JULES VERNE

COMPLETE WORKS

DELPHI CLASSICS

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF

JULES VERNE

(1828-1905)

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Jules Verne

Delphi Classics 2011

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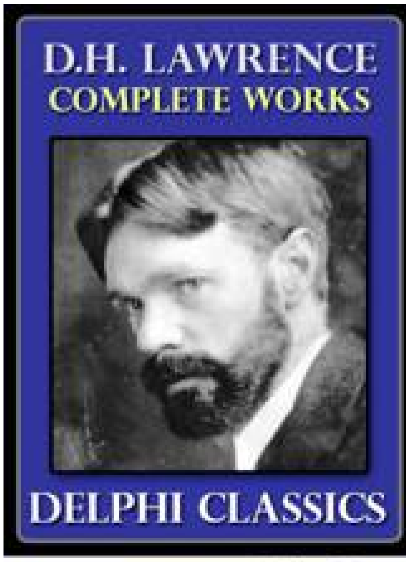
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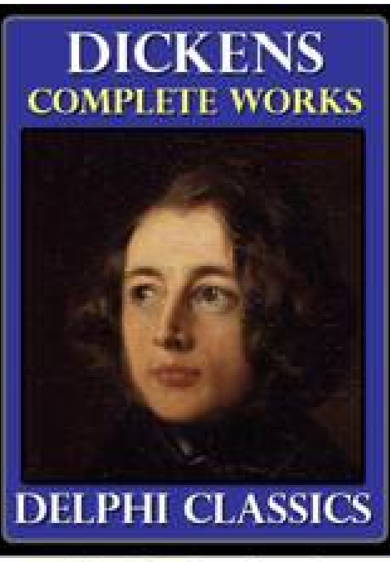
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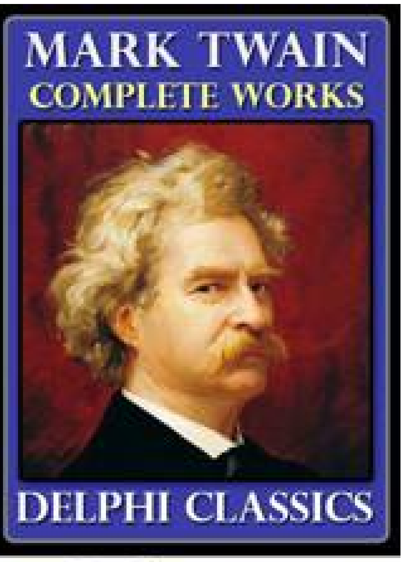
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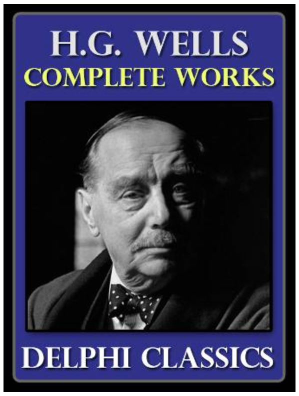

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The Novels

Verne’s birthplace – Nantes, France

LIST OF VERNE’S NOVELS

Please note: the novels are sequenced in the chronological order of publication.

FIVE WEEKS IN A BALLOON

PARIS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON

THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN HATTERAS

THE CHILDREN OF CAPTAIN GRANT

AROUND THE MOON

TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

A FLOATING CITY

THE ADVENTURES OF THREE ENGLISHMEN AND THREE RUSSIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

THE FUR COUNTRY

AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS

THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

THE SURVIVORS OF THE CHANCELLOR

MICHAEL STROGOFF

OFF ON A COMET

THE UNDERGROUND CITY

DICK SAND: A CAPTAIN AT FIFTEEN

THE BEGUM’S FORTUNE

TRIBULATIONS OF A CHINAMAN IN CHINA

THE STEAM HOUSE

EIGHT HUNDRED LEAGUES ON THE AMAZON

THE GREEN RAY

THE SCHOOL FOR ROBINSONS

KÉRABAN THE INFLEXIBLE

THE ARCHIPELAGO ON FIRE

THE STAR OF THE SOUTH

MATHIAS SANDORF

ROBUR THE CONQUEROR

THE LOTTERY TICKET

THE FLIGHT TO FRANCE

THE WRECK OF THE CYNTHIA

NORTH AGAINST SOUTH

TWO YEARS HOLIDAY

THE PURCHASE OF THE NORTH POLE

FAMILY WITHOUT A NAME

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MISTRESS BRANICAN

THE CARPATHIAN CASTLE

CLAUDIUS BOMBARNAC

FOUNDLING MICK

THE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN ANTIFER

THE FLOATING ISLAND

FACING THE FLAG

CLOVIS DARDENTOR

THE SPHINX OF THE ICE FIELDS

THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM OF NANTUCKET by Edgar Allan Poe

THE SUPER ORINOCO

THE WILL OF AN ECCENTRIC

SECOND FATHERLAND

THE VILLAGE IN THE TREETOPS

THE YARNS OF JEAN-MARIE CABIDOULIN

THE KIP BROTHERS

TRAVELING SCHOLARSHIPS

MASTER OF THE WORLD

A DRAMA IN LIVONIA

INVASION OF THE SEA

THE LIGHTHOUSE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

THE GOLDEN VOLCANO

THE THOMPSON AGENCY AND CO.

THE CHASE OF THE GOLDEN METEOR

THE DANUBE PILOT

THE SURVIVORS OF THE ‘JONATHAN’

THE SECRET OF WILHELM STORITZ

ASTONISHING ADVENTURES OF THE BARSAC MISSION

Please note: due to copyright restrictions and the scarcity of English translations, the 16 novels listed below are only available in their original French texts. Once their translations become available, they will be added to future updates of this eBook.

THE SUPER ORINOCO

SECOND FATHERLAND

THE VILLAGE IN THE TREETOPS

THE YARNS OF JEAN-MARIE CABIDOULIN

THE KIP BROTHERS

TRAVELING SCHOLARSHIPS

A DRAMA IN LIVONIA

INVASION OF THE SEA

THE LIGHTHOUSE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

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THE THOMPSON AGENCY AND CO.

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THE DANUBE PILOT

THE SURVIVORS OF THE ‘JONATHAN’

THE SECRET OF WILHELM STORITZ

ASTONISHING ADVENTURES OF THE BARSAC MISSION

FIVE WEEKS IN A BALLOON

Translated by William Lackland

First published in 1863, this is Verne’s first novel in a series which would be later called *Les Voyages Extraordinaires*. The novel includes many of the ingredients of Verne’s later work, with plot twists of adventure, blended with technical, geographic and historic description. The book concerns the exploration of Africa, which was still not completely known to Europeans of the time, making the work even more popular for readers.

Five Weeks in a Balloon tells the story of scholar and explorer, Dr. Samuel Ferguson, who is accompanied by his manservant Joe and his friend professional hunter Richard “Dick” Kennedy. They set out to travel across the African continent with the help of a hot-air balloon filled with hydrogen.

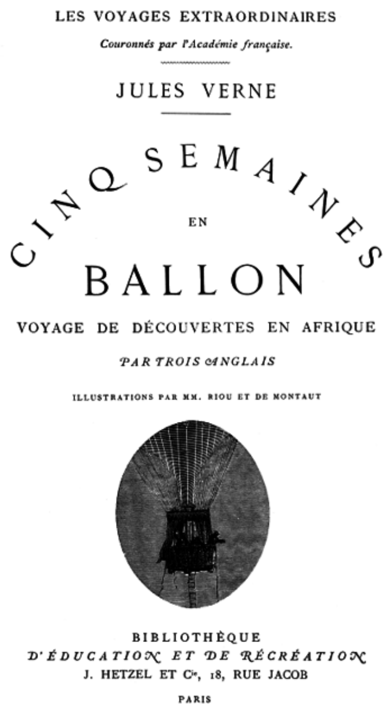

LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES
Couronnés par l'Académie française.

JULES VERNE

CINQ SEMAINES
EN
BALLON

VOYAGE DE DÉCOUVERTES EN AFRIQUE
PAR TROIS ANGLAIS

ILLUSTRATIONS PAR MM. RIOU ET DE MONTAUT

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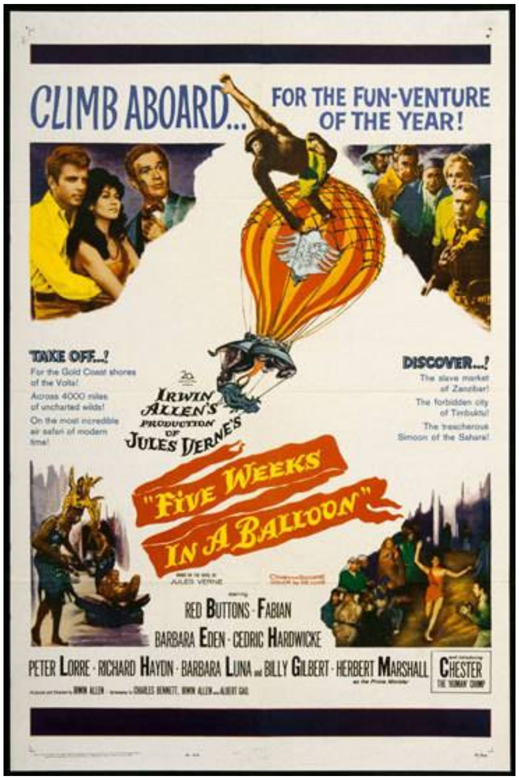
CLIMB ABOARD...
FOR THE FUN-VENTURE OF THE YEAR!
TAKE OFF...!
For the Gold Coast shores of the Volta!
Across 4000 miles of uncharted wilds!
On the most incredible air safari of modern time!
DISCOVER...!
The slave market of Zanzibar!
The forbidden city of Timbuktu!
The treacherous Simoon of the Sahara!
IRWIN ALLEN'S PRODUCTION OF JULES VERNE'S
"FIVE WEEKS IN A BALLOON"
JULES VERNE
RED BUTTONS · FABIAN
BARBARA EDEN · CEDRIC HARDWICKE
PETER LORRE · RICHARD HAYDON · BARBARA LUNA and BILLY GILBERT · HERBERT MARSHALL
CHESTER
THE 'HUMAN' CHIMP
IRWIN ALLEN
CHARLES BENNETT, IRWIN ALLEN and ALBERT GAIL

The 1962 film adaptation

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5
SEMAINES
EN
BALLON

CHAPTER FIRST.

The End of a much-applauded Speech. — The Presentation of Dr. Samuel Ferguson. — Excelsior. — Full-length Portrait of the Doctor. — A Fatalist convinced. — A Dinner at the Travellers' Club. — Several Toasts for the Occasion.

There was a large audience assembled on the 14th of January, 1862, at the session of the Royal Geographical Society, No. 3 Waterloo Place, London. The president, Sir Francis M — — , made an important communication to his colleagues, in an address that was frequently interrupted by applause.

This rare specimen of eloquence terminated with the following sonorous phrases bubbling over with patriotism:

“England has always marched at the head of nations” (for, the reader will observe, the nations always march at the head of each other), “by the intrepidity of her explorers in the line of geographical discovery.” (General assent). “Dr. Samuel Ferguson, one of her most glorious sons, will not reflect discredit on his origin.” (“No, indeed!” from all parts of the hall.)

“This attempt, should it succeed” (“It will succeed!”), “will complete and link together the notions, as yet disjointed, which the world entertains of African cartology” (vehement applause); “and, should it fail, it will, at least, remain on record as one of the most daring conceptions of human genius!” (Tremendous cheering.)

“Huzza! huzza!” shouted the immense audience, completely electrified by these inspiring words.

“Huzza for the intrepid Ferguson!” cried one of the most excitable of the enthusiastic crowd.

The wildest cheering resounded on all sides; the name of Ferguson was in every mouth, and we may safely believe that it lost nothing in passing through English throats. Indeed, the hall fairly shook with it.

And there were present, also, those fearless travellers and explorers whose energetic temperaments had borne them through every quarter of the globe, many of them grown old and worn out in the service of science. All had, in some degree, physically or morally, undergone the sorest trials. They had escaped shipwreck; conflagration; Indian tomahawks and war-clubs; the fagot and the stake; nay, even the cannibal maws of the South Sea Islanders. But still their hearts beat high during Sir Francis M — — ’s address, which certainly was the finest oratorical success that the Royal Geographical Society of London had yet achieved.

But, in England, enthusiasm does not stop short with mere words. It strikes off money faster than the dies of the Royal Mint itself. So a subscription to encourage Dr. Ferguson was voted there and then, and it at once attained the handsome amount of two thousand five hundred pounds. The sum was made commensurate with the importance of the enterprise.

A member of the Society then inquired of the president whether Dr. Ferguson was not to be officially introduced.

“The doctor is at the disposition of the meeting,” replied Sir Francis.

“Let him come in, then! Bring him in!” shouted the audience. “We’d like to see a man of such extraordinary daring, face to face!”

"Perhaps this incredible proposition of his is only intended to mystify us," growled an apoplectic old admiral.

"Suppose that there should turn out to be no such person as Dr. Ferguson?" exclaimed another voice, with a malicious twang.

"Why, then, we'd have to invent one!" replied a facetious member of this grave Society.

"Ask Dr. Ferguson to come in," was the quiet remark of Sir Francis M — — .

And come in the doctor did, and stood there, quite unmoved by the thunders of applause that greeted his appearance.

He was a man of about forty years of age, of medium height and physique. His sanguine temperament was disclosed in the deep color of his cheeks. His countenance was coldly expressive, with regular features, and a large nose — one of those noses that resemble the prow of a ship, and stamp the faces of men predestined to accomplish great discoveries. His eyes, which were gentle and intelligent, rather than bold, lent a peculiar charm to his physiognomy. His arms were long, and his feet were planted with that solidity which indicates a great pedestrian.

A calm gravity seemed to surround the doctor's entire person, and no one would dream that he could become the agent of any mystification, however harmless.

Hence, the applause that greeted him at the outset continued until he, with a friendly gesture, claimed silence on his own behalf. He stepped toward the seat that had been prepared for him on his presentation, and then, standing erect and motionless, he, with a determined glance, pointed his right forefinger upward, and pronounced aloud the single word —

“Excelsior!”

Never had one of Bright’s or Cobden’s sudden onslaughts, never had one of Palmerston’s abrupt demands for funds to plate the rocks of the English coast with iron, made such a sensation. Sir Francis M — — ’s address was completely overshadowed. The doctor had shown himself moderate, sublime, and self-contained, in one; he had uttered the word of the situation —

“Excelsior!”

The gouty old admiral who had been finding fault, was completely won over by the singular man before him, and immediately moved the insertion of Dr. Ferguson’s speech in “The Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London.”

Who, then, was this person, and what was the enterprise that he proposed?

Ferguson’s father, a brave and worthy captain in the English Navy, had associated his son with him, from the young man’s earliest years, in the perils and adventures of his profession. The fine little fellow, who seemed to have never known the meaning of fear, early revealed a keen and active mind, an investigating intelligence, and a remarkable turn for scientific study; moreover, he disclosed uncommon address in extricating himself from difficulty; he was never perplexed, not even in handling his fork for the first time — an exercise in which children generally have so little success.

His fancy kindled early at the recitals he read of daring enterprise and maritime adventure, and he followed with enthusiasm the discoveries that signalized the first part of the nineteenth century. He mused over the glory of the Mungo Parks, the Bruces, the Caillies, the Levaillants, and to some extent, I verily believe, of Selkirk (Robinson Crusoe), whom he considered in no wise inferior to the rest. How many a well-employed hour he passed with that hero on his isle of Juan Fernandez! Often he criticised the ideas of the shipwrecked sailor, and sometimes discussed his plans and projects. He would have done differently, in such and such a case, or quite as well at least — of that he felt assured. But of one thing he was satisfied, that he never should have left that pleasant island, where he was as happy as a king without subjects — no, not if the inducement held out had been promotion to the first lordship in the admiralty!

It may readily be conjectured whether these tendencies were developed during a youth of adventure, spent in every nook and corner of the Globe. Moreover, his father, who was a man of thorough instruction, omitted no opportunity to consolidate this keen intelligence by serious studies in hydrography, physics, and mechanics, along with a slight tincture of botany, medicine, and astronomy.

Upon the death of the estimable captain, Samuel Ferguson, then twenty-two years of age, had already made his voyage around the world. He had enlisted in the Bengalese Corps of Engineers, and distinguished himself in several affairs; but this soldier’s life had not exactly suited him; caring but little for command, he had not been fond of obeying. He, therefore, sent in his resignation, and half botanizing, half playing the hunter, he made his way toward the north of the Indian Peninsula, and crossed it from Calcutta to Surat — a mere amateur trip for him.

From Surat we see him going over to Australia, and in 1845 participating in Captain Sturt's expedition, which had been sent out to explore the new Caspian Sea, supposed to exist in the centre of New Holland.

Samuel Ferguson returned to England about 1850, and, more than ever possessed by the demon of discovery, he spent the intervening time, until 1853, in accompanying Captain McClure on the expedition that went around the American Continent from Behring's Straits to Cape Farewell.

Notwithstanding fatigues of every description, and in all climates, Ferguson's constitution continued marvellously sound. He felt at ease in the midst of the most complete privations; in fine, he was the very type of the thoroughly accomplished explorer whose stomach expands or contracts at will; whose limbs grow longer or shorter according to the resting-place that each stage of a journey may bring; who can fall asleep at any hour of the day or awake at any hour of the night.

Nothing, then, was less surprising, after that, than to find our traveller, in the period from 1855 to 1857, visiting the whole region west of the Thibet, in company with the brothers Schlagintweit, and bringing back some curious ethnographic observations from that expedition.

During these different journeys, Ferguson had been the most active and interesting correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, the penny newspaper whose circulation amounts to 140,000 copies, and yet scarcely suffices for its many legions of readers. Thus, the doctor had become well known to the public, although he could not claim membership in either of the Royal Geographical Societies of London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, or St. Petersburg, or yet with the Travellers' Club, or even the Royal Polytechnic Institute, where his friend the statistician Cockburn ruled in state.

The latter savant had, one day, gone so far as to propose to him the following problem: Given the number of miles travelled by the doctor in making the circuit of the Globe, how many more had his head described than his feet, by reason of the different lengths of the radii? — or, the number of miles traversed by the doctor's head and feet respectively being given, required the exact height of that gentleman?

This was done with the idea of complimenting him, but the doctor had held himself aloof from all the learned bodies — belonging, as he did, to the church militant and not to the church polemical. He found his time better employed in seeking than in discussing, in discovering rather than discoursing.

There is a story told of an Englishman who came one day to Geneva, intending to visit the lake. He was placed in one of those odd vehicles in which the passengers sit side by side, as they do in an omnibus. Well, it so happened that the Englishman got a seat that left him with his back turned toward the lake. The vehicle completed its circular trip without his thinking to turn around once, and he went back to London delighted with the Lake of Geneva.

Doctor Ferguson, however, had turned around to look about him on his journeyings, and turned to such good purpose that he had seen a great deal. In doing so, he had simply obeyed the laws of his nature, and we have good reason to believe that he was, to some extent, a fatalist, but of an orthodox school of fatalism withal, that led him to rely upon himself and even upon Providence. He claimed that he was impelled, rather than drawn by his own volition, to journey as he did, and that he traversed the world like the locomotive, which does not direct itself, but is guided and directed by the track it runs on.

“I do not follow my route;” he often said, “it is my route that follows me.”

The reader will not be surprised, then, at the calmness with which the doctor received the applause that welcomed him in the Royal Society. He was above all such trifles, having no pride, and less vanity. He looked upon the proposition addressed to him by Sir Francis M — — as the simplest thing in the world, and scarcely noticed the immense effect that it produced.

When the session closed, the doctor was escorted to the rooms of the Travellers’ Club, in Pall Mall. A superb entertainment had been prepared there in his honor. The dimensions of the dishes served were made to correspond with the importance of the personage entertained, and the boiled sturgeon that figured at this magnificent repast was not an inch shorter than Dr. Ferguson himself.

Numerous toasts were offered and quaffed, in the wines of France, to the celebrated travellers who had made their names illustrious by their explorations of African territory.

The guests drank to their health or to their memory, in alphabetical order, a good old English way of doing the thing. Among those remembered thus, were: Abbadie, Adams, Adamson, Anderson, Arnaud, Baikie, Baldwin, Barth, Batouda, Beke, Beltram, Du Berba, Bimbachi,Bolognesi, Bolwik, Belzoni, Bonnemain, Brisson, Browne,Bruce, Brun-Rollet, Burchell, Burckhardt, Burton, Cailland, Caillie, Campbell, Chapman, Clapperton, Clot-Bey, Colomieu, Courval, Cumming, Cuny, Debono, Decken,Denham, Desavanchers, Dicksen, Dickson, Dochard, DuChaillu, Duncan, Durand, Duroule, Duveyrier, D’Escayrac, De Lauture, Erhardt, Ferret, Fresnel, Galinier, Galton, Geoffroy, Golberry, Hahn, Halm, Harnier, Hecquart,Heuglin, Hornemann, Houghton, Imbert, Kauffmann, Knoblecher, Krapf, Kummer, Lafargue, Laing, Lafaille,Lambert, Lamiral, Lampriere, John Lander, RichardLander, Lefebvre, Lejean, Levaillant, Livingstone, MacCarthy,Maggiar, Maizan, Malzac, Moffat, Mollien, Monteiro, Morrison, Mungo Park, Neimans, Overweg, Panet, Partarrieau, Pascal, Pearse, Peddie, Penney, Petherick, Poncet, Prax, Raffenel, Rabh, Rebmann, Richardson, Riley, Ritchey, Rochet d'Hericourt, Rongawi, Roscher, Ruppel, Saugnier, Speke, Steidner, Thibaud, Thompson, Thornton, Toole, Tousny, Trotter, Tuckey, Tyrwhitt, Vaudey, Veyssiere, Vincent, Vinco, Vogel, Wahlberg, Warrington, Washington, Werne, Wild, and last, but not least, Dr. Ferguson, who, by his incredible attempt, was to link together the achievements of all these explorers, and complete the series of African discovery.

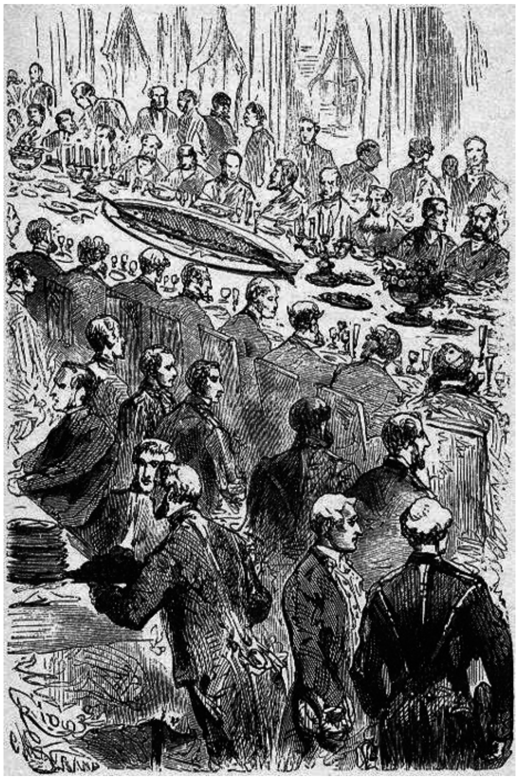

CHAPTER SECOND.

The Article in the Daily Telegraph. — War between the Scientific Journals. — Mr. Petermann backs his Friend Dr. Ferguson. — Reply of the Savant Koner. — Bets made. — Sundry Propositions offered to the Doctor.

On the next day, in its number of January 15th, the Daily

Telegraph published an article couched in the following terms:

“Africa is, at length, about to surrender the secret of her vast solitudes; a modern OEdipus is to give us the key to that enigma which the learned men of sixty centuries have not been able to decipher. In other days, to seek the sources of the Nile — fontes Nili quoerere — was regarded as a mad endeavor, a chimera that could not be realized.

“Dr. Barth, in following out to Soudan the track traced by Denham and Clapperton; Dr. Livingstone, in multiplying his fearless explorations from the Cape of Good Hope to the basin of the Zambesi; Captains Burton and Speke, in the discovery of the great interior lakes, have opened three highways to modern civilization. THEIR POINT OF INTERSECTION, which no traveller has yet been able to reach, is the very heart of Africa, and it is thither that all efforts should now be directed.

“The labors of these hardy pioneers of science are now about to be knit together by the daring project of Dr. Samuel Ferguson, whose fine explorations our readers have frequently had the opportunity of appreciating.

“This intrepid discoverer proposes to traverse all Africa from east to west IN A BALLOON. If we are well informed, the point of departure for this surprising journey is to be the island of Zanzibar, upon the eastern coast. As for the point of arrival, it is reserved for Providence alone to designate.

“The proposal for this scientific undertaking was officially made, yesterday, at the rooms of the Royal Geographical Society, and the sum of twenty-five hundred pounds was voted to defray the expenses of the enterprise.

“We shall keep our readers informed as to the progress of this enterprise, which has no precedent in the annals of exploration.”

As may be supposed, the foregoing article had an enormous echo among scientific people. At first, it stirred up a storm of incredulity; Dr. Ferguson passed for a purely chimerical personage of the Barnum stamp, who, after having gone through the United States, proposed to “do” the British Isles.

A humorous reply appeared in the February number of the Bulletins de la Societe Geographique of Geneva, which very wittily showed up the Royal Society of London and their phenomenal sturgeon.

But Herr Petermann, in his Mittheilungen, published at Gotha, reduced the Geneva journal to the most absolute silence. Herr Petermann knew Dr. Ferguson personally, and guaranteed the intrepidity of his dauntless friend.

Besides, all manner of doubt was quickly put out of the question: preparations for the trip were set on foot at London; the factories of Lyons received a heavy order for the silk required for the body of the balloon; and, finally, the British Government placed the transport-ship Resolute, Captain Bennett, at the disposal of the expedition.

At once, upon word of all this, a thousand encouragements were offered, and felicitations came pouring in from all quarters. The details of the undertaking were published in full in the bulletins of the Geographical Society of Paris; a remarkable article appeared in the Nouvelles Annales des Voyages, de la Geographie, de l’Histoire, et de l’Archaeologie de M. V. A. Malte-Brun (“New Annals of Travels, Geography, History, and Archaeology, by M. V. A. Malte-Brun”); and a searching essay in the Zeitschrift fur Allgemeine Erdkunde, by Dr. W. Koner, triumphantly demonstrated the feasibility of the journey, its chances of success, the nature of the obstacles existing, the immense advantages of the aerial mode of locomotion, and found fault with nothing but the selected point of departure, which it contended should be Massowah, a small port in Abyssinia, whence James Bruce, in 1768, started upon his explorations in search of the sources of the Nile. Apart from that, it mentioned, in terms of unreserved admiration, the energetic character of Dr. Ferguson, and the heart, thrice panoplied in bronze, that could conceive and undertake such an enterprise.

The North American Review could not, without some displeasure, contemplate so much glory monopolized by England. It therefore rather ridiculed the doctor’s scheme, and urged him, by all means, to push his explorations as far as America, while he was about it.

In a word, without going over all the journals in the world, there was not a scientific publication, from the Journal of Evangelical Missions to the Revue Algerienne et Coloniale, from the Annales de la Propagation de la Foi to the Church Missionary Intelligencer, that had not something to say about the affair in all its phases.

Many large bets were made at London and throughout England generally, first, as to the real or supposititious existence of Dr. Ferguson; secondly, as to the trip itself, which, some contended, would not be undertaken at all, and which was really contemplated, according to others; thirdly, upon the success or failure of the enterprise; and fourthly, upon the probabilities of Dr. Ferguson's return. The betting-books were covered with entries of immense sums, as though the Epsom races were at stake.

Thus, believers and unbelievers, the learned and the ignorant, alike had their eyes fixed on the doctor, and he became the lion of the day, without knowing that he carried such a mane. On his part, he willingly gave the most accurate information touching his project. He was very easily approached, being naturally the most affable man in the world. More than one bold adventurer presented himself, offering to share the dangers as well as the glory of the undertaking; but he refused them all, without giving his reasons for rejecting them.

Numerous inventors of mechanism applicable to the guidance of balloons came to propose their systems, but he would accept none; and, when he was asked whether he had discovered something of his own for that purpose, he constantly refused to give any explanation, and merely busied himself more actively than ever with the preparations for his journey.

CHAPTER THIRD.

The Doctor's Friend. — The Origin of their Friendship. — Dick Kennedy at London. — An unexpected but not very consoling Proposal. — A Proverb by no means cheering. — A few Names from the African Martyrology. — The Advantages of a Balloon. — Dr. Ferguson's Secret.

Dr. Ferguson had a friend — not another self, indeed, an alter ego, for friendship could not exist between two beings exactly alike.

But, if they possessed different qualities, aptitudes, and temperaments, Dick Kennedy and Samuel Ferguson lived with one and the same heart, and that gave them no great trouble. In fact, quite the reverse.

Dick Kennedy was a Scotchman, in the full acceptation of the word — open, resolute, and headstrong. He lived in the town of Leith, which is near Edinburgh, and, in truth, is a mere suburb of Auld Reekie. Sometimes he was a fisherman, but he was always and everywhere a determined hunter, and that was nothing remarkable for a son of Caledonia, who had known some little climbing among the Highland mountains. He was cited as a wonderful shot with the rifle, since not only could he split a bullet on a knife-blade, but he could divide it into two such equal parts that, upon weighing them, scarcely any difference would be perceptible.

Kennedy's countenance strikingly recalled that of Herbert Glendinning, as Sir Walter Scott has depicted it in “The Monastery”; his stature was above six feet; full of grace and easy movement, he yet seemed gifted with herculean strength; a face embrowned by the sun; eyes keen and black; a natural air of daring courage; in fine, something sound, solid, and reliable in his entire person, spoke, at first glance, in favor of the bonny Scot.

The acquaintanceship of these two friends had been formed in India, when they belonged to the same regiment. While Dick would be out in pursuit of the tiger and the elephant, Samuel would be in search of plants and insects. Each could call himself expert in his own province, and more than one rare botanical specimen, that to science was as great a victory won as the conquest of a pair of ivory tusks, became the doctor's booty.

These two young men, moreover, never had occasion to save each other's lives, or to render any reciprocal service. Hence, an unalterable friendship. Destiny sometimes bore them apart, but sympathy always united them again.

Since their return to England they had been frequently separated by the doctor's distant expeditions; but, on his return, the latter never failed to go, not to ASK for hospitality, but to bestow some weeks of his presence at the home of his crony Dick.

The Scot talked of the past; the doctor busily prepared for the future. The one looked back, the other forward. Hence, a restless spirit personified in Ferguson; perfect calmness typified in Kennedy — such was the contrast.

After his journey to the Thibet, the doctor had remained nearly two years without hinting at new explorations; and Dick, supposing that his friend's instinct for travel and thirst for adventure had at length died out, was perfectly enchanted. They would have ended badly, some day or other, he thought to himself; no matter what experience one has with men, one does not travel always with impunity among cannibals and wild beasts. So, Kennedy besought the doctor to tie up his bark for life, having done enough for science, and too much for the gratitude of men.

The doctor contented himself with making no reply to this. He remained absorbed in his own reflections, giving himself up to secret calculations, passing his nights among heaps of figures, and making experiments with the strangest-looking machinery, inexplicable to everybody but himself. It could readily be guessed, though, that some great thought was fermenting in his brain.

“What can he have been planning?” wondered Kennedy, when, in the month of January, his friend quitted him to return to London.

He found out one morning when he looked into the Daily Telegraph.

“Merciful Heaven!” he exclaimed, “the lunatic! the madman! Cross Africa in a balloon! Nothing but that was wanted to cap the climax! That’s what he’s been bothering his wits about these two years past!”

Now, reader, substitute for all these exclamation points, as many ringing thumps with a brawny fist upon the table, and you have some idea of the manual exercise that Dick went through while he thus spoke.

When his confidential maid-of-all-work, the aged Elspeth, tried to insinuate that the whole thing might be a hoax —

“Not a bit of it!” said he. “Don’t I know my man? Isn’t it just like him? Travel through the air! There, now, he’s jealous of the eagles, next! No! I warrant you, he’ll not do it! I’ll find a way to stop him! He! why if they’d let him alone, he’d start some day for the moon!”

On that very evening Kennedy, half alarmed, and half exasperated, took the train for London, where he arrived next morning.

Three-quarters of an hour later a cab deposited him at the door of the doctor's modest dwelling, in Soho Square, Greek Street. Forthwith he bounded up the steps and announced his arrival with five good, hearty, sounding raps at the door.

Ferguson opened, in person.

"Dick! you here?" he exclaimed, but with no great expression of surprise, after all.

"Dick himself!" was the response.

"What, my dear boy, you at London, and this the mid-season of the winter shooting?"

"Yes! here I am, at London!"

"And what have you come to town for?"

"To prevent the greatest piece of folly that ever was conceived."

"Folly!" said the doctor.

"Is what this paper says, the truth?" rejoined Kennedy, holding out the copy of the Daily Telegraph, mentioned above.

"Ah! that's what you mean, is it? These newspapers are great tattlers! But, sit down, my dear Dick."

"No, I won't sit down! — Then, you really intend to attempt this journey?"

"Most certainly! all my preparations are getting along finely, and I — "

“Where are your traps? Let me have a chance at them! I’ll make them fly! I’ll put your preparations in fine order.” And so saying, the gallant Scot gave way to a genuine explosion of wrath.

“Come, be calm, my dear Dick!” resumed the doctor. “You’re angry at me because I did not acquaint you with my new project.”

“He calls this his new project!”

“I have been very busy,” the doctor went on, without heeding the interruption; “I have had so much to look after! But rest assured that I should not have started without writing to you.”

“Oh, indeed! I’m highly honored.”

“Because it is my intention to take you with me.”

Upon this, the Scotchman gave a leap that a wild goat would not have been ashamed of among his native crags.

“Ah! really, then, you want them to send us both to

Bedlam!”

“I have counted positively upon you, my dear Dick, and I have picked you out from all the rest.”

Kennedy stood speechless with amazement.

“After listening to me for ten minutes,” said the doctor, “you will thank me!”

“Are you speaking seriously?”

“Very seriously.”

“And suppose that I refuse to go with you?”

“But you won’t refuse.”

“But, suppose that I were to refuse?”

“Well, I’d go alone.”

“Let us sit down,” said Kennedy, “and talk without excitement. The moment you give up jesting about it, we can discuss the thing.”

“Let us discuss it, then, at breakfast, if you have no objections, my dear Dick.”

The two friends took their seats opposite to each other, at a little table with a plate of toast and a huge tea-urn before them.

“My dear Samuel,” said the sportsman, “your project is insane! it is impossible! it has no resemblance to anything reasonable or practicable!”

“That’s for us to find out when we shall have tried it!”

“But trying it is exactly what you ought not to attempt.”

“Why so, if you please?”

“Well, the risks, the difficulty of the thing.”

“As for difficulties,” replied Ferguson, in a serious tone, “they were made to be overcome; as for risks and dangers, who can flatter himself that he is to escape them? Every thing in life involves danger; it may even be dangerous to sit down at one’s own table, or to put one’s hat on one’s own head. Moreover, we must look upon what is to occur as having already occurred, and see nothing but the present in the future, for the future is but the present a little farther on.”

“There it is!” exclaimed Kennedy, with a shrug.

“As great a fatalist as ever!”

“Yes! but in the good sense of the word. Let us not trouble ourselves, then, about what fate has in store for us, and let us not forget our good old English proverb: ‘The man who was born to be hung will never be drowned!’”

There was no reply to make, but that did not prevent Kennedy from resuming a series of arguments which may be readily conjectured, but which were too long for us to repeat.

“Well, then,” he said, after an hour’s discussion, “if you are absolutely determined to make this trip across the African continent — if it is necessary for your happiness, why not pursue the ordinary routes?”

“Why?” ejaculated the doctor, growing animated. “Because, all attempts to do so, up to this time, have utterly failed. Because, from Mungo Park, assassinated on the Niger, to Vogel, who disappeared in the Wadai country; from Oudney, who died at Murmur, and Clapperton, lost at Sackatou, to the Frenchman Maizan, who was cut to pieces; from Major Laing, killed by the Touaregs, to Roscher, from Hamburg, massacred in the beginning of 1860, the names of victim after victim have been inscribed on the lists of African martyrdom! Because, to contend successfully against the elements; against hunger, and thirst, and fever; against savage beasts, and still more savage men, is impossible! Because, what cannot be done in one way, should be tried in another. In fine, because what one cannot pass through directly in the middle, must be passed by going to one side or overhead!”

“If passing over it were the only question!” interposed Kennedy; “but passing high up in the air, doctor, there’s the rub!”

“Come, then,” said the doctor, “what have I to fear? You will admit that I have taken my precautions in such manner as to be certain that my balloon will not fall; but, should it disappoint me, I should find myself on the ground in the normal conditions imposed upon other explorers. But, my balloon will not deceive me, and we need make no such calculations.”

“Yes, but you must take them into view.”

“No, Dick. I intend not to be separated from the balloon until I reach the western coast of Africa. With it, every thing is possible; without it, I fall back into the dangers and difficulties as well as the natural obstacles that ordinarily attend such an expedition: with it, neither heat, nor torrents, nor tempests, nor the simoom, nor unhealthy climates, nor wild animals, nor savage men, are to be feared! If I feel too hot, I can ascend; if too cold, I can come down. Should there be a mountain, I can pass over it; a precipice, I can sweep across it; a river, I can sail beyond it; a storm, I can rise away above it; a torrent, I can skim it like a bird! I can advance without fatigue, I can halt without need of repose! I can soar above the nascent cities! I can speed onward with the rapidity of a tornado, sometimes at the loftiest heights, sometimes only a hundred feet above the soil, while the map of Africa unrolls itself beneath my gaze in the great atlas of the world.”

Even the stubborn Kennedy began to feel moved, and yet the spectacle thus conjured up before him gave him the vertigo. He riveted his eyes upon the doctor with wonder and admiration, and yet with fear, for he already felt himself swinging aloft in space.

“Come, come,” said he, at last. “Let us see, Samuel.

Then you have discovered the means of guiding a balloon?”

“Not by any means. That is a Utopian idea.”

“Then, you will go — ”

“Whithersoever Providence wills; but, at all events, from east to west.”

“Why so?”

“Because I expect to avail myself of the trade-winds, the direction of which is always the same.”

“Ah! yes, indeed!” said Kennedy, reflecting; “the trade-winds — yes — truly — one might — there’s something in that!”

“Something in it — yes, my excellent friend — there’s EVERY THING in it. The English Government has placed a transport at my disposal, and three or four vessels are to cruise off the western coast of Africa, about the presumed period of my arrival. In three months, at most, I shall be at Zanzibar, where I will inflate my balloon, and from that point we shall launch ourselves.”

“We!” said Dick.

“Have you still a shadow of an objection to offer?

Speak, friend Kennedy.”

“An objection! I have a thousand; but among other things, tell me, if you expect to see the country. If you expect to mount and descend at pleasure, you cannot do so, without losing your gas. Up to this time no other means have been devised, and it is this that has always prevented long journeys in the air.”

“My dear Dick, I have only one word to answer — I shall not lose one particle of gas.”

“And yet you can descend when you please?”

“I shall descend when I please.”

“And how will you do that?”

“Ah, ha! therein lies my secret, friend Dick. Have faith, and let my device be yours — ’Excelsior!’”

“‘Excelsior’ be it then,” said the sportsman, who did not understand a word of Latin.

But he made up his mind to oppose his friend’s departure by all means in his power, and so pretended to give in, at the same time keeping on the watch. As for the doctor, he went on diligently with his preparations.

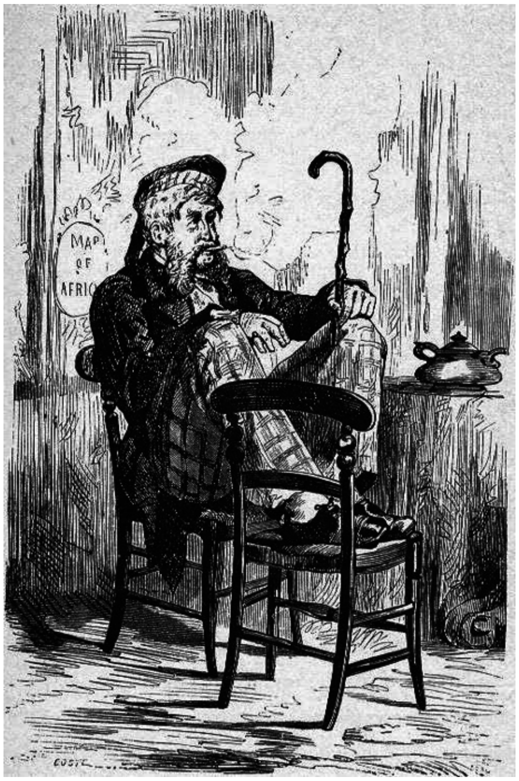
MAP OF AFRIC
COSTE

CHAPTER FOURTH.

African Explorations. — Barth, Richardson, Overweg, Werne, Brun-Rollet, Penney, Andrea, Debono, Miani, Guillaume Lejean, Bruce, Krapf and Rebmann, Maizan, Roscher, Burton and Speke.

The aerial line which Dr. Ferguson counted upon following had not been chosen at random; his point of departure had been carefully studied, and it was not without good cause that he had resolved to ascend at the island of Zanzibar. This island, lying near to the eastern coast of Africa, is in the sixth degree of south latitude, that is to say, four hundred and thirty geographical miles below the equator.

From this island the latest expedition, sent by way of the great lakes to explore the sources of the Nile, had just set out.

But it would be well to indicate what explorations Dr. Ferguson hoped to link together. The two principal ones were those of Dr. Barth in 1849, and of Lieutenants Burton and Speke in 1858.

Dr. Barth is a Hamburger, who obtained permission for himself and for his countryman Overweg to join the expedition of the Englishman Richardson. The latter was charged with a mission in the Soudan.

This vast region is situated between the fifteenth and tenth degrees of north latitude; that is to say, that, in order to approach it, the explorer must penetrate fifteen hundred miles into the interior of Africa.

Until then, the country in question had been known only through the journeys of Denham, of Clapperton, and of Oudney, made from 1822 to 1824. Richardson, Barth, and Overweg, jealously anxious to push their investigations farther, arrived at Tunis and Tripoli, like their predecessors, and got as far as Mourzouk, the capital of Fezzan.

They then abandoned the perpendicular line, and made a sharp turn westward toward Ghat, guided, with difficulty, by the Touaregs. After a thousand scenes of pillage, of vexation, and attacks by armed forces, their caravan arrived, in October, at the vast oasis of Asben. Dr. Barth separated from his companions, made an excursion to the town of Aghades, and rejoined the expedition, which resumed its march on the 12th of December. At length it reached the province of Damerghou; there the three travellers parted, and Barth took the road to Kano, where he arrived by dint of perseverance, and after paying considerable tribute.

In spite of an intense fever, he quitted that place on the 7th of March, accompanied by a single servant. The principal aim of his journey was to reconnoitre Lake Tchad, from which he was still three hundred and fifty miles distant. He therefore advanced toward the east, and reached the town of Zouricolo, in the Bornou country, which is the core of the great central empire of Africa. There he heard of the death of Richardson, who had succumbed to fatigue and privation. He next arrived at Kouka, the capital of Bornou, on the borders of the lake. Finally, at the end of three weeks, on the 14th of April, twelve months after having quitted Tripoli, he reached the town of Ngornou.

We find him again setting forth on the 29th of March, 1851, with Overweg, to visit the kingdom of Adamaoua, to the south of the lake, and from there he pushed on as far as the town of Yola, a little below nine degrees north latitude. This was the extreme southern limit reached by that daring traveller.

He returned in the month of August to Kouka; from there he successively traversed the Mandara, Barghimi, and Klanem countries, and reached his extreme limit in the east, the town of Masena, situated at seventeen degrees twenty minutes west longitude.

On the 25th of November, 1852, after the death of Overweg, his last companion, he plunged into the west, visited Sockoto, crossed the Niger, and finally reached Timbuctoo, where he had to languish, during eight long months, under vexations inflicted upon him by the sheik, and all kinds of ill-treatment and wretchedness. But the presence of a Christian in the city could not long be tolerated, and the Foullans threatened to besiege it. The doctor, therefore, left it on the 17th of March, 1854, and fled to the frontier, where he remained for thirty-three days in the most abject destitution. He then managed to get back to Kano in November, thence to Kouka, where he resumed Denham’s route after four months’ delay. He regained Tripoli toward the close of August, 1855, and arrived in London on the 6th of September, the only survivor of his party.

Such was the venturesome journey of Dr. Barth.

Dr. Ferguson carefully noted the fact, that he had stopped at four degrees north latitude and seventeen degrees west longitude.

Now let us see what Lieutenants Burton and Speke accomplished in Eastern Africa.

The various expeditions that had ascended the Nile could never manage to reach the mysterious source of that river. According to the narrative of the German doctor, Ferdinand Werne, the expedition attempted in 1840, under the auspices of Mehemet Ali, stopped at Gondokoro, between the fourth and fifth parallels of north latitude.

In 1855, Brun-Rollet, a native of Savoy, appointed consul for Sardinia in Eastern Soudan, to take the place of Vaudey, who had just died, set out from Karthoum, and, under the name of Yacoub the merchant, trading in gums and ivory, got as far as Belenia, beyond the fourth degree, but had to return in ill-health to Karthoum, where he died in 1857.

Neither Dr. Penney — the head of the Egyptian medical service, who, in a small steamer, penetrated one degree beyond Gondokoro, and then came back to die of exhaustion at Karthoum — nor Miani, the Venetian, who, turning the cataracts below Gondokoro, reached the second parallel — nor the Maltese trader, Andrea Debono, who pushed his journey up the Nile still farther — could work their way beyond the apparently impassable limit.

In 1859, M. Guillaume Lejean, intrusted with a mission by the French Government, reached Karthoum by way of the Red Sea, and embarked upon the Nile with a retinue of twenty-one hired men and twenty soldiers, but he could not get past Gondokoro, and ran extreme risk of his life among the negro tribes, who were in full revolt. The expedition directed by M. d’Escayrac de Lauture made an equally unsuccessful attempt to reach the famous sources of the Nile.

This fatal limit invariably brought every traveller to a halt. In ancient times, the ambassadors of Nero reached the ninth degree of latitude, but in eighteen centuries only from five to six degrees, or from three hundred to three hundred and sixty geographical miles, were gained.

Many travellers endeavored to reach the sources of the Nile by taking their point of departure on the eastern coast of Africa.

Between 1768 and 1772 the Scotch traveller, Bruce,

set out from Massowah, a port of Abyssinia, traversed the

Tigre, visited the ruins of Axum, saw the sources of the

Nile where they did not exist, and obtained no serious result.

In 1844, Dr. Krapf, an Anglican missionary, founded an establishment at Monbaz, on the coast of Zanguebar, and, in company with the Rev. Dr. Rebmann, discovered two mountain-ranges three hundred miles from the coast. These were the mountains of Kilimandjaro and Kenia, which Messrs. de Heuglin and Thornton have partly scaled so recently.

In 1845, Maizan, the French explorer, disembarked, alone, at Bagamayo, directly opposite to Zanzibar, and got as far as Deje-la-Mhora, where the chief caused him to be put to death in the most cruel torment.

In 1859, in the month of August, the young traveller, Roscher, from Hamburg, set out with a caravan of Arab merchants, reached Lake Nyassa, and was there assassinated while he slept.

Finally, in 1857, Lieutenants Burton and Speke, both officers in the Bengal army, were sent by the London Geographical Society to explore the great African lakes, and on the 17th of June they quitted Zanzibar, and plunged directly into the west.

After four months of incredible suffering, their baggage having been pillaged, and their attendants beaten and slain, they arrived at Kazeh, a sort of central rendezvous for traders and caravans. They were in the midst of the country of the Moon, and there they collected some precious documents concerning the manners, government, religion, fauna, and flora of the region. They next made for the first of the great lakes, the one named Tanganayika, situated between the third and eighth degrees of south latitude. They reached it on the 14th of February, 1858, and visited the various tribes residing on its banks, the most of whom are cannibals.

They departed again on the 26th of May, and reentered Kazeh on the 20th of June. There Burton, who was completely worn out, lay ill for several months, during which time Speke made a push to the northward of more than three hundred miles, going as far as Lake Okeracua, which he came in sight of on the 3d of August; but he could descry only the opening of it at latitude two degrees thirty minutes.

He reached Kazeh, on his return, on the 25th of August, and, in company with Burton, again took up the route to Zanzibar, where they arrived in the month of March in the following year. These two daring explorers then reembarked for England; and the Geographical Society of Paris decreed them its annual prize medal.

Dr. Ferguson carefully remarked that they had not gone beyond the second degree of south latitude, nor the twenty-ninth of east longitude.

The problem, therefore, was how to link the explorations of Burton and Speke with those of Dr. Barth, since to do so was to undertake to traverse an extent of more than twelve degrees of territory.

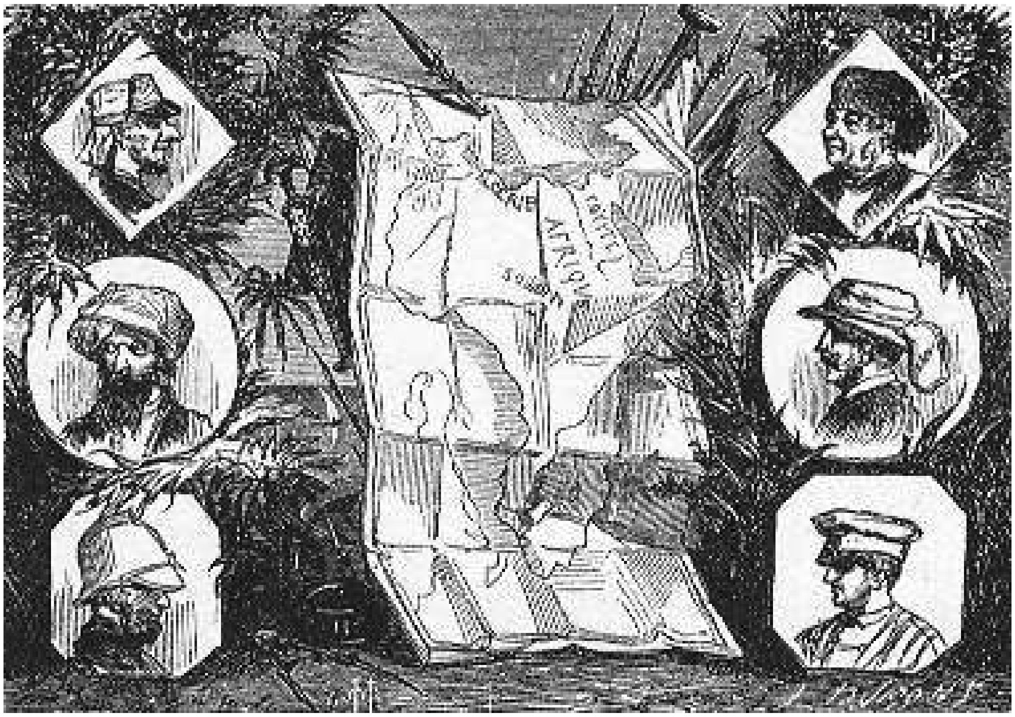
AFRICA

CHAPTER FIFTH.

Kennedy's Dreams. — Articles and Pronouns in the Plural. — Dick's Insinuations. — A Promenade over the Map of Africa. — What is contained between two Points of the Compass. — Expeditions now on foot. — Speke and Grant. — Krapf, De Decken, and De Heuglin.

Dr. Ferguson energetically pushed the preparations for his departure, and in person superintended the construction of his balloon, with certain modifications; in regard to which he observed the most absolute silence. For a long time past he had been applying himself to the study of the Arab language and the various Mandingoe idioms, and, thanks to his talents as a polyglot, he had made rapid progress.

In the mean while his friend, the sportsman, never let him out of his sight — afraid, no doubt, that the doctor might take his departure, without saying a word to anybody. On this subject, he regaled him with the most persuasive arguments, which, however, did NOT persuade Samuel Ferguson, and wasted his breath in pathetic entreaties, by which the latter seemed to be but slightly moved. In fine, Dick felt that the doctor was slipping through his fingers.

The poor Scot was really to be pitied. He could not look upon the azure vault without a sombre terror: when asleep, he felt oscillations that made his head reel; and every night he had visions of being swung aloft at immeasurable heights.

We must add that, during these fearful nightmares, he once or twice fell out of bed. His first care then was to show Ferguson a severe contusion that he had received on the cranium. “And yet,” he would add, with warmth, “that was at the height of only three feet — not an inch more — and such a bump as this! Only think, then!”

This insinuation, full of sad meaning as it was, did not seem to touch the doctor’s heart.

“We’ll not fall,” was his invariable reply.

“But, still, suppose that we WERE to fall!”

“We will NOT fall!”

This was decisive, and Kennedy had nothing more to say.

What particularly exasperated Dick was, that the doctor seemed completely to lose sight of his personality — of his — Kennedy’s — and to look upon him as irrevocably destined to become his aerial companion. Not even the shadow of a doubt was ever suggested; and Samuel made an intolerable misuse of the first person plural:

“‘We’ are getting along; ‘we’ shall be ready on the — — ; ‘we’ shall start on the — — ,” etc. etc.

And then there was the singular possessive adjective:

“‘Our’ balloon; ‘our’ car; ‘our’ expedition.”

And the same in the plural, too:

“‘Our’ preparations; ‘our’ discoveries; ‘our’ ascensions.”

Dick shuddered at them, although he was determined not to go; but he did not want to annoy his friend. Let us also disclose the fact that, without knowing exactly why himself, he had sent to Edinburgh for a certain selection of heavy clothing, and his best hunting-gear and fire-arms.

One day, after having admitted that, with an overwhelming run of good-luck, there MIGHT be one chance of success in a thousand, he pretended to yield entirely to the doctor’s wishes; but, in order to still put off the journey, he opened the most varied series of subterfuges. He threw himself back upon questioning the utility of the expedition — its opportuneness, etc. This discovery of the sources of the Nile, was it likely to be of any use? — Would one have really labored for the welfare of humanity? — When, after all, the African tribes should have been civilized, would they be any happier? — Were folks certain that civilization had not its chosen abode there rather than in Europe? — Perhaps! — And then, couldn’t one wait a little longer? — The trip across Africa would certainly be accomplished some day, and in a less hazardous manner. — In another month, or in six months before the year was over, some explorer would undoubtedly come in — etc. etc.

These hints produced an effect exactly opposite to what was desired or intended, and the doctor trembled with impatience.

“Are you willing, then, wretched Dick — are you willing, false friend — that this glory should belong to another? Must I then be untrue to my past history; recoil before obstacles that are not serious; requite with cowardly hesitation what both the English Government and the Royal Society of London have done for me?”

“But,” resumed Kennedy, who made great use of that conjunction.

“But,” said the doctor, “are you not aware that my journey is to compete with the success of the expeditions now on foot? Don’t you know that fresh explorers are advancing toward the centre of Africa?”

“Still — ”

“Listen to me, Dick,” and cast your eyes over that map.”

Dick glanced over it, with resignation.

“Now, ascend the course of the Nile.”

“I have ascended it,” replied the Scotchman, with docility.

“Stop at Gondokoro.”

“I am there.”

And Kennedy thought to himself how easy such a trip was — on the map!

“Now, take one of the points of these dividers and let it rest upon that place beyond which the most daring explorers have scarcely gone.”

“I have done so.”

“And now look along the coast for the island of Zanzibar, in latitude six degrees south.”

“I have it.”

“Now, follow the same parallel and arrive at Kazeh.”

“I have done so.”

“Run up again along the thirty-third degree of longitude to the opening of Lake Oukereoue, at the point where Lieutenant Speke had to halt.”

“I am there; a little more, and I should have tumbled into the lake.”

“Very good! Now, do you know what we have the right to suppose, according to the information given by the tribes that live along its shores?”

“I haven’t the least idea.”

“Why, that this lake, the lower extremity of which is in two degrees and thirty minutes, must extend also two degrees and a half above the equator.”

“Really!”

“Well from this northern extremity there flows a stream which must necessarily join the Nile, if it be not the Nile itself.”

“That is, indeed, curious.”

“Then, let the other point of your dividers rest upon that extremity of Lake Oukereoue.”

“It is done, friend Ferguson.”

“Now, how many degrees can you count between the two points?”

“Scarcely two.”

“And do you know what that means, Dick?”

“Not the least in the world.”

“Why, that makes scarcely one hundred and twenty miles — in other words, a nothing.”

“Almost nothing, Samuel.”

“Well, do you know what is taking place at this moment?”

“No, upon my honor, I do not.”

“Very well, then, I’ll tell you. The Geographical Society regard as very important the exploration of this lake of which Speke caught a glimpse. Under their auspices, Lieutenant (now Captain) Speke has associated with him Captain Grant, of the army in India; they have put themselves at the head of a numerous and well-equipped expedition; their mission is to ascend the lake and return to Gondokoro; they have received a subsidy of more than five thousand pounds, and the Governor of the Cape of Good Hope has placed Hottentot soldiers at their disposal; they set out from Zanzibar at the close of October, 1860. In the mean while John Petherick, the English consul at the city of Karthoum, has received about seven hundred pounds from the foreign office; he is to equip a steamer at Karthoum, stock it with sufficient provisions, and make his way to Gondokoro; there, he will await Captain Speke’s caravan, and be able to replenish its supplies to some extent.”

“Well planned,” said Kennedy.

“You can easily see, then, that time presses if we are to take part in these exploring labors. And that is not all, since, while some are thus advancing with sure steps to the discovery of the sources of the Nile, others are penetrating to the very heart of Africa.”

“On foot?” said Kennedy.

“Yes, on foot,” rejoined the doctor, without noticing the insinuation. “Doctor Krapf proposes to push forward, in the west, by way of the Djob, a river lying under the equator. Baron de Decken has already set out from Monbaz, has reconnoitred the mountains of Kenaia and Kilimandjaro, and is now plunging in toward the centre.”

“But all this time on foot?”

“On foot or on mules.”

“Exactly the same, so far as I am concerned,” ejaculated Kennedy.

“Lastly,” resumed the doctor, “M. de Heuglin, the Austrian vice-consul at Karthoum, has just organized a very important expedition, the first aim of which is to search for the traveller Vogel, who, in 1853, was sent into the Soudan to associate himself with the labors of Dr. Barth. In 1856, he quitted Bornou, and determined to explore the unknown country that lies between Lake Tchad and Darfur. Nothing has been seen of him since that time. Letters that were received in Alexandria, in 1860, said that he was killed at the order of the King of Wadai; but other letters, addressed by Dr. Hartmann to the traveller’s father, relate that, according to the recital of a felatah of Bornou, Vogel was merely held as a prisoner at Wara. All hope is not then lost. Hence, a committee has been organized under the presidency of the Regent of Saxe-Cogurg-Gotha; my friend Petermann is its secretary; a national subscription has provided for the expense of the expedition, whose strength has been increased by the voluntary accession of several learned men, and M. de Heuglin set out from Massowah, in the month of June. While engaged in looking for Vogel, he is also to explore all the country between the Nile and Lake Tchad, that is to say, to knit together the operations of Captain Speke and those of Dr. Barth, and then Africa will have been traversed from east to west.”*

* After the departure of Dr. Ferguson, it was ascertained that M. de Heuglin, owing to some disagreement, took a route different from the one assigned to his expedition, the command of the latter having been transferred to Mr. Muntzinger.

“Well,” said the canny Scot, “since every thing is getting on so well, what’s the use of our going down there?”

Dr. Ferguson made no reply, but contented himself with a significant shrug of the shoulders.

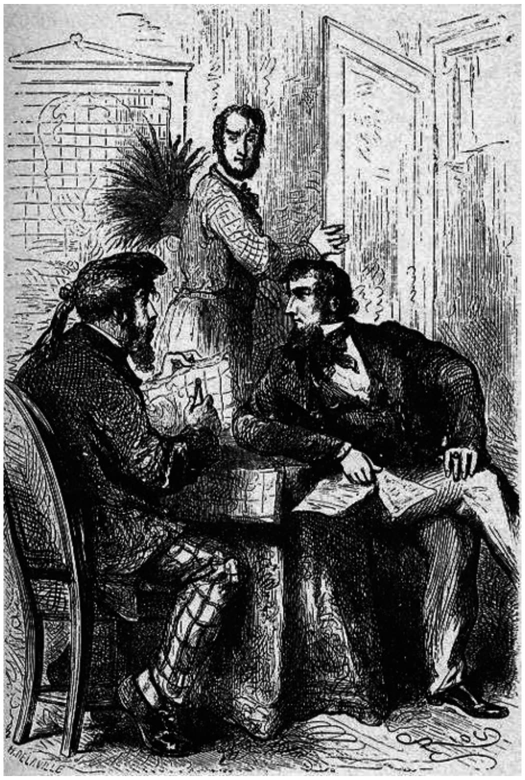

CHAPTER SIXTH.

A Servant — match him! — He can see the Satellites of Jupiter. — Dick and Joe hard at it. — Doubt and Faith. — The Weighing Ceremony. — Joe and Wellington. — He gets a Half-crown.

Dr. Ferguson had a servant who answered with alacrity to the name of Joe. He was an excellent fellow, who testified the most absolute confidence in his master, and the most unlimited devotion to his interests, even anticipating his wishes and orders, which were always intelligently executed. In fine, he was a Caleb without the growling, and a perfect pattern of constant good-humor. Had he been made on purpose for the place, it could not have been better done. Ferguson put himself entirely in his hands, so far as the ordinary details of existence were concerned, and he did well. Incomparable, whole-souled Joe! a servant who orders your dinner; who likes what you like; who packs your trunk, without forgetting your socks or your linen; who has charge of your keys and your secrets, and takes no advantage of all this!

But then, what a man the doctor was in the eyes of this worthy Joe! With what respect and what confidence the latter received all his decisions! When Ferguson had spoken, he would be a fool who should attempt to question the matter. Every thing he thought was exactly right; every thing he said, the perfection of wisdom; every thing he ordered to be done, quite feasible; all that he undertook, practicable; all that he accomplished, admirable. You might have cut Joe to pieces — not an agreeable operation, to be sure — and yet he would not have altered his opinion of his master.

So, when the doctor conceived the project of crossing Africa through the air, for Joe the thing was already done; obstacles no longer existed; from the moment when the doctor had made up his mind to start, he had arrived — along with his faithful attendant, too, for the noble fellow knew, without a word uttered about it, that he would be one of the party.

Moreover, he was just the man to render the greatest service by his intelligence and his wonderful agility. Had the occasion arisen to name a professor of gymnastics for the monkeys in the Zoological Garden (who are smart enough, by-the-way!), Joe would certainly have received the appointment. Leaping, climbing, almost flying — these were all sport to him.

If Ferguson was the head and Kennedy the arm, Joe was to be the right hand of the expedition. He had, already, accompanied his master on several journeys, and had a smattering of science appropriate to his condition and style of mind, but he was especially remarkable for a sort of mild philosophy, a charming turn of optimism. In his sight every thing was easy, logical, natural, and, consequently, he could see no use in complaining or grumbling.

Among other gifts, he possessed a strength and range of vision that were perfectly surprising. He enjoyed, in common with Moestlin, Kepler’s professor, the rare faculty of distinguishing the satellites of Jupiter with the naked eye, and of counting fourteen of the stars in the group of Pleiades, the remotest of them being only of the ninth magnitude. He presumed none the more for that; on the contrary, he made his bow to you, at a distance, and when occasion arose he bravely knew how to use his eyes.

With such profound faith as Joe felt in the doctor, it is not to be wondered at that incessant discussions sprang up between him and Kennedy, without any lack of respect to the latter, however.

One doubted, the other believed; one had a prudent foresight, the other blind confidence. The doctor, however, vibrated between doubt and confidence; that is to say, he troubled his head with neither one nor the other.

“Well, Mr. Kennedy,” Joe would say.

“Well, my boy?”

“The moment’s at hand. It seems that we are to sail for the moon.”

“You mean the Mountains of the Moon, which are not quite so far off. But, never mind, one trip is just as dangerous as the other!”

“Dangerous! What! with a man like Dr. Ferguson?”

“I don’t want to spoil your illusions, my good Joe; but this undertaking of his is nothing more nor less than the act of a madman. He won’t go, though!”

“He won’t go, eh? Then you haven’t seen his balloon at Mitchell’s factory in the Borough?”

“I’ll take precious good care to keep away from it!”

“Well, you’ll lose a fine sight, sir. What a splendid thing it is! What a pretty shape! What a nice car! How snug we’ll feel in it!”

“Then you really think of going with your master?”

“I?” answered Joe, with an accent of profound conviction. “Why, I’d go with him wherever he pleases! Who ever heard of such a thing? Leave him to go off alone, after we’ve been all over the world together! Who would help him, when he was tired? Who would give him a hand in climbing over the rocks? Who would attend him when he was sick? No, Mr. Kennedy, Joe will always stick to the doctor!”

“You’re a fine fellow, Joe!”

“But, then, you’re coming with us!”

“Oh! certainly,” said Kennedy; “that is to say, I will go with you up to the last moment, to prevent Samuel even then from being guilty of such an act of folly! I will follow him as far as Zanzibar, so as to stop him there, if possible.”

“You’ll stop nothing at all, Mr. Kennedy, with all respect to you, sir. My master is no hare-brained person; he takes a long time to think over what he means to do, and then, when he once gets started, the Evil One himself couldn’t make him give it up.”

“Well, we’ll see about that.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, sir — but then, the main thing is, to have you with us. For a hunter like you, sir, Africa’s a great country. So, either way, you won’t be sorry for the trip.”

“No, that’s a fact, I shan’t be sorry for it, if I can get this crazy man to give up his scheme.”

“By-the-way,” said Joe, “you know that the weighing comes off to-day.”

“The weighing — what weighing?”

“Why, my master, and you, and I, are all to be weighed to-day!”

“What! like horse-jockeys?”

“Yes, like jockeys. Only, never fear, you won’t be expected to make yourself lean, if you’re found to be heavy. You’ll go as you are.”

“Well, I can tell you, I am not going to let myself be weighed,” said Kennedy, firmly.

“But, sir, it seems that the doctor’s machine requires it.”

“Well, his machine will have to do without it.”

“Humph! and suppose that it couldn’t go up, then?”

“Egad! that’s all I want!”

“Come! come, Mr. Kennedy! My master will be sending for us directly.”

“I shan’t go.”

“Oh! now, you won’t vex the doctor in that way!”

“Aye! that I will.”

“Well!” said Joe with a laugh, “you say that because he’s not here; but when he says to your face, ‘Dick!’ (with all respect to you, sir,) ‘Dick, I want to know exactly how much you weigh,’ you’ll go, I warrant it.”

“No, I will NOT go!”

At this moment the doctor entered his study, where this discussion had been taking place; and, as he came in, cast a glance at Kennedy, who did not feel altogether at his ease.

“Dick,” said the doctor, “come with Joe; I want to know how much you both weigh.”

“But — ”

“You may keep your hat on. Come!” And Kennedy went.

They repaired in company to the workshop of the Messrs. Mitchell, where one of those so-called “Roman” scales was in readiness. It was necessary, by the way, for the doctor to know the weight of his companions, so as to fix the equilibrium of his balloon; so he made Dick get up on the platform of the scales. The latter, without making any resistance, said, in an undertone:

“Oh! well, that doesn’t bind me to any thing.”

“One hundred and fifty-three pounds,” said the doctor, noting it down on his tablets.

“Am I too heavy?”

“Why, no, Mr. Kennedy!” said Joe; “and then, you know, I am light to make up for it.”

So saying, Joe, with enthusiasm, took his place on the scales, and very nearly upset them in his ready haste. He struck the attitude of Wellington where he is made to ape Achilles, at Hyde-Park entrance, and was superb in it, without the shield.

“One hundred and twenty pounds,” wrote the doctor.

“Ah! ha!” said Joe, with a smile of satisfaction

And why did he smile? He never could tell himself.

“It’s my turn now,” said Ferguson — and he put down one hundred and thirty-five pounds to his own account.

“All three of us,” said he, “do not weigh much more than four hundred pounds.”

“But, sir,” said Joe, “if it was necessary for your expedition, I could make myself thinner by twenty pounds, by not eating so much.”

“Useless, my boy!” replied the doctor. “You may eat as much as you like, and here’s half-a-crown to buy you the ballast.”

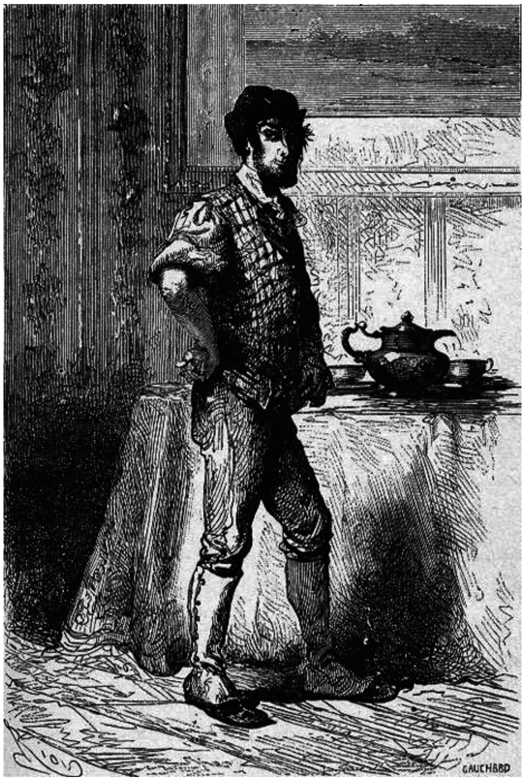

CHAPTER SEVENTH.

Geometrical Details. — Calculation of the Capacity of the Balloon. — The Double Receptacle. — The Covering. — The Car. — The Mysterious Apparatus. — The Provisions and Stores. — The Final Summing up.

Dr. Ferguson had long been engaged upon the details of his expedition. It is easy to comprehend that the balloon — that marvellous vehicle which was to convey him through the air — was the constant object of his solicitude.

At the outset, in order not to give the balloon too ponderous dimensions, he had decided to fill it with hydrogen gas, which is fourteen and a half times lighter than common air. The production of this gas is easy, and it has given the greatest satisfaction hitherto in aerostatic experiments.

The doctor, according to very accurate calculations, found that, including the articles indispensable to his journey and his apparatus, he should have to carry a weight of 4,000 pounds; therefore he had to find out what would be the ascensional force of a balloon capable of raising such a weight, and, consequently, what would be its capacity.

A weight of four thousand pounds is represented by a displacement of the air amounting to forty-four thousand eight hundred and forty-seven cubic feet; or, in other words, forty-four thousand eight hundred and forty-seven cubic feet of air weigh about four thousand pounds.

By giving the balloon these cubic dimensions, and filling it with hydrogen gas, instead of common air — the former being fourteen and a half times lighter and weighing therefore only two hundred and seventy-six pounds — a difference of three thousand seven hundred and twenty-four pounds in equilibrium is produced; and it is this difference between the weight of the gas contained in the balloon and the weight of the surrounding atmosphere that constitutes the ascensional force of the former.

However, were the forty-four thousand eight hundred and forty-seven cubic feet of gas of which we speak, all introduced into the balloon, it would be entirely filled; but that would not do, because, as the balloon continued to mount into the more rarefied layers of the atmosphere, the gas within would dilate, and soon burst the cover containing it. Balloons, then, are usually only two-thirds filled.

But the doctor, in carrying out a project known only to himself, resolved to fill his balloon only one-half; and, since he had to carry forty-four thousand eight hundred and forty-seven cubic feet of gas, to give his balloon nearly double capacity he arranged it in that elongated, oval shape which has come to be preferred. The horizontal diameter was fifty feet, and the vertical diameter seventy-five feet. He thus obtained a spheroid, the capacity of which amounted, in round numbers, to ninety thousand cubic feet.

Could Dr. Ferguson have used two balloons, his chances of success would have been increased; for, should one burst in the air, he could, by throwing out ballast, keep himself up with the other. But the management of two balloons would, necessarily, be very difficult, in view of the problem how to keep them both at an equal ascensional force.

After having pondered the matter carefully, Dr. Ferguson, by an ingenious arrangement, combined the advantages of two balloons, without incurring their inconveniences. He constructed two of different sizes, and inclosed the smaller in the larger one. His external balloon, which had the dimensions given above, contained a less one of the same shape, which was only forty-five feet in horizontal, and sixty-eight feet in vertical diameter. The capacity of this interior balloon was only sixty-seven thousand cubic feet: it was to float in the fluid surrounding it. A valve opened from one balloon into the other, and thus enabled the aeronaut to communicate with both.

This arrangement offered the advantage, that if gas had to be let off, so as to descend, that which was in the outer balloon would go first; and, were it completely emptied, the smaller one would still remain intact. The outer envelope might then be cast off as a useless encumbrance; and the second balloon, left free to itself, would not offer the same hold to the currents of air as a half-inflated one must needs present.

Moreover, in case of an accident happening to the outside balloon, such as getting torn, for instance, the other would remain intact.

The balloons were made of a strong but light Lyons silk, coated with gutta percha. This gummy, resinous substance is absolutely water-proof, and also resists acids and gas perfectly. The silk was doubled, at the upper extremity of the oval, where most of the strain would come.

Such an envelope as this could retain the inflating fluid for any length of time. It weighed half a pound per nine square feet. Hence the surface of the outside balloon being about eleven thousand six hundred square feet, its envelope weighed six hundred and fifty pounds. The envelope of the second or inner balloon, having nine thousand two hundred square feet of surface, weighed only about five hundred and ten pounds, or say eleven hundred and sixty pounds for both.

The network that supported the car was made of very strong hempen cord, and the two valves were the object of the most minute and careful attention, as the rudder of a ship would be.

The car, which was of a circular form and fifteen feet in diameter, was made of wicker-work, strengthened with a slight covering of iron, and protected below by a system of elastic springs, to deaden the shock of collision. Its weight, along with that of the network, did not exceed two hundred and fifty pounds.

In addition to the above, the doctor caused to be constructed two sheet-iron chests two lines in thickness. These were connected by means of pipes furnished with stopcocks. He joined to these a spiral, two inches in diameter, which terminated in two branch pieces of unequal length, the longer of which, however, was twenty-five feet in height and the shorter only fifteen feet.

These sheet-iron chests were embedded in the car in such a way as to take up the least possible amount of space. The spiral, which was not to be adjusted until some future moment, was packed up, separately, along with a very strong Buntzen electric battery. This apparatus had been so ingeniously combined that it did not weigh more than seven hundred pounds, even including twenty-five gallons of water in another receptacle.

The instruments provided for the journey consisted of two barometers, two thermometers, two compasses, a sextant, two chronometers, an artificial horizon, and an altazimuth, to throw out the height of distant and inaccessible objects.

The Greenwich Observatory had placed itself at the doctor’s disposal. The latter, however, did not intend to make experiments in physics; he merely wanted to be able to know in what direction he was passing, and to determine the position of the principal rivers, mountains, and towns.

He also provided himself with three thoroughly tested iron anchors, and a light but strong silk ladder fifty feet in length.

He at the same time carefully weighed his stores of provision, which consisted of tea, coffee, biscuit, salted meat, and pemmican, a preparation which comprises many nutritive elements in a small space. Besides a sufficient stock of pure brandy, he arranged two water-tanks, each of which contained twenty-two gallons.

The consumption of these articles would necessarily, little by little, diminish the weight to be sustained, for it must be remembered that the equilibrium of a balloon floating in the atmosphere is extremely sensitive. The loss of an almost insignificant weight suffices to produce a very noticeable displacement.

Nor did the doctor forget an awning to shelter the car, nor the coverings and blankets that were to be the bedding of the journey, nor some fowling pieces and rifles, with their requisite supply of powder and ball.

Here is the summing up of his various items, and their weight, as he computed it:

Ferguson………………………	135 pounds.
Kennedy……………………….	153 “
Joe…………………………..	120 “
Weight of the outside balloon……	650 “
Weight of the second balloon…….	510 “

Car and network	280 “
Anchors, instruments, awnings, and sundry utensils, guns, coverings, etc	190 “
Meat, pemmican, biscuits, tea, coffee, brandy	386 “
Water	400 “
Apparatus	700 “
Weight of the hydrogen	276 “
Ballast	200 “
	— — -
	4,000 pounds.

Such were the items of the four thousand pounds that Dr. Ferguson proposed to carry up with him. He took only two hundred pounds of ballast for “unforeseen emergencies,” as he remarked, since otherwise he did not expect to use any, thanks to the peculiarity of his apparatus.

CHAPTER EIGHTH.

Joe's Importance. — The Commander of the Resolute. — Kennedy's Arsenal. — Mutual Amenities. — The Farewell Dinner. — Departure on the 21st of February. — The Doctor's Scientific Sessions. — Duveyrier. — Livingstone. — Details of the Aerial Voyage. — Kennedy silenced.

About the 10th of February, the preparations were pretty well completed; and the balloons, firmly secured, one within the other, were altogether finished. They had been subjected to a powerful pneumatic pressure in all parts, and the test gave excellent evidence of their solidity and of the care applied in their construction.

Joe hardly knew what he was about, with delight. He trotted incessantly to and fro between his home in Greek Street, and the Mitchell establishment, always full of business, but always in the highest spirits, giving details of the affair to people who did not even ask him, so proud was he, above all things, of being permitted to accompany his master. I have even a shrewd suspicion that what with showing the balloon, explaining the plans and views of the doctor, giving folks a glimpse of the latter, through a half-opened window, or pointing him out as he passed along the streets, the clever scamp earned a few half-crowns, but we must not find fault with him for that. He had as much right as anybody else to speculate upon the admiration and curiosity of his contemporaries.

On the 16th of February, the Resolute cast anchor near Greenwich. She was a screw propeller of eight hundred tons, a fast sailer, and the very vessel that had been sent out to the polar regions, to revictual the last expedition of Sir James Ross. Her commander, Captain Bennet, had the name of being a very amiable person, and he took a particular interest in the doctor's expedition, having been one of that gentleman's admirers for a long time. Bennet was rather a man of science than a man of war, which did not, however, prevent his vessel from carrying four carronades, that had never hurt any body, to be sure, but had performed the most pacific duty in the world.

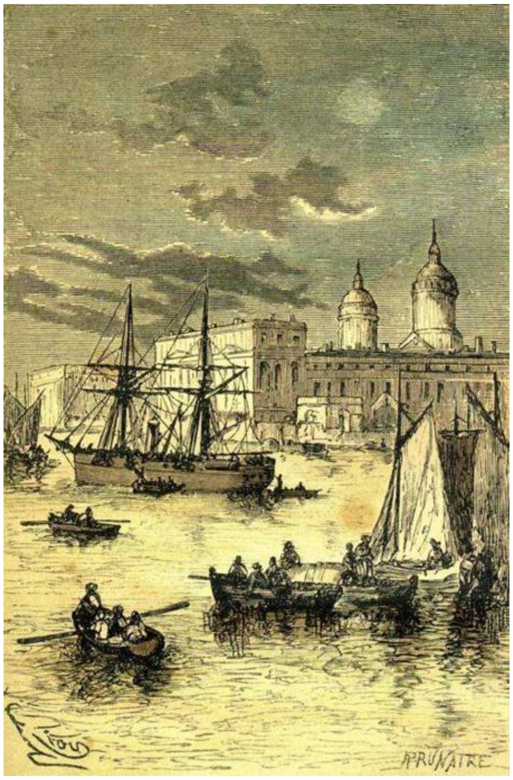

The hold of the Resolute was so arranged as to find a stowing-place for the balloon. The latter was shipped with the greatest precaution on the 18th of February, and was then carefully deposited at the bottom of the vessel in such a way as to prevent accident. The car and its accessories, the anchors, the cords, the supplies, the water-tanks, which were to be filled on arriving, all were embarked and put away under Ferguson's own eyes.

Ten tons of sulphuric acid and ten tons of iron filings, were put on board for the future production of the hydrogen gas. The quantity was more than enough, but it was well to be provided against accident. The apparatus to be employed in manufacturing the gas, including some thirty empty casks, was also stowed away in the hold.

These various preparations were terminated on the 18th of February, in the evening. Two state-rooms, comfortably fitted up, were ready for the reception of Dr. Ferguson and his friend Kennedy. The latter, all the while swearing that he would not go, went on board with a regular arsenal of hunting weapons, among which were two double-barrelled breech-loading fowling-pieces, and a rifle that had withstood every test, of the make of Purdey, Moore & Dickson, at Edinburgh. With such a weapon a marksman would find no difficulty in lodging a bullet in the eye of a chamois at the distance of two thousand paces. Along with these implements, he had two of Colt's six-shooters, for unforeseen emergencies. His powder-case, his cartridge-pouch, his lead, and his bullets, did not exceed a certain weight prescribed by the doctor.

The three travellers got themselves to rights on board during the working-hours of February 19th. They were received with much distinction by the captain and his officers, the doctor continuing as reserved as ever, and thinking of nothing but his expedition. Dick seemed a good deal moved, but was unwilling to betray it; while Joe was fairly dancing and breaking out in laughable remarks. The worthy fellow soon became the jester and merry-andrew of the boatswain's mess, where a berth had been kept for him.

On the 20th, a grand farewell dinner was given to Dr. Ferguson and Kennedy by the Royal Geographical Society. Commander Bennet and his officers were present at the entertainment, which was signalized by copious libations and numerous toasts. Healths were drunk, in sufficient abundance to guarantee all the guests a lifetime of centuries. Sir Francis M — — presided, with restrained but dignified feeling.

To his own supreme confusion, Dick Kennedy came in for a large share in the jovial felicitations of the night. After having drunk to the “intrepid Ferguson, the glory of England,” they had to drink to “the no less courageous Kennedy, his daring companion.”

Dick blushed a good deal, and that passed for modesty; whereupon the applause redoubled, and Dick blushed again.

A message from the Queen arrived while they were at dessert. Her Majesty offered her compliments to the two travellers, and expressed her wishes for their safe and successful journey. This, of course, rendered imperative fresh toasts to “Her most gracious Majesty.”

At midnight, after touching farewells and warm shaking of hands, the guests separated.

The boats of the Resolute were in waiting at the stairs of Westminster Bridge. The captain leaped in, accompanied by his officers and passengers, and the rapid current of the Thames, aiding the strong arms of the rowers, bore them swiftly to Greenwich. In an hour’s time all were asleep on board.

The next morning, February 21st, at three o’clock, the furnaces began to roar; at five, the anchors were weighed, and the Resolute, powerfully driven by her screw, began to plough the water toward the mouth of the Thames.

It is needless to say that the topic of conversation with every one on board was Dr. Ferguson’s enterprise. Seeing and hearing the doctor soon inspired everybody with such confidence that, in a very short time, there was no one, excepting the incredulous Scotchman, on the steamer who had the least doubt of the perfect feasibility and success of the expedition.

During the long, unoccupied hours of the voyage, the doctor held regular sittings, with lectures on geographical science, in the officers’ mess-room. These young men felt an intense interest in the discoveries made during the last forty years in Africa; and the doctor related to them the explorations of Barth, Burton, Speke, and Grant, and depicted the wonders of this vast, mysterious country, now thrown open on all sides to the investigations of science. On the north, the young Duveyrier was exploring Sahara, and bringing the chiefs of the Touaregs to Paris. Under the inspiration of the French Government, two expeditions were preparing, which, descending from the north, and coming from the west, would cross each other at Timbuctoo. In the south, the indefatigable Livingstone was still advancing toward the equator; and, since March, 1862, he had, in company with Mackenzie, ascended the river Rovoonia. The nineteenth century would, assuredly, not pass, contended the doctor, without Africa having been compelled to surrender the secrets she has kept locked up in her bosom for six thousand years.

But the interest of Dr. Ferguson’s hearers was excited to the highest pitch when he made known to them, in detail, the preparations for his own journey. They took pleasure in verifying his calculations; they discussed them; and the doctor frankly took part in the discussion.

As a general thing, they were surprised at the limited quantity of provision that he took with him; and one day one of the officers questioned him on that subject.

“That peculiar point astonishes you, does it?” said

Ferguson.

“It does, indeed.”

“But how long do you think my trip is going to last? Whole months? If so, you are greatly mistaken. Were it to be a long one, we should be lost; we should never get back. But you must know that the distance from Zanzibar to the coast of Senegal is only thirty-five hundred — say four thousand miles. Well, at the rate of two hundred and forty miles every twelve hours, which does not come near the rapidity of our railroad trains, by travelling day and night, it would take only seven days to cross Africa!”

“But then you could see nothing, make no geographical observations, or reconnoitre the face of the country.”

“Ah!” replied the doctor, “if I am master of my balloon — if I can ascend and descend at will, I shall stop when I please, especially when too violent currents of air threaten to carry me out of my way with them.”

“And you will encounter such,” said Captain Bennet. “There are tornadoes that sweep at the rate of more than two hundred and forty miles per hour.”

“You see, then, that with such speed as that, we could cross Africa in twelve hours. One would rise at Zanzibar, and go to bed at St. Louis!”

“But,” rejoined the officer, “could any balloon withstand the wear and tear of such velocity?”

“It has happened before,” replied Ferguson.

“And the balloon withstood it?”

“Perfectly well. It was at the time of the coronation of Napoleon, in 1804. The aeronaut, Gernerin, sent up a balloon at Paris, about eleven o’clock in the evening. It bore the following inscription, in letters of gold: ‘Paris, 25 Frimaire; year XIII; Coronation of the Emperor Napoleon by his Holiness, Pius VII.’ On the next morning, the inhabitants of Rome saw the same balloon soaring above the Vatican, whence it crossed the Campagna, and finally fluttered down into the lake of Bracciano. So you see, gentlemen, that a balloon can resist such velocities.”

“A balloon — that might be; but a man?” insinuated Kennedy.

“Yes, a man, too! — for the balloon is always motionless with reference to the air that surrounds it. What moves is the mass of the atmosphere itself: for instance, one may light a taper in the car, and the flame will not even waver. An aeronaut in Garnerin’s balloon would not have suffered in the least from the speed. But then I have no occasion to attempt such velocity; and if I can anchor to some tree, or some favorable inequality of the ground, at night, I shall not fail to do so. Besides, we take provision for two months with us, after all; and there is nothing to prevent our skilful huntsman here from furnishing game in abundance when we come to alight.”

“Ah! Mr. Kennedy,” said a young midshipman, with envious eyes, “what splendid shots you’ll have!”

“Without counting,” said another, “that you’ll have the glory as well as the sport!”

“Gentlemen,” replied the hunter, stammering with confusion, “I greatly — appreciate — your compliments — but they — don’t — belong to me.”

“You!” exclaimed every body, “don’t you intend to go?”

“I am not going!”

“You won’t accompany Dr. Ferguson?”

“Not only shall I not accompany him, but I am here so as to be present at the last moment to prevent his going.”

Every eye was now turned to the doctor.

“Never mind him!” said the latter, calmly. “This is a matter that we can’t argue with him. At heart he knows perfectly well that he IS going.”

“By Saint Andrew!” said Kennedy, “I swear — ”

“Swear to nothing, friend Dick; you have been ganged and weighed — you and your powder, your guns, and your bullets; so don’t let us say anything more about it.”

And, in fact, from that day until the arrival at Zanzibar, Dick never opened his mouth. He talked neither about that nor about anything else. He kept absolutely silent.

CHAPTER NINTH.

They double the Cape. — The Forecastle. — A Course of Cosmography by Professor Joe. — Concerning the Method of guiding Balloons. — How to seek out Atmospheric Currents. — Eureka.

The Resolute plunged along rapidly toward the Cape of Good Hope, the weather continuing fine, although the sea ran heavier.

On the 30th of March, twenty-seven days after the departure from London, the Table Mountain loomed up on the horizon. Cape City lying at the foot of an amphitheatre of hills, could be distinguished through the ship's glasses, and soon the Resolute cast anchor in the port. But the captain touched there only to replenish his coal bunkers, and that was but a day's job. On the morrow, he steered away to the south'ard, so as to double the southernmost point of Africa, and enter the Mozambique Channel.

This was not Joe's first sea-voyage, and so, for his part, he soon found himself at home on board; every body liked him for his frankness and good-humor. A considerable share of his master's renown was reflected upon him. He was listened to as an oracle, and he made no more mistakes than the next one.

So, while the doctor was pursuing his descriptive course of lecturing in the officers' mess, Joe reigned supreme on the forecastle, holding forth in his own peculiar manner, and making history to suit himself — a style of procedure pursued, by the way, by the greatest historians of all ages and nations.

The topic of discourse was, naturally, the aerial voyage. Joe had experienced some trouble in getting the rebellious spirits to believe in it; but, once accepted by them, nothing connected with it was any longer an impossibility to the imaginations of the seamen stimulated by Joe's harangues.

Our dazzling narrator persuaded his hearers that, after this trip, many others still more wonderful would be undertaken. In fact, it was to be but the first of a long series of superhuman expeditions.

"You see, my friends, when a man has had a taste of that kind of travelling, he can't get along afterward with any other; so, on our next expedition, instead of going off to one side, we'll go right ahead, going up, too, all the time."

"Humph! then you'll go to the moon!" said one of the crowd, with a stare of amazement.

"To the moon!" exclaimed Joe, "To the moon! pooh! that's too common. Every body might go to the moon, that way. Besides, there's no water there, and you have to carry such a lot of it along with you. Then you have to take air along in bottles, so as to breathe."

"Ay! ay! that's all right! But can a man get a drop of the real stuff there?" said a sailor who liked his toddy.

"Not a drop!" was Joe's answer. "No! old fellow, not in the moon. But we're going to skip round among those little twinklers up there — the stars — and the splendid planets that my old man so often talks about. For instance, we'll commence with Saturn — "

“That one with the ring?” asked the boatswain.

“Yes! the wedding-ring — only no one knows what’s become of his wife!”

“What? will you go so high up as that?” said one of the ship-boys, gaping with wonder. “Why, your master must be Old Nick himself.”

“Oh! no, he’s too good for that.”

“But, after Saturn — what then?” was the next inquiry of his impatient audience.

“After Saturn? Well, we’ll visit Jupiter. A funny place that is, too, where the days are only nine hours and a half long — a good thing for the lazy fellows — and the years, would you believe it — last twelve of ours, which is fine for folks who have only six months to live. They get off a little longer by that.”

“Twelve years!” ejaculated the boy.

“Yes, my youngster; so that in that country you’d be toddling after your mammy yet, and that old chap yonder, who looks about fifty, would only be a little shaver of four and a half.”

“Blazes! that’s a good ‘un!” shouted the whole forecastle together.

“Solemn truth!” said Joe, stoutly.

“But what can you expect? When people will stay in this world, they learn nothing and keep as ignorant as bears. But just come along to Jupiter and you’ll see. But they have to look out up there, for he’s got satellites that are not just the easiest things to pass.”

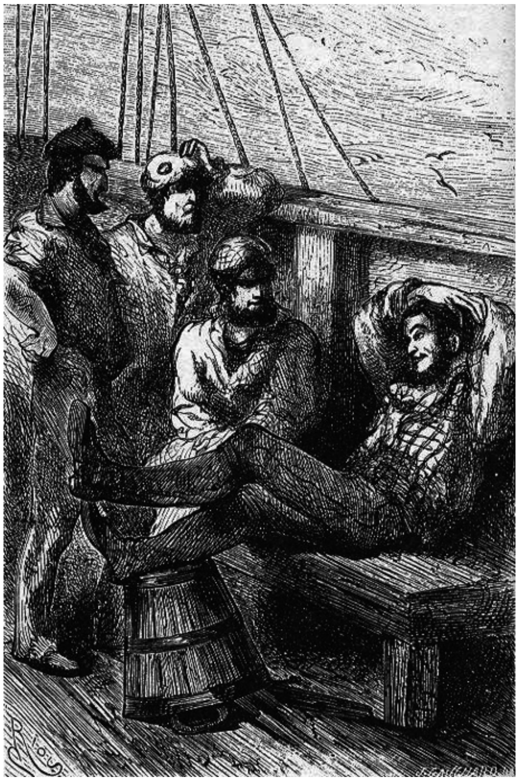

All the men laughed, but they more than half believed him. Then he went on to talk about Neptune, where seafaring men get a jovial reception, and Mars, where the military get the best of the sidewalk to such an extent that folks can hardly stand it. Finally, he drew them a heavenly picture of the delights of Venus.

“And when we get back from that expedition,” said the indefatigable narrator, “they’ll decorate us with the Southern Cross that shines up there in the Creator’s button-hole.”

“Ay, and you’d have well earned it!” said the sailors.

Thus passed the long evenings on the forecastle in merry chat, and during the same time the doctor went on with his instructive discourses.

One day the conversation turned upon the means of directing balloons, and the doctor was asked his opinion about it.

“I don’t think,” said he, “that we shall succeed in finding out a system of directing them. I am familiar with all the plans attempted and proposed, and not one has succeeded, not one is practicable. You may readily understand that I have occupied my mind with this subject, which was, necessarily, so interesting to me, but I have not been able to solve the problem with the appliances now known to mechanical science. We would have to discover a motive power of extraordinary force, and almost impossible lightness of machinery. And, even then, we could not resist atmospheric currents of any considerable strength. Until now, the effort has been rather to direct the car than the balloon, and that has been one great error.”

“Still there are many points of resemblance between a balloon and a ship which is directed at will.”

“Not at all,” retorted the doctor, “there is little or no similarity between the two cases. Air is infinitely less dense than water, in which the ship is only half submerged, while the whole bulk of a balloon is plunged in the atmosphere, and remains motionless with reference to the element that surrounds it.”

“You think, then, that aerostatic science has said its last word?”

“Not at all! not at all! But we must look for another point in the case, and if we cannot manage to guide our balloon, we must, at least, try to keep it in favorable aerial currents. In proportion as we ascend, the latter become much more uniform and flow more constantly in one direction. They are no longer disturbed by the mountains and valleys that traverse the surface of the globe, and these, you know, are the chief cause of the variations of the wind and the inequality of their force. Therefore, these zones having been once determined, the balloon will merely have to be placed in the currents best adapted to its destination.”

“But then,” continued Captain Bennet, “in order to reach them, you must keep constantly ascending or descending. That is the real difficulty, doctor.”

“And why, my dear captain?”

“Let us understand one another. It would be a difficulty and an obstacle only for long journeys, and not for short aerial excursions.”

“And why so, if you please?”

“Because you can ascend only by throwing out ballast; you can descend only after letting off gas, and by these processes your ballast and your gas are soon exhausted.”

“My dear sir, that’s the whole question. There is the only difficulty that science need now seek to overcome. The problem is not how to guide the balloon, but how to take it up and down without expending the gas which is its strength, its life-blood, its soul, if I may use the expression.”

“You are right, my dear doctor; but this problem is not yet solved; this means has not yet been discovered.”

“I beg your pardon, it HAS been discovered.”

“By whom?”

“By me!”

“By you?”

“You may readily believe that otherwise I should not have risked this expedition across Africa in a balloon. In twenty-four hours I should have been without gas!”

“But you said nothing about that in England?”

“No! I did not want to have myself overhauled in public. I saw no use in that. I made my preparatory experiments in secret and was satisfied. I have no occasion, then, to learn any thing more from them.”

“Well! doctor, would it be proper to ask what is your secret?”

“Here it is, gentlemen — the simplest thing in the world!”

The attention of his auditory was now directed to the doctor in the utmost degree as he quietly proceeded with his explanation.

CHAPTER TENTH.

Former Experiments. — The Doctor’s Five Receptacles. — The Gas Cylinder. — The Calorifere. — The System of Manoeuvring. — Success certain.

“The attempt has often been made, gentlemen,” said the doctor, “to rise and descend at will, without losing ballast or gas from the balloon. A French aeronaut, M. Meunier, tried to accomplish this by compressing air in an inner receptacle. A Belgian, Dr. Van Hecke, by means of wings and paddles, obtained a vertical power that would have sufficed in most cases, but the practical results secured from these experiments have been insignificant.

“I therefore resolved to go about the thing more directly; so, at the start, I dispensed with ballast altogether, excepting as a provision for cases of special emergency, such as the breakage of my apparatus, or the necessity of ascending very suddenly, so as to avoid unforeseen obstacles.

“My means of ascent and descent consist simply in dilating or contracting the gas that is in the balloon by the application of different temperatures, and here is the method of obtaining that result.

“You saw me bring on board with the car several cases or receptacles, the use of which you may not have understood. They are five in number.

“The first contains about twenty-five gallons of water, to which I add a few drops of sulphuric acid, so as to augment its capacity as a conductor of electricity, and then I decompose it by means of a powerful Buntzen battery. Water, as you know, consists of two parts of hydrogen to one of oxygen gas.

“The latter, through the action of the battery, passes at its positive pole into the second receptacle. A third receptacle, placed above the second one, and of double its capacity, receives the hydrogen passing into it by the negative pole.

“Stopcocks, of which one has an orifice twice the size of the other, communicate between these receptacles and a fourth one, which is called the mixture reservoir, since in it the two gases obtained by the decomposition of the water do really commingle. The capacity of this fourth tank is about forty-one cubic feet.

“On the upper part of this tank is a platinum tube provided with a stopcock.

“You will now readily understand, gentlemen, the apparatus that I have described to you is really a gas cylinder and blow-pipe for oxygen and hydrogen, the heat of which exceeds that of a forge fire.

“This much established, I proceed to the second part of my apparatus. From the lowest part of my balloon, which is hermetically closed, issue two tubes a little distance apart. The one starts among the upper layers of the hydrogen gas, the other amid the lower layers.

“These two pipes are provided at intervals with strong jointings of india-rubber, which enable them to move in harmony with the oscillations of the balloon.

“Both of them run down as far as the car, and lose themselves in an iron receptacle of cylindrical form, which is called the heat-tank. The latter is closed at its two ends by two strong plates of the same metal.

“The pipe running from the lower part of the balloon runs into this cylindrical receptacle through the lower plate; it penetrates the latter and then takes the form of a helicoidal or screw-shaped spiral, the rings of which, rising one over the other, occupy nearly the whole of the height of the tank. Before again issuing from it, this spiral runs into a small cone with a concave base, that is turned downward in the shape of a spherical cap.

“It is from the top of this cone that the second pipe issues, and it runs, as I have said, into the upper beds of the balloon.

“The spherical cap of the small cone is of platinum, so as not to melt by the action of the cylinder and blow-pipe, for the latter are placed upon the bottom of the iron tank in the midst of the helicoidal spiral, and the extremity of their flame will slightly touch the cap in question.

“You all know, gentlemen, what a calorifere, to heat apartments, is. You know how it acts. The air of the apartments is forced to pass through its pipes, and is then released with a heightened temperature. Well, what I have just described to you is nothing more nor less than a calorifere.

“In fact, what is it that takes place? The cylinder once lighted, the hydrogen in the spiral and in the concave cone becomes heated, and rapidly ascends through the pipe that leads to the upper part of the balloon. A vacuum is created below, and it attracts the gas in the lower parts; this becomes heated in its turn, and is continually replaced; thus, an extremely rapid current of gas is established in the pipes and in the spiral, which issues from the balloon and then returns to it, and is heated over again, incessantly.

“Now, the cases increase 1/480 of their volume for each degree of heat applied. If, then, I force the temperature 18 degrees, the hydrogen of the balloon will dilate 18/480 or 1614 cubic feet, and will, therefore, displace

1614 more cubic feet of air, which will increase its ascensional power by 160 pounds. This is equivalent to throwing out that weight of ballast. If I augment the temperature by 180 degrees, the gas will dilate 180/480 and will displace 16,740 cubic feet more, and its ascensional force will be augmented by 1,600 pounds.

“Thus, you see, gentlemen, that I can easily effect very considerable changes of equilibrium. The volume of the balloon has been calculated in such manner that, when half inflated, it displaces a weight of air exactly equal to that of the envelope containing the hydrogen gas, and of the car occupied by the passengers, and all its apparatus and accessories. At this point of inflation, it is in exact equilibrium with the air, and neither mounts nor descends.

“In order, then, to effect an ascent, I give the gas a temperature superior to the temperature of the surrounding air by means of my cylinder. By this excess of heat it obtains a larger distention, and inflates the balloon more. The latter, then, ascends in proportion as I heat the hydrogen.

“The descent, of course, is effected by lowering the heat of the cylinder, and letting the temperature abate. The ascent would be, usually, more rapid than the descent; but that is a fortunate circumstance, since it is of no importance to me to descend rapidly, while, on the other hand, it is by a very rapid ascent that I avoid obstacles. The real danger lurks below, and not above.

“Besides, as I have said, I have a certain quantity of ballast, which will enable me to ascend more rapidly still, when necessary. My valve, at the top of the balloon, is nothing more nor less than a safety-valve. The balloon always retains the same quantity of hydrogen, and the variations of temperature that I produce in the midst of this shut-up gas are, of themselves, sufficient to provide for all these ascending and descending movements.

“Now, gentlemen, as a practical detail, let me add this:

“The combustion of the hydrogen and of the oxygen at the point of the cylinder produces solely the vapor or steam of water. I have, therefore, provided the lower part of the cylindrical iron box with a scape-pipe, with a valve operating by means of a pressure of two atmospheres; consequently, so soon as this amount of pressure is attained, the steam escapes of itself.

“Here are the exact figures: 25 gallons of water, separated into its constituent elements, yield 200 pounds of oxygen and 25 pounds of hydrogen. This represents, at atmospheric tension, 1,800 cubic feet of the former and 3,780 cubic feet of the latter, or 5,670 cubic feet, in all, of the mixture. Hence, the stopcock of my cylinder, when fully open, expends 27 cubic feet per hour, with a flame at least six times as strong as that of the large lamps used for lighting streets. On an average, then, and in order to keep myself at a very moderate elevation, I should not burn more than nine cubic feet per hour, so that my twenty-five gallons of water represent six hundred and thirty-six hours of aerial navigation, or a little more than twenty-six days.

“Well, as I can descend when I please, to replenish my stock of water on the way, my trip might be indefinitely prolonged.

“Such, gentlemen, is my secret. It is simple, and, like most simple things, it cannot fail to succeed. The dilation and contraction of the gas in the balloon is my means of locomotion, which calls for neither cumbersome wings, nor any other mechanical motor. A calorifere to produce the changes of temperature, and a cylinder to generate the heat, are neither inconvenient nor heavy. I think, therefore, that I have combined all the elements of success."

Dr. Ferguson here terminated his discourse, and was most heartily applauded. There was not an objection to make to it; all had been foreseen and decided.

"However," said the captain, "the thing may prove dangerous."

"What matters that," replied the doctor, "provided that it be practicable?"

CHAPTER ELEVENTH.

The Arrival at Zanzibar. — The English Consul. — Ill-will of the Inhabitants. — The Island of Koumbeni. — The Rain-Makers. — Inflation of the Balloon. — Departure on the 18th of April. — The last Good-by. — The Victoria.

An invariably favorable wind had accelerated the progress of the Resolute toward the place of her destination. The navigation of the Mozambique Channel was especially calm and pleasant. The agreeable character of the trip by sea was regarded as a good omen of the probable issue of the trip through the air. Every one looked forward to the hour of arrival, and sought to give the last touch to the doctor’s preparations.

At length the vessel hove in sight of the town of Zanzibar, upon the island of the same name, and, on the 15th of April, at 11 o’clock in the morning, she anchored in the port.

The island of Zanzibar belongs to the Imaum of Muscat, an ally of France and England, and is, undoubtedly, his finest settlement. The port is frequented by a great many vessels from the neighboring countries.

The island is separated from the African coast only by a channel, the greatest width of which is but thirty miles.

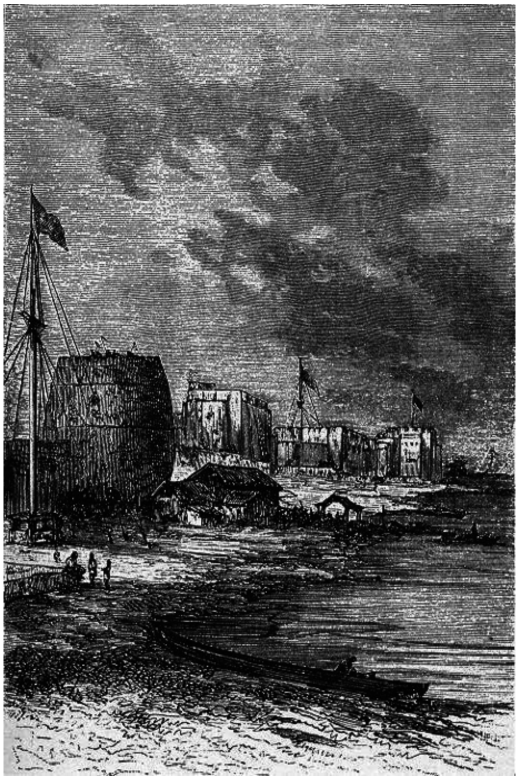

It has a large trade in gums, ivory, and, above all, in “ebony,” for Zanzibar is the great slave-market. Thither converges all the booty captured in the battles which the chiefs of the interior are continually fighting. This traffic extends along the whole eastern coast, and as far as the Nile latitudes. Mr. G. Lejean even reports that he has seen it carried on, openly, under the French flag.

Upon the arrival of the Resolute, the English consul at Zanzibar came on board to offer his services to the doctor, of whose projects the European newspapers had made him aware for a month past. But, up to that moment, he had remained with the numerous phalanx of the incredulous.

“I doubted,” said he, holding out his hand to Dr. Ferguson, “but now I doubt no longer.”

He invited the doctor, Kennedy, and the faithful Joe, of course, to his own dwelling. Through his courtesy, the doctor was enabled to have knowledge of the various letters that he had received from Captain Speke. The captain and his companions had suffered dreadfully from hunger and bad weather before reaching the Ugogo country. They could advance only with extreme difficulty, and did not expect to be able to communicate again for a long time.

“Those are perils and privations which we shall manage to avoid,” said the doctor.

The baggage of the three travellers was conveyed to the consul’s residence. Arrangements were made for disembarking the balloon upon the beach at Zanzibar. There was a convenient spot, near the signal-mast, close by an immense building, that would serve to shelter it from the east winds. This huge tower, resembling a tun standing on one end, beside which the famous Heidelberg tun would have seemed but a very ordinary barrel, served as a fortification, and on its platform were stationed Belootchees, armed with lances. These Belootchees are a kind of brawling, good-for-nothing Janizaries.

But, when about to land the balloon, the consul was informed that the population of the island would oppose their doing so by force. Nothing is so blind as fanatical passion. The news of the arrival of a Christian, who was to ascend into the air, was received with rage. The negroes, more exasperated than the Arabs, saw in this project an attack upon their religion. They took it into their heads that some mischief was meant to the sun and the moon. Now, these two luminaries are objects of veneration to the African tribes, and they determined to oppose so sacrilegious an enterprise.

The consul, informed of their intentions, conferred with Dr. Ferguson and Captain Bennet on the subject. The latter was unwilling to yield to threats, but his friend dissuaded him from any idea of violent retaliation.

“We shall certainly come out winners,” he said. “Even the imaum’s soldiers will lend us a hand, if we need it. But, my dear captain, an accident may happen in a moment, and it would require but one unlucky blow to do the balloon an irreparable injury, so that the trip would be totally defeated; therefore we must act with the greatest caution.”

“But what are we to do? If we land on the coast of Africa, we shall encounter the same difficulties. What are we to do?”

“Nothing is more simple,” replied the consul. “You observe those small islands outside of the port; land your balloon on one of them; surround it with a guard of sailors, and you will have no risk to run.”

“Just the thing!” said the doctor, “and we shall be entirely at our ease in completing our preparations.”

The captain yielded to these suggestions, and the Resolute was headed for the island of Koumbeni. During the morning of the 16th April, the balloon was placed in safety in the middle of a clearing in the great woods, with which the soil is studded.

Two masts, eighty feet in height, were raised at the same distance from each other. Blocks and tackle, placed at their extremities, afforded the means of elevating the balloon, by the aid of a transverse rope. It was then entirely uninflated. The interior balloon was fastened to the exterior one, in such manner as to be lifted up in the same way. To the lower end of each balloon were fixed the pipes that served to introduce the hydrogen gas.

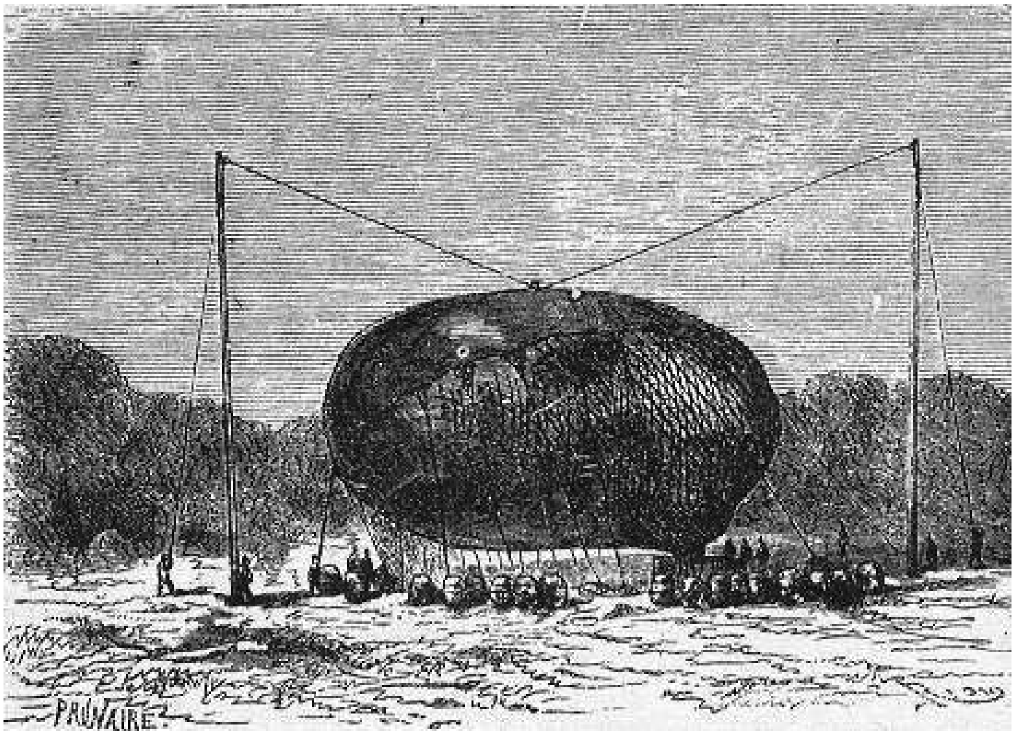

The whole day, on the 17th, was spent in arranging the apparatus destined to produce the gas; it consisted of some thirty casks, in which the decomposition of water was effected by means of iron-filings and sulphuric acid placed together in a large quantity of the first-named fluid. The hydrogen passed into a huge central cask, after having been washed on the way, and thence into each balloon by the conduit-pipes. In this manner each of them received a certain accurately-ascertained quantity of gas. For this purpose, there had to be employed eighteen hundred and sixty-six pounds of sulphuric acid, sixteen thousand and fifty pounds of iron, and nine thousand one hundred and sixty-six gallons of water. This operation commenced on the following night, about three A.M. and lasted nearly eight hours. The next day, the balloon, covered with its network, undulated gracefully above its car, which was held to the ground by numerous sacks of earth. The inflating apparatus was put together with extreme care, and the pipes issuing from the balloon were securely fitted to the cylindrical case.

The anchors, the cordage, the instruments, the travelling-wraps, the awning, the provisions, and the arms, were put in the place assigned to them in the car. The supply of water was procured at Zanzibar. The two hundred pounds of ballast were distributed in fifty bags placed at the bottom of the car, but within arm’s-reach.

These preparations were concluded about five o’clock in the evening, while sentinels kept close watch around the island, and the boats of the Resolute patrolled the channel.

The blacks continued to show their displeasure by grimaces and contortions. Their obi-men, or wizards, went up and down among the angry throngs, pouring fuel on the flame of their fanaticism; and some of the excited wretches, more furious and daring than the rest, attempted to get to the island by swimming, but they were easily driven off.

Thereupon the sorceries and incantations commenced; the “rain-makers,” who pretend to have control over the clouds, invoked the storms and the “stone-showers,” as the blacks call hail, to their aid. To compel them to do so, they plucked leaves of all the different trees that grow in that country, and boiled them over a slow fire, while, at the same time, a sheep was killed by thrusting a long needle into its heart. But, in spite of all their ceremonies, the sky remained clear and beautiful, and they profited nothing by their slaughtered sheep and their ugly grimaces.

The blacks then abandoned themselves to the most furious orgies, and got fearfully drunk on “tembo,” a kind of ardent spirits drawn from the cocoa-nut tree, and an extremely heady sort of beer called “togwa.” Their chants, which were destitute of all melody, but were sung in excellent time, continued until far into the night.

About six o’clock in the evening, the captain assembled the travellers and the officers of the ship at a farewell repast in his cabin. Kennedy, whom nobody ventured to question now, sat with his eyes riveted on Dr. Ferguson, murmuring indistinguishable words. In other respects, the dinner was a gloomy one. The approach of the final moment filled everybody with the most serious reflections. What had fate in store for these daring adventurers? Should they ever again find themselves in the midst of their friends, or seated at the domestic hearth? Were their travelling apparatus to fail, what would become of them, among those ferocious savage tribes, in regions that had never been explored, and in the midst of boundless deserts?

Such thoughts as these, which had been dim and vague until then, or but slightly regarded when they came up, returned upon their excited fancies with intense force at this parting moment. Dr. Ferguson, still cold and impassible, talked of this, that, and the other; but he strove in vain to overcome this infectious gloominess. He utterly failed.

As some demonstration against the personal safety of the doctor and his companions was feared, all three slept that night on board the Resolute. At six o’clock in the morning they left their cabin, and landed on the island of Koumbeni.

The balloon was swaying gently to and fro in the morning breeze; the sand-bags that had held it down were now replaced by some twenty strong-armed sailors, and Captain Bennet and his officers were present to witness the solemn departure of their friends.

At this moment Kennedy went right up to the doctor, grasped his hand, and said:

“Samuel, have you absolutely determined to go?”

“Solemnly determined, my dear Dick.”

“I have done every thing that I could to prevent this expedition, have I not?”

“Every thing!”

“Well, then, my conscience is clear on that score, and

I will go with you.”

“I was sure you would!” said the doctor, betraying in his features swift traces of emotion.

At last the moment of final leave-taking arrived. The captain and his officers embraced their dauntless friends with great feeling, not excepting even Joe, who, worthy fellow, was as proud and happy as a prince. Every one in the party insisted upon having a final shake of the doctor’s hand.

At nine o’clock the three travellers got into their car. The doctor lit the combustible in his cylinder and turned the flame so as to produce a rapid heat, and the balloon, which had rested on the ground in perfect equipoise, began to rise in a few minutes, so that the seamen had to slacken the ropes they held it by. The car then rose about twenty feet above their heads.

“My friends!” exclaimed the doctor, standing up between his two companions, and taking off his hat, “let us give our aerial ship a name that will bring her good luck! let us christen her Victoria!”

This speech was answered with stentorian cheers of

“Huzza for the Queen! Huzza for Old England!”

At this moment the ascensional force of the balloon increased prodigiously, and Ferguson, Kennedy, and Joe, waved a last good-by to their friends.

“Let go all!” shouted the doctor, and at the word the Victoria shot rapidly up into the sky, while the four carronades on board the Resolute thundered forth a parting salute in her honor.

CHAPTER TWELFTH

Crossing the Strait. — The Mrima. — Dick's Remark and Joe's Proposition. — A Recipe for Coffee-making. — The Uzaramo. — The Unfortunate Maizan. — Mount Dathumi. — The Doctor's Cards. — Night under a Nopal.

The air was pure, the wind moderate, and the balloon ascended almost perpendicularly to a height of fifteen hundred feet, as indicated by a depression of two inches in the barometric column.

At this height a more decided current carried the balloon toward the southwest. What a magnificent spectacle was then outspread beneath the gaze of the travellers! The island of Zanzibar could be seen in its entire extent, marked out by its deeper color upon a vast planisphere; the fields had the appearance of patterns of different colors, and thick clumps of green indicated the groves and thickets.

The inhabitants of the island looked no larger than insects. The huzzaing and shouting were little by little lost in the distance, and only the discharge of the ship's guns could be heard in the concavity beneath the balloon, as the latter sped on its flight.

“How fine that is!” said Joe, breaking silence for the first time.

He got no reply. The doctor was busy observing the variations of the barometer and noting down the details of his ascent.

Kennedy looked on, and had not eyes enough to take in all that he saw.

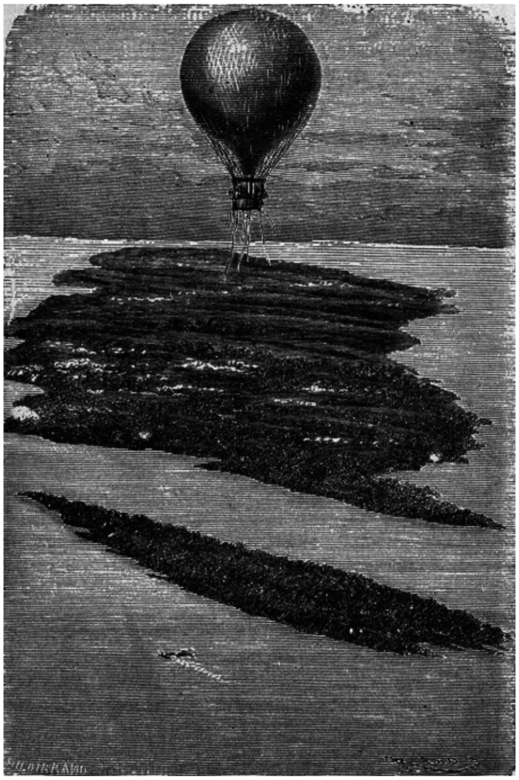

The rays of the sun coming to the aid of the heating cylinder, the tension of the gas increased, and the Victoria attained the height of twenty-five hundred feet.

The Resolute looked like a mere cockle-shell, and the African coast could be distinctly seen in the west marked out by a fringe of foam.

“You don’t talk?” said Joe, again.

“We are looking!” said the doctor, directing his spy-glass toward the mainland.

“For my part, I must talk!”

“As much as you please, Joe; talk as much as you like!”

And Joe went on alone with a tremendous volley of exclamations. The “ohs!” and the “ahs!” exploded one after the other, incessantly, from his lips.

During his passage over the sea the doctor deemed it best to keep at his present elevation. He could thus reconnoitre a greater stretch of the coast. The thermometer and the barometer, hanging up inside of the half-opened awning, were always within sight, and a second barometer suspended outside was to serve during the night watches.

At the end of about two hours the Victoria, driven along at a speed of a little more than eight miles, very visibly neared the coast of the mainland. The doctor, thereupon, determined to descend a little nearer to the ground. So he moderated the flame of his cylinder, and the balloon, in a few moments, had descended to an altitude only three hundred feet above the soil.

It was then found to be passing just over the Mrima country, the name of this part of the eastern coast of Africa. Dense borders of mango-trees protected its margin, and the ebb-tide disclosed to view their thick roots, chafed and gnawed by the teeth of the Indian Ocean. The sands which, at an earlier period, formed the coast-line, rounded away along the distant horizon, and Mount Nguru reared aloft its sharp summit in the northwest.

The Victoria passed near to a village which the doctor found marked upon his chart as Kaole. Its entire population had assembled in crowds, and were yelling with anger and fear, at the same time vainly directing their arrows against this monster of the air that swept along so majestically away above all their powerless fury.

The wind was setting to the southward, but the doctor felt no concern on that score, since it enabled him the better to follow the route traced by

Captains Burton and Speke.

Kennedy had, at length, become as talkative as Joe, and the two kept up a continual interchange of admiring interjections and exclamations.

“Out upon stage-coaches!” said one.

“Steamers indeed!” said the other.

“Railroads! eh? rubbish!” put in Kennedy, “that you travel on, without seeing the country!”

“Balloons! they’re the sort for me!” Joe would add. “Why, you don’t feel yourself going, and Nature takes the trouble to spread herself out before one’s eyes!”

“What a splendid sight! What a spectacle! What a delight! a dream in a hammock!”

“Suppose we take our breakfast?” was Joe’s unpoetical change of tune, at last, for the keen, open air had mightily sharpened his appetite.

“Good idea, my boy!”

“Oh! it won’t take us long to do the cooking — biscuit and potted meat?”

“And as much coffee as you like,” said the doctor. “I give you leave to borrow a little heat from my cylinder. There’s enough and to spare, for that matter, and so we shall avoid the risk of a conflagration.”

“That would be a dreadful misfortune!” ejaculated Kennedy. “It’s the same as a powder-magazine suspended over our heads.”

“Not precisely,” said Ferguson, “but still if the gas were to take fire it would burn up gradually, and we should settle down on the ground, which would be disagreeable; but never fear — our balloon is hermetically sealed.”

“Let us eat a bite, then,” replied Kennedy.

“Now, gentlemen,” put in Joe, “while doing the same as you, I’m going to get you up a cup of coffee that I think you’ll have something to say about.”

“The fact is,” added the doctor, “that Joe, along with a thousand other virtues, has a remarkable talent for the preparation of that delicious beverage: he compounds it of a mixture of various origin, but he never would reveal to me the ingredients.”

“Well, master, since we are so far above-ground, I can tell you the secret. It is just to mix equal quantities of Mocha, of Bourbon coffee, and of Rio Nunez.”

A few moments later, three steaming cups of coffee were served, and topped off a substantial breakfast, which was additionally seasoned by the jokes and repartees of the guests. Each one then resumed his post of observation.

The country over which they were passing was remarkable for its fertility. Narrow, winding paths plunged in beneath the overarching verdure. They swept along above cultivated fields of tobacco, maize, and barley, at full maturity, and here and there immense rice-fields, full of straight stalks and purple blossoms. They could distinguish sheep and goats too, confined in large cages, set up on piles to keep them out of reach of the leopards’ fangs. Luxuriant vegetation spread in wild profuseness over this prodigal soil.

Village after village rang with yells of terror and astonishment at the sight of the Victoria, and Dr. Ferguson prudently kept her above the reach of the barbarian arrows. The savages below, thus baffled, ran together from their huddle of huts and followed the travellers with their vain imprecations while they remained in sight.

At noon, the doctor, upon consulting his map, calculated that they were passing over the Uzaramo* country. The soil was thickly studded with cocoa-nut, papaw, and cotton-wood trees, above which the balloon seemed to disport itself like a bird. Joe found this splendid vegetation a matter of course, seeing that they were in Africa. Kennedy descried some hares and quails that asked nothing better than to get a good shot from his fowling-piece, but it would have been powder wasted, since there was no time to pick up the game.

* U and Ou signify country in the language of that region.

The aeronauts swept on with the speed of twelve miles per hour, and soon were passing in thirty-eight degrees twenty minutes east longitude, over the village of Tounda.

“It was there,” said the doctor, “that Burton and Speke were seized with violent fevers, and for a moment thought their expedition ruined. And yet they were only a short distance from the coast, but fatigue and privation were beginning to tell upon them severely.”

In fact, there is a perpetual malaria reigning throughout the country in question. Even the doctor could hope to escape its effects only by rising above the range of the miasma that exhales from this damp region whence the blazing rays of the sun pump up its poisonous vapors. Once in a while they could descry a caravan resting in a “kraal,” awaiting the freshness and cool of the evening to resume its route. These kraals are wide patches of cleared land, surrounded by hedges and jungles, where traders take shelter against not only the wild beasts, but also the robber tribes of the country. They could see the natives running and scattering in all directions at the sight of the Victoria. Kennedy was keen to get a closer look at them, but the doctor invariably held out against the idea.

“The chiefs are armed with muskets,” he said, “and our balloon would be too conspicuous a mark for their bullets.”

“Would a bullet-hole bring us down?” asked Joe.

“Not immediately; but such a hole would soon become a large torn orifice through which our gas would escape.”

“Then, let us keep at a respectful distance from yon miscreants. What must they think as they see us sailing in the air? I’m sure they must feel like worshipping us!”

“Let them worship away, then,” replied the doctor, “but at a distance. There is no harm done in getting as far away from them as possible. See! the country is already changing its aspect: the villages are fewer and farther between; the mango-trees have disappeared, for their growth ceases at this latitude. The soil is becoming hilly and portends mountains not far off.”

“Yes,” said Kennedy, “it seems to me that I can see some high land on this side.”

“In the west — those are the nearest ranges of the Ourizara — Mount Duthumi, no doubt, behind which I hope to find shelter for the night. I’ll stir up the heat in the cylinder a little, for we must keep at an elevation of five or six hundred feet.”

“That was a grant idea of yours, sir,” said Joe. “It’s mighty easy to manage it; you turn a cock, and the thing’s done.”

“Ah! here we are more at our ease,” said the sportsman, as the balloon ascended; “the reflection of the sun on those red sands was getting to be insupportable.”

“What splendid trees!” cried Joe. “They’re quite natural, but they are very fine! Why a dozen of them would make a forest!”

“Those are baobabs,” replied Dr. Ferguson. “See, there’s one with a trunk fully one hundred feet in circumference. It was, perhaps, at the foot of that very tree that Maizan, the French traveller, expired in 1845, for we are over the village of Deje-la-Mhora, to which he pushed on alone. He was seized by the chief of this region, fastened to the foot of a baobab, and the ferocious black then severed all his joints while the war-song of his tribe was chanted; he then made a gash in the prisoner’s neck, stopped to sharpen his knife, and fairly tore away the poor wretch’s head before it had been cut from the body. The unfortunate Frenchman was but twenty-six years of age.”

“And France has never avenged so hideous a crime?” said Kennedy.

“France did demand satisfaction, and the Said of Zanzibar did all in his power to capture the murderer, but in vain.”

“I move that we don’t stop here!” urged Joe; “let us go up, master, let us go up higher by all means.”

“All the more willingly, Joe, that there is Mount Duthumi right ahead of us. If my calculations be right we shall have passed it before seven o’clock in the evening.”

“Shall we not travel at night?” asked the Scotchman.

“No, as little as possible. With care and vigilance we might do so safely, but it is not enough to sweep across Africa. We want to see it.”

“Up to this time we have nothing to complain of, master. The best cultivated and most fertile country in the world instead of a desert! Believe the geographers after that!”

Let us wait, Joe! we shall see by-and-by.”

About half-past six in the evening the Victoria was directly opposite Mount Duthumi; in order to pass, it had to ascend to a height of more than three thousand feet, and to accomplish that the doctor had only to raise the temperature of his gas eighteen degrees. It might have been correctly said that he held his balloon in his hand. Kennedy had only to indicate to him the obstacles to be surmounted, and the Victoria sped through the air, skimming the summits of the range.

At eight o’clock it descended the farther slope, the acclivity of which was much less abrupt. The anchors were thrown out from the car and one of them, coming in contact with the branches of an enormous nopal, caught on it firmly. Joe at once let himself slide down the rope and secured it. The silk ladder was then lowered to him and he remounted to the car with agility. The balloon now remained perfectly at rest sheltered from the eastern winds.

The evening meal was got ready, and the aeronauts, excited by their day's journey, made a heavy onslaught upon the provisions.

"What distance have we traversed to-day?" asked

Kennedy, disposing of some alarming mouthfuls.

The doctor took his bearings, by means of lunar observations, and consulted the excellent map that he had with him for his guidance. It belonged to the Atlas of "Der Neuester Endeckungen in Afrika" ("The Latest Discoveries in Africa"), published at Gotha by his learned friend Dr. Petermann, and by that savant sent to him. This Atlas was to serve the doctor on his whole journey; for it contained the itinerary of Burton and Speke to the great lakes; the Soudan, according to Dr. Barth; the Lower Senegal, according to Guillaume Lejean; and the Delta of the Niger, by Dr. Blaikie.

Ferguson had also provided himself with a work which combined in one compilation all the notions already acquired concerning the Nile. It was entitled "The Sources of the Nile; being a General Survey of the Basin of that River and of its Head-Stream, with the History of the Nilotic Discovery, by Charles Beke, D.D."

He also had the excellent charts published in the "Bulletins of the Geographical Society of London;" and not a single point of the countries already discovered could, therefore, escape his notice.

Upon tracing on his maps, he found that his latitudinal route had been two degrees, or one hundred and twenty miles, to the westward.

Kennedy remarked that the route tended toward the south; but this direction was satisfactory to the doctor, who desired to reconnoitre the tracks of his predecessors as much as possible. It was agreed that the night should be divided into three watches, so that each of the party should take his turn in watching over the safety of the rest. The doctor took the watch commencing at nine o’clock; Kennedy, the one commencing at midnight; and Joe, the three o’clock morning watch.

So Kennedy and Joe, well wrapped in their blankets, stretched themselves at full length under the awning, and slept quietly; while Dr. Ferguson kept on the lookout.

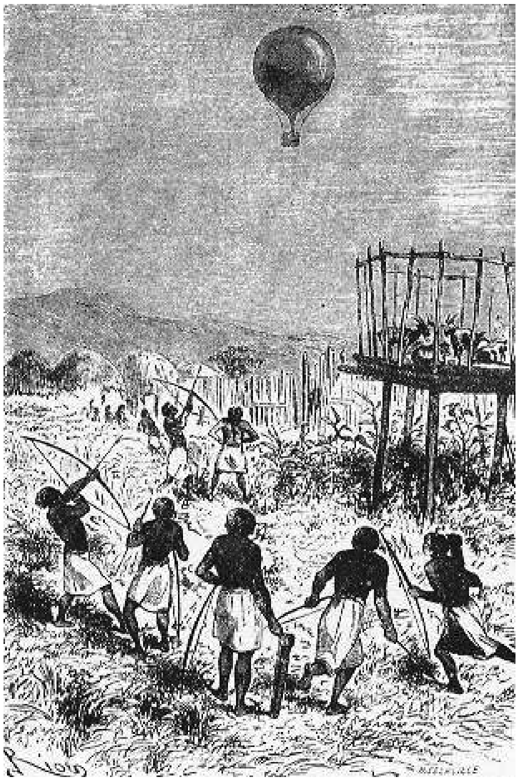

CHAPTER THIRTEENTH.

Change of Weather. — Kennedy has the Fever. — The Doctor's Medicine. — Travels on Land. — The Basin of Imenge. — Mount Rubeho. — Six Thousand Feet Elevation. — A Halt in the Daytime.

The night was calm. However, on Saturday morning, Kennedy, as he awoke, complained of lassitude and feverish chills. The weather was changing. The sky, covered with clouds, seemed to be laying in supplies for a fresh deluge. A gloomy region is that Zungomoro country, where it rains continually, excepting, perhaps, for a couple of weeks in the month of January.

A violent shower was not long in drenching our travellers. Below them, the roads, intersected by "nullahs," a sort of instantaneous torrent, were soon rendered impracticable, entangled as they were, besides, with thorny thickets and gigantic lianas, or creeping vines. The sulphuretted hydrogen emanations, which Captain Burton mentions, could be distinctly smelt.

"According to his statement, and I think he's right," said the doctor, "one could readily believe that there is a corpse hidden behind every thicket."

"An ugly country this!" sighed Joe; "and it seems to me that Mr. Kennedy is none the better for having passed the night in it."

"To tell the truth, I have quite a high fever," said the sportsman.

"There's nothing remarkable about that, my dear Dick, for we are in one of the most unhealthy regions in Africa; but we shall not remain here long; so let's be off."

Thanks to a skilful manoeuvre achieved by Joe, the anchor was disengaged, and Joe reascended to the car by means of the ladder. The doctor vigorously dilated the gas, and the Victoria resumed her flight, driven along by a spanking breeze.

Only a few scattered huts could be seen through the pestilential mists; but the appearance of the country soon changed, for it often happens in Africa that some of the unhealthiest districts lie close beside others that are perfectly salubrious.

Kennedy was visibly suffering, and the fever was mastering his vigorous constitution.

“It won’t do to fall ill, though,” he grumbled; and so saying, he wrapped himself in a blanket, and lay down under the awning.

“A little patience, Dick, and you’ll soon get over this,” said the doctor.

“Get over it! Egad, Samuel, if you’ve any drug in your travelling-chest that will set me on my feet again, bring it without delay. I’ll swallow it with my eyes shut!”

“Oh, I can do better than that, friend Dick; for I can give you a febrifuge that won’t cost any thing.”

“And how will you do that?”

“Very easily. I am simply going to take you up above these clouds that are now deluging us, and remove you from this pestilential atmosphere. I ask for only ten minutes, in order to dilate the hydrogen.”

The ten minutes had scarcely elapsed ere the travellers were beyond the rainy belt of country.

“Wait a little, now, Dick, and you’ll begin to feel the effect of pure air and sunshine.”

“There’s a cure for you!” said Joe; “why, it’s wonderful!”

“No, it’s merely natural.”

“Oh! natural; yes, no doubt of that!”

“I bring Dick into good air, as the doctors do, every day, in Europe, or, as I would send a patient at Martinique to the Pitons, a lofty mountain on that island, to get clear of the yellow fever.”

“Ah! by Jove, this balloon is a paradise!” exclaimed

Kennedy, feeling much better already.

“It leads to it, anyhow!” replied Joe, quite gravely.

It was a curious spectacle — that mass of clouds piled up, at the moment, away below them! The vapors rolled over each other, and mingled together in confused masses of superb brilliance, as they reflected the rays of the sun. The Victoria had attained an altitude of four thousand feet, and the thermometer indicated a certain diminution of temperature. The land below could no longer be seen. Fifty miles away to the westward, Mount Rubeho raised its sparkling crest, marking the limit of the Ugogo country in east longitude thirty-six degrees twenty minutes. The wind was blowing at the rate of twenty miles an hour, but the aeronauts felt nothing of this increased speed. They observed no jar, and had scarcely any sense of motion at all.

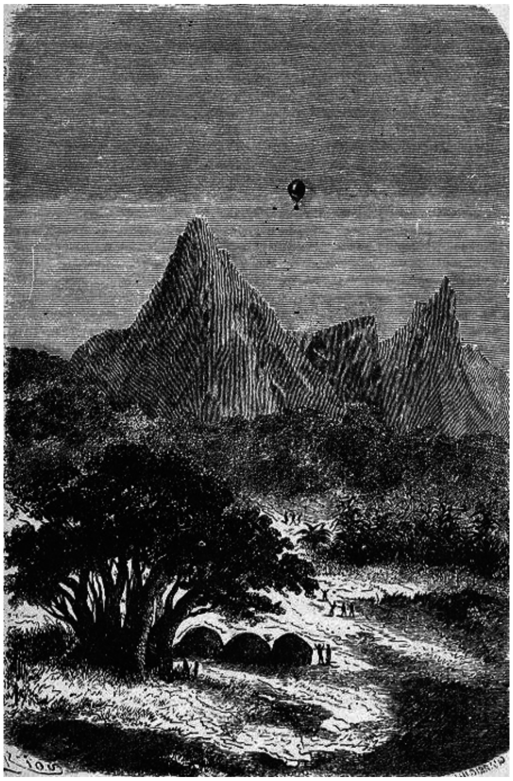

Three hours later, the doctor’s prediction was fully verified. Kennedy no longer felt a single shiver of the fever, but partook of some breakfast with an excellent appetite.

That beats sulphate of quinine!” said the energetic

Scot, with hearty emphasis and much satisfaction.

“Positively,” said Joe, “this is where I’ll have to retire to when I get old!”

About ten o’clock in the morning the atmosphere cleared up, the clouds parted, and the country beneath could again be seen, the Victoria meanwhile rapidly descending. Dr. Ferguson was in search of a current that would carry him more to the northeast, and he found it about six hundred feet from the ground. The country was becoming more broken, and even mountainous. The Zungomoro district was fading out of sight in the east with the last cocoa-nut-trees of that latitude.

Ere long, the crests of a mountain-range assumed a more decided prominence. A few peaks rose here and there, and it became necessary to keep a sharp lookout for the pointed cones that seemed to spring up every moment.

“We’re right among the breakers!” said Kennedy.

“Keep cool, Dick. We shan’t touch them,” was the doctor’s quiet answer.

“It’s a jolly way to travel, anyhow!” said Joe, with his usual flow of spirits.

In fact, the doctor managed his balloon with wondrous dexterity.

“Now, if we had been compelled to go afoot over that drenched soil,” said he, “we should still be dragging along in a pestilential mire. Since our departure from Zanzibar, half our beasts of burden would have died with fatigue. We should be looking like ghosts ourselves, and despair would be seizing on our hearts. We should be in continual squabbles with our guides and porters, and completely exposed to their unbridled brutality. During the daytime, a damp, penetrating, unendurable humidity! At night, a cold frequently intolerable, and the stings of a kind of fly whose bite pierces the thickest cloth, and drives the victim crazy! All this, too, without saying any thing about wild beasts and ferocious native tribes!”

“I move that we don’t try it!” said Joe, in his droll way.

“I exaggerate nothing,” continued Ferguson, “for, upon reading the narratives of such travellers as have had the hardihood to venture into these regions, your eyes would fill with tears.”

About eleven o’clock they were passing over the basin of Imenge, and the tribes scattered over the adjacent hills were impotently menacing the Victoria with their weapons. Finally, she sped along as far as the last undulations of the country which precede Rubeho. These form the last and loftiest chain of the mountains of Usagara.

The aeronauts took careful and complete note of the orographic conformation of the country. The three ramifications mentioned, of which the Duthumi forms the first link, are separated by immense longitudinal plains. These elevated summits consist of rounded cones, between which the soil is bestrewn with erratic blocks of stone and gravelly bowlders. The most abrupt declivity of these mountains confronts the Zanzibar coast, but the western slopes are merely inclined planes. The depressions in the soil are covered with a black, rich loam, on which there is a vigorous vegetation. Various water-courses filter through, toward the east, and work their way onward to flow into the Kingani, in the midst of gigantic clumps of sycamore, tamarind, calabash, and palmyra trees.

“Attention!” said Dr. Ferguson. “We are approaching Rubeho, the name of which signifies, in the language of the country, the ‘Passage of the Winds,’ and we would do well to double its jagged pinnacles at a certain height. If my chart be exact, we are going to ascend to an elevation of five thousand feet.”

“Shall we often have occasion to reach those far upper belts of the atmosphere?”

“Very seldom: the height of the African mountains

appears to be quite moderate compared with that of the

European and Asiatic ranges; but, in any case, our good

Victoria will find no difficulty in passing over them.”

In a very little while, the gas expanded under the action of the heat, and the balloon took a very decided ascensional movement. Besides, the dilation of the hydrogen involved no danger, and only three-fourths of the vast capacity of the balloon was filled when the barometer, by a depression of eight inches, announced an elevation of six thousand feet.

“Shall we go this high very long?” asked Joe.

“The atmosphere of the earth has a height of six thousand fathoms,” said the doctor; “and, with a very large balloon, one might go far. That is what Messrs. Brioschi and Gay-Lussac did; but then the blood burst from their mouths and ears. Respirable air was wanting. Some years ago, two fearless Frenchmen, Messrs. Barral and Bixio, also ventured into the very lofty regions; but their balloon burst — ”

“And they fell?” asked Kennedy, abruptly.

“Certainly they did; but as learned men should always fall — namely, without hurting themselves.”

“Well, gentlemen,” said Joe, “you may try their fall over again, if you like; but, as for me, who am but a dolt, I prefer keeping at the medium height — neither too far up, nor too low down. It won’t do to be too ambitious.”

At the height of six thousand feet, the density of the atmosphere has already greatly diminished; sound is conveyed with difficulty, and the voice is not so easily heard. The view of objects becomes confused; the gaze no longer takes in any but large, quite ill-distinguishable masses; men and animals on the surface become absolutely invisible; the roads and rivers get to look like threads, and the lakes dwindle to ponds.

The doctor and his friends felt themselves in a very anomalous condition; an atmospheric current of extreme velocity was bearing them away beyond arid mountains, upon whose summits vast fields of snow surprised the gaze; while their convulsed appearance told of Titanic travail in the earliest epoch of the world’s existence.

The sun shone at the zenith, and his rays fell perpendicularly upon those lonely summits. The doctor took an accurate design of these mountains, which form four distinct ridges almost in a straight line, the northernmost being the longest.

The Victoria soon descended the slope opposite to the Rubeho, skirting an acclivity covered with woods, and dotted with trees of very deep-green foliage. Then came crests and ravines, in a sort of desert which preceded the Ugogo country; and lower down were yellow plains, parched and fissured by the intense heat, and, here and there, bestrewn with saline plants and brambly thickets.

Some underbrush, which, farther on, became forests, embellished the horizon. The doctor went nearer to the ground; the anchors were thrown out, and one of them soon caught in the boughs of a huge sycamore.

Joe, slipping nimbly down the tree, carefully attached the anchor, and the doctor left his cylinder at work to a certain degree in order to retain sufficient ascensional force in the balloon to keep it in the air. Meanwhile the wind had suddenly died away.

“Now,” said Ferguson, “take two guns, friend Dick — one for yourself and one for Joe — and both of you try to bring back some nice cuts of antelope-meat; they will make us a good dinner.”

“Off to the hunt!” exclaimed Kennedy, joyously.

He climbed briskly out of the car and descended. Joe had swung himself down from branch to branch, and was waiting for him below, stretching his limbs in the mean time.

“Don’t fly away without us, doctor!” shouted Joe.

“Never fear, my boy! — I am securely lashed. I’ll spend the time getting my notes into shape. A good hunt to you! but be careful. Besides, from my post here, I can observe the face of the country, and, at the least suspicious thing I notice, I’ll fire a signal-shot, and with that you must rally home.”

“Agreed!” said Kennedy; and off they went.

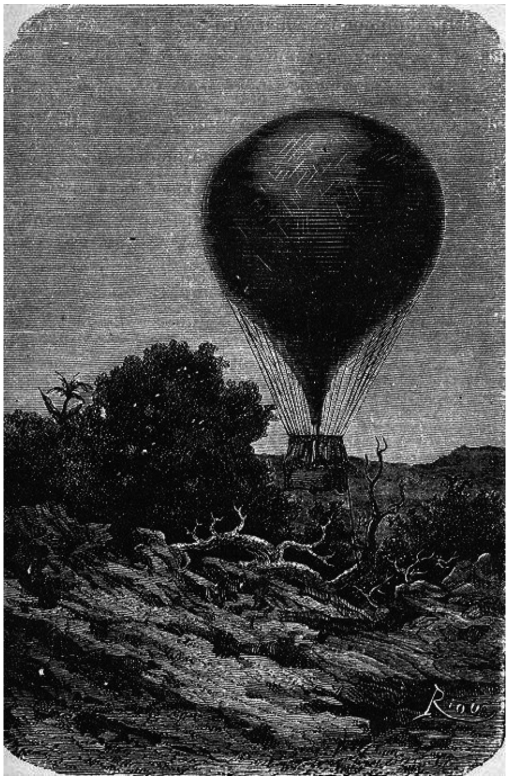
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CHAPTER FOURTEENTH.

The Forest of Gum-Trees. — The Blue Antelope. — The Rallying-Signal. — An Unexpected Attack. — The Kanyeme. — A Night in the Open Air. — The Mabunguru. — Jihoue-la-Mkoa. — A Supply of Water. — Arrival at Kazeh.

The country, dry and parched as it was, consisting of a clayey soil that cracked open with the heat, seemed, indeed, a desert: here and there were a few traces of caravans; the bones of men and animals, that had been half-gnawed away, mouldering together in the same dust.

After half an hour's walking, Dick and Joe plunged into a forest of gum-trees, their eyes alert on all sides, and their fingers on the trigger. There was no foreseeing what they might encounter. Without being a rifleman, Joe could handle fire-arms with no trifling dexterity.

"A walk does one good, Mr. Kennedy, but this isn't the easiest ground in the world," he said, kicking aside some fragments of quartz with which the soil was bestrewn.

Kennedy motioned to his companion to be silent and to halt. The present case compelled them to dispense with hunting-dogs, and, no matter what Joe's agility might be, he could not be expected to have the scent of a setter or a greyhound.

A herd of a dozen antelopes were quenching their thirst in the bed of a torrent where some pools of water had lodged. The graceful creatures, snuffing danger in the breeze, seemed to be disturbed and uneasy. Their beautiful heads could be seen between every draught, raised in the air with quick and sudden motion as they sniffed the wind in the direction of our two hunters, with their flexible nostrils.

Kennedy stole around behind some clumps of shrubbery, while Joe remained motionless where he was. The former, at length, got within gunshot and fired.

The herd disappeared in the twinkling of an eye; one male antelope only, that was hit just behind the shoulder-joint, fell headlong to the ground, and Kennedy leaped toward his booty.

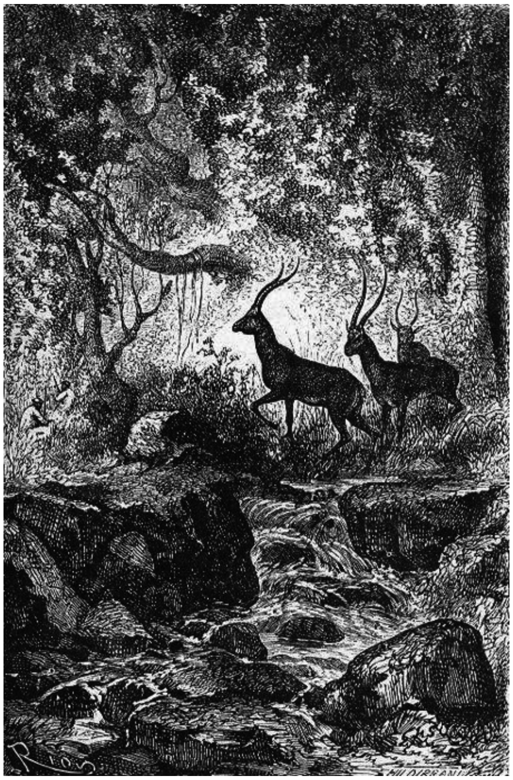

It was a blauwbok, a superb animal of a pale-bluish color shading upon the gray, but with the belly and the inside of the legs as white as the driven snow.

“A splendid shot!” exclaimed the hunter. “It’s a very rare species of the antelope, and I hope to be able to prepare his skin in such a way as to keep it.”

“Indeed!” said Joe, “do you think of doing that, Mr. Kennedy?”

“Why, certainly I do! Just see what a fine hide it is!”

“But Dr. Ferguson will never allow us to take such an extra weight!”

“You’re right, Joe. Still it is a pity to have to leave such a noble animal.”

“The whole of it? Oh, we won’t do that, sir; we’ll take all the good eatable parts of it, and, if you’ll let me, I’ll cut him up just as well as the chairman of the honorable corporation of butchers of the city of London could do.”

“As you please, my boy! But you know that in my hunter’s way

I can just as easily skin and cut up a piece of game as kill it.”

“I’m sure of that, Mr. Kennedy. Well, then, you can build a fireplace with a few stones; there’s plenty of dry dead-wood, and I can make the hot coals tell in a few minutes.”

“Oh! that won’t take long,” said Kennedy, going to work on the fireplace, where he had a brisk flame crackling and sparkling in a minute or two.

Joe had cut some of the nicest steaks and the best parts of the tenderloin from the carcass of the antelope, and these were quickly transformed to the most savory of broils.

“There, those will tickle the doctor!” said Kennedy.

“Do you know what I was thinking about?” said Joe.

“Why, about the steaks you’re broiling, to be sure!” replied Dick.

“Not the least in the world. I was thinking what a figure we’d cut if we couldn’t find the balloon again.”

“By George, what an idea! Why, do you think the doctor would desert us?”

“No; but suppose his anchor were to slip!”

“Impossible! and, besides, the doctor would find no difficulty in coming down again with his balloon; he handles it at his ease.”

“But suppose the wind were to sweep it off, so that he couldn’t come back toward us?”

“Come, come, Joe! a truce to your suppositions; they’re any thing but pleasant.”

“Ah! sir, every thing that happens in this world is natural, of course; but, then, any thing may happen, and we ought to look out beforehand.”

At this moment the report of a gun rang out upon the air.

“What’s that?” exclaimed Joe.

“It’s my rifle, I know the ring of her!” said Kennedy.

“A signal!”

“Yes; danger for us!”

“For him, too, perhaps.”

“Let’s be off!”

And the hunters, having gathered up the product of their expedition, rapidly made their way back along the path that they had marked by breaking boughs and bushes when they came. The density of the underbrush prevented their seeing the balloon, although they could not be far from it.

A second shot was heard.

“We must hurry!” said Joe.

“There! a third report!”

“Why, it sounds to me as if he was defending himself against something.”

“Let us make haste!”

They now began to run at the top of their speed. When they reached the outskirts of the forest, they, at first glance, saw the balloon in its place and the doctor in the car.

“What’s the matter?” shouted Kennedy.

“Good God!” suddenly exclaimed Joe.

“What do you see?”

“Down there! look! a crowd of blacks surrounding the balloon!”

And, in fact, there, two miles from where they were, they saw some thirty wild natives close together, yelling, gesticulating, and cutting all kinds of antics at the foot of the sycamore. Some, climbing into the tree itself, were making their way to the topmost branches. The danger seemed pressing.

“My master is lost!” cried Joe.

“Come! a little more coolness, Joe, and let us see how we stand. We hold the lives of four of those villains in our hands. Forward, then!”

They had made a mile with headlong speed, when another report was heard from the car. The shot had, evidently, told upon a huge black demon, who had been hoisting himself up by the anchor-rope. A lifeless body fell from bough to bough, and hung about twenty feet from the ground, its arms and legs swaying to and fro in the air.

“Ha!” said Joe, halting, “what does that fellow hold by?”

“No matter what!” said Kennedy; “let us run! let us run!”

“Ah! Mr. Kennedy,” said Joe, again, in a roar of laughter, “by his tail! by his tail! it’s an ape! They’re all apes!”

“Well, they’re worse than men!” said Kennedy, as he dashed into the midst of the howling crowd.

It was, indeed, a troop of very formidable baboons of the dog-faced species. These creatures are brutal, ferocious, and horrible to look upon, with their dog-like muzzles and savage expression. However, a few shots scattered them, and the chattering horde scampered off, leaving several of their number on the ground.

In a moment Kennedy was on the ladder, and Joe, clambering up the branches, detached the anchor; the car then dipped to where he was, and he got into it without difficulty. A few minutes later, the Victoria slowly ascended and soared away to the eastward, wafted by a moderate wind.

“That was an attack for you!” said Joe.

“We thought you were surrounded by natives.”

“Well, fortunately, they were only apes,” said the doctor.

“At a distance there’s no great difference,” remarked Kennedy.

“Nor close at hand, either,” added Joe.

“Well, however that may be,” resumed Ferguson, “this attack of apes might have had the most serious consequences. Had the anchor yielded to their repeated efforts, who knows whither the wind would have carried me?”

“What did I tell you, Mr. Kennedy?”

“You were right, Joe; but, even right as you may have been, you were, at that moment, preparing some antelope-steaks, the very sight of which gave me a monstrous appetite.”

“I believe you!” said the doctor; “the flesh of the antelope is exquisite.”

“You may judge of that yourself, now, sir, for supper’s ready.”

“Upon my word as a sportsman, those venison-steaks have a gamy flavor that’s not to be sneezed at, I tell you.”

“Good!” said Joe, with his mouth full, “I could live on antelope all the days of my life; and all the better with a glass of grog to wash it down.”

So saying, the good fellow went to work to prepare a jorum of that fragrant beverage, and all hands tasted it with satisfaction.

“Every thing has gone well thus far,” said he.

“Very well indeed!” assented Kennedy.

“Come, now, Mr. Kennedy, are you sorry that you came with us?”

“I’d like to see anybody prevent my coming!”

It was now four o’clock in the afternoon. The Victoria had struck a more rapid current. The face of the country was gradually rising, and, ere long, the barometer indicated a height of fifteen hundred feet above the level of the sea. The doctor was, therefore, obliged to keep his balloon up by a quite considerable dilation of gas, and the cylinder was hard at work all the time.

Toward seven o’clock, the balloon was sailing over the basin of Kanyeme. The doctor immediately recognized that immense clearing, ten miles in extent, with its villages buried in the midst of baobab and calabash trees. It is the residence of one of the sultans of the Ugogo country, where civilization is, perhaps, the least backward. The natives there are less addicted to selling members of their own families, but still, men and animals all live together in round huts, without frames, that look like haystacks.

Beyond Kanyeme the soil becomes arid and stony, but in an hour’s journey, in a fertile dip of the soil, vegetation had resumed all its vigor at some distance from Mdaburu. The wind fell with the close of the day, and the atmosphere seemed to sleep. The doctor vainly sought for a current of air at different heights, and, at last, seeing this calm of all nature, he resolved to pass the night afloat, and, for greater safety, rose to the height of one thousand feet, where the balloon remained motionless. The night was magnificent, the heavens glittering with stars, and profoundly silent in the upper air.

Dick and Joe stretched themselves on their peaceful couch, and were soon sound asleep, the doctor keeping the first watch. At twelve o’clock the latter was relieved by Kennedy.

“Should the slightest accident happen, waken me,” said Ferguson, “and, above all things, don’t lose sight of the barometer. To us it is the compass!”

The night was cold. There were twenty-seven degrees of difference between its temperature and that of the daytime. With nightfall had begun the nocturnal concert of animals driven from their hiding-places by hunger and thirst. The frogs struck in their guttural soprano, redoubled by the yelping of the jackals, while the imposing bass of the African lion sustained the accords of this living orchestra.

Upon resuming his post, in the morning, the doctor consulted his compass, and found that the wind had changed during the night. The balloon had been bearing about thirty miles to the northwest during the last two hours. It was then passing over Mabunguru, a stony country, strewn with blocks of syenite of a fine polish, and knobbed with huge bowlders and angular ridges of rock; conic masses, like the rocks of Karnak, studded the soil like so many Druidic dolmens; the bones of buffaloes and elephants whitened it here and there; but few trees could be seen, excepting in the east, where there were dense woods, among which a few villages lay half concealed.

Toward seven o’clock they saw a huge round rock nearly two miles in extent, like an immense tortoise.

“We are on the right track,” said Dr. Ferguson. “There’s Jihoue-la-Mkoa, where we must halt for a few minutes. I am going to renew the supply of water necessary for my cylinder, and so let us try to anchor somewhere.”

“There are very few trees,” replied the hunger.

“Never mind, let us try. Joe, throw out the anchors!”

The balloon, gradually losing its ascensional force, approached the ground; the anchors ran along until, at last, one of them caught in the fissure of a rock, and the balloon remained motionless.

It must not be supposed that the doctor could entirely extinguish his cylinder, during these halts. The equilibrium of the balloon had been calculated at the level of the sea; and, as the country was continually ascending, and had reached an elevation of from six to seven hundred feet, the balloon would have had a tendency to go lower than the surface of the soil itself. It was, therefore, necessary to sustain it by a certain dilation of the gas. But, in case the doctor, in the absence of all wind, had let the car rest upon the ground, the balloon, thus relieved of a considerable weight, would have kept up of itself, without the aid of the cylinder.

The maps indicated extensive ponds on the western slope of the Jihoue-la-Mkoa. Joe went thither alone with a cask that would hold about ten gallons. He found the place pointed out to him, without difficulty, near to a deserted village; got his stock of water, and returned in less than three-quarters of an hour. He had seen nothing particular excepting some immense elephant-pits. In fact, he came very near falling into one of them, at the bottom of which lay a half-eaten carcass.

He brought back with him a sort of clover which the apes eat with avidity. The doctor recognized the fruit of the “mbenbu”-tree which grows in profusion, on the western part of Jihoue-la-Mkoa. Ferguson waited for Joe with a certain feeling of impatience, for even a short halt in this inhospitable region always inspires a degree of fear.

The water was got aboard without trouble, as the car was nearly resting on the ground. Joe then found it easy to loosen the anchor and leaped lightly to his place beside the doctor. The latter then replenished the flame in the cylinder, and the balloon majestically soared into the air.

It was then about one hundred miles from Kazeh, an important establishment in the interior of Africa, where, thanks to a south-southeasterly current, the travellers might hope to arrive on that same day. They were moving at the rate of fourteen miles per hour, and the guidance of the balloon was becoming difficult, as they dared not rise very high without extreme dilation of the gas, the country itself being at an average height of three thousand feet. Hence, the doctor preferred not to force the dilation, and so adroitly followed the sinuosities of a pretty sharply-inclined plane, and swept very close to the villages of Thembo and Tura-Wels. The latter forms part of the Unyamwezy, a magnificent country, where the trees attain enormous dimensions; among them the cactus, which grows to gigantic size.

About two o’clock, in magnificent weather, but under a fiery sun that devoured the least breath of air, the balloon was floating over the town of Kazeh, situated about three hundred and fifty miles from the coast.

“We left Zanzibar at nine o’clock in the morning,” said the doctor, consulting his notes, “and, after two days’ passage, we have, including our deviations, travelled nearly five hundred geographical miles. Captains Burton and Speke took four months and a half to make the same distance!”

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH.

Kazeh. — The Noisy Market-place. — The Appearance of the Balloon. — The Wangaga. — The Sons of the Moon. — The Doctor's Walk. — The Population of the Place. — The Royal Tembe. — The Sultan's Wives. — A Royal Drunken-Bout. — Joe an Object of Worship. — How they Dance in the Moon. — A Reaction. — Two Moons in one Sky. — The Instability of Divine Honors.

Kazeh, an important point in Central Africa, is not a city; in truth, there are no cities in the interior. Kazeh is but a collection of six extensive excavations. There are enclosed a few houses and slave-huts, with little courtyards and small gardens, carefully cultivated with onions, potatoes, cucumbers, pumpkins, and mushrooms, of perfect flavor, growing most luxuriantly.

The Unyamwezy is the country of the Moon — above all the rest, the fertile and magnificent garden-spot of Africa. In its centre is the district of Unyanembe — a delicious region, where some families of Omani, who are of very pure Arabic origin, live in luxurious idleness.

They have, for a long period, held the commerce between the interior of Africa and Arabia: they trade in gums, ivory, fine muslin, and slaves. Their caravans traverse these equatorial regions on all sides; and they even make their way to the coast in search of those articles of luxury and enjoyment which the wealthy merchants covet; while the latter, surrounded by their wives and their attendants, lead in this charming country the least disturbed and most horizontal of lives — always stretched at full length, laughing, smoking, or sleeping.

Around these excavations are numerous native dwellings; wide, open spaces for the markets; fields of cannabis and datura; superb trees and depths of freshest shade — such is Kazeh!

There, too, is held the general rendezvous of the caravans — those of the south, with their slaves and their freightage of ivory; and those of the west, which export cotton, glassware, and trinkets, to the tribes of the great lakes.

So in the market-place there reigns perpetual excitement, a nameless hubbub, made up of the cries of mixed-breed porters and carriers, the beating of drums, and the twanging of horns, the neighing of mules, the braying of donkeys, the singing of women, the squalling of children, and the banging of the huge rattan, wielded by the jemadar or leader of the caravans, who beats time to this pastoral symphony.

There, spread forth, without regard to order — indeed, we may say, in charming disorder — are the showy stuffs, the glass beads, the ivory tusks, the rhinoceros'-teeth, the shark's-teeth, the honey, the tobacco, and the cotton of these regions, to be purchased at the strangest of bargains by customers in whose eyes each article has a price only in proportion to the desire it excites to possess it.

All at once this agitation, movement and noise stopped as though by magic. The balloon had just come in sight, far aloft in the sky, where it hovered majestically for a few moments, and then descended slowly, without deviating from its perpendicular. Men, women, children, merchants and slaves, Arabs and negroes, as suddenly disappeared within the "tembes" and the huts.

"My dear doctor," said Kennedy, "if we continue to produce such a sensation as this, we shall find some difficulty in establishing commercial relations with the people hereabouts.”

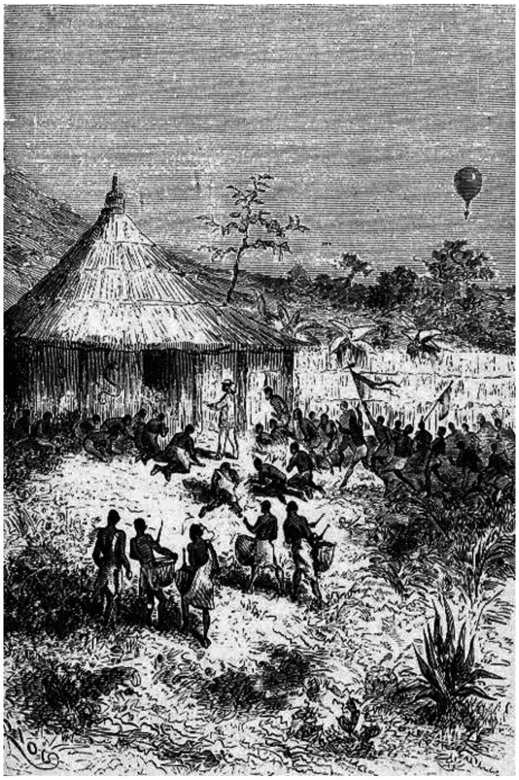

“There’s one kind of trade that we might carry on, though, easily enough,” said Joe; “and that would be to go down there quietly, and walk off with the best of the goods, without troubling our heads about the merchants; we’d get rich that way!”

“Ah!” said the doctor, “these natives are a little scared at first; but they won’t be long in coming back, either through suspicion or through curiosity.”

“Do you really think so, doctor?”

“Well, we’ll see pretty soon. But it wouldn’t be prudent to go too near to them, for the balloon is not iron-clad, and is, therefore, not proof against either an arrow or a bullet.”

“Then you expect to hold a parley with these blacks?”

“If we can do so safely, why should we not? There must be some Arab merchants here at Kazeh, who are better informed than the rest, and not so barbarous. I remember that Burton and Speke had nothing but praises to utter concerning the hospitality of these people; so we might, at least, make the venture.”

The balloon having, meanwhile, gradually approached the ground, one of the anchors lodged in the top of a tree near the market-place.

By this time the whole population had emerged from their hiding-places stealthily, thrusting their heads out first. Several “waganga,” recognizable by their badges of conical shellwork, came boldly forward. They were the sorcerers of the place. They bore in their girdles small gourds, coated with tallow, and several other articles of witchcraft, all of them, by-the-way, most professionally filthy.

Little by little the crowd gathered beside them, the women and children grouped around them, the drums renewed their deafening uproar, hands were violently clapped together, and then raised toward the sky.

“That’s their style of praying,” said the doctor; “and, if I’m not mistaken, we’re going to be called upon to play a great part.”

“Well, sir, play it!”

“You, too, my good Joe — perhaps you’re to be a god!”

“Well, master, that won’t trouble me much. I like a little flattery!”

At this moment, one of the sorcerers, a “myanga,” made a sign, and all the clamor died away into the profoundest silence. He then addressed a few words to the strangers, but in an unknown tongue.

Dr. Ferguson, not having understood them, shouted some sentences in Arabic, at a venture, and was immediately answered in that language.

The speaker below then delivered himself of a very copious harangue, which was also very flowery and very gravely listened to by his audience. From it the doctor was not slow in learning that the balloon was mistaken for nothing less than the moon in person, and that the amiable goddess in question had condescended to approach the town with her three sons — an honor that would never be forgotten in this land so greatly loved by the god of day.

The doctor responded, with much dignity, that the moon made her provincial tour every thousand years, feeling the necessity of showing herself nearer at hand to her worshippers. He, therefore, begged them not to be disturbed by her presence, but to take advantage of it to make known all their wants and longings.

The sorcerer, in his turn, replied that the sultan, the “mwani,” who had been sick for many years, implored the aid of heaven, and he invited the son of the moon to visit him.

The doctor acquainted his companions with the invitation.

“And you are going to call upon this negro king?” asked Kennedy.

“Undoubtedly so; these people appear well disposed; the air is calm; there is not a breath of wind, and we have nothing to fear for the balloon?”

“But, what will you do?”

“Be quiet on that score, my dear Dick. With a little medicine, I shall work my way through the affair!”

Then, addressing the crowd, he said:

“The moon, taking compassion on the sovereign who is so dear to the children of Unyamwezy, has charged us to restore him to health. Let him prepare to receive us!”

The clamor, the songs and demonstrations of all kinds increased twofold, and the whole immense ants’ nest of black heads was again in motion.

“Now, my friends,” said Dr. Ferguson, “we must look out for every thing beforehand; we may be forced to leave this at any moment, unexpectedly, and be off with extra speed. Dick had better remain, therefore, in the car, and keep the cylinder warm so as to secure a sufficient ascensional force for the balloon. The anchor is solidly fastened, and there is nothing to fear in that respect. I shall descend, and Joe will go with me, only that he must remain at the foot of the ladder.”

“What! are you going alone into that blackamoor’s den?”

“How! doctor, am I not to go with you?”

“No! I shall go alone; these good folks imagine that the goddess of the moon has come to see them, and their superstition protects me; so have no fear, and each one remain at the post that I have assigned to him.”

“Well, since you wish it,” sighed Kennedy.

“Look closely to the dilation of the gas.”

“Agreed!”

By this time the shouts of the natives had swelled to double volume as they vehemently implored the aid of the heavenly powers.

“There, there,” said Joe, “they’re rather rough in their orders to their good moon and her divine sons.”

The doctor, equipped with his travelling medicine-chest, descended to the ground, preceded by Joe, who kept a straight countenance and looked as grave and knowing as the circumstances of the case required. He then seated himself at the foot of the ladder in the Arab fashion, with his legs crossed under him, and a portion of the crowd collected around him in a circle, at respectful distances.

In the meanwhile the doctor, escorted to the sound of savage instruments, and with wild religious dances, slowly proceeded toward the royal “tembe,” situated a considerable distance outside of the town. It was about three o’clock, and the sun was shining brilliantly. In fact, what less could it do upon so grand an occasion!

The doctor stepped along with great dignity, the waganga surrounding him and keeping off the crowd. He was soon joined by the natural son of the sultan, a handsomely-built young fellow, who, according to the custom of the country, was the sole heir of the paternal goods, to the exclusion of the old man’s legitimate children. He prostrated himself before the son of the moon, but the latter graciously raised him to his feet.

Three-quarters of an hour later, through shady paths, surrounded by all the luxuriance of tropical vegetation, this enthusiastic procession arrived at the sultan’s palace, a sort of square edifice called ititenya, and situated on the slope of a hill.

A kind of veranda, formed by the thatched roof, adorned the outside, supported upon wooden pillars, which had some pretensions to being carved. Long lines of dark-red clay decorated the walls in characters that strove to reproduce the forms of men and serpents, the latter better imitated, of course, than the former. The roofing of this abode did not rest directly upon the walls, and the air could, therefore, circulate freely, but windows there were none, and the door hardly deserved the name.

Dr. Ferguson was received with all the honors by the guards and favorites of the sultan; these were men of a fine race, the Wanyamwezi so-called, a pure type of the central African populations, strong, robust, well-made, and in splendid condition. Their hair, divided into a great number of small tresses, fell over their shoulders, and by means of black-and-blue incisions they had tattooed their cheeks from the temples to the mouth. Their ears, frightfully distended, held dangling to them disks of wood and plates of gum copal. They were clad in brilliantly-painted cloths, and the soldiers were armed with the saw-toothed war-club, the bow and arrows barbed and poisoned with the juice of the euphorbium, the cutlass, the “sima,” a long sabre (also with saw-like teeth), and some small battle-axes.

The doctor advanced into the palace, and there, notwithstanding the sultan’s illness, the din, which was terrific before, redoubled the instant that he arrived. He noticed, at the lintels of the door, some rabbits’ tails and zebras’ manes, suspended as talismans. He was received by the whole troop of his majesty’s wives, to the harmonious accords of the “upatu,” a sort of cymbal made of the bottom of a copper kettle, and to the uproar of the “kilindo,” a drum five feet high, hollowed out from the trunk of a tree, and hammered by the ponderous, horny fists of two jet-black virtuosi.

Most of the women were rather good-looking, and they laughed and chattered merrily as they smoked their tobacco and “thang” in huge black pipes. They seemed to be well made, too, under the long robes that they wore gracefully flung about their persons, and carried a sort of “kilt” woven from the fibres of calabash fastened around their girdles.

Six of them were not the least merry of the party, although put aside from the rest, and reserved for a cruel fate. On the death of the sultan, they were to be buried alive with him, so as to occupy and divert his mind during the period of eternal solitude.

Dr. Ferguson, taking in the whole scene at a rapid glance, approached the wooden couch on which the sultan lay reclining. There he saw a man of about forty, completely brutalized by orgies of every description, and in a condition that left little or nothing to be done. The sickness that had afflicted him for so many years was simply perpetual drunkenness. The royal sot had nearly lost all consciousness, and all the ammonia in the world would not have set him on his feet again.

His favorites and the women kept on bended knees during this solemn visit. By means of a few drops of powerful cordial, the doctor for a moment reanimated the imbruted carcass that lay before him. The sultan stirred, and, for a dead body that had given no sign whatever of life for several hours previously, this symptom was received with a tremendous repetition of shouts and cries in the doctor’s honor.

The latter, who had seen enough of it by this time, by a rapid motion put aside his too demonstrative admirers and went out of the palace, directing his steps immediately toward the balloon, for it was now six o'clock in the evening.

Joe, during his absence, had been quietly waiting at the foot of the ladder, where the crowd paid him their most humble respects. Like a genuine son of the moon, he let them keep on. For a divinity, he had the air of a very clever sort of fellow, by no means proud, nay, even pleasingly familiar with the young negresses, who seemed never to tire of looking at him. Besides, he went so far as to chat agreeably with them.

"Worship me, ladies! worship me!" he said to them.

"I'm a clever sort of devil, if I am the son of a goddess."

They brought him propitiatory gifts, such as are usually deposited in the fetich huts or mzimu. These gifts consisted of stalks of barley and of "pombe." Joe considered himself in duty bound to taste the latter species of strong beer, but his palate, although accustomed to gin and whiskey, could not withstand the strength of the new beverage, and he had to make a horrible grimace, which his dusky friends took to be a benevolent smile.

Thereupon, the young damsels, conjoining their voices in a drawling chant, began to dance around him with the utmost gravity.

"Ah! you're dancing, are you?" said he. "Well, I won't be behind you in politeness, and so I'll give you one of my country reels."

So at it he went, in one of the wildest jigs that ever was seen, twisting, turning, and jerking himself in all directions; dancing with his hands, dancing with his body, dancing with his knees, dancing with his feet; describing the most fearful contortions and extravagant evolutions; throwing himself into incredible attitudes; grimacing beyond all belief, and, in fine giving his savage admirers a strange idea of the style of ballet adopted by the deities in the moon.

Then, the whole collection of blacks, naturally as imitative as monkeys, at once reproduced all his airs and graces, his leaps and shakes and contortions; they did not lose a single gesticulation; they did not forget an attitude; and the result was, such a pandemonium of movement, noise, and excitement, as it would be out of the question even feebly to describe. But, in the very midst of the fun, Joe saw the doctor approaching.

The latter was coming at full speed, surrounded by a yelling and disorderly throng. The chiefs and sorcerers seemed to be highly excited. They were close upon the doctor’s heels, crowding and threatening him.

Singular reaction! What had happened? Had the sultan unluckily perished in the hands of his celestial physician?

Kennedy, from his post of observation, saw the danger without knowing what had caused it, and the balloon, powerfully urged by the dilation of the gas, strained and tugged at the ropes that held it as though impatient to soar away.

The doctor had got as far as the foot of the ladder. A superstitious fear still held the crowd aloof and hindered them from committing any violence on his person. He rapidly scaled the ladder, and Joe followed him with his usual agility.

“Not a moment to lose!” said the doctor. “Don’t attempt to let go the anchor! We’ll cut the cord! Follow me!”

“But what’s the matter?” asked Joe, clambering into the car.

“What’s happened?” questioned Kennedy, rifle in hand.

“Look!” replied the doctor, pointing to the horizon.

“Well?” ejaculated the Scot.

“Well! the moon!”

And, in fact, there was the moon rising red and magnificent, a globe of fire in a field of blue! It was she, indeed — she and the balloon! — both in one sky!

Either there were two moons, then, or these strangers were imposters, designing scamps, false deities!

Such were the very natural reflections of the crowd, and hence the reaction in their feelings.

Joe could not, for the life of him, keep in a roar of laughter; and the population of Kazeh, comprehending that their prey was slipping through their clutches, set up prolonged howlings, aiming, the while, their bows and muskets at the balloon.

But one of the sorcerers made a sign, and all the weapons were lowered. He then began to climb into the tree, intending to seize the rope and bring the machine to the ground.

Joe leaned out with a hatchet ready. “Shall I cut away?” said he.

“No; wait a moment,” replied the doctor.

“But this black?”

“We may, perhaps, save our anchor — and I hold a great deal by that. There’ll always be time enough to cut loose.”

The sorcerer, having climbed to the right place, worked so vigorously that he succeeded in detaching the anchor, and the latter, violently jerked, at that moment, by the start of the balloon, caught the rascal between the limbs, and carried him off astride of it through the air.

The stupefaction of the crowd was indescribable as they saw one of their waganga thus whirled away into space.

“Huzza!” roared Joe, as the balloon — thanks to its ascensional force — shot up higher into the sky, with increased rapidity.

“He holds on well,” said Kennedy; “a little trip will do him good.”

“Shall we let this darky drop all at once?” inquired Joe.

“Oh no,” replied the doctor, “we’ll let him down easily; and I warrant me that, after such an adventure, the power of the wizard will be enormously enhanced in the sight of his comrades.”

“Why, I wouldn’t put it past them to make a god of him!” said Joe, with a laugh.

The Victoria, by this time, had risen to the height of one thousand feet, and the black hung to the rope with desperate energy. He had become completely silent, and his eyes were fixed, for his terror was blended with amazement. A light west wind was sweeping the balloon right over the town, and far beyond it.

Half an hour later, the doctor, seeing the country deserted, moderated the flame of his cylinder, and descended toward the ground. At twenty feet above the turf, the affrighted sorcerer made up his mind in a twinkling: he let himself drop, fell on his feet, and scampered off at a furious pace toward Kazeh; while the balloon, suddenly relieved of his weight, again shot up on her course.

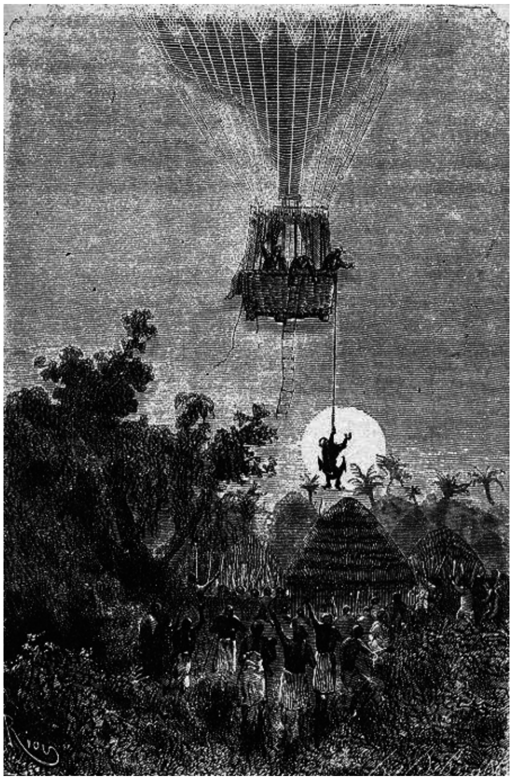

CHAPTER SIXTEENTH.

Symptoms of a Storm. — The Country of the Moon. — The Future of the African Continent. — The Last Machine of all. — A View of the Country at Sunset. — Flora and Fauna. — The Tempest. — The Zone of Fire. — The Starry Heavens.

“See,” said Joe, “what comes of playing the sons of the moon without her leave! She came near serving us an ugly trick. But say, master, did you damage your credit as a physician?”

“Yes, indeed,” chimed in the sportsman. “What kind of a dignitary was this Sultan of Kazeh?”

“An old half-dead sot,” replied the doctor, “whose loss will not be very severely felt. But the moral of all this is that honors are fleeting, and we must not take too great a fancy to them.”

“So much the worse!” rejoined Joe. “I liked the thing — to be worshipped! — Play the god as you like! Why, what would any one ask more than that? By-the-way, the moon did come up, too, and all red, as if she was in a rage.”

While the three friends went on chatting of this and other things, and Joe examined the luminary of night from an entirely novel point of view, the heavens became covered with heavy clouds to the northward, and the lowering masses assumed a most sinister and threatening look. Quite a smart breeze, found about three hundred feet from the earth, drove the balloon toward the north-northeast; and above it the blue vault was clear; but the atmosphere felt close and dull.

The aeronauts found themselves, at about eight in the evening, in thirty-two degrees forty minutes east longitude, and four degrees seventeen minutes latitude. The atmospheric currents, under the influence of a tempest not far off, were driving them at the rate of from thirty to thirty-five miles an hour; the undulating and fertile plains of Mfuto were passing swiftly beneath them. The spectacle was one worthy of admiration — and admire it they did.

“We are now right in the country of the Moon,” said Dr. Ferguson; “for it has retained the name that antiquity gave it, undoubtedly, because the moon has been worshipped there in all ages. It is, really, a superb country.”

“It would be hard to find more splendid vegetation.”

“If we found the like of it around London it would not be natural, but it would be very pleasant,” put in Joe. “Why is it that such savage countries get all these fine things?”

“And who knows,” said the doctor, “that this country may not, one day, become the centre of civilization? The races of the future may repair hither, when Europe shall have become exhausted in the effort to feed her inhabitants.”

“Do you think so, really?” asked Kennedy.

“Undoubtedly, my dear Dick. Just note the progress of events: consider the migrations of races, and you will arrive at the same conclusion assuredly. Asia was the first nurse of the world, was she not? For about four thousand years she travailed, she grew pregnant, she produced, and then, when stones began to cover the soil where the golden harvests sung by Homer had flourished, her children abandoned her exhausted and barren bosom. You next see them precipitating themselves upon young and vigorous Europe, which has nourished them for the last two thousand years. But already her fertility is beginning to die out; her productive powers are diminishing every day. Those new diseases that annually attack the products of the soil, those defective crops, those insufficient resources, are all signs of a vitality that is rapidly wearing out and of an approaching exhaustion. Thus, we already see the millions rushing to the luxuriant bosom of America, as a source of help, not inexhaustible indeed, but not yet exhausted. In its turn, that new continent will grow old; its virgin forests will fall before the axe of industry, and its soil will become weak through having too fully produced what had been demanded of it. Where two harvests bloomed every year, hardly one will be gathered from a soil completely drained of its strength. Then, Africa will be there to offer to new races the treasures that for centuries have been accumulating in her breast. Those climates now so fatal to strangers will be purified by cultivation and by drainage of the soil, and those scattered water supplies will be gathered into one common bed to form an artery of navigation. Then this country over which we are now passing, more fertile, richer, and fuller of vitality than the rest, will become some grand realm where more astonishing discoveries than steam and electricity will be brought to light."

"Ah! sir," said Joe, "I'd like to see all that."

"You got up too early in the morning, my boy!"

"Besides," said Kennedy, "that may prove to be a very dull period when industry will swallow up every thing for its own profit. By dint of inventing machinery, men will end in being eaten up by it! I have always fancied that the end of the earth will be when some enormous boiler, heated to three thousand millions of atmospheric pressure, shall explode and blow up our Globe!”

“And I add that the Americans,” said Joe, “will not have been the last to work at the machine!”

“In fact,” assented the doctor, “they are great boiler-makers! But, without allowing ourselves to be carried away by such speculations, let us rest content with enjoying the beauties of this country of the Moon, since we have been permitted to see it.”

The sun, darting his last rays beneath the masses of heaped-up cloud, adorned with a crest of gold the slightest inequalities of the ground below; gigantic trees, arborescent bushes, mosses on the even surface — all had their share of this luminous effulgence. The soil, slightly undulating, here and there rose into little conical hills; there were no mountains visible on the horizon; immense brambly palisades, impenetrable hedges of thorny jungle, separated the clearings dotted with numerous villages, and immense euphorbiae surrounded them with natural fortifications, interlacing their trunks with the coral-shaped branches of the shrubbery and undergrowth.

Ere long, the Malagazeri, the chief tributary of Lake Tanganayika, was seen winding between heavy thickets of verdure, offering an asylum to many water-courses that spring from the torrents formed in the season of freshets, or from ponds hollowed in the clayey soil. To observers looking from a height, it was a chain of waterfalls thrown across the whole western face of the country.

Animals with huge humps were feeding in the luxuriant prairies, and were half hidden, sometimes, in the tall grass; spreading forests in bloom redolent of spicy perfumes presented themselves to the gaze like immense bouquets; but, in these bouquets, lions, leopards, hyenas, and tigers, were then crouching for shelter from the last hot rays of the setting sun. From time to time, an elephant made the tall tops of the undergrowth sway to and fro, and you could hear the crackling of huge branches as his ponderous ivory tusks broke them in his way.

“What a sporting country!” exclaimed Dick, unable longer to restrain his enthusiasm; “why, a single ball fired at random into those forests would bring down game worthy of it. Suppose we try it once!”

“No, my dear Dick; the night is close at hand — a threatening night with a tempest in the background — and the storms are awful in this country, where the heated soil is like one vast electric battery.”

“You are right, sir,” said Joe, “the heat has got to be enough to choke one, and the breeze has died away. One can feel that something’s coming.”

“The atmosphere is saturated with electricity,” replied the doctor; “every living creature is sensible that this state of the air portends a struggle of the elements, and I confess that I never before was so full of the fluid myself.”

“Well, then,” suggested Dick, “would it not be advisable to alight?”

“On the contrary, Dick, I’d rather go up, only that I am afraid of being carried out of my course by these counter-currents contending in the atmosphere.”

“Have you any idea, then, of abandoning the route that we have followed since we left the coast?”

“If I can manage to do so,” replied the doctor, “I will turn more directly northward, by from seven to eight degrees; I shall then endeavor to ascend toward the presumed latitudes of the sources of the Nile; perhaps we may discover some traces of Captain Speke's expedition or of M. de Heuglin's caravan. Unless I am mistaken, we are at thirty-two degrees forty minutes east longitude, and I should like to ascend directly north of the equator."

"Look there!" exclaimed Kennedy, suddenly, "see those hippopotami sliding out of the pools — those masses of blood-colored flesh — and those crocodiles snuffing the air aloud!"

"They're choking!" ejaculated Joe. "Ah! what a fine way to travel this is; and how one can snap his fingers at all that vermin! — Doctor! Mr. Kennedy! see those packs of wild animals hurrying along close together. There are fully two hundred. Those are wolves."

"No! Joe, not wolves, but wild dogs; a famous breed that does not hesitate to attack the lion himself. They are the worst customers a traveller could meet, for they would instantly tear him to pieces."

"Well, it isn't Joe that'll undertake to muzzle them!" responded that amiable youth. "After all, though, if that's the nature of the beast, we mustn't be too hard on them for it!"

Silence gradually settled down under the influence of the impending storm: the thickened air actually seemed no longer adapted to the transmission of sound; the atmosphere appeared MUFFLED, and, like a room hung with tapestry, lost all its sonorous reverberation. The "rover bird" so-called, the coroneted crane, the red and blue jays, the mocking-bird, the flycatcher, disappeared among the foliage of the immense trees, and all nature revealed symptoms of some approaching catastrophe.

At nine o’clock the Victoria hung motionless over Msene, an extensive group of villages scarcely distinguishable in the gloom. Once in a while, the reflection of a wandering ray of light in the dull water disclosed a succession of ditches regularly arranged, and, by one last gleam, the eye could make out the calm and sombre forms of palm-trees, sycamores, and gigantic euphorbiae.

“I am stifling!” said the Scot, inhaling, with all the power of his lungs, as much as possible of the rarefied air. “We are not moving an inch! Let us descend!”

“But the tempest!” said the doctor, with much uneasiness.

“If you are afraid of being carried away by the wind, it seems to me that there is no other course to pursue.”

“Perhaps the storm won’t burst to-night,” said Joe; “the clouds are very high.”

“That is just the thing that makes me hesitate about going beyond them; we should have to rise still higher, lose sight of the earth, and not know all night whether we were moving forward or not, or in what direction we were going.”

“Make up your mind, dear doctor, for time presses!”

“It’s a pity that the wind has fallen,” said Joe, again; “it would have carried us clear of the storm.”

“It is, indeed, a pity, my friends,” rejoined the doctor. “The clouds are dangerous for us; they contain opposing currents which might catch us in their eddies, and lightnings that might set on fire. Again, those perils avoided, the force of the tempest might hurl us to the ground, were we to cast our anchor in the tree-tops."

"Then what shall we do?"

"Well, we must try to get the balloon into a medium zone of the atmosphere, and there keep her suspended between the perils of the heavens and those of the earth. We have enough water for the cylinder, and our two hundred pounds of ballast are untouched. In case of emergency I can use them."

"We will keep watch with you," said the hunter.

"No, my friends, put the provisions under shelter, and lie down; I will rouse you, if it becomes necessary."

"But, master, wouldn't you do well to take some rest yourself, as there's no danger close on us just now?" insisted poor Joe.

"No, thank you, my good fellow, I prefer to keep awake. We are not moving, and should circumstances not change, we'll find ourselves to-morrow in exactly the same place."

"Good-night, then, sir!"

"Good-night, if you can only find it so!"

Kennedy and Joe stretched themselves out under their blankets, and the doctor remained alone in the immensity of space.

However, the huge dome of clouds visibly descended, and the darkness became profound. The black vault closed in upon the earth as if to crush it in its embrace.

All at once a violent, rapid, incisive flash of lightning pierced the gloom, and the rent it made had not closed ere a frightful clap of thunder shook the celestial depths.

“Up! up! turn out!” shouted Ferguson.

The two sleepers, aroused by the terrible concussion, were at the doctor’s orders in a moment.

“Shall we descend?” said Kennedy.

“No! the balloon could not stand it. Let us go up before those clouds dissolve in water, and the wind is let loose!” and, so saying, the doctor actively stirred up the flame of the cylinder, and turned it on the spirals of the serpentine siphon.

The tempests of the tropics develop with a rapidity equalled only by their violence. A second flash of lightning rent the darkness, and was followed by a score of others in quick succession. The sky was crossed and dotted, like the zebra’s hide, with electric sparks, which danced and flickered beneath the great drops of rain.

“We have delayed too long,” exclaimed the doctor; “we must now pass through a zone of fire, with our balloon filled as it is with inflammable gas!”

“But let us descend, then! let us descend!” urged Kennedy.

“The risk of being struck would be just about even, and we should soon be torn to pieces by the branches of the trees!”

“We are going up, doctor!”

“Quicker, quicker still!”

In this part of Africa, during the equatorial storms, it is not rare to count from thirty to thirty-five flashes of lightning per minute. The sky is literally on fire, and the crashes of thunder are continuous.

The wind burst forth with frightful violence in this burning atmosphere; it twisted the blazing clouds; one might have compared it to the breath of some gigantic bellows, fanning all this conflagration.

Dr. Ferguson kept his cylinder at full heat, and the balloon dilated and went up, while Kennedy, on his knees, held together the curtains of the awning. The balloon whirled round wildly enough to make their heads turn, and the aeronauts got some very alarming jolts, indeed, as their machine swung and swayed in all directions. Huge cavities would form in the silk of the balloon as the wind fiercely bent it in, and the stuff fairly cracked like a pistol as it flew back from the pressure. A sort of hail, preceded by a rumbling noise, hissed through the air and rattled on the covering of the Victoria. The latter, however, continued to ascend, while the lightning described tangents to the convexity of her circumference; but she bore on, right through the midst of the fire.

“God protect us!” said Dr. Ferguson, solemnly, “we are in His hands; He alone can save us — but let us be ready for every event, even for fire — our fall could not be very rapid.”

The doctor’s voice could scarcely be heard by his companions; but they could see his countenance calm as ever even amid the flashing of the lightnings; he was watching the phenomena of phosphorescence produced by the fires of St. Elmo, that were now skipping to and fro along the network of the balloon.

The latter whirled and swung, but steadily ascended, and, ere the hour was over, it had passed the stormy belt. The electric display was going on below it like a vast crown of artificial fireworks suspended from the car.

Then they enjoyed one of the grandest spectacles that Nature can offer to the gaze of man. Below them, the tempest; above them, the starry firmament, tranquil, mute, impassible, with the moon projecting her peaceful rays over these angry clouds.

Dr. Ferguson consulted the barometer; it announced twelve thousand feet of elevation. It was then eleven o'clock at night.

"Thank Heaven, all danger is past; all we have to do now, is, to keep ourselves at this height," said the doctor.

"It was frightful!" remarked Kennedy.

"Oh!" said Joe, "it gives a little variety to the trip, and I'm not sorry to have seen a storm from a trifling distance up in the air. It's a fine sight!"

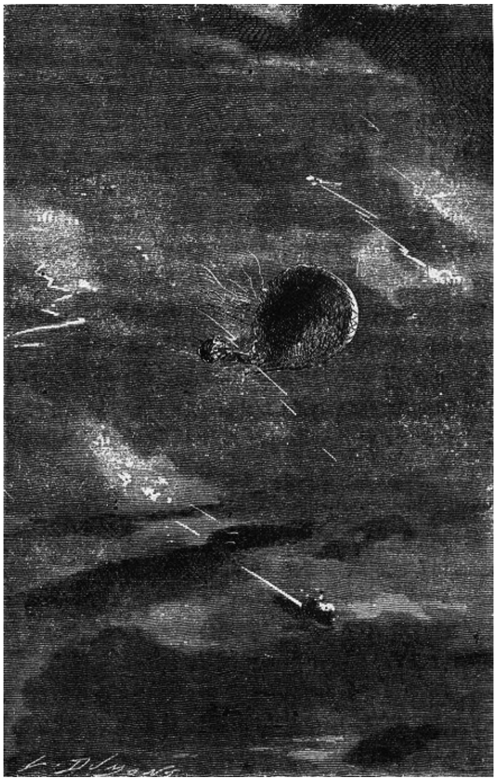

L. Dumont

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH.

The Mountains of the Moon. — An Ocean of Verdure. — They cast Anchor. — The Towing Elephant. — A Running Fire. — Death of the Monster. — The Field-Oven. — A Meal on the Grass. — A Night on the Ground.

About four in the morning, Monday, the sun reappeared in the horizon; the clouds had dispersed, and a cheery breeze refreshed the morning dawn.

The earth, all redolent with fragrant exhalations, reappeared to the gaze of our travellers. The balloon, whirled about by opposing currents, had hardly budged from its place, and the doctor, letting the gas contract, descended so as to get a more northerly direction. For a long while his quest was fruitless; the wind carried him toward the west until he came in sight of the famous Mountains of the Moon, which grouped themselves in a semicircle around the extremity of Lake Tanganayika; their ridges, but slightly indented, stood out against the bluish horizon, so that they might have been mistaken for a natural fortification, not to be passed by the explorers of the centre of Africa. Among them were a few isolated cones, revealing the mark of the eternal snows.

“Here we are at last,” said the doctor, “in an unexplored country! Captain Burton pushed very far to the westward, but he could not reach those celebrated mountains; he even denied their existence, strongly as it was affirmed by Speke, his companion. He pretended that they were born in the latter’s fancy; but for us, my friends, there is no further doubt possible.”

“Shall we cross them?” asked Kennedy.

“Not, if it please God. I am looking for a wind that will take me back toward the equator. I will even wait for one, if necessary, and will make the balloon like a ship that casts anchor, until favorable breezes come up.”

But the foresight of the doctor was not long in bringing its reward; for, after having tried different heights, the Victoria at length began to sail off to the northeastward with medium speed.

“We are in the right track,” said the doctor, consulting his compass, “and scarcely two hundred feet from the surface; lucky circumstances for us, enabling us, as they do, to reconnoitre these new regions. When Captain Speke set out to discover Lake Ukereoue, he ascended more to the eastward in a straight line above Kazeh.”

“Shall we keep on long in this way?” inquired the Scot.

“Perhaps. Our object is to push a point in the direction of the sources of the Nile; and we have more than six hundred miles to make before we get to the extreme limit reached by the explorers who came from the north.”

“And we shan’t set foot on the solid ground?” murmured

Joe; “it’s enough to cramp a fellow’s legs!”

“Oh, yes, indeed, my good Joe,” said the doctor, reassuring him; “we have to economize our provisions, you know; and on the way, Dick, you must get us some fresh meat.”

“Whenever you like, doctor.”

“We shall also have to replenish our stock of water. Who knows but we may be carried to some of the dried-up regions? So we cannot take too many precautions.”

At noon the Victoria was at twenty-nine degrees fifteen minutes east longitude, and three degrees fifteen minutes south latitude. She passed the village of Uyofu, the last northern limit of the Unyamwezi, opposite to the Lake Ukereoue, which could still be seen.

The tribes living near to the equator seem to be a little more civilized, and are governed by absolute monarchs, whose control is an unlimited despotism. Their most compact union of power constitutes the province of Karagwah.

It was decided by the aeronauts that they would alight at the first favorable place. They found that they should have to make a prolonged halt, and take a careful inspection of the balloon: so the flame of the cylinder was moderated, and the anchors, flung out from the car, ere long began to sweep the grass of an immense prairie, that, from a certain height, looked like a shaven lawn, but the growth of which, in reality, was from seven to eight feet in height.

The balloon skimmed this tall grass without bending it, like a gigantic butterfly: not an obstacle was in sight; it was an ocean of verdure without a single breaker.

“We might proceed a long time in this style,” remarked Kennedy; “I don’t see one tree that we could approach, and I’m afraid that our hunt’s over.”

“Wait, Dick; you could not hunt anyhow in this grass, that grows higher than your head. We’ll find a favorable place presently.”

In truth, it was a charming excursion that they were making now — a veritable navigation on this green, almost transparent sea, gently undulating in the breath of the wind. The little car seemed to cleave the waves of verdure, and, from time to time, coveys of birds of magnificent plumage would rise fluttering from the tall herbage, and speed away with joyous cries. The anchors plunged into this lake of flowers, and traced a furrow that closed behind them, like the wake of a ship.

All at once a sharp shock was felt — the anchor had caught in the fissure of some rock hidden in the high grass.

“We are fast!” exclaimed Joe.

These words had scarcely been uttered when a shrill cry rang through the air, and the following phrases, mingled with exclamations, escaped from the lips of our travellers:

“What’s that?”

“A strange cry!”

“Look! Why, we’re moving!”

“The anchor has slipped!”

“No; it holds, and holds fast too!” said Joe, who was tugging at the rope.

“It’s the rock, then, that’s moving!”

An immense rustling was noticed in the grass, and soon an elongated, winding shape was seen rising above it.

“A serpent!” shouted Joe.

“A serpent!” repeated Kennedy, handling his rifle.

“No,” said the doctor, “it’s an elephant’s trunk!”

“An elephant, Samuel?”

And, as Kennedy said this, he drew his rifle to his shoulder.

“Wait, Dick; wait!”

“That’s a fact! The animal’s towing us!”

“And in the right direction, Joe — in the right direction.”

The elephant was now making some headway, and soon reached a clearing where his whole body could be seen. By his gigantic size, the doctor recognized a male of a superb species. He had two whitish tusks, beautifully curved, and about eight feet in length; and in these the shanks of the anchor had firmly caught. The animal was vainly trying with his trunk to disengage himself from the rope that attached him to the car.

“Get up — go ahead, old fellow!” shouted Joe, with delight, doing his best to urge this rather novel team. “Here is a new style of travelling! — no more horses for me. An elephant, if you please!”

“But where is he taking us to?” said Kennedy, whose rifle itched in his grasp.

“He’s taking us exactly to where we want to go, my dear Dick. A little patience!”

“‘Wig-a-more! wig-a-more!’ as the Scotch country folks say,” shouted Joe, in high glee. “Gee-up! gee-up there!”

The huge animal now broke into a very rapid gallop. He flung his trunk from side to side, and his monstrous bounds gave the car several rather heavy thumps. Meanwhile the doctor stood ready, hatchet in hand, to cut the rope, should need arise.

“But,” said he, “we shall not give up our anchor until the last moment.”

This drive, with an elephant for the team, lasted about an hour and a half; yet the animal did not seem in the least fatigued. These immense creatures can go over a great deal of ground, and, from one day to another, are found at enormous distances from there they were last seen, like the whales, whose mass and speed they rival.

“In fact,” said Joe, “it’s a whale that we have harpooned; and we’re only doing just what whalemen do when out fishing.”

But a change in the nature of the ground compelled the doctor to vary his style of locomotion. A dense grove of calmadores was descried on the horizon, about three miles away, on the north of the prairie. So it became necessary to detach the balloon from its draught-animal at last.

Kennedy was intrusted with the job of bringing the elephant to a halt. He drew his rifle to his shoulder, but his position was not favorable to a successful shot; so that the first ball fired flattened itself on the animal’s skull, as it would have done against an iron plate. The creature did not seem in the least troubled by it; but, at the sound of the discharge, he had increased his speed, and now was going as fast as a horse at full gallop.

“The deuce!” ejaculated Kennedy.

“What a solid head!” commented Joe.

“We’ll try some conical balls behind the shoulder-joint,” said Kennedy, reloading his rifle with care. In another moment he fired.

The animal gave a terrible cry, but went on faster than ever.

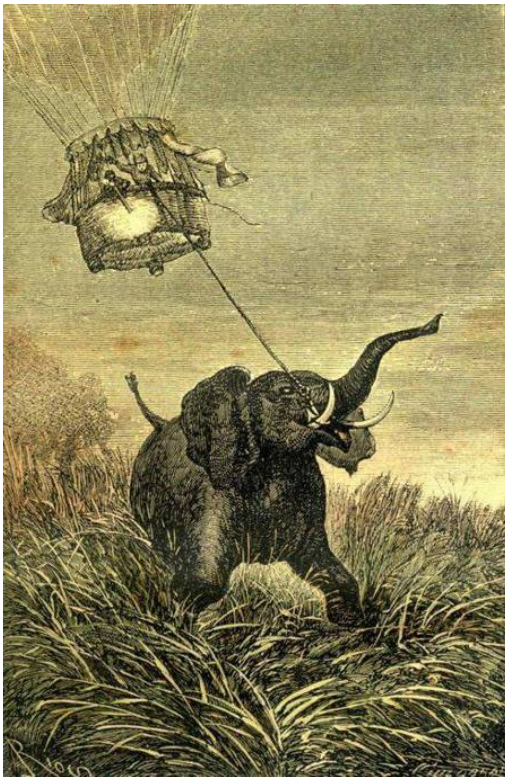

“Come!” said Joe, taking aim with another gun, “I must help you, or we’ll never end it.” And now two balls penetrated the creature’s side.

The elephant halted, lifted his trunk, and resumed his run toward the wood with all his speed; he shook his huge head, and the blood began to gush from his wounds.

“Let us keep up our fire, Mr. Kennedy.”

“And a continuous fire, too,” urged the doctor, “for we are close on the woods.”

Ten shots more were discharged. The elephant made a fearful bound; the car and balloon cracked as though every thing were going to pieces, and the shock made the doctor drop his hatchet on the ground.

The situation was thus rendered really very alarming; the anchor-rope, which had securely caught, could not be disengaged, nor could it yet be cut by the knives of our aeronauts, and the balloon was rushing headlong toward the wood, when the animal received a ball in the eye just as he lifted his head. On this he halted, faltered, his knees bent under him, and he uncovered his whole flank to the assaults of his enemies in the balloon.

“A bullet in his heart!” said Kennedy, discharging one last rifle-shot.

The elephant uttered a long bellow of terror and agony, then raised himself up for a moment, twirling his trunk in the air, and finally fell with all his weight upon one of his tusks, which he broke off short. He was dead.

“His tusk’s broken!” exclaimed Kennedy — ”ivory too that in England would bring thirty-five guineas per hundred pounds.”

“As much as that?” said Joe, scrambling down to the ground by the anchor-rope.

“What’s the use of sighing over it, Dick?” said the doctor. “Are we ivory merchants? Did we come hither to make money?”

Joe examined the anchor and found it solidly attached to the unbroken tusk. The doctor and Dick leaped out on the ground, while the balloon, now half emptied, hovered over the body of the huge animal.

“What a splendid beast!” said Kennedy, “what a mass of flesh! I never saw an elephant of that size in India!”

“There’s nothing surprising about that, my dear Dick; the elephants of Central Africa are the finest in the world. The Andersons and the Cummings have hunted so incessantly in the neighborhood of the Cape, that these animals have migrated to the equator, where they are often met with in large herds.”

“In the mean while, I hope,” added Joe, “that we’ll taste a morsel of this fellow. I’ll undertake to get you a good dinner at his expense. Mr. Kennedy will go off and hunt for an hour or two; the doctor will make an inspection of the balloon, and, while they’re busy in that way, I’ll do the cooking.”

“A good arrangement!” said the doctor; “so do as you like, Joe.”

“As for me,” said the hunter, “I shall avail myself of the two hours’ recess that Joe has condescended to let me have.”

“Go, my friend, but no imprudence! Don’t wander too far away.”

“Never fear, doctor!” and, so saying, Dick, shouldering his gun, plunged into the woods.

Forthwith Joe went to work at his vocation. At first he made a hole in the ground two feet deep; this he filled with the dry wood that was so abundantly scattered about, where it had been strewn by the elephants, whose tracks could be seen where they had made their way through the forest. This hole filled, he heaped a pile of fagots on it a foot in height, and set fire to it.

Then he went back to the carcass of the elephant, which had fallen only about a hundred feet from the edge of the forest; he next proceeded adroitly to cut off the trunk, which might have been two feet in diameter at the base; of this he selected the most delicate portion, and then took with it one of the animal’s spongy feet. In fact, these are the finest morsels, like the hump of the bison, the paws of the bear, and the head of the wild boar.

When the pile of fagots had been thoroughly consumed, inside and outside, the hole, cleared of the cinders and hot coals, retained a very high temperature. The pieces of elephant-meat, surrounded with aromatic leaves, were placed in this extempore oven and covered with hot coals. Then Joe piled up a second heap of sticks over all, and when it had burned out the meat was cooked to a turn.

Then Joe took the viands from the oven, spread the savory mess upon green leaves, and arranged his dinner upon a magnificent patch of greensward. He finally brought out some biscuit, some coffee, and some cognac, and got a can of pure, fresh water from a neighboring streamlet.

The repast thus prepared was a pleasant sight to behold, and Joe, without being too proud, thought that it would also be pleasant to eat.

“A journey without danger or fatigue,” he soliloquized; “your meals when you please; a swinging hammock all the time! What more could a man ask? And there was Kennedy, who didn’t want to come!”

On his part, Dr. Ferguson was engrossed in a serious and thorough examination of the balloon. The latter did not appear to have suffered from the storm; the silk and the gutta percha had resisted wonderfully, and, upon estimating the exact height of the ground and the ascensional force of the balloon, our aeronaut saw, with satisfaction, that the hydrogen was in exactly the same quantity as before. The covering had remained completely waterproof.

It was now only five days since our travellers had quitted Zanzibar; their pemmican had not yet been touched; their stock of biscuit and potted meat was enough for a long trip, and there was nothing to be replenished but the water.

The pipes and spiral seemed to be in perfect condition, since, thanks to their india-rubber jointings, they had yielded to all the oscillations of the balloon. His examination ended, the doctor betook himself to setting his notes in order. He made a very accurate sketch of the surrounding landscape, with its long prairie stretching away out of sight, the forest of calmadores, and the balloon resting motionless over the body of the dead elephant.

At the end of his two hours, Kennedy returned with a string of fat partridges and the haunch of an oryx, a sort of gemsbok belonging to the most agile species of antelopes. Joe took upon himself to prepare this surplus stock of provisions for a later repast.

“But, dinner’s ready!” he shouted in his most musical voice.

And the three travellers had only to sit down on the green turf. The trunk and feet of the elephant were declared to be exquisite. Old England was toasted, as usual, and delicious Havanas perfumed this charming country for the first time.

Kennedy ate, drank, and chatted, like four; he was perfectly delighted with his new life, and seriously proposed to the doctor to settle in this forest, to construct a cabin of boughs and foliage, and, there and then, to lay the foundation of a Robinson Crusoe dynasty in Africa.

The proposition went no further, although Joe had, at once, selected the part of Man Friday for himself.

The country seemed so quiet, so deserted, that the doctor resolved to pass the night on the ground, and Joe arranged a circle of watch-fires as an indispensable barrier against wild animals, for the hyenas, cougars, and jackals, attracted by the smell of the dead elephant, were prowling about in the neighborhood. Kennedy had to fire his rifle several times at these unceremonious visitors, but the night passed without any untoward occurrence.

CHAPTER EIGHTEENTH.

The Karagwah. — Lake Ukereoue. — A Night on an Island. — The Equator. — Crossing the Lake. — The Cascades. — A View of the Country. — The Sources of the Nile. — The Island of Benga. — The Signature of Andrea Debono. — The Flag with the Arms of England.

At five o’clock in the morning, preparations for departure commenced. Joe, with the hatchet which he had fortunately recovered, broke the elephant’s tusks. The balloon, restored to liberty, sped away to the northwest with our travellers, at the rate of eighteen miles per hour.

The doctor had carefully taken his position by the altitude of the stars, during the preceding night. He knew that he was in latitude two degrees forty minutes below the equator, or at a distance of one hundred and sixty geographical miles. He swept along over many villages without heeding the cries that the appearance of the balloon excited; he took note of the conformation of places with quick sights; he passed the slopes of the Rubemhe, which are nearly as abrupt as the summits of the Ousagara, and, farther on, at Tenga, encountered the first projections of the Karagwah chains, which, in his opinion, are direct spurs of the Mountains of the Moon. So, the ancient legend which made these mountains the cradle of the Nile, came near to the truth, since they really border upon Lake Ukereoue, the conjectured reservoir of the waters of the great river.

From Kafuro, the main district of the merchants of that country, he descried, at length, on the horizon, the lake so much desired and so long sought for, of which Captain Speke caught a glimpse on the 3d of August, 1858.

Samuel Ferguson felt real emotion: he was almost in contact with one of the principal points of his expedition, and, with his spy-glass constantly raised, he kept every nook and corner of the mysterious region in sight. His gaze wandered over details that might have been thus described:

“Beneath him extended a country generally destitute of cultivation; only here and there some ravines seemed under tillage; the surface, dotted with peaks of medium height, grew flat as it approached the lake; barley-fields took the place of rice-plantations, and there, too, could be seen growing the species of plantain from which the wine of the country is drawn, and mwani, the wild plant which supplies a substitute for coffee. A collection of some fifty or more circular huts, covered with a flowering thatch, constituted the capital of the Karagwah country.”

He could easily distinguish the astonished countenances of a rather fine-looking race of natives of yellowish-brown complexion. Women of incredible corpulence were dawdling about through the cultivated grounds, and the doctor greatly surprised his companions by informing them that this rotundity, which is highly esteemed in that region, was obtained by an obligatory diet of curdled milk.

At noon, the Victoria was in one degree forty-five minutes south latitude, and at one o’clock the wind was driving her directly toward the lake.

This sheet of water was christened Uyanza Victoria, or Victoria Lake, by Captain Speke. At the place now mentioned it might measure about ninety miles in breadth, and at its southern extremity the captain found a group of islets, which he named the Archipelago of Bengal. He pushed his survey as far as Muanza, on the eastern coast, where he was received by the sultan. He made a triangulation of this part of the lake, but he could not procure a boat, either to cross it or to visit the great island of Ukereoue which is very populous, is governed by three sultans, and appears to be only a promontory at low tide.

The balloon approached the lake more to the northward, to the doctor’s great regret, for it had been his wish to determine its lower outlines. Its shores seemed to be thickly set with brambles and thorny plants, growing together in wild confusion, and were literally hidden, sometimes, from the gaze, by myriads of mosquitoes of a light-brown hue. The country was evidently habitable and inhabited. Troops of hippopotami could be seen disporting themselves in the forests of reeds, or plunging beneath the whitish waters of the lake.

The latter, seen from above, presented, toward the west, so broad an horizon that it might have been called a sea; the distance between the two shores is so great that communication cannot be established, and storms are frequent and violent, for the winds sweep with fury over this elevated and unsheltered basin.

The doctor experienced some difficulty in guiding his course; he was afraid of being carried toward the east, but, fortunately, a current bore him directly toward the north, and at six o’clock in the evening the balloon alighted on a small desert island in thirty minutes south latitude, and thirty-two degrees fifty-two minutes east longitude, about twenty miles from the shore.

The travellers succeeded in making fast to a tree, and, the wind having fallen calm toward evening, they remained quietly at anchor. They dared not dream of taking the ground, since here, as on the shores of the Uyanza, legions of mosquitoes covered the soil in dense clouds. Joe even came back, from securing the anchor in the tree, speckled with bites, but he kept his temper, because he found it quite the natural thing for mosquitoes to treat him as they had done.

Nevertheless, the doctor, who was less of an optimist, let out as much rope as he could, so as to escape these pitiless insects, that began to rise toward him with a threatening hum.

The doctor ascertained the height of the lake above the level of the sea, as it had been determined by Captain Speke, say three thousand seven hundred and fifty feet.

“Here we are, then, on an island!” said Joe, scratching as though he’d tear his nails out.

“We could make the tour of it in a jiffy,” added Kennedy, “and, excepting these confounded mosquitoes, there’s not a living being to be seen on it.”

“The islands with which the lake is dotted,” replied the doctor, “are nothing, after all, but the tops of submerged hills; but we are lucky to have found a retreat among them, for the shores of the lake are inhabited by ferocious tribes. Take your sleep, then, since Providence has granted us a tranquil night.”

“Won’t you do the same, doctor?”

“No, I could not close my eyes. My thoughts would banish sleep. To-morrow, my friends, should the wind prove favorable, we shall go due north, and we shall, perhaps, discover the sources of the Nile, that grand secret which has so long remained impenetrable. Near as we are to the sources of the renowned river, I could not sleep.”

Kennedy and Joe, whom scientific speculations failed to disturb to that extent, were not long in falling into sound slumber, while the doctor held his post.

On Wednesday, April 23d, the balloon started at four o’clock in the morning, with a grayish sky overhead; night was slow in quitting the surface of the lake, which was enveloped in a dense fog, but presently a violent breeze scattered all the mists, and, after the balloon had been swung to and fro for a moment, in opposite directions, it at length veered in a straight line toward the north.

Dr. Ferguson fairly clapped his hands for joy.

“We are on the right track!” he exclaimed. “To-day or never we shall see the Nile! Look, my friends, we are crossing the equator! We are entering our own hemisphere!”

“Ah!” said Joe, “do you think, doctor, that the equator passes here?”

“Just here, my boy!”

“Well, then, with all respect to you, sir, it seems to me that this is the very time to moisten it.”

“Good!” said the doctor, laughing. “Let us have a glass of punch. You have a way of comprehending cosmography that is any thing but dull.”

And thus was the passage of the Victoria over the equator duly celebrated.

The balloon made rapid headway. In the west could be seen a low and but slightly-diversified coast, and, farther away in the background, the elevated plains of the Uganda and the Usoga. At length, the rapidity of the wind became excessive, approaching thirty miles per hour.

The waters of the Nyanza, violently agitated, were foaming like the billows of a sea. By the appearance of certain long swells that followed the sinking of the waves, the doctor was enabled to conclude that the lake must have great depth of water. Only one or two rude boats were seen during this rapid passage.

“This lake is evidently, from its elevated position, the natural reservoir of the rivers in the eastern part of Africa, and the sky gives back to it in rain what it takes in vapor from the streams that flow out of it. I am certain that the Nile must here take its rise.”

“Well, we shall see!” said Kennedy.

About nine o’clock they drew nearer to the western coast. It seemed deserted, and covered with woods; the wind freshened a little toward the east, and the other shore of the lake could be seen. It bent around in such a curve as to end in a wide angle toward two degrees forty minutes north latitude. Lofty mountains uplifted their arid peaks at this extremity of Nyanza; but, between them, a deep and winding gorge gave exit to a turbulent and foaming river.

While busy managing the balloon, Dr. Ferguson never ceased reconnoitring the country with eager eyes.

“Look!” he exclaimed, “look, my friends! the statements of the Arabs were correct! They spoke of a river by which Lake Ukereoue discharged its waters toward the north, and this river exists, and we are descending it, and it flows with a speed analogous to our own! And this drop of water now gliding away beneath our feet is, beyond all question, rushing on, to mingle with the Mediterranean! It is the Nile!”

“It is the Nile!” reeechoed Kennedy, carried away by the enthusiasm of his friend.

“Hurrah for the Nile!” shouted Joe, glad, and always ready to cheer for something.

Enormous rocks, here and there, embarrassed the course of this mysterious river. The water foamed as it fell in rapids and cataracts, which confirmed the doctor in his preconceived ideas on the subject. From the environing mountains numerous torrents came plunging and seething down, and the eye could take them in by hundreds. There could be seen, starting from the soil, delicate jets of water scattering in all directions, crossing and recrossing each other, mingling, contending in the swiftness of their progress, and all rushing toward that nascent stream which became a river after having drunk them in.

“Here is, indeed, the Nile!” reiterated the doctor, with the tone of profound conviction. “The origin of its name, like the origin of its waters, has fired the imagination of the learned; they have sought to trace it from the Greek, the Coptic, the Sanscrit; but all that matters little now, since we have made it surrender the secret of its source!”

“But,” said the Scotchman, “how are you to make sure of the identity of this river with the one recognized by the travellers from the north?”

“We shall have certain, irrefutable, convincing, and infallible proof,” replied Ferguson, “should the wind hold another hour in our favor!”

The mountains drew farther apart, revealing in their place numerous villages, and fields of white Indian corn, doura, and sugar-cane. The tribes inhabiting the region seemed excited and hostile; they manifested more anger than adoration, and evidently saw in the aeronauts only obtrusive strangers, and not condescending deities. It appeared as though, in approaching the sources of the Nile, these men came to rob them of something, and so the Victoria had to keep out of range of their muskets.

“To land here would be a ticklish matter!” said the Scot.

“Well!” said Joe, “so much the worse for these natives.

They’ll have to do without the pleasure of our conversation.”

“Nevertheless, descend I must,” said the doctor, “were it only for a quarter of an hour. Without doing so I cannot verify the results of our expedition.”

“It is indispensable, then, doctor?”

“Indispensable; and we will descend, even if we have to do so with a volley of musketry.”

“The thing suits me,” said Kennedy, toying with his pet rifle.

“And I’m ready, master, whenever you say the word!” added Joe, preparing for the fight.

“It would not be the first time,” remarked the doctor, “that science has been followed up, sword in hand. The same thing happened to a French savant among the mountains of Spain, when he was measuring the terrestrial meridian.”

“Be easy on that score, doctor, and trust to your two body-guards.”

“Are we there, master?”

“Not yet. In fact, I shall go up a little, first, in order to get an exact idea of the configuration of the country.”

The hydrogen expanded, and in less than ten minutes the balloon was soaring at a height of twenty-five hundred feet above the ground.

From that elevation could be distinguished an inextricable network of smaller streams which the river received into its bosom; others came from the west, from between numerous hills, in the midst of fertile plains.

“We are not ninety miles from Gondokoro,” said the doctor, measuring off the distance on his map, “and less than five miles from the point reached by the explorers from the north. Let us descend with great care.”

And, upon this, the balloon was lowered about two thousand feet.

“Now, my friends, let us be ready, come what may.”

“Ready it is!” said Dick and Joe, with one voice.

“Good!”

In a few moments the balloon was advancing along the bed of the river, and scarcely one hundred feet above the ground. The Nile measured but fifty fathoms in width at this point, and the natives were in great excitement, rushing to and fro, tumultuously, in the villages that lined the banks of the stream. At the second degree it forms a perpendicular cascade of ten feet in height, and consequently impassable by boats.

“Here, then, is the cascade mentioned by Debono!” exclaimed the doctor.

The basin of the river spread out, dotted with numerous islands, which Dr. Ferguson devoured with his eyes. He seemed to be seeking for a point of reference which he had not yet found.

By this time, some blacks, having ventured in a boat just under the balloon, Kennedy saluted them with a shot from his rifle, that made them regain the bank at their utmost speed.

“A good journey to you,” bawled Joe, “and if I were in your place, I wouldn’t try coming back again. I should be mightily afraid of a monster that can hurl thunderbolts when he pleases.”

But, all at once, the doctor snatched up his spy-glass, and directed it toward an island reposing in the middle of the river.

“Four trees!” he exclaimed; “look, down there!” Sure enough, there were four trees standing alone at one end of it.

“It is Bengal Island! It is the very same,” repeated the doctor, exultingly.

“And what of that?” asked Dick.

“It is there that we shall alight, if God permits.”

“But, it seems to be inhabited, doctor.”

“Joe is right; and, unless I’m mistaken, there is a group of about a score of natives on it now.”

“We’ll make them scatter; there’ll be no great trouble in that,” responded Ferguson.

“So be it,” chimed in the hunter.

The sun was at the zenith as the balloon approached the island.

The blacks, who were members of the Makado tribe, were howling lustily, and one of them waved his bark hat in the air. Kennedy took aim at him, fired, and his hat flew about him in pieces. Thereupon there was a general scamper. The natives plunged headlong into the river, and swam to the opposite bank. Immediately, there came a shower of balls from both banks, along with a perfect cloud of arrows, but without doing the balloon any damage, where it rested with its anchor snugly secured in the fissure of a rock. Joe lost no time in sliding to the ground.

“The ladder!” cried the doctor. “Follow me, Kennedy.”

“What do you wish, sir?”

“Let us alight. I want a witness.”

“Here I am!”

“Mind your post, Joe, and keep a good lookout.”

“Never fear, doctor; I’ll answer for all that.”

“Come, Dick,” said the doctor, as he touched the ground.

So saying, he drew his companion along toward a group of rocks that rose upon one point of the island; there, after searching for some time, he began to rummage among the brambles, and, in so doing, scratched his hands until they bled.

Suddenly he grasped Kennedy’s arm, exclaiming:

“Look! look!”

“Letters!”

Yes; there, indeed, could be descried, with perfect precision of outline, some letters carved on the rock. It was quite easy to make them out:

“A. D.”

“A.D!” repeated Dr. Ferguson. “Andrea Debono — the very signature of the traveller who farthest ascended the current of the Nile.”

“No doubt of that, friend Samuel,” assented Kennedy.

“Are you now convinced?”

“It is the Nile! We cannot entertain a doubt on that score now,” was the reply.

The doctor, for the last time, examined those precious initials, the exact form and size of which he carefully noted.

“And now,” said he — ”now for the balloon!”

“Quickly, then, for I see some of the natives getting ready to recross the river.”

“That matters little to us now. Let the wind but send us northward for a few hours, and we shall reach Gondokoro, and press the hands of some of our countrymen.”

Ten minutes more, and the balloon was majestically ascending, while Dr. Ferguson, in token of success, waved the English flag triumphantly from his car.

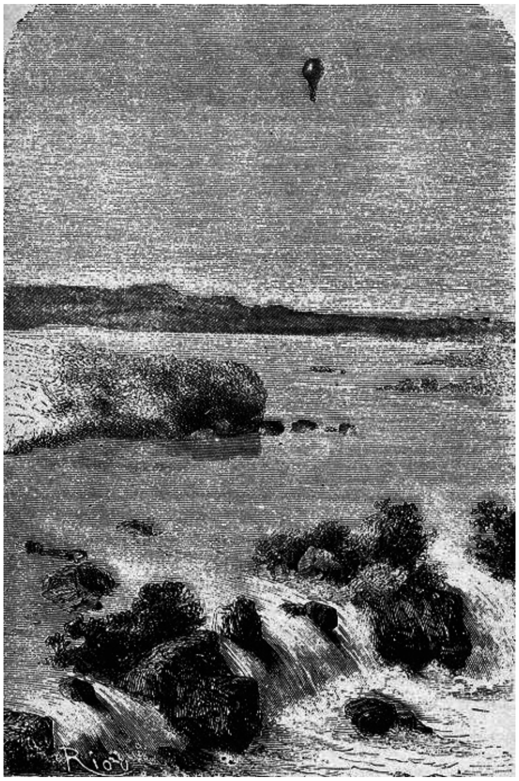
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CHAPTER NINETEENTH.

The Nile. — The Trembling Mountain. — A Remembrance of the Country. — The Narratives of the Arabs. — The Nyam-Nyams. — Joe's Shrewd Cogitations. — The Balloon runs the Gantlet. — Aerostatic Ascensions. — Madame Blanchard. "Which way do we head?" asked Kennedy, as he saw his friend consulting the compass.

"North-northeast."

"The deuce! but that's not the north?"

"No, Dick; and I'm afraid that we shall have some trouble in getting to Gondokoro. I am sorry for it; but, at last, we have succeeded in connecting the explorations from the east with those from the north; and we must not complain."

The balloon was now receding gradually from the Nile.

"One last look," said the doctor, "at this impassable latitude, beyond which the most intrepid travellers could not make their way. There are those intractable tribes, of whom Petherick, Arnaud, Miuni, and the young traveller Lejean, to whom we are indebted for the best work on the Upper Nile, have spoken."

"Thus, then," added Kennedy, inquiringly, "our discoveries agree with the speculations of science."

"Absolutely so. The sources of the White Nile, of the Bahr-el-Abiad, are immersed in a lake as large as a sea; it is there that it takes its rise. Poesy, undoubtedly, loses something thereby. People were fond of ascribing a celestial origin to this king of rivers. The ancients gave it the name of an ocean, and were not far from believing that it flowed directly from the sun; but we must come down from these flights from time to time, and accept what science teaches us. There will not always be scientific men, perhaps; but there always will be poets."

"We can still see cataracts," said Joe.

"Those are the cataracts of Makedo, in the third degree of latitude. Nothing could be more accurate. Oh, if we could only have followed the course of the Nile for a few hours!"

"And down yonder, below us, I see the top of a mountain," said the hunter.

"That is Mount Longwek, the Trembling Mountain of the Arabs. This whole country was visited by Debono, who went through it under the name of Latif-Effendi. The tribes living near the Nile are hostile to each other, and are continually waging a war of extermination. You may form some idea, then, of the difficulties he had to encounter."

The wind was carrying the balloon toward the northwest, and, in order to avoid Mount Longwek, it was necessary to seek a more slanting current.

"My friends," said the doctor, "here is where OUR passage of the African Continent really commences; up to this time we have been following the traces of our predecessors. Henceforth we are to launch ourselves upon the unknown. We shall not lack the courage, shall we?"

"Never!" said Dick and Joe together, almost in a shout.

"Onward, then, and may we have the help of Heaven!"

At ten o’clock at night, after passing over ravines, forests, and scattered villages, the aeronauts reached the side of the Trembling Mountain, along whose gentle slopes they went quietly gliding. In that memorable day, the 23d of April, they had, in fifteen hours, impelled by a rapid breeze, traversed a distance of more than three hundred and fifteen miles.

But this latter part of the journey had left them in dull spirits, and complete silence reigned in the car. Was Dr. Ferguson absorbed in the thought of his discoveries? Were his two companions thinking of their trip through those unknown regions? There were, no doubt, mingled with these reflections, the keenest reminiscences of home and distant friends. Joe alone continued to manifest the same careless philosophy, finding it QUITE NATURAL that home should not be there, from the moment that he left it; but he respected the silent mood of his friends, the doctor and Kennedy.

About ten the balloon anchored on the side of the Trembling Mountain, so called, because, in Arab tradition, it is said to tremble the instant that a Mussulman sets foot upon it. The travellers then partook of a substantial meal, and all quietly passed the night as usual, keeping the regular watches.

On awaking the next morning, they all had pleasanter feelings. The weather was fine, and the wind was blowing from the right quarter; so that a good breakfast, seasoned with Joe’s merry pranks, put them in high good-humor.

The region they were now crossing is very extensive. It borders on the Mountains of the Moon on one side, and those of Darfur on the other — a space about as broad as Europe.

“We are, no doubt, crossing what is supposed to be the kingdom of Usoga. Geographers have pretended that there existed, in the centre of Africa, a vast depression, an immense central lake. We shall see whether there is any truth in that idea,” said the doctor.

“But how did they come to think so?” asked Kennedy.

“From the recitals of the Arabs. Those fellows are great narrators — too much so, probably. Some travellers, who had got as far as Kazeh, or the great lakes, saw slaves that had been brought from this region; interrogated them concerning it, and, from their different narratives, made up a jumble of notions, and deduced systems from them. Down at the bottom of it all there is some appearance of truth; and you see that they were right about the sources of the Nile.”

“Nothing could be more correct,” said Kennedy. “It was by the aid of these documents that some attempts at maps were made, and so I am going to try to follow our route by one of them, rectifying it when need be.”

“Is all this region inhabited?” asked Joe.

“Undoubtedly; and disagreeably inhabited, too.”

“I thought so.”

“These scattered tribes come, one and all, under the title of Nyam-Nyams, and this compound word is only a sort of nickname. It imitates the sound of chewing.”

“That’s it! Excellent!” said Joe, champing his teeth as though he were eating; “Nyam-Nyam.”

“My good Joe, if you were the immediate object of this chewing, you wouldn’t find it so excellent.”

“Why, what’s the reason, sir?”

“These tribes are considered man-eaters.”

“Is that really the case?”

“Not a doubt of it! It has also been asserted that these natives had tails, like mere quadrupeds; but it was soon discovered that these appendages belonged to the skins of animals that they wore for clothing.”

“More’s the pity! a tail’s a nice thing to chase away mosquitoes.”

“That may be, Joe; but we must consign the story to the domain of fable, like the dogs’ heads which the traveller, Brun-Rollet, attributed to other tribes.”

“Dogs’ heads, eh? Quite convenient for barking, and even for man-eating!”

“But one thing that has been, unfortunately, proven true, is, the ferocity of these tribes, who are really very fond of human flesh, and devour it with avidity.”

“I only hope that they won’t take such a particular fancy to mine!” said Joe, with comic solemnity.

“See that!” said Kennedy.

“Yes, indeed, sir; if I have to be eaten, in a moment of famine, I want it to be for your benefit and my master’s; but the idea of feeding those black fellows — gracious! I’d die of shame!”

“Well, then, Joe,” said Kennedy, “that’s understood; we count upon you in case of need!”

“At your service, gentlemen!”

“Joe talks in this way so as to make us take good care of him, and fatten him up.”

“Maybe so!” said Joe. “Every man for himself.”

In the afternoon, the sky became covered with a warm mist, that oozed from the soil; the brownish vapor scarcely allowed the beholder to distinguish objects, and so, fearing collision with some unexpected mountain-peak, the doctor, about five o’clock, gave the signal to halt.

The night passed without accident, but in such profound obscurity, that it was necessary to use redoubled vigilance.

The monsoon blew with extreme violence during all the next morning. The wind buried itself in the lower cavities of the balloon and shook the appendage by which the dilating-pipes entered the main apparatus. They had, at last, to be tied up with cords, Joe acquitting himself very skilfully in performing that operation.

He had occasion to observe, at the same time, that the orifice of the balloon still remained hermetically sealed.

“That is a matter of double importance for us,” said the doctor; “in the first place, we avoid the escape of precious gas, and then, again, we do not leave behind us an inflammable train, which we should at last inevitably set fire to, and so be consumed.”

“That would be a disagreeable travelling incident!” said Joe.

“Should we be hurled to the ground?” asked Kennedy.

“Hurled! No, not quite that. The gas would burn quietly, and we should descend little by little. A similar accident happened to a French aeronaut, Madame Blanchard. She ignited her balloon while sending off fireworks, but she did not fall, and she would not have been killed, probably, had not her car dashed against a chimney and precipitated her to the ground.”

“Let us hope that nothing of the kind may happen to us,” said the hunter. “Up to this time our trip has not seemed to me very dangerous, and I can see nothing to prevent us reaching our destination.”

“Nor can I either, my dear Dick; accidents are generally caused by the imprudence of the aeronauts, or the defective construction of their apparatus. However, in thousands of aerial ascensions, there have not been twenty fatal accidents. Usually, the danger is in the moment of leaving the ground, or of alighting, and therefore at those junctures we should never omit the utmost precaution.”

“It’s breakfast-time,” said Joe; “we’ll have to put up with preserved meat and coffee until Mr. Kennedy has had another chance to get us a good slice of venison.”

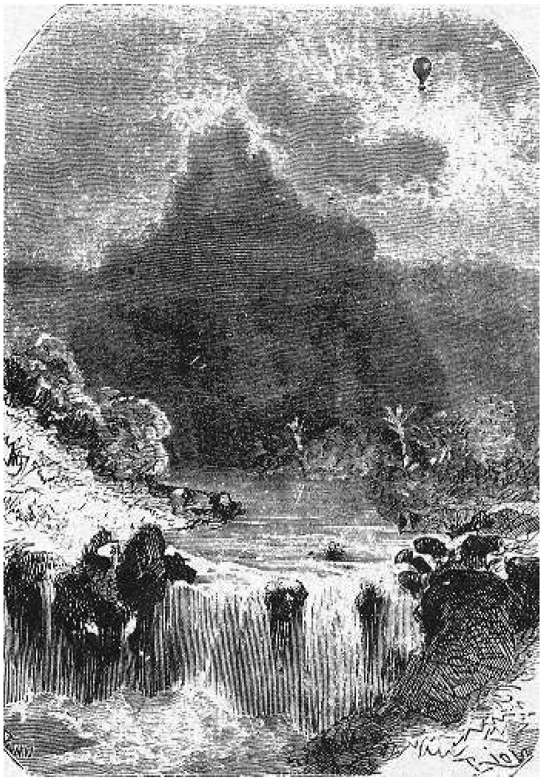

CHAPTER TWENTIETH.

The Celestial Bottle. — The Fig-Palms. — The Mammoth Trees. — The Tree of War. — The Winged Team. — Two Native Tribes in Battle. — A Massacre. — An Intervention from above.

The wind had become violent and irregular; the balloon was running the gantlet through the air. Tossed at one moment toward the north, at another toward the south, it could not find one steady current.

“We are moving very swiftly without advancing much,” said Kennedy, remarking the frequent oscillations of the needle of the compass.

“The balloon is rushing at the rate of at least thirty miles an hour. Lean over, and see how the country is gliding away beneath us!” said the doctor.

“See! that forest looks as though it were precipitating itself upon us!”

“The forest has become a clearing!” added the other.

“And the clearing a village!” continued Joe, a moment or two later. “Look at the faces of those astonished darkys!”

“Oh! it’s natural enough that they should be astonished,” said the doctor. “The French peasants, when they first saw a balloon, fired at it, thinking that it was an aerial monster. A Soudan negro may be excused, then, for opening his eyes VERY wide!”

“Faith!” said Joe, as the Victoria skimmed closely along the ground, at scarcely the elevation of one hundred feet, and immediately over a village, “I’ll throw them an empty bottle, with your leave, doctor, and if it reaches them safe and sound, they’ll worship it; if it breaks, they’ll make talismans of the pieces.”

So saying, he flung out a bottle, which, of course, was broken into a thousand fragments, while the negroes scampered into their round huts, uttering shrill cries.

A little farther on, Kennedy called out: “Look at that strange tree! The upper part is of one kind and the lower part of another!”

“Well!” said Joe, “here’s a country where the trees grow on top of each other.”

“It’s simply the trunk of a fig-tree,” replied the doctor, “on which there is a little vegetating earth. Some fine day, the wind left the seed of a palm on it, and the seed has taken root and grown as though it were on the plain ground.”

“A fine new style of gardening,” said Joe, “and I’ll import the idea to England. It would be just the thing in the London parks; without counting that it would be another way to increase the number of fruit-trees. We could have gardens up in the air; and the small house-owners would like that!”

At this moment, they had to raise the balloon so as to pass over a forest of trees that were more than three hundred feet in height — a kind of ancient banyan.

“What magnificent trees!” exclaimed Kennedy. “I never saw any thing so fine as the appearance of these venerable forests. Look, doctor!”

“The height of these banyans is really remarkable, my dear Dick; and yet, they would be nothing astonishing in the New World.”

“Why, are there still loftier trees in existence?”

“Undoubtedly; among the ‘mammoth trees’ of California, there is a cedar four hundred and eighty feet in height. It would overtop the Houses of Parliament, and even the Great Pyramid of Egypt. The trunk at the surface of the ground was one hundred and twenty feet in circumference, and the concentric layers of the wood disclosed an age of more than four thousand years.”

“But then, sir, there was nothing wonderful in it! When one has lived four thousand years, one ought to be pretty tall!” was Joe’s remark.

Meanwhile, during the doctor’s recital and Joe’s response, the forest had given place to a large collection of huts surrounding an open space. In the middle of this grew a solitary tree, and Joe exclaimed, as he caught sight of it:

“Well! if that tree has produced such flowers as those, for the last four thousand years, I have to offer it my compliments, anyhow,” and he pointed to a gigantic sycamore, whose whole trunk was covered with human bones. The flowers of which Joe spoke were heads freshly severed from the bodies, and suspended by daggers thrust into the bark of the tree.

“The war-tree of these cannibals!” said the doctor; “the Indians merely carry off the scalp, but these negroes take the whole head.”

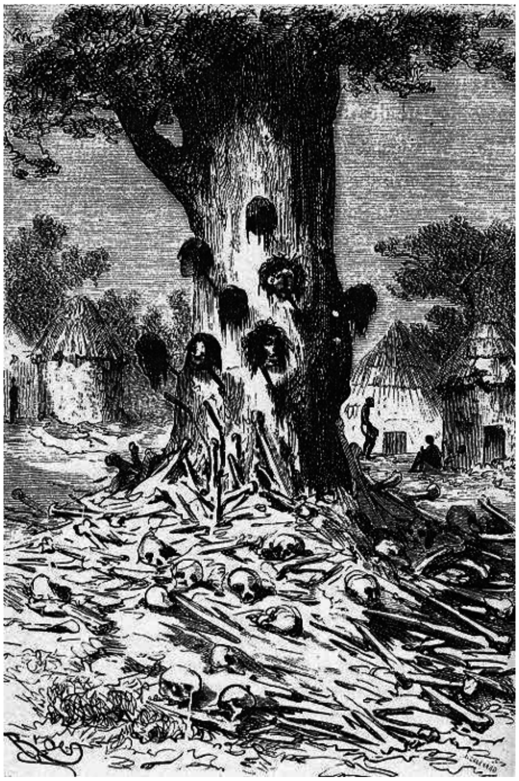

“A mere matter of fashion!” said Joe. But, already, the village and the bleeding heads were disappearing on the horizon. Another place offered a still more revolting spectacle — half-devoured corpses; skeletons mouldering to dust; human limbs scattered here and there, and left to feed the jackals and hyenas.

“No doubt, these are the bodies of criminals; according to the custom in Abyssinia, these people have left them a prey to the wild beasts, who kill them with their terrible teeth and claws, and then devour them at their leisure.

“Not a whit more cruel than hanging!” said the

Scot; “filthier, that’s all!”

“In the southern regions of Africa, they content themselves,” resumed the doctor, “with shutting up the criminal in his own hut with his cattle, and sometimes with his family. They then set fire to the hut, and the whole party are burned together. I call that cruel; but, like friend Kennedy, I think that the gallows is quite as cruel, quite as barbarous."

Joe, by the aid of his keen sight, which he did not fail to use continually, noticed some flocks of birds of prey flitting about the horizon.

"They are eagles!" exclaimed Kennedy, after reconnoitring them through the glass, "magnificent birds, whose flight is as rapid as ours."

"Heaven preserve us from their attacks!" said the doctor, "they are more to be feared by us than wild beasts or savage tribes."

"Bah!" said the hunter, "we can drive them off with a few rifle-shots."

"Nevertheless, I would prefer, dear Dick, not having to rely upon your skill, this time, for the silk of our balloon could not resist their sharp beaks; fortunately, the huge birds will, I believe, be more frightened than attracted by our machine."

"Yes! but a new idea, and I have dozens of them," said Joe; "if we could only manage to capture a team of live eagles, we could hitch them to the balloon, and they'd haul us through the air!"

"The thing has been seriously proposed," replied the doctor, "but I think it hardly practicable with creatures naturally so restive."

"Oh! we'd tame them," said Joe. "Instead of driving them with bits, we'd do it with eye-blinkers that would cover their eyes. Half blinded in that way, they'd go to the right or to the left, as we desired; when blinded completely, they would stop."

“Allow me, Joe, to prefer a favorable wind to your team of eagles. It costs less for fodder, and is more reliable.”

“Well, you may have your choice, master, but I stick to my idea.”

It now was noon. The Victoria had been going at a more moderate speed for some time; the country merely passed below it; it no longer flew.

Suddenly, shouts and whistlings were heard by our aeronauts, and, leaning over the edge of the car, they saw on the open plain below them an exciting spectacle.

Two hostile tribes were fighting furiously, and the air was dotted with volleys of arrows. The combatants were so intent upon their murderous work that they did not notice the arrival of the balloon; there were about three hundred mingled confusedly in the deadly struggle: most of them, red with the blood of the wounded, in which they fairly wallowed, were horrible to behold.

As they at last caught sight of the balloon, there was a momentary pause; but their yells redoubled, and some arrows were shot at the Victoria, one of them coming close enough for Joe to catch it with his hand.

“Let us rise out of range,” exclaimed the doctor; “there must be no rashness! We are forbidden any risk.”

Meanwhile, the massacre continued on both sides, with battle-axes and war-clubs; as quickly as one of the combatants fell, a hostile warrior ran up to cut off his head, while the women, mingling in the fray, gathered up these bloody trophies, and piled them together at either extremity of the battle-field. Often, too, they even fought for these hideous spoils.

“What a frightful scene!” said Kennedy, with profound disgust.

“They’re ugly acquaintances!” added Joe; “but then, if they had uniforms they’d be just like the fighters of all the rest of the world!”

“I have a keen hankering to take a hand in at that fight,” said the hunter, brandishing his rifle.

“No! no!” objected the doctor, vehemently; “no, let us not meddle with what don’t concern us. Do you know which is right or which is wrong, that you would assume the part of the Almighty? Let us, rather, hurry away from this revolting spectacle. Could the great captains of the world float thus above the scenes of their exploits, they would at last, perhaps, conceive a disgust for blood and conquest.”

The chieftain of one of the contending parties was remarkable for his athletic proportions, his great height, and herculean strength. With one hand he plunged his spear into the compact ranks of his enemies, and with the other mowed large spaces in them with his battle-axe. Suddenly he flung away his war-club, red with blood, rushed upon a wounded warrior, and, chopping off his arm at a single stroke, carried the dissevered member to his mouth, and bit it again and again.

“Ah!” ejaculated Kennedy, “the horrible brute! I can hold back no longer,” and, as he spoke, the huge savage, struck full in the forehead with a rifle-ball, fell headlong to the ground.

Upon this sudden mishap of their leader, his warriors seemed struck dumb with amazement; his supernatural death awed them, while it reanimated the courage and ardor of their adversaries, and, in a twinkling, the field was abandoned by half the combatants.

“Come, let us look higher up for a current to bear us away. I am sick of this spectacle,” said the doctor.

But they could not get away so rapidly as to avoid the sight of the victorious tribe rushing upon the dead and the wounded, scrambling and disputing for the still warm and reeking flesh, and eagerly devouring it.

“Faugh!” uttered Joe, “it’s sickening.”

The balloon rose as it expanded; the howlings of the brutal horde, in the delirium of their orgy, pursued them for a few minutes; but, at length, borne away toward the south, they were carried out of sight and hearing of this horrible spectacle of cannibalism.

The surface of the country was now greatly varied,

with numerous streams of water, bearing toward the east.

The latter, undoubtedly, ran into those affluents of Lake

Nu, or of the River of the Gazelles, concerning which M.

Guillaume Lejean has given such curious details.

At nightfall, the balloon cast anchor in twenty-seven degrees east longitude, and four degrees twenty minutes north latitude, after a day’s trip of one hundred and fifty miles.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIRST.

Strange Sounds. — A Night Attack. — Kennedy and Joe in the Tree. — Two Shots. — ”Help! help!” — Reply in French. — The Morning. — The Missionary. — The Plan of Rescue.

The night came on very dark. The doctor had not been able to reconnoitre the country. He had made fast to a very tall tree, from which he could distinguish only a confused mass through the gloom.

As usual, he took the nine-o’clock watch, and at midnight

Dick relieved him.

“Keep a sharp lookout, Dick!” was the doctor’s good-night injunction.

“Is there any thing new on the carpet?”

“No; but I thought that I heard vague sounds below us, and, as I don’t exactly know where the wind has carried us to, even an excess of caution would do no harm.”

“You’ve probably heard the cries of wild beasts.”

“No! the sounds seemed to me something altogether different from that; at all events, on the least alarm don’t fail to waken us.”

“I’ll do so, doctor; rest easy.”

After listening attentively for a moment or two longer, the doctor, hearing nothing more, threw himself on his blankets and went asleep.

The sky was covered with dense clouds, but not a breath of air was stirring; and the balloon, kept in its place by only a single anchor, experienced not the slightest oscillation.

Kennedy, leaning his elbow on the edge of the car, so as to keep an eye on the cylinder, which was actively at work, gazed out upon the calm obscurity; he eagerly scanned the horizon, and, as often happens to minds that are uneasy or possessed with preconceived notions, he fancied that he sometimes detected vague gleams of light in the distance.

At one moment he even thought that he saw them only two hundred paces away, quite distinctly, but it was a mere flash that was gone as quickly as it came, and he noticed nothing more. It was, no doubt, one of those luminous illusions that sometimes impress the eye in the midst of very profound darkness.

Kennedy was getting over his nervousness and falling into his wandering meditations again, when a sharp whistle pierced his ear.

Was that the cry of an animal or of a night-bird, or did it come from human lips?

Kennedy, perfectly comprehending the gravity of the situation, was on the point of waking his companions, but he reflected that, in any case, men or animals, the creatures that he had heard must be out of reach. So he merely saw that his weapons were all right, and then, with his night-glass, again plunged his gaze into space.

It was not long before he thought he could perceive below him vague forms that seemed to be gliding toward the tree, and then, by the aid of a ray of moonlight that shot like an electric flash between two masses of cloud, he distinctly made out a group of human figures moving in the shadow.

The adventure with the dog-faced baboons returned to his memory, and he placed his hand on the doctor’s shoulder.

The latter was awake in a moment.

“Silence!” said Dick. “Let us speak below our breath.”

“Has any thing happened?”

“Yes, let us waken Joe.”

The instant that Joe was aroused, Kennedy told him what he had seen.

“Those confounded monkeys again!” said Joe.

“Possibly, but we must be on our guard.”

“Joe and I,” said Kennedy, “will climb down the tree by the ladder.”

“And, in the meanwhile,” added the doctor, “I will take my measures so that we can ascend rapidly at a moment’s warning.”

“Agreed!”

“Let us go down, then!” said Joe.

“Don’t use your weapons, excepting at the last extremity! It would be a useless risk to make the natives aware of our presence in such a place as this.”

Dick and Joe replied with signs of assent, and then letting themselves slide noiselessly toward the tree, took their position in a fork among the strong branches where the anchor had caught.

For some moments they listened minutely and motionlessly among the foliage, and ere long Joe seized Kenedy's hand as he heard a sort of rubbing sound against the bark of the tree.

"Don't you hear that?" he whispered.

"Yes, and it's coming nearer."

"Suppose it should be a serpent? That hissing or whistling that you heard before — "

"No! there was something human in it."

"I'd prefer the savages, for I have a horror of those snakes."

"The noise is increasing," said Kennedy, again, after a lapse of a few moments.

"Yes! something's coming up toward us — climbing."

"Keep watch on this side, and I'll take care of the other."

"Very good!"

There they were, isolated at the top of one of the larger branches shooting out in the midst of one of those miniature forests called baobab-trees. The darkness, heightened by the density of the foliage, was profound; however, Joe, leaning over to Kennedy's ear and pointing down the tree, whispered:

“The blacks! They’re climbing toward us.”

The two friends could even catch the sound of a few words uttered in the lowest possible tones.

Joe gently brought his rifle to his shoulder as he spoke.

“Wait!” said Kennedy.

Some of the natives had really climbed the baobab, and now they were seen rising on all sides, winding along the boughs like reptiles, and advancing slowly but surely, all the time plainly enough discernible, not merely to the eye but to the nostrils, by the horrible odors of the rancid grease with which they bedaub their bodies.

Ere long, two heads appeared to the gaze of Kennedy and Joe, on a level with the very branch to which they were clinging.

“Attention!” said Kennedy. “Fire!”

The double concussion resounded like a thunderbolt and died away into cries of rage and pain, and in a moment the whole horde had disappeared.

But, in the midst of these yells and howls, a strange, unexpected — nay what seemed an impossible — cry had been heard! A human voice had, distinctly, called aloud in the French language —

“Help! help!”

Kennedy and Joe, dumb with amazement, had regained the car immediately.

“Did you hear that?” the doctor asked them.

“Undoubtedly, that supernatural cry, ‘A moi! a moi!’ comes from a Frenchman in the hands of these barbarians!”

“A traveller.”

“A missionary, perhaps.”

“Poor wretch!” said Kennedy, “they’re assassinating him — making a martyr of him!”

The doctor then spoke, and it was impossible for him to conceal his emotions.

“There can be no doubt of it,” he said; “some unfortunate Frenchman has fallen into the hands of these savages. We must not leave this place without doing all in our power to save him. When he heard the sound of our guns, he recognized an unhoped-for assistance, a providential interposition. We shall not disappoint his last hope. Are such your views?”

“They are, doctor, and we are ready to obey you.”

“Let us, then, lay our heads together to devise some plan, and in the morning we’ll try to rescue him.”

“But how shall we drive off those abominable blacks?” asked Kennedy.

“It’s quite clear to me, from the way in which they made off, that they are unacquainted with fire-arms. We must, therefore, profit by their fears; but we shall await daylight before acting, and then we can form our plans of rescue according to circumstances.”

“The poor captive cannot be far off,” said Joe, “because — ”

“Help! help!” repeated the voice, but much more feebly this time.

“The savage wretches!” exclaimed Joe, trembling with indignation. “Suppose they should kill him to-night!”

“Do you hear, doctor,” resumed Kennedy, seizing the doctor’s hand. “Suppose they should kill him to-night!”

“It is not at all likely, my friends. These savage tribes kill their captives in broad daylight; they must have the sunshine.”

“Now, if I were to take advantage of the darkness to slip down to the poor fellow?” said Kennedy.

“And I’ll go with you,” said Joe, warmly.

“Pause, my friends — pause! The suggestion does honor to your hearts and to your courage; but you would expose us all to great peril, and do still greater harm to the unfortunate man whom you wish to aid.”

“Why so?” asked Kennedy. “These savages are frightened and dispersed: they will not return.”

“Dick, I implore you, heed what I say. I am acting for the common good; and if by any accident you should be taken by surprise, all would be lost.”

“But, think of that poor wretch, hoping for aid, waiting there, praying, calling aloud. Is no one to go to his assistance? He must think that his senses deceived him; that he heard nothing!”

“We can reassure him, on that score,” said Dr. Ferguson — and, standing erect, making a speaking-trumpet of his hands, he shouted at the top of his voice, in French: “Whoever you are, be of good cheer! Three friends are watching over you.”

A terrific howl from the savages responded to these words — no doubt drowning the prisoner’s reply.

“They are murdering him! they are murdering him!” exclaimed Kennedy. “Our interference will have served no other purpose than to hasten the hour of his doom. We must act!”

“But how, Dick? What do you expect to do in the midst of this darkness?”

“Oh, if it was only daylight!” sighed Joe.

“Well, and suppose it were daylight?” said the doctor, in a singular tone.

“Nothing more simple, doctor,” said Kennedy. “I’d go down and scatter all these savage villains with powder and ball!”

“And you, Joe, what would you do?”

“I, master? why, I’d act more prudently, maybe, by telling the prisoner to make his escape in a certain direction that we’d agree upon.”

“And how would you get him to know that?”

“By means of this arrow that I caught flying the other day. I’d tie a note to it, or I’d just call out to him in a loud voice what you want him to do, because these black fellows don’t understand the language that you’d speak in!”

“Your plans are impracticable, my dear friends. The greatest difficulty would be for this poor fellow to escape at all — even admitting that he should manage to elude the vigilance of his captors. As for you, my dear Dick, with determined daring, and profiting by their alarm at our fire-arms, your project might possibly succeed; but, were it to fail, you would be lost, and we should have two persons to save instead of one. No! we must put ALL the chances on OUR side, and go to work differently.”

“But let us act at once!” said the hunter.

“Perhaps we may,” said the doctor, throwing considerable stress upon the words.

“Why, doctor, can you light up such darkness as this?”

“Who knows, Joe?”

“Ah! if you can do that, you’re the greatest learned man in the world!”

The doctor kept silent for a few moments; he was thinking. His two companions looked at him with much emotion, for they were greatly excited by the strangeness of the situation. Ferguson at last resumed:

“Here is my plan: We have two hundred pounds of ballast left, since the bags we brought with us are still untouched. I’ll suppose that this prisoner, who is evidently exhausted by suffering, weighs as much as one of us; there will still remain sixty pounds of ballast to throw out, in case we should want to ascend suddenly.”

“How do you expect to manage the balloon?” asked Kennedy.

“This is the idea, Dick: you will admit that if I can get to the prisoner, and throw out a quantity of ballast, equal to his weight, I shall have in nowise altered the equilibrium of the balloon. But, then, if I want to get a rapid ascension, so as to escape these savages, I must employ means more energetic than the cylinder. Well, then, in throwing out this overplus of ballast at a given moment, I am certain to rise with great rapidity.”

“That’s plain enough.”

“Yes; but there is one drawback: it consists in the fact that, in order to descend after that, I should have to part with a quantity of gas proportionate to the surplus ballast that I had thrown out. Now, the gas is precious; but we must not haggle over it when the life of a fellow-creature is at stake.”

“You are right, sir; we must do every thing in our power to save him.”

“Let us work, then, and get these bags all arranged on the rim of the car, so that they may be thrown overboard at one movement.”

“But this darkness?”

“It hides our preparations, and will be dispersed only when they are finished. Take care to have all our weapons close at hand. Perhaps we may have to fire; so we have one shot in the rifle; four for the two muskets; twelve in the two revolvers; or seventeen in all, which might be fired in a quarter of a minute. But perhaps we shall not have to resort to all this noisy work. Are you ready?”

“We’re ready,” responded Joe.

The sacks were placed as requested, and the arms were put in good order.

“Very good!” said the doctor. “Have an eye to every thing. Joe will see to throwing out the ballast, and Dick will carry off the prisoner; but let nothing be done until I give the word. Joe will first detach the anchor, and then quickly make his way back to the car.”

Joe let himself slide down by the rope; and, in a few moments, reappeared at his post; while the balloon, thus liberated, hung almost motionless in the air.

In the mean time the doctor assured himself of the presence of a sufficient quantity of gas in the mixing-tank to feed the cylinder, if necessary, without there being any need of resorting for some time to the Buntzen battery. He then took out the two perfectly-isolated conducting-wires, which served for the decomposition of the water, and, searching in his travelling-sack, brought forth two pieces of charcoal, cut down to a sharp point, and fixed one at the end of each wire.

His two friends looked on, without knowing what he was about, but they kept perfectly silent. When the doctor had finished, he stood up erect in the car, and, taking the two pieces of charcoal, one in each hand, drew their points nearly together.

In a twinkling, an intense and dazzling light was produced, with an insupportable glow between the two pointed ends of charcoal, and a huge jet of electric radiance literally broke the darkness of the night.

“Oh!” ejaculated the astonished friends.

“Not a word!” cautioned the doctor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SECOND.

The Jet of Light. — The Missionary. — The Rescue in a Ray of Electricity. — A Lazarist Priest. — But little Hope. — The Doctor's Care. — A Life of Self-Denial. — Passing a Volcano.

Dr. Ferguson darted his powerful electric jet toward various points of space, and caused it to rest on a spot from which shouts of terror were heard. His companions fixed their gaze eagerly on the place.

The baobab, over which the balloon was hanging almost motionless, stood in the centre of a clearing, where, between fields of Indian-corn and sugar-cane, were seen some fifty low, conical huts, around which swarmed a numerous tribe.

A hundred feet below the balloon stood a large post, or stake, and at its foot lay a human being — a young man of thirty years or more, with long black hair, half naked, wasted and wan, bleeding, covered with wounds, his head bowed over upon his breast, as Christ's was, when He hung upon the cross.

The hair, cut shorter on the top of his skull, still indicated the place of a half-effaced tonsure.

"A missionary! a priest!" exclaimed Joe.

"Poor, unfortunate man!" said Kennedy.

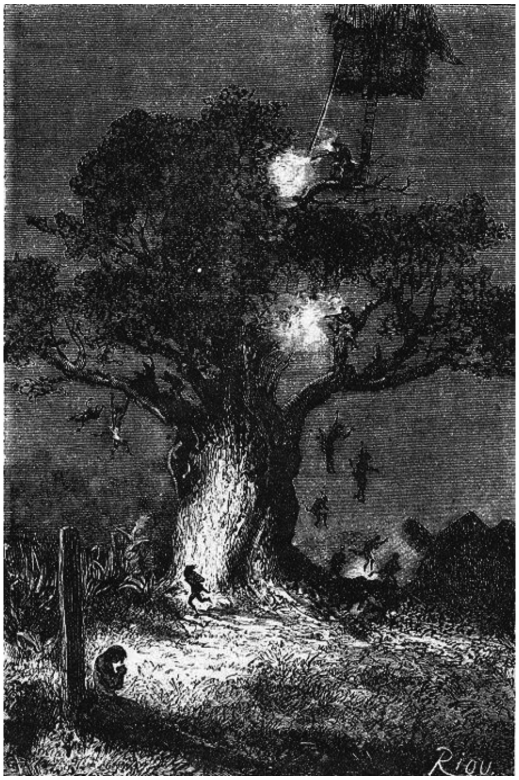

“We must save him, Dick!” responded the doctor; “we must save him!”

The crowd of blacks, when they saw the balloon over their heads, like a huge comet with a train of dazzling light, were seized with a terror that may be readily imagined. Upon hearing their cries, the prisoner raised his head. His eyes gleamed with sudden hope, and, without too thoroughly comprehending what was taking place, he stretched out his hands to his unexpected deliverers.

“He is alive!” exclaimed Ferguson. “God be praised!

The savages have got a fine scare, and we shall save him!

Are you ready, friends?”

“Ready, doctor, at the word.”

“Joe, shut off the cylinder!”

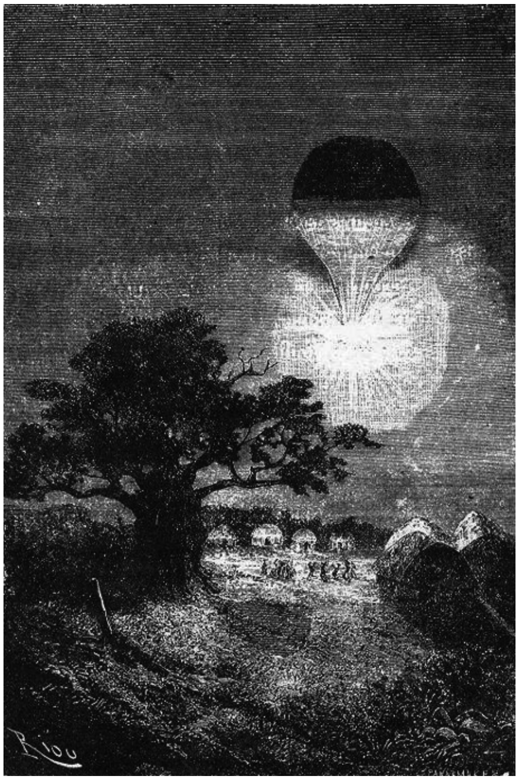

The doctor’s order was executed. An almost imperceptible breath of air impelled the balloon directly over the prisoner, at the same time that it gently lowered with the contraction of the gas. For about ten minutes it remained floating in the midst of luminous waves, for Ferguson continued to flash right down upon the throng his glowing sheaf of rays, which, here and there, marked out swift and vivid sheets of light. The tribe, under the influence of an indescribable terror, disappeared little by little in the huts, and there was complete solitude around the stake. The doctor had, therefore, been right in counting upon the fantastic appearance of the balloon throwing out rays, as vivid as the sun’s, through this intense gloom.

The car was approaching the ground; but a few of the savages, more audacious than the rest, guessing that their victim was about to escape from their clutches, came back with loud yells, and Kennedy seized his rifle. The doctor, however, besought him not to fire.

The priest, on his knees, for he had not the strength to stand erect, was not even fastened to the stake, his weakness rendering that precaution superfluous. At the instant when the car was close to the ground, the brawny Scot, laying aside his rifle, and seizing the priest around the waist, lifted him into the car, while, at the same moment, Joe tossed over the two hundred pounds of ballast.

The doctor had expected to ascend rapidly, but, contrary to his calculations, the balloon, after going up some three or four feet, remained there perfectly motionless.

“What holds us?” he asked, with an accent of terror.

Some of the savages were running toward them, uttering ferocious cries.

“Ah, ha!” said Joe, “one of those cursed blacks is hanging to the car!”

“Dick! Dick!” cried the doctor, “the water-tank!”

Kennedy caught his friend’s idea on the instant, and, snatching up with desperate strength one of the water-tanks weighing about one hundred pounds, he tossed it overboard. The balloon, thus suddenly lightened, made a leap of three hundred feet into the air, amid the howlings of the tribe whose prisoner thus escaped them in a blaze of dazzling light.

“Hurrah!” shouted the doctor’s comrades.

Suddenly, the balloon took a fresh leap, which carried it up to an elevation of a thousand feet.

“What’s that?” said Kennedy, who had nearly lost his balance.

“Oh! nothing; only that black villain leaving us!” replied the doctor, tranquilly, and Joe, leaning over, saw the savage that had clung to the car whirling over and over, with his arms outstretched in the air, and presently dashed to pieces on the ground. The doctor then separated his electric wires, and every thing was again buried in profound obscurity. It was now one o’clock in the morning.

The Frenchman, who had swooned away, at length opened his eyes.

“You are saved!” were the doctor’s first words.

“Saved!” he with a sad smile replied in English, “saved from a cruel death! My brethren, I thank you, but my days are numbered, nay, even my hours, and I have but little longer to live.”

With this, the missionary, again yielding to exhaustion, relapsed into his fainting-fit.

“He is dying!” said Kennedy.

“No,” replied the doctor, bending over him, “but he is very weak; so let us lay him under the awning.”

And they did gently deposit on their blankets that poor, wasted body, covered with scars and wounds, still bleeding where fire and steel had, in twenty places, left their agonizing marks. The doctor, taking an old handkerchief, quickly prepared a little lint, which he spread over the wounds, after having washed them. These rapid attentions were bestowed with the celerity and skill of a practised surgeon, and, when they were complete, the doctor, taking a cordial from his medicine-chest, poured a few drops upon his patient's lips.

The latter feebly pressed his kind hands, and scarcely had the strength to say, "Thank you! thank you!"

The doctor comprehended that he must be left perfectly quiet; so he closed the folds of the awning and resumed the guidance of the balloon.

The latter, after taking into account the weight of the new passenger, had been lightened of one hundred and eighty pounds, and therefore kept aloft without the aid of the cylinder. At the first dawn of day, a current drove it gently toward the west-northwest. The doctor went in under the awning for a moment or two, to look at his still sleeping patient.

"May Heaven spare the life of our new companion!

Have you any hope?" said the Scot.

"Yes, Dick, with care, in this pure, fresh atmosphere."

"How that man has suffered!" said Joe, with feeling. "He did bolder things than we've done, in venturing all alone among those savage tribes!"

"That cannot be questioned," assented the hunter.

During the entire day the doctor would not allow the sleep of his patient to be disturbed. It was really a long stupor, broken only by an occasional murmur of pain that continued to disquiet and agitate the doctor greatly.

Toward evening the balloon remained stationary in the midst of the gloom, and during the night, while Kennedy and Joe relieved each other in carefully tending the sick man, Ferguson kept watch over the safety of all.

By the morning of the next day, the balloon had moved, but very slightly, to the westward. The dawn came up pure and magnificent. The sick man was able to call his friends with a stronger voice. They raised the curtains of the awning, and he inhaled with delight the keen morning air.

“How do you feel to-day?” asked the doctor.

“Better, perhaps,” he replied. “But you, my friends, I have not seen you yet, excepting in a dream! I can, indeed, scarcely recall what has occurred. Who are you — that your names may not be forgotten in my dying prayers?”

“We are English travellers,” replied Ferguson. “We are trying to cross Africa in a balloon, and, on our way, we have had the good fortune to rescue you.”

“Science has its heroes,” said the missionary.

“But religion its martyrs!” rejoined the Scot.

“Are you a missionary?” asked the doctor.

“I am a priest of the Lazarist mission. Heaven sent you to me — Heaven be praised! The sacrifice of my life had been accomplished! But you come from Europe; tell me about Europe, about France! I have been without news for the last five years!”

“Five years! alone! and among these savages!” exclaimed

Kennedy with amazement.

“They are souls to redeem! ignorant and barbarous brethren, whom religion alone can instruct and civilize.”

Dr. Ferguson, yielding to the priest’s request, talked to him long and fully about France. He listened eagerly, and his eyes filled with tears. He seized Kennedy’s and Joe’s hands by turns in his own, which were burning with fever. The doctor prepared him some tea, and he drank it with satisfaction. After that, he had strength enough to raise himself up a little, and smiled with pleasure at seeing himself borne along through so pure a sky.

“You are daring travellers!” he said, “and you will succeed in your bold enterprise. You will again behold your relatives, your friends, your country — you — ”

At this moment, the weakness of the young missionary became so extreme that they had to lay him again on the bed, where a prostration, lasting for several hours, held him like a dead man under the eye of Dr. Ferguson. The latter could not suppress his emotion, for he felt that this life now in his charge was ebbing away. Were they then so soon to lose him whom they had snatched from an agonizing death? The doctor again washed and dressed the young martyr’s frightful wounds, and had to sacrifice nearly his whole stock of water to refresh his burning limbs. He surrounded him with the tenderest and most intelligent care, until, at length, the sick man revived, little by little, in his arms, and recovered his consciousness if not his strength.

The doctor was able to gather something of his history from his broken murmurs.

“Speak in your native language,” he said to the sufferer;

“I understand it, and it will fatigue you less.”

The missionary was a poor young man from the village of Aradon, in Brittany, in the Morbihan country. His earliest instincts had drawn him toward an ecclesiastical career, but to this life of self-sacrifice he was also desirous of joining a life of danger, by entering the mission of the order of priesthood of which St. Vincent de Paul was the founder, and, at twenty, he quitted his country for the inhospitable shores of Africa. From the sea-coast, overcoming obstacles, little by little, braving all privations, pushing onward, afoot, and praying, he had advanced to the very centre of those tribes that dwell among the tributary streams of the Upper Nile. For two years his faith was spurned, his zeal denied recognition, his charities taken in ill part, and he remained a prisoner to one of the cruelest tribes of the Nyambarra, the object of every species of maltreatment. But still he went on teaching, instructing, and praying. The tribe having been dispersed and he left for dead, in one of those combats which are so frequent between the tribes, instead of retracing his steps, he persisted in his evangelical mission. His most tranquil time was when he was taken for a madman. Meanwhile, he had made himself familiar with the idioms of the country, and he catechised in them. At length, during two more long years, he traversed these barbarous regions, impelled by that superhuman energy that comes from God. For a year past he had been residing with that tribe of the Nyam-Nyams known as the Barafri, one of the wildest and most ferocious of them all. The chief having died a few days before our travellers appeared, his sudden death was attributed to the missionary, and the tribe resolved to immolate him. His sufferings had already continued for the space of forty hours, and, as the doctor had supposed, he was to have perished in the blaze of the noonday sun. When he heard the sound of fire-arms, nature got the best of him, and he had cried out, “Help! help!” He then thought that he must have been dreaming, when a voice, that seemed to come from the sky, had uttered words of consolation.

“I have no regrets,” he said, “for the life that is passing away from me; my life belongs to God!”

“Hope still!” said the doctor; “we are near you, and we will save you now, as we saved you from the tortures of the stake.”

“I do not ask so much of Heaven,” said the priest, with resignation. “Blessed be God for having vouchsafed to me the joy before I die of having pressed your friendly hands, and having heard, once more, the language of my country!”

The missionary here grew weak again, and the whole day went by between hope and fear, Kennedy deeply moved, and Joe drawing his hand over his eyes more than once when he thought that no one saw him.

The balloon made little progress, and the wind seemed as though unwilling to jostle its precious burden.

Toward evening, Joe discovered a great light in the west. Under more elevated latitudes, it might have been mistaken for an immense aurora borealis, for the sky appeared on fire. The doctor very attentively examined the phenomenon.

“It is, perhaps, only a volcano in full activity,” said he.

“But the wind is carrying us directly over it,” replied

Kennedy.

“Very well, we shall cross it then at a safe height!” said the doctor.

Three hours later, the Victoria was right among the mountains. Her exact position was twenty-four degrees fifteen minutes east longitude, and four degrees forty-two minutes north latitude, and four degrees forty-two minutes north latitude. In front of her a volcanic crater was pouring forth torrents of melted lava, and hurling masses of rock to an enormous height. There were jets, too, of liquid fire that fell back in dazzling cascades — a superb but dangerous spectacle, for the wind with unswerving certainty was carrying the balloon directly toward this blazing atmosphere.

This obstacle, which could not be turned, had to be crossed, so the cylinder was put to its utmost power, and the balloon rose to the height of six thousand feet, leaving between it and the volcano a space of more than three hundred fathoms.

From his bed of suffering, the dying missionary could contemplate that fiery crater from which a thousand jets of dazzling flame were that moment escaping.

“How grand it is!” said he, “and how infinite is the power of God even in its most terrible manifestations!”

This overflow of blazing lava wrapped the sides of the mountain with a veritable drapery of flame; the lower half of the balloon glowed redly in the upper night; a torrid heat ascended to the car, and Dr. Ferguson made all possible haste to escape from this perilous situation.

By ten o’clock the volcano could be seen only as a red point on the horizon, and the balloon tranquilly pursued her course in a less elevated zone of the atmosphere.

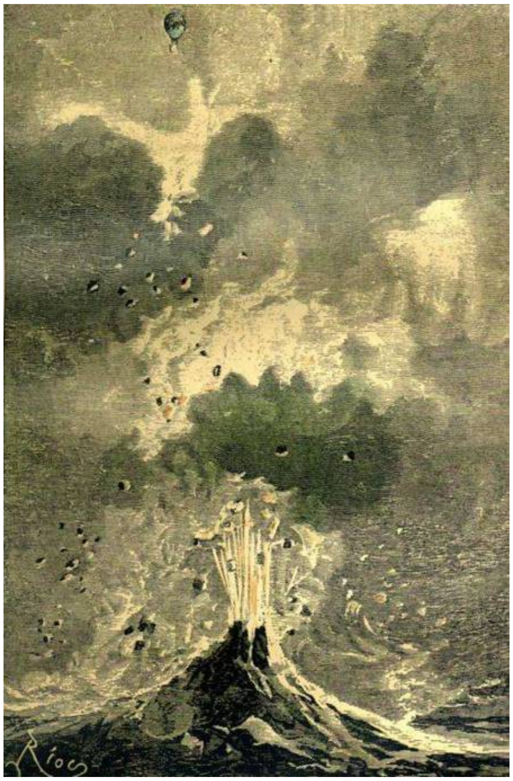

CHAPTER TWENTY-THIRD.

Joe in a Fit of Rage. — The Death of a Good Man. — The Night of watching by the Body. — Barrenness and Drought. — The Burial. — The Quartz Rocks. — Joe's Hallucinations. — A Precious Ballast. — A Survey of the Gold-bearing Mountains. — The Beginning of Joe's Despair.

A magnificent night overspread the earth, and the missionary lay quietly asleep in utter exhaustion.

"He'll not get over it!" sighed Joe. "Poor young fellow — scarcely thirty years of age!"

"He'll die in our arms. His breathing, which was so feeble before, is growing weaker still, and I can do nothing to save him," said the doctor, despairingly.

"The infamous scoundrels!" exclaimed Joe, grinding his teeth, in one of those fits of rage that came over him at long intervals; "and to think that, in spite of all, this good man could find words only to pity them, to excuse, to pardon them!"

"Heaven has given him a lovely night, Joe — his last on earth, perhaps! He will suffer but little more after this, and his dying will be only a peaceful falling asleep."

The dying man uttered some broken words, and the doctor at once went to him. His breathing became difficult, and he asked for air. The curtains were drawn entirely back, and he inhaled with rapture the light breezes of that clear, beautiful night. The stars sent him their trembling rays, and the moon wrapped him in the white winding-sheet of its effulgence.

“My friends,” said he, in an enfeebled voice, “I am going. May God requite you, and bring you to your safe harbor! May he pay for me the debt of gratitude that I owe to you!”

“You must still hope,” replied Kennedy. “This is but a passing fit of weakness. You will not die. How could any one die on this beautiful summer night?”

“Death is at hand,” replied the missionary, “I know it! Let me look it in the face! Death, the commencement of things eternal, is but the end of earthly cares. Place me upon my knees, my brethren, I beseech you!”

Kennedy lifted him up, and it was distressing to see his weakened limbs bend under him.

“My God! my God!” exclaimed the dying apostle, “have pity on me!”

His countenance shone. Far above that earth on which he had known no joys; in the midst of that night which sent to him its softest radiance; on the way to that heaven toward which he uplifted his spirit, as though in a miraculous assumption, he seemed already to live and breathe in the new existence.

His last gesture was a supreme blessing on his new friends of only one day. Then he fell back into the arms of Kennedy, whose countenance was bathed in hot tears.

“Dead!” said the doctor, bending over him, “dead!” And with one common accord, the three friends knelt together in silent prayer.

“To-morrow,” resumed the doctor, “we shall bury him in the

African soil which he has besprinkled with his blood.”

During the rest of the night the body was watched, turn by turn, by the three travellers, and not a word disturbed the solemn silence. Each of them was weeping.

The next day the wind came from the south, and the balloon moved slowly over a vast plateau of mountains: there, were extinct craters; here, barren ravines; not a drop of water on those parched crests; piles of broken rocks; huge stony masses scattered hither and thither, and, interspersed with whitish marl, all indicated the most complete sterility.

Toward noon, the doctor, for the purpose of burying the body, decided to descend into a ravine, in the midst of some plutonic rocks of primitive formation. The surrounding mountains would shelter him, and enable him to bring his car to the ground, for there was no tree in sight to which he could make it fast.

But, as he had explained to Kennedy, it was now impossible for him to descend, except by releasing a quantity of gas proportionate to his loss of ballast at the time when he had rescued the missionary. He therefore opened the valve of the outside balloon. The hydrogen escaped, and the Victoria quietly descended into the ravine.

As soon as the car touched the ground, the doctor shut the valve. Joe leaped out, holding on the while to the rim of the car with one hand, and with the other gathering up a quantity of stones equal to his own weight. He could then use both hands, and had soon heaped into the car more than five hundred pounds of stones, which enabled both the doctor and Kennedy, in their turn, to get out. Thus the Victoria found herself balanced, and her ascensional force insufficient to raise her.

Moreover, it was not necessary to gather many of these stones, for the blocks were extremely heavy, so much so, indeed, that the doctor’s attention was attracted by the circumstance. The soil, in fact, was bestrewn with quartz and porphyritic rocks.

“This is a singular discovery!” said the doctor, mentally.

In the mean while, Kennedy and Joe had strolled away a few paces, looking up a proper spot for the grave. The heat was extreme in this ravine, shut in as it was like a sort of furnace. The noonday sun poured down its rays perpendicularly into it.

The first thing to be done was to clear the surface of the fragments of rock that encumbered it, and then a quite deep grave had to be dug, so that the wild animals should not be able to disinter the corpse.

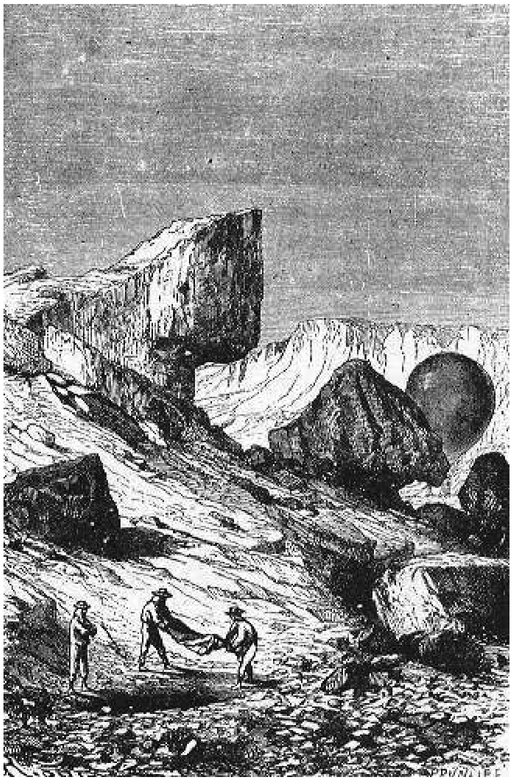

The body of the martyred missionary was then solemnly placed in it. The earth was thrown in over his remains, and above it masses of rock were deposited, in rude resemblance to a tomb.

The doctor, however, remained motionless, and lost in his reflections. He did not even heed the call of his companions, nor did he return with them to seek a shelter from the heat of the day.

“What are you thinking about, doctor?” asked Kennedy.

“About a singular freak of Nature, a curious effect of chance. Do you know, now, in what kind of soil that man of self-denial, that poor one in spirit, has just been buried?”

“No! what do you mean, doctor?”

“That priest, who took the oath of perpetual poverty, now reposes in a gold-mine!”

“A gold-mine!” exclaimed Kennedy and Joe in one breath.

“Yes, a gold-mine,” said the doctor, quietly. “Those blocks which you are trampling under foot, like worthless stones, contain gold-ore of great purity.”

“Impossible! impossible!” repeated Joe.

“You would not have to look long among those fissures of slaty schist without finding peptites of considerable value.”

Joe at once rushed like a crazy man among the scattered fragments, and Kennedy was not long in following his example.

“Keep cool, Joe,” said his master.

“Why, doctor, you speak of the thing quite at your ease.”

“What! a philosopher of your mettle — ”

“Ah, master, no philosophy holds good in this case!”

“Come! come! Let us reflect a little. What good would all this wealth do you? We cannot carry any of it away with us.”

“We can’t take any of it with us, indeed?”

“It’s rather too heavy for our car! I even hesitated to tell you any thing about it, for fear of exciting your regret!”

“What!” said Joe, again, “abandon these treasures — a fortune for us! — really for us — our own — leave it behind!”

“Take care, my friend! Would you yield to the thirst for gold? Has not this dead man whom you have just helped to bury, taught you the vanity of human affairs?”

“All that is true,” replied Joe, “but gold! Mr. Kennedy, won’t you help to gather up a trifle of all these millions?”

“What could we do with them, Joe?” said the hunter, unable to repress a smile. “We did not come hither in search of fortune, and we cannot take one home with us.”

“The millions are rather heavy, you know,” resumed the doctor, “and cannot very easily be put into one’s pocket.”

“But, at least,” said Joe, driven to his last defences, “couldn’t we take some of that ore for ballast, instead of sand?”

“Very good! I consent,” said the doctor, “but you must not make too many wry faces when we come to throw some thousands of crowns’ worth overboard.”

“Thousands of crowns!” echoed Joe; “is it possible that there is so much gold in them, and that all this is the same?”

“Yes, my friend, this is a reservoir in which Nature has been heaping up her wealth for centuries! There is enough here to enrich whole nations! An Australia and a California both together in the midst of the wilderness!”

“And the whole of it is to remain useless!”

“Perhaps! but at all events, here’s what I’ll do to console you.”

“That would be rather difficult to do!” said Joe, with a contrite air.

“Listen! I will take the exact bearings of this spot, and give them to you, so that, upon your return to England, you can tell our countrymen about it, and let them have a share, if you think that so much gold would make them happy.”

“Ah! master, I give up; I see that you are right, and that there is nothing else to be done. Let us fill our car with the precious mineral, and what remains at the end of the trip will be so much made.”

And Joe went to work. He did so, too, with all his might, and soon had collected more than a thousand pieces of quartz, which contained gold enclosed as though in an extremely hard crystal casket.

The doctor watched him with a smile; and, while Joe went on, he took the bearings, and found that the missionary’s grave lay in twenty-two degrees twenty-three minutes east longitude, and four degrees fifty-five minutes north latitude.

Then, casting one glance at the swelling of the soil, beneath which the body of the poor Frenchman reposed, he went back to his car.

He would have erected a plain, rude cross over the tomb, left solitary thus in the midst of the African deserts, but not a tree was to be seen in the environs.

“God will recognize it!” said Kennedy.

An anxiety of another sort now began to steal over the doctor’s mind. He would have given much of the gold before him for a little water — for he had to replace what had been thrown overboard when the negro was carried up into the air. But it was impossible to find it in these arid regions; and this reflection gave him great uneasiness. He had to feed his cylinder continually; and he even began to find that he had not enough to quench the thirst of his party. Therefore he determined to lose no opportunity of replenishing his supply.

Upon getting back to the car, he found it burdened with the quartz-blocks that Joe’s greed had heaped in it. He got in, however, without saying any thing. Kennedy took his customary place, and Joe followed, but not without casting a covetous glance at the treasures in the ravine.

The doctor rekindled the light in the cylinder; the spiral became heated; the current of hydrogen came in a few minutes, and the gas dilated; but the balloon did not stir an inch.

Joe looked on uneasily, but kept silent.

“Joe!” said the doctor.

Joe made no reply.

“Joe! Don’t you hear me?”

Joe made a sign that he heard; but he would not understand.

“Do me the kindness to throw out some of that quartz!”

“But, doctor, you gave me leave — ”

“I gave you leave to replace the ballast; that was all!”

“But — ”

“Do you want to stay forever in this desert?”

Joe cast a despairing look at Kennedy; but the hunter put on the air of a man who could do nothing in the matter.

“Well, Joe?”

“Then your cylinder don’t work,” said the obstinate fellow.

“My cylinder? It is lit, as you perceive. But the balloon will not rise until you have thrown off a little ballast.”

Joe scratched his ear, picked up a piece of quartz, the smallest in the lot, weighed and reweighed it, and tossed it up and down in his hand. It was a fragment of about three or four pounds. At last he threw it out.

But the balloon did not budge.

“Humph!” said he; “we’re not going up yet.”

“Not yet,” said the doctor. “Keep on throwing.”

Kennedy laughed. Joe now threw out some ten pounds, but the balloon stood still.

Joe got very pale.

“Poor fellow!” said the doctor. “Mr. Kennedy, you and I weigh, unless I am mistaken, about four hundred pounds — so that you’ll have to get rid of at least that weight, since it was put in here to make up for us.”

“Throw away four hundred pounds!” said Joe, piteously.

“And some more with it, or we can’t rise. Come, courage, Joe!”

The brave fellow, heaving deep sighs, began at last to lighten the balloon; but, from time to time, he would stop, and ask:

“Are you going up?”

“No, not yet,” was the invariable response.

“It moves!” said he, at last.

“Keep on!” replied the doctor.

“It’s going up; I’m sure.”

“Keep on yet,” said Kennedy.

And Joe, picking up one more block, desperately tossed it out of the car. The balloon rose a hundred feet or so, and, aided by the cylinder, soon passed above the surrounding summits.

“Now, Joe,” resumed the doctor, “there still remains a handsome fortune for you; and, if we can only keep the rest of this with us until the end of our trip, there you are — rich for the balance of your days!”

Joe made no answer, but stretched himself out luxuriously on his heap of quartz.

“See, my dear Dick!” the doctor went on. “Just see the power of this metal over the cleverest lad in the world! What passions, what greed, what crimes, the knowledge of such a mine as that would cause! It is sad to think of it!”

By evening the balloon had made ninety miles to the westward, and was, in a direct line, fourteen hundred miles from Zanzibar.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOURTH.

The Wind dies away. — The Vicinity of the Desert. — The Mistake in the Water-Supply. — The Nights of the Equator. — Dr. Ferguson's Anxieties. — The Situation flatly stated. — Energetic Replies of Kennedy and Joe. — One Night more.

The balloon, having been made fast to a solitary tree, almost completely dried up by the aridity of the region in which it stood, passed the night in perfect quietness; and the travellers were enabled to enjoy a little of the repose which they so greatly needed. The emotions of the day had left sad impressions on their minds.

Toward morning, the sky had resumed its brilliant purity and its heat. The balloon ascended, and, after several ineffectual attempts, fell into a current that, although not rapid, bore them toward the northwest.

"We are not making progress," said the doctor. "If I am not mistaken, we have accomplished nearly half of our journey in ten days; but, at the rate at which we are going, it would take months to end it; and that is all the more vexatious, that we are threatened with a lack of water."

"But we'll find some," said Joe. "It is not to be thought of that we shouldn't discover some river, some stream, or pond, in all this vast extent of country."

"I hope so."

"Now don't you think that it's Joe's cargo of stone that is keeping us back?"

Kennedy asked this question only to tease Joe; and he did so the more willingly because he had, for a moment, shared the poor lad’s hallucinations; but, not finding any thing in them, he had fallen back into the attitude of a strong-minded looker-on, and turned the affair off with a laugh.

Joe cast a mournful glance at him; but the doctor made no reply. He was thinking, not without secret terror, probably, of the vast solitudes of Sahara — for there whole weeks sometimes pass without the caravans meeting with a single spring of water. Occupied with these thoughts, he scrutinized every depression of the soil with the closest attention.

These anxieties, and the incidents recently occurring, had not been without their effect upon the spirits of our three travellers. They conversed less, and were more wrapt in their own thoughts.

Joe, clever lad as he was, seemed no longer the same person since his gaze had plunged into that ocean of gold. He kept entirely silent, and gazed incessantly upon the stony fragments heaped up in the car — worthless to-day, but of inestimable value to-morrow.

The appearance of this part of Africa was, moreover, quite calculated to inspire alarm: the desert was gradually expanding around them; not another village was to be seen — not even a collection of a few huts; and vegetation also was disappearing. Barely a few dwarf plants could now be noticed, like those on the wild heaths of Scotland; then came the first tract of grayish sand and flint, with here and there a lentisk tree and brambles. In the midst of this sterility, the rudimental carcass of the Globe appeared in ridges of sharply-jutting rock. These symptoms of a totally dry and barren region greatly disquieted Dr. Ferguson.

It seemed as though no caravan had ever braved this desert expanse, or it would have left visible traces of its encampments, or the whitened bones of men and animals. But nothing of the kind was to be seen, and the aeronauts felt that, ere long, an immensity of sand would cover the whole of this desolate region.

However, there was no going back; they must go forward; and, indeed, the doctor asked for nothing better; he would even have welcomed a tempest to carry him beyond this country. But, there was not a cloud in the sky. At the close of the day, the balloon had not made thirty miles.

If there had been no lack of water! But, there remained only three gallons in all! The doctor put aside one gallon, destined to quench the burning thirst that a heat of ninety degrees rendered intolerable. Two gallons only then remained to supply the cylinder. Hence, they could produce no more than four hundred and eighty cubic feet of gas; yet the cylinder consumed about nine cubic feet per hour. Consequently, they could not keep on longer than fifty-four hours — and all this was a mathematical calculation!

“Fifty-four hours!” said the doctor to his companions. “Therefore, as I am determined not to travel by night, for fear of passing some stream or pool, we have but three days and a half of journeying during which we must find water, at all hazards. I have thought it my duty to make you aware of the real state of the case, as I have retained only one gallon for drinking, and we shall have to put ourselves on the shortest allowance.”

“Put us on short allowance, then, doctor,” responded Kennedy, “but we must not despair. We have three days left, you say?”

“Yes, my dear Dick!”

“Well, as grieving over the matter won’t help us, in three days there will be time enough to decide upon what is to be done; in the meanwhile, let us redouble our vigilance!”

At their evening meal, the water was strictly measured out, and the brandy was increased in quantity in the punch they drank. But they had to be careful with the spirits, the latter being more likely to produce than to quench thirst.

The car rested, during the night, upon an immense plateau, in which there was a deep hollow; its height was scarcely eight hundred feet above the level of the sea. This circumstance gave the doctor some hope, since it recalled to his mind the conjectures of geographers concerning the existence of a vast stretch of water in the centre of Africa. But, if such a lake really existed, the point was to reach it, and not a sign of change was visible in the motionless sky.

To the tranquil night and its starry magnificence succeeded the unchanging daylight and the blazing rays of the sun; and, from the earliest dawn, the temperature became scorching. At five o’clock in the morning, the doctor gave the signal for departure, and, for a considerable time, the balloon remained immovable in the leaden atmosphere.

The doctor might have escaped this intense heat by rising into a higher range, but, in order to do so, he would have had to consume a large quantity of water, a thing that had now become impossible. He contented himself, therefore, with keeping the balloon at one hundred feet from the ground, and, at that elevation, a feeble current drove it toward the western horizon.

The breakfast consisted of a little dried meat and pemmican.

By noon, the Victoria had advanced only a few miles.

“We cannot go any faster,” said the doctor; “we no longer command — we have to obey.”

“Ah! doctor, here is one of those occasions when a propeller would not be a thing to be despised.”

“Undoubtedly so, Dick, provided it would not require an expenditure of water to put it in motion, for, in that case, the situation would be precisely the same; moreover, up to this time, nothing practical of the sort has been invented. Balloons are still at that point where ships were before the invention of steam. It took six thousand years to invent propellers and screws; so we have time enough yet.”

“Confounded heat!” said Joe, wiping away the perspiration that was streaming from his forehead.

“If we had water, this heat would be of service to us, for it dilates the hydrogen in the balloon, and diminishes the amount required in the spiral, although it is true that, if we were not short of the useful liquid, we should not have to economize it. Ah! that rascally savage who cost us the tank!”*

* The water-tank had been thrown overboard when the native clung to the car.

“You don’t regret, though, what you did, doctor?”

“No, Dick, since it was in our power to save that unfortunate missionary from a horrible death. But, the hundred pounds of water that we threw overboard would be very useful to us now; it would be thirteen or fourteen days more of progress secured, or quite enough to carry us over this desert."

"We've made at least half the journey, haven't we?" asked Joe.

"In distance, yes; but in duration, no, should the wind leave us; and it, even now, has a tendency to die away altogether."

"Come, sir," said Joe, again, "we must not complain; we've got along pretty well, thus far, and whatever happens to me, I can't get desperate. We'll find water; mind, I tell you so."

The soil, however, ran lower from mile to mile; the undulations of the gold-bearing mountains they had left died away into the plain, like the last throes of exhausted Nature. Scanty grass took the place of the fine trees of the east; only a few belts of half-scorched herbage still contended against the invasion of the sand, and the huge rocks, that had rolled down from the distant summits, crushed in their fall, had scattered in sharp-edged pebbles which soon again became coarse sand, and finally impalpable dust.

"Here, at last, is Africa, such as you pictured it to yourself, Joe! Was I not right in saying, 'Wait a little?' eh?"

"Well, master, it's all natural, at least — heat and dust. It would be foolish to look for any thing else in such a country. Do you see," he added, laughing, "I had no confidence, for my part, in your forests and your prairies; they were out of reason. What was the use of coming so far to find scenery just like England? Here's the first time that I believe in Africa, and I'm not sorry to get a taste of it."

Toward evening, the doctor calculated that the balloon had not made twenty miles during that whole burning day, and a heated gloom closed in upon it, as soon as the sun had disappeared behind the horizon, which was traced against the sky with all the precision of a straight line.

The next day was Thursday, the 1st of May, but the days followed each other with desperate monotony. Each morning was like the one that had preceded it; noon poured down the same exhaustless rays, and night condensed in its shadow the scattered heat which the ensuing day would again bequeath to the succeeding night. The wind, now scarcely observable, was rather a gasp than a breath, and the morning could almost be foreseen when even that gasp would cease.

The doctor reacted against the gloominess of the situation and retained all the coolness and self-possession of a disciplined heart. With his glass he scrutinized every quarter of the horizon; he saw the last rising ground gradually melting to the dead level, and the last vegetation disappearing, while, before him, stretched the immensity of the desert.

The responsibility resting upon him pressed sorely, but he did not allow his disquiet to appear. Those two men, Dick and Joe, friends of his, both of them, he had induced to come with him almost by the force alone of friendship and of duty. Had he done well in that? Was it not like attempting to tread forbidden paths? Was he not, in this trip, trying to pass the borders of the impossible? Had not the Almighty reserved for later ages the knowledge of this inhospitable continent?

All these thoughts, of the kind that arise in hours of discouragement, succeeded each other and multiplied in his mind, and, by an irresistible association of ideas, the doctor allowed himself to be carried beyond the bounds of logic and of reason. After having established in his own mind what he should NOT have done, the next question was, what he should do, then. Would it be impossible to retrace his steps? Were there not currents higher up that would waft him to less arid regions? Well informed with regard to the countries over which he had passed, he was utterly ignorant of those to come, and thus his conscience speaking aloud to him, he resolved, in his turn, to speak frankly to his two companions. He thereupon laid the whole state of the case plainly before them; he showed them what had been done, and what there was yet to do; at the worst, they could return, or attempt it, at least. — What did they think about it?

“I have no other opinion than that of my excellent master,” said Joe; “what he may have to suffer, I can suffer, and that better than he can, perhaps. Where he goes, there I’ll go!”

“And you, Kennedy?”

“I, doctor, I’m not the man to despair; no one was less ignorant than I of the perils of the enterprise, but I did not want to see them, from the moment that you determined to brave them. Under present circumstances, my opinion is, that we should persevere — go clear to the end. Besides, to return looks to me quite as perilous as the other course. So onward, then! you may count upon us!”

“Thanks, my gallant friends!” replied the doctor, with much real feeling, “I expected such devotion as this; but I needed these encouraging words. Yet, once again, thank you, from the bottom of my heart!”

And, with this, the three friends warmly grasped each other by the hand.

“Now, hear me!” said the doctor. “According to my solar observations, we are not more than three hundred miles from the Gulf of Guinea; the desert, therefore, cannot extend indefinitely, since the coast is inhabited, and the country has been explored for some distance back into the interior. If needs be, we can direct our course to that quarter, and it seems out of the question that we should not come across some oasis, or some well, where we could replenish our stock of water. But, what we want now, is the wind, for without it we are held here suspended in the air at a dead calm.

“Let us wait with resignation,” said the hunter.

But, each of the party, in his turn, vainly scanned the space around him during that long wearisome day. Nothing could be seen to form the basis of a hope. The very last inequalities of the soil disappeared with the setting sun, whose horizontal rays stretched in long lines of fire over the flat immensity. It was the Desert!

Our aeronauts had scarcely gone a distance of fifteen miles, having expended, as on the preceding day, one hundred and thirty-five cubic feet of gas to feed the cylinder, and two pints of water out of the remaining eight had been sacrificed to the demands of intense thirst.

The night passed quietly — too quietly, indeed, but the doctor did not sleep!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIFTH.

A Little Philosophy. — A Cloud on the Horizon. — In the Midst of a Fog. — The Strange Balloon. — An Exact View of the Victoria. — The Palm-Trees. — Traces of a Caravan. — The Well in the Midst of the Desert.

On the morrow, there was the same purity of sky, the same stillness of the atmosphere. The balloon rose to an elevation of five hundred feet, but it had scarcely changed its position to the westward in any perceptible degree.

“We are right in the open desert,” said the doctor. “Look at that vast reach of sand! What a strange spectacle! What a singular arrangement of nature! Why should there be, in one place, such extreme luxuriance of vegetation yonder, and here, this extreme aridity, and that in the same latitude, and under the same rays of the sun?”

“The why concerns me but little,” answered Kennedy, “the reason interests me less than the fact. The thing is so; that’s the important part of it!”

“Oh, it is well to philosophize a little, Dick; it does no harm.”

“Let us philosophize, then, if you will; we have time enough before us; we are hardly moving; the wind is afraid to blow; it sleeps.”

“That will not last forever,” put in Joe; “I think I see some banks of clouds in the east.”

“Joe’s right!” said the doctor, after he had taken a look.

“Good!” said Kennedy; “now for our clouds, with a fine rain, and a fresh wind to dash it into our faces!”

“Well, we’ll see, Dick, we’ll see!”

“But this is Friday, master, and I’m afraid of Fridays!”

“Well, I hope that this very day you’ll get over those notions.”

“I hope so, master, too. Whew!” he added, mopping his face, “heat’s a good thing, especially in winter, but in summer it don’t do to take too much of it.”

“Don’t you fear the effect of the sun’s heat on our balloon?” asked Kennedy, addressing the doctor.

“No! the gutta-percha coating resists much higher temperatures than even this. With my spiral I have subjected it inside to as much as one hundred and fifty-eight degrees sometimes, and the covering does not appear to have suffered.”

“A cloud! a real cloud!” shouted Joe at this moment, for that piercing eyesight of his beat all the glasses.

And, in fact, a thick bank of vapor, now quite distinct, could be seen slowly emerging above the horizon. It appeared to be very deep, and, as it were, puffed out. It was, in reality, a conglomeration of smaller clouds. The latter invariably retained their original formation, and from this circumstance the doctor concluded that there was no current of air in their collected mass.

This compact body of vapor had appeared about eight o’clock in the morning, and, by eleven, it had already reached the height of the sun’s disk.

The latter then disappeared entirely behind the murky veil, and the lower belt of cloud, at the same moment, lifted above the line of the horizon, which was again disclosed in a full blaze of daylight.

“It’s only an isolated cloud,” remarked the doctor.

“It won’t do to count much upon that.”

“Look, Dick, its shape is just the same as when we saw it this morning!”

“Then, doctor, there’s to be neither rain nor wind, at least for us!”

“I fear so; the cloud keeps at a great height.”

“Well, doctor, suppose we were to go in pursuit of this cloud, since it refuses to burst upon us?”

“I fancy that to do so wouldn’t help us much; it would be a consumption of gas, and, consequently, of water, to little purpose; but, in our situation, we must not leave anything untried; therefore, let us ascend!”

And with this, the doctor put on a full head of flame from the cylinder, and the dilation of the hydrogen, occasioned by such sudden and intense heat, sent the balloon rapidly aloft.

About fifteen hundred feet from the ground, it encountered an opaque mass of cloud, and entered a dense fog, suspended at that elevation; but it did not meet with the least breath of wind. This fog seemed even destitute of humidity, and the articles brought in contact with it were scarcely dampened in the slightest degree. The balloon, completely enveloped in the vapor, gained a little increase of speed, perhaps, and that was all.

The doctor gloomily recognized what trifling success he had obtained from his manoeuvre, and was relapsing into deep meditation, when he heard Joe exclaim, in tones of most intense astonishment:

“Ah! by all that’s beautiful!”

“What’s the matter, Joe?”

“Doctor! Mr. Kennedy! Here’s something curious!”

“What is it, then?”

“We are not alone, up here! There are rogues about!

They’ve stolen our invention!”

“Has he gone crazy?” asked Kennedy.

Joe stood there, perfectly motionless, the very picture of amazement.

“Can the hot sun have really affected the poor fellow’s brain?” said the doctor, turning toward him.

“Will you tell me? — ”

“Look!” said Joe, pointing to a certain quarter of the sky.

“By St. James!” exclaimed Kennedy, in turn, “why, who would have believed it? Look, look! doctor!”

“I see it!” said the doctor, very quietly.

“Another balloon! and other passengers, like ourselves!”

And, sure enough, there was another balloon about two hundred paces from them, floating in the air with its car and its aeronauts. It was following exactly the same route as the Victoria.

“Well,” said the doctor, “nothing remains for us but to make signals; take the flag, Kennedy, and show them our colors.”

It seemed that the travellers by the other balloon had just the same idea, at the same moment, for the same kind of flag repeated precisely the same salute with a hand that moved in just the same manner.

“What does that mean?” asked Kennedy.

“They are apes,” said Joe, “imitating us.”

“It means,” said the doctor, laughing, “that it is you, Dick, yourself, making that signal to yourself; or, in other words, that we see ourselves in the second balloon, which is no other than the Victoria.”

“As to that, master, with all respect to you,” said Joe, “you’ll never make me believe it.”

“Climb up on the edge of the car, Joe; wave your arms, and then you’ll see.”

Joe obeyed, and all his gestures were instantaneously and exactly repeated.

“It is merely the effect of the MIRAGE,” said the doctor, “and nothing else — a simple optical phenomenon due to the unequal refraction of light by different layers of the atmosphere, and that is all.

“It’s wonderful,” said Joe, who could not make up his mind to surrender, but went on repeating his gesticulations.

“What a curious sight! Do you know,” said Kennedy, “that it’s a real pleasure to have a view of our noble balloon in that style? She’s a beauty, isn’t she? — and how stately her movements as she sweeps along!”

“You may explain the matter as you like,” continued

Joe, “it’s a strange thing, anyhow!”

But ere long this picture began to fade away; the clouds rose higher, leaving the balloon, which made no further attempt to follow them, and in about an hour they disappeared in the open sky.

The wind, which had been scarcely perceptible, seemed still to diminish, and the doctor in perfect desperation descended toward the ground, and all three of the travellers, whom the incident just recorded had, for a few moments, diverted from their anxieties, relapsed into gloomy meditation, sweltering the while beneath the scorching heat.

About four o’clock, Joe descried some object standing out against the vast background of sand, and soon was able to declare positively that there were two palm-trees at no great distance.

“Palm-trees!” exclaimed Ferguson; “why, then there’s a spring — a well!”

He took up his glass and satisfied himself that Joe’s eyes had not been mistaken.

“At length!” he said, over and over again, “water! water! and we are saved; for if we do move slowly, still we move, and we shall arrive at last!”

"Good, master! but suppose we were to drink a mouthful in the mean time, for this air is stifling?"

"Let us drink then, my boy!"

No one waited to be coaxed. A whole pint was swallowed then and there, reducing the total remaining supply to three pints and a half.

"Ah! that does one good!" said Joe; "wasn't it fine? Barclay and Perkins never turned out ale equal to that!"

"See the advantage of being put on short allowance!" moralized the doctor.

"It is not great, after all," retorted Kennedy; "and if

I were never again to have the pleasure of drinking water,

I should agree on condition that I should never be deprived

of it."

At six o'clock the balloon was floating over the palm-trees.

They were two shrivelled, stunted, dried-up specimens of trees — two ghosts of palms — without foliage, and more dead than alive. Ferguson examined them with terror.

At their feet could be seen the half-worn stones of a spring, but these stones, pulverized by the baking heat of the sun, seemed to be nothing now but impalpable dust. There was not the slightest sign of moisture. The doctor's heart shrank within him, and he was about to communicate his thoughts to his companions, when their exclamations attracted his attention. As far as the eye could reach to the eastward, extended a long line of whitened bones; pieces of skeletons surrounded the fountain; a caravan had evidently made its way to that point, marking its progress by its bleaching remains; the weaker had fallen one by one upon the sand; the stronger, having at length reached this spring for which they panted, had there found a horrible death.

Our travellers looked at each other and turned pale.

“Let us not alight!” said Kennedy, “let us fly from this hideous spectacle! There’s not a drop of water here!”

“No, Dick, as well pass the night here as elsewhere; let us have a clear conscience in the matter. We’ll dig down to the very bottom of the well. There has been a spring here, and perhaps there’s something left in it!”

The Victoria touched the ground; Joe and Kennedy put into the car a quantity of sand equal to their weight, and leaped out. They then hastened to the well, and penetrated to the interior by a flight of steps that was now nothing but dust. The spring appeared to have been dry for years. They dug down into a parched and powdery sand — the very dryest of all sand, indeed — there was not one trace of moisture!

The doctor saw them come up to the surface of the desert, saturated with perspiration, worn out, covered with fine dust, exhausted, discouraged and despairing.

He then comprehended that their search had been fruitless. He had expected as much, and he kept silent, for he felt that, from this moment forth, he must have courage and energy enough for three.

Joe brought up with him some pieces of a leathern bottle that had grown hard and horn-like with age, and angrily flung them away among the bleaching bones of the caravan.

At supper, not a word was spoken by our travellers, and they even ate without appetite. Yet they had not, up to this moment, endured the real agonies of thirst, and were in no desponding mood, excepting for the future.

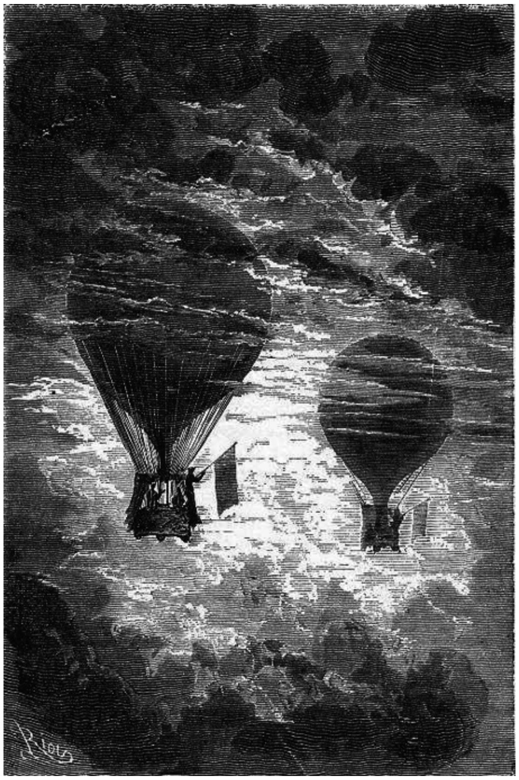

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIXTH.

One Hundred and Thirteen Degrees. — The Doctor's Reflections. — A Desperate Search. — The Cylinder goes out. — One Hundred and Twenty-two Degrees. — Contemplation of the Desert. — A Night Walk. — Solitude. — Debility. — Joe's Prospects. — He gives himself One Day more.

The distance made by the balloon during the preceding day did not exceed ten miles, and, to keep it afloat, one hundred and sixty-two cubic feet of gas had been consumed.

On Saturday morning the doctor again gave the signal for departure.

"The cylinder can work only six hours longer; and, if in that time we shall not have found either a well or a spring of water, God alone knows what will become of us!"

"Not much wind this morning, master," said Joe; "but it will come up, perhaps," he added, suddenly remarking the doctor's ill-concealed depression.

Vain hope! The atmosphere was in a dead calm — one of those calms which hold vessels captive in tropical seas. The heat had become intolerable; and the thermometer, in the shade under the awning, indicated one hundred and thirteen degrees.

Joe and Kennedy, reclining at full length near each other, tried, if not in slumber, at least in torpor, to forget their situation, for their forced inactivity gave them periods of leisure far from pleasant. That man is to be pitied the most who cannot wean himself from gloomy reflections by actual work, or some practical pursuit. But here there was nothing to look after, nothing to undertake, and they had to submit to the situation, without having it in their power to ameliorate it.

The pangs of thirst began to be severely felt; brandy, far from appeasing this imperious necessity, augmented it, and richly merited the name of “tiger’s milk” applied to it by the African natives. Scarcely two pints of water remained, and that was heated. Each of the party devoured the few precious drops with his gaze, yet neither of them dared to moisten his lips with them. Two pints of water in the midst of the desert!

Then it was that Dr. Ferguson, buried in meditation, asked himself whether he had acted with prudence. Would he not have done better to have kept the water that he had decomposed in pure loss, in order to sustain him in the air? He had gained a little distance, to be sure; but was he any nearer to his journey’s end? What difference did sixty miles to the rear make in this region, when there was no water to be had where they were? The wind, should it rise, would blow there as it did here, only less strongly at this point, if it came from the east. But hope urged him onward. And yet those two gallons of water, expended in vain, would have sufficed for nine days’ halt in the desert. And what changes might not have occurred in nine days! Perhaps, too, while retaining the water, he might have ascended by throwing out ballast, at the cost merely of discharging some gas, when he had again to descend. But the gas in his balloon was his blood, his very life!

A thousand one such reflections whirled in succession through his brain; and, resting his head between his hands, he sat there for hours without raising it.

“We must make one final effort,” he said, at last, about ten o’clock in the morning. “We must endeavor, just once more, to find an atmospheric current to bear us away from here, and, to that end, must risk our last resources.”

Therefore, while his companions slept, the doctor raised the hydrogen in the balloon to an elevated temperature, and the huge globe, filling out by the dilation of the gas, rose straight up in the perpendicular rays of the sun. The doctor searched vainly for a breath of wind, from the height of one hundred feet to that of five miles; his starting-point remained fatally right below him, and absolute calm seemed to reign, up to the extreme limits of the breathing atmosphere.

At length the feeding-supply of water gave out; the cylinder was extinguished for lack of gas; the Buntzen battery ceased to work, and the balloon, shrinking together, gently descended to the sand, in the very place that the car had hollowed out there.

It was noon; and solar observations gave nineteen degrees thirty-five minutes east longitude, and six degrees fifty-one minutes north latitude, or nearly five hundred miles from Lake Tchad, and more than four hundred miles from the western coast of Africa.

On the balloon taking ground, Kennedy and Joe awoke from their stupor.

“We have halted,” said the Scot.

“We had to do so,” replied the doctor, gravely.

His companions understood him. The level of the soil at that point corresponded with the level of the sea, and, consequently, the balloon remained in perfect equilibrium, and absolutely motionless.

The weight of the three travellers was replaced with an equivalent quantity of sand, and they got out of the car. Each was absorbed in his own thoughts; and for many hours neither of them spoke. Joe prepared their evening meal, which consisted of biscuit and pemmican, and was hardly tasted by either of the party. A mouthful of scalding water from their little store completed this gloomy repast.

During the night none of them kept awake; yet none could be precisely said to have slept. On the morrow there remained only half a pint of water, and this the doctor put away, all three having resolved not to touch it until the last extremity.

It was not long, however, before Joe exclaimed:

“I’m choking, and the heat is getting worse! I’m not surprised at that, though,” he added, consulting the thermometer; “one hundred and forty degrees!”

“The sand scorches me,” said the hunter, “as though it had just come out of a furnace; and not a cloud in this sky of fire. It’s enough to drive one mad!”

“Let us not despair,” responded the doctor. “In this latitude these intense heats are invariably followed by storms, and the latter come with the suddenness of lightning. Notwithstanding this disheartening clearness of the sky, great atmospheric changes may take place in less than an hour.”

“But,” asked Kennedy, “is there any sign whatever of that?”

“Well,” replied the doctor, “I think that there is some slight symptom of a fall in the barometer.”

"May Heaven hearken to you, Samuel! for here we are pinned to the ground, like a bird with broken wings."

"With this difference, however, my dear Dick, that our wings are unhurt, and I hope that we shall be able to use them again."

"Ah! wind! wind!" exclaimed Joe; "enough to carry us to a stream or a well, and we'll be all right. We have provisions enough, and, with water, we could wait a month without suffering; but thirst is a cruel thing!"

It was not thirst alone, but the unchanging sight of the desert, that fatigued the mind. There was not a variation in the surface of the soil, not a hillock of sand, not a pebble, to relieve the gaze. This unbroken level discouraged the beholder, and gave him that kind of malady called the "desert-sickness." The impassible monotony of the arid blue sky, and the vast yellow expanse of the desert-sand, at length produced a sensation of terror. In this inflamed atmosphere the heat appeared to vibrate as it does above a blazing hearth, while the mind grew desperate in contemplating the limitless calm, and could see no reason why the thing should ever end, since immensity is a species of eternity.

Thus, at last, our hapless travellers, deprived of water in this torrid heat, began to feel symptoms of mental disorder. Their eyes swelled in their sockets, and their gaze became confused.

When night came on, the doctor determined to combat this alarming tendency by rapid walking. His idea was to pace the sandy plain for a few hours, not in search of any thing, but simply for exercise.

"Come along!" he said to his companions; "believe me, it will do you good."

“Out of the question!” said Kennedy; “I could not walk a step.”

“And I,” said Joe, “would rather sleep!”

“But sleep, or even rest, would be dangerous to you, my friends; you must react against this tendency to stupor. Come with me!”

But the doctor could do nothing with them, and, therefore, set off alone, amid the starry clearness of the night. The first few steps he took were painful, for they were the steps of an enfeebled man quite out of practice in walking. However, he quickly saw that the exercise would be beneficial to him, and pushed on several miles to the westward. Once in rapid motion, he felt his spirits greatly cheered, when, suddenly, a vertigo came over him; he seemed to be poised on the edge of an abyss; his knees bent under him; the vast solitude struck terror to his heart; he found himself the minute mathematical point, the centre of an infinite circumference, that is to say — a nothing! The balloon had disappeared entirely in the deepening gloom. The doctor, cool, impassible, reckless explorer that he was, felt himself at last seized with a nameless dread. He strove to retrace his steps, but in vain. He called aloud. Not even an echo replied, and his voice died out in the empty vastness of surrounding space, like a pebble cast into a bottomless gulf; then, down he sank, fainting, on the sand, alone, amid the eternal silence of the desert.

At midnight he came to, in the arms of his faithful follower, Joe. The latter, uneasy at his master’s prolonged absence, had set out after him, easily tracing him by the clear imprint of his feet in the sand, and had found him lying in a swoon.

“What has been the matter, sir?” was the first inquiry.

“Nothing, Joe, nothing! Only a touch of weakness, that’s all. It’s over now.”

“Oh! it won’t amount to any thing, sir, I’m sure of that; but get up on your feet, if you can. There! lean upon me, and let us get back to the balloon.”

And the doctor, leaning on Joe’s arm, returned along the track by which he had come.

“You were too bold, sir; it won’t do to run such risks. You might have been robbed,” he added, laughing. “But, sir, come now, let us talk seriously.”

“Speak! I am listening to you.”

“We must positively make up our minds to do something. Our present situation cannot last more than a few days longer, and if we get no wind, we are lost.”

The doctor made no reply.

“Well, then, one of us must sacrifice himself for the good of all, and it is most natural that it should fall to me to do so.”

“What have you to propose? What is your plan?”

“A very simple one! It is to take provisions enough, and to walk right on until I come to some place, as I must do, sooner or later. In the mean time, if Heaven sends you a good wind, you need not wait, but can start again. For my part, if I come to a village, I’ll work my way through with a few Arabic words that you can write for me on a slip of paper, and I’ll bring you help or lose my hide. What do you think of my plan?”

“It is absolute folly, Joe, but worthy of your noble heart. The thing is impossible. You will not leave us.”

“But, sir, we must do something, and this plan can’t do you any harm, for, I say again, you need not wait; and then, after all, I may succeed.”

“No, Joe, no! We will not separate. That would only be adding sorrow to trouble. It was written that matters should be as they are; and it is very probably written that it shall be quite otherwise by-and-by. Let us wait, then, with resignation.”

“So be it, master; but take notice of one thing: I give you a day longer, and I’ll not wait after that. To-day is Sunday; we might say Monday, as it is one o’clock in the morning, and if we don’t get off by Tuesday, I’ll run the risk. I’ve made up my mind to that!”

The doctor made no answer, and in a few minutes they got back to the car, where he took his place beside Kennedy, who lay there plunged in silence so complete that it could not be considered sleep.

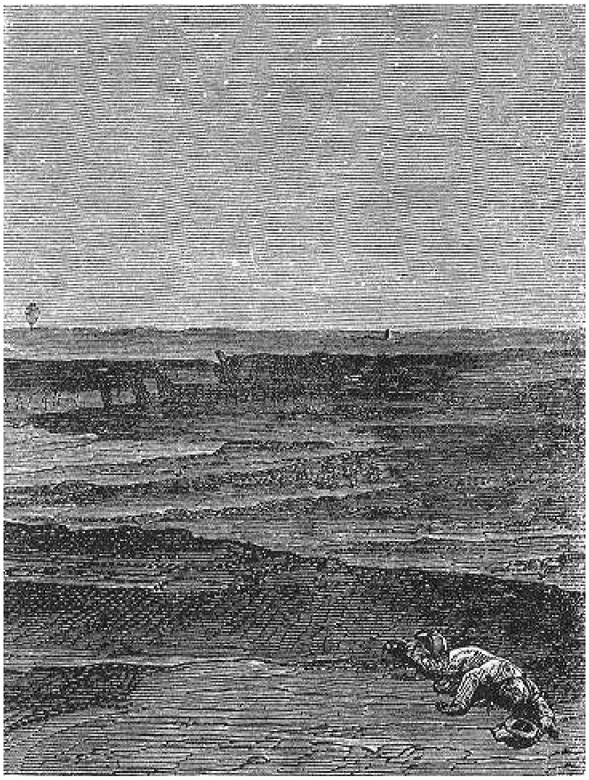

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVENTH.

Terrific Heat. — Hallucinations. — The Last Drops of Water. — Nights of Despair. — An Attempt at Suicide. — The Simoom. — The Oasis. — The Lion and Lioness.

The doctor’s first care, on the morrow, was to consult the barometer. He found that the mercury had scarcely undergone any perceptible depression.

“Nothing!” he murmured, “nothing!”

He got out of the car and scrutinized the weather; there was only the same heat, the same cloudless sky, the same merciless drought.

“Must we, then, give up to despair?” he exclaimed, in agony.

Joe did not open his lips. He was buried in his own thoughts, and planning the expedition he had proposed.

Kennedy got up, feeling very ill, and a prey to nervous agitation. He was suffering horribly with thirst, and his swollen tongue and lips could hardly articulate a syllable.

There still remained a few drops of water. Each of them knew this, and each was thinking of it, and felt himself drawn toward them; but neither of the three dared to take a step.

Those three men, friends and companions as they were, fixed their haggard eyes upon each other with an instinct of ferocious longing, which was most plainly revealed in the hardy Scot, whose vigorous constitution yielded the soonest to these unnatural privations.

Throughout the day he was delirious, pacing up and down, uttering hoarse cries, gnawing his clinched fists, and ready to open his veins and drink his own hot blood.

“Ah!” he cried, “land of thirst! Well might you be called the land of despair!”

At length he sank down in utter prostration, and his friends heard no other sound from him than the hissing of his breath between his parched and swollen lips.

Toward evening, Joe had his turn of delirium. The vast expanse of sand appeared to him an immense pond, full of clear and limpid water; and, more than once, he dashed himself upon the scorching waste to drink long draughts, and rose again with his mouth clogged with hot dust.

“Curses on it!” he yelled, in his madness, “it’s nothing but salt water!”

Then, while Ferguson and Kennedy lay there motionless, the resistless longing came over him to drain the last few drops of water that had been kept in reserve. The natural instinct proved too strong. He dragged himself toward the car, on his knees; he glared at the bottle containing the precious fluid; he gave one wild, eager glance, seized the treasured store, and bore it to his lips.

At that instant he heard a heart-rending cry close beside him — ”Water! water!”

It was Kennedy, who had crawled up close to him, and was begging there, upon his knees, and weeping piteously.

Joe, himself in tears, gave the poor wretch the bottle, and Kennedy drained the last drop with savage haste.

“Thanks!” he murmured hoarsely, but Joe did not hear him, for both alike had dropped fainting on the sand.

What took place during that fearful night neither of them knew, but, on Tuesday morning, under those showers of heat which the sun poured down upon them, the unfortunate men felt their limbs gradually drying up, and when Joe attempted to rise he found it impossible.

He looked around him. In the car, the doctor, completely overwhelmed, sat with his arms folded on his breast, gazing with idiotic fixedness upon some imaginary point in space. Kennedy was frightful to behold. He was rolling his head from right to left like a wild beast in a cage.

All at once, his eyes rested on the butt of his rifle, which jutted above the rim of the car.

“Ah!” he screamed, raising himself with a superhuman effort.

Desperate, mad, he snatched at the weapon, and turned the barrel toward his mouth.

“Kennedy!” shouted Joe, throwing himself upon his friend.

“Let go! hands off!” moaned the Scot, in a hoarse, grating voice — and then the two struggled desperately for the rifle.

“Let go, or I’ll kill you!” repeated Kennedy. But Joe clung to him only the more fiercely, and they had been contending thus without the doctor seeing them for many seconds, when, suddenly the rifle went off. At the sound of its discharge, the doctor rose up erect, like a spectre, and glared around him.

But all at once his glance grew more animated; he extended his hand toward the horizon, and in a voice no longer human shrieked:

“There! there — off there!”

There was such fearful force in the cry that Kennedy and Joe released each other, and both looked where the doctor pointed.

The plain was agitated like the sea shaken by the fury of a tempest; billows of sand went tossing over each other amid blinding clouds of dust; an immense pillar was seen whirling toward them through the air from the southeast, with terrific velocity; the sun was disappearing behind an opaque veil of cloud whose enormous barrier extended clear to the horizon, while the grains of fine sand went gliding together with all the supple ease of liquid particles, and the rising dust-tide gained more and more with every second.

Ferguson’s eyes gleamed with a ray of energetic hope.

“The simoom!” he exclaimed.

“The simoom!” repeated Joe, without exactly knowing what it meant.

“So much the better!” said Kennedy, with the bitterness of despair. “So much the better — we shall die!”

“So much the better!” echoed the doctor, “for we shall live!” and, so saying, he began rapidly to throw out the sand that encumbered the car.

At length his companions understood him, and took their places at his side.

“And now, Joe,” said the doctor, “throw out some fifty pounds of your ore, there!”

Joe no longer hesitated, although he still felt a fleeting pang of regret. The balloon at once began to ascend.

“It was high time!” said the doctor.

The simoom, in fact, came rushing on like a thunderbolt, and a moment later the balloon would have been crushed, torn to atoms, annihilated. The awful whirlwind was almost upon it, and it was already pelted with showers of sand driven like hail by the storm.

“Out with more ballast!” shouted the doctor.

“There!” responded Joe, tossing over a huge fragment of quartz.

With this, the Victoria rose swiftly above the range of the whirling column, but, caught in the vast displacement of the atmosphere thereby occasioned, it was borne along with incalculable rapidity away above this foaming sea.

The three travellers did not speak. They gazed, and hoped, and even felt refreshed by the breath of the tempest.

About three o’clock, the whirlwind ceased; the sand, falling again upon the desert, formed numberless little hillocks, and the sky resumed its former tranquillity.

The balloon, which had again lost its momentum, was floating in sight of an oasis, a sort of islet studded with green trees, thrown up upon the surface of this sandy ocean.

“Water! we’ll find water there!” said the doctor.

And, instantly, opening the upper valve, he let some hydrogen escape, and slowly descended, taking the ground at about two hundred feet from the edge of the oasis.

In four hours the travellers had swept over a distance of two hundred and forty miles!

The car was at once ballasted, and Kennedy, closely followed by Joe, leaped out.

“Take your guns with you!” said the doctor; “take your guns, and be careful!”

Dick grasped his rifle, and Joe took one of the fowling-pieces. They then rapidly made for the trees, and disappeared under the fresh verdure, which announced the presence of abundant springs. As they hurried on, they had not taken notice of certain large footprints and fresh tracks of some living creature marked here and there in the damp soil.

Suddenly, a dull roar was heard not twenty paces from them.

“The roar of a lion!” said Joe.

“Good for that!” said the excited hunter; “we’ll fight him. A man feels strong when only a fight’s in question.”

“But be careful, Mr. Kennedy; be careful! The lives of all depend upon the life of one.”

But Kennedy no longer heard him; he was pushing on, his eye blazing; his rifle cocked; fearful to behold in his daring rashness. There, under a palm-tree, stood an enormous black-maned lion, crouching for a spring on his antagonist. Scarcely had he caught a glimpse of the hunter, when he bounded through the air; but he had not touched the ground ere a bullet pierced his heart, and he fell to the earth dead.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” shouted Joe, with wild exultation.

Kennedy rushed toward the well, slid down the dampened steps, and flung himself at full length by the side of a fresh spring, in which he plunged his parched lips. Joe followed suit, and for some minutes nothing was heard but the sound they made with their mouths, drinking more like maddened beasts than men.

“Take care, Mr. Kennedy,” said Joe at last; “let us not overdo the thing!” and he panted for breath.

But Kennedy, without a word, drank on. He even plunged his hands, and then his head, into the delicious tide — he fairly revelled in its coolness.

“But the doctor?” said Joe; “our friend, Dr. Ferguson?”

That one word recalled Kennedy to himself, and, hastily filling a flask that he had brought with him, he started on a run up the steps of the well.

But what was his amazement when he saw an opaque body of enormous dimensions blocking up the passage! Joe, who was close upon Kennedy’s heels, recoiled with him.

“We are blocked in — entrapped!”

“Impossible! What does that mean? — ”

Dick had no time to finish; a terrific roar made him only too quickly aware what foe confronted him.

“Another lion!” exclaimed Joe.

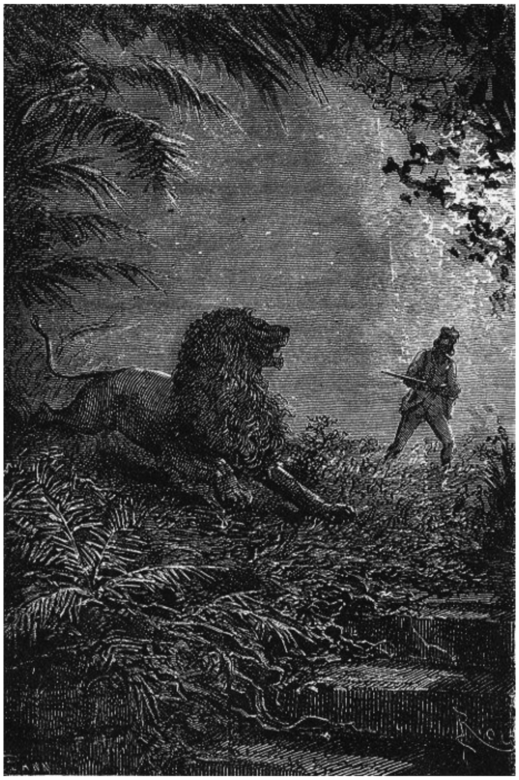

“A lioness, rather,” said Kennedy. “Ah! ferocious brute!” he added, “I’ll settle you in a moment more!” and swiftly reloaded his rifle.

In another instant he fired, but the animal had disappeared.

“Onward!” shouted Kennedy.

“No!” interposed the other, “that shot did not kill her; her body would have rolled down the steps; she’s up there, ready to spring upon the first of us who appears, and he would be a lost man!”

“But what are we to do? We must get out of this, and the doctor is expecting us.”

“Let us decoy the animal. Take my piece, and give me your rifle.”

“What is your plan?”

“You’ll see.”

And Joe, taking off his linen jacket, hung it on the end of the rifle, and thrust it above the top of the steps. The lioness flung herself furiously upon it. Kennedy was on the alert for her, and his bullet broke her shoulder. The lioness, with a frightful howl of agony, rolled down the steps, overturning Joe in her fall. The poor fellow imagined that he could already feel the enormous paws of the savage beast in his flesh, when a second detonation resounded in the narrow passage, and Dr. Ferguson appeared at the opening above with his gun in hand, and still smoking from the discharge.

Joe leaped to his feet, clambered over the body of the dead lioness, and handed up the flask full of sparkling water to his master.

To carry it to his lips, and to half empty it at a draught, was the work of an instant, and the three travellers offered up thanks from the depths of their hearts to that Providence who had so miraculously saved them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHTH.

An Evening of Delight. — Joe’s Culinary Performance. — A Dissertation on Raw Meat. — The Narrative of James Bruce. — Camping out. — Joe’s Dreams. — The Barometer begins to fall. — The Barometer rises again. — Preparations for Departure. — The Tempest.

The evening was lovely, and our three friends enjoyed it in the cool shade of the mimosas, after a substantial repast, at which the tea and the punch were dealt out with no niggardly hand.

Kennedy had traversed the little domain in all directions. He had ransacked every thicket and satisfied himself that the balloon party were the only living creatures in this terrestrial paradise; so they stretched themselves upon their blankets and passed a peaceful night that brought them forgetfulness of their past sufferings.

On the morrow, May 7th, the sun shone with all his splendor, but his rays could not penetrate the dense screen of the palm-tree foliage, and as there was no lack of provisions, the doctor resolved to remain where he was while waiting for a favorable wind.

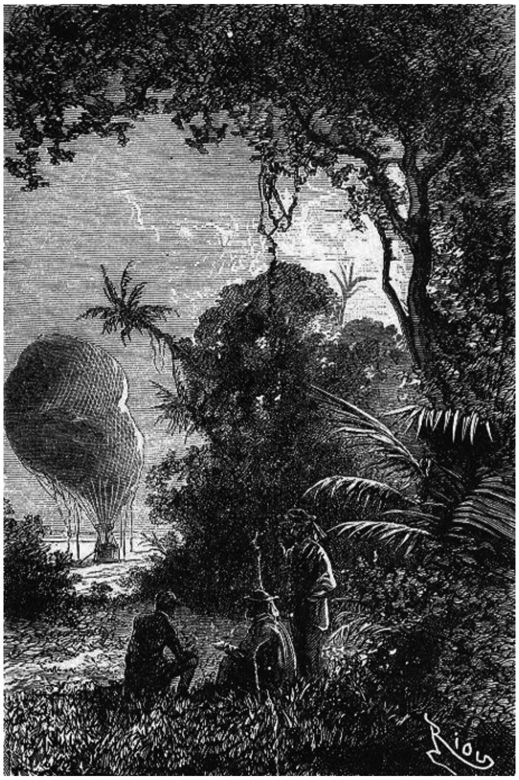

Joe had conveyed his portable kitchen to the oasis, and proceeded to indulge in any number of culinary combinations, using water all the time with the most profuse extravagance.

“What a strange succession of annoyances and enjoyments!” moralized Kennedy. “Such abundance as this after such privations; such luxury after such want! Ah! I nearly went mad!”

“My dear Dick,” replied the doctor, “had it not been for Joe, you would not be sitting here, to-day, discoursing on the instability of human affairs.”

“Whole-hearted friend!” said Kennedy, extending his hand to Joe.

“There’s no occasion for all that,” responded the latter; “but you can take your revenge some time, Mr. Kennedy, always hoping though that you may never have occasion to do the same for me!”

“It’s a poor constitution this of ours to succumb to so little,” philosophized Dr. Ferguson.

“So little water, you mean, doctor,” interposed Joe; “that element must be very necessary to life.”

“Undoubtedly, and persons deprived of food hold out longer than those deprived of water.”

“I believe it. Besides, when needs must, one can eat any thing he comes across, even his fellow-creatures, although that must be a kind of food that’s pretty hard to digest.”

“The savages don’t boggle much about it!” said

Kennedy.

“Yes; but then they are savages, and accustomed to devouring raw meat; it’s something that I’d find very disgusting, for my part.”

“It is disgusting enough,” said the doctor, “that’s a fact; and so much so, indeed, that nobody believed the narratives of the earliest travellers in Africa who brought back word that many tribes on that continent subsisted upon raw meat, and people generally refused to credit the statement. It was under such circumstances that a very singular adventure befell James Bruce.”

“Tell it to us, doctor; we’ve time enough to hear it,” said Joe, stretching himself voluptuously on the cool greensward.

“By all means. — James Bruce was a Scotchman, of Stirlingshire, who, between 1768 and 1772, traversed all Abyssinia, as far as Lake Tyana, in search of the sources of the Nile. He afterward returned to England, but did not publish an account of his journeys until 1790. His statements were received with extreme incredulity, and such may be the reception accorded to our own. The manners and customs of the Abyssinians seemed so different from those of the English, that no one would credit the description of them. Among other details, Bruce had put forward the assertion that the tribes of Eastern Africa fed upon raw flesh, and this set everybody against him. He might say so as much as he pleased; there was no one likely to go and see! One day, in a parlor at Edinburgh, a Scotch gentleman took up the subject in his presence, as it had become the topic of daily pleasantry, and, in reference to the eating of raw flesh, said that the thing was neither possible nor true. Bruce made no reply, but went out and returned a few minutes later with a raw steak, seasoned with pepper and salt, in the African style.

"'Sir,' said he to the Scotchman, 'in doubting my statements, you have grossly affronted me; in believing the thing to be impossible, you have been egregiously mistaken; and, in proof thereof, you will now eat this beef-steak raw, or you will give me instant satisfaction!' The Scotchman had a wholesome dread of the brawny traveller, and DID eat the steak, although not without a good many wry faces. Thereupon, with the utmost coolness, James Bruce added: 'Even admitting, sir, that the thing were untrue, you will, at least, no longer maintain that it is impossible.'"

"Well put in!" said Joe, "and if the Scotchman found it lie heavy on his stomach, he got no more than he deserved. If, on our return to England, they dare to doubt what we say about our travels — "

"Well, Joe, what would you do?"

“Why, I’ll make the doubters swallow the pieces of the balloon, without either salt or pepper!”

All burst out laughing at Joe’s queer notions, and thus the day slipped by in pleasant chat. With returning strength, hope had revived, and with hope came the courage to do and to dare. The past was obliterated in the presence of the future with providential rapidity.

Joe would have been willing to remain forever in this enchanting asylum; it was the realm he had pictured in his dreams; he felt himself at home; his master had to give him his exact location, and it was with the gravest air imaginable that he wrote down on his tablets fifteen degrees forty-three minutes east longitude, and eight degrees thirty-two minutes north latitude.

Kennedy had but one regret, to wit, that he could not hunt in that miniature forest, because, according to his ideas, there was a slight deficiency of ferocious wild beasts in it.

“But, my dear Dick,” said the doctor, “haven’t you rather a short memory? How about the lion and the lioness?”

“Oh, that!” he ejaculated with the contempt of a thorough-bred sportsman for game already killed. “But the fact is, that finding them here would lead one to suppose that we can’t be far from a more fertile country.”

“It don’t prove much, Dick, for those animals, when goaded by hunger or thirst, will travel long distances, and I think that, to-night, we had better keep a more vigilant lookout, and light fires, besides.”

“What, in such heat as this?” said Joe. “Well, if it’s necessary, we’ll have to do it, but I do think it a real pity to burn this pretty grove that has been such a comfort to us!”

“Oh! above all things, we must take the utmost care not to set it on fire,” replied the doctor, “so that others in the same strait as ourselves may some day find shelter here in the middle of the desert.”

“I’ll be very careful, indeed, doctor; but do you think that this oasis is known?”

“Undoubtedly; it is a halting-place for the caravans that frequent the centre of Africa, and a visit from one of them might be any thing but pleasant to you, Joe.”

“Why, are there any more of those rascally Nyam-Nyams around here?”

“Certainly; that is the general name of all the neighboring tribes, and, under the same climates, the same races are likely to have similar manners and customs.”

“Pah!” said Joe, “but, after all, it’s natural enough. If savages had the ways of gentlemen, where would be the difference? By George, these fine fellows wouldn’t have to be coaxed long to eat the Scotchman’s raw steak, nor the Scotchman either, into the bargain!”

With this very sensible observation, Joe began to get ready his firewood for the night, making just as little of it as possible. Fortunately, these precautions were superfluous; and each of the party, in his turn, dropped off into the soundest slumber.

On the next day the weather still showed no sign of change, but kept provokingly and obstinately fair. The balloon remained motionless, without any oscillation to betray a breath of wind.

The doctor began to get uneasy again. If their stay in the desert were to be prolonged like this, their provisions would give out. After nearly perishing for want of water, they would, at last, have to starve to death!

But he took fresh courage as he saw the mercury fall considerably in the barometer, and noticed evident signs of an early change in the atmosphere. He therefore resolved to make all his preparations for a start, so as to avail himself of the first opportunity. The feeding-tank and the water-tank were both completely filled.

Then he had to reestablish the equilibrium of the balloon, and Joe was obliged to part with another considerable portion of his precious quartz. With restored health, his ambitious notions had come back to him, and he made more than one wry face before obeying his master; but the latter convinced him that he could not carry so considerable a weight with him through the air, and gave him his choice between the water and the gold. Joe hesitated no longer, but flung out the requisite quantity of his much-prized ore upon the sand.

“The next people who come this way,” he remarked, “will be rather surprised to find a fortune in such a place.”

“And suppose some learned traveller should come across these specimens, eh?” suggested Kennedy.

“You may be certain, Dick, that they would take him by surprise, and that he would publish his astonishment in several folios; so that some day we shall hear of a wonderful deposit of gold-bearing quartz in the midst of the African sands!”

“And Joe there, will be the cause of it all!”

This idea of mystifying some learned sage tickled Joe hugely, and made him laugh.

During the rest of the day the doctor vainly kept on the watch for a change of weather. The temperature rose, and, had it not been for the shade of the oasis, would have been insupportable. The thermometer marked a hundred and forty-nine degrees in the sun, and a veritable rain of fire filled the air. This was the most intense heat that they had yet noted.

Joe arranged their bivouac for that evening, as he had done for the previous night; and during the watches kept by the doctor and Kennedy there was no fresh incident.

But, toward three o'clock in the morning, while Joe was on guard, the temperature suddenly fell; the sky became overcast with clouds, and the darkness increased.

“Turn out!” cried Joe, arousing his companions.

“Turn out! Here's the wind!”

“At last!” exclaimed the doctor, eying the heavens. “But it is a storm! The balloon! Let us hasten to the balloon!”

It was high time for them to reach it. The Victoria was bending to the force of the hurricane, and dragging along the car, the latter grazing the sand. Had any portion of the ballast been accidentally thrown out, the balloon would have been swept away, and all hope of recovering it have been forever lost.

But fleet-footed Joe put forth his utmost speed, and checked the car, while the balloon beat upon the sand, at the risk of being torn to pieces. The doctor, followed by Kennedy, leaped in, and lit his cylinder, while his companions threw out the superfluous ballast.

The travellers took one last look at the trees of the oasis bowing to the force of the hurricane, and soon, catching the wind at two hundred feet above the ground, disappeared in the gloom.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINTH.

Signs of Vegetation. — The Fantastic Notion of a French Author. — A Magnificent Country. — The Kingdom of Adamova. — The Explorations of Speke and Burton connected with those of Dr. Barth. — The Atlantika Mountains. — The River Benoue. — The City of Yola. — The Bagele. — Mount Mendif.

From the moment of their departure, the travellers moved with great velocity. They longed to leave behind them the desert, which had so nearly been fatal to them.

About a quarter-past nine in the morning, they caught a glimpse of some signs of vegetation: herbage floating on that sea of sand, and announcing, as the weeds upon the ocean did to Christopher Columbus, the nearness of the shore — green shoots peeping up timidly between pebbles that were, in their turn, to be the rocks of that vast expanse.

Hills, but of trifling height, were seen in wavy lines upon the horizon. Their profile, muffled by the heavy mist, was defined but vaguely. The monotony, however, was beginning to disappear.

The doctor hailed with joy the new country thus disclosed, and, like a seaman on lookout at the mast-head, he was ready to shout aloud:

“Land, ho! land!”

An hour later the continent spread broadly before their gaze, still wild in aspect, but less flat, less denuded, and with a few trees standing out against the gray sky.

“We are in a civilized country at last!” said the hunter.

“Civilized? Well, that’s one way of speaking; but there are no people to be seen yet.”

“It will not be long before we see them,” said Ferguson, “at our present rate of travel.”

“Are we still in the negro country, doctor?”

“Yes, and on our way to the country of the Arabs.”

“What! real Arabs, sir, with their camels?”

“No, not many camels; they are scarce, if not altogether unknown, in these regions. We must go a few degrees farther north to see them.”

“What a pity!”

“And why, Joe?”

“Because, if the wind fell contrary, they might be of use to us.”

“How so?”

“Well, sir, it’s just a notion that’s got into my head: we might hitch them to the car, and make them tow us along. What do you say to that, doctor?”

“Poor Joe! Another person had that idea in advance of you. It was used by a very gifted French author — M. Mery — in a romance, it is true. He has his travellers drawn along in a balloon by a team of camels; then a lion comes up, devours the camels, swallows the tow-rope, and hauls the balloon in their stead; and so on through the story. You see that the whole thing is the top-flower of fancy, but has nothing in common with our style of locomotion.”

Joe, a little cut down at learning that his idea had been used already, cudgelled his wits to imagine what animal could have devoured the lion; but he could not guess it, and so quietly went on scanning the appearance of the country.

A lake of medium extent stretched away before him, surrounded by an amphitheatre of hills, which yet could not be dignified with the name of mountains. There were winding valleys, numerous and fertile, with their tangled thickets of the most various trees. The African oil-tree rose above the mass, with leaves fifteen feet in length upon its stalk, the latter studded with sharp thorns; the bombax, or silk-cotton-tree, filled the wind, as it swept by, with the fine down of its seeds; the pungent odors of the pendanus, the “kenda” of the Arabs, perfumed the air up to the height where the Victoria was sailing; the papaw-tree, with its palm-shaped leaves; the sterculier, which produces the Soudan-nut; the baobab, and the banana-tree, completed the luxuriant flora of these inter-tropical regions.

“The country is superb!” said the doctor.

“Here are some animals,” added Joe. “Men are not far away.”

“Oh, what magnificent elephants!” exclaimed Kennedy.

“Is there no way to get a little shooting?”

“How could we manage to halt in a current as strong as this? No, Dick; you must taste a little of the torture of Tantalus just now. You shall make up for it afterward.”

And, in truth, there was enough to excite the fancy of a sportsman. Dick's heart fairly leaped in his breast as he grasped the butt of his Purdy.

The fauna of the region were as striking as its flora. The wild-ox revelled in dense herbage that often concealed his whole body; gray, black, and yellow elephants of the most gigantic size burst headlong, like a living hurricane, through the forests, breaking, rending, tearing down, devastating every thing in their path; upon the woody slopes of the hills trickled cascades and springs flowing northward; there, too, the hippopotami bathed their huge forms, splashing and snorting as they frolicked in the water, and lamantines, twelve feet long, with bodies like seals, stretched themselves along the banks, turning up toward the sun their rounded teats swollen with milk.

It was a whole menagerie of rare and curious beasts in a wondrous hot-house, where numberless birds with plumage of a thousand hues gleamed and fluttered in the sunshine.

By this prodigality of Nature, the doctor recognized the splendid kingdom of Adamova.

"We are now beginning to trench upon the realm of modern discovery. I have taken up the lost scent of preceding travellers. It is a happy chance, my friends, for we shall be enabled to link the toils of Captains Burton and Speke with the explorations of Dr. Barth. We have left the Englishmen behind us, and now have caught up with the Hamburger. It will not be long, either, before we arrive at the extreme point attained by that daring explorer."

"It seems to me that there is a vast extent of country between the two explored routes," remarked Kennedy; "at least, if I am to judge by the distance that we have made."

“It is easy to determine: take the map and see what is the longitude of the southern point of Lake Ukereoue, reached by Speke.”

“It is near the thirty-seventh degree.”

“And the city of Yola, which we shall sight this evening, and to which Barth penetrated, what is its position?”

“It is about in the twelfth degree of east longitude.”

“Then there are twenty-five degrees, or, counting sixty miles to each, about fifteen hundred miles in all.”

“A nice little walk,” said Joe, “for people who have to go on foot.”

“It will be accomplished, however. Livingstone and Moffat are pushing on up this line toward the interior. Nyassa, which they have discovered, is not far from Lake Tanganayika, seen by Burton. Ere the close of the century these regions will, undoubtedly, be explored. But,” added the doctor, consulting his compass, “I regret that the wind is carrying us so far to the westward. I wanted to get to the north.”

After twelve hours of progress, the Victoria found herself on the confines of Nigritia. The first inhabitants of this region, the Chouas Arabs, were feeding their wandering flocks. The immense summits of the Atlantika Mountains seen above the horizon — mountains that no European foot had yet scaled, and whose height is computed to be ten thousand feet! Their western slope determines the flow of all the waters in this region of Africa toward the ocean. They are the Mountains of the Moon to this part of the continent.

At length a real river greeted the gaze of our travellers, and, by the enormous ant-hills seen in its vicinity, the doctor recognized the Benoue, one of the great tributaries of the Niger, the one which the natives have called “The Fountain of the Waters.”

“This river,” said the doctor to his companions, “will, one day, be the natural channel of communication with the interior of Nigritia. Under the command of one of our brave captains, the steamer Pleiad has already ascended as far as the town of Yola. You see that we are not in an unknown country.”

Numerous slaves were engaged in the labors of the field, cultivating sorgho, a kind of millet which forms the chief basis of their diet; and the most stupid expressions of astonishment ensued as the Victoria sped past like a meteor. That evening the balloon halted about forty miles from Yola, and ahead of it, but in the distance, rose the two sharp cones of Mount Mendif.

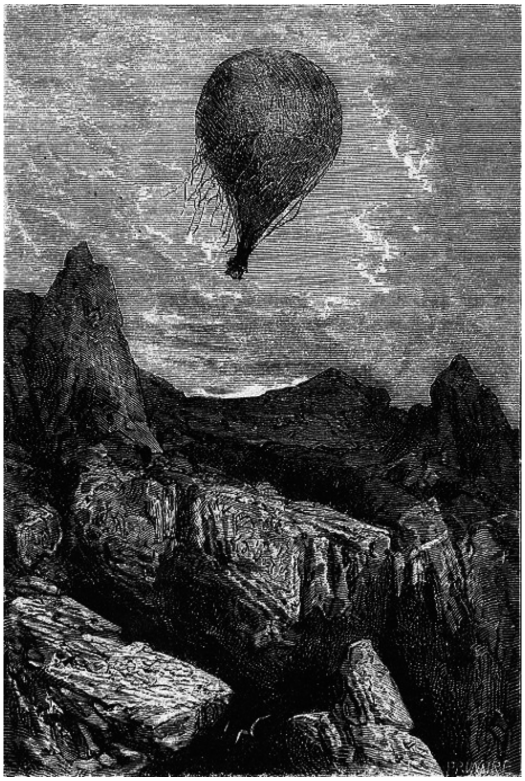

The doctor threw out his anchors and made fast to the top of a high tree; but a very violent wind beat upon the balloon with such force as to throw it over on its side, thus rendering the position of the car sometimes extremely dangerous. Ferguson did not close his all night, and he was repeatedly on the point of cutting the anchor-rope and scudding away before the gale. At length, however, the storm abated, and the oscillations of the balloon ceased to be alarming.

On the morrow the wind was more moderate, but it carried our travellers away from the city of Yola, which recently rebuilt by the Fouillans, excited Ferguson's curiosity. However, he had to make up his mind to being borne farther to the northward and even a little to the east.

Kennedy proposed to halt in this fine hunting-country, and Joe declared that the need of fresh meat was beginning to be felt; but the savage customs of the country, the attitude of the population, and some shots fired at the Victoria, admonished the doctor to continue his journey. They were then crossing a region that was the scene of massacres and burnings, and where warlike conflicts between the barbarian sultans, contending for their power amid the most atrocious carnage, never cease.

Numerous and populous villages of long low huts stretched away between broad pasture-fields whose dense herbage was besprinkled with violet-colored blossoms. The huts, looking like huge beehives, were sheltered behind bristling palisades. The wild hill-sides and hollows frequently reminded the beholder of the glens in the Highlands of Scotland, as Kennedy more than once remarked.

In spite of all he could do, the doctor bore directly to the northeast, toward Mount Mendif, which was lost in the midst of environing clouds. The lofty summits of these mountains separate the valley of the Niger from the basin of Lake Tchad.

Soon afterward was seen the Bagele, with its eighteen villages clinging to its flanks like a whole brood of children to their mother’s bosom — a magnificent spectacle for the beholder whose gaze commanded and took in the entire picture at one view. Even the ravines were seen to be covered with fields of rice and of arachides.

By three o’clock the Victoria was directly in front of Mount Mendif. It had been impossible to avoid it; the only thing to be done was to cross it. The doctor, by means of a temperature increased to one hundred and eighty degrees, gave the balloon a fresh ascensional force of nearly sixteen hundred pounds, and it went up to an elevation of more than eight thousand feet, the greatest height attained during the journey. The temperature of the atmosphere was so much cooler at that point that the aeronauts had to resort to their blankets and thick coverings.

Ferguson was in haste to descend; the covering of the balloon gave indications of bursting, but in the meanwhile he had time to satisfy himself of the volcanic origin of the mountain, whose extinct craters are now but deep abysses. Immense accumulations of bird-guano gave the sides of Mount Mendif the appearance of calcareous rocks, and there was enough of the deposit there to manure all the lands in the United Kingdom.

At five o’clock the Victoria, sheltered from the south winds, went gently gliding along the slopes of the mountain, and stopped in a wide clearing remote from any habitation. The instant it touched the soil, all needful precautions were taken to hold it there firmly; and Kennedy, fowling-piece in hand, sallied out upon the sloping plain. Ere long, he returned with half a dozen wild ducks and a kind of snipe, which Joe served up in his best style.

The meal was heartily relished, and the night was passed in undisturbed and refreshing slumber.

CHAPTER THIRTIETH.

Mosfeia. — The Sheik. — Denham, Clapperton, and Oudney. — Vogel. — The Capital of Loggoum. — Toole. — Becalmed above Kernak. — The Governor and his Court. — The Attack. — The Incendiary Pigeons.

On the next day, May 11th, the Victoria resumed her adventurous journey. Her passengers had the same confidence in her that a good seaman has in his ship.

In terrific hurricanes, in tropical heats, when making dangerous departures, and descents still more dangerous, it had, at all times and in all places, come out safely. It might almost have been said that Ferguson managed it with a wave of the hand; and hence, without knowing in advance, where the point of arrival would be, the doctor had no fears concerning the successful issue of his journey. However, in this country of barbarians and fanatics, prudence obliged him to take the strictest precautions. He therefore counselled his companions to have their eyes wide open for every thing and at all hours.

The wind drifted a little more to the northward, and, toward nine o’clock, they sighted the larger city of Mosfeia, built upon an eminence which was itself enclosed between two lofty mountains. Its position was impregnable, a narrow road running between a marsh and a thick wood being the only channel of approach to it.

At the moment of which we write, a sheik, accompanied by a mounted escort, and clad in a garb of brilliant colors, preceded by couriers and trumpeters, who put aside the boughs of the trees as he rode up, was making his grand entry into the place.

The doctor lowered the balloon in order to get a better look at this cavalcade of natives; but, as the balloon grew larger to their eyes, they began to show symptoms of intense affright, and at length made off in different directions as fast as their legs and those of their horses could carry them.

The sheik alone did not budge an inch. He merely grasped his long musket, cocked it, and proudly waited in silence. The doctor came on to within a hundred and fifty feet of him, and then, with his roundest and fullest voice, saluted him courteously in the Arabic tongue.

But, upon hearing these words falling, as it seemed, from the sky, the sheik dismounted and prostrated himself in the dust of the highway, where the doctor had to leave him, finding it impossible to divert him from his adoration.

“Unquestionably,” Ferguson remarked, “those people take us for supernatural beings. When Europeans came among them for the first time, they were mistaken for creatures of a higher race. When this sheik comes to speak of to-day’s meeting, he will not fail to embellish the circumstance with all the resources of an Arab imagination. You may, therefore, judge what an account their legends will give of us some day.”

“Not such a desirable thing, after all,” said the Scot, “in the point of view that affects civilization; it would be better to pass for mere men. That would give these negro races a superior idea of European power.”

“Very good, my dear Dick; but what can we do about it? You might sit all day explaining the mechanism of a balloon to the savants of this country, and yet they would not comprehend you, but would persist in ascribing it to supernatural aid.”

“Doctor, you spoke of the first time Europeans visited these regions. Who were the visitors?” inquired Joe.

“My dear fellow, we are now upon the very track of Major Denham. It was at this very city of Mosfeia that he was received by the Sultan of Mandara; he had quitted the Bornou country; he accompanied the sheik in an expedition against the Fellatahs; he assisted in the attack on the city, which, with its arrows alone, bravely resisted the bullets of the Arabs, and put the sheik’s troops to flight. All this was but a pretext for murders, raids, and pillage. The major was completely plundered and stripped, and had it not been for his horse, under whose stomach he clung with the skill of an Indian rider, and was borne with a headlong gallop from his barbarous pursuers, he never could have made his way back to Kouka, the capital of Bornou.”

“Who was this Major Denham?”

“A fearless Englishman, who, between 1822 and 1824, commanded an expedition into the Bornou country, in company with Captain Clapperton and Dr. Oudney. They set out from Tripoli in the month of March, reached Mourzouk, the capital of Fez, and, following the route which at a later period Dr. Barth was to pursue on his way back to Europe, they arrived, on the 16th of February, 1823, at Kouka, near Lake Tchad. Denham made several explorations in Bornou, in Mandara, and to the eastern shores of the lake. In the mean time, on the 15th of December, 1823, Captain Clapperton and Dr. Oudney had pushed their way through the Soudan country as far as

Sackatoo, and Oudney died of fatigue and exhaustion in the town of Murmur."

"This part of Africa has, therefore, paid a heavy tribute of victims to the cause of science," said Kennedy.

"Yes, this country is fatal to travellers. We are moving directly toward the kingdom of Baghirmi, which Vogel traversed in 1856, so as to reach the Wadai country, where he disappeared. This young man, at the age of twenty-three, had been sent to cooperate with Dr. Barth. They met on the 1st of December, 1854, and thereupon commenced his explorations of the country. Toward 1856, he announced, in the last letters received from him, his intention to reconnoitre the kingdom of Wadai, which no European had yet penetrated. It appears that he got as far as Wara, the capital, where, according to some accounts, he was made prisoner, and, according to others, was put to death for having attempted to ascend a sacred mountain in the environs. But, we must not too lightly admit the death of travellers, since that does away with the necessity of going in search of them. For instance, how often was the death of Dr. Barth reported, to his own great annoyance! It is, therefore, very possible that Vogel may still be held as a prisoner by the Sultan of Wadai, in the hope of obtaining a good ransom for him.

"Baron de Neimans was about starting for the Wadai country when he died at Cairo, in 1855; and we now know that De Heuglin has set out on Vogel's track with the expedition sent from Leipsic, so that we shall soon be accurately informed as to the fate of that young and interesting explorer."*

* Since the doctor's departure, letters written from El'Obeid by Mr. Muntzinger, the newly-appointed head of the expedition, unfortunately place the death of Vogel beyond a doubt.

Mosfeia had disappeared from the horizon long ere this, and the Mandara country was developing to the gaze of our aeronauts its astonishing fertility, with its forests of acacias, its locust-trees covered with red flowers, and the herbaceous plants of its fields of cotton and indigo trees. The river Shari, which eighty miles farther on rolled its impetuous waters into Lake Tchad, was quite distinctly seen.

The doctor got his companions to trace its course upon the maps drawn by Dr. Barth.

“You perceive,” said he, “that the labors of this savant have been conducted with great precision; we are moving directly toward the Loggoum region, and perhaps toward Kernak, its capital. It was there that poor Toole died, at the age of scarcely twenty-two. He was a young Englishman, an ensign in the 80th regiment, who, a few weeks before, had joined Major Denham in Africa, and it was not long ere he there met his death. Ah! this vast country might well be called the graveyard of European travellers.”

Some boats, fifty feet long, were descending the current of the Shari. The Victoria, then one thousand feet above the soil, hardly attracted the attention of the natives; but the wind, which until then had been blowing with a certain degree of strength, was falling off.

“Is it possible that we are to be caught in another dead calm?” sighed the doctor.

“Well, we’ve no lack of water, nor the desert to fear, anyhow, master,” said Joe.

“No; but there are races here still more to be dreaded.”

“Why!” said Joe, again, “there’s something like a town.”

“That is Kernak. The last puffs of the breeze are wafting us to it, and, if we choose, we can take an exact plan of the place.”

“Shall we not go nearer to it?” asked Kennedy.

“Nothing easier, Dick! We are right over it. Allow me to turn the stopcock of the cylinder, and we’ll not be long in descending.”

Half an hour later the balloon hung motionless about two hundred feet from the ground.

“Here we are!” said the doctor, “nearer to Kernak than a man would be to London, if he were perched in the cupola of St. Paul’s. So we can take a survey at our ease.”

“What is that tick-tacking sound that we hear on all sides?”

Joe looked attentively, and at length discovered that the noise they heard was produced by a number of weavers beating cloth stretched in the open air, on large trunks of trees.

The capital of Loggoum could then be seen in its entire extent, like an unrolled chart. It is really a city with straight rows of houses and quite wide streets. In the midst of a large open space there was a slave-market, attended by a great crowd of customers, for the Mandara women, who have extremely small hands and feet, are in excellent request, and can be sold at lucrative rates.

At the sight of the Victoria, the scene so often produced occurred again. At first there were outcries, and then followed general stupefaction; business was abandoned; work was flung aside, and all noise ceased. The aeronauts remained as they were, completely motionless, and lost not a detail of the populous city. They even went down to within sixty feet of the ground.

Hereupon the Governor of Loggoum came out from his residence, displaying his green standard, and accompanied by his musicians, who blew on hoarse buffalo-horns, as though they would split their cheeks or any thing else, excepting their own lungs. The crowd at once gathered around him. In the mean while Dr. Ferguson tried to make himself heard, but in vain.

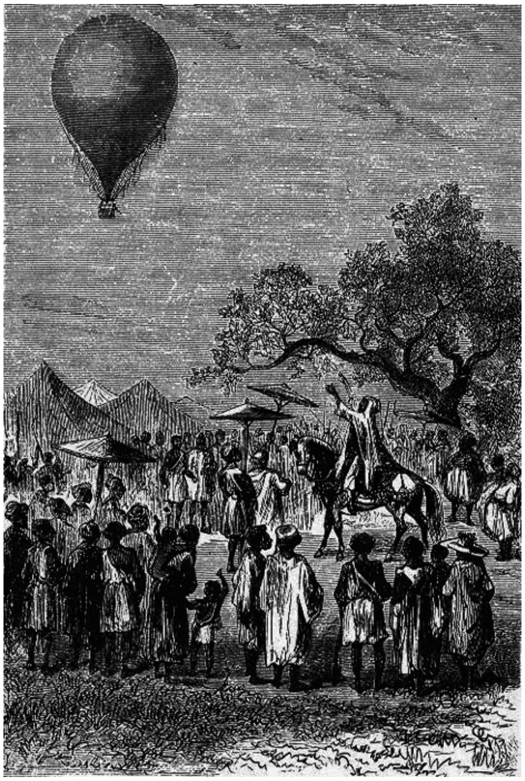

This population looked like proud and intelligent people, with their high foreheads, their almost aquiline noses, and their curling hair; but the presence of the Victoria troubled them greatly. Horsemen could be seen galloping in all directions, and it soon became evident that the governor’s troops were assembling to oppose so extraordinary a foe. Joe wore himself out waving handkerchiefs of every color and shape to them; but his exertions were all to no purpose.

However, the sheik, surrounded by his court, proclaimed silence, and pronounced a discourse, of which the doctor could not understand a word. It was Arabic, mixed with Baghirmi. He could make out enough, however, by the universal language of gestures, to be aware that he was receiving a very polite invitation to depart. Indeed, he would have asked for nothing better, but for lack of wind, the thing had become impossible. His noncompliance, therefore, exasperated the governor, whose courtiers and attendants set up a furious howl to enforce immediate obedience on the part of the aerial monster.

They were odd-looking fellows those courtiers, with their five or six shirts swathed around their bodies! They had enormous stomachs, some of which actually seemed to be artificial. The doctor surprised his companions by informing them that this was the way to pay court to the sultan. The rotundity of the stomach indicated the ambition of its possessor. These corpulent gentry gesticulated and bawled at the top of their voices — one of them particularly distinguishing himself above the rest — to such an extent, indeed, that he must have been a prime minister — at least, if the disturbance he made was any criterion of his rank. The common rabble of dusky denizens united their howlings with the uproar of the court, repeating their gesticulations like so many monkeys, and thereby producing a single and instantaneous movement of ten thousand arms at one time.

To these means of intimidation, which were presently deemed insufficient, were added others still more formidable. Soldiers, armed with bows and arrows, were drawn up in line of battle; but by this time the balloon was expanding, and rising quietly beyond their reach. Upon this the governor seized a musket and aimed it at the balloon; but, Kennedy, who was watching him, shattered the uplifted weapon in the sheik’s grasp.

At this unexpected blow there was a general rout. Every mother’s son of them scampered for his dwelling with the utmost celerity, and stayed there, so that the streets of the town were absolutely deserted for the remainder of that day.

Night came, and not a breath of wind was stirring. The aeronauts had to make up their minds to remain motionless at the distance of but three hundred feet above the ground. Not a fire or light shone in the deep gloom, and around reigned the silence of death; but the doctor only redoubled his vigilance, as this apparent quiet might conceal some snare.

And he had reason to be watchful. About midnight, the whole city seemed to be in a blaze. Hundreds of streaks of flame crossed each other, and shot to and fro in the air like rockets, forming a regular network of fire.

“That’s really curious!” said the doctor, somewhat puzzled to make out what it meant.

“By all that’s glorious!” shouted Kennedy, “it looks as if the fire were ascending and coming up toward us!”

And, sure enough, with an accompaniment of musket-shots, yelling, and din of every description, the mass of fire was, indeed, mounting toward the Victoria. Joe got ready to throw out ballast, and Ferguson was not long at guessing the truth. Thousands of pigeons, their tails garnished with combustibles, had been set loose and driven toward the Victoria; and now, in their terror, they were flying high up, zigzagging the atmosphere with lines of fire. Kennedy was preparing to discharge all his batteries into the middle of the ascending multitude, but what could he have done against such a numberless army? The pigeons were already whisking around the car; they were even surrounding the balloon, the sides of which, reflecting their illumination, looked as though enveloped with a network of fire.

The doctor dared hesitate no longer; and, throwing out a fragment of quartz, he kept himself beyond the reach of these dangerous assailants; and, for two hours afterward, he could see them wandering hither and thither through the darkness of the night, until, little by little, their light diminished, and they, one by one, died out.

“Now we may sleep in quiet,” said the doctor.

“Not badly got up for barbarians,” mused friend Joe, speaking his thoughts aloud.

“Oh, they employ these pigeons frequently, to set fire to the thatch of hostile villages; but this time the village mounted higher than they could go.”

“Why, positively, a balloon need fear no enemies!”

“Yes, indeed, it may!” objected Ferguson.

“What are they, then, doctor?”

“They are the careless people in the car! So, my friends, let us have vigilance in all places and at all times.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIRST.

Departure in the Night-time. — All Three. — Kennedy’s Instincts. — Precautions. — The Course of the Shari River. — Lake Tchad. — The Water of the Lake. — The Hippopotamus. — One Bullet thrown away.

About three o’clock in the morning, Joe, who was then on watch, at length saw the city move away from beneath his feet. The Victoria was once again in motion, and both the doctor and Kennedy awoke.

The former consulted his compass, and saw, with satisfaction, that the wind was carrying them toward the north-northeast.

“We are in luck!” said he; “every thing works in our favor: we shall discover Lake Tchad this very day.”

“Is it a broad sheet of water?” asked Kennedy.

“Somewhat, Dick. At its greatest length and breadth, it measures about one hundred and twenty miles.”

“It will spice our trip with a little variety to sail over a spacious sheet of water.”

“After all, though, I don’t see that we have much to complain of on that score. Our trip has been very much varied, indeed; and, moreover, we are getting on under the best possible conditions.”

“Unquestionably so; excepting those privations on the desert, we have encountered no serious danger.”

“It is not to be denied that our noble balloon has behaved wonderfully well. To-day is May 12th, and we started on the 18th of April. That makes twenty-five days of journeying. In ten days more we shall have reached our destination.”

“Where is that?”

“I do not know. But what does that signify?”

“You are right again, Samuel! Let us intrust to Providence the care of guiding us and of keeping us in good health as we are now. We don’t look much as though we had been crossing the most pestilential country in the world!”

“We had an opportunity of getting up in life, and that’s what we have done!”

“Hurrah for trips in the air!” cried Joe. “Here we are at the end of twenty-five days in good condition, well fed, and well rested. We’ve had too much rest in fact, for my legs begin to feel rusty, and I wouldn’t be vexed a bit to stretch them with a run of thirty miles or so!”

“You can do that, Joe, in the streets of London, but in fine we set out three together, like Denham, Clapperton, and Overweg; like Barth, Richardson, and Vogel, and, more fortunate than our predecessors here, we are three in number still. But it is most important for us not to separate. If, while one of us was on the ground, the Victoria should have to ascend in order to escape some sudden danger, who knows whether we should ever see each other again? Therefore it is that I say again to Kennedy frankly that I do not like his going off alone to hunt."

"But still, Samuel, you will permit me to indulge that fancy a little. There is no harm in renewing our stock of provisions. Besides, before our departure, you held out to me the prospect of some superb hunting, and thus far I have done but little in the line of the Andersons and Cummings."

"But, my dear Dick, your memory fails you, or your modesty makes you forget your own exploits. It really seems to me that, without mentioning small game, you have already an antelope, an elephant, and two lions on your conscience."

"But what's all that to an African sportsman who sees all the animals in creation strutting along under the muzzle of his rifle? There! there! look at that troop of giraffes!"

"Those giraffes," roared Joe; "why, they're not as big as my fist."

"Because we are a thousand feet above them; but close to them you would discover that they are three times as tall as you are!"

"And what do you say to yon herd of gazelles, and those ostriches, that run with the speed of the wind?" resumed Kennedy.

"Those ostriches?" remonstrated Joe, again; "those are chickens, and the greatest kind of chickens!"

"Come, doctor, can't we get down nearer to them?" pleaded Kennedy.

"We can get closer to them, Dick, but we must not land. And what good will it do you to strike down those poor animals when they can be of no use to you? Now, if the question were to destroy a lion, a tiger, a cat, a hyena, I could understand it; but to deprive an antelope or a gazelle of life, to no other purpose than the gratification of your instincts as a sportsman, seems hardly worth the trouble. But, after all, my friend, we are going to keep at about one hundred feet only from the soil, and, should you see any ferocious wild beast, oblige us by sending a ball through its heart!”

The Victoria descended gradually, but still keeping at a safe height, for, in a barbarous, yet very populous country, it was necessary to keep on the watch for unexpected perils.

The travellers were then directly following the course of the Shari. The charming banks of this river were hidden beneath the foliage of trees of various dyes; lianas and climbing plants wound in and out on all sides and formed the most curious combinations of color. Crocodiles were seen basking in the broad blaze of the sun or plunging beneath the waters with the agility of lizards, and in their gambols they sported about among the many green islands that intercept the current of the stream.

It was thus, in the midst of rich and verdant landscapes that our travellers passed over the district of Maffatay, and about nine o’clock in the morning reached the southern shore of Lake Tchad.

There it was at last, outstretched before them, that Caspian Sea of Africa, the existence of which was so long consigned to the realms of fable — that interior expanse of water to which only Denham’s and Barth’s expeditions had been able to force their way.

The doctor strove in vain to fix its precise configuration upon paper. It had already changed greatly since 1847. In fact, the chart of Lake Tchad is very difficult to trace with exactitude, for it is surrounded by muddy and almost impassable morasses, in which Barth thought that he was doomed to perish. From year to year these marshes, covered with reeds and papyrus fifteen feet high, become the lake itself. Frequently, too, the villages on its shores are half submerged, as was the case with Ngornou in 1856, and now the hippopotamus and the alligator frisk and dive where the dwellings of Bornou once stood.

The sun shot his dazzling rays over this placid sheet of water, and toward the north the two elements merged into one and the same horizon.

The doctor was desirous of determining the character of the water, which was long believed to be salt. There was no danger in descending close to the lake, and the car was soon skimming its surface like a bird at the distance of only five feet.

Joe plunged a bottle into the lake and drew it up half filled. The water was then tasted and found to be but little fit for drinking, with a certain carbonate-of-soda flavor.

While the doctor was jotting down the result of this experiment, the loud report of a gun was heard close beside him. Kennedy had not been able to resist the temptation of firing at a huge hippopotamus. The latter, who had been basking quietly, disappeared at the sound of the explosion, but did not seem to be otherwise incommoded by Kennedy’s conical bullet.

“You’d have done better if you had harpooned him,” said Joe.

“But how?”

“With one of our anchors. It would have been a hook just big enough for such a rousing beast as that!”

“Humph!” ejaculated Kennedy, “Joe really has an idea this time — ”

“Which I beg of you not to put into execution,” interposed the doctor. “The animal would very quickly have dragged us where we could not have done much to help ourselves, and where we have no business to be.”

“Especially now since we’ve settled the question as to what kind of water there is in Lake Tchad. Is that sort of fish good to eat, Dr. Ferguson?”

“That fish, as you call it, Joe, is really a mammiferous animal of the pachydermal species. Its flesh is said to be excellent and is an article of important trade between the tribes living along the borders of the lake.”

“Then I’m sorry that Mr. Kennedy’s shot didn’t do more damage.”

“The animal is vulnerable only in the stomach and between the thighs. Dick’s ball hasn’t even marked him; but should the ground strike me as favorable, we shall halt at the northern end of the lake, where Kennedy will find himself in the midst of a whole menagerie, and can make up for lost time.”

“Well,” said Joe, “I hope then that Mr. Kennedy will hunt the hippopotamus a little; I’d like to taste the meat of that queer-looking beast. It doesn’t look exactly natural to get away into the centre of Africa, to feed on snipe and partridge, just as if we were in England.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SECOND.

The Capital of Bornou. — The Islands of the Biddiomahs. — The Condors. — The Doctor's Anxieties. — His Precautions. — An Attack in Mid-air. — The Balloon Covering torn. — The Fall. — Sublime Self-Sacrifice. — The Northern Coast of the Lake.

Since its arrival at Lake Tchad, the balloon had struck a current that edged it farther to the westward. A few clouds tempered the heat of the day, and, besides, a little air could be felt over this vast expanse of water; but about one o'clock, the Victoria, having slanted across this part of the lake, again advanced over the land for a space of seven or eight miles.

The doctor, who was somewhat vexed at first at this turn of his course, no longer thought of complaining when he caught sight of the city of Kouka, the capital of Bornou. He saw it for a moment, encircled by its walls of white clay, and a few rudely-constructed mosques rising clumsily above that conglomeration of houses that look like playing-dice, which form most Arab towns. In the court-yards of the private dwellings, and on the public squares, grew palms and caoutchouc-trees topped with a dome of foliage more than one hundred feet in breadth. Joe called attention to the fact that these immense parasols were in proper accordance with the intense heat of the sun, and made thereon some pious reflections which it were needless to repeat.

Kouka really consists of two distinct towns, separated by the “Dendal,” a large boulevard three hundred yards wide, at that hour crowded with horsemen and foot passengers. On one side, the rich quarter stands squarely with its airy and lofty houses, laid out in regular order; on the other, is huddled together the poor quarter, a miserable collection of low hovels of a conical shape, in which a poverty-stricken multitude vegetate rather than live, since Kouka is neither a trading nor a commercial city.

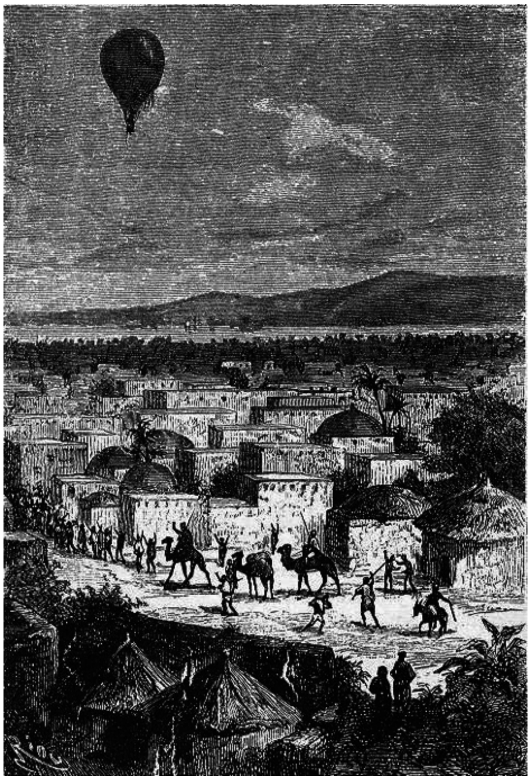

Kennedy thought it looked something like Edinburgh, were that city extended on a plain, with its two distinct boroughs.

But our travellers had scarcely the time to catch even this glimpse of it, for, with the fickleness that characterizes the air-currents of this region, a contrary wind suddenly swept them some forty miles over the surface of Lake Tchad.

Then then were regaled with a new spectacle. They could count the numerous islets of the lake, inhabited by the Biddiomahs, a race of bloodthirsty and formidable pirates, who are as greatly feared when neighbors as are the Touaregs of Sahara.

These estimable people were in readiness to receive the Victoria bravely with stones and arrows, but the balloon quickly passed their islands, fluttering over them, from one to the other with butterfly motion, like a gigantic beetle.

At this moment, Joe, who was scanning the horizon, said to Kennedy:

“There, sir, as you are always thinking of good sport, yonder is just the thing for you!”

“What is it, Joe?”

“This time, the doctor will not disapprove of your shooting.”

“But what is it?”

“Don’t you see that flock of big birds making for us?”

“Birds?” exclaimed the doctor, snatching his spyglass.

“I see them,” replied Kennedy; “there are at least a dozen of them.”

“Fourteen, exactly!” said Joe.

“Heaven grant that they may be of a kind sufficiently noxious for the doctor to let me peg away at them!”

“I should not object, but I would much rather see those birds at a distance from us!”

“Why, are you afraid of those fowls?”

“They are condors, and of the largest size. Should they attack us — ”

“Well, if they do, we’ll defend ourselves. We have a whole arsenal at our disposal. I don’t think those birds are so very formidable.”

“Who can tell?” was the doctor’s only remark.

Ten minutes later, the flock had come within gunshot, and were making the air ring with their hoarse cries. They came right toward the Victoria, more irritated than frightened by her presence.

“How they scream! What a noise!” said Joe.

“Perhaps they don’t like to see anybody poaching in their country up in the air, or daring to fly like themselves!”

“Well, now, to tell the truth, when I take a good look at them, they are an ugly, ferocious set, and I should think them dangerous enough if they were armed with Purdy-Moore rifles,” admitted Kennedy.

“They have no need of such weapons,” said Ferguson, looking very grave.

The condors flew around them in wide circles, their flight growing gradually closer and closer to the balloon. They swept through the air in rapid, fantastic curves, occasionally precipitating themselves headlong with the speed of a bullet, and then breaking their line of projection by an abrupt and daring angle.

The doctor, much disquieted, resolved to ascend so as to escape this dangerous proximity. He therefore dilated the hydrogen in his balloon, and it rapidly rose.

But the condors mounted with him, apparently determined not to part company.

“They seem to mean mischief!” said the hunter, cocking his rifle.

And, in fact, they were swooping nearer, and more than one came within fifty feet of them, as if defying the fire-arms.

“By George, I’m itching to let them have it!” exclaimed

Kennedy.

“No, Dick; not now! Don’t exasperate them needlessly.

That would only be exciting them to attack us!”

“But I could soon settle those fellows!”

“You may think so, Dick. But you are wrong!”

“Why, we have a bullet for each of them!”

“And suppose that they were to attack the upper part of the balloon, what would you do? How would you get at them? Just imagine yourself in the presence of a troop of lions on the plain, or a school of sharks in the open ocean! For travellers in the air, this situation is just as dangerous.”

“Are you speaking seriously, doctor?”

“Very seriously, Dick.”

“Let us wait, then!”

“Wait! Hold yourself in readiness in case of an attack, but do not fire without my orders.”

The birds then collected at a short distance, yet to near that their naked necks, entirely bare of feathers, could be plainly seen, as they stretched them out with the effort of their cries, while their gristly crests, garnished with a comb and gills of deep violet, stood erect with rage. They were of the very largest size, their bodies being more than three feet in length, and the lower surface of their white wings glittering in the sunlight. They might well have been considered winged sharks, so striking was their resemblance to those ferocious rangers of the deep.

“They are following us!” said the doctor, as he saw them ascending with him, “and, mount as we may, they can fly still higher!”

“Well, what are we to do?” asked Kennedy.

The doctor made no answer.

“Listen, Samuel!” said the sportsman. “There are fourteen of those birds; we have seventeen shots at our disposal if we discharge all our weapons. Have we not the means, then, to destroy them or disperse them? I will give a good account of some of them!”

“I have no doubt of your skill, Dick; I look upon all as dead that may come within range of your rifle, but I repeat that, if they attack the upper part of the balloon, you could not get a sight at them. They would tear the silk covering that sustains us, and we are three thousand feet up in the air!”

At this moment, one of the ferocious birds darted right at the balloon, with outstretched beak and claws, ready to rend it with either or both.

“Fire! fire at once!” cried the doctor.

He had scarcely ceased, ere the huge creature, stricken dead, dropped headlong, turning over and over in space as he fell.

Kennedy had already grasped one of the two-barrelled fowling-pieces and Joe was taking aim with another.

Frightened by the report, the condors drew back for a moment, but they almost instantly returned to the charge with extreme fury. Kennedy severed the head of one from its body with his first shot, and Joe broke the wing of another.

“Only eleven left,” said he.

Thereupon the birds changed their tactics, and by common consent soared above the balloon. Kennedy glanced at Ferguson. The latter, in spite of his imperturbability, grew pale. Then ensued a moment of terrifying silence. In the next they heard a harsh tearing noise, as of something rending the silk, and the car seemed to sink from beneath the feet of our three aeronauts.

“We are lost!” exclaimed Ferguson, glancing at the barometer, which was now swiftly rising.

“Over with the ballast!” he shouted, “over with it!”

And in a few seconds the last lumps of quartz had disappeared.

“We are still falling! Empty the water-tanks! Do you hear me, Joe? We are pitching into the lake!”

Joe obeyed. The doctor leaned over and looked out. The lake seemed to come up toward him like a rising tide. Every object around grew rapidly in size while they were looking at it. The car was not two hundred feet from the surface of Lake Tchad.

“The provisions! the provisions!” cried the doctor.

And the box containing them was launched into space.

Their descent became less rapid, but the luckless aeronauts were still falling, and into the lake.

“Throw out something — something more!” cried the doctor.

“There is nothing more to throw!” was Kennedy’s despairing response.

“Yes, there is!” called Joe, and with a wave of the hand he disappeared like a flash, over the edge of the car.

“Joe! Joe!” exclaimed the doctor, horror-stricken.

The Victoria thus relieved resumed her ascending motion, mounted a thousand feet into the air, and the wind, burying itself in the disinflated covering, bore them away toward the northern part of the lake.

“Lost!” exclaimed the sportsman, with a gesture of despair.

“Lost to save us!” responded Ferguson.

And these men, intrepid as they were, felt the large tears streaming down their cheeks. They leaned over with the vain hope of seeing some trace of their heroic companion, but they were already far away from him.

“What course shall we pursue?” asked Kennedy.

“Alight as soon as possible, Dick, and then wait.”

After a sweep of some sixty miles the Victoria halted on a desert shore, on the north of the lake. The anchors caught in a low tree and the sportsman fastened it securely. Night came, but neither Ferguson nor Kennedy could find one moment’s sleep.

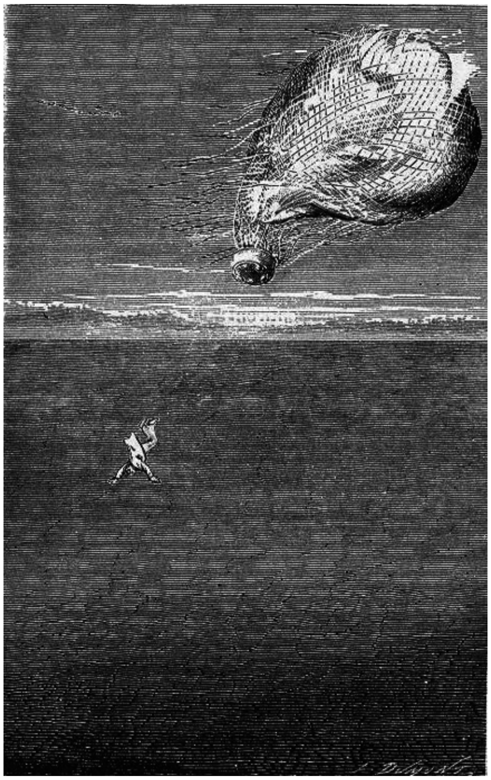

CHAPTER THIRTY-THIRD.

Conjectures. — Reestablishment of the Victoria's Equilibrium. — Dr. Ferguson's New Calculations. — Kennedy's Hunt. — A Complete Exploration of Lake Tchad. — Tangalia. — The Return. — Lari.

On the morrow, the 13th of May, our travellers, for the first time, reconnoitred the part of the coast on which they had landed. It was a sort of island of solid ground in the midst of an immense marsh. Around this fragment of terra firma grew reeds as lofty as trees are in Europe, and stretching away out of sight.

These impenetrable swamps gave security to the position of the balloon. It was necessary to watch only the borders of the lake. The vast stretch of water broadened away from the spot, especially toward the east, and nothing could be seen on the horizon, neither mainland nor islands.

The two friends had not yet ventured to speak of their recent companion. Kennedy first imparted his conjectures to the doctor.

"Perhaps Joe is not lost after all," he said. "He was a skilful lad, and had few equals as a swimmer. He would find no difficulty in swimming across the Firth of Forth at Edinburgh. We shall see him again — but how and where I know not. Let us omit nothing on our part to give him the chance of rejoining us."

"May God grant it as you say, Dick!" replied the doctor, with much emotion. "We shall do everything in the world to find our lost friend again. Let us, in the first place, see where we are. But, above all things, let us rid the Victoria of this outside covering, which is of no further use. That will relieve us of six hundred and fifty pounds, a weight not to be despised — and the end is worth the trouble!”

The doctor and Kennedy went to work at once, but they encountered great difficulty. They had to tear the strong silk away piece by piece, and then cut it in narrow strips so as to extricate it from the meshes of the network. The tear made by the beaks of the condors was found to be several feet in length.

This operation took at least four hours, but at length the inner balloon once completely extricated did not appear to have suffered in the least degree. The Victoria was thus diminished in size by one fifth, and this difference was sufficiently noticeable to excite Kennedy’s surprise.

“Will it be large enough?” he asked.

“Have no fears on that score, I will reestablish the equilibrium, and should our poor Joe return we shall find a way to start off with him again on our old route.”

“At the moment of our fall, unless I am mistaken, we were not far from an island.”

“Yes, I recollect it,” said the doctor, “but that island, like all the islands on Lake Tchad, is, no doubt, inhabited by a gang of pirates and murderers. They certainly witnessed our misfortune, and should Joe fall into their hands, what will become of him unless protected by their superstitions?”

“Oh, he’s just the lad to get safely out of the scrape, I repeat.

I have great confidence in his shrewdness and skill.”

“I hope so. Now, Dick, you may go and hunt in the neighborhood, but don’t get far away whatever you do. It has become a pressing necessity for us to renew our stock of provisions, since we had to sacrifice nearly all the old lot.”

“Very good, doctor, I shall not be long absent.”

Hereupon, Kennedy took a double-barrelled fowling-piece, and strode through the long grass toward a thicket not far off, where the frequent sound of shooting soon let the doctor know that the sportsman was making a good use of his time.

Meanwhile Ferguson was engaged in calculating the relative weight of the articles still left in the car, and in establishing the equipoise of the second balloon. He found that there were still left some thirty pounds of pemmican, a supply of tea and coffee, about a gallon and a half of brandy, and one empty water-tank. All the dried meat had disappeared.

The doctor was aware that, by the loss of the hydrogen in the first balloon, the ascensional force at his disposal was now reduced to about nine hundred pounds. He therefore had to count upon this difference in order to rearrange his equilibrium. The new balloon measured sixty-seven thousand cubic feet, and contained thirty-three thousand four hundred and eighty feet of gas. The dilating apparatus appeared to be in good condition, and neither the battery nor the spiral had been injured.

The ascensional force of the new balloon was then about three thousand pounds, and, in adding together the weight of the apparatus, of the passengers, of the stock of water, of the car and its accessories, and putting aboard fifty gallons of water, and one hundred pounds of fresh meat, the doctor got a total weight of twenty-eight hundred and thirty pounds. He could then take with him one hundred and seventy pounds of ballast, for unforeseen emergencies, and the balloon would be in exact balance with the surrounding atmosphere.

His arrangements were completed accordingly, and he made up for Joe’s weight with a surplus of ballast. He spent the whole day in these preparations, and the latter were finished when Kennedy returned. The hunter had been successful, and brought back a regular cargo of geese, wild-duck, snipe, teal, and plover. He went to work at once to draw and smoke the game. Each piece, suspended on a small, thin skewer, was hung over a fire of green wood. When they seemed in good order, Kennedy, who was perfectly at home in the business, packed them away in the car.

On the morrow, the hunter was to complete his supplies.

Evening surprised our travellers in the midst of this work. Their supper consisted of pemmican, biscuit, and tea; and fatigue, after having given them appetite, brought them sleep. Each of them strained eyes and ears into the gloom during his watch, sometimes fancying that they heard the voice of poor Joe; but, alas! the voice that they so longed to hear, was far away.

“At the first streak of day, the doctor aroused Kennedy.

“I have been long and carefully considering what should be done,” said he, “to find our companion.”

“Whatever your plan may be, doctor, it will suit me. Speak!”

“Above all things, it is important that Joe should hear from us in some way.”

“Undoubtedly. Suppose the brave fellow should take it into his head that we have abandoned him?”

“He! He knows us too well for that. Such a thought would never come into his mind. But he must be informed as to where we are.”

“How can that be managed?”

“We shall get into our car and be off again through the air.”

“But, should the wind bear us away?”

“Happily, it will not. See, Dick! it is carrying us back to the lake; and this circumstance, which would have been vexatious yesterday, is fortunate now. Our efforts, then, will be limited to keeping ourselves above that vast sheet of water throughout the day. Joe cannot fail to see us, and his eyes will be constantly on the lookout in that direction. Perhaps he will even manage to let us know the place of his retreat.”

“If he be alone and at liberty, he certainly will.”

“And if a prisoner,” resumed the doctor, “it not being the practice of the natives to confine their captives, he will see us, and comprehend the object of our researches.”

“But, at last,” put in Kennedy — ”for we must anticipate every thing — should we find no trace — if he should have left no mark to follow him by, what are we to do?”

“We shall endeavor to regain the northern part of the lake, keeping ourselves as much in sight as possible. There we’ll wait; we’ll explore the banks; we’ll search the water’s edge, for Joe will assuredly try to reach the shore; and we will not leave the country without having done every thing to find him."

"Let us set out, then!" said the hunter.

The doctor hereupon took the exact bearings of the patch of solid land they were about to leave, and arrived at the conclusion that it lay on the north shore of Lake Tchad, between the village of Lari and the village of Ingemini, both visited by Major Denham. During this time Kennedy was completing his stock of fresh meat. Although the neighboring marshes showed traces of the rhinoceros, the lamantine (or manatee), and the hippopotamus, he had no opportunity to see a single specimen of those animals.

At seven in the morning, but not without great difficulty — which to Joe would have been nothing — the balloon's anchor was detached from its hold, the gas dilated, and the new Victoria rose two hundred feet into the air. It seemed to hesitate at first, and went spinning around, like a top; but at last a brisk current caught it, and it advanced over the lake, and was soon borne away at a speed of twenty miles per hour.

The doctor continued to keep at a height of from two hundred to five hundred feet. Kennedy frequently discharged his rifle; and, when passing over islands, the aeronauts approached them even imprudently, scrutinizing the thickets, the bushes, the underbrush — in fine, every spot where a mass of shade or jutting rock could have afforded a retreat to their companion. They swooped down close to the long pirogues that navigated the lake; and the wild fishermen, terrified at the sight of the balloon, would plunge into the water and regain their islands with every symptom of undisguised affright.

“We can see nothing,” said Kennedy, after two hours of search.

“Let us wait a little longer, Dick, and not lose heart.

We cannot be far away from the scene of our accident.”

By eleven o’clock the balloon had gone ninety miles. It then fell in with a new current, which, blowing almost at right angles to the other, drove them eastward about sixty miles. It next floated over a very large and populous island, which the doctor took to be Farram, on which the capital of the Biddiomahs is situated. Ferguson expected at every moment to see Joe spring up out of some thicket, flying for his life, and calling for help. Were he free, they could pick him up without trouble; were he a prisoner, they could rescue him by repeating the manoeuvre they had practised to save the missionary, and he would soon be with his friends again; but nothing was seen, not a sound was heard. The case seemed desperate.

About half-past two o’clock, the Victoria hove in sight of Tangalia, a village situated on the eastern shore of Lake Tchad, where it marks the extreme point attained by Denham at the period of his exploration.

The doctor became uneasy at this persistent setting of the wind in that direction, for he felt that he was being thrown back to the eastward, toward the centre of Africa, and the interminable deserts of that region.

“We must absolutely come to a halt,” said he, “and even alight. For Joe’s sake, particularly, we ought to go back to the lake; but, to begin with, let us endeavor to find an opposite current.”

During more than an hour he searched at different altitudes: the balloon always came back toward the mainland. But at length, at the height of a thousand feet, a very violent breeze swept to the northwestward.

It was out of the question that Joe should have been detained on one of the islands of the lake; for, in such case he would certainly have found means to make his presence there known. Perhaps he had been dragged to the mainland. The doctor was reasoning thus to himself, when he again came in sight of the northern shore of Lake Tchad.

As for supposing that Joe had been drowned, that was not to be believed for a moment. One horrible thought glanced across the minds of both Kennedy and the doctor: caymans swarm in these waters! But neither one nor the other had the courage to distinctly communicate this impression. However, it came up to them so forcibly at last that the doctor said, without further preface:

“Crocodiles are found only on the shores of the islands or of the lake, and Joe will have skill enough to avoid them. Besides, they are not very dangerous; and the Africans bathe with impunity, and quite fearless of their attacks.”

Kennedy made no reply. He preferred keeping quiet to discussing this terrible possibility.

The doctor made out the town of Lari about five o’clock in the evening. The inhabitants were at work gathering in their cotton-crop in front of their huts, constructed of woven reeds, and standing in the midst of clean and neatly-kept enclosures. This collection of about fifty habitations occupied a slight depression of the soil, in a valley extending between two low mountains. The force of the wind carried the doctor farther onward than he wanted to go; but it changed a second time, and bore him back exactly to his starting-point, on the sort of enclosed island where he had passed the preceding night. The anchor, instead of catching the branches of the tree, took hold in the masses of reeds mixed with the thick mud of the marshes, which offered considerable resistance.

The doctor had much difficulty in restraining the balloon; but at length the wind died away with the setting in of nightfall; and the two friends kept watch together in an almost desperate state of mind.

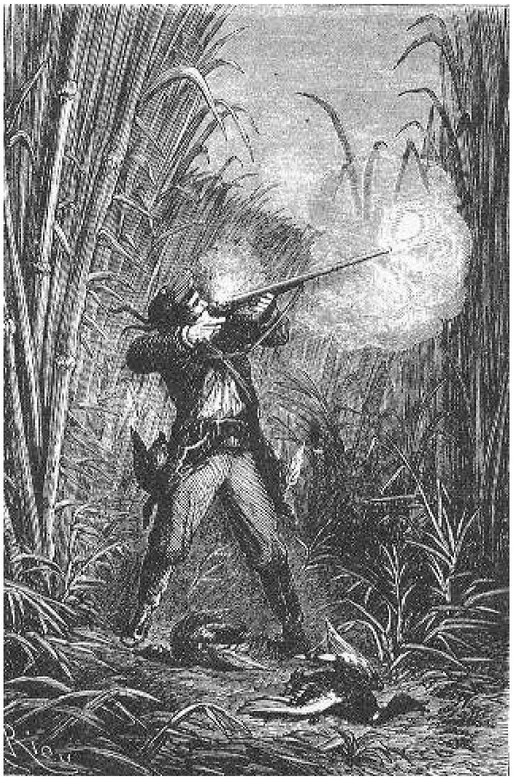

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOURTH.

The Hurricane. — A Forced Departure. — Loss of an Anchor. — Melancholy Reflections. — The Resolution adopted. — The Sand-Storm. — The Buried Caravan. — A Contrary yet Favorable Wind. — The Return southward. — Kennedy at his Post.

At three o’clock in the morning the wind was raging. It beat down with such violence that the Victoria could not stay near the ground without danger. It was thrown almost flat over upon its side, and the reeds chafed the silk so roughly that it seemed as though they would tear it.

“We must be off, Dick,” said the doctor; “we cannot remain in this situation.”

“But, doctor, what of Joe?”

“I am not likely to abandon him. No, indeed! and should the hurricane carry me a thousand miles to the northward, I will return! But here we are endangering the safety of all.”

“Must we go without him?” asked the Scot, with an accent of profound grief.

“And do you think, then,” rejoined Ferguson, “that my heart does not bleed like your own? Am I not merely obeying an imperious necessity?”

“I am entirely at your orders,” replied the hunter; “let us start!”

But their departure was surrounded with unusual difficulty. The anchor, which had caught very deeply, resisted all their efforts to disengage it; while the balloon, drawing in the opposite direction, increased its tension. Kennedy could not get it free. Besides, in his present position, the manoeuvre had become a very perilous one, for the Victoria threatened to break away before he should be able to get into the car again.

The doctor, unwilling to run such a risk, made his friend get into his place, and resigned himself to the alternative of cutting the anchor-rope. The Victoria made one bound of three hundred feet into the air, and took her route directly northward.

Ferguson had no other choice than to scud before the storm. He folded his arms, and soon became absorbed in his own melancholy reflections.

After a few moments of profound silence, he turned to

Kennedy, who sat there no less taciturn.

“We have, perhaps, been tempting Providence,” said he; “it does not belong to man to undertake such a journey!” — and a sigh of grief escaped him as he spoke.

“It is but a few days,” replied the sportsman, “since we were congratulating ourselves upon having escaped so many dangers! All three of us were shaking hands!”

“Poor Joe! kindly and excellent disposition! brave and candid heart! Dazzled for a moment by his sudden discovery of wealth, he willingly sacrificed his treasures! And now, he is far from us; and the wind is carrying us still farther away with resistless speed!”

“Come, doctor, admitting that he may have found refuge among the lake tribes, can he not do as the travellers who visited them before us, did; —

like Denham, like Barth? Both of those men got back to their own country.”

“Ah! my dear Dick! Joe doesn’t know one word of the language; he is alone, and without resources. The travellers of whom you speak did not attempt to go forward without sending many presents in advance of them to the chiefs, and surrounded by an escort armed and trained for these expeditions. Yet, they could not avoid sufferings of the worst description! What, then, can you expect the fate of our companion to be? It is horrible to think of, and this is one of the worst calamities that it has ever been my lot to endure!”

“But, we’ll come back again, doctor!”

“Come back, Dick? Yes, if we have to abandon the balloon! if we should be forced to return to Lake Tchad on foot, and put ourselves in communication with the Sultan of Bornou! The Arabs cannot have retained a disagreeable remembrance of the first Europeans.”

“I will follow you, doctor,” replied the hunter, with emphasis. “You may count upon me! We would rather give up the idea of prosecuting this journey than not return. Joe forgot himself for our sake; we will sacrifice ourselves for his!”

This resolve revived some hope in the hearts of these two men; they felt strong in the same inspiration. Ferguson forthwith set every thing at work to get into a contrary current, that might bring him back again to Lake Tchad; but this was impracticable at that moment, and even to alight was out of the question on ground completely bare of trees, and with such a hurricane blowing.

The Victoria thus passed over the country of the Tibbous, crossed the Belad el Djerid, a desert of briers that forms the border of the Soudan, and advanced into the desert of sand streaked with the long tracks of the many caravans that pass and repass there. The last line of vegetation was speedily lost in the dim southern horizon, not far from the principal oasis in this part of Africa, whose fifty wells are shaded by magnificent trees; but it was impossible to stop. An Arab encampment, tents of striped stuff, some camels, stretching out their viper-like heads and necks along the sand, gave life to this solitude, but the Victoria sped by like a shooting-star, and in this way traversed a distance of sixty miles in three hours, without Ferguson being able to check or guide her course.

“We cannot halt, we cannot alight!” said the doctor; “not a tree, not an inequality of the ground! Are we then to be driven clear across Sahara? Surely, Heaven is indeed against us!”

He was uttering these words with a sort of despairing rage, when suddenly he saw the desert sands rising aloft in the midst of a dense cloud of dust, and go whirling through the air, impelled by opposing currents.

Amid this tornado, an entire caravan, disorganized, broken, and overthrown, was disappearing beneath an avalanche of sand. The camels, flung pell-mell together, were uttering dull and pitiful groans; cries and howls of despair were heard issuing from that dusty and stifling cloud, and, from time to time, a parti-colored garment cut the chaos of the scene with its vivid hues, and the moaning and shrieking sounded over all, a terrible accompaniment to this spectacle of destruction.

Ere long the sand had accumulated in compact masses; and there, where so recently stretched a level plain as far as the eye could see, rose now a ridgy line of hillocks, still moving from beneath — the vast tomb of an entire caravan!

The doctor and Kennedy, pallid with emotion, sat transfixed by this fearful spectacle. They could no longer manage their balloon, which went whirling round and round in contending currents, and refused to obey the different dilations of the gas. Caught in these eddies of the atmosphere, it spun about with a rapidity that made their heads reel, while the car oscillated and swung to and fro violently at the same time. The instruments suspended under the awning clattered together as though they would be dashed to pieces; the pipes of the spiral bent to and fro, threatening to break at every instant; and the water-tanks jostled and jarred with tremendous din. Although but two feet apart, our aeronauts could not hear each other speak, but with firmly-clinched hands they clung convulsively to the cordage, and endeavored to steady themselves against the fury of the tempest.

Kennedy, with his hair blown wildly about his face, looked on without speaking; but the doctor had regained all his daring in the midst of this deadly peril, and not a sign of his emotion was betrayed in his countenance, even when, after a last violent twirl, the Victoria stopped suddenly in the midst of a most unlooked-for calm; the north wind had abruptly got the upper hand, and now drove her back with equal rapidity over the route she had traversed in the morning.

“Whither are we going now?” cried Kennedy.

“Let us leave that to Providence, my dear Dick; I was wrong in doubting it. It knows better than we, and here we are, returning to places that we had expected never to see again!”

The surface of the country, which had looked so flat and level when they were coming, now seemed tossed and uneven, like the ocean-billows after a storm; a long succession of hillocks, that had scarcely settled to their places yet, indented the desert; the wind blew furiously, and the balloon fairly flew through the atmosphere.

The direction taken by our aeronauts differed somewhat from that of the morning, and thus about nine o’clock, instead of finding themselves again near the borders of Lake Tchad, they saw the desert still stretching away before them.

Kennedy remarked the circumstance.

“It matters little,” replied the doctor, “the important point is to return southward; we shall come across the towns of Bornou, Wouddie, or Kouka, and I should not hesitate to halt there.”

“If you are satisfied, I am content,” replied the Scot, “but Heaven grant that we may not be reduced to cross the desert, as those unfortunate Arabs had to do! What we saw was frightful!”

“It often happens, Dick; these trips across the desert are far more perilous than those across the ocean. The desert has all the dangers of the sea, including the risk of being swallowed up, and added thereto are unendurable fatigues and privations.”

“I think the wind shows some symptoms of moderating; the sand-dust is less dense; the undulations of the surface are diminishing, and the sky is growing clearer.”

“So much the better! We must now reconnoitre attentively with our glasses, and take care not to omit a single point.”

“I will look out for that, doctor, and not a tree shall be seen without my informing you of it.”

And, suiting the action to the word, Kennedy took his station, spy-glass in hand, at the forward part of the car.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIFTH.

What happened to Joe. — The Island of the Biddiomahs. — The Adoration shown him. — The Island that sank. — The Shores of the Lake. — The Tree of the Serpents. — The Foot-Tramp. — Terrible Suffering. — Mosquitoes and Ants. — Hunger. — The Victoria seen. — She disappears. — The Swamp. — One Last Despairing Cry.

What had become of Joe, while his master was thus vainly seeking for him?

When he had dashed headlong into the lake, his first movement on coming to the surface was to raise his eyes and look upward. He saw the Victoria already risen far above the water, still rapidly ascending and growing smaller and smaller. It was soon caught in a rapid current and disappeared to the northward. His master — both his friends were saved!

“How lucky it was,” thought he, “that I had that idea to throw myself out into the lake! Mr. Kennedy would soon have jumped at it, and he would not have hesitated to do as I did, for nothing’s more natural than for one man to give himself up to save two others. That’s mathematics!”

Satisfied on this point, Joe began to think of himself. He was in the middle of a vast lake, surrounded by tribes unknown to him, and probably ferocious. All the greater reason why he should get out of the scrape by depending only on himself. And so he gave himself no farther concern about it.

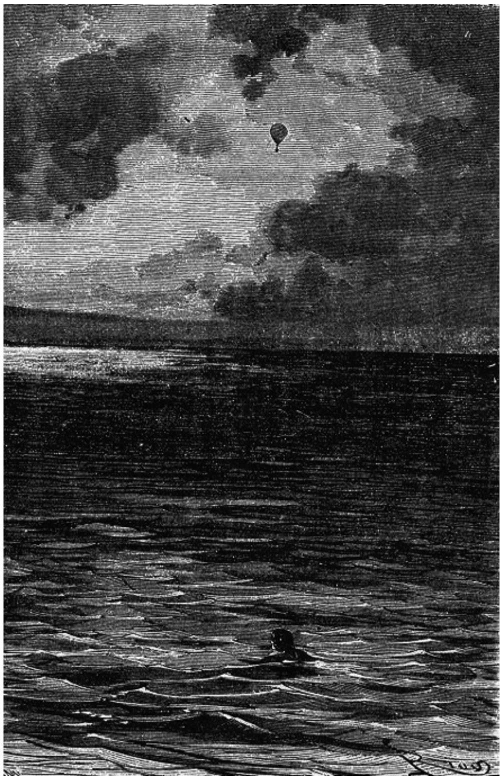

Before the attack by the birds of prey, which, according to him, had behaved like real condors, he had noticed an island on the horizon, and determining to reach it, if possible, he put forth all his knowledge and skill in the art of swimming, after having relieved himself of the most troublesome part of his clothing. The idea of a stretch of five or six miles by no means disconcerted him; and therefore, so long as he was in the open lake, he thought only of striking out straight ahead and manfully.

In about an hour and a half the distance between him and the island had greatly diminished.

But as he approached the land, a thought, at first fleeting and then tenacious, arose in his mind. He knew that the shores of the lake were frequented by huge alligators, and was well aware of the voracity of those monsters.

Now, no matter how much he was inclined to find every thing in this world quite natural, the worthy fellow was no little disturbed by this reflection. He feared greatly lest white flesh like his might be particularly acceptable to the dreaded brutes, and advanced only with extreme precaution, his eyes on the alert on both sides and all around him. At length, he was not more than one hundred yards from a bank, covered with green trees, when a puff of air strongly impregnated with a musky odor reached him.

“There!” said he to himself, “just what I expected.

The crocodile isn’t far off!”

With this he dived swiftly, but not sufficiently so to avoid coming into contact with an enormous body, the scaly surface of which scratched him as he passed. He thought himself lost and swam with desperate energy. Then he rose again to the top of the water, took breath and dived once more. Thus passed a few minutes of unspeakable anguish, which all his philosophy could not overcome, for he thought, all the while, that he heard behind him the sound of those huge jaws ready to snap him up forever. In this state of mind he was striking out under the water as noiselessly as possible when he felt himself seized by the arm and then by the waist.

Poor Joe! he gave one last thought to his master; and began to struggle with all the energy of despair, feeling himself the while drawn along, but not toward the bottom of the lake, as is the habit of the crocodile when about to devour its prey, but toward the surface.

So soon as he could get breath and look around him, he saw that he was between two natives as black as ebony, who held him, with a firm gripe, and uttered strange cries.

“Ha!” said Joe, “blacks instead of crocodiles! Well, I prefer it as it is; but how in the mischief dare these fellows go in bathing in such places?”

Joe was not aware that the inhabitants of the islands of Lake Tchad, like many other negro tribes, plunge with impunity into sheets of water infested with crocodiles and caymans, and without troubling their heads about them. The amphibious denizens of this lake enjoy the well-deserved reputation of being quite inoffensive.

But had not Joe escaped one peril only to fall into another? That was a question which he left events to decide; and, since he could not do otherwise, he allowed himself to be conducted to the shore without manifesting any alarm.

“Evidently,” thought he, “these chaps saw the Victoria skimming the waters of the lake, like a monster of the air. They were the distant witnesses of my tumble, and they can’t fail to have some respect for a man that fell from the sky! Let them have their own way, then.”

Joe was at this stage of his meditations, when he was landed amid a yelling crowd of both sexes, and all ages and sizes, but not of all colors. In fine, he was surrounded by a tribe of Biddiomahs as black as jet. Nor had he to blush for the scantiness of his costume, for he saw that he was in “undress” in the highest style of that country.

But before he had time to form an exact idea of the situation, there was no mistaking the agitation of which he instantly became the object, and this soon enabled him to pluck up courage, although the adventure of Kazah did come back rather vividly to his memory.

"I foresee that they are going to make a god of me again," thought he, "some son of the moon most likely. Well, one trade's as good as another when a man has no choice. The main thing is to gain time. Should the Victoria pass this way again, I'll take advantage of my new position to treat my worshippers here to a miracle when I go sailing up into the sky!"

While Joe's thoughts were running thus, the throng pressed around him. They prostrated themselves before him; they howled; they felt him; they became even annoyingly familiar; but at the same time they had the consideration to offer him a superb banquet consisting of sour milk and rice pounded in honey. The worthy fellow, making the best of every thing, took one of the heartiest luncheons he ever ate in his life, and gave his new adorers an exalted idea of how the gods tuck away their food upon grand occasions.

When evening came, the sorcerers of the island took him respectfully by the hand, and conducted him to a sort of house surrounded with talismans; but, as he was entering it, Joe cast an uneasy look at the heaps of human bones that lay scattered around this sanctuary. But he had still more time to think about them when he found himself at last shut up in the cabin.

During the evening and through a part of the night, he heard festive chantings, the reverberations of a kind of drum, and a clatter of old iron, which were very sweet, no doubt, to African ears. Then there were howling choruses, accompanied by endless dances by gangs of natives who circled round and round the sacred hut with contortions and grimaces.

Joe could catch the sound of this deafening orchestra, through the mud and reeds of which his cabin was built; and perhaps under other circumstances he might have been amused by these strange ceremonies; but his mind was soon disturbed by quite different and less agreeable reflections. Even looking at the bright side of things, he found it both stupid and sad to be left alone in the midst of this savage country and among these wild tribes. Few travellers who had penetrated to these regions had ever again seen their native land. Moreover, could he trust to the worship of which he saw himself the object? He had good reason to believe in the vanity of human greatness; and he asked himself whether, in this country, adoration did not sometimes go to the length of eating the object adored!

But, notwithstanding this rather perplexing prospect, after some hours of meditation, fatigue got the better of his gloomy thoughts, and Joe fell into a profound slumber, which would have lasted no doubt until sunrise, had not a very unexpected sensation of dampness awakened the sleeper. Ere long this dampness became water, and that water gained so rapidly that it had soon mounted to Joe's waist.

"What can this be?" said he; "a flood! a water-spout! or a new torture invented by these blacks? Faith, though, I'm not going to wait here till it's up to my neck!"

And, so saying, he burst through the frail wall with a jog of his powerful shoulder, and found himself — where? — in the open lake! Island there was none. It had sunk during the night. In its place, the watery immensity of Lake Tchad!

"A poor country for the land-owners!" said Joe, once more vigorously resorting to his skill in the art of natation.

One of those phenomena, which are by no means unusual on Lake Tchad, had liberated our brave Joe. More than one island, that previously seemed to have the solidity of rock, has been submerged in this way; and the people living along the shores of the mainland have had to pick up the unfortunate survivors of these terrible catastrophes.

Joe knew nothing about this peculiarity of the region, but he was none the less ready to profit by it. He caught sight of a boat drifting about, without occupants, and was soon aboard of it. He found it to be but the trunk of a tree rudely hollowed out; but there were a couple of paddles in it, and Joe, availing himself of a rapid current, allowed his craft to float along.

“But let us see where we are,” he said. “The polar-star there, that does its work honorably in pointing out the direction due north to everybody else, will, most likely, do me that service.”

He discovered, with satisfaction, that the current was taking him toward the northern shore of the lake, and he allowed himself to glide with it. About two o’clock in the morning he disembarked upon a promontory covered with prickly reeds, that proved very provoking and inconvenient even to a philosopher like him; but a tree grew there expressly to offer him a bed among its branches, and Joe climbed up into it for greater security, and there, without sleeping much, however, awaited the dawn of day.

When morning had come with that suddenness which is peculiar to the equatorial regions, Joe cast a glance at the tree which had sheltered him during the last few hours, and beheld a sight that chilled the marrow in his bones. The branches of the tree were literally covered with snakes and chameleons! The foliage actually was hidden beneath their coils, so that the beholder might have fancied that he saw before him a new kind of tree that bore reptiles for its leaves and fruit. And all this horrible living mass writhed and twisted in the first rays of the morning sun! Joe experienced a keen sensation or terror mingled with disgust, as he looked at it, and he leaped precipitately from the tree amid the hissings of these new and unwelcome bedfellows.

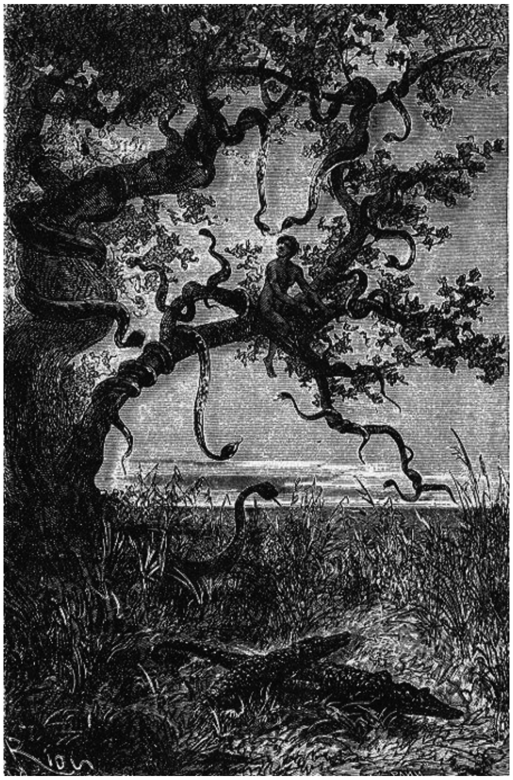

“Now, there’s something that I would never have believed!” said he.

He was not aware that Dr. Vogel’s last letters had made known this singular feature of the shores of Lake Tchad, where reptiles are more numerous than in any other part of the world. But after what he had just seen, Joe determined to be more circumspect for the future; and, taking his bearings by the sun, he set off afoot toward the northeast, avoiding with the utmost care cabins, huts, hovels, and dens of every description, that might serve in any manner as a shelter for human beings.

How often his gaze was turned upward to the sky! He hoped to catch a glimpse, each time, of the Victoria; and, although he looked vainly during all that long, fatiguing day of sore foot-travel, his confident reliance on his master remained undiminished. Great energy of character was needed to enable him thus to sustain the situation with philosophy. Hunger conspired with fatigue to crush him, for a man’s system is not greatly restored and fortified by a diet of roots, the pith of plants, such as the Mele, or the fruit of the doum palm-tree; and yet, according to his own calculations, Joe was enabled to push on about twenty miles to the westward.

His body bore in scores of places the marks of the thorns with which the lake-reeds, the acacias, the mimosas, and other wild shrubbery through which he had to force his way, are thickly studded; and his torn and bleeding feet rendered walking both painful and difficult. But at length he managed to react against all these sufferings; and when evening came again, he resolved to pass the night on the shores of Lake Tchad.

There he had to endure the bites of myriads of insects — gnats, mosquitoes, ants half an inch long, literally covered the ground; and, in less than two hours, Joe had not a rag remaining of the garments that had covered him, the insects having devoured them! It was a terrible night, that did not yield our exhausted traveller an hour of sleep. During all this time the wild-boars and native buffaloes, reenforced by the ajoub — a very dangerous species of lamantine — carried on their ferocious revels in the bushes and under the waters of the lake, filling the night with a hideous concert. Joe dared scarcely breathe. Even his courage and coolness had hard work to bear up against so terrible a situation.

At length, day came again, and Joe sprang to his feet precipitately; but judge of the loathing he felt when he saw what species of creature had shared his couch — a toad! — but a toad five inches in length, a monstrous, repulsive specimen of vermin that sat there staring at him with huge round eyes. Joe felt his stomach revolt at the sight, and, regaining a little strength from the intensity of his repugnance, he rushed at the top of his speed and plunged into the lake. This sudden bath somewhat allayed the pangs of the itching that tortured his whole body; and, chewing a few leaves, he set forth resolutely, again feeling an obstinate resolution in the act, for which he could hardly account even to his own mind. He no longer seemed to have entire control of his own acts, and, nevertheless, he felt within him a strength superior to despair.

However, he began now to suffer terribly from hunger. His stomach, less resigned than he was, rebelled, and he was obliged to fasten a tendril of wild-vine tightly about his waist. Fortunately, he could quench his thirst at any moment, and, in recalling the sufferings he had undergone in the desert, he experienced comparative relief in his exemption from that other distressing want.

“What can have become of the Victoria?” he wondered. “The wind blows from the north, and she should be carried back by it toward the lake. No doubt the doctor has gone to work to right her balance, but yesterday would have given him time enough for that, so that may be to-day — but I must act just as if I was never to see him again. After all, if I only get to one of the large towns on the lake, I’ll find myself no worse off than the travellers my master used to talk about. Why shouldn’t I work my way out of the scrape as well as they did? Some of them got back home again. Come, then! the deuce! Cheer up, my boy!”

Thus talking to himself and walking on rapidly, Joe came right upon a horde of natives in the very depths of the forest, but he halted in time and was not seen by them. The negroes were busy poisoning arrows with the juice of the euphorbium — a piece of work deemed a great affair among these savage tribes, and carried on with a sort of ceremonial solemnity.

Joe, entirely motionless and even holding his breath, was keeping himself concealed in a thicket, when, happening to raise his eyes, he saw through an opening in the foliage the welcome apparition of the balloon — the Victoria herself — moving toward the lake, at a height of only about one hundred feet above him. But he could not make himself heard; he dared not, could not make his friends even see him!

Tears came to his eyes, not of grief but of thankfulness; his master was then seeking him; his master had not left him to perish! He would have to wait for the departure of the blacks; then he could quit his hiding-place and run toward the borders of Lake Tchad!

But by this time the Victoria was disappearing in the distant sky. Joe still determined to wait for her; she would come back again, undoubtedly. She did, indeed, return, but farther to the eastward. Joe ran, gesticulated, shouted — but all in vain! A strong breeze was sweeping the balloon away with a speed that deprived him of all hope.

For the first time, energy and confidence abandoned the heart of the unfortunate man. He saw that he was lost. He thought his master gone beyond all prospect of return. He dared no longer think; he would no longer reflect!

Like a crazy man, his feet bleeding, his body cut and torn, he walked on during all that day and a part of the next night. He even dragged himself along, sometimes on his knees, sometimes with his hands. He saw the moment nigh when all his strength would fail, and nothing would be left to him but to sink upon the ground and die.

Thus working his way along, he at length found himself close to a marsh, or what he knew would soon become a marsh, for night had set in some hours before, and he fell by a sudden misstep into a thick, clinging mire. In spite of all his efforts, in spite of his desperate struggles, he felt himself sinking gradually in the swampy ooze, and in a few minutes he was buried to his waist.

“Here, then, at last, is death!” he thought, in agony, “and what a death!”

He now began to struggle again, like a madman; but his efforts only served to bury him deeper in the tomb that the poor doomed lad was hollowing for himself; not a log of wood or a branch to buoy him up; not a reed to which he might cling! He felt that all was over! His eyes convulsively closed!

“Master! master! — Help!” were his last words; but his voice, despairing, unaided, half stifled already by the rising mire, died away feebly on the night.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIXTH.

A Throng of People on the Horizon. — A Troop of Arabs. — The Pursuit. — It is He. — Fall from Horseback. — The Strangled Arab. — A Ball from Kennedy. — Adroit Manoeuvres. — Caught up flying. — Joe saved at last.

From the moment when Kennedy resumed his post of observation in the front of the car, he had not ceased to watch the horizon with his utmost attention.

After the lapse of some time he turned toward the doctor and said:

“If I am not greatly mistaken I can see, off yonder in the distance, a throng of men or animals moving. It is impossible to make them out yet, but I observe that they are in violent motion, for they are raising a great cloud of dust.”

“May it not be another contrary breeze?” said the doctor, “another whirlwind coming to drive us back northward again?” and while speaking he stood up to examine the horizon.

“I think not, Samuel; it is a troop of gazelles or of wild oxen.”

“Perhaps so, Dick; but yon throng is some nine or ten miles from us at least, and on my part, even with the glass, I can make nothing of it!”

“At all events I shall not lose sight of it. There is something remarkable about it that excites my curiosity. Sometimes it looks like a body of cavalry manoeuvring. Ah! I was not mistaken. It is, indeed, a squadron of horsemen. Look — look there!”

The doctor eyed the group with great attention, and, after a moment's pause, remarked:

"I believe that you are right. It is a detachment of Arabs or Tibbous, and they are galloping in the same direction with us, as though in flight, but we are going faster than they, and we are rapidly gaining on them. In half an hour we shall be near enough to see them and know what they are."

Kennedy had again lifted his glass and was attentively scrutinizing them. Meanwhile the crowd of horsemen was becoming more distinctly visible, and a few were seen to detach themselves from the main body.

"It is some hunting manoeuvre, evidently," said Kennedy.

"Those fellows seem to be in pursuit of something.

I would like to know what they are about."

"Patience, Dick! In a little while we shall overtake them, if they continue on the same route. We are going at the rate of twenty miles per hour, and no horse can keep up with that."

Kennedy again raised his glass, and a few minutes later he exclaimed:

"They are Arabs, galloping at the top of their speed; I can make them out distinctly. They are about fifty in number. I can see their bournouses puffed out by the wind. It is some cavalry exercise that they are going through. Their chief is a hundred paces ahead of them and they are rushing after him at headlong speed."

"Whoever they may be, Dick, they are not to be feared, and then, if necessary, we can go higher."

“Wait, doctor — wait a little!”

“It’s curious,” said Kennedy again, after a brief pause, “but there’s something going on that I can’t exactly explain. By the efforts they make, and the irregularity of their line, I should fancy that those Arabs are pursuing some one, instead of following.”

“Are you certain of that, Dick?”

“Oh! yes, it’s clear enough now. I am right! It is a pursuit — a hunt — but a man-hunt! That is not their chief riding ahead of them, but a fugitive.”

“A fugitive!” exclaimed the doctor, growing more and more interested.

“Yes!”

“Don’t lose sight of him, and let us wait!”

Three or four miles more were quickly gained upon these horsemen, who nevertheless were dashing onward with incredible speed.

“Doctor! doctor!” shouted Kennedy in an agitated voice.

“What is the matter, Dick?”

“Is it an illusion? Can it be possible?”

“What do you mean?”

“Wait!” and so saying, the Scot wiped the sights of his spy-glass carefully, and looked through it again intently.

“Well?” questioned the doctor.

“It is he, doctor!”

“He!” exclaimed Ferguson with emotion.

“It is he! no other!” and it was needless to pronounce the name.

“Yes! it is he! on horseback, and only a hundred paces in advance of his enemies! He is pursued!”

“It is Joe — Joe himself!” cried the doctor, turning pale.

“He cannot see us in his flight!”

“He will see us, though!” said the doctor, lowering the flame of his blow-pipe.

“But how?”

“In five minutes we shall be within fifty feet of the ground, and in fifteen we shall be right over him!”

“We must let him know it by firing a gun!”

“No! he can’t turn back to come this way. He’s headed off!”

“What shall we do, then?”

“We must wait.”

“Wait? — and these Arabs!”

“We shall overtake them. We’ll pass them. We are not more than two miles from them, and provided that Joe’s horse holds out!”

“Great God!” exclaimed Kennedy, suddenly.

“What is the matter?”

Kennedy had uttered a cry of despair as he saw Joe fling himself to the ground. His horse, evidently exhausted, had just fallen headlong.

“He sees us!” cried the doctor, “and he motions to us, as he gets upon his feet!”

“But the Arabs will overtake him! What is he waiting for? Ah! the brave lad! Huzza!” shouted the sportsman, who could no longer restrain his feelings.

Joe, who had immediately sprung up after his fall, just as one of the swiftest horsemen rushed upon him, bounded like a panther, avoided his assailant by leaping to one side, jumped up behind him on the crupper, seized the Arab by the throat, and, strangling him with his sinewy hands and fingers of steel, flung him on the sand, and continued his headlong flight.

A tremendous howl was heard from the Arabs, but, completely engrossed by the pursuit, they had not taken notice of the balloon, which was now but five hundred paces behind them, and only about thirty feet from the ground. On their part, they were not twenty lengths of their horses from the fugitive.

One of them was very perceptibly gaining on Joe, and was about to pierce him with his lance, when Kennedy, with fixed eye and steady hand, stopped him short with a ball, that hurled him to the earth.

Joe did not even turn his head at the report. Some of the horsemen reined in their barbs, and fell on their faces in the dust as they caught sight of the Victoria; the rest continued their pursuit.

“But what is Joe about?” said Kennedy; “he don’t stop!”

“He’s doing better than that, Dick! I understand him! He’s keeping on in the same direction as the balloon. He relies upon our intelligence. Ah! the noble fellow! We’ll carry him off in the very teeth of those Arab rascals! We are not more than two hundred paces from him!”

“What are we to do?” asked Kennedy.

“Lay aside your rifle,Dick.”

And the Scot obeyed the request at once.

“Do you think that you can hold one hundred and fifty pounds of ballast in your arms?”

“Ay, more than that!”

“No! That will be enough!”

And the doctor proceeded to pile up bags of sand in

Kennedy’s arms.

“Hold yourself in readiness in the back part of the car, and be prepared to throw out that ballast at a single effort. But, for your life, don’t do so until I give the word!”

“Be easy on that point.”

“Otherwise, we should miss Joe, and he would be lost.”

“Count upon me!”

The Victoria at that moment almost commanded the troop of horsemen who were still desperately urging their steeds at Joe's heels. The doctor, standing in the front of the car, held the ladder clear, ready to throw it at any moment. Meanwhile, Joe had still maintained the distance between himself and his pursuers — say about fifty feet. The Victoria was now ahead of the party.

"Attention!" exclaimed the doctor to Kennedy.

"I'm ready!"

"Joe, look out for yourself!" shouted the doctor in his sonorous, ringing voice, as he flung out the ladder, the lowest ratlines of which tossed up the dust of the road.

As the doctor shouted, Joe had turned his head, but without checking his horse. The ladder dropped close to him, and at the instant he grasped it the doctor again shouted to Kennedy:

"Throw ballast!"

"It's done!"

And the Victoria, lightened by a weight greater than

Joe's, shot up one hundred and fifty feet into the air.

Joe clung with all his strength to the ladder during the wide oscillations that it had to describe, and then making an indescribable gesture to the Arabs, and climbing with the agility of a monkey, he sprang up to his companions, who received him with open arms.

The Arabs uttered a scream of astonishment and rage. The fugitive had been snatched from them on the wing, and the Victoria was rapidly speeding far beyond their reach.

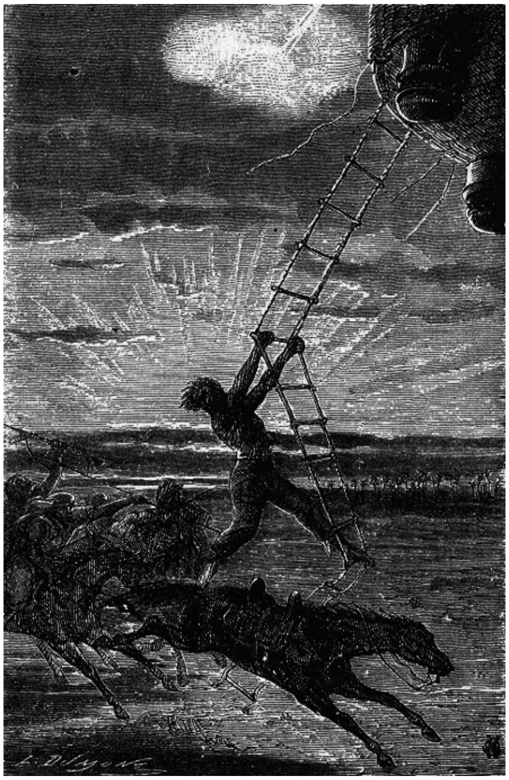

“Master! Kennedy!” ejaculated Joe, and overwhelmed, at last, with fatigue and emotion, the poor fellow fainted away, while Kennedy, almost beside himself, kept exclaiming:

“Saved — saved!”

“Saved indeed!” murmured the doctor, who had recovered all his phlegmatic coolness.

Joe was almost naked. His bleeding arms, his body covered with cuts and bruises, told what his sufferings had been. The doctor quietly dressed his wounds, and laid him comfortably under the awning.

Joe soon returned to consciousness, and asked for a glass of brandy, which the doctor did not see fit to refuse, as the faithful fellow had to be indulged.

After he had swallowed the stimulant, Joe grasped the hands of his two friends and announced that he was ready to relate what had happened to him.

But they would not allow him to talk at that time, and he sank back into a profound sleep, of which he seemed to have the greatest possible need.

The Victoria was then taking an oblique line to the westward. Driven by a tempestuous wind, it again approached the borders of the thorny desert, which the travellers descried over the tops of palm-trees, bent and broken by the storm; and, after having made a run of two hundred miles since rescuing Joe, it passed the tenth degree of east longitude about nightfall.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVENTH.

The Western Route. — Joe wakes up. — His Obstinacy. — End of Joe's Narrative. — Tagelei. — Kennedy's Anxieties. — The Route to the North. — A Night near Aghades.

During the night the wind lulled as though reposing after the boisterousness of the day, and the Victoria remained quietly at the top of the tall sycamore. The doctor and Kennedy kept watch by turns, and Joe availed himself of the chance to sleep most sturdily for twenty-four hours at a stretch.

“That's the remedy he needs,” said Dr. Ferguson.

“Nature will take charge of his care.”

With the dawn the wind sprang up again in quite strong, and moreover capricious gusts. It shifted abruptly from south to north, but finally the Victoria was carried away by it toward the west.

The doctor, map in hand, recognized the kingdom of Damerghou, an undulating region of great fertility, in which the huts that compose the villages are constructed of long reeds interwoven with branches of the asclepia. The grain-mills were seen raised in the cultivated fields, upon small scaffoldings or platforms, to keep them out of the reach of the mice and the huge ants of that country.

They soon passed the town of Zinder, recognized by its spacious place of execution, in the centre of which stands the “tree of death.” At its foot the executioner stands waiting, and whoever passes beneath its shadow is immediately hung!

Upon consulting his compass, Kennedy could not refrain from saying:

“Look! we are again moving northward.”

“No matter; if it only takes us to Timbuctoo, we shall not complain. Never was a finer voyage accomplished under better circumstances!”

“Nor in better health,” said Joe, at that instant thrusting his jolly countenance from between the curtains of the awning.

“There he is! there’s our gallant friend — our preserver!” exclaimed Kennedy, cordially. — ”How goes it, Joe?”

“Oh! why, naturally enough, Mr. Kennedy, very naturally!

I never felt better in my life! Nothing sets a

man up like a little pleasure-trip with a bath in Lake

Tchad to start on — eh, doctor?”

“Brave fellow!” said Ferguson, pressing Joe’s hand, “what terrible anxiety you caused us!”

“Humph! and you, sir? Do you think that I felt easy in my mind about you, gentlemen? You gave me a fine fright, let me tell you!”

“We shall never agree in the world, Joe, if you take things in that style.”

“I see that his tumble hasn’t changed him a bit,” added Kennedy.

“Your devotion and self-forgetfulness were sublime, my brave lad, and they saved us, for the Victoria was falling into the lake, and, once there, nobody could have extricated her.”

“But, if my devotion, as you are pleased to call my summerset, saved you, did it not save me too, for here we are, all three of us, in first-rate health? Consequently we have nothing to squabble about in the whole affair.”

“Oh! we can never come to a settlement with that youth,” said the sportsman.

“The best way to settle it,” replied Joe, “is to say nothing more about the matter. What’s done is done. Good or bad, we can’t take it back.”

“You obstinate fellow!” said the doctor, laughing; “you can’t refuse, though, to tell us your adventures, at all events.”

“Not if you think it worth while. But, in the first place, I’m going to cook this fat goose to a turn, for I see that Mr. Kennedy has not wasted his time.”

“All right, Joe!”

“Well, let us see then how this African game will sit on a European stomach!”

The goose was soon roasted by the flame of the blow-pipe, and not long afterward was comfortably stowed away. Joe took his own good share, like a man who had eaten nothing for several days. After the tea and the punch, he acquainted his friends with his recent adventures. He spoke with some emotion, even while looking at things with his usual philosophy. The doctor could not refrain from frequently pressing his hand when he saw his worthy servant more considerate of his master’s safety than of his own, and, in relation to the sinking of the island of the Biddiomahs, he explained to him the frequency of this phenomenon upon Lake Tchad.

At length Joe, continuing his recital, arrived at the point where, sinking in the swamp, he had uttered a last cry of despair.

“I thought I was gone,” said he, “and as you came right into my mind, I made a hard fight for it. How, I couldn’t tell you — but I’d made up my mind that I wouldn’t go under without knowing why. Just then, I saw — two or three feet from me — what do you think? the end of a rope that had been fresh cut; so I took leave to make another jerk, and, by hook or by crook, I got to the rope. When I pulled, it didn’t give; so I pulled again and hauled away and there I was on dry ground! At the end of the rope, I found an anchor! Ah, master, I’ve a right to call that the anchor of safety, anyhow, if you have no objection. I knew it again! It was the anchor of the Victoria! You had grounded there! So I followed the direction of the rope and that gave me your direction, and, after trying hard a few times more, I got out of the swamp. I had got my strength back with my spunk, and I walked on part of the night away from the lake, until I got to the edge of a very big wood. There I saw a fenced-in place, where some horses were grazing, without thinking of any harm. Now, there are times when everybody knows how to ride a horse, are there not, doctor? So I didn’t spend much time thinking about it, but jumped right on the back of one of those innocent animals and away we went galloping north as fast as our legs could carry us. I needn’t tell you about the towns that I didn’t see nor the villages that I took good care to go around. No! I crossed the ploughed fields; I leaped the hedges; I scrambled over the fences; I dug my heels into my nag; I thrashed him; I fairly lifted the poor fellow off his feet! At last I got to the end of the tilled land. Good! There was the desert. ‘That suits me!’ said I, ‘for I can see better ahead of me and farther too.’ I was hoping all the time to see the balloon tacking about and waiting for me. But not a bit of it; and so, in about three hours, I go plump, like a fool, into a camp of Arabs! Whew!

what a hunt that was! You see, Mr. Kennedy, a hunter don’t know what a real hunt is until he’s been hunted himself! Still I advise him not to try it if he can keep out of it! My horse was so tired, he was ready to drop off his legs; they were close on me; I threw myself to the ground; then I jumped up again behind an Arab! I didn’t mean the fellow any harm, and I hope he has no grudge against me for choking him, but I saw you — and you know the rest. The Victoria came on at my heels, and you caught me up flying, as a circus-rider does a ring. Wasn’t I right in counting on you? Now, doctor, you see how simple all that was! Nothing more natural in the world! I’m ready to begin over again, if it would be of any service to you. And besides, master, as I said a while ago, it’s not worth mentioning.”

“My noble, gallant Joe!” said the doctor, with great feeling. “Heart of gold! we were not astray in trusting to your intelligence and skill.”

“Poh! doctor, one has only just to follow things along as they happen, and he can always work his way out of a scrape! The safest plan, you see, is to take matters as they come.”

While Joe was telling his experience, the balloon had rapidly passed over a long reach of country, and Kennedy soon pointed out on the horizon a collection of structures that looked like a town. The doctor glanced at his map and recognized the place as the large village of Tagelei, in the Damerghou country.

“Here,” said he, “we come upon Dr. Barth’s route. It was at this place that he parted from his companions, Richardson and Overweg; the first was to follow the Zinder route, and the second that of Maradi; and you may remember that, of these three travellers, Barth was the only one who ever returned to Europe.”

“Then,” said Kennedy, following out on the map the direction of the Victoria, “we are going due north.”

“Due north, Dick.”

“And don’t that give you a little uneasiness?”

“Why should it?”

“Because that line leads to Tripoli, and over the Great

Desert.”

“Oh, we shall not go so far as that, my friend — at least, I hope not.”

“But where do you expect to halt?”

“Come, Dick, don’t you feel some curiosity to see

Timbuctoo?”

“Timbuctoo?”

“Certainly,” said Joe; “nobody nowadays can think of making the trip to Africa without going to see Timbuctoo.”

“You will be only the fifth or sixth European who has ever set eyes on that mysterious city.”

“Ho, then, for Timbuctoo!”

“Well, then, let us try to get as far as between the seventeenth and eighteenth degrees of north latitude, and there we will seek a favorable wind to carry us westward.”

"Good!" said the hunter. "But have we still far to go to the northward?"

"One hundred and fifty miles at least."

"In that case," said Kennedy, "I'll turn in and sleep a bit."

"Sleep, sir; sleep!" urged Joe. "And you, doctor, do the same yourself: you must have need of rest, for I made you keep watch a little out of time."

The sportsman stretched himself under the awning; but Ferguson, who was not easily conquered by fatigue, remained at his post.

In about three hours the Victoria was crossing with extreme rapidity an expanse of stony country, with ranges of lofty, naked mountains of granitic formation at the base. A few isolated peaks attained the height of even four thousand feet. Giraffes, antelopes, and ostriches were seen running and bounding with marvellous agility in the midst of forests of acacias, mimosas, souahs, and date-trees. After the barrenness of the desert, vegetation was now resuming its empire. This was the country of the Kailouas, who veil their faces with a bandage of cotton, like their dangerous neighbors, the Touaregs.

At ten o'clock in the evening, after a splendid trip of two hundred and fifty miles, the Victoria halted over an important town. The moonlight revealed glimpses of one district half in ruins; and some pinnacles of mosques and minarets shot up here and there, glistening in the silvery rays. The doctor took a stellar observation, and discovered that he was in the latitude of Aghades.

This city, once the seat of an immense trade, was already falling into ruin when Dr. Barth visited it.

The Victoria, not being seen in the obscurity of night, descended about two miles above Aghades, in a field of millet. The night was calm, and began to break into dawn about three o’clock A.M.; while a light wind coaxed the balloon westward, and even a little toward the south.

Dr. Ferguson hastened to avail himself of such good fortune, and rapidly ascending resumed his aerial journey amid a long wake of golden morning sunshine.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHTH.

A Rapid Passage. — Prudent Resolves. — Caravans in Sight. — Incessant Rains. — Goa. — The Niger. — Golberry, Geoffroy, and Gray. — Mungo Park. — Laing. — Rene Caillie. — Clapperton. — John and Richard Lander.

The 17th of May passed tranquilly, without any remarkable incident; the desert gained upon them once more; a moderate wind bore the Victoria toward the southwest, and she never swerved to the right or to the left, but her shadow traced a perfectly straight line on the sand.

Before starting, the doctor had prudently renewed his stock of water, having feared that he should not be able to touch ground in these regions, infested as they are by the Aouelim-Minian Touaregs. The plateau, at an elevation of eighteen hundred feet above the level of the sea, sloped down toward the south. Our travellers, having crossed the Aghades route at Murzouk — a route often pressed by the feet of camels — arrived that evening, in the sixteenth degree of north latitude, and four degrees fifty-five minutes east longitude, after having passed over one hundred and eighty miles of a long and monotonous day’s journey.

During the day Joe dressed the last pieces of game, which had been only hastily prepared, and he served up for supper a mess of snipe, that were greatly relished. The wind continuing good, the doctor resolved to keep on during the night, the moon, still nearly at the full, illumining it with her radiance. The Victoria ascended to a height of five hundred feet, and, during her nocturnal trip of about sixty miles, the gentle slumbers of an infant would not have been disturbed by her motion.

On Sunday morning, the direction of the wind again changed, and it bore to the northwestward. A few crows were seen sweeping through the air, and, off on the horizon, a flock of vultures which, fortunately, however, kept at a distance.

The sight of these birds led Joe to compliment his master on the idea of having two balloons.

“Where would we be,” said he, “with only one balloon? The second balloon is like the life-boat to a ship; in case of wreck we could always take to it and escape.”

“You are right, friend Joe,” said the doctor, “only that my life-boat gives me some uneasiness. It is not so good as the main craft.”

“What do you mean by that, doctor?” asked Kennedy.

“I mean to say that the new Victoria is not so good as the old one. Whether it be that the stuff it is made of is too much worn, or that the heat of the spiral has melted the gutta-percha, I can observe a certain loss of gas. It don’t amount to much thus far, but still it is noticeable. We have a tendency to sink, and, in order to keep our elevation, I am compelled to give greater dilation to the hydrogen.”

“The deuce!” exclaimed Kennedy with concern; “I see no remedy for that.”

“There is none, Dick, and that is why we must hasten our progress, and even avoid night halts.”

“Are we still far from the coast?” asked Joe.

“Which coast, my boy? How are we to know whither chance will carry us? All that I can say is, that Timbuctoo is still about four hundred miles to the westward.

“And how long will it take us to get there?”

“Should the wind not carry us too far out of the way,

I hope to reach that city by Tuesday evening.”

“Then,” remarked Joe, pointing to a long file of animals and men winding across the open desert, “we shall arrive there sooner than that caravan.”

Ferguson and Kennedy leaned over and saw an immense cavalcade. There were at least one hundred and fifty camels of the kind that, for twelve mutkals of gold, or about twenty-five dollars, go from Timbuctoo to Tafilet with a load of five hundred pounds upon their backs. Each animal had dangling to its tail a bag to receive its excrement, the only fuel on which the caravans can depend when crossing the desert.

These Touareg camels are of the very best race. They can go from three to seven days without drinking, and for two without eating. Their speed surpasses that of the horse, and they obey with intelligence the voice of the khabir, or guide of the caravan. They are known in the country under the name of mehari.

Such were the details given by the doctor while his companions continued to gaze upon that multitude of men, women, and children, advancing on foot and with difficulty over a waste of sand half in motion, and scarcely kept in its place by scanty nettles, withered grass, and stunted bushes that grew upon it. The wind obliterated the marks of their feet almost instantly.

Joe inquired how the Arabs managed to guide themselves across the desert, and come to the few wells scattered far between throughout this vast solitude.

“The Arabs,” replied Dr. Ferguson, “are endowed by nature with a wonderful instinct in finding their way. Where a European would be at a loss, they never hesitate for a moment. An insignificant fragment of rock, a pebble, a tuft of grass, a different shade of color in the sand, suffice to guide them with accuracy. During the night they go by the polar star. They never travel more than two miles per hour, and always rest during the noonday heat. You may judge from that how long it takes them to cross Sahara, a desert more than nine hundred miles in breadth.”

But the Victoria had already disappeared from the astonished gaze of the Arabs, who must have envied her rapidity. That evening she passed two degrees twenty minutes east longitude, and during the night left another degree behind her.

On Monday the weather changed completely. Rain began to fall with extreme violence, and not only had the balloon to resist the power of this deluge, but also the increase of weight which it caused by wetting the whole machine, car and all. This continuous shower accounted for the swamps and marshes that formed the sole surface of the country. Vegetation reappeared, however, along with the mimosas, the baobabs, and the tamarind-trees.

Such was the Sonray country, with its villages topped with roofs turned over like Armenian caps. There were few mountains, and only such hills as were enough to form the ravines and pools where the pintadoes and snipes went sailing and diving through. Here and there, an impetuous torrent cut the roads, and had to be crossed by the natives on long vines stretched from tree to tree. The forests gave place to jungles, which alligators, hippopotami, and the rhinoceros, made their haunts.

“It will not be long before we see the Niger,” said the doctor. “The face of the country always changes in the vicinity of large rivers. These moving highways, as they are sometimes correctly called, have first brought vegetation with them, as they will at last bring civilization. Thus, in its course of twenty-five hundred miles, the Niger has scattered along its banks the most important cities of Africa.”

“By-the-way,” put in Joe, “that reminds me of what was said by an admirer of the goodness of Providence, who praised the foresight with which it had generally caused rivers to flow close to large cities!”

At noon the Victoria was passing over a petty town, a mere assemblage of miserable huts, which once was Goa, a great capital.

“It was there,” said the doctor, “that Barth crossed the Niger, on his return from Timbuctoo. This is the river so famous in antiquity, the rival of the Nile, to which pagan superstition ascribed a celestial origin. Like the Nile, it has engaged the attention of geographers in all ages; and like it, also, its exploration has cost the lives of many victims; yes, even more of them than perished on account of the other.”

The Niger flowed broadly between its banks, and its waters rolled southward with some violence of current; but our travellers, borne swiftly by as they were, could scarcely catch a glimpse of its curious outline.

“I wanted to talk to you about this river,” said Dr. Ferguson, “and it is already far from us. Under the names of Dhiouleba, Mayo, Egghirreou, Quorra, and other titles besides, it traverses an immense extent of country, and almost competes in length with the Nile. These appellations signify simply ‘the River,’ according to the dialects of the countries through which it passes.”

“Did Dr. Barth follow this route?” asked Kennedy.

“No, Dick: in quitting Lake Tchad, he passed through the different towns of Bornou, and intersected the Niger at Say, four degrees below Goa; then he penetrated to the bosom of those unexplored countries which the Niger embraces in its elbow; and, after eight months of fresh fatigues, he arrived at Timbuctoo; all of which we may do in about three days with as swift a wind as this.”

“Have the sources of the Niger been discovered?” asked Joe.

“Long since,” replied the doctor. “The exploration of the Niger and its tributaries was the object of several expeditions, the principal of which I shall mention: Between 1749 and 1758, Adamson made a reconnoissance of the river, and visited Gorea; from 1785 to 1788, Golberry and Geoffroy travelled across the deserts of Senegambia, and ascended as far as the country of the Moors, who assassinated Saugnier, Brisson, Adam, Riley, Cochelet, and so many other unfortunate men. Then came the illustrious Mungo Park, the friend of Sir Walter Scott, and, like him, a Scotchman by birth. Sent out in 1795 by the African Society of London, he got as far as Bambarra, saw the Niger, travelled five hundred miles with a slave-merchant, reconnoitred the Gambia River, and returned to England in 1797. He again set out, on the 30th of January, 1805, with his brother-in-law Anderson, Scott, the designer, and a gang of workmen; he reached Gorea, there added a detachment of thirty-five soldiers to his party, and saw the Niger again on the 19th of August. But, by that time, in consequence of fatigue, privations, ill-usage, the inclemencies of the weather, and the unhealthiness of the country, only eleven persons remained alive of the forty Europeans in the party. On the 16th of November, the last letters from Mungo Park reached his wife; and, a year later a trader from that country gave information that, having got as far as Boussa, on the Niger, on the 23d of December, the unfortunate traveller's boat was upset by the cataracts in that part of the river, and he was murdered by the natives."

"And his dreadful fate did not check the efforts of others to explore that river?"

"On the contrary, Dick. Since then, there were two objects in view: namely, to recover the lost man's papers, as well as to pursue the exploration. In 1816, an expedition was organized, in which Major Grey took part. It arrived in Senegal, penetrated to the Fonta-Jallon, visited the Foullah and Mandingo populations, and returned to England without further results. In 1822, Major Laing explored all the western part of Africa near to the British possessions; and he it was who got so far as the sources of the Niger; and, according to his documents, the spring in which that immense river takes its rise is not two feet broad.

"Easy to jump over," said Joe.

"How's that? Easy you think, eh?" retorted the doctor. "If we are to believe tradition, whoever attempts to pass that spring, by leaping over it, is immediately swallowed up; and whoever tries to draw water from it, feels himself repulsed by an invisible hand."

"I suppose a man has a right not to believe a word of that!" persisted Joe.

"Oh, by all means! — Five years later, it was Major Laing's destiny to force his way across the desert of Sahara, penetrate to Timbuctoo, and perish a few miles above it, by strangling, at the hands of the Oueladshiman, who wanted to compel him to turn Mussulman."

"Still another victim!" said the sportsman.

"It was then that a brave young man, with his own feeble resources, undertook and accomplished the most astonishing of modern journeys — I mean the Frenchman Rene Caillie, who, after sundry attempts in 1819 and 1824, set out again on the 19th of April, 1827, from Rio Nunez. On the 3d of August he arrived at Time, so thoroughly exhausted and ill that he could not resume his journey until six months later, in January, 1828. He then joined a caravan, and, protected by his Oriental dress, reached the Niger on the 10th of March, penetrated to the city of Jenne, embarked on the river, and descended it, as far as Timbuctoo, where he arrived on the 30th of April. In 1760, another Frenchman, Imbert by name, and, in 1810, an Englishman, Robert Adams, had seen this curious place; but Rene Caillie was to be the first European who could bring back any authentic data concerning it. On the 4th of May he quitted this 'Queen of the desert;' on the 9th, he surveyed the very spot where Major Laing had been murdered; on the 19th, he arrived at El-Arouan, and left that commercial town to brave a thousand dangers in crossing the vast solitudes comprised between the Soudan and the northern regions of Africa. At length he entered Tangiers, and on the 28th of September sailed for Toulon. In nineteen months, notwithstanding one hundred and eighty days' sickness, he had traversed Africa from west to north. Ah! had Callie been born in England, he would have been honored as the most intrepid traveller of modern times, as was the case with Mungo Park. But in France he was not appreciated according to his worth."

"He was a sturdy fellow!" said Kennedy, "but what became of him?"

“He died at the age of thirty-nine, from the consequences of his long fatigues. They thought they had done enough in decreeing him the prize of the Geographical Society in 1828; the highest honors would have been paid to him in England.

“While he was accomplishing this remarkable journey, an Englishman had conceived a similar enterprise and was trying to push it through with equal courage, if not with equal good fortune. This was Captain Clapperton, the companion of Denham. In 1829 he reentered Africa by the western coast of the Gulf of Benin; he then followed in the track of Mungo Park and of Laing, recovered at Boussa the documents relative to the death of the former, and arrived on the 20th of August at Sackatoo, where he was seized and held as a prisoner, until he expired in the arms of his faithful attendant Richard Lander.”

“And what became of this Lander?” asked Joe, deeply interested.

“He succeeded in regaining the coast and returned to London, bringing with him the captain’s papers, and an exact narrative of his own journey. He then offered his services to the government to complete the reconnoissance of the Niger. He took with him his brother John, the second child of a poor couple in Cornwall, and, together, these men, between 1829 and 1831, redescended the river from Boussa to its mouth, describing it village by village, mile by mile.”

“So both the brothers escaped the common fate?” queried Kennedy.

“Yes, on this expedition, at least; but in 1833 Richard undertook a third trip to the Niger, and perished by a bullet, near the mouth of the river. You see, then, my friends, that the country over which we are now passing has witnessed some noble instances of self-sacrifice which, unfortunately, have only too often had death for their reward.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINTH.

The Country in the Elbow of the Niger. — A Fantastic View of the Hombori Mountains. — Kabra. — Timbuctoo. — The Chart of Dr. Barth. — A Decaying City. — Whither Heaven wills.

During this dull Monday, Dr. Ferguson diverted his thoughts by giving his companions a thousand details concerning the country they were crossing. The surface, which was quite flat, offered no impediment to their progress. The doctor’s sole anxiety arose from the obstinate northeast wind which continued to blow furiously, and bore them away from the latitude of Timbuctoo.

The Niger, after running northward as far as that city, sweeps around, like an immense water-jet from some fountain, and falls into the Atlantic in a broad sheaf. In the elbow thus formed the country is of varied character, sometimes luxuriantly fertile, and sometimes extremely bare; fields of maize succeeded by wide spaces covered with broom-corn and uncultivated plains. All kinds of aquatic birds — pelicans, wild-duck, kingfishers, and the rest — were seen in numerous flocks hovering about the borders of the pools and torrents.

From time to time there appeared an encampment of Touaregs, the men sheltered under their leather tents, while their women were busied with the domestic toil outside, milking their camels and smoking their huge-bowled pipes.

By eight o’clock in the evening the Victoria had advanced more than two hundred miles to the westward, and our aeronauts became the spectators of a magnificent scene.

A mass of moonbeams forcing their way through an opening in the clouds, and gliding between the long lines of falling rain, descended in a golden shower on the ridges of the Hombori Mountains. Nothing could be more weird than the appearance of these seemingly basaltic summits; they stood out in fantastic profile against the sombre sky, and the beholder might have fancied them to be the legendary ruins of some vast city of the middle ages, such as the icebergs of the polar seas sometimes mimic them in nights of gloom.

“An admirable landscape for the ‘Mysteries of Udolpho’!” exclaimed the doctor. “Ann Radcliffe could not have depicted yon mountains in a more appalling aspect.”

“Faith!” said Joe, “I wouldn’t like to be strolling alone in the evening through this country of ghosts. Do you see now, master, if it wasn’t so heavy, I’d like to carry that whole landscape home to Scotland! It would do for the borders of Loch Lomond, and tourists would rush there in crowds.”

“Our balloon is hardly large enough to admit of that little experiment — but I think our direction is changing. Bravo! — the elves and fairies of the place are quite obliging. See, they’ve sent us a nice little southeast breeze, that will put us on the right track again.”

In fact, the Victoria was resuming a more northerly route, and on the morning of the 20th she was passing over an inextricable network of channels, torrents, and streams, in fine, the whole complicated tangle of the Niger’s tributaries. Many of these channels, covered with a thick growth of herbage, resembled luxuriant meadow-lands. There the doctor recognized the route followed by the explorer Barth when he launched upon the river to descend to Timbuctoo. Eight hundred fathoms broad at this point, the Niger flowed between banks richly grown with cruciferous plants and tamarind-trees. Herds of agile gazelles were seen skipping about, their curling horns mingling with the tall herbage, within which the alligator, half concealed, lay silently in wait for them with watchful eyes.

Long files of camels and asses laden with merchandise from Jenne were winding in under the noble trees. Ere long, an amphitheatre of low-built houses was discovered at a turn of the river, their roofs and terraces heaped up with hay and straw gathered from the neighboring districts.

“There’s Kabra!” exclaimed the doctor, joyously; “there is the harbor of Timbuctoo, and the city is not five miles from here!”

“Then, sir, you are satisfied?” half queried Joe.

“Delighted, my boy!”

“Very good; then every thing’s for the best!”

In fact, about two o’clock, the Queen of the Desert, mysterious Timbuctoo, which once, like Athens and Rome, had her schools of learned men, and her professorships of philosophy, stretched away before the gaze of our travellers.

Ferguson followed the most minute details upon the chart traced by Barth himself, and was enabled to recognize its perfect accuracy.

The city forms an immense triangle marked out upon a vast plain of white sand, its acute angle directed toward the north and piercing a corner of the desert. In the environs there was almost nothing, hardly even a few grasses, with some dwarf mimosas and stunted bushes.

As for the appearance of Timbuctoo, the reader has but to imagine a collection of billiard-balls and thimbles — such is the bird's-eye view! The streets, which are quite narrow, are lined with houses only one story in height, built of bricks dried in the sun, and huts of straw and reeds, the former square, the latter conical. Upon the terraces were seen some of the male inhabitants, carelessly lounging at full length in flowing apparel of bright colors, and lance or musket in hand; but no women were visible at that hour of the day.

"Yet they are said to be handsome," remarked the doctor. "You see the three towers of the three mosques that are the only ones left standing of a great number — the city has indeed fallen from its ancient splendor! At the top of the triangle rises the Mosque of Sankore, with its ranges of galleries resting on arcades of sufficiently pure design. Farther on, and near to the Sane-Gungu quarter, is the Mosque of Sidi-Yahia and some two-story houses. But do not look for either palaces or monuments: the sheik is a mere son of traffic, and his royal palace is a counting-house."

"It seems to me that I can see half-ruined ramparts," said Kennedy.

"They were destroyed by the Fouillanes in 1826; the city was one-third larger then, for Timbuctoo, an object generally coveted by all the tribes, since the eleventh century, has belonged in succession to the Touaregs, the Sonrayans, the Morocco men, and the Fouillanes; and this great centre of civilization, where a sage like Ahmed-Baba owned, in the sixteenth century, a library of sixteen hundred manuscripts, is now nothing but a mere half-way house for the trade of Central Africa."

The city, indeed, seemed abandoned to supreme neglect; it betrayed that indifference which seems epidemic to cities that are passing away. Huge heaps of rubbish encumbered the suburbs, and, with the hill on which the market-place stood, formed the only inequalities of the ground.

When the Victoria passed, there was some slight show of movement; drums were beaten; but the last learned man still lingering in the place had hardly time to notice the new phenomenon, for our travellers, driven onward by the wind of the desert, resumed the winding course of the river, and, ere long, Timbuctoo was nothing more than one of the fleeting reminiscences of their journey.

“And now,” said the doctor, “Heaven may waft us whither it pleases!”

“Provided only that we go westward,” added Kennedy.

“Bah!” said Joe; “I wouldn’t be afraid if it was to go back to Zanzibar by the same road, or to cross the ocean to America.”

“We would first have to be able to do that, Joe!”

“And what’s wanting, doctor?”

“Gas, my boy; the ascending force of the balloon is evidently growing weaker, and we shall need all our management to make it carry us to the sea-coast. I shall even have to throw over some ballast. We are too heavy.”

“That’s what comes of doing nothing, doctor; when a man lies stretched out all day long in his hammock, he gets fat and heavy. It’s a lazybones trip, this of ours, master, and when we get back every body will find us big and stout.”

“Just like Joe,” said Kennedy; “just the ideas for him: but wait a bit! Can you tell what we may have to go through yet? We are still far from the end of our trip. Where do you expect to strike the African coast, doctor?”

“I should find it hard to answer you, Kennedy. We are at the mercy of very variable winds; but I should think myself fortunate were we to strike it between Sierra Leone and Portendick. There is a stretch of country in that quarter where we should meet with friends.”

“And it would be a pleasure to press their hands; but, are we going in the desirable direction?”

“Not any too well, Dick; not any too well! Look at the needle of the compass; we are bearing southward, and ascending the Niger toward its sources.”

“A fine chance to discover them,” said Joe, “if they were not known already. Now, couldn’t we just find others for it, on a pinch?”

“Not exactly, Joe; but don’t be alarmed: I hardly expect to go so far as that.”

At nightfall the doctor threw out the last bags of sand. The Victoria rose higher, and the blow-pipe, although working at full blast, could scarcely keep her up. At that time she was sixty miles to the southward of Timbuctoo, and in the morning the aeronauts awoke over the banks of the Niger, not far from Lake Debo.

CHAPTER FORTIETH.

Dr. Ferguson's Anxieties. — Persistent Movement southward. — A Cloud of Grasshoppers. — A View of Jenne. — A View of Sego. — Change of the Wind. — Joe's Regrets.

The flow of the river was, at that point, divided by large islands into narrow branches, with a very rapid current. Upon one among them stood some shepherds' huts, but it had become impossible to take an exact observation of them, because the speed of the balloon was constantly increasing. Unfortunately, it turned still more toward the south, and in a few moments crossed Lake Debo.

Dr. Ferguson, forcing the dilation of his aerial craft to the utmost, sought for other currents of air at different heights, but in vain; and he soon gave up the attempt, which was only augmenting the waste of gas by pressing it against the well-worn tissue of the balloon.

He made no remark, but he began to feel very anxious. This persistence of the wind to head him off toward the southern part of Africa was defeating his calculations, and he no longer knew upon whom or upon what to depend. Should he not reach the English or French territories, what was to become of him in the midst of the barbarous tribes that infest the coasts of Guinea? How should he there get to a ship to take him back to England? And the actual direction of the wind was driving him along to the kingdom of Dahomey, among the most savage races, and into the power of a ruler who was in the habit of sacrificing thousands of human victims at his public orgies. There he would be lost!

On the other hand, the balloon was visibly wearing out, and the doctor felt it failing him. However, as the weather was clearing up a little, he hoped that the cessation of the rain would bring about a change in the atmospheric currents.

It was therefore a disagreeable reminder of the actual situation when Joe said aloud:

“There! the rain’s going to pour down harder than ever; and this time it will be the deluge itself, if we’re to judge by yon cloud that’s coming up!”

“What! another cloud?” asked Ferguson.

“Yes, and a famous one,” replied Kennedy.

“I never saw the like of it,” added Joe.

“I breathe freely again!” said the doctor, laying down his spy-glass. “That’s not a cloud!”

“Not a cloud?” queried Joe, with surprise.

“No; it is a swarm.”

“Eh?”

“A swarm of grasshoppers!”

“That? Grasshoppers!”

“Myriads of grasshoppers, that are going to sweep over this country like a water-spout; and woe to it! for, should these insects alight, it will be laid waste.”

“That would be a sight worth beholding!”

“Wait a little, Joe. In ten minutes that cloud will have arrived where we are, and you can then judge by the aid of your own eyes.”

The doctor was right. The cloud, thick, opaque, and several miles in extent, came on with a deafening noise, casting its immense shadow over the fields. It was composed of numberless legions of that species of grasshopper called crickets. About a hundred paces from the balloon, they settled down upon a tract full of foliage and verdure. Fifteen minutes later, the mass resumed its flight, and our travellers could, even at a distance, see the trees and the bushes entirely stripped, and the fields as bare as though they had been swept with the scythe. One would have thought that a sudden winter had just descended upon the earth and struck the region with the most complete sterility.

“Well, Joe, what do you think of that?”

“Well, doctor, it’s very curious, but quite natural. What one grasshopper does on a small scale, thousands do on a grand scale.”

“It’s a terrible shower,” said the hunter; “more so than hail itself in the devastation it causes.”

“It is impossible to prevent it,” replied Ferguson. “Sometimes the inhabitants have had the idea to burn the forests, and even the standing crops, in order to arrest the progress of these insects; but the first ranks plunging into the flames would extinguish them beneath their mass, and the rest of the swarm would then pass irresistibly onward. Fortunately, in these regions, there is some sort of compensation for their ravages, since the natives gather these insects in great numbers and greedily eat them."

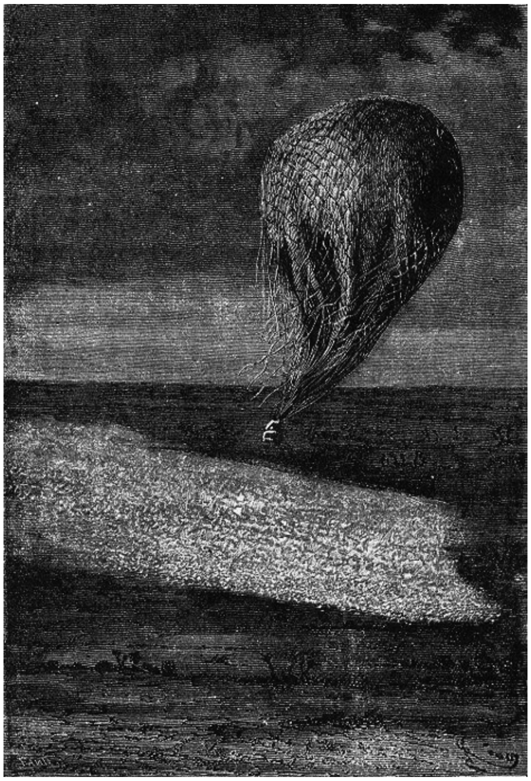

"They are the prawns of the air," said Joe, who added that he was sorry that he had never had the chance to taste them — just for information's sake!

The country became more marshy toward evening; the forests dwindled to isolated clumps of trees; and on the borders of the river could be seen plantations of tobacco, and swampy meadow-lands fat with forage. At last the city of Jenne, on a large island, came in sight, with the two towers of its clay-built mosque, and the putrid odor of the millions of swallows' nests accumulated in its walls. The tops of some baobabs, mimosas, and date-trees peeped up between the houses; and, even at night, the activity of the place seemed very great. Jenne is, in fact, quite a commercial city: it supplies all the wants of Timbuctoo. Its boats on the river, and its caravans along the shaded roads, bear thither the various products of its industry.

“Were it not that to do so would prolong our journey,” said the doctor, “I should like to alight at this place. There must be more than one Arab there who has travelled in England and France, and to whom our style of locomotion is not altogether new. But it would not be prudent.”

“Let us put off the visit until our next trip,” said Joe, laughing.

“Besides, my friends, unless I am mistaken, the wind has a slight tendency to veer a little more to the eastward, and we must not lose such an opportunity.”

The doctor threw overboard some articles that were no longer of use — some empty bottles, and a case that had contained preserved-meat — and thereby managed to keep the balloon in a belt of the atmosphere more favorable to his plans. At four o’clock in the morning the first rays of the sun lighted up Sego, the capital of Bambarra, which could be recognized at once by the four towns that compose it, by its Saracenic mosques, and by the incessant going and coming of the flat-bottomed boats that convey its inhabitants from one quarter to the other. But the travellers were not more seen than they saw. They sped rapidly and directly to the northwest, and the doctor’s anxiety gradually subsided.

“Two more days in this direction, and at this rate of speed, and we’ll reach the Senegal River.”

“And we’ll be in a friendly country?” asked the hunter.

“Not altogether; but, if the worst came to the worst, and the balloon were to fail us, we might make our way to the French settlements. But, let it hold out only for a few hundred miles, and we shall arrive without fatigue, alarm, or danger, at the western coast.”

“And the thing will be over!” added Joe. “Heigh-ho! so much the worse. If it wasn’t for the pleasure of telling about it, I would never want to set foot on the ground again! Do you think anybody will believe our story, doctor?”

“Who can tell, Joe? One thing, however, will be undeniable: a thousand witnesses saw us start on one side of the African Continent, and a thousand more will see us arrive on the other.”

“And, in that case, it seems to me that it would be hard to say that we had not crossed it,” added Kennedy.

“Ah, doctor!” said Joe again, with a deep sigh, “I’ll think more than once of my lumps of solid gold-ore! There was something that would have given WEIGHT to our narrative! At a grain of gold per head, I could have got together a nice crowd to listen to me, and even to admire me!”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIRST.

The Approaches to Senegal. — The Balloon sinks lower and lower. — They keep throwing out, throwing out. — The Marabout Al-Hadji. — Messrs. Pascal, Vincent, and Lambert. — A Rival of Mohammed. — The Difficult Mountains. — Kennedy's Weapons. — One of Joe's Manoeuvres. — A Halt over a Forest.

On the 27th of May, at nine o'clock in the morning, the country presented an entirely different aspect. The slopes, extending far away, changed to hills that gave evidence of mountains soon to follow. They would have to cross the chain which separates the basin of the Niger from the basin of the Senegal, and determines the course of the water-shed, whether to the Gulf of Guinea on the one hand, or to the bay of Cape Verde on the other.

As far as Senegal, this part of Africa is marked down as dangerous. Dr. Ferguson knew it through the recitals of his predecessors. They had suffered a thousand privations and been exposed to a thousand dangers in the midst of these barbarous negro tribes. It was this fatal climate that had devoured most of the companions of Mungo Park. Ferguson, therefore, was more than ever decided not to set foot in this inhospitable region.

But he had not enjoyed one moment of repose. The Victoria was descending very perceptibly, so much so that he had to throw overboard a number more of useless articles, especially when there was a mountain-top to pass. Things went on thus for more than one hundred and twenty miles; they were worn out with ascending and falling again; the balloon, like another rock of Sisyphus, kept continually sinking back toward the ground. The rotundity of the covering, which was now but little inflated, was collapsing already. It assumed an elongated shape, and the wind hollowed large cavities in the silken surface.

Kennedy could not help observing this.

“Is there a crack or a tear in the balloon?” he asked.

“No, but the gutta percha has evidently softened or melted in the heat, and the hydrogen is escaping through the silk.”

“How can we prevent that?”

“It is impossible. Let us lighten her. That is the only help. So let us throw out every thing we can spare.”

“But what shall it be?” said the hunter, looking at the car, which was already quite bare.

“Well, let us get rid of the awning, for its weight is quite considerable.”

Joe, who was interested in this order, climbed up on the circle which kept together the cordage of the network, and from that place easily managed to detach the heavy curtains of the awning and throw them overboard.

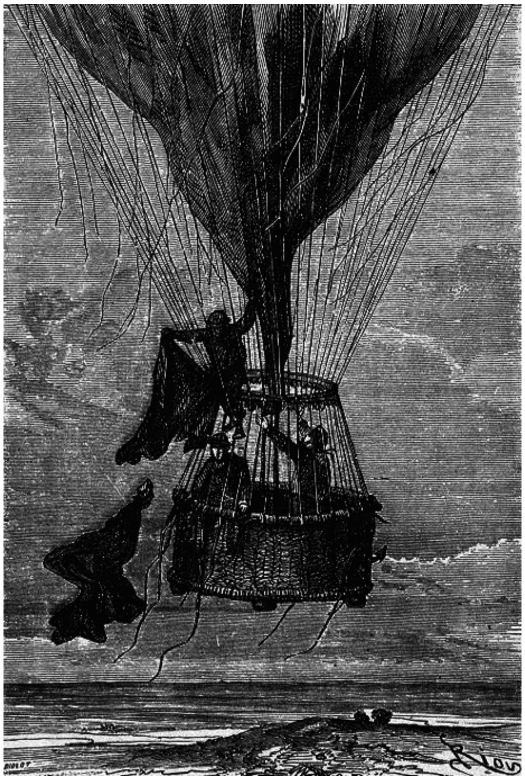

“There’s something that will gladden the hearts of a whole tribe of blacks,” said he; “there’s enough to dress a thousand of them, for they’re not very extravagant with cloth.”

The balloon had risen a little, but it soon became evident that it was again approaching the ground.

“Let us alight,” suggested Kennedy, “and see what can be done with the covering of the balloon.”

“I tell you, again, Dick, that we have no means of repairing it.”

“Then what shall we do?”

“We’ll have to sacrifice every thing not absolutely indispensable; I am anxious, at all hazards, to avoid a detention in these regions. The forests over the tops of which we are skimming are any thing but safe.”

“What! are there lions in them, or hyenas?” asked

Joe, with an expression of sovereign contempt.

“Worse than that, my boy! There are men, and some of the most cruel, too, in all Africa.”

“How is that known?”

“By the statements of travellers who have been here before us. Then the French settlers, who occupy the colony of Senegal, necessarily have relations with the surrounding tribes. Under the administration of Colonel Faidherbe, reconnoissances have been pushed far up into the country. Officers such as Messrs. Pascal, Vincent, and Lambert, have brought back precious documents from their expeditions. They have explored these countries formed by the elbow of the Senegal in places where war and pillage have left nothing but ruins.”

“What, then, took place?”

“I will tell you. In 1854 a Marabout of the Senegalese Fouta, Al-Hadji by name, declaring himself to be inspired like Mohammed, stirred up all the tribes to war against the infidels — that is to say, against the Europeans. He carried destruction and desolation over the regions between the Senegal River and its tributary, the Fateme. Three hordes of fanatics led on by him scoured the country, sparing neither a village nor a hut in their pillaging, massacring career. He advanced in person on the town of Sego, which was a long time threatened. In 1857 he worked up farther to the northward, and invested the fortification of Medina, built by the French on the bank of the river. This stronghold was defended by Paul Holl, who, for several months, without provisions or ammunition, held out until Colonel Faidherbe came to his relief. Al-Hadji and his bands then repassed the Senegal, and reappeared in the Kaarta, continuing their rapine and murder. — Well, here below us is the very country in which he has found refuge with his hordes of banditti; and I assure you that it would not be a good thing to fall into his hands."

"We shall not," said Joe, "even if we have to throw overboard our clothes to save the Victoria."

"We are not far from the river," said the doctor, "but I foresee that our balloon will not be able to carry us beyond it."

"Let us reach its banks, at all events," said the Scot, "and that will be so much gained."

"That is what we are trying to do," rejoined Ferguson, "only that one thing makes me feel anxious."

"What is that?"

"We shall have mountains to pass, and that will be difficult to do, since I cannot augment the ascensional force of the balloon, even with the greatest possible heat that I can produce."

"Well, wait a bit," said Kennedy, "and we shall see!"

"The poor Victoria!" sighed Joe; "I had got fond of her as the sailor does of his ship, and I'll not give her up so easily. She may not be what she was at the start — granted; but we shouldn't say a word against her. She has done us good service, and it would break my heart to desert her."

"Be at your ease, Joe; if we leave her, it will be in spite of ourselves. She'll serve us until she's completely worn out, and I ask of her only twenty-four hours more!”

“Ah, she’s getting used up! She grows thinner and thinner,” said Joe, dolefully, while he eyed her. “Poor balloon!”

“Unless I am deceived,” said Kennedy, “there on the horizon are the mountains of which you were speaking, doctor.”

“Yes, there they are, indeed!” exclaimed the doctor, after having examined them through his spy-glass, “and they look very high. We shall have some trouble in crossing them.”

“Can we not avoid them?”

“I am afraid not, Dick. See what an immense space they occupy — nearly one-half of the horizon!”

“They even seem to shut us in,” added Joe. “They are gaining on both our right and our left.”

“We must then pass over them.”

These obstacles, which threatened such imminent peril, seemed to approach with extreme rapidity, or, to speak more accurately, the wind, which was very fresh, was hurrying the balloon toward the sharp peaks. So rise it must, or be dashed to pieces.

“Let us empty our tank of water,” said the doctor, “and keep only enough for one day.”

“There it goes,” shouted Joe.

“Does the balloon rise at all?” asked Kennedy.

“A little — some fifty feet,” replied the doctor, who kept his eyes fixed on the barometer. “But that is not enough.”

In truth the lofty peaks were starting up so swiftly before the travellers that they seemed to be rushing down upon them. The balloon was far from rising above them. She lacked an elevation of more than five hundred feet more.

The stock of water for the cylinder was also thrown overboard and only a few pints were retained, but still all this was not enough.

“We must pass them though!” urged the doctor.

“Let us throw out the tanks — we have emptied them.” said Kennedy.

“Over with them!”

“There they go!” panted Joe. “But it’s hard to see ourselves dropping off this way by piecemeal.”

“Now, for your part, Joe, make no attempt to sacrifice yourself as you did the other day! Whatever happens, swear to me that you will not leave us!”

“Have no fears, my master, we shall not be separated.”

The Victoria had ascended some hundred and twenty feet, but the crest of the mountain still towered above it. It was an almost perpendicular ridge that ended in a regular wall rising abruptly in a straight line. It still rose more than two hundred feet over the aeronauts.

“In ten minutes,” said the doctor to himself, “our car will be dashed against those rocks unless we succeed in passing them!”

“Well, doctor?” queried Joe.

“Keep nothing but our pemmican, and throw out all the heavy meat.”

Thereupon the balloon was again lightened by some fifty pounds, and it rose very perceptibly, but that was of little consequence, unless it got above the line of the mountain-tops. The situation was terrifying. The Victoria was rushing on with great rapidity. They could feel that she would be dashed to pieces — that the shock would be fearful.

The doctor glanced around him in the car. It was nearly empty.

“If needs be, Dick, hold yourself in readiness to throw over your fire-arms!”

“Sacrifice my fire-arms?” repeated the sportsman, with intense feeling.

“My friend, I ask it; it will be absolutely necessary!”

“Samuel! Doctor!”

“Your guns, and your stock of powder and ball might cost us our lives.”

“We are close to it!” cried Joe.

Sixty feet! The mountain still overtopped the balloon by sixty feet.

Joe took the blankets and other coverings and tossed them out; then, without a word to Kennedy, he threw over several bags of bullets and lead.

The balloon went up still higher; it surmounted the dangerous ridge, and the rays of the sun shone upon its uppermost extremity; but the car was still below the level of certain broken masses of rock, against which it would inevitably be dashed.

“Kennedy! Kennedy! throw out your fire-arms, or we are lost!” shouted the doctor.

“Wait, sir; wait one moment!” they heard Joe exclaim, and, looking around, they saw Joe disappear over the edge of the balloon.

“Joe! Joe!” cried Kennedy.

“Wretched man!” was the doctor’s agonized expression.

The flat top of the mountain may have had about twenty feet in breadth at this point, and, on the other side, the slope presented a less declivity. The car just touched the level of this plane, which happened to be quite even, and it glided over a soil composed of sharp pebbles that grated as it passed.

“We’re over it! we’re over it! we’re clear!” cried out an exulting voice that made Ferguson’s heart leap to his throat.

The daring fellow was there, grasping the lower rim of the car, and running afoot over the top of the mountain, thus lightening the balloon of his whole weight. He had to hold on with all his strength, too, for it was likely to escape his grasp at any moment.

When he had reached the opposite declivity, and the abyss was before him, Joe, by a vigorous effort, hoisted himself from the ground, and, clambering up by the cordage, rejoined his friends.

“That was all!” he coolly ejaculated.

“My brave Joe! my friend!” said the doctor, with deep emotion.

“Oh! what I did,” laughed the other, “was not for you; it was to save Mr. Kennedy’s rifle. I owed him that good turn for the affair with the Arab! I like to pay my debts, and now we are even,” added he, handing to the sportsman his favorite weapon. “I’d feel very badly to see you deprived of it.”

Kennedy heartily shook the brave fellow’s hand, without being able to utter a word.

The Victoria had nothing to do now but to descend. That was easy enough, so that she was soon at a height of only two hundred feet from the ground, and was then in equilibrium. The surface seemed very much broken as though by a convulsion of nature. It presented numerous inequalities, which would have been very difficult to avoid during the night with a balloon that could no longer be controlled. Evening was coming on rapidly, and, notwithstanding his repugnance, the doctor had to make up his mind to halt until morning.

“We’ll now look for a favorable stopping-place,” said he.

“Ah!” replied Kennedy, “you have made up your mind, then, at last?”

“Yes, I have for a long time been thinking over a plan which we’ll try to put into execution; it is only six o’clock in the evening, and we shall have time enough. Throw out your anchors, Joe!”

Joe immediately obeyed, and the two anchors dangled below the balloon.

“I see large forests ahead of us,” said the doctor; “we are going to sweep along their tops, and we shall grapple to some tree, for nothing would make me think of passing the night below, on the ground.”

“But can we not descend?” asked Kennedy.

“To what purpose? I repeat that it would be dangerous for us to separate, and, besides, I claim your help for a difficult piece of work.”

The Victoria, which was skimming along the tops of immense forests, soon came to a sharp halt. Her anchors had caught, and, the wind falling as dusk came on, she remained motionlessly suspended above a vast field of verdure, formed by the tops of a forest of sycamores.

CHAPTER FORTY-SECOND.

A Struggle of Generosity. — The Last Sacrifice. — The Dilating Apparatus. — Joe's Adroitness. — Midnight. — The Doctor's Watch. — Kennedy's Watch. — The Latter falls asleep at his Post. — The Fire. — The Howlings of the Natives. — Out of Range.

Doctor Ferguson's first care was to take his bearings by stellar observation, and he discovered that he was scarcely twenty-five miles from Senegal.

"All that we can manage to do, my friends," said he, after having pointed his map, "is to cross the river; but, as there is neither bridge nor boat, we must, at all hazards, cross it with the balloon, and, in order to do that, we must still lighten up."

"But I don't exactly see how we can do that?" replied Kennedy, anxious about his fire-arms, "unless one of us makes up his mind to sacrifice himself for the rest, — that is, to stay behind, and, in my turn, I claim that honor."

"You, indeed!" remonstrated Joe; "ain't I used to — "

"The question now is, not to throw ourselves out of the car, but simply to reach the coast of Africa on foot. I am a first-rate walker, a good sportsman, and — "

"I'll never consent to it!" insisted Joe.

"Your generous rivalry is useless, my brave friends," said Ferguson; "I trust that we shall not come to any such extremity: besides, if we did, instead of separating, we should keep together, so as to make our way across the country in company.”

“That’s the talk,” said Joe; “a little tramp won’t do us any harm.”

“But before we try that,” resumed the doctor, “we must employ a last means of lightening the balloon.”

“What will that be? I should like to see it,” said

Kennedy, incredulously.

“We must get rid of the cylinder-chests, the spiral, and the Buntzen battery. Nine hundred pounds make a rather heavy load to carry through the air.”

“But then, Samuel, how will you dilate your gas?”

“I shall not do so at all. We’ll have to get along without it.”

“But — ”

“Listen, my friends: I have calculated very exactly the amount of ascensional force left to us, and it is sufficient to carry us every one with the few objects that remain. We shall make in all a weight of hardly five hundred pounds, including the two anchors which I desire to keep.”

“Dear doctor, you know more about the matter than we do; you are the sole judge of the situation. Tell us what we ought to do, and we will do it.”

“I am at your orders, master,” added Joe.

“I repeat, my friends, that however serious the decision may appear, we must sacrifice our apparatus.”

“Let it go, then!” said Kennedy, promptly.

“To work!” said Joe.

It was no easy job. The apparatus had to be taken down piece by piece. First, they took out the mixing reservoir, then the one belonging to the cylinder, and lastly the tank in which the decomposition of the water was effected. The united strength of all three travellers was required to detach these reservoirs from the bottom of the car in which they had been so firmly secured; but Kennedy was so strong, Joe so adroit, and the doctor so ingenious, that they finally succeeded. The different pieces were thrown out, one after the other, and they disappeared below, making huge gaps in the foliage of the sycamores.

“The black fellows will be mightily astonished,” said Joe, “at finding things like those in the woods; they’ll make idols of them!”

The next thing to be looked after was the displacement of the pipes that were fastened in the balloon and connected with the spiral. Joe succeeded in cutting the caoutchouc jointings above the car, but when he came to the pipes he found it more difficult to disengage them, because they were held by their upper extremity and fastened by wires to the very circlet of the valve.

Then it was that Joe showed wonderful adroitness. In his naked feet, so as not to scratch the covering, he succeeded by the aid of the network, and in spite of the oscillations of the balloon, in climbing to the upper extremity, and after a thousand difficulties, in holding on with one hand to that slippery surface, while he detached the outside screws that secured the pipes in their place. These were then easily taken out, and drawn away by the lower end, which was hermetically sealed by means of a strong ligature.

The Victoria, relieved of this considerable weight, rose upright in the air and tugged strongly at the anchor-rope.

About midnight this work ended without accident, but at the cost of most severe exertion, and the trio partook of a luncheon of pemmican and cold punch, as the doctor had no more fire to place at Joe’s disposal.

Besides, the latter and Kennedy were dropping off their feet with fatigue.

“Lie down, my friends, and get some rest,” said the doctor. “I’ll take the first watch; at two o’clock I’ll waken Kennedy; at four, Kennedy will waken Joe, and at six we’ll start; and may Heaven have us in its keeping for this last day of the trip!”

Without waiting to be coaxed, the doctor’s two companions stretched themselves at the bottom of the car and dropped into profound slumber on the instant.

The night was calm. A few clouds broke against the last quarter of the moon, whose uncertain rays scarcely pierced the darkness. Ferguson, resting his elbows on the rim of the car, gazed attentively around him. He watched with close attention the dark screen of foliage that spread beneath him, hiding the ground from his view. The least noise aroused his suspicions, and he questioned even the slightest rustling of the leaves.

He was in that mood which solitude makes more keenly felt, and during which vague terrors mount to the brain. At the close of such a journey, after having surmounted so many obstacles, and at the moment of touching the goal, one’s fears are more vivid, one’s emotions keener. The point of arrival seems to fly farther from our gaze.

Moreover, the present situation had nothing very consolatory about it. They were in the midst of a barbarous country, and dependent upon a vehicle that might fail them at any moment. The doctor no longer counted implicitly on his balloon; the time had gone by when he manoevred it boldly because he felt sure of it.

Under the influence of these impressions, the doctor, from time to time, thought that he heard vague sounds in the vast forests around him; he even fancied that he saw a swift gleam of fire shining between the trees. He looked sharply and turned his night-glass toward the spot; but there was nothing to be seen, and the profoundest silence appeared to return.

He had, no doubt, been under the dominion of a mere hallucination. He continued to listen, but without hearing the slightest noise. When his watch had expired, he woke Kennedy, and, enjoining upon him to observe the extremest vigilance, took his place beside Joe, and fell sound asleep.

Kennedy, while still rubbing his eyes, which he could scarcely keep open, calmly lit his pipe. He then ensconced himself in a corner, and began to smoke vigorously by way of keeping awake.

The most absolute silence reigned around him; a light wind shook the tree-tops and gently rocked the car, inviting the hunter to taste the sleep that stole over him in spite of himself. He strove hard to resist it, and repeatedly opened his eyes to plunge into the outer darkness one of those looks that see nothing; but at last, yielding to fatigue, he sank back and slumbered.

How long he had been buried in this stupor he knew not, but he was suddenly aroused from it by a strange, unexpected crackling sound.

He rubbed his eyes and sprang to his feet. An intense glare half-blinded him and heated his cheek — the forest was in flames!

“Fire! fire!” he shouted, scarcely comprehending what had happened.

His two companions started up in alarm.

“What’s the matter?” was the doctor’s immediate exclamation.

“Fire!” said Joe. “But who could — ”

At this moment loud yells were heard under the foliage, which was now illuminated as brightly as the day.

“Ah! the savages!” cried Joe again; “they have set fire to the forest so as to be the more certain of burning us up.”

“The Talabas! Al-Hadji’s marabouts, no doubt,” said the doctor.

A circle of fire hemmed the Victoria in; the crackling of the dry wood mingled with the hissing and sputtering of the green branches; the clambering vines, the foliage, all the living part of this vegetation, writhed in the destructive element. The eye took in nothing but one vast ocean of flame; the large trees stood forth in black relief in this huge furnace, their branches covered with glowing coals, while the whole blazing mass, the entire conflagration, was reflected on the clouds, and the travellers could fancy themselves enveloped in a hollow globe of fire.

“Let us escape to the ground!” shouted Kennedy, “it is our only chance of safety!”

But Ferguson checked him with a firm grasp, and, dashing at the anchor-rope, severed it with one well-directed blow of his hatchet. Meanwhile, the flames, leaping up at the balloon, already quivered on its illuminated sides; but the Victoria, released from her fastenings, spun upward a thousand feet into the air.

Frightful yells resounded through the forest, along with the report of fire-arms, while the balloon, caught in a current of air that rose with the dawn of day, was borne to the westward.

It was now four o’clock in the morning.

CHAPTER FORTY-THIRD.

The Talabas. — The Pursuit. — A Devastated Country. — The Wind begins to fall. — The Victoria sinks. — The last of the Provisions. — The Leaps of the Balloon. — A Defence with Fire-arms. — The Wind freshens. — The Senegal River. — The Cataracts of Gouina. — The Hot Air. — The Passage of the River.

“Had we not taken the precaution to lighten the balloon yesterday evening, we should have been lost beyond redemption,” said the doctor, after a long silence.

“See what’s gained by doing things at the right time!” replied Joe. “One gets out of scrapes then, and nothing is more natural.”

“We are not out of danger yet,” said the doctor.

“What do you still apprehend?” queried Kennedy. “The balloon can’t descend without your permission, and even were it to do so — ”

“Were it to do so, Dick? Look!”

They had just passed the borders of the forest, and the three friends could see some thirty mounted men clad in broad pantaloons and the floating bournouses. They were armed, some with lances, and others with long muskets, and they were following, on their quick, fiery little steeds, the direction of the balloon, which was moving at only moderate speed.

When they caught sight of the aeronauts, they uttered savage cries, and brandished their weapons. Anger and menace could be read upon their swarthy faces, made more ferocious by thin but bristling beards. Meanwhile they galloped along without difficulty over the low levels and gentle declivities that lead down to the Senegal.

“It is, indeed, they!” said the doctor; “the cruel Talabas! the ferocious marabouts of Al-Hadji! I would rather find myself in the middle of the forest encircled by wild beasts than fall into the hands of these banditti.”

“They haven’t a very obliging look!” assented Kennedy; “and they are rough, stalwart fellows.”

“Happily those brutes can’t fly,” remarked Joe; “and that’s something.”

“See,” said Ferguson, “those villages in ruins, those huts burned down — that is their work! Where vast stretches of cultivated land were once seen, they have brought barrenness and devastation.”

“At all events, however,” interposed Kennedy, “they can’t overtake us; and, if we succeed in putting the river between us and them, we are safe.”

“Perfectly, Dick,” replied Ferguson; “but we must not fall to the ground!” and, as he said this, he glanced at the barometer.

“In any case, Joe,” added Kennedy, “it would do us no harm to look to our fire-arms.”

“No harm in the world, Mr. Dick! We are lucky that we didn’t scatter them along the road.”

“My rifle!” said the sportsman. “I hope that I shall never be separated from it!”

And so saying, Kennedy loaded the pet piece with the greatest care, for he had plenty of powder and ball remaining.

“At what height are we?” he asked the doctor.

“About seven hundred and fifty feet; but we no longer have the power of seeking favorable currents, either going up or coming down. We are at the mercy of the balloon!”

“That is vexatious!” rejoined Kennedy. “The wind is poor; but if we had come across a hurricane like some of those we met before, these vile brigands would have been out of sight long ago.”

“The rascals follow us at their leisure,” said Joe. “They’re only at a short gallop. Quite a nice little ride!”

“If we were within range,” sighed the sportsman, “I should amuse myself with dismounting a few of them.”

“Exactly,” said the doctor; “but then they would have you within range also, and our balloon would offer only too plain a target to the bullets from their long guns; and, if they were to make a hole in it, I leave you to judge what our situation would be!”

The pursuit of the Talabas continued all morning; and by eleven o’clock the aeronauts had made scarcely fifteen miles to the westward.

The doctor was anxiously watching for the least cloud on the horizon. He feared, above all things, a change in the atmosphere. Should he be thrown back toward the Niger, what would become of him? Besides, he remarked that the balloon tended to fall considerably. Since the start, he had already lost more than three hundred feet, and the Senegal must be about a dozen miles distant. At his present rate of speed, he could count upon travelling only three hours longer.

At this moment his attention was attracted by fresh cries. The Talabas appeared to be much excited, and were spurring their horses.

The doctor consulted his barometer, and at once discovered the cause of these symptoms.

“Are we descending?” asked Kennedy.

“Yes!” replied the doctor.

“The mischief!” thought Joe

In the lapse of fifteen minutes the Victoria was only one hundred and fifty feet above the ground; but the wind was much stronger than before.

The Talabas checked their horses, and soon a volley of musketry pealed out on the air.

“Too far, you fools!” bawled Joe. “I think it would be well to keep those scamps at a distance.”

And, as he spoke, he aimed at one of the horsemen who was farthest to the front, and fired. The Talaba fell headlong, and, his companions halting for a moment, the balloon gained upon them.

“They are prudent!” said Kennedy.

“Because they think that they are certain to take us,” replied the doctor; “and, they will succeed if we descend much farther. We must, absolutely, get higher into the air.”

“What can we throw out?” asked Joe.

“All that remains of our stock of pemmican; that will be thirty pounds less weight to carry.”

“Out it goes, sir!” said Joe, obeying orders.

The car, which was now almost touching the ground, rose again, amid the cries of the Talabas; but, half an hour later, the balloon was again falling rapidly, because the gas was escaping through the pores of the covering.

Ere long the car was once more grazing the soil, and Al-Hadji’s black riders rushed toward it; but, as frequently happens in like cases, the balloon had scarcely touched the surface ere it rebounded, and only came down again a mile away.

“So we shall not escape!” said Kennedy, between his teeth.

“Throw out our reserved store of brandy, Joe,” cried the doctor; “our instruments, and every thing that has any weight, even to our last anchor, because go they must!”

Joe flung out the barometers and thermometers, but all that amounted to little; and the balloon, which had risen for an instant, fell again toward the ground.

The Talabas flew toward it, and at length were not more than two hundred paces away.

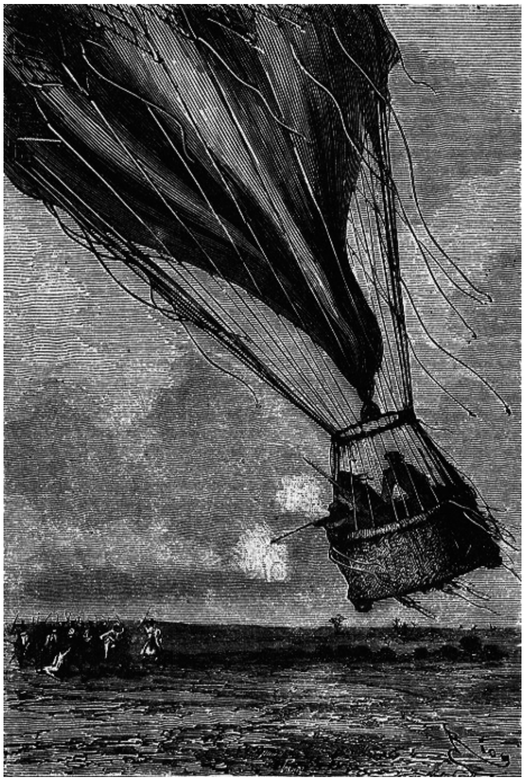

“Throw out the two fowling-pieces!” shouted Ferguson.

“Not without discharging them, at least,” responded the sportsman; and four shots in quick succession struck the thick of the advancing group of horsemen. Four Talabas fell, amid the frantic howls and imprecations of their comrades.

The Victoria ascended once more, and made some enormous leaps, like a huge gum-elastic ball, bounding and rebounding through the air. A strange sight it was to see these unfortunate men endeavoring to escape by those huge aerial strides, and seeming, like the giant Antaeus, to receive fresh strength every time they touched the earth. But this situation had to terminate. It was now nearly noon; the Victoria was getting empty and exhausted, and assuming a more and more elongated form every instant. Its outer covering was becoming flaccid, and floated loosely in the air, and the folds of the silk rustled and grated on each other.

“Heaven abandons us!” said Kennedy; “we have to fall!”

Joe made no answer. He kept looking intently at his master.

“No!” said the latter; “we have more than one hundred and fifty pounds yet to throw out.”

“What can it be, then?” said Kennedy, thinking that the doctor must be going mad.

“The car!” was his reply; “we can cling to the network. There we can hang on in the meshes until we reach the river. Quick! quick!”

And these daring men did not hesitate a moment to avail themselves of this last desperate means of escape. They clutched the network, as the doctor directed, and Joe, holding on by one hand, with the other cut the cords that suspended the car; and the latter dropped to the ground just as the balloon was sinking for the last time.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” shouted the brave fellow exultingly, as the Victoria, once more relieved, shot up again to a height of three hundred feet.

The Talabas spurred their horses, which now came tearing on at a furious gallop; but the balloon, falling in with a much more favorable wind, shot ahead of them, and was rapidly carried toward a hill that stretched across the horizon to the westward. This was a circumstance favorable to the aeronauts, because they could rise over the hill, while Al-Hadji’s horde had to diverge to the northward in order to pass this obstacle.

The three friends still clung to the network. They had been able to fasten it under their feet, where it had formed a sort of swinging pocket.

Suddenly, after they had crossed the hill, the doctor exclaimed: “The river! the river! the Senegal, my friends!”

And about two miles ahead of them, there was indeed the river rolling along its broad mass of water, while the farther bank, which was low and fertile, offered a sure refuge, and a place favorable for a descent.

“Another quarter of an hour,” said Ferguson, “and we are saved!”

But it was not to happen thus; the empty balloon descended slowly upon a tract almost entirely bare of vegetation. It was made up of long slopes and stony plains, a few bushes and some coarse grass, scorched by the sun.

The Victoria touched the ground several times, and rose again, but her rebound was diminishing in height and length. At the last one, it caught by the upper part of the network in the lofty branches of a baobab, the only tree that stood there, solitary and alone, in the midst of the waste.

“It’s all over,” said Kennedy.

“And at a hundred paces only from the river!” groaned Joe.

The three hapless aeronauts descended to the ground, and the doctor drew his companions toward the Senegal.

At this point the river sent forth a prolonged roaring; and when Ferguson reached its bank, he recognized the falls of Gouina. But not a boat, not a living creature was to be seen. With a breadth of two thousand feet, the Senegal precipitates itself for a height of one hundred and fifty, with a thundering reverberation. It ran, where they saw it, from east to west, and the line of rocks that barred its course extended from north to south. In the midst of the falls, rocks of strange forms started up like huge ante-diluvian animals, petrified there amid the waters.

The impossibility of crossing this gulf was self-evident, and Kennedy could not restrain a gesture of despair.

But Dr. Ferguson, with an energetic accent of undaunted daring, exclaimed —

“All is not over!”

“I knew it,” said Joe, with that confidence in his master which nothing could ever shake.

The sight of the dried-up grass had inspired the doctor with a bold idea. It was the last chance of escape. He led his friends quickly back to where they had left the covering of the balloon.

“We have at least an hour’s start of those banditti,” said he; “let us lose no time, my friends; gather a quantity of this dried grass; I want a hundred pounds of it, at least.”

“For what purpose?” asked Kennedy, surprised.

“I have no more gas; well, I’ll cross the river with hot air!”

“Ah, doctor,” exclaimed Kennedy, “you are, indeed, a great man!”

Joe and Kennedy at once went to work, and soon had an immense pile of dried grass heaped up near the baobab.

In the mean time, the doctor had enlarged the orifice of the balloon by cutting it open at the lower end. He then was very careful to expel the last remnant of hydrogen through the valve, after which he heaped up a quantity of grass under the balloon, and set fire to it.

It takes but a little while to inflate a balloon with hot air. A head of one hundred and eighty degrees is sufficient to diminish the weight of the air it contains to the extent of one-half, by rarefying it. Thus, the Victoria quickly began to assume a more rounded form. There was no lack of grass; the fire was kept in full blast by the doctor’s assiduous efforts, and the balloon grew fuller every instant.

It was then a quarter to four o’clock.

At this moment the band of Talabas reappeared about two miles to the northward, and the three friends could hear their cries, and the clatter of their horses galloping at full speed.

“In twenty minutes they will be here!” said Kennedy.

“More grass! more grass, Joe! In ten minutes we shall have her full of hot air.”

“Here it is, doctor!”

The Victoria was now two-thirds inflated.

“Come, my friends, let us take hold of the network, as we did before.”

“All right!” they answered together.

In about ten minutes a few jerking motions by the balloon indicated that it was disposed to start again. The Talabas were approaching. They were hardly five hundred paces away.

“Hold on fast!” cried Ferguson.

“Have no fear, master — have no fear!”

And the doctor, with his foot pushed another heap of grass upon the fire.

With this the balloon, now completely inflated by the increased temperature, moved away, sweeping the branches of the baobab in her flight.

“We’re off!” shouted Joe.

A volley of musketry responded to his exclamation. A bullet even ploughed his shoulder; but Kennedy, leaning over, and discharging his rifle with one hand, brought another of the enemy to the ground.

Cries of fury exceeding all description hailed the departure of the balloon, which had at once ascended nearly eight hundred feet. A swift current caught and swept it along with the most alarming oscillations, while the intrepid doctor and his friends saw the gulf of the cataracts yawning below them.

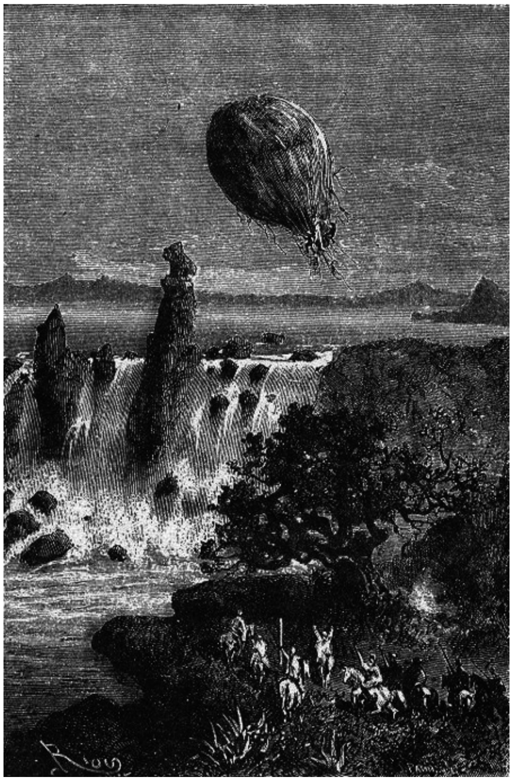

Ten minutes later, and without having exchanged a word, they descended gradually toward the other bank of the river.

There, astonished, speechless, terrified, stood a group of men clad in the French uniform. Judge of their amazement when they saw the balloon rise from the right bank of the river. They had well-nigh taken it for some celestial phenomenon, but their officers, a lieutenant of marines and a naval ensign, having seen mention made of Dr. Ferguson's daring expedition, in the European papers, quickly explained the real state of the case.

The balloon, losing its inflation little by little, settled with the daring travellers still clinging to its network; but it was doubtful whether it would reach the land. At once some of the brave Frenchmen rushed into the water and caught the three aeronauts in their arms just as the Victoria fell at the distance of a few fathoms from the left bank of the Senegal.

“Dr. Ferguson!” exclaimed the lieutenant.

“The same, sir,” replied the doctor, quietly, “and his two friends.”

The Frenchmen escorted our travellers from the river, while the balloon, half-empty, and borne away by a swift current, sped on, to plunge, like a huge bubble, headlong with the waters of the Senegal, into the cataracts of Gouina.

“The poor Victoria!” was Joe’s farewell remark.

The doctor could not restrain a tear, and extending his hands his two friends wrung them silently with that deep emotion which requires no spoken words.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOURTH.

Conclusion. — The Certificate. — The French Settlements. — The Post of Medina. — The Basilic. — Saint Louis. — The English Frigate. — The Return to London.

The expedition upon the bank of the river had been sent by the governor of Senegal. It consisted of two officers, Messrs. Dufraisse, lieutenant of marines, and Rodamel, naval ensign, and with these were a sergeant and seven soldiers. For two days they had been engaged in reconnoitring the most favorable situation for a post at Gouina, when they became witnesses of Dr. Ferguson’s arrival.

The warm greetings and felicitations of which our travellers were the recipients may be imagined. The Frenchmen, and they alone, having had ocular proof of the accomplishment of the daring project, naturally became Dr. Ferguson’s witnesses. Hence the doctor at once asked them to give their official testimony of his arrival at the cataracts of Gouina.

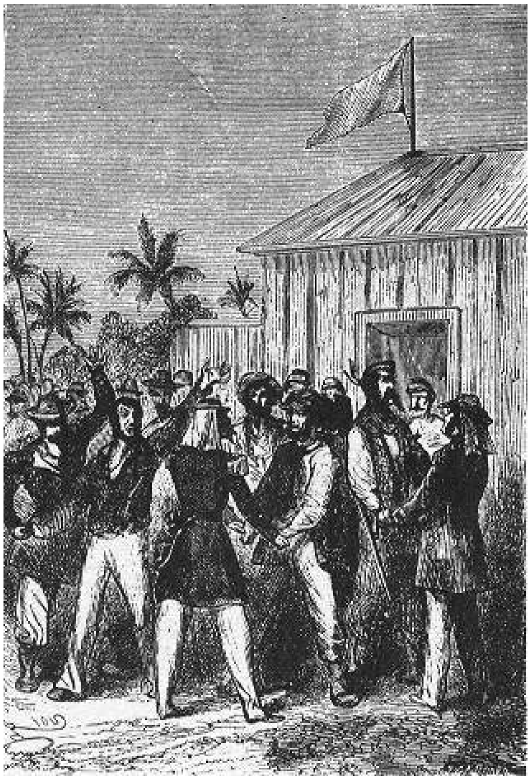

“You would have no objection to signing a certificate of the fact, would you?” he inquired of Lieutenant Dufraisse.

“At your orders!” the latter instantly replied.

The Englishmen were escorted to a provisional post established on the bank of the river, where they found the most assiduous attention, and every thing to supply their wants. And there the following certificate was drawn up in the terms in which it appears to-day, in the archives of the Royal Geographical Society of London:

“We, the undersigned, do hereby declare that, on the day herein mentioned, we witnessed the arrival of Dr. Ferguson and his two companions, Richard Kennedy and Joseph Wilson, clinging to the cordage and network of a balloon, and that the said balloon fell at a distance of a few paces from us into the river, and being swept away by the current was lost in the cataracts of Gouina. In testimony whereof, we have hereunto set our hands and seals beside those of the persons hereinabove named, for the information of all whom it may concern.

“Done at the Cataracts of Gouina, on the 24th of May,

1862.

“(Signed), “SAMUEL FERGUSON

“RICHARD KENNEDY,

“JOSEPH WILSON,

“DUFRAISSE, Lieutenant of Marines,

“RODAMEL, Naval Ensign,

“DUFAYS, Sergeant,

“FLIPPEAU, MAYOR, }

“PELISSIER, LOROIS, } Privates.”

RASCAGNET, GUIL- }

LON, LEBEL, }

Here ended the astonishing journey of Dr. Ferguson and his brave companions, as vouched for by undeniable testimony; and they found themselves among friends in the midst of most hospitable tribes, whose relations with the French settlements are frequent and amicable.

They had arrived at Senegal on Saturday, the 24th of May, and on the 27th of the same month they reached the post of Medina, situated a little farther to the north, but on the river.

There the French officers received them with open arms, and lavished upon them all the resources of their hospitality. Thus aided, the doctor and his friends were enabled to embark almost immediately on the small steamer called the Basilic, which ran down to the mouth of the river.

Two weeks later, on the 10th of June, they arrived at Saint Louis, where the governor gave them a magnificent reception, and they recovered completely from their excitement and fatigue.

Besides, Joe said to every one who chose to listen:

That was a stupid trip of ours, after all, and I wouldn’t advise any body who is greedy for excitement to undertake it. It gets very tiresome at the last, and if it hadn’t been for the adventures on Lake Tchad and at the Senegal River, I do believe that we’d have died of yawning.”

An English frigate was just about to sail, and the three travellers procured passage on board of her. On the 25th of June they arrived at Portsmouth, and on the next day at London.

We will not describe the reception they got from the Royal Geographical Society, nor the intense curiosity and consideration of which they became the objects. Kennedy set off, at once, for Edinburgh, with his famous rifle, for he was in haste to relieve the anxiety of his faithful old housekeeper.

The doctor and his devoted Joe remained the same men that we have known them, excepting that one change took place at their own suggestion.

They ceased to be master and servant, in order to become bosom friends.

The journals of all Europe were untiring in their praises of the bold explorers, and the Daily Telegraph struck off an edition of three hundred and seventy-seven thousand copies on the day when it published a sketch of the trip.

Doctor Ferguson, at a public meeting of the Royal Geographical Society, gave a recital of his journey through the air, and obtained for himself and his companions the golden medal set apart to reward the most remarkable exploring expedition of the year 1862.

The first result of Dr. Ferguson’s expedition was to establish, in the most precise manner, the facts and geographical surveys reported by Messrs. Barth, Burton, Speke, and others. Thanks to the still more recent expeditions of Messrs. Speke and Grant, De Heuglin and Muntzinger, who have been ascending to the sources of the Nile, and penetrating to the centre of Africa, we shall be enabled ere long to verify, in turn, the discoveries of Dr. Ferguson in that vast region comprised between the fourteenth and thirty-third degrees of east longitude.

PARIS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Although written in 1863, this novel was first published in 1994 and is sadly not available in this edition due to copyright restrictions. However, information is provided here about the novel's content to inform the reader, who may wish to purchase the text separately.

Paris in the Twentieth Century presents Paris in 1960, about 100 years in Verne's future, where society values only business and technology. The story concerns a young man who lives in a technologically advanced, but culturally backwards future. This main character is 16-year-old Michel Dufrénoy, who graduates with a major in literature and the classics, but finds they have been forgotten in a futuristic world where only business and technology are considered as important. Michel, whose father was a musician, is a poet born too late.

Set in August 1960, the novel depicts a grim, dystopian view of the future and many of Verne's predictions are remarkably true when appraised now. In 1863 his publisher, Pierre-Jules Hetzel, did not release the book because he thought it was too unbelievable and inferior to his previous work *Five Weeks in a Balloon*.

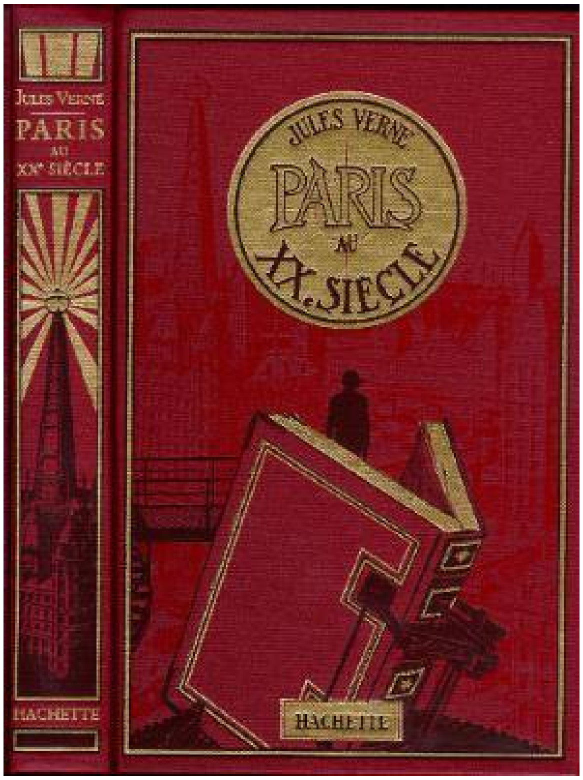
JULES VERNE
PARIS
AU
XXe SIÈCLE
HACHETTE
JULES VERNE
PARIS
AU
XX. SIECLE
HACHETTE

The first edition

A JOURNEY TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

Translated by Rev. F. A. Malleson

This 1864 novel concerns German professor Otto Lidenbrock (Professor Von Hardwigg in most common English translations) who believes there are volcanic tubes going toward the centre of the Earth. With his nephew Axel and their guide Hans, they encounter many adventures, including prehistoric animals and natural hazards, eventually coming to the surface again in southern Italy.

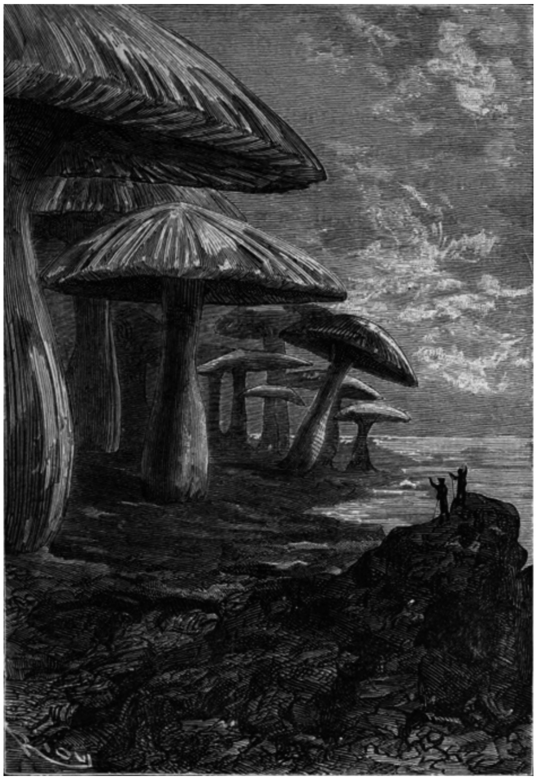

An original illustration in the French edition

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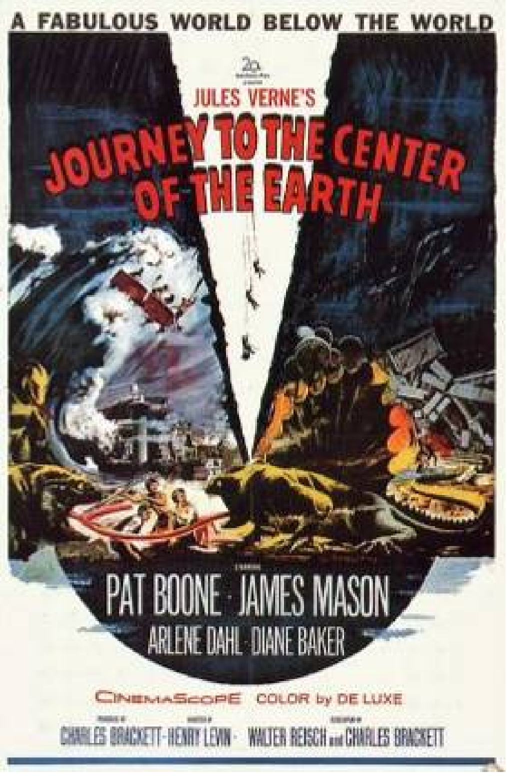
A FABULOUS WORLD BELOW THE WORLD
JULES VERNE'S
JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH
PAT BOONE · JAMES MASON
ARLENE DAHL · DIANE BAKER
CINEMASCOPE COLOR by DE LUXE
CHARLES BRACKETT · HENRY LEVIN · WALTER REISCH and CHARLES BRACKETT

The 1959 film version

BRENDAN FRASER
JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH
SAME PLANET. DIFFERENT WORLD.
JULY 11

The 2008 movie adaptation, filmed in 3D

CHAPTER I.

THE PROFESSOR AND HIS FAMILY

On the 24th of May, 1863, my uncle, Professor Liedenbrock, rushed into his little house, No. 19 Königstrasse, one of the oldest streets in the oldest portion of the city of Hamburg.

Martha must have concluded that she was very much behindhand, for the dinner had only just been put into the oven.

“Well, now,” said I to myself, “if that most impatient of men is hungry, what a disturbance he will make!”

“M. Liedenbrock so soon!” cried poor Martha in great alarm, half opening the dining-room door.

“Yes, Martha; but very likely the dinner is not half cooked, for it is not two yet. Saint Michael’s clock has only just struck half-past one.”

“Then why has the master come home so soon?”

“Perhaps he will tell us that himself.”

“Here he is, Monsieur Axel; I will run and hide myself while you argue with him.”

And Martha retreated in safety into her own dominions.

I was left alone. But how was it possible for a man of my undecided turn of mind to argue successfully with so irascible a person as the Professor? With this persuasion I was hurrying away to my own little retreat upstairs, when the street door creaked upon its hinges; heavy feet made the whole flight of stairs to shake; and the master of the house, passing rapidly through the dining-room, threw himself in haste into his own sanctum.

But on his rapid way he had found time to fling his hazel stick into a corner, his rough broadbrim upon the table, and these few emphatic words at his nephew:

“Axel, follow me!”

I had scarcely had time to move when the Professor was again shouting after me:

“What! not come yet?”

And I rushed into my redoubtable master’s study.

Otto Liedenbrock had no mischief in him, I willingly allow that; but unless he very considerably changes as he grows older, at the end he will be a most original character.

He was professor at the Johannæum, and was delivering a series of lectures on mineralogy, in the course of every one of which he broke into a passion once or twice at least. Not at all that he was over-anxious about the improvement of his class, or about the degree of attention with which they listened to him, or the success which might eventually crown his labours. Such little matters of detail never troubled him much. His teaching was as the German philosophy calls it, ‘subjective’; it was to benefit himself, not others. He was a learned egotist. He was a well of science, and the pulleys worked uneasily when you wanted to draw anything out of it. In a word, he was a learned miser.

Germany has not a few professors of this sort.

To his misfortune, my uncle was not gifted with a sufficiently rapid utterance; not, to be sure, when he was talking at home, but certainly in his public delivery; this is a want much to be deplored in a speaker. The fact is, that during the course of his lectures at the Johannæum, the Professor often came to a complete standstill; he fought with wilful words that refused to pass his struggling lips, such words as resist and distend the cheeks, and at last break out into the unasked-for shape of a round and most unscientific oath: then his fury would gradually abate.

Now in mineralogy there are many half-Greek and half-Latin terms, very hard to articulate, and which would be most trying to a poet's measures. I don't wish to say a word against so respectable a science, far be that from me. True, in the august presence of rhombohedral crystals, retinasphaltic resins, gehlenites, Fassaites, molybdenites, tungstates of manganese, and titanite of zirconium, why, the most facile of tongues may make a slip now and then.

It therefore happened that this venial fault of my uncle's came to be pretty well understood in time, and an unfair advantage was taken of it; the students laid wait for him in dangerous places, and when he began to stumble, loud was the laughter, which is not in good taste, not even in Germans. And if there was always a full audience to honour the Liedenbrock courses, I should be sorry to conjecture how many came to make merry at my uncle's expense.

Nevertheless my good uncle was a man of deep learning — a fact I am most anxious to assert and reassert. Sometimes he might irretrievably injure a specimen by his too great ardour in handling it; but still he united the genius of a true geologist with the keen eye of the mineralogist. Armed with his hammer, his steel pointer, his magnetic needles, his blowpipe, and his bottle of nitric acid, he was a powerful man of science. He would refer any mineral to its proper place among the six hundred elementary substances now enumerated, by its fracture, its appearance, its hardness, its fusibility, its sonorousness, its smell, and its taste.

The name of Liedenbrock was honourably mentioned in colleges and learned societies. Humphry Davy, Humboldt, Captain Sir John Franklin, General Sabine, never failed to call upon him on their way through Hamburg. Becquerel, Ebelman, Brewster, Dumas, Milne-Edwards, Saint-Claire-Deville frequently consulted him upon the most difficult problems in chemistry, a science which was indebted to him for considerable discoveries, for in 1853 there had appeared at Leipzig an imposing folio by Otto Liedenbrock, entitled, “A Treatise upon Transcendental Chemistry,” with plates; a work, however, which failed to cover its expenses.

To all these titles to honour let me add that my uncle was the curator of the museum of mineralogy formed by M. Struve, the Russian ambassador; a most valuable collection, the fame of which is European.

Such was the gentleman who addressed me in that impetuous manner. Fancy a tall, spare man, of an iron constitution, and with a fair complexion which took off a good ten years from the fifty he must own to. His restless eyes were in incessant motion behind his full-sized spectacles. His long, thin nose was like a knife blade. Boys have been heard to remark that that organ was magnetised and attracted iron filings. But this was merely a mischievous report; it had no attraction except for snuff, which it seemed to draw to itself in great quantities.

When I have added, to complete my portrait, that my uncle walked by mathematical strides of a yard and a half, and that in walking he kept his fists firmly closed, a sure sign of an irritable temperament, I think I shall have said enough to disenchant any one who should by mistake have coveted much of his company.

He lived in his own little house in Königstrasse, a structure half brick and half wood, with a gable cut into steps; it looked upon one of those winding canals which intersect each other in the middle of the ancient quarter of Hamburg, and which the great fire of 1842 had fortunately spared.

Sixty-three. (Tr.)

As Sir Humphry Davy died in 1829, the translator must be pardoned for pointing out here an anachronism, unless we are to assume that the learned Professor’s celebrity dawned in his earliest years. (Tr.)

It is true that the old house stood slightly off the perpendicular, and bulged out a little towards the street; its roof sloped a little to one side, like the cap over the left ear of a Tugendbund student; its lines wanted accuracy; but after all, it stood firm, thanks to an old elm which buttressed it in front, and which often in spring sent its young sprays through the window panes.

My uncle was tolerably well off for a German professor. The house was his own, and everything in it. The living contents were his god-daughter Gräuben, a young Virlandaise of seventeen, Martha, and myself. As his nephew and an orphan, I became his laboratory assistant.

I freely confess that I was exceedingly fond of geology and all its kindred sciences; the blood of a mineralogist was in my veins, and in the midst of my specimens I was always happy.

In a word, a man might live happily enough in the little old house in the Königstrasse, in spite of the restless impatience of its master, for although he was a little too excitable — he was very fond of me. But the man had no notion how to wait; nature herself was too slow for him. In April, after he had planted in the terra-cotta pots outside his window seedling plants of mignonette and convolvulus, he would go and give them a little pull by their leaves to make them grow faster. In dealing with such a strange individual there was nothing for it but prompt obedience. I therefore rushed after him.

CHAPTER II.

A MYSTERY TO BE SOLVED AT ANY PRICE

That study of his was a museum, and nothing else. Specimens of everything known in mineralogy lay there in their places in perfect order, and correctly named, divided into inflammable, metallic, and lithoid minerals.

How well I knew all these bits of science! Many a time, instead of enjoying the company of lads of my own age, I had preferred dusting these graphites, anthracites, coals, lignites, and peats! And there were bitumens, resins, organic salts, to be protected from the least grain of dust; and metals, from iron to gold, metals whose current value altogether disappeared in the presence of the republican equality of scientific specimens; and stones too, enough to rebuild entirely the house in Königstrasse, even with a handsome additional room, which would have suited me admirably.

But on entering this study now I thought of none of all these wonders; my uncle alone filled my thoughts. He had thrown himself into a velvet easy-chair, and was grasping between his hands a book over which he bent, pondering with intense admiration.

“Here’s a remarkable book! What a wonderful book!” he was exclaiming.

These ejaculations brought to my mind the fact that my uncle was liable to occasional fits of bibliomania; but no old book had any value in his eyes unless it had the virtue of being nowhere else to be found, or, at any rate, of being illegible.

“Well, now; don’t you see it yet? Why I have got a priceless treasure, that I found his morning, in rummaging in old Hevelius’s shop, the Jew.”

“Magnificent!” I replied, with a good imitation of enthusiasm.

What was the good of all this fuss about an old quarto, bound in rough calf, a yellow, faded volume, with a ragged seal depending from it?

But for all that there was no lull yet in the admiring exclamations of the Professor.

“See,” he went on, both asking the questions and supplying the answers. “Isn’t it a beauty? Yes; splendid! Did you ever see such a binding? Doesn’t the book open easily? Yes; it stops open anywhere. But does it shut equally well? Yes; for the binding and the leaves are flush, all in a straight line, and no gaps or openings anywhere. And look at its back, after seven hundred years. Why, Bozerian, Closs, or Purgold might have been proud of such a binding!”

While rapidly making these comments my uncle kept opening and shutting the old tome. I really could do no less than ask a question about its contents, although I did not feel the slightest interest.

“And what is the title of this marvellous work?” I asked with an affected eagerness which he must have been very blind not to see through.

“This work,” replied my uncle, firing up with renewed enthusiasm,

“this work is the Heims Kringla of Snorre Turlleson, the most famous

Icelandic author of the twelfth century! It is the chronicle of the

Norwegian princes who ruled in Iceland.”

“Indeed;” I cried, keeping up wonderfully, “of course it is a German translation?”

“What!” sharply replied the Professor, “a translation! What should I do with a translation? This is the Icelandic original, in the magnificent idiomatic vernacular, which is both rich and simple, and admits of an infinite variety of grammatical combinations and verbal modifications.”

“Like German.” I happily ventured.

“Yes,” replied my uncle, shrugging his shoulders; “but, in addition to all this, the Icelandic has three numbers like the Greek, and irregular declensions of nouns proper like the Latin.”

“Ah!” said I, a little moved out of my indifference; “and is the type good?”

“Type! What do you mean by talking of type, wretched Axel? Type! Do you take it for a printed book, you ignorant fool? It is a manuscript, a Runic manuscript.”

“Runic?”

“Yes. Do you want me to explain what that is?”

“Of course not,” I replied in the tone of an injured man. But my uncle persevered, and told me, against my will, of many things I cared nothing about.

“Runic characters were in use in Iceland in former ages. They were invented, it is said, by Odin himself. Look there, and wonder, impious young man, and admire these letters, the invention of the Scandinavian god!”

Well, well! not knowing what to say, I was going to prostrate myself before this wonderful book, a way of answering equally pleasing to gods and kings, and which has the advantage of never giving them any embarrassment, when a little incident happened to divert conversation into another channel.

This was the appearance of a dirty slip of parchment, which slipped out of the volume and fell upon the floor.

My uncle pounced upon this shred with incredible avidity. An old document, enclosed an immemorial time within the folds of this old book, had for him an immeasurable value.

“What’s this?” he cried.

And he laid out upon the table a piece of parchment, five inches by three, and along which were traced certain mysterious characters.

Here is the exact facsimile. I think it important to let these strange signs be publicly known, for they were the means of drawing on Professor Liedenbrock and his nephew to undertake the most wonderful expedition of the nineteenth century.

[Runic glyphs occur here]

The Professor mused a few moments over this series of characters; then raising his spectacles he pronounced:

“These are Runic letters; they are exactly like those of the manuscript of Snorre Turlleson. But, what on earth is their meaning?”

Runic letters appearing to my mind to be an invention of the learned to mystify this poor world, I was not sorry to see my uncle suffering the pangs of mystification. At least, so it seemed to me, judging from his fingers, which were beginning to work with terrible energy.

“It is certainly old Icelandic,” he muttered between his teeth.

And Professor Liedenbrock must have known, for he was acknowledged to be quite a polyglot. Not that he could speak fluently in the two thousand languages and twelve thousand dialects which are spoken on the earth, but he knew at least his share of them.

So he was going, in the presence of this difficulty, to give way to all the impetuosity of his character, and I was preparing for a violent outbreak, when two o’clock struck by the little timepiece over the fireplace.

At that moment our good housekeeper Martha opened the study door, saying:

“Dinner is ready!”

I am afraid he sent that soup to where it would boil away to nothing, and Martha took to her heels for safety. I followed her, and hardly knowing how I got there I found myself seated in my usual place.

I waited a few minutes. No Professor came. Never within my remembrance had he missed the important ceremonial of dinner. And yet what a good dinner it was! There was parsley soup, an omelette of ham garnished with spiced sorrel, a fillet of veal with compote of prunes; for dessert, crystallised fruit; the whole washed down with sweet Moselle.

All this my uncle was going to sacrifice to a bit of old parchment. As an affectionate and attentive nephew I considered it my duty to eat for him as well as for myself, which I did conscientiously.

“I have never known such a thing,” said Martha. “M. Liedenbrock is not at table!”

“Who could have believed it?” I said, with my mouth full.

“Something serious is going to happen,” said the servant, shaking her head.

My opinion was, that nothing more serious would happen than an awful scene when my uncle should have discovered that his dinner was devoured. I had come to the last of the fruit when a very loud voice tore me away from the pleasures of my dessert. With one spring I bounded out of the dining-room into the study.

CHAPTER III.

THE RUNIC WRITING EXERCISES THE PROFESSOR

“Undoubtedly it is Runic,” said the Professor, bending his brows; “but there is a secret in it, and I mean to discover the key.”

A violent gesture finished the sentence.

“Sit there,” he added, holding out his fist towards the table. “Sit there, and write.”

I was seated in a trice.

“Now I will dictate to you every letter of our alphabet which corresponds with each of these Icelandic characters. We will see what that will give us. But, by St. Michael, if you should dare to deceive me — ”

The dictation commenced. I did my best. Every letter was given me one after the other, with the following remarkable result:

mm.rnlls esrevel seecIde sgtssmf vnteief niedrke kt,samn atrateS saodrrn emtnaeI nvaect rrilSa Atsaar .nvcrc ieaabs ccrmi eevtVl frAntv dt,iac oseibo KediiI

[Redactor: In the original version the initial letter is an ‘m’ with a superscore over it. It is my supposition that this is the translator’s way of writing ‘mm’ and I have replaced it accordingly, since our typography does not allow such a character.]

When this work was ended my uncle tore the paper from me and examined it attentively for a long time.

“What does it all mean?” he kept repeating mechanically.

Upon my honour I could not have enlightened him. Besides he did not ask me, and he went on talking to himself.

“This is what is called a cryptogram, or cipher,” he said, “in which letters are purposely thrown in confusion, which if properly arranged would reveal their sense. Only think that under this jargon there may lie concealed the clue to some great discovery!”

As for me, I was of opinion that there was nothing at all, in it; though, of course, I took care not to say so.

Then the Professor took the book and the parchment, and diligently compared them together.

“These two writings are not by the same hand,” he said; “the cipher is of later date than the book, an undoubted proof of which I see in a moment. The first letter is a double m, a letter which is not to be found in Turlleson’s book, and which was only added to the alphabet in the fourteenth century. Therefore there are two hundred years between the manuscript and the document.”

I admitted that this was a strictly logical conclusion.

“I am therefore led to imagine,” continued my uncle, “that some possessor of this book wrote these mysterious letters. But who was that possessor? Is his name nowhere to be found in the manuscript?”

My uncle raised his spectacles, took up a strong lens, and carefully examined the blank pages of the book. On the front of the second, the title-page, he noticed a sort of stain which looked like an ink blot. But in looking at it very closely he thought he could distinguish some half-effaced letters. My uncle at once fastened upon this as the centre of interest, and he laboured at that blot, until by the help of his microscope he ended by making out the following Runic characters which he read without difficulty.

“Arne Saknussemm!” he cried in triumph. “Why that is the name of another Icelander, a savant of the sixteenth century, a celebrated alchemist!”

I gazed at my uncle with satisfactory admiration.

“Those alchemists,” he resumed, “Avicenna, Bacon, Lully, Paracelsus, were the real and only savants of their time. They made discoveries at which we are astonished. Has not this Saknussemm concealed under his cryptogram some surprising invention? It is so; it must be so!”

The Professor’s imagination took fire at this hypothesis.

“No doubt,” I ventured to reply, “but what interest would he have in thus hiding so marvellous a discovery?”

“Why? Why? How can I tell? Did not Galileo do the same by Saturn? We shall see. I will get at the secret of this document, and I will neither sleep nor eat until I have found it out.”

My comment on this was a half-suppressed “Oh!”

“Nor you either, Axel,” he added.

“The deuce!” said I to myself; “then it is lucky I have eaten two dinners to-day!”

“First of all we must find out the key to this cipher; that cannot be difficult.”

At these words I quickly raised my head; but my uncle went on soliloquising.

“There’s nothing easier. In this document there are a hundred and thirty-two letters, viz. seventy-seven consonants and fifty-five vowels. This is the proportion found in southern languages, whilst northern tongues are much richer in consonants; therefore this is in a southern language.”

These were very fair conclusions, I thought.

“But what language is it?”

Here I looked for a display of learning, but I met instead with profound analysis.

“This Saknussemm,” he went on, “was a very well-informed man; now since he was not writing in his own mother tongue, he would naturally select that which was currently adopted by the choice spirits of the sixteenth century; I mean Latin. If I am mistaken, I can but try Spanish, French, Italian, Greek, or Hebrew. But the savants of the sixteenth century generally wrote in Latin. I am therefore entitled to pronounce this, à priori, to be Latin. It is Latin.”

I jumped up in my chair. My Latin memories rose in revolt against the notion that these barbarous words could belong to the sweet language of Virgil.

“Yes, it is Latin,” my uncle went on; “but it is Latin confused and in disorder; “pertubata seu inordinata,” as Euclid has it.”

“Very well,” thought I, “if you can bring order out of that confusion, my dear uncle, you are a clever man.”

“Let us examine carefully,” said he again, taking up the leaf upon which I had written. “Here is a series of one hundred and thirty-two letters in apparent disorder. There are words consisting of consonants only, as nrrlls; others, on the other hand, in which vowels predominate, as for instance the fifth, uneeief, or the last but one, oseibo. Now this arrangement has evidently not been premeditated; it has arisen mathematically in obedience to the unknown law which has ruled in the succession of these letters. It appears to me a certainty that the original sentence was written in a proper manner, and afterwards distorted by a law which we have yet to discover. Whoever possesses the key of this cipher will read it with fluency. What is that key? Axel, have you got it?”

I answered not a word, and for a very good reason. My eyes had fallen upon a charming picture, suspended against the wall, the portrait of Gräuben. My uncle’s ward was at that time at Altona, staying with a relation, and in her absence I was very downhearted; for I may confess it to you now, the pretty Virlandaise and the professor’s nephew loved each other with a patience and a calmness entirely German. We had become engaged unknown to my uncle, who was too much taken up with geology to be able to enter into such feelings as ours. Gräuben was a lovely blue-eyed blonde, rather given to gravity and seriousness; but that did not prevent her from loving me very sincerely. As for me, I adored her, if there is such a word in the German language. Thus it happened that the picture of my pretty Virlandaise threw me in a moment out of the world of realities into that of memory and fancy.

There looked down upon me the faithful companion of my labours and my recreations. Every day she helped me to arrange my uncle’s precious specimens; she and I labelled them together. Mademoiselle Gräuben was an accomplished mineralogist; she could have taught a few things to a savant. She was fond of investigating abstruse scientific questions. What pleasant hours we have spent in study; and how often I envied the very stones which she handled with her charming fingers.

Then, when our leisure hours came, we used to go out together and turn into the shady avenues by the Alster, and went happily side by side up to the old windmill, which forms such an improvement to the landscape at the head of the lake. On the road we chatted hand in hand; I told her amusing tales at which she laughed heartilv. Then we reached the banks of the Elbe, and after having bid good-bye to the swan, sailing gracefully amidst the white water lilies, we returned to the quay by the steamer.

That is just where I was in my dream, when my uncle with a vehement thump on the table dragged me back to the realities of life.

“Come,” said he, “the very first idea which would come into any one’s head to confuse the letters of a sentence would be to write the words vertically instead of horizontally.”

“Indeed!” said I.

“Now we must see what would be the effect of that, Axel; put down upon this paper any sentence you like, only instead of arranging the letters in the usual way, one after the other, place them in succession in vertical columns, so as to group them together in five or six vertical lines.”

I caught his meaning, and immediately produced the following literary wonder:

I y l o a u l o l w r b o u , n G e v w m d r n e e y e a !

“Good,” said the professor, without reading them, “now set down those words in a horizontal line.”

I obeyed, and with this result:

Iyloau lolwrb ou,nGe vwmdrn eeyea!

“Excellent!” said my uncle, taking the paper hastily out of my hands. “This begins to look just like an ancient document: the vowels and the consonants are grouped together in equal disorder; there are even capitals in the middle of words, and commas too, just as in Saknussemm’s parchment.”

I considered these remarks very clever.

“Now,” said my uncle, looking straight at me, “to read the sentence which you have just written, and with which I am wholly unacquainted, I shall only have to take the first letter of each word, then the second, the third, and so forth.”

And my uncle, to his great astonishment, and my much greater, read:

“I love you well, my own dear Gräuben!”

“Hallo!” cried the Professor.

Yes, indeed, without knowing what I was about, like an awkward and unlucky lover, I had compromised myself by writing this unfortunate sentence.

“Aha! you are in love with Gräuben?” he said, with the right look for a guardian.

“Yes; no!” I stammered.

“You love Gräuben,” he went on once or twice dreamily. “Well, let us apply the process I have suggested to the document in question.”

My uncle, falling back into his absorbing contemplations, had already forgotten my imprudent words. I merely say imprudent, for the great mind of so learned a man of course had no place for love affairs, and happily the grand business of the document gained me the victory.

Just as the moment of the supreme experiment arrived the Professor’s eyes flashed right through his spectacles. There was a quivering in his fingers as he grasped the old parchment. He was deeply moved. At last he gave a preliminary cough, and with profound gravity, naming in succession the first, then the second letter of each word, he dictated me the following:

mmessvnkaSenrA.icefdoK.segnittamvrtn
ecertserrette,rotaisadva,ednecsedsadne
lacartniiilvIsiratracSarbmvtabiledmek meretarcsilvcoIsleffenSnI.

I confess I felt considerably excited in coming to the end; these letters named, one at a time, had carried no sense to my mind; I therefore waited for the Professor with great pomp to unfold the magnificent but hidden Latin of this mysterious phrase.

But who could have foretold the result? A violent thump made the furniture rattle, and spilt some ink, and my pen dropped from between my fingers.

“That’s not it,” cried my uncle, “there’s no sense in it.”

Then darting out like a shot, bowling down stairs like an avalanche, he rushed into the Königstrasse and fled.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ENEMY TO BE STARVED INTO SUBMISSION

“He is gone!” cried Martha, running out of her kitchen at the noise of the violent slamming of doors.

“Yes,” I replied, “completely gone.”

“Well; and how about his dinner?” said the old servant.

“He won’t have any.”

“And his supper?”

“He won’t have any.”

“What?” cried Martha, with clasped hands.

“No, my dear Martha, he will eat no more. No one in the house is to eat anything at all. Uncle Liedenbrock is going to make us all fast until he has succeeded in deciphering an undecipherable scrawl.”

“Oh, my dear! must we then all die of hunger?”

I hardly dared to confess that, with so absolute a ruler as my uncle, this fate was inevitable.

The old servant, visibly moved, returned to the kitchen, moaning piteously.

When I was alone, I thought I would go and tell Gräuben all about it. But how should I be able to escape from the house? The Professor might return at any moment. And suppose he called me? And suppose he tackled me again with this logomachy, which might vainly have been set before ancient Oedipus. And if I did not obey his call, who could answer for what might happen?

The wisest course was to remain where I was. A mineralogist at Besançon had just sent us a collection of siliceous nodules, which I had to classify: so I set to work; I sorted, labelled, and arranged in their own glass case all these hollow specimens, in the cavity of each of which was a nest of little crystals.

But this work did not succeed in absorbing all my attention. That old document kept working in my brain. My head throbbed with excitement, and I felt an undefined uneasiness. I was possessed with a presentiment of coming evil.

In an hour my nodules were all arranged upon successive shelves. Then I dropped down into the old velvet armchair, my head thrown back and my hands joined over it. I lighted my long crooked pipe, with a painting on it of an idle-looking naiad; then I amused myself watching the process of the conversion of the tobacco into carbon, which was by slow degrees making my naiad into a negress. Now and then I listened to hear whether a well-known step was on the stairs. No. Where could my uncle be at that moment? I fancied him running under the noble trees which line the road to Altona, gesticulating, making shots with his cane, thrashing the long grass, cutting the heads off the thistles, and disturbing the contemplative storks in their peaceful solitude.

Would he return in triumph or in discouragement? Which would get the upper hand, he or the secret? I was thus asking myself questions, and mechanically taking between my fingers the sheet of paper mysteriously disfigured with the incomprehensible succession of letters I had written down; and I repeated to myself "What does it all mean?"

I sought to group the letters so as to form words. Quite impossible! When I put them together by twos, threes, fives or sixes, nothing came of it but nonsense. To be sure the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth letters made the English word 'ice'; the eighty-third and two following made 'sir'; and in the midst of the document, in the second and third lines, I observed the words, "rots," "mutabile," "ira," "net," "atra."

"Come now," I thought, "these words seem to justify my uncle's view about the language of the document. In the fourth line appeared the word "luco", which means a sacred wood. It is true that in the third line was the word "tabiled", which looked like Hebrew, and in the last the purely French words "mer", "arc", "mere.""

All this was enough to drive a poor fellow crazy. Four different languages in this ridiculous sentence! What connection could there possibly be between such words as ice, sir, anger, cruel, sacred wood, changeable, mother, bow, and sea? The first and the last might have something to do with each other; it was not at all surprising that in a document written in Iceland there should be mention of a sea of ice; but it was quite another thing to get to the end of this cryptogram with so small a clue. So I was struggling with an insurmountable difficulty; my brain got heated, my eyes watered over that sheet of paper; its hundred and thirty-two letters seemed to flutter and fly around me like those motes of mingled light and darkness which float in the air around the head when the blood is rushing upwards with undue violence. I was a prey to a kind of hallucination; I was stifling; I wanted air. Unconsciously I fanned myself with the bit of paper, the back and front of which successively came before my eyes. What was my surprise when, in one of those rapid revolutions, at the moment when the back was turned to me I thought I caught sight of the Latin words “craterem,” “terrestre,” and others.

A sudden light burst in upon me; these hints alone gave me the first glimpse of the truth; I had discovered the key to the cipher. To read the document, it would not even be necessary to read it through the paper. Such as it was, just such as it had been dictated to me, so it might be spelt out with ease. All those ingenious professorial combinations were coming right. He was right as to the arrangement of the letters; he was right as to the language. He had been within a hair’s breadth of reading this Latin document from end to end; but that hair’s breadth, chance had given it to me!

You may be sure I felt stirred up. My eyes were dim, I could scarcely see. I had laid the paper upon the table. At a glance I could tell the whole secret.

At last I became more calm. I made a wise resolve to walk twice round the room quietly and settle my nerves, and then I returned into the deep gulf of the huge armchair.

“Now I’ll read it,” I cried, after having well distended my lungs with air.

I leaned over the table; I laid my finger successively upon every letter; and without a pause, without one moment’s hesitation, I read off the whole sentence aloud.

Stupefaction! terror! I sat overwhelmed as if with a sudden deadly blow. What! that which I read had actually, really been done! A mortal man had had the audacity to penetrate!...

“Ah!” I cried, springing up. “But no! no! My uncle shall never know it. He would insist upon doing it too. He would want to know all about it. Ropes could not hold him, such a determined geologist as he is! He would start, he would, in spite of everything and everybody, and he would take me with him, and we should never get back. No, never! never!”

My over-excitement was beyond all description.

“No! no! it shall not be,” I declared energetically; “and as it is in my power to prevent the knowledge of it coming into the mind of my tyrant, I will do it. By dint of turning this document round and round, he too might discover the key. I will destroy it.”

There was a little fire left on the hearth. I seized not only the paper but Saknussemm’s parchment; with a feverish hand I was about to fling it all upon the coals and utterly destroy and abolish this dangerous secret, when the study door opened, and my uncle appeared.

CHAPTER V.

FAMINE, THEN VICTORY, FOLLOWED BY DISMAY

I had only just time to replace the unfortunate document upon the table.

Professor Liedenbrock seemed to be greatly abstracted.

The ruling thought gave him no rest. Evidently he had gone deeply into the matter, analytically and with profound scrutiny. He had brought all the resources of his mind to bear upon it during his walk, and he had come back to apply some new combination.

He sat in his armchair, and pen in hand he began what looked very much like algebraic formula: I followed with my eyes his trembling hands, I took count of every movement. Might not some unhoped-for result come of it? I trembled, too, very unnecessarily, since the true key was in my hands, and no other would open the secret.

For three long hours my uncle worked on without a word, without lifting his head; rubbing out, beginning again, then rubbing out again, and so on a hundred times.

I knew very well that if he succeeded in setting down these letters in every possible relative position, the sentence would come out. But I knew also that twenty letters alone could form two quintillions, four hundred and thirty-two quadrillions, nine hundred and two trillions, eight billions, a hundred and seventy-six millions, six hundred and forty thousand combinations. Now, here were a hundred and thirty-two letters in this sentence, and these hundred and thirty-two letters would give a number of different sentences, each made up of at least a hundred and thirty-three figures, a number which passed far beyond all calculation or conception.

So I felt reassured as far as regarded this heroic method of solving the difficulty.

But time was passing away; night came on; the street noises ceased; my uncle, bending over his task, noticed nothing, not even Martha half opening the door; he heard not a sound, not even that excellent woman saying:

“Will not monsieur take any supper to-night?”

And poor Martha had to go away unanswered. As for me, after long resistance, I was overcome by sleep, and fell off at the end of the sofa, while uncle Liedenbrock went on calculating and rubbing out his calculations.

When I awoke next morning that indefatigable worker was still at his post. His red eyes, his pale complexion, his hair tangled between his feverish fingers, the red spots on his cheeks, revealed his desperate struggle with impossibilities, and the weariness of spirit, the mental wrestlings he must have undergone all through that unhappy night.

To tell the plain truth, I pitied him. In spite of the reproaches which I considered I had a right to lay upon him, a certain feeling of compassion was beginning to gain upon me. The poor man was so entirely taken up with his one idea that he had even forgotten how to get angry. All the strength of his feelings was concentrated upon one point alone; and as their usual vent was closed, it was to be feared lest extreme tension should give rise to an explosion sooner or later.

I might with a word have loosened the screw of the steel vice that was crushing his brain; but that word I would not speak.

Yet I was not an ill-natured fellow. Why was I dumb at such a crisis?

Why so insensible to my uncle's interests?

"No, no," I repeated, "I shall not speak. He would insist upon going; nothing on earth could stop him. His imagination is a volcano, and to do that which other geologists have never done he would risk his life. I will preserve silence. I will keep the secret which mere chance has revealed to me. To discover it, would be to kill Professor Liedenbrock! Let him find it out himself if he can. I will never have it laid to my door that I led him to his destruction."

Having formed this resolution, I folded my arms and waited. But I had not reckoned upon one little incident which turned up a few hours after.

When our good Martha wanted to go to Market, she found the door locked. The big key was gone. Who could have taken it out? Assuredly, it was my uncle, when he returned the night before from his hurried walk.

Was this done on purpose? Or was it a mistake? Did he want to reduce us by famine? This seemed like going rather too far! What! should Martha and I be victims of a position of things in which we had not the smallest interest? It was a fact that a few years before this, whilst my uncle was working at his great classification of minerals, he was forty-eight hours without eating, and all his household were obliged to share in this scientific fast. As for me, what I remember is, that I got severe cramps in my stomach, which hardly suited the constitution of a hungry, growing lad.

Now it appeared to me as if breakfast was going to be wanting, just as supper had been the night before. Yet I resolved to be a hero, and not to be conquered by the pangs of hunger. Martha took it very seriously, and, poor woman, was very much distressed. As for me, the impossibility of leaving the house distressed me a good deal more, and for a very good reason. A caged lover’s feelings may easily be imagined.

My uncle went on working, his imagination went off rambling into the ideal world of combinations; he was far away from earth, and really far away from earthly wants.

About noon hunger began to stimulate me severely. Martha had, without thinking any harm, cleared out the larder the night before, so that now there was nothing left in the house. Still I held out; I made it a point of honour.

Two o’clock struck. This was becoming ridiculous; worse than that, unbearable. I began to say to myself that I was exaggerating the importance of the document; that my uncle would surely not believe in it, that he would set it down as a mere puzzle; that if it came to the worst, we should lay violent hands on him and keep him at home if he thought on venturing on the expedition; that, after all, he might himself discover the key of the cipher, and that then I should be clear at the mere expense of my involuntary abstinence.

These reasons seemed excellent to me, though on the night before I should have rejected them with indignation; I even went so far as to condemn myself for my absurdity in having waited so long, and I finally resolved to let it all out.

I was therefore meditating a proper introduction to the matter, so as not to seem too abrupt, when the Professor jumped up, clapped on his hat, and prepared to go out.

Surely he was not going out, to shut us in again! no, never!

“Uncle!” I cried.

He seemed not to hear me.

“Uncle Liedenbrock!” I cried, lifting up my voice.

“Ay,” he answered like a man suddenly waking.

“Uncle, that key!”

“What key? The door key?”

“No, no!” I cried. “The key of the document.”

The Professor stared at me over his spectacles; no doubt he saw something unusual in the expression of my countenance; for he laid hold of my arm, and speechlessly questioned me with his eyes. Yes, never was a question more forcibly put.

I nodded my head up and down.

He shook his pityingly, as if he was dealing with a lunatic. I gave a more affirmative gesture.

His eyes glistened and sparkled with live fire, his hand was shaken threateningly.

This mute conversation at such a momentous crisis would have riveted the attention of the most indifferent. And the fact really was that I dared not speak now, so intense was the excitement for fear lest my uncle should smother me in his first joyful embraces. But he became so urgent that I was at last compelled to answer.

“Yes, that key, chance — ”

“What is that you are saying?” he shouted with indescribable emotion.

“There, read that!” I said, presenting a sheet of paper on which I had written.

“But there is nothing in this,” he answered, crumpling up the paper.

“No, nothing until you proceed to read from the end to the beginning.”

I had not finished my sentence when the Professor broke out into a cry, nay, a roar. A new revelation burst in upon him. He was transformed!

“Aha, clever Saknussemm!” he cried. “You had first written out your sentence the wrong way.”

And darting upon the paper, with eyes bedimmed, and voice choked with emotion, he read the whole document from the last letter to the first.

It was conceived in the following terms:

> In Sneffels Joculis craterem quem delibat
>
> Umbra Scartaris Julii intra calendas descende,
>
> Audax viator, et terrestre centrum attinges.
>
> Quod feci, Arne Saknussemm.

Which bad Latin may be translated thus:

“Descend, bold traveller, into the crater of the jokul of Sneffels, which the shadow of Scartaris touches before the kalends of July, and you will attain the centre of the earth; which I have done, Arne Saknussemm.”

In reading this, my uncle gave a spring as if he had touched a Leyden jar. His audacity, his joy, and his convictions were magnificent to behold. He came and he went; he seized his head between both his hands; he pushed the chairs out of their places, he piled up his books; incredible as it may seem, he rattled his precious nodules of flints together; he sent a kick here, a thump there. At last his nerves calmed down, and like a man exhausted by too lavish an expenditure of vital power, he sank back exhausted into his armchair.

“What o’clock is it?” he asked after a few moments of silence.

“Three o’clock,” I replied.

“Is it really? The dinner-hour is past, and I did not know it. I am half dead with hunger. Come on, and after dinner — ”

In the cipher, audax is written avdas, and quod and quem, hod and ken. (Tr.)

“Well?”

“After dinner, pack up my trunk.”

“What?” I cried.

“And yours!” replied the indefatigable Professor, entering the dining-room.

CHAPTER VI.

EXCITING DISCUSSIONS ABOUT AN UNPARALLELED ENTERPRISE

At these words a cold shiver ran through me. Yet I controlled myself; I even resolved to put a good face upon it. Scientific arguments alone could have any weight with Professor Liedenbrock. Now there were good ones against the practicability of such a journey. Penetrate to the centre of the earth! What nonsense! But I kept my dialectic battery in reserve for a suitable opportunity, and I interested myself in the prospect of my dinner, which was not yet forthcoming.

It is no use to tell of the rage and imprecations of my uncle before the empty table. Explanations were given, Martha was set at liberty, ran off to the market, and did her part so well that in an hour afterwards my hunger was appeased, and I was able to return to the contemplation of the gravity of the situation.

During all dinner time my uncle was almost merry; he indulged in some of those learned jokes which never do anybody any harm. Dessert over, he beckoned me into his study.

I obeyed; he sat at one end of his table, I at the other.

“Axel,” said he very mildly; “you are a very ingenious young man, you have done me a splendid service, at a moment when, wearied out with the struggle, I was going to abandon the contest. Where should I have lost myself? None can tell. Never, my lad, shall I forget it; and you shall have your share in the glory to which your discovery will lead.”

“Oh, come!” thought I, “he is in a good way. Now is the time for discussing that same glory.”

“Before all things,” my uncle resumed, “I enjoin you to preserve the most inviolable secrecy: you understand? There are not a few in the scientific world who envy my success, and many would be ready to undertake this enterprise, to whom our return should be the first news of it.”

“Do you really think there are many people bold enough?” said I.

“Certainly; who would hesitate to acquire such renown? If that document were divulged, a whole army of geologists would be ready to rush into the footsteps of Arne Saknussemm.”

“I don’t feel so very sure of that, uncle,” I replied; “for we have no proof of the authenticity of this document.”

“What! not of the book, inside which we have discovered it?”

“Granted. I admit that Saknussemm may have written these lines. But does it follow that he has really accomplished such a journey? And may it not be that this old parchment is intended to mislead?”

I almost regretted having uttered this last word, which dropped from me in an unguarded moment. The Professor bent his shaggy brows, and I feared I had seriously compromised my own safety. Happily no great harm came of it. A smile flitted across the lip of my severe companion, and he answered:

“That is what we shall see.”

“Ah!” said I, rather put out. “But do let me exhaust all the possible objections against this document.”

“Speak, my boy, don’t be afraid. You are quite at liberty to express your opinions. You are no longer my nephew only, but my colleague. Pray go on.”

“Well, in the first place, I wish to ask what are this Jokul, this

Sneffels, and this Scartaris, names which I have never heard before?”

“Nothing easier. I received not long ago a map from my friend, Augustus Petermann, at Liepzig. Nothing could be more apropos. Take down the third atlas in the second shelf in the large bookcase, series Z, plate 4.”

I rose, and with the help of such precise instructions could not fail to find the required atlas. My uncle opened it and said:

“Here is one of the best maps of Iceland, that of Handersen, and I believe this will solve the worst of our difficulties.”

I bent over the map.

“You see this volcanic island,” said the Professor; “observe that all the volcanoes are called jokuls, a word which means glacier in Icelandic, and under the high latitude of Iceland nearly all the active volcanoes discharge through beds of ice. Hence this term of jokul is applied to all the eruptive mountains in Iceland.”

“Very good,” said I; “but what of Sneffels?”

I was hoping that this question would be unanswerable; but I was mistaken. My uncle replied:

“Follow my finger along the west coast of Iceland. Do you see Rejkiavik, the capital? You do. Well; ascend the innumerable fiords that indent those sea-beaten shores, and stop at the sixty-fifth degree of latitude. What do you see there?”

“I see a peninsula looking like a thigh bone with the knee bone at the end of it.”

“A very fair comparison, my lad. Now do you see anything upon that knee bone?”

“Yes; a mountain rising out of the sea.”

“Right. That is Snæfell.”

“That Snæfell?”

“It is. It is a mountain five thousand feet high, one of the most remarkable in the world, if its crater leads down to the centre of the earth.”

“But that is impossible,” I said shrugging my shoulders, and disgusted at such a ridiculous supposition.

“Impossible?” said the Professor severely; “and why, pray?”

“Because this crater is evidently filled with lava and burning rocks, and therefore — ”

“But suppose it is an extinct volcano?”

“Extinct?”

“Yes; the number of active volcanoes on the surface of the globe is at the present time only about three hundred. But there is a very much larger number of extinct ones. Now, Snæfell is one of these. Since historic times there has been but one eruption of this mountain, that of 1219; from that time it has quieted down more and more, and now it is no longer reckoned among active volcanoes.”

To such positive statements I could make no reply. I therefore took refuge in other dark passages of the document.

“What is the meaning of this word Scartaris, and what have the kalends of July to do with it?”

My uncle took a few minutes to consider. For one short moment I felt a ray of hope, speedily to be extinguished. For he soon answered thus:

“What is darkness to you is light to me. This proves the ingenious care with which Saknussemm guarded and defined his discovery. Sneffels, or Snæfell, has several craters. It was therefore necessary to point out which of these leads to the centre of the globe. What did the Icelandic sage do? He observed that at the approach of the kalends of July, that is to say in the last days of June, one of the peaks, called Scartaris, flung its shadow down the mouth of that particular crater, and he committed that fact to his document. Could there possibly have been a more exact guide? As soon as we have arrived at the summit of Snæfell we shall have no hesitation as to the proper road to take.”

Decidedly, my uncle had answered every one of my objections. I saw that his position on the old parchment was impregnable. I therefore ceased to press him upon that part of the subject, and as above all things he must be convinced, I passed on to scientific objections, which in my opinion were far more serious.

“Well, then,” I said, “I am forced to admit that Saknussemm’s sentence is clear, and leaves no room for doubt. I will even allow that the document bears every mark and evidence of authenticity. That learned philosopher did get to the bottom of Sneffels, he has seen the shadow of Scartaris touch the edge of the crater before the kalends of July; he may even have heard the legendary stories told in his day about that crater reaching to the centre of the world; but as for reaching it himself, as for performing the journey, and returning, if he ever went, I say no — he never, never did that.”

“Now for your reason?” said my uncle ironically.

“All the theories of science demonstrate such a feat to be impracticable.”

“The theories say that, do they?” replied the Professor in the tone of a meek disciple. “Oh! unpleasant theories! How the theories will hinder us, won’t they?”

I saw that he was only laughing at me; but I went on all the same.

“Yes; it is perfectly well known that the internal temperature rises one degree for every 70 feet in depth; now, admitting this proportion to be constant, and the radius of the earth being fifteen hundred leagues, there must be a temperature of 360,032 degrees at the centre of the earth. Therefore, all the substances that compose the body of this earth must exist there in a state of incandescent gas; for the metals that most resist the action of heat, gold, and platinum, and the hardest rocks, can never be either solid or liquid under such a temperature. I have therefore good reason for asking if it is possible to penetrate through such a medium.”

“So, Axel, it is the heat that troubles you?”

“Of course it is. Were we to reach a depth of thirty miles we should have arrived at the limit of the terrestrial crust, for there the temperature will be more than 2372 degrees.”

“Are you afraid of being put into a state of fusion?”

“I will leave you to decide that question,” I answered rather sullenly. “This is my decision,” replied Professor Liedenbrock, putting on one of his grandest airs. “Neither you nor anybody else knows with any certainty what is going on in the interior of this globe, since not the twelve thousandth part of its radius is known; science is eminently perfectible; and every new theory is soon routed by a newer. Was it not always believed until Fourier that the temperature of the interplanetary spaces decreased perpetually? and is it not known at the present time that the greatest cold of the ethereal regions is never lower than 40 degrees below zero Fahr.? Why should it not be the same with the internal heat? Why should it not, at a certain depth, attain an impassable limit, instead of rising to such a point as to fuse the most infusible metals?”

As my uncle was now taking his stand upon hypotheses, of course, there was nothing to be said.

“Well, I will tell you that true savants, amongst them Poisson, have demonstrated that if a heat of 360,000 degrees existed in the interior of the globe, the fiery gases arising from the fused matter would acquire an elastic force which the crust of the earth would be unable to resist, and that it would explode like the plates of a bursting boiler.”

“That is Poisson’s opinion, my uncle, nothing more.”

“Granted. But it is likewise the creed adopted by other distinguished geologists, that the interior of the globe is neither gas nor water, nor any of the heaviest minerals known, for in none of these cases would the earth weigh what it does.”

“Oh, with figures you may prove anything!”

“But is it the same with facts! Is it not known that the number of volcanoes has diminished since the first days of creation? and if there is central heat may we not thence conclude that it is in process of diminution?”

“My good uncle, if you will enter into the legion of speculation, I can discuss the matter no longer.”

“But I have to tell you that the highest names have come to the support of my views. Do you remember a visit paid to me by the celebrated chemist, Humphry Davy, in 1825?”

“Not at all, for I was not born until nineteen years afterwards.”

“Well, Humphry Davy did call upon me on his way through Hamburg. We were long engaged in discussing, amongst other problems, the hypothesis of the liquid structure of the terrestrial nucleus. We were agreed that it could not be in a liquid state, for a reason which science has never been able to confute.”

The degrees of temperature are given by Jules Verne according to the centigrade system, for which we will in each case substitute the Fahrenheit measurement. (Tr.)

“What is that reason?” I said, rather astonished.

“Because this liquid mass would be subject, like the ocean, to the lunar attraction, and therefore twice every day there would be internal tides, which, upheaving the terrestrial crust, would cause periodical earthquakes!”

“Yet it is evident that the surface of the globe has been subject to the action of fire,” I replied, “and it is quite reasonable to suppose that the external crust cooled down first, whilst the heat took refuge down to the centre.”

“Quite a mistake,” my uncle answered. “The earth has been heated by combustion on its surface, that is all. Its surface was composed of a great number of metals, such as potassium and sodium, which have the peculiar property of igniting at the mere contact with air and water; these metals kindled when the atmospheric vapours fell in rain upon the soil; and by and by, when the waters penetrated into the fissures of the crust of the earth, they broke out into fresh combustion with explosions and eruptions. Such was the cause of the numerous volcanoes at the origin of the earth.”

“Upon my word, this is a very clever hypothesis,” I exclaimed, in spite rather of myself.

“And which Humphry Davy demonstrated to me by a simple experiment. He formed a small ball of the metals which I have named, and which was a very fair representation of our globe; whenever he caused a fine dew of rain to fall upon its surface, it heaved up into little monticules, it became oxydized and formed miniature mountains; a crater broke open at one of its summits; the eruption took place, and communicated to the whole of the ball such a heat that it could not be held in the hand.”

In truth, I was beginning to be shaken by the Professor’s arguments, besides which he gave additional weight to them by his usual ardour and fervent enthusiasm.

“You see, Axel,” he added, “the condition of the terrestrial nucleus has given rise to various hypotheses among geologists; there is no proof at all for this internal heat; my opinion is that there is no such thing, it cannot be; besides we shall see for ourselves, and, like Arne Saknussemm, we shall know exactly what to hold as truth concerning this grand question.”

“Very well, we shall see,” I replied, feeling myself carried off by his contagious enthusiasm. “Yes, we shall see; that is, if it is possible to see anything there.”

“And why not? May we not depend upon electric phenomena to give us light? May we not even expect light from the atmosphere, the pressure of which may render it luminous as we approach the centre?”

“Yes, yes,” said I; “that is possible, too.”

“It is certain,” exclaimed my uncle in a tone of triumph. “But silence, do you hear me? silence upon the whole subject; and let no one get before us in this design of discovering the centre of the earth.”

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN’S COURAGE

Thus ended this memorable seance. That conversation threw me into a fever. I came out of my uncle’s study as if I had been stunned, and as if there was not air enough in all the streets of Hamburg to put me right again. I therefore made for the banks of the Elbe, where the steamer lands her passengers, which forms the communication between the city and the Hamburg railway.

Was I convinced of the truth of what I had heard? Had I not bent under the iron rule of the Professor Liedenbrock? Was I to believe him in earnest in his intention to penetrate to the centre of this massive globe? Had I been listening to the mad speculations of a lunatic, or to the scientific conclusions of a lofty genius? Where did truth stop? Where did error begin?

I was all adrift amongst a thousand contradictory hypotheses, but I could not lay hold of one.

Yet I remembered that I had been convinced, although now my enthusiasm was beginning to cool down; but I felt a desire to start at once, and not to lose time and courage by calm reflection. I had at that moment quite courage enough to strap my knapsack to my shoulders and start.

But I must confess that in another hour this unnatural excitement abated, my nerves became unstrung, and from the depths of the abysses of this earth I ascended to its surface again.

“It is quite absurd!” I cried, “there is no sense about it. No sensible young man should for a moment entertain such a proposal. The whole thing is non-existent. I have had a bad night, I have been dreaming of horrors.”

But I had followed the banks of the Elbe and passed the town. After passing the port too, I had reached the Altona road. I was led by a presentiment, soon to be realised; for shortly I espied my little Gräuben bravely returning with her light step to Hamburg.

“Gräuben!” I cried from afar off.

The young girl stopped, rather frightened perhaps to hear her name called after her on the high road. Ten yards more, and I had joined her.

“Axel!” she cried surprised. “What! have you come to meet me? Is this why you are here, sir?”

But when she had looked upon me, Gräuben could not fail to see the uneasiness and distress of my mind.

“What is the matter?” she said, holding out her hand.

“What is the matter, Gräuben?” I cried.

In a couple of minutes my pretty Virlandaise was fully informed of the position of affairs. For a time she was silent. Did her heart palpitate as mine did? I don’t know about that, but I know that her hand did not tremble in mine. We went on a hundred yards without speaking.

At last she said, “Axel!”

“My dear Gräuben.”

“That will be a splendid journey!”

I gave a bound at these words.

“Yes, Axel, a journey worthy of the nephew of a savant; it is a good thing for a man to be distinguished by some great enterprise.”

“What, Gräuben, won’t you dissuade me from such an undertaking?”

“No, my dear Axel, and I would willingly go with you, but that a poor girl would only be in your way.”

“Is that quite true?”

“It is true.”

Ah! women and young girls, how incomprehensible are your feminine hearts! When you are not the timidest, you are the bravest of creatures. Reason has nothing to do with your actions. What! did this child encourage me in such an expedition! Would she not be afraid to join it herself? And she was driving me to it, one whom she loved!

I was disconcerted, and, if I must tell the whole truth, I was ashamed.

“Gräuben, we will see whether you will say the same thing to-morrow.”

“To-morrow, dear Axel, I will say what I say to-day.”

Gräuben and I, hand in hand, but in silence, pursued our way. The emotions of that day were breaking my heart.

After all, I thought, the kalends of July are a long way off, and between this and then many things may take place which will cure my uncle of his desire to travel underground.

It was night when we arrived at the house in Königstrasse. I expected to find all quiet there, my uncle in bed as was his custom, and Martha giving her last touches with the feather brush.

But I had not taken into account the Professor's impatience. I found him shouting — and working himself up amidst a crowd of porters and messengers who were all depositing various loads in the passage. Our old servant was at her wits' end.

"Come, Axel, come, you miserable wretch," my uncle cried from as far off as he could see me. "Your boxes are not packed, and my papers are not arranged; where's the key of my carpet bag? and what have you done with my gaiters?"

I stood thunderstruck. My voice failed. Scarcely could my lips utter the words:

"Are we really going?"

"Of course, you unhappy boy! Could I have dreamed that you would have gone out for a walk instead of hurrying your preparations forward?"

"Are we to go?" I asked again, with sinking hopes.

"Yes; the day after to-morrow, early."

I could hear no more. I fled for refuge into my own little room.

All hope was now at an end. My uncle had been all the morning making purchases of a part of the tools and apparatus required for this desperate undertaking. The passage was encumbered with rope ladders, knotted cords, torches, flasks, grappling irons, alpenstocks, pickaxes, iron shod sticks, enough to load ten men.

I spent an awful night. Next morning I was called early. I had quite decided I would not open the door. But how was I to resist the sweet voice which was always music to my ears, saying, “My dear Axel?”

I came out of my room. I thought my pale countenance and my red and sleepless eyes would work upon Gräuben’s sympathies and change her mind.

“Ah! my dear Axel,” she said. “I see you are better. A night’s rest has done you good.”

“Done me good!” I exclaimed.

I rushed to the glass. Well, in fact I did look better than I had expected. I could hardly believe my own eyes.

“Axel,” she said, “I have had a long talk with my guardian. He is a bold philosopher, a man of immense courage, and you must remember that his blood flows in your veins. He has confided to me his plans, his hopes, and why and how he hopes to attain his object. He will no doubt succeed. My dear Axel, it is a grand thing to devote yourself to science! What honour will fall upon Herr Liedenbrock, and so be reflected upon his companion! When you return, Axel, you will be a man, his equal, free to speak and to act independently, and free to — ”

The dear girl only finished this sentence by blushing. Her words revived me. Yet I refused to believe we should start. I drew Gräuben into the Professor’s study.

“Uncle, is it true that we are to go?”

“Why do you doubt?”

“Well, I don’t doubt,” I said, not to vex him; “but, I ask, what need is there to hurry?”

“Time, time, flying with irreparable rapidity.”

“But it is only the 16th May, and until the end of June — ”

“What, you monument of ignorance! do you think you can get to Iceland in a couple of days? If you had not deserted me like a fool I should have taken you to the Copenhagen office, to Liffender & Co. and you would have learned then that there is only one trip every month from Copenhagen to Rejkiavik, on the 22nd.”

“Well?”

“Well, if we waited for the 22nd June we should be too late to see the shadow of Scartaris touch the crater of Sneffels. Therefore we must get to Copenhagen as fast as we can to secure our passage. Go and pack up.”

There was no reply to this. I went up to my room. Gräuben followed me. She undertook to pack up all things necessary for my voyage. She was no more moved than if I had been starting for a little trip to Lübeck or Heligoland. Her little hands moved without haste. She talked quietly. She supplied me with sensible reasons for our expedition. She delighted me, and yet I was angry with her. Now and then I felt I ought to break out into a passion, but she took no notice and went on her way as methodically as ever.

Finally the last strap was buckled; I came downstairs. All that day the philosophical instrument makers and the electricians kept coming and going. Martha was distracted.

“Is master mad?” she asked.

I nodded my head.

“And is he going to take you with him?”

I nodded again.

“Where to?”

I pointed with my finger downward.

“Down into the cellar?” cried the old servant.

“No,” I said. “Lower down than that.”

Night came. But I knew nothing about the lapse of time.

“To-morrow morning at six precisely,” my uncle decreed “we start.”

At ten o’clock I fell upon my bed, a dead lump of inert matter. All through the night terror had hold of me. I spent it dreaming of abysses. I was a prey to delirium. I felt myself grasped by the Professor’s sinewy hand, dragged along, hurled down, shattered into little bits. I dropped down unfathomable precipices with the accelerating velocity of bodies falling through space. My life had become an endless fall. I awoke at five with shattered nerves, trembling and weary. I came downstairs. My uncle was at table, devouring his breakfast. I stared at him with horror and disgust. But dear Gräuben was there; so I said nothing, and could eat nothing.

At half-past five there was a rattle of wheels outside. A large carriage was there to take us to the Altona railway station. It was soon piled up with my uncle's multifarious preparations.

“Where's your box?” he cried.

“It is ready,” I replied, with faltering voice.

“Then make haste down, or we shall lose the train.”

It was now manifestly impossible to maintain the struggle against destiny. I went up again to my room, and rolling my portmanteaus downstairs I darted after him.

At that moment my uncle was solemnly investing Gräuben with the reins of government. My pretty Virlandaise was as calm and collected as was her wont. She kissed her guardian; but could not restrain a tear in touching my cheek with her gentle lips.

“Gräuben!” I murmured.

“Go, my dear Axel, go! I am now your betrothed; and when you come back I will be your wife.”

I pressed her in my arms and took my place in the carriage. Martha and the young girl, standing at the door, waved their last farewell. Then the horses, roused by the driver's whistling, darted off at a gallop on the road to Altona.

CHAPTER VIII.

SERIOUS PREPARATIONS FOR VERTICAL DESCENT

Altona, which is but a suburb of Hamburg, is the terminus of the Kiel railway, which was to carry us to the Belts. In twenty minutes we were in Holstein.

At half-past six the carriage stopped at the station; my uncle’s numerous packages, his voluminous impedimenta, were unloaded, removed, labelled, weighed, put into the luggage vans, and at seven we were seated face to face in our compartment. The whistle sounded, the engine started, we were off.

Was I resigned? No, not yet. Yet the cool morning air and the scenes on the road, rapidly changed by the swiftness of the train, drew me away somewhat from my sad reflections.

As for the Professor’s reflections, they went far in advance of the swiftest express. We were alone in the carriage, but we sat in silence. My uncle examined all his pockets and his travelling bag with the minutest care. I saw that he had not forgotten the smallest matter of detail.

Amongst other documents, a sheet of paper, carefully folded, bore the heading of the Danish consulate with the signature of W. Christiensen, consul at Hamburg and the Professor’s friend. With this we possessed the proper introductions to the Governor of Iceland.

I also observed the famous document most carefully laid up in a secret pocket in his portfolio. I bestowed a malediction upon it, and then proceeded to examine the country.

It was a very long succession of uninteresting loamy and fertile flats, a very easy country for the construction of railways, and propitious for the laying-down of these direct level lines so dear to railway companies.

I had no time to get tired of the monotony; for in three hours we stopped at Kiel, close to the sea.

The luggage being labelled for Copenhagen, we had no occasion to look after it. Yet the Professor watched every article with jealous vigilance, until all were safe on board. There they disappeared in the hold.

My uncle, notwithstanding his hurry, had so well calculated the relations between the train and the steamer that we had a whole day to spare. The steamer Ellenora, did not start until night. Thence sprang a feverish state of excitement in which the impatient irascible traveller devoted to perdition the railway directors and the steamboat companies and the governments which allowed such intolerable slowness. I was obliged to act chorus to him when he attacked the captain of the Ellenora upon this subject. The captain disposed of us summarily.

At Kiel, as elsewhere, we must do something to while away the time. What with walking on the verdant shores of the bay within which nestles the little town, exploring the thick woods which make it look like a nest embowered amongst thick foliage, admiring the villas, each provided with a little bathing house, and moving about and grumbling, at last ten o’clock came.

The heavy coils of smoke from the Ellenora’s funnel unrolled in the sky, the bridge shook with the quivering of the struggling steam; we were on board, and owners for the time of two berths, one over the other, in the only saloon cabin on board.

At a quarter past the moorings were loosed and the throbbing steamer pursued her way over the dark waters of the Great Belt.

The night was dark; there was a sharp breeze and a rough sea, a few lights appeared on shore through the thick darkness; later on, I cannot tell when, a dazzling light from some lighthouse threw a bright stream of fire along the waves; and this is all I can remember of this first portion of our sail.

At seven in the morning we landed at Korsor, a small town on the west coast of Zealand. There we were transferred from the boat to another line of railway, which took us by just as flat a country as the plain of Holstein.

Three hours' travelling brought us to the capital of Denmark. My uncle had not shut his eyes all night. In his impatience I believe he was trying to accelerate the train with his feet.

At last he discerned a stretch of sea.

"The Sound!" he cried.

At our left was a huge building that looked like a hospital.

"That's a lunatic asylum," said one of or travelling companions.

Very good! thought I, just the place we want to end our days in; and great as it is, that asylum is not big enough to contain all Professor Liedenbrock's madness!

At ten in the morning, at last, we set our feet in Copenhagen; the luggage was put upon a carriage and taken with ourselves to the Phoenix Hotel in Breda Gate. This took half an hour, for the station is out of the town. Then my uncle, after a hasty toilet, dragged me after him. The porter at the hotel could speak German and English; but the Professor, as a polyglot, questioned him in good Danish, and it was in the same language that that personage directed him to the Museum of Northern Antiquities.

The curator of this curious establishment, in which wonders are gathered together out of which the ancient history of the country might be reconstructed by means of its stone weapons, its cups and its jewels, was a learned savant, the friend of the Danish consul at Hamburg, Professor Thomsen.

My uncle had a cordial letter of introduction to him. As a general rule one savant greets another with coolness. But here the case was different. M. Thomsen, like a good friend, gave the Professor Liedenbrock a cordial greeting, and he even vouchsafed the same kindness to his nephew. It is hardly necessary to say the secret was sacredly kept from the excellent curator; we were simply disinterested travellers visiting Iceland out of harmless curiosity.

M. Thomsen placed his services at our disposal, and we visited the quays with the object of finding out the next vessel to sail.

I was yet in hopes that there would be no means of getting to Iceland. But there was no such luck. A small Danish schooner, the Valkyria, was to set sail for Rejkiavik on the 2nd of June. The captain, M. Bjarne, was on board. His intending passenger was so joyful that he almost squeezed his hands till they ached. That good man was rather surprised at his energy. To him it seemed a very simple thing to go to Iceland, as that was his business; but to my uncle it was sublime. The worthy captain took advantage of his enthusiasm to charge double fares; but we did not trouble ourselves about mere trifles. .

“You must be on board on Tuesday, at seven in the morning,” said

Captain Bjarne, after having pocketed more dollars than were his due.

Then we thanked M. Thomsen for his kindness, “and we returned to the

Phoenix Hotel.

“It’s all right, it’s all right,” my uncle repeated. “How fortunate we are to have found this boat ready for sailing. Now let us have some breakfast and go about the town.”

We went first to Kongens-nye-Torw, an irregular square in which are two innocent-looking guns, which need not alarm any one. Close by, at No. 5, there was a French “restaurant,” kept by a cook of the name of Vincent, where we had an ample breakfast for four marks each (2_s_. 4_d_.).

Then I took a childish pleasure in exploring the city; my uncle let me take him with me, but he took notice of nothing, neither the insignificant king’s palace, nor the pretty seventeenth century bridge, which spans the canal before the museum, nor that immense cenotaph of Thorwaldsen’s, adorned with horrible mural painting, and containing within it a collection of the sculptor’s works, nor in a fine park the toylike chateau of Rosenberg, nor the beautiful renaissance edifice of the Exchange, nor its spire composed of the twisted tails of four bronze dragons, nor the great windmill on the ramparts, whose huge arms dilated in the sea breeze like the sails of a ship.

What delicious walks we should have had together, my pretty Virlandaise and I, along the harbour where the two-deckers and the frigate slept peaceably by the red roofing of the warehouse, by the green banks of the strait, through the deep shades of the trees amongst which the fort is half concealed, where the guns are thrusting out their black throats between branches of alder and willow.

But, alas! Gräuben was far away; and I never hoped to see her again.

But if my uncle felt no attraction towards these romantic scenes he was very much struck with the aspect of a certain church spire situated in the island of Amak, which forms the south-west quarter of Copenhagen.

I was ordered to direct my feet that way; I embarked on a small steamer which plies on the canals, and in a few minutes she touched the quay of the dockyard.

After crossing a few narrow streets where some convicts, in trousers half yellow and half grey, were at work under the orders of the gangers, we arrived at the Vor Frelsers Kirk. There was nothing remarkable about the church; but there was a reason why its tall spire had attracted the Professor’s attention. Starting from the top of the tower, an external staircase wound around the spire, the spirals circling up into the sky.

“Let us get to the top,” said my uncle.

“I shall be dizzy,” I said.

“The more reason why we should go up; we must get used to it.”

“But — ”

“Come, I tell you; don’t waste our time.”

I had to obey. A keeper who lived at the other end of the street handed us the key, and the ascent began.

My uncle went ahead with a light step. I followed him not without alarm, for my head was very apt to feel dizzy; I possessed neither the equilibrium of an eagle nor his fearless nature.

As long as we were protected on the inside of the winding staircase up the tower, all was well enough; but after toiling up a hundred and fifty steps the fresh air came to salute my face, and we were on the leads of the tower. There the aerial staircase began its gyrations, only guarded by a thin iron rail, and the narrowing steps seemed to ascend into infinite space!

“Never shall I be able to do it,” I said.

“Don’t be a coward; come up, sir”; said my uncle with the coldest cruelty.

I had to follow, clutching at every step. The keen air made me giddy; I felt the spire rocking with every gust of wind; my knees began to fail; soon I was crawling on my knees, then creeping on my stomach; I closed my eyes; I seemed to be lost in space.

At last I reached the apex, with the assistance of my uncle dragging me up by the collar.

“Look down!” he cried. “Look down well! You must take a lesson in abysses.”

I opened my eyes. I saw houses squashed flat as if they had all fallen down from the skies; a smoke fog seemed to drown them. Over my head ragged clouds were drifting past, and by an optical inversion they seemed stationary, while the steeple, the ball and I were all spinning along with fantastic speed. Far away on one side was the green country, on the other the sea sparkled, bathed in sunlight. The Sound stretched away to Elsinore, dotted with a few white sails, like sea-gulls' wings; and in the misty east and away to the north-east lay outstretched the faintly-shadowed shores of Sweden. All this immensity of space whirled and wavered, fluctuating beneath my eyes.

But I was compelled to rise, to stand up, to look. My first lesson in dizziness lasted an hour. When I got permission to come down and feel the solid street pavements I was afflicted with severe lumbago.

“To-morrow we will do it again,” said the Professor.

And it was so; for five days in succession, I was obliged to undergo this anti-vertiginous exercise; and whether I would or not, I made some improvement in the art of “lofty contemplations.”

CHAPTER IX.

ICELAND! BUT WHAT NEXT?

The day for our departure arrived. The day before it our kind friend

M. Thomsen brought us letters of introduction to Count Trampe, the

Governor of Iceland, M. Picturssen, the bishop's suffragan, and M.

Finsen, mayor of Rejkiavik. My uncle expressed his gratitude by

tremendous compressions of both his hands.

On the 2nd, at six in the evening, all our precious baggage being safely on board the Valkyria, the captain took us into a very narrow cabin.

"Is the wind favourable?" my uncle asked.

"Excellent," replied Captain Bjarne; "a sou'-easter. We shall pass down the Sound full speed, with all sails set."

In a few minutes the schooner, under her mizen, brigantine, topsail, and topgallant sail, loosed from her moorings and made full sail through the straits. In an hour the capital of Denmark seemed to sink below the distant waves, and the Valkyria was skirting the coast by Elsinore. In my nervous frame of mind I expected to see the ghost of Hamlet wandering on the legendary castle terrace.

"Sublime madman!" I said, "no doubt you would approve of our expedition. Perhaps you would keep us company to the centre of the globe, to find the solution of your eternal doubts."

But there was no ghostly shape upon the ancient walls. Indeed, the castle is much younger than the heroic prince of Denmark. It now answers the purpose of a sumptuous lodge for the doorkeeper of the straits of the Sound, before which every year there pass fifteen thousand ships of all nations.

The castle of Kronsberg soon disappeared in the mist, as well as the tower of Helsingborg, built on the Swedish coast, and the schooner passed lightly on her way urged by the breezes of the Cattegat.

The Valkyria was a splendid sailer, but on a sailing vessel you can place no dependence. She was taking to Rejkiavik coal, household goods, earthenware, woollen clothing, and a cargo of wheat. The crew consisted of five men, all Danes.

“How long will the passage take?” my uncle asked.

“Ten days,” the captain replied, “if we don’t meet a nor’-wester in passing the Faroes.”

“But are you not subject to considerable delays?”

“No, M. Liedenbrock, don’t be uneasy, we shall get there in very good time.”

At evening the schooner doubled the Skaw at the northern point of Denmark, in the night passed the Skager Rack, skirted Norway by Cape Lindness, and entered the North Sea.

In two days more we sighted the coast of Scotland near Peterhead, and the Valkyria turned her lead towards the Faroe Islands, passing between the

Orkneys and Shetlands.

Soon the schooner encountered the great Atlantic swell; she had to tack against the north wind, and reached the Faroes only with some difficulty. On the 8th the captain made out Myganness, the southernmost of these islands, and from that moment took a straight course for Cape Portland, the most southerly point of Iceland.

The passage was marked by nothing unusual. I bore the troubles of the sea pretty well; my uncle, to his own intense disgust, and his greater shame, was ill all through the voyage.

He therefore was unable to converse with the captain about Snæfell, the way to get to it, the facilities for transport, he was obliged to put off these inquiries until his arrival, and spent all his time at full length in his cabin, of which the timbers creaked and shook with every pitch she took. It must be confessed he was not undeserving of his punishment.

On the 11th we reached Cape Portland. The clear open weather gave us a good view of Myrdals jokul, which overhangs it. The cape is merely a low hill with steep sides, standing lonely by the beach.

The Valkyria kept at some distance from the coast, taking a westerly course amidst great shoals of whales and sharks. Soon we came in sight of an enormous perforated rock, through which the sea dashed furiously. The Westman islets seemed to rise out of the ocean like a group of rocks in a liquid plain. From that time the schooner took a wide berth and swept at a great distance round Cape Rejkianess, which forms the western point of Iceland.

The rough sea prevented my uncle from coming on deck to admire these shattered and surf-beaten coasts.

Forty-eight hours after, coming out of a storm which forced the schooner to scud under bare poles, we sighted east of us the beacon on Cape Skagen, where dangerous rocks extend far away seaward. An Icelandic pilot came on board, and in three hours the Valkyria dropped her anchor before Rejkiavik, in Faxa Bay.

The Professor at last emerged from his cabin, rather pale and wretched-looking, but still full of enthusiasm, and with ardent satisfaction shining in his eyes.

The population of the town, wonderfully interested in the arrival of a vessel from which every one expected something, formed in groups upon the quay.

My uncle left in haste his floating prison, or rather hospital. But before quitting the deck of the schooner he dragged me forward, and pointing with outstretched finger north of the bay at a distant mountain terminating in a double peak, a pair of cones covered with perpetual snow, he cried:

“Snæfell! Snæfell!”

Then recommending me, by an impressive gesture, to keep silence, he went into the boat which awaited him. I followed, and presently we were treading the soil of Iceland.

The first man we saw was a good-looking fellow enough, in a general’s uniform. Yet he was not a general but a magistrate, the Governor of the island, M. le Baron Trampe himself. The Professor was soon aware of the presence he was in. He delivered him his letters from Copenhagen, and then followed a short conversation in the Danish language, the purport of which I was quite ignorant of, and for a very good reason. But the result of this first conversation was, that Baron Trampe placed himself entirely at the service of Professor Liedenbrock.

My uncle was just as courteously received by the mayor, M. Finsen, whose appearance was as military, and disposition and office as pacific, as the Governor's.

As for the bishop's suffragan, M. Picturssen, he was at that moment engaged on an episcopal visitation in the north. For the time we must be resigned to wait for the honour of being presented to him. But M. Fridrikssen, professor of natural sciences at the school of Rejkiavik, was a delightful man, and his friendship became very precious to me. This modest philosopher spoke only Danish and Latin. He came to proffer me his good offices in the language of Horace, and I felt that we were made to understand each other. In fact he was the only person in Iceland with whom I could converse at all.

This good-natured gentleman made over to us two of the three rooms which his house contained, and we were soon installed in it with all our luggage, the abundance of which rather astonished the good people of Rejkiavik.

"Well, Axel," said my uncle, "we are getting on, and now the worst is over."

"The worst!" I said, astonished.

"To be sure, now we have nothing to do but go down."

“Oh, if that is all, you are quite right; but after all, when we have gone down, we shall have to get up again, I suppose?”

“Oh I don’t trouble myself about that. Come, there’s no time to lose;

I am going to the library. Perhaps there is some manuscript of

Saknussemm’s there, and I should be glad to consult it.”

“Well, while you are there I will go into the town. Won’t you?”

“Oh, that is very uninteresting to me. It is not what is upon this island, but what is underneath, that interests me.”

I went out, and wandered wherever chance took me.

It would not be easy to lose your way in Rejkiavik. I was therefore under no necessity to inquire the road, which exposes one to mistakes when the only medium of intercourse is gesture.

The town extends along a low and marshy level, between two hills. An immense bed of lava bounds it on one side, and falls gently towards the sea. On the other extends the vast bay of Faxa, shut in at the north by the enormous glacier of the Snæfell, and of which the Valkyria was for the time the only occupant. Usually the English and French conservators of fisheries moor in this bay, but just then they were cruising about the western coasts of the island.

The longest of the only two streets that Rejkiavik possesses was parallel with the beach. Here live the merchants and traders, in wooden cabins made of red planks set horizontally; the other street, running west, ends at the little lake between the house of the bishop and other non-commercial people.

I had soon explored these melancholy ways; here and there I got a glimpse of faded turf, looking like a worn-out bit of carpet, or some appearance of a kitchen garden, the sparse vegetables of which (potatoes, cabbages, and lettuces), would have figured appropriately upon a Lilliputian table. A few sickly wallflowers were trying to enjoy the air and sunshine.

About the middle of the tin-commercial street I found the public cemetery, inclosed with a mud wall, and where there seemed plenty of room.

Then a few steps brought me to the Governor’s house, a but compared with the town hall of Hamburg, a palace in comparison with the cabins of the Icelandic population.

Between the little lake and the town the church is built in the Protestant style, of calcined stones extracted out of the volcanoes by their own labour and at their own expense; in high westerly winds it was manifest that the red tiles of the roof would be scattered in the air, to the great danger of the faithful worshippers.

On a neighbouring hill I perceived the national school, where, as I was informed later by our host, were taught Hebrew, English, French, and Danish, four languages of which, with shame I confess it, I don’t know a single word; after an examination I should have had to stand last of the forty scholars educated at this little college, and I should have been held unworthy to sleep along with them in one of those little double closets, where more delicate youths would have died of suffocation the very first night.

In three hours I had seen not only the town but its environs. The general aspect was wonderfully dull. No trees, and scarcely any vegetation. Everywhere bare rocks, signs of volcanic action. The Icelandic huts are made of earth and turf, and the walls slope inward; they rather resemble roofs placed on the ground. But then these roofs are meadows of comparative fertility. Thanks to the internal heat, the grass grows on them to some degree of perfection. It is carefully mown in the hay season; if it were not, the horses would come to pasture on these green abodes.

In my excursion I met but few people. On returning to the main street I found the greater part of the population busied in drying, salting, and putting on board codfish, their chief export. The men looked like robust but heavy, blond Germans with pensive eyes, conscious of being far removed from their fellow creatures, poor exiles relegated to this land of ice, poor creatures who should have been Esquimaux, since nature had condemned them to live only just outside the arctic circle! In vain did I try to detect a smile upon their lips; sometimes by a spasmodic and involuntary contraction of the muscles they seemed to laugh, but they never smiled.

Their costume consisted of a coarse jacket of black woollen cloth called in Scandinavian lands a ‘vadmel,’ a hat with a very broad brim, trousers with a narrow edge of red, and a bit of leather rolled round the foot for shoes.

The women looked as sad and as resigned as the men; their faces were agreeable but expressionless, and they wore gowns and petticoats of dark ‘vadmel’; as maidens, they wore over their braided hair a little knitted brown cap; when married, they put around their heads a coloured handkerchief, crowned with a peak of white linen.

After a good walk I returned to M. Fridrikssen’s house, where I found my uncle already in his host’s company.

CHAPTER X.

INTERESTING CONVERSATIONS WITH ICELANDIC SAVANTS

Dinner was ready. Professor Liedenbrock devoured his portion voraciously, for his compulsory fast on board had converted his stomach into a vast unfathomable gulf. There was nothing remarkable in the meal itself; but the hospitality of our host, more Danish than Icelandic, reminded me of the heroes of old. It was evident that we were more at home than he was himself.

The conversation was carried on in the vernacular tongue, which my uncle mixed with German and M. Fridrikssen with Latin for my benefit. It turned upon scientific questions as befits philosophers; but Professor Liedenbrock was excessively reserved, and at every sentence spoke to me with his eyes, enjoining the most absolute silence upon our plans.

In the first place M. Fridrikssen wanted to know what success my uncle had had at the library.

“Your library! why there is nothing but a few tattered books upon almost deserted shelves.”

“Indeed!” replied M. Fridrikssen, “why we possess eight thousand volumes, many of them valuable and scarce, works in the old Scandinavian language, and we have all the novelties that Copenhagen sends us every year.”

“Where do you keep your eight thousand volumes? For my part — ”

“Oh, M. Liedenbrock, they are all over the country. In this icy region we are fond of study. There is not a farmer nor a fisherman that cannot read and does not read. Our principle is, that books, instead of growing mouldy behind an iron grating, should be worn out under the eyes of many readers. Therefore, these volumes are passed from one to another, read over and over, referred to again and again; and it often happens that they find their way back to their shelves only after an absence of a year or two.”

“And in the meantime,” said my uncle rather spitefully, “strangers — ”

“Well, what would you have? Foreigners have their libraries at home, and the first essential for labouring people is that they should be educated. I repeat to you the love of reading runs in Icelandic blood. In 1816 we founded a prosperous literary society; learned strangers think themselves honoured in becoming members of it. It publishes books which educate our fellow-countrymen, and do the country great service. If you will consent to be a corresponding member, Herr Liedenbrock, you will be giving us great pleasure.”

My uncle, who had already joined about a hundred learned societies, accepted with a grace which evidently touched M. Fridrikssen.

“Now,” said he, “will you be kind enough to tell me what books you hoped to find in our library and I may perhaps enable you to consult them?”

My uncle’s eyes and mine met. He hesitated. This direct question went to the root of the matter. But after a moment’s reflection he decided on speaking.

“Monsieur Fridrikssen, I wished to know if amongst your ancient books you possessed any of the works of Arne Saknussemm?”

“Arne Saknussemm!” replied the Rejkiavik professor. “You mean that learned sixteenth century savant, a naturalist, a chemist, and a traveller?”

“Just so!”

“One of the glories of Icelandic literature and science?”

“That’s the man.”

“An illustrious man anywhere!”

“Quite so.”

“And whose courage was equal to his genius!”

“I see that you know him well.”

My uncle was bathed in delight at hearing his hero thus described. He feasted his eyes upon M. Fridrikssen’s face.

“Well,” he cried, “where are his works?”

“His works, we have them not.”

“What — not in Iceland?”

“They are neither in Iceland nor anywhere else.”

“Why is that?”

“Because Arne Saknussemm was persecuted for heresy, and in 1573 his books were burned by the hands of the common hangman.”

“Very good! Excellent!” cried my uncle, to the great scandal of the professor of natural history.

“What!” he cried.

“Yes, yes; now it is all clear, now it is all unravelled; and I see why Saknussemm, put into the Index Expurgatorius, and compelled to hide the discoveries made by his genius, was obliged to bury in an incomprehensible cryptogram the secret — ”

“What secret?” asked M. Fridrikssen, starting.

“Oh, just a secret which — ” my uncle stammered.

“Have you some private document in your possession?” asked our host.

“No; I was only supposing a case.”

“Oh, very well,” answered M. Fridrikssen, who was kind enough not to pursue the subject when he had noticed the embarrassment of his friend. “I hope you will not leave our island until you have seen some of its mineralogical wealth.”

“Certainly,” replied my uncle; “but I am rather late; or have not others been here before me?”

“Yes, Herr Liedenbrock; the labours of MM. Olafsen and Povelsen, pursued by order of the king, the researches of Troïl the scientific mission of MM. Gaimard and Robert on the French corvette La Recherche, and lately the observations of scientific men who came in the Reine Hortense, have added materially to our knowledge of Iceland. But I assure you there is plenty left.”

“Do you think so?” said my uncle, pretending to look very modest, and trying to hide the curiosity was flashing out of his eyes.

“Oh, yes; how many mountains, glaciers, and volcanoes there are to study, which are as yet but imperfectly known! Then, without going any further, that mountain in the horizon. That is Snæfell.”

“Ah!” said my uncle, as coolly as he was able, “is that Snæfell?”

“Yes; one of the most curious volcanoes, and the crater of which has scarcely ever been visited.”

“Is it extinct?”

“Oh, yes; more than five hundred years.”

“Well,” replied my uncle, who was frantically locking his legs together to keep himself from jumping up in the air, “that is where I mean to begin my geological studies, there on that Seffel — Fessel — what do you call it?”

“Snæfell,” replied the excellent M. Fridrikssen.

This part of the conversation was in Latin; I had understood every word of it, and I could hardly conceal my amusement at seeing my uncle trying to keep down the excitement and satisfaction which were brimming over in every limb and every feature. He tried hard to put on an innocent little expression of simplicity; but it looked like a diabolical grin.

Recherche was sent out in 1835 by Admiral Duperré to learn the fate of the lost expedition of M. de Blosseville in the Lilloise which has never been heard of.

"Yes," said he, "your words decide me. We will try to scale that

Snæfell; perhaps even we may pursue our studies in its crater!"

"I am very sorry," said M. Fridrikssen, "that my engagements will not allow me to absent myself, or I would have accompanied you myself with both pleasure and profit."

"Oh, no, no!" replied my uncle with great animation, "we would not disturb any one for the world, M. Fridrikssen. Still, I thank you with all my heart: the company of such a talented man would have been very serviceable, but the duties of your profession — "

I am glad to think that our host, in the innocence of his Icelandic soul, was blind to the transparent artifices of my uncle.

"I very much approve of your beginning with that volcano, M.

Liedenbrock. You will gather a harvest of interesting observations.

But, tell me, how do you expect to get to the peninsula of Snæfell?"

"By sea, crossing the bay. That's the most direct way."

"No doubt; but it is impossible."

"Why?"

"Because we don't possess a single boat at Rejkiavik."

"You don't mean to say so?"

“You will have to go by land, following the shore. It will be longer, but more interesting.”

“Very well, then; and now I shall have to see about a guide.”

“I have one to offer you.”

“A safe, intelligent man.”

“Yes; an inhabitant of that peninsula. He is an eider-down hunter, and very clever. He speaks Danish perfectly.”

“When can I see him?”

“To-morrow, if you like.”

“Why not to-day?”

“Because he won’t be here till to-morrow.”

“To-morrow, then,” added my uncle with a sigh.

This momentous conversation ended in a few minutes with warm acknowledgments paid by the German to the Icelandic Professor. At this dinner my uncle had just elicited important facts, amongst others, the history of Saknussemm, the reason of the mysterious document, that his host would not accompany him in his expedition, and that the very next day a guide would be waiting upon him.

CHAPTER XI.

A GUIDE FOUND TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

In the evening I took a short walk on the beach and returned at night to my plank-bed, where I slept soundly all night.

When I awoke I heard my uncle talking at a great rate in the next room. I immediately dressed and joined him.

He was conversing in the Danish language with a tall man, of robust build. This fine fellow must have been possessed of great strength. His eyes, set in a large and ingenuous face, seemed to me very intelligent; they were of a dreamy sea-blue. Long hair, which would have been called red even in England, fell in long meshes upon his broad shoulders. The movements of this native were lithe and supple; but he made little use of his arms in speaking, like a man who knew nothing or cared nothing about the language of gestures. His whole appearance bespoke perfect calmness and self-possession, not indolence but tranquillity. It was felt at once that he would be beholden to nobody, that he worked for his own convenience, and that nothing in this world could astonish or disturb his philosophic calmness.

I caught the shades of this Icelander’s character by the way in which he listened to the impassioned flow of words which fell from the Professor. He stood with arms crossed, perfectly unmoved by my uncle’s incessant gesticulations. A negative was expressed by a slow movement of the head from left to right, an affirmative by a slight bend, so slight that his long hair scarcely moved. He carried economy of motion even to parsimony.

Certainly I should never have dreamt in looking at this man that he was a hunter; he did not look likely to frighten his game, nor did he seem as if he would even get near it. But the mystery was explained when M. Fridrikssen informed me that this tranquil personage was only a hunter of the eider duck, whose under plumage constitutes the chief wealth of the island. This is the celebrated eider down, and it requires no great rapidity of movement to get it.

Early in summer the female, a very pretty bird, goes to build her nest among the rocks of the fiords with which the coast is fringed. After building the nest she feathers it with down plucked from her own breast. Immediately the hunter, or rather the trader, comes and robs the nest, and the female recommences her work. This goes on as long as she has any down left. When she has stripped herself bare the male takes his turn to pluck himself. But as the coarse and hard plumage of the male has no commercial value, the hunter does not take the trouble to rob the nest of this; the female therefore lays her eggs in the spoils of her mate, the young are hatched, and next year the harvest begins again.

Now, as the eider duck does not select steep cliffs for her nest, but rather the smooth terraced rocks which slope to the sea, the Icelandic hunter might exercise his calling without any inconvenient exertion. He was a farmer who was not obliged either to sow or reap his harvest, but merely to gather it in.

This grave, phlegmatic, and silent individual was called Hans Bjelke; and he came recommended by M. Fridrikssen. He was our future guide. His manners were a singular contrast with my uncle’s.

Nevertheless, they soon came to understand each other. Neither looked at the amount of the payment: the one was ready to accept whatever was offered; the other was ready to give whatever was demanded. Never was bargain more readily concluded.

The result of the treaty was, that Hans engaged on his part to conduct us to the village of Stapi, on the south shore of the Snæfell peninsula, at the very foot of the volcano. By land this would be about twenty-two miles, to be done, said my uncle, in two days.

But when he learnt that the Danish mile was 24,000 feet long, he was obliged to modify his calculations and allow seven or eight days for the march.

Four horses were to be placed at our disposal — two to carry him and me, two for the baggage. Hams, as was his custom, would go on foot. He knew all that part of the coast perfectly, and promised to take us the shortest way.

His engagement was not to terminate with our arrival at Stapi; he was to continue in my uncle’s service for the whole period of his scientific researches, for the remuneration of three rixdales a week (about twelve shillings), but it was an express article of the covenant that his wages should be counted out to him every Saturday at six o’clock in the evening, which, according to him, was one indispensable part of the engagement.

The start was fixed for the 16th of June. My uncle wanted to pay the hunter a portion in advance, but he refused with one word:

“Efter,” said he.

“After,” said the Professor for my edification.

The treaty concluded, Hans silently withdrew.

“A famous fellow,” cried my uncle; “but he little thinks of the marvellous part he has to play in the future.”

“So he is to go with us as far as — ”

“As far as the centre of the earth, Axel.”

Forty-eight hours were left before our departure; to my great regret I had to employ them in preparations; for all our ingenuity was required to pack every article to the best advantage; instruments here, arms there, tools in this package, provisions in that: four sets of packages in all.

The instruments were:

1. An Eigel’s centigrade thermometer, graduated up to 150 degrees (302 degrees Fahr.), which seemed to me too much or too little. Too much if the internal heat was to rise so high, for in this case we should be baked, not enough to measure the temperature of springs or any matter in a state of fusion.

2. An aneroid barometer, to indicate extreme pressures of the atmosphere. An ordinary barometer would not have answered the purpose, as the pressure would increase during our descent to a point which the mercurial barometer would not register.

3. A chronometer, made by Boissonnas, jun. of Geneva, accurately set to the meridian of Hamburg.

4. Two compasses, viz. a common compass and a dipping needle.

5. A night glass.

6. Two of Ruhmkorff's apparatus, which, by means of an electric current, supplied a safe and handy portable light

The arms consisted of two of Purdy's rifles and two brace of pistols. But what did we want arms for? We had neither savages nor wild beasts to fear, I supposed. But my uncle seemed to believe in his arsenal as in his instruments, and more especially in a considerable quantity of gun cotton, which is unaffected by moisture, and the explosive force of which exceeds that of gunpowder.

In M. Verne's book a 'manometer' is the instrument used, of which very little is known. In a complete list of philosophical instruments the translator cannot find the name. As he is assured by a first-rate instrument maker, Chadburn, of Liverpool, that an aneroid can be constructed to measure any depth, he has thought it best to furnish the adventurous professor with this more familiar instrument. The 'manometer' is generally known as a pressure gauge. — TRANS.

Ruhmkorff's apparatus consists of a Bunsen pile worked with bichromate of potash, which makes no smell; an induction coil carries the electricity generated by the pile into communication with a lantern of peculiar construction; in this lantern there is a spiral glass tube from which the air has been excluded, and in which remains only a residuum of carbonic acid gas or of nitrogen. When the apparatus is put in action this gas becomes luminous, producing a white steady light. The pile and coil are placed in a leathern bag which the traveller carries over his shoulders; the lantern outside of the bag throws sufficient light into deep darkness; it enables one to venture without fear of explosions into the midst of the most inflammable gases, and is not extinguished even in the deepest waters. M. Ruhmkorff is a learned and most ingenious man of science; his great discovery is his induction coil, which produces a powerful stream of electricity. He obtained in 1864 the quinquennial prize of 50,000 franc reserved by the French government for the most ingenious application of electricity.

The tools comprised two pickaxes, two spades, a silk ropeladder, three iron-tipped sticks, a hatchet, a hammer, a dozen wedges and iron spikes, and a long knotted rope. Now this was a large load, for the ladder was 300 feet long.

And there were provisions too: this was not a large parcel, but it was comforting to know that of essence of beef and biscuits there were six months' consumption. Spirits were the only liquid, and of water we took none; but we had flasks, and my uncle depended on springs from which to fill them. Whatever objections I hazarded as to their quality, temperature, and even absence, remained ineffectual.

To complete the exact inventory of all our travelling accompaniments, I must not forget a pocket medicine chest, containing blunt scissors, splints for broken limbs, a piece of tape of unbleached linen, bandages and compresses, lint, a lancet for bleeding, all dreadful articles to take with one. Then there was a row of phials containing dextrine, alcoholic ether, liquid acetate of lead, vinegar, and ammonia drugs which afforded me no comfort. Finally, all the articles needful to supply Ruhmkorff's apparatus.

My uncle did not forget a supply of tobacco, coarse grained powder, and amadou, nor a leathern belt in which he carried a sufficient quantity of gold, silver, and paper money. Six pairs of boots and shoes, made waterproof with a composition of indiarubber and naphtha, were packed amongst the tools.

“Clothed, shod, and equipped like this,” said my uncle, “there is no telling how far we may go.”

The 14th was wholly spent in arranging all our different articles. In the evening we dined with Baron Tramps; the mayor of Rejkiavik, and Dr. Hyaltalin, the first medical man of the place, being of the party. M. Fridrikssen was not there. I learned afterwards that he and the Governor disagreed upon some question of administration, and did not speak to each other. I therefore knew not a single word of all that was said at this semi-official dinner; but I could not help noticing that my uncle talked the whole time.

On the 15th our preparations were all made. Our host gave the Professor very great pleasure by presenting him with a map of Iceland far more complete than that of Hendersen. It was the map of M. Olaf Nikolas Olsen, in the proportion of 1 to 480,000 of the actual size of the island, and published by the Icelandic Literary Society. It was a precious document for a mineralogist.

Our last evening was spent in intimate conversation with M. Fridrikssen, with whom I felt the liveliest sympathy; then, after the talk, succeeded, for me, at any rate, a disturbed and restless night.

At five in the morning I was awoke by the neighing and pawing of four horses under my window. I dressed hastily and came down into the street. Hans was finishing our packing, almost as it were without moving a limb; and yet he did his work cleverly. My uncle made more noise than execution, and the guide seemed to pay very little attention to his energetic directions.

At six o’clock our preparations were over. M. Fridrikssen shook hands with us. My uncle thanked him heartily for his extreme kindness. I constructed a few fine Latin sentences to express my cordial farewell. Then we bestrode our steeds and with his last adieu M. Fridrikssen treated me to a line of Virgil eminently applicable to such uncertain wanderers as we were likely to be:

“Et quacumque viam dedent fortuna sequamur.”

“Therever fortune clears a way,

Thither our ready footsteps stray.”

CHAPTER XII.

A BARREN LAND

We had started under a sky overcast but calm. There was no fear of heat, none of disastrous rain. It was just the weather for tourists.

The pleasure of riding on horseback over an unknown country made me easy to be pleased at our first start. I threw myself wholly into the pleasure of the trip, and enjoyed the feeling of freedom and satisfied desire. I was beginning to take a real share in the enterprise.

“Besides,” I said to myself, “where’s the risk? Here we are travelling all through a most interesting country! We are about to climb a very remarkable mountain; at the worst we are going to scramble down an extinct crater. It is evident that Saknussemm did nothing more than this. As for a passage leading to the centre of the globe, it is mere rubbish! perfectly impossible! Very well, then; let us get all the good we can out of this expedition, and don’t let us haggle about the chances.”

This reasoning having settled my mind, we got out of Rejkiavik.

Hans moved steadily on, keeping ahead of us at an even, smooth, and rapid pace. The baggage horses followed him without giving any trouble. Then came my uncle and myself, looking not so very ill-mounted on our small but hardy animals.

Iceland is one of the largest islands in Europe. Its surface is 14,000 square miles, and it contains but 16,000 inhabitants. Geographers have divided it into four quarters, and we were crossing diagonally the south-west quarter, called the ‘Sudvester Fjordungr.’

On leaving Rejkiavik Hans took us by the seashore. We passed lean pastures which were trying very hard, but in vain, to look green; yellow came out best. The rugged peaks of the trachyte rocks presented faint outlines on the eastern horizon; at times a few patches of snow, concentrating the vague light, glittered upon the slopes of the distant mountains; certain peaks, boldly uprising, passed through the grey clouds, and reappeared above the moving mists, like breakers emerging in the heavens.

Often these chains of barren rocks made a dip towards the sea, and encroached upon the scanty pasturage: but there was always enough room to pass. Besides, our horses instinctively chose the easiest places without ever slackening their pace. My uncle was refused even the satisfaction of stirring up his beast with whip or voice. He had no excuse for being impatient. I could not help smiling to see so tall a man on so small a pony, and as his long legs nearly touched the ground he looked like a six-legged centaur.

“Good horse! good horse!” he kept saying. “You will see, Axel, that there is no more sagacious animal than the Icelandic horse. He is stopped by neither snow, nor storm, nor impassable roads, nor rocks, glaciers, or anything. He is courageous, sober, and surefooted. He never makes a false step, never shies. If there is a river or fiord to cross (and we shall meet with many) you will see him plunge in at once, just as if he were amphibious, and gain the opposite bank. But we must not hurry him; we must let him have his way, and we shall get on at the rate of thirty miles a day.”

“We may; but how about our guide?”

“Oh, never mind him. People like him get over the ground without a thought. There is so little action in this man that he will never get tired; and besides, if he wants it, he shall have my horse. I shall get cramped if I don’t have a little action. The arms are all right, but the legs want exercise.”

We were advancing at a rapid pace. The country was already almost a desert. Here and there was a lonely farm, called a boër built either of wood, or of sods, or of pieces of lava, looking like a poor beggar by the wayside. These ruinous huts seemed to solicit charity from passers-by; and on very small provocation we should have given alms for the relief of the poor inmates. In this country there were no roads and paths, and the poor vegetation, however slow, would soon efface the rare travellers’ footsteps.

Yet this part of the province, at a very small distance from the capital, is reckoned among the inhabited and cultivated portions of Iceland. What, then, must other tracts be, more desert than this desert? In the first half mile we had not seen one farmer standing before his cabin door, nor one shepherd tending a flock less wild than himself, nothing but a few cows and sheep left to themselves. What then would be those convulsed regions upon which we were advancing, regions subject to the dire phenomena of eruptions, the offspring of volcanic explosions and subterranean convulsions?

We were to know them before long, but on consulting Olsen’s map, I saw that they would be avoided by winding along the seashore. In fact, the great plutonic action is confined to the central portion of the island; there, rocks of the trappean and volcanic class, including trachyte, basalt, and tuffs and agglomerates associated with streams of lava, have made this a land of supernatural horrors. I had no idea of the spectacle which was awaiting us in the peninsula of Snæfell, where these ruins of a fiery nature have formed a frightful chaos.

In two hours from Rejkiavik we arrived at the burgh of Gufunes, called Aolkirkja, or principal church. There was nothing remarkable here but a few houses, scarcely enough for a German hamlet.

Hans stopped here half an hour. He shared with us our frugal breakfast; answering my uncle's questions about the road and our resting place that night with merely yes or no, except when he said "Gardär."

I consulted the map to see where Gardär was. I saw there was a small town of that name on the banks of the Hvalfiord, four miles from Rejkiavik. I showed it to my uncle.

"Four miles only!" he exclaimed; "four miles out of twenty-eight.

What a nice little walk!"

He was about to make an observation to the guide, who without answering resumed his place at the head, and went on his way.

Three hours later, still treading on the colourless grass of the pasture land, we had to work round the Kolla fiord, a longer way but an easier one than across that inlet. We soon entered into a 'pingstaoer' or parish called Ejulberg, from whose steeple twelve o'clock would have struck, if Icelandic churches were rich enough to possess clocks. But they are like the parishioners who have no watches and do without.

There our horses were baited; then taking the narrow path to left between a chain of hills and the sea, they carried us to our next stage, the aolkirkja of Brantär and one mile farther on, to Saurboër 'Annexia,' a chapel of ease built on the south shore of the Hvalfiord.

It was now four o’clock, and we had gone four Icelandic miles, or twenty-four English miles.

In that place the fiord was at least three English miles wide; the waves rolled with a rushing din upon the sharp-pointed rocks; this inlet was confined between walls of rock, precipices crowned by sharp peaks 2,000 feet high, and remarkable for the brown strata which separated the beds of reddish tuff. However much I might respect the intelligence of our quadrupeds, I hardly cared to put it to the test by trusting myself to it on horseback across an arm of the sea.

If they are as intelligent as they are said to be, I thought, they won’t try it. In any case, I will tax my intelligence to direct theirs.

But my uncle would not wait. He spurred on to the edge. His steed lowered his head to examine the nearest waves and stopped. My uncle, who had an instinct of his own, too, applied pressure, and was again refused by the animal significantly shaking his head. Then followed strong language, and the whip; but the brute answered these arguments with kicks and endeavours to throw his rider. At last the clever little pony, with a bend of his knees, started from under the Professor’s legs, and left him standing upon two boulders on the shore just like the colossus of Rhodes.

“Confounded brute!” cried the unhorsed horseman, suddenly degraded into a pedestrian, just as ashamed as a cavalry officer degraded to a foot soldier.

“Färja,” said the guide, touching his shoulder.

“What! a boat?”

“Der,” replied Hans, pointing to one.

“Yes,” I cried; “there is a boat.”

“Why did not you say so then? Well, let us go on.”

“Tidvatten,” said the guide.

“What is he saying?”

“He says tide,” said my uncle, translating the Danish word.

“No doubt we must wait for the tide.”

“Förbida,” said my uncle.

“Ja,” replied Hans.

My uncle stamped with his foot, while the horses went on to the boat.

I perfectly understood the necessity of abiding a particular moment of the tide to undertake the crossing of the fiord, when, the sea having reached its greatest height, it should be slack water. Then the ebb and flow have no sensible effect, and the boat does not risk being carried either to the bottom or out to sea.

That favourable moment arrived only with six o’clock; when my uncle, myself, the guide, two other passengers and the four horses, trusted ourselves to a somewhat fragile raft. Accustomed as I was to the swift and sure steamers on the Elbe, I found the oars of the rowers rather a slow means of propulsion. It took us more than an hour to cross the fiord; but the passage was effected without any mishap.

In another half hour we had reached the aolkirkja of Gardär

CHAPTER XIII.

HOSPITALITY UNDER THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

It ought to have been night-time, but under the 65th parallel there was nothing surprising in the nocturnal polar light. In Iceland during the months of June and July the sun does not set.

But the temperature was much lower. I was cold and more hungry than cold. Welcome was the sight of the boër which was hospitably opened to receive us.

It was a peasant’s house, but in point of hospitality it was equal to a king’s. On our arrival the master came with outstretched hands, and without more ceremony he beckoned us to follow him.

To accompany him down the long, narrow, dark passage, would have been impossible. Therefore, we followed, as he bid us. The building was constructed of roughly squared timbers, with rooms on both sides, four in number, all opening out into the one passage: these were the kitchen, the weaving shop, the badstofa, or family sleeping-room, and the visitors’ room, which was the best of all. My uncle, whose height had not been thought of in building the house, of course hit his head several times against the beams that projected from the ceilings.

We were introduced into our apartment, a large room with a floor of earth stamped hard down, and lighted by a window, the panes of which were formed of sheep’s bladder, not admitting too much light. The sleeping accommodation consisted of dry litter, thrown into two wooden frames painted red, and ornamented with Icelandic sentences. I was hardly expecting so much comfort; the only discomfort proceeded from the strong odour of dried fish, hung meat, and sour milk, of which my nose made bitter complaints.

When we had laid aside our travelling wraps the voice of the host was heard inviting us to the kitchen, the only room where a fire was lighted even in the severest cold.

My uncle lost no time in obeying the friendly call, nor was I slack in following.

The kitchen chimney was constructed on the ancient pattern; in the middle of the room was a stone for a hearth, over it in the roof a hole to let the smoke escape. The kitchen was also a dining-room.

At our entrance the host, as if he had never seen us, greeted us with the word “Sællvertu,” which means “be happy,” and came and kissed us on the cheek.

After him his wife pronounced the same words, accompanied with the same ceremonial; then the two placing their hands upon their hearts, inclined profoundly before us.

I hasten to inform the reader that this Icelandic lady was the mother of nineteen children, all, big and little, swarming in the midst of the dense wreaths of smoke with which the fire on the hearth filled the chamber. Every moment I noticed a fair-haired and rather melancholy face peeping out of the rolling volumes of smoke — they were a perfect cluster of unwashed angels.

My uncle and I treated this little tribe with kindness; and in a very short time we each had three or four of these brats on our shoulders, as many on our laps, and the rest between our knees. Those who could speak kept repeating “Sællvertu,” in every conceivable tone; those that could not speak made up for that want by shrill cries.

This concert was brought to a close by the announcement of dinner. At that moment our hunter returned, who had been seeing his horses provided for; that is to say, he had economically let them loose in the fields, where the poor beasts had to content themselves with the scanty moss they could pull off the rocks and a few meagre sea weeds, and the next day they would not fail to come of themselves and resume the labours of the previous day.

“Sællvertu,” said Hans.

Then calmly, automatically, and dispassionately he kissed the host, the hostess, and their nineteen children.

This ceremony over, we sat at table, twenty-four in number, and therefore one upon another. The luckiest had only two urchins upon their knees.

But silence reigned in all this little world at the arrival of the soup, and the national taciturnity resumed its empire even over the children. The host served out to us a soup made of lichen and by no means unpleasant, then an immense piece of dried fish floating in butter rancid with twenty years’ keeping, and, therefore, according to Icelandic gastronomy, much preferable to fresh butter. Along with this, we had ‘skye,’ a sort of clotted milk, with biscuits, and a liquid prepared from juniper berries; for beverage we had a thin milk mixed with water, called in this country ‘blanda.’ It is not for me to decide whether this diet is wholesome or not; all I can say is, that I was desperately hungry, and that at dessert I swallowed to the very last gulp of a thick broth made from buckwheat.

As soon as the meal was over the children disappeared, and their elders gathered round the peat fire, which also burnt such miscellaneous fuel as briars, cow-dung, and fishbones. After this little pinch of warmth the different groups retired to their respective rooms. Our hostess hospitably offered us her assistance in undressing, according to Icelandic usage; but on our gracefully declining, she insisted no longer, and I was able at last to curl myself up in my mossy bed.

At five next morning we bade our host farewell, my uncle with difficulty persuading him to accept a proper remuneration; and Hans signalled the start.

At a hundred yards from Gardär the soil began to change its aspect; it became boggy and less favourable to progress. On our right the chain of mountains was indefinitely prolonged like an immense system of natural fortifications, of which we were following the counter-scarp or lesser steep; often we were met by streams, which we had to ford with great care, not to wet our packages.

The desert became wider and more hideous; yet from time to time we seemed to descry a human figure that fled at our approach, sometimes a sharp turn would bring us suddenly within a short distance of one of these spectres, and I was filled with loathing at the sight of a huge deformed head, the skin shining and hairless, and repulsive sores visible through the gaps in the poor creature’s wretched rags.

The unhappy being forbore to approach us and offer his misshapen hand. He fled away, but not before Hans had saluted him with the customary “Sællvertu.”

“Spetelsk,” said he.

“A leper!” my uncle repeated.

This word produced a repulsive effect. The horrible disease of leprosy is too common in Iceland; it is not contagious, but hereditary, and lepers are forbidden to marry.

These apparitions were not cheerful, and did not throw any charm over the less and less attractive landscapes. The last tufts of grass had disappeared from beneath our feet. Not a tree was to be seen, unless we except a few dwarf birches as low as brushwood. Not an animal but a few wandering ponies that their owners would not feed. Sometimes we could see a hawk balancing himself on his wings under the grey cloud, and then darting away south with rapid flight. I felt melancholy under this savage aspect of nature, and my thoughts went away to the cheerful scenes I had left in the far south.

We had to cross a few narrow fiords, and at last quite a wide gulf; the tide, then high, allowed us to pass over without delay, and to reach the hamlet of Alftanes, one mile beyond.

That evening, after having forded two rivers full of trout and pike, called Alfa and Heta, we were obliged to spend the night in a deserted building worthy to be haunted by all the elfins of Scandinavia. The ice king certainly held court here, and gave us all night long samples of what he could do.

No particular event marked the next day. Bogs, dead levels, melancholy desert tracks, wherever we travelled. By nightfall we had accomplished half our journey, and we lay at Krösolbt.

On the 19th of June, for about a mile, that is an Icelandic mile, we walked upon hardened lava; this ground is called in the country ‘hraun’; the writhen surface presented the appearance of distorted, twisted cables, sometimes stretched in length, sometimes contorted together; an immense torrent, once liquid, now solid, ran from the nearest mountains, now extinct volcanoes, but the ruins around revealed the violence of the past eruptions. Yet here and there were a few jets of steam from hot springs.

We had no time to watch these phenomena; we had to proceed on our way. Soon at the foot of the mountains the boggy land reappeared, intersected by little lakes. Our route now lay westward; we had turned the great bay of Faxa, and the twin peaks of Snæfell rose white into the cloudy sky at the distance of at least five miles.

The horses did their duty well, no difficulties stopped them in their steady career. I was getting tired; but my uncle was as firm and straight as he was at our first start. I could not help admiring his persistency, as well as the hunter’s, who treated our expedition like a mere promenade.

June 20. At six p.m. we reached Büdir, a village on the sea shore; and the guide there claiming his due, my uncle settled with him. It was Hans’ own family, that is, his uncles and cousins, who gave us hospitality; we were kindly received, and without taxing too much the goodness of these folks, I would willingly have tarried here to recruit after my fatigues. But my uncle, who wanted no recruiting, would not hear of it, and the next morning we had to bestride our beasts again.

The soil told of the neighbourhood of the mountain, whose granite foundations rose from the earth like the knotted roots of some huge oak. We were rounding the immense base of the volcano. The Professor hardly took his eyes off it. He tossed up his arms and seemed to defy it, and to declare, “There stands the giant that I shall conquer.” After about four hours’ walking the horses stopped of their own accord at the door of the priest’s house at Stapi.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUT ARCTICS CAN BE INHOSPITABLE, TOO

Stapi is a village consisting of about thirty huts, built of lava, at the south side of the base of the volcano. It extends along the inner edge of a small fiord, inclosed between basaltic walls of the strangest construction.

Basalt is a brownish rock of igneous origin. It assumes regular forms, the arrangement of which is often very surprising. Here nature had done her work geometrically, with square and compass and plummet. Everywhere else her art consists alone in throwing down huge masses together in disorder. You see cones imperfectly formed, irregular pyramids, with a fantastic disarrangement of lines; but here, as if to exhibit an example of regularity, though in advance of the very earliest architects, she has created a severely simple order of architecture, never surpassed either by the splendours of Babylon or the wonders of Greece.

I had heard of the Giant's Causeway in Ireland, and Fingal's Cave in Staffa, one of the Hebrides; but I had never yet seen a basaltic formation.

At Stapi I beheld this phenomenon in all its beauty.

The wall that confined the fiord, like all the coast of the peninsula, was composed of a series of vertical columns thirty feet high. These straight shafts, of fair proportions, supported an architrave of horizontal slabs, the overhanging portion of which formed a semi-arch over the sea. At intervals, under this natural shelter, there spread out vaulted entrances in beautiful curves, into which the waves came dashing with foam and spray. A few shafts of basalt, torn from their hold by the fury of tempests, lay along the soil like remains of an ancient temple, in ruins for ever fresh, and over which centuries passed without leaving a trace of age upon them.

This was our last stage upon the earth. Hans had exhibited great intelligence, and it gave me some little comfort to think then that he was not going to leave us.

On arriving at the door of the rector’s house, which was not different from the others, I saw a man shoeing a horse, hammer in hand, and with a leathern apron on.

“Sællvertu,” said the hunter.

“God dag,” said the blacksmith in good Danish.

“Kyrkoherde,” said Hans, turning round to my uncle.

“The rector,” repeated the Professor. “It seems, Axel, that this good man is the rector.”

Our guide in the meanwhile was making the ‘kyrkoherde’ aware of the position of things; when the latter, suspending his labours for a moment, uttered a sound no doubt understood between horses and farriers, and immediately a tall and ugly hag appeared from the hut. She must have been six feet at the least. I was in great alarm lest she should treat me to the Icelandic kiss; but there was no occasion to fear, nor did she do the honours at all too gracefully.

The visitors’ room seemed to me the worst in the whole cabin. It was close, dirty, and evil smelling. But we had to be content. The rector did not to go in for antique hospitality. Very far from it. Before the day was over I saw that we had to do with a blacksmith, a fisherman, a hunter, a joiner, but not at all with a minister of the Gospel. To be sure, it was a week-day; perhaps on a Sunday he made amends.

I don’t mean to say anything against these poor priests, who after all are very wretched. They receive from the Danish Government a ridiculously small pittance, and they get from the parish the fourth part of the tithe, which does not come to sixty marks a year (about £4). Hence the necessity to work for their livelihood; but after fishing, hunting, and shoeing horses for any length of time, one soon gets into the ways and manners of fishermen, hunters, and farriers, and other rather rude and uncultivated people; and that evening I found out that temperance was not among the virtues that distinguished my host.

My uncle soon discovered what sort of a man he had to do with; instead of a good and learned man he found a rude and coarse peasant. He therefore resolved to commence the grand expedition at once, and to leave this inhospitable parsonage. He cared nothing about fatigue, and resolved to spend some days upon the mountain.

The preparations for our departure were therefore made the very day after our arrival at Stapi. Hans hired the services of three Icelanders to do the duty of the horses in the transport of the burdens; but as soon as we had arrived at the crater these natives were to turn back and leave us to our own devices. This was to be clearly understood.

My uncle now took the opportunity to explain to Hans that it was his intention to explore the interior of the volcano to its farthest limits.

Hans merely nodded. There or elsewhere, down in the bowels of the earth, or anywhere on the surface, all was alike to him. For my own part the incidents of the journey had hitherto kept me amused, and made me forgetful of coming evils; but now my fears again were beginning to get the better of me. But what could I do? The place to resist the Professor would have been Hamburg, not the foot of Snæfell.

One thought, above all others, harassed and alarmed me; it was one calculated to shake firmer nerves than mine.

Now, thought I, here we are, about to climb Snæfell. Very good. We will explore the crater. Very good, too, others have done as much without dying for it. But that is not all. If there is a way to penetrate into the very bowels of the island, if that ill-advised Saknussemm has told a true tale, we shall lose our way amidst the deep subterranean passages of this volcano. Now, there is no proof that Snæfell is extinct. Who can assure us that an eruption is not brewing at this very moment? Does it follow that because the monster has slept since 1229 he must therefore never awake again? And if he wakes up presently, where shall we be?

It was worth while debating this question, and I did debate it. I could not sleep for dreaming about eruptions. Now, the part of ejected scoriae and ashes seemed to my mind a very rough one to act.

So, at last, when I could hold out no longer, I resolved to lay the case before my uncle, as prudently and as cautiously as possible, just under the form of an almost impossible hypothesis.

I went to him. I communicated my fears to him, and drew back a step to give him room for the explosion which I knew must follow. But I was mistaken.

“I was thinking of that,” he replied with great simplicity.

What could those words mean? — Was he actually going to listen to reason? Was he contemplating the abandonment of his plans? This was too good to be true.

After a few moments' silence, during which I dared not question him, he resumed:

“I was thinking of that. Ever since we arrived at Stapi I have been occupied with the important question you have just opened, for we must not be guilty of imprudence.”

“No, indeed!” I replied with forcible emphasis.

“For six hundred years Snæfell has been dumb; but he may speak again. Now, eruptions are always preceded by certain well-known phenomena. I have therefore examined the natives, I have studied external appearances, and I can assure you, Axel, that there will be no eruption.”

At this positive affirmation I stood amazed and speechless.

“You don't doubt my word?” said my uncle. “Well, follow me.”

I obeyed like an automaton. Coming out from the priest's house, the Professor took a straight road, which, through an opening in the basaltic wall, led away from the sea. We were soon in the open country, if one may give that name to a vast extent of mounds of volcanic products. This tract seemed crushed under a rain of enormous ejected rocks of trap, basalt, granite, and all kinds of igneous rocks.

Here and there I could see puffs and jets of steam curling up into the air, called in Icelandic ‘reykir,’ issuing from thermal springs, and indicating by their motion the volcanic energy underneath. This seemed to justify my fears: But I fell from the height of my new-born hopes when my uncle said:

“You see all these volumes of steam, Axel; well, they demonstrate that we have nothing to fear from the fury of a volcanic eruption.”

“Am I to believe that?” I cried.

“Understand this clearly,” added the Professor. “At the approach of an eruption these jets would redouble their activity, but disappear altogether during the period of the eruption. For the elastic fluids, being no longer under pressure, go off by way of the crater instead of escaping by their usual passages through the fissures in the soil. Therefore, if these vapours remain in their usual condition, if they display no augmentation of force, and if you add to this the observation that the wind and rain are not ceasing and being replaced by a still and heavy atmosphere, then you may affirm that no eruption is preparing.”

“But — ”

‘No more; that is sufficient. When science has uttered her voice, let babblers hold their peace.’

I returned to the parsonage, very crestfallen. My uncle had beaten me with the weapons of science. Still I had one hope left, and this was, that when we had reached the bottom of the crater it would be impossible, for want of a passage, to go deeper, in spite of all the Saknussemm’s in Iceland.

I spent that whole night in one constant nightmare; in the heart of a volcano, and from the deepest depths of the earth I saw myself tossed up amongst the interplanetary spaces under the form of an eruptive rock.

The next day, June 23, Hans was awaiting us with his companions carrying provisions, tools, and instruments; two iron pointed sticks, two rifles, and two shot belts were for my uncle and myself. Hans, as a cautious man, had added to our luggage a leathern bottle full of water, which, with that in our flasks, would ensure us a supply of water for eight days.

It was nine in the morning. The priest and his tall Megæra were awaiting us at the door. We supposed they were standing there to bid us a kind farewell. But the farewell was put in the unexpected form of a heavy bill, in which everything was charged, even to the very air we breathed in the pastoral house, infected as it was. This worthy couple were fleecing us just as a Swiss innkeeper might have done, and estimated their imperfect hospitality at the highest price.

My uncle paid without a remark: a man who is starting for the centre of the earth need not be particular about a few rix dollars.

This point being settled, Hans gave the signal, and we soon left

Stapi behind us.

CHAPTER XV.

SNÆFELL AT LAST

Snæfell is 5,000 feet high. Its double cone forms the limit of a trachytic belt which stands out distinctly in the mountain system of the island. From our starting point we could see the two peaks boldly projected against the dark grey sky; I could see an enormous cap of snow coming low down upon the giant’s brow.

We walked in single file, headed by the hunter, who ascended by narrow tracks, where two could not have gone abreast. There was therefore no room for conversation.

After we had passed the basaltic wall of the fiord of Stapi we passed over a vegetable fibrous peat bog, left from the ancient vegetation of this peninsula. The vast quantity of this unworked fuel would be sufficient to warm the whole population of Iceland for a century; this vast turbary measured in certain ravines had in many places a depth of seventy feet, and presented layers of carbonized remains of vegetation alternating with thinner layers of tufaceous pumice.

As a true nephew of the Professor Liedenbrock, and in spite of my dismal prospects, I could not help observing with interest the mineralogical curiosities which lay about me as in a vast museum, and I constructed for myself a complete geological account of Iceland.

This most curious island has evidently been projected from the bottom of the sea at a comparatively recent date. Possibly, it may still be subject to gradual elevation. If this is the case, its origin may well be attributed to subterranean fires. Therefore, in this case, the theory of Sir Humphry Davy, Saknussemm's document, and my uncle's theories would all go off in smoke. This hypothesis led me to examine with more attention the appearance of the surface, and I soon arrived at a conclusion as to the nature of the forces which presided at its birth.

Iceland, which is entirely devoid of alluvial soil, is wholly composed of volcanic tufa, that is to say, an agglomeration of porous rocks and stones. Before the volcanoes broke out it consisted of trap rocks slowly upraised to the level of the sea by the action of central forces. The internal fires had not yet forced their way through.

But at a later period a wide chasm formed diagonally from south-west to north-east, through which was gradually forced out the trachyte which was to form a mountain chain. No violence accompanied this change; the matter thrown out was in vast quantities, and the liquid material oozing out from the abysses of the earth slowly spread in extensive plains or in hillocky masses. To this period belong the felspar, syenites, and porphyries.

But with the help of this outflow the thickness of the crust of the island increased materially, and therefore also its powers of resistance. It may easily be conceived what vast quantities of elastic gases, what masses of molten matter accumulated beneath its solid surface whilst no exit was practicable after the cooling of the trachytic crust. Therefore a time would come when the elastic and explosive forces of the imprisoned gases would upheave this ponderous cover and drive out for themselves openings through tall chimneys. Hence then the volcano would distend and lift up the crust, and then burst through a crater suddenly formed at the summit or thinnest part of the volcano.

To the eruption succeeded other volcanic phenomena. Through the outlets now made first escaped the ejected basalt of which the plain we had just left presented such marvellous specimens. We were moving over grey rocks of dense and massive formation, which in cooling had formed into hexagonal prisms. Everywhere around us we saw truncated cones, formerly so many fiery mouths.

After the exhaustion of the basalt, the volcano, the power of which grew by the extinction of the lesser craters, supplied an egress to lava, ashes, and scoriae, of which I could see lengthened screes streaming down the sides of the mountain like flowing hair.

Such was the succession of phenomena which produced Iceland, all arising from the action of internal fire; and to suppose that the mass within did not still exist in a state of liquid incandescence was absurd; and nothing could surpass the absurdity of fancying that it was possible to reach the earth's centre.

So I felt a little comforted as we advanced to the assault of Snæfell.

The way was growing more and more arduous, the ascent steeper and steeper; the loose fragments of rock trembled beneath us, and the utmost care was needed to avoid dangerous falls.

Hans went on as quietly as if he were on level ground; sometimes he disappeared altogether behind the huge blocks, then a shrill whistle would direct us on our way to him. Sometimes he would halt, pick up a few bits of stone, build them up into a recognisable form, and thus made landmarks to guide us in our way back. A very wise precaution in itself, but, as things turned out, quite useless.

Three hours' fatiguing march had only brought us to the base of the mountain. There Hans bid us come to a halt, and a hasty breakfast was served out. My uncle swallowed two mouthfuls at a time to get on faster. But, whether he liked it or not, this was a rest as well as a breakfast hour and he had to wait till it pleased our guide to move on, which came to pass in an hour. The three Icelanders, just as taciturn as their comrade the hunter, never spoke, and ate their breakfasts in silence.

We were now beginning to scale the steep sides of Snæfell. Its snowy summit, by an optical illusion not unfrequent in mountains, seemed close to us, and yet how many weary hours it took to reach it! The stones, adhering by no soil or fibrous roots of vegetation, rolled away from under our feet, and rushed down the precipice below with the swiftness of an avalanche.

At some places the flanks of the mountain formed an angle with the horizon of at least 36 degrees; it was impossible to climb them, and these stony cliffs had to be tacked round, not without great difficulty. Then we helped each other with our sticks.

I must admit that my uncle kept as close to me as he could; he never lost sight of me, and in many straits his arm furnished me with a powerful support. He himself seemed to possess an instinct for equilibrium, for he never stumbled. The Icelanders, though burdened with our loads, climbed with the agility of mountaineers.

To judge by the distant appearance of the summit of Snæfell, it would have seemed too steep to ascend on our side. Fortunately, after an hour of fatigue and athletic exercises, in the midst of the vast surface of snow presented by the hollow between the two peaks, a kind of staircase appeared unexpectedly which greatly facilitated our ascent. It was formed by one of those torrents of stones flung up by the eruptions, called ‘sting’ by the Icelanders. If this torrent had not been arrested in its fall by the formation of the sides of the mountain, it would have gone on to the sea and formed more islands.

Such as it was, it did us good service. The steepness increased, but these stone steps allowed us to rise with facility, and even with such rapidity that, having rested for a moment while my companions continued their ascent, I perceived them already reduced by distance to microscopic dimensions.

At seven we had ascended the two thousand steps of this grand staircase, and we had attained a bulge in the mountain, a kind of bed on which rested the cone proper of the crater.

Three thousand two hundred feet below us stretched the sea. We had passed the limit of perpetual snow, which, on account of the moisture of the climate, is at a greater elevation in Iceland than the high latitude would give reason to suppose. The cold was excessively keen. The wind was blowing violently. I was exhausted. The Professor saw that my limbs were refusing to perform their office, and in spite of his impatience he decided on stopping. He therefore spoke to the hunter, who shook his head, saying:

“Ofvanför.”

“It seems we must go higher,” said my uncle.

Then he asked Hans for his reason.

“Mistour,” replied the guide.

“Ja Mistour,” said one of the Icelanders in a tone of alarm.

“What does that word mean?” I asked uneasily.

“Look!” said my uncle.

I looked down upon the plain. An immense column of pulverized pumice, sand and dust was rising with a whirling circular motion like a waterspout; the wind was lashing it on to that side of Snæfell where we were holding on; this dense veil, hung across the sun, threw a deep shadow over the mountain. If that huge revolving pillar sloped down, it would involve us in its whirling eddies. This phenomenon, which is not unfrequent when the wind blows from the glaciers, is called in Icelandic ‘mistour.’

“Hastigt! hastigt!” cried our guide.

Without knowing Danish I understood at once that we must follow Hans at the top of our speed. He began to circle round the cone of the crater, but in a diagonal direction so as to facilitate our progress. Presently the dust storm fell upon the mountain, which quivered under the shock; the loose stones, caught with the irresistible blasts of wind, flew about in a perfect hail as in an eruption. Happily we were on the opposite side, and sheltered from all harm. But for the precaution of our guide, our mangled bodies, torn and pounded into fragments, would have been carried afar like the ruins hurled along by some unknown meteor.

Yet Hans did not think it prudent to spend the night upon the sides of the cone. We continued our zigzag climb. The fifteen hundred remaining feet took us five hours to clear; the circuitous route, the diagonal and the counter marches, must have measured at least three leagues. I could stand it no longer. I was yielding to the effects of hunger and cold. The rarefied air scarcely gave play to the action of my lungs.

At last, at eleven in the sunlight night, the summit of Snæfell was reached, and before going in for shelter into the crater I had time to observe the midnight sun, at his lowest point, gilding with his pale rays the island that slept at my feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

BOLDLY DOWN THE CRATER

Supper was rapidly devoured, and the little company housed themselves as best they could. The bed was hard, the shelter not very substantial, and our position an anxious one, at five thousand feet above the sea level. Yet I slept particularly well; it was one of the best nights I had ever had, and I did not even dream.

Next morning we awoke half frozen by the sharp keen air, but with the light of a splendid sun. I rose from my granite bed and went out to enjoy the magnificent spectacle that lay unrolled before me.

I stood on the very summit of the southernmost of Snæfell’s peaks. The range of the eye extended over the whole island. By an optical law which obtains at all great heights, the shores seemed raised and the centre depressed. It seemed as if one of Helbesmer’s raised maps lay at my feet. I could see deep valleys intersecting each other in every direction, precipices like low walls, lakes reduced to ponds, rivers abbreviated into streams. On my right were numberless glaciers and innumerable peaks, some plumed with feathery clouds of smoke. The undulating surface of these endless mountains, crested with sheets of snow, reminded one of a stormy sea. If I looked westward, there the ocean lay spread out in all its magnificence, like a mere continuation of those flock-like summits. The eye could hardly tell where the snowy ridges ended and the foaming waves began.

I was thus steeped in the marvellous ecstasy which all high summits develop in the mind; and now without giddiness, for I was beginning to be accustomed to these sublime aspects of nature. My dazzled eyes were bathed in the bright flood of the solar rays. I was forgetting where and who

I was, to live the life of elves and sylphs, the fanciful creation of Scandinavian superstitions. I felt intoxicated with the sublime pleasure of lofty elevations without thinking of the profound abysses into which I was shortly to be plunged. But I was brought back to the realities of things by the arrival of Hans and the Professor, who joined me on the summit.

My uncle pointed out to me in the far west a light steam or mist, a semblance of land, which bounded the distant horizon of waters.

“Greenland!” said he.

“Greenland?” I cried.

“Yes; we are only thirty-five leagues from it; and during thaws the white bears, borne by the ice fields from the north, are carried even into Iceland. But never mind that. Here we are at the top of Snæfell and here are two peaks, one north and one south. Hans will tell us the name of that on which we are now standing.”

The question being put, Hans replied:

“Scartaris.”

My uncle shot a triumphant glance at me.

“Now for the crater!” he cried.

The crater of Snæfell resembled an inverted cone, the opening of which might be half a league in diameter. Its depth appeared to be about two thousand feet. Imagine the aspect of such a reservoir, brim full and running over with liquid fire amid the rolling thunder. The bottom of the funnel was about 250 feet in circuit, so that the gentle slope allowed its lower brim to be reached without much difficulty. Involuntarily I compared the whole crater to an enormous erected mortar, and the comparison put me in a terrible fright.

“What madness,” I thought, “to go down into a mortar, perhaps a loaded mortar, to be shot up into the air at a moment’s notice!”

But I did not try to back out of it. Hans with perfect coolness resumed the lead, and I followed him without a word.

In order to facilitate the descent, Hans wound his way down the cone by a spiral path. Our route lay amidst eruptive rocks, some of which, shaken out of their loosened beds, rushed bounding down the abyss, and in their fall awoke echoes remarkable for their loud and well-defined sharpness.

In certain parts of the cone there were glaciers. Here Hans advanced only with extreme precaution, sounding his way with his iron-pointed pole, to discover any crevasses in it. At particularly dubious passages we were obliged to connect ourselves with each other by a long cord, in order that any man who missed his footing might be held up by his companions. This solid formation was prudent, but did not remove all danger.

Yet, notwithstanding the difficulties of the descent, down steeps unknown to the guide, the journey was accomplished without accidents, except the loss of a coil of rope, which escaped from the hands of an Icelander, and took the shortest way to the bottom of the abyss.

At mid-day we arrived. I raised my head and saw straight above me the upper aperture of the cone, framing a bit of sky of very small circumference, but almost perfectly round. Just upon the edge appeared the snowy peak of Saris, standing out sharp and clear against endless space.

At the bottom of the crater were three chimneys, through which, in its eruptions, Snæfell had driven forth fire and lava from its central furnace. Each of these chimneys was a hundred feet in diameter. They gaped before us right in our path. I had not the courage to look down either of them. But Professor Liedenbrock had hastily surveyed all three; he was panting, running from one to the other, gesticulating, and uttering incoherent expressions. Hans and his comrades, seated upon loose lava rocks, looked at him with as much wonder as they knew how to express, and perhaps taking him for an escaped lunatic.

Suddenly my uncle uttered a cry. I thought his foot must have slipped and that he had fallen down one of the holes. But, no; I saw him, with arms outstretched and legs straddling wide apart, erect before a granite rock that stood in the centre of the crater, just like a pedestal made ready to receive a statue of Pluto. He stood like a man stupefied, but the stupefaction soon gave way to delirious rapture.

“Axel, Axel,” he cried. “Come, come!”

I ran. Hans and the Icelanders never stirred.

“Look!” cried the Professor.

And, sharing his astonishment, but I think not his joy, I read on the western face of the block, in Runic characters, half mouldered away with lapse of ages, this thrice-accursed name:

[At this point a Runic text appears]

“Arne Saknussemm!” replied my uncle. “Do you yet doubt?”

I made no answer; and I returned in silence to my lava seat in a state of utter speechless consternation. Here was crushing evidence.

How long I remained plunged in agonizing reflections I cannot tell; all that I know is, that on raising my head again, I saw only my uncle and Hans at the bottom of the crater. The Icelanders had been dismissed, and they were now descending the outer slopes of Snæfell to return to Stapi.

Hans slept peaceably at the foot of a rock, in a lava bed, where he had found a suitable couch for himself; but my uncle was pacing around the bottom of the crater like a wild beast in a cage. I had neither the wish nor the strength to rise, and following the guide’s example I went off into an unhappy slumber, fancying I could hear ominous noises or feel tremblings within the recesses of the mountain.

Thus the first night in the crater passed away.

The next morning, a grey, heavy, cloudy sky seemed to droop over the summit of the cone. I did not know this first from the appearances of nature, but I found it out by my uncle’s impetuous wrath.

I soon found out the cause, and hope dawned again in my heart. For this reason.

Of the three ways open before us, one had been taken by Saknussemm. The indications of the learned Icelander hinted at in the cryptogram, pointed to this fact that the shadow of Scartaris came to touch that particular way during the latter days of the month of June.

That sharp peak might hence be considered as the gnomon of a vast sun dial, the shadow projected from which on a certain day would point out the road to the centre of the earth.

Now, no sun no shadow, and therefore no guide. Here was June 25. If the sun was clouded for six days we must postpone our visit till next year.

My limited powers of description would fail, were I to attempt a picture of the Professor’s angry impatience. The day wore on, and no shadow came to lay itself along the bottom of the crater. Hans did not move from the spot he had selected; yet he must be asking himself what were we waiting for, if he asked himself anything at all. My uncle spoke not a word to me. His gaze, ever directed upwards, was lost in the grey and misty space beyond.

On the 26th nothing yet. Rain mingled with snow was falling all day long. Hans built a hut of pieces of lava. I felt a malicious pleasure in watching the thousand rills and cascades that came tumbling down the sides of the cone, and the deafening continuous din awaked by every stone against which they bounded.

My uncle’s rage knew no bounds. It was enough to irritate a meeker man than he; for it was foundering almost within the port.

But Heaven never sends unmixed grief, and for Professor Liedenbrock there was a satisfaction in store proportioned to his desperate anxieties.

The next day the sky was again overcast; but on the 29th of June, the last day but one of the month, with the change of the moon came a change of weather. The sun poured a flood of light down the crater. Every hillock, every rock and stone, every projecting surface, had its share of the beaming torrent, and threw its shadow on the ground. Amongst them all, Scartaris laid down his sharp-pointed angular shadow which began to move slowly in the opposite direction to that of the radiant orb.

My uncle turned too, and followed it.

At noon, being at its least extent, it came and softly fell upon the edge of the middle chimney.

“There it is! there it is!” shouted the Professor.

“Now for the centre of the globe!” he added in Danish.

I looked at Hans, to hear what he would say.

“Forüt!” was his tranquil answer.

“Forward!” replied my uncle.

It was thirteen minutes past one.

CHAPTER XVII.

VERTICAL DESCENT

Now began our real journey. Hitherto our toil had overcome all difficulties, now difficulties would spring up at every step.

I had not yet ventured to look down the bottomless pit into which I was about to take a plunge. The supreme hour had come. I might now either share in the enterprise or refuse to move forward. But I was ashamed to recoil in the presence of the hunter. Hans accepted the enterprise with such calmness, such indifference, such perfect disregard of any possible danger that I blushed at the idea of being less brave than he. If I had been alone I might have once more tried the effect of argument; but in the presence of the guide I held my peace; my heart flew back to my sweet Virlandaise, and I approached the central chimney.

I have already mentioned that it was a hundred feet in diameter, and three hundred feet round. I bent over a projecting rock and gazed down. My hair stood on end with terror. The bewildering feeling of vacuity laid hold upon me. I felt my centre of gravity shifting its place, and giddiness mounting into my brain like drunkenness. There is nothing more treacherous than this attraction down deep abysses. I was just about to drop down, when a hand laid hold of me. It was that of Hans. I suppose I had not taken as many lessons on gulf exploration as I ought to have done in the Frelsers Kirk at Copenhagen.

But, however short was my examination of this well, I had taken some account of its conformation. Its almost perpendicular walls were bristling with innumerable projections which would facilitate the descent. But if there was no want of steps, still there was no rail. A rope fastened to the edge of the aperture might have helped us down. But how were we to unfasten it, when arrived at the other end?

My uncle employed a very simple expedient to obviate this difficulty. He uncoiled a cord of the thickness of a finger, and four hundred feet long; first he dropped half of it down, then he passed it round a lava block that projected conveniently, and threw the other half down the chimney. Each of us could then descend by holding with the hand both halves of the rope, which would not be able to unroll itself from its hold; when two hundred feet down, it would be easy to get possession of the whole of the rope by letting one end go and pulling down by the other. Then the exercise would go on again ad infinitum.

“Now,” said my uncle, after having completed these preparations, “now let us look to our loads. I will divide them into three lots; each of us will strap one upon his back. I mean only fragile articles.”

Of course, we were not included under that head.

“Hans,” said he, “will take charge of the tools and a portion of the provisions; you, Axel, will take another third of the provisions, and the arms; and I will take the rest of the provisions and the delicate instruments.”

“But,” said I, “the clothes, and that mass of ladders and ropes, what is to become of them?”

“They will go down by themselves.”

“How so?” I asked.

“You will see presently.”

My uncle was always willing to employ magnificent resources. Obeying orders, Hans tied all the non-fragile articles in one bundle, corded them firmly, and sent them bodily down the gulf before us.

I listened to the dull thuds of the descending bale. My uncle, leaning over the abyss, followed the descent of the luggage with a satisfied nod, and only rose erect when he had quite lost sight of it.

“Very well, now it is our turn.”

Now I ask any sensible man if it was possible to hear those words without a shudder.

The Professor fastened his package of instruments upon his shoulders; Hans took the tools; I took the arms: and the descent commenced in the following order; Hans, my uncle, and myself. It was effected in profound silence, broken only by the descent of loosened stones down the dark gulf.

I dropped as it were, frantically clutching the double cord with one hand and buttressing myself from the wall with the other by means of my stick. One idea overpowered me almost, fear lest the rock should give way from which I was hanging. This cord seemed a fragile thing for three persons to be suspended from. I made as little use of it as possible, performing wonderful feats of equilibrium upon the lava projections which my foot seemed to catch hold of like a hand.

When one of these slippery steps shook under the heavier form of

Hans, he said in his tranquil voice:

“Gif akt!”

“Attention!” repeated my uncle.

In half an hour we were standing upon the surface of a rock jammed in across the chimney from one side to the other.

Hans pulled the rope by one of its ends, the other rose in the air; after passing the higher rock it came down again, bringing with it a rather dangerous shower of bits of stone and lava.

Leaning over the edge of our narrow standing ground, I observed that the bottom of the hole was still invisible.

The same manoeuvre was repeated with the cord, and half an hour after we had descended another two hundred feet.

I don’t suppose the maddest geologist under such circumstances would have studied the nature of the rocks that we were passing. I am sure I did trouble my head about them. Pliocene, miocene, eocene, cretaceous, jurassic, triassic, permian, carboniferous, devonian, silurian, or primitive was all one to me. But the Professor, no doubt, was pursuing his observations or taking notes, for in one of our halts he said to me:

“The farther I go the more confidence I feel. The order of these volcanic formations affords the strongest confirmation to the theories of Davy. We are now among the primitive rocks, upon which the chemical operations took place which are produced by the contact of elementary bases of metals with water. I repudiate the notion of central heat altogether. We shall see further proof of that very soon.”

No variation, always the same conclusion. Of course, I was not inclined to argue. My silence was taken for consent and the descent went on.

Another three hours, and I saw no bottom to the chimney yet. When I lifted my head I perceived the gradual contraction of its aperture. Its walls, by a gentle incline, were drawing closer to each other, and it was beginning to grow darker.

Still we kept descending. It seemed to me that the falling stones were meeting with an earlier resistance, and that the concussion gave a more abrupt and deadened sound.

As I had taken care to keep an exact account of our manoeuvres with the rope, which I knew that we had repeated fourteen times, each descent occupying half an hour, the conclusion was easy that we had been seven hours, plus fourteen quarters of rest, making ten hours and a half. We had started at one, it must therefore now be eleven o'clock; and the depth to which we had descended was fourteen times 200 feet, or 2,800 feet.

At this moment I heard the voice of Hans.

"Halt!" he cried.

I stopped short just as I was going to place my feet upon my uncle's head.

"We are there," he cried.

"Where?" said I, stepping near to him.

"At the bottom of the perpendicular chimney," he answered.

"Is there no way farther?"

"Yes; there is a sort of passage which inclines to the right. We will see about that to-morrow. Let us have our supper, and go to sleep."

The darkness was not yet complete. The provision case was opened; we refreshed ourselves, and went to sleep as well as we could upon a bed of stones and lava fragments.

When lying on my back, I opened my eyes and saw a bright sparkling point of light at the extremity of the gigantic tube 3,000 feet long, now a vast telescope.

It was a star which, seen from this depth, had lost all scintillation, and which by my computation should be 46; Ursa minor. Then I fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE WONDERS OF TERRESTRIAL DEPTHS

At eight in the morning a ray of daylight came to wake us up. The thousand shining surfaces of lava on the walls received it on its passage, and scattered it like a shower of sparks.

There was light enough to distinguish surrounding objects.

“Well, Axel, what do you say to it?” cried my uncle, rubbing his hands. “Did you ever spend a quieter night in our little house at Königsberg? No noise of cart wheels, no cries of basket women, no boatmen shouting!”

“No doubt it is very quiet at the bottom of this well, but there is something alarming in the quietness itself.”

“Now come!” my uncle cried; “if you are frightened already, what will you be by and by? We have not gone a single inch yet into the bowels of the earth.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that we have only reached the level of the island, long vertical tube, which terminates at the mouth of the crater, has its lower end only at the level of the sea.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Quite sure. Consult the barometer.”

In fact, the mercury, which had risen in the instrument as fast as we descended, had stopped at twenty-nine inches.

“You see,” said the Professor, “we have now only the pressure of our atmosphere, and I shall be glad when the aneroid takes the place of the barometer.”

And in truth this instrument would become useless as soon as the weight of the atmosphere should exceed the pressure ascertained at the level of the sea.

“But,” I said, “is there not reason to fear that this ever-increasing pressure will become at last very painful to bear?”

“No; we shall descend at a slow rate, and our lungs will become inured to a denser atmosphere. Aeronauts find the want of air as they rise to high elevations, but we shall perhaps have too much: of the two, this is what I should prefer. Don’t let us lose a moment. Where is the bundle we sent down before us?”

I then remembered that we had searched for it in vain the evening before. My uncle questioned Hans, who, after having examined attentively with the eye of a huntsman, replied:

“Der huppe!”

“Up there.”

And so it was. The bundle had been caught by a projection a hundred feet above us. Immediately the Icelander climbed up like a cat, and in a few minutes the package was in our possession.

“Now,” said my uncle, “let us breakfast; but we must lay in a good stock, for we don’t know how long we may have to go on.”

The biscuit and extract of meat were washed down with a draught of water mingled with a little gin.

Breakfast over, my uncle drew from his pocket a small notebook, intended for scientific observations. He consulted his instruments, and recorded:

“Monday, July 1.

“Chronometer, 8.17 a.m.; barometer, 297 in.; thermometer, 6° (43°

F.). Direction, E.S.E.”

This last observation applied to the dark gallery, and was indicated by the compass.

“Now, Axel,” cried the Professor with enthusiasm, “now we are really going into the interior of the earth. At this precise moment the journey commences.”

So saying, my uncle took in one hand Ruhmkorff’s apparatus, which was hanging from his neck; and with the other he formed an electric communication with the coil in the lantern, and a sufficiently bright light dispersed the darkness of the passage.

Hans carried the other apparatus, which was also put into action. This ingenious application of electricity would enable us to go on for a long time by creating an artificial light even in the midst of the most inflammable gases.

“Now, march!” cried my uncle.

Each shouldered his package. Hans drove before him the load of cords and clothes; and, myself walking last, we entered the gallery.

At the moment of becoming engulfed in this dark gallery, I raised my head, and saw for the last time through the length of that vast tube the sky of Iceland, which I was never to behold again.

The lava, in the last eruption of 1229, had forced a passage through this tunnel. It still lined the walls with a thick and glistening coat. The electric light was here intensified a hundredfold by reflection.

The only difficulty in proceeding lay in not sliding too fast down an incline of about forty-five degrees; happily certain asperities and a few blisterings here and there formed steps, and we descended, letting our baggage slip before us from the end of a long rope.

But that which formed steps under our feet became stalactites overhead. The lava, which was porous in many places, had formed a surface covered with small rounded blisters; crystals of opaque quartz, set with limpid tears of glass, and hanging like clustered chandeliers from the vaulted roof, seemed as it were to kindle and form a sudden illumination as we passed on our way. It seemed as if the genii of the depths were lighting up their palace to receive their terrestrial guests.

“It is magnificent!” I cried spontaneously. “My uncle, what a sight! Don’t you admire those blending hues of lava, passing from reddish brown to bright yellow by imperceptible shades? And these crystals are just like globes of light.”

“Ali, you think so, do you, Axel, my boy? Well, you will see greater splendours than these, I hope. Now let us march: march!”

He had better have said slide, for we did nothing but drop down the steep inclines. It was the facifs descensus Averni of Virgil. The compass, which I consulted frequently, gave our direction as south-east with inflexible steadiness. This lava stream deviated neither to the right nor to the left.

Yet there was no sensible increase of temperature. This justified Davy’s theory, and more than once I consulted the thermometer with surprise. Two hours after our departure it only marked 10° (50° Fahr.), an increase of only 4°. This gave reason for believing that our descent was more horizontal than vertical. As for the exact depth reached, it was very easy to ascertain that; the Professor measured accurately the angles of deviation and inclination on the road, but he kept the results to himself.

About eight in the evening he signalled to stop. Hans sat down at once. The lamps were hung upon a projection in the lava; we were in a sort of cavern where there was plenty of air. Certain puffs of air reached us. What atmospheric disturbance was the cause of them? I could not answer that question at the moment. Hunger and fatigue made me incapable of reasoning. A descent of seven hours consecutively is not made without considerable expenditure of strength. I was exhausted. The order to ‘halt’ therefore gave me pleasure. Hans laid our provisions upon a block of lava, and we ate with a good appetite. But one thing troubled me, our supply of water was half consumed. My uncle reckoned upon a fresh supply from subterranean sources, but hitherto we had met with none. I could not help drawing his attention to this circumstance.

“Are you surprised at this want of springs?” he said.

“More than that, I am anxious about it; we have only water enough for five days.”

“Don’t be uneasy, Axel, we shall find more than we want.”

“When?”

“When we have left this bed of lava behind us. How could springs break through such walls as these?”

“But perhaps this passage runs to a very great depth. It seems to me that we have made no great progress vertically.”

“Why do you suppose that?”

“Because if we had gone deep into the crust of earth, we should have encountered greater heat.”

“According to your system,” said my uncle. “But what does the thermometer say?”

“Hardly fifteen degrees (59° Fahr), nine degrees only since our departure.”

“Well, what is your conclusion?”

“This is my conclusion. According to exact observations, the increase of temperature in the interior of the globe advances at the rate of one degree (1 4/5° Fahr.) for every hundred feet. But certain local conditions may modify this rate. Thus at Yakoutsk in Siberia the increase of a degree is ascertained to be reached every 36 feet. This difference depends upon the heat-conducting power of the rocks. Moreover, in the neighbourhood of an extinct volcano, through gneiss, it has been observed that the increase of a degree is only attained at every 125 feet. Let us therefore assume this last hypothesis as the most suitable to our situation, and calculate.”

“Well, do calculate, my boy.”

“Nothing is easier,” said I, putting down figures in my note book. “Nine times a hundred and twenty-five feet gives a depth of eleven hundred and twenty-five feet.”

“Very accurate indeed.”

“Well?”

“By my observation we are at 10,000 feet below the level of the sea.”

“Is that possible?”

“Yes, or figures are of no use.”

The Professor’s calculations were quite correct. We had already attained a depth of six thousand feet beyond that hitherto reached by the foot of man, such as the mines of Kitz Bahl in Tyrol, and those of Wuttembourg in Bohemia.

The temperature, which ought to have been 81° (178° Fahr.) was scarcely 15° (59° Fahr.). Here was cause for reflection.

CHAPTER XIX.

GEOLOGICAL STUDIES IN SITU

Next day, Tuesday, June 30, at 6 a.m. the descent began again.

We were still following the gallery of lava, a real natural staircase, and as gently sloping as those inclined planes which in some old houses are still found instead of flights of steps. And so we went on until 12.17, the, precise moment when we overtook Hans, who had stopped.

“Ah! here we are,” exclaimed my uncle, “at the very end of the chimney.”

I looked around me. We were standing at the intersection of two roads, both dark and narrow. Which were we to take? This was a difficulty.

Still my uncle refused to admit an appearance of hesitation, either before me or the guide; he pointed out the Eastern tunnel, and we were soon all three in it.

Besides there would have been interminable hesitation before this choice of roads; for since there was no indication whatever to guide our choice, we were obliged to trust to chance.

The slope of this gallery was scarcely perceptible, and its sections very unequal. Sometimes we passed a series of arches succeeding each other like the majestic arcades of a gothic cathedral. Here the architects of the middle ages might have found studies for every form of the sacred art which sprang from the development of the pointed arch. A mile farther we had to bow our heads under corniced elliptic arches in the romanesque style; and massive pillars standing out from the wall bent under the spring of the vault that rested heavily upon them. In other places this magnificence gave way to narrow channels between low structures which looked like beaver's huts, and we had to creep along through extremely narrow passages.

The heat was perfectly bearable. Involuntarily I began to think of its heat when the lava thrown out by Snæfell was boiling and working through this now silent road. I imagined the torrents of fire hurled back at every angle in the gallery, and the accumulation of intensely heated vapours in the midst of this confined channel.

I only hope, thought I, that this so-called extinct volcano won't take a fancy in his old age to begin his sports again!

I abstained from communicating these fears to Professor Liedenbrock. He would never have understood them at all. He had but one idea — forward! He walked, he slid, he scrambled, he tumbled, with a persistency which one could not but admire.

By six in the evening, after a not very fatiguing walk, we had gone two leagues south, but scarcely a quarter of a mile down.

My uncle said it was time to go to sleep. We ate without talking, and went to sleep without reflection.

Our arrangements for the night were very simple; a railway rug each, into which we rolled ourselves, was our sole covering. We had neither cold nor intrusive visits to fear. Travellers who penetrate into the wilds of central Africa, and into the pathless forests of the New World, are obliged to watch over each other by night. But we enjoyed absolute safety and utter seclusion; no savages or wild beasts infested these silent depths.

Next morning, we awoke fresh and in good spirits. The road was resumed. As the day before, we followed the path of the lava. It was impossible to tell what rocks we were passing: the tunnel, instead of tending lower, approached more and more nearly to a horizontal direction, I even fancied a slight rise. But about ten this upward tendency became so evident, and therefore so fatiguing, that I was obliged to slacken my pace.

“Well, Axel?” demanded the Professor impatiently.

“Well, I cannot stand it any longer,” I replied.

“What! after three hours’ walk over such easy ground.”

“It may be easy, but it is tiring all the same.”

“What, when we have nothing to do but keep going down!”

“Going up, if you please.”

“Going up!” said my uncle, with a shrug.

“No doubt, for the last half-hour the inclines have gone the other way, and at this rate we shall soon arrive upon the level soil of Iceland.”

The Professor nodded slowly and uneasily like a man that declines to be convinced. I tried to resume the conversation. He answered not a word, and gave the signal for a start. I saw that his silence was nothing but ill-humour.

Still I had courageously shouldered my burden again, and was rapidly following Hans, whom my uncle preceded. I was anxious not to be left behind. My greatest care was not to lose sight of my companions. I shuddered at the thought of being lost in the mazes of this vast subterranean labyrinth.

Besides, if the ascending road did become steeper, I was comforted with the thought that it was bringing us nearer to the surface. There was hope in this. Every step confirmed me in it, and I was rejoicing at the thought of meeting my little Gräuben again.

By mid-day there was a change in the appearance of this wall of the gallery. I noticed it by a diminution of the amount of light reflected from the sides; solid rock was appearing in the place of the lava coating. The mass was composed of inclined and sometimes vertical strata. We were passing through rocks of the transition or silurian system.

“It is evident,” I cried, “the marine deposits formed in the second period, these shales, limestones, and sandstones. We are turning away from the primary granite. We are just as if we were people of Hamburg going to Lübeck by way of Hanover!”

I had better have kept my observations to myself. But my geological instinct was stronger than my prudence, and uncle Liedenbrock heard my exclamation.

“What’s that you are saying?” he asked.

“See,” I said, pointing to the varied series of sandstones and limestones, and the first indication of slate.

“Well?”

“We are at the period when the first plants and animals appeared.”

“Do you think so?”

“Look close, and examine.”

I obliged the Professor to move his lamp over the walls of the gallery. I expected some signs of astonishment; but he spoke not a word, and went on.

Had he understood me or not? Did he refuse to admit, out of self-love as an uncle and a philosopher, that he had mistaken his way when he chose the eastern tunnel? or was he determined to examine this passage to its farthest extremity? It was evident that we had left the lava path, and that this road could not possibly lead to the extinct furnace of Snæfell.

Yet I asked myself if I was not depending too much on this change in the rock. Might I not myself be mistaken? Were we really crossing the layers of rock which overlie the granite foundation?

The name given by Sir Roderick Murchison to a vast series of fossiliferous strata, which lies between the non-fossiliferous slaty schists below and the old red sandstone above. The system is well developed in the region of Shropshire, etc. once inhabited by the Silures under Caractacus, or Caradoc. (Tr.)

If I am right, I thought, I must soon find some fossil remains of primitive life; and then we must yield to evidence. I will look.

I had not gone a hundred paces before incontestable proofs presented themselves. It could not be otherwise, for in the Silurian age the seas contained at least fifteen hundred vegetable and animal species. My feet, which had become accustomed to the indurated lava floor, suddenly rested upon a dust composed of the debris of plants and shells. In the walls were distinct impressions of fucoids and lycopodites.

Professor Liedenbrock could not be mistaken, I thought, and yet he pushed on, with, I suppose, his eyes resolutely shut.

This was only invincible obstinacy. I could hold out no longer. I picked up a perfectly formed shell, which had belonged to an animal not unlike the woodlouse: then, joining my uncle, I said:

“Look at this!”

“Very well,” said he quietly, “it is the shell of a crustacean, of an extinct species called a trilobite. Nothing more.”

“But don’t you conclude — ?”

“Just what you conclude yourself. Yes; I do, perfectly. We have left the granite and the lava. It is possible that I may be mistaken. But I cannot be sure of that until I have reached the very end of this gallery.”

“You are right in doing this, my uncle, and I should quite approve of your determination, if there were not a danger threatening us nearer and nearer.”

“What danger?”

“The want of water.”

“Well, Axel, we will put ourselves upon rations.”

CHAPTER XX.

THE FIRST SIGNS OF DISTRESS

In fact, we had to ration ourselves. Our provision of water could not last more than three days. I found that out for certain when supper-time came. And, to our sorrow, we had little reason to expect to find a spring in these transition beds.

The whole of the next day the gallery opened before us its endless arcades. We moved on almost without a word. Hans' silence seemed to be infecting us.

The road was now not ascending, at least not perceptibly. Sometimes, even, it seemed to have a slight fall. But this tendency, which was very trifling, could not do anything to reassure the Professor; for there was no change in the beds, and the transitional characteristics became more and more decided.

The electric light was reflected in sparkling splendour from the schist, limestone, and old red sandstone of the walls. It might have been thought that we were passing through a section of Wales, of which an ancient people gave its name to this system. Specimens of magnificent marbles clothed the walls, some of a greyish agate fantastically veined with white, others of rich crimson or yellow dashed with splotches of red; then came dark cherry-coloured marbles relieved by the lighter tints of limestone.

The greater part of these bore impressions of primitive organisms. Creation had evidently advanced since the day before. Instead of rudimentary trilobites, I noticed remains of a more perfect order of beings, amongst others ganoid fishes and some of those sauroids in which palaeontologists have discovered the earliest reptile forms. The Devonian seas were peopled by animals of these species, and deposited them by thousands in the rocks of the newer formation.

It was evident that we were ascending that scale of animal life in which man fills the highest place. But Professor Liedenbrock seemed not to notice it.

He was awaiting one of two events, either the appearance of a vertical well opening before his feet, down which our descent might be resumed, or that of some obstacle which should effectually turn us back on our own footsteps. But evening came and neither wish was gratified.

On Friday, after a night during which I felt pangs of thirst, our little troop again plunged into the winding passages of the gallery.

After ten hours' walking I observed a singular deadening of the reflection of our lamps from the side walls. The marble, the schist, the limestone, and the sandstone were giving way to a dark and lustreless lining. At one moment, the tunnel becoming very narrow, I leaned against the wall.

When I removed my hand it was black. I looked nearer, and found we were in a coal formation.

"A coal mine!" I cried.

"A mine without miners," my uncle replied.

"Who knows?" I asked.

"I know," the Professor pronounced decidedly, "I am certain that this gallery driven through beds of coal was never pierced by the hand of man.

But whether it be the hand of nature or not does not matter. Supper time is come; let us sup.”

Hans prepared some food. I scarcely ate, and I swallowed down the few drops of water rationed out to me. One flask half full was all we had left to slake the thirst of three men.

After their meal my two companions laid themselves down upon their rugs, and found in sleep a solace for their fatigue. But I could not sleep, and I counted every hour until morning.

On Saturday, at six, we started afresh. In twenty minutes we reached a vast open space; I then knew that the hand of man had not hollowed out this mine; the vaults would have been shored up, and, as it was, they seemed to be held up by a miracle of equilibrium.

This cavern was about a hundred feet wide and a hundred and fifty in height. A large mass had been rent asunder by a subterranean disturbance. Yielding to some vast power from below it had broken asunder, leaving this great hollow into which human beings were now penetrating for the first time.

The whole history of the carboniferous period was written upon these gloomy walls, and a geologist might with ease trace all its diverse phases. The beds of coal were separated by strata of sandstone or compact clays, and appeared crushed under the weight of overlying strata.

At the age of the world which preceded the secondary period, the earth was clothed with immense vegetable forms, the product of the double influence of tropical heat and constant moisture; a vapoury atmosphere surrounded the earth, still veiling the direct rays of the sun.

Thence arises the conclusion that the high temperature then existing was due to some other source than the heat of the sun. Perhaps even the orb of day may not have been ready yet to play the splendid part he now acts. There were no ‘climates’ as yet, and a torrid heat, equal from pole to equator, was spread over the whole surface of the globe. Whence this heat? Was it from the interior of the earth?

Notwithstanding the theories of Professor Liedenbrock, a violent heat did at that time brood within the body of the spheroid. Its action was felt to the very last coats of the terrestrial crust; the plants, unacquainted with the beneficent influences of the sun, yielded neither flowers nor scent. But their roots drew vigorous life from the burning soil of the early days of this planet.

There were but few trees. Herbaceous plants alone existed. There were tall grasses, ferns, lycopods, besides sigillaria, asterophyllites, now scarce plants, but then the species might be counted by thousands.

The coal measures owe their origin to this period of profuse vegetation. The yet elastic and yielding crust of the earth obeyed the fluid forces beneath. Thence innumerable fissures and depressions. The plants, sunk underneath the waters, formed by degrees into vast accumulated masses.

Then came the chemical action of nature; in the depths of the seas the vegetable accumulations first became peat; then, acted upon by generated gases and the heat of fermentation, they underwent a process of complete mineralization.

Thus were formed those immense coalfields, which nevertheless, are not inexhaustible, and which three centuries at the present accelerated rate of consumption will exhaust unless the industrial world will devise a remedy.

These reflections came into my mind whilst I was contemplating the mineral wealth stored up in this portion of the globe. These no doubt, I thought, will never be discovered; the working of such deep mines would involve too large an outlay, and where would be the use as long as coal is yet spread far and wide near the surface? Such as my eyes behold these virgin stores, such they will be when this world comes to an end.

But still we marched on, and I alone was forgetting the length of the way by losing myself in the midst of geological contemplations. The temperature remained what it had been during our passage through the lava and schists. Only my sense of smell was forcibly affected by an odour of protocarburet of hydrogen. I immediately recognised in this gallery the presence of a considerable quantity of the dangerous gas called by miners firedamp, the explosion of which has often occasioned such dreadful catastrophes.

Happily, our light was from Ruhmkorff's ingenious apparatus. If unfortunately we had explored this gallery with torches, a terrible explosion would have put an end to travelling and travellers at one stroke.

This excursion through the coal mine lasted till night. My uncle scarcely could restrain his impatience at the horizontal road. The darkness, always deep twenty yards before us, prevented us from estimating the length of the gallery; and I was beginning to think it must be endless, when suddenly at six o'clock a wall very unexpectedly stood before us. Right or left, top or bottom, there was no road farther; we were at the end of a blind alley. “Very well, it's all right!” cried my uncle, “now, at any rate, we shall know what we are about. We are not in Saknussemm's road, and all we have to do is to go back. Let us take a night's rest, and in three days we shall get to the fork in the road.” “Yes,” said I, “if we have any strength left.” “Why not?”

“Because to-morrow we shall have no water.” “Nor courage either?” asked my uncle severely. I dared make no answer.

CHAPTER XXI.

COMPASSION FUSES THE PROFESSOR’S HEART

Next day we started early. We had to hasten forward. It was a three days’ march to the cross roads.

I will not speak of the sufferings we endured in our return. My uncle bore them with the angry impatience of a man obliged to own his weakness; Hans with the resignation of his passive nature; I, I confess, with complaints and expressions of despair. I had no spirit to oppose this ill fortune.

As I had foretold, the water failed entirely by the end of the first day’s retrograde march. Our fluid aliment was now nothing but gin; but this infernal fluid burned my throat, and I could not even endure the sight of it. I found the temperature and the air stifling. Fatigue paralysed my limbs. More than once I dropped down motionless. Then there was a halt; and my uncle and the Icelander did their best to restore me. But I saw that the former was struggling painfully against excessive fatigue and the tortures of thirst.

At last, on Tuesday, July 8, we arrived on our hands and knees, and half dead, at the junction of the two roads. There I dropped like a lifeless lump, extended on the lava soil. It was ten in the morning.

Hans and my uncle, clinging to the wall, tried to nibble a few bits of biscuit. Long moans escaped from my swollen lips.

After some time my uncle approached me and raised me in his arms.

“Poor boy!” said he, in genuine tones of compassion.

I was touched with these words, not being accustomed to see the excitable Professor in a softened mood. I grasped his trembling hands in mine. He let me hold them and looked at me. His eyes were moistened.

Then I saw him take the flask that was hanging at his side. To my amazement he placed it on my lips.

“Drink!” said he.

Had I heard him? Was my uncle beside himself? I stared at, him stupidly, and felt as if I could not understand him.

“Drink!” he said again.

And raising his flask he emptied it every drop between my lips.

Oh! infinite pleasure! a slender sip of water came to moisten my burning mouth. It was but one sip but it was enough to recall my ebbing life.

I thanked my uncle with clasped hands.

“Yes,” he said, “a draught of water; but it is the very last — you hear! — the last. I had kept it as a precious treasure at the bottom of my flask. Twenty times, nay, a hundred times, have I fought against a frightful impulse to drink it off. But no, Axel, I kept it for you.”

“My dear uncle,” I said, whilst hot tears trickled down my face.

“Yes, my poor boy, I knew that as soon as you arrived at these cross roads you would drop half dead, and I kept my last drop of water to reanimate you.”

“Thank you, thank you,” I said. Although my thirst was only partially quenched, yet some strength had returned. The muscles of my throat, until then contracted, now relaxed again; and the inflammation of my lips abated somewhat; and I was now able to speak. .

“Let us see,” I said, “we have now but one thing to do. We have no water; we must go back.”

While I spoke my uncle avoided looking at me; he hung his head down; his eyes avoided mine.

“We must return,” I exclaimed vehemently; “we must go back on our way to Snæfell. May God give us strength to climb up the crater again!”

“Return!” said my uncle, as if he was rather answering himself than me.

“Yes, return, without the loss of a minute.”

A long silence followed.

“So then, Axel,” replied the Professor ironically, “you have found no courage or energy in these few drops of water?”

“Courage?”

“I see you just as feeble-minded as you were before, and still expressing only despair!”

What sort of a man was this I had to do with, and what schemes was he now revolving in his fearless mind?

“What! you won’t go back?”

“Should I renounce this expedition just when we have the fairest chance of success! Never!”

“Then must we resign ourselves to destruction?”

“No, Axel, no; go back. Hans will go with you. Leave me to myself!”

“Leave you here!”

“Leave me, I tell you. I have undertaken this expedition. I will carry it out to the end, and I will not return. Go, Axel, go!”

My uncle was in high state of excitement. His voice, which had for a moment been tender and gentle, had now become hard and threatening. He was struggling with gloomy resolutions against impossibilities. I would not leave him in this bottomless abyss, and on the other hand the instinct of self-preservation prompted me to fly.

The guide watched this scene with his usual phlegmatic unconcern. Yet he understood perfectly well what was going on between his two companions. The gestures themselves were sufficient to show that we were each bent on taking a different road; but Hans seemed to take no part in a question upon which depended his life. He was ready to start at a given signal, or to stay, if his master so willed it.

How I wished at this moment I could have made him understand me. My words, my complaints, my sorrow would have had some influence over that frigid nature. Those dangers which our guide could not understand I could have demonstrated and proved to him. Together we might have over-ruled the obstinate Professor; if it were needed, we might perhaps have compelled him to regain the heights of Snæfell.

I drew near to Hans. I placed my hand upon his. He made no movement. My parted lips sufficiently revealed my sufferings. The Icelander slowly moved his head, and calmly pointing to my uncle said:

“Master.”

“Master!” I shouted; “you madman! no, he is not the master of our life; we must fly, we must drag him. Do you hear me? Do you understand?”

I had seized Hans by the arm. I wished to oblige him to rise. I strove with him. My uncle interposed.

“Be calm, Axel! you will get nothing from that immovable servant.

Therefore, listen to my proposal.”

I crossed my arms, and confronted my uncle boldly.

“The want of water,” he said, “is the only obstacle in our way. In this eastern gallery made up of lavas, schists, and coal, we have not met with a single particle of moisture. Perhaps we shall be more fortunate if we follow the western tunnel.”

I shook my head incredulously.

“Hear me to the end,” the Professor went on with a firm voice. “Whilst you were lying there motionless, I went to examine the conformation of that gallery. It penetrates directly downward, and in a few hours it will bring us to the granite rocks. There we must meet with abundant springs. The nature of the rock assures me of this, and instinct agrees with logic to support my conviction. Now, this is my proposal. When Columbus asked of his ships’ crews for three days more to discover a new world, those crews, disheartened and sick as they were, recognised the justice of the claim, and he discovered America. I am the Columbus of this nether world, and I only ask for one more day. If in a single day I have not met with the water that we want, I swear to you we will return to the surface of the earth.”

In spite of my irritation I was moved with these words, as well as with the violence my uncle was doing to his own wishes in making so hazardous a proposal.

“Well,” I said, “do as you will, and God reward your superhuman energy. You have now but a few hours to tempt fortune. Let us start!”

CHAPTER XXII.

TOTAL FAILURE OF WATER

This time the descent commenced by the new gallery. Hans walked first as was his custom.

We had not gone a hundred yards when the Professor, moving his lantern along the walls, cried:

“Here are primitive rocks. Now we are in the right way. Forward!”

When in its early stages the earth was slowly cooling, its contraction gave rise in its crust to disruptions, distortions, fissures, and chasms. The passage through which we were moving was such a fissure, through which at one time granite poured out in a molten state. Its thousands of windings formed an inextricable labyrinth through the primeval mass.

As fast as we descended, the succession of beds forming the primitive foundation came out with increasing distinctness. Geologists consider this primitive matter to be the base of the mineral crust of the earth, and have ascertained it to be composed of three different formations, schist, gneiss, and mica schist, resting upon that unchangeable foundation, the granite.

Never had mineralogists found themselves in so marvellous a situation to study nature in situ. What the boring machine, an insensible, inert instrument, was unable to bring to the surface of the inner structure of the globe, we were able to peruse with our own eyes and handle with our own hands.

Through the beds of schist, coloured with delicate shades of green, ran in winding course threads of copper and manganese, with traces of platinum and gold. I thought, what riches are here buried at an unapproachable depth in the earth, hidden for ever from the covetous eyes of the human race! These treasures have been buried at such a profound depth by the convulsions of primeval times that they run no chance of ever being molested by the pickaxe or the spade.

To the schists succeeded gneiss, partially stratified, remarkable for the parallelism and regularity of its lamina, then mica schists, laid in large plates or flakes, revealing their lamellated structure by the sparkle of the white shining mica.

The light from our apparatus, reflected from the small facets of quartz, shot sparkling rays at every angle, and I seemed to be moving through a diamond, within which the quickly darting rays broke across each other in a thousand flashing coruscations.

About six o’clock this brilliant fete of illuminations underwent a sensible abatement of splendour, then almost ceased. The walls assumed a crystallised though sombre appearance; mica was more closely mingled with the feldspar and quartz to form the proper rocky foundations of the earth, which bears without distortion or crushing the weight of the four terrestrial systems. We were immured within prison walls of granite.

It was eight in the evening. No signs of water had yet appeared. I was suffering horribly. My uncle strode on. He refused to stop. He was listening anxiously for the murmur of distant springs. But, no, there was dead silence.

And now my limbs were failing beneath me. I resisted pain and torture, that I might not stop my uncle, which would have driven him to despair, for the day was drawing near to its end, and it was his last.

At last I failed utterly; I uttered a cry and fell.

“Come to me, I am dying.”

My uncle retraced his steps. He gazed upon me with his arms crossed; then these muttered words passed his lips:

“It’s all over!”

The last thing I saw was a fearful gesture of rage, and my eyes closed.

When I reopened them I saw my two companions motionless and rolled up in their coverings. Were they asleep? As for me, I could not get one moment’s sleep. I was suffering too keenly, and what embittered my thoughts was that there was no remedy. My uncle’s last words echoed painfully in my ears: “it’s all over!” For in such a fearful state of debility it was madness to think of ever reaching the upper world again.

We had above us a league and a half of terrestrial crust. The weight of it seemed to be crushing down upon my shoulders. I felt weighed down, and I exhausted myself with imaginary violent exertions to turn round upon my granite couch.

A few hours passed away. A deep silence reigned around us, the silence of the grave. No sound could reach us through walls, the thinnest of which were five miles thick.

Yet in the midst of my stupefaction I seemed to be aware of a noise. It was dark down the tunnel, but I seemed to see the Icelander vanishing from our sight with the lamp in his hand.

Why was he leaving us? Was Hans going to forsake us? My uncle was fast asleep. I wanted to shout, but my voice died upon my parched and swollen lips. The darkness became deeper, and the last sound died away in the far distance.

“Hans has abandoned us,” I cried. “Hans! Hans!”

But these words were only spoken within me. They went no farther. Yet after the first moment of terror I felt ashamed of suspecting a man of such extraordinary faithfulness. Instead of ascending he was descending the gallery. An evil design would have taken him up not down. This reflection restored me to calmness, and I turned to other thoughts. None but some weighty motive could have induced so quiet a man to forfeit his sleep. Was he on a journey of discovery? Had he during the silence of the night caught a sound, a murmuring of something in the distance, which had failed to affect my hearing?

CHAPTER XXIII.

WATER DISCOVERED

For a whole hour I was trying to work out in my delirious brain the reasons which might have influenced this seemingly tranquil huntsman. The absurdest notions ran in utter confusion through my mind. I thought madness was coming on!

But at last a noise of footsteps was heard in the dark abyss. Hans was approaching. A flickering light was beginning to glimmer on the wall of our darksome prison; then it came out full at the mouth of the gallery. Hans appeared.

He drew close to my uncle, laid his hand upon his shoulder, and gently woke him. My uncle rose up.

“What is the matter?” he asked.

“Watten!” replied the huntsman.

No doubt under the inspiration of intense pain everybody becomes endowed with the gift of divers tongues. I did not know a word of Danish, yet instinctively I understood the word he had uttered.

“Water! water!” I cried, clapping my hands and gesticulating like a madman.

“Water!” repeated my uncle. “Hvar?” he asked, in Icelandic.

“Nedat,” replied Hans.

“Where? Down below!” I understood it all. I seized the hunter’s hands, and pressed them while he looked on me without moving a muscle of his countenance.

The preparations for our departure were not long in making, and we were soon on our way down a passage inclining two feet in seven. In an hour we had gone a mile and a quarter, and descended two thousand feet.

Then I began to hear distinctly quite a new sound of something running within the thickness of the granite wall, a kind of dull, dead rumbling, like distant thunder. During the first part of our walk, not meeting with the promised spring, I felt my agony returning; but then my uncle acquainted me with the cause of the strange noise.

“Hans was not mistaken,” he said. “What you hear is the rushing of a torrent.”

“A torrent?” I exclaimed.

“There can be no doubt; a subterranean river is flowing around us.”

We hurried forward in the greatest excitement. I was no longer sensible of my fatigue. This murmuring of waters close at hand was already refreshing me. It was audibly increasing. The torrent, after having for some time flowed over our heads, was now running within the left wall, roaring and rushing. Frequently I touched the wall, hoping to feel some indications of moisture: But there was no hope here.

Yet another half hour, another half league was passed.

Then it became clear that the hunter had gone no farther. Guided by an instinct peculiar to mountaineers he had as it were felt this torrent through the rock; but he had certainly seen none of the precious liquid; he had drunk nothing himself.

Soon it became evident that if we continued our walk we should widen the distance between ourselves and the stream, the noise of which was becoming fainter.

We returned. Hans stopped where the torrent seemed closest. I sat near the wall, while the waters were flowing past me at a distance of two feet with extreme violence. But there was a thick granite wall between us and the object of our desires.

Without reflection, without asking if there were any means of procuring the water, I gave way to a movement of despair.

Hans glanced at me with, I thought, a smile of compassion.

He rose and took the lamp. I followed him. He moved towards the wall. I looked on. He applied his ear against the dry stone, and moved it slowly to and fro, listening intently. I perceived at once that he was examining to find the exact place where the torrent could be heard the loudest. He met with that point on the left side of the tunnel, at three feet from the ground.

I was stirred up with excitement. I hardly dared guess what the hunter was about to do. But I could not but understand, and applaud and cheer him on, when I saw him lay hold of the pickaxe to make an attack upon the rock.

“We are saved!” I cried.

“Yes,” cried my uncle, almost frantic with excitement. “Hans is right. Capital fellow! Who but he would have thought of it?”

Yes; who but he? Such an expedient, however simple, would never have entered into our minds. True, it seemed most hazardous to strike a blow of the hammer in this part of the earth's structure. Suppose some displacement should occur and crush us all! Suppose the torrent, bursting through, should drown us in a sudden flood! There was nothing vain in these fancies. But still no fears of falling rocks or rushing floods could stay us now; and our thirst was so intense that, to satisfy it, we would have dared the waves of the north Atlantic.

Hans set about the task which my uncle and I together could not have accomplished. If our impatience had armed our hands with power, we should have shattered the rock into a thousand fragments. Not so Hans. Full of self possession, he calmly wore his way through the rock with a steady succession of light and skilful strokes, working through an aperture six inches wide at the outside. I could hear a louder noise of flowing waters, and I fancied I could feel the delicious fluid refreshing my parched lips.

The pick had soon penetrated two feet into the granite partition, and our man had worked for above an hour. I was in an agony of impatience. My uncle wanted to employ stronger measures, and I had some difficulty in dissuading him; still he had just taken a pickaxe in his hand, when a sudden hissing was heard, and a jet of water spurted out with violence against the opposite wall.

Hans, almost thrown off his feet by the violence of the shock, uttered a cry of grief and disappointment, of which I soon under-. stood the cause, when plunging my hands into the spouting torrent, I withdrew them in haste, for the water was scalding hot.

“The water is at the boiling point,” I cried.

“Well, never mind, let it cool,” my uncle replied.

The tunnel was filling with steam, whilst a stream was forming, which by degrees wandered away into subterranean windings, and soon we had the satisfaction of swallowing our first draught.

Could anything be more delicious than the sensation that our burning intolerable thirst was passing away, and leaving us to enjoy comfort and pleasure? But where was this water from? No matter. It was water; and though still warm, it brought life back to the dying. I kept drinking without stopping, and almost without tasting.

At last after a most delightful time of reviving energy, I cried,

“Why, this is a chalybeate spring!”

“Nothing could be better for the digestion,” said my uncle. “It is highly impregnated with iron. It will be as good for us as going to the Spa, or to Töplitz.”

“Well, it is delicious!”

“Of course it is, water should be, found six miles underground. It has an inky flavour, which is not at all unpleasant. What a capital source of strength Hans has found for us here. We will call it after his name.”

“Agreed,” I cried.

And Hansbach it was from that moment.

Hans was none the prouder. After a moderate draught, he went quietly into a corner to rest.

“Now,” I said, “we must not lose this water.”

“What is the use of troubling ourselves?” my uncle, replied. “I fancy it will never fail.”

“Never mind, we cannot be sure; let us fill the water bottle and our flasks, and then stop up the opening.”

My advice was followed so far as getting in a supply; but the stopping up of the hole was not so easy to accomplish. It was in vain that we took up fragments of granite, and stuffed them in with tow, we only scalded our hands without succeeding. The pressure was too great, and our efforts were fruitless.

“It is quite plain,” said I, “that the higher body of this water is at a considerable elevation. The force of the jet shows that.”

“No doubt,” answered my uncle. “If this column of water is 32,000 feet high — that is, from the surface of the earth, it is equal to the weight of a thousand atmospheres. But I have got an idea.”

“Well?”

“Why should we trouble ourselves to stop the stream from coming out at all?”

“Because — ” Well, I could not assign a reason.

“When our flasks are empty, where shall we fill them again? Can we tell that?”

No; there was no certainty.

“Well, let us allow the water to run on. It will flow down, and will both guide and refresh us.”

“That is well planned,” I cried. “With this stream for our guide, there is no reason why we should not succeed in our undertaking.”

“Ah, my boy! you agree with me now,” cried the Professor, laughing.

“I agree with you most heartily.”

“Well, let us rest awhile; and then we will start again.”

I was forgetting that it was night. The chronometer soon informed me of that fact; and in a very short time, refreshed and thankful, we all three fell into a sound sleep.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WELL SAID, OLD MOLE! CANST THOU WORK I’ THE GROUND SO FAST?

By the next day we had forgotten all our sufferings. At first, I was wondering that I was no longer thirsty, and I was for asking for the reason. The answer came in the murmuring of the stream at my feet.

We breakfasted, and drank of this excellent chalybeate water. I felt wonderfully stronger, and quite decided upon pushing on. Why should not so firmly convinced a man as my uncle, furnished with so industrious a guide as Hans, and accompanied by so determined a nephew as myself, go on to final success? Such were the magnificent plans which struggled for mastery within me. If it had been proposed to me to return to the summit of Snæfell, I should have indignantly declined.

Most fortunately, all we had to do was to descend.

“Let us start!” I cried, awakening by my shouts the echoes of the vaulted hollows of the earth.

On Thursday, at 8 a.m. we started afresh. The granite tunnel winding from side to side, earned us past unexpected turns, and seemed almost to form a labyrinth; but, on the whole, its direction seemed to be south-easterly. My uncle never ceased to consult his compass, to keep account of the ground gone over.

The gallery dipped down a very little way from the horizontal, scarcely more than two inches in a fathom, and the stream ran gently murmuring at our feet. I compared it to a friendly genius guiding us underground, and caressed with my hand the soft naiad, whose comforting voice accompanied our steps. With my reviving spirits these mythological notions seemed to come unbidden.

As for my uncle, he was beginning to storm against the horizontal road. He loved nothing better than a vertical path; but this way seemed indefinitely prolonged, and instead of sliding along the hypothenuse as we were now doing, he would willingly have dropped down the terrestrial radius. But there was no help for it, and as long as we were approaching the centre at all we felt that we must not complain.

From time to time, a steeper path appeared; our naiad then began to tumble before us with a hoarser murmur, and we went down with her to a greater depth.

On the whole, that day and the next we made considerable way horizontally, very little vertically.

On Friday evening, the 10th of July, according to our calculations, we were thirty leagues south-east of Rejkiavik, and at a depth of two leagues and a half.

At our feet there now opened a frightful abyss. My uncle, however, was not to be daunted, and he clapped his hands at the steepness of the descent.

“This will take us a long way,” he cried, “and without much difficulty; for the projections in the rock form quite a staircase.”

The ropes were so fastened by Hans as to guard against accident, and the descent commenced. I can hardly call it perilous, for I was beginning to be familiar with this kind of exercise.

This well, or abyss, was a narrow cleft in the mass of the granite, called by geologists a ‘fault,’ and caused by the unequal cooling of the globe of the earth. If it had at one time been a passage for eruptive matter thrown out by Snæfell, I still could not understand why no trace was left of its passage. We kept going down a kind of winding staircase, which seemed almost to have been made by the hand of man.

Every quarter of an hour we were obliged to halt, to take a little necessary repose and restore the action of our limbs. We then sat down upon a fragment of rock, and we talked as we ate and drank from the stream.

Of course, down this fault the Hansbach fell in a cascade, and lost some of its volume; but there was enough and to spare to slake our thirst. Besides, when the incline became more gentle, it would of course resume its peaceable course. At this moment it reminded me of my worthy uncle, in his frequent fits of impatience and anger, while below it ran with the calmness of the Icelandic hunter.

On the 6th and 7th of July we kept following the spiral curves of this singular well, penetrating in actual distance no more than two leagues; but being carried to a depth of five leagues below the level of the sea. But on the 8th, about noon, the fault took, towards the south-east, a much gentler slope, one of about forty-five degrees.

Then the road became monotonously easy. It could not be otherwise, for there was no landscape to vary the stages of our journey.

On Wednesday, the 15th, we were seven leagues underground, and had travelled fifty leagues away from Snæfell. Although we were tired, our health was perfect, and the medicine chest had not yet had occasion to be opened.

My uncle noted every hour the indications of the compass, the chronometer, the aneroid, and the thermometer the very same which he has published in his scientific report of our journey. It was therefore not difficult to know exactly our whereabouts. When he told me that we had gone fifty leagues horizontally, I could not repress an exclamation of astonishment, at the thought that we had now long left Iceland behind us.

“What is the matter?” he cried.

“I was reflecting that if your calculations are correct we are no longer under Iceland.”

“Do you think so?”

“I am not mistaken,” I said, and examining the map, I added, “We have passed Cape Portland, and those fifty leagues bring us under the wide expanse of ocean.”

“Under the sea,” my uncle repeated, rubbing his hands with delight.

“Can it be?” I said. “Is the ocean spread above our heads?”

“Of course, Axel. What can be more natural? At Newcastle are there not coal mines extending far under the sea?”

It was all very well for the Professor to call this so simple, but I could not feel quite easy at the thought that the boundless ocean was rolling over my head. And yet it really mattered very little whether it was the plains and mountains that covered our heads, or the Atlantic waves, as long as we were arched over by solid granite. And, besides, I was getting used to this idea; for the tunnel, now running straight, now winding as capriciously in its inclines as in its turnings, but constantly preserving its south-easterly direction, and always running deeper, was gradually carrying us to very great depths indeed.

Four days later, Saturday, the 18th of July, in the evening, we arrived at a kind of vast grotto; and here my uncle paid Hans his weekly wages, and it was settled that the next day, Sunday, should be a day of rest.

CHAPTER XXV.

DE PROFUNDIS

I therefore awoke next day relieved from the preoccupation of an immediate start. Although we were in the very deepest of known depths, there was something not unpleasant about it. And, besides, we were beginning to get accustomed to this troglodyte life. I no longer thought of sun, moon, and stars, trees, houses, and towns, nor of any of those terrestrial superfluities which are necessaries of men who live upon the earth’s surface. Being fossils, we looked upon all those things as mere jokes.

The grotto was an immense apartment. Along its granite floor ran our faithful stream. At this distance from its spring the water was scarcely tepid, and we drank of it with pleasure.

After breakfast the Professor gave a few hours to the arrangement of his daily notes.

“First,” said he, “I will make a calculation to ascertain our exact position. I hope, after our return, to draw a map of our journey, which will be in reality a vertical section of the globe, containing the track of our expedition.”

“That will be curious, uncle; but are your observations sufficiently accurate to enable you to do this correctly?”

“Yes; I have everywhere observed the angles and the inclines. I am sure there is no error. Let us see where we are now. Take your compass, and note the direction.”

I looked, and replied carefully:

tpwgln, a hole; dnw, to creep into. The name of an Ethiopian tribe who lived in caves and holes. ??????, a hole, and ???, to creep into.

“South-east by east.”

“Well,” answered the Professor, after a rapid calculation, “I infer that we have gone eighty-five leagues since we started.”

“Therefore we are under mid-Atlantic?”

“To be sure we are.”

“And perhaps at this very moment there is a storm above, and ships over our heads are being rudely tossed by the tempest.”

“Quite probable.”

“And whales are lashing the roof of our prison with their tails?”

“It may be, Axel, but they won’t shake us here. But let us go back to our calculation. Here we are eighty-five leagues south-east of Snæfell, and I reckon that we are at a depth of sixteen leagues.”

“Sixteen leagues?” I cried.

“No doubt.”

“Why, this is the very limit assigned by science to the thickness of the crust of the earth.”

“I don’t deny it.”

“And here, according to the law of increasing temperature, there ought to be a heat of 2,732° Fahr!”

“So there should, my lad.”

“And all this solid granite ought to be running in fusion.”

“You see that it is not so, and that, as so often happens, facts come to overthrow theories.”

“I am obliged to agree; but, after all, it is surprising.”

“What does the thermometer say?”

“Twenty-seven, six tenths (82° Fahr.).”

“Therefore the savants are wrong by 2,705°, and the proportional increase is a mistake. Therefore Humphry Davy was right, and I am not wrong in following him. What do you say now?”

“Nothing.”

In truth, I had a good deal to say. I gave way in no respect to Davy’s theory. I still held to the central heat, although I did not feel its effects. I preferred to admit in truth, that this chimney of an extinct volcano, lined with lavas, which are non-conductors of heat, did not suffer the heat to pass through its walls.

But without stopping to look up new arguments I simply took up our situation such as it was.

“Well, admitting all your calculations to be quite correct, you must allow me to draw one rigid result therefrom.”

“What is it. Speak freely.”

“At the latitude of Iceland, where we now are, the radius of the earth, the distance from the centre to the surface is about 1,583 leagues; let us say in round numbers 1,600 leagues, or 4,800 miles. Out of 1,600 leagues we have gone twelve!”

“So you say.”

“And these twelve at a cost of 85 leagues diagonally?”

“Exactly so.”

“In twenty days?”

“Yes.”

“Now, sixteen leagues are the hundredth part of the earth’s radius. At this rate we shall be two thousand days, or nearly five years and a half, in getting to the centre.”

No answer was vouchsafed to this rational conclusion. “Without reckoning, too, that if a vertical depth of sixteen leagues can be attained only by a diagonal descent of eighty-four, it follows that we must go eight thousand miles in a south-easterly direction; so that we shall emerge from some point in the earth’s circumference instead of getting to the centre!”

“Confusion to all your figures, and all your hypotheses besides,” shouted my uncle in a sudden rage. “What is the basis of them all? How do you know that this passage does not run straight to our destination? Besides, there is a precedent. What one man has done, another may do.”

“I hope so; but, still, I may be permitted — ”

“You shall have my leave to hold your tongue, Axel, but not to talk in that irrational way.”

I could see the awful Professor bursting through my uncle’s skin, and

I took timely warning.

“Now look at your aneroid. What does that say?”

“It says we are under considerable pressure.”

“Very good; so you see that by going gradually down, and getting accustomed to the density of the atmosphere, we don’t suffer at all.”

“Nothing, except a little pain in the ears.”

“That’s nothing, and you may get rid of even that by quick breathing whenever you feel the pain.”

“Exactly so,” I said, determined not to say a word that might cross my uncle’s prejudices. “There is even positive pleasure in living in this dense atmosphere. Have you observed how intense sound is down here?”

“No doubt it is. A deaf man would soon learn to hear perfectly.”

“But won’t this density augment?”

“Yes; according to a rather obscure law. It is well known that the weight of bodies diminishes as fast as we descend. You know that it is at the surface of the globe that weight is most sensibly felt, and that at the centre there is no weight at all.”

“I am aware of that; but, tell me, will not air at last acquire the density of water?”

“Of course, under a pressure of seven hundred and ten atmospheres.”

“And how, lower down still?”

“Lower down the density will still increase.”

“But how shall we go down then.”

“Why, we must fill our pockets with stones.”

“Well, indeed, my worthy uncle, you are never at a loss for an answer.”

I dared venture no farther into the region of probabilities, for I might presently have stumbled upon an impossibility, which would have brought the Professor on the scene when he was not wanted.

Still, it was evident that the air, under a pressure which might reach that of thousands of atmospheres, would at last reach the solid state, and then, even if our bodies could resist the strain, we should be stopped, and no reasonings would be able to get us on any farther.

But I did not advance this argument. My uncle would have met it with his inevitable Saknussemm, a precedent which possessed no weight with me; for even if the journey of the learned Icelander were really attested, there was one very simple answer, that in the sixteenth century there was neither barometer or aneroid and therefore Saknussemm could not tell how far he had gone.

But I kept this objection to myself, and waited the course of events.

The rest of the day was passed in calculations and in conversations. I remained a steadfast adherent of the opinions of Professor Liedenbrock, and I envied the stolid indifference of Hans, who, without going into causes and effects, went on with his eyes shut wherever his destiny guided him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WORST PERIL OF ALL

It must be confessed that hitherto things had not gone on so badly, and that I had small reason to complain. If our difficulties became no worse, we might hope to reach our end. And to what a height of scientific glory we should then attain! I had become quite a Liedenbrock in my reasonings; seriously I had. But would this state of things last in the strange place we had come to? Perhaps it might.

For several days steeper inclines, some even frightfully near to the perpendicular, brought us deeper and deeper into the mass of the interior of the earth. Some days we advanced nearer to the centre by a league and a half, or nearly two leagues. These were perilous descents, in which the skill and marvellous coolness of Hans were invaluable to us. That unimpassioned Icelander devoted himself with incomprehensible deliberation; and, thanks to him, we crossed many a dangerous spot which we should never have cleared alone.

But his habit of silence gained upon him day by day, and was infecting us. External objects produce decided effects upon the brain. A man shut up between four walls soon loses the power to associate words and ideas together. How many prisoners in solitary confinement become idiots, if not mad, for want of exercise for the thinking faculty!

During the fortnight following our last conversation, no incident occurred worthy of being recorded. But I have good reason for remembering one very serious event which took place at this time, and of which I could scarcely now forget the smallest details.

By the 7th of August our successive descents had brought us to a depth of thirty leagues; that is, that for a space of thirty leagues there were over our heads solid beds of rock, ocean, continents, and towns. We must have been two hundred leagues from Iceland.

On that day the tunnel went down a gentle slope. I was ahead of the others. My uncle was carrying one of Ruhmkorff's lamps and I the other. I was examining the beds of granite.

Suddenly turning round I observed that I was alone.

Well, well, I thought; I have been going too fast, or Hans and my uncle have stopped on the way. Come, this won't do; I must join them. Fortunately there is not much of an ascent.

I retraced my steps. I walked for a quarter of an hour. I gazed into the darkness. I shouted. No reply: my voice was lost in the midst of the cavernous echoes which alone replied to my call.

I began to feel uneasy. A shudder ran through me.

"Calmly!" I said aloud to myself, "I am sure to find my companions again. There are not two roads. I was too far ahead. I will return!"

For half an hour I climbed up. I listened for a call, and in that dense atmosphere a voice could reach very far. But there was a dreary silence in all that long gallery. I stopped. I could not believe that I was lost. I was only bewildered for a time, not lost. I was sure I should find my way again.

"Come," I repeated, "since there is but one road, and they are on it, I must find them again. I have but to ascend still. Unless, indeed, missing me, and supposing me to be behind, they too should have gone back. But even in this case I have only to make the greater haste. I shall find them, I am sure."

I repeated these words in the fainter tones of a half-convinced man. Besides, to associate even such simple ideas with words, and reason with them, was a work of time.

A doubt then seized upon me. Was I indeed in advance when we became separated? Yes, to be sure I was. Hans was after me, preceding my uncle. He had even stopped for a while to strap his baggage better over his shoulders. I could remember this little incident. It was at that very moment that I must have gone on.

Besides, I thought, have not I a guarantee that I shall not lose my way, a clue in the labyrinth, that cannot be broken, my faithful stream? I have but to trace it back, and I must come upon them.

This conclusion revived my spirits, and I resolved to resume my march without loss of time.

How I then blessed my uncle's foresight in preventing the hunter from stopping up the hole in the granite. This beneficent spring, after having satisfied our thirst on the road, would now be my guide among the windings of the terrestrial crust.

Before starting afresh I thought a wash would do me good. I stooped to bathe my face in the Hansbach.

To my stupefaction and utter dismay my feet trod only — the rough dry granite. The stream was no longer at my feet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LOST IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH

To describe my despair would be impossible. No words could tell it. I was buried alive, with the prospect before me of dying of hunger and thirst.

Mechanically I swept the ground with my hands. How dry and hard the rock seemed to me!

But how had I left the course of the stream? For it was a terrible fact that it no longer ran at my side. Then I understood the reason of that fearful, silence, when for the last time I listened to hear if any sound from my companions could reach my ears. At the moment when I left the right road I had not noticed the absence of the stream. It is evident that at that moment a deviation had presented itself before me, whilst the Hansbach, following the caprice of another incline, had gone with my companions away into unknown depths.

How was I to return? There was not a trace of their footsteps or of my own, for the foot left no mark upon the granite floor. I racked my brain for a solution of this impracticable problem. One word described my position. Lost!

Lost at an immeasurable depth! Thirty leagues of rock seemed to weigh upon my shoulders with a dreadful pressure. I felt crushed.

I tried to carry back my ideas to things on the surface of the earth. I could scarcely succeed. Hamburg, the house in the Königstrasse, my poor Gräuben, all that busy world underneath which I was wandering about, was passing in rapid confusion before my terrified memory. I could revive with vivid reality all the incidents of our voyage, Iceland, M. Fridrikssen, Snæfell. I said to myself that if, in such a position as I was now in, I was fool enough to cling to one glimpse of hope, it would be madness, and that the best thing I could do was to despair.

What human power could restore me to the light of the sun by rending asunder the huge arches of rock which united over my head, buttressing each other with impregnable strength? Who could place my feet on the right path, and bring me back to my company?

“Oh, my uncle!” burst from my lips in the tone of despair.

It was my only word of reproach, for I knew how much he must be suffering in seeking me, wherever he might be.

When I saw myself thus far removed from all earthly help I had recourse to heavenly succour. The remembrance of my childhood, the recollection of my mother, whom I had only known in my tender early years, came back to me, and I knelt in prayer imploring for the Divine help of which I was so little worthy.

This return of trust in God’s providence allayed the turbulence of my fears, and I was enabled to concentrate upon my situation all the force of my intelligence.

I had three days’ provisions with me and my flask was full. But I could not remain alone for long. Should I go up or down?

Up, of course; up continually.

I must thus arrive at the point where I had left the stream, that fatal turn in the road. With the stream at my feet, I might hope to regain the summit of

Snæfell.

Why had I not thought of that sooner? Here was evidently a chance of safety. The most pressing duty was to find out again the course of the Hansbach. I rose, and leaning upon my iron-pointed stick I ascended the gallery. The slope was rather steep. I walked on without hope but without indecision, like a man who has made up his mind.

For half an hour I met with no obstacle. I tried to recognise my way by the form of the tunnel, by the projections of certain rocks, by the disposition of the fractures. But no particular sign appeared, and I soon saw that this gallery could not bring me back to the turning point. It came to an abrupt end. I struck against an impenetrable wall, and fell down upon the rock.

Unspeakable despair then seized upon me. I lay overwhelmed, aghast!

My last hope was shattered against this granite wall.

Lost in this labyrinth, whose windings crossed each other in all directions, it was no use to think of flight any longer. Here I must die the most dreadful of deaths. And, strange to say, the thought came across me that when some day my petrified remains should be found thirty leagues below the surface in the bowels of the earth, the discovery might lead to grave scientific discussions.

I tried to speak aloud, but hoarse sounds alone passed my dry lips. I panted for breath.

In the midst of my agony a new terror laid hold of me. In falling my lamp had got wrong. I could not set it right, and its light was paling and would soon disappear altogether.

I gazed painfully upon the luminous current growing weaker and weaker in the wire coil. A dim procession of moving shadows seemed slowly unfolding down the darkening walls. I scarcely dared to shut my eyes for one moment, for fear of losing the least glimmer of this precious light. Every instant it seemed about to vanish and the dense blackness to come rolling in palpably upon me.

One last trembling glimmer shot feebly up. I watched it in trembling and anxiety; I drank it in as if I could preserve it, concentrating upon it the full power of my eyes, as upon the very last sensation of light which they were ever to experience, and the next moment I lay in the heavy gloom of deep, thick, unfathomable darkness.

A terrible cry of anguish burst from me. Upon earth, in the midst of the darkest night, light never abdicates its functions altogether. It is still subtle and diffusive, but whatever little there may be, the eye still catches that little. Here there was not an atom; the total darkness made me totally blind.

Then I began to lose my head. I arose with my arms stretched out before me, attempting painfully to feel my way. I began to run wildly, hurrying through the inextricable maze, still descending, still running through the substance of the earth’s thick crust, a struggling denizen of geological ‘faults,’ crying, shouting, yelling, soon bruised by contact with the jagged rock, falling and rising again bleeding, trying to drink the blood which covered my face, and even waiting for some rock to shatter my skull against.

I shall never know whither my mad career took me. After the lapse of some hours, no doubt exhausted, I fell like a lifeless lump at the foot of the wall, and lost all consciousness.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RESCUE IN THE WHISPERING GALLERY

When I returned to partial life my face was wet with tears. How long that state of insensibility had lasted I cannot say. I had no means now of taking account of time. Never was solitude equal to this, never had any living being been so utterly forsaken.

After my fall I had lost a good deal of blood. I felt it flowing over me. Ah! how happy I should have been could I have died, and if death were not yet to be gone through. I would think no longer. I drove away every idea, and, conquered by my grief, I rolled myself to the foot of the opposite wall.

Already I was feeling the approach of another faint, and was hoping for complete annihilation, when a loud noise reached me. It was like the distant rumble of continuous thunder, and I could hear its sounding undulations rolling far away into the remote recesses of the abyss.

Whence could this noise proceed? It must be from some phenomenon proceeding in the great depths amidst which I lay helpless. Was it an explosion of gas? Was it the fall of some mighty pillar of the globe?

I listened still. I wanted to know if the noise would be repeated. A quarter of an hour passed away. Silence reigned in this gallery. I could not hear even the beating of my heart.

Suddenly my ear, resting by chance against the wall, caught, or seemed to catch, certain vague, indescribable, distant, articulate sounds, as of words.

“This is a delusion,” I thought.

But it was not. Listening more attentively, I heard in reality a murmuring of voices. But my weakness prevented me from understanding what the voices said. Yet it was language, I was sure of it.

For a moment I feared the words might be my own, brought back by the echo. Perhaps I had been crying out unknown to myself. I closed my lips firmly, and laid my ear against the wall again.

“Yes, truly, some one is speaking; those are words!”

Even a few feet from the wall I could hear distinctly. I succeeded in catching uncertain, strange, undistinguishable words. They came as if pronounced in low murmured whispers. The word ‘forlorad’ was several times repeated in a tone of sympathy and sorrow.

“Help!” I cried with all my might. “Help!”

I listened, I watched in the darkness for an answer, a cry, a mere breath of sound, but nothing came. Some minutes passed. A whole world of ideas had opened in my mind. I thought that my weakened voice could never penetrate to my companions.

“It is they,” I repeated. “What other men can be thirty leagues under ground?”

I again began to listen. Passing my ear over the wall from one place to another, I found the point where the voices seemed to be best heard. The word ‘forlorad’ again returned; then the rolling of thunder which had roused me from my lethargy.

“No,” I said, “no; it is not through such a mass that a voice can be heard. I am surrounded by granite walls, and the loudest explosion could never be heard here! This noise comes along the gallery. There must be here some remarkable exercise of acoustic laws!”

I listened again, and this time, yes this time, I did distinctly hear my name pronounced across the wide interval.

It was my uncle’s own voice! He was talking to the guide. And ‘forlorad’ is a Danish word.

Then I understood it all. To make myself heard, I must speak along this wall, which would conduct the sound of my voice just as wire conducts electricity.

But there was no time to lose. If my companions moved but a few steps away, the acoustic phenomenon would cease. I therefore approached the wall, and pronounced these words as clearly as possible:

“Uncle Liedenbrock!”

I waited with the deepest anxiety. Sound does not travel with great velocity. Even increased density air has no effect upon its rate of travelling; it merely augments its intensity. Seconds, which seemed ages, passed away, and at last these words reached me:

“Axel! Axel! is it you?”

...

“Yes, yes,” I replied.

...

“My boy, where are you?”

...

“Lost, in the deepest darkness.”

...

“Where is your lamp?”

...

“It is out.”

...

“And the stream?”

...

“Disappeared.”

...

“Axel, Axel, take courage!”

...

“Wait! I am exhausted! I can’t answer. Speak to me!”

...

“Courage,” resumed my uncle. “Don’t speak. Listen to me. We have looked for you up the gallery and down the gallery. Could not find you. I wept for you, my poor boy. At last, supposing you were still on the Hansbach, we fired our guns. Our voices are audible to each other, but our hands cannot touch. But don’t despair, Axel! It is a great thing that we can hear each other.”

...

During this time I had been reflecting. A vague hope was returning to my heart. There was one thing I must know to begin with. I placed my lips close to the wall, saying:

“My uncle!”

...

“My boy!” came to me after a few seconds.

...

“We must know how far we are apart.”

...

“That is easy.”

...

“You have your chronometer?”

. . .

"Yes."

...

"Well, take it. Pronounce my name, noting exactly the second when you speak. I will repeat it as soon as it shall come to me, and you will observe the exact moment when you get my answer."

"Yes; and half the time between my call and your answer will exactly indicate that which my voice will take in coming to you."

...

"Just so, my uncle."

...

"Are you ready?"

...

"Yes."

... . .

"Now, attention. I am going to call your name."

...

I put my ear to the wall, and as soon as the name 'Axel' came I immediately replied "Axel," then waited.

...

"Forty seconds," said my uncle. "Forty seconds between the two words; so the sound takes twenty seconds in coming. Now, at the rate of 1,120 feet in a second, this is 22,400 feet, or four miles and a quarter, nearly."

...

"Four miles and a quarter!" I murmured.

...

"It will soon be over, Axel."

...

"Must I go up or down?"

...

"Down — for this reason: We are in a vast chamber, with endless galleries. Yours must lead into it, for it seems as if all the clefts and fractures of the globe radiated round this vast cavern. So get up, and begin walking. Walk on, drag yourself along, if necessary slide down the steep places, and at the end you will find us ready to receive you. Now begin moving."

...

These words cheered me up.

"Good bye, uncle." I cried. "I am going. There will be no more voices heard when once I have started. So good bye!"

...

“Good bye, Axel, au revoir!”

...

These were the last words I heard.

This wonderful underground conversation, carried on with a distance of four miles and a quarter between us, concluded with these words of hope. I thanked God from my heart, for it was He who had conducted me through those vast solitudes to the point where, alone of all others perhaps, the voices of my companions could have reached me.

This acoustic effect is easily explained on scientific grounds. It arose from the concave form of the gallery and the conducting power of the rock. There are many examples of this propagation of sounds which remain unheard in the intermediate space. I remember that a similar phenomenon has been observed in many places; amongst others on the internal surface of the gallery of the dome of St. Paul’s in London, and especially in the midst of the curious caverns among the quarries near Syracuse, the most wonderful of which is called Dionysius’ Ear.

These remembrances came into my mind, and I clearly saw that since my uncle’s voice really reached me, there could be no obstacle between us. Following the direction by which the sound came, of course I should arrive in his presence, if my strength did not fail me.

I therefore rose; I rather dragged myself than walked. The slope was rapid, and I slid down.

Soon the swiftness of the descent increased horribly, and threatened to become a fall. I no longer had the strength to stop myself.

Suddenly there was no ground under me. I felt myself revolving in air, striking and rebounding against the craggy projections of a vertical gallery, quite a well; my head struck against a sharp corner of the rock, and I became unconscious.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THALATTA! THALATTA!

When I came to myself, I was stretched in half darkness, covered with thick coats and blankets. My uncle was watching over me, to discover the least sign of life. At my first sigh he took my hand; when I opened my eyes he uttered a cry of joy.

“He lives! he lives!” he cried.

“Yes, I am still alive,” I answered feebly.

“My dear nephew,” said my uncle, pressing me to his breast, “you are saved.”

I was deeply touched with the tenderness of his manner as he uttered these words, and still more with the care with which he watched over me. But such trials were wanted to bring out the Professor’s tenderer qualities.

At this moment Hans came, he saw my hand in my uncle’s, and I may safely say that there was joy in his countenance.

“God dag,” said he.

“How do you do, Hans? How are you? And now, uncle, tell me where we are at the present moment?”

“To-morrow, Axel, to-morrow. Now you are too faint and weak. I have bandaged your head with compresses which must not be disturbed. Sleep now, and to-morrow I will tell you all.”

“But do tell me what time it is, and what day.”

“It is Sunday, the 8th of August, and it is ten at night. You must ask me no more questions until the 10th.”

In truth I was very weak, and my eyes involuntarily closed. I wanted a good night’s rest; and I therefore went off to sleep, with the knowledge that I had been four long days alone in the heart of the earth.

Next morning, on awakening, I looked round me. My couch, made up of all our travelling gear, was in a charming grotto, adorned with splendid stalactites, and the soil of which was a fine sand. It was half light. There was no torch, no lamp, yet certain mysterious glimpses of light came from without through a narrow opening in the grotto. I heard too a vague and indistinct noise, something like the murmuring of waves breaking upon a shingly shore, and at times I seemed to hear the whistling of wind.

I wondered whether I was awake, whether I was dreaming, whether my brain, crazed by my fall, was not affected by imaginary noises. Yet neither eyes, nor ears could be so utterly deceived.

It is a ray of daylight, I thought, sliding in through this cleft in the rock! That is indeed the murmuring of waves! That is the rustling noise of wind. Am I quite mistaken, or have we returned to the surface of the earth? Has my uncle given up the expedition, or is it happily terminated?

I was asking myself these unanswerable questions when the Professor entered.

“Good morning, Axel,” he cried cheerily. “I feel sure you are better.”

“Yes, I am indeed,” said I, sitting up on my couch.

“You can hardly fail to be better, for you have slept quietly. Hans and I watched you by turns, and we have noticed you were evidently recovering.”

“Indeed, I do feel a great deal better, and I will give you a proof of that presently if you will let me have my breakfast.”

“You shall eat, lad. The fever has left you. Hans rubbed your wounds with some ointment or other of which the Icelanders keep the secret, and they have healed marvellously. Our hunter is a splendid fellow!”

Whilst he went on talking, my uncle prepared a few provisions, which I devoured eagerly, notwithstanding his advice to the contrary. All the while I was overwhelming him with questions which he answered readily.

I then learnt that my providential fall had brought me exactly to the extremity of an almost perpendicular shaft; and as I had landed in the midst of an accompanying torrent of stones, the least of which would have been enough to crush me, the conclusion was that a loose portion of the rock had come down with me. This frightful conveyance had thus carried me into the arms of my uncle, where I fell bruised, bleeding, and insensible.

“Truly it is wonderful that you have not been killed a hundred times over. But, for the love of God, don’t let us ever separate again, or we many never see each other more.”

“Not separate! Is the journey not over, then?” I opened a pair of astonished eyes, which immediately called for the question:

“What is the matter, Axel?”

“I have a question to ask you. You say that I am safe and sound?”

“No doubt you are.”

“And all my limbs unbroken?”

“Certainly.”

“And my head?”

“Your head, except for a few bruises, is all right; and it is on your shoulders, where it ought to be.”

“Well, I am afraid my brain is affected.”

“Your mind affected!”

“Yes, I fear so. Are we again on the surface of the globe?”

“No, certainly not.”

“Then I must be mad; for don’t I see the light of day, and don’t I hear the wind blowing, and the sea breaking on the shore?”

“Ah! is that all?”

“Do tell me all about it.”

“I can’t explain the inexplicable, but you will soon see and understand that geology has not yet learnt all it has to learn.”

“Then let us go,” I answered quickly.

“No, Axel; the open air might be bad for you.”

“Open air?”

“Yes; the wind is rather strong. You must not expose yourself.”

“But I assure you I am perfectly well.”

“A little patience, my nephew. A relapse might get us into trouble, and we have no time to lose, for the voyage may be a long one.”

“The voyage!”

“Yes, rest to-day, and to-morrow we will set sail.”

“Set sail!” — and I almost leaped up.

What did it all mean? Had we a river, a lake, a sea to depend upon?

Was there a ship at our disposal in some underground harbour?

My curiosity was highly excited, my uncle vainly tried to restrain me. When he saw that my impatience was doing me harm, he yielded.

I dressed in haste. For greater safety I wrapped myself in a blanket, and came out of the grotto.

CHAPTER XXX.

A NEW MARE INTERNUM

At first I could hardly see anything. My eyes, unaccustomed to the light, quickly closed. When I was able to reopen them, I stood more stupefied even than surprised.

“The sea!” I cried.

“Yes,” my uncle replied, “the Liedenbrock Sea; and I don’t suppose any other discoverer will ever dispute my claim to name it after myself as its first discoverer.”

A vast sheet of water, the commencement of a lake or an ocean, spread far away beyond the range of the eye, reminding me forcibly of that open sea which drew from Xenophon’s ten thousand Greeks, after their long retreat, the simultaneous cry, “Thalatta! thalatta!” the sea! the sea! The deeply indented shore was lined with a breadth of fine shining sand, softly lapped by the waves, and strewn with the small shells which had been inhabited by the first of created beings. The waves broke on this shore with the hollow echoing murmur peculiar to vast inclosed spaces. A light foam flew over the waves before the breath of a moderate breeze, and some of the spray fell upon my face. On this slightly inclining shore, about a hundred fathoms from the limit of the waves, came down the foot of a huge wall of vast cliffs, which rose majestically to an enormous height. Some of these, dividing the beach with their sharp spurs, formed capes and promontories, worn away by the ceaseless action of the surf. Farther on the eye discerned their massive outline sharply defined against the hazy distant horizon.

It was quite an ocean, with the irregular shores of earth, but desert and frightfully wild in appearance.

If my eyes were able to range afar over this great sea, it was because a peculiar light brought to view every detail of it. It was not the light of the sun, with his dazzling shafts of brightness and the splendour of his rays; nor was it the pale and uncertain shimmer of the moonbeams, the dim reflection of a nobler body of light. No; the illuminating power of this light, its trembling diffusiveness, its bright, clear whiteness, and its low temperature, showed that it must be of electric origin. It was like an aurora borealis, a continuous cosmical phenomenon, filling a cavern of sufficient extent to contain an ocean.

The vault that spanned the space above, the sky, if it could be called so, seemed composed of vast plains of cloud, shifting and variable vapours, which by their condensation must at certain times fall in torrents of rain. I should have thought that under so powerful a pressure of the atmosphere there could be no evaporation; and yet, under a law unknown to me, there were broad tracts of vapour suspended in the air. But then ‘the weather was fine.’ The play of the electric light produced singular effects upon the upper strata of cloud. Deep shadows reposed upon their lower wreaths; and often, between two separated fields of cloud, there glided down a ray of unspeakable lustre. But it was not solar light, and there was no heat. The general effect was sad, supremely melancholy. Instead of the shining firmament, spangled with its innumerable stars, shining singly or in clusters, I felt that all these subdued and shaded lights were ribbed in by vast walls of granite, which seemed to overpower me with their weight, and that all this space, great as it was, would not be enough for the march of the humblest of satellites.

Then I remembered the theory of an English captain, who likened the earth to a vast hollow sphere, in the interior of which the air became luminous because of the vast pressure that weighed upon it; while two stars, Pluto and Proserpine, rolled within upon the circuit of their mysterious orbits.

We were in reality shut up inside an immeasurable excavation. Its width could not be estimated, since the shore ran widening as far as eye could reach, nor could its length, for the dim horizon bounded the new. As for its height, it must have been several leagues. Where this vault rested upon its granite base no eye could tell; but there was a cloud hanging far above, the height of which we estimated at 12,000 feet, a greater height than that of any terrestrial vapour, and no doubt due to the great density of the air.

The word cavern does not convey any idea of this immense space; words of human tongue are inadequate to describe the discoveries of him who ventures into the deep abysses of earth.

Besides I could not tell upon what geological theory to account for the existence of such an excavation. Had the cooling of the globe produced it? I knew of celebrated caverns from the descriptions of travellers, but had never heard of any of such dimensions as this.

If the grotto of Guachara, in Colombia, visited by Humboldt, had not given up the whole of the secret of its depth to the philosopher, who investigated it to the depth of 2,500 feet, it probably did not extend much farther. The immense mammoth cave in Kentucky is of gigantic proportions, since its vaulted roof rises five hundred feet above the level of an unfathomable lake and travellers have explored its ramifications to the extent of forty miles. But what were these cavities compared to that in which I stood with wonder and admiration, with its sky of luminous vapours, its bursts of electric light, and a vast sea filling its bed? My imagination fell powerless before such immensity.

I gazed upon these wonders in silence. Words failed me to express my feelings. I felt as if I was in some distant planet Uranus or Neptune — and in the presence of phenomena of which my terrestrial experience gave me no cognisance. For such novel sensations, new words were wanted; and my imagination failed to supply them. I gazed, I thought, I admired, with a stupefaction mingled with a certain amount of fear.

The unforeseen nature of this spectacle brought back the colour to my cheeks. I was under a new course of treatment with the aid of astonishment, and my convalescence was promoted by this novel system of therapeutics; besides, the dense and breezy air invigorated me, supplying more oxygen to my lungs.

It will be easily conceived that after an imprisonment of forty seven days in a narrow gallery it was the height of physical enjoyment to breathe a moist air impregnated with saline particles.

One hundred and twenty. (Trans.)

I was delighted to leave my dark grotto. My uncle, already familiar with these wonders, had ceased to feel surprise.

“You feel strong enough to walk a little way now?” he asked.

“Yes, certainly; and nothing could be more delightful.”

“Well, take my arm, Axel, and let us follow the windings of the shore.”

I eagerly accepted, and we began to coast along this new sea. On the left huge pyramids of rock, piled one upon another, produced a prodigious titanic effect. Down their sides flowed numberless waterfalls, which went on their way in brawling but pellucid streams. A few light vapours, leaping from rock to rock, denoted the place of hot springs; and streams flowed softly down to the common basin, gliding down the gentle slopes with a softer murmur.

Amongst these streams I recognised our faithful travelling companion, the Hansbach, coming to lose its little volume quietly in the mighty sea, just as if it had done nothing else since the beginning of the world.

“We shall see it no more,” I said, with a sigh.

“What matters,” replied the philosopher, “whether this or another serves to guide us?”

I thought him rather ungrateful.

But at that moment my attention was drawn to an unexpected sight. At a distance of five hundred paces, at the turn of a high promontory, appeared a high, tufted, dense forest. It was composed of trees of moderate height, formed like umbrellas, with exact geometrical outlines. The currents of wind seemed to have had no effect upon their shape, and in the midst of the windy blasts they stood unmoved and firm, just like a clump of petrified cedars.

I hastened forward. I could not give any name to these singular creations. Were they some of the two hundred thousand species of vegetables known hitherto, and did they claim a place of their own in the lacustrine flora? No; when we arrived under their shade my surprise turned into admiration.

There stood before me productions of earth, but of gigantic stature, which my uncle immediately named.

“It is only a forest of mushrooms,” said he.

And he was right. Imagine the large development attained by these plants, which prefer a warm, moist climate. I knew that the Lycopodon giganteum attains, according to Bulliard, a circumference of eight or nine feet; but here were pale mushrooms, thirty to forty feet high, and crowned with a cap of equal diameter. There they stood in thousands. No light could penetrate between their huge cones, and complete darkness reigned beneath those giants; they formed settlements of domes placed in close array like the round, thatched roofs of a central African city.

Yet I wanted to penetrate farther underneath, though a chill fell upon me as soon as I came under those cellular vaults. For half an hour we wandered from side to side in the damp shades, and it was a comfortable and pleasant change to arrive once more upon the sea shore.

But the subterranean vegetation was not confined to these fungi. Farther on rose groups of tall trees of colourless foliage and easy to recognise. They were lowly shrubs of earth, here attaining gigantic size; lycopodiums, a hundred feet high; the huge sigillaria, found in our coal mines; tree ferns, as tall as our fir-trees in northern latitudes; lepidodendra, with cylindrical forked stems, terminated by long leaves, and bristling with rough hairs like those of the cactus.

“Wonderful, magnificent, splendid!” cried my uncle. “Here is the entire flora of the second period of the world — the transition period. These, humble garden plants with us, were tall trees in the early ages. Look, Axel, and admire it all. Never had botanist such a feast as this!”

“You are right, my uncle. Providence seems to have preserved in this immense conservatory the antediluvian plants which the wisdom of philosophers has so sagaciously put together again.”

“It is a conservatory, Axel; but is it not also a menagerie?”

“Surely not a menagerie!”

“Yes; no doubt of it. Look at that dust under your feet; see the bones scattered on the ground.”

“So there are!” I cried; “bones of extinct animals.”

I had rushed upon these remains, formed of indestructible phosphates of lime, and without hesitation I named these monstrous bones, which lay scattered about like decayed trunks of trees.

“Here is the lower jaw of a mastodon,” I said. “These are the molar teeth of the deinotherium; this femur must have belonged to the greatest of those beasts, the megatherium. It certainly is a menagerie, for these remains were not brought here by a deluge. The animals to which they belonged roamed on the shores of this subterranean sea, under the shade of those arborescent trees. Here are entire skeletons. And yet I cannot understand the appearance of these quadrupeds in a granite cavern.”

These animals belonged to a late geological period, the Pliocene, just before the glacial epoch, and therefore could have no connection with the carboniferous vegetation. (Trans.)

“Why?”

“Because animal life existed upon the earth only in the secondary period, when a sediment of soil had been deposited by the rivers, and taken the place of the incandescent rocks of the primitive period.”

“Well, Axel, there is a very simple answer to your objection that this soil is alluvial.”

“What! at such a depth below the surface of the earth?”

“No doubt; and there is a geological explanation of the fact. At a certain period the earth consisted only of an elastic crust or bark, alternately acted on by forces from above or below, according to the laws of attraction and gravitation. Probably there were subsidences of the outer crust, when a portion of the sedimentary deposits was carried down sudden openings.”

“That may be,” I replied; “but if there have been creatures now extinct in these underground regions, why may not some of those monsters be now roaming through these gloomy forests, or hidden behind the steep crags?”

And as this unpleasant notion got hold of me, I surveyed with anxious scrutiny the open spaces before me; but no living creature appeared upon the barren strand.

I felt rather tired, and went to sit down at the end of a promontory, at the foot of which the waves came and beat themselves into spray. Thence my eye could sweep every part of the bay; within its extremity a little harbour was formed between the pyramidal cliffs, where the still waters slept untouched by the boisterous winds. A brig and two or three schooners might have moored within it in safety. I almost fancied I should presently see some ship issue from it, full sail, and take to the open sea under the southern breeze.

But this illusion lasted a very short time. We were the only living creatures in this subterranean world. When the wind lulled, a deeper silence than that of the deserts fell upon the arid, naked rocks, and weighed upon the surface of the ocean. I then desired to pierce the distant haze, and to rend asunder the mysterious curtain that hung across the horizon. Anxious queries arose to my lips. Where did that sea terminate? Where did it lead to? Should we ever know anything about its opposite shores?

My uncle made no doubt about it at all; I both desired and feared.

After spending an hour in the contemplation of this marvellous spectacle, we returned to the shore to regain the grotto, and I fell asleep in the midst of the strangest thoughts.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PREPARATIONS FOR A VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

The next morning I awoke feeling perfectly well. I thought a bathe would do me good, and I went to plunge for a few minutes into the waters of this mediterranean sea, for assuredly it better deserved this name than any other sea.

I came back to breakfast with a good appetite. Hans was a good caterer for our little household; he had water and fire at his disposal, so that he was able to vary our bill of fare now and then. For dessert he gave us a few cups of coffee, and never was coffee so delicious.

“Now,” said my uncle, “now is the time for high tide, and we must not lose the opportunity to study this phenomenon.”

“What! the tide!” I cried. “Can the influence of the sun and moon be felt down here?”

“Why not? Are not all bodies subject throughout their mass to the power of universal attraction? This mass of water cannot escape the general law. And in spite of the heavy atmospheric pressure on the surface, you will see it rise like the Atlantic itself.”

At the same moment we reached the sand on the shore, and the waves were by slow degrees encroaching on the shore.

“Here is the tide rising,” I cried.

“Yes, Axel; and judging by these ridges of foam, you may observe that the sea will rise about twelve feet.”

“This is wonderful,” I said.

“No; it is quite natural.”

“You may say so, uncle; but to me it is most extraordinary, and I can hardly believe my eyes. Who would ever have imagined, under this terrestrial crust, an ocean with ebbing and flowing tides, with winds and storms?”

“Well,” replied my uncle, “is there any scientific reason against it?”

“No; I see none, as soon as the theory of central heat is given up.” “So then, thus far,” he answered, “the theory of Sir Humphry Davy is confirmed.”

“Evidently it is; and now there is no reason why there should not be seas and continents in the interior of the earth.”

“No doubt,” said my uncle; “and inhabited too.”

“To be sure,” said I; “and why should not these waters yield to us fishes of unknown species?”

“At any rate,” he replied, “we have not seen any yet.”

“Well, let us make some lines, and see if the bait will draw here as it does in sublunary regions.”

“We will try, Axel, for we must penetrate all secrets of these newly discovered regions.”

“But where are we, uncle? for I have not yet asked you that question, and your instruments must be able to furnish the answer.”

“Horizontally, three hundred and fifty leagues from Iceland.”

“So much as that?”

“I am sure of not being a mile out of my reckoning.”

“And does the compass still show south-east?”

“Yes; with a westerly deviation of nineteen degrees forty-five minutes, just as above ground. As for its dip, a curious fact is coming to light, which I have observed carefully: that the needle, instead of dipping towards the pole as in the northern hemisphere, on the contrary, rises from it.”

“Would you then conclude,” I said, “that the magnetic pole is somewhere between the surface of the globe and the point where we are?”

“Exactly so; and it is likely enough that if we were to reach the spot beneath the polar regions, about that seventy-first degree where Sir James Ross has discovered the magnetic pole to be situated, we should see the needle point straight up. Therefore that mysterious centre of attraction is at no great depth.”

I remarked: “It is so; and here is a fact which science has scarcely suspected.”

“Science, my lad, has been built upon many errors; but they are errors which it was good to fall into, for they led to the truth.”

“What depth have we now reached?”

“We are thirty-five leagues below the surface.”

“So,” I said, examining the map, “the Highlands of Scotland are over our heads, and the Grampians are raising their rugged summits above us.”

“Yes,” answered the Professor laughing. “It is rather a heavy weight to bear, but a solid arch spans over our heads. The great Architect has built it of the best materials; and never could man have given it so wide a stretch. What are the finest arches of bridges and the arcades of cathedrals, compared with this far reaching vault, with a radius of three leagues, beneath which a wide and tempest-tossed ocean may flow at its ease?”

“Oh, I am not afraid that it will fall down upon my head. But now what are your plans? Are you not thinking of returning to the surface now?”

“Return! no, indeed! We will continue our journey, everything having gone on well so far.”

“But how are we to get down below this liquid surface?”

“Oh, I am not going to dive head foremost. But if all oceans are properly speaking but lakes, since they are encompassed by land, of course this internal sea will be surrounded by a coast of granite, and on the opposite shores we shall find fresh passages opening.”

“How long do you suppose this sea to be?”

“Thirty or forty leagues; so that we have no time to lose, and we shall set sail to-morrow.”

I looked about for a ship.

“Set sail, shall we? But I should like to see my boat first.”

“It will not be a boat at all, but a good, well-made raft.”

“Why,” I said, “a raft would be just as hard to make as a boat, and I don’t see — ”

“I know you don’t see; but you might hear if you would listen. Don’t you hear the hammer at work? Hans is already busy at it.”

“What, has he already felled the trees?”

“Oh, the trees were already down. Come, and you will see for yourself.”

After half an hour’s walking, on the other side of the promontory which formed the little natural harbour, I perceived Hans at work. In a few more steps I was at his side. To my great surprise a half-finished raft was already lying on the sand, made of a peculiar kind of wood, and a great number of planks, straight and bent, and of frames, were covering the ground, enough almost for a little fleet.

“Uncle, what wood is this?” I cried.

“It is fir, pine, or birch, and other northern coniferae, mineralised by the action of the sea. It is called surturbrand, a variety of brown coal or lignite, found chiefly in Iceland.”

“But surely, then, like other fossil wood, it must be as hard as stone, and cannot float?”

“Sometimes that may happen; some of these woods become true anthracites; but others, such as this, have only gone through the first stage of fossil transformation. Just look,” added my uncle, throwing into the sea one of those precious waifs.

The bit of wood, after disappearing, returned to the surface and oscillated to and fro with the waves.

“Are you convinced?” said my uncle.

“I am quite convinced, although it is incredible!”

By next evening, thanks to the industry and skill of our guide, the raft was made. It was ten feet by five; the planks of surturbrand, braced strongly together with cords, presented an even surface, and when launched this improvised vessel floated easily upon the waves of the Liedenbrock Sea.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WONDERS OF THE DEEP

On the 13th of August we awoke early. We were now to begin to adopt a mode of travelling both more expeditious and less fatiguing than hitherto.

A mast was made of two poles spliced together, a yard was made of a third, a blanket borrowed from our coverings made a tolerable sail. There was no want of cordage for the rigging, and everything was well and firmly made.

The provisions, the baggage, the instruments, the guns, and a good quantity of fresh water from the rocks around, all found their proper places on board; and at six the Professor gave the signal to embark. Hans had fitted up a rudder to steer his vessel. He took the tiller, and unmoored; the sail was set, and we were soon afloat. At the moment of leaving the harbour, my uncle, who was tenaciously fond of naming his new discoveries, wanted to give it a name, and proposed mine amongst others.

“But I have a better to propose,” I said: “Grauben. Let it be called

Port Gräuben; it will look very well upon the map.”

“Port Gräuben let it be then.”

And so the cherished remembrance of my Virlandaise became associated with our adventurous expedition.

The wind was from the north-west. We went with it at a high rate of speed. The dense atmosphere acted with great force and impelled us swiftly on.

In an hour my uncle had been able to estimate our progress. At this rate, he said, we shall make thirty leagues in twenty-four hours, and we shall soon come in sight of the opposite shore.

I made no answer, but went and sat forward. The northern shore was already beginning to dip under the horizon. The eastern and western strands spread wide as if to bid us farewell. Before our eyes lay far and wide a vast sea; shadows of great clouds swept heavily over its silver-grey surface; the glistening bluish rays of electric light, here and there reflected by the dancing drops of spray, shot out little sheaves of light from the track we left in our rear. Soon we entirely lost sight of land; no object was left for the eye to judge by, and but for the frothy track of the raft, I might have thought we were standing still.

About twelve, immense shoals of seaweeds came in sight. I was aware of the great powers of vegetation that characterise these plants, which grow at a depth of twelve thousand feet, reproduce themselves under a pressure of four hundred atmospheres, and sometimes form barriers strong enough to impede the course of a ship. But never, I think, were such seaweeds as those which we saw floating in immense waving lines upon the sea of Liedenbrock.

Our raft skirted the whole length of the fuci, three or four thousand feet long, undulating like vast serpents beyond the reach of sight; I found some amusement in tracing these endless waves, always thinking I should come to the end of them, and for hours my patience was vying with my surprise.

What natural force could have produced such plants, and what must have been the appearance of the earth in the first ages of its formation, when, under the action of heat and moisture, the vegetable kingdom alone was developing on its surface?

Evening came, and, as on the previous day, I perceived no change in the luminous condition of the air. It was a constant condition, the permanency of which might be relied upon.

After supper I laid myself down at the foot of the mast, and fell asleep in the midst of fantastic reveries.

Hans, keeping fast by the helm, let the raft run on, which, after all, needed no steering, the wind blowing directly aft.

Since our departure from Port Gräuben, Professor Liedenbrock had entrusted the log to my care; I was to register every observation, make entries of interesting phenomena, the direction of the wind, the rate of sailing, the way we made — in a word, every particular of our singular voyage.

I shall therefore reproduce here these daily notes, written, so to speak, as the course of events directed, in order to furnish an exact narrative of our passage.

Friday, August 14. — Wind steady, N.W. The raft makes rapid way in a direct line. Coast thirty leagues to leeward. Nothing in sight before us. Intensity of light the same. Weather fine; that is to say, that the clouds are flying high, are light, and bathed in a white atmosphere resembling silver in a state of fusion. Therm. 89° Fahr.

At noon Hans prepared a hook at the end of a line. He baited it with a small piece of meat and flung it into the sea. For two hours nothing was caught. Are these waters, then, bare of inhabitants? No, there’s a pull at the line. Hans draws it in and brings out a struggling fish.

“A sturgeon,” I cried; “a small sturgeon.”

The Professor eyes the creature attentively, and his opinion differs from mine.

The head of this fish was flat, but rounded in front, and the anterior part of its body was plated with bony, angular scales; it had no teeth, its pectoral fins were large, and of tail there was none. The animal belonged to the same order as the sturgeon, but differed from that fish in many essential particulars. After a short examination my uncle pronounced his opinion.

“This fish belongs to an extinct family, of which only fossil traces are found in the devonian formations.”

“What!” I cried. “Have we taken alive an inhabitant of the seas of primitive ages?”

“Yes; and you will observe that these fossil fishes have no identity with any living species. To have in one’s possession a living specimen is a happy event for a naturalist.”

“But to what family does it belong?”

“It is of the order of ganoids, of the family of the cephalaspidae; and a species of pterichthys. But this one displays a peculiarity confined to all fishes that inhabit subterranean waters. It is blind, and not only blind, but actually has no eyes at all.”

I looked: nothing could be more certain. But supposing it might be a solitary case, we baited afresh, and threw out our line. Surely this ocean is well peopled with fish, for in another couple of hours we took a large quantity of pterichthydes, as well as of others belonging to the extinct family of the dipterides, but of which my uncle could not tell the species; none had organs of sight. This unhoped-for catch recruited our stock of provisions.

Thus it is evident that this sea contains none but species known to us in their fossil state, in which fishes as well as reptiles are the less perfectly and completely organised the farther back their date of creation.

Perhaps we may yet meet with some of those saurians which science has reconstructed out of a bit of bone or cartilage. I took up the telescope and scanned the whole horizon, and found it everywhere a desert sea. We are far away removed from the shores.

I gaze upward in the air. Why should not some of the strange birds restored by the immortal Cuvier again flap their ‘sail-broad vans’ in this dense and heavy atmosphere? There are sufficient fish for their support. I survey the whole space that stretches overhead; it is as desert as the shore was.

Still my imagination carried me away amongst the wonderful speculations of palæontology. Though awake I fell into a dream. I thought I could see floating on the surface of the waters enormous chelonia, pre-adamite tortoises, resembling floating islands. Over the dimly lighted strand there trod the huge mammals of the first ages of the world, the leptotherium (slender beast), found in the caverns of Brazil; the merycotherium (ruminating beast), found in the ‘drift’ of iceclad Siberia. Farther on, the pachydermatous lophiodon (crested toothed), a gigantic tapir, hides behind the rocks to dispute its prey with the anoplotherium (unarmed beast), a strange creature, which seemed a compound of horse, rhinoceros, camel, and hippopotamus. The colossal mastodon (nipple-toothed) twists and untwists his trunk, and brays and pounds with his huge tusks the fragments of rock that cover the shore; whilst the megatherium (huge beast), buttressed upon his enormous hinder paws, grubs in the soil, awaking the sonorous echoes of the granite rocks with his tremendous roarings. Higher up, the protopitheca — the first monkey that appeared on the globe — is climbing up the steep ascents. Higher yet, the pterodactyle (wing-fingered) darts in irregular zigzags to and fro in the heavy air. In the uppermost regions of the air immense birds, more powerful than the cassowary, and larger than the ostrich, spread their vast breadth of wings and strike with their heads the granite vault that bounds the sky.

All this fossil world rises to life again in my vivid imagination. I return to the scriptural periods or ages of the world, conventionally called ‘days,’ long before the appearance of man, when the unfinished world was as yet unfitted for his support. Then my dream backed even farther still into the ages before the creation of living beings. The mammals disappear, then the birds vanish, then the reptiles of the secondary period, and finally the fish, the crustaceans, molluscs, and articulated beings. Then the zoophytes of the transition period also return to nothing. I am the only living thing in the world: all life is concentrated in my beating heart alone. There are no more seasons; climates are no more; the heat of the globe continually increases and neutralises that of the sun. Vegetation becomes accelerated. I glide like a shade amongst arborescent ferns, treading with unsteady feet the coloured marls and the particoloured clays; I lean for support against the trunks of immense conifers; I lie in the shade of sphenophylla (wedge-leaved), asterophylla (star-leaved), and lycopods, a hundred feet high.

Ages seem no more than days! I am passed, against my will, in retrograde order, through the long series of terrestrial changes. Plants disappear; granite rocks soften; intense heat converts solid bodies into thick fluids; the waters again cover the face of the earth; they boil, they rise in whirling eddies of steam; white and ghastly mists wrap round the shifting forms of the earth, which by imperceptible degrees dissolves into a gaseous mass, glowing fiery red and white, as large and as shining as the sun.

And I myself am floating with wild caprice in the midst of this nebulous mass of fourteen hundred thousand times the volume of the earth into which it will one day be condensed, and carried forward amongst the planetary bodies. My body is no longer firm and terrestrial; it is resolved into its constituent atoms, subtilised, volatilised. Sublimed into imponderable vapour, I mingle and am lost in the endless foods of those vast globular volumes of vaporous mists, which roll upon their flaming orbits through infinite space.

But is it not a dream? Whither is it carrying me? My feverish hand has vainly attempted to describe upon paper its strange and wonderful details. I have forgotten everything that surrounds me. The Professor, the guide, the raft — are all gone out of my ken. An illusion has laid hold upon me.

“What is the matter?” my uncle breaks in.

My staring eyes are fixed vacantly upon him.

“Take care, Axel, or you will fall overboard.”

At that moment I felt the sinewy hand of Hans seizing me vigorously. But for him, carried away by my dream, I should have thrown myself into the sea.

“Is he mad?” cried the Professor.

“What is it all about?” at last I cried, returning to myself.

“Do you feel ill?” my uncle asked.

“No; but I have had a strange hallucination; it is over now. Is all going on right?”

“Yes, it is a fair wind and a fine sea; we are sailing rapidly along, and if I am not out in my reckoning, we shall soon land.”

At these words I rose and gazed round upon the horizon, still everywhere bounded by clouds alone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A BATTLE OF MONSTERS

Saturday, August 15. — The sea unbroken all round. No land in sight. The horizon seems extremely distant.

My head is still stupefied with the vivid reality of my dream.

My uncle has had no dreams, but he is out of temper. He examines the horizon all round with his glass, and folds his arms with the air of an injured man.

I remark that Professor Liedenbrock has a tendency to relapse into an impatient mood, and I make a note of it in my log. All my danger and sufferings were needed to strike a spark of human feeling out of him; but now that I am well his nature has resumed its sway. And yet, what cause was there for anger? Is not the voyage prospering as favourably as possible under the circumstances? Is not the raft spinning along with marvellous speed?

“-You seem anxious, my uncle,” I said, seeing him continually with his glass to his eye.

“Anxious! No, not at all.”

“Impatient, then?”

“One might be, with less reason than now.”

“Yet we are going very fast.”

"What does that signify? I am not complaining that the rate is slow, but that the sea is so wide."

I then remembered that the Professor, before starting, had estimated the length of this underground sea at thirty leagues. Now we had made three times the distance, yet still the southern coast was not in sight.

"We are not descending as we ought to be," the Professor declares. "We are losing time, and the fact is, I have not come all this way to take a little sail upon a pond on a raft."

He called this sea a pond, and our long voyage, taking a little sail!

"But," I remarked, "since we have followed the road that Saknussemm has shown us — "

"That is just the question. Have we followed that road? Did Saknussemm meet this sheet of water? Did he cross it? Has not the stream that we followed led us altogether astray?"

"At any rate we cannot feel sorry to have come so far. This prospect is magnificent, and — "

"But I don't care for prospects. I came with an object, and I mean to attain it. Therefore don't talk to me about views and prospects."

I take this as my answer, and I leave the Professor to bite his lips with impatience. At six in the evening Hans asks for his wages, and his three rix dollars are counted out to him.

Sunday, August 16. — Nothing new. Weather unchanged. The wind freshens. On awaking, my first thought was to observe the intensity of the light. I was possessed with an apprehension lest the electric light should grow dim, or fail altogether. But there seemed no reason to fear. The shadow of the raft was clearly outlined upon the surface of the waves.

Truly this sea is of infinite width. It must be as wide as the

Mediterranean or the Atlantic — and why not?

My uncle took soundings several times. He tied the heaviest of our pickaxes to a long rope which he let down two hundred fathoms. No bottom yet; and we had some difficulty in hauling up our plummet.

But when the pick was shipped again, Hans pointed out on its surface deep prints as if it had been violently compressed between two hard bodies.

I looked at the hunter.

“Tänder,” said he.

I could not understand him, and turned to my uncle who was entirely absorbed in his calculations. I had rather not disturb him while he is quiet. I return to the Icelander. He by a snapping motion of his jaws conveys his ideas to me.

“Teeth!” I cried, considering the iron bar with more attention.

Yes, indeed, those are the marks of teeth imprinted upon the metal! The jaws which they arm must be possessed of amazing strength. Is there some monster beneath us belonging to the extinct races, more voracious than the shark, more fearful in vastness than the whale? I could not take my eyes off this indented iron bar. Surely will my last night’s dream be realised?

These thoughts agitated me all day, and my imagination scarcely calmed down after several hours' sleep.

Monday, August 17. — I am trying to recall the peculiar instincts of the monsters of the pre-adamite world, who, coming next in succession after the molluscs, the crustaceans and le fishes, preceded the animals of mammalian race upon the earth. The world then belonged to reptiles. Those monsters held the mastery in the seas of the secondary period. They possessed a perfect organisation, gigantic proportions, prodigious strength. The saurians of our day, the alligators and the crocodiles, are but feeble reproductions of their forefathers of primitive ages.

I shudder as I recall these monsters to my remembrance. No human eye has ever beheld them living. They burdened this earth a thousand ages before man appeared, but their fossil remains, found in the argillaceous limestone called by the English the lias, have enabled their colossal structure to be perfectly built up again and anatomically ascertained.

I saw at the Hamburg museum the skeleton of one of these creatures thirty feet in length. Am I then fated — I, a denizen of earth — to be placed face to face with these representatives of long extinct families? No; surely it cannot be! Yet the deep marks of conical teeth upon the iron pick are certainly those of the crocodile.

My eyes are fearfully bent upon the sea. I dread to see one of these monsters darting forth from its submarine caverns. I suppose Professor Liedenbrock was of my opinion too, and even shared my fears, for after having examined the pick, his eyes traversed the ocean from side to side. What a very bad notion that was of his, I thought to myself, to take soundings just here! He has disturbed some monstrous beast in its remote den, and if we are not attacked on our voyage —

I look at our guns and see that they are all right. My uncle notices it, and looks on approvingly.

Already widely disturbed regions on the surface of the water indicate some commotion below. The danger is approaching. We must be on the look out.

Tuesday, August 18. — Evening came, or rather the time came when sleep weighs down the weary eyelids, for there is no night here, and the ceaseless light wearies the eyes with its persistency just as if we were sailing under an arctic sun. Hans was at the helm. During his watch I slept.

Two hours afterwards a terrible shock awoke me. The raft was heaved up on a watery mountain and pitched down again, at a distance of twenty fathoms.

“What is the matter?” shouted my uncle. “Have we struck land?”

Hans pointed with his finger at a dark mass six hundred yards away, rising and falling alternately with heavy plunges. I looked and cried:

“It is an enormous porpoise.”

“Yes,” replied my uncle, “and there is a sea lizard of vast size.”

“And farther on a monstrous crocodile. Look at its vast jaws and its rows of teeth! It is diving down!”

“There’s a whale, a whale!” cried the Professor. “I can see its great fins. See how he is throwing out air and water through his blowers.”

And in fact two liquid columns were rising to a considerable height above the sea. We stood amazed, thunderstruck, at the presence of such a herd of marine monsters. They were of supernatural dimensions; the smallest of them would have crunched our raft, crew and all, at one snap of its huge jaws.

Hans wants to tack to get away from this dangerous neighbourhood; but he sees on the other hand enemies not less terrible; a tortoise forty feet long, and a serpent of thirty, lifting its fearful head and gleaming eyes above the flood.

Flight was out of the question now. The reptiles rose; they wheeled around our little raft with a rapidity greater than that of express trains. They described around us gradually narrowing circles. I took up my rifle. But what could a ball do against the scaly armour with which these enormous beasts were clad?

We stood dumb with fear. They approach us close: on one side the crocodile, on the other the serpent. The remainder of the sea monsters have disappeared. I prepare to fire. Hans stops me by a gesture. The two monsters pass within a hundred and fifty yards of the raft, and hurl themselves the one upon the other, with a fury which prevents them from seeing us.

At three hundred yards from us the battle was fought. We could distinctly observe the two monsters engaged in deadly conflict. But it now seems to me as if the other animals were taking part in the fray — the porpoise, the whale, the lizard, the tortoise. Every moment I seem to see one or other of them. I point them to the Icelander. He shakes his head negatively.

“Tva,” says he.

“What two? Does he mean that there are only two animals?”

“He is right,” said my uncle, whose glass has never left his eye.

“Surely you must be mistaken,” I cried.

“No: the first of those monsters has a porpoise’s snout, a lizard’s head, a crocodile’s teeth; and hence our mistake. It is the ichthyosaurus (the fish lizard), the most terrible of the ancient monsters of the deep.”

“And the other?”

“The other is a plesiosaurus (almost lizard), a serpent, armoured with the carapace and the paddles of a turtle; he is the dreadful enemy of the other.”

Hans had spoken truly. Two monsters only were creating all this commotion; and before my eyes are two reptiles of the primitive world. I can distinguish the eye of the ichthyosaurus glowing like a red-hot coal, and as large as a man’s head. Nature has endowed it with an optical apparatus of extreme power, and capable of resisting the pressure of the great volume of water in the depths it inhabits. It has been appropriately called the saurian whale, for it has both the swiftness and the rapid movements of this monster of our own day. This one is not less than a hundred feet long, and I can judge of its size when it sweeps over the waters the vertical coils of its tail. Its jaw is enormous, and according to naturalists it is armed with no less than one hundred and eighty-two teeth.

The plesiosaurus, a serpent with a cylindrical body and a short tail, has four flappers or paddles to act like oars. Its body is entirely covered with a thick armour of scales, and its neck, as flexible as a swan’s, rises thirty feet above the waves.

Those huge creatures attacked each other with the greatest animosity. They heaved around them liquid mountains, which rolled even to our raft and rocked it perilously. Twenty times we were near capsizing. Hissings of prodigious force are heard. The two beasts are fast locked together; I cannot distinguish the one from the other. The probable rage of the conqueror inspires us with intense fear.

One hour, two hours, pass away. The struggle continues with unabated ferocity. The combatants alternately approach and recede from our raft. We remain motionless, ready to fire. Suddenly the ichthyosaurus and the plesiosaurus disappear below, leaving a whirlpool eddying in the water. Several minutes pass by while the fight goes on under water.

All at once an enormous head is darted up, the head of the plesiosaurus. The monster is wounded to death. I no longer see his scaly armour. Only his long neck shoots up, drops again, coils and uncoils, droops, lashes the waters like a gigantic whip, and writhes like a worm that you tread on. The water is splashed for a long way around. The spray almost blinds us. But soon the reptile’s agony draws to an end; its movements become fainter, its contortions cease to be so violent, and the long serpentine form lies a lifeless log on the labouring deep.

As for the ichthyosaurus — has he returned to his submarine cavern? or will he reappear on the surface of the sea?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE GREAT GEYSER

Wednesday, August 19. — Fortunately the wind blows violently, and has enabled us to flee from the scene of the late terrible struggle. Hans keeps at his post at the helm. My uncle, whom the absorbing incidents of the combat had drawn away from his contemplations, began again to look impatiently around him.

The voyage resumes its uniform tenor, which I don't care to break with a repetition of such events as yesterday's.

Thursday, Aug. 20. — Wind N.N.E. unsteady and fitful. Temperature high. Rate three and a half leagues an hour.

About noon a distant noise is heard. I note the fact without being able to explain it. It is a continuous roar.

"In the distance," says the Professor, "there is a rock or islet, against which the sea is breaking."

Hans climbs up the mast, but sees no breakers. The ocean' is smooth and unbroken to its farthest limit.

Three hours pass away. The roarings seem to proceed from a very distant waterfall.

I remark upon this to my uncle, who replies doubtfully: "Yes, I am convinced that I am right." Are we, then, speeding forward to some cataract which will cast us down an abyss? This method of getting on may please the Professor, because it is vertical; but for my part I prefer the more ordinary modes of horizontal progression.

At any rate, some leagues to the windward there must be some noisy phenomenon, for now the roarings are heard with increasing loudness. Do they proceed from the sky or the ocean?

I look up to the atmospheric vapours, and try to fathom their depths. The sky is calm and motionless. The clouds have reached the utmost limit of the lofty vault, and there lie still bathed in the bright glare of the electric light. It is not there that we must seek for the cause of this phenomenon. Then I examine the horizon, which is unbroken and clear of all mist. There is no change in its aspect. But if this noise arises from a fall, a cataract, if all this ocean flows away headlong into a lower basin yet, if that deafening roar is produced by a mass of falling water, the current must needs accelerate, and its increasing speed will give me the measure of the peril that threatens us. I consult the current: there is none. I throw an empty bottle into the sea: it lies still.

About four Hans rises, lays hold of the mast, climbs to its top. Thence his eye sweeps a large area of sea, and it is fixed upon a point. His countenance exhibits no surprise, but his eye is immovably steady.

“He sees something,” says my uncle.

“I believe he does.”

Hans comes down, then stretches his arm to the south, saying:

“Dere nere!”

“Down there?” repeated my uncle.

Then, seizing his glass, he gazes attentively for a minute, which seems to me an age.

“Yes, yes!” he cried. “I see a vast inverted cone rising from the surface.”

“Is it another sea beast?”

“Perhaps it is.”

“Then let us steer farther westward, for we know something of the danger of coming across monsters of that sort.”

“Let us go straight on,” replied my uncle.

I appealed to Hans. He maintained his course inflexibly.

Yet, if at our present distance from the animal, a distance of twelve leagues at the least, the column of water driven through its blowers may be distinctly seen, it must needs be of vast size. The commonest prudence would counsel immediate flight; but we did not come so far to be prudent.

Imprudently, therefore, we pursue our way. The nearer we approach, the higher mounts the jet of water. What monster can possibly fill itself with such a quantity of water, and spurt it up so continuously?

At eight in the evening we are not two leagues distant from it. Its body — dusky, enormous, hillocky — lies spread upon the sea like an islet. Is it illusion or fear? Its length seems to me a couple of thousand yards. What can be this cetacean, which neither Cuvier nor Blumenbach knew anything about? It lies motionless, as if asleep; the sea seems unable to move it in the least; it is the waves that undulate upon its sides. The column of water thrown up to a height of five hundred feet falls in rain with a deafening uproar. And here are we scudding like lunatics before the wind, to get near to a monster that a hundred whales a day would not satisfy!

Terror seizes upon me. I refuse to go further. I will cut the halliards if necessary! I am in open mutiny against the Professor, who vouchsafes no answer.

Suddenly Hans rises, and pointing with his finger at the menacing object, he says:

“Holm.”

“An island!” cries my uncle.

“That’s not an island!” I cried sceptically.

“It’s nothing else,” shouted the Professor, with a loud laugh.

“But that column of water?”

“Geyser,” said Hans.

“No doubt it is a geyser, like those in Iceland.”

At first I protest against being so widely mistaken as to have taken an island for a marine monster. But the evidence is against me, and I have to confess my error. It is nothing worse than a natural phenomenon.

As we approach nearer the dimensions of the liquid column become magnificent. The islet resembles, with a most deceiving likeness, an enormous cetacean, whose head dominates the waves at a height of twenty yards. The geyser, a word meaning ‘fury,’ rises majestically from its extremity. Deep and heavy explosions are heard from time to time, when the enormous jet, possessed with more furious violence, shakes its plumy crest, and springs with a bound till it reaches the lowest stratum of the clouds. It stands alone. No steam vents, no hot springs surround it, and all the volcanic power of the region is concentrated here. Sparks of electric fire mingle with the dazzling sheaf of lighted fluid, every drop of which refracts the prismatic colours.

“Let us land,” said the Professor.

“But we must carefully avoid this waterspout, which would sink our raft in a moment.”

Hans, steering with his usual skill, brought us to the other extremity of the islet.

I leaped up on the rock; my uncle lightly followed, while our hunter remained at his post, like a man too wise ever to be astonished.

We walked upon granite mingled with siliceous tufa. The soil shivers and shakes under our feet, like the sides of an overheated boiler filled with steam struggling to get loose. We come in sight of a small central basin, out of which the geyser springs. I plunge a register thermometer into the boiling water. It marks an intense heat of 325°, which is far above the boiling point; therefore this water issues from an ardent furnace, which is not at all in harmony with Professor Liedenbrock’s theories. I cannot help making the remark.

“Well,” he replied, “how does that make against my doctrine?”

“Oh, nothing at all,” I said, seeing that I was going in opposition to immovable obstinacy.

Still I am constrained to confess that hitherto we have been wonderfully favoured, and that for some reason unknown to myself we have accomplished our journey under singularly favourable conditions of temperature. But it seems manifest to me that some day we shall reach a region where the central heat attains its highest limits, and goes beyond a point that can be registered by our thermometers.

“That is what we shall see.” So says the Professor, who, having named this volcanic islet after his nephew, gives the signal to embark again.

For some minutes I am still contemplating the geyser. I notice that it throws up its column of water with variable force: sometimes sending it to a great height, then again to a lower, which I attribute to the variable pressure of the steam accumulated in its reservoir.

At last we leave the island, rounding away past the low rocks on its southern shore. Hans has taken advantage of the halt to refit his rudder.

But before going any farther I make a few observations, to calculate the distance we have gone over, and note them in my journal. We have crossed two hundred and seventy leagues of sea since leaving Port Gräuben; and we are six hundred and twenty leagues from Iceland, under England.

This distance carries the travellers as far as under the Pyrenees if the league measures three miles. (Trans.)

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN ELECTRIC STORM

Friday, August 21. — On the morrow the magnificent geyser has disappeared. The wind has risen, and has rapidly carried us away from Axel Island. The roarings become lost in the distance.

The weather — if we may use that term — will change before long. The atmosphere is charged with vapours, pervaded with the electricity generated by the evaporation of saline waters. The clouds are sinking lower, and assume an olive hue. The electric light can scarcely penetrate through the dense curtain which has dropped over the theatre on which the battle of the elements is about to be waged.

I feel peculiar sensations, like many creatures on earth at the approach of violent atmospheric changes. The heavily voluted cumulus clouds lower gloomily and threateningly; they wear that implacable look which I have sometimes noticed at the outbreak of a great storm. The air is heavy; the sea is calm.

In the distance the clouds resemble great bales of cotton, piled up in picturesque disorder. By degrees they dilate, and gain in huge size what they lose in number. Such is their ponderous weight that they cannot rise from the horizon; but, obeying an impulse from higher currents, their dense consistency slowly yields. The gloom upon them deepens; and they soon present to our view a ponderous mass of almost level surface. From time to time a fleecy tuft of mist, with yet some gleaming light left upon it, drops down upon the dense floor of grey, and loses itself in the opaque and impenetrable mass.

The atmosphere is evidently charged and surcharged with electricity. My whole body is saturated; my hair bristles just as when you stand upon an insulated stool under the action of an electrical machine. It seems to me as if my companions, the moment they touched me, would receive a severe shock like that from an electric eel.

At ten in the morning the symptoms of storm become aggravated. The wind never lulls but to acquire increased strength; the vast bank of heavy clouds is a huge reservoir of fearful windy gusts and rushing storms.

I am loth to believe these atmospheric menaces, and yet I cannot help muttering:

“Here’s some very bad weather coming on.”

The Professor made no answer. His temper is awful, to judge from the working of his features, as he sees this vast length of ocean unrolling before him to an indefinite extent. He can only spare time to shrug his shoulders viciously.

“There’s a heavy storm coming on,” I cried, pointing towards the horizon. “Those clouds seem as if they were going to crush the sea.”

A deep silence falls on all around. The lately roaring winds are hushed into a dead calm; nature seems to breathe no more, and to be sinking into the stillness of death. On the mast already I see the light play of a lambent St. Elmo’s fire; the outstretched sail catches not a breath of wind, and hangs like a sheet of lead. The rudder stands motionless in a sluggish, waveless sea. But if we have now ceased to advance why do we yet leave that sail loose, which at the first shock of the tempest may capsize us in a moment?

“Let us reef the sail and cut the mast down!” I cried. “That will be safest.”

“No, no! Never!” shouted my impetuous uncle. “Never! Let the wind catch us if it will! What I want is to get the least glimpse of rock or shore, even if our raft should be smashed into shivers!”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a sudden change took place in the southern sky. The piled-up vapours condense into water; and the air, put into violent action to supply the vacuum left by the condensation of the mists, rouses itself into a whirlwind. It rushes on from the farthest recesses of the vast cavern. The darkness deepens; scarcely can I jot down a few hurried notes. The helm makes a bound. My uncle falls full length; I creep close to him. He has laid a firm hold upon a rope, and appears to watch with grim satisfaction this awful display of elemental strife.

Hans stirs not. His long hair blown by the pelting storm, and laid flat across his immovable countenance, makes him a strange figure; for the end of each lock of loose flowing hair is tipped with little luminous radiations. This frightful mask of electric sparks suggests to me, even in this dizzy excitement, a comparison with pre-adamite man, the contemporary of the ichthyosaurus and the megatherium.

Rather of the mammoth and the mastodon. (Trans.)

The mast yet holds firm. The sail stretches tight like a bubble ready to burst. The raft flies at a rate that I cannot reckon, but not so fast as the foaming clouds of spray which it dashes from side to side in its headlong speed.

“The sail! the sail!” I cry, motioning to lower it.

“No!” replies my uncle.

“Nej!” repeats Hans, leisurely shaking his head.

But now the rain forms a rushing cataract in front of that horizon toward which we are running with such maddening speed. But before it has reached us the rain cloud parts asunder, the sea boils, and the electric fires are brought into violent action by a mighty chemical power that descends from the higher regions. The most vivid flashes of lightning are mingled with the violent crash of continuous thunder. Ceaseless fiery arrows dart in and out amongst the flying thunder-clouds; the vaporous mass soon glows with incandescent heat; hailstones rattle fiercely down, and as they dash upon our iron tools they too emit gleams and flashes of lurid light. The heaving waves resemble fiery volcanic hills, each belching forth its own interior flames, and every crest is plumed with dancing fire. My eyes fail under the dazzling light, my ears are stunned with the incessant crash of thunder. I must be bound to the mast, which bows like a reed before the mighty strength of the storm.

(Here my notes become vague and indistinct. I have only been able to find a few which I seem to have jotted down almost unconsciously. But their very brevity and their obscurity reveal the intensity of the excitement which dominated me, and describe the actual position even better than my memory could do.)

Sunday, 23. — Where are we? Driven forward with a swiftness that cannot be measured.

The night was fearful; no abatement of the storm. The din and uproar are incessant; our ears are bleeding; to exchange a word is impossible.

The lightning flashes with intense brilliancy, and never seems to cease for a moment. Zigzag streams of bluish white fire dash down upon the sea and rebound, and then take an upward flight till they strike the granite vault that overarches our heads. Suppose that solid roof should crumble down upon our heads! Other flashes with incessant play cross their vivid fires, while others again roll themselves into balls of living fire which explode like bombshells, but the music of which scarcely-adds to the din of the battle strife that almost deprives us of our senses of hearing and sight; the limit of intense loudness has been passed within which the human ear can distinguish one sound from another. If all the powder magazines in the world were to explode at once, we should hear no more than we do now.

From the under surface of the clouds there are continual emissions of lurid light; electric matter is in continual evolution from their component molecules; the gaseous elements of the air need to be slaked with moisture; for innumerable columns of water rush upwards into the air and fall back again in white foam.

Whither are we flying? My uncle lies full length across the raft.

The heat increases. I refer to the thermometer; it indicates... (the figure is obliterated).

Monday, August 24. — Will there be an end to it? Is the atmospheric condition, having once reached this density, to become final?

We are prostrated and worn out with fatigue. But Hans is as usual. The raft bears on still to the south-east. We have made two hundred leagues since we left Axel Island.

At noon the violence of the storm redoubles. We are obliged to secure as fast as possible every article that belongs to our cargo. Each of us is lashed to some part of the raft. The waves rise above our heads.

For three days we have never been able to make each other hear a word. Our mouths open, our lips move, but not a word can be heard. We cannot even make ourselves heard by approaching our mouth close to the ear.

My uncle has drawn nearer to me. He has uttered a few words. They seem to be ‘We are lost’; but I am not sure.

At last I write down the words: “Let us lower the sail.”

He nods his consent.

Scarcely has he lifted his head again before a ball of fire has bounded over the waves and lighted on board our raft. Mast and sail flew up in an instant together, and I saw them carried up to prodigious height, resembling in appearance a pterodactyle, one of those strong birds of the infant world.

We lay there, our blood running cold with unspeakable terror. The fireball, half of it white, half azure blue, and the size of a ten-inch shell, moved slowly about the raft, but revolving on its own axis with astonishing velocity, as if whipped round by the force of the whirlwind. Here it comes, there it glides, now it is up the ragged stump of the mast, thence it lightly leaps on the provision bag, descends with a light bound, and just skims the powder magazine. Horrible! we shall be blown up; but no, the dazzling disk of mysterious light nimbly leaps aside; it approaches Hans, who fixes his blue eye upon it steadily; it threatens the head of my uncle, who falls upon his knees with his head down to avoid it. And now my turn comes; pale and trembling under the blinding splendour and the melting heat, it drops at my feet, spinning silently round upon the deck; I try to move my foot away, but cannot.

A suffocating smell of nitrogen fills the air, it enters the throat, it fills the lungs. We suffer stifling pains.

Why am I unable to move my foot? Is it riveted to the planks? Alas! the fall upon our fated raft of this electric globe has magnetised every iron article on board. The instruments, the tools, our guns, are clashing and clanking violently in their collisions with each other; the nails of my boots cling tenaciously to a plate of iron let into the timbers, and I cannot draw my foot away from the spot. At last by a violent effort I release myself at the instant when the ball in its gyrations was about to seize upon it, and carry me off my feet ….

Ah! what a flood of intense and dazzling light! the globe has burst, and we are deluged with tongues of fire!

Then all the light disappears. I could just see my uncle at full length on the raft, and Hans still at his helm and spitting fire under the action of the electricity which has saturated him.

But where are we going to? Where?

* * * *

Tuesday, August 25. — I recover from a long swoon. The storm continues to roar and rage; the lightnings dash hither and thither, like broods of fiery serpents filling all the air. Are we still under the sea? Yes, we are borne at incalculable speed. We have been carried under England, under the channel, under France, perhaps under the whole of Europe.

* * * *

A fresh noise is heard! Surely it is the sea breaking upon the rocks!

But then...

CHAPTER XXXVI.

CALM PHILOSOPHIC DISCUSSIONS

Here I end what I may call my log, happily saved from the wreck, and

I resume my narrative as before.

What happened when the raft was dashed upon the rocks is more than I can tell. I felt myself hurled into the waves; and if I escaped from death, and if my body was not torn over the sharp edges of the rocks, it was because the powerful arm of Hans came to my rescue.

The brave Icelander carried me out of the reach of the waves, over a burning sand where I found myself by the side of my uncle.

Then he returned to the rocks, against which the furious waves were beating, to save what he could. I was unable to speak. I was shattered with fatigue and excitement; I wanted a whole hour to recover even a little.

But a deluge of rain was still falling, though with that violence which generally denotes the near cessation of a storm. A few overhanging rocks afforded us some shelter from the storm. Hans prepared some food, which I could not touch; and each of us, exhausted with three sleepless nights, fell into a broken and painful sleep.

The next day the weather was splendid. The sky and the sea had sunk into sudden repose. Every trace of the awful storm had disappeared. The exhilarating voice of the Professor fell upon my ears as I awoke; he was ominously cheerful.

“Well, my boy,” he cried, “have you slept well?”

Would not any one have thought that we were still in our cheerful little house on the Königstrasse and that I was only just coming down to breakfast, and that I was to be married to Gräuben that day?

Alas! if the tempest had but sent the raft a little more east, we should have passed under Germany, under my beloved town of Hamburg, under the very street where dwelt all that I loved most in the world. Then only forty leagues would have separated us! But they were forty leagues perpendicular of solid granite wall, and in reality we were a thousand leagues asunder!

All these painful reflections rapidly crossed my mind before I could answer my uncle's question.

"Well, now," he repeated, "won't you tell me how you have slept?"

"Oh, very well," I said. "I am only a little knocked up, but I shall soon be better."

"Oh," says my uncle, "that's nothing to signify. You are only a little bit tired."

"But you, uncle, you seem in very good spirits this morning."

"Delighted, my boy, delighted. We have got there."

"To our journey's end?"

"No; but we have got to the end of that endless sea. Now we shall go by land, and really begin to go down! down! down!"

"But, my dear uncle, do let me ask you one question."

“Of course, Axel.”

“How about returning?”

“Returning? Why, you are talking about the return before the arrival.”

“No, I only want to know how that is to be managed.”

“In the simplest way possible. When we have reached the centre of the globe, either we shall find some new way to get back, or we shall come back like decent folks the way we came. I feel pleased at the thought that it is sure not to be shut against us.”

“But then we shall have to refit the raft.”

“Of course.”

“Then, as to provisions, have we enough to last?”

“Yes; to be sure we have. Hans is a clever fellow, and I am sure he must have saved a large part of our cargo. But still let us go and make sure.”

We left this grotto which lay open to every wind. At the same time I cherished a trembling hope which was a fear as well. It seemed to me impossible that the terrible wreck of the raft should not have destroyed everything on board. On my arrival on the shore I found Hans surrounded by an assemblage of articles all arranged in good order. My uncle shook hands with him with a lively gratitude. This man, with almost superhuman devotion, had been at work all the while that we were asleep, and had saved the most precious of the articles at the risk of his life.

Not that we had suffered no losses. For instance, our firearms; but we might do without them. Our stock of powder had remained uninjured after having risked blowing up during the storm.

“Well,” cried the Professor, “as we have no guns we cannot hunt, that’s all.”

“Yes, but how about the instruments?”

“Here is the aneroid, the most useful of all, and for which I would have given all the others. By means of it I can calculate the depth and know when we have reached the centre; without it we might very likely go beyond, and come out at the antipodes!”

Such high spirits as these were rather too strong.

“But where is the compass? I asked.

“Here it is, upon this rock, in perfect condition, as well as the thermometers and the chronometer. The hunter is a splendid fellow.”

There was no denying it. We had all our instruments. As for tools and appliances, there they all lay on the ground — ladders, ropes, picks, spades, etc.

Still there was the question of provisions to be settled, and I asked —
”How are we off for provisions?”

The boxes containing these were in a line upon the shore, in a perfect state of preservation; for the most part the sea had spared them, and what with biscuits, salt meat, spirits, and salt fish, we might reckon on four months’ supply.

“Four months!” cried the Professor. “We have time to go and to return; and with what is left I will give a grand dinner to my friends at the Johannæum.”

I ought by this time to have been quite accustomed to my uncle’s ways; yet there was always something fresh about him to astonish me.

“Now,” said he, “we will replenish our supply of water with the rain which the storm has left in all these granite basins; therefore we shall have no reason to fear anything from thirst. As for the raft, I will recommend Hans to do his best to repair it, although I don’t expect it will be of any further use to us.”

“How so?” I cried.

“An idea of my own, my lad. I don’t think we shall come out by the way that we went in.”

I stared at the Professor with a good deal of mistrust. I asked, was he not touched in the brain? And yet there was method in his madness.

“And now let us go to breakfast,” said he.

I followed him to a headland, after he had given his instructions to the hunter. There preserved meat, biscuit, and tea made us an excellent meal, one of the best I ever remember. Hunger, the fresh air, the calm quiet weather, after the commotions we had gone through, all contributed to give me a good appetite.

Whilst breakfasting I took the opportunity to put to my uncle the question where we were now.

“That seems to me,” I said, “rather difficult to make out.”

“Yes, it is difficult,” he said, “to calculate exactly; perhaps even impossible, since during these three stormy days I have been unable to keep any account of the rate or direction of the raft; but still we may get an approximation.”

“The last observation,” I remarked, “was made on the island, when the geyser was — ”

“You mean Axel Island. Don’t decline the honour of having given your name to the first island ever discovered in the central parts of the globe.”

“Well,” said I, “let it be Axel Island. Then we had cleared two hundred and seventy leagues of sea, and we were six hundred leagues from Iceland.”

“Very well,” answered my uncle; “let us start from that point and count four days’ storm, during which our rate cannot have been less than eighty leagues in the twenty-four hours.”

“That is right; and this would make three hundred leagues more.”

“Yes, and the Liedenbrock sea would be six hundred leagues from shore to shore. Surely, Axel, it may vie in size with the Mediterranean itself.”

“Especially,” I replied, “if it happens that we have only crossed it in its narrowest part. And it is a curious circumstance,” I added, “that if my computations are right, and we are nine hundred leagues from Rejkiavik, we have now the Mediterranean above our head.”

“That is a good long way, my friend. But whether we are under Turkey or the Atlantic depends very much upon the question in what direction we have been moving. Perhaps we have deviated.”

“No, I think not. Our course has been the same all along, and I believe this shore is south-east of Port Gräuben.”

“Well,” replied my uncle, “we may easily ascertain this by consulting the compass. Let us go and see what it says.”

The Professor moved towards the rock upon which Hans had laid down the instruments. He was gay and full of spirits; he rubbed his hands, he studied his attitudes. I followed him, curious to know if I was right in my estimate. As soon as we had arrived at the rock my uncle took the compass, laid it horizontally, and questioned the needle, which, after a few oscillations, presently assumed a fixed position. My uncle looked, and looked, and looked again. He rubbed his eyes, and then turned to me thunderstruck with some unexpected discovery.

“What is the matter?” I asked.

He motioned to me to look. An exclamation of astonishment burst from me. The north pole of the needle was turned to what we supposed to be the south. It pointed to the shore instead of to the open sea! I shook the box, examined it again, it was in perfect condition. In whatever position I placed the box the needle pertinaciously returned to this unexpected quarter. Therefore there seemed no reason to doubt that during the storm there had been a sudden change of wind unperceived by us, which had brought our raft back to the shore which we thought we had left so long a distance behind us.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LIEDENBROCK MUSEUM OF GEOLOGY

How shall I describe the strange series of passions which in succession shook the breast of Professor Liedenbrock? First stupefaction, then incredulity, lastly a downright burst of rage. Never had I seen the man so put out of countenance and so disturbed. The fatigues of our passage across, the dangers met, had all to be begun over again. We had gone backwards instead of forwards!

But my uncle rapidly recovered himself.

“Aha! will fate play tricks upon me? Will the elements lay plots against me? Shall fire, air, and water make a combined attack against me? Well, they shall know what a determined man can do. I will not yield. I will not stir a single foot backwards, and it will be seen whether man or nature is to have the upper hand!”

Erect upon the rock, angry and threatening, Otto Liedenbrock was a rather grotesque fierce parody upon the fierce Achilles defying the lightning. But I thought it my duty to interpose and attempt to lay some restraint upon this unmeasured fanaticism.

“Just listen to me,” I said firmly. “Ambition must have a limit somewhere; we cannot perform impossibilities; we are not at all fit for another sea voyage; who would dream of undertaking a voyage of five hundred leagues upon a heap of rotten planks, with a blanket in rags for a sail, a stick for a mast, and fierce winds in our teeth? We cannot steer; we shall be buffeted by the tempests, and we should be fools and madmen to attempt to cross a second time."

I was able to develop this series of unanswerable reasons for ten minutes without interruption; not that the Professor was paying any respectful attention to his nephew's arguments, but because he was deaf to all my eloquence.

"To the raft!" he shouted.

Such was his only reply. It was no use for me to entreat, supplicate, get angry, or do anything else in the way of opposition; it would only have been opposing a will harder than the granite rock.

Hans was finishing the repairs of the raft. One would have thought that this strange being was guessing at my uncle's intentions. With a few more pieces of surturbrand he had refitted our vessel. A sail already hung from the new mast, and the wind was playing in its waving folds.

The Professor said a few words to the guide, and immediately he put everything on board and arranged every necessary for our departure. The air was clear — and the north-west wind blew steadily.

What could I do? Could I stand against the two? It was impossible? If Hans had but taken my side! But no, it was not to be. The Icelander seemed to have renounced all will of his own and made a vow to forget and deny himself. I could get nothing out of a servant so feudalised, as it were, to his master. My only course was to proceed.

I was therefore going with as much resignation as I could find to resume my accustomed place on the raft, when my uncle laid his hand upon my shoulder.

“We shall not sail until to-morrow,” he said.

I made a movement intended to express resignation.

“I must neglect nothing,” he said; “and since my fate has driven me on this part of the coast, I will not leave it until I have examined it.”

To understand what followed, it must be borne in mind that, through circumstances hereafter to be explained, we were not really where the Professor supposed we were. In fact we were not upon the north shore of the sea.

“Now let us start upon fresh discoveries,” I said.

And leaving Hans to his work we started off together. The space between the water and the foot of the cliffs was considerable. It took half an hour to bring us to the wall of rock. We trampled under our feet numberless shells of all the forms and sizes which existed in the earliest ages of the world. I also saw immense carapaces more than fifteen feet in diameter. They had been the coverings of those gigantic glyptodons or armadilloes of the pleiocene period, of which the modern tortoise is but a miniature representative. The soil was besides this scattered with stony fragments, boulders rounded by water action, and ridged up in successive lines. I was therefore led to the conclusion that at one time the sea must have covered the ground on which we were treading. On the loose and scattered rocks, now out of the reach of the highest tides, the waves had left manifest traces of their power to wear their way in the hardest stone.

This might up to a certain point explain the existence of an ocean forty leagues beneath the surface of the globe. But in my opinion this liquid mass would be lost by degrees farther and farther within the interior of the earth, and it certainly had its origin in the waters of the ocean overhead, which had made their way hither through some fissure. Yet it must be believed that that fissure is now closed, and that all this cavern or immense reservoir was filled in a very short time. Perhaps even this water, subjected to the fierce action of central heat, had partly been resolved into vapour. This would explain the existence of those clouds suspended over our heads and the development of that electricity which raised such tempests within the bowels of the earth.

This theory of the phenomena we had witnessed seemed satisfactory to me; for however great and stupendous the phenomena of nature, fixed physical laws will or may always explain them.

We were therefore walking upon sedimentary soil, the deposits of the waters of former ages. The Professor was carefully examining every little fissure in the rocks. Wherever he saw a hole he always wanted to know the depth of it. To him this was important.

We had traversed the shores of the Liedenbrock sea for a mile when we observed a sudden change in the appearance of the soil. It seemed upset, contorted, and convulsed by a violent upheaval of the lower strata. In many places depressions or elevations gave witness to some tremendous power effecting the dislocation of strata.

The glyptodon and armadillo are mammalian; the tortoise is a chelonian, a reptile, distinct classes of the animal kingdom; therefore the latter cannot be a representative of the former. (Trans.)

We moved with difficulty across these granite fissures and chasms mingled with silex, crystals of quartz, and alluvial deposits, when a field, nay, more than a field, a vast plain, of bleached bones lay spread before us. It seemed like an immense cemetery, where the remains of twenty ages mingled their dust together. Huge mounds of bony fragments rose stage after stage in the distance. They undulated away to the limits of the horizon, and melted in the distance in a faint haze. There within three square miles were accumulated the materials for a complete history of the animal life of ages, a history scarcely outlined in the too recent strata of the inhabited world.

But an impatient curiosity impelled our steps; crackling and rattling, our feet were trampling on the remains of prehistoric animals and interesting fossils, the possession of which is a matter of rivalry and contention between the museums of great cities. A thousand Cuviers could never have reconstructed the organic remains deposited in this magnificent and unparalleled collection.

I stood amazed. My uncle had uplifted his long arms to the vault which was our sky; his mouth gaping wide, his eyes flashing behind his shining spectacles, his head balancing with an up-and-down motion, his whole attitude denoted unlimited astonishment. Here he stood facing an immense collection of scattered leptotheria, mericotheria, lophiodia, anoplotheria, megatheria, mastodons, protopithecæ, pterodactyles, and all sorts of extinct monsters here assembled together for his special satisfaction. Fancy an enthusiastic bibliomaniac suddenly brought into the midst of the famous Alexandrian library burnt by Omar and restored by a miracle from its ashes! just such a crazed enthusiast was my uncle, Professor Liedenbrock.

But more was to come, when, with a rush through clouds of bone dust, he laid his hand upon a bare skull, and cried with a voice trembling with excitement:

“Axel! Axel! a human head!”

“A human skull?” I cried, no less astonished.

“Yes, nephew. Aha! M. Milne-Edwards! Ah! M. de Quatrefages, how I wish you were standing here at the side of Otto Liedenbrock!”

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE PROFESSOR IN HIS CHAIR AGAIN

To understand this apostrophe of my uncle’s, made to absent French savants, it will be necessary to allude to an event of high importance in a palæontological point of view, which had occurred a little while before our departure.

On the 28th of March, 1863, some excavators working under the direction of M. Boucher de Perthes, in the stone quarries of Moulin Quignon, near Abbeville, in the department of Somme, found a human jawbone fourteen feet beneath the surface. It was the first fossil of this nature that had ever been brought to light. Not far distant were found stone hatchets and flint arrow-heads stained and encased by lapse of time with a uniform coat of rust.

The noise of this discovery was very great, not in France alone, but in England and in Germany. Several savants of the French Institute, and amongst them MM. Milne-Edwards and de Quatrefages, saw at once the importance of this discovery, proved to demonstration the genuineness of the bone in question, and became the most ardent defendants in what the English called this ‘trial of a jawbone.’ To the geologists of the United Kingdom, who believed in the certainty of the fact — Messrs. Falconer, Busk, Carpenter, and others — scientific Germans were soon joined, and amongst them the forwardest, the most fiery, and the most enthusiastic, was my uncle Liedenbrock.

Therefore the genuineness of a fossil human relic of the quaternary period seemed to be incontestably proved and admitted.

It is true that this theory met with a most obstinate opponent in M. Elie de Beaumont. This high authority maintained that the soil of Moulin Quignon was not diluvial at all, but was of much more recent formation; and, agreeing in that with Cuvier, he refused to admit that the human species could be contemporary with the animals of the quaternary period. My uncle Liedenbrock, along with the great body of the geologists, had maintained his ground, disputed, and argued, until M. Elie de Beaumont stood almost alone in his opinion.

We knew all these details, but we were not aware that since our departure the question had advanced to farther stages. Other similar maxillaries, though belonging to individuals of various types and different nations, were found in the loose grey soil of certain grottoes in France, Switzerland, and Belgium, as well as weapons, tools, earthen utensils, bones of children and adults. The existence therefore of man in the quaternary period seemed to become daily more certain.

Nor was this all. Fresh discoveries of remains in the pleiocene formation had emboldened other geologists to refer back the human species to a higher antiquity still. It is true that these remains were not human bones, but objects bearing the traces of his handiwork, such as fossil leg-bones of animals, sculptured and carved evidently by the hand of man.

Thus, at one bound, the record of the existence of man receded far back into the history of the ages past; he was a predecessor of the mastodon; he was a contemporary of the southern elephant; he lived a hundred thousand years ago, when, according to geologists, the pleiocene formation was in progress.

Such then was the state of palæontological science, and what we knew of it was sufficient to explain our behaviour in the presence of this stupendous

Golgotha. Any one may now understand the frenzied excitement of my uncle, when, twenty yards farther on, he found himself face to face with a primitive man!

It was a perfectly recognisable human body. Had some particular soil, like that of the cemetery St. Michel, at Bordeaux, preserved it thus for so many ages? It might be so. But this dried corpse, with its parchment-like skin drawn tightly over the bony frame, the limbs still preserving their shape, sound teeth, abundant hair, and finger and toe nails of frightful length, this desiccated mummy startled us by appearing just as it had lived countless ages ago. I stood mute before this apparition of remote antiquity. My uncle, usually so garrulous, was struck dumb likewise. We raised the body. We stood it up against a rock. It seemed to stare at us out of its empty orbits. We sounded with our knuckles his hollow frame.

After some moments' silence the Professor was himself again. Otto Liedenbrock, yielding to his nature, forgot all the circumstances of our eventful journey, forgot where we were standing, forgot the vaulted cavern which contained us. No doubt he was in mind back again in his Johannæum, holding forth to his pupils, for he assumed his learned air; and addressing himself to an imaginary audience, he proceeded thus:

"Gentlemen, I have the honour to introduce to you a man of the quaternary or post-tertiary system. Eminent geologists have denied his existence, others no less eminent have affirmed it. The St. Thomases of palæontology, if they were here, might now touch him with their fingers, and would be obliged to acknowledge their error. I am quite aware that science has to be on its guard with discoveries of this kind. I know what capital enterprising individuals like Barnum have made out of fossil men. I have heard the tale of the kneepan of Ajax, the pretended body of Orestes claimed to have been found by the Spartans, and of the body of Asterius, ten cubits long, of which Pausanias speaks. I have read the reports of the skeleton of Trapani, found in the fourteenth century, and which was at the time identified as that of Polyphemus; and the history of the giant unearthed in the sixteenth century near Palermo. You know as well as I do, gentlemen, the analysis made at Lucerne in 1577 of those huge bones which the celebrated Dr. Felix Plater affirmed to be those of a giant nineteen feet high. I have gone through the treatises of Cassanion, and all those memoirs, pamphlets, answers, and rejoinders published respecting the skeleton of Teutobochus, the invader of Gaul, dug out of a sandpit in the Dauphiné, in 1613. In the eighteenth century I would have stood up for Scheuchzer's pre-adamite man against Peter Campet. I have perused a writing, entitled Gigan — "

Here my uncle's unfortunate infirmity met him — that of being unable in public to pronounce hard words.

"The pamphlet entitled Gigan — "

He could get no further.

"Giganteo — "

It was not to be done. The unlucky word would not come out. At the

Johannæum there would have been a laugh.

"Gigantosteologie," at last the Professor burst out, between two words which I shall not record here.

Then rushing on with renewed vigour, and with great animation:

“Yes, gentlemen, I know all these things, and more. I know that Cuvier and Blumenbach have recognised in these bones nothing more remarkable than the bones of the mammoth and other mammals of the post-tertiary period. But in the presence of this specimen to doubt would be to insult science. There stands the body! You may see it, touch it. It is not a mere skeleton; it is an entire body, preserved for a purely anthropological end and purpose.”

I was good enough not to contradict this startling assertion.

“If I could only wash it in a solution of sulphuric acid,” pursued my uncle, “I should be able to clear it from all the earthy particles and the shells which are incrusted about it. But I do not possess that valuable solvent. Yet, such as it is, the body shall tell us its own wonderful story.”

Here the Professor laid hold of the fossil skeleton, and handled it with the skill of a dexterous showman.

“You see,” he said, “that it is not six feet long, and that we are still separated by a long interval from the pretended race of giants. As for the family to which it belongs, it is evidently Caucasian. It is the white race, our own. The skull of this fossil is a regular oval, or rather ovoid. It exhibits no prominent cheekbones, no projecting jaws. It presents no appearance of that prognathism which diminishes the facial angle. Measure that angle. It is nearly ninety degrees. But I will go further in my deductions, and I will affirm that this specimen of the human family is of the Japhetic race, which has since spread from the Indies to the Atlantic. Don’t smile, gentlemen.”

Nobody was smiling; but the learned Professor was frequently disturbed by the broad smiles provoked by his learned eccentricities.

“Yes,” he pursued with animation, “this is a fossil man, the contemporary of the mastodons whose remains fill this amphitheatre. But if you ask me how he came there, how those strata on which he lay slipped down into this enormous hollow in the globe, I confess I cannot answer that question. No doubt in the post-tertiary period considerable commotions were still disturbing the crust of the earth. The long-continued cooling of the globe produced chasms, fissures, clefts, and faults, into which, very probably, portions of the upper earth may have fallen. I make no rash assertions; but there is the man surrounded by his own works, by hatchets, by flint arrow-heads, which are the characteristics of the stone age. And unless he came here, like myself, as a tourist on a visit and as a pioneer of science, I can entertain no doubt of the authenticity of his remote origin.”

The facial angle is formed by two lines, one touching the brow and the front teeth, the other from the orifice of the ear to the lower line of the nostrils. The greater this angle, the higher intelligence denoted by the formation of the skull. Prognathism is that projection of the jaw-bones which sharpens or lessons this angle, and which is illustrated in the negro countenance and in the lowest savages.

The Professor ceased to speak, and the audience broke out into loud and unanimous applause. For of course my uncle was right, and wiser men than his nephew would have had some trouble to refute his statements.

Another remarkable thing. This fossil body was not the only one in this immense catacomb. We came upon other bodies at every step amongst this mortal dust, and my uncle might select the most curious of these specimens to demolish the incredulity of sceptics.

In fact it was a wonderful spectacle, that of these generations of men and animals commingled in a common cemetery. Then one very serious question arose presently which we scarcely dared to suggest. Had all those creatures slided through a great fissure in the crust of the earth, down to the shores of the Liedenbrock sea, when they were dead and turning to dust, or had they lived and grown and died here in this subterranean world under a false sky, just like inhabitants of the upper earth? Until the present time we had seen alive only marine monsters and fishes. Might not some living man, some native of the abyss, be yet a wanderer below on this desert strand?

CHAPTER XXXIX.

FOREST SCENERY ILLUMINATED BY ELECTRICITY

For another half hour we trod upon a pavement of bones. We pushed on, impelled by our burning curiosity. What other marvels did this cavern contain? What new treasures lay here for science to unfold? I was prepared for any surprise, my imagination was ready for any astonishment however astounding.

We had long lost sight of the sea shore behind the hills of bones. The rash Professor, careless of losing his way, hurried me forward. We advanced in silence, bathed in luminous electric fluid. By some phenomenon which I am unable to explain, it lighted up all sides of every object equally. Such was its diffusiveness, there being no central point from which the light emanated, that shadows no longer existed. You might have thought yourself under the rays of a vertical sun in a tropical region at noonday and the height of summer. No vapour was visible. The rocks, the distant mountains, a few isolated clumps of forest trees in the distance, presented a weird and wonderful aspect under these totally new conditions of a universal diffusion of light. We were like Hoffmann’s shadowless man.

After walking a mile we reached the outskirts of a vast forest, but not one of those forests of fungi which bordered Port Gräuben.

Here was the vegetation of the tertiary period in its fullest blaze of magnificence. Tall palms, belonging to species no longer living, splendid palmacites, firs, yews, cypress trees, thujas, representatives of the conifers, were linked together by a tangled network of long climbing plants. A soft carpet of moss and hepaticas luxuriously clothed the soil. A few sparkling streams ran almost in silence under what would have been the shade of the trees, but that there was no shadow. On their banks grew tree-ferns similar to those we grow in hothouses. But a remarkable feature was the total absence of colour in all those trees, shrubs, and plants, growing without the life-giving heat and light of the sun. Everything seemed mixed-up and confounded in one uniform silver grey or light brown tint like that of fading and faded leaves. Not a green leaf anywhere, and the flowers — which were abundant enough in the tertiary period, which first gave birth to flowers — looked like brown-paper flowers, without colour or scent.

My uncle Liedenbrock ventured to penetrate under this colossal grove. I followed him, not without fear. Since nature had here provided vegetable nourishment, why should not the terrible mammals be there too? I perceived in the broad clearings left by fallen trees, decayed with age, leguminose plants, acerineæ, rubiceæ and many other eatable shrubs, dear to ruminant animals at every period. Then I observed, mingled together in confusion, trees of countries far apart on the surface of the globe. The oak and the palm were growing side by side, the Australian eucalyptus leaned against the Norwegian pine, the birch-tree of the north mingled its foliage with New Zealand kauris. It was enough to distract the most ingenious classifier of terrestrial botany.

Suddenly I halted. I drew back my uncle.

The diffused light revealed the smallest object in the dense and distant thickets. I had thought I saw — no! I did see, with my own eyes, vast colossal forms moving amongst the trees. They were gigantic animals; it was a herd of mastodons — not fossil remains, but living and resembling those the bones of which were found in the marshes of Ohio in 1801. I saw those huge elephants whose long, flexible trunks were grouting and turning up the soil under the trees like a legion of serpents. I could hear the crashing noise of their long ivory tusks boring into the old decaying trunks. The boughs cracked, and the leaves torn away by cartloads went down the cavernous throats of the vast brutes.

So, then, the dream in which I had had a vision of the prehistoric world, of the tertiary and post-tertiary periods, was now realised. And there we were alone, in the bowels of the earth, at the mercy of its wild inhabitants!

My uncle was gazing with intense and eager interest.

“Come on!” said he, seizing my arm. “Forward! forward!”

“No, I will not!” I cried. “We have no firearms. What could we do in the midst of a herd of these four-footed giants? Come away, uncle — come! No human being may with safety dare the anger of these monstrous beasts.”

“No human creature?” replied my uncle in a lower voice. “You are wrong, Axel. Look, look down there! I fancy I see a living creature similar to ourselves: it is a man!”

I looked, shaking my head incredulously. But though at first I was unbelieving I had to yield to the evidence of my senses.

In fact, at a distance of a quarter of a mile, leaning against the trunk of a gigantic kauri, stood a human being, the Proteus of those subterranean regions, a new son of Neptune, watching this countless herd of mastodons.

Immanis pecoris custos, immanior ipse.

“The shepherd of gigantic herds, and huger still himself.”

Yes, truly, huger still himself. It was no longer a fossil being like him whose dried remains we had easily lifted up in the field of bones; it was a giant, able to control those monsters. In stature he was at least twelve feet high. His head, huge and unshapely as a buffalo’s, was half hidden in the thick and tangled growth of his unkempt hair. It most resembled the mane of the primitive elephant. In his hand he wielded with ease an enormous bough, a staff worthy of this shepherd of the geologic period.

We stood petrified and speechless with amazement. But he might see us! We must fly!

“Come, do come!” I said to my uncle, who for once allowed himself to be persuaded.

In another quarter of an hour our nimble heels had carried us beyond the reach of this horrible monster.

And yet, now that I can reflect quietly, now that my spirit has grown calm again, now that months have slipped by since this strange and supernatural meeting, what am I to think? what am I to believe? I must conclude that it was impossible that our senses had been deceived, that our eyes did not see what we supposed they saw. No human being lives in this subterranean world; no generation of men dwells in those inferior caverns of the globe, unknown to and unconnected with the inhabitants of its surface. It is absurd to believe it!

I had rather admit that it may have been some animal whose structure resembled the human, some ape or baboon of the early geological ages, some protopitheca, or some mesopitheca, some early or middle ape like that discovered by Mr. Lartet in the bone cave of Sansau. But this creature surpassed in stature all the measurements known in modern palæontology. But that a man, a living man, and therefore whole generations doubtless besides, should be buried there in the bowels of the earth, is impossible.

However, we had left behind us the luminous forest, dumb with astonishment, overwhelmed and struck down with a terror which amounted to stupefaction. We kept running on for fear the horrible monster might be on our track. It was a flight, a fall, like that fearful pulling and dragging which is peculiar to nightmare. Instinctively we got back to the Liedenbrock sea, and I cannot say into what vagaries my mind would not have carried me but for a circumstance which brought me back to practical matters.

Although I was certain that we were now treading upon a soil not hitherto touched by our feet, I often perceived groups of rocks which reminded me of those about Port Gräuben. Besides, this seemed to confirm the indications of the needle, and to show that we had against our will returned to the north of the Liedenbrock sea. Occasionally we felt quite convinced. Brooks and waterfalls were tumbling everywhere from the projections in the rocks. I thought I recognised the bed of surturbrand, our faithful Hansbach, and the grotto in which I had recovered life and consciousness. Then a few paces farther on, the arrangement of the cliffs, the appearance of an unrecognised stream, or the strange outline of a rock, came to throw me again into doubt.

I communicated my doubts to my uncle. Like myself, he hesitated; he could recognise nothing again amidst this monotonous scene.

“Evidently,” said I, “we have not landed again at our original starting point, but the storm has carried us a little higher, and if we follow the shore we shall find Port Gräuben.”

“If that is the case it will be useless to continue our exploration, and we had better return to our raft. But, Axel, are you not mistaken?”

“It is difficult to speak decidedly, uncle, for all these rocks are so very much alike. Yet I think I recognise the promontory at the foot of which Hans constructed our launch. We must be very near the little port, if indeed this is not it,” I added, examining a creek which I thought I recognised.

“No, Axel, we should at least find our own traces and I see nothing — ”

“But I do see,” I cried, darting upon an object lying on the sand.

And I showed my uncle a rusty dagger which I had just picked up.

“Come,” said he, “had you this weapon with you?”

“I! No, certainly! But you, perhaps — ”

“Not that I am aware,” said the Professor. “I have never had this object in my possession.”

“Well, this is strange!”

“No, Axel, it is very simple. The Icelanders often wear arms of this kind. This must have belonged to Hans, and he has lost it.”

I shook my head. Hans had never had an object like this in his possession.

“Did it not belong to some pre-adamite warrior?” I cried, “to some living man, contemporary with the huge cattle-driver? But no. This is not a relic of the stone age. It is not even of the iron age. This blade is steel — ”

My uncle stopped me abruptly on my way to a dissertation which would have taken me a long way, and said coolly:

“Be calm, Axel, and reasonable. This dagger belongs to the sixteenth century; it is a poniard, such as gentlemen carried in their belts to give the coup de grace. Its origin is Spanish. It was never either yours, or mine, or the hunter’s, nor did it belong to any of those human beings who may or may not inhabit this inner world. See, it was never jagged like this by cutting men’s throats; its blade is coated with a rust neither a day, nor a year, nor a hundred years old.”

The Professor was getting excited according to his wont, and was allowing his imagination to run away with him.

“Axel, we are on the way towards the grand discovery. This blade has been left on the strand for from one to three hundred years, and has blunted its edge upon the rocks that fringe this subterranean sea!”

“But it has not come alone. It has not twisted itself out of shape; some one has been here before us!

“Yes — a man has.”

“And who was that man?”

“A man who has engraved his name somewhere with that dagger. That man wanted once more to mark the way to the centre of the earth. Let us look about: look about!”

And, wonderfully interested, we peered all along the high wall, peeping into every fissure which might open out into a gallery.

And so we arrived at a place where the shore was much narrowed. Here the sea came to lap the foot of the steep cliff, leaving a passage no wider than a couple of yards. Between two boldly projecting rocks appeared the mouth of a dark tunnel.

There, upon a granite slab, appeared two mysterious graven letters, half eaten away by time. They were the initials of the bold and daring traveller:

[Runic initials appear here]

“A. S.” shouted my uncle. “Arne Saknussemm! Arne Saknussemm everywhere!”

CHAPTER XL.

PREPARATIONS FOR BLASTING A PASSAGE TO THE CENTRE OF THE EARTH

Since the start upon this marvellous pilgrimage I had been through so many astonishments that I might well be excused for thinking myself well hardened against any further surprise. Yet at the sight of these two letters, engraved on this spot three hundred years ago, I stood aghast in dumb amazement. Not only were the initials of the learned alchemist visible upon the living rock, but there lay the iron point with which the letters had been engraved. I could no longer doubt of the existence of that wonderful traveller and of the fact of his unparalleled journey, without the most glaring incredulity.

Whilst these reflections were occupying me, Professor Liedenbrock had launched into a somewhat rhapsodical eulogium, of which Arne Saknussemm was, of course, the hero.

“Thou marvellous genius!” he cried, “thou hast not forgotten one indication which might serve to lay open to mortals the road through the terrestrial crust; and thy fellow-creatures may even now, after the lapse of three centuries, again trace thy footsteps through these deep and darksome ways. You reserved the contemplation of these wonders for other eyes besides your own. Your name, graven from stage to stage, leads the bold follower of your footsteps to the very centre of our planet’s core, and there again we shall find your own name written with your own hand. I too will inscribe my name upon this dark granite page. But for ever henceforth let this cape that advances into the sea discovered by yourself be known by your own illustrious name — Cape Saknussemm.”

Such were the glowing words of panegyric which fell upon my attentive ear, and I could not resist the sentiment of enthusiasm with which I too was infected. The fire of zeal kindled afresh in me. I forgot everything. I dismissed from my mind the past perils of the journey, the future danger of our return. That which another had done I supposed we might also do, and nothing that was not superhuman appeared impossible to me.

“Forward! forward!” I cried.

I was already darting down the gloomy tunnel when the Professor stopped me; he, the man of impulse, counselled patience and coolness.

“Let us first return to Hans,” he said, “and bring the raft to this spot.”

I obeyed, not without dissatisfaction, and passed out rapidly among the rocks on the shore.

I said: “Uncle, do you know it seems to me that circumstances have wonderfully befriended us hitherto?”

“You think so, Axel?”

“No doubt; even the tempest has put us on the right way. Blessings on that storm! It has brought us back to this coast from which fine weather would have carried us far away. Suppose we had touched with our prow (the prow of a rudder!) the southern shore of the Liedenbrock sea, what would have become of us? We should never have seen the name of Saknussemm, and we should at this moment be imprisoned on a rockbound, impassable coast.”

“Yes, Axel, it is providential that whilst supposing we were steering south we should have just got back north at Cape Saknussemm. I must say that this is astonishing, and that I feel I have no way to explain it.”

“What does that signify, uncle? Our business is not to explain facts, but to use them!”

“Certainly; but — ”

“Well, uncle, we are going to resume the northern route, and to pass under the north countries of Europe — under Sweden, Russia, Siberia: who knows where? — instead of burrowing under the deserts of Africa, or perhaps the waves of the Atlantic; and that is all I want to know.”

“Yes, Axel, you are right. It is all for the best, since we have left that weary, horizontal sea, which led us nowhere. Now we shall go down, down, down! Do you know that it is now only 1,500 leagues to the centre of the globe?”

“Is that all?” I cried. “Why, that’s nothing. Let us start: march!”

All this crazy talk was going on still when we met the hunter.

Everything was made ready for our instant departure. Every bit of

cordage was put on board. We took our places, and with our sail set,

Hans steered us along the coast to Cape Saknussemm.

The wind was unfavourable to a species of launch not calculated for shallow water. In many places we were obliged to push ourselves along with iron-pointed sticks. Often the sunken rocks just beneath the surface obliged us to deviate from our straight course. At last, after three hours’ sailing, about six in the evening we reached a place suitable for our landing. I jumped ashore, followed by my uncle and the Icelander. This short passage had not served to cool my ardour. On the contrary, I even proposed to burn ‘our ship,’ to prevent the possibility of return; but my uncle would not consent to that. I thought him singularly lukewarm.

“At least,” I said, “don’t let us lose a minute.”

“Yes, yes, lad,” he replied; “but first let us examine this new gallery, to see if we shall require our ladders.”

My uncle put his Ruhmkorff’s apparatus in action; the raft moored to the shore was left alone; the mouth of the tunnel was not twenty yards from us; and our party, with myself at the head, made for it without a moment’s delay.

The aperture, which was almost round, was about five feet in diameter; the dark passage was cut out in the live rock and lined with a coat of the eruptive matter which formerly issued from it; the interior was level with the ground outside, so that we were able to enter without difficulty. We were following a horizontal plane, when, only six paces in, our progress was interrupted by an enormous block just across our way.

“Accursed rock!” I cried in a passion, finding myself suddenly confronted by an impassable obstacle.

Right and left we searched in vain for a way, up and down, side to side; there was no getting any farther. I felt fearfully disappointed, and I would not admit that the obstacle was final. I stopped, I looked underneath the block: no opening. Above: granite still. Hans passed his lamp over every portion of the barrier in vain. We must give up all hope of passing it.

I sat down in despair. My uncle strode from side to side in the narrow passage.

“But how was it with Saknussemm?” I cried.

“Yes,” said my uncle, “was he stopped by this stone barrier?”

“No, no,” I replied with animation. “This fragment of rock has been shaken down by some shock or convulsion, or by one of those magnetic storms which agitate these regions, and has blocked up the passage which lay open to him. Many years have elapsed since the return of Saknussemm to the surface and the fall of this huge fragment. Is it not evident that this gallery was once the way open to the course of the lava, and that at that time there must have been a free passage? See here are recent fissures grooving and channelling the granite roof. This roof itself is formed of fragments of rock carried down, of enormous stones, as if by some giant’s hand; but at one time the expulsive force was greater than usual, and this block, like the falling keystone of a ruined arch, has slipped down to the ground and blocked up the way. It is only an accidental obstruction, not met by Saknussemm, and if we don’t destroy it we shall be unworthy to reach the centre of the earth.”

Such was my sentence! The soul of the Professor had passed into me. The genius of discovery possessed me wholly. I forgot the past, I scorned the future. I gave not a thought to the things of the surface of this globe into which I had dived; its cities and its sunny plains, Hamburg and the Königstrasse, even poor Gräuben, who must have given us up for lost, all were for the time dismissed from the pages of my memory.

“Well,” cried my uncle, “let us make a way with our pickaxes.”

“Too hard for the pickaxe.”

“Well, then, the spade.”

“That would take us too long.”

“What, then?”

“Why gunpowder, to be sure! Let us mine the obstacle and blow it up.”

“Oh, yes, it is only a bit of rock to blast!”

“Hans, to work!” cried my uncle.

The Icelander returned to the raft and soon came back with an iron bar which he made use of to bore a hole for the charge. This was no easy work. A hole was to be made large enough to hold fifty pounds of guncotton, whose expansive force is four times that of gunpowder.

I was terribly excited. Whilst Hans was at work I was actively helping my uncle to prepare a slow match of wetted powder encased in linen.

“This will do it,” I said.

“It will,” replied my uncle.

By midnight our mining preparations were over; the charge was rammed into the hole, and the slow match uncoiled along the gallery showed its end outside the opening.

A spark would now develop the whole of our preparations into activity.

“To-morrow,” said the Professor.

I had to be resigned and to wait six long hours.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE GREAT EXPLOSION AND THE RUSH DOWN BELOW

The next day, Thursday, August 27, is a well-remembered date in our subterranean journey. It never returns to my memory without sending through me a shudder of horror and a palpitation of the heart. From that hour we had no further occasion for the exercise of reason, or judgment, or skill, or contrivance. We were henceforth to be hurled along, the playthings of the fierce elements of the deep.

At six we were afoot. The moment drew near to clear a way by blasting through the opposing mass of granite.

I begged for the honour of lighting the fuse. This duty done, I was to join my companions on the raft, which had not yet been unloaded; we should then push off as far as we could and avoid the dangers arising from the explosion, the effects of which were not likely to be confined to the rock itself.

The fuse was calculated to burn ten minutes before setting fire to the mine. I therefore had sufficient time to get away to the raft.

I prepared to fulfil my task with some anxiety.

After a hasty meal, my uncle and the hunter embarked whilst I remained on shore. I was supplied with a lighted lantern to set fire to the fuse. “Now go,” said my uncle, “and return immediately to us.” “Don’t be uneasy,” I replied. “I will not play by the way.” I immediately proceeded to the mouth of the tunnel. I opened my lantern. I laid hold of the end of the match. The Professor stood, chronometer in hand. “Ready?” he cried.

“Ay.”

“Fire!”

I instantly plunged the end of the fuse into the lantern. It spluttered and flamed, and I ran at the top of my speed to the raft.

“Come on board quickly, and let us push off.”

Hans, with a vigorous thrust, sent us from the shore. The raft shot twenty fathoms out to sea.

It was a moment of intense excitement. The Professor was watching the hand of the chronometer.

“Five minutes more!” he said. “Four! Three!”

My pulse beat half-seconds.

“Two! One! Down, granite rocks; down with you.”

What took place at that moment? I believe I did not hear the dull roar of the explosion. But the rocks suddenly assumed a new arrangement: they rent asunder like a curtain. I saw a bottomless pit open on the shore. The sea, lashed into sudden fury, rose up in an enormous billow, on the ridge of which the unhappy raft was uplifted bodily in the air with all its crew and cargo.

We all three fell down flat. In less than a second we were in deep, unfathomable darkness. Then I felt as if not only myself but the raft also had no support beneath. I thought it was sinking; but it was not so. I wanted to speak to my uncle, but the roaring of the waves prevented him from hearing even the sound of my voice.

In spite of darkness, noise, astonishment, and terror, I then understood what had taken place.

On the other side of the blown-up rock was an abyss. The explosion had caused a kind of earthquake in this fissured and abysmal region; a great gulf had opened; and the sea, now changed into a torrent, was hurrying us along into it.

I gave myself up for lost.

An hour passed away — two hours, perhaps — I cannot tell. We clutched each other fast, to save ourselves from being thrown off the raft. We felt violent shocks whenever we were borne heavily against the craggy projections. Yet these shocks were not very frequent, from which I concluded that the gully was widening. It was no doubt the same road that Saknussemm had taken; but instead of walking peaceably down it, as he had done, we were carrying a whole sea along with us.

These ideas, it will be understood, presented themselves to my mind in a vague and undetermined form. I had difficulty in associating any ideas together during this headlong race, which seemed like a vertical descent. To judge by the air which was whistling past me and made a whizzing in my ears, we were moving faster than the fastest express trains. To light a torch under these’ conditions would have been impossible; and our last electric apparatus had been shattered by the force of the explosion.

I was therefore much surprised to see a clear light shining near me. It lighted up the calm and unmoved countenance of Hans. The skilful huntsman had succeeded in lighting the lantern; and although it flickered so much as to threaten to go out, it threw a fitful light across the awful darkness.

I was right in my supposition. It was a wide gallery. The dim light could not show us both its walls at once. The fall of the waters which were carrying us away exceeded that of the swiftest rapids in American rivers. Its surface seemed composed of a sheaf of arrows hurled with inconceivable force; I cannot convey my impressions by a better comparison. The raft, occasionally seized by an eddy, spun round as it still flew along. When it approached the walls of the gallery I threw on them the light of the lantern, and I could judge somewhat of the velocity of our speed by noticing how the jagged projections of the rocks spun into endless ribbons and bands, so that we seemed confined within a network of shifting lines. I supposed we were running at the rate of thirty leagues an hour.

My uncle and I gazed on each other with haggard eyes, clinging to the stump of the mast, which had snapped asunder at the first shock of our great catastrophe. We kept our backs to the wind, not to be stifled by the rapidity of a movement which no human power could check.

Hours passed away. No change in our situation; but a discovery came to complicate matters and make them worse.

In seeking to put our cargo into somewhat better order, I found that the greater part of the articles embarked had disappeared at the moment of the explosion, when the sea broke in upon us with such violence. I wanted to know exactly what we had saved, and with the lantern in my hand I began my examination. Of our instruments none were saved but the compass and the chronometer; our stock of ropes and ladders was reduced to the bit of cord rolled round the stump of the mast! Not a spade, not a pickaxe, not a hammer was left us; and, irreparable disaster! we had only one day's provisions left.

I searched every nook and corner, every crack and cranny in the raft. There was nothing. Our provisions were reduced to one bit of salt meat and a few biscuits.

I stared at our failing supplies stupidly. I refused to take in the gravity of our loss. And yet what was the use of troubling myself. If we had had provisions enough for months, how could we get out of the abyss into which we were being hurled by an irresistible torrent? Why should we fear the horrors of famine, when death was swooping down upon us in a multitude of other forms? Would there be time left to die of starvation?

Yet by an inexplicable play of the imagination I forgot my present dangers, to contemplate the threatening future. Was there any chance of escaping from the fury of this impetuous torrent, and of returning to the surface of the globe? I could not form the slightest conjecture how or when. But one chance in a thousand, or ten thousand, is still a chance; whilst death from starvation would leave us not the smallest hope in the world.

The thought came into my mind to declare the whole truth to my uncle, to show him the dreadful straits to which we were reduced, and to calculate how long we might yet expect to live. But I had the courage to preserve silence. I wished to leave him cool and self-possessed.

At that moment the light from our lantern began to sink by little and little, and then went out entirely. The wick had burnt itself out. Black night reigned again; and there was no hope left of being able to dissipate the palpable darkness. We had yet a torch left, but we could not have kept it alight. Then, like a child, I closed my eyes firmly, not to see the darkness.

After a considerable lapse of time our speed redoubled. I could perceive it by the sharpness of the currents that blew past my face. The descent became steeper. I believe we were no longer sliding, but falling down. I had an impression that we were dropping vertically. My uncle's hand, and the vigorous arm of Hans, held me fast.

Suddenly, after a space of time that I could not measure, I felt a shock. The raft had not struck against any hard resistance, but had suddenly been checked in its fall. A waterspout, an immense liquid column, was beating upon the surface of the waters. I was suffocating! I was drowning!

But this sudden flood was not of long duration. In a few seconds I found myself in the air again, which I inhaled with all the force of my lungs. My uncle and Hans were still holding me fast by the arms; and the raft was still carrying us.

CHAPTER XLII.

HEADLONG SPEED UPWARD THROUGH THE HORRORS OF DARKNESS

It might have been, as I guessed, about ten at night. The first of my senses which came into play after this last bout was that of hearing. All at once I could hear; and it was a real exercise of the sense of hearing. I could hear the silence in the gallery after the din which for hours had stunned me. At last these words of my uncle's came to me like a vague murmuring:

"We are going up."

"What do you mean?" I cried.

"Yes, we are going up — up!"

I stretched out my arm. I touched the wall, and drew back my hand bleeding. We were ascending with extreme rapidity.

"The torch! The torch!" cried the Professor.

Not without difficulty Hans succeeded in lighting the torch; and the flame, preserving its upward tendency, threw enough light to show us what kind of a place we were in.

"Just as I thought," said the Professor "We are in a tunnel not four-and-twenty feet in diameter. The water had reached the bottom of the gulf. It is now rising to its level, and carrying us with it."

"Where to?"

“I cannot tell; but we must be ready for anything. We are mounting at a speed which seems to me of fourteen feet in a second, or ten miles an hour. At this rate we shall get on.”

“Yes, if nothing stops us; if this well has an aperture. But suppose it to be stopped. If the air is condensed by the pressure of this column of water we shall be crushed.”

“Axel,” replied the Professor with perfect coolness, “our situation is almost desperate; but there are some chances of deliverance, and it is these that I am considering. If at every instant we may perish, so at every instant we may be saved. Let us then be prepared to seize upon the smallest advantage.”

“But what shall we do now?”

“Recruit our strength by eating.”

At these words I fixed a haggard eye upon my uncle. That which I had been so unwilling to confess at last had to be told.

“Eat, did you say?”

“Yes, at once.”

The Professor added a few words in Danish, but Hans shook his head mournfully.

“What!” cried my uncle. “Have we lost our provisions?”

“Yes; here is all we have left; one bit of salt meat for the three.”

My uncle stared at me as if he could not understand.

“Well,” said I, “do you think we have any chance of being saved?”

My question was unanswered.

An hour passed away. I began to feel the pangs of a violent hunger. My companions were suffering too, and not one of us dared touch this wretched remnant of our goodly store.

But now we were mounting up with excessive speed. Sometimes the air would cut our breath short, as is experienced by aeronauts ascending too rapidly. But whilst they suffer from cold in proportion to their rise, we were beginning to feel a contrary effect. The heat was increasing in a manner to cause us the most fearful anxiety, and certainly the temperature was at this moment at the height of 100° Fahr.

What could be the meaning of such a change? Up to this time facts had supported the theories of Davy and of Liedenbrock; until now particular conditions of non-conducting rocks, electricity and magnetism, had tempered the laws of nature, giving us only a moderately warm climate, for the theory of a central fire remained in my estimation the only one that was true and explicable. Were we then turning back to where the phenomena of central heat ruled in all their rigour and would reduce the most refractory rocks to the state of a molten liquid? I feared this, and said to the Professor:

“If we are neither drowned, nor shattered to pieces, nor starved to death, there is still the chance that we may be burned alive and reduced to ashes.”

At this he shrugged his shoulders and returned to his thoughts.

Another hour passed, and, except some slight increase in the temperature, nothing new had happened.

“Come,” said he, “we must determine upon something.”

“Determine on what?” said I.

“Yes, we must recruit our strength by carefully rationing ourselves, and so prolong our existence by a few hours. But we shall be reduced to very great weakness at last.”

“And our last hour is not far off.”

“Well, if there is a chance of safety, if a moment for active exertion presents itself, where should we find the required strength if we allowed ourselves to be enfeebled by hunger?”

“Well, uncle, when this bit of meat has been devoured what shall we have left?”

“Nothing, Axel, nothing at all. But will it do you any more good to devour it with your eyes than with your teeth? Your reasoning has in it neither sense nor energy.”

“Then don’t you despair?” I cried irritably.

“No, certainly not,” was the Professor’s firm reply.

“What! do you think there is any chance of safety left?”

“Yes, I do; as long as the heart beats, as long as body and soul keep together, I cannot admit that any creature endowed with a will has need to despair of life.”

Resolute words these! The man who could speak so, under such circumstances, was of no ordinary type.

“Finally, what do you mean to do?” I asked.

“Eat what is left to the last crumb, and recruit our fading strength. This meal will be our last, perhaps: so let it be! But at any rate we shall once more be men, and not exhausted, empty bags.”

“Well, let us consume it then,” I cried.

My uncle took the piece of meat and the few biscuits which had escaped from the general destruction. He divided them into three equal portions and gave one to each. This made about a pound of nourishment for each. The Professor ate his greedily, with a kind of feverish rage. I ate without pleasure, almost with disgust; Hans quietly, moderately, masticating his small mouthfuls without any noise, and relishing them with the calmness of a man above all anxiety about the future. By diligent search he had found a flask of Hollands; he offered it to us each in turn, and this generous beverage cheered us up slightly.

“Forträfflig,” said Hans, drinking in his turn.

“Excellent,” replied my uncle.

A glimpse of hope had returned, although without cause. But our last meal was over, and it was now five in the morning.

Man is so constituted that health is a purely negative state. Hunger once satisfied, it is difficult for a man to imagine the horrors of starvation; they cannot be understood without being felt.

Therefore it was that after our long fast these few mouthfuls of meat and biscuit made us triumph over our past agonies.

But as soon as the meal was done, we each of us fell deep into thought. What was Hans thinking of — that man of the far West, but who seemed ruled by the fatalist doctrines of the East?

As for me, my thoughts were made up of remembrances, and they carried me up to the surface of the globe of which I ought never to have taken leave. The house in the Königstrasse, my poor dear Gräuben, that kind soul Martha, flitted like visions before my eyes, and in the dismal moanings which from time to time reached my ears I thought I could distinguish the roar of the traffic of the great cities upon earth.

My uncle still had his eye upon his work. Torch in hand, he tried to gather some idea of our situation from the observation of the strata. This calculation could, at best, be but a vague approximation; but a learned man is always a philosopher when he succeeds in remaining cool, and assuredly Professor Liedenbrock possessed this quality to a surprising degree.

I could hear him murmuring geological terms. I could understand them, and in spite of myself I felt interested in this last geological study.

“Eruptive granite,” he was saying. “We are still in the primitive period. But we are going up, up, higher still. Who can tell?”

Ah! who can tell? With his hand he was examining the perpendicular wall, and in a few more minutes he continued:

“This is gneiss! here is mica schist! Ah! presently we shall come to the transition period, and then — ”

What did the Professor mean? Could he be trying to measure the thickness of the crust of the earth that lay between us and the world above? Had he any means of making this calculation? No, he had not the aneroid, and no guessing could supply its place.

Still the temperature kept rising, and I felt myself steeped in a broiling atmosphere. I could only compare it to the heat of a furnace at the moment when the molten metal is running into the mould. Gradually we had been obliged to throw aside our coats and waistcoats, the lightest covering became uncomfortable and even painful.

“Are we rising into a fiery furnace?” I cried at one moment when the heat was redoubling.

“No,” replied my uncle, “that is impossible — quite impossible!”

“Yet,” I answered, feeling the wall, “this well is burning hot.”

At the same moment, touching the water, I had to withdraw my hand in haste.

“The water is scalding,” I cried.

This time the Professor’s only answer was an angry gesture.

Then an unconquerable terror seized upon me, from which I could no longer get free. I felt that a catastrophe was approaching before which the boldest spirit must quail. A dim, vague notion laid hold of my mind, but which was fast hardening into certainty. I tried to repel it, but it would return. I dared not express it in plain terms. Yet a few involuntary observations confirmed me in my view. By the flickering light of the torch I could distinguish contortions in the granite beds; a phenomenon was unfolding in which electricity would play the principal part; then this unbearable heat, this boiling water! I consulted the compass.

The compass had lost its properties! it had ceased to act properly!

CHAPTER XLIII.

SHOT OUT OF A VOLCANO AT LAST!

Yes: our compass was no longer a guide; the needle flew from pole to pole with a kind of frenzied impulse; it ran round the dial, and spun hither and thither as if it were giddy or intoxicated.

I knew quite well that according to the best received theories the mineral covering of the globe is never at absolute rest; the changes brought about by the chemical decomposition of its component parts, the agitation caused by great liquid torrents, and the magnetic currents, are continually tending to disturb it — even when living beings upon its surface may fancy that all is quiet below. A phenomenon of this kind would not have greatly alarmed me, or at any rate it would not have given rise to dreadful apprehensions.

But other facts, other circumstances, of a peculiar nature, came to reveal to me by degrees the true state of the case. There came incessant and continuous explosions. I could only compare them to the loud rattle of a long train of chariots driven at full speed over the stones, or a roar of unintermitting thunder.

Then the disordered compass, thrown out of gear by the electric currents, confirmed me in a growing conviction. The mineral crust of the globe threatened to burst up, the granite foundations to come together with a crash, the fissure through which we were helplessly driven would be filled up, the void would be full of crushed fragments of rock, and we poor wretched mortals were to be buried and annihilated in this dreadful consummation.

“My uncle,” I cried, “we are lost now, utterly lost!”

“What are you in a fright about now?” was the calm rejoinder. “What is the matter with you?”

“The matter? Look at those quaking walls! look at those shivering rocks. Don’t you feel the burning heat? Don’t you see how the water boils and bubbles? Are you blind to the dense vapours and steam growing thicker and denser every minute? See this agitated compass needle. It is an earthquake that is threatening us.”

My undaunted uncle calmly shook his head.

“Do you think,” said he, “an earthquake is coming?”

“I do.”

“Well, I think you are mistaken.”

“What! don’t you recognise the symptoms?”

“Of an earthquake? no! I am looking out for something better.”

“What can you mean? Explain?”

“It is an eruption, Axel.”

“An eruption! Do you mean to affirm that we are running up the shaft of a volcano?”

“I believe we are,” said the indomitable Professor with an air of perfect self-possession; “and it is the best thing that could possibly happen to us under our circumstances.”

The best thing! Was my uncle stark mad? What did the man mean? and what was the use of saying facetious things at a time like this?

“What!” I shouted. “Are we being taken up in an eruption? Our fate has flung us here among burning lavas, molten rocks, boiling waters, and all kinds of volcanic matter; we are going to be pitched out, expelled, tossed up, vomited, spit out high into the air, along with fragments of rock, showers of ashes and scoria, in the midst of a towering rush of smoke and flames; and it is the best thing that could happen to us!”

“Yes,” replied the Professor, eyeing me over his spectacles, “I don’t see any other way of reaching the surface of the earth.”

I pass rapidly over the thousand ideas which passed through my mind. My uncle was right, undoubtedly right; and never had he seemed to me more daring and more confirmed in his notions than at this moment when he was calmly contemplating the chances of being shot out of a volcano!

In the meantime up we went; the night passed away in continual ascent; the din and uproar around us became more and more intensified; I was stifled and stunned; I thought my last hour was approaching; and yet imagination is such a strong thing that even in this supreme hour I was occupied with strange and almost childish speculations. But I was the victim, not the master, of my own thoughts.

It was very evident that we were being hurried upward upon the crest of a wave of eruption; beneath our raft were boiling waters, and under these the more sluggish lava was working its way up in a heated mass, together with shoals of fragments of rock which, when they arrived at the crater, would be dispersed in all directions high and low. We were imprisoned in the shaft or chimney of some volcano. There was no room to doubt of that.

But this time, instead of Snæfell, an extinct volcano, we were inside one in full activity. I wondered, therefore, where could this mountain be, and in what part of the world we were to be shot out.

I made no doubt but that it would be in some northern region. Before its disorders set in, the needle had never deviated from that direction. From Cape Saknussemm we had been carried due north for hundreds of leagues. Were we under Iceland again? Were we destined to be thrown up out of Hecla, or by which of the seven other fiery craters in that island? Within a radius of five hundred leagues to the west I remembered under this parallel of latitude only the imperfectly known volcanoes of the north-east coast of America. To the east there was only one in the 80th degree of north latitude, the Esk in Jan Mayen Island, not far from Spitzbergen! Certainly there was no lack of craters, and there were some capacious enough to throw out a whole army! But I wanted to know which of them was to serve us for an exit from the inner world.

Towards morning the ascending movement became accelerated. If the heat increased, instead of diminishing, as we approached nearer to the surface of the globe, this effect was due to local causes alone, and those volcanic. The manner of our locomotion left no doubt in my mind. An enormous force, a force of hundreds of atmospheres, generated by the extreme pressure of confined vapours, was driving us irresistibly forward. But to what numberless dangers it exposed us!

Soon lurid lights began to penetrate the vertical gallery which widened as we went up. Right and left I could see deep channels, like huge tunnels, out of which escaped dense volumes of smoke; tongues of fire lapped the walls, which crackled and sputtered under the intense heat.

“See, see, my uncle!” I cried.

“Well, those are only sulphureous flames and vapours, which one must expect to see in an eruption. They are quite natural.”

“But suppose they should wrap us round.”

“But they won’t wrap us round.”

“But we shall be stifled.”

“We shall not be stifled at all. The gallery is widening, and if it becomes necessary, we shall abandon the raft, and creep into a crevice.”

“But the water — the rising water?”

“There is no more water, Axel; only a lava paste, which is bearing us up on its surface to the top of the crater.”

The liquid column had indeed disappeared, to give place to dense and still boiling eruptive matter of all kinds. The temperature was becoming unbearable. A thermometer exposed to this atmosphere would have marked 150°. The perspiration streamed from my body. But for the rapidity of our ascent we should have been suffocated.

But the Professor gave up his idea of abandoning the raft, and it was well he did. However roughly joined together, those planks afforded us a firmer support than we could have found anywhere else.

About eight in the morning a new incident occurred. The upward movement ceased. The raft lay motionless.

“What is this?” I asked, shaken by this sudden stoppage as if by a shock.

“It is a halt,” replied my uncle.

“Is the eruption checked?” I asked.

“I hope not.”

I rose, and tried to look around me. Perhaps the raft itself, stopped in its course by a projection, was staying the volcanic torrent. If this were the case we should have to release it as soon as possible.

But it was not so. The blast of ashes, scorix, and rubbish had ceased to rise.

“Has the eruption stopped?” I cried.

“Ah!” said my uncle between his clenched teeth, “you are afraid. But don’t alarm yourself — this lull cannot last long. It has lasted now five minutes, and in a short time we shall resume our journey to the mouth of the crater.”

As he spoke, the Professor continued to consult his chronometer, and he was again right in his prognostications. The raft was soon hurried and driven forward with a rapid but irregular movement, which lasted about ten minutes, and then stopped again.

“Very good,” said my uncle; “in ten minutes more we shall be off again, for our present business lies with an intermittent volcano. It gives us time now and then to take breath.”

This was perfectly true. When the ten minutes were over we started off again with renewed and increased speed. We were obliged to lay fast hold of the planks of the raft, not to be thrown off. Then again the paroxysm was over.

I have since reflected upon this singular phenomenon without being able to explain it. At any rate it was clear that we were not in the main shaft of the volcano, but in a lateral gallery where there were felt recurrent tunes of reaction.

How often this operation was repeated I cannot say. All I know is, that at each fresh impulse we were hurled forward with a greatly increased force, and we seemed as if we were mere projectiles. During the short halts we were stifled with the heat; whilst we were being projected forward the hot air almost stopped my breath. I thought for a moment how delightful it would be to find myself carried suddenly into the arctic regions, with a cold 30° below the freezing point. My overheated brain conjured up visions of white plains of cool snow, where I might roll and allay my feverish heat. Little by little my brain, weakened by so many constantly repeated shocks, seemed to be giving way altogether. But for the strong arm of Hans I should more than once have had my head broken against the granite roof of our burning dungeon.

I have therefore no exact recollection of what took place during the following hours. I have a confused impression left of continuous explosions, loud detonations, a general shaking of the rocks all around us, and of a spinning movement with which our raft was once whirled helplessly round. It rocked upon the lava torrent, amidst a dense fall of ashes. Snorting flames darted their fiery tongues at us. There were wild, fierce puffs of stormy wind from below, resembling the blasts of vast iron furnaces blowing all at one time; and I caught a glimpse of the figure of Hans lighted up by the fire; and all the feeling I had left was just what I imagine must be the feeling of an unhappy criminal doomed to be blown away alive from the mouth of a cannon, just before the trigger is pulled, and the flying limbs and rags of flesh and skin fill the quivering air and spatter the blood-stained ground.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SUNNY LANDS IN THE BLUE MEDITERRANEAN

When I opened my eyes again I felt myself grasped by the belt with the strong hand of our guide. With the other arm he supported my uncle. I was not seriously hurt, but I was shaken and bruised and battered all over. I found myself lying on the sloping side of a mountain only two yards from a gaping gulf, which would have swallowed me up had I leaned at all that way. Hans had saved me from death whilst I lay rolling on the edge of the crater.

“Where are we?” asked my uncle irascibly, as if he felt much injured by being landed upon the earth again.

The hunter shook his head in token of complete ignorance.

“Is it Iceland?” I asked.

“Nej,” replied Hans.

“What! Not Iceland?” cried the Professor.

“Hans must be mistaken,” I said, raising myself up.

This was our final surprise after all the astonishing events of our wonderful journey. I expected to see a white cone covered with the eternal snow of ages rising from the midst of the barren deserts of the icy north, faintly lighted with the pale rays of the arctic sun, far away in the highest latitudes known; but contrary to all our expectations, my uncle, the Icelander, and myself were sitting half-way down a mountain baked under the burning rays of a southern sun, which was blistering us with the heat, and blinding us with the fierce light of his nearly vertical rays.

I could not believe my own eyes; but the heated air and the sensation of burning left me no room for doubt. We had come out of the crater half naked, and the radiant orb to which we had been strangers for two months was lavishing upon us out of his blazing splendours more of his light and heat than we were able to receive with comfort.

When my eyes had become accustomed to the bright light to which they had been so long strangers, I began to use them to set my imagination right. At least I would have it to be Spitzbergen, and I was in no humour to give up this notion.

The Professor was the first to speak, and said:

“Well, this is not much like Iceland.”

“But is it Jan Mayen?” I asked.

“Nor that either,” he answered. “This is no northern mountain; here are no granite peaks capped with snow. Look, Axel, look!”

Above our heads, at a height of five hundred feet or more, we saw the crater of a volcano, through which, at intervals of fifteen minutes or so, there issued with loud explosions lofty columns of fire, mingled with pumice stones, ashes, and flowing lava. I could feel the heaving of the mountain, which seemed to breathe like a huge whale, and puff out fire and wind from its vast blowholes. Beneath, down a pretty steep declivity, ran streams of lava for eight or nine hundred feet, giving the mountain a height of about 1,300 or 1,400 feet. But the base of the mountain was hidden in a perfect bower of rich verdure, amongst which I was able to distinguish the olive, the fig, and vines, covered with their luscious purple bunches.

I was forced to confess that there was nothing arctic here.

When the eye passed beyond these green surroundings it rested on a wide, blue expanse of sea or lake, which appeared to enclose this enchanting island, within a compass of only a few leagues. Eastward lay a pretty little white seaport town or village, with a few houses scattered around it, and in the harbour of which a few vessels of peculiar rig were gently swayed by the softly swelling waves. Beyond it, groups of islets rose from the smooth, blue waters, but in such numbers that they seemed to dot the sea like a shoal. To the west distant coasts lined the dim horizon, on some rose blue mountains of smooth, undulating forms; on a more distant coast arose a prodigious cone crowned on its summit with a snowy plume of white cloud. To the northward lay spread a vast sheet of water, sparkling and dancing under the hot, bright rays, the uniformity broken here and there by the topmast of a gallant ship appearing above the horizon, or a swelling sail moving slowly before the wind.

This unforeseen spectacle was most charming to eyes long used to underground darkness.

“Where are we? Where are we?” I asked faintly.

Hans closed his eyes with lazy indifference. What did it matter to him? My uncle looked round with dumb surprise.

“Well, whatever mountain this may be,” he said at last, “it is very hot here. The explosions are going on still, and I don’t think it would look well to have come out by an eruption, and then to get our heads broken by bits of falling rock. Let us get down. Then we shall know better what we are about. Besides, I am starving, and parching with thirst.”

Decidedly the Professor was not given to contemplation. For my part, I could for another hour or two have forgotten my hunger and my fatigue to enjoy the lovely scene before me; but I had to follow my companions.

The slope of the volcano was in many places of great steepness. We slid down screes of ashes, carefully avoiding the lava streams which glided sluggishly by us like fiery serpents. As we went I chattered and asked all sorts of questions as to our whereabouts, for I was too much excited not to talk a great deal.

“We are in Asia,” I cried, “on the coasts of India, in the Malay Islands, or in Oceania. We have passed through half the globe, and come out nearly at the antipodes.”

“But the compass?” said my uncle.

“Ay, the compass!” I said, greatly puzzled. “According to the compass we have gone northward.”

“Has it lied?”

“Surely not. Could it lie?”

“Unless, indeed, this is the North Pole!”

“Oh, no, it is not the Pole; but — ”

Well, here was something that baffled us completely. I could not tell what to say.

But now we were coming into that delightful greenery, and I was suffering greatly from hunger and thirst. Happily, after two hours' walking, a charming country lay open before us, covered with olive trees, pomegranate trees, and delicious vines, all of which seemed to belong to anybody who pleased to claim them. Besides, in our state of destitution and famine we were not likely to be particular. Oh, the inexpressible pleasure of pressing those cool, sweet fruits to our lips, and eating grapes by mouthfuls off the rich, full bunches! Not far off, in the grass, under the delicious shade of the trees, I discovered a spring of fresh, cool water, in which we luxuriously bathed our faces, hands, and feet.

Whilst we were thus enjoying the sweets of repose a child appeared out of a grove of olive trees.

"Ah!" I cried, "here is an inhabitant of this happy land!"

It was but a poor boy, miserably ill-clad, a sufferer from poverty, and our aspect seemed to alarm him a great deal; in fact, only half clothed, with ragged hair and beards, we were a suspicious-looking party; and if the people of the country knew anything about thieves, we were very likely to frighten them.

Just as the poor little wretch was going to take to his heels, Hans caught hold of him, and brought him to us, kicking and struggling.

My uncle began to encourage him as well as he could, and said to him in good German:

"Was heiszt diesen Berg, mein Knablein? Sage mir geschwind!"

("What is this mountain called, my little friend?")

The child made no answer.

“Very well,” said my uncle. “I infer that we are not in Germany.”

He put the same question in English.

We got no forwarder. I was a good deal puzzled.

“Is the child dumb?” cried the Professor, who, proud of his knowledge of many languages, now tried French: “Comment appellet-on cette montagne, mon enfant?”

Silence still.

“Now let us try Italian,” said my uncle; and he said:

“Dove noi siamo?”

“Yes, where are we?” I impatiently repeated.

But there was no answer still.

“Will you speak when you are told?” exclaimed my uncle, shaking the urchin by the ears. “Come si noma questa isola?”

“STROMBOLI,” replied the little herdboy, slipping out of Hans’ hands, and scudding into the plain across the olive trees.

We were hardly thinking of that. Stromboli! What an effect this unexpected name produced upon my mind! We were in the midst of the Mediterranean Sea, on an island of the Æolian archipelago, in the ancient Strongyle, where Æolus kept the winds and the storms chained up, to be let loose at his will. And those distant blue mountains in the east were the mountains of

Calabria. And that threatening volcano far away in the south was the fierce Etna.

“Stromboli, Stromboli!” I repeated.

My uncle kept time to my exclamations with hands and feet, as well as with words. We seemed to be chanting in chorus!

What a journey we had accomplished! How marvellous! Having entered by one volcano, we had issued out of another more than two thousand miles from Snæfell and from that barren, far-away Iceland! The strange chances of our expedition had carried us into the heart of the fairest region in the world. We had exchanged the bleak regions of perpetual snow and of impenetrable barriers of ice for those of brightness and ‘the rich hues of all glorious things.’ We had left over our heads the murky sky and cold fogs of the frigid zone to revel under the azure sky of Italy!

After our delicious repast of fruits and cold, clear water we set off again to reach the port of Stromboli. It would not have been wise to tell how we came there. The superstitious Italians would have set us down for fire-devils vomited out of hell; so we presented ourselves in the humble guise of shipwrecked mariners. It was not so glorious, but it was safer.

On my way I could hear my uncle murmuring: “But the compass! that compass! It pointed due north. How are we to explain that fact?”

“My opinion is,” I replied disdainfully, “that it is best not to explain it. That is the easiest way to shelve the difficulty.”

“Indeed, sir! The occupant of a professorial chair at the Johannæum unable to explain the reason of a cosmical phenomenon! Why, it would be simply disgraceful!”

And as he spoke, my uncle, half undressed, in rags, a perfect scarecrow, with his leathern belt around him, settling his spectacles upon his nose and looking learned and imposing, was himself again, the terrible German professor of mineralogy.

One hour after we had left the grove of olives, we arrived at the little port of San Vicenzo, where Hans claimed his thirteen week’s wages, which was counted out to him with a hearty shaking of hands all round.

At that moment, if he did not share our natural emotion, at least his countenance expanded in a manner very unusual with him, and while with the ends of his fingers he lightly pressed our hands, I believe he smiled.

CHAPTER XLV.

ALL’S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Such is the conclusion of a history which I cannot expect everybody to believe, for some people will believe nothing against the testimony of their own experience. However, I am indifferent to their incredulity, and they may believe as much or as little as they please.

The Stromboliotes received us kindly as shipwrecked mariners. They gave us food and clothing. After waiting forty-eight hours, on the 31 st of August, a small craft took us to Messina, where a few days’ rest completely removed the effect of our fatigues.

On Friday, September the 4th, we embarked on the steamer Volturno, employed by the French Messageries Imperiales, and in three days more we were at Marseilles, having no care on our minds except that abominable deceitful compass, which we had mislaid somewhere and could not now examine; but its inexplicable behaviour exercised my mind fearfully. On the 9th of September, in the evening, we arrived at Hamburg.

I cannot describe to you the astonishment of Martha or the joy of

Gräuben.

“Now you are a hero, Axel,” said to me my blushing fiancée, my betrothed, “you will not leave me again!”

I looked tenderly upon her, and she smiled through her tears.

How can I describe the extraordinary sensation produced by the return of Professor Liedenbrock? Thanks to Martha’s ineradicable tattling, the news that the Professor had gone to discover a way to the centre of the earth had spread over the whole civilised world. People refused to believe it, and when they saw him they would not believe him any the more. Still, the appearance of Hans, and sundry pieces of intelligence derived from Iceland, tended to shake the confidence of the unbelievers.

Then my uncle became a great man, and I was now the nephew of a great man — which is not a privilege to be despised.

Hamburg gave a grand fete in our honour. A public audience was given to the Professor at the Johannæum, at which he told all about our expedition, with only one omission, the unexplained and inexplicable behaviour of our compass. On the same day, with much state, he deposited in the archives of the city the now famous document of Saknussemm, and expressed his regret that circumstances over which he had no control had prevented him from following to the very centre of the earth the track of the learned Icelander. He was modest notwithstanding his glory, and he was all the more famous for his humility.

So much honour could not but excite envy. There were those who envied him his fame; and as his theories, resting upon known facts, were in opposition to the systems of science upon the question of the central fire, he sustained with his pen and by his voice remarkable discussions with the learned of every country.

For my part I cannot agree with his theory of gradual cooling: in spite of what I have seen and felt, I believe, and always shall believe, in the central heat. But I admit that certain circumstances not yet sufficiently understood may tend to modify in places the action of natural phenomena.

While these questions were being debated with great animation, my uncle met with a real sorrow. Our faithful Hans, in spite of our entreaties, had left Hamburg; the man to whom we owed all our success and our lives too would not suffer us to reward him as we could have wished. He was seized with the mal de pays, a complaint for which we have not even a name in English.

“Farval,” said he one day; and with that simple word he left us and sailed for Rejkiavik, which he reached in safety.

We were strongly attached to our brave eider-down hunter; though far away in the remotest north, he will never be forgotten by those whose lives he protected, and certainly I shall not fail to endeavour to see him once more before I die.

To conclude, I have to add that this ‘Journey into the Interior of the Earth’ created a wonderful sensation in the world. It was translated into all civilised languages. The leading newspapers extracted the most interesting passages, which were commented upon, picked to pieces, discussed, attacked, and defended with equal enthusiasm and determination, both by believers and sceptics. Rare privilege! my uncle enjoyed during his lifetime the glory he had deservedly won; and he may even boast the distinguished honour of an offer from Mr. Barnum, to exhibit him on most advantageous terms in all the principal cities in the United States!

But there was one ‘dead fly’ amidst all this glory and honour; one fact, one incident, of the journey remained a mystery. Now to a man eminent for his learning, an unexplained phenomenon is an unbearable hardship. Well! it was yet reserved for my uncle to be completely happy.

One day, while arranging a collection of minerals in his cabinet, I noticed in a corner this unhappy compass, which we had long lost sight of; I opened it, and began to watch it.

It had been in that corner for six months, little mindful of the trouble it was giving.

Suddenly, to my intense astonishment, I noticed a strange fact, and I uttered a cry of surprise.

“What is the matter?” my uncle asked.

“That compass!”

“Well?”

“See, its poles are reversed!”

“Reversed?”

“Yes, they point the wrong way.”

My uncle looked, he compared, and the house shook with his triumphant leap of exultation.

A light broke in upon his spirit and mine.

“See there,” he cried, as soon as he was able to speak. “After our arrival at Cape Saknussemm the north pole of the needle of this confounded compass began to point south instead of north.”

“Evidently!”

“Here, then, is the explanation of our mistake. But what phenomenon could have caused this reversal of the poles?”

“The reason is evident, uncle.”

“Tell me, then, Axel.”

“During the electric storm on the Liedenbrock sea, that ball of fire, which magnetised all the iron on board, reversed the poles of our magnet!”

“Aha! aha!” shouted the Professor with a loud laugh. “So it was just an electric joke!”

From that day forth the Professor was the most glorious of savants, and I was the happiest of men; for my pretty Virlandaise, resigning her place as ward, took her position in the old house on the Königstrasse in the double capacity of niece to my uncle and wife to a certain happy youth. What is the need of adding that the illustrious Otto Liedenbrock, corresponding member of all the scientific, geographical, and mineralogical societies of all the civilised world, was now her uncle and mine?

FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON

Translated by Lewis Page Mercier

First published in 1865, this is a humorous science fantasy novel, which tells the story of the president of a post-American Civil War gun club in Baltimore, his rival, a Philadelphia maker of armour and a Frenchman. Together they build an enormous sky-facing Columbiad space gun and launch themselves in a spaceship, heading to a Moon landing.

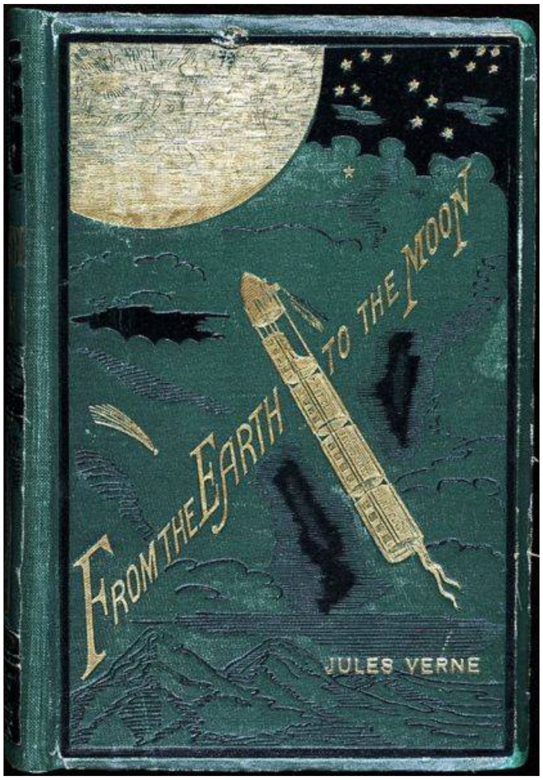
FROM THE EARTH TO THE MOON
JULES VERNE

The first edition in English

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CHAPTER I

THE GUN CLUB

During the War of the Rebellion, a new and influential club was established in the city of Baltimore in the State of Maryland. It is well known with what energy the taste for military matters became developed among that nation of ship-owners, shopkeepers, and mechanics. Simple tradesmen jumped their counters to become extemporized captains, colonels, and generals, without having ever passed the School of Instruction at West Point; nevertheless; they quickly rivaled their compeers of the old continent, and, like them, carried off victories by dint of lavish expenditure in ammunition, money, and men.

But the point in which the Americans singularly distanced the Europeans was in the science of gunnery. Not, indeed, that their weapons retained a higher degree of perfection than theirs, but that they exhibited unheard-of dimensions, and consequently attained hitherto unheard-of ranges. In point of grazing, plunging, oblique, or enfilading, or point-blank firing, the English, French, and Prussians have nothing to learn; but their cannon, howitzers, and mortars are mere pocket-pistols compared with the formidable engines of the American artillery.

This fact need surprise no one. The Yankees, the first mechanicians in the world, are engineers — just as the Italians are musicians and the Germans metaphysicians — by right of birth. Nothing is more natural, therefore, than to perceive them applying their audacious ingenuity to the science of gunnery. Witness the marvels of Parrott, Dahlgren, and Rodman. The Armstrong, Palliser, and Beaulieu guns were compelled to bow before their transatlantic rivals.

Now when an American has an idea, he directly seeks a second American to share it. If there be three, they elect a president and two secretaries. Given four, they name a keeper of records, and the office is ready for work; five, they convene a general meeting, and the club is fully constituted. So things were managed in Baltimore. The inventor of a new cannon associated himself with the caster and the borer. Thus was formed the nucleus of the “Gun Club.” In a single month after its formation it numbered 1,833 effective members and 30,565 corresponding members.

One condition was imposed as a *sine qua non* upon every candidate for admission into the association, and that was the condition of having designed, or (more or less) perfected a cannon; or, in default of a cannon, at least a firearm of some description. It may, however, be mentioned that mere inventors of revolvers, fire-shooting carbines, and similar small arms, met with little consideration. Artillerists always commanded the chief place of favor.

The estimation in which these gentlemen were held, according to one of the most scientific exponents of the Gun Club, was “proportional to the masses of their guns, and in the direct ratio of the square of the distances attained by their projectiles.”

The Gun Club once founded, it is easy to conceive the result of the inventive genius of the Americans. Their military weapons attained colossal proportions, and their projectiles, exceeding the prescribed limits, unfortunately occasionally cut in two some unoffending pedestrians. These inventions, in fact, left far in the rear the timid instruments of European artillery.

It is but fair to add that these Yankees, brave as they have ever proved themselves to be, did not confine themselves to theories and formulae, but that they paid heavily, *in propria persona*, for their inventions. Among them were to be counted officers of all ranks, from lieutenants to generals; military men of every age, from those who were just making their *debut* in the profession of arms up to those who had grown old in the gun-carriage. Many had found their rest on the field of battle whose names figured in the "Book of Honor" of the Gun Club; and of those who made good their return the greater proportion bore the marks of their indisputable valor. Crutches, wooden legs, artificial arms, steel hooks, caoutchouc jaws, silver craniums, platinum noses, were all to be found in the collection; and it was calculated by the great statistician Pitcairn that throughout the Gun Club there was not quite one arm between four persons and two legs between six.

Nevertheless, these valiant artillerists took no particular account of these little facts, and felt justly proud when the despatches of a battle returned the number of victims at ten-fold the quantity of projectiles expended.

One day, however — sad and melancholy day! — peace was signed between the survivors of the war; the thunder of the guns gradually ceased, the mortars were silent, the howitzers were muzzled for an indefinite period, the cannon, with muzzles depressed, were returned into the arsenal, the shot were repiled, all bloody reminiscences were effaced; the cotton-plants grew luxuriantly in the well-manured fields, all mourning garments were laid aside, together with grief; and the Gun Club was relegated to profound inactivity.

Some few of the more advanced and inveterate theorists set themselves again to work upon calculations regarding the laws of projectiles. They reverted invariably to gigantic shells and howitzers of unparalleled caliber. Still in default of practical experience what was the value of mere theories? Consequently, the clubrooms became deserted, the servants dozed in the antechambers, the newspapers grew mouldy on the tables, sounds of snoring came from dark corners, and the members of the Gun Club, erstwhile so noisy in their seances, were reduced to silence by this disastrous peace and gave themselves up wholly to dreams of a Platonic kind of artillery.

“This is horrible!” said Tom Hunter one evening, while rapidly carbonizing his wooden legs in the fireplace of the smoking-room; “nothing to do! nothing to look forward to! what a loathsome existence! When again shall the guns arouse us in the morning with their delightful reports?”

“Those days are gone by,” said jolly Bilsby, trying to extend his missing arms. “It was delightful once upon a time! One invented a gun, and hardly was it cast, when one hastened to try it in the face of the enemy! Then one returned to camp with a word of encouragement from Sherman or a friendly shake of the hand from McClellan. But now the generals are gone back to their counters; and in place of projectiles, they despatch bales of cotton. By Jove, the future of gunnery in America is lost!”

“Ay! and no war in prospect!” continued the famous James T. Maston, scratching with his steel hook his gutta-percha cranium. “Not a cloud on the horizon! and that too at such a critical period in the progress of the science of artillery! Yes, gentlemen! I who address you have myself this very morning perfected a model (plan, section, elevation, etc.) of a mortar destined to change all the conditions of warfare!”

“No! is it possible?” replied Tom Hunter, his thoughts reverting involuntarily to a former invention of the Hon. J. T. Maston, by which, at its first trial, he had succeeded in killing three hundred and thirty-seven people.

“Fact!” replied he. “Still, what is the use of so many studies worked out, so many difficulties vanquished? It’s mere waste of time! The New World seems to have made up its mind to live in peace; and our bellicose *Tribune* predicts some approaching catastrophes arising out of this scandalous increase of population.”

“Nevertheless,” replied Colonel Blomsberry, “they are always struggling in Europe to maintain the principle of nationalities.”

“Well?”

“Well, there might be some field for enterprise down there; and if they would accept our services — — ”

“What are you dreaming of?” screamed Bilsby; “work at gunnery for the benefit of foreigners?”

“That would be better than doing nothing here,” returned the colonel.

“Quite so,” said J. T. Matson; “but still we need not dream of that expedient.”

“And why not?” demanded the colonel.

“Because their ideas of progress in the Old World are contrary to our American habits of thought. Those fellows believe that one can’t become a general without having served first as an ensign; which is as much as to say that one can’t point a gun without having first cast it oneself!”

“Ridiculous!” replied Tom Hunter, whittling with his bowie-knife the arms of his easy chair; “but if that be the case there, all that is left for us is to plant tobacco and distill whale-oil.”

“What!” roared J. T. Maston, “shall we not employ these remaining years of our life in perfecting firearms? Shall there never be a fresh opportunity of trying the ranges of projectiles? Shall the air never again be lighted with the glare of our guns? No international difficulty ever arise to enable us to declare war against some transatlantic power? Shall not the French sink one of our steamers, or the English, in defiance of the rights of nations, hang a few of our countrymen?”

“No such luck,” replied Colonel Blomsberry; “nothing of the kind is likely to happen; and even if it did, we should not profit by it. American susceptibility is fast declining, and we are all going to the dogs.”

“It is too true,” replied J. T. Maston, with fresh violence; “there are a thousand grounds for fighting, and yet we don’t fight. We save up our arms and legs for the benefit of nations who don’t know what to do with them! But stop — without going out of one’s way to find a cause for war — did not North America once belong to the English?”

“Undoubtedly,” replied Tom Hunter, stamping his crutch with fury.

“Well, then,” replied J. T. Maston, “why should not England in her turn belong to the Americans?”

“It would be but just and fair,” returned Colonel Blomsberry.

“Go and propose it to the President of the United States,” cried

J. T. Maston, “and see how he will receive you.”

“Bah!” growled Bilsby between the four teeth which the war had left him; “that will never do!”

“By Jove!” cried J. T. Maston, “he mustn’t count on my vote at the next election!”

“Nor on ours,” replied unanimously all the bellicose invalids.

“Meanwhile,” replied J. T. Maston, “allow me to say that, if I cannot get an opportunity to try my new mortars on a real field of battle, I shall say good-by to the members of the Gun Club, and go and bury myself in the prairies of Arkansas!”

“In that case we will accompany you,” cried the others.

Matters were in this unfortunate condition, and the club was threatened with approaching dissolution, when an unexpected circumstance occurred to prevent so deplorable a catastrophe.

On the morrow after this conversation every member of the association received a sealed circular couched in the following terms:

BALTIMORE, October 3. The president of the Gun Club has the honor to inform his colleagues that, at the meeting of the 5th instant, he will bring before them a communication of an extremely interesting nature. He requests, therefore, that they will make it convenient to attend in accordance with the present invitation. Very cordially, IMPEY BARBICANE, P.G.C.

CHAPTER II

PRESIDENT BARBICANE'S COMMUNICATION

On the 5th of October, at eight p.m. a dense crowd pressed toward the saloons of the Gun Club at No. 21 Union Square. All the members of the association resident in Baltimore attended the invitation of their president. As regards the corresponding members, notices were delivered by hundreds throughout the streets of the city, and, large as was the great hall, it was quite inadequate to accommodate the crowd of *savants*. They overflowed into the adjoining rooms, down the narrow passages, into the outer courtyards. There they ran against the vulgar herd who pressed up to the doors, each struggling to reach the front ranks, all eager to learn the nature of the important communication of President Barbicane; all pushing, squeezing, crushing with that perfect freedom of action which is so peculiar to the masses when educated in ideas of "self-government."

On that evening a stranger who might have chanced to be in Baltimore could not have gained admission for love or money into the great hall. That was reserved exclusively for resident or corresponding members; no one else could possibly have obtained a place; and the city magnates, municipal councilors, and "select men" were compelled to mingle with the mere townspeople in order to catch stray bits of news from the interior.

Nevertheless the vast hall presented a curious spectacle. Its immense area was singularly adapted to the purpose. Lofty pillars formed of cannon, superposed upon huge mortars as a base, supported the fine ironwork of the arches, a perfect piece of cast-iron lacework. Trophies of blunderbuses, matchlocks, arquebuses, carbines, all kinds of firearms, ancient and modern, were picturesquely interlaced against the walls. The gas lit up in full glare myriads of revolvers grouped in the form of lustres, while groups of pistols, and candelabra formed of muskets bound together, completed this magnificent display of brilliance. Models of cannon, bronze castings, sights covered with dents, plates battered by the shots of the Gun Club, assortments of rammers and sponges, chaplets of shells, wreaths of projectiles, garlands of howitzers — in short, all the apparatus of the artillerist, enchanted the eye by this wonderful arrangement and induced a kind of belief that their real purpose was ornamental rather than deadly.

At the further end of the saloon the president, assisted by four secretaries, occupied a large platform. His chair, supported by a carved gun-carriage, was modeled upon the ponderous proportions of a 32-inch mortar. It was pointed at an angle of ninety degrees, and suspended upon truncheons, so that the president could balance himself upon it as upon a rocking-chair, a very agreeable fact in the very hot weather. Upon the table (a huge iron plate supported upon six carronades) stood an inkstand of exquisite elegance, made of a beautifully chased Spanish piece, and a sonnette, which, when required, could give forth a report equal to that of a revolver. During violent debates this novel kind of bell scarcely sufficed to drown the clamor of these excitable artillerists.

In front of the table benches arranged in zigzag form, like the circumvallations of a retrenchment, formed a succession of bastions and curtains set apart for the use of the members of the club; and on this especial evening one might say, “All the world was on the ramparts.” The president was sufficiently well known, however, for all to be assured that he would not put his colleagues to discomfort without some very strong motive.

Impey Barbicane was a man of forty years of age, calm, cold, austere; of a singularly serious and self-contained demeanor, punctual as a chronometer, of imperturbable temper and immovable character; by no means chivalrous, yet adventurous withal, and always bringing practical ideas to bear upon the very rashest enterprises; an essentially New Englander, a Northern colonist, a descendant of the old anti-Stuart Roundheads, and the implacable enemy of the gentlemen of the South, those ancient cavaliers of the mother country. In a word, he was a Yankee to the backbone.

Barbicane had made a large fortune as a timber merchant. Being nominated director of artillery during the war, he proved himself fertile in invention. Bold in his conceptions, he contributed powerfully to the progress of that arm and gave an immense impetus to experimental researches.

He was personage of the middle height, having, by a rare exception in the Gun Club, all his limbs complete. His strongly marked features seemed drawn by square and rule; and if it be true that, in order to judge a man's character one must look at his profile, Barbicane, so examined, exhibited the most certain indications of energy, audacity, and *sang-froid*.

At this moment he was sitting in his armchair, silent, absorbed, lost in reflection, sheltered under his high-crowned hat — a kind of black cylinder which always seems firmly screwed upon the head of an American.

Just when the deep-toned clock in the great hall struck eight, Barbicane, as if he had been set in motion by a spring, raised himself up. A profound silence ensued, and the speaker, in a somewhat emphatic tone of voice, commenced as follows:

“My brave, colleagues, too long already a paralyzing peace has plunged the members of the Gun Club in deplorable inactivity. After a period of years full of incidents we have been compelled to abandon our labors, and to stop short on the road of progress. I do not hesitate to state, baldly, that any war which would recall us to arms would be welcome!” (Tremendous applause!) “But war, gentlemen, is impossible under existing circumstances; and, however we may desire it, many years may elapse before our cannon shall again thunder in the field of battle. We must make up our minds, then, to seek in another train of ideas some field for the activity which we all pine for.”

The meeting felt that the president was now approaching the critical point, and redoubled their attention accordingly.

“For some months past, my brave colleagues,” continued Barbicane, “I have been asking myself whether, while confining ourselves to our own particular objects, we could not enter upon some grand experiment worthy of the nineteenth century; and whether the progress of artillery science would not enable us to carry it out to a successful issue. I have been considering, working, calculating; and the result of my studies is the conviction that we are safe to succeed in an enterprise which to any other country would appear wholly impracticable. This project, the result of long elaboration, is the object of my present communication. It is worthy of yourselves, worthy of the antecedents of the Gun Club; and it cannot fail to make some noise in the world.”

A thrill of excitement ran through the meeting.

Barbicane, having by a rapid movement firmly fixed his hat upon his head, calmly continued his harangue:

“There is no one among you, my brave colleagues, who has not seen the Moon, or, at least, heard speak of it. Don’t be surprised if I am about to discourse to you regarding the Queen of the Night. It is perhaps reserved for us to become the Columbuses of this unknown world. Only enter into my plans, and second me with all your power, and I will lead you to its conquest, and its name shall be added to those of the thirty-six states which compose this Great Union.”

“Three cheers for the Moon!” roared the Gun Club, with one voice.

“The moon, gentlemen, has been carefully studied,” continued Barbicane; “her mass, density, and weight; her constitution, motions, distance, as well as her place in the solar system, have all been exactly determined. Selenographic charts have been constructed with a perfection which equals, if it does not even surpass, that of our terrestrial maps. Photography has given us proofs of the incomparable beauty of our satellite; all is known regarding the moon which mathematical science, astronomy, geology, and optics can learn about her. But up to the present moment no direct communication has been established with her.”

A violent movement of interest and surprise here greeted this remark of the speaker.

“Permit me,” he continued, “to recount to you briefly how certain ardent spirits, starting on imaginary journeys, have penetrated the secrets of our satellite. In the seventeenth century a certain David Fabricius boasted of having seen with his own eyes the inhabitants of the moon. In 1649 a Frenchman, one Jean Baudoin, published a `Journey performed from the Earth to the Moon by Domingo Gonzalez,’ a Spanish adventurer. At the same period Cyrano de Bergerac published that celebrated `Journeys in the Moon’ which met with such success in France. Somewhat later another

Frenchman, named Fontenelle, wrote `The Plurality of Worlds,' a *chef-d'oeuvre* of its time. About 1835 a small treatise, translated from the New York *American*, related how Sir John Herschel, having been despatched to the Cape of Good Hope for the purpose of making there some astronomical calculations, had, by means of a telescope brought to perfection by means of internal lighting, reduced the apparent distance of the moon to eighty yards! He then distinctly perceived caverns frequented by hippopotami, green mountains bordered by golden lace-work, sheep with horns of ivory, a white species of deer and inhabitants with membranous wings, like bats. This *brochure*, the work of an American named Locke, had a great sale. But, to bring this rapid sketch to a close, I will only add that a certain Hans Pfaal, of Rotterdam, launching himself in a balloon filled with a gas extracted from nitrogen, thirty-seven times lighter than hydrogen, reached the moon after a passage of nineteen hours. This journey, like all previous ones, was purely imaginary; still, it was the work of a popular American author — I mean Edgar Poe!"

"Cheers for Edgar Poe!" roared the assemblage, electrified by their president's words.

"I have now enumerated," said Barbicane, "the experiments which I call purely paper ones, and wholly insufficient to establish serious relations with the Queen of the Night. Nevertheless, I am bound to add that some practical geniuses have attempted to establish actual communication with her. Thus, a few days ago, a German geometrician proposed to send a scientific expedition to the steppes of Siberia. There, on those vast plains, they were to describe enormous geometric figures, drawn in characters of reflecting luminosity, among which was the proposition regarding the `square of the hypothenuse,' commonly called the `Ass's Bridge' by the French. `Every intelligent being,' said the geometrician, `must understand the scientific meaning of that figure. The Selenites, do they exist, will respond by a similar figure; and, a communication being thus once established, it will be easy to form an alphabet which shall enable us to converse with the inhabitants of the moon.’ So spoke the German geometrician; but his project was never put into practice, and up to the present day there is no bond in existence between the Earth and her satellite. It is reserved for the practical genius of Americans to establish a communication with the sidereal world. The means of arriving thither are simple, easy, certain, infallible — and that is the purpose of my present proposal.”

A storm of acclamations greeted these words. There was not a single person in the whole audience who was not overcome, carried away, lifted out of himself by the speaker’s words!

Long-continued applause resounded from all sides.

As soon as the excitement had partially subsided, Barbicane resumed his speech in a somewhat graver voice.

“You know,” said he, “what progress artillery science has made during the last few years, and what a degree of perfection firearms of every kind have reached. Moreover, you are well aware that, in general terms, the resisting power of cannon and the expansive force of gunpowder are practically unlimited. Well! starting from this principle, I ask myself whether, supposing sufficient apparatus could be obtained constructed upon the conditions of ascertained resistance, it might not be possible to project a shot up to the moon?”

At these words a murmur of amazement escaped from a thousand panting chests; then succeeded a moment of perfect silence, resembling that profound stillness which precedes the bursting of a thunderstorm. In point of fact, a thunderstorm did peal forth, but it was the thunder of applause, or cries, and of uproar which made the very hall tremble. The president attempted to speak, but could not. It was fully ten minutes before he could make himself heard.

“Suffer me to finish,” he calmly continued. “I have looked at the question in all its bearings, I have resolutely attacked it, and by incontrovertible calculations I find that a projectile endowed with an initial velocity of 12,000 yards per second, and aimed at the moon, must necessarily reach it. I have the honor, my brave colleagues, to propose a trial of this little experiment.”

CHAPTER III

EFFECT OF THE PRESIDENT’S COMMUNICATION

It is impossible to describe the effect produced by the last words of the honorable president — the cries, the shouts, the succession of roars, hurrahs, and all the varied vociferations which the American language is capable of supplying. It was a scene of indescribable confusion and uproar. They shouted, they clapped, they stamped on the floor of the hall. All the weapons in the museum discharged at once could not have more violently set in motion the waves of sound. One need not be surprised at this. There are some cannoneers nearly as noisy as their own guns.

Barbicane remained calm in the midst of this enthusiastic clamor; perhaps he was desirous of addressing a few more words to his colleagues, for by his gestures he demanded silence, and his powerful alarum was worn out by its violent reports. No attention, however, was paid to his request. He was presently torn from his seat and passed from the hands of his faithful colleagues into the arms of a no less excited crowd.

Nothing can astound an American. It has often been asserted that the word “impossible” in not a French one. People have evidently been deceived by the dictionary. In America, all is easy, all is simple; and as for mechanical difficulties, they are overcome before they arise. Between Barbicane’s proposition and its realization no true Yankee would have allowed even the semblance of a difficulty to be possible. A thing with them is no sooner said than done.

The triumphal progress of the president continued throughout the evening. It was a regular torchlight procession. Irish, Germans, French, Scotch, all the heterogeneous units which make up the population of Maryland shouted in their respective vernaculars; and the “vivas,” “hurrahs,” and “bravos” were intermingled in inexpressible enthusiasm.

Just at this crisis, as though she comprehended all this agitation regarding herself, the moon shone forth with serene splendor, eclipsing by her intense illumination all the surrounding lights. The Yankees all turned their gaze toward her resplendent orb, kissed their hands, called her by all kinds of endearing names. Between eight o’clock and midnight one optician in Jones’-Fall Street made his fortune by the sale of opera-glasses.

Midnight arrived, and the enthusiasm showed no signs of diminution. It spread equally among all classes of citizens — men of science, shopkeepers, merchants, porters, chair-men, as well as “greenhorns,” were stirred in their innermost fibres. A national enterprise was at stake. The whole city, high and low, the quays bordering the Patapsco, the ships lying in the basins, disgorged a crowd drunk with joy, gin, and whisky. Every one chattered, argued, discussed, disputed, applauded, from the gentleman lounging upon the barroom settee with his tumbler of sherry-cobbler before him down to the waterman who got drunk upon his “knock-me-down” in the dingy taverns of Fell Point.

About two A.M. however, the excitement began to subside. President Barbicane reached his house, bruised, crushed, and squeezed almost to a mummy. Hercules could not have resisted a similar outbreak of enthusiasm. The crowd gradually deserted the squares and streets. The four railways from Philadelphia and Washington, Harrisburg and Wheeling, which converge at Baltimore, whirled away the heterogeneous population to the four corners of the United States, and the city subsided into comparative tranquility.

On the following day, thanks to the telegraphic wires, five hundred newspapers and journals, daily, weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly, all took up the question. They examined it under all its different aspects, physical, meteorological, economical, or moral, up to its bearings on politics or civilization. They debated whether the moon was a finished world, or whether it was destined to undergo any further transformation. Did it resemble the earth at the period when the latter was destitute as yet of an atmosphere? What kind of spectacle would its hidden hemisphere present to our terrestrial spheroid? Granting that the question at present was simply that of sending a projectile up to the moon, every one must see that that involved the commencement of a series of experiments. All must hope that some day America would penetrate the deepest secrets of that mysterious orb; and some even seemed to fear lest its conquest should not sensibly derange the equilibrium of Europe.

The project once under discussion, not a single paragraph suggested a doubt of its realization. All the papers, pamphlets, reports — all the journals published by the scientific, literary, and religious societies enlarged upon its advantages; and the Society of Natural History of Boston, the Society of Science and Art of Albany, the Geographical and Statistical Society of New York, the Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, and the Smithsonian of Washington sent innumerable letters of congratulation to the Gun Club, together with offers of immediate assistance and money.

From that day forward Impey Barbicane became one of the greatest citizens of the United States, a kind of Washington of science. A single trait of feeling, taken from many others, will serve to show the point which this homage of a whole people to a single individual attained.

Some few days after this memorable meeting of the Gun Club, the manager of an English company announced, at the Baltimore theatre, the production of “Much ado about Nothing.” But the populace, seeing in that title an allusion damaging to Barbicane’s project, broke into the auditorium, smashed the benches, and compelled the unlucky director to alter his playbill. Being a sensible man, he bowed to the public will and replaced the offending comedy by “As you like it”; and for many weeks he realized fabulous profits.

CHAPTER IV

REPLY FROM THE OBSERVATORY OF CAMBRIDGE

Barbicane, however, lost not one moment amid all the enthusiasm of which he had become the object. His first care was to reassemble his colleagues in the board-room of the Gun Club. There, after some discussion, it was agreed to consult the astronomers regarding the astronomical part of the enterprise. Their reply once ascertained, they could then discuss the mechanical means, and nothing should be wanting to ensure the success of this great experiment.

A note couched in precise terms, containing special interrogatories, was then drawn up and addressed to the Observatory of Cambridge in Massachusetts. This city, where the first university of the United States was founded, is justly celebrated for its astronomical staff. There are to be found assembled all the most eminent men of science. Here is to be seen at work that powerful telescope which enabled Bond to resolve the nebula of Andromeda, and Clarke to discover the satellite of Sirius. This celebrated institution fully justified on all points the confidence reposed in it by the Gun Club. So, after two days, the reply so impatiently awaited was placed in the hands of President Barbicane.

It was couched in the following terms:

The Director of the Cambridge Observatory to the President of the Gun Club at Baltimore.

CAMBRIDGE, October 7. On the receipt of your favor of the 6th instant, addressed to the Observatory of Cambridge in the name of the members of the Baltimore Gun Club, our staff was immediately called together, and it was judged expedient to reply as follows:

The questions which have been proposed to it are these —

“1. Is it possible to transmit a projectile up to the moon?

“2. What is the exact distance which separates the earth from its satellite?

“3. What will be the period of transit of the projectile when endowed with sufficient initial velocity? and, consequently, at what moment ought it to be discharged in order that it may touch the moon at a particular point?

“4. At what precise moment will the moon present herself in the most favorable position to be reached by the projectile?

“5. What point in the heavens ought the cannon to be aimed at which is intended to discharge the projectile?

“6. What place will the moon occupy in the heavens at the moment of the projectile’s departure?”

Regarding the *first* question, “Is it possible to transmit a projectile up to the moon?”

Answer. — Yes; provided it possess an initial velocity of 1,200 yards per second; calculations prove that to be sufficient. In proportion as we recede from the earth the action of gravitation diminishes in the inverse ratio of the square of the distance; that is to say, *at three times a given distance the action is nine times less.* Consequently, the weight of a shot will decrease, and will become reduced to *zero* at the instant that the attraction of the moon exactly counterpoises that of the earth; that is to say at 47/52 of its passage. At that instant the projectile will have no weight whatever; and, if it passes that point, it will fall into the moon by the sole effect of the lunar attraction. The *theoretical possibility* of the experiment is therefore absolutely demonstrated; its *success* must depend upon the power of the engine employed.

As to the *second* question, “What is the exact distance which separates the earth from its satellite?”

Answer. — The moon does not describe a *circle* round the earth, but rather an *ellipse*, of which our earth occupies one of the *foci*; the consequence, therefore, is, that at certain times it approaches nearer to, and at others it recedes farther from, the earth; in astronomical language, it is at one time in *apogee*, at another in *perigee*. Now the difference between its greatest and its least distance is too considerable to be left out of consideration. In point of fact, in its apogee the moon is 247,552 miles, and in its perigee, 218,657 miles only distant; a fact which makes a difference of 28,895 miles, or more than one-ninth of the entire distance. The perigee distance, therefore, is that which ought to serve as the basis of all calculations.

To the *third* question.

Answer. — If the shot should preserve continuously its initial velocity of 12,000 yards per second, it would require little more than nine hours to reach its destination; but, inasmuch as that initial velocity will be continually decreasing, it will occupy 300,000 seconds, that is 83hrs. 20m. in reaching the point where the attraction of the earth and moon will be *in equilibrio*. From this point it will fall into the moon in 50,000 seconds, or 13hrs. 53m. 20sec. It will be desirable, therefore, to discharge it 97hrs. 13m. 20sec. before the arrival of the moon at the point aimed at.

Regarding question *four*, “At what precise moment will the moon present herself in the most favorable position, etc.?”

Answer. — After what has been said above, it will be necessary, first of all, to choose the period when the moon will be in perigee, and *also* the moment when she will be crossing the zenith, which latter event will further diminish the entire distance by a length equal to the radius of the earth, *i. e.* 3,919 miles; the result of which will be that the final passage remaining to be accomplished will be 214,976 miles. But although the moon passes her perigee every month, she does not reach the zenith always *at exactly the same moment*. She does not appear under these two conditions simultaneously, except at long intervals of time. It will be necessary, therefore, to wait for the moment when her passage in perigee shall coincide with that in the zenith. Now, by a fortunate circumstance, on the 4th of December in the ensuing year the moon *will* present these two conditions. At midnight she will be in perigee, that is, at her shortest distance from the earth, and at the same moment she will be crossing the zenith.

On the *fifth* question, “At what point in the heavens ought the cannon to be aimed?”

Answer. — The preceding remarks being admitted, the cannon ought to be pointed to the zenith of the place. Its fire, therefore, will be perpendicular to the plane of the horizon; and the projectile will soonest pass beyond the range of the terrestrial attraction. But, in order that the moon should reach the zenith of a given place, it is necessary that the place should not exceed in latitude the declination of the luminary; in other words, it must be comprised within the degrees 0@ and 28@ of lat. N. or S. In every other spot the fire must necessarily be oblique, which would seriously militate against the success of the experiment.

As to the *sixth* question, “What place will the moon occupy in the heavens at the moment of the projectile’s departure?”

Answer. — At the moment when the projectile shall be discharged into space, the moon, which travels daily forward 13@ 10’ 35’’, will be distant from the zenith point by four times that quantity, *i. e.* by 52@ 41’ 20’’, a space which corresponds to the path which she will describe during the entire journey of the projectile. But, inasmuch as it is equally necessary to take into account the deviation which the rotary motion of the earth will impart to the shot, and as the shot cannot reach the moon until after a deviation equal to 16 radii of the earth, which, calculated upon the moon’s orbit, are equal to about eleven degrees, it becomes necessary to add these eleven degrees to those which express the retardation of the moon just mentioned: that is to say, in round numbers, about sixty-four degrees. Consequently, at the moment of firing the visual radius applied to the moon will describe, with the vertical line of the place, an angle of sixty-four degrees.

These are our answers to the questions proposed to the

Observatory of Cambridge by the members of the Gun Club:

To sum up —

1st. The cannon ought to be planted in a country situated between 0@ and 28@ of N. or S. lat.

2nd. It ought to be pointed directly toward the zenith of the place.

3rd. The projectile ought to be propelled with an initial velocity of 12,000 yards per second.

4th. It ought to be discharged at 10hrs. 46m. 40sec. of the 1st of December of the ensuing year.

5th. It will meet the moon four days after its discharge, precisely at midnight on the 4th of December, at the moment of its transit across the zenith.

The members of the Gun Club ought, therefore, without delay, to commence the works necessary for such an experiment, and to be prepared to set to work at the moment determined upon; for, if they should suffer this 4th of December to go by, they will not find the moon again under the same conditions of perigee and of zenith until eighteen years and eleven days afterward.

The staff of the Cambridge Observatory place themselves entirely at their disposal in respect of all questions of theoretical astronomy; and herewith add their congratulations to those of all the rest of America. For the Astronomical Staff, J. M. BELFAST, *Director of the Observatory of Cambridge.*

CHAPTER V

THE ROMANCE OF THE MOON

An observer endued with an infinite range of vision, and placed in that unknown center around which the entire world revolves, might have beheld myriads of atoms filling all space during the chaotic epoch of the universe. Little by little, as ages went on, a change took place; a general law of attraction manifested itself, to which the hitherto errant atoms became obedient: these atoms combined together chemically according to their affinities, formed themselves into molecules, and composed those nebulous masses with which the depths of the heavens are strewed. These masses became immediately endued with a rotary motion around their own central point. This center, formed of indefinite molecules, began to revolve around its own axis during its gradual condensation; then, following the immutable laws of mechanics, in proportion as its bulk diminished by condensation, its rotary motion became accelerated, and these two effects continuing, the result was the formation of one principal star, the center of the nebulous mass.

By attentively watching, the observer would then have perceived the other molecules of the mass, following the example of this central star, become likewise condensed by gradually accelerated rotation, and gravitating round it in the shape of innumerable stars. Thus was formed the *Nebulae*, of which astronomers have reckoned up nearly 5,000.

Among these 5,000 nebulae there is one which has received the name of the Milky Way, and which contains eighteen millions of stars, each of which has become the center of a solar world.

If the observer had then specially directed his attention to one of the more humble and less brilliant of these stellar bodies, a star of the fourth class, that which is arrogantly called the Sun, all the phenomena to which the formation of the Universe is to be ascribed would have been successively fulfilled before his eyes. In fact, he would have perceived this sun, as yet in the gaseous state, and composed of moving molecules, revolving round its axis in order to accomplish its work of concentration. This motion, faithful to the laws of mechanics, would have been accelerated with the diminution of its volume; and a moment would have arrived when the centrifugal force would have overpowered the centripetal, which causes the molecules all to tend toward the center.

Another phenomenon would now have passed before the observer's eye, and the molecules situated on the plane of the equator, escaping like a stone from a sling of which the cord had suddenly snapped, would have formed around the sun sundry concentric rings resembling that of Saturn. In their turn, again, these rings of cosmical matter, excited by a rotary motion about the central mass, would have been broken up and decomposed into secondary nebulosities, that is to say, into planets. Similarly he would have observed these planets throw off one or more rings each, which became the origin of the secondary bodies which we call satellites.

Thus, then, advancing from atom to molecule, from molecule to nebulous mass, from that to principal star, from star to sun, from sun to planet, and hence to satellite, we have the whole series of transformations undergone by the heavenly bodies during the first days of the world.

Now, of those attendant bodies which the sun maintains in their elliptical orbits by the great law of gravitation, some few in turn possess satellites. Uranus has eight, Saturn eight, Jupiter four, Neptune possibly three, and the

Earth one. This last, one of the least important of the entire solar system, we call the Moon; and it is she whom the daring genius of the Americans professed their intention of conquering.

The moon, by her comparative proximity, and the constantly varying appearances produced by her several phases, has always occupied a considerable share of the attention of the inhabitants of the earth.

From the time of Thales of Miletus, in the fifth century B.C. down to that of Copernicus in the fifteenth and Tycho Brahe in the sixteenth century A.D. observations have been from time to time carried on with more or less correctness, until in the present day the altitudes of the lunar mountains have been determined with exactitude. Galileo explained the phenomena of the lunar light produced during certain of her phases by the existence of mountains, to which he assigned a mean altitude of 27,000 feet. After him Hevelius, an astronomer of Dantzic, reduced the highest elevations to 15,000 feet; but the calculations of Riccioli brought them up again to 21,000 feet.

At the close of the eighteenth century Herschel, armed with a powerful telescope, considerably reduced the preceding measurements. He assigned a height of 11,400 feet to the maximum elevations, and reduced the mean of the different altitudes to little more than 2,400 feet. But Herschel's calculations were in their turn corrected by the observations of Halley, Nasmyth, Bianchini, Gruithuysen, and others; but it was reserved for the labors of Boeer and Maedler finally to solve the question. They succeeded in measuring 1,905 different elevations, of which six exceed 15,000 feet, and twenty-two exceed 14,400 feet. The highest summit of all towers to a height of 22,606 feet above the surface of the lunar disc. At the same period the examination of the moon was completed. She appeared completely riddled with craters, and her essentially volcanic character was apparent at each observation. By the absence of refraction in the rays of the planets occulted by her we conclude that she is absolutely devoid of an atmosphere. The absence of air entails the absence of water. It became, therefore, manifest that the Selenites, to support life under such conditions, must possess a special organization of their own, must differ remarkably from the inhabitants of the earth.

At length, thanks to modern art, instruments of still higher perfection searched the moon without intermission, not leaving a single point of her surface unexplored; and notwithstanding that her diameter measures 2,150 miles, her surface equals the one-fifteenth part of that of our globe, and her bulk the one-forty-ninth part of that of the terrestrial spheroid — not one of her secrets was able to escape the eyes of the astronomers; and these skillful men of science carried to an even greater degree their prodigious observations.

Thus they remarked that, during full moon, the disc appeared scored in certain parts with white lines; and, during the phases, with black. On prosecuting the study of these with still greater precision, they succeeded in obtaining an exact account of the nature of these lines. They were long and narrow furrows sunk between parallel ridges, bordering generally upon the edges of the craters. Their length varied between ten and 100 miles, and their width was about 1,600 yards. Astronomers called them chasms, but they could not get any further. Whether these chasms were the dried-up beds of ancient rivers or not they were unable thoroughly to ascertain.

The Americans, among others, hoped one day or other to determine this geological question. They also undertook to examine the true nature of that system of parallel ramparts discovered on the moon’s surface by

Gruithuysen, a learned professor of Munich, who considered them to be “a system of fortifications thrown up by the Selenitic engineers.” These two points, yet obscure, as well as others, no doubt, could not be definitely settled except by direct communication with the moon.

Regarding the degree of intensity of its light, there was nothing more to learn on this point. It was known that it is 300,000 times weaker than that of the sun, and that its heat has no appreciable effect upon the thermometer. As to the phenomenon known as the “ashy light,” it is explained naturally by the effect of the transmission of the solar rays from the earth to the moon, which give the appearance of completeness to the lunar disc, while it presents itself under the crescent form during its first and last phases.

Such was the state of knowledge acquired regarding the earth’s satellite, which the Gun Club undertook to perfect in all its aspects, cosmographic, geological, political, and moral.

CHAPTER VI

PERMISSIVE LIMITS OF IGNORANCE AND BELIEF IN THE UNITED STATES

The immediate result of Barbicane’s proposition was to place upon the orders of the day all the astronomical facts relative to the Queen of the Night. Everybody set to work to study assiduously. One would have thought that the moon had just appeared for the first time, and that no one had ever before caught a glimpse of her in the heavens. The papers revived all the old anecdotes in which the “sun of the wolves” played a part; they recalled the influences which the ignorance of past ages ascribed to her; in short, all America was seized with selenomania, or had become moon-mad.

The scientific journals, for their part, dealt more especially with the questions which touched upon the enterprise of the Gun Club. The letter of the Observatory of Cambridge was published by them, and commented upon with unreserved approval.

Until that time most people had been ignorant of the mode in which the distance which separates the moon from the earth is calculated. They took advantage of this fact to explain to them that this distance was obtained by measuring the parallax of the moon. The term parallax proving “caviare to the general,” they further explained that it meant the angle formed by the inclination of two straight lines drawn from either extremity of the earth’s radius to the moon. On doubts being expressed as to the correctness of this method, they immediately proved that not only was the mean distance 234,347 miles, but that astronomers could not possibly be in error in their estimate by more than seventy miles either way.

To those who were not familiar with the motions of the moon, they demonstrated that she possesses two distinct motions, the first being that of rotation upon her axis, the second being that of revolution round the earth, accomplishing both together in an equal period of time, that is to say, in twenty-seven and one-third days.

The motion of rotation is that which produces day and night on the surface of the moon; save that there is only one day and one night in the lunar month, each lasting three hundred and fifty-four and one-third hours. But, happily for her, the face turned toward the terrestrial globe is illuminated by it with an intensity equal to that of fourteen moons. As to the other face, always invisible to us, it has of necessity three hundred and fifty-four hours of absolute night, tempered only by that “pale glimmer which falls upon it from the stars.”

Some well-intentioned, but rather obstinate persons, could not at first comprehend how, if the moon displays invariably the same face to the earth during her revolution, she can describe one turn round herself. To such they answered, “Go into your dining-room, and walk round the table in such a way as to always keep your face turned toward the center; by the time you will have achieved one complete round you will have completed one turn around yourself, since your eye will have traversed successively every point of the room. Well, then, the room is the heavens, the table is the earth, and the moon is yourself.” And they would go away delighted.

So, then the moon displays invariably the same face to the earth; nevertheless, to be quite exact, it is necessary to add that, in consequence of certain fluctuations of north and south, and of west and east, termed her libration, she permits rather more than half, that is to say, five-sevenths, to be seen.

As soon as the ignoramuses came to understand as much as the director of the observatory himself knew, they began to worry themselves regarding her revolution round the earth, whereupon twenty scientific reviews immediately came to the rescue. They pointed out to them that the firmament, with its infinitude of stars, may be considered as one vast dial-plate, upon which the moon travels, indicating the true time to all the inhabitants of the earth; that it is during this movement that the Queen of Night exhibits her different phases; that the moon is *full* when she is in *opposition* with the sun, that is when the three bodies are on the same straight line, the earth occupying the center; that she is *new* when she is in *conjunction* with the sun, that is, when she is between it and the earth; and, lastly that she is in her *first* or *last* quarter, when she makes with the sun and the earth an angle of which she herself occupies the apex.

Regarding the altitude which the moon attains above the horizon, the letter of the Cambridge Observatory had said all that was to be said in this respect. Every one knew that this altitude varies according to the latitude of the observer. But the only zones of the globe in which the moon passes the zenith, that is, the point directly over the head of the spectator, are of necessity comprised between the twenty-eighth parallels and the equator. Hence the importance of the advice to try the experiment upon some point of that part of the globe, in order that the projectile might be discharged perpendicularly, and so the soonest escape the action of gravitation. This was an essential condition to the success of the enterprise, and continued actively to engage the public attention.

Regarding the path described by the moon in her revolution round the earth, the Cambridge Observatory had demonstrated that this path is a re-entering curve, not a perfect circle, but an ellipse, of which the earth occupies one of the *foci*. It was also well understood that it is farthest removed from the earth during its *apogee*, and approaches most nearly to it at its *perigee*.

Such was then the extent of knowledge possessed by every American on the subject, and of which no one could decently profess ignorance. Still, while these principles were being rapidly disseminated many errors and illusory fears proved less easy to eradicate.

For instance, some worthy persons maintained that the moon was an ancient comet which, in describing its elongated orbit round the sun, happened to pass near the earth, and became confined within her circle of attraction. These drawing-room astronomers professed to explain the charred aspect of the moon — a disaster which they attributed to the intensity of the solar heat; only, on being reminded that comets have an atmosphere, and that the moon has little or none, they were fairly at a loss for a reply.

Others again, belonging to the doubting class, expressed certain fears as to the position of the moon. They had heard it said that, according to observations made in the time of the Caliphs, her revolution had become accelerated in a certain degree. Hence they concluded, logically enough, that an acceleration of motion ought to be accompanied by a corresponding diminution in the distance separating the two bodies; and that, supposing the double effect to be continued to infinity, the moon would end by one day falling into the earth. However, they became reassured as to the fate of future generations on being apprised that, according to the calculations of Laplace, this acceleration of motion is confined within very restricted limits, and that a proportional diminution of speed will be certain to succeed it. So, then, the stability of the solar system would not be deranged in ages to come.

There remains but the third class, the superstitious. These worthies were not content merely to rest in ignorance; they must know all about things which had no existence whatever, and as to the moon, they had long known all about her. One set regarded her disc as a polished mirror, by means of which people could see each other from different points of the earth and interchange their thoughts. Another set pretended that out of one thousand new moons that had been observed, nine hundred and fifty had been attended with remarkable disturbances, such as cataclysms, revolutions, earthquakes, the deluge, etc. Then they believed in some mysterious influence exercised by her over human destinies — that every Selenite was attached to some inhabitant of the earth by a tie of sympathy; they maintained that the entire vital system is subject to her control, etc. But in time the majority renounced these vulgar errors, and espoused the true side of the question. As for the Yankees, they had no other ambition than to take possession of this new continent of the sky, and to plant upon the summit of its highest elevation the star- spangled banner of the United States of America.

CHAPTER VII

THE HYMN OF THE CANNON-BALL

The Observatory of Cambridge in its memorable letter had treated the question from a purely astronomical point of view. The mechanical part still remained.

President Barbicane had, without loss of time, nominated a working committee of the Gun Club. The duty of this committee was to resolve the three grand questions of the cannon, the projectile, and the powder. It was composed of four members of great technical knowledge, Barbicane (with a casting vote in case of equality), General Morgan, Major Elphinstone, and J. T. Maston, to whom were confided the functions of secretary. On the 8th of October the committee met at the house of President Barbicane, 3 Republican Street. The meeting was opened by the president himself.

“Gentlemen,” said he, “we have to resolve one of the most important problems in the whole of the noble science of gunnery. It might appear, perhaps, the most logical course to devote our first meeting to the discussion of the engine to be employed. Nevertheless, after mature consideration, it has appeared to me that the question of the projectile must take precedence of that of the cannon, and that the dimensions of the latter must necessarily depend on those of the former.”

“Suffer me to say a word,” here broke in J. T. Maston. Permission having been granted, “Gentlemen,” said he with an inspired accent, “our president is right in placing the question of the projectile above all others. The ball we are about to discharge at the moon is our ambassador to her, and I wish to consider it from a moral point of view. The cannon-ball, gentlemen, to my mind, is the most magnificent manifestation of human power. If Providence has created the stars and the planets, man has called the cannon-ball into existence. Let Providence claim the swiftness of electricity and of light, of the stars, the comets, and the planets, of wind and sound — we claim to have invented the swiftness of the cannon-ball, a hundred times superior to that of the swiftest horses or railway train. How glorious will be the moment when, infinitely exceeding all hitherto attained velocities, we shall launch our new projectile with the rapidity of seven miles a second! Shall it not, gentlemen — shall it not be received up there with the honors due to a terrestrial ambassador?”

Overcome with emotion the orator sat down and applied himself to a huge plate of sandwiches before him.

“And now,” said Barbicane, “let us quit the domain of poetry and come direct to the question.”

“By all means,” replied the members, each with his mouth full of sandwich.

“The problem before us,” continued the president, “is how to

communicate to a projectile a velocity of 12,000 yards per second.

Let us at present examine the velocities hitherto attained.

General Morgan will be able to enlighten us on this point.”

“And the more easily,” replied the general, “that during the war I was a member of the committee of experiments. I may say, then, that the 100-pounder Dahlgrens, which carried a distance of 5,000 yards, impressed upon their projectile an initial velocity of 500 yards a second. The Rodman Columbiad threw a shot weighing half a ton a distance of six miles, with a velocity of 800 yards per second — a result which Armstrong and Palisser have never obtained in England.”

“This,” replied Barbicane, “is, I believe, the maximum velocity ever attained?”

“It is so,” replied the general.

“Ah!” groaned J. T. Maston, “if my mortar had not burst — — ”

“Yes,” quietly replied Barbicane, “but it did burst. We must take, then, for our starting point, this velocity of 800 yards. We must increase it twenty-fold. Now, reserving for another discussion the means of producing this velocity, I will call your attention to the dimensions which it will be proper to assign to the shot. You understand that we have nothing to do here with projectiles weighing at most but half a ton.”

“Why not?” demanded the major.

“Because the shot,” quickly replied J. T. Maston, “must be big enough to attract the attention of the inhabitants of the moon, if there are any?”

“Yes,” replied Barbicane, “and for another reason more important still.”

“What mean you?” asked the major.

“I mean that it is not enough to discharge a projectile, and then take no further notice of it; we must follow it throughout its course, up to the moment when it shall reach its goal.”

“What?” shouted the general and the major in great surprise.

“Undoubtedly,” replied Barbicane composedly, “or our experiment would produce no result.”

“But then,” replied the major, “you will have to give this projectile enormous dimensions.”

“No! Be so good as to listen. You know that optical instruments have acquired great perfection; with certain instruments we have succeeded in obtaining enlargements of 6,000 times and reducing the moon to within forty miles’ distance. Now, at this distance, any objects sixty feet square would be perfectly visible.

“If, then, the penetrative power of telescopes has not been further increased, it is because that power detracts from their light; and the moon, which is but a reflecting mirror, does not give back sufficient light to enable us to perceive objects of lesser magnitude.”

“Well, then, what do you propose to do?” asked the general.

“Would you give your projectile a diameter of sixty feet?”

“Not so.”

“Do you intend, then, to increase the luminous power of the moon?”

“Exactly so. If I can succeed in diminishing the density of the atmosphere through which the moon’s light has to travel I shall have rendered her light more intense. To effect that object it will be enough to establish a telescope on some elevated mountain. That is what we will do.”

“I give it up,” answered the major. “You have such a way of simplifying things. And what enlargement do you expect to obtain in this way?”

“One of 48,000 times, which should bring the moon within an apparent distance of five miles; and, in order to be visible, objects need not have a diameter of more than nine feet.”

“So, then,” cried J. T. Maston, “our projectile need not be more than nine feet in diameter.”

“Let me observe, however,” interrupted Major Elphinstone, “this will involve a weight such as — — ”

“My dear major,” replied Barbicane, “before discussing its weight permit me to enumerate some of the marvels which our ancestors have achieved in this respect. I don’t mean to pretend that the science of gunnery has not advanced, but it is as well to bear in mind that during the middle ages they obtained results more surprising, I will venture to say, than ours. For instance, during the siege of Constantinople by Mahomet II. in 1453, stone shot of 1,900 pounds weight were employed. At Malta, in the time of the knights, there was a gun of the fortress of St. Elmo which threw a projectile weighing 2,500 pounds. And, now, what is the extent of what we have seen ourselves? Armstrong guns discharging shot of 500 pounds, and the Rodman guns projectiles of half a ton! It seems, then, that if projectiles have gained in range, they have lost far more in weight. Now, if we turn our efforts in that direction, we ought to arrive, with the progress on science, at ten times the weight of the shot of Mahomet II. and the Knights of Malta.”

“Clearly,” replied the major; “but what metal do you calculate upon employing?”

“Simply cast iron,” said General Morgan.

“But,” interrupted the major, “since the weight of a shot is proportionate to its volume, an iron ball of nine feet in diameter would be of tremendous weight.”

“Yes, if it were solid, not if it were hollow.”

“Hollow? then it would be a shell?”

“Yes, a shell,” replied Barbicane; “decidely it must be. A solid shot of 108 inches would weigh more than 200,000 pounds, a weight evidently far too great. Still, as we must reserve a certain stability for our projectile, I propose to give it a weight of 20,000 pounds.”

“What, then, will be the thickness of the sides?” asked the major.

“If we follow the usual proportion,” replied Morgan, “a diameter of 108 inches would require sides of two feet thickness, or less.”

“That would be too much,” replied Barbicane; “for you will observe that the question is not that of a shot intended to pierce an iron plate; it will suffice to give it sides strong enough to resist the pressure of the gas. The problem, therefore, is this — What thickness ought a cast-iron shell to have in order not to weight more than 20,000 pounds? Our clever secretary will soon enlighten us upon this point.”

“Nothing easier.” replied the worthy secretary of the committee; and, rapidly tracing a few algebraical formulae upon paper, among which n^2 and x^2 frequently appeared, he presently said:

“The sides will require a thickness of less than two inches.”

“Will that be enough?” asked the major doubtfully.

“Clearly not!” replied the president.

“What is to be done, then?” said Elphinstone, with a puzzled air.

“Employ another metal instead of iron.”

“Copper?” said Morgan.

“No! that would be too heavy. I have better than that to offer.”

“What then?” asked the major.

“Aluminum!” replied Barbicane.

“Aluminum?” cried his three colleagues in chorus.

“Unquestionably, my friends. This valuable metal possesses the whiteness of silver, the indestructibility of gold, the tenacity of iron, the fusibility of copper, the lightness of glass. It is easily wrought, is very widely distributed, forming the base of most of the rocks, is three times lighter than iron, and seems to have been created for the express purpose of furnishing us with the material for our projectile.”

“But, my dear president,” said the major, “is not the cost price of aluminum extremely high?”

“It was so at its first discovery, but it has fallen now to nine dollars a pound.”

“But still, nine dollars a pound!” replied the major, who was not willing readily to give in; “even that is an enormous price.”

“Undoubtedly, my dear major; but not beyond our reach.”

“What will the projectile weigh then?” asked Morgan.

“Here is the result of my calculations,” replied Barbicane. “A shot of 108 inches in diameter, and twelve inches in thickness, would weigh, in cast-iron, 67,440 pounds; cast in aluminum, its weight will be reduced to 19,250 pounds.”

“Capital!” cried the major; “but do you know that, at nine dollars a pound, this projectile will cost — — ”

“One hundred and seventy-three thousand and fifty dollars ($173,050). I know it quite well. But fear not, my friends; the money will not be wanting for our enterprise. I will answer for it. Now what say you to aluminum, gentlemen?”

“Adopted!” replied the three members of the committee. So ended the first meeting. The question of the projectile was definitely settled.

CHAPTER VII

HISTORY OF THE CANNON

The resolutions passed at the last meeting produced a great effect out of doors. Timid people took fright at the idea of a shot weighing 20,000 pounds being launched into space; they asked what cannon could ever transmit a sufficient velocity to such a mighty mass. The minutes of the second meeting were destined triumphantly to answer such questions. The following evening the discussion was renewed.

“My dear colleagues,” said Barbicane, without further preamble, “the subject now before us is the construction of the engine, its length, its composition, and its weight. It is probable that we shall end by giving it gigantic dimensions; but however great may be the difficulties in the way, our mechanical genius will readily surmount them. Be good enough, then, to give me your attention, and do not hesitate to make objections at the close. I have no fear of them. The problem before us is how to communicate an initial force of 12,000 yards per second to a shell of 108 inches in diameter, weighing 20,000 pounds. Now when a projectile is launched into space, what happens to it? It is acted upon by three independent forces: the resistance of the air, the attraction of the earth, and the force of impulsion with which it is endowed. Let us examine these three forces. The resistance of the air is of little importance. The atmosphere of the earth does not exceed forty miles. Now, with the given rapidity, the projectile will have traversed this in five seconds, and the period is too brief for the resistance of the medium to be regarded otherwise than as insignificant. Proceding, then, to the attraction of the earth, that is, the weight of the shell, we know that this weight will diminish in the inverse ratio of the square of the distance. When a body left to itself falls to the surface of the earth, it falls five feet in the first second; and if the same body were removed 257,542 miles further off, in other words, to the distance of the moon, its fall would be reduced to about half a line in the first second. That is almost equivalent to a state of perfect rest. Our business, then, is to overcome progressively this action of gravitation. The mode of accomplishing that is by the force of impulsion.”

“There’s the difficulty,” broke in the major.

“True,” replied the president; “but we will overcome that, for the force of impulsion will depend on the length of the engine and the powder employed, the latter being limited only by the resisting power of the former. Our business, then, to-day is with the dimensions of the cannon.”

“Now, up to the present time,” said Barbicane, “our longest guns have not exceeded twenty-five feet in length. We shall therefore astonish the world by the dimensions we shall be obliged to adopt. It must evidently be, then, a gun of great range, since the length of the piece will increase the detention of the gas accumulated behind the projectile; but there is no advantage in passing certain limits.”

“Quite so,” said the major. “What is the rule in such a case?”

“Ordinarily the length of a gun is twenty to twenty-five times the diameter of the shot, and its weight two hundred and thirty-five to two hundred and forty times that of the shot.”

“That is not enough,” cried J. T. Maston impetuously.

“I agree with you, my good friend; and, in fact, following this proportion for a projectile nine feet in diameter, weighing 30,000 pounds, the gun would only have a length of two hundred and twenty- five feet, and a weight of 7,200,000 pounds.”

“Ridiculous!” rejoined Maston. “As well take a pistol.”

“I think so too,” replied Barbicane; “that is why I propose to quadruple that length, and to construct a gun of nine hundred feet.”

The general and the major offered some objections; nevertheless, the proposition, actively supported by the secretary, was definitely adopted.

“But,” said Elphinstone, “what thickness must we give it?”

“A thickness of six feet,” replied Barbicane.

“You surely don’t think of mounting a mass like that upon a carriage?” asked the major.

“It would be a superb idea, though,” said Maston.

“But impracticable,” replied Barbicane. “No, I think of sinking this engine in the earth alone, binding it with hoops of wrought iron, and finally surrounding it with a thick mass of masonry of stone and cement. The piece once cast, it must be bored with great precision, so as to preclude any possible windage. So there will be no loss whatever of gas, and all the expansive force of the powder will be employed in the propulsion.”

“One simple question,” said Elphinstone: “is our gun to be rifled?”

“No, certainly not,” replied Barbicane; “we require an enormous initial velocity; and you are well aware that a shot quits a rifled gun less rapidly than it does a smooth-bore.”

“True,” rejoined the major.

The committee here adjourned for a few minutes to tea and sandwiches.

On the discussion being renewed, “Gentlemen,” said Barbicane, “we must now take into consideration the metal to be employed. Our cannon must be possessed of great tenacity, great hardness, be infusible by heat, indissoluble, and inoxidable by the corrosive action of acids.”

“There is no doubt about that,” replied the major; “and as we shall have to employ an immense quantity of metal, we shall not be at a loss for choice.”

“Well, then,” said Morgan, “I propose the best alloy hitherto known, which consists of one hundred parts of copper, twelve of tin, and six of brass.”

“I admit,” replied the president, “that this composition has yielded excellent results, but in the present case it would be too expensive, and very difficult to work. I think, then, that we ought to adopt a material excellent in its way and of low price, such as cast iron. What is your advice, major?”

“I quite agree with you,” replied Elphinstone.

“In fact,” continued Barbicane, “cast iron costs ten times less than bronze; it is easy to cast, it runs readily from the moulds of sand, it is easy of manipulation, it is at once economical of money and of time. In addition, it is excellent as a material, and I well remember that during the war, at the siege of Atlanta, some iron guns fired one thousand rounds at intervals of twenty minutes without injury.”

“Cast iron is very brittle, though,” replied Morgan.

“Yes, but it possesses great resistance. I will now ask our worthy secretary to calculate the weight of a cast-iron gun with a bore of nine feet and a thickness of six feet of metal.”

“In a moment,” replied Maston. Then, dashing off some algebraical formulae with marvelous facility, in a minute or two he declared the following result:

“The cannon will weigh 68,040 tons. And, at two cents a pound, it will cost — — ”

“Two million five hundred and ten thousand seven hundred and one dollars.”

Maston, the major, and the general regarded Barbicane with uneasy looks.

“Well, gentlemen,” replied the president, “I repeat what I said yesterday. Make yourselves easy; the millions will not be wanting.”

With this assurance of their president the committee separated, after having fixed their third meeting for the following evening.

CHAPTER IX

THE QUESTION OF THE POWDERS

There remained for consideration merely the question of powders. The public awaited with interest its final decision. The size of the projectile, the length of the cannon being settled, what would be the quantity of powder necessary to produce impulsion?

It is generally asserted that gunpowder was invented in the fourteenth century by the monk Schwartz, who paid for his grand discovery with his life. It is, however, pretty well proved that this story ought to be ranked among the legends of the middle ages. Gunpowder was not invented by any one; it was the lineal successor of the Greek fire, which, like itself, was composed of sulfur and saltpeter. Few persons are acquainted with the mechanical power of gunpowder. Now this is precisely what is necessary to be understood in order to comprehend the importance of the question submitted to the committee.

A litre of gunpowder weighs about two pounds; during combustion it produces 400 litres of gas. This gas, on being liberated and acted upon by temperature raised to 2,400 degrees, occupies a space of 4,000 litres: consequently the volume of powder is to the volume of gas produced by its combustion as 1 to 4,000. One may judge, therefore, of the tremendous pressure on this gas when compressed within a space 4,000 times too confined. All this was, of course, well known to the members of the committee when they met on the following evening.

The first speaker on this occasion was Major Elphinstone, who had been the director of the gunpowder factories during the war.

“Gentlemen,” said this distinguished chemist, “I begin with some figures which will serve as the basis of our calculation. The old 24-pounder shot required for its discharge sixteen pounds of powder.”

“You are certain of this amount?” broke in Barbicane.

“Quite certain,” replied the major. “The Armstrong cannon employs only seventy-five pounds of powder for a projectile of eight hundred pounds, and the Rodman Columbiad uses only one hundred and sixty pounds of powder to send its half ton shot a distance of six miles. These facts cannot be called in question, for I myself raised the point during the depositions taken before the committee of artillery.”

“Quite true,” said the general.

“Well,” replied the major, “these figures go to prove that the quantity of powder is not increased with the weight of the shot; that is to say, if a 24-pounder shot requires sixteen pounds of powder; — in other words, if in ordinary guns we employ a quantity of powder equal to two-thirds of the weight of the projectile, this proportion is not constant. Calculate, and you will see that in place of three hundred and thirty-three pounds of powder, the quantity is reduced to no more than one hundred and sixty pounds.”

“What are you aiming at?” asked the president.

“If you push your theory to extremes, my dear major,” said J. T. Maston, “you will get to this, that as soon as your shot becomes sufficiently heavy you will not require any powder at all.”

“Our friend Maston is always at his jokes, even in serious matters,” cried the major; “but let him make his mind easy, I am going presently to propose gunpowder enough to satisfy his artillerist’s propensities. I only keep to statistical facts when I say that, during the war, and for the very largest guns, the weight of the powder was reduced, as the result of experience, to a tenth part of the weight of the shot.”

“Perfectly correct,” said Morgan; “but before deciding the quantity of powder necessary to give the impulse, I think it would be as well — — ”

“We shall have to employ a large-grained powder,” continued the major; “its combustion is more rapid than that of the small.”

“No doubt about that,” replied Morgan; “but it is very destructive, and ends by enlarging the bore of the pieces.”

“Granted; but that which is injurious to a gun destined to perform long service is not so to our Columbiad. We shall run no danger of an explosion; and it is necessary that our powder should take fire instantaneously in order that its mechanical effect may be complete.”

“We must have,” said Maston, “several touch-holes, so as to fire it at different points at the same time.”

“Certainly,” replied Elphinstone; “but that will render the working of the piece more difficult. I return then to my large-grained powder, which removes those difficulties. In his Columbiad charges Rodman employed a powder as large as chestnuts, made of willow charcoal, simply dried in cast-iron pans. This powder was hard and glittering, left no trace upon the hand, contained hydrogen and oxygen in large proportion, took fire instantaneously, and, though very destructive, did not sensibly injure the mouth-piece.”

Up to this point Barbicane had kept aloof from the discussion; he left the others to speak while he himself listened; he had evidently got an idea. He now simply said, “Well, my friends, what quantity of powder do you propose?”

The three members looked at one another.

“Two hundred thousand pounds.” at last said Morgan.

“Five hundred thousand,” added the major.

“Eight hundred thousand,” screamed Maston.

A moment of silence followed this triple proposal; it was at last broken by the president.

“Gentlemen,” he quietly said, “I start from this principle, that the resistance of a gun, constructed under the given conditions, is unlimited. I shall surprise our friend Maston, then, by stigmatizing his calculations as timid; and I propose to double his 800,000 pounds of powder.”

“Sixteen hundred thousand pounds?” shouted Maston, leaping from his seat.

“Just so.”

“We shall have to come then to my ideal of a cannon half a mile long; for you see 1,600,000 pounds will occupy a space of about 20,000 cubic feet; and since the contents of your cannon do not exceed 54,000 cubic feet, it would be half full; and the bore will not be more than long enough for the gas to communicate to the projectile sufficient impulse.”

“Nevertheless,” said the president, “I hold to that quantity of powder. Now, 1,600,000 pounds of powder will create 6,000,000,000 litres of gas. Six thousand millions! You quite understand?”

“What is to be done then?” said the general.

“The thing is very simple; we must reduce this enormous quantity of powder, while preserving to it its mechanical power.”

“Good; but by what means?”

“I am going to tell you,” replied Barbicane quietly.

“Nothing is more easy than to reduce this mass to one quarter of its bulk. You know that curious cellular matter which constitutes the elementary tissues of vegetable? This substance is found quite pure in many bodies, especially in cotton, which is nothing more than the down of the seeds of the cotton plant. Now cotton, combined with cold nitric acid, become transformed into a substance eminently insoluble, combustible, and explosive. It was first discovered in 1832, by Braconnot, a French chemist, who called it xyloidine. In 1838 another Frenchman, Pelouze, investigated its different properties, and finally, in 1846, Schonbein, professor of chemistry at Bale, proposed its employment for purposes of war. This powder, now called pyroxyle, or fulminating cotton, is prepared with great facility by simply plunging cotton for fifteen minutes in nitric acid, then washing it in water, then drying it, and it is ready for use.”

“Nothing could be more simple,” said Morgan.

“Moreover, pyroxyle is unaltered by moisture — a valuable property to us, inasmuch as it would take several days to charge the cannon. It ignites at

170 degrees in place of 240, and its combustion is so rapid that one may set light to it on the top of the ordinary powder, without the latter having time to ignite."

"Perfect!" exclaimed the major.

"Only it is more expensive."

"What matter?" cried J. T. Maston.

"Finally, it imparts to projectiles a velocity four times superior to that of gunpowder. I will even add, that if we mix it with one-eighth of its own weight of nitrate of potassium, its expansive force is again considerably augmented."

"Will that be necessary?" asked the major.

"I think not," replied Barbicane. "So, then, in place of 1,600,000 pounds of powder, we shall have but 400,000 pounds of fulminating cotton; and since we can, without danger, compress 500 pounds of cotton into twenty-seven cubic feet, the whole quantity will not occupy a height of more than 180 feet within the bore of the Columbiad. In this way the shot will have more than 700 feet of bore to traverse under a force of 6,000,000,000 litres of gas before taking its flight toward the moon."

At this juncture J. T. Maston could not repress his emotion; he flung himself into the arms of his friend with the violence of a projectile, and Barbicane would have been stove in if he had not been boom-proof.

This incident terminated the third meeting of the committee.

Barbicane and his bold colleagues, to whom nothing seemed impossible, had succeeding in solving the complex problems of projectile, cannon, and powder. Their plan was drawn up, and it only remained to put it into execution.

“A mere matter of detail, a bagatelle,” said J. T. Maston.

CHAPTER X

ONE ENEMY *v.* TWENTY-FIVE MILLIONS OF FRIENDS

The American public took a lively interest in the smallest details of the enterprise of the Gun Club. It followed day by day the discussion of the committee. The most simple preparations for the great experiment, the questions of figures which it involved, the mechanical difficulties to be resolved — in one word, the entire plan of work — roused the popular excitement to the highest pitch.

The purely scientific attraction was suddenly intensified by the following incident:

We have seen what legions of admirers and friends Barbicane’s project had rallied round its author. There was, however, one single individual alone in all the States of the Union who protested against the attempt of the Gun Club. He attacked it furiously on every opportunity, and human nature is such that Barbicane felt more keenly the opposition of that one man than he did the applause of all the others. He was well aware of the motive of this antipathy, the origin of this solitary enmity, the cause of its personality and old standing, and in what rivalry of self-love it had its rise.

This persevering enemy the president of the Gun Club had never seen. Fortunate that it was so, for a meeting between the two men would certainly have been attended with serious consequences. This rival was a man of science, like Barbicane himself, of a fiery, daring, and violent disposition; a pure Yankee. His name was Captain Nicholl; he lived at Philadelphia.

Most people are aware of the curious struggle which arose during the Federal war between the guns and armor of iron-plated ships. The result was the entire reconstruction of the navy of both the continents; as the one grew heavier, the other became thicker in proportion. The Merrimac, the Monitor, the Tennessee, the Weehawken discharged enormous projectiles themselves, after having been armor-clad against the projectiles of others. In fact they did to others that which they would not they should do to them — that grand principle of immortality upon which rests the whole art of war.

Now if Barbicane was a great founder of shot, Nicholl was a great forger of plates; the one cast night and day at Baltimore, the other forged day and night at Philadelphia. As soon as ever Barbicane invented a new shot, Nicholl invented a new plate; each followed a current of ideas essentially opposed to the other. Happily for these citizens, so useful to their country, a distance of from fifty to sixty miles separated them from one another, and they had never yet met. Which of these two inventors had the advantage over the other it was difficult to decide from the results obtained. By last accounts, however, it would seem that the armor-plate would in the end have to give way to the shot; nevertheless, there were competent judges who had their doubts on the point.

At the last experiment the cylindro-conical projectiles of Barbicane stuck like so many pins in the Nicholl plates. On that day the Philadelphia iron-forger then believed himself victorious, and could not evince contempt enough for his rival; but when the other afterward substituted for conical shot simple 600-pound shells, at very moderate velocity, the captain was obliged to give in. In fact, these projectiles knocked his best metal plate to shivers.

Matters were at this stage, and victory seemed to rest with the shot, when the war came to an end on the very day when Nicholl had completed a new armor-plate of wrought steel. It was a masterpiece of its kind, and bid defiance to all the projectiles of the world. The captain had it conveyed to the Polygon at Washington, challenging the president of the Gun Club to break it. Barbicane, peace having been declared, declined to try the experiment.

Nicholl, now furious, offered to expose his plate to the shock of any shot, solid, hollow, round, or conical. Refused by the president, who did not choose to compromise his last success.

Nicholl, disgusted by this obstinacy, tried to tempt Barbicane by offering him every chance. He proposed to fix the plate within two hundred yards of the gun. Barbicane still obstinate in refusal. A hundred yards? Not even seventy-five!

“At fifty then!” roared the captain through the newspapers.

“At twenty-five yards! and I’ll stand behind!”

Barbicane returned for answer that, even if Captain Nicholl would be so good as to stand in front, he would not fire any more.

Nicholl could not contain himself at this reply; threw out hints of cowardice; that a man who refused to fire a cannon-shot was pretty near being afraid of it; that artillerists who fight at six miles distance are substituting mathematical formulae for individual courage.

To these insinuations Barbicane returned no answer; perhaps he never heard of them, so absorbed was he in the calculations for his great enterprise.

When his famous communication was made to the Gun Club, the captain's wrath passed all bounds; with his intense jealousy was mingled a feeling of absolute impotence. How was he to invent anything to beat this 900-feet Columbiad? What armor-plate could ever resist a projectile of 30,000 pounds weight? Overwhelmed at first under this violent shock, he by and by recovered himself, and resolved to crush the proposal by weight of his arguments.

He then violently attacked the labors of the Gun Club, published a number of letters in the newspapers, endeavored to prove Barbicane ignorant of the first principles of gunnery. He maintained that it was absolutely impossible to impress upon any body whatever a velocity of 12,000 yards per second; that even with such a velocity a projectile of such a weight could not transcend the limits of the earth's atmosphere. Further still, even regarding the velocity to be acquired, and granting it to be sufficient, the shell could not resist the pressure of the gas developed by the ignition of 1,600,000 pounds of powder; and supposing it to resist that pressure, it would be less able to support that temperature; it would melt on quitting the Columbiad, and fall back in a red-hot shower upon the heads of the imprudent spectators.

Barbicane continued his work without regarding these attacks.

Nicholl then took up the question in its other aspects. Without touching upon its uselessness in all points of view, he regarded the experiment as fraught with extreme danger, both to the citizens, who might sanction by their presence so reprehensible a spectacle, and also to the towns in the neighborhood of this deplorable cannon. He also observed that if the projectile did not succeed in reaching its destination (a result absolutely impossible), it must inevitably fall back upon the earth, and that the shock of such a mass, multiplied by the square of its velocity, would seriously endanger every point of the globe. Under the circumstances, therefore, and without interfering with the rights of free citizens, it was a case for the intervention of Government, which ought not to endanger the safety of all for the pleasure of one individual.

In spite of all his arguments, however, Captain Nicholl remained alone in his opinion. Nobody listened to him, and he did not succeed in alienating a single admirer from the president of the Gun Club. The latter did not even take the pains to refute the arguments of his rival.

Nicholl, driven into his last entrenchments, and not able to fight personally in the cause, resolved to fight with money. He published, therefore, in the Richmond *Inquirer* a series of wagers, conceived in these terms, and on an increasing scale:

No. 1 ($1,000). — That the necessary funds for the experiment of the Gun Club will not be forthcoming.

No. 2 ($2,000). — That the operation of casting a cannon of 900 feet is impracticable, and cannot possibly succeed.

No. 3 ($3,000). — That is it impossible to load the Columbiad, and that the pyroxyle will take fire spontaneously under the pressure of the projectile.

No. 4 ($4,000). — That the Columbiad will burst at the first fire.

No. 5 ($5,000). — That the shot will not travel farther than six miles, and that it will fall back again a few seconds after its discharge.

It was an important sum, therefore, which the captain risked in his invincible obstinacy. He had no less than $15,000 at stake.

Notwithstanding the importance of the challenge, on the 19th of

May he received a sealed packet containing the following

superbly laconic reply:

BALTIMORE, October 19.

“Done.

“BARBICANE.”

CHAPTER XI

FLORIDA AND TEXAS

One question remained yet to be decided; it was necessary to choose a favorable spot for the experiment. According to the advice of the Observatory of Cambridge, the gun must be fired perpendicularly to the plane of the horizon, that is to say, toward the zenith. Now the moon does not traverse the zenith, except in places situated between 0@ and 28@ of latitude. It became, then, necessary to determine exactly that spot on the globe where the immense Columbiad should be cast.

On the 20th of October, at a general meeting of the Gun Club, Barbicane produced a magnificent map of the United States. “Gentlemen,” said he, in opening the discussion, “I presume that we are all agreed that this experiment cannot and ought not to be tried anywhere but within the limits of the soil of the Union. Now, by good fortune, certain frontiers of the United States extend downward as far as the 28th parallel of the north latitude. If you will cast your eye over this map, you will see that we have at our disposal the whole of the southern portion of Texas and Florida.”

It was finally agreed, then, that the Columbiad must be cast on the soil of either Texas or Florida. The result, however, of this decision was to create a rivalry entirely without precedent between the different towns of these two States.

The 28th parallel, on reaching the American coast, traverses the peninsula of Florida, dividing it into two nearly equal portions. Then, plunging into the Gulf of Mexico, it subtends the arc formed by the coast of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana; then skirting Texas, off which it cuts an angle, it continues its course over Mexico, crosses the Sonora, Old California, and loses itself in the Pacific Ocean. It was, therefore, only those portions of Texas and Florida which were situated below this parallel which came within the prescribed conditions of latitude.

Florida, in its southern part, reckons no cities of importance; it is simply studded with forts raised against the roving Indians. One solitary town, Tampa Town, was able to put in a claim in favor of its situation.

In Texas, on the contrary, the towns are much more numerous and important. Corpus Christi, in the county of Nueces, and all the cities situated on the Rio Bravo, Laredo, Comalites, San Ignacio on the Web, Rio Grande City on the Starr, Edinburgh in the Hidalgo, Santa Rita, Elpanda, Brownsville in the Cameron, formed an imposing league against the pretensions of Florida. So, scarcely was the decision known, when the Texan and Floridan deputies arrived at Baltimore in an incredibly short space of time. From that very moment President Barbicane and the influential members of the Gun Club were besieged day and night by formidable claims. If seven cities of Greece contended for the honor of having given birth to a Homer, here were two entire States threatening to come to blows about the question of a cannon.

The rival parties promenaded the streets with arms in their hands; and at every occasion of their meeting a collision was to be apprehended which might have been attended with disastrous results. Happily the prudence and address of President Barbicane averted the danger. These personal demonstrations found a division in the newspapers of the different States. The New York *Herald* and the *Tribune* supported Texas, while the *Times* and the *American Review* espoused the cause of the Floridan deputies. The members of the Gun Club could not decide to which to give the preference.

Texas produced its array of twenty-six counties; Florida replied that twelve counties were better than twenty-six in a country only one-sixth part of the size.

Texas plumed itself upon its 330,000 natives; Florida, with a far smaller territory, boasted of being much more densely populated with 56,000.

The Texans, through the columns of the *Herald* claimed that some regard should be had to a State which grew the best cotton in all America, produced the best green oak for the service of the navy, and contained the finest oil, besides iron mines, in which the yield was fifty per cent. of pure metal.

To this the *American Review* replied that the soil of Florida, although not equally rich, afforded the best conditions for the moulding and casting of the Columbiad, consisting as it did of sand and argillaceous earth.

“That may be all very well,” replied the Texans; “but you must first get to this country. Now the communications with Florida are difficult, while the coast of Texas offers the bay of Galveston, which possesses a circumference of fourteen leagues, and is capable of containing the navies of the entire world!”

“A pretty notion truly,” replied the papers in the interest of Florida, “that of Galveston bay *below the 29th parallel!* Have we not got the bay of Espiritu Santo, opening precisely upon *the 28th degree*, and by which ships can reach Tampa Town by direct route?”

“A fine bay; half choked with sand!”

“Choked yourselves!” returned the others.

Thus the war went on for several days, when Florida endeavored to draw her adversary away on to fresh ground; and one morning the *Times* hinted that, the enterprise being essentially American, it ought not to be attempted upon other than purely American territory.

To these words Texas retorted, “American! are we not as much so as you? Were not Texas and Florida both incorporated into the Union in 1845?”

“Undoubtedly,” replied the *Times*; “but we have belonged to the

Americans ever since 1820.”

“Yes!” returned the *Tribune*; “after having been Spaniards or

English for two hundred years, you were sold to the United

States for five million dollars!”

“Well! and why need we blush for that? Was not Louisiana bought from Napoleon in 1803 at the price of sixteen million dollars?”

“Scandalous!” roared the Texas deputies. “A wretched little strip of country like Florida to dare to compare itself to Texas, who, in place of selling herself, asserted her own independence, drove out the Mexicans in March 2, 1846, and declared herself a federal republic after the victory gained by Samuel Houston, on the banks of the San Jacinto, over the troops of Santa Anna! — a country, in fine, which voluntarily annexed itself to the United States of America!”

“Yes; because it was afraid of the Mexicans!” replied Florida.

“Afraid!” From this moment the state of things became intolerable. A sanguinary encounter seemed daily imminent between the two parties in the streets of Baltimore. It became necessary to keep an eye upon the deputies.

President Barbicane knew not which way to look. Notes, documents, letters full of menaces showered down upon his house. Which side ought he to take? As regarded the appropriation of the soil, the facility of communication, the rapidity of transport, the claims of both States were evenly balanced. As for political prepossessions, they had nothing to do with the question.

This dead block had existed for some little time, when Barbicane resolved to get rid of it all at once. He called a meeting of his colleagues, and laid before them a proposition which, it will be seen, was profoundly sagacious.

“On carefully considering,” he said, “what is going on now between Florida and Texas, it is clear that the same difficulties will recur with all the towns of the favored State. The rivalry will descend from State to city, and so on downward. Now Texas possesses eleven towns within the prescribed conditions, which will further dispute the honor and create us new enemies, while Florida has only one. I go in, therefore, for Florida and Tampa Town.”

This decision, on being made known, utterly crushed the Texan deputies. Seized with an indescribable fury, they addressed threatening letters to the different members of the Gun Club by name. The magistrates had but one course to take, and they took it. They chartered a special train, forced the Texans into it whether they would or no; and they quitted the city with a speed of thirty miles an hour.

Quickly, however, as they were despatched, they found time to hurl one last and bitter sarcasm at their adversaries.

Alluding to the extent of Florida, a mere peninsula confined between two seas, they pretended that it could never sustain the shock of the discharge, and that it would “bust up” at the very first shot.

“Very well, let it bust up!” replied the Floridans, with a brevity of the days of ancient Sparta.

CHAPTER XII

URBI ET ORBI

The astronomical, mechanical, and topographical difficulties resolved, finally came the question of finance. The sum required was far too great for any individual, or even any single State, to provide the requisite millions.

President Barbicane undertook, despite of the matter being a purely American affair, to render it one of universal interest, and to request the financial co-operation of all peoples. It was, he maintained, the right and duty of the whole earth to interfere in the affairs of its satellite. The subscription opened at Baltimore extended properly to the whole world — *Urbi et orbi*.

This subscription was successful beyond all expectation; notwithstanding that it was a question not of lending but of giving the money. It was a purely disinterested operation in the strictest sense of the term, and offered not the slightest chance of profit.

The effect, however, of Barbicane's communication was not confined to the frontiers of the United States; it crossed the Atlantic and Pacific, invading simultaneously Asia and Europe, Africa and Oceanica. The observatories of the Union placed themselves in immediate communication with those of foreign countries. Some, such as those of Paris, Petersburg, Berlin, Stockholm, Hamburg, Malta, Lisbon, Benares, Madras, and others, transmitted their good wishes; the rest maintained a prudent silence, quietly awaiting the result. As for the observatory at Greenwich, seconded as it was by the twenty- two astronomical establishments of Great Britain, it spoke plainly enough. It boldly denied the possibility of success, and pronounced in favor of the theories of Captain Nicholl. But this was nothing more than mere English jealousy.

On the 8th of October President Barbicane published a manifesto full of enthusiasm, in which he made an appeal to “all persons of good will upon the face of the earth.” This document, translated into all languages, met with immense success.

Subscription lists were opened in all the principal cities of the Union, with a central office at the Baltimore Bank, 9 Baltimore Street.

In addition, subscriptions were received at the following banks in the different states of the two continents:

At Vienna, with S. M. de Rothschild.

At Petersburg, Stieglitz and Co.

At Paris, The Credit Mobilier.

At Stockholm, Tottie and Arfuredson.

At London, N. M. Rothschild and Son.

At Turin, Ardouin and Co.

At Berlin, Mendelssohn.

At Geneva, Lombard, Odier and Co.

At Constantinople, The Ottoman Bank.

At Brussels, J. Lambert.

At Madrid, Daniel Weisweller.

At Amsterdam, Netherlands Credit Co.

At Rome, Torlonia and Co.

At Lisbon, Lecesne.

At Copenhagen, Private Bank.

At Rio de Janeiro, Private Bank.

At Montevideo, Private Bank.

At Valparaiso and Lima, Thomas la Chambre and Co.

At Mexico, Martin Daran and Co.

Three days after the manifesto of President Barbicane $4,000,000 were paid into the different towns of the Union. With such a balance the Gun Club might begin operations at once. But some days later advices were received to the effect that foreign subscriptions were being eagerly taken up. Certain countries distinguished themselves by their liberality; others untied their purse-strings with less facility — a matter of temperament. Figures are, however, more eloquent than words, and here is the official statement of the sums which were paid in to the credit of the Gun Club at the close of the subscription.

Russia paid in as her contingent the enormous sum of 368,733 roubles. No one need be surprised at this, who bears in mind the scientific taste of the Russians, and the impetus which they have given to astronomical studies — thanks to their numerous observatories.

France began by deriding the pretensions of the Americans. The moon served as a pretext for a thousand stale puns and a score of ballads, in which bad taste contested the palm with ignorance. But as formerly the French paid before singing, so now they paid after having had their laugh, and they subscribed for a sum of 1,253,930 francs. At that price they had a right to enjoy themselves a little.

Austria showed herself generous in the midst of her financial crisis. Her public contributions amounted to the sum of 216,000 florins — a perfect godsend.

Fifty-two thousand rix-dollars were the remittance of Sweden and Norway; the amount is large for the country, but it would undoubtedly have been considerably increased had the subscription been opened in Christiana simultaneously with that at Stockholm. For some reason or other the Norwegians do not like to send their money to Sweden.

Prussia, by a remittance of 250,000 thalers, testified her high approval of the enterprise.

Turkey behaved generously; but she had a personal interest in the matter. The moon, in fact, regulates the cycle of her years and her fast of Ramadan. She could not do less than give 1,372,640 piastres; and she gave them with an eagerness which denoted, however, some pressure on the part of the government.

Belgium distinguished herself among the second-rate states by a grant of 513,000 francs — about two centimes per head of her population.

Holland and her colonies interested themselves to the extent of 110,000 florins, only demanding an allowance of five per cent. discount for paying ready money.

Denmark, a little contracted in territory, gave nevertheless 9,000 ducats, proving her love for scientific experiments.

The Germanic Confederation pledged itself to 34,285 florins. It was impossible to ask for more; besides, they would not have given it.

Though very much crippled, Italy found 200,000 lire in the pockets of her people. If she had had Venetia she would have done better; but she had not.

The States of the Church thought that they could not send less than 7,040 Roman crowns; and Portugal carried her devotion to science as far as 30,000 cruzados. It was the widow's mite — eighty-six piastres; but self-constituted empires are always rather short of money.

Two hundred and fifty-seven francs, this was the modest contribution of Switzerland to the American work. One must freely admit that she did not see the practical side of the matter. It did not seem to her that the mere despatch of a shot to the moon could possibly establish any relation of affairs with her; and it did not seem prudent to her to embark her capital in so hazardous an enterprise. After all, perhaps she was right.

As to Spain, she could not scrape together more than 110 reals. She gave as an excuse that she had her railways to finish. The truth is, that science is not favorably regarded in that country, it is still in a backward state; and moreover, certain Spaniards, not by any means the least educated, did not form a correct estimate of the bulk of the projectile compared with that of the moon. They feared that it would disturb the established order of things. In that case it were better to keep aloof; which they did to the tune of some reals.

There remained but England; and we know the contemptuous antipathy with which she received Barbicane’s proposition. The English have but one soul for the whole twenty-six millions of inhabitants which Great Britain contains. They hinted that the enterprise of the Gun Club was contrary to the “principle of non-intervention.” And they did not subscribe a single farthing.

At this intimation the Gun Club merely shrugged its shoulders and returned to its great work. When South America, that is to say, Peru, Chili, Brazil, the provinces of La Plata and Columbia, had poured forth their quota into their hands, the sum of $300,000, it found itself in possession of a considerable capital, of which the following is a statement:

United States subscriptions, . . $4,000,000

Foreign subscriptions... $1,446,675

— — — — — -

Total... $5,446,675

Such was the sum which the public poured into the treasury of the Gun Club.

Let no one be surprised at the vastness of the amount. The work of casting, boring, masonry, the transport of workmen, their establishment in an almost uninhabited country, the construction of furnaces and workshops, the plant, the powder, the projectile, and incipient expenses, would, according to the estimates, absorb nearly the whole. Certain cannon-shots in the Federal war cost one thousand dollars apiece. This one of President Barbicane, unique in the annals of gunnery, might well cost five thousand times more.

On the 20th of October a contract was entered into with the manufactory at Coldspring, near New York, which during the war had furnished the largest Parrott, cast-iron guns. It was stipulated between the contracting parties that the manufactory of Coldspring should engage to transport to Tampa Town, in southern Florida, the necessary materials for casting the Columbiad. The work was bound to be completed at latest by the 15th of October following, and the cannon delivered in good condition under penalty of a forfeit of one hundred dollars a day to the moment when the moon should again present herself under the same conditions — that is to say, in eighteen years and eleven days.

The engagement of the workmen, their pay, and all the necessary details of the work, devolved upon the Coldspring Company.

This contract, executed in duplicate, was signed by Barbicane, president of the Gun Club, of the one part, and T. Murchison director of the Coldspring manufactory, of the other, who thus executed the deed on behalf of their respective principals.

CHAPTER XIII

STONES HILL

When the decision was arrived at by the Gun Club, to the disparagement of Texas, every one in America, where reading is a universal acquirement, set to work to study the geography of Florida. Never before had there been such a sale for works like “Bertram’s Travels in Florida,” “Roman’s Natural History of East and West Florida,” “William’s Territory of Florida,” and “Cleland on the Cultivation of the Sugar-Cane in Florida.” It became necessary to issue fresh editions of these works.

Barbicane had something better to do than to read. He desired to see things with his own eyes, and to mark the exact position of the proposed gun. So, without a moment’s loss of time, he placed at the disposal of the Cambridge Observatory the funds necessary for the construction of a telescope, and entered into negotiations with the house of Breadwill and Co. of Albany, for the construction of an aluminum projectile of the required size. He then quitted Baltimore, accompanied by J. T. Maston, Major Elphinstone, and the manager of the Coldspring factory.

On the following day, the four fellow-travelers arrived at New Orleans. There they immediately embarked on board the *Tampico*, a despatch-boat belonging to the Federal navy, which the government had placed at their disposal; and, getting up steam, the banks of Louisiana speedily disappeared from sight.

The passage was not long. Two days after starting, the *Tampico*, having made four hundred and eighty miles, came in sight of the coast of Florida. On a nearer approach Barbicane found himself in view of a low, flat country of somewhat barren aspect. After coasting along a series of creeks abounding in lobsters and oysters, the *Tampico* entered the bay of Espiritu Santo, where she finally anchored in a small natural harbor, formed by the *embouchure* of the River Hillisborough, at seven P.M. on the 22d of October.

Our four passengers disembarked at once. “Gentlemen,” said Barbicane, “we have no time to lose; tomorrow we must obtain horses, and proceed to reconnoiter the country.”

Barbicane had scarcely set his foot on shore when three thousand of the inhabitants of Tampa Town came forth to meet him, an honor due to the president who had signalized their country by his choice.

Declining, however, every kind of ovation, Barbicane ensconced himself in a room of the Franklin Hotel.

On the morrow some of the small horses of the Spanish breed, full of vigor and of fire, stood snorting under his windows; but instead of four steeds, here were fifty, together with their riders. Barbicane descended with his three fellow- travelers; and much astonished were they all to find themselves in the midst of such a cavalcade. He remarked that every horseman carried a carbine slung across his shoulders and pistols in his holsters.

On expressing his surprise at these preparations, he was speedily enlightened by a young Floridan, who quietly said:

“Sir, there are Seminoles there.”

“What do you mean by Seminoles?”

“Savages who scour the prairies. We thought it best, therefore, to escort you on your road.”

“Pooh!” cried J. T. Maston, mounting his steed.

“All right,” said the Floridan; “but it is true enough, nevertheless.”

“Gentlemen,” answered Barbicane, “I thank you for your kind attention; but it is time to be off.”

It was five A.M. when Barbicane and his party, quitting Tampa Town, made their way along the coast in the direction of Alifia Creek. This little river falls into Hillisborough Bay twelve miles above Tampa Town. Barbicane and his escort coasted along its right bank to the eastward. Soon the waves of the bay disappeared behind a bend of rising ground, and the Floridan “champagne” alone offered itself to view.

Florida, discovered on Palm Sunday, in 1512, by Juan Ponce de Leon, was originally named *Pascha Florida*. It little deserved that designation, with its dry and parched coasts. But after some few miles of tract the nature of the soil gradually changes and the country shows itself worthy of the name. Cultivated plains soon appear, where are united all the productions of the northern and tropical floras, terminating in prairies abounding with pineapples and yams, tobacco, rice, cotton-plants, and sugar-canes, which extend beyond reach of sight, flinging their riches broadcast with careless prodigality.

Barbicane appeared highly pleased on observing the progressive elevation of the land; and in answer to a question of J. T. Maston, replied:

“My worthy friend, we cannot do better than sink our Columbiad in these high grounds.”

“To get nearer the moon, perhaps?” said the secretary of the Gun Club.

“Not exactly,” replied Barbicane, smiling; “do you not see that among these elevated plateaus we shall have a much easier work of it? No struggles with the water-springs, which will save us long expensive tubings; and we shall be working in daylight instead of down a deep and narrow well. Our business, then, is to open our trenches upon ground some hundreds of yards above the level of the sea.”

“You are right, sir,” struck in Murchison, the engineer; “and, if I mistake not, we shall ere long find a suitable spot for our purpose.”

“I wish we were at the first stroke of the pickaxe,” said the president.

“And I wish we were at the *last*,” cried J. T. Maston.

About ten A.M. the little band had crossed a dozen miles. To fertile plains succeeded a region of forests. There perfumes of the most varied kinds mingled together in tropical profusion. These almost impenetrable forests were composed of pomegranates, orange-trees, citrons, figs, olives, apricots, bananas, huge vines, whose blossoms and fruits rivaled each other in color and perfume. Beneath the odorous shade of these magnificent trees fluttered and warbled a little world of brilliantly plumaged birds.

J. T. Maston and the major could not repress their admiration on finding themselves in the presence of the glorious beauties of this wealth of nature. President Barbicane, however, less sensitive to these wonders, was in haste to press forward; the very luxuriance of the country was displeasing to him.

They hastened onward, therefore, and were compelled to ford several rivers, not without danger, for they were infested with huge alligators from fifteen to eighteen feet long. Maston courageously menaced them with his steel hook, but he only succeeded in frightening some pelicans and teal, while tall flamingos stared stupidly at the party.

At length these denizens of the swamps disappeared in their turn; smaller trees became thinly scattered among less dense thickets — a few isolated groups detached in the midst of endless plains over which ranged herds of startled deer.

“At last,” cried Barbicane, rising in his stirrups, “here we are at the region of pines!”

“Yes! and of savages too,” replied the major.

In fact, some Seminoles had just came in sight upon the horizon; they rode violently backward and forward on their fleet horses, brandishing their spears or discharging their guns with a dull report. These hostile demonstrations, however, had no effect upon Barbicane and his companions.

They were then occupying the center of a rocky plain, which the sun scorched with its parching rays. This was formed by a considerable elevation of the soil, which seemed to offer to the members of the Gun Club all the conditions requisite for the construction of their Columbiad.

“Halt!” said Barbicane, reining up. “Has this place any local appellation?”

“It is called Stones Hill,” replied one of the Floridans.

Barbicane, without saying a word, dismounted, seized his instruments, and began to note his position with extreme exactness. The little band, drawn up in the rear, watched his proceedings in profound silence.

At this moment the sun passed the meridian. Barbicane, after a few moments, rapidly wrote down the result of his observations, and said:

“This spot is situated eighteen hundred feet above the level of the sea, in 27@ 7’ N. lat. and 5@ 7’ W. long. of the meridian of Washington. It appears to me by its rocky and barren character to offer all the conditions requisite for our experiment. On that plain will be raised our magazines, workshops, furnaces, and workmen’s huts; and here, from this very spot,” said he, stamping his foot on the summit of Stones Hill, “hence shall our projectile take its flight into the regions of the Solar World.”

CHAPTER XIV

PICKAXE AND TROWEL

The same evening Barbicane and his companions returned to Tampa Town; and Murchison, the engineer, re-embarked on board the Tampico for New Orleans. His object was to enlist an army of workmen, and to collect together the greater part of the materials. The members of the Gun Club remained at Tampa Town, for the purpose of setting on foot the preliminary works by the aid of the people of the country.

Eight days after its departure, the Tampico returned into the bay of Espiritu Santo, with a whole flotilla of steamboats. Murchison had succeeded in assembling together fifteen hundred artisans. Attracted by the high pay and considerable bounties offered by the Gun Club, he had enlisted a choice legion of stokers, iron-founders, lime-burners, miners, brickmakers, and artisans of every trade, without distinction of color. As many of these people brought their families with them, their departure resembled a perfect emigration.

On the 31st of October, at ten o’clock in the morning, the troop disembarked on the quays of Tampa Town; and one may imagine the activity which pervaded that little town, whose population was thus doubled in a single day.

During the first few days they were busy discharging the cargo brought by the flotilla, the machines, and the rations, as well as a large number of huts constructed of iron plates, separately pieced and numbered. At the same period Barbicane laid the first sleepers of a railway fifteen miles in length, intended to unite Stones Hill with Tampa Town. On the first of November Barbicane quitted Tampa Town with a detachment of workmen; and on the following day the whole town of huts was erected round Stones Hill. This they enclosed with palisades; and in respect of energy and activity, it might have been mistaken for one of the great cities of the Union. Everything was placed under a complete system of discipline, and the works were commenced in most perfect order.

The nature of the soil having been carefully examined, by means of repeated borings, the work of excavation was fixed for the 4th of November.

On that day Barbicane called together his foremen and addressed them as follows: “You are well aware, my friends, of the object with which I have assembled you together in this wild part of Florida. Our business is to construct a cannon measuring nine feet in its interior diameter, six feet thick, and with a stone revetment of nineteen and a half feet in thickness. We have, therefore, a well of sixty feet in diameter to dig down to a depth of nine hundred feet. This great work must be completed within eight months, so that you have 2,543,400 cubic feet of earth to excavate in 255 days; that is to say, in round numbers, 2,000 cubic feet per day. That which would present no difficulty to a thousand navvies working in open country will be of course more troublesome in a comparatively confined space. However, the thing must be done, and I reckon for its accomplishment upon your courage as much as upon your skill.”

At eight o’clock the next morning the first stroke of the pickaxe was struck upon the soil of Florida; and from that moment that prince of tools was never inactive for one moment in the hands of the excavators. The gangs relieved each other every three hours.

On the 4th of November fifty workmen commenced digging, in the very center of the enclosed space on the summit of Stones Hill, a circular hole sixty feet in diameter. The pickaxe first struck upon a kind of black earth, six inches in thickness, which was speedily disposed of. To this earth succeeded two feet of fine sand, which was carefully laid aside as being valuable for serving the casting of the inner mould. After the sand appeared some compact white clay, resembling the chalk of Great Britain, which extended down to a depth of four feet. Then the iron of the picks struck upon the hard bed of the soil; a kind of rock formed of petrified shells, very dry, very solid, and which the picks could with difficulty penetrate. At this point the excavation exhibited a depth of six and a half feet and the work of the masonry was begun.

At the bottom of the excavation they constructed a wheel of oak, a kind of circle strongly bolted together, and of immense strength. The center of this wooden disc was hollowed out to a diameter equal to the exterior diameter of the Columbiad. Upon this wheel rested the first layers of the masonry, the stones of which were bound together by hydraulic cement, with irresistible tenacity. The workmen, after laying the stones from the circumference to the center, were thus enclosed within a kind of well twenty-one feet in diameter. When this work was accomplished, the miners resumed their picks and cut away the rock from underneath the wheel itself, taking care to support it as they advanced upon blocks of great thickness. At every two feet which the hole gained in depth they successively withdrew the blocks. The wheel then sank little by little, and with it the massive ring of masonry, on the upper bed of which the masons labored incessantly, always reserving some vent holes to permit the escape of gas during the operation of the casting.

This kind of work required on the part of the workmen extreme nicety and minute attention. More than one, in digging underneath the wheel, was dangerously injured by the splinters of stone. But their ardor never relaxed, night or day. By day they worked under the rays of the scorching sun; by night, under the gleam of the electric light. The sounds of the picks against the rock, the bursting of mines, the grinding of the machines, the wreaths of smoke scattered through the air, traced around Stones Hill a circle of terror which the herds of buffaloes and the war parties of the Seminoles never ventured to pass. Nevertheless, the works advanced regularly, as the steam-cranes actively removed the rubbish. Of unexpected obstacles there was little account; and with regard to foreseen difficulties, they were speedily disposed of.

At the expiration of the first month the well had attained the depth assigned for that lapse of time, namely, 112 feet. This depth was doubled in December, and trebled in January.

During the month of February the workmen had to contend with a sheet of water which made its way right across the outer soil. It became necessary to employ very powerful pumps and compressed-air engines to drain it off, so as to close up the orifice from whence it issued; just as one stops a leak on board ship. They at last succeeded in getting the upper hand of these untoward streams; only, in consequence of the loosening of the soil, the wheel partly gave way, and a slight partial settlement ensued. This accident cost the life of several workmen.

No fresh occurrence thenceforward arrested the progress of the operation; and on the tenth of June, twenty days before the expiration of the period fixed by Barbicane, the well, lined throughout with its facing of stone, had attained the depth of 900 feet. At the bottom the masonry rested upon a massive block measuring thirty feet in thickness, while on the upper portion it was level with the surrounding soil.

President Barbicane and the members of the Gun Club warmly congratulated their engineer Murchison; the cyclopean work had been accomplished with extraordinary rapidity.

During these eight months Barbicane never quitted Stones Hill for a single instant. Keeping ever close by the work of excavation, he busied himself incessantly with the welfare and health of his workpeople, and was singularly fortunate in warding off the epidemics common to large communities of men, and so disastrous in those regions of the globe which are exposed to the influences of tropical climates.

Many workmen, it is true, paid with their lives for the rashness inherent in these dangerous labors; but these mishaps are impossible to be avoided, and they are classed among the details with which the Americans trouble themselves but little. They have in fact more regard for human nature in general than for the individual in particular.

Nevertheless, Barbicane professed opposite principles to these, and put them in force at every opportunity. So, thanks to his care, his intelligence, his useful intervention in all difficulties, his prodigious and humane sagacity, the average of accidents did not exceed that of transatlantic countries, noted for their excessive precautions — France, for instance, among others, where they reckon about one accident for every two hundred thousand francs of work.

CHAPTER XV

THE FETE OF THE CASTING

During the eight months which were employed in the work of excavation the preparatory works of the casting had been carried on simultaneously with extreme rapidity. A stranger arriving at Stones Hill would have been surprised at the spectacle offered to his view.

At 600 yards from the well, and circularly arranged around it as a central point, rose 1,200 reverberating ovens, each six feet in diameter, and separated from each other by an interval of three feet. The circumference occupied by these 1,200 ovens presented a length of two miles. Being all constructed on the same plan, each with its high quadrangular chimney, they produced a most singular effect.

It will be remembered that on their third meeting the committee had decided to use cast iron for the Columbiad, and in particular the white description. This metal, in fact, is the most tenacious, the most ductile, and the most malleable, and consequently suitable for all moulding operations; and when smelted with pit coal, is of superior quality for all engineering works requiring great resisting power, such as cannon, steam boilers, hydraulic presses, and the like.

Cast iron, however, if subjected to only one single fusion, is rarely sufficiently homogeneous; and it requires a second fusion completely to refine it by dispossessing it of its last earthly deposits. So long before being forwarded to Tampa Town, the iron ore, molten in the great furnaces of Coldspring, and brought into contact with coal and silicium heated to a high temperature, was carburized and transformed into cast iron. After this first operation, the metal was sent on to Stones Hill. They had, however, to deal with 136,000,000 pounds of iron, a quantity far too costly to send by railway. The cost of transport would have been double that of material. It appeared preferable to freight vessels at New York, and to load them with the iron in bars. This, however, required not less than sixty- eight vessels of 1,000 tons, a veritable fleet, which, quitting New York on the 3rd of May, on the 10th of the same month ascended the Bay of Espiritu Santo, and discharged their cargoes, without dues, in the port at Tampa Town. Thence the iron was transported by rail to Stones Hill, and about the middle of January this enormous mass of metal was delivered at its destination.

It will easily be understood that 1,200 furnaces were not too many to melt simultaneously these 60,000 tons of iron. Each of these furnaces contained nearly 140,000 pounds weight of metal. They were all built after the model of those which served for the casting of the Rodman gun; they were trapezoidal in shape, with a high elliptical arch. These furnaces, constructed of fireproof brick, were especially adapted for burning pit coal, with a flat bottom upon which the iron bars were laid. This bottom, inclined at an angle of 25 degrees, allowed the metal to flow into the receiving troughs; and the 1,200 converging trenches carried the molten metal down to the central well.

The day following that on which the works of the masonry and boring had been completed, Barbicane set to work upon the central mould. His object now was to raise within the center of the well, and with a coincident axis, a cylinder 900 feet high, and nine feet in diameter, which should exactly fill up the space reserved for the bore of the Columbiad. This cylinder was composed of a mixture of clay and sand, with the addition of a little hay and straw. The space left between the mould and the masonry was intended to be filled up by the molten metal, which would thus form the walls six feet in thickness. This cylinder, in order to maintain its equilibrium, had to be bound by iron bands, and firmly fixed at certain intervals by cross-clamps fastened into the stone lining; after the castings these would be buried in the block of metal, leaving no external projection.

This operation was completed on the 8th of July, and the run of the metal was fixed for the following day.

“This *fete* of the casting will be a grand ceremony,” said J.

T. Maston to his friend Barbicane.

“Undoubtedly,” said Barbicane; “but it will not be a public *fete*”

“What! will you not open the gates of the enclosure to all comers?”

“I must be very careful, Maston. The casting of the Columbiad is an extremely delicate, not to say a dangerous operation, and I should prefer its being done privately. At the discharge of the projectile, a *fete* if you like — till then, no!”

The president was right. The operation involved unforeseen dangers, which a great influx of spectators would have hindered him from averting. It was necessary to preserve complete freedom of movement. No one was admitted within the enclosure except a delegation of members of the Gun Club, who had made the voyage to Tampa Town. Among these was the brisk Bilsby, Tom Hunter, Colonel Blomsberry, Major Elphinstone, General Morgan, and the rest of the lot to whom the casting of the Columbiad was a matter of personal interest. J. T. Maston became their cicerone. He omitted no point of detail; he conducted them throughout the magazines, workshops, through the midst of the engines, and compelled them to visit the whole 1,200 furnaces one after the other. At the end of the twelve-hundredth visit they were pretty well knocked up.

The casting was to take place at twelve o'clock precisely. The previous evening each furnace had been charged with 114,000 pounds weight of metal in bars disposed cross-ways to each other, so as to allow the hot air to circulate freely between them. At daybreak the 1,200 chimneys vomited their torrents of flame into the air, and the ground was agitated with dull tremblings. As many pounds of metal as there were to cast, so many pounds of coal were there to burn. Thus there were 68,000 tons of coal which projected in the face of the sun a thick curtain of smoke. The heat soon became insupportable within the circle of furnaces, the rumbling of which resembled the rolling of thunder. The powerful ventilators added their continuous blasts and saturated with oxygen the glowing plates. The operation, to be successful, required to be conducted with great rapidity. On a signal given by a cannon-shot each furnace was to give vent to the molten iron and completely to empty itself. These arrangements made, foremen and workmen waited the preconcerted moment with an impatience mingled with a certain amount of emotion. Not a soul remained within the enclosure. Each superintendent took his post by the aperture of the run.

Barbicane and his colleagues, perched on a neighboring eminence, assisted at the operation. In front of them was a piece of artillery ready to give fire on the signal from the engineer. Some minutes before midday the first driblets of metal began to flow; the reservoirs filled little by little; and, by the time that the whole melting was completely accomplished, it was kept in abeyance for a few minutes in order to facilitate the separation of foreign substances.

Twelve o’clock struck! A gunshot suddenly pealed forth and shot its flame into the air. Twelve hundred melting-troughs were simultaneously opened and twelve hundred fiery serpents crept toward the central well, unrolling their incandescent curves. There, down they plunged with a terrific noise into a depth of 900 feet. It was an exciting and a magnificent spectacle. The ground trembled, while these molten waves, launching into the sky their wreaths of smoke, evaporated the moisture of the mould and hurled it upward through the vent-holes of the stone lining in the form of dense vapor-clouds. These artificial clouds unrolled their thick spirals to a height of 1,000 yards into the air. A savage, wandering somewhere beyond the limits of the horizon, might have believed that some new crater was forming in the bosom of Florida, although there was neither any eruption, nor typhoon, nor storm, nor struggle of the elements, nor any of those terrible phenomena which nature is capable of producing. No, it was man alone who had produced these reddish vapors, these gigantic flames worthy of a volcano itself, these tremendous vibrations resembling the shock of an earthquake, these reverberations rivaling those of hurricanes and storms; and it was his hand which precipitated into an abyss, dug by himself, a whole Niagara of molten metal!

CHAPTER XVI

THE COLUMBIAD

Had the casting succeeded? They were reduced to mere conjecture. There was indeed every reason to expect success, since the mould has absorbed the entire mass of the molten metal; still some considerable time must elapse before they could arrive at any certainty upon the matter.

The patience of the members of the Gun Club was sorely tried during this period of time. But they could do nothing. J. T. Maston escaped roasting by a miracle. Fifteen days after the casting an immense column of smoke was still rising in the open sky and the ground burned the soles of the feet within a radius of two hundred feet round the summit of Stones Hill. It was impossible to approach nearer. All they could do was to wait with what patience they might.

“Here we are at the 10th of August,” exclaimed J. T. Maston one morning, “only four months to the 1st of December! We shall never be ready in time!” Barbicane said nothing, but his silence covered serious irritation.

However, daily observations revealed a certain change going on in the state of the ground. About the 15th of August the vapors ejected had sensibly diminished in intensity and thickness. Some days afterward the earth exhaled only a slight puff of smoke, the last breath of the monster enclosed within its circle of stone. Little by little the belt of heat contracted, until on the 22nd of August, Barbicane, his colleagues, and the engineer were enabled to set foot on the iron sheet which lay level upon the summit of Stones Hill.

“At last!” exclaimed the president of the Gun Club, with an immense sigh of relief.

The work was resumed the same day. They proceeded at once to extract the interior mould, for the purpose of clearing out the boring of the piece. Pickaxes and boring irons were set to work without intermission. The clayey and sandy soils had acquired extreme hardness under the action of the heat; but, by the aid of the machines, the rubbish on being dug out was rapidly carted away on railway wagons; and such was the ardor of the work, so persuasive the arguments of Barbicane’s dollars, that by the 3rd of September all traces of the mould had entirely disappeared.

Immediately the operation of boring was commenced; and by the aid of powerful machines, a few weeks later, the inner surface of the immense tube had been rendered perfectly cylindrical, and the bore of the piece had acquired a thorough polish.

At length, on the 22d of September, less than a twelvemonth after Barbicane’s original proposition, the enormous weapon, accurately bored, and exactly vertically pointed, was ready for work. There was only the moon now to wait for; and they were pretty sure that she would not fail in the rendezvous.

The ecstasy of J. T. Maston knew no bounds, and he narrowly escaped a frightful fall while staring down the tube. But for the strong hand of Colonel Blomsberry, the worthy secretary, like a modern Erostratus, would have found his death in the depths of the Columbiad.

The cannon was then finished; there was no possible doubt as to its perfect completion. So, on the 6th of October, Captain Nicholl opened an account between himself and President Barbicane, in which he debited himself to the latter in the sum of two thousand dollars. One may believe that the captain's wrath was increased to its highest point, and must have made him seriously ill. However, he had still three bets of three, four, and five thousand dollars, respectively; and if he gained two out of these, his position would not be very bad. But the money question did not enter into his calculations; it was the success of his rival in casting a cannon against which iron plates sixty feet thick would have been ineffectual, that dealt him a terrible blow.

After the 23rd of September the enclosure of Stones hill was thrown open to the public; and it will be easily imagined what was the concourse of visitors to this spot! There was an incessant flow of people to and from Tampa Town and the place, which resembled a procession, or rather, in fact, a pilgrimage.

It was already clear to be seen that, on the day of the experiment itself, the aggregate of spectators would be counted by millions; for they were already arriving from all parts of the earth upon this narrow strip of promontory. Europe was emigrating to America.

Up to that time, however, it must be confessed, the curiosity of the numerous comers was but scantily gratified. Most had counted upon witnessing the spectacle of the casting, and they were treated to nothing but smoke. This was sorry food for hungry eyes; but Barbicane would admit no one to that operation. Then ensued grumbling, discontent, murmurs; they blamed the president, taxed him with dictatorial conduct. His proceedings were declared "un-American." There was very nearly a riot round Stones Hill; but Barbicane remained inflexible. When, however, the Columbiad was entirely finished, this state of closed doors could no longer be maintained; besides it would have been bad taste, and even imprudence, to affront the public feeling. Barbicane, therefore, opened the enclosure to all comers; but, true to his practical disposition, he determined to coin money out of the public curiosity.

It was something, indeed, to be enabled to contemplate this immense Columbiad; but to descend into its depths, this seemed to the Americans the *ne plus ultra* of earthly felicity. Consequently, there was not one curious spectator who was not willing to give himself the treat of visiting the interior of this great metallic abyss. Baskets suspended from steam-cranes permitted them to satisfy their curiosity. There was a perfect mania. Women, children, old men, all made it a point of duty to penetrate the mysteries of the colossal gun. The fare for the descent was fixed at five dollars per head; and despite this high charge, during the two months which preceded the experiment, the influx of visitors enabled the Gun Club to pocket nearly five hundred thousand dollars!

It is needless to say that the first visitors of the Columbiad were the members of the Gun Club. This privilege was justly reserved for that illustrious body. The ceremony took place on the 25th of September. A basket of honor took down the president, J. T. Maston, Major Elphinstone, General Morgan, Colonel Blomsberry, and other members of the club, to the number of ten in all. How hot it was at the bottom of that long tube of metal! They were half suffocated. But what delight! What ecstasy! A table had been laid with six covers on the massive stone which formed the bottom of the Columbiad, and lighted by a jet of electric light resembling that of day itself. Numerous exquisite dishes, which seemed to descend from heaven, were placed successively before the guests, and the richest wines of France flowed in profusion during this splendid repast, served nine hundred feet beneath the surface of the earth!

The festival was animated, not to say somewhat noisy. Toasts flew backward and forward. They drank to the earth and to her satellite, to the Gun Club, the Union, the Moon, Diana, Phoebe, Selene, the “peaceful courier of the night!” All the hurrahs, carried upward upon the sonorous waves of the immense acoustic tube, arrived with the sound of thunder at its mouth; and the multitude ranged round Stones Hill heartily united their shouts with those of the ten revelers hidden from view at the bottom of the gigantic Columbiad.

J. T. Maston was no longer master of himself. Whether he shouted or gesticulated, ate or drank most, would be a difficult matter to determine. At all events, he would not have given his place up for an empire, “not even if the cannon — loaded, primed, and fired at that very moment — were to blow him in pieces into the planetary world.”

CHAPTER XVII

A TELEGRAPHIC DISPATCH

The great works undertaken by the Gun Club had now virtually come to an end; and two months still remained before the day for the discharge of the shot to the moon. To the general impatience these two months appeared as long as years! Hitherto the smallest details of the operation had been daily chronicled by the journals, which the public devoured with eager eyes.

Just at this moment a circumstance, the most unexpected, the most extraordinary and incredible, occurred to rouse afresh their panting spirits, and to throw every mind into a state of the most violent excitement.

One day, the 30th of September, at 3:47 P.M. a telegram, transmitted by cable from Valentia (Ireland) to Newfoundland and the American Mainland, arrived at the address of President Barbicane.

The president tore open the envelope, read the dispatch, and, despite his remarkable powers of self-control, his lips turned pale and his eyes grew dim, on reading the twenty words of this telegram.

Here is the text of the dispatch, which figures now in the archives of the Gun Club:

FRANCE, PARIS,

30 September, 4 A.M.

Barbicane, Tampa Town, Florida, United States.

Substitute for your spherical shell a cylindro-conical projectile.

I shall go inside. Shall arrive by steamer Atlanta.

MICHEL ARDAN.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PASSENGER OF THE ATLANTA

If this astounding news, instead of flying through the electric wires, had simply arrived by post in the ordinary sealed envelope, Barbicane would not have hesitated a moment. He would have held his tongue about it, both as a measure of prudence, and in order not to have to reconsider his plans. This telegram might be a cover for some jest, especially as it came from a Frenchman. What human being would ever have conceived the idea of such a journey? and, if such a person really existed, he must be an idiot, whom one would shut up in a lunatic ward, rather than within the walls of the projectile.

The contents of the dispatch, however, speedily became known; for the telegraphic officials possessed but little discretion, and Michel Ardan’s proposition ran at once throughout the several States of the Union. Barbicane, had, therefore, no further motives for keeping silence. Consequently, he called together such of his colleagues as were at the moment in Tampa Town, and without any expression of his own opinions simply read to them the laconic text itself. It was received with every possible variety of expressions of doubt, incredulity, and derision from every one, with the exception of J. T. Maston, who exclaimed, “It is a grand idea, however!”

When Barbicane originally proposed to send a shot to the moon every one looked upon the enterprise as simple and practicable enough — a mere question of gunnery; but when a person, professing to be a reasonable being, offered to take passage within the projectile, the whole thing became a farce, or, in plainer language a humbug.

One question, however, remained. Did such a being exist? This telegram flashed across the depths of the Atlantic, the designation of the vessel on board which he was to take his passage, the date assigned for his speedy arrival, all combined to impart a certain character of reality to the proposal. They must get some clearer notion of the matter. Scattered groups of inquirers at length condensed themselves into a compact crowd, which made straight for the residence of President Barbicane. That worthy individual was keeping quiet with the intention of watching events as they arose. But he had forgotten to take into account the public impatience; and it was with no pleasant countenance that he watched the population of Tampa Town gathering under his windows. The murmurs and vociferations below presently obliged him to appear. He came forward, therefore, and on silence being procured, a citizen put point-blank to him the following question: “Is the person mentioned in the telegram, under the name of Michel Ardan, on his way here? Yes or no.”

“Gentlemen,” replied Barbicane, “I know no more than you do.”

“We must know,” roared the impatient voices.

“Time will show,” calmly replied the president.

“Time has no business to keep a whole country in suspense,” replied the orator. “Have you altered the plans of the projectile according to the request of the telegram?”

“Not yet, gentlemen; but you are right! we must have better information to go by. The telegraph must complete its information.”

“To the telegraph!” roared the crowd.

Barbicane descended; and heading the immense assemblage, led the way to the telegraph office. A few minutes later a telegram was dispatched to the secretary of the underwriters at Liverpool, requesting answers to the following queries:

“About the ship Atlanta — when did she leave Europe? Had she on board a Frenchman named Michel Ardan?”

Two hours afterward Barbicane received information too exact to leave room for the smallest remaining doubt.

“The steamer Atlanta from Liverpool put to sea on the 2nd of October, bound for Tampa Town, having on board a Frenchman borne on the list of passengers by the name of Michel Ardan.”

That very evening he wrote to the house of Breadwill and Co. requesting them to suspend the casting of the projectile until the receipt of further orders. On the 10th of October, at nine A.M. the semaphores of the Bahama Canal signaled a thick smoke on the horizon. Two hours later a large steamer exchanged signals with them. the name of the Atlanta flew at once over Tampa Town. At four o’clock the English vessel entered the Bay of Espiritu Santo. At five it crossed the passage of Hillisborough Bay at full steam. At six she cast anchor at Port Tampa. The anchor had scarcely caught the sandy bottom when five hundred boats surrounded the Atlanta, and the steamer was taken by assault. Barbicane was the first to set foot on deck, and in a voice of which he vainly tried to conceal the emotion, called “Michel Ardan.”

“Here!” replied an individual perched on the poop.

Barbicane, with arms crossed, looked fixedly at the passenger of the Atlanta.

He was a man of about forty-two years of age, of large build, but slightly round-shouldered. His massive head momentarily shook a shock of reddish hair, which resembled a lion’s mane. His face was short with a broad forehead, and furnished with a moustache as bristly as a cat’s, and little patches of yellowish whiskers upon full cheeks. Round, wildish eyes, slightly near-sighted, completed a physiognomy essentially feline. His nose was firmly shaped, his mouth particularly sweet in expression, high forehead, intelligent and furrowed with wrinkles like a newly-plowed field. The body was powerfully developed and firmly fixed upon long legs. Muscular arms, and a general air of decision gave him the appearance of a hardy, jolly, companion. He was dressed in a suit of ample dimensions, loose neckerchief, open shirtcollar, disclosing a robust neck; his cuffs were invariably unbuttoned, through which appeared a pair of red hands.

On the bridge of the steamer, in the midst of the crowd, he bustled to and fro, never still for a moment, “dragging his anchors,” as the sailors say, gesticulating, making free with everybody, biting his nails with nervous avidity. He was one of those originals which nature sometimes invents in the freak of a moment, and of which she then breaks the mould.

Among other peculiarities, this curiosity gave himself out for a sublime ignoramus, “like Shakespeare,” and professed supreme contempt for all scientific men. Those “fellows,” as he called them, “are only fit to mark the points, while we play the game.” He was, in fact, a thorough Bohemian, adventurous, but not an adventurer; a hare-brained fellow, a kind of Icarus, only possessing relays of wings. For the rest, he was ever in scrapes, ending invariably by falling on his feet, like those little figures which they sell for children’s toys. In a few words, his motto was “I have my opinions,” and the love of the impossible constituted his ruling passion.

Such was the passenger of the Atlanta, always excitable, as if boiling under the action of some internal fire by the character of his physical organization. If ever two individuals offered a striking contrast to each other, these were certainly Michel Ardan and the Yankee Barbicane; both, moreover, being equally enterprising and daring, each in his own way.

The scrutiny which the president of the Gun Club had instituted regarding this new rival was quickly interrupted by the shouts and hurrahs of the crowd. The cries became at last so uproarious, and the popular enthusiasm assumed so personal a form, that Michel Ardan, after having shaken hands some thousands of times, at the imminent risk of leaving his fingers behind him, was fain at last to make a bolt for his cabin.

Barbicane followed him without uttering a word.

“You are Barbicane, I suppose?” said Michel Ardan, in a tone of voice in which he would have addressed a friend of twenty years’ standing.

“Yes,” replied the president of the Gun Club.

“All right! how d’ye do, Barbicane? how are you getting on — pretty well? that’s right.”

“So,” said Barbicane without further preliminary, “you are quite determined to go.”

“Quite decided.”

“Nothing will stop you?”

“Nothing. Have you modified your projectile according to my telegram.”

“I waited for your arrival. But,” asked Barbicane again, “have you carefully reflected?”

“Reflected? have I any time to spare? I find an opportunity of making a tour in the moon, and I mean to profit by it. There is the whole gist of the matter.”

Barbicane looked hard at this man who spoke so lightly of his project with such complete absence of anxiety. “But, at least,” said he, “you have some plans, some means of carrying your project into execution?”

“Excellent, my dear Barbicane; only permit me to offer one remark: My wish is to tell my story once for all, to everybody, and then have done with it; then there will be no need for recapitulation. So, if you have no objection, assemble your friends, colleagues, the whole town, all Florida, all America if you like, and to-morrow I shall be ready to explain my plans and answer any objections whatever that may be advanced. You may rest assured I shall wait without stirring. Will that suit you?”

“All right,” replied Barbicane.

So saying, the president left the cabin and informed the crowd of the proposal of Michel Ardan. His words were received with clappings of hands and shouts of joy. They had removed all difficulties. To-morrow every one would contemplate at his ease this European hero. However, some of the spectators, more infatuated than the rest, would not leave the deck of the Atlanta. They passed the night on board. Among others J. T. Maston got his hook fixed in the combing of the poop, and it pretty nearly required the capstan to get it out again.

“He is a hero! a hero!” he cried, a theme of which he was never tired of ringing the changes; “and we are only like weak, silly women, compared with this European!”

As to the president, after having suggested to the visitors it was time to retire, he re-entered the passenger’s cabin, and remained there till the bell of the steamer made it midnight.

But then the two rivals in popularity shook hands heartily and parted on terms of intimate friendship.

CHAPTER XIX

A MONSTER MEETING

On the following day Barbicane, fearing that indiscreet questions might be put to Michel Ardan, was desirous of reducing the number of the audience to a few of the initiated, his own colleagues for instance. He might as well have tried to check the Falls of Niagara! he was compelled, therefore, to give up the idea, and let his new friend run the chances of a public conference. The place chosen for this monster meeting was a vast plain situated in the rear of the town. In a few hours, thanks to the help of the shipping in port, an immense roofing of canvas was stretched over the parched prairie, and protected it from the burning rays of the sun. There three hundred thousand people braved for many hours the stifling heat while awaiting the arrival of the Frenchman. Of this crowd of spectators a first set could both see and hear; a second set saw badly and heard nothing at all; and as for the third, it could neither see nor hear anything at all. At three o’clock Michel Ardan made his appearance, accompanied by the principal members of the Gun Club. He was supported on his right by President Barbicane, and on his left by J. T. Maston, more radiant than the midday sun, and nearly as ruddy. Ardan mounted a platform, from the top of which his view extended over a sea of black hats.

He exhibited not the slightest embarrassment; he was just as gay, familiar, and pleasant as if he were at home. To the hurrahs which greeted him he replied by a graceful bow; then, waving his hands to request silence, he spoke in perfectly correct English as follows:

“Gentlemen, despite the very hot weather I request your patience for a short time while I offer some explanations regarding the projects which seem to have so interested you. I am neither an orator nor a man of science, and I had no idea of addressing you in public; but my friend Barbicane has told me that you would like to hear me, and I am quite at your service. Listen to me, therefore, with your six hundred thousand ears, and please excuse the faults of the speaker. Now pray do not forget that you see before you a perfect ignoramus whose ignorance goes so far that he cannot even understand the difficulties! It seemed to him that it was a matter quite simple, natural, and easy to take one's place in a projectile and start for the moon! That journey must be undertaken sooner or later; and, as for the mode of locomotion adopted, it follows simply the law of progress. Man began by walking on all-fours; then, one fine day, on two feet; then in a carriage; then in a stage-coach; and lastly by railway. Well, the projectile is the vehicle of the future, and the planets themselves are nothing else! Now some of you, gentlemen, may imagine that the velocity we propose to impart to it is extravagant. It is nothing of the kind. All the stars exceed it in rapidity, and the earth herself is at this moment carrying us round the sun at three times as rapid a rate, and yet she is a mere lounger on the way compared with many others of the planets! And her velocity is constantly decreasing. Is it not evident, then, I ask you, that there will some day appear velocities far greater than these, of which light or electricity will probably be the mechanical agent?

“Yes, gentlemen,” continued the orator, “in spite of the opinions of certain narrow-minded people, who would shut up the human race upon this globe, as within some magic circle which it must never outstep, we shall one day travel to the moon, the planets, and the stars, with the same facility, rapidity, and certainty as we now make the voyage from Liverpool to New York! Distance is but a relative expression, and must end by being reduced to zero.”

The assembly, strongly predisposed as they were in favor of the

French hero, were slightly staggered at this bold theory.

Michel Ardan perceived the fact.

“Gentlemen,” he continued with a pleasant smile, “you do not seem quite convinced. Very good! Let us reason the matter out. Do you know how long it would take for an express train to reach the moon? Three hundred days; no more! And what is that? The distance is no more than nine times the circumference of the earth; and there are no sailors or travelers, of even moderate activity, who have not made longer journeys than that in their lifetime. And now consider that I shall be only ninety- seven hours on my journey. Ah! I see you are reckoning that the moon is a long way off from the earth, and that one must think twice before making the experiment. What would you say, then, if we were talking of going to Neptune, which revolves at a distance of more than two thousand seven hundred and twenty millions of miles from the sun! And yet what is that compared with the distance of the fixed stars, some of which, such as Arcturus, are billions of miles distant from us? And then you talk of the distance which separates the planets from the sun! And there are people who affirm that such a thing as distance exists. Absurdity, folly, idiotic nonsense! Would you know what I think of our own solar universe? Shall I tell you my theory? It is very simple! In my opinion the solar system is a solid homogeneous body; the planets which compose it are in actual contact with each other; and whatever space exists between them is nothing more than the space which separates the molecules of the densest metal, such as silver, iron, or platinum! I have the right, therefore, to affirm, and I repeat, with the conviction which must penetrate all your minds, `Distance is but an empty name; distance does not really exist!’”

“Hurrah!” cried one voice (need it be said it was that of J. T. Maston). “Distance does not exist!” And overcome by the energy of his movements, he nearly fell from the platform to the ground. He just escaped a severe fall, which would have proved to him that distance was by no means an empty name.

“Gentlemen,” resumed the orator, “I repeat that the distance between the earth and her satellite is a mere trifle, and undeserving of serious consideration. I am convinced that before twenty years are over one-half of our earth will have paid a visit to the moon. Now, my worthy friends, if you have any question to put to me, you will, I fear, sadly embarrass a poor man like myself; still I will do my best to answer you.”

Up to this point the president of the Gun Club had been satisfied with the turn which the discussion had assumed. It became now, however, desirable to divert Ardan from questions of a practical nature, with which he was doubtless far less conversant. Barbicane, therefore, hastened to get in a word, and began by asking his new friend whether he thought that the moon and the planets were inhabited.

“You put before me a great problem, my worthy president,” replied the orator, smiling. “Still, men of great intelligence, such as Plutarch, Swedenborg, Bernardin de St. Pierre, and others have, if I mistake not, pronounced in the affirmative. Looking at the question from the natural philosopher’s point of view, I should say that nothing useless existed in the world; and, replying to your question by another, I should venture to assert, that if these worlds are habitable, they either are, have been, or will be inhabited.”

“No one could answer more logically or fairly,” replied the president. “The question then reverts to this: Are these worlds habitable? For my own part I believe they are.”

“For myself, I feel certain of it,” said Michel Ardan.

“Nevertheless,” retorted one of the audience, “there are many arguments against the habitability of the worlds. The conditions of life must evidently be greatly modified upon the majority of them. To mention only the planets, we should be either broiled alive in some, or frozen to death in others, according as they are more or less removed from the sun.”

“I regret,” replied Michel Ardan, “that I have not the honor of personally knowing my contradictor, for I would have attempted to answer him. His objection has its merits, I admit; but I think we may successfully combat it, as well as all others which affect the habitability of other worlds. If I were a natural philosopher, I would tell him that if less of caloric were set in motion upon the planets which are nearest to the sun, and more, on the contrary, upon those which are farthest removed from it, this simple fact would alone suffice to equalize the heat, and to render the temperature of those worlds supportable by beings organized like ourselves. If I were a naturalist, I would tell him that, according to some illustrious men of science, nature has furnished us with instances upon the earth of animals existing under very varying conditions of life; that fish respire in a medium fatal to other animals; that amphibious creatures possess a double existence very difficult of explanation; that certain denizens of the seas maintain life at enormous depths, and there support a pressure equal to that of fifty or sixty atmospheres without being crushed; that several aquatic insects, insensible to temperature, are met with equally among boiling springs and in the frozen plains of the Polar Sea; in fine, that we cannot help recognizing in nature a diversity of means of operation oftentimes incomprehensible, but not the less real. If I were a chemist, I would tell him that the aerolites, bodies evidently formed exteriorly of our terrestrial globe, have, upon analysis, revealed indisputable traces of carbon, a substance which owes its origin solely to organized beings, and which, according to the experiments of Reichenbach, must necessarily itself have been endued with animation. And lastly, were I a theologian, I would tell him that the scheme of the Divine Redemption, according to St. Paul, seems to be applicable, not merely to the earth, but to all the celestial worlds. But, unfortunately, I am neither theologian, nor chemist, nor naturalist, nor philosopher; therefore, in my absolute ignorance of the great laws which govern the universe, I confine myself to saying in reply, `I do not know whether the worlds are inhabited or not: and since I do not know, I am going to see!'"

Whether Michel Ardan's antagonist hazarded any further arguments or not it is impossible to say, for the uproarious shouts of the crowd would not allow any expression of opinion to gain a hearing. On silence being restored, the triumphant orator contented himself with adding the following remarks:

"Gentlemen, you will observe that I have but slightly touched upon this great question. There is another altogether different line of argument in favor of the habitability of the stars, which I omit for the present. I only desire to call attention to one point. To those who maintain that the planets are *not* inhabited one may reply: You might be perfectly in the right, if you could only show that the earth is the best possible world, in spite of what Voltaire has said. She has but *one* satellite, while Jupiter, Uranus, Saturn, Neptune have each several, an advantage by no means to be despised. But that which renders our own globe so uncomfortable is the inclination of its axis to the plane of its orbit. Hence the inequality of days and nights; hence the disagreeable diversity of the seasons. On the surface of our unhappy spheroid we are always either too hot or too cold; we are frozen in winter, broiled in summer; it is the planet of rheumatism, coughs, bronchitis; while on the surface of Jupiter, for example, where the axis is but slightly inclined, the inhabitants may enjoy uniform temperatures. It possesses zones of perpetual springs, summers, autumns, and winters; every Jovian may choose for himself what climate he likes, and there spend the whole of his life in security from all variations of temperature. You will, I am sure, readily admit this superiority of Jupiter over our own planet, to say nothing of his years, which each equal twelve of ours! Under such auspices and such marvelous conditions of existence, it appears to me that the inhabitants of so fortunate a world must be in every respect superior to ourselves. All we require, in order to attain such perfection, is the mere trifle of having an axis of rotation less inclined to the plane of its orbit!"

"Hurrah!" roared an energetic voice, "let us unite our efforts, invent the necessary machines, and rectify the earth's axis!"

A thunder of applause followed this proposal, the author of which was, of course, no other than J. T. Maston. And, in all probability, if the truth must be told, if the Yankees could only have found a point of application for it, they would have constructed a lever capable of raising the earth and rectifying its axis. It was just this deficiency which baffled these daring mechanicians.

CHAPTER XX

ATTACK AND RIPOSTE

As soon as the excitement had subsided, the following words were heard uttered in a strong and determined voice:

“Now that the speaker has favored us with so much imagination, would he be so good as to return to his subject, and give us a little practical view of the question?”

All eyes were directed toward the person who spoke. He was a little dried-up man, of an active figure, with an American “goatee” beard. Profiting by the different movements in the crowd, he had managed by degrees to gain the front row of spectators. There, with arms crossed and stern gaze, he watched the hero of the meeting. After having put his question he remained silent, and appeared to take no notice of the thousands of looks directed toward himself, nor of the murmur of disapprobation excited by his words. Meeting at first with no reply, he repeated his question with marked emphasis, adding, “We are here to talk about the *moon* and not about the *earth*.”

“You are right, sir,” replied Michel Ardan; “the discussion has become irregular. We will return to the moon.”

“Sir,” said the unknown, “you pretend that our satellite is inhabited. Very good, but if Selenites do exist, that race of beings assuredly must live without breathing, for — I warn you for your own sake — there is not the smallest particle of air on the surface of the moon.”

At this remark Ardan pushed up his shock of red hair; he saw that he was on the point of being involved in a struggle with this person upon the very gist of the whole question. He looked sternly at him in his turn and said:

“Oh! so there is no air in the moon? And pray, if you are so good, who ventures to affirm that?

“The men of science.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Sir,” replied Michel, “pleasantry apart, I have a profound respect for men of science who do possess science, but a profound contempt for men of science who do not.”

“Do you know any who belong to the latter category?”

“Decidedly. In France there are some who maintain that, mathematically, a bird cannot possibly fly; and others who demonstrate theoretically that fishes were never made to live in water.”

“I have nothing to do with persons of that description, and I can quote, in support of my statement, names which you cannot refuse deference to.”

“Then, sir, you will sadly embarrass a poor ignorant, who, besides, asks nothing better than to learn.”

“Why, then, do you introduce scientific questions if you have never studied them?” asked the unknown somewhat coarsely.

“For the reason that `he is always brave who never suspects danger.’ I know nothing, it is true; but it is precisely my very weakness which constitutes my strength.”

“Your weakness amounts to folly,” retorted the unknown in a passion.

“All the better,” replied our Frenchman, “if it carries me up to the moon.”

Barbicane and his colleagues devoured with their eyes the intruder who had so boldly placed himself in antagonism to their enterprise. Nobody knew him, and the president, uneasy as to the result of so free a discussion, watched his new friend with some anxiety. The meeting began to be somewhat fidgety also, for the contest directed their attention to the dangers, if not the actual impossibilities, of the proposed expedition.

“Sir,” replied Ardan’s antagonist, “there are many and incontrovertible reasons which prove the absence of an atmosphere in the moon. I might say that, *a priori*, if one ever did exist, it must have been absorbed by the earth; but I prefer to bring forward indisputable facts.”

“Bring them forward then, sir, as many as you please.”

“You know,” said the stranger, “that when any luminous rays cross a medium such as the air, they are deflected out of the straight line; in other words, they undergo refraction. Well! When stars are occulted by the moon, their rays, on grazing the edge of her disc, exhibit not the least deviation, nor offer the slightest indication of refraction. It follows, therefore, that the moon cannot be surrounded by an atmosphere.

“In point of fact,” replied Ardan, “this is your chief, if not your *only* argument; and a really scientific man might be puzzled to answer it. For myself, I will simply say that it is defective, because it assumes that the angular diameter of the moon has been completely determined, which is not the case. But let us proceed. Tell me, my dear sir, do you admit the existence of volcanoes on the moon’s surface?”

“Extinct, yes! In activity, no!”

“These volcanoes, however, were at one time in a state of activity?”

“True, but, as they furnish themselves the oxygen necessary for combustion, the mere fact of their eruption does not prove the presence of an atmosphere.”

“Proceed again, then; and let us set aside this class of arguments in order to come to direct observations. In 1715 the astronomers Louville and Halley, watching the eclipse of the 3rd of May, remarked some very extraordinary scintillations. These jets of light, rapid in nature, and of frequent recurrence, they attributed to thunderstorms generated in the lunar atmosphere.”

“In 1715,” replied the unknown, “the astronomers Louville and Halley mistook for lunar phenomena some which were purely terrestrial, such as meteoric or other bodies which are generated in our own atmosphere. This was the scientific explanation at the time of the facts; and that is my answer now.”

“On again, then,” replied Ardan; “Herschel, in 1787, observed a great number of luminous points on the moon’s surface, did he not?”

“Yes! but without offering any solution of them. Herschel himself never inferred from them the necessity of a lunar atmosphere. And I may add that

Baeer and Maedler, the two great authorities upon the moon, are quite agreed as to the entire absence of air on its surface."

A movement was here manifest among the assemblage, who appeared to be growing excited by the arguments of this singular personage.

"Let us proceed," replied Ardan, with perfect coolness, "and come to one important fact. A skillful French astronomer, M. Laussedat, in watching the eclipse of July 18, 1860, probed that the horns of the lunar crescent were rounded and truncated. Now, this appearance could only have been produced by a deviation of the solar rays in traversing the atmosphere of the moon. There is no other possible explanation of the facts."

"But is this established as a fact?"

"Absolutely certain!"

A counter-movement here took place in favor of the hero of the meeting, whose opponent was now reduced to silence. Ardan resumed the conversation; and without exhibiting any exultation at the advantage he had gained, simply said:

"You see, then, my dear sir, we must not pronounce with absolute positiveness against the existence of an atmosphere in the moon. That atmosphere is, probably, of extreme rarity; nevertheless at the present day science generally admits that it exists."

"Not in the mountains, at all events," returned the unknown, unwilling to give in.

"No! but at the bottom of the valleys, and not exceeding a few hundred feet in height."

“In any case you will do well to take every precaution, for the air will be terribly rarified.”

“My good sir, there will always be enough for a solitary individual; besides, once arrived up there, I shall do my best to economize, and not to breathe except on grand occasions!”

A tremendous roar of laughter rang in the ears of the mysterious interlocutor, who glared fiercely round upon the assembly.

“Then,” continued Ardan, with a careless air, “since we are in accord regarding the presence of a certain atmosphere, we are forced to admit the presence of a certain quantity of water. This is a happy consequence for me. Moreover, my amiable contradictor, permit me to submit to you one further observation. We only know *one* side of the moon’s disc; and if there is but little air on the face presented to us, it is possible that there is plenty on the one turned away from us.”

“And for what reason?”

“Because the moon, under the action of the earth’s attraction, has assumed the form of an egg, which we look at from the smaller end. Hence it follows, by Hausen’s calculations, that its center of gravity is situated in the other hemisphere. Hence it results that the great mass of air and water must have been drawn away to the other face of our satellite during the first days of its creation.”

“Pure fancies!” cried the unknown.

“No! Pure theories! which are based upon the laws of mechanics, and it seems difficult to me to refute them. I appeal then to this meeting, and I put it to them whether life, such as exists upon the earth, is possible on the surface of the moon?”

Three hundred thousand auditors at once applauded the proposition. Ardan’s opponent tried to get in another word, but he could not obtain a hearing. Cries and menaces fell upon him like hail.

“Enough! enough!” cried some.

“Drive the intruder off!” shouted others.

“Turn him out!” roared the exasperated crowd.

But he, holding firmly on to the platform, did not budge an inch, and let the storm pass on, which would soon have assumed formidable proportions, if Michel Ardan had not quieted it by a gesture. He was too chivalrous to abandon his opponent in an apparent extremity.

“You wished to say a few more words?” he asked, in a pleasant voice.

“Yes, a thousand; or rather, no, only one! If you persevere in your enterprise, you must be a — — ”

“Very rash person! How can you treat me as such? me, who have demanded a cylindro-conical projectile, in order to prevent turning round and round on my way like a squirrel?”

“But, unhappy man, the dreadful recoil will smash you to pieces at your starting.”

“My dear contradictor, you have just put your finger upon the true and only difficulty; nevertheless, I have too good an opinion of the industrial genius of the Americans not to believe that they will succeed in overcoming it.”

“But the heat developed by the rapidity of the projectile in crossing the strata of air?”

“Oh! the walls are thick, and I shall soon have crossed the atmosphere.”

“But victuals and water?”

“I have calculated for a twelvemonth’s supply, and I shall be only four days on the journey.”

“But for air to breathe on the road?”

“I shall make it by a chemical process.”

“But your fall on the moon, supposing you ever reach it?”

“It will be six times less dangerous than a sudden fall upon the earth, because the weight will be only one-sixth as great on the surface of the moon.”

“Still it will be enough to smash you like glass!”

“What is to prevent my retarding the shock by means of rockets conveniently placed, and lighted at the right moment?”

“But after all, supposing all difficulties surmounted, all obstacles removed, supposing everything combined to favor you, and granting that you may arrive safe and sound in the moon, how will you come back?”

“I am not coming back!”

At this reply, almost sublime in its very simplicity, the assembly became silent. But its silence was more eloquent than could have been its cries of enthusiasm. The unknown profited by the opportunity and once more protested:

“You will inevitably kill yourself!” he cried; “and your death will be that of a madman, useless even to science!”

“Go on, my dear unknown, for truly your prophecies are most agreeable!”

“It really is too much!” cried Michel Ardan’s adversary. “I do not know why I should continue so frivolous a discussion! Please yourself about this insane expedition! We need not trouble ourselves about you!”

“Pray don’t stand upon ceremony!”

“No! another person is responsible for your act.”

“Who, may I ask?” demanded Michel Ardan in an imperious tone.

“The ignoramus who organized this equally absurd and impossible experiment!”

The attack was direct. Barbicane, ever since the interference of the unknown, had been making fearful efforts of self-control; now, however, seeing himself directly attacked, he could restrain himself no longer. He rose suddenly, and was rushing upon the enemy who thus braved him to the face, when all at once he found himself separated from him.

The platform was lifted by a hundred strong arms, and the president of the Gun Club shared with Michel Ardan triumphal honors. The shield was heavy, but the bearers came in continuous relays, disputing, struggling, even fighting among themselves in their eagerness to lend their shoulders to this demonstration.

However, the unknown had not profited by the tumult to quit his post. Besides he could not have done it in the midst of that compact crowd. There he held on in the front row with crossed arms, glaring at President Barbicane.

The shouts of the immense crowd continued at their highest pitch throughout this triumphant march. Michel Ardan took it all with evident pleasure. His face gleamed with delight. Several times the platform seemed seized with pitching and rolling like a weatherbeaten ship. But the two heros of the meeting had good sea-legs. They never stumbled; and their vessel arrived without dues at the port of Tampa Town.

Michel Ardan managed fortunately to escape from the last embraces of his vigorous admirers. He made for the Hotel Franklin, quickly gained his chamber, and slid under the bedclothes, while an army of a hundred thousand men kept watch under his windows.

During this time a scene, short, grave, and decisive, took place between the mysterious personage and the president of the Gun Club.

Barbicane, free at last, had gone straight at his adversary.

“Come!” he said shortly.

The other followed him on the quay; and the two presently found themselves alone at the entrance of an open wharf on Jones’ Fall.

The two enemies, still mutually unknown, gazed at each other.

“Who are you?” asked Barbicane.

“Captain Nicholl!”

“So I suspected. Hitherto chance has never thrown you in my way.”

“I am come for that purpose.”

“You have insulted me.”

“Publicly!”

“And you will answer to me for this insult?”

“At this very moment.”

“No! I desire that all that passes between us shall be secret. Their is a wood situated three miles from Tampa, the wood of Skersnaw. Do you know it?”

“I know it.”

“Will you be so good as to enter it to-morrow morning at five o’clock, on one side?”

“Yes! if you will enter at the other side at the same hour.”

“And you will not forget your rifle?” said Barbicane.

“No more than you will forget yours?” replied Nicholl.

These words having been coldly spoken, the president of the Gun Club and the captain parted. Barbicane returned to his lodging; but instead of snatching a few hours of repose, he passed the night in endeavoring to discover a means of evading the recoil of the projectile, and resolving the difficult problem proposed by Michel Ardan during the discussion at the meeting.

CHAPTER XXI

HOW A FRENCHMAN MANAGES AN AFFAIR

While the contract of this duel was being discussed by the president and the captain — this dreadful, savage duel, in which each adversary became a man-hunter — Michel Ardan was resting from the fatigues of his triumph. Resting is hardly an appropriate expression, for American beds rival marble or granite tables for hardness.

Ardan was sleeping, then, badly enough, tossing about between the cloths which served him for sheets, and he was dreaming of making a more comfortable couch in his projectile when a frightful noise disturbed his dreams. Thundering blows shook his door. They seemed to be caused by some iron instrument. A great deal of loud talking was distinguishable in this racket, which was rather too early in the morning. “Open the door,” some one shrieked, “for heaven’s sake!” Ardan saw no reason for complying with a demand so roughly expressed. However, he got up and opened the door just as it was giving way before the blows of this determined visitor. The secretary of the Gun Club burst into the room. A bomb could not have made more noise or have entered the room with less ceremony.

“Last night,” cried J. T. Maston, *ex abrupto*, “our president was publicly insulted during the meeting. He provoked his adversary, who is none other than Captain Nicholl! They are fighting this morning in the wood of Skersnaw. I heard all the particulars from the mouth of Barbicane himself. If he is killed, then our scheme is at an end. We must prevent his duel; and one man alone has enough influence over Barbicane to stop him, and that man is Michel Ardan.”

While J. T. Maston was speaking, Michel Ardan, without interrupting him, had hastily put on his clothes; and, in less than two minutes, the two friends were making for the suburbs of Tampa Town with rapid strides.

It was during this walk that Maston told Ardan the state of the case. He told him the real causes of the hostility between Barbicane and Nicholl; how it was of old date, and why, thanks to unknown friends, the president and the captain had, as yet, never met face to face. He added that it arose simply from a rivalry between iron plates and shot, and, finally, that the scene at the meeting was only the long-wished-for opportunity for Nicholl to pay off an old grudge.

Nothing is more dreadful than private duels in America. The two adversaries attack each other like wild beasts. Then it is that they might well covet those wonderful properties of the Indians of the prairies — their quick intelligence, their ingenious cunning, their scent of the enemy. A single mistake, a moment's hesitation, a single false step may cause death. On these occasions Yankees are often accompanied by their dogs, and keep up the struggle for hours.

"What demons you are!" cried Michel Ardan, when his companion had depicted this scene to him with much energy.

"Yes, we are," replied J. T. modestly; "but we had better make haste."

Though Michel Ardan and he had crossed the plains still wet with dew, and had taken the shortest route over creeks and ricefields, they could not reach Skersnaw in under five hours and a half.

Barbicane must have passed the border half an hour ago.

There was an old bushman working there, occupied in selling fagots from trees that had been leveled by his axe.

Maston ran toward him, saying, “Have you seen a man go into the wood, armed with a rifle? Barbicane, the president, my best friend?”

The worthy secretary of the Gun Club thought that his president must be known by all the world. But the bushman did not seem to understand him.

“A hunter?” said Ardan.

“A hunter? Yes,” replied the bushman.

“Long ago?”

“About an hour.”

“Too late!” cried Maston.

“Have you heard any gunshots?” asked Ardan.

“No!”

“Not one?”

“Not one! that hunter did not look as if he knew how to hunt!”

“What is to be done?” said Maston.

“We must go into the wood, at the risk of getting a ball which is not intended for us.”

“Ah!” cried Maston, in a tone which could not be mistaken, “I would rather have twenty balls in my own head than one in Barbicane’s.”

“Forward, then,” said Ardan, pressing his companion’s hand.

A few moments later the two friends had disappeared in the copse. It was a dense thicket, in which rose huge cypresses, sycamores, tulip-trees, olives, tamarinds, oaks, and magnolias. These different trees had interwoven their branches into an inextricable maze, through which the eye could not penetrate. Michel Ardan and Maston walked side by side in silence through the tall grass, cutting themselves a path through the strong creepers, casting curious glances on the bushes, and momentarily expecting to hear the sound of rifles. As for the traces which Barbicane ought to have left of his passage through the wood, there was not a vestige of them visible: so they followed the barely perceptible paths along which Indians had tracked some enemy, and which the dense foliage darkly overshadowed.

After an hour spent in vain pursuit the two stopped in intensified anxiety.

“It must be all over,” said Maston, discouraged. “A man like Barbicane would not dodge with his enemy, or ensnare him, would not even maneuver! He is too open, too brave. He has gone straight ahead, right into the danger, and doubtless far enough from the bushman for the wind to prevent his hearing the report of the rifles.”

“But surely,” replied Michel Ardan, “since we entered the wood we should have heard!”

“And what if we came too late?” cried Maston in tones of despair.

For once Ardan had no reply to make, he and Maston resuming their walk in silence. From time to time, indeed, they raised great shouts, calling alternately Barbicane and Nicholl, neither of whom, however, answered their cries. Only the birds, awakened by the sound, flew past them and disappeared among the branches, while some frightened deer fled precipitately before them.

For another hour their search was continued. The greater part of the wood had been explored. There was nothing to reveal the presence of the combatants. The information of the bushman was after all doubtful, and Ardan was about to propose their abandoning this useless pursuit, when all at once Maston stopped.

“Hush!” said he, “there is some one down there!”

“Some one?” repeated Michel Ardan.

“Yes; a man! He seems motionless. His rifle is not in his hands.

What can he be doing?”

“But can you recognize him?” asked Ardan, whose short sight was of little use to him in such circumstances.

“Yes! yes! He is turning toward us,” answered Maston.

“And it is?”

“Captain Nicholl!”

“Nicholl?” cried Michel Ardan, feeling a terrible pang of grief.

“Nicholl unarmed! He has, then, no longer any fear of his adversary!”

“Let us go to him,” said Michel Ardan, “and find out the truth.”

But he and his companion had barely taken fifty steps, when they paused to examine the captain more attentively. They expected to find a bloodthirsty man, happy in his revenge.

On seeing him, they remained stupefied.

A net, composed of very fine meshes, hung between two enormous tulip-trees, and in the midst of this snare, with its wings entangled, was a poor little bird, uttering pitiful cries, while it vainly struggled to escape. The bird-catcher who had laid this snare was no human being, but a venomous spider, peculiar to that country, as large as a pigeon’s egg, and armed with enormous claws. The hideous creature, instead of rushing on its prey, had beaten a sudden retreat and taken refuge in the upper branches of the tulip-tree, for a formidable enemy menaced its stronghold.

Here, then, was Nicholl, his gun on the ground, forgetful of danger, trying if possible to save the victim from its cobweb prison. At last it was accomplished, and the little bird flew joyfully away and disappeared.

Nicholl lovingly watched its flight, when he heard these words pronounced by a voice full of emotion:

“You are indeed a brave man.”

He turned. Michel Ardan was before him, repeating in a different tone:

“And a kindhearted one!”

“Michel Ardan!” cried the captain. “Why are you here?”

“To press your hand, Nicholl, and to prevent you from either killing Barbicane or being killed by him.”

“Barbicane!” returned the captain. “I have been looking for him for the last two hours in vain. Where is he hiding?”

“Nicholl!” said Michel Ardan, “this is not courteous! we ought always to treat an adversary with respect; rest assureed if Barbicane is still alive we shall find him all the more easily; because if he has not, like you, been amusing himself with freeing oppressed birds, he must be looking for *you*. When we have found him, Michel Ardan tells you this, there will be no duel between you.”

“Between President Barbicane and myself,” gravely replied

Nicholl, “there is a rivalry which the death of one of us — — ”

“Pooh, pooh!” said Ardan. “Brave fellows like you indeed! you shall not fight!”

“I will fight, sir!”

“No!”

“Captain,” said J. T. Maston, with much feeling, “I am a friend of the president’s, his *alter ego*, his second self; if you really must kill some one, *shoot me!* it will do just as well!”

“Sir,” Nicholl replied, seizing his rifle convulsively, “these jokes — — ”

“Our friend Maston is not joking,” replied Ardan. “I fully understand his idea of being killed himself in order to save his friend. But neither he nor Barbicane will fall before the balls of Captain Nicholl. Indeed I have so attractive a proposal to make to the two rivals, that both will be eager to accept it.”

“What is it?” asked Nicholl with manifest incredulity.

“Patience!” exclaimed Ardan. “I can only reveal it in the presence of Barbicane.”

“Let us go in search of him then!” cried the captain.

The three men started off at once; the captain having discharged his rifle threw it over his shoulder, and advanced in silence. Another half hour passed, and the pursuit was still fruitless. Maston was oppressed by sinister forebodings. He looked fiercely at Nicholl, asking himself whether the captain’s vengeance had already been satisfied, and the unfortunate Barbicane, shot, was perhaps lying dead on some bloody track. The same thought seemed to occur to Ardan; and both were casting inquiring glances on Nicholl, when suddenly Maston paused.

The motionless figure of a man leaning against a gigantic catalpa twenty feet off appeared, half-veiled by the foliage.

“It is he!” said Maston.

Barbicane never moved. Ardan looked at the captain, but he did not wince. Ardan went forward crying:

“Barbicane! Barbicane!”

No answer! Ardan rushed toward his friend; but in the act of seizing his arms, he stopped short and uttered a cry of surprise.

Barbicane, pencil in hand, was tracing geometrical figures in a memorandum book, while his unloaded rifle lay beside him on the ground.

Absorbed in his studies, Barbicane, in his turn forgetful of the duel, had seen and heard nothing.

When Ardan took his hand, he looked up and stared at his visitor in astonishment.

“Ah, it is you!” he cried at last. “I have found it, my friend,

I have found it!”

“What?”

“My plan!”

“What plan?”

“The plan for countering the effect of the shock at the departure of the projectile!”

“Indeed?” said Michel Ardan, looking at the captain out of the corner of his eye.

“Yes! water! simply water, which will act as a spring — ah!

Maston,” cried Barbicane, “you here also?”

“Himself,” replied Ardan; “and permit me to introduce to you at the same time the worthy Captain Nicholl!”

“Nicholl!” cried Barbicane, who jumped up at once. “Pardon me, captain, I had quite forgotten — I am ready!”

Michel Ardan interfered, without giving the two enemies time to say anything more.

“Thank heaven!” said he. “It is a happy thing that brave men like you two did not meet sooner! we should now have been mourning for one or other of you. But, thanks to Providence, which has interfered, there is now no further cause for alarm. When one forgets one’s anger in mechanics or in cobwebs, it is a sign that the anger is not dangerous.”

Michel Ardan then told the president how the captain had been found occupied.

“I put it to you now,” said he in conclusion, “are two such good fellows as you are made on purpose to smash each other’s skulls with shot?”

There was in “the situation” somewhat of the ridiculous, something quite unexpected; Michel Ardan saw this, and determined to effect a reconciliation.

“My good friends,” said he, with his most bewitching smile, “this is nothing but a misunderstanding. Nothing more! well! to prove that it is all over between you, accept frankly the proposal I am going to make to you.”

“Make it,” said Nicholl.

“Our friend Barbicane believes that his projectile will go straight to the moon?”

“Yes, certainly,” replied the president.

“And our friend Nicholl is persuaded it will fall back upon the earth?”

“I am certain of it,” cried the captain.

“Good!” said Ardan. “I cannot pretend to make you agree; but I suggest this: Go with me, and so see whether we are stopped on our journey.”

“What?” exclaimed J. T. Maston, stupefied.

The two rivals, on this sudden proposal, looked steadily at each other. Barbicane waited for the captain’s answer. Nicholl watched for the decision of the president.

“Well?” said Michel. “There is now no fear of the shock!”

“Done!” cried Barbicane.

But quickly as he pronounced the word, he was not before Nicholl.

“Hurrah! bravo! hip! hip! hurrah!” cried Michel, giving a hand to each of the late adversaries. “Now that it is all settled, my friends, allow me to treat you after French fashion. Let us be off to breakfast!”

CHAPTER XXII

THE NEW CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES

That same day all America heard of the affair of Captain Nicholl and President Barbicane, as well as its singular *denouement*. From that day forth, Michel Ardan had not one moment's rest. Deputations from all corners of the Union harassed him without cessation or intermission. He was compelled to receive them all, whether he would or no. How many hands he shook, how many people he was "hail-fellow-well-met" with, it is impossible to guess! Such a triumphal result would have intoxicated any other man; but he managed to keep himself in a state of delightful *semi*-tipsiness.

Among the deputations of all kinds which assailed him, that of "The Lunatics" were careful not to forget what they owed to the future conqueror of the moon. One day, certain of these poor people, so numerous in America, came to call upon him, and requested permission to return with him to their native country.

"Singular hallucination!" said he to Barbicane, after having dismissed the deputation with promises to convey numbers of messages to friends in the moon. "Do you believe in the influence of the moon upon distempers?"

"Scarcely!"

"No more do I, despite some remarkable recorded facts of history. For instance, during an epidemic in 1693, a large number of persons died at the very moment of an eclipse. The celebrated Bacon always fainted during an eclipse. Charles VI relapsed six times into madness during the year 1399, sometimes during the new, sometimes during the full moon. Gall observed that insane persons underwent an accession of their disorder twice in every month, at the epochs of new and full moon. In fact, numerous observations made upon fevers, somnambulisms, and other human maladies, seem to prove that the moon does exercise some mysterious influence upon man."

"But the how and the wherefore?" asked Barbicane.

"Well, I can only give you the answer which Arago borrowed from Plutarch, which is nineteen centuries old. `Perhaps the stories are not true!'"

In the height of his triumph, Michel Ardan had to encounter all the annoyances incidental to a man of celebrity. Managers of entertainments wanted to exhibit him. Barnum offered him a million dollars to make a tour of the United States in his show. As for his photographs, they were sold of all size, and his portrait taken in every imaginable posture. More than half a million copies were disposed of in an incredibly short space of time.

But it was not only the men who paid him homage, but the women as well. He might have married well a hundred times over, if he had been willing to settle in life. The old maids, in particular, of forty years and upward, and dry in proportion, devoured his photographs day and night. They would have married him by hundreds, even if he had imposed upon them the condition of accompanying him into space. He had, however, no intention of transplanting a race of Franco-Americans upon the surface of the moon.

He therefore declined all offers.

As soon as he could withdraw from these somewhat embarrassing demonstrations, he went, accompanied by his friends, to pay a visit to the Columbiad. He was highly gratified by his inspection, and made the descent to the bottom of the tube of this gigantic machine which was presently to launch him to the regions of the moon. It is necessary here to mention a proposal of J. T. Maston's. When the secretary of the Gun Club found that Barbicane and Nicholl accepted the proposal of Michel Ardan, he determined to join them, and make one of a smug party of four. So one day he determined to be admitted as one of the travelers. Barbicane, pained at having to refuse him, gave him clearly to understand that the projectile could not possibly contain so many passengers. Maston, in despair, went in search of Michel Ardan, who counseled him to resign himself to the situation, adding one or two arguments *ad hominem*.

"You see, old fellow," he said, "you must not take what I say in bad part; but really, between ourselves, you are in too incomplete a condition to appear in the moon!"

"Incomplete?" shrieked the valiant invalid.

"Yes, my dear fellow! imagine our meeting some of the inhabitants up there! Would you like to give them such a melancholy notion of what goes on down here? to teach them what war is, to inform them that we employ our time chiefly in devouring each other, in smashing arms and legs, and that too on a globe which is capable of supporting a hundred billions of inhabitants, and which actually does contain nearly two hundred millions? Why, my worthy friend, we should have to turn you out of doors!"

"But still, if you arrive there in pieces, you will be as incomplete as I am."

"Unquestionably," replied Michel Ardan; "but we shall not."

In fact, a preparatory experiment, tried on the 18th of October, had yielded the best results and caused the most well-grounded hopes of success. Barbicane, desirous of obtaining some notion of the effect of the shock at the moment of the projectile’s departure, had procured a 38-inch mortar from the arsenal of Pensacola. He had this placed on the bank of Hillisborough Roads, in order that the shell might fall back into the sea, and the shock be thereby destroyed. His object was to ascertain the extent of the shock of departure, and not that of the return.

A hollow projectile had been prepared for this curious experiment. A thick padding fastened upon a kind of elastic network, made of the best steel, lined the inside of the walls. It was a veritable *nest* most carefully wadded.

“What a pity I can’t find room in there,” said J. T. Maston, regretting that his height did not allow of his trying the adventure.

Within this shell were shut up a large cat, and a squirrel belonging to J. T. Maston, and of which he was particularly fond. They were desirous, however, of ascertaining how this little animal, least of all others subject to giddiness, would endure this experimental voyage.

The mortar was charged with 160 pounds of powder, and the shell placed in the chamber. On being fired, the projectile rose with great velocity, described a majestic parabola, attained a height of about a thousand feet, and with a graceful curve descended in the midst of the vessels that lay there at anchor.

Without a moment’s loss of time a small boat put off in the direction of its fall; some divers plunged into the water and attached ropes to the handles of the shell, which was quickly dragged on board. Five minutes did not elapse between the moment of enclosing the animals and that of unscrewing the coverlid of their prison.

Ardan, Barbicane, Maston, and Nicholl were present on board the boat, and assisted at the operation with an interest which may readily be comprehended. Hardly had the shell been opened when the cat leaped out, slightly bruised, but full of life, and exhibiting no signs whatever of having made an aerial expedition. No trace, however, of the squirrel could be discovered. The truth at last became apparent — the cat had eaten its fellow-traveler!

J. T. Maston grieved much for the loss of his poor squirrel, and proposed to add its case to that of other martyrs to science.

After this experiment all hesitation, all fear disappeared. Besides, Barbicane's plans would ensure greater perfection for his projectile, and go far to annihilate altogether the effects of the shock. Nothing now remained but to go!

Two days later Michel Ardan received a message from the President of the United States, an honor of which he showed himself especially sensible.

After the example of his illustrious fellow-countryman, the Marquis de la Fayette, the government had decreed to him the title of "Citizen of the United States of America."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PROJECTILE-VEHICLE

On the completion of the Columbiad the public interest centered in the projectile itself, the vehicle which was destined to carry the three hardy adventurers into space.

The new plans had been sent to Breadwill and Co. of Albany, with the request for their speedy execution. The projectile was consequently cast on the 2nd of November, and immediately forwarded by the Eastern Railway to Stones Hill, which it reached without accident on the 10th of that month, where Michel Ardan, Barbicane, and Nicholl were waiting impatiently for it.

The projectile had now to be filled to the depth of three feet with a bed of water, intended to support a water-tight wooden disc, which worked easily within the walls of the projectile. It was upon this kind of raft that the travelers were to take their place. This body of water was divided by horizontal partitions, which the shock of the departure would have to break in succession. Then each sheet of the water, from the lowest to the highest, running off into escape tubes toward the top of the projectile, constituted a kind of spring; and the wooden disc, supplied with extremely powerful plugs, could not strike the lowest plate except after breaking successively the different partitions. Undoubtedly the travelers would still have to encounter a violent recoil after the complete escapement of the water; but the first shock would be almost entirely destroyed by this powerful spring. The upper parts of the walls were lined with a thick padding of leather, fastened upon springs of the best steel, behind which the escape tubes were completely concealed; thus all imaginable precautions had been taken for averting the first shock; and if they did get crushed, they must, as Michel Ardan said, be made of very bad materials.

The entrance into this metallic tower was by a narrow aperture contrived in the wall of the cone. This was hermetically closed by a plate of aluminum, fastened internally by powerful screw-pressure. The travelers could therefore quit their prison at pleasure, as soon as they should reach the moon.

Light and view were given by means of four thick lenticular glass scuttles, two pierced in the circular wall itself, the third in the bottom, the fourth in the top. These scuttles then were protected against the shock of departure by plates let into solid grooves, which could easily be opened outward by unscrewing them from the inside. Reservoirs firmly fixed contained water and the necessary provisions; and fire and light were procurable by means of gas, contained in a special reservoir under a pressure of several atmospheres. They had only to turn a tap, and for six hours the gas would light and warm this comfortable vehicle.

There now remained only the question of air; for allowing for the consumption of air by Barbicane, his two companions, and two dogs which he proposed taking with him, it was necessary to renew the air of the projectile. Now air consists principally of twenty-one parts of oxygen and seventy-nine of nitrogen. The lungs absorb the oxygen, which is indispensable for the support of life, and reject the nitrogen. The air expired loses nearly five per cent. of the former and contains nearly an equal volume of carbonic acid, produced by the combustion of the elements of the blood. In an air-tight enclosure, then, after a certain time, all the oxygen of the air will be replaced by the carbonic acid — a gas fatal to life. There were two things to be done then — first, to replace the absorbed oxygen;

secondly, to destroy the expired carbonic acid; both easy enough to do, by means of chlorate of potassium and caustic potash. The former is a salt which appears under the form of white crystals; when raised to a temperature of 400 degrees it is transformed into chlorure of potassium, and the oxygen which it contains is entirely liberated. Now twenty-eight pounds of chlorate of potassium produces seven pounds of oxygen, or 2,400 litres — the quantity necessary for the travelers during twenty-four hours.

Caustic potash has a great affinity for carbonic acid; and it is sufficient to shake it in order for it to seize upon the acid and form bicarbonate of potassium. By these two means they would be enabled to restore to the vitiated air its life- supporting properties.

It is necessary, however, to add that the experiments had hitherto been made *in anima vili*. Whatever its scientific accuracy was, they were at present ignorant how it would answer with human beings. The honor of putting it to the proof was energetically claimed by J. T. Maston.

“Since I am not to go,” said the brave artillerist, “I may at least live for a week in the projectile.”

It would have been hard to refuse him; so they consented to his wish. A sufficient quantity of chlorate of potassium and of caustic potash was placed at his disposal, together with provisions for eight days. And having shaken hands with his friends, on the 12th of November, at six o’clock A.M. after strictly informing them not to open his prison before the 20th, at six o’clock P.M. he slid down the projectile, the plate of which was at once hermetically sealed. What did he do with himself during that week? They could get no information. The thickness of the walls of the projectile prevented any sound reaching from the inside to the outside. On the 20th of November, at six P.M. exactly, the plate was opened. The friends of J. T.

Maston had been all along in a state of much anxiety; but they were promptly reassured on hearing a jolly voice shouting a boisterous hurrah.

Presently afterward the secretary of the Gun Club appeared at the top of the cone in a triumphant attitude. He had grown fat!

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TELESCOPE OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

On the 20th of October in the preceding year, after the close of the subscription, the president of the Gun Club had credited the Observatory of Cambridge with the necessary sums for the construction of a gigantic optical instrument. This instrument was designed for the purpose of rendering visible on the surface of the moon any object exceeding nine feet in diameter.

At the period when the Gun Club essayed their great experiment, such instruments had reached a high degree of perfection, and produced some magnificent results. Two telescopes in particular, at this time, were possessed of remarkable power and of gigantic dimensions. The first, constructed by Herschel, was thirty-six feet in length, and had an object-glass of four feet six inches; it possessed a magnifying power of 6,000. The second was raised in Ireland, in Parsonstown Park, and belongs to Lord Rosse. The length of this tube is forty-eight feet, and the diameter of its object-glass six feet; it magnifies 6,400 times, and required an immense erection of brick work and masonry for the purpose of working it, its weight being twelve and a half tons.

Still, despite these colossal dimensions, the actual enlargements scarcely exceeded 6,000 times in round numbers; consequently, the moon was brought within no nearer an apparent distance than thirty-nine miles; and objects of less than sixty feet in diameter, unless they were of very considerable length, were still imperceptible.

In the present case, dealing with a projectile nine feet in diameter and fifteen feet long, it became necessary to bring the moon within an apparent distance of five miles at most; and for that purpose to establish a magnifying power of 48,000 times.

Such was the question proposed to the Observatory of Cambridge, There was no lack of funds; the difficulty was purely one of construction.

After considerable discussion as to the best form and principle of the proposed instrument the work was finally commenced. According to the calculations of the Observatory of Cambridge, the tube of the new reflector would require to be 280 feet in length, and the object-glass sixteen feet in diameter. Colossal as these dimensions may appear, they were diminutive in comparison with the 10,000 foot telescope proposed by the astronomer Hooke only a few years ago!

Regarding the choice of locality, that matter was promptly determined. The object was to select some lofty mountain, and there are not many of these in the United States. In fact there are but two chains of moderate elevation, between which runs the magnificent Mississippi, the “king of rivers” as these Republican Yankees delight to call it.

Eastwards rise the Appalachians, the very highest point of which, in New Hampshire, does not exceed the very moderate altitude of 5,600 feet.

On the west, however, rise the Rocky Mountains, that immense range which, commencing at the Straights of Magellan, follows the western coast of Southern America under the name of the Andes or the Cordilleras, until it crosses the Isthmus of Panama, and runs up the whole of North America to the very borders of the Polar Sea. The highest elevation of this range still does not exceed 10,700 feet. With this elevation, nevertheless, the Gun Club were compelled to be content, inasmuch as they had determined that both telescope and Columbiad should be erected within the limits of the Union. All the necessary apparatus was consequently sent on to the summit of Long’s Peak, in the territory of Missouri.

Neither pen nor language can describe the difficulties of all kinds which the American engineers had to surmount, of the prodigies of daring and skill which they accomplished. They had to raise enormous stones, massive pieces of wrought iron, heavy corner-clamps and huge portions of cylinder, with an object-glass weighing nearly 30,000 pounds, above the line of perpetual snow for more than 10,000 feet in height, after crossing desert prairies, impenetrable forests, fearful rapids, far from all centers of population, and in the midst of savage regions, in which every detail of life becomes an almost insoluble problem. And yet, notwithstanding these innumerable obstacles, American genius triumphed. In less than a year after the commencement of the works, toward the close of September, the gigantic reflector rose into the air to a height of 280 feet. It was raised by means of an enormous iron crane; an ingenious mechanism allowed it to be easily worked toward all the points of the heavens, and to follow the stars from the one horizon to the other during their journey through the heavens.

It had cost $400,000. The first time it was directed toward the moon the observers evinced both curiosity and anxiety. What were they about to discover in the field of this telescope which magnified objects 48,000 times? Would they perceive peoples, herds of lunar animals, towns, lakes, seas? No! there was nothing which science had not already discovered! and on all the points of its disc the volcanic nature of the moon became determinable with the utmost precision.

But the telescope of the Rocky Mountains, before doing its duty to the Gun Club, rendered immense services to astronomy. Thanks to its penetrative power, the depths of the heavens were sounded to the utmost extent; the apparent diameter of a great number of stars was accurately measured; and Mr. Clark, of the Cambridge staff, resolved the Crab nebula in Taurus, which the reflector of Lord Rosse had never been able to decompose.

CHAPTER XXV

FINAL DETAILS

It was the 22nd of November; the departure was to take place in ten days. One operation alone remained to be accomplished to bring all to a happy termination; an operation delicate and perilous, requiring infinite precautions, and against the success of which Captain Nicholl had laid his third bet. It was, in fact, nothing less than the loading of the Columbiad, and the introduction into it of 400,000 pounds of gun-cotton. Nicholl had thought, not perhaps without reason, that the handling of such formidable quantities of pyroxyle would, in all probability, involve a grave catastrophe; and at any rate, that this immense mass of eminently inflammable matter would inevitably ignite when submitted to the pressure of the projectile.

There were indeed dangers accruing as before from the carelessness of the Americans, but Barbicane had set his heart on success, and took all possible precautions. In the first place, he was very careful as to the transportation of the gun-cotton to Stones Hill. He had it conveyed in small quantities, carefully packed in sealed cases. These were brought by rail from Tampa Town to the camp, and from thence were taken to the Columbiad by barefooted workmen, who deposited them in their places by means of cranes placed at the orifice of the cannon. No steam-engine was permitted to work, and every fire was extinguished within two miles of the works.

Even in November they feared to work by day, lest the sun’s rays acting on the gun-cotton might lead to unhappy results. This led to their working at night, by light produced in a vacuum by means of Ruhmkorff’s apparatus, which threw an artificial brightness into the depths of the Columbiad. There the cartridges were arranged with the utmost regularity, connected by a metallic thread, destined to communicate to them all simultaneously the electric spark, by which means this mass of gun-cotton was eventually to be ignited.

By the 28th of November eight hundred cartridges had been placed in the bottom of the Columbiad. So far the operation had been successful! But what confusion, what anxieties, what struggles were undergone by President Barbicane! In vain had he refused admission to Stones Hill; every day the inquisitive neighbors scaled the palisades, some even carrying their imprudence to the point of smoking while surrounded by bales of gun-cotton. Barbicane was in a perpetual state of alarm. J. T. Maston seconded him to the best of his ability, by giving vigorous chase to the intruders, and carefully picking up the still lighted cigar ends which the Yankees threw about. A somewhat difficult task! seeing that more than 300,000 persons were gathered round the enclosure. Michel Ardan had volunteered to superintend the transport of the cartridges to the mouth of the Columbiad; but the president, having surprised him with an enormous cigar in his mouth, while he was hunting out the rash spectators to whom he himself offered so dangerous an example, saw that he could not trust this fearless smoker, and was therefore obliged to mount a special guard over him.

At last, Providence being propitious, this wonderful loading came to a happy termination, Captain Nicholl's third bet being thus lost. It remained now to introduce the projectile into the Columbiad, and to place it on its soft bed of gun-cotton.

But before doing this, all those things necessary for the journey had to be carefully arranged in the projectile vehicle. These necessaries were numerous; and had Ardan been allowed to follow his own wishes, there would have been no space remaining for the travelers. It is impossible to conceive of half the things this charming Frenchman wished to convey to the moon. A veritable stock of useless trifles! But Barbicane interfered and refused admission to anything not absolutely needed. Several thermometers, barometers, and telescopes were packed in the instrument case.

The travelers being desirous of examing the moon carefully during their voyage, in order to facilitate their studies, they took with them Boeer and Moeller's excellent *Mappa Selenographica*, a masterpiece of patience and observation, which they hoped would enable them to identify those physical features in the moon, with which they were acquainted. This map reproduced with scrupulous fidelity the smallest details of the lunar surface which faces the earth; the mountains, valleys, craters, peaks, and ridges were all represented, with their exact dimensions, relative positions, and names; from the mountains Doerfel and Leibnitz on the eastern side of the disc, to the *Mare frigoris* of the North Pole.

They took also three rifles and three fowling-pieces, and a large quantity of balls, shot, and powder.

"We cannot tell whom we shall have to deal with," said Michel Ardan. "Men or beasts may possibly object to our visit. It is only wise to take all precautions."

These defensive weapons were accompanied by pickaxes, crowbars, saws, and other useful implements, not to mention clothing adapted to every temperature, from that of polar regions to that of the torrid zone.

Ardan wished to convey a number of animals of different sorts, not indeed a pair of every known species, as he could not see the necessity of acclimatizing serpents, tigers, alligators, or any other noxious beasts in the moon. "Nevertheless," he said to Barbicane, "some valuable and useful beasts, bullocks, cows, horses, and donkeys, would bear the journey very well, and would also be very useful to us."

"I dare say, my dear Ardan," replied the president, "but our projectile-vehicle is no Noah's ark, from which it differs both in dimensions and object. Let us confine ourselves to possibilities."

After a prolonged discussion, it was agreed that the travelers should restrict themselves to a sporting-dog belonging to Nicholl, and to a large Newfoundland. Several packets of seeds were also included among the necessaries. Michel Ardan, indeed, was anxious to add some sacks full of earth to sow them in; as it was, he took a dozen shrubs carefully wrapped up in straw to plant in the moon.

The important question of provisions still remained; it being necessary to provide against the possibility of their finding the moon absolutely barren. Barbicane managed so successfully, that he supplied them with sufficient rations for a year. These consisted of preserved meats and vegetables, reduced by strong hydraulic pressure to the smallest possible dimensions. They were also supplied with brandy, and took water enough for two months, being confident, from astronomical observations, that there was no lack of water on the moon's surface. As to provisions, doubtless the inhabitants of the *earth* would find nourishment somewhere in the *moon*. Ardan never questioned this; indeed, had he done so, he would never have undertaken the journey.

"Besides," he said one day to his friends, "we shall not be completely abandoned by our terrestrial friends; they will take care not to forget us."

"No, indeed!" replied J. T. Maston.

“Nothing would be simpler,” replied Ardan; “the Columbiad will be always there. Well! whenever the moon is in a favorable condition as to the zenith, if not to the perigee, that is to say about once a year, could you not send us a shell packed with provisions, which we might expect on some appointed day?”

“Hurrah! hurrah!” cried J. T. Matson; “what an ingenious fellow! what a splendid idea! Indeed, my good friends, we shall not forget you!”

“I shall reckon upon you! Then, you see, we shall receive news regularly from the earth, and we shall indeed be stupid if we hit upon no plan for communicating with our good friends here!”

These words inspired such confidence, that Michel Ardan carried all the Gun Club with him in his enthusiasm. What he said seemed so simple and so easy, so sure of success, that none could be so sordidly attached to this earth as to hesitate to follow the three travelers on their lunar expedition.

All being ready at last, it remained to place the projectile in the Columbiad, an operation abundantly accompanied by dangers and difficulties.

The enormous shell was conveyed to the summit of Stones Hill. There, powerful cranes raised it, and held it suspended over the mouth of the cylinder.

It was a fearful moment! What if the chains should break under its enormous weight? The sudden fall of such a body would inevitably cause the gun-cotton to explode!

Fortunately this did not happen; and some hours later the projectile-vehicle descended gently into the heart of the cannon and rested on its couch of pyroxyle, a veritable bed of explosive eider-down. Its pressure had no result, other than the more effectual ramming down of the charge in the Columbiad.

“I have lost,” said the captain, who forthwith paid President

Barbicane the sum of three thousand dollars.

Barbicane did not wish to accept the money from one of his fellow-travelers, but gave way at last before the determination of Nicholl, who wished before leaving the earth to fulfill all his engagements.

“Now,” said Michel Ardan, “I have only one thing more to wish for you, my brave captain.”

“What is that?” asked Nicholl.

“It is that you may lose your two other bets! Then we shall be sure not to be stopped on our journey!”

CHAPTER XXVI

FIRE!

The first of December had arrived! the fatal day! for, if the projectile were not discharged that very night at 10h. 48m. 40s. P.M. more than eighteen years must roll by before the moon would again present herself under the same conditions of zenith and perigee.

The weather was magnificent. Despite the approach of winter, the sun shone brightly, and bathed in its radiant light that earth which three of its denizens were about to abandon for a new world.

How many persons lost their rest on the night which preceded this long-expected day! All hearts beat with disquietude, save only the heart of Michel Ardan. That imperturbable personage came and went with his habitual business-like air, while nothing whatever denoted that any unusual matter preoccupied his mind.

After dawn, an innumerable multitude covered the prairie which extends, as far as the eye can reach, round Stones Hill. Every quarter of an hour the railway brought fresh accessions of sightseers; and, according to the statement of the Tampa Town *Observer*, not less than five millions of spectators thronged the soil of Florida.

For a whole month previously, the mass of these persons had bivouacked round the enclosure, and laid the foundations for a town which was afterward called “Ardan’s Town.” The whole plain was covered with huts, cottages, and tents. Every nation under the sun was represented there; and every language might be heard spoken at the same time. It was a perfect Babel re-enacted. All the various classes of American society were mingled together in terms of absolute equality. Bankers, farmers, sailors, cotton-planters, brokers, merchants, watermen, magistrates, elbowed each other in the most free-and-easy way. Louisiana Creoles fraternized with farmers from Indiana; Kentucky and Tennessee gentlemen and haughty Virginians conversed with trappers and the half-savages of the lakes and butchers from Cincinnati. Broad-brimmed white hats and Panamas, blue-cotton trousers, light-colored stockings, cambric frills, were all here displayed; while upon shirt-fronts, wristbands, and neckties, upon every finger, even upon the very ears, they wore an assortment of rings, shirt-pins, brooches, and trinkets, of which the value only equaled the execrable taste. Women, children, and servants, in equally expensive dress, surrounded their husbands, fathers, or masters, who resembled the patriarchs of tribes in the midst of their immense households.

At meal-times all fell to work upon the dishes peculiar to the Southern States, and consumed with an appetite that threatened speedy exhaustion of the victualing powers of Florida, fricasseed frogs, stuffed monkey, fish chowder, underdone ‘possum, and raccoon steaks. And as for the liquors which accompanied this indigestible repast! The shouts, the vociferations that resounded through the bars and taverns decorated with glasses, tankards, and bottles of marvelous shape, mortars for pounding sugar, and bundles of straws! “Mint-julep” roars one of the barmen; “Claret sangaree!” shouts another; “Cocktail!” “Brandy-smash!” “Real mint-julep in the new style!” All these cries intermingled produced a bewildering and deafening hubbub.

But on this day, 1st of December, such sounds were rare. No one thought of eating or drinking, and at four P.M. there were vast numbers of spectators who had not even taken their customary lunch! And, a still more significant fact, even the national passion for play seemed quelled for the time under the general excitement of the hour.

Up till nightfall, a dull, noiseless agitation, such as precedes great catastrophes, ran through the anxious multitude. An indescribable uneasiness pervaded all minds, an indefinable sensation which oppressed the heart. Every one wished it was over.

However, about seven o’clock, the heavy silence was dissipated. The moon rose above the horizon. Millions of hurrahs hailed her appearance. She was punctual to the rendezvous, and shouts of welcome greeted her on all sides, as her pale beams shone gracefully in the clear heavens. At this moment the three intrepid travelers appeared. This was the signal for renewed cries of still greater intensity. Instantly the vast assemblage, as with one accord, struck up the national hymn of the United States, and “Yankee Doodle,” sung by five million of hearty throats, rose like a roaring tempest to the farthest limits of the atmosphere. Then a profound silence reigned throughout the crowd.

The Frenchman and the two Americans had by this time entered the enclosure reserved in the center of the multitude. They were accompanied by the members of the Gun Club, and by deputations sent from all the European Observatories. Barbicane, cool and collected, was giving his final directions. Nicholl, with compressed lips, his arms crossed behind his back, walked with a firm and measured step. Michel Ardan, always easy, dressed in thorough traveler’s costume, leathern gaiters on his legs, pouch by his side, in loose velvet suit, cigar in mouth, was full of inexhaustible gayety, laughing, joking, playing pranks with J. T. Maston. In one word, he was the thorough “Frenchman” (and worse, a “Parisian”) to the last moment.

Ten o’clock struck! The moment had arrived for taking their places in the projectile! The necessary operations for the descent, and the subsequent removal of the cranes and scaffolding that inclined over the mouth of the Columbiad, required a certain period of time.

Barbicane had regulated his chronometer to the tenth part of a second by that of Murchison the engineer, who was charged with the duty of firing the gun by means of an electric spark. Thus the travelers enclosed within the projectile were enabled to follow with their eyes the impassive needle which marked the precise moment of their departure.

The moment had arrived for saying “good-by!” The scene was a touching one. Despite his feverish gayety, even Michel Ardan was touched. J. T. Maston had found in his own dry eyes one ancient tear, which he had doubtless reserved for the occasion. He dropped it on the forehead of his dear president.

“Can I not go?” he said, “there is still time!”

“Impossible, old fellow!” replied Barbicane. A few moments later, the three fellow-travelers had ensconced themselves in the projectile, and screwed down the plate which covered the entrance-aperture. The mouth of the Columbiad, now completely disencumbered, was open entirely to the sky.

The moon advanced upward in a heaven of the purest clearness, outshining in her passage the twinkling light of the stars. She passed over the constellation of the Twins, and was now nearing the halfway point between the horizon and the zenith. A terrible silence weighed upon the entire scene! Not a breath of wind upon the earth! not a sound of breathing from the countless chests of the spectators! Their hearts seemed afraid to beat! All eyes were fixed upon the yawning mouth of the Columbiad.

Murchison followed with his eye the hand of his chronometer. It wanted scarce forty seconds to the moment of departure, but each second seemed to last an age! At the twentieth there was a general shudder, as it occurred to the minds of that vast assemblage that the bold travelers shut up within the projectile were also counting those terrible seconds. Some few cries here and there escaped the crowd.

“Thirty-five! — thirty-six! — thirty-seven! — thirty-eight! — thirty-nine! — forty! FIRE!!!”

Instantly Murchison pressed with his finger the key of the electric battery, restored the current of the fluid, and discharged the spark into the breech of the Columbiad.

An appalling unearthly report followed instantly, such as can be compared to nothing whatever known, not even to the roar of thunder, or the blast of volcanic explosions! No words can convey the slightest idea of the terrific sound! An immense spout of fire shot up from the bowels of the earth as from a crater. The earth heaved up, and with great difficulty some few spectators obtained a momentary glimpse of the projectile victoriously cleaving the air in the midst of the fiery vapors!

CHAPTER XXVII

FOUL WEATHER

At the moment when that pyramid of fire rose to a prodigious height into the air, the glare of flame lit up the whole of Florida; and for a moment day superseded night over a considerable extent of the country. This immense canopy of fire was perceived at a distance of one hundred miles out at sea, and more than one ship's captain entered in his log the appearance of this gigantic meteor.

The discharge of the Columbiad was accompanied by a perfect earthquake. Florida was shaken to its very depths. The gases of the powder, expanded by heat, forced back the atmospheric strata with tremendous violence, and this artificial hurricane rushed like a water-spout through the air.

Not a single spectator remained on his feet! Men, women children, all lay prostrate like ears of corn under a tempest. There ensued a terrible tumult; a large number of persons were seriously injured. J. T. Maston, who, despite all dictates of prudence, had kept in advance of the mass, was pitched back 120 feet, shooting like a projectile over the heads of his fellow-citizens. Three hundred thousand persons remained deaf for a time, and as though struck stupefied.

As soon as the first effects were over, the injured, the deaf, and lastly, the crowd in general, woke up with frenzied cries. “Hurrah for Ardan! Hurrah for Barbicane! Hurrah for Nicholl!” rose to the skies. Thousands of persons, noses in air, armed with telescopes and race-glasses, were questioning space, forgetting all contusions and emotions in the one idea of watching for the projectile. They looked in vain! It was no longer to be seen, and they were obliged to wait for telegrams from Long's Peak. The director of the

Cambridge Observatory was at his post on the Rocky Mountains; and to him, as a skillful and persevering astronomer, all observations had been confided.

But an unforeseen phenomenon came in to subject the public impatience to a severe trial.

The weather, hitherto so fine, suddenly changed; the sky became heavy with clouds. It could not have been otherwise after the terrible derangement of the atmospheric strata, and the dispersion of the enormous quantity of vapor arising from the combustion of 200,000 pounds of pyroxyle!

On the morrow the horizon was covered with clouds — a thick and impenetrable curtain between earth and sky, which unhappily extended as far as the Rocky Mountains. It was a fatality! But since man had chosen so to disturb the atmosphere, he was bound to accept the consequences of his experiment.

Supposing, now, that the experiment had succeeded, the travelers having started on the 1st of December, at 10h. 46m. 40s. P.M. were due on the 4th at 0h. P.M. at their destination. So that up to that time it would have been very difficult after all to have observed, under such conditions, a body so small as the shell. Therefore they waited with what patience they might.

From the 4th to the 6th of December inclusive, the weather remaining much the same in America, the great European instruments of Herschel, Rosse, and Foucault, were constantly directed toward the moon, for the weather was then magnificent; but the comparative weakness of their glasses prevented any trustworthy observations being made.

On the 7th the sky seemed to lighten. They were in hopes now, but their hope was of but short duration, and at night again thick clouds hid the starry vault from all eyes.

Matters were now becoming serious, when on the 9th the sun reappeared for an instant, as if for the purpose of teasing the Americans. It was received with hisses; and wounded, no doubt, by such a reception, showed itself very sparing of its rays.

On the 10th, no change! J. T. Maston went nearly mad, and great fears were entertained regarding the brain of this worthy individual, which had hitherto been so well preserved within his gutta-percha cranium.

But on the 11th one of those inexplicable tempests peculiar to those intertropical regions was let loose in the atmosphere. A terrific east wind swept away the groups of clouds which had been so long gathering, and at night the semi-disc of the orb of night rode majestically amid the soft constellations of the sky.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A NEW STAR

That very night, the startling news so impatiently awaited, burst like a thunderbolt over the United States of the Union, and thence, darting across the ocean, ran through all the telegraphic wires of the globe. The projectile had been detected, thanks to the gigantic reflector of Long’s Peak! Here is the note received by the director of the Observatory of Cambridge. It contains the scientific conclusion regarding this great experiment of the Gun Club.

LONG’S PEAK, December 12. To the Officers of the Observatory of Cambridge. The projectile discharged by the Columbiad at Stones Hill has been detected by Messrs. Belfast and J. T. Maston, 12th of December, at 8:47 P.M. the moon having entered her last quarter. This projectile has not arrived at its destination. It has passed by the side; but sufficiently near to be retained by the lunar attraction.

The rectilinear movement has thus become changed into a circular motion of extreme velocity, and it is now pursuing an elliptical orbit round the moon, of which it has become a true satellite.

The elements of this new star we have as yet been unable to determine; we do not yet know the velocity of its passage. The distance which separates it from the surface of the moon may be estimated at about 2,833 miles.

However, two hypotheses come here into our consideration.

1. Either the attraction of the moon will end by drawing them into itself, and the travelers will attain their destination; or,

2. The projectile, following an immutable law, will continue to gravitate round the moon till the end of time.

At some future time, our observations will be able to determine this point, but till then the experiment of the Gun Club can have no other result than to have provided our solar system with a new star. J. BELFAST.

To how many questions did this unexpected *denouement* give rise? What mysterious results was the future reserving for the investigation of science? At all events, the names of Nicholl, Barbicane, and Michel Ardan were certain to be immortalized in the annals of astronomy!

When the dispatch from Long’s Peak had once become known, there was but one universal feeling of surprise and alarm. Was it possible to go to the aid of these bold travelers? No! for they had placed themselves beyond the pale of humanity, by crossing the limits imposed by the Creator on his earthly creatures. They had air enough for *two* months; they had victuals enough for *twelve; — but after that?* There was only one man who would not admit that the situation was desperate — he alone had confidence; and that was their devoted friend J. T. Maston.

Besides, he never let them get out of sight. His home was henceforth the post at Long’s Peak; his horizon, the mirror of that immense reflector. As soon as the moon rose above the horizon, he immediately caught her in the field of the telescope; he never let her go for an instant out of his sight, and followed her assiduously in her course through the stellar spaces. He watched with untiring patience the passage of the projectile across her silvery disc, and really the worthy man remained in perpetual communication with his three friends, whom he did not despair of seeing again some day.

“Those three men,” said he, “have carried into space all the resources of art, science, and industry. With that, one can do anything; and you will see that, some day, they will come out all right.”

THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN HATTERAS

Anonymous translation, 1867

This novel was first published in 1866. Set in 1861, the novel concerns the adventures of a British expedition led by Captain John Hatteras to the North Pole. Hatteras is convinced that the sea around the pole is not frozen and his obsession is to reach the place no matter what. Mutiny by the crew results in destruction of their ship but Hatteras, with a few men, continues on the expedition.

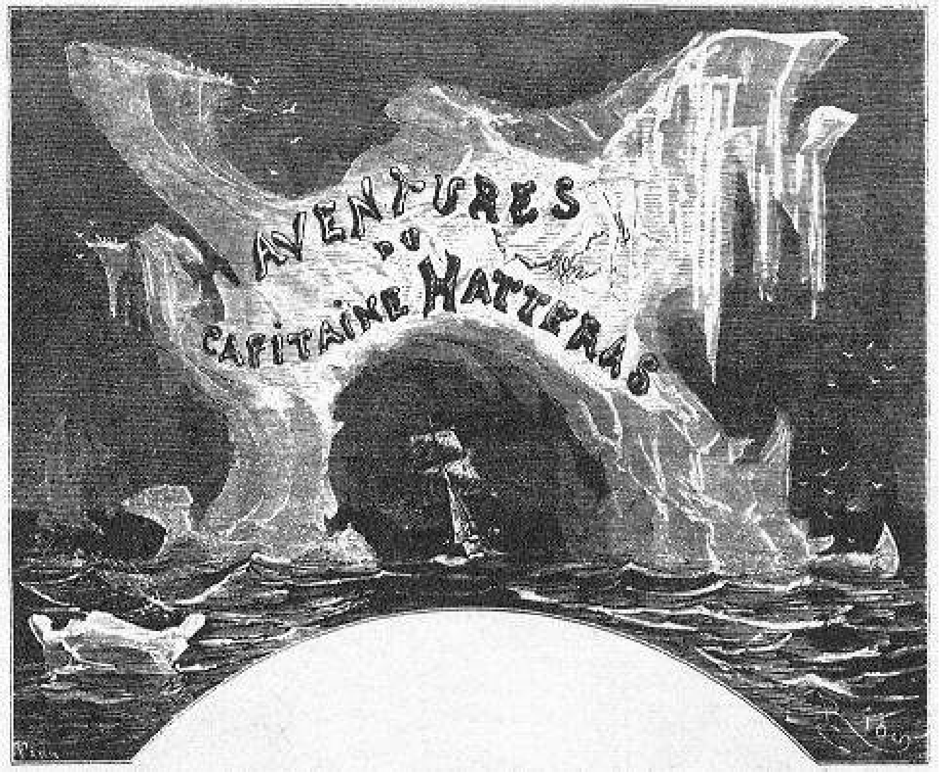
AVENTURES
DU
CAPITAINE HATTERAS

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PART I

THE ENGLISH AT THE NORTH POLE

CHAPTER I

THE “FORWARD”

“To-morrow, at low tide, the brig *Forward*, Captain K. Z — — , Richard Shandon mate, will start from New Prince’s Docks for an unknown destination.”

The foregoing might have been read in the *Liverpool Herald* of April 5th, 1860. The departure of a brig is an event of little importance for the most commercial port in England. Who would notice it in the midst of vessels of all sorts of tonnage and nationality that six miles of docks can hardly contain? However, from daybreak on the 6th of April a considerable crowd covered the wharfs of New Prince’s Docks — the innumerable companies of sailors of the town seemed to have met there. Workmen from the neighbouring wharfs had left their work, merchants their dark counting-houses, tradesmen their shops. The different-coloured omnibuses that ran along the exterior wall of the docks brought cargoes of spectators at every moment; the town seemed to have but one pre-occupation, and that was to see the *Forward* go out.

The *Forward* was a vessel of a hundred and seventy tons, charged with a screw and steam-engine of a hundred and twenty horse-power. It might easily have been confounded with the other brigs in the port. But though it offered nothing curious to the eyes of the public, connoisseurs remarked certain peculiarities in it that a sailor cannot mistake. On board the *Nautilus*, anchored at a little distance, a group of sailors were hazarding a thousand conjectures about the destination of the *Forward*.

“I don’t know what to think about its masting,” said one; “it isn’t usual for steamboats to have so much sail.”

“That ship,” said a quartermaster with a big red face — ”that ship will have to depend more on her masts than her engine, and the topsails are the biggest because the others will be often useless. I haven’t got the slightest doubt that the *Forward* is destined for the Arctic or Antarctic seas, where the icebergs stop the wind more than is good for a brave and solid ship.”

“You must be right, Mr. Cornhill,” said a third sailor. “Have you noticed her stern, how straight it falls into the sea?”

“Yes,” said the quartermaster, “and it is furnished with a steel cutter as sharp as a razor and capable of cutting a three-decker in two if the *Forward* were thrown across her at top speed.”

“That’s certain,” said a Mersey pilot; “for that ‘ere vessel runs her fourteen knots an hour with her screw. It was marvellous to see her cutting the tide when she made her trial trip. I believe you, she’s a quick un.”

“The canvas isn’t intricate either,” answered Mr. Cornhill; “it goes straight before the wind, and can be managed by hand. That ship is going to try the Polar seas, or my name isn’t what it is. There’s something else — do you see the wide helm-port that the head of her helm goes through?”

“It’s there, sure enough,” answered one; “but what does that prove?”

“That proves, my boys,” said Mr. Cornhill with disdainful satisfaction, “that you don’t know how to put two and two together and make it four; it proves that they want to be able to take off the helm when they like, and you know it’s a manoeuvre that’s often necessary when you have ice to deal with.”

“That’s certain,” answered the crew of the *Nautilus*.

“Besides,” said one of them, “the way she’s loaded confirms Mr. Cornhill’s opinion. Clifton told me. The *Forward* is victualled and carries coal enough for five or six years. Coals and victuals are all its cargo, with a stock of woollen garments and sealskins.”

“Then,” said the quartermaster, “there is no more doubt on the matter; but you, who know Clifton, didn’t he tell you anything about her destination?”

“He couldn’t tell me; he doesn’t know; the crew was engaged without knowing. He’ll only know where he’s going when he gets there.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if they were going to the devil,” said an unbeliever: “it looks like it.”

“And such pay,” said Clifton’s friend, getting warm — ”five times more than the ordinary pay. If it hadn’t been for that, Richard Shandon wouldn’t have found a soul to go with him. A ship with a queer shape, going nobody knows where, and looking more like not coming back than anything else, it wouldn’t have suited this child.”

“Whether it would have suited you or not,” answered Cornhill, “you couldn’t have been one of the crew of the *Forward*.”

“And why, pray?”

“Because you don’t fulfil the required conditions. I read that all married men were excluded, and you are in the category, so you needn’t talk. Even the very name of the ship is a bold one. The *Forward* — where is it to be forwarded to? Besides, nobody knows who the captain is.”

“Yes, they do,” said a simple-faced young sailor.

“Why, you don’t mean to say that you think Shandon is the captain of the *Forward*?” said Cornhill.

“But — — ” answered the young sailor —

“Why, Shandon is commander, and nothing else; he’s a brave and bold sailor, an experienced whaler, and a jolly fellow worthy in every respect to be the captain, but he isn’t any more captain than you or I. As to who is going to command after God on board he doesn’t know any more than we do. When the moment has come the true captain will appear, no one knows how nor where, for Richard Shandon has not said and hasn’t been allowed to say to what quarter of the globe he is going to direct his ship.”

“But, Mr. Cornhill,” continued the young sailor, “I assure you that there is someone on board who was announced in the letter, and that Mr. Shandon was offered the place of second to.”

“What!” said Cornhill, frowning, “do you mean to maintain that the *Forward* has a captain on board?”

“Yes, Mr. Cornhill.”

“Where did you get your precious information from?”

“From Johnson, the boatswain.”

“From Johnson?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Johnson told you so?”

"He not only told me so, but he showed me the captain."

"He showed him to you!" said Cornhill, stupefied. "And who is it, pray?"

"A dog."

"What do you mean by a dog?"

"A dog on four legs."

Stupefaction reigned amongst the crew of the *Nautilus*. Under any other circumstances they would have burst out laughing. A dog captain of a vessel of a hundred and seventy tons burden! It was enough to make them laugh. But really the *Forward* was such an extraordinary ship that they felt it might be no laughing matter, and they must be sure before they denied it. Besides, Cornhill himself didn't laugh.

"So Johnson showed you the new sort of captain, did he?" added he, addressing the young sailor, "and you saw him?"

"Yes, sir, as plainly as I see you now."

"Well, and what do you think about it?" asked the sailors of the quartermaster.

"I don't think anything," he answered shortly. "I don't think anything, except that the *Forward* is a ship belonging to the devil, or madmen fit for nothing but Bedlam."

The sailors continued silently watching the *Forward*, whose preparations for departure were drawing to an end; there was not one of them who pretended that Johnson had only been laughing at the young sailor. The history of the dog had already made the round of the town, and amongst the crowd of spectators many a one looked out for the dog-captain and believed him to be a supernatural animal. Besides, the *Forward* had been attracting public attention for some months past. Everything about her was marvellous; her peculiar shape, the mystery which surrounded her, the incognito kept by the captain, the way Richard Shandon had received the proposition to direct her, the careful selection of the crew, her unknown destination, suspected only by a few — all about her was strange.

To a thinker, dreamer, or philosopher nothing is more affecting than the departure of a ship; his imagination plays round the sails, sees her struggles with the sea and the wind in the adventurous journey which does not always end in port; when in addition to the ordinary incidents of departure there are extraordinary ones, even minds little given to credulity let their imagination run wild.

So it was with the *Forward*, and though the generality of people could not make the knowing remarks of Quartermaster Cornhill, it did not prevent the ship forming the subject of Liverpool gossip for three long months. The ship had been put in dock at Birkenhead, on the opposite side of the Mersey. The builders, Scott and Co. amongst the first in England, had received an estimate and detailed plan from Richard Shandon; it informed them of the exact tonnage, dimensions, and store room that the brig was to have. They saw by the details given that they had to do with a consummate seaman. As Shandon had considerable funds at his disposal, the work advanced rapidly, according to the recommendation of the owner. The brig was constructed of a solidity to withstand all tests; it was evident that she was destined to resist enormous pressure, for her ribs were built of teak-wood, a sort of Indian oak, remarkable for its extreme hardness, and were, besides, plated with iron. Sailors asked why the hull of a vessel made so evidently for resistance was not built of sheet-iron like other steamboats, and were told it was because the mysterious engineer had his own reasons for what he did.

Little by little the brig grew on the stocks, and her qualities of strength and delicacy struck connoisseurs. As the sailors of the *Nautilus* had remarked, her stern formed a right angle with her keel; her steel prow, cast in the workshop of R. Hawthorn, of Newcastle, shone in the sun and gave a peculiar look to the brig, though otherwise she had nothing particularly warlike about her. However, a 16-pounder cannon was installed on the forecastle; it was mounted on a pivot, so that it might easily be turned in any direction; but neither the cannon nor the stern, steel-clad as they were, succeeded in looking warlike.

On the 5th of February, 1860, this strange vessel was launched in the midst of an immense concourse of spectators, and the trial trip was perfectly successful. But if the brig was neither a man-of-war, a merchant vessel, nor a pleasure yacht — for a pleasure trip is not made with six years' provisions in the hold — what was it? Was it a vessel destined for another Franklin expedition? It could not be, because in 1859, the preceding year, Captain McClintock had returned from the Arctic seas, bringing the certain proof of the loss of the unfortunate expedition. Was the *Forward* going to attempt the famous North-West passage? What would be the use? Captain McClure had discovered it in 1853, and his lieutenant, Creswell, was the first who had the honour of rounding the American continent from Behring's Straits to Davis's Straits. Still it was certain to competent judges that the *Forward* was prepared to face the ice regions. Was it going to the South Pole, farther than the whaler Weddell or Captain James Ross? But, if so, what for?

The day after the brig was floated her engine was sent from Hawthorn’s foundry at Newcastle. It was of a hundred and twenty horse-power, with oscillating cylinders, taking up little room; its power was considerable for a hundred-and-seventy-ton brig, with so much sail, too, and of such fleetness. Her trial trips had left no doubt on that subject, and even the boatswain, Johnson, had thought right to express his opinion to Clifton’s friend —

“When the *Forward* uses her engine and sails at the same time, her sails will make her go the quickest.”

Clifton’s friend did not understand him, but he thought anything possible of a ship commanded by a dog. After the engine was installed on board, the stowage of provisions began. This was no slight work, for the vessel was to carry enough for six years. They consisted of dry and salted meat, smoked fish, biscuit, and flour; mountains of tea and coffee were thrown down the shafts in perfect avalanches. Richard Shandon presided over the management of this precious cargo like a man who knows what he is about; all was stowed away, ticketed, and numbered in perfect order; a very large provision of the Indian preparation called pemmican, which contains many nutritive elements in a small volume, was also embarked. The nature of the provisions left no doubt about the length of the cruise, and the sight of the barrels of lime-juice, lime-drops, packets of mustard, grains of sorrel and *cochlearia*, all antiscorbutic, confirmed the opinion on the destination of the brig for the ice regions; their influence is so necessary in Polar navigation. Shandon had doubtless received particular instructions about this part of the cargo, which, along with the medicine-chest, he attended to particularly.

Although arms were not numerous on board, the powder-magazine overflowed. The one cannon could not pretend to use the contents. That gave people more to think about. There were also gigantic saws and powerful instruments, such as levers, leaden maces, handsaws, enormous axes, etc. without counting a considerable quantity of blasting cylinders, enough to blow up the Liverpool Customs — all that was strange, not to say fearful, without mentioning rockets, signals, powder-chests, and beacons of a thousand different sorts. The numerous spectators on the wharfs of Prince’s Docks admired likewise a long mahogany whaler, a tin *pirogue* covered with gutta-percha, and a certain quantity of halkett-boats, a sort of indiarubber cloaks that can be transformed into canoes by blowing in their lining. Expectation was on the *qui vive*, for the *Forward* was going out with the tide.

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED LETTER

The letter received by Richard Shandon, eight months before, ran as follows: —

“ABERDEEN,

“August 2nd, 1859.

“To Mr. Richard Shandon,

“Liverpool.

“SIR, — I beg to advise you that the sum of sixteen thousand pounds sterling has been placed in the hands of Messrs. Marcuart and Co. bankers, of Liverpool. I join herewith a series of cheques, signed by me, which will allow you to draw upon the said Messrs. Marcuart for the above-mentioned sum. You do not know me, but that is of no consequence. I know you: that is sufficient. I offer you the place of second on board the brig *Forward* for a voyage that may be long and perilous. If you agree to my conditions you will receive a salary of £500, and all through the voyage it will be augmented one-tenth at the end of each year. The *Forward* is not yet in existence. You must have it built so as to be ready for sea at the beginning of April, 1860, at the latest. Herewith is a detailed plan and estimate. You will take care that it is scrupulously followed. The ship is to be built by Messrs. Scott and Co. who will settle with you. I particularly recommend you the choice of the *Forward's* crew; it will be composed of a captain, myself, of a second, you, of a third officer, a boatswain, two engineers, an ice pilot, eight sailors, and two others, eighteen men in all, comprising Dr. Clawbonny, of this town, who will introduce himself to you when necessary. The *Forward's* crew must be composed of Englishmen without incumbrance; they should be all bachelors and sober — for no spirits, nor even beer, will be allowed on board — ready to undertake anything, and to bear with anything. You will give the preference to men of a sanguine constitution, as they carry a greater amount of animal heat. Offer them five times the usual pay, with an increase of one-tenth for each year of service. At the end of the voyage five hundred pounds will be placed at the disposition of each, and two thousand at yours. These funds will be placed with Messrs. Marcuart and Co. The voyage will be long and difficult, but honourable, so you need not hesitate to accept my conditions. Be good enough to send your answer to K. Z. Poste Restante, Goteborg, Sweden.

"P.S. — On the 15th of February next you will receive a large Danish dog, with hanging lips, and tawny coat with black stripes. You will take it on board and have it fed with oaten bread, mixed with tallow grease. You will acknowledge the reception of the said dog to me under the same initials as above, Poste Restante, Leghorn, Italy.

"The captain of the *Forward* will introduce himself to you when necessary. When you are ready to start you will receive further instructions.

"THE CAPTAIN OF THE 'FORWARD,'

"K. Z."

CHAPTER III

DR. CLAWBONNY

Richard Shandon was a good sailor; he had been commander of whalers in the Arctic seas for many years, and had a wide reputation for skill. He might well be astonished at such a letter, and so he was, but astonished like a man used to astonishments. He fulfilled, too, all the required conditions: he had no wife, children, or relations; he was as free as a man could be. Having no one to consult, he went straight to Messrs. Marcuart’s bank.

“If the money is there,” he said to himself, “I’ll undertake the rest.”

He was received by the firm with all the attention due to a man with sixteen thousand pounds in their safes. Sure of that fact, Shandon asked for a sheet of letter-paper, and sent his acceptance in a large sailor’s hand to the address indicated. The same day he put himself in communication with the Birkenhead shipbuilders, and twenty-four hours later the keel of the *Forward* lay on the stocks in the dockyard.

Richard Shandon was a bachelor of forty, robust, energetic, and brave, three sailor-like qualities, giving their possessor confidence, vigour, and *sang-froid*. He was reputed jealous and hard to be pleased, so he was more feared than loved by his sailors. But this reputation did not increase the difficulty of finding a crew, for he was known to be a clever commander. He was afraid that the mystery of the enterprise would embarrass his movements, and he said to himself, “The best thing I can do is to say nothing at all; there are sea-dogs who will want to know the why and the wherefore of the business, and as I know nothing myself, I can’t tell them. K. Z. is a queer fish, but after all he knows me, and has confidence in me; that's enough. As to the ship, she will be a handsome lass, and my name isn't Richard Shandon if she is not destined for the Frozen Seas. But I shall keep that to myself and my officers."

Upon which Richard Shandon set about recruiting his crew upon the conditions of family and health exacted by the captain. He knew a brave fellow and capital sailor, named James Wall. Wall was about thirty, and had made more than one trip to the North Seas. Shandon offered him the post of third officer, and he accepted blindly; all he cared for was to sail, as he was devoted to his profession. Shandon told him and Johnson (whom he engaged as boatswain) all he knew about the business.

"Just as soon go there as anywhere else," answered Wall. "If it's to seek the North-West passage, many have been and come back."

"Been, yes; but come back I don't answer for," said Johnson; "but that's no reason for not going."

"Besides, if we are not mistaken in our conjectures," said Shandon, "the voyage will be undertaken under good conditions. The *Forward's* a bonny lass, with a good engine, and will stand wear and tear. Eighteen men are all the crew we want."

"Eighteen men?" said Johnson. "That's just the number that the American, Kane, had on board when he made his famous voyage towards the North Pole."

"It's a singular fact that there's always some private individual trying to cross the sea from Davis's Straits to Behring's Straits. The Franklin expeditions have already cost England more than seven hundred and sixty thousand pounds without producing any practical result. Who the devil means to risk his fortune in such an enterprise?”

“We are reasoning now on a simple hypothesis,” said Shandon. “I don’t know if we are really going to the Northern or Southern Seas. Perhaps we are going on a voyage of discovery. We shall know more when Dr. Clawbonny comes; I daresay he will tell us all about it.”

“There’s nothing for it but to wait,” answered Johnson; “I’ll go and hunt up some solid subjects, captain; and as to their animal heat, I guarantee beforehand you can trust me for that.”

Johnson was a valuable acquisition; he understood the navigation of these high latitudes. He was quartermaster on board the *Phoenix*, one of the vessels of the Franklin expedition of 1853. He was witness of the death of the French lieutenant Bellot, whom he had accompanied in his expedition across the ice. Johnson knew the maritime population of Liverpool, and started at once on his recruiting expedition. Shandon, Wall, and he did their work so well that the crew was complete in the beginning of December. It had been a difficult task; many, tempted by the high pay, felt frightened at the risk, and more than one enlisted boldly who came afterwards to take back his word and enlistment money, dissuaded by his friends from undertaking such an enterprise. All of them tried to pierce the mystery, and worried Shandon with questions; he sent them to Johnson.

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know,” he answered invariably; “you’ll be in good company, that’s all I can tell you. You can take it or leave it alone.”

And the greater number took it.

“I have only to choose,” added the boatswain; “such salary has never been heard of in the memory of sailors, and then the certainty of finding a handsome capital when we come back. Only think: it’s tempting enough.”

“The fact is,” answered the sailor, “it is tempting; enough to live on till the end of one’s days.”

“I don’t hide from you,” continued Johnson, “that the cruise will be long, painful, and perilous; that is formally stated in our instructions, and you ought to know what you undertake; you will very likely be required to attempt all that it is possible for human beings to do, and perhaps more. If you are the least bit frightened, if you don’t think you may just as well finish yonder as here, you’d better not enlist, but give way to a bolder man.”

“But, Mr. Johnson,” continued the sailor, for the want of something better to say, “at least you know the captain?”

“The captain is Richard Shandon till another comes.”

Richard Shandon, in his secret heart, hoped that the command would remain with him, and that at the last moment he should receive precise instructions as to the destination of the *Forward*. He did all he could to spread the report in his conversations with his officers, or when following the construction of the brig as it grew in the Birkenhead dockyard, looking like the ribs of a whale turned upside down. Shandon and Johnson kept strictly to their instructions touching the health of the sailors who were to form the crew; they all looked hale and hearty, and had enough heat in their bodies to suffice for the engine of the *Forward*; their supple limbs, their clear and florid complexions were fit to react against the action of intense cold. They were confident and resolute men, energetically and solidly constituted. Of course they were not all equally vigorous; Shandon had even hesitated about taking some of them, such as the sailors Gripper and Garry, and the harpooner Simpson, because they looked rather thin; but, on the whole, their build was good; they were a warm-hearted lot, and their engagement was signed.

All the crew belonged to the same sect of the Protestant religion; during these long campaigns prayer in common and the reading of the Bible have a good influence over the men and sustain them in the hour of discouragement; it was therefore important that they should be all of the same way of thinking. Shandon knew by experience the utility of these practices, and their influence on the mind of the crew; they are always employed on board ships that are intended to winter in the Polar Seas. The crew once got together, Shandon and his two officers set about the provisions; they strictly followed the instructions of the captain; these instructions were clear, precise, and detailed, and the least articles were put down with their quality and quantity. Thanks to the cheques at the commander's disposition, every article was paid for at once with a discount of 8 per cent, which Richard carefully placed to the credit of K. Z.

Crew, provisions, and cargo were ready by January, 1860; the *Forward* began to look shipshape, and Shandon went daily to Birkenhead. On the morning of the 23rd of January he was, as usual, on board one of the Mersey ferry-boats with a helm at either end to prevent having to turn it; there was a thick fog, and the sailors of the river were obliged to direct their course by means of the compass, though the passage lasts scarcely ten minutes. But the thickness of the fog did not prevent Shandon seeing a man of short stature, rather fat, with an intelligent and merry face and an amiable look, who came up to him, took him by the two hands, and shook them with an ardour, a petulance, and a familiarity "quite meridional," as a Frenchman would have said. But if this person did not come from the South, he had got his temperament there; he talked and gesticulated with volubility; his thought must come out or the machine would burst. His eyes, small as those of witty men generally are, his mouth, large and mobile, were safety-pipes which allowed him to give passage to his overflowing thoughts; he talked, and talked, and talked so much and so fast that Shandon couldn't understand a word he said. However, this did not prevent the *Forward's* mate from recognising the little man he had never seen before; a lightning flash traversed his mind, and when the other paused to take breath, Shandon made haste to get out the words, "Doctor Clawbonny!"

"Himself in person, commander! I've been at least half a quarter of an hour looking for you, asking everybody everywhere! Just think how impatient I got; five minutes more and I should have lost my head! And so you are the commander Richard? You really exist? You are not a myth? Your hand, your hand! I want to shake it again. It is Richard Shandon's hand, and if there is a commander Shandon, there's a brig *Forward* to command; and if he commands he will start, and if he starts he'll take Dr. Clawbonny on board."

"Well, yes, doctor, I am Richard Shandon; there is a brig *Forward*, and it will start."

"That's logic," answered the doctor, after taking in a large provision of breathing air — "that's logic. And I am ready to jump for joy at having my dearest wishes gratified. I've wanted to undertake such a voyage. Now with you, commander — — "

"I don't — — " began Shandon.

"With you," continued Clawbonny, without hearing him, "we are sure to go far and not to draw back for a trifle."

“But — — ” began Shandon again.

“For you have shown what you are made of, commander; I know your deeds of service. You are a fine sailor!”

“If you will allow me — — ”

“No, I won’t have your bravery, audacity, and skill put an instant in doubt, even by you! The captain who chose you for his mate is a man who knows what he’s about, I can tell you.”

“But that’s nothing to do with it,” said Shandon, impatient.

“What is it, then? Don’t keep me in suspense another minute.”

“You don’t give me time to speak. Tell me, if you please, doctor, how it comes that you are to take part in the expedition of the *Forward*.”

“Read this letter, this worthy letter, the letter of a brave captain — very laconic, but quite sufficient.”

Saying which the doctor held out the following letter to Shandon: —

“INVERNESS,

“Jan. 22nd, 1860.

“To Dr. Clawbonny.

“If Dr. Clawbonny wishes to embark on board the *Forward* for a long cruise, he may introduce himself to the commander, Richard Shandon, who has received orders concerning him.

“THE CAPTAIN OF THE ‘FORWARD,’

“K. Z.”

“This letter reached me this morning, and here I am, ready to embark.”

“But, doctor, do you know where we are going to?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea, and I do not care so that it is somewhere. They pretend that I am learned; they are mistaken, commander. I know nothing, and if I have published a few books that don’t sell badly, I ought not to have done it; the public is silly for buying them. I know nothing, I tell you. I am only an ignorant man. When I have the offer of completing, or rather of going over again, my knowledge of medicine, surgery, history, geography, botany, mineralogy, conchology, geodesy, chemistry, natural philosophy, mechanics, and hydrography, why I accept, of course.”

“Then,” said Shandon, disappointed, “you do not know where the *Forward* is bound for?”

“Yes, I do; it is bound for where there is something to learn, to discover, and to compare — where we shall meet with other customs, other countries, other nations, to study in the exercise of their functions; it is going, in short, where I have never been.”

“But I want to know something more definite than that,” cried Shandon.

“Well, I have heard that we are bound for the Northern Seas.”

“At least,” asked Shandon, “you know the captain?”

“Not the least bit in the world! But he is an honest fellow, you may believe me.”

The commander and the doctor disembarked at Birkenhead; the former told the doctor all he knew about the situation of things, and the mystery inflamed the imagination of the doctor. The sight of the brig caused him transports of joy. From that day he stopped with Shandon, and went every day to pay a visit to the shell of the *Forward*. Besides, he was specially appointed to overlook the installation of the ship’s medicine-chest. For Dr. Clawbonny was a doctor, and a good one, though practising little. At the age of twenty-five he was an ordinary practitioner; at the age of forty he was a *savant*, well known in the town; he was an influential member of all the literary and scientific institutions of Liverpool. His fortune allowed him to distribute counsels which were none the worse for being gratuitous; beloved as a man eminently lovable must always be, he had never wronged any one, not even himself; lively and talkative, he carried his heart in his hand, and put his hand into that of everybody. When it was known in Liverpool that he was going to embark on board the *Forward* his friends did all they could to dissuade him, and only fixed him more completely in his determination, and when the doctor was determined to do anything no one could prevent him. From that time the suppositions and apprehensions increased, but did not prevent the *Forward* being launched on the 5th of February, 1860. Two months later she was ready to put to sea. On the 15th of March, as the letter of the captain had announced, a dog of Danish breed was sent by railway from Edinburgh to Liverpool, addressed to Richard Shandon. The animal seemed surly, peevish, and even sinister, with quite a singular look in his eyes. The name of the *Forward* was engraved on his brass collar. The commander installed it on board the same day, and acknowledged its reception to K. Z. at Leghorn. Thus, with the exception of the captain, the crew was complete. It was composed as follows: —

1. K. Z. captain; 2. Richard Shandon, commander; 3. James Wall, third officer; 4. Dr. Clawbonny; 5. Johnson, boatswain; 6. Simpson, harpooner; 7. Bell, carpenter; 8. Brunton, chief engineer; 9. Plover, second engineer; 10. Strong (negro), cook; 11. Foker, ice-master; 12. Wolsten, smith; 13. Bolton, sailor; 14. Garry, sailor; 15. Clifton, sailor; 16. Gripper, sailor; 17. Pen, sailor; 18. Warren, stoker.

CHAPTER IV

DOG-CAPTAIN

The day of departure arrived with the 5th of April. The admission of the doctor on board had given the crew more confidence. They knew that where the worthy doctor went they could follow. However, the sailors were still uneasy, and Shandon, fearing that some of them would desert, wished to be off. With the coast out of sight, they would make up their mind to the inevitable.

Dr. Clawbonny’s cabin was situated at the end of the poop, and occupied all the stern of the vessel. The captain’s and mate’s cabins gave upon deck. The captain’s remained hermetically closed, after being furnished with different instruments, furniture, travelling garments, books, clothes for changing, and utensils, indicated in a detailed list. According to the wish of the captain, the key of the cabin was sent to Lubeck; he alone could enter his room.

This detail vexed Shandon, and took away all chance of the chief command. As to his own cabin, he had perfectly appropriated it to the needs of the presumed voyage, for he thoroughly understood the needs of a Polar expedition. The room of the third officer was placed under the lower deck, which formed a vast sleeping-room for the sailors’ use; the men were very comfortably lodged, and would not have found anything like the same convenience on board any other ship; they were cared for like the most priceless cargo: a vast stove occupied all the centre of the common room. Dr. Clawbonny was in his element; he had taken possession of his cabin on the 6th of February, the day after the *Forward* was launched.

“The happiest of animals,” he used to say, “is a snail, for it can make a shell exactly to fit it; I shall try to be an intelligent snail.”

And considering that the shell was to be his lodging for a considerable time, the cabin began to look like home; the doctor had a *savant’s* or a child’s pleasure in arranging his scientific traps. His books, his herbals, his set of pigeon-holes, his instruments of precision, his chemical apparatus, his collection of thermometers, barometers, hygrometers, rain-gauges, spectacles, compasses, sextants, maps, plans, flasks, powders, bottles for medicine-chest, were all classed in an order that would have shamed the British Museum. The space of six square feet contained incalculable riches: the doctor had only to stretch out his hand without moving to become instantaneously a doctor, a mathematician, an astronomer, a geographer, a botanist, or a conchologist. It must be acknowledged that he was proud of his management and happy in his floating sanctuary, which three of his thinnest friends would have sufficed to fill. His friends came to it in such numbers that even a man as easy-going as the doctor might have said with Socrates, “My house is small, but may it please Heaven never to fill it with friends!”

To complete the description of the *Forward* it is sufficient to say that the kennel of the large Danish dog was constructed under the window of the mysterious cabin but its savage inhabitant preferred wandering between decks and in the hold; it seemed impossible to tame him, and no one had been able to become his master; during the night he howled lamentably, making the hollows of the ship ring in a sinister fashion. Was it regret for his absent master? Was it the instinct of knowing that he was starting for a perilous voyage? Was it a presentiment of dangers to come? The sailors decided that it was for the latter reason, and more than one pretended to joke who believed seriously that the dog was of a diabolical kind. Pen, who was a brutal man, was going to strike him once, when he fell, unfortunately, against the angle of the capstan, and made a frightful wound in his head. Of course this accident was placed to the account of the fantastic animal. Clifton, the most superstitious of the crew, made the singular observation that when the dog was on the poop he always walked on the windward side, and afterwards, when the brig was out at sea, and altered its tack, the surprising animal changed its direction with the wind the same as the captain of the *Forward* would have done in his place. Dr. Clawbonny, whose kindness and caresses would have tamed a tiger, tried in vain to win the good graces of the dog; he lost his time and his pains. The animal did not answer to any name ever written in the dog calendar, and the crew ended by calling him Captain, for he appeared perfectly conversant with ship customs; it was evident that it was not his first trip. From such facts it is easy to understand the boatswain's answer to Clifton's friend, and the credulity of those who heard it; more than one repeated jokingly that he expected one day to see the dog take human shape and command the manoeuvres with a resounding voice.

If Richard Shandon did not feel the same apprehensions he was not without anxiety, and the day before the departure, in the evening of April 5th, he had a conversation on the subject with the doctor, Wall, and Johnson in the poop cabin. These four persons were tasting their tenth grog, and probably their last, for the letter from Aberdeen had ordered that all the crew, from the captain to the stoker, should be teetotallers, and that there should be no wine, beer, nor spirits on board except those given by the doctor's orders. The conversation had been going on about the departure for the last hour. If the instructions of the captain were realised to the end, Shandon would receive his last instructions the next day.

“If the letter,” said the commander, “does not tell me the captain’s name, it must at least tell me the destination of the brig, or I shall not know where to take her to.”

“If I were you,” said the impatient doctor, “I should start whether I get a letter or no; they’ll know how to send after you, you may depend.”

“You are ready for anything, doctor; but if so, to what quarter of the globe should you set sail?”

“To the North Pole, of course; there’s not the slightest doubt about that.”

“Why should it not be the South Pole?” asked Wall.

“The South Pole is out of the question. No one with any sense would send a brig across the whole of the Atlantic. Just reflect a minute, and you’ll see the impossibility.”

“The doctor has an answer to everything,” said Wall.

“Well, we’ll say north,” continued Shandon. “But where north? To Spitzbergen or Greenland? Labrador or Hudson’s Bay? Although all directions end in insuperable icebergs, I am not less puzzled as to which to take. Have you an answer to that, doctor?”

“No,” he answered, vexed at having nothing to say; “but if you don’t get a letter what shall you do?”

“I shall do nothing; I shall wait.”

“Do you mean to say you won’t start?” cried Dr. Clawbonny, agitating his glass in despair.

“Certainly I do.”

“And that would be the wisest plan,” said Johnson tranquilly, while the doctor began marching round the table, for he could not keep still; “but still, if we wait too long, the consequences may be deplorable; the season is good now if we are really going north, as we ought to profit by the breaking up of the ice to cross Davis’s Straits; besides, the crew gets more and more uneasy; the friends and companions of our men do all they can to persuade them to leave the *Forward*, and their influence may be pernicious for us.”

“Besides,” added Wall, “if one of them deserted they all would, and then I don’t know how you would get another crew together.”

“But what can I do?” cried Shandon.

“What you said you would do,” replied the doctor; “wait and wait till to-morrow before you despair. The captain’s promises have all been fulfilled up to now with the greatest regularity, and there’s no reason to believe we shan’t be made acquainted with our destination when the proper time comes. I haven’t the slightest doubt that to-morrow we shall be sailing in the Irish Channel, and I propose we drink a last grog to our pleasant voyage. It begins in an unaccountable fashion, but with sailors like you there are a thousand chances that it will end well.”

And all four drank to their safe return.

“Now, commander,” continued Johnson, “if you will allow me to advise you, you will prepare everything to start; the crew must think that you know what you are about. If you don’t get a letter to-morrow, set sail; do not get up the steam, the wind looks like holding out, and it will be easy enough to sail; let the pilot come on board; go out of the docks with the tide, and anchor below Birkenhead; our men won’t be able to communicate with land, and if the devil of a letter comes it will find us as easily there as elsewhere.”

“By heavens! you are right, Johnson!” cried the doctor, holding out his hand to the old sailor.

“So be it,” answered Shandon.

Then each one entered his cabin, and waited in feverish sleep for the rising of the sun. The next day the first distribution of letters took place in the town, and not one bore the address of the commander, Richard Shandon. Nevertheless, he made his preparations for departure, and the news spread at once all over Liverpool, and, as we have already seen, an extraordinary affluence of spectators crowded the wharfs of New Prince’s Docks. Many of them came on board to shake hands for the last time with a comrade, or to try and dissuade a friend, or to take a look at the brig, and to know its destination; they were disappointed at finding the commander more taciturn and reserved than ever. He had his reasons for that.

Ten o’clock struck. Eleven followed. The tide began to go out that day at about one o’clock in the afternoon. Shandon from the top of the poop was looking at the crowd with uneasy eyes, trying to read the secret of his destiny on one of the faces. But in vain. The sailors of the *Forward* executed his orders in silence, looking at him all the time, waiting for orders which did not come. Johnson went on preparing for departure. The weather was cloudy and the sea rough; a south-easter blew with violence, but it was easy to get out of the Mersey.

At twelve o’clock nothing had yet been received. Dr. Clawbonny marched up and down in agitation, looking through his telescope, gesticulating, impatient for the sea, as he said. He felt moved, though he struggled against it. Shandon bit his lips till the blood came. Johnson came up to him and said —

“Commander, if we want to profit by the tide, there is no time to be lost; we shall not be clear of the docks for at least an hour.”

Shandon looked round him once more and consulted his watch. The twelve o’clock letters had been distributed. In despair he told Johnson to start. The boatswain ordered the deck to be cleared of spectators, and the crowd made a general movement to regain the wharves while the last moorings were unloosed. Amidst the confusion a dog’s bark was distinctly heard, and all at once the animal broke through the compact mass, jumped on to the poop, and, as a thousand spectators can testify, dropped a letter at Shandon’s feet.

“A letter!” cried Shandon. “*He* is on board, then?”

“He was, that’s certain, but he isn’t now,” said Johnson, pointing to the deserted deck.

Shandon held the letter without opening it in his astonishment.

“But read it, read it, I say,” said the doctor.

Shandon looked at it. The envelope had no postmark or date; it was addressed simply to:

“RICHARD SHANDON,

“Commander on board the brig

“*Forward*.”

Shandon opened the letter and read as follows: —

“Sail for Cape Farewell. You will reach it by the 20th of April. If the captain does not appear on board, cross Davis’s Straits, and sail up Baffin’s Sea to Melville Bay.

“THE CAPTAIN OF THE ‘FORWARD,’

“K. Z.”

Shandon carefully folded this laconic epistle, put it in his pocket, and gave the order for departure. His voice, which rang above the east wind, had something solemn in it.

Soon the *Forward* had passed the docks, and directed by a Liverpool pilot whose little cutter followed, went down the Mersey with the current. The crowd precipitated itself on to the exterior wharf along the Victoria Docks in order to get a last glimpse of the strange brig. The two topsails, the foresail and the brigantine sail were rapidly set up, and the *Forward*, worthy of its name, after having rounded Birkenhead Point, sailed with extraordinary fleetness into the Irish Sea.

CHAPTER V

OUT AT SEA

The wind was favourable, though it blew in April gales. The *Forward* cut through the waves, and towards three o’clock crossed the mail steamer between Liverpool and the Isle of Man. The captain hailed from his deck the last adieu that the *Forward* was destined to hear.

At five o’clock the pilot left the command in the hands of Richard Shandon, the commander of the brig, and regained his cutter, which, turning round, soon disappeared on the south-west. Towards evening the brig doubled the Calf of Man at the southern extremity of the island. During the night the sea was very rough, but the *Forward* behaved well, left the point of Ayr to the north-west, and directed its course for the Northern Channel. Johnson was right; once out at sea the maritime instinct of the sailors gained the upper hand. Life on board went on with regularity.

The doctor breathed in the sea air with delight; he walked about vigorously in the squalls, and for a *savant* he was not a bad sailor.

“The sea is splendid,” said he to Johnson, coming up on deck after breakfast. “I have made its acquaintance rather late, but I shall make up for lost time.”

“You are right, Mr. Clawbonny. I would give all the continents of the world for a corner of the ocean. They pretend that sailors soon get tired of their profession, but I’ve been forty years on the sea and I love it as much as the first day.”

“It is a great pleasure to feel a good ship under one’s feet, and if I’m not a bad judge the *Forward* behaves herself well.”

“You judge rightly, doctor,” answered Shandon, who had joined the talkers; “she is a good ship, and I acknowledge that a vessel destined for navigation amongst ice has never been better equipped. That reminds me that thirty years ago Captain James Ross, sailing for the North-West passage — — ”

“In the *Victory*,” added the doctor quickly, “a brig about the same tonnage as ours, with a steam-engine too.”

“What! you know about that?”

“Judge if I do,” answered the doctor. “Machines were then in their infancy, and the *Victory’s* kept her back; the captain, James Ross, after having vainly repaired it bit by bit, finished by taking it down, and abandoned it at his first winter quarters.”

“The devil!” said Shandon. “You know all about it, I see.”

“Yes. I’ve read the works of Parry, Ross, and Franklin, and the reports of McClure, Kennedy, Kane, and McClintock, and I remember something of what I’ve read. I can tell you, too, that this same McClintock, on board the *Fox*, a screw brig in the style of ours, went easier to his destination than any of the men who preceded him.”

“That’s perfectly true,” answered Shandon; “he was a bold sailor was McClintock; I saw him at work. You may add that, like him, we shall find ourselves in Davis’s Straits in April, and if we succeed in passing the ice our voyage will be considerably advanced.”

“Unless,” added the doctor, “it happens to us like it did to the *Fox* in 1857, to be caught the very first year by the ice in Baffin’s Sea, and have to winter in the midst of the icebergs.”

“We must hope for better luck,” answered Johnson. “If a ship like the *Forward* can’t take us where we want to go, we must renounce all hope for ever.”

“Besides,” said the doctor, “if the captain is on board he will know better than we do what must be done. We know nothing as yet; his letter says nothing about what our voyage is for.”

“It is a good deal to know which way to go,” answered Shandon quickly. “We can do without the captain and his instructions for another month at least. Besides, you know what I think about it.”

“A short time ago,” said the doctor, “I thought like you that the captain would never appear, and that you would remain commander of the ship; but now — — ”

“Now what?” replied Shandon in an impatient tone.

“Since the arrival of the second letter I have modified that opinion.”

“Why, doctor?”

“Because the letter tells you the route to follow, but leaves you ignorant of the *Forward’s* destination; and we must know where we are going to. How the deuce are you to get a letter now we are out at sea? On the coast of Greenland the service of the post must leave much to wish for. I believe that our gentleman is waiting for us in some Danish settlement — at Holsteinborg or Uppernawik; he has evidently gone there to complete his cargo of sealskins, buy his sledges and dog, and, in short, get together all the tackle wanted for a voyage in the Arctic Seas. I shouldn't be at all surprised to see him come out of his cabin one of these fine mornings and begin commanding the ship in anything but a supernatural way."

"It's possible," answered Shandon drily; "but in the meantime the wind is getting up, and I can't risk my gallant sails in such weather."

Shandon left the doctor and gave the order to reef the topsails.

"He takes it to heart," said the doctor to the boatswain.

"Yes," answered the latter, "and it's a great pity, for you may be right, Mr. Clawbonny."

In the evening of Saturday the *Forward* doubled the Mull of Galloway, whose lighthouse shone to the north-east; during the night they left the Mull of Cantyre to the north, and Cape Fair, on the coast of Ireland, to the east. Towards three o'clock in the morning, the brig, leaving Rathlin Island on her starboard side, disembogued by the Northern Channel into the ocean. It was Sunday, the 8th of April, and the doctor read some chapters of the Bible to the assembled seamen. The wind then became a perfect hurricane, and tended to throw the brig on to the Irish coast; she pitched, and rolled, and tossed, and if the doctor was not seasick it was because he would not be, for nothing was easier. At noon Cape Malinhead disappeared towards the south; it was the last European ground that these bold sailors were to perceive, and more than one watched it out of sight, destined never to see it again. They were then in 55° 57' latitude and 7° 40' longitude by the Greenwich meridian.

The storm spent itself out about nine o'clock in the evening; the *Forward*, like a good sailor, maintained her route north-west. She showed by her behaviour during the day what her sailing capacities were, and as the Liverpool connoisseurs had remarked, she was above all, a sailing vessel. During the following days the *Forward* gained the north-west with rapidity; the wind veered round south, and the sea had a tremendous swell on; the brig was then going along under full sail. Some petrels and puffins came sailing over the poop; the doctor skilfully shot one of the latter, and it fell, fortunately, on the deck. The harpooner, Simpson, picked it up and brought it to its owner.

"Nasty game that, Mr. Clawbonny," he said.

"It will make an excellent meal, on the contrary," said the doctor.

"You don't mean to say you are going to eat that thing?"

"And so are you, old fellow," said the doctor, laughing.

"Poh!" replied Simpson, "but it's oily and rancid, like all other sea birds."

"Never mind!" answered the doctor, "I have a peculiar way of cooking that game, and if you recognise it for a sea bird I'll consent never to kill another in my life."

"Do you know how to cook, then?"

"A *savant* ought to know how to do a little of everything."

"You'd better take care, Simpson," said the boatswain; "the doctor's a clever man, and he'll make you take this puffin for a grouse."

The fact is that the doctor was quite right about his fowl; he took off all the fat, which all lies under the skin, principally on the thighs, and with it disappeared the rancidity and taste of fish which is so disagreeable in a sea bird. Thus prepared the puffin was declared excellent, and Simpson acknowledged it the first.

During the late storm Richard Shandon had been able to judge of the qualities of his crew; he had watched each man narrowly, and knew how much each was to be depended upon.

James Wall was devoted to Richard, understood quickly and executed well, but he might fail in initiative; he placed him in the third rank. Johnson was used to struggle with the sea; he was an old stager in the Arctic Ocean, and had nothing to learn either in audacity or *sang-froid*. The harpooner, Simpson, and the carpenter, Bell, were sure men, faithful to duty and discipline. The ice-master, Foker, was an experienced sailor, and, like Johnson, was capable of rendering important service. Of the other sailors Garry and Bolton seemed to be the best; Bolton was a gay and talkative fellow; Garry was thirty-five, with an energetic face, but rather pale and sad-looking. The three sailors, Clifton, Gripper, and Pen, seemed less ardent and resolute; they easily grumbled. Gripper wanted to break his engagement even before the departure of the *Forward*; a sort of shame kept him on board. If things went on all right, if there were not too many risks to run, no dangers to encounter, these three men might be depended upon; but they must be well fed, for it might be said that they were led by their stomachs. Although warned beforehand, they grumbled at having to be teetotallers; at their meals they regretted the brandy and gin; it did not, however, make them spare the tea and coffee, which was prodigally given out on board. As to the two engineers, Brunton and Plover, and the stoker, Warren, there had been nothing for them to do as yet, and Shandon could not tell anything about their capabilities.

On the 14th of April the *Forward* got into the grand current of the Gulf Stream, which, after ascending the eastern coast of America to Newfoundland, inclines to the north-east along the coast of Norway. They were then in 57° 37’ latitude by 22° 58’ longitude, at two hundred miles from the point of Greenland. The weather grew colder, and the thermometer descended to thirty-two degrees, that is to say to freezing point.

The doctor had not yet begun to wear the garments he destined for the Arctic Seas, but he had donned a sailor’s dress like the rest; he was a queer sight with his top-boots, in which his legs disappeared, his vast oilcloth hat, his jacket and trousers of the same; when drenched with heavy rains or enormous waves the doctor looked like a sort of sea-animal, and was proud of the comparison.

During two days the sea was extremely rough; the wind veered round to the north-west, and delayed the progress of the *Forward*. From the 14th to the 16th of April the swell was great, but on the Monday there came such a torrent of rain that the sea became calm immediately. Shandon spoke to the doctor about this phenomenon.

“It confirms the curious observations of the whaler Scoresby, who laid it before the Royal Society of Edinburgh, of which I have the honour to be an honorary member. You see that when it rains the waves are not very high, even under the influence of a violent wind, and when the weather is dry the sea is more agitated, even when there is less wind.”

“But how is this phenomenon accounted for?”

“Very simply; it is not accounted for at all.”

Just then the ice-master, who was keeping watch on the crossbars of the topsails, signalled a floating mass on the starboard, at about fifteen miles distance before the wind.

“An iceberg here!” cried the doctor.

Shandon pointed his telescope in the direction indicated, and confirmed the pilot’s announcement.

“That is curious!” said the doctor.

“What! you are astonished at last!” said the commander, laughing.

“I am surprised, but not astonished,” answered the doctor, laughing; “for the brig *Ann*, of Poole, from Greenspond, was caught in 1813 in perfect ice-fields, in the forty-fourth degree of north latitude, and her captain, Dayernent, counted them by hundreds!”

“I see you can teach us something, even upon that subject.”

“Very little,” answered Clawbonny modestly; “it is only that ice has been met with in even lower latitudes.”

“I knew that already, doctor, for when I was cabinboy on board the war-sloop *Fly* — — ”

“In 1818,” continued the doctor, “at the end of March, almost in April, you passed between two large islands of floating ice under the forty-second degree of latitude.”

“Well, I declare you astonish me!” cried Shandon.

“But the iceberg doesn’t astonish me, as we are two degrees further north.”

“You are a well, doctor,” answered the commander, “and all we have to do is to be water-buckets.”

“You will draw me dry sooner than you think for; and now, Shandon, if we could get a nearer look at this phenomenon, I should be the happiest of doctors.”

“Just so, Johnson,” said Shandon, calling his boatswain. “It seems to me that the breeze is getting up.”

“Yes, commander,” answered Johnson; “we are making very little way, and the currents of Davis’s Straits will soon be against us.”

“You are right, Johnson, and if we wish to be in sight of Cape Farewell on the 20th of April we must put the steam on, or we shall be thrown on the coasts of Labrador. Mr. Wall, will you give orders to light the fires?”

The commander’s orders were executed, an hour afterwards the steam was up, the sails were furled, and the screw cutting the waves sent the *Forward* against the north-west wind.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT POLAR CURRENT

A short time after the flights of birds became more and more numerous. Petrels, puffins, and mates, inhabitants of those desolate quarters, signalled the approach of Greenland. The *Forward* was rapidly nearing the north, leaving to her leeward a long line of black smoke.

On Tuesday the 17th of April, about eleven o'clock in the morning, the ice-master signalled the first sight of the ice-blink; it was about twenty miles to the N.N.W. This glaring white strip was brilliantly lighted up, in spite of the presence of thick clouds in the neighbouring parts of the sky. Experienced people on board could make no mistake about this phenomenon, and declared, from its whiteness, that the blink was owing to a large ice-field, situated at about thirty miles out of sight, and that it proceeded from the reflection of luminous rays. Towards evening the wind turned round to the south, and became favourable; Shandon put on all sail, and for economy's sake caused the fires to be put out. The *Forward*, under her topsails and foresails, glided on towards Cape Farewell.

At three o'clock on the 18th they came across the ice-stream, and a white thick line of a glaring colour cut brilliantly the lines of the sea and sky. It was evidently drifting from the eastern coast of Greenland more than from Davis's Straits, for ice generally keeps to the west coast of Baffin's Sea. An hour afterwards the *Forward* passed in the midst of isolated portions of the ice-stream, and in the most compact parts, the icebergs, though welded together, obeyed the movements of the swell. The next day the man at the masthead signalled a vessel. It was the *Valkirien*, a Danish corvette, running alongside the *Forward*, and making for the bank of Newfoundland. The current of the Strait began to make itself felt, and Shandon had to put on sail to go up it. At this moment the commander, the doctor, James Wall, and Johnson were assembled on the poop examining the direction and strength of the current. The doctor wanted to know if the current existed also in Baffin's Sea.

"Without the least doubt," answered Shandon, "and the sailing vessels have much trouble to stem it."

"Besides there," added Wall, "you meet with it on the eastern coast of America, as well as on the western coast of Greenland."

"There," said the doctor, "that is what gives very singular reason to the seekers of the North-West passage! That current runs about five miles an hour, and it is a little difficult to suppose that it springs from the bottom of a gulf."

"It is so much the more probable, doctor," replied Shandon, "that if this current runs from north to south we find in Behring's Straits a contrary current which runs from south to north, and which must be the origin of this one."

"According to that," replied the doctor, "we must admit that America is totally unconnected with the Polar lands, and that the waters of the Pacific run round the coasts of America into the Atlantic. On the other hand, the greater elevation of the waters of the Pacific gives reason to the supposition that they fall into the European seas."

"But," sharply replied Shandon, "there must be facts to establish that theory, and if there are any," added he with irony, "our universally well-informed doctor ought to know them.”

“Well,” replied the above-mentioned, with amiable satisfaction, “if it interests you, I can tell you that whales, wounded in Davis’s Straits, are caught some time afterwards in the neighbourhood of Tartary with the European harpoon still in their flanks.”

“And unless they have been able to double Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope,” replied Shandon, “they must necessarily have rounded the septentrional coasts of America — that’s what I call indisputable, doctor.”

“However, if you were not convinced, my dear fellow,” said the doctor, smiling, “I could still produce other facts, such as drift-wood, of which Davis’s Straits are full, larch, aspen, and other tropical trees. Now we know that the Gulf Stream hinders those woods from entering the Straits. If, then, they come out of it they can only get in from Behring’s Straits.”

“I am convinced, doctor, and I avow that it would be difficult to remain incredulous with you.”

“Upon my honour,” said Johnson, “there’s something that comes just in time to help our discussion. I perceive in the distance a lump of wood of certain dimensions; if the commander permits it we’ll haul it in, and ask it the name of its country.”

“That’s it,” said the doctor, “the example after the rule.”

Shandon gave the necessary orders; the brig was directed towards the piece of wood signalled, and soon afterwards, not without trouble, the crew hoisted it on deck. It was the trunk of a mahogany tree, gnawed right into the centre by worms, but for which circumstance it would not have floated.

“This is glorious,” said the doctor enthusiastically, “for as the currents of the Atlantic could not carry it to Davis’s Straits, and as it has not been driven into the Polar basin by the streams of septentrional America, seeing that this tree grew under the Equator, it is evident that it comes in a straight line from Behring; and look here, you see those sea-worms which have eaten it, they belong to a hot-country species.”

“It is evident,” replied Wall, “that the people who do not believe in the famous passage are wrong.”

“Why, this circumstance alone ought to convince them,” said the doctor; “I will just trace you out the itinerary of that mahogany; it has been floated towards the Pacific by some river of the Isthmus of Panama or Guatemala, from thence the current has dragged it along the American coast as far as Behring’s Straits, and in spite of everything it was obliged to enter the Polar Seas. It is neither so old nor so soaked that we need fear to assign a recent date to its setting out; it has had the good luck to get clear of the obstacles in that long suite of straits which lead out of Baffin’s Bay, and quickly seized by the boreal current came by Davis’s Straits to be made prisoner by the *Forward* to the great joy of Dr. Clawbonny, who asks the commander’s permission to keep a sample of it.”

“Do so,” said Shandon, “but allow me to tell you that you will not be the only proprietor of such a wreck. The Danish governor of the Isle of Disko — — ”

“On the coast of Greenland,” continued the doctor, “possesses a mahogany table made from a trunk fished up under the same circumstances. I know it, but I don’t envy him his table, for if it were not for the bother, I should have enough there for a whole bedroom.”

During the night, from Wednesday to Thursday, the wind blew with extreme violence, and driftwood was seen more frequently. Nearing the coast offered many dangers at an epoch in which icebergs were so numerous; the commander caused some of the sails to be furled, and the *Forward* glided away under her foresail and foremast only. The thermometer sank below freezing-point. Shandon distributed suitable clothing to the crew, a woollen jacket and trousers, a flannel shirt, wadmel stockings, the same as those the Norwegian country-people wear, and a pair of perfectly waterproof sea-boots. As to the captain, he contented himself with his natural fur, and appeared little sensible to the change in the temperature; he had, no doubt, gone through more than one trial of this kind, and besides, a Dane had no right to be difficult. He was seen very little, as he kept himself concealed in the darkest parts of the vessel.

Towards evening the coast of Greenland peeped out through an opening in the fog. The doctor, armed with his glass, could distinguish for an instant a line of peaks, ridged with large blocks of ice; but the fog closed rapidly on this vision, like the curtain of a theatre falling in the most interesting moment of the piece.

On the morning of the 20th of April the *Forward* was in sight of an iceberg a hundred and fifty feet high, stranded there from time immemorial; the thaws had taken no effect on it, and had respected its strange forms. Snow saw it; James Ross took an exact sketch of it in 1829; and in 1851 the French lieutenant Bellot saw it from the deck of the *Prince Albert*. Of course the doctor wished to keep a memento of the celebrated mountain, and made a clever sketch of it. It is not surprising that such masses should be stranded and adhere to the land, for to each foot above water they have two feet below, giving, therefore, to this one about eighty fathoms of depth.

At last, under a temperature which at noon was only 12°, under a snowy and foggy sky, Cape Farewell was perceived. The *Forward* arrived on the day fixed; if it pleased the unknown captain to come and occupy his position in such diabolical weather he would have no cause to complain.

“There you are, then,” said the doctor to himself, “cape so celebrated and so well named! Many have cleared it like us who were destined never to see it again. Is it, then, an eternal adieu said to one’s European friends? You have all passed it. Frobisher, Knight, Barlow, Vaughan, Scroggs, Barentz, Hudson, Blosseville, Franklin, Crozier, Bellot, never to come back to your domestic hearth, and that cape has been really for you the cape of adieus.”

It was about the year 970 that some navigators left Iceland and discovered Greenland. Sebastian Cabot forced his way as far as latitude 56° in 1498. Gaspard and Michel Cotreal, in 1500 and 1502, went as far north as 60°; and Martin Frobisher, in 1576, arrived as far as the bay that bears his name. To John Davis belongs the honour of having discovered the Straits in 1585; and two years later, in a third voyage, that bold navigator and great whaler reached the sixty-third parallel, twenty-seven degrees from the Pole.

Barentz in 1596, Weymouth in 1602, James Hall in 1605 and 1607, Hudson, whose name was given to that vast bay which hollows out so profoundly the continent of America, James Poole, in 1611, advanced far into the Strait in search of that North-West passage the discovery of which would have considerably shortened the track of communication between the two worlds. Baffin, in 1616, found the Straits of Lancaster in the sea that bears his own name; he was followed, in 1619, by James Munk, and in 1719 by Knight, Barlow, Vaughan, and Scroggs, of whom no news has ever been heard. In 1776 Lieutenant Pickersgill, sent out to meet Captain Cook, who tried to go up Behring’s Straits, reached the sixty-eighth degree; the following year Young, for the same purpose, went as far north as Woman's Island.

Afterwards came Captain James Ross, who, in 1818, rounded the coasts of Baffin's Sea, and corrected the hydrographic errors of his predecessors. Lastly, in 1819 and 1820, the celebrated Parry passed through Lancaster Straits, and penetrated, in spite of unnumbered difficulties, as far as Melville Island, and won the prize of £5,000 promised by Act of Parliament to the English sailors who would reach the hundred and seventeenth meridian by a higher latitude than the seventy-seventh parallel.

In 1826 Beechey touched Chamisso Island; James Ross wintered from 1829 to 1833 in Prince Regent Straits, and amongst other important works discovered the magnetic pole. During this time Franklin, by an overland route, traversed the septentrional coasts of America from the River Mackenzie to Turnagain Point. Captain Back followed in his steps from 1823 to 1835, and these explorations were completed in 1839 by Messrs. Dease and Simpson and Dr. Rae.

Lastly, Sir John Franklin, wishing to discover the North-West passage, left England in 1845 on board the *Erebus* and the *Terror*; he penetrated into Baffin's Sea, and since his passage across Disko Island no news had been heard of his expedition.

That disappearance determined the numerous investigations which have brought about the discovery of the passage, and the survey of these Polar continents, with such indented coast lines. The most daring English, French, and American sailors made voyages towards these terrible countries, and, thanks to their efforts, the maps of that country, so difficult to make, figured in the list of the Royal Geographical Society of London. The curious history of these countries was thus presented to the doctor's imagination as he leaned on the rail, and followed with his eyes the long track left by the brig. Thoughts of the bold navigators weighed upon his mind, and he fancied he could perceive under the frozen arches of the icebergs the pale ghosts of those who were no more.

CHAPTER VII

DAVIS'S STRAITS

During that day the *Forward* cut out an easy road amongst the half-broken ice; the wind was good, but the temperature very low; the currents of air blowing across the ice-fields brought with them their penetrating cold. The night required the severest attention; the floating icebergs drew together in that narrow pass; a hundred at once were often counted on the horizon; they broke off from the elevated coasts under the teeth of the grinding waves and the influence of the spring season, in order to go and melt or to be swallowed up in the depths of the ocean. Long rafts of wood, with which it was necessary to escape collision, kept the crew on the alert; the crow's nest was put in its place on the mizenmast; it consisted of a cask, in which the ice-master was partly hidden to protect him from the cold winds while he kept watch over the sea and the icebergs in view, and from which he signalled danger and sometimes gave orders to the crew. The nights were short; the sun had reappeared since the 31st of January in consequence of the refraction, and seemed to get higher and higher above the horizon. But the snow impeded the view, and if it did not cause complete obscurity it rendered navigation laborious.

On the 21st of April Desolation Cape appeared in the midst of thick mists; the crew were tired out with the constant strain on their energies rendered necessary ever since they had got amongst the icebergs; the sailors had not had a minute's rest; it was soon necessary to have recourse to steam to cut a way through the heaped-up blocks. The doctor and Johnson were talking together on the stern, whilst Shandon was snatching a few hours' sleep in his cabin. Clawbonny was getting information from the old sailor, whose numerous voyages had given him an interesting and sensible education. The doctor felt much friendship for him, and the boatswain repaid it with interest.

“You see, Mr. Clawbonny,” Johnson used to say, “this country is not like all others; they call it *Green*land, but there are very few weeks in the year when it justifies its name.”

“Who knows if in the tenth century this land did not justify its name?” added the doctor. “More than one revolution of this kind has been produced upon our globe, and I daresay I should astonish you if I were to tell you that according to Icelandic chronicles two thousand villages flourished upon this continent about eight or nine hundred years ago.”

“You would so much astonish me, Mr. Clawbonny, that I should have some difficulty in believing you, for it is a miserable country.”

“However miserable it may be, it still offers a sufficient retreat to its inhabitants, and even to civilised Europeans.”

“Without doubt! We met men at Disko and Uppernawik who consented to live in such climates; but my ideas upon the matter were that they lived there by compulsion and not by choice.”

“I daresay you are right, though men get accustomed to everything, and the Greenlanders do not appear to me so unfortunate as the workmen of our large towns; they may be unfortunate, but they are certainly not unhappy. I say unhappy, but the word does not translate my thought, for if these people have not the comforts of temperate countries, they are formed for a rude climate, and find pleasures in it which we are not able to conceive.”

“I suppose we must think so, as Heaven is just. Many, many voyages have brought me upon these coasts, and my heart always shrinks at the sight of these wretched solitudes; but they ought to have cheered up these capes, promontories, and bays with more engaging names, for Farewell Cape and Desolation Cape are not names made to attract navigators.”

“I have also remarked that,” replied the doctor, “but these names have a geographical interest that we must not overlook. They describe the adventures of those who gave them those names. Next to the names of Davis, Baffin, Hudson, Ross, Parry, Franklin, and Bellot, if I meet with Cape Desolation I soon find Mercy Bay; Cape Providence is a companion to Port Anxiety; Repulsion Bay brings me back to Cape Eden, and leaving Turnagain Point I take refuge in Refuge Bay. I have there under my eyes an unceasing succession of perils, misfortunes, obstacles, successes, despairs, and issues, mixed with great names of my country, and, like a series of old-fashioned medals, that nomenclature retraces in my mind the whole history of these seas.”

“You are quite right, Mr. Clawbonny, and I hope we shall meet with more Success Bays than Despair Capes in our voyage.”

“I hope so too, Johnson; but, I say, is the crew come round a little from its terrors?”

“Yes, a little; but since we got into the Straits they have begun to talk about the fantastic captain; more than one of them expected to see him appear at the extremity of Greenland; but between you and me, doctor, doesn’t it astonish you a little too?”

“It does indeed, Johnson.”

“Do you believe in the captain’s existence?”

“Of course I do.”

“But what can be his reasons for acting in that manner?”

“If I really must tell you the whole of my thoughts, Johnson, I believe that the captain wished to entice the crew far enough out to prevent them being able to come back. Now if he had been on board when we started they would all have wanted to know our destination, and he might have been embarrassed.”

“But why so?”

“Suppose he should wish to attempt some superhuman enterprise, and to penetrate where others have never been able to reach, do you believe if the crew knew it they would ever have enlisted? As it is, having got so far, going farther becomes a necessity.”

“That’s very probable, Mr. Clawbonny. I have known more than one intrepid adventurer whose name alone was a terror, and who would never have found any one to accompany him in his perilous expeditions — — ”

“Excepting me,” ventured the doctor.

“And me, after you,” answered Johnson, “and to follow you; I can venture to affirm that our captain is amongst the number of such adventurers. No matter, we shall soon see; I suppose the unknown will come as captain on board from the coast of Uppernawik or Melville Bay, and will tell us at last where it is his good pleasure to conduct the ship.”

“I am of your opinion, Johnson, but the difficulty will be to get as far as Melville Bay. See how the icebergs encircle us from every point! They scarcely leave a passage for the *Forward*. Just examine that immense plain over there.”

“The whalers call that in our language an ice-field, that is to say a continued surface of ice the limits of which cannot be perceived.”

“And on that side, that broken field, those long pieces of ice more or less joined at their edges?”

“That is a pack; if it was of a circular form we should call it a patch; and, if the form was longer, a stream.”

“And there, those floating icebergs?”

“Those are drift-ice; if they were a little higher they would be icebergs or hills; their contact with vessels is dangerous, and must be carefully avoided. Here, look over there: on that ice-field there is a protuberance produced by the pressure of the icebergs; we call that a hummock; if that protuberance was submerged to its base we should call it a calf. It was very necessary to give names to all those forms in order to recognise them.”

“It is truly a marvellous spectacle!” exclaimed the doctor, contemplating the wonders of the Boreal Seas; “there is a field for the imagination in such pictures!”

“Yes,” answered Johnson, “ice often takes fantastic shapes, and our men are not behindhand in explaining them according to their own notions.”

“Isn’t that assemblage of ice-blocks admirable? Doesn’t it look like a foreign town, an Eastern town, with its minarets and mosques under the pale glare of the moon? Further on there is a long series of Gothic vaults, reminding one of Henry the Seventh's chapel or the Houses of Parliament."

"They would be houses and towns very dangerous to inhabit, and we must not sail too close to them. Some of those minarets yonder totter on their base, and the least of them would crush a vessel like the *Forward*."

"And yet sailors dared to venture into these seas before they had steam at their command! How ever could a sailing vessel be steered amongst these moving rocks?"

"Nevertheless, it has been accomplished, Mr. Clawbonny. When the wind became contrary — and that has happened to me more than once — we quietly anchored to one of those blocks, and we drifted more or less with it and waited for a favourable moment to set sail again. I must acknowledge that such a manner of voyaging required months, whilst with a little good fortune we shall only want a few days."

"It seems to me," said the doctor, "that the temperature has a tendency to get lower."

"That would be a pity," answered Johnson, "for a thaw is necessary to break up these masses and drive them away into the Atlantic; besides, they are more numerous in Davis's Straits, for the sea gets narrower between Capes Walsingham and Holsteinborg; but on the other side of the 67th degree we shall find the seas more navigable during the months of May and June."

"Yes; but first of all we must get to the other side."

"Yes, we must get there, Mr. Clawbonny. In June and July we should have found an open passage, like the whalers do, but our orders were precise; we were to be here in April. I am very much mistaken if our captain has not his reasons for getting us out here so early.”

The doctor was right in stating that the temperature was lowering; the thermometer at noon only indicated 6 degrees, and a north-west breeze was getting up, which, although it cleared the sky, assisted the current in precipitating the floating masses of ice into the path of the *Forward*. All of them did not obey the same impulsion, and it was not uncommon to encounter some of the highest masses drifting in an opposite direction, seized at their base by an undercurrent.

It is easy to understand the difficulties of this kind of navigation; the engineers had not a minute’s rest; the engines were worked from the deck by means of levers, which opened, stopped, and reversed them according to the orders of the officers on watch. Sometimes the brig had to hasten through an opening in the ice-fields, sometimes to struggle against the swiftness of an iceberg which threatened to close the only practicable issue, or, again, some block, suddenly overthrown, compelled the brig to back quickly so as not to be crushed to pieces. This mass of ice, carried along, broken up and amalgamated by the northern current, crushed up the passage, and if seized by the frost would oppose an impassable barrier to the passage of the *Forward*.

Birds were found in innumerable quantities on these coasts, petrels and other sea-birds fluttered about here and there with deafening cries, a great number of big-headed, short-necked sea-gulls were amongst them; they spread out their long wings and braved in their play the snow whipped by the hurricane. This animation of the winged tribe made the landscape more lively.

Numerous pieces of wood were floating to leeway, clashing with noise; a few enormous, bloated-headed sharks approached the vessel, but there was no question of chasing them, although Simpson, the harpooner, was longing to have a hit at them. Towards evening several seals made their appearance, nose above water, swimming between the blocks.

On the 22nd the temperature again lowered; the *Forward* put on all steam to catch the favourable passes: the wind was decidedly fixed in the north-west; all sails were furled.

During that day, which was Sunday, the sailors had little to do. After the reading of Divine service, which was conducted by Shandon, the crew gave chase to sea-birds, of which they caught a great number. They were suitably prepared according to the doctor’s method, and furnished an agreeable increase of provisions to the tables of the officers and crew.

At three o’clock in the afternoon the *Forward* had attained Thin de Sael, Sukkertop Mountain; the sea was very rough; from time to time a vast and inopportune fog fell from the grey sky; however, at noon an exact observation could be taken. The vessel was in 65° 20’ latitude by 54° 22’ longitude. It was necessary to attain two degrees more in order to meet with freer and more favourable navigation.

During the three following days, the 24th, 25th, and 26th of April, the *Forward* had a continual struggle with the ice; the working of the machines became very fatiguing. The steam was turned off quickly or got up again at a moment’s notice, and escaped whistling from its valves. During the thick mist the nearing of icebergs was only known by dull thundering produced by the avalanches; the brig was instantly veered; it ran the risk of being crushed against the heaps of fresh-water ice, remarkable for its crystal transparency, and as hard as a rock.

Richard Shandon never missed completing his provision of water by embarking several tons of ice every day. The doctor could not accustom himself to the optical delusions that refraction produces on these coasts. An iceberg sometimes appeared to him like a small white lump within reach, when it was at least at ten or twelve miles' distance. He endeavoured to accustom his eyesight to this singular phenomenon, so that he might be able to correct its errors rapidly.

At last the crew were completely worn out by their labours in hauling the vessel alongside of the ice-fields and by keeping it free from the most menacing blocks by the aid of long perches. Nevertheless, the *Forward* was still held back in the impassable limits of the Polar Circle on Friday, the 27th of April.

CHAPTER VIII

GOSSIP OF THE CREW

However, the *Forward* managed, by cunningly slipping into narrow passages, to gain a few more minutes north; but instead of avoiding the enemy, it was soon necessary to attack it. The ice-fields, several miles in extent, were getting nearer, and as these moving heaps often represent a pressure of more than ten millions of tons, it was necessary to give a wide berth to their embraces. The ice-saws were at once installed in the interior of the vessel, in such a manner as to facilitate immediate use of them. Part of the crew philosophically accepted their hard work, but the other complained of it, if it did not refuse to obey. At the same time that they assisted in the installation of the instruments, Garry, Bolton, Pen and Gripper exchanged their opinions.

“By Jingo!” said Bolton gaily, “I don’t know why the thought strikes me that there’s a very jolly tavern in Water-street where it’s comfortable to be between a glass of gin and a bottle of porter. Can’t you imagine it, Gripper?”

“To tell you the truth,” quickly answered the questioned sailor, who generally professed to be in a bad temper, “I don’t imagine it here.”

“It’s for the sake of talking, Gripper; it’s evident that the snow towns Dr. Clawbonny admires so don’t contain the least public where a poor sailor can get a half-pint of brandy.”

“That’s sure enough, Bolton; and you may as well add that there’s nothing worth drinking here. It’s a nice idea to deprive men of their grog when they are in the Northern Seas.”

“But you know,” said Garry, “that the doctor told us it was to prevent us getting the scurvy. It’s the only way to make us go far.”

“But I don’t want to go far, Garry; it’s pretty well to have come this far without trying to go where the devil is determined we shan’t.”

“Well, we shan’t go, that’s all,” replied Pen. “I declare I’ve almost forgotten the taste of gin.”

“But remember what the doctor says,” replied Bolton.

“It’s all very fine for them to talk. It remains to be seen if it isn’t an excuse for being skinny with the drink.”

“Pen may be right, after all,” said Gripper.

“His nose is too red for that,” answered Bolton. “Pen needn’t grumble if it loses a little of its colour in the voyage.”

“What’s my nose got to do with you?” sharply replied the sailor, attacked in the most sensitive place. “My nose doesn’t need any of your remarks; take care of your own.”

“Now, then, don’t get angry, Pen; I didn’t know your nose was so touchy. I like a glass of whisky as well as anybody, especially in such a temperature; but if I know it’ll do me more harm than good, I go without.”

“You go without,” said Warren, the stoker; “but everyone don’t go without.”

“What do you mean, Warren?” asked Garry, looking fixedly at him.

“I mean that for some reason or other there are spirits on board, and I know they don’t go without in the stern.”

“And how do you know that?” asked Garry.

Warren did not know what to say: he talked for the sake of talking.

“You see Warren don’t know anything about it, Garry,” said Bolton.

“Well,” said Pen, “we’ll ask the commander for a ration of gin; we’ve earned it well and we’ll see what he says.”

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” answered Garry.

“Why?” cried Pen and Gripper.

“Because he’ll refuse. You knew you weren’t to have any when you enlisted; you should have thought of it then.”

“Besides,” replied Bolton, who took Garry’s part because he liked his character, “Richard Shandon isn’t master on board; he obeys, like us.”

“Who is master if he isn’t?”

“The captain.”

“Always that unfortunate captain!” exclaimed Pen. “Don’t you see that on these ice-banks there’s no more a captain than there is a public? It’s a polite way of refusing us what we’ve a right to claim.”

“But if there’s a captain,” replied Bolton, “I’ll bet two months’ pay we shall see him before long.”

“I should like to tell the captain a bit of my mind,” said Pen.

“Who’s talking about the captain?” said a new-comer. It was Clifton, the sailor, a superstitious and envious man. “Is anything new known about the captain?” he asked.

“No,” they all answered at once.

“Well, I believe we shall find him one fine morning installed in his cabin, and no one will know how he got there.”

“Get along, do!” replied Bolton. “Why, Clifton, you imagine that he’s a hobgoblin — a sort of wild child of the Highlands.”

“Laugh as much as you like, Bolton, you won’t change my opinion. Every day as I pass his cabin I look through the keyhole. One of these fine mornings I shall come and tell you what he’s like.”

“Why, he’ll be like everyone else,” said Pen, “and if he thinks he’ll be able to do what he likes with us, he’ll find himself mistaken, that’s all!”

“Pen don’t know him yet,” said Bolton, “and he’s beginning to quarrel with him already.”

“Who doesn’t know him?” said Clifton, looking knowing; “I don’t know that he don’t!”

“What the devil do you mean?” asked Gripper.

“I know very well what I mean.”

“But we don’t.”

“Well, Pen has quarrelled with him before.”

“With the captain?”

“Yes, the dog-captain — it’s all one.”

The sailors looked at one another, afraid to say anything.

“Man or dog,” muttered Pen, “I declare that that animal will have his account one of these days.”

“Come, Clifton,” asked Bolton seriously, “you don’t mean to say that you believe the dog is the real captain?”

“Indeed I do,” answered Clifton with conviction. “If you noticed things like I do, you would have noticed what a queer beast it is.”

“Well, tell us what you’ve noticed.”

“Haven’t you noticed the way he walks on the poop with such an air of authority, looking up at the sails as if he were on watch?”

“That’s true enough,” added Gripper, “and one evening I actually found him with his paws on the paddle-wheel.”

“You don’t mean it!” said Bolton.

“And now what do you think he does but go for a walk on the ice-fields, minding neither the bears nor the cold?”

“That’s true enough,” said Bolton.

“Do you ever see that ‘ere animal, like an honest dog, seek men’s company, sneak about the kitchen, and set his eyes on Mr. Strong when’s he taking something good to the commander? Don’t you hear him in the night when he goes away two or three miles from the vessel, howling fit to make your blood run cold, as if it weren’t easy enough to feel that sensation in such a temperature as this? Again, have you ever seen him feed? He takes nothing from any one. His food is always untouched and unless a secret hand feeds him on board, I may say that he lives without eating, and if he’s not unearthly, I’m a fool!”

“Upon my word,” said Bell, the carpenter, who had heard all Clifton’s reasoning, “I shouldn’t be surprised if such was the case.” The other sailors were silenced.

“Well, at any rate, where’s the *Forward* going to?”

“I don’t know anything about it,” replied Bell. “Richard Shandon will receive the rest of his instructions in due time.”

“But from whom?”

“From whom?”

“Yes, how?” asked Bolton, becoming pressing.

“Now then, answer, Bell!” chimed in all the other sailors.

“By whom? how? Why, I don’t know,” said the carpenter, embarrassed in his turn.

“Why, by the dog-captain,” exclaimed Clifton. “He has written once already; why shouldn’t he again? If I only knew half of what that ‘ere animal knows, I shouldn't be embarrassed at being First Lord of the Admiralty!"

"So then you stick to your opinion that the dog is the captain?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Pen in a hoarse voice, "if that 'ere animal don't want to turn up his toes in a dog's skin, he's only got to make haste and become a man, or I'm hanged if I don't settle him."

"What for?" asked Garry.

"Because I choose," replied Pen brutally; "besides, it's no business of any one."

"Enough talking, my boys," called out Mr. Johnson, interfering just in time, for the conversation was getting hot. "Get on with your work, and set up your saws quicker than that. We must clear the iceberg."

"What! on a Friday?" replied Clifton, shrugging his shoulders. "You'll see she won't get over the Polar circle as easily as you think."

The efforts of the crew were almost powerless during the whole day. The *Forward* could not separate the ice-fields even by going against them full speed, and they were obliged to anchor for the night. On Saturday the temperature lowered again under the influence of an easterly wind. The weather cleared up, and the eye could sweep over the white plains in the distance, which the reflection of the sun's rays rendered dazzling. At seven in the morning the thermometer marked eight degrees below zero. The doctor was tempted to stay quietly in his cabin, and read the Arctic voyages over again; but, according to his custom, he asked himself what would be the most disagreeable thing he could do, which he settled was to go on deck and assist the men to work in such a temperature. Faithful to the line of conduct he had traced out for himself, he left his well-warmed cabin and came to help in hauling the vessel. His was a pleasant face, in spite of the green spectacles by which he preserved his eyes from the biting of the reflected rays; in his future observations he was always careful in making use of his snow spectacles, in order to avoid ophthalmia, very frequent in these high latitudes.

Towards evening the *Forward* had made several miles further north, thanks to the activity of the men and Shandon's skill, which made him take advantage of every favourable circumstance; at midnight he had got beyond the sixty-sixth parallel, and the fathom line declared twenty-three fathoms of water; Shandon discovered that he was on the shoal where Her Majesty's ship *Victoria* struck, and that land was drawing near, thirty miles to the east. But now the heaps of ice, which up till now had been motionless, divided and began to move; icebergs seemed coming from every point of the horizon; the brig was entangled in a series of moving rocks, the crushing force of which it was impossible to resist. Moving became so difficult that Garry, the best helmsman, took the wheel; the mountains had a tendency to close up behind the brig; it then became essential to cut through the floating ice, and prudence as well as duty ordered them to go ahead. Difficulties became greater from the impossibility that Shandon found in establishing the direction of the vessel amongst such changing points, which kept moving without offering one firm perspective. The crew was divided into two tacks, larboard and starboard; each one, armed with a long perch with an iron point, drove back the two threatening blocks. Soon the *Forward* entered into a pass so narrow, between two high blocks, that the extremity of her yards struck against the walls, hard as rock; by degrees she entangled herself in the midst of a winding valley, filled up with eddies of snow, whilst the floating ice was crashing and splitting with sinister cracklings. But it soon became certain that there was no egress from this gullet. An enormous block, caught in the channel, was driving rapidly on to the *Forward*! It seemed impossible to avoid it, and equally impossible to back out along a road already obstructed.

Shandon and Johnson, standing on the prow, were contemplating the position. Shandon was pointing with his right hand at the direction the helmsman was to take, and with his left was conveying to James Wall, posted near the engineer, his orders for the working of the machine.

“How will this end?” asked the doctor of Johnson.

“As it may please God,” replied the boatswain.

The block of ice, at least a hundred feet high, was only about a cable’s length from the *Forward*, and threatened to pound her under it.

“Cursed luck!” exclaimed Pen, swearing frightfully.

“Silence!” exclaimed a voice which it was impossible to recognise in the midst of the storm.

The block seemed to be precipitating itself upon the brig; there was a moment of undefinable anguish; the men forsook their poles and flocked to the stern in spite of Shandon’s orders.

Suddenly a frightful sound was heard; a genuine waterspout fell upon deck, heaved up by an enormous wave. A cry of terror rang out from the crew whilst Garry, at the helm, held the *Forward* in a straight line in spite of the frightful incumbrance. When their frightened looks were drawn towards the mountain of ice it had disappeared; the pass was free, and further on a long channel, illuminated by the oblique rays of the sun, allowed the brig to pursue her track.

“Well, Mr. Clawbonny,” said Johnson, “can you explain to me the cause of that phenomenon?”

“It is a very simple one,” answered the doctor, “and happens very often. When those floating bodies are disengaged from each other by the thaw, they sail away separately, maintaining their balance; but by degrees, as they near the south, where the water is relatively warmer, their base, shaken by the collision with other icebergs, begins to melt and weaken; it then happens that their centre of gravity is displaced, and, naturally, they overturn. Only, if that one had turned over two minutes later, it would have crushed our vessel to pieces.”

CHAPTER IX

NEWS

The Polar circle was cleared at last. On the 30th of April, at midday, the *Forward* passed abreast of Holsteinborg; picturesque mountains rose up on the eastern horizon. The sea appeared almost free from icebergs, and the few there were could easily be avoided. The wind veered round to the south-east, and the brig, under her mizensail, brigantine, topsails, and her topgallant sail, sailed up Baffin's Sea. It had been a particularly calm day, and the crew were able to take a little rest. Numerous birds were swimming and fluttering about round the vessel; amongst others, the doctor observed some *alca-alla*, very much like the teal, with black neck, wings and back, and white breast; they plunged with vivacity, and their immersion often lasted forty seconds.

The day would not have been remarkable if the following fact, however extraordinary it may appear, had not occurred on board. At six o'clock in the morning Richard Shandon, re-entering his cabin after having been relieved, found upon the table a letter with this address:

"To the Commander,

"RICHARD SHANDON,

“On board the ‘FORWARD,’

“Baffin’s Sea.”

Shandon could not believe his own eyes, and before reading such a strange epistle he caused the doctor, James Wall and Johnson to be called, and showed them the letter.

“That grows very strange,” said Johnson.

“It’s delightful!” thought the doctor.

“At last,” cried Shandon, “we shall know the secret.”

With a quick hand he tore the envelope and read as follows:

“COMMANDER, — The captain of the *Forward* is pleased with the coolness, skill, and courage that your men, your officers, and yourself have shown on the late occasions, and begs you to give evidence of his gratitude to the crew.

“Have the goodness to take a northerly direction towards Melville Bay, and from thence try and penetrate into Smith’s Straits.

“THE CAPTAIN OF THE *Forward*,

“K. Z.”

“Monday, April 30th,

“Abreast of Cape Walsingham.”

“Is that all?” cried the doctor.

“That’s all,” replied Shandon, and the letter fell from his hands.

“Well,” said Wall, “this chimerical captain doesn’t even mention coming on board, so I conclude that he never will come.”

“But how did this letter get here?” said Johnson.

Shandon was silent.

“Mr. Wall is right,” replied the doctor, after picking up the letter and turning it over in every direction; “the captain won’t come on board for an excellent reason — — ”

“And what’s that?” asked Shandon quickly.

“Because he is here already,” replied the doctor simply.

“Already!” said Shandon. “What do you mean?”

“How do you explain the arrival of this letter if such is not the case?”

Johnson nodded his head in sign of approbation.

“It is not possible!” said Shandon energetically. “I know every man of the crew. We should have to believe, in that case, that the captain has been with us ever since we set sail. It is not possible, I tell you. There isn’t one of them that I haven’t seen for more than two years in Liverpool; doctor, your supposition is inadmissible.”

“Then what do you admit, Shandon?”

“Everything but that! I admit that the captain, or one of his men, has profited by the darkness, the fog, or anything you like, in order to slip on board; we are not very far from land; there are Esquimaux kaïaks that pass unperceived between the icebergs; someone may have come on board and left the letter; the fog was intense enough to favour their design.”

“And to hinder them from seeing the brig,” replied the doctor; “if we were not able to perceive an intruder slip on board, how could *he* have discovered the *Forward* in the midst of a fog?”

“That is evident,” exclaimed Johnson.

“I come back, then,” said the doctor, “to my first hypothesis. What do you think about it, Shandon?”

“I think what you please,” replied Shandon fiercely, “with the exception of supposing that this man is on board my vessel.”

“Perhaps,” added Wall, “there may be amongst the crew a man of his who has received instructions from him.”

“That’s very likely,” added the doctor.

“But which man?” asked Shandon. “I tell you I have known all my men a long time.”

“Anyhow,” replied Johnson, “if this captain shows himself, let him be man or devil, we’ll receive him; but we have another piece of information to draw from this letter.”

“What’s that?” asked Shandon.

“Why, that we are to direct our path not only towards Melville Bay, but again into Smith’s Straits.”

“You are right,” answered the doctor.

“Smith’s Straits?” echoed Shandon mechanically.

“It is evident,” replied Johnson, “that the destination of the *Forward* is not to seek a North-West passage, as we shall leave to our left the only track that leads to it — that is to say, Lancaster Straits; that’s what forebodes us difficult navigation in unknown seas.”

“Yes, Smith’s Straits,” replied Shandon, “that’s the route the American Kane followed in 1853, and at the price of what dangers! For a long time he was thought to be lost in those dreadful latitudes! However, as we must go, go we must. But where? how far? To the Pole?”

“And why not?” cried the doctor.

The idea of such an insane attempt made the boatswain shrug his shoulders.

“After all,” resumed James Wall, “to come back to the captain, if he exists, I see nowhere on the coast of Greenland except Disko or Uppernawik where he can be waiting for us; in a few days we shall know what we may depend upon."

"But," asked the doctor of Shandon, "aren't you going to make known the contents of that letter to the crew?"

"With the commander's permission," replied Johnson, "I should do nothing of the kind."

"And why so?" asked Shandon.

"Because all that mystery tends to discourage the men: they are already very anxious about the fate of our expedition, and if the supernatural side of it is increased it may produce very serious results, and in a critical moment we could not rely upon them. What do you say about it, commander?"

"And you, doctor — what do you think?" asked Shandon.

"I think Johnson's reasoning is just."

"And you, Wall?"

"Unless there's better advice forthcoming, I shall stick to the opinion of these gentlemen."

Shandon reflected seriously during a few minutes, and read the letter over again carefully.

"Gentlemen," said he, "your opinion on this subject is certainly excellent, but I cannot adopt it."

"Why not, Shandon?" asked the doctor.

“Because the instructions of this letter are formal: they command me to give the captain’s congratulations to the crew, and up till to-day I have always blindly obeyed his orders in whatever manner they have been transmitted to me, and I cannot — — ”

“But — — ” said Johnson, who rightly dreaded the effect of such a communication upon the minds of the sailors.

“My dear Johnson,” answered Shandon, “your reasons are excellent, but read — ’he begs you to give evidence of his gratitude to the crew.’”

“Act as you think best,” replied Johnson, who was besides a very strict observer of discipline. “Are we to muster the crew on deck?”

“Do so,” replied Shandon.

The news of a communication having been received from the captain spread like wildfire on deck; the sailors quickly arrived at their post, and the commander read out the contents of the mysterious letter. The reading of it was received in a dead silence; the crew dispersed, a prey to a thousand suppositions. Clifton had heard enough to give himself up to all the wanderings of his superstitious imagination; he attributed a considerable share in this incident to the dog-captain, and when by chance he met him in his passage he never failed to salute him. “I told you the animal could write,” he used to say to the sailors. No one said anything in answer to this observation, and even Bell, the carpenter himself, would not have known what to answer.

Nevertheless it was certain to all that, in default of the captain, his spirit or his shadow watched on board; and henceforward the wisest of the crew abstained from exchanging their opinions about him.

On the 1st of May, at noon, they were in 68° latitude and 56° 32’ longitude. The temperature was higher and the thermometer marked twenty-five degrees above zero. The doctor was amusing himself with watching the antics of a white bear and two cubs on the brink of a pack that lengthened out the land. Accompanied by Wall and Simpson, he tried to give chase to them by means of the canoe; but the animal, of a rather warlike disposition, rapidly led away its offspring, and consequently the doctor was compelled to renounce following them up.

Chilly Cape was doubled during the night under the influence of a favourable wind, and soon the high mountains of Disko rose in the horizon. Godhavn Bay, the residence of the Governor-General of the Danish Settlements, was left to the right. Shandon did not consider it worth while to stop, and soon outran the Esquimaux pirogues who were endeavouring to reach his ship.

The Island of Disko is also called Whale Island. It was from this point that on the 12th of July, 1845, Sir John Franklin wrote to the Admiralty for the last time. It was also on that island on the 27th of August, 1859, that Captain McClintock set foot on his return, bringing back, alas! proofs too complete of the loss of the expedition. The coincidence of these two facts were noted by the doctor; that melancholy conjunction was prolific in memories, but soon the heights of Disko disappeared from his view.

There were, at that time, numerous icebergs on the coasts, some of those which the strongest thaws are unable to detach; the continual series of ridges showed themselves under the strangest forms.

The next day, towards three o’clock, they were bearing on to Sanderson Hope to the north-east. Land was left on the starboard at a distance of about fifteen miles; the mountains seemed tinged with a red-coloured bistre.

During the evening, several whales of the finners species, which have fins on their backs, came playing about in the midst of the ice-trails, throwing out air and water from their blow-holes. It was during the night between the 3rd and 4th of May that the doctor saw for the first time the sun graze the horizon without dipping his luminous disc into it. Since the 31st of January the days had been getting longer and longer till the sun went down no more. To strangers not accustomed to the persistence of this perpetual light it was a constant subject of astonishment, and even of fatigue; it is almost impossible to understand to what extent obscurity is requisite for the well-being of our eyes. The doctor experienced real pain in getting accustomed to this light, rendered still more acute by the reflection of the sun's rays upon the plains of ice.

On May 5th the *Forward* headed the seventy-second parallel; two months later they would have met with numerous whalers under these high latitudes, but at present the straits were not sufficiently open to allow them to penetrate into Baffin's Bay. The following day the brig, after having headed Woman's Island, came in sight of Uppernawik, the most northerly settlement that Denmark possesses on these coasts.

CHAPTER X

DANGEROUS NAVIGATION

Shandon, Dr. Clawbonny, Johnson, Foker, and Strong, the cook, went on shore in the small boat. The governor, his wife, and five children, all of the Esquimaux race, came politely to meet the visitors. The doctor knew enough Danish to enable him to establish a very agreeable acquaintance with them; besides, Foker, who was interpreter of the expedition, as well as ice-master, knew about twenty words of the Greenland language, and if not ambitious, twenty words will carry you far. The governor was born on the island, and had never left his native country. He did the honours of the town, which is composed of three wooden huts, for himself and the Lutheran minister, of a school, and magazines stored with the produce of wrecks. The remainder consists of snow-huts, the entrance to which is attained by creeping through a hole.

The greater part of the population came down to greet the *Forward,* and more than one native advanced as far as the middle of the bay in his kaïak, fifteen feet long and scarcely two wide. The doctor knew that the word Esquimaux signified raw-fish-eater, and he likewise knew that the name was considered an insult in the country, for which reason he did not fail to address them by the title of Greenlanders, and nevertheless only by the look of their oily sealskin clothing, their boots of the same material, and all their greasy tainted appearance, it was easy to discover their accustomed food. Like all Ichthyophagans, they were half-eaten up with leprosy; and yet, for all that, were in no worse health.

The Lutheran minister and his wife, with whom the doctor promised himself a private chat, were on a journey towards Proven on the south of Uppernawik; he was therefore reduced to getting information out of the governor. This chief magistrate did not seem to be very learned; a little less and he would have been an ass, a little more and he would have known how to read. The doctor, however, questioned him upon the commercial affairs, the customs and manners of the Esquimaux, and learnt by signs that seals were worth about £40 delivered in Copenhagen, a bearskin forty Danish dollars, a blue foxskin four, and a white one two or three dollars. The doctor also wished, with an eye to completing his personal education, to visit one of the Esquimaux huts; it is almost impossible to imagine of what a learned man who is desirous of knowledge is capable. Happily the opening of those hovels was too narrow, and the enthusiastic fellow was not able to crawl in; it was very lucky for him, for there is nothing more repulsive than that accumulation of things living and dead, seal flesh or Esquimaux flesh, rotten fish and infectious wearing apparel, which constitute a Greenland hovel; no window to revive the unbreathable air, only a hole at the top of the hut, which gives free passage to the smoke, but does not allow the stench to go out.

Foker gave these details to the doctor, who did not curse his corpulence the less for that. He wished to judge for himself about these emanations, *sui generis*.

“I am sure,” said he, “one gets used to it in the long run.”

In the long run depicts Dr. Clawbonny in a single phrase. During the ethnographical studies of the worthy doctor, Shandon, according to his instructions, was occupied in procuring means of transport to cross the ice. He had to pay £4 for a sledge and six dogs, and even then he had great difficulty in persuading the natives to part with them. Shandon wanted also to engage Hans Christian, the clever dog-driver, who made one of the party of Captain McClintock's expedition; but, unfortunately, Hans was at that time in Southern Greenland. Then came the grand question, the topic of the day, was there in Uppernawik a European waiting for the passage of the *Forward*? Did the governor know if any foreigner, an Englishman probably, had settled in those countries? To what epoch could he trace his last relations with whale or other ships? To these questions the governor replied that not one single foreigner had landed on that side of the coast for more than ten months.

Shandon asked for the names of the last whalers seen there; he knew none of them. He was in despair.

"You must acknowledge, doctor, that all this is quite inconceivable. Nothing at Cape Farewell, nothing at Disko Island, nothing at Uppernawik."

"If when we get there you repeat 'Nothing in Melville Bay,' I shall greet you as the only captain of the *Forward*."

The small boat came back to the brig towards evening, bringing back the visitors. Strong, in order to change the food a little, had procured several dozens of eider-duck eggs, twice as big as hens' eggs, and of greenish colour. It was not much, but the change was refreshing to a crew fed on salted meat. The wind became favourable the next day, but, however, Shandon did not command them to get under sail; he still wished to stay another day, and for conscience' sake to give any human being time to join the *Forward*. He even caused the 16-pounder to be fired from hour to hour; it thundered out with a great crash amidst the icebergs, but the noise only frightened the swarms of molly-mokes and rotches. During the night several rockets were sent up, but in vain. And thus they were obliged to set sail.

On the 8th of May, at six o'clock in the morning, the *Forward* under her topsails, foresails, and topgallant, lost sight of the Uppernawik settlement, and the hideous stakes to which were hung seal-guts and deer-paunches. The wind was blowing from the south-east, and the temperature went up to thirty-two degrees. The sun pierced through the fog, and the ice was getting a little loosened under its dissolving action. But the reflection of the white rays produced a sad effect on the eyesight of several of the crew. Wolsten, the gunsmith, Gripper, Clifton, and Bell were struck with snow blindness, a kind of weakness in the eyes very frequent in spring, and which determines, amongst the Esquimaux, numerous cases of blindness. The doctor advised those who were so afflicted and their companions in general to cover their faces with green gauze, and he was the first to put his own prescription into execution.

The dogs bought by Shandon at Uppernawik were of a rather savage nature, but in the end they became accustomed to the ship; the captain did not take the arrival of these new comrades too much to heart, and he seemed to know their habits. Clifton was not the last to remark the fact that the captain must already have been in communication with his Greenland brethren, as on land they were always famished and reduced by incomplete nourishment; they only thought of recruiting themselves by the diet on board.

On the 9th of May the *Forward* touched within a few cables' length the most westerly of the Baffin Isles. The doctor noticed several rocks in the bay between the islands and the continent, those called Crimson Cliffs; they were covered over with snow as red as carmine, to which Dr. Kane gives a purely vegetable origin. Clawbonny wanted to consider this phenomenon nearer, but the ice prevented them approaching the coast; although the temperature had a tendency to rise, it was easy enough to see that the icebergs and ice-streams were accumulating to the north of Baffin's Sea. The land offered a very different aspect from that of Uppernawik; immense glaciers were outlined on the horizon against a greyish sky. On the 10th the *Forward* left Hingston Bay on the right, near to the seventy-fourth degree of latitude. Several hundred miles westward the Lancaster Channel opened out into the sea.

But afterwards that immense extent of water disappeared under enormous fields of ice, upon which hummocks rose up as regularly as a crystallisation of the same substance. Shandon had the steam put on, and up to the 11th of May the *Forward* wound amongst the sinuous rocks, leaving the print of a track on the sky, caused by the black smoke from her funnels. But new obstacles were soon encountered; the paths were getting closed up in consequence of the incessant displacement of the floating masses; at every minute a failure of water in front of the *Forward's* prow became imminent, and if she had been nipped it would have been difficult to extricate her. They all knew it, and thought about it.

On board this vessel, without aim or known destination, foolishly seeking to advance towards the north, some symptoms of hesitation were manifested amongst those men, accustomed to an existence of danger; many, forgetting the advantages offered, regretted having ventured so far, and already a certain demoralisation prevailed in their minds, still more increased by Clifton's fears, and the idle talk of two or three of the leaders, such as Pen, Gripper, Warren, and Wolston.

To the uneasiness of the crew were joined overwhelming fatigues, for on the 12th of May the brig was closed in on every side; her steam was powerless, and it was necessary to force a road through the ice-fields. The working of the saws was very difficult in the floes, which measured from six to seven feet in thickness. When two parallel grooves divided the ice for the length of a hundred feet, they had to break the interior part with hatchets or handspikes; then took place the elongation of the anchors, fixed in a hole by means of a thick auger; afterwards the working of the capstan began, and in this way the vessel was hauled over. The greatest difficulty consisted in driving the smashed pieces under the floes in order to open up a free passage for the ship, and to thrust them away they were compelled to use long iron-spiked poles.

At last, what with the working of the saws, the hauling, the capstan and poles, incessant, dangerous, and forced work, in the midst of fogs or thick snow, the temperature relatively low, ophthalmic suffering and moral uneasiness, all contributed to discourage the crew, and react on the men's imagination. When sailors have an energetic, audacious, and convinced man to do with, who knows what he wants, where he is bound for, and what end he has in view, confidence sustains them in spite of everything. They make one with their chief, feeling strong in his strength, and quiet in his tranquillity; but on the brig it was felt that the commander was not sure of himself, that he hesitated before his unknown end and destination. In spite of his energetic nature, his weakness showed itself in his changing orders, incomplete manoeuvres, stormy reflections, and a thousand details which could not escape the notice of the crew.

Besides, Shandon was not captain of the ship, a sufficient reason for argument about his orders; from argument to a refusal to obey the step is easy. The discontented soon added to their number the first engineer, who up to now had remained a slave to his duty.

On May 16th, six days after the *Forward's* arrival at the icebergs, Shandon had not gained two miles northward, and the ice threatened to freeze in the brig till the following season. This was becoming dangerous. Towards eight in the evening Shandon and the doctor, accompanied by Garry, went on a voyage of discovery in the midst of the immense plains; they took care not to go too far away from the vessel, as it was difficult to fix any landmarks in those white solitudes, the aspects of which changed constantly.

The refraction produced strange effects; they still astonished the doctor; where he thought he had only one foot to leap he found it was five or six, or the contrary; and in both cases the result was a fall, if not dangerous, at least painful, on the frozen ice as hard as glass.

Shandon and his two companions went in search of a practicable passage. Three miles from the ship they succeeded, not without trouble, in climbing the iceberg, which was perhaps three hundred feet high.

From this point their view extended over that desolated mass which looked like the ruins of a gigantic town with its beaten-down obelisks, its overthrown steeples and palaces turned upside down all in a lump — in fact, a genuine chaos. The sun threw long oblique rays of a light without warmth, as if heat-absorbing substances were placed between it and that gloomy country. The sea seemed to be frozen to the remotest limits of view.

“How shall we get through?” exclaimed the doctor.

“I have not the least idea,” replied Shandon; “but we will get through, even if we are obliged to employ powder to blow up those mountains, for I certainly won't let that ice shut me up till next spring.”

“Nevertheless, such was the fate of the *Fox*, almost in these same quarters. Never mind,” continued the doctor, “we shall get through with a little philosophy. Believe me, that is worth all the engines in the world.”

“You must acknowledge,” replied Shandon, “that the year doesn’t begin under very favourable auspices.”

“That is incontestable, and I notice that Baffin’s Sea has a tendency to return to the same state in which it was before 1817.”

“Then you think, doctor, that the present state of things has not always existed?”

“Yes; from time to time there are vast breakings up which scientific men can scarcely explain; thus, up to 1817 this sea was constantly obstructed, when suddenly an immense cataclysm took place which drove back these icebergs into the ocean, the great part of which were stranded on Newfoundland Bank. From that time Baffin’s Bay has been almost free, and has become the haunt of numerous whalers.”

“Then, since that epoch, voyages to the north have been easier?”

“Incomparably so; but for the last few years it has been observed that the bay has a tendency to be closed up again, and according to investigations made by navigators, it may probably be so for a long time — a still greater reason for us to go on as far as possible. Just now we look like people who get into unknown galleries, the doors of which are always shut behind them.”

“Do you advise me to back out?” asked Shandon, endeavouring to read the answer in the doctor’s eyes.

“I! I have never known how to take a step backward, and should we never return, I say ‘Go ahead.’ However, I should like to make known to you that if we do anything imprudent, we know very well what we are exposed to.”

“Well, Garry, what do you think about it?” asked Shandon of the sailor.

“I? Commander, I should go on; I’m of the same opinion as Mr. Clawbonny; but you do as you please; command, and we will obey.”

“They don’t all speak like you, Garry,” replied Shandon. “They aren’t all in an obedient humour! Suppose they were to refuse to execute my orders?”

“Commander,” replied Garry coldly, “I have given you my advice because you asked me for it; but you are not obliged to act upon it.”

Shandon did not reply; he attentively examined the horizon, and descended with his two companions on to the ice-field.

CHAPTER XI

THE DEVIL’S THUMB

During the commander’s absence the men had gone through divers works in order to make the ship fit to avoid the pressure of the ice-fields. Pen, Clifton, Gripper, Bolton, and Simpson were occupied in this laborious work; the stoker and the two engineers were even obliged to come to the aid of their comrades, for, from the instant they were not wanted at the engine, they again became sailors, and, as such, they could be employed in all kinds of work on board. But this was not accomplished without a great deal of grumbling.

“I’ll tell you what,” said Pen, “I’ve had enough of it, and if in three days the breaking up isn’t come, I’ll swear to God that I’ll chuck up!”

“You’ll chuck up?” replied Gripper; “you’d do better to help us to back out. Do you think we are in the humour to winter here till next year?”

“To tell you the truth, it would be a dreary winter,” said Plover, “for the ship is exposed from every quarter.”

“And who knows,” added Brunton, “if even next spring we should find the sea freer than it is now?”

“We aren’t talking about next spring,” said Pen; “to-day’s Thursday; if next Sunday morning the road ain’t clear, we’ll back out south.”

“That’s the ticket!” cried Clifton.

“Are you all agreed?” said Pen.

“Yes,” answered all his comrades.

“That’s right enough,” answered Warren, “for if we are obliged to work like this, hauling the ship by the strength of our arms, my advice is to backwater.”

“We’ll see about that on Sunday,” answered Wolsten.

“As soon as I get the order,” said Brunton, “I’ll soon get my steam up.”

“Or we’d manage to get it up ourselves,” said Clifton.

“If any of the officers,” said Pen, “wants to have the pleasure of wintering here, we’ll let him. He can build himself a snow-hut like the Esquimaux.”

“Nothing of the kind, Pen,” replied Brunton; “we won’t leave anybody. You understand that, you others. Besides, I don’t think it would be difficult to persuade the commander; he already seems very uncertain, and if we were quietly to propose it — — ”

“I don’t know that,” said Plover; “Richard Shandon is a hard, headstrong man, and we should have to sound him carefully.”

“When I think,” replied Bolton, with a covetous sigh, “that in a month we might be back in Liverpool; we could soon clear the southern ice-line. The pass in Davis’s Straits will be open in the beginning of June, and we shall only have to let ourselves drift into the Atlantic.”

“Besides,” said the prudent Clifton, “if we bring back the commander with us, acting under his responsibility, our pay and bounty money will be sure;

whilst if we return alone it won’t be so certain.”

“That’s certain!” said Plover; “that devil of a Clifton speaks like a book. Let us try to have nothing to explain to the Admiralty; it’s much safer to leave no one behind us.”

“But if the officers refuse to follow us?” replied Pen, who wished to push his comrades to an extremity.

To such a question they were puzzled to reply.

“We shall see about it when the time comes,” replied Bolton; “besides, it would be enough to win Richard Shandon over to our side. We shall have no difficulty about that.”

“Anyhow,” said Pen, swearing, “there’s something I’ll leave here if I get an arm eaten in the attempt.”

“Ah! you mean the dog,” said Plover.

“Yes, the dog; and before long I’ll settle his hash!”

“The more so,” replied Clifton, coming back to his favourite theme, “that the dog is the cause of all our misfortunes.”

“He’s cast an evil spell over us,” said Plover.

“It’s through him we’re in an iceberg,” said Gripper.

“He’s the cause that we’ve had more ice against us than has ever been seen at this time of year,” said Wolsten.

“He’s the cause of my bad eyes,” said Brunton.

“He’s cut off the gin and brandy,” added Pen.

“He’s the cause of everything,” said the assembly, getting excited.

“And he’s captain into the bargain!” cried Clifton.

“Well, captain of ill-luck,” said Pen, whose unreasonable fury grew stronger at every word; “you wanted to come here, and here you’ll stay.”

“But how are we to nap him?” said Plover.

“We’ve a good opportunity,” replied Clifton; “the commander isn’t on deck, the lieutenant is asleep in his cabin, and the fog’s thick enough to stop Johnson seeing us.”

“But where’s the dog?” cried Pen.

“He’s asleep near the coalhole,” replied Clifton, “and if anybody wants — — ”

“I’ll take charge of him,” answered Pen furiously.

“Look out, Pen, he’s got teeth that could snap an iron bar in two.”

“If he moves I’ll cut him open,” cried Pen, taking his knife in one hand. He bounced in between decks, followed by Warren, who wanted to help him in his undertaking. They quickly came back, carrying the animal in their arms, strongly muzzled, with his paws bound tightly together. They had taken him by surprise whilst he slept, so that the unfortunate dog could not escape them.

“Hurrah for Pen!” cried Plover.

“What do you mean to do with him now you’ve got him?” asked Clifton.

“Why, drown him, and if ever he gets over it — — ” replied Pen, with a fearful smile of satisfaction.

About two hundred steps from the vessel there was a seal-hole, a kind of circular crevice cut out by the teeth of that amphibious animal, hollowed out from underneath, and through which the seal comes up to breathe on to the surface of the ice. To keep this aperture from closing up he has to be very careful because the formation of his jaws would not enable him to bore through the hole again from the outside, and in a moment of danger he would fall a prey to his enemies. Pen and Warren directed their steps towards this crevice, and there, in spite of the dog’s energetic efforts, he was unmercifully precipitated into the sea. An enormous lump of ice was then placed over the opening, thus closing all possible issue to the poor animal, walled up in a watery prison.

“Good luck to you, captain,” cried the brutal sailor.

Shortly afterwards Pen and Warren returned on deck. Johnson had seen nothing of this performance. The fog thickened round about the ship, and snow began to fall with violence. An hour later, Richard Shandon, the doctor, and Garry rejoined the *Forward*. Shandon had noticed a pass in a north-eastern direction of which he was resolved to take advantage, and gave his orders in consequence. The crew obeyed with a certain activity, not without hinting to Shandon that it was impossible to go further on, and that they only gave him three more days’ obedience. During a part of the night and the following day the working of the saws and the hauling were actively kept up; the *Forward* gained about two miles further north. On the 18th she was in sight of land, and at five or six cable-lengths from a peculiar peak, called from its strange shape the Devil’s Thumb.

It was there that the *Prince Albert* in 1851, and the *Advance* with Kane, in 1853, were kept prisoners by the ice for several weeks. The odd form of the Devil's Thumb, the dreary deserts in its vicinity, the vast circus of icebergs — some of them more than three hundred feet high — the cracking of the ice, reproduced by the echo in so sinister a manner, rendered the position of the *Forward* horribly dreary. Shandon understood the necessity of getting out of it and going further ahead. Twenty-four hours later, according to his estimation, he had been able to clear the fatal coast for about two miles, but this was not enough. Shandon, overwhelmed with fear, and the false situation in which he was placed, lost both courage and energy; in order to obey his instructions and get further north, he had thrown his vessel into an excessively perilous situation. The men were worn out by the hauling; it required more than three hours to hollow out a channel twenty feet long, through ice that was usually from four to five feet thick. The health of the crew threatened to break down. Shandon was astonished at the silence of his men and their unaccustomed obedience, but he feared that it was the calm before the storm. Who can judge, then, of his painful disappointment, surprise, and despair when he perceived that in consequence of an insensible movement of the ice-field the *Forward* had, during the night from the 18th to the 19th, lost all the advantage she had gained with so much toil? On the Saturday morning they were once more opposite the ever-threatening Devil's Thumb, and in a still more critical position. The icebergs became more numerous, and drifted by in the fog like phantoms. Shandon was in a state of complete demoralisation, for fright had taken possession of the dauntless man and his crew. Shandon had heard the dog's disappearance spoken about, but dared not punish those who were guilty of it. He feared that a rebellion might be the consequence. The weather was fearful during the whole day; the snow rose up in thick whirlpools, wrapping up the *Forward* in an impenetrable cloak. Sometimes, under the action of the storm, the fog was torn asunder, and displayed towards land, raised up like a spectre, the Devil’s Thumb.

The *Forward* was anchored to an immense block of ice; it was all that could be done; there was nothing more to attempt; the obscurity became denser, and the man at the helm could not see James Wall, who was on duty in the bow. Shandon withdrew to his cabin, a prey to unremitting uneasiness; the doctor was putting his voyage notes in order; one half the crew remained on deck, the other half stayed in the common cabin. At one moment, when the storm increased in fury, the Devil’s Thumb seemed to rise up out of all proportion in the midst of the fog.

“Good God!” cried Simpson, drawing back with fright.

“What the devil’s that?” said Foker, and exclamations rose up in every direction.

“It is going to smash us!”

“We are lost!”

“Mr. Wall! Mr. Wall!”

“It’s all over with us!”

“Commander! Commander!”

These cries were simultaneously uttered by the men on watch. Wall fled to the quarter-deck, and Shandon, followed by the doctor, rushed on deck to look. In the midst of the fog the Devil’s Thumb seemed to have suddenly neared the brig, and seemed to have grown in a most fantastic manner. At its summit rose up a second cone, turned upside down and spindled on its point; its enormous mass threatened to crush the ship, as it was oscillating and ready to fall. It was a most fearful sight; every one instinctively drew back, and several sailors, leaping on to the ice, abandoned the ship.

“Let no one move!” cried the commander in a severe voice. “Every one to his post!”

“How now, my friends? There’s nothing to be frightened at!” said the doctor. “There’s no danger! Look, commander, look ahead, Mr. Wall; it’s only an effect of the mirage, nothing else.”

“You are quite right, Mr. Clawbonny,” answered Johnson; “those fools were frightened at a shadow.”

After the doctor had spoken most of the sailors drew near, and their fear changed to admiration at the wonderful phenomenon, which shortly disappeared from sight.

“They call that a mirage?” said Clifton. “Well, you may believe me that the devil has something to do with it.”

“That’s certain!” replied Gripper.

But when the fog cleared away it disclosed to the eyes of the commander an immense free and unexpected passage; it seemed to run away from the coast, and he therefore determined to seize such a favourable hazard. Men were placed on each side of the creek, hawsers were lowered down to them, and they began to tow the vessel in a northerly direction. During long hours this work was actively executed in silence. Shandon caused the steam to be got up, in order to take advantage of the fortunate discovery of this channel.

“This,” said he to Johnson, “is a most providential hazard, and if we can only get a few miles ahead, we shall probably get to the end of our misfortunes.”

“Brunton! stir up the fires, and as soon as there’s enough pressure let me know. In the meantime our men will pluck up their courage — that will be so much gained. They are in a hurry to run away from the Devil’s Thumb; we’ll take advantage of their good inclinations!”

All at once the progress of the *Forward* was abruptly arrested.

“What’s up?” cried Shandon. “I say, Wall! have we broken our tow-ropes?”

“Not at all, commander,” answered Wall, looking over the side. “Hallo! Here are the men coming back again. They are climbing the ship’s side as if the devil was at their heels.”

“What the deuce can it be?” cried Shandon, rushing forward.

“On board! On board!” cried the terrified sailors.

Shandon looked in a northerly direction, and shuddered in spite of himself. A strange animal, with appalling movements, whose foaming tongue emerged from enormous jaws, was leaping about at a cable’s length from the ship. In appearance he seemed to be about twenty feet high, with hair like bristles; he was following up the sailors, whilst his formidable tail, ten feet long, was sweeping the snow and throwing it up in thick whirlwinds. The sight of such a monster riveted the most daring to the spot.

“It’s a bear!” said one.

“It’s the Gevaudan beast!”

“It’s the lion of the Apocalypse!”

Shandon ran to his cabin for a gun he always kept loaded. The doctor armed himself, and held himself in readiness to fire upon an animal which, by its dimensions, recalled the antediluvian quadrupeds. He neared the ship in immense leaps; Shandon and the doctor fired at the same time, when, suddenly, the report of their firearms, shaking the atmospheric stratum, produced an unexpected effect. The doctor looked attentively, and burst out laughing.

“It’s the refraction!” he exclaimed.

“Only the refraction!” repeated Shandon. But a fearful exclamation from the crew interrupted them.

“The dog!” said Clifton.

“The dog, captain!” repeated all his comrades.

“Himself!” cried Pen; “always that cursed brute.”

They were not mistaken — it was the dog. Having got loose from his shackles, he had regained the surface by another crevice. At that instant the refraction, through a phenomenon common to these latitudes, caused him to appear under formidable dimensions, which the shaking of the air had dispersed; but the vexatious effect was none the less produced upon the minds of the sailors, who were very little disposed to admit an explanation of the fact by purely physical reasons. The adventure of the Devil’s Thumb, the reappearance of the dog under such fantastic circumstances, gave the finishing touch to their mental faculties, and murmurs broke out on all sides.

CHAPTER XII

CAPTAIN HATTERAS

The *Forward*, under steam, rapidly made its way between the ice-mountains and the icebergs. Johnson was at the wheel. Shandon, with his snow spectacles, was examining the horizon, but his joy was of short duration, for he soon discovered that the passage ended in a circus of mountains. However, he preferred going on, in spite of the difficulty, to going back. The dog followed the brig at a long distance, running along the plain, but if he lagged too far behind a singular whistle could be distinguished, which he immediately obeyed. The first time this whistle was heard the sailors looked round about them; they were alone on deck all together, and no stranger was to be seen; and yet the whistle was again heard from time to time. Clifton was the first alarmed.

“Do you hear?” said he. “Just look how that animal answers when he hears the whistle.”

“I can scarcely believe my eyes,” answered Gripper.

“It’s all over!” cried Pen. “I don’t go any further.”

“Pen’s right!” replied Brunton; “it’s tempting God!”

“Tempting the devil!” replied Clifton. “I’d sooner lose my bounty money than go a step further.”

“We shall never get back!” said Bolton in despair.

The crew had arrived at the highest pitch of insubordination.

“Not a step further!” cried Wolsten. “Are you all of the same mind?”

“Ay! ay!” answered all the sailors.

“Come on, then,” said Bolton; “let’s go and find the commander; I’ll undertake the talking.”

The sailors in a tight group swayed away towards the poop. The *Forward* at the time was penetrating into a vast circus, which measured perhaps 800 feet in diameter, and with the exception of one entrance — that by which the vessel had come — was entirely closed up.

Shandon said that he had just imprisoned himself; but what was he to do? How were they to retrace their steps? He felt his responsibility, and his hand grasped the telescope. The doctor, with folded arms, kept silent; he was contemplating the walls of ice, the medium altitude of which was over 300 feet. A foggy dome remained suspended above the gulf. It was at this instant that Bolton addressed his speech to the commander.

“Commander!” said he in a trembling voice, “we can’t go any further.”

“What do you say?” replied Shandon, whose consciousness of disregarded authority made the blood rise to the roots of his hair.

“Commander,” replied Bolton, “we say that we’ve done enough for that invisible captain, and we are decided to go no further ahead.”

“You are decided?” cried Shandon. “You talk thus, Bolton? Take care!”

“Your threats are all the same to us,” brutally replied Pen; “we won’t go an inch further.”

Shandon advanced towards the mutineers; at the same time the mate came up and said in a whisper: “Commander, if you wish to get out of here we haven’t a minute to lose; there’s an iceberg drifting up the pass, and it is very likely to cork up all issue and keep us prisoners.”

Shandon examined the situation.

“You will give an account of your conduct later on, you fellows,” said he. “Now heave aboard!”

The sailors rushed to their posts, and the *Forward* quickly veered round; the fires were stuffed with coals; the great question was to outrun the floating mountain. It was a struggle between the brig and the iceberg. The former, in order to get through, was running south; the latter was drifting north, ready to close up every passage.

“Steam up! steam up!” cried Shandon. “Do you hear, Brunton?”

The *Forward* glided like a bird amidst the struggling icebergs, which her prow sent to the right-about; the brig’s hull shivered under the action of the screw, and the manometer indicated a prodigious tension of steam, for it whistled with a deafening noise.

“Load the valves!” cried Shandon, and the engineer obeyed at the risk of blowing up the ship; but his despairing efforts were in vain. The iceberg, caught up by an undercurrent, rapidly approached the pass. The brig was still about three cables’ length from it, when the mountain, entering like a corner-stone into the open space, strongly adhered to its neighbours and closed up all issue.

“We are lost!” cried Shandon, who could not retain the imprudent words.

“Lost!” repeated the crew.

“Let them escape who can!” said some.

“Lower the shore boats!” said others.

“To the steward’s room!” cried Pen and several of his band, “and if we are to be drowned, let’s drown ourselves in gin!”

Disorder among the men was at its height. Shandon felt himself overcome; when he wished to command, he stammered and hesitated. His thought was unable to make way through his words. The doctor was walking about in agitation. Johnson stoically folded his arms and said nothing. All at once a strong, imperious, and energetic voice was heard to pronounce these words:

“Every man to his post and tack about!”

Johnson started, and, hardly knowing what he did, turned the wheel rapidly. He was just in time, for the brig, launched at full speed, was about to crush herself against her prison walls. But while Johnson was instinctively obeying, Shandon, Clawbonny, the crew, and all down to the stoker Warren, who had abandoned his fires, even black Strong, who had left his cooking, were all mustered on deck, and saw emerge from that cabin the only man who was in possession of the key, and that man was Garry, the sailor.

“Sir!” cried Shandon, becoming pale. “Garry — you — by what right do you command here?”

“Dick,” called out Garry, reproducing that whistle which had so much surprised the crew. The dog, at the sound of his right name, jumped with one bound on to the poop and lay quietly down at his master’s feet. The crew did not say a word. The key which the captain of the *Forward* alone possessed, the dog sent by him, and who came thus to verify his identity, that commanding accent which it was impossible to mistake — all this acted strongly on the minds of the sailors, and was sufficient to establish Garry’s authority.

Besides, Garry was no longer recognisable; he had cut off the long whiskers which had covered his face, which made it look more energetic and imperious than ever; dressed in the clothes of his rank which had been deposited in the cabin, he appeared in the insignia of commander.

Then immediately, with that mobility which characterised them, the crew of the *Forward* cried out — ”Three cheers for the captain!”

“Shandon!” said the latter to his second, “muster the crew; I am going to inspect it!”

Shandon obeyed and gave orders with an altered voice. The captain advanced to meet his officers and men, saying something suitable to each, and treating each according to his past conduct. When he had finished the inspection, he returned on to the poop, and with a calm voice pronounced the following words:

“Officers and sailors, like you, I am English, and my motto is that of Nelson, ‘England expects that every man will do his duty.’ As an Englishman I am resolved, we are resolved, that no bolder men shall go further than we have been. As an Englishman I will not allow, we will not allow, other people to have the glory of pushing further north themselves. If ever human foot can step upon the land of the North Pole, it shall be the foot of an Englishman. Here is our country's flag. I have equipped this vessel, and consecrated my fortune to this enterprise, and, if necessary, I shall consecrate to it my life and yours; for I am determined that these colours shall float on the North Pole. Take courage. From this day, for every degree we can gain northwards the sum of a thousand pounds will be awarded to you. There are ninety, for we are now in the seventy-second. Count them. Besides, my name is enough. It means energy and patriotism. I am Captain Hatteras!"

"Captain Hatteras!" exclaimed Shandon, and that name, well known to English sailors, was whispered amongst the crew.

"Now," continued Hatteras, "anchor the brig to the ice, put out the fires, and each of you return to your usual work. Shandon, I wish to hold a council with you relative to affairs on board. Join me with the doctor, Wall, and the boatswain in my cabin. Johnson, disperse the men."

Hatteras, calm and haughty, quietly left the poop. In the meantime Shandon was anchoring the brig.

Who, then, was this Hatteras, and for what reason did his name make such a profound impression upon the crew? John Hatteras was the only son of a London brewer, who died in 1852 worth six millions of money. Still young, he embraced the maritime career in spite of the splendid fortune awaiting him. Not that he felt any vocation for commerce, but the instinct of geographical discoveries was dear to him. He had always dreamt of placing his foot where no mortal foot had yet soiled the ground.

At the age of twenty he was already in possession of the vigorous constitution of a thin and sanguine man; an energetic face, with lines geometrically traced; a high and perpendicular forehead; cold but handsome eyes; thin lips, which set off a mouth from which words rarely issued; a middle stature; solidly-jointed limbs, put in motion by iron muscles; the whole forming a man endowed with a temperament fit for anything. When you saw him you felt he was daring; when you heard him you knew he was coldly determined; his was a character that never drew back, ready to stake the lives of others as well as his own. It was well to think twice before following him in his expeditions.

John Hatteras was proud of being an Englishman. A Frenchman once said to him, with what he thought was refined politeness and amiability:

“If I were not a Frenchman I should like to be an Englishman.”

“And if I were not an Englishman,” answered Hatteras, “I should like to be an Englishman.”

That answer revealed the character of the man. It was a great grief to him that Englishmen had not the monopoly of geographical discoveries, and were, in fact, rather behind other nations in that field.

Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of America, was a Genoese; Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese, discovered India; another Portuguese, Fernando de Andrada, China; and a third, Magellan, the Terra del Fuego. Canada was discovered by Jacques Cartier, a Frenchman; Labrador, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, the Azores, Madeira, Newfoundland, Guinea, Congo, Mexico, Cape Blanco, Greenland, Iceland, the South Seas, California, Japan, Cambodia, Peru, Kamtchatka, the Philippines, Spitzbergen, Cape Horn, Behring’s Straits, Tasmania, New Zealand, New Brittany, New Holland, Louisiana, Jean Mayen Island, were discovered by Icelanders, Scandinavians, French, Russians, Portuguese, Danes, Spaniards, Genoese, and Dutch, but not one by an Englishman. Captain Hatteras could not reconcile himself to the fact that Englishmen were excluded from the glorious list of navigators who made the great discoveries of the 15th and 16th centuries.

Hatteras consoled himself a little when he turned to more modern times. Then Englishmen had the best of it with Sturt, Burke, Wills, King, and Grey in Australia; with Palliser in America; with Cyril Graham, Wadington, and Cummingham in India; with Burton, Speke, Grant, and Livingstone in Africa.

But for a man like Hatteras this was not enough; from his point of view these bold travellers were *improvers* rather than *inventors*; and he was determined to do something better, and he would have invented a country if he could, only to have the honour of discovering it. Now he had noticed that, although Englishmen did not form a majority amongst ancient discoverers, and that he had to go back to Cook in 1774 to obtain New Caledonia and the Sandwich Isles, where the unfortunate captain perished in 1778, yet there existed, nevertheless, a corner of the globe where they seemed to have united all their efforts. This corner was precisely the boreal lands and seas of North America. The list of Polar discoveries may be thus written:

Nova Zembla, discovered by Willoughby, in 1553; Weigatz Island, by Barrough, in 1556; the West Coast of Greenland, by Davis, in 1585; Davis’s Straits, by Davis, in 1587; Spitzbergen, by Willoughby, in 1596; Hudson’s Bay, by Hudson, in 1610; Baffin’s Bay, by Baffin, in 1616.

In more modern times, Hearne, Mackenzie, John Ross, Parry, Franklin, Richardson, Beechey, James Ross, Back, Dease, Simpson, Rae, Inglefield, Belcher, Austin, Kellett, Moore, McClure, Kennedy, and McClintock have continually searched those unknown lands.

The limits of the northern coasts of America had been fixed, and the North-West passage almost discovered, but this was not enough; there was something better still to be done, and John Hatteras had twice attempted it by equipping two ships at his own expense. He wanted to reach the North Pole, and thus crown the series of English discoveries by one of the most illustrious attempts. To attain the Pole was the aim of his life.

After a few successful cruises in the Southern seas, Hatteras endeavoured for the first time, in 1846, to go north by Baffin's Sea; but he could not get beyond the seventy-fourth degree of latitude; he was then commanding the sloop *Halifax*. His crew suffered atrocious torments, and John Hatteras pushed his adventurous rashness so far, that, afterwards, sailors were little tempted to re-commence similar expeditions under such a chief.

However, in 1850 Hatteras succeeded in enrolling on the schooner *Farewell* about twenty determined men, tempted principally by the high prize offered for their audacity. It was upon that occasion that Dr. Clawbonny entered into correspondence with John Hatteras, whom he did not know, requesting to join the expedition, but happily for the doctor the post was already filled up. The *Farewell,* following the track taken in 1817 by the *Neptune* from Aberdeen, got up to the north of Spitzbergen as far as the seventy-sixth degree of latitude. There the expedition was compelled to winter. But the sufferings of the crew from the intense cold were so great that not a single man saw England again, with the exception of Hatteras himself, who was brought back to his own country by a Danish whaler after a walk of more than two hundred miles across the ice.

The sensation produced by the return of this one man was immense. Who in future would dare to follow Hatteras in his mad attempts? However, he did not despair of beginning again. His father, the brewer, died, and he became possessor of a nabob's fortune. Soon after a geographical fact bitterly stirred up John Hatteras. A brig, the *Advance*, manned by seventeen men, equipped by a merchant named Grinnell, under the command of Dr. Kane, and sent in search of Sir John Franklin, advanced in 1853 through Baffin's Sea and Smith's Strait, beyond the eighty-second degree of boreal latitude, much nearer the Pole than any of his predecessors. Now, this vessel was American, Grinnell was American, and Kane was American. The Englishman's disdain for the Yankee will be easily understood; in the heart of Hatteras it changed to hatred; he was resolved to outdo his audacious competitor and reach the Pole itself.

For two years he had been living incognito in Liverpool, passing himself off as a sailor; he recognised in Richard Shandon the man he wanted; he sent him an offer by an anonymous letter, and one to Dr. Clawbonny at the same time. The *Forward* was built, armed, and equipped. Hatteras took great care to conceal his name, for had it been known he would not have found a single man to accompany him. He was determined not to take the command of the brig except in a moment of danger, and when his crew had gone too far to draw back. He had in reserve, as we have seen, such offers of money to make to the men that not one of them would refuse to follow him to the other end of the world; and, in fact, it was right to the other end of the world that he meant to go. Circumstances had become critical, and John Hatteras had made himself known. His dog, the faithful Dick, the companion of his voyages, was the first to recognise him. Luckily for the brave and unfortunately for the timid, it was well and duly established that John Hatteras was the captain of the *Forward*.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PROJECTS OF HATTERAS

The appearance of this bold personage was appreciated in different ways by the crew; part of them completely rallied round him, either from love of money or daring; others submitted because they could not help themselves, reserving their right to protest later on; besides, resistance to such a man seemed, for the present, difficult. Each man went back to his post. The 20th of May fell on a Sunday, and was consequently a day of rest for the crew. A council was held by the captain, composed of the officers, Shandon, Wall, Johnson, and the doctor.

“Gentlemen,” said the captain in that voice at the same time soft and imperious which characterised him, “you are aware that I intend to go as far as the Pole. I wish to know your opinion about this enterprise. Shandon, what do you think about it?”

“It is not for me to think, captain,” coldly replied Shandon; “I have only to obey.”

Hatteras was not surprised at the answer.

“Richard Shandon,” continued he, not less coldly, “I beg you will say what you think about our chance of success.”

“Very well, captain,” answered Shandon, “facts are there, and answer for me; attempts of the same kind up till now have always failed; I hope we shall be more fortunate.”

“We shall be. What do you think, gentlemen?”

“As far as I am concerned,” replied the doctor, “I consider your plan practicable, as it is certain that some day navigators will attain the boreal Pole. I don’t see why the honour should not fall to our lot.”

“There are many things in our favour,” answered Hatteras; “our measures are taken in consequence, and we shall profit by the experience of those who have gone before us. And thereupon, Shandon, accept my thanks for the care you have taken in fitting out this ship; there are a few evil-disposed fellows amongst the crew that I shall have to bring to reason, but on the whole I have only praises to give you.”

Shandon bowed coldly. His position on the *Forward*, which he thought to command, was a false one. Hatteras understood this, and did not insist further.

“As to you, gentlemen,” he continued, turning to Wall and Johnson, “I could not have secured officers more distinguished for courage and experience.”

“Well, captain, I’m your man,” answered Johnson, “and although your enterprise seems to me rather daring, you may rely upon me till the end.”

“And on me too,” said James Wall.

“As to you, doctor, I know what you are worth.”

“You know more than I do, then,” quickly replied the doctor.

“Now, gentlemen,” continued Hatteras, “it is well you should learn upon what undeniable facts my pretension to arrive at the Pole is founded. In

1817 the *Neptune* got up to the north of Spitzbergen, as far as the eighty-second degree. In 1826 the celebrated Parry, after his third voyage to the Polar Seas, started also from Spitzbergen Point, and by the aid of sledge-boats went a hundred and fifty miles northward. In 1852 Captain Inglefield penetrated into Smith's Inlet as far as seventy-eight degrees thirty-five minutes latitude. All these vessels were English, and Englishmen, our countrymen, commanded them." Here Hatteras paused. "I ought to add," he continued, with a constrained look, and as though the words were unable to leave his lips — "I must add that, in 1854, Kane, the American, commanding the brig *Advance*, went still higher, and that his lieutenant, Morton, going across the ice-fields, hoisted the United States standard on the other side of the eighty-second degree. This said, I shall not return to the subject. Now what remains to be known is this, that the captains of the *Neptune*, the *Enterprise*, the *Isabel*, and the *Advance* ascertained that proceeding from the highest latitudes there existed a Polar basin entirely free from ice."

"Free from ice!" exclaimed Shandon, interrupting the captain, "that is impossible!"

"You will notice, Shandon," quietly replied Hatteras, whose eye shone for an instant, "that I quote names and facts as a proof. I may even add that during Captain Parry's station on the border of Wellington Channel, in 1851, his lieutenant, Stewart, also found himself in the presence of open sea, and this peculiarity was confirmed during Sir Edward Beecher's wintering in 1853, in Northumberland Bay, in 76° 52' N. latitude, and 99° 20' longitude. The reports are incontestable, and it would be most unjust not to admit them."

“However, captain,” continued Shandon, “those reports are so contradictory.”

“You are mistaken, Shandon,” cried Dr. Clawbonny. “These reports do not contradict any scientific assertion, the captain will allow me to tell you.”

“Go on, doctor,” answered Hatteras.

“Well, listen, Shandon; it evidently follows from geographical facts, and from the study of isotherm lines, that the coldest point of the globe is not at the Pole itself; like the magnetic point, it deviates several degrees from the Pole. The calculations of Brewster, Bergham, and several other natural philosophers show us that in our hemisphere there are two cold Poles; one is situated in Asia at 79° 30’ N. latitude, and by 120° E. longitude, and the other in America at 78° N. latitude, and 97° W. longitude. It is with the latter that we have to do, and you see, Shandon, we have met with it at more than twelve degrees below the Pole. Well, why should not the Polar Sea be as equally disengaged from ice as the sixty-sixth parallel is in summer — that is to say, the south of Baffin’s Bay?”

“That’s what I call well pleaded,” replied Johnson. “Mr. Clawbonny speaks upon these matters like a professional man.”

“It appears very probable,” chimed in James Wall.

“All guess-work,” answered Shandon obstinately.

“Well, Shandon,” said Hatteras, “let us take into consideration either case; either the sea is free from ice or it is not so, and neither of these suppositions can hinder us from attaining the Pole. If the sea is free the *Forward* will take us there without trouble; if it is frozen we will attempt the adventure upon our sledges. This, you will allow, is not impracticable. When once our brig has attained the eighty-third degree we shall only have six hundred miles to traverse before reaching the Pole."

"And what are six hundred miles?" quickly answered the doctor, "when it is known that a Cossack, Alexis Markoff, went over the ice sea along the northern coast of the Russian Empire, in sledges drawn by dogs, for the space of eight hundred miles in twenty-four days?"

"Do you hear that, Shandon?" said Hatteras; "can't Englishmen do as much as a Cossack?"

"Of course they can," cried the impetuous doctor.

"Of course," added the boatswain.

"Well, Shandon?" said the captain.

"I can only repeat what I said before, captain," said Shandon — "I will obey."

"Very good. And now," continued Hatteras, "let us consider our present situation. We are caught by the ice, and it seems to me impossible, for this year at least, to get into Smith's Strait. Well, here, then, this is what I propose."

Hatteras laid open upon the table one of the excellent maps published in 1859 by the order of the Admiralty.

"Be kind enough to follow me. If Smith's Strait is closed up from us, Lancaster Strait, on the west coast of Baffin's Sea, is not. I think we ought to ascend that strait as far as Barrow Strait, and from there sail to Beechey

Island; the same track has been gone over a hundred times by sailing vessels; consequently with a screw we can do it easily. Once at Beechey Island we will go north as far as possible, by Wellington Channel, up to the outlet of the creek which joins Wellington's and Queen's Channels, at the very point where the open sea was perceived. It is now only the 20th of May; in a month, if circumstances favour us, we shall have attained that point, and from there we'll drive forward towards the Pole. What do you think about it, gentlemen?"

"It is evidently the only track to follow," replied Johnson.

"Very well, we will take it from to-morrow. I shall let them rest to-day as it is Sunday. Shandon, you will take care that religious service be attended to; it has a beneficial effect on the minds of men, and a sailor above all needs to place confidence in the Almighty."

"It shall be attended to, captain," answered Shandon, who went out with the lieutenant and the boatswain.

"Doctor!" said Hatteras, pointing towards Shandon, "there's a man whose pride is wounded; I can no longer rely upon him."

Early the following day the captain caused the pirogue to be lowered in order to reconnoitre the icebergs in the vicinity, the breadth of which did not exceed 200 yards. He remarked that through a slow pressure of the ice the basin threatened to become narrower. It became urgent, therefore, to make an aperture to prevent the ship being crushed in a vice of the mountains. By the means employed by John Hatteras, it is easy to observe that he was an energetic man.

He first had steps cut out in the walls of ice, and by their means climbed to the summit of an iceberg. From that point he saw that it was easy for him to cut out a road towards the south-west. By his orders a blasting furnace was hollowed nearly in the heart of the mountain. This work, rapidly put into execution, was terminated by noon on Monday. Hatteras could not rely on his eight or ten pound blasting cylinders, which would have had no effect on such masses as those. They were only sufficient to shatter ice-fields. He therefore had a thousand pounds of powder placed in the blasting furnace, of which the diffusive direction was carefully calculated. This mine was provided with a long wick, bound in gutta-percha, the end of which was outside. The gallery conducting to the mine was filled up with snow and lumps of ice, which the cold of the following night made as hard as granite. The temperature, under the influence of an easterly wind, came down to twelve degrees.

At seven the next morning the *Forward* was held under steam, ready to profit by the smallest issue. Johnson was charged with setting fire to the wick, which, according to calculation, would burn for half an hour before setting fire to the mine. Johnson had, therefore, plenty of time to regain the brig; ten minutes after having executed Hatteras's order he was again at his post. The crew remained on deck, for the weather was dry and bright; it had left off snowing.

Hatteras was on the poop, chronometer in hand, counting the minutes; Shandon and the doctor were with him. At eight thirty-five a dull explosion was heard, much less loud than any one would have supposed. The outline of the mountains was changed all at once as if by an earthquake; thick white smoke rose up to a considerable height in the sky, leaving long crevices in the iceberg, the top part of which fell in pieces all round the *Forward*. But the path was not yet free; large blocks of ice remained suspended above the pass on the adjacent mountains, and there was every reason to fear that they would fall and close up the passage. Hatteras took in the situation at one glance.

“Wolsten!” cried he.

The gunsmith hastened up.

“Yes, captain?” cried he.

“Load the gun in the bow with a triple charge,” said Hatteras, “and wad it as hard as possible.”

“Are we going to attack the mountain with cannon-balls?” asked the doctor.

“No,” answered Hatteras, “that would be useless. No bullet, Wolsten, but a triple charge of powder. Look sharp!”

A few minutes after the gun was loaded.

“What does he mean to do without a bullet?” muttered Shandon between his teeth.

“We shall soon see,” answered the doctor.

“Ready, captain!” called out Wolsten.

“All right!” replied Hatteras.

“Brunton!” he called out to the engineer, “a few turns ahead.”

Brunton opened the sliders, and the screw being put in movement, the *Forward* neared the mined mountain.

“Aim at the pass!” cried the captain to the gunsmith. The latter obeyed, and when the brig was only half a cable’s length from it, Hatteras called out:

“Fire!”

A formidable report followed his order, and the blocks, shaken by the atmospheric commotion, were suddenly precipitated into the sea; the disturbance amongst the strata of the air had been sufficient to accomplish this.

“All steam on, Brunton! Straight for the pass, Johnson!”

The latter was at the helm; the brig, driven along by her screw, which turned in the foaming waves, dashed into the middle of the then opened pass; it was time, for scarcely had the *Forward* cleared the opening than her prison closed up again behind her. It was a thrilling moment, and on board there was only one stout and undisturbed heart — that of the captain. The crew, astonished at the manoeuvre, cried out:

“Hurrah for the captain!”

CHAPTER XIV

EXPEDITION IN SEARCH OF FRANKLIN

On Wednesday, the 23rd of May, the *Forward* had again taken up her adventurous navigation, cleverly tacking amongst the packs and icebergs. Thanks to steam, that obedient force which so many of our Polar sea navigators have had to do without, she appeared to be playing in the midst of the moving rocks. She seemed to recognise the hand of an experienced master, and like a horse under an able rider, she obeyed the thought of her captain. The temperature rose. At six o'clock in the morning the thermometer marked twenty-six degrees, at six in the evening twenty-nine degrees, and at midnight twenty-five degrees; the wind was lightly blowing from the south-east.

On Thursday, towards three in the morning, the *Forward* was in sight of Possession Bay, on the coast of America. At the entrance to Lancaster Strait, shortly after, the crew caught a glimpse of Burney Cape. A few Esquimaux pulled off towards the vessel, but Hatteras did not take the trouble to wait for them. The Byam-Martin peaks, which overlook Cape Liverpool, were sighted to the left, and soon disappeared in the evening mists, which also prevented any observation being taken from Cape Hay. This cape is so low that it gets confounded with the ice on the coast, a circumstance which often renders the hydrographic determination of the Polar seas extremely difficult.

Puffins, ducks, and white sea-gulls showed up in very great numbers. The *Forward* was then in latitude 74° 1', and in longitude 77° 15'. The snowy hoods of the two mountains, Catherine and Elizabeth, rose up above the clouds.

On Friday, at six o’clock, Cape Warender was passed on the right side of the strait, and on the left Admiralty Inlet, a bay that has been little explored by navigators, who are generally in a hurry to sail away west. The sea became rather rough, and the waves often swept the deck of the brig, throwing up pieces of ice. The land on the north coast, with its high table lands almost level, and which reverberated the sun’s rays, offered a very curious appearance.

Hatteras wanted to run along the north coast, in order to reach Beechey Island and the entrance to Wellington Channel sooner; but continual icebergs compelled him, to his great annoyance, to follow the southern passes. That was why, on the 26th of May, the *Forward* was abreast of Cape York in a thick fog interspersed with snow; a very high mountain, almost perpendicular, caused it to be recognised. The weather cleared up a little, and the sun, towards noon, appeared for an instant, allowing a tolerably good observation to be taken; 74° 4’ latitude and 84° 23’ longitude. The *Forward* was then at the extremity of Lancaster Strait.

Hatteras pointed out to the doctor on his map the route already taken, and the one he meant to follow. The position of the brig at the time was very interesting.

“I should like to have been further north,” said he, “but no one can do the impossible; see, this is our exact situation.”

And the captain pricked his map at a short distance from Cape York.

“We are in the centre of this four-road way, open to every wind, fenced by the outlets of Lancaster Strait, Barrow Strait, Wellington Channel, and Regent’s Passage; it is a point that all navigators in these seas have been obliged to come to.”

“Well,” replied the doctor, “it must have puzzled them greatly; four cross-roads with no sign-posts to tell them which to take. How did Parry, Ross, and Franklin manage?”

“They did not manage at all, they were managed; they had no choice, I can assure you; sometimes Barrow Strait was closed to one of them, and the next year another found it open; sometimes the vessel was irresistibly drawn towards Regent’s Passage, so that we have ended by becoming acquainted with these inextricable seas.”

“What a singular country!” said the doctor, examining the map. “It is all in pieces, and they seem to have no logical connection. It seems as if the land in the vicinity of the North Pole had been cut up like this on purpose to make access to it more difficult, whilst that in the other hemisphere quietly terminates in tapered-out points like those of Cape Horn, the Cape of Good Hope, and the Indian Peninsula. Is it the greater rapidity of the equator which has thus modified matters, whilst the land at the extremities, yet fluid from the creation, has not been able to get condensed or agglomerated together, for want of a sufficiently rapid rotation?”

“That must be the case, for everything on earth is logical, and ‘nothing is that errs from law,’ and God often allows men to discover His laws; make use of His permission, doctor.”

“Unfortunately, I shall not be able to take much advantage of it,” said the doctor, “but the wind here is something dreadful,” added he, muffling himself up as well as he could.

“Yes, we are quite exposed to the north wind, and it is turning us out of our road.”

“Anyhow it ought to drive the ice down south, and level a clear road.”

“It ought to do so, doctor, but the wind does not always do what it ought. Look, that ice-bank seems impenetrable. Never mind, we will try to reach Griffith Island, sail round Cornwallis Island, and get into Queen’s Channel without going by Wellington Channel. Nevertheless I positively desire to touch at Beechey Island in order to renew my coal provision.”

“What do you mean?” asked the astonished doctor.

“I mean that, according to orders from the Admiralty, large provisions have been deposited on that island in order to provide for future expeditions, and although Captain McClintock took some in 1859, I assure you that there will be some left for us.”

“By-the-bye,” said the doctor, “these parts have been explored for the last fifteen years, and since the day when the proof of the loss of Franklin was acquired, the Admiralty has always kept five or six cruisers in these seas. If I am not mistaken, Griffith Island, which I see there on the map, almost in the middle of the cross-roads, has become a general meeting-place for navigators.”

“It is so, doctor; and Franklin’s unfortunate expedition resulted in making known these distant countries to us.”

“That is true, captain, for since 1845 expeditions have been very numerous. It was not until 1848 that we began to be uneasy about the disappearance of the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, Franklin's two vessels. It was then that we saw the admiral's old friend, Dr. Richardson, at the age of seventy, go to Canada, and ascend Coppermine River as far as the Polar Sea; and James Ross, commanding the *Enterprise* and *Investigation*, set out from Uppernawik in 1848 and arrived at Cape York, where we now are. Every day he threw a tub containing papers into the sea, for the purpose of making known his whereabouts. During the mists he caused the cannon to be fired, and had sky-rockets sent up at night along with Bengal lights, and kept under sail continually. He wintered in Port Leopold from 1848 to 1849, where he took possession of a great number of white foxes, and caused brass collars, upon which was engraved the indication of the whereabouts of ships and the store depots, to be riveted on their necks. Afterwards they were dispersed in all directions; in the following spring he began to search the coasts of North Somerset on sledges in the midst of dangers and privations from which almost all his men fell ill or lame. He built up cairns in which he inclosed brass cylinders with the necessary memoranda for rallying the lost expedition. While he was away his lieutenant McClure explored the northern coasts of Barrow Strait, but without result. James Ross had under his orders two officers who, later on, were destined to become celebrities — McClure, who cleared the North-West passage, and McClintock, who discovered the remains of Sir John Franklin."

"Yes; they are now two good and brave English captains. You know the history of these seas well, doctor, and you will benefit us by telling us about it. There is always something to be gained by hearing about such daring attempts."

"Well, to finish all I know about James Ross: he tried to reach Melville Island by a more westerly direction, but he nearly lost his two vessels, for he was caught by the ice and driven back into Baffin's Sea."

“Driven back?” repeated Hatteras, contracting his brows; “forced back in spite of himself?”

“Yes, and without having discovered anything,” continued the doctor; “and ever since that year, 1850, English vessels have never ceased to plough these seas, and a reward of twenty thousand pounds was offered to any one who might find the crews of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. Captains Kellett and Moore had already, in 1848, attempted to get through Behring’s Strait. In 1850 and 1851 Captain Austin wintered in Cornwallis Island; Captain Parry, on board the *Assistance* and the *Resolute*, explored Wellington Channel; John Ross, the venerable hero of the magnetic pole, set out again with his yacht, the *Felix*, in search of his friend; the brig *Prince Albert* went on a first cruise at the expense of Lady Franklin; and, lastly, two American ships, sent out by Grinnell with Captain Haven, were drifted out of Wellington Channel and thrown back into Lancaster Strait. It was during this year that McClintock, who was then Austin’s lieutenant, pushed on as far as Melville Island and Cape Dundas, the extreme points attained by Parry in 1819; it was then that he found traces of Franklin’s wintering on Beechey Island in 1845.”

“Yes,” answered Hatteras, “three of his sailors had been buried there — three men more fortunate than the others!”

The doctor nodded in approval of Hatteras’s remark, and continued:

“During 1851 and 1852 the *Prince Albert* went on a second voyage under the French lieutenant, Bellot; he wintered at Batty Bay, in Prince Regent Strait, explored the south-west of Somerset, and reconnoitred the coast as far as Cape Walker. During that time the *Enterprise* and the *Investigator* returned to England and passed under the command of Collinson and

McClure for the purpose of rejoining Kellett and Moore in Behring's Straits; whilst Collinson came back to winter at Hong-Kong, McClure made the best of his way onward, and after being obliged to winter three times — from 1850 to '51; from 1851 to '52; and from 1852 to '53 — he discovered the North-West passage without learning anything of Franklin's fate. During 1852 and '53 a new expedition composed of three sailing vessels, the *Resolute*, the *Assistance*, the *North Star*, and two steamers, the *Pioneer* and *Intrepid*, set sail under the command of Sir Edward Belcher, with Captain Kellett under him; Sir Edward visited Wellington Channel, wintered in Northumberland Bay, and went over the coast, whilst Kellett, pushing on to Bridport in Melville Island, explored, without success, that part of the boreal land. It was at this time that news was spread in England that two ships, abandoned in the midst of icebergs, had been descried near the coast of New Scotland. Lady Franklin immediately had prepared the little screw *Isabelle*, and Captain Inglefield, after having steamed up Baffin's Bay as far as Victoria Point on the eightieth parallel, came back to Beechey Island no more successful than his predecessors. At the beginning of 1855, Grinnell, an American, fitted up a fresh expedition, and Captain Kane tried to penetrate to the Pole — — "

"But he didn't do it," cried Hatteras violently; "and what he didn't do we will, with God's help!"

"I know, captain," answered the doctor, "and I mention it because this expedition is of necessity connected with the search for Franklin. But it had no result. I was almost forgetting to tell you that the Admiralty, considering Beechey Island as the general rendezvous of expeditions, charged Captain Inglefield, who then commanded the steamer *Phoenix*, to transport provisions there in 1853; Inglefield set out with Lieutenant Bellot, and lost the brave officer who for the second time had devoted his services to

England; we can have more precise details upon this catastrophe, as our boatswain, Johnson, was witness to the misfortune.”

“Lieutenant Bellot was a brave Frenchman,” said Hatteras, “and his memory is honoured in England.”

“By that time,” continued the doctor, “Belcher’s fleet began to come back little by little; not all of it, for Sir Edward had been obliged to abandon the *Assistance* in 1854, as McClure had done with the *Investigator* in 1853. In the meantime, Dr. Rae, in a letter dated the 29th of July, 1854, and addressed from Repulse Bay, which he had succeeded in reaching through America, sent word that the Esquimaux of King William’s Land were in possession of different objects taken from the wrecks of the *Erebus* and *Terror*; there was then not the least doubt about the fate of the expedition; the *Phoenix*, the *North Star*, and Collinson’s vessel then came back to England, leaving the Arctic Seas completely abandoned by English ships. But if the Government seemed to have lost all hope it was not so with Lady Franklin, and with the remnants of her fortune she fitted out the *Fox*, commanded by McClintock, who set sail in 1857, and wintered in the quarters where you made your apparition; he reached Beechey Island on the 11th of August, 1858, wintered a second time in Bellot’s Strait, began his search again in February, 1859, and on the 6th of May found the document which cleared away all doubt about the fate of the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, and returned to England at the end of the year. That is all that has happened for fifteen years in these fateful countries, and since the return of the *Fox* not a single vessel has returned to attempt success in the midst of these dangerous seas.”

“Well,” replied Hatteras, “we will attempt it.”

CHAPTER XV

THE “FORWARD” DRIVEN BACK SOUTH

The weather cleared up towards evening, and land was clearly distinguished between Cape Sepping and Cape Clarence, which runs east, then south, and is joined to the coast on the west by a rather low neck of land. The sea at the entrance to Regent Strait was free from ice, with the exception of an impenetrable ice-bank, a little further than Port Leopold, which threatened to stop the *Forward* in her north-westerly course. Hatteras was greatly vexed, but he did not show it; he was obliged to have recourse to petards in order to force an entrance to Port Leopold; he reached it on Sunday, the 27th of May; the brig was solidly anchored to the enormous icebergs, which were as upright, hard, and solid as rocks.

The captain, followed by the doctor, Johnson, and his dog Dick, immediately leaped upon the ice, and soon reached land. Dick leaped with joy, for since he had recognised the captain he had become more sociable, keeping his grudge against certain men of the crew for whom his master had no more friendship than he. The port was not then blocked up with ice that the east winds generally heaped up there; the earth, intersected with peaks, offered at their summits graceful undulations of snow. The house and lantern erected by James Ross were still in a tolerable state of preservation; but the provisions seemed to have been ransacked by foxes and bears, the recent traces of which were easily distinguished. Men, too, had had something to do with the devastation, for a few remains of Esquimaux huts remained upon the shores of the Bay. The six graves inclosing the remains of the six sailors of the *Enterprise* and the *Investigator* were recognisable by a slight swelling of the ground; they had been respected both by men and animals. In placing his foot for the first time on boreal land, the doctor experienced much emotion. It is impossible to imagine the feelings with which the heart is assailed at the sight of the remains of houses, tents, huts, and magazines that Nature so marvellously preserves in those cold countries.

“There is that residence,” he said to his companions, “which James Ross himself called the Camp of Refuge; if Franklin’s expedition had reached this spot, it would have been saved. There is the engine which was abandoned here, and the stove at which the crew of the *Prince Albert* warmed themselves in 1851. Things have remained just as they were, and any one would think that Captain Kennedy had only left yesterday. Here is the long boat which sheltered him and his for a few days, for this Kennedy, separated from his ship, was in reality saved by Lieutenant Bellot, who braved the October temperature in order to go to his assistance.”

“I knew that brave and worthy officer,” said Johnson.

Whilst the doctor was examining with all an antiquarian’s enthusiasm the vestiges of previous winterings, Hatteras was occupied in piling together the various provisions and articles of fuel, which were only to be found in very small quantities. The following day was employed in transporting them on board. The doctor, without going too far from the ship, surveyed the country, and took sketches of the most remarkable points of view. The temperature rose by degrees, and the heaped-up snow began to melt. The doctor made an almost complete collection of northern birds, such as gulls, divers, eider-down ducks, which are very much like common ducks, with white breasts and backs, blue bellies, the top of the head blue, and the remainder of the plumage white, shaded with green; several of them had already their breasts stripped of that beautiful down with which the male and female line their nests. The doctor also perceived large seals taking breath on the surface of the ice, but could not shoot one. In his excursions he discovered the high water mark, a stone upon which the following signs are engraved:

(E. I.)

1849,

and which indicate the passage of the *Enterprise* and *Investigator*; he pushed forward as far as Cape Clarence to the spot where John and James Ross, in 1833, waited with so much impatience for the breaking up of the ice. The land was strewn with skulls and bones of animals, and traces of Esquimaux habitations could be still distinguished.

The doctor wanted to raise up a cairn on Port Leopold, and deposit in it a note indicating the passage of the *Forward*, and the aim of the expedition. But Hatteras would not hear of it; he did not want to leave traces behind of which a competitor might take advantage. In spite of his good motives the doctor was forced to yield to the captain’s will. Shandon blamed the captain’s obstinacy, which prevented any ships following the trace of the *Forward* in case of accident. Hatteras would not give way. His lading was finished on Monday night, and he attempted once more to gain the north by breaking open the ice-bank; but after dangerous efforts he was forced to resign himself, and to go down Regent’s Channel again; he would not stop at Port Leopold, which, open to-day, might be closed again to-morrow by an unexpected displacement of ice-fields, a very frequent phenomenon in these seas, and which navigators ought particularly to take into consideration.

If Hatteras did not allow his uneasiness to be outwardly perceived, it did not prevent him feeling it inwardly. His desire was to push northward, whilst, on the contrary, he found himself constrained to put back southward. Where should he get to in that case? Should he be obliged to put back to Victoria Harbour, in Boothia Gulf, where Sir John Ross wintered in 1833? Would he find Bellot Strait open at that epoch, and could he ascend Peel Strait by rounding North Somerset? Or, again, should he, like his predecessors, find himself captured during several winters, and be compelled to exhaust his strength and provisions? These fears were fermenting in his brain; he must decide one way or other. He heaved about, and struck out south. The width of Prince Regent's Channel is about the same from Port Leopold to Adelaide Bay. The *Forward*, more favoured than the ships which had preceded her, and of which the greater number had required more than a month to descend the channel, even in a more favourable season, made her way rapidly amongst the icebergs; it is true that other ships, with the exception of the *Fox*, had no steam at their disposal, and had to endure the caprices of an uncertain and often foul wind.

In general the crew showed little wish to push on with the enterprising Hatteras; the men were only too glad to perceive that the vessel was taking a southerly direction. Hatteras would have liked to go on regardless of consequences.

The *Forward* rushed along under the pressure of her engines, the smoke from which twisted round the shining points of the icebergs; the weather was constantly changing from dry cold to snowy fogs. The brig, which drew little water, sailed along the west coast; Hatteras did not wish to miss the entrance to Bellot Strait, as the only outlet to the Gulf of Boothia on the south was the strait, only partially known to the *Fury* and the *Hecla*; if he missed the Bellot Strait, he might be shut up without possibility of egress.

In the evening the *Forward* was in sight of Elwin Bay, known by its high perpendicular rocks; on the Tuesday morning Batty Bay was sighted, where the *Prince Albert* anchored for its long wintering on the 10th of September, 1851. The doctor swept the whole coast with his telescope. It was from this point that the expeditions radiated that established the geographical configuration of North Somerset. The weather was clear, and the profound ravines by which the bay is surrounded could be clearly distinguished.

The doctor and Johnson were perhaps the only beings on board who took any interest in these deserted countries. Hatteras was always intent upon his maps, and said little; his taciturnity increased as the brig got more and more south; he often mounted the poop, and there with folded arms, and eyes lost in vacancy, he stood for hours. His orders, when he gave any, were curt and rough. Shandon kept a cold silence, and kept himself so much aloof by degrees that at last he had no relations with Hatteras except those exacted by the service; James Wall remained devoted to Shandon, and regulated his conduct accordingly. The remainder of the crew waited for something to turn up, ready to take any advantage in their own interest. There was no longer that unity of thought and communion of ideas on board which are so necessary for the accomplishment of anything great, and this Hatteras knew to his sorrow.

During the day two whales were perceived rushing towards the south; a white bear was also seen, and was shot at without any apparent success. The captain knew the value of an hour under the circumstances, and would not allow the animal to be chased.

On Wednesday morning the extremity of Regent’s Channel was passed; the angle on the west coast was followed by a deep curve in the land. By consulting his map the doctor recognised the point of Somerset House, or Fury Point.

“There,” said he to his habitual companion — ”there is the very spot where the first English ship, sent into these seas in 1815, was lost, during the third of Parry’s voyages to the Pole; the *Fury* was so damaged by the ice on her second wintering, that her crew were obliged to desert her and return to England on board her companion ship the *Hecla*.”

“That shows the advantage of having a second ship,” answered Johnson. “It is a precaution that Polar navigators ought not to neglect, but Captain Hatteras wasn’t the sort of man to trouble himself with another ship.”

“Do you think he is imprudent, Johnson?” asked the doctor.

“I? I think nothing, Mr. Clawbonny. Do you see those stakes over there with some rotten tent-rags still hanging to them?”

“Yes; that’s where Parry disembarked his provisions from his ship, and, if I remember rightly, the roof of his tent was a topsail.”

“Everything must be greatly changed since 1825!”

“Not so much as any one might think. John Ross owed the health and safety of his crew to that fragile habitation in 1829. When the *Prince Albert* sent an expedition there in 1851, it was still existing; Captain Kennedy had it repaired, nine years ago now. It would be interesting to visit it, but Hatteras isn’t in the humour to stop!”

“I daresay he is right, Mr. Clawbonny; if time is money in England, here it is life, and a day’s or even an hour’s delay might make all the difference.”

During the day of Thursday, the 1st of June, the *Forward* cut across Creswell Bay; from Fury Point the coast rose towards the north in perpendicular rocks three hundred feet high; it began to get lower towards the south; some snow summits looked like neatly-cut tables, whilst others were shaped like pyramids, and had other strange forms.

The weather grew milder during that day, but was not so clear; land was lost to sight, and the thermometer went up to thirty-two degrees; seafowl fluttered about, the flocks of wild ducks were seen flying north; the crew could divest themselves of some of their garments, and the influence of the Arctic summer began to be felt. Towards evening the *Forward* doubled Cape Garry at a quarter of a mile from the shore, where the soundings gave from ten to twelve fathoms; from thence she kept near the coast as far as Brentford Bay. It was under this latitude that Bellot Strait was to be met with; a strait the existence of which Sir John Ross did not even guess at during his expedition in 1828; his maps indicated an uninterrupted coast-line, whose irregularities he noted with the utmost care; the entrance to the strait must therefore have been blocked up by ice at the time. It was really discovered by Kennedy in April, 1852, and he gave it the name of his lieutenant, Bellot, as “a just tribute,” he said, “to the important services rendered to our expedition by the French officer.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAGNETIC POLE

Hatteras felt his anxiety increase as he neared the strait; the fate of his voyage depended upon it; up till now he had done more than his predecessors, the most fortunate of whom, McClintock, had taken fifteen months to reach this part of the Polar Seas; but it was little or nothing if he did not succeed in clearing Bellot Strait; he could not retrace his steps, and would be blocked up till the following year.

He trusted the care of examining the coast to no one but himself; he mounted the crow’s nest and passed several hours there during the morning of Saturday. The crew perfectly understood the ship’s position; profound silence reigned on board; the engine slackened steam, and the *Forward* kept as near land as possible; the coast bristled with icebergs, which the warmest summers do not melt; an experienced eye alone could distinguish an opening between them. Hatteras compared his maps with the land. As the sun showed himself for an instant towards noon, he caused Shandon and Wall to take a pretty exact observation, which was shouted to him. All the crew suffered the tortures of anxiety for half the day, but towards two o’clock these words were shouted from the top of the mizenmast:

“Veer to the west, all steam on.”

The brig instantly obeyed; her prow was directed towards the point indicated; the sea foamed under the screws, and the *Forward,* with all speed on, entered between two ice-streams. The road was found, Hatteras descended upon deck, and the ice-master took his place.

“Well, captain,” said the doctor, “we are in the famous strait at last.”

“Yes,” answered Hatteras, lowering his voice; “but getting in isn’t everything; we must get out too,” and so saying he regained his cabin.

“He’s right,” said the doctor; “we are here in a sort of mousetrap, with scarcely enough space for working the brig, and if we are forced to winter in the strait!... Well, we shan’t be the first that have had to do it, and they got over it, and so shall we.”

The doctor was not mistaken. It was in that very place, in a little sheltered harbour called Kennedy Harbour by McClintock himself, that the *Fox* wintered in 1858. The high granite chain and the steep cliffs of the two banks were clearly discernible.

Bellot Strait is seventeen miles long and a mile wide, and about six or seven fathoms deep. It lies between mountains whose height is estimated at 1,600 feet. It separates North Somerset from Boothia Land.

It is easy to understand that there is not much elbow-room for vessels in such a strait. The *Forward* advanced slowly, but it did advance; tempests are frequent in the strait, and the brig did not escape them; by Hatteras’s order all sails were furled; but, notwithstanding all precautions, the brig was much knocked about; the waves dashed over her, and her smoke fled towards the east with astonishing rapidity; her course was not certain amongst the moving ice; the barometer fell; it was difficult to stop on deck, and most of the men stayed below to avoid useless suffering.

Hatteras, Johnson, and Shandon remained on the poop in spite of the gales of snow and rain; as usual the doctor had asked himself what would be the most disagreeable thing he could do, and answered himself by going on deck at once; it was impossible to hear and difficult to see one another, so that he kept his reflections to himself. Hatteras tried to see through the fog; he calculated that they would be at the mouth of the strait at six o’clock, but when the time came all issue seemed closed up; he was obliged to wait and anchor the brig to an iceberg; but he stopped under pressure all night.

The weather was frightful. The *Forward* threatened to break her chains at every instant; it was feared that the iceberg to which they were anchored, torn away at its base under the violent west wind, would float away with the brig. The officers were constantly on the look-out and under extreme apprehension; along with the snow there fell a perfect hail of ice torn off from the surface of the icebergs by the strength of the wind; it was like a shower of arrows bristling in the atmosphere. The temperature rose singularly during this terrible night; the thermometer marked fifty-seven degrees, and the doctor, to his great astonishment, thought he saw flashes of lightning in the south, followed by the roar of far-off thunder that seemed to corroborate the testimony of the whaler Scoresby, who observed a similar phenomenon above the sixty-fifth parallel. Captain Parry was also witness to a similar meteorological wonder in 1821.

Towards five o’clock in the morning the weather changed with astonishing rapidity; the temperature went down to freezing point, the wind turned north, and became calmer. The western opening to the strait was in sight, but entirely obstructed. Hatteras looked eagerly at the coast, asking himself if the passage really existed. However, the brig got under way, and glided slowly amongst the ice-streams, whilst the icebergs pressed noisily against her planks, the packs at that epoch were still from six to seven feet thick; they were obliged carefully to avoid their pressure, for if the brig had resisted them she would have run the risk of being lifted up and turned over on her side. At noon, for the first time, they could admire a magnificent solar phenomenon, a halo with two parhelia; the doctor observed it, and took its exact dimensions; the exterior bow was only visible over an extent of thirty degrees on each side of its horizontal diameter; the two images of the sun were remarkably clear; the colours of the luminous bows proceeded from inside to outside, and were red, yellow, green, and very light blue — in short, white light without any assignable exterior limit. The doctor remembered the ingenious theory of Thomas Young about these meteors; this natural philosopher supposed that certain clouds composed of prisms of ice are suspended in the atmosphere; the rays of the sun that fall on the prisms are decomposed at angles of sixty and ninety degrees. Halos cannot, therefore, exist in a calm atmosphere. The doctor thought this theory very probable. Sailors accustomed to the boreal seas generally consider this phenomenon as the precursor of abundant snow. If their observation was just, the position of the *Forward* became very difficult. Hatteras, therefore, resolved to go on fast; during the remainder of the day and following night he did not take a minute's rest, sweeping the horizon with his telescope, taking advantage of the least opening, and losing no occasion of getting out of the strait.

But in the morning he was obliged to stop before the insuperable ice-bank. The doctor joined him on the poop. Hatteras went with him apart where they could talk without fear of being overheard.

"We are in for it," began Hatteras; "it is impossible to go any further."

"Is there no means of getting out?" asked the doctor.

"None. All the powder in the *Forward* would not make us gain half a mile!"

"What shall we do, then?" said the doctor.

“I don’t know. This cursed year has been unfavourable from the beginning.”

“Well,” answered the doctor, “if we must winter here, we must. One place is as good as another.”

“But,” said Hatteras, lowering his voice, “we must not winter here, especially in the month of June. Wintering is full of physical and moral danger. The crew would be unmanageable during a long inaction in the midst of real suffering. I thought I should be able to stop much nearer the Pole than this!”

“Luck would have it so, or Baffin’s Bay wouldn’t have been closed.”

“It was open enough for that American!” cried Hatteras in a rage.

“Come, Hatteras,” said the doctor, interrupting him on purpose, “to-day is only the 5th of June; don’t despair; a passage may suddenly open up before us; you know that the ice has a tendency to break up into several blocks, even in the calmest weather, as if a force of repulsion acted upon the different parts of it; we may find the sea free at any minute.”

“If that minute comes we shall take advantage of it. It is quite possible that, once out of Bellot Strait, we shall be able to go north by Peel Strait or McClintock Channel, and then — — ”

“Captain,” said James Wall, who had come up while Hatteras was speaking, “the ice nearly carries off our rudder.”

“Well,” answered Hatteras, “we must risk it. We must be ready day and night. You must do all you can to protect it, Mr. Wall, but I can’t have it removed.”

“But — — ” added Wall.

“That is my business,” said Hatteras severely, and Wall went back to his post.

“I would give five years of my life,” said Hatteras, in a rage, “to be up north. I know no more dangerous passage. To add to the difficulty, the compass is no guide at this distance from the magnetic pole: the needle is constantly shifting its direction.”

“I acknowledge,” answered the doctor, “that navigation is difficult, but we knew what we had to expect when we began our enterprise, and we ought not to be surprised at it.”

“Ah, doctor, my crew is no longer what it was; the officers are spoiling the men. I could make them do what I want by offering them a pecuniary reward, but I am not seconded by my officers, but they shall pay dearly for it!”

“You are exaggerating, Hatteras.”

“No, I am not. Do you think the crew is sorry for the obstacles that I meet with? On the contrary, they hope they will make me abandon my projects. They do not complain now, and they won’t as long as the *Forward* is making for the south. The fools! They think they are getting nearer England! But once let me go north and you’ll see how they’ll change! I swear, though, that no living being will make me deviate from my line of conduct. Only let me find a passage, that’s all!”

One of the captain’s wishes was fulfilled soon enough. There was a sudden change during the evening; under some influence of the wind, the current, or the temperature, the ice-fields were separated; the *Forward* went along boldly, breaking up the ice with her steel prow; she sailed along all night, and the next morning about six cleared Bellot Strait. But that was all; the northern passage was completely obstructed — to the great disgust of Hatteras. However, he had sufficient strength of character to hide his disappointment, and as if the only passage open was the one he preferred, he let the *Forward* sail down Franklin Strait again; not being able to get up Peel Strait, he resolved to go round Prince of Wales's Land to get into McClintock Channel. But he felt he could not deceive Shandon and Wall as to the extent of his disappointment. The day of the 6th of June was uneventful; the sky was full of snow, and the prognostics of the halo were fulfilled.

During thirty-six hours the *Forward* followed the windings of Boothia Land, unable to approach Prince of Wales's Land; the captain counted upon getting supplies at Beechey Island; he arrived on the Thursday at the extremity of Franklin Strait, where he again found the road to the north blocked up. It was enough to make him despair; he could not even retrace his steps; the icebergs pushed him onwards, and he saw the passages close up behind him as if there never had existed open sea where he had passed an hour before. The *Forward* was, therefore, not only prevented from going northwards, but could not stop still an instant for fear of being caught, and she fled before the ice as a ship flies before a storm.

On Friday, the 8th of June, they arrived near the shore of Boothia, at the entrance to James Ross Strait, which they were obliged to avoid, as its only issue is on the west, near the American coasts.

Observations taken at noon from this point gave 70° 5' 17" latitude, and 96° 46' 45" longitude; when the doctor heard that he consulted his map, and saw they were at the magnetic pole, at the very place where James Ross, the nephew of Sir John, had fixed it. The land was low near the coast, and at about a mile's distance became slightly elevated, sixty feet only. The *Forward's* boiler wanted cleaning, and the captain caused the brig to be anchored to an ice-field, and allowed the doctor and the boatswain to land. He himself cared for nothing but his pet project, and stayed in his cabin, consulting his map of the Pole.

The doctor and his companion easily succeeded in reaching land; the doctor took a compass to make experiments with. He wished to try if James Ross's conclusions hold good. He easily discovered the limestone heap raised by Ross; he ran to it; an opening allowed him to see, in the interior, the tin case in which James Ross had placed the official report of his discoveries. No living being seemed to have visited this desolate coast for the last thirty years. In this spot a loadstone needle, suspended as delicately as possible, immediately moved into an almost vertical position under the magnetic influence; if the centre of attraction was not immediately under the needle, it could only be at a trifling distance. The doctor made the experiment carefully, and found that the imperfect instruments of James Ross had given his vertical needle an inclination of 89° 59', making the real magnetic point at a minute's distance from the spot, but that his own at a little distance gave him an inclination of 90°.

"Here is the exact spot of the world's magnetic pole," said the doctor, rapping the earth.

"Then," said the boatswain, "there's no loadstone mountain, after all."

"Of course not; that mountain was only a credulous hypothesis. As you see, there isn't the least mountain capable of attracting ships, of attracting their iron anchor after anchor and nail after nail, and you see it respects your shoes as much as any other land on the globe.”

“Then how do you explain — — ”

“Nothing is explained, Johnson; we don’t know enough for that yet. But it is certain, exact, mathematical, that the magnetic pole is in this very spot!”

“Ah, Mr. Clawbonny! how happy the captain would be to say as much of the boreal pole!”

“He will some day, Johnson, you will see.”

“I hope he will,” answered the boatswain.

He and the doctor elevated a cairn on the exact spot where the experiment had been made, and returned on board at five o’clock in the evening.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FATE OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN

The *Forward* succeeded in cutting straight across James Ross Strait, but not without difficulty; the crew were obliged to work the saws and use petards, and they were worn out with fatigue. Happily the temperature was bearable, and thirty degrees higher than that experienced by James Ross at the same epoch. The thermometer marked thirty-four degrees.

On Saturday they doubled Cape Felix at the northern extremity of King William's Land, one of the middle-sized isles of the northern seas. The crew there experienced a strong and painful sensation, and many a sad look was turned towards the island as they sailed by the coast. This island had been the theatre of the most terrible tragedy of modern times. Some miles to the west the *Erebus* and the *Terror* had been lost for ever. The sailors knew about the attempts made to find Admiral Franklin and the results, but they were ignorant of the affecting details of the catastrophe. While the doctor was following the progress of the ship on his map, several of them, Bell, Bolton, and Simpson, approached and entered into conversation with him. Their comrades, animated by curiosity, soon followed them; while the brig flew along with extreme rapidity, and the coast with its bays, capes, and promontories passed before their eyes like a gigantic panorama.

Hatteras was marching up and down the poop with quick steps. The doctor, on the deck, looked round, and saw himself surrounded by almost the whole crew. He saw how powerful a recital would be in such a situation, and he continued the conversation begun with Johnson as follows: —

“You know how Franklin began, my friends; he was a cabin-boy like Cook and Nelson; after having employed his youth in great maritime expeditions, he resolved in 1845 to launch out in search of the North-West passage; he commanded the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, two vessels, already famous, that had just made an Antarctic campaign under James Ross, in 1840. The *Erebus*, equipped by Franklin, carried a crew of seventy men, officers and sailors, with Fitz-James as captain; Gore and Le Vesconte, lieutenants; Des Voeux, Sargent, and Couch, boatswains; and Stanley as surgeon. The *Terror* had sixty-eight men, Captain Crozier; Lieutenants Little, Hodgson, and Irving; Horesby and Thomas were the boatswains, and Peddie the surgeon. In the names on the map of the capes, straits, points, and channels, you may read those of these unfortunate men, not one of whom was destined ever again to see his native land. There were a hundred and thirty-eight men in all! We know that Franklin’s last letters were addressed from Disko Island, and were dated July 12th, 1845. ‘I hope,’ he said, ‘to get under way to-night for Lancaster Strait.’ What happened after his departure from Disko Bay? The captains of two whalers, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Enterprise*, perceived the two ships in Melville Bay for the last time, and after that day nothing was heard of them. However, we can follow Franklin in his westerly course: he passed through Lancaster and Barrow Straits, and arrived at Beechey Island, where he passed the winter of 1845 and ‘46.”

“But how do you know all this?” asked Bell, the carpenter.

“By three tombs which Austin discovered on that island in 1850. Three of Franklin’s sailors were buried there, and by a document which was found by Lieutenant Hobson, of the *Fox*, which bears the date of April 25th, 1848, we know that after their wintering the *Erebus* and the *Terror* went up Wellington Strait as far as the seventy-seventh parallel; but instead of continuing their route northwards, which was, probably, not practicable, they returned south.”

“And that was their ruin!” said a grave voice. “Safety lay to the north.”

Every one turned round. Hatteras, leaning on the rail of the poop, had just uttered that terrible observation.

“There is not a doubt,” continued the doctor, “that Franklin’s intention was to get back to the American coast; but tempests stopped him, and on the 12th September, 1846, the two ships were seized by the ice, at a few miles from here, to the north-west of Cape Felix; they were dragged along N.N.W. to Victoria Point over there,” said the doctor, pointing to a part of the sea. “Now,” he continued, “the ships were not abandoned till the 22nd of April, 1848. What happened during these nineteen months? What did the poor unfortunate men do? They, doubtless, explored the surrounding land, attempting any chance of safety, for the admiral was an energetic man, and if he did not succeed — — ”

“Very likely his crew betrayed him,” added Hatteras.

The sailors dared not raise their eyes; these words pricked their conscience.

“To end my tale, the fatal document informs us also that John Franklin succumbed to fatigue on the 11th of June, 1847. Honour to his memory!” said the doctor, taking off his hat. His audience imitated him in silence.

“What became of the poor fellows for the next ten months after they had lost their chief? They remained on board their vessels, and only resolved to abandon them in April, 1848; a hundred and five men out of a hundred and thirty-eight were still living; thirty-three were dead! Then Captain Crozier and Captain Fitz-James raised a cairn on Victory Point, and there deposited their last document. See, my friends, we are passing the point now! You can still see the remains of the cairn placed on the extreme point, reached by John Ross in 1831. There is Jane Franklin Cape. There is Franklin Point. There is Le Vesconte Point. There is Erebus Bay, where the boat made out of the *débris* of one of the vessels was found on a sledge. Silver spoons, provisions in abundance, chocolate, tea, and religious books were found there too. The hundred and five survivors, under Captain Crozier, started for Great Fish River. Where did they get to? Did they succeed in reaching Hudson's Bay? Did any survive? What became of them after this last departure?"

"I will tell you what became of them," said John Hatteras in a firm voice. "Yes, they did try to reach Hudson's Bay, and they split up into several parties! Yes, they did make for the south! A letter from Dr. Rae in 1854 contained the information that in 1850 the Esquimaux had met on King William's Land a detachment of forty men travelling on the ice, and dragging a boat, thin, emaciated, worn out by fatigue and suffering! Later on they discovered thirty corpses on the continent and five on a neighbouring island, some half-buried, some left without burial, some under a boat turned upside down, others under the remains of a tent; here an officer with his telescope on his shoulder and a loaded gun at his side, further on a boiler with the remnants of a horrible meal! When the Admiralty received these tidings it begged the Hudson's Bay Company to send its most experienced agents to the scene. They descended Back River to its mouth. They visited the islands of Montreal, Maconochie, and Ogle Point. But they discovered nothing. All the poor wretches had died from misery, suffering, and hunger, whilst trying to prolong their existence by the dreadful resource of cannibalism. That is what became of them on the southern route. Well! Do you still wish to march in their footsteps?"

His trembling voice, his passionate gestures and beaming face, produced an indescribable effect. The crew, excited by its emotion before this fatal land, cried out with one voice: “To the north! To the north!”

“Yes, to the north! Safety and glory lie to the north. Heaven is for us! The wind is changing; the pass is free!”

So saying, Hatteras gave orders to turn the vessel; the sailors went to work with alacrity; the ice streams got clear little by little; the *Forward*, with all steam on, made for McClintock Channel. Hatteras was right when he counted upon a more open sea; he followed up the supposed route taken by Franklin, sailing along the western coast of Prince of Wales’s Land, then pretty well known, whilst the opposite shore is still unknown. It was evident that the breaking up of the ice had taken place in the eastern locks, for this strait appeared entirely free; the *Forward* made up for lost time; she fled along so quickly that she passed Osborne Bay on the 14th of June, and the extreme points attained by the expeditions of 1851. Icebergs were still numerous, but the sea did not threaten to quit the keel of the *Forward*.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NORTHERN ROUTE

The crew seemed to have returned to its habits of discipline and obedience. There was little fatiguing work to do, and they had a good deal of leisure. The temperature kept above freezing point, and it seemed as if the thaw had removed the great obstacles to navigation.

Dick, now sociable and familiar, had made great friends with Dr. Clawbonny. But as in most friendships one friend has to give way to the other, it must be acknowledged it was not the dog. Dick did what he liked with the doctor, who obeyed him as if he were the dog. He was amiable with most of the sailors and officers on board, only by instinct, doubtless, he shunned Shandon's society; he also kept up a grudge against Pen and Foker; he vented his hatred of them by growling at their approach. But they dare not now attack the captain's dog — his "familiar," as Clifton called him. On the whole the crew had plucked up courage again and worked well.

"It seems to me," said James Wall one day to Richard Shandon, "that our men took the captain's speech seriously; they no longer seem to be doubtful of success."

"The more fools they!" answered Shandon. "If they reflected, if they examined the situation, they would see that we are going out of one imprudence into another."

"But," continued Wall, "the sea is open now, and we are getting back into well-known tracks; aren't you exaggerating a bit, Shandon?"

“No, I am not exaggerating; the dislike I feel to Hatteras is not blinding me. Have you seen the coal-holes lately?”

“No,” answered Wall.

“Well, then, go and examine them: you will see how much there’s left. He ought to have navigated under sail, and have kept the engine for currents and contrary winds; he ought only to have used his coal where he was obliged; who can tell where we shall be kept, and for how many years? But Hatteras only thinks about getting north. Whether the wind is contrary or not, he goes along at full steam, and if things go on as they are doing now, we shall soon be in a pretty pickle.”

“If what you say is true, it is very serious.”

“Yes, it is, because of the wintering. What shall we do without coal in a country where even the thermometer freezes?”

“But, if I am not mistaken, the captain counts upon renewing his stock of coal at Beechey Island. It appears there is a large provision there.”

“And suppose we can’t reach Beechey Island, what will become of us then?”

“You are right, Shandon; Hatteras seems to me very imprudent; but why don’t you expostulate with him on the subject?”

“No,” said Shandon, with ill-concealed bitterness, “I won’t say a word. It is nothing to do with me now. I shall wait to see what turns up; I shall obey orders, and not give my opinion where it isn’t wanted.”

“Allow me to tell you that you are in the wrong, Shandon; you have as much interest in setting yourself against the captain’s imprudence as we have.”

“He wouldn’t listen to me if I were to speak; do you think he would?”

Wall dared not answer in the affirmative, and he added —

“But perhaps he would listen to the crew.”

“The crew!” answered Shandon, shrugging his shoulders; “you don’t know the crew. The men know they are nearing the 72nd parallel, and that they will earn a thousand pounds for every degree above that.”

“The captain knew what he was doing when he offered them that.”

“Of course he did, and for the present he can do what he likes with them.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that while they have nothing to do, and there is an open sea, they will go on right enough; but wait till difficulty and danger come, and you will see how much they’ll think about the money!”

“Then you don’t think Hatteras will succeed?”

“No, he will not; to succeed in such an enterprise there must be a good understanding between him and his officers, and that does not exist. Hatteras is a madman; all his past career proves it. Well, we shall see; perhaps circumstances will force them to give the command to a less adventurous captain.”

“Still,” said Wall, shaking his head, “he will always have on his side — — ”

“Dr. Clawbonny, a man who only cares for science, and Johnson, a sailor who only cares to obey, and perhaps two more men like Bell, the carpenter; four at the most, and we are eighteen on board! No, Wall, Hatteras has not got the confidence of his men, and he knows it, so he bribes them; he profited cleverly by the Franklin affair, but that won’t last, I tell you, and if he doesn’t reach Beechey Island he’s a lost man!”

“Suppose the crew should take it into its head — — ”

“Don’t tell the crew what I think,” answered Shandon quickly; “the men will soon see for themselves. Besides, just now we must go north. Who knows if Hatteras won’t find that way will bring us back sooner? At the end of McClintock Channel lies Melville Bay, and from thence go the straits that lead to Baffin’s Bay. Hatteras must take care! The way to the east is easier than the road to the north!”

Hatteras was not mistaken in his opinion that Shandon would betray him if he could. Besides, Shandon was right in attributing the contentment of the men to the hope of gain. Clifton had counted exactly how much each man would have. Without reckoning the captain and the doctor, who would not expect a share in the bounty-money, there remained sixteen men to divide it amongst. If ever they succeeded in reaching the Pole, each man would have £1,125 — that is to say, a fortune. It would cost the captain £18,000, but he could afford it. The thoughts of the money inflamed the minds of the crew, and they were now as anxious to go north as before they had been eager to turn south. The *Forward* during the day of June 16th passed Cape Aworth. Mount Rawlinson raised its white peaks towards the sky; the snow and fog made it appear colossal, as they exaggerated its distance; the temperature still kept some degrees above freezing point; improvised cascades and cataracts showed themselves on the sides of the mountains, and avalanches roared down with the noise of artillery discharges. The glaciers, spread out in long white sheets, projected an immense reverberation into space. Boreal nature, in its struggle with the frost, presented a splendid spectacle. The brig went very near the coast; on some sheltered rocks rare heaths were to be seen, the pink flowers lifting their heads timidly out of the snows, and some meagre lichens of a reddish colour and the shoots of a dwarf willow.

At last, on the 19th of June, at the famous seventy-third parallel, they doubled Cape Minto, which forms one of the extremities of Ommaney Bay; the brig entered Melville Bay, surnamed by Bolton Money Bay; the merry sailors joked about the name, and made Dr. Clawbonny laugh heartily. Notwithstanding a strong breeze from the northeast, the *Forward* made considerable progress, and on the 23rd of June she passed the 74th degree of latitude. She was in the midst of Melville Bay, one of the most considerable seas in these regions. This sea was crossed for the first time by Captain Parry in his great expedition of 1819, and it was then that his crew earned the prize of £5,000 promised by Act of Parliament. Clifton remarked that there were two degrees from the 72nd to the 74th; that already placed £125 to his credit. But they told him that a fortune was not worth much there, and that it was of no use being rich if he could not drink his riches, and he had better wait till he could roll under a Liverpool table before he rejoiced and rubbed his hands.

CHAPTER XIX

A WHALE IN SIGHT

Melville Bay, though easily navigable, was not free from ice; ice-fields lay as far as the utmost limits of the horizon; a few icebergs appeared here and there, but they were immovable, as if anchored in the midst of the frozen fields. The *Forward,* with all steam on, followed the wide passes where it was easy to work her. The wind changed frequently from one point of the compass to another. The variability of the wind in the Arctic Seas is a remarkable fact; sometimes a dead calm is followed in a few minutes by a violent tempest, as the *Forward* found to her cost on the 23rd of June in the midst of the immense bay. The more constant winds blow from off the ice-bank on to the open sea, and are intensely cold. On that day the thermometer fell several degrees; the wind veered round to the south, and violent gusts, sweeping over the ice-fields, brought a thick snow along with them. Hatteras immediately caused the sails that helped the screw to be furled, but not quickly enough to prevent his little foresail being carried away in the twinkling of an eye. Hatteras worked his ship with the greatest composure, and did not leave the deck during the tempest; he was obliged to fly before the weather and to turn westward. The wind raised up enormous waves, in the midst of which blocks of ice balanced themselves; these blocks were of all sizes and shapes, and had been struck off the surrounding ice-fields; the brig was tossed about like a child’s plaything, and morsels of the packs were thrown over her hull; at one instant she was lying perpendicularly along the side of a liquid mountain; her steel prow concentrated the light, and shone like a melting metal bar; at another she was down an abyss, plunging her head into whirlwinds of snow, whilst her screws, out of the water, turned in space with a sinister noise, striking the air with their paddles. Rain mixed with the snow and fell in torrents.

The doctor could not miss such an occasion of getting wet to the skin; he remained on deck, a prey to that emotional admiration which a scientific man must necessarily feel during such a spectacle. His nearest neighbour could not have heard him speak, so he said nothing and watched; but whilst watching he was witness to an odd phenomenon, peculiar to hyperborean regions. The tempest was confined to a restricted area, and only extended for about three or four miles; the wind that passes over ice-fields loses much of its strength and cannot carry its violence far out; the doctor perceived from time to time, through an opening in the tempest, a calm sky and a quiet sea beyond some ice-fields. The *Forward* would therefore only have to take advantage of some channels left by the ice to find a peaceful navigation again, but she ran the risk of being thrown on to one of the moving banks which followed the movement of the swell. However, in a few hours Hatteras succeeded in getting his ship into a calm sea, whilst the violence of the hurricane spent itself at a few cables' length from the *Forward*. Melville Bay no longer presented the same aspect; under the influence of the winds and the waves a great number of icebergs, detached from the coast, floated northward, running against one another in every direction. There were several hundreds of them, but the bay is very wide, and the brig easily avoided them. The spectacle of these floating masses was magnificent; they seemed to be having a grand race for it on the open sea. The doctor was getting quite excited with watching them, when the harpooner, Simpson, came up and made him look at the changing tints in the sea; they varied from a deep blue to olive green; long stripes stretched north and south in such decided lines that the eye could follow each shade out of sight. Sometimes a transparent sheet of water would follow a perfectly opaque sheet.

“Well, Mr. Clawbonny, what do you think of that?” said Simpson.

“I am of the same opinion as the whaler Scoresby on the nature of the different coloured waters; blue water has no animalculæ, and green water is full of them. Scoresby has made several experiments on this subject, and I think he is right.”

“Well, sir, I know something else about the colours in the sea, and if I were a whaler I should be precious glad to see them.”

“But I don’t see any whales,” answered the doctor.

“You won’t be long before you do, though, I can tell you. A whaler is lucky when he meets with those green stripes under this latitude.”

“Why?” asked the doctor, who always liked to get information from anybody who understood what they were talking about.

“Because whales are always found in great quantities in green water.”

“What’s the reason of that?”

“Because they find plenty of food in them.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“I’ve seen it a hundred times, at least, in Baffin Sea; why shouldn’t it be the same in Melville Bay? Besides, look there, Mr. Clawbonny,” added Simpson, leaning over the barricading.

“Why any one would think it was the wake of a ship!”

“It is an oily substance that the whale leaves behind. The animal can’t be far off!”

The atmosphere was impregnated with a strong oily odour, and the doctor attentively watched the surface of the water. The prediction of the harpooner was soon accomplished. Foker called out from the masthead —

“A whale alee!”

All looks turned to the direction indicated. A small spout was perceived coming up out of the sea about a mile from the brig.

“There she spouts!” cried Simpson, who knew what that meant.

“She has disappeared!” answered the doctor.

“Oh, we could find her again easily enough if necessary!” said Simpson, with an accent of regret. To his great astonishment, and although no one dared ask for it, Hatteras gave orders to man the whaler. Johnson went aft to the stern, while Simpson, harpoon in hand, stood in the bow. They could not prevent the doctor joining the expedition. The sea was pretty calm. The whaler soon got off, and in ten minutes was a mile from the brig. The whale had taken in another provision of air, and had plunged again; but she soon returned to the surface and spouted out that mixture of gas and mucus that escapes from her air-holes.

“There! There!” said Simpson, pointing to a spot about eight hundred yards from the boat. It was soon alongside the animal, and as they had seen her from the brig too, she came nearer, keeping little steam on. The enormous cetacean disappeared and reappeared as the waves rose and fell, showing its black back like a rock in open sea. Whales do not swim quickly unless they are pursued, and this one only rocked itself in the waves. The boat silently approached along the green water; its opacity prevented the animal seeing the enemy. It is always an agitating spectacle when a fragile boat attacks one of these monsters; this one was about 130 feet long, and it is not rare, between the 72nd and the 80th degree, to meet with whales more than 180 feet long. Ancient writers have described animals more than 700 feet long, but they drew upon their imagination for their facts. The boat soon neared the whale; on a sign from Simpson the men rested on their oars, and brandishing his harpoon, the experienced sailor threw it with all his strength; it went deep into the thick covering of fat. The wounded whale struck the sea with its tail and plunged. The four oars were immediately raised perpendicularly; the cord fastened to the harpoon, and attached to the bow, rolled rapidly out and dragged the boat along, steered cleverly by Johnson.

The whale got away from the brig and made for the moving icebergs; she kept on for more than half-an-hour; they were obliged to wet the cord fastened to the harpoon to prevent it catching fire by rubbing against the boat. When the whale seemed to be going along a little more slowly, the cord was pulled in little by little and rolled up; the whale soon reappeared on the surface of the sea, which she beat with her formidable tail: veritable waterspouts fell in a violent rain on to the boat. It was getting nearer. Simpson had seized a long lance, and was preparing to give close battle to the animal, when all at once the whale glided into a pass between two mountainous icebergs. The pursuit then became really dangerous.

“The devil!” said Johnson.

“Go ahead,” cried Simpson; “we’ve got her!”

“But we can’t follow her into the icebergs!” said Johnson, steering steadily.

“Yes we can!” cried Simpson.

“No, no!” cried some of the sailors.

“Yes, yes!” said others.

During the discussion the whale had got between two floating mountains which the swell was bringing close together. The boat was being dragged into this dangerous part when Johnson rushed to the fore, an axe in his hand, and cut the cord. He was just in time; the two mountains came together with a tremendous crash, crushing the unfortunate animal.

“The whale’s lost!” cried Simpson.

“But we are saved!” answered Johnson.

“Well,” said the doctor, who had not moved, “that was worth seeing!”

The crushing force of these ice-mountains is enormous. The whale was victim to an accident that often happens in these seas. Scoresby relates that in the course of a single summer thirty whales perished in the same way in Baffin’s Sea; he saw a three-master flattened in a minute between two immense walls of ice. Other vessels were split through, as if with a lance, by pointed icicles a hundred feet long, meeting through the planks. A few minutes afterwards the boat hailed the brig, and was soon in its accustomed place on deck.

“It is a lesson for those who are imprudent enough to adventure into the channels amongst the ice!” said Shandon in a loud voice.

CHAPTER XX

BEECHEY ISLAND

On the 25th of June the *Forward* arrived in sight of Cape Dundas at the north-western extremity of Prince of Wales's Land. There the difficulty of navigating amongst the ice grew greater. The sea is narrower there, and the line made by Crozier, Young, Day, Lowther, and Garret Islands, like a chain of forts before a roadstead, forced the ice-streams to accumulate in this strait. The brig took from the 25th to the 30th of June to make as much way as she would have done in one day under any other circumstances; she stopped, retraced her steps, waiting for a favourable occasion so as not to miss Beechey Island, using a great deal of coal, as the fires were only moderated when she had to halt, but were never put out, so that she might be under pressure day and night. Hatteras knew the extent of his coal provision as well as Shandon, but as he was certain of getting his provision renewed at Beechey Island he would not lose a minute for the sake of economy; he had been much delayed by his forced march southward, and although he had taken the precaution of leaving England before the month of April, he did not find himself more advanced than preceding expeditions had been at the same epoch. On the 30th they sighted Cape Walker at the north-eastern extremity of Prince of Wales's Land; it was the extreme point that Kennedy and Bellot perceived on the 3rd of May, 1852, after an excursion across the whole of North Somerset. Before that, in 1851, Captain Ommaney, of the Austin expedition, had the good luck to revictual his detachments there. This cape is very high, and remarkable for its reddish-brown colour; from there, when the weather is clear, the view stretches as far as the entrance to Wellington Channel. Towards evening they saw Cape Bellot, separated from Cape Walker by McLeon Bay. Cape Bellot was so named in the presence of the young French officer, for whom the English expedition gave three cheers. At this spot the coast is made of yellowish limestone, presenting a very rugged outline; it is defended by enormous icebergs which the north winds pile up there in a most imposing way. It was soon lost to sight by the *Forward* as she opened a passage amongst the ice to get to Beechey Island through Barrow Strait. Hatteras resolved to go straight on, and, so as not to be drifted further than the island, scarcely quitted his post during the following days; he often went to the masthead to look out for the most advantageous channels. All that pluck, skill, and genius could do he did while they were crossing the strait. Fortune did not favour him, for the sea is generally more open at this epoch. But at last, by dint of sparing neither his steam, his crew, nor himself, he attained his end.

On the 3rd of July, at 11 o'clock in the morning, the ice-master signalled land to the north. After taking an observation Hatteras recognised Beechey Island, that general meeting-place of Arctic navigators. Almost all ships that adventure in these seas stop there. Franklin wintered there for the first time before getting into Wellington Strait, and Creswell, with Lieutenant McClure, after having cleared 170 miles on the ice, rejoined the *Phoenix* and returned to England. The last ship which anchored at Beechey Island before the *Forward* was the *Fox*; McClintock revictualled there the 11th of August, 1858, and repaired the habitations and magazines; only two years had elapsed since then, and Hatteras knew all these details. The boatswain's heart beat with emotion at the sight of this island; when he had visited it he was quartermaster on board the *Phoenix*; Hatteras questioned him about the coast line, the facilities for anchoring, how far they could go inland, &c.; the weather was magnificent, and the temperature kept at 57°.

“Well, Johnson,” said the captain, “do you know where you are?”

“Yes, sir, that is Beechey Island; only you must let us get further north — the coast is more easy of access.”

“But where are the habitations and the magazines?” said Hatteras.

“Oh, you can’t see them till you land; they are sheltered behind those little hills you see yonder.”

“And is that where you transported a considerable quantity of provisions?”

“Yes, sir; the Admiralty sent us here in 1853, under the command of Captain Inglefield, with the steamer *Phoenix* and a transport ship, the *Breadalbane*, loaded with provisions; we brought enough with us to revictual a whole expedition.”

“But the commander of the *Fox* took a lot of them in 1858,” said Hatteras.

“That doesn’t matter, sir; there’ll be plenty left for you; the cold preserves them wonderfully, and we shall find them as fresh and in as good a state of preservation as the first day.”

“What I want is coal,” said Hatteras; “I have enough provisions for several years.”

“We left more than a thousand tons there, so you can make your mind easy.”

“Are we getting near?” said Hatteras, who, telescope in hand, was watching the coast.

“You see that point?” continued Johnson. “When we have doubled it we shall be very near where we drop anchor. It was from that place that we started for England with Lieutenant Creswell and the twelve invalids from the *Investigator*. We were fortunate enough to bring back McClure’s lieutenant, but the officer Bellot, who accompanied us on board the *Phoenix*, never saw his country again! It is a painful thing to think about. But, captain, I think we ought to drop anchor here.”

“Very well,” answered Hatteras, and he gave his orders in consequence. The *Forward* was in a little bay naturally sheltered on the north, east, and south, and at about a cable’s length from the coast.

“Mr. Wall,” said Hatteras, “have the long boat got ready to transport the coal on board. I shall land in the pirogue with the doctor and the boatswain. Will you accompany us, Mr. Shandon?”

“As you please,” answered Shandon.

A few minutes later the doctor, armed as a sportsman and a *savant*, took his place in the pirogue along with his companions; in ten minutes they landed on a low and rocky coast.

“Lead the way, Johnson,” said Hatteras. “You know it, I suppose?”

“Perfectly, sir; only there’s a monument here that I did not expect to find!”

“That!” cried the doctor; “I know what it is; let us go up to it; the stone itself will tell us.”

The four men advanced, and the doctor said, after taking off his hat —

“This, my friends, is a monument in memory of Franklin and his companions.”

Lady Franklin had, in 1855, confided a black marble tablet to Doctor Kane, and in 1858 she gave a second to McClintock to be raised on Beechey Island. McClintock accomplished this duty religiously, and placed the stone near a funeral monument erected to the memory of Bellot by Sir John Barrow.

The tablet bore the following inscription:

“TO THE MEMORY OF

FRANKLIN, CROZIER, FITZ-JAMES,

AND ALL THEIR VALIANT BRETHREN

OFFICERS AND FAITHFUL COMPANIONS

who suffered for the cause of science and for their country’s glory.

“This stone is erected near the place where they passed their first Arctic winter, and from whence they departed to conquer obstacles or to die.

“It perpetuates the regret of their countrymen and friends who admire them, and the anguish, conquered by Faith, of her who lost in the chief of the expedition the most devoted and most affectionate of husbands.

“It is thus that He led them to the supreme haven where all men take their rest.

“1855.”

This stone, on a forlorn coast of these far-off regions, appealed mournfully to the heart; the doctor, in presence of these touching regrets, felt his eyes fill with tears. At the very same place which Franklin and his companions passed full of energy and hope, there only remained a block of marble in remembrance! And notwithstanding this sombre warning of destiny, the *Forward* was going to follow in the track of the *Erebus* and the *Terror*. Hatteras was the first to rouse himself from the perilous contemplation, and quickly climbed a rather steep hill, almost entirely bare of snow.

“Captain,” said Johnson, following him, “we shall see the magazines from here.”

Shandon and the doctor joined them on the summit. But from there the eye contemplated the vast plains, on which there remained no vestige of a habitation.

“That is singular!” cried the boatswain.

“Well, and where are the magazines?” said Hatteras quickly.

“I don’t know — I don’t see — — ” stammered Johnson.

“You have mistaken the way,” said the doctor.

“It seemed to me that this was the very place,” continued Johnson.

“Well,” said Hatteras, impatiently “where are we to go now?”

“We had better go down, for I may be mistaken. I may have forgotten the exact locality in seven years!”

“Especially when the country is so uniformly monotonous!” added the doctor.

“And yet — — ” murmured Johnson.

Shandon had not spoken a word. After walking for a few minutes, Johnson stopped.

“But no,” he cried, “I am not mistaken!”

“Well?” said Hatteras, looking round him.

“Do you see that swell of the ground?” asked the boatswain, pointing to a sort of mound with three distinct swells on it.

“What do you conclude from that?” asked the doctor.

“Those are the three graves of Franklin’s sailors. I am sure now that I am not mistaken; the habitations ought to be about a hundred feet from here, and if they are not, they — — ”

He dared not finish his sentence; Hatteras had rushed forward, a prey to violent despair. There, where the wished-for stores on which he had counted ought to have been, there ruin, pillage and destruction had been before him. Who had done it? Animals would only have attacked the provisions, and there did not remain a single rag from the tent, a piece of wood or iron, and, more terrible still, not a fragment of coal! It was evident that the Esquimaux had learnt the value of these objects from their frequent relations with Europeans; since the departure of the *Fox* they had fetched everything away, and had not left a trace even of their passage. A slight coating of snow covered the ground. Hatteras was confounded. The doctor looked and shook his head. Shandon still said nothing, but an attentive observer would have noticed his lips curl with a cruel smile. At this moment the men sent by Lieutenant Wall came up; they soon saw the state of affairs. Shandon advanced towards the captain, and said:

“Mr. Hatteras, we need not despair; happily we are near the entrance to Barrow Strait, which will take us back to Baffin’s Sea!”

“Mr. Shandon,” answered Hatteras, “happily we are near the entrance to Wellington Strait, and that will take us north!”

“But how shall we get along, captain?”

“With the sails, sir. We have two months’ firing left, and that is enough for our wintering.”

“But allow me to tell you — — ” added Shandon.

“I will allow you to follow me on board my ship, sir,” answered Hatteras, and turning his back on his second, he returned to the brig and shut himself up in his cabin. For the next two days the wind was contrary, and the captain did not show up on deck. The doctor profited by the forced sojourn to go over Beechey Island; he gathered some plants, which the temperature, relatively high, allowed to grow here and there on the rocks that the snow had left, some heaths, a few lichens, a sort of yellow ranunculus, a sort of plant something like sorrel, with wider leaves and more veins, and some pretty vigorous saxifrages. He found the fauna of this country much richer than the flora; he perceived long flocks of geese and cranes going northward, partridges, eider ducks of a bluish black, sandpipers, a sort of wading bird of the scolopax class, northern divers, plungers with very long bodies, numerous ptarmites, a sort of bird very good to eat, dovekies with black bodies, wings spotted with white, feet and beak red as coral; noisy bands of kittywakes and fat loons with white breasts, represented the ornithology of the island. The doctor was fortunate enough to kill a few grey hares, which had not yet put on their white winter fur, and a blue fox which Dick ran down skilfully. Some bears, evidently accustomed to dread the presence of men, would not allow themselves to be got at, and the seals were extremely timid, doubtless for the same reason as their enemies the bears. The class of articulated animals was represented by a single mosquito, which the doctor caught to his great delight, though not till it had stung him. As a conchologist he was less favoured, and only found a sort of mussel and some bivalve shells.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEATH OF BELLOT

The temperature during the days of the 3rd and 4th of July kept up to 57°; this was the highest thermometric point observed during the campaign. But on Thursday, the 5th, the wind turned to the south-east, and was accompanied by violent snow-storms. The thermometer fell during the preceding night to 23°. Hatteras took no notice of the murmurs of the crew, and gave orders to get under way. For the last thirteen days, from Cape Dundas, the *Forward* had not been able to gain one more degree north, so the party represented by Clifton was no longer satisfied, but wished like Hatteras to get into Wellington Channel, and worked away with a will. The brig had some difficulty in getting under sail; but Hatteras having set his mizensail, his topsails, and his gallantsails during the night, advanced boldly in the midst of fields of ice which the current was drifting south. The crew were tired out with this winding navigation, which kept them constantly at work at the sails. Wellington Channel is not very wide; it is bounded by North Devon on the east and Cornwallis Island on the west; this island was long believed to be a peninsula. It was Sir John Franklin who first sailed round it in 1846, starting west, and coming back to the same point to the north of the channel. The exploration of Wellington Channel was made in 1851 by Captain Penny in the whalers *Lady Franklin* and *Sophia*; one of his lieutenants, Stewart, reached Cape Beecher in latitude 76° 20’, and discovered the open sea — that open sea which was Hatteras’s dream!

“What Stewart found I shall find,” said he to the doctor; “then I shall be able to set sail to the Pole.”

“But aren’t you afraid that your crew — — ”

“My crew!” said Hatteras severely. Then in a low tone — ”Poor fellows!” murmured he, to the great astonishment of the doctor. It was the first expression of feeling he had heard the captain deliver.

“No,” he repeated with energy, “they must follow me! They shall follow me!”

However, although the *Forward* had nothing to fear from the collision of the ice-streams, which were still pretty far apart, they made very little progress northward, for contrary winds often forced them to stop. They passed Capes Spencer and Innis slowly, and on Tuesday, the 10th, cleared 75° to the great delight of Clifton. The *Forward* was then at the very place where the American ships, the *Rescue* and the *Advance,* encountered such terrible dangers. Doctor Kane formed part of this expedition; towards the end of September, 1850, these ships got caught in an ice-bank, and were forcibly driven into Lancaster Strait. It was Shandon who related this catastrophe to James Wall before some of the brig’s crew.

“The *Advance* and the *Rescue*,” he said to them, “were so knocked about by the ice, that they were obliged to leave off fires on board; but that did not prevent the temperature sinking 18° below zero. During the whole winter the unfortunate crews were kept prisoners in the ice-bank, ready to abandon their ships at any moment; for three weeks they did not even change their clothes. They floated along in that dreadful situation for more than a thousand miles, when at last they were thrown into the middle of Baffin’s Sea.”

The effect of this speech upon a crew already badly disposed can be well imagined. During this conversation Johnson was talking to the doctor about an event that had taken place in those very quarters; he asked the doctor to tell him when the brig was in latitude 75° 30’, and when they passed it he cried:

“Yes, it was just there!” in saying which tears filled his eyes.

“You mean that Lieutenant Bellot died there?” said the doctor.

“Yes, Mr. Clawbonny. He was as good and brave a fellow as ever lived! It was upon this very North Devon coast! It was to be, I suppose, but if Captain Pullen had returned on board sooner it would not have happened.”

“What do you mean, Johnson?”

“Listen to me, Mr. Clawbonny, and you will see on what a slight thread existence often hangs. You know that Lieutenant Bellot went his first campaign in search of Franklin in 1850?”

“Yes, on the *Prince Albert*.”

“Well, when he got back to France he obtained permission to embark on board the *Phoenix* under Captain Inglefield; I was a sailor on board. We came with the *Breadalbane* to transport provisions to Beechey Island!”

“Those provisions we, unfortunately, did not find. Well?”

“We reached Beechey Island in the beginning of August; on the 10th Captain Inglefield left the *Phoenix* to rejoin Captain Pullen, who had been separated from his ship, the *North Star*, for a month. When he came back he thought of sending his Admiralty despatches to Sir Edward Belcher, who was wintering in Wellington Channel. A little while after the departure of our captain, Captain Pullen got back to his ship. Why did he not arrive before the departure of Captain Inglefield? Lieutenant Bellot, fearing that our captain would be long away, and knowing that the Admiralty despatches ought to be sent at once, offered to take them himself. He left the command of the two ships to Captain Pullen, and set out on the 12th of August with a sledge and an indiarubber boat. He took the boatswain of the *North Star* (Harvey) with him, and three sailors, Madden, David Hook, and me. We supposed that Sir Edward Belcher was to be found in the neighbourhood of Beecher Cape, to the north of the channel; we made for it with our sledge along the eastern coast. The first day we encamped about three miles from Cape Innis; the next day we stopped on a block of ice about three miles from Cape Bowden. As land lay at about three miles' distance, Lieutenant Bellot resolved to go and encamp there during the night, which was as light as the day; he tried to get to it in his indiarubber canoe; he was twice repulsed by a violent breeze from the south-east; Harvey and Madden attempted the passage in their turn, and were more fortunate; they took a cord with them, and established a communication between the coast and the sledge; three objects were transported by means of the cord, but at the fourth attempt we felt our block of ice move; Mr. Bellot called out to his companions to drop the cord, and we were dragged to a great distance from the coast. The wind blew from the south-east, and it was snowing; but we were not in much danger, and the lieutenant might have come back as we did."

Here Johnson stopped an instant to take a glance at the fatal coast, and continued:

"After our companions were lost to sight we tried to shelter ourselves under the tent of our sledge, but in vain; then, with our knives, we began to cut out a house in the ice. Mr. Bellot helped us for half an hour, and talked to us about the danger of our situation. I told him I was not afraid. ‘By God’s help,’ he answered, ‘we shall not lose a hair of our heads.’ I asked him what o’clock it was, and he answered, ‘About a quarter-past six.’ It was a quarter-past six in the morning of Thursday, August 18th. Then Mr. Bellot tied up his books, and said he would go and see how the ice floated; he had only been gone four minutes when I went round the block of ice to look for him; I saw his stick on the opposite side of a crevice, about five fathoms wide, where the ice was broken, but I could not see him anywhere. I called out, but no one answered. The wind was blowing great guns. I looked all round the block of ice, but found no trace of the poor lieutenant.”

“What do you think had become of him?” said the doctor, much moved.

“I think that when Mr. Bellot got out of shelter the wind blew him into the crevice, and, as his greatcoat was buttoned up he could not swim. Oh! Mr. Clawbonny, I never was more grieved in my life! I could not believe it! He was a victim to duty, for it was in order to obey Captain Pullen’s instructions that he tried to get to land. He was a good fellow, everybody liked him; even the Esquimaux, when they learnt his fate from Captain Inglefield on his return from Pound Bay, cried while they wept, as I am doing now, ‘Poor Bellot! poor Bellot!’”

“But you and your companion, Johnson,” said the doctor, “how did you manage to reach land?”

“Oh! we stayed twenty-four hours more on the block of ice, without food or firing; but at last we met with an ice-field; we jumped on to it, and with the help of an oar we fastened ourselves to an iceberg that we could guide like a raft, and we got to land, but without our brave officer.”

By the time Johnson had finished his story the *Forward* had passed the fatal coast, and Johnson lost sight of the place of the painful catastrophe. The next day they left Griffin Bay to the starboard, and, two days after, Capes Grinnell and Helpmann; at last, on the 14th of July, they doubled Osborn Point, and on the 15th the brig anchored in Baring Bay, at the extremity of the channel. Navigation had not been very difficult; Hatteras met with a sea almost as free as that of which Belcher profited to go and winter with the *Pioneer* and the *Assistance* as far north as 77°. It was in 1852 and 1853, during his first wintering, for he passed the winter of 1853 to 1854 in Baring Bay, where the *Forward* was now at anchor. He suffered so much that he was obliged to leave the *Assistance* in the midst of the ice. Shandon told all these details to the already discontented sailors. Did Hatteras know how he was betrayed by his first officer? It is impossible to say; if he did, he said nothing about it.

At the top of Baring Bay there is a narrow channel which puts Wellington and Queen's Channel into communication with each other. There the rafts of ice lie closely packed. Hatteras tried, in vain, to clear the passes to the north of Hamilton Island; the wind was contrary; five precious days were lost in useless efforts. The temperature still lowered, and, on the 19th of July, fell to 26°; it got higher the following day; but this foretaste of winter made Hatteras afraid of waiting any longer. The wind seemed to be going to keep in the west, and to stop the progress of the ship. However, he was in a hurry to gain the point where Stewart had met with the open sea. On the 19th he resolved to get into the Channel at any price; the wind blew right on the brig, which might, with her screw, have stood against it, had not Hatteras been obliged to economise his fuel; on the other hand, the Channel was too wide to allow the men to haul the brig along. Hatteras, not considering the men's fatigue, resolved to have recourse to means often employed by whalers under similar circumstances. The men took it in turns to row, so as to push the brig on against the wind. The *Forward* advanced slowly up the Channel. The men were worn out and murmured loudly. They went on in that manner till the 23rd of July, when they reached Baring Island in Queen's Channel. The wind was still against them. The doctor thought the health of the men much shaken, and perceived the first symptoms of scurvy amongst them; he did all he could to prevent the spread of the wretched malady, and distributed lime-juice to the men.

Hatteras saw that he could no longer count upon his crew; reasoning and kindness were ineffectual, so he resolved to employ severity for the future; he suspected Shandon and Wall, though they dare not speak out openly. Hatteras had the doctor, Johnson, Bell, and Simpson for him; they were devoted to him body and soul; amongst the undecided were Foker, Bolton, Wolsten the gunsmith, and Brunton the first engineer; and they might turn against the captain at any moment; as to Pen, Gripper, Clifton, and Warren, they were in open revolt; they wished to persuade their comrades to force the captain to return to England. Hatteras soon saw that he could not continue to work his ship with such a crew. He remained twenty-four hours at Baring Island without taking a step forward. The weather grew cooler still, for winter begins to be felt in July in these high latitudes. On the 24th the thermometer fell to 22°. Young ice formed during the night, and if snow fell it would soon be thick enough to bear the weight of a man. The sea began already to have that dirty colour which precedes the formation of the first crystals. Hatteras could not mistake these alarming symptoms; if the channels got blocked up, he should be obliged to winter there at a great distance from the point he had undertaken the voyage in order to reach, without having caught a glimpse of that open sea which his predecessors made out was so near. He resolved, then, to gain several degrees further north, at whatever cost; seeing that he could not employ oars without the rowers were willing, nor sail in a contrary wind, he gave orders to put steam on again.

CHAPTER XXII

BEGINNING OF REVOLT

At this unexpected command, the surprise was great on board the *Forward*.

“Light the fires!” exclaimed some.

“What with?” asked others.

“When we’ve only two months’ coal in the hold!” said Pen.

“What shall we warm ourselves with in the winter?” asked Clifton.

“We shall be obliged to burn the brig down to her water-line,” answered Gripper.

“And stuff the stove with the masts,” added Warren. Shandon looked at Wall. The stupefied engineers hesitated to go down to the machine-room.

“Did you hear me?” cried the captain in an irritated tone.

Brunton made for the hatchway, but before going down he stopped.

“Don’t go, Brunton!” called out a voice.

“Who spoke?” cried Hatteras.

“I did,” said Pen, advancing towards the captain.

“And what did you say?” asked Hatteras.

“I say,” answered Pen with an oath — ”I say, we’ve had enough of it, and we won’t go any further. You shan’t kill us with hunger and work in the winter, and they shan’t light the fires!”

“Mr. Shandon,” answered Hatteras calmly, “have that man put in irons!”

“But, captain,” replied Shandon, “what the man says — — ”

“If you repeat what the man says,” answered Hatteras, “I’ll have you shut up in your cabin and guarded! Seize that man! Do you hear?” Johnson, Bell, and Simpson advanced towards the sailor, who was in a terrible passion.

“The first who touches me — — ” he said, brandishing a handspike. Hatteras approached him.

“Pen,” said he tranquilly, “if you move, I shall blow out your brains!” So speaking, he cocked a pistol and aimed it at the sailor. A murmur was heard.

“Not a word, men,” said Hatteras, “or that man falls dead!” Johnson and Bell disarmed Pen, who no longer made any resistance, and placed him in the hold.

“Go, Brunton,” said Hatteras. The engineer, followed by Plover and Warren, went down to his post. Hatteras returned to the poop.

“That Pen is a wretched fellow!” said the doctor.

“No man has ever been nearer death!” answered the captain, simply.

The steam was soon got up, the anchors were weighed, and the *Forward* veered away east, cutting the young ice with her steel prow. Between Baring Island and Beecher Point there are a considerable quantity of islands in the midst of ice-fields; the streams crowd together in the little channels which cut up this part of the sea; they had a tendency to agglomerate under the relatively low temperature; hummocks were formed here and there, and these masses, already more compact, denser, and closer together, would soon form an impenetrable mass. The *Forward* made its way with great difficulty amidst the snowstorms. However, with the mobility that characterises the climate of these regions, the sun appeared from time to time, the temperature went up several degrees, obstacles melted as if by magic, and a fine sheet of water lay where icebergs bristled all the passes. The horizon glowed with those magnificent orange shades which rest the eye, tired with the eternal white of the snow.

On the 26th of July the *Forward* passed Dundas Island, and veered afterwards more to the north; but there Hatteras found himself opposite an ice-bank eight or nine feet high, formed of little icebergs detached from the coast; he was obliged to turn west. The uninterrupted cracking of the ice, added to the noise of the steamer, was like sighs or groans. At last the brig found a channel, and advanced painfully along it; often an enormous iceberg hindered her course for hours; the fog hindered the pilot’s look-out; as long as he can see for a mile in front of him, he can easily avoid obstacles; but in the midst of the fog it was often impossible to see a cable’s length, and the swell was very strong. Sometimes the clouds looked smooth and white as though they were reflections of the ice-banks; but there were entire days when the yellow rays of the sun could not pierce the tenacious fog. Birds were still very numerous, and their cries were deafening; seals, lying idle on the floating ice, raised their heads, very little frightened, and moved their long necks as the brig passed. Pieces from the ship’s sheathing were often rubbed off in her contact with the ice. At last, after six days of slow navigation, Point Beecher was sighted to the north on the 1st of August. Hatteras passed the last few hours at his masthead; the open sea that Stewart had perceived on May 30th, 1851, about latitude 76° 20’, could not be far off; but as far as the eye could reach, Hatteras saw no indication of it. He came down without saying a word.

“Do you believe in an open sea?” asked Shandon of the lieutenant.

“I am beginning not to,” answered Wall.

“Wasn’t I right to say the pretended discovery was purely imagination? But they would not believe me, and even you were against me, Wall.”

“We shall believe in you for the future, Shandon.”

“Yes,” said he, “when it’s too late,” and so saying he went back to his cabin, where he had stopped almost ever since his dispute with the captain. The wind veered round south towards evening; Hatteras ordered the brig to be put under sail and the fires to be put out; the crew had to work very hard for the next few days; they were more than a week getting to Barrow Point. The *Forward* had only made thirty miles in ten days. There the wind turned north again, and the screw was set to work. Hatteras still hoped to find an open sea beyond the 77th parallel, as Sir Edward Belcher had done. Ought he to treat these accounts as apocryphal? or had the winter come upon him earlier? On the 15th of August Mount Percy raised its peak, covered with eternal snow, through the mist. The next day the sun set for the first time, ending thus the long series of days with twenty-four hours in them. The men had ended by getting accustomed to the continual daylight, but it had never made any difference to the animals; the Greenland dogs went to their rest at their accustomed hour, and Dick slept as regularly every evening as though darkness had covered the sky. Still, during the nights which followed the 15th of August, darkness was never profound; although the sun set, he still gave sufficient light by refraction. On the 19th of August, after a pretty good observation, they sighted Cape Franklin on the east coast and Cape Lady Franklin on the west coast; the gratitude of the English people had given these names to the two opposite points — probably the last reached by Franklin: the name of the devoted wife, opposite to that of her husband, is a touching emblem of the sympathy which always united them.

The doctor, by following Johnson’s advice, accustomed himself to support the low temperature; he almost always stayed on deck braving the cold, the wind, and the snow. He got rather thinner, but his constitution did not suffer. Besides, he expected to be much worse off, and joyfully prepared for the approaching winter.

“Look at those birds,” he said to Johnson one day; “they are emigrating south in flocks! They are shrieking out their good-byes!”

“Yes, Mr. Clawbonny, some instinct tells them they must go, and they set out.”

“There’s more than one amongst us who would like to imitate them, I think.”

“They are cowards, Mr. Clawbonny; those animals have no provisions as we have, and are obliged to seek their food where it is to be found. But sailors, with a good ship under their feet, ought to go to the world’s end.”

“You hope that Hatteras will succeed, then?”

“He certainly will, Mr. Clawbonny.”

“I am of the same opinion as you, Johnson, and if he only wanted one faithful companion — — ”

“He’ll have two!”

“Yes, Johnson,” answered the doctor, shaking hands with the brave sailor.

Prince Albert Land, which the *Forward* was then coasting, bears also the name of Grinnell Land, and though Hatteras, from his hatred to the Yankees, would never call it by its American name, it is the one it generally goes by. It owes its double appellation to the following circumstances: At the same time that Penny, an Englishman, gave it the name of Prince Albert, Lieutenant Haven, commander of the *Rescue*, called it Grinnell Land in honour of the American merchant who had fitted out the expedition from New York at his own expense. Whilst the brig was coasting it, she experienced a series of unheard-of difficulties, navigating sometimes under sail, sometimes by steam. On the 18th of August they sighted Britannia Mountain, scarcely visible through the mist, and the *Forward* weighed anchor the next day in Northumberland Bay. She was hemmed in on all sides.

CHAPTER XXIII

ATTACKED BY ICEBERGS

Hatteras, after seeing to the anchoring of his ship, re-entered his cabin and examined his map attentively. He found himself in latitude 76° 57’ and longitude 99° 20’ — that is to say, at only three minutes from the 77th parallel. It was at this very spot that Sir Edward Belcher passed his first winter with the *Pioneer* and the *Assistance*. It was thence that he organised his sledge and boat excursions. He discovered Table Isle, North Cornwall, Victoria Archipelago, and Belcher Channel. He reached the 78th parallel, and saw that the coast was depressed on the south-east. It seemed to go down to Jones’s Strait, the entrance to which lies in Baffin’s Bay. But to the north-west, on the contrary, says his report, an open sea lay as far as the eye could reach.

Hatteras considered attentively the white part of the map, which represented the Polar basin free from ice.

“After such testimony as that of Stewart, Penny, and Belcher, I can’t have a doubt about it,” he said to himself. “They saw it with their own eyes. But if the winter has already frozen it! But no; they made their discoveries at intervals of several years. It exists, and I shall find it! I shall see it.”

Hatteras went on to the poop. An intense fog enveloped the *Forward*; the masthead could scarcely be distinguished from the deck. However, Hatteras called down the ice-master from his crow’s nest, and took his place. He wished to profit by the shortest clear interval to examine the north-western horizon. Shandon did not let the occasion slip for saying to the lieutenant:

“Well, Wall, where is the open sea?”

“You were right, Shandon, and we have only six weeks’ coal in the hold.”

“Perhaps the doctor will find us some scientific fuel to warm us in the place of coal,” answered Shandon. “I have heard say you can turn fire to ice; perhaps he’ll turn ice to fire.” And he entered his cabin, shrugging his shoulders. The next day was the 20th of August, and the fog cleared away for several minutes. They saw Hatteras look eagerly at the horizon, and then come down without speaking; but it was easy to see that his hopes had again been crushed. The *Forward* weighed anchor, and took up her uncertain march northward. As the *Forward* began to be weather-worn, the masts were unreeved, for they could no longer rely on the variable wind, and the sails were nearly useless in the winding channels. Large white marks appeared here and there on the sea like oil spots; they presaged an approaching frost; as soon as the breeze dropped the sea began to freeze immediately; but as soon as the wind got up again, the young ice was broken up and dispersed. Towards evening the thermometer went down to 17°.

When the brig came to a closed-up pass she acted as a battering ram, and ran at full steam against the obstacle, which she sunk. Sometimes they thought she was stopped for good; but an unexpected movement of the streams opened her a new passage, and she took advantage of it boldly. When the brig stopped, the steam which escaped from the safety-pipes was condensed by the cold air and fell in snow on to the deck. Another impediment came in the way; the ice-blocks sometimes got entangled in the paddles, and they were so hard that all the strength of the machine was not sufficient to break them; it was then necessary to back the engine and send men to clear the screws with their handspikes. All this delayed the brig; it lasted thirteen days. The *Forward* dragged herself painfully along Penny Strait; the crew grumbled, but obeyed: the men saw now that it was impossible to go back. Keeping north was less dangerous than retreating south. They were obliged to think about wintering. The sailors talked together about their present position, and one day they mentioned it to Richard Shandon, who, they knew, was on their side. The second officer forgot his duty as an officer, and allowed them to discuss the authority of the captain before him.

“You say, then, Mr. Shandon, that we can’t go back now?” said Gripper.

“No, it’s too late now,” answered Shandon.

“Then we must think about wintering,” said another sailor.

“It’s the only thing we can do. They wouldn’t believe me.”

“Another time,” said Pen, who had been released, “we shall believe you.”

“But as I am not the master — — ” replied Shandon.

“Who says you mayn’t be?” answered Pen. “John Hatteras may go as far as he likes, but we aren’t obliged to follow him.”

“You all know what became of the crew that did follow him in his first cruise to Baffin’s Sea?” said Gripper.

“And the cruise of the *Farewell* under him that got lost in the Spitzbergen seas!” said Clifton.

“He was the only man that came back,” continued Gripper.

“He and his dog,” answered Clifton.

“We won’t die for his pleasure,” added Pen.

“Nor lose the bounty we’ve been at so much trouble to earn,” cried Clifton. “When we’ve passed the 78th degree — and we aren’t far off it, I know — that will make just the £375 each.”

“But,” answered Gripper, “shan’t we lose it if we go back without the captain?”

“Not if we prove that we were obliged to,” answered Clifton.

“But it’s the captain — — ”

“You never mind, Gripper,” answered Pen; “we’ll have a captain and a good one — that Mr. Shandon knows. When one commander goes mad, folks have done with him, and they take another; don’t they, Mr. Shandon?”

Shandon answered evasively that they could reckon upon him, but that they must wait to see what turned up. Difficulties were getting thick round Hatteras, but he was as firm, calm, energetic, and confident as ever. After all, he had done in five months what other navigators had taken two or three years to do! He should be obliged to winter now, but there was nothing to frighten brave sailors in that. Sir John Ross and McClure had passed three successive winters in the Arctic regions. What they had done he could do too!

“If I had only been able to get up Smith Strait at the north of Baffin’s Sea, I should be at the Pole by now!” he said to the doctor regretfully.

“Never mind, captain!” answered the doctor, “we shall get at it by the 99th meridian instead of by the 75th; if all roads lead to Rome, it’s more certain still that all meridians lead to the Pole."

On the 31st of August the thermometer marked 13°. The end of the navigable season was approaching; the *Forward* left Exmouth Island to the starboard, and three days after passed Table Island in the middle of Belcher Channel. At an earlier period it would perhaps have been possible to regain Baffin's Sea by this channel, but it was not to be dreamt of then; this arm of the sea was entirely barricaded by ice; ice-fields extended as far as the eye could reach, and would do so for eight months longer. Happily they could still gain a few minutes further north on the condition of breaking up the ice with huge clubs and petards. Now the temperature was so low, any wind, even a contrary one, was welcome, for in a calm the sea froze in a single night. The *Forward* could not winter in her present situation, exposed to winds, icebergs, and the drift from the channel; a shelter was the first thing to find; Hatteras hoped to gain the coast of New Cornwall, and to find above Albert Point a bay of refuge sufficiently sheltered. He therefore pursued his course northward with perseverance. But on the 8th an impenetrable ice-bank lay in front of him, and the temperature was at 10°. Hatteras did all he could to force a passage, continually risking his ship and getting out of danger by force of skill. He could be accused of imprudence, want of reflection, folly, blindness, but he was a good sailor, and one of the best! The situation of the *Forward* became really dangerous; the sea closed up behind her, and in a few hours the ice got so hard that the men could run along it and tow the ship in all security.

Hatteras found he could not get round the obstacle, so he resolved to attack it in front; he used his strongest blasting cylinders of eight to ten pounds of powder; they began by making a hole in the thick of the ice, and filled it with snow, taking care to place the cylinder in a horizontal position, so that a greater portion of the ice might be submitted to the explosion; lastly, they lighted the wick, which was protected by a gutta-percha tube. They worked at the blasting, as they could not saw, for the saws stuck immediately in the ice. Hatteras hoped to pass the next day. But during the night a violent wind raged, and the sea rose under her crust of ice as if shaken by some submarine commotion, and the terrified voice of the pilot was heard crying:

“Look out aft!”

Hatteras turned to the direction indicated, and what he saw by the dim twilight was frightful. A high iceberg, driven back north, was rushing on to the ship with the rapidity of an avalanche.

“All hands on deck!” cried the captain.

The rolling mountain was hardly half a mile off; the blocks of ice were driven about like so many huge grains of sand; the tempest raged with fury.

“There, Mr. Clawbonny,” said Johnson to the doctor, “we are in something like danger now.”

“Yes,” answered the doctor tranquilly, “it looks frightful enough.”

“It’s an assault we shall have to repulse,” replied the boatswain.

“It looks like a troop of antediluvian animals, those that were supposed to inhabit the Pole. They are trying which shall get here first!”

“Well,” added Johnson, “I hope we shan’t get one of their spikes into us!”

“It’s a siege — let’s run to the ramparts!”

And they made haste aft, where the crew, armed with poles, bars of iron, and handspikes, were getting ready to repulse the formidable enemy. The avalanche came nearer, and got bigger by the addition of the blocks of ice which it caught in its passage; Hatteras gave orders to fire the cannon in the bow to break the threatening line. But it arrived and rushed on to the brig; a great crackling noise was heard, and as it struck on the brig’s starboard a part of her barricading was broken. Hatteras gave his men orders to keep steady and prepare for the ice. It came along in blocks; some of them weighing several hundredweight came over the ship’s side; the smaller ones, thrown up as high as the topsails, fell in little spikes, breaking the shrouds and cutting the rigging. The ship was boarded by these innumerable enemies, which in a block would have crushed a hundred ships like the *Forward*. Some of the sailors were badly wounded whilst trying to keep off the ice, and Bolton had his left shoulder torn open. The noise was deafening. Dick barked with rage at this new kind of enemy. The obscurity of the night came to add to the horror of the situation, but did not hide the threatening blocks, their white surface reflected the last gleams of light. Hatteras’s orders were heard in the midst of the crew’s strange struggle with the icebergs. The ship giving way to the tremendous pressure, bent to the larboard, and the extremity of her mainyard leaned like a buttress against the iceberg and threatened to break her mast.

Hatteras saw the danger; it was a terrible moment; the brig threatened to turn completely over, and the masting might be carried away. An enormous block, as big as the steamer itself, came up alongside her hull; it rose higher and higher on the waves; it was already above the poop; it fell over the *Forward*. All was lost; it was now upright, higher than the gallant yards, and it shook on its foundation. A cry of terror escaped the crew. Everyone fled to starboard. But at this moment the steamer was lifted completely up, and for a little while she seemed to be suspended in the air, and fell again on to the ice-blocks; then she rolled over till her planks cracked again. After a minute, which appeared a century, she found herself again in her natural element, having been turned over the ice-bank that blocked her passage by the rising of the sea.

“She’s cleared the ice-bank!” shouted Johnson, who had rushed to the fore of the brig.

“Thank God!” answered Hatteras.

The brig was now in the midst of a pond of ice, which hemmed her in on every side, and though her keel was in the water, she could not move; she was immovable, but the ice-field moved for her.

“We are drifting, captain!” cried Johnson.

“We must drift,” answered Hatteras; “we can’t help ourselves.”

When daylight came, it was seen that the brig was drifting rapidly northward, along with a submarine current. The floating mass carried the *Forward* along with it. In case of accident, when the brig might be thrown on her side, or crushed by the pressure of the ice, Hatteras had a quantity of provisions brought up on deck, along with materials for encamping, the clothes and blankets of the crew. Taking example from Captain McClure under similar circumstances, he caused the brig to be surrounded by a belt of hammocks, filled with air, so as to shield her from the thick of the damage; the ice soon accumulated under a temperature of 7°, and the ship was surrounded by a wall of ice, above which her masts only were to be seen. They navigated thus for seven days; Point Albert, the western extremity of New Cornwall, was sighted on the 10th of September, but soon disappeared; from thence the ice-field drifted east. Where would it take them to? Where should they stop? Who could tell? The crew waited, and the men folded their arms. At last, on the 15th of September, about three o’clock in the afternoon, the ice-field, stopped, probably, by collision with another field, gave a violent shake to the brig, and stood still. Hatteras found himself out of sight of land in latitude 78° 15’ and longitude 95° 35’ in the midst of the unknown sea, where geographers have placed the Frozen Pole.

CHAPTER XXIV

PREPARATIONS FOR WINTERING

The southern hemisphere is colder in parallel latitudes than the northern hemisphere; but the temperature of the new continent is still 15° below that of the other parts of the world; and in America the countries known under the name of the Frozen Pole are the most formidable. The average temperature of the year is 2° below zero. Scientific men, and Dr. Clawbonny amongst them, explain the fact in the following way. According to them, the prevailing winds of the northern regions of America blow from the south-west; they come from the Pacific Ocean with an equal and bearable temperature; but in order to reach the Arctic Seas they have to cross the immense American territory, covered with snow, they get cold by contact with it, and then cover the hyperborean regions with their frigid violence. Hatteras found himself at the Frozen Pole beyond the countries seen by his predecessors; he, therefore, expected a terrible winter on a ship lost in the midst of the ice with a crew nearly in revolt. He resolved to face these dangers with his accustomed energy. He began by taking, with the help of Johnson's experience, all the measures necessary for wintering. According to his calculations he had been dragged two hundred and fifty miles beyond New Cornwall, the last country discovered; he was clasped in an ice-field as securely as in a bed of granite, and no power on earth could extricate him.

There no longer existed a drop of water in the vast seas over which the Arctic winter reigned. Ice-fields extended as far as the eye could reach, bristling with icebergs, and the *Forward* was sheltered by three of the highest on three points of the compass; the south-east wind alone could reach her. If instead of icebergs there had been rocks, verdure instead of snow, and the sea in its liquid state again, the brig would have been safely anchored in a pretty bay sheltered from the worst winds. But in such a latitude it was a miserable state of things. They were obliged to fasten the brig by means of her anchors, notwithstanding her immovability; they were obliged to prepare for the submarine currents and the breaking up of the ice. When Johnson heard where they were, he took the greatest precautions in getting everything ready for wintering.

“It’s the captain’s usual luck,” said he to the doctor; “we’ve got nipped in the most disagreeable point of the whole glove! Never mind; we’ll get out of it!”

As to the doctor, he was delighted at the situation. He would not have changed it for any other! A winter at the Frozen Pole seemed to him desirable. The crew were set to work at the sails, which were not taken down, and put into the hold, as the first people who wintered in these regions had thought prudent; they were folded up in their cases, and the ice soon made them an impervious envelope. The crow’s nest, too, remained in its place, serving as a nautical observatory; the rigging alone was taken away. It became necessary to cut away the part of the field that surrounded the brig, which began to suffer from the pressure. It was a long and painful work. In a few days the keel was cleared, and on examination was found to have suffered little, thanks to the solidity of its construction, only its copper plating was almost all torn off. When the ship was once liberated she rose at least nine inches; the crew then bevelled the ice in the shape of the keel, and the field formed again under the brig, and offered sufficient opposition to pressure from without. The doctor helped in all this work; he used the ice-knife skilfully; he incited the sailors by his happy disposition. He instructed himself and others, and was delighted to find the ice under the ship.

“It’s a very good precaution!” said he.

“We couldn’t do without it, Mr. Clawbonny,” said Johnson. “Now we can raise a snow-wall as high as the gunwale, and if we like we can make it ten feet thick, for we’ve plenty of materials.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” answered the doctor. “Snow is a bad conductor of heat; it reflects it instead of absorbing it, and the heat of the interior does not escape.”

“That’s true,” said Johnson. “We shall raise a fortification against the cold, and against animals too, if they take it into their heads to pay us a visit; when the work is done it will answer, I can tell you. We shall make two flights of steps in the snow, one from the ship and the other from outside; when once we’ve cut out the steps we shall pour water over them, and it will make them as hard as rock. We shall have a royal staircase.”

“It’s a good thing that cold makes ice and snow, and so gives us the means of protecting ourselves against it. I don’t know what we should do if it did not.”

A roofing of tarred cloth was spread over the deck and descended to the sides of the brig. It was thus sheltered from all outside impression, and made a capital promenade; it was covered with two feet and a-half of snow, which was beaten down till it became very hard, and above that they put a layer of sand, completely macadamising it.

“With a few trees I should imagine myself in Hyde Park,” said the doctor, “or in one of the hanging gardens of Babylon.”

They made a hole at a short distance from the brig; it was round, like a well; they broke the ice every morning. This well was useful in case of fire or for the frequent baths ordered to keep the crew in health. In order to spare their fuel, they drew the water from a greater depth by means of an apparatus invented by a Frenchman, François Arago. Generally, when a ship is wintering, all the objects which encumber her are placed in magazines on the coast, but it was impossible to do this in the midst of an ice-field. Every precaution was taken against cold and damp; men have been known to resist the cold and succumb to damp; therefore both had to be guarded against. The *Forward* had been built expressly for these regions, and the common room was wisely arranged. They had made war on the corners, where damp takes refuge at first. If it had been quite circular it would have done better, but warmed by a vast stove and well ventilated, it was very comfortable; the walls were lined with buckskins and not with woollen materials, for wool condenses the vapours and impregnates the atmosphere with damp. The partitions were taken down in the poop, and the officers had a large comfortable room, warmed by a stove. Both this room and that of the crew had a sort of antechamber, which prevented all direct communication with the exterior, and prevented the heat going out; it also made the crew pass more gradually from one temperature to another. They left their snow-covered garments in these antechambers, and scraped their feet on scrapers put there on purpose to prevent any unhealthy element getting in.

Canvas hose let in the air necessary to make the stoves draw; other hose served for escape-pipes for the steam. Two condensers were fixed in the two rooms; they gathered the vapour instead of letting it escape, and were emptied twice a week; sometimes they contained several bushels of ice. By means of the air-pipes the fires could be easily regulated, and it was found that very little fuel was necessary to keep up a temperature of 50 degrees in the rooms. But Hatteras saw with grief that he had only enough coal left for two months' firing. A drying-room was prepared for the garments that were obliged to be washed, as they could not be hung in the air or they would have been frozen and spoiled. The delicate parts of the machine were taken to pieces carefully, and the room where they were placed was closed up hermetically. The rules for life on board were drawn up by Hatteras and hung up in the common room. The men got up at six in the morning, and their hammocks were exposed to the air three times a week; the floors of the two rooms were rubbed with warm sand every morning; boiling tea was served out at every meal, and the food varied as much as possible, according to the different days of the week; it consisted of bread, flour, beef suet and raisins for puddings, sugar, cocoa, tea, rice, lemon-juice, preserved meat, salted beef and pork, pickled cabbage and other vegetables; the kitchen was outside the common rooms, and the men were thus deprived of its heat, but cooking is a constant source of evaporation and humidity.

The health of men depends a great deal on the food they eat; under these high latitudes it is of great importance to consume as much animal food as possible. The doctor presided at the drawing up of the bill of fare.

“We must take example from the Esquimaux,” said he; “they have received their lessons from nature, and are our teachers here; although Arabians and Africans can live on a few dates and a handful of rice, it is very different here, where we must eat a great deal and often. The Esquimaux absorb as much as ten and fifteen pounds of oil in a day. If you do not like oil, you must have recourse to things rich in sugar and fat. In a word, you want carbon in the stove inside you as much as the stove there wants coal.”

Every man was forced to take a bath in the half-frozen water condensed from the fire. The doctor set the example; he did it at first as we do all disagreeable things that we feel obliged to do, but he soon began to take extreme pleasure in it. When the men had to go out either to hunt or work they had to take great care not to get frost-bitten; and if by accident it happened, they made haste to rub the part attacked with snow to bring back the circulation of the blood. Besides being carefully clothed in wool from head to foot, the men wore hoods of buckskin and sealskin trousers, through which it is impossible for the wind to penetrate. All these preparations took about three weeks, and the 10th of October came round without anything remarkable happening.

CHAPTER XXV

AN OLD FOX

That day the thermometer went down to 3° below zero. The weather was pretty calm, and the cold without breeze was bearable. Hatteras profited by the clearness of the atmosphere to reconnoitre the surrounding plains; he climbed one of the highest icebergs to the north, and could see nothing, as far as his telescope would let him, but ice-fields and icebergs. No land anywhere, but the image of chaos in its saddest aspect. He came back on board trying to calculate the probable duration of his captivity. The hunters, and amongst them the doctor, James Wall, Simpson, Johnson, and Bell, did not fail to supply the ship with fresh meat. Birds had disappeared; they were gone to less rigorous southern climates. The ptarmigans, a sort of partridge, alone stay the winter in these latitudes; they are easily killed, and their great number promised an abundant supply of game. There were plenty of hares, foxes, wolves, ermine, and bears; there were enough for any sportsman, English, French, or Norwegian; but they were difficult to get at, and difficult to distinguish on the white plains from the whiteness of their fur; when the intense cold comes their fur changes colour, and white is their winter colour. The doctor found that this change of fur is not caused by the change of temperature, for it takes place in the month of October, and is simply a precaution of Providence to guard them from the rigour of a boreal winter.

Seals were abundant in all their varieties, and were particularly sought after by the hunters for the sake, not only of their skins, but their fat, which is very warming; besides which, the liver of these animals makes excellent fuel: hundreds of them were to be seen, and two or three miles to the north of the brig the ice was literally perforated all over with the holes these enormous amphibians make; only they smelt the hunters from afar, and many were wounded that escaped by plunging under the ice. However, on the 19th, Simpson managed to catch one at about a hundred yards from the ship; he had taken the precaution to block up its hole of refuge so that it was at the mercy of the hunters. It took several bullets to kill the animal, which measured nine feet in length; its bulldog head, the sixteen teeth in its jaws, its large pectoral fins in the shape of pinions, and its little tail, furnished with another pair of fins, made it a good specimen of the family of dog-hound fish. The doctor, wishing to preserve the head for his natural history collection, and its skin for his future use, had them prepared by a rapid and inexpensive process. He plunged the body of the animal into the hole in the ice, and thousands of little prawns soon ate off all the flesh; in half a day the work was accomplished, and the most skilful of the honourable corporation of Liverpool tanners could not have succeeded better.

As soon as the sun had passed the autumnal equinox — that is to say, on the 23rd of September — winter may be said to begin in the Arctic regions. The sun disappears entirely on the 23rd of October, lighting up with its oblique rays the summits of the frozen mountains. The doctor wished him a traveller’s farewell; he was not going to see him again till February. But obscurity is not complete during this long absence of the sun; the moon comes each month to take its place as well as she can; starlight is very bright, and there is besides frequent aurora borealis, and a refraction peculiar to the snowy horizons; besides, the sun at the very moment of his greatest austral declination, the 21st of December, is still only 13° from the Polar horizon, so that there is twilight for a few hours; only fogs, mists, and snowstorms often plunge these regions into complete obscurity. However, at this epoch the weather was pretty favourable; the partridges and the hares were the only animals that had a right to complain, for the sportsmen did not give them a moment's peace; they set several fox-traps, but the suspicious animals did not let themselves be caught so easily; they would often come and eat the snare by scratching out the snow from under the trap; the doctor wished them at the devil, as he could not get them himself. On the 25th of October the thermometer marked more than 4° below zero. A violent tempest set in; the air was thick with snow, which prevented a ray of light reaching the *Forward*. During several hours they were very uneasy about Bell and Simpson, who had gone too far whilst hunting; they did not reach the ship till the next day, after having lain for a whole day in their buckskins, whilst the tempest swept the air about them, and buried them under five feet of snow. They were nearly frozen, and the doctor had some trouble to restore their circulation.

The tempest lasted a week without interruption. It was impossible to stir out. In a single day the temperature varied fifteen and twenty degrees. During their forced idleness each one lived to himself; some slept, others smoked, or talked in whispers, stopping when they saw the doctor or Johnson approach; there was no moral union between the men; they only met for evening prayers, and on Sunday for Divine service. Clifton had counted that once the 78th parallel cleared, his share in the bounty would amount to £375; he thought that enough, and his ambition did not go beyond. The others were of the same opinion, and only thought of enjoying the fortune acquired at such a price. Hatteras was hardly ever seen. He neither took part in the hunting nor other excursions. He felt no interest in the meteorological phenomena which excited the doctor's admiration. He lived for one idea; it was comprehended in three words — the North Pole. He was constantly looking forward to the moment when the *Forward*, once more free, would begin her adventurous voyage again.

In short, it was a melancholy life; the brig, made for movement, seemed quite out of place as a stationary dwelling; her original form could not be distinguished amidst the ice and snow that covered her, and she was anything but a lively spectacle. During these unoccupied hours the doctor put his travelling notes in order — the notes from which this history is taken; he was never idle, and the evenness of his humour remained the same, only he was very glad to see the tempest clearing off so as to allow him to set off hunting once more. On the 3rd of November, at six in the morning, with a temperature at 5° below zero, he started, accompanied by Johnson and Bell; the plains of ice were level; the snow, which covered the ground thickly, solidified by the frost, made the ground good for walking; a dry and keen cold lightened the atmosphere; the moon shone in all her splendour, and threw an astonishing light on all the asperities of the field; their footsteps left marks on the snow, and the moon lighted up their edges, so that they looked like a luminous track behind the hunters whose shadows fell on the ice with astonishing outlines.

The doctor had taken his friend Dick with him; he preferred him to the Greenland dogs to run down the game for a good reason; the latter do not seem to have the scent of their brethren of more temperate climates. Dick ran on and often pointed out the track of a bear, but in spite of his skill the hunters had not even killed a hare after two hours' walking.

"Do you think the game has gone south too?" asked the doctor, halting at the foot of a hummock.

"It looks like it, Mr. Clawbonny," answered the carpenter.

"I don't think so," answered Johnson; "hares, foxes, and bears are accustomed to the climate; I believe the late tempest is the cause of their disappearance; but with the south winds they'll soon come back. Ah! if you said reindeers or musk-oxen it would be a different thing."

"But it appears those, too, are found in troops in Melville Island," replied the doctor; "that is much further south, I grant you; when Parry wintered there he always had as much game as he wanted."

"We are not so well off," said Bell; "if we could only get plenty of bear's flesh I should not complain."

"Bears are very difficult to get at," answered the doctor; "it seems to me they want civilising."

"Bell talks about the bear's flesh, but we want its fat more than its flesh or its skin," said Johnson.

"You are right, Johnson; you are always thinking about the fuel."

"How can I help thinking about it? I know if we are ever so careful of it we've only enough left for three weeks."

"Yes," replied the doctor, "that is our greatest danger, for we are only at the beginning of November, and February is the coldest month of the year in the Frozen Zone; however, if we can't get bear's grease we can rely on that of the seals."

"Not for long, Mr. Clawbonny," answered Johnson. "They'll soon desert us too; either through cold or fright, they'll soon leave off coming on to the surface of the ice."

"Then we must get at the bears," said the doctor; "they are the most useful animals in these countries: they furnish food, clothes, light, and fuel. Do you hear, Dick?” continued he, caressing his friend; “we must have a bear, so look out.”

Dick, who was smelling the ice as the doctor spoke, started off all at once, quick as an arrow. He barked loudly, and, notwithstanding his distance, the sportsmen heard him distinctly. The extreme distance to which sound is carried in these low temperatures is astonishing; it is only equalled by the brilliancy of the constellations in the boreal sky.

The sportsmen, guided by Dick’s barking, rushed on his traces; they had to run about a mile, and arrived quite out of breath, for the lungs are rapidly suffocated in such an atmosphere. Dick was pointing at about fifty paces from an enormous mass at the top of a mound of ice.

“We’ve got him,” said the doctor, taking aim.

“And a fine one,” added Bell, imitating the doctor.

“It’s a queer bear,” said Johnson, waiting to fire after his two companions.

Dick barked furiously. Bell advanced to within twenty feet and fired, but the animal did not seem to be touched. Johnson advanced in his turn, and after taking a careful aim, pulled the trigger.

“What,” cried the doctor, “not touched yet? Why, it’s that cursed refraction. The bear is at least a thousand paces off.”

The three sportsmen ran rapidly towards the animal, whom the firing had not disturbed; he seemed to be enormous, and without calculating the dangers of the attack, they began to rejoice in their conquest. Arrived within reasonable distance they fired again; the bear, mortally wounded, gave a great jump and fell at the foot of the mound. Dick threw himself upon it.

“That bear wasn’t difficult to kill,” said the doctor.

“Only three shots,” added Bell in a tone of disdain, “and he’s down.”

“It’s very singular,” said Johnson.

“Unless we arrived at the very moment when it was dying of old age,” said the doctor, laughing.

So speaking, the sportsmen reached the foot of the mound, and, to their great stupefaction, they found Dick with his fangs in the body of a white fox.

“Well, I never!” cried Bell.

“We kill a bear and a fox falls,” added the doctor.

Johnson did not know what to say.

“Why!” said the doctor, with a roar of laughter, “it’s the refraction again!”

“What do you mean, Mr. Clawbonny?” asked the carpenter.

“Why, it deceived us about the size as it did about the distance. It made us see a bear in a fox’s skin.”

“Well,” answered Johnson, “now we’ve got him, we’ll eat him.”

Johnson was going to lift the fox on to his shoulders, when he cried like Bell — ”Well, I never!”

“What is it?” asked the doctor.

“Look, Mr. Clawbonny — look what the animal’s got on its neck; it’s a collar, sure enough.”

“A collar?” echoed the doctor, leaning over the animal. A half worn-out collar encircled the fox’s neck, and the doctor thought he saw something engraved on it; he took it off and examined it.

“That bear is more than twelve years old, my friends,” said the doctor; “it’s one of James Ross’s foxes, and the collar has been round its neck ever since 1848.”

“Is it possible?” cried Bell.

“There isn’t a doubt about it, and I’m sorry we’ve shot the poor animal. During his wintering James Ross took a lot of white foxes in his traps, and had brass collars put round their necks on which were engraved the whereabouts of his ships, the *Enterprise* and the *Investigator*, and the store magazines. He hoped one of them might fall into the hands of some of the men belonging to Franklin’s expedition. The poor animal might have saved the lives of the ship’s crews, and it has fallen under our balls.”

“Well, we won’t eat him,” said Johnson, “especially as he’s twelve years old. Anyway, we’ll keep his skin for curiosity sake.” So saying he lifted the animal on his shoulders, and they made their way to the ship, guided by the stars; still their expedition was not quite fruitless: they bagged several brace of ptarmigans. An hour before they reached the *Forward*, a phenomenon occurred which excited the astonishment of the doctor; it was a very rain of shooting stars; they could be counted by thousands, like rockets in a display of fireworks. They paled the light of the moon, and the admirable spectacle lasted several hours. A like meteor was observed at Greenland by the Moravian brothers in 1799. The doctor passed the whole night watching it, till it ceased, at seven in the morning, amidst the profound silence of the atmosphere.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LAST LUMP OF COAL

It seemed certain that no bears were to be had; several seals were killed during the days of the 4th, 5th, and 6th of November; then the wind changed, and the thermometer went up several degrees; but the snow-drifts began again with great violence. It became impossible to leave the vessel, and the greatest precaution was needed to keep out the damp. At the end of the week there were several bushels of ice in the condensers. The weather changed again on the 15th of November, and the thermometer, under the influence of certain atmospherical conditions, went down to 24° below zero. It was the lowest temperature observed up till then. This cold would have been bearable in a quiet atmosphere, but there was a strong wind which seemed to fill the atmosphere with sharp blades. The doctor was vexed at being kept prisoner, for the ground was covered with snow, made hard by the wind, and was easy to walk upon; he wanted to attempt some long excursion.

It is very difficult to work when it is so cold, because of the shortness of breath it causes. A man can only do a quarter of his accustomed work; iron implements become impossible to touch; if one is taken up without precaution, it causes a pain as bad as a burn, and pieces of skin are left on it. The crew, confined to the ship, were obliged to walk for two hours on the covered deck, where they were allowed to smoke, which was not allowed in the common room. There, directly the fire got low, the ice invaded the walls and the joins in the flooring; every bolt, nail, or metal plate became immediately covered with a layer of ice. The doctor was amazed at the instantaneity of the phenomenon. The breath of the men condensed in the air, and passing quickly from a fluid to a solid state, fell round them in snow. At a few feet only from the stoves the cold was intense, and the men stood near the fire in a compact group. The doctor advised them to accustom their skin to the temperature, which would certainly get worse, and he himself set the example; but most of them were too idle or too benumbed to follow his advice, and preferred remaining in the unhealthy heat. However, according to the doctor, there was no danger in the abrupt changes of temperature in going from the warm room into the cold. It is only dangerous for people in perspiration; but the doctor's lessons were thrown away on the greater part of the crew.

As to Hatteras, he did not seem to feel the influence of the temperature. He walked silently about at his ordinary pace. Had the cold no empire over his strong constitution, or did he possess in a supreme degree the natural heat he wished his sailors to have? Was he so armed in his one idea as to be insensible to exterior impressions? His men were profoundly astonished at seeing him facing the 24° below zero; he left the ship for hours, and came back without his face betraying the slightest mark of cold.

"He is a strange man," said the doctor to Johnson; "he even astonishes me. He is one of the most powerful natures I have ever studied in my life."

"The fact is," answered Johnson, "that he comes and goes in the open air without clothing himself more warmly than in the month of June."

"Oh! the question of clothes is not of much consequence," replied the doctor; "it is of no use clothing people who do not produce heat naturally. It is the same as if we tried to warm a piece of ice by wrapping it up in a blanket! Hatteras does not want that; he is constituted so, and I should not be surprised if being by his side were as good as being beside a stove."

Johnson had the job of clearing the water-hole the next day, and remarked that the ice was more than ten feet thick. The doctor could observe magnificent aurora borealis almost every night; from four till eight p.m. the sky became slightly coloured in the north; then this colouring took the regular form of a pale yellow border, whose extremities seemed to buttress on to the ice-field. Little by little the brilliant zone rose in the sky, following the magnetic meridian, and appeared striated with blackish bands; jets of some luminous matter, augmenting and diminishing, shot out lengthways; the meteor, arrived at its zenith, was often composed of several bows, bathed in floods of red, yellow, or green light. It was a dazzling spectacle. Soon the different curves all joined in one point, and formed boreal crowns of a heavenly richness. At last the bows joined, the splendid aurora faded, the intense rays melted into pale, vague, undetermined shades, and the marvellous phenomenon, feeble, and almost extinguished, fainted insensibly into the dark southern clouds. Nothing can equal the wonders of such a spectacle under the high latitudes less than eight degrees from the Pole; the aurora borealis perceived in temperate regions gives no idea of them — not even a feeble one; it seems as if Providence wished to reserve its most astonishing marvels for these climates.

During the duration of the moon several images of her are seen in the sky, increasing her brilliancy; often simple lunar halos surround her, and she shines from the centre of her luminous circle with a splendid intensity.

On the 26th of November there was a high tide, and the water escaped with violence from the water-hole; the thick layer of ice was shaken by the rising of the sea, and sinister crackings announced the submarine struggle; happily the ship kept firm in her bed, and her chains only were disturbed. Hatteras had had them fastened in anticipation of the event. The following days were still colder; there was a penetrating fog, and the wind scattered the piled-up snow; it became difficult to see whether the whirlwinds began in the air or on the ice-fields; confusion reigned.

The crew were occupied in different works on board, the principal of which consisted in preparing the grease and oil produced by the seals; they had become blocks of ice, which had to be broken with axes into little bits, and ten barrels were thus preserved.

All sorts of vessels were useless, and the liquid they contained would only have broken them when the temperature changed. On the 28th the thermometer went down to 32° below zero; there was only coal enough left for ten days, and everyone looked forward to its disappearance with dread. Hatteras had the poop stove put out for economy's sake, and from that time Shandon, the doctor, and he stayed in the common room. Hatteras was thus brought into closer contact with the men, who threw ferocious and stupefied looks at him. He heard their reproaches, their recriminations, and even their threats, and he could not punish them. But he seemed to be deaf to everything. He did not claim the place nearest the fire, but stopped in a corner, his arms folded, never speaking.

In spite of the doctor's recommendations, Pen and his friends refused to take the least exercise; they passed whole days leaning against the stove or lying under the blankets of their hammocks. Their health soon began to suffer; they could not bear up against the fatal influence of the climate, and the terrible scurvy made its appearance on board. The doctor had, however, begun, some time ago, to distribute limejuice and lime pastilles every morning; but these preservatives, generally so efficacious, had very little effect on the malady, which soon presented the most horrible symptoms. The sight of the poor fellows, whose nerves and muscles contracted with pain, was pitiable. Their legs swelled in an extraordinary fashion, and were covered with large blackish blue spots; their bloody gums and ulcerated lips only gave passage to inarticulate sounds; the vitiated blood no longer went to the extremities.

Clifton was the first attacked; then Gripper, Brunton, and Strong took to their hammocks. Those that the malady still spared could not lose sight of their sufferings; they were obliged to stay there, and it was soon transformed into a hospital, for out of eighteen sailors of the *Forward*, thirteen were attacked in a few days. Pen seemed destined to escape contagion; his vigorous nature preserved him from it. Shandon felt the first symptoms, but they did not go further, and exercise kept the two in pretty good health.

The doctor nursed the invalids with the greatest care, and it made him miserable to see the sufferings he could not alleviate. He did all he could to keep his companions in good spirits; he talked to them, read to them, and told them tales, which his astonishing memory made it easy for him to do. He was often interrupted by the complaints and groans of the invalids, and he stopped his talk to become once more the attentive and devoted doctor. His health kept up well; he did not get thinner, and he used to say that it was a good thing for him that he was dressed like a seal or a whale, who, thanks to its thick layer of fat, easily supports the Arctic atmosphere. Hatteras felt nothing, either physically or morally. Even the sufferings of his crew did not seem to touch him. Perhaps it was because he would not let his face betray his emotions; but an attentive observer would have remarked that a man’s heart beat beneath the iron envelope. The doctor analysed him, studied him, but did not succeed in classifying so strange an organisation, a temperament so supernatural. The thermometer lowered again; the walk on deck was deserted; the Esquimaux dogs alone frequented it, howling lamentably.

There was always one man on guard near the stove to keep up the fire; it was important not to let it go out. As soon as the fire got lower, the cold glided into the room; ice covered the walls, and the humidity, rapidly condensed, fell in snow on the unfortunate inhabitants of the brig. It was in the midst of these unutterable tortures that the 8th of December was reached. That morning the doctor went as usual to consult the exterior thermometer. He found the mercury completely frozen.

“Forty-four degrees below zero!” he cried with terror. And that day they threw the last lump of coal into the stove.

CHAPTER XXVII

CHRISTMAS

There was then a movement of despair. The thought of death, and death from cold, appeared in all its horror; the last piece of coal burnt away as quickly as the rest, and the temperature of the room lowered sensibly. But Johnson went to fetch some lumps of the new fuel which the marine animals had furnished him with, and he stuffed it into the stove; he added some oakum, impregnated with frozen oil, and soon obtained enough heat. The smell of the grease was abominable, but how could they get rid of it? They were obliged to get used to it. Johnson agreed that his expedient left much to wish for, and would have no success in a Liverpool house.

“However,” added he, “the smell may have one good result.”

“What’s that?” asked the carpenter.

“It will attract the bears; they are very fond of the stink.”

“And what do we want with bears?” added Bell.

“You know, Bell, we can’t depend on the seals; they’ve disappeared for a good while to come; if the bears don’t come to be turned into fuel too, I don’t know what will become of us.”

“There would be only one thing left; but I don’t see how — — ”

“The captain would never consent; but perhaps we shall be obliged.”

Johnson shook his head sadly, and fell into a silent reverie, which Bell did not interrupt. He knew that their stock of grease would not last more than a week with the strictest economy.

The boatswain was not mistaken. Several bears, attracted by the fetid exhalations, were signalled to the windward; the healthy men gave chase to them, but they are extraordinarily quick, and did not allow themselves to be approached, and the most skilful shots could not touch them. The ship’s crew was seriously menaced with death from cold; it was impossible to resist such a temperature more than forty-eight hours, and every one feared the end of the fuel. The dreaded moment arrived at three o’clock p.m. on the 20th of December. The fire went out; the sailors looked at each other with haggard eyes. Hatteras remained immovable in his corner. The doctor as usual marched up and down in agitation; he was at his wits’ end. The temperature of the room fell suddenly to 7° below zero. But if the doctor did not know what to do, some of the others did. Shandon, calm and resolute, and Pen with anger in his eyes, and two or three of their comrades, who could still walk, went up to Hatteras.

“Captain!” said Shandon.

Hatteras, absorbed in thought, did not hear him.

“Captain!” repeated Shandon, touching his hand.

Hatteras drew himself up.

“What is it?” he said.

“Our fire is out!”

“What then?” answered Hatteras.

“If you mean to kill us with cold, you had better say so,” said Shandon ironically.

“I mean,” said Hatteras gravely, “to require every man to do his duty to the end.”

“There’s something higher than duty, captain — there’s the right to one’s own preservation. I repeat that the fire is out, and if it is not relighted, not one of us will be alive in two days.”

“I have no fuel,” answered Hatteras, with a hollow voice.

“Very well,” cried Pen violently, “if you have no fuel, we must take it where we can!”

Hatteras grew pale with anger.

“Where?” said he.

“On board,” answered the sailor insolently.

“On board!” echoed the captain, his fists closed, his eyes sparkling.

He had seized an axe, and he now raised it over Pen’s head.

“Wretch!” he cried.

The doctor rushed between the captain and Pen; the axe fell to the ground, its sharp edge sinking into the flooring. Johnson, Bell, and Simpson were grouped round Hatteras, and appeared determined to give him their support. But lamentable and plaintive voices came from the beds.

“Some fire! Give us some fire!” cried the poor fellows.

Hatteras made an effort, and said calmly:

“If we destroy the brig, how shall we get back to England?”

“We might burn some of the rigging and the gunwale, sir,” said Johnson.

“Besides, we should still have the boats left,” answered Shandon; “and we could build a smaller vessel with the remains of the old one!”

“Never!” answered Hatteras.

“But — — ” began several sailors, raising their voices.

“We have a great quantity of spirits of wine,” answered Hatteras; “burn that to the last drop.”

“Ah, we didn’t think of that!” said Johnson, with affected cheerfulness, and by the help of large wicks steeped in spirits he succeeded in raising the temperature a few degrees.

During the days that followed this melancholy scene the wind went round to the south, and the thermometer went up. Some of the men could leave the vessel during the least damp part of the day; but ophthalmia and scurvy kept the greater number on board; besides, neither fishing nor hunting was practicable. But it was only a short respite from the dreadful cold, and on the 25th, after an unexpected change in the wind, the mercury again froze; they were then obliged to have recourse to the spirits of wine thermometer, which never freezes. The doctor found, to his horror, that it marked 66° below zero; men had never been able to support such a temperature. The ice spread itself in long tarnished mirrors on the floor; a thick fog invaded the common room; the damp fell in thick snow; they could no longer see one another; the extremities became blue as the heat of the body left them; a circle of iron seemed to be clasping their heads, and made them nearly delirious. A still more fearful symptom was that their tongues could no longer articulate a word.

From the day they had threatened to burn his ship, Hatteras paced the deck for hours. He was guarding his treasures; the wood of the ship was his own flesh, and whoever cut a piece off cut off one of his limbs. He was armed, and mounted guard, insensible to the cold, the snow, and the ice, which stiffened his garments and enveloped him in granite armour. His faithful Dick accompanied him, and seemed to understand why he was there.

However, on Christmas Day he went down to the common room. The doctor, taking advantage of what energy he had left, went straight to him, and said —

“Hatteras, we shall all die if we get no fuel.”

“Never!” said Hatteras, knowing what was coming.

“We must,” said the doctor gently.

“Never!” repeated Hatteras with more emphasis still. “I will never consent! They can disobey me if they like!”

Johnson and Bell took advantage of the half-permission, and rushed on deck. Hatteras heard the wood crack under the axe. He wept. What a Christmas Day for Englishmen was that on board the *Forward*! The thought of the great difference between their position and that of the happy English families who rejoiced in their roast beef, plum pudding, and mince pies added another pang to the miseries of the unfortunate crew. However, the fire put a little hope and confidence into the men; the boiling of coffee and tea did them good, and the next week passed less miserably, ending the dreadful year 1860; its early winter had defeated all Hatteras's plans.

On the 1st of January, 1861, the doctor made a discovery. It was not quite so cold, and he had resumed his interrupted studies; he was reading Sir Edward Belcher's account of his expedition to the Polar Seas; all at once a passage struck him; he read it again and again. It was where Sir Edward Belcher relates that after reaching the extremity of Queen's Channel he had discovered important traces of the passage and residence of men. "They were," said he, "very superior habitations to those which might be attributed to the wandering Esquimaux. The walls had foundations, the floors of the interior had been covered with a thick layer of fine gravel, and were paved. Reindeer, seal, and walrus bones were seen in great quantities. *We found some coal.*" At the last words the doctor was struck with an idea; he carried the book to Hatteras and showed him the passage.

"They could not have found coal on this deserted coast," said Hatteras; "it is not possible!"

"Why should we doubt what Belcher says? He would not have recorded such a fact unless he had been certain and had seen it with his own eyes."

"And what then, doctor?"

"We aren't a hundred miles from the coast where Belcher saw the coal, and what is a hundred miles' excursion? Nothing. Longer ones than that have often been made across the ice."

"We will go," said Hatteras.

Johnson was immediately told of their resolution, of which he strongly approved; he told his companions about it: some were glad, others indifferent.

“Coal on these coasts!” said Wall, stretched on his bed of pain.

“Let them go,” answered Shandon mysteriously.

But before Hatteras began his preparations for the journey, he wished to be exactly certain of the *Forward’s* position. He was obliged to be mathematically accurate as to her whereabouts, because of finding her again. His task was very difficult; he went upon deck and took at different moments several lunar distances and the meridian heights of the principal stars. These observations were hard to make, for the glass and mirrors of the instrument were covered with ice from Hatteras’s breath; he burnt his eyelashes more than once by touching the brass of the glasses. However, he obtained exact bases for his calculations, and came down to make them in the room. When his work was over, he raised his head in astonishment, took his map, pricked it, and looked at the doctor.

“What is it?” asked the latter.

“In what latitude were we at the beginning of our wintering?”

“We were in latitude 78° 15’, by longitude 95° 35’; exactly at the Frozen Pole.”

“Well,” said Hatteras, in a low tone, “our ice-field has been drifting! We are two degrees farther north and farther west, and three hundred miles at least from your store of coal!”

“And those poor fellows don’t know,” said the doctor.

“Hush!” said Hatteras, putting his finger on his lips.

CHAPTER XXVIII

PREPARATIONS FOR DEPARTURE

Hatteras would not inform his crew of their situation, for if they had known that they had been dragged farther north they would very likely have given themselves up to the madness of despair. The captain had hidden his own emotions at his discovery. It was his first happy moment during the long months passed in struggling with the elements. He was a hundred and fifty miles farther north, scarcely eight degrees from the Pole! But he hid his delight so profoundly that even the doctor did not suspect it; he wondered at seeing an unwonted brilliancy in the captain's eyes; but that was all, and he never once thought of the reason.

The *Forward*, by getting nearer the Pole, had got farther away from the coal repository observed by Sir Edward Belcher; instead of one hundred, it lay at two hundred and fifty miles farther south. However, after a short discussion about it between Hatteras and Clawbonny, the journey was persisted in. If Belcher had written the truth — and there was no reason for doubting his veracity — they should find things exactly in the same state as he had left them, for no new expedition had gone to these extreme continents since 1853. There were few or no Esquimaux to be met with in that latitude. They could not be disappointed on the coast of New Cornwall as they had been on Beechey Island. The low temperature preserves the objects abandoned to its influence for any length of time. All probabilities were therefore in favour of this excursion across the ice. It was calculated that the expedition would take, at the most, forty days, and Johnson's preparations were made in consequence.

The sledge was his first care; it was in the Greenland style, thirty-five inches wide and twenty-four feet long. The Esquimaux often make them more than fifty feet long. This one was made of long planks, bent up front and back, and kept bent like a bow by two thick cords; the form thus given to it gave it increased resistance to shocks; it ran easily on the ice, but when the snow was soft on the ground it was put upon a frame; to make it glide more easily it was rubbed, Esquimaux fashion, with sulphur and snow. Six dogs drew it; notwithstanding their leanness these animals did not appear to suffer from the cold; their buckskin harness was in good condition, and they could draw a weight of two thousand pounds without fatigue. The materials for encampment consisted of a tent, should the construction of a snow-house be impossible, a large piece of mackintosh to spread over the snow, to prevent it melting in contact with the human body, and lastly, several blankets and buffalo-skins. They took the halkett boat too.

The provisions consisted of five cases of pemmican, weighing about four hundred and fifty pounds; they counted one pound of pemmican for each man and each dog; there were seven dogs including Dick, and four men. They also took twelve gallons of spirits of wine — that is to say, about one hundred fifty pounds weight — a sufficient quantity of tea and biscuit, a portable kitchen with plenty of wicks, oakum, powder, ammunition, and two double-barrelled guns. They also used Captain Parry’s invention of indiarubber belts, in which the warmth of the body and the movement of walking keeps coffee, tea, and water in a liquid state. Johnson was very careful about the snow-shoes; they are a sort of wooden patten, fastened on with leather straps; when the ground was quite hard and frozen they could be replaced by buckskin moccasins; each traveller had two pairs of both.

These preparations were important, for any detail omitted might occasion the loss of an expedition; they took four whole days. Each day at noon

Hatteras took care to set the position of his ship; they had ceased to drift; he was obliged to be certain in order to get back. He next set about choosing the men he should take with him; some of them were not fit either to take or leave, but the captain decided to take none but sure companions, as the common safety depended upon the success of the excursion. Shandon was, therefore, excluded, which he did not seem to regret. James Wall was ill in bed. The state of the sick got no worse, however, and as the only thing to do for them was to rub them with lime-juice, and give them doses of it, the doctor was not obliged to stop, and he made one of the travellers. Johnson very much wished to accompany the captain in his perilous enterprise, but Hatteras took him aside, and said, in an affectionate tone:

“Johnson, I have confidence in you alone. You are the only officer in whose hands I can leave my ship. I must know that you are there to overlook Shandon and the others. They are kept prisoners here by the winter, but I believe them capable of anything. You will be furnished with my formal instructions, which, in case of need, will give you the command. You will take my place entirely. Our absence will last four or five weeks at the most. I shall not be anxious, knowing you are where I cannot be. You must have wood, Johnson, I know, but, as far as possible, spare my poor ship. Do you understand me, Johnson?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the old sailor, “I’ll stop if you wish.”

“Thank you,” said Hatteras, shaking his boatswain’s hand; “and if we don’t come back, wait for the next breaking-up time, and try to push forward towards the Pole. But if the others won’t go, don’t mind us, and take the *Forward* back to England.”

“Are those your last commands, captain?”

“Yes, my express commands,” answered Hatteras.

“Very well, sir, they shall be carried out,” said Johnson simply.

The doctor regretted his friend, but he thought Hatteras had acted wisely in leaving him. Their other two travelling companions were Bell the carpenter and Simpson. The former was in good health, brave and devoted, and was the right man to render service during the encampments on the snow; Simpson was not so sure, but he accepted a share in the expedition, and his hunting and fishing capabilities might be of the greatest use. The expedition consisted, therefore, of four men, Hatteras, Clawbonny, Bell, and Simpson, and seven dogs. The provisions had been calculated in consequence. During the first days of January the temperature kept at an average of 33° below zero. Hatteras was very anxious for the weather to change; he often consulted the barometer, but it is of little use in such high latitudes. A clear sky in these regions does not always bring cold, and the snow does not make the temperature rise; the barometer is uncertain; it goes down with the north and east winds; low, it brought fine weather; high, snow or rain. Its indications could not, therefore, be relied upon.

At last, on January 5th, the mercury rose to 18° below zero, and Hatteras resolved to start the next day; he could not bear to see his ship burnt piece by piece before his eyes; all the poop had gone into the stove. On the 6th, then, in the midst of whirlwinds of snow, the order for departure was given. The doctor gave his last orders about the sick; Bell and Simpson shook hands silently with their companions. Hatteras wished to say his good-byes aloud, but he saw himself surrounded by evil looks and thought he saw Shandon smile ironically. He was silent, and perhaps hesitated for an instant about leaving the *Forward*, but it was too late to turn back; the loaded sledge, with the dogs harnessed to it, awaited him on the ice-field. Bell started the first; the others followed.

Johnson accompanied the travellers for a quarter of a mile, then Hatteras begged him to return on board, and the old sailor went back after making a long farewell gesture. At that moment Hatteras turned a last look towards the brig, and saw the extremity of her masts disappear in the dark clouds of the sky.

CHAPTER XXIX

ACROSS THE ICE

The little troop descended towards the south-east. Simpson drove the sledge. Dick helped him with zeal, and did not seem astonished at the new occupation of his companions. Hatteras and the doctor walked behind, whilst Bell went on in front, sounding the ice with his iron-tipped stick. The rising of the thermometer indicated approaching snow; it soon fell in thick flakes, and made the journey difficult for the travellers; it made them deviate from the straight line, and obliged them to walk slower; but, on an average, they made three miles an hour. The surface of the ice was unequal, and the sledge was often in danger of being overturned, but by great care it was kept upright.

Hatteras and his companions were clothed in skins more useful than elegant. Their heads and faces were covered with hoods, their mouths, eyes, and noses alone coming into contact with the air. If they had not been exposed the breath would have frozen their coverings, and they would have been obliged to take them off with the help of an axe — an awkward way of undressing. The interminable plain kept on with fatiguing monotony; icebergs of uniform aspect and hummocks whose irregularity ended by seeming always the same; blocks cast in the same mould, and icebergs between which tortuous valleys wound. The travellers spoke little, and marched on, compass in hand. It is painful to open one’s mouth in such an atmosphere; sharp icicles form immediately between one’s lips, and the breath is not warm enough to melt them. Bell’s steps were marked in the soft ground, and they followed them attentively, certain of being able to go where he had been before.

Numerous traces of bears and foxes crossed their path, but not an animal was seen that day. It would have been dangerous and useless to hunt them, as the sledge was sufficiently freighted. Generally in this sort of excursion travellers leave provision-stores along their route; they place them in hiding-places of snow, out of reach of animals; unload during the journey, and take up the provisions on their return. But Hatteras could not venture to do this on moveable ice-fields, and the uncertainty of the route made the return the same way exceedingly problematic. At noon Hatteras caused his little troop to halt under shelter of an ice-wall. Their breakfast consisted of pemmican and boiling tea; the latter beverage comforted the cold wayfarers. They set out again after an hour’s rest. The first day they walked about twenty miles, and in the evening both men and dogs were exhausted. However, notwithstanding their fatigue, they were obliged to construct a snow-house in which to pass the night. It took about an hour and a half to build. Bell showed himself very skilful. The ice-blocks were cut out and placed above one another in the form of a dome; a large block at the top made the vault. Snow served for mortar and filled up the chinks. It soon hardened and made a single block of the entire structure. It was reached by a narrow opening, through which the doctor squeezed himself painfully, and the others followed him. The supper was rapidly prepared with spirits of wine. The interior temperature of the snow-house was bearable, as the wind which raged outside could not penetrate. When their repast, which was always the same, was over, they began to think of sleep. A mackintosh was spread over the floor and kept them from the damp. Their stockings and shoes were dried by the portable grate, and then three of the travellers wrapped themselves up in their blankets, leaving the fourth to keep watch;

he watched over the common safety, and prevented the opening getting blocked up, for if it did they would be buried alive.

Dick shared the snow-house; the other dogs remained outside, and after their supper they squatted down in the snow, which made them a blanket. The men were tired out with their day’s walk, and soon slept. The doctor took his turn on guard at three o’clock in the morning. There was a tempest during the night, the gusts of which thickened the walls of the snow-house. The next day, at six o’clock, they set out again on their monotonous march. The temperature lowered several degrees, and hardened the ground so that walking was easier. They often met with mounds or cairns something like the Esquimaux hiding-places. The doctor had one demolished, and found nothing but a block of ice.

“What did you expect, Clawbonny?” said Hatteras. “Are we not the first men who have set foot here?”

“It’s very likely we are, but who knows?” answered the doctor.

“I do not want to lose my time in useless search,” continued the captain; “I want to be quick back to my ship, even if we don’t find the fuel.”

“I believe we are certain of doing that,” said the doctor.

“I often wish I had not left the *Forward*,” said Hatteras; “a captain’s place is on board.”

“Johnson is there.”

“Yes; but — well, we must make haste, that’s all.”

The procession marched along rapidly; Simpson excited the dogs by calling to them; in consequence of a phosphorescent phenomenon they seemed to be running on a ground in flames, and the sledges seemed to raise a dust of sparks. The doctor went on in front to examine the state of the snow, but all at once he disappeared. Bell, who was nearest to him, ran up.

“Well, Mr. Clawbonny,” he called out in anxiety, “where are you?”

“Doctor!” called the captain.

“Here, in a hole,” answered a reassuring voice; “throw me a cord, and I shall soon be on the surface of the globe again.”

They threw a cord to the doctor, who was at the bottom of a hole about ten feet deep; he fastened it round his waist, and his companions hauled him up with difficulty.

“Are you hurt?” asked Hatteras.

“Not a bit,” answered the doctor, shaking his kind face, all covered with snow.

“But how did you tumble down there?”

“Oh, it was the refraction’s fault,” he answered laughing. “I thought I was stepping across about a foot’s distance, and I fell into a hole ten feet deep! I never shall get used to it. It will teach us to sound every step before we advance. Ears hear and eyes see all topsy-turvy in this enchanted spot.”

“Can you go on?” asked the captain.

“Oh, yes; the little fall has done me more good than harm.”

In the evening the travellers had marched twenty-five miles; they were worn out, but it did not prevent the doctor climbing up an iceberg while the snow-house was being built. The full moon shone with extraordinary brilliancy in the clearest sky; the stars were singularly bright; from the top of the iceberg the view stretched over an immense plain, bristling with icebergs; they were of all sizes and shapes, and made the field look like a vast cemetery, in which twenty generations slept the sleep of death. Notwithstanding the cold, the doctor remained a long time in contemplation of the spectacle, and his companions had much trouble to get him away; but they were obliged to think of rest; the snow-hut was ready; the four companions burrowed into it like moles, and soon slept the sleep of the just.

The next day and the following ones passed without any particular incident; the journey was easy or difficult according to the weather; when it was cold and clear they wore their moccasins and advanced rapidly, when damp and penetrating, their snow-shoes, and made little way. They reached thus the 15th of January; the moon was in her last quarter, and was only visible for a short time; the sun, though still hidden below the horizon, gave six hours of a sort of twilight, not sufficient to see the way by; they were obliged to stake it out according to the direction given by the compass. Bell led the way; Hatteras marched in a straight line behind him; then Simpson and the doctor, taking it in turns, so as only to see Hatteras, and keep in a straight line. But notwithstanding all their precautions, they deviated sometimes thirty or forty degrees; they were then obliged to stake it out again. On Sunday, the 15th of January, Hatteras considered he had made a hundred miles to the south; the morning was consecrated to the mending of different articles of clothing and encampment; divine service was not forgotten. They set out again at noon; the temperature was cold, the thermometer marked only 32° below zero in a very clear atmosphere.

All at once, without warning of any kind, a vapour rose from the ground in a complete state of congelation, reaching a height of about ninety feet, and remaining stationary; they could not see a foot before them; it clung to their clothing, and bristled it with ice. Our travellers, surprised by the frost-rime, had all the same idea — that of getting near one another. They called out, “Bell!” “Simpson!” “This way, doctor!” “Where are you, captain?” But no answers were heard; the vapour did not conduct sound. They all fired as a sign of rallying. But if the sound of the voice appeared too weak, the detonation of the firearms was too strong, for it was echoed in all directions, and produced a confused rumble without appreciable direction. Each acted then according to his instincts. Hatteras stopped, folded his arms, and waited. Simpson contented himself with stopping his sledge. Bell retraced his steps, feeling the traces with his hands. The doctor ran hither and thither, bumping against the icebergs, falling down, getting up, and losing himself more and more. At the end of five minutes he said:

“I can’t go on like this! What a queer climate! It changes too suddenly, and the icicles are cutting my face. Captain! I say, captain!”

But he obtained no answer; he discharged his gun, and notwithstanding his thick gloves, burnt his hand with the trigger. During this operation he thought he saw a confused mass moving at a few steps from him.

“At last!” said he. “Hatteras! Bell! Simpson! Is it you? Answer, do!”

A hollow growl was the only answer.

“Whatever is that?” thought the doctor. The mass approached, and its outline was more distinctly seen. “Why, it’s a bear!” thought the terrified doctor. It was a bear, lost too in the frost-rime, passing within a few steps of the men of whose existence it was ignorant. The doctor saw its enormous paws beating the air, and did not like the situation. He jumped back and the mass disappeared like a phantom. The doctor felt the ground rising under his feet; climbing on all-fours he got to the top of a block, then another, feeling the end with his stick. “It’s an iceberg!” he said to himself: “if I get to the top I shall be saved.” So saying he climbed to a height of about eighty feet; his head was higher than the frozen fog, of which he could clearly see the top. As he looked round he saw the heads of his three companions emerging from the dense fluid.

“Hatteras!”

“Doctor!”

“Bell!”

“Simpson!”

The four names were all shouted at the same time; the sky, lightened by a magnificent halo, threw pale rays which coloured the frost-rime like clouds, and the summits of the icebergs seemed to emerge from liquid silver. The travellers found themselves circumscribed by a circle less than a hundred feet in diameter. Thanks to the purity of the upper layers of air, they could hear each other distinctly, and could talk from the top of their icebergs. After the first shots they had all thought the best thing they could do was to climb.

“The sledge!” cried the captain.

“It’s eighty feet below us,” answered Simpson.

“In what condition?”

“In good condition.”

“What about the bear?” asked the doctor.

“What bear?” asked Bell.

“The bear that nearly broke my head,” answered the doctor.

“If there is a bear we must go down,” said Hatteras.

“If we do we shall get lost again,” said the doctor.

“And our dogs?” said Hatteras.

At this moment Dick’s bark was heard through the fog.

“That’s Dick,” said Hatteras; “there’s something up; I shall go down.”

Growls and barks were heard in a fearful chorus. In the fog it sounded like an immense humming in a wadded room. Some struggle was evidently going on.

“Dick! Dick!” cried the captain, re-entering the frost-rime.

“Wait a minute, Hatteras; I believe the fog is clearing off,” called out the doctor. So it was, but lowering like the waters of a pond that is being emptied; it seemed to enter the ground from whence it sprang; the shining summits of the icebergs grew above it; others, submerged till then, came out like new islands; by an optical illusion the travellers seemed to be mounting with their icebergs above the fog. Soon the top of the sledge appeared, then the dogs, then about thirty other animals, then enormous moving masses, and Dick jumping about in and out of the fog.

“Foxes!” cried Bell.

“Bears!” shouted the doctor. “Five!”

“Our dogs! Our provisions!” cried Simpson. A band of foxes and bears had attacked the sledge, and were making havoc with the provisions. The instinct of pillage made them agree; the dogs barked furiously, but the herd took no notice, and the scene of destruction was lamentable.

“Fire!” cried the captain, discharging his gun. His companions imitated him. Upon hearing the quadruple detonation the bears raised their heads, and with a comical growl gave the signal for departure; they went faster than a horse could gallop, and, followed by the herd of foxes, soon disappeared amongst the northern icebergs.

CHAPTER XXX

THE CAIRN

The frost-rime had lasted about three-quarters of an hour; quite long enough for the bears and foxes to make away with a considerable quantity of provisions which they attacked all the more greedily, arriving, as they did, when the animals were perishing with hunger from the long winter. They had torn open the covering of the sledge with their enormous paws; the cases of pemmican were open, and half-empty; the biscuit-bags pillaged, the provisions of tea spilt over the snow, a barrel of spirits of wine broken up, and its precious contents run out; the camping materials lying all about. The wild animals had done their work.

“The devils have done for us!” said Bell.

“What shall we do now?” said Simpson.

“Let us first see how much we’ve lost,” said the doctor; “we can talk after.”

Hatteras said nothing, but began picking up the scattered objects. They picked up all the pemmican and biscuit that was still eatable. The loss of so much spirits of wine was deplorable, as without it it was impossible to get any hot drinks — no tea nor coffee.

The doctor made an inventory of the provisions that were left, and found that the animals had eaten two hundred pounds of pemmican and a hundred and fifty pounds of biscuit; if the travellers continued their journey they would be obliged to put themselves on half-rations. They deliberated about what was to be done under the circumstances. Should they return to the brig and begin their expedition again? But how could they resolve to lose the hundred and fifty miles already cleared? and coming back without the fuel, how would they be received by the crew? and which of them would begin the excursion again? It was evident that the best thing to do was to go on, even at the price of the worst privations. The doctor, Hatteras, and Bell were for going on, but Simpson wanted to go back; his health had severely suffered from the fatigues of the journey, and he grew visibly weaker; but at last, seeing he was alone in his opinion, he took his place at the head of the sledge, and the little caravan continued its route. During the three following days, from the 15th to the 17th of January, the monotonous incidents of the journey took place again. They went on more slowly; the travellers were soon tired; their legs ached with fatigue, and the dogs drew with difficulty. Their insufficient food told upon them. The weather changed with its usual quickness, going suddenly from intense cold to damp and penetrating fogs.

On the 18th of January the aspect of the ice-field changed all at once. A great number of peaks, like pyramids, ending in a sharp point at a great elevation, showed themselves on the horizon. The soil in certain places was seen through the layer of snow; it seemed to consist of schist and quartz, with some appearance of calcareous rock. At last the travellers had reached *terra firma*, and, according to their estimation, the continent must be New Cornwall. The doctor was delighted to tread on solid ground once more; the travellers had only a hundred more miles to go before reaching Belcher Cape; but the trouble of walking increased on this rocky soil, full of inequalities, crevices, and precipices; they were obliged to plunge into the interior of the land and climb the high cliffs on the coast, across narrow gorges, in which the snow was piled up to a height of thirty or forty feet. The travellers soon had cause to regret the levels they had left, on which the sledge rolled so easily. Now they were obliged to drag it with all their strength. The dogs were worn out, and had to be helped; the men harnessed themselves along with them, and wore themselves out too. They were often obliged to unload the provisions in order to get over a steep hill, whose frozen surface gave no hold. Some passages ten feet long took hours to clear. During the first day they only made about five miles on that land, so well named Cornwall. The next day the sledge attained the upper part of the cliffs; the travellers were too exhausted to construct their snow-house, and were obliged to pass the night under the tent, enveloped in their buffalo-skins, and drying their stockings by placing them on their chests. The consequences of such a state of things may be readily imagined; during the night the thermometer went down to 44° below zero, and the mercury froze.

The health of Simpson became alarming; an obstinate cold, violent rheumatism, and intolerable pain forced him to lie down on the sledge, which he could no longer guide. Bell took his place; he was not well, but was obliged not to give in. The doctor also felt the influence of his terrible winter excursion, but he did not utter a complaint; he marched on in front, leaning on his stick; he lighted the way; he helped in everything. Hatteras, impassive, impenetrable, insensible, in as good health as the first day, with his iron constitution, followed the sledge in silence. On the 20th of January the weather was so bad that the least effort caused immediate prostration; but the difficulties of the ground became so great that Hatteras and Bell harnessed themselves along with the dogs; the front of the sledge was broken by an unexpected shock, and they were forced to stop and mend it. Such delays occurred several times a day. The travellers were journeying along a deep ravine up to their waists in snow, and perspiring, notwithstanding the violent cold. No one spoke. All at once Bell looked at the doctor in alarm, picked up a handful of snow, and began to rub his companion’s face with all his might.

“What the deuce, Bell?” said the doctor, struggling.

But Bell went on rubbing.

“Are you mad? You’ve filled my eyes, nose, and mouth with snow. What is it?”

“Why,” answered Bell, “if you’ve got a nose left, you owe it to me.”

“A nose?” said the doctor, putting his hand to his face.

“Yes, Mr. Clawbonny, you were quite frostbitten; your nose was quite white when I looked at you, and without my bit of rubbing you would be minus nose.”

“Thanks, Bell,” said the doctor; “I’ll do the same for you in case of need.”

“I hope you will, Mr. Clawbonny, and I only wish we had nothing worse to look forward to!”

“You mean Simpson! Poor fellow, he is suffering dreadfully!”

“Do you fear for him?” asked Hatteras quickly.

“Yes, captain,” answered the doctor.

“What do you fear?”

“A violent attack of scurvy. His legs swell already, and his gums are attacked; the poor fellow is lying under his blankets on the sledge, and every shock increases his pain. I pity him, but I can’t do anything for him!”

“Poor Simpson!” said Bell.

“Perhaps we had better stop a day or two,” said the doctor.

“Stop!” cried Hatteras, “when the lives of eighteen men depend upon our return! You know we have only enough provisions left for twenty days.”

Neither the doctor nor Bell could answer that, and the sledge went on its way. In the evening they stopped at the foot of an ice-hill, out of which Bell soon cut a cavern; the travellers took refuge in it, and the doctor passed the night in nursing Simpson; he was a prey to the scurvy, and constant groans issued from his terrified lips.

“Ah, Mr. Clawbonny, I shall never get over it. I wish I was dead already.”

“Take courage, my poor fellow!” answered the doctor, with pity in his tone, and he answered Simpson’s complaints by incessant attention. Though half-dead with fatigue, he employed a part of the night in making the sick man a soothing draught, and rubbed him with lime-juice. Unfortunately it had little effect, and did not prevent the terrible malady spreading. The next day they were obliged to lift the poor fellow on to the sledge, although he begged and prayed them to leave him to die in peace, and begin their painful march again.

The freezing mists wet the three men to the skin; the snow and sleet beat in their faces; they did the work of beasts of burden, and had not even sufficient food. Dick ran hither and thither, discovering by instinct the best route to follow. During the morning of the 23rd of January, when it was nearly dark, for the new moon had not yet made her appearance, Dick ran on first; he was lost to sight for several hours. Hatteras became anxious, as there were many bear-marks on the ground; he was considering what had better be done, when a loud barking was heard in front. The little procession moved on quicker, and soon came upon the faithful animal in the depth of a ravine. Dick was set as if he had been petrified in front of a sort of cairn, made of limestone, and covered with a cement of ice.

“This time,” said the doctor, disengaging himself from the traces, “it’s really a cairn; we can’t be mistaken.”

“What does it matter to us?” said Hatteras.

“Why, if it is a cairn, it may inclose something that would be useful to us — some provisions perhaps.”

“As if Europeans had ever been here!” said Hatteras, shrugging his shoulders.

“But if not Europeans, it may be that the Esquimaux have hidden some product of their hunting here. They are accustomed to doing it, I think.”

“Well, look if you like, Clawbonny, but I don’t think it is worth your while.”

Clawbonny and Bell, armed with their pickaxes made for the cairn. Dick kept on barking furiously. The cairn was soon demolished, and the doctor took out a damp paper. Hatteras took the document and read:

“Altam... *Porpoise*, Dec... 13th, 1860,

12..° long... 8..° 35’ lat...”

“The *Porpoise*!” said the doctor.

“I don’t know any ship of that name frequenting these seas,” said Hatteras.

“It is evident,” continued the doctor, “that some sailors, or perhaps some shipwrecked fellows, have passed here within the last two months.”

“That’s certain,” said Bell.

“What shall we do?” asked the doctor.

“Continue our route,” said Hatteras coldly. “I don’t know anything about the *Porpoise*, but I do know that the *Forward* is waiting for our return.”

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DEATH OF SIMPSON

The travellers went on their weary way, each thinking of the discovery they had just made. Hatteras frowned with uneasiness.

“What can the *Porpoise* be?” he asked himself. “Is it a ship? and if so, what was it doing so near the Pole?”

At this thought he shivered, but not from the cold. The doctor and Bell only thought of the result their discovery might have for others or for themselves. But the difficulties and obstacles in their way soon made them oblivious to everything but their own preservation.

Simpson’s condition grew worse; the doctor saw that death was near. He could do nothing, and was suffering cruelly on his own account from a painful ophthalmia which might bring on blindness if neglected. The twilight gave them enough light to hurt the eyes when reflected by the snow; it was difficult to guard against the reflection, for the spectacle-glasses got covered with a layer of opaque ice which obstructed the view, and when so much care was necessary for the dangers of the route, it was important to see clearly; however, the doctor and Bell took it in turns to cover their eyes or to guide the sledge. The soil was volcanic, and by its inequalities made it very difficult to draw the sledge, the frame of which was getting worn out. Another difficulty was the effect of the uniform brilliancy of the snow; the ground seemed to fall beneath the feet of the travellers, and they experienced the same sensation as that of the rolling of a ship; they could not get accustomed to it, and it made them sleepy, and they often walked on half in a dream. Then some unexpected shock, fall, or obstacle would wake them up from their inertia, which afterwards took possession of them again.

On the 25th of January they began to descend, and their dangers increased. The least slip might send them down a precipice, and there they would have been infallibly lost. Towards evening an extremely violent tempest swept the snow-clad summits; they were obliged to lie down on the ground, and the temperature was so low that they were in danger of being frozen to death. Bell, with the help of Hatteras, built a snow-house, in which the poor fellows took shelter; there they partook of a little pemmican and warm tea; there were only a few gallons of spirits of wine left, and they were obliged to use them to quench their thirst, as they could not take snow in its natural state; it must be melted. In temperate countries, where the temperature scarcely falls below freezing point, it is not injurious; but above the Polar circle it gets so cold that it cannot be touched more than a red-hot iron; there is such a difference of temperature that its absorption produces suffocation. The Esquimaux would rather suffer the greatest torments than slake their thirst with snow.

The doctor took his turn to watch at three o’clock in the morning, when the tempest was at its height; he was leaning in a corner of the snow-house, when a lamentable groan from Simpson drew his attention; he rose to go to him, and struck his head against the roof; without thinking of the accident he began to rub Simpson’s swollen limbs; after about a quarter of an hour he got up again, and bumped his head again, although he was kneeling then.

“That’s very queer,” he said to himself.

He lifted his hand above his head, and felt that the roof was lowering.

“Good God!” he cried; “Hatteras! Bell!”

His cries awoke his companions, who got up quickly, and bumped themselves too; the darkness was thick.

“The roof is falling in!” cried the doctor.

They all rushed out, dragging Simpson with them; they had no sooner left their dangerous retreat, than it fell in with a great noise. The poor fellows were obliged to take refuge under the tent covering, which was soon covered with a thick layer of snow, which, as a bad conductor, prevented the travellers being frozen alive. The tempest continued all through the night. When Bell harnessed the dogs the next morning he found that some of them had begun to eat their leather harness, and that two of them were very ill, and could not go much further. However, the caravan set out again; there only remained sixty miles to go. On the 26th, Bell, who went on in front, called out suddenly to his companions. They ran up to him, and he pointed to a gun leaning against an iceberg.

“A gun!” cried the doctor.

Hatteras took it; it was loaded and in good condition.

“The men from the *Porpoise* can’t be far off,” said the doctor.

Hatteras remarked that the gun was of American manufacture, and his hands crisped the frozen barrel. He gave orders to continue the march, and they kept on down the mountain slope. Simpson seemed deprived of all feeling; he had no longer the strength to complain. The tempest kept on, and the sledge proceeded more and more slowly; they scarcely made a few miles in twenty-four hours, and in spite of the strictest economy, the provisions rapidly diminished; but as long as they had enough for the return journey, Hatteras kept on.

On the 27th they found a sextant half-buried in the snow, then a leather bottle; the latter contained brandy, or rather a lump of ice, with a ball of snow in the middle, which represented the spirit; it could not be used. It was evident that they were following in the steps of some poor shipwrecked fellows who, like them, had taken the only practicable route. The doctor looked carefully round for other cairns, but in vain. Sad thoughts came into his mind; he could not help thinking that it would be a good thing not to meet with their predecessors; what could he and his companions do for them? They wanted help themselves; their clothes were in rags, and they had not enough to eat. If their predecessors were numerous they would all die of hunger. Hatteras seemed to wish to avoid them, and could he be blamed? But these men might be their fellow-countrymen, and, however slight might be the chance of saving them, ought they not to try it? He asked Bell what he thought about it, but the poor fellow’s heart was hardened by his own suffering, and he did not answer. Clawbonny dared not question Hatteras, so he left it to Providence.

In the evening of the 27th, Simpson appeared to be at the last extremity; his limbs were already stiff and frozen; his difficult breathing formed a sort of mist round his head, and convulsive movements announced that his last hour was come. The expression of his face was terrible, desperate, and he threw looks of powerless anger towards the captain. He accused him silently, and Hatteras avoided him and became more taciturn and wrapped up in himself than ever. The following night was frightful; the tempest redoubled in violence; the tent was thrown down three times, and the snowdrifts buried the poor fellows, blinded them, froze them, and wounded them with the sharp icicles struck off the surrounding icebergs. The dogs howled lamentably. Simpson lay exposed to the cruel atmosphere. Bell succeeded in getting up the tent again, which, though it did not protect them from the cold, kept out the snow. But a more violent gust blew it down a fourth time, and dragged it along in its fury.

“Oh, we can’t bear it any longer!” cried Bell.

“Courage, man, courage!” answered the doctor, clinging to him in order to prevent themselves rolling down a ravine. Simpson’s death-rattle was heard. All at once, with a last effort, he raised himself up and shook his fist at Hatteras, who was looking at him fixedly, then gave a fearful cry, and fell back dead in the midst of his unfinished threat.

“He is dead!” cried the doctor.

“Dead!” repeated Bell.

Hatteras advanced towards the corpse, but was driven back by a gust of wind.

Poor Simpson was the first victim to the murderous climate, the first to pay with his life the unreasonable obstinacy of the captain. The dead man had called Hatteras an assassin, but he did not bend beneath the accusation. A single tear escaped from his eyes and froze on his pale cheek. The doctor and Bell looked at him with a sort of terror. Leaning on his stick, he looked like the genius of the North, upright in the midst of the whirlwind, and frightful in his immobility.

He remained standing thus till the first dawn of twilight, bold, tenacious, indomitable, and seemed to defy the tempest that roared round him.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE RETURN

The wind went down about six in the morning, and turning suddenly north cleared the clouds from the sky; the thermometer marked 33° below zero. The first rays of the sun reached the horizon which they would gild a few days later. Hatteras came up to his two dejected companions, and said to them, in a low, sad voice:

"We are still more than sixty miles from the spot indicated by Sir Edward Belcher. We have just enough provisions to allow us to get back to the brig. If we go on any further we shall meet with certain death, and that will do good to no one. We had better retrace our steps."

"That is a sensible resolution, Hatteras," answered the doctor; "I would have followed you as far as you led us, but our health gets daily weaker; we can scarcely put one foot before the other; we ought to go back."

"Is that your opinion too, Bell?" asked Hatteras.

"Yes, captain," answered the carpenter.

"Very well," said Hatteras; "we will take two days' rest. We want it. The sledge wants mending. I think we had better build ourselves a snow-house, and try to regain a little strength."

After this was settled, our three men set to work with vigour. Bell took the necessary precautions to assure the solidity of the construction, and they soon had a good shelter at the bottom of the ravine where the last halt had taken place. It had cost Hatteras a great effort to interrupt his journey. All their trouble and pain lost! A useless excursion, which one man had paid for with his life. What would become of the crew now that all hope of coal was over? What would Shandon think? Notwithstanding all these painful thoughts, he felt it impossible to go on any further. They began their preparations for the return journey at once. The sledge was mended; it had now only two hundred pounds weight to carry. They mended their clothes, worn-out, torn, soaked with snow, and hardened by the frost; new moccasins and snow-shoes replaced those that were worn out. This work took the whole day of the 29th and the morning of the 30th; the three travellers rested and comforted themselves as well as they could.

During the thirty-six hours passed in the snow-house and on the icebergs of the ravine, the doctor had noticed that Dick’s conduct was very strange; he crept smelling about a sort of rising in the ground made by several layers of ice; he kept wagging his tail with impatience, and trying to draw the attention of his master to the spot. The doctor thought that the dog’s uneasiness might be caused by the presence of Simpson’s body, which he and his companions had not yet had time to bury. He resolved to put it off no longer, especially as they intended starting early the next morning. Bell and the doctor took their pickaxes and directed their steps towards the lowest part of the ravine; the mound indicated by Dick seemed to be a good spot to place the corpse in; they were obliged to bury it deep to keep it from the bears. They began by removing the layer of soft snow, and then attacked the ice. At the third blow of his pickaxe the doctor broke some hard obstacle; he took out the pieces and saw that it was a glass bottle; Bell discovered a small biscuit-sack with a few crumbs at the bottom.

“Whatever does this mean?” said the doctor.

“I can’t think,” answered Bell, suspending his work.

They called Hatteras, who came immediately. Dick barked loudly, and began scratching at the ice.

“Perhaps we have found a provision-store,” said the doctor.

“It is possible,” said Bell.

“Go on,” said Hatteras.

Some remains of food were drawn out, and a case a quarter full of pemmican.

“If it is a hiding-place,” said Hatteras, “the bears have been before us. See, the provisions are not intact.”

“I am afraid so,” answered the doctor; “for — — ”

He was interrupted by a cry from Bell, who had come upon a man’s leg, stiffened and frozen.

“A corpse,” cried the doctor.

“It is a tomb,” answered Hatteras.

When the corpse was disinterred it turned out to be that of a sailor, about thirty years old, perfectly preserved. He wore the clothes of an Arctic navigator. The doctor could not tell how long he had been dead. But after this corpse, Bell discovered a second, that of a man of fifty, bearing the mark of the suffering that had killed him on his face.

“These are not buried bodies,” cried the doctor, “the poor fellows were surprised by death just as we find them.”

“You are right, Mr. Clawbonny,” answered Bell.

“Go on! go on!” said Hatteras.

Bell obeyed tremblingly; for who knew how many human bodies the mound contained?

“These men have been the victims of the same accident that almost happened to us,” said the doctor. “Their snow-house tumbled in. Let us see if any one of them is still alive.”

The place was soon cleared, and Bell dug out a third body, that of a man of forty, who had not the cadaverous look of the others. The doctor examined him and thought he recognised some symptoms of existence.

“He is alive!” he cried.

Bell and he carried the body into the snow-house whilst Hatteras, unmoved, contemplated their late habitation. The doctor stripped the resuscitated man and found no trace of a wound on him. He and Bell rubbed him vigorously with oakum steeped in spirits of wine, and they saw signs of returning consciousness; but the unfortunate man was in a state of complete prostration, and could not speak a word. His tongue stuck to his palate as if frozen. The doctor searched his pockets, but they were empty. He left Bell to continue the friction, and rejoined Hatteras. The captain had been down into the depths of the snow-house, and had searched about carefully. He came up holding a half-burnt fragment of a letter. These words were on it:

... tamont

... orpoise

... w York.

“Altamont!” cried the doctor, of the ship *Porpoise*, of New York.”

“An American,” said Hatteras.

“I’ll save him,” said the doctor, “and then we shall know all about it.”

He went back to Altamont whilst Hatteras remained pensive. Thanks to his attentions, the doctor succeeded in recalling the unfortunate man to life, but not to feeling; he neither saw, heard, nor spoke, but he lived. The next day Hatteras said to the doctor:

“We must start at once.”

“Yes. The sledge is not loaded; we’ll put the poor fellow on it and take him to the brig.”

“Very well; but we must bury these bodies first.”

The two unknown sailors were placed under the ruins of the snow-house again, and Simpson’s corpse took Altamont’s place. The three travellers buried their companion, and at seven o’clock in the morning they set out again. Two of the Greenland dogs were dead, and Dick offered himself in their place. He pulled with energy.

During the next twenty days the travellers experienced the same incidents as before. But as it was in the month of February they did not meet with the same difficulty from the ice. It was horribly cold, but there was not much wind. The sun reappeared for the first time on the 31st of January, and every day he stopped longer above the horizon. Bell and the doctor were almost blinded and half-lame; the carpenter was obliged to walk upon crutches. Altamont still lived, but he was in a state of complete insensibility. The doctor took great care of him, although he wanted attention himself; he was getting ill with fatigue. Hatteras thought of nothing but his ship. What state should he find it in?

On the 24th of February he stopped all of a sudden. A red light appeared about 300 paces in front, and a column of black smoke went up to the sky.

“Look at that smoke! my ship is burning,” said he with a beating heart.

“We are three miles off yet,” said Bell; “it can’t be the *Forward*.”

“Yes it is,” said the doctor; “the mirage makes it seem nearer.”

The three men, leaving the sledge to the care of Dick, ran on, and in an hour’s time were in sight of the ship. She was burning in the midst of the ice, which melted around her. A hundred steps farther a man met them, wringing his hands before the *Forward* in flames. It was Johnson. Hatteras ran to him.

“My ship! My ship!” cried he.

“Is that you, captain? Oh, don’t come any nearer,” said Johnson.

“What is it?” said Hatteras.

“The wretches left forty-eight hours ago, after setting fire to the ship.”

“Curse them!” cried Hatteras.

A loud explosion was then heard; the ground trembled; the icebergs fell upon the ice-field; a column of smoke went up into the clouds, and the *Forward* blew up. The doctor and Bell reached Hatteras, who out of the depths of despair cried:

“The cowards have fled! The strong will succeed! Johnson and Bell, you are courageous. Doctor, you have science. I have faith. To the North Pole! To the North Pole!”

His companions heard these energetic words, and they did them good; but it was a terrible situation for these four men, alone, under the 80th degree of latitude, in the midst of the Polar Regions!

PART II

THE FIELD OF ICE.

CHAPTER I.

THE DOCTOR’S INVENTORY.

It was a bold project of Hatteras to push his way to the North Pole, and gain for his country the honour and glory of its discovery. But he had done all that lay in human power now, and, after having struggled for nine months against currents and tempests, shattering icebergs and breaking through almost insurmountable barriers, amid the cold of an unprecedented winter, after having outdistanced all his predecessors and accomplished half his task, he suddenly saw all his hopes blasted. The treachery, or rather the despondency, of his worn-out crew, and the criminal folly of one or two leading spirits among them had left him and his little band of men in a terrible situation — helpless in an icy desert, two thousand five hundred miles away from their native land, and without even a ship to shelter them.

However, the courage of Hatteras was still undaunted. The three men which were left him were the

best on board his brig, and while they remained he might venture to hope.

After the cheerful, manly words of the captain, the Doctor felt the best thing to be done was to look their prospects fairly in the face, and know the exact state of things. Accordingly, leaving his companions, he stole away alone down to the scene of the explosion.

Of the *Forward*, the brig that had been so carefully built and had become so dear, not a vestige remained. Shapeless blackened fragments, twisted bars of iron, cable ends still smouldering, and here and there in the distance spiral wreaths of smoke, met his eye on all sides. His cabin and all his precious treasures were gone, his books, and instruments, and collections reduced to ashes. As he stood thinking mournfully of his irreparable loss, he was joined by Johnson, who grasped his offered hand in speechless sorrow.

“What’s to become of us?” asked the Doctor.

“Who can tell!” was the old sailor’s reply.

“Anyhow,” said Clawbonny, “do not let us despair! Let us be men!”

“Yes, Mr. Clawbonny, you are right. Now is the time to show our mettle. We are in a bad plight, and how to get out of it, that is the question.”

“Poor old brig!” exclaimed the Doctor. “I had grown so attached to her. I loved her as one loves a house where he has spent a life-time.”

“Ay! it’s strange what a hold those planks and beams get on a fellow’s heart.”

“And the long-boat — is that burnt?” asked the Doctor.

“No, Mr. Clawbonny. Shandon and his gang have carried it off.”

“And the pirogue?”

“Shivered into a thousand pieces? Stop. Do you see those bits of sheet-iron? That is all that remains of it.”

“Then we have nothing but the Halkett-boat?”

“Yes, we have that still, thanks to your idea of taking it with you.”

“That isn’t much,” said the Doctor.

“Oh, those base traitors!” exclaimed Johnson. “Heaven punish them as they deserve!”

“Johnson,” returned the Doctor, gently, “we must not forget how sorely they have been tried. Only the best remain good in the evil day; few can stand trouble. Let us pity our fellow-sufferers, and not curse them.”

For the next few minutes both were silent, and then Johnson asked what had become of the sledge.

“We left it about a mile off,” was the reply.

“In charge of Simpson?”

“No, Simpson is dead, poor fellow!”

“Simpson dead!”

“Yes, his strength gave way entirely, and he first sank.”

“Poor Simpson! And yet who knows if he isn’t rather to be envied?”

“But, for the dead man we have left behind, we have brought back a dying one.”

“A dying man?”

“Yes, Captain Altamont.”

And in a few words he informed Johnson of their discovery.

“An American!” said Johnson, as the recital was ended.

“Yes, everything goes to prove that. But I wonder what the *Porpoise* was, and what brought her in these seas?”

“She rushed on to her ruin like the rest of foolhardy adventurers; but, tell me, did you find the coal?”

The Doctor shook his head sadly.

“No coal! not a vestige! No, we did not even get as far as the place mentioned by Sir Edward Belcher.”

“Then we have no fuel whatever?” said the old sailor.

“No.”

“And no provisions?”

“No.”

“And no ship to make our way back to England?”

It required courage indeed to face these gloomy realities, but, after a moment’s silence, Johnson said again —

“Well, at any rate we know exactly how we stand. The first thing to be done now is to make a hut, for we can’t stay long exposed to this temperature.”

“Yes, we’ll soon manage that with Bell’s help,” replied the Doctor. “Then we must go and find the sledge, and bring back the American, and have a consultation with Hatteras.”

“Poor captain,” said Johnson, always forgetting his own troubles, “how he must feel it!”

Clawbonny and Bell found Hatteras standing motionless, his arms folded in his usual fashion. He seemed gazing into space, but his face had recovered its calm, self-possessed expression. His faithful dog stood beside him, like his master, apparently insensible to the biting cold, though the temperature was 32 degrees below zero.

Bell lay on the ice in an almost inanimate condition. Johnson had to take vigorous measures to rouse him, but at last, by dint of shaking and rubbing him with snow, he succeeded.

“Come, Bell,” he cried, “don’t give way like this. Exert yourself, my man; we must have a talk about our situation, and we need a place to put our heads in. Come and help me, Bell. You haven’t forgotten how to make a snow hut, have you? There is an iceberg all ready to hand; we’ve only got to hollow it out. Let’s set to work; we shall find that is the best remedy for us.”

Bell tried to shake off his torpor and help his comrade, while Mr. Clawbonny undertook to go and fetch the sledge and the dogs.

“Will you go with him, captain?” asked Johnson.

“No, my friend,” said Hatteras, in a gentle tone, “if the Doctor will kindly undertake the task. Before the day ends I must come to some resolution, and I need to be alone to think. Go. Do meantime whatever you think best. I will deal with the future.”

Johnson went back to the Doctor, and said —

"It's very strange, but the captain seems quite to have got over his anger. I never heard him speak so gently before."

"So much the better," said Clawbonny. "Believe me, Johnson, that man can save us yet."

And drawing his hood as closely round his head as possible, the Doctor seized his iron-tipped staff, and set out without further delay.

Johnson and Bell commenced operations immediately. They had simply to dig a hole in the heart of a great block of ice; but it was not easy work, owing to the extreme hardness of the material. However, this very hardness guaranteed the solidity of the dwelling, and the further their labours advanced the more they became sheltered.

Hatteras alternately paced up and down, and stood motionless, evidently shrinking from any approach to the scene of explosion.

In about an hour the Doctor returned, bringing with him Altamont lying on the sledge, wrapped up in the folds of the tent. The poor dogs were so exhausted from starvation that they could scarcely draw it along, and they had begun to gnaw their harness. It was, indeed, high time for feasts and men to take food and rest.

While the hut was being still further dug out, the Doctor went foraging about, and had the good fortune to find a little stove, almost undamaged by the explosion. He soon restored it to working trim, and, by the time the hut was completed, had filled it with wood and got it lighted. Before long it was roaring, and diffusing a genial warmth on all sides. The American was brought in and laid on blankets, and the four Englishmen seated themselves round the fire to enjoy their scanty meal of biscuit and hot tea, the last remains of the provisions on the sledge. Not a word was spoken by Hatteras, and the others respected his silence.

When the meal was over, the Doctor rose and went out, making a sign to Johnson to follow.

“Come, Johnson,” he said, “we will take an inventory of all we have left. We must know exactly how we are off, and our treasures are scattered in all directions; so we had better begin, and pick them up as fast as possible, for the snow may fall at any moment, and then it would be quite useless to look for anything.”

“Don’t let us lose a minute, then,” replied Johnson. “Fire and food — those are our chief wants.”

“Very well, you take one side and I’ll take the other, and we’ll search from the centre to the circumference.”

This task occupied two hours, and all they discovered was a little salt meat, about 50 lbs. of pemmican, three sacks of biscuits, a small stock of chocolate, five or six pints of brandy, and about 2 lbs. of coffee, picked up bean by bean off the ice.

Neither blankets, nor hammocks, nor clothing — all had been consumed in the devouring flame.

This slender store of provisions would hardly last three weeks, and they had wood enough to supply the stove for about the same time.

Now that the inventory was made, the next business was to fetch the sledge. The tired-out dogs were harnessed sorely against their will, and before long returned bringing the few but precious treasures found among the *débris* of the brig. These were safely deposited in the hut, and then Johnson and Clawbonny, half-frozen with their work, resumed their places beside their companions in misfortune.

CHAPTER II.

FIRST WORDS OF ALTAMONT.

About eight o'clock in the evening, the grey snow clouds cleared away for a little, and the stars shone out brilliantly in the sky.

Hatteras seized the opportunity and went out silently to take the altitude of some of the principal constellations. He wished to ascertain if the ice-field was still drifting.

In half an hour he returned and sat down in a corner of the hut, where he remained without stirring all night, motionless as if asleep, but in reality buried in deepest thought.

The next day the snow fell heavily, and the Doctor congratulated himself on his wise forethought, when he saw the white sheet lying three feet thick over the scene of the explosion, completely obliterating all traces of the *Forward*.

It was impossible to venture outside in such weather, but the stove drew capitally, and made the hut quite comfortable, or at any rate it seemed so to the weary, worn out adventurers.

The American was in less pain, and was evidently gradually coming back to life. He opened his eyes, but could not yet speak, for his lips were so affected by the scurvy that articulation was impossible, but he could hear and understand all that was said to him. On learning what had passed, and the circumstances of his discovery, he expressed his thanks by gestures, and the Doctor was too wise to let him know how brief his respite from death would prove. In three weeks at most every vestige of food would be gone.

About noon Hatteras roused himself, and going up to his friends, said —

“We must make up our minds what to do, but I must request Johnson to tell me first all the particulars of the mutiny on the brig, and how this final act of baseness came about.”

“What good will that do?” said the Doctor. “The fact is certain, and it is no use thinking over it.”

“I differ from your opinion,” rejoined Hatteras. “Let me hear the whole affair from Johnson, and then I will banish it from my thoughts.”

“Well,” said the boatswain, “this was how it happened. I did all in my power to prevent, but — — ”

“I am sure of that, Johnson; and what’s more, I have no doubt the ringleaders had been hatching their plans for some time.”

“That’s my belief too,” said the Doctor.

“And so it is mine,” resumed Johnson; “for almost immediately after your departure Shandon, supported by the others, took the command of the ship.

I could not resist him, and from that moment everybody did pretty much as they pleased. Shandon made no attempt to restrain them: it was his policy to make them believe that their privations and toils were at an end. Economy was entirely disregarded. A blazing fire was kept up in the stove, and the men were allowed to eat and drink at discretion; not only tea and coffee was at their disposal, but all the spirits on board, and on men who had been so long deprived of ardent liquors, you may guess the result. They went on in this manner from the 7th to the 15th of January.”

“And this was Shandon’s doing?” asked Hatteras.

“Yes, captain.”

“Never mention his name to me again! Go on, Johnson.”

“It was about the 24th or 25th of January, that they resolved to abandon the ship. Their plan was to reach the west coast of Baffin’s Bay, and from thence to embark in the boat and follow the track of the whalers, or to get to some of the Greenland settlements on the eastern side. Provisions were abundant, and the sick men were so excited by the hope of return that they were almost well. They began their preparations for departure by making a sledge which they were to draw themselves, as they had no dogs. This was not ready till the 15th of February, and I was always hoping for your arrival, though I half dreaded it too, for you could have done nothing with the men, and they would have massacred you rather than remain on board. I tried my influence on each one separately, remonstrating and reasoning with them, and pointing out the dangers they would encounter, and also the cowardice of leaving you, but it was a mere waste of words; not even the best among them would listen to me. Shandon was impatient to be off, and fixed the 22nd of February for starting. The sledge and the boat were packed as closely as possible with provisions and spirits, and heaps of wood, to obtain which they had hewed the brig down to her water-line. The last day the men ran riot. They completely sacked the ship, and in a drunken paroxysm Pen and two or three others set it on fire. I fought and struggled against them, but they threw me down and assailed me with blows, and then the wretches, headed by Shandon, went off towards the east and were soon out of sight. I found myself alone on the burning ship, and what could I do? The fire- hole was completely blocked up with ice. I had not a single drop of water! For two days the *Forward* struggled with the flames, and you know the rest.”

A long silence followed the gloomy recital, broken at length by Hatteras, who said —

“Johnson, I thank you; you did all you could to save my ship, but single-handed you could not resist. Again I thank you, and now let the subject be dropped. Let us unite efforts for our common salvation. There are four of us, four companions, four friends, and all our lives are equally precious. Let each give his opinion on the best course for us to pursue.”

“You ask us then, Hatteras,” said the Doctor, “we are all devoted to you, and our words come from our hearts. But will you not state you own views first?”

“That would be little use,” said Hatteras, sadly; “my opinion might appear interested; let me hear all yours first.”

“Captain,” said Johnson, “before pronouncing on such an important matter, I wish to ask you a question.”

“Ask it, then, Johnson.”

“You went out yesterday to ascertain our exact position; well, is the field drifting or stationary?”

“Perfectly stationary. It had not moved since the last reckoning was made. I find we are just where we were before we left, in 80° 15” lat. and 97° 35” long.”

“And what distance are we from the nearest sea to the west?”

“About six hundred miles.”

“And that sea is — — ?”

“Smith’s Sound,” was the reply.

“The same that we could not get through last April?”

“The same.”

“Well, captain, now we know our actual situation, we are in a better position to determine our course of action.”

“Speak your minds, then,” said Hatteras, again burying his head in his hands.

“What do you say, Bell?” asked the Doctor.

“It strikes me the case doesn’t need long thinking over,” said the carpenter. “We must get back at once without losing a single day or even a single hour, either to the south or west, and make our way to the nearest coast, even if we are two months doing it!”

“We have only food for three weeks,” replied Hatteras, without raising his head.

“Very well,” said Johnson, “we must make the journey in three weeks, since it is our last chance. Even if we can only crawl on our knees before we get to our destination, we must be there in twenty-five days.”

“This part of the Arctic Continent is unexplored. We may have to encounter difficulties. Mountains and glaciers may bar our progress,” objected Hatteras.

“I don’t see that’s any sufficient reason for not attempting it. We shall have to endure sufferings, no doubt, and perhaps many. We shall have to limit ourselves to the barest quantities of food, unless our guns should procure us anything.”

“There is only about half a pound of powder left,” said Hatteras.

“Come now, Hatteras, I know the full weight of your objections, and I am not deluding myself with vain hopes. But I think I can read your motive. Have you any practical suggestion to offer?”

“No,” said Hatteras, after a little hesitation.

“You don’t doubt our courage,” continued the Doctor. “We would follow you to the last — you know that. But must we not, meantime, give up all hope of reaching the Pole? Your plans have been defeated by treachery. Natural difficulties you might have overcome, but you have been outmatched by perfidy and human weakness. You have done all that man could do, and you would have succeeded I am certain; but situated as we are now, are you not obliged to relinquish your projects for the present, and is not a return to England even positively necessary before you could continue them?”

“Well, captain?” asked Johnson after waiting a considerable time for Hatteras to reply.

Thus interrogated, he raised his head, and said in a constrained tone —

“You think yourselves quite certain then of reaching the Sound, exhausted though you are, and almost without food?”

“No,” replied the Doctor, “but there is one thing certain, the Sound won’t come to us, we must go to it. We may chance to find some Esquimaux tribes further south.”

“Besides, isn’t there the chance of falling in with some ship that is wintering here?” asked Johnson.

“Even supposing the Sound is blocked up, couldn’t we get across to some Greenland or Danish settlement? At any rate, Hatteras, we can get nothing by remaining here. The route to England is towards the south, not the north.”

“Yes,” said Bell, “Mr. Clawbonny is right. We must start, and start at once. We have been forgetting our country too long already.”

“Is this your advice, Johnson?” asked Hatteras again.

“Yes, captain.”

“And yours, Doctor?”

“Yes, Hatteras.”

Hatteras remained silent, but his face, in spite of himself, betrayed his inward agitation. The issue of his whole life hung on the decision he had to make, for he felt that to return to England was to lose all! He could not venture on a fourth expedition.

The Doctor finding he did not reply, added —

“I ought also to have said, that there is not a moment to lose. The sledge must be loaded with the provisions at once, and as much wood as possible. I must confess six hundred miles is a long journey, but we can, or rather we must make twenty miles a day, which will bring us to the coast about the 26th of March."

"But cannot we wait a few days yet?" said Hatteras.

"What are you hoping for?" asked Johnson.

"I don't know. Who can tell the future? It is necessary, too, that you should get your strength a little recruited. You might sink down on the road with fatigue, without even a snow hut to shelter you."

"But think of the terrible death that awaits us here," replied the carpenter.

"My friends," said Hatteras, in almost supplicating tones; "you are despairing too soon. I should propose that we should seek our deliverance towards the north, but you would refuse to follow me, and yet why should there not be Esquimaux tribes round about the Pole as well as towards the south? The open sea, of the existence of which we are certified, must wash the shores of continents. Nature is logical in all her doings. Consequently vegetation must be found there when the earth is no longer ice-bound. Is there not a promised land awaiting us in the north from which you would flee?"

Hatteras became animated as he spoke, and Doctor Clawbonny's excitable nature was so wrought upon that his decision began to waver. He was on the point of yielding, when Johnson, with his wiser head and calmer temperament, recalled him to reason and duty by calling out —

"Come, Bell, let us be off to the sledge."

“All right,” said Bell, and the two had risen to leave the hut, when Hatteras exclaimed —

“Oh, Johnson! You! you! Well, go! I shall stay, I shall stay!”

“Captain!” said Johnson, stopping in spite of himself.

“I shall stay, I tell you. Go! Leave me like the rest! Come, Duk, you and I will stay together.”

The faithful dog barked as if he understood, and settled himself down beside his master. Johnson looked at the Doctor, who seemed at a loss to know what to do, but came to the conclusion at last that the best way, meantime, was to calm Hatteras, even at the sacrifice of a day. He was just about to try the force of his eloquence in this direction, when he felt a light touch on his arm, and turning round saw Altamont who had crawled out of bed and managed to get on his knees. He was trying to speak, but his swollen lips could scarcely make a sound. Hatteras went towards him, and watched his efforts to articulate so attentively that in a few minutes he made out a word that sounded like *Porpoise*, and stooping over him he asked —

“Is it the *Porpoise*?”

Altamont made a sign in the affirmative, and Hatteras went on with his queries, now that he had found a clue.

“In these seas?”

The affirmative gesture was repeated.

“Is she in the north?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know her position?”

“Yes.”

“Exactly?”

“Yes.”

For a minute or so, nothing more was said, and the onlookers waited with palpitating hearts.

Then Hatteras spoke again and said —

“Listen to me. We must know the exact position of your vessel. I will count the degrees aloud, and you; will stop me when I come to the right one.”

The American assented by a motion of the head, and Hatteras began —

“We’ll take the longitude first. 105°, No? 106°, 107°? It is to the west, I suppose?”

“Yes,” replied Altamont.

“Let us go on, then: 109°, 110°, 112°, 114°, 116°, 118°, 120°.”

“Yes,” interrupted the sick man.

“120° of longitude, and how many minutes? I will count.”

Hatteras began at number one, and when he got to fifteen, Altamont made a sign to stop.

“Very good,” said Hatteras; “now for the latitude. Are you listening? 80°, 81°, 82°, 83°.”

Again the sign to stop was made.

“Now for the minutes: 5’, 10’, 15’, 20’, 25’, 30’, 35’.”

Altamont stopped him once more, and smiled feebly.

“You say, then, that the *Porpoise* is in longitude 120° 15’, and latitude 83° 35’?”

“Yes,” sighed the American, and fell back motionless in the Doctor’s arms, completely overpowered by the effort he had made.

“Friends!” exclaimed Hatteras; “you see I was right. Our salvation lies indeed in the north, always in the north. We shall be saved!”

But the joyous, exulting words had hardly escaped his lips before a sudden thought made his countenance change. The serpent of jealousy had stung him, for this stranger was an American, and he had reached three degrees nearer the Pole than the ill-fated *Forward*.

CHAPTER III.

A SEVENTEEN DAYS' MARCH.

These first words of Altamont had completely changed the whole aspect of affairs, but his communication was still incomplete, and, after giving him a little time to rest, the Doctor undertook the task of conversing again with him, putting his questions in such a form that a movement of the head or eyes would be a sufficient answer.

He soon ascertained that the *Porpoise* was a three-mast American ship, from New York, wrecked on the ice, with provisions and combustibles in abundance still on board, and that, though she had been thrown on her side, she had not gone to pieces, and there was every chance of saving her cargo.

Altamont and his crew had left her two months previously, taking the long boat with them on a sledge. They intended to get to Smith's Sound, and reach some whaler that would take them back to America; but one after another succumbed to fatigue and illness, till at last Altamont and two men were all that remained out of thirty; and truly he had survived by a providential miracle, while his two companions already lay beside him in the sleep of death.

Hatteras wished to know why the *Porpoise* had come so far north, and learned in reply that she had been irresistibly driven there by the ice. But his anxious fears were not satisfied with this explanation, and he asked further what was the purpose of his voyage. Altamont said he wanted to make the north-west passage, and this appeared to content the jealous Englishman, for he made no more reference to the subject. "Well," said the Doctor, "it strikes me that, instead of trying to get to Baffin's Bay, our best plan would be to go in search of the *Porpoise*, for here lies a ship a full third of the distance nearer, and, more than that, stocked with everything necessary for winter quarters."

"I see no other course open to us," replied Bell.

"And the sooner we go the better," added Johnson, "for the time we allow ourselves must depend on our provisions."

"You are right, Johnson," returned the Doctor. "If we start to- morrow, we must reach the *Porpoise* by the 15th of March, unless we mean to die of starvation. What do you say, Hatteras?"

"Let us make preparations immediately, but perhaps the route may be longer than we suppose."

"How can that be, captain? The man seems quite sure of the position of his ship," said the Doctor.

"But suppose the ice-field should have drifted like ours?"

Here Altamont, who was listening attentively, made a sign that he wished to speak, and, after much difficulty, he succeeded in telling the Doctor that the *Porpoise* had struck on rocks near the coast, and that it was impossible for her to move.

This was re-assuring information, though it cut off all hope of returning to Europe, unless Bell could construct a smaller ship out of the wreck.

No time was lost in getting ready to start. The sledge was the principal thing, as it needed thorough repair. There was plenty of wood, and, profiting by the experience they had recently had of this mode of transit, several improvements were made by Bell.

Inside, a sort of couch was laid for the American, and covered over with the tent. The small stock of provisions did not add much to the weight, but, to make up the deficiency, as much wood was piled up on it as it could hold.

The Doctor did the packing, and made an exact calculation of how long their stores would last. He found that, by allowing three-quarter rations to each man and full rations to the dogs, they might hold out for three weeks.

Towards seven in the evening, they felt so worn out that they were obliged to give up work for the night; but, before lying down to sleep, they heaped up the wood in the stove, and made a roaring fire, determined to allow themselves this parting luxury. As they gathered round it, basking in the unaccustomed heat, and enjoying their hot coffee and biscuits and pemmican, they became quite cheerful, and forgot all their sufferings.

About seven in the morning they set to work again and by three in the afternoon everything was ready.

It was almost dark, for, though the sun had reappeared above the horizon since the 31st of January, his light was feeble and of short duration. Happily the moon would rise about half-past six, and her soft beams would give sufficient light to show the road.

The parting moment came. Altamont was overjoyed at the idea of starting, though the jolting would necessarily increase his sufferings, for the Doctor would find on board the medicines he required for his cure.

They lifted him on to the sledge, and laid him as comfortably as possible, and then harnessed the dogs, including Duk. One final look towards the icy bed where the *Forward* had been, and the little party set out for the *Porpoise*. Bell was scout, as before; the Doctor and Johnson took each a side of the sledge, and lent a helping hand when necessary; while Hatteras walked behind to keep all in the right track.

They got on pretty quickly, for the weather was good, and the ice smooth and hard, allowing the sledge to glide easily along, yet the temperature was so low that men and dogs were soon panting, and had often to stop and take breath. About seven the moon shone out, and irradiated the whole horizon. Far as the eye could see, there was nothing visible but a wide- stretching level plain of ice, without a solitary hummock or patch to relieve the uniformity.

As the Doctor remarked to his companion, it looked like some vast, monotonous desert.

“Ay! Mr. Clawbonny, it is a desert, but we shan’t die of thirst in it at any rate.”

“That’s a comfort, certainly, but I’ll tell you one thing: it proves, Johnson, we must be a great distance from any coast. The nearer the coast, the more numerous the icebergs in general, and you see there is not one in sight.”

“The horizon is rather misty, though.”

“So it is, but ever since we started, we have been on this same interminable ice-field.”

“Do you know, Mr. Clawbonny, that smooth as this ice is, we are going over most dangerous ground? Fathomless abysses lie beneath our feet.”

“That’s true enough, but they won’t engulph us. This white sheet over them is pretty tough, I can tell you. It is always getting thicker too; for in these latitudes, it snows nine days out of ten even in April and May; ay, and in

June as well. The ice here, in some parts, cannot be less than between thirty and forty feet thick."

"That sounds reassuring, at all events." said Johnson.

"Yes, we're not like the skaters on the Serpentine — always in danger of falling through. This ice is strong enough to bear the weight of the Custom House in Liverpool, or the Houses of Parliament in Westminster."

"Can they reckon pretty nearly what ice will bear, Mr. Clawbonny?" asked the old sailor, always eager for information.

"What can't be reckoned now-a-days? Yes, ice two inches thick will bear a man; three and a half inches, a man on horse-back; five inches, an eight pounder; eight inches, field artillery; and ten inches, a whole army."

"It is difficult to conceive of such a power of resistance, but you were speaking of the incessant snow just now, and I cannot help wondering where it comes from, for the water all round is frozen, and what makes the clouds?"

"That's a natural enough question, but my notion is that nearly all the snow or rain that we get here comes from the temperate zones. I fancy each of those snowflakes was originally a drop of water in some river, caught up by evaporation into the air, and wafted over here in the shape of clouds; so that it is not impossible that when we quench our thirst with the melted snow, we are actually drinking from the very rivers of our own native land."

Just at this moment the conversation was interrupted by Hatteras, who called out that they were getting out of the straight line. The increasing mist made it difficult to keep together, and at last, about eight o'clock, they determined to come to a halt, as they had gone fifteen miles. The tent was put up and the stove lighted, and after their usual supper they lay down and slept comfortably till morning.

The calm atmosphere was highly favourable, for though the cold became intense, and the mercury was always frozen in the thermometer, they found no difficulty in continuing their route, confirming the truth of Parry's assertion that any man suitably clad may walk abroad with impunity in the lowest temperature, provided there is no wind; while, on the other hand, the least breeze would make the skin smart acutely, and bring on violent headache, which would soon end in death.

On the 5th of March a peculiar phenomenon occurred. The sky was perfectly clear and glittering with stars, when suddenly snow began to fall thick and fast, though there was not a cloud in the heavens and through the white flakes the constellations could be seen shining. This curious display lasted two hours, and ceased before the Doctor could arrive at any satisfactory conclusion as to its cause.

The moon had ended her last quarter, and complete darkness prevailed now for seventeen hours out of the twenty-four. The travellers had to fasten themselves together with a long rope to avoid getting separated, and it was all but impossible to pursue the right course. Moreover, the brave fellows, in spite of their iron will, began to show signs of fatigue. Halts became more frequent, and yet every hour was precious, for the provisions were rapidly coming to an end.

Hatteras hardly knew what to think as day after day went on without apparent result, and he asked himself sometimes whether the *Porpoise* had any actual existence except in Altamont's fevered brain, and more than once the idea even came into his head that perhaps national hatred might have induced the American to drag them along with himself to certain death.

He told the Doctor his suppositions, who rejected them absolutely, and laid them down to the score of the unhappy rivalry that had arisen already between the two captains.

On the 14th of March, after sixteen days’ march the little party found themselves only yet in the 82° latitude. Their strength was exhausted, and they had a hundred miles more to go. To increase their sufferings, rations had to be still further reduced. Each man must be content with a fourth part to allow the dogs their full quantity.

Unfortunately they could not rely at all on their guns, for only seven charges of powder were left, and six balls. They had fired at several hares and foxes on the road already, but unsuccessfully.

However, on the 15th, the Doctor was fortunate enough to surprise a seal basking on the ice, and, after several shots, the animal was captured and killed.

Johnson soon had it skinned and cut in pieces, but it was so lean that it was worthless as food, unless its captors would drink the oil like the Esquimaux.

The Doctor was bold enough to make the attempt, but failed in spite of himself.

Next day several icebergs and hummocks were noticed on the horizon. Was this a sign that land was near, or was it some ice-field that had broken up? It was difficult to know what to surmise.

On arriving at the first of these hummocks, the travellers set to work to make a cave in it where they could rest more comfortably than in the tent, and after three hours’ persevering toil, were able to light their stove and lie down beside it to stretch their weary limbs.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST CHARGE OF POWDER

Johnson was obliged to take the dogs inside the hut, for they would have been soon frozen outside in such dry weather. Had it been snowing they would have been safe enough, for the snow served as a covering, and kept in the natural heat of the animals.

The old sailor, who made a first-rate dog-driver, tried his beasts with the oily flesh of the seal; and found, to his joyful surprise, that they ate it greedily. The Doctor said he was not astonished at this, as in North America the horses were chiefly fed on fish; and he thought that what would satisfy an herbivorous horse might surely content an omnivorous dog.

The whole party were soon buried in deep sleep, for they were fairly overcome with fatigue. Johnson awoke his companions early next morning, and the march was resumed in haste. Their lives depended now on their speed, for provisions would only hold out three days longer.

The sky was magnificent; the atmosphere extremely clear, and the temperature very low. The sun rose in the form of a long ellipse, owing to refraction, which made his horizontal diameter appear twice the length of his vertical.

The Doctor, gun in hand, wandered away from the others, braving the solitude and the cold in the hope of discovering game. He had only sufficient powder left to load three times, and he had just three balls. That was little enough should he encounter a bear, for it often takes ten or twelve shots to have any effect on these enormous animals.

But the brave Doctor would have been satisfied with humbler game. A few hares or foxes would be a welcome addition to their scanty food; but all that day, if even he chanced to see one, either he was too far away, or he was deceived by refraction, and took a wrong aim. He came back to his companions at night with crestfallen looks, having wasted one ball and one charge of powder.

Next day the route appeared more difficult, and the weary men could hardly drag themselves along. The dogs had devoured even the entrails of the seal, and began to gnaw their traces.

A few foxes passed in the distance, and the Doctor lost another ball in attempting to shoot them.

They were forced to come to a halt early in the evening, though the road was illumined by a splendid Aurora Borealis; for they could not put one foot before the other.

Their last meal, on the Sunday evening, was a very sad one — if no providential help came, their doom was sealed.

Johnson set a few traps before going to sleep, though he had no baits to put inside them. He was very disappointed to find them all empty in the morning, and was returning gloomily to the hut, when he perceived a bear of huge dimensions. The old sailor took it into his head that Heaven had sent this beast specially for him to kill; and without waking his comrades, he seized the Doctor’s gun, and was soon in pursuit of his prey. On reaching the right distance, he took aim; but, just as his finger touched the trigger, he felt his arm tremble. His thick gloves hampered him, and, flinging them hastily off, he took up the gun with a firmer grasp. But what a cry of agony escaped him! The skin of his fingers stuck to the gun as if it had been red-hot, and he was forced to let it drop. The sudden fall made it go off, and the last ball was discharged in the air.

The Doctor ran out at the noise of the report, and understood all at a glance. He saw the animal walking quietly off, and poor Johnson forgetting his sufferings in his despair.

“I am a regular milksop!” he exclaimed, “a cry-baby, that can’t stand the least pain! And at my age, too!”

“Come, Johnson; go in at once, or you will be frost-bitten. Look at your hands — they are white already! Come, come this minute.”

“I am not worth troubling about, Mr. Clawbonny,” said the old boatswain. “Never mind me!”

“But you must come in, you obstinate fellow. Come, now, I tell you; it will be too late presently.”

At last he succeeded in dragging the poor fellow into the tent, where he made him plunge his hands into a

bowl of water, which the heat of the stove kept in a liquid state, though still cold. Johnson’s hands had hardy touched it before it froze immediately.

“You see it was high time you came in; I should have been forced to amputate soon,” said the Doctor.

Thanks to his endeavours, all danger was over in about an hour, but he was advised to keep his hands at a good distance from the stove for some time still.

That morning they had no breakfast. Pemmican and salt beef were both done. Not a crumb of biscuit remained. They were obliged to content themselves with half a cup of hot coffee, and start off again.

They scarcely went three miles before they were compelled to give up for the day. They had no supper but coffee, and the dogs were so ravenous that they were almost devouring each other.

Johnson fancied he could see the bear following them in the distance, but he made no remark to his companions. Sleep forsook the unfortunate men, and their eyes grew wild and haggard.

Tuesday morning came, and it was thirty-four hours since they had tasted a morsel of food. Yet these brave, stout-hearted men continued their march, sustained by their superhuman energy of purpose. They pushed the sledge themselves, for the dogs could no longer draw it.

At the end of two hours, they sank exhausted. Hatteras urged them to make a fresh attempt, but his entreaties and supplications were powerless; they could not do impossibilities.

“Well, at any rate,” he said, “I won’t die of cold if I must of hunger.” He set to work to hew out

a hut in an iceberg, aided by Johnson, and really they looked like men digging their own tomb.

It was hard labour, but at length the task was accomplished. The little house was ready, and the miserable men took up their abode in it.

In the evening, while the others lay motionless, a sort of hallucination came over Johnson, and he began raving about bears.

The Doctor roused himself from his torpor, and asked the old man what he meant, and what bear he was talking about.

“The bear that is following us,” replied Johnson.

“A bear following us?”

“Yes, for the last two days!”

“For the last two days! You have seen him?”

“Yes, about a mile to leeward.”

“And you never told me, Johnson!”

“What was the good!”

“True enough,” said the Doctor; “we have not a single bail to send after him!”

“No, not even a bit of iron!”

The Doctor was silent for a minute, as if thinking. Then he said —

“Are you quite certain the animal is following us?”

“Yes, Mr. Clawbonny, he is reckoning on a good feed of human flesh!”

“Johnson!” exclaimed the Doctor, grieved at the despairing mood of his companion.

“He is sure enough of his meal!” continued the

“You have no ball!”

“I’ll make one.”

“You have no lead!”

“No, but I have mercury.”

So saying, he took the thermometer, which stood at 50° above zero, and went outside and laid it on a block of ice. Then he came in again, and said, “Tomorrow! Go to sleep, and wait till the sun rises.”

With the first streak of dawn next day, the Doctor and Johnson rushed out to look at the thermometer. All the mercury had frozen into a compact cylindrical mass. The Doctor broke the tube and took it out. Here was a hard piece of metal ready for use.

“It is wonderful, Mr. Clawbonny; you ought to be a proud man.”

“Not at all, my friend, I am only gifted with a good memory, and I have read a great deal.”

“How did that help you?”

“Why, I just happened to recollect a fact related by Captain Ross in his voyages. He states that they pierced a plank, an inch thick, with a bullet made of mercury. Oil would even have suited my purpose, for, he adds, that a ball of frozen almond oil splits through a post without breaking in pieces.”

“It is quite incredible!”

“But it is a fact, Johnson. Well, come now, this bit of metal may save our lives. We’ll leave it exposed to the air a little while, and go and have a look for the bear.”

Just then Hatteras made his appearance, and the

Doctor told him his project, and showed him the mercury.

The captain grasped his hand silently, and the three hunters went off in quest of their game.

The weather was very clear, and Hatteras, who was a little ahead of the others, speedily discovered the bear about three hundred yards distant, sitting on his hind quarters sniffing the air, evidently scenting the intruders on his domains.

“There he is!” he exclaimed.

“Hush!” cried the Doctor.

But the enormous quadruped, even when he perceived his antagonists, never stirred, and displayed neither fear nor anger. It would not be easy to get near him, however, and Hatteras said —

“Friends, this is no idle sport, our very existence is at stake; we must act prudently.”

“Yes,” replied the Doctor, “for we have but the one shot to depend upon. We must not miss, for if Away they went, while the old boatswain slipped behind a hummock, which completely hid him from the bear, who continued still in the same place and in the same position.

CHAPTER V.

THE SEAL AND THE BEAR.

“You know, Doctor,” said Hatteras, as they returned to the hut, “the polar bears subsist almost entirely on seals. They’ll lie in wait for them beside the crevasses for whole days, ready to strangle them the moment their heads appear above the surface. It is not likely, then, that a bear will be frightened of a seal.”

“I think I see what you are after, but it is dangerous.”

“Yes, but there is more chance of success than in trying any other plan, so I mean to risk it. I am going to dress myself in the seal’s skin, and creep along the ice. Come, don’t let us lose time. Load the gun and give it me.”

The Doctor could not say anything, for he would have done the same himself, so he followed Hatteras silently to the sledge, taking with him a couple of hatchets for his own and Johnson’s use.

Hatteras soon made his *toilette*, and slipped into the skin, which was big enough to cover him almost entirely.

“Now, then, give me the gun,” he said, “and you be off to Johnson. I must try and steal a march on my adversary.”

“Courage, Hatteras!” said the Doctor, handing him the weapon, which he had carefully loaded meanwhile.

“Never fear! but be sure you don’t show yourselves till I fire.”

The Doctor soon joined the old boatswain behind the hummock, and told him what they had been doing. The bear was still there, but moving restlessly about, as if he felt the approach of danger.

In a quarter of an hour or so the seal made his appearance on the ice. He had gone a good way round, so as to come on the bear by surprise, and every movement was so perfect an imitation of a seal, that even the Doctor would have been deceived if he had not known it was Hatteras.

“It is capital!” said Johnson, in a low voice. The bear had instantly caught sight of the supposed seal, for he gathered himself up, preparing to make a spring as the animal came nearer, apparently seeking to return to his native element, and unaware of the enemy’s proximity. Bruin went to work with extreme prudence, though his eyes glared with greedy desire to clutch the coveted prey, for he had probably been fasting a month, if not two. He allowed his victim to get within ten paces of him, and then sprang forward with a tremendous bound, but stopped short, stupefied and frightened, within three steps of Hatteras, who started up that moment, and, throwing off his disguise, knelt on one knee, and aimed straight at the bear’s heart. He fired, and the huge monster rolled back on the ice.

“Forward! Forward!” shouted the Doctor, hurrying towards Hatteras, for the bear had reared on his hind legs, and was striking the air with one paw and tearing up the snow to stanch his wound with the other.

Hatteras never moved, but waited, knife in hand. He had aimed well, and fired with a sure and steady aim. Before either of his companions came up he had plunged the knife in the animal’s throat, and made an end of him, for he fell down at once to rise no more.

“Hurrah! Bravo!” shouted Johnson and the Doctor, but Hatteras was as cool and unexcited as possible, and stood with folded arms gazing at his prostrate foe.

“It is my turn now,” said Johnson. “It is a good thing the bear is killed, but if we leave him out here much longer, he will get as hard as a stone, and we shall be able to do nothing with him.”

He began forthwith to strip the skin off, and a fine business it was, for the enormous quadruped was almost as large as an ox. It measured nearly nine feet long, and four round, and the great tusks in his jaws were three inches long.

On cutting the carcase open, Johnson found nothing but water in the stomach. The beast had evidently had no food for a long time, yet it was very fat, and weighed fifteen hundred pounds. The hunters were so famished that they had hardly patience to carry home the flesh to be cooked, and it needed all the Doctor’s persuasion to prevent them eating it raw.

On entering the hut, each man with a load on his back, Clawbonny was struck with the coldness that pervaded the atmosphere. On going up to the stove he found the fire black out. The exciting business of the morning had made Johnson neglect his accustomed duty of replenishing the stove.

The Doctor tried to blow the embers into a flame, but finding he could not even get a red spark, he went out to the sledge to fetch tinder, and get the steel from Johnson.

The old sailor put his hand into his pocket, but was surprised to find the steel missing. He felt in the other pockets, but it was not there. Then he went into the hut again, and shook the blanket he had slept in all night, but his search was still unsuccessful.

He went back to his companions and said —

“Are you sure, Doctor, you haven’t the steel?”

“Quite, Johnson.”

“And you haven’t it either, captain?”

“Not I!” replied Hatteras.

“It has always been in your keeping,” said the Doctor.

“Well, I have not got it now!” exclaimed Johnson, turning pale.

“Not got the steel!” repeated the Doctor, shuddering involuntarily at the bare idea of its loss, for it was all the means they had of procuring a fire.

“Look again, Johnson,” he said.

The boatswain hurried to the only remaining place he could think of, the hummock where he had stood to watch the bear. But the missing treasure was nowhere to be found, and the old sailor returned in despair.

Hatteras looked at him, but no word of reproach escaped his lips. He only said —

“This is a serious business, Doctor.”

“It is, indeed!” said Clawbonny.

“We have not even an instrument, some glass that we might take the lens out of, and use like a burning glass.”

“No, and it is a great pity, for the sun’s rays are quite strong enough just now to light our tinder.”

“Well,” said Hatteras, “we must just appease our hunger with the raw meat, and set off again as soon as we can, to try to discover the ship.”

“Yes!” replied Clawbonny, speaking to himself, absorbed in his own reflections. “Yes, that might do at a pinch! Why not? We might try.”

“What are you dreaming about?” asked Hatteras.

“An idea has just occurred to me.”

“An idea come into your head, Doctor,” exclaimed Johnson; “then we are saved!”

“Will it succeed? that’s the question.”

“What’s your project?” said Hatteras.

“We want a lens; well, let us make one.”

“How?” asked Johnson.

“With a piece of ice.”

“What? Do you think that would do?”

“Why not? All that is needed is to collect the sun’s rays into one common focus, and ice will serve that purpose as well as the finest crystal.”

“Is it possible?” said Johnson.

“Yes, only I should like fresh water ice, it is harder and more transparent than the other.”

“There it is to your hand, if I am not much mistaken,” said Johnson, pointing to a hummock close by.

“I fancy that is fresh water, from the dark look of it, and the green tinge.”

“You are right. Bring your hatchet, Johnson.”

A good-sized piece was soon cut off, about a foot in diameter, and the Doctor set to work. He began by chopping it into rough shape with the hatchet; then he operated upon it more carefully with his knife, making as smooth a surface as possible, and finished the polishing process with his fingers, rubbing away until he had obtained as transparent a lens as if it had been made of magnificent crystal.

The sun was shining brilliantly enough for the Doctor’s experiment. The tinder was fetched, and held beneath the lens so as to catch the rays in full power. In a few seconds it took fire, to Johnson’s rapturous delight.

He danced about like an idiot, almost beside himself with joy, and shouted, “Hurrah! hurrah!” while Clawbonny hurried back into the hut and rekindled the fire. The stove was soon roaring, and it was not many minutes before the savoury odour of broiled bear-steaks roused Bell from his torpor.

What a feast this meal was to the poor starving men may be imagined. The Doctor, however, counselled moderation in eating, and set the example himself.

"This is a glad day for us," he said, "and we have no fear of wanting food all the rest of our journey. Still we must not forget we have further to go yet, and I think the sooner we start the better."

"We cannot be far off now," said Altamont, who could almost articulate perfectly again; "we must be within forty-eight hours' march of the *Porpoise*."

"I hope we'll find something there to make a fire with," said the Doctor, smiling. "My lens does well enough at present; but it needs the sun, and there are plenty of days when he does not make his appearance here, within less than four degrees of the pole."

"Less than four degrees!" repeated Altamont, with a sigh; "yes, my ship went further than any other has ever ventured."

"It is time we started," said Hatteras, abruptly.

"Yes," replied the Doctor, glancing uneasily at the two captains.

The dogs were speedily harnessed to the sledge, and the march resumed. As they went along, the Doctor tried to get out of Altamont the real motive that had brought him so far north. But the American made only evasive replies, and Clawbonny whispered in old Johnson's ear —

"Two men we've got that need looking after."

"You are right," said Johnson.

"Hatteras never says a word to this American, and I must say the man has not shown himself very grateful. I am here, fortunately."

“Mr. Clawbonny,” said Johnson, “now this Yankee has come back to life again, I must confess I don’t much like the expression of his face.”

“I am much mistaken if he does not suspect the projects of Hatteras.”

“Do you think his own were similar?”

“Who knows? These Americans, Johnson, are bold, daring fellows. It is likely enough an American would try to do as much as an Englishman.”

“Then you think that Altamont — ”

“I think nothing about it, but his ship is certainly on the road to the North Pole.”

“But didn’t Altamont say that he had been caught among the ice, and dragged there irresistibly?”

“He said so, but I fancied there was a peculiar smile on his lips while he spoke.”

“Hang it! It would be a bad job, Mr. Clawbonny, if any feeling of rivalry came between two men of their stamp.”

“Heaven forfend! for it might involve the most serious consequences, Johnson.”

“I hope Altamont will remember he owes his life to us?”

“But do we not owe ours to him now? I grant, without us, he would not be alive at this moment, but without him and his ship, what would become of us?”

“Well, Mr. Clawbonny, you are here to keep things straight anyhow, and that is a blessing.”

“I hope I may manage it, Johnson.”

The journey proceeded without any fresh incident, but on the Saturday morning the travellers found themselves in a region of quite an altered character. Instead of the wide smooth plain of ice that had hitherto stretched before them, overturned icebergs and broken hummocks covered the horizon; while the frequent blocks of fresh-water ice showed that some coast was near.

Next day, after a hearty breakfast off the bear’s paws, the little party continued their route; but the road became toilsome and fatiguing. Altamont lay watching the horizon with feverish anxiety — an anxiety shared by all his companions, for, according to the last reckoning made by Hatteras, they were now exactly in latitude 83° 35” and longitude 120° 15”, and the question of life or death would be decided before the day was over.

At last, about two o’clock in the afternoon, Altamont started up with a shout that arrested the whole party, and pointing to a white mass that no eye but his could have distinguished from the surrounding icebergs, exclaimed in a loud, ringing voice, “The *Porpoise*.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE *PORPOISE*

It was the 24th of March, and Palm Sunday, a bright, joyous day in many a town and village of the Old World, but in this desolate region what mournful silence prevailed! No willow branches here with their silvery blossom — not even a single withered leaf to be seen — not a blade of grass!

Yet this was a glad day to the travellers, for it promised them speedy deliverance from the death that had seemed so inevitable.

They hastened onward, the dogs put forth renewed energy, and Duk barked his loudest, till, before long, they arrived at the ship. The *Porpoise* was completely buried under the snow. All her masts and rigging had been destroyed in the shipwreck, and she was lying on a bed of rocks so entirely on her side that her hull was uppermost.

They had to knock away fifteen feet of ice before they could even catch a glimpse of her, and it was not without great difficulty that they managed to get on board, and made the welcome discovery that the provision stores had not been visited by any four-footed marauders. It was quite evident, however, that the ship was not habitable.

“Never mind!” said Hatteras, “we must build a snow-house, and make ourselves comfortable on land.”

“Yes, but we need not hurry over it,” said the Doctor; “let us do it well while we’re about it, and for a time we can make shift on board; for we must build a good, substantial house, that will protect us from the bears as well as the cold. I'll undertake to be the architect, and you shall see what a first-rate job I'll make of it."

"I don't doubt your talents, Mr. Clawbonny," replied Johnson; "but, meantime, let us see about taking up our abode here, and making an inventory of the stores we find. There does not seem a boat visible of any description, and I fear these timbers are in too bad a condition to build a new ship out of them."

"I don't know that," returned Clawbonny, "time and thought do wonders; but our first business is to build a house, and not a ship; one thing at a time, I propose."

"And quite right too," said Hatteras; "so we'll go ashore again."

They returned to the sledge, to communicate the result of their investigation to Bell and Altamont; and about four in the afternoon the five men installed themselves as well as they could on the wreck. Bell had managed to make a tolerably level floor with planks and spars; the stiffened cushions and hammocks were placed round the stove to thaw, and were soon fit for use. Altamont, with the Doctor's assistance, got on board without much trouble, and a sigh of satisfaction escaped him as if he felt himself once more at home — a sigh which to Johnson's ear boded no good.

The rest of the day was given to repose, and they wound up with a good supper off the remains of the bear, backed by a plentiful supply of biscuit and hot tea.

It was late next morning before Hatteras and his companions woke, for their minds were not burdened now with any solicitudes about the morrow, and they might sleep as long as they pleased. The poor fellows felt like colonists safely arrived at their destination, who had forgotten all the sufferings of the voyage, and thought only of the new life that lay before them.

“Well, it is something at all events,” said the Doctor, rousing himself and stretching his arms, “for a fellow not to need to ask where he is going to find his next bed and breakfast.”

“Let us see what there is on board before we say much,” said Johnson.

The *Porpoise* has been thoroughly equipped and provisioned for a long voyage, and, on making an inventory of what stores remained, they found 6150 lbs. of flour, fat, and raisins; 2000 lbs. of salt beef and pork, 1500 lbs. of pemmican; 700 lbs. of sugar, and the same of chocolate; a chest and a half of tea, weighing 96 lbs.; 500 lbs. of rice; several barrels of preserved fruits and vegetables; a quantity of lime-juice, with all sorts of medicines, and 300 gallons of rum and brandy. There was also a large supply of gunpowder, ball, and shot, and coal and wood in abundance.

Altogether, there was enough to last those five men for more than two years, and all fear of death from starvation or cold was at an end.

“Well, Hatteras, we’re sure of enough to live on now,” said the Doctor, “and there is nothing to hinder us reaching the Pole.”

“The Pole!” echoed Hatteras.

“Yes, why not? Can’t we push our way overland in the summer months?”

“We might overland; but how could we cross water?”

“Perhaps we may be able to build a boat out of some of the ship’s planks.”

“Out of an American ship!” exclaimed the captain, contemptuously.

Clawbonny was prudent enough to make no reply, and presently changed the conversation by saying —

“Well, now we have seen what we have to depend upon, we must begin our house and store-rooms. We have materials enough at hand; and, Bell, I hope you are going to distinguish yourself,” he added.

“I am ready, Mr. Clawbonny,” replied Bell; “and, as for material, there is enough for a town here with houses and streets.”

“We don’t require that; we’ll content ourselves with imitating the Hudson’s Bay Company. They entrench themselves in fortresses against the Indians and wild beasts. That’s all we need — a house one side and stores the other, with a wall and two bastions. I must try to make a plan.”

“Ah! Doctor, if you undertake it,” said Johnson, “I am sure you’ll make a good thing of it.”

“Well, the first part of the business is to go and choose the ground. Will you come with us Hatteras?”

“I’ll trust all that to you, Doctor,” replied the captain. “I’m going to look along the coast.”

Altamont was too feeble yet to take part in any work, so he remained on the ship, while the others commenced to explore the unknown continent.

On examining the coast, they found that the *Porpoise* was in a sort of bay bristling with dangerous rocks, and that to the west, far as the eye could reach, the sea extended, entirely frozen now, though if Belcher and Penny were to be believed, open during the summer months. Towards the north, a promontory stretched out into the sea, and about three miles away was an island of moderate size. The roadstead thus formed would have afforded safe anchorage to ships, but for the difficulty of entering it. A considerable distance inland there was a solitary mountain, about 3000 feet high, by the Doctor’s reckoning; and half-way up the steep rocky cliffs that rose from the shore, they noticed a circular plateau, open on three sides to the bay and sheltered on the fourth by a precipitous wall, 120 feet high.

This seemed to the Doctor the very place for this house, from its naturally fortified situation. By cutting steps in the ice, they managed to climb up and examine it more closely.

They were soon convinced they could not have a better foundation, and resolved to commence operations forthwith, by removing the hard snow more than ten feet deep, which covered the ground, as both dwelling and storehouses must have a solid foundation.

This preparatory work occupied the whole of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. At last they came to hard granite close in grain, and containing garnets and felspar crystals, which flew out with every stroke of the pickaxe.

The dimensions and plan of the snow-house were then settled by the Doctor. It was to be divided into three rooms, as all they needed was a bed-room, sitting-room and kitchen. The sitting-room was to be in the middle, the kitchen to the left, and the bed-room to the right.

For five days they toiled unremittingly. There was plenty of material, and the walls required to be thick enough to resist summer thaws. Already the house began to present an imposing appearance. There were four windows in front, made of splendid sheets of ice, in Esquimaux fashion, through which the light came softly in as if through frosted glass.

Outside there was a long covered passage between the two windows of the sitting-room. This was the entrance hall, and it was shut in by a strong door taken from the cabin of the *Porpoise*. The Doctor was highly delighted with his performance when all was finished, for though it would have been difficult to say to what style of architecture it belonged, it was strong, and that was the chief thing.

The next business was to move in all the furniture of the *Porpoise*. The beds were brought first and laid down round the large stove in the sleeping room; then came chairs, tables, arm-chairs, cupboards, and benches for the sitting-room, and finally the ship furnaces and cooking utensils for the kitchen. Sails spread on the ground did duty for carpets, and also served for inner doors.

The walls of the house were over five feet thick, and the windows resembled port-holes for cannon. Every part was as solid as possible, and what more was wanted? Yet if the Doctor could have had his way, he would have made all manner of ornamental additions, in humble imitation of the Ice Palace built in St. Petersburgh in January, 1740, of which he had read an account. He amused his companions after work in the evening by describing its grandeur, the cannons in front, and statues of exquisite beauty, and the wonderful elephant that spouted water out of his trunk by day and flaming naphtha by night — all cut out of ice. He also depicted the interior, with tables, and toilette tables, mirrors, candelabra, tapers, beds, mattresses, pillows, curtains, time-pieces, chairs, playing-cards, wardrobes, completely fitted up — in fact, everything in the way of furniture that could be mentioned, and the whole entirely composed of ice.

It was on Easter Sunday, the 31st of March, when the travellers installed themselves in their new abode and after holding divine service in the sitting-room, they devoted the remainder of the day to rest.

Next morning they set about building the storehouses and powder magazine. This took a whole week longer, including the time spent in unloading the vessel, which was a task of considerable difficulty, as the temperature was so low, that they could not work for many hours at a time. At length on the 8th of April, provisions, fuel, and ammunition were all safe on *terra firma,* and deposited in their respective places. A sort of kennel was constructed a little distance from the house for the Greenland dogs, which the Doctor dignified by the name of “Dog Palace.” Duk shared his master’s quarters.

All that now remained to be done was to put a parapet right round the plateau by way of fortification.

By the 15th this was also completed, and the snow-house might bid defiance to a whole tribe of Esquimaux, or any other hostile invaders, if indeed any human beings whatever were to be found on this unknown continent, for Hatteras, who had minutely examined the bay and the surrounding coast, had not been able to discover the least vestiges of the huts that are generally met with on shores frequented by Greenland tribes. The shipwrecked sailors of the *Porpoise* and *Forward* seemed to be the first whose feet had ever trod this lone region.

CHAPTER VII.

AN IMPORTANT DISCUSSION.

While all these preparations for winter were going on Altamont was fast regaining strength. His vigorous constitution triumphed, and he was even able to lend a helping hand in the unlading of the ship. He was a true type of the American, a shrewd, intelligent man, full of energy and resolution, enterprising, bold, and ready for anything. He was a native of New York, he informed his companions, and had been a sailor from his boyhood.

The *Porpoise* had been equipped and sent out by a company of wealthy merchants belonging to the States, at the head of which was the famous Grinnell.

There were many points of resemblance between Altamont and Hatteras, but no affinities. Indeed, any similarity that there was between them, tended rather to create discord than to make the men friends. With a greater show of frankness, he was in reality far more deep and crafty than Hatteras. He was more free and easy, but not so true-hearted, and somehow his apparent openness did not inspire such confidence as the Englishman’s gloomy reserve.

The Doctor was in constant dread of a collision between the rival captains, and yet one must command inevitably, and which should it be! Hatteras had the men, but Altamont had the ship, and it was hard to say whose was the better right.

It required all the Doctor’s tact to keep things smooth, for the simplest conversation threatened to lead to strife.

At last, in spite of all his endeavours, an outbreak occurred on the occasion of a grand banquet by way of “house-warming,” when the new habitation was completed.

This banquet was Dr Clawbonny’s idea. He was head-cook, and distinguished himself by the concoction of a wonderful pudding, which would positively have done no dishonour to the *cuisine* of the Lord Chancellor of England.

Bell most opportunely chanced to shoot a white hare and several ptarmigans, which made an agreeable variety from the pemmican and salt meat.

Clawbonny was master of the ceremonies, and brought in his pudding, adorning himself with the insignia of his office — a big apron, and a knife dangling at his belt.

As Altamont did not conform to the teetotal *régime* of his English companions, gin and brandy were set on the table after dinner, and the others, by the Doctor’s orders, joined him in a glass for once, that the festive occasion might be duly honoured. When the different toasts were being drunk, one was given to the United States, to which Hatteras made no response.

This important business over, the Doctor introduced an interesting subject of conversation by saying —

“My friends, it is not enough to have come thus far in spite of so many difficulties; we have something more yet to do. I propose we should bestow a name on this continent, where we have found friendly shelter and rest, and not only on the continent, but on the several bays, peaks, and promontories that we meet with. This has been invariably done by navigators and is a most necessary proceeding.”

“Quite right,” said Johnson, “when once a place is named, it takes away the feeling of being castaways on an unknown shore.”

“Yes,” added Bell, “and we might be going on some expedition and obliged to separate, or go out hunting, and it would make it much easier to find one another if each locality had a definite name.”

“Very well; then,” said the Doctor, “since we are all agreed, let us go steadily to work.”

Hatteras had taken no part in the conversation as yet, but seeing all eyes fixed on him, he rose at last, and said —

“If no one objects, I think the most suitable name we can give our house is that of its skilful architect, the best man among us. Let us call it ‘Doctor’s House.’”

“Just the thing!” said Bell.

“First rate!” exclaimed Johnson, “‘Doctor’s House!’”

“We cannot do better,” chimed in Altamont. “Hurrah for Doctor Clawbonny.”

Three hearty cheers were given, in which Duk joined lustily, barking his loudest.

“It is agreed then,” said Hatteras, “that this house is to be called ‘Doctor’s House.’”

The Doctor, almost overcome by his feelings, modestly protested against the honour; but he was obliged to yield to the wishes of his friends, and the new habitation was formally named “Doctor’s House.”

“Now, then,” said the Doctor, “let us go onto name the most important of our discoveries.”

“There is that immense sea which surrounds us, unfurrowed as yet by a single ship.”

“A single ship!” repeated Altamont. “I think you have forgotten the *Porpoise*, and yet she certainly did not get here overland,”

“Well, it would not be difficult to believe she had,” replied Hatteras, “to see on what she lies at present.”

“True, enough, Hatteras,” said Altamont, in a piqued tone; “but, after all, is not that better than being blown to atoms like the *Forward*?”

Hatteras was about to make some sharp retort, but Clawbonny interposed.

“It is not a question of ships, my friends,” he said, “but of a fresh sea.”

“It is no new sea,” returned Altamont; “it is in every Polar chart, and has a name already. It is called the Arctic Ocean, and I think it would be very inconvenient to alter its designation. Should we find out by and by, that, instead of being an ocean it is only a strait or gulf, it will be time enough to alter it then.”

“So be it,” said Hatteras.

“Very well, that is an understood thing, then,” said the Doctor, almost regretting that he had started a discussion so pregnant with national rivalries.

“Let us proceed with the continent where we find ourselves at present,” resumed Hatteras. “I am not aware that any name whatever has been affixed to it, even in the most recent charts.”

He looked at Altamont as he spoke, who met his gaze steadily, and said —

“Possibly you may be mistaken again, Hatteras.”

“Mistaken! What! This unknown continent, this virgin soil — — ”

“Has already a name,” replied Altamont, coolly.

Hatteras was silent, but his lip quivered.

“And what name has it, then?” asked the Doctor, rather astonished at Altamont’s affirmation.

“My dear Clawbonny,” replied the American, “it is the custom, not to say the right, of every navigator to christen the soil on which he is the first to set foot. It appears to me, therefore, that it is my privilege and duty on this occasion to exercise my prerogative, and — ”

“But, sir,” interrupted Johnson, rather nettled at his *sang froid*.

“It would be a difficult matter to prove that the *Porpoise* did not come here, even supposing she reached this coast by land,” continued Altamont, without noticing Johnson’s protest. “The fact is indisputable,” he added looking at Hatteras.

“I dispute the claim,” said the Englishman, restraining himself by a powerful effort. “To name a country, you must first discover it, I suppose, and that you certainly did not do. Besides, but for us, where would you have been, sir, at this moment, pray? Lying twenty feet deep under the snow.”

“And without me, sir,” retorted Altamont, hotly, “without me and my ship, where would you all be at this moment? Dead, from cold and hunger.”

“Come, come, friends,” said the Doctor, “don’t get to words, all that can be easily settled. Listen to me.”

“Mr. Hatteras,” said Altamont, “is welcome to name whatever territories he may discover, should he succeed in discovering any; but this continent belongs to me. I should not even consent to its having two names like Grinnell’s Land, which is also called Prince Albert’s Land, because it was discovered almost simultaneously by an Englishman and an American. This is quite another matter; my right of priority is incontestable. No ship before mine ever touched this shore, no foot before mine ever trod this soil. I have given it a name, and that name it shall keep.”

“And what is that name?” inquired the Doctor.

“New America,” replied Altamont.

Hatteras trembled with suppressed passion, but by a violent effort restrained himself.

“Can you prove to me,” said Altamont, “that an Englishman has set foot here before an American?”

Johnson and Bell said nothing, though quite as much offended as the captain by Altamont’s imperious tone. They felt that reply was impossible.

For a few minutes there was an awkward silence, which the Doctor broke by saying —

“My friends, the highest human law is justice. It includes all others. Let us be just, then, and don’t let any bad feeling get in among us. The priority of Altamont seems to me indisputable. We will take our revenge by and by, and England will get her full share in our future discoveries. Let the name New America stand for the continent itself, but I suppose Altamont has not yet disposed of all the bays, and capes, and headlands it contains, and I imagine there will be nothing to prevent us calling this bay Victoria Bay?”

“Nothing whatever, provided that yonder cape is called Cape Washington,” replied Altamont.

“You might choose a name, sir,” exclaimed Hatteras, almost beside himself with passion, “that is less offensive to an Englishman.”

“But not one which sounds so sweet to an American,” retorted Altamont, proudly.

“Come, come,” said the Doctor, “no discussion on that subject. An American has a perfect right to be proud of his great countryman! Let us honour genius wherever it is met with; and since Altamont has made his choice, let us take our turn next; let the captain — — ”

“Doctor!” interrupted Hatteras, “I have no wish that my name should figure anywhere on this continent, seeing that it belongs to America.”

“Is this your unalterable determination?” asked Clawbonny.

“It is.”

The Doctor did not insist further.

“Very well, we’ll have it to ourselves then,” he continued, turning to Johnson and Bell. “We’ll leave our traces behind us. I propose that the island we see out there, about three miles away from the shore, should be called Isle Johnson, in honour of our boatswain,’’

“Oh, Mr. Clawbonny,” began Johnson, in no little confusion.

“And that mountain that we discovered in the west we will call Bell Mount, if our carpenter is willing.”

“It is doing me too much honour,” replied Bell.

“It is simple justice,” returned the Doctor.

“Nothing could be better,” said Altamont.

“Now then, all we have to do is to christen our fort,” said the Doctor, “about that there will be no discussion, I hope, for it is neither to our gracious sovereign Queen Victoria, nor to Washington, that we owe our safety and shelter here, but to God, who brought about our meeting, and by so doing saved us all. Let our little fort be called Fort Providence.”

“Your remarks are just,” said Altamont; “no name could be more suitable.”

“Fort Providence,” added Johnson, “sounds well too. In our future excursions, then, we shall go by Cape Washington to Victoria Bay, and from thence to Fort Providence, where we shall find food and rest at Doctor’s House!”

“The business is settled then so far,” resumed the Doctor. “As our discoveries multiply we shall have other names to give; but I trust, friends, we shall have no disputes about them, for placed as we are, we need all the help and love we can give each other. Let us be strong by being united. Who knows what dangers yet we may have to brave, and what sufferings to endure before we see our native land once more. Let us be one in heart though five in number, and let us lay aside all feelings of rivalry. Such feelings are bad enough at all times, but among us they would be doubly wrong. You understand me, Altamont, and you, Hatteras?”

Neither of the captains replied, but the Doctor took no notice of their silence, and went on to speak of other things. Sundry expeditions were planned to forage for fresh food. It would soon be spring, and hares and partridges, foxes and bears would re-appear. So it was determined that part of every day should be spent in hunting and exploring this unknown continent of New America.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN EXCURSION TO THE NORTH OF VICTORIA BAY

Next morning Clawbonny was out by dawn of day. Clambering up the steep, rocky wall, against which the Doctor's House leaned, he succeeded, though with considerable difficulty, in reaching the top, which he found terminated abruptly in a sort of truncated cone. From this elevation there was an extensive view over a vast tract of country, which was all disordered and convulsed as if it had undergone some volcanic commotion. Sea and land, as far as it was possible to distinguish one from the other, were covered with a sheet of ice.

A new project struck the Doctor's mind, which was soon matured and ripe for execution. He lost no time in going back to the snow house, and consulting over it with his companions.

"I have got an idea," he said; "I think of constructing a lighthouse on the top of that cone above our heads."

"A lighthouse!" they all exclaimed.

"Yes, a lighthouse. It would be a double advantage. It would be a beacon to guide us in distant excursions, and also serve to illumine our *plateau* in the long dreary winter months."

"There is no doubt," replied Altamont, "of its utility; but how would you contrive to make it?"

"With one of the lanterns out of the *Porpoise*."

“All right; but how will you feed your lamp? With seal oil?”

“No, seal oil would not give nearly sufficient light. It would scarcely be visible through the fog.”

“Are you going to try to make gas out of our coal then?”

“No, not that either, for gas would not be strong enough; and, worse still, it would waste our combustibles.”

“Well,” replied Altamont; “I’m at a loss to see how you — ”

“Oh, I’m prepared for everything after the mercury bullet, and the ice lens, and Fort Providence. I believe Mr. Clawbonny can do anything,” exclaimed Johnson.

“Come, Clawbonny, tell us what your light is to be, then,” said Altamont.

“That’s soon told,” replied Clawbonny. “I mean to have an electric light.”

“An electric light?”

“Yes, why not? Haven’t you a galvanic battery on board your ship?”

“Yes.”

“Well, there will be no difficulty then in producing an electric light, and that will cost nothing, and be far brighter.”

“First-rate?” said Johnson; “let us set to work at once.”

“By all means. There is plenty of material. In an hour we can raise a pillar of ice ten feet high, and that is quite enough.

Away went the Doctor, followed by his companions, and the column was soon erected and crowned with a ship lantern. The conducting wires were properly adjusted within it, and the pile with which they communicated fixed up in the sitting-room, where the warmth of the stove would protect it from the action of the frost.

As soon as it grew dark the experiment was made, and proved a complete success. An intense brilliant light streamed from the lantern and illumined the entire plateau and the plains beneath.

Johnson could not help clapping his hands, half beside himself with delight.

“Well, I declare, Mr. Clawbonny,” he exclaimed, “you’re our sun now.”

“One must be a little of everything, you know,” was Clawbonny’s modest reply.

It was too cold. however, even to stand admiring more than a minute, and the whole party were glad enough to get indoors again, and tuck themselves up in their warm blankets.

A regular course of life commenced now, though uncertain weather and frequent changes of temperature made it sometimes impracticable to venture outside the hut at all, and it was not till the Saturday after the installation, that a day came that was favourable enough for a hunting excursion; when Bell, and Altamont, and the Doctor determined to take advantage of it, and try to replenish their stock of provisions.

They started very early in the morning, each armed with a double- barrelled gun and plenty of powder and shot, a hatchet, and a snow knife.

The weather was cloudy, but Clawbonny put the galvanic battery in action before he left, and the bright rays of the electric light did duty for the glorious orb of day, and in truth was no bad substitute, for the light was equal to three thousand candles, or three hundred gas burners.

It was intensely cold, but dry, and there was little or no wind. The hunters set off in the direction of Cape Washington, and the hard snow so favoured their march, that in three hours they had gone fifteen miles, Duk jumping and barking beside them all the way. They kept as close to the coast as possible, but found no trace of human habitation and indeed scarcely a sign of animal life. A few snow birds, however, darting to and fro announced the approach of spring and the return of the animal creation. The sea was still entirely frozen over, but it was evident from the open breathing holes in the ice, that the seals had been quite recently on the surface. In one part the holes were so numerous, that the Doctor said to his companions that he had no doubt that when summer came, they would be seen there in hundreds, and would be easily captured, for on unfrequented shores they were not so difficult of approach. But once frighten them and they all vanish as if by enchantment, and never return to the spot again. “Inexperienced hunters,” he said, “have often lost a whole shoal by attacking them, *en masse*, with noisy shouts instead of singly and silently.”

“Is it for the oil or skin that they are mostly hunted?”

“Europeans hunt them for the skin, but the Esquimaux eat them. They live on seals, and nothing is so delicious to them as a piece of the flesh, dipped in the blood and oil. After all, cooking has a good deal to do with it, and I’ll bet you something I could dress you cutlets you would not turn up your nose at, unless for their black appearance.”

“We’ll set you to work on it,” said Bell, “and I’ll eat as much as you like to please you.”

“My good Bell, you mean to say to please yourself, but your voracity would never equal the Green-landers’, for they devour from ten to fifteen pounds of meat a day.”

“Fifteen pounds!” said Bell. “What stomachs!”

“Arctic stomachs,” replied the Doctor, “are prodigious; they can expand at will, and, I may add, contract at will; so that they can endure starvation quite as well as abundance. When an Esquimaux sits down to dinner he is quite thin, and by the time he has finished, he is so corpulent you would hardly recognize him. But then we must remember that one meal sometimes has to last a whole day.”

“This voracity must be peculiar to the inhabitants of cold countries,” said Altamont.

“I think it is,” replied the Doctor. “In the Arctic regions people must eat enormously: it is not only one of the conditions of strength, but of existence. The Hudson’s Bay Company always reckoned on this account 8 lbs. of meat to each man a day, or 12 lbs. of fish, or 2 lbs. of pemmican.”

“Invigorating regimen, certainly!” said Bell.

“Not so much as you imagine, my friend. An Indian who guzzles like that can’t do a whit better day’s work than an Englishman, who has his pound of beef and pint of beer.”

“Things are best as they are, then, Mr. Clawbonny.”

“No doubt of it; and yet an Esquimaux meal may well astonish us. In Sir John Ross’s narrative, he states his surprise at the appetites of his guides. He tells us that two of them — just two mind — devoured a quarter of a buffalo in one morning. They cut the meat in long narrow strips, and the mode of eating was either for the one to bite off as much as his mouth could hold, and then pass it on to the other, or to leave the long ribbons of meat dangling from the mouth and devour them gradually like boa-constrictors, lying at full length on the ground.”

“Faugh!” exclaimed Bell, “what disgusting brutes!”

“Every man has his own fashion of dining,” remarked the philosophical American.

“Happily,” said the Doctor.

“Well, if eating is such an imperative necessity in these latitudes, it quite accounts for all the journals of Arctic travellers being so full of eating and drinking.”

“You are right,” returned the Doctor. “I have been struck by the same fact; but I think it arises not only from the necessity of full diet, but from the extreme difficulty sometimes in procuring it. The thought of food is always uppermost in the mind, and naturally finds mention in the narrative.”

“And yet,” said Altamont, “if my memory serves me right, in the coldest parts of Norway the peasants do not seem to need such substantial fare. Milk diet is their staple food, with eggs, and bread made of the bark of the birch-tree; a little salmon occasionally, but never meat; and still they are fine hardy fellows.”

“It is an affair of organization out of my power to explain,” replied Clawbonny; “but I have no doubt that if these same Norwegians were transplanted to Greenland, they would learn to eat like the Esquimaux by the second or third generation. Even if we ourselves were to remain in this blessed country long, we should be as bad as the Esquimaux, even if we escaped becoming regular gluttons.”

“I declare, Mr. Clawbonny, you make me feel hungry with talking so much about eating,” exclaimed Bell.

“Not I!” said Altamont. “It rather sickens me, and makes me loathe the sight of a seal. But, stop, I do believe we are going to have the chance of a dinner off one, for I am much mistaken if that’s not something alive lying on those lumps of ice yonder!”

“It is a walrus!” exclaimed the Doctor. “Be quiet, and let us get up to him.”

Clawbonny was right, it was a walrus of huge dimensions, disporting himself not more than two hundred yards away. The hunters separated, going in different directions, so as to surround the animal and cut off all retreat. They crept along cautiously behind the hummocks, and managed to get within a few paces of him unperceived, when they fired simultaneously.

The walrus rolled over, but speedily got up again, and tried to make his escape, but Altamont fell upon him with his hatchet, and cut off his dorsal fins. He made a desperate resistance, but was overpowered by his enemies, and soon lay dead, reddening the ice-field with his blood.

It was a fine animal, measuring more than fifteen feet in length, and would have been worth a good deal for the oil; but the hunters contented themselves with cutting off the most savoury parts, and left the rest to the ravens, which had just begun to make their appearance.

Night was drawing on, and it was time to think of returning to Fort Providence. The moon had not yet risen, but the sky was serene and cloudless, and already glittering with stars — magnificent stars.

“Come,” said the Doctor, “let us be off, for it is getting late. Our hunting has not been very successful; but still, if a man has found something for his supper, he need not grumble. Let us go the shortest road, however, and get quickly home without losing our way. The stars will guide us.”

They resolved to try a more direct route back by going further inland, and avoiding the windings of the coast; but, after some hours’ walking, they found themselves no nearer Doctor’s House, and it was evident that they must have lost their way. The question was raised whether to construct a hut and rest till morning, or proceed; but Clawbonny insisted on going on, as Hatteras and Johnson would be so uneasy.

“Duk will guide us,” he said; “he won’t go wrong. His instinct can dispense with star and compass. Just let us keep close behind him.”

They did well to trust to Duk, for very speedily a faint light appeared in the horizon almost like a star glimmering through the mist, which hung low above the ground.

“There’s our lighthouse!” exclaimed the Doctor.

“Do you think it is, Mr. Clawbonny?” said Bell.

“I’m certain of it! Come on faster.” The light became stronger the nearer they approached, and soon they were walking in a bright luminous track, leaving their long shadows behind them on the spotless snow.

Quickening their steps, they hastened forward, and in another half hour they were climbing the ascent to Fort Providence.

CHAPTER IX.

COLD AND HEAT.

Hatteras and Johnson had been getting somewhat uneasy at the prolonged absence of their companions, and were delighted to see them back safe and sound. The hunters were no less glad to find themselves once more in a warm shelter, for the temperature had fallen considerably as night drew on, and the thermometer outside was 73° below zero.

The poor hunters were half frozen, and so worn out that they could hardly drag their limbs along; but the stoves were roaring and crackling cheerily, and the big kitchen fire waiting to cook such game as might be brought in. Clawbonny donned his official apron again, and soon had his seal cutlets dressed and smoking on the table. By nine o’clock the whole party were enjoying a good supper, and Bell couldn’t help exclaiming —

“Well, even at the risk of being taken for an Esquimaux, I must confess eating is the most important business if one has to winter in these regions. A good meal isn’t to be sneezed at.”

They all had their mouths crammed too full to speak, but the Doctor signified his agreement with Bell’s views by an approving nod.

The cutlets were pronounced first-rate, and it seemed as if they were, for they were all eaten, to the very last morsel.

For dessert they had coffee, which the Doctor brewed himself in a French coffee-pot over spirits-of-wine. He never allowed anybody but himself to concoct this precious beverage; for he made a point of serving it boiling hot, always declaring it was not fit to drink unless it burnt his tongue. This evening he took it so scalding that Altamont exclaimed —

“You’ll skin your throat!”

“Not a bit of it,” was the Doctor’s reply.

“Then your palate must be copper-sheathed,” said Johnson.

“Not at all, friends. I advise you to copy my example. Many persons, and I am one, can drink coffee at a temperature of 131°.”

“131°?” said Altamont; “why, that is hotter than the hand could bear!”

“Of course it is, Altamont, for the hand could not bear more than 122°, but the palate and tongue are less sensitive.”

“You surprise me.”

“Well, I will convince you it is fact,” returned Clawbonny, and taking up a thermometer, he plunged it into the steaming coffee. He waited till the mercury rose as high as 131° and then withdrew it, and swallowed the liquid with evident gusto.

Bell tried to follow his example, but burnt his mouth severely.

“You are not used to it,” said the Doctor, coolly.

“Can you tell us, Clawbonny,” asked Altamont, “what is the highest temperature that the human body can bear.”

“Yes, several curious experiments have been made in that respect. I remember reading of some servant girls, in the town of Rochefoucauld, in

France, who could stay ten minutes in a baker’s large oven when the temperature was 300°, while potatoes and meat were cooking all round them.”

“What girls!” exclaimed Altamont.

“Well, there is another case, where eight of our own countrymen — Fordyce, Banks, Solander, Blagdin, Home, Nooth, Lord Seaforth, and Captain Phillips — went into one as hot as 200°, where eggs and beef were frizzling.”

“And they were Englishmen!” said Bell, with a touch of national pride.

“Oh, the Americans could have done better than that,” said Altamont.

“They would have roasted,” returned the Doctor, laughing. “At all events they have never tried it, so I shall stand up for my countrymen. There is one more instance I recollect, and really it is so incredible, that it would be impossible to believe it, if it were not attested by unimpeachable evidence. The Duke of Ragusa and

Dr. Jung, a Frenchman and an Austrian, saw a Turk plunge into a bath at 170°.”

“But that is not so astonishing as those servant girls, or our own countrymen,” said Johnson.

“I beg your pardon,” replied Clawbonny; “there is a great difference between plunging into hot air and hot water. Hot air produces perspiration, which protects the skin, but boiling water scalds. The *maximum* heat of baths is 107°, so that this Turk must have been an extraordinary fellow to endure such temperature.”

“What is the mean temperature, Mr. Clawbonny, of animated beings?” asked Johnson.

“That varies with the species,” replied the Doctor. “Birds have the highest, especially the duck and the hen. The mammalia come next, and human beings. The temperature of Englishmen averages 101°.”

“I am sure Mr. Altamont is going to claim a higher rate for his countrymen,” said Johnson, smiling.

“Well, sure enough, we’ve some precious hot ones among us, but as I never have put a thermometer down their throats to ascertain, I can’t give you statistics.”

“There is no sensible difference,” said the Doctor, “between men of different races when they are placed under the same conditions, whatever their food may be. I may almost say their temperature would be the same at the Equator as the Pole.”

“Then the heat of our bodies is the same here as in England,” replied Altamont.

“Just about it. The other species of mammalia are generally hotter than human beings. The horse, the hare, the elephant, the porpoise, and the tiger are nearly the same; but the cat, the squirrel, the rat, the panther, the sheep, the ox, the dog, the monkey, and the goat, are as high as 103°; and the pig is 104°.”

“Rather humiliating to us,” put in Altamont.

“Then come the amphibia and the fish,” resumed the Doctor, “whose temperature varies with that of the water. The serpent has a temperature of 86°, the frog 70°, and the shark several degrees less. Insects appear to have the temperature of air and water.”

“All this is very well,” interrupted Hatteras, who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation, “and we are obliged to the Doctor for his scientific information; but we are really talking as if we were going to brave the heat of the torrid zone. I think it would be far more seasonable to speak of cold, if the Doctor could tell us what is the lowest temperature on record.”

“I can enlighten you on that too,” replied the Doctor. “There are a great number of memorable winters, which appear to have come at intervals of about forty-one years. In 1364, the Rhone was frozen over as far as Arles; in 1408, the Danube was frozen throughout its entire extent, and the wolves crossed the Cattigut on firm ground; in 1509, the Adriatic and the Mediterranean were frozen at Venice and Marseilles, and the Baltic on the 10th of April; in 1608, all the cattle died in England from the cold; in 1789, the Thames was frozen as far as Gravesend; and the frightful winter of 1813 will long be remembered in France. The earliest and longest ever known in the present century was in 1829. So much for Europe.”

“But here, within the Polar circle, what is the lowest degree?” asked Altamont.

“My word!” said the Doctor. “I think we have experienced the lowest ourselves, for one day the thermometer was 72° below zero, and, if my memory serves me right, the lowest temperature mentioned hitherto by Arctic voyagers has been 61° at Melville Island, 65° at Port Felix, and 70° at Fort Reliance.”

“Yes,” said Hatteras, “it was the unusual severity of the winter that barred our progress, for it came on just at the worst time possible.”

“You were stopped, you say?” asked Altamont, looking fixedly at the captain.

“Yes, in our voyage west,” the Doctor hastened to reply.

“Then the maximum and minimum temperatures,” said Altamont, resuming the conversation, “are about 200° apart. So you see, my friends, we may make ourselves easy.”

“But if the sun were suddenly extinguished,” suggested Johnson, “would not the earth’s temperature be far lower?”

“There is no fear of such a catastrophe; but, even should it happen, the temperature would be scarcely any different.”

“That’s curious.”

“It is; but Fourrier, a learned Frenchman, has proved the fact incontestably. If it were not the case, the difference between day and night would be far greater, as also the degree of cold at the Poles. But now I think, friends, we should be the better of a few hours’ sleep. Who has charge of the stove?”

“It is my turn to-night,” said Bell.

“Well, pray keep up a good fire, for it is a perishing night.”

“Trust me for that,” said Bell. “But do look out, the sky is all in a blaze.”

“Ay! it is a magnificent aurora,” replied the Doctor, going up to the window. “How beautiful! I never tire gazing at it.”

No more he ever did, though his companions had become so used to such displays that they hardly noticed them now. He soon followed the example of the others, however, and lay down on his bed beside the fire, leaving Bell to mount guard.

CHAPTER X.

WINTER PLEASURES

It is a dreary affair to live at the Pole, for there is no going out for many long months, and nothing to break the weary monotony.

The day after the hunting excursion was dark and snowy, and Clawbonny could find no occupation except polishing up the ice walls of the hut as they became damp with the heat inside, and emptying out the snow which drifted into the long passage leading to the inner door. The “Snow- House” stood out well, defying storm and tempest, and the snow only seemed to increase the thickness of the walls.

The storehouses, too, did not give way the least; but though they were only a few yards off, it was found necessary to lay in enough provisions for the day, as very often the weather made it almost impossible to venture that short distance.

The unloading of the *Porpoise* turned out to have been a wise precaution, for she was slowly but surely being crashed to pieces by the silent, irresistible pressure around her. Still the Doctor was always hoping enough planks might be sufficiently sound to construct a small vessel to convey them back to England, but the right time to build had not come.

The five men were consequently compelled to spend the greater part of the day in complete idleness. Hatteras lolled on his bed absorbed in thought. Altamont smoked or dozed, and the Doctor took care not to disturb either of them, for he was in perpetual fear of a quarrel between them.

At meal times he always led the conversation away from irritating topics and sought, as far as possible, to instruct and interest all parties. Whenever he was not engaged with the preparation of his notes, he gave them dissertations on history, geography, or meteorology, handling his subject in an easy, though philosophical manner, drawing lessons from the most trivial incidents. His inexhaustible memory was never at a loss for fact or illustration when his good humour and geniality made him the life and soul of the little company. He was implicitly trusted by all, even by Hatteras, who cherished a deep affection for him.

Yet no man felt the compulsory confinement more painfully than Clawbonny. He longed ardently for the breaking up of the frost to resume his excursions though he dreaded the rivalry that might ensue between the two captains.

Yet things must come to a crisis soon or late, and meantime he resolved to use his best endeavors to bring both parties to a better mind, but to reconcile an American and an Englishman was no easy task. He and Johnson had many a talk on the subject, for the old sailor’s views quite coincided with his own as to the difficult complications which awaited them in the future.

However, the bad weather continued, and leaving Fort Providence, even for an hour, was out of the question. Day and night they were pent up in these glittering ice-walls, and time hung heavily on their hands, at least on all but the Doctor’s, and he always managed to find some occupation for himself.

“I declare,” said Altamont, one evening; “life like this is not worth having. We might as well be some of those reptiles that sleep all the winter. But I suppose there is no help for it.”

“I am afraid not,” said the Doctor; “unfortunately we are too few in number to get up any amusement.”

“Then you think if there were more of us, we should find more to do?”

“Of course: when whole ships’ crews have wintered here, they have managed to while away the time famously.”

“Well, I must say I should like to know how. It would need a vast amount of ingenuity to extract anything amusing out of our circumstances. I suppose they did not play at charades?”

“No, but they introduced the press and the theatre.”

“What? They had a newspaper?” exclaimed the American.

“They acted a comedy?” said Bell.

“That they did,” said the Doctor. “When Parry wintered at Melville Island, he started both amusements among his men, and they met with great success.”

“Well, I must confess, I should like to have been there,” returned Johnson; “for it must have been rather curious work.”

“Curious and amusing too, my good Johnson. Lieutenant Beechey was the theatre manager, and Captain Sabina chief editor of the newspaper called ‘The Winter Chronicle, or the Gazette of Northern Georgia.’”

“Good titles,” said Altamont.

“The newspaper appeared daily from the 1st of November, 1819, to the 20th of March, 1820. It reported the different excursions, and hunting parties, and accidents, and adventures, and published amusing stories. No doubt the articles were not up to the ‘Spectator’ or the ‘Daily Telegraph,’ but the readers were neither critical nor *blasé*, and found great pleasure in their perusal.”

“My word!” said Altamont. “I should like to read some of the articles.”

“Would you? Well, you shall judge for yourself.”

“What! can you repeat them from memory?”

“No; but you had Parry’s Voyages on board the *Porpoise*, and I can read you his own narrative if you like.”

This proposition was so eagerly welcomed that the Doctor fetched the book forthwith, and soon found the passage in question.

“Here is a letter,” he said, “addressed to the editor.”

“‘Your proposition to establish a journal has been received by us with the greatest satisfaction. I am convinced that, under your direction, it will be a great source of amusement, and go a long way to lighten our hundred days of darkness.

“‘The interest I take in the matter myself has led me to study the effect of your announcement on my comrades, and I can testify, to use reporter’s language, that the thing has produced an immense sensation.

“‘The day after your prospectus appeared, there was an unusual and unprecedented demand for ink among us, and our green tablecloth was deluged with snippings and parings of quill-pens, to the injury of one of our servants, who got a piece driven right under his nail. I know for a fact that Sergeant Martin had no less than nine pen-knives to sharpen.

"'It was quite a novel sight to see all the writing-desks brought out, which had not made their appearance for a couple of months, and judging by the reams of paper visible, more than one visit must have been made to the depths of the hold.

"'I must not forget to tell you, that I believe attempts will be made to slip into your box sundry articles which are not altogether original, as they have been published already. I can declare that, no later than last night, I saw an author bending over his desk, holding a volume of the "Spectator" open with one hand, and thawing the frozen ink in his pen at the lamp with the other. I need not warn you to be on your guard against such tricks, for it would never do for us to have articles in our "Winter Chronicle" which our great-grandfathers read over their breakfast-tables a century ago.'"

"Well, well," said Altamont, "there is a good deal of clever humour in that writer. He must have been a sharp fellow."

"You're right. Here is an amusing catalogue of Arctic tribulations: —

"'To go out in the morning for a walk, and the moment you put your foot outside the ship, find yourself immersed in the cook's water-hole.

"'To go out hunting, and fall in with a splendid reindeer, take aim, and find your gun has gone off with a flash in the pan, owing to damp powder.

"'To set out on a march with a good supply of soft new bread in your pocket, and discover, when you want to eat, that it has frozen so hard that you would break your teeth if you attempted to bite it through.

“‘To rush from the table when it is reported that a wolf is in sight, and on coming back to find the cat has eaten your dinner.

“‘To be returning quietly home from a walk, absorbed in profitable meditation, and suddenly find yourself in the embrace of a bear.’

“We might supplement this list ourselves,” said the Doctor, “to almost any amount, for there is a sort of pleasure in enumerating troubles when one has got the better of them.”

“I declare,” said Altamont, “this ‘Winter Journal’ is an amusing affair. I wish we could subscribe to it.”

“Suppose we start one,” said Johnson.

“For us five!” exclaimed Clawbonny; “we might do for editors, but there would not be readers enough.”

“No, nor spectators enough, if we tried to get up a comedy,” added Altamont.

“Tell us some more about Captain Parry’s theatre,” said Johnson; “did they play new pieces?”

“Certainly. At first two volumes on board the ‘Hecla’ were gone through, but as there was a performance once a fortnight, this *repertoire* was soon exhausted. Then they had to improvise fresh plays; Parry himself composed one which had immense success. It was called ‘The North-West Passage, or the End of the Voyage.’”

“A famous title,” said Altamont; “but I must confess, if I had chosen such a subject, I should have been at a loss for the *dénouement*.”

“You are right,” said Bell; “who can say what the end will be?”

“What does that matter?” replied Mr. Clawbonny. “Why should we trouble about the last act, while the first ones are going on well. Leave all that to Providence, friends; let us each play our own *rôle* as perfectly as we can, and since the *dénouement* belongs to the Great Author of all things, we will trust his skill. He will manage our affairs for us, never fear.”

“Well, we’d better go and dream about it,” said Johnson, “for it’s getting late, and it is time we went to bed,” said Johnson.

“You’re in a great hurry, old fellow,” replied the Doctor.

“Why would you sit up, Mr. Clawbonny? I am so comfortable in my bed, and then I always have such good dreams. I dream invariably of hot countries, so that I might almost say, half my life is spent in the tropics, and half at the North Pole.”

“You’re a happy man, Johnson,” said Altamont, “to be blessed with such a fortunate organization.”

“Indeed I am,” replied Johnson.

“Well, come, after that it would be positive cruelty to keep our good friend pining here,” said the Doctor, “his tropical sun awaits him, so let’s all go to bed.”

CHAPTER XI

TRACES OF BEARS

On the 26th of April during the night there was a sudden change in the weather. The thermometer fell several degrees, and the inmates of Doctor's House could hardly keep themselves warm even in their beds. Altamont had charge of the stove, and he found it needed careful replenishing to preserve the temperature at 50° above zero.

This increase of cold betokened the cessation of the stormy weather, and the Doctor hailed it gladly as the harbinger of his favourite hunting and exploring expeditions.

He rose early next morning, and climbed up to the top of the cone. The wind had shifted north, the air was clear, and the snow firm and smooth to the tread.

Before long the five companions had left Doctor's House, and were busily engaged in clearing the heavy masses of snow off the roof and sides, for the house was no longer distinguishable from the plateau, as the snow had drifted to a depth of full fifteen feet. It took two hours to remove the frozen snow, and restore the architectural form of the dwelling. At length the granite foundations appeared, and the storehouses and powder magazines were once more accessible.

But as, in so uncertain a climate, a storm might cut off their supplies any day, they wisely resolved to provide for any such emergency by carrying over a good stock of provisions to the kitchen; and then Clawbonny, Altamont, and Bell started off with their guns in search of game, for the want of fresh food began to be urgently felt.

The three companions went across the east side of the cone, right down into the centre of the far-stretching, snow-covered plain beneath, but they did not need to go far, for numerous traces of animals appeared on all sides within a circle of two miles round Fort Providence.

After gazing attentively at these traces for some minutes, the hunters looked at each other silently, and then the Doctor exclaimed: —

“Well, these are plain enough, I think!”

“Ay, only too plain,” added Bell, “bears have been here!”

“First rate game!” said Altamont. “There’s only one fault about it.”

“And what is that?” asked Bell.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean this — there are distinct traces of five bears, and five bears are rather too much for five men.”

“Are you sure there are five?” said Clawbonny.

“Look and see for yourself. Here is one footprint, and there is another quite different. These claws are far wider apart than those; and see here, again, that paw belongs to a much smaller bear. I tell you, if you look carefully, you will see the marks of all five different bears distinctly.”

“You’re right,” said Bell, after a close inspection.

“If that’s the case, then,” said the Doctor, “we must take care what we’re about, and not be foolhardy, for these animals are starving after the severe winter, and they might be extremely dangerous to encounter and, since we are sure of their number — — ”

“And of their intentions, too,” put in Altamont.

“You think they have discovered our presence here?”

“No doubt of it, unless we have got into a bear-pass, but then, why should these footprints be in a circle round our fort? Look, these animals have come from the south-east, and stopped at this place, and commenced to reconnoitre the coast.”

“You’re right,” said the Doctor, “and, what’s more, it is certain that they have been here last night.”

“And other nights before that,” replied Altamont.

“I don’t think so,” rejoined Clawbonny. “It is more likely that they waited till the cessation of the tempest, and were on their way down to the bay, intending to catch seals, when they scented us.”

“Well, we can easily find out if they come tonight,” said Altamont.

“How?”

“By effacing all the marks in a given place, and if to-morrow, we find fresh ones, it will be evident that Fort Providence is the goal for which the bears are bound.”

“Very good, at any rate we shall know, then, what we have to expect.”

The three hunters set to work, and scraped the snow over till all the footprints were obliterated for a considerable distance.

“It is singular, though,” said Bell, “that bears could scent us all that way off; we have not been burning anything fat which might have attracted them.”

“Oh!” replied the Doctor, “bears are endowed with a wonderfully keen sense of smell, and a piercing sight; and, more than that, they are extremely intelligent, almost more so than any other animal. They have smelt something unusual; and, besides, who can tell whether they have not even found their way as far as our plateau during the tempest?”

“But then, why did they stop here last night?” asked Altamont.

“Well, that’s a question I can’t answer, but there is no doubt they will continue narrowing their circles, till they reach Fort Providence.”

“We shall soon see,” said Altamont.

“And, meantime, we had best go on,” added the Doctor, “and keep a sharp look out.”

But not a sign of anything living was visible, and after a time they returned to the snow-house.

Hatteras and Johnson were informed how matters stood, and it was resolved to maintain a vigilant watch. Night came, but nothing disturbed its calm splendour — nothing was heard to indicate approaching danger.

Next morning at early dawn, Hatteras and his companions, well armed, went out to reconnoitre the state of the snow. They found the same identical footmarks, but somewhat nearer. Evidently the enemy was bent on the siege of Fort Providence.

“But where can the bears be?” said Bell.

“Behind the icebergs watching us,” replied the Doctor. “Don’t let us expose ourselves imprudently.”

“What about going hunting, then?” asked Altamont.

“We must put it off for a day or two, I think, and rub out the marks again, and see if they are renewed to-morrow.”

The Doctor’s advice was followed, and they entrenched themselves for the present in the fort. The lighthouse was taken down, as it was not of actual use meantime, and might help to attract the bears. Each took it in turn to keep watch on the upper plateau.

The day passed without a sign of the enemy’s existence, and next morning, when they hurried eagerly out to examine the snow, judge their astonishment to find it wholly untouched!

“Capital!” exclaimed Altamont. “The bears are put off the scent; they have no perseverance, and have grown tired waiting for us. They are off, and a good riddance. Now let us start for a day’s hunting.”

“Softly, softly,” said the Doctor; “I’m not so sure they have gone. I think we had better wait one day more. It is evident the bears have not been here last night, at least on this side; but still — ”

“Well, let us go right round the plateau, and see how things stand,” said the impatient Altamont.

“All right,” said Clawbonny. “Come along.”

Away they went, but it was impossible to scrutinize carefully a track of two miles, and no trace of the enemy was discoverable.

“Now, then, can’t we go hunting?” said Altamont.

“Wait till to-morrow,” urged the Doctor again.

His friend was very unwilling to delay, but yielded the point at last, and returned to the fort.

As on the preceding night, each man took his hour’s watch on the upper plateau. When it came to Altamont’s turn, and he had gone out to relieve Bell, Hatteras called his old companions round him. The Doctor left his desk and Johnson his cooking, and hastened to their captain’s side, supposing he wanted to talk over their perilous situation; but Hatteras never gave it a thought.

“My friends,” he said, “let us take advantage of the American’s absence to speak of business. There are things which cannot concern him, and with which I do not choose him to meddle.”

Johnson and Clawbonny looked at each other, wondering what the captain was driving at.

“I wish,” he continued, “to talk with you about our plans for the future.”

“All right! talk away while we are alone,” said the Doctor.

“In a month, or six weeks at the outside, the time for making distant excursions will come again. Have you thought of what we had better undertake in summer?”

“Have you, captain?” asked Johnson.

"Have I? I may say that not an hour of my life passes without revolving in my mind my one cherished purpose. I suppose not a man among you intends to retrace his steps?"

No one replied, and Hatteras went on to say —

"For my own part, even if I must go alone, I will push on to the North Pole. Never were men so near it before, for we are not more than 360 miles distant at most, and I will not lose such an opportunity without making every attempt to reach it, even though it be an impossibility. What are your views, Doctor?"

"Your own, Hatteras."

"And yours, Johnson?"

"Like the Doctor's."

"And yours, Bell?"

"Captain," replied the carpenter, "it is true we have neither wives nor children waiting us in England, but, after all, it is one's country — one's native land! Have you no thoughts of returning home?"

"We can return after we have discovered the Pole quite as well as before, and even better. Our difficulties will not increase, for as we near the Pole we get away from the point of greatest cold. We have fuel and provisions enough. There is nothing to stop us, and we should be culpable, in my opinion, if we allowed ourselves to abandon the project."

"Very well, captain, I'll go along with you."

“That’s right; I never doubted you,” said Hatteras. “We shall succeed, and England will have all the glory.”

“But there is an American among us!” said Johnson.

Hatteras could not repress an impatient exclamation.

“I know it!” he said, in a stern voice.

“We cannot leave him behind,” added the Doctor.

“No, we can’t,” repeated Hatteras, almost mechanically.

“And he will be sure to go too.”

“Yes, he will go too; but who will command?”

“You, captain.”

“And if you all obey my orders, will the Yankee refuse?”

“I shouldn’t think so; but suppose he should, what can be done?”

“He and I must fight it out, then.”

The three Englishmen looked at Hatteras, but said nothing. Then the Doctor asked how they were to go.

“By the coast, as far as possible,” was the reply.

“But what if we find open water, as is likely enough?”

“Well, we’ll go across it.”

“But we have no boat.”

Hatteras did not answer, and looked embarrassed.

“Perhaps,” suggested Bell, “we might make a ship out of some of the planks of the *Porpoise*.”

“Never!” exclaimed Hatteras, vehemently.

“Never!” said Johnson.

The Doctor shook his head. He understood the feeling of the captain.

“Never!” reiterated Hatteras. “A boat made out of an American ship would be an American!”

“But, captain — — ” began Johnson.

The Doctor made a sign to the old boatswain not to press the subject further, and resolved in his own mind to reserve the question for discussion at a more opportune moment. He managed to turn the conversation to other matters, till it abruptly terminated by the entrance of Altamont.

This ended the day, and the night passed quietly without the least disturbance. The bears had evidently disappeared.

CHAPTER XII

IMPRISONED IN DOCTOR’S HOUSE

The first business next day was to arrange for a hunt. It was settled that Altamont, Bell, and Hatteras should form the party, while Clawbonny should go and explore as far as Isle Johnson, and make some hydrographic notes and Johnson should remain behind to keep house.

The three hunters soon completed their preparations. They armed themselves each with a double barrelled revolver and a rifle, and took plenty of powder and shot. Each man also carried in his belt his indispensable snow knife and hatchet, and a small supply of pemmican in case night should surprise them before their return.

Thus equipped, they could go far, and might count on a good supply of game.

At eight o’clock they started, accompanied by Duk, who frisked and gambolled with delight. They went up the hill to the east, across the cone, and down into the plain below.

The Doctor next took his departure, after agreeing with Johnson on a signal of alarm in case of danger.

The old boatswain was left alone, but he had plenty to do. He began by unfastening the Greenland dogs, and letting them out for a run after their long, wearisome confinement. Then he attended to divers housekeeping matters. He had to replenish the stock of combustibles and provisions, to arrange the store-houses, to mend several broken utensils, to repair the rents in coverlets, and get new shoes ready for summer excursions. There was no lack of work, and the old sailor’s nimble clever fingers could do anything.

While his hands were busy, his mind was occupied with the conversation of the preceding evening. He thought with regret over the captain’s obstinacy, and yet he felt that there was something grand and even heroic in his determination that neither an American nor an American ship should first touch the Pole.

The hunters had been gone about an hour when Johnson suddenly heard the report of a gun.

“Capital!” he exclaimed. “They have found something, and pretty quickly too, for me to hear their guns so distinctly. The atmosphere must be very clear.”

A second and a third shot followed.

“Bravo!” again exclaimed the boatswain; “they must have fallen in luck’s way!”

But when three more shots came in rapid succession, the old man turned pale, and a horrible thought crossed his mind, which made him rush out and climb hastily to the top of the cone. He shuddered at the sight which met his eyes. The three hunters, followed by Duk, were tearing home at full speed, followed by the five huge bears! Their six balls had evidently taken no effect, and the terrible monsters were close on their heels. Hatteras, who brought up the rear, could only manage to keep off his pursuers by flinging down one article after another — first his cap, then his hatchet, and, finally, his gun. He knew that the inquisitive bears would stop and examine every object, sniffing all round it, and this gave him a little time, otherwise he could not have escaped, for these animals outstrip the fleetest horse, and one monster was so near that Hatteras had to brandish his knife vigorously, to ward off a tremendous blow of his paw.

At last, though panting and out of breath, the three men reached Johnson safely, and slid down the rock with him into the snow-house. The bears stopped short on the upper plateau, and Hatteras and his companions lost no time in barring and barricading them out.

“Here we are at last!” exclaimed Hatteras; “we can defend ourselves better now. It is five against five.”

“Four!” said Johnson in a frightened voice.

“How?”

“The Doctor!” replied Johnson, pointing to the empty sitting-room.

“Well, he is in Isle Johnson.”

“A bad job for him,” said Bell.

“But we can’t leave him to his fate, in this fashion,” said Altamont.

“No, let’s be off to find him at once,” replied Hatteras.

He opened the door, but soon shut it, narrowly escaping a bear’s hug.

“They are there!” he exclaimed.

“All?” asked Bell.

“The whole pack.”

Altamont rushed to the windows, and began to fill up the deep embrasure with blocks of ice, which he broke off the walls of the house.

His companions followed his example silently. Not a sound was heard but the low, deep growl of Duk.

To tell the simple truth, however, it was not their own danger that occupied their thoughts, but their absent friend, the Doctor's. It was for him they trembled, not for themselves. Poor Clawbonny, so good and devoted as he had been to every member of the little colony! This was the first time they had been separated from him. Extreme peril, and most likely a frightful death awaited him, for he might return unsuspectingly to Fort Providence, and find himself in the power of these ferocious animals.

"And yet," said Johnson, "unless I am much mistaken, he must be on guard. Your repeated shots cannot but have warned him. He must surely be aware that something unusual has happened."

"But suppose he was too far away to hear them," replied Altamont, "or has not understood the cause of them? It is ten chances to one but he'll come quickly back, never imagining the danger. The bears are screened from sight by the crag completely."

"We must get rid of them before he comes," said Hatteras.

"But how?" asked Bell.

It was difficult to reply to this, for a sortie was out of the question. They had taken care to barricade the entrance passage, but the bears could easily find a way in if they chose. So it was thought advisable to keep a close watch on their movements outside, by listening attentively in each room, so as to be able to resist all attempts at invasion. They could hear them distinctly prowling about, growling and scraping the walls with their enormous paws.

However, some action must be taken speedily, for time was passing. Altamont resolved to try a port-hole through which he might fire on his assailants. He had soon scooped out a hole in the wall, but his gun was hardly pushed through, when it was seized with irresistible force, and wrested from his grasp before he could even fire.

“Confound it!” he exclaimed, “we’re no match for them.”

And he hastened to stop up the breach as fast as possible.

This state of things had lasted upwards of an hour, and there seemed no prospect of a termination. The question of a *sortie* began now to be seriously discussed. There was little chance of success, as the bears could not be attacked separately, but Hatteras and his companions had grown so impatient, and it must be confessed were also so much ashamed of being kept in prison by beasts, that they would even have dared the risk if the captain had not suddenly thought of a new mode of defence.

He took Johnson’s furnace-poker, and thrust it into the stove while he made an opening in the snow wall, or rather a partial opening, for he left a thin sheet of ice on the outer side. As soon as the poker was red hot, he said to his comrades who stood eagerly watching him, wondering what he was going to do —

“This red-hot bar will keep off the bears when they try to get hold of it, and we shall be able easily to fire across it without letting them snatch away our guns.”

“A good idea,” said Bell, posting himself beside Altamont.

Hatteras withdrew the poker, and instantly plunged it in the wall. The melting snow made a loud hissing noise, and two bears ran and made a snatch at the glowing bar; but they fell back with a terrible howl, and at the same moment four shots resounded, one after the other.

“Hit!” exclaimed Altamont.

“Hit!” echoed Bell.

“Let us repeat the dose,” said Hatteras, carefully stopping up the opening meantime.

The poker was again thrust into the fire, and in a few minutes was ready for Hatteras to recommence operations.

Altamont and Bell reloaded their guns, and took their places; but this time the poker would not pass through.

“Confound the beasts!” exclaimed the impetuous American.

“What’s the matter?” asked Johnson.

“What’s the matter? Why, those plaguey animals are piling up block after block, intending to bury us alive!”

“Impossible!”

“Look for yourself; the poker can’t get through. I declare it is getting absurd now.”

It was worse than absurd, it was alarming. Things grew worse. It was evident that the bears meant to stifle their prey, for the sagacious animals were heaping up huge masses, which would make escape impossible.

“It is too bad,” said old Johnson, with a mortified look. “One might put up with men, but bears!”

Two hours elapsed without bringing any relief to the prisoners; to go out was impossible, and the thick walls excluded all sound. Altamont walked impatiently up and down full of exasperation and excitement at finding himself worsted for once. Hatteras could think of nothing but the Doctor, and of the serious peril which threatened him.

“Oh, if Mr. Clawbonny were only here!” said Johnson.

“What could he do?” asked Altamont.

“Oh, he’d manage to get us out somehow.”

“How, pray?” said the American, crossly.

“If I knew that I should not need him. However, I know what his advice just now would be.”

“What?”

“To take some food; that can’t hurt us. What do you say, Mr. Altamont?”

“Oh, let’s eat, by all means, if that will please you, though we’re in a ridiculous, not to say humiliating, plight.”

“I’ll bet you we’ll find a way out after dinner.”

No one replied, but they seated themselves round the table.

Johnson, trained in Clawbonny’s school, tried to be brave and unconcerned about the danger, but he could scarcely manage it. His jokes stuck in his throat. Moreover, the whole party began to feel uncomfortable. The atmosphere was getting dense, for every opening was hermetically sealed. The stoves would hardly draw, and it was evident would soon go out altogether for want of oxygen.

Hatteras was the first to see their fresh danger, and he made no attempt to hide it from his companions.

“If that is the case,” said Altamont, “we must get out at all risks.”

“Yes,” replied Hatteras; “but let us wait till night. We will make a hole in the roof, and let in a provision of air, and then one of us can fire out of it on the bears.”

“It is the only thing we can do, I suppose,” said Altamont.

So it was agreed; but waiting was hard work, and Altamont could not refrain from giving vent to his impatience by thundering maledictions on the bears, and abusing the ill fate which had placed them in such an awkward and humbling predicament. “It was beasts versus men,” he said, “and certainly the men cut a pretty figure.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MINE.

Night drew on, and the lamp in the sitting-room already began to burn dim for want of oxygen.

At eight o’clock the final arrangements were completed, and all that remained to do was to make an opening in the roof.

They had been working away at this for some minutes, and Bell was showing himself quite an adept in the business, when Johnson, who had been keeping watch in the sleeping room, came hurriedly in to his companions, pulling such a long face, that the captain asked immediately what was the matter?

“Nothing exactly,” said the old sailor, “and yet — ”

“Come, out with it!” exclaimed Altamont.

“Hush! don’t you hear a peculiar noise?”

“Where?”

“Here, on this side, on the wall of the room.”

Bell stopped working, and listened attentively like the rest. Johnson was right; a noise there certainly was on the side wall, as if some one were cutting the ice.

“Don’t you hear it?” repeated Johnson.

“Hear it? Yes, plain enough,” replied Altamont.

“Is it the bears?” asked Bell.

“Most assuredly.”

“Well; they have changed their tactics,” said old Johnson, “and given up the idea of suffocating us.”

“Or may be they suppose we are suffocated by now,” suggested the American, getting furious at his invisible enemies.

“They are going to attack us,” said Bell.

“Well, what of it?” returned Hatteras.

“We shall have a hand-to-hand struggle, that’s all.”

“And so much the better,” added Altamont; “that’s far more to my taste; I have had enough of invisible foes — let me see my antagonist, and then I can fight him.”

“Ay,” said Johnson; “but not with guns. They would be useless here.”

“With knife and hatchet then,” returned the American.

The noise increased, and it was evident that the point of attack was the angle of the wall formed by its junction with the cliff.

“They are hardly six feet off now,” said the boatswain.

“Right, Johnson!” replied Altamont; “but we have time enough to be ready for them.”

And seizing a hatchet, he placed himself in fighting attitude, planting his right foot firmly forward and throwing himself back.

Hatteras and the others followed his example, and Johnson took care to load a gun in case of necessity.

Every minute the sound came nearer, till at last only a thin coating separated them from their assailants.

Presently this gave way with a loud crack, and a huge dark mass rolled over into the room.

Altamont had already swung his hatchet to strike, when he was arrested by a well-known voice, exclaiming —

“For Heaven’s sake, stop!”

“The Doctor! the Doctor!” cried Johnson.

And the Doctor it actually was who had tumbled in among them in such undignified fashion.

“How do ye do, good friends?” he said, picking himself smartly up.

His companions stood stupefied for a moment, but joy soon loosened their tongues, and each rushed eagerly forward to welcome his old comrade with a loving embrace. Hatteras was for once fairly overcome with emotion, and positively hugged him like a child.

“And is it really you, Mr. Clawbonny?” said Johnson.

“Myself and nobody else, my old fellow. I assure you I have been far more uneasy about you than you could have been about me.”

“But how did you know we had been attacked by a troop of bears?” asked Altamont. “What we were most afraid of was that you would come quickly back to Fort Providence, never dreaming of danger.”

“Oh, I saw it all. Your repeated shots gave me the alarm. When you commenced firing I was beside the wreck of the *Porpoise*, but I climbed up a hummock, and discovered five bears close on your heels. Oh, how anxious I was for you! But when I saw you disappear down the cliff, while the bears stood hesitating on the edge, as if uncertain what to do, I felt sure that you had managed to get safely inside the house and barricade it. I crept cautiously nearer, sometimes going on all-fours, sometimes slipping between great blocks of ice, till I came at last quite close to our fort, and then I found the bears working away like beavers. They were prowling about the snow, and dragging enormous blocks of ice towards the house, piling them up like a wall, evidently intending to bury you alive. It is a lucky thing they did not take it into their heads to dash down the blocks from the summit of the cone, for you must have been crushed inevitably.”

“But what danger you were in, Mr. Clawbonny,” said Bell. “Any moment they might have turned round and attacked you.”

“They never thought of it even. Johnson’s Greenland dogs came in sight several times, but they did not take the trouble to go after them. No, they imagined themselves sure of a more savoury supper!”

“Thanks for the compliment!” said Altamont, laughing.

“Oh, there is nothing to be proud of. When I saw what the bears were up to, I determined to get back to you by some means or other. I waited till night, but as soon as it got dark I glided noiselessly along towards the powder-magazine. I had my reasons for choosing that point from which to work my way hither, and I speedily commenced operations with my snow-knife. A famous tool it is. For three mortal hours I have been hacking and heaving away, but here I am at last tired enough and starving, but still safe here."

"To share our fate!" said Altamont.

"No, to save you all; but, for any sake, give me a biscuit and a bit of meat, for I feel sinking for want of food."

A substantial meal was soon before him, but the vivacious little man could talk all the while he was eating, and was quite ready to answer any questions.

"Did you say *to save us*?" asked Bell.

"Most assuredly!" was the reply.

"Well, certainly, if you found your way in, we can find our way out by the same road."

"A likely story, and leave the field clear for the whole pack to come in and find out our stores. Pretty havoc they would make!"

"No, we must stay here," said Hatteras.

"Of course we must," replied Clawbonny, "but we'll get rid of the bears for all that."

"I told you so," said Johnson, rubbing his hands. "I knew nothing was hopeless if Mr. Clawbonny was here; he has always some expedient in his wise head."

“My poor head is very empty, I fear, but by dint of rummaging perhaps I — — ”

“Doctor,” interrupted Altamont, “I suppose there is no fear of the bears getting in by the passage you have made?”

“No, I took care to stop up the opening thoroughly, and now we can reach the powder-magazine without letting them see us.”

“All right; and now will you let us have your plan of getting rid of these comical assailants?”

“My plan is quite simple, and part of the work is done already.”

“What do you mean?”

“You shall see. But I am forgetting that I brought a companion with me.”

“What do you say?” said Johnson.

“I have a companion to introduce to you,” replied the Doctor, going out again into the passage, and bringing back a dead fox, newly killed.

“I shot it this morning,” he continued, “and never did fox come more opportunely.”

“What on earth do you mean?” asked Altamont.

“I mean to blow up the bears *en masse* with 100 lbs of powder.”

“But where is the powder?” exclaimed his friend.

“In the magazine. This passage will lead to it. I made it purposely.”

"And where is the mine to be?" inquired Altamont.

"At the furthest point from the house and stores."

"And how will you manage to entice the bears there, all to one spot?"

"I'll undertake that business; but we have talked enough, let us set to work. We have a hundred feet more to add to our passage to-night, and that is no easy matter, but as there are five of us, we can take turns at it. Bell will begin, and we will lie down and sleep meantime."

"Well, really," said Johnson, "the more I think of it, the more feasible seems the Doctor's plan."

"It is a sure one, anyway," said Clawbonny.

"So sure that I can feel the bear's fur already on my shoulder. Well, come, let's begin then."

Away he went into the gloomy passage, followed by Bell, and in a few moments they had reached the powder-magazine, and stood among the well- arranged barrels. The Doctor pointed out to his companion the exact spot where he began excavating, and then left him to his task, at which he laboured diligently for about an hour, when Altamont came to relieve him. All the snow he had dug out was taken to the kitchen and melted, to prevent its taking up room.

The captain succeeded Altamont, and was followed by Johnson. In ten hours — that is to say, about eight in the morning — the gallery was entirely open.

With the first streak of day, the Doctor was up to reconnoitre the position of the enemy. The patient animals were still occupying their old position, prowling up and down and growling. The house had already almost disappeared beneath the piled-up blocks of ice, but even while he gazed a council of war seemed being held, which evidently resulted in the determination to alter the plan of action, for suddenly all the five bears began vigorously to pull down these same heaped-up blocks.

“What are they about?” asked Hatteras, who was standing beside him.

“Well, they look to me to be bent on demolishing their own work, and getting right down to us as fast as possible; but wait a bit, my gentlemen, we’ll demolish you first. However, we have not a minute to lose.”

Hastening away to the mine, he had the chamber where the powder was to be lodged enlarged the whole breadth and height of the sloping rock against which the wall leaned, till the upper part was about a foot thick, and had to be propped up to prevent its falling in. A strong stake was fixed firmly on the granite foundation, on the top of which the dead fox was fastened. A rope was attached to the lower part of the stake, sufficiently long to reach the powder stores.

“This is the bait,” he said, pointing to the dead fox, “and here is the mine,” he added, rolling in a keg of powder containing about 100 lbs.

“But, Doctor,” said Hatteras, “won’t that blow us up too, as well as the bears?”

“No, we shall be too far from the scene of explosion. Besides, our house is solid, and we can soon repair the walls even if they should get a bit shaken.”

“And how do you propose to manage?” asked Altamont.

“See! By hauling in this rope we lower the post which props up the roof, and make it give way, and bring up the dead fox to light, and I think you will agree with me that the bears are so famished with their long fasting, that they won’t lose much time in rushing towards their unexpected meal. Well, just at that very moment, I shall set fire to the mine, and blow up both the guests and the meal.”

“Capital! Capital!” shouted Johnson, who had been listening with intense interest.

Hatteras said nothing, for he had such absolute confidence in his friend that he wanted no further explanation. But Altamont must know the why and wherefore of everything.

“But Doctor,” he said, “can you reckon on your match so exactly that you can be quite sure it will fire the mine at the right moment?”

“I don’t need to reckon at all; that’s a difficulty easily got over.”

“Then you have a match a hundred feet long?”

“No.”

“You are simply going to lay a train of powder.”

“No, that might miss fire.”

“Well, there is no way then but for one of us to devote his life to the others, and go and light the powder himself.”

“I’m ready,” said Johnson, eagerly, “ready and willing.”

“Quite useless my brave fellow,” replied the Doctor, holding out his hand. “All our lives are precious, and they will be all spared, thank God!”

“Well, I give it up!” said the American. “I’ll make no more guesses.”

“I should like to know what is the good of learning physics,” said the Doctor, smiling, “if they can’t help a man at a pinch like this. Haven’t we an electric battery, and long enough lines attached to it to serve our purpose? We can fire our mine whenever we please in an instant, and without the slightest danger.”

“Hurrah!” exclaimed Johnson.

“Hurrah!” echoed the others, without heeding whether the enemy heard them or not.

The Doctor’s idea was immediately carried out, and the connecting lines uncoiled and laid down from the house to the chamber of the mine, one end of each remaining attached to the electric pile, and the other inserted into the keg of powder.

By nine o’clock everything was ready. It was high time, for the bears were furiously engaged in the work of demolition. Johnson was stationed in the powder-magazine, in charge of the cord which held the bait.

“Now,” said Clawbonny to his companions, “load your guns, in case our assailants are not killed. Stand beside Johnson, and the moment the explosion is over rush out.”

“All right,” said Altamont.

"And now we have done all we can to help ourselves. So may Heaven help us!"

Hatteras, Altamont, and Bell repaired to the powder-magazine, while the Doctor remained alone beside the pile.

Soon he heard Johnson's voice in the distance calling out "Ready."

"All right," was the reply.

Johnson pulled his rope vigorously, and then rushed to the loop-hole to see the effect. The thin shell of ice had given way, and the body of the fox lay among the ruins. The bears were somewhat scared at first, but the next minute had eagerly rushed to seize the booty.

"Fire!" called out Johnson, and at once the electric spark was sent along the lines right into the keg of powder. A formidable explosion ensued; the house was shaken as if by an earthquake, and the walls cracked asunder. Hatteras, Altamont, and Bell hurried out with the guns, but they might spare their shot, for four of the bears lay dead, and the fifth, half roasted, though alive, was scampering away in terror as fast as his legs could carry him.

"Hurrah! Three cheers for Clawbonny," they shouted and overwhelmed the Doctor with plaudits and thanks.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN ARCTIC SPRING.

The prisoners were free, and their joy found vent in the noisiest demonstrations. They employed the rest of the day in repairing the house, which had suffered greatly by the explosion. They cleared away the blocks piled up by the animals, and filled up the rents in the walls, working with might and main, enlivened by the many songs of old Johnson.

Next morning there was a singular rise in the temperature, the thermometer going up to 15° above zero.

This comparative heat lasted several days. In sheltered spots the glass rose as high as 31°, and symptoms of a thaw appeared.

The ice began to crack here and there, and jets of salt water were thrown up, like fountains in an English park. A few days later, the rain fell in torrents.

Thick vapour rose from the snow, giving promise of the speedy disappearance of these immense masses. The sun’s pale disc became deeper in colour, and remained longer above the horizon. The night was scarcely longer than three hours.

Other tokens of spring’s approach were manifest of equal significance, the birds were returning in flocks, and the air resounded with their deafening cries. Hares were seen on the shores of the bay, and mice in such abundance that their burrows completely honeycombed the ground.

The Doctor drew the attention of his companions to the fact, that almost all these animals were beginning to lose their white winter dress, and would soon put on summer attire, while nature was already providing mosses, and poppies, and saxifragas, and short grass for their sustenance. A new world lay beneath that melting snow.

But with these inoffensive animals came back their natural enemies. Foxes and wolves arrived in search of their prey, and dismal howls broke the silence of the short night.

Arctic wolves closely resemble dogs, and their barking would deceive the most practised ears; even the canine race themselves have been deceived by it. Indeed, it seems as if the wily animals employed this ruse to attract the dogs, and make them their prey. Several navigators have mentioned the fact, and the Doctor's own experience confirmed it. Johnson took care not to let his Greenlanders loose; of Duk there was little fear; nothing could take him in.

For about a fortnight hunting was the principal occupation. There was an abundant supply of fresh meat to be had. They shot partridges, ptarmigans, and snow ortolans, which are delicious eating. The hunters never went far from Fort Providence, for game was so plentiful that it seemed waiting their guns, and the whole bay presented an animated appearance.

The thaw, meanwhile, was making rapid progress. The thermometer stood steadily at 32° above zero, and the water ran down the mountain sides in cataracts, and dashed in torrents through the ravines.

The Doctor lost no time in clearing about an acre of ground, in which he sowed the seeds of anti-scorbutic plants. He just had the pleasure of seeing tiny little green leaves begin to sprout, when the cold returned in full force.

In a single night, the thermometer lost nearly 40°; it went down to 8° below zero. Everything was frozen — birds, quadrupeds, amphibia disappeared as if by magic; seal-holes reclosed, and the ice once more became hard as granite.

The change was most striking; it occurred on the 18th of May, during the night. The Doctor was rather disappointed at having all his work to do again, but Hatteras bore the grievance most unphilosophically, as it interfered with all his plans of speedy departure.

“Do you think we shall have a long spell of this weather, Mr. Clawbonny?” asked Johnson.

“No, my friend, I don’t; it is a last blow from the cold. You see these are his dominions, and he won’t be driven out without making some resistance.”

“He can defend himself pretty well,” said Bell, rubbing his face.

“Yes; but I ought to have waited, and not have wasted my seed like an ignoramus; and all the more as I could, if necessary, have made them sprout by the kitchen stoves.”

“But do you mean to say,” asked Altamont, “that you might have anticipated the sudden change?”

“Of course, and without being a wizard. I ought to have put my seed under the protection of Saint Paucratius and the other two saints, whose fête days fall this month.”

“Absurd! Pray tell me what they have to do with it? What influence can they possibly have on the temperature?”

“An immense one, if we are to believe horticulturists, who call them the patron saints of the frost.”

“And for what reason?”

“Because generally there is a periodical frost in the month of May, and it is coldest from the 11th to the 13th. That is the fact.”

“And how is it explained?”

“In two ways. Some say that a larger number of asteroids come between the earth and the sun at this time of year, and others that the mere melting of the snow necessarily absorbs a large amount of heat, and accounts for the low temperature. Both theories are plausible enough, but the fact remains whichever we accept, and I ought to have remembered it.”

The Doctor was right, for the cold lasted till the end of the month, and put an end to all their hunting expeditions. The old monotonous life in-doors recommenced, and was unmarked by any incident except a serious illness which suddenly attacked Bell. This was violent quinsy, but, under the Doctor’s skilful treatment, it was soon cured. Ice was the only remedy he employed, administered in small pieces, and in twenty- four hours Bell was himself again.

During this compulsory leisure, Clawbonny determined to have a talk with the captain on an important subject — the building of a sloop out of the planks of the *Porpoise*.

The Doctor hardly knew how to begin, as Hatteras had declared so vehemently that he would never consent to use a morsel of American wood; yet it was high time he were brought to reason, as June was at hand, the only season for distant expeditions, and they could not start without a ship.

He thought over it a long while, and at last drew the captain aside, and said in the kindest, gentlest way —

“Hatteras, do you believe I’m your friend?”

“Most certainly I do,” replied the captain, earnestly; “my best, indeed my only friend.”

“And if I give you a piece of advice without your asking, will you consider my motive is perfectly disinterested?”

“Yes, for I know you have never been actuated by self-interest. But what are you driving at?”

“Wait, Hatteras, I have one thing more to ask. Do you look on me as a true-hearted Englishman like yourself, anxious for his country’s glory?”

Hatteras looked surprised, but simply said —

“I do.”

“You desire to reach the North Pole,” the Doctor went on; “and I understand and share your ambition, but to achieve your object you must employ the right means.”

“Well, and have I not sacrificed everything for it?”

“No, Hatteras, you have not sacrificed your personal antipathies. Even at this very moment I know you are in the mood to refuse the indispensable conditions of reaching the pole.”

“Ah! it is the boat you want to talk about, and that man — — ”

“Hatteras, let us discuss the question calmly, and examine the case on all sides. The coast on which we find ourselves at present may terminate abruptly; we have no proof that it stretches right away to the pole; indeed, if your present information prove correct, we ought to come to an open sea during the summer months. Well, supposing we reach this Arctic Ocean and find it free from ice and easy to navigate, what shall we do if we have no ship?”

Hatteras made no reply.

“Tell me, now, would you like to find yourself only a few miles from the pole and not be able to get to it?”

Hatteras still said nothing, but buried his head in his hands.

“Besides,” continued the Doctor, “look at the question in its moral aspect. Here is an Englishman who sacrifices his fortune, and even his life, to win fresh glory for his country, but because the boat which bears him across an unknown ocean, or touches the new shore, happens to be made of the planks of an American vessel — a cast-away wreck of no use to anyone — will that lessen the honour of the discovery? If you yourself had found the hull of some wrecked vessel lying deserted on the shore, would you have hesitated to make use of it; and must not a sloop built by four Englishmen and manned by four Englishmen be English from keel to gunwale?”

Hatteras was still silent.

“No,” continued Clawbonny; “the real truth is, it is not the sloop you care about: it is the man.”

“Yes, Doctor, yes,” replied the captain. “It is this American I detest; I hate him with a thorough English hatred. Fate has thrown him in my path.”

“To save you!”

“To ruin me. He seems to defy me, and speaks as if he were lord and master. He thinks he has my destiny in his hands, and knows all my projects. Didn’t we see the man in his true colours when we were giving names to the different coasts? Has he ever avowed his object in coming so far north? You will never get out of my head that this man is not the leader of some expedition sent out by the American government.”

“Well, Hatteras, suppose it is so, does it follow that this expedition is to search for the North Pole? May it not be to find the North-West Passage? But anyway, Altamont is in complete ignorance of our object, for neither Johnson, nor Bell, nor myself, have ever breathed a word to him about it, and I am sure you have not.”

“Well, let him always remain so.”

“He must be told in the end, for we can’t leave him here alone.”

“Why not? Can’t he stay here in Fort Providence?”

“He would never consent to that, Hatteras; and, moreover, to leave a man in that way, and not know whether we might find him safe when we came back, would be worse than imprudent: it would be inhuman. Altamont will come with us; he must come. But we need not disclose our projects; let us tell him nothing, but simply build a sloop for the ostensible purpose of making a survey of the coast.”

Hatteras could not bring himself to consent, but said —

“And suppose the man won’t allow his ship to be cut up?”

“In that case, you must take the law in your own hands, and build a vessel in spite of him.”

“I wish to goodness he would refuse, then!”

“He must be asked before he can refuse. I’ll undertake the asking,” said Clawbonny.

He kept his word, for that very same night, at supper, he managed to turn the conversation towards the subject of making excursions during summer for hydrographical purposes.

“You will join us, I suppose, Altamont,” he said.

“Of course,” replied the American. “We must know how far New America extends.”

Hatteras looked fixedly at his rival, but said nothing.

“And for that purpose,” continued Altamont, “we had better build a little ship out of the remains of the *Porpoise*. It is the best possible use we can make of her.”

“You hear, Bell,” said the Doctor, eagerly. “We’ll all set to work to-morrow morning.”

CHAPTER XV.

THE NORTH-WEST PASSAGE.

Next morning, Altamont Bell and the Doctor repaired to the *Porpoise*. There was no lack of wood, for, shattered as the old “three-master” had been by the icebergs, she could still supply the principal parts of a new ship, and the carpenter began his task immediately.

In the end of May, the temperature again rose, and spring returned for good and all. Rain fell copiously, and before long the melting snow was running down every little slope in falls and cascades.

Hatteras could not contain his delight at these signs of a general thaw among the ice-fields, for an open sea would bring him liberty. At last he might hope to ascertain for himself whether his predecessors were correct in their assertions about a polar basin.

This was a frequent topic of thought and conversation with him, and one evening when he was going over all the old familiar arguments in support of his theory, Altamont took up the subject, and declared his opinion that the polar basin extended west as well as east. But it was impossible for the American and Englishman, to talk long about anything without coming to words, so intensely national were both. Dr. Kane was the first bone of contention on this occasion, for the jealous Englishman was unwilling to grant his rival the glory of being a discoverer, alleging his belief that though the brave adventurer had gone far north, it was by mere chance he had made a discovery.

“Chance!” interrupted Altamont, hotly. “Do you mean to assert that it is not to Kane’s energy and science that we owe his great discovery?”

“I mean to say that Dr. Kane’s name is not worth mentioning in a country made illustrious by such names as Parry, and Franklin, and Ross, and Belcher, and Penny; in a country where the seas opened the North- West Passage to an Englishman — McClure!”

“McClure!” exclaimed the American. “Well, if ever chance favoured anyone it was that McClure. Do you pretend to deny it?”

“I do,” said Hatteras, becoming quite excited. “It was his courage and perseverance in remaining four whole winters among the ice.”

“I believe that, don’t I?” said Altamont, sneeringly. “He was caught among the bergs and could not get away; but didn’t he after all abandon his ship, the *Investigator*, and try to get back home? Besides, putting the man aside, what is the value of his discovery? I maintain that the North-West Passage is still undiscovered, for not a single ship to this day has ever sailed from Behring’s Straits to Baffin’s Bay!”

The fact was indisputable, but Hatteras started to his feet, and said —

“I will not permit the honour of an English captain to be attacked in my presence any longer!”

“You will not permit!” echoed Altamont, also springing erect. “But these are facts, and it is out of your power to destroy them!”

“Sir!” shouted Hatteras, pale with rage.

“My friends!” interposed the Doctor; “pray be calm. This is a scientific point we are discussing.”

But Hatteras was deaf to reason now, and said angrily —

"I'll tell you the facts, sir."

"And I'll tell you," retorted the irate American.

"Gentlemen," said Clawbonny, in a firm tone; "allow me to speak, for I know the facts of the case as well as and perhaps better than you, and I can state them impartially."

"Yes, yes!" cried Bell and Johnson, who had been anxiously watching the strife.

"Well, go on," said Altamont, finding himself in the minority, while Hatteras simply made a sign of acquiescence, and resumed his seat.

The Doctor brought a chart and spread it out on the table, that his auditors might follow his narration intelligibly, and be able to judge the merits of McClure for themselves.

"It was in 1848," he said, "that two vessels, the *Herald* and the *Plover*, were sent out in search of Franklin, but their efforts proving ineffectual, two others were despatched to assist them — the *Investigator*, in command of McClure, and the *Enterprise*, in command of Captain Collison. The *Investigator* arrived first in Behring's Straits, and without waiting for her consort, set out with the declared purpose to find Franklin or the North-West Passage. The gallant young officer hoped to push north as far as Melville Sound, but just at the extremity of the Strait, he was stopped by an insurmountable barrier of ice, and forced to winter there. During the long, dreary months, however, he and his officers undertook a journey over the ice-field, to make sure of its communicating with Melville Sound."

"Yes, but he did not get through," said Altamont.

“Stop a bit,” replied Clawbonny; “as soon as a thaw set in, McClure renewed his attempt to bring his ship into Melville Sound, and had succeeded in getting within twenty miles, when contrary winds set in, and dragged her south with irresistible violence. This decided the captain to alter his course. He determined to go in a westerly direction; but after a fearful struggle with icebergs, he stuck fast in the first of the series of straits which end in Baffin’s Bay, and was obliged to winter in Mercy Bay. His provisions would only hold out eighteen months longer, but he would not give up. He set out on a sledge, and reached Melville Island, hoping to fall in with some ship or other, but all he found in Winter Harbour was a cairn, which contained a document, stating that Captain Austin’s lieutenant, McClintock, had been there the preceding year. McClure replaced this document by another, which stated his intention of returning to England by the North-West Passage he had discovered, by Lancaster Sound and Baffin’s Bay, and that in the event of his not being heard of, he might be looked for north or west of Melville Island. Then he went back to Mercy Bay with undaunted courage, to pass a third winter. By the beginning of March his stock of provisions was so reduced in consequence of the utter scarcity of game through the severity of the season, that McClure resolved to send half his men to England, either by Baffin’s Bay or by McKenzie River and Hudson’s Bay. The other half would manage to work the vessel to Europe. He kept all his best sailors, and selected for departure only those to whom a fourth winter would have been fatal. Everything was arranged for their leaving, and the day fixed, when McClure, who was out walking with Lieutenant Craswell, observed a man running towards them, flinging up his arms and gesticulating frantically, and on getting nearer recognized him as Lieutenant Prim, officer on board the *Herald*, one of the ships he had parted with in Behring’s Straits two years before.

Captain Kellett, the Commander, had reached Winter Harbour, and finding McClure's document in the cairn, had dispatched his lieutenant in search of him. McClure accompanied him back, and arranged with the captain to send him his batch of invalids. Lieutenant Craswell took charge of these and conveyed them safely to Winter Harbour. Leaving them there he went across the ice four hundred and seventy miles, and arrived at Isle Beechy, where, a few days afterwards, he took passage with twelve men on board the *Phoenix,* and reached London safely on the 7th of October, 1853, having traversed the whole extent between Behring's Straits and Cape Farewell."

"Well, if arriving on one side and leaving at the other is not going through, I don't know what is!" said Hatteras.

"Yes, but he went four hundred and seventy miles over ice-fields," objected Altamont.

"What of that?"

"Everything; that is the gist of the whole argument. It was not the *Investigator* that went through."

"No," replied Clawbonny, "for, at the close of the fourth winter, McClure was obliged to leave her among the ice."

"Well, in maritime expeditions the vessel has to get through, and not the man; and if ever the Northwest Passage is practicable, it will be for ships and not sledges. If a ship cannot go, a sloop must."

"A sloop!" exclaimed Hatteras, discovering a hidden meaning in the words.

"Altamont," said the Doctor, "your distinction is simply puerile, and in that respect we all consider that you are in the wrong."

“You may easily do that,” returned the American. “It is four against one, but that will not prevent me from holding my own opinion.”

“Keep it and welcome, but keep it to yourself, if you please, for the future,” exclaimed Hatteras.

“And pray what right have you to speak to me like this, sir?” shouted Altamont, in a fury.

“My right as captain,” returned Hatteras, equally angry.

“Am I to submit to your orders, then?”

“Most assuredly, and woe to you if — — ”

The Doctor did not allow him to proceed, for he really feared the two antagonists might come to blows. Bell and Johnson seconded his endeavours to make peace, and, after a few conciliatory words, Altamont turned on his heel, and walked carelessly away, whistling “Yankee Doodle.” Hatteras went outside, and paced up and down with rapid strides. In about an hour he came back, and retired to bed without saying another word.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARCTIC ARCADIA

On the 29th of May, for the first time, the sun never set. His glowing disc just touched the boundary line of the horizon, and rose again immediately. The period was now entered when the day lasts twenty- four hours.

Next morning there was a magnificent halo; the monarch of day appeared surrounded by a luminous circle, radiant with all the prismatic colours. This phenomenon never lost its charm, for the Doctor, however frequently it occurred, and he always noted carefully down all particulars respecting it.

Before long the feathered tribes began to return, filling the air with their discordant cries. Flocks of bustards and Canadian geese from Florida or Arkansas came flying north with marvellous rapidity, bringing spring beneath their wings. The Doctor shot several, and among them one or two cranes and a solitary stork.

The snow was now fast melting, and the ice-fields were covered with “slush.” All round the bay large pools had formed, between which the soil appeared as if some product of spring.

The Doctor recommenced his sowing, for he had plenty of seed; but he was surprised to find sorrel growing already between the half-dried stones, and even pale sickly heaths, trying to show their delicate pink blossoms.

At last it began to be really hot weather. On the 15th of June, the thermometer stood at 57° above zero. The Doctor scarcely believed his eyes, but it was a positive fact, and it was soon confirmed by the changed appearance of the country.

An excursion was made to Isle Johnson, but it turned out to be a barren little islet of no importance whatever, though it gave the old boatswain infinite pleasure to know that those sea girt rocks bore his name.

There was some danger of both house and stores melting, but happily this high temperature proved exceptional, the thermometer seldom averaging much above freezing point.

By the middle of June, the sloop had made good progress, and already presented a shapely appearance. As Bell and Johnson took the work of construction entirely on themselves, the others went hunting, and succeeded in killing several deer, in spite of its being difficult game to approach. Altamont adopted the Indian practice of crawling on all fours, and adjusting his gun and arms so as to simulate horns and deceive the timid animal, till he could get near enough to take good aim.

Their principal object of pursuit, however, was the musk-ox, which Parry had met with in such numbers in Melville Island; but not a solitary specimen was to be seen anywhere about Victoria Bay, and a distant excursion was, therefore, resolved upon, which would serve the double purpose of hunting and surveying the eastern coast.

The three hunters, accompanied by Duk, set out on Monday, the 17th of June, at six in the morning, each man armed with a double-barrelled gun, a hatchet and snow-knife, and provisions for several days.

It was a fine bright morning, and by ten o’clock they had gone twelve miles; but not a living thing had crossed their path, and the hunt threatened to turn out a mere excursion.

However, they went on in hope, after a good breakfast and half-an- hour's rest.

The ground was getting gradually lower, and presented a peculiar appearance from the snow, which lay here and there in ridges unmelted. At a distance it looked like the sea when a strong wind is lashing up the waves, and cresting them with a white foam.

Before long they reached a sort of glen, at the bottom of which was a winding river. It was almost completely thawed, and already the banks were clothed with a species of vegetation, as if the sun had done his best to fertilise the soil.

"I tell you what," said the Doctor, "a few enterprising colonists might make a fine settlement here. With a little industry and perseverance wonders might be done in this country. Ah! if I am not much mistaken, it has some four-footed inhabitants already. Those frisky little fellows know the best spots to choose."

"Hares! I declare. That's jolly!" said Altamont, loading his gun.

"Stop!" cried the Doctor; "stop, you furious hunter. Let the poor little things alone; they are not thinking of running away. Look, they are actually coming to us, I do believe!"

He was right, for presently three or four young hares, gambolling away among the fresh moss and tiny heaths, came running about their legs so fearlessly and trustfully, that even Altamont was disarmed. They rubbed against the Doctor's knees, and let him stroke them till the kind-hearted man could not help saying to Altamont —

“Why give shot to those who come for caresses? The death of these little beasts could do us no good.”

“You say what’s true, Clawbonny. Let them live!” replied Hatteras.

“And these ptarmigans too, I suppose, and these long-legged plovers,” added Altamont, as a whole covey of birds flew down among the hunters, never suspecting their danger. Duk could not tell what to make of it, and stood stupefied.

It was a strange and touching spectacle to see the pretty creatures; they flew on Clawbonny’s shoulders, and lay down at his feet as if inviting friendly caresses, and doing their utmost to welcome the strangers. The whole glen echoed with their joyous cries as they darted to and fro from all parts. The good Doctor seemed some mighty enchanter.

The hunters had continued their course along the banks of the river, when a sudden bend in the valley revealed a herd of deer, eight or ten in number, peacefully browsing on some lichens that lay half-buried in the snow. They were charming creatures, so graceful and gentle, male and female, both adorned with noble antlers, wide-spreading and deeply- notched. Their skin had already lost its winter whiteness, and began to assume the brown tint of summer. Strange to say, they appeared not a whit more afraid than the birds or hares.

The three men were now right in the centre of the herd, but not one made the least movement to run away. This time the worthy Doctor had far more difficulty in restraining Altamont’s impatience, for the mere sight of such magnificent animals roused his hunting instincts, and he became quite excited; while Hatteras, on the contrary, seemed really touched to see the splendid creatures rubbing their heads so affectionately and trustfully against the good Clawbonny, the friend of every living thing.

“But, I say,” exclaimed Altamont, “didn’t we come out expressly to hunt?”

“To hunt the musk-ox, and nothing else,” replied Clawbonny. “Besides, we shouldn’t know what to do with this game, even if we killed it; we have provisions enough. Let us for once enjoy the sight of men and animals in perfect amity.”

“It proves no human beings have been here before,” said Hatteras.

“True, and that proves something more, these animals are not of American origin.”

“How do you make that out?” said Altamont.

“Why, if they had been born in North America they would have known how to treat that mammiferous biped called man, and would have fled at the first glimpse of us. No, they are from the north, most likely from the untrodden wilds of Asia, so Altamont, you have no right to claim them as fellow-countrymen.”

“Oh! a hunter doesn’t examine his game so closely as all that. Everything is grist that comes to his mill.”

“All right. Calm yourself, my brave Nimrod! For my own part, I would rather never fire another shot than make one of these beautiful creatures afraid of me. See, even Duk fraternizes with them. Believe me, it is well to be kind where we can. Kindness is power.”

“Well, well, so be it,” said Altamont, not at all understanding such scruples. “But I should like to see what you would do if you had no weapon but kindness among a pack of bears or wolves! You wouldn’t make much of it.”

“I make no pretensions to charm wild beasts. I don’t believe much in Orpheus and his enchantments. Besides, bears and wolves would not come to us like these hares, and partridges, and deer.”

“Why not? They have never seen human beings either.”

“No but they are savage by nature,” said Clawbonny, “and ferocity, like wickedness, engenders suspicion. This is true of men as well as animals.”

They spent the whole day in the glen, which the Doctor christened “Arctic Arcadia,” and when evening came they lay down to rest in the hollow of a rock, which seemed as if expressly prepared for their accommodation.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALTAMONT’S REVENGE.

Next morning, as the fine weather still continued, the hunters determined to have another search for the musk ox. It was only fair to give Altamont a chance, with the distinct understanding that he should have the right of firing, however fascinating the game they might meet. Besides, the flesh of the musk ox, though a little too highly impregnated with the smell, is savoury food, and the hunters would gladly carry back a few pounds of it to Fort Providence.

During the first part of the day, nothing occurred worth mentioning, but they noticed a considerable change in the aspect of the country, and appearances seemed to indicate that they were approaching a hilly region. This New America was evidently either a continent or an island of considerable extent.

Duk was running far ahead of his party when he stopped suddenly short, and began sniffing the ground as if he had caught scent of game. Next minute he rushed forward again with extreme rapidity, and was speedily out of sight. But loud distinct barking convinced the hunters that the faithful fellow had at last discovered the desired object.

They hurried onwards, and after an hour and a half’s quick walking, found him standing in front of two formidable looking animals, and barking furiously. The Doctor recognized them at once as belonging to the musk ox, or *Ovibos* genus, as naturalists call it, by the very wide horns touching each other at their base, by the absence of muzzle, by the narrow square chanfrin resembling that of a sheep, and by the very short tail. Their hair was long and thickly matted, and mixed with fine brown, silky wool.

These singular-looking quadrupeds were not the least afraid of Duk, though extremely surprised; but at the first glimpse of the hunters they took flight, and it was no easy task to go after them, for half an hour's swift running brought them no nearer, and made the whole party so out of breath, that they were forced to come to a halt.

"Confound the beasts!" said Altamont.

"Yes, Altamont, I'll make them over to you," replied Clawbonny; "they are true Americans, and they don't appear to have a very favourable idea of their fellow countrymen."

"That proves our hunting prowess," rejoined Altamont.

Meantime the oxen finding themselves no longer pursued, had stopped short. Further pursuit was evidently useless. If they were to be captured at all they must be surrounded, and the plateau which they first happened to have reached, was very favourable for the purpose. Leaving Duk to worry them, they went down by the neighbouring ravines; and got to the one end of the plateau, where Altamont and the Doctor hid themselves behind projecting rocks, while Hatteras went on to the other end, intending to startle the animals by his sudden appearance, and drive them back towards his companions.

"I suppose you have no objection this time to bestow a few bullets on these gentry?" said Altamont.

"Oh, no, it is 'a fair field now and no favour,'" returned Clawbonny.

The oxen had begun to shake themselves impatiently at Duk, trying to kick him off, when Hatteras started up right in front of them, shouting and chasing them back. This was the signal for Altamont and the Doctor to rush forward and fire, but at the sight of two assailants, the terrified animals wheeled round and attacked Hatteras. He met their onset with a firm, steady foot, and fired straight at their heads. But both his balls were powerless, and only served still further to madden the enraged beasts. They rushed upon the unfortunate man like furies, and threw him on the ground in an instant.

“He is a dead man!” exclaimed the Doctor, in despairing accents.

A tremendous struggle was going on in Altamont’s breast at the sight of his prostrate foe, and though his first impulse was to hasten to his help, he stopped short, battling with himself and his prejudices. But his hesitation scarcely lasted half a second, his better self conquered, and exclaiming,

“No, it would be cowardly!” he rushed forward with Clawbonny.

Hatteras full well understood how his rival felt, but would rather have died than have begged his intervention. However, he had hardly time to think about it, before Altamont was at his side.

He could not have held out much longer, for it was impossible to ward off the blows of horns and hoofs of two such powerful antagonists, and in a few minutes more he must have been torn to pieces. But suddenly two shots resounded, and Hatteras felt the balls graze his head.

[Ilustration: Dealt him such a tremendous blow on the head with his hatchet, that the skull was completely split open. — P.177]

“Courage!” shouted Altamont, flinging away his discharged weapon, and throwing himself right in front of the raging animals. One of them, shot to the heart, fell dead as he reached the spot, while the other dashed madly on

Hatteras, and was about to gore the unfortunate captain with his horns, when Altamont plunged his snow knife far into the beast’s wide open jaws with one hand, with the other dealt him such a tremendous blow on the head with his hatchet, that the skull was completely split open.

It was done so quickly that it seemed like a flash of lightning, and all was over. The second ox lay dead, and Clawbonny shouted “Hurrah! hurrah!” Hatteras was saved.

He owed his life to the man he hated the most. What a storm of conflicting passions this must have roused in his soul! But where was the emotion he could not master?

However, his action was prompt, whatever his feeling might be. Without a moment’s hesitancy, he went up to his rival, and said in a grave voice —

“Altamont, you have saved my life!”

“You saved mine,” replied the American.

There was a moment’s silence, and then Altamont added —

“We’re quits, Hatteras.”

“No, Altamont,” said the captain; “when the Doctor dragged you out of your icy tomb, I did not know who you were; but you saved me at the peril of your own life, knowing quite well who I was.”

“Why, you are a fellow-creature at any rate, and whatever faults an American may have, he is no coward.”

“No, indeed,” said the Doctor. “He is a man, every inch as much as yourself, Hatteras.”

“And like me, he shall have part in the glory that awaits us.”

“The glory of reaching the North Pole?” asked Altamont.

“Yes,” replied Hatteras, proudly.

“I guessed right, then,” said Altamont.

“And you have actually dared to conceive such a project? Oh! it is grand; I tell you it is sublime even to think of it?”

“But tell me,” said Hatteras in a hurried manner; “you were not bound for the Pole then yourself?”

Altamont hesitated.

“Come, speak out, man,” urged the Doctor.

“Well, to tell the truth, I was not, and the truth is better than self-love. No, I had no such grand purpose in view. I was trying to clear the North-West Passage, and that was all.”

“Altamont,” said Hatteras, holding out his hand; “be our companion to glory, come with us and find the North Pole.”

The two men clasped hands in a warm, hearty grasp, and the bond of friendship between them was sealed.

When they turned to look for the Doctor they found him in tears.

“Ah! friends,” he said, wiping his eyes; “you have made me so happy, it is almost more than I can bear’ You have sacrificed this miserable nationality for the sake of the common cause. You have said, ‘What does it matter if only the Pole is discovered, whether it is by an Englishman or an American?’ Why should we brag of being American or English, when we can boast that we are men?”

The good little man was beside himself with joy He hugged the reconciled enemies to his bosom, and cemented their friendship by his own affection to both.

At last he grew calm after at least a twentieth embrace, and said —

“It is time I went to work now. Since I am no hunter, I must use my talents in another direction”

And he began to cut up the oxen so skilfully, that he seemed like a surgeon making a delicate autopsy.

His two companions looked on smiling. In a few minutes the adroit operator had cut off more than a hundred pounds of flesh. This he divided into three parts. Each man took one, and they retraced their steps to Fort Providence.

At ten o’clock they arrived at Doctor’s House, where Johnson and Bell had a good supper prepared for them.

But before sitting down to enjoy it, the Doctor exclaimed in a jubilant tone, and pointing to his two companions —

“My dear old Johnson, I took out an American and an Englishman with me, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Mr. Clawbonny.”

“Well, I bring back two brothers.”

This was joyous news to the sailors, and they shook hands warmly with Altamont; while the Doctor recounted all that had passed, and how the American captain had saved the English captain’s life. That night no five happier men could have been found than those that lay sleeping in the little snow house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

Next day the weather changed, the cold returned. Snow, and rain, and tempest came in quick succession for several days.

Bell had completed the sloop, and done his work well, for the little vessel was admirably adapted for the purpose contemplated, being high at the sides and partly decked so as to be able to stand a heavy sea, and yet light enough to be drawn on the sledge without overburdening the dogs.

At last a change of the greatest importance took place. The ice began to tremble in the centre of the bay, and the highest masses became loosened at their base ready to form icebergs, and drift away before the first gale; but Hatteras would not wait for the ice-fields to break up before he started. Since the journey must be made on land, he did not care whether the sea was open or not; and the day of departure was fixed for the 25th of June — Johnson and Bell undertaking the necessary repairs of the sledge.

On the 20th, finding there was space enough between the broken ice to allow the sloop to get through, it was determined to take her a trial trip to Cape Washington.

The sea was not quite open but it would have been impossible to go across on foot.

This short sail of six hours sufficiently tested the powers of the sloop, and proved her excellent qualities. In coming back they witnessed a curious sight; it was the chase of a seal by a gigantic bear. Mr. Bruin was too busily engaged to notice the vessel, or he would have pursued; he was intently watching beside a seal hole with the patience of a true hunter, or rather angler, for he was certainly fishing just then. He watched in absolute silence, without stirring or giving the least sign of life.

But all of a sudden there was a slight disturbance on the surface of the water in the hole, which announced the coming up of the amphibious animal to breathe. Instantly the bear lay flat on his belly with his two paws stretched round the opening.

Next minute up came the seal, but his head no sooner appeared above the water than the bear's paws closed about him like a vice, and dragged him right out. The poor seal struggled desperately, but could not free himself from the iron grasp of his enemy, who hugged him closer and closer till suffocation was complete. Then he carried him off to his den as if the weight were nothing, leaping lightly from pack to pack till he gained *terra firma* safely.

On the 22nd of June, Hatteras began to load the sledge. They put in 200 lbs. of salt meat, three cases of vegetables and preserved meat, besides lime-juice, and flour, and medicines. They also took 200 lbs. of powder and a stock of fire-arms. Including the sloop and the Halkett- boat, there was about 1500 lbs. weight, a heavy

load for four dogs, and all the more as they would have to drag it every day, instead of only four days successively, like the dogs employed by the Esquimaux, who always keep a relay for their sledges. However, the distance to the Pole was not 150 miles at the outside, and they did not intend to go more than twelve miles a day, as they could do it comfortably in a month. Even if land failed them, they could always fall back on the sloop, and finish the journey without fatigue to men or dogs.

All the party were in excellent health, though they had lost flesh a little; but, by attending to the Doctor’s wise counsels, they had weathered the winter without being attacked by any of the maladies incident to the climate.

Now, they were almost at their journey’s end, and not one doubted of success, for a common bond of sympathy bound fast the five men, and made them strong to persevere.

On Sunday, the 23rd, all was ready, and it was resolved to devote the entire day to rest.

The dwellers on Fort Providence could not see the last day dawn without some emotion. It cost them a pang to leave the snow-hut which had served them in such good stead, and this hospitable shore where they had passed the winter. Take it altogether, they had spent very happy hours there, and the Doctor made a touching reference to the subject as they sat round the table at the evening meal, and did not forget to thank God for his manifest protection.

They retired early to rest, for they needed to be up betimes. So passed the last night in Fort Providence.

CHAPTER XIX.

MARCH TO THE NORTH

Next day at early dawn, Hatteras gave the signal for departure. The well-fed and well-rested dogs were harnessed to the sledge. They had been having a good time of it all the winter, and might be expected to do good service during the summer.

It was six in the morning when the expedition started. After following the windings of the bay and going past Cape Washington, they struck into the direct route for the north, and by seven o’clock had lost sight of the lighthouse and Fort Providence.

During the first two days they made twenty miles in twelve hours, devoting the remainder of the time to rest and meals. The tent was quite sufficient protection during sleep.

The temperature began to rise. In many places the snow melted entirely away, and great patches of water appeared; here and there complete ponds, which a little stretch of imagination might easily convert into lakes. The travellers were often up to their knees, but they only laughed over it; and, indeed, the Doctor was rather glad of such unexpected baths.

“But for all that,” he said, “the water has no business to wet us here. It is an element which has no right to this country, except in a solid or vaporous state. Ice or vapour is all very well, but water — never!”

Hunting was not forgotten during the march, for fresh meat was a necessity. Altamont and Bell kept their guns loaded, and shot ptarmigans, guillemots, geese, and a few young hares; but, by degrees, birds and animals had been changing from trustfulness to fear, and had become so shy and difficult to approach, that very often, but for Duk, the hunters would have wasted their powder.

Hatteras advised them not to go more than a mile away, as there was not a day, nor even an hour, to lose, for three months of fine weather was the utmost they could count upon. Besides, the sledge was often coming to difficult places, when each man was needed to lend a helping hand.

On the third day they came to a lake, several acres in extent, and still entirely frozen over. The sun’s rays had little access to it, owing to its situation, and the ice was so strong that it must have dated from some remote winter. It was strong enough to bear both the travellers and their sledge, and was covered with dry snow.

From this point the country became gradually lower, from which the Doctor concluded that it did not extend to the Pole, but that most probably this New America was an island.

Up to this time the expedition had been attended with no fatigue. The travellers had only suffered from the intense glare of the sun on the snow, which threatened them with snow-blindness. At another time of the year they might have avoided this by walking during the night, but at present there was no night at all. Happily the snow was beginning to melt, and the brilliancy would diminish as the process of dissolution advanced.

On the 28th of June the thermometer rose to 45°, and the rain fell in torrents. Hatteras and his companions, however, marched stoically on, and even hailed the downpour with delight, knowing that it would hasten the disappearance of the snow.

As they went along, the Doctor often picked up stones, both round ones and flat pebbles, as if worn away by the tide. He thought from this they must be near the Polar Basin, and yet far as the eye could reach was one interminable plain.

There was not a trace of houses, or huts, or cairns visible. It was evident that the Greenlanders had not pushed their way so far north, and yet the famished tribes would have found their account in coming, for the country abounded in game. Bears were frequently seen, and numerous herds of musk-oxen and deer.

On the 29th, Bell killed a fox and Altamont a musk-ox. These supplies of fresh food were very acceptable, and even the Doctor surveyed, with considerable satisfaction, the haunches of meat they managed to procure from time to time.

“Don’t let us stint ourselves,” he used to say on these occasions; “food is no unimportant matter in expeditions like ours.”

“Especially,” said Johnson, “when a meal depends on a lucky shot.”

“You’re right, Johnson; a man does not think so much about dinner when he knows the soup-pot is simmering by the kitchen-fire.”

On the 30th, they came to a district which seemed

to have been upturned by some volcanic convulsion, so covered was it with cones and sharp lofty peaks.

A strong breeze from the south-east was blowing, which soon increased to a hurricane, sweeping over the rocks covered with snow and the huge masses, of ice, which took the forms of icebergs and hummocks, though on dry land.

The tempest was followed by damp, warm weather, which caused a regular thaw.

On all sides nothing could be heard but the noise of cracking ice and falling avalanches.

The travellers had to be very careful in avoiding hills, and even in speaking aloud, for the slightest agitation in the air might have caused a catastrophe. Indeed, the suddenness is the peculiar feature in Arctic avalanches, distinguishing them from those of Switzerland and Norway. Often the dislodgment of a block of ice is instantaneous, and not even a cannon-ball or thunderbolt could be more rapid in its descent. The loosening, the fall, and the crash happen almost simultaneously.

Happily, however, no accident befel any of the party, and three days afterwards they came to smooth, level ground again.

But here a new phenomenon met their gaze — a phenomenon which was long a subject of patient inquiry among the learned of both hemispheres. They came to a long chain of low hills which seemed to extend for miles, and were all covered on the eastern side with bright red snow.

It is easy to imagine the surprise and half-terrified exclamations of the little company at the sight of this long red curtain; but the Doctor hastened to reassure them, or rather to instruct them, as to the nature of this peculiar snow. He told them that this same red substance had been found in Switzerland, in the heart of the Alps, and that the colour proceeded solely from the presence of certain corpuscles, about the nature of which for a long time chemists could not agree. They could not decide whether these corpuscles were of animal or vegetable origin, but at last it was settled that they belonged to the family of fungi, being a sort of microscopic champignon of the species *Uredo*.

Turning the snow over with his iron-tipped staff, the Doctor found that the colouring matter measured nine feet deep. He pointed this out to his companions, that they might have some idea of the enormous number of these tiny mushrooms in a layer extending so many miles.

This phenomenon was none the less strange for being explained, for red is a colour seldom seen in nature over any considerable area. The reflection of the sun’s rays upon it produced the most peculiar effect, lighting up men, and animals, and rocks with a fiery glow, as if proceeding from some flame within. When the snow melted it looked like blood, as the red particles do not decompose. It seemed to the travellers as if rivulets of blood were running among their feet.

The Doctor filled several bottles with this precious substance to examine at leisure, as he had only had a glimpse of the Crimson Cliffs in Baffin’s Bay.

This Field of Blood, as he called it, took three hours to get over, and then the country resumed its usual aspect.

CHAPTER XX.

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SNOW.

On the fourth of July there was such an exceedingly dense fog, that it was very difficult to keep the straight course for the north. No misadventure, however, befel the party during the darkness, except the loss of Bell's snow-shoes. At Bell's suggestion, which fired the Doctor's inventive genius, torches were contrived, made of tow steeped in spirits-of-wine and fastened on the end of a stick, and these served somewhat to help them on, though they made but small progress; for, on the sixth, after the fog had cleared off, the Doctor took their bearings, and found that they had only been marching at the rate of eight miles a day.

Determined to make up for lost time, they rose next morning very early and started off, Bell and Altamont as usual going ahead of the rest and acting as scouts. Johnson and the others kept beside the sledge, and were soon nearly two miles behind the guides; but the weather was so dry and clear that all their movements could be distinctly observed.

“What now?” said Clawbonny, as he saw them make a sudden halt, and stoop down as if examining the ground.

“I was just wondering what they are about, myself,” replied old Johnson.

“Perhaps they have come on the tracks of animals,” suggested Hatteras.

“No,” said Clawbonny, “it can't be that.”

“Why not?”

“Because Duk would bark.”

“Well, it is quite evident they are examining some sort of marks.”

“Let’s get on, then,” said Hatteras; and, urging forward the dogs, they rejoined their companions in about twenty minutes, and shared their surprise at finding unmistakable fresh footprints of human beings in the snow, as plain as if only made the preceding day.

“They are Esquimaux footprints,” said Hatteras.

“Do you think so?” asked Altamont.

“There is no doubt of it.”

“But what do you make of this, then?” returned Altamont, pointing to another footmark repeated in several places. “Do you believe for a minute that was made by an Esquimaux?”

It was incontestably the print of a European boot — nails, sole, and heel clearly stamped in the snow. There was no room for doubt, and Hatteras exclaimed in amazement —

“Europeans here!”

“Evidently,” said Johnson.

“And yet it is so improbable that we must take a second look before pronouncing an opinion,” said Clawbonny.

But the longer he looked, the more apparent became the fact. Hatteras was chagrined beyond measure. A European here, so near the Pole!

The footprints extended for about a quarter of a mile, and then diverged to the west. Should the travellers follow them further?

“No,” said Hatteras, “let us go on.”

He was interrupted by an exclamation from the Doctor, who had just picked up an object that gave still more convincing proof of European origin. It was part of a pocket spy-glass!

“Well, if we still had any doubts about the footmarks, this settles the case at once, at any rate,” said Clawbonny.

“Forward!” exclaimed Hatteras so energetically, that instinctively each one obeyed, and the march was resumed forthwith.

The day wore away, but no further sign of the presence of suspected rivals was discovered, and they prepared to encamp for the night.

The tent was pitched in a ravine for shelter, as the sky was dark and threatening, and a violent north wind was blowing.

“I’m afraid we’ll have a bad night,” said Johnson.

“A pretty noisy one, I expect,” replied the Doctor, “but not cold. We had better take every precaution, and fasten down our tent with good big stones.”

“You are right, Mr. Clawbonny. If the hurricane swept away our tent, I don’t know where we should find it again.”

The tent held fast, but sleep was impossible, for the tempest was let loose and raged with tremendous violence.

“It seems to me,” said the Doctor, during a brief lull in the deafening roar,” as if I could hear the sound of collisions between icebergs and ice-fields. If we were near the sea, I could really believe there was a general break-up in the ice.”

“I can’t explain the noises any other way,” said Johnson.

“Can we have reached the coast, I wonder?” asked Hatteras.

“It is not impossible,” replied Clawbonny. “Listen! Do you hear that crash? That is certainly the sound of icebergs falling. We cannot be very far from the ocean.”

“Well, if it turn out to be so, I shall push right on over the ice- fields.”

“Oh, they’ll be all broken up after such a storm as this. We shall see what to-morrow, brings; but all I can say is, if any poor fellows are wandering about in a night like this, I pity them.

The storm lasted for ten hours, and the weary travellers anxiously watched for the morning. About daybreak its fury seemed to have spent itself, and Hatteras, accompanied by Bell and Altamont, ventured to leave the tent. They climbed a hill about three hundred feet high, which commanded a wide view. But what a metamorphosed region met their gaze! All the ice had completely vanished, the storm had chased away the winter, and stripped the soil everywhere of its snow covering.

But Hatteras scarcely bestowed a glance on surrounding objects; his eager gaze was bent on the northern horizon, which appeared shrouded in black mist.

“That may very likely be caused by the ocean,” suggested Clawbonny.

“You are right. The sea must be there,” was the reply.

“That tint is what we call the *blink* of open water,” said Johnson.

“Come on, then, to the sledge at once, and let us get to this unknown ocean,” exclaimed Hatteras.

Their few preparations were soon made, and the march resumed. Three hours afterwards they arrived at the coast, and shouted simultaneously, “The sea! the sea!”

“Ay, and open sea!” added Hatteras.

And so it was. The storm had opened wide the Polar Basin, and the loosened packs were drifting in all directions. The icebergs had weighed anchor, and were sailing out into the open sea.

This new ocean stretched far away out of sight, and not a single island or continent was visible.

On the east and west the coast formed two capes or headlands, which sloped gently down to the sea. In the centre, a projecting rock formed a small natural bay, sheltered on three sides, into which a wide river fell, bearing in its bosom the melted snows of winter.

After a careful survey of the coast, Hatteras determined to launch the sloop that very day, and to unpack the sledge, and get everything on board. The tent was soon put up, and a comfortable repast prepared. This important business despatched, work commenced; and all hands were so expeditious and willing, that by five o’clock nothing more remained to be done. The sloop lay rocking gracefully in the little bay, and all the cargo was on board except the tent, and what was required for the night’s encampment.

The sight of the sloop suggested to Clawbonny the propriety of giving Altamont’s name to the little bay. His proposition to that effect met with unanimous approval, and the port was forthwith dignified by the title of Altamont Harbour.

According to the Doctor’s calculations the travellers were now only 9° distant from the Pole. They had gone over two hundred miles from Victoria Bay to Altamont Harbour, and were in latitude 87° 5’ and longitude 118° 35’.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE OPEN SEA.

Next morning by eight o’clock all the remaining effects were on board, and the preparations for departure completed. But before starting the Doctor thought he would like to take a last look at the country and see if any further traces of the presence of strangers could be discovered, for the mysterious footmarks they had met with were never out of his thoughts. He climbed to the top of a height which commanded a view of the whole southern horizon, and took out his pocket telescope. But what was his astonishment, to find he could see nothing through it, not even neighbouring objects. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but with no better result. Then he began to examine the telescope, the object glass was gone!

The object glass! This explained the whole mystery, foot-prints and all; and with a shout of surprise he hurried down the hill to impart his discovery to the wondering companions, who came running towards him, startled by his loud exclamation, and full of anxiety at his precipitate descent.

“Well, what is the matter now?” said Johnson.

The Doctor could hardly speak, he was so out of breath. At last he managed to gasp out —

“The tracks, footmarks, strangers.”

“What?” said Hatteras, “strangers here?”

“No, no, the object glass; the object glass out of my telescope.”

And he held out his spy-glass for them to look at.

“Ah! I see,” said Altamont; “it is wanting.”

“Yes.”

“But then the footmarks?”

“They were ours, friends, just ours,” exclaimed the Doctor. “We had lost ourselves in the fog, and been wandering in a circle.”

“But the boot-marks,” objected Hatteras.

“Bell’s. He walked about a whole day after he had lost his snow shoes.”

“So I did,” said Bell.

The mistake was so evident, that they all laughed heartily, except Hatteras, though no one was more glad than he at the discovery.

A quarter of an hour afterwards the little sloop sailed out of Altamont Harbour, and commenced her voyage of discovery. The wind was favourable, but there was little of it, and the weather was positively warm.

The sloop was none the worse for the sledge journey. She was in first-rate trim, and easily managed. Johnson steered, the Doctor, Bell, and the American leaned back against the cargo, and Hatteras stood at the prow, his fixed, eager gaze bent steadily on that mysterious point towards which he felt drawn with irresistible power, like the magnetic needle to the Pole. He wished to be the first to descry any shore that might come in sight, and he had every right to the honour.

The water of this Polar Sea presented some peculiar features worth mentioning. In colour it was a faint ultramarine blue, and possessed such wonderful transparency that one seemed to gaze down into fathomless depths. These depths were lighted up, no doubt, by some electrical phenomenon, and so many varieties of living creatures were visible that the vessel seemed to be sailing over a vast aquarium.

Innumerable flocks of birds were flying over the surface of this marvellous ocean, darkening the sky like thick heavy storm-clouds. Water-fowl of every description were among them, from the albatross to the penguin, and all of gigantic proportions. Their cries were absolutely deafening, and some of them had such immense, wide-spreading wings, that they covered the sloop completely as they flew over. The Doctor thought himself a good naturalist, but he found his science greatly at fault, for many a species here was wholly unknown to any ornithological society.

The good little man was equally nonplussed when he looked at the water, for he saw the most wonderful medusæ, some so large that they looked like little islands floating about among Brobdignagian sea-weeds. And below the surface, what a spectacle met the eye! Myriads of fish of every species; young manati at play with each other; narwhals with their one strong weapon of defence, like the horn of a unicorn, chasing the timid seals; whales of every tribe, spouting out columns of water and mucilage, and filling the air with a peculiar whizzing noise; dolphins, seals, and walruses; sea-dogs and sea-horses, sea-bears and sea-elephants, quietly browsing on submarine pastures; and the Doctor could gaze at them all as easily and clearly as if they were in glass tanks in the Zoological Gardens.

There was a strange supernatural purity about the atmosphere. It seemed charged to overflowing with oxygen, and had a marvellous power of exhilaration, producing an almost intoxicating effect on the brain.

Towards evening, Hatteras and his companions lost sight of the coast. Night came on, though the sun remained just above the horizon; but it had the same influence on animated nature as in temperate zones. Birds, fish, and all the cetacea disappeared and perfect silence prevailed.

Since the departure from Altamont Harbour, the sloop had made one degree further north. The next day brought no signs of land; there was not even a speck on the horizon. The wind was still favourable, and the sea pretty calm. The birds and fishes returned as numerously as on the preceding day, and the Doctor leaning over the side of the vessel, could see the whales and the dolphins, and all the rest of the monsters of the deep, gradually coming up from the clear depths below. On the surface, far as the eye could reach, nothing was visible except a solitary iceberg here and there, and a few scattered floes.

Indeed, but little ice was met with anywhere. The sloop was ten degrees above the point of greatest cold, and consequently in the same temperature as Baffin’s Bay and Disko. It was therefore not astonishing that the sea should be open in these summer months.

This is a fact of great practical value, for if ever the whalers can penetrate north as far as the Polar basin, they may be sure of an immediate cargo, as this part of the ocean seems the general reservoir of whales and seals, and every marine species.

The day wore on, but still nothing appeared on the horizon. Hatteras never left the prow of the ship, but stood, glass in hand, eagerly gazing into the distance with anxious, questioning eyes, and seeking to discover, in the colour of the water, the shape of the waves, and the breath of the wind, indications of approaching land.

CHAPTER XXII.

GETTING NEAR THE POLE.

Hour after hour passed away, and still Hatteras persevered in his weary watch, though his hopes appeared doomed to disappointment.

At length, about six in the evening, a dim, hazy, shapeless sort of mist seemed to rise far away between sea and sky. It was not a cloud, for it was constantly vanishing, and then reappearing next minute.

Hatteras was the first to notice this peculiar phenomenon; but after an hour's scrutiny through his telescope, he could make nothing of it.

All at once, however, some sure indication met his eye, and stretching out his arm to the horizon, he shouted, in a clear ringing voice — -

"Land! land!"

His words produced an electrical effect on his companions, and every man rushed to his side.

"I see it, I see it," said Clawbonny.

"Yes, yes, so do I!" exclaimed Johnson.

"It is a cloud," said Altamont.

"Land! land!" repeated Hatteras, in tones of absolute conviction.

Even while he spoke the appearance vanished, and when it returned again the Doctor fancied he caught a gleam of light about the smoke for an instant.

“It is a volcano!” he exclaimed.

“A volcano?” repeated Altamont.

“Undoubtedly.”

“In so high a latitude?”

“Why not? Is not Iceland a volcanic island — indeed, almost made of volcanoes, one might say?”

“Well, has not our famous countryman, James Ross, affirmed the existence of two active volcanoes, the Erebus and the Terror, on the Southern Continent, in longitude 170° and latitude 78°? Why, then, should not volcanoes be found near the North Pole?”

“It is possible, certainly,” replied Altamont.

“Ah, now I see it distinctly,” exclaimed the Doctor.” It is a volcano!”

“Let us make right for it then,” said Hatteras.

It was impossible longer to doubt the proximity of the coast. In twenty-four hours, probably, the bold navigators might hope to set foot on its untrodden soil. But strange as it was, now that they were so near the goal of their voyage, no one showed the joy which might have been expected. Each man sat silent, absorbed in his own thoughts, wondering what sort of place this Pole must be. The birds seemed to shun it, for though it was evening, they were all flying towards the south with outspread wings. Was it, then, so inhospitable, that not so much as a sea-gull or a ptarmigan could find a shelter? The fish, too, even the large cetacea, were hastening away through the transparent waters. What could cause this feeling either of repulsion or terror?

At last sleep overcame the tired men, and one after another dropped off, leaving Hatteras to keep watch.

He took the helm, and tried his best not to close his eyes, for he grudged losing precious time; but the slow motion of the vessel rocked him into a state of such irresistible somnolence that, in spite of himself, he was soon, like his companions, locked fast in deep slumber. He began to dream, and imagination brought back all the scenes of his past life. He dreamt of his ship, the *Forward*, and of the traitors that had burnt it. Again he felt all the agonies of disappointment and failure, and forgot his actual situation. Then the scene changed, and he saw himself at the Pole unfurling the Union Jack!

While memory and fancy were thus busied, an enormous cloud of an olive tinge had begun to darken sea and sky. A hurricane was at hand. The first blast of the tempest roused the captain and his companions, and they were on their feet in an instant, ready to meet it. The sea had risen tremendously, and the ship was tossing violently up and down on the billows. Hatteras took the helm again, and kept a firm hold of it, while Johnson and Bell baled out the water which was constantly dashing over the ship.

It was a difficult matter to preserve the right course, for the thick fog made it impossible to see more than a few yards off.

This sudden tempest might well seem to such excited men, a stern prohibition against further approach to the Pole; but it needed but a glance at their resolute faces to know that they would neither yield to winds nor waves, but go right on to the end.

For a whole day the struggle lasted, death threatening them each moment; but about six in the evening, just as the fury of the waves seemed at its highest pitch, there came a sudden calm. The wind was stilled as if miraculously, and the sea became smooth as glass.

Then came a most extraordinary inexplicable phenomenon.

The fog, without dispersing, became strangely luminous, and the sloop sailed along in a zone of electric light. Mast, sail, and rigging appeared pencilled in black against the phosphorescent sky with wondrous distinctness. The men were bathed in light, and their faces shone with a fiery glow.

“The volcano!” exclaimed Hatteras.

“Is it possible?” said Bell.

“No, no!” replied Clawbonny. “We should be suffocated with its flames so near.”

“Perhaps it is the reflection,” suggested Altamont.

“Not that much even, for then we must be near land, and in that case we should hear the noise of the eruption.”

“What is it, then?” asked the captain.

“It is a cosmical phenomenon,” replied the Doctor, “seldom met hitherto. If we go on, we shall soon get out of our luminous sphere and be back in the darkness and tempest again.”

“Well, let’s go on, come what may,” said Hatteras.

The Doctor was right. Gradually the fog began to lose its light, and then its transparency, and the howling wind was heard not far off. A few minutes more, and the little vessel was caught in a violent squall, and swept back into the cyclone.

But the hurricane had fortunately turned a point towards the south, and left the vessel free to run before the wind straight towards the Pole. There was imminent danger of her sinking, for she sped along at frenzied speed, and any sudden collision with rock or iceberg must have inevitably dashed her to pieces.

But not a man on board counselled prudence. They were intoxicated with the danger, and no speed could be quick enough to satisfy their longing impatience to reach the unknown.

At last they began evidently to near the coast. Strange symptoms were manifest in the air; the fog suddenly rent like a curtain torn by the wind; and for an instant, like a flash of lightning, an immense column of flame was seen on the horizon.

“The volcano! the volcano!” was the simultaneous exclamation.

But the words had hardly passed their lips before the fantastic vision had vanished. The wind suddenly changed to south-east, and drove the ship back again from the land.

“Confound it!” said Hatteras; “we weren’t three miles from the coast.”

However, resistance was impossible. All that could be done was to keep tacking; but every few minutes the little sloop would be thrown on her side, though she righted herself again immediately obedient to the helm.

As Hatteras stood with dishevelled hair, grasping the helm as if welded to his hand, he seemed the animating soul of the ship.

All at once, a fearful sight met his gaze.

Scarcely twenty yards in front was a great block of ice coming right towards them, mounting and falling on the stormy billows, ready to overturn at any moment and crush them in its descent.

But this was not the only danger that threatened the bold navigators. The iceberg was packed with white bears, huddling close together, and evidently beside themselves with terror.

The iceberg made frightful lurches, sometimes inclining at such a sharp angle that the animals rolled pell-mell over each other and set up a loud growling, which mingled with the roar of the elements and made a terrible concert.

For a quarter of an hour, which seemed a whole century, the sloop sailed on in this formidable company, sometimes a few yards distant and sometimes near enough to touch. The Greenland dogs trembled for fear, but Duk was quite imperturbable. At last the iceberg lost ground, and got driven by the wind further and further away till it disappeared in the fog, only at intervals betraying its presence by the ominous growls of its equipage.

The storm now burst forth with redoubled fury. The little barque was lifted bodily out of the water, and whirled round and round with the most frightful rapidity. Mast and sail were torn off, and went flying away through the darkness like some large white bird. A whirlpool began to form among the waves, drawing down the ship gradually by its irresistible suction.

Deeper and deeper she sank, whizzing round at such tremendous speed that to the poor fellows on board, the water seemed motionless. All five men stood erect, gazing at each other in speechless terror. But suddenly the ship rose perpendicularly, her prow went above the edge of the vortex, and getting out of the centre of attraction by her own velocity, she escaped at a tangent from the circumference, and was thrown far beyond, swift as a ball from a cannon's mouth.

Altamont, the Doctor, Johnson, and Bell were pitched flat on the planks. When they got up, Hatteras had disappeared!

It was two o'clock in the morning.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ENGLISH FLAG

For a few seconds they seemed stupefied, and then a cry of “Hatteras!” broke from every lip.

On all sides, nothing was visible but the tempestuous ocean. Duk barked desperately, and Bell could hardly keep him from leaping into the waves.

“Take the helm, Altamont,” said the Doctor, “and let us try our utmost to find our poor captain.”

Johnson and Bell seized the oars, and rowed about for more than an hour; but their search was vain — Hatteras was lost!

Lost! and so near the Pole, just as he had caught sight of the goal!

The Doctor called, and shouted, and fired signals, and Duk made piteous lamentations; but there was no response. Clawbonny could bear up no longer; he buried his head in his hands, and fairly wept aloud.

At such a distance from the coast, it was impossible Hatteras could reach it alive, without an oar or even so much as a spar to help him; if ever he touched the haven of his desire, it would be as a swollen, mutilated corpse!

Longer search was useless, and nothing remained but to resume the route north. The tempest was dying out, and about five in the morning on the 11th of July, the wind fell, and the sea gradually became calm. The sky recovered its polar clearness, and less than three miles away the land appeared in all its grandeur.

The new continent was only an island, or rather a volcano, fixed like a lighthouse on the North Pole of the world.

The mountain was in full activity, pouring out a mass of burning stones and glowing rock. At every fresh eruption there was a convulsive heaving within, as if some mighty giant were respiring, and the masses ejected were thrown up high into the air amidst jets of bright flame, streams of lava rolling down the sides in impetuous torrents. In one part, serpents of fire seemed writhing and wriggling amongst smoking rocks, and in another the glowing liquid fell in cascades, in the midst of purple vapour, into a river of fire below, formed of a thousand igneous streams, which emptied itself into the sea, the waters hissing and seething like a boiling cauldron.

Apparently there was only one crater to the volcano, out of which the columns of fire issued, streaked with forked lightning. Electricity seemed to have something to do with this magnificent panorama.

Above the panting flames waved an immense plume-shaped cloud of smoke, red at its base and black at its summit. It rose with incomparable majesty, and unrolled in thick volumes.

The sky was ash-colour to a great height, and it was evident that the darkness that had prevailed while the tempest lasted, which had seemed quite inexplicable to the Doctor, was owing to the columns of cinders overspreading the sun like a thick curtain. He remembered a similar phenomenon which occurred in the Barbadoes, where the whole island was plunged in profound obscurity by the mass of cinders ejected from the crater of Isle St. Vincent.

This enormous ignivomous rock in the middle of the sea was six thousand feet high, just about the altitude of Hecla.

It seemed to rise gradually out of the water as the boat got nearer. There was no trace of vegetation, indeed there was no shore; the rock ran straight down to the sea.

“Can we land?” said the Doctor.

“The wind is carrying us right to it,” said Altamont. “But I don’t see an inch of land to set our foot upon.”

“It seems so at this distance,” said Johnson; “but we shall be sure to find some place to run in our boat at, and that is all we want.”

“Let us go on, then,” said Clawbonny, dejectedly.

He had no heart now for anything. The North Pole was indeed before his eyes, but not the man who had discovered it.

As they got nearer the island, which was not more than eight or ten miles in circumference, the navigators noticed a tiny fiord, just large enough to harbour their boat, and made towards it immediately. They feared their captain’s dead body would meet their eyes on the coast, and yet it seemed difficult for a corpse to lie on it, for there was no shore, and the sea broke on steep rocks, which were covered with cinders above watermark.

At last the little sloop glided gently into the narrow opening between two sandbanks just visible above the water, where she would be safe from the violence of the breakers; but before she could be moored, Duk began howling and barking again in the most piteous manner, as if calling on the cruel sea and stony rocks to yield up his lost master. The Doctor tried to calm him by caresses, but in vain. The faithful beast, as if he would represent the captain, sprang on shore with a tremendous bound, sending a cloud of cinders after him.

“Duk! Duk!” called Clawbonny.

But Duk had already disappeared.

After the sloop was made fast, they all got out and went after him. Altamont was just going to climb to the top of a pile of stones, when the Doctor exclaimed, “Listen!”

Duk was barking vehemently some distance off, but his bark seemed full of grief rather than fury.

“Has he come on the track of some animal, do you think?” asked Johnson.

“No, no!” said Clawbonny, shuddering. “His bark is too sorrowful; it is the dog’s tear. He has found the body of Hatteras.”

They all four rushed forward, in spite of the blinding cinder-dust, and came to the far-end of a fiord, where they discovered the dog barking round a corpse wrapped in the British flag!

“Hatteras! Hatteras!” cried the Doctor, throwing himself on the body of his friend. But next minute he started up with an indescribable cry, and shouted, “Alive! alive!”

“Yes!” said a feeble voice; “yes, alive at the North Pole, on *Queen’s Island*.”

“Hurrah for England!” shouted all with one accord.

“And for America!” added Clawbonny, holding out one hand to Hatteras and the other to Altamont.

Duk was not behind with his hurrah, which was worth quite as much as the others.

For a few minutes the joy of recovery of their captain filled all their hearts, and the poor fellows could not restrain their tears.

The Doctor found, on examination, that he was not seriously hurt. The wind threw him on the coast where landing was perilous work, but, after being driven back more than once into the sea, the hardy sailor had managed to scramble on to a rock, and gradually to hoist himself above the waves.

Then he must have become insensible, for he remembered nothing more except rolling himself in his flag. He only awoke to consciousness with the loud barking and caresses of his faithful Duk.

After a little, Hatteras was able to stand up supported by the Doctor, and tried to get back to the sloop.

He kept exclaiming, “The Pole! the North Pole!”

“You are happy now?” said his friend.

“Yes, happy! And are not you? Isn’t it joy to find yourself here! The ground we tread is round the Pole! The air we breathe is the air that blows round the Pole! The sea we have crossed is the sea which washes the Pole! Oh! the North Pole! the North Pole!”

He had become quite delirious with excitement, and fever burned in his veins. His eyes shone with unnatural brilliancy, and his brain seemed on fire. Perfect rest was what he most needed, for the Doctor found it impossible to quiet him.

A place of encampment must therefore be fixed upon immediately.

Altamont speedily discovered a grotto composed of rocks, which had so fallen as to form a sort of cave. Johnson and Bell carried in provisions, and gave the dogs their liberty.

About eleven o’clock, breakfast, or rather dinner, was ready, consisting of pemmican, salt meat, and smoking-hot tea and coffee.

But Hatteras would do nothing till the exact position of the island was ascertained; so the Doctor and Altamont set to work with their instruments, and found that the exact latitude of the grotto was 89° 59’ 15”. The longitude was of little importance, for all the meridians blended a few hundred feet higher.

The 90° of lat. was then only about three quarters of a mile off, or just about the summit of the volcano.

When the result was communicated to Hatteras, he desired that a formal document might be drawn up to attest the fact, and two copies made, one of which should be deposited on a cairn on the island.

Clawbonny was the scribe, and indited the following document, a copy of which is now among the archives of the Royal Geographical Society of London: —

“On this 11th day of July, 1861, in North latitude 89° 59’ 15” was discovered *Queen’s* Island at the North Pole, by Captain Hatteras, Commander of the brig *Forward* of Liverpool, who signs this, as also all his companions.

"Whoever may find this document is requested to forward it to the Admiralty.

"(Signed) JOHN HATTERAS, Commander

of the *Forward*

"DR. CLAWBONNY

"ALTAMONT, Commander of the *Porpoise*

"JOHNSON, Boatswain

"BELL, Carpenter."

"And now, friends, come to table," said the Doctor, merrily.

Coming to table was just squatting on the ground.

"But who," said Clawbonny, "would not give all the tables and dining-rooms in the world to dine at 89" 59' and 15" N. lat.?"

It was an exciting occasion this first meal at the Pole! What neither ancients nor moderns, neither Europeans, nor Americans, nor Asiatics had been able to accomplish was now achieved, and all past sufferings and perils were forgotten in the glow of success.

"But, after all," said Johnson, after toasts to Hatteras and the North Pole had been enthusiastically drunk, "what is there so very special about the North Pole? Will you tell me, Mr. Clawbonny?"

“Just this, my good Johnson. It is the only point of the globe that is motionless; all the other points are revolving with extreme rapidity.”

“But I don’t see that we are any more motionless here than at Liverpool.”

“Because in both cases you are a party concerned, both in the motion and the rest; but the fact is certain.”

Clawbonny then went on to describe the diurnal and annual motions of the earth — the one round its own axis, the extremities of which are the poles, which is accomplished in twenty-four hours, and the other round the sun, which takes a whole year.

Bell and Johnson listened half incredulously, and

couldn’t see why the earth could not have been allowed to keep still, till Altamont informed them that they would then have had neither day nor night, nor spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

“Ay, and worse still,” said Clawbonny, “if the motion chanced to be interrupted, we should fall right into the sun in sixty-four and a half days.”

“What! take sixty-four and a half days, to fall?” exclaimed Johnson.

“Yes, we are ninety-five millions of miles off. But when I say the Pole is motionless, it is not strictly true; it is only so in comparison with the rest of the globe, for it has a certain movement of its own, and completes a circle in about twenty-six thousand years. This comes from the precession of the equinoxes.”

A long and learned talk was started on this subject between Altamont and the Doctor, simplified, however, as much as possible for the benefit of Bell and Johnson.

Hatteras took no part in it, and even when they went on to speculate about the earth’s centre, and discussed several of the theories that had been advanced respecting it, he seemed not to hear; it was evident his thoughts were far away.

Among other opinions put forth was one in our own days, which greatly excited Altamont’s surprise. It was held that there was an immense opening at the poles which led into the heart of the earth, and that it was out of the opening that the light of the *Aurora Borealis* streamed. This was gravely stated, and Captain Synness, a countryman of our own, actually proposed that Sir Humphrey Davy, Humboldt, and Arago should undertake an expedition through it, but they refused.”

“And quite right too,” said Altamont.

“So say I; but you see, my friends, what absurdities imagination has conjured up about these regions, and how, sooner or later, the simple reality comes to light.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

MOUNT HATTERAS.

After this conversation they all made themselves as comfortable as they could, and lay down to sleep.

All, except Hatteras; and why could this extraordinary man not sleep like the others?

Was not the purpose of his life attained now? Had he not realized his most daring project? Why could he not rest? Indeed, might not one have supposed that, after the strain his nervous system had undergone, he would long for rest?

But no, he grew more and more excited, and it was not the thought of returning that so affected him. Was he bent on going farther still? Had his passion for travel no limits? Was the world too small for him now he had circumnavigated it.

Whatever might be the cause, he could not sleep; yet this first night at the Pole was clear and calm. The isle was absolutely uninhabited — not a bird was to be seen in this burning atmosphere, not an animal on these scoriae-covered rocks, not a fish in these seething waters. Next morning, when Altamont, and the others awoke, Hatteras was gone. Feeling uneasy at his absence, they hurried out of the grotto in search of him.

There he was standing on a rock, gazing fixedly at the top of the mountain. His instruments were in his hand, and he was evidently calculating the exact longitude and latitude.

The Doctor went towards him and spoke, but it was long before he could rouse him from his absorbing contemplations. At last the captain seemed to understand, and Clawbonny said, while he examined him with a keen scrutinizing glance —

“Let us go round the island. Here we are, all ready for our last excursion.”

“The last!” repeated Hatteras, as if in a dream. “Yes!, the last truly, but,” he added, with more animation, “the most wonderful.”

He pressed both hands on his brow as he spoke, as if to calm the inward tumult.

Just then Altamont and the others came up, and their appearance seemed to dispel the hallucinations under which he was labouring.

“My friends,” he said, in a voice full of emotion, “thanks for your courage, thanks for your perseverance, thanks for your superhuman efforts, through which we are permitted to set our feet on this soil.”

“Captain,” said Johnson, “we have only obeyed orders to you alone belongs the honour.”

“No, no!” exclaimed Hatteras, with a violent outburst of emotion, “to all of you as much as to me! To Altamont as much as any of us, as much as the Doctor himself! Oh, let my heart break in your hands, it cannot contain its joy and gratitude any longer.”

He grasped the hands of his brave companions as he spoke, and paced up and down as if he had lost all self-control.

“We have only done our duty as Englishmen,” said Bell.

“And as friends,” added Clawbonny.

“Yes, but all did not do it,” replied Hatteras “some gave way. However, we must pardon them — pardon both the traitors and those who were led away by them. Poor fellows! I forgive them. You hear me, Doctor?”

“Yes,” replied Clawbonny, beginning to be seriously uneasy at his friend’s excitement.

“I have no wish, therefore,” continued the captain, “that they should lose the little fortune they came so far to seek. No, the original agreement is to remain unaltered, and they shall be rich — if they ever see England again.”

It would have been difficult not to have been touched by the pathetic tone of voice in which Hatteras said this.

“But, captain,” interrupted Johnson, trying to joke, “one would think you were making your will!”

“Perhaps I am,” said Hatteras, gravely.

“And yet you have a long bright career of glory before you!”

“Who knows?” was the reply.

No one answered, and the Doctor did not dare to guess his meaning; but Hatteras soon made them understand it, for presently he said, in a hurried, agitated manner, as if he could scarcely command himself —

“Friends, listen to me. We have done much already, but much yet remains to be done.”

His companions heard him with profound astonishment.

“Yes,” he resumed, “we are close to the Pole, but we are not on it.”

“How do you make that out,” said Altamont.

“Yes,” replied Hatteras, with vehemence, “I said an Englishman should plant his foot on the Pole of the world! I said it, and an Englishman shall.”

“What!” cried Clawbonny.

“We are still 45” from the unknown point,” resumed Hatteras, with increasing animation, “and to that point I shall go.”

“But it is on the summit of the volcano,” said the Doctor.

“I shall go.”

“It is an inaccessible cone!”

“I shall go.”

“But it is a yawning fiery crater!”

“I shall go.”

The tone of absolute determination in which Hatteras pronounced these words it is impossible to describe.

His friends were stupefied, and gazed in terror at the blazing mountain.

At last the Doctor recovered himself, and began to urge and entreat Hatteras to renounce his project. He tried every means his heart dictated, from humble supplications to friendly threats; but he could gain nothing — a sort of frenzy had come over the captain, an absolute monomania about the Pole.

Nothing but violent measures would keep him back from destruction, but the Doctor was unwilling to employ these unless driven to extremity.

He trusted, moreover, that physical impossibilities, insuperable obstacles would bar his further progress, and meantime finding all protestations were useless, he simply said —

“Very well, since you are bent on it, we’ll go too.”

“Yes,” replied Hatteras, “half-way up the mountain, but not a step beyond. You know you have to carry back to England the duplicate of the document in the cairn — — ”

“Yes; but — — ”

“It is settled,” said Hatteras, in an imperious tone; “and since the prayers of a friend will not suffice, the captain commands.”

The Doctor did not insist longer, and a few minutes after the little band set out, accompanied by Duk.

It was about eight o’clock when they commenced their difficult ascent; the sky was splendid, and the thermometer stood at 52°.

Hatteras and his dog went first, closely followed by the others.

“I am afraid,” said Johnson to the Doctor.

“No, no, there’s nothing to be afraid of; we are here.”

This singular little island appeared to be of recent formation, and was evidently the product of successive volcanic eruptions. The rocks were all lying loose on the top of each other, and it was a marvel how they preserved their equilibrium. Strictly speaking, the mountain was only a heap of stones thrown down from a height, and the mass of rocks which composed the island had evidently come out of the bowels of the earth.

The earth, indeed, may be compared to a vast cauldron of spherical form, in which, under the influence of a central fire, immense quantities of vapours are generated, which would explode the globe but for the safety-valves outside.

These safety-valves are volcanoes, when one closes another opens; and at the Poles where the crust of the earth is thinner, owing to its being flattened, it is not surprising that a volcano should be suddenly formed by the upheaving of some part of the ocean-bed.

The Doctor, while following Hatteras, was closely following all the peculiarities of the island, and he was further confirmed in his opinion as to its recent formation by the absence of water. Had it existed for centuries, the thermal springs would have flowed from its bosom.

As they got higher, the ascent became more and more difficult, for the flanks of the mountain were almost perpendicular, and it required the utmost care to keep them from falling. Clouds of scoriæ and ashes would whirl round them repeatedly, threatening them with asphyxia, or torrents of lava would bar their passage. In parts where these torrents ran horizontally, the outside had become hardened; while underneath was the boiling lava, and every step the travellers took had first to be tested with the iron-tipped staff to avoid being suddenly plunged into the scalding liquid.

At intervals large fragments of red-hot rock were thrown up from the crater, and burst in the air like bomb-shells, scattering the debris to enormous distances in all directions.

Hatteras, however, climbed up the steepest ascents with surprising agility, disdaining the help of his staff.

He arrived before long at a circular rock, a sort of plateau about ten feet wide. A river of boiling lava surrounded it, except in one part, where it forked away to a higher rock, leaving a narrow passage, through which Hatteras fearlessly passed.

Here he stopped, and his companions managed to rejoin him. He seemed to be measuring with his eye the distance he had yet to get over. Horizontally, he was not more than two hundred yards from the top of the crater, but vertically he had nearly three times that distance to traverse.

The ascent had occupied three hours already. Hatteras showed no signs of fatigue, while the others were almost spent.

The summit of the volcano appeared inaccessible, and the Doctor determined at any price to prevent Hatteras from attempting to proceed. He tried gentle means first, but the captain’s excitement was fast becoming delirium. During their ascent, symptoms of insanity had become more and more marked, and no one could be surprised who knew anything of his previous history.

“Hatteras,” said the Doctor, “it is enough! we cannot go further!”

“Stop, then,” he replied, in a strangely altered voice; “I am going higher.”

“No, it is useless; you are at the Pole already.”

“No, no! higher, higher!”

“My friend, do you know who is speaking to you? It is I, Doctor Clawbonny.”

“Higher, higher!” repeated the madman.

“Very well, we shall not allow it — that is all.”

He had hardly uttered the words before Hatteras, by a superhuman effort, sprang over the boiling lava, and was beyond the reach of his companions.

A cry of horror burst from every lip, for they thought the poor captain must have perished in that fiery gulf; but there he was safe on the other side, accompanied by his faithful Duk, who would not leave him.

He speedily disappeared behind a curtain of smoke, and they heard his voice growing fainter in the distance, shouting —

“To the north! to the north! to the top of Mount Hatteras! Remember Mount Hatteras!”

All pursuit of him was out of the question; it was impossible to leap across the fiery torrent, and equally impossible to get round it. Altamont, indeed, was mad enough to make an attempt, and would certainly have lost his life if the others had not held him back by main force.

“Hatteras! Hatteras!” shouted the Doctor, but no response was heard save the faint bark of Duk.

At intervals, however, a glimpse of him could be caught through the clouds of smoke and showers of ashes. Sometimes his head, sometimes his arm appeared; then he was out of sight again, and a few minutes later was seen higher up clinging to the rocks. His size constantly decreased with the fantastic rapidity of objects rising upwards in the air. In half-an-hour he was only half his size.

The air was full of the deep rumbling noise of the volcano, and the mountain shook and trembled. From time to time a loud fail was heard behind, and the travellers would see some enormous rock rebounding from the heights to engulph itself in the polar basin below.

Hatteras did not even turn once to look back, but marched straight on, carrying his country's flag attached to his staff. His terrified friends watched every movement, and saw him gradually decrease to microscopic dimensions, while Duk looked no larger than a big rat.

Then came a moment of intense anxiety, for the wind beat down on them an immense sheet of flame, and they could see nothing but the red glare. A cry of agony escaped the Doctor; but an instant afterwards Hatteras reappeared, waving his flag.

For a whole hour this fearful spectacle went on — an hour of battle with unsteady loose rocks and quagmires of ashes, where the foolhardy climber sank up to his waist. Sometimes they saw him hoist himself up by leaning knees and loins against the rocks in narrow, intricate winding paths, and sometimes he would be hanging on by both hands to some sharp crag, swinging to and fro like a withered tuft.

At last he reached the summit of the mountain, the mouth of the crater. Here the Doctor hoped the infatuated man would stop, at any rate, and would, perhaps, recover his senses, and expose himself to no more danger than the descent involved.

Once more he shouted —

“Hatteras! Hatteras!”

There was such a pathos of entreaty in his tone that Altamont felt moved to his inmost soul.

“I’ll save him yet!” he exclaimed; and before Clawbonny could hinder him, he had cleared with a bound the torrent of fire, and was out of sight among the rocks.

Meantime, Hatteras had mounted a rock which overhung the crater, and stood waving his flag amidst showers of stones which rained down on him. Duk was by his side; but the poor beast was growing dizzy in such close proximity to the abyss.

Hatteras balanced his staff in one hand, and with the other sought to find the precise mathematical point where all the meridians of the globe meet, the point on which it was his sublime purpose to plant his foot.

All at once the rock gave way, and he disappeared. A cry of horror broke from his companions, and rang to the top of the mountain. Clawbonny thought his friend had perished, and lay buried for ever in the depths of the volcano. A second — only a second, though it seemed an age — elapsed, and there was Altamont and the dog holding the ill-fated Hatteras! Man and dog had caught him at the very moment when he disappeared in the abyss.

Hatteras was saved! Saved in spite of himself; and half-an-hour later be lay unconscious in the arms of his despairing companions.

When he came to himself, the Doctor looked at him in speechless anguish, for there was no glance of recognition in his eye. It was the eye of a blind man, who gazes without seeing.

“Good heavens!” exclaimed Johnson; “he is blind!”

“No,” replied Clawbonny, “no! My poor friends, we have only saved the body of Hatteras; his soul is left behind on the top of the volcano. His reason is gone!”

“Insane!” exclaimed Johnson and Altamont, in consternation.

“Insane!” replied the Doctor, and the big tears ran down his cheeks.

CHAPTER XXV.

RETURN SOUTH.

Three hours after this sad *dénouement* of the adventures of Captain Hatteras, the whole party were back once more in the grotto.

Clawbonny was asked his opinion as to what was best to be done.

“Well, friends,” he said, “we cannot stay longer in this island; the sea is open, and we have enough provisions. We ought to start at once, and get back without the least delay to Fort Providence, where we must winter.”

“That is my opinion, too,” said Altamont. “The wind is favourable, so to-morrow we will get to sea.”

The day passed in profound dejection. The insanity of the captain was a bad omen and when they began to talk over the return voyage, their hearts failed them for fear. They missed the intrepid spirit of their leader.

However, like brave men, they prepared to battle anew with the elements and with themselves, if ever they felt inclined to give way.

Next morning they made all ready to sail, and brought the tent and all its belongings on board.

But before leaving these rocks, never to return, the Doctor carrying out the intentions of Hatteras, had a cairn erected on the very spot where the poor fellow had jumped ashore. It was made of great blocks placed one on the top of the other, so as to be a landmark perfectly visible while the eruptions of the volcano left it undisturbed. On one of the side stones, Bell chiselled the simple inscription —

JOHN HATTERAS.

The duplicate of the document attesting the discovery of the North Pole was enclosed in a tinned iron cylinder, and deposited in the cairn, to remain as a silent witness among those desert rocks.

This done, the four men and the captain, a poor body without a soul, set out on the return voyage, accompanied by the faithful Duk, who had become sad and downcast. A new sail was manufactured out of the tent, and about ten o’clock, the little sloop sailed out before the wind.

She made a quick passage, finding abundance of open water. It was certainly easier to get away from the Pole than to get to it.

But Hatteras knew nothing that was passing around him. He lay full length in the boat, perfectly silent, with lifeless eye and folded arms, and Duk lying at his feet. Clawbonny frequently addressed him, but could elicit no reply.

On the 15th they sighted Altamont Harbour, but as the sea was open all along the coast, they determined to go round to Victoria Bay by water, instead of crossing New America in the sledge.

The voyage was easy and rapid. In a week they accomplished what had taken a fortnight in the sledge, and on the 23rd they cast anchor in Victoria Bay.

As soon as the sloop was made fast, they all hastened to Fort Providence. But what a scene of devastation met their eyes! Doctor’s House, stores, powder-magazine, fortifications, all had melted away, and the provisions had been ransacked by devouring animals.

The navigators had almost come to the end of their supplies, and had been reckoning on replenishing their stores at Fort Providence. The impossibility of wintering there now was evident, and they decided to get to Baffin’s Bay by the shortest route.

“We have no alternative,” said Clawbonny; “Baffin’s Bay is not more than six hundred miles distant. We can sail as long as there is water enough under our sloop, and get to Jones’ Sound, and then on to the Danish settlements.”

“Yes,” said Altamont; “let us collect what food remains, and be off at once.”

After a thorough search, a few cases of pemmican were found scattered here and there, and two barrels of preserved meat, altogether enough for six weeks, and a good supply of powder. It was soon collected and brought on board, and the remainder of the day was employed in caulking the sloop and putting her in good trim.

Next morning they put out once more to sea. The voyage presented no great difficulties, the drift-ice being easily avoided; but still the Doctor thought it advisable, in case of possible delays, to limit the rations to one-half. This was no great hardship, as there was not much work for anyone to do, and all were in perfect health.

Besides, they found a little shooting, and brought down ducks, and geese, and guillemots, or sea turtledoves. Water they were able to supply themselves with in abundance, from the fresh-water icebergs they constantly fell in with as they kept near the coast, not daring to venture out to the open sea in so frail a barque.

At that time of the year, the thermometer was already constantly below freezing point. The frequent rains changed to snow, and the weather became gloomy. Each day the sun dipped lower below the horizon, and on the 30th, for a few minutes, he was out of sight altogether.

However, the little sloop sailed steadily on without stopping an instant. They knew what fatigues and obstacles a land journey involved, if they should be forced to adopt it, and no time was to be lost, for soon the open water would harden to firm ground; already the young ice had begun to form. In these high latitudes there is neither spring nor autumn; winter follows close on the heels of summer.

On the 31st the first stars glimmered overhead, and from that time forwards there was continual fog, which considerably impeded navigation.

The Doctor became very uneasy at these multiplied indications of approaching winter. He knew the difficulties Sir John Ross had to contend with after he left his ship to try and reach Baffin's Bay, and how, after all, he was compelled to return and pass a fourth winter on board. It was bad enough with shelter and food and fuel, but if any such calamity befell the survivors of the *Forward*, if they were obliged to stop or return, they were lost.

The Doctor said nothing of his anxieties to his companions, but only urged them to get as far east as possible.

At last, after thirty days' tolerably quick sailing, and after battling for forty-eight hours against the increasing drift ice, and risking the frail sloop a hundred times, the navigators saw themselves blocked in on all sides. Further progress was impossible, for the sea was frozen in every direction, and the thermometer was only 15° above zero.

Altamont made a reckoning with scrupulous precision, and found they were in 77°15’ latitude, and 85° 2’ longitude.

“This is our exact position then,” said the Doctor. “We are in South Lincoln, just at Cape Eden, and are entering Jones’ Sound. With a little more good luck, we should have found open water right to Baffin’s Bay. But we must not grumble. If my poor Hatteras had found as navigable a sea at first, he would have soon reached the Pole. His men would not have deserted him, and his brain would not have given way under the pressure of terrible trial.”

“I suppose, then,” said Altamont, “our only course is to leave the sloop, and get by sledge to the east coast of Lincoln.”

“Yes; but I think we should go through Jones’ Sound, and get to South Devon instead of crossing Lincoln.”

“Why?”

“Because the nearer we get to Lancaster Sound, the more chance we have of meeting whalers.”

“You are right; but I question whether the ice is firm enough to make it practicable.”

“We’ll try,” replied Clawbonny.

The little vessel was unloaded, and the sledge put together again. All the parts were in good condition, so the next day the dogs were harnessed, and they started off along the coast to reach the ice-field; but Altamont’s opinion proved right. They could not get through Jones’ Sound, and were obliged to follow the coast to Lincoln.

At last, on the 24th, they set foot on North Devon.

“Now,” said Clawbonny, “we have only to cross this, and get to Cape Warender at the entrance to Lancaster Sound.”

But the weather became frightful, and very cold. The snow-storms and tempests returned with winter violence, and the travellers felt too weak to contend with them. Their stock of provisions was almost exhausted, and rations had to be reduced now to a third, that the dogs might have food enough to keep them in working condition.

The nature of the ground added greatly to the fatigue. North Devon is extremely wild and rugged, and the path across the Trauter mountains is through difficult gorges. The whole party — men, and dogs, and sledge alike — were frequently forced to stop, for they could not struggle on against the fury of the elements. More than once despair crept over the brave little band, hardy as they were, and used to Polar sufferings. Though scarcely aware of it themselves, they were completely worn out, physically and mentally.

It was not till the 30th of August that they emerged from these wild mountains into a plain, which seemed to have been upturned and convulsed by volcanic action at some distant period.

Here it was absolutely necessary to take a few days’ rest, for the travellers could not drag one foot after the other, and two of the dogs had died from exhaustion. None of the party felt equal to put up the tent, so they took shelter behind an iceberg.

Provisions were now so reduced, that, notwithstanding their scanty rations, there was only enough left for one week. Starvation stared the poor fellows in the face.

Altamont, who had displayed great unselfishness and devotion to the others, roused his sinking energies, and determined to go out and find food for his comrades.

He took his gun, called Duk, and went off almost unnoticed by the rest.

He had been absent about an hour, and only once during that time had they heard the report of his gun; and now he was coming back empty- handed, but running as if terrified.

“What is the matter?” asked the Doctor.

“Down there, under the snow!” said Altamont, speaking as if scared, and pointing in a particular direction.

“What?”

“A whole party of men!”

“Alive?”

“Dead — frozen — and even — ”

He did not finish the sentence, but a look of unspeakable horror came over his face.

The Doctor and the others were so roused by this incident, that they managed to get up and drag themselves after Altamont towards the place he indicated.

They soon arrived, at a narrow part at the bottom of a ravine, and what a spectacle met their gaze! Dead bodies, already stiff, lay half- buried in a winding-sheet of snow. A leg visible here, an arm there, and yonder shrunken hands and rigid faces, stamped with the expression of rage and despair.

The Doctor stooped down to look at them more closely, but instantly started back pale and agitated, while Duk barked ominously.

“Horrible, horrible!” he said.

“What is it?” asked Johnson.

“Don’t you recognize them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Look and see!”

It was evident this ravine had been but recently the scene of a fearful straggle with cold, and despair, and starvation, for by certain horrible remains it was manifest that the poor wretches had been feeding on human flesh, perhaps while still warm and palpitating; and among them the Doctor recognized Shandon, Pen, and the ill-fated crew of the *Forward!* Their strength had failed; provisions had come to an end; their boat had been broken, perhaps by an avalanche or engulphed in some abyss, and they could not take advantage of the open sea; or perhaps they had lost their way in wandering over these unknown continents. Moreover, men who set out under the excitement of a revolt were not likely to remain long united. The leader of a rebellion has but a doubtful power, and no doubt Shandon’s authority had been soon cast off.

Be that as it might, it was evident the crew had come through agonies of suffering and despair before this last terrible catastrophe, but the secret of their miseries is buried with them beneath the polar snows.

“Come away! come away!” said the Doctor, dragging his companions from the scene. Horror gave them momentary strength, and they resumed their march without stopping a minute longer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

CONCLUSION.

It would be useless to enumerate all the misfortunes which befell the survivors of the expedition. Even the men themselves were never able to give any detailed narrative of the events which occurred during the week subsequent to the horrible discovery related in the last chapter. However, on the 9th of September, by superhuman exertions, they arrived at last at Cape Horsburg, the extreme point of North Devon.

They were absolutely starving. For forty-eight hours they had tasted nothing, and their last meal had been off the flesh of their last Esquimaux dog. Bell could go no further, and Johnson felt himself dying.

They were on the shore of Baffin’s Bay, now half-frozen over; that is to say, on the road to Europe, and three miles off the waves were dashing noiselessly on the sharp edges of the ice-field.

Here they must wait their chance of a whaler appearing; and for how long?

But Heaven pitied the poor fellows, for the very next day Altamont distinctly perceived a sail on the horizon. Every one knows the torturing suspense that follows such an appearance, and the agonizing dread lest it should prove a false hope. The vessel seems alternately to approach and recede, and too often just at the very moment when the poor castaways think they are saved, the sail begins to disappear, and is soon out of sight.

The Doctor and his companions went through all these experiences. They had succeeded in reaching the western boundary of the ice-field by carrying and pushing each other along, and they watched the ship gradually fade away from view without observing them, in spite of their loud cries for help.

Just then a happy inspiration came to the Doctor. His fertile genius, which had served him many a time in such good stead, supplied him with one last idea!

A floe driven by the current struck against the icefield, and Clawbonny exclaimed, pointing to it —

“This floe!”

His companions could not understand what he meant.

“Let us embark on it! let us embark on it!”

“Oh! Mr. Clawbonny, Mr. Clawbonny,” said Johnson, pressing his hand.

Bell, assisted by Altamont, hurried to the sledge, and brought back one of the poles, which he stuck fast on the ice like a mast, and fastened it with ropes. The tent was torn up to furnish a sail, and as soon as the frail raft was ready the poor fellows jumped upon it, and sailed out to the open sea.

Two hours later, after unheard-of exertions, the survivors of the *Forward* were picked up by the *Hans Christian*, a Danish whaler, on her way to Davis’ Straits. They were more like spectres than human beings, and the sight of their sufferings was enough. It told its own tale; but the captain received them with such hearty sympathy, and lavished on them such care and kindness, that he succeeded in keeping them alive.

Ten days afterwards, Clawbonny, Johnson, Bell, Altamont, and Captain Hatteras landed at Korsam, in Zealand, an island belonging to Denmark.

They took the steamer to Kiel, and from there proceeded by Altona and Hamburg to London, where they arrived on the 13th of the same month, scarcely recovered after their long sufferings.

The first care of Clawbonny was to request the Royal Geographical Society to receive a communication from him. He was accordingly admitted to the next

séance, and one can imagine the astonishment of the learned assembly and the enthusiastic applause produced by the reading of Hatteras' document.

The English have a passion for geographical discovery, from the lord to the cockney, from the merchant down to the dock labourer, and the news of this grand discovery speedily flashed along the telegraph wires, throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom. Hatteras was lauded as a martyr by all the newspapers, and every Englishman felt proud of him.

The Doctor and his companions had the honour of being presented to the Queen by the Lord Chancellor, and they were feted and "lionized" in all quarters.

The Government confirmed the names of "Queen's Island," "Mount Hatteras," and "Altamont Harbour."

Altamont would not part from his companions in misery and glory, but followed them to Liverpool, where they were joyously welcomed back, after being so long supposed dead and buried beneath the eternal snows.

But Dr. Clawbonny would never allow that any honour was due to himself. He claimed all the merit of the discovery for his unfortunate captain, and in the narrative of his voyage, published the next year under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society, he places John Hatteras on a level with the most illustrious navigators, and makes him the compeer of all the brave, daring men who have sacrificed themselves for the progress of science.

The insanity of this poor victim of a sublime passion was of a mild type, and he lived quietly at Sten Cottage, a private asylum near Liverpool, where the Doctor himself had placed him. He never spoke, and understood nothing that was said to him; reason and speech had fled together. The only tie that connected him with the outside world was his friendship for Duk, who was allowed to remain with him.

For a considerable time the captain had been in the habit of walking in the garden for hours, accompanied by his faithful dog, who watched him with sad, wistful eyes, but his promenade was always in one direction in a particular part of the garden. When he got to the end of this path, he would stop and begin to walk backwards. If anyone stopped him he would point with his finger towards a certain part of the sky, but let anyone attempt to turn him round, and he became angry, while Duk, as if sharing his master’s sentiments, would bark furiously.

The Doctor, who often visited his afflicted friend, noticed this strange proceeding one day, and soon understood the reason of it. He saw how it was that he paced so constantly in a given direction, as if under the influence of some magnetic force.

This was the secret: John Hatteras invariably walked towards the North.

THE END.

THE CHILDREN OF CAPTAIN GRANT

Anonymous translation, 1868

Also known as *In Search of the Castaways*, this novel was first published in 1867. It tells the story of Captain Grant's quest for finding the shipwrecked *Britannia*. After finding a bottle cast into the ocean by the captain, Lord and Lady Glenarvan of Scotland contact Mary and Robert, the young daughter and son of Captain Grant, through an announcement in a newspaper. Moved by the children's condition, Lord and Lady Glenarvan decide to launch a rescue expedition.

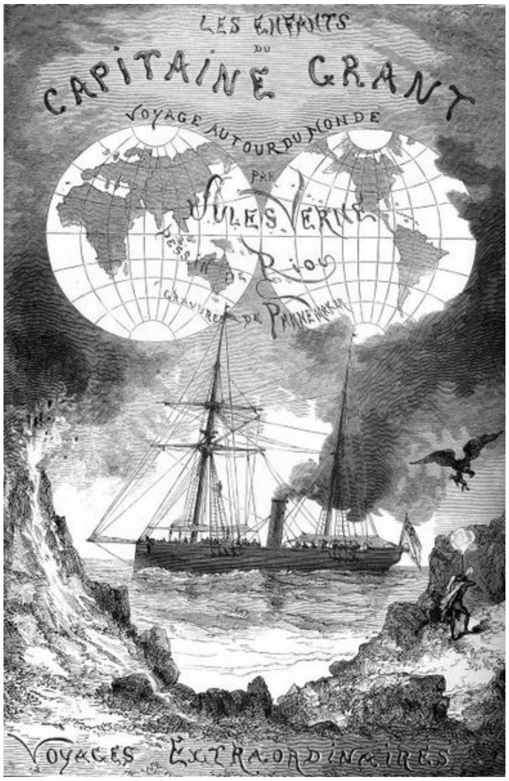
LES ENFANTS
DU
CAPITAINE GRANT
VOYAGE AUTOUR DU MONDE
PAR
JULES VERNE
DESSIN DE RIOU
GRAVURE DE PANNEMAKER
VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES

The original frontispiece

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I THE SHARK

ON the 26th of July, 1864, a magnificent yacht was steaming along the North Channel at full speed, with a strong breeze blowing from the N. E. The Union Jack was flying at the mizzen-mast, and a blue standard bearing the initials E. G. embroidered in gold, and surmounted by a ducal coronet, floated from the topgallant head of the main-mast. The name of the yacht was the DUNCAN, and the owner was Lord Glenarvan, one of the sixteen Scotch peers who sit in the Upper House, and the most distinguished member of the Royal Thames Yacht Club, so famous throughout the United Kingdom.

Lord Edward Glenarvan was on board with his young wife, Lady Helena, and one of his cousins, Major McNabbs.

The DUNCAN was newly built, and had been making a trial trip a few miles outside the Firth of Clyde. She was returning to Glasgow, and the Isle of Arran already loomed in the distance, when the sailor on watch caught sight of an enormous fish sporting in the wake of the ship. Lord Edward, who was immediately apprised of the fact, came up on the poop a few minutes after with his cousin, and asked John Mangles, the captain, what sort of an animal he thought it was.

“Well, since your Lordship asks my opinion,” said Mangles, “I think it is a shark, and a fine large one too.”

“A shark on these shores!”

“There is nothing at all improbable in that,” returned the captain. “This fish belongs to a species that is found in all latitudes and in all seas. It is the ‘balance-fish,’ or hammer-headed shark, if I am not much mistaken. But if your Lordship has no objections, and it would give the smallest pleasure to Lady Helena to see a novelty in the way of fishing, we'll soon haul up the monster and find out what it really is."

"What do you say, McNabbs? Shall we try to catch it?" asked Lord Glenarvan.

"If you like; it's all one to me," was his cousin's cool reply.

"The more of those terrible creatures that are killed the better, at all events," said John Mangles, "so let's seize the chance, and it will not only give us a little diversion, but be doing a good action."

"Very well, set to work, then," said Glenarvan.

Lady Helena soon joined her husband on deck, quite charmed at the prospect of such exciting sport. The sea was splendid, and every movement of the shark was distinctly visible. In obedience to the captain's orders, the sailors threw a strong rope over the starboard side of the yacht, with a big hook at the end of it, concealed in a thick lump of bacon. The bait took at once, though the shark was full fifty yards distant. He began to make rapidly for the yacht, beating the waves violently with his fins, and keeping his tail in a perfectly straight line. As he got nearer, his great projecting eyes could be seen inflamed with greed, and his gaping jaws with their quadruple row of teeth. His head was large, and shaped like a double hammer at the end of a handle. John Mangles was right. This was evidently a balance-fish — the most voracious of all the SQUALIDAE species.

The passengers and sailors on the yacht were watching all the animal's movements with the liveliest interest. He soon came within reach of the bait, turned over on his back to make a good dart at it, and in a second bacon and contents had disappeared. He had hooked himself now, as the tremendous jerk he gave the cable proved, and the sailors began to haul in the monster by means of tackle attached to the mainyard. He struggled desperately, but his captors were prepared for his violence, and had a long rope ready with a slip knot, which caught his tail and rendered him powerless at once. In a few minutes more he was hoisted up over the side of the yacht and thrown on the deck. A man came forward immediately, hatchet in hand, and approaching him cautiously, with one powerful stroke cut off his tail.

This ended the business, for there was no longer any fear of the shark. But, though the sailors' vengeance was satisfied, their curiosity was not; they knew the brute had no very delicate appetite, and the contents of his stomach might be worth investigation. This is the common practice on all ships when a shark is captured, but Lady Glenarvan declined to be present at such a disgusting exploration, and withdrew to the cabin again. The fish was still breathing; it measured ten feet in length, and weighed more than six hundred pounds. This was nothing extraordinary, for though the hammer-headed shark is not classed among the most gigantic of the species, it is always reckoned among the most formidable.

The huge brute was soon ripped up in a very unceremonious fashion. The hook had fixed right in the stomach, which was found to be absolutely empty, and the disappointed sailors were just going to throw the remains overboard, when the boatswain's attention was attracted by some large object sticking fast in one of the viscera.

"I say! what's this?" he exclaimed.

"That!" replied one of the sailors, "why, it's a piece of rock the beast swallowed by way of ballast."

“It’s just a bottle, neither more nor less, that the fellow has got in his inside, and couldn’t digest,” said another of the crew.

“Hold your tongues, all of you!” said Tom Austin, the mate of the DUNCAN. “Don’t you see the animal has been such an inveterate tippler that he has not only drunk the wine, but swallowed the bottle?”

“What!” said Lord Glenarvan. “Do you mean to say it is a bottle that the shark has got in his stomach.”

“Ay, it is a bottle, most certainly,” replied the boatswain, “but not just from the cellar.”

“Well, Tom, be careful how you take it out,” said Lord Glenarvan, “for bottles found in the sea often contain precious documents.”

“Do you think this does?” said Major McNabbs, incredulously.

“It possibly may, at any rate.”

“Oh! I’m not saying it doesn’t. There may perhaps be some secret in it,” returned the Major.

“That’s just what we’re to see,” said his cousin. “Well, Tom.”

“Here it is,” said the mate, holding up a shapeless lump he had managed to pull out, though with some difficulty.

“Get the filthy thing washed then, and bring it to the cabin.”

Tom obeyed, and in a few minutes brought in the bottle and laid it on the table, at which Lord Glenarvan and the Major were sitting ready with the captain, and, of course Lady Helena, for women, they say, are always a little curious. Everything is an event at sea. For a moment they all sat silent, gazing at this frail relic, wondering if it told the tale of sad disaster, or brought some trifling message from a frolic-loving sailor, who had flung it into the sea to amuse himself when he had nothing better to do.

However, the only way to know was to examine the bottle, and Glenarvan set to work without further delay, so carefully and minutely, that he might have been taken for a coroner making an inquest.

He commenced by a close inspection of the outside.

The neck was long and slender, and round the thick rim there

was still an end of wire hanging, though eaten away with rust.

The sides were very thick, and strong enough to bear great pressure.

It was evidently of Champagne origin, and the Major said immediately,

“That’s one of our Clicquot’s bottles.”

Nobody contradicted him, as he was supposed to know; but Lady Helena exclaimed, “What does it matter about the bottle, if we don’t know where it comes from?”

“We shall know that, too, presently, and we may affirm this much already — it comes from a long way off. Look at those petrifactions all over it, these different substances almost turned to mineral, we might say, through the action of the salt water! This waif had been tossing about in the ocean a long time before the shark swallowed it.”

"I quite agree with you," said McNabbs. "I dare say this frail concern has made a long voyage, protected by this strong covering."

"But I want to know where from?" said Lady Glenarvan.

"Wait a little, dear Helena, wait; we must have patience with bottles; but if I am not much mistaken, this one will answer all our questions," replied her husband, beginning to scrape away the hard substances round the neck. Soon the cork made its appearance, but much damaged by the water.

"That's vexing," said Lord Edward, "for if papers are inside, they'll be in a pretty state!"

"It's to be feared they will," said the Major.

"But it is a lucky thing the shark swallowed them, I must say," added Glenarvan, "for the bottle would have sunk to the bottom before long with such a cork as this."

"That's true enough," replied John Mangles, "and yet it would have been better to have fished them up in the open sea. Then we might have found out the road they had come by taking the exact latitude and longitude, and studying the atmospheric and submarine currents; but with such a postman as a shark, that goes against wind and tide, there's no clew whatever to the starting-point."

"We shall see," said Glenarvan, gently taking out the cork. A strong odor of salt water pervaded the whole saloon, and Lady Helena asked impatiently: "Well, what is there?"

"I was right!" exclaimed Glenarvan. "I see papers inside. But I fear it will be impossible to remove them," he added, "for they appear to have rotted with the damp, and are sticking to the sides of the bottle."

"Break it," said the Major.

"I would rather preserve the whole if I could."

"No doubt you would," said Lady Helena; "but the contents are more valuable than the bottle, and we had better sacrifice the one than the other."

"If your Lordship would simply break off the neck, I think we might easily withdraw the papers," suggested John Mangles.

"Try it, Edward, try it," said Lady Helena.

Lord Glenarvan was very unwilling, but he found there was no alternative; the precious bottle must be broken. They had to get a hammer before this could be done, though, for the stony material had acquired the hardness of granite. A few sharp strokes, however, soon shivered it to fragments, many of which had pieces of paper sticking to them. These were carefully removed by Lord Glenarvan, and separated and spread out on the table before the eager gaze of his wife and friends.

CHAPTER II THE THREE DOCUMENTS

ALL that could be discovered, however, on these pieces of paper was a few words here and there, the remainder of the lines being almost completely obliterated by the action of the water. Lord Glenarvan examined them attentively for a few minutes, turning them over on all sides, holding them up to the light, and trying to decipher the least scrap of writing, while the others looked on with anxious eyes. At last he said: “There are three distinct documents here, apparently copies of the same document in three different languages. Here is one in English, one in French, and one in German.”

“But can you make any sense out of them?” asked Lady Helena.

“That’s hard to say, my dear Helena, the words are quite incomplete.”

“Perhaps the one may supplement the other,” suggested Major McNabbs.

“Very likely they will,” said the captain. “It is impossible that the very same words should have been effaced in each document, and by putting the scraps together we might gather some intelligible meaning out of them.”

“That’s what we will do,” rejoined Lord Glenarvan; “but let us proceed methodically. Here is the English document first.”

All that remained of it was the following:

62 Bri gow

sink stra

aland

skipp Gr

that monit of long

and ssistance

lost

“There’s not much to be made out of that,” said the Major, looking disappointed.

“No, but it is good English anyhow,” returned the captain.

“There’s no doubt of it,” said Glenarvan. “The words SINK, ALAND, LOST are entire; SKIPP is evidently part of the word SKIPPER, and that’s what they call ship captains often in England. There seems a Mr. Gr. mentioned, and that most likely is the captain of the shipwrecked vessel.”

“Well, come, we have made out a good deal already,” said Lady Helena.

“Yes, but unfortunately there are whole lines wanting,” said the Major, “and we have neither the name of the ship nor the place where she was shipwrecked.”

“We’ll get that by and by,” said Edward.

“Oh, yes; there is no doubt of it,” replied the Major, who always echoed his neighbor’s opinion. “But how?”

“By comparing one document with the other.”

“Let us try them,” said his wife.

The second piece of paper was even more destroyed than the first; only a few scattered words remained here and there.

It ran as follows:

7 Juni Glas

zwei atrosen

graus

bringt ihnen

“This is written in German,” said John Mangles the moment he looked at it.

“And you understand that language, don’t you?” asked Lord Glenarvan.

“Perfectly.”

“Come, then, tell us the meaning of these words.”

The captain examined the document carefully, and said:

“Well, here’s the date of the occurrence first: 7 Juni means June 7; and if we put that before the figures 62 we have in the other document, it gives us the exact date, 7th of June, 1862.”

“Capital!” exclaimed Lady Helena. “Go on, John!”

“On the same line,” resumed the young captain, “there is the syllable GLAS and if we add that to the GOW we found in the English paper, we get the whole word GLASGOW at once. The documents evidently refer to some ship that sailed out of the port of Glasgow." "That is my opinion, too," said the Major.

"The second line is completely effaced," continued the Captain; "but here are two important words on the third. There is ZWEI, which means TWO, and ATROSEN or MATROSEN, the German for SAILORS."

"Then I suppose it is about a captain and two sailors," said Lady Helena.

"It seems so," replied Lord Glenarvan.

"I must confess, your Lordship, that the next word puzzles me. I can make nothing of it. Perhaps the third document may throw some light on it. The last two words are plain enough. BRINGT IHNEN means BRING THEM; and, if you recollect, in the English paper we had SSISTANCE, so by putting the parts together, it reads thus, I think: 'BRING THEM ASSISTANCE.'"

"Yes, that must be it," replied Lord Glenarvan. "But where are the poor fellows? We have not the slightest indication of the place, meantime, nor of where the catastrophe happened."

"Perhaps the French copy will be more explicit," suggested Lady Helena.

"Here it is, then," said Lord Glenarvan, "and that is in a language we all know."

The words it contained were these:

troi ats tannia

gonie austral

abor

contin pr cruel indi

jete ongit

et 37 degrees 11” LAT

“There are figures!” exclaimed Lady Helena. “Look!”

“Let us go steadily to work,” said Lord Glenarvan, “and begin at the beginning. I think we can make out from the incomplete words in the first line that a three-mast vessel is in question, and there is little doubt about the name; we get that from the fragments of the other papers; it is the BRITANNIA. As to the next two words, GONIE and AUSTRAL, it is only AUSTRAL that has any meaning to us.”

“But that is a valuable scrap of information,” said John Mangles.

“The shipwreck occurred in the southern hemisphere.”

“That’s a wide world,” said the Major.

“Well, we’ll go on,” resumed Glenarvan. “Here is the word ABOR; that is clearly the root of the verb ABORDER. The poor men have landed somewhere; but where? CONTIN — does that mean continent? CRUEL!”

“CRUEL!” interrupted John Mangles. “I see now what GRAUS is part of in the second document. It is GRAUSAM, the word in German for CRUEL!”

“Let’s go on,” said Lord Glenarvan, becoming quite excited over his task, as the incomplete words began to fill up and develop their meaning. “INDI, — is it India where they have been shipwrecked? And what can this word

ONGIT be part of? Ah! I see — it is LONGITUDE; and here is the latitude, 37 degrees 11”. That is the precise indication at last, then!”

“But we haven’t the longitude,” objected McNabbs.

“But we can’t get everything, my dear Major; and it is something at all events, to have the exact latitude. The French document is decidedly the most complete of the three; but it is plain enough that each is the literal translation of the other, for they all contain exactly the same number of lines. What we have to do now is to put together all the words we have found, and translate them into one language, and try to ascertain their most probable and logical sense.”

“Well, what language shall we choose?” asked the Major.

“I think we had better keep to the French, since that was the most complete document of the three.”

“Your Lordship is right,” said John Mangles, “and besides, we’re all familiar with the language.”

“Very well, then, I’ll set to work.”

In a few minutes he had written as follows:

7 Juin 1862 trois-mats Britannia Glasgow

sombre gonie austral

    a terre deux matelots

capitaine Gr abor

contin pr cruel indi

jete ce document de longitude

et 37 degrees 11” de latitude Portez-leur secours

perdus.

[7th of June, 1862 three-mast BRITANNIA Glasgow] foundered gonie southern on the coast two sailors Gr Captain landed contin pr cruel indi thrown this document in longitude and 37 degrees 11” latitude Bring them assistance lost

Just at that moment one of the sailors came to inform the captain that they were about entering the Firth of Clyde, and to ask what were his orders.

“What are your Lordship’s intentions?” said John Mangles, addressing Lord Glenarvan.

“To get to Dunbarton as quickly as possible, John; and Lady Helena will return to Malcolm Castle, while I go on to London and lay this document before the Admiralty.”

The sailor received orders accordingly, and went out to deliver them to the mate.

“Now, friends,” said Lord Glenarvan, “let us go on with our investigations, for we are on the track of a great catastrophe, and the lives of several human beings depend on our sagacity. We must give our whole minds to the solution of this enigma.”

“First of all, there are three very distinct things to be considered in this document — the things we know, the things we may conjecture, the things we do not know.”

“What are those we know? We know that on the 7th of June a three-mast vessel, the BRITANNIA of Glasgow, foundered; that two sailors and the captain threw this document into the sea in 37 degrees 11” latitude, and they entreat help.”

“Exactly so,” said the Major.

“What are those now we may conjecture?” continued Glenarvan. “That the shipwreck occurred in the southern seas; and here I would draw your attention at once to the incomplete word GONIE. Doesn’t the name of the country strike you even in the mere mention of it?”

“Patagonia!” exclaimed Lady Helena.

“Undoubtedly.”

“But is Patagonia crossed by the 37th parallel?” asked the Major.

“That is easily ascertained,” said the captain, opening a map of

South America. “Yes, it is; Patagonia just touches the 37th parallel.

It cuts through Araucania, goes along over the Pampas to the north,

and loses itself in the Atlantic.”

“Well, let us proceed then with our conjectures. The two sailors and the captain LAND — land where? CONTIN — on a continent; on a continent, mark you, not an island. What becomes of them? There are two letters here providentially which give a clew to their fate — PR, that must mean prisoners, and CRUEL INDIAN is evidently the meaning of the next two words. These unfortunate men are captives in the hands of cruel Indians. Don't you see it? Don't the words seem to come of themselves, and fill up the blanks? Isn't the document quite clear now? Isn't the sense self-evident?"

Glenarvan spoke in a tone of absolute conviction, and his enthusiastic confidence appeared contagious, for the others all exclaimed, too, "Yes, it is evident, quite evident!"

After an instant, Lord Edward said again, "To my own mind the hypothesis is so plausible, that I have no doubt whatever the event occurred on the coast of Patagonia, but still I will have inquiries made in Glasgow, as to the destination of the BRITANNIA, and we shall know if it is possible she could have been wrecked on those shores."

"Oh, there's no need to send so far to find out that," said John Mangles. "I have the Mercantile and Shipping Gazette here, and we'll see the name on the list, and all about it."

"Do look at once, then," said Lord Glenarvan.

The file of papers for the year 1862 was soon brought, and John began to turn over the leaves rapidly, running down each page with his eye in search of the name required. But his quest was not long, for in a few minutes he called out: "I've got it! 'May 30, 1862, Peru-Callao, with cargo for Glasgow, the BRITANNIA, Captain Grant.'"

"Grant!" exclaimed Lord Glenarvan. "That is the adventurous Scotchman that attempted to found a new Scotland on the shores of the Pacific."

“Yes,” rejoined John Mangles, “it is the very man. He sailed from Glasgow in the BRITANNIA in 1861, and has not been heard of since.”

“There isn’t a doubt of it, not a shadow of doubt,” repeated Lord Glenarvan. “It is just that same Captain Grant. The BRITANNIA left Callao on the 30th of May, and on the 7th of June, a week afterward, she is lost on the coast of Patagonia. The few broken disjointed words we find in these documents tell us the whole story. You see, friends, our conjectures hit the mark very well; we know all now except one thing, and that is the longitude.”

“That is not needed now, we know the country. With the latitude alone,

I would engage to go right to the place where the wreck happened.”

“Then have we really all the particulars now?” asked Lady Helena.

“All, dear Helena; I can fill up every one of these blanks the sea has made in the document as easily as if Captain Grant were dictating to me.”

And he took up the pen, and dashed off the following lines immediately: “On the 7th of June, 1862, the three-mast vessel, BRITANNIA, of Glasgow, has sunk on the coast of Patagonia, in the southern hemisphere. Making for the shore, two sailors and Captain Grant are about to land on the continent, where they will be taken prisoners by cruel Indians. They have thrown this document into the sea, in longitude and latitude 37 degrees 11”. Bring them assistance, or they are lost.”

“Capital! capital! dear Edward,” said Lady Helena. “If those poor creatures ever see their native land again, it is you they will have to thank for it.”

“And they will see it again,” returned Lord Glenarvan; “the statement is too explicit, and clear, and certain for England to hesitate about going to the aid of her three sons cast away on a desert coast. What she has done for Franklin and so many others, she will do to-day for these poor shipwrecked fellows of the BRITANNIA.”

“Most likely the unfortunate men have families who mourn their loss. Perhaps this ill-fated Captain Grant had a wife and children,” suggested Lady Helena.

“Very true, my dear, and I’ll not forget to let them know that there is still hope. But now, friends, we had better go up on deck, as the boat must be getting near the harbor.”

A carriage and post-horses waited there, in readiness to convey Lady Helena and Major McNabbs to Malcolm Castle, and Lord Glenarvan bade adieu to his young wife, and jumped into the express train for Glasgow.

But before starting he confided an important missive to a swifter agent than himself, and a few minutes afterward it flashed along the electric wire to London, to appear next day in the Times and Morning Chronicle in the following words: “For information respecting the fate of the three-mast vessel BRITANNIA, of Glasgow, Captain Grant, apply to Lord Glenarvan, Malcolm Castle, Luss, Dumbartonshire, Scotland.”

CHAPTER III THE CAPTAIN’S CHILDREN

LORD GLENARVAN’S fortune was enormous, and he spent it entirely in doing good. His kindheartedness was even greater than his generosity, for the one knew no bounds, while the other, of necessity, had its limits. As Lord of Luss and “laird” of Malcolm, he represented his county in the House of Lords; but, with his Jacobite ideas, he did not care much for the favor of the House of Hanover, and he was looked upon coldly by the State party in England, because of the tenacity with which he clung to the traditions of his forefathers, and his energetic resistance to the political encroachments of Southerners. And yet he was not a man behind the times, and there was nothing little or narrow-minded about him; but while always keeping open his ancestral county to progress, he was a true Scotchman at heart, and it was for the honor of Scotland that he competed in the yacht races of the Royal Thames Yacht Club.

Edward Glenarvan was thirty-two years of age. He was tall in person, and had rather stern features; but there was an exceeding sweetness in his look, and a stamp of Highland poetry about his whole bearing. He was known to be brave to excess, and full of daring and chivalry — a Fer-gus of the nineteenth century; but his goodness excelled every other quality, and he was more charitable than St. Martin himself, for he would have given the whole of his cloak to any of the poor Highlanders.

He had scarcely been married three months, and his bride was Miss Helena Tuffnell, the daughter of William Tuffnell, the great traveler, one of the many victims of geographical science and of the passion for discovery. Miss Helena did not belong to a noble family, but she was Scotch, and that was better than all nobility in the eyes of Lord Glenarvan; and she was, moreover, a charming, high-souled, religious young woman.

Lord Glenarvan did not forget that his wife was the daughter of a great traveler, and he thought it likely that she would inherit her father’s predilections. He had the DUNCAN built expressly that he might take his bride to the most beautiful lands in the world, and complete their honeymoon by sailing up the Mediterranean, and through the clustering islands of the Archipelago.

However, Lord Glenarvan had gone now to London. The lives of the shipwrecked men were at stake, and Lady Helena was too much concerned herself about them to grudge her husband’s temporary absence. A telegram next day gave hope of his speedy return, but in the evening a letter apprised her of the difficulties his proposition had met with, and the morning after brought another, in which he openly expressed his dissatisfaction with the Admiralty.

Lady Helena began to get anxious as the day wore on. In the evening, when she was sitting alone in her room, Mr. Halbert, the house steward, came in and asked if she would see a young girl and boy that wanted to speak to Lord Glenarvan.

“Some of the country people?” asked Lady Helena.

“No, madame,” replied the steward, “I do not know them at all.

They came by rail to Balloch, and walked the rest of the way to Luss.”

“Tell them to come up, Halbert.”

In a few minutes a girl and boy were shown in. They were evidently brother and sister, for the resemblance was unmistakable. The girl was about sixteen years of age; her tired pretty face, and sorrowful eyes, and resigned but courageous look, as well as her neat though poor attire, made a favorable impression. The boy she held by the hand was about twelve, but his face expressed such determination, that he appeared quite his sister's protector.

The girl seemed too shy to utter a word at first, but Lady Helena quickly relieved her embarrassment by saying, with an encouraging smile: "You wish to speak to me, I think?"

"No," replied the boy, in a decided tone; "not to you, but to Lord Glenarvan."

"Excuse him, ma'am," said the girl, with a look at her brother.

"Lord Glenarvan is not at the castle just now," returned Lady Helena; "but I am his wife, and if I can do anything for you — "

"You are Lady Glenarvan?" interrupted the girl.

"I am."

"The wife of Lord Glenarvan, of Malcolm Castle, that put an announcement in the TIMES about the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA?"

"Yes, yes," said Lady Helena, eagerly; "and you?"

"I am Miss Grant, ma'am, and this is my brother."

"Miss Grant, Miss Grant!" exclaimed Lady Helena, drawing the young girl toward her, and taking both her hands and kissing the boy's rosy cheeks.

"What is it you know, ma'am, about the shipwreck? Tell me, is my father living? Shall we ever see him again? Oh, tell me," said the girl, earnestly.

“My dear child,” replied Lady Helena. “Heaven forbid that I should answer you lightly such a question; I would not delude you with vain hopes.”

“Oh, tell me all, tell me all, ma’am. I’m proof against sorrow.

I can bear to hear anything.”

“My poor child, there is but a faint hope; but with the help of almighty Heaven it is just possible you may one day see your father once more.”

The girl burst into tears, and Robert seized Lady Glenarvan’s hand and covered it with kisses.

As soon as they grew calmer they asked a complete string of questions, and Lady Helena recounted the whole story of the document, telling them that their father had been wrecked on the coast of Patagonia, and that he and two sailors, the sole survivors, appeared to have reached the shore, and had written an appeal for help in three languages and committed it to the care of the waves.

During the recital, Robert Grant was devouring the speaker with his eyes, and hanging on her lips. His childish imagination evidently retraced all the scenes of his father’s shipwreck. He saw him on the deck of the BRITANNIA, and then struggling with the billows, then clinging to the rocks, and lying at length exhausted on the beach.

More than once he cried out, “Oh, papa! my poor papa!” and pressed close to his sister.

Miss Grant sat silent and motionless, with clasped hands, and all she said when the narration ended, was: “Oh, ma’am, the paper, please!”

“I have not it now, my dear child,” replied Lady Helena.

“You haven’t it?”

“No. Lord Glenarvan was obliged to take it to London, for the sake of your father; but I have told you all it contained, word for word, and how we managed to make out the complete sense from the fragments of words left — all except the longitude, unfortunately.”

“We can do without that,” said the boy.

“Yes, Mr. Robert,” rejoined Lady Helena, smiling at the child’s decided tone. “And so you see, Miss Grant, you know the smallest details now just as well as I do.”

“Yes, ma’am, but I should like to have seen my father’s writing.”

“Well, to-morrow, perhaps, to-morrow, Lord Glenarvan will be back. My husband determined to lay the document before the Lords of the Admiralty, to induce them to send out a ship immediately in search of Captain Grant.”

“Is it possible, ma’am,” exclaimed the girl, “that you have done that for us?”

“Yes, my dear Miss Grant, and I am expecting Lord Glenarvan back every minute now.”

“Oh, ma’am! Heaven bless you and Lord Glenarvan,” said the young girl, fervently, overcome with grateful emotion.”

“My dear girl, we deserve no thanks; anyone in our place would have done the same. I only trust the hopes we are leading you to entertain may be realized, but till my husband returns, you will remain at the Castle.”

“Oh, no, ma’am. I could not abuse the sympathy you show to strangers.”

“Strangers, dear child!” interrupted Lady Helena; “you and your brother are not strangers in this house, and I should like Lord Glenarvan to be able on his arrival to tell the children of Captain Grant himself, what is going to be done to rescue their father.”

It was impossible to refuse an invitation given with such heart, and Miss Grant and her brother consented to stay till Lord Glenarvan returned.

CHAPTER IV LADY GLENARVAN'S PROPOSAL

LADY HELENA thought it best to say nothing to the children about the fears Lord Glenarvan had expressed in his letters respecting the decisions of the Lords of the Admiralty with regard to the document. Nor did she mention the probable captivity of Captain Grant among the Indians of South America. Why sadden the poor children, and damp their newly cherished hopes? It would not in the least alter the actual state of the case; so not a word was said, and after answering all Miss Grant's questions, Lady Helena began to interrogate in her turn, asking her about her past life and her present circumstances.

It was a touching, simple story she heard in reply, and one which increased her sympathy for the young girl.

Mary and Robert were the captain's only children. Harry Grant lost his wife when Robert was born, and during his long voyages he left his little ones in charge of his cousin, a good old lady. Captain Grant was a fearless sailor. He not only thoroughly understood navigation, but commerce also — a two-fold qualification eminently useful to skippers in the merchant service. He lived in Dundee, in Perthshire, Scotland. His father, a minister of St. Katrine's Church, had given him a thorough education, as he believed that could never hurt anybody.

Harry's voyages were prosperous from the first, and a few years after

Robert was born, he found himself possessed of a considerable fortune.

It was then that he projected the grand scheme which made him popular in Scotland. Like Glenarvan, and a few noble families in the Lowlands, he had no heart for the union with England. In his eyes the interests of his country were not identified with those of the Anglo-Saxons, and to give scope for personal development, he resolved to found an immense Scotch colony on one of the ocean continents. Possibly he might have thought that some day they would achieve their independence, as the United States did — an example doubtless to be followed eventually by Australia and India. But whatever might be his secret motives, such was his dream of colonization. But, as is easily understood, the Government opposed his plans, and put difficulties enough in his way to have killed an ordinary man. But Harry would not be beaten. He appealed to the patriotism of his countrymen, placed his fortune at the service of the cause, built a ship, and manned it with a picked crew, and leaving his children to the care of his old cousin set off to explore the great islands of the Pacific. This was in 1861, and for twelve months, or up to May, 1862, letters were regularly received from him, but no tidings whatever had come since his departure from Callao, in June, and the name of the BRITANNIA never appeared in the Shipping List.

Just at this juncture the old cousin died, and Harry Grant's two children were left alone in the world.

Mary Grant was then only fourteen, but she resolved to face her situation bravely, and to devote herself entirely to her little brother, who was still a mere child. By dint of close economy, combined with tact and prudence, she managed to support and educate him, working day and night, denying herself everything, that she might give him all he needed, watching over him and caring for him like a mother.

The two children were living in this touching manner in Dundee, struggling patiently and courageously with their poverty. Mary thought only of her brother, and indulged in dreams of a prosperous future for him. She had long given up all hope of the BRITANNIA, and was fully persuaded that her father was dead. What, then, was her emotion when she accidentally saw the notice in the TIMES!

She never hesitated for an instant as to the course she should adopt, but determined to go to Dumbartonshire immediately, to learn the best and worst. Even if she were to be told that her father's lifeless body had been found on a distant shore, or in the bottom of some abandoned ship, it would be a relief from incessant doubt and torturing suspense.

She told her brother about the advertisement, and the two children started off together that same day for Perth, where they took the train, and arrived in the evening at Malcolm Castle.

Such was Mary Grant's sorrowful story, and she recounted it in so simple and unaffected a manner, that it was evident she never thought her conduct had been that of a heroine through those long trying years. But Lady Helena thought it for her, and more than once she put her arms round both the children, and could not restrain her tears.

As for Robert, he seemed to have heard these particulars for the first time. All the while his sister was speaking, he gazed at her with wide-open eyes, only knowing now how much she had done and suffered for him; and, as she ended, he flung himself on her neck, and exclaimed, "Oh, mamma! My dear little mamma!"

It was quite dark by this time, and Lady Helena made the children go to bed, for she knew they must be tired after their journey. They were soon both sound asleep, dreaming of happy days.

After they had retired. Lady Helena sent for Major McNabbs, and told him the incidents of the evening.

“That Mary Grant must be a brave girl,” said the Major.

“I only hope my husband will succeed, for the poor children’s sake,” said his cousin. “It would be terrible for them if he did not.”

“He will be sure to succeed, or the Lords of the Admiralty must have hearts harder than Portland stone.”

But, notwithstanding McNabbs’s assurance, Lady Helena passed the night in great anxiety, and could not close her eyes.

Mary Grant and her brother were up very early next morning, and were walking about in the courtyard when they heard the sound of a carriage approaching. It was Lord Glenarvan; and, almost immediately, Lady Helena and the Major came out to meet him.

Lady Helena flew toward her husband the moment he alighted; but he embraced her silently, and looked gloomy and disappointed — indeed, even furious.

“Well, Edward?” she said; “tell me.”

“Well, Helena, dear; those people have no heart!”

“They have refused?”

“Yes. They have refused me a ship! They talked of the millions that had been wasted in search for Franklin, and declared the document was obscure and unintelligible. And, then, they said it was two years now since they were cast away, and there was little chance of finding them. Besides, they would have it that the Indians, who made them prisoners, would have dragged them into the interior, and it was impossible, they said, to hunt all through Patagonia for three men — three Scotchmen; that the search would be vain and perilous, and cost more lives than it saved. In short, they assigned all the reasons that people invent who have made up their minds to refuse. The truth is, they remembered Captain Grant's projects, and that is the secret of the whole affair. So the poor fellow is lost for ever."

"My father! my poor father!" cried Mary Grant, throwing herself on her knees before Lord Glenarvan, who exclaimed in amazement:

"Your father? What? Is this Miss — "

"Yes, Edward," said Lady Helena; "this is Miss Mary Grant and her brother, the two children condemned to orphanage by the cruel Admiralty!"

"Oh! Miss Grant," said Lord Glenarvan, raising the young girl, "if I had known of your presence — "

He said no more, and there was a painful silence in the courtyard, broken only by sobs. No one spoke, but the very attitude of both servants and masters spoke their indignation at the conduct of the English Government.

At last the Major said, addressing Lord Glenarvan: "Then you have no hope whatever?"

"None," was the reply.

"Very well, then," exclaimed little Robert, "I'll go and speak to those people myself, and we'll see if they — " He did not complete his sentence, for his sister stopped him; but his clenched fists showed his intentions were the reverse of pacific.

“No, Robert,” said Mary Grant, “we will thank this noble lord and lady for what they have done for us, and never cease to think of them with gratitude; and then we’ll both go together.”

“Mary!” said Lady Helena, in a tone of surprise.

“Go where?” asked Lord Glenarvan.

“I am going to throw myself at the Queen’s feet, and we shall see if she will turn a deaf ear to the prayers of two children, who implore their father’s life.”

Lord Glenarvan shook his head; not that he doubted the kind heart of her Majesty, but he knew Mary would never gain access to her. Suppliants but too rarely reach the steps of a throne; it seems as if royal palaces had the same inscription on their doors that the English have on their ships: Passengers are requested not to speak to the man at the wheel.

Lady Glenarvan understood what was passing in her husband’s mind, and she felt the young girl’s attempt would be useless, and only plunge the poor children in deeper despair. Suddenly, a grand, generous purpose fired her soul, and she called out: “Mary Grant! wait, my child, and listen to what I’m going to say.”

Mary had just taken her brother by the hand, and turned to go away; but she stepped back at Lady Helena’s bidding.

The young wife went up to her husband, and said, with tears in her eyes, though her voice was firm, and her face beamed with animation: “Edward, when Captain Grant wrote that letter and threw it into the sea, he committed it to the care of God. God has sent it to us — to us! Undoubtedly God intends us to undertake the rescue of these poor men.”

“What do you mean, Helena?”

“I mean this, that we ought to think ourselves fortunate if we can begin our married life with a good action. Well, you know, Edward, that to please me you planned a pleasure trip; but what could give us such genuine pleasure, or be so useful, as to save those unfortunate fellows, cast off by their country?”

“Helena!” exclaimed Lord Glenarvan.

“Yes, Edward, you understand me. The DUNCAN is a good strong ship, she can venture in the Southern Seas, or go round the world if necessary. Let us go, Edward; let us start off and search for Captain Grant!”

Lord Glenarvan made no reply to this bold proposition, but smiled, and, holding out his arms, drew his wife into a close, fond embrace. Mary and Robert seized her hands, and covered them with kisses; and the servants who thronged the courtyard, and had been witnesses of this touching scene, shouted with one voice, “Hurrah for the Lady of Luss. Three cheers for Lord and Lady Glenarvan!”

CHAPTER V THE DEPARTURE OF THE "DUNCAN"

WE have said already that Lady Helena was a brave, generous woman, and what she had just done proved it in-disputably. Her husband had good reason to be proud of such a wife, one who could understand and enter into all his views. The idea of going to Captain Grant's rescue had occurred to him in London when his request was refused, and he would have anticipated Lady Helena, only he could not bear the thought of parting from her. But now that she herself proposed to go, all hesitation was at an end. The servants of the Castle had hailed the project with loud acclamations — for it was to save their brothers — Scotchmen, like themselves — and Lord Glenarvan cordially joined his cheers with theirs, for the Lady of Luss.

The departure once resolved upon, there was not an hour to be lost. A telegram was dispatched to John Mangles the very same day, conveying Lord Glenarvan's orders to take the DUNCAN immediately to Glasgow, and to make preparations for a voyage to the Southern Seas, and possibly round the world, for Lady Helena was right in her opinion that the yacht might safely attempt the circumnavigation of the globe, if necessary.

The DUNCAN was a steam yacht of the finest description. She was 210 tons burden — much larger than any of the first vessels that touched the shores of the New World, for the largest of the four ships that sailed with Columbus was only 70 tons. She had two masts and all the sails and rigging of an ordinary clipper, which would enable her to take advantage of every favorable wind, though her chief reliance was on her mechanical power. The engine, which was constructed on a new system, was a high-pressure one, of 160-horse power, and put in motion a double screw. This gave the yacht such swiftness that during her trial trip in the Firth of Clyde, she made seventeen miles an hour, a higher speed than any vessel had yet attained. No alterations were consequently needed in the DUNCAN herself; John Mangles had only to attend to her interior arrangements.

His first care was to enlarge the bunkers to carry as much coal as possible, for it is difficult to get fresh supplies en route. He had to do the same with the store-rooms, and managed so well that he succeeded in laying in provisions enough for two years. There was abundance of money at his command, and enough remained to buy a cannon, on a pivot carriage, which he mounted on the forecastle. There was no knowing what might happen, and it is always well to be able to send a good round bullet flying four miles off.

John Mangles understood his business. Though he was only the captain of a pleasure yacht, he was one of the best skippers in Glasgow. He was thirty years of age, and his countenance expressed both courage and goodness, if the features were somewhat coarse. He had been brought up at the castle by the Glenarvan family, and had turned out a capital sailor, having already given proof, in some of his long voyages, of his skill and energy and sang-froid. When Lord Glenarvan offered him the command of the DUNCAN, he accepted it with right good will, for he loved the master of Malcolm Castle, like a brother, and had hitherto vainly sought some opportunity of showing his devotion.

Tom Austin, the mate, was an old sailor, worthy of all confidence. The crew, consisting of twenty-five men, including the captain and chief officer, were all from Dumbartonshire, experienced sailors, and all belonging to the Glenarvan estate; in fact, it was a regular clan, and they did not forget to carry with them the traditional bagpipes. Lord Glenarvan had in them a band of trusty fellows, skilled in their calling, devoted to himself, full of courage, and as practiced in handling fire-arms as in the maneuvering of a ship; a valiant little troop, ready to follow him any where, even in the most dangerous expeditions. When the crew heard whither they were bound, they could not restrain their enthusiasm, and the rocks of Dumbarton rang again with their joyous outbursts of cheers.

But while John Mangles made the stowage and provisioning of the yacht his chief business, he did not forget to fit up the rooms of Lord and Lady Glenarvan for a long voyage. He had also to get cabins ready for the children of Captain Grant, as Lady Helena could not refuse Mary's request to accompany her.

As for young Robert, he would have smuggled himself in somewhere in the hold of the DUNCAN rather than be left behind. He would willingly have gone as cabin-boy, like Nelson. It was impossible to resist a little fellow like that, and, indeed, no one tried. He would not even go as a passenger, but must serve in some capacity, as cabin-boy, apprentice or sailor, he did not care which, so he was put in charge of John Mangles, to be properly trained for his vocation.

"And I hope he won't spare me the 'cat-o-nine-tails' if I don't do properly," said Robert.

"Rest easy on that score, my boy," said Lord Glenarvan, gravely; he did not add, that this mode of punishment was forbidden on board the DUNCAN, and moreover, was quite unnecessary.

To complete the roll of passengers, we must name Major McNabbs. The Major was about fifty years of age, with a calm face and regular features — a man who did whatever he was told, of an excellent, indeed, a perfect temper; modest, silent, peaceable, and amiable, agreeing with everybody on every subject, never discussing, never disputing, never getting angry. He wouldn't move a step quicker, or slower, whether he walked upstairs to bed or mounted a breach. Nothing could excite him, nothing could disturb him, not even a cannon ball, and no doubt he will die without ever having known even a passing feeling of irritation.

This man was endowed in an eminent degree, not only with ordinary animal courage, that physical bravery of the battle-field, which is solely due to muscular energy, but he had what is far nobler — moral courage, firmness of soul. If he had any fault it was his being so intensely Scotch from top to toe, a Caledonian of the Caledonians, an obstinate stickler for all the ancient customs of his country. This was the reason he would never serve in England, and he gained his rank of Major in the 42nd regiment, the Highland Black Watch, composed entirely of Scotch noblemen.

As a cousin of Glenarvan, he lived in Malcolm Castle, and as a major he went as a matter of course with the DUNCAN.

Such, then, was the PERSONNEL of this yacht, so unexpectedly called to make one of the most wonderful voyages of modern times. From the hour she reached the steamboat quay at Glasgow, she completely monopolized the public attention. A considerable crowd visited her every day, and the DUNCAN was the one topic of interest and conversation, to the great vexation of the different captains in the port, among others of Captain Burton, in command of the SCOTIA, a magnificent steamer lying close beside her, and bound for Calcutta. Considering her size, the SCOTIA might justly look upon the DUNCAN as a mere fly-boat, and yet this pleasure yacht of Lord Glenarvan was quite the center of attraction, and the excitement about her daily increased.

The DUNCAN was to sail out with the tide at three o’clock on the morning of the 25th of August. But before starting, a touching ceremony was witnessed by the good people of Glasgow. At eight o’clock the night before, Lord Glenarvan and his friends, and the entire crew, from the stokers to the captain, all who were to take part in this self-sacrificing voyage, left the yacht and repaired to St. Mungo’s, the ancient cathedral of the city. This venerable edifice, so marvelously described by Walter Scott, remains intact amid the ruins made by the Reformation; and it was there, beneath its lofty arches, in the grand nave, in the presence of an immense crowd, and surrounded by tombs as thickly set as in a cemetery, that they all assembled to implore the blessing of Heaven on their expedition, and to put themselves under the protection of Providence. The Rev. Mr. Morton conducted the service, and when he had ended and pronounced the benediction, a young girl’s voice broke the solemn silence that followed. It was Mary Grant who poured out her heart to God in prayer for her benefactors, while grateful happy tears streamed down her cheeks, and almost choked her utterance. The vast assembly dispersed under the influence of deep emotion, and at ten o’clock the passengers and crew returned on board the vessel.

CHAPTER VI AN UNEXPECTED PASSENGER

THE ladies passed the whole of the first day of the voyage in their berths, for there was a heavy swell in the sea, and toward evening the wind blew pretty fresh, and the DUNCAN tossed and pitched considerably.

But the morning after, the wind changed, and the captain ordered the men to put up the foresail, and brigantine and foretopsail, which greatly lessened the rolling of the vessel. Lady Helena and Mary Grant were able to come on deck at daybreak, where they found Lord Glenarvan, Major McNabbs and the captain.

“And how do you stand the sea, Miss Mary?” said Lord Glenarvan.

“Pretty well, my Lord. I am not very much inconvenienced by it.

Besides I shall get used to it.”

“And our young Robert!”

“Oh, as for Robert,” said the captain, “whenever he is not poking about down below in the engine-room, he is perched somewhere aloft among the rigging. A youngster like that laughs at sea-sickness. Why, look at him this very moment! Do you see him?”

The captain pointed toward the foremast, and sure enough there was Robert, hanging on the yards of the topgallant mast, a hundred feet above in the air. Mary involuntarily gave a start, but the captain said:

“Oh, don’t be afraid, Miss Mary; he is all right, take my word for it; I’ll have a capital sailor to present to Captain Grant before long, for we’ll find the worthy captain, depend upon it.”

“Heaven grant it, Mr. John,” replied the young girl.

“My dear child,” said Lord Glenarvan, “there is something so providential in the whole affair, that we have every reason to hope. We are not going, we are led; we are not searching, we are guided. And then see all the brave men that have enlisted in the service of the good cause. We shall not only succeed in our enterprise, but there will be little difficulty in it. I promised Lady Helena a pleasure trip, and I am much mistaken if I don’t keep my word.”

“Edward,” said his wife, “you are the best of men.”

“Not at all,” was the reply; “but I have the best of crews and the best of ships. You don’t admire the DUNCAN, I suppose, Miss Mary?”

“On the contrary, my lord, I do admire her, and I’m a connoisseur in ships,” returned the young girl.

“Indeed!”

“Yes. I have played all my life on my father’s ships.

He should have made me a sailor, for I dare say, at a push,

I could reef a sail or plait a gasket easily enough.”

“Do you say so, miss?” exclaimed John Mangles.

“If you talk like that you and John will be great friends, for he can’t think any calling is equal to that of a seaman; he can’t fancy any other, even for a woman. Isn’t it true, John?”

“Quite so,” said the captain, “and yet, your Lordship, I must confess that Miss Grant is more in her place on the poop than reefing a topsail. But for all that, I am quite flattered by her remarks.”

“And especially when she admires the DUNCAN,” replied Glenarvan.

“Well, really,” said Lady Glenarvan, “you are so proud of your yacht that you make me wish to look all over it; and I should like to go down and see how our brave men are lodged.”

“Their quarters are first-rate,” replied John, “they are as comfortable as if they were at home.”

“And they really are at home, my dear Helena,” said Lord Glenarvan. “This yacht is a portion of our old Caledonia, a fragment of Dumbartonshire, making a voyage by special favor, so that in a manner we are still in our own country. The DUNCAN is Malcolm Castle, and the ocean is Loch Lomond.”

“Very well, dear Edward, do the honors of the Castle then.”

“At your service, madam; but let me tell Olbinett first.”

The steward of the yacht was an excellent maitre d’hotel, and might have been French for his airs of importance, but for all that he discharged his functions with zeal and intelligence.

“Olbinett,” said his master, as he appeared in answer to his summons, “we are going to have a turn before breakfast. I hope we shall find it ready when we come back.”

He said this just as if it had been a walk to Tarbert or Loch Katrine they were going, and the steward bowed with perfect gravity in reply.

“Are you coming with us, Major?” asked Lady Helena.

“If you command me,” replied McNabbs.

“Oh!” said Lord Glenarvan; “the Major is absorbed in his cigar; “you mustn’t tear him from it. He is an inveterate smoker, Miss Mary, I can tell you. He is always smoking, even while he sleeps.”

The Major gave an assenting nod, and Lord Glenarvan and his party went below.

McNabbs remained alone, talking to himself, as was his habit, and was soon enveloped in still thicker clouds of smoke. He stood motionless, watching the track of the yacht. After some minutes of this silent contemplation he turned round, and suddenly found himself face to face with a new comer. Certainly, if any thing could have surprised him, this RENCONTRE would, for he had never seen the stranger in his life before.

He was a tall, thin, withered-looking man, about forty years of age, and resembled a long nail with a big head. His head was large and massive, his forehead high, his chin very marked. His eyes were concealed by enormous round spectacles, and in his look was that peculiar indecision which is common to nyctalopes, or people who have a peculiar construction of the eye, which makes the sight imperfect in the day and better at night. It was evident from his physiognomy that he was a lively, intelligent man; he had not the crabbed expression of those grave individuals who never laugh on principle, and cover their emptiness with a mask of seriousness. He looked far from that. His careless, good-humored air, and easy, unceremonious manners, showed plainly that he knew how to take men and things on their bright side. But though he had not yet opened his mouth, he gave one the impression of being a great talker, and moreover, one of those absent folks who neither see though they are looking, nor hear though they are listening. He wore a traveling cap, and strong, low, yellow boots with leather gaiters. His pantaloons and jacket were of brown velvet, and their innumerable pockets were stuffed with note-books, memorandum-books, account-books, pocket-books, and a thousand other things equally cumbersome and useless, not to mention a telescope in addition, which he carried in a shoulder-belt.

The stranger’s excitement was a strong contrast to the Major’s placidity. He walked round McNabbs, looking at him and questioning him with his eyes without eliciting one remark from the imperturbable Scotchman, or awakening his curiosity in the least, to know where he came from, and where he was going, and how he had got on board the DUNCAN.

Finding all his efforts baffled by the Major’s indifference, the mysterious passenger seized his telescope, drew it out to its fullest extent, about four feet, and began gazing at the horizon, standing motionless with his legs wide apart. His examination lasted some few minutes, and then he lowered the glass, set it up on deck, and leaned on it as if it had been a walking-stick. Of course, his weight shut up the instrument immediately by pushing the different parts one into the other, and so suddenly, that he fell full length on deck, and lay sprawling at the foot of the mainmast.

Any one else but the Major would have smiled, at least, at such a ludicrous sight; but McNabbs never moved a muscle of his face.

This was too much for the stranger, and he called out, with an unmistakably foreign accent:

“Steward!”

He waited a minute, but nobody appeared, and he called again, still louder, “Steward!”

Mr. Olbinett chanced to be passing that minute on his way from the galley, and what was his astonishment at hearing himself addressed like this by a lanky individual of whom he had no knowledge whatever.

“Where can he have come from? Who is he?” he thought to himself.

“He can not possibly be one of Lord Glenarvan’s friends?”

However, he went up on the poop, and approached the unknown personage, who accosted him with the inquiry, “Are you the steward of this vessel? “

“Yes, sir,” replied Olbinett; “but I have not the honor of — ”

“I am the passenger in cabin Number 6.”

“Number 6!” repeated the steward.

“Certainly; and your name, what is it?”

“Olbinett.”

“Well, Olbinett, my friend, we must think of breakfast, and that pretty quickly. It is thirty-six hours since I have had anything to eat, or rather thirty-six hours that I have been asleep — pardonable enough in a man who came all the way, without stopping, from Paris to Glasgow. What is the breakfast hour?”

“Nine o’clock,” replied Olbinett, mechanically.

The stranger tried to pull out his watch to see the time; but it was not till he had rummaged through the ninth pocket that he found it.

“Ah, well,” he said, “it is only eight o’clock at present. Fetch me a glass of sherry and a biscuit while I am waiting, for I am actually falling through sheer inanition.”

Olbinett heard him without understanding what he meant for the voluble stranger kept on talking incessantly, flying from one subject to another.

“The captain? Isn’t the captain up yet? And the chief officer? What is he doing? Is he asleep still? It is fine weather, fortunately, and the wind is favorable, and the ship goes all alone.”

Just at that moment John Mangles appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Here is the captain!” said Olbinett.

“Ah! delighted, Captain Burton, delighted to make your acquaintance,” exclaimed the unknown.

John Mangles stood stupefied, as much at seeing the stranger on board as at hearing himself called “Captain Burton.”

But the new comer went on in the most affable manner.

“Allow me to shake hands with you, sir; and if I did not do so yesterday evening, it was only because I did not wish to be troublesome when you were starting. But to-day, captain, it gives me great pleasure to begin my intercourse with you.”

John Mangles opened his eyes as wide as possible, and stood staring at Olbinett and the stranger alternately.

But without waiting for a reply, the rattling fellow continued:

“Now the introduction is made, my dear captain, we are old friends.

Let’s have a little talk, and tell me how you like the SCOTIA?”

“What do you mean by the SCOTIA?” put in John Mangles at last.

“By the SCOTIA? Why, the ship we’re on, of course — a good ship that has been commended to me, not only for its physical qualities, but also for the moral qualities of its commander, the brave Captain Burton. You will be some relation of the famous African traveler of that name. A daring man he was, sir. I offer you my congratulations.”

“Sir,” interrupted John. “I am not only no relation of Burton the great traveler, but I am not even Captain Burton.”

“Ah, is that so? It is Mr. Burdness, the chief officer, that I am talking to at present.”

“Mr. Burdness!” repeated John Mangles, beginning to suspect how the matter stood. Only he asked himself whether the man was mad, or some heedless rattle pate? He was beginning to explain the case in a categorical manner, when Lord Glenarvan and his party came up on the poop. The stranger caught sight of them directly, and exclaimed:

“Ah! the passengers, the passengers! I hope you are going to introduce me to them, Mr. Burdness!”

But he could not wait for any one’s intervention, and going up to them with perfect ease and grace, said, bowing to Miss Grant, “Madame;” then to Lady Helena, with another bow, “Miss;” and to Lord Glenarvan, “Sir.”

Here John Mangles interrupted him, and said, “Lord Glenarvan.”

“My Lord,” continued the unknown, “I beg pardon for presenting myself to you, but at sea it is well to relax the strict rules of etiquette a little. I hope we shall soon become acquainted with each other, and that the company of these ladies will make our voyage in the SCOTIA appear as short as agreeable.”

Lady Helena and Miss Grant were too astonished to be able to utter a single word. The presence of this intruder on the poop of the DUNCAN was perfectly inexplicable.

Lord Glenarvan was more collected, and said, “Sir, to whom have I the honor of speaking?”

“To Jacques Eliacin Francois Marie Paganel, Secretary of the Geographical Society of Paris, Corresponding Member of the Societies of Berlin, Bombay, Darmstadt, Leipsic, London, St. Petersburg, Vienna, and New York; Honorary Member of the Royal Geographical and Ethnographical Institute of the East Indies; who, after having spent twenty years of his life in geographical work in the study, wishes to see active service, and is on his way to India to gain for the science what information he can by following up the footsteps of great travelers.”

CHAPTER VII JACQUES PAGANEL IS UNDECEIVED

THE Secretary of the Geographical Society was evidently an amiable personage, for all this was said in a most charming manner. Lord Glenarvan knew quite well who he was now, for he had often heard Paganel spoken of, and was aware of his merits. His geographical works, his papers on modern discoveries, inserted in the reports of the Society, and his world-wide correspondence, gave him a most distinguished place among the LITERATI of France.

Lord Glenarvan could not but welcome such a guest, and shook hands cordially.

“And now that our introductions are over,” he added, “you will allow me,

Monsieur Paganel, to ask you a question?”

“Twenty, my Lord, “replied Paganel; “it will always be a pleasure to converse with you.”

“Was it last evening that you came on board this vessel?”

“Yes, my Lord, about 8 o’clock. I jumped into a cab at the Caledonian Railway, and from the cab into the SCOTIA, where I had booked my cabin before I left Paris. It was a dark night, and I saw no one on board, so I found cabin No. 6, and went to my berth immediately, for I had heard that the best way to prevent sea-sickness is to go to bed as soon as you start, and not to stir for the first few days; and, moreover, I had been traveling for thirty hours. So I tucked myself in, and slept conscientiously, I assure you, for thirty-six hours.”

Paganel’s listeners understood the whole mystery, now, of his presence on the DUNCAN. The French traveler had mistaken his vessel, and gone on board while the crew were attending the service at St. Mungo’s. All was explained. But what would the learned geographer say, when he heard the name and destination of the ship, in which he had taken passage?

“Then it is Calcutta, M. Paganel, that you have chosen as your point of departure on your travels?”

“Yes, my Lord, to see India has been a cherished purpose with me all my life. It will be the realization of my fondest dreams, to find myself in the country of elephants and Thugs.”

“Then it would be by no means a matter of indifference to you, to visit another country instead.”

“No, my Lord; indeed it would be very disagreeable, for I have letters from Lord Somerset, the Governor-General, and also a commission to execute for the Geographical Society.”

“Ah, you have a commission.”

“Yes, I have to attempt a curious and important journey, the plan of which has been drawn up by my learned friend and colleague, M. Vivien de Saint Martin. I am to pursue the track of the Schlaginweit Brothers; and Colonels Waugh and Webb, and Hodgson; and Huc and Gabet, the missionaries; and Moorecroft and M. Jules Remy, and so many celebrated travelers. I mean to try and succeed where Krick, the missionary so unfortunately failed in 1846; in a word, I want to follow the course of the river Yarou-Dzangbo-Tchou, which waters Thibet for a distance of 1500 kilometres, flowing along the northern base of the Himalayas, and to find out at last whether this river does not join itself to the Brahmapoutre in the northeast of Assam. The gold medal, my Lord, is promised to the traveler who will succeed in ascertaining a fact which is one of the greatest DESIDERATA to the geography of India.”

Paganel was magnificent. He spoke with superb animation, soaring away on the wings of imagination. It would have been as impossible to stop him as to stop the Rhine at the Falls of Schaffhausen.

“Monsieur Jacques Paganel,” said Lord Glenarvan, after a brief pause, “that would certainly be a grand achievement, and you would confer a great boon on science, but I should not like to allow you to be laboring under a mistake any longer, and I must tell you, therefore, that for the present at least, you must give up the pleasure of a visit to India.”

“Give it up. And why?”

“Because you are turning your back on the Indian peninsula.”

“What! Captain Burton.”

“I am not Captain Burton,” said John Mangles.

“But the SCOTIA.”

“This vessel is not the SCOTIA.”

It would be impossible to depict the astonishment of Paganel. He stared first at one and then at another in the utmost bewilderment.

Lord Glenarvan was perfectly grave, and Lady Helena and Mary showed their sympathy for his vexation by their looks. As for John Mangles, he could not suppress a smile; but the Major appeared as unconcerned as usual. At last the poor fellow shrugged his shoulders, pushed down his spectacles over his nose and said:

“You are joking.”

But just at that very moment his eye fell on the wheel of the ship,

and he saw the two words on it:

Duncan.

Glasgow.

“The DUNCAN! the DUNCAN!” he exclaimed, with a cry of despair, and forthwith rushed down the stairs, and away to his cabin.

As soon as the unfortunate SAVANT had disappeared, every one, except the Major, broke out into such peals of laughter that the sound reached the ears of the sailors in the forecastle. To mistake a railway or to take the train to Edinburgh when you want to go to Dumbarton might happen; but to mistake a ship and be sailing for Chili when you meant to go to India — that is a blunder indeed!

“However,” said Lord Glenarvan, “I am not much astonished at it in Paganel. He is quite famous for such misadventures. One day he published a celebrated map of America, and put Japan in it! But for all that, he is distinguished for his learning, and he is one of the best geographers in France.”

“But what shall we do with the poor gentleman?” said Lady Helena; “we can’t take him with us to Patagonia.”

"Why not?" replied McNabbs, gravely. "We are not responsible for his heedless mistakes. Suppose he were in a railway train, would they stop it for him?"

"No, but he would get out at the first station."

"Well, that is just what he can do here, too, if he likes; he can disembark at the first place where we touch."

While they were talking, Paganel came up again on the poop, looking very woebegone and crestfallen. He had been making inquiry about his luggage, to assure himself that it was all on board, and kept repeating incessantly the unlucky words, "The DUNCAN! the DUNCAN!"

He could find no others in his vocabulary. He paced restlessly up and down; sometimes stopping to examine the sails, or gaze inquiringly over the wide ocean, at the far horizon. At length he accosted Lord Glenarvan once more, and said —

"And this DUNCAN — where is she going?"

"To America, Monsieur Paganel," was the reply.

"And to what particular part?"

"To Concepcion."

"To Chili! to Chili!" cried the unfortunate geographer. "And my mission to India. But what will M. de Quatre-fages, the President of the Central Commission, say? And M. d' Avezac? And M. Cortanbert? And M. Vivien de Saint Martin? How shall I show my face at the SEANCES of the Society?"

“Come, Monsieur Paganel, don’t despair. It can all be managed; you will only have to put up with a little delay, which is relatively of not much importance. The Yarou-Dzangbo-Tchou will wait for you still in the mountains of Thibet. We shall soon put in at Madeira, and you will get a ship there to take you back to Europe.”

“Thanks, my Lord. I suppose I must resign myself to it; but people will say it is a most extraordinary adventure, and it is only to me such things happen. And then, too, there is a cabin taken for me on board the SCOTIA.”

“Oh, as to the SCOTIA, you’ll have to give that up meantime.”

“But the DUNCAN is a pleasure yacht, is it not?” began Paganel again, after a fresh examination of the vessel.

“Yes, sir,” said John Mangles, “and belongs to Lord Glenarvan.”

“Who begs you will draw freely on his hospitality,” said Lord Glenarvan.

“A thousand thanks, my Lord! I deeply feel your courtesy, but allow me to make one observation: India is a fine country, and can offer many a surprising marvel to travelers. These ladies, I suppose, have never seen it. Well now, the man at the helm has only to give a turn at the wheel, and the DUNCAN will sail as easily to Calcutta as to Concepcion; and since it is only a pleasure trip that you are — ”

His proposal was met by such grave, disapproving shakes of the head, that he stopped short before the sentence was completed; and Lady Helena said:

“Monsieur Paganel, if we were only on a pleasure trip, I should reply, ‘Let us all go to India together,’ and I am sure Lord Glenarvan would not object; but the DUNCAN is going to bring back shipwrecked mariners who were cast away on the shores of Patagonia, and we could not alter such a destination."

The Frenchman was soon put in possession of all the circumstances of the case. He was no unmoved auditor, and when he heard of Lady Helena's generous proposition, he could not help saying,

"Madame, permit me to express my admiration of your conduct throughout — my unreserved admiration. Let your yacht continue her course. I should reproach myself were I to cause a single day's delay."

"Will you join us in our search, then?" asked Lady Helena.

"It is impossible, madame. I must fulfill my mission. I shall disembark at the first place you touch at, wherever it may be."

"That will be Madeira," said John Mangles.

"Madeira be it then. I shall only be 180 leagues from Lisbon, and I shall wait there for some means of transport."

"Very well, Monsieur Paganel, it shall be as you wish; and, for my own part, I am very glad to be able to offer you, meantime, a few days' hospitality. I only hope you will not find our company too dull."

"Oh, my Lord," exclaimed Paganel, "I am but too happy to have made a mistake which has turned out so agreeably. Still, it is a very ridiculous plight for a man to be in, to find himself sailing to America when he set out to go to the East Indies!"

But in spite of this melancholy reflection, the Frenchman submitted gracefully to the compulsory delay. He made himself amiable and merry, and even diverting, and enchanted the ladies with his good humor. Before the end of the day he was friends with everybody. At his request, the famous document was brought out. He studied it carefully and minutely for a long time, and finally declared his opinion that no other interpretation of it was possible. Mary Grant and her brother inspired him with the most lively interest. He gave them great hope; indeed, the young girl could not help smiling at his sanguine prediction of success, and this odd way of foreseeing future events. But for his mission he would have made one of the search party for Captain Grant, undoubtedly.

As for Lady Helena, when he heard that she was a daughter of William Tuffnell, there was a perfect explosion of admiring epithets. He had known her father, and what letters had passed between them when William Tuffnell was a corresponding member of the Society! It was he himself that had introduced him and M. Malte Brun. What a rencontre this was, and what a pleasure to travel with the daughter of Tuffnell.

He wound up by asking permission to kiss her, which Lady Helena granted, though it was, perhaps, a little improper.

CHAPTER VIII THE GEOGRAPHER’S RESOLUTION

MEANTIME the yacht, favored by the currents from the north of Africa, was making rapid progress toward the equator. On the 30th of August they sighted the Madeira group of islands, and Glenarvan, true to his promise, offered to put in there, and land his new guest.

But Paganel said:

“My dear Lord, I won’t stand on ceremony with you. Tell me, did you intend to stop at Madeira before I came on board?”

“No,” replied Glenarvan.

“Well, then, allow me to profit by my unlucky mistake. Madeira is an island too well known to be of much interest now to a geographer. Every thing about this group has been said and written already. Besides, it is completely going down as far as wine growing is concerned. Just imagine no vines to speak of being in Madeira! In 1813, 22,000 pipes of wine were made there, and in 1845 the number fell to 2,669. It is a grievous spectacle! If it is all the same to you, we might go on to the Canary Isles instead.”

“Certainly. It will not the least interfere with our route.”

“I know it will not, my dear Lord. In the Canary Islands, you see, there are three groups to study, besides the Peak of Teneriffe, which I always wished to visit. This is an opportunity, and I should like to avail myself of it, and make the ascent of the famous mountain while I am waiting for a ship to take me back to Europe.”

“As you please, my dear Paganel,” said Lord Glenarvan, though he could not help smiling; and no wonder, for these islands are scarcely 250 miles from Madeira, a trifling distance for such a quick sailer as the DUNCAN.

Next day, about 2 P. M. John Mangles and Paganel were walking on the poop. The Frenchman was assailing his companion with all sorts of questions about Chili, when all at once the captain interrupted him, and pointing toward the southern horizon, said:

“Monsieur Paganel?”

“Yes, my dear Captain.”

“Be so good as to look in this direction. Don’t you see anything?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re not looking in the right place. It is not on the horizon, but above it in the clouds.”

“In the clouds? I might well not see.”

“There, there, by the upper end of the bowsprit.”

“I see nothing.”

“Then you don’t want to see. Anyway, though we are forty miles off, yet I tell you the Peak of Teneriffe is quite visible yonder above the horizon.”

But whether Paganel could not or would not see it then, two hours later he was forced to yield to ocular evidence or own himself blind.

“You do see it at last, then,” said John Mangles.

“Yes, yes, distinctly,” replied Paganel, adding in a disdainful tone, “and that’s what they call the Peak of Teneriffe!”

“That’s the Peak.”

“It doesn’t look much of a height.”

“It is 11,000 feet, though, above the level of the sea.”

“That is not equal to Mont Blanc.”

“Likely enough, but when you come to ascend it, probably you’ll think it high enough.”

“Oh, ascend it! ascend it, my dear captain! What would be the good after Humboldt and Bonplan? That Humboldt was a great genius. He made the ascent of this mountain, and has given a description of it which leaves nothing unsaid. He tells us that it comprises five different zones — the zone of the vines, the zone of the laurels, the zone of the pines, the zone of the Alpine heaths, and, lastly, the zone of sterility. He set his foot on the very summit, and found that there was not even room enough to sit down. The view from the summit was very extensive, stretching over an area equal to Spain. Then he went right down into the volcano, and examined the extinct crater. What could I do, I should like you to tell me, after that great man?”

“Well, certainly, there isn’t much left to glean. That is vexing, too, for you would find it dull work waiting for a vessel in the Peak of Teneriffe.”

“But, I say, Mangles, my dear fellow, are there no ports in the Cape Verde Islands that we might touch at?”

“Oh, yes, nothing would be easier than putting you off at Villa Praya.”

“And then I should have one advantage, which is by no means inconsiderable — I should find fellow-countrymen at Senegal, and that is not far away from those islands. I am quite aware that the group is said to be devoid of much interest, and wild, and unhealthy; but everything is curious in the eyes of a geographer. Seeing is a science. There are people who do not know how to use their eyes, and who travel about with as much intelligence as a shell-fish. But that’s not in my line, I assure you.”

“Please yourself, Monsieur Paganel. I have no doubt geographical science will be a gainer by your sojourn in the Cape Verde Islands. We must go in there anyhow for coal, so your disembarkation will not occasion the least delay.”

The captain gave immediate orders for the yacht to continue her route, steering to the west of the Canary group, and leaving Teneriffe on her larboard. She made rapid progress, and passed the Tropic of Cancer on the second of September at 5 A. M.

The weather now began to change, and the atmosphere became damp and heavy. It was the rainy season, “le tempo das aguas,” as the Spanish call it, a trying season to travelers, but useful to the inhabitants of the African Islands, who lack trees and consequently water. The rough weather prevented the passengers from going on deck, but did not make the conversation any less animated in the saloon.

On the 3d of September Paganel began to collect his luggage to go on shore. The DUNCAN was already steaming among the Islands. She passed Sal, a complete tomb of sand lying barren and desolate, and went on among the vast coral reefs and athwart the Isle of St. Jacques, with its long chain of basaltic mountains, till she entered the port of Villa Praya and anchored in eight fathoms of water before the town. The weather was frightful, and the surf excessively violent, though the bay was sheltered from the sea winds. The rain fell in such torrents that the town was scarcely visible through it. It rose on a plain in the form of a terrace, buttressed on volcanic rocks three hundred feet high. The appearance of the island through the thick veil of rain was mournful in the extreme.

Lady Helena could not go on shore as she had purposed; indeed, even coaling was a difficult business, and the passengers had to content themselves below the poop as best they might. Naturally enough, the main topic of conversation was the weather. Everybody had something to say about it except the Major, who surveyed the universal deluge with the utmost indifference. Paganel walked up and down shaking his head.

“It is clear enough, Paganel,” said Lord Glenarvan, “that the elements are against you.”

“I’ll be even with them for all that,” replied the Frenchman.

“You could not face rain like that, Monsieur Paganel,” said Lady Helena.

“Oh, quite well, madam, as far as I myself am concerned.

It is for my luggage and instruments that I am afraid.

Everything will be ruined.”

“The disembarking is the worst part of the business. Once at Villa Praya you might manage to find pretty good quarters. They wouldn’t be over clean, and you might find the monkeys and pigs not always the most agreeable companions. But travelers are not too particular, and, moreover, in seven or eight months you would get a ship, I dare say, to take you back to Europe."

"Seven or eight months!" exclaimed Paganel.

"At least. The Cape Verde Islands are not much frequented by ships during the rainy season. But you can employ your time usefully. This archipelago is still but little known."

"You can go up the large rivers," suggested Lady Helena.

"There are none, madam."

"Well, then, the small ones."

"There are none, madam."

"The running brooks, then."

"There are no brooks, either."

"You can console yourself with the forests if that's the case," put in the Major.

"You can't make forests without trees, and there are no trees."

"A charming country!" said the Major.

"Comfort yourself, my dear Paganel, you'll have the mountains at any rate," said Glenarvan.

"Oh, they are neither lofty nor interesting, my Lord, and, beside, they have been described already."

“Already!” said Lord Glenarvan.

“Yes, that is always my luck. At the Canary Islands, I saw myself anticipated by Humboldt, and here by M. Charles Sainte-Claire Deville, a geologist.”

“Impossible!”

“It is too true,” replied Paganel, in a doleful voice. “Monsieur Deville was on board the government corvette, La Decidee, when she touched at the Cape Verde Islands, and he explored the most interesting of the group, and went to the top of the volcano in Isle Fogo. What is left for me to do after him?”

“It is really a great pity,” said Helena. “What will become of you, Monsieur Paganel?”

Paganel remained silent.

“You would certainly have done much better to have landed at Madeira, even though there had been no wine,” said Glenarvan.

Still the learned secretary was silent.

“I should wait,” said the Major, just as if he had said,

“I should not wait.”

Paganel spoke again at length, and said:

“My dear Glenarvan, where do you mean to touch next?”

“At Concepcion.”

“Plague it! That is a long way out of the road to India.”

“Not it! From the moment you pass Cape Horn, you are getting nearer to it.”

“I doubt it much.”

“Beside,” resumed Lord Glenarvan, with perfect gravity, “when people are going to the Indies it doesn’t matter much whether it is to the East or West.”

“What! it does not matter much?”

“Without taking into account the fact that the inhabitants of the Pampas in Patagonia are as much Indians as the natives of the Punjaub.”

“Well done, my Lord. That’s a reason that would never have entered my head!”

“And then, my dear Paganel, you can gain the gold medal anyway. There is as much to be done, and sought, and investigated, and discovered in the Cordilleras as in the mountains of Thibet.”

“But the course of the Yarou-Dzangbo-Tchou — what about that?”

“Go up the Rio Colorado instead. It is a river but little known, and its course on the map is marked out too much according to the fancy of geographers.”

“I know it is, my dear Lord; they have made grave mistakes. Oh, I make no question that the Geographical Society would have sent me to Patagonia as soon as to India, if I had sent in a request to that effect. But I never thought of it.”

“Just like you.”

“Come, Monsieur Paganel, will you go with us?” asked Lady Helena, in her most winning tone.

“Madam, my mission?”

“We shall pass through the Straits of Magellan, I must tell you,” said Lord Glenarvan.

“My Lord, you are a tempter.”

“Let me add, that we shall visit Port Famine.”

“Port Famine!” exclaimed the Frenchman, besieged on all sides.

“That famous port in French annals!”

“Think, too, Monsieur Paganel, that by taking part in our enterprise, you will be linking France with Scotland.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“A geographer would be of much use to our expedition, and what can be nobler than to bring science to the service of humanity?”

“That’s well said, madam.”

“Take my advice, then, and yield to chance, or rather providence. Follow our example. It was providence that sent us the document, and we set out in consequence. The same providence brought you on board the DUNCAN. Don’t leave her.”

“Shall I say yes, my good friends? Come, now, tell me, you want me very much to stay, don’t you?” said Paganel.

“And you’re dying to stay, now, aren’t you, Paganel?” returned Glenarvan.

“That’s about it,” confessed the learned geographer; “but I was afraid it would be inconsiderate.”

CHAPTER IX THROUGH THE STRAITS OF MAGELLAN

THE joy on board was universal when Paganel’s resolution was made known.

Little Robert flung himself on his neck in such tumultuous delight that he nearly threw the worthy secretary down, and made him say, “Rude petit bonhomme. I’ll teach him geography.”

Robert bade fair to be an accomplished gentleman some day, for John Mangles was to make a sailor of him, and the Major was to teach him sang-froid, and Glenarvan and Lady Helena were to instil into him courage and goodness and generosity, while Mary was to inspire him with gratitude toward such instructors.

The DUNCAN soon finished taking in coal, and turned her back on the dismal region. She fell in before long with the current from the coast of Brazil, and on the 7th of September entered the Southern hemisphere.

So far, then, the voyage had been made without difficulty. Everybody was full of hope, for in this search for Captain Grant, each day seemed to increase the probability of finding him. The captain was among the most confident on board, but his confidence mainly arose from the longing desire he had to see Miss Mary happy. He was smitten with quite a peculiar interest for this young girl, and managed to conceal his sentiments so well that everyone on board saw it except himself and Mary Grant.

As for the learned geographer, he was probably the happiest man in all the southern hemisphere. He spent the whole day in studying maps, which were spread out on the saloon table, to the great annoyance of M. Olbinett, who could never get the cloth laid for meals, without disputes on the subject. But all the passengers took his part except the Major, who was perfectly indifferent about geographical questions, especially at dinner-time. Paganel also came across a regular cargo of old books in the chief officer's chest. They were in a very damaged condition, but among them he raked out a few Spanish volumes, and determined forthwith to set to work to master the language of Cer-vantes, as no one on board understood it, and it would be helpful in their search along the Chilian coast. Thanks to his taste for languages, he did not despair of being able to speak the language fluently when they arrived at Concepcion. He studied it furiously, and kept constantly muttering heterogeneous syllables.

He spent his leisure hours in teaching young Robert, and instructed him in the history of the country they were so rapidly approaching.

On the 25th of September, the yacht arrived off the Straits of Magellan, and entered them without delay. This route is generally preferred by steamers on their way to the Pacific Ocean. The exact length of the straits is 372 miles. Ships of the largest tonnage find, throughout, sufficient depth of water, even close to the shore, and there is a good bottom everywhere, and abundance of fresh water, and rivers abounding in fish, and forests in game, and plenty of safe and accessible harbors; in fact a thousand things which are lacking in Strait Lemaire and Cape Horn, with its terrible rocks, incessantly visited by hurricane and tempest.

For the first three or four hours — that is to say, for about sixty to eighty miles, as far as Cape Gregory — the coast on either side was low and sandy. Jacques Paganel would not lose a single point of view, nor a single detail of the straits. It would scarcely take thirty-six hours to go through them, and the moving panorama on both sides, seen in all the clearness and glory of the light of a southern sun, was well worth the trouble of looking at and admiring. On the Terra del Fuego side, a few wretched-looking creatures were wandering about on the rocks, but on the other side not a solitary inhabitant was visible.

Paganel was so vexed at not being able to catch a glimpse of

any Patagonians, that his companions were quite amused at him.

He would insist that Patagonia without Patagonians was not

Patagonia at all.

But Glenarvan replied:

“Patience, my worthy geographer. We shall see the Patagonians yet.”

“I am not sure of it.”

“But there is such a people, anyhow,” said Lady Helena.

“I doubt it much, madam, since I don’t see them.”

“But surely the very name Patagonia, which means ‘great feet’ in Spanish, would not have been given to imaginary beings.” “Oh, the name is nothing,” said Paganel, who was arguing simply for the sake of arguing. “And besides, to speak the truth, we are not sure if that is their name.”

“What an idea!” exclaimed Glenarvan. “Did you know that, Major?”

“No,” replied McNabbs, “and wouldn’t give a Scotch pound-note for the information.”

“You shall hear it, however, Major Indifferent. Though Magellan called the natives Patagonians, the Fuegians called them Tiremenen, the Chilians Caucalhues, the colonists of Carmen Tehuelches, the Araucans Huiliches; Bougainville gives them the name of Chauha, and Falkner that of Tehuelhets. The name they give themselves is Inaken. Now, tell me then, how would you recognize them? Indeed, is it likely that a people with so many names has any actual existence?”

“That’s a queer argument, certainly,” said Lady Helena.

“Well, let us admit it,” said her husband, “but our friend Paganel must own that even if there are doubts about the name of the race there is none about their size.”

“Indeed, I will never own anything so outrageous as that,” replied Paganel.

“They are tall,” said Glenarvan.

“I don’t know that.”

“Are they little, then?” asked Lady Helena.

“No one can affirm that they are.”

“About the average, then?” said McNabbs.

“I don’t know that either.”

“That’s going a little too far,” said Glenarvan. “Travelers who have seen them tell us.”

“Travelers who have seen them,” interrupted Paganel, “don’t agree at all in their accounts. Magellan said that his head scarcely reached to their waist.”

“Well, then, that proves.”

“Yes, but Drake declares that the English are taller than the tallest Patagonian?”

“Oh, the English — that may be,” replied the Major, disdainfully, “but we are talking of the Scotch.”

“Cavendish assures us that they are tall and robust,” continued Paganel. “Hawkins makes out they are giants. Lemaire and Shouten declare that they are eleven feet high.”

“These are all credible witnesses,” said Glenarvan.

“Yes, quite as much as Wood, Narborough, and Falkner, who say they are of medium stature. Again, Byron, Giraudais, Bougainville, Wallis, and Carteret, declared that the Patagonians are six feet six inches tall.”

“But what is the truth, then, among all these contradictions?” asked Lady Helena.

“Just this, madame; the Patagonians have short legs, and a large bust; or by way of a joke we might say that these natives are six feet high when they are sitting, and only five when they are standing.”

“Bravo! my dear geographer,” said Glenarvan. “That is very well put.”

“Unless the race has no existence, that would reconcile all statements,” returned Paganel. “But here is one consolation, at all events: the Straits of Magellan are very magnificent, even without Patagonians.”

Just at this moment the DUNCAN was rounding the peninsula of Brunswick between splendid panoramas.

Seventy miles after doubling Cape Gregory, she left on her starboard the penitentiary of Punta Arena. The church steeple and the Chilian flag gleamed for an instant among the trees, and then the strait wound on between huge granitic masses which had an imposing effect. Cloud-capped mountains appeared, their heads white with eternal snows, and their feet hid in immense forests. Toward the southwest, Mount Tarn rose 6,500 feet high. Night came on after a long lingering twilight, the light insensibly melting away into soft shades. These brilliant constellations began to bestud the sky, and the Southern Cross shone out. There were numerous bays along the shore, easy of access, but the yacht did not drop anchor in any; she continued her course fearlessly through the luminous darkness. Presently ruins came in sight, crumbling buildings, which the night invested with grandeur, the sad remains of a deserted settlement, whose name will be an eternal protest against these fertile shores and forests full of game. The DUNCAN was passing Fort Famine.

It was in that very spot that Sarmiento, a Spaniard, came in 1581, with four hundred emigrants, to establish a colony. He founded the city of St. Philip, but the extreme severity of winter decimated the inhabitants, and those who had struggled through the cold died subsequently of starvation. Cavendish the Corsair discovered the last survivor dying of hunger in the ruins.

After sailing along these deserted shores, the DUNCAN went through a series of narrow passes, between forests of beech and ash and birch, and at length doubled Cape Froward, still bristling with the ice of the last winter. On the other side of the strait, in Terra del Fuego, stood Mount Sarmiento, towering to a height of 6,000 feet, an enormous accumulation of rocks, separated by bands of cloud, forming a sort of aerial archipelago in the sky.

It is at Cape Froward that the American continent actually terminates, for Cape Horn is nothing but a rock sunk in the sea in latitude 52 degrees. At Cape Momax the straits widened, and she was able to get round Narborough Isles and advance in a more southerly direction, till at length the rock of Cape Pilares, the extreme point of Desolation Island, came in sight, thirty-six hours after entering the straits. Before her stem lay a broad, open, sparkling ocean, which Jacques Paganel greeted with enthusiastic gestures, feeling kindred emotions with those which stirred the bosom of Ferdinand de Magellan himself, when the sails of his ship, the TRINIDAD, first bent before the breeze from the great Pacific.

CHAPTER X THE COURSE DECIDED

A WEEK after they had doubled the Cape Pilares, the DUNCAN steamed into the bay of Talcahuano, a magnificent estuary, twelve miles long and nine broad. The weather was splendid. From November to March the sky is always cloudless, and a constant south wind prevails, as the coast is sheltered by the mountain range of the Andes. In obedience to Lord Glenarvan’s order, John Mangles had sailed as near the archipelago of Chiloe as possible, and examined all the creeks and windings of the coast, hoping to discover some traces of the shipwreck. A broken spar, or any fragment of the vessel, would have put them in the right track; but nothing whatever was visible, and the yacht continued her route, till she dropped anchor at the port of Talcahuano, forty-two days from the time she had sailed out of the fogs of the Clyde.

Glenarvan had a boat lowered immediately, and went on shore, accompanied by Paganel. The learned geographer gladly availed himself of the opportunity of making use of the language he had been studying so conscientiously, but to his great amazement, found he could not make himself understood by the people. “It is the accent I’ve not got,” he said.

“Let us go to the Custom-house,” replied Glenarvan.

They were informed on arriving there, by means of a few English words, aided by expressive gestures, that the British Consul lived at Concepcion, an hour’s ride distant. Glenarvan found no difficulty in procuring two fleet horses, and he and Paganel were soon within the walls of the great city, due to the enterprising genius of Valdivia, the valiant comrade of the Pizarros.

How it was shorn of its ancient splendor! Often pillaged by the natives, burned in 1819, it lay in desolation and ruins, its walls still blackened by the flames, scarcely numbering 8,000 inhabitants, and already eclipsed by Talcahuano. The grass was growing in the streets, beneath the lazy feet of the citizens, and all trade and business, indeed any description of activity, was impossible. The notes of the mandolin resounded from every balcony, and languishing songs floated on the breeze. Concepcion, the ancient city of brave men, had become a village of women and children. Lord Glenarvan felt no great desire to inquire into the causes of this decay, though Paganel tried to draw him into a discussion on the subject. He would not delay an instant, but went straight on to the house of Mr. Bentic, her Majesty's Consul, who received them very courteously, and, on learning their errand, undertook to make inquiries all along the coast.

But to the question whether a three-mast vessel, called the BRITANNIA, had gone ashore either on the Chilian or Araucanian coast, he gave a decided negative. No report of such an event had been made to him, or any of the other consuls. Glenarvan, however, would not allow himself to be disheartened; he went back to Talcahuano, and spared neither pains nor expense to make a thorough investigation of the whole seaboard. But it was all in vain. The most minute inquiries were fruitless, and Lord Glenarvan returned to the yacht to report his ill success. Mary Grant and her brother could not restrain their grief. Lady Helena did her best to comfort them by loving caresses, while Jacques Paganel took up the document and began studying it again. He had been poring over it for more than an hour when Glenarvan interrupted him and said:

“Paganel! I appeal to your sagacity. Have we made an erroneous interpretation of the document? Is there anything illogical about the meaning?”

Paganel was silent, absorbed in reflection.

“Have we mistaken the place where the catastrophe occurred?” continued Glenarvan. “Does not the name Patagonia seem apparent even to the least clear-sighted individual?”

Paganel was still silent.

“Besides,” said Glenarvan, “does not the word INDIEN prove we are right?”

“Perfectly so,” replied McNabbs.

“And is it not evident, then, that at the moment of writing the words, the shipwrecked men were expecting to be made prisoners by the Indians?”

“I take exception to that, my Lord,” said Paganel; “and even if your other conclusions are right, this, at least, seemed to me irrational.”

“What do you mean?” asked Lady Helena, while all eyes were fixed on the geographer.

“I mean this,” replied Paganel, “that Captain Grant is now a prisoner among the Indians, and I further add that the document states it unmistakably.”

“Explain yourself, sir,” said Mary Grant.

“Nothing is plainer, dear Mary. Instead of reading the document seront prisonniers, read sont prisonniers, and the whole thing is clear.”

“But that is impossible,” replied Lord Glenarvan.

“Impossible! and why, my noble friend?” asked Paganel, smiling.

“Because the bottle could only have been thrown into the sea just when the vessel went to pieces on the rocks, and consequently the latitude and longitude given refer to the actual place of the shipwreck.”

“There is no proof of that,” replied Paganel, “and I see nothing to preclude the supposition that the poor fellows were dragged into the interior by the Indians, and sought to make known the place of their captivity by means of this bottle.”

“Except this fact, my dear Paganel, that there was no sea, and therefore they could not have flung the bottle into it.”

“Unless they flung it into rivers which ran into the sea,” returned Paganel.

This reply was so unexpected, and yet so admissible, that it made them all completely silent for a minute, though their beaming eyes betrayed the rekindling of hope in their hearts. Lady Helena was the first to speak.

“What an idea!” she exclaimed.

“And what a good idea,” was Paganel’s naive rejoinder to her exclamation.

“What would you advise, then?” said Glenarvan.

“My advice is to follow the 37th parallel from the point where it touches the American continent to where it dips into the Atlantic, without deviating from it half a degree, and possibly in some part of its course we shall fall in with the shipwrecked party.”

“There is a poor chance of that,” said the Major.

“Poor as it is,” returned Paganel, “we ought not to lose it. If I am right in my conjecture, that the bottle has been carried into the sea on the bosom of some river, we cannot fail to find the track of the prisoners. You can easily convince yourselves of this by looking at this map of the country.”

He unrolled a map of Chili and the Argentine provinces as he spoke, and spread it out on the table.

“Just follow me for a moment,” he said, “across the American continent. Let us make a stride across the narrow strip of Chili, and over the Cordilleras of the Andes, and get into the heart of the Pampas. Shall we find any lack of rivers and streams and currents? No, for here are the Rio Negro and Rio Colorado, and their tributaries intersected by the 37th parallel, and any of them might have carried the bottle on its waters. Then, perhaps, in the midst of a tribe in some Indian settlement on the shores of these almost unknown rivers, those whom I may call my friends await some providential intervention. Ought we to disappoint their hopes? Do you not all agree with me that it is our duty to go along the line my finger is pointing out at this moment on the map, and if after all we find I have been mistaken, still to keep straight on and follow the 37th parallel till we find those we seek, if even we go right round the world?”

His generous enthusiasm so touched his auditors that, involuntarily, they rose to their feet and grasped his hands, while Robert exclaimed as he devoured the map with his eyes:

“Yes, my father is there!”

“And where he is,” replied Glenarvan, “we’ll manage to go, my boy, and find him. Nothing can be more logical than Paganel’s theory, and we must follow the course he points out without the least hesitation. Captain Grant may have fallen into the hands of a numerous tribe, or his captors may be but a handful. In the latter case we shall carry him off at once, but in the event of the former, after we have reconnoitered the situation, we must go back to the DUNCAN on the eastern coast and get to Buenos Ayres, where we can soon organize a detachment of men, with Major McNabbs at their head, strong enough to tackle all the Indians in the Argentine provinces.”

“That’s capital, my Lord,” said John Mangles, “and I may add, that there is no danger whatever crossing the continent.”

“Monsieur Paganel,” asked Lady Helena, “you have no fear then that if the poor fellows have fallen into the hands of the Indians their lives at least have been spared.”

“What a question? Why, madam, the Indians are not anthropophagi! Far from it. One of my own countrymen, M. Guinnard, associated with me in the Geographical Society, was three years a prisoner among the Indians in the Pampas. He had to endure sufferings and ill-treatment, but came off victorious at last. A European is a useful being in these countries. The Indians know his value, and take care of him as if he were some costly animal.”

“There is not the least room then for hesitation,” said Lord Glenarvan. “Go we must, and as soon as possible. What route must we take?”

“One that is both easy and agreeable,” replied Paganel. “Rather mountainous at first, and then sloping gently down the eastern side of the Andes into a smooth plain, turfed and graveled quite like a garden.”

“Let us see the map?” said the Major.

“Here it is, my dear McNabbs. We shall go through the capital of Araucania, and cut the Cordilleras by the pass of Antuco, leaving the volcano on the south, and gliding gently down the mountain sides, past the Neuquem and the Rio Colorado on to the Pampas, till we reach the Sierra Tapalquen, from whence we shall see the frontier of the province of Buenos Ayres. These we shall pass by, and cross over the Sierra Tandil, pursuing our search to the very shores of the Atlantic, as far as Point Medano.”

Paganel went through this programme of the expedition without so much as a glance at the map. He was so posted up in the travels of Frezier, Molina, Humboldt, Miers, and Orbigny, that he had the geographical nomenclature at his fingers’ ends, and could trust implicitly to his never-failing memory.

“You see then, friend,” he added, “that it is a straight course. In thirty days we shall have gone over it, and gained the eastern side before the DUNCAN, however little she may be delayed by the westerly winds.”

“Then the DUNCAN is to cruise between Corrientes and Cape Saint Antonie,” said John Mangles.

“Just so.”

“And how is the expedition to be organized?” asked Glenarvan.

“As simply as possible. All there is to be done is to reconnoiter the situation of Captain Grant and not to come to gunshot with the Indians. I think that Lord Glenarvan, our natural leader; the Major, who would not yield his place to anybody; and your humble servant, Jacques Paganel.”

“And me,” interrupted Robert.

“Robert, Robert!” exclaimed Mary.

“And why not?” returned Paganel. “Travels form the youthful mind.

Yes, Robert, we four and three of the sailors.”

“And does your Lordship mean to pass me by?” said John Mangles, addressing his master.

“My dear John,” replied Glenarvan, “we leave passengers on board, those dearer to us than life, and who is to watch over them but the devoted captain?”

“Then we can’t accompany you?” said Lady Helena, while a shade of sadness beclouded her eyes.

“My dear Helena, the journey will so soon be accomplished that it will be but a brief separation, and — ”

“Yes, dear, I understand, it is all right; and I do hope you may succeed.”

“Besides, you can hardly call it a journey,” added Paganel.

“What is it, then?”

“It is just making a flying passage across the continent, the way a good man goes through the world, doing all the good he can. Transire beneficiendo — that is our motto.”

This ended the discussion, if a conversation can be so called, where all who take part in it are of the same opinion. Preparations commenced the same day, but as secretly as possible to prevent the Indians getting scent of it.

The day of departure was fixed for the 14th of October. The sailors were all so eager to join the expedition that Glenarvan found the only way to prevent jealousy among them was to draw lots who should go. This was accordingly done, and fortune favored the chief officer, Tom Austin, Wilson, a strong, jovial young fellow, and Mulrady, so good a boxer that he might have entered the lists with Tom Sayers himself.

Glenarvan displayed the greatest activity about the preparations, for he was anxious to be ready by the appointed day. John Mangles was equally busy in coaling the vessel, that she might weigh anchor at the same time. There was quite a rivalry between Glenarvan and the young captain about getting first to the Argentine coast.

Both were ready on the 14th. The whole search party assembled in the saloon to bid farewell to those who remained behind. The DUNCAN was just about to get under way, and already the vibration of the screw began to agitate the limpid waters of Talcahuano, Glenarvan, Paganel, McNabbs, Robert Grant, Tom Austin, Wilson, and Mulrady, stood armed with carbines and Colt's revolvers. Guides and mules awaited them at the landing stairs of the harbor.

"It is time," said Lord Glenarvan at last.

"Go then, dear Edward," said Lady Helena, restraining her emotion.

Lord Glenarvan clasped her closely to his breast for an instant, and then turned away, while Robert flung his arms round Mary's neck.

"And now, friends," said Paganel, "let's have one good hearty shake of the hand all round, to last us till we get to the shores of the Atlantic."

This was not much to ask, but he certainly got strong enough grips to go some way towards satisfying his desire.

All went on deck now, and the seven explorers left the vessel. They were soon on the quay, and as the yacht turned round to pursue her course, she came so near where they stood, that Lady Helena could exchange farewells once more.

“God help you!” she called out.

“Heaven will help us, madam,” shouted Paganel, in reply, “for you may be sure we’ll help ourselves.”

“Go on,” sung out the captain to his engineer.

At the same moment Lord Glenarvan gave the signal to start, and away went the mules along the coast, while the DUNCAN steamed out at full speed toward the broad ocean.

CHAPTER XI TRAVELING IN CHILI

THE native troops organized by Lord Glenarvan consisted of three men and a boy. The captain of the muleteers was an Englishman, who had become naturalized through twenty years’ residence in the country. He made a livelihood by letting out mules to travelers, and leading them over the difficult passes of the Cordilleras, after which he gave them in charge of a BAQUEANO, or Argentine guide, to whom the route through the Pampas was perfectly familiar. This Englishman had not so far forgotten his mother tongue among mules and Indians that he could not converse with his countrymen, and a lucky thing it was for them, as Lord Glenarvan found it far easier to give orders than to see them executed, Paganel was still unsuccessful in making himself understood.

The CATAPEZ, as he was called in Chilian, had two natives called PEONS, and a boy about twelve years of age under him. The PEONS took care of the baggage mules, and the boy led the MADRINA, a young mare adorned with rattle and bells, which walked in front, followed by ten mules. The travelers rode seven of these, and the CATAPEZ another. The remaining two carried provisions and a few bales of goods, intended to secure the goodwill of the Caciques of the plain. The PEONS walked, according to their usual habit.

Every arrangement had been made to insure safety and speed, for crossing the Andes is something more than an ordinary journey. It could not be accomplished without the help of the hardy mules of the far-famed Argentine breed. Those reared in the country are much superior to their progenitors. They are not particular about their food, and only drink once a day, and they can go with ease ten leagues in eight hours.

There are no inns along this road from one ocean to another. The only viands on which travelers can regale themselves are dried meat, rice seasoned with pimento, and such game as may be shot en route. The torrents provide them with water in the mountains, and the rivulets in the plains, which they improve by the addition of a few drops of rum, and each man carries a supply of this in a bullock’s horn, called CHIFFLE. They have to be careful, however, not to indulge too freely in alcoholic drinks, as the climate itself has a peculiarly exhilarating effect on the nervous system. As for bedding, it is all contained in the saddle used by the natives, called RECADO. This saddle is made of sheepskins, tanned on one side and woolly on the other, fastened by gorgeous embroidered straps. Wrapped in these warm coverings a traveler may sleep soundly, and brave exposure to the damp nights.

Glenarvan, an experienced traveler, who knew how to adapt himself to the customs of other countries, adopted the Chilian costume for himself and his whole party. Paganel and Robert, both alike children, though of different growth, were wild with delight as they inserted their heads in the national PONCHO, an immense plaid with a hole in center, and their legs in high leather boots. The mules were richly caparisoned, with the Arab bit in their mouths, and long reins of plaited leather, which served as a whip; the headstall of the bridle was decorated with metal ornaments, and the ALFORJAS, double sacks of gay colored linen, containing the day’s provisions. Paganel, DISTRAIT as usual, was flung several times before he succeeded in bestriding his good steed, but once in the saddle, his inseparable telescope on his shoulder-belt, he held on well enough, keeping his feet fast in the stirrups, and trusting entirely to the sagacity of his beast. As for Robert, his first attempt at mounting was successful, and proved that he had the making in him of an excellent horseman.

The weather was splendid when they started, the sky a deep cloudless blue, and yet the atmosphere so tempered by the sea breezes as to prevent any feeling of oppressive heat. They marched rapidly along the winding shore of the bay of Talcahuano, in order to gain the extremity of the parallel, thirty miles south. No one spoke much the first day, for the smoke of the DUNCAN was still visible on the horizon, and the pain of parting too keenly felt. Paganel talked to himself in Spanish, asking and answering questions.

The CATAPEZ, moreover, was a taciturn man naturally, and had not been rendered loquacious by his calling. He hardly spoke to his PEONS. They understood their duties perfectly. If one of the mules stopped, they urged it on with a guttural cry, and if that proved unavailing, a good-sized pebble, thrown with unerring aim, soon cured the animal's obstinacy. If a strap got loose, or a rein fell, a PEON came forward instantly, and throwing off his poncho, flung it over his beast's head till the accident was repaired and the march resumed.

The custom of the muleteers is to start immediately after breakfast, about eight o'clock, and not to stop till they camp for the night, about 4 P. M. Glenarvan fell in with the practice, and the first halt was just as they arrived at Arauco, situated at the very extremity of the bay. To find the extremity of the 37th degree of latitude, they would have required to proceed as far as the Bay of Carnero, twenty miles further. But the agents of Glenarvan had already scoured that part of the coast, and to repeat the exploration would have been useless. It was, therefore, decided that Arauco should be the point of departure, and they should keep on from there toward the east in a straight line.

Since the weather was so favorable, and the whole party, even Robert, were in perfect health, and altogether the journey had commenced under such favorable auspices, it was deemed advisable to push forward as quickly as possible. Accordingly, the next day they marched 35 miles or more, and encamped at nightfall on the banks of Rio Biobio. The country still presented the same fertile aspect, and abounded in flowers, but animals of any sort only came in sight occasionally, and there were no birds visible, except a solitary heron or owl, and a thrush or grebe, flying from the falcon. Human beings there were none, not a native appeared; not even one of the GUASSOS, the degenerate offspring of Indians and Spaniards, dashed across the plain like a shadow, his flying steed dripping with blood from the cruel thrusts inflicted by the gigantic spurs of his master’s naked feet. It was absolutely impossible to make inquiries when there was no one to address, and Lord Glenarvan came to the conclusion that Captain Grant must have been dragged right over the Andes into the Pampas, and that it would be useless to search for him elsewhere. The only thing to be done was to wait patiently and press forward with all the speed in their power.

On the 17th they set out in the usual line of march, a line which it was hard work for Robert to keep, his ardor constantly compelled him to get ahead of the MADRINA, to the great despair of his mule. Nothing but a sharp recall from Glenarvan kept the boy in proper order.

The country now became more diversified, and the rising ground indicated their approach to a mountainous district. Rivers were more numerous, and came rushing noisily down the slopes. Paganel consulted his maps, and when he found any of those streams not marked, which often happened, all the fire of a geographer burned in his veins, and he would exclaim, with a charming air of vexation:

“A river which hasn’t a name is like having no civil standing.

It has no existence in the eye of geographical law.”

He christened them forthwith, without the least hesitation, and marked them down on the map, qualifying them with the most high-sounding adjectives he could find in the Spanish language.

“What a language!” he said. “How full and sonorous it is! It is like the metal church bells are made of — composed of seventy-eight parts of copper and twenty-two of tin.”

“But, I say, do you make any progress in it?” asked Glenarvan.

“Most certainly, my dear Lord. Ah, if it wasn’t the accent, that wretched accent!”

And for want of better work, Paganel whiled away the time along the road by practising the difficulties in pronunciation, repeating all the break-jaw words he could, though still making geographical observations. Any question about the country that Glenarvan might ask the CATAPEZ was sure to be answered by the learned Frenchman before he could reply, to the great astonishment of the guide, who gazed at him in bewilderment.

About two o’clock that same day they came to a cross road, and naturally enough Glenarvan inquired the name of it.

“It is the route from Yumbel to Los Angeles,” said Paganel.

Glenarvan looked at the CATAPEZ, who replied:

“Quite right.”

And then, turning toward the geographer, he added:

“You have traveled in these parts before, sir?”

“Oh, yes,” said Paganel, quite gravely.

“On a mule?”

“No, in an easy chair.”

The CATAPEZ could not make him out, but shrugged his shoulders and resumed his post at the head of the party.

At five in the evening they stopped in a gorge of no great depth, some miles above the little town of Loja, and encamped for the night at the foot of the Sierras, the first steppes of the great Cordilleras.

CHAPTER XII ELEVEN THOUSAND FEET ALOFT

NOTHING of importance had occurred hitherto in the passage through Chili; but all the obstacles and difficulties incident to a mountain journey were about to crowd on the travelers now.

One important question had first to be settled. Which pass would take them over the Andes, and yet not be out of their fixed route?

On questioning the CATAPEZ on the subject, he replied:

“There are only two practicable passes that I know of in this part of the Cordilleras.”

“The pass of Arica is one undoubtedly discovered by Valdivia Mendoze,” said Paganel.

“Just so.”

“And that of Villarica is the other.”

“Precisely.”

“Well, my good fellow, both these passes have only one fault; they take us too far out of our route, either north or south.”

“Have you no other to propose?” asked the Major.

“Certainly,” replied Paganel. “There is the pass of Antuco, on the slope of the volcano, in latitude, 37 degrees 30’ , or, in other words, only half a degree out of our way.”

“That would do, but are you acquainted with this pass of Antuco, CATAPEZ?” said Glenarvan.

“Yes, your Lordship, I have been through it, but I did not mention it, as no one goes that way but the Indian shepherds with the herds of cattle.”

“Oh, very well; if mares and sheep and oxen can go that way, we can, so let’s start at once.”

The signal for departure was given immediately, and they struck into the heart of the valley of Las Lejas, between great masses of chalk crystal. From this point the pass began to be difficult, and even dangerous. The angles of the declivities widened and the ledges narrowed, and frightful precipices met their gaze. The mules went cautiously along, keeping their heads near the ground, as if scenting the track. They marched in file. Sometimes at a sudden bend of the road, the MADRINA would disappear, and the little caravan had to guide themselves by the distant tinkle of her bell. Often some capricious winding would bring the column in two parallel lines, and the CATAPEZ could speak to his PEONS across a crevasse not two fathoms wide, though two hundred deep, which made between them an inseparable gulf.

Glenarvan followed his guide step by step. He saw that his perplexity was increasing as the way became more difficult, but did not dare to interrogate him, rightly enough, perhaps, thinking that both mules and muleteers were very much governed by instinct, and it was best to trust to them.

For about an hour longer the CATAPEZ kept wandering about almost at haphazard, though always getting higher up the mountains. At last he was obliged to stop short. They were in a narrow valley, one of those gorges called by the Indians “quebrads,” and on reaching the end, a wall of porphyry rose perpendicularly before them, and barred further passage. The CATAPEZ, after vain attempts at finding an opening, dismounted, crossed his arms, and waited. Glenarvan went up to him and asked if he had lost his way.

“No, your Lordship,” was the reply.

“But you are not in the pass of Antuco.”

“We are.”

“You are sure you are not mistaken?”

“I am not mistaken. See! there are the remains of a fire left by the Indians, and there are the marks of the mares and the sheep.”

“They must have gone on then.”

“Yes, but no more will go; the last earthquake has made the route impassable.”

“To mules,” said the Major, “but not to men.”

“Ah, that’s your concern; I have done all I could. My mules and myself are at your service to try the other passes of the Cordilleras.”

“And that would delay us?”

“Three days at least.”

Glenarvan listened silently. He saw the CATAPEZ was right. His mules could not go farther. When he talked of returning, however, Glenarvan appealed to his companions and said:

“Will you go on in spite of all the difficulty?”

“We will follow your Lordship,” replied Tom Austin.

“And even precede you,” added Paganel. “What is it after all? We have only to cross the top of the mountain chain, and once over, nothing can be easier of descent than the slopes we shall find there. When we get below, we shall find BAQUEANOS, Argentine shepherds, who will guide us through the Pampas, and swift horses accustomed to gallop over the plains. Let’s go forward then, I say, and without a moment’s hesitation.”

“Forward!” they all exclaimed. “You will not go with us, then?” said Glenarvan to the CATAPEZ.

“I am the muleteer,” was the reply.

“As you please,” said Glenarvan.

“We can do without him,” said Paganel. “On the other side we shall get back into the road to Antuco, and I’m quite sure I’ll lead you to the foot of the mountain as straight as the best guide in the Cordilleras.”

Accordingly, Glenarvan settled accounts with the CATAPEZ, and bade farewell to him and his PEONS and mules. The arms and instruments, and a small stock of provisions were divided among the seven travelers, and it was unanimously agreed that the ascent should recommence at once, and, if necessary, should continue part of the night. There was a very steep winding path on the left, which the mules never would have attempted. It was toilsome work, but after two hours’ exertion, and a great deal of roundabout climbing, the little party found themselves once more in the pass of Antuco.

They were not far now from the highest peak of the Cordilleras, but there was not the slightest trace of any beaten path. The entire region had been overturned by recent shocks of earthquake, and all they could do was to keep on climbing higher and higher. Paganel was rather disconcerted at finding no way out to the other side of the chain, and laid his account with having to undergo great fatigue before the topmost peaks of the Andes could be reached, for their mean height is between eleven and twelve thousand six hundred feet. Fortunately the weather was calm and the sky clear, in addition to the season being favorable, but in Winter, from May to October, such an ascent would have been impracticable. The intense cold quickly kills travelers, and those who even manage to hold out against it fall victims to the violence of the TEMPORALES, a sort of hurricane peculiar to those regions, which yearly fills the abysses of the Cordilleras with dead bodies.

They went on toiling steadily upward all night, hoisting themselves up to almost inaccessible plateaux, and leaping over broad, deep crevasses. They had no ropes, but arms linked in arms supplied the lack, and shoulders served for ladders. The strength of Mulrady and the dexterity of Wilson were taxed heavily now. These two brave Scots multiplied themselves, so to speak. Many a time, but for their devotion and courage the small band could not have gone on. Glenarvan never lost sight of young Robert, for his age and vivacity made him imprudent. Paganel was a true Frenchman in his impetuous ardor, and hurried furiously along. The Major, on the contrary, only went as quick as was necessary, neither more nor less, climbing without the least apparent exertion. Perhaps he hardly knew, indeed, that he was climbing at all, or perhaps he fancied he was descending.

The whole aspect of the region had now completely changed. Huge blocks of glittering ice, of a bluish tint on some of the declivities, stood up on all sides, reflecting the early light of morn. The ascent became very perilous. They were obliged to reconnoiter carefully before making a single step, on account of the crevasses. Wilson took the lead, and tried the ground with his feet. His companions followed exactly in his footprints, lowering their voices to a whisper, as the least sound would disturb the currents of air, and might cause the fall of the masses of snow suspended in the air seven or eight hundred feet above their heads.

They had come now to the region of shrubs and bushes, which, higher still, gave place to grasses and cacti. At 11,000 feet all trace of vegetation had disappeared. They had only stopped once, to rest and snatch a hurried meal to recruit their strength. With superhuman courage, the ascent was then resumed amid increasing dangers and difficulties. They were forced to bestride sharp peaks and leap over chasms so deep that they did not dare to look down them. In many places wooden crosses marked the scene of some great catastrophes.

About two o’clock they came to an immense barren plain, without a sign of vegetation. The air was dry and the sky unclouded blue. At this elevation rain is unknown, and vapors only condense into snow or hail. Here and there peaks of porphyry or basalt pierced through the white winding-sheet like the bones of a skeleton; and at intervals fragments of quartz or gneiss, loosened by the action of the air, fell down with a faint, dull sound, which in a denser atmosphere would have been almost imperceptible.

However, in spite of their courage, the strength of the little band was giving way. Glenarvan regretted they had gone so far into the interior of the mountain when he saw how exhausted his men had become. Young Robert held out manfully, but he could not go much farther.

At three o’clock Glenarvan stopped and said:

"We must rest."

He knew if he did not himself propose it, no one else would.

"Rest?" rejoined Paganel; "we have no place of shelter."

"It is absolutely necessary, however, if it were only for Robert."

"No, no," said the courageous lad; "I can still walk; don't stop."

"You shall be carried, my boy; but we must get to the other side of the Cordilleras, cost what it may. There we may perhaps find some hut to cover us. All I ask is a two hours' longer march."

"Are you all of the same opinion?" said Glenarvan.

"Yes," was the unanimous reply: and Mulrady added, "I'll carry the boy."

The march eastward was forthwith resumed. They had a frightful height to climb yet to gain the topmost peaks. The rarefaction of the atmosphere produced that painful oppression known by the name of PUNA. Drops of blood stood on the gums and lips, and respiration became hurried and difficult. However strong the will of these brave men might be, the time came at last when their physical powers failed, and vertigo, that terrible malady in the mountains, destroyed not only their bodily strength but their moral energy. Falls became frequent, and those who fell could not rise again, but dragged themselves along on their knees.

But just as exhaustion was about to make short work of any further ascent, and Glenarvan's heart began to sink as he thought of the snow lying far as the eye could reach, and of the intense cold, and saw the shadow of night fast overspreading the desolate peaks, and knew they had not a roof to shelter them, suddenly the Major stopped and said, in a calm voice, “A hut!”

CHAPTER XIII A SUDDEN DESCENT

ANYONE else but McNabbs might have passed the hut a hundred times, and gone all round it, and even over it without suspecting its existence. It was covered with snow, and scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding rocks; but Wilson and Mulrady succeeded in digging it out and clearing the opening after half an hour's hard work, to the great joy of the whole party, who eagerly took possession of it.

They found it was a CASUCHA, constructed by the Indians, made of ADOBES, a species of bricks baked in the sun. Its form was that of a cube, 12 feet on each side, and it stood on a block of basalt. A stone stair led up to the door, the only opening; and narrow as this door was, the hurricane, and snow, and hail found their way in when the TEMPORALES were unchained in the mountains.

Ten people could easily find room in it, and though the walls might be none too water-tight in the rainy season, at this time of the year, at any rate, it was sufficient protection against the intense cold, which, according to the thermometer, was ten degrees below zero. Besides, there was a sort of fireplace in it, with a chimney of bricks, badly enough put together, certainly, but still it allowed of a fire being lighted.

"This will shelter us, at any rate," said Glenarvan, "even if it is not very comfortable. Providence has led us to it, and we can only be thankful."

"Why, it is a perfect palace, I call it," said Paganel; "we only want flunkeys and courtiers. We shall do capital here."

"Especially when there is a good fire blazing on the hearth, for we are quite as cold as we are hungry. For my part, I would rather see a good faggot just now than a slice of venison.”

“Well, Tom, we’ll try and get some combustible or other,” said Paganel.

“Combustibles on the top of the Cordilleras!” exclaimed Mulrady, in a dubious tone.

“Since there is a chimney in the CASUCHA,” said the Major, “the probability is that we shall find something to burn in it.”

“Our friend McNabbs is right,” said Glenarvan. “Get everything in readiness for supper, and I’ll go out and turn woodcutter.”

“Wilson and I will go with you,” said Paganel.

“Do you want me?” asked Robert, getting up.

“No, my brave boy, rest yourself. You’ll be a man, when others are only children at your age,” replied Glenarvan.

On reaching the little mound of porphyry, Glenarvan and his two companions left the CASUCHA. In spite of the perfect calmness of the atmosphere, the cold was stinging. Paganel consulted his barometer, and found that the depression of the mercury corresponded to an elevation of 11,000 feet, only 910 meters lower than Mont Blanc. But if these mountains had presented the difficulties of the giant of the Swiss Alps, not one of the travelers could have crossed the great chain of the New World.

On reaching a little mound of porphyry, Glenarvan and Paganel stopped to gaze about them and scan the horizon on all sides. They were now on the summit of the Nevadas of the Cordilleras, and could see over an area of forty miles. The valley of the Colorado was already sunk in shadow, and night was fast drawing her mantle over the eastern slopes of the Andes. The western side was illumined by the rays of the setting sun, and peaks and glaciers flashed back his golden beams with dazzling radiance. On the south the view was magnificent. Across the wild valley of the Torbido, about two miles distant, rose the volcano of Antuco. The mountain roared like some enormous monster, and vomited red smoke, mingled with torrents of sooty flame. The surrounding peaks appeared on fire. Showers of red-hot stones, clouds of reddish vapor and rockets of lava, all combined, presented the appearance of glowing sparkling streams. The splendor of the spectacle increased every instant as night deepened, and the whole sky became lighted up with a dazzling reflection of the blazing crater, while the sun, gradually becoming shorn of his sunset glories, disappeared like a star lost in the distant darkness of the horizon.

Paganel and Glenarvan would have remained long enough gazing at the sublime struggle between the fires of earth and heaven, if the more practical Wilson had not reminded them of the business on hand. There was no wood to be found, however, but fortunately the rocks were covered with a poor, dry species of lichen. Of this they made an ample provision, as well as of a plant called LLARETTA, the root of which burns tolerably well. This precious combustible was carried back to the CASUCHA and heaped up on the hearth. It was a difficult matter to kindle it, though, and still more to keep it alight. The air was so rarefied that there was scarcely oxygen enough in it to support combustion. At least, this was the reason assigned by the Major.

“By way of compensation, however,” he added, “water will boil at less than 100 degrees heat. It will come to the point of ebullition before 99 degrees.”

McNabbs was right, as the thermometer proved, for it was plunged into the kettle when the water boiled, and the mercury only rose to 99 degrees.

Coffee was soon ready, and eagerly gulped down by everybody.

The dry meat certainly seemed poor fare, and Paganel couldn’t help saying:

“I tell you what, some grilled llama wouldn’t be bad with this, would it? They say that the llama is substitute for the ox and the sheep, and I should like to know if it is, in an alimentary respect.”

“What!” replied the Major. “You’re not content with your supper, most learned Paganel.”

“Enchanted with it, my brave Major; still I must confess I should not say no to a dish of llama.”

“You are a Sybarite.”

“I plead guilty to the charge. But come, now, though you call me that, you wouldn’t sulk at a beefsteak yourself, would you?”

“Probably not.”

“And if you were asked to lie in wait for a llama, notwithstanding the cold and the darkness, you would do it without the least hesitation?”

“Of course; and if it will give you the slightest pleasure — ”

His companions had hardly time to thank him for his obliging good nature, when distant and prolonged howls broke on their ear, plainly not proceeding from one or two solitary animals, but from a whole troop, and one, moreover, that was rapidly approaching.

Providence had sent them a supper, as well as led them to a hut. This was the geographer’s conclusion; but Glenarvan damped his joy somewhat by remarking that the quadrupeds of the Cordilleras are never met with in such a high latitude.

“Then where can these animals come from?” asked Tom Austin. “Don’t you hear them getting nearer!”

“An avalanche,” suggested Mulrady.

“Impossible,” returned Paganel. “That is regular howling.”

“Let us go out and see,” said Glenarvan.

“Yes, and be ready for hunting,” replied McNabbs, arming himself with his carbine.

They all rushed forthwith out of the CASUCHA. Night had completely set in, dark and starry. The moon, now in her last quarter, had not yet risen. The peaks on the north and east had disappeared from view, and nothing was visible save the fantastic SILHOUETTE of some towering rocks here and there. The howls, and clearly the howls of terrified animals, were redoubled. They proceeded from that part of the Cordilleras which lay in darkness. What could be going on there? Suddenly a furious avalanche came down, an avalanche of living animals mad with fear. The whole plateau seemed to tremble. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these animals, and in spite of the rarefied atmosphere, their noise was deafening. Were they wild beasts from the Pampas, or herds of llamas and vicunas? Glenarvan, McNabbs, Robert, Austin, and the two sailors, had just time to throw themselves flat on the ground before they swept past like a whirlwind, only a few paces distant. Paganel, who had remained standing, to take advantage of his peculiar powers of sight, was knocked down in a twinkling. At the same moment the report of firearms was heard. The Major had fired, and it seemed to him that an animal had fallen close by, and that the whole herd, yelling louder than ever, had rushed down and disappeared among the declivities lighted up by the reflection of the volcano.

“Ah, I’ve got them,” said a voice, the voice of Paganel.

“Got what?” asked Glenarvan.

“My spectacles,” was the reply. “One might expect to lose that much in such a tumult as this.”

“You are not wounded, I hope?”

“No, only knocked down; but by what?”

“By this,” replied the Major, holding up the animal he had killed.

They all hastened eagerly into the hut, to examine McNabbs’ prize by the light of the fire.

It was a pretty creature, like a small camel without a hump. The head was small and the body flattened, the legs were long and slender, the skin fine, and the hair the color of cafe au lait.

Paganel had scarcely looked at it before he exclaimed, “A guanaco!”

“What sort of an animal is that?” asked Glenarvan.

“One you can eat.”

“And it is good savory meat, I assure you; a dish of Olympus! I knew we should have fresh meat for supper, and such meat! But who is going to cut up the beast?”

“I will,” said Wilson.

“Well, I’ll undertake to cook it,” said Paganel.

“Can you cook, then, Monsieur Paganel?” asked Robert.

“I should think so, my boy. I’m a Frenchman, and in every Frenchman there is a cook.”

Five minutes afterward Paganel began to grill large slices of venison on the embers made by the use of the LLARETTAS, and in about ten minutes a dish was ready, which he served up to his companions by the tempting name of guanaco cutlets. No one stood on ceremony, but fell to with a hearty good will.

To the absolute stupefaction of the geographer, however, the first mouthful was greeted with a general grimace, and such exclamations as — ”Tough!” “It is horrible.” “It is not eatable.”

The poor SAVANT was obliged to own that his cutlets could not be relished, even by hungry men. They began to banter him about his “Olympian dish,” and indulge in jokes at his expense; but all he cared about was to find out how it happened that the flesh of the guanaco, which was certainly good and eatable food, had turned out so badly in his hands. At last light broke in on him, and he called out:

“I see through it now! Yes, I see through it. I have found out the secret now.”

“The meat was too long kept, was it?” asked McNabbs, quietly.

“No, but the meat had walked too much. How could I have forgotten that?”

“What do you mean?” asked Tom Austin.

“I mean this: the guanaco is only good for eating when it is killed in a state of rest. If it has been long hunted, and gone over much ground before it is captured, it is no longer eatable. I can affirm the fact by the mere taste, that this animal has come a great distance, and consequently the whole herd has.”

“You are certain of this?” asked Glenarvan.

“Absolutely certain.”

“But what could have frightened the creatures so, and driven them from their haunts, when they ought to have been quietly sleeping?”

“That’s a question, my dear Glenarvan, I could not possibly answer. Take my advice, and let us go to sleep without troubling our heads about it. I say, Major, shall we go to sleep?”

“Yes, we’ll go to sleep, Paganel.”

Each one, thereupon, wrapped himself up in his poncho, and the fire was made up for the night.

Loud snores in every tune and key soon resounded from all sides of the hut, the deep bass contribution of Paganel completing the harmony.

But Glenarvan could not sleep. Secret uneasiness kept him in a continual state of wakefulness. His thoughts reverted involuntarily to those frightened animals flying in one common direction, impelled by one common terror. They could not be pursued by wild beasts, for at such an elevation there were almost none to be met with, and of hunters still fewer. What terror then could have driven them among the precipices of the Andes? Glenarvan felt a presentiment of approaching danger.

But gradually he fell into a half-drowsy state, and his apprehensions were lulled. Hope took the place of fear. He saw himself on the morrow on the plains of the Andes, where the search would actually commence, and perhaps success was close at hand. He thought of Captain Grant and his two sailors, and their deliverance from cruel bondage. As these visions passed rapidly through his mind, every now and then he was roused by the crackling of the fire, or sparks flying out, or some little jet of flame would suddenly flare up and illumine the faces of his slumbering companions.

Then his presentiments returned in greater strength than before, and he listened anxiously to the sounds outside the hut.

At certain intervals he fancied he could hear rumbling noises in the distance, dull and threatening like the mutter-ings of thunder before a storm. There surely must be a storm raging down below at the foot of the mountains. He got up and went out to see.

The moon was rising. The atmosphere was pure and calm. Not a cloud visible either above or below. Here and there was a passing reflection from the flames of Antuco, but neither storm nor lightning, and myriads of bright stars studded the zenith. Still the rumbling noises continued. They seemed to meet together and cross the chain of the Andes. Glenarvan returned to the CASUCHA more uneasy than ever, questioning within himself as to the connection between these sounds and the flight of the guanacos. He looked at his watch and found the time was about two in the morning. As he had no certainty, however, of any immediate danger, he did not wake his companions, who were sleeping soundly after their fatigue, and after a little dozed off himself, and slumbered heavily for some hours.

All of a sudden a violent crash made him start to his feet.

A deafening noise fell on his ear like the roar of artillery.

He felt the ground giving way beneath him, and the CASUCHA

rocked to and fro, and opened.

He shouted to his companions, but they were already awake, and tumbling pell-mell over each other. They were being rapidly dragged down a steep declivity. Day dawned and revealed a terrible scene. The form of the mountains changed in an instant. Cones were cut off. Tottering peaks disappeared as if some trap had opened at their base. Owing to a peculiar phenomenon of the Cordilleras, an enormous mass, many miles in extent, had been displaced entirely, and was speeding down toward the plain.

“An earthquake!” exclaimed Paganel. He was not mistaken. It was one of those cataclysms frequent in Chili, and in this very region where Copiapo had been twice destroyed, and Santiago four times laid in ruins in fourteen years. This region of the globe is so underlaid with volcanic fires and the volcanoes of recent origin are such insufficient safety valves for the subterranean vapors, that shocks are of frequent occurrence, and are called by the people TREMBLORES.

The plateau to which the seven men were clinging, holding on by tufts of lichen, and giddy and terrified in the extreme, was rushing down the declivity with the swiftness of an express, at the rate of fifty miles an hour. Not a cry was possible, nor an attempt to get off or stop. They could not even have heard themselves speak. The internal rumblings, the crash of the avalanches, the fall of masses of granite and basalt, and the whirlwind of pulverized snow, made all communication impossible. Sometimes they went perfectly smoothly along without jolts or jerks, and sometimes on the contrary, the plateau would reel and roll like a ship in a storm, coasting past abysses in which fragments of the mountain were falling, tearing up trees by the roots, and leveling, as if with the keen edge of an immense scythe, every projection of the declivity.

How long this indescribable descent would last, no one could calculate, nor what it would end in ultimately. None of the party knew whether the rest were still alive, whether one or another were not already lying in the depths of some abyss. Almost breathless with the swift motion, frozen with the cold air, which pierced them through, and blinded with the whirling snow, they gasped for breath, and became exhausted and nearly inanimate, only retaining their hold of the rocks by a powerful instinct of self-preservation. Suddenly a tremendous shock pitched them right off, and sent them rolling to the very foot of the mountain. The plateau had stopped.

For some minutes no one stirred. At last one of the party picked himself up, and stood on his feet, stunned by the shock, but still firm on his legs. This was the Major. He shook off the blinding snow and looked around him. His companions lay in a close circle like the shots from a gun that has just been discharged, piled one on top of another.

The Major counted them. All were there except one — that one was Robert Grant.

CHAPTER XIV PROVIDENTIALLY RESCUED

THE eastern side of the Cordilleras of the Andes consists of a succession of lengthened declivities, which slope down almost insensibly to the plain. The soil is carpeted with rich herbage, and adorned with magnificent trees, among which, in great numbers, were apple-trees, planted at the time of the conquest, and golden with fruit. There were literally, perfect forests of these. This district was, in fact, just a corner of fertile Normandy.

The sudden transition from a desert to an oasis, from snowy peaks to verdant plains, from Winter to Summer, can not fail to strike the traveler’s eye.

The ground, moreover, had recovered its immobility. The trembling had ceased, though there was little doubt the forces below the surface were carrying on their devastating work further on, for shocks of earthquake are always occurring in some part or other of the Andes. This time the shock had been one of extreme violence. The outline of the mountains was wholly altered, and the Pampas guides would have sought vainly for the accustomed landmarks.

A magnificent day had dawned. The sun was just rising from his ocean bed, and his bright rays streamed already over the Argentine plains, and ran across to the Atlantic. It was about eight o’clock.

Lord Glenarvan and his companions were gradually restored to animation by the Major’s efforts. They had been completely stunned, but had sustained no injury whatever. The descent of the Cordilleras was accomplished; and as Dame Nature had conveyed them at her own expense, they could only have praised her method of locomotion if one of their number, and that one the feeblest and youngest, the child of the party, had not been missing at the roll call.

The brave boy was beloved by everybody. Paganel was particularly attached to him, and so was the Major, with all his apparent coldness. As for Glenarvan, he was in absolute despair when he heard of his disappearance, and pictured to himself the child lying in some deep abyss, wildly crying for succor.

“We must go and look for him, and look till we find him,” he exclaimed, almost unable to keep back his tears. “We cannot leave him to his fate. Every valley and precipice and abyss must be searched through and through. I will have a rope fastened round my waist, and go down myself. I insist upon it; you understand; I insist upon it. Heaven grant Robert may be still alive! If we lose the boy, how could we ever dare to meet the father? What right have we to save the captain at the cost of his son’s life?”

Glenarvan’s companions heard him in silence. He sought to read hope in their eyes, but they did not venture to meet his gaze.

At last he said,

“Well, you hear what I say, but you make no response.

Do you mean to tell me that you have no hope — not the slightest?”

Again there was silence, till McNabbs asked:

“Which of you can recollect when Robert disappeared?”

No one could say.

“Well, then,” resumed the Major, “you know this at any rate.

Who was the child beside during our descent of the Cordilleras?”

“Beside me,” replied Wilson.

“Very well. Up to what moment did you see him beside you?

Try if you can remember.”

“All that I can recollect is that Robert Grant was still by my side, holding fast by a tuft of lichen, less than two minutes before the shock which finished our descent.”

“Less than two minutes? Mind what you are saying;

I dare say a minute seemed a very long time to you.

Are you sure you are not making a mistake?”

“I don’t think I am. No; it was just about two minutes, as I tell you.”

“Very well, then; and was Robert on your right or left?”

“On my left. I remember that his poncho brushed past my face.”

“And with regard to us, how were you placed?”

“On the left also.”

“Then Robert must have disappeared on this side,” said the Major, turning toward the mountain and pointing toward the right: “and I should judge,” he added, “considering the time that has elapsed, that the spot where he fell is about two miles up. Between that height and the ground is where we must search, dividing the different zones among us, and it is there we shall find him."

Not another word was spoken. The six men commenced their explorations, keeping constantly to the line they had made in their descent, examining closely every fissure, and going into the very depths of the abysses, choked up though they partly were with fragments of the plateau; and more than one came out again with garments torn to rags, and feet and hands bleeding. For many long hours these brave fellows continued their search without dreaming of taking rest. But all in vain. The child had not only met his death on the mountain, but found a grave which some enormous rock had sealed forever.

About one o'clock, Glenarvan and his companions met again in the valley.

Glenarvan was completely crushed with grief. He scarcely spoke.

The only words that escaped his lips amid his sighs were,

"I shall not go away! I shall not go away!"

No one of the party but could enter into his feeling, and respect it.

"Let us wait," said Paganel to the Major and Tom Austin. "We will take a little rest, and recruit our strength. We need it anyway, either to prolong our search or continue our route."

"Yes; and, as Edward wishes it, we will rest. He has still hope, but what is it he hopes?"

"Who knows!" said Tom Austin.

“Poor Robert!” replied Paganel, brushing away a tear.

The valley was thickly wooded, and the Major had no difficulty in finding a suitable place of encampment. He chose a clump of tall carob trees, under which they arranged their few belongings — few indeed, for all they had were sundry wraps and fire-arms, and a little dried meat and rice. Not far off there was a RIO, which supplied them with water, though it was still somewhat muddy after the disturbance of the avalanche. Mulrady soon had a fire lighted on the grass, and a warm refreshing beverage to offer his master. But Glenarvan refused to touch it, and lay stretched on his poncho in a state of absolute prostration.

So the day passed, and night came on, calm and peaceful as the preceding had been. While his companions were lying motionless, though wide awake, Glenarvan betook himself once more to the slopes of the Cordilleras, listening intently in hope that some cry for help would fall upon his ear. He ventured far up in spite of his being alone, straining his ear with painful eagerness to catch the faintest sound, and calling aloud in an agony of despair.

But he heard nothing save the beatings of his own heart, though he wandered all night on the mountain. Sometimes the Major followed him, and sometimes Paganel, ready to lend a helping hand among the slippery peaks and dangerous precipices among which he was dragged by his rash and useless imprudence. All his efforts were in vain, however, and to his repeated cries of “Robert, Robert!” echo was the only response.

Day dawned, and it now became a matter of necessity to go and bring back the poor Lord from the distant plateau, even against his will. His despair was terrible. Who could dare to speak of quitting this fatal valley? Yet provisions were done, and Argentine guides and horses were not far off to lead them to the Pampas. To go back would be more difficult than to go forward. Besides, the Atlantic Ocean was the appointed meeting place with the DUNCAN. These were strong reasons against any long delay; indeed it was best for all parties to continue the route as soon as possible.

McNabbs undertook the task of rousing Lord Glenarvan from his grief. For a long time his cousin seemed not to hear him. At last he shook his head, and said, almost in-audibly:

“Did you say we must start?”

“Yes, we must start.”

“Wait one hour longer.”

“Yes, we’ll wait another,” replied the Major.

The hour slipped away, and again Glenarvan begged for longer grace. To hear his imploring tones, one might have thought him a criminal begging a respite. So the day passed on till it was almost noon. McNabbs hesitated now no longer, but, acting on the advice of the rest, told his cousin that start they must, for all their lives depended on prompt action.

“Yes, yes!” replied Glenarvan. “Let us start, let us start!”

But he spoke without looking at McNabbs. His gaze was fixed intently on a certain dark speck in the heavens. Suddenly he exclaimed, extending his arm, and keeping it motionless, as if petrified:

“There! there! Look! look!”

All eyes turned immediately in the direction indicated so imperiously. The dark speck was increasing visibly. It was evidently some bird hovering above them.

“A condor,” said Paganel.

“Yes, a condor,” replied Glenarvan. “Who knows? He is coming down — he is gradually getting lower! Let us wait.”

Paganel was not mistaken, it was assuredly a condor. This magnificent bird is the king of the Southern Andes, and was formerly worshiped by the Incas. It attains an extraordinary development in those regions. Its strength is prodigious. It has frequently driven oxen over the edge of precipices down into the depths of abysses. It seizes sheep, and kids, and young calves, browsing on the plains, and carries them off to inaccessible heights. It hovers in the air far beyond the utmost limits of human sight, and its powers of vision are so great that it can discern the smallest objects on the earth beneath.

What had this condor discovered then? Could it be the corpse of Robert Grant? “Who knows?” repeated Glenarvan, keeping his eye immovably fixed on the bird. The enormous creature was fast approaching, sometimes hovering for awhile with outspread wings, and sometimes falling with the swiftness of inert bodies in space. Presently he began to wheel round in wide circles. They could see him distinctly. He measured more than fifteen feet, and his powerful wings bore him along with scarcely the slightest effort, for it is the prerogative of large birds to fly with calm majesty, while insects have to beat their wings a thousand times a second.

The Major and Wilson had seized their carbines, but Glenarvan stopped them by a gesture. The condor was encircling in his flight a sort of inaccessible plateau about a quarter of a mile up the side of the mountain. He wheeled round and round with dazzling rapidity, opening and shutting his formidable claws, and shaking his cartilaginous carbuncle, or comb.

“It is there, there!” exclaimed Glenarvan.

A sudden thought flashed across his mind, and with a terrible cry, he called out, “Fire! fire! Oh, suppose Robert were still alive! That bird.”

But it was too late. The condor had dropped out of sight behind the crags. Only a second passed, a second that seemed an age, and the enormous bird reappeared, carrying a heavy load and flying at a slow rate.

A cry of horror rose on all sides. It was a human body the condor had in his claws, dangling in the air, and apparently lifeless — it was Robert Grant. The bird had seized him by his clothes, and had him hanging already at least one hundred and fifty feet in the air. He had caught sight of the travelers, and was flapping his wings violently, endeavoring to escape with his heavy prey.

“Oh! would that Robert were dashed to pieces against the rocks, rather than be a — ”

He did not finish his sentence, but seizing Wilson’s carbine, took aim at the condor. His arm was too trembling, however, to keep the weapon steady.

“Let me do it,” said the Major. And with a calm eye, and sure hands and motionless body, he aimed at the bird, now three hundred feet above him in the air.

But before he had pulled the trigger the report of a gun resounded from the bottom of the valley. A white smoke rose from between two masses of basalt, and the condor, shot in the head, gradually turned over and began to fall, supported by his great wings spread out like a parachute. He had not let go his prey, but gently sank down with it on the ground, about ten paces from the stream.

“We’ve got him, we’ve got him,” shouted Glenarvan; and without waiting to see where the shot so providentially came from, he rushed toward the condor, followed by his companions.

When they reached the spot the bird was dead, and the body of Robert was quite concealed beneath his mighty wings. Glenarvan flung himself on the corpse, and dragging it from the condor’s grasp, placed it flat on the grass, and knelt down and put his ear to the heart.

But a wilder cry of joy never broke from human lips, than Glenarvan uttered the next moment, as he started to his feet and exclaimed:

“He is alive! He is still alive!”

The boy’s clothes were stripped off in an instant, and his face bathed with cold water. He moved slightly, opened his eyes, looked round and murmured, “Oh, my Lord! Is it you!” he said; “my father!”

Glenarvan could not reply. He was speechless with emotion, and kneeling down by the side of the child so miraculously saved, burst into tears.

CHAPTER XV THALCAVE

ROBERT had no sooner escaped one terrible danger than he ran the risk of another scarcely less formidable. He was almost torn to pieces by his friends, for the brave fellows were so overjoyed at the sight of him, that in spite of his weak state, none of them would be satisfied without giving him a hug. However, it seemed as if good rough hugging did not hurt sick people; at any rate it did not hurt Robert, but quite the contrary.

But the first joy of deliverance over, the next thought was who was the deliverer? Of course it was the Major who suggested looking for him, and he was not far off, for about fifty paces from the RIO a man of very tall stature was seen standing motionless on the lowest crags at the foot of the mountain. A long gun was lying at his feet.

He had broad shoulders, and long hair bound together with leather thongs. He was over six feet in height. His bronzed face was red between the eyes and mouth, black by the lower eyelids, and white on the forehead. He wore the costume of the Patagonians on the frontiers, consisting of a splendid cloak, ornamented with scarlet arabesques, made of the skins of the guanaco, sewed together with ostrich tendons, and with the silky wool turned up on the edge. Under this mantle was a garment of fox-skin, fastened round the waist, and coming down to a point in front. A little bag hung from his belt, containing colors for painting his face. His boots were pieces of ox hide, fastened round the ankles by straps, across.

This Patagonian had a splendid face, indicating real intelligence, notwithstanding the medley of colors by which it was disfigured. His waiting attitude was full of dignity; indeed, to see him standing grave and motionless on his pedestal of rocks, one might have taken him for a statue of sang-froid.

As soon as the Major perceived him, he pointed him out to Glenarvan, who ran toward him immediately. The Patagonian came two steps forward to meet him, and Glenarvan caught hold of his hand and pressed it in his own. It was impossible to mistake the meaning of the action, for the noble face of the Scotch lord so beamed with gratitude that no words were needed. The stranger bowed slightly in return, and said a few words that neither Glenarvan nor the Major could understand.

The Patagonian surveyed them attentively for a few minutes, and spoke again in another language. But this second idiom was no more intelligible than the first. Certain words, however, caught Glenarvan's ear as sounding like Spanish, a few sentences of which he could speak.

ESPANOL?" he asked.

The Patagonian nodded in reply, a movement of the head which has an affirmative significance among all nations.

"That's good!" said the Major. "Our friend Paganel will be the very man for him. It is lucky for us that he took it into his head to learn Spanish."

Paganel was called forthwith. He came at once, and saluted the stranger with all the grace of a Frenchman. But his compliments were lost on the Patagonian, for he did not understand a single syllable.

However, on being told how things stood, he began in Spanish, and opening his mouth as wide as he could, the better to articulate, said:

"Vos sois um homen de bem." (You are a brave man.)

The native listened, but made no reply.

“He doesn’t understand,” said the geographer.

“Perhaps you haven’t the right accent,” suggested the Major.

“That’s just it! Confound the accent!”

Once more Paganel repeated his compliment, but with no better success.

“I’ll change the phrase,” he said; and in slow, deliberate tones he went on, “Sam duvida um Patagao” (A Patagonian, undoubtedly).

No response still.

“DIZEIME!” said Paganel (Answer me).

But no answer came.

“Vos compriendeis?” (Do you understand?) shouted Paganel, at the very top of his voice, as if he would burst his throat.

Evidently the Indian did not understand, for he replied in Spanish,

“No comprendo” (I do not understand).

It was Paganel’s turn now to be amazed. He pushed his spectacles right down over his nose, as if greatly irritated, and said,

“I’ll be hanged if I can make out one word of his infernal patois.

It is Araucanian, that’s certain!”

“Not a bit of it!” said Glenarvan. “It was Spanish he spoke.”

And addressing the Patagonian, he repeated the word, “ESPANOL?”

(Spanish?).

“Si, si” (yes, yes) replied the Indian.

Paganel’s surprise became absolute stupefaction. The Major and his cousin exchanged sly glances, and McNabbs said, mischievously, with a look of fun on his face, “Ah, ah, my worthy friend; is this another of your misadventures? You seem to have quite a monopoly of them.”

“What!” said Paganel, pricking up his ear.

“Yes, it’s clear enough the man speaks Spanish.”

“He!”

“Yes, he certainly speaks Spanish. Perhaps it is some other language you have been studying all this time instead of — ”

But Paganel would not allow him to proceed. He shrugged his shoulders, and said stiffly,

“You go a little too far, Major.”

“Well, how is it that you don’t understand him then?”

“Why, of course, because the man speaks badly,” replied the learned geographer, getting impatient.

“He speaks badly; that is to say, because you can’t understand him,” returned the Major coolly.

“Come, come, McNabbs,” put in Glenarvan, “your supposition is quite inadmissable. However DISTRAIT our friend Paganel is, it is hardly likely he would study one language for another.”

“Well, Edward — or rather you, my good Paganel — explain it then.”

“I explain nothing. I give proof. Here is the book I use daily, to practice myself in the difficulties of the Spanish language. Examine it for yourself, Major,” he said, handing him a volume in a very ragged condition, which he had brought up, after a long rummage, from the depths of one of his numerous pockets. “Now you can see whether I am imposing on you,” he continued, indignantly.

“And what’s the name of this book?” asked the Major, as he took it from his hand.

“The LUSIADES, an admirable epic, which — ”

“The LUSIADES!” exclaimed Glenarvan.

“Yes, my friend, the LUSIADES of the great Camoens, neither more nor less.”

“Camoens!” repeated Glenarvan; “but Paganel, my unfortunate fellow, Camoens was a Portuguese! It is Portuguese you have been learning for the last six weeks!”

“Camoens! LUISADES! Portuguese!” Paganel could not say more. He looked vexed, while his companions, who had all gathered round, broke out in a furious burst of laughter.

The Indian never moved a muscle of his face. He quietly awaited the explanation of this incomprehensible mirth.

“Fool, idiot, that I am!” at last uttered Paganel. “Is it really a fact? You are not joking with me? It is what I have actually been doing? Why, it is a second confusion of tongues, like Babel. Ah me! alack-a-day! my friends, what is to become of me? To start for India and arrive at Chili! To learn Spanish and talk Portuguese! Why, if I go on like this, some day I shall be throwing myself out of the window instead of my cigar!”

To hear Paganel bemoan his misadventures and see his comical discomfiture, would have upset anyone’s gravity. Besides, he set the example himself, and said:

“Laugh away, my friends, laugh as loud as you like; you can’t laugh at me half as much as I laugh at myself!”

“But, I say,” said the Major, after a minute, “this doesn’t alter the fact that we have no interpreter.”

“Oh, don’t distress yourself about that,” replied Paganel, “Portuguese and Spanish are so much alike that I made a mistake; but this very resemblance will be a great help toward rectifying it. In a very short time I shall be able to thank the Patagonian in the language he speaks so well.”

Paganel was right. He soon managed to exchange a few words with the stranger, and found out even that his name was Thalcave, a word that signified in Araucanian, “The Thunderer.” This surname had, no doubt, come from his skill in handling fire-arms.

But what rejoiced Glenarvan most was to learn that he was a guide by occupation, and, moreover, a guide across the Pampas. To his mind, the meeting with him was so providential, that he could not doubt now of the success of their enterprise. The deliverance of Captain Grant seemed an accomplished fact.

When the party went back to Robert, the boy held out his arms to the Patagonian, who silently laid his hand on his head, and proceeded to examine him with the greatest care, gently feeling each of his aching limbs. Then he went down to the RIO, and gathered a few handfuls of wild celery, which grew on the banks, with which he rubbed the child's body all over. He handled him with the most exquisite delicacy, and his treatment so revived the lad's strength, that it was soon evident that a few hours' rest would set him all right.

It was accordingly decided that they should encamp for the rest of the day and the ensuing night. Two grave questions, moreover, had to be settled: where to get food, and means of transport. Provisions and mules were both lacking. Happily, they had Thalcave, however, a practised guide, and one of the most intelligent of his class. He undertook to find all that was needed, and offered to take him to a TOLDERIA of Indians, not further than four miles off at most, where he could get supplies of all he wanted. This proposition was partly made by gestures, and partly by a few Spanish words which Paganel managed to make out. His offer was accepted, and Glenarvan and his learned friend started off with him at once.

They walked at a good pace for an hour and a half, and had to make great strides to keep up with the giant Thalcave. The road lay through a beautiful fertile region, abounding in rich pasturages; where a hundred thousand cattle might have fed comfortably. Large ponds, connected by an inextricable labyrinth of RIOS, amply watered these plains and produced their greenness. Swans with black heads were disporting in the water, disputing possession with the numerous intruders which gamboled over the LLANOS. The feathered tribes were of most brilliant plumage, and of marvelous variety and deafening noise. The isacus, a graceful sort of dove with gray feathers streaked with white, and the yellow cardinals, were flitting about in the trees like moving flowers; while overhead pigeons, sparrows, chingolos, bulgueros, and mongitas, were flying swiftly along, rending the air with their piercing cries.

Paganel’s admiration increased with every step, and he had nearly exhausted his vocabulary of adjectives by his loud exclamations, to the astonishment of the Patagonian, to whom the birds, and the swans, and the prairies were every day things. The learned geographer was so lost in delight, that he seemed hardly to have started before they came in sight of the Indian camp, or TOLDERIA, situated in the heart of a valley.

About thirty nomadic Indians were living there in rude cabins made of branches, pasturing immense herds of milch cows, sheep, oxen, and horses. They went from one prairie to another, always finding a well-spread table for their four-footed guests.

These nomads were a hybrid type of Araucans, Pehu-enches, and Aucas. They were Ando-Peruvians, of an olive tint, of medium stature and massive form, with a low forehead, almost circular face, thin lips, high cheekbones, effeminate features, and cold expression. As a whole, they are about the least interesting of the Indians. However, it was their herds Glenarvan wanted, not themselves. As long as he could get beef and horses, he cared for nothing else.

Thalcave did the bargaining. It did not take long. In exchange for seven ready saddled horses of the Argentine breed, 100 pounds of CHARQUI, or dried meat, several measures of rice, and leather bottles for water, the Indians agreed to take twenty ounces of gold as they could not get wine or rum, which they would have preferred, though they were perfectly acquainted with the value of gold. Glenarvan wished to purchase an eighth horse for the Patagonian, but he gave him to understand that it would be useless.

They got back to the camp in less than half an hour, and were hailed with acclamations by the whole party or rather the provisions and horses were. They were all hungry, and ate heartily of the welcome viands. Robert took a little food with the rest. He was fast recovering strength. The close of the day was spent in complete repose and pleasant talk about the dear absent ones.

Paganel never quitted the Indian’s side. It was not that he was so glad to see a real Patagonian, by whom he looked a perfect pigmy — a Patagonian who might have almost rivaled the Emperor Maximii, and that Congo negro seen by the learned Van der Brock, both eight feet high; but he caught up Spanish phrases from the Indian and studied the language without a book this time, gesticulating at a great rate all the grand sonorous words that fell on his ear.

“If I don’t catch the accent,” he said to the Major, “it won’t be my fault; but who would have said to me that it was a Patagonian who would teach me Spanish one day?”

CHAPTER XVI THE NEWS OF THE LOST CAPTAIN

NEXT day, the 22d of October, at eight o’clock in the morning, Thalcave gave the signal for departure. Between the 22d and 42d degrees the Argentine soil slopes eastward, and all the travelers had to do was to follow the slope right down to the sea.

Glenarvan had supposed Thalcave’s refusal of a horse was that he preferred walking, as some guides do, but he was mistaken, for just as they were ready, the Patagonian gave a peculiar whistle, and immediately a magnificent steed of the pure Argentine breed came bounding out of a grove close by, at his master’s call. Both in form and color the animal was of perfect beauty. The Major, who was a thorough judge of all the good points of a horse, was loud in admiration of this sample of the Pampas breed, and considered that, in many respects, he greatly resembled an English hunter. This splendid creature was called “Thaouka,” a word in Patagonia which means bird, and he well deserved the name.

Thalcave was a consummate horseman, and to see him on his prancing steed was a sight worth looking at. The saddle was adapted to the two hunting weapons in common use on the Argentine plains — the BOLAS and the LAZO. The BOLAS consists of three balls fastened together by a strap of leather, attached to the front of the RECADO. The Indians fling them often at the distance of a hundred feet from the animal or enemy of which they are in pursuit, and with such precision that they catch round their legs and throw them down in an instant. It is a formidable weapon in their hands, and one they handle with surprising skill. The LAZO is always retained in the hand. It is simply a rope, thirty feet long, made of tightly twisted leather, with a slip knot at the end, which passes through an iron ring. This noose was thrown by the right hand, while the left keeps fast hold of the rope, the other end of which is fastened to the saddle. A long carbine, in the shoulder belt completed the accouterments of the Patagonian.

He took his place at the head of the party, quite unconscious of the admiration he was exciting, and they set off, going alternately at a gallop and walking pace, for the “trot” seemed altogether unknown to them. Robert proved to be a bold rider, and completely reassured Glenarvan as to his ability to keep his seat.

The Pampas commenced at the very foot of the Cordilleras. They may be divided into three parts. The first extends from the chain of the Andes, and stretches over an extent of 250 miles covered with stunted trees and bushes; the second 450 miles is clothed with magnificent herbage, and stops about 180 miles from Buenos Ayres; from this point to the sea, the foot of the traveler treads over immense prairies of lucerne and thistles, which constitute the third division of the Pampas.

On issuing from the gorges of the Cordilleras, Glenarvan and his band came first to plains of sand, called MEDANOS, lying in ridges like waves of the sea, and so extremely fine that the least breath of wind agitated the light particles, and sent them flying in clouds, which rose and fell like water-spouts. It was a spectacle which caused both pleasure and pain, for nothing could be more curious than to see the said water-spouts wandering over the plain, coming in contact and mingling with each other, and falling and rising in wild confusion; but, on the other hand, nothing could be more disagreeable than the dust which was thrown off by these innumerable MEDANOS, which was so impalpable that close one’s eyes as they might, it found its way through the lids.

This phenomenon lasted the greater part of the day. The travelers made good progress, however, and about four o'clock the Cordilleras lay full forty miles behind them, the dark outlines being already almost lost in the evening mists. They were all somewhat fatigued with the journey, and glad enough to halt for the night on the banks of the Neuquem, called Ramid, or Comoe by certain geographers, a troubled, turbulent rapid flowing between high red banks.

No incident of any importance occurred that night or the following day. They rode well and fast, finding the ground firm, and the temperature bearable. Toward noon, however, the sun's rays were extremely scorching, and when evening came, a bar of clouds streaked the southwest horizon — a sure sign of a change in the weather. The Patagonian pointed it out to the geographer, who replied:

"Yes, I know;" and turning to his companions, added, "see, a change of weather is coming! We are going to have a taste of PAMPERO."

And he went on to explain that this PAMPERO is very common in the Argentine plains. It is an extremely dry wind which blows from the southwest. Thalcave was not mistaken, for the PAMPERO blew violently all night, and was sufficiently trying to poor fellows only sheltered by their ponchos. The horses lay down on the ground, and the men stretched themselves beside them in a close group. Glenarvan was afraid they would be delayed by the continuance of the hurricane, but Paganel was able to reassure him on that score, after consulting his barometer.

"The PAMPERO generally brings a tempest which lasts three days, and may be always foretold by the depression of the mercury," he said. "But when the barometer rises, on the contrary, which is the case now, all we need expect is a few violent blasts. So you can make your mind easy, my good friend; by sunrise the sky will be quite clear again.”

“You talk like a book, Paganel,” replied Glenarvan.

“And I am one; and what’s more, you are welcome to turn over my leaves whenever you like.”

The book was right. At one o’clock the wind suddenly lulled, and the weary men fell asleep and woke at daybreak, refreshed and invigorated.

It was the 20th of October, and the tenth day since they had left Talcahuano. They were still ninety miles from the point where the Rio Colorado crosses the thirty-seventh parallel, that is to say, about two days’ journey. Glenarvan kept a sharp lookout for the appearance of any Indians, intending to question them, through Thalcave, about Captain Grant, as Paganel could not speak to him well enough for this. But the track they were following was one little frequented by the natives, for the ordinary routes across the Pampas lie further north. If by chance some nomadic horseman came in sight far away, he was off again like a dart, not caring to enter into conversation with strangers. To a solitary individual, a little troop of eight men, all mounted and well armed, wore a suspicious aspect, so that any intercourse either with honest men or even banditti, was almost impossible.

Glenarvan was regretting this exceedingly, when he unexpectedly met with a singular justification of his rendering of the eventful document.

In pursuing the course the travelers had laid down for themselves, they had several times crossed the routes over the plains in common use, but had struck into none of them. Hitherto Thalcave had made no remark about this. He understood quite well, however, that they were not bound for any particular town, or village, or settlement. Every morning they set out in a straight line toward the rising sun, and went on without the least deviation. Moreover, it must have struck Thalcave that instead of being the guide he was guided; yet, with true Indian reserve, he maintained absolute silence. But on reaching a particular point, he checked his horse suddenly, and said to Paganel:

“The Carmen route.”

“Yes, my good Patagonian,” replied Paganel in his best Spanish; “the route from Carmen to Mendoza.”

“We are not going to take it?”

“No,” replied Paganel.

“Where are we going then?”

“Always to the east.”

“That’s going nowhere.”

“Who knows?”

Thalcave was silent, and gazed at the geographer with an air of profound surprise. He had no suspicion that Paganel was joking, for an Indian is always grave.

“You are not going to Carmen, then?” he added, after a moment’s pause.

“No.”

“Nor to Mendoza?”

“No, nor to Mendoza.”

Just then Glenarvan came up to ask the reason of the stoppage, and what he and Thalcave were discussing.

“He wanted to know whether we were going to Carmen or Mendoza, and was very much surprised at my negative reply to both questions.”

“Well, certainly, it must seem strange to him.”

“I think so. He says we are going nowhere.”

“Well, Paganel, I wonder if it is possible to make him understand the object of our expedition, and what our motive is for always going east.”

“That would be a difficult matter, for an Indian knows nothing about degrees, and the finding of the document would appear to him a mere fantastic story.”

“Is it the story he would not understand, or the storyteller?” said McNabbs, quietly

“Ah, McNabbs, I see you have small faith in my Spanish yet.”

“Well, try it, my good friend.”

“So I will.”

And turning round to the Patagonian he began his narrative, breaking down frequently for the want of a word, and the difficulty of making certain details intelligible to a half-civilized Indian. It was quite a sight to see the learned geographer. He gesticulated and articulated, and so worked himself up over it, that the big drops of sweat fell in a cascade down his forehead on to his chest. When his tongue failed, his arms were called to aid. Paganel got down on the ground and traced a geographical map on the sand, showing where the lines of latitude and longitude cross and where the two oceans were, along which the Carmen route led. Thalcave looked on composedly, without giving any indication of comprehending or not comprehending.

The lesson had lasted half an hour, when the geographer left off, wiped his streaming face, and waited for the Patagonian to speak.

“Does he understand?” said Glenarvan.

“That remains to be seen; but if he doesn’t, I give it up,” replied Paganel.

Thalcave neither stirred nor spoke. His eyes remained fixed on the lines drawn on the sand, now becoming fast effaced by the wind.

“Well?” said Paganel to him at length.

The Patagonian seemed not to hear. Paganel fancied he could detect an ironical smile already on the lips of the Major, and determined to carry the day, was about to recommence his geographical illustrations, when the Indian stopped him by a gesture, and said:

“You are in search of a prisoner?”

“Yes,” replied Paganel.

“And just on this line between the setting and rising sun?” added Thalcave, speaking in Indian fashion of the route from west to east.

“Yes, yes, that’s it.”

"And it's your God," continued the guide, "that has sent you the secret of this prisoner on the waves."

"God himself."

"His will be accomplished then," replied the native almost solemnly.

"We will march east, and if it needs be, to the sun."

Paganel, triumphing in his pupil, immediately translated his replies to his companions, and exclaimed:

"What an intelligent race! All my explanations would have been lost on nineteen in every twenty of the peasants in my own country."

Glenarvan requested him to ask the Patagonian if he had heard of any foreigners who had fallen into the hands of the Indians of the Pampas.

Paganel did so, and waited an answer.

"Perhaps I have."

The reply was no sooner translated than the Patagonian found himself surrounded by the seven men questioning him with eager glances. Paganel was so excited, he could hardly find words, and he gazed at the grave Indian as if he could read the reply on his lips.

Each word spoken by Thalcave was instantly translated, so that the whole party seemed to hear him speak in their mother tongue.

"And what about the prisoner?" asked Paganel.

"He was a foreigner."

“You have seen him?”

“No; but I have heard the Indian speak of him. He is brave; he has the heart of a bull.”

“The heart of a bull!” said Paganel. “Ah, this magnificent Patagonian language. You understand him, my friends, he means a courageous man.”

“My father!” exclaimed Robert Grant, and, turning to Paganel, he asked what the Spanish was for, “Is it my father.”

“Es mio padre,” replied the geographer.

Immediately taking Thalcave’s hands in his own, the boy said, in a soft tone:

“Es mio padre.”

“Suo padre,” replied the Patagonian, his face lighting up.

He took the child in his arms, lifted him up on his horse, and gazed at him with peculiar sympathy. His intelligent face was full of quiet feeling.

But Paganel had not completed his interrogations. “This prisoner, who was he? What was he doing? When had Thalcave heard of him?” All these questions poured upon him at once.

He had not long to wait for an answer, and learned that the European was a slave in one of the tribes that roamed the country between the Colorado and the Rio Negro.

“But where was the last place he was in?”

“With the Cacique Calfoucoura.”

“In the line we have been following?”

“Yes.”

“And who is this Cacique?”

“The chief of the Poyuches Indians, a man with two tongues and two hearts.”

“That’s to say false in speech and false in action,” said Paganel, after he had translated this beautiful figure of the Patagonian language.

“And can we deliver our friend?” he added.

“You may if he is still in the hands of the Indians.”

“And when did you last hear of him?”

“A long while ago; the sun has brought two summers since then to the Pampas.”

The joy of Glenarvan can not be described. This reply agreed perfectly with the date of the document. But one question still remained for him to put to Thalcave.

“You spoke of a prisoner,” he said; “but were there not three?”

“I don’t know,” said Thalcave.

“And you know nothing of his present situation?”

“Nothing.”

This ended the conversation. It was quite possible that the three men had become separated long ago; but still this much was certain, that the Indians had spoken of a European that was in their power; and the date of the captivity, and even the descriptive phrase about the captive, evidently pointed to Harry Grant.

CHAPTER XVII A SERIOUS NECESSITY

THE Argentine Pampas extend from the thirty-fourth to the fortieth degree of southern latitude. The word PAMPA, of Araucanian origin, signifies grass plain, and justly applies to the whole region. The mimosas growing on the western part, and the substantial herbage on the eastern, give those plains a peculiar appearance. The soil is composed of sand and red or yellow clay, and this is covered by a layer of earth, in which the vegetation takes root. The geologist would find rich treasures in the tertiary strata here, for it is full of antediluvian remains — enormous bones, which the Indians attribute to some gigantic race that lived in a past age.

The horses went on at a good pace through the thick PAJA-BRAVA, the grass of the Pampas, par excellence, so high and thick that the Indians find shelter in it from storms. At certain distances, but increasingly seldom, there were wet, marshy spots, almost entirely under water, where the willows grew, and a plant called the Gygnerium argenteum. Here the horses drank their fill greedily, as if bent on quenching their thirst for past, present and future. Thalcave went first to beat the bushes and frighten away the cholinas, a most dangerous species of viper, the bite of which kills an ox in less than an hour.

For two days they plodded steadily across this arid and deserted plain.

The dry heat became severe. There were not only no RIOS,

but even the ponds dug out by the Indians were dried up.

As the drought seemed to increase with every mile, Paganel asked

Thalcave when he expected to come to water.

“At Lake Salinas,” replied the Indian.

“And when shall we get there?”

“To-morrow evening.”

When the Argentines travel in the Pampas they generally dig wells, and find water a few feet below the surface. But the travelers could not fall back on this resource, not having the necessary implements. They were therefore obliged to husband the small provision of water they had still left, and deal it out in rations, so that if no one had enough to satisfy his thirst no one felt it too painful.

They halted at evening after a course of thirty miles and eagerly looked forward to a good night’s rest to compensate for the fatigue of day. But their slumbers were invaded by a swarm of mosquitoes, which allowed them no peace. Their presence indicated a change of wind which shifted to the north. A south or southwest wind generally puts to flight these little pests.

Even these petty ills of life could not ruffle the Major’s equanimity; but Paganel, on the contrary, was perfectly exasperated by such trifling annoyances. He abused the poor mosquitoes desperately, and deplored the lack of some acid lotion which would have eased the pain of their stings. The Major did his best to console him by reminding him of the fact that they had only to do with one species of insect, among the 300,000 naturalists reckon. He would listen to nothing, and got up in a very bad temper.

He was quite willing to start at daybreak, however, for they had to get to Lake Salinas before sundown. The horses were tired out and dying for water, and though their riders had stinted themselves for their sakes, still their ration was very insufficient. The drought was constantly increasing, and the heat none the less for the wind being north, this wind being the simoom of the Pampas.

There was a brief interruption this day to the monotony of the journey. Mulrady, who was in front of the others, rode hastily back to report the approach of a troop of Indians. The news was received with very different feelings by Glenarvan and Thalcave. The Scotchman was glad of the chance of gleaning some information about his shipwrecked countryman, while the Patagonian hardly cared to encounter the nomadic Indians of the prairie, knowing their bandit propensities. He rather sought to avoid them, and gave orders to his party to have their arms in readiness for any trouble.

Presently the nomads came in sight, and the Patagonian was reassured at finding they were only ten in number. They came within a hundred yards of them, and stopped. This was near enough to observe them distinctly. They were fine specimens of the native races, which had been almost entirely swept away in 1833 by General Rosas, tall in stature, with arched forehead and olive complexion. They were dressed in guanaco skins, and carried lances twenty feet long, knives, slings, bolas, and lassos, and, by their dexterity in the management of their horses, showed themselves to be accomplished riders.

They appeared to have stopped for the purpose of holding a council with each other, for they shouted and gesticulated at a great rate. Glenarvan determined to go up to them; but he had no sooner moved forward than the whole band wheeled round, and disappeared with incredible speed. It would have been useless for the travelers to attempt to overtake them with such wornout horses.

“The cowards!” exclaimed Paganel.

“They scampered off too quick for honest folks,” said McNabbs.

“Who are these Indians, Thalcave?” asked Paganel.

“Gauchos.”

“The Gauchos!” cried Paganel; and, turning to his companions, he added, “we need not have been so much on our guard; there was nothing to fear.”

“How is that?” asked McNabbs.

“Because the Gauchos are inoffensive peasants.”

“You believe that, Paganel?”

“Certainly I do. They took us for robbers, and fled in terror.”

“I rather think they did not dare to attack us,” replied Glenarvan, much vexed at not being able to enter into some sort of communication with those Indians, whatever they were.

“That’s my opinion too,” said the Major, “for if I am not mistaken, instead of being harmless, the Gauchos are formidable out-and-out bandits.”

“The idea!” exclaimed Paganel.

And forthwith commenced a lively discussion of this ethnological thesis — so lively that the Major became excited, and, quite contrary to his usual suavity, said bluntly:

“I believe you are wrong, Paganel.”

“Wrong?” replied Paganel.

“Yes. Thalcave took them for robbers, and he knows what he is talking about.”

“Well, Thalcave was mistaken this time,” retorted Paganel, somewhat sharply. “The Gauchos are agricul-turists and shepherds, and nothing else, as I have stated in a pamphlet on the natives of the Pampas, written by me, which has attracted some notice.”

[illustration omitted] [page intentionally blank]

“Well, well, you have committed an error, that’s all, Monsieur Paganel.”

“What, Monsieur McNabbs! you tell me I have committed an error?”

“An inadvertence, if you like, which you can put among the ERRATA in the next edition.”

Paganel, highly incensed at his geographical knowledge being brought in question, and even jested about, allowed his ill-humor to get the better of him, and said:

“Know, sir, that my books have no need of such ERRATA.”

“Indeed! Well, on this occasion they have, at any rate,” retorted McNabbs, quite as obstinate as his opponent.

“Sir, I think you are very annoying to-day.”

“And I think you are very crabbed.”

Glenarvan thought it was high time to interfere, for the discussion was getting too hot, so he said:

“Come, now, there is no doubt one of you is very teasing and the other is very crabbed, and I must say I am surprised at both of you.”

The Patagonian, without understanding the cause, could see that the two friends were quarreling. He began to smile, and said quietly:

“It’s the north wind.”

“The north wind,” exclaimed Paganel; “what’s the north wind to do with it?”

“Ah, it is just that,” said Glenarvan. “It’s the north wind that has put you in a bad temper. I have heard that, in South America, the wind greatly irritates the nervous system.”

“By St. Patrick, Edward you are right,” said the Major, laughing heartily.

But Paganel, in a towering rage, would not give up the contest, and turned upon Glenarvan, whose intervention in this jesting manner he resented.

“And so, my Lord, my nervous system is irritated?” he said.

“Yes, Paganel, it is the north wind — a wind which causes many a crime in the Pampas, as the TRAMONTANE does in the Campagna of Rome.”

“Crimes!” returned the geographer. “Do I look like a man that would commit crimes?”

“That’s not exactly what I said.”

“Tell me at once that I want to assassinate you?”

“Well, I am really afraid,” replied Glenarvan, bursting into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, in which all others joined.

Paganel said no more, but went off in front alone, and came back in a few minutes quite himself, as if he had completely forgotten his grievance.

At eight o’clock in the evening, Thalcave, who was considerably in advance of the rest, descried in the distance the much-desired lake, and in less than a quarter of an hour they reached its banks; but a grievous disappointment awaited them — the lake was dried up.

CHAPTER XVIII IN SEARCH OF WATER

LAKE SALINAS ends the string of lagoons connected with the Sierras Ventana and Guamini. Numerous expeditions were formerly made there from Buenos Ayres, to collect the salt deposited on its banks, as the waters contain great quantities of chloride of sodium.

But when Thalcave spoke of the lake as supplying drinkable water he was thinking of the RIOS of fresh water which run into it. Those streams, however, were all dried up also; the burning sun had drunk up every thing liquid, and the consternation of the travelers may be imagined at the discovery.

Some action must be taken immediately, however; for what little water still remained was almost bad, and could not quench thirst. Hunger and fatigue were forgotten in the face of this imperious necessity. A sort of leather tent, called a ROUKAH, which had been left by the natives, afforded the party a temporary resting-place, and the weary horses stretched themselves along the muddy banks, and tried to browse on the marine plants and dry reeds they found there — nauseous to the taste as they must have been.

As soon as the whole party were ensconced in the ROUKAH, Paganel asked Thalcave what he thought was best to be done. A rapid conversation followed, a few words of which were intelligible to Glenarvan. Thalcave spoke calmly, but the lively Frenchman gesticulated enough for both. After a little, Thalcave sat silent and folded his arms.

“What does he say?” asked Glenarvan. “I fancied he was advising us to separate.”

“Yes, into two parties. Those of us whose horses are so done out with fatigue and thirst that they can scarcely drag one leg after the other, are to continue the route as they best can, while the others, whose steeds are fresher, are to push on in advance toward the river Guamini, which throws itself into Lake San Lucas about thirty-one miles off. If there should be water enough in the river, they are to wait on the banks till their companions reach them; but should it be dried up, they will hasten back and spare them a useless journey.”

“And what will we do then?” asked Austin.

“Then we shall have to make up our minds to go seventy-two miles south, as far as the commencement of the Sierra Ventana, where rivers abound.”

“It is wise counsel, and we will act upon it without loss of time. My horse is in tolerable good trim, and I volunteer to accompany Thalcave.”

“Oh, my Lord, take me,” said Robert, as if it were a question of some pleasure party.

“But would you be able for it, my boy?”

“Oh, I have a fine beast, which just wants to have a gallop.

Please, my Lord, to take me.”

“Come, then, my boy,” said Glenarvan, delighted not to leave Robert behind. “If we three don’t manage to find out fresh water somewhere,” he added, “we must be very stupid.”

“Well, well, and what about me?” said Paganel.

“Oh, my dear Paganel, you must stay with the reserve corps,” replied the Major. “You are too well acquainted with the 37th parallel and the river Guamini and the whole Pampas for us to let you go. Neither Mulrady, nor Wilson, nor myself would be able to rejoin Thalcave at the given rendezvous, but we will put ourselves under the banner of the brave Jacques Paganel with perfect confidence.”

“I resign myself,” said the geographer, much flattered at having supreme command.

“But mind, Paganel, no distractions,” added the Major. “Don’t you take us to the wrong place — to the borders of the Pacific, for instance.”

“Oh, you insufferable Major; it would serve you right,” replied Paganel, laughing. “But how will you manage to understand what Thalcave says, Glenarvan?” he continued.

“I suppose,” replied Glenarvan, “the Patagonian and I won’t have much to talk about; besides, I know a few Spanish words, and, at a pinch, I should not fear either making him understand me, or my understanding him.”

“Go, then, my worthy friend,” said Paganel.

“We’ll have supper first,” rejoined Glenarvan, “and then sleep, if we can, till it is starting time.”

The supper was not very reviving without drink of any kind, and they tried to make up for the lack of it by a good sleep. But Paganel dreamed of water all night, of torrents and cascades, and rivers and ponds, and streams and brooks — in fact, he had a complete nightmare.

Next morning, at six o’clock, the horses of Thalcave, Glenarvan and Robert were got ready. Their last ration of water was given them, and drunk with more avidity than satisfaction, for it was filthy, disgusting stuff. The three travelers then jumped into their saddles, and set off, shouting “Au revoir!” to their companions.

“Don’t come back whatever you do,” called Paganel after them.

The Desertio de las Salinas, which they had to traverse, is a dry plain, covered with stunted trees not above ten feet high, and small mimosas, which the Indians call curra-mammel; and JUMES, a bushy shrub, rich in soda. Here and there large spaces were covered with salt, which sparkled in the sunlight with astonishing brilliancy. These might easily have been taken for sheets of ice, had not the intense heat forbidden the illusion; and the contrast these dazzling white sheets presented to the dry, burned-up ground gave the desert a most peculiar character. Eighty miles south, on the contrary, the Sierra Ventana, toward which the travelers might possibly have to betake themselves should the Guamini disappoint their hopes, the landscape was totally different. There the fertility is splendid; the pasturage is incomparable. Unfortunately, to reach them would necessitate a march of one hundred and thirty miles south; and this was why Thalcave thought it best to go first to Guamini, as it was not only much nearer, but also on the direct line of route.

The three horses went forward might and main, as if instinctively knowing whither they were bound. Thaouka especially displayed a courage that neither fatigue nor hunger could damp. He bounded like a bird over the dried-up CANADAS and the bushes of CURRA-MAMMEL, his loud, joyous neighing seeming to bode success to the search. The horses of Glenarvan and Robert, though not so light-footed, felt the spur of his example, and followed him bravely. Thalcave inspirited his companions as much as Thaouka did his four-footed brethren. He sat motionless in the saddle, but often turned his head to look at Robert, and ever and anon gave him a shout of encouragement and approval, as he saw how well he rode. Certainly the boy deserved praise, for he was fast becoming an excellent cavalier.

“Bravo! Robert,” said Glenarvan. “Thalcave is evidently congratulating you, my boy, and paying you compliments.”

“What for, my Lord?”

“For your good horsemanship.”

“I can hold firm on, that’s all,” replied Robert blushing with pleasure at such an encomium.

“That is the principal thing, Robert; but you are too modest.

I tell you that some day you will turn out an accomplished horseman.”

“What would papa say to that?” said Robert, laughing.

“He wants me to be a sailor.”

“The one won’t hinder the other. If all cavaliers wouldn’t make good sailors, there is no reason why all sailors should not make good horsemen. To keep one’s footing on the yards must teach a man to hold on firm; and as to managing the reins, and making a horse go through all sorts of movements, that’s easily acquired. Indeed, it comes naturally.”

“Poor father,” said Robert; “how he will thank you for saving his life.”

“You love him very much, Robert?”

“Yes, my Lord, dearly. He was so good to me and my sister. We were his only thought: and whenever he came home from his voyages, we were sure of some SOUVENIR from all the places he had been to; and, better still, of loving words and caresses. Ah! if you knew him you would love him, too. Mary is most like him. He has a soft voice, like hers. That’s strange for a sailor, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Robert, very strange.”

“I see him still,” the boy went on, as if speaking to himself. “Good, brave papa. He put me to sleep on his knee, crooning an old Scotch ballad about the lochs of our country. The time sometimes comes back to me, but very confused like. So it does to Mary, too. Ah, my Lord, how we loved him. Well, I do think one needs to be little to love one’s father like that.”

“Yes, and to be grown up, my child, to venerate him,” replied Glenarvan, deeply touched by the boy’s genuine affection.

During this conversation the horses had been slackening speed, and were only walking now.

“You will find him?” said Robert again, after a few minutes’ silence.

“Yes, we’ll find him,” was Glenarvan’s reply, “Thalcave has set us on the track, and I have great confidence in him.”

“Thalcave is a brave Indian, isn’t he?” said the boy.

“That indeed he is.”

“Do you know something, my Lord?”

“What is it, and then I will tell you?”

“That all the people you have with you are brave. Lady Helena, whom I love so, and the Major, with his calm manner, and Captain Mangles, and Monsieur Paganel, and all the sailors on the DUNCAN. How courageous and devoted they are.”

“Yes, my boy, I know that,” replied Glenarvan.

“And do you know that you are the best of all.”

“No, most certainly I don’t know that.”

“Well, it is time you did, my Lord,” said the boy, seizing his lordship’s hand, and covering it with kisses.

Glenarvan shook his head, but said no more, as a gesture from Thalcave made them spur on their horses and hurry forward.

But it was soon evident that, with the exception of Thaouka, the wearied animals could not go quicker than a walking pace. At noon they were obliged to let them rest for an hour. They could not go on at all, and refused to eat the ALFAFARES, a poor, burnt-up sort of lucerne that grew there.

Glenarvan began to be uneasy. Tokens of sterility were not the least on the decrease, and the want of water might involve serious calamities. Thalcave said nothing, thinking probably, that it would be time enough to despair if the Guamini should be dried up — if, indeed, the heart of an Indian can ever despair.

Spur and whip had both to be employed to induce the poor animals to resume the route, and then they only crept along, for their strength was gone.

Thaouka, indeed, could have galloped swiftly enough, and reached the RIO in a few hours, but Thalcave would not leave his companions behind, alone in the midst of a desert.

It was hard work, however, to get the animal to consent to walk quietly. He kicked, and reared, and neighed violently, and was subdued at last more by his master's voice than hand. Thalcave positively talked to the beast, and Thaouka understood perfectly, though unable to reply, for, after a great deal of arguing, the noble creature yielded, though he still champed the bit.

Thalcave did not understand Thaouka, it turned out, though Thaouka understood him. The intelligent animal felt humidity in the atmosphere and drank it in with frenzy, moving and making a noise with his tongue, as if taking deep draughts of some cool refreshing liquid. The Patagonian could not mistake him now — water was not far off.

The two other horses seemed to catch their comrade's meaning, and, inspired by his example, made a last effort, and galloped forward after the Indian.

About three o'clock a white line appeared in a dip of the road, and seemed to tremble in the sunlight.

"Water!" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Yes, yes! it is water!" shouted Robert.

They were right; and the horses knew it too, for there was no need now to urge them on; they tore over the ground as if mad, and in a few minutes had reached the river, and plunged in up to their chests.

Their masters had to go on too, whether they would or not but they were so rejoiced at being able to quench their thirst, that this compulsory bath was no grievance.

“Oh, how delicious this is!” exclaimed Robert, taking a deep draught.

“Drink moderately, my boy,” said Glenarvan; but he did not set the example.

Thalcave drank very quietly, without hurrying himself, taking small gulps, but “as long as a lazo,” as the Patagonians say. He seemed as if he were never going to leave off, and really there was some danger of his swallowing up the whole river.

At last Glenarvan said:

“Well, our friends won’t be disappointed this time; they will be sure of finding clear, cool water when they get here — that is to say, if Thalcave leaves any for them.”

“But couldn’t we go to meet them? It would spare them several hours’ suffering and anxiety.”

“You’re right my boy; but how could we carry them this water? The leather bottles were left with Wilson. No; it is better for us to wait for them as we agreed. They can’t be here till about the middle of the night, so the best thing we can do is to get a good bed and a good supper ready for them.”

Thalcave had not waited for Glenarvan’s proposition to prepare an encampment. He had been fortunate enough to discover on the banks of the rio a ramada, a sort of enclosure, which had served as a fold for flocks, and was shut in on three sides. A more suitable place could not be found for their night’s lodging, provided they had no fear of sleeping in the open air beneath the star-lit heavens; and none of Thalcave’s companions had much solicitude on that score. Accordingly they took possession at once, and stretched themselves at full length on the ground in the bright sunshine, to dry their dripping garments.

“Well, now we’ve secured a lodging, we must think of supper,” said Glenarvan. “Our friends must not have reason to complain of the couriers they sent to precede them; and if I am not much mistaken, they will be very satisfied. It strikes me that an hour’s shooting won’t be lost time. Are you ready, Robert?”

“Yes, my Lord,” replied the boy, standing up, gun in hand.

Why Glenarvan proposed this was, that the banks of the Guamini seemed to be the general rendezvous of all the game in the surrounding plains. A sort of partridge peculiar to the Pampas, called TINAMOUS; black wood-hens; a species of plover, called TERU-TERU; yellow rays, and waterfowl with magnificent green plumage, rose in coveys. No quadrupeds, however, were visible, but Thalcave pointed to the long grass and thick brushwood, and gave his friends to understand they were lying there in concealment.

Disdaining the feathered tribes when more substantial game was at hand, the hunters’ first shots were fired into the underwood. Instantly there rose by the hundred roebucks and guanacos, like those that had swept over them that terrible night on the Cordilleras, but the timid creatures were so frightened that they were all out of gunshot in a twinkling. The hunters were obliged to content themselves with humbler game, though in an alimentary point of view nothing better could be wished. A dozen of red partridges and rays were speedily brought down, and Glenarvan also managed very cleverly to kill a TAY-TETRE, or peccary, a pachydermatous animal, the flesh of which is excellent eating.

In less than half an hour the hunters had all the game they required. Robert had killed a curious animal belonging to the order EDENTATA, an armadillo, a sort of tatou, covered with a hard bony shell, in movable pieces, and measuring a foot and a half long. It was very fat and would make an excellent dish, the Patagonian said. Robert was very proud of his success.

Thalcave did his part by capturing a NANDOU, a species of ostrich, remarkable for its extreme swiftness.

There could be no entrapping such an animal, and the Indian did not attempt it. He urged Thaouka to a gallop, and made a direct attack, knowing that if the first aim missed the NANDOU would soon tire out horse and rider by involving them in an inextricable labyrinth of windings. The moment, therefore, that Thalcave got to a right distance, he flung his BOLAS with such a powerful hand, and so skillfully, that he caught the bird round the legs and paralyzed his efforts at once. In a few seconds it lay flat on the ground.

The Indian had not made his capture for the mere pleasure and glory of such a novel chase. The flesh of the NANDOU is highly esteemed, and Thalcave felt bound to contribute his share of the common repast.

They returned to the RAMADA, bringing back the string of partridges, the ostrich, the peccary, and the armadillo. The ostrich and the peccary were prepared for cooking by divesting them of their tough skins, and cutting them up into thin slices. As to the armadillo, he carries his cooking apparatus with him, and all that had to be done was to place him in his own shell over the glowing embers.

The substantial dishes were reserved for the night-comers, and the three hunters contented themselves with devouring the partridges, and washed down their meal with clear, fresh water, which was pronounced superior to all the porter in the world, even to the famous Highland USQUEBAUGH, or whisky.

The horses had not been overlooked. A large quantity of dry fodder was discovered lying heaped up in the RAMADA, and this supplied them amply with both food and bedding.

When all was ready the three companions wrapped themselves in the ponchos, and stretched themselves on an eiderdown of ALFAFARES, the usual bed of hunters on the Pampas.

CHAPTER XIX THE RED WOLVES

NIGHT came, but the orb of night was invisible to the inhabitants of the earth, for she was just in her first quarter. The dim light of the stars was all that illumined the plain. The waters of the Guamini ran silently, like a sheet of oil over a surface of marble. Birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles were resting motionless after the fatigues of the day, and the silence of the desert brooded over the far-spreading Pampas.

Glenarvan, Robert, and Thalcave, had followed the common example, and lay in profound slumber on their soft couch of lucerne. The worn-out horses had stretched themselves full length on the ground, except Thaouka, who slept standing, true to his high blood, proud in repose as in action, and ready to start at his master's call. Absolute silence reigned within the inclosure, over which the dying embers of the fire shed a fitful light.

However, the Indian's sleep did not last long; for about ten o'clock he woke, sat up, and turned his ear toward the plain, listening intently, with half-closed eyes. An uneasy look began to depict itself on his usually impassive face. Had he caught scent of some party of Indian marauders, or of jaguars, water tigers, and other terrible animals that haunt the neighborhood of rivers? Apparently it was the latter, for he threw a rapid glance on the combustible materials heaped up in the inclosure, and the expression of anxiety on his countenance seemed to deepen. This was not surprising, as the whole pile of ALFAFARES would soon burn out and could only ward off the attacks of wild beasts for a brief interval.

There was nothing to be done in the circumstances but wait; and wait he did, in a half-recumbent posture, his head leaning on his hands, and his elbows on his knees, like a man roused suddenly from his night's sleep.

A whole hour passed, and anyone except Thalcave would have lain down again on his couch, reassured by the silence round him. But where a stranger would have suspected nothing, the sharpened senses of the Indian detected the approach of danger.

As he was thus watching and listening, Thaouka gave a low neigh, and stretched his nostrils toward the entrance of the RAMADA.

This startled the Patagonian, and made him rise to his feet at once.

“Thaouka scents an enemy,” he said to himself, going toward the opening, to make careful survey of the plains.

Silence still prevailed, but not tranquillity; for Thalcave caught a glimpse of shadows moving noiselessly over the tufts of CURRA-MAMMEL. Here and there luminous spots appeared, dying out and rekindling constantly, in all directions, like fantastic lights dancing over the surface of an immense lagoon. An inexperienced eye might have mistaken them for fireflies, which shine at night in many parts of the Pampas; but Thalcave was not deceived; he knew the enemies he had to deal with, and lost no time in loading his carbine and taking up his post in front of the fence.

He did not wait long, for a strange cry — a confused sound of barking and howling — broke over the Pampas, followed next instant by the report of the carbine, which made the uproar a hundred times worse.

Glenarvan and Robert woke in alarm, and started to their feet instantly.

“What is it?” exclaimed Robert.

“Is it the Indians?” asked Glenarvan.

“No,” replied Thalcave, “the AGUARAS.”

“AGUARAS?” said Robert, looking inquiringly at Glenarvan.

“Yes,” replied Glenarvan, “the red wolves of the Pampas.”

They seized their weapons at once, and stationed themselves beside the Patagonian, who pointed toward the plain from whence the yelling resounded.

Robert drew back involuntarily.

“You are not afraid of wolves, my boy?” said Glenarvan.

“No, my Lord,” said the lad in a firm tone, “and moreover, beside you I am afraid of nothing.”

“So much the better. These AGUARAS are not very formidable either; and if it were not for their number I should not give them a thought.”

“Never mind; we are all well armed; let them come.”

“We’ll certainly give them a warm reception,” rejoined Glenarvan.

His Lordship only spoke thus to reassure the child, for a secret terror filled him at the sight of this legion of bloodthirsty animals let loose on them at midnight.

There might possibly be some hundreds, and what could three men do, even armed to the teeth, against such a multitude?

As soon as Thalcave said the word AGUARA, Glenarvan knew that he meant the red wolf, for this is the name given to it by the Pampas Indians.

This voracious animal, called by naturalists the Canis jubatus, is in shape like a large dog, and has the head of a fox. Its fur is a reddish-cinnamon color, and there is a black mane all down the back. It is a strong, nimble animal, generally inhabiting marshy places, and pursuing aquatic animals by swimming, prowling about by night and sleeping during the day. Its attacks are particularly dreaded at the ESTANCIAS, or sheep stations, as it often commits considerable ravages, carrying off the finest of the flock. Singly, the AGUARA is not much to be feared; but they generally go in immense packs, and one had better have to deal with a jaguar or cougar than with them.

Both from the noise of the howling and the multitude of shadows leaping about, Glenarvan had a pretty good idea of the number of the wolves, and he knew they had scented a good meal of human flesh or horse flesh, and none of them would go back to their dens without a share. It was certainly a very alarming situation to be in.

The assailants were gradually drawing closer. The horses displayed signs of the liveliest terror, with the exception of Thaouka, who stamped his foot, and tried to break loose and get out. His master could only calm him by keeping up a low, continuous whistle.

Glenarvan and Robert had posted themselves so as to defend the opening of the RAMADA. They were just going to fire into the nearest ranks of the wolves when Thalcave lowered their weapons.

“What does Thalcave mean?” asked Robert.

“He forbids our firing.”

“And why?”

“Perhaps he thinks it is not the right time.”

But this was not the Indian’s reason, and so Glenarvan saw when he lifted the powder-flask, showed him it was nearly empty.

“What’s wrong?” asked Robert.

“We must husband our ammunition,” was the reply. “To-day’s shooting has cost us dear, and we are short of powder and shot. We can’t fire more than twenty times.”

The boy made no reply, and Glenarvan asked him if he was frightened.

“No, my Lord,” he said.

“That’s right,” returned Glenarvan.

A fresh report resounded that instant. Thalcave had made short work of one assailant more audacious than the rest, and the infuriated pack had retreated to within a hundred steps of the inclosure.

On a sign from the Indian Glenarvan took his place, while Thalcave went back into the inclosure and gathered up all the dried grass and ALFAFARES, and, indeed, all the combustibles he could rake together, and made a pile of them at the entrance. Into this he flung one of the still-glowing embers, and soon the bright flames shot up into the dark night. Glenarvan could now get a good glimpse of his antagonists, and saw that it was impossible to exaggerate their numbers or their fury. The barrier of fire just raised by Thalcave had redoubled their anger, though it had cut off their approach. Several of them, however, urged on by the hindmost ranks, pushed forward into the very flames, and burned their paws for their pains.

From time to time another shot had to be fired, notwithstanding the fire, to keep off the howling pack, and in the course of an hour fifteen dead animals lay stretched on the prairie.

The situation of the besieged was, relatively speaking, less dangerous now. As long as the powder lasted and the barrier of fire burned on, there was no fear of being overmastered. But what was to be done afterward, when both means of defense failed at once?

Glenarvan's heart swelled as he looked at Robert. He forgot himself in thinking of this poor child, as he saw him showing a courage so far above his years. Robert was pale, but he kept his gun steady, and stood with firm foot ready to meet the attacks of the infuriated wolves.

However, after Glenarvan had calmly surveyed the actual state of affairs, he determined to bring things to a crisis.

"In an hour's time," he said, "we shall neither have powder nor fire.

It will never do to wait till then before we settle what to do."

Accordingly, he went up to Thalcave, and tried to talk to him by the help of the few Spanish words his memory could muster, though their conversation was often interrupted by one or the other having to fire a shot.

It was no easy task for the two men to understand each other, but, most fortunately, Glenarvan knew a great deal of the peculiarities of the red wolf; otherwise he could never have interpreted the Indian's words and gestures.

As it was, fully a quarter of an hour elapsed before he could get any answer from Thalcave to tell Robert in reply to his inquiry.

“What does he say?”

“He says that at any price we must hold out till daybreak. The AGUARA only prowls about at night, and goes back to his lair with the first streak of dawn. It is a cowardly beast, that loves the darkness and dreads the light — an owl on four feet.”

“Very well, let us defend ourselves, then, till morning.”

“Yes, my boy, and with knife-thrusts, when gun and shots fail.”

Already Thalcave had set the example, for whenever a wolf came too near the burning pile, the long arm of the Patagonian dashed through the flames and came out again reddened with blood.

But very soon this means of defense would be at an end. About two o’clock, Thalcave flung his last armful of combustibles into the fire, and barely enough powder remained to load a gun five times.

Glenarvan threw a sorrowful glance round him. He thought of the lad standing there, and of his companions and those left behind, whom he loved so dearly.

Robert was silent. Perhaps the danger seemed less imminent to his imagination. But Glenarvan thought for him, and pictured to himself the horrible fate that seemed to await him inevitably. Quite overcome by his emotion, he took the child in his arms, and straining him convulsively to his heart, pressed his lips on his forehead, while tears he could not restrain streamed down his cheeks.

Robert looked up into his face with a smile, and said, “I am not frightened.”

“No, my child, no! and you are right. In two hours daybreak will come, and we shall be saved. Bravo, Thalcave! my brave Patagonian! Bravo!” he added as the Indian that moment leveled two enormous beasts who endeavored to leap across the barrier of flames.

But the fire was fast dying out, and the DENOUEMENT of the terrible drama was approaching. The flames got lower and lower. Once more the shadows of night fell on the prairie, and the glaring eyes of the wolves glowed like phosphorescent balls in the darkness. A few minutes longer, and the whole pack would be in the inclosure.

Thalcave loaded his carbine for the last time, killed one more enormous monster, and then folded his arms. His head sank on his chest, and he appeared buried in deep thought. Was he planning some daring, impossible, mad attempt to repulse the infuriated horde? Glenarvan did not venture to ask.

At this very moment the wolves began to change their tactics.

The deafening howls suddenly ceased: they seemed to be going away.

Gloomy silence spread over the prairie, and made Robert exclaim:

“They’re gone!”

But Thalcave, guessing his meaning, shook his head. He knew they would never relinquish their sure prey till daybreak made them hasten back to their dens.

Still, their plan of attack had evidently been altered. They no longer attempted to force the entrance, but their new maneuvers only heightened the danger.

They had gone round the RAMADA, as by common consent, and were trying to get in on the opposite side.

The next minute they heard their claws attacking the moldering wood, and already formidable paws and hungry, savage jaws had found their way through the palings. The terrified horses broke loose from their halters and ran about the inclosure, mad with fear.

Glenarvan put his arms round the young lad, and resolved to defend him as long as his life held out. Possibly he might have made a useless attempt at flight when his eye fell on Thalcave.

The Indian had been stalking about the RAMADA like a stag, when he suddenly stopped short, and going up to his horse, who was trembling with impatience, began to saddle him with the most scrupulous care, without forgetting a single strap or buckle. He seemed no longer to disturb himself in the least about the wolves outside, though their yells had redoubled in intensity. A dark suspicion crossed Glenarvan’s mind as he watched him.

“He is going to desert us,” he exclaimed at last, as he saw him seize the reins, as if preparing to mount.

“He! never!” replied Robert. Instead of deserting them, the truth was that the Indian was going to try and save his friends by sacrificing himself.

Thaouka was ready, and stood champing his bit. He reared up, and his splendid eyes flashed fire; he understood his master.

But just as the Patagonian caught hold of the horse’s mane, Glenarvan seized his arm with a convulsive grip, and said, pointing to the open prairie.

“You are going away?”

“Yes,” replied the Indian, understanding his gesture. Then he said a few words in Spanish, which meant: “Thaouka; good horse; quick; will draw all the wolves away after him.”

“Oh, Thalcave,” exclaimed Glenarvan.

“Quick, quick!” replied the Indian, while Glenarvan said, in a broken, agitated voice to Robert:

“Robert, my child, do you hear him? He wants to sacrifice himself for us. He wants to rush away over the Pampas, and turn off the wolves from us by attracting them to himself.”

“Friend Thalcave,” returned Robert, throwing himself at the feet of the Patagonian, “friend Thalcave, don’t leave us!”

“No,” said Glenarvan, “he shall not leave us.”

And turning toward the Indian, he said, pointing to the frightened horses,

“Let us go together.”

“No,” replied Thalcave, catching his meaning.

“Bad beasts; frightened; Thaouka, good horse.”

“Be it so then!” returned Glenarvan. “Thalcave will not leave you, Robert. He teaches me what I must do. It is for me to go, and for him to stay by you."

Then seizing Thaouka's bridle, he said, "I am going, Thalcave, not you."

"No," replied the Patagonian quietly.

"I am," exclaimed Glenarvan, snatching the bridle out of his hands.

"I, myself! Save this boy, Thalcave! I commit him to you."

Glenarvan was so excited that he mixed up English words with his Spanish. But what mattered the language at such a terrible moment. A gesture was enough. The two men understood each other.

However, Thalcave would not give in, and though every instant's delay but increased the danger, the discussion continued.

Neither Glenarvan nor Thalcave appeared inclined to yield. The Indian had dragged his companion towards the entrance of the RAMADA, and showed him the prairie, making him understand that now was the time when it was clear from the wolves; but that not a moment was to be lost, for should this maneuver not succeed, it would only render the situation of those left behind more desperate. and that he knew his horse well enough to be able to trust his wonderful lightness and swiftness to save them all. But Glenarvan was blind and obstinate, and determined to sacrifice himself at all hazards, when suddenly he felt himself violently pushed back. Thaouka pranced up, and reared himself bolt upright on his hind legs, and made a bound over the barrier of fire, while a clear, young voice called out:

"God save you, my lord."

But before either Thalcave or Glenarvan could get more than a glimpse of the boy, holding on fast by Thaouka’s mane, he was out of sight.

“Robert! oh you unfortunate boy,” cried Glenarvan.

But even Thalcave did not catch the words, for his voice was drowned in the frightful uproar made by the wolves, who had dashed off at a tremendous speed on the track of the horse.

Thalcave and Glenarvan rushed out of the RAMADA. Already the plain had recovered its tranquillity, and all that could be seen of the red wolves was a moving line far away in the distant darkness.

Glenarvan sank prostrate on the ground, and clasped his hands despairingly. He looked at Thalcave, who smiled with his accustomed calmness, and said:

“Thaouka, good horse. Brave boy. He will save himself!”

“And suppose he falls?” said Glenarvan.

“He’ll not fall.”

But notwithstanding Thalcave’s assurances, poor Glenarvan spent the rest of the night in torturing anxiety. He seemed quite insensible now to the danger they had escaped through the departure of the wolves, and would have hastened immediately after Robert if the Indian had not kept him back by making him understand the impossibility of their horses overtaking Thaouka; and also that boy and horse had outdistanced the wolves long since, and that it would be useless going to look for them till daylight.

At four o’clock morning began to dawn. A pale glimmer appeared in the horizon, and pearly drops of dew lay thick on the plain and on the tall grass, already stirred by the breath of day.

The time for starting had arrived.

“Now!” cried Thalcave, “come.”

Glenarvan made no reply, but took Robert’s horse and sprung into the saddle. Next minute both men were galloping at full speed toward the west, in the line in which their companions ought to be advancing. They dashed along at a prodigious rate for a full hour, dreading every minute to come across the mangled corpse of Robert. Glenarvan had torn the flanks of his horse with his spurs in his mad haste, when at last gun-shots were heard in the distance at regular intervals, as if fired as a signal.

“There they are!” exclaimed Glenarvan; and both he and the Indian urged on their steeds to a still quicker pace, till in a few minutes more they came up to the little detachment conducted by Paganel. A cry broke from Glenarvan’s lips, for Robert was there, alive and well, still mounted on the superb Thaouka, who neighed loudly with delight at the sight of his master.

“Oh, my child, my child!” cried Glenarvan, with indescribable tenderness in his tone.

Both he and Robert leaped to the ground, and flung themselves into each other’s arms. Then the Indian hugged the brave boy in his arms.

“He is alive, he is alive,” repeated Glenarvan again and again.

“Yes,” replied Robert; “and thanks to Thaouka.”

This great recognition of his favorite’s services was wholly unexpected by the Indian, who was talking to him that minute, caressing and speaking to him, as if human blood flowed in the veins of the proud creature. Then turning to Paganel, he pointed to Robert, and said, “A brave!” and employing the Indian metaphor, he added, “his spurs did not tremble!”

But Glenarvan put his arms round the boy and said, “Why wouldn’t you let me or Thalcave run the risk of this last chance of deliverance, my son?”

“My lord,” replied the boy in tones of gratitude, “wasn’t it my place to do it? Thalcave has saved my life already, and you — you are going to save my father.”

CHAPTER XX STRANGE SIGNS

AFTER the first joy of the meeting was over, Paganel and his party, except perhaps the Major, were only conscious of one feeling — they were dying of thirst. Most fortunately for them, the Guamini ran not far off, and about seven in the morning the little troop reached the inclosure on its banks. The precincts were strewed with the dead wolves, and judging from their numbers, it was evident how violent the attack must have been, and how desperate the resistance.

As soon as the travelers had drunk their fill, they began to demolish the breakfast prepared in the RAMADA, and did ample justice to the extraordinary viands. The NANDOU fillets were pronounced first-rate, and the armadillo was delicious.

“To eat moderately,” said Paganel, “would be positive ingratitude to Providence. We must eat immoderately.”

And so they did, but were none the worse for it.

The water of the Guamini greatly aided digestion apparently.

Glenarvan, however, was not going to imitate Hannibal at Capua, and at ten o’clock next morning gave the signal for starting. The leathern bottles were filled with water, and the day’s march commenced. The horses were so well rested that they were quite fresh again, and kept up a canter almost constantly. The country was not so parched up now, and consequently less sterile, but still a desert. No incident occurred of any importance during the 2d and 3d of November, and in the evening they reached the boundary of the Pampas, and camped for the night on the frontiers of the province of Buenos Ayres. Two-thirds of their journey was now accomplished. It was twenty-two days since they left the Bay of Talcahuano, and they had gone 450 miles.

Next morning they crossed the conventional line which separates the Argentine plains from the region of the Pampas. It was here that Thalcave hoped to meet the Caciques, in whose hands, he had no doubt, Harry Grant and his men were prisoners.

From the time of leaving the Guamini, there was marked change in the temperature, to the great relief of the travelers. It was much cooler, thanks to the violent and cold winds from Patagonia, which constantly agitate the atmospheric waves. Horses and men were glad enough of this, after what they had suffered from the heat and drought, and they felt animated with fresh ardor and confidence. But contrary to what Thalcave had said, the whole district appeared uninhabited, or rather abandoned.

Their route often led past or went right through small lagoons, sometimes of fresh water, sometimes of brackish. On the banks and bushes about these, king-wrens were hopping about and larks singing joyously in concert with the tangaras, the rivals in color of the brilliant humming birds. On the thorny bushes the nests of the ANNUBIS swung to and fro in the breeze like an Indian hammock; and on the shore magnificent flamingos stalked in regular order like soldiers marching, and spread out their flaming red wings. Their nests were seen in groups of thousands, forming a complete town, about a foot high, and resembling a truncated cone in shape. The flamingos did not disturb themselves in the least at the approach of the travelers, but this did not suit Paganel.

“I have been very desirous a long time,” he said to the Major, “to see a flamingo flying.”

“All right,” replied McNabbs.

“Now while I have the opportunity, I should like to make the most of it,” continued Paganel.

“Very well; do it, Paganel.”

“Come with me, then, Major, and you too Robert. I want witnesses.”

And all three went off towards the flamingos, leaving the others to go on in advance.

As soon as they were near enough, Paganel fired, only loading his gun, however, with powder, for he would not shed even the blood of a bird uselessly. The shot made the whole assemblage fly away en masse, while Paganel watched them attentively through his spectacles.

“Well, did you see them fly?” he asked the Major.

“Certainly I did,” was the reply. “I could not help seeing them, unless I had been blind.”

“Well and did you think they resembled feathered arrows when they were flying?”

“Not in the least.”

“Not a bit,” added Robert.

“I was sure of it,” said the geographer, with a satisfied air; “and yet the very proudest of modest men, my illustrious countryman, Chateaubriand, made the inaccurate comparison. Oh, Robert, comparison is the most dangerous figure in rhetoric that I know. Mind you avoid it all your life, and only employ it in a last extremity."

"Are you satisfied with your experiment?" asked McNabbs.

"Delighted."

"And so am I. But we had better push on now, for your illustrious

Chateaubriand has put us more than a mile behind."

On rejoining their companions, they found Glenarvan busily engaged in conversation with the Indian, though apparently unable to make him understand. Thalcave's gaze was fixed intently on the horizon, and his face wore a puzzled expression.

The moment Paganel came in sight, Glenarvan called out:

"Come along, friend Paganel. Thalcave and I can't understand each other at all."

After a few minute's talk with the Patagonian, the interpreter turned to Glenarvan and said:

"Thalcave is quite astonished at the fact, and certainly it is very strange that there are no Indians, nor even traces of any to be seen in these plains, for they are generally thick with companies of them, either driving along cattle stolen from the ESTANCIAS, or going to the Andes to sell their zorillo cloths and plaited leather whips."

"And what does Thalcave think is the reason?"

"He does not know; he is amazed and that's all."

“But what description of Indians did he reckon on meeting in this part of the Pampas?”

“Just the very ones who had the foreign prisoners in their hands, the natives under the rule of the Caciques Calfoucoura, Catriel, or Yanchetruz.”

“Who are these Caciques?”

“Chiefs that were all powerful thirty years ago, before they were driven beyond the sierras. Since then they have been reduced to subjection as much as Indians can be, and they scour the plains of the Pampas and the province of Buenos Ayres. I quite share Thalcave’s surprise at not discovering any traces of them in regions which they usually infest as SALTEADORES, or bandits.”

“And what must we do then?”

“I’ll go and ask him,” replied Paganel.

After a brief colloquy he returned and said:

“This is his advice, and very sensible it is, I think. He says we had better continue our route to the east as far as Fort Independence, and if we don’t get news of Captain Grant there we shall hear, at any rate, what has become of the Indians of the Argentine plains.”

“Is Fort Independence far away?” asked Glenarvan.

“No, it is in the Sierra Tandil, a distance of about sixty miles.”

“And when shall we arrive?”

“The day after to-morrow, in the evening.”

Glenarvan was considerably disconcerted by this circumstance. Not to find an Indian where in general there were only too many, was so unusual that there must be some grave cause for it; but worse still if Harry Grant were a prisoner in the hands of any of those tribes, had be been dragged away with them to the north or south? Glenarvan felt that, cost what it might, they must not lose his track, and therefore decided to follow the advice of Thalcave, and go to the village of Tandil. They would find some one there to speak to, at all events.

About four o’clock in the evening a hill, which seemed a mountain in so flat a country, was sighted in the distance. This was Sierra Tapalquem, at the foot of which the travelers camped that night.

The passage in the morning over this sierra, was accomplished without the slightest difficulty; after having crossed the Cordillera of the Andes, it was easy work to ascend the gentle heights of such a sierra as this. The horses scarcely slackened their speed. At noon they passed the deserted fort of Tapalquem, the first of the chain of forts which defend the southern frontiers from Indian marauders. But to the increasing surprise of Thalcave, they did not come across even the shadow of an Indian. About the middle of the day, however, three flying horsemen, well mounted and well armed came in sight, gazed at them for an instant, and then sped away with inconceivable rapidity. Glenarvan was furious.

“Gauchos,” said the Patagonian, designating them by the name which had caused such a fiery discussion between the Major and Paganel.

“Ah! the Gauchos,” replied McNabbs. “Well, Paganel, the north wind is not blowing to-day. What do you think of those fellows yonder?”

“I think they look like regular bandits.”

“And how far is it from looking to being, my good geographer?”

“Only just a step, my dear Major.”

Paganel’s admission was received with a general laugh, which did not in the least disconcert him. He went on talking about the Indians however, and made this curious observation:

“I have read somewhere,” he said, “that about the Arabs there is a peculiar expression of ferocity in the mouth, while the eyes have a kindly look. Now, in these American savages it is quite the reverse, for the eye has a particularly villainous aspect.”

No physiognomist by profession could have better characterized the Indian race.

But desolate as the country appeared, Thalcave was on his guard against surprises, and gave orders to his party to form themselves in a close platoon. It was a useless precaution, however; for that same evening, they camped for the night in an immense TOLDERIA, which they not only found perfectly empty, but which the Patagonian declared, after he had examined it all round, must have been uninhabited for a long time.

Next day, the first ESTANCIAS of the Sierra Tandil came in sight. The ESTANCIAS are large cattle stations for breeding cattle; but Thalcave resolved not to stop at any of them, but to go straight on to Fort Independence. They passed several farms fortified by battlements and surrounded by a deep moat, the principal building being encircled by a terrace, from which the inhabitants could fire down on the marauders in the plain. Glenarvan might, perhaps, have got some information at these houses, but it was the surest plan to go straight on to the village of Tandil. Accordingly they went on without stopping, fording the RIO of Los Huasos and also the Chapaleofu, a few miles further on. Soon they were treading the grassy slopes of the first ridges of the Sierra Tandil, and an hour afterward the village appeared in the depths of a narrow gorge, and above it towered the lofty battlements of Fort Independence.

CHAPTER XXI A FALSE TRAIL

THE Sierra Tandil rises a thousand feet above the level of the sea. It is a primordial chain — that is to say, anterior to all organic and metamorphic creation. It is formed of a semi-circular ridge of gneiss hills, covered with fine short grass. The district of Tandil, to which it has given its name, includes all the south of the Province of Buenos Ayres, and terminates in a river which conveys north all the RIOS that take their rise on its slopes.

After making a short ascent up the sierra, they reached the postern gate, so carelessly guarded by an Argentine sentinel, that they passed through without difficulty, a circumstance which betokened extreme negligence or extreme security.

A few minutes afterward the Commandant appeared in person. He was a vigorous man about fifty years of age, of military aspect, with grayish hair, and an imperious eye, as far as one could see through the clouds of tobacco smoke which escaped from his short pipe. His walk reminded Paganel instantly of the old subalterns in his own country.

Thalcave was spokesman, and addressing the officer, presented Lord Glenarvan and his companions. While he was speaking, the Commandant kept staring fixedly at Paganel in rather an embarrassing manner. The geographer could not understand what he meant by it, and was just about to interrogate him, when the Commandant came forward, and seizing both his hands in the most free-and-easy fashion, said in a joyous voice, in the mother tongue of the geographer:

“A Frenchman!”

“Yes, a Frenchman,” replied Paganel.

“Ah! delightful! Welcome, welcome. I am a Frenchman too,” he added, shaking Paganel’s hand with such vigor as to be almost alarming.

“Is he a friend of yours, Paganel?” asked the Major.

“Yes,” said Paganel, somewhat proudly. “One has friends in every division of the globe.”

After he had succeeded in disengaging his hand, though not without difficulty, from the living vise in which it was held, a lively conversation ensued. Glenarvan would fain have put in a word about the business on hand, but the Commandant related his entire history, and was not in a mood to stop till he had done. It was evident that the worthy man must have left his native country many years back, for his mother tongue had grown unfamiliar, and if he had not forgotten the words he certainly did not remember how to put them together. He spoke more like a negro belonging to a French colony.

The fact was that the Governor of Fort Independence was a French sergeant, an old comrade of Parachapee. He had never left the fort since it had been built in 1828; and, strange to say, he commanded it with the consent of the Argentine Government. He was a man about fifty years of age, a Basque by birth, and his name was Manuel Ipharaguerre, so that he was almost a Spaniard. A year after his arrival in the country he was naturalized, took service in the Argentine army, and married an Indian girl, who was then nursing twin babies six months old — two boys, be it understood, for the good wife of the Commandant would have never thought of presenting her husband with girls. Manuel could not conceive of any state but a military one, and he hoped in due time, with the help of God, to offer the republic a whole company of young soldiers.

“You saw them. Charming! good soldiers are Jose, Juan, and Miquele! Pepe, seven year old; Pepe can handle a gun.”

Pepe, hearing himself complimented, brought his two little feet together, and presented arms with perfect grace.

“He’ll get on!” added the sergeant. “He’ll be colonel-major or brigadier-general some day.”

Sergeant Manuel seemed so enchanted that it would have been useless to express a contrary opinion, either to the profession of arms or the probable future of his children. He was happy, and as Goethe says, “Nothing that makes us happy is an illusion.”

All this talk took up a quarter of an hour, to the great astonishment of Thalcave. The Indian could not understand how so many words could come out of one throat. No one interrupted the Sergeant, but all things come to an end, and at last he was silent, but not till he had made his guests enter his dwelling, and be presented to Madame Ipharaguerre. Then, and not till then, did he ask his guests what had procured him the honor of their visit. Now or never was the moment to explain, and Paganel, seizing the chance at once, began an account of their journey across the Pampas, and ended by inquiring the reason of the Indians having deserted the country.

“Ah! there was no one!” replied the Sergeant, shrugging his shoulders — ”really no one, and us, too, our arms crossed! Nothing to do!”

“But why?”

“War.”

“War?”

"Yes, civil war between the Paraguayans and Buenos Ayriens," replied the Sergeant.

"Well?"

"Well, Indians all in the north, in the rear of General Flores.

Indian pillagers find pillage there."

"But where are the Caciques?"

"Caciques are with them."

"What! Catriel?"

"There is no Catriel."

"And Calfoucoura?"

"There is no Calfoucoura."

"And is there no Yanchetruz?"

"No; no Yanchetruz."

The reply was interpreted by Thalcave, who shook his head and gave an approving look. The Patagonian was either unaware of, or had forgotten that civil war was decimating the two parts of the republic — a war which ultimately required the intervention of Brazil. The Indians have everything to gain by these intestine strifes, and can not lose such fine opportunities of plunder. There was no doubt the Sergeant was right in assigning war then as the cause of the forsaken appearance of the plains.

But this circumstance upset all Glenarvan's projects, for if Harry Grant was a prisoner in the hands of the Caciques, he must have been dragged north with them. How and where should they ever find him if that were the case? Should they attempt a perilous and almost useless journey to the northern border of the Pampas? It was a serious question which would need to be well talked over.

However, there was one inquiry more to make to the Sergeant; and it was the Major who thought of it, for all the others looked at each other in silence.

"Had the Sergeant heard whether any Europeans were prisoners in the hands of the Caciques?"

Manuel looked thoughtful for a few minutes, like a man trying to ransack his memory. At last he said:

"Yes."

"Ah!" said Glenarvan, catching at the fresh hope.

They all eagerly crowded round the Sergeant, exclaiming,

"Tell us, tell us."

"It was some years ago," replied Manuel. "Yes; all I heard was that some Europeans were prisoners, but I never saw them."

"You are making a mistake," said Glenarvan. "It can't be some years ago; the date of the shipwreck is explicitly given. The BRITANNIA was wrecked in June, 1862. It is scarcely two years ago."

“Oh, more than that, my Lord.”

“Impossible!” said Paganel.

“Oh, but it must be. It was when Pepe was born.

There were two prisoners.”

“No, three!” said Glenarvan.

“Two!” replied the Sergeant, in a positive tone.

“Two?” echoed Glenarvan, much surprised. “Two Englishmen?”

“No, no. Who is talking of Englishmen? No; a Frenchman and an Italian.”

“An Italian who was massacred by the Poyuches?” exclaimed Paganel.

“Yes; and I heard afterward that the Frenchman was saved.”

“Saved!” exclaimed young Robert, his very life hanging on the lips of the Sergeant.

Yes; delivered out of the hands of the Indians.”

Paganel struck his forehead with an air of desperation, and said at last,

“Ah! I understand. It is all clear now; everything is explained.”

“But what is it?” asked Glenarvan, with as much impatience.

“My friends,” replied Paganel, taking both Robert’s hands in his own, “we must resign ourselves to a sad disaster. We have been on a wrong track. The prisoner mentioned is not the captain at all, but one of my own countrymen;

and his companion, who was assassinated by the Poyuches, was Marco Vazello. The Frenchman was dragged along by the cruel Indians several times as far as the shores of the Colorado, but managed at length to make his escape, and return to Colorado. Instead of following the track of Harry Grant, we have fallen on that of young Guinnard."

This announcement was heard with profound silence. The mistake was palpable. The details given by the Sergeant, the nationality of the prisoner, the murder of his companions, his escape from the hands of the Indians, all evidenced the fact. Glenarvan looked at Thalcave with a crestfallen face, and the Indian, turning to the Sergeant, asked whether he had never heard of three English captives.

"Never," replied Manuel. "They would have known of them at Tandil, I am sure. No, it cannot be."

After this, there was nothing further to do at Fort Independence but to shake hands with the Commandant, and thank him and take leave.

Glenarvan was in despair at this complete overthrow of his hopes, and Robert walked silently beside him, with his eyes full of tears. Glenarvan could not find a word of comfort to say to him. Paganel gesticulated and talked away to himself. The Major never opened his mouth, nor Thalcave, whose amour propre, as an Indian, seemed quite wounded by having allowed himself to go on a wrong scent. No one, however, would have thought of reproaching him for an error so pardonable.

They went back to the FONDA, and had supper; but it was a gloomy party that surrounded the table. It was not that any one of them regretted the fatigue they had so heedlessly endured or the dangers they had run, but they felt their hope of success was gone, for there was no chance of coming across Captain Grant between the Sierra Tandil and the sea, as Sergeant Manuel must have heard if any prisoners had fallen into the hands of the Indians on the coast of the Atlantic. Any event of this nature would have attracted the notice of the Indian traders who traffic between Tandil and Carmen, at the mouth of the Rio Negro. The best thing to do now was to get to the DUNCAN as quick as possible at the appointed rendezvous.

Paganel asked Glenarvan, however, to let him have the document again, on the faith of which they had set out on so bootless a search. He read it over and over, as if trying to extract some new meaning out of it.

“Yet nothing can be clearer,” said Glenarvan; “it gives the date of the shipwreck, and the manner, and the place of the captivity in the most categorical manner.”

“That it does not — no, it does not!” exclaimed Paganel, striking the table with his fist. “Since Harry Grant is not in the Pampas, he is not in America; but where he is the document must say, and it shall say, my friends, or my name is not Jacques Paganel any longer.”

CHAPTER XXII THE FLOOD

A DISTANCE of 150 miles separates Fort Independence from the shores of the Atlantic. Unless unexpected and certainly improbable delays should occur, in four days Glenarvan would rejoin the DUNCAN. But to return on board without Captain Grant, and after having so completely failed in his search, was what he could not bring himself to do. Consequently, when next day came, he gave no orders for departure; the Major took it upon himself to have the horses saddled, and make all preparations. Thanks to his activity, next morning at eight o'clock the little troop was descending the grassy slopes of the Sierra.

Glenarvan, with Robert at his side, galloped along without saying a word. His bold, determined nature made it impossible to take failure quietly. His heart throbbed as if it would burst, and his head was burning. Paganel, excited by the difficulty, was turning over and over the words of the document, and trying to discover some new meaning. Thalcave was perfectly silent, and left Thaouka to lead the way. The Major, always confident, remained firm at his post, like a man on whom discouragement takes no hold. Tom Austin and his two sailors shared the dejection of their master. A timid rabbit happened to run across their path, and the superstitious men looked at each other in dismay.

“A bad omen,” said Wilson.

“Yes, in the Highlands,” repeated Mulrady.

“What's bad in the Highlands is not better here,” returned Wilson sententiously.

Toward noon they had crossed the Sierra, and descended into the undulating plains which extend to the sea. Limpid RIOS intersected these plains, and lost themselves among the tall grasses. The ground had once more become a dead level, the last mountains of the Pampas were passed, and a long carpet of verdure unrolled itself over the monotonous prairie beneath the horses’ tread.

Hitherto the weather had been fine, but to-day the sky presented anything but a reassuring appearance. The heavy vapors, generated by the high temperature of the preceding days, hung in thick clouds, which ere long would empty themselves in torrents of rain. Moreover, the vicinity of the Atlantic, and the prevailing west wind, made the climate of this district particularly damp. This was evident by the fertility and abundance of the pasture and its dark color. However, the clouds remained unbroken for the present, and in the evening, after a brisk gallop of forty miles, the horses stopped on the brink of deep CANADAS, immense natural trenches filled with water. No shelter was near, and ponchos had to serve both for tents and coverlets as each man lay down and fell asleep beneath the threatening sky.

Next day the presence of water became still more sensibly felt; it seemed to exude from every pore of the ground. Soon large ponds, some just beginning to form, and some already deep, lay across the route to the east. As long as they had only to deal with lagoons, circumscribed pieces of water unencumbered with aquatic plants, the horses could get through well enough, but when they encountered moving sloughs called PENTANOS, it was harder work. Tall grass blocked them up, and they were involved in the peril before they were aware.

These bogs had already proved fatal to more than one living thing, for Robert, who had got a good bit ahead of the party, came rushing back at full gallop, calling out:

“Monsieur Paganel, Monsieur Paganel, a forest of horns.”

“What!” exclaimed the geographer; “you have found a forest of horns?”

“Yes, yes, or at any rate a coppice.”

“A coppice!” replied Paganel, shrugging his shoulders.

“My boy, you are dreaming.”

“I am not dreaming, and you will see for yourself. Well, this is a strange country. They sow horns, and they sprout up like wheat. I wish I could get some of the seed.”

“The boy is really speaking seriously,” said the Major.

“Yes, Mr. Major, and you will soon see I am right.”

The boy had not been mistaken, for presently they found themselves in front of an immense field of horns, regularly planted and stretching far out of sight. It was a complete copse, low and close packed, but a strange sort.

“Well,” said Robert.

“This is peculiar certainly,” said Paganel, and he turned round to question Thalcave on the subject.

“The horns come out of the ground,” replied the Indian, “but the oxen are down below.”

“What!” exclaimed Paganel; “do you mean to say that a whole herd was caught in that mud and buried alive?”

“Yes,” said the Patagonian.

And so it was. An immense herd had been suffocated side by side in this enormous bog, and this was not the first occurrence of the kind which had taken place in the Argentine plains.

An hour afterward and the field of horns lay two miles behind.

Thalcave was somewhat anxiously observing a state of things which appeared to him unusual. He frequently stopped and raised himself on his stirrups and looked around. His great height gave him a commanding view of the whole horizon; but after a keen rapid survey, he quickly resumed his seat and went on. About a mile further he stopped again, and leaving the straight route, made a circuit of some miles north and south, and then returned and fell back in his place at the head of the troop, without saying a syllable as to what he hoped or feared. This strange behavior, several times repeated, made Glenarvan very uneasy, and quite puzzled Paganel. At last, at Glenarvan’s request, he asked the Indian about it.

Thalcave replied that he was astonished to see the plains so saturated with water. Never, to his knowledge, since he had followed the calling of guide, had he found the ground in this soaking condition. Even in the rainy season, the Argentine plains had always been passable.

“But what is the cause of this increasing humidity?” said Paganel.

“I do not know, and what if I did?”

“Could it be owing to the RIOS of the Sierra being swollen to overflowing by the heavy rains?”

“Sometimes they are.”

“And is it the case now?”

“Perhaps.”

Paganel was obliged to be content with this unsatisfactory reply, and went back to Glenarvan to report the result of his conversation.

“And what does Thalcave advise us to do?” said Glenarvan.

Paganel went back to the guide and asked him.

“Go on fast,” was the reply.

This was easier said than done. The horses soon tired of treading over ground that gave way at every step. It sank each moment more and more, till it seemed half under water.

They quickened their pace, but could not go fast enough to escape the water, which rolled in great sheets at their feet. Before two hours the cataracts of the sky opened and deluged the plain in true tropical torrents of rain. Never was there a finer occasion for displaying philosophic equanimity. There was no shelter, and nothing for it but to bear it stolidly. The ponchos were streaming like the overflowing gutter-spouts on the roof of a house, and the unfortunate horsemen had to submit to a double bath, for their horses dashed up the water to their waists at every step.

In this drenching, shivering state, and worn out with fatigue, they came toward evening to a miserable RANCHO, which could only have been called a shelter by people not very fastidious, and certainly only travelers in extremity would even have entered it; but Glenarvan and his companions had no choice, and were glad enough to burrow in this wretched hovel, though it would have been despised by even a poor Indian of the Pampas. A miserable fire of grass was kindled, which gave out more smoke than heat, and was very difficult to keep alight, as the torrents of rain which dashed against the ruined cabin outside found their way within and fell down in large drops from the roof. Twenty times over the fire would have been extinguished if Mulrady and Wilson had not kept off the water.

The supper was a dull meal, and neither appetizing nor reviving. Only the Major seemed to eat with any relish. The impassive McNabbs was superior to all circumstances. Paganel, Frenchman as he was, tried to joke, but the attempt was a failure.

“My jests are damp,” he said, “they miss fire.”

The only consolation in such circumstances was to sleep, and accordingly each one lay down and endeavored to find in slumber a temporary forgetfulness of his discomforts and his fatigues. The night was stormy, and the planks of the rancho cracked before the blast as if every instant they would give way. The poor horses outside, exposed to all the inclemency of the weather, were making piteous moans, and their masters were suffering quite as much inside the ruined RANCHO. However, sleep overpowered them at length. Robert was the first to close his eyes and lean his head against Glenarvan’s shoulder, and soon all the rest were soundly sleeping too under the guardian eye of Heaven.

The night passed safely, and no one stirred till Thaouka woke them by tapping vigorously against the RANCHO with his hoof. He knew it was time to start, and at a push could give the signal as well as his master. They owed the faithful creature too much to disobey him, and set off immediately.

The rain had abated, but floods of water still covered the ground. Paganel, on consulting his map, came to the conclusion that the RIOS Grande and Vivarota, into which the water from the plains generally runs, must have been united in one large bed several miles in extent.

Extreme haste was imperative, for all their lives depended on it. Should the inundation increase, where could they find refuge? Not a single elevated point was visible on the whole circle of the horizon, and on such level plains water would sweep along with fearful rapidity.

The horses were spurred on to the utmost, and Thaouka led the way, bounding over the water as if it had been his natural element. Certainly he might justly have been called a sea-horse — better than many of the amphibious animals who bear that name.

All of a sudden, about ten in the morning, Thaouka betrayed symptoms of violent agitation. He kept turning round toward the south, neighing continually, and snorting with wide open nostrils. He reared violently, and Thalcave had some difficulty in keeping his seat. The foam from his mouth was tinged with blood from the action of the bit, pulled tightly by his master’s strong hand, and yet the fiery animal would not be still. Had he been free, his master knew he would have fled away to the north as fast as his legs would have carried him.

“What is the matter with Thaouka?” asked Paganel. “Is he bitten by the leeches? They are very voracious in the Argentine streams.”

“No,” replied the Indian.

“Is he frightened at something, then?”

“Yes, he scents danger.”

“What danger?”

“I don’t know.”

But, though no danger was apparent to the eye, the ear could catch the sound of a murmuring noise beyond the limits of the horizon, like the coming in of the tide. Soon a confused sound was heard of bellowing and neighing and bleating, and about a mile to the south immense flocks appeared, rushing and tumbling over each other in the greatest disorder, as they hurried pell-mell along with inconceivable rapidity. They raised such a whirlwind of water in their course that it was impossible to distinguish them clearly. A hundred whales of the largest size could hardly have dashed up the ocean waves more violently.

“Anda, anda!” (quick, quick), shouted Thalcave, in a voice like thunder.

“What is it, then?” asked Paganel.

“The rising,” replied Thalcave.

“He means an inundation,” exclaimed Paganel, flying with the others after Thalcave, who had spurred on his horse toward the north.

It was high time, for about five miles south an immense towering wave was seen advancing over the plain, and changing the whole country into an ocean. The tall grass disappeared before it as if cut down by a scythe, and clumps of mimosas were torn up and drifted about like floating islands.

The wave was speeding on with the rapidity of a racehorse, and the travelers fled before it like a cloud before a storm-wind. They looked in vain for some harbor of refuge, and the terrified horses galloped so wildly along that the riders could hardly keep their saddles.

“Anda, anda!” shouted Thalcave, and again they spurred on the poor animals till the blood ran from their lacerated sides. They stumbled every now and then over great cracks in the ground, or got entangled in the hidden grass below the water. They fell, and were pulled up only to fall again and again, and be pulled up again and again. The level of the waters was sensibly rising, and less than two miles off the gigantic wave reared its crested head.

For a quarter of an hour this supreme struggle with the most terrible of elements lasted. The fugitives could not tell how far they had gone, but, judging by the speed, the distance must have been considerable. The poor horses, however, were breast-high in water now, and could only advance with extreme difficulty. Glenarvan and Paganel, and, indeed, the whole party, gave themselves up for lost, as the horses were fast getting out of their depth, and six feet of water would be enough to drown them.

It would be impossible to tell the anguish of mind these eight men endured; they felt their own impotence in the presence of these cataclysms of nature so far beyond all human power. Their salvation did not lie in their own hands.

Five minutes afterward, and the horses were swimming; the current alone carried them along with tremendous force, and with a swiftness equal to their fastest gallop; they must have gone fully twenty miles an hour.

All hope of delivery seemed impossible, when the Major suddenly called out:

“A tree!”

“A tree?” exclaimed Glenarvan.

“Yes, there, there!” replied Thalcave, pointing with his finger to a species of gigantic walnut-tree, which raised its solitary head above the waters.

His companions needed no urging forward now; this tree, so opportunely discovered, they must reach at all hazards. The horses very likely might not be able to get to it, but, at all events, the men would, the current bearing them right down to it.

Just at that moment Tom Austin’s horse gave a smothered neigh and disappeared. His master, freeing his feet from the stirrups, began to swim vigorously.

“Hang on to my saddle,” called Glenarvan.

“Thanks, your honor, but I have good stout arms.”

“Robert, how is your horse going?” asked his Lordship, turning to young Grant.

“Famously, my Lord, he swims like a fish.”

“Lookout!” shouted the Major, in a stentorian voice.

The warning was scarcely spoken before the enormous billow, a monstrous wave forty feet high, broke over the fugitives with a fearful noise. Men and animals all disappeared in a whirl of foam; a liquid mass, weighing several millions of tons, engulfed them in its seething waters.

When it had rolled on, the men reappeared on the surface, and counted each other rapidly; but all the horses, except Thaouka, who still bore his master, had gone down forever.

“Courage, courage,” repeated Glenarvan, supporting Paganel with one arm, and swimming with the other.

“I can manage, I can manage,” said the worthy savant.

“I am even not sorry — ”

But no one ever knew what he was not sorry about, for the poor man was obliged to swallow down the rest of his sentence with half a pint of muddy water. The Major advanced quietly, making regular strokes, worthy of a master swimmer. The sailors took to the water like porpoises, while Robert clung to Thaouka’s mane, and was carried along with him. The noble animal swam superbly, instinctively making for the tree in a straight line.

The tree was only twenty fathoms off, and in a few minutes was safely reached by the whole party; but for this refuge they must all have perished in the flood.

The water had risen to the top of the trunk, just to where the parent branches fork out. It was consequently, quite easy to clamber up to it. Thalcave climbed up first, and got off his horse to hoist up Robert and help the others. His powerful arms had soon placed all the exhausted swimmers in a place of security.

But, meantime, Thaouka was being rapidly carried away by the current. He turned his intelligent face toward his master, and, shaking his long mane, neighed as if to summon him to his rescue.

“Are you going to forsake him, Thalcave?” asked Paganel.

“I!” replied the Indian, and forthwith he plunged down into the tumultuous waters, and came up again ten fathoms off. A few instants afterward his arms were round Thaouka’s neck, and master and steed were drifting together toward the misty horizon of the north.

CHAPTER XXIII A SINGULAR ABODE

THE tree on which Glenarvan and his companions had just found refuge, resembled a walnut-tree, having the same glossy foliage and rounded form. In reality, however, it was the OMBU, which grows solitarily on the Argentine plains. The enormous and twisted trunk of this tree is planted firmly in the soil, not only by its great roots, but still more by its vigorous shoots, which fasten it down in the most tenacious manner. This was how it stood proof against the shock of the mighty billow.

This OMBU measured in height a hundred feet, and covered with its shadow a circumference of one hundred and twenty yards. All this scaffolding rested on three great boughs which sprang from the trunk. Two of these rose almost perpendicularly, and supported the immense parasol of foliage, the branches of which were so crossed and intertwined and entangled, as if by the hand of a basket-maker, that they formed an impenetrable shade. The third arm, on the contrary, stretched right out in a horizontal position above the roaring waters, into which the lower leaves dipped. There was no want of room in the interior of this gigantic tree, for there were great gaps in the foliage, perfect glades, with air in abundance, and freshness everywhere. To see the innumerable branches rising to the clouds, and the creepers running from bough to bough, and attaching them together while the sunlight glinted here and there among the leaves, one might have called it a complete forest instead of a solitary tree sheltering them all.

On the arrival of the fugitives a myriad of the feathered tribes fled away into the topmost branches, protesting by their outcries against this flagrant usurpation of their domicile. These birds, who themselves had taken refuge in the solitary OMBU, were in hundreds, comprising blackbirds, starlings, isacas, HILGUEROS, and especially the pica-flor, humming-birds of most resplendent colors. When they flew away it seemed as though a gust of wind had blown all the flowers off the tree.

Such was the asylum offered to the little band of Glenarvan. Young Grant and the agile Wilson were scarcely perched on the tree before they had climbed to the upper branches and put their heads through the leafy dome to get a view of the vast horizon. The ocean made by the inundation surrounded them on all sides, and, far as the eye could reach, seemed to have no limits. Not a single tree was visible on the liquid plain; the OMBU stood alone amid the rolling waters, and trembled before them. In the distance, drifting from south to north, carried along by the impetuous torrent, they saw trees torn up by the roots, twisted branches, roofs torn off, destroyed RANCHOS, planks of sheds stolen by the deluge from ESTANCIAS, carcasses of drowned animals, blood-stained skins, and on a shaky tree a complete family of jaguars, howling and clutching hold of their frail raft. Still farther away, a black spot almost invisible, already caught Wilson’s eye. It was Thalcave and his faithful Thaouka.

“Thalcave, Thalcave!” shouted Robert, stretching out his hands toward the courageous Patagonian.

“He will save himself, Mr. Robert,” replied Wilson; “we must go down to his Lordship.”

Next minute they had descended the three stages of boughs, and landed safely on the top of the trunk, where they found Glenarvan, Paganel, the Major, Austin, and Mulrady, sitting either astride or in some position they found more comfortable. Wilson gave an account of their investigations aloft, and all shared his opinion with respect to Thalcave. The only question was whether it was Thalcave who would save Thaouka, or Thaouka save Thalcave.

Their own situation meantime was much more alarming than his. No doubt the tree would be able to resist the current, but the waters might rise higher and higher, till the topmost branches were covered, for the depression of the soil made this part of the plain a deep reservoir. Glenarvan's first care, consequently, was to make notches by which to ascertain the progress of the inundation. For the present it was stationary, having apparently reached its height. This was reassuring.

"And now what are we going to do?" said Glenarvan.

"Make our nest, of course!" replied Paganel

"Make our nest!" exclaimed Robert.

"Certainly, my boy, and live the life of birds, since we can't that of fishes."

"All very well, but who will fill our bills for us?" said Glenarvan.

"I will," said the Major.

All eyes turned toward him immediately, and there he sat in a natural arm-chair, formed of two elastic boughs, holding out his ALFORJAS damp, but still intact.

"Oh, McNabbs, that's just like you," exclaimed Glenarvan, "you think of everything even under circumstances which would drive all out of your head."

"Since it was settled we were not going to be drowned, I had no intention of starving of hunger.”

“I should have thought of it, too,” said Paganel, “but I am so DISTRAIT.”

“And what is in the ALFORJAS?” asked Tom Austin.

“Food enough to last seven men for two days,” replied McNabbs.

“And I hope the inundation will have gone down in twenty-four hours,” said Glenarvan.

“Or that we shall have found some way of regaining terra firma,” added Paganel.

“Our first business, then, now is to breakfast,” said Glenarvan.

“I suppose you mean after we have made ourselves dry,” observed the Major.

“And where’s the fire?” asked Wilson.

“We must make it,” returned Paganel.

“Where?”

“On the top of the trunk, of course.”

“And what with?”

“With the dead wood we cut off the tree.”

“But how will you kindle it?” asked Glenarvan. “Our tinder is just like wet sponge.”

“We can dispense with it,” replied Paganel. “We only want a little dry moss and a ray of sunshine, and the lens of my telescope, and you’ll see what a fire I’ll get to dry myself by. Who will go and cut wood in the forest?”

“I will,” said Robert.

And off he scampered like a young cat into the depths of the foliage, followed by his friend Wilson. Paganel set to work to find dry moss, and had soon gathered sufficient. This he laid on a bed of damp leaves, just where the large branches began to fork out, forming a natural hearth, where there was little fear of conflagration.

Robert and Wilson speedily reappeared, each with an armful of dry wood, which they threw on the moss. By the help of the lens it was easily kindled, for the sun was blazing overhead. In order to ensure a proper draught, Paganel stood over the hearth with his long legs straddled out in the Arab manner. Then stooping down and raising himself with a rapid motion, he made a violent current of air with his poncho, which made the wood take fire, and soon a bright flame roared in the improvised brasier. After drying themselves, each in his own fashion, and hanging their ponchos on the tree, where they were swung to and fro in the breeze, they breakfasted, carefully however rationing out the provisions, for the morrow had to be thought of; the immense basin might not empty so soon as Glenarvan expected, and, anyway, the supply was very limited. The OMBU produced no fruit, though fortunately, it would likely abound in fresh eggs, thanks to the numerous nests stowed away among the leaves, not to speak of their feathered proprietors. These resources were by no means to be despised.

The next business was to install themselves as comfortably as they could, in prospect of a long stay.

“As the kitchen and dining-room are on the ground floor,” said Paganel, “we must sleep on the first floor. The house is large, and as the rent is not dear, we must not cramp ourselves for room. I can see up yonder natural cradles, in which once safely tucked up we shall sleep as if we were in the best beds in the world. We have nothing to fear. Besides, we will watch, and we are numerous enough to repulse a fleet of Indians and other wild animals.”

“We only want fire-arms.”

“I have my revolvers,” said Glenarvan.

“And I have mine,” replied Robert.

“But what’s the good of them?” said Tom Austin, “unless Monsieur Paganel can find out some way of making powder.”

“We don’t need it,” replied McNabbs, exhibiting a powder flask in a perfect state of preservation.

“Where did you get it from, Major,” asked Paganel.

“From Thalcave. He thought it might be useful to us, and gave it to me before he plunged into the water to save Thaouka.”

“Generous, brave Indian!” exclaimed Glenarvan.

“Yes,” replied Tom Austin, “if all the Patagonians are cut after the same pattern, I must compliment Patagonia.”

“I protest against leaving out the horse,” said Paganel. “He is part and parcel of the Patagonian, and I’m much mistaken if we don’t see them again, the one on the other’s back.”

“What distance are we from the Atlantic?” asked the Major.

“About forty miles at the outside,” replied Paganel; “and now, friends, since this is Liberty Hall, I beg to take leave of you. I am going to choose an observatory for myself up there, and by the help of my telescope, let you know how things are going on in the world.”

Forthwith the geographer set off, hoisting himself up very cleverly from bough to bough, till he disappeared beyond the thick foliage. His companions began to arrange the night quarters, and prepare their beds. But this was neither a long nor difficult task, and very soon they resumed their seats round the fire to have a talk.

As usual their theme was Captain Grant. In three days, should the water subside, they would be on board the DUNCAN once more. But Harry Grant and his two sailors, those poor shipwrecked fellows, would not be with them. Indeed, it even seemed after this ill success and this useless journey across America, that all chance of finding them was gone forever. Where could they commence a fresh quest? What grief Lady Helena and Mary Grant would feel on hearing there was no further hope.

“Poor sister!” said Robert. “It is all up with us.”

For the first time Glenarvan could not find any comfort to give him.

What could he say to the lad?

Had they not searched exactly where the document stated?

“And yet,” he said, “this thirty-seventh degree of latitude is not a mere figure, and that it applies to the shipwreck or captivity of Harry Grant, is no mere guess or supposition. We read it with our own eyes.”

“All very true, your Honor,” replied Tom Austin, “and yet our search has been unsuccessful.”

“It is both a provoking and hopeless business,” replied Glenarvan.

“Provoking enough, certainly,” said the Major, “but not hopeless. It is precisely because we have an uncon-testable figure, provided for us, that we should follow it up to the end.”

“What do you mean?” asked Glenarvan. “What more can we do?”

“A very logical and simple thing, my dear Edward. When we go on board the DUNCAN, turn her beak head to the east, and go right along the thirty-seventh parallel till we come back to our starting point if necessary.”

“Do you suppose that I have not thought of that, Mr. McNabbs?” replied Glenarvan. “Yes, a hundred times. But what chance is there of success? To leave the American continent, wouldn’t it be to go away from the very spot indicated by Harry Grant, from this very Patagonia so distinctly named in the document.”

“And would you recommence your search in the Pampas, when you have the certainty that the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA neither occurred on the coasts of the Pacific nor the Atlantic?”

Glenarvan was silent.

"And however small the chance of finding Harry Grant by following up the given parallel, ought we not to try?"

"I don't say no," replied Glenarvan.

"And are you not of my opinion, good friends," added the Major, addressing the sailors.

"Entirely," said Tom Austin, while Mulrady and Wilson gave an assenting nod.

"Listen to me, friends," said Glenarvan after a few minutes' reflection; "and remember, Robert, this is a grave discussion. I will do my utmost to find Captain Grant; I am pledged to it, and will devote my whole life to the task if needs be. All Scotland would unite with me to save so devoted a son as he has been to her. I too quite think with you that we must follow the thirty-seventh parallel round the globe if necessary, however slight our chance of finding him. But that is not the question we have to settle. There is one much more important than that is — should we from this time, and all together, give up our search on the American continent?"

No one made any reply. Each one seemed afraid to pronounce the word.

"Well?" resumed Glenarvan, addressing himself especially to the Major.

"My dear Edward," replied McNabbs, "it would be incurring too great a responsibility for me to reply hic et nunc. It is a question which requires reflection. I must know first, through which countries the thirty-seventh parallel of southern latitude passes?"

"That's Paganel's business; he will tell you that," said Glenarvan.

“Let’s ask him, then,” replied the Major.

But the learned geographer was nowhere to be seen. He was hidden among the thick leafage of the OMBU, and they must call out if they wanted him.

“Paganel, Paganel!” shouted Glenarvan.

“Here,” replied a voice that seemed to come from the clouds.

“Where are you?”

“In my tower.”

“What are you doing there?”

“Examining the wide horizon.”

“Could you come down for a minute?”

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“What for?”

“To know what countries the thirty-seventh parallel passes through.”

“That’s easily said. I need not disturb myself to come down for that.”

“Very well, tell us now.”

“Listen, then. After leaving America the thirty-seventh parallel crosses the Atlantic Ocean.”

“And then?”

“It encounters Isle Tristan d’Acunha.”

“Yes.”

“It goes on two degrees below the Cape of Good Hope.”

“And afterwards?”

“Runs across the Indian Ocean, and just touches Isle St. Pierre, in the Amsterdam group.”

“Go on.”

“It cuts Australia by the province of Victoria.”

“And then.”

“After leaving Australia in — ”

This last sentence was not completed. Was the geographer hesitating, or didn’t he know what to say?

No; but a terrible cry resounded from the top of the tree.

Glenarvan and his friends turned pale and looked at each other.

What fresh catastrophe had happened now? Had the unfortunate

Paganel slipped his footing?

Already Wilson and Mulrady had rushed to his rescue when his long body appeared tumbling down from branch to branch.

But was he living or dead, for his hands made no attempt to seize anything to stop himself. A few minutes more, and he would have fallen into the roaring waters had not the Major’s strong arm barred his passage.

“Much obliged, McNabbs,” said Paganel.

“How’s this? What is the matter with you? What came over you?

Another of your absent fits.”

“Yes, yes,” replied Paganel, in a voice almost inarticulate with emotion.

“Yes, but this was something extraordinary.”

“What was it?”

“I said we had made a mistake. We are making it still, and have been all along.”

“Explain yourself.”

“Glenarvan, Major, Robert, my friends,” exclaimed Paganel, “all you that hear me, we are looking for Captain Grant where he is not to be found.”

“What do you say?” exclaimed Glenarvan.

“Not only where he is not now, but where he has never been.”

CHAPTER XXIV PAGANEL’S DISCLOSURE

PROFOUND astonishment greeted these unexpected words of the learned geographer. What could he mean? Had he lost his sense? He spoke with such conviction, however, that all eyes turned toward Glenarvan, for Paganel’s affirmation was a direct answer to his question, but Glenarvan shook his head, and said nothing, though evidently he was not inclined to favor his friend’s views.

“Yes,” began Paganel again, as soon as he had recovered himself a little; “yes, we have gone a wrong track, and read on the document what was never there.”

“Explain yourself, Paganel,” said the Major, “and more calmly if you can.”

“The thing is very simple, Major. Like you, I was in error; like you, I had rushed at a false interpretation, until about an instant ago, on the top of the tree, when I was answering your questions, just as I pronounced the word ‘Australia,’ a sudden flash came across my mind, and the document became clear as day.”

“What!” exclaimed Glenarvan, “you mean to say that Harry Grant — ”

“I mean to say,” replied Paganel, “that the word AUSTRAL that occurs in the document is not a complete word, as we have supposed up till now, but just the root of the word AUSTRALIE.”

“Well, that would be strange,” said the Major.

“Strange!” repeated Glenarvan, shrugging his shoulders; “it is simply impossible.”

“Impossible?” returned Paganel. “That is a word we don’t allow in France.”

“What!” continued Glenarvan, in a tone of the most profound incredulity, “you dare to contend, with the document in your hand, that the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA happened on the shores of Australia.”

“I am sure of it,” replied Paganel.

“My conscience,” exclaimed Glenarvan, “I must say I am surprised at such a declaration from the Secretary of a Geographical Society!”

“And why so?” said Paganel, touched in his weak point.

“Because, if you allow the word AUSTRALIE! you must also allow the word INDIENS, and Indians are never seen there.”

Paganel was not the least surprised at this rejoinder.

Doubtless he expected it, for he began to smile, and said:

“My dear Glenarvan, don’t triumph over me too fast.

I am going to floor you completely, and never was an

Englishman more thoroughly defeated than you will be.

It will be the revenge for Cressy and Agincourt.”

“I wish nothing better. Take your revenge, Paganel.”

“Listen, then. In the text of the document, there is neither mention of the Indians nor of Patagonia! The incomplete word INDI does not mean

INDIENS, but of course, INDIGENES, aborigines! Now, do you admit that there are aborigines in Australia?”

“Bravo, Paganel!” said the Major.

“Well, do you agree to my interpretation, my dear Lord?” asked the geographer again.

“Yes,” replied Glenarvan, “if you will prove to me that the fragment of a word GONIE, does not refer to the country of the Patagonians.”

“Certainly it does not. It has nothing to do with Patagonia,” said Paganel. “Read it any way you please except that.”

“How?”

“Cosmogonie, theogonie, agonie.”

“AGONIE,” said the Major.

“I don’t care which,” returned Paganel. “The word is quite unimportant; I will not even try to find out its meaning. The main point is that AUSTRAL means AUSTRALIE, and we must have gone blindly on a wrong track not to have discovered the explanation at the very beginning, it was so evident. If I had found the document myself, and my judgment had not been misled by your interpretation, I should never have read it differently.”

A burst of hurrahs, and congratulations, and compliments followed Paganel’s words. Austin and the sailors, and the Major and Robert, most all overjoyed at this fresh hope, applauded him heartily; while even Glenarvan, whose eyes were gradually getting open, was almost prepared to give in.

“I only want to know one thing more, my dear Paganel,” he said, “and then I must bow to your perspicacity.”

“What is it?”

“How will you group the words together according to your new interpretation? How will the document read?”

“Easily enough answered. Here is the document,” replied Paganel, taking out the precious paper he had been studying so conscientiously for the last few days.

For a few minutes there was complete silence, while the worthy SAVANT took time to collect his thoughts before complying with his lordship’s request. Then putting his finger on the words, and emphasizing some of them, he began as follows:

“‘Le 7 juin 1862 le trois-mats Britannia de Glasgow a sombre apres,’ — put, if you please, ‘deux jours, trois jours,’ or ‘une longue agonie,’ it doesn’t signify, it is quite a matter of indifference, — ’sur les cotes de l’Australie. Se dirigeant a terre, deux matelots et le Capitaine Grant vont essayer d’aborder,’ or ‘ont aborde le continent ou ils seront,’ or, ‘sont prisonniers de cruels indigenes. Ils ont jete ce documents,’ etc. Is that clear?”

“Clear enough,” replied Glenarvan, “if the word continent can be applied to Australia, which is only an island.”

“Make yourself easy about that, my dear Glenarvan; the best geographers have agreed to call the island the Australian Continent.”

“Then all I have now to say is, my friends,” said Glenarvan, “away to Australia, and may Heaven help us!”

“To Australia!” echoed his companions, with one voice.

“I tell you what, Paganel,” added Glenarvan, “your being on board the DUNCAN is a perfect providence.”

“All right. Look on me as a messenger of providence, and let us drop the subject.”

So the conversation ended — a conversation which great results were to follow; it completely changed the moral condition of the travelers; it gave the clew of the labyrinth in which they had thought themselves hopelessly entangled, and, amid their ruined projects, inspired them with fresh hope. They could now quit the American Continent without the least hesitation, and already their thoughts had flown to the Australias. In going on board the DUNCAN again they would not bring despair with them, and Lady Helena and Mary Grant would not have to mourn the irrevocable loss of Captain Grant. This thought so filled them with joy that they forgot all the dangers of their actual situation, and only regretted that they could not start immediately.

It was about four o’clock in the afternoon, and they determined to have supper at six. Paganel wished to get up a splendid spread in honor of the occasion, but as the materials were very scanty, he proposed to Robert to go and hunt in the neighboring forest. Robert clapped his hands at the idea, so they took Thalcave’s powder flask, cleaned the revolvers and loaded them with small shot, and set off.

“Don’t go too far,” said the Major, gravely, to the two hunters.

After their departure, Glenarvan and McNabbs went down to examine the state of the water by looking at the notches they had made on the tree, and Wilson and Mulrady replenished the fire.

No sign of decrease appeared on the surface of the immense lake, yet the flood seemed to have reached its maximum height; but the violence with which it rushed from the south to north proved that the equilibrium of the Argentine rivers was not restored. Before getting lower the liquid mass must remain stationary, as in the case with the ocean before the ebb tide commences.

While Glenarvan and his cousin were making these observations, the report of firearms resounded frequently above their heads, and the jubilant outcries of the two sportsmen — for Paganel was every whit as much a child as Robert. They were having a fine time of it among the thick leaves, judging by the peals of laughter which rang out in the boy’s clear treble voice and Paganel’s deep bass. The chase was evidently successful, and wonders in culinary art might be expected. Wilson had a good idea to begin with, which he had skilfully carried out; for when Glenarvan came back to the brasier, he found that the brave fellow had actually managed to catch, with only a pin and a piece of string, several dozen small fish, as delicate as smelts, called MOJARRAS, which were all jumping about in a fold of his poncho, ready to be converted into an exquisite dish.

At the same moment the hunters reappeared. Paganel was carefully carrying some black swallows’ eggs, and a string of sparrows, which he meant to serve up later under the name of field larks. Robert had been clever enough to bring down several brace of HILGUEROS, small green and yellow birds, which are excellent eating, and greatly in demand in the Montevideo market. Paganel, who knew fifty ways of dressing eggs, was obliged for this once to be content with simply hardening them on the hot embers. But notwithstanding this, the viands at the meal were both dainty and varied. The dried beef, hard eggs, grilled MOJARRAS, sparrows, and roast HILGUEROS, made one of those gala feasts the memory of which is imperishable.

The conversation was very animated. Many compliments were paid Paganel on his twofold talents as hunter and cook, which the SAVANT accepted with the modesty which characterizes true merit. Then he turned the conversation on the peculiarities of the OMBU, under whose canopy they had found shelter, and whose depths he declared were immense.

“Robert and I,” he added, jestingly, “thought ourselves hunting in the open forest. I was afraid, for the minute, we should lose ourselves, for I could not find the road. The sun was sinking below the horizon; I sought vainly for footmarks; I began to feel the sharp pangs of hunger, and the gloomy depths of the forest resounded already with the roar of wild beasts. No, not that; there are no wild beasts here, I am sorry to say.”

“What!” exclaimed Glenarvan, “you are sorry there are no wild beasts?”

“Certainly I am.”

“And yet we should have every reason to dread their ferocity.”

“Their ferocity is non-existent, scientifically speaking,” replied the learned geographer.

“Now come, Paganel,” said the Major, “you’ll never make me admit the utility of wild beasts. What good are they?”

"Why, Major," exclaimed Paganel, "for purposes of classification into orders, and families, and species, and sub-species."

"A mighty advantage, certainly!" replied McNabbs, "I could dispense with all that. If I had been one of Noah's companions at the time of the deluge, I should most assuredly have hindered the imprudent patriarch from putting in pairs of lions, and tigers, and panthers, and bears, and such animals, for they are as malevolent as they are useless."

"You would have done that?" asked Paganel.

"Yes, I would."

"Well, you would have done wrong in a zoological point of view," returned Paganel.

"But not in a humanitarian one," rejoined the Major.

"It is shocking!" replied Paganel. "Why, for my part, on the contrary, I should have taken special care to preserve megatheriums and pterodactyles, and all the antediluvian species of which we are unfortunately deprived by his neglect."

"And I say," returned McNabbs, "that Noah did a very good thing when he abandoned them to their fate — that is, if they lived in his day."

"And I say he did a very bad thing," retorted Paganel, "and he has justly merited the malediction of SAVANTS to the end of time!"

The rest of the party could not help laughing at hearing the two friends disputing over old Noah. Contrary to all his principles, the Major, who all his life had never disputed with anyone, was always sparring with Paganel. The geographer seemed to have a peculiarly exciting effect on him.

Glenarvan, as usual, always the peacemaker, interfered in the debate, and said:

“Whether the loss of ferocious animals is to be regretted or not, in a scientific point of view, there is no help for it now; we must be content to do without them. Paganel can hardly expect to meet with wild beasts in this aerial forest.”

“Why not?” asked the geographer.

“Wild beasts on a tree!” exclaimed Tom Austin.

“Yes, undoubtedly. The American tiger, the jaguar, takes refuge in the trees, when the chase gets too hot for him. It is quite possible that one of these animals, surprised by the inundation, might have climbed up into this OMBU, and be hiding now among its thick foliage.”

“You haven’t met any of them, at any rate, I suppose?” said the Major.

“No,” replied Paganel, “though we hunted all through the wood. It is vexing, for it would have been a splendid chase. A jaguar is a bloodthirsty, ferocious creature. He can twist the neck of a horse with a single stroke of his paw. When he has once tasted human flesh he scents it greedily. He likes to eat an Indian best, and next to him a negro, then a mulatto, and last of all a white man.”

“I am delighted to hear we come number four,” said McNabbs.

“That only proves you are insipid,” retorted Paganel, with an air of disdain.

“I am delighted to be insipid,” was the Major’s reply.

“Well, it is humiliating enough,” said the intractable Paganel. “The white man proclaimed himself chief of the human race; but Mr. Jaguar is of a different opinion it seems.”

“Be that as it may, my brave Paganel, seeing there are

neither Indians, nor negroes, nor mulattoes among us,

I am quite rejoiced at the absence of your beloved jaguars.

Our situation is not so particularly agreeable.”

“What! not agreeable!” exclaimed Paganel, jumping at the word as likely to give a new turn to the conversation. “You are complaining of your lot, Glenarvan.”

“I should think so, indeed,” replied Glenarvan. “Do you find these uncomfortable hard branches very luxurious?”

“I have never been more comfortable, even in my study. We live like the birds, we sing and fly about. I begin to believe men were intended to live on trees.”

“But they want wings,” suggested the Major.

“They’ll make them some day.”

“And till then,” put in Glenarvan, “with your leave, I prefer the gravel of a park, or the floor of a house, or the deck of a ship, to this aerial dwelling.”

“We must take things as they come, Glenarvan,” returned Paganel. “If good, so much the better; if bad, never mind. Ah, I see you are wishing you had all the comforts of Malcolm Castle.”

“No, but — ”

“I am quite certain Robert is perfectly happy,” interrupted Paganel, eager to insure one partisan at least.

“Yes, that I am!” exclaimed Robert, in a joyous tone.

“At his age it is quite natural,” replied Glenarvan.

“And at mine, too,” returned the geographer. “The fewer one’s comforts, the fewer one’s needs; and the fewer one’s needs, the greater one’s happiness.”

“Now, now,” said the Major, “here is Paganel running a tilt against riches and gilt ceilings.”

“No, McNabbs,” replied the SAVANT, “I’m not; but if you like, I’ll tell you a little Arabian story that comes into my mind, very APROPOS this minute.”

“Oh, do, do,” said Robert.

“And what is your story to prove, Paganel?” inquired the Major.

“Much what all stories prove, my brave comrade.”

“Not much then,” rejoined McNabbs. “But go on, Scheherazade, and tell us the story.”

“There was once,” said Paganel, “a son of the great Haroun-al-Raschid, who was unhappy, and went to consult an old Dervish. The old sage told him that happiness was a difficult thing to find in this world. ‘However,’ he added, ‘I know an infallible means of procuring your happiness.’ ‘What is it?’ asked the young Prince. ‘It is to put the shirt of a happy man on your shoulders.’ Whereupon the Prince embraced the old man, and set out at once to search for his talisman. He visited all the capital cities in the world. He tried on the shirts of kings, and emperors, and princes and nobles; but all in vain: he could not find a man among them that was happy. Then he put on the shirts of artists, and warriors, and merchants; but these were no better. By this time he had traveled a long way, without finding what he sought. At last he began to despair of success, and began sorrowfully to retrace his steps back to his father’s palace, when one day he heard an honest peasant singing so merrily as he drove the plow, that he thought, ‘Surely this man is happy, if there is such a thing as happiness on earth.’ Forthwith he accosted him, and said, ‘Are you happy?’ ‘Yes,’ was the reply. ‘There is nothing you desire?’ ‘Nothing.’ ‘You would not change your lot for that of a king?’ ‘Never!’ ‘Well, then, sell me your shirt.’ ‘My shirt! I haven’t one!’”

CHAPTER XXV BETWEEN FIRE AND WATER

BEFORE turning into “their nest,” as Paganel had called it, he, and Robert, and Glenarvan climbed up into the observatory to have one more inspection of the liquid plain. It was about nine o’clock; the sun had just sunk behind the glowing mists of the western horizon.

The eastern horizon was gradually assuming a most stormy aspect. A thick dark bar of cloud was rising higher and higher, and by degrees extinguishing the stars. Before long half the sky was overspread. Evidently motive power lay in the cloud itself, for there was not a breath of wind. Absolute calm reigned in the atmosphere; not a leaf stirred on the tree, not a ripple disturbed the surface of the water. There seemed to be scarcely any air even, as though some vast pneumatic machine had rarefied it. The entire atmosphere was charged to the utmost with electricity, the presence of which sent a thrill through the whole nervous system of all animated beings.

“We are going to have a storm,” said Paganel.

“You’re not afraid of thunder, are you, Robert?” asked Glenarvan.

“No, my Lord!” exclaimed Robert. “Well, my boy, so much the better, for a storm is not far off.”

“And a violent one, too,” added Paganel, “if I may judge by the look of things.”

“It is not the storm I care about,” said Glenarvan, “so much as the torrents of rain that will accompany it. We shall be soaked to the skin. Whatever you may say, Paganel, a nest won’t do for a man, and you will learn that soon, to your cost.”

“With the help of philosophy, it will,” replied Paganel.

“Philosophy! that won’t keep you from getting drenched.”

“No, but it will warm you.”

“Well,” said Glenarvan, “we had better go down to our friends, and advise them to wrap themselves up in their philosophy and their ponchos as tightly as possible, and above all, to lay in a stock of patience, for we shall need it before very long.”

Glenarvan gave a last glance at the angry sky. The clouds now covered it entirely; only a dim streak of light shone faintly in the west. A dark shadow lay on the water, and it could hardly be distinguished from the thick vapors above it. There was no sensation of light or sound. All was darkness and silence around.

“Let us go down,” said Glenarvan; “the thunder will soon burst over us.”

On returning to the bottom of the tree, they found themselves, to their great surprise, in a sort of dim twilight, produced by myriads of luminous specks which appeared buzzing confusedly over the surface of the water.

“It is phosphorescence, I suppose,” said Glenarvan.

“No, but phosphorescent insects, positive glow-worms, living diamonds, which the ladies of Buenos Ayres convert into magnificent ornaments.”

“What!” exclaimed Robert, “those sparks flying about are insects!”

“Yes, my boy.”

Robert caught one in his hand, and found Paganel was right. It was a kind of large drone, an inch long, and the Indians call it "tuco-tuco." This curious specimen of the COLEOPTERA sheds its radiance from two spots in the front of its breast-plate, and the light is sufficient to read by. Holding his watch close to the insect, Paganel saw distinctly that the time was 10 P. M.

On rejoining the Major and his three sailors, Glenarvan warned them of the approaching storm, and advised them to secure themselves in their beds of branches as firmly as possible, for there was no doubt that after the first clap of thunder the wind would become unchained, and the OMBU would be violently shaken. Though they could not defend themselves from the waters above, they might at least keep out of the rushing current beneath.

They wished one another "good-night," though hardly daring to hope for it, and then each one rolled himself in his poncho and lay down to sleep.

But the approach of the great phenomena of nature excites vague uneasiness in the heart of every sentient being, even in the most strong-minded. The whole party in the OMBU felt agitated and oppressed, and not one of them could close his eyes. The first peal of thunder found them wide awake. It occurred about 11 P. M. and sounded like a distant rolling. Glenarvan ventured to creep out of the sheltering foliage, and made his way to the extremity of the horizontal branch to take a look round.

The deep blackness of the night was already scarified with sharp bright lines, which were reflected back by the water with unerring exactness. The clouds had rent in many parts, but noiselessly, like some soft cotton material. After attentively observing both the zenith and horizon, Glenarvan went back to the center of the trunk.

"Well, Glenarvan, what's your report?" asked Paganel.

“I say it is beginning in good earnest, and if it goes on so we shall have a terrible storm.”

“So much the better,” replied the enthusiastic Paganel; “I should like a grand exhibition, since we can’t run away.”

“That’s another of your theories,” said the Major.

“And one of my best, McNabbs. I am of Glenarvan’s opinion, that the storm will be superb. Just a minute ago, when I was trying to sleep, several facts occurred to my memory, that make me hope it will, for we are in the region of great electrical tempests. For instance, I have read somewhere, that in 1793, in this very province of Buenos Ayres, lightning struck thirty-seven times during one single storm. My colleague, M. Martin de Moussy, counted fifty-five minutes of uninterrupted rolling.”

“Watch in hand?” asked the Major.

“Watch in hand. Only one thing makes me uneasy,” added Paganel, “if it is any use to be uneasy, and that is, that the culminating point of this plain, is just this very OMBU where we are. A lightning conductor would be very serviceable to us at present. For it is this tree especially, among all that grow in the Pampas, that the thunder has a particular affection for. Besides, I need not tell you, friend, that learned men tell us never to take refuge under trees during a storm.”

“Most seasonable advice, certainly, in our circumstances,” said the Major.

“I must confess, Paganel,” replied Glenarvan, “that you might have chosen a better time for this reassuring information.”

“Bah!” replied Paganel, “all times are good for getting information.

Ha! now it’s beginning.”

Louder peals of thunder interrupted this inopportune conversation, the violence increasing with the noise till the whole atmosphere seemed to vibrate with rapid oscillations.

The incessant flashes of lightning took various forms. Some darted down perpendicularly from the sky five or six times in the same place in succession. Others would have excited the interest of a SAVANT to the highest degree, for though Arago, in his curious statistics, only cites two examples of forked lightning, it was visible here hundreds of times. Some of the flashes branched out in a thousand different directions, making coralliform zigzags, and threw out wonderful jets of arborescent light.

Soon the whole sky from east to north seemed supported by a phosphoric band of intense brilliancy. This kept increasing by degrees till it overspread the entire horizon, kindling the clouds which were faithfully mirrored in the waters as if they were masses of combustible material, beneath, and presented the appearance of an immense globe of fire, the center of which was the OMBU.

Glenarvan and his companions gazed silently at this terrifying spectacle. They could not make their voices heard, but the sheets of white light which enwrapped them every now and then, revealed the face of one and another, sometimes the calm features of the Major, sometimes the eager, curious glance of Paganel, or the energetic face of Glenarvan, and at others, the scared eyes of the terrified Robert, and the careless looks of the sailors, investing them with a weird, spectral aspect.

However, as yet, no rain had fallen, and the wind had not risen in the least. But this state of things was of short duration; before long the cataracts of the sky burst forth, and came down in vertical streams. As the large drops fell splashing into the lake, fiery sparks seemed to fly out from the illuminated surface.

Was the rain the FINALE of the storm? If so, Glenarvan and his companions would escape scot free, except for a few vigorous douche baths. No. At the very height of this struggle of the electric forces of the atmosphere, a large ball of fire appeared suddenly at the extremity of the horizontal parent branch, as thick as a man's wrist, and surrounded with black smoke. This ball, after turning round and round for a few seconds, burst like a bombshell, and with so much noise that the explosion was distinctly audible above the general FRACAS. A sulphurous smoke filled the air, and complete silence reigned till the voice of Tom Austin was heard shouting:

"The tree is on fire."

Tom was right. In a moment, as if some fireworks were being ignited, the flame ran along the west side of the OMBU; the dead wood and nests of dried grass, and the whole sap, which was of a spongy texture, supplied food for its devouring activity.

The wind had risen now and fanned the flame. It was time to flee, and Glenarvan and his party hurried away to the eastern side of their refuge, which was meantime untouched by the fire. They were all silent, troubled, and terrified, as they watched branch after branch shrivel, and crack, and writhe in the flame like living serpents, and then drop into the swollen torrent, still red and gleaming, as it was borne swiftly along on the rapid current. The flames sometimes rose to a prodigious height, and seemed almost lost in the atmosphere, and sometimes, beaten down by the hurricane, closely enveloped the OMBU like a robe of Nessus. Terror seized the entire group. They were almost suffocated with smoke, and scorched with the unbearable heat, for the conflagration had already reached the lower branches on their side of the OMBU. To extinguish it or check its progress was impossible; and they saw themselves irrevocably condemned to a torturing death, like the victims of Hindoo divinities.

At last, their situation was absolutely intolerable. Of the two deaths staring them in the face, they had better choose the less cruel.

“To the water!” exclaimed Glenarvan.

Wilson, who was nearest the flames, had already plunged into the lake, but next minute he screamed out in the most violent terror:

“Help! Help!”

Austin rushed toward him, and with the assistance of the Major, dragged him up again on the tree.

“What’s the matter?” they asked.

“Alligators! alligators!” replied Wilson.

The whole foot of the tree appeared to be surrounded by these formidable animals of the Saurian order. By the glare of the flames, they were immediately recognized by Paganel, as the ferocious species peculiar to America, called CAIMANS in the Spanish territories. About ten of them were there, lashing the water with their powerful tails, and attacking the OMBU with the long teeth of their lower jaw.

At this sight the unfortunate men gave themselves up to be lost. A frightful death was in store for them, since they must either be devoured by the fire or by the caimans. Even the Major said, in a calm voice:

“This is the beginning of the end, now.”

There are circumstances in which men are powerless, when the unchained elements can only be combated by other elements. Glenarvan gazed with haggard looks at the fire and water leagued against him, hardly knowing what deliverance to implore from Heaven.

The violence of the storm had abated, but it had developed in the atmosphere a considerable quantity of vapors, to which electricity was about to communicate immense force. An enormous water-spout was gradually forming in the south — a cone of thick mists, but with the point at the bottom, and base at the top, linking together the turbulent water and the angry clouds. This meteor soon began to move forward, turning over and over on itself with dizzy rapidity, and sweeping up into its center a column of water from the lake, while its gyratory motions made all the surrounding currents of air rush toward it.

A few seconds more, and the gigantic water-spout threw itself on the OMBU, and caught it up in its whirl. The tree shook to its roots. Glenarvan could fancy the caimans’ teeth were tearing it up from the soil; for as he and his companions held on, each clinging firmly to the other, they felt the towering OMBU give way, and the next minute it fell right over with a terrible hissing noise, as the flaming branches touched the foaming water.

It was the work of an instant. Already the water-spout had passed, to carry on its destructive work elsewhere. It seemed to empty the lake in its passage, by continually drawing up the water into itself.

The OMBU now began to drift rapidly along, impelled by wind and current. All the caimans had taken their departure, except one that was crawling over the upturned roots, and coming toward the poor refugees with wide open jaws. But Mulrady, seizing hold of a branch that was half-burned off, struck the monster such a tremendous blow, that it fell back into the torrent and disappeared, lashing the water with its formidable tail.

Glenarvan and his companions being thus delivered from the voracious SAURIANS, stationed themselves on the branches windward of the conflagration, while the OMBU sailed along like a blazing fire-ship through the dark night, the flames spreading themselves round like sails before the breath of the hurricane.

CHAPTER XXVI THE RETURN ON BOARD

FOR two hours the OMBU navigated the immense lake without reaching terra firma. The flames which were devouring it had gradually died out. The chief danger of their frightful passage was thus removed, and the Major went the length of saying, that he should not be surprised if they were saved after all.

The direction of the current remained unchanged, always running from southwest to northeast. Profound darkness had again set in, only illumined here and there by a parting flash of lightning. The storm was nearly over. The rain had given place to light mists, which a breath of wind dispersed, and the heavy masses of cloud had separated, and now streaked the sky in long bands.

The OMBU was borne onward so rapidly by the impetuous torrent, that anyone might have supposed some powerful locomotive engine was hidden in its trunk. It seemed likely enough they might continue drifting in this way for days. About three o'clock in the morning, however, the Major noticed that the roots were beginning to graze the ground occasionally, and by sounding the depth of the water with a long branch, Tom Austin found that they were getting on rising ground. Twenty minutes afterward, the OMBU stopped short with a violent jolt.

“Land! land!” shouted Paganel, in a ringing tone.

The extremity of the calcined bough had struck some hillock, and never were sailors more glad; the rock to them was the port.

Already Robert and Wilson had leaped on to the solid plateau with a loud, joyful hurrah! when a well-known whistle was heard. The gallop of a horse resounded over the plain, and the tall form of Thalcave emerged from the darkness.

“Thalcave! Thalcave!” they all cried with one voice.

“Amigos!” replied the Patagonian, who had been waiting for the travelers here in the same place where the current had landed himself.

As he spoke he lifted up Robert in his arms, and hugged him to his breast, never imagining that Paganel was hanging on to him. A general and hearty hand-shaking followed, and everyone rejoiced at seeing their faithful guide again. Then the Patagonian led the way into the HANGAR of a deserted ESTANCIA, where there was a good, blazing fire to warm them, and a substantial meal of fine, juicy slices of venison soon broiling, of which they did not leave a crumb. When their minds had calmed down a little, and they were able to reflect on the dangers they had come through from flood, and fire, and alligators, they could scarcely believe they had escaped.

Thalcave, in a few words, gave Paganel an account of himself since they parted, entirely ascribing his deliverance to his intrepid horse. Then Paganel tried to make him understand their new interpretation of the document, and the consequent hopes they were indulging. Whether the Indian actually understood his ingenious hypothesis was a question; but he saw that they were glad and confident, and that was enough for him.

As can easily be imagined, after their compulsory rest on the OMBU, the travelers were up betimes and ready to start. At eight o’clock they set off. No means of transport being procurable so far south, they were compelled to walk. However, it was not more than forty miles now that they had to go, and Thaouka would not refuse to give a lift occasionally to a tired pedestrian, or even to a couple at a pinch. In thirty-six hours they might reach the shores of the Atlantic.

The low-lying tract of marshy ground, still under water, soon lay behind them, as Thalcave led them upward to the higher plains. Here the Argentine territory resumed its monotonous aspect. A few clumps of trees, planted by European hands, might chance to be visible among the pasturage, but quite as rarely as in Tandil and Tapalquem Sierras. The native trees are only found on the edge of long prairies and about Cape Corrientes.

Next day, though still fifteen miles distant, the proximity of the ocean was sensibly felt. The VIRAZON, a peculiar wind, which blows regularly half of the day and night, bent down the heads of the tall grasses. Thinly planted woods rose to view, and small tree-like mimosas, bushes of acacia, and tufts of CURRA-MANTEL. Here and there, shining like pieces of broken glass, were salinous lagoons, which increased the difficulty of the journey as the travelers had to wind round them to get past. They pushed on as quickly as possible, hoping to reach Lake Salado, on the shores of the ocean, the same day; and at 8 P. M. when they found themselves in front of the sand hills two hundred feet high, which skirt the coast, they were all tolerably tired. But when the long murmur of the distant ocean fell on their ears, the exhausted men forgot their fatigue, and ran up the sandhills with surprising agility. But it was getting quite dark already, and their eager gaze could discover no traces of the DUNCAN on the gloomy expanse of water that met their sight.

“But she is there, for all that,” exclaimed Glenarvan, “waiting for us, and running alongside.”

“We shall see her to-morrow,” replied McNabbs.

Tom Austin hailed the invisible yacht, but there was no response. The wind was very high and the sea rough. The clouds were scudding along from the west, and the spray of the waves dashed up even to the sand-hills. It was little wonder, then, if the man on the look-out could neither hear nor make himself heard, supposing the DUNCAN were there. There was no shelter on the coast for her, neither bay nor cove, nor port; not so much as a creek. The shore was composed of sand-banks which ran out into the sea, and were more dangerous to approach than rocky shoals. The sand-banks irritate the waves, and make the sea so particularly rough, that in heavy weather vessels that run aground there are invariably dashed to pieces.

Though, then, the DUNCAN would keep far away from such a coast, John Mangles is a prudent captain to get near. Tom Austin, however, was of the opinion that she would be able to keep five miles out.

The Major advised his impatient relative to restrain himself to circumstances. Since there was no means of dissipating the darkness, what was the use of straining his eyes by vainly endeavoring to pierce through it.

He set to work immediately to prepare the night’s encampment beneath the shelter of the sand-hills; the last provisions supplied the last meal, and afterward, each, following the Major’s example, scooped out a hole in the sand, which made a comfortable enough bed, and then covered himself with the soft material up to his chin, and fell into a heavy sleep.

But Glenarvan kept watch. There was still a stiff breeze of wind, and the ocean had not recovered its equilibrium after the recent storm. The waves, at all times tumultuous, now broke over the sand-banks with a noise like thunder. Glenarvan could not rest, knowing the DUNCAN was so near him. As to supposing she had not arrived at the appointed rendezvous, that was out of the question. Glenarvan had left the Bay of Talcahuano on the 14th of

October, and arrived on the shores of the Atlantic on the 12th of November. He had taken thirty days to cross Chili, the Cordilleras, the Pampas, and the Argentine plains, giving the DUNCAN ample time to double Cape Horn, and arrive on the opposite side. For such a fast runner there were no impediments. Certainly the storm had been very violent, and its fury must have been terrible on such a vast battlefield as the Atlantic, but the yacht was a good ship, and the captain was a good sailor. He was bound to be there, and he would be there.

These reflections, however, did not calm Glenarvan. When the heart and the reason are struggling, it is generally the heart that wins the mastery. The laird of Malcolm Castle felt the presence of loved ones about him in the darkness as he wandered up and down the lonely strand. He gazed, and listened, and even fancied he caught occasional glimpses of a faint light.

“I am not mistaken,” he said to himself; “I saw a ship’s light, one of the lights on the DUNCAN! Oh! why can’t I see in the dark?”

All at once the thought rushed across him that Paganel said he was a nyctalope, and could see at night. He must go and wake him.

The learned geographer was sleeping as sound as a mole.

A strong arm pulled him up out of the sand and made him call out:

“Who goes there?”

“It is I, Paganel.”

“Who?”

“Glenarvan. Come, I need your eyes.”

“My eyes,” replied Paganel, rubbing them vigorously.

“Yes, I need your eyes to make out the DUNCAN in this darkness, so come.”

“Confound the nyctalopia!” said Paganel, inwardly, though delighted to be of any service to his friend.

He got up and shook his stiffened limbs, and stretching and yawning as most people do when roused from sleep, followed Glenarvan to the beach.

Glenarvan begged him to examine the distant horizon across the sea, which he did most conscientiously for some minutes.

“Well, do you see nothing?” asked Glenarvan.

“Not a thing. Even a cat couldn’t see two steps before her.”

“Look for a red light or a green one — her larboard or starboard light.”

“I see neither a red nor a green light, all is pitch dark,” replied Paganel, his eyes involuntarily beginning to close.

For half an hour he followed his impatient friend, mechanically letting his head frequently drop on his chest, and raising it again with a start. At last he neither answered nor spoke, and he reeled about like a drunken man. Glenarvan looked at him, and found he was sound asleep!

Without attempting to wake him, he took his arm, led him back to his hole, and buried him again comfortably.

At dawn next morning, all the slumberers started to their feet and rushed to the shore, shouting “Hurrah, hurrah!” as Lord Glenarvan’s loud cry, “The

DUNCAN, the DUNCAN!” broke upon his ear.

There she was, five miles out, her courses carefully reefed, and her steam half up. Her smoke was lost in the morning mist. The sea was so violent that a vessel of her tonnage could not have ventured safely nearer the sand-banks.

Glenarvan, by the aid of Paganel’s telescope, closely observed the movements of the yacht. It was evident that John Mangles had not perceived his passengers, for he continued his course as before.

But at this very moment Thalcave fired his carbine in the direction of the yacht. They listened and looked, but no signal of recognition was returned. A second and a third time the Indian fired, awakening the echoes among the sand-hills.

At last a white smoke was seen issuing from the side of the yacht.

“They see us!” exclaimed Glenarvan. “That’s the cannon of the DUNCAN.”

A few seconds, and the heavy boom of the cannon came across the water and died away on the shore. The sails were instantly altered, and the steam got up, so as to get as near the coast as possible.

Presently, through the glass, they saw a boat lowered.

“Lady Helena will not be able to come,” said Tom Austin.

“It is too rough.”

“Nor John Mangles,” added McNabbs; “he cannot leave the ship.”

“My sister, my sister!” cried Robert, stretching out his arms toward the yacht, which was now rolling violently.

“Oh, how I wish I could get on board!” said Glenarvan.

“Patience, Edward! you will be there in a couple of hours,” replied the Major.

Two hours! But it was impossible for a boat — a six-oared one — to come and go in a shorter space of time.

Glenarvan went back to Thalcave, who stood beside Thaouka, with his arms crossed, looking quietly at the troubled waves.

Glenarvan took his hand, and pointing to the yacht, said: “Come!”

The Indian gently shook his head.

“Come, friend,” repeated Glenarvan.

“No,” said Thalcave, gently. “Here is Thaouka, and there — the Pampas,” he added, embracing with a passionate gesture the wide-stretching prairies.

Glenarvan understood his refusal. He knew that the Indian would never forsake the prairie, where the bones of his fathers were whitening, and he knew the religious attachment of these sons of the desert for their native land. He did not urge Thalcave longer, therefore, but simply pressed his hand. Nor could he find it in his heart to insist, when the Indian, smiling as usual, would not accept the price of his services, pushing back the money, and saying:

“For the sake of friendship.”

Glenarvan could not reply; but he wished at least, to leave the brave fellow some souvenir of his European friends. What was there to give, however? Arms, horses, everything had been destroyed in the unfortunate inundation, and his friends were no richer than himself.

He was quite at a loss how to show his recognition of the disinterestedness of this noble guide, when a happy thought struck him. He had an exquisite portrait of Lady Helena in his pocket, a CHEF-D'OEUVRE of Lawrence. This he drew out, and offered to Thalcave, simply saying:

“My wife.”

The Indian gazed at it with a softened eye, and said:

“Good and beautiful.”

Then Robert, and Paganel, and the Major, and the rest, exchanged touching farewells with the faithful Patagonian. Thalcave embraced them each, and pressed them to his broad chest. Paganel made him accept a map of South America and the two oceans, which he had often seen the Indian looking at with interest. It was the most precious thing the geographer possessed. As for Robert, he had only caresses to bestow, and these he lavished on his friend, not forgetting to give a share to Thaouka.

The boat from the DUNCAN was now fast approaching, and in another minute had glided into a narrow channel between the sand-banks, and run ashore.

“My wife?” were Glenarvan’s first words.

“My sister?” said Robert.

“Lady Helena and Miss Grant are waiting for you on board,” replied the coxswain; “but lose no time your honor, we have not a minute, for the tide is beginning to ebb already.”

The last kindly adieux were spoken, and Thalcave accompanied his friends to the boat, which had been pushed back into the water. Just as Robert was going to step in, the Indian took him in his arms, and gazed tenderly into his face. Then he said:

“Now go. You are a man.”

“Good-by, good-by, friend!” said Glenarvan, once more.

“Shall we never see each other again?” Paganel called out.

“Quien sabe?” (Who knows?) replied Thalcave, lifting his arms toward heaven.

These were the Indian’s last words, dying away on the breeze, as the boat receded gradually from the shore. For a long time, his dark, motionless SILHOUETTE stood out against the sky, through the white, dashing spray of the waves. Then by degrees his tall form began to diminish in size, till at last his friends of a day lost sight of him altogether.

An hour afterward Robert was the first to leap on board the DUNCAN. He flung his arms round Mary’s neck, amid the loud, joyous hurrahs of the crew on the yacht.

Thus the journey across South America was accomplished, the given line of march being scrupulously adhered to throughout.

Neither mountains nor rivers had made the travelers change their course; and though they had not had to encounter any ill-will from men, their generous intrepidity had been often enough roughly put to the proof by the fury of the unchained elements.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I A NEW DESTINATION

FOR the first few moments the joy of reunion completely filled the hearts. Lord Glenarvan had taken care that the ill-success of their expedition should not throw a gloom over the pleasure of meeting, his very first words being:

“Cheer up, friends, cheer up! Captain Grant is not with us, but we have a certainty of finding him!”

Only such an assurance as this would have restored hope to those on board the DUNCAN. Lady Helena and Mary Grant had been sorely tried by the suspense, as they stood on the poop waiting for the arrival of the boat, and trying to count the number of its passengers. Alternate hope and fear agitated the bosom of poor Mary. Sometimes she fancied she could see her father, Harry Grant, and sometimes she gave way to despair. Her heart throbbed violently; she could not speak, and indeed could scarcely stand. Lady Helena put her arm round her waist to support her, but the captain, John Mangles, who stood close beside them spoke no encouraging word, for his practiced eye saw plainly that the captain was not there.

“He is there! He is coming! Oh, father!” exclaimed the young girl. But as the boat came nearer, her illusion was dispelled; all hope forsook her, and she would have sunk in despair, but for the reassuring voice of Glenarvan.

After their mutual embraces were over, Lady Helena, and Mary Grant, and John Mangles, were informed of the principal incidents of the expedition, and especially of the new interpretation of the document, due to the sagacity of Jacques Paganel. His Lordship also spoke in the most eulogistic terms of Robert, of whom Mary might well be proud. His courage and devotion, and the dangers he had run, were all shown up in strong relief by his patron, till the modest boy did not know which way to look, and was obliged to hide his burning cheeks in his sister’s arms.

“No need to blush, Robert,” said John Mangles. “Your conduct has been worthy of your name.” And he leaned over the boy and pressed his lips on his cheek, still wet with Mary’s tears.

The Major and Paganel, it need hardly be said, came in for their due share of welcome, and Lady Helena only regretted she could not shake hands with the brave and generous Thalcave. McNabbs soon slipped away to his cabin, and began to shave himself as coolly and composedly as possible; while Paganel flew here and there, like a bee sipping the sweets of compliments and smiles. He wanted to embrace everyone on board the yacht, and beginning with Lady Helena and Mary Grant, wound up with M. Olbinett, the steward, who could only acknowledge so polite an attention by announcing that breakfast was ready.

“Breakfast!” exclaimed Paganel.

“Yes, Monsieur Paganel.”

“A real breakfast, on a real table, with a cloth and napkins?”

“Certainly, Monsieur Paganel.”

“And we shall neither have CHARQUI, nor hard eggs, nor fillets of ostrich?”

“Oh, Monsieur,” said Olbinett in an aggrieved tone.

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings, my friend,” said the geographer smiling. “But for a month that has been our usual bill of fare, and when we dined we stretched ourselves full length on the ground, unless we sat astride on the trees. Consequently, the meal you have just announced seemed to me like a dream, or fiction, or chimera.”

“Well, Monsieur Paganel, come along and let us prove its reality,” said Lady Helena, who could not help laughing.

“Take my arm,” replied the gallant geographer.

“Has his Lordship any orders to give me about the DUNCAN?” asked John Mangles.

“After breakfast, John,” replied Glenarvan, “we’ll discuss the program of our new expedition en famille.”

M. Olbinett’s breakfast seemed quite a FETE to the hungry guests. It was pronounced excellent, and even superior to the festivities of the Pampas. Paganel was helped twice to each dish, through “absence of mind,” he said.

This unlucky word reminded Lady Helena of the amiable Frenchman’s propensity, and made her ask if he had ever fallen into his old habits while they were away. The Major and Glenarvan exchanged smiling glances, and Paganel burst out laughing, and protested on his honor that he would never be caught tripping again once more during the whole voyage. After this prelude, he gave an amusing recital of his disastrous mistake in learning Spanish, and his profound study of Camoens. “After all,” he added, “it’s an ill wind that blows nobody good, and I don’t regret the mistake.”

“Why not, my worthy friend?” asked the Major.

“Because I not only know Spanish, but Portuguese. I can speak two languages instead of one.”

“Upon my word, I never thought of that,” said McNabbs. “My compliments,

Paganel — my sincere compliments.”

But Paganel was too busily engaged with his knife and fork to lose a single mouthful, though he did his best to eat and talk at the same time. He was so much taken up with his plate, however, that one little fact quite escaped his observation, though Glenarvan noticed it at once. This was, that John Mangles had grown particularly attentive to Mary Grant. A significant glance from Lady Helena told him, moreover, how affairs stood, and inspired him with affectionate sympathy for the young lovers; but nothing of this was apparent in his manner to John, for his next question was what sort of a voyage he had made.

“We could not have had a better; but I must apprise your Lordship that I did not go through the Straits of Magellan again.”

“What! you doubled Cape Horn, and I was not there!” exclaimed Paganel.

“Hang yourself!” said the Major.

“Selfish fellow! you advise me to do that because you want my rope,” retorted the geographer.

“Well, you see, my dear Paganel, unless you have the gift of ubiquity you can’t be in two places at once. While you were scouring the pampas you could not be doubling Cape Horn.”

“That doesn’t prevent my regretting it,” replied Paganel.

Here the subject dropped, and John continued his account of his voyage. On arriving at Cape Pilares he had found the winds dead against him, and therefore made for the south, coasting along the Desolation Isle, and after going as far as the sixty-seventh degree southern latitude, had doubled Cape Horn, passed by Terra del Fuego and the Straits of Lemaire, keeping close to the Patagonian shore. At Cape Corrientes they encountered the terrible storm which had handled the travelers across the pampas so roughly, but the yacht had borne it bravely, and for the last three days had stood right out to sea, till the welcome signal-gun of the expedition was heard announcing the arrival of the anxiously-looked-for party. "It was only justice," the captain added, "that he should mention the intrepid bearing of Lady Helena and Mary Grant throughout the whole hurricane. They had not shown the least fear, unless for their friends, who might possibly be exposed to the fury of the tempest."

After John Mangles had finished his narrative, Glenarvan turned to Mary and said; "My dear Miss Mary, the captain has been doing homage to your noble qualities, and I am glad to think you are not unhappy on board his ship."

"How could I be?" replied Mary naively, looking at Lady Helena, and at the young captain too, likely enough.

"Oh, my sister is very fond of you, Mr. John, and so am I," exclaimed Robert.

"And so am I of you, my dear boy," returned the captain, a little abashed by Robert's innocent avowal, which had kindled a faint blush on Mary's cheek. Then he managed to turn the conversation to safer topics by saying: "And now that your Lordship has heard all about the doings of the DUNCAN, perhaps you will give us some details of your own journey, and tell us more about the exploits of our young hero."

Nothing could be more agreeable than such a recital to Lady Helena and Mary Grant; and accordingly Lord Glenarvan hastened to satisfy their curiosity — going over incident by incident, the entire march from one ocean to another, the pass of the Andes, the earthquake, the disappearance of Robert, his capture by the condor, Thalcave's providential shot, the episode of the red wolves, the devotion of the young lad, Sergeant Manuel, the inundations, the caimans, the waterspout, the night on the Atlantic shore — all these details, amusing or terrible, excited by turns laughter and horror in the listeners. Often and often Robert came in for caresses from his sister and Lady Helena. Never was a boy so much embraced, or by such enthusiastic friends.

"And now, friends," added Lord Glenarvan, when he had finished his narrative, "we must think of the present. The past is gone, but the future is ours. Let us come back to Captain Harry Grant."

As soon as breakfast was over they all went into Lord Glenarvan's private cabin and seated themselves round a table covered with charts and plans, to talk over the matter fully.

"My dear Helena," said Lord Glenarvan, "I told you, when we came on board a little while ago, that though we had not brought back Captain Grant, our hope of finding him was stronger than ever. The result of our journey across America is this: We have reached the conviction, or rather absolute certainty, that the shipwreck never occurred on the shores of the Atlantic nor Pacific. The natural inference is that, as far as regards Patagonia, our interpretation of the document was erroneous. Most fortunately, our friend Paganel, in a happy moment of inspiration, discovered the mistake. He has proved clearly that we have been on the wrong track, and so explained the document that all doubt whatever is removed from our minds. However, as the document is in French, I will ask Paganel to go over it for your benefit.”

The learned geographer, thus called upon, executed his task in the most convincing manner, descanting on the syllables GONIE and INDI, and extracting AUSTRALIA out of AUSTRAL. He pointed out that Captain Grant, on leaving the coast of Peru to return to Europe, might have been carried away with his disabled ship by the southern currents of the Pacific right to the shores of Australia, and his hypotheses were so ingenious and his deductions so subtle that even the matter-of-fact John Mangles, a difficult judge, and most unlikely to be led away by any flights of imagination, was completely satisfied.

At the conclusion of Paganel’s dissertation, Glenarvan announced that the DUNCAN would sail immediately for Australia.

But before the decisive orders were given, McNabbs asked for a few minutes’ hearing.

“Say away, McNabbs,” replied Glenarvan.

“I have no intention of weakening the arguments of my friend Paganel, and still less of refuting them. I consider them wise and weighty, and deserving our attention, and think them justly entitled to form the basis of our future researches. But still I should like them to be submitted to a final examination, in order to make their worth incontestable and uncontested.”

“Go on, Major,” said Paganel; “I am ready to answer all your questions.”

“They are simple enough, as you will see. Five months ago, when we left the Clyde, we had studied these same documents, and their interpretation then appeared quite plain. No other coast but the western coast of Patagonia could possibly, we thought, have been the scene of the shipwreck. We had not even the shadow of a doubt on the subject.”

“That’s true,” replied Glenarvan.

“A little later,” continued the Major, “when a providential fit of absence of mind came over Paganel, and brought him on board the yacht, the documents were submitted to him and he approved our plan of search most unreservedly.”

“I do not deny it,” said Paganel.

“And yet we were mistaken,” resumed the Major.

“Yes, we were mistaken,” returned Paganel; “but it is only human to make a mistake, while to persist in it, a man must be a fool.”

“Stop, Paganel, don’t excite yourself; I don’t mean to say that we should prolong our search in America.”

“What is it, then, that you want?” asked Glenarvan.

“A confession, nothing more. A confession that Australia now as evidently appears to be the theater of the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA as America did before.”

“We confess it willingly,” replied Paganel.

“Very well, then, since that is the case, my advice is not to let your imagination rely on successive and contradictory evidence. Who knows whether after Australia some other country may not appear with equal certainty to be the place, and we may have to recommence our search?”

Glenarvan and Paganel looked at each other silently, struck by the justice of these remarks.

“I should like you, therefore,” continued the Major, “before we actually start for Australia, to make one more examination of the documents. Here they are, and here are the charts. Let us take up each point in succession through which the 37th parallel passes, and see if we come across any other country which would agree with the precise indications of the document.”

“Nothing can be more easily and quickly done,” replied Paganel; “for countries are not very numerous in this latitude, happily.”

“Well, look,” said the Major, displaying an English planisphere on the plan of Mercator’s Chart, and presenting the appearance of a terrestrial globe.

He placed it before Lady Helena, and then they all stood round, so as to be able to follow the argument of Paganel.

“As I have said already,” resumed the learned geographer, “after having crossed South America, the 37th degree of latitude cuts the islands of Tristan d’Acunha. Now I maintain that none of the words of the document could relate to these islands.”

The documents were examined with the most minute care, and the conclusion unanimously reached was that these islands were entirely out of the question.

“Let us go on then,” resumed Paganel. “After leaving the Atlantic, we pass two degrees below the Cape of Good Hope, and into the Indian Ocean. Only one group of islands is found on this route, the Amsterdam Isles. Now, then, we must examine these as we did the Tristan d’Acunha group.”

After a close survey, the Amsterdam Isles were rejected in their turn. Not a single word, or part of a word, French, English or German, could apply to this group in the Indian Ocean.

“Now we come to Australia,” continued Paganel.

“The 37th parallel touches this continent at Cape Bernouilli, and leaves it at Twofold Bay. You will agree with me that, without straining the text, the English word STRA and the French one AUSTRAL may relate to Australia. The thing is too plain to need proof.”

The conclusion of Paganel met with unanimous approval; every probability was in his favor.

“And where is the next point?” asked McNabbs.

“That is easily answered. After leaving Twofold Bay, we cross an arm of the sea which extends to New Zealand. Here I must call your attention to the fact that the French word CONTIN means a continent, irrefragably. Captain Grant could not, then, have found refuge in New Zealand, which is only an island. However that may be though, examine and compare, and go over and over each word, and see if, by any possibility, they can be made to fit this new country.”

“In no way whatever,” replied John Mangles, after a minute investigation of the documents and the planisphere.

“No,” chimed in all the rest, and even the Major himself, “it cannot apply to New Zealand.”

“Now,” went on Paganel, “in all this immense space between this large island and the American coast, there is only one solitary barren little island crossed by the 37th parallel.”

“And what is its name,” asked the Major.

“Here it is, marked in the map. It is Maria Theresa — a name of which there is not a single trace in either of the three documents.”

“Not the slightest,” said Glenarvan.

“I leave you, then, my friends, to decide whether all these probabilities, not to say certainties, are not in favor of the Australian continent.”

“Evidently,” replied the captain and all the others.

“Well, then, John,” said Glenarvan, “the next question is, have you provisions and coal enough?”

“Yes, your honor, I took in an ample store at Talcahuano, and, besides, we can easily replenish our stock of coal at Cape Town.”

“Well, then, give orders.”

“Let me make one more observation,” interrupted McNabbs.

“Go on then.”

“Whatever likelihood of success Australia may offer us, wouldn’t it be advisable to stop a day or two at the Tristan d’Acunha Isles and the

Amsterdam? They lie in our route, and would not take us the least out of the way. Then we should be able to ascertain if the BRITANNIA had left any traces of her shipwreck there?”

“Incredulous Major!” exclaimed Paganel, “he still sticks to his idea.”

“I stick to this any way, that I don’t want to have to retrace our steps, supposing that Australia should disappoint our sanguine hopes.”

“It seems to me a good precaution,” replied Glenarvan.

“And I’m not the one to dissuade you from it,” returned Paganel; “quite the contrary.”

“Steer straight for Tristan d’Acunha.”

“Immediately, your Honor,” replied the captain, going on deck, while Robert and Mary Grant overwhelmed Lord Glenarvan with their grateful thanks.

Shortly after, the DUNCAN had left the American coast, and was running eastward, her sharp keel rapidly cutting her way through the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

CHAPTER II TRISTAN D’ACUNHA AND THE ISLE OF AMSTERDAM

IF the yacht had followed the line of the equator, the 196 degrees which separate Australia from America, or, more correctly, Cape Bernouilli from Cape Corrientes, would have been equal to 11,760 geographical miles; but along the 37th parallel these same degrees, owing to the form of the earth, only represent 9,480 miles. From the American coast to Tristan d’Acunha is reckoned 2,100 miles — a distance which John Mangles hoped to clear in ten days, if east winds did not retard the motion of the yacht. But he was not long uneasy on that score, for toward evening the breeze sensibly lulled and then changed altogether, giving the DUNCAN a fair field on a calm sea for displaying her incomparable qualities as a sailor.

The passengers had fallen back into their ordinary ship life, and it hardly seemed as if they really could have been absent a whole month. Instead of the Pacific, the Atlantic stretched itself out before them, and there was scarcely a shade of difference in the waves of the two oceans. The elements, after having handled them so roughly, seemed now disposed to favor them to the utmost. The sea was tranquil, and the wind kept in the right quarter, so that the yacht could spread all her canvas, and lend its aid, if needed to the indefatigable steam stored up in the boiler.

Under such conditions, the voyage was safely and rapidly accomplished. Their confidence increased as they found themselves nearer the Australian coast. They began to talk of Captain Grant as if the yacht were going to take him on board at a given port. His cabin was got ready, and berths for the men. This cabin was next to the famous number six, which Paganel had taken possession of instead of the one he had booked on the SCOTIA. It had been till now occupied by M. Olbinett, who vacated it for the expected guest. Mary took great delight in arranging it with her own hands, and adorning it for the reception of the loved inmate.

The learned geographer kept himself closely shut up. He was working away from morning till night at a work entitled “Sublime Impressions of a Geographer in the Argentine Pampas,” and they could hear him repeating elegant periods aloud before committing them to the white pages of his day-book; and more than once, unfaithful to Clio, the muse of history, he invoked in his transports the divine Calliope, the muse of epic poetry.

Paganel made no secret of it either. The chaste daughters of Apollo willingly left the slopes of Helicon and Parnassus at his call. Lady Helena paid him sincere compliments on his mythological visitants, and so did the Major, though he could not forbear adding:

“But mind no fits of absence of mind, my dear Paganel; and if you take a fancy to learn Australian, don’t go and study it in a Chinese grammar.”

Things went on perfectly smoothly on board. Lady Helena and Lord Glenarvan found leisure to watch John Mangles’ growing attachment to Mary Grant. There was nothing to be said against it, and, indeed, since John remained silent, it was best to take no notice of it.

“What will Captain Grant think?” Lord Glenarvan asked his wife one day.

“He’ll think John is worthy of Mary, my dear Edward, and he’ll think right.”

Meanwhile, the yacht was making rapid progress. Five days after losing sight of Cape Corrientes, on the 16th of November, they fell in with fine westerly breezes, and the DUNCAN might almost have dispensed with her screw altogether, for she flew over the water like a bird, spreading all her sails to catch the breeze, as if she were running a race with the Royal Thames Club yachts.

Next day, the ocean appeared covered with immense seaweeds, looking like a great pond choked up with the DEBRIS of trees and plants torn off the neighboring continents. Commander Murray had specially pointed them out to the attention of navigators. The DUNCAN appeared to glide over a long prairie, which Paganel justly compared to the Pampas, and her speed slackened a little.

Twenty-four hours after, at break of day, the man on the look-out was heard calling out, “Land ahead!”

“In what direction?” asked Tom Austin, who was on watch.

“Leeward!” was the reply.

This exciting cry brought everyone speedily on deck. Soon a telescope made its appearance, followed by Jacques Paganel. The learned geographer pointed the instrument in the direction indicated, but could see nothing that resembled land.

“Look in the clouds,” said John Mangles.

“Ah, now I do see a sort of peak, but very indistinctly.”

“It is Tristan d’Acunha,” replied John Mangles.

“Then, if my memory serves me right, we must be eighty miles from it, for the peak of Tristan, seven thousand feet high, is visible at that distance.”

“That’s it, precisely.”

Some hours later, the sharp, lofty crags of the group of islands stood out clearly on the horizon. The conical peak of Tristan looked black against the bright sky, which seemed all ablaze with the splendor of the rising sun. Soon the principal island stood out from the rocky mass, at the summit of a triangle inclining toward the northeast.

Tristan d’Acunha is situated in 37 degrees 8’ of southern latitude, and 10 degrees 44’ of longitude west of the meridian at Greenwich. Inaccessible Island is eighteen miles to the southwest and Nightingale Island is ten miles to the southeast, and this completes the little solitary group of islets in the Atlantic Ocean. Toward noon, the two principal landmarks, by which the group is recognized were sighted, and at 3 P. M. the DUNCAN entered Falmouth Bay in Tristan d’Acunha.

Several whaling vessels were lying quietly at anchor there, for the coast abounds in seals and other marine animals.

John Mangle’s first care was to find good anchorage, and then all the passengers, both ladies and gentlemen, got into the long boat and were rowed ashore. They stepped out on a beach covered with fine black sand, the impalpable DEBRIS of the calcined rocks of the island.

Tristan d’Acunha is the capital of the group, and consists of a little village, lying in the heart of the bay, and watered by a noisy, rapid stream. It contained about fifty houses, tolerably clean, and disposed with geometrical regularity. Behind this miniature town there lay 1,500 hectares of meadow land, bounded by an embankment of lava. Above this embankment, the conical peak rose 7,000 feet high.

Lord Glenarvan was received by a governor supplied from the English colony at the Cape. He inquired at once respecting Harry Grant and the BRITANNIA, and found the names entirely unknown. The Tristan d’Acunha Isles are out of the route of ships, and consequently little frequented. Since the wreck of the Blendon Hall in 1821, on the rocks of Inaccessible Island, two vessels have stranded on the chief island — the PRIMANGUET in 1845, and the three-mast American, PHILADELPHIA, in 1857. These three events comprise the whole catalogue of maritime disasters in the annals of the Acunhas.

Lord Glenarvan did not expect to glean any information, and only asked by the way of duty. He even sent the boats to make the circuit of the island, the entire extent of which was not more than seventeen miles at most.

In the interim the passengers walked about the village. The population does not exceed 150 inhabitants, and consists of English and Americans, married to negroes and Cape Hottentots, who might bear away the palm for ugliness. The children of these heterogeneous households are very disagreeable compounds of Saxon stiffness and African blackness.

It was nearly nightfall before the party returned to the yacht, chattering and admiring the natural riches displayed on all sides, for even close to the streets of the capital, fields of wheat and maize were waving, and crops of vegetables, imported forty years before; and in the environs of the village, herds of cattle and sheep were feeding.

The boats returned to the DUNCAN about the same time as Lord Glenarvan. They had made the circuit of the entire island in a few hours, but without coming across the least trace of the BRITANNIA. The only result of this voyage of circumnavigation was to strike out the name of Isle Tristan from the program of search.

CHAPTER III CAPE TOWN AND M. VIOT

As John Mangles intended to put in at the Cape of Good Hope for coals, he was obliged to deviate a little from the 37th parallel, and go two degrees north. In less than six days he cleared the thirteen hundred miles which separate the point of Africa from Tristan d'Acunha, and on the 24th of November, at 3 P. M. the Table Mountain was sighted. At eight o'clock they entered the bay, and cast anchor in the port of Cape Town. They sailed away next morning at daybreak.

Between the Cape and Amsterdam Island there is a distance of 2,900 miles, but with a good sea and favoring breeze, this was only a ten day's voyage. The elements were now no longer at war with the travelers, as on their journey across the Pampas — air and water seemed in league to help them forward.

"Ah! the sea! the sea!" exclaimed Paganel, "it is the field par excellence for the exercise of human energies, and the ship is the true vehicle of civilization. Think, my friends, if the globe had been only an immense continent, the thousandth part of it would still be unknown to us, even in this nineteenth century. See how it is in the interior of great countries. In the steppes of Siberia, in the plains of Central Asia, in the deserts of Africa, in the prairies of America, in the immense wilds of Australia, in the icy solitudes of the Poles, man scarcely dares to venture; the most daring shrinks back, the most courageous succumbs. They cannot penetrate them; the means of transport are insufficient, and the heat and disease, and savage disposition of the natives, are impassable obstacles. Twenty miles of desert separate men more than five hundred miles of ocean."

Paganel spoke with such warmth that even the Major had nothing to say against this panegyric of the ocean. Indeed, if the finding of Harry Grant had involved following a parallel across continents instead of oceans, the enterprise could not have been attempted; but the sea was there ready to carry the travelers from one country to another, and on the 6th of December, at the first streak of day, they saw a fresh mountain apparently emerging from the bosom of the waves.

This was Amsterdam Island, situated in 37 degrees 47 minutes latitude and 77 degrees 24 minutes longitude, the high cone of which in clear weather is visible fifty miles off. At eight o'clock, its form, indistinct though it still was, seemed almost a reproduction of Teneriffe.

"And consequently it must resemble Tristan d'Acunha," observed Glenarvan.

"A very wise conclusion," said Paganel, "according to the geometrographic axiom that two islands resembling a third must have a common likeness. I will only add that, like Tristan d'Acunha, Amsterdam Island is equally rich in seals and Robinsons."

"There are Robinsons everywhere, then?" said Lady Helena.

"Indeed, Madam," replied Paganel, "I know few islands without some tale of the kind appertaining to them, and the romance of your immortal countryman, Daniel Defoe, has been often enough realized before his day."

"Monsieur Paganel," said Mary, "may I ask you a question?"

"Two if you like, my dear young lady, and I promise to answer them."

“Well, then, I want to know if you would be very much frightened at the idea of being cast away alone on a desert island.”

“I?” exclaimed Paganel.

“Come now, my good fellow,” said the Major, “don’t go and tell us that it is your most cherished desire.”

“I don’t pretend it is that, but still, after all, such an adventure would not be very unpleasant to me. I should begin a new life; I should hunt and fish; I should choose a grotto for my domicile in Winter and a tree in Summer. I should make storehouses for my harvests: in one word, I should colonize my island.”

“All by yourself?”

“All by myself if I was obliged. Besides, are we ever obliged? Cannot one find friends among the animals, and choose some tame kid or eloquent parrot or amiable monkey? And if a lucky chance should send one a companion like the faithful Friday, what more is needed? Two friends on a rock, there is happiness. Suppose now, the Major and I — ”

“Thank you,” replied the Major, interrupting him; “I have no inclination in that line, and should make a very poor Robinson Crusoe.”

“My dear Monsieur Paganel,” said Lady Helena, “you are letting your imagination run away with you, as usual. But the dream is very different from the reality. You are thinking of an imaginary Robinson’s life, thrown on a picked island and treated like a spoiled child by nature. You only see the sunny side.”

“What, madam! You don’t believe a man could be happy on a desert island?”

“I do not. Man is made for society and not for solitude, and solitude can only engender despair. It is a question of time. At the outset it is quite possible that material wants and the very necessities of existence may engross the poor shipwrecked fellow, just snatched from the waves; but afterward, when he feels himself alone, far from his fellow men, without any hope of seeing country and friends again, what must he think, what must he suffer? His little island is all his world. The whole human race is shut up in himself, and when death comes, which utter loneliness will make terrible, he will be like the last man on the last day of the world. Believe me, Monsieur Paganel, such a man is not to be envied.”

Paganel gave in, though regretfully, to the arguments of Lady Helena, and still kept up a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of Isolation, till the very moment the DUNCAN dropped anchor about a mile off Amsterdam Island.

This lonely group in the Indian Ocean consists of two distinct islands, thirty-three miles apart, and situated exactly on the meridian of the Indian peninsula. To the north is Amsterdam Island, and to the south St. Paul; but they have been often confounded by geographers and navigators.

At the time of the DUNCAN’S visit to the island, the population consisted of three people, a Frenchman and two mulattoes, all three employed by the merchant proprietor. Paganel was delighted to shake hands with a countryman in the person of good old Monsieur Viot. He was far advanced in years, but did the honors of the place with much politeness. It was a happy day for him when these kindly strangers touched at his island, for St.

Peter’s was only frequented by seal-fishers, and now and then a whaler, the crews of which are usually rough, coarse men.

M. Viot presented his subjects, the two mulattoes. They composed the whole living population of the island, except a few wild boars in the interior and myriads of penguins. The little house where the three solitary men lived was in the heart of a natural bay on the southeast, formed by the crumbling away of a portion of the mountain.

Twice over in the early part of the century, Amsterdam Island became the country of deserted sailors, providentially saved from misery and death; but since these events no vessel had been lost on its coast. Had any shipwreck occurred, some fragments must have been thrown on the sandy shore, and any poor sufferers from it would have found their way to M. Viot’s fishing-huts. The old man had been long on the island, and had never been called upon to exercise such hospitality. Of the BRITANNIA and Captain Grant he knew nothing, but he was certain that the disaster had not happened on Amsterdam Island, nor on the islet called St. Paul, for whalers and fishing-vessels went there constantly, and must have heard of it.

Glenarvan was neither surprised nor vexed at the reply; indeed, his object in asking was rather to establish the fact that Captain Grant had not been there than that he had. This done, they were ready to proceed on their voyage next day.

They rambled about the island till evening, as its appearance was very inviting. Its FAUNA and FLORA, however, were poor in the extreme. The only specimens of quadrupeds, birds, fish and cetacea were a few wild boars, stormy petrels, albatrosses, perch and seals. Here and there thermal springs and chalybeate waters escaped from the black lava, and thin dark vapors rose above the volcanic soil. Some of these springs were very hot.

John Mangles held his thermometer in one of them, and found the temperature was 176 degrees Fahrenheit. Fish caught in the sea a few yards off, cooked in five minutes in these all but boiling waters, a fact which made Paganel resolve not to attempt to bathe in them.

Toward evening, after a long promenade, Glenarvan and his party bade adieu to the good old M. Viot, and returned to the yacht, wishing him all the happiness possible on his desert island, and receiving in return the old man’s blessing on their expedition.

CHAPTER IV A WAGER AND HOW DECIDED

ON the 7th of December, at three A. M. the DUNCAN lay puffing out her smoke in the little harbor ready to start, and a few minutes afterward the anchor was lifted, and the screw set in motion. By eight o’clock, when the passengers came on deck, the Amsterdam Island had almost disappeared from view behind the mists of the horizon. This was the last halting-place on the route, and nothing now was between them and the Australian coast but three thousand miles’ distance. Should the west wind continue but a dozen days longer, and the sea remain favorable, the yacht would have reached the end of her voyage.

Mary Grant and her brother could not gaze without emotion at the waves through which the DUNCAN was speeding her course, when they thought that these very same waves must have dashed against the prow of the BRITANNIA but a few days before her shipwreck. Here, perhaps, Captain Grant, with a disabled ship and diminished crew, had struggled against the tremendous hurricanes of the Indian Ocean, and felt himself driven toward the coast with irresistible force. The Captain pointed out to Mary the different currents on the ship’s chart, and explained to her their constant direction. Among others there was one running straight to the Australian continent, and its action is equally felt in the Atlantic and Pacific. It was doubtless against this that the BRITANNIA, dismasted and rudderless, had been unable to contend, and consequently been dashed against the coast, and broken in pieces.

A difficulty about this, however, presented itself. The last intelligence of Captain Grant was from Callao on the 30th of May, 1862, as appeared in the Mercantile and Shipping Gazette. “How then was it possible that on the 7th of June, only eight days after leaving the shores of Peru, that the

BRITANNIA could have found herself in the Indian Ocean? But to this, Paganel, who was consulted on the subject, found a very plausible solution.

It was one evening, about six days after their leaving Amsterdam Island, when they were all chatting together on the poop, that the above-named difficulty was stated by Glenarvan. Paganel made no reply, but went and fetched the document. After perusing it, he still remained silent, simply shrugging his shoulders, as if ashamed of troubling himself about such a trifle.

“Come, my good friend,” said Glenarvan, “at least give us an answer.”

“No,” replied Paganel, “I’ll merely ask a question for

Captain John to answer.”

“And what is it, Monsieur Paganel?” said John Mangles.

“Could a quick ship make the distance in a month over that part of the Pacific Ocean which lies between America and Australia?”

“Yes, by making two hundred miles in twenty-four hours.”

“Would that be an extraordinary rate of speed?”

“Not at all; sailing clippers often go faster.”

“Well, then, instead of ‘7 June’ on this document, suppose that one figure has been destroyed by the sea-water, and read ‘17 June’ or ‘27 June,’ and all is explained.”

“That’s to say,” replied Lady Helena, “that between the 31st of May and the 27th of June — ”

"Captain Grant could have crossed the Pacific and found himself in the Indian Ocean."

Paganel's theory met with universal acceptance.

"That's one more point cleared up," said Glenarvan. "Thanks to our friend, all that remains to be done now is to get to Australia, and look out for traces of the wreck on the western coast."

"Or the eastern?" said John Mangles.

"Indeed, John, you may be right, for there is nothing in the document to indicate which shore was the scene of the catastrophe, and both points of the continent crossed by the 37th parallel, must, therefore, be explored."

"Then, my Lord, it is doubtful, after all," said Mary.

"Oh no, Miss Mary," John Mangles hastened to reply, seeing the young girl's apprehension. "His Lordship will please to consider that if Captain Grant had gained the shore on the east of Australia, he would almost immediately have found refuge and assistance. The whole of that coast is English, we might say, peopled with colonists. The crew of the BRITANNIA could not have gone ten miles without meeting a fellow-countryman."

"I am quite of your opinion, Captain John," said Paganel. "On the eastern coast Harry Grant would not only have found an English colony easily, but he would certainly have met with some means of transport back to Europe."

"And he would not have found the same resources on the side we are making for?" asked Lady Helena.

“No, madam,” replied Paganel; “it is a desert coast, with no communication between it and Melbourne or Adelaide. If the BRITANNIA was wrecked on those rocky shores, she was as much cut off from all chance of help as if she had been lost on the inhospitable shores of Africa.”

“But what has become of my father there, then, all these two years?” asked Mary Grant.

“My dear Mary,” replied Paganel, “you have not the least doubt, have you, that Captain Grant reached the Australian continent after his shipwreck?”

“No, Monsieur Paganel.”

“Well, granting that, what became of him? The suppositions we might make are not numerous. They are confined to three. Either Harry Grant and his companions have found their way to the English colonies, or they have fallen into the hands of the natives, or they are lost in the immense wilds of Australia.”

“Go on, Paganel,” said Lord Glenarvan, as the learned Frenchman made a pause.

“The first hypothesis I reject, then, to begin with, for Harry Grant could not have reached the English colonies, or long ago he would have been back with his children in the good town of Dundee.”

“Poor father,” murmured Mary, “away from us for two whole years.”

“Hush, Mary,” said Robert, “Monsieur Paganel will tell us.”

“Alas! my boy, I cannot. All that I affirm is, that Captain Grant is in the hands of the natives.”

“But these natives,” said Lady Helena, hastily, “are they — ”

“Reassure yourself, madam,” said Paganel, divining her thoughts. “The aborigines of Australia are low enough in the scale of human intelligence, and most degraded and uncivilized, but they are mild and gentle in disposition, and not sanguinary like their New Zealand neighbors. Though they may be prisoners, their lives have never been threatened, you may be sure. All travelers are unanimous in declaring that the Australian natives abhor shedding blood, and many a time they have found in them faithful allies in repelling the attacks of evil-disposed convicts far more cruelly inclined.”

“You hear what Monsieur Paganel tells us, Mary,” said Lady Helena turning to the young girl. “If your father is in the hands of the natives, which seems probable from the document, we shall find him.”

“And what if he is lost in that immense country?” asked Mary.

“Well, we’ll find him still,” exclaimed Paganel, in a confident tone.

“Won’t we, friends?”

“Most certainly,” replied Glenarvan; and anxious to give a less gloomy turn to the conversation, he added —

“But I won’t admit the supposition of his being lost, not for an instant.”

“Neither will I,” said Paganel.

“Is Australia a big place?” inquired Robert.

“Australia, my boy, is about as large as four-fifths of Europe. It has somewhere about 775,000 HECTARES.”

“So much as that?” said the Major.

“Yes, McNabbs, almost to a yard’s breadth. Don’t you think now it has a right to be called a continent?”

“I do, certainly.”

“I may add,” continued the SAVANT, “that there are but few accounts of travelers being lost in this immense country. Indeed, I believe Leichardt is the only one of whose fate we are ignorant, and some time before my departure I learned from the Geographical Society that Mcintyre had strong hopes of having discovered traces of him.”

“The whole of Australia, then, is not yet explored?” asked Lady Helena.

“No, madam, but very little of it. This continent is not much better known than the interior of Africa, and yet it is from no lack of enterprising travelers. From 1606 to 1862, more than fifty have been engaged in exploring along the coast and in the interior.”

“Oh, fifty!” exclaimed McNabbs incredulously.

“No, no,” objected the Major; “that is going too far.”

“And I might go farther, McNabbs,” replied the geographer, impatient of contradiction.

“Yes, McNabbs, quite that number.”

“Farther still, Paganel.”

“If you doubt me, I can give you the names.”

“Oh, oh,” said the Major, coolly. “That’s just like you SAVANTS. You stick at nothing.”

“Major, will you bet your Purdy-Moore rifle against my telescope?”

“Why not, Paganel, if it would give you any pleasure.”

“Done, Major!” exclaimed Paganel. “You may say good-by to your rifle, for it will never shoot another chamois or fox unless I lend it to you, which I shall always be happy to do, by the by.”

“And whenever you require the use of your telescope, Paganel, I shall be equally obliging,” replied the Major, gravely.

“Let us begin, then; and ladies and gentlemen, you shall be our jury.

Robert, you must keep count.”

This was agreed upon, and Paganel forthwith commenced.

“Mnemosyne! Goddess of Memory, chaste mother of the Muses!” he exclaimed, “inspire thy faithful servant and fervent worshiper! Two hundred and fifty-eight years ago, my friends, Australia was unknown. Strong suspicions were entertained of the existence of a great southern continent. In the library of your British Museum, Glenarvan, there are two charts, the date of which is 1550, which mention a country south of Asia, called by the Portuguese Great Java. But these charts are not sufficiently authentic. In the seventeenth century, in 1606, Quiros, a Spanish navigator, discovered a country which he named Australia de Espiritu Santo. Some authors imagine that this was the New Hebrides group, and not Australia. I am not going to discuss the question, however. Count Quiros, Robert, and let us pass on to another."

"ONE," said Robert.

"In that same year, Louis Vas de Torres, the second in command of the fleet of Quiros, pushed further south. But it is to Theodore Hertoge, a Dutchman, that the honor of the great discovery belongs. He touched the western coast of Australia in 25 degrees latitude, and called it Eendracht, after his vessel. From this time navigators increased. In 1618, Zeachen discovered the northern parts of the coast, and called them Arnheim and Diemen. In 1618, Jan Edels went along the western coast, and christened it by his own name. In 1622, Leuwin went down as far as the cape which became his namesake." And so Paganel continued with name after name until his hearers cried for mercy.

"Stop, Paganel," said Glenarvan, laughing heartily, "don't quite crush poor McNabbs. Be generous; he owns he is vanquished."

"And what about the rifle?" asked the geographer, triumphantly.

"It is yours, Paganel," replied the Major, "and I am very sorry for it; but your memory might gain an armory by such feats."

"It is certainly impossible to be better acquainted with Australia; not the least name, not even the most trifling fact — "

"As to the most trifling fact, I don't know about that," said the Major, shaking his head.

"What do you mean, McNabbs?" exclaimed Paganel.

“Simply that perhaps all the incidents connected with the discovery of Australia may not be known to you.”

“Just fancy,” retorted Paganel, throwing back his head proudly.

“Come now. If I name one fact you don’t know, will you give me back my rifle?” said McNabbs.

“On the spot, Major.”

“Very well, it’s a bargain, then.”

“Yes, a bargain; that’s settled.”

“All right. Well now, Paganel, do you know how it is that Australia does not belong to France?”

“But it seems to me — ”

“Or, at any rate, do you know what’s the reason the English give?” asked the Major.

“No,” replied Paganel, with an air of vexation.

“Just because Captain Baudin, who was by no means a timid man, was so afraid in 1802, of the croaking of the Australian frogs, that he raised his anchor with all possible speed, and quitted the coast, never to return.”

“What!” exclaimed Paganel. “Do they actually give that version of it in England? But it is just a bad joke.”

“Bad enough, certainly, but still it is history in the United Kingdom.”

“It’s an insult!” exclaimed the patriotic geographer; “and they relate that gravely?”

“I must own it is the case,” replied Glenarvan, amidst a general outburst of laughter. “Do you mean to say you have never heard of it before?”

“Never! But I protest against it. Besides, the English call us ‘frog-eaters.’ Now, in general, people are not afraid of what they eat.”

“It is said, though, for all that,” replied McNabbs. So the Major kept his famous rifle after all.

CHAPTER V THE STORM ON THE INDIAN OCEAN

Two days after this conversation, John Mangles announced that the DUNCAN was in longitude 113 degrees 37 minutes, and the passengers found on consulting the chart that consequently Cape Bernouilli could not be more than five degrees off. They must be sailing then in that part of the Indian Ocean which washed the Australian continent, and in four days might hope to see Cape Bernouilli appear on the horizon.

Hitherto the yacht had been favored by a strong westerly breeze, but now there were evident signs that a calm was impending, and on the 13th of December the wind fell entirely; as the sailors say, there was not enough to fill a cap.

There was no saying how long this state of the atmosphere might last. But for the powerful propeller the yacht would have been obliged to lie motionless as a log. The young captain was very much annoyed, however, at the prospect of emptying his coal-bunkers, for he had covered his ship with canvas, intending to take advantage of the slightest breeze.

“After all, though,” said Glenarvan, with whom he was talking over the subject, “it is better to have no wind than a contrary one.”

“Your Lordship is right,” replied John Mangles; “but the fact is these sudden calms bring change of weather, and this is why I dread them. We are close on the trade winds, and if we get them ever so little in our teeth, it will delay us greatly.”

“Well, John, what if it does? It will only make our voyage a little longer.”

“Yes, if it does not bring a storm with it.”

“Do you mean to say you think we are going to have bad weather?” replied Glenarvan, examining the sky, which from horizon to zenith seemed absolutely cloudless.

“I do,” returned the captain. “I may say so to your Lordship, but I should not like to alarm Lady Glenarvan or Miss Grant.”

“You are acting wisely; but what makes you uneasy?”

“Sure indications of a storm. Don’t trust, my Lord, to the appearance of the sky. Nothing is more deceitful. For the last two days the barometer has been falling in a most ominous manner, and is now at 27 degrees. This is a warning I dare not neglect, for there is nothing I dread more than storms in the Southern Seas; I have had a taste of them already. The vapors which become condensed in the immense glaciers at the South Pole produce a current of air of extreme violence. This causes a struggle between the polar and equatorial winds, which results in cyclones, tornadoes, and all those multiplied varieties of tempest against which a ship is no match.”

“Well, John,” said Glenarvan, “the DUNCAN is a good ship, and her captain is a brave sailor. Let the storm come, we’ll meet it!”

John Mangles remained on deck the whole night, for though as yet the sky was still unclouded, he had such faith in his weather-glass, that he took every precaution that prudence could suggest. About 11 P. M. the sky began to darken in the south, and the crew were called up, and all the sails hauled in, except the foresail, brigantine, top-sail, and jib-boom. At midnight the wind freshened, and before long the cracking of the masts, and the rattling of the cordage, and groaning of the timbers, awakened the passengers, who speedily made their appearance on deck — at least Paganel, Glenarvan, the Major and Robert.

“Is it the hurricane?” asked Glenarvan quietly.

“Not yet,” replied the captain; “but it is close at hand.”

And he went on giving his orders to the men, and doing his best to make ready for the storm, standing, like an officer commanding a breach, with his face to the wind, and his gaze fixed on the troubled sky. The glass had fallen to 26 degrees, and the hand pointed to tempest.

It was one o’clock in the morning when Lady Helena and Miss Grant ventured upstairs on deck. But they no sooner made their appearance than the captain hurried toward them, and begged them to go below again immediately. The waves were already beginning to dash over the side of the ship, and the sea might any moment sweep right over her from stem to stern. The noise of the warring elements was so great that his words were scarcely audible, but Lady Helena took advantage of a sudden lull to ask if there was any danger.

“None whatever,” replied John Mangles; “but you cannot remain on deck, madam, no more can Miss Mary.”

The ladies could not disobey an order that seemed almost an entreaty, and they returned to their cabin. At the same moment the wind redoubled its fury, making the masts bend beneath the weight of the sails, and completely lifting up the yacht.

“Haul up the foresail!” shouted the captain. “Lower the topsail and jib-boom!”

Glenarvan and his companions stood silently gazing at the struggle between their good ship and the waves, lost in wondering and half-terrified admiration at the spectacle.

Just then, a dull hissing was heard above the noise of the elements. The steam was escaping violently, not by the funnel, but from the safety-valves of the boiler; the alarm whistle sounded unnaturally loud, and the yacht made a frightful pitch, overturning Wilson, who was at the wheel, by an unexpected blow from the tiller. The DUNCAN no longer obeyed the helm.

“What is the matter?” cried the captain, rushing on the bridge.

“The ship is heeling over on her side,” replied Wilson.

“The engine! the engine!” shouted the engineer.

Away rushed John to the engine-room. A cloud of steam filled the room. The pistons were motionless in their cylinders, and they were apparently powerless, and the engine-driver, fearing for his boilers, was letting off the steam.

“What’s wrong?” asked the captain.

“The propeller is bent or entangled,” was the reply.

“It’s not acting at all.”

“Can’t you extricate it?”

“It is impossible.”

An accident like this could not be remedied, and John’s only resource was to fall back on his sails, and seek to make an auxiliary of his most powerful enemy, the wind. He went up again on deck, and after explaining in a few words to Lord Glenarvan how things stood, begged him to retire to his cabin, with the rest of the passengers. But Glenarvan wished to remain above.

“No, your Lordship,” said the captain in a firm tone,

“I must be alone with my men. Go into the saloon.

The vessel will have a hard fight with the waves, and they

would sweep you over without mercy.”

“But we might be a help.”

“Go in, my Lord, go in. I must indeed insist on it.

There are times when I must be master on board, and retire you must.”

Their situation must indeed be desperate for John Mangles to speak in such authoritative language. Glenarvan was wise enough to understand this, and felt he must set an example in obedience. He therefore quitted the deck immediately with his three companions, and rejoined the ladies, who were anxiously watching the DENOUEMENT of this war with the elements.

“He’s an energetic fellow, this brave John of mine!” said Lord Glenarvan, as he entered the saloon.

“That he is,” replied Paganel. “He reminds me of your great

Shakespeare’s boatswain in the ‘Tempest,’ who says to the king

on board: ‘Hence! What care these roarers for the name of king?

To cabin! Silence! Trouble us not.’”

However, John Mangles did not lose a second in extricating his ship from the peril in which she was placed by the condition of her screw propeller. He resolved to rely on the mainsail for keeping in the right route as far as possible, and to brace the yards obliquely, so as not to present a direct front to the storm. The yacht turned about like a swift horse that feels the spur, and presented a broadside to the billows. The only question was, how long would she hold out with so little sail, and what sail could resist such violence for any length of time. The great advantage of keeping up the mainsail was that it presented to the waves only the most solid portions of the yacht, and kept her in the right course. Still it involved some peril, for the vessel might get engulfed between the waves, and not be able to raise herself. But Mangles felt there was no alternative, and all he could do was to keep the crew ready to alter the sail at any moment, and stay in the shrouds himself watching the tempest.

The remainder of the night was spent in this manner, and it was hoped that morning would bring a calm. But this was a delusive hope. At 8 A. M. the wind had increased to a hurricane.

John said nothing, but he trembled for his ship, and those on board. The DUNCAN made a frightful plunge forward, and for an instant the men thought she would never rise again. Already they had seized their hatchets to cut away the shrouds from the mainmast, but the next minute the sails were torn away by the tempest, and had flown off like gigantic albatrosses.

The yacht had risen once more, but she found herself at the mercy of the waves entirely now, with nothing to steady or direct her, and was so fearfully pitched and tossed about that every moment the captain expected the masts would break short off. John had no resource but to put up a forestaysail, and run before the gale. But this was no easy task. Twenty times over he had all his work to begin again, and it was 3 P. M. before his attempt succeeded. A mere shred of canvas though it was, it was enough to drive the DUNCAN forward with inconceivable rapidity to the northeast, of course in the same direction as the hurricane. Swiftness was their only chance of safety. Sometimes she would get in advance of the waves which carried her along, and cutting through them with her sharp prow, bury herself in their depths. At others, she would keep pace with them, and make such enormous leaps that there was imminent danger of her being pitched over on her side, and then again, every now and then the storm-driven sea would out-distance the yacht, and the angry billows would sweep over the deck from stem to stern with tremendous violence.

In this alarming situation and amid dreadful alternations of hope and despair, the 12th of December passed away, and the ensuing night, John Mangles never left his post, not even to take food. Though his impassive face betrayed no symptoms of fear, he was tortured with anxiety, and his steady gaze was fixed on the north, as if trying to pierce through the thick mists that enshrouded it.

There was, indeed, great cause for fear. The DUNCAN was out of her course, and rushing toward the Australian coast with a speed which nothing could lessen. To John Mangles it seemed as if a thunderbolt were driving them along. Every instant he expected the yacht would dash against some rock, for he reckoned the coast could not be more than twelve miles off, and better far be in mid ocean exposed to all its fury than too near land.

John Mangles went to find Glenarvan, and had a private talk with him about their situation, telling him frankly the true state of affairs, stating the case with all the coolness of a sailor prepared for anything and everything and he wound up by saying he might, perhaps, be obliged to cast the yacht on shore.

“To save the lives of those on board, my Lord,” he added.

“Do it then, John,” replied Lord Glenarvan.

“And Lady Helena, Miss Grant?”

“I will tell them at the last moment when all hope of keeping out at sea is over. You will let me know?”

“I will, my Lord.”

Glenarvan rejoined his companions, who felt they were in imminent danger, though no word was spoken on the subject. Both ladies displayed great courage, fully equal to any of the party. Paganel descanted in the most inopportune manner about the direction of atmospheric currents, making interesting comparisons, between tornadoes, cyclones, and rectilinear tempests. The Major calmly awaited the end with the fatalism of a Mussulman.

About eleven o’clock, the hurricane appeared to decrease slightly. The damp mist began to clear away, and a sudden gleam of light revealed a low-lying shore about six miles distant. They were driving right down on it. Enormous breakers fifty feet high were dashing over it, and the fact of their height showed John there must be solid ground before they could make such a rebound.

“Those are sand-banks,” he said to Austin.

“I think they are,” replied the mate.

“We are in God’s hands,” said John. “If we cannot find any opening for the yacht, and if she doesn’t find the way in herself, we are lost.”

“The tide is high at present, it is just possible we may ride over those sand-banks.”

“But just see those breakers. What ship could stand them.

Let us invoke divine aid, Austin!”

Meanwhile the DUNCAN was speeding on at a frightful rate. Soon she was within two miles of the sand-banks, which were still veiled from time to time in thick mist. But John fancied he could see beyond the breakers a quiet basin, where the DUNCAN would be in comparative safety. But how could she reach it?

All the passengers were summoned on deck, for now that the hour of shipwreck was at hand, the captain did not wish anyone to be shut up in his cabin.

“John!” said Glenarvan in a low voice to the captain, “I will try to save my wife or perish with her. I put Miss Grant in your charge.”

“Yes, my Lord,” replied John Mangles, raising Glenarvan’s hand to his moistened eyes.

The yacht was only a few cables’ lengths from the sandbanks. The tide was high, and no doubt there was abundance of water to float the ship over the dangerous bar; but these terrific breakers alternately lifting her up and then leaving her almost dry, would infallibly make her graze the sand-banks.

Was there no means of calming this angry sea? A last expedient struck the captain. “The oil, my lads!” he exclaimed. “Bring the oil here!”

The crew caught at the idea immediately; this was a plan that had been successfully tried already. The fury of the waves had been allayed before this time by covering them with a sheet of oil. Its effect is immediate, but very temporary. The moment after a ship has passed over the smooth surface, the sea redoubles its violence, and woe to the bark that follows. The casks of seal-oil were forthwith hauled up, for danger seemed to have given the men double strength. A few hatchet blows soon knocked in the heads, and they were then hung over the larboard and starboard.

“Be ready!” shouted John, looking out for a favorable moment.

In twenty seconds the yacht reached the bar. Now was the time.

“Pour out!” cried the captain, “and God prosper it!”

The barrels were turned upside down, and instantly a sheet of oil covered the whole surface of the water. The billows fell as if by magic, the whole foaming sea seemed leveled, and the DUNCAN flew over its tranquil bosom into a quiet basin beyond the formidable bar; but almost the same minute the ocean burst forth again with all its fury, and the towering breakers dashed over the bar with increased violence.

CHAPTER VI A HOSPITABLE COLONIST

THE captain’s first care was to anchor his vessel securely. He found excellent moorage in five fathoms’ depth of water, with a solid bottom of hard granite, which afforded a firm hold. There was no danger now of either being driven away or stranded at low water. After so many hours of danger, the DUNCAN found herself in a sort of creek, sheltered by a high circular point from the winds outside in the open sea.

Lord Glenarvan grasped John Mangles’ hand, and simply said:

“Thank you, John.”

This was all, but John felt it ample recompense. Glenarvan kept to himself the secret of his anxiety, and neither Lady Helena, nor Mary, nor Robert suspected the grave perils they had just escaped.

One important fact had to be ascertained. On what part of the coast had the tempest thrown them? How far must they go to regain the parallel. At what distance S. W. was Cape Bernouilli? This was soon determined by taking the position of the ship, and it was found that she had scarcely deviated two degrees from the route. They were in longitude 36 degrees 12 minutes, and latitude 32 degrees 67 minutes, at Cape Catastrophe, three hundred miles from Cape Bernouilli. The nearest port was Adelaide, the Capital of Southern Australia.

Could the DUNCAN be repaired there? This was the question. The extent of the injuries must first be ascertained, and in order to do this he ordered some of the men to dive down below the stern. Their report was that one of the branches of the screw was bent, and had got jammed against the stern post, which of course prevented all possibility of rotation. This was a serious damage, so serious as to require more skilful workmen than could be found in Adelaide.

After mature reflection, Lord Glenarvan and John Mangles came to the determination to sail round the Australian coast, stopping at Cape Bernouilli, and continuing their route south as far as Melbourne, where the DUNCAN could speedily be put right. This effected, they would proceed to cruise along the eastern coast to complete their search for the BRITANNIA.

This decision was unanimously approved, and it was agreed that they should start with the first fair wind. They had not to wait long for the same night the hurricane had ceased entirely, and there was only a manageable breeze from the S. W. Preparations for sailing were instantly commenced, and at four o’clock in the morning the crew lifted the anchors, and got under way with fresh canvas outspread, and a wind blowing right for the Australian shores.

Two hours afterward Cape Catastrophe was out of sight. In the evening they doubled Cape Borda, and came alongside Kangaroo Island. This is the largest of the Australian islands, and a great hiding place for runaway convicts. Its appearance was enchanting. The stratified rocks on the shore were richly carpeted with verdure, and innumerable kangaroos were jumping over the woods and plains, just as at the time of its discovery in 1802. Next day, boats were sent ashore to examine the coast minutely, as they were now on the 36th parallel, and between that and the 38th Glenarvan wished to leave no part unexplored.

The boats had hard, rough work of it now, but the men never complained. Glenarvan and his inseparable companion, Paganel, and young Robert generally accompanied them. But all this painstaking exploration came to nothing. Not a trace of the shipwreck could be seen anywhere. The

Australian shores revealed no more than the Patagonian. However, it was not time yet to lose hope altogether, for they had not reached the exact point indicated by the document.

On the 20th of December, they arrived off Cape Bernouilli, which terminates Lacepede Bay, and yet not a vestige of the BRITANNIA had been discovered. Still this was not surprising, as it was two years since the occurrence of the catastrophe, and the sea might, and indeed must, have scattered and destroyed whatever fragments of the brig had remained. Besides, the natives who scent a wreck as the vultures do a dead body, would have pounced upon it and carried off the smaller DEBRIS. There was no doubt whatever Harry Grant and his companions had been made prisoners the moment the waves threw them on the shore, and been dragged away into the interior of the continent.

But if so, what becomes of Paganel’s ingenious hypothesis about the document? viz. that it had been thrown into a river and carried by a current into the sea. That was a plausible enough theory in Patagonia, but not in the part of Australia intersected by the 37th parallel. Besides the Patagonian rivers, the Rio Colorado and the Rio Negro, flow into the sea along deserted solitudes, uninhabited and uninhabitable; while, on the contrary, the principal rivers of Australia — the Murray, the Yarrow, the Torrens, the Darling — all connected with each other, throw themselves into the ocean by well-frequented routes, and their mouths are ports of great activity. What likelihood, consequently, would there be that a fragile bottle would ever find its way along such busy thoroughfares right out into the Indian Ocean?

Paganel himself saw the impossibility of it, and confessed to the Major, who raised a discussion on the subject, that his hypothesis would be altogether illogical in Australia. It was evident that the degrees given related to the place where the BRITANNIA was actually shipwrecked and not the place of captivity, and that the bottle therefore had been thrown into the sea on the western coast of the continent.

However, as Glenarvan justly remarked, this did not alter the fact of Captain Grant's captivity in the least degree, though there was no reason now for prosecuting the search for him along the 37th parallel, more than any other. It followed, consequently, that if no traces of the BRITANNIA were discovered at Cape Bernouilli, the only thing to be done was to return to Europe. Lord Glenarvan would have been unsuccessful, but he would have done his duty courageously and conscientiously.

But the young Grants did not feel disheartened. They had long since said to themselves that the question of their father's deliverance was about to be finally settled. Irrevocably, indeed, they might consider it, for as Paganel had judiciously demonstrated, if the wreck had occurred on the eastern side, the survivors would have found their way back to their own country long since.

“Hope on! Hope on, Mary!” said Lady Helena to the young girl, as they neared the shore; “God's hand will still lead us.”

“Yes, Miss Mary,” said Captain John. “Man's extremity is God's opportunity. When one way is hedged up another is sure to open.”

“God grant it,” replied Mary.

Land was quite close now. The cape ran out two miles into the sea, and terminated in a gentle slope, and the boat glided easily into a sort of natural creek between coral banks in a state of formation, which in course of time would be a belt of coral reefs round the southern point of the Australian coast. Even now they were quite sufficiently formidable to destroy the keel of a ship, and the BRITANNIA might likely enough have been dashed to pieces on them.

The passengers landed without the least difficulty on an absolutely desert shore. Cliffs composed of beds of strata made a coast line sixty to eighty feet high, which it would have been difficult to scale without ladders or cramp-irons. John Mangles happened to discover a natural breach about half a mile south. Part of the cliff had been partially beaten down, no doubt, by the sea in some equinoctial gale. Through this opening the whole party passed and reached the top of the cliff by a pretty steep path. Robert climbed like a young cat, and was the first on the summit, to the despair of Paganel, who was quite ashamed to see his long legs, forty years old, out-distanced by a young urchin of twelve. However, he was far ahead of the Major, who gave himself no concern on the subject.

They were all soon assembled on the lofty crags, and from this elevation could command a view of the whole plain below. It appeared entirely uncultivated, and covered with shrubs and bushes. Glenarvan thought it resembled some glens in the lowlands of Scotland, and Paganel fancied it like some barren parts of Britanny. But along the coast the country appeared to be inhabited, and significant signs of industry revealed the presence of civilized men, not savages.

“A mill!” exclaimed Robert.

And, sure enough, in the distance the long sails of a mill appeared, apparently about three miles off.

“It certainly is a windmill,” said Paganel, after examining the object in question through his telescope.

“Let us go to it, then,” said Glenarvan.

Away they started, and, after walking about half an hour, the country began to assume a new aspect, suddenly changing its sterility for cultivation. Instead of bushes, quick-set hedges met the eye, inclosing recent clearings. Several bullocks and about half a dozen horses were feeding in meadows, surrounded by acacias supplied from the vast plantations of Kangaroo Island. Gradually fields covered with cereals came in sight, whole acres covered with bristling ears of corn, hay-ricks in the shape of large bee-hives, blooming orchards, a fine garden worthy of Horace, in which the useful and agreeable were blended; then came sheds; commons wisely distributed, and last of all, a plain comfortable dwelling-house, crowned by a joyous-sounding mill, and fanned and shaded by its long sails as they kept constantly moving round.

Just at that moment a pleasant-faced man, about fifty years of age, came out of the house, warned, by the loud barking of four dogs, of the arrival of strangers. He was followed by five handsome strapping lads, his sons, and their mother, a fine tall woman. There was no mistaking the little group. This was a perfect type of the Irish colonist — a man who, weary of the miseries of his country, had come, with his family, to seek fortune and happiness beyond the seas.

Before Glenarvan and his party had time to reach the house and present themselves in due form, they heard the cordial words: “Strangers! welcome to the house of Paddy O’Moore!”

“You are Irish,” said Glenarvan, “if I am not mistaken,” warmly grasping the outstretched hand of the colonist.

“I was,” replied Paddy O’Moore, “but now I am Australian. Come in, gentlemen, whoever you may be, this house is yours.”

It was impossible not to accept an invitation given with such grace. Lady Helena and Mary Grant were led in by Mrs. O’Moore, while the gentlemen were assisted by his sturdy sons to disencumber themselves of their fire-arms.

An immense hall, light and airy, occupied the ground floor of the house, which was built of strong planks laid horizontally. A few wooden benches fastened against the gaily-colored walls, about ten stools, two oak chests on tin mugs, a large long table where twenty guests could sit comfortably, composed the furniture, which looked in perfect keeping with the solid house and robust inmates.

The noonday meal was spread; the soup tureen was smoking between roast beef and a leg of mutton, surrounded by large plates of olives, grapes, and oranges. The necessary was there and there was no lack of the superfluous. The host and hostess were so pleasant, and the big table, with its abundant fare, looked so inviting, that it would have been ungracious not to have seated themselves. The farm servants, on equal footing with their master, were already in their places to take their share of the meal. Paddy O’Moore pointed to the seats reserved for the strangers, and said to Glenarvan:

“I was waiting for you.”

“Waiting for us!” replied Glenarvan in a tone of surprise.

“I am always waiting for those who come,” said the Irishman; and then, in a solemn voice, while the family and domestics reverently stood, he repeated the BENEDICITE.

Dinner followed immediately, during which an animated conversation was kept up on all sides. From Scotch to Irish is but a handsbreadth. The Tweed, several fathoms wide, digs a deeper trench between Scotland and England than the twenty leagues of Irish Channel, which separates Old Caledonia from the Emerald Isle. Paddy O'Moore related his history. It was that of all emigrants driven by misfortune from their own country. Many come to seek fortunes who only find trouble and sorrow, and then they throw the blame on chance, and forget the true cause is their own idleness and vice and want of commonsense. Whoever is sober and industrious, honest and economical, gets on.

Such a one had been and was Paddy O'Moore. He left Dundalk, where he was starving, and came with his family to Australia, landed at Adelaide, where, refusing employment as a miner, he got engaged on a farm, and two months afterward commenced clearing ground on his own account.

The whole territory of South Australia is divided into lots, each containing eighty acres, and these are granted to colonists by the government. Any industrious man, by proper cultivation, can not only get a living out of his lot, but lay by pounds 80 a year.

Paddy O'Moore knew this. He profited by his own former experience, and laid by every penny he could till he had saved enough to purchase new lots. His family prospered, and his farm also. The Irish peasant became a landed proprietor, and though his little estate had only been under cultivation for two years, he had five hundred acres cleared by his own hands, and five hundred head of cattle. He was his own master, after having been a serf in Europe, and as independent as one can be in the freest country in the world.

His guests congratulated him heartily as he ended his narration; and Paddy O'Moore no doubt expected confidence for confidence, but he waited in vain. However, he was one of those discreet people who can say, “I tell you who I am, but I don’t ask who you are.” Glenarvan’s great object was to get information about the BRITANNIA, and like a man who goes right to the point, he began at once to interrogate O’Moore as to whether he had heard of the shipwreck.

The reply of the Irishman was not favorable; he had never heard the vessel mentioned. For two years, at least, no ship had been wrecked on that coast, neither above nor below the Cape. Now, the date of the catastrophe was within two years. He could, therefore, declare positively that the survivors of the wreck had not been thrown on that part of the western shore. Now, my Lord,” he added, “may I ask what interest you have in making the inquiry?”

This pointed question elicited in reply the whole history of the expedition. Glenarvan related the discovery of the document, and the various attempts that had been made to follow up the precise indications given of the whereabouts of the unfortunate captives; and he concluded his account by expressing his doubt whether they should ever find the Captain after all.

His dispirited tone made a painful impression on the minds of his auditors. Robert and Mary could not keep back their tears, and Paganel had not a word of hope or comfort to give them. John Mangles was grieved to the heart, though he, too, was beginning to yield to the feeling of hopelessness which had crept over the rest, when suddenly the whole party were electrified by hearing a voice exclaim: “My Lord, praise and thank God! if Captain Grant is alive, he is on this Australian continent.”

CHAPTER VII THE QUARTERMASTER OF THE “BRITANNIA”

THE surprise caused by these words cannot be described.

Glenarvan sprang to his feet, and pushing back his seat, exclaimed:

“Who spoke?”

“I did,” said one of the servants, at the far end of the table.

“You, Ayrton!” replied his master, not less bewildered than Glenarvan.

“Yes, it was I,” rejoined Ayrton in a firm tone, though somewhat agitated voice. “A Scotchman like yourself, my Lord, and one of the shipwrecked crew of the BRITANNIA.”

The effect of such a declaration may be imagined. Mary Grant fell back, half-fainting, in Lady Helena’s arms, overcome by joyful emotion, and Robert, and Mangles, and Paganel started up and toward the man that Paddy O’Moore had addressed as AYRTON. He was a coarse-looking fellow, about forty-five years of age, with very bright eyes, though half-hidden beneath thick, overhanging brows. In spite of extreme leanness there was an air of unusual strength about him. He seemed all bone and nerves, or, to use a Scotch expression, as if he had not wasted time in making fat. He was broad-shouldered and of middle height, and though his features were coarse, his face was so full of intelligence and energy and decision, that he gave one a favorable impression. The interest he excited was still further heightened by the marks of recent suffering imprinted on his countenance. It was evident that he had endured long and severe hardships, and that he had borne them bravely and come off victor.

“You are one of the shipwrecked sailors of the BRITANNIA?” was Glenarvan’s first question.

“Yes, my Lord; Captain Grant’s quartermaster.”

“And saved with him after the shipwreck?”

“No, my Lord, no. I was separated from him at that terrible moment, for I was swept off the deck as the ship struck.”

“Then you are not one of the two sailors mentioned in the document?”

“No; I was not aware of the existence of the document. The captain must have thrown it into the sea when I was no longer on board.”

“But the captain? What about the captain?”

“I believed he had perished; gone down with all his crew.

I imagined myself the sole survivor.”

“But you said just now, Captain Grant was living.”

“No, I said, ‘if the captain is living.’”

“And you added, ‘he is on the Australian continent.’”

“And, indeed, he cannot be anywhere else.”

“Then you don’t know where he is?”

“No, my Lord. I say again, I supposed he was buried beneath the waves, or dashed to pieces against the rocks. It was from you I learned that he was still alive.”

“What then do you know?”

“Simply this — if Captain Grant is alive, he is in Australia.”

“Where did the shipwreck occur?” asked Major McNabbs.

This should have been the first question, but in the excitement caused by the unexpected incident, Glenarvan cared more to know where the captain was, than where the BRITANNIA had been lost. After the Major’s inquiry, however, Glenarvan’s examination proceeded more logically, and before long all the details of the event stood out clearly before the minds of the company.

To the question put by the Major, Ayrton replied:

“When I was swept off the forecastle, when I was hauling in the jib-boom, the BRITANNIA was running right on the Australian coast. She was not more than two cables’ length from it and consequently she must have struck just there.”

“In latitude 37 degrees?” asked John Mangles.

“Yes, in latitude 37 degrees.”

“On the west coast?”

“No, on the east coast,” was the prompt reply.

“And at what date?”

“It was on the night of the 27th of June, 1862.”

"Exactly, just exactly," exclaimed Glenarvan.

"You see, then, my Lord," continued Ayrton, "I might justly say, If Captain Grant is alive, he is on the Australian continent, and it is useless looking for him anywhere else."

"And we will look for him there, and find him too, and save him," exclaimed Paganel. "Ah, precious document," he added, with perfect NAIVETE, "you must own you have fallen into the hands of uncommonly shrewd people."

But, doubtless, nobody heard his flattering words, for Glenarvan and Lady Helena, and Mary Grant, and Robert, were too much engrossed with Ayrton to listen to anyone else. They pressed round him and grasped his hands. It seemed as if this man's presence was the sure pledge of Harry Grant's deliverance. If this sailor had escaped the perils of the shipwreck, why should not the captain? Ayrton was quite sanguine as to his existence; but on what part of the continent he was to be found, that he could not say. The replies the man gave to the thousand questions that assailed him on all sides were remarkably intelligent and exact. All the while he spake, Mary held one of his hands in hers. This sailor was a companion of her father's, one of the crew of the BRITANNIA. He had lived with Harry Grant, crossed the seas with him and shared his dangers. Mary could not keep her eyes off his face, rough and homely though it was, and she wept for joy.

Up to this time no one had ever thought of doubting either the veracity or identity of the quartermaster; but the Major, and perhaps John Mangles, now began to ask themselves if this Ayrton's word was to be absolutely believed. There was something suspicious about this unexpected meeting. Certainly the man had mentioned facts and dates which corresponded, and the minuteness of his details was most striking. Still exactness of details was no positive proof. Indeed, it has been noticed that a falsehood has sometimes gained ground by being exceedingly particular in minutiae. McNabbs, therefore, prudently refrained from committing himself by expressing any opinion.

John Mangles, however, was soon convinced when he heard Ayrton speak to the young girl about her father. He knew Mary and Robert quite well. He had seen them in Glasgow when the ship sailed. He remembered them at the farewell breakfast given on board the BRITANNIA to the captain’s friends, at which Sheriff Mcintyre was present. Robert, then a boy of ten years old, had been given into his charge, and he ran away and tried to climb the rigging.

“Yes, that I did, it is quite right,” said Robert.

He went on to mention several other trifling incidents, without attaching the importance to them that John Mangles did, and when he stopped Mary Grant said, in her soft voice: “Oh, go on, Mr. Ayrton, tell us more about our father.”

The quartermaster did his best to satisfy the poor girl, and Glenarvan did not interrupt him, though a score of questions far more important crowded into his mind. Lady Helena made him look at Mary’s beaming face, and the words he was about to utter remained unspoken.

Ayrton gave an account of the BRITANNIA’S voyage across the Pacific. Mary knew most of it before, as news of the ship had come regularly up to the month of May, 1862. In the course of the year Harry Grant had touched at all the principal ports. He had been to the Hebrides, to New Guinea, New Zealand, and New Caledonia, and had succeeded in finding an important point on the western coast of Papua, where the establishment of a Scotch colony seemed to him easy, and its prosperity certain. A good port on the Molucca and Philippine route must attract ships, especially when the opening of the Suez Canal would have supplanted the Cape route. Harry Grant was one of those who appreciated the great work of M. De Lesseps, and would not allow political rivalries to interfere with international interests.

After reconnoitering Papua, the BRITANNIA went to provision herself at Callao, and left that port on the 30th of May, 1862, to return to Europe by the Indian Ocean and the Cape. Three weeks afterward, his vessel was disabled by a fearful storm in which they were caught, and obliged to cut away the masts. A leak sprang in the hold, and could not be stopped. The crew were too exhausted to work the pumps, and for eight days the BRITANNIA was tossed about in the hurricane like a shuttlecock. She had six feet of water in her hold, and was gradually sinking. The boats had been all carried away by the tempest; death stared them in the face, when, on the night of the 22d of June, as Paganel had rightly supposed, they came in sight of the eastern coast of Australia.

The ship soon neared the shore, and presently dashed violently against it. Ayrton was swept off by a wave, and thrown among the breakers, where he lost consciousness. When he recovered, he found himself in the hands of natives, who dragged him away into the interior of the country. Since that time he had never heard the BRITANNIA’s name mentioned, and reasonably enough came to the conclusion that she had gone down with all hands off the dangerous reefs of Twofold Bay.

This ended Ayrton’s recital, and more than once sorrowful exclamations were evoked by the story. The Major could not, in common justice, doubt its authenticity. The sailor was then asked to narrate his own personal history, which was short and simple enough. He had been carried by a tribe of natives four hundred miles north of the 37th parallel. He spent a miserable existence there — not that he was ill-treated, but the natives themselves lived miserably. He passed two long years of painful slavery among them, but always cherished in his heart the hope of one day regaining his freedom, and watching for the slightest opportunity that might turn up, though he knew that his flight would be attended with innumerable dangers.

At length one night in October, 1864, he managed to escape the vigilance of the natives, and took refuge in the depths of immense forests. For a whole month he subsisted on roots, edible ferns and mimosa gums, wandering through vast solitudes, guiding himself by the sun during the day and by the stars at night. He went on, though often almost despairingly, through bogs and rivers, and across mountains, till he had traversed the whole of the uninhabited part of the continent, where only a few bold travelers have ventured; and at last, in an exhausted and all but dying condition, he reached the hospitable dwelling of Paddy O’Moore, where he said he had found a happy home in exchange for his labor.

“And if Ayrton speaks well of me,” said the Irish settler, when the narrative ended, “I have nothing but good to say of him. He is an honest, intelligent fellow and a good worker; and as long as he pleases, Paddy O’Moore’s house shall be his.”

Ayrton thanked him by a gesture, and waited silently for any fresh question that might be put to him, though he thought to himself that he surely must have satisfied all legitimate curiosity. What could remain to be said that he had not said a hundred times already. Glenarvan was just about to open a discussion about their future plan of action, profiting by this rencontre with

Ayrton, and by the information he had given them, when Major McNabbs, addressing the sailor said, “You were quartermaster, you say, on the BRITANNIA?”

“Yes,” replied Ayrton, without the least hesitation.

But as if conscious that a certain feeling of mistrust, however slight, had prompted the inquiry, he added, “I have my shipping papers with me; I saved them from the wreck.”

He left the room immediately to fetch his official document, and, though hardly absent a minute, Paddy O’Moore managed to say, “My Lord, you may trust Ayrton; I vouch for his being an honest man. He has been two months now in my service, and I have never had once to find fault with him. I knew all this story of his shipwreck and his captivity. He is a true man, worthy of your entire confidence.”

Glenarvan was on the point of replying that he had never doubted his good faith, when the man came in and brought his engagement written out in due form. It was a paper signed by the shipowners and Captain Grant. Mary recognized her father’s writing at once. It was to certify that “Tom Ayrton, able-bodied seaman, was engaged as quartermaster on board the three-mast vessel, the BRITANNIA, Glasgow.”

There could not possibly be the least doubt now of Ayrton’s identity, for it would have been difficult to account for his possession of the document if he were not the man named in it.

“Now then,” said Glenarvan, “I wish to ask everyone’s opinion as to what is best to be done. Your advice, Ayrton, will be particularly valuable, and I shall be much obliged if you would let us have it.”

After a few minutes' thought, Ayrton replied — "I thank you, my Lord, for the confidence you show towards me, and I hope to prove worthy of it. I have some knowledge of the country, and the habits of the natives, and if I can be of any service to you — "

"Most certainly you can," interrupted Glenarvan.

"I think with you," resumed Ayrton, "that the captain and his two sailors have escaped alive from the wreck, but since they have not found their way to the English settlement, nor been seen any where, I have no doubt that their fate has been similar to my own, and that they are prisoners in the hands of some of the native tribes."

"That's exactly what I have always argued," said Paganel.

"The shipwrecked men were taken prisoners, as they feared.

But must we conclude without question that, like yourself,

they have been dragged away north of the 37th parallel?"

"I should suppose so, sir; for hostile tribes would hardly remain anywhere near the districts under the British rule."

"That will complicate our search," said Glenarvan, somewhat disconcerted. "How can we possibly find traces of the captives in the heart of so vast a continent?"

No one replied, though Lady Helena's questioning glances at her companions seemed to press for an answer. Paganel even was silent. His ingenuity for once was at fault. John Mangles paced the cabin with great strides, as if he fancied himself on the deck of his ship, evidently quite nonplussed.

“And you, Mr. Ayrton,” said Lady Helena at last, “what would you do?”

“Madam,” replied Ayrton, readily enough, “I should re-embark in the DUNCAN, and go right to the scene of the catastrophe. There I should be guided by circumstances, and by any chance indications we might discover.”

“Very good,” returned Glenarvan; “but we must wait till the DUNCAN is repaired.”

“Ah, she has been injured then?” said Ayrton.

“Yes,” replied Mangles.

“To any serious extent?”

“No; but such injuries as require more skilful workmanship than we have on board. One of the branches of the screw is twisted, and we cannot get it repaired nearer than Melbourne.”

“Well, let the ship go to Melbourne then,” said Paganel, “and we will go without her to Twofold Bay.”

“And how?” asked Mangles.

“By crossing Australia as we crossed America, keeping along the 37th parallel.”

“But the DUNCAN?” repeated Ayrton, as if particularly anxious on that score.

“The DUNCAN can rejoin us, or we can rejoin her, as the case may be. Should we discover Captain Grant in the course of our journey, we can all return together to Melbourne. If we have to go on to the coast, on the contrary, then the DUNCAN can come to us there. Who has any objection to make? Have you, Major?”

“No, not if there is a practicable route across Australia.”

“So practicable, that I propose Lady Helena and Miss Grant should accompany us.”

“Are you speaking seriously?” asked Glenarvan.

“Perfectly so, my Lord. It is a journey of 350 miles, not more. If we go twelve miles a day it will barely take us a month, just long enough to put the vessel in trim. If we had to cross the continent in a lower latitude, at its wildest part, and traverse immense deserts, where there is no water and where the heat is tropical, and go where the most adventurous travelers have never yet ventured, that would be a different matter. But the 37th parallel cuts only through the province of Victoria, quite an English country, with roads and railways, and well populated almost everywhere. It is a journey you might make, almost, in a chaise, though a wagon would be better. It is a mere trip from London to Edinburgh, nothing more.”

“What about wild beasts, though?” asked Glenarvan, anxious to go into all the difficulties of the proposal.

“There are no wild beasts in Australia.”

“And how about the savages?”

“There are no savages in this latitude, and if there were, they are not cruel, like the New Zealanders.”

“And the convicts?”

“There are no convicts in the southern provinces, only in the eastern colonies. The province of Victoria not only refused to admit them, but passed a law to prevent any ticket-of-leave men from other provinces from entering her territories. This very year the Government threatened to withdraw its subsidy from the Peninsular Company if their vessels continued to take in coal in those western parts of Australia where convicts are admitted. What! Don’t you know that, and you an Englishman?”

“In the first place, I beg leave to say I am not an Englishman,” replied Glenarvan.

“What M. Paganel says is perfectly correct,” said Paddy O’Moore. “Not only the province of Victoria, but also Southern Australia, Queensland, and even Tasmania, have agreed to expel convicts from their territories. Ever since I have been on this farm, I have never heard of one in this Province.”

“And I can speak for myself. I have never come across one.”

“You see then, friends,” went on Jacques Paganel, “there are few if any savages, no ferocious animals, no convicts, and there are not many countries of Europe for which you can say as much. Well, will you go?”

“What do you think, Helena?” asked Glenarvan.

“What we all think, dear Edward,” replied Lady Helena, turning toward her companions; “let us be off at once.”

CHAPTER VIII PREPARATION FOR THE JOURNEY

GLENARVAN never lost much time between adopting an idea and carrying it out. As soon as he consented to Paganel’s proposition, he gave immediate orders to make arrangements for the journey with as little delay as possible. The time of starting was fixed for the 22d of December, the next day but one.

What results might not come out of this journey. The presence of Harry Grant had become an indisputable fact, and the chances of finding him had increased. Not that anyone expected to discover the captain exactly on the 37th parallel, which they intended strictly to follow, but they might come upon his track, and at all events, they were going to the actual spot where the wreck had occurred. That was the principal point.

Besides, if Ayrton consented to join them and act as their guide through the forests of the province of Victoria and right to the eastern coast, they would have a fresh chance of success. Glenarvan was sensible of this, and asked his host whether he would have any great objection to his asking Ayrton to accompany them, for he felt particularly desirous of securing the assistance of Harry Grant’s old companion.

Paddy O’Moore consented, though he would regret the loss of his excellent servant.

“Well, then, Ayrton, will you come with us in our search expedition?”

Ayrton did not reply immediately. He even showed signs of hesitation; but at last, after due reflection, said, “Yes, my Lord, I will go with you, and if I can not take you to Captain Grant, I can at least take you to the very place where his ship struck."

"Thanks, Ayrton."

"One question, my Lord."

"Well?"

"Where will you meet the DUNCAN again?"

"At Melbourne, unless we traverse the whole continent from coast to coast."

"But the captain?"

"The captain will await my instructions in the port of Melbourne."

"You may depend on me then, my Lord."

"I will, Ayrton."

The quartermaster was warmly thanked by the passengers of the DUNCAN, and the children loaded him with caresses. Everyone rejoiced in his decision except the Irishman, who lost in him an intelligent and faithful helper. But Paddy understood the importance Glenarvan attached to the presence of the man, and submitted. The whole party then returned to the ship, after arranging a rendezvous with Ayrton, and ordering him to procure the necessary means of conveyance across the country.

When John Mangles supported the proposition of Paganel, he took for granted that he should accompany the expedition. He began to speak to Glenarvan at once about it, and adduced all sorts of arguments to advance his cause — his devotion to Lady Helena and his Lordship, how useful could he be in organizing the party, and how useless on board the DUNCAN; everything, in fact, but the main reason, and that he had no need to bring forward.

“I’ll only ask you one question, John,” said Glenarvan. “Have you entire confidence in your chief officer?”

“Absolute,” replied Mangles, “Tom Austin is a good sailor. He will take the ship to her destination, see that the repairs are skilfully executed, and bring her back on the appointed day. Tom is a slave to duty and discipline. Never would he take it upon himself to alter or retard the execution of an order. Your Lordship may rely on him as on myself.”

“Very well then, John,” replied Glenarvan. “You shall go with us, for it would be advisable,” he added, smiling, “that you should be there when we find Mary Grant’s father.”

“Oh! your Lordship,” murmured John, turning pale. He could say no more, but grasped Lord Glenarvan’s hand.

Next day, John Mangles and the ship’s carpenter, accompanied by sailors carrying provisions, went back to Paddy O’Moore’s house to consult the Irishman about the best method of transport. All the family met him, ready to give their best help. Ayrton was there, and gave the benefit of his experience.

On one point both he and Paddy agreed, that the journey should be made in a bullock-wagon by the ladies, and that the gentlemen should ride on horseback. Paddy could furnish both bullocks and vehicle. The vehicle was a cart twenty feet long, covered over by a tilt, and resting on four large wheels without spokes or felloes, or iron tires — in a word, plain wooden discs. The front and hinder part were connected by means of a rude mechanical contrivance, which did not allow of the vehicle turning quickly. There was a pole in front thirty-five feet long, to which the bullocks were to be yoked in couples. These animals were able to draw both with head and neck, as their yoke was fastened on the nape of the neck, and to this a collar was attached by an iron peg. It required great skill to drive such a long, narrow, shaky concern, and to guide such a team by a goad; but Ayrton had served his apprenticeship to it on the Irishman's farm, and Paddy could answer for his com-petency. The role of conductor was therefore assigned to him.

There were no springs to the wagon, and, consequently, it was not likely to be very comfortable; but, such as it was, they had to take it. But if the rough construction could not be altered, John Mangles resolved that the interior should be made as easy as possible. His first care was to divide it into two compartments by a wooden partition. The back one was intended for the provisions and luggage, and M. Olbinett's portable kitchen. The front was set apart especially for the ladies, and, under the carpenter's hands, was to be speedily converted into a comfortable room, covered with a thick carpet, and fitted up with a toilet table and two couches. Thick leather curtains shut in this apartment, and protected the occupants from the chilliness of the nights. In case of necessity, the gentlemen might shelter themselves here, when the violent rains came on, but a tent was to be their usual resting-place when the caravan camped for the night. John Mangles exercised all his ingenuity in furnishing the small space with everything that the two ladies could possibly require, and he succeeded so well, that neither Lady Helena nor Mary had much reason to regret leaving their cosy cabins on board the DUNCAN.

For the rest of the party, the preparations were soon made, for they needed much less. Strong horses were provided for Lord Glenarvan, Paganel, Robert Grant, McNabbs, and John Mangles; also for the two sailors, Wilson and Mulrady, who were to accompany their captain. Ayrton's place was, of course, to be in front of the wagon, and M. Olbinett, who did not much care for equitation, was to make room for himself among the baggage. Horses and bullocks were grazing in the Irishman's meadows, ready to fetch at a moment's notice.

After all arrangements were made, and the carpenter set to work, John Mangles escorted the Irishman and his family back to the vessel, for Paddy wished to return the visit of Lord Glenarvan. Ayrton thought proper to go too, and about four o'clock the party came over the side of the DUNCAN.

They were received with open arms. Glenarvan would not be outstripped in politeness, and invited his visitors to stop and dine. His hospitality was willingly accepted. Paddy was quite amazed at the splendor of the saloon, and was loud in admiration of the fitting up of the cabins, and the carpets and hangings, as well as of the polished maple-wood of the upper deck. Ayrton's approbation was much less hearty, for he considered it mere costly superfluity.

But when he examined the yacht with a sailor's eye, the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA was as enthusiastic about it as Paddy. He went down into the hold, inspected the screw department and the engine-room, examining the engine thoroughly, and inquired about its power and consumption. He explored the coal-bunkers, the store-room, the powder-store, and armory, in which last he seemed to be particularly attracted by a cannon mounted on the forecastle. Glenarvan saw he had to do with a man who understood such matters, as was evident from his questions. Ayrton concluded his investigations by a survey of the masts and rigging.

“You have a fine vessel, my Lord,” he said after his curiosity was satisfied.

“A good one, and that is best,” replied Glenarvan.

“And what is her tonnage?”

“Two hundred and ten tons.”

“I don’t think I am far out,” continued Ayrton, “in judging her speed at fifteen knots. I should say she could do that easily.”

“Say seventeen,” put in John Mangles, “and you’ve hit the mark.”

“Seventeen!” exclaimed the quartermaster. “Why, not a man-of-war — not the best among them, I mean — could chase her!”

“Not one,” replied Mangles. “The DUNCAN is a regular racing yacht, and would never let herself be beaten.”

“Even at sailing?” asked Ayrton.

“Even at sailing.”

“Well, my Lord, and you too, captain,” returned Ayrton, “allow a sailor who knows what a ship is worth, to compliment you on yours.”

“Stay on board of her, then, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan; “it rests with yourself to call it yours.”

“I will think of it, my Lord,” was all Ayrton’s reply.

Just then M. Olbinett came to announce dinner, and his Lordship repaired with his guests to the saloon.

“That Ayrton is an intelligent man,” said Paganel to the Major.

“Too intelligent!” muttered McNabbs, who, without any apparent reason, had taken a great dislike to the face and manners of the quartermaster.

During the dinner, Ayrton gave some interesting details about the Australian continent, which he knew perfectly. He asked how many sailors were going to accompany the expedition, and seemed astonished to hear that only two were going. He advised Glenarvan to take all his best men, and even urged him to do it, which advice, by the way, ought to have removed the Major’s suspicion.

“But,” said Glenarvan, “our journey is not dangerous, is it?”

“Not at all,” replied Ayrton, quickly.

“Well then, we’ll have all the men we can on board.

Hands will be wanted to work the ship, and to help in the repairs.

Besides, it is of the utmost importance that she should meet us

to the very day, at whatever place may be ultimately selected.

Consequently, we must not lessen her crew.”

Ayrton said nothing more, as if convinced his Lordship was right.

When evening came, Scotch and Irish separated.

Ayrton and Paddy O’Moore and family returned home.

Horses and wagons were to be ready the next day, and eight

o’clock in the morning was fixed for starting.

Lady Helena and Mary Grant soon made their preparations. They had less to do than Jacques Paganel, for he spent half the night in arranging, and wiping, and rubbing up the lenses of his telescope. Of course, next morning he slept on till the Major’s stentorian voice roused him.

The luggage was already conveyed to the farm, thanks to John Mangles, and a boat was waiting to take the passengers. They were soon seated, and the young captain gave his final orders to Tom Austin, his chief officer. He impressed upon him that he was to wait at Melbourne for Lord Glenarvan’s commands, and to obey them scrupulously, whatever they might be.

The old sailor told John he might rely on him, and, in the name of the men, begged to offer his Lordship their best wishes for the success of this new expedition.

A storm of hurrahs burst forth from the yacht as the boat rowed off. In ten minutes the shore was reached, and a quarter of an hour afterward the Irishman’s farm. All was ready. Lady Helena was enchanted with her installation. The huge chariot, with its primitive wheels and massive planks, pleased her particularly. The six bullocks, yoked in pairs, had a patriarchal air about them which took her fancy. Ayrton, goad in hand, stood waiting the orders of this new master.

“My word,” said Paganel, “this is a famous vehicle; it beats all the mail-coaches in the world. I don’t know a better fashion of traveling than in a mountebank’s caravan — a movable house, which goes or stops wherever you please. What can one wish better? The Samaratians understood that, and never traveled in any other way.”

“Monsieur Paganel,” said Lady Helena, “I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you in my SALONS.”

“Assuredly, madam, I should count it an honor. Have you fixed the day?”

“I shall be at home every day to my friends,” replied Lady Helena; “and you are — ”

“The most devoted among them all,” interrupted Paganel, gaily.

These mutual compliments were interrupted by the arrival of the seven horses, saddled and ready. They were brought by Paddy’s sons, and Lord Glenarvan paid the sum stipulated for his various purchases, adding his cordial thanks, which the worthy Irishman valued at least as much as his golden guineas.

The signal was given to start, and Lady Helena and Mary took their places in the reserved compartment. Ayrton seated himself in front, and Olbinett scrambled in among the luggage. The rest of the party, well armed with carbines and revolvers, mounted their horses. Ayrton gave a peculiar cry, and his team set off. The wagon shook and the planks creaked, and the axles grated in the naves of the wheels; and before long the hospitable farm of the Irishman was out of sight.

CHAPTER IX A COUNTRY OF PARADOXES

IT was the 23d of December, 1864, a dull, damp, dreary month in the northern hemisphere; but on the Australian continent it might be called June. The hottest season of the year had already commenced, and the sun’s rays were almost tropical, when Lord Glenarvan started on his new expedition.

Most fortunately the 37th parallel did not cross the immense deserts, inaccessible regions, which have cost many martyrs to science already. Glenarvan could never have encountered them. He had only to do with the southern part of Australia — viz. with a narrow portion of the province of Adelaide, with the whole of Victoria, and with the top of the reversed triangle which forms New South Wales.

It is scarcely sixty-two miles from Cape Bernouilli to the frontiers of Victoria. It was not above a two days’ march, and Ayrton reckoned on their sleeping next night at Apsley, the most westerly town of Victoria.

The commencement of a journey is always marked by ardor, both in the horses and the horsemen. This is well enough in the horsemen, but if the horses are to go far, their speed must be moderated and their strength husbanded. It was, therefore, fixed that the average journey every day should not be more than from twenty-five to thirty miles.

Besides, the pace of the horses must be regulated by the slower pace of the bullocks, truly mechanical engines which lose in time what they gain in power. The wagon, with its passengers and provisions, was the very center of the caravan, the moving fortress. The horsemen might act as scouts, but must never be far away from it.

As no special marching order had been agreed upon, everybody was at liberty to follow his inclinations within certain limits. The hunters could scour the plain, amiable folks could talk to the fair occupants of the wagon, and philosophers could philosophize. Paganel, who was all three combined, had to be and was everywhere at once.

The march across Adelaide presented nothing of any particular interest. A succession of low hills rich in dust, a long stretch of what they call in Australia “bush,” several prairies covered with a small prickly bush, considered a great dainty by the ovine tribe, embraced many miles. Here and there they noticed a species of sheep peculiar to New Holland — sheep with pig’s heads, feeding between the posts of the telegraph line recently made between Adelaide and the coast.

Up to this time there had been a singular resemblance in the country to the monotonous plains of the Argentine Pampas. There was the same grassy flat soil, the same sharply-defined horizon against the sky. McNabbs declared they had never changed countries; but Paganel told him to wait, and he would soon see a difference. And on the faith of this assurance marvelous things were expected by the whole party.

In this fashion, after a march of sixty miles in two days, the caravan reached the parish of Apsley, the first town in the Province of Victoria in the Wimerra district.

The wagon was put up at the Crown Inn. Supper was soon smoking on the table. It consisted solely of mutton served up in various ways.

They all ate heartily, but talked more than they ate, eagerly asking Paganel questions about the wonders of the country they were just beginning to traverse. The amiable geographer needed no pressing, and told them first that this part of it was called Australia Felix.

“Wrongly named!” he continued. “It had better have been called rich, for it is true of countries, as individuals, that riches do not make happiness. Thanks to her gold mines, Australia has been abandoned to wild devastating adventurers. You will come across them when we reach the gold fields.”

“Is not the colony of Victoria of but a recent origin?” asked Lady Glenarvan.

“Yes, madam, it only numbers thirty years of existence.

It was on the 6th of June, 1835, on a Tuesday — ”

“At a quarter past seven in the evening,” put in the Major, who delighted in teasing the Frenchman about his precise dates.

“No, at ten minutes past seven,” replied the geographer, gravely, “that Batman and Falckner first began a settlement at Port Phillip, the bay on which the large city of Melbourne now stands. For fifteen years the colony was part of New South Wales, and recognized Sydney as the capital; but in 1851, she was declared independent, and took the name of Victoria.”

“And has greatly increased in prosperity since then,

I believe,” said Glenarvan.

“Judge for yourself, my noble friend,” replied Paganel. “Here are the numbers given by the last statistics; and let McNabbs say as he likes, I know nothing more eloquent than statistics.”

"Go on," said the Major.

"Well, then, in 1836, the colony of Port Phillip had 224 inhabitants. To-day the province of Victoria numbers 550,000. Seven millions of vines produce annually 121,- 000 gallons of wine. There are 103,000 horses spreading over the plains, and 675,272 horned cattle graze in her wide-stretching pastures."

"Is there not also a certain number of pigs?" inquired McNabbs.

"Yes, Major, 79,625."

"And how many sheep?"

"7,115,943, McNabbs."

"Including the one we are eating at this moment."

"No, without counting that, since it is three parts devoured."

"Bravo, Monsieur Paganel," exclaimed Lady Helena, laughing heartily. "It must be owned you are posted up in geographical questions, and my cousin McNabbs need not try and find you tripping."

"It is my calling, Madam, to know this sort of thing, and to give you the benefit of my information when you please. You may therefore believe me when I tell you that wonderful things are in store for you in this strange country."

"It does not look like it at present," said McNabbs, on purpose to tease Paganel.

“Just wait, impatient Major,” was his rejoinder. “You have hardly put your foot on the frontier, when you turn round and abuse it. Well, I say and say again, and will always maintain that this is the most curious country on the earth. Its formation, and nature, and products, and climate, and even its future disappearance have amazed, and are now amazing, and will amaze, all the SAVANTS in the world. Think, my friends, of a continent, the margin of which, instead of the center, rose out of the waves originally like a gigantic ring, which encloses, perhaps, in its center, a sea partly evaporated, the waves of which are drying up daily; where humidity does not exist either in the air or in the soil; where the trees lose their bark every year, instead of their leaves; where the leaves present their sides to the sun and not their face, and consequently give no shade; where the wood is often incombustible, where good-sized stones are dissolved by the rain; where the forests are low and the grasses gigantic; where the animals are strange; where quadrupeds have beaks, like the echidna, or ornithorhynchus, and naturalists have been obliged to create a special order for them, called monotremes; where the kangaroos leap on unequal legs, and sheep have pigs’ heads; where foxes fly about from tree to tree; where the swans are black; where rats make nests; where the bower-bird opens her reception-rooms to receive visits from her feathered friends; where the birds astonish the imagination by the variety of their notes and their aptness; where one bird serves for a clock, and another makes a sound like a postilion cracking of a whip, and a third imitates a knife-grinder, and a fourth the motion of a pendulum; where one laughs when the sun rises, and another cries when the sun sets! Oh, strange, illogical country, land of paradoxes and anomalies, if ever there was one on earth — the learned botanist Grimard was right when he said, ‘There is that Australia, a sort of parody, or rather a defiance of universal laws in the face of the rest of the world.’”

Paganel’s tirade was poured forth in the most impetuous manner, and seemed as if it were never coming to an end. The eloquent secretary of the Geographical Society was no longer master of himself. He went on and on, gesticulating furiously, and brandishing his fork to the imminent danger of his neighbors. But at last his voice was drowned in a thunder of applause, and he managed to stop.

Certainly after such an enumeration of Australian peculiarities, he might have been left in peace but the Major said in the coolest tone possible: “And is that all, Paganel?”

“No, indeed not,” rejoined the Frenchman, with renewed vehemence.

“What!” exclaimed Lady Helena; “there are more wonders still in Australia?”

“Yes, Madam, its climate. It is even stranger than its productions.”

“Is it possible?” they all said.

“I am not speaking of the hygienic qualities of the climate,” continued Paganel, “rich as it is in oxygen and poor in azote. There are no damp winds, because the trade winds blow regularly on the coasts, and most diseases are unknown, from typhus to measles, and chronic affections.”

“Still, that is no small advantage,” said Glenarvan.

“No doubt; but I am not referring to that, but to one quality it has which is incomparable.”

“And what is that?”

“You will never believe me.”

“Yes, we will,” exclaimed his auditors, their curiosity aroused by this preamble.

“Well, it is — ”

“It is what?”

“It is a moral regeneration.”

“A moral regeneration?”

“Yes,” replied the SAVANT, in a tone of conviction. “Here metals do not get rust on them by exposure to the air, nor men. Here the pure, dry atmosphere whitens everything rapidly, both linen and souls. The virtue of the climate must have been well known in England when they determined to send their criminals here to be reformed.”

“What! do you mean to say the climate has really any such influence?” said Lady Helena.

“Yes, Madam, both on animals and men.”

“You are not joking, Monsieur Paganel?”

“I am not, Madam. The horses and the cattle here are of incomparable docility. You see it?”

“It is impossible!”

“But it is a fact. And the convicts transported into this reviving, salubrious air, become regenerated in a few years. Philanthropists know this. In

Australia all natures grow better.”

“But what is to become of you then, Monsieur Paganel, in this privileged country — you who are so good already?” said Lady Helena. “What will you turn out?”

“Excellent, Madam, just excellent, and that’s all.”

CHAPTER X AN ACCIDENT

THE next day, the 24th of December, they started at daybreak. The heat was already considerable, but not unbearable, and the road was smooth and good, and allowed the cavalcade to make speedy progress. In the evening they camped on the banks of the White Lake, the waters of which are brackish and undrinkable.

Jacques Paganel was obliged to own that the name of this lake was a complete misnomer, for the waters were no more white than the Black Sea is black, or the Red Sea red, or the Yellow River yellow, or the Blue Mountains blue. However, he argued and disputed the point with all the amour propre of a geographer, but his reasoning made no impression.

M. Olbinett prepared the evening meal with his accustomed punctuality, and after this was dispatched, the travelers disposed themselves for the night in the wagon and in the tent, and were soon sleeping soundly, notwithstanding the melancholy howling of the “dingoes,” the jackals of Australia.

A magnificent plain, thickly covered with chrysanthemums, stretched out beyond the lake, and Glenarvan and his friends would gladly have explored its beauties when they awoke next morning, but they had to start. As far as the eye could reach, nothing was visible but one stretch of prairie, enameled with flower, in all the freshness and abundance of spring. The blue flowers of the slender-leaved flax, combined with the bright hues of the scarlet acanthus, a flower peculiar to the country.

A few cassowaries were bounding over the plain, but it was impossible to get near them. The Major was fortunate enough, however, to hit one very rare animal with a ball in the leg. This was the jabiru, a species which is fast disappearing, the gigantic crane of the English colonies. This winged creature was five feet high, and his wide, conical, extremely pointed beak, measured eighteen inches in length. The violet and purple tints of his head contrasted vividly with the glossy green of his neck, and the dazzling whiteness of his throat, and the bright red of his long legs. Nature seems to have exhausted in its favor all the primitive colors on her palette.

Great admiration was bestowed on this bird, and the Major’s spoil would have borne the honors of the day, had not Robert come across an animal a few miles further on, and bravely killed it. It was a shapeless creature, half porcupine, half ant-eater, a sort of unfinished animal belonging to the first stage of creation. A long glutinous extensible tongue hung out of his jaws in search of the ants, which formed its principal food.

“It is an echidna,” said Paganel. “Have you ever seen such a creature?”

“It is horrible,” replied Glenarvan.

“Horrible enough, but curious, and, what’s more, peculiar to Australia. One might search for it in vain in any other part of the world.”

Naturally enough, the geographer wished to preserve this interesting specimen of monotremata, and wanted to stow it away in the luggage; but M. Olbinett resented the idea so indignantly, that the SAVANT was obliged to abandon his project.

About four o’clock in the afternoon, John Mangles descried an enormous column of smoke about three miles off, gradually overspreading the whole horizon. What could be the cause of this phenomenon? Paganel was inclined to think it was some description of meteor, and his lively imagination was already in search of an explanation, when Ayrton cut short all his conjectures summarily, by announcing that the cloud of dust was caused by a drove of cattle on the road.

The quartermaster proved right, for as the cloud came nearer, quite a chorus of bleatings and neighings, and bel-lowings escaped from it, mingled with the loud tones of a human voice, in the shape of cries, and whistles, and vociferations.

Presently a man came out of the cloud. This was the leader-in-chief of the four-footed army. Glenarvan advanced toward him, and friendly relations were speedily established between them. The leader, or to give him his proper designation, the stock-keeper, was part owner of the drove. His name was Sam Machell, and he was on his way from the eastern provinces to Portland Bay.

The drove numbered 12,075 head in all, or l,000 bullocks, 11,000 sheep, and 75 horses. All these had been bought in the Blue Mountains in a poor, lean condition, and were going to be fatted up on the rich pasture lands of Southern Australia, and sold again at a great profit. Sam Machell expected to get pounds 2 on each bullock, and 10s. on every sheep, which would bring him in pounds 3,750. This was doing good business; but what patience and energy were required to conduct such a restive, stubborn lot to their destination, and what fatigues must have to be endured. Truly the gain was hardly earned.

Sam Machell told his history in a few words, while the drove continued their march among the groves of mimosas. Lady Helena and Mary and the rest of the party seated themselves under the shade of a wide-spreading gum-tree, and listened to his recital.

It was seven months since Sam Machell had started. He had gone at the rate of ten miles a day, and his interminable journey would last three months longer. His assistants in the laborious task comprised twenty dogs and thirty men, five of whom were blacks, and very serviceable in tracking up any strayed beasts. Six wagons made the rear-guard. All the men were armed with stockwhips, the handles of which are eighteen inches long, and the lash nine feet, and they move about among the ranks, bringing refractory animals back into order, while the dogs, the light cavalry of the regiment, preserved discipline in the wings.

The travelers were struck with the admirable arrangement of the drove. The different stock were kept apart, for wild sheep and bullocks would not have got on together at all. The bullocks would never have grazed where the sheep had passed along, and consequently they had to go first, divided into two battalions. Five regiments of sheep followed, in charge of twenty men, and last of all came the horses.

Sam Machell drew the attention of his auditors to the fact that the real guides of the drove were neither the men nor the dogs, but the oxen themselves, beasts of superior intelligence, recognized as leaders by their congenitors. They advanced in front with perfect gravity, choosing the best route by instinct, and fully alive to their claim to respect. Indeed, they were obliged to be studied and humored in everything, for the whole drove obeyed them implicitly. If they took it into their heads to stop, it was a matter of necessity to yield to their good pleasure, for not a single animal would move a step till these leaders gave the signal to set off.

Sundry details, added by the stock-keeper, completed the history of this expedition, worthy of being written, if not commended by Xenophon himself. As long as the troop marched over the plains it was well enough, there was little difficulty or fatigue. The animals fed as they went along, and slaked their thirst at the numerous creeks that watered the plains, sleeping at night and making good progress in the day, always obedient and tractable to the dogs. But when they had to go through great forests and groves of eucalyptus and mimosas, the difficulties increased. Platoons, battalions and regiments got all mixed together or scattered, and it was a work of time to collect them again. Should a “leader” unfortunately go astray, he had to be found, cost what it might, on pain of a general disbandment, and the blacks were often long days in quest of him, before their search was successful. During the heavy rains the lazy beasts refused to stir, and when violent storms chanced to occur, the creatures became almost mad with terror, and were seized with a wild, disorderly panic.

However, by dint of energy and ambition, the stock-keeper triumphed over these difficulties, incessantly renewed though they were. He kept steadily on; mile after mile of plains and woods, and mountains, lay behind. But in addition to all his other qualities, there was one higher than all that he specially needed when they came to rivers. This was patience — patience that could stand any trial, and not only could hold out for hours and days, but for weeks. The stock-keeper would be himself forced to wait on the banks of a stream that might have been crossed at once. There was nothing to hinder but the obstinacy of the herd. The bullocks would taste the water and turn back. The sheep fled in all directions, afraid to brave the liquid element. The stock-keeper hoped when night came he might manage them better, but they still refused to go forward. The rams were dragged in by force, but the sheep would not follow. They tried what thirst would do, by keeping them without drink for several days, but when they were brought to the river again, they simply quenched their thirst, and declined a more intimate acquaintance with the water. The next expedient employed was to carry all the lambs over, hoping the mothers would be drawn after them, moved by their cries. But the lambs might bleat as pitifully as they liked, the mothers never stirred. Sometimes this state of affairs would last a whole month, and the stock-keeper would be driven to his wits' end by his bleating, bellowing, neighing army. Then all of a sudden, one fine day, without rhyme or reason, a detachment would take it into their heads to make a start across, and the only difficulty now was to keep the whole herd from rushing helter-skelter after them. The wildest confusion set in among the ranks, and numbers of the animals were drowned in the passage.

Such was the narrative of Sam Machell. During its recital, a considerable part of the troop had filed past in good order. It was time for him to return to his place at their head, that he might be able to choose the best pasturage. Taking leave of Lord Glenarvan, he sprang on a capital horse of the native breed, that one of his men held waiting for him, and after shaking hands cordially with everybody all round, took his departure. A few minutes later, nothing was visible of the stock-keeper and his troop but a cloud of dust.

The wagon resumed its course in the opposite direction, and did not stop again till they halted for the night at the foot of Mount Talbot.

Paganel made the judicious observation that it was the 25th of December, the Christmas Day so dear to English hearts. But the steward had not forgotten it, and an appetizing meal was soon ready under the tent, for which he deserved and received warm compliments from the guests. Indeed, M. Olbinett had quite excelled himself on this occasion. He produced from his stores such an array of European dishes as is seldom seen in the Australian desert. Reindeer hams, slices of salt beef, smoked salmon, oat cakes, and barley meal scones; tea ad libitum, and whisky in abundance, and several bottles of port, composed this astonishing meal. The little party might have thought themselves in the grand dining-hall of Malcolm Castle, in the heart of the Highlands of Scotland.

The next day, at 11 A. M. the wagon reached the banks of the Wimerra on the 143d meridian.

The river, half a mile in width, wound its limpid course between tall rows of gum-trees and acacias. Magnificent specimens of the MYRTACEA, among others, the metroside-ros speciosa, fifteen feet high, with long drooping branches, adorned with red flowers. Thousands of birds, the lories, and greenfinches, and gold-winged pigeons, not to speak of the noisy paroquets, flew about in the green branches. Below, on the bosom of the water, were a couple of shy and unapproachable black swans. This rara avis of the Australian rivers soon disappeared among the windings of the Wimerra, which water the charming landscape in the most capricious manner.

The wagon stopped on a grassy bank, the long fringes of which dipped in the rapid current. There was neither raft nor bridge, but cross over they must. Ayrton looked about for a practicable ford. About a quarter of a mile up the water seemed shallower, and it was here they determined to try to pass over. The soundings in different parts showed a depth of three feet only, so that the wagon might safely enough venture.

“I suppose there is no other way of fording the river?” said Glenarvan to the quartermaster.

“No, my Lord; but the passage does not seem dangerous.

We shall manage it.”

“Shall Lady Glenarvan and Miss Grant get out of the wagon?”

“Not at all. My bullocks are surefooted, and you may rely on me for keeping them straight.”

“Very well, Ayrton; I can trust you.”

The horsemen surrounded the ponderous vehicle, and all stepped boldly into the current. Generally, when wagons have to ford rivers, they have empty casks slung all round them, to keep them floating on the water; but they had no such swimming belt with them on this occasion, and they could only depend on the sagacity of the animals and the prudence of Ayrton, who directed the team. The Major and the two sailors were some feet in advance. Glenarvan and John Mangles went at the sides of the wagon, ready to lend any assistance the fair travelers might require, and Paganel and Robert brought up the rear.

All went well till they reached the middle of the Wimerra, but then the hollow deepened, and the water rose to the middle of the wheels. The bullocks were in danger of losing their footing, and dragging with them the oscillating vehicle. Ayrton devoted himself to his task courageously. He jumped into the water, and hanging on by the bullocks’ horns, dragged them back into the right course.

Suddenly the wagon made a jolt that it was impossible to prevent; a crack was heard, and the vehicle began to lean over in a most precarious manner. The water now rose to the ladies’ feet; the whole concern began to float, though John Mangles and Lord Glenarvan hung on to the side. It was an anxious moment.

Fortunately a vigorous effort drove the wagon toward the opposite shore, and the bank began to slope upward, so that the horses and bullocks were able to regain their footing, and soon the whole party found themselves on the other side, glad enough, though wet enough too.

The fore part of the wagon, however, was broken by the jolt, and Glenarvan's horse had lost a shoe.

This was an accident that needed to be promptly repaired. They looked at each other hardly knowing what to do, till Ayrton proposed he should go to Black Point Station, twenty miles further north, and bring back a blacksmith with him.

"Yes, go, my good fellow," said Glenarvan. "How long will it take you to get there and back?"

"About fifteen hours," replied Ayrton, "but not longer."

"Start at once, then, and we will camp here, on the banks of the Wimerra, till you return."

CHAPTER XI CRIME OR CALAMITY

IT was not without apprehension that the Major saw Ayrton quit the Wimerra camp to go and look for a blacksmith at the Black Point Station. But he did not breathe a word of his private misgivings, and contented himself with watching the neighborhood of the river; nothing disturbed the repose of those tranquil glades, and after a short night the sun reappeared on the horizon.

As to Glenarvan, his only fear was lest Ayrton should return alone.

If they fail to find a workman, the wagon could not resume the journey.

This might end in a delay of many days, and Glenarvan, impatient to

succeed, could brook no delay, in his eagerness to attain his object.

Ayrton luckily had lost neither his time nor his trouble. He appeared next morning at daybreak, accompanied by a man who gave himself out as the blacksmith from BlackPoint Station. He was a powerful fellow, and tall, but his features were of a low, brutal type, which did not prepossess anyone in his favor. But that was nothing, provided he knew his business. He scarcely spoke, and certainly he did not waste his breath in useless words.

“Is he a good workman?” said John Mangles to the quartermaster.

“I know no more about him than you do, captain,” said Ayrton.

“But we shall see.”

The blacksmith set to work. Evidently that was his trade, as they could plainly see from the way he set about repairing the forepart of the wagon.

He worked skilfully and with uncommon energy. The Major observed that the flesh of his wrists was deeply furrowed, showing a ring of extravasated blood. It was the mark of a recent injury, which the sleeve of an old woolen shirt could not conceal. McNabbs questioned the blacksmith about those sores which looked so painful. The man continued his work without answering. Two hours more and the damage the carriage had sustained was made good. As to Glenarvan's horse, it was soon disposed of. The blacksmith had had the forethought to bring the shoes with him. These shoes had a peculiarity which did not escape the Major; it was a trefoil clumsily cut on the back part. McNabbs pointed it out to Ayrton.

"It is the Black-Point brand," said the quartermaster. "That enables them to track any horses that may stray from the station, and prevents their being mixed with other herds."

The horse was soon shod. The blacksmith claimed his wage, and went off without uttering four words.

Half an hour later, the travelers were on the road. Beyond the grove of mimosas was a stretch of sparsely timbered country, which quite deserved its name of "open plain." Some fragments of quartz and ferruginous rock lay among the scrub and the tall grass, where numerous flocks were feeding. Some miles farther the wheels of the wagon plowed deep into the alluvial soil, where irregular creeks murmured in their beds, half hidden among giant reeds. By-and-by they skirted vast salt lakes, rapidly evaporating. The journey was accomplished without trouble, and, indeed, without fatigue.

Lady Helena invited the horsemen of the party to pay her a visit in turns, as her reception-room was but small, and in pleasant converse with this amiable woman they forgot the fatigue of their day's ride.

Lady Helena, seconded by Miss Mary, did the honors of their ambulatory house with perfect grace. John Mangles was not forgotten in these daily invitations, and his somewhat serious conversation was not unpleasing.

The party crossed, in a diagonal direction, the mail-coach road from Crowland to Horsham, which was a very dusty one, and little used by pedestrians.

The spurs of some low hills were skirted at the boundary of Talbot County, and in the evening the travelers reached a point about three miles from Maryborough. The fine rain was falling, which, in any other country, would have soaked the ground; but here the air absorbed the moisture so wonderfully that the camp did not suffer in the least.

Next day, the 29th of December, the march was delayed somewhat by a succession of little hills, resembling a miniature Switzerland. It was a constant repetition of up and down hill, and many a jolt besides, all of which were scarcely pleasant. The travelers walked part of the way, and thought it no hardship.

At eleven o’clock they arrived at Carisbrook, rather an important municipality. Ayrton was for passing outside the town without going through it, in order, he said, to save time. Glenarvan concurred with him, but Paganel, always eager for novelties, was for visiting Carisbrook. They gave him his way, and the wagon went on slowly.

Paganel, as was his custom, took Robert with him. His visit to the town was very short, but it sufficed to give him an exact idea of Australian towns. There was a bank, a court-house, a market, a church, and a hundred or so of brick houses, all exactly alike. The whole town was laid out in squares, crossed with parallel streets in the English fashion. Nothing could be more simple, nothing less attractive. As the town grows, they lengthen the streets as we lengthen the trousers of a growing child, and thus the original symmetry is undisturbed.

Carisbrook was full of activity, a remarkable feature in these towns of yesterday. It seems in Australia as if towns shot up like trees, owing to the heat of the sun. Men of business were hurrying along the streets; gold buyers were hastening to meet the in-coming escort; the precious metal, guarded by the local police, was coming from the mines at Bendigo and Mount Alexander. All the little world was so absorbed in its own interests, that the strangers passed unobserved amid the laborious inhabitants.

After an hour devoted to visiting Carisbrook, the two visitors rejoined their companions, and crossed a highly cultivated district. Long stretches of prairie, known as the "Low Level Plains," next met their gaze, dotted with countless sheep, and shepherds' huts. And then came a sandy tract, without any transition, but with the abruptness of change so characteristic of Australian scenery. Mount Simpson and Mount Terrengower marked the southern point where the boundary of the Loddon district cuts the 144th meridian.

As yet they had not met with any of the aboriginal tribes living in the savage state. Glenarvan wondered if the Australians were wanting in Australia, as the Indians had been wanting in the Pampas of the Argentine district; but Paganel told him that, in that latitude, the natives frequented chiefly the Murray Plains, about one hundred miles to the eastward.

"We are now approaching the gold district," said he, "in a day or two we shall cross the rich region of Mount Alexander. It was here that the swarm of diggers alighted in 1852; the natives had to fly to the interior. We are in civilized districts without seeing any sign of it; but our road will, before the day is over, cross the railway which connects the Murray with the sea. Well, I must confess, a railway in Australia does seem to me an astonishing thing!”

“And pray, why, Paganel?” said Glenarvan.

“Why? because it jars on one’s ideas. Oh! I know you English are so used to colonizing distant possessions. You, who have electric telegraphs and universal exhibitions in New Zealand, you think it is all quite natural. But it dumb-founders the mind of a Frenchman like myself, and confuses all one’s notions of Australia!”

“Because you look at the past, and not at the present,” said John Mangles.

A loud whistle interrupted the discussion. The party were within a mile of the railway. Quite a number of persons were hastening toward the railway bridge. The people from the neighboring stations left their houses, and the shepherds their flocks, and crowded the approaches to the railway. Every now and then there was a shout, “The railway! the railway!”

Something serious must have occurred to produce such an agitation.

Perhaps some terrible accident.

Glenarvan, followed by the rest, urged on his horse. In a few minutes he arrived at Camden Bridge and then he became aware of the cause of such an excitement.

A fearful accident had occurred; not a collision, but a train had gone off the line, and then there had been a fall. The affair recalled the worst disasters of American railways. The river crossed by the railway was full of broken carriages and the engine. Whether the weight of the train had been too much for the bridge, or whether the train had gone off the rails, the fact remained that five carriages out of six fell into the bed of the Loddon, dragged down by the locomotive. The sixth carriage, miraculously preserved by the breaking of the coupling chain, remained on the rails, six feet from the abyss. Below nothing was discernible but a melancholy heap of twisted and blackened axles, shattered wagons, bent rails, charred sleepers; the boiler, burst by the shock, had scattered its plates to enormous distances. From this shapeless mass of ruins flames and black smoke still rose. After the fearful fall came fire, more fearful still! Great tracks of blood, scattered limbs, charred trunks of bodies, showed here and there; none could guess how many victims lay dead and mangled under those ruins.

Glenarvan, Paganel, the Major, Mangles, mixing with the crowd, heard the current talk. Everyone tried to account for the accident, while doing his utmost to save what could be saved.

“The bridge must have broken,” said one.

“Not a bit of it. The bridge is whole enough; they must have forgotten to close it to let the train pass. That is all.”

It was, in fact, a swing bridge, which opened for the convenience of the boats. Had the guard, by an unpardonable oversight, omitted to close it for the passage of the train, so that the train, coming on at full speed, was precipitated into the Loddon? This hypothesis seemed very admissible; for although one-half of the bridge lay beneath the ruins of the train, the other half, drawn up to the opposite shore, hung, still unharmed, by its chains. No one could doubt that an oversight on the part of the guard had caused the catastrophe.

The accident had occurred in the night, to the express train which left Melbourne at 11:45 in the evening. About a quarter past three in the morning, twenty-five minutes after leaving Castlemaine, it arrived at Camden Bridge, where the terrible disaster befell. The passengers and guards of the last and only remaining carriage at once tried to obtain help. But the telegraph, whose posts were lying on the ground, could not be worked. It was three hours before the authorities from Castlemaine reached the scene of the accident, and it was six o'clock in the morning when the salvage party was organized, under the direction of Mr. Mitchell, the surveyor-general of the colony, and a detachment of police, commanded by an inspector. The squatters and their "hands" lent their aid, and directed their efforts first to extinguishing the fire which raged in the ruined heap with unconquerable violence. A few unrecognizable bodies lay on the slope of the embankment, but from that blazing mass no living thing could be saved. The fire had done its work too speedily. Of the passengers ten only survived — those in the last carriage. The railway authorities sent a locomotive to bring them back to Castlemaine.

Lord Glenarvan, having introduced himself to the surveyor-general, entered into conversation with him and the inspector of police. The latter was a tall, thin man, im-perturbably cool, and, whatever he may have felt, allowed no trace of it to appear on his features. He contemplated this calamity as a mathematician does a problem; he was seeking to solve it, and to find the unknown; and when Glenarvan observed, "This is a great misfortune," he quietly replied, "Better than that, my Lord."

"Better than that?" cried Glenarvan. "I do not understand you."

"It is better than a misfortune, it is a crime!" he replied, in the same quiet tone.

Glenarvan looked inquiringly at Mr. Mitchell for a solution. “Yes, my Lord,” replied the surveyor-general, “our inquiries have resulted in the conclusion that the catastrophe is the result of a crime. The last luggage-van has been robbed. The surviving passengers were attacked by a gang of five or six villains. The bridge was intentionally opened, and not left open by the negligence of the guard; and connecting with this fact the guard’s disappearance, we may conclude that the wretched fellow was an accomplice of these ruffians.”

The police-officer shook his head at this inference.

“You do not agree with me?” said Mr. Mitchell.

“No, not as to the complicity of the guard.”

“Well, but granting that complicity, we may attribute the crime to the natives who haunt the Murray. Without him the blacks could never have opened a swing-bridge; they know nothing of its mechanism.”

“Exactly so,” said the police-inspector.

“Well,” added Mr. Mitchell, “we have the evidence of a boatman whose boat passed Camden Bridge at 10:40 P. M. that the bridge was properly shut after he passed.”

“True.”

“Well, after that I cannot see any doubt as to the complicity of the guard.”

The police-officer shook his head gently, but continuously.

“Then you don’t attribute the crime to the natives?”

“Not at all.”

“To whom then?”

Just at this moment a noise was heard from about half a mile up the river. A crowd had gathered, and quickly increased. They soon reached the station, and in their midst were two men carrying a corpse. It was the body of the guard, quite cold, stabbed to the heart. The murderers had no doubt hoped, by dragging their victim to a distance, that the police would be put on a wrong scent in their first inquiries. This discovery, at any rate, justified the doubts of the police-inspector. The poor blacks had had no hand in the matter.

“Those who dealt that blow,” said he, “were already well used to this little instrument”; and so saying he produced a pair of “darbies,” a kind of handcuff made of a double ring of iron secured by a lock. “I shall soon have the pleasure of presenting them with these bracelets as a New Year’s gift.”

“Then you suspect — ”

“Some folks who came out free in Her Majesty’s ships.”

“What! convicts?” cried Paganel, who recognized the formula employed in the Australian colonies.

“I thought,” said Glenarvan, “convicts had no right in the province of Victoria.”

“Bah!” said the inspector, “if they have no right, they take it! They escape sometimes, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, this lot have come straight from Perth, and, take my word for it, they will soon be there again.”

Mr. Mitchell nodded acquiescence in the words of the police-inspector. At this moment the wagon arrived at the level crossing of the railway. Glenarvan wished to spare the ladies the horrible spectacle at Camden Bridge. He took courteous leave of the surveyor-general, and made a sign to the rest to follow him. “There is no reason,” said he, “for delaying our journey.”

When they reached the wagon, Glenarvan merely mentioned to Lady Helena that there had been a railway accident, without a hint of the crime that had played so great a part in it; neither did he make mention of the presence of a band of convicts in the neighborhood, reserving that piece of information solely for Ayrton’s ear. The little procession now crossed the railway some two hundred yards below the bridge, and then resumed their eastward course.

CHAPTER XII TOLINE OF THE LACHLAN

ABOUT two miles from the railway, the plain terminated in a range of low hills, and it was not long before the wagon entered a succession of narrow gorges and capricious windings, out of which it emerged into a most charming region, where grand trees, not closely planted, but in scattered groups, were growing with absolutely tropical luxuriance. As the party drove on they stumbled upon a little native boy lying fast asleep beneath the shade of a magnificent banksia. He was dressed in European garb, and seemed about eight years of age. There was no mistaking the characteristic features of his race; the crisped hair, the nearly black skin, the flattened nose, the thick lips, the unusual length of the arms, immediately classed him among the aborigines of the interior. But a degree of intelligence appeared in his face that showed some educational influences must have been at work on his savage, untamed nature.

Lady Helena, whose interest was greatly excited by this spectacle, got out of the wagon, followed by Mary, and presently the whole company surrounded the peaceful little sleeper. “Poor child!” said Mary Grant. “Is he lost, I wonder, in this desert?”

“I suppose,” said Lady Helena, “he has come a long way to visit this part. No doubt some he loves are here.”

“But he can’t be left here,” added Robert. “We must — ”

His compassionate sentence remained unfinished, for, just at that moment the child turned over in his sleep, and, to the extreme surprise of everybody, there was a large label on his shoulders, on which the following was written:

TOLINE.

To be conducted to Echuca.

Care of Jeffries Smith, Railway Porter.

Prepaid.

“That’s the English all over!” exclaimed Paganel. “They send off a child just as they would luggage, and book him like a parcel. I heard it was done, certainly; but I could not believe it before.”

“Poor child!” said Lady Helena. “Could he have been in the train that got off the line at Camden Bridge? Perhaps his parents are killed, and he is left alone in the world!”

“I don’t think so, madam,” replied John Mangles. “That card rather goes to prove he was traveling alone.”

“He is waking up!” said Mary.

And so he was. His eyes slowly opened and then closed again, pained by the glare of light. But Lady Helena took his hand, and he jumped up at once and looked about him in bewilderment at the sight of so many strangers. He seemed half frightened at first, but the presence of Lady Helena reassured him. “Do you understand English, my little man?” asked the young lady.

“I understand it and speak it,” replied the child in fluent enough English, but with a marked accent. His pronunciation was like a Frenchman’s.

“What is your name?” asked Lady Helena.

“Toline,” replied the little native.

“Toline!” exclaimed Paganel. “Ah! I think that means ‘bark of a tree’ in Australian.”

Toline nodded, and looked again at the travelers.

“Where do you come from?” inquired Lady Helena.

“From Melbourne, by the railway from Sandhurst.”

“Were you in the accident at Camden Bridge?” said Glenarvan.

“Yes, sir,” was Toline’s reply; “but the God of the Bible protected me.”

“Are you traveling alone?”

“Yes, alone; the Reverend Paxton put me in charge of Jeffries Smith; but unfortunately the poor man was killed.”

“And you did not know any one else on the train?”

“No one, madam; but God watches over children and never forsakes them.”

Toline said this in soft, quiet tones, which went to the heart. When he mentioned the name of God his voice was grave and his eyes beamed with all the fervor that animated his young soul.

This religious enthusiasm at so tender an age was easily explained. The child was one of the aborigines baptized by the English missionaries, and trained by them in all the rigid principles of the Methodist Church. His calm replies, proper behavior, and even his somber garb made him look like a little reverend already.

But where was he going all alone in these solitudes and why had he left

Camden Bridge? Lady Helena asked him about this.

“I was returning to my tribe in the Lachlan,” he replied.

“I wished to see my family again.”

“Are they Australians?” inquired John Mangles.

“Yes, Australians of the Lachlan,” replied Toline.

“Have you a father and mother?” said Robert Grant.

“Yes, my brother,” replied Toline, holding out his hand to little Grant. Robert was so touched by the word brother that he kissed the black child, and they were friends forthwith.

The whole party were so interested in these replies of the little Australian savage that they all sat round him in a listening group. But the sun had meantime sunk behind the tall trees, and as a few miles would not greatly retard their progress, and the spot they were in would be suitable for a halt, Glenarvan gave orders to prepare their camp for the night at once. Ayrton unfastened the bullocks and turned them out to feed at will. The tent was pitched, and Olbinett got the supper ready. Toline consented, after some difficulty, to share it, though he was hungry enough. He took his seat beside Robert, who chose out all the titbits for his new friend. Toline accepted them with a shy grace that was very charming.

The conversation with him, however, was still kept up, for everyone felt an interest in the child, and wanted to talk to him and hear his history. It was simple enough. He was one of the poor native children confided to the care of charitable societies by the neighboring tribes. The Australian aborigines are gentle and inoffensive, never exhibiting the fierce hatred toward their conquerors which characterizes the New Zealanders, and possibly a few of the races of Northern Australia. They often go to the large towns, such as Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne, and walk about in very primitive costume. They go to barter their few articles of industry, hunting and fishing implements, weapons, etc. and some of the chiefs, from pecuniary motives, no doubt, willingly leave their children to profit by the advantages of a gratuitous education in English.

This was how Toline's parents had acted. They were true Australian savages living in the Lachlan, a vast region lying beyond the Murray. The child had been in Melbourne five years, and during that time had never once seen any of his own people. And yet the imperishable feeling of kindred was still so strong in his heart that he had dared to brave this journey over the wilds to visit his tribe once more, scattered though perchance it might be, and his family, even should he find it decimated.

"And after you have kissed your parents, are you coming back to Melbourne?" asked Lady Glenarvan.

"Yes, Madam," replied Toline, looking at the lady with a loving expression.

"And what are you going to be some day?" she continued.

"I am going to snatch my brothers from misery and ignorance. I am going to teach them, to bring them to know and love God. I am going to be a missionary."

Words like those, spoken with such animation from a child of only eight years, might have provoked a smile in light, scoffing auditors, but they were understood and appreciated by the grave Scotch, who admired the courage of this young disciple, already armed for the battle. Even Paganel was stirred to the depths of his heart, and felt his warmer sympathy awakened for the poor child.

To speak the truth, up to that moment he did not care much for a savage in European attire. He had not come to Australia to see Australians in coats and trousers. He preferred them simply tattooed, and this conventional dress jarred on his preconceived notions. But the child's genuine religious fervor won him over completely. Indeed, the wind-up of the conversation converted the worthy geographer into his best friend.

It was in reply to a question Lady Helena had asked, that Toline said he was studying at the Normal School in Melbourne, and that the principal was the Reverend Mr. Paxton.

"And what do they teach you?" she went on to say.

"They teach me the Bible, and mathematics, and geography."

Paganel pricked up his ears at this, and said, "Indeed, geography!"

"Yes, sir," said Toline; "and I had the first prize for geography before the Christmas holidays."

"You had the first prize for geography, my boy?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is," returned Toline, pulling a book out of his pocket.

It was a bible, 32mo size, and well bound. On the first page was written the words: "Normal School, Melbourne. First Prize for Geography. Toline of the Lachlan."

Paganel was beside himself. An Australian well versed in geography. This was marvelous, and he could not help kissing Toline on both cheeks, just as if he had been the Reverend Mr. Paxton himself, on the day of the distribution of prizes. Paganel need not have been so amazed at this circumstance, however, for it is frequent enough in Australian schools. The little savages are very quick in learning geography. They learn it eagerly, and on the other hand, are perfectly averse to the science of arithmetic.

Toline could not understand this outburst of affection on the part of the Frenchman, and looked so puzzled that Lady Helena thought she had better inform him that Paganel was a celebrated geographer and a distinguished professor on occasion.

“A professor of geography!” cried Toline. “Oh, sir, do question me!”

“Question you? Well, I’d like nothing better. Indeed, I was going to do it without your leave. I should very much like to see how they teach geography in the Normal School of Melbourne.”

“And suppose Toline trips you up, Paganel!” said McNabbs.

“What a likely idea!” exclaimed the geographer. “Trip up the Secretary of the Geographical Society of France.”

Their examination then commenced, after Paganel had settled his spectacles firmly on his nose, drawn himself up to his full height, and put on a solemn voice becoming to a professor.

“Pupil Toline, stand up.”

As Toline was already standing, he could not get any higher, but he waited modestly for the geographer’s questions.

“Pupil Toline, what are the five divisions of the globe?”

“Oceanica, Asia, Africa, America, and Europe.”

“Perfectly so. Now we’ll take Oceanica first; where are we at this moment? What are the principal divisions?”

“Australia, belonging to the English; New Zealand, belonging to the English; Tasmania, belonging to the English. The islands of Chatham, Auckland, Macquarie, Kermadec, Makin, Maraki, are also belonging to the English.”

“Very good, and New Caledonia, the Sandwich Islands, the Mendana, the Pomotou?”

“They are islands under the Protectorate of Great Britain.”

“What!” cried Paganel, “under the Protectorate of Great Britain. I rather think on the contrary, that France — ”

“France,” said the child, with an astonished look.

“Well, well,” said Paganel; “is that what they teach you in the Melbourne Normal School?”

“Yes, sir. Isn’t it right?”

“Oh, yes, yes, perfectly right. All Oceanica belongs to the English. That’s an understood thing. Go on.”

Paganel’s face betrayed both surprise and annoyance, to the great delight of the Major.

“Let us go on to Asia,” said the geographer.

“Asia,” replied Toline, “is an immense country.

Capital — Calcutta. Chief Towns — Bombay, Madras, Calicut, Aden,

Malacca, Singapore, Pegu, Colombo. The Lacca-dive Islands,

the Maldives, the Chagos, etc. belonging to the English.”

“Very good, pupil Toline. And now for Africa.”

“Africa comprises two chief colonies — the Cape on the south, capital Capetown; and on the west the English settlements, chief city, Sierra Leone.”

“Capital!” said Paganel, beginning to enter into this perfectly taught but Anglo-colored fanciful geography. “As to Algeria, Morocco, Egypt — they are all struck out of the Britannic cities.”

“Let us pass on, pray, to America.”

“It is divided,” said Toline, promptly, “into North and South America. The former belongs to the English in Canada, New Brunswick, New Scotland, and the United States, under the government of President Johnson.”

“President Johnson,” cried Paganel, “the successor of the great and good Lincoln, assassinated by a mad fanatic of the slave party. Capital; nothing could be better. And as to South America, with its Guiana, its archipelago of South Shetland, its Georgia, Jamaica, Trinidad, etc. that belongs to the English, too! Well, I’ll not be the one to dispute that point! But, Toline, I should like to know your opinion of Europe, or rather your professor’s.”

“Europe?” said Toline not at all understanding Paganel’s excitement.

“Yes, Europe! Who does Europe belong to?”

“Why, to the English,” replied Toline, as if the fact was quite settled.

“I much doubt it,” returned Paganel. “But how’s that, Toline, for I want to know that?”

“England, Ireland, Scotland, Malta, Jersey and Guern-sey, the Ionian Islands, the Hebrides, the Shetlands, and the Orkneys.”

“Yes, yes, my lad; but there are other states you forgot to mention.”

“What are they?” replied the child, not the least disconcerted.

“Spain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, France,” answered Paganel.

“They are provinces, not states,” said Toline.

“Well, that beats all!” exclaimed Paganel, tearing off his spectacles.

“Yes,” continued the child. “Spain — capital, Gibraltar.”

“Admirable! perfect! sublime! And France, for I am French, and I should like to know to whom I belong.”

“France,” said Toline, quietly, “is an English province; chief city, Calais.”

“Calais!” cried Paganel. “So you think Calais still belongs to the English?”

“Certainly.”

“And that it is the capital of France?”

“Yes, sir; and it is there that the Governor, Lord Napo-leon, lives.”

This was too much for Paganel’s risible faculties. He burst out laughing. Toline did not know what to make of him. He had done his best to answer every question put to him. But the singularity of the answers were not his blame; indeed, he never imagined anything singular about them. However, he took it all quietly, and waited for the professor to recover himself. These peals of laughter were quite incomprehensible to him.

“You see,” said Major McNabbs, laughing, “I was right.

The pupil could enlighten you after all.”

“Most assuredly, friend Major,” replied the geographer. “So that’s the way they teach geography in Melbourne! They do it well, these professors in the Normal School! Europe, Asia, Africa, America, Oceanica, the whole world belongs to the English. My conscience! with such an ingenious education it is no wonder the natives submit. Ah, well, Toline, my boy, does the moon belong to England, too?”

“She will, some day,” replied the young savage, gravely.

This was the climax. Paganel could not stand any more. He was obliged to go away and take his laugh out, for he was actually exploding with mirth, and he went fully a quarter of a mile from the encampment before his equilibrium was restored.

Meanwhile, Glenarvan looked up a geography they had brought among their books. It was “Richardson’s Compendium,” a work in great repute in England, and more in agreement with modern science than the manual in use in the Normal School in Melbourne.

“Here, my child,” he said to Toline, “take this book and keep it. You have a few wrong ideas about geography, which it would be well for you to rectify. I will give you this as a keepsake from me.”

Toline took the book silently; but, after examining it attentively, he shook his head with an air of incredulity, and could not even make up his mind to put it in his pocket.

By this time night had closed in; it was 10 P. M. and time to think of rest, if they were to start betimes next day. Robert offered his friend Toline half his bed, and the little fellow accepted it. Lady Helena and Mary Grant withdrew to the wagon, and the others lay down in the tent, Paganel’s merry peals still mingling with the low, sweet song of the wild magpie.

But in the morning at six o’clock, when the sunshine wakened the sleepers,

they looked in vain for the little Australian. Toline had disappeared.

Was he in haste to get to the Lachlan district? or was he hurt by

Paganel’s laughter? No one could say.

But when Lady Helena opened her eyes she discovered a fresh branch of mimosa leaves lying across her, and Paganel found a book in his vest pocket, which turned out to be “Richardson’s Geography.”

CHAPTER XIII A WARNING

ON the 2d of January, at sunrise, the travelers forded the Colban and the Caupespe rivers. The half of their journey was now accomplished. In fifteen days more, should their journey continue to be prosperous, the little party would reach Twofold Bay.

They were all in good health. All that Paganel said of the hygienic qualities of the climate was realized. There was little or no humidity, and the heat was quite bearable. Neither horses nor bullocks could complain of it any more than human beings. The order of the march had been changed in one respect since the affair of Camden Bridge. That criminal catastrophe on the railway made Ayrton take sundry precautions, which had hitherto been unnecessary. The hunters never lost sight of the wagon, and whenever they camped, one was always placed on watch. Morning and evening the firearms were primed afresh. It was certain that a gang of ruffians was prowling about the country, and though there was no cause for actual fear, it was well to be ready for whatever might happen.

It need hardly be said these precautions were adopted without the knowledge of Lady Helena and Mary Grant, as Lord Glenarvan did not wish to alarm them.

They were by no means unnecessary, however, for any imprudence or carelessness might have cost the travelers dear. Others beside Glenarvan were on their guard. In lonely settlements and on stations, the inhabitants and the squatters prepared carefully against any attack or surprise. Houses are closed at nightfall; the dogs let loose inside the fences, barked at the slightest sound. Not a single shepherd on horseback gathered his numerous flocks together at close of day, without having a carbine slung from his saddle.

The outrage at Camden Bridge was the reason for all this, and many a colonist fastened himself in with bolts and bars now at dusk, who used to sleep with open doors and windows.

The Government itself displayed zeal and prudence, especially in the Post-office department. On this very day, just as Glenarvan and his party were on their way from Kilmore to Heathcote, the mail dashed by at full speed; but though the horses were at a gallop, Glenarvan caught sight of the glittering weapons of the mounted police that rode by its side, as they swept past in a cloud of dust. The travelers might have fancied themselves back in those lawless times when the discovery of the first gold-fields deluged the Australian continent with the scum of Europe.

A mile beyond the road to Kilmore, the wagon, for the first time since leaving Cape Bernouilli, struck into one of those forests of gigantic trees which extend over a super-fices of several degrees. A cry of admiration escaped the travelers at the sight of the eucalyptus trees, two hundred feet high, with tough bark five inches thick. The trunks, measuring twenty feet round, and furrowed with foamy streaks of an odorous resin, rose one hundred and fifty feet above the soil. Not a branch, not a twig, not a stray shoot, not even a knot, spoilt the regularity of their outline. They could not have come out smoother from the hands of a turner. They stood like pillars all molded exactly alike, and could be counted by hundreds. At an enormous height they spread out in chaplets of branches, rounded and adorned at their extremity with alternate leaves. At the axle of these leaves solitary flowers drooped down, the calyx of which resembles an inverted urn.

Under this leafy dome, which never lost its greenness, the air circulated freely, and dried up the dampness of the ground. Horses, cattle, and wagon could easily pass between the trees, for they were standing in wide rows, and parceled out like a wood that was being felled. This was neither like the densely-packed woods choked up with brambles, nor the virgin forest barricaded with the trunks of fallen trees, and overgrown with inextricable tangles of creepers, where only iron and fire could open up a track. A grassy carpet at the foot of the trees, and a canopy of verdure above, long perspectives of bold colors, little shade, little freshness at all, a peculiar light, as if the rays came through a thin veil, dappled lights and shades sharply reflected on the ground, made up a whole, and constituted a peculiar spectacle rich in novel effects. The forests of the Oceanic continent do not in the least resemble the forests of the New World; and the Eucalyptus, the “Tara” of the aborigines, belonging to the family of MYRTACEA, the different varieties of which can hardly be enumerated, is the tree par excellence of the Australian flora.

The reason of the shade not being deep, nor the darkness profound, under these domes of verdure, was that these trees presented a curious anomaly in the disposition of the leaves. Instead of presenting their broad surface to the sunlight, only the side is turned. Only the profile of the leaves is seen in this singular foliage. Consequently the sun’s rays slant down them to the earth, as if through the open slants of a Venetian blind.

Glenarvan expressed his surprise at this circumstance, and wondered what could be the cause of it. Paganel, who was never at a loss for an answer, immediately replied:

“What astonishes me is not the caprice of nature. She knows what she is about, but botanists don’t always know what they are saying. Nature made no mistake in giving this peculiar foliage to the tree, but men have erred in calling them EUCALYPTUS.”

“What does the word mean?” asked Mary Grant.

“It comes from a Greek word, meaning I cover well. They took care to commit the mistake in Greek, that it might not be so self-evident, for anyone can see that the ecualyptus covers badly.”

“I agree with you there,” said Glenarvan; “but now tell us, Paganel, how it is that the leaves grow in this fashion?”

“From a purely physical cause, friends,” said Paganel, “and one that you will easily understand. In this country where the air is dry and rain seldom falls, and the ground is parched, the trees have no need of wind or sun. Moisture lacking, sap is lacking also. Hence these narrow leaves, which seek to defend themselves against the light, and prevent too great evaporation. This is why they present the profile and not the face to the sun’s rays. There is nothing more intelligent than a leaf.”

“And nothing more selfish,” added the Major. “These only thought of themselves, and not at all of travelers.”

Everyone inclined to the opinion of McNabbs except Paganel, who congratulated himself on walking under shadeless trees, though all the time he was wiping the perspiration from his forehead. However, this disposition of foliage was certainly to be regretted, for the journey through the forest was often long and painful, as the traveler had no protection whatever against the sun’s fierce rays.

The whole of this day the wagon continued to roll along through interminable rows of eucalyptus, without meeting either quadruped or native. A few cockatoos lived in the tops of the trees, but at such a height they could scarcely be distinguished, and their noisy chatter was changed into an imperceptible murmur. Occasionally a swarm of par-roquets flew along a distant path, and lighted it up for an instant with gay colors; but otherwise, solemn silence reigned in this vast green temple, and the tramp of the horses, a few words exchanged with each other by the riders, the grinding noise of the wheels, and from time to time a cry from Ayrton to stir up his lazy team, were the only sounds which disturbed this immense solitude.

When night came they camped at the foot of some eucalyptus, which bore marks of a comparatively recent fire. They looked like tall factory chimneys, for the flame had completely hollowed them out their whole length. With the thick bark still covering them, they looked none the worse. However, this bad habit of squatters or natives will end in the destruction of these magnificent trees, and they will disappear like the cedars of Lebanon, those world monuments burnt by unlucky camp fires.

Olbinett, acting on Paganel’s advice, lighted his fire to prepare supper in one of these tubular trunks. He found it drew capitally, and the smoke was lost in the dark foliage above. The requisite precautions were taken for the night, and Ayrton, Mulrady, Wilson and John Mangles undertook in turn to keep watch until sunrise.

On the 3d of January, all day long, they came to nothing but the same symmetrical avenues of trees; it seemed as if they never were going to end. However, toward evening the ranks of trees began to thin, and on a little plain a few miles off an assemblage of regular houses.

“Seymour!” cried Paganel; “that is the last town we come to in the province of Victoria.”

“Is it an important one?” asked Lady Helena.

“It is a mere village, madam, but on the way to become a municipality.”

“Shall we find a respectable hotel there?” asked Glenarvan.

“I hope so,” replied Paganel.

“Very well; let us get on to the town, for our fair travelers, with all their courage, will not be sorry, I fancy, to have a good night’s rest.”

“My dear Edward, Mary and I will accept it gladly, but only on the condition that it will cause no delay, or take us the least out of the road.”

“It will do neither,” replied Lord Glenarvan. “Besides, our bullocks are fatigued, and we will start to-morrow at daybreak.”

It was now nine o’clock; the moon was just beginning to rise, but her rays were only slanting yet, and lost in the mist. It was gradually getting dark when the little party entered the wide streets of Seymour, under Paganel’s guidance, who seemed always to know what he had never seen; but his instinct led him right, and he walked straight to Campbell’s North British Hotel.

The Major without even leaving the hotel, was soon aware that fear absorbed the inhabitants of the little town. Ten minutes’ conversation with Dickson, the loquacious landlord, made him completely acquainted with the actual state of affairs; but he never breathed a word to any one.

When supper was over, though, and Lady Glenarvan, and Mary, and Robert had retired, the Major detained his companions a little, and said, “They have found out the perpetrators of the crime on the Sandhurst railroad.”

“And are they arrested?” asked Ayrton, eagerly.

“No,” replied McNabbs, without apparently noticing the EMPRESSMENT of the quartermaster — an EMPRESSMENT which, moreover, was reasonable enough under the circumstances.

“So much the worse,” replied Ayrton.

“Well,” said Glenarvan, “who are the authors of the crime?”

“Read,” replied the Major, offering Glenarvan a copy of the Australian and New Zealand Gazette, “and you will see that the inspector of the police was not mistaken.”

Glenarvan read aloud the following message:

SYDNEY, Jan. 2, 1866.

It will be remembered that on the night of the 29th or 30th of last December there was an accident at Camden Bridge, five miles beyond the station at Castlemaine, on the railway from Melbourne to Sandhurst. The night express, 11.45, dashing along at full speed, was precipitated into the Loddon River.

Camden Bridge had been left open. The numerous robberies committed after the accident, the body of the guard picked up about half a mile from Camden Bridge, proved that this catastrophe was the result of a crime.

Indeed, the coroner’s inquest decided that the crime must be attributed to the band of convicts which escaped six months ago from the Penitentiary at Perth, Western Australia, just as they were about to be transferred to Norfolk Island.

The gang numbers twenty-nine men; they are under the command of a certain Ben Joyce, a criminal of the most dangerous class, who arrived in Australia a few months ago, by what ship is not known, and who has hitherto succeeded in evading the hands of justice.

The inhabitants of towns, colonists and squatters at stations, are hereby cautioned to be on their guard, and to communicate to the Surveyor-General any information that may aid his search. J. P. MITCHELL, S. G.

When Glenarvan had finished reading this article, McNabbs turned to the geographer and said, “You see, Paganel, there can be convicts in Australia.”

“Escaped convicts, that is evident,” replied Paganel, “but not regularly transported criminals. Those fellows have no business here.”

“Well, they are here, at any rate,” said Glenarvan; “but I don’t suppose the fact need materially alter our arrangements. What do you think, John?”

John Mangles did not reply immediately; he hesitated between the sorrow it would cause the two children to give up the search, and the fear of compromising the expedition.

“If Lady Glenarvan, and Miss Grant were not with us,” he said,

“I should not give myself much concern about these wretches.”

Glenarvan understood him and added, “Of course I need not say that it is not a question of giving up our task; but would it perhaps be prudent, for the sake of our companions, to rejoin the DUNCAN at Melbourne, and proceed with our search for traces of Harry Grant on the eastern side. What do you think of it, McNabbs?”

“Before I give my opinion,” replied the Major, “I should like to hear Ayrton’s.”

At this direct appeal, the quartermaster looked at Glenarvan, and said, “I think we are two hundred miles from Melbourne, and that the danger, if it exists, is as great on the route to the south as on the route to the east. Both are little frequented, and both will serve us. Besides, I do not think that thirty scoundrels can frighten eight well-armed, determined men. My advice, then, is to go forward.”

“And good advice too, Ayrton,” replied Paganel. “By going on we may come across the traces of Captain Grant. In returning south, on the contrary, we turn our backs to them. I think with you, then, and I don’t care a snap for these escaped fellows. A brave man wouldn’t care a bit for them!”

Upon this they agreed with the one voice to follow their original programme.

“Just one thing, my Lord,” said Ayrton, when they were about to separate.

“Say on, Ayrton.”

“Wouldn’t it be advisable to send orders to the DUNCAN to be at the coast?”

“What good would that be,” replied John Mangles. “When we reach Twofold Bay it will be time enough for that. If any unexpected event should oblige us to go to Melbourne, we might be sorry not to find the DUNCAN there. Besides, her injuries can not be repaired yet. For these reasons, then, I think it would be better to wait.”

“All right,” said Ayrton, and forbore to press the matter further.

CHAPTER XIV WEALTH IN THE WILDERNESS

ON January 6, at 7 A. M. after a tranquil night passed in longitude 146 degrees 15”, the travelers continued their journey across the vast district. They directed their course steadily toward the rising sun, and made a straight line across the plain. Twice over they came upon the traces of squatters going toward the north, and their different footprints became confused, and Glenarvan’s horse no longer left on the dust the Blackpoint mark, recognizable by its double shamrock.

The plain was furrowed in some places by fantastic winding creeks surrounded by box, and whose waters were rather temporary than permanent. They originated in the slopes of the Buffalo Ranges, a chain of mountains of moderate height, the undulating line of which was visible on the horizon. It was resolved to camp there the same night. Ayrton goaded on his team, and after a journey of thirty-five miles, the bullocks arrived, somewhat fatigued. The tent was pitched beneath the great trees, and as night had drawn on supper was served as quickly as possible, for all the party cared more for sleeping than eating, after such a day’s march.

Paganel who had the first watch did not lie down, but shouldered his rifle and walked up and down before the camp, to keep himself from going to sleep. In spite of the absence of the moon, the night was almost luminous with the light of the southern constellations. The SAVANT amused himself with reading the great book of the firmament, a book which is always open, and full of interest to those who can read it. The profound silence of sleeping nature was only interrupted by the clanking of the hobbles on the horses’ feet.

Paganel was engrossed in his astronomical meditations, and thinking more about the celestial than the terrestrial world, when a distant sound aroused him from his reverie. He listened attentively, and to his great amaze, fancied he heard the sounds of a piano. He could not be mistaken, for he distinctly heard chords struck.

“A piano in the wilds!” said Paganel to himself.

“I can never believe it is that.”

It certainly was very surprising, but Paganel found it easier to believe it was some Australian bird imitating the sounds of a Pleyel or Erard, as others do the sounds of a clock or mill. But at this very moment, the notes of a clear ringing voice rose on the air. The PIANIST was accompanied by singing. Still Paganel was unwilling to be convinced. However, next minute he was forced to admit the fact, for there fell on his ear the sublime strains of Mozart’s “Il mio tesoro tanto” from Don Juan.

“Well, now,” said the geographer to himself, “let the Australian birds be as queer as they may, and even granting the paroquets are the most musical in the world, they can’t sing Mozart!”

He listened to the sublime inspiration of the great master to the end. The effect of this soft melody on the still clear night was indescribable. Paganel remained as if spellbound for a time; the voice ceased and all was silence. When Wilson came to relieve the watch, he found the geographer plunged into a deep reverie. Paganel made no remark, however, to the sailor, but reserved his information for Glenarvan in the morning, and went into the tent to bed.

Next day, they were all aroused from sleep by the sudden loud barking of dogs, Glenarvan got up forthwith. Two magnificent pointers, admirable specimens of English hunting dogs, were bounding in front of the little wood, into which they had retreated at the approach of the travelers, redoubling their clamor.

“There is some station in this desert, then,” said Glenarvan, “and hunters too, for these are regular setters.”

Paganel was just about to recount his nocturnal experiences, when two young men appeared, mounted on horses of the most perfect breed, true “hunters.”

The two gentlemen dressed in elegant hunting costume, stopped at the sight of the little group camping in gipsy fashion. They looked as if they wondered what could bring an armed party there, but when they saw the ladies get out of the wagon, they dismounted instantly, and went toward them hat in hand. Lord Glenarvan came to meet them, and, as a stranger, announced his name and rank.

The gentlemen bowed, and the elder of them said, “My Lord, will not these ladies and yourself and friends honor us by resting a little beneath our roof?”

“Mr. — ,” began Glenarvan.

“Michael and Sandy Patterson are our names, proprietors of

Hottam Station. Our house is scarcely a quarter of a mile distant.”

“Gentlemen,” replied Glenarvan, “I should not like to abuse such kindly-offered hospitality.”

“My Lord,” returned Michael Patterson, “by accepting it you will confer a favor on poor exiles, who will be only too happy to do the honors of the wilds.”

Glenarvan bowed in token of acquiescence.

“Sir,” said Paganel, addressing Michael Patterson, “if it is not an impudent question, may I ask whether it was you that sung an air from the divine Mozart last night?”

“It was, sir,” replied the stranger, “and my cousin Sandy accompanied me.”

“Well, sir,” replied Paganel, holding out his hand to the young man, “receive the sincere compliments of a Frenchman, who is a passionate admirer of this music.”

Michael grasped his hand cordially, and then pointing out the road to take, set off, accompanied by the ladies and Lord Glenarvan and his friends, for the station. The horses and the camp were left to the care of Ayrton and the sailors.

Hottam Station was truly a magnificent establishment, kept as scrupulously in order as an English park. Immense meadows, enclosed in gray fences, stretched away out of sight. In these, thousands of bullocks and millions of sheep were grazing, tended by numerous shepherds, and still more numerous dogs. The crack of the stock-whip mingled continually with the barking of the “collies” and the bellowing and bleating of the cattle and sheep.

Toward the east there was a boundary of myalls and gum-trees, beyond which rose Mount Hottam, its imposing peak towering 7,500 feet high.

Long avenues of green trees were visible on all sides. Here and there was a thick clump of “grass trees,” tall bushes ten feet high, like the dwarf palm, quite lost in their crown of long narrow leaves. The air was balmy and odorous with the perfume of scented laurels, whose white blossoms, now in full bloom, distilled on the breeze the finest aromatic perfume.

To these charming groups of native trees were added transplantations from European climates. The peach, pear, and apple trees were there, the fig, the orange, and even the oak, to the rapturous delight of the travelers, who greeted them with loud hurrahs! But astonished as the travelers were to find themselves walking beneath the shadow of the trees of their own native land, they were still more so at the sight of the birds that flew about in the branches — the “satin bird,” with its silky plumage, and the “king-honeysuckers,” with their plumage of gold and black velvet.

For the first time, too, they saw here the “Lyre” bird, the tail of which resembles in form the graceful instrument of Orpheus. It flew about among the tree ferns, and when its tail struck the branches, they were almost surprised not to hear the harmonious strains that inspired Amphion to rebuild the walls of Thebes. Paganel had a great desire to play on it.

However, Lord Glenarvan was not satisfied with admiring the fairy-like wonders of this oasis, improvised in the Australian desert. He was listening to the history of the young gentlemen. In England, in the midst of civilized countries, the new comer acquaints his host whence he comes and whither he is going; but here, by a refinement of delicacy, Michael and Sandy Patterson thought it a duty to make themselves known to the strangers who were about to receive their hospitality.

Michael and Sandy Patterson were the sons of London bankers.

When they were twenty years of age, the head of their family said,

“Here are some thousands, young men. Go to a distant colony;

and start some useful settlement there. Learn to know life by labor.

If you succeed, so much the better. If you fail, it won’t matter much.

We shall not regret the money which makes you men.”

The two young men obeyed. They chose the colony of Victoria in Australia, as the field for sowing the paternal bank-notes, and had no reason to repent the selection. At the end of three years the establishment was flourishing. In Victoria, New South Wales, and Southern Australia, there are more than three thousand stations, some belonging to squatters who rear cattle, and others to settlers who farm the ground. Till the arrival of the two Pattersons, the largest establishment of this sort was that of Mr. Jamieson, which covered an area of seventy-five miles, with a frontage of about eight miles along the Peron, one of the affluents of the Darling.

Now Hottam Station bore the palm for business and extent. The young men were both squatters and settlers. They managed their immense property with rare ability and uncommon energy.

The station was far removed from the chief towns in the midst of the unfrequented districts of the Murray. It occupied a long wide space of five leagues in extent, lying between the Buffalo Ranges and Mount Hottam. At the two angles north of this vast quadrilateral, Mount Aberdeen rose on the left, and the peaks of High Barven on the right. Winding, beautiful streams were not wanting, thanks to the creeks and affluents of the Oven’s River, which throws itself at the north into the bed of the Murray. Consequently they were equally successful in cattle breeding and farming. Ten thousand acres of ground, admirably cultivated, produced harvests of native productions and exotics, and several millions of animals fattened in the fertile pastures. The products of Hottam Station fetched the very highest price in the markets of Castlemaine and Melbourne.

Michael and Sandy Patterson had just concluded these details of their busy life, when their dwelling came in sight, at the extremity of the avenue of the oaks.

It was a charming house, built of wood and brick, hidden in groves of emerophilis. Nothing at all, however, belonging to a station was visible — neither sheds, nor stables, nor cart-houses. All these out-buildings, a perfect village, comprising more than twenty huts and houses, were about a quarter of a mile off in the heart of a little valley. Electric communication was established between this village and the master’s house, which, far removed from all noise, seemed buried in a forest of exotic trees.

At Sandy Patterson’s bidding, a sumptuous breakfast was served in less than a quarter of an hour. The wines and viands were of the finest quality; but what pleased the guests most of all in the midst of these refinements of opulence, was the joy of the young squatters in offering them this splendid hospitality.

It was not long before they were told the history of the expedition, and had their liveliest interest awakened for its success. They spoke hopefully to the young Grants, and Michael said: “Harry Grant has evidently fallen into the hands of natives, since he has not turned up at any of the settlements on the coast. He knows his position exactly, as the document proves, and the reason he did not reach some English colony is that he must have been taken prisoner by the savages the moment he landed!”

“That is precisely what befell his quartermaster, Ayrton,” said John Mangles.

“But you, gentlemen, then, have never heard the catastrophe of the BRITANNIA, mentioned?” inquired Lady Helena.

“Never, Madam,” replied Michael.

“And what treatment, in your opinion, has Captain Grant met with among the natives?”

“The Australians are not cruel, Madam,” replied the young squatter, “and Miss Grant may be easy on that score. There have been many instances of the gentleness of their nature, and some Europeans have lived a long time among them without having the least cause to complain of their brutality.”

“King, among others, the sole survivor of the Burke expedition,” put in Paganel.

“And not only that bold explorer,” returned Sandy, “but also an English soldier named Buckley, who deserted at Port Philip in 1803, and who was welcomed by the natives, and lived thirty-three years among them.”

“And more recently,” added Michael,” one of the last numbers of the AUSTRALASIA informs us that a certain Morrilli has just been restored to his countrymen after sixteen years of slavery. His story is exactly similar to the captain’s, for it was at the very time of his shipwreck in the PRUVIENNE, in 1846, that he was made prisoner by the natives, and dragged away into the interior of the continent. I therefore think you have reason to hope still.”

The young squatter’s words caused great joy to his auditors.

They completely corroborated the opinions of Paganel and Ayrton.

The conversation turned on the convicts after the ladies had left the table. The squatters had heard of the catastrophe at Camden Bridge, but felt no uneasiness about the escaped gang. It was not a station, with more than a hundred men on it, that they would dare to attack. Besides, they would never go into the deserts of the Murray, where they could find no booty, nor near the colonies of New South Wales, where the roads were too well watched. Ayrton had said this too.

Glenarvan could not refuse the request of his amiable hosts, to spend the whole day at the station. It was twelve hours’ delay, but also twelve hours’ rest, and both horses and bullocks would be the better for the comfortable quarters they would find there. This was accordingly agreed upon, and the young squatters sketched out a programme of the day’s amusements, which was adopted eagerly.

At noon, seven vigorous hunters were before the door. An elegant brake was intended for the ladies, in which the coachman could exhibit his skill in driving four-in-hand. The cavalcade set off preceded by huntsmen, and armed with first-rate rifles, followed by a pack of pointers barking joyously as they bounded through the bushes. For four hours the hunting party wandered through the paths and avenues of the park, which was as large as a small German state. The Reuiss-Schleitz, or Saxe-Coburg Gotha, would have gone inside it comfortably. Few people were to be met in it certainly, but sheep in abundance. As for game, there was a complete preserve awaiting the hunters. The noisy reports of guns were soon heard on all sides. Little Robert did wonders in company with Major McNabbs. The daring boy, in spite of his sister’s injunctions, was always in front, and the first to fire. But John Mangles promised to watch over him, and Mary felt less uneasy.

During this BATTUE they killed certain animals peculiar to the country, the very names of which were unknown to Paganel; among others the “wombat” and the “bandicoot.” The wombat is an herbivorous animal, which burrows in the ground like a badger. It is as large as a sheep, and the flesh is excellent.

The bandicoot is a species of marsupial animal which could outwit the European fox, and give him lessons in pillaging poultry yards. It was a repulsive-looking animal, a foot and a half long, but, as Paganel chanced to kill it, of course he thought it charming.

“An adorable creature,” he called it.

But the most interesting event of the day, by far, was the kangaroo hunt. About four o’clock, the dogs roused a troop of these curious marsupials. The little ones retreated precipitately into the maternal pouch, and all the troop decamped in file. Nothing could be more astonishing than the enormous bounds of the kangaroo. The hind legs of the animal are twice as long as the front ones, and unbend like a spring. At the head of the flying troop was a male five feet high, a magnificent specimen of the macropus giganteus, an “old man,” as the bushmen say.

For four or five miles the chase was vigorously pursued. The kangaroos showed no signs of weariness, and the dogs, who had reason enough to fear their strong paws and sharp nails, did not care to approach them. But at last, worn out with the race, the troop stopped, and the “old man” leaned against the trunk of a tree, ready to defend himself. One of the pointers, carried away by excitement, went up to him. Next minute the unfortunate beast leaped into the air, and fell down again completely ripped up.

The whole pack, indeed, would have had little chance with these powerful marsupia. They had to dispatch the fellow with rifles. Nothing but balls could bring down the gigantic animal.

Just at this moment, Robert was well nigh the victim of his own imprudence. To make sure of his aim, he had approached too near the kangaroo, and the animal leaped upon him immediately. Robert gave a loud cry and fell. Mary Grant saw it all from the brake, and in an agony of terror, speechless and almost unable even to see, stretched out her arms toward her little brother. No one dared to fire, for fear of wounding the child.

But John Mangles opened his hunting knife, and at the risk of being ripped up himself, sprang at the animal, and plunged it into his heart. The beast dropped forward, and Robert rose unhurt. Next minute he was in his sister’s arms.

“Thank you, Mr. John, thank you!” she said, holding out her hand to the young captain.

“I had pledged myself for his safety,” was all John said, taking her trembling fingers into his own.

This occurrence ended the sport. The band of marsupia

had disappeared after the death of their leader.

The hunting party returned home, bringing their game with them.

It was then six o’clock. A magnificent dinner was ready.

Among other things, there was one dish that was a great success.

It was kangaroo-tail soup, prepared in the native manner.

Next morning very early, they took leave of the young squatters, with hearty thanks and a positive promise from them of a visit to Malcolm Castle when they should return to Europe.

Then the wagon began to move away, round the foot of Mount Hottam, and soon the hospitable dwelling disappeared from the sight of the travelers like some brief vision which had come and gone.

For five miles further, the horses were still treading the station lands. It was not till nine o’clock that they had passed the last fence, and entered the almost unknown districts of the province of Victoria.

CHAPTER XV SUSPICIOUS OCCURRENCES

AN immense barrier lay across the route to the southeast. It was the Australian Alps, a vast fortification, the fantastic curtain of which extended 1,500 miles, and pierced the clouds at the height of 4,000 feet.

The cloudy sky only allowed the heat to reach the ground through a close veil of mist. The temperature was just bearable, but the road was toilsome from its uneven character. The extumescences on the plain became more and more marked. Several mounds planted with green young gum trees appeared here and there. Further on these protuberances rising sharply, formed the first steps of the great Alps. From this time their course was a continual ascent, as was soon evident in the strain it made on the bullocks to drag along the cumbrous wagon. Their yoke creaked, they breathed heavily, and the muscles of their houghs were stretched as if they would burst. The planks of the vehicle groaned at the unexpected jolts, which Ayrton with all his skill could not prevent. The ladies bore their share of discomfort bravely.

John Mangles and his two sailors acted as scouts, and went about a hundred steps in advance. They found out practical paths, or passes, indeed they might be called, for these projections of the ground were like so many rocks, between which the wagon had to steer carefully. It required absolute navigation to find a safe way over the billowy region.

It was a difficult and often perilous task. Many a time Wilson’s hatchet was obliged to open a passage through thick tangles of shrubs. The damp argillaceous soil gave way under their feet. The route was indefinitely prolonged owing to the insurmountable obstacles, huge blocks of granite, deep ravines, suspected lagoons, which obliged them to make a thousand detours. When night came they found they had only gone over half a degree. They camped at the foot of the Alps, on the banks of the creek of Cobongra, on the edge of a little plain, covered with little shrubs four feet high, with bright red leaves which gladdened the eye.

“We shall have hard work to get over,” said Glenarvan, looking at the chain of mountains, the outlines of which were fast fading away in the deepening darkness. “The very name Alps gives plenty of room for reflection.”

“It is not quite so big as it sounds, my dear Glenarvan. Don’t suppose you have a whole Switzerland to traverse. In Australia there are the Grampians, the Pyrenees, the Alps, the Blue Mountains, as in Europe and America, but in miniature. This simply implies either that the imagination of geographers is not infinite, or that their vocabulary of proper names is very poor.”

“Then these Australian Alps,” said Lord Glenarvan, “are — ”

“Mere pocket mountains,” put in Paganel; “we shall get over them without knowing it.”

“Speak for yourself,” said the Major. “It would certainly take a very absent man who could cross over a chain of mountains and not know it.”

“Absent! But I am not an absent man now. I appeal to the ladies. Since ever I set foot on the Australian continent, have I been once at fault? Can you reproach me with a single blunder?”

“Not one. Monsieur Paganel,” said Mary Grant. “You are now the most perfect of men.”

“Too perfect,” added Lady Helena, laughing; “your blunders suited you admirably.”

“Didn’t they, Madam? If I have no faults now, I shall soon get like everybody else. I hope then I shall make some outrageous mistake before long, which will give you a good laugh. You see, unless I make mistakes, it seems to me I fail in my vocation.”

Next day, the 9th of January, notwithstanding the assurances of the confident geographer, it was not without great difficulty that the little troop made its way through the Alpine pass. They were obliged to go at a venture, and enter the depths of narrow gorges without any certainty of an outlet. Ayrton would doubtless have found himself very much embarrassed if a little inn, a miserable public house, had not suddenly presented itself.

“My goodness!” cried Paganel, “the landlord of this inn won’t make his fortune in a place like this. What is the use of it here?”

“To give us the information we want about the route,” replied Glenarvan. “Let us go in.”

Glenarvan, followed by Ayrton, entered the inn forthwith. The landlord of the “Bush Inn,” as it was called, was a coarse man with an ill-tempered face, who must have considered himself his principal customer for the gin, brandy and whisky he had to sell. He seldom saw any one but the squatters and rovers. He answered all the questions put to him in a surly tone. But his replies sufficed to make the route clear to Ayrton, and that was all that was wanted. Glenarvan rewarded him with a handful of silver for his trouble, and was about to leave the tavern, when a placard against the wall arrested his attention.

It was a police notice, and announcing the escape of the convicts from Perth, and offering a reward for the capture of Ben Joyce of pounds 100 sterling.

“He’s a fellow that’s worth hanging, and no mistake,” said Glenarvan to the quartermaster.

“And worth capturing still more. But what a sum to offer!

He is not worth it!”

“I don’t feel very sure of the innkeeper though, in spite of the notice,” said Glenarvan.

“No more do I,” replied Ayrton.

They went back to the wagon, toward the point where the route to Lucknow stopped. A narrow path wound away from this which led across the chain in a slanting direction. They had commenced the ascent.

It was hard work. More than once both the ladies and gentlemen had to get down and walk. They were obliged to help to push round the wheels of the heavy vehicle, and to support it frequently in dangerous declivities, to unhar-ness the bullocks when the team could not go well round sharp turnings, prop up the wagon when it threatened to roll back, and more than once Ayrton had to reinforce his bullocks by harnessing the horses, although they were tired out already with dragging themselves along.

Whether it was this prolonged fatigue, or from some other cause altogether, was not known, but one of the horses sank suddenly, without the slightest symptom of illness. It was Mulrady’s horse that fell, and on attempting to pull it up, the animal was found to be dead. Ayrton examined it immediately, but was quite at a loss to account for the disaster.

"The beast must have broken some blood vessels," said Glenarvan.

"Evidently," replied Ayrton.

"Take my horse, Mulrady," added Glenarvan. "I will join Lady Helena in the wagon."

Mulrady obeyed, and the little party continued their fatiguing ascent, leaving the carcass of the dead animal to the ravens.

The Australian Alps are of no great thickness, and the base is not more than eight miles wide. Consequently if the pass chosen by Ayrton came out on the eastern side, they might hope to get over the high barrier within forty-eight hours more. The difficulty of the route would then be surmounted, and they would only have to get to the sea.

During the 18th the travelers reached the top-most point of the pass, about 2,000 feet high. They found themselves on an open plateau, with nothing to intercept the view. Toward the north the quiet waters of Lake Omco, all alive with aquatic birds, and beyond this lay the vast plains of the Murray. To the south were the wide spreading plains of Gippsland, with its abundant gold-fields and tall forests. There nature was still mistress of the products and water, and great trees where the woodman's ax was as yet unknown, and the squatters, then five in number, could not struggle against her. It seemed as if this chain of the Alps separated two different countries, one of which had retained its primitive wildness. The sun went down, and a few solitary rays piercing the rosy clouds, lighted up the Murray district, leaving Gippsland in deep shadow, as if night had suddenly fallen on the whole region. The contrast was presented very vividly to the spectators placed between these two countries so divided, and some emotion filled the minds of the travelers, as they contemplated the almost unknown district they were about to traverse right to the frontiers of Victoria.

They camped on the plateau that night, and next day the descent commenced. It was tolerably rapid. A hailstorm of extreme violence assailed the travelers, and obliged them to seek a shelter among the rocks. It was not hail-stones, but regular lumps of ice, as large as one’s hand, which fell from the stormy clouds. A waterspout could not have come down with more violence, and sundry big bruises warned Paganel and Robert to retreat. The wagon was riddled in several places, and few coverings would have held out against those sharp icicles, some of which had fastened themselves into the trunks of the trees. It was impossible to go on till this tremendous shower was over, unless the travelers wished to be stoned. It lasted about an hour, and then the march commenced anew over slanting rocks still slippery after the hail.

Toward evening the wagon, very much shaken and disjointed in several parts, but still standing firm on its wooden disks, came down the last slopes of the Alps, among great isolated pines. The passage ended in the plains of Gippsland. The chain of the Alps was safely passed, and the usual arrangements were made for the nightly encampment.

On the 21st, at daybreak, the journey was resumed with an ardor which never relaxed. Everyone was eager to reach the goal — that is to say the Pacific Ocean — at that part where the wreck of the BRITANNIA had occurred. Nothing could be done in the lonely wilds of Gippsland, and Ayrton urged Lord Glenarvan to send orders at once for the DUNCAN to repair to the coast, in order to have at hand all means of research. He thought it would certainly be advisable to take advantage of the Lucknow route to Melbourne. If they waited it would be difficult to find any way of direct communication with the capital.

This advice seemed good, and Paganel recommended that they should act upon it. He also thought that the presence of the yacht would be very useful, and he added, that if the Lucknow road was once passed, it would be impossible to communicate with Melbourne.

Glenarvan was undecided what to do, and perhaps he would have yielded to Ayrton's arguments, if the Major had not combated this decision vigorously. He maintained that the presence of Ayrton was necessary to the expedition, that he would know the country about the coast, and that if any chance should put them on the track of Harry Grant, the quartermaster would be better able to follow it up than any one else, and, finally, that he alone could point out the exact spot where the shipwreck occurred.

McNabbs voted therefore for the continuation of the voyage, without making the least change in their programme. John Mangles was of the same opinion. The young captain said even that orders would reach the DUNCAN more easily from Twofold Bay, than if a message was sent two hundred miles over a wild country.

His counsel prevailed. It was decided that they should wait till they came to Twofold Bay. The Major watched Ayrton narrowly, and noticed his disappointed look. But he said nothing, keeping his observations, as usual, to himself.

The plains which lay at the foot of the Australian Alps were level, but slightly inclined toward the east. Great clumps of mimosas and eucalyptus, and various odorous gum-trees, broke the uniform monotony here and there. The gastrolobium grandiflorum covered the ground, with its bushes covered with gay flowers. Several unimportant creeks, mere streams full of little rushes, and half covered up with orchids, often interrupted the route. They had to ford these. Flocks of bustards and emus fled at the approach of the travelers. Below the shrubs, kangaroos were leaping and springing like dancing jacks. But the hunters of the party were not thinking much of the sport, and the horses little needed any additional fatigue.

Moreover, a sultry heat oppressed the plain. The atmosphere was completely saturated with electricity, and its influence was felt by men and beasts. They just dragged themselves along, and cared for nothing else. The silence was only interrupted by the cries of Ayrton urging on his burdened team.

From noon to two o’clock they went through a curious forest of ferns, which would have excited the admiration of less weary travelers. These plants in full flower measured thirty feet in height. Horses and riders passed easily beneath their drooping leaves, and sometimes the spurs would clash against the woody stems. Beneath these immovable parasols there was a refreshing coolness which every one appreciated. Jacques Paganel, always demonstrative, gave such deep sighs of satisfaction that the paroquets and cockatoos flew out in alarm, making a deafening chorus of noisy chatter.

The geographer was going on with his sighs and jubilations with the utmost coolness, when his companions suddenly saw him reel forward, and he and his horse fell down in a lump. Was it giddiness, or worse still, suffocation, caused by the high temperature? They ran to him, exclaiming: “Paganel! Paganel! what is the matter?”

“Just this. I have no horse, now!” he replied, disengaging his feet from the stirrups.

“What! your horse?”

“Dead like Mulrady’s, as if a thunderbolt had struck him.”

Glenarvan, John Mangles, and Wilson examined the animal; and found

Paganel was right. His horse had been suddenly struck dead.

“That is strange,” said John.

“Very strange, truly,” muttered the Major.

Glenarvan was greatly disturbed by this fresh accident. He could not get a fresh horse in the desert, and if an epidemic was going to seize their steeds, they would be seriously embarrassed how to proceed.

Before the close of the day, it seemed as if the word epidemic was really going to be justified. A third horse, Wilson’s, fell dead, and what was, perhaps equally disastrous, one of the bullocks also. The means of traction and transport were now reduced to three bullocks and four horses.

The situation became grave. The unmounted horsemen might walk, of course, as many squatters had done already; but if they abandoned the wagon, what would the ladies do? Could they go over the one hundred and twenty miles which lay between them and Twofold Bay? John Mangles and Lord Glenarvan examined the surviving horses with great uneasiness, but there was not the slightest symptom of illness or feebleness in them. The animals were in perfect health, and bravely bearing the fatigues of the voyage. This somewhat reassured Glenarvan, and made him hope the malady would strike no more victims. Ayrton agreed with him, but was unable to find the least solution of the mystery.

They went on again, the wagon serving, from time to time, as a house of rest for the pedestrians. In the evening, after a march of only ten miles, the signal to halt was given, and the tent pitched. The night passed without inconvenience beneath a vast mass of bushy ferns, under which enormous bats, properly called flying foxes, were flapping about.

The next day's journey was good; there were no new calamities. The health of the expedition remained satisfactory; horses and cattle did their task cheerily. Lady Helena's drawing-room was very lively, thanks to the number of visitors. M. Olbinett busied himself in passing round refreshments which were very acceptable in such hot weather. Half a barrel of Scotch ale was sent in bodily. Barclay and Co. was declared to be the greatest man in Great Britain, even above Wellington, who could never have manufactured such good beer. This was a Scotch estimate. Jacques Paganel drank largely, and discoursed still more de omni re scibili.

A day so well commenced seemed as if it could not but end well; they had gone fifteen good miles, and managed to get over a pretty hilly district where the soil was reddish. There was every reason to hope they might camp that same night on the banks of the Snowy River, an important river which throws itself into the Pacific, south of Victoria.

Already the wheels of the wagon were making deep ruts on the wide plains, covered with blackish alluvium, as it passed on between tufts of luxuriant grass and fresh fields of gastrolobium. As evening came on, a white mist on the horizon marked the course of the Snowy River. Several additional miles were got over, and a forest of tall trees came in sight at a bend of the road, behind a gentle eminence. Ayrton turned his team a little toward the great trunks, lost in shadow, and he had got to the skirts of the wood, about half-a-mile from the river, when the wagon suddenly sank up to the middle of the wheels.

“Stop!” he called out to the horsemen following him.

“What is wrong?” inquired Glenarvan.

“We have stuck in the mud,” replied Ayrton.

He tried to stimulate the bullocks to a fresh effort by voice and goad, but the animals were buried half-way up their legs, and could not stir.

“Let us camp here,” suggested John Mangles.

“It would certainly be the best place,” said Ayrton. “We shall see by daylight to-morrow how to get ourselves out.”

Glenarvan acted on their advice, and came to a halt. Night came on rapidly after a brief twilight, but the heat did not withdraw with the light. Stifling vapors filled the air, and occasionally bright flashes of lightning, the reflections of a distant storm, lighted up the sky with a fiery glare. Arrangements were made for the night immediately. They did the best they could with the sunk wagon, and the tent was pitched beneath the shelter of the great trees; and if the rain did not come, they had not much to complain about.

Ayrton succeeded, though with some difficulty, in extricating the three bullocks. These courageous beasts were engulfed up to their flanks. The quartermaster turned them out with the four horses, and allowed no one but himself to see after their pasturage. He always executed his task wisely, and this evening Glenarvan noticed he redoubled his care, for which he took occasion to thank him, the preservation of the team being of supreme importance.

Meantime, the travelers were dispatching a hasty supper. Fatigue and heat destroy appetite, and sleep was needed more than food. Lady Helena and Miss Grant speedily bade the company good-night, and retired. Their companions soon stretched themselves under the tent or outside under the trees, which is no great hardship in this salubrious climate.

Gradually they all fell into a heavy sleep. The darkness deepened owing to a thick current of clouds which overspread the sky. There was not a breath of wind. The silence of night was only interrupted by the cries of the "morepork" in the minor key, like the mournful cuckoos of Europe.

Towards eleven o'clock, after a wretched, heavy, unre-freshing sleep, the Major woke. His half-closed eyes were struck with a faint light running among the great trees. It looked like a white sheet, and glittered like a lake, and McNabbs thought at first it was the commencement of a fire.

He started up, and went toward the wood; but what was his surprise to perceive a purely natural phenomenon! Before him lay an immense bed of mushrooms, which emitted a phosphorescent light. The luminous spores of the cryptograms shone in the darkness with intensity.

The Major, who had no selfishness about him, was going to waken Paganel, that he might see this phenomenon with his own eyes, when something occurred which arrested him. This phosphorescent light illumined the distance half a mile, and McNabbs fancied he saw a shadow pass across the edge of it. Were his eyes deceiving him? Was it some hallucination?

McNabbs lay down on the ground, and, after a close scrutiny, he could distinctly see several men stooping down and lifting themselves up alternately, as if they were looking on the ground for recent marks.

The Major resolved to find out what these fellows were about, and without the least hesitation or so much as arousing his companions, crept along, lying flat on the ground, like a savage on the prairies, completely hidden among the long grass.

CHAPTER XVI A STARTLING DISCOVERY

IT was a frightful night. At two A. M. the rain began to fall in torrents from the stormy clouds, and continued till daybreak. The tent became an insufficient shelter. Glenarvan and his companions took refuge in the wagon; they did not sleep, but talked of one thing and another. The Major alone, whose brief absence had not been noticed, contented himself with being a silent listener. There was reason to fear that if the storm lasted longer the Snowy River would overflow its banks, which would be a very unlucky thing for the wagon, stuck fast as it was already in the soft ground. Mulrady, Ayrton and Mangles went several times to ascertain the height of the water, and came back dripping from head to foot.

At last day appeared; the rain ceased, but sunlight could not break through the thick clouds. Large patches of yellowish water — muddy, dirty ponds indeed they were — covered the ground. A hot steam rose from the soaking earth, and saturated the atmosphere with unhealthy humidity.

Glenarvan’s first concern was the wagon; this was the main thing in his eyes. They examined the ponderous vehicle, and found it sunk in the mud in a deep hollow in the stiff clay. The forepart had disappeared completely, and the hind part up to the axle. It would be a hard job to get the heavy conveyance out, and would need the united strength of men, bullocks, and horses.

“At any rate, we must make haste,” said John Mangles. “If the clay dries, it will make our task still more difficult.”

“Let us be quick, then,” replied Ayrton.

Glenarvan, his two sailors, John Mangles, and Ayrton went off at once into the wood, where the animals had passed the night. It was a gloomy-looking forest of tall gum-trees; nothing but dead trees, with wide spaces between, which had been barked for ages, or rather skinned like the cork-oak at harvest time. A miserable network of bare branches was seen above two hundred feet high in the air. Not a bird built its nest in these aerial skeletons; not a leaf trembled on the dry branches, which rattled together like bones. To what cataclysm is this phenomenon to be attributed, so frequent in Australia, entire forests struck dead by some epidemic; no one knows; neither the oldest natives, nor their ancestors who have lain long buried in the groves of the dead, have ever seen them green.

Glenarvan as he went along kept his eye fixed on the gray sky, on which the smallest branch of the gum-trees was sharply defined. Ayrton was astonished not to discover the horses and bullocks where he had left them the preceding night. They could not have wandered far with the hobbles on their legs.

They looked over the wood, but saw no signs of them, and Ayrton returned to the banks of the river, where magnificent mimosas were growing. He gave a cry well known to his team, but there was no reply. The quartermaster seemed uneasy, and his companions looked at him with disappointed faces. An hour had passed in vain endeavors, and Glenarvan was about to go back to the wagon, when a neigh struck on his ear, and immediately after a bellow.

“They are there!” cried John Mangles, slipping between the tall branches of gastrolobium, which grew high enough to hide a whole flock. Glenarvan, Mulrady, and Ayrton darted after him, and speedily shared his stupefaction at the spectacle which met their gaze.

Two bullocks and three horses lay stretched on the ground, struck down like the rest. Their bodies were already cold, and a flock of half-starved looking ravens croaking among the mimosas were watching the unexpected prey. Glenarvan and his party gazed at each other and Wilson could not keep back the oath that rose to his lips.

“What do you mean, Wilson?” said Glenarvan, with difficulty controlling himself. “Ayrton, bring away the bullock and the horse we have left; they will have to serve us now.”

“If the wagon were not sunk in the mud,” said John Mangles, “these two animals, by making short journeys, would be able to take us to the coast; so we must get the vehicle out, cost what it may.”

“We will try, John,” replied Glenarvan. “Let us go back now, or they will be uneasy at our long absence.”

Ayrton removed the hobbles from the bullock and Mulrady from the horse, and they began to return to the encampment, following the winding margin of the river. In half an hour they rejoined Paganel, and McNabbs, and the ladies, and told them of this fresh disaster.

“Upon my honor, Ayrton,” the Major could not help saying, “it is a pity that you hadn’t had the shoeing of all our beasts when we forded the Wimerra.”

“Why, sir?” asked Ayrton.

“Because out of all our horses only the one your blacksmith had in his hands has escaped the common fate.”

“That’s true,” said John Mangles. “It’s strange it happens so.”

“A mere chance, and nothing more,” replied the quartermaster, looking firmly at the Major.

Major McNabbs bit his lips as if to keep back something he was about to say. Glenarvan and the rest waited for him to speak out his thoughts, but the Major was silent, and went up to the wagon, which Ayrton was examining.

“What was he going to say. Mangles?” asked Glenarvan.

“I don’t know,” replied the young captain; “but the Major is not at all a man to speak without reason.”

“No, John,” said Lady Helena. “McNabbs must have suspicions about Ayrton.”

“Suspicions!” exclaimed Paganel, shrugging his shoulders.

“And what can they be?” asked Glenarvan. “Does he suppose him capable of having killed our horses and bullocks? And for what purpose? Is not Ayrton’s interest identical with our own?”

“You are right, dear Edward,” said Lady Helena! “and what is more, the quartermaster has given us incontestable proofs of his devotion ever since the commencement of the journey.”

“Certainly he has,” replied Mangles; “but still, what could the Major mean? I wish he would speak his mind plainly out.”

“Does he suppose him acting in concert with the convicts?” asked Paganel, imprudently.

“What convicts?” said Miss Grant.

“Monsieur Paganel is making a mistake,” replied John Mangles, instantly.

“He knows very well there are no convicts in the province of Victoria.”

“Ah, that is true,” returned Paganel, trying to get out of his unlucky speech. “Whatever had I got in my head? Convicts! who ever heard of convicts being in Australia? Besides, they would scarcely have disembarked before they would turn into good, honest men. The climate, you know, Miss Mary, the regenerative climate — ”

Here the poor SAVANT stuck fast, unable to get further, like the wagon in the mud. Lady Helena looked at him in surprise, which quite deprived him of his remaining sang-froid; but seeing his embarrassment, she took Mary away to the side of the tent, where M. Olbinett was laying out an elaborate breakfast.

“I deserve to be transported myself,” said Paganel, woefully.

“I think so,” said Glenarvan.

And after this grave reply, which completely overwhelmed the worthy geographer, Glenarvan and John Mangles went toward the wagon.

They found Ayrton and the two sailors doing their best to get it out of the deep ruts, and the bullock and horse, yoked together, were straining every muscle. Wilson and Mulrady were pushing the wheels, and the quartermaster urging on the team with voice and goad; but the heavy vehicle did not stir, the clay, already dry, held it as firmly as if sealed by some hydraulic cement.

John Mangles had the clay watered to loosen it, but it was of no use. After renewed vigorous efforts, men and animals stopped. Unless the vehicle was taken to pieces, it would be impossible to extricate it from the mud; but they had no tools for the purpose, and could not attempt such a task.

However, Ayrton, who was for conquering this obstacle at all costs, was about to commence afresh, when Glenarvan stopped him by saying: “Enough, Ayrton, enough. We must husband the strength of our remaining horse and bullock. If we are obliged to continue our journey on foot, the one animal can carry the ladies and the other the provisions. They may thus still be of great service to us.”

“Very well, my Lord,” replied the quartermaster, un-yoking the exhausted beasts.

“Now, friends,” added Glenarvan, “let us return to the encampment and deliberately examine our situation, and determine on our course of action.”

After a tolerably good breakfast to make up for their bad night, the discussion was opened, and every one of the party was asked to give his opinion. The first point was to ascertain their exact position, and this was referred to Paganel, who informed them, with his customary rigorous accuracy, that the expedition had been stopped on the 37th parallel, in longitude 147 degrees 53 minutes, on the banks of the Snowy River.

“What is the exact longitude of Twofold Bay?” asked Glenarvan.

“One hundred and fifty degrees,” replied Paganel; “two degrees seven minutes distant from this, and that is equal to seventy-five miles.”

“And Melbourne is?”

“Two hundred miles off at least.”

“Very good. Our position being then settled, what is best to do?”

The response was unanimous to get to the coast without delay.

Lady Helena and Mary Grant undertook to go five miles a day.

The courageous ladies did not shrink, if necessary, from walking

the whole distance between the Snowy River and Twofold Bay.

“You are a brave traveling companion, dear Helena,” said Lord Glenarvan. “But are we sure of finding at the bay all we want when we get there?”

“Without the least doubt,” replied Paganel. “Eden is a municipality which already numbers many years in existence; its port must have frequent communication with Melbourne. I suppose even at Delegete, on the Victoria frontier, thirty-five miles from here, we might revictual our expedition, and find fresh means of transport.”

“And the DUNCAN?” asked Ayrton. “Don’t you think it advisable to send for her to come to the bay?”

“What do you think, John?” said Glenarvan.

“I don’t think your lordship should be in any hurry about it,” replied the young captain, after brief reflection. “There will be time enough to give orders to Tom Austin, and summon him to the coast.”

“That’s quite certain,” added Paganel.

“You see,” said John, “in four or five days we shall reach Eden.”

“Four or five days!” repeated Ayrton, shaking his head; “say fifteen or twenty, Captain, if you don’t want to repent your mistake when it is too late.”

“Fifteen or twenty days to go seventy-five miles?” cried Glenarvan.

“At the least, my Lord. You are going to traverse the most difficult portion of Victoria, a desert, where everything is wanting, the squatters say; plains covered with scrub, where is no beaten track and no stations. You will have to walk hatchet or torch in hand, and, believe me, that’s not quick work.”

Ayrton had spoken in a firm tone, and Paganel, at whom all the others looked inquiringly, nodded his head in token of his agreement in opinion with the quartermaster.

But John Mangles said, “Well, admitting these difficulties, in fifteen days at most your Lordship can send orders to the DUNCAN.”

“I have to add,” said Ayrton, “that the principal difficulties are not the obstacles in the road, but the Snowy River has to be crossed, and most probably we must wait till the water goes down.”

“Wait!” cried John. “Is there no ford?”

“I think not,” replied Ayrton. “This morning I was looking for some practical crossing, but could not find any. It is unusual to meet with such a tumultuous river at this time of the year, and it is a fatality against which I am powerless.”

“Is this Snowy River wide?” asked Lady Helena.

“Wide and deep, Madam,” replied Ayrton; “a mile wide, with an impetuous current. A good swimmer could not go over without danger.”

“Let us build a boat then,” said Robert, who never stuck at anything. “We have only to cut down a tree and hollow it out, and get in and be off.”

“He’s going ahead, this boy of Captain Grant’s!” said Paganel.

“And he’s right,” returned John Mangles. “We shall be forced to come to that, and I think it is useless to waste our time in idle discussion.”

“What do you think of it, Ayrton?” asked Glenarvan seriously.

“I think, my Lord, that a month hence, unless some help arrives, we shall find ourselves still on the banks of the Snowy.”

“Well, then, have you any better plan to propose?” said John Mangles, somewhat impatiently.

“Yes, that the DUNCAN should leave Melbourne, and go to the east coast.”

“Oh, always the same story! And how could her presence at the bay facilitate our means of getting there?”

Ayrton waited an instant before answering, and then said, rather evasively: “I have no wish to obtrude my opinions. What I do is for our common good, and I am ready to start the moment his honor gives the signal.” And he crossed his arms and was silent.

“That is no reply, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan. “Tell us your plan, and we will discuss it. What is it you propose?”

Ayrton replied in a calm tone of assurance: “I propose that we should not venture beyond the Snowy in our present condition. It is here we must wait till help comes, and this help can only come from the DUNCAN. Let us camp here, where we have provisions, and let one of us take your orders to Tom Austin to go on to Twofold Bay.”

This unexpected proposition was greeted with astonishment, and by John Mangles with openly-expressed opposition.

“Meantime,” continued Ayrton, “either the river will get lower, and allow us to ford it, or we shall have time to make a canoe. This is the plan I submit for your Lordship’s approval.”

“Well, Ayrton,” replied Glenarvan, “your plan is worthy of serious consideration. The worst thing about it is the delay it would cause; but it would save us great fatigue, and perhaps danger. What do you think of it, friends?”

“Speak your mind, McNabbs,” said Lady Helena. “Since the beginning of the discussion you have been only a listener, and very sparing of your words.”

“Since you ask my advice,” said the Major, “I will give it you frankly.

I think Ayrton has spoken wisely and well, and I side with him.”

Such a reply was hardly looked for, as hitherto the Major had been strongly opposed to Ayrton’s project. Ayrton himself was surprised, and gave a hasty glance at the Major. However, Paganel, Lady Helena, and the sailors were all of the same way of thinking; and since McNabbs had come over to his opinion, Glenarvan decided that the quartermaster’s plan should be adopted in principle.

“And now, John,” he added, “don’t you think yourself it would be prudent to encamp here, on the banks of the river Snowy, till we can get some means of conveyance.”

“Yes,” replied John Mangles, “if our messenger can get across the Snowy when we cannot.”

All eyes were turned on the quartermaster, who said, with the air of a man who knew what he was about: “The messenger will not cross the river.”

“Indeed!” said John Mangles.

“He will simply go back to the Lucknow Road which leads straight to Melbourne.”

“Go two hundred and fifty miles on foot!” cried the young Captain.

“On horseback,” replied Ayrton. “There is one horse sound enough at present. It will only be an affair of four days. Allow the DUNCAN two days more to get to the bay and twenty hours to get back to the camp, and in a week the messenger can be back with the entire crew of the vessel.”

The Major nodded approvingly as Ayrton spoke, to the profound astonishment of John Mangles; but as every one was in favor of the plan all there was to do was to carry it out as quickly as possible.

“Now, then, friends,” said Glenarvan, “we must settle who is to be our messenger. It will be a fatiguing, perilous mission. I would not conceal the fact from you. Who is disposed, then, to sacrifice himself for his companions and carry our instructions to Melbourne?”

Wilson and Mulrady, and also Paganel, John Mangles and Robert instantly offered their services. John particularly insisted that he should be intrusted with the business; but Ayrton, who had been silent till that moment, now said: “With your Honor’s permission I will go myself. I am accustomed to all the country round. Many a time I have been across worse parts. I can go through where another would stick. I ask then, for the good of all, that I may be sent to Melbourne. A word from you will accredit me with your chief officer, and in six days I guarantee the DUNCAN shall be in Twofold Bay.”

“That’s well spoken,” replied Glenarvan. “You are a clever, daring fellow, and you will succeed.”

It was quite evident the quartermaster was the fittest man for the mission. All the rest withdrew from the competition. John Mangles made this one last objection, that the presence of Ayrton was necessary to discover traces of the BRITANNIA or Harry Grant. But the Major justly observed that the expedition would remain on the banks of the Snowy till the return of Ayrton, that they had no idea of resuming their search without him, and that consequently his absence would not in the least prejudice the Captain’s interests.

“Well, go, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan. “Be as quick as you can, and come back by Eden to our camp.”

A gleam of satisfaction shot across the quartermaster’s face. He turned away his head, but not before John Mangles caught the look and instinctively felt his old distrust of Ayrton revive.

The quartermaster made immediate preparations for departure, assisted by the two sailors, one of whom saw to the horse and the other to the provisions. Glenarvan, meantime, wrote his letter for Tom Austin. He ordered his chief officer to repair without delay to Twofold Bay. He introduced the quartermaster to him as a man worthy of all confidence. On arriving at the coast, Tom was to dispatch a detachment of sailors from the yacht under his orders.

Glenarvan was just at this part of his letter, when McNabbs, who was following him with his eyes, asked him in a singular tone, how he wrote Ayrton's name.

"Why, as it is pronounced, of course," replied Glenarvan.

"It is a mistake," replied the Major quietly. "He pronounces it AYRTON, but he writes it Ben Joyce!"

CHAPTER XVII THE PLOT UNVEILED

THE revelation of Tom Ayrton’s name was like a clap of thunder.

Ayrton had started up quickly and grasped his revolver.

A report was heard, and Glenarvan fell wounded by a ball.

Gunshots resounded at the same time outside.

John Mangles and the sailors, after their first surprise, would have seized Ben Joyce; but the bold convict had already disappeared and rejoined his gang scattered among the gum-trees.

The tent was no shelter against the balls. It was necessary to beat a retreat. Glenarvan was slightly wounded, but could stand up.

“To the wagon — to the wagon!” cried John Mangles, dragging Lady Helena and Mary Grant along, who were soon in safety behind the thick curtains.

John and the Major, and Paganel and the sailors seized their carbines in readiness to repulse the convicts. Glenarvan and Robert went in beside the ladies, while Olbinett rushed to the common defense.

These events occurred with the rapidity of lightning. John Mangles watched the skirts of the wood attentively. The reports had ceased suddenly on the arrival of Ben Joyce; profound silence had succeeded the noisy fusillade. A few wreaths of white smoke were still curling over the tops of the gum trees. The tall tufts of gastrolobium were motionless. All signs of attack had disappeared.

The Major and John Mangles examined the wood closely as far as the great trees; the place was abandoned. Numerous footmarks were there and several half-burned caps were lying smoking on the ground. The Major, like a prudent man, extinguished these carefully, for a spark would be enough to kindle a tremendous conflagration in this forest of dry trees.

“The convicts have disappeared!” said John Mangles.

“Yes,” replied the Major; “and the disappearance of them

makes me uneasy. I prefer seeing them face to face.

Better to meet a tiger on the plain than a serpent in the grass.

Let us beat the bushes all round the wagon.”

The Major and John hunted all round the country, but there was not a convict to be seen from the edge of the wood right down to the river. Ben Joyce and his gang seemed to have flown away like a flock of marauding birds. It was too sudden a disappearance to let the travelers feel perfectly safe; consequently they resolved to keep a sharp lookout. The wagon, a regular fortress buried in mud, was made the center of the camp, and two men mounted guard round it, who were relieved hour by hour.

The first care of Lady Helena and Mary was to dress Glenarvan’s wound. Lady Helena rushed toward him in terror, as he fell down struck by Ben Joyce’s ball. Controlling her agony, the courageous woman helped her husband into the wagon. Then his shoulder was bared, and the Major found, on examination, that the ball had only gone into the flesh, and there was no internal lesion. Neither bone nor muscle appeared to be injured. The wound bled profusely, but Glenarvan could use his fingers and forearm; and consequently there was no occasion for any uneasiness about the issue. As soon as his shoulder was dressed, he would not allow any more fuss to be made about himself, but at once entered on the business in hand.

All the party, except Mulrady and Wilson, who were on guard, were brought into the wagon, and the Major was asked to explain how this DENOUEMENT had come about.

Before commencing his recital, he told Lady Helena about the escape of the convicts at Perth, and their appearance in Victoria; as also their complicity in the railway catastrophe. He handed her the Australian and New Zealand Gazette they had bought in Seymour, and added that a reward had been offered by the police for the apprehension of Ben Joyce, a redoubtable bandit, who had become a noted character during the last eighteen months, for doing deeds of villainy and crime.

But how had McNabbs found out that Ayrton and Ben Joyce were one and the same individual? This was the mystery to be unraveled, and the Major soon explained it.

Ever since their first meeting, McNabbs had felt an instinctive distrust of the quartermaster. Two or three insignificant facts, a hasty glance exchanged between him and the blacksmith at the Wimerra River, his unwillingness to cross towns and villages, his persistence about getting the DUNCAN summoned to the coast, the strange death of the animals entrusted to his care, and, lastly, a want of frankness in all his behavior — all these details combined had awakened the Major’s suspicions.

However, he could not have brought any direct accusation against him till the events of the preceding evening had occurred. He then told of his experience.

McNabbs, slipping between the tall shrubs, got within reach of the suspicious shadows he had noticed about half a mile away from the encampment. The phosphorescent furze emitted a faint light, by which he could discern three men examining marks on the ground, and one of the three was the blacksmith of Black Point.

"'It is them!' said one of the men. 'Yes,' replied another, 'there is the trefoil on the mark of the horseshoe. It has been like that since the Wimerra.' 'All the horses are dead.' 'The poison is not far off.' 'There is enough to kill a regiment of cavalry.' 'A useful plant this gastrolobium.'

"I heard them say this to each other, and then they were quite silent; but I did not know enough yet, so I followed them. Soon the conversation began again. 'He is a clever fellow, this Ben Joyce,' said the blacksmith. 'A capital quartermaster, with his invention of shipwreck.' 'If his project succeeds, it will be a stroke of fortune.' 'He is a very devil, is this Ayrton.' 'Call him Ben Joyce, for he has well earned his name.' And then the scoundrels left the forest.

"I had all the information I wanted now, and came back to the camp quite convinced, begging Paganel's pardon, that Australia does not reform criminals."

This was all the Major's story, and his companions sat silently thinking over it.

"Then Ayrton has dragged us here," said Glenarvan, pale with anger, "on purpose to rob and assassinate us."

"For nothing else," replied the Major; "and ever since we left the Wimerra, his gang has been on our track and spying on us, waiting for a favorable opportunity."

"Yes."

"Then the wretch was never one of the sailors on the BRITANNIA; he had stolen the name of Ayrton and the shipping papers."

They were all looking at McNabbs for an answer, for he must have put the question to himself already.

"There is no great certainty about the matter," he replied, in his usual calm voice; "but in my opinion the man's name is really Ayrton. Ben Joyce is his nom de guerre. It is an incontestible fact that he knew Harry Grant, and also that he was quartermaster on the BRITANNIA. These facts were proved by the minute details given us by Ayrton, and are corroborated by the conversation between the convicts, which I repeated to you. We need not lose ourselves in vain conjectures, but consider it as certain that Ben Joyce is Ayrton, and that Ayrton is Ben Joyce; that is to say, one of the crew of the BRITANNIA has turned leader of the convict gang."

The explanations of McNabbs were accepted without discussion.

"Now, then," said Glenarvan, "will you tell us how and why

Harry Grant's quartermaster comes to be in Australia?"

"How, I don't know," replied McNabbs; "and the police declare they are as ignorant on the subject as myself. Why, it is impossible to say; that is a mystery which the future may explain."

"The police are not even aware of Ayrton's identity with Ben Joyce," said John Mangles.

“You are right, John,” replied the Major, “and this circumstance would throw light on their search.”

“Then, I suppose,” said Lady Helena, “the wicked wretch had got work on Paddy O’Moore’s farm with a criminal intent?”

“There is not the least doubt of it. He was planning some evil design against the Irishman, when a better chance presented itself. Chance led us into his presence. He heard Paganel’s story and all about the shipwreck, and the audacious fellow determined to act his part immediately. The expedition was decided on. At the Wimerra he found means of communicating with one of his gang, the blacksmith of Black Point, and left traces of our journey which might be easily recognized. The gang followed us. A poisonous plant enabled them gradually to kill our bullocks and horses. At the right moment he sunk us in the marshes of the Snowy, and gave us into the hands of his gang.”

Such was the history of Ben Joyce. The Major had shown him up in his character — a bold and formidable criminal. His manifestly evil designs called for the utmost vigilance on the part of Glenarvan. Happily the unmasked bandit was less to be feared than the traitor.

But one serious consequence must come out of this revelation; no one had thought of it yet except Mary Grant. John Mangles was the first to notice her pale, despairing face; he understood what was passing in her mind at a glance.

“Miss Mary! Miss Mary!” he cried; “you are crying!”

“Crying, my child!” said Lady Helena.

“My father, madam, my father!” replied the poor girl.

She could say no more, but the truth flashed on every mind. They all knew the cause of her grief, and why tears fell from her eyes and her father’s name came to her lips.

The discovery of Ayrton’s treachery had destroyed all hope; the convict had invented a shipwreck to entrap Glenarvan. In the conversation overheard by McNabbs, the convicts had plainly said that the BRITANNIA had never been wrecked on the rocks in Twofold Bay. Harry Grant had never set foot on the Australian continent!

A second time they had been sent on the wrong track by an erroneous interpretation of the document. Gloomy silence fell on the whole party at the sight of the children’s sorrow, and no one could find a cheering word to say. Robert was crying in his sister’s arms. Paganel muttered in a tone of vexation: “That unlucky document! It may boast of having half-crazed a dozen peoples’ wits!” The worthy geographer was in such a rage with himself, that he struck his forehead as if he would smash it in.

Glenarvan went out to Mulrady and Wilson, who were keeping watch. Profound silence reigned over the plain between the wood and the river. Ben Joyce and his band must be at considerable distance, for the atmosphere was in such a state of complete torpor that the slightest sound would have been heard. It was evident, from the flocks of birds on the lower branches of the trees, and the kangaroos feeding quietly on the young shoots, and a couple of emus whose confiding heads passed between the great clumps of bushes, that those peaceful solitudes were untroubled by the presence of human beings.

“You have neither seen nor heard anything for the last hour?” said Glenarvan to the two sailors.

“Nothing whatever, your honor,” replied Wilson. “The convicts must be miles away from here.”

“They were not in numbers enough to attack us, I suppose,” added Mulrady. “Ben Joyce will have gone to recruit his party, with some bandits like himself, among the bush-rangers who may be lurking about the foot of the Alps.”

“That is probably the case, Mulrady,” replied Glenarvan. “The rascals are cowards; they know we are armed, and well armed too. Perhaps they are waiting for nightfall to commence the attack. We must redouble our watchfulness. Oh, if we could only get out of this bog, and down the coast; but this swollen river bars our passage. I would pay its weight in gold for a raft which would carry us over to the other side.”

“Why does not your honor give orders for a raft to be constructed?

We have plenty of wood.”

“No, Wilson,” replied Glenarvan; “this Snowy is not a river, it is an impassable torrent.”

John Mangles, the Major, and Paganel just then came out of the wagon on purpose to examine the state of the river. They found it still so swollen by the heavy rain that the water was a foot above the level. It formed an impetuous current, like the American rapids. To venture over that foaming current and that rushing flood, broken into a thousand eddies and hollows and gulfs, was impossible.

John Mangles declared the passage impracticable. “But we must not stay here,” he added, “without attempting anything. What we were going to do before Ayrton’s treachery is still more necessary now.”

“What do you mean, John?” asked Glenarvan.

“I mean that our need is urgent, and that since we cannot go to Twofold Bay, we must go to Melbourne. We have still one horse. Give it to me, my Lord, and I will go to Melbourne.”

“But that will be a dangerous venture, John,” said Glenarvan. “Not to speak of the perils of a journey of two hundred miles over an unknown country, the road and the by-ways will be guarded by the accomplices of Ben Joyce.”

“I know it, my Lord, but I know also that things can’t stay long as they are; Ayrton only asked a week’s absence to fetch the crew of the DUNCAN, and I will be back to the Snowy River in six days. Well, my Lord, what are your commands?”

“Before Glenarvan decides,” said Paganel, “I must make an observation.

That some one must go to Melbourne is evident, but that John Mangles

should be the one to expose himself to the risk, cannot be.

He is the captain of the DUNCAN, and must be careful of his life.

I will go instead.”

“That is all very well, Paganel,” said the Major; “but why should you be the one to go?”

“Are we not here?” said Mulrady and Wilson.

“And do you think,” replied McNabbs, “that a journey of two hundred miles on horseback frightens me.”

“Friends,” said Glenarvan, “one of us must go, so let it be decided by drawing lots. Write all our names, Paganel.”

“Not yours, my Lord,” said John Mangles.

“And why not?”

“What! separate you from Lady Helena, and before your wound is healed, too!”

“Glenarvan,” said Paganel, “you cannot leave the expedition.”

“No,” added the Major. “Your place is here, Edward, you ought not to go.”

“Danger is involved in it,” said Glenarvan, “and I will take my share along with the rest. Write the names, Paganel, and put mine among them, and I hope the lot may fall on me.”

His will was obeyed. The names were written, and the lots drawn.

Fate fixed on Mulrady. The brave sailor shouted hurrah! and said:

“My Lord, I am ready to start.” Glenarvan pressed his hand, and then

went back to the wagon, leaving John Mangles and the Major on watch.

Lady Helena was informed of the determination to send a message to Melbourne, and that they had drawn lots who should go, and Mulrady had been chosen. Lady Helena said a few kind words to the brave sailor, which went straight to his heart. Fate could hardly have chosen a better man, for he was not only brave and intelligent, but robust and superior to all fatigue.

Mulrady's departure was fixed for eight o'clock, immediately after the short twilight. Wilson undertook to get the horse ready. He had a project in his head of changing the horse's left shoe, for one off the horses that had died in the night. This would prevent the convicts from tracking Mulrady, or following him, as they were not mounted.

While Wilson was arranging this, Glenarvan got his letter ready for Tom Austin, but his wounded arm troubled him, and he asked Paganel to write it for him. The SAVANT was so absorbed in one fixed idea that he seemed hardly to know what he was about. In all this succession of vexations, it must be said the document was always uppermost in Paganel's mind. He was always worrying himself about each word, trying to discover some new meaning, and losing the wrong interpretation of it, and going over and over himself in perplexities.

He did not hear Glenarvan when he first spoke, but on the request being made a second time, he said: "Ah, very well. I'm ready."

While he spoke he was mechanically getting paper from his note-book.

He tore a blank page off, and sat down pencil in hand to write.

Glenarvan began to dictate as follows: "Order to Tom Austin, Chief Officer, to get to sea without delay, and bring the DUNCAN to — "

Paganel was just finishing the last word, when his eye chanced to fall on the Australian and New Zealand Gazette lying on the ground. The paper was so folded that only the last two syllables of the title were visible. Paganel's pencil stopped, and he seemed to become oblivious of Glenarvan and the letter entirely, till his friends called out: "Come, Paganel!"

"Ah!" said the geographer, with a loud exclamation.

"What is the matter?" asked the Major.

"Nothing, nothing," replied Paganel. Then he muttered to himself, "Aland! aland! aland!"

He had got up and seized the newspaper. He shook it in his efforts to keep back the words that involuntarily rose to his lips.

Lady Helena, Mary, Robert, and Glenarvan gazed at him in astonishment,

at a loss to understand this unaccountable agitation.

Paganel looked as if a sudden fit of insanity had come over him.

But his excitement did not last. He became by degrees calmer.

The gleam of joy that shone in his eyes died away.

He sat down again, and said quietly:

"When you please, my Lord, I am ready." Glenarvan resumed his dictation at once, and the letter was soon completed. It read as follows: "Order to Tom Austin to go to sea without delay; and take the DUNCAN to Melbourne by the 37th degree of latitude to the eastern coast of Australia."

"Of Australia?" said Paganel. "Ah yes! of Australia."

Then he finished the letter, and gave it to Glenarvan to sign, who went through the necessary formality as well as he could, and closed and sealed the letter. Paganel, whose hand still trembled with emotion, directed it thus: “Tom Austin, Chief Officer on board the Yacht DUNCAN, Melbourne.”

Then he got up and went out of the wagon, gesticulating and repeating the incomprehensible words:

“Aland aland! aland!”

CHAPTER XVIII FOUR DAYS OF ANGUISH

THE rest of the day passed on without any further incident. All the preparations for Mulrady's journey were completed, and the brave sailor rejoiced in being able to give his Lordship this proof of devotion.

Paganel had recovered his usual sang-froid and manners. His look, indeed, betrayed his preoccupation, but he seemed resolved to keep it secret. No doubt he had strong reasons for this course of action, for the Major heard him repeating, like a man struggling with himself: "No, no, they would not believe it; and, besides, what good would it be? It is too late!"

Having taken this resolution, he busied himself with giving Mulrady the necessary directions for getting to Melbourne, and showed him his way on the map. All the TRACKS, that is to say, paths through the prairie, came out on the road to Lucknow. This road, after running right down to the coast took a sudden bend in the direction of Melbourne. This was the route that must be followed steadily, for it would not do to attempt a short cut across an almost unknown country. Nothing, consequently, could be more simple. Mulrady could not lose his way.

As to dangers, there were none after he had gone a few miles beyond the encampment, out of the reach of Ben Joyce and his gang. Once past their hiding place, Mulrady was certain of soon being able to outdistance the convicts, and execute his important mission successfully.

At six o'clock they all dined together. The rain was falling in torrents. The tent was not protection enough, and the whole party had to take refuge in the wagon. This was a sure refuge. The clay kept it firmly imbedded in the soil, like a fortress resting on sure foundations. The arsenal was composed of seven carbines and seven revolvers, and could stand a pretty long siege, for they had plenty of ammunition and provisions. But before six days were over, the DUNCAN would anchor in Twofold Bay, and twenty-four hours after her crew would reach the other shore of the Snowy River; and should the passage still remain impracticable, the convicts at any rate would be forced to retire before the increased strength. But all depended on Mulrady's success in his perilous enterprise.

At eight o'clock it got very dark; now was the time to start. The horse prepared for Mulrady was brought out. His feet, by way of extra precaution, were wrapped round with cloths, so that they could not make the least noise on the ground. The animal seemed tired, and yet the safety of all depended on his strength and surefootedness. The Major advised Mulrady to let him go gently as soon as he got past the convicts. Better delay half-a-day than not arrive safely.

John Mangles gave his sailor a revolver, which he had loaded with the utmost care. This is a formidable weapon in the hand of a man who does not tremble, for six shots fired in a few seconds would easily clear a road infested with criminals. Mulrady seated himself in the saddle ready to start.

"Here is the letter you are to give to Tom Austin," said Glenarvan. "Don't let him lose an hour. He is to sail for Twofold Bay at once; and if he does not find us there, if we have not managed to cross the Snowy, let him come on to us without delay. Now go, my brave sailor, and God be with you."

He shook hands with him, and bade him good-by; and so did Lady Helena and Mary Grant. A more timorous man than the sailor would have shrunk back a little from setting out on such a dark, raining night on an errand so full of danger, across vast unknown wilds. But his farewells were calmly spoken, and he speedily disappeared down a path which skirted the wood.

At the same moment the gusts of wind redoubled their violence. The high branches of the eucalyptus clattered together noisily, and bough after bough fell on the wet ground. More than one great tree, with no living sap, but still standing hitherto, fell with a crash during this storm. The wind howled amid the cracking wood, and mingled its moans with the ominous roaring of the rain. The heavy clouds, driving along toward the east, hung on the ground like rays of vapor, and deep, cheerless gloom intensified the horrors of the night.

The travelers went back into the wagon immediately Mulrady had gone. Lady Helena, Mary Grant, Glenarvan and Paganel occupied the first compartment, which had been hermetically closed. The second was occupied by Olbinett, Wilson and Robert. The Major and John Mangles were on duty outside. This precaution was necessary, for an attack on the part of the convicts would be easy enough, and therefore probable enough.

The two faithful guardians kept close watch, bearing philosophically the rain and wind that beat on their faces. They tried to pierce through the darkness so favorable to ambushes, for nothing could be heard but the noise of the tempest, the sough of the wind, the rattling branches, falling trees, and roaring of the unchained waters.

At times the wind would cease for a few moments, as if to take breath. Nothing was audible but the moan of the Snowy River, as it flowed between the motionless reeds and the dark curtain of gum trees. The silence seemed deeper in these momentary lulls, and the Major and John Mangles listened attentively.

During one of these calms a sharp whistle reached them. John Mangles went hurriedly up to the Major. “You heard that?” he asked.

“Yes,” said McNabbs. “Is it man or beast?”

“A man,” replied John Mangles.

And then both listened. The mysterious whistle was repeated, and answered by a kind of report, but almost indistinguishable, for the storm was raging with renewed violence. McNabbs and John Mangles could not hear themselves speak. They went for comfort under the shelter of the wagon.

At this moment the leather curtains were raised and Glenarvan rejoined his two companions. He too had heard this ill-boding whistle, and the report which echoed under the tilt. “Which way was it?” asked he.

“There,” said John, pointing to the dark track in the direction taken by Mulrady.

“How far?”

“The wind brought it; I should think, three or four miles, at least.”

“Come,” said Glenarvan, putting his gun on his shoulder.

“No,” said the Major. “It is a decoy to get us away from the wagon.”

“But if Mulrady has even now fallen beneath the blows of these rascals?” exclaimed Glenarvan, seizing McNabbs by the hand.

“We shall know by to-morrow,” said the Major, coolly, determined to prevent Glenarvan from taking a step which was equally rash and futile.

“You cannot leave the camp, my Lord,” said John. “I will go alone.”

“You will do nothing of the kind!” cried McNabbs, energetically. “Do you want to have us killed one by one to diminish our force, and put us at the mercy of these wretches? If Mulrady has fallen a victim to them, it is a misfortune that must not be repeated. Mulrady was sent, chosen by chance. If the lot had fallen to me, I should have gone as he did; but I should neither have asked nor expected assistance.”

In restraining Glenarvan and John Mangles, the Major was right in every aspect of the case. To attempt to follow the sailor, to run in the darkness of night among the convicts in their leafy ambush was madness, and more than that — it was useless. Glenarvan’s party was not so numerous that it could afford to sacrifice another member of it.

Still Glenarvan seemed as if he could not yield; his hand was always on his carbine. He wandered about the wagon, and bent a listening ear to the faintest sound. The thought that one of his men was perhaps mortally wounded, abandoned to his fate, calling in vain on those for whose sake he had gone forth, was a torture to him. McNabbs was not sure that he should be able to restrain him, or if Glenarvan, carried away by his feelings, would not run into the arms of Ben Joyce.

“Edward,” said he, “be calm. Listen to me as a friend.

Think of Lady Helena, of Mary Grant, of all who are left.

And, besides, where would you go? Where would you

find Mulrady? He must have been attacked two miles off.

In what direction? Which track would you follow?”

At that very moment, as if to answer the Major, a cry of distress was heard.

“Listen!” said Glenarvan.

This cry came from the same quarter as the report, but less than a quarter of a mile off.

Glenarvan, repulsing McNabbs, was already on the track, when at three hundred paces from the wagon they heard the exclamation: “Help! help!”

The voice was plaintive and despairing. John Mangles and the Major sprang toward the spot. A few seconds after they perceived among the scrub a human form dragging itself along the ground and uttering mournful groans. It was Mulrady, wounded, apparently dying; and when his companions raised him they felt their hands bathed in blood.

The rain came down with redoubled violence, and the wind raged among the branches of the dead trees. In the pelting storm, Glenarvan, the Major and John Mangles transported the body of Mulrady.

On their arrival everyone got up. Paganel, Robert, Wilson and Olbinett left the wagon, and Lady Helena gave up her compartment to poor Mulrady. The Major removed the poor fellow’s flannel shirt, which was dripping with blood and rain. He soon found the wound; it was a stab in the right side.

McNabbs dressed it with great skill. He could not tell whether the weapon had touched any vital part. An intermittent jet of scarlet blood flowed from it; the patient’s paleness and weakness showed that he was seriously injured. The Major washed the wound first with fresh water and then closed the orifice; after this he put on a thick pad of lint, and then folds of scraped linen held firmly in place with a bandage. He succeeded in stopping the hemorrhage. Mulrady was laid on his side, with his head and chest well raised, and Lady Helena succeeded in making him swallow a few drops of water.

After about a quarter of an hour, the wounded man, who till then had lain motionless, made a slight movement. His eyes unclosed, his lips muttered incoherent words, and the Major, bending toward him, heard him repeating: “My Lord — the letter — Ben Joyce.”

The Major repeated these words, and looked at his companions. What did Mulrady mean? Ben Joyce had been the attacking party, of course; but why? Surely for the express purpose of intercepting him, and preventing his arrival at the DUNCAN. This letter —

Glenarvan searched Mulrady’s pockets. The letter addressed to Tom Austin was gone!

The night wore away amid anxiety and distress; every moment, they feared,

would be poor Mulrady’s last. He suffered from acute fever.

The Sisters of Charity, Lady Helena and Mary Grant, never left him.

Never was patient so well tended, nor by such sympathetic hands.

Day came, and the rain had ceased. Great clouds filled the sky still; the ground was strewn with broken branches; the marly soil, soaked by the torrents of rain, had yielded still more; the approaches to the wagon became difficult, but it could not sink any deeper.

John Mangles, Paganel, and Glenarvan went, as soon as it was light enough, to reconnoiter in the neighborhood of the encampment. They revisited the track, which was still stained with blood. They saw no vestige of Ben

Joyce, nor of his band. They penetrated as far as the scene of the attack. Here two corpses lay on the ground, struck down by Mulrady’s bullets. One was the blacksmith of Blackpoint. His face, already changed by death, was a dreadful spectacle. Glenarvan searched no further. Prudence forbade him to wander from the camp. He returned to the wagon, deeply absorbed by the critical position of affairs.

“We must not think of sending another messenger to Melbourne,” said he.

“But we must,” said John Mangles; “and I must try to pass where my sailor could not succeed.”

“No, John! it is out of the question. You have not even a horse for the journey, which is full two hundred miles!”

This was true, for Mulrady’s horse, the only one that remained, had not returned. Had he fallen during the attack on his rider, or was he straying in the bush, or had the convicts carried him off?

“Come what will,” replied Glenarvan, “we will not separate again. Let us wait a week, or a fortnight, till the Snowy falls to its normal level. We can then reach Twofold Bay by short stages, and from there we can send on to the DUNCAN, by a safer channel, the order to meet us.”

“That seems the only plan,” said Paganel.

“Therefore, my friends,” rejoined Glenarvan, “no more parting. It is too great a risk for one man to venture alone into a robber-haunted waste. And now, may God save our poor sailor, and protect the rest of us!”

Glenarvan was right in both points; first in prohibiting all isolated attempts, and second, in deciding to wait till the passage of the Snowy River was practicable. He was scarcely thirty miles from Delegete, the first frontier village of New South Wales, where he would easily find the means of transport to Twofold Bay, and from there he could telegraph to Melbourne his orders about the DUNCAN.

These measures were wise, but how late! If Glenarvan had not sent Mulrady to Lucknow what misfortunes would have been averted, not to speak of the assassination of the sailor!

When he reached the camp he found his companions in better spirits. They seemed more hopeful than before. “He is better! he is better!” cried Robert, running out to meet Lord Glenarvan.

“Mulrady? — ”

“Yes, Edward,” answered Lady Helena. “A reaction has set in.

The Major is more confident. Our sailor will live.”

“Where is McNabbs?” asked Glenarvan.

“With him. Mulrady wanted to speak to him, and they must not be disturbed.”

He then learned that about an hour since, the wounded man had awakened from his lethargy, and the fever had abated. But the first thing he did on recovering his memory and speech was to ask for Lord Glenarvan, or, failing him, the Major. McNabbs seeing him so weak, would have forbidden any conversation; but Mulrady insisted with such energy that the Major had to give in. The interview had already lasted some minutes when Glenarvan returned. There was nothing for it but to await the return of McNabbs.

Presently the leather curtains of the wagon moved, and the Major appeared. He rejoined his friends at the foot of a gum-tree, where the tent was placed. His face, usually so stolid, showed that something disturbed him. When his eyes fell on Lady Helena and the young girl, his glance was full of sorrow.

Glenarvan questioned him, and extracted the following information: When he left the camp Mulrady followed one of the paths indicated by Paganel. He made as good speed as the darkness of the night would allow. He reckoned that he had gone about two miles when several men — five, he thought — sprang to his horse’s head. The animal reared; Mulrady seized his revolver and fired. He thought he saw two of his assailants fall. By the flash he recognized Ben Joyce. But that was all. He had not time to fire all the barrels. He felt a violent blow on his side and was thrown to the ground.

Still he did not lose consciousness. The murderers thought he was dead.

He felt them search his pockets, and then heard one of them say:

“I have the letter.”

“Give it to me,” returned Ben Joyce, “and now the DUNCAN is ours.”

At this point of the story, Glenarvan could not help uttering a cry.

McNabbs continued: “‘Now you fellows,’ added Ben Joyce, ‘catch the horse. In two days I shall be on board the DUNCAN, and in six I shall reach Twofold Bay. This is to be the rendezvous. My Lord and his party will be still stuck in the marshes of the Snowy River. Cross the river at the bridge of Kemple Pier, proceed to the coast, and wait for me. I will easily manage to get you on board. Once at sea in a craft like the DUNCAN, we shall be masters of the Indian Ocean.’ ‘Hurrah for Ben Joyce!’ cried the convicts. Mulrady's horse was brought, and Ben Joyce disappeared, galloping on the Lucknow Road, while the band took the road southeast of the Snowy River. Mulrady, though severely wounded, had the strength to drag himself to within three hundred paces from the camp, whence we found him almost dead. There," said McNabbs, "is the history of Mulrady; and now you can understand why the brave fellow was so determined to speak."

This revelation terrified Glenarvan and the rest of the party.

"Pirates! pirates!" cried Glenarvan. "My crew massacred! my DUNCAN in the hands of these bandits!"

"Yes, for Ben Joyce will surprise the ship," said the Major, "and then — "

"Well, we must get to the coast first," said Paganel.

"But how are we to cross the Snowy River?" said Wilson.

"As they will," replied Glenarvan. "They are to cross at

Kemple Pier Bridge, and so will we."

"But about Mulrady?" asked Lady Helena.

"We will carry him; we will have relays. Can I leave my crew to the mercy of Ben Joyce and his gang?"

To cross the Snowy River at Kemple Pier was practicable, but dangerous.

The convicts might entrench themselves at that point, and defend it.

They were at least thirty against seven! But there are moments when people do not deliberate, or when they have no choice but to go on.

“My Lord,” said John Mangles, “before we throw away our chance, before venturing to this bridge, we ought to reconnoiter, and I will undertake it.”

“I will go with you, John,” said Paganel.

This proposal was agreed to, and John Mangles and Paganel prepared to start immediately. They were to follow the course of the Snowy River, follow its banks till they reached the place indicated by Ben Joyce, and especially they were to keep out of sight of the convicts, who were probably scouring the bush.

So the two brave comrades started, well provisioned and well armed, and were soon out of sight as they threaded their way among the tall reeds by the river. The rest anxiously awaited their return all day. Evening came, and still the scouts did not return. They began to be seriously alarmed. At last, toward eleven o’clock, Wilson announced their arrival. Paganel and John Mangles were worn out with the fatigues of a ten-mile walk.

“Well, what about the bridge? Did you find it?” asked Glenarvan, with impetuous eagerness.

“Yes, a bridge of supple-jacks,” said John Mangles. “The convicts passed over, but — ”

“But what?” said Glenarvan, who foreboded some new misfortune.

“They burned it after they passed!” said Paganel.

CHAPTER XIX HELPLESS AND HOPELESS

IT was not a time for despair, but action. The bridge at Kemple Pier was destroyed, but the Snowy River must be crossed, come what might, and they must reach Twofold Bay before Ben Joyce and his gang, so, instead of wasting time in empty words, the next day (the 16th of January) John Mangles and Glenarvan went down to examine the river, and arrange for the passage over.

The swollen and tumultuous waters had not gone down the least. They rushed on with indescribable fury. It would be risking life to battle with them. Glenarvan stood gazing with folded arms and downcast face.

“Would you like me to try and swim across?” said John Mangles.

“No, John, no!” said Lord Glenarvan, holding back the bold, daring young fellow, “let us wait.”

And they both returned to the camp. The day passed in the most intense anxiety. Ten times Lord Glenarvan went to look at the river, trying to invent some bold way of getting over; but in vain. Had a torrent of lava rushed between the shores, it could not have been more impassable.

During these long wasted hours, Lady Helena, under the Major’s advice, was nursing Mulrady with the utmost skill. The sailor felt a throb of returning life. McNabbs ventured to affirm that no vital part was injured. Loss of blood accounted for the patient’s extreme exhaustion. The wound once closed and the hemorrhage stopped, time and rest would be all that was needed to complete his cure. Lady Helena had insisted on giving up the first compartment of the wagon to him, which greatly tried his modesty. The poor fellow’s greatest trouble was the delay his condition might cause

Glenarvan, and he made him promise that they should leave him in the camp under Wilson’s care, should the passage of the river become practicable.

But, unfortunately, no passage was practicable, either that day or the next (January 17); Glenarvan was in despair. Lady Helena and the Major vainly tried to calm him, and preached patience.

Patience, indeed, when perhaps at this very moment Ben Joyce was boarding the yacht; when the DUNCAN, loosing from her moorings, was getting up steam to reach the fatal coast, and each hour was bringing her nearer.

John Mangles felt in his own breast all that Glenarvan was suffering. He determined to conquer the difficulty at any price, and constructed a canoe in the Australian manner, with large sheets of bark of the gum-trees. These sheets were kept together by bars of wood, and formed a very fragile boat. The captain and the sailor made a trial trip in it during the day. All that skill, and strength, and tact, and courage could do they did; but they were scarcely in the current before they were upside down, and nearly paid with their lives for the dangerous experiment. The boat disappeared, dragged down by the eddy. John Mangles and Wilson had not gone ten fathoms, and the river was a mile broad, and swollen by the heavy rains and melted snows.

Thus passed the 19th and 20th of January. The Major and Glenarvan went five miles up the river in search of a favorable passage, but everywhere they found the same roaring, rushing, impetuous torrent. The whole southern slope of the Australian Alps poured its liquid masses into this single bed.

All hope of saving the DUNCAN was now at an end. Five days had elapsed since the departure of Ben Joyce. The yacht must be at this moment at the coast, and in the hands of the convicts.

However, it was impossible that this state of things could last. The temporary influx would soon be exhausted, and the violence also. Indeed, on the morning of the 21st, Paganel announced that the water was already lower. “What does it matter now?” said Glenarvan. “It is too late!”

“That is no reason for our staying longer here,” said the Major.

“Certainly not,” replied John Mangles. “Perhaps tomorrow the river may be practicable.”

“And will that save my unhappy men?” cried Glenarvan.

“Will your Lordship listen to me?” returned John Mangles. “I know Tom Austin. He would execute your orders, and set out as soon as departure was possible. But who knows whether the DUNCAN was ready and her injury repaired on the arrival of Ben Joyce. And suppose the yacht could not go to sea; suppose there was a delay of a day, or two days.”

“You are right, John,” replied Glenarvan. “We must get to Twofold Bay; we are only thirty-five miles from Delegete.”

“Yes,” added Paganel, “and that’s a town where we shall find rapid means of conveyance. Who knows whether we shan’t arrive in time to prevent a catastrophe.”

“Let us start,” cried Glenarvan.

John Mangles and Wilson instantly set to work to construct a canoe of larger dimensions. Experience had proved that the bark was powerless against the violence of the torrent, and John accordingly felled some of the gum-trees, and made a rude but solid raft with the trunks. It was a long task, and the day had gone before the work was ended. It was completed next morning.

By this time the waters had visibly diminished; the torrent had once more become a river, though a very rapid one, it is true. However, by pursuing a zigzag course, and overcoming it to a certain extent, John hoped to reach the opposite shore. At half-past twelve, they embarked provisions enough for a couple of days. The remainder was left with the wagon and the tent. Mulrady was doing well enough to be carried over; his convalescence was rapid.

At one o’clock, they all seated themselves on the raft, still moored to the shore. John Mangles had installed himself at the starboard, and entrusted to Wilson a sort of oar to steady the raft against the current, and lessen the leeway. He took his own stand at the back, to steer by means of a large scull; but, notwithstanding their efforts, Wilson and John Mangles soon found themselves in an inverse position, which made the action of the oars impossible.

There was no help for it; they could do nothing to arrest the gyratory movement of the raft; it turned round with dizzying rapidity, and drifted out of its course. John Mangles stood with pale face and set teeth, gazing at the whirling current.

However, the raft had reached the middle of the river, about half a mile from the starting point. Here the current was extremely strong, and this broke the whirling eddy, and gave the raft some stability. John and Wilson seized their oars again, and managed to push it in an oblique direction. This brought them nearer to the left shore. They were not more than fifty fathoms from it, when Wilson's oar snapped short off, and the raft, no longer supported, was dragged away. John tried to resist at the risk of breaking his own oar, too, and Wilson, with bleeding hands, seconded his efforts with all his might.

At last they succeeded, and the raft, after a passage of more than half an hour, struck against the steep bank of the opposite shore. The shock was so violent that the logs became disunited, the cords broke, and the water bubbled up between. The travelers had barely time to catch hold of the steep bank. They dragged out Mulrady and the two dripping ladies. Everyone was safe; but the provisions and firearms, except the carbine of the Major, went drifting down with the DEBRIS of the raft.

The river was crossed. The little company found themselves almost without provisions, thirty-five miles from Delegete, in the midst of the unknown deserts of the Victoria frontier. Neither settlers nor squatters were to be met with; it was entirely uninhabited, unless by ferocious bushrangers and bandits.

They resolved to set off without delay. Mulrady saw clearly that he would be a great drag on them, and he begged to be allowed to remain, and even to remain alone, till assistance could be sent from Delegete.

Glenarvan refused. It would be three days before he could reach Delegete, and five the shore — that is to say, the 26th of January. Now, as the DUNCAN had left Melbourne on the 16th, what difference would a few days' delay make?

"No, my friend," he said, "I will not leave anyone behind.

We will make a litter and carry you in turn.”

The litter was made of boughs of eucalyptus covered with branches; and, whether he would or not, Mulrady was obliged to take his place on it. Glenarvan would be the first to carry his sailor. He took hold of one end and Wilson of the other, and all set off.

What a sad spectacle, and how lamentably was this expedition to end which had commenced so well. They were no longer in search of Harry Grant. This continent, where he was not, and never had been, threatened to prove fatal to those who sought him. And when these intrepid countrymen of his should reach the shore, they would find the DUNCAN waiting to take them home again. The first day passed silently and painfully. Every ten minutes the litter changed bearers. All the sailor’s comrades took their share in this task without murmuring, though the fatigue was augmented by the great heat.

In the evening, after a journey of only five miles, they camped under the gum-trees. The small store of provisions saved from the raft composed the evening meal. But all they had to depend upon now was the Major’s carbine.

It was a dark, rainy night, and morning seemed as if it would never dawn. They set off again, but the Major could not find a chance of firing a shot. This fatal region was only a desert, unfrequented even by animals. Fortunately, Robert discovered a bustard’s nest with a dozen of large eggs in it, which Olbinett cooked on hot cinders. These, with a few roots of purslain which were growing at the bottom of a ravine, were all the breakfast of the 22d.

The route now became extremely difficult. The sandy plains were bristling with SPINIFEX, a prickly plant, which is called in Melbourne the porcupine. It tears the clothing to rags, and makes the legs bleed. The courageous ladies never complained, but footed it bravely, setting an example, and encouraging one and another by word or look.

They stopped in the evening at Mount Bulla Bulla, on the edge of the Jungalla Creek. The supper would have been very scant, if McNabbs had not killed a large rat, the mus conditor, which is highly spoken of as an article of diet. Olbinett roasted it, and it would have been pronounced even superior to its reputation had it equaled the sheep in size. They were obliged to be content with it, however, and it was devoured to the bones.

On the 23d the weary but still energetic travelers started off again. After having gone round the foot of the mountain, they crossed the long prairies where the grass seemed made of whalebone. It was a tangle of darts, a medley of sharp little sticks, and a path had to be cut through either with the hatchet or fire.

That morning there was not even a question of breakfast. Nothing could be more barren than this region strewn with pieces of quartz. Not only hunger, but thirst began to assail the travelers. A burning atmosphere heightened their discomfort. Glenarvan and his friends could only go half a mile an hour. Should this lack of food and water continue till evening, they would all sink on the road, never to rise again.

But when everything fails a man, and he finds himself without resources, at the very moment when he feels he must give up, then Providence steps in. Water presented itself in the CEPHALOTES, a species of cup-shaped flower, filled with refreshing liquid, which hung from the branches of coralliform-shaped bushes. They all quenched their thirst with these, and felt new life returning.

The only food they could find was the same as the natives were forced to subsist upon, when they could find neither game, nor serpents, nor insects. Paganel discovered in the dry bed of a creek, a plant whose excellent properties had been frequently described by one of his colleagues in the Geographical Society.

It was the NARDOU, a cryptogamous plant of the family Marsilacea, and the same which kept Burke and King alive in the deserts of the interior. Under its leaves, which resembled those of the trefoil, there were dried sporules as large as a lentil, and these sporules, when crushed between two stones, made a sort of flour. This was converted into coarse bread, which stilled the pangs of hunger at least. There was a great abundance of this plant growing in the district, and Olbinett gathered a large supply, so that they were sure of food for several days.

The next day, the 24th, Mulrady was able to walk part of the way. His wound was entirely cicatrized. The town of Delegete was not more than ten miles off, and that evening they camped in longitude 140 degrees, on the very frontier of New South Wales.

For some hours, a fine but penetrating rain had been falling. There would have been no shelter from this, if by chance John Mangles had not discovered a sawyer’s hut, deserted and dilapidated to a degree. But with this miserable cabin they were obliged to be content. Wilson wanted to kindle a fire to prepare the NARDOU bread, and he went out to pick up the dead wood scattered all over the ground. But he found it would not light, the great quantity of albuminous matter which it contained prevented all combustion. This is the incombustible wood put down by Paganel in his list of Australian products.

They had to dispense with fire, and consequently with food too, and sleep in their wet clothes, while the laughing jackasses, concealed in the high branches, seemed to ridicule the poor unfortunates. However, Glenarvan was nearly at the end of his sufferings. It was time. The two young ladies were making heroic efforts, but their strength was hourly decreasing. They dragged themselves along, almost unable to walk.

Next morning they started at daybreak. At 11 A. M. Delegete came in sight in the county of Wellesley, and fifty miles from Twofold Bay.

Means of conveyance were quickly procured here. Hope returned to Glenarvan as they approached the coast. Perhaps there might have been some slight delay, and after all they might get there before the arrival of the DUNCAN. In twenty-four hours they would reach the bay.

At noon, after a comfortable meal, all the travelers installed in a mail-coach, drawn by five strong horses, left Delegete at a gallop. The postilions, stimulated by a promise of a princely DOUCEUR, drove rapidly along over a well-kept road. They did not lose a minute in changing horses, which took place every ten miles. It seemed as if they were infected with Glenarvan’s zeal. All that day, and night, too, they traveled on at the rate of six miles an hour.

In the morning at sunrise, a dull murmur fell on their ears, and announced their approach to the Indian Ocean. They required to go round the bay to gain the coast at the 37th parallel, the exact point where Tom Austin was to wait their arrival.

When the sea appeared, all eyes anxiously gazed at the offing.

Was the DUNCAN, by a miracle of Providence, there running

close to the shore, as a month ago, when they crossed

Cape Corrientes, they had found her on the Argentine coast?

They saw nothing. Sky and earth mingled in the same horizon.

Not a sail enlivened the vast stretch of ocean.

One hope still remained. Perhaps Tom Austin had thought it his duty to cast anchor in Twofold Bay, for the sea was heavy, and a ship would not dare to venture near the shore. “To Eden!” cried Glenarvan. Immediately the mail-coach resumed the route round the bay, toward the little town of Eden, five miles distant. The postilions stopped not far from the lighthouse, which marks the entrance of the port. Several vessels were moored in the roadstead, but none of them bore the flag of Malcolm.

Glenarvan, John Mangles, and Paganel got out of the coach, and rushed to the custom-house, to inquire about the arrival of vessels within the last few days.

No ship had touched the bay for a week.

“Perhaps the yacht has not started,” Glenarvan said, a sudden revulsion of feeling lifting him from despair. “Perhaps we have arrived first.”

John Mangles shook his head. He knew Tom Austin. His first mate would not delay the execution of an order for ten days.

“I must know at all events how they stand,” said Glenarvan.

“Better certainty than doubt.”

A quarter of an hour afterward a telegram was sent to the syndicate of shipbrokers in Melbourne. The whole party then repaired to the Victoria Hotel.

At 2 P.M. the following telegraphic reply was received:

“LORD GLENARVAN, Eden.

“Twofold Bay.

“The DUNCAN left on the 16th current. Destination unknown.

J. ANDREWS, S. B.”

The telegram dropped from Glenarvan’s hands.

There was no doubt now. The good, honest Scotch yacht was now a pirate ship in the hands of Ben Joyce!

So ended this journey across Australia, which had commenced under circumstances so favorable. All trace of Captain Grant and his shipwrecked men seemed to be irrevocably lost. This ill success had cost the loss of a ship’s crew. Lord Glenarvan had been vanquished in the strife; and the courageous searchers, whom the unfriendly elements of the Pampas had been unable to check, had been conquered on the Australian shore by the perversity of man.

END OF BOOK TWO

In Search of the Castaways or The Children of Captain Grant

New Zealand

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In Search of the Castaways

New Zealand

CHAPTER I A ROUGH CAPTAIN

IF ever the searchers after Captain Grant were tempted to despair, surely it was at this moment when all their hopes were destroyed at a blow. Toward what quarter of the world should they direct their endeavors? How were they to explore new countries? The DUNCAN was no longer available, and even an immediate return to their own land was out of the question. Thus the enterprise of these generous Scots had failed! Failed! a despairing word that finds no echo in a brave soul; and yet under the repeated blows of adverse fate, Glenarvan himself was compelled to acknowledge his inability to prosecute his devoted efforts.

Mary Grant at this crisis nerved herself to the resolution never to utter the name of her father. She suppressed her own anguish, when she thought of the unfortunate crew who had perished. The daughter was merged in the friend, and she now took upon her to console Lady Glenarvan, who till now had been her faithful comforter. She was the first to speak of returning to Scotland. John Mangles was filled with admiration at seeing her so courageous and so resigned. He wanted to say a word further in the Captain’s interest, but Mary stopped him with a glance, and afterward said to him: “No, Mr. John, we must think of those who ventured their lives. Lord Glenarvan must return to Europe!”

“You are right, Miss Mary,” answered John Mangles; “he must. Beside, the English authorities must be informed of the fate of the DUNCAN. But do not despair. Rather than abandon our search I will resume it alone! I will either find Captain Grant or perish in the attempt!”

It was a serious undertaking to which John Mangles bound himself; Mary accepted, and gave her hand to the young captain, as if to ratify the treaty.

On John Mangles' side it was a life's devotion; on Mary's undying gratitude.

During that day, their departure was finally arranged;

they resolved to reach Melbourne without delay.

Next day John went to inquire about the ships ready to sail.

He expected to find frequent communication between Eden and Victoria.

He was disappointed; ships were scarce. Three or four vessels, anchored in Twofold Bay, constituted the mercantile fleet of the place; none of them were bound for Melbourne, nor Sydney, nor Point de Galle, at any of which ports Glenarvan would have found ships loading for England. In fact, the Peninsular and Oriental Company has a regular line of packets between these points and England.

Under these circumstances, what was to be done? Waiting for a ship might be a tedious affair, for Twofold Bay is not much frequented. Numbers of ships pass by without touching. After due reflection and discussion, Glenarvan had nearly decided to follow the coast road to Sydney, when Paganel made an unexpected proposition.

The geographer had visited Twofold Bay on his own account, and was aware that there were no means of transport for Sydney or Melbourne. But of the three vessels anchored in the roadstead one was loading for Auckland, the capital of the northern island of New Zealand. Paganel's proposal was to take the ship in question, and get to Auckland, whence it would be easy to return to Europe by the boats of the Peninsular and Oriental Company.

This proposition was taken into serious consideration. Paganel on this occasion dispensed with the volley of arguments he generally indulged in. He confined himself to the bare proposition, adding that the voyage to New Zealand was only five or six days — the distance, in fact, being only about a thousand miles.

By a singular coincidence Auckland is situated on the self-same parallel — the thirty-seventh — which the explorers had perseveringly followed since they left the coast of Araucania. Paganel might fairly have used this as an argument in favor of his scheme; in fact, it was a natural opportunity of visiting the shores of New Zealand.

But Paganel did not lay stress on this argument. After two mistakes, he probably hesitated to attempt a third interpretation of the document. Besides, what could he make of it? It said positively that a “continent” had served as a refuge for Captain Grant, not an island. Now, New Zealand was nothing but an island. This seemed decisive. Whether, for this reason, or for some other, Paganel did not connect any idea of further search with this proposition of reaching Auckland. He merely observed that regular communication existed between that point and Great Britain, and that it was easy to take advantage of it.

John Mangles supported Paganel’s proposal. He advised its adoption, as it was hopeless to await the problematical arrival of a vessel in Twofold Bay. But before coming to any decision, he thought it best to visit the ship mentioned by the geographer. Glenarvan, the Major, Paganel, Robert, and Mangles himself, took a boat, and a few strokes brought them alongside the ship anchored two cables’ length from the quay.

It was a brig of 150 tons, named the MACQUARIE. It was engaged in the coasting trade between the various ports of Australia and New Zealand. The captain, or rather the “master,” received his visitors gruffly enough. They perceived that they had to do with a man of no education, and whose manners were in no degree superior to those of the five sailors of his crew. With a coarse, red face, thick hands, and a broken nose, blind of an eye, and his lips stained with the pipe, Will Halley was a sadly brutal looking person. But they had no choice, and for so short a voyage it was not necessary to be very particular.

“What do you want?” asked Will Halley, when the strangers stepped on the poop of his ship.

“The captain,” answered John Mangles.

“I am the captain,” said Halley. “What else do you want?”

“The MACQUARIE is loading for Auckland, I believe?”

“Yes. What else?”

“What does she carry?”

“Everything salable and purchasable. What else?”

“When does she sail?”

“To-morrow at the mid-day tide. What else?”

“Does she take passengers?”

“That depends on who the passengers are, and whether they are satisfied with the ship’s mess.”

“They would bring their own provisions.”

“What else?”

“What else?”

“Yes. How many are there?”

“Nine; two of them are ladies.”

“I have no cabins.”

“We will manage with such space as may be left at their disposal.”

“What else?”

“Do you agree?” said John Mangles, who was not in the least put out by the captain’s peculiarities.

“We’ll see,” said the master of the MACQUARIE.

Will Halley took two or three turns on the poop, making it resound with iron-heeled boots, and then he turned abruptly to John Mangles.

“What would you pay?” said he.

“What do you ask?” replied John.

“Fifty pounds.”

Glenarvan looked consent.

“Very good! Fifty pounds,” replied John Mangles.

“But passage only,” added Halley.

“Yes, passage only.”

“Food extra.”

“Extra.”

“Agreed. And now,” said Will, putting out his hand, “what about the deposit money?”

“Here is half of the passage-money, twenty-five pounds,” said Mangles, counting out the sum to the master.

“All aboard to-morrow,” said he, “before noon. Whether or no,

I weigh anchor.”

“We will be punctual.”

This said, Glenarvan, the Major, Robert, Paganel, and John Mangles left the ship, Halley not so much as touching the oilskin that adorned his red locks.

“What a brute,” exclaimed John.

“He will do,” answered Paganel. “He is a regular sea-wolf.”

“A downright bear!” added the Major.

“I fancy,” said John Mangles, “that the said bear has dealt in human flesh in his time.”

“What matter?” answered Glenarvan, “as long as he commands the MACQUARIE, and the MACQUARIE goes to New Zealand. From

Twofold Bay to Auckland we shall not see much of him; after Auckland we shall see him no more.”

Lady Helena and Mary Grant were delighted to hear that their departure was arranged for to-morrow. Glenarvan warned them that the MACQUARIE was inferior in comfort to the DUNCAN. But after what they had gone through, they were indifferent to trifling annoyances. Wilson was told off to arrange the accommodation on board the MACQUARIE. Under his busy brush and broom things soon changed their aspect.

Will Halley shrugged his shoulders, and let the sailor have his way. Glenarvan and his party gave him no concern. He neither knew, nor cared to know, their names. His new freight represented fifty pounds, and he rated it far below the two hundred tons of cured hides which were stowed away in his hold. Skins first, men after. He was a merchant. As to his sailor qualification, he was said to be skillful enough in navigating these seas, whose reefs make them very dangerous.

As the day drew to a close, Glenarvan had a desire to go again to the point on the coast cut by the 37th parallel. Two motives prompted him. He wanted to examine once more the presumed scene of the wreck. Ayrton had certainly been quartermaster on the BRITANNIA, and the BRITANNIA might have been lost on this part of the Australian coast; on the east coast if not on the west. It would not do to leave without thorough investigation, a locality which they were never to revisit.

And then, failing the BRITANNIA, the DUNCAN certainly had fallen into the hands of the convicts. Perhaps there had been a fight? There might yet be found on the coast traces of a struggle, a last resistance. If the crew had perished among the waves, the waves probably had thrown some bodies on the shore.

Glenarvan, accompanied by his faithful John, went to carry out the final search. The landlord of the Victoria Hotel lent them two horses, and they set out on the northern road that skirts Twofold Bay.

It was a melancholy journey. Glenarvan and Captain John trotted along without speaking, but they understood each other. The same thoughts, the same anguish harrowed both their hearts. They looked at the sea-worn rocks; they needed no words of question or answer. John’s well-tried zeal and intelligence were a guarantee that every point was scrupulously examined, the least likely places, as well as the sloping beaches and sandy plains where even the slight tides of the Pacific might have thrown some fragments of wreck. But no indication was seen that could suggest further search in that quarter — all trace of the wreck escaped them still.

As to the DUNCAN, no trace either. All that part of Australia, bordering the ocean, was desert.

Still John Mangles discovered on the skirts of the shore evident traces of camping, remains of fires recently kindled under solitary Myall-trees. Had a tribe of wandering blacks passed that way lately? No, for Glenarvan saw a token which furnished incontestable proof that the convicts had frequented that part of the coast.

This token was a grey and yellow garment worn and patched, an ill-omened rag thrown down at the foot of a tree. It bore the convict’s original number at the Perth Penitentiary. The felon was not there, but his filthy garments betrayed his passage. This livery of crime, after having clothed some miscreant, was now decaying on this desert shore.

“You see, John,” said Glenarvan, “the convicts got as far as here! and our poor comrades of the DUNCAN — ”

“Yes,” said John, in a low voice, “they never landed, they perished!”

“Those wretches!” cried Glenarvan. “If ever they fall into my hands

I will avenge my crew — ”

Grief had hardened Glenarvan’s features. For some minutes he gazed at the expanse before him, as if taking a last look at some ship disappearing in the distance. Then his eyes became dim; he recovered himself in a moment, and without a word or look, set off at a gallop toward Eden.

The wanderers passed their last evening sadly enough. Their thoughts

recalled all the misfortunes they had encountered in this country.

They remembered how full of well-warranted hope they had been at

Cape Bernouilli, and how cruelly disappointed at Twofold Bay!

Paganel was full of feverish agitation. John Mangles, who had watched him since the affair at Snowy River, felt that the geographer was hesitating whether to speak or not to speak. A thousand times he had pressed him with questions, and failed in obtaining an answer.

But that evening, John, in lighting him to his room, asked him why he was so nervous.

“Friend John,” said Paganel, evasively, “I am not more nervous to-night than I always am.”

“Mr. Paganel,” answered John, “you have a secret that chokes you.”

“Well!” cried the geographer, gesticulating, “what can I do?

It is stronger than I!”

“What is stronger?”

“My joy on the one hand, my despair on the other.”

“You rejoice and despair at the same time!”

“Yes; at the idea of visiting New Zealand.”

“Why! have you any trace?” asked John, eagerly. “Have you recovered the lost tracks?”

“No, friend John. No one returns from New Zealand; but still — you know human nature. All we want to nourish hope is breath. My device is ‘Spiro spero,’ and it is the best motto in the world!”

CHAPTER II NAVIGATORS AND THEIR DISCOVERIES

NEXT day, the 27th of January, the passengers of the MACQUARIE were installed on board the brig. Will Halley had not offered his cabin to his lady passengers. This omission was the less to be deplored, for the den was worthy of the bear.

At half past twelve the anchor was weighed, having been loosed from its holding-ground with some difficulty. A moderate breeze was blowing from the southwest. The sails were gradually unfurled; the five hands made slow work. Wilson offered to assist the crew; but Halley begged him to be quiet and not to interfere with what did not concern him. He was accustomed to manage his own affairs, and required neither assistance nor advice.

This was aimed at John Mangles, who had smiled at the clumsiness of some maneuver. John took the hint, but mentally resolved that he would nevertheless hold himself in readiness in case the incapacity of the crew should endanger the safety of the vessel.

However, in time, the sails were adjusted by the five sailors, aided by the stimulus of the captain’s oaths. The MACQUARIE stood out to sea on the larboard tack, under all her lower sails, topsails, topgallants, cross-jack, and jib. By and by, the other sails were hoisted. But in spite of this additional canvas the brig made very little way. Her rounded bow, the width of her hold, and her heavy stern, made her a bad sailor, the perfect type of a wooden shoe.

They had to make the best of it. Happily, five days, or, at most, six, would take them to Auckland, no matter how bad a sailor the MACQUARIE was.

At seven o’clock in the evening the Australian coast and the lighthouse of the port of Eden had faded out of sight. The ship labored on the lumpy sea, and rolled heavily in the trough of the waves. The passengers below suffered a good deal from this motion. But it was impossible to stay on deck, as it rained violently. Thus they were condemned to close imprisonment.

Each one of them was lost in his own reflections. Words were few. Now and then Lady Helena and Miss Grant exchanged a few syllables. Glenarvan was restless; he went in and out, while the Major was impassive. John Mangles, followed by Robert, went on the poop from time to time, to look at the weather. Paganel sat in his corner, muttering vague and incoherent words.

What was the worthy geographer thinking of? Of New Zealand, the country to which destiny was leading him. He went mentally over all his history; he called to mind the scenes of the past in that ill-omened country.

But in all that history was there a fact, was there a solitary incident that could justify the discoverers of these islands in considering them as “a continent.” Could a modern geographer or a sailor concede to them such a designation. Paganel was always revolving the meaning of the document. He was possessed with the idea; it became his ruling thought. After Patagonia, after Australia, his imagination, allured by a name, flew to New Zealand. But in that direction, one point, and only one, stood in his way.

“Contin — contin,” he repeated, “that must mean continent!”

And then he resumed his mental retrospect of the navigators who made known to us these two great islands of the Southern Sea.

It was on the 13th of December, 1642, that the Dutch navigator Tasman, after discovering Van Diemen’s Land, sighted the unknown shores of New Zealand. He coasted along for several days, and on the 17th of December his ships penetrated into a large bay, which, terminating in a narrow strait, separated the two islands.

The northern island was called by the natives Ikana-Mani, a word which signifies the fish of Mani. The southern island was called Tavai-Pouna-Mou, “the whale that yields the green-stones.”

Abel Tasman sent his boats on shore, and they returned accompanied by two canoes and a noisy company of natives. These savages were middle height, of brown or yellow complexion, angular bones, harsh voices, and black hair, which was dressed in the Japanese manner, and surmounted by a tall white feather.

This first interview between Europeans and aborigines seemed to promise amicable and lasting intercourse. But the next day, when one of Tasman’s boats was looking for an anchorage nearer to the land, seven canoes, manned by a great number of natives, attacked them fiercely. The boat capsized and filled. The quartermaster in command was instantly struck with a badly-sharpened spear, and fell into the sea. Of his six companions four were killed; the other two and the quartermaster were able to swim to the ships, and were picked up and recovered.

After this sad occurrence Tasman set sail, confining his revenge to giving the natives a few musket-shots, which probably did not reach them. He left this bay — which still bears the name of Massacre Bay — followed the western coast, and on the 5th of January, anchored near the northern-most point. Here the violence of the surf, as well as the unfriendly attitude of the natives, prevented his obtaining water, and he finally quitted these shores, giving them the name Staten-land or the Land of the States, in honor of the States-General.

The Dutch navigator concluded that these islands were adjacent to the islands of the same name on the east of Terra del Fuego, at the southern point of the American continent. He thought he had found “the Great Southern Continent.”

“But,” said Paganel to himself, “what a seventeenth century sailor might call a ‘continent’ would never stand for one with a nineteenth century man. No such mistake can be supposed! No! there is something here that baffles me.”

CHAPTER III THE MARTYR-ROLL OF NAVIGATORS

ON the 31st of January, four days after starting, the MACQUARIE had not done two-thirds of the distance between Australia and New Zealand. Will Halley took very little heed to the working of the ship; he let things take their chance. He seldom showed himself, for which no one was sorry. No one would have complained if he had passed all his time in his cabin, but for the fact that the brutal captain was every day under the influence of gin or brandy. His sailors willingly followed his example, and no ship ever sailed more entirely depending on Providence than the MACQUARIE did from Twofold Bay.

This unpardonable carelessness obliged John Mangles to keep a watchful eye ever open. Mulrady and Wilson more than once brought round the helm when some careless steering threatened to throw the ship on her beam-ends. Often Will Halley would interfere and abuse the two sailors with a volley of oaths. The latter, in their impatience, would have liked nothing better than to bind this drunken captain, and lower him into the hold, for the rest of the voyage. But John Mangles succeeded, after some persuasion, in calming their well-grounded indignation.

Still, the position of things filled him with anxiety; but, for fear of alarming Glenarvan, he spoke only to Paganel or the Major. McNabbs recommended the same course as Mulrady and Wilson.

“If you think it would be for the general good, John,” said McNabbs, “you should not hesitate to take the command of the vessel. When we get to Auckland the drunken imbecile can resume his command, and then he is at liberty to wreck himself, if that is his fancy.”

“All that is very true, Mr. McNabbs, and if it is absolutely necessary I will do it. As long as we are on open sea, a careful lookout is enough; my sailors and I are watching on the poop; but when we get near the coast, I confess I shall be uneasy if Halley does not come to his senses.”

“Could not you direct the course?” asked Paganel.

“That would be difficult,” replied John. “Would you believe it that there is not a chart on board?”

“Is that so?”

“It is indeed. The MACQUARIE only does a coasting trade between Eden and Auckland, and Halley is so at home in these waters that he takes no observations.”

“I suppose he thinks the ship knows the way, and steers herself.” “Ha! ha!” laughed John Mangles; “I do not believe in ships that steer themselves; and if Halley is drunk when we get among soundings, he will get us all into trouble.”

“Let us hope,” said Paganel, “that the neighborhood of land will bring him to his senses.”

“Well, then,” said McNabbs, “if needs were, you could not sail the MACQUARIE into Auckland?”

“Without a chart of the coast, certainly not. The coast is very dangerous. It is a series of shallow fiords as irregular and capricious as the fiords of Norway. There are many reefs, and it requires great experience to avoid them. The strongest ship would be lost if her keel struck one of those rocks that are submerged but a few feet below the water.”

“In that case those on board would have to take refuge on the coast.”

“If there was time.”

“A terrible extremity,” said Paganel, “for they are not hospitable shores, and the dangers of the land are not less appalling than the dangers of the sea.”

“You refer to the Maories, Monsieur Paganel?” asked John Mangles.

“Yes, my friend. They have a bad name in these waters. It is not a matter of timid or brutish Australians, but of an intelligent and sanguinary race, cannibals greedy of human flesh, man-eaters to whom we should look in vain for pity.”

“Well, then,” exclaimed the Major, “if Captain Grant had been wrecked on the coast of New Zealand, you would dissuade us from looking for him.”

“Oh, you might search on the coasts,” replied the geographer, “because you might find traces of the BRITANNIA, but not in the interior, for it would be perfectly useless. Every European who ventures into these fatal districts falls into the hands of the Maories, and a prisoner in the hands of the Maories is a lost man. I have urged my friends to cross the Pampas, to toil over the plains of Australia, but I will never lure them into the mazes of the New Zealand forest. May heaven be our guide, and keep us from ever being thrown within the power of those fierce natives!”

CHAPTER IV THE WRECK OF THE “MACQUARIE”

STILL this wearisome voyage dragged on. On the 2d of February, six days from starting, the MACQUARIE had not yet made a nearer acquaintance with the shores of Auckland. The wind was fair, nevertheless, and blew steadily from the southwest; but the currents were against the ship’s course, and she scarcely made any way. The heavy, lumpy sea strained her cordage, her timbers creaked, and she labored painfully in the trough of the sea. Her standing rigging was so out of order that it allowed play to the masts, which were violently shaken at every roll of the sea.

Fortunately, Will Halley was not a man in a hurry, and did not use a press of canvas, or his masts would inevitably have come down. John Mangles therefore hoped that the wretched hull would reach port without accident; but it grieved him that his companions should have to suffer so much discomfort from the defective arrangements of the brig.

But neither Lady Helena nor Mary Grant uttered a word of complaint, though the continuous rain obliged them to stay below, where the want of air and the violence of the motion were painfully felt. They often braved the weather, and went on the poop till driven down again by the force of a sudden squall. Then they returned to the narrow space, fitter for stowing cargo than accommodating passengers, especially ladies.

Their friends did their best to amuse them. Paganel tried to beguile the time with his stories, but it was a hopeless case. Their minds were so distracted at this change of route as to be quite unhinged. Much as they had been interested in his dissertation on the Pampas, or Australia, his lectures on New Zealand fell on cold and indifferent ears. Besides, they were going to this new and ill-reputed country without enthusiasm, without conviction, not even of their own free will, but solely at the bidding of destiny.

Of all the passengers on board the MACQUARIE, the most to be pitied was Lord Glenarvan. He was rarely to be seen below. He could not stay in one place. His nervous organization, highly excited, could not submit to confinement between four narrow bulkheads. All day long, even all night, regardless of the torrents of rain and the dashing waves, he stayed on the poop, sometimes leaning on the rail, sometimes walking to and fro in feverish agitation. His eyes wandered ceaselessly over the blank horizon. He scanned it eagerly during every short interval of clear weather. It seemed as if he sought to question the voiceless waters; he longed to tear away the veil of fog and vapor that obscured his view. He could not be resigned, and his features expressed the bitterness of his grief. He was a man of energy, till now happy and powerful, and deprived in a moment of power and happiness. John Mangles bore him company, and endured with him the inclemency of the weather. On this day Glenarvan looked more anxiously than ever at each point where a break in the mist enabled him to do so. John came up to him and said, “Your Lordship is looking out for land?”

Glenarvan shook his head in dissent.

“And yet,” said the young captain, “you must be longing to quit this vessel. We ought to have seen the lights of Auckland thirty-six hours ago.”

Glenarvan made no reply. He still looked, and for a moment his glass was pointed toward the horizon to windward.

“The land is not on that side, my Lord,” said John Mangles.

“Look more to starboard.”

“Why, John?” replied Glenarvan. “I am not looking for the land.”

“What then, my Lord?”

“My yacht! the DUNCAN,” said Glenarvan, hotly. “It must be here on these coasts, skimming these very waves, playing the vile part of a pirate! It is here, John; I am certain of it, on the track of vessels between Australia and New Zealand; and I have a presentiment that we shall fall in with her.”

“God keep us from such a meeting!”

“Why, John?”

“Your Lordship forgets our position. What could we do in this ship if the DUNCAN gave chase. We could not even fly!”

“Fly, John?”

“Yes, my Lord; we should try in vain! We should be taken, delivered up to the mercy of those wretches, and Ben Joyce has shown us that he does not stop at a crime! Our lives would be worth little. We would fight to the death, of course, but after that! Think of Lady Glenarvan; think of Mary Grant!”

“Poor girls!” murmured Glenarvan. “John, my heart is broken; and sometimes despair nearly masters me. I feel as if fresh misfortunes awaited us, and that Heaven itself is against us. It terrifies me!”

“You, my Lord?”

“Not for myself, John, but for those I love — whom you love, also.”

“Keep up your heart, my Lord,” said the young captain. “We must not look out for troubles. The MACQUARIE sails badly, but she makes some way nevertheless. Will Halley is a brute, but I am keeping my eyes open, and if the coast looks dangerous, I will put the ship’s head to sea again. So that, on that score, there is little or no danger. But as to getting alongside the DUNCAN! God forbid! And if your Lordship is bent on looking out for her, let it be in order to give her a wide berth.”

John Mangles was right. An encounter with the DUNCAN would have been fatal to the MACQUARIE. There was every reason to fear such an engagement in these narrow seas, in which pirates could ply their trade without risk. However, for that day at least, the yacht did not appear, and the sixth night from their departure from Twofold Bay came, without the fears of John Mangles being realized.

But that night was to be a night of terrors. Darkness came on almost suddenly at seven o’clock in the evening; the sky was very threatening. The sailor instinct rose above the stupefaction of the drunkard and roused Will Halley. He left his cabin, rubbed his eyes, and shook his great red head. Then he drew a great deep breath of air, as other people swallow a draught of water to revive themselves. He examined the masts. The wind freshened, and veering a point more to the westward, blew right for the New Zealand coast.

[illustration omitted] [page intentionally blank]

Will Halley, with many an oath, called his men, tightened his topmast cordage, and made all snug for the night. John Mangles approved in silence. He had ceased to hold any conversation with the coarse seaman; but neither Glenarvan nor he left the poop. Two hours after a stiff breeze came on. Will Halley took in the lower reef of his topsails. The maneuver would have been a difficult job for five men if the MACQUARIE had not carried a double yard, on the American plan. In fact, they had only to lower the upper yard to bring the sail to its smallest size.

Two hours passed; the sea was rising. The MACQUARIE was struck so violently that it seemed as if her keel had touched the rocks. There was no real danger, but the heavy vessel did not rise easily to the waves. By and by the returning waves would break over the deck in great masses. The boat was washed out of the davits by the force of the water.

John Mangles never released his watch. Any other ship would have made no account of a sea like this; but with this heavy craft there was a danger of sinking by the bow, for the deck was filled at every lurch, and the sheet of water not being able to escape quickly by the scuppers, might submerge the ship. It would have been the wisest plan to prepare for emergency by knocking out the bulwarks with an ax to facilitate their escape, but Halley refused to take this precaution.

But a greater danger was at hand, and one that it was too late to prevent. About half-past eleven, John Mangles and Wilson, who stayed on deck throughout the gale, were suddenly struck by an unusual noise. Their nautical instincts awoke. John seized the sailor’s hand. “The reef!” said he.

“Yes,” said Wilson; “the waves breaking on the bank.”

“Not more than two cables’ length off?”

“At farthest? The land is there!”

John leaned over the side, gazed into the dark water, and called out,

“Wilson, the lead!”

The master, posted forward, seemed to have no idea of his position. Wilson seized the lead-line, sprang to the fore-chains, and threw the lead; the rope ran out between his fingers, at the third knot the lead stopped.

“Three fathoms,” cried Wilson.

“Captain,” said John, running to Will Halley, “we are on the breakers.”

Whether or not he saw Halley shrug his shoulders is of very little importance. But he hurried to the helm, put it hard down, while Wilson, leaving the line, hauled at the main-topsail brace to bring the ship to the wind. The man who was steering received a smart blow, and could not comprehend the sudden attack.

“Let her go! Let her go!” said the young captain, working her to get away from the reefs.

For half a minute the starboard side of the vessel was turned toward them, and, in spite of the darkness, John could discern a line of foam which moaned and gleamed four fathoms away.

At this moment, Will Halley, comprehending the danger, lost his head. His sailors, hardly sobered, could not understand his orders. His incoherent words, his contradictory orders showed that this stupid sot had quite lost his self-control. He was taken by surprise at the proximity of the land, which was eight miles off, when he thought it was thirty or forty miles off. The currents had thrown him out of his habitual track, and this miserable slave of routine was left quite helpless.

Still the prompt maneuver of John Mangles succeeded in keeping the MACQUARIE off the breakers. But John did not know the position. For anything he could tell he was girdled in by reefs. The wind blew them strongly toward the east, and at every lurch they might strike.

In fact, the sound of the reef soon redoubled on the starboard side of the bow. They must luff again. John put the helm down again and brought her up. The breakers increased under the bow of the vessel, and it was necessary to put her about to regain the open sea. Whether she would be able to go about under shortened sail, and badly trimmed as she was, remained to be seen, but there was nothing else to be done.

“Helm hard down!” cried Mangles to Wilson.

The MACQUARIE began to near the new line of reefs:

in another moment the waves were seen dashing on submerged rocks.

It was a moment of inexpressible anxiety. The spray

was luminous, just as if lit up by sudden phosphorescence.

The roaring of the sea was like the voice of those ancient

Tritons whom poetic mythology endowed with life.

Wilson and Mulrady hung to the wheel with all their weight.

Some cordage gave way, which endangered the foremast.

It seemed doubtful whether she would go about without further damage.

Suddenly the wind fell and the vessel fell back, and turning her became hopeless. A high wave caught her below, carried her up on the reefs, where she struck with great violence. The foremast came down with all the fore-rigging. The brig rose twice, and then lay motionless, heeled over on her port side at an angle of 30 degrees.

The glass of the skylight had been smashed to powder. The passengers rushed out. But the waves were sweeping the deck from one side to the other, and they dared not stay there. John Mangles, knowing the ship to be safely lodged in the sand, begged them to return to their own quarters.

“Tell me the truth, John,” said Glenarvan, calmly.

“The truth, my Lord, is that we are at a standstill. Whether the sea will devour us is another question; but we have time to consider.”

“It is midnight?”

“Yes, my Lord, and we must wait for the day.”

“Can we not lower the boat?”

“In such a sea, and in the dark, it is impossible.

And, besides, where could we land?”

“Well, then, John, let us wait for the daylight.”

Will Halley, however, ran up and down the deck like a maniac. His crew had recovered their senses, and now broached a cask of brandy, and began to drink. John foresaw that if they became drunk, terrible scenes would ensue.

The captain could not be relied on to restrain them;

the wretched man tore his hair and wrung his hands.

His whole thought was his uninsured cargo. “I am ruined!

I am lost!” he would cry, as he ran from side to side.

John Mangles did not waste time on him. He armed his two companions, and they all held themselves in readiness to resist the sailors who were filling themselves with brandy, seasoned with fearful blasphemies.

“The first of these wretches that comes near the ladies,

I will shoot like a dog,” said the Major, quietly.

The sailors doubtless saw that the passengers were determined to hold their own, for after some attempts at pillage, they disappeared to their own quarters. John Mangles thought no more of these drunken rascals, and waited impatiently for the dawn. The ship was now quite motionless. The sea became gradually calmer. The wind fell. The hull would be safe for some hours yet. At daybreak John examined the landing-place; the yawl, which was now their only boat, would carry the crew and the passengers. It would have to make three trips at least, as it could only hold four.

As he was leaning on the skylight, thinking over the situation of affairs, John Mangles could hear the roaring of the surf. He tried to pierce the darkness. He wondered how far it was to the land they longed for no less than dreaded. A reef sometimes extends for miles along the coast. Could their fragile boat hold out on a long trip?

While John was thus ruminating and longing for a little light from the murky sky, the ladies, relying on him, slept in their little berths. The stationary attitude of the brig insured them some hours of repose. Glenarvan, John, and their companions, no longer disturbed by the noise of the crew who were now wrapped in a drunken sleep, also refreshed themselves by a short nap, and a profound silence reigned on board the ship, herself slumbering peacefully on her bed of sand.

Toward four o’clock the first peep of dawn appeared in the east. The clouds were dimly defined by the pale light of the dawn. John returned to the deck. The horizon was veiled with a curtain of fog. Some faint outlines were shadowed in the mist, but at a considerable height. A slight swell still agitated the sea, but the more distant waves were undistinguishable in a motionless bank of clouds.

John waited. The light gradually increased, and the horizon acquired a rosy hue. The curtain slowly rose over the vast watery stage. Black reefs rose out of the waters. Then a line became defined on the belt of foam, and there gleamed a luminous beacon-light point behind a low hill which concealed the scarcely risen sun. There was the land, less than nine miles off.

“Land ho!” cried John Mangles.

His companions, aroused by his voice, rushed to the poop, and gazed in silence at the coast whose outline lay on the horizon. Whether they were received as friends or enemies, that coast must be their refuge.

“Where is Halley?” asked Glenarvan.

“I do not know, my Lord,” replied John Mangles.

“Where are the sailors?”

“Invisible, like himself.”

“Probably dead drunk, like himself,” added McNabbs.

“Let them be called,” said Glenarvan, “we cannot leave them on the ship.”

Mulrady and Wilson went down to the forecastle, and two

minutes after they returned. The place was empty!

They then searched between decks, and then the hold.

But found no trace of Will Halley nor his sailors.

“What! no one?” exclaimed Glenarvan.

“Could they have fallen into the sea?” asked Paganel.

“Everything is possible,” replied John Mangles, who was getting uneasy.

Then turning toward the stern: “To the boat!” said he.

Wilson and Mulrady followed to launch the yawl. The yawl was gone.

CHAPTER V CANNIBALS

WILL HALLEY and his crew, taking advantage of the darkness of night and the sleep of the passengers, had fled with the only boat. There could be no doubt about it. The captain, whose duty would have kept him on board to the last, had been the first to quit the ship.

“The cowards are off!” said John Mangles. “Well, my Lord, so much the better. They have spared us some trying scenes.”

“No doubt,” said Glenarvan; “besides we have a captain of our own, and courageous, if unskillful sailors, your companions, John. Say the word, and we are ready to obey.”

The Major, Paganel, Robert, Wilson, Mulrady, Olbinett himself, applauded Glenarvan’s speech, and ranged themselves on the deck, ready to execute their captain’s orders.

“What is to be done?” asked Glenarvan.

It was evident that raising the MACQUARIE was out of the question, and no less evident that she must be abandoned. Waiting on board for succor that might never come, would have been imprudence and folly. Before the arrival of a chance vessel on the scene, the MACQUARIE would have broken up. The next storm, or even a high tide raised by the winds from seaward, would roll it on the sands, break it up into splinters, and scatter them on the shore. John was anxious to reach the land before this inevitable consummation.

He proposed to construct a raft strong enough to carry the passengers, and a sufficient quantity of provisions, to the coast of New Zealand.

There was no time for discussion, the work was to be set about at once, and they had made considerable progress when night came and interrupted them.

Toward eight o'clock in the evening, after supper, while Lady Helena and Mary Grant slept in their berths, Paganel and his friends conversed on serious matters as they walked up and down the deck. Robert had chosen to stay with them. The brave boy listened with all his ears, ready to be of use, and willing to enlist in any perilous adventure.

Paganel asked John Mangles whether the raft could not follow the coast as far as Auckland, instead of landing its freight on the coast.

John replied that the voyage was impossible with such an unmanageable craft.

"And what we cannot do on a raft could have been done in the ship's boat?"

"Yes, if necessary," answered John; "but we should have had to sail by day and anchor at night."

"Then those wretches who abandoned us — "

"Oh, as for them," said John, "they were drunk, and in the darkness

I have no doubt they paid for their cowardice with their lives."

"So much the worse for them and for us," replied Paganel; "for the boat would have been very useful to us."

"What would you have, Paganel? The raft will bring us to the shore," said Glenarvan.

“The very thing I would fain avoid,” exclaimed the geographer.

“What! do you think another twenty miles after crossing the Pampas and Australia, can have any terrors for us, hardened as we are to fatigue?”

“My friend,” replied Paganel, “I do not call in question our courage nor the bravery of our friends. Twenty miles would be nothing in any other country than New Zealand. You cannot suspect me of faint-heartedness. I was the first to persuade you to cross America and Australia. But here the case is different. I repeat, anything is better than to venture into this treacherous country.”

“Anything is better, in my judgment,” said John Mangles, “than braving certain destruction on a stranded vessel.”

“What is there so formidable in New Zealand?” asked Glenarvan.

“The savages,” said Paganel.

“The savages!” repeated Glenarvan. “Can we not avoid them by keeping to the shore? But in any case what have we to fear? Surely, two resolute and well-armed Europeans need not give a thought to an attack by a handful of miserable beings.”

Paganel shook his head. “In this case there are no miserable beings to contend with. The New Zealanders are a powerful race, who are rebelling against English rule, who fight the invaders, and often beat them, and who always eat them!”

“Cannibals!” exclaimed Robert, “cannibals?” Then they heard him whisper,

“My sister! Lady Helena.”

“Don’t frighten yourself, my boy,” said Glenarvan; “our friend Paganel exaggerates.”

“Far from it,” rejoined Paganel. “Robert has shown himself a man, and I treat him as such, in not concealing the truth from him.”

Paganel was right. Cannibalism has become a fixed fact in New Zealand, as it is in the Fijis and in Torres Strait. Superstition is no doubt partly to blame, but cannibalism is certainly owing to the fact that there are moments when game is scarce and hunger great. The savages began by eating human flesh to appease the demands of an appetite rarely satiated; subsequently the priests regulated and satisfied the monstrous custom. What was a meal, was raised to the dignity of a ceremony, that is all.

Besides, in the eyes of the Maories, nothing is more natural than to eat one another. The missionaries often questioned them about cannibalism. They asked them why they devoured their brothers; to which the chiefs made answer that fish eat fish, dogs eat men, men eat dogs, and dogs eat one another. Even the Maori mythology has a legend of a god who ate another god; and with such a precedent, who could resist eating his neighbor?

Another strange notion is, that in eating a dead enemy they consume his spiritual being, and so inherit his soul, his strength and his bravery, which they hold are specially lodged in the brain. This accounts for the fact that the brain figures in their feasts as the choicest delicacy, and is offered to the most honored guest.

But while he acknowledged all this, Paganel maintained, not without a show of reason, that sensuality, and especially hunger, was the first cause of cannibalism among the New Zealanders, and not only among the Polynesian races, but also among the savages of Europe.

“For,” said he, “cannibalism was long prevalent among the ancestors of the most civilized people, and especially (if the Major will not think me personal) among the Scotch.”

“Really,” said McNabbs.

“Yes, Major,” replied Paganel. “If you read certain passages of Saint Jerome, on the Atticoli of Scotland, you will see what he thought of your forefathers. And without going so far back as historic times, under the reign of Elizabeth, when Shakespeare was dreaming out his Shy-lock, a Scotch bandit, Sawney Bean, was executed for the crime of cannibalism. Was it religion that prompted him to cannibalism? No! it was hunger.”

“Hunger?” said John Mangles.

“Hunger!” repeated Paganel; “but, above all, the necessity of the carnivorous appetite of replacing the bodily waste, by the azote contained in animal tissues. The lungs are satisfied with a provision of vegetable and farinaceous food. But to be strong and active the body must be supplied with those plastic elements that renew the muscles. Until the Maories become members of the Vegetarian Association they will eat meat, and human flesh as meat.”

“Why not animal flesh?” asked Glenarvan.

“Because they have no animals,” replied Paganel; “and that ought to be taken into account, not to extenuate, but to explain, their cannibal habits. Quadrupeds, and even birds, are rare on these inhospitable shores, so that the Maories have always eaten human flesh. There are even ‘man-eating seasons,’ as there are in civilized countries hunting seasons. Then begin the great wars, and whole tribes are served up on the tables of the conquerors.”

“Well, then,” said Glenarvan, “according to your mode of reasoning, Paganel, cannibalism will not cease in New Zealand until her pastures teem with sheep and oxen.”

“Evidently, my dear Lord; and even then it will take years to wean them from Maori flesh, which they prefer to all others; for the children will still have a relish for what their fathers so highly appreciated. According to them it tastes like pork, with even more flavor. As to white men’s flesh, they do not like it so well, because the whites eat salt with their food, which gives a peculiar flavor, not to the taste of connoisseurs.”

“They are dainty,” said the Major. “But, black or white, do they eat it raw, or cook it?”

“Why, what is that to you, Mr. McNabbs?” cried Robert.

“What is that to me!” exclaimed the Major, earnestly. “If I am to make a meal for a cannibal, I should prefer being cooked.”

“Why?”

“Because then I should be sure of not being eaten alive!”

“Very good. Major,” said Paganel; “but suppose they cooked you alive?”

“The fact is,” answered the Major, “I would not give half-a-crown for the choice!”

“Well, McNabbs, if it will comfort you — you may as well be told —

the New Zealanders do not eat flesh without cooking or smoking it.

They are very clever and experienced in cookery.

For my part, I very much dislike the idea of being eaten!

The idea of ending one’s life in the maw of a savage! bah!”

“The conclusion of all,” said John Mangles, “is that we must not fall into their hands. Let us hope that one day Christianity will abolish all these monstrous customs.”

“Yes, we must hope so,” replied Paganel; “but, believe me, a savage who has tasted human flesh, is not easily persuaded to forego it. I will relate two facts which prove it.”

“By all means let us have the facts, Paganel,” said Glenarvan.

“The first is narrated in the chronicles of the Jesuit Society in Brazil. A Portuguese missionary was one day visiting an old Brazilian woman who was very ill. She had only a few days to live. The Jesuit inculcated the truths of religion, which the dying woman accepted, without objection. Then having attended to her spiritual wants, he bethought himself of her bodily needs, and offered her some European delicacies. ‘Alas,’ said she, ‘my digestion is too weak to bear any kind of food. There is only one thing I could fancy, and nobody here could get it for me.’ ‘What is it?’ asked the Jesuit. ‘Ah! my son,’ said she, ‘it is the hand of a little boy! I feel as if I should enjoy munching the little bones!’”

“Horrid! but I wonder is it so very nice?” said Robert.

“My second tale will answer you, my boy,” said Paganel: “One day a missionary was reproving a cannibal for the horrible custom, so abhorrent to God’s laws, of eating human flesh! ‘And beside,’ said he, ‘it must be so nasty!’ ‘Oh, father,’ said the savage, looking greedily at the missionary, ‘say that God forbids it! That is a reason for what you tell us. But don’t say it is nasty! If you had only tasted it!’”

CHAPTER VI A DREADED COUNTRY

PAGANEL’S facts were indisputable. The cruelty of the New Zealanders was beyond a doubt, therefore it was dangerous to land. But had the danger been a hundredfold greater, it had to be faced. John Mangles felt the necessity of leaving without delay a vessel doomed to certain and speedy destruction. There were two dangers, one certain and the other probable, but no one could hesitate between them.

As to their chance of being picked up by a passing vessel, they could not reasonably hope for it. The MACQUARIE was not in the track of ships bound to New Zealand. They keep further north for Auckland, further south for New Plymouth, and the ship had struck just between these two points, on the desert region of the shores of Ika-na-Mani, a dangerous, difficult coast, and infested by desperate characters.

“When shall we get away?” asked Glenarvan.

“To-morrow morning at ten o’clock,” replied John Mangles. “The tide will then turn and carry us to land.”

Next day, February 5, at eight o’clock, the raft was finished. John had given all his attention to the building of this structure. The foreyard, which did very well for mooring the anchors, was quite inadequate to the transport of passengers and provisions. What was needed was a strong, manageable raft, that would resist the force of the waves during a passage of nine miles. Nothing but the masts could supply suitable materials.

Wilson and Mulrady set to work; the rigging was cut clear, and the mainmast, chopped away at the base, fell over the starboard rail, which crashed under its weight. The MACQUARIE was thus razed like a pontoon.

When the lower mast, the topmasts, and the royals were sawn and split, the principal pieces of the raft were ready. They were then joined to the fragments of the foremast and the whole was fastened securely together. John took the precaution to place in the interstices half a dozen empty barrels, which would raise the structure above the level of the water. On this strong foundation, Wilson laid a kind of floor in open work, made of the gratings off the hatches. The spray could then dash on the raft without staying there, and the passengers would be kept dry. In addition to this, the hose-pipes firmly lashed together formed a kind of circular barrier which protected the deck from the waves.

That morning, John seeing that the wind was in their favor, rigged up the royal-yard in the middle of the raft as a mast. It was stayed with shrouds, and carried a makeshift sail. A large broad-bladed oar was fixed behind to act as a rudder in case the wind was sufficient to require it. The greatest pains had been expended on strengthening the raft to resist the force of the waves, but the question remained whether, in the event of a change of wind, they could steer, or indeed, whether they could hope ever to reach the land.

At nine o’clock they began to load. First came the provisions, in quantity sufficient to last till they should reach Auckland, for they could not count on the productions of this barren region.

Olbinett’s stores furnished some preserved meat which remained of the purchase made for their voyage in the MACQUARIE. This was but a scanty resource. They had to fall back on the coarse viands of the ship; sea biscuits of inferior quality, and two casks of salt fish. The steward was quite crestfallen.

These provisions were put in hermetically sealed cases, staunch and safe from sea water, and then lowered on to the raft and strongly lashed to the foot of the mast. The arms and ammunition were piled in a dry corner. Fortunately the travelers were well armed with carbines and revolvers.

A holding anchor was also put on board in case John should be unable to make the land in one tide, and would have to seek moorings.

At ten o’clock the tide turned. The breeze blew gently from the northwest, and a slight swell rocked the frail craft.

“Are we ready?” asked John.

“All ready, captain,” answered Wilson.

“All aboard!” cried John.

Lady Helena and Mary Grant descended by a rope ladder, and took their station at the foot of the mast on the cases of provisions, their companions near them. Wilson took the helm. John stood by the tackle, and Mulrady cut the line which held the raft to the ship’s side.

The sail was spread, and the frail structure commenced its progress toward the land, aided by wind and tide. The coast was about nine miles off, a distance that a boat with good oars would have accomplished in three hours. But with a raft allowance must be made. If the wind held, they might reach the land in one tide. But if the breeze died away, the ebb would carry them away from the shore, and they would be compelled to anchor and wait for the next tide, a serious consideration, and one that filled John Mangles with anxiety.

Still he hoped to succeed. The wind freshened. The tide had turned at ten o'clock, and by three they must either make the land or anchor to save themselves from being carried out to sea. They made a good start. Little by little the black line of the reefs and the yellow banks of sand disappeared under the swelling tide. Extreme watchfulness and perfect skill were necessary to avoid these submerged rocks, and steer a bark that did not readily answer to the helm, and that constantly broke off.

At noon they were still five miles from shore. A tolerably clear sky allowed them to make out the principal features of the land. In the northeast rose a mountain about 2,300 feet high, whose sharply defined outline was exactly like the grinning face of a monkey turned toward the sky. It was Pirongia, which the map gave as exactly on the 38th parallel.

At half-past twelve, Paganel remarked that all the rocks had disappeared under the rising tide.

"All but one," answered Lady Helena.

"Which, Madam?" asked Paganel.

"There," replied she, pointing to a black speck a mile off.

"Yes, indeed," said Paganel. "Let us try to ascertain its position, so as not to get too near it, for the sea will soon conceal it."

"It is exactly in a line with the northern slope of the mountain," said John Mangles. "Wilson, mind you give it a wide berth."

"Yes, captain," answered the sailor, throwing his whole weight on the great oar that steered the raft.

In half an hour they had made half a mile. But, strange to say, the black point still rose above the waves.

John looked attentively, and in order to make it out, borrowed Paganel's telescope.

"That is no reef," said he, after a moment; "it is something floating, which rises and falls with the swell."

"Is it part of the mast of the MACQUARIE?" asked Lady Helena.

"No," said Glenarvan, "none of her timbers could have come so far."

"Stay!" said John Mangles; "I know it! It is the boat."

"The ship's boat?" exclaimed Glenarvan.

"Yes, my lord. The ship's boat, keel up."

"The unfortunate creatures," cried Lady Helena, "they have perished!"

"Yes, Madam," replied John Mangles, "they must have perished, for in the midst of these breakers in a heavy swell on that pitchy night, they ran to certain death."

For a few minutes the passengers were silent.

They gazed at the frail craft as they drew near it.

It must evidently have capsized about four miles from the shore,

and not one of the crew could have escaped.

"But this boat may be of use to us," said Glenarvan.

“That is true,” answered John Mangles. “Keep her up, Wilson.”

The direction was slightly changed, but the breeze fell gradually, and it was two hours before they reached the boat.

Mulrady, stationed forward, fended off the blow, and the yawl was drawn alongside.

“Empty?” asked John Mangles.

“Yes, captain,” answered the sailor, “the boat is empty. and all its seams are open. It is of no use to us.”

“No use at all?” said McNabbs.

“None at all,” said John Mangles.

“It is good for nothing but to burn.”

“I regret it,” said Paganel, “for the yawl might have taken us to Auckland.”

“We must bear our fate, Monsieur Paganel,” replied John Mangles.

“But, for my part, in such a stormy sea I prefer our raft to that

crazy boat. A very slight shock would be enough to break her up.

Therefore, my lord, we have nothing to detain us further.”

“As you think best, John.”

“On then, Wilson,” said John, “and bear straight for the land.”

There was still an hour before the turn of the tide. In that time they might make two miles. But the wind soon fell almost entirely, and the raft became nearly motionless, and soon began to drift to seaward under the influence of the ebb-tide.

John did not hesitate a moment.

“Let go the anchor,” said he.

Mulrady, who stood to execute this order, let go the anchor in five fathoms water. The raft backed about two fathoms on the line, which was then at full stretch. The sail was taken in, and everything made snug for a tedious period of inaction.

The returning tide would not occur till nine o’clock in the evening; and as John Mangles did not care to go on in the dark, the anchorage was for the night, or at least till five o’clock in the morning, land being in sight at a distance of less than three miles.

A considerable swell raised the waves, and seemed to set in continuously toward the coast, and perceiving this, Glenarvan asked John why he did not take advantage of this swell to get nearer to the land.

“Your Lordship is deceived by an optical illusion,” said the young captain. “Although the swell seems to carry the waves landward, it does not really move at all. It is mere undulating molecular motion, nothing more. Throw a piece of wood overboard and you will see that it will remain quite stationary except as the tide affects it. There is nothing for it but patience.”

“And dinner,” said the Major.

Olbinett unpacked some dried meat and a dozen biscuits.

The steward blushed as he proffered the meager bill of fare.

But it was received with a good grace, even by the ladies,

who, however, had not much appetite, owing to the violent motion.

This motion, produced by the jerking of the raft on the cable, while she lay head on to the sea, was very severe and fatiguing. The blows of the short, tumbling seas were as severe as if she had been striking on a submerged rock. Sometimes it was hard to believe that she was not aground. The cable strained violently, and every half hour John had to take in a fathom to ease it. Without this precaution it would certainly have given way, and the raft must have drifted to destruction.

John’s anxiety may easily be understood. His cable might break, or his anchor lose its hold, and in either case the danger was imminent.

Night drew on; the sun’s disc, enlarged by refraction, was dipping blood-red below the horizon. The distant waves glittered in the west, and sparkled like sheets of liquid silver. Nothing was to be seen in that direction but sky and water, except one sharply-defined object, the hull of the MACQUARIE motionless on her rocky bed.

The short twilight postponed the darkness only by a few minutes, and soon the coast outline, which bounded the view on the east and north, was lost in darkness.

The shipwrecked party were in an agonizing situation on their narrow raft, and overtaken by the shades of night.

Some of the party fell into a troubled sleep, a prey to evil dreams; others could not close an eye. When the day dawned, the whole party were worn out with fatigue.

With the rising tide the wind blew again toward the land. It was six o’clock in the morning, and there was no time to lose. John arranged everything for resuming their voyage, and then he ordered the anchor to be weighed. But the anchor flukes had been so imbedded in the sand by the repeated jerks of the cable, that without a windlass it was impossible to detach it, even with the tackle which Wilson had improvised.

Half an hour was lost in vain efforts. John, impatient of delay, cut the rope, thus sacrificing his anchor, and also the possibility of anchoring again if this tide failed to carry them to land. But he decided that further delay was not to be thought of, and an ax-blow committed the raft to the mercy of the wind, assisted by a current of two knots an hour.

The sail was spread. They drifted slowly toward the land, which rose in gray, hazy masses, on a background of sky illumined by the rising sun. The reef was dexterously avoided and doubled, but with the fitful breeze the raft could not get near the shore. What toil and pain to reach a coast so full of danger when attained.

At nine o’clock, the land was less than a mile off. It was a steeply-shelving shore, fringed with breakers; a practicable landing-place had to be discovered.

Gradually the breeze grew fainter, and then ceased entirely. The sail flapped idly against the mast, and John had it furled. The tide alone carried the raft to the shore, but steering had become impossible, and its passage was impeded by immense bands of FUCUS.

At ten o’clock John found himself almost at a stand-still, not three cables’ lengths from the shore. Having lost their anchor, they were at the mercy of the ebb-tide.

John clenched his hands; he was racked with anxiety, and cast frenzied glances toward this inaccessible shore.

In the midst of his perplexities, a shock was felt. The raft stood still. It had landed on a sand-bank, twenty-five fathoms from the coast.

Glenarvan, Robert, Wilson, and Mulrady, jumped into the water. The raft was firmly moored to the nearest rocks. The ladies were carried to land without wetting a fold of their dresses, and soon the whole party, with their arms and provisions, were finally landed on these much dreaded New Zealand shores.

CHAPTER VII THE MAORI WAR

GLENARVAN would have liked to start without an hour's delay, and follow the coast to Auckland. But since the morning heavy clouds had been gathering, and toward eleven o'clock, after the landing was effected, the vapors condensed into violent rain, so that instead of starting they had to look for shelter.

Wilson was fortunate enough to discover what just suited their wants: a grotto hollowed out by the sea in the basaltic rocks. Here the travelers took shelter with their arms and provisions. In the cave they found a ready-garnered store of dried sea-weed, which formed a convenient couch; for fire, they lighted some wood near the mouth of the cavern, and dried themselves as well as they could.

John hoped that the duration of this deluge of rain would be in an inverse ratio to its violence, but he was doomed to disappointment. Hours passed without any abatement of its fury. Toward noon the wind freshened, and increased the force of the storm. The most patient of men would have rebelled at such an untoward incident; but what could be done; without any vehicle, they could not brave such a tempest; and, after all, unless the natives appeared on the scene, a delay of twelve hours was not so much consequence, as the journey to Auckland was only a matter of a few days. During this involuntary halt, the conversation turned on the incidents of the New Zealand war. But to understand and appreciate the critical position into which these MACQUARIE passengers were thrown, something ought to be known of the history of the struggle which had deluged the island of Ika-na-Mani with blood.

Since the arrival of Abel Tasman in Cook's Strait, on the 16th of December, 1642, though the New Zealanders had often been visited by European vessels, they had maintained their liberty in their several islands. No European power had thought of taking possession of this archipelago, which commands the whole Pacific Ocean. The missionaries stationed at various points were the sole channels of Christian civilization. Some of them, especially the Anglicans, prepared the minds of the New Zealand chiefs for submitting to the English yoke. It was cleverly managed, and these chiefs were influenced to sign a letter addressed to Queen Victoria to ask her protection. But the most clearsighted of them saw the folly of this step; and one of them, after having affixed his tattoo-mark to the letter by way of signature, uttered these prophetic words: "We have lost our country! henceforth it is not ours; soon the stranger will come and take it, and we shall be his slaves."

And so it was; on January 29, 1840, the English corvette HERALD arrived to claim possession.

From the year 1840, till the day the DUNCAN left the Clyde, nothing had happened here that Paganel did not know and he was ready to impart his information to his companions.

"Madam," said he, in answer to Lady Helena's questions, "I must repeat what I had occasion to remark before, that the New Zealanders are a courageous people, who yielded for a moment, but afterward fought foot to foot against the English invaders. The Maori tribes are organized like the old clans of Scotland. They are so many great families owning a chief, who is very jealous of his prerogative. The men of this race are proud and brave, one tribe tall, with straight hair, like the Maltese, or the Jews of Bagdad; the other smaller, thickset like mulattoes, but robust, haughty, and warlike.

They had a famous chief, named Hihi, a real Vercingetorix, so that you need not be astonished that the war with the English has become chronic in the Northern Island, for in it is the famous tribe of the Waikatos, who defend their lands under the leadership of William Thompson."

"But," said John Mangles, "are not the English in possession of the principal points in New Zealand?"

"Certainly, dear John," replied Paganel. "After Captain Hobson took formal possession, and became governor, nine colonies were founded at various times between 1840 and 1862, in the most favorable situations. These formed the nucleus of nine provinces, four in the North Island and five in the southern island, with a total population of 184,346 inhabitants on the 30th of June, 1864."

"But what about this interminable war?" asked John Mangles.

"Well," said Paganel, "six long months have gone by since we left Europe, and I cannot say what may have happened during that time, with the exception of a few facts which I gathered from the newspapers of Maryborough and Seymour during our Australian journey. At that time the fighting was very lively in the Northern Island."

"And when did the war commence?" asked Mary Grant.

"Recommence, you mean, my dear young lady," replied Paganel; "for there was an insurrection so far back as 1845. The present war began toward the close of 1863; but long before that date the Maories were occupied in making preparations to shake off the English yoke. The national party among the natives carried on an active propaganda for the election of a Maori ruler. The object was to make old Potatau king, and to fix as the capital of the new kingdom his village, which lay between the Waikato and Waipa Rivers. Potatau was an old man, remarkable rather for cunning than bravery; but he had a Prime Minister who was both intelligent and energetic, a descendant of the Ngatihahuas, who occupied the isthmus before the arrival of the strangers. This minister, William Thompson, became the soul of the War of Independence, and organized the Maori troops, with great skill. Under this guidance a Taranaki chief gathered the scattered tribes around the same flag; a Waikato chief formed a 'Land League,' intended to prevent the natives from selling their land to the English Government, and warlike feasts were held just as in civilized countries on the verge of revolution. The English newspapers began to notice these alarming symptoms, and the government became seriously disturbed at these 'Land League' proceedings. In short, the train was laid, and the mine was ready to explode. Nothing was wanted but the spark, or rather the shock of rival interests to produce the spark.

"This shock took place in 1860, in the Taranaki province on the southwest coast of Ika-na-Mani. A native had six hundred acres of land in the neighborhood of New Plymouth. He sold them to the English Government; but when the surveyor came to measure the purchased land, the chief Kingi protested, and by the month of March he had made the six hundred acres in question into a fortified camp, surrounded with high palisades. Some days after Colonel Gold carried this fortress at the head of his troops, and that day heard the first shot fired of the native war."

"Have the rebels been successful up to this time?"

"Yes, Madam, and the English themselves have often been compelled to admire the courage and bravery of the New Zealanders. Their mode of warfare is of the guerilla type; they form skirmishing parties, come down in small detachments, and pillage the colonists' homes. General Cameron had no easy time in the campaigns, during which every bush had to be searched. In 1863, after a long and sanguinary struggle, the Maories were entrenched in strong and fortified position on the Upper Waikato, at the end of a chain of steep hills, and covered by three miles of forts. The native prophets called on all the Maori population to defend the soil, and promised the extermination of the pakekas, or white men. General Cameron had three thousand volunteers at his disposal, and they gave no quarter to the Maories after the barbarous murder of Captain Sprent. Several bloody engagements took place; in some instances the fighting lasted twelve hours before the Maories yielded to the English cannonade. The heart of the army was the fierce Waikato tribe under William Thompson. This native general commanded at the outset 2,500 warriors, afterward increased to 8,000. The men of Shongi and Heki, two powerful chiefs, came to his assistance. The women took their part in the most trying labors of this patriotic war. But right has not always might. After severe struggles General Cameron succeeded in subduing the Waikato district, but empty and depopulated, for the Maories escaped in all directions. Some wonderful exploits were related. Four hundred Maories who were shut up in the fortress of Orakau, besieged by 1,000 English, under Brigadier-General Carey, without water or provisions, refused to surrender, but one day at noon cut their way through the then decimated 40th Regiment, and escaped to the marshes."

"But," asked John Mangles, "did the submission of the Waikato district put an end to this sanguinary war?"

"No, my friend," replied Paganel. "The English resolved to march on Taranaki province and besiege Mataitawa, William Thompson's fortress. But they did not carry it without great loss. Just as I was leaving Paris, I heard that the Governor and the General had accepted the submission of the

Tauranga tribes, and left them in possession of three-fourths of their lands. It was also rumored that the principal chief of the rebellion, William Thompson, was inclined to surrender, but the Australian papers have not confirmed this, but rather the contrary, and I should not be surprised to find that at this moment the war is going on with renewed vigor.”

“Then, according to you, Paganel,” said Glenarvan, “this struggle is still going on in the provinces of Auckland and Taranaki?”

“I think so.”

“This very province where the MACQUARIE’S wreck has deposited us.”

“Exactly. We have landed a few miles above Kawhia harbor, where the Maori flag is probably still floating.”

“Then our most prudent course would be to keep toward the north,” remarked Glenarvan.

“By far the most prudent,” said Paganel. “The New Zealanders are incensed against Europeans, and especially against the English. Therefore let us avoid falling into their hands.”

“We might have the good fortune to fall in with a detachment of European troops,” said Lady Helena.

“We may, Madam,” replied the geographer; “but I do not expect it. Detached parties do not like to go far into the country, where the smallest tussock, the thinnest brushwood, may conceal an accomplished marksman. I don’t fancy we shall pick up an escort of the 40th Regiment. But there are mission-stations on this west coast, and we shall be able to make them our halting-places till we get to Auckland.”

CHAPTER VIII ON THE ROAD TO AUCKLAND

ON the 7th of February, at six o’clock in the morning, the signal for departure was given by Glenarvan. During the night the rain had ceased. The sky was veiled with light gray clouds, which moderated the heat of the sun, and allowed the travelers to venture on a journey by day.

Paganel had measured on the map a distance of eighty miles between Point Kawhia and Auckland; it was an eight days’ journey if they made ten miles a day. But instead of following the windings of the coast, he thought it better to make for a point thirty miles off, at the confluence of the Waikato and the Waipa, at the village of Ngarnavahia. The “overland track” passes that point, and is rather a path than a road, practicable for the vehicles which go almost across the island, from Napier, in Hawke’s Bay, to Auckland. From this village it would be easy to reach Drury, and there they could rest in an excellent hotel, highly recommended by Dr. Hochstetter.

The travelers, each carrying a share of the provisions, commenced to follow the shore of Aotea Bay. From prudential motives they did not allow themselves to straggle, and by instinct they kept a look-out over the undulating plains to the eastward, ready with their loaded carbines. Paganel, map in hand, took a professional pleasure in verifying the minutest details.

The country looked like an immense prairie which faded into distance, and promised an easy walk. But the travelers were undeceived when they came to the edge of this verdant plain. The grass gave way to a low scrub of small bushes bearing little white flowers, mixed with those innumerable tall ferns with which the lands of New Zealand abound. They had to cut a path across the plain, through these woody stems, and this was a matter of some difficulty, but at eight o’clock in the evening the first slopes of the Hakarihoata Ranges were turned, and the party camped immediately. After a fourteen miles’ march, they might well think of resting.

Neither wagon or tent being available, they sought repose beneath some magnificent Norfolk Island pines. They had plenty of rugs which make good beds. Glenarvan took every possible precaution for the night. His companions and he, well armed, were to watch in turns, two and two, till daybreak. No fires were lighted. Barriers of fire are a potent preservation from wild beasts, but New Zealand has neither tiger, nor lion, nor bear, nor any wild animal, but the Maori adequately fills their place, and a fire would only have served to attract this two-footed jaguar.

The night passed pleasantly with the exception of the attack of the sand-flies, called by the natives, “ngamu,” and the visit of the audacious family of rats, who exercised their teeth on the provisions.

Next day, on the 8th of February, Paganel rose more sanguine, and almost reconciled to the country. The Maories, whom he particularly dreaded, had not yet appeared, and these ferocious cannibals had not molested him even in his dreams. “I begin to think that our little journey will end favorably. This evening we shall reach the confluence of the Waipa and Waikato, and after that there is not much chance of meeting natives on the way to Auckland.”

“How far is it now,” said Glenarvan, “to the confluence of the Waipa and Waikato?”

“Fifteen miles; just about what we did yesterday.”

“But we shall be terribly delayed if this interminable scrub continues to obstruct our path.”

“No,” said Paganel, “we shall follow the banks of the Waipa, and then we shall have no obstacle, but on the contrary, a very easy road.”

“Well, then,” said Glenarvan, seeing the ladies ready, “let us make a start.”

During the early part of the day, the thick brushwood seriously impeded their progress. Neither wagon nor horses could have passed where travelers passed, so that their Australian vehicle was but slightly regretted. Until practicable wagon roads are cut through these forests of scrub, New Zealand will only be accessible to foot passengers. The ferns, whose name is legion, concur with the Maories in keeping strangers off the lands.

The little party overcame many obstacles in crossing the plains in which the Hakarihoata Ranges rise. But before noon they reached the banks of the Waipa, and followed the northward course of the river.

The Major and Robert, without leaving their companions, shot some snipe and partridge under the low shrubs of the plain. Olbinett, to save time, plucked the birds as he went along.

Paganel was less absorbed by the culinary importance of the game than by the desire of obtaining some bird peculiar to New Zealand. His curiosity as a naturalist overcame his hunger as a traveler. He called to mind the peculiarities of the “tui” of the natives, sometimes called the mocking-bird from its incessant chuckle, and sometimes “the parson,” in allusion to the white cravat it wears over its black, cassock-like plumage.

“The tui,” said Paganel to the Major, “grows so fat during the Winter that it makes him ill, and prevents him from flying. Then he tears his breast with his beak, to relieve himself of his fat, and so becomes lighter. Does not that seem to you singular, McNabbs?”

“So singular that I don’t believe a word of it,” replied the Major.

Paganel, to his great regret, could not find a single specimen, or he might have shown the incredulous Major the bloody scars on the breast. But he was more fortunate with a strange animal which, hunted by men, cats and dogs, has fled toward the unoccupied country, and is fast disappearing from the fauna of New Zealand. Robert, searching like a ferret, came upon a nest made of interwoven roots, and in it a pair of birds destitute of wings and tail, with four toes, a long snipe-like beak, and a covering of white feathers over the whole body, singular creatures, which seemed to connect the oviparous tribes with the mam-mifers.

It was the New Zealand “kiwi,” the Apteryx australis of naturalists, which lives with equal satisfaction on larvae, insects, worms or seeds. This bird is peculiar to the country. It has been introduced into very few of the zoological collections of Europe. Its graceless shape and comical motions have always attracted the notice of travelers, and during the great exploration of the Astrolabe and the Zelee, Dumont d’Urville was principally charged by the Academy of Sciences to bring back a specimen of these singular birds. But in spite of rewards offered to the natives, he could not obtain a single specimen.

Paganel, who was elated at such a piece of luck, tied the two birds together, and carried them along with the intention of presenting them to the Jardin des Plantes, in Paris. “Presented by M. Jacques Paganel.” He mentally saw the flattering inscription on the handsomest cage in the gardens. Sanguine geographer!

The party pursued their way without fatigue along the banks of the Waipa. The country was quite deserted; not a trace of natives, nor any track that could betray the existence of man. The stream was fringed with tall bushes, or glided along sloping banks, so that nothing obstructed the view of the low range of hills which closed the eastern end of the valley. With their grotesque shapes, and their outlines lost in a deceptive haze, they brought to mind giant animals, worthy of antediluvian times. They might have been a herd of enormous whales, suddenly turned to stone. These disrupted masses proclaimed their essentially volcanic character. New Zealand is, in fact, a formation of recent plutonic origin. Its emergence from the sea is constantly increasing. Some points are known to have risen six feet in twenty years. Fire still runs across its center, shakes it, convulses it, and finds an outlet in many places by the mouths of geysers and the craters of volcanoes.

At four in the afternoon, nine miles had been easily accomplished. According to the map which Paganel constantly referred to, the confluence of the Waipa and Waikato ought to be reached about five miles further on, and there the night halt could be made. Two or three days would then suffice for the fifty miles which lay between them and the capital; and if Glenarvan happened to fall in with the mail coach that plies between Hawkes’ Bay and Auckland twice a month, eight hours would be sufficient.

“Therefore,” said Glenarvan, “we shall be obliged to camp during the night once more.”

“Yes,” said Paganel, “but I hope for the last time.”

“I am very glad to think so, for it is very trying for Lady Helena and Mary Grant.”

“And they never utter a murmur,” added John Mangles. “But I think

I heard you mention a village at the confluence of these rivers.”

“Yes,” said the geographer, “here it is, marked on Johnston’s map.

It is Ngarnavahia, two miles below the junction.”

“Well, could we not stay there for the night? Lady Helena and Miss Grant would not grudge two miles more to find a hotel even of a humble character.”

“A hotel!” cried Paganel, “a hotel in a Maori village! you would not find an inn, not a tavern! This village will be a mere cluster of huts, and so far from seeking rest there, my advice is that you give it a wide berth.”

“Your old fears, Paganel!” retorted Glenarvan.

“My dear Lord, where Maories are concerned, distrust is safer than confidence. I do not know on what terms they are with the English, whether the insurrection is suppressed or successful, or whether indeed the war may not be going on with full vigor. Modesty apart, people like us would be a prize, and I must say, I would rather forego a taste of Maori hospitality. I think it certainly more prudent to avoid this village of Ngarnavahia, to skirt it at a distance, so as to avoid all encounters with the natives. When we reach Drury it will be another thing, and there our brave ladies will be able to recruit their strength at their leisure.”

This advice prevailed. Lady Helena preferred to pass another night in the open air, and not to expose her companions to danger. Neither Mary Grant or she wished to halt, and they continued their march along the river.

Two hours later, the first shades of evening began to fall. The sun, before disappearing below the western horizon, darted some bright rays through an opening in the clouds. The distant eastern summits were empurpled with the parting glories of the day. It was like a flying salute addressed to the way-worn travelers.

Glenarvan and his friends hastened their steps, they knew how short the twilight is in this high latitude, and how quickly the night follows it. They were very anxious to reach the confluence of the two rivers before the darkness overtook them. But a thick fog rose from the ground, and made it very difficult to see the way.

Fortunately hearing stood them in the stead of sight; shortly a nearer sound of water indicated that the confluence was at hand. At eight o'clock the little troop arrived at the point where the Waipa loses itself in the Waikato, with a moaning sound of meeting waves.

“There is the Waikato!” cried Paganel, “and the road to Auckland is along its right bank.”

“We shall see that to-morrow,” said the Major, “Let us camp here. It seems to me that that dark shadow is that of a little clump of trees grown expressly to shelter us. Let us have supper and then get some sleep.”

“Supper by all means,” said Paganel, “but no fire; nothing but biscuit and dried meat. We have reached this spot incognito, let us try and get away in the same manner. By good luck, the fog is in our favor.”

The clump of trees was reached and all concurred in the wish of the geographer. The cold supper was eaten without a sound, and presently a profound sleep overcame the travelers, who were tolerably fatigued with their fifteen miles’ march.

CHAPTER IX INTRODUCTION TO THE CANNIBALS

THE next morning at daybreak a thick fog was clinging to the surface of the river. A portion of the vapors that saturated the air were condensed by the cold, and lay as a dense cloud on the water. But the rays of the sun soon broke through the watery mass and melted it away.

A tongue of land, sharply pointed and bristling with bushes, projected into the uniting streams. The swifter waters of the Waipa rushed against the current of the Waikato for a quarter of a mile before they mingled with it; but the calm and majestic river soon quieted the noisy stream and carried it off quietly in its course to the Pacific Ocean.

When the vapor disappeared, a boat was seen ascending the current of the Waikato. It was a canoe seventy feet long, five broad, and three deep; the prow raised like that of a Venetian gondola, and the whole hollowed out of a trunk of a kahikatea. A bed of dry fern was laid at the bottom. It was swiftly rowed by eight oars, and steered with a paddle by a man seated in the stern.

This man was a tall Maori, about forty-five years of age, broad-chested, muscular, with powerfully developed hands and feet. His prominent and deeply-furrowed brow, his fierce look, and sinister expression, gave him a formidable aspect.

Tattooing, or “moko,” as the New Zealanders call it, is a mark of great distinction. None is worthy of these honorary lines, who has not distinguished himself in repeated fights. The slaves and the lower class can not obtain this decoration. Chiefs of high position may be known by the finish and precision and truth of the design, which sometimes covers their whole bodies with the figures of animals. Some are found to undergo the painful operation of “moko” five times. The more illustrious, the more illustrated, is the rule of New Zealand.

Dumont D’Urville has given some curious details as to this custom. He justly observes that “moko” is the counterpart of the armorial bearings of which many families in Europe are so vain. But he remarks that there is this difference: the armorial bearings of Europe are frequently a proof only of the merits of the first who bore them, and are no certificate of the merits of his descendants; while the individual coat-of-arms of the Maori is an irrefragible proof that it was earned by the display of extraordinary personal courage.

The practice of tattooing, independently of the consideration it procures, has also a useful aspect. It gives the cu-taneous system an increased thickness, enabling it to resist the inclemency of the season and the incessant attacks of the mosquito.

As to the chief who was steering the canoe, there could be no mistake. The sharpened albatross bone used by the Maori tattooer, had five times scored his countenance. He was in his fifth edition, and betrayed it in his haughty bearing.

His figure, draped in a large mat woven of “phormium” trimmed with dogskins, was clothed with a pair of cotton drawers, blood-stained from recent combats. From the pendant lobe of his ears hung earrings of green jade, and round his neck a quivering necklace of “pounamous,” a kind of jade stone sacred among the New Zealanders. At his side lay an English rifle, and a “patou-patou,” a kind of two-headed ax of an emerald color, and eighteen inches long. Beside him sat nine armed warriors of inferior rank, ferocious-looking fellows, some of them suffering from recent wounds.

They sat quite motionless, wrapped in their flax mantles. Three savage-looking dogs lay at their feet. The eight rowers in the prow seemed to be servants or slaves of the chief. They rowed vigorously, and propelled the boat against the not very rapid current of the Waikato, with extraordinary velocity.

In the center of this long canoe, with their feet tied together, sat ten European prisoners closely packed together.

It was Glenarvan and Lady Helena, Mary Grant, Robert, Paganel, the Major, John Mangles, the steward, and the two sailors.

The night before, the little band had unwittingly, owing to the mist, encamped in the midst of a numerous party of natives. Toward the middle of the night they were surprised in their sleep, were made prisoners, and carried on board the canoe. They had not been ill-treated, so far, but all attempts at resistance had been vain. Their arms and ammunition were in the hands of the savages, and they would soon have been targets for their own balls.

They were soon aware, from a few English words used by the natives, that they were a retreating party of the tribe who had been beaten and decimated by the English troops, and were on their way back to the Upper Waikato. The Maori chief, whose principal warriors had been picked off by the soldiers of the 42nd Regiment, was returning to make a final appeal to the tribes of the Waikato district, so that he might go to the aid of the indomitable William Thompson, who was still holding his own against the conquerors. The chief’s name was “Kai-Koumou,” a name of evil boding in the native language, meaning “He who eats the limbs of his enemy.” He was bold and brave, but his cruelty was equally remarkable. No pity was to be expected at his hands. His name was well known to the English soldiers, and a price had been set on his head by the governor of New Zealand.

This terrible blow befell Glenarvan at the very moment when he was about to reach the long-desired haven of Auckland, and so regain his own country; but no one who looked at his cool, calm features, could have guessed the anguish he endured. Glenarvan always rose to his misfortunes. He felt that his part was to be the strength and the example of his wife and companions; that he was the head and chief; ready to die for the rest if circumstances required it. He was of a deeply religious turn of mind, and never lost his trust in Providence nor his belief in the sacred character of his enterprise. In the midst of this crowning peril he did not give way to any feeling of regret at having been induced to venture into this country of savages.

His companions were worthy of him; they entered into his lofty views; and judging by their haughty demeanor, it would scarcely have been supposed that they were hurrying to the final catastrophe. With one accord, and by Glenarvan’s advice, they resolved to affect utter indifference before the natives. It was the only way to impress these ferocious natures. Savages in general, and particularly the Maories, have a notion of dignity from which they never derogate. They respect, above all things, coolness and courage. Glenarvan was aware that by this mode of procedure, he and his companions would spare themselves needless humiliation.

From the moment of embarking, the natives, who were very taciturn, like all savages, had scarcely exchanged a word, but from the few sentences they did utter, Glenarvan felt certain that the English language was familiar to them. He therefore made up his mind to question the chief on the fate that awaited them. Addressing himself to Kai-Koumou, he said in a perfectly unconcerned voice:

“Where are we going, chief?”

Kai-Koumou looked coolly at him and made no answer.

“What are you going to do with us?” pursued Glenarvan.

A sudden gleam flashed into the eyes of Kai-Koumou, and he said in a deep voice:

“Exchange you, if your own people care to have you; eat you if they don’t.”

Glenarvan asked no further questions; but hope revived in his heart. He concluded that some Maori chiefs had fallen into the hands of the English, and that the natives would try to get them exchanged. So they had a chance of salvation, and the case was not quite so desperate.

The canoe was speeding rapidly up the river. Paganel, whose excitable temperament always rebounded from one extreme to the other, had quite regained his spirits. He consoled himself that the natives were saving them the trouble of the journey to the English outposts, and that was so much gain. So he took it quite quietly and followed on the map the course of the Waikato across the plains and valleys of the province. Lady Helena and Mary Grant, concealing their alarm, conversed in a low voice with Glenarvan, and the keenest physiognomists would have failed to see any anxiety in their faces.

The Waikato is the national river in New Zealand. It is to the Maories what the Rhine is to the Germans, and the Danube to the Slavs. In its course of 200 miles it waters the finest lands of the North Island, from the province of

Wellington to the province of Auckland. It gave its name to all those indomitable tribes of the river district, which rose en masse against the invaders.

The waters of this river are still almost strangers to any craft but the native canoe. The most audacious tourist will scarcely venture to invade these sacred shores; in fact, the Upper Waikato is sealed against profane Europeans.

Paganel was aware of the feelings of veneration with which the natives regard this great arterial stream. He knew that the English and German naturalists had never penetrated further than its junction with the Waipa. He wondered how far the good pleasure of Kai-Koumou would carry his captives? He could not have guessed, but for hearing the word “Taupo” repeatedly uttered between the chief and his warriors. He consulted his map and saw that “Taupo” was the name of a lake celebrated in geographical annals, and lying in the most mountainous part of the island, at the southern extremity of Auckland province. The Waikato passes through this lake and then flows on for 120 miles.

CHAPTER X A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW

AN unfathomable gulf twenty-five miles long, and twenty miles broad was produced, but long before historic times, by the falling in of caverns among the trachytic lavas of the center of the island. And these waters falling from the surrounding heights have taken possession of this vast basin. The gulf has become a lake, but it is also an abyss, and no lead-line has yet sounded its depths.

Such is the wondrous lake of Taupo, lying 1,250 feet above the level of the sea, and in view of an amphitheater of mountains 2,400 feet high. On the west are rocky peaks of great size; on the north lofty summits clothed with low trees; on the east a broad beach with a road track, and covered with pumice stones, which shimmer through the leafy screen of the bushes; on the southern side rise volcanic cones behind a forest flat. Such is the majestic frame that incloses this vast sheet of water whose roaring tempests rival the cyclones of Ocean.

The whole region boils like an immense cauldron hung over subterranean fires. The ground vibrates from the agitation of the central furnace. Hot springs filter out everywhere. The crust of the earth cracks in great rifts like a cake, too quickly baked.

About a quarter of a mile off, on a craggy spur of the mountain stood a “pah,” or Maori fortress. The prisoners, whose feet and hands were liberated, were landed one by one, and conducted into it by the warriors. The path which led up to the intrenchment, lay across fields of “phormium” and a grove of beautiful trees, the “kai-kateas” with persistent leaves and red berries; “dracaenas australis,” the “ti-trees” of the natives, whose crown is a graceful counterpart of the cabbage-palm, and “huious,” which are used to give a black dye to cloth. Large doves with metallic sheen on their plumage, and a world of starlings with reddish carmeles, flew away at the approach of the natives.

After a rather circuitous walk, Glenarvan and his party arrived at the “pah.”

The fortress was defended by an outer inclosure of strong palisades, fifteen feet high; a second line of stakes; then a fence composed of osiers, with loop-holes, inclosed Verne the inner space, that is the plateau of the “pah,” on which were erected the Maori buildings, and about forty huts arranged symmetrically.

When the captives approached they were horror-struck at the sight of the heads which adorned the posts of the inner circle. Lady Helena and Mary Grant turned away their eyes more with disgust than with terror. These heads were those of hostile chiefs who had fallen in battle, and whose bodies had served to feed the conquerors. The geographer recognized that it was so, from their eye sockets being hollow and deprived of eye-balls.

Glenarvan and his companions had taken in all this scene at a glance. They stood near an empty house, waiting the pleasure of the chief, and exposed to the abuse of a crowd of old crones. This troop of harpies surrounded them, shaking their fists, howling and vociferating. Some English words that escaped their coarse mouths left no doubt that they were clamoring for immediate vengeance.

In the midst of all these cries and threats, Lady Helena, tranquil to all outward seeming, affected an indifference she was far from feeling. This courageous woman made heroic efforts to restrain herself, lest she should disturb Glenarvan’s coolness. Poor Mary Grant felt her heart sink within her, and John Mangles stood by ready to die in her behalf. His companions bore the deluge of invectives each according to his disposition; the Major with utter indifference, Paganel with exasperation that increased every moment.

Glenarvan, to spare Lady Helena the attacks of these witches, walked straight up to Kai-Koumou, and pointing to the hideous group:

“Send them away,” said he.

The Maori chief stared fixedly at his prisoner without speaking; and then, with a nod, he silenced the noisy horde. Glenarvan bowed, as a sign of thanks, and went slowly back to his place.

At this moment a hundred Maories were assembled in the “pah,” old men, full grown men, youths; the former were calm, but gloomy, awaiting the orders of Kai-Koumou; the others gave themselves up to the most violent sorrow, bewailing their parents and friends who had fallen in the late engagements.

Kai-Koumou was the only one of all the chiefs that obeyed the call of William Thompson, who had returned to the lake district, and he was the first to announce to his tribe the defeat of the national insurrection, beaten on the plains of the lower Waikato. Of the two hundred warriors who, under his orders, hastened to the defence of the soil, one hundred and fifty were missing on his return. Allowing for a number being made prisoners by the invaders, how many must be lying on the field of battle, never to return to the country of their ancestors!

This was the secret of the outburst of grief with which the tribe saluted the arrival of Kai-Koumou. Up to that moment nothing had been known of the last defeat, and the fatal news fell on them like a thunder clap.

Among the savages, sorrow is always manifested by physical signs; the parents and friends of deceased warriors, the women especially, lacerated their faces and shoulders with sharpened shells. The blood spurted out and blended with their tears. Deep wounds denoted great despair. The unhappy Maories, bleeding and excited, were hideous to look upon.

There was another serious element in their grief. Not only had they lost the relative or friend they mourned, but his bones would be missing in the family mausoleum. In the Maori religion the possession of these relics is regarded as indispensable to the destinies of the future life; not the perishable flesh, but the bones, which are collected with the greatest care, cleaned, scraped, polished, even varnished, and then deposited in the "oudoupa," that is the "house of glory." These tombs are adorned with wooden statues, representing with perfect exactness the tattoo of the deceased. But now their tombs would be left empty, the religious rites would be unsolemnized, and the bones that escaped the teeth of the wild dog would whiten without burial on the field of battle.

Then the sorrowful chorus redoubled. The menaces of the women were intensified by the imprecations of the men against the Europeans. Abusive epithets were lavished, the accompanying gestures became more violent. The howl was about to end in brutal action.

Kai-Koumou, fearing that he might be overpowered by the fanatics of his tribe, conducted his prisoners to a sacred place, on an abruptly raised plateau at the other end of the "pah." This hut rested against a mound elevated a hundred feet above it, which formed the steep outer buttress of the entrenchment. In this "Ware-Atoua," sacred house, the priests or arikis taught the Maories about a Triune God, father, son, and bird, or spirit. The large, well constructed hut, contained the sacred and choice food which Maoui-Ranga-Rangui eats by the mouths of his priests.

In this place, and safe for the moment from the frenzied natives, the captives lay down on the flax mats. Lady Helena was quite exhausted, her moral energies prostrate, and she fell helpless into her husband's arms.

Glenarvan pressed her to his bosom and said:

"Courage, my dear Helena; Heaven will not forsake us!"

Robert was scarcely in when he jumped on Wilson's shoulders, and squeezed his head through a crevice left between the roof and the walls, from which chaplets of amulets were hung. From that elevation he could see the whole extent of the "pah," and as far as Kai-Koumou's house.

"They are all crowding round the chief," said he softly.

"They are throwing their arms about... They are howling...

. Kai-Koumou is trying to speak."

Then he was silent for a few minutes.

"Kai-Koumou is speaking... The savages are quieter.

... They are listening... ."

"Evidently," said the Major, "this chief has a personal interest in protecting us. He wants to exchange his prisoners for some chiefs of his tribe! But will his warriors consent?"

“Yes!... They are listening... . They have dispersed, some are gone into their huts... The others have left the intrenchment.”

“Are you sure?” said the Major.

“Yes, Mr. McNabbs,” replied Robert, “Kai-Koumou is left alone with the warriors of his canoe... . Oh! one of them is coming up here... .”

“Come down, Robert,” said Glenarvan.

At this moment, Lady Helena who had risen, seized her husband’s arm.

“Edward,” she said in a resolute tone, “neither Mary Grant nor I must fall into the hands of these savages alive!”

And so saying, she handed Glenarvan a loaded revolver.

“Fire-arm!” exclaimed Glenarvan, with flashing eyes.

“Yes! the Maories do not search their prisoners. But, Edward, this is for us, not for them.”

Glenarvan slipped the revolver under his coat; at the same moment the mat at the entrance was raised, and a native entered.

He motioned to the prisoners to follow him. Glenarvan and the rest walked across the “pah” and stopped before Kai-Koumou. He was surrounded by the principal warriors of his tribe, and among them the Maori whose canoe joined that of the Kai-Koumou at the confluence of Pohain-henna, on the Waikato. He was a man about forty years of age, powerfully built and of fierce and cruel aspect. His name was Kara-Tete, meaning “the irascible” in the native tongue. Kai-Koumou treated him with a certain tone of respect, and by the fineness of his tattoo, it was easy to perceive that Kara-Tete held a lofty position in the tribe, but a keen observer would have guessed the feeling of rivalry that existed between these two chiefs. The Major observed that the influence of Kara-Tete gave umbrage to Kai-Koumou. They both ruled the Waikato tribes, and were equal in authority. During this interview Kai-Koumou smiled, but his eyes betrayed a deep-seated enmity.

Kai-Koumou interrogated Glenarvan.

“You are English?” said he.

“Yes,” replied Glenarvan, unhesitatingly, as his nationality would facilitate the exchange.

“And your companions?” said Kai-Koumou.

“My companions are English like myself. We are shipwrecked travelers, but it may be important to state that we have taken no part in the war.”

“That matters little!” was the brutal answer of Kara-Tete.

“Every Englishman is an enemy. Your people invaded our island!

They robbed our fields! they burned our villages!”

“They were wrong!” said Glenarvan, quietly. “I say so, because I think it, not because I am in your power.”

“Listen,” said Kai-Koumou, “the Tohonga, the chief priest of Noui-Atoua has fallen into the hands of your brethren; he is a prisoner among the Pakekas. Our deity has commanded us to ransom him. For my own part, I would rather have torn out your heart, I would have stuck your head, and those of your companions, on the posts of that palisade. But Noui-Atoua has spoken.”

As he uttered these words, Kai-Koumou, who till now had been quite unmoved, trembled with rage, and his features expressed intense ferocity.

Then after a few minutes’ interval he proceeded more calmly.

“Do you think the English will exchange you for our Tohonga?”

Glenarvan hesitated, all the while watching the Maori chief.

“I do not know,” said he, after a moment of silence.

“Speak,” returned Kai-Koumou, “is your life worth that of our Tohonga?”

“No,” replied Glenarvan. “I am neither a chief nor a priest among my own people.”

Paganel, petrified at this reply, looked at Glenarvan in amazement.

Kai-Koumou appeared equally astonished.

“You doubt it then?” said he.

“I do not know,” replied Glenarvan.

“Your people will not accept you as an exchange for Tohonga?”

“Me alone? no,” repeated Glenarvan. “All of us perhaps they might.”

“Our Maori custom,” replied Kai-Koumou, “is head for head.”

“Offer first these ladies in exchange for your priest,” said Glenarvan, pointing to Lady Helena and Mary Grant.

Lady Helena was about to interrupt him. But the Major held her back.

“Those two ladies,” continued Glenarvan, bowing respectfully toward Lady Helena and Mary Grant, “are personages of rank in their own country.”

The warrior gazed coldly at his prisoner. An evil smile relaxed his lips for a moment; then he controlled himself, and in a voice of ill-concealed anger:

“Do you hope to deceive Kai-Koumou with lying words, accursed Pakeka? Can not the eyes of Kai-Koumou read hearts?”

And pointing to Lady Helena: “That is your wife?” he said.

“No! mine!” exclaimed Kara-Tete.

And then pushing his prisoners aside, he laid his hand on the shoulder of Lady Helena, who turned pale at his touch.

“Edward!” cried the unfortunate woman in terror.

Glenarvan, without a word, raised his arm, a shot! and Kara-Tete fell at his feet.

The sound brought a crowd of natives to the spot. A hundred arms were ready, and Glenarvan’s revolver was snatched from him.

Kai-Koumou glanced at Glenarvan with a curious expression: then with one hand protecting Glenarvan, with the other he waved off the crowd who were rushing on the party.

At last his voice was heard above the tumult.

“Taboo! Taboo!” he shouted.

At that word the crowd stood still before Glenarvan and his companions, who for the time were preserved by a supernatural influence.

A few minutes after they were re-conducted to Ware-Atoua, which was their prison. But Robert Grant and Paganel were not with them.

CHAPTER XI THE CHIEF’S FUNERAL

KAI-KOUMOU, as frequently happens among the Maories, joined the title of ariki to that of tribal chief. He was invested with the dignity of priest, and, as such, he had the power to throw over persons or things the superstitious protection of the “taboo.”

The “taboo,” which is common to all the Polynesian races, has the primary effect of isolating the “tabooed” person and preventing the use of “tabooed” things. According to the Maori doctrine, anyone who laid sacrilegious hands on what had been declared “taboo,” would be punished with death by the insulted deity, and even if the god delayed the vindication of his power, the priests took care to accelerate his vengeance.

By the chiefs, the “taboo” is made a political engine, except in some cases, for domestic reasons. For instance, a native is tabooed for several days when his hair is cut; when he is tattooed; when he is building a canoe, or a house; when he is seriously ill, and when he is dead. If excessive consumption threatens to exterminate the fish of a river, or ruin the early crop of sweet potatoes, these things are put under the protection of the taboo. If a chief wishes to clear his house of hangers-on, he taboos it; if an English trader displeases him he is tabooed. His interdict has the effect of the old royal “veto.”

If an object is tabooed, no one can touch it with impunity. When a native is under the interdict, certain aliments are denied him for a prescribed period. If he is relieved, as regards the severe diet, his slaves feed him with the viands he is forbidden to touch with his hands; if he is poor and has no slaves, he has to take up the food with his mouth, like an animal.

In short, the most trifling acts of the Maories are directed and modified by this singular custom, the deity is brought into constant contact with their daily life. The taboo has the same weight as a law; or rather, the code of the Maories, indisputable and undisputed, is comprised in the frequent applications of the taboo.

As to the prisoners confined in the Ware-Atoua, it was an arbitrary taboo which had saved them from the fury of the tribe. Some of the natives, friends and partisans of Kai-Koumou, desisted at once on hearing their chief’s voice, and protected the captives from the rest.

Glenarvan cherished no illusive hopes as to his own fate; nothing but his death could atone for the murder of a chief, and among these people death was only the concluding act of a martyrdom of torture. Glenarvan, therefore, was fully prepared to pay the penalty of the righteous indignation that nerved his arm, but he hoped that the wrath of Kai-Koumou would not extend beyond himself.

What a night he and his companions passed! Who could picture their agonies or measure their sufferings? Robert and Paganel had not been restored to them, but their fate was no doubtful matter. They were too surely the first victims of the frenzied natives. Even McNabbs, who was always sanguine, had abandoned hope. John Mangles was nearly frantic at the sight of Mary Grant’s despair at being separated from her brother. Glenarvan pondered over the terrible request of Lady Helena, who preferred dying by his hand to submitting to torture and slavery. How was he to summon the terrible courage!

“And Mary? who has a right to strike her dead?” thought John, whose heart was broken.

Escape was clearly impossible. Ten warriors, armed to the teeth, kept watch at the door of Ware-Atoua.

The morning of February 13th arrived. No communication had taken place between the natives and the “tabooed” prisoners. A limited supply of provisions was in the house, which the unhappy inmates scarcely touched. Misery deadened the pangs of hunger. The day passed without change, and without hope; the funeral ceremonies of the dead chief would doubtless be the signal for their execution.

Although Glenarvan did not conceal from himself the probability that Kai-Koumou had given up all idea of exchange, the Major still cherished a spark of hope.

“Who knows,” said he, as he reminded Glenarvan of the effect produced on the chief by the death of Kara-Tete — ”who knows but that Kai-Koumou, in his heart, is very much obliged to you?”

But even McNabbs’ remarks failed to awaken hope in Glenarvan’s mind. The next day passed without any appearance of preparation for their punishment; and this was the reason of the delay.

The Maories believe that for three days after death the soul inhabits the body, and therefore, for three times twenty-four hours, the corpse remains unburied. This custom was rigorously observed. Till February 15th the “pah” was deserted.

John Mangles, hoisted on Wilson’s shoulders, frequently reconnoitered the outer defences. Not a single native was visible; only the watchful sentinels relieving guard at the door of the Ware-Atoua.

But on the third day the huts opened; all the savages, men, women, and children, in all several hundred Maories, assembled in the “pah,” silent and calm.

Kai-Koumou came out of his house, and surrounded by the principal chiefs of his tribe, he took his stand on a mound some feet above the level, in the center of the enclosure. The crowd of natives formed in a half circle some distance off, in dead silence.

At a sign from Kai-Koumou, a warrior bent his steps toward Ware-Atoua.

“Remember,” said Lady Helena to her husband. Glenarvan pressed her to his heart, and Mary Grant went closer to John Mangles, and said hurriedly:

“Lord and Lady Glenarvan cannot but think if a wife may claim death at her husband’s hands, to escape a shameful life, a betrothed wife may claim death at the hands of her betrothed husband, to escape the same fate. John! at this last moment I ask you, have we not long been betrothed to each other in our secret hearts? May I rely on you, as Lady Helena relies on Lord Glenarvan?”

“Mary!” cried the young captain in his despair. “Ah! dear Mary — ”

The mat was lifted, and the captives led to Kai-Koumou; the two women were resigned to their fate; the men dissembled their sufferings with superhuman effort.

They arrived in the presence of the Maori chief.

“You killed Kara-Tete,” said he to Glenarvan.

“I did,” answered Glenarvan.

“You die to-morrow at sunrise.”

“Alone?” asked Glenarvan, with a beating heart.

“Oh! if our Tohonga’s life was not more precious than yours!” exclaimed Kai-Koumou, with a ferocious expression of regret.

At this moment there was a commotion among the natives. Glenarvan looked quickly around; the crowd made way, and a warrior appeared heated by running, and sinking with fatigue.

Kai-Koumou, as soon as he saw him, said in English, evidently for the benefit of the captives:

“You come from the camp of the Pakekas?”

“Yes,” answered the Maori.

“You have seen the prisoner, our Tohonga?”

“I have seen him.”

“Alive?”

“Dead! English have shot him.”

It was all over with Glenarvan and his companions.

“All!” cried Kai-Koumou; “you all die to-morrow at daybreak.”

Punishment fell on all indiscriminately. Lady Helena and Mary Grant were grateful to Heaven for the boon.

The captives were not taken back to Ware-Atoua. They were destined to attend the obsequies of the chief and the bloody rites that accompanied them. A guard of natives conducted them to the foot of an immense kauri, and then stood on guard without taking their eyes off the prisoners.

The three prescribed days had elapsed since the death of Kara-Tete, and the soul of the dead warrior had finally departed; so the ceremonies commenced.

The body was laid on a small mound in the central enclosure. It was clothed in a rich dress, and wrapped in a magnificent flax mat. His head, adorned with feathers, was encircled with a crown of green leaves. His face, arms, and chest had been rubbed with oil, and did not show any sign of decay.

The parents and friends arrived at the foot of the mound, and at a certain moment, as if the leader of an orchestra were leading a funeral chant, there arose a great wail of tears, sighs, and sobs. They lamented the deceased with a plaintive rhythm and doleful cadence. The kinsmen beat their heads; the kinswomen tore their faces with their nails and lavished more blood than tears. But these demonstrations were not sufficient to propitiate the soul of the deceased, whose wrath might strike the survivors of his tribe; and his warriors, as they could not recall him to life, were anxious that he should have nothing to wish for in the other world. The wife of Kara-Tete was not to be parted from him; indeed, she would have refused to survive him. It was a custom, as well as a duty, and Maori history has no lack of such sacrifices.

This woman came on the scene; she was still young. Her disheveled hair flowed over her shoulders. Her sobs and cries filled the air. Incoherent words, regrets, sobs, broken phrases in which she extolled the virtues of the dead, alternated with her moans, and in a crowning paroxysm of sorrow, she threw herself at the foot of the mound and beat her head on the earth.

The Kai-Koumou drew near; suddenly the wretched victim rose; but a violent blow from a “MERE,” a kind of club brandished by the chief, struck her to the ground; she fell senseless.

Horrible yells followed; a hundred arms threatened the terror-stricken captives. But no one moved, for the funeral ceremonies were not yet over.

The wife of Kara-Tete had joined her husband. The two bodies lay stretched side by side. But in the future life, even the presence of his faithful companion was not enough. Who would attend on them in the realm of Noui-Atoua, if their slaves did not follow them into the other world.

Six unfortunate fellows were brought to the mound. They were attendants whom the pitiless usages of war had reduced to slavery. During the chief’s lifetime they had borne the severest privations, and been subjected to all kinds of ill-usage; they had been scantily fed, and incessantly occupied like beasts of burden, and now, according to Maori ideas, they were to resume to all eternity this life of bondage.

These poor creatures appeared quite resigned to their destiny. They were not taken by surprise. Their unbound hands showed that they met their fate without resistance.

Their death was speedy and not aggravated by tedious suffering; torture was reserved for the authors of the murder, who, only twenty paces off, averted their eyes from the horrible scene which was to grow yet more horrible.

Six blows of the MERE, delivered by the hands of six powerful warriors, felled the victims in the midst of a sea of blood.

This was the signal for a fearful scene of cannibalism. The bodies of slaves are not protected by taboo like those of their masters. They belong to the tribe; they were a sort of small change thrown among the mourners, and the moment the sacrifice was over, the whole crowd, chiefs, warriors, old men, women, children, without distinction of age, or sex, fell upon the senseless remains with brutal appetite. Faster than a rapid pen could describe it, the bodies, still reeking, were dismembered, divided, cut up, not into morsels, but into crumbs. Of the two hundred Maories present everyone obtained a share. They fought, they struggled, they quarreled over the smallest fragment. The drops of hot blood splashed over these festive monsters, and the whole of this detestable crew groveled under a rain of blood. It was like the delirious fury of tigers fighting over their prey, or like a circus where the wild beasts devour the deer. This scene ended, a score of fires were lit at various points of the “pah”; the smell of charred flesh polluted the air; and but for the fearful tumult of the festival, but for the cries that emanated from these flesh-sated throats, the captives might have heard the bones crunching under the teeth of the cannibals.

Glenarvan and his companions, breathless with horror, tried to conceal this fearful scene from the eyes of the two poor ladies. They understood then what fate awaited them next day at dawn, and also with what cruel torture this death would be preceded. They were dumb with horror.

The funeral dances commenced. Strong liquors distilled from the “piper excelsum” animated the intoxication of the natives. They had nothing human left. It seemed possible that the “taboo” might be forgotten, and they might rush upon the prisoners, who were already terrified at their delirious gestures.

But Kai-Koumou had kept his own senses amidst the general delirium. He allowed an hour for this orgy of blood to attain its maximum and then cease, and the final scene of the obsequies was performed with the accustomed ceremonial.

The corpses of Kara-Tete and his wife were raised, the limbs were bent, and laid against the stomach according to the Maori usage; then came the funeral, not the final interment, but a burial until the moment when the earth had destroyed the flesh and nothing remained but the skeleton.

The place of “oudoupa,” or the tomb, had been chosen outside the fortress, about two miles off at the top of a low hill called Maunganamu, situated on the right bank of the lake, and to this spot the body was to be taken. Two palanquins of a very primitive kind, hand-barrows, in fact, were brought to the foot of the mound, and the corpses doubled up so that they were sitting rather than lying, and their garments kept in place by a band of hanes, were placed on them. Four warriors took up the litters on their shoulders, and the whole tribe, repeating their funeral chant, followed in procession to the place of sepulture.

The captives, still strictly guarded, saw the funeral cortege leave the inner inclosure of the “pah”; then the chants and cries grew fainter. For about half an hour the funeral procession remained out of sight, in the hollow valley, and then came in sight again winding up the mountain side; the distance gave a fantastic effect to the undulating movement of this long serpentine column.

The tribe stopped at an elevation of about 800 feet, on the summit of Maunganamu, where the burial place of Kara-Tete had been prepared. An ordinary Maori would have had nothing but a hole and a heap of earth. But a powerful and formidable chief destined to speedy deification, was honored with a tomb worthy of his exploits.

The “oudoupa” had been fenced round, and posts, surmounted with faces painted in red ochre, stood near the grave where the bodies were to lie. The relatives had not forgotten that the “Waidoua,” the spirit of the dead, lives on mortal food, as the body did in this life. Therefore, food was deposited in the inclosure as well as the arms and clothing of the deceased. Nothing was omitted for comfort. The husband and wife were laid side by side, then covered with earth and grass, after another series of laments.

Then the procession wound slowly down the mountain, and henceforth none dare ascend the slope of Maunganamu on pain of death, for it was “tabooed,” like Tongariro, where lie the ashes of a chief killed by an earthquake in 1846.

CHAPTER XII STRANGELY LIBERATED

JUST as the sun was sinking beyond Lake Taupo, behind the peaks of

Tuhahua and Pukepapu, the captives were conducted back to their prison.

They were not to leave it again till the tops of the Wahiti Ranges

were lit with the first fires of day.

They had one night in which to prepare for death. Overcome as they were with horror and fatigue, they took their last meal together.

“We shall need all our strength,” Glenarvan had said, “to look death in the face. We must show these savages how Europeans can die.”

The meal ended. Lady Helena repeated the evening prayer aloud, her companions, bare-headed, repeated it after her. Who does not turn his thoughts toward God in the hour of death? This done, the prisoners embraced each other. Mary Grant and Helena, in a corner of the hut, lay down on a mat. Sleep, which keeps all sorrow in abeyance, soon weighed down their eyelids; they slept in each other’s arms, overcome by exhaustion and prolonged watching.

Then Glenarvan, taking his friends aside, said: “My dear friends, our lives and the lives of these poor women are in God’s hands. If it is decreed that we die to-morrow, let us die bravely, like Christian men, ready to appear without terror before the Supreme Judge. God, who reads our hearts, knows that we had a noble end in view. If death awaits us instead of success, it is by His will. Stern as the decree may seem, I will not repine. But death here, means not death only, it means torture, insult, perhaps, and here are two ladies — ”

Glenarvan’s voice, firm till now, faltered. He was silent a moment, and having overcome his emotion, he said, addressing the young captain:

“John, you have promised Mary what I promised Lady Helena.

What is your plan?”

“I believe,” said John, “that in the sight of God I have a right to fulfill that promise.”

“Yes, John; but we are unarmed.”

“No!” replied John, showing him a dagger. “I snatched it from Kara-Tete when he fell at your feet. My Lord, whichever of us survives the other will fulfill the wish of Lady Helena and Mary Grant.”

After these words were said, a profound silence ensued.

At last the Major said: “My friends, keep that to the last moment.

I am not an advocate of irremediable measures.”

“I did not speak for ourselves,” said Glenarvan. “Be it as it may,

we can face death! Had we been alone, I should ere now have cried,

‘My friends, let us make an effort. Let us attack these wretches!’

But with these poor girls — ”

At this moment John raised the mat, and counted twenty-five natives keeping guard on the Ware-Atoua. A great fire had been lighted, and its lurid glow threw into strong relief the irregular outlines of the “pah.” Some of the savages were sitting round the brazier; the others standing motionless, their black outlines relieved against the clear background of flame. But they all kept watchful guard on the hut confided to their care.

It has been said that between a vigilant jailer and a prisoner who wishes to escape, the chances are in favor of the prisoner; the fact is, the interest of the one is keener than that of the other. The jailer may forget that he is on guard; the prisoner never forgets that he is guarded. The captive thinks oftener of escaping than the jailer of preventing his flight, and hence we hear of frequent and wonderful escapes.

But in the present instance hatred and revenge were the jailers — not an indifferent warder; the prisoners were not bound, but it was because bonds were useless when five-and-twenty men were watching the only egress from the Ware-Atoua.

This house, with its back to the rock which closed the fortress, was only accessible by a long, narrow promontory which joined it in front to the plateau on which the “pah” was erected. On its two other sides rose pointed rocks, which jutted out over an abyss a hundred feet deep. On that side descent was impossible, and had it been possible, the bottom was shut in by the enormous rock. The only outlet was the regular door of the Ware-Atoua, and the Maories guarded the promontory which united it to the “pah” like a drawbridge. All escape was thus hopeless, and Glenarvan having tried the walls for the twentieth time, was compelled to acknowledge that it was so.

The hours of this night, wretched as they were, slipped away. Thick darkness had settled on the mountain. Neither moon nor stars pierced the gloom. Some gusts of wind whistled by the sides of the “pah,” and the posts of the house creaked: the fire outside revived with the puffs of wind, and the flames sent fitful gleams into the interior of Ware-Atoua. The group of prisoners was lit up for a moment; they were absorbed in their last thoughts, and a deathlike silence reigned in the hut.

It might have been about four o’clock in the morning when the Major’s attention was called to a slight noise which seemed to come from the foundation of the posts in the wall of the hut which abutted on the rock. McNabbs was at first indifferent, but finding the noise continue, he listened; then his curiosity was aroused, and he put his ear to the ground; it sounded as if someone was scraping or hollowing out the ground outside.

As soon as he was sure of it, he crept over to Glenarvan and John Mangles, and startling them from their melancholy thoughts, led them to the end of the hut.

“Listen,” said he, motioning them to stoop.

The scratching became more and more audible; they could hear the little stones grate on a hard body and roll away.

“Some animal in his burrow,” said John Mangles.

Glenarvan struck his forehead.

“Who knows?” said he, “it might be a man.”

“Animal or man,” answered the Major, “I will soon find out!”

Wilson and Olbinett joined their companions, and all united to dig through the wall — John with his dagger, the others with stones taken from the ground, or with their nails, while Mulrady, stretched along the ground, watched the native guard through a crevice of the matting.

These savages sitting motionless around the fire, suspected nothing of what was going on twenty feet off.

The soil was light and friable, and below lay a bed of silicious tufa; therefore, even without tools, the aperture deepened quickly. It soon became evident that a man, or men, clinging to the sides of the “pah,” were cutting a passage into its exterior wall. What could be the object? Did they know of the existence of the prisoners, or was it some private enterprise that led to the undertaking?

The prisoners redoubled their efforts. Their fingers bled, but still they worked on; after half an hour they had gone three feet deep; they perceived by the increased sharpness of the sounds that only a thin layer of earth prevented immediate communication.

Some minutes more passed, and the Major withdrew his hand from the stroke of a sharp blade. He suppressed a cry.

John Mangles, inserting the blade of his poniard, avoided the knife which now protruded above the soil, but seized the hand that wielded it.

It was the hand of a woman or child, a European! On neither side had a word been uttered. It was evidently the cue of both sides to be silent.

“Is it Robert?” whispered Glenarvan.

But softly as the name was breathed, Mary Grant, already awakened by the sounds in the hut, slipped over toward Glenarvan, and seizing the hand, all stained with earth, she covered it with kisses.

“My darling Robert,” said she, never doubting, “it is you! it is you!”

“Yes, little sister,” said he, “it is I am here to save you all; but be very silent.”

“Brave lad!” repeated Glenarvan.

“Watch the savages outside,” said Robert.

Mulrady, whose attention was distracted for a moment by the appearance of the boy, resumed his post.

“It is all right,” said he. “There are only four awake; the rest are asleep.”

A minute after, the hole was enlarged, and Robert passed from the arms of his sister to those of Lady Helena. Round his body was rolled a long coil of flax rope.

“My child, my child,” murmured Lady Helena, “the savages did not kill you!”

“No, madam,” said he; “I do not know how it happened, but in the scuffle I got away; I jumped the barrier; for two days I hid in the bushes, to try and see you; while the tribe were busy with the chief’s funeral, I came and reconnoitered this side of the path, and I saw that I could get to you. I stole this knife and rope out of the desert hut. The tufts of bush and the branches made me a ladder, and I found a kind of grotto already hollowed out in the rock under this hut; I had only to bore some feet in soft earth, and here I am.”

Twenty noiseless kisses were his reward.

“Let us be off!” said he, in a decided tone.

"Is Paganel below?" asked Glenarvan.

"Monsieur Paganel?" replied the boy, amazed.

"Yes; is he waiting for us?"

"No, my Lord; but is he not here?" inquired Robert.

"No, Robert!" answered Mary Grant.

"Why! have you not seen him?" asked Glenarvan. "Did you lose each other in the confusion? Did you not get away together?"

"No, my Lord!" said Robert, taken aback by the disappearance of his friend Paganel.

"Well, lose no more time," said the Major. "Wherever Paganel is, he cannot be in worse plight than ourselves. Let us go."

Truly, the moments were precious. They had to fly. The escape was not very difficult, except the twenty feet of perpendicular fall outside the grotto.

After that the slope was practicable to the foot of the mountain. From this point the prisoners could soon gain the lower valleys; while the Maories, if they perceived the flight of the prisoners, would have to make a long round to catch them, being unaware of the gallery between the Ware-Atoua and the outer rock.

The escape was commenced, and every precaution was taken. The captives passed one by one through the narrow passage into the grotto. John Mangles, before leaving the hut, disposed of all the evidences of their work, and in his turn slipped through the opening and let down over it the mats of the house, so that the entrance to the gallery was quite concealed.

The next thing was to descend the vertical wall to the slope below, and this would have been impracticable, but that Robert had brought the flax rope, which was now unrolled and fixed to a projecting point of rock, the end hanging over.

John Mangles, before his friends trusted themselves to this flax rope, tried it; he did not think it very strong; and it was of importance not to risk themselves imprudently, as a fall would be fatal.

“This rope,” said he, “will only bear the weight of two persons; therefore let us go in rotation. Lord and Lady Glenarvan first; when they arrive at the bottom, three pulls at the rope will be a signal to us to follow.”

“I will go first,” said Robert. “I discovered a deep hollow at the foot of the slope where those who come down can conceal themselves and wait for the rest.”

“Go, my boy,” said Glenarvan, pressing Robert’s hand.

Robert disappeared through the opening out of the grotto. A minute after, the three pulls at the cord informed them the boy had alighted safely.

Glenarvan and Lady Helena immediately ventured out of the grotto. The darkness was still very great, though some grayish streaks were already visible on the eastern summits.

The biting cold of the morning revived the poor young lady.

She felt stronger and commenced her perilous descent.

Glenarvan first, then Lady Helena, let themselves down along the rope, till they came to the spot where the perpendicular wall met the top of the slope. Then Glenarvan going first and supporting his wife, began to descend backward.

He felt for the tufts and grass and shrubs able to afford a foothold; tried them and then placed Lady Helena's foot on them. Some birds, suddenly awakened, flew away, uttering feeble cries, and the fugitives trembled when a stone loosened from its bed rolled to the foot of the mountain.

They had reached half-way down the slope, when a voice was heard from the opening of the grotto.

"Stop!" whispered John Mangles.

Glenarvan, holding with one hand to a tuft of tetragonia, with the other holding his wife, waited with breathless anxiety.

Wilson had had an alarm. Having heard some unusual noise outside the Ware-Atoua, he went back into the hut and watched the Maories from behind the mat. At a sign from him, John stopped Glenarvan.

One of the warriors on guard, startled by an unusual sound, rose and drew nearer to the Ware-Atoua. He stood still about two paces from the hut and listened with his head bent forward. He remained in that attitude for a minute that seemed an hour, his ear intent, his eye peering into the darkness. Then shaking his head like one who sees he is mistaken, he went back to his companions, took an armful of dead wood, and threw it into the smouldering fire, which immediately revived. His face was lighted up by the flame, and was free from any look of doubt, and after having glanced to where the first light of dawn whitened the eastern sky, stretched himself near the fire to warm his stiffened limbs.

“All’s well!” whispered Wilson.

John signaled to Glenarvan to resume his descent.

Glenarvan let himself gently down the slope; soon Lady Helena and he landed on the narrow track where Robert waited for them.

The rope was shaken three times, and in his turn John Mangles, preceding Mary Grant, followed in the dangerous route.

He arrived safely; he rejoined Lord and Lady Glenarvan in the hollow mentioned by Robert.

Five minutes after, all the fugitives had safely escaped from the Ware-Atoua, left their retreat, and keeping away from the inhabited shores of the lakes, they plunged by narrow paths into the recesses of the mountains.

They walked quickly, trying to avoid the points where they might be seen from the pah. They were quite silent, and glided among the bushes like shadows. Whither? Where chance led them, but at any rate they were free.

Toward five o’clock, the day began to dawn, bluish clouds marbled the upper stratum of clouds. The misty summits began to pierce the morning mists. The orb of day was soon to appear, and instead of giving the signal for their execution, would, on the contrary, announce their flight.

It was of vital importance that before the decisive moment arrived they should put themselves beyond the reach of the savages, so as to put them off their track. But their progress was slow, for the paths were steep. Lady

Glenarvan climbed the slopes, supported, not to say carried, by Glenarvan, and Mary Grant leaned on the arm of John Mangles; Robert, radiant with joy, triumphant at his success, led the march, and the two sailors brought up the rear.

Another half an hour and the glorious sun would rise out of the mists of the horizon. For half an hour the fugitives walked on as chance led them. Paganel was not there to take the lead. He was now the object of their anxiety, and whose absence was a black shadow between them and their happiness. But they bore steadily eastward, as much as possible, and faced the gorgeous morning light. Soon they had reached a height of 500 feet above Lake Taupo, and the cold of the morning, increased by the altitude, was very keen. Dim outlines of hills and mountains rose behind one another; but Glenarvan only thought how best to get lost among them. Time enough by and by to see about escaping from the labyrinth.

At last the sun appeared and sent his first rays on their path.

Suddenly a terrific yell from a hundred throats rent the air.

It came from the pah, whose direction Glenarvan did not know.

Besides, a thick veil of fog, which, spread at his feet,

prevented any distinct view of the valleys below.

But the fugitives could not doubt that their escape had been discovered; and now the question was, would they be able to elude pursuit? Had they been seen? Would not their track betray them?

At this moment the fog in the valley lifted, and enveloped them for a moment in a damp mist, and at three hundred feet below they perceived the swarming mass of frantic natives.

While they looked they were seen. Renewed howls broke forth, mingled with the barking of dogs, and the whole tribe, after vainly trying to scale the rock of Ware-Atoua, rushed out of the pah, and hastened by the shortest paths in pursuit of the prisoners who were flying from their vengeance.

CHAPTER XIII THE SACRED MOUNTAIN

THE summit of the mountain was still a hundred feet above them. The fugitives were anxious to reach it that they might continue their flight on the eastern slope out of the view of their pursuers. They hoped then to find some practicable ridge that would allow of a passage to the neighboring peaks that were thrown together in an orographic maze, to which poor Paganel's genius would doubtless have found the clew.

They hastened up the slope, spurred on by the loud cries that drew nearer and nearer. The avenging crowd had already reached the foot of the mountain.

"Courage! my friends," cried Glenarvan, urging his companions by voice and look.

In less than five minutes they were at the top of the mountain, and then they turned to judge of their position, and decide on a route that would baffle their pursuers.

From their elevated position they could see over Lake Taupo, which stretched toward the west in its setting of picturesque mountains. On the north the peaks of Pirongia; on the south the burning crater of Tongariro. But eastward nothing but the rocky barrier of peaks and ridges that formed the Wahiti ranges, the great chain whose unbroken links stretch from the East Cape to Cook's Straits. They had no alternative but to descend the opposite slope and enter the narrow gorges, uncertain whether any outlet existed.

Glenarvan could not prolong the halt for a moment.

Wearied as they might be, they must fly or be discovered.

“Let us go down!” cried he, “before our passage is cut off.”

But just as the ladies had risen with a despairing effort,

McNabbs stopped them and said:

“Glenarvan, it is useless. Look!”

And then they all perceived the inexplicable change that had taken place in the movements of the Maories.

Their pursuit had suddenly stopped. The ascent of the mountain had ceased by an imperious command. The natives had paused in their career, and surged like the sea waves against an opposing rock. All the crowd, thirsting for blood, stood at the foot of the mountain yelling and gesticulating, brandishing guns and hatchets, but not advancing a foot. Their dogs, rooted to the spot like themselves, barked with rage.

What stayed them? What occult power controlled these savages? The fugitives looked without understanding, fearing lest the charm that enchained Kai-Koumou’s tribe should be broken.

Suddenly John Mangles uttered an exclamation which attracted the attention of his companions. He pointed to a little inclosure on the summit of the cone.

“The tomb of Kara-Tete!” said Robert.

“Are you sure, Robert?” said Glenarvan.

“Yes, my Lord, it is the tomb; I recognize it.”

Robert was right. Fifty feet above, at the extreme peak of the mountain, freshly painted posts formed a small palisaded inclosure, and Glenarvan too was convinced that it was the chief's burial place. The chances of their flight had led them to the crest of Maunganamu.

Glenarvan, followed by the rest, climbed to the foot of the tomb.

A large opening, covered with mats, led into it.

Glenarvan was about to invade the sanctity of the “oudoupa,”

when he reeled backward.

“A savage!” said he.

“In the tomb?” inquired the Major.

“Yes, McNabbs.”

“No matter; go in.”

Glenarvan, the Major, Robert and John Mangles entered.

There sat a Maori, wrapped in a large flax mat; the darkness

of the “oudoupa” preventing them from distinguishing his features.

He was very quiet, and was eating his breakfast quite coolly.

Glenarvan was about to speak to him when the native forestalled him by saying gayly and in good English:

“Sit down, my Lord; breakfast is ready.”

It was Paganel. At the sound of his voice they all rushed into the “oudoupa,” and he was cordially embraced all round. Paganel was found again. He was their salvation. They wanted to question him; to know how and why he was here on the summit of Maunganamu; but Glenarvan stopped this misplaced curiosity.

“The savages?” said he.

“The savages,” said Paganel, shrugging his shoulders.

“I have a contempt for those people! Come and look at them.”

They all followed Paganel out of the “oudoupa.” The Maories were still in the same position round the base of the mountain, uttering fearful cries.

“Shout! yell! till your lungs are gone, stupid wretches!” said Paganel. “I dare you to come here!”

“But why?” said Glenarvan.

“Because the chief is buried here, and the tomb protects us, because the mountain is tabooed.”

“Tabooed?”

“Yes, my friends! and that is why I took refuge here, as the malefactors used to flee to the sanctuaries in the middle ages.”

“God be praised!” said Lady Helena, lifting her hands to heaven.

The fugitives were not yet out of danger, but they had a moment’s respite, which was very welcome in their exhausted state.

Glenarvan was too much overcome to speak, and the Major nodded his head with an air of perfect content.

“And now, my friends,” said Paganel, “if these brutes think to exercise their patience on us, they are mistaken. In two days we shall be out of their reach.”

“By flight!” said Glenarvan. “But how?”

“That I do not know,” answered Paganel, “but we shall manage it.”

And now everybody wanted to know about their friend’s adventures. They were puzzled by the reserve of a man generally so talkative; on this occasion they had to drag the words out of his mouth; usually he was a ready story-teller, now he gave only evasive answers to the questions of the rest.

“Paganel is another man!” thought McNabbs.

His face was really altered. He wrapped himself closely in his great flax mat and seemed to deprecate observation. Everyone noticed his embarrassment, when he was the subject of conversation, though nobody appeared to remark it; when other topics were under discussion, Paganel resumed his usual gayety.

Of his adventures all that could be extracted from him at this time was as follows:

After the murder of Kara-Tete, Paganel took advantage, like Robert, of the commotion among the natives, and got out of the inclosure. But less fortunate than young Grant, he walked straight into a Maori camp, where he met a tall, intelligent-looking chief, evidently of higher rank than all the warriors of his tribe. The chief spoke excellent English, and he saluted the new-comer by rubbing the end of his nose against the end of the geographer’s nose.

Paganel wondered whether he was to consider himself a prisoner or not. But perceiving that he could not stir without the polite escort of the chief, he soon made up his mind on that point.

This chief, Hihi, or Sunbeam, was not a bad fellow. Paganel’s spectacles and telescope seemed to give him a great idea of Paganel’s importance, and he manifested great attachment to him, not only by kindness, but by a strong flax rope, especially at night.

This lasted for three days; to the inquiry whether he was well treated, he said “Yes and no!” without further answer; he was a prisoner, and except that he expected immediate execution, his state seemed to him no better than that in which he had left his unfortunate friends.

One night, however, he managed to break his rope and escape. He had seen from afar the burial of the chief, and knew that he was buried on the top of Maunganamu, and he was well acquainted with the fact that the mountain would be therefore tabooed. He resolved to take refuge there, being unwilling to leave the region where his companions were in durance. He succeeded in his dangerous attempt, and had arrived the previous night at the tomb of Kara-Tete, and there proposed to recruit his strength while he waited in the hope that his friends might, by Divine mercy, find the means of escape.

Such was Paganel’s story. Did he designedly conceal some incident of his captivity? More than once his embarrassment led them to that conclusion. But however that might be, he was heartily congratulated on all sides. And then the present emergency came on for serious discussion. The natives dare not climb Maunganamu, but they, of course, calculated that hunger and thirst would restore them their prey. It was only a question of time, and patience is one of the virtues of all savages. Glenarvan was fully alive to the difficulty, but made up his mind to watch for an opportunity, or make one. First of all he made a thorough survey of Maunganamu, their present fortress; not for the purpose of defence, but of escape. The Major, John, Robert, Paganel, and himself, made an exact map of the mountain. They noted the direction, outlet and inclination of the paths. The ridge, a mile in length, which united Maunganamu to the Wahiti chain had a downward inclination. Its slope, narrow and jagged though it was, appeared the only practicable route, if they made good their escape at all. If they could do this without observation, under cover of night, they might possibly reach the deep valleys of the Range and put the Maories off the scent.

But there were dangers in this route; the last part of it was within pistol shot of natives posted on the lower slopes. Already when they ventured on the exposed part of the crest, they were saluted with a hail of shot which did not reach them. Some gun wads, carried by the wind, fell beside them; they were made of printed paper, which Paganel picked up out of curiosity, and with some trouble deciphered.

“That is a good idea! My friends, do you know what those creatures use for wads?”

“No, Paganel!” said Glenarvan.

“Pages of the Bible! If that is the use they make of the Holy Book, I pity the missionaries! It will be rather difficult to establish a Maori library.”

“And what text of scripture did they aim at us?”

“A message from God Himself!” exclaimed John Mangles, who was in the act of reading the scorched fragment of paper. “It bids us hope in Him,” added the young captain, firm in the faith of his Scotch convictions.

“Read it, John!” said Glenarvan.

And John read what the powder had left visible: “I will deliver him, for he hath trusted in me.”

“My friends,” said Glenarvan, “we must carry these words of hope to our dear, brave ladies. The sound will bring comfort to their hearts.”

Glenarvan and his companions hastened up the steep path to the cone, and went toward the tomb. As they climbed they were astonished to perceive every few moments a kind of vibration in the soil. It was not a movement like earthquake, but that peculiar tremor that affects the metal of a boiler under high pressure. It was clear the mountain was the outer covering of a body of vapor, the product of subterranean fires.

This phenomenon of course excited no surprise in those that had just traveled among the hot springs of the Waikato. They knew that the central region of the Ika-na-Mani is essentially volcanic. It is a sieve, whose interstices furnish a passage for the earth’s vapors in the shape of boiling geysers and solfataras.

Paganel, who had already noticed this, called the attention of his friends to the volcanic nature of the mountain. The peak of Maunganamu was only one of the many cones which bristle on this part of the island. It was a volcano of the future. A slight mechanical change would produce a crater of eruption in these slopes, which consisted merely of whitish silicious tufa.

“That may be,” said Glenarvan, “but we are in no more danger here than standing by the boiler of the DUNCAN; this solid crust is like sheet iron.”

“I agree with you,” added the Major, “but however good a boiler may be, it bursts at last after too long service.”

“McNabbs,” said Paganel, “I have no fancy for staying on the cone.

When Providence points out a way, I will go at once.”

“I wish,” remarked John, “that Maunganamu could carry us himself, with all the motive power that he has inside. It is too bad that millions of horse-power should lie under our feet unavailable for our needs. Our DUNCAN would carry us to the end of the world with the thousandth part of it.”

The recollections of the DUNCAN evoked by John Mangles turned Glenarvan’s thoughts into their saddest channel; for desperate as his own case was he often forgot it, in vain regret at the fate of his crew.

His mind still dwelt on it when he reached the summit of Maunganamu and met his companions in misfortune.

Lady Helena, when she saw Glenarvan, came forward to meet him.

“Dear Edward,” said she, “you have made up your mind?

Are we to hope or fear?”

“Hope, my dear Helena,” replied Glenarvan. “The natives will never set foot on the mountain, and we shall have time to devise a plan of escape.”

“More than that, madam, God himself has encouraged us to hope.”

And so saying, John Mangles handed to Lady Helena the fragment of paper on which was legible the sacred words; and these young women, whose trusting hearts were always open to observe Providential interpositions, read in these words an indisputable sign of salvation.

“And now let us go to the ‘oudoupa!’” cried Paganel, in his gayest mood. “It is our castle, our dining-room, our study! None can meddle with us there! Ladies! allow me to do the honors of this charming abode.”

They followed Paganel, and when the savages saw them profaning anew the tabooed burial place, they renewed their fire and their fearful yells, the one as loud as the other. But fortunately the balls fell short of our friends, though the cries reached them.

Lady Helena, Mary Grant, and their companions were quite relieved to find that the Maories were more dominated by superstition than by anger, and they entered the monument.

It was a palisade made of red-painted posts. Symbolic figures, tattooed on the wood, set forth the rank and achievements of the deceased. Strings of amulets, made of shells or cut stones, hung from one part to another. In the interior, the ground was carpeted with green leaves, and in the middle, a slight mound betokened the place of the newly made grave. There lay the chief’s weapons, his guns loaded and capped, his spear, his splendid ax of green jade, with a supply of powder and ball for the happy hunting grounds.

“Quite an arsenal!” said Paganel, “of which we shall make a better use.

What ideas they have! Fancy carrying arms in the other world!”

“Well!” said the Major, “but these are English firearms.”

“No doubt,” replied Glenarvan, “and it is a very unwise practice to give firearms to savages! They turn them against the invaders, naturally enough. But at any rate, they will be very valuable to us.”

“Yes,” said Paganel, “but what is more useful still is the food and water provided for Kara-Tete.”

Things had been handsomely done for the deceased chief; the amount of provisions denoted their esteem for the departed. There was food enough to sustain ten persons for fifteen days, or the dead man forever.

The vegetable aliments consisted of edible ferns, sweet potatoes, the “convolvulus batatas,” which was indigenous, and the potato which had been imported long before by the Europeans. Large jars contained pure water, and a dozen baskets artistically plaited contained tablets of an unknown green gum.

The fugitives were therefore provided for some days against hunger and thirst, and they needed no persuasion to begin their attack on the deceased chief’s stores. Glenarvan brought out the necessary quantity and put them into Olbinett’s hands. The steward, who never could forget his routine ideas, even in the most exceptional circumstances, thought the meal a slender one. He did not know how to prepare the roots, and, besides, had no fire.

But Paganel soon solved the difficulty by recommending him to bury his fern roots and sweet potatoes in the soil. The temperature of the surface stratum was very high, and a thermometer plunged into the soil would have marked from 160 to 170 degrees; in fact, Olbinett narrowly missed being scalded, for just as he had scooped a hole for the roots, a jet of vapor sprang up and with a whistling sound rose six feet above the ground.

The steward fell back in terror.

“Shut off steam!” cried the Major, running to close the hole with the loose drift, while Paganel pondering on the singular phenomenon muttered to himself:

“Let me see! ha! ha! Why not?”

“Are you hurt?” inquired McNabbs of Olbinett.

“No, Major,” said the steward, “but I did not expect — ”

“That Providence would send you fire,” interrupted Paganel in a jovial tone. “First the larder of Kara-Tete and then fire out of the ground! Upon my word, this mountain is a paradise! I propose that we found a colony, and cultivate the soil and settle here for life! We shall be the Robinsons of Maunganamu. We should want for nothing.”

“If it is solid ground,” said John Mangles.

“Well! it is not a thing of yesterday,” said Paganel. “It has stood against the internal fire for many a day, and will do so till we leave it, at any rate.”

“Breakfast is ready,” announced Olbinett with as much dignity as if he was in Malcolm Castle.

Without delay, the fugitives sat down near the palisade, and began one of the many meals with which Providence had supplied them in critical circumstances. Nobody was inclined to be fastidious, but opinions were divided as regarded the edible fern. Some thought the flavor sweet and agreeable, others pronounced it leathery, insipid, and resembling the taste of gum. The sweet potatoes, cooked in the burning soil, were excellent. The geographer remarked that Kara-Tete was not badly off after all.

And now that their hunger was appeased, it was time to decide on their plan of escape.

“So soon!” exclaimed Paganel in a piteous tone. “Would you quit the home of delight so soon?”

“But, Monsieur Paganel,” interposed Lady Helena, “if this be Capua, you dare not intend to imitate Hannibal!”

“Madam, I dare not contradict you, and if discussion is the order of the day, let it proceed.”

“First,” said Glenarvan, “I think we ought to start before we are driven to it by hunger. We are revived now, and ought to take advantage of it. To-night we will try to reach the eastern valleys by crossing the cordon of natives under cover of the darkness.”

“Excellent,” answered Paganel, “if the Maories allow us to pass.”

“And if not?” asked John Mangles.

“Then we will use our great resources,” said Paganel.

“But have we great resources?” inquired the Major.

“More than we can use!” replied Paganel, without any further explanation.

And then they waited for the night.

The natives had not stirred. Their numbers seemed even greater, perhaps owing to the influx of the stragglers of the tribe. Fires lighted at intervals formed a girdle of flame round the base of the mountain, so that when darkness fell, Maunganamu appeared to rise out of a great brasier, and to hide its head in the thick darkness. Five hundred feet below they could hear the hum and the cries of the enemy's camp.

At nine o'clock the darkness being very intense, Glenarvan and John Mangles went out to reconnoiter before embarking the whole party on this critical journey. They made the descent noiselessly, and after about ten minutes, arrived on the narrow ridge that crossed the native lines, fifty feet above the camp.

All went well so far. The Maories, stretched beside the fires, did not appear to observe the two fugitives. But in an instant a double fusillade burst forth from both sides of the ridge.

"Back," exclaimed Glenarvan; "those wretches have the eyes of cats and the guns of riflemen!"

And they turned, and once more climbed the steep slope of the mountain, and then hastened to their friends who had been alarmed at the firing. Glenarvan's hat was pierced by two balls, and they concluded that it was out of the question to venture again on the ridge between two lines of marksmen.

"Wait till to-morrow," said Paganel, "and as we cannot elude their vigilance, let me try my hand on them."

The night was cold; but happily Kara-Tete had been furnished with his best night gear, and the party wrapped themselves each in a warm flax mantle, and protected by native superstition, slept quietly inside the inclosure, on the warm ground, still violating with the violence of the internal ebullition.

CHAPTER XIV A BOLD STRATAGEM

NEXT day, February 17th, the sun’s first rays awoke the sleepers of the Maunganamu. The Maories had long since been astir, coming and going at the foot of the mountain, without leaving their line of observation. Furious clamor broke out when they saw the Europeans leave the sacred place they had profaned.

Each of the party glanced first at the neighboring mountains,

and at the deep valleys still drowned in mist, and over

Lake Taupo, which the morning breeze ruffled slightly.

And then all clustered round Paganel eager to hear his project.

Paganel soon satisfied their curiosity. “My friends,” said he, “my plan has one great recommendation; if it does not accomplish all that I anticipate, we shall be no worse off than we are at present. But it must, it will succeed.”

“And what is it?” asked McNabbs.

“It is this,” replied Paganel, “the superstition of the natives has made this mountain a refuge for us, and we must take advantage of their superstition to escape. If I can persuade Kai-Koumou that we have expiated our profanation, that the wrath of the Deity has fallen on us: in a word, that we have died a terrible death, do you think he will leave the plateau of Maunganamu to return to his village?”

“Not a doubt of it,” said Glenarvan.

“And what is the horrible death you refer to?” asked Lady Helena.

“The death of the sacrilegious, my friends,” replied Paganel. “The avenging flames are under our feet. Let us open a way for them!”

“What! make a volcano!” cried John Mangles.

“Yes, an impromptu volcano, whose fury we can regulate. There are plenty of vapors ready to hand, and subterranean fires ready to issue forth. We can have an eruption ready to order.”

“An excellent idea, Paganel; well conceived,” said the Major.

“You understand,” replied the geographer, “we are to pretend to fall victims to the flames of the Maori Pluto, and to disappear spiritually into the tomb of Kara-Tete. And stay there three, four, even five days if necessary — that is to say, till the savages are convinced that we have perished, and abandon their watch.”

“But,” said Miss Grant, “suppose they wish to be sure of our punishment, and climb up here to see?”

“No, my dear Mary,” returned Paganel. “They will not do that. The mountain is tabooed, and if it devoured its sacrilegious intruders, it would only be more inviolably tabooed.”

“It is really a very clever plan,” said Glenarvan. “There is only one chance against it; that is, if the savages prolong their watch at the foot of Maunganamu, we may run short of provisions. But if we play our game well there is not much fear of that.”

“And when shall we try this last chance?” asked Lady Helena.

“To-night,” rejoined Paganel, “when the darkness is the deepest.”

“Agreed,” said McNabbs; “Paganel, you are a genius! and I, who seldom get up an enthusiasm, I answer for the success of your plan. Oh! those villains! They shall have a little miracle that will put off their conversion for another century. I hope the missionaries will forgive us.”

The project of Paganel was therefore adopted, and certainly with the superstitious ideas of the Maories there seemed good ground for hope. But brilliant as the idea might be, the difficulty was in the modus operandi. The volcano might devour the bold schemers, who offered it a crater. Could they control and direct the eruption when they had succeeded in letting loose its vapor and flames, and lava streams? The entire cone might be engulfed. It was meddling with phenomena of which nature herself has the absolute monopoly.

Paganel had thought of all this; but he intended to act prudently and without pushing things to extremes. An appearance would be enough to dupe the Maories, and there was no need for the terrible realities of an eruption.

How long that day seemed. Each one of the party inwardly counted the hours. All was made ready for flight. The oudoupa provisions were divided and formed very portable packets. Some mats and firearms completed their light equipment, all of which they took from the tomb of the chief. It is needless to say that their preparations were made within the inclosure, and that they were unseen by the savages.

At six o’clock the steward served up a refreshing meal. Where or when they would eat in the valleys of the Ranges no one could foretell. So that they had to take in supplies for the future. The principal dish was composed of half a dozen rats, caught by Wilson and stewed. Lady Helena and Mary Grant obstinately refused to taste this game, which is highly esteemed by the natives; but the men enjoyed it like the real Maories. The meat was excellent and savory, and the six devourers were devoured down to the bones.

The evening twilight came on. The sun went down in a stormy-looking bank of clouds. A few flashes of lightning glanced across the horizon and distant thunder pealed through the darkened sky.

Paganel welcomed the storm, which was a valuable aid to his plans, and completed his program. The savages are superstitiously affected by the great phenomena of nature. The New Zealanders think that thunder is the angry voice of Noui-Atoua, and lightning the fierce gleam of his eyes. Thus their deity was coming personally to chastise the violators of the taboo.

At eight o’clock, the summit of the Maunganamu was lost in portentous darkness. The sky would supply a black background for the blaze which Paganel was about to throw on it. The Maories could no longer see their prisoners; and this was the moment for action. Speed was necessary. Glenarvan, Paganel, McNabbs, Robert, the steward, and the two sailors, all lent a hand.

The spot for the crater was chosen thirty paces from Kara-Tete’s tomb. It was important to keep the oudoupa intact, for if it disappeared, the taboo of the mountain would be nullified. At the spot mentioned Paganel had noticed an enormous block of stone, round which the vapors played with a certain degree of intensity. This block covered a small natural crater hollowed in the cone, and by its own weight prevented the egress of the subterranean fire. If they could move it from its socket, the vapors and the lava would issue by the disencumbered opening.

The workers used as levers some posts taken from the interior of the oudoupa, and they plied their tools vigorously against the rocky mass. Under their united efforts the stone soon moved. They made a little trench so that it might roll down the inclined plane. As they gradually raised it, the vibrations under foot became more distinct. Dull roarings of flame and the whistling sound of a furnace ran along under the thin crust. The intrepid laborers, veritable Cyclops handling Earth's fires, worked in silence; soon some fissures and jets of steam warned them that their place was growing dangerous. But a crowning effort moved the mass which rolled down and disappeared. Immediately the thin crust gave way. A column of fire rushed to the sky with loud detonations, while streams of boiling water and lava flowed toward the native camp and the lower valleys.

All the cone trembled as if it was about to plunge into a fathomless gulf.

Glenarvan and his companions had barely time to get out of the way; they fled to the enclosure of the oudoupa, not without having been sprinkled with water at 220 degrees. This water at first spread a smell like soup, which soon changed into a strong odor of sulphur.

Then the mud, the lava, the volcanic stones, all spouted forth in a torrent. Streams of fire furrowed the sides of Maunganamu. The neighboring mountains were lit up by the glare; the dark valleys were also filled with dazzling light.

All the savages had risen, howling under the pain inflicted by the burning lava, which was bubbling and foaming in the midst of their camp.

Those whom the liquid fire had not touched fled to the surrounding hills; then turned, and gazed in terror at this fearful phenomenon, this volcano in which the anger of their deity would swallow up the profane intruders on the sacred mountain. Now and then, when the roar of the eruption became less violent, their cry was heard:

“Taboo! taboo! taboo!”

An enormous quantity of vapors, heated stones and lava was escaping by this crater of Maunganamu. It was not a mere geyser like those that girdle round Mount Hecla, in Iceland, it was itself a Hecla. All this volcanic commotion was confined till then in the envelope of the cone, because the safety valve of Tangariro was enough for its expansion; but when this new issue was afforded, it rushed forth fiercely, and by the laws of equilibrium, the other eruptions in the island must on that night have lost their usual intensity.

An hour after this volcano burst upon the world, broad streams of lava were running down its sides. Legions of rats came out of their holes, and fled from the scene.

All night long, and fanned by the tempest in the upper sky, the crater never ceased to pour forth its torrents with a violence that alarmed Glenarvan. The eruption was breaking away the edges of the opening. The prisoners. hidden behind the inclosure of stakes, watched the fearful progress of the phenomenon.

Morning came. The fury of the volcano had not slackened. Thick yellowish fumes were mixed with the flames; the lava torrents wound their serpentine course in every direction.

Glenarvan watched with a beating heart, looking from all the interstices of the palisaded enclosure, and observed the movements in the native camp.

The Maories had fled to the neighboring ledges, out of the reach of the volcano. Some corpses which lay at the foot of the cone, were charred by the fire. Further off toward the “pah,” the lava had reached a group of twenty huts, which were still smoking. The Maories, forming here and there groups, contemplated the canopied summit of Maunganamu with religious awe.

Kai-Koumou approached in the midst of his warriors, and Glenarvan recognized him. The chief advanced to the foot of the hill, on the side untouched by the lava, but he did not ascend the first ledge.

Standing there, with his arms stretched out like an ex-erciser, he made some grimaces, whose meaning was obvious to the prisoners. As Paganel had foreseen, Kai-Koumou launched on the avenging mountain a more rigorous taboo.

Soon after the natives left their positions and followed the winding paths that led toward the pah.

“They are going!” exclaimed Glenarvan. “They have left their posts! God be praised! Our stratagem has succeeded! My dear Lady Helena, my brave friends, we are all dead and buried! But this evening when night comes, we shall rise and leave our tomb, and fly these barbarous tribes!”

It would be difficult to conceive of the joy that pervaded the oudoupa. Hope had regained the mastery in all hearts. The intrepid travelers forgot the past, forgot the future, to enjoy the present delight! And yet the task before them was not an easy one — to gain some European outpost in the midst of this unknown country. But Kai-Koumou once off their track, they thought themselves safe from all the savages in New Zealand.

A whole day had to elapse before they could make a start, and they employed it in arranging a plan of flight. Paganel had treasured up his map of New Zealand, and on it could trace out the best roads.

After discussion, the fugitives resolved to make for the Bay of Plenty, towards the east. The region was unknown, but apparently desert. The travelers, who from their past experience, had learned to make light of physical difficulties, feared nothing but meeting Maories. At any cost they wanted to avoid them and gain the east coast, where the missionaries had several stations. That part of the country had hitherto escaped the horrors of war, and the natives were not in the habit of scouring the country.

As to the distance that separated Lake Taupo from the Bay of Plenty, they calculated it about a hundred miles. Ten days' march at ten miles a day, could be done, not without fatigue, but none of the party gave that a thought. If they could only reach the mission stations they could rest there while waiting for a favorable opportunity to get to Auckland, for that was the point they desired to reach.

This question settled, they resumed their watch of the native proceedings, and continued so doing till evening fell. Not a solitary native remained at the foot of the mountain, and when darkness set in over the Taupo valleys, not a fire indicated the presence of the Maories at the base. The road was free.

At nine o'clock, the night being unusually dark, Glenarvan gave the order to start. His companions and he, armed and equipped at the expense of Kara-Tete, began cautiously to descend the slopes of Maunganamu, John Mangles and Wilson leading the way, eyes and ears on the alert. They stopped at the slightest sound, they started at every passing cloud. They slid rather than walked down the spur, that their figures might be lost in the dark mass of the mountain. At two hundred feet below the summit, John Mangles and his sailors reached the dangerous ridge that had been so obstinately defended by the natives. If by ill luck the Maories, more cunning than the fugitives, had only pretended to retreat; if they were not really duped by the volcanic phenomenon, this was the spot where their presence would be betrayed. Glenarvan could not but shudder, in spite of his confidence, and in spite of the jokes of Paganel. The fate of the whole party would hang in the balance for the ten minutes required to pass along that ridge. He felt the beating of Lady Helena's heart, as she clung to his arm.

He had no thought of turning back. Neither had John. The young captain, followed closely by the whole party, and protected by the intense darkness, crept along the ridge, stopping when some loose stone rolled to the bottom. If the savages were still in the ambush below, these unusual sounds might provoke from both sides a dangerous fusillade.

But speed was impossible in their serpent-like progress down this sloping crest. When John Mangles had reached the lowest point, he was scarcely twenty-five feet from the plateau, where the natives were encamped the night before, and then the ridge rose again pretty steeply toward a wood for about a quarter of a mile.

All this lower part was crossed without molestation, and they commenced the ascent in silence. The clump of bush was invisible, though they knew it was there, and but for the possibility of an ambush, Glenarvan counted on being safe when the party arrived at that point. But he observed that after this point, they were no longer protected by the taboo. The ascending ridge belonged not to Maunganamu, but to the mountain system of the eastern side of Lake Taupo, so that they had not only pistol shots, but hand-to-hand fighting to fear. For ten minutes, the little band ascended by insensible degrees toward the higher table-land. John could not discern the dark wood, but he knew it ought to be within two hundred feet. Suddenly he stopped; almost retreated. He fancied he heard something in the darkness; his stoppage interrupted the march of those behind.

He remained motionless long enough to alarm his companions. They waited with unspeakable anxiety, wondering if they were doomed to retrace their steps, and return to the summit of Maunganamu.

But John, finding that the noise was not repeated, resumed the ascent of the narrow path of the ridge. Soon they perceived the shadowy outline of the wood showing faintly through the darkness. A few steps more and they were hid from sight in the thick foliage of the trees.

CHAPTER XV FROM PERIL TO SAFETY

THE night favored their escape, and prudence urged them to lose no time in getting away from the fatal neighborhood of Lake Taupo. Paganel took the post of leader, and his wonderful instinct shone out anew in this difficult mountain journey. His nyctalopia was a great advantage, his cat-like sight enabling him to distinguish the smallest object in the deepest gloom.

For three hours they walked on without halting along the far-reaching slope of the eastern side. Paganel kept a little to the southeast, in order to make use of a narrow passage between the Kaimanawa and the Wahiti Ranges, through which the road from Hawkes' Bay to Auckland passes. Once through that gorge, his plan was to keep off the road, and, under the shelter of the high ranges, march to the coast across the inhabited regions of the province.

At nine o'clock in the morning, they had made twelve miles in twelve hours. The courageous women could not be pressed further, and, besides, the locality was suitable for camping. The fugitives had reached the pass that separates the two chains. Paganel, map in hand, made a loop toward the northeast, and at ten o'clock the little party reached a sort of redan, formed by a projecting rock.

The provisions were brought out, and justice was done to their meal. Mary Grant and the Major, who had not thought highly of the edible fern till then, now ate of it heartily.

The halt lasted till two o'clock in the afternoon, then they resumed their journey; and in the evening they stopped eight miles from the mountains, and required no persuasion to sleep in the open air.

Next day was one of serious difficulties. Their route lay across this wondrous region of volcanic lakes, geysers, and solfataras, which extended to the east of the Wahiti Ranges. It is a country more pleasant for the eye to ramble over, than for the limbs. Every quarter of a mile they had to turn aside or go around for some obstacle, and thus incurred great fatigue; but what a strange sight met their eyes! What infinite variety nature lavishes on her great panoramas!

On this vast extent of twenty miles square, the subterranean forces had a field for the display of all their varied effects. Salt springs, of singular transparency, peopled by myriads of insects, sprang up from thickets of tea-tree scrub. They diffused a powerful odor of burnt powder, and scattered on the ground a white sediment like dazzling snow. The limpid waters were nearly at boiling point, while some neighboring springs spread out like sheets of glass. Gigantic tree-ferns grew beside them, in conditions analogous to those of the Silurian vegetation.

On every side jets of water rose like park fountains, out of a sea of vapor; some of them continuous, others intermittent, as if a capricious Pluto controlled their movements. They rose like an amphitheater on natural terraces; their waters gradually flowed together under folds of white smoke, and corroding the edges of the semi-transparent steps of this gigantic staircase. They fed whole lakes with their boiling torrents.

Farther still, beyond the hot springs and tumultuous geysers, came the solfataras. The ground looked as if covered with large pustules. These were slumbering craters full of cracks and fissures from which rose various gases. The air was saturated with the acrid and unpleasant odor of sulphurous acid. The ground was encrusted with sulphur and crystalline concretions. All this incalculable wealth had been accumulating for centuries, and if the sulphur beds of Sicily should ever be exhausted, it is here, in this little known district of New Zealand, that supplies must be sought.

The fatigue in traveling in such a country as this will be best understood. Camping was very difficult, and the sportsmen of the party shot nothing worthy of Olbinett’s skill; so that they had generally to content themselves with fern and sweet potato — a poor diet which was scarcely sufficient to recruit the exhausted strength of the little party, who were all anxious to escape from this barren region.

But four days at least must elapse before they could hope to leave it. On February 23, at a distance of fifty miles from Maunganamu, Glenarvan called a halt, and camped at the foot of a nameless mountain, marked on Paganel’s map. The wooded plains stretched away from sight, and great forests appeared on the horizon.

That day McNabbs and Robert killed three kiwis, which filled the chief place on their table, not for long, however, for in a few moments they were all consumed from the beaks to the claws.

At dessert, between the potatoes and sweet potatoes, Paganel moved a resolution which was carried with enthusiasm. He proposed to give the name of Glenarvan to this unnamed mountain, which rose 3,000 feet high, and then was lost in the clouds, and he printed carefully on his map the name of the Scottish nobleman.

It would be idle to narrate all the monotonous and uninteresting details of the rest of the journey. Only two or three occurrences of any importance took place on the way from the lakes to the Pacific Ocean. The march was all day long across forests and plains. John took observations of the sun and stars. Neither heat nor rain increased the discomfort of the journey, but the travelers were so reduced by the trials they had undergone, that they made very slow progress; and they longed to arrive at the mission station.

They still chatted, but the conversation had ceased to be general. The little party broke up into groups, attracted to each other, not by narrow sympathies, but by a more personal communion of ideas.

Glenarvan generally walked alone; his mind seemed to recur to his unfortunate crew, as he drew nearer to the sea. He apparently lost sight of the dangers which lay before them on their way to Auckland, in the thought of his massacred men; the horrible picture haunted him.

Harry Grant was never spoken of; they were no longer in a position to make any effort on his behalf. If his name was uttered at all, it was between his daughter and John Mangles.

John had never reminded Mary of what she had said to him on that last night at Ware-Atoua. He was too wise to take advantage of a word spoken in a moment of despair. When he mentioned Captain Grant, John always spoke of further search. He assured Mary that Lord Glenarvan would re-embark in the enterprise. He persistently returned to the fact that the authenticity of the document was indisputable, and that therefore Harry Grant was somewhere to be found, and that they would find him, if they had to try all over the world. Mary drank in his words, and she and John, united by the same thought, cherished the same hope. Often Lady Helena joined in the conversation; but she did not participate in their illusions, though she refrained from chilling their enthusiasm.

McNabbs, Robert, Wilson, and Mulrady kept up their hunting parties, without going far from the rest, and each one furnished his QUOTA of game.

Paganel, arrayed in his flax mat, kept himself aloof, in a silent and pensive mood.

And yet, it is only justice to say, in spite of the general rule that, in the midst of trials, dangers, fatigues, and privations, the most amiable dispositions become ruffled and embittered, all our travelers were united, devoted, ready to die for one another.

On the 25th of February, their progress was stopped by a river which answered to the Wakari on Paganel’s map, and was easily forded. For two days plains of low scrub succeeded each other without interruption. Half the distance from Lake Taupo to the coast had been traversed without accident, though not without fatigue.

Then the scene changed to immense and interminable forests, which reminded them of Australia, but here the kauri took the place of the eucalyptus. Although their enthusiasm had been incessantly called forth during their four months’ journey, Glenarvan and his companions were compelled to admire and wonder at those gigantic pines, worthy rivals of the Cedars of Lebanon, and the “Mammoth trees” of California. The kauris measured a hundred feet high, before the ramification of the branches. They grew in isolated clumps, and the forest was not composed of trees, but of innumerable groups of trees, which spread their green canopies in the air two hundred feet from the ground.

Some of these pines, still young, about a hundred years old, resembled the red pine of Europe. They had a dark crown surmounted by a dark conical shoot. Their older brethren, five or six hundred years of age, formed great green pavilions supported on the inextricable network of their branches.

These patriarchs of the New Zealand forest measured fifty yards in circumference, and the united arms of all the travelers could not embrace the giant trunk.

For three days the little party made their way under these vast arches, over a clayey soil which the foot of man had never trod. They knew this by the quantity of resinous gum that lay in heaps at the foot of the trees, and which would have lasted for native exportation many years.

The sportsmen found whole coveys of the kiwi, which are scarce in districts frequented by the Maories; the native dogs drive them away to the shelter of these inaccessible forests. They were an abundant source of nourishing food to our travelers.

Paganel also had the good fortune to espy, in a thicket, a pair of gigantic birds; his instinct as a naturalist was awakened. He called his companions, and in spite of their fatigue, the Major, Robert, and he set off on the track of these animals.

His curiosity was excusable, for he had recognized, or thought he had recognized, these birds as “moas” belonging to the species of “dinornis,” which many naturalists class with the extinct birds. This, if Paganel was right, would confirm the opinion of Dr. Hochstetter and other travelers on the present existence of the wingless giants of New Zealand.

These moas which Paganel was chasing, the contemporaries of the Megatherium and the Pterodactyles, must have been eighteen feet high. They were huge ostriches, timid too, for they fled with extreme rapidity. But no shot could stay their course. After a few minutes of chase, these fleet-footed moas disappeared among the tall trees, and the sportsmen lost their powder and their pains.

That evening, March 1, Glenarvan and his companions, emerging at last from the immense kauri-forest, camped at the foot of Mount Ikirangi, whose summit rose five thousand five hundred feet into the air. At this point they had traveled a hundred miles from Maunganamu, and the shore was still thirty miles away. John Mangles had calculated on accomplishing the whole journey in ten days, but he did not foresee the physical difficulties of the country.

On the whole, owing to the circuits, the obstacles, and the imperfect observations, the journey had been extended by fully one-fifth, and now that they had reached Mount Ikirangi, they were quite worn out.

Two long days of walking were still to be accomplished, during which time all their activity and vigilance would be required, for their way was through a district often frequented by the natives. The little party conquered their weariness, and set out next morning at daybreak.

Between Mount Ikirangi which was left to the right, and Mount Hardy whose summit rose on the left to a height of 3,700 feet, the journey was very trying; for about ten miles the bush was a tangle of “supple-jack,” a kind of flexible rope, appropriately called “stifling-creeper,” that caught the feet at every step. For two days, they had to cut their way with an ax through this thousand-headed hydra. Hunting became impossible, and the sportsmen failed in their accustomed tribute. The provisions were almost exhausted, and there was no means of renewing them; their thirst was increasing by fatigue, and there was no water wherewith to quench it.

The sufferings of Glenarvan and his party became terrible, and for the first time their moral energy threatened to give way. They no longer walked, they dragged themselves along, soulless bodies, animated only by the instinct of self-preservation which survives every other feeling, and in this melancholy plight they reached Point Lottin on the shores of the Pacific.

Here they saw several deserted huts, the ruins of a village lately destroyed by the war, abandoned fields, and everywhere signs of pillage and incendiary fires.

They were toiling painfully along the shore, when they saw, at a distance of about a mile, a band of natives, who rushed toward them brandishing their weapons. Glenarvan, hemmed in by the sea, could not fly, and summoning all his remaining strength he was about to meet the attack, when John Mangles cried:

“A boat! a boat!”

And there, twenty paces off, a canoe with six oars lay on the beach. To launch it, jump in and fly from the dangerous shore, was only a minute’s work. John Mangles, McNabbs, Wilson and Mulrady took the oars; Glenarvan the helm; the two women, Robert and Olbinett stretched themselves beside him. In ten minutes the canoe was a quarter of a mile from the shore. The sea was calm. The fugitives were silent. But John, who did not want to get too far from land, was about to give the order to go up the coast, when he suddenly stopped rowing.

He saw three canoes coming out from behind Point Lottin and evidently about to give chase.

“Out to sea! Out to sea!” he exclaimed. “Better to drown if we must!”

The canoe went fast under her four rowers. For half an hour she kept her distance; but the poor exhausted fellows grew weaker, and the three pursuing boats began to gain sensibly on them. At this moment, scarcely two miles lay between them. It was impossible to avoid the attack of the natives, who were already preparing to fire their long guns.

What was Glenarvan about? — standing up in the stern he was looking toward the horizon for some chimerical help. What did he hope for? What did he wish? Had he a presentiment?

In a moment his eyes gleamed, his hand pointed out into the distance.

“A ship! a ship!” he cried. “My friends, row! row hard!”

Not one of the rowers turned his head — not an oar-stroke must be lost.

Paganel alone rose, and turned his telescope to the point indicated.

“Yes,” said he, “a ship! a steamer! they are under full steam! they are coming to us! Found now, brave comrades!”

The fugitives summoned new energy, and for another half hour, keeping their distance, they rowed with hasty strokes. The steamer came nearer and nearer. They made out her two masts, bare of sails, and the great volumes of black smoke. Glenarvan, handing the tiller to Robert, seized Paganel’s glass, and watched the movements of the steamer.

John Mangles and his companions were lost in wonder when they saw Glenarvan’s features contract and grow pale, and the glass drop from his hands. One word explained it.

“The DUNCAN!” exclaimed Glenarvan. “The DUNCAN, and the convicts!”

“The DUNCAN!” cried John, letting go his oar and rising.

“Yes, death on all sides!” murmured Glenarvan, crushed by despair.

It was indeed the yacht, they could not mistake her — the yacht and her bandit crew!

The major could scarcely restrain himself from cursing their destiny.

The canoe was meantime standing still. Where should they go? Whither fly? What choice was there between the convicts and the savages?

A shot was fired from the nearest of the native boats, and the ball struck Wilson’s oar.

A few strokes then carried the canoe nearer to the DUNCAN.

The yacht was coming down at full speed, and was not more than half a mile off.

John Mangles, between two enemies, did not know what to advise, whither to fly! The two poor ladies on their knees, prayed in their agony.

The savages kept up a running fire, and shots were raining round the canoe, when suddenly a loud report was heard, and a ball from the yacht’s cannon passed over their heads, and now the boat remained motionless between the DUNCAN and the native canoes.

John Mangles, frenzied with despair, seized his ax. He was about to scuttle the boat and sink it with his unfortunate companions, when a cry from Robert arrested his arm.

“Tom Austin! Tom Austin!” the lad shouted. “He is on board!

I see him! He knows us! He is waving his hat.”

The ax hung useless in John’s hand.

A second ball whistled over his head, and cut in two the nearest of the three native boats, while a loud hurrah burst forth on board the DUNCAN.

The savages took flight, fled and regained the shore.

“Come on, Tom, come on!” cried John Mangles in a joyous voice.

And a few minutes after, the ten fugitives, how, they knew not, were all safe on board the DUNCAN.

CHAPTER XVI WHY THE “DUNCAN” WENT TO NEW ZEALAND

IT would be vain to attempt to depict the feelings of Glenarvan and his friends when the songs of old Scotia fell on their ears. The moment they set foot on the deck of the DUNCAN, the piper blew his bagpipes, and commenced the national pibroch of the Malcolm clan, while loud hurrahs rent the air.

Glenarvan and his whole party, even the Major himself, were crying and embracing each other. They were delirious with joy. The geographer was absolutely mad. He frisked about, telescope in hand, pointing it at the last canoe approaching the shore.

But at the sight of Glenarvan and his companions, with their clothing in rags, and thin, haggard faces, bearing marks of horrible sufferings, the crew ceased their noisy demonstrations. These were specters who had returned — not the bright, adventurous travelers who had left the yacht three months before, so full of hope! Chance, and chance only, had brought them back to the deck of the yacht they never thought to see again. And in what a state of exhaustion and feebleness. But before thinking of fatigue, or attending to the imperious demands of hunger and thirst, Glenarvan questioned Tom Austin about his being on this coast.

Why had the DUNCAN come to the eastern coast of New Zealand? How was it not in the hands of Ben Joyce? By what providential fatality had God brought them in the track of the fugitives?

Why? how? and for what purpose? Tom was stormed with questions on all sides. The old sailor did not know which to listen to first, and at last resolved to hear nobody but Glenarvan, and to answer nobody but him.

"But the convicts?" inquired Glenarvan. "What did you do with them?"

"The convicts?" replied Tom, with the air of a man who does not in the least understand what he is being asked.

"Yes, the wretches who attacked the yacht."

"What yacht? Your Honor's?"

"Why, of course, Tom. The DUNCAN, and Ben Joyce, who came on board."

"I don't know this Ben Joyce, and have never seen him."

"Never seen him!" exclaimed Paganel, stupefied at the old sailor's replies. "Then pray tell me, Tom, how it is that the DUNCAN is cruising at this moment on the coast of New Zealand?"

But if Glenarvan and his friends were totally at a loss to understand the bewilderment of the old sailor, what was their amazement when he replied in a calm voice:

"The DUNCAN is cruising here by your Honor's orders."

"By my orders?" cried Glenarvan.

"Yes, my Lord. I only acted in obedience to the instructions sent in your letter of January fourteenth."

"My letter! my letter!" exclaimed Glenarvan.

The ten travelers pressed closer round Tom Austin, devouring him with their eyes. The letter dated from Snowy River had reached the DUNCAN, then.

“Let us come to explanations, pray, for it seems to me I am dreaming.

You received a letter, Tom?”

“Yes, a letter from your Honor.”

“At Melbourne?”

“At Melbourne, just as our repairs were completed.”

“And this letter?”

“It was not written by you, but bore your signature, my Lord.”

“Just so; my letter was brought by a convict called Ben Joyce.”

“No, by a sailor called Ayrton, a quartermaster on the BRITANNIA.”

“Yes, Ayrton or Ben Joyce, one and the same individual.

Well, and what were the contents of this letter?”

“It contained orders to leave Melbourne without delay, and go and cruise on the eastern coast of — ”

“Australia!” said Glenarvan with such vehemence that the old sailor was somewhat disconcerted.

“Of Australia?” repeated Tom, opening his eyes. “No, but New Zealand.”

“Australia, Tom! Australia!” they all cried with one voice.

Austin’s head began to feel in a whirl. Glenarvan spoke with such assurance that he thought after all he must have made a mistake in reading the letter. Could a faithful, exact old servant like himself have been guilty of such a thing! He turned red and looked quite disturbed.

“Never mind, Tom,” said Lady Helena. “God so willed it.”

“But, no, madam, pardon me,” replied old Tom. “No, it is impossible, I was not mistaken. Ayrton read the letter as I did, and it was he, on the contrary, who wished to bring me to the Australian coast.”

“Ayrton!” cried Glenarvan.

“Yes, Ayrton himself. He insisted it was a mistake: that you meant to order me to Twofold Bay.”

“Have you the letter still, Tom?” asked the Major, extremely interested in this mystery.

“Yes, Mr. McNabbs,” replied Austin. “I’ll go and fetch it.”

He ran at once to his cabin in the forecastle. During his momentary absence they gazed at each other in silence, all but the Major, who crossed his arms and said:

“Well, now, Paganel, you must own this would be going a little too far.”

“What?” growled Paganel, looking like a gigantic note of interrogation, with his spectacles on his forehead and his stooping back.

Austin returned directly with the letter written by Paganel and signed by Glenarvan.

“Will your Honor read it?” he said, handing it to him.

Glenarvan took the letter and read as follows:

“Order to Tom Austin to put out to sea without delay, and to take the Duncan, by latitude 37 degrees to the eastern coast of New Zealand!”

“New Zealand!” cried Paganel, leaping up.

And he seized the letter from Glenarvan, rubbed his eyes, pushed down his spectacles on his nose, and read it for himself.

“New Zealand!” he repeated in an indescribable tone, letting the order slip between his fingers.

That same moment he felt a hand laid on his shoulder, and turning round found himself face to face with the Major, who said in a grave tone:

“Well, my good Paganel, after all, it is a lucky thing you did not send the DUNCAN to Cochin China!”

This pleasantry finished the poor geographer. The crew burst out into loud Homeric laughter. Paganel ran about like a madman, seized his head with both hands and tore his hair. He neither knew what he was doing nor what he wanted to do. He rushed down the poop stairs mechanically and paced the deck, nodding to himself and going straight before without aim or object till he reached the forecastle. There his feet got entangled in a coil of rope. He stumbled and fell, accidentally catching hold of a rope with both hands in his fall.

Suddenly a tremendous explosion was heard. The forecastle gun had gone off, riddling the quiet calm of the waves with a volley of small shot. The unfortunate Paganel had caught hold of the cord of the loaded gun. The geographer was thrown down the forecastle ladder and disappeared below.

A cry of terror succeeded the surprise produced by the explosion. Everybody thought something terrible must have happened. The sailors rushed between decks and lifted up Paganel, almost bent double. The geographer uttered no sound.

They carried his long body onto the poop. His companions were in despair. The Major, who was always the surgeon on great occasions, began to strip the unfortunate that he might dress his wounds; but he had scarcely put his hands on the dying man when he started up as if touched by an electrical machine.

“Never! never!” he exclaimed, and pulling his ragged coat tightly round him, he began buttoning it up in a strangely excited manner.

“But, Paganel,” began the Major.

“No, I tell you!”

“I must examine — ”

“You shall not examine.”

“You may perhaps have broken — ” continued McNabbs.

“Yes,” continued Paganel, getting up on his long legs, “but what I have broken the carpenter can mend.”

“What is it, then?”

“There.”

Bursts of laughter from the crew greeted this speech.

Paganel’s friends were quite reassured about him now.

They were satisfied that he had come off safe and sound from

his adventure with the forecastle gun.

“At any rate,” thought the Major, “the geographer is wonderfully bashful.”

But now Paganel was recovered a little, he had to reply to a question he could not escape.

“Now, Paganel,” said Glenarvan, “tell us frankly all about it. I own that your blunder was providential. It is sure and certain that but for you the DUNCAN would have fallen into the hands of the convicts; but for you we should have been recaptured by the Maories. But for my sake tell me by what supernatural aberration of mind you were induced to write New Zealand instead of Australia?”

“Well, upon my oath,” said Paganel, “it is — ”

But the same instant his eyes fell on Mary and Robert Grant, and he stopped short and then went on:

“What would you have me say, my dear Glenarvan? I am mad, I am an idiot, an incorrigible fellow, and I shall live and die the most terrible absent man. I can’t change my skin.”

“Unless you get flayed alive.”

“Get flayed alive!” cried the geographer, with a furious look.

“Is that a personal allusion?”

“An allusion to what?” asked McNabbs, quietly. This was all that passed. The mystery of the DUNCAN’S presence on the coast was explained, and all that the travelers thought about now was to get back to their comfortable cabins, and to have breakfast.

However, Glenarvan and John Mangles stayed behind with Tom Austin after the others had retired. They wished to put some further questions to him.

“Now, then, old Austin,” said Glenarvan, “tell me, didn’t it strike you as strange to be ordered to go and cruise on the coast of New Zealand?”

“Yes, your Honor,” replied Tom. “I was very much surprised, but it is not my custom to discuss any orders I receive, and I obeyed. Could I do otherwise? If some catastrophe had occurred through not carrying out your injunctions to the letter, should not I have been to blame? Would you have acted differently, captain?”

“No, Tom,” replied John Mangles.

“But what did you think?” asked Glenarvan.

“I thought, your Honor, that in the interest of Harry Grant, it was necessary to go where I was told to go. I thought that in consequence of fresh arrangements, you were to sail over to New Zealand, and that I was to wait for you on the east coast of the island. Moreover, on leaving Melbourne, I kept our destination a secret, and the crew only knew it when we were right out at sea, and the Australian continent was finally out of sight. But one circumstance occurred which greatly perplexed me.”

“What was it, Tom?” asked Glenarvan.

“Just this, that when the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA heard our destination — ”

“Ayrton!” cried Glenarvan. “Then he is on board?”

“Yes, your Honor.”

“Ayrton here?” repeated Glenarvan, looking at John Mangles.

“God has so willed!” said the young captain.

In an instant, like lightning, Ayrton’s conduct, his long-planned treachery, Glenarvan’s wound, Mulrady’s assassination, the sufferings of the expedition in the marshes of the Snowy River, the whole past life of the miscreant, flashed before the eyes of the two men. And now, by the strangest concourse of events, the convict was in their power.

“Where is he?” asked Glenarvan eagerly.

“In a cabin in the forecastle, and under guard.”

“Why was he imprisoned?”

“Because when Ayrton heard the vessel was going to New Zealand, he was in a fury; because he tried to force me to alter the course of the ship; because he threatened me; and, last of all, because he incited my men to mutiny. I saw clearly he was a dangerous individual, and I must take precautions against him."

"And since then?"

"Since then he has remained in his cabin without attempting to go out."

"That's well, Tom."

Just at this moment Glenarvan and John Mangles were summoned to the saloon where breakfast, which they so sorely needed, was awaiting them. They seated themselves at the table and spoke no more of Ayrton.

But after the meal was over, and the guests were refreshed and invigorated, and they all went upon deck, Glenarvan acquainted them with the fact of the quartermaster's presence on board, and at the same time announced his intention of having him brought before them.

"May I beg to be excused from being present at his examination?" said Lady Helena. "I confess, dear Edward, it would be extremely painful for me to see the wretched man."

"He must be confronted with us, Helena," replied Lord Glenarvan; "I beg you will stay. Ben Joyce must see all his victims face to face."

Lady Helena yielded to his wish. Mary Grant sat beside her, near Glenarvan. All the others formed a group round them, the whole party that had been compromised so seriously by the treachery of the convict. The crew of the yacht, without understanding the gravity of the situation, kept profound silence.

"Bring Ayrton here," said Glenarvan.

CHAPTER XVII AYRTON’S OBSTINACY

AYRTON came. He crossed the deck with a confident tread, and mounted the steps to the poop. His eyes were gloomy, his teeth set, his fists clenched convulsively. His appearance betrayed neither effrontery nor timidity. When he found himself in the presence of Lord Glenarvan he folded his arms and awaited the questions calmly and silently.

“Ayrton,” said Glenarvan, “here we are then, you and us, on this very DUNCAN that you wished to deliver into the hands of the convicts of Ben Joyce.”

The lips of the quartermaster trembled slightly and a quick flush suffused his impassive features. Not the flush of remorse, but of shame at failure. On this yacht which he thought he was to command as master, he was a prisoner, and his fate was about to be decided in a few seconds.

However, he made no reply. Glenarvan waited patiently.

But Ayrton persisted in keeping absolute silence.

“Speak, Ayrton, what have you to say?” resumed Glenarvan.

Ayrton hesitated, the wrinkles in his forehead deepened, and at length he said in calm voice:

“I have nothing to say, my Lord. I have been fool enough to allow myself to be caught. Act as you please.”

Then he turned his eyes away toward the coast which lay on the west, and affected profound indifference to what was passing around him. One would have thought him a stranger to the whole affair. But Glenarvan was determined to be patient. Powerful motives urged him to find out certain details concerning the mysterious life of Ayrton, especially those which related to Harry Grant and the BRITANNIA. He therefore resumed his interrogations, speaking with extreme gentleness and firmly restraining his violent irritation against him.

“I think, Ayrton,” he went on, “that you will not refuse to reply to certain questions that I wish to put to you; and, first of all, ought I to call you Ayrton or Ben Joyce? Are you, or are you not, the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA?”

Ayrton remained impassive, gazing at the coast, deaf to every question.

Glenarvan’s eyes kindled, as he said again:

“Will you tell me how you left the BRITANNIA, and why you are in Australia?”

The same silence, the same impassibility.

“Listen to me, Ayrton,” continued Glenarvan; “it is to your interest to speak. Frankness is the only resource left to you, and it may stand you in good stead. For the last time, I ask you, will you reply to my questions?”

Ayrton turned his head toward Glenarvan, and looked into his eyes.

“My Lord,” he said, “it is not for me to answer. Justice may witness against me, but I am not going to witness against myself.”

“Proof will be easy,” said Glenarvan.

“Easy, my Lord,” repeated Ayrton, in a mocking tone. “Your honor makes rather a bold assertion there, it seems to me. For my own part, I venture to affirm that the best judge in the Temple would be puzzled what to make of me. Who will say why I came to Australia, when Captain Grant is not here to tell? Who will prove that I am the Ben Joyce placarded by the police, when the police have never had me in their hands, and my companions are at liberty? Who can damage me except yourself, by bringing forward a single crime against me, or even a blameable action? Who will affirm that I intended to take possession of this ship and deliver it into the hands of the convicts? No one, I tell you, no one. You have your suspicions, but you need certainties to condemn a man, and certainties you have none. Until there is a proof to the contrary, I am Ayrton, quartermaster of the BRITANNIA.”

Ayrton had become animated while he was speaking, but soon relapsed into his former indifference.

He, no doubt, expected that his reply would close the examination, but Glenarvan commenced again, and said:

“Ayrton, I am not a Crown prosecutor charged with your indictment. That is no business of mine. It is important that our respective situations should be clearly defined. I am not asking you anything that could compromise you. That is for justice to do. But you know what I am searching for, and a single word may put me on the track I have lost. Will you speak?”

Ayrton shook his head like a man determined to be silent.

“Will you tell me where Captain Grant is?” asked Glenarvan.

“No, my Lord,” replied Ayrton.

"Will you tell me where the BRITANNIA was wrecked?"

"No, neither the one nor the other."

"Ayrton," said Glenarvan, in almost beseeching tones, "if you know where Harry Grant is, will you, at least, tell his poor children, who are waiting for you to speak the word?"

Ayrton hesitated. His features contracted, and he muttered in a low voice, "I cannot, my Lord."

Then he added with vehemence, as if reproaching himself for a momentary weakness:

"No, I will not speak. Have me hanged, if you choose."

"Hanged!" exclaimed Glenarvan, overcome by a sudden feeling of anger.

But immediately mastering himself, he added in a grave voice:

"Ayrton, there is neither judge nor executioner here. At the first port we touch at, you will be given up into the hands of the English authorities."

"That is what I demand," was the quartermaster's reply.

Then he turned away and quietly walked back to his cabin, which served as his prison. Two sailors kept guard at the door, with orders to watch his slightest movement. The witnesses of this examination retired from the scene indignant and despairing.

As Glenarvan could make no way against Ayrton's obstinacy, what was to be done now? Plainly no course remained but to carry out the plan formed at Eden, of returning to Europe and giving up for the time this unsuccessful enterprise, for the traces of the BRITANNIA seemed irrevocably lost, and the document did not appear to allow any fresh interpretation. On the 37th parallel there was not even another country, and the DUNCAN had only to turn and go back.

After Glenarvan had consulted his friends, he talked over the question of returning, more particularly with the captain. John examined the coal bunkers, and found there was only enough to last fifteen days longer at the outside. It was necessary, therefore, to put in at the nearest port for a fresh supply.

John proposed that he should steer for the Bay of Talcahuano, where the DUNCAN had once before been revictualed before she commenced her voyage of circumnavigation. It was a direct route across, and lay exactly along the 37th parallel. From thence the yacht, being amply provisioned, might go south, double Cape Horn, and get back to Scotland by the Atlantic route.

This plan was adopted, and orders were given to the engineer to get up the steam. Half an hour afterward the beak-head of the yacht was turned toward Talcahuano, over a sea worthy of being called the Pacific, and at six P. M. the last mountains of New Zealand had disappeared in warm, hazy mist on the horizon.

The return voyage was fairly commenced. A sad voyage, for the courageous searching party to come back to the port without bringing home Harry Grant with them! The crew, so joyous at departure and so hopeful, were coming back to Europe defeated and discouraged. There was not one among the brave fellows whose heart did not swell at the thought of seeing his own country once more; and yet there was not one among them either who would not have been willing to brave the perils of the sea for a long time still if they could but find Captain Grant.

Consequently, the hurrahs which greeted the return of Lord Glenarvan to the yacht soon gave place to dejection. Instead of the close intercourse which had formerly existed among the passengers, and the lively conversations which had cheered the voyage, each one kept apart from the others in the solitude of his own cabin, and it was seldom that anyone appeared on the deck of the DUNCAN.

Paganel, who generally shared in an exaggerated form the feelings of those about him, whether painful or joyous — a man who could have invented hope if necessary — even Paganel was gloomy and taciturn. He was seldom visible; his natural loquacity and French vivacity gave place to silence and dejection. He seemed even more downhearted than his companions. If Glenarvan spoke at all of renewing the search, he shook his head like a man who has given up all hope, and whose convictions concerning the fate of the shipwrecked men appeared settled. It was quite evident he believed them irrevocably lost.

And yet there was a man on board who could have spoken the decisive word, and refused to break his silence. This was Ayrton. There was no doubt the fellow knew, if not the present whereabouts of the captain, at least the place of shipwreck. But it was evident that were Grant found, he would be a witness against him. Hence his persistent silence, which gave rise to great indignation on board, especially among the crew, who would have liked to deal summarily with him.

Glenarvan repeatedly renewed his attempts with the quartermaster, but promises and threats were alike useless. Ayrton’s obstinacy was so great, and so inexplicable, that the Major began to believe he had nothing to reveal. His opinion was shared, moreover, by the geographer, as it corroborated his own notion about Harry Grant.

But if Ayrton knew nothing, why did he not confess his ignorance? It could not be turned against him. His silence increased the difficulty of forming any new plan. Was the presence of the quartermaster on the Australian continent a proof of Harry Grant's being there? It was settled that they must get this information out of Ayrton.

Lady Helena, seeing her husband's ill-success, asked his permission to try her powers against the obstinacy of the quartermaster. When a man had failed, a woman perhaps, with her gentler influence, might succeed. Is there not a constant repetition going on of the story of the fable where the storm, blow as it will, cannot tear the cloak from the shoulders of the traveler, while the first warm rays of sunshine make him throw it off immediately?

Glenarvan, knowing his young wife's good sense, allowed her to act as she pleased.

The same day (the 5th of March), Ayrton was conducted to Lady Helena's saloon. Mary Grant was to be present at the interview, for the influence of the young girl might be considerable, and Lady Helena would not lose any chance of success.

For a whole hour the two ladies were closeted with the quartermaster, but nothing transpired about their interview. What had been said, what arguments they used to win the secret from the convict, or what questions were asked, remained unknown; but when they left Ayrton, they did not seem to have succeeded, as the expression on their faces denoted discouragement.

In consequence of this, when the quartermaster was being taken back to his cabin, the sailors met him with violent menaces. He took no notice except by shrugging his shoulders, which so increased their rage, that John Mangles and Glenarvan had to interfere, and could only repress it with difficulty.

But Lady Helena would not own herself vanquished. She resolved to struggle to the last with this pitiless man, and went next day herself to his cabin to avoid exposing him again to the vindictiveness of the crew.

The good and gentle Scotchwoman stayed alone with the convict leader for two long hours. Glenarvan in a state of extreme nervous anxiety, remained outside the cabin, alternately resolved to exhaust completely this last chance of success, alternately resolved to rush in and snatch his wife from so painful a situation.

But this time when Lady Helena reappeared, her look was full of hope. Had she succeeded in extracting the secret, and awakening in that adamant heart a last faint touch of pity?

McNabbs, who first saw her, could not restrain a gesture of incredulity.

However the report soon spread among the sailors that the quartermaster had yielded to the persuasions of Lady Helena. The effect was electrical. The entire crew assembled on deck far quicker than Tom Austin’s whistle could have brought them together.

Glenarvan had hastened up to his wife and eagerly asked:

“Has he spoken?”

“No,” replied Lady Helena, “but he has yielded to my entreaties, and wishes to see you.”

“Ah, dear Helena, you have succeeded!”

“I hope so, Edward.”

“Have you made him any promise that I must ratify?”

“Only one; that you will do all in your power to mitigate his punishment.”

“Very well, dear Helena. Let Ayrton come immediately.”

Lady Helena retired to her cabin with Mary Grant, and the quartermaster was brought into the saloon where Lord Glenarvan was expecting him.

CHAPTER XVIII A DISCOURAGING CONFESSION

As soon as the quartermaster was brought into the presence of Lord Glenarvan, his keepers withdrew.

“You wanted to speak to me, Ayrton?” said Glenarvan.

“Yes, my Lord,” replied the quartermaster.

“Did you wish for a private interview?”

“Yes, but I think if Major McNabbs and Mr. Paganel were present it would be better.”

“For whom?”

“For myself.”

Ayrton spoke quite calmly and firmly. Glenarvan looked at him for an instant, and then sent to summon McNabbs and Paganel, who came at once.

“We are all ready to listen to you,” said Glenarvan, when his two friends had taken their place at the saloon table.

Ayrton collected himself, for an instant, and then said:

“My Lord, it is usual for witnesses to be present at every contract or transaction between two parties. That is why I desire the presence of Messrs. Paganel and McNabbs, for it is, properly speaking, a bargain which I propose to make.”

Glenarvan, accustomed to Ayrton's ways, exhibited no surprise, though any bargaining between this man and himself seemed strange.

"What is the bargain?" he said.

"This," replied Ayrton. "You wish to obtain from me certain facts which may be useful to you. I wish to obtain from you certain advantages which would be valuable to me. It is giving for giving, my Lord. Do you agree to this or not?"

"What are the facts?" asked Paganel eagerly.

"No," said Glenarvan. "What are the advantages?"

Ayrton bowed in token that he understood Glenarvan's distinction.

"These," he said, "are the advantages I ask. It is still your intention,

I suppose, to deliver me up to the English authorities?"

"Yes, Ayrton, it is only justice."

"I don't say it is not," replied the quartermaster quietly.

"Then of course you would never consent to set me at liberty."

Glenarvan hesitated before replying to a question so plainly put.

On the answer he gave, perhaps the fate of Harry Grant might depend!

However, a feeling of duty toward human justice compelled him to say:

"No, Ayrton, I cannot set you at liberty."

“I do not ask it,” said the quartermaster proudly.

“Then, what is it you want?”

“A middle place, my Lord, between the gibbet that awaits me and the liberty which you cannot grant me.”

“And that is — ”

“To allow me to be left on one of the uninhabited islands of the Pacific, with such things as are absolute necessaries. I will manage as best I can, and will repent if I have time.”

Glenarvan, quite unprepared for such a proposal, looked at his two friends in silence. But after a brief reflection, he replied:

“Ayrton, if I agree to your request, you will tell me all I have an interest in knowing.”

“Yes, my Lord, that is to say, all I know about Captain Grant and the BRITANNIA.”

“The whole truth?”

“The whole.”

“But what guarantee have I?”

“Oh, I see what you are uneasy about. You need a guarantee for me, for the truth of a criminal. That’s natural. But what can you have under the circumstances. There is no help for it, you must either take my offer or leave it.”

“I will trust to you, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan, simply.

“And you do right, my Lord. Besides, if I deceive you, vengeance is in your own power.”

“How?”

“You can come and take me again from where you left me, as I shall have no means of getting away from the island.”

Ayrton had an answer for everything. He anticipated the difficulties and furnished unanswerable arguments against himself. It was evident he intended to affect perfect good faith in the business. It was impossible to show more complete confidence. And yet he was prepared to go still further in disinterestedness.

“My Lord and gentlemen,” he added, “I wish to convince you of the fact that I am playing cards on the table. I have no wish to deceive you, and I am going to give you a fresh proof of my sincerity in this matter. I deal frankly with you, because I reckon on your honor.”

“Speak, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan.

“My Lord, I have not your promise yet to accede to my proposal, and yet I do not scruple to tell you that I know very little about Harry Grant.”

“Very little,” exclaimed Glenarvan.

“Yes, my Lord, the details I am in a position to give you relate to myself. They are entirely personal, and will not do much to help you to recover the lost traces of Captain Grant.”

Keen disappointment was depicted on the faces of Glenarvan and the Major.

They thought the quartermaster in the possession of an important secret,

and he declared that his communications would be very nearly barren.

Paganel’s countenance remained unmoved.

Somehow or other, this avowal of Ayrton, and surrender of himself, so to speak, unconditionally, singularly touched his auditors, especially when the quartermaster added:

“So I tell you beforehand, the bargain will be more to my profit than yours.”

“It does not signify,” replied Glenarvan. “I accept your proposal, Ayrton. I give you my word to land you on one of the islands of the Pacific Ocean.”

“All right, my Lord,” replied the quartermaster.

Was this strange man glad of this decision? One might have doubted it, for his impassive countenance betokened no emotion whatever. It seemed as if he were acting for someone else rather than himself.

“I am ready to answer,” he said.

“We have no questions to put to you,” said Glenarvan. “Tell us all you know, Ayrton, and begin by declaring who you are.”

“Gentlemen,” replied Ayrton, “I am really Tom Ayrton, the quartermaster of the BRITANNIA. I left Glasgow on Harry Grant’s ship on the 12th of March, 1861. For fourteen months I cruised with him in the Pacific in search of an advantageous spot for founding a Scotch colony. Harry Grant was the man to carry out grand projects, but serious disputes often arose between us. His temper and mine could not agree. I cannot bend, and with Harry Grant, when once his resolution is taken, any resistance is impossible, my Lord. He has an iron will both for himself and others.

“But in spite of that, I dared to rebel, and I tried to get the crew to join me, and to take possession of the vessel. Whether I was to blame or not is of no consequence. Be that as it may, Harry Grant had no scruples, and on the 8th of April, 1862, he left me behind on the west coast of Australia.”

“Of Australia!” said the Major, interrupting Ayrton in his narrative. “Then of course you had quitted the BRITANNIA before she touched at Callao, which was her last date?”

“Yes,” replied the quartermaster, “for the BRITANNIA did not touch there while I was on board. And how I came to speak of Callao at Paddy O’Moore’s farm was that I learned the circumstances from your recital.”

“Go on, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan.

“I found myself abandoned on a nearly desert coast, but only forty miles from the penal settlement at Perth, the capital of Western Australia. As I was wandering there along the shore, I met a band of convicts who had just escaped, and I joined myself to them. You will dispense, my Lord, with any account of my life for two years and a half. This much, however, I must tell you, that I became the leader of the gang, under the name of Ben Joyce. In September, 1864, I introduced myself at the Irish farm, where I engaged myself as a servant in my real name, Ayrton. I waited there till I should get some chance of seizing a ship. This was my one idea. Two months afterward the DUNCAN arrived. During your visit to the farm you related Captain Grant’s history, and I learned then facts of which I was not previously aware — that the BRITANNIA had touched at Callao, and that her latest news was dated June, 1862, two months after my disembarkation, and also about the document and the loss of the ship somewhere along the 37th parallel; and, lastly, the strong reasons you had for supposing Harry Grant was on the Australian continent. Without the least hesitation I determined to appropriate the DUNCAN, a matchless vessel, able to outdistance the swiftest ships in the British Navy. But serious injuries had to be repaired. I therefore let it go to Melbourne, and joined myself to you in my true character as quartermaster, offering to guide you to the scene of the shipwreck, fictitiously placed by me on the east coast of Australia. It was in this way, followed or sometimes preceded by my gang of convicts, I directed your expedition toward the province of Victoria. My men committed a bootless crime at Camden Bridge; since the DUNCAN, if brought to the coast, could not escape me, and with the yacht once mine, I was master of the ocean. I led you in this way unsuspectingly as far as the Snowy River. The horses and bullocks dropped dead one by one, poisoned by the gastrolobium. I dragged the wagon into the marshes, where it got half buried. At my instance — but you know the rest, my Lord, and you may be sure that but for the blunder of Mr. Paganel, I should now command the DUNCAN. Such is my history, gentlemen. My disclosures, unfortunately, cannot put you on the track of Harry Grant, and you perceive that you have made but a poor bargain by coming to my terms."

The quartermaster said no more, but crossed his arms in his usual fashion and waited. Glenarvan and his friends kept silence. They felt that this strange criminal had spoken the whole truth. He had only missed his coveted prize, the DUNCAN, through a cause independent of his will. His accomplices had gone to Twofold Bay, as was proved by the convict blouse found by Glenarvan. Faithful to the orders of their chief, they had kept watch on the yacht, and at length, weary of waiting, had returned to the old haunt of robbers and incendiaries in the country parts of New South Wales.

The Major put the first question, his object being to verify the dates of the BRITANNIA.

“You are sure then,” he said, “that it was on the 8th of April you were left on the west coast of Australia?”

“On that very day,” replied Ayrton.

“And do you know what projects Harry Grant had in view at the time?”

“In an indefinite way I do.”

“Say all you can, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan, “the least indication may set us in the right course.”

“I only know this much, my Lord,” replied the quartermaster, “that Captain Grant intended to visit New Zealand. Now, as this part of the programme was not carried out while I was on board, it is not impossible that on leaving Callao the BRITANNIA went to reconnoiter New Zealand. This would agree with the date assigned by the document to the shipwreck — the 27th of June, 1862.”

“Clearly,” said Paganel.

“But,” objected Glenarvan, “there is nothing in the fragmentary words in the document that could apply to New Zealand.”

“That I cannot answer,” said the quartermaster.

“Well, Ayrton,” said Glenarvan, “you have kept your word, and I will keep mine. We have to decide now on what island of the Pacific Ocean you are to be left?”

“It matters little, my Lord,” replied Ayrton.

“Return to your cabin,” said Glenarvan, “and wait our decision.”

The quartermaster withdrew, guarded by the two sailors.

“That villain might have been a man,” said the Major.

“Yes,” returned Glenarvan; “he is a strong, clear-headed fellow.

Why was it that he must needs turn his powers to such evil account?”

“But Harry Grant?”

“I must fear he is irrevocably lost. Poor children!

Who can tell them where their father is?”

“I can!” replied Paganel. “Yes; I can!” One could not help remarking that the geographer, so loquacious and impatient usually, had scarcely spoken during Ayrton’s examination. He listened without opening his mouth. But this speech of his now was worth many others, and it made Glenarvan spring to his feet, crying out: “You, Paganel! you know where Captain Grant is?”

“Yes, as far as can be known.”

“How do you know?”

“From that infernal document.”

“Ah!” said the Major, in a tone of the most profound incredulity.

“Hear me first, and shrug your shoulders afterward,” said Paganel. “I did not speak sooner, because you would not have believed me. Besides, it was useless; and I only speak to-day because Ayrton’s opinion just supports my own.”

“Then it is New Zealand?” asked Glenarvan.

“Listen and judge,” replied Paganel. “It is not without reason, or, rather, I had a reason for making the blunder which has saved our lives. When I was in the very act of writing the letter to Glenarvan’s dictation, the word ZEALAND was swimming in my brain. This is why. You remember we were in the wagon. McNabbs had just apprised Lady Helena about the convicts; he had given her the number of the Australian and New Zealand Gazette which contained the account of the catastrophe at Camden Bridge. Now, just as I was writing, the newspaper was lying on the ground, folded in such a manner that only two syllables of the title were visible; these two syllables were ALAND. What a sudden light flashed on my mind. ALAND was one of the words in the English document, one that hitherto we had translated a terre, and which must have been the termination of the proper noun, ZEALAND.”

“Indeed!” said Glenarvan.

“Yes,” continued Paganel, with profound conviction; “this meaning had escaped me, and do you know why? Because my wits were exercised naturally on the French document, as it was most complete, and in that this important word was wanting.”

“Oh, oh!” said the Major; “your imagination goes too far, Paganel; and you forget your former deductions.”

“Go on, Major; I am ready to answer you.”

“Well, then, what do you make of your word AUSTRA?”

“What it was at first. It merely means southern countries.”

“Well, and this syllable, INDI, which was first the root of the INDIANS, and second the root of the word indigenes?”

“Well, the third and last time,” replied Paganel, “it will be the first syllable of the word INDIGENCE.”

“And CONTIN?” cried McNabbs. “Does that still mean CONTINENT?”

“No; since New Zealand is only an island.”

“What then?” asked Glenarvan.

“My dear lord,” replied Paganel, “I am going to translate the document according to my third interpretation, and you shall judge. I only make two observations beforehand. First, forget as much as possible preceding interpretations, and divest your mind of all preconceived notions. Second, certain parts may appear to you strained, and it is possible that I translate them badly; but they are of no importance; among others, the word AGONIE, which chokes me; but I cannot find any other explanation. Besides, my interpretation was founded on the French document; and don’t forget it was written by an Englishman, who could not be familiar with the idioms of the French language. Now then, having said this much, I will begin.”

And slowly articulating each syllable, he repeated the following sentences:

“LE 27th JUIN, 1862, le trois-mats Britannia, de Glasgow, a sombre apres une longue AGONIE dans les mers AUSTRALES sur les cotes de la Nouvelle ZELANDE — in English Zealand. Deux matelots et le Capitaine Grant ont pu y ABORDER. La CONTINUellement en PRoie a une CRUELle INDIgence, ils ont jete ce document par — _de lon_gitude ET 37 degrees 11’ de LATItude. Venex a leur secours, ou ils sont PERDUS!” (On the 27th of June, 1865, the three-mast vessel BRITANNIA, of Glasgow, has foundered after a long AGOnie in the Southern Seas, on the coast of New Zealand. Two sailors and Captain Grant have succeeded in landing. Continually a prey to cruel indigence, they have thrown this document into the sea in — longitude and 37 degrees 11’ latitude. Come to their help, or they are lost.)

Paganel stopped. His interpretation was admissible. But precisely because it appeared as likely as the preceding, it might be as false. Glenarvan and the Major did not then try and discuss it. However, since no traces of the BRITANNIA had yet been met with, either on the Patagonian or Australian coasts, at the points where these countries are crossed by the 37th parallel, the chances were in favor of New Zealand.

“Now, Paganel,” said Glenarvan, “will you tell me why you have kept this interpretation secret for nearly two months?”

“Because I did not wish to buoy you up again with vain hopes. Besides, we were going to Auckland, to the very spot indicated by the latitude of the document.”

“But since then, when we were dragged out of the route, why did you not speak?”

“Because, however just the interpretation, it could do nothing for the deliverance of the captain.”

“Why not, Paganel?”

“Because, admitting that the captain was wrecked on the New Zealand coast, now that two years have passed and he has not reappeared, he must have perished by shipwreck or by the New Zealanders.”

“Then you are of the opinion,” said Glenarvan, “that — ”

“That vestiges of the wreck might be found; but that the survivors of the BRITANNIA have, beyond doubt, perished.”

“Keep all this silent, friends,” said Glenarvan, “and let me choose a fitting moment to communicate these sad tidings to Captain Grant’s children.”

CHAPTER XIX A CRY IN THE NIGHT

THE crew soon heard that no light had been thrown on the situation of Captain Grant by the revelations of Ayrton, and it caused profound disappointment among them, for they had counted on the quartermaster, and the quartermaster knew nothing which could put the DUNCAN on the right track.

The yacht therefore continued her course. They had yet to select the island for Ayrton’s banishment.

Paganel and John Mangles consulted the charts on board, and exactly on the 37th parallel found a little isle marked by the name of Maria Theresa, a sunken rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, 3,500 miles from the American coast, and 1,500 miles from New Zealand. The nearest land on the north was the Archipelago of Pomotou, under the protectorate of France; on the south there was nothing but the eternal ice-belt of the Polar Sea. No ship would come to reconnoiter this solitary isle. No echoes from the world would ever reach it. The storm birds only would rest awhile on it during their long flight, and in many charts the rock was not even marked.

If ever complete isolation was to be found on earth, it was on this little out-of-the-way island. Ayrton was informed of its situation, and expressed his willingness to live there apart from his fellows. The head of the vessel was in consequence turned toward it immediately.

Two days later, at two o’clock, the man on watch signaled land on the horizon. This was Maria Theresa, a low, elongated island, scarcely raised above the waves, and looking like an enormous whale. It was still thirty miles distant from the yacht, whose stem was rapidly cutting her way over the water at the rate of sixteen knots an hour.

Gradually the form of the island grew more distinct on the horizon. The orb of day sinking in the west, threw up its peculiar outlines in sharp relief. A few peaks of no great elevation stood out here and there, tipped with sunlight. At five o'clock John Mangles could discern a light smoke rising from it.

"Is it a volcano?" he asked of Paganel, who was gazing at this new land through his telescope.

"I don't know what to think," replied the geographer; "Maria Theresa is a spot little known; nevertheless, it would not be surprising if its origin were due to some submarine upheaval, and consequently it may be volcanic."

"But in that case," said Glenarvan, "is there not reason to fear that if an eruption produced it, an eruption may carry it away?"

"That is not possible," replied Paganel. "We know of its existence for several centuries, which is our security. When the Isle Julia emerged from the Mediterranean, it did not remain long above the waves, and disappeared a few months after its birth."

"Very good," said Glenarvan. "Do you think, John, we can get there to-night?"

"No, your honor, I must not risk the DUNCAN in the dark, for I am unacquainted with the coast. I will keep under steam, but go very slowly, and to-morrow, at daybreak, we can send off a boat."

At eight o'clock in the evening, Maria Theresa, though five miles to leeward, appeared only an elongated shadow, scarcely visible. The DUNCAN was always getting nearer.

At nine o’clock, a bright glare became visible, and flames shot up through the darkness. The light was steady and continued.

“That confirms the supposition of a volcano,” said Paganel, observing it attentively.

“Yet,” replied John Mangles, “at this distance we ought to hear the noise which always accompanies an eruption, and the east wind brings no sound whatever to our ear.”

“That’s true,” said Paganel. “It is a volcano that blazes, but does not speak. The gleam seems intermittent too, sometimes, like that of a lighthouse.”

“You are right,” said John Mangles, “and yet we are not on a lighted coast.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “another fire? On the shore this time!

Look! It moves! It has changed its place!”

John was not mistaken. A fresh fire had appeared, which seemed to die out now and then, and suddenly flare up again.

“Is the island inhabited then?” said Glenarvan.

“By savages, evidently,” replied Paganel.

“But in that case, we cannot leave the quartermaster there.”

“No,” replied the Major, “he would be too bad a gift even to bestow on savages.”

“We must find some other uninhabited island,” said Glenarvan, who could not help smiling at the delicacy of McNabbs. “I promised Ayrton his life, and I mean to keep my promise.”

“At all events, don’t let us trust them,” added Paganel.

“The New Zealanders have the barbarous custom of deceiving ships by

moving lights, like the wreckers on the Cornish coast in former times.

Now the natives of Maria Theresa may have heard of this proceeding.”

“Keep her off a point,” called out John to the man at the helm.

“To-morrow at sunrise we shall know what we’re about.”

At eleven o’clock, the passengers and John Mangles retired to their cabins. In the forepart of the yacht the man on watch was pacing the deck, while aft, there was no one but the man at the wheel.

At this moment Mary Grant and Robert came on the poop.

The two children of the captain, leaning over the rail, gazed sadly at the phosphorescent waves and the luminous wake of the DUNCAN. Mary was thinking of her brother’s future, and Robert of his sister’s. Their father was uppermost in the minds of both. Was this idolized parent still in existence? Must they give him up? But no, for what would life be without him? What would become of them without him? What would have become of them already, but for Lord Glenarvan and Lady Helena?

The young boy, old above his years through trouble, divined the thoughts that troubled his sister, and taking her hand in his own, said, “Mary, we must never despair. Remember the lessons our father gave us. Keep your courage up and no matter what befalls you, let us show this obstinate courage which can rise above everything. Up to this time, sister, you have been working for me, it is my turn now, and I will work for you."

"Dear Robert!" replied the young girl.

"I must tell you something," resumed Robert. "You mustn't be vexed, Mary!"

"Why should I be vexed, my child?"

"And you will let me do it?"

"What do you mean?" said Mary, getting uneasy.

"Sister, I am going to be a sailor!"

"You are going to leave me!" cried the young girl, pressing her brother's hand.

"Yes, sister; I want to be a sailor, like my father and Captain John. Mary, dear Mary, Captain John has not lost all hope, he says. You have confidence in his devotion to us, and so have I. He is going to make a grand sailor out of me some day, he has promised me he will; and then we are going to look for our father together. Tell me you are willing, sister mine. What our father would have done for us it is our duty, mine, at least, to do for him. My life has one purpose to which it should be entirely consecrated — that is to search, and never cease searching for my father, who would never have given us up. Ah, Mary, how good our father was!"

"And so noble, so generous!" added Mary. "Do you know, Robert, he was already a glory to our country, and that he would have been numbered among our great men if fate had not arrested his course."

“Yes, I know it,” said Robert.

Mary put her arm around the boy, and hugged him fondly as he felt her tears fall on his forehead.

“Mary, Mary!” he cried, “it doesn’t matter what our friends say, I still hope, and will always hope. A man like my father doesn’t die till he has finished his work.”

Mary Grant could not reply. Sobs choked her voice. A thousand feelings struggled in her breast at the news that fresh attempts were about to be made to recover Harry Grant, and that the devotion of the captain was so unbounded.

“And does Mr. John still hope?” she asked.

“Yes,” replied Robert. “He is a brother that will never forsake us, never! I will be a sailor, you’ll say yes, won’t you, sister? And let me join him in looking for my father. I am sure you are willing.”

“Yes, I am willing,” said Mary. “But the separation!” she murmured.

“You will not be alone, Mary, I know that. My friend John told me so. Lady Helena will not let you leave her. You are a woman; you can and should accept her kindness. To refuse would be ungrateful, but a man, my father has said a hundred times, must make his own way.”

“But what will become of our own dear home in Dundee, so full of memories?”

“We will keep it, little sister! All that is settled, and settled so well, by our friend John, and also by Lord Glenarvan. He is to keep you at Malcolm

Castle as if you were his daughter. My Lord told my friend John so, and he told me. You will be at home there, and have someone to speak to about our father, while you are waiting till John and I bring him back to you some day. Ah! what a grand day that will be!” exclaimed Robert, his face glowing with enthusiasm.

“My boy, my brother,” replied Mary, “how happy my father would be if he could hear you. How much you are like him, dear Robert, like our dear, dear father. When you grow up you’ll be just himself.”

“I hope I may,” said Robert, blushing with filial and sacred pride.

“But how shall we requite Lord and Lady Glenarvan?” said Mary Grant.

“Oh, that will not be difficult,” replied Robert, with boyish confidence. “We will love and revere them, and we will tell them so; and we will give them plenty of kisses, and some day, when we can get the chance, we will die for them.”

“We’ll live for them, on the contrary,” replied the young girl, covering her brother’s forehead with kisses. “They will like that better, and so shall I.”

The two children then relapsed into silence, gazing out into the dark night, and giving way to long reveries, interrupted occasionally by a question or remark from one to the other. A long swell undulated the surface of the calm sea, and the screw turned up a luminous furrow in the darkness.

A strange and altogether supernatural incident now occurred. The brother and sister, by some of those magnetic communications which link souls mysteriously together, were the subjects at the same time and the same instant of the same hallucination.

Out of the midst of these waves, with their alternations of light and shadow, a deep plaintive voice sent up a cry, the tones of which thrilled through every fiber of their being.

“Come! come!” were the words which fell on their ears.

They both started up and leaned over the railing, and peered into the gloom with questioning eyes.

“Mary, you heard that? You heard that?” cried Robert.

But they saw nothing but the long shadow that stretched before them.

“Robert,” said Mary, pale with emotion, “I thought — yes, I thought as you did, that — We must both be ill with fever, Robert.”

A second time the cry reached them, and this time the illusion was so great, that they both exclaimed simultaneously, “My father! My father!”

It was too much for Mary. Overcome with emotion, she fell fainting into Robert’s arms.

“Help!” shouted Robert. “My sister! my father! Help! Help!”

The man at the wheel darted forward to lift up the girl. The sailors on watch ran to assist, and John Mangles, Lady Helena, and Glenarvan were hastily roused from sleep.

“My sister is dying, and my father is there!” exclaimed Robert, pointing to the waves.

They were wholly at a loss to understand him.

“Yes!” he repeated, “my father is there! I heard my father’s voice;

Mary heard it too!”

Just at this moment, Mary Grant recovering consciousness, but wandering and excited, called out, “My father! my father is there!”

And the poor girl started up, and leaning over the side of the yacht, wanted to throw herself into the sea.

“My Lord — Lady Helena!” she exclaimed, clasping her hands, “I tell you my father is there! I can declare that I heard his voice come out of the waves like a wail, as if it were a last adieu.”

The young girl went off again into convulsions and spasms, which became so violent that she had to be carried to her cabin, where Lady Helena lavished every care on her. Robert kept on repeating, “My father! my father is there! I am sure of it, my Lord!”

The spectators of this painful scene saw that the captain’s children were laboring under an hallucination. But how were they to be undeceived?

Glenarvan made an attempt, however. He took Robert’s hand, and said,

“You say you heard your father’s voice, my dear boy?”

“Yes, my Lord; there, in the middle of the waves.

He cried out, ‘Come! come!’”

“And did you recognize his voice?”

“Yes, I recognized it immediately. Yes, yes; I can swear to it!

My sister heard it, and recognized it as well. How could we

both be deceived? My Lord, do let us go to my father’s help.

A boat! a boat!”

Glenarvan saw it was impossible to undeceive the poor boy, but he tried once more by saying to the man at the wheel:

“Hawkins, you were at the wheel, were you not, when Miss Mary was so strangely attacked?”

“Yes, your Honor,” replied Hawkins.

“And you heard nothing, and saw nothing?”

“Nothing.”

“Now Robert, see?”

“If it had been Hawkins’s father,” returned the boy, with indomitable energy, “Hawkins would not say he had heard nothing. It was my father, my lord! my father.”

Sobs choked his voice; he became pale and silent, and presently fell down insensible, like his sister.

Glenarvan had him carried to his bed, where he lay in a deep swoon.

“Poor orphans,” said John Mangles. “It is a terrible trial they have to bear!”

“Yes,” said Glenarvan; “excessive grief has produced the same hallucination in both of them, and at the same time.”

“In both of them!” muttered Paganel; “that’s strange, and pure science would say inadmissible.”

He leaned over the side of the vessel, and listened attentively, making a sign to the rest to keep still.

But profound silence reigned around. Paganel shouted his loudest.

No response came.

“It is strange,” repeated the geographer, going back to his cabin. “Close sympathy in thought and grief does not suffice to explain this phenomenon.”

Next day, March 4, at 5 A. M. at dawn, the passengers, including Mary and Robert, who would not stay behind, were all assembled on the poop, each one eager to examine the land they had only caught a glimpse of the night before.

The yacht was coasting along the island at the distance of about a mile, and its smallest details could be seen by the eye.

Suddenly Robert gave a loud cry, and exclaimed he could see two men running about and gesticulating, and a third was waving a flag.

“The Union Jack,” said John Mangles, who had caught up a spy-glass.

“True enough,” said Paganel, turning sharply round toward Robert.

“My Lord,” said Robert, trembling with emotion, “if you don’t want me to swim to the shore, let a boat be lowered. Oh, my Lord, I implore you to let me be the first to land.”

No one dared to speak. What! on this little isle, crossed by the 37th parallel, there were three men, shipwrecked Englishmen! Instantaneously everyone thought of the voice heard by Robert and Mary the preceding night. The children were right, perhaps, in the affirmation. The sound of a voice might have reached them, but this voice — was it their father's? No, alas, most assuredly no. And as they thought of the dreadful disappointment that awaited them, they trembled lest this new trial should crush them completely. But who could stop them from going on shore? Lord Glenarvan had not the heart to do it.

“Lower a boat,” he called out.

Another minute and the boat was ready. The two children of Captain Grant, Glenarvan, John Mangles, and Paganel, rushed into it, and six sailors, who rowed so vigorously that they were presently almost close to the shore.

At ten fathoms' distance a piercing cry broke from Mary's lips.

“My father!” she exclaimed.

A man was standing on the beach, between two others. His tall, powerful form, and his physiognomy, with its mingled expression of boldness and gentleness, bore a resemblance both to Mary and Robert. This was indeed the man the children had so often described. Their hearts had not deceived them. This was their father, Captain Grant!

The captain had heard Mary's cry, for he held out his arms, and fell flat on the sand, as if struck by a thunderbolt.

CHAPTER XX CAPTAIN GRANT’S STORY

JOY does not kill, for both father and children recovered before they had reached the yacht. The scene which followed, who can describe? Language fails. The whole crew wept aloud at the sight of these three clasped together in a close, silent embrace.

The moment Harry Grant came on deck, he knelt down reverently. The pious Scotchman’s first act on touching the yacht, which to him was the soil of his native land, was to return thanks to the God of his deliverance. Then, turning to Lady Helena and Lord Glenarvan, and his companions, he thanked them in broken words, for his heart was too full to speak. During the short passage from the isle to the yacht, his children had given him a brief sketch of the DUNCAN’S history.

What an immense debt he owed to this noble lady and her friends! From Lord Glenarvan, down to the lowest sailor on board, how all had struggled and suffered for him! Harry Grant expressed his gratitude with such simplicity and nobleness, his manly face suffused with pure and sweet emotion, that the whole crew felt amply recompensed for the trials they had undergone. Even the impassable Major himself felt a tear steal down his cheek in spite of all his self-command; while the good, simple Paganel cried like a child who does not care who sees his tears.

Harry Grant could not take his eyes off his daughter. He thought her beautiful, charming; and he not only said so to himself, but repeated it aloud, and appealed to Lady Helena for confirmation of his opinion, as if to convince himself that he was not blinded by his paternal affection. His boy, too, came in for admiration. “How he has grown! he is a man!” was his delighted exclamation. And he covered the two children so dear to him with the kisses he had been heaping up for them during his two years of absence.

Robert then presented all his friends successively, and found means always to vary the formula of introduction, though he had to say the same thing about each. The fact was, each and all had been perfect in the children’s eyes.

John Mangles blushed like a child when his turn came, and his voice trembled as he spoke to Mary’s father.

Lady Helena gave Captain Grant a narrative of the voyage, and made him proud of his son and daughter. She told him of the young hero’s exploits, and how the lad had already paid back part of the paternal debt to Lord Glenarvan. John Mangles sang Mary’s praises in such terms, that Harry Grant, acting on a hint from Lady Helena, put his daughter’s hand into that of the brave young captain, and turning to Lord and Lady Glenarvan, said: “My Lord, and you, Madam, also give your blessing to our children.”

When everything had been said and re-said over and over again, Glenarvan informed Harry Grant about Ayrton. Grant confirmed the quartermaster’s confession as far as his disembarkation on the coast of Australia was concerned.

“He is an intelligent, intrepid man,” he added, “whose passions have led him astray. May reflection and repentance bring him to a better mind!”

But before Ayrton was transferred, Harry Grant wished to do the honors of his rock to his friends. He invited them to visit his wooden house, and dine with him in Robinson Crusoe fashion.

Glenarvan and his friends accepted the invitation most willingly. Robert and Mary were eagerly longing to see the solitary house where their father had so often wept at the thought of them. A boat was manned, and the Captain and his two children, Lord and Lady Glenarvan, the Major, John Mangles, and Paganel, landed on the shores of the island.

A few hours sufficed to explore the whole domain of Harry Grant. It was in fact the summit of a submarine mountain, a plateau composed of basaltic rocks and volcanic DEBRIS. During the geological epochs of the earth, this mountain had gradually emerged from the depths of the Pacific, through the action of the subterranean fires, but for ages back the volcano had been a peaceful mountain, and the filled-up crater, an island rising out of the liquid plain. Then soil formed. The vegetable kingdom took possession of this new land. Several whalers landed domestic animals there in passing; goats and pigs, which multiplied and ran wild, and the three kingdoms of nature were now displayed on this island, sunk in mid ocean.

When the survivors of the shipwrecked BRITANNIA took refuge there, the hand of man began to organize the efforts of nature. In two years and a half, Harry Grant and his two sailors had metamorphosed the island. Several acres of well-cultivated land were stocked with vegetables of excellent quality.

The house was shaded by luxuriant gum-trees. The magnificent ocean stretched before the windows, sparkling in the sunlight. Harry Grant had the table placed beneath the grand trees, and all the guests seated themselves. A hind quarter of a goat, nardou bread, several bowls of milk, two or three roots of wild endive, and pure fresh water, composed the simple repast, worthy of the shepherds of Arcadia.

Paganel was enchanted. His old fancies about Robinson Crusoe revived in full force. “He is not at all to be pitied, that scoundrel, Ayrton!” he exclaimed, enthusiastically. “This little isle is just a paradise!”

“Yes,” replied Harry Grant, “a paradise to these poor, shipwrecked fellows that Heaven had pity on, but I am sorry that Maria Theresa was not an extensive and fertile island, with a river instead of a stream, and a port instead of a tiny bay exposed to the open sea.”

“And why, captain?” asked Glenarvan.

“Because I should have made it the foundation of the colony with which I mean to dower Scotland.”

“Ah, Captain Grant, you have not given up the project, then, which made you so popular in our old country?”

“No, my Lord, and God has only saved me through your efforts that I might accomplish my task. My poor brothers in old Caledonia, all who are needy must have a refuge provided for them in another land against their misery, and my dear country must have a colony of her own, for herself alone, somewhere in these seas, where she may find that independence and comfort she so lacks in Europe.”

“Ah, that is very true, Captain Grant,” said Lady Helena. “This is a grand project of yours, and worthy of a noble heart. But this little isle — ”

“No, madam, it is a rock only fit at most to support a few settlers; while what we need is a vast country, whose virgin soil abounds in untouched stores of wealth,” replied the captain.

“Well, captain,” exclaimed Glenarvan, “the future is ours, and this country we will seek for together.”

And the two brave Scotchmen joined hands in a hearty grip and so sealed the compact.

A general wish was expressed to hear, while they were on the island, the account of the shipwreck of the BRITANNIA, and of the two years spent by the survivors in this very place. Harry Grant was delighted to gratify their curiosity, and commenced his narration forthwith.

“My story,” he said, “is that of all the Robinson Cru-soes cast upon an island, with only God and themselves to rely on, and feeling it a duty to struggle for life with the elements.

“It was during the night of the 26th or 27th of June, 1862, that the BRITANNIA, disabled by a six days’ storm, struck against the rocks of Maria Theresa. The sea was mountains high, and lifeboats were useless. My unfortunate crew all perished, except Bob Learce and Joe Bell, who with myself managed to reach shore after twenty unsuccessful attempts.

“The land which received us was only an uninhabited island, two miles broad and five long, with about thirty trees in the interior, a few meadows, and a brook of fresh water, which fortunately never dried up. Alone with my sailors, in this corner of the globe, I did not despair. I put my trust in God, and accustomed myself to struggle resolutely for existence. Bob and Joe, my brave companions in misfortune, my friends, seconded me energetically.

“We began like the fictitious Robinson Crusoe of Defoe, our model, by collecting the planks of the ship, the tools, a little powder, and firearms, and a bag of precious seeds. The first few days were painful enough, but hunting and fishing soon afforded us a sure supply of food, for wild goats were in abundance in the interior of the island, and marine animals abounded on the coast. By degrees we fell into regular ways and habits of life.

“I had saved my instruments from the wreck, and knew exactly the position of the island. I found we were out of the route of vessels, and could not be rescued unless by some providential chance. I accepted our trying lot composedly, always thinking, however, of my dear ones, remembering them every day in my prayers, though never hoping to see them again.

“However, we toiled on resolutely, and before long several acres of land were sown with the seed off the BRITANNIA; potatoes, endive, sorrel, and other vegetables besides, gave wholesome variety to our daily fare. We caught some young kids, which soon grew quite tame. We had milk and butter. The nardou, which grew abundantly in dried up creeks, supplied us with tolerably substantial bread, and we had no longer any fears for our material life.

“We had built a log hut with the DEBRIS of the BRITANNIA, and this was covered over with sail cloth, carefully tarred over, and beneath this secure shelter the rainy season passed comfortably. Many a plan was discussed here, and many a dream indulged in, the brightest of which is this day realized.

“I had at first the idea of trying to brave the perils of the ocean in a canoe made out of the spars of the ship, but 1,500 miles lay between us and the nearest coast, that is to say the islands of the Archipelago of Pomotou. No boat could have stood so long a voyage. I therefore relinquished my scheme, and looked for no deliverance except from a divine hand.

“Ah, my poor children! how often we have stood on the top of the rocks and watched the few vessels passing in the distance far out at sea. During the whole period of our exile only two or three vessels appeared on the horizon, and those only to disappear again immediately. Two years and a half were spent in this manner. We gave up hoping, but yet did not despair. At last, early yesterday morning, when I was standing on the highest peak of the island, I noticed a light smoke rising in the west. It increased, and soon a ship appeared in sight. It seemed to be coming toward us. But would it not rather steer clear of an island where there was no harbor.

“Ah, what a day of agony that was! My heart was almost bursting.

My comrades kindled a fire on one of the peaks. Night came on,

but no signal came from the yacht. Deliverance was there, however.

Were we to see it vanish from our eyes?

“I hesitated no longer. The darkness was growing deeper. The ship might double the island during the night. I jumped into the sea, and attempted to make my way toward it. Hope trebled my strength, I cleft the waves with superhuman vigor, and had got so near the yacht that I was scarcely thirty fathoms off, when it tacked about.

“This provoked me to the despairing cry, which only my two children heard. It was no illusion.

“Then I came back to the shore, exhausted and overcome with emotion and fatigue. My two sailors received me half dead. It was a horrible night this last we spent on the island, and we believed ourselves abandoned forever, when day dawned, and there was the yacht sailing nearly alongside, under easy steam. Your boat was lowered — we were saved — and, oh, wonder of Divine goodness, my children, my beloved children, were there holding out their arms to me!”

Robert and Mary almost smothered their father with kisses and caresses as he ended his narrative.

It was now for the first time that the captain heard that he owed his deliverance to the somewhat hieroglyphical document which he had placed in a bottle and confined to the mercy of the ocean.

But what were Jacques Paganel’s thoughts during Captain Grant’s recital? The worthy geographer was turning over in his brain for the thousandth time the words of the document. He pondered his three successive interpretations, all of which had proved false. How had this island, called Maria Theresa, been indicated in the papers originally?

At last Paganel could contain himself no longer, and seizing

Harry Grant’s hand, he exclaimed:

“Captain! will you tell me at last what really was in your indecipherable document?”

A general curiosity was excited by this question of the geographer, for the enigma which had been for nine months a mystery was about to be explained.

“Well, captain,” repeated Paganel, “do you remember the precise words of the document?”

“Exactly,” replied Harry Grant; “and not a day has passed without my recalling to memory words with which our last hopes were linked.”

“And what are they, captain?” asked Glenarvan. “Speak, for our amour propre is wounded to the quick!”

“I am ready to satisfy you,” replied Harry Grant; “but, you know, to multiply the chances of safety, I had inclosed three documents in the bottle, in three different languages. Which is it you wish to hear?”

“They are not identical, then?” cried Paganel.

“Yes, they are, almost to a word.”

“Well, then, let us have the French document,” replied Glenarvan. “That is the one that is most respected by the waves, and the one on which our interpretations have been mostly founded.”

“My Lord, I will give it you word for word,” replied Harry Grant.

“LE 27 JUIN, 1862, le trois-mats Britannia, de Glasgow, s’est perdu a quinze cents lieues de la Patagonie, dans l’hemisphere austral. Partes a terre, deux matelots et le Capitaine Grant ont atteint l’ile Tabor — ”

“Oh!” exclaimed Paganel.

“LA,” continued Harry Grant, “continuellement en proie a une cruelle indigence, ils ont jete ce document par 153 degrees de longitude et 37 degrees 11’ de latitude. Venes a leur secours, ou ils sont perdus.”

At the name of Tabor, Paganel had started up hastily, and now being unable to restrain himself longer, he called out:

“How can it be Isle Tabor? Why, this is Maria Theresa!”

“Undoubtedly, Monsieur Paganel,” replied Harry Grant. “It is

Maria Theresa on the English and German charts, but is named

Tabor on the French ones!”

At this moment a vigorous thump on Paganel’s shoulder almost bent him double. Truth obliges us to say it was the Major that dealt the blow, though strangely contrary to his usual strict politeness.

“Geographer!” said McNabbs, in a tone of the most supreme contempt.

But Paganel had not even felt the Major’s hand. What was that compared to the geographical blow which had stunned him?

He had been gradually getting nearer the truth, however, as he learned from Captain Grant. He had almost entirely deciphered the indecipherable document. The names Patagonia, Australia, New Zealand, had appeared to him in turn with absolute certainty. CONTIN, at first CONTINENT, had gradually reached its true meaning, continuelle. Indi had successively signified indiens, indigenes, and at last the right word was found — INDIGENCE. But one mutilated word, ABOR, had baffled the geographer’s sagacity. Paganel had persisted in making it the root of the verb ABORDER, and it turned out to be a proper name, the French name of the Isle Tabor, the isle which had been a refuge for the shipwrecked sailors of the BRITANNIA. It was difficult to avoid falling into the error, however, for on the English planispheres on the DUNCAN, the little isle was marked Maria Theresa.

“No matter?” cried Paganel, tearing his hair; “I ought not to have forgotten its double appellation. It is an unpardonable mistake, one unworthy of a secretary of the Geographical Society. I am disgraced!”

“Come, come, Monsieur Paganel,” said Lady Helena; “moderate your grief.”

“No, madam, no; I am a mere ass!”

“And not even a learned one!” added the Major, by way of consolation.

When the meal was over, Harry Grant put everything in order in his house. He took nothing away, wishing the guilty to inherit the riches of the innocent. Then they returned to the vessel, and, as Glenarvan had determined to start the same day, he gave immediate orders for the disembarkation of the quartermaster. Ayrton was brought up on the poop, and found himself face to face with Harry Grant.

“It is I, Ayrton!” said Grant

“Yes, it is you, captain,” replied Ayrton, without the least sign of surprise at Harry Grant’s recovery. “Well, I am not sorry to see you again in good health.”

“It seems, Ayrton, that I made a mistake in landing you on an inhabited coast.”

“It seems so, captain.”

“You are going to take my place on this uninhabited island.

May Heaven give you repentance!”

“Amen,” said Ayrton, calmly.

Glenarvan then addressed the quartermaster.

“It is still your wish, then, Ayrton, to be left behind?”

“Yes, my Lord!”

“And Isle Tabor meets your wishes?”

“Perfectly.”

“Now then, listen to my last words, Ayrton. You will be cut off here from all the world, and no communication with your fellows is possible. Miracles are rare, and you will not be able to quit this isle. You will be alone, with no eye upon you but that of God, who reads the deepest secrets of the heart; but you will be neither lost nor forsaken, as Captain Grant was. Unworthy as you are of anyone’s remembrance, you will not be dropped out of recollection. I know where you are, Ayrton; I know where to find you — I shall never forget.”

“God keep your Honor,” was all Ayrton’s reply.

These were the final words exchanged between Glenarvan and the quartermaster. The boat was ready and Ayrton got into it.

John Mangles had previously conveyed to the island several cases of preserved food, besides clothing, and tools and firearms, and a supply of powder and shot. The quartermaster could commence a new life of honest labor. Nothing was lacking, not even books; among others, the Bible, so dear to English hearts.

The parting hour had come. The crew and all the passengers were assembled on deck. More than one felt his heart swell with emotion. Mary Grant and Lady Helena could not restrain their feelings.

“Must it be done?” said the young wife to her husband.

“Must the poor man be left there?”

“He must, Helena,” replied Lord Glenarvan. “It is in expiation of his crimes.”

At that moment the boat, in charge of John Mangles, turned away. Ayrton, who remained standing, and still unmoved, took off his cap and bowed gravely.

Glenarvan uncovered, and all the crew followed his example, as if in presence of a man who was about to die, and the boat went off in profound silence.

On reaching land, Ayrton jumped on the sandy shore, and the boat returned to the yacht. It was then four o’clock in the afternoon, and from the poop the passengers could see the quartermaster gazing at the ship, standing with folded arms on a rock, motionless as a statue.

“Shall we set sail, my Lord?” asked John Mangles.

“Yes, John,” replied Glenarvan, hastily, more moved than he cared to show.

“Go on!” shouted John to the engineer.

The steam hissed and puffed out, the screw began to stir the waves, and by eight o’clock the last peaks of Isle Tabor disappeared in the shadows of the night.

CHAPTER XXI PAGANEL’S LAST ENTANGLEMENT

ON the 19th of March, eleven days after leaving the island, the DUNCAN sighted the American coast, and next day dropped anchor in the bay of Talcahuano. They had come back again after a voyage of five months, during which, and keeping strictly along the 37th parallel, they had gone round the world. The passengers in this memorable expedition, unprecedented in the annals of the Travelers’ Club, had visited Chili, the Pampas, the Argentine Republic, the Atlantic, the island of Tristan d’Acunha, the Indian Ocean, Amsterdam Island, Australia, New Zealand, Isle Tabor, and the Pacific. Their search had not been fruitless, for they were bringing back the survivors of the shipwrecked BRITANNIA.

Not one of the brave Scots who set out at the summons of their chief, but could answer to their names; all were returning to their old Scotia.

As soon as the DUNCAN had re-provisioned, she sailed along the coast of Patagonia, doubled Cape Horn, and made a swift run up the Atlantic Ocean. No voyage could be more devoid of incident. The yacht was simply carrying home a cargo of happiness. There was no secret now on board, not even John Mangles’s attachment to Mary Grant.

Yes, there was one mystery still, which greatly excited McNabbs’s curiosity. Why was it that Paganel remained always hermetically fastened up in his clothes, with a big comforter round his throat and up to his very ears? The Major was burning with desire to know the reason of this singular fashion. But in spite of interrogations, allusions, and suspicions on the part of McNabbs, Paganel would not unbutton.

Not even when the DUNCAN crossed the line, and the heat was so great that the seams of the deck were melting. “He is so DISTRAIT that he thinks he is at St. Petersburg,” said the Major, when he saw the geographer wrapped in an immense great-coat, as if the mercury had been frozen in the thermometer.

At last on the 9th of May, fifty-three days from the time of leaving Talcahuano, John Mangles sighted the lights of Cape Clear. The yacht entered St. George’s Channel, crossed the Irish Sea, and on the 10th of May reached the Firth of Clyde. At 11 o’clock she dropped anchor off Dunbarton, and at 2 P.M. the passengers arrived at Malcolm Castle amidst the enthusiastic cheering of the Highlanders.

As fate would have it then, Harry Grant and his two companions were saved. John Mangles wedded Mary Grant in the old cathedral of St. Mungo, and Mr. Paxton, the same clergyman who had prayed nine months before for the deliverance of the father, now blessed the marriage of his daughter and his deliverer. Robert was to become a sailor like Harry Grant and John Mangles, and take part with them in the captain’s grand projects, under the auspices of Lord Glenarvan.

But fate also decreed that Paganel was not to die a bachelor?

Probably so.

The fact was, the learned geographer after his heroic exploits, could not escape celebrity. His blunders made quite a FURORE among the fashionables of Scotland, and he was overwhelmed with courtesies.

It was then that an amiable lady, about thirty years of age, in fact, a cousin of McNabbs, a little eccentric herself, but good and still charming, fell in love with the geographer’s oddities, and offered him her hand. Forty thousand pounds went with it, but that was not mentioned.

Paganel was far from being insensible to the sentiments of Miss Arabella, but yet he did not dare to speak. It was the Major who was the medium of communication between these two souls, evidently made for each other. He even told Paganel that his marriage was the last freak he would be able to allow himself. Paganel was in a great state of embarrassment, but strangely enough could not make up his mind to speak the fatal word.

“Does not Miss Arabella please you then?” asked McNabbs.

“Oh, Major, she is charming,” exclaimed Paganel, “a thousand times too charming, and if I must tell you all, she would please me better if she were less so. I wish she had a defect!”

“Be easy on that score,” replied the Major, “she has, and more than one.

The most perfect woman in the world has always her quota.

So, Paganel, it is settled then, I suppose?”

“I dare not.”

“Come, now, my learned friend, what makes you hesitate?”

“I am unworthy of Miss Arabella,” was the invariable reply of the geographer. And to this he would stick.

At last, one day being fairly driven in a corner by the intractable Major, he ended by confiding to him, under the seal of secrecy, a certain peculiarity which would facilitate his apprehension should the police ever be on his track.

“Bah!” said the Major.

“It is really as I tell you,” replied Paganel.

“What does it matter, my worthy friend?”

“Do you think so, Major?”

“On the contrary, it only makes you more uncommon. It adds to your personal merits. It is the very thing to make you the nonpareil husband that Arabella dreams about.”

And the Major with imperturbable gravity left Paganel in a state of the utmost disquietude.

A short conversation ensued between McNabbs and Miss Arabella. A fortnight afterwards, the marriage was celebrated in grand style in the chapel of Malcolm Castle. Paganel looked magnificent, but closely buttoned up, and Miss Arabella was arrayed in splendor.

And this secret of the geographer would have been forever buried in oblivion, if the Major had not mentioned it to Glenarvan, and he could not hide it from Lady Helena, who gave a hint to Mrs. Mangles. To make a long story short, it got in the end to M. Olbinett’s ears, and soon became noised abroad.

Jacques Paganel, during his three days’ captivity among the Maories, had been tattooed from the feet to the shoulders, and he bore on his chest a heraldic kiwi with outspread wings, which was biting at his heart.

This was the only adventure of his grand voyage that Paganel could never get over, and he always bore a grudge to New Zealand on account of it. It was for this reason too, that, notwithstanding solicitation and regrets, he never would return to France. He dreaded lest he should expose the whole Geographical Society in his person to the jests of caricaturists and low newspapers, by their secretary coming back tattooed.

The return of the captain to Scotland was a national event, and Harry Grant was soon the most popular man in old Caledonia. His son Robert became a sailor like himself and Captain Mangles, and under the patronage of Lord Glenarvan they resumed the project of founding a Scotch colony in the Southern Seas.

AROUND THE MOON

Translated by Lewis Page Mercier

This 1870 novel is a sequel to *From the Earth to the Moon*, continuing the journey to the moon by three adventurers. Having been fired out of the giant Columbiad space gun, Barbicane, Nicholl and Michel Ardan begin a five-day trip to the moon. A few minutes into the journey, a small, bright asteroid passes within a few hundred yards of them, but fortunately does not collide with the projectile. The asteroid had been captured by the Earth's gravity and had become a second moon. The three travellers undergo a series of adventures during the rest of their astrological journey.

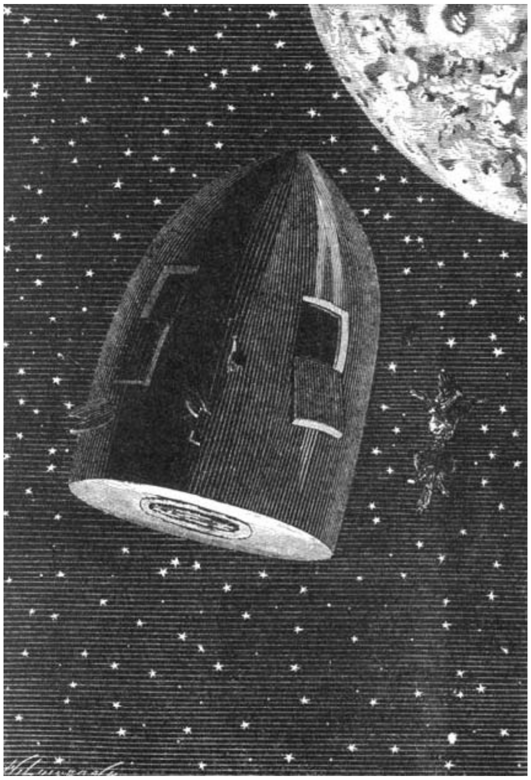

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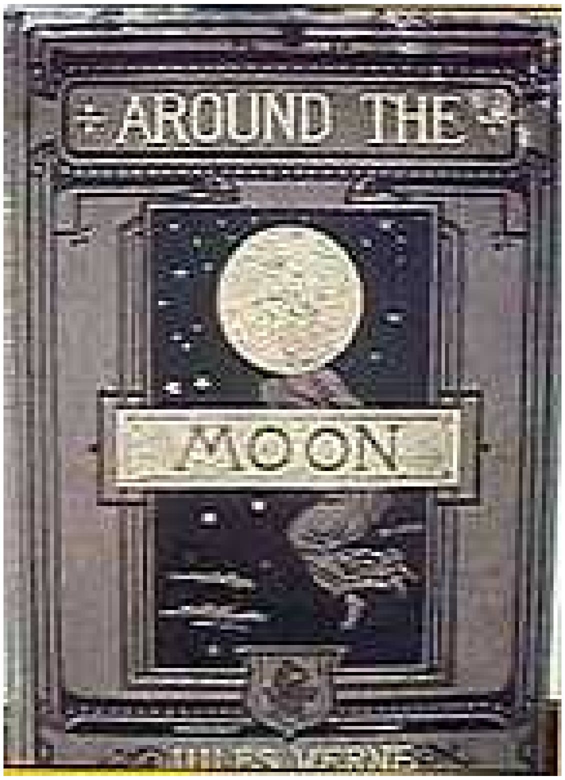
AROUND THE
MOON
JULES VERNE

The first edition in English

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PRELIMINARY CHAPTER

THE FIRST PART OF THIS WORK, AND SERVING AS A PREFACE TO THE SECOND

During the year 186-, the whole world was greatly excited by a scientific experiment unprecedented in the annals of science. The members of the Gun Club, a circle of artillerymen formed at Baltimore after the American war, conceived the idea of putting themselves in communication with the moon! — yes, with the moon — by sending to her a projectile. Their president, Barbicane, the promoter of the enterprise, having consulted the astronomers of the Cambridge Observatory upon the subject, took all necessary means to ensure the success of this extraordinary enterprise, which had been declared practicable by the majority of competent judges. After setting on foot a public subscription, which realized nearly L1,200,000, they began the gigantic work.

According to the advice forwarded from the members of the Observatory, the gun destined to launch the projectile had to be fixed in a country situated between the 0 and 28th degrees of north or south latitude, in order to aim at the moon when at the zenith; and its initiatory velocity was fixed at twelve thousand yards to the second. Launched on the 1st of December, at 10hrs. 46m. 40s. P.M. it ought to reach the moon four days after its departure, that is on the 5th of December, at midnight precisely, at the moment of her attaining her perigee, that is her nearest distance from the earth, which is exactly 86,410 leagues (French), or 238,833 miles mean distance (English).

The principal members of the Gun Club, President Barbicane, Major Elphinstone, the secretary Joseph T. Maston, and other learned men, held several meetings, at which the shape and composition of the projectile were discussed, also the position and nature of the gun, and the quality and quantity of powder to be used. It was decided: First, that the projectile should be a shell made of aluminum with a diameter of 108 inches and a thickness of twelve inches to its walls; and should weigh 19,250 pounds. Second, that the gun should be a Columbiad cast in iron, 900 feet long, and run perpendicularly into the earth. Third, that the charge should contain 400,000 pounds of gun-cotton, which, giving out six billions of litres of gas in rear of the projectile, would easily carry it toward the orb of night.

These questions determined President Barbicane, assisted by Murchison the engineer, to choose a spot situated in Florida, in 27@ 7’ North latitude, and 77@ 3’ West (Greenwich) longitude. It was on this spot, after stupendous labor, that the Columbiad was cast with full success. Things stood thus, when an incident took place which increased the interest attached to this great enterprise a hundredfold.

A Frenchman, an enthusiastic Parisian, as witty as he was bold, asked to be enclosed in the projectile, in order that he might reach the moon, and reconnoiter this terrestrial satellite. The name of this intrepid adventurer was Michel Ardan. He landed in America, was received with enthusiasm, held meetings, saw himself carried in triumph, reconciled President Barbicane to his mortal enemy, Captain Nicholl, and, as a token of reconciliation, persuaded them both to start with him in the projectile. The proposition being accepted, the shape of the projectile was slightly altered. It was made of a cylindro-conical form. This species of aerial car was lined with strong springs and partitions to deaden the shock of departure. It was provided with food for a year, water for some months, and gas for some days. A self-acting apparatus supplied the three travelers with air to breathe. At the same time, on one of the highest points of the Rocky Mountains, the

Gun Club had a gigantic telescope erected, in order that they might be able to follow the course of the projectile through space. All was then ready.

On the 30th of November, at the hour fixed upon, from the midst of an extraordinary crowd of spectators, the departure took place, and for the first time, three human beings quitted the terrestrial globe, and launched into inter-planetary space with almost a certainty of reaching their destination. These bold travelers, Michel Ardan, President Barbicane, and Captain Nicholl, ought to make the passage in ninety-seven hours, thirteen minutes, and twenty seconds. Consequently, their arrival on the lunar disc could not take place until the 5th of December at twelve at night, at the exact moment when the moon should be full, and not on the 4th, as some badly informed journalists had announced.

But an unforeseen circumstance, viz. the detonation produced by the Columbiad, had the immediate effect of troubling the terrestrial atmosphere, by accumulating a large quantity of vapor, a phenomenon which excited universal indignation, for the moon was hidden from the eyes of the watchers for several nights.

The worthy Joseph T. Maston, the staunchest friend of the three travelers, started for the Rocky Mountains, accompanied by the Hon. J. Belfast, director of the Cambridge Observatory, and reached the station of Long's Peak, where the telescope was erected which brought the moon within an apparent distance of two leagues. The honorable secretary of the Gun Club wished himself to observe the vehicle of his daring friends.

The accumulation of the clouds in the atmosphere prevented all observation on the 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, and 10th of December. Indeed it was thought that all observations would have to be put off to the 3d of January in the following year; for the moon entering its last quarter on the 11th, would then only present an ever-decreasing portion of her disc, insufficient to allow of their following the course of the projectile.

At length, to the general satisfaction, a heavy storm cleared the atmosphere on the night of the 11th and 12th of December, and the moon, with half-illuminated disc, was plainly to be seen upon the black sky.

That very night a telegram was sent from the station of Long’s Peak by Joseph T. Maston and Belfast to the gentlemen of the Cambridge Observatory, announcing that on the 11th of December at 8h. 47m. P.M. the projectile launched by the Columbiad of Stones Hill had been detected by Messrs. Belfast and Maston — that it had deviated from its course from some unknown cause, and had not reached its destination; but that it had passed near enough to be retained by the lunar attraction; that its rectilinear movement had been changed to a circular one, and that following an elliptical orbit round the star of night it had become its satellite. The telegram added that the elements of this new star had not yet been calculated; and indeed three observations made upon a star in three different positions are necessary to determine these elements. Then it showed that the distance separating the projectile from the lunar surface “might” be reckoned at about 2,833 miles.

It ended with the double hypothesis: either the attraction of the moon would draw it to herself, and the travelers thus attain their end; or that the projectile, held in one immutable orbit, would gravitate around the lunar disc to all eternity.

With such alternatives, what would be the fate of the travelers? Certainly they had food for some time. But supposing they did succeed in their rash enterprise, how would they return? Could they ever return? Should they hear from them? These questions, debated by the most learned pens of the day, strongly engrossed the public attention.

It is advisable here to make a remark which ought to be well considered by hasty observers. When a purely speculative discovery is announced to the public, it cannot be done with too much prudence. No one is obliged to discover either a planet, a comet, or a satellite; and whoever makes a mistake in such a case exposes himself justly to the derision of the mass. Far better is it to wait; and that is what the impatient Joseph T. Maston should have done before sending this telegram forth to the world, which, according to his idea, told the whole result of the enterprise. Indeed this telegram contained two sorts of errors, as was proved eventually. First, errors of observation, concerning the distance of the projectile from the surface of the moon, for on the 11th of December it was impossible to see it; and what Joseph T. Maston had seen, or thought he saw, could not have been the projectile of the Columbiad. Second, errors of theory on the fate in store for the said projectile; for in making it a satellite of the moon, it was putting it in direct contradiction of all mechanical laws.

One single hypothesis of the observers of Long’s Peak could ever be realized, that which foresaw the case of the travelers (if still alive) uniting their efforts with the lunar attraction to attain the surface of the disc.

Now these men, as clever as they were daring, had survived the terrible shock consequent on their departure, and it is their journey in the projectile car which is here related in its most dramatic as well as in its most singular details. This recital will destroy many illusions and surmises; but it will give a true idea of the singular changes in store for such an enterprise; it will bring out the scientific instincts of Barbicane, the industrious resources of Nicholl, and the audacious humor of Michel Ardan. Besides this, it will prove that their worthy friend, Joseph T. Maston, was wasting his time, while leaning over the gigantic telescope he watched the course of the moon through the starry space.

CHAPTER I

TWENTY MINUTES PAST TEN TO FORTY-SEVEN MINUTES PAST TEN P. M.

As ten o’clock struck, Michel Ardan, Barbicane, and Nicholl, took leave of the numerous friends they were leaving on the earth. The two dogs, destined to propagate the canine race on the lunar continents, were already shut up in the projectile.

The three travelers approached the orifice of the enormous cast-iron tube, and a crane let them down to the conical top of the projectile. There, an opening made for the purpose gave them access to the aluminum car. The tackle belonging to the crane being hauled from outside, the mouth of the Columbiad was instantly disencumbered of its last supports.

Nicholl, once introduced with his companions inside the projectile, began to close the opening by means of a strong plate, held in position by powerful screws. Other plates, closely fitted, covered the lenticular glasses, and the travelers, hermetically enclosed in their metal prison, were plunged in profound darkness.

“And now, my dear companions,” said Michel Ardan, “let us make ourselves at home; I am a domesticated man and strong in housekeeping. We are bound to make the best of our new lodgings, and make ourselves comfortable. And first let us try and see a little. Gas was not invented for moles.”

So saying, the thoughtless fellow lit a match by striking it on the sole of his boot; and approached the burner fixed to the receptacle, in which the carbonized hydrogen, stored at high pressure, sufficed for the lighting and warming of the projectile for a hundred and forty-four hours, or six days and six nights. The gas caught fire, and thus lighted the projectile looked like a comfortable room with thickly padded walls, furnished with a circular divan, and a roof rounded in the shape of a dome.

Michel Ardan examined everything, and declared himself satisfied with his installation.

“It is a prison,” said he, “but a traveling prison; and, with the right of putting my nose to the window, I could well stand a lease of a hundred years. You smile, Barbicane. Have you any arriere-pensee? Do you say to yourself, `This prison may be our tomb?’ Tomb, perhaps; still I would not change it for Mahomet’s, which floats in space but never advances an inch!”

While Michel Ardan was speaking, Barbicane and Nicholl were making their last preparations.

Nicholl’s chronometer marked twenty minutes past ten P.M. when

the three travelers were finally enclosed in their projectile.

This chronometer was set within the tenth of a second by that of

Murchison the engineer. Barbicane consulted it.

“My friends,” said he, “it is twenty minutes past ten. At forty- seven minutes past ten Murchison will launch the electric spark on the wire which communicates with the charge of the Columbiad. At that precise moment we shall leave our spheroid. Thus we still have twenty-seven minutes to remain on the earth.”

“Twenty-six minutes thirteen seconds,” replied the methodical Nicholl.

“Well!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, in a good-humored tone, “much may be done in twenty-six minutes. The gravest questions of morals and politics may be discussed, and even solved. Twenty-six minutes well employed are worth more than twenty-six years in which nothing is done. Some seconds of a Pascal or a Newton are more precious than the whole existence of a crowd of raw simpletons — — ”

“And you conclude, then, you everlasting talker?” asked Barbicane.

“I conclude that we have twenty-six minutes left,” replied Ardan.

“Twenty-four only,” said Nicholl.

“Well, twenty-four, if you like, my noble captain,” said Ardan; “twenty-four minutes in which to investigate — — ”

“Michel,” said Barbicane, “during the passage we shall have plenty of time to investigate the most difficult questions. For the present we must occupy ourselves with our departure.”

“Are we not ready?”

“Doubtless; but there are still some precautions to be taken, to deaden as much as possible the first shock.”

“Have we not the water-cushions placed between the partition- breaks, whose elasticity will sufficiently protect us?”

“I hope so, Michel,” replied Barbicane gently, “but I am not sure.”

“Ah, the joker!” exclaimed Michel Ardan. “He hopes! — He is not sure! — and he waits for the moment when we are encased to make this deplorable admission! I beg to be allowed to get out!”

“And how?” asked Barbicane.

“Humph!” said Michel Ardan, “it is not easy; we are in the train, and the guard’s whistle will sound before twenty-four minutes are over.”

“Twenty,” said Nicholl.

For some moments the three travelers looked at each other.

Then they began to examine the objects imprisoned with them.

“Everything is in its place,” said Barbicane. “We have now to decide how we can best place ourselves to resist the shock. Position cannot be an indifferent matter; and we must, as much as possible, prevent the rush of blood to the head.”

“Just so,” said Nicholl.

“Then,” replied Michel Ardan, ready to suit the action to the word, “let us put our heads down and our feet in the air, like the clowns in the grand circus.”

“No,” said Barbicane, “let us stretch ourselves on our sides; we shall resist the shock better that way. Remember that, when the projectile starts, it matters little whether we are in it or before it; it amounts to much the same thing.”

“If it is only `much the same thing,’ I may cheer up,” said

Michel Ardan.

“Do you approve of my idea, Nicholl?” asked Barbicane.

“Entirely,” replied the captain. “We’ve still thirteen minutes and a half.”

“That Nicholl is not a man,” exclaimed Michel; “he is a chronometer with seconds, an escape, and eight holes.”

But his companions were not listening; they were taking up their last positions with the most perfect coolness. They were like two methodical travelers in a car, seeking to place themselves as comfortably as possible.

We might well ask ourselves of what materials are the hearts of these Americans made, to whom the approach of the most frightful danger added no pulsation.

Three thick and solidly-made couches had been placed in the projectile. Nicholl and Barbicane placed them in the center of the disc forming the floor. There the three travelers were to stretch themselves some moments before their departure.

During this time, Ardan, not being able to keep still, turned in his narrow prison like a wild beast in a cage, chatting with his friends, speaking to the dogs Diana and Satellite, to whom, as may be seen, he had given significant names.

“Ah, Diana! Ah, Satellite!” he exclaimed, teasing them; “so you are going to show the moon-dogs the good habits of the dogs of the earth! That will do honor to the canine race! If ever we do come down again, I will bring a cross type of `moon-dogs,’ which will make a stir!”

“If there are dogs in the moon,” said Barbicane.

“There are,” said Michel Ardan, “just as there are horses, cows, donkeys, and chickens. I bet that we shall find chickens.”

“A hundred dollars we shall find none!” said Nicholl.

“Done, my captain!” replied Ardan, clasping Nicholl’s hand. “But, by the bye, you have already lost three bets with our president, as the necessary funds for the enterprise have been found, as the operation of casting has been successful, and lastly, as the Columbiad has been loaded without accident, six thousand dollars.”

“Yes,” replied Nicholl. “Thirty-seven minutes six seconds past ten.”

“It is understood, captain. Well, before another quarter of an hour you will have to count nine thousand dollars to the president; four thousand because the Columbiad will not burst, and five thousand because the projectile will rise more than six miles in the air.”

“I have the dollars,” replied Nicholl, slapping the pocket of this coat. “I only ask to be allowed to pay.”

“Come, Nicholl. I see that you are a man of method, which I could never be; but indeed you have made a series of bets of very little advantage to yourself, allow me to tell you.”

“And why?” asked Nicholl.

“Because, if you gain the first, the Columbiad will have burst, and the projectile with it; and Barbicane will no longer be there to reimburse your dollars.”

“My stake is deposited at the bank in Baltimore,” replied Barbicane simply; “and if Nicholl is not there, it will go to his heirs.”

“Ah, you practical men!” exclaimed Michel Ardan; “I admire you the more for not being able to understand you.”

“Forty-two minutes past ten!” said Nicholl.

“Only five minutes more!” answered Barbicane.

“Yes, five little minutes!” replied Michel Ardan; “and we are enclosed in a projectile, at the bottom of a gun 900 feet long! And under this projectile are rammed 400,000 pounds of gun-cotton, which is equal to 1,600,000 pounds of ordinary powder! And friend Murchison, with his chronometer in hand, his eye fixed on the needle, his finger on the electric apparatus, is counting the seconds preparatory to launching us into interplanetary space.”

“Enough, Michel, enough!” said Barbicane, in a serious voice; “let us prepare. A few instants alone separate us from an eventful moment. One clasp of the hand, my friends.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Michel Ardan, more moved than he wished to appear; and the three bold companions were united in a last embrace.

“God preserve us!” said the religious Barbicane.

Michel Ardan and Nicholl stretched themselves on the couches placed in the center of the disc.

“Forty-seven minutes past ten!” murmured the captain.

“Twenty seconds more!” Barbicane quickly put out the gas and lay down by his companions, and the profound silence was only broken by the ticking of the chronometer marking the seconds.

Suddenly a dreadful shock was felt, and the projectile, under the force of six billions of litres of gas, developed by the combustion of pyroxyle, mounted into space.

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST HALF-HOUR

What had happened? What effect had this frightful shock produced? Had the ingenuity of the constructors of the projectile obtained any happy result? Had the shock been deadened, thanks to the springs, the four plugs, the water-cushions, and the partition-breaks? Had they been able to subdue the frightful pressure of the initiatory speed of more than 11,000 yards, which was enough to traverse Paris or New York in a second? This was evidently the question suggested to the thousand spectators of this moving scene. They forgot the aim of the journey, and thought only of the travelers. And if one of them — Joseph T. Maston for example — could have cast one glimpse into the projectile, what would he have seen?

Nothing then. The darkness was profound. But its cylindro- conical partitions had resisted wonderfully. Not a rent or a dent anywhere! The wonderful projectile was not even heated under the intense deflagration of the powder, nor liquefied, as they seemed to fear, in a shower of aluminum.

The interior showed but little disorder; indeed, only a few objects had been violently thrown toward the roof; but the most important seemed not to have suffered from the shock at all; their fixtures were intact.

On the movable disc, sunk down to the bottom by the smashing of the partition-breaks and the escape of the water, three bodies lay apparently lifeless. Barbicane, Nicholl, and Michel Ardan — did they still breathe? or was the projectile nothing now but a metal coffin, bearing three corpses into space?

Some minutes after the departure of the projectile, one of the bodies moved, shook its arms, lifted its head, and finally succeeded in getting on its knees. It was Michel Ardan. He felt himself all over, gave a sonorous "Hem!" and then said:

"Michel Ardan is whole. How about the others?"

The courageous Frenchman tried to rise, but could not stand. His head swam, from the rush of blood; he was blind; he was a drunken man.

"Bur-r!" said he. "It produces the same effect as two bottles of Corton, though perhaps less agreeable to swallow." Then, passing his hand several times across his forehead and rubbing his temples, he called in a firm voice:

"Nicholl! Barbicane!"

He waited anxiously. No answer; not even a sigh to show that the hearts of his companions were still beating. He called again. The same silence.

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "They look as if they had fallen from a fifth story on their heads. Bah!" he added, with that imperturbable confidence which nothing could check, "if a Frenchman can get on his knees, two Americans ought to be able to get on their feet. But first let us light up."

Ardan felt the tide of life return by degrees. His blood became calm, and returned to its accustomed circulation. Another effort restored his equilibrium. He succeeded in rising, drew a match from his pocket, and approaching the burner lighted it. The receiver had not suffered at all. The gas had not escaped. Besides, the smell would have betrayed it; and in that case Michel Ardan could not have carried a lighted match with impunity through the space filled with hydrogen. The gas mixing with the air would have produced a detonating mixture, and the explosion would have finished what the shock had perhaps begun. When the burner was lit, Ardan leaned over the bodies of his companions: they were lying one on the other, an inert mass, Nicholl above, Barbicane underneath.

Ardan lifted the captain, propped him up against the divan, and began to rub vigorously. This means, used with judgment, restored Nicholl, who opened his eyes, and instantly recovering his presence of mind, seized Ardan's hand and looked around him.

"And Barbicane?" said he.

"Each in turn," replied Michel Ardan. "I began with you, Nicholl, because you were on the top. Now let us look to Barbicane." Saying which, Ardan and Nicholl raised the president of the Gun Club and laid him on the divan. He seemed to have suffered more than either of his companions; he was bleeding, but Nicholl was reassured by finding that the hemorrhage came from a slight wound on the shoulder, a mere graze, which he bound up carefully.

Still, Barbicane was a long time coming to himself, which frightened his friends, who did not spare friction.

"He breathes though," said Nicholl, putting his ear to the chest of the wounded man.

"Yes," replied Ardan, "he breathes like a man who has some notion of that daily operation. Rub, Nicholl; let us rub harder." And the two improvised practitioners worked so hard and so well that Barbicane recovered his senses. He opened his eyes, sat up, took his two friends by the hands, and his first words were —

“Nicholl, are we moving?”

Nicholl and Ardan looked at each other; they had not yet troubled themselves about the projectile; their first thought had been for the traveler, not for the car.

“Well, are we really moving?” repeated Michel Ardan.

“Or quietly resting on the soil of Florida?” asked Nicholl.

“Or at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico?” added Michel Ardan.

“What an idea!” exclaimed the president.

And this double hypothesis suggested by his companions had the effect of recalling him to his senses. In any case they could not decide on the position of the projectile. Its apparent immovability, and the want of communication with the outside, prevented them from solving the question. Perhaps the projectile was unwinding its course through space. Perhaps after a short rise it had fallen upon the earth, or even in the Gulf of Mexico — a fall which the narrowness of the peninsula of Florida would render not impossible.

The case was serious, the problem interesting, and one that must be solved as soon as possible. Thus, highly excited, Barbicane’s moral energy triumphed over physical weakness, and he rose to his feet. He listened. Outside was perfect silence; but the thick padding was enough to intercept all sounds coming from the earth. But one circumstance struck Barbicane, viz. that the temperature inside the projectile was singularly high. The president drew a thermometer from its case and consulted it. The instrument showed 81@ Fahr.

“Yes,” he exclaimed, “yes, we are moving! This stifling heat, penetrating through the partitions of the projectile, is produced by its friction on the atmospheric strata. It will soon diminish, because we are already floating in space, and after having nearly stifled, we shall have to suffer intense cold.

“What!” said Michel Ardan. “According to your showing, Barbicane, we are already beyond the limits of the terrestrial atmosphere?”

“Without a doubt, Michel. Listen to me. It is fifty-five minutes past ten; we have been gone about eight minutes; and if our initiatory speed has not been checked by the friction, six seconds would be enough for us to pass through the forty miles of atmosphere which surrounds the globe.”

“Just so,” replied Nicholl; “but in what proportion do you estimate the diminution of speed by friction?”

“In the proportion of one-third, Nicholl. This diminution is considerable, but according to my calculations it is nothing less. If, then, we had an initiatory speed of 12,000 yards, on leaving the atmosphere this speed would be reduced to 9,165 yards. In any case we have already passed through this interval, and — — ”

“And then,” said Michel Ardan, “friend Nicholl has lost his two bets: four thousand dollars because the Columbiad did not burst; five thousand dollars because the projectile has risen more than six miles. Now, Nicholl, pay up.”

“Let us prove it first,” said the captain, “and we will pay afterward. It is quite possible that Barbicane’s reasoning is correct, and that I have lost my nine thousand dollars. But a new hypothesis presents itself to my mind, and it annuls the wager.”

“What is that?” asked Barbicane quickly.

“The hypothesis that, for some reason or other, fire was never set to the powder, and we have not started at all.”

“My goodness, captain,” exclaimed Michel Ardan, “that hypothesis is not worthy of my brain! It cannot be a serious one. For have we not been half annihilated by the shock? Did I not recall you to life? Is not the president’s shoulder still bleeding from the blow it has received?”

“Granted,” replied Nicholl; “but one question.”

“Well, captain?”

“Did you hear the detonation, which certainly ought to be loud?”

“No,” replied Ardan, much surprised; “certainly I did not hear the detonation.”

“And you, Barbicane?”

“Nor I, either.”

“Very well,” said Nicholl.

“Well now,” murmured the president “why did we not hear the detonation?”

The three friends looked at each other with a disconcerted air. It was quite an inexplicable phenomenon. The projectile had started, and consequently there must have been a detonation.

“Let us first find out where we are,” said Barbicane, “and let down this panel.”

This very simple operation was soon accomplished.

The nuts which held the bolts to the outer plates of the right-hand scuttle gave way under the pressure of the English wrench. These bolts were pushed outside, and the buffers covered with India-rubber stopped up the holes which let them through. Immediately the outer plate fell back upon its hinges like a porthole, and the lenticular glass which closed the scuttle appeared. A similar one was let into the thick partition on the opposite side of the projectile, another in the top of the dome, and finally a fourth in the middle of the base. They could, therefore, make observations in four different directions; the firmament by the side and most direct windows, the earth or the moon by the upper and under openings in the projectile.

Barbicane and his two companions immediately rushed to the uncovered window. But it was lit by no ray of light. Profound darkness surrounded them, which, however, did not prevent the president from exclaiming:

“No, my friends, we have not fallen back upon the earth; no, nor are we submerged in the Gulf of Mexico. Yes! we are mounting into space. See those stars shining in the night, and that impenetrable darkness heaped up between the earth and us!”

“Hurrah! hurrah!” exclaimed Michel Ardan and Nicholl in one voice.

Indeed, this thick darkness proved that the projectile had left the earth, for the soil, brilliantly lit by the moon-beams would have been visible to the travelers, if they had been lying on its surface. This darkness also showed that the projectile had passed the atmospheric strata, for the diffused light spread in the air would have been reflected on the metal walls, which reflection was wanting. This light would have lit the window, and the window was dark. Doubt was no longer possible; the travelers had left the earth.

“I have lost,” said Nicholl.

“I congratulate you,” replied Ardan.

“Here are the nine thousand dollars,” said the captain, drawing a roll of paper dollars from his pocket.

“Will you have a receipt for it?” asked Barbicane, taking the sum.

“If you do not mind,” answered Nicholl; “it is more business-like.”

And coolly and seriously, as if he had been at his strong-box, the president drew forth his notebook, tore out a blank leaf, wrote a proper receipt in pencil, dated and signed it with the usual flourish, and gave it to the captain, who carefully placed it in his pocketbook. Michel Ardan, taking off his hat, bowed to his two companions without speaking. So much formality under such circumstances left him speechless. He had never before seen anything so “American.”

This is a purely French habit.

This affair settled, Barbicane and Nicholl had returned to the window, and were watching the constellations. The stars looked like bright points on the black sky. But from that side they could not see the orb of night, which, traveling from east to west, would rise by degrees toward the zenith. Its absence drew the following remark from Ardan:

“And the moon; will she perchance fail at our rendezvous?”

“Do not alarm yourself,” said Barbicane; “our future globe is at its post, but we cannot see her from this side; let us open the other.”

“As Barbicane was about leaving the window to open the opposite scuttle, his attention was attracted by the approach of a brilliant object. It was an enormous disc, whose colossal dimension could not be estimated. Its face, which was turned to the earth, was very bright. One might have thought it a small moon reflecting the light of the large one. She advanced with great speed, and seemed to describe an orbit round the earth, which would intersect the passage of the projectile. This body revolved upon its axis, and exhibited the phenomena of all celestial bodies abandoned in space.

“Ah!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, “What is that? another projectile?”

Barbicane did not answer. The appearance of this enormous body surprised and troubled him. A collision was possible, and might be attended with deplorable results; either the projectile would deviate from its path, or a shock, breaking its impetus, might precipitate it to earth; or, lastly, it might be irresistibly drawn away by the powerful asteroid. The president caught at a glance the consequences of these three hypotheses, either of which would, one way or the other, bring their experiment to an unsuccessful and fatal termination. His companions stood silently looking into space. The object grew rapidly as it approached them, and by an optical illusion the projectile seemed to be throwing itself before it.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, “we shall run into one another!”

Instinctively the travelers drew back. Their dread was great, but it did not last many seconds. The asteroid passed several hundred yards from the projectile and disappeared, not so much from the rapidity of its course, as that its face being opposite the moon, it was suddenly merged into the perfect darkness of space.

“A happy journey to you,” exclaimed Michel Ardan, with a sigh of relief. “Surely infinity of space is large enough for a poor little projectile to walk through without fear. Now, what is this portentous globe which nearly struck us?”

“I know,” replied Barbicane.

“Oh, indeed! you know everything.”

“It is,” said Barbicane, “a simple meteorite, but an enormous one, which the attraction of the earth has retained as a satellite.”

“Is it possible!” exclaimed Michel Ardan; “the earth then has two moons like Neptune?”

“Yes, my friends, two moons, though it passes generally for having only one; but this second moon is so small, and its speed so great, that the inhabitants of the earth cannot see it. It was by noticing disturbances that a French astronomer, M. Petit, was able to determine the existence of this second satellite and calculate its elements. According to his observations, this meteorite will accomplish its revolution around the earth in three hours and twenty minutes, which implies a wonderful rate of speed.”

“Do all astronomers admit the existence of this satellite?” asked Nicholl.

“No,” replied Barbicane; “but if, like us, they had met it, they could no longer doubt it. Indeed, I think that this meteorite, which, had it struck the projectile, would have much embarrassed us, will give us the means of deciding what our position in space is.”

“How?” said Ardan.

“Because its distance is known, and when we met it, we were exactly four thousand six hundred and fifty miles from the surface of the terrestrial globe.”

“More than two thousand French leagues,” exclaimed Michel Ardan.

“That beats the express trains of the pitiful globe called the earth.”

“I should think so,” replied Nicholl, consulting his chronometer; “it is eleven o’clock, and it is only thirteen minutes since we left the American continent.”

“Only thirteen minutes?” said Barbicane.

“Yes,” said Nicholl; “and if our initiatory speed of twelve thousand yards has been kept up, we shall have made about twenty thousand miles in the hour.”

“That is all very well, my friends,” said the president, “but the insoluble question still remains. Why did we not hear the detonation of the Columbiad?”

For want of an answer the conversation dropped, and Barbicane began thoughtfully to let down the shutter of the second side. He succeeded; and through the uncovered glass the moon filled the projectile with a brilliant light. Nicholl, as an economical man, put out the gas, now useless, and whose brilliancy prevented any observation of the inter-planetary space.

The lunar disc shone with wonderful purity. Her rays, no longer filtered through the vapory atmosphere of the terrestrial globe, shone through the glass, filling the air in the interior of the projectile with silvery reflections. The black curtain of the firmament in reality heightened the moon’s brilliancy, which in this void of ether unfavorable to diffusion did not eclipse the neighboring stars. The heavens, thus seen, presented quite a new aspect, and one which the human eye could never dream of. One may conceive the interest with which these bold men watched the orb of night, the great aim of their journey.

In its motion the earth’s satellite was insensibly nearing the zenith, the mathematical point which it ought to attain ninety-six hours later. Her mountains, her plains, every projection was as clearly discernible to their eyes as if they were observing it from some spot upon the earth; but its light was developed through space with wonderful intensity. The disc shone like a platinum mirror. Of the earth flying from under their feet, the travelers had lost all recollection.

It was captain Nicholl who first recalled their attention to the vanishing globe.

“Yes,” said Michel Ardan, “do not let us be ungrateful to it. Since we are leaving our country, let our last looks be directed to it. I wish to see the earth once more before it is quite hidden from my eyes.”

To satisfy his companions, Barbicane began to uncover the window at the bottom of the projectile, which would allow them to observe the earth direct. The disc, which the force of the projection had beaten down to the base, was removed, not without difficulty. Its fragments, placed carefully against a wall, might serve again upon occasion. Then a circular gap appeared, nineteen inches in diameter, hollowed out of the lower part of the projectile. A glass cover, six inches thick and strengthened with upper fastenings, closed it tightly. Beneath was fixed an aluminum plate, held in place by bolts. The screws being undone, and the bolts let go, the plate fell down, and visible communication was established between the interior and the exterior.

Michel Ardan knelt by the glass. It was cloudy, seemingly opaque.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “and the earth?”

“The earth?” said Barbicane. “There it is.”

“What! that little thread; that silver crescent?”

“Doubtless, Michel. In four days, when the moon will be full, at the very time we shall reach it, the earth will be new, and will only appear to us as a slender crescent which will soon disappear, and for some days will be enveloped in utter darkness.”

“That the earth?” repeated Michel Ardan, looking with all his eyes at the thin slip of his native planet.

The explanation given by President Barbicane was correct. The earth, with respect to the projectile, was entering its last phase. It was in its octant, and showed a crescent finely traced on the dark background of the sky. Its light, rendered bluish by the thick strata of the atmosphere was less intense than that of the crescent moon, but it was of considerable dimensions, and looked like an enormous arch stretched across the firmament. Some parts brilliantly lighted, especially on its concave part, showed the presence of high mountains, often disappearing behind thick spots, which are never seen on the lunar disc. They were rings of clouds placed concentrically round the terrestrial globe.

While the travelers were trying to pierce the profound darkness, a brilliant cluster of shooting stars burst upon their eyes. Hundreds of meteorites, ignited by the friction of the atmosphere, irradiated the shadow of the luminous train, and lined the cloudy parts of the disc with their fire. At this period the earth was in its perihelion, and the month of December is so propitious to these shooting stars, that astronomers have counted as many as twenty-four thousand in an hour. But Michel Ardan, disdaining scientific reasonings, preferred thinking that the earth was thus saluting the departure of her three children with her most brilliant fireworks.

Indeed this was all they saw of the globe lost in the solar world, rising and setting to the great planets like a simple morning or evening star! This globe, where they had left all their affections, was nothing more than a fugitive crescent!

Long did the three friends look without speaking, though united in heart, while the projectile sped onward with an ever-decreasing speed. Then an irresistible drowsiness crept over their brain. Was it weariness of body and mind? No doubt; for after the over-excitement of those last hours passed upon earth, reaction was inevitable.

“Well,” said Nicholl, “since we must sleep, let us sleep.”

And stretching themselves on their couches, they were all three soon in a profound slumber.

But they had not forgotten themselves more than a quarter of an hour, when Barbicane sat up suddenly, and rousing his companions with a loud voice, exclaimed — —

“I have found it!”

“What have you found?” asked Michel Ardan, jumping from his bed.

“The reason why we did not hear the detonation of the Columbiad.”

“And it is — — ?” said Nicholl.

“Because our projectile traveled faster than the sound!”

CHAPTER III

THEIR PLACE OF SHELTER

This curious but certainly correct explanation once given, the three friends returned to their slumbers. Could they have found a calmer or more peaceful spot to sleep in? On the earth, houses, towns, cottages, and country feel every shock given to the exterior of the globe. On sea, the vessels rocked by the waves are still in motion; in the air, the balloon oscillates incessantly on the fluid strata of divers densities. This projectile alone, floating in perfect space, in the midst of perfect silence, offered perfect repose.

Thus the sleep of our adventurous travelers might have been indefinitely prolonged, if an unexpected noise had not awakened them at about seven o'clock in the morning of the 2nd of December, eight hours after their departure.

This noise was a very natural barking.

"The dogs! it is the dogs!" exclaimed Michel Ardan, rising at once.

"They are hungry," said Nicholl.

"By Jove!" replied Michel, "we have forgotten them."

"Where are they?" asked Barbicane.

They looked and found one of the animals crouched under the divan. Terrified and shaken by the initiatory shock, it had remained in the corner till its voice returned with the pangs of hunger. It was the amiable Diana, still very confused, who crept out of her retreat, though not without much persuasion, Michel Ardan encouraging her with most gracious words.

“Come, Diana,” said he: “come, my girl! thou whose destiny will be marked in the cynegetic annals; thou whom the pagans would have given as companion to the god Anubis, and Christians as friend to St. Roch; thou who art rushing into interplanetary space, and wilt perhaps be the Eve of all Selenite dogs! come, Diana, come here.”

Diana, flattered or not, advanced by degrees, uttering plaintive cries.

“Good,” said Barbicane: “I see Eve, but where is Adam?”

“Adam?” replied Michel; “Adam cannot be far off; he is there somewhere; we must call him. Satellite! here, Satellite!”

But Satellite did not appear. Diana would not leave off howling. They found, however, that she was not bruised, and they gave her a pie, which silenced her complaints. As to Satellite, he seemed quite lost. They had to hunt a long time before finding him in one of the upper compartments of the projectile, whither some unaccountable shock must have violently hurled him. The poor beast, much hurt, was in a piteous state.

“The devil!” said Michel.

They brought the unfortunate dog down with great care. Its skull had been broken against the roof, and it seemed unlikely that he could recover from such a shock. Meanwhile, he was stretched comfortably on a cushion. Once there, he heaved a sigh.

“We will take care of you,” said Michel; “we are responsible for your existence. I would rather lose an arm than a paw of my poor Satellite.”

Saying which, he offered some water to the wounded dog, who swallowed it with avidity.

This attention paid, the travelers watched the earth and the moon attentively. The earth was now only discernible by a cloudy disc ending in a crescent, rather more contracted than that of the previous evening; but its expanse was still enormous, compared with that of the moon, which was approaching nearer and nearer to a perfect circle.

“By Jove!” said Michel Ardan, “I am really sorry that we did not start when the earth was full, that is to say, when our globe was in opposition to the sun.”

“Why?” said Nicholl.

“Because we should have seen our continents and seas in a new light — the first resplendent under the solar rays, the latter cloudy as represented on some maps of the world. I should like to have seen those poles of the earth on which the eye of man has never yet rested.

“I dare say,” replied Barbicane; “but if the earth had been full, the moon would have been new; that is to say, invisible, because of the rays of the sun. It is better for us to see the destination we wish to reach, than the point of departure.”

“You are right, Barbicane,” replied Captain Nicholl; “and, besides, when we have reached the moon, we shall have time during the long lunar nights to consider at our leisure the globe on which our likenesses swarm.”

“Our likenesses!” exclaimed Michel Ardan; “They are no more our likenesses than the Selenites are! We inhabit a new world, peopled by ourselves — the projectile! I am Barbicane's likeness, and Barbicane is Nicholl's. Beyond us, around us, human nature is at an end, and we are the only population of this microcosm until we become pure Selenites."

"In about eighty-eight hours," replied the captain.

"Which means to say?" asked Michel Ardan.

"That it is half-past eight," replied Nicholl.

"Very well," retorted Michel; "then it is impossible for me to find even the shadow of a reason why we should not go to breakfast."

Indeed the inhabitants of the new star could not live without eating, and their stomachs were suffering from the imperious laws of hunger. Michel Ardan, as a Frenchman, was declared chief cook, an important function, which raised no rival. The gas gave sufficient heat for the culinary apparatus, and the provision box furnished the elements of this first feast.

The breakfast began with three bowls of excellent soup, thanks to the liquefaction in hot water of those precious cakes of Liebig, prepared from the best parts of the ruminants of the Pampas. To the soup succeeded some beefsteaks, compressed by an hydraulic press, as tender and succulent as if brought straight from the kitchen of an English eating-house. Michel, who was imaginative, maintained that they were even "red."

Preserved vegetables ("fresher than nature," said the amiable Michel) succeeded the dish of meat; and was followed by some cups of tea with bread and butter, after the American fashion.

The beverage was declared exquisite, and was due to the infusion of the choicest leaves, of which the emperor of Russia had given some chests for the benefit of the travelers.

And lastly, to crown the repast, Ardan had brought out a fine bottle of Nuits, which was found “by chance” in the provision-box. The three friends drank to the union of the earth and her satellite.

And, as if he had not already done enough for the generous wine which he had distilled on the slopes of Burgundy, the sun chose to be part of the party. At this moment the projectile emerged from the conical shadow cast by the terrestrial globe, and the rays of the radiant orb struck the lower disc of the projectile direct occasioned by the angle which the moon’s orbit makes with that of the earth.

“The sun!” exclaimed Michel Ardan.

“No doubt,” replied Barbicane; “I expected it.”

“But,” said Michel, “the conical shadow which the earth leaves in space extends beyond the moon?”

“Far beyond it, if the atmospheric refraction is not taken into consideration,” said Barbicane. “But when the moon is enveloped in this shadow, it is because the centers of the three stars, the sun, the earth, and the moon, are all in one and the same straight line. Then the nodes coincide with the phases of the moon, and there is an eclipse. If we had started when there was an eclipse of the moon, all our passage would have been in the shadow, which would have been a pity.”

“Why?”

“Because, though we are floating in space, our projectile, bathed in the solar rays, will receive light and heat. It economizes the gas, which is in every respect a good economy.”

Indeed, under these rays which no atmosphere can temper, either in temperature or brilliancy, the projectile grew warm and bright, as if it had passed suddenly from winter to summer. The moon above, the sun beneath, were inundating it with their fire.

“It is pleasant here,” said Nicholl.

“I should think so,” said Michel Ardan. “With a little earth spread on our aluminum planet we should have green peas in twenty-four hours. I have but one fear, which is that the walls of the projectile might melt.”

“Calm yourself, my worthy friend,” replied Barbicane; “the projectile withstood a very much higher temperature than this as it slid through the strata of the atmosphere. I should not be surprised if it did not look like a meteor on fire to the eyes of the spectators in Florida.”

“But then J. T. Maston will think we are roasted!”

“What astonishes me,” said Barbicane, “is that we have not been.

That was a danger we had not provided for.”

“I feared it,” said Nicholl simply.

“And you never mentioned it, my sublime captain,” exclaimed

Michel Ardan, clasping his friend’s hand.

Barbicane now began to settle himself in the projectile as if he was never to leave it. One must remember that this aerial car had a base with a superficies of fifty-four square feet. Its height to the roof was twelve feet.

Carefully laid out in the inside, and little encumbered by instruments and traveling utensils, which each had their particular place, it left the three travelers a certain freedom of movement. The thick window inserted in the bottom could bear any amount of weight, and Barbicane and his companions walked upon it as if it were solid plank; but the sun striking it directly with its rays lit the interior of the projectile from beneath, thus producing singular effects of light.

They began by investigating the state of their store of water and provisions, neither of which had suffered, thanks to the care taken to deaden the shock. Their provisions were abundant, and plentiful enough to last the three travelers for more than a year. Barbicane wished to be cautious, in case the projectile should land on a part of the moon which was utterly barren. As to water and the reserve of brandy, which consisted of fifty gallons, there was only enough for two months; but according to the last observations of astronomers, the moon had a low, dense, and thick atmosphere, at least in the deep valleys, and there springs and streams could not fail. Thus, during their passage, and for the first year of their settlement on the lunar continent, these adventurous explorers would suffer neither hunger nor thirst.

Now about the air in the projectile. There, too, they were secure. Reiset and Regnaut's apparatus, intended for the production of oxygen, was supplied with chlorate of potassium for two months. They necessarily consumed a certain quantity of gas, for they were obliged to keep the producing substance at a temperature of above 400@. But there again they were all safe. The apparatus only wanted a little care. But it was not enough to renew the oxygen; they must absorb the carbonic acid produced by expiration. During the last twelve hours the atmosphere of the projectile had become charged with this deleterious gas. Nicholl discovered the state of the air by observing Diana panting painfully. The carbonic acid, by a phenomenon similar to that produced in the famous Grotto del Cane, had collected at the bottom of the projectile owing to its weight. Poor Diana, with her head low, would suffer before her masters from the presence of this gas. But Captain Nicholl hastened to remedy this state of things, by placing on the floor several receivers containing caustic potash, which he shook about for a time, and this substance, greedy of carbonic acid, soon completely absorbed it, thus purifying the air.

An inventory of instruments was then begun. The thermometers and barometers had resisted, all but one minimum thermometer, the glass of which was broken. An excellent aneroid was drawn from the wadded box which contained it and hung on the wall. Of course it was only affected by and marked the pressure of the air inside the projectile, but it also showed the quantity of moisture which it contained. At that moment its needle oscillated between 25.24 and 25.08.

It was fine weather.

Barbicane had also brought several compasses, which he found intact. One must understand that under present conditions their needles were acting wildly, that is without any constant direction. Indeed, at the distance they were from the earth, the magnetic pole could have no perceptible action upon the apparatus; but the box placed on the lunar disc might perhaps exhibit some strange phenomena. In any case it would be interesting to see whether the earth's satellite submitted like herself to its magnetic influence.

A hypsometer to measure the height of the lunar mountains, a sextant to take the height of the sun, glasses which would be useful as they neared the moon, all these instruments were carefully looked over, and pronounced good in spite of the violent shock.

As to the pickaxes and different tools which were Nicholl’s especial choice; as to the sacks of different kinds of grain and shrubs which Michel Ardan hoped to transplant into Selenite ground, they were stowed away in the upper part of the projectile. There was a sort of granary there, loaded with things which the extravagant Frenchman had heaped up. What they were no one knew, and the good-tempered fellow did not explain. Now and then he climbed up by cramp-irons riveted to the walls, but kept the inspection to himself. He arranged and rearranged, he plunged his hand rapidly into certain mysterious boxes, singing in one of the falsest of voices an old French refrain to enliven the situation.

Barbicane observed with some interest that his guns and other arms had not been damaged. These were important, because, heavily loaded, they were to help lessen the fall of the projectile, when drawn by the lunar attraction (after having passed the point of neutral attraction) on to the moon’s surface; a fall which ought to be six times less rapid than it would have been on the earth’s surface, thanks to the difference of bulk. The inspection ended with general satisfaction, when each returned to watch space through the side windows and the lower glass coverlid.

There was the same view. The whole extent of the celestial sphere swarmed with stars and constellations of wonderful purity, enough to drive an astronomer out of his mind! On one side the sun, like the mouth of a lighted oven, a dazzling disc without a halo, standing out on the dark background of the sky! On the other, the moon returning its fire by reflection, and apparently motionless in the midst of the starry world. Then, a large spot seemingly nailed to the firmament, bordered by a silvery cord; it was the earth! Here and there nebulous masses like large flakes of starry snow; and from the zenith to the nadir, an immense ring formed by an impalpable dust of stars, the “Milky Way,” in the midst of which the sun ranks only as a star of the fourth magnitude. The observers could not take their eyes from this novel spectacle, of which no description could give an adequate idea. What reflections it suggested! What emotions hitherto unknown awoke in their souls! Barbicane wished to begin the relation of his journey while under its first impressions, and hour after hour took notes of all facts happening in the beginning of the enterprise. He wrote quietly, with his large square writing, in a business-like style.

During this time Nicholl, the calculator, looked over the minutes of their passage, and worked out figures with unparalleled dexterity. Michel Ardan chatted first with Barbicane, who did not answer him, and then with Nicholl, who did not hear him, with Diana, who understood none of his theories, and lastly with himself, questioning and answering, going and coming, busy with a thousand details; at one time bent over the lower glass, at another roosting in the heights of the projectile, and always singing. In this microcosm he represented French loquacity and excitability, and we beg you to believe that they were well represented. The day, or rather (for the expression is not correct) the lapse of twelve hours, which forms a day upon the earth, closed with a plentiful supper carefully prepared. No accident of any nature had yet happened to shake the travelers’ confidence; so, full of hope, already sure of success, they slept peacefully, while the projectile under an uniformly decreasing speed was crossing the sky.

CHAPTER IV

A LITTLE ALGEBRA

The night passed without incident. The word “night,” however, is scarcely applicable.

The position of the projectile with regard to the sun did not change. Astronomically, it was daylight on the lower part, and night on the upper; so when during this narrative these words are used, they represent the lapse of time between rising and setting of the sun upon the earth.

The travelers’ sleep was rendered more peaceful by the projectile’s excessive speed, for it seemed absolutely motionless. Not a motion betrayed its onward course through space. The rate of progress, however rapid it might be, cannot produce any sensible effect on the human frame when it takes place in a vacuum, or when the mass of air circulates with the body which is carried with it. What inhabitant of the earth perceives its speed, which, however, is at the rate of 68,000 miles per hour? Motion under such conditions is “felt” no more than repose; and when a body is in repose it will remain so as long as no strange force displaces it; if moving, it will not stop unless an obstacle comes in its way. This indifference to motion or repose is called inertia.

Barbicane and his companions might have believed themselves perfectly stationary, being shut up in the projectile; indeed, the effect would have been the same if they had been on the outside of it. Had it not been for the moon, which was increasing above them, they might have sworn that they were floating in complete stagnation.

That morning, the 3rd of December, the travelers were awakened by a joyous but unexpected noise; it was the crowing of a cock which sounded through the car. Michel Ardan, who was the first on his feet, climbed to the top of the projectile, and shutting a box, the lid of which was partly open, said in a low voice, “Will you hold your tongue? That creature will spoil my design!”

But Nicholl and Barbicane were awake.

“A cock!” said Nicholl.

“Why no, my friends,” Michel answered quickly; “it was I who wished to awake you by this rural sound.” So saying, he gave vent to a splendid cock-a-doodledoo, which would have done honor to the proudest of poultry-yards.

The two Americans could not help laughing.

“Fine talent that,” said Nicholl, looking suspiciously at his companion.

“Yes,” said Michel; “a joke in my country. It is very Gallic; they play the cock so in the best society.”

Then turning the conversation:

“Barbicane, do you know what I have been thinking of all night?”

“No,” answered the president.

“Of our Cambridge friends. You have already remarked that I am an ignoramus in mathematical subjects; and it is impossible for me to find out how the savants of the observatory were able to calculate what initiatory speed the projectile ought to have on leaving the Columbiad in order to attain the moon.”

“You mean to say,” replied Barbicane, “to attain that neutral point where the terrestrial and lunar attractions are equal; for, starting from that point, situated about nine-tenths of the distance traveled over, the projectile would simply fall upon the moon, on account of its weight.”

“So be it,” said Michel; “but, once more; how could they calculate the initiatory speed?”

“Nothing can be easier,” replied Barbicane.

“And you knew how to make that calculation?” asked Michel Ardan.

“Perfectly. Nicholl and I would have made it, if the observatory had not saved us the trouble.”

“Very well, old Barbicane,” replied Michel; “they might have cut off my head, beginning at my feet, before they could have made me solve that problem.”

“Because you do not know algebra,” answered Barbicane quietly.

“Ah, there you are, you eaters of x^1; you think you have said all when you have said `Algebra.’”

“Michel,” said Barbicane, “can you use a forge without a hammer, or a plow without a plowshare?”

“Hardly.”

“Well, algebra is a tool, like the plow or the hammer, and a good tool to those who know how to use it.”

“Seriously?”

“Quite seriously.”

“And can you use that tool in my presence?”

“If it will interest you.”

“And show me how they calculated the initiatory speed of our car?”

“Yes, my worthy friend; taking into consideration all the elements of the problem, the distance from the center of the earth to the center of the moon, of the radius of the earth, of its bulk, and of the bulk of the moon, I can tell exactly what ought to be the initiatory speed of the projectile, and that by a simple formula.”

“Let us see.”

“You shall see it; only I shall not give you the real course drawn by the projectile between the moon and the earth in considering their motion round the sun. No, I shall consider these two orbs as perfectly motionless, which will answer all our purpose.”

“And why?”

“Because it will be trying to solve the problem called `the problem of the three bodies,’ for which the integral calculus is not yet far enough advanced.”

“Then,” said Michel Ardan, in his sly tone, “mathematics have not said their last word?”

“Certainly not,” replied Barbicane.

“Well, perhaps the Selenites have carried the integral calculus farther than you have; and, by the bye, what is this `integral calculus?’”

“It is a calculation the converse of the differential,” replied

Barbicane seriously.

“Much obliged; it is all very clear, no doubt.”

“And now,” continued Barbicane, “a slip of paper and a bit of pencil, and before a half-hour is over I will have found the required formula.”

Half an hour had not elapsed before Barbicane, raising his head, showed Michel Ardan a page covered with algebraical signs, in which the general formula for the solution was contained.

“Well, and does Nicholl understand what that means?”

“Of course, Michel,” replied the captain. “All these signs, which seem cabalistic to you, form the plainest, the clearest, and the most logical language to those who know how to read it.”

“And you pretend, Nicholl,” asked Michel, “that by means of these hieroglyphics, more incomprehensible than the Egyptian Ibis, you can find what initiatory speed it was necessary to give the projectile?”

“Incontestably,” replied Nicholl; “and even by this same formula

I can always tell you its speed at any point of its transit.”

“On your word?”

“On my word.”

“Then you are as cunning as our president.”

“No, Michel; the difficult part is what Barbicane has done; that is, to get an equation which shall satisfy all the conditions of the problem. The remainder is only a question of arithmetic, requiring merely the knowledge of the four rules.”

“That is something!” replied Michel Ardan, who for his life could not do addition right, and who defined the rule as a Chinese puzzle, which allowed one to obtain all sorts of totals.

“The expression v zero, which you see in that equation, is the speed which the projectile will have on leaving the atmosphere.”

“Just so,” said Nicholl; “it is from that point that we must calculate the velocity, since we know already that the velocity at departure was exactly one and a half times more than on leaving the atmosphere.”

“I understand no more,” said Michel.

“It is a very simple calculation,” said Barbicane.

“Not as simple as I am,” retorted Michel.

“That means, that when our projectile reached the limits of the terrestrial atmosphere it had already lost one-third of its initiatory speed.”

"As much as that?"

"Yes, my friend; merely by friction against the atmospheric strata. You understand that the faster it goes the more resistance it meets with from the air."

"That I admit," answered Michel; "and I understand it, although your x's and zero's, and algebraic formula, are rattling in my head like nails in a bag."

"First effects of algebra," replied Barbicane; "and now, to finish, we are going to prove the given number of these different expressions, that is, work out their value."

"Finish me!" replied Michel.

Barbicane took the paper, and began to make his calculations with great rapidity. Nicholl looked over and greedily read the work as it proceeded.

"That's it! that's it!" at last he cried.

"Is it clear?" asked Barbicane.

"It is written in letters of fire," said Nicholl.

"Wonderful fellows!" muttered Ardan.

"Do you understand it at last?" asked Barbicane.

"Do I understand it?" cried Ardan; "my head is splitting with it."

"And now," said Nicholl, "to find out the speed of the projectile when it leaves the atmosphere, we have only to calculate that."

The captain, as a practical man equal to all difficulties, began to write with frightful rapidity. Divisions and multiplications grew under his fingers; the figures were like hail on the white page. Barbicane watched him, while Michel Ardan nursed a growing headache with both hands.

“Very well?” asked Barbicane, after some minutes’ silence.

“Well!” replied Nicholl; every calculation made, v zero, that is to say, the speed necessary for the projectile on leaving the atmosphere, to enable it to reach the equal point of attraction, ought to be — — ”

“Yes?” said Barbicane.

“Twelve thousand yards.”

“What!” exclaimed Barbicane, starting; “you say — — ”

“Twelve thousand yards.”

“The devil!” cried the president, making a gesture of despair.

“What is the matter?” asked Michel Ardan, much surprised.

“What is the matter! why, if at this moment our speed had already diminished one-third by friction, the initiatory speed ought to have been — — ”

“Seventeen thousand yards.”

“And the Cambridge Observatory declared that twelve thousand yards was enough at starting; and our projectile, which only started with that speed — — ”

“Well?” asked Nicholl.

“Well, it will not be enough.”

“Good.”

“We shall not be able to reach the neutral point.”

“The deuce!”

“We shall not even get halfway.”

“In the name of the projectile!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, jumping as if it was already on the point of striking the terrestrial globe.

“And we shall fall back upon the earth!”

CHAPTER V

THE COLD OF SPACE

This revelation came like a thunderbolt. Who could have expected such an error in calculation? Barbicane would not believe it. Nicholl revised his figures: they were exact. As to the formula which had determined them, they could not suspect its truth; it was evident that an initiatory velocity of seventeen thousand yards in the first second was necessary to enable them to reach the neutral point.

The three friends looked at each other silently. There was no thought of breakfast. Barbicane, with clenched teeth, knitted brows, and hands clasped convulsively, was watching through the window. Nicholl had crossed his arms, and was examining his calculations. Michel Ardan was muttering:

“That is just like these scientific men: they never do anything else.

I would give twenty pistoles if we could fall upon the Cambridge

Observatory and crush it, together with the whole lot of dabblers

in figures which it contains.”

Suddenly a thought struck the captain, which he at once communicated to Barbicane.

“Ah!” said he; “it is seven o’clock in the morning; we have already been gone thirty-two hours; more than half our passage is over, and we are not falling that I am aware of.”

Barbicane did not answer, but after a rapid glance at the captain, took a pair of compasses wherewith to measure the angular distance of the terrestrial globe; then from the lower window he took an exact observation, and noticed that the projectile was apparently stationary. Then rising and wiping his forehead, on which large drops of perspiration were standing, he put some figures on paper. Nicholl understood that the president was deducting from the terrestrial diameter the projectile's distance from the earth. He watched him anxiously.

"No," exclaimed Barbicane, after some moments, "no, we are not falling! no, we are already more than 50,000 leagues from the earth. We have passed the point at which the projectile would have stopped if its speed had only been 12,000 yards at starting. We are still going up."

"That is evident," replied Nicholl; "and we must conclude that our initial speed, under the power of the 400,000 pounds of gun-cotton, must have exceeded the required 12,000 yards. Now I can understand how, after thirteen minutes only, we met the second satellite, which gravitates round the earth at more than 2,000 leagues' distance."

"And this explanation is the more probable," added Barbicane, "Because, in throwing off the water enclosed between its partition-breaks, the projectile found itself lightened of a considerable weight."

"Just so," said Nicholl.

"Ah, my brave Nicholl, we are saved!"

"Very well then," said Michel Ardan quietly; "as we are safe, let us have breakfast."

Nicholl was not mistaken. The initial speed had been, very fortunately, much above that estimated by the Cambridge Observatory; but the Cambridge Observatory had nevertheless made a mistake.

The travelers, recovered from this false alarm, breakfasted merrily. If they ate a good deal, they talked more. Their confidence was greater after than before "the incident of the algebra."

"Why should we not succeed?" said Michel Ardan; "why should we not arrive safely? We are launched; we have no obstacle before us, no stones in the way; the road is open, more so than that of a ship battling with the sea; more open than that of a balloon battling with the wind; and if a ship can reach its destination, a balloon go where it pleases, why cannot our projectile attain its end and aim?"

"It will attain it," said Barbicane.

"If only to do honor to the Americans," added Michel Ardan, "the only people who could bring such an enterprise to a happy termination, and the only one which could produce a President Barbicane. Ah, now we are no longer uneasy, I begin to think, What will become of us? We shall get right royally weary."

Barbicane and Nicholl made a gesture of denial.

"But I have provided for the contingency, my friends," replied Michel; "you have only to speak, and I have chess, draughts, cards, and dominoes at your disposal; nothing is wanting but a billiard-table."

"What!" exclaimed Barbicane; "you brought away such trifles?"

“Certainly,” replied Michel, “and not only to distract ourselves, but also with the laudable intention of endowing the Selenite smoking divans with them.”

“My friend,” said Barbicane, “if the moon is inhabited, its inhabitants must have appeared some thousands of years before those of the earth, for we cannot doubt that their star is much older than ours. If then these Selenites have existed their hundreds of thousands of years, and if their brain is of the same organization of the human brain, they have already invented all that we have invented, and even what we may invent in future ages. They have nothing to learn from us, and we have everything to learn from them.”

“What!” said Michel; “you believe that they have artists like

Phidias, Michael Angelo, or Raphael?”

“Yes.”

“Poets like Homer, Virgil, Milton, Lamartine, and Hugo?”

“I am sure of it.”

“Philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant?”

“I have no doubt of it.”

“Scientific men like Archimedes, Euclid, Pascal, Newton?”

“I could swear it.”

“Comic writers like Arnal, and photographers like — like Nadar?”

“Certain.”

“Then, friend Barbicane, if they are as strong as we are, and even stronger — these Selenites — why have they not tried to communicate with the earth? why have they not launched a lunar projectile to our terrestrial regions?”

“Who told you that they have never done so?” said Barbicane seriously.

“Indeed,” added Nicholl, “it would be easier for them than for us, for two reasons; first, because the attraction on the moon’s surface is six times less than on that of the earth, which would allow a projectile to rise more easily; secondly, because it would be enough to send such a projectile only at 8,000 leagues instead of 80,000, which would require the force of projection to be ten times less strong.”

“Then,” continued Michel, “I repeat it, why have they not done it?”

“And I repeat,” said Barbicane; “who told you that they have not done it?”

“When?”

“Thousands of years before man appeared on earth.”

“And the projectile — where is the projectile? I demand to see the projectile.”

“My friend,” replied Barbicane, “the sea covers five-sixths of our globe. From that we may draw five good reasons for supposing that the lunar projectile, if ever launched, is now at the bottom of the Atlantic or the Pacific, unless it sped into some crevasse at that period when the crust of the earth was not yet hardened.”

“Old Barbicane,” said Michel, “you have an answer for everything, and I bow before your wisdom. But there is one hypothesis that would suit me better than all the others, which is, the Selenites, being older than we, are wiser, and have not invented gunpowder.”

At this moment Diana joined in the conversation by a sonorous barking.

She was asking for her breakfast.

“Ah!” said Michel Ardan, “in our discussion we have forgotten

Diana and Satellite.”

Immediately a good-sized pie was given to the dog, which devoured it hungrily.

“Do you see, Barbicane,” said Michel, “we should have made a second Noah’s ark of this projectile, and borne with us to the moon a couple of every kind of domestic animal.”

“I dare say; but room would have failed us.”

“Oh!” said Michel, “we might have squeezed a little.”

“The fact is,” replied Nicholl, “that cows, bulls, and horses, and all ruminants, would have been very useful on the lunar continent, but unfortunately the car could neither have been made a stable nor a shed.”

“Well, we might have at least brought a donkey, only a little donkey; that courageous beast which old Silenus loved to mount. I love those old donkeys; they are the least favored animals in creation; they are not only beaten while alive, but even after they are dead.”

"How do you make that out?" asked Barbicane. "Why," said

Michel, "they make their skins into drums."

Barbicane and Nicholl could not help laughing at this ridiculous remark. But a cry from their merry companion stopped them. The latter was leaning over the spot where Satellite lay. He rose, saying:

"My good Satellite is no longer ill."

"Ah!" said Nicholl.

"No," answered Michel, "he is dead! There," added he, in a piteous tone, "that is embarrassing. I much fear, my poor Diana, that you will leave no progeny in the lunar regions!"

Indeed the unfortunate Satellite had not survived its wound. It was quite dead. Michel Ardan looked at his friends with a rueful countenance.

"One question presents itself," said Barbicane. "We cannot keep the dead body of this dog with us for the next forty-eight hours."

"No! certainly not," replied Nicholl; "but our scuttles are fixed on hinges; they can be let down. We will open one, and throw the body out into space."

The president thought for some moments, and then said:

"Yes, we must do so, but at the same time taking very great precautions."

"Why?" asked Michel.

"For two reasons which you will understand," answered Barbicane. "The first relates to the air shut up in the projectile, and of which we must lose as little as possible.”

“But we manufacture the air?”

“Only in part. We make only the oxygen, my worthy Michel; and with regard to that, we must watch that the apparatus does not furnish the oxygen in too great a quantity; for an excess would bring us very serious physiological troubles. But if we make the oxygen, we do not make the azote, that medium which the lungs do not absorb, and which ought to remain intact; and that azote will escape rapidly through the open scuttles.”

“Oh! the time for throwing out poor Satellite?” said Michel.

“Agreed; but we must act quickly.”

“And the second reason?” asked Michel.

“The second reason is that we must not let the outer cold, which is excessive, penetrate the projectile or we shall be frozen to death.”

“But the sun?”

“The sun warms our projectile, which absorbs its rays; but it does not warm the vacuum in which we are floating at this moment. Where there is no air, there is no more heat than diffused light; and the same with darkness; it is cold where the sun’s rays do not strike direct. This temperature is only the temperature produced by the radiation of the stars; that is to say, what the terrestrial globe would undergo if the sun disappeared one day.”

“Which is not to be feared,” replied Nicholl.

“Who knows?” said Michel Ardan. “But, in admitting that the sun does not go out, might it not happen that the earth might move away from it?”

“There!” said Barbicane, “there is Michel with his ideas.”

“And,” continued Michel, “do we not know that in 1861 the earth passed through the tail of a comet? Or let us suppose a comet whose power of attraction is greater than that of the sun. The terrestrial orbit will bend toward the wandering star, and the earth, becoming its satellite, will be drawn such a distance that the rays of the sun will have no action on its surface.”

“That might happen, indeed,” replied Barbicane, “but the consequences of such a displacement need not be so formidable as you suppose.”

“And why not?”

“Because the heat and cold would be equalized on our globe. It has been calculated that, had our earth been carried along in its course by the comet of 1861, at its perihelion, that is, its nearest approach to the sun, it would have undergone a heat 28,000 times greater than that of summer. But this heat, which is sufficient to evaporate the waters, would have formed a thick ring of cloud, which would have modified that excessive temperature; hence the compensation between the cold of the aphelion and the heat of the perihelion.”

“At how many degrees,” asked Nicholl, “is the temperature of the planetary spaces estimated?”

“Formerly,” replied Barbicane, “it was greatly exagerated; but now, after the calculations of Fourier, of the French Academy of Science, it is not supposed to exceed 60@ Centigrade below zero.”

“Pooh!” said Michel, “that’s nothing!”

“It is very much,” replied Barbicane; “the temperature which was observed in the polar regions, at Melville Island and Fort Reliance, that is 76@ Fahrenheit below zero.”

“If I mistake not,” said Nicholl, “M. Pouillet, another savant, estimates the temperature of space at 250@ Fahrenheit below zero. We shall, however, be able to verify these calculations for ourselves.”

“Not at present; because the solar rays, beating directly upon our thermometer, would give, on the contrary, a very high temperature. But, when we arrive in the moon, during its fifteen days of night at either face, we shall have leisure to make the experiment, for our satellite lies in a vacuum.”

“What do you mean by a vacuum?” asked Michel. “Is it perfectly such?”

“It is absolutely void of air.”

“And is the air replaced by nothing whatever?”

“By the ether only,” replied Barbicane.

“And pray what is the ether?”

“The ether, my friend, is an agglomeration of imponderable atoms, which, relatively to their dimensions, are as far removed from each other as the celestial bodies are in space. It is these atoms which, by their vibratory motion, produce both light and heat in the universe.”

They now proceeded to the burial of Satellite. They had merely to drop him into space, in the same way that sailors drop a body into the sea; but, as President Barbicane suggested, they must act quickly, so as to lose as little as possible of that air whose elasticity would rapidly have spread it into space. The bolts of the right scuttle, the opening of which measured about twelve inches across, were carefully drawn, while Michel, quite grieved, prepared to launch his dog into space. The glass, raised by a powerful lever, which enabled it to overcome the pressure of the inside air on the walls of the projectile, turned rapidly on its hinges, and Satellite was thrown out. Scarcely a particle of air could have escaped, and the operation was so successful that later on Barbicane did not fear to dispose of the rubbish which encumbered the car.

CHAPTER VI

QUESTION AND ANSWER

On the 4th of December, when the travelers awoke after fifty-four hours' journey, the chronometer marked five o'clock of the terrestrial morning. In time it was just over five hours and forty minutes, half of that assigned to their sojourn in the projectile; but they had already accomplished nearly seven-tenths of the way. This peculiarity was due to their regularly decreasing speed.

Now when they observed the earth through the lower window, it looked like nothing more than a dark spot, drowned in the solar rays. No more crescent, no more cloudy light! The next day, at midnight, the earth would be new, at the very moment when the moon would be full. Above, the orb of night was nearing the line followed by the projectile, so as to meet it at the given hour. All around the black vault was studded with brilliant points, which seemed to move slowly; but, at the great distance they were from them, their relative size did not seem to change. The sun and stars appeared exactly as they do to us upon earth. As to the moon, she was considerably larger; but the travelers' glasses, not very powerful, did not allow them as yet to make any useful observations upon her surface, or reconnoiter her topographically or geologically.

Thus the time passed in never-ending conversations all about the moon. Each one brought forward his own contingent of particular facts; Barbicane and Nicholl always serious, Michel Ardan always enthusiastic. The projectile, its situation, its direction, incidents which might happen, the precautions necessitated by their fall on to the moon, were inexhaustible matters of conjecture.

As they were breakfasting, a question of Michel's, relating to the projectile, provoked rather a curious answer from Barbicane, which is worth repeating. Michel, supposing it to be roughly stopped, while still under its formidable initial speed, wished to know what the consequences of the stoppage would have been.

"But," said Barbicane, "I do not see how it could have been stopped."

"But let us suppose so," said Michel.

"It is an impossible supposition," said the practical Barbicane; "unless that impulsive force had failed; but even then its speed would diminish by degrees, and it would not have stopped suddenly."

"Admit that it had struck a body in space."

"What body?"

"Why that enormous meteor which we met."

"Then," said Nicholl, "the projectile would have been broken into a thousand pieces, and we with it."

"More than that," replied Barbicane; "we should have been burned to death."

"Burned?" exclaimed Michel, "by Jove! I am sorry it did not happen, `just to see.'"

"And you would have seen," replied Barbicane. "It is known now that heat is only a modification of motion. When water is warmed — that is to say, when heat is added to it — its particles are set in motion."

“Well,” said michel, “that is an ingenious theory!”

“And a true one, my worthy friend; for it explains every phenomenon of caloric. Heat is but the motion of atoms, a simple oscillation of the particles of a body. When they apply the brake to a train, the train comes to a stop; but what becomes of the motion which it had previously possessed? It is transformed into heat, and the brake becomes hot. Why do they grease the axles of the wheels? To prevent their heating, because this heat would be generated by the motion which is thus lost by transformation.”

“Yes, I understand,” replied Michel, “perfectly. For example, when I have run a long time, when I am swimming, when I am perspiring in large drops, why am I obliged to stop? Simply because my motion is changed into heat.”

Barbicane could not help smiling at Michel’s reply; then, returning to his theory, said:

“Thus, in case of a shock, it would have been with our projectile as with a ball which falls in a burning state after having struck the metal plate; it is its motion which is turned into heat. Consequently I affirm that, if our projectile had struck the meteor, its speed thus suddenly checked would have raised a heat great enough to turn it into vapor instantaneously.”

“Then,” asked Nicholl, “what would happen if the earth’s motion were to stop suddenly?”

“Her temperature would be raised to such a pitch,” said

Barbicane, “that she would be at once reduced to vapor.”

“Well,” said Michel, “that is a way of ending the earth which will greatly simplify things.”

“And if the earth fell upon the sun?” asked Nicholl.

“According to calculation,” replied Barbicane, “the fall would develop a heat equal to that produced by 16,000 globes of coal, each equal in bulk to our terrestrial globe.”

“Good additional heat for the sun,” replied Michel Ardan, “of which the inhabitants of Uranus or Neptune would doubtless not complain; they must be perished with cold on their planets.”

“Thus, my friends,” said Barbicane, “all motion suddenly stopped produces heat. And this theory allows us to infer that the heat of the solar disc is fed by a hail of meteors falling incessantly on its surface. They have even calculated — — ”

“Oh, dear!” murmured Michel, “the figures are coming.”

“They have even calculated,” continued the imperturbable Barbicane, “that the shock of each meteor on the sun ought to produce a heat equal to that of 4,000 masses of coal of an equal bulk.”

“And what is the solar heat?” asked Michel.

“It is equal to that produced by the combustion of a stratum of coal surrounding the sun to a depth of forty-seven miles.”

“And that heat — — ”

“Would be able to boil two billions nine hundred millions of cubic myriameters of water.”

The myriameter is equal to rather more than 10,936 cubic yards English.

“And it does not roast us!” exclaimed Michel.

“No,” replied Barbicane, “because the terrestrial atmosphere absorbs four-tenths of the solar heat; besides, the quantity of heat intercepted by the earth is but a billionth part of the entire radiation.”

“I see that all is for the best,” said Michel, “and that this atmosphere is a useful invention; for it not only allows us to breathe, but it prevents us from roasting.”

“Yes!” said Nicholl, “unfortunately, it will not be the same in the moon.”

“Bah!” said Michel, always hopeful. “If there are inhabitants, they must breathe. If there are no longer any, they must have left enough oxygen for three people, if only at the bottom of ravines, where its own weight will cause it to accumulate, and we will not climb the mountains; that is all.” And Michel, rising, went to look at the lunar disc, which shone with intolerable brilliancy.

“By Jove!” said he, “it must be hot up there!”

“Without considering,” replied Nicholl, “that the day lasts 360 hours!”

“And to compensate that,” said Barbicane, “the nights have the same length; and as heat is restored by radiation, their temperature can only be that of the planetary space.”

“A pretty country, that!” exclaimed Michel. “Never mind! I wish I was there! Ah! my dear comrades, it will be rather curious to have the earth for our moon, to see it rise on the horizon, to recognize the shape of its continents, and to say to oneself, `There is America, there is Europe;’ then to follow it when it is about to lose itself in the sun’s rays! By the bye, Barbicane, have the Selenites eclipses?”

“Yes, eclipses of the sun,” replied Barbicane, “when the centers of the three orbs are on a line, the earth being in the middle. But they are only partial, during which the earth, cast like a screen upon the solar disc, allows the greater portion to be seen.”

“And why,” asked Nicholl, “is there no total eclipse? Does not the cone of the shadow cast by the earth extend beyond the moon?”

“Yes, if we do not take into consideration the refraction produced by the terrestrial atmosphere. No, if we take that refraction into consideration. Thus let <lower case delta> be the horizontal parallel, and p the apparent semidiameter — — ”

“Oh!” said Michel. “Do speak plainly, you man of algebra!”

“Very well, replied Barbicane; “in popular language the mean distance from the moon to the earth being sixty terrestrial radii, the length of the cone of the shadow, on account of refraction, is reduced to less than forty-two radii. The result is that when there are eclipses, the moon finds itself beyond the cone of pure shadow, and that the sun sends her its rays, not only from its edges, but also from its center.”

“Then,” said Michel, in a merry tone, “why are there eclipses, when there ought not to be any?”

“Simply because the solar rays are weakened by this refraction, and the atmosphere through which they pass extinguished the greater part of them!”

“That reason satisfies me,” replied Michel. “Besides we shall see when we get there. Now, tell me, Barbicane, do you believe that the moon is an old comet?”

“There’s an idea!”

“Yes,” replied Michel, with an amiable swagger, “I have a few ideas of that sort.”

“But that idea does not spring from Michel,” answered Nicholl.

“Well, then, I am a plagiarist.”

“No doubt about it. According to the ancients, the Arcadians pretend that their ancestors inhabited the earth before the moon became her satellite. Starting from this fact, some scientific men have seen in the moon a comet whose orbit will one day bring it so near to the earth that it will be held there by its attraction.”

“Is there any truth in this hypothesis?” asked Michel.

“None whatever,” said Barbicane, “and the proof is, that the moon has preserved no trace of the gaseous envelope which always accompanies comets.”

“But,” continued Nicholl, “Before becoming the earth’s satellite, could not the moon, when in her perihelion, pass so near the sun as by evaporation to get rid of all those gaseous substances?”

“It is possible, friend Nicholl, but not probable.”

“Why not?”

"Because — Faith I do not know."

"Ah!" exclaimed Michel, "what hundred of volumes we might make of all that we do not know!"

"Ah! indeed. What time is it?" asked Barbicane.

"Three o'clock," answered Nicholl.

"How time goes," said Michel, "in the conversation of scientific men such as we are! Certainly, I feel I know too much! I feel that I am becoming a well!"

Saying which, Michel hoisted himself to the roof of the projectile, "to observe the moon better," he pretended. During this time his companions were watching through the lower glass. Nothing new to note!

When Michel Ardan came down, he went to the side scuttle; and suddenly they heard an exclamation of surprise!

"What is it?" asked Barbicane.

The president approached the window, and saw a sort of flattened sack floating some yards from the projectile. This object seemed as motionless as the projectile, and was consequently animated with the same ascending movement.

"What is that machine?" continued Michel Ardan. "Is it one of the bodies which our projectile keeps within its attraction, and which will accompany it to the moon?"

“What astonishes me,” said Nicholl, “is that the specific weight of the body, which is certainly less than that of the projectile, allows it to keep so perfectly on a level with it.”

“Nicholl,” replied Barbicane, after a moment’s reflection, “I do not know what the object it, but I do know why it maintains our level.”

“And why?”

“Because we are floating in space, my dear captain, and in space bodies fall or move (which is the same thing) with equal speed whatever be their weight or form; it is the air, which by its resistance creates these differences in weight. When you create a vacuum in a tube, the objects you send through it, grains of dust or grains of lead, fall with the same rapidity. Here in space is the same cause and the same effect.”

“Just so,” said Nicholl, “and everything we throw out of the projectile will accompany it until it reaches the moon.”

“Ah! fools that we are!” exclaimed Michel.

“Why that expletive?” asked Barbicane.

“Because we might have filled the projectile with useful objects, books, instruments, tools, etc. We could have thrown them all out, and all would have followed in our train. But happy thought! Why cannot we walk outside like the meteor? Why cannot we launch into space through the scuttle? What enjoyment it would be to feel oneself thus suspended in ether, more favored than the birds who must use their wings to keep themselves up!”

“Granted,” said Barbicane, “but how to breathe?”

“Hang the air, to fail so inopportunely!”

“But if it did not fail, Michel, your density being less than that of the projectile, you would soon be left behind.”

“Then we must remain in our car?”

“We must!”

“Ah!” exclaimed Michel, in a load voice.

“What is the matter,” asked Nicholl.

“I know, I guess, what this pretended meteor is! It is no asteroid which is accompanying us! It is not a piece of a planet.”

“What is it then?” asked Barbicane.

“It is our unfortunate dog! It is Diana’s husband!”

Indeed, this deformed, unrecognizable object, reduced to nothing, was the body of Satellite, flattened like a bagpipe without wind, and ever mounting, mounting!

CHAPTER VII

A MOMENT OF INTOXICATION

Thus a phenomenon, curious but explicable, was happening under these strange conditions.

Every object thrown from the projectile would follow the same course and never stop until it did. There was a subject for conversation which the whole evening could not exhaust.

Besides, the excitement of the three travelers increased as they drew near the end of their journey. They expected unforseen incidents, and new phenomena; and nothing would have astonished them in the frame of mind they then were in. Their overexcited imagination went faster than the projectile, whose speed was evidently diminishing, though insensibly to themselves. But the moon grew larger to their eyes, and they fancied if they stretched out their hands they could seize it.

The next day, the 5th of November, at five in the morning, all three were on foot. That day was to be the last of their journey, if all calculations were true. That very night, at twelve o’clock, in eighteen hours, exactly at the full moon, they would reach its brilliant disc. The next midnight would see that journey ended, the most extraordinary of ancient or modern times. Thus from the first of the morning, through the scuttles silvered by its rays, they saluted the orb of night with a confident and joyous hurrah.

The moon was advancing majestically along the starry firmament. A few more degrees, and she would reach the exact point where her meeting with the projectile was to take place.

According to his own observations, Barbicane reckoned that they would land on her northern hemisphere, where stretch immense plains, and where mountains are rare. A favorable circumstance if, as they thought, the lunar atmosphere was stored only in its depths.

“Besides,” observed Michel Ardan, “a plain is easier to disembark upon than a mountain. A Selenite, deposited in Europe on the summit of Mont Blanc, or in Asia on the top of the Himalayas, would not be quite in the right place.”

“And,” added Captain Nicholl, “on a flat ground, the projectile will remain motionless when it has once touched; whereas on a declivity it would roll like an avalanche, and not being squirrels we should not come out safe and sound. So it is all for the best.”

Indeed, the success of the audacious attempt no longer appeared doubtful. But Barbicane was preoccupied with one thought; but not wishing to make his companions uneasy, he kept silence on this subject.

The direction the projectile was taking toward the moon’s northern hemisphere, showed that her course had been slightly altered. The discharge, mathematically calculated, would carry the projectile to the very center of the lunar disc. If it did not land there, there must have been some deviation. What had caused it? Barbicane could neither imagine nor determine the importance of the deviation, for there were no points to go by.

He hoped, however, that it would have no other result than that of bringing them nearer the upper border of the moon, a region more suitable for landing.

Without imparting his uneasiness to his companions, Barbicane contented himself with constantly observing the moon, in order to see whether the course of the projectile would not be altered; for the situation would have been terrible if it failed in its aim, and being carried beyond the disc should be launched into interplanetary space. At that moment, the moon, instead of appearing flat like a disc, showed its convexity. If the sun's rays had struck it obliquely, the shadow thrown would have brought out the high mountains, which would have been clearly detached. The eye might have gazed into the crater's gaping abysses, and followed the capricious fissures which wound through the immense plains. But all relief was as yet leveled in intense brilliancy. They could scarcely distinguish those large spots which give the moon the appearance of a human face.

"Face, indeed!" said Michel Ardan; "but I am sorry for the amiable sister of Apollo. A very pitted face!"

But the travelers, now so near the end, were incessantly observing this new world. They imagined themselves walking through its unknown countries, climbing its highest peaks, descending into its lowest depths. Here and there they fancied they saw vast seas, scarcely kept together under so rarefied an atmosphere, and water-courses emptying the mountain tributaries. Leaning over the abyss, they hoped to catch some sounds from that orb forever mute in the solitude of space. That last day left them.

They took down the most trifling details. A vague uneasiness took possession of them as they neared the end. This uneasiness would have been doubled had they felt how their speed had decreased. It would have seemed to them quite insufficient to carry them to the end. It was because the projectile then "weighed" almost nothing. Its weight was ever decreasing, and would be entirely annihilated on that line where the lunar and terrestrial attractions would neutralize each other.

But in spite of his preoccupation, Michel Ardan did not forget to prepare the morning repast with his accustomed punctuality. They ate with a good appetite. Nothing was so excellent as the soup liquefied by the heat of the gas; nothing better than the preserved meat. Some glasses of good French wine crowned the repast, causing Michel Ardan to remark that the lunar vines, warmed by that ardent sun, ought to distill even more generous wines; that is, if they existed. In any case, the far-seeing Frenchman had taken care not to forget in his collection some precious cuttings of the Medoc and Cote d’Or, upon which he founded his hopes.

Reiset and Regnaut’s apparatus worked with great regularity. Not an atom of carbonic acid resisted the potash; and as to the oxygen, Captain Nicholl said “it was of the first quality.” The little watery vapor enclosed in the projectile mixing with the air tempered the dryness; and many apartments in London, Paris, or New York, and many theaters, were certainly not in such a healthy condition.

But that it might act with regularity, the apparatus must be kept in perfect order; so each morning Michel visited the escape regulators, tried the taps, and regulated the heat of the gas by the pyrometer. Everything had gone well up to that time, and the travelers, imitating the worthy Joseph T. Maston, began to acquire a degree of embonpoint which would have rendered them unrecognizable if their imprisonment had been prolonged to some months. In a word, they behaved like chickens in a coop; they were getting fat.

In looking through the scuttle Barbicane saw the specter of the dog, and other divers objects which had been thrown from the projectile, obstinately following them. Diana howled lugubriously on seeing the remains of Satellite, which seemed as motionless as if they reposed on solid earth.

“Do you know, my friends,” said Michel Ardan, “that if one of us had succumbed to the shock consequent on departure, we should have had a great deal of trouble to bury him? What am I saying? to etherize him, as here ether takes the place of earth. You see the accusing body would have followed us into space like a remorse.”

“That would have been sad,” said Nicholl.

“Ah!” continued Michel, “what I regret is not being able to take a walk outside. What voluptuousness to float amid this radiant ether, to bathe oneself in it, to wrap oneself in the sun’s pure rays. If Barbicane had only thought of furnishing us with a diving apparatus and an air-pump, I could have ventured out and assumed fanciful attitudes of feigned monsters on the top of the projectile.”

“Well, old Michel,” replied Barbicane, “you would not have made a feigned monster long, for in spite of your diver’s dress, swollen by the expansion of air within you, you would have burst like a shell, or rather like a balloon which has risen too high. So do not regret it, and do not forget this — as long as we float in space, all sentimental walks beyond the projectile are forbidden.”

Michel Ardan allowed himself to be convinced to a certain extent. He admitted that the thing was difficult but not impossible, a word which he never uttered.

The conversation passed from this subject to another, not failing him for an instant. It seemed to the three friends as though, under present conditions, ideas shot up in their brains as leaves shoot at the first warmth of spring. They felt bewildered. In the middle of the questions and answers which crossed each other, Nicholl put one question which did not find an immediate solution.

“Ah, indeed!” said he; “it is all very well to go to the moon, but how to get back again?”

His two interlocutors looked surprised. One would have thought that this possibility now occurred to them for the first time.

“What do you mean by that, Nicholl?” asked Barbicane gravely.

“To ask for means to leave a country,” added Michel, “When we have not yet arrived there, seems to me rather inopportune.”

“I do not say that, wishing to draw back,” replied Nicholl; “but I repeat my question, and I ask, `How shall we return?’”

“I know nothing about it,” answered Barbicane.

“And I,” said Michel, “if I had known how to return, I would never have started.”

“There’s an answer!” cried Nicholl.

“I quite approve of Michel’s words,” said Barbicane; “and add, that the question has no real interest. Later, when we think it is advisable to return, we will take counsel together. If the Columbiad is not there, the projectile will be.”

“That is a step certainly. A ball without a gun!”

“The gun,” replied Barbicane, “can be manufactured. The powder can be made. Neither metals, saltpeter, nor coal can fail in the depths of the moon, and we need only go 8,000 leagues in order to fall upon the terrestrial globe by virtue of the mere laws of weight.”

“Enough,” said Michel with animation. “Let it be no longer a question of returning: we have already entertained it too long. As to communicating with our former earthly colleagues, that will not be difficult.”

“And how?”

“By means of meteors launched by lunar volcanoes.”

“Well thought of, Michel,” said Barbicane in a convinced tone of voice. “Laplace has calculated that a force five times greater than that of our gun would suffice to send a meteor from the moon to the earth, and there is not one volcano which has not a greater power of propulsion than that.”

“Hurrah!” exclaimed Michel; “these meteors are handy postmen, and cost nothing. And how we shall be able to laugh at the post-office administration! But now I think of it — — ”

“What do you think of?”

“A capital idea. Why did we not fasten a thread to our projectile, and we could have exchanged telegrams with the earth?”

“The deuce!” answered Nicholl. “Do you consider the weight of a thread 250,000 miles long nothing?”

“As nothing. They could have trebled the Columbiad’s charge; they could have quadrupled or quintupled it!” exclaimed Michel, with whom the verb took a higher intonation each time.

“There is but one little objection to make to your proposition,” replied Barbicane, “which is that, during the rotary motion of the globe, our thread would have wound itself round it like a chain on a capstan, and that it would inevitably have brought us to the ground.”

“By the thirty-nine stars of the Union!” said Michel, “I have nothing but impracticable ideas to-day; ideas worthy of J. T. Maston. But I have a notion that, if we do not return to earth, J. T. Maston will be able to come to us.”

“Yes, he’ll come,” replied Barbicane; “he is a worthy and a courageous comrade. Besides, what is easier? Is not the Columbiad still buried in the soil of Florida? Is cotton and nitric acid wanted wherewith to manufacture the pyroxyle? Will not the moon pass the zenith of Florida? In eighteen years’ time will she not occupy exactly the same place as to-day?”

“Yes,” continued Michel, “yes, Maston will come, and with him our friends Elphinstone, Blomsberry, all the members of the Gun Club, and they will be well received. And by and by they will run trains of projectiles between the earth and the moon! Hurrah for J. T. Maston!”

It is probable that, if the Hon. J. T. Maston did not hear the hurrahs uttered in his honor, his ears at least tingled. What was he doing then? Doubtless, posted in the Rocky Mountains, at the station of Long’s Peak, he was trying to find the invisible projectile gravitating in space. If he was thinking of his dear companions, we must allow that they were not far behind him; and that, under the influence of a strange excitement, they were devoting to him their best thoughts.

But whence this excitement, which was evidently growing upon the tenants of the projectile? Their sobriety could not be doubted. This strange irritation of the brain, must it be attributed to the peculiar circumstances under which they found themselves, to their proximity to the orb of night, from which only a few hours separated them, to some secret influence of the moon acting upon their nervous system? Their faces were as rosy as if they had been exposed to the roaring flames of an oven; their voices resounded in loud accents; their words escaped like a champagne cork driven out by carbonic acid; their gestures became annoying, they wanted so much room to perform them; and, strange to say, they none of them noticed this great tension of the mind.

“Now,” said Nicholl, in a short tone, “now that I do not know whether we shall ever return from the moon, I want to know what we are going to do there?”

“What we are going to do there?” replied Barbicane, stamping with his foot as if he was in a fencing saloon; “I do not know.”

“You do not know!” exclaimed Michel, with a bellow which provoked a sonorous echo in the projectile.

“No, I have not even thought about it,” retorted Barbicane, in the same loud tone.

“Well, I know,” replied Michel.

“Speak, then,” cried Nicholl, who could no longer contain the growling of his voice.

“I shall speak if it suits me,” exclaimed Michel, seizing his companions’ arms with violence.

“It must suit you,” said Barbicane, with an eye on fire and a threatening hand. “It was you who drew us into this frightful journey, and we want to know what for.”

“Yes,” said the captain, “now that I do not know where I am going, I want to know why I am going.”

“Why?” exclaimed Michel, jumping a yard high, “why? To take possession of the moon in the name of the United States; to add a fortieth State to the Union; to colonize the lunar regions; to cultivate them, to people them, to transport thither all the prodigies of art, of science, and industry; to civilize the Selenites, unless they are more civilized than we are; and to constitute them a republic, if they are not already one!”

“And if there are no Selenites?” retorted Nicholl, who, under the influence of this unaccountable intoxication, was very contradictory.

“Who said that there were no Selenites?” exclaimed Michel in a threatening tone.

“I do,” howled Nicholl.

“Captain,” said Michel, “do not repreat that insolence, or I will knock your teeth down your throat!”

The two adversaries were going to fall upon each other, and the incoherent discussion threatened to merge into a fight, when Barbicane intervened with one bound.

“Stop, miserable men,” said he, separating his two companions; “if there are no Selenites, we will do without them.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Michel, who was not particular; “yes, we will do without them. We have only to make Selenites. Down with the Selenites!”

“The empire of the moon belongs to us,” said Nicholl.

“Let us three constitute the republic.”

“I will be the congress,” cried Michel.

“And I the senate,” retorted Nicholl.

“And Barbicane, the president,” howled Michel.

“Not a president elected by the nation,” replied Barbicane.

“Very well, a president elected by the congress,” cried Michel; “and as I am the congress, you are unanimously elected!”

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! for President Barbicane,” exclaimed Nicholl.

“Hip! hip! hip!” vociferated Michel Ardan.

Then the president and the senate struck up in a tremendous voice the popular song “Yankee Doodle,” while from the congress resounded the masculine tones of the “Marseillaise.”

Then they struck up a frantic dance, with maniacal gestures, idiotic stampings, and somersaults like those of the boneless clowns in the circus. Diana, joining in the dance, and howling in her turn, jumped to the top of the projectile. An unaccountable flapping of wings was then heard amid most fantastic cock-crows, while five or six hens fluttered like bats against the walls.

Then the three traveling companions, acted upon by some unaccountable influence above that of intoxication, inflamed by the air which had set their respiratory apparatus on fire, fell motionless to the bottom of the projectile.

CHAPTER VIII

AT SEVENTY-EIGHT THOUSAND FIVE HUNDRED AND FOURTEEN LEAGUES

What had happened? Whence the cause of this singular intoxication, the consequences of which might have been very disastrous? A simple blunder of Michel's, which, fortunately, Nicholl was able to correct in time.

After a perfect swoon, which lasted some minutes, the captain, recovering first, soon collected his scattered senses. Although he had breakfasted only two hours before, he felt a gnawing hunger, as if he had not eaten anything for several days. Everything about him, stomach and brain, were overexcited to the highest degree. He got up and demanded from Michel a supplementary repast. Michel, utterly done up, did not answer.

Nicholl then tried to prepare some tea destined to help the absorption of a dozen sandwiches. He first tried to get some fire, and struck a match sharply. What was his surprise to see the sulphur shine with so extraordinary a brilliancy as to be almost unbearable to the eye. From the gas-burner which he lit rose a flame equal to a jet of electric light.

A revelation dawned on Nicholl's mind. That intensity of light, the physiological troubles which had arisen in him, the overexcitement of all his moral and quarrelsome faculties — he understood all.

"The oxygen!" he exclaimed.

And leaning over the air apparatus, he saw that the tap was allowing the colorless gas to escape freely, life-giving, but in its pure state producing the gravest disorders in the system. Michel had blunderingly opened the tap of the apparatus to the full.

Nicholl hastened to stop the escape of oxygen with which the atmosphere was saturated, which would have been the death of the travelers, not by suffocation, but by combustion. An hour later, the air less charged with it restored the lungs to their normal condition. By degrees the three friends recovered from their intoxication; but they were obliged to sleep themselves sober over their oxygen as a drunkard does over his wine.

When Michel learned his share of the responsibility of this incident, he was not much disconcerted. This unexpected drunkenness broke the monotony of the journey. Many foolish things had been said while under its influence, but also quickly forgotten.

“And then,” added the merry Frenchman, “I am not sorry to have tasted a little of this heady gas. Do you know, my friends, that a curious establishment might be founded with rooms of oxygen, where people whose system is weakened could for a few hours live a more active life. Fancy parties where the room was saturated with this heroic fluid, theaters where it should be kept at high pressure; what passion in the souls of the actors and spectators! what fire, what enthusiasm! And if, instead of an assembly only a whole people could be saturated, what activity in its functions, what a supplement to life it would derive. From an exhausted nation they might make a great and strong one, and I know more than one state in old Europe which ought to put itself under the regime of oxygen for the sake of its health!”

Michel spoke with so much animation that one might have fancied that the tap was still too open. But a few words from Barbicane soon shattered his enthusiasm.

“That is all very well, friend Michel,” said he, “but will you inform us where these chickens came from which have mixed themselves up in our concert?”

“Those chickens?”

“Yes.”

Indeed, half a dozen chickens and a fine cock were walking about, flapping their wings and chattering.

“Ah, the awkward things!” exclaimed Michel. “The oxygen has made them revolt.”

“But what do you want to do with these chickens?” asked Barbicane.

“To acclimatize them in the moon, by Jove!”

“Then why did you hide them?”

“A joke, my worthy president, a simple joke, which has proved a miserable failure. I wanted to set them free on the lunar continent, without saying anything. Oh, what would have been your amazement on seeing these earthly-winged animals pecking in your lunar fields!”

“You rascal, you unmitigated rascal,” replied Barbicane, “you do not want oxygen to mount to the head. You are always what we were under the influence of the gas; you are always foolish!”

“Ah, who says that we were not wise then?” replied Michel Ardan.

After this philosophical reflection, the three friends set about restoring the order of the projectile. Chickens and cock were reinstated in their coop. But while proceeding with this operation, Barbicane and his two companions had a most desired perception of a new phenomenon. From the moment of leaving the earth, their own weight, that of the projectile, and the objects it enclosed, had been subject to an increasing diminution. If they could not prove this loss of the projectile, a moment would arrive when it would be sensibly felt upon themselves and the utensils and instruments they used.

It is needless to say that a scale would not show this loss; for the weight destined to weight the object would have lost exactly as much as the object itself; but a spring steelyard for example, the tension of which was independent of the attraction, would have given a just estimate of this loss.

We know that the attraction, otherwise called the weight, is in proportion to the densities of the bodies, and inversely as the squares of the distances. Hence this effect: If the earth had been alone in space, if the other celestial bodies had been suddenly annihilated, the projectile, according to Newton’s laws, would weigh less as it got farther from the earth, but without ever losing its weight entirely, for the terrestrial attraction would always have made itself felt, at whatever distance.

But, in reality, a time must come when the projectile would no longer be subject to the law of weight, after allowing for the other celestial bodies whose effect could not be set down as zero. Indeed, the projectile’s course was being traced between the earth and the moon. As it distanced the earth, the terrestrial attraction diminished: but the lunar attraction rose in proportion. There must come a point where these two attractions would neutralize each other: the projectile would possess weight no longer. If the moon’s and the earth’s densities had been equal, this point would have been at an equal distance between the two orbs. But taking the different densities into consideration, it was easy to reckon that this point would be situated at 47/60ths of the whole journey, i.e. at 78,514 leagues from the earth. At this point, a body having no principle of speed or displacement in itself, would remain immovable forever, being attracted equally by both orbs, and not being drawn more toward one than toward the other.

Now if the projectile's impulsive force had been correctly calculated, it would attain this point without speed, having lost all trace of weight, as well as all the objects within it. What would happen then? Three hypotheses presented themselves.

1. Either it would retain a certain amount of motion, and pass the point of equal attraction, and fall upon the moon by virtue of the excess of the lunar attraction over the terrestrial.

2. Or, its speed failing, and unable to reach the point of equal attraction, it would fall upon the moon by virtue of the excess of the lunar attraction over the terrestrial.

3. Or, lastly, animated with sufficient speed to enable it to reach the neutral point, but not sufficient to pass it, it would remain forever suspended in that spot like the pretended tomb of Mahomet, between the zenith and the nadir.

Such was their situation; and Barbicane clearly explained the consequences to his traveling companions, which greatly interested them. But how should they know when the projectile had reached this neutral point situated at that distance, especially when neither themselves, nor the objects enclosed in the projectile, would be any longer subject to the laws of weight?

Up to this time, the travelers, while admitting that this action was constantly decreasing, had not yet become sensible to its total absence.

But that day, about eleven o’clock in the morning, Nicholl having accidentally let a glass slip from his hand, the glass, instead of falling, remained suspended in the air.

“Ah!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, “that is rather an amusing piece of natural philosophy.”

And immediately divers other objects, firearms and bottles, abandoned to themselves, held themselves up as by enchantment. Diana too, placed in space by Michel, reproduced, but without any trick, the wonderful suspension practiced by Caston and Robert Houdin. Indeed the dog did not seem to know that she was floating in air.

The three adventurous companions were surprised and stupefied, despite their scientific reasonings. They felt themselves being carried into the domain of wonders! they felt that weight was really wanting to their bodies. If they stretched out their arms, they did not attempt to fall. Their heads shook on their shoulders. Their feet no longer clung to the floor of the projectile. They were like drunken men having no stability in themselves.

Fancy has depicted men without reflection, others without shadow. But here reality, by the neutralizations of attractive forces, produced men in whom nothing had any weight, and who weighed nothing themselves.

Suddenly Michel, taking a spring, left the floor and remained suspended in the air, like Murillo’s monk of the Cusine des Anges.

The two friends joined him instantly, and all three formed a miraculous "Ascension" in the center of the projectile.

"Is it to be believed? is it probable? is it possible?" exclaimed Michel; "and yet it is so. Ah! if Raphael had seen us thus, what an `Assumption' he would have thrown upon canvas!"

"The `Assumption' cannot last," replied Barbicane. "If the projectile passes the neutral point, the lunar attraction will draw us to the moon."

"Then our feet will be upon the roof," replied Michel.

"No," said Barbicane, "because the projectile's center of gravity is very low; it will only turn by degrees."

"Then all our portables will be upset from top to bottom, that is a fact."

"Calm yourself, Michel," replied Nicholl; "no upset is to be feared; not a thing will move, for the projectile's evolution will be imperceptible."

"Just so," continued Barbicane; "and when it has passed the point of equal attraction, its base, being the heavier, will draw it perpendicularly to the moon; but, in order that this phenomenon should take place, we must have passed the neutral line."

"Pass the neutral line," cried Michel; "then let us do as the sailors do when they cross the equator."

A slight side movement brought Michel back toward the padded side; thence he took a bottle and glasses, placed them "in space" before his companions, and, drinking merrily, they saluted the line with a triple hurrah. The influence of these attractions scarcely lasted an hour; the travelers felt themselves insensibly drawn toward the floor, and Barbicane fancied that the conical end of the projectile was varying a little from its normal direction toward the moon. By an inverse motion the base was approaching first; the lunar attraction was prevailing over the terrestrial; the fall toward the moon was beginning, almost imperceptibly as yet, but by degrees the attractive force would become stronger, the fall would be more decided, the projectile, drawn by its base, would turn its cone to the earth, and fall with ever-increasing speed on to the surface of the Selenite continent; their destination would then be attained. Now nothing could prevent the success of their enterprise, and Nicholl and Michel Ardan shared Barbicane's joy.

Then they chatted of all the phenomena which had astonished them one after the other, particularly the neutralization of the laws of weight. Michel Ardan, always enthusiastic, drew conclusions which were purely fanciful.

"Ah, my worthy friends," he exclaimed, "what progress we should make if on earth we could throw off some of that weight, some of that chain which binds us to her; it would be the prisoner set at liberty; no more fatigue of either arms or legs. Or, if it is true that in order to fly on the earth's surface, to keep oneself suspended in the air merely by the play of the muscles, there requires a strength a hundred and fifty times greater than that which we possess, a simple act of volition, a caprice, would bear us into space, if attraction did not exist."

"Just so," said Nicholl, smiling; "if we could succeed in suppressing weight as they suppress pain by anaesthesia, that would change the face of modern society!"

"Yes," cried Michel, full of his subject, "destroy weight, and no more burdens!"

“Well said,” replied Barbicane; “but if nothing had any weight, nothing would keep in its place, not even your hat on your head, worthy Michel; nor your house, whose stones only adhere by weight; nor a boat, whose stability on the waves is only caused by weight; not even the ocean, whose waves would no longer be equalized by terrestrial attraction; and lastly, not even the atmosphere, whose atoms, being no longer held in their places, would disperse in space!”

“That is tiresome,” retorted Michel; “nothing like these matter-of-fact people for bringing one back to the bare reality.”

“But console yourself, Michel,” continued Barbicane, “for if no orb exists from whence all laws of weight are banished, you are at least going to visit one where it is much less than on the earth.”

“The moon?”

“Yes, the moon, on whose surface objects weigh six times less than on the earth, a phenomenon easy to prove.”

“And we shall feel it?” asked Michel.

“Evidently, as two hundred pounds will only weigh thirty pounds on the surface of the moon.”

“And our muscular strength will not diminish?”

“Not at all; instead of jumping one yard high, you will rise eighteen feet high.”

“But we shall be regular Herculeses in the moon!” exclaimed Michel.

“Yes,” replied Nicholl; “for if the height of the Selenites is in proportion to the density of their globe, they will be scarcely a foot high.”

“Lilliputians!” ejaculated Michel; “I shall play the part of Gulliver. We are going to realize the fable of the giants. This is the advantage of leaving one’s own planet and over-running the solar world.”

“One moment, Michel,” answered Barbicane; “if you wish to play the part of Gulliver, only visit the inferior planets, such as Mercury, Venus, or Mars, whose density is a little less than that of the earth; but do not venture into the great planets, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune; for there the order will be changed, and you will become Lilliputian.”

“And in the sun?”

“In the sun, if its density is thirteen hundred and twenty-four thousand times greater, and the attraction is twenty-seven times greater than on the surface of our globe, keeping everything in proportion, the inhabitants ought to be at least two hundred feet high.”

“By Jove!” exclaimed Michel; “I should be nothing more than a pigmy, a shrimp!”

“Gulliver with the giants,” said Nicholl.

“Just so,” replied Barbicane.

“And it would not be quite useless to carry some pieces of artillery to defend oneself.”

“Good,” replied Nicholl; “your projectiles would have no effect on the sun; they would fall back upon the earth after some minutes.”

“That is a strong remark.”

“It is certain,” replied Barbicane; “the attraction is so great on this enormous orb, that an object weighing 70,000 pounds on the earth would weigh but 1,920 pounds on the surface of the sun. If you were to fall upon it you would weigh — let me see — about 5,000 pounds, a weight which you would never be able to raise again.”

“The devil!” said Michel; “one would want a portable crane. However, we will be satisfied with the moon for the present; there at least we shall cut a great figure. We will see about the sun by and by.”

CHAPTER IX

THE CONSEQUENCES OF A DEVIATION

Barbicane had now no fear of the issue of the journey, at least as far as the projectile’s impulsive force was concerned; its own speed would carry it beyond the neutral line; it would certainly not return to earth; it would certainly not remain motionless on the line of attraction. One single hypothesis remained to be realized, the arrival of the projectile at its destination by the action of the lunar attraction.

It was in reality a fall of 8,296 leagues on an orb, it is true, where weight could only be reckoned at one sixth of terrestrial weight; a formidable fall, nevertheless, and one against which every precaution must be taken without delay.

These precautions were of two sorts, some to deaden the shock when the projectile should touch the lunar soil, others to delay the fall, and consequently make it less violent.

To deaden the shock, it was a pity that Barbicane was no longer able to employ the means which had so ably weakened the shock at departure, that is to say, by water used as springs and the partition breaks.

The partitions still existed, but water failed, for they could not use their reserve, which was precious, in case during the first days the liquid element should be found wanting on lunar soil.

And indeed this reserve would have been quite insufficient for a spring. The layer of water stored in the projectile at the time of starting upon their journey occupied no less than three feet in depth, and spread over a surface of not less than fifty-four square feet. Besides, the cistern did not contain one-fifth part of it; they must therefore give up this efficient means of deadening the shock of arrival. Happily, Barbicane, not content with employing water, had furnished the movable disc with strong spring plugs, destined to lessen the shock against the base after the breaking of the horizontal partitions. These plugs still existed; they had only to readjust them and replace the movable disc; every piece, easy to handle, as their weight was now scarcely felt, was quickly mounted.

The different pieces were fitted without trouble, it being only a matter of bolts and screws; tools were not wanting, and soon the reinstated disc lay on steel plugs, like a table on its legs. One inconvenience resulted from the replacing of the disc, the lower window was blocked up; thus it was impossible for the travelers to observe the moon from that opening while they were being precipitated perpendicularly upon her; but they were obliged to give it up; even by the side openings they could still see vast lunar regions, as an aeronaut sees the earth from his car.

This replacing of the disc was at least an hour’s work. It was past twelve when all preparations were finished. Barbicane took fresh observations on the inclination of the projectile, but to his annoyance it had not turned over sufficiently for its fall; it seemed to take a curve parallel to the lunar disc. The orb of night shone splendidly into space, while opposite, the orb of day blazed with fire.

Their situation began to make them uneasy.

“Are we reaching our destination?” said Nicholl.

“Let us act as if we were about reaching it,” replied Barbicane.

“You are sceptical,” retorted Michel Ardan. “We shall arrive, and that, too, quicker than we like.”

This answer brought Barbicane back to his preparations, and he occupied himself with placing the contrivances intended to break their descent. We may remember the scene of the meeting held at Tampa Town, in Florida, when Captain Nicholl came forward as Barbicane’s enemy and Michel Ardan’s adversary. To Captain Nicholl’s maintaining that the projectile would smash like glass, Michel replied that he would break their fall by means of rockets properly placed.

Thus, powerful fireworks, taking their starting-point from the base and bursting outside, could, by producing a recoil, check to a certain degree the projectile’s speed. These rockets were to burn in space, it is true; but oxygen would not fail them, for they could supply themselves with it, like the lunar volcanoes, the burning of which has never yet been stopped by the want of atmosphere round the moon.

Barbicane had accordingly supplied himself with these fireworks, enclosed in little steel guns, which could be screwed on to the base of the projectile. Inside, these guns were flush with the bottom; outside, they protruded about eighteen inches. There were twenty of them. An opening left in the disc allowed them to light the match with which each was provided. All the effect was felt outside. The burning mixture had already been rammed into each gun. They had, then, nothing to do but raise the metallic buffers fixed in the base, and replace them by the guns, which fitted closely in their places.

This new work was finished about three o’clock, and after taking all these precautions there remained but to wait. But the projectile was perceptibly nearing the moon, and evidently succumbed to her influence to a certain degree; though its own velocity also drew it in an oblique direction. From these conflicting influences resulted a line which might become a tangent. But it was certain that the projectile would not fall directly on the moon; for its lower part, by reason of its weight, ought to be turned toward her.

Barbicane's uneasiness increased as he saw his projectile resist the influence of gravitation. The Unknown was opening before him, the Unknown in interplanetary space. The man of science thought he had foreseen the only three hypotheses possible — the return to the earth, the return to the moon, or stagnation on the neutral line; and here a fourth hypothesis, big with all the terrors of the Infinite, surged up inopportunely. To face it without flinching, one must be a resolute savant like Barbicane, a phlegmatic being like Nicholl, or an audacious adventurer like Michel Ardan.

Conversation was started upon this subject. Other men would have considered the question from a practical point of view; they would have asked themselves whither their projectile carriage was carrying them. Not so with these; they sought for the cause which produced this effect.

“So we have become diverted from our route,” said Michel; “but why?”

“I very much fear,” answered Nicholl, “that, in spite of all precautions taken, the Columbiad was not fairly pointed. An error, however small, would be enough to throw us out of the moon's attraction.”

“Then they must have aimed badly?” asked Michel.

“I do not think so,” replied Barbicane. “The perpendicularity of the gun was exact, its direction to the zenith of the spot incontestible; and the moon passing to the zenith of the spot, we ought to reach it at the full. There is another reason, but it escapes me.”

“Are we not arriving too late?” asked Nicholl.

“Too late?” said Barbicane.

“Yes,” continued Nicholl. “The Cambridge Observatory’s note says that the transit ought to be accomplished in ninety-seven hours thirteen minutes and twenty seconds; which means to say, that sooner the moon will not be at the point indicated, and later it will have passed it.”

“True,” replied Barbicane. “But we started the 1st of December, at thirteen minutes and twenty-five seconds to eleven at night; and we ought to arrive on the 5th at midnight, at the exact moment when the moon would be full; and we are now at the 5th of December. It is now half-past three in the evening; half-past eight ought to see us at the end of our journey. Why do we not arrive?”

“Might it not be an excess of speed?” answered Nicholl; “for we know now that its initial velocity was greater than they supposed.”

“No! a hundred times, no!” replied Barbicane. “An excess of speed, if the direction of the projectile had been right, would not have prevented us reaching the moon. No, there has been a deviation. We have been turned out of our course.”

“By whom? by what?” asked Nicholl.

“I cannot say,” replied Barbicane.

“Very well, then, Barbicane,” said Michel, “do you wish to know my opinion on the subject of finding out this deviation?”

“Speak.”

“I would not give half a dollar to know it. That we have deviated is a fact. Where we are going matters little; we shall soon see. Since we are being borne along in space we shall end by falling into some center of attraction or other.”

Michel Ardan’s indifference did not content Barbicane. Not that he was uneasy about the future, but he wanted to know at any cost why his projectile had deviated.

But the projectile continued its course sideways to the moon, and with it the mass of things thrown out. Barbicane could even prove, by the elevations which served as landmarks upon the moon, which was only two thousand leagues distant, that its speed was becoming uniform — fresh proof that there was no fall. Its impulsive force still prevailed over the lunar attraction, but the projectile’s course was certainly bringing it nearer to the moon, and they might hope that at a nearer point the weight, predominating, would cause a decided fall.

The three friends, having nothing better to do, continued their observations; but they could not yet determine the topographical position of the satellite; every relief was leveled under the reflection of the solar rays.

They watched thus through the side windows until eight o’clock at night. The moon had grown so large in their eyes that it filled half of the firmament. The sun on one side, and the orb of night on the other, flooded the projectile with light.

At that moment Barbicane thought he could estimate the distance which separated them from their aim at no more than 700 leagues. The speed of the projectile seemed to him to be more than 200 yards, or about 170 leagues a second. Under the centripetal force, the base of the projectile tended toward the moon; but the centrifugal still prevailed; and it was probable that its rectilineal course would be changed to a curve of some sort, the nature of which they could not at present determine.

Barbicane was still seeking the solution of his insoluble problem. Hours passed without any result. The projectile was evidently nearing the moon, but it was also evident that it would never reach her. As to the nearest distance at which it would pass her, that must be the result of two forces, attraction and repulsion, affecting its motion.

“I ask but one thing,” said Michel; “that we may pass near enough to penetrate her secrets.”

“Cursed be the thing that has caused our projectile to deviate from its course,” cried Nicholl.

And, as if a light had suddenly broken in upon his mind, Barbicane answered, “Then cursed be the meteor which crossed our path.”

“What?” said Michel Ardan.

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicholl.

“I mean,” said Barbicane in a decided tone, “I mean that our deviation is owing solely to our meeting with this erring body.”

“But it did not even brush us as it passed,” said Michel.

“What does that matter? Its mass, compared to that of our projectile, was enormous, and its attraction was enough to influence our course.”

“So little?” cried Nicholl.

“Yes, Nicholl; but however little it might be,” replied Barbicane, “in a distance of 84,000 leagues, it wanted no more to make us miss the moon.”

CHAPTER X

THE OBSERVERS OF THE MOON

Barbicane had evidently hit upon the only plausible reason of this deviation. However slight it might have been, it had sufficed to modify the course of the projectile. It was a fatality. The bold attempt had miscarried by a fortuitous circumstance; and unless by some exceptional event, they could now never reach the moon's disc.

Would they pass near enough to be able to solve certain physical and geological questions until then insoluble? This was the question, and the only one, which occupied the minds of these bold travelers. As to the fate in store for themselves, they did not even dream of it.

But what would become of them amid these infinite solitudes, these who would soon want air? A few more days, and they would fall stifled in this wandering projectile. But some days to these intrepid fellows was a century; and they devoted all their time to observe that moon which they no longer hoped to reach.

The distance which had then separated the projectile from the satellite was estimated at about two hundred leagues. Under these conditions, as regards the visibility of the details of the disc, the travelers were farther from the moon than are the inhabitants of earth with their powerful telescopes.

Indeed, we know that the instrument mounted by Lord Rosse at Parsonstown, which magnifies 6,500 times, brings the moon to within an apparent distance of sixteen leagues. And more than that, with the powerful one set up at Long's Peak, the orb of night, magnified 48,000 times, is brought to within less than two leagues, and objects having a diameter of thirty feet are seen very distinctly. So that, at this distance, the topographical details of the moon, observed without glasses, could not be determined with precision. The eye caught the vast outline of those immense depressions inappropriately called “seas,” but they could not recognize their nature. The prominence of the mountains disappeared under the splendid irradiation produced by the reflection of the solar rays. The eye, dazzled as if it was leaning over a bath of molten silver, turned from it involuntarily; but the oblong form of the orb was quite clear. It appeared like a gigantic egg, with the small end turned toward the earth. Indeed the moon, liquid and pliable in the first days of its formation, was originally a perfect sphere; but being soon drawn within the attraction of the earth, it became elongated under the influence of gravitation. In becoming a satellite, she lost her native purity of form; her center of gravity was in advance of the center of her figure; and from this fact some savants draw the conclusion that the air and water had taken refuge on the opposite surface of the moon, which is never seen from the earth. This alteration in the primitive form of the satellite was only perceptible for a few moments. The distance of the projectile from the moon diminished very rapidly under its speed, though that was much less than its initial velocity — but eight or nine times greater than that which propels our express trains. The oblique course of the projectile, from its very obliquity, gave Michel Ardan some hopes of striking the lunar disc at some point or other. He could not think that they would never reach it. No! he could not believe it; and this opinion he often repeated. But Barbicane, who was a better judge, always answered him with merciless logic.

“No, Michel, no! We can only reach the moon by a fall, and we are not falling. The centripetal force keeps us under the moon’s influence, but the centrifugal force draws us irresistibly away from it.”

This was said in a tone which quenched Michel Ardan’s last hope.

The portion of the moon which the projectile was nearing was the northern hemisphere, that which the selenographic maps place below; for these maps are generally drawn after the outline given by the glasses, and we know that they reverse the objects. Such was the Mappa Selenographica of Boeer and Moedler which Barbicane consulted. This northern hemisphere presented vast plains, dotted with isolated mountains.

At midnight the moon was full. At that precise moment the travelers should have alighted upon it, if the mischievous meteor had not diverted their course. The orb was exactly in the condition determined by the Cambridge Observatory. It was mathematically at its perigee, and at the zenith of the twenty-eighth parallel. An observer placed at the bottom of the enormous Columbiad, pointed perpendicularly to the horizon, would have framed the moon in the mouth of the gun. A straight line drawn through the axis of the piece would have passed through the center of the orb of night. It is needless to say, that during the night of the 5th-6th of December, the travelers took not an instant’s rest. Could they close their eyes when so near this new world? No! All their feelings were concentrated in one single thought: — See! Representatives of the earth, of humanity, past and present, all centered in them! It is through their eyes that the human race look at these lunar regions, and penetrate the secrets of their satellite! A strange emotion filled their hearts as they went from one window to the other. Their observations, reproduced by Barbicane, were rigidly determined. To take them, they had glasses; to correct them, maps.

As regards the optical instruments at their disposal, they had excellent marine glasses specially constructed for this journey. They possessed magnifying powers of 100. They would thus have brought the moon to within a distance (apparent) of less than 2,000 leagues from the earth. But then, at a distance which for three hours in the morning did not exceed sixty-five miles, and in a medium free from all atmospheric disturbances, these instruments could reduce the lunar surface to within less than 1,500 yards!

CHAPTER XI

FANCY AND REALITY

“Have you ever seen the moon?” asked a professor, ironically, of one of his pupils.

“No, sir!” replied the pupil, still more ironically, “but I must say I have heard it spoken of.”

In one sense, the pupil’s witty answer might be given by a large majority of sublunary beings. How many people have heard speak of the moon who have never seen it — at least through a glass or a telescope! How many have never examined the map of their satellite!

In looking at a selenographic map, one peculiarity strikes us. Contrary to the arrangement followed for that of the Earth and Mars, the continents occupy more particularly the southern hemisphere of the lunar globe. These continents do not show such decided, clear, and regular boundary lines as South America, Africa, and the Indian peninsula. Their angular, capricious, and deeply indented coasts are rich in gulfs and peninsulas. They remind one of the confusion in the islands of the Sound, where the land is excessively indented. If navigation ever existed on the surface of the moon, it must have been wonderfully difficult and dangerous; and we may well pity the Selenite sailors and hydrographers; the former, when they came upon these perilous coasts, the latter when they took the soundings of its stormy banks.

We may also notice that, on the lunar sphere, the south pole is much more continental than the north pole. On the latter, there is but one slight strip of land separated from other continents by vast seas. Toward the south, continents clothe almost the whole of the hemisphere. It is even possible that the Selenites have already planted the flag on one of their poles, while Franklin, Ross, Kane, Dumont, d'Urville, and Lambert have never yet been able to attain that unknown point of the terrestrial globe.

As to islands, they are numerous on the surface of the moon. Nearly all oblong or circular, and as if traced with the compass, they seem to form one vast archipelago, equal to that charming group lying between Greece and Asia Minor, and which mythology in ancient times adorned with most graceful legends. Involuntarily the names of Naxos, Tenedos, and Carpathos, rise before the mind, and we seek vainly for Ulysses' vessel or the "clipper" of the Argonauts. So at least it was in Michel Ardan's eyes. To him it was a Grecian archipelago that he saw on the map. To the eyes of his matter-of-fact companions, the aspect of these coasts recalled rather the parceled-out land of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and where the Frenchman discovered traces of the heroes of fable, these Americans were marking the most favorable points for the establishment of stores in the interests of lunar commerce and industry.

After wandering over these vast continents, the eye is attracted by the still greater seas. Not only their formation, but their situation and aspect remind one of the terrestrial oceans; but again, as on earth, these seas occupy the greater portion of the globe. But in point of fact, these are not liquid spaces, but plains, the nature of which the travelers hoped soon to determine. Astronomers, we must allow, have graced these pretended seas with at least odd names, which science has respected up to the present time. Michel Ardan was right when he compared this map to a "Tendre card," got up by a Scudary or a Cyrano de Bergerac. "Only," said he, "it is no longer the sentimental card of the seventeenth century, it is the card of life, very neatly divided into two parts, one feminine, the other masculine; the right hemisphere for woman, the left for man."

In speaking thus, Michel made his prosaic companions shrug their shoulders. Barbicane and Nicholl looked upon the lunar map from a very different point of view to that of their fantastic friend. Nevertheless, their fantastic friend was a little in the right. Judge for yourselves.

In the left hemisphere stretches the "Sea of Clouds," where human reason is so often shipwrecked. Not far off lies the "Sea of Rains," fed by all the fever of existence. Near this is the "Sea of Storms," where man is ever fighting against his passions, which too often gain the victory. Then, worn out by deceit, treasons, infidelity, and the whole body of terrestrial misery, what does he find at the end of his career? that vast "Sea of Humors," barely softened by some drops of the waters from the "Gulf of Dew!" Clouds, rain, storms, and humors — does the life of man contain aught but these? and is it not summed up in these four words?

The right hemisphere, "dedicated to the ladies," encloses smaller seas, whose significant names contain every incident of a feminine existence. There is the "Sea of Serenity," over which the young girl bends; "The Lake of Dreams," reflecting a joyous future; "The Sea of Nectar," with its waves of tenderness and breezes of love; "The Sea of Fruitfulness;" "The Sea of Crises;" then the "Sea of Vapors," whose dimensions are perhaps a little too confined; and lastly, that vast "Sea of Tranquillity," in which every false passion, every useless dream, every unsatisfied desire is at length absorbed, and whose waves emerge peacefully into the "Lake of Death!"

What a strange succession of names! What a singular division of the moon's two hemispheres, joined to one another like man and woman, and forming that sphere of life carried into space! And was not the fantastic

Michel right in thus interpreting the fancies of the ancient astronomers? But while his imagination thus roved over “the seas,” his grave companions were considering things more geographically. They were learning this new world by heart. They were measuring angles and diameters.

CHAPTER XII

OROGRAPHIC DETAILS

The course taken by the projectile, as we have before remarked, was bearing it toward the moon's northern hemisphere. The travelers were far from the central point which they would have struck, had their course not been subject to an irremediable deviation. It was past midnight; and Barbicane then estimated the distance at seven hundred and fifty miles, which was a little greater than the length of the lunar radius, and which would diminish as it advanced nearer to the North Pole. The projectile was then not at the altitude of the equator; but across the tenth parallel, and from that latitude, carefully taken on the map to the pole, Barbicane and his two companions were able to observe the moon under the most favorable conditions. Indeed, by means of glasses, the above-named distance was reduced to little more than fourteen miles. The telescope of the Rocky Mountains brought the moon much nearer; but the terrestrial atmosphere singularly lessened its power. Thus Barbicane, posted in his projectile, with the glasses to his eyes, could seize upon details which were almost imperceptible to earthly observers.

"My friends," said the president, in a serious voice, "I do not know whither we are going; I do not know if we shall ever see the terrestrial globe again. Nevertheless, let us proceed as if our work would one day by useful to our fellow-men. Let us keep our minds free from every other consideration. We are astronomers; and this projectile is a room in the Cambridge University, carried into space. Let us make our observations!"

This said, work was begun with great exactness; and they faithfully reproduced the different aspects of the moon, at the different distances which the projectile reached.

At the time that the projectile was as high as the tenth parallel, north latitude, it seemed rigidly to follow the twentieth degree, east longitude. We must here make one important remark with regard to the map by which they were taking observations. In the selenographical maps where, on account of the reversing of the objects by the glasses, the south is above and the north below, it would seem natural that, on account of that inversion, the east should be to the left hand, and the west to the right. But it is not so. If the map were turned upside down, showing the moon as we see her, the east would be to the left, and the west to the right, contrary to that which exists on terrestrial maps. The following is the reason of this anomaly. Observers in the northern hemisphere (say in Europe) see the moon in the south — according to them. When they take observations, they turn their backs to the north, the reverse position to that which they occupy when they study a terrestrial map. As they turn their backs to the north, the east is on their left, and the west to their right. To observers in the southern hemisphere (Patagonia for example), the moon's west would be quite to their left, and the east to their right, as the south is behind them. Such is the reason of the apparent reversing of these two cardinal points, and we must bear it in mind in order to be able to follow President Barbicane's observations.

With the help of Boeer and Moedler's Mappa Selenographica, the travelers were able at once to recognize that portion of the disc enclosed within the field of their glasses.

"What are we looking at, at this moment?" asked Michel.

"At the northern part of the `Sea of Clouds,'" answered Barbicane. "We are too far off to recognize its nature. Are these plains composed of arid sand, as the first astronomer maintained? Or are they nothing but immense forests, according to M. Warren de la Rue’s opinion, who gives the moon an atmosphere, though a very low and a very dense one? That we shall know by and by. We must affirm nothing until we are in a position to do so.”

This “Sea of Clouds” is rather doubtfully marked out upon the maps. It is supposed that these vast plains are strewn with blocks of lava from the neighboring volcanoes on its right, Ptolemy, Purbach, Arzachel. But the projectile was advancing, and sensibly nearing it. Soon there appeared the heights which bound this sea at this northern limit. Before them rose a mountain radiant with beauty, the top of which seemed lost in an eruption of solar rays.

“That is — ?” asked Michel.

“Copernicus,” replied Barbicane.

“Let us see Copernicus.”

This mount, situated in 9@ north latitude and 20@ east longitude, rose to a height of 10,600 feet above the surface of the moon. It is quite visible from the earth; and astronomers can study it with ease, particularly during the phase between the last quarter and the new moon, because then the shadows are thrown lengthways from east to west, allowing them to measure the heights.

This Copernicus forms the most important of the radiating system, situated in the southern hemisphere, according to Tycho Brahe. It rises isolated like a gigantic lighthouse on that portion of the “Sea of Clouds,” which is bounded by the “Sea of Tempests,” thus lighting by its splendid rays two oceans at a time. It was a sight without an equal, those long luminous trains, so dazzling in the full moon, and which, passing the boundary chain on the north, extends to the “Sea of Rains.” At one o’clock of the terrestrial morning, the projectile, like a balloon borne into space, overlooked the top of this superb mount. Barbicane could recognize perfectly its chief features. Copernicus is comprised in the series of ringed mountains of the first order, in the division of great circles. Like Kepler and Aristarchus, which overlook the “Ocean of Tempests,” sometimes it appeared like a brilliant point through the cloudy light, and was taken for a volcano in activity. But it is only an extinct one — like all on that side of the moon. Its circumference showed a diameter of about twenty-two leagues. The glasses discovered traces of stratification produced by successive eruptions, and the neighborhood was strewn with volcanic remains which still choked some of the craters.

“There exist,” said Barbicane, “several kinds of circles on the surface of the moon, and it is easy to see that Copernicus belongs to the radiating class. If we were nearer, we should see the cones bristling on the inside, which in former times were so many fiery mouths. A curious arrangement, and one without an exception on the lunar disc, is that the interior surface of these circles is the reverse of the exterior, and contrary to the form taken by terrestrial craters. It follows, then, that the general curve of the bottom of these circles gives a sphere of a smaller diameter than that of the moon.”

“And why this peculiar disposition?” asked Nicholl.

“We do not know,” replied Barbicane.

“What splendid radiation!” said Michel. “One could hardly see a finer spectacle, I think.”

“What would you say, then,” replied Barbicane, “if chance should bear us toward the southern hemisphere?”

“Well, I should say that it was still more beautiful,” retorted

Michel Ardan.

At this moment the projectile hung perpendicularly over the circle. The circumference of Copernicus formed almost a perfect circle, and its steep escarpments were clearly defined. They could even distinguish a second ringed enclosure. Around spread a grayish plain, of a wild aspect, on which every relief was marked in yellow. At the bottom of the circle, as if enclosed in a jewel case, sparkled for one instant two or three eruptive cones, like enormous dazzling gems. Toward the north the escarpments were lowered by a depression which would probably have given access to the interior of the crater.

In passing over the surrounding plains, Barbicane noticed a great number of less important mountains; and among others a little ringed one called Guy Lussac, the breadth of which measured twelve miles.

Toward the south, the plain was very flat, without one elevation, without one projection. Toward the north, on the contrary, till where it was bounded by the “Sea of Storms,” it resembled a liquid surface agitated by a storm, of which the hills and hollows formed a succession of waves suddenly congealed. Over the whole of this, and in all directions, lay the luminous lines, all converging to the summit of Copernicus.

The travelers discussed the origin of these strange rays; but they could not determine their nature any more than terrestrial observers.

“But why,” said Nicholl, “should not these rays be simply spurs of mountains which reflect more vividly the light of the sun?”

“No,” replied Barbicane; “if it was so, under certain conditions of the moon, these ridges would cast shadows, and they do not cast any.”

And indeed, these rays only appeared when the orb of day was in opposition to the moon, and disappeared as soon as its rays became oblique.

“But how have they endeavored to explain these lines of light?” asked Michel; “for I cannot believe that savants would ever be stranded for want of an explanation.”

“Yes,” replied Barbicane; “Herschel has put forward an opinion, but he did not venture to affirm it.”

“Never mind. What was the opinion?”

“He thought that these rays might be streams of cooled lava which shone when the sun beat straight upon them. It may be so; but nothing can be less certain. Besides, if we pass nearer to Tycho, we shall be in a better position to find out the cause of this radiation.”

“Do you know, my friends, what that plain, seen from the height we are at, resembles?” said Michel.

“No,” replied Nicholl.

“Very well; with all those pieces of lava lengthened like rockets, it resembles an immense game of spelikans thrown pellmell. There wants but the hook to pull them out one by one.”

“Do be serious,” said Barbicane.

“Well, let us be serious,” replied Michel quietly; “and instead of spelikans, let us put bones. This plain, would then be nothing but an immense cemetery, on which would repose the mortal remains of thousands of extinct generations. Do you prefer that high-flown comparison?”

“One is as good as the other,” retorted Barbicane.

“My word, you are difficult to please,” answered Michel.

“My worthy friend,” continued the matter-of-fact Barbicane, “it matters but little what it resembles, when we do not know what it is.”

“Well answered,” exclaimed Michel. “That will teach me to reason with savants.”

But the projectile continued to advance with almost uniform speed around the lunar disc. The travelers, we may easily imagine, did not dream of taking a moment’s rest. Every minute changed the landscape which fled from beneath their gaze. About half past one o’clock in the morning, they caught a glimpse of the tops of another mountain. Barbicane, consulting his map, recognized Eratosthenes.

It was a ringed mountain nine thousand feet high, and one of those circles so numerous on this satellite. With regard to this, Barbicane related Kepler’s singular opinion on the formation of circles. According to that celebrated mathematician, these crater-like cavities had been dug by the hand of man.

“For what purpose?” asked Nicholl.

“For a very natural one,” replied Barbicane. “The Selenites might have undertaken these immense works and dug these enormous holes for a refuge and shield from the solar rays which beat upon them during fifteen consecutive days.”

“The Selenites are not fools,” said Michel.

“A singular idea,” replied Nicholl; “but it is probable that Kepler did not know the true dimensions of these circles, for the digging of them would have been the work of giants quite impossible for the Selenites.”

“Why? if weight on the moon’s surface is six times less than on the earth?” said Michel.

“But if the Selenites are six times smaller?” retorted Nicholl.

“And if there are no Selenites?” added Barbicane.

This put an end to the discussion.

Soon Eratosthenes disappeared under the horizon without the projectile being sufficiently near to allow close observation. This mountain separated the Apennines from the Carpathians. In the lunar orography they have discerned some chains of mountains, which are chiefly distributed over the northern hemisphere. Some, however, occupy certain portions of the southern hemisphere also.

About two o’clock in the morning Barbicane found that they were above the twentieth lunar parallel. The distance of the projectile from the moon was not more than six hundred miles. Barbicane, now perceiving that the projectile was steadily approaching the lunar disc, did not despair; if not of reaching her, at least of discovering the secrets of her configuration.

CHAPTER XIII

LUNAR LANDSCAPES

At half-past two in the morning, the projectile was over the thirteenth lunar parallel and at the effective distance of five hundred miles, reduced by the glasses to five. It still seemed impossible, however, that it could ever touch any part of the disc. Its motive speed, comparatively so moderate, was inexplicable to President Barbicane. At that distance from the moon it must have been considerable, to enable it to bear up against her attraction. Here was a phenomenon the cause of which escaped them again. Besides, time failed them to investigate the cause. All lunar relief was defiling under the eyes of the travelers, and they would not lose a single detail.

Under the glasses the disc appeared at the distance of five miles. What would an aeronaut, borne to this distance from the earth, distinguish on its surface? We cannot say, since the greatest ascension has not been more than 25,000 feet.

This, however, is an exact description of what Barbicane and his companions saw at this height. Large patches of different colors appeared on the disc. Selenographers are not agreed upon the nature of these colors. There are several, and rather vividly marked. Julius Schmidt pretends that, if the terrestrial oceans were dried up, a Selenite observer could not distinguish on the globe a greater diversity of shades between the oceans and the continental plains than those on the moon present to a terrestrial observer. According to him, the color common to the vast plains known by the name of “seas” is a dark gray mixed with green and brown. Some of the large craters present the same appearance. Barbicane knew this opinion of the German selenographer, an opinion shared by Boeer and Moedler.

Observation has proved that right was on their side, and not on that of some astronomers who admit the existence of only gray on the moon’s surface. In some parts green was very distinct, such as springs, according to Julius Schmidt, from the seas of “Serenity and Humors.” Barbicane also noticed large craters, without any interior cones, which shed a bluish tint similar to the reflection of a sheet of steel freshly polished. These colors belonged really to the lunar disc, and did not result, as some astronomers say, either from the imperfection in the objective of the glasses or from the interposition of the terrestrial atmosphere.

Not a doubt existed in Barbicane’s mind with regard to it, as he observed it through space, and so could not commit any optical error. He considered the establishment of this fact as an acquisition to science. Now, were these shades of green, belonging to tropical vegetation, kept up by a low dense atmosphere? He could not yet say.

Farther on, he noticed a reddish tint, quite defined. The same shade had before been observed at the bottom of an isolated enclosure, known by the name of Lichtenburg’s circle, which is situated near the Hercynian mountains, on the borders of the moon; but they could not tell the nature of it.

They were not more fortunate with regard to another peculiarity of the disc, for they could not decide upon the cause of it.

Michel Ardan was watching near the president, when he noticed long white lines, vividly lighted up by the direct rays of the sun. It was a succession of luminous furrows, very different from the radiation of Copernicus not long before; they ran parallel with each other.

Michel, with his usual readiness, hastened to exclaim:

“Look there! cultivated fields!”

“Cultivated fields!” replied Nicholl, shrugging his shoulders.

“Plowed, at all events,” retorted Michel Ardan; “but what laborers those Selenites must be, and what giant oxen they must harness to their plow to cut such furrows!”

“They are not furrows,” said Barbicane; “they are rifts.”

“Rifts? stuff!” replied Michel mildly; “but what do you mean by `rifts’ in the scientific world?”

Barbicane immediately enlightened his companion as to what he knew about lunar rifts. He knew that they were a kind of furrow found on every part of the disc which was not mountainous; that these furrows, generally isolated, measured from 400 to 500 leagues in length; that their breadth varied from 1,000 to 1,500 yards, and that their borders were strictly parallel; but he knew nothing more either of their formation or their nature.

Barbicane, through his glasses, observed these rifts with great attention. He noticed that their borders were formed of steep declivities; they were long parallel ramparts, and with some small amount of imagination he might have admitted the existence of long lines of fortifications, raised by Selenite engineers. Of these different rifts some were perfectly straight, as if cut by a line; others were slightly curved, though still keeping their borders parallel; some crossed each other, some cut through craters; here they wound through ordinary cavities, such as Posidonius or Petavius; there they wound through the seas, such as the “Sea of Serenity.”

These natural accidents naturally excited the imaginations of these terrestrial astronomers. The first observations had not discovered these rifts. Neither Hevelius, Cassin, La Hire, nor Herschel seemed to have known them. It was Schroeter who in 1789 first drew attention to them. Others followed who studied them, as Pastorff, Gruithuysen, Boeer, and Moedler. At this time their number amounts to seventy; but, if they have been counted, their nature has not yet been determined; they are certainly not fortifications, any more than they are the ancient beds of dried-up rivers; for, on one side, the waters, so slight on the moon's surface, could never have worn such drains for themselves; and, on the other, they often cross craters of great elevation.

We must, however, allow that Michel Ardan had "an idea," and that, without knowing it, he coincided in that respect with Julius Schmidt.

"Why," said he, "should not these unaccountable appearances be simply phenomena of vegetation?"

"What do you mean?" asked Barbicane quickly.

"Do not excite yourself, my worthy president," replied Michel; "might it not be possible that the dark lines forming that bastion were rows of trees regularly placed?"

"You stick to your vegetation, then?" said Barbicane.

"I like," retorted Michel Ardan, "to explain what you savants cannot explain; at least my hypotheses has the advantage of indicating why these rifts disappear, or seem to disappear, at certain seasons."

"And for what reason?"

“For the reason that the trees become invisible when they lose their leaves, and visible again when they regain them.”

“Your explanation is ingenious, my dear companion,” replied

Barbicane, “but inadmissible.”

“Why?”

“Because, so to speak, there are no seasons on the moon’s surface, and that, consequently, the phenomena of vegetation of which you speak cannot occur.”

Indeed, the slight obliquity of the lunar axis keeps the sun at an almost equal height in every latitude. Above the equatorial regions the radiant orb almost invariably occupies the zenith, and does not pass the limits of the horizon in the polar regions; thus, according to each region, there reigns a perpetual winter, spring, summer, or autumn, as in the planet Jupiter, whose axis is but little inclined upon its orbit.

What origin do they attribute to these rifts? That is a question difficult to solve. They are certainly anterior to the formation of craters and circles, for several have introduced themselves by breaking through their circular ramparts. Thus it may be that, contemporary with the later geological epochs, they are due to the expansion of natural forces.

But the projectile had now attained the fortieth degree of lunar latitude, at a distance not exceeding 40 miles. Through the glasses objects appeared to be only four miles distant.

At this point, under their feet, rose Mount Helicon, 1,520 feet high, and round about the left rose moderate elevations, enclosing a small portion of the "Sea of Rains," under the name of the Gulf of Iris. The terrestrial atmosphere would have to be one hundred and seventy times more transparent than it is, to allow astronomers to make perfect observations on the moon's surface; but in the void in which the projectile floated no fluid interposed itself between the eye of the observer and the object observed. And more, Barbicane found himself carried to a greater distance than the most powerful telescopes had ever done before, either that of Lord Rosse or that of the Rocky Mountains. He was, therefore, under extremely favorable conditions for solving that great question of the habitability of the moon; but the solution still escaped him; he could distinguish nothing but desert beds, immense plains, and toward the north, arid mountains. Not a work betrayed the hand of man; not a ruin marked his course; not a group of animals was to be seen indicating life, even in an inferior degree. In no part was there life, in no part was there an appearance of vegetation. Of the three kingdoms which share the terrestrial globe between them, one alone was represented on the lunar and that the mineral.

"Ah, indeed!" said Michel Ardan, a little out of countenance; "then you see no one?"

"No," answered Nicholl; "up to this time, not a man, not an animal, not a tree! After all, whether the atmosphere has taken refuge at the bottom of cavities, in the midst of the circles, or even on the opposite face of the moon, we cannot decide."

"Besides," added Barbicane, "even to the most piercing eye a man cannot be distinguished farther than three and a half miles off; so that, if there are any Selenites, they can see our projectile, but we cannot see them."

Toward four in the morning, at the height of the fiftieth parallel, the distance was reduced to 300 miles. To the left ran a line of mountains capriciously shaped, lying in the full light. To the right, on the contrary, lay a black hollow resembling a vast well, unfathomable and gloomy, drilled into the lunar soil.

This hole was the “Black Lake”; it was Pluto, a deep circle which can be conveniently studied from the earth, between the last quarter and the new moon, when the shadows fall from west to east.

This black color is rarely met with on the surface of the satellite. As yet it has only been recognized in the depths of the circle of Endymion, to the east of the “Cold Sea,” in the northern hemisphere, and at the bottom of Grimaldi’s circle, on the equator, toward the eastern border of the orb.

Pluto is an annular mountain, situated in 51@ north latitude, and 9@ east longitude. Its circuit is forty-seven miles long and thirty-two broad.

Barbicane regretted that they were not passing directly above this vast opening. There was an abyss to fathom, perhaps some mysterious phenomenon to surprise; but the projectile’s course could not be altered. They must rigidly submit. They could not guide a balloon, still less a projectile, when once enclosed within its walls. Toward five in the morning the northern limits of the “Sea of Rains” was at length passed. The mounts of Condamine and Fontenelle remained — one on the right, the other on the left. That part of the disc beginning with 60@ was becoming quite mountainous. The glasses brought them to within two miles, less than that separating the summit of Mont Blanc from the level of the sea. The whole region was bristling with spikes and circles. Toward the 60@ Philolaus stood predominant at a height of 5,550 feet with its elliptical crater, and seen from this distance, the disc showed a very fantastical appearance. Landscapes were presented to the eye under very different conditions from those on the earth, and also very inferior to them.

The moon having no atmosphere, the consequences arising from the absence of this gaseous envelope have already been shown. No twilight on her surface; night following day and day following night with the suddenness of a lamp which is extinguished or lighted amid profound darkness — no transition from cold to heat, the temperature falling in an instant from boiling point to the cold of space.

Another consequence of this want of air is that absolute darkness reigns where the sun's rays do not penetrate. That which on earth is called diffusion of light, that luminous matter which the air holds in suspension, which creates the twilight and the daybreak, which produces the umbrae and penumbrae, and all the magic of chiaro-oscuro, does not exist on the moon. Hence the harshness of contrasts, which only admit of two colors, black and white. If a Selenite were to shade his eyes from the sun's rays, the sky would seem absolutely black, and the stars would shine to him as on the darkest night. Judge of the impression produced on Barbicane and his three friends by this strange scene! Their eyes were confused. They could no longer grasp the respective distances of the different plains. A lunar landscape without the softening of the phenomena of chiaro-oscuro could not be rendered by an earthly landscape painter; it would be spots of ink on a white page — nothing more.

This aspect was not altered even when the projectile, at the height of 80@, was only separated from the moon by a distance of fifty miles; nor even when, at five in the morning, it passed at less than twenty-five miles from the mountain of Gioja, a distance reduced by the glasses to a quarter of a mile. It seemed as if the moon might be touched by the hand! It seemed impossible that, before long, the projectile would not strike her, if only at the north pole, the brilliant arch of which was so distinctly visible on the black sky.

Michel Ardan wanted to open one of the scuttles and throw himself on to the moon’s surface! A very useless attempt; for if the projectile could not attain any point whatever of the satellite, Michel, carried along by its motion, could not attain it either.

At that moment, at six o’clock, the lunar pole appeared. The disc only presented to the travelers’ gaze one half brilliantly lit up, while the other disappeared in the darkness. Suddenly the projectile passed the line of demarcation between intense light and absolute darkness, and was plunged in profound night!

CHAPTER XIV

THE NIGHT OF THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FOUR HOURS AND A HALF

At the moment when this phenomenon took place so rapidly, the projectile was skirting the moon’s north pole at less than twenty-five miles distance. Some seconds had sufficed to plunge it into the absolute darkness of space. The transition was so sudden, without shade, without gradation of light, without attenuation of the luminous waves, that the orb seemed to have been extinguished by a powerful blow.

“Melted, disappeared!” Michel Ardan exclaimed, aghast.

Indeed, there was neither reflection nor shadow. Nothing more was to be seen of that disc, formerly so dazzling. The darkness was complete. and rendered even more so by the rays from the stars. It was “that blackness” in which the lunar nights are insteeped, which last three hundred and fifty-four hours and a half at each point of the disc, a long night resulting from the equality of the translatory and rotary movements of the moon. The projectile, immerged in the conical shadow of the satellite, experienced the action of the solar rays no more than any of its invisible points.

In the interior, the obscurity was complete. They could not see each other. Hence the necessity of dispelling the darkness. However desirous Barbicane might be to husband the gas, the reserve of which was small, he was obliged to ask from it a fictitious light, an expensive brilliancy which the sun then refused.

“Devil take the radiant orb!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, “which forces us to expend gas, instead of giving us his rays gratuitously.”

“Do not let us accuse the sun,” said Nicholl, “it is not his fault, but that of the moon, which has come and placed herself like a screen between us and it.”

“It is the sun!” continued Michel.

“It is the moon!” retorted Nicholl.

An idle dispute, which Barbicane put an end to by saying:

“My friends, it is neither the fault of the sun nor of the moon; it is the fault of the projectile, which, instead of rigidly following its course, has awkwardly missed it. To be more just, it is the fault of that unfortunate meteor which has so deplorably altered our first direction.”

“Well,” replied Michel Ardan, “as the matter is settled, let us have breakfast. After a whole night of watching it is fair to build ourselves up a little.”

This proposal meeting with no contradiction, Michel prepared the repast in a few minutes. But they ate for eating’s sake, they drank without toasts, without hurrahs. The bold travelers being borne away into gloomy space, without their accustomed cortege of rays, felt a vague uneasiness in their hearts. The “strange” shadow so dear to Victor Hugo’s pen bound them on all sides. But they talked over the interminable night of three hundred and fifty-four hours and a half, nearly fifteen days, which the law of physics has imposed on the inhabitants of the moon.

Barbicane gave his friends some explanation of the causes and the consequences of this curious phenomenon.

“Curious indeed,” said they; “for, if each hemisphere of the moon is deprived of solar light for fifteen days, that above which we now float does not even enjoy during its long night any view of the earth so beautifully lit up. In a word she has no moon (applying this designation to our globe) but on one side of her disc. Now if this were the case with the earth — if, for example, Europe never saw the moon, and she was only visible at the antipodes, imagine to yourself the astonishment of a European on arriving in Australia.”

“They would make the voyage for nothing but to see the moon!” replied Michel.

“Very well!” continued Barbicane, “that astonishment is reserved for the Selenites who inhabit the face of the moon opposite to the earth, a face which is ever invisible to our countrymen of the terrestrial globe.”

“And which we should have seen,” added Nicholl, “if we had arrived here when the moon was new, that is to say fifteen days later.”

“I will add, to make amends,” continued Barbicane, “that the inhabitants of the visible face are singularly favored by nature, to the detriment of their brethren on the invisible face. The latter, as you see, have dark nights of 354 hours, without one single ray to break the darkness. The other, on the contrary, when the sun which has given its light for fifteen days sinks below the horizon, see a splendid orb rise on the opposite horizon. It is the earth, which is thirteen times greater than the diminutive moon that we know — the earth which developes itself at a diameter of two degrees, and which sheds a light thirteen times greater than that qualified by atmospheric strata — the earth which only disappears at the moment when the sun reappears in its turn!”

“Nicely worded!” said Michel, “slightly academical perhaps.”

“It follows, then,” continued Barbicane, without knitting his brows, “that the visible face of the disc must be very agreeable to inhabit, since it always looks on either the sun when the moon is full, or on the earth when the moon is new.”

“But,” said Nicholl, “that advantage must be well compensated by the insupportable heat which the light brings with it.”

“The inconvenience, in that respect, is the same for the two faces, for the earth’s light is evidently deprived of heat. But the invisible face is still more searched by the heat than the visible face. I say that for you, Nicholl, because Michel will probably not understand.”

“Thank you,” said Michel.

“Indeed,” continued Barbicane, “when the invisible face receives at the same time light and heat from the sun, it is because the moon is new; that is to say, she is situated between the sun and the earth. It follows, then, considering the position which she occupies in opposition when full, that she is nearer to the sun by twice her distance from the earth; and that distance may be estimated at the two-hundredth part of that which separates the sun from the earth, or in round numbers 400,000 miles. So that invisible face is so much nearer to the sun when she receives its rays.”

“Quite right,” replied Nicholl.

“On the contrary,” continued Barbicane.

“One moment,” said Michel, interrupting his grave companion.

“What do you want?”

“I ask to be allowed to continue the explanation.”

“And why?”

“To prove that I understand.”

“Get along with you,” said Barbicane, smiling.

“On the contrary,” said Michel, imitating the tone and gestures of the president, “on the contrary, when the visible face of the moon is lit by the sun, it is because the moon is full, that is to say, opposite the sun with regard to the earth. The distance separating it from the radiant orb is then increased in round numbers to 400,000 miles, and the heat which she receives must be a little less.”

“Very well said!” exclaimed Barbicane. “Do you know, Michel, that, for an amateur, you are intelligent.”

“Yes,” replied Michel coolly, “we are all so on the Boulevard des Italiens.”

Barbicane gravely grasped the hand of his amiable companion, and continued to enumerate the advantages reserved for the inhabitants of the visible face.

Among others, he mentioned eclipses of the sun, which only take place on this side of the lunar disc; since, in order that they may take place, it is necessary for the moon to be in opposition. These eclipses, caused by the interposition of the earth between the moon and the sun, can last two hours; during which time, by reason of the rays refracted by its atmosphere, the terrestrial globe can appear as nothing but a black point upon the sun.

“So,” said Nicholl, “there is a hemisphere, that invisible hemisphere which is very ill supplied, very ill treated, by nature.”

“Never mind,” replied Michel; “if we ever become Selenites, we will inhabit the visible face. I like the light.”

“Unless, by any chance,” answered Nicholl, “the atmosphere should be condensed on the other side, as certain astronomers pretend.”

“That would be a consideration,” said Michel.

Breakfast over, the observers returned to their post. They tried to see through the darkened scuttles by extinguishing all light in the projectile; but not a luminous spark made its way through the darkness.

One inexplicable fact preoccupied Barbicane. Why, having passed within such a short distance of the moon — about twenty-five miles only — why the projectile had not fallen? If its speed had been enormous, he could have understood that the fall would not have taken place; but, with a relatively moderate speed, that resistance to the moon’s attraction could not be explained. Was the projectile under some foreign influence? Did some kind of body retain it in the ether? It was quite evident that it could never reach any point of the moon. Whither was it going? Was it going farther from, or nearing, the disc? Was it being borne in that profound darkness through the infinity of space? How could they learn, how calculate, in the midst of this night? All these questions made Barbicane uneasy, but he could not solve them.

Certainly, the invisible orb was there, perhaps only some few miles off; but neither he nor his companions could see it. If there was any noise on its surface, they could not hear it. Air, that medium of sound, was wanting to transmit the groanings of that moon which the Arabic legends call “a man already half granite, and still breathing.”

One must allow that that was enough to aggravate the most patient observers. It was just that unknown hemisphere which was stealing from their sight. That face which fifteen days sooner, or fifteen days later, had been, or would be, splendidly illuminated by the solar rays, was then being lost in utter darkness. In fifteen days where would the projectile be? Who could say? Where would the chances of conflicting attractions have drawn it to? The disappointment of the travelers in the midst of this utter darkness may be imagined. All observation of the lunar disc was impossible. The constellations alone claimed all their attention; and we must allow that the astronomers Faye, Charconac, and Secchi, never found themselves in circumstances so favorable for their observation.

Indeed, nothing could equal the splendor of this starry world, bathed in limpid ether. Its diamonds set in the heavenly vault sparkled magnificently. The eye took in the firmament from the Southern Cross to the North Star, those two constellations which in 12,000 years, by reason of the succession of equinoxes, will resign their part of the polar stars, the one to Canopus in the southern hemisphere, the other to Wega in the northern. Imagination loses itself in this sublime Infinity, amid which the projectile was gravitating, like a new star created by the hand of man. From a natural cause, these constellations shone with a soft luster; they did not twinkle, for there was no atmosphere which, by the intervention of its layers unequally dense and of different degrees of humidity, produces this scintillation. These stars were soft eyes, looking out into the dark night, amid the silence of absolute space.

Long did the travelers stand mute, watching the constellated firmament, upon which the moon, like a vast screen, made an enormous black hole. But at length a painful sensation drew them from their watchings. This was an intense cold, which soon covered the inside of the glass of the scuttles with a thick coating of ice. The sun was no longer warming the projectile with its direct rays, and thus it was losing the heat stored up in its walls by degrees. This heat was rapidly evaporating into space by radiation, and a considerably lower temperature was the result. The humidity of the interior was changed into ice upon contact with the glass, preventing all observation.

Nicholl consulted the thermometer, and saw that it had fallen to seventeen degrees (Centigrade) below zero. So that, in spite of the many reasons for economizing, Barbicane, after having begged light from the gas, was also obliged to beg for heat. The projectile's low temperature was no longer endurable. Its tenants would have been frozen to death.

1@ Fahrenheit.

“Well!” observed Michel, “we cannot reasonably complain of the monotony of our journey! What variety we have had, at least in temperature. Now we are blinded with light and saturated with heat, like the Indians of the Pampas! now plunged into profound darkness, amid the cold, like the Esquimaux of the north pole. No, indeed! we have no right to complain; nature does wonders in our honor.”

“But,” asked Nicholl, “what is the temperature outside?”

“Exactly that of the planetary space,” replied Barbicane.

“Then,” continued Michel Ardan, “would not this be the time to make the experiment which we dared not attempt when we were drowned in the sun’s rays?

“It is now or never,” replied Barbicane, “for we are in a good position to verify the temperature of space, and see if Fourier or Pouillet’s calculations are exact.”

“In any case it is cold,” said Michel. “See! the steam of the interior is condensing on the glasses of the scuttles. If the fall continues, the vapor of our breath will fall in snow around us.”

“Let us prepare a thermometer,” said Barbicane.

We may imagine that an ordinary thermometer would afford no result under the circumstances in which this instrument was to be exposed. The mercury would have been frozen in its ball, as below 42@ Fahrenheit below zero it is no longer liquid. But Barbicane had furnished himself with a spirit thermometer on Wafferdin’s system, which gives the minima of excessively low temperatures.

Before beginning the experiment, this instrument was compared with an ordinary one, and then Barbicane prepared to use it.

“How shall we set about it?” asked Nicholl.

“Nothing is easier,” replied Michel Ardan, who was never at a loss. “We open the scuttle rapidly; throw out the instrument; it follows the projectile with exemplary docility; and a quarter of an hour after, draw it in.”

“With the hand?” asked Barbicane.

"With the hand," replied Michel.

"Well, then, my friend, do not expose yourself," answered Barbicane, "for the hand that you draw in again will be nothing but a stump frozen and deformed by the frightful cold."

"Really!"

"You will feel as if you had had a terrible burn, like that of iron at a white heat; for whether the heat leaves our bodies briskly or enters briskly, it is exactly the same thing. Besides, I am not at all certain that the objects we have thrown out are still following us."

"Why not?" asked Nicholl.

"Because, if we are passing through an atmosphere of the slightest density, these objects will be retarded. Again, the darkness prevents our seeing if they still float around us. But in order not to expose ourselves to the loss of our thermometer, we will fasten it, and we can then more easily pull it back again."

Barbicane's advice was followed. Through the scuttle rapidly opened, Nicholl threw out the instrument, which was held by a short cord, so that it might be more easily drawn up. The scuttle had not been opened more than a second, but that second had sufficed to let in a most intense cold.

"The devil!" exclaimed Michel Ardan, "it is cold enough to freeze a white bear."

Barbicane waited until half an hour had elapsed, which was more than time enough to allow the instrument to fall to the level of the surrounding temperature. Then it was rapidly pulled in.

Barbicane calculated the quantity of spirits of wine overflowed into the little vial soldered to the lower part of the instrument, and said:

“A hundred and forty degrees Centigrade below zero!”

 218 degrees Fahrenheit below zero.

M. Pouillet was right and Fourier wrong. That was the undoubted temperature of the starry space. Such is, perhaps, that of the lunar continents, when the orb of night has lost by radiation all the heat which fifteen days of sun have poured into her.

CHAPTER XV

HYPERBOLA OR PARABOLA

We may, perhaps, be astonished to find Barbicane and his companions so little occupied with the future reserved for them in their metal prison which was bearing them through the infinity of space. Instead of asking where they were going, they passed their time making experiments, as if they had been quietly installed in their own study.

We might answer that men so strong-minded were above such anxieties — that they did not trouble themselves about such trifles — and that they had something else to do than to occupy their minds with the future.

The truth was that they were not masters of their projectile; they could neither check its course, nor alter its direction.

A sailor can change the head of his ship as he pleases; an aeronaut can give a vertical motion to his balloon. They, on the contrary, had no power over their vehicle. Every maneuver was forbidden. Hence the inclination to let things alone, or as the sailors say, “let her run.”

Where did they find themselves at this moment, at eight o’clock in the morning of the day called upon the earth the 6th of December? Very certainly in the neighborhood of the moon, and even near enough for her to look to them like an enormous black screen upon the firmament. As to the distance which separated them, it was impossible to estimate it. The projectile, held by some unaccountable force, had been within four miles of grazing the satellite’s north pole.

But since entering the cone of shadow these last two hours, had the distance increased or diminished? Every point of mark was wanting by which to estimate both the direction and the speed of the projectile.

Perhaps it was rapidly leaving the disc, so that it would soon quit the pure shadow. Perhaps, again, on the other hand, it might be nearing it so much that in a short time it might strike some high point on the invisible hemisphere, which would doubtlessly have ended the journey much to the detriment of the travelers.

A discussion arose on this subject, and Michel Ardan, always ready with an explanation, gave it as his opinion that the projectile, held by the lunar attraction, would end by falling on the surface of the terrestrial globe like an aerolite.

“First of all, my friend,” answered Barbicane, “every aerolite does not fall to the earth; it is only a small proportion which do so; and if we had passed into an aerolite, it does not necessarily follow that we should ever reach the surface of the moon.”

“But how if we get near enough?” replied Michel.

“Pure mistake,” replied Barbicane. “Have you not seen shooting stars rush through the sky by thousands at certain seasons?”

“Yes.”

“Well, these stars, or rather corpuscles, only shine when they are heated by gliding over the atmospheric layers. Now, if they enter the atmosphere, they pass at least within forty miles of the earth, but they seldom fall upon it.

The same with our projectile. It may approach very near to the moon, and not yet fall upon it."

"But then," asked Michel, "I shall be curious to know how our erring vehicle will act in space?"

"I see but two hypotheses," replied Barbicane, after some moments' reflection.

"What are they?"

"The projectile has the choice between two mathematical curves, and it will follow one or the other according to the speed with which it is animated, and which at this moment I cannot estimate."

"Yes," said Nicholl, "it will follow either a parabola or a hyperbola."

"Just so," replied Barbicane. "With a certain speed it will assume the parabola, and with a greater the hyperbola."

"I like those grand words," exclaimed Michel Ardan; "one knows directly what they mean. And pray what is your parabola, if you please?"

"My friend," answered the captain, "the parabola is a curve of the second order, the result of the section of a cone intersected by a plane parallel to one of the sides."

"Ah! ah!" said Michel, in a satisfied tone.

"It is very nearly," continued Nicholl, "the course described by a bomb launched from a mortar."

"Perfect! And the hyperbola?"

“The hyperbola, Michel, is a curve of the second order, produced by the intersection of a conic surface and a plane parallel to its axis, and constitutes two branches separated one from the other, both tending indefinitely in the two directions.”

“Is it possible!” exclaimed Michel Ardan in a serious tone, as if they had told him of some serious event. “What I particularly like in your definition of the hyperbola (I was going to say hyperblague) is that it is still more obscure than the word you pretend to define.”

Nicholl and Barbicane cared little for Michel Ardan’s fun. They were deep in a scientific discussion. What curve would the projectile follow? was their hobby. One maintained the hyperbola, the other the parabola. They gave each other reasons bristling with x. Their arguments were couched in language which made Michel jump. The discussion was hot, and neither would give up his chosen curve to his adversary.

This scientific dispute lasted so long that it made Michel very impatient.

“Now, gentlemen cosines, will you cease to throw parabolas and hyperbolas at each other’s heads? I want to understand the only interesting question in the whole affair. We shall follow one or the other of these curves? Good. But where will they lead us to?”

“Nowhere,” replied Nicholl.

“How, nowhere?”

“Evidently,” said Barbicane, “they are open curves, which may be prolonged indefinitely.”

“Ah, savants!” cried Michel; “and what are either the one or the other to us from the moment we know that they equally lead us into infinite space?”

Barbicane and Nicholl could not forbear smiling. They had just been creating “art for art’s sake.” Never had so idle a question been raised at such an inopportune moment. The sinister truth remained that, whether hyperbolically or parabolically borne away, the projectile would never again meet either the earth or the moon.

What would become of these bold travelers in the immediate future? If they did not die of hunger, if they did not die of thirst, in some days, when the gas failed, they would die from want of air, unless the cold had killed them first. Still, important as it was to economize the gas, the excessive lowness of the surrounding temperature obliged them to consume a certain quantity. Strictly speaking, they could do without its light, but not without its heat. Fortunately the caloric generated by Reiset’s and Regnaut’s apparatus raised the temperature of the interior of the projectile a little, and without much expenditure they were able to keep it bearable.

But observations had now become very difficult. the dampness of the projectile was condensed on the windows and congealed immediately. This cloudiness had to be dispersed continually. In any case they might hope to be able to discover some phenomena of the highest interest.

But up to this time the disc remained dumb and dark. It did not answer the multiplicity of questions put by these ardent minds; a matter which drew this reflection from Michel, apparently a just one:

“If ever we begin this journey over again, we shall do well to choose the time when the moon is at the full.”

“Certainly,” said Nicholl, “that circumstance will be more favorable. I allow that the moon, immersed in the sun’s rays, will not be visible during the transit, but instead we should see the earth, which would be full. And what is more, if we were drawn round the moon, as at this moment, we should at least have the advantage of seeing the invisible part of her disc magnificently lit.”

“Well said, Nicholl,” replied Michel Ardan. “What do you think, Barbicane?”

“I think this,” answered the grave president: “If ever we begin this journey again, we shall start at the same time and under the same conditions. Suppose we had attained our end, would it not have been better to have found continents in broad daylight than a country plunged in utter darkness? Would not our first installation have been made under better circumstances? Yes, evidently. As to the invisible side, we could have visited it in our exploring expeditions on the lunar globe. So that the time of the full moon was well chosen. But we ought to have arrived at the end; and in order to have so arrived, we ought to have suffered no deviation on the road.”

“I have nothing to say to that,” answered Michel Ardan. “Here is, however, a good opportunity lost of observing the other side of the moon.”

But the projectile was now describing in the shadow that incalculable course which no sight-mark would allow them to ascertain. Had its direction been altered, either by the influence of the lunar attraction, or by the action of some unknown star? Barbicane could not say. But a change had taken place in the relative position of the vehicle; and Barbicane verified it about four in the morning.

The change consisted in this, that the base of the projectile had turned toward the moon’s surface, and was so held by a perpendicular passing through its axis. The attraction, that is to say the weight, had brought about this alteration. The heaviest part of the projectile inclined toward the invisible disc as if it would fall upon it.

Was it falling? Were the travelers attaining that much desired end? No. And the observation of a sign-point, quite inexplicable in itself, showed Barbicane that his projectile was not nearing the moon, and that it had shifted by following an almost concentric curve.

This point of mark was a luminous brightness, which Nicholl sighted suddenly, on the limit of the horizon formed by the black disc. This point could not be confounded with a star. It was a reddish incandescence which increased by degrees, a decided proof that the projectile was shifting toward it and not falling normally on the surface of the moon.

“A volcano! it is a volcano in action!” cried Nicholl; “a disemboweling of the interior fires of the moon! That world is not quite extinguished.”

“Yes, an eruption,” replied Barbicane, who was carefully studying the phenomenon through his night glass. “What should it be, if not a volcano?”

“But, then,” said Michel Ardan, “in order to maintain that combustion, there must be air. So the atmosphere does surround that part of the moon.”

“Perhaps so,” replied Barbicane, “but not necessarily.

The volcano, by the decomposition of certain substances, can provide its own oxygen, and thus throw flames into space. It seems to me that the deflagration, by the intense brilliancy of the substances in combustion, is produced in pure oxygen. We must not be in a hurry to proclaim the existence of a lunar atmosphere.”

The fiery mountain must have been situated about the 45@ south latitude on the invisible part of the disc; but, to Barbicane’s great displeasure, the curve which the projectile was describing was taking it far from the point indicated by the eruption. Thus he could not determine its nature exactly. Half an hour after being sighted, this luminous point had disappeared behind the dark horizon; but the verification of this phenomenon was of considerable consequence in their selenographic studies. It proved that all heat had not yet disappeared from the bowels of this globe; and where heat exists, who can affirm that the vegetable kingdom, nay, even the animal kingdom itself, has not up to this time resisted all destructive influences? The existence of this volcano in eruption, unmistakably seen by these earthly savants, would doubtless give rise to many theories favorable to the grave question of the habitability of the moon.

Barbicane allowed himself to be carried away by these reflections. He forgot himself in a deep reverie in which the mysterious destiny of the lunar world was uppermost. He was seeking to combine together the facts observed up to that time, when a new incident recalled him briskly to reality. This incident was more than a cosmical phenomenon; it was a threatened danger, the consequence of which might be disastrous in the extreme.

Suddenly, in the midst of the ether, in the profound darkness, an enormous mass appeared. It was like a moon, but an incandescent moon whose brilliancy was all the more intolerable as it cut sharply on the frightful darkness of space. This mass, of a circular form, threw a light which filled the projectile. The forms of Barbicane, Nicholl, and Michel Ardan, bathed in its white sheets, assumed that livid spectral appearance which physicians produce with the fictitious light of alcohol impregnated with salt.

“By Jove!” cried Michel Ardan, “we are hideous. What is that ill-conditioned moon?”

“A meteor,” replied Barbicane.

“A meteor burning in space?”

“Yes.”

This shooting globe suddenly appearing in shadow at a distance of at most 200 miles, ought, according to Barbicane, to have a diameter of 2,000 yards. It advanced at a speed of about one mile and a half per second. It cut the projectile’s path and must reach it in some minutes. As it approached it grew to enormous proportions.

Imagine, if possible, the situation of the travelers! It is impossible to describe it. In spite of their courage, their sang-froid, their carelessness of danger, they were mute, motionless with stiffened limbs, a prey to frightful terror. Their projectile, the course of which they could not alter, was rushing straight on this ignited mass, more intense than the open mouth of an oven. It seemed as though they were being precipitated toward an abyss of fire.

Barbicane had seized the hands of his two companions, and all three looked through their half-open eyelids upon that asteroid heated to a white heat. If thought was not destroyed within them, if their brains still worked amid all this awe, they must have given themselves up for lost.

Two minutes after the sudden appearance of the meteor (to them two centuries of anguish) the projectile seemed almost about to strike it, when the globe of fire burst like a bomb, but without making any noise in that void where sound, which is but the agitation of the layers of air, could not be generated.

Nicholl uttered a cry, and he and his companions rushed to the scuttle. What a sight! What pen can describe it? What palette is rich enough in colors to reproduce so magnificent a spectacle?

It was like the opening of a crater, like the scattering of an immense conflagration. Thousands of luminous fragments lit up and irradiated space with their fires. Every size, every color, was there intermingled. There were rays of yellow and pale yellow, red, green, gray — a crown of fireworks of all colors. Of the enormous and much-dreaded globe there remained nothing but these fragments carried in all directions, now become asteroids in their turn, some flaming like a sword, some surrounded by a whitish cloud, and others leaving behind them trains of brilliant cosmical dust.

These incandescent blocks crossed and struck each other, scattering still smaller fragments, some of which struck the projectile. Its left scuttle was even cracked by a violent shock. It seemed to be floating amid a hail of howitzer shells, the smallest of which might destroy it instantly.

The light which saturated the ether was so wonderfully intense, that Michel, drawing Barbicane and Nicholl to his window, exclaimed, “The invisible moon, visible at last!”

And through a luminous emanation, which lasted some seconds, the whole three caught a glimpse of that mysterious disc which the eye of man now saw for the first time. What could they distinguish at a distance which they could not estimate? Some lengthened bands along the disc, real clouds formed in the midst of a very confined atmosphere, from which emerged not only all the mountains, but also projections of less importance; its circles, its yawning craters, as capriciously placed as on the visible surface. Then immense spaces, no longer arid plains, but real seas, oceans, widely distributed, reflecting on their liquid surface all the dazzling magic of the fires of space; and, lastly, on the surface of the continents, large dark masses, looking like immense forests under the rapid illumination of a brilliance.

Was it an illusion, a mistake, an optical illusion? Could they give a scientific assent to an observation so superficially obtained? Dared they pronounce upon the question of its habitability after so slight a glimpse of the invisible disc?

But the lightnings in space subsided by degrees; its accidental brilliancy died away; the asteroids dispersed in different directions and were extinguished in the distance.

The ether returned to its accustomed darkness; the stars, eclipsed for a moment, again twinkled in the firmament, and the disc, so hastily discerned, was again buried in impenetrable night.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE

The projectile had just escaped a terrible danger, and a very unforseen one. Who would have thought of such an encounter with meteors? These erring bodies might create serious perils for the travelers. They were to them so many sandbanks upon that sea of ether which, less fortunate than sailors, they could not escape. But did these adventurers complain of space? No, not since nature had given them the splendid sight of a cosmical meteor bursting from expansion, since this inimitable firework, which no Ruggieri could imitate, had lit up for some seconds the invisible glory of the moon. In that flash, continents, seas, and forests had become visible to them. Did an atmosphere, then, bring to this unknown face its life-giving atoms? Questions still insoluble, and forever closed against human curiousity!

It was then half-past three in the afternoon. The projectile was following its curvilinear direction round the moon. Had its course again been altered by the meteor? It was to be feared so. But the projectile must describe a curve unalterably determined by the laws of mechanical reasoning. Barbicane was inclined to believe that this curve would be rather a parabola than a hyperbola. But admitting the parabola, the projectile must quickly have passed through the cone of shadow projected into space opposite the sun. This cone, indeed, is very narrow, the angular diameter of the moon being so little when compared with the diameter of the orb of day; and up to this time the projectile had been floating in this deep shadow. Whatever had been its speed (and it could not have been insignificant), its period of occultation continued. That was evident, but perhaps that would not have been the case in a supposedly rigidly parabolical trajectory — a new problem which tormented Barbicane’s brain, imprisoned as he was in a circle of unknowns which he could not unravel.

Neither of the travelers thought of taking an instant’s repose. Each one watched for an unexpected fact, which might throw some new light on their uranographic studies. About five o’clock, Michel Ardan distributed, under the name of dinner, some pieces of bread and cold meat, which were quickly swallowed without either of them abandoning their scuttle, the glass of which was incessantly encrusted by the condensation of vapor.

About forty-five minutes past five in the evening, Nicholl, armed with his glass, sighted toward the southern border of the moon, and in the direction followed by the projectile, some bright points cut upon the dark shield of the sky. They looked like a succession of sharp points lengthened into a tremulous line. They were very bright. Such appeared the terminal line of the moon when in one of her octants.

They could not be mistaken. It was no longer a simple meteor. This luminous ridge had neither color nor motion. Nor was it a volcano in eruption. And Barbicane did not hesitate to pronounce upon it.

“The sun!” he exclaimed.

“What! the sun?” answered Nicholl and Michel Ardan.

“Yes, my friends, it is the radiant orb itself lighting up the summit of the mountains situated on the southern borders of the moon. We are evidently nearing the south pole.”

“After having passed the north pole,” replied Michel. “We have made the circuit of our satellite, then?”

“Yes, my good Michel.”

“Then, no more hyperbolas, no more parabolas, no more open curves to fear?”

“No, but a closed curve.”

“Which is called — — ”

“An ellipse. Instead of losing itself in interplanetary space, it is probable that the projectile will describe an elliptical orbit around the moon.”

“Indeed!”

“And that it will become her satellite.”

“Moon of the moon!” cried Michel Ardan.

“Only, I would have you observe, my worthy friend,” replied

Barbicane, “that we are none the less lost for that.”

“Yes, in another manner, and much more pleasantly,” answered the careless Frenchman with his most amiable smile.

CHAPTER XVII

TYCHO

At six in the evening the projectile passed the south pole at less than forty miles off, a distance equal to that already reached at the north pole. The elliptical curve was being rigidly carried out.

At this moment the travelers once more entered the blessed rays of the sun. They saw once more those stars which move slowly from east to west. The radiant orb was saluted by a triple hurrah. With its light it also sent heat, which soon pierced the metal walls. The glass resumed its accustomed appearance. The layers of ice melted as if by enchantment; and immediately, for economy's sake, the gas was put out, the air apparatus alone consuming its usual quantity.

“Ah!” said Nicholl, “these rays of heat are good. With what impatience must the Selenites wait the reappearance of the orb of day.”

“Yes,” replied Michel Ardan, “imbibing as it were the brilliant ether, light and heat, all life is contained in them.”

At this moment the bottom of the projectile deviated somewhat from the lunar surface, in order to follow the slightly lengthened elliptical orbit. From this point, had the earth been at the full, Barbicane and his companions could have seen it, but immersed in the sun's irradiation she was quite invisible. Another spectacle attracted their attention, that of the southern part of the moon, brought by the glasses to within 450 yards. They did not again leave the scuttles, and noted every detail of this fantastical continent.

Mounts Doerful and Leibnitz formed two separate groups very near the south pole. The first group extended from the pole to the eighty-fourth parallel, on the eastern part of the orb; the second occupied the eastern border, extending from the 65@ of latitude to the pole.

On their capriciously formed ridge appeared dazzling sheets, as mentioned by Pere Secchi. With more certainty than the illustrious Roman astronomer, Barbicane was enabled to recognize their nature.

“They are snow,” he exclaimed.

“Snow?” repeated Nicholl.

“Yes, Nicholl, snow; the surface of which is deeply frozen. See how they reflect the luminous rays. Cooled lava would never give out such intense reflection. There must then be water, there must be air on the moon. As little as you please, but the fact can no longer be contested.” No, it could not be. And if ever Barbicane should see the earth again, his notes will bear witness to this great fact in his selenographic observations.

These mountains of Doerful and Leibnitz rose in the midst of plains of a medium extent, which were bounded by an indefinite succession of circles and annular ramparts. These two chains are the only ones met with in this region of circles. Comparatively but slightly marked, they throw up here and there some sharp points, the highest summit of which attains an altitude of 24,600 feet.

But the projectile was high above all this landscape, and the projections disappeared in the intense brilliancy of the disc. And to the eyes of the travelers there reappeared that original aspect of the lunar landscapes, raw in tone, without gradation of colors, and without degrees of shadow, roughly black and white, from the want of diffusion of light.

But the sight of this desolate world did not fail to captivate them by its very strangeness. They were moving over this region as if they had been borne on the breath of some storm, watching heights defile under their feet, piercing the cavities with their eyes, going down into the rifts, climbing the ramparts, sounding these mysterious holes, and leveling all cracks. But no trace of vegetation, no appearance of cities; nothing but stratification, beds of lava, overflowings polished like immense mirrors, reflecting the sun's rays with overpowering brilliancy. Nothing belonging to a living world — everything to a dead world, where avalanches, rolling from the summits of the mountains, would disperse noiselessly at the bottom of the abyss, retaining the motion, but wanting the sound. In any case it was the image of death, without its being possible even to say that life had ever existed there.

Michel Ardan, however, thought he recognized a heap of ruins, to which he drew Barbicane's attention. It was about the 80th parallel, in 30@ longitude. This heap of stones, rather regularly placed, represented a vast fortress, overlooking a long rift, which in former days had served as a bed to the rivers of prehistorical times. Not far from that, rose to a height of 17,400 feet the annular mountain of Short, equal to the Asiatic Caucasus. Michel Ardan, with his accustomed ardor, maintained "the evidences" of his fortress. Beneath it he discerned the dismantled ramparts of a town; here the still intact arch of a portico, there two or three columns lying under their base; farther on, a succession of arches which must have supported the conduit of an aqueduct; in another part the sunken pillars of a gigantic bridge, run into the thickest parts of the rift. He distinguished all this, but with so much imagination in his glance, and through glasses so fantastical, that we must mistrust his observation. But who could affirm, who would dare to say, that the amiable fellow did not really see that which his two companions would not see?

Moments were too precious to be sacrificed in idle discussion. The selenite city, whether imaginary or not, had already disappeared afar off. The distance of the projectile from the lunar disc was on the increase, and the details of the soil were being lost in a confused jumble. The reliefs, the circles, the craters, and the plains alone remained, and still showed their boundary lines distinctly. At this moment, to the left, lay extended one of the finest circles of lunar orography, one of the curiosities of this continent. It was Newton, which Barbicane recognized without trouble, by referring to the Mappa Selenographica.

Newton is situated in exactly 77@ south latitude, and 16@ east longitude. It forms an annular crater, the ramparts of which, rising to a height of 21,300 feet, seemed to be impassable.

Barbicane made his companions observe that the height of this mountain above the surrounding plain was far from equaling the depth of its crater. This enormous hole was beyond all measurement, and formed a gloomy abyss, the bottom of which the sun's rays could never reach. There, according to Humboldt, reigns utter darkness, which the light of the sun and the earth cannot break. Mythologists could well have made it the mouth of hell.

“Newton,” said Barbicane, “is the most perfect type of these annular mountains, of which the earth possesses no sample. They prove that the moon's formation, by means of cooling, is due to violent causes; for while, under the pressure of internal fires the reliefs rise to considerable height, the depths withdraw far below the lunar level.”

“I do not dispute the fact,” replied Michel Ardan.

Some minutes after passing Newton, the projectile directly overlooked the annular mountains of Moret. It skirted at some distance the summits of Blancanus, and at about half-past seven in the evening reached the circle of Clavius.

This circle, one of the most remarkable of the disc, is situated in 58@ south latitude, and 15@ east longitude. Its height is estimated at 22,950 feet. The travelers, at a distance of twenty-four miles (reduced to four by their glasses) could admire this vast crater in its entirety.

“Terrestrial volcanoes,” said Barbicane, “are but mole-hills compared with those of the moon. Measuring the old craters formed by the first eruptions of Vesuvius and Etna, we find them little more than three miles in breadth. In France the circle of Cantal measures six miles across; at Ceyland the circle of the island is forty miles, which is considered the largest on the globe. What are these diameters against that of Clavius, which we overlook at this moment?”

“What is its breadth?” asked Nicholl.

“It is 150 miles,” replied Barbicane. “This circle is certainly the most important on the moon, but many others measure 150, 100, or 75 miles.”

“Ah! my friends,” exclaimed Michel, “can you picture to yourselves what this now peaceful orb of night must have been when its craters, filled with thunderings, vomited at the same time smoke and tongues of flame. What a wonderful spectacle then, and now what decay! This moon is nothing more than a thin carcase of fireworks, whose squibs, rockets, serpents, and suns, after a superb brilliancy, have left but sadly broken cases. Who can say the cause, the reason, the motive force of these cataclysms?”

Barbicane was not listening to Michel Ardan; he was contemplating these ramparts of Clavius, formed by large mountains spread over several miles. At the bottom of the immense cavity burrowed hundreds of small extinguished craters, riddling the soil like a colander, and overlooked by a peak 15,000 feet high.

Around the plain appeared desolate. Nothing so arid as these reliefs, nothing so sad as these ruins of mountains, and (if we may so express ourselves) these fragments of peaks and mountains which strewed the soil. The satellite seemed to have burst at this spot.

The projectile was still advancing, and this movement did not subside. Circles, craters, and uprooted mountains succeeded each other incessantly. No more plains; no more seas. A never ending Switzerland and Norway. And lastly, in the canter of this region of crevasses, the most splendid mountain on the lunar disc, the dazzling Tycho, in which posterity will ever preserve the name of the illustrious Danish astronomer.

In observing the full moon in a cloudless sky no one has failed to remark this brilliant point of the southern hemisphere. Michel Ardan used every metaphor that his imagination could supply to designate it by. To him this Tycho was a focus of light, a center of irradiation, a crater vomiting rays. It was the tire of a brilliant wheel, an asteria enclosing the disc with its silver tentacles, an enormous eye filled with flames, a glory carved for Pluto’s head, a star launched by the Creator’s hand, and crushed against the face of the moon!

Tycho forms such a concentration of light that the inhabitants of the earth can see it without glasses, though at a distance of 240,000 miles! Imagine, then, its intensity to the eye of observers placed at a distance of only fifty miles! Seen through this pure ether, its brilliancy was so intolerable that Barbicane and his friends were obliged to blacken their glasses with the gas smoke before they could bear the splendor. Then silent, scarcely uttering an interjection of admiration, they gazed, they contemplated. All their feelings, all their impressions, were concentrated in that look, as under any violent emotion all life is concentrated at the heart.

Tycho belongs to the system of radiating mountains, like Aristarchus and Copernicus; but it is of all the most complete and decided, showing unquestionably the frightful volcanic action to which the formation of the moon is due. Tycho is situated in 43@ south latitude, and 12@ east longitude. Its center is occupied by a crater fifty miles broad. It assumes a slightly elliptical form, and is surrounded by an enclosure of annular ramparts, which on the east and west overlook the outer plain from a height of 15,000 feet. It is a group of Mont Blancs, placed round one common center and crowned by radiating beams.

What this incomparable mountain really is, with all the projections converging toward it, and the interior excrescences of its crater, photography itself could never represent. Indeed, it is during the full moon that Tycho is seen in all its splendor. Then all shadows disappear, the foreshortening of perspective disappears, and all proofs become white — a disagreeable fact: for this strange region would have been marvelous if reproduced with photographic exactness. It is but a group of hollows, craters, circles, a network of crests; then, as far as the eye could see, a whole volcanic network cast upon this encrusted soil. One can then understand that the bubbles of this central eruption have kept their first form. Crystallized by cooling, they have stereotyped that aspect which the moon formerly presented when under the Plutonian forces.

The distance which separated the travelers from the annular summits of Tycho was not so great but that they could catch the principal details. Even on the causeway forming the fortifications of Tycho, the mountains hanging on to the interior and exterior sloping flanks rose in stories like gigantic terraces. They appeared to be higher by 300 or 400 feet to the west than to the east. No system of terrestrial encampment could equal these natural fortifications. A town built at the bottom of this circular cavity would have been utterly inaccessible.

Inaccessible and wonderfully extended over this soil covered with picturesque projections! Indeed, nature had not left the bottom of this crater flat and empty. It possessed its own peculiar orography, a mountainous system, making it a world in itself. The travelers could distinguish clearly cones, central hills, remarkable positions of the soil, naturally placed to receive the chefs-d’oeuvre of Selenite architecture. There was marked out the place for a temple, here the ground of a forum, on this spot the plan of a palace, in another the plateau for a citadel; the whole overlooked by a central mountain of 1,500 feet. A vast circle, in which ancient Rome could have been held in its entirety ten times over.

“Ah!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, enthusiastic at the sight; “what a grand town might be constructed within that ring of mountains! A quiet city, a peaceful refuge, beyond all human misery. How calm and isolated those misanthropes, those haters of humanity might live there, and all who have a distaste for social life!”

“All! It would be too small for them,” replied Barbicane simply.

CHAPTER XVIII

GRAVE QUESTIONS

But the projectile had passed the enceinte of Tycho, and Barbicane and his two companions watched with scrupulous attention the brilliant rays which the celebrated mountain shed so curiously over the horizon.

What was this radiant glory? What geological phenomenon had designed these ardent beams? This question occupied Barbicane’s mind.

Under his eyes ran in all directions luminous furrows, raised at the edges and concave in the center, some twelve miles, others thirty miles broad. These brilliant trains extended in some places to within 600 miles of Tycho, and seemed to cover, particularly toward the east, the northeast and the north, the half of the southern hemisphere. One of these jets extended as far as the circle of Neander, situated on the 40th meridian. Another, by a slight curve, furrowed the “Sea of Nectar,” breaking against the chain of Pyrenees, after a circuit of 800 miles. Others, toward the west, covered the “Sea of Clouds” and the “Sea of Humors” with a luminous network. What was the origin of these sparkling rays, which shone on the plains as well as on the reliefs, at whatever height they might be? All started from a common center, the crater of Tycho. They sprang from him. Herschel attributed their brilliancy to currents of lava congealed by the cold; an opinion, however, which has not been generally adopted. Other astronomers have seen in these inexplicable rays a kind of moraines, rows of erratic blocks, which had been thrown up at the period of Tycho’s formation.

“And why not?” asked Nicholl of Barbicane, who was relating and rejecting these different opinions.

“Because the regularity of these luminous lines, and the violence necessary to carry volcanic matter to such distances, is inexplicable.”

“Eh! by Jove!” replied Michel Ardan, “it seems easy enough to me to explain the origin of these rays.”

“Indeed?” said Barbicane.

“Indeed,” continued Michel. “It is enough to say that it is a vast star, similar to that produced by a ball or a stone thrown at a square of glass!”

“Well!” replied Barbicane, smiling. “And what hand would be powerful enough to throw a ball to give such a shock as that?”

“The hand is not necessary,” answered Nicholl, not at all confounded; “and as to the stone, let us suppose it to be a comet.”

“Ah! those much-abused comets!” exclaimed Barbicane. “My brave Michel, your explanation is not bad; but your comet is useless. The shock which produced that rent must have some from the inside of the star. A violent contraction of the lunar crust, while cooling, might suffice to imprint this gigantic star.”

“A contraction! something like a lunar stomach-ache.” said

Michel Ardan.

“Besides,” added Barbicane, “this opinion is that of an English savant, Nasmyth, and it seems to me to sufficiently explain the radiation of these mountains.”

“That Nasmyth was no fool!” replied Michel.

Long did the travelers, whom such a sight could never weary, admire the splendors of Tycho. Their projectile, saturated with luminous gleams in the double irradiation of sun and moon, must have appeared like an incandescent globe. They had passed suddenly from excessive cold to intense heat. Nature was thus preparing them to become Selenites. Become Selenites! That idea brought up once more the question of the habitability of the moon. After what they had seen, could the travelers solve it? Would they decide for or against it? Michel Ardan persuaded his two friends to form an opinion, and asked them directly if they thought that men and animals were represented in the lunar world.

“I think that we can answer,” said Barbicane; “but according to my idea the question ought not to be put in that form. I ask it to be put differently.”

“Put it your own way,” replied Michel.

“Here it is,” continued Barbicane. “The problem is a double one, and requires a double solution. Is the moon habitable? Has the moon ever been inhabitable?”

“Good!” replied Nicholl. “First let us see whether the moon is habitable.”

“To tell the truth, I know nothing about it,” answered Michel.

“And I answer in the negative,” continued Barbicane. “In her actual state, with her surrounding atmosphere certainly very much reduced, her seas for the most part dried up, her insufficient supply of water restricted, vegetation, sudden alternations of cold and heat, her days and nights of 354 hours — the moon does not seem habitable to me, nor does she seem propitious to animal development, nor sufficient for the wants of existence as we understand it.”

“Agreed,” replied Nicholl. “But is not the moon habitable for creatures differently organized from ourselves?”

“That question is more difficult to answer, but I will try; and I ask Nicholl if motion appears to him to be a necessary result of life, whatever be its organization?”

“Without a doubt!” answered Nicholl.

“Then, my worthy companion, I would answer that we have observed the lunar continent at a distance of 500 yards at most, and that nothing seemed to us to move on the moon’s surface. The presence of any kind of life would have been betrayed by its attendant marks, such as divers buildings, and even by ruins. And what have we seen? Everywhere and always the geological works of nature, never the work of man. If, then, there exist representatives of the animal kingdom on the moon, they must have fled to those unfathomable cavities which the eye cannot reach; which I cannot admit, for they must have left traces of their passage on those plains which the atmosphere must cover, however slightly raised it may be. These traces are nowhere visible. There remains but one hypothesis, that of a living race to which motion, which is life, is foreign.”

“One might as well say, living creatures which do not live,” replied Michel.

“Just so,” said Barbicane, “which for us has no meaning.”

“Then we may form our opinion?” said Michel.

“Yes,” replied Nicholl.

“Very well,” continued Michel Ardan, “the Scientific Commission assembled in the projectile of the Gun Club, after having founded their argument on facts recently observed, decide unanimously upon the question of the habitability of the moon — `No! the moon is not habitable.'"

This decision was consigned by President Barbicane to his notebook, where the process of the sitting of the 6th of December may be seen.

"Now," said Nicholl, "let us attack the second question, an indispensable complement of the first. I ask the honorable commission, if the moon is not habitable, has she ever been inhabited, Citizen Barbicane?"

"My friends," replied Barbicane, "I did not undertake this journey in order to form an opinion on the past habitability of our satellite; but I will add that our personal observations only confirm me in this opinion. I believe, indeed I affirm, that the moon has been inhabited by a human race organized like our own; that she has produced animals anatomically formed like the terrestrial animals: but I add that these races, human and animal, have had their day, and are now forever extinct!"

"Then," asked Michel, "the moon must be older than the earth?"

"No!" said Barbicane decidedly, "but a world which has grown old quicker, and whose formation and deformation have been more rapid. Relatively, the organizing force of matter has been much more violent in the interior of the moon than in the interior of the terrestrial globe. The actual state of this cracked, twisted, and burst disc abundantly proves this. The moon and the earth were nothing but gaseous masses originally. These gases have passed into a liquid state under different influences, and the solid masses have been formed later. But most certainly our sphere was still gaseous or liquid, when the moon was solidified by cooling, and had become habitable."

"I believe it," said Nicholl.

“Then,” continued Barbicane, “an atmosphere surrounded it, the waters contained within this gaseous envelope could not evaporate. Under the influence of air, water, light, solar heat, and central heat, vegetation took possession of the continents prepared to receive it, and certainly life showed itself about this period, for nature does not expend herself in vain; and a world so wonderfully formed for habitation must necessarily be inhabited.”

“But,” said Nicholl, “many phenomena inherent in our satellite might cramp the expansion of the animal and vegetable kingdom. For example, its days and nights of 354 hours?”

“At the terrestrial poles they last six months,” said Michel.

“An argument of little value, since the poles are not inhabited.”

“Let us observe, my friends,” continued Barbicane, “that if in the actual state of the moon its long nights and long days created differences of temperature insupportable to organization, it was not so at the historical period of time. The atmosphere enveloped the disc with a fluid mantle; vapor deposited itself in the shape of clouds; this natural screen tempered the ardor of the solar rays, and retained the nocturnal radiation. Light, like heat, can diffuse itself in the air; hence an equality between the influences which no longer exists, now that atmosphere has almost entirely disappeared. And now I am going to astonish you.”

“Astonish us?” said Michel Ardan.

“I firmly believe that at the period when the moon was inhabited, the nights and days did not last 354 hours!”

“And why?” asked Nicholl quickly.

"Because most probably then the rotary motion of the moon upon her axis was not equal to her revolution, an equality which presents each part of her disc during fifteen days to the action of the solar rays."

"Granted," replied Nicholl, "but why should not these two motions have been equal, as they are really so?"

"Because that equality has only been determined by terrestrial attraction. And who can say that this attraction was powerful enough to alter the motion of the moon at that period when the earth was still fluid?"

"Just so," replied Nicholl; "and who can say that the moon has always been a satellite of the earth?"

"And who can say," exclaimed Michel Ardan, "that the moon did not exist before the earth?"

Their imaginations carried them away into an indefinite field of hypothesis. Barbicane sought to restrain them.

"Those speculations are too high," said he; "problems utterly insoluble. Do not let us enter upon them. Let us only admit the insufficiency of the primordial attraction; and then by the inequality of the two motions of rotation and revolution, the days and nights could have succeeded each other on the moon as they succeed each other on the earth. Besides, even without these conditions, life was possible."

"And so," asked Michel Ardan, "humanity has disappeared from the moon?"

"Yes," replied Barbicane, "after having doubtless remained persistently for millions of centuries; by degrees the atmosphere becoming rarefied, the disc became uninhabitable, as the terrestrial globe will one day become by cooling.”

“By cooling?”

“Certainly,” replied Barbicane; “as the internal fires became extinguished, and the incandescent matter concentrated itself, the lunar crust cooled. By degrees the consequences of these phenomena showed themselves in the disappearance of organized beings, and by the disappearance of vegetation. Soon the atmosphere was rarefied, probably withdrawn by terrestrial attraction; then aerial departure of respirable air, and disappearance of water by means of evaporation. At this period the moon becoming uninhabitable, was no longer inhabited. It was a dead world, such as we see it to-day.”

“And you say that the same fate is in store for the earth?”

“Most probably.”

“But when?”

“When the cooling of its crust shall have made it uninhabitable.”

“And have they calculated the time which our unfortunate sphere will take to cool?”

“Certainly.”

“And you know these calculations?”

“Perfectly.”

“But speak, then, my clumsy savant,” exclaimed Michel Ardan, “for you make me boil with impatience!”

“Very well, my good Michel,” replied Barbicane quietly; “we know what diminution of temperature the earth undergoes in the lapse of a century. And according to certain calculations, this mean temperature will after a period of 400,000 years, be brought down to zero!”

“Four hundred thousand years!” exclaimed Michel. “Ah! I breathe again. Really I was frightened to hear you; I imagined that we had not more than 50,000 years to live.”

Barbicane and Nicholl could not help laughing at their companion’s uneasiness. Then Nicholl, who wished to end the discussion, put the second question, which had just been considered again.

“Has the moon been inhabited?” he asked.

The answer was unanimously in the affirmative. But during this discussion, fruitful in somewhat hazardous theories, the projectile was rapidly leaving the moon: the lineaments faded away from the travelers’ eyes, mountains were confused in the distance; and of all the wonderful, strange, and fantastical form of the earth’s satellite, there soon remained nothing but the imperishable remembrance.

CHAPTER XIX

A STRUGGLE AGAINST THE IMPOSSIBLE

For a long time Barbicane and his companions looked silently and sadly upon that world which they had only seen from a distance, as Moses saw the land of Canaan, and which they were leaving without a possibility of ever returning to it. The projectile’s position with regard to the moon had altered, and the base was now turned to the earth.

This change, which Barbicane verified, did not fail to surprise them. If the projectile was to gravitate round the satellite in an elliptical orbit, why was not its heaviest part turned toward it, as the moon turns hers to the earth? That was a difficult point.

In watching the course of the projectile they could see that on leaving the moon it followed a course analogous to that traced in approaching her. It was describing a very long ellipse, which would most likely extend to the point of equal attraction, where the influences of the earth and its satellite are neutralized.

Such was the conclusion which Barbicane very justly drew from facts already observed, a conviction which his two friends shared with him.

“And when arrived at this dead point, what will become of us?” asked Michel Ardan.

“We don’t know,” replied Barbicane.

“But one can draw some hypotheses, I suppose?”

“Two,” answered Barbicane; “either the projectile’s speed will be insufficient, and it will remain forever immovable on this line of double attraction — — ”

“I prefer the other hypothesis, whatever it may be,” interrupted Michel.

“Or,” continued Barbicane, “its speed will be sufficient, and it will continue its elliptical course, to gravitate forever around the orb of night.”

“A revolution not at all consoling,” said Michel, “to pass to the state of humble servants to a moon whom we are accustomed to look upon as our own handmaid. So that is the fate in store for us?”

Neither Barbicane nor Nicholl answered.

“You do not answer,” continued Michel impatiently.

“There is nothing to answer,” said Nicholl.

“Is there nothing to try?”

“No,” answered Barbicane. “Do you pretend to fight against the impossible?”

“Why not? Do one Frenchman and two Americans shrink from such a word?”

“But what would you do?”

“Subdue this motion which is bearing us away.”

“Subdue it?”

“Yes,” continued Michel, getting animated, “or else alter it, and employ it to the accomplishment of our own ends.”

“And how?”

“That is your affair. If artillerymen are not masters of their projectile they are not artillerymen. If the projectile is to command the gunner, we had better ram the gunner into the gun. My faith! fine savants! who do not know what is to become of us after inducing me — — ”

“Inducing you!” cried Barbicane and Nicholl. “Inducing you!

What do you mean by that?”

“No recrimination,” said Michel. “I do not complain, the trip has pleased me, and the projectile agrees with me; but let us do all that is humanly possible to do the fall somewhere, even if only on the moon.”

“We ask no better, my worthy Michel,” replied Barbicane, “but means fail us.”

“We cannot alter the motion of the projectile?”

“No.”

“Nor diminish its speed?”

“No.”

“Not even by lightening it, as they lighten an overloaded vessel?”

“What would you throw out?” said Nicholl. “We have no ballast on board; and indeed it seems to me that if lightened it would go much quicker.”

“Slower.”

“Quicker.”

“Neither slower nor quicker,” said Barbicane, wishing to make his two friends agree; “for we float is space, and must no longer consider specific weight.”

“Very well,” cried Michel Ardan in a decided voice; “then their remains but one thing to do.”

“What is it?” asked Nicholl.

“Breakfast,” answered the cool, audacious Frenchman, who always brought up this solution at the most difficult juncture.

In any case, if this operation had no influence on the projectile’s course, it could at least be tried without inconvenience, and even with success from a stomachic point of view. Certainly Michel had none but good ideas.

They breakfasted then at two in the morning; the hour mattered little. Michel served his usual repast, crowned by a glorious bottle drawn from his private cellar. If ideas did not crowd on their brains, we must despair of the Chambertin of 1853. The repast finished, observation began again. Around the projectile, at an invariable distance, were the objects which had been thrown out. Evidently, in its translatory motion round the moon, it had not passed through any atmosphere, for the specific weight of these different objects would have checked their relative speed.

On the side of the terrestrial sphere nothing was to be seen. The earth was but a day old, having been new the night before at twelve; and two days must elapse before its crescent, freed from the solar rays, would serve as a clock to the Selenites, as in its rotary movement each of its points after twenty-four hours repasses the same lunar meridian.

On the moon’s side the sight was different; the orb shone in all her splendor amid innumerable constellations, whose purity could not be troubled by her rays. On the disc, the plains were already returning to the dark tint which is seen from the earth. The other part of the nimbus remained brilliant, and in the midst of this general brilliancy Tycho shone prominently like a sun.

Barbicane had no means of estimating the projectile’s speed, but reasoning showed that it must uniformly decrease, according to the laws of mechanical reasoning. Having admitted that the projectile was describing an orbit around the moon, this orbit must necessarily be elliptical; science proves that it must be so. No motive body circulating round an attracting body fails in this law. Every orbit described in space is elliptical. And why should the projectile of the Gun Club escape this natural arrangement? In elliptical orbits, the attracting body always occupies one of the foci; so that at one moment the satellite is nearer, and at another farther from the orb around which it gravitates. When the earth is nearest the sun she is in her perihelion; and in her aphelion at the farthest point. Speaking of the moon, she is nearest to the earth in her perigee, and farthest from it in her apogee. To use analogous expressions, with which the astronomers’ language is enriched, if the projectile remains as a satellite of the moon, we must say that it is in its “aposelene” at its farthest point, and in its “periselene” at its nearest. In the latter case, the projectile would attain its maximum of speed; and in the former its minimum. It was evidently moving toward its aposelenitical point; and Barbicane had reason to think that its speed would decrease up to this point, and then increase by degrees as it neared the moon. This speed would even become nil, if this point joined that of equal attraction. Barbicane studied the consequences of these different situations, and thinking what inference he could draw from them, when he was roughly disturbed by a cry from Michel Ardan.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed, “I must admit we are down-right simpletons!”

“I do not say we are not,” replied Barbicane; “but why?”

“Because we have a very simple means of checking this speed which is bearing us from the moon, and we do not use it!”

“And what is the means?”

“To use the recoil contained in our rockets.”

“Done!” said Nicholl.

“We have not used this force yet,” said Barbicane, “it is true, but we will do so.”

“When?” asked Michel.

“When the time comes. Observe, my friends, that in the position occupied by the projectile, an oblique position with regard to the lunar disc, our rockets, in slightly altering its direction, might turn it from the moon instead of drawing it nearer?”

“Just so,” replied Michel.

“Let us wait, then. By some inexplicable influence, the projectile is turning its base toward the earth. It is probable that at the point of equal attraction, its conical cap will be directed rigidly toward the moon; at that moment we may hope that its speed will be nil; then will be the moment to act, and with the influence of our rockets we may perhaps provoke a fall directly on the surface of the lunar disc.”

“Bravo!” said Michel. “What we did not do, what we could not do on our first passage at the dead point, because the projectile was then endowed with too great a speed.”

“Very well reasoned,” said Nicholl.

“Let us wait patiently,” continued Barbicane. “Putting every chance on our side, and after having so much despaired, I may say I think we shall gain our end.”

This conclusion was a signal for Michel Ardan’s hips and hurrahs. And none of the audacious boobies remembered the question that they themselves had solved in the negative. No! the moon is not inhabited; no! the moon is probably not habitable. And yet they were going to try everything to reach her.

One single question remained to be solved. At what precise moment the projectile would reach the point of equal attraction, on which the travelers must play their last card. In order to calculate this to within a few seconds, Barbicane had only to refer to his notes, and to reckon the different heights taken on the lunar parallels. Thus the time necessary to travel over the distance between the dead point and the south pole would be equal to the distance separating the north pole from the dead point. The hours representing the time traveled over were carefully noted, and the calculation was easy. Barbicane found that this point would be reached at one in the morning on the night of the 7th-8th of December. So that, if nothing interfered with its course, it would reach the given point in twenty-two hours.

The rockets had primarily been placed to check the fall of the projectile upon the moon, and now they were going to employ them for a directly contrary purpose. In any case they were ready, and they had only to wait for the moment to set fire to them.

“Since there is nothing else to be done,” said Nicholl, “I make a proposition.”

“What is it?” asked Barbicane.

“I propose to go to sleep.”

“What a motion!” exclaimed Michel Ardan.

“It is forty hours since we closed our eyes,” said Nicholl.

“Some hours of sleep will restore our strength.”

“Never,” interrupted Michel.

“Well,” continued Nicholl, “every one to his taste; I shall go to sleep.” And stretching himself on the divan, he soon snored like a forty-eight pounder.

“That Nicholl has a good deal of sense,” said Barbicane; “presently I shall follow his example.” Some moments after his continued bass supported the captain’s baritone.

“Certainly,” said Michel Ardan, finding himself alone, “these practical people have sometimes most opportune ideas.”

And with his long legs stretched out, and his great arms folded under his head, Michel slept in his turn.

But this sleep could be neither peaceful nor lasting, the minds of these three men were too much occupied, and some hours after, about seven in the morning, all three were on foot at the same instant.

The projectile was still leaving the moon, and turning its conical part more and more toward her.

An explicable phenomenon, but one which happily served

Barbicane's ends.

Seventeen hours more, and the moment for action would have arrived.

The day seemed long. However bold the travelers might be, they were greatly impressed by the approach of that moment which would decide all — either precipitate their fall on to the moon, or forever chain them in an immutable orbit. They counted the hours as they passed too slow for their wish; Barbicane and Nicholl were obstinately plunged in their calculations, Michel going and coming between the narrow walls, and watching that impassive moon with a longing eye.

At times recollections of the earth crossed their minds. They saw once more their friends of the Gun Club, and the dearest of all, J. T. Maston. At that moment, the honorable secretary must be filling his post on the Rocky Mountains. If he could see the projectile through the glass of his gigantic telescope, what would he think? After seeing it disappear behind the moon's south pole, he would see them reappear by the north pole! They must therefore be a satellite of a satellite! Had J. T. Maston given this unexpected news to the world? Was this the denouement of this great enterprise?

But the day passed without incident. The terrestrial midnight arrived. The 8th of December was beginning. One hour more, and the point of equal attraction would be reached. What speed would then animate the projectile? They could not estimate it. But no error could vitiate Barbicane's calculations. At one in the morning this speed ought to be and would be nil.

Besides, another phenomenon would mark the projectile's stopping-point on the neutral line. At that spot the two attractions, lunar and terrestrial, would be annulled. Objects would "weigh" no more. This singular fact, which had surprised Barbicane and his companions so much in going, would be repeated on their return under the very same conditions. At this precise moment they must act.

Already the projectile's conical top was sensibly turned toward the lunar disc, presented in such a way as to utilize the whole of the recoil produced by the pressure of the rocket apparatus. The chances were in favor of the travelers. If its speed was utterly annulled on this dead point, a decided movement toward the moon would suffice, however slight, to determine its fall.

"Five minutes to one," said Nicholl.

"All is ready," replied Michel Ardan, directing a lighted match to the flame of the gas.

"Wait!" said Barbicane, holding his chronometer in his hand.

At that moment weight had no effect. The travelers felt in themselves the entire disappearance of it. They were very near the neutral point, if they did not touch it.

“One o’clock,” said Barbicane.

Michel Ardan applied the lighted match to a train in communication with the rockets. No detonation was heard in the inside, for there was no air. But, through the scuttles, Barbicane saw a prolonged smoke, the flames of which were immediately extinguished.

The projectile sustained a certain shock, which was sensibly felt in the interior.

The three friends looked and listened without speaking, and scarcely breathing. One might have heard the beating of their hearts amid this perfect silence.

“Are we falling?” asked Michel Ardan, at length.

“No,” said Nicholl, “since the bottom of the projectile is not turning to the lunar disc!”

At this moment, Barbicane, quitting his scuttle, turned to his two companions. He was frightfully pale, his forehead wrinkled, and his lips contracted.

“We are falling!” said he.

“Ah!” cried Michel Ardan, “on to the moon?”

“On to the earth!”

“The devil!” exclaimed Michel Ardan, adding philosophically, “well, when we came into this projectile we were very doubtful as to the ease with which we should get out of it!”

And now this fearful fall had begun. The speed retained had borne the projectile beyond the dead point. The explosion of the rockets could not divert its course. This speed in going had carried it over the neutral line, and in returning had done the same thing. The laws of physics condemned it to pass through every point which it had already gone through. It was a terrible fall, from a height of 160,000 miles, and no springs to break it. According to the laws of gunnery, the projectile must strike the earth with a speed equal to that with which it left the mouth of the Columbiad, a speed of 16,000 yards in the last second.

But to give some figures of comparison, it has been reckoned that an object thrown from the top of the towers of Notre Dame, the height of which is only 200 feet, will arrive on the pavement at a speed of 240 miles per hour. Here the projectile must strike the earth with a speed of 115,200 miles per hour.

“We are lost!” said Michel coolly.

“Very well! if we die,” answered Barbicane, with a sort of religious enthusiasm, “the results of our travels will be magnificently spread. It is His own secret that God will tell us! In the other life the soul will want to know nothing, either of machines or engines! It will be identified with eternal wisdom!”

“In fact,” interrupted Michel Ardan, “the whole of the other world may well console us for the loss of that inferior orb called the moon!”

Barbicane crossed his arms on his breast, with a motion of sublime resignation, saying at the same time:

“The will of heaven be done!”

CHAPTER XX

THE SOUNDINGS OF THE SUSQUEHANNA

Well, lieutenant, and our soundings?”

“I think, sir, that the operation is nearing its completion,” replied Lieutenant Bronsfield. “But who would have thought of finding such a depth so near in shore, and only 200 miles from the American coast?”

“Certainly, Bronsfield, there is a great depression,” said Captain Blomsberry. “In this spot there is a submarine valley worn by Humboldt’s current, which skirts the coast of America as far as the Straits of Magellan.”

“These great depths,” continued the lieutenant, “are not favorable for laying telegraphic cables. A level bottom, like that supporting the American cable between Valentia and Newfoundland, is much better.”

“I agree with you, Bronsfield. With your permission, lieutenant, where are we now?”

“Sir, at this moment we have 3,508 fathoms of line out, and the ball which draws the sounding lead has not yet touched the bottom; for if so, it would have come up of itself.”

“Brook’s apparatus is very ingenious,” said Captain Blomsberry; “it gives us very exact soundings.”

“Touch!” cried at this moment one of the men at the forewheel, who was superintending the operation.

The captain and the lieutenant mounted the quarterdeck.

“What depth have we?” asked the captain.

“Three thousand six hundred and twenty-seven fathoms,” replied the lieutenant, entering it in his notebook.

“Well, Bronsfield,” said the captain, “I will take down the result. Now haul in the sounding line. It will be the work of some hours. In that time the engineer can light the furnaces, and we shall be ready to start as soon as you have finished. It is ten o’clock, and with your permission, lieutenant, I will turn in.”

“Do so, sir; do so!” replied the lieutenant obligingly.

The captain of the Susquehanna, as brave a man as need be, and the humble servant of his officers, returned to his cabin, took a brandy-grog, which earned for the steward no end of praise, and turned in, not without having complimented his servant upon his making beds, and slept a peaceful sleep.

It was then ten at night. The eleventh day of the month of

December was drawing to a close in a magnificent night.

The Susquehanna, a corvette of 500 horse-power, of the United

States navy, was occupied in taking soundings in the Pacific

Ocean about 200 miles off the American coast, following that

long peninsula which stretches down the coast of Mexico.

The wind had dropped by degrees. There was no disturbance in the air. The pennant hung motionless from the maintop-gallant- mast truck.

Captain Jonathan Blomsberry (cousin-german of Colonel Blomsberry, one of the most ardent supporters of the Gun Club, who had married an aunt of the captain and daughter of an honorable Kentucky merchant) — Captain Blomsberry could not have wished for finer weather in which to bring to a close his delicate operations of sounding. His corvette had not even felt the great tempest, which by sweeping away the groups of clouds on the Rocky Mountains, had allowed them to observe the course of the famous projectile.

Everything went well, and with all the fervor of a Presbyterian, he did not forget to thank heaven for it. The series of soundings taken by the Susquehanna, had for its aim the finding of a favorable spot for the laying of a submarine cable to connect the Hawaiian Islands with the coast of America.

It was a great undertaking, due to the instigation of a powerful company. Its managing director, the intelligent Cyrus Field, purposed even covering all the islands of Oceanica with a vast electrical network, an immense enterprise, and one worthy of American genius.

To the corvette Susquehanna had been confided the first operations of sounding. It was on the night of the 11th-12th of December, she was in exactly 27@ 7’ north latitude, and 41@ 37’ west longitude, on the meridian of Washington.

The moon, then in her last quarter, was beginning to rise above the horizon.

After the departure of Captain Blomsberry, the lieutenant and some officers were standing together on the poop. On the appearance of the moon, their thoughts turned to that orb which the eyes of a whole hemisphere were contemplating. The best naval glasses could not have discovered the projectile wandering around its hemisphere, and yet all were pointed toward that brilliant disc which millions of eyes were looking at at the same moment.

“They have been gone ten days,” said Lieutenant Bronsfield at last. “What has become of them?”

“They have arrived, lieutenant,” exclaimed a young midshipman, “and they are doing what all travelers do when they arrive in a new country, taking a walk!”

“Oh! I am sure of that, if you tell me so, my young friend,” said Lieutenant Bronsfield, smiling.

“But,” continued another officer, “their arrival cannot be doubted. The projectile was to reach the moon when full on the 5th at midnight. We are now at the 11th of December, which makes six days. And in six times twenty-four hours, without darkness, one would have time to settle comfortably. I fancy I see my brave countrymen encamped at the bottom of some valley, on the borders of a Selenite stream, near a projectile half-buried by its fall amid volcanic rubbish, Captain Nicholl beginning his leveling operations, President Barbicane writing out his notes, and Michel Ardan embalming the lunar solitudes with the perfume of his — — ”

“Yes! it must be so, it is so!” exclaimed the young midshipman, worked up to a pitch of enthusiasm by this ideal description of his superior officer.

“I should like to believe it,” replied the lieutenant, who was quite unmoved. “Unfortunately direct news from the lunar world is still wanting.”

“Beg pardon, lieutenant,” said the midshipman, “but cannot

President Barbicane write?”

A burst of laughter greeted this answer.

“No letters!” continued the young man quickly. “The postal administration has something to see to there.”

“Might it not be the telegraphic service that is at fault?” asked one of the officers ironically.

“Not necessarily,” replied the midshipman, not at all confused. “But it is very easy to set up a graphic communication with the earth.”

“And how?”

“By means of the telescope at Long’s Peak. You know it brings the moon to within four miles of the Rocky Mountains, and that it shows objects on its surface of only nine feet in diameter. Very well; let our industrious friends construct a giant alphabet; let them write words three fathoms long, and sentences three miles long, and then they can send us news of themselves.”

The young midshipman, who had a certain amount of imagination, was loudly applauded; Lieutenant Bronsfield allowing that the idea was possible, but observing that if by these means they could receive news from the lunar world they could not send any from the terrestrial, unless the Selenites had instruments fit for taking distant observations at their disposal.

“Evidently,” said one of the officers; “but what has become of the travelers? what they have done, what they have seen, that above all must interest us. Besides, if the experiment has succeeded (which I do not doubt), they will try it again. The Columbiad is still sunk in the soil of Florida. It is now only a question of powder and shot; and every time the moon is at her zenith a cargo of visitors may be sent to her."

"It is clear," replied Lieutenant Bronsfield, "that J. T. Maston will one day join his friends."

"If he will have me," cried the midshipman, "I am ready!"

"Oh! volunteers will not be wanting," answered Bronsfield; "and if it were allowed, half of the earth's inhabitants would emigrate to the moon!"

This conversation between the officers of the Susquehanna was kept up until nearly one in the morning. We cannot say what blundering systems were broached, what inconsistent theories advanced by these bold spirits. Since Barbicane's attempt, nothing seemed impossible to the Americans. They had already designed an expedition, not only of savants, but of a whole colony toward the Selenite borders, and a complete army, consisting of infantry, artillery, and cavalry, to conquer the lunar world.

At one in the morning, the hauling in of the sounding-line was not yet completed; 1,670 fathoms were still out, which would entail some hours' work. According to the commander's orders, the fires had been lighted, and steam was being got up. The Susquehanna could have started that very instant.

At that moment (it was seventeen minutes past one in the morning) Lieutenant Bronsfield was preparing to leave the watch and return to his cabin, when his attention was attracted by a distant hissing noise. His comrades and himself first thought that this hissing was caused by the letting off of steam; but lifting their heads, they found that the noise was produced in the highest regions of the air. They had not time to question each other before the hissing became frightfully intense, and suddenly there appeared to their dazzled eyes an enormous meteor, ignited by the rapidity of its course and its friction through the atmospheric strata.

This fiery mass grew larger to their eyes, and fell, with the noise of thunder, upon the bowsprit, which it smashed close to the stem, and buried itself in the waves with a deafening roar!

A few feet nearer, and the Susquehanna would have foundered with all on board!

At this instant Captain Blomsberry appeared, half-dressed, and rushing on to the forecastle-deck, whither all the officers had hurried, exclaimed, “With your permission, gentlemen, what has happened?”

And the midshipman, making himself as it were the echo of the body, cried, “Commander, it is `they’ come back again!”

CHAPTER XXI

J. T. MASTON RECALLED

“It is `they’ come back again!” the young midshipman had said, and every one had understood him. No one doubted but that the meteor was the projectile of the Gun Club. As to the travelers which it enclosed, opinions were divided regarding their fate.

“They are dead!” said one.

“They are alive!” said another; “the crater is deep, and the shock was deadened.”

“But they must have wanted air,” continued a third speaker; “they must have died of suffocation.”

“Burned!” replied a fourth; “the projectile was nothing but an incandescent mass as it crossed the atmosphere.”

“What does it matter!” they exclaimed unanimously; “living or dead, we must pull them out!”

But Captain Blomsberry had assembled his officers, and “with their permission,” was holding a council. They must decide upon something to be done immediately. The more hasty ones were for fishing up the projectile. A difficult operation, though not an impossible one. But the corvette had no proper machinery, which must be both fixed and powerful; so it was resolved that they should put in at the nearest port, and give information to the Gun Club of the projectile’s fall.

This determination was unanimous. The choice of the port had to be discussed. The neighboring coast had no anchorage on 27@ latitude. Higher up, above the peninsula of Monterey, stands the important town from which it takes its name; but, seated on the borders of a perfect desert, it was not connected with the interior by a network of telegraphic wires, and electricity alone could spread these important news fast enough.

Some degrees above opened the bay of San Francisco. Through the capital of the gold country communication would be easy with the heart of the Union. And in less than two days the Susquehanna, by putting on high pressure, could arrive in that port. She must therefore start at once.

The fires were made up; they could set off immediately.

Two thousand fathoms of line were still out, which Captain

Blomsberry, not wishing to lose precious time in hauling in,

resolved to cut.

“we will fasten the end to a buoy,” said he, “and that buoy will show us the exact spot where the projectile fell.”

“Besides,” replied Lieutenant Bronsfield, “we have our situation exact — 27@ 7’ north latitude and 41@ 37’ west longitude.”

“Well, Mr. Bronsfield,” replied the captain, “now, with your permission, we will have the line cut.”

A strong buoy, strengthened by a couple of spars, was thrown into the ocean. The end of the rope was carefully lashed to it; and, left solely to the rise and fall of the billows, the buoy would not sensibly deviate from the spot.

At this moment the engineer sent to inform the captain that steam was up and they could start, for which agreeable communication the captain thanked him. The course was then given north-northeast, and the corvette, wearing, steered at full steam direct for San Francisco. It was three in the morning.

Four hundred and fifty miles to cross; it was nothing for a good vessel like the Susquehanna. In thirty-six hours she had covered that distance; and on the 14th of December, at twenty-seven minutes past one at night, she entered the bay of San Francisco.

At the sight of a ship of the national navy arriving at full speed, with her bowsprit broken, public curiosity was greatly roused. A dense crowd soon assembled on the quay, waiting for them to disembark.

After casting anchor, Captain Blomsberry and Lieutenant Bronsfield entered an eight-pared cutter, which soon brought them to land.

They jumped on to the quay.

“The telegraph?” they asked, without answering one of the thousand questions addressed to them.

The officer of the port conducted them to the telegraph office through a concourse of spectators. Blomsberry and Bronsfield entered, while the crowd crushed each other at the door.

Some minutes later a fourfold telegram was sent out — the first to the Naval Secretary at Washington; the second to the vice-president of the Gun

Club, Baltimore; the third to the Hon. J. T. Maston, Long’s Peak, Rocky Mountains; and the fourth to the sub-director of the Cambridge Observatory, Massachusetts.

It was worded as follows:

In 20@ 7’ north latitude, and 41@ 37’ west longitude, on the 12th of December, at seventeen minutes past one in the morning, the projectile of the Columbiad fell into the Pacific. Send instructions. — BLOMSBERRY, Commander Susquehanna.

Five minutes afterward the whole town of San Francisco learned the news. Before six in the evening the different States of the Union had heard the great catastrophe; and after midnight, by the cable, the whole of Europe knew the result of the great American experiment. We will not attempt to picture the effect produced on the entire world by that unexpected denouement.

On receipt of the telegram the Naval Secretary telegraphed to the Susquehanna to wait in the bay of San Francisco without extinguishing her fires. Day and night she must be ready to put to sea.

The Cambridge observatory called a special meeting; and, with that composure which distinguishes learned bodies in general, peacefully discussed the scientific bearings of the question. At the Gun Club there was an explosion. All the gunners were assembled. Vice-President the Hon. Wilcome was in the act of reading the premature dispatch, in which J. T. Maston and Belfast announced that the projectile had just been seen in the gigantic reflector of Long’s Peak, and also that it was held by lunar attraction, and was playing the part of under satellite to the lunar world.

We know the truth on that point.

But on the arrival of Blomsberry's dispatch, so decidely contradicting J. T. Maston's telegram, two parties were formed in the bosom of the Gun Club. On one side were those who admitted the fall of the projectile, and consequently the return of the travelers; on the other, those who believed in the observations of Long's Peak, concluded that the commander of the Susquehanna had made a mistake. To the latter the pretended projectile was nothing but a meteor! nothing but a meteor, a shooting globe, which in its fall had smashed the bows of the corvette. It was difficult to answer this argument, for the speed with which it was animated must have made observation very difficult. The commander of the Susquehanna and her officers might have made a mistake in all good faith; one argument however, was in their favor, namely, that if the projectile had fallen on the earth, its place of meeting with the terrestrial globe could only take place on this 27@ north latitude, and (taking into consideration the time that had elapsed, and the rotary motion of the earth) between the 41@ and the 42@ of west longitude. In any case, it was decided in the Gun Club that Blomsberry brothers, Bilsby, and Major Elphinstone should go straight to San Francisco, and consult as to the means of raising the projectile from the depths of the ocean.

These devoted men set off at once; and the railroad, which will soon cross the whole of Central America, took them as far as St. Louis, where the swift mail-coaches awaited them. Almost at the same moment in which the Secretary of Marine, the vice-president of the Gun Club, and the sub-director of the Observatory received the dispatch from San Francisco, the Honorable J. T. Maston was undergoing the greatest excitement he had ever experienced in his life, an excitement which even the bursting of his pet gun, which had more than once nearly cost him his life, had not caused him.

We may remember that the secretary of the Gun Club had started soon after the projectile (and almost as quickly) for the station on Long’s Peak, in the Rocky Mountains, J. Belfast, director of the Cambridge Observatory, accompanying him. Arrived there, the two friends had installed themselves at once, never quitting the summit of their enormous telescope. We know that this gigantic instrument had been set up according to the reflecting system, called by the English “front view.” This arrangement subjected all objects to but one reflection, making the view consequently much clearer; the result was that, when they were taking observation, J. T. Maston and Belfast were placed in the upper part of the instrument and not in the lower, which they reached by a circular staircase, a masterpiece of lightness, while below them opened a metal well terminated by the metallic mirror, which measured two hundred and eighty feet in depth.

It was on a narrow platform placed above the telescope that the two savants passed their existence, execrating the day which hid the moon from their eyes, and the clouds which obstinately veiled her during the night.

What, then, was their delight when, after some days of waiting, on the night of the 5th of December, they saw the vehicle which was bearing their friends into space! To this delight succeeded a great deception, when, trusting to a cursory observation, they launched their first telegram to the world, erroneously affirming that the projectile had become a satellite of the moon, gravitating in an immutable orbit.

From that moment it had never shown itself to their eyes — a disappearance all the more easily explained, as it was then passing behind the moon’s invisible disc; but when it was time for it to reappear on the visible disc, one may imagine the impatience of the fuming J. T. Maston and his not less impatient companion. Each minute of the night they thought they saw the projectile once more, and they did not see it. Hence constant discussions and violent disputes between them, Belfast affirming that the projectile could not be seen, J. T. Maston maintaining that "it had put his eyes out."

"It is the projectile!" repeated J. T. Maston.

"No," answered Belfast; "it is an avalanche detached from a lunar mountain."

"Well, we shall see it to-morrow."

"No, we shall not see it any more. It is carried into space."

"Yes!"

"No!"

And at these moments, when contradictions rained like hail, the well-known irritability of the secretary of the Gun Club constituted a permanent danger for the Honorable Belfast. The existence of these two together would soon have become impossible; but an unforseen event cut short their everlasting discussions.

During the night, from the 14th to the 15th of December, the two irreconcilable friends were busy observing the lunar disc, J. T. Maston abusing the learned Belfast as usual, who was by his side; the secretary of the Gun Club maintaining for the thousandth time that he had just seen the projectile, and adding that he could see Michel Ardan's face looking through one of the scuttles, at the same time enforcing his argument by a series of gestures which his formidable hook rendered very unpleasant.

At this moment Belfast's servant appeared on the platform (it was ten at night) and gave him a dispatch. It was the commander of the Susquehanna's telegram.

Belfast tore the envelope and read, and uttered a cry.

"What!" said J. T. Maston.

"The projectile!"

"Well!"

"Has fallen to the earth!"

Another cry, this time a perfect howl, answered him. He turned toward J. T. Maston. The unfortunate man, imprudently leaning over the metal tube, had disappeared in the immense telescope. A fall of two hundred and eighty feet! Belfast, dismayed, rushed to the orifice of the reflector.

He breathed. J. T. Maston, caught by his metal hook, was holding on by one of the rings which bound the telescope together, uttering fearful cries.

Belfast called. Help was brought, tackle was let down, and they hoisted up, not without some trouble, the imprudent secretary of the Gun Club.

He reappeared at the upper orifice without hurt.

"Ah!" said he, "if I had broken the mirror?"

"You would have paid for it," replied Belfast severely.

"And that cursed projectile has fallen?" asked J. T. Maston.

“Into the Pacific!”

“Let us go!”

A quarter of an hour after the two savants were descending the declivity of the Rocky Mountains; and two days after, at the same time as their friends of the Gun Club, they arrived at San Francisco, having killed five horses on the road.

Elphinstone, the brothers Blomsberry, and Bilsby rushed toward them on their arrival.

“What shall we do?” they exclaimed.

“Fish up the projectile,” replied J. T. Maston, “and the sooner the better.”

CHAPTER XXII

RECOVERED FROM THE SEA

The spot where the projectile sank under the waves was exactly known; but the machinery to grasp it and bring it to the surface of the ocean was still wanting. It must first be invented, then made. American engineers could not be troubled with such trifles. The grappling-irons once fixed, by their help they were sure to raise it in spite of its weight, which was lessened by the density of the liquid in which it was plunged.

But fishing-up the projectile was not the only thing to be thought of. They must act promptly in the interest of the travelers. No one doubted that they were still living.

“Yes,” repeated J. T. Maston incessantly, whose confidence gained over everybody, “our friends are clever people, and they cannot have fallen like simpletons. They are alive, quite alive; but we must make haste if we wish to find them so. Food and water do not trouble me; they have enough for a long while. But air, air, that is what they will soon want; so quick, quick!”

And they did go quick. They fitted up the Susquehanna for her new destination. Her powerful machinery was brought to bear upon the hauling-chains. The aluminum projectile only weighed 19,250 pounds, a weight very inferior to that of the transatlantic cable which had been drawn up under similar conditions. The only difficulty was in fishing up a cylindro-conical projectile, the walls of which were so smooth as to offer no hold for the hooks. On that account Engineer Murchison hastened to San Francisco, and had some enormous grappling-irons fixed on an automatic system, which would never let the projectile go if it once succeeded in seizing it in its powerful claws. Diving-dresses were also prepared, which through this impervious covering allowed the divers to observe the bottom of the sea. He also had put on board an apparatus of compressed air very cleverly designed. There were perfect chambers pierced with scuttles, which, with water let into certain compartments, could draw it down into great depths. These apparatuses were at San Francisco, where they had been used in the construction of a submarine breakwater; and very fortunately it was so, for there was no time to construct any. But in spite of the perfection of the machinery, in spite of the ingenuity of the savants entrusted with the use of them, the success of the operation was far from being certain. How great were the chances against them, the projectile being 20,000 feet under the water! And if even it was brought to the surface, how would the travelers have borne the terrible shock which 20,000 feet of water had perhaps not sufficiently broken? At any rate they must act quickly. J. T. Maston hurried the workmen day and night. He was ready to don the diving-dress himself, or try the air apparatus, in order to reconnoiter the situation of his courageous friends.

But in spite of all the diligence displayed in preparing the different engines, in spite of the considerable sum placed at the disposal of the Gun Club by the Government of the Union, five long days (five centuries!) elapsed before the preparations were complete. During this time public opinion was excited to the highest pitch. Telegrams were exchanged incessantly throughout the entire world by means of wires and electric cables. The saving of Barbicane, Nicholl, and Michel Ardan was an international affair. Every one who had subscribed to the Gun Club was directly interested in the welfare of the travelers.

At length the hauling-chains, the air-chambers, and the automatic grappling-irons were put on board. J. T. Maston, Engineer Murchison, and the delegates of the Gun Club, were already in their cabins. They had but to start, which they did on the 21st of December, at eight o'clock at night, the corvette meeting with a beautiful sea, a northeasterly wind, and rather sharp cold. The whole population of San Francisco was gathered on the quay, greatly excited but silent, reserving their hurrahs for the return. Steam was fully up, and the screw of the Susquehanna carried them briskly out of the bay.

It is needless to relate the conversations on board between the officers, sailors, and passengers. All these men had but one thought. All these hearts beat under the same emotion. While they were hastening to help them, what were Barbicane and his companions doing? What had become of them? Were they able to attempt any bold maneuver to regain their liberty? None could say. The truth is that every attempt must have failed! Immersed nearly four miles under the ocean, this metal prison defied every effort of its prisoners.

On the 23rd inst. at eight in the morning, after a rapid passage, the Susquehanna was due at the fatal spot. They must wait till twelve to take the reckoning exactly. The buoy to which the sounding line had been lashed had not yet been recognized.

At twelve, Captain Blomsberry, assisted by his officers who superintended the observations, took the reckoning in the presence of the delegates of the Gun Club. Then there was a moment of anxiety. Her position decided, the Susquehanna was found to be some minutes westward of the spot where the projectile had disappeared beneath the waves.

The ship's course was then changed so as to reach this exact point.

At forty-seven minutes past twelve they reached the buoy; it was in perfect condition, and must have shifted but little.

“At last!” exclaimed J. T. Maston.

“Shall we begin?” asked Captain Blomsberry.

“Without losing a second.”

Every precaution was taken to keep the corvette almost completely motionless. Before trying to seize the projectile, Engineer Murchison wanted to find its exact position at the bottom of the ocean. The submarine apparatus destined for this expedition was supplied with air. The working of these engines was not without danger, for at 20,000 feet below the surface of the water, and under such great pressure, they were exposed to fracture, the consequences of which would be dreadful.

J. T. Maston, the brothers Blomsberry, and Engineer Murchison, without heeding these dangers, took their places in the air-chamber. The commander, posted on his bridge, superintended the operation, ready to stop or haul in the chains on the slightest signal. The screw had been shipped, and the whole power of the machinery collected on the capstan would have quickly drawn the apparatus on board. The descent began at twenty-five minutes past one at night, and the chamber, drawn under by the reservoirs full of water, disappeared from the surface of the ocean.

The emotion of the officers and sailors on board was now divided between the prisoners in the projectile and the prisoners in the submarine apparatus. As to the latter, they forgot themselves, and, glued to the windows of the scuttles, attentively watched the liquid mass through which they were passing.

The descent was rapid. At seventeen minutes past two, J. T. Maston and his companions had reached the bottom of the Pacific; but they saw nothing but an arid desert, no longer animated by either fauna or flora. By the light of their lamps, furnished with powerful reflectors, they could see the dark beds of the ocean for a considerable extent of view, but the projectile was nowhere to be seen.

The impatience of these bold divers cannot be described, and having an electrical communication with the corvette, they made a signal already agreed upon, and for the space of a mile the Susquehanna moved their chamber along some yards above the bottom.

Thus they explored the whole submarine plain, deceived at every turn by optical illusions which almost broke their hearts. Here a rock, there a projection from the ground, seemed to be the much-sought-for projectile; but their mistake was soon discovered, and then they were in despair.

“But where are they? where are they?” cried J. T. Maston. And the poor man called loudly upon Nicholl, Barbicane, and Michel Ardan, as if his unfortunate friends could either hear or answer him through such an impenetrable medium! The search continued under these conditions until the vitiated air compelled the divers to ascend.

The hauling in began about six in the evening, and was not ended before midnight.

“To-morrow,” said J. T. Maston, as he set foot on the bridge of the corvette.

“Yes,” answered Captain Blomsberry.

“And on another spot?”

“Yes.”

J. T. Maston did not doubt of their final success, but his companions, no longer upheld by the excitement of the first hours, understood all the difficulty of the enterprise. What seemed easy at San Francisco, seemed here in the wide ocean almost impossible. The chances of success diminished in rapid proportion; and it was from chance alone that the meeting with the projectile might be expected.

The next day, the 24th, in spite of the fatigue of the previous day, the operation was renewed. The corvette advanced some minutes to westward, and the apparatus, provided with air, bore the same explorers to the depths of the ocean.

The whole day passed in fruitless research; the bed of the sea was a desert. The 25th brought no other result, nor the 26th.

It was disheartening. They thought of those unfortunates shut up in the projectile for twenty-six days. Perhaps at that moment they were experiencing the first approach of suffocation; that is, if they had escaped the dangers of their fall. The air was spent, and doubtless with the air all their morale.

“The air, possibly,” answered J. T. Maston resolutely, “but their morale never!”

On the 28th, after two more days of search, all hope was gone.

This projectile was but an atom in the immensity of the ocean.

They must give up all idea of finding it.

But J. T. Maston would not hear of going away. He would not abandon the place without at least discovering the tomb of his friends. But Commander

Blomsberry could no longer persist, and in spite of the exclamations of the worthy secretary, was obliged to give the order to sail.

On the 29th of December, at nine A.M. the Susquehanna, heading northeast, resumed her course to the bay of San Francisco.

It was ten in the morning; the corvette was under half-steam, as it was regretting to leave the spot where the catastrophe had taken place, when a sailor, perched on the main-top-gallant crosstrees, watching the sea, cried suddenly:

“A buoy on the lee bow!”

The officers looked in the direction indicated, and by the help of their glasses saw that the object signalled had the appearance of one of those buoys which are used to mark the passages of bays or rivers. But, singularly to say, a flag floating on the wind surmounted its cone, which emerged five or six feet out of water. This buoy shone under the rays of the sun as if it had been made of plates of silver. Commander Blomsberry, J. T. Maston, and the delegates of the Gun Club were mounted on the bridge, examining this object straying at random on the waves.

All looked with feverish anxiety, but in silence. None dared give expression to the thoughts which came to the minds of all.

The corvette approached to within two cables’ lengths of the object.

A shudder ran through the whole crew. That flag was the

American flag!

At this moment a perfect howling was heard; it was the brave J. T. Maston who had just fallen all in a heap. Forgetting on the one hand that his right arm had been replaced by an iron hook, and on the other that a simple gutta-percha cap covered his brain-box, he had given himself a formidable blow.

They hurried toward him, picked him up, restored him to life.

And what were his first words?

“Ah! trebly brutes! quadruply idiots! quintuply boobies that we are!”

“What is it?” exclaimed everyone around him.

“What is it?”

“Come, speak!”

“It is, simpletons,” howled the terrible secretary, “it is that the projectile only weighs 19,250 pounds!”

“Well?”

“And that it displaces twenty-eight tons, or in other words 56,000 pounds, and that consequently it floats!”

Ah! what stress the worthy man had laid on the verb “float!” And it was true! All, yes! all these savants had forgotten this fundamental law, namely, that on account of its specific lightness, the projectile, after having been drawn by its fall to the greatest depths of the ocean, must naturally return to the surface. And now it was floating quietly at the mercy of the waves.

The boats were put to sea. J. T. Maston and his friends had rushed into them! Excitement was at its height! Every heart beat loudly while they advanced to the projectile. What did it contain? Living or dead?

Living, yes! living, at least unless death had struck

Barbicane and his two friends since they had hoisted the flag.

Profound silence reigned on the boats. All were breathless.

Eyes no longer saw. One of the scuttles of the projectile was open.

Some pieces of glass remained in the frame, showing that it had

been broken. This scuttle was actually five feet above the water.

A boat came alongside, that of J. T. Maston, and J. T. Maston rushed to the broken window.

At that moment they heard a clear and merry voice, the voice of

Michel Ardan, exclaiming in an accent of triumph:

“White all, Barbicane, white all!”

Barbicane, Michel Ardan, and Nicholl were playing at dominoes!

CHAPTER XXIII

THE END

We may remember the intense sympathy which had accompanied the travelers on their departure. If at the beginning of the enterprise they had excited such emotion both in the old and new world, with what enthusiasm would they be received on their return! The millions of spectators which had beset the peninsula of Florida, would they not rush to meet these sublime adventurers? Those legions of strangers, hurrying from all parts of the globe toward the American shores, would they leave the Union without having seen Barbicane, Nicholl, and Michel Ardan? No! and the ardent passion of the public was bound to respond worthily to the greatness of the enterprise. Human creatures who had left the terrestrial sphere, and returned after this strange voyage into celestial space, could not fail to be received as the prophet Elias would be if he came back to earth. To see them first, and then to hear them, such was the universal longing.

Barbicane, Michel Ardan, Nicholl, and the delegates of the Gun Club, returning without delay to Baltimore, were received with indescribable enthusiasm. The notes of President Barbicane’s voyage were ready to be given to the public. The New York Herald bought the manuscript at a price not yet known, but which must have been very high. Indeed, during the publication of “A Journey to the Moon,” the sale of this paper amounted to five millions of copies. Three days after the return of the travelers to the earth, the slightest detail of their expedition was known. There remained nothing more but to see the heroes of this superhuman enterprise.

The expedition of Barbicane and his friends round the moon had enabled them to correct the many admitted theories regarding the terrestrial satellite.

These savants had observed de visu, and under particular circumstances. They knew what systems should be rejected, what retained with regard to the formation of that orb, its origin, its habitability. Its past, present, and future had even given up their last secrets. Who could advance objections against conscientious observers, who at less than twenty-four miles distance had marked that curious mountain of Tycho, the strangest system of lunar orography? How answer those savants whose sight had penetrated the abyss of Pluto's circle? How contradict those bold ones whom the chances of their enterprise had borne over that invisible face of the disc, which no human eye until then had ever seen? It was now their turn to impose some limit on that selenographic science, which had reconstructed the lunar world as Cuvier did the skeleton of a fossil, and say, "The moon was this, a habitable world, inhabited before the earth. The moon is that, a world uninhabitable, and now uninhabited."

To celebrate the return of its most illustrious member and his two companions, the Gun Club decided upon giving a banquet, but a banquet worthy of the conquerors, worthy of the American people, and under such conditions that all the inhabitants of the Union could directly take part in it.

All the head lines of railroads in the States were joined by flying rails; and on all the platforms, lined with the same flags, and decorated with the same ornaments, were tables laid and all served alike. At certain hours, successively calculated, marked by electric clocks which beat the seconds at the same time, the population were invited to take their places at the banquet tables. For four days, from the 5th to the 9th of January, the trains were stopped as they are on Sundays on the railways of the United States, and every road was open. One engine only at full speed, drawing a triumphal carriage, had the right of traveling for those four days on the railroads of the United States.

The engine was manned by a driver and a stoker, and bore, by special favor, the Hon. J. T. Maston, secretary of the Gun Club. The carriage was reserved for President Barbicane, Colonel Nicholl, and Michel Ardan. At the whistle of the driver, amid the hurrahs, and all the admiring vociferations of the American language, the train left the platform of Baltimore. It traveled at a speed of one hundred and sixty miles in the hour. But what was this speed compared with that which had carried the three heroes from the mouth of the Columbiad?

Thus they sped from one town to the other, finding whole populations at table on their road, saluting them with the same acclamations, lavishing the same bravos! They traveled in this way through the east of the Union, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire; the north and west by New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin; returning to the south by Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and Louisiana; they went to the southeast by Alabama and Florida, going up by Georgia and the Carolinas, visiting the center by Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and Indiana, and, after quitting the Washington station, re-entered Baltimore, where for four days one would have thought that the United States of America were seated at one immense banquet, saluting them simultaneously with the same hurrahs! The apotheosis was worthy of these three heroes whom fable would have placed in the rank of demigods.

And now will this attempt, unprecedented in the annals of travels, lead to any practical result? Will direct communication with the moon ever be established? Will they ever lay the foundation of a traveling service through the solar world? Will they go from one planet to another, from Jupiter to Mercury, and after awhile from one star to another, from the Polar to Sirius? Will this means of locomotion allow us to visit those suns which swarm in the firmament?

To such questions no answer can be given. But knowing the bold ingenuity of the Anglo-Saxon race, no one would be astonished if the Americans seek to make some use of President Barbicane’s attempt.

Thus, some time after the return of the travelers, the public received with marked favor the announcement of a company, limited, with a capital of a hundred million of dollars, divided into a hundred thousand shares of a thousand dollars each, under the name of the “National Company of Interstellary Communication.” President, Barbicane; vice-president, Captain Nicholl; secretary, J. T. Maston; director of movements, Michel Ardan.

And as it is part of the American temperament to foresee everything in business, even failure, the Honorable Harry Trolloppe, judge commissioner, and Francis Drayton, magistrate, were nominated beforehand!

TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

Translated by Lewis Mercier

First published in 1870, this novel is one of Verne’s most famous works. It tells the story of Captain Nemo and his submarine Nautilus, from the perspective of Professor Pierre Aronnax. The title refers to the distance travelled under the sea and not to a depth, as is often misunderstood.

The narrative begins in 1866, when a mysterious sea monster is sighted and then an ocean liner is damaged by the mysterious creature. The United States government finally assembles an expedition in New York City to track down and destroy the menace. Professor Pierre Aronnax, a noted French marine biologist and narrator of the story, who happens to be in New York at the time and is a recognised expert in his field, is invited to join the expedition.

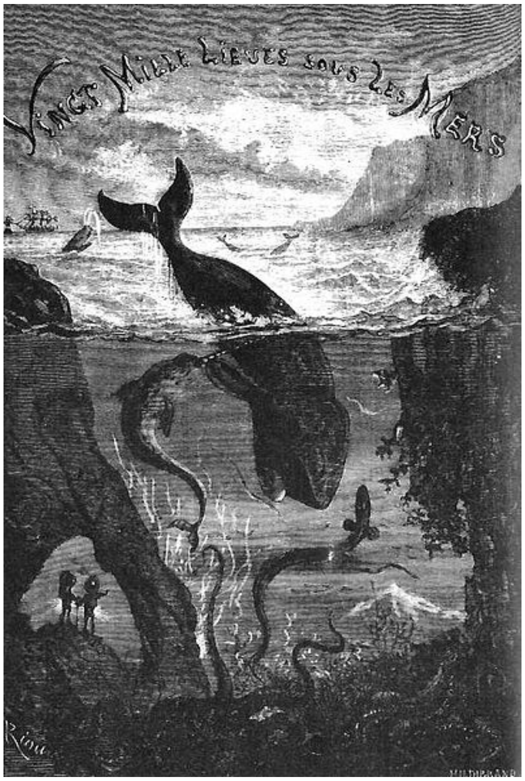
Vingt Mille Lieues sous les Mers
Riou
HILDIBRAND

The original frontispiece

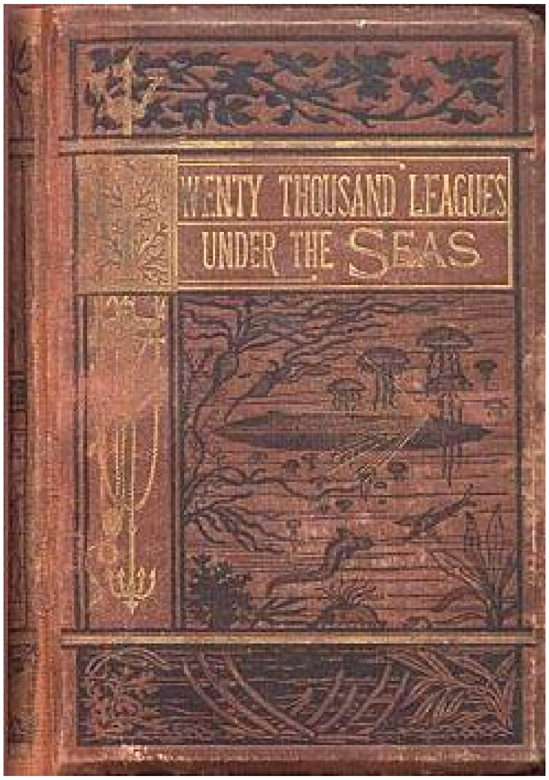
WENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES
UNDER THE SEAS

The first edition in English

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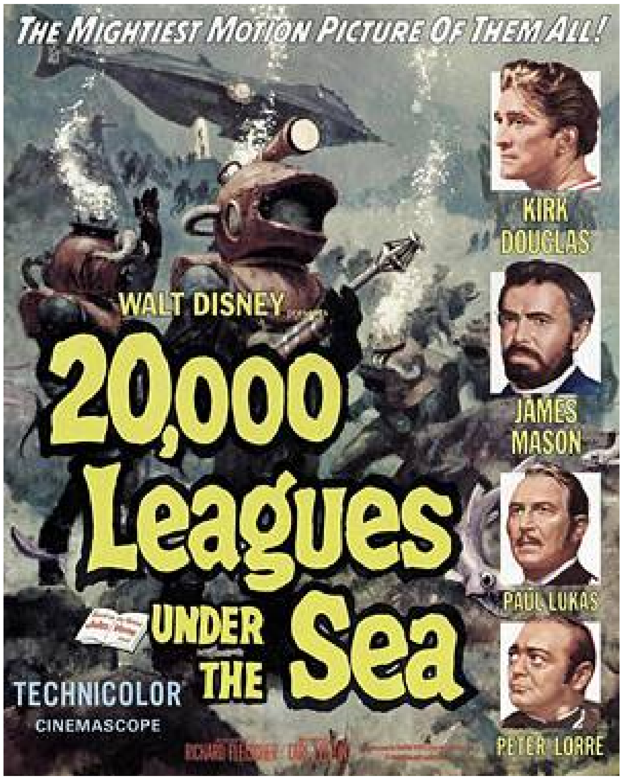
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KIRK DOUGLAS
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20,000 Leagues UNDER THE Sea
JAMES MASON
PAUL LUKAS
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The 1954 film adaptation

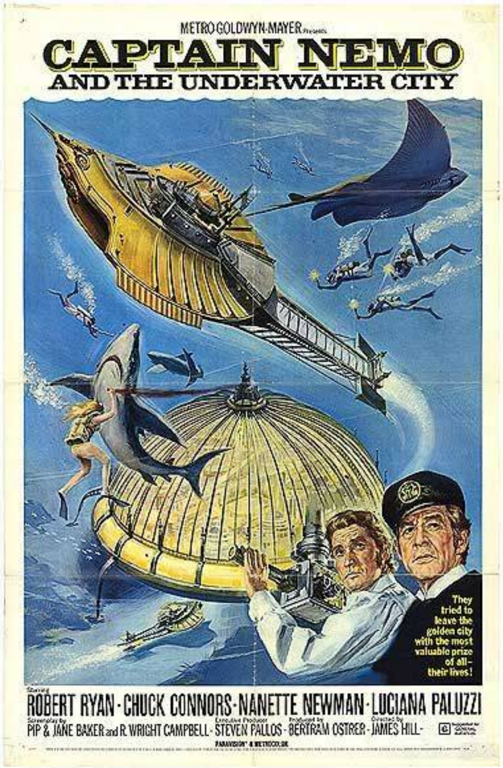
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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

A SHIFTING REEF

The year 1866 was signalised by a remarkable incident, a mysterious and puzzling phenomenon, which doubtless no one has yet forgotten. Not to mention rumours which agitated the maritime population and excited the public mind, even in the interior of continents, seafaring men were particularly excited. Merchants, common sailors, captains of vessels, skippers, both of Europe and America, naval officers of all countries, and the Governments of several States on the two continents, were deeply interested in the matter.

For some time past vessels had been met by “an enormous thing,” a long object, spindle-shaped, occasionally phosphorescent, and infinitely larger and more rapid in its movements than a whale.

The facts relating to this apparition (entered in various log-books) agreed in most respects as to the shape of the object or creature in question, the untiring rapidity of its movements, its surprising power of locomotion, and the peculiar life with which it seemed endowed. If it was a whale, it surpassed in size all those hitherto classified in science. Taking into consideration the mean of observations made at divers times — rejecting the timid estimate of those who assigned to this object a length of two hundred feet, equally with the exaggerated opinions which set it down as a mile in width and three in length — we might fairly conclude that this mysterious being surpassed greatly all dimensions admitted by the learned ones of the day, if it existed at all. And that it DID exist was an undeniable fact; and, with that tendency which disposes the human mind in favour of the marvellous, we can understand the excitement produced in the entire world by this supernatural apparition. As to classing it in the list of fables, the idea was out of the question.

On the 20th of July, 1866, the steamer Governor Higginson, of the Calcutta and Burnach Steam Navigation Company, had met this moving mass five miles off the east coast of Australia. Captain Baker thought at first that he was in the presence of an unknown sandbank; he even prepared to determine its exact position when two columns of water, projected by the mysterious object, shot with a hissing noise a hundred and fifty feet up into the air. Now, unless the sandbank had been submitted to the intermittent eruption of a geyser, the Governor Higginson had to do neither more nor less than with an aquatic mammal, unknown till then, which threw up from its blow-holes columns of water mixed with air and vapour.

Similar facts were observed on the 23rd of July in the same year, in the Pacific Ocean, by the Columbus, of the West India and Pacific Steam Navigation Company. But this extraordinary creature could transport itself from one place to another with surprising velocity; as, in an interval of three days, the Governor Higginson and the Columbus had observed it at two different points of the chart, separated by a distance of more than seven hundred nautical leagues.

Fifteen days later, two thousand miles farther off, the Helvetia, of the Compagnie-Nationale, and the Shannon, of the Royal Mail Steamship Company, sailing to windward in that portion of the Atlantic lying between the United States and Europe, respectively signalled the monster to each other in 42° 15’ N. lat. and 60° 35’ W. long. In these simultaneous observations they thought themselves justified in estimating the minimum length of the mammal at more than three hundred and fifty feet, as the

Shannon and Helvetia were of smaller dimensions than it, though they measured three hundred feet over all.

Now the largest whales, those which frequent those parts of the sea round the Aleutian, Kulammak, and Umgullich islands, have never exceeded the length of sixty yards, if they attain that.

In every place of great resort the monster was the fashion. They sang of it in the cafes, ridiculed it in the papers, and represented it on the stage. All kinds of stories were circulated regarding it. There appeared in the papers caricatures of every gigantic and imaginary creature, from the white whale, the terrible “Moby Dick” of sub-arctic regions, to the immense kraken, whose tentacles could entangle a ship of five hundred tons and hurry it into the abyss of the ocean. The legends of ancient times were even revived.

Then burst forth the unending argument between the believers and the unbelievers in the societies of the wise and the scientific journals. “The question of the monster” inflamed all minds. Editors of scientific journals, quarrelling with believers in the supernatural, spilled seas of ink during this memorable campaign, some even drawing blood; for from the sea-serpent they came to direct personalities.

During the first months of the year 1867 the question seemed buried, never to revive, when new facts were brought before the public. It was then no longer a scientific problem to be solved, but a real danger seriously to be avoided. The question took quite another shape. The monster became a small island, a rock, a reef, but a reef of indefinite and shifting proportions.

On the 5th of March, 1867, the Moravian, of the Montreal Ocean Company, finding herself during the night in 27° 30’ lat. and 72° 15’ long. struck on her starboard quarter a rock, marked in no chart for that part of the sea.

Under the combined efforts of the wind and its four hundred horse power, it was going at the rate of thirteen knots. Had it not been for the superior strength of the hull of the Moravian, she would have been broken by the shock and gone down with the 237 passengers she was bringing home from Canada.

The accident happened about five o'clock in the morning, as the day was breaking. The officers of the quarter-deck hurried to the after-part of the vessel. They examined the sea with the most careful attention. They saw nothing but a strong eddy about three cables' length distant, as if the surface had been violently agitated. The bearings of the place were taken exactly, and the Moravian continued its route without apparent damage. Had it struck on a submerged rock, or on an enormous wreck? They could not tell; but, on examination of the ship's bottom when undergoing repairs, it was found that part of her keel was broken.

This fact, so grave in itself, might perhaps have been forgotten like many others if, three weeks after, it had not been re-enacted under similar circumstances. But, thanks to the nationality of the victim of the shock, thanks to the reputation of the company to which the vessel belonged, the circumstance became extensively circulated.

The 13th of April, 1867, the sea being beautiful, the breeze favourable, the Scotia, of the Cunard Company's line, found herself in 15° 12' long. and 45° 37' lat. She was going at the speed of thirteen knots and a half.

At seventeen minutes past four in the afternoon, whilst the passengers were assembled at lunch in the great saloon, a slight shock was felt on the hull of the Scotia, on her quarter, a little aft of the port-paddle.

The Scotia had not struck, but she had been struck, and seemingly by something rather sharp and penetrating than blunt. The shock had been so slight that no one had been alarmed, had it not been for the shouts of the carpenter’s watch, who rushed on to the bridge, exclaiming, “We are sinking! we are sinking!” At first the passengers were much frightened, but Captain Anderson hastened to reassure them. The danger could not be imminent. The Scotia, divided into seven compartments by strong partitions, could brave with impunity any leak. Captain Anderson went down immediately into the hold. He found that the sea was pouring into the fifth compartment; and the rapidity of the influx proved that the force of the water was considerable. Fortunately this compartment did not hold the boilers, or the fires would have been immediately extinguished. Captain Anderson ordered the engines to be stopped at once, and one of the men went down to ascertain the extent of the injury. Some minutes afterwards they discovered the existence of a large hole, two yards in diameter, in the ship’s bottom. Such a leak could not be stopped; and the Scotia, her paddles half submerged, was obliged to continue her course. She was then three hundred miles from Cape Clear, and, after three days’ delay, which caused great uneasiness in Liverpool, she entered the basin of the company.

The engineers visited the Scotia, which was put in dry dock. They could scarcely believe it possible; at two yards and a half below water-mark was a regular rent, in the form of an isosceles triangle. The broken place in the iron plates was so perfectly defined that it could not have been more neatly done by a punch. It was clear, then, that the instrument producing the perforation was not of a common stamp and, after having been driven with prodigious strength, and piercing an iron plate 1 3/8 inches thick, had withdrawn itself by a backward motion.

Such was the last fact, which resulted in exciting once more the torrent of public opinion. From this moment all unlucky casualties which could not be otherwise accounted for were put down to the monster.

Upon this imaginary creature rested the responsibility of all these shipwrecks, which unfortunately were considerable; for of three thousand ships whose loss was annually recorded at Lloyd’s, the number of sailing and steam-ships supposed to be totally lost, from the absence of all news, amounted to not less than two hundred!

Now, it was the “monster” who, justly or unjustly, was accused of their disappearance, and, thanks to it, communication between the different continents became more and more dangerous. The public demanded sharply that the seas should at any price be relieved from this formidable cetacean.

Member of the whale family.

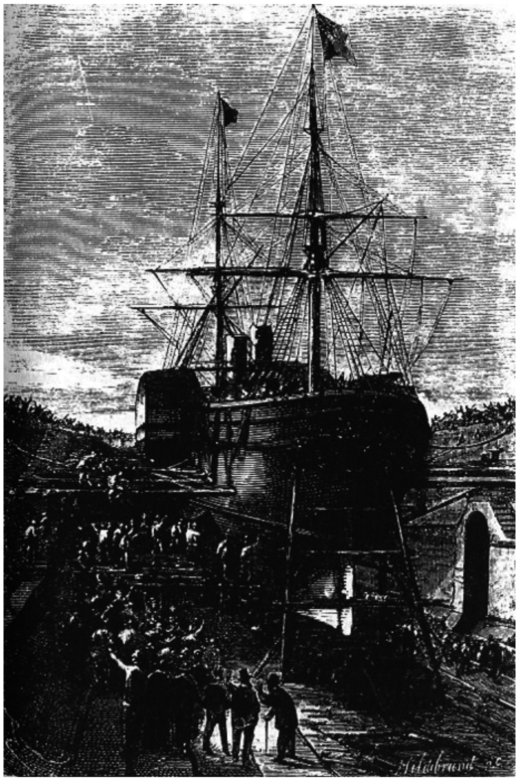

Hildibrand sc.

CHAPTER II

PRO AND CON

At the period when these events took place, I had just returned from a scientific research in the disagreeable territory of Nebraska, in the United States. In virtue of my office as Assistant Professor in the Museum of Natural History in Paris, the French Government had attached me to that expedition. After six months in Nebraska, I arrived in New York towards the end of March, laden with a precious collection. My departure for France was fixed for the first days in May. Meanwhile I was occupying myself in classifying my mineralogical, botanical, and zoological riches, when the accident happened to the Scotia.

I was perfectly up in the subject which was the question of the day. How could I be otherwise? I had read and reread all the American and European papers without being any nearer a conclusion. This mystery puzzled me. Under the impossibility of forming an opinion, I jumped from one extreme to the other. That there really was something could not be doubted, and the incredulous were invited to put their finger on the wound of the Scotia.

On my arrival at New York the question was at its height. The theory of the floating island, and the unapproachable sandbank, supported by minds little competent to form a judgment, was abandoned. And, indeed, unless this shoal had a machine in its stomach, how could it change its position with such astonishing rapidity?

From the same cause, the idea of a floating hull of an enormous wreck was given up.

There remained, then, only two possible solutions of the question, which created two distinct parties: on one side, those who were for a monster of colossal strength; on the other, those who were for a submarine vessel of enormous motive power.

But this last theory, plausible as it was, could not stand against inquiries made in both worlds. That a private gentleman should have such a machine at his command was not likely. Where, when, and how was it built? and how could its construction have been kept secret? Certainly a Government might possess such a destructive machine. And in these disastrous times, when the ingenuity of man has multiplied the power of weapons of war, it was possible that, without the knowledge of others, a State might try to work such a formidable engine.

But the idea of a war machine fell before the declaration of Governments. As public interest was in question, and transatlantic communications suffered, their veracity could not be doubted. But how admit that the construction of this submarine boat had escaped the public eye? For a private gentleman to keep the secret under such circumstances would be very difficult, and for a State whose every act is persistently watched by powerful rivals, certainly impossible.

Upon my arrival in New York several persons did me the honour of consulting me on the phenomenon in question. I had published in France a work in quarto, in two volumes, entitled Mysteries of the Great Submarine Grounds. This book, highly approved of in the learned world, gained for me a special reputation in this rather obscure branch of Natural History. My advice was asked. As long as I could deny the reality of the fact, I confined myself to a decided negative. But soon, finding myself driven into a corner, I was obliged to explain myself point by point. I discussed the question in all its forms, politically and scientifically; and I give here an extract from a carefully-studied article which I published in the number of the 30th of April. It ran as follows:

“After examining one by one the different theories, rejecting all other suggestions, it becomes necessary to admit the existence of a marine animal of enormous power.

“The great depths of the ocean are entirely unknown to us. Soundings cannot reach them. What passes in those remote depths — what beings live, or can live, twelve or fifteen miles beneath the surface of the waters — what is the organisation of these animals, we can scarcely conjecture. However, the solution of the problem submitted to me may modify the form of the dilemma. Either we do know all the varieties of beings which people our planet, or we do not. If we do NOT know them all — if Nature has still secrets in the deeps for us, nothing is more conformable to reason than to admit the existence of fishes, or cetaceans of other kinds, or even of new species, of an organisation formed to inhabit the strata inaccessible to soundings, and which an accident of some sort has brought at long intervals to the upper level of the ocean.

“If, on the contrary, we DO know all living kinds, we must necessarily seek for the animal in question amongst those marine beings already classed; and, in that case, I should be disposed to admit the existence of a gigantic narwhal.

“The common narwhal, or unicorn of the sea, often attains a length of sixty feet. Increase its size fivefold or tenfold, give it strength proportionate to its size, lengthen its destructive weapons, and you obtain the animal required. It will have the proportions determined by the officers of the Shannon, the instrument required by the perforation of the Scotia, and the power necessary to pierce the hull of the steamer.

“Indeed, the narwhal is armed with a sort of ivory sword, a halberd, according to the expression of certain naturalists. The principal tusk has the hardness of steel. Some of these tusks have been found buried in the bodies of whales, which the unicorn always attacks with success. Others have been drawn out, not without trouble, from the bottoms of ships, which they had pierced through and through, as a gimlet pierces a barrel. The Museum of the Faculty of Medicine of Paris possesses one of these defensive weapons, two yards and a quarter in length, and fifteen inches in diameter at the base.

“Very well! suppose this weapon to be six times stronger and the animal ten times more powerful; launch it at the rate of twenty miles an hour, and you obtain a shock capable of producing the catastrophe required. Until further information, therefore, I shall maintain it to be a sea-unicorn of colossal dimensions, armed not with a halberd, but with a real spur, as the armoured frigates, or the `rams’ of war, whose massiveness and motive power it would possess at the same time. Thus may this puzzling phenomenon be explained, unless there be something over and above all that one has ever conjectured, seen, perceived, or experienced; which is just within the bounds of possibility.”

These last words were cowardly on my part; but, up to a certain point, I wished to shelter my dignity as professor, and not give too much cause for laughter to the Americans, who laugh well when they do laugh. I reserved for myself a way of escape. In effect, however, I admitted the existence of the “monster.” My article was warmly discussed, which procured it a high reputation. It rallied round it a certain number of partisans. The solution it proposed gave, at least, full liberty to the imagination. The human mind delights in grand conceptions of supernatural beings. And the sea is precisely their best vehicle, the only medium through which these giants (against which terrestrial animals, such as elephants or rhinoceroses, are as nothing) can be produced or developed.

The industrial and commercial papers treated the question chiefly from this point of view. The Shipping and Mercantile Gazette, the Lloyd’s List, the Packet-Boat, and the Maritime and Colonial Review, all papers devoted to insurance companies which threatened to raise their rates of premium, were unanimous on this point. Public opinion had been pronounced. The United States were the first in the field; and in New York they made preparations for an expedition destined to pursue this narwhal. A frigate of great speed, the Abraham Lincoln, was put in commission as soon as possible. The arsenals were opened to Commander Farragut, who hastened the arming of his frigate; but, as it always happens, the moment it was decided to pursue the monster, the monster did not appear. For two months no one heard it spoken of. No ship met with it. It seemed as if this unicorn knew of the plots weaving around it. It had been so much talked of, even through the Atlantic cable, that jesters pretended that this slender fly had stopped a telegram on its passage and was making the most of it.

So when the frigate had been armed for a long campaign, and provided with formidable fishing apparatus, no one could tell what course to pursue. Impatience grew apace, when, on the 2nd of July, they learned that a steamer of the line of San Francisco, from California to Shanghai, had seen the animal three weeks before in the North Pacific Ocean. The excitement caused by this news was extreme. The ship was revictualled and well stocked with coal.

Three hours before the Abraham Lincoln left Brooklyn pier, I received a letter worded as follows:

To M. ARONNAX, Professor in the Museum of Paris, Fifth Avenue Hotel, New York.

SIR, — If you will consent to join the Abraham Lincoln in this expedition, the Government of the United States will with pleasure see France represented in the enterprise. Commander Farragut has a cabin at your disposal.

Very cordially yours, J.B. HOBSON, Secretary of Marine.

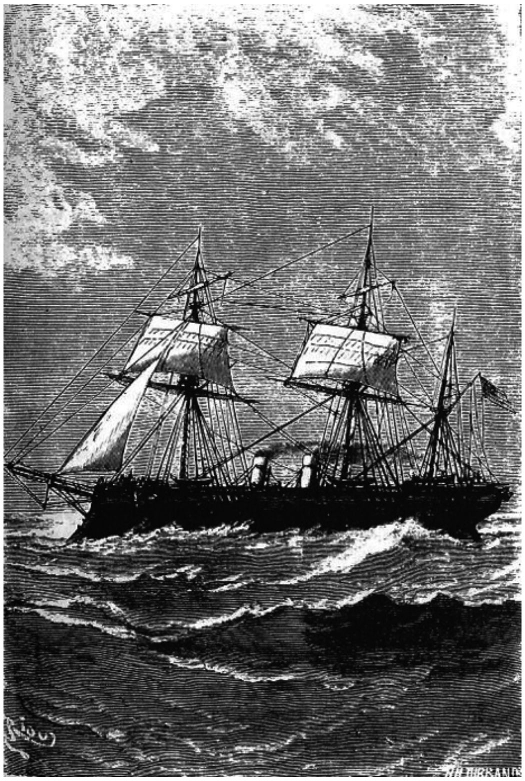

CHAPTER III

I FORM MY RESOLUTION

Three seconds before the arrival of J. B. Hobson’s letter I no more thought of pursuing the unicorn than of attempting the passage of the North Sea. Three seconds after reading the letter of the honourable Secretary of Marine, I felt that my true vocation, the sole end of my life, was to chase this disturbing monster and purge it from the world.

But I had just returned from a fatiguing journey, weary and longing for repose. I aspired to nothing more than again seeing my country, my friends, my little lodging by the Jardin des Plantes, my dear and precious collections — but nothing could keep me back! I forgot all — fatigue, friends and collections — and accepted without hesitation the offer of the American Government.

“Besides,” thought I, “all roads lead back to Europe; and the unicorn may be amiable enough to hurry me towards the coast of France. This worthy animal may allow itself to be caught in the seas of Europe (for my particular benefit), and I will not bring back less than half a yard of his ivory halberd to the Museum of Natural History.” But in the meanwhile I must seek this narwhal in the North Pacific Ocean, which, to return to France, was taking the road to the antipodes.

“Conseil,” I called in an impatient voice.

Conseil was my servant, a true, devoted Flemish boy, who had accompanied me in all my travels. I liked him, and he returned the liking well. He was quiet by nature, regular from principle, zealous from habit, evincing little disturbance at the different surprises of life, very quick with his hands, and apt at any service required of him; and, despite his name, never giving advice — even when asked for it.

Conseil had followed me for the last ten years wherever science led. Never once did he complain of the length or fatigue of a journey, never make an objection to pack his portmanteau for whatever country it might be, or however far away, whether China or Congo. Besides all this, he had good health, which defied all sickness, and solid muscles, but no nerves; good morals are understood. This boy was thirty years old, and his age to that of his master as fifteen to twenty. May I be excused for saying that I was forty years old?

But Conseil had one fault: he was ceremonious to a degree, and would never speak to me but in the third person, which was sometimes provoking.

“Conseil,” said I again, beginning with feverish hands to make preparations for my departure.

Certainly I was sure of this devoted boy. As a rule, I never asked him if it were convenient for him or not to follow me in my travels; but this time the expedition in question might be prolonged, and the enterprise might be hazardous in pursuit of an animal capable of sinking a frigate as easily as a nutshell. Here there was matter for reflection even to the most impassive man in the world. What would Conseil say?

“Conseil,” I called a third time.

Conseil appeared.

“Did you call, sir?” said he, entering.

"Yes, my boy; make preparations for me and yourself too. We leave in two hours."

"As you please, sir," replied Conseil, quietly.

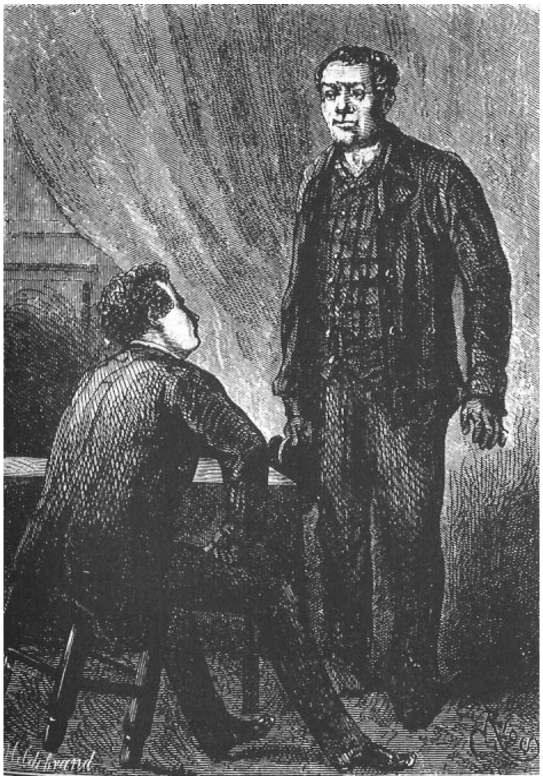

"Not an instant to lose; lock in my trunk all travelling utensils, coats, shirts, and stockings — without counting, as many as you can, and make haste."

"And your collections, sir?" observed Conseil.

"They will keep them at the hotel."

"We are not returning to Paris, then?" said Conseil.

"Oh! certainly," I answered, evasively, "by making a curve."

"Will the curve please you, sir?"

“Oh! it will be nothing; not quite so direct a road, that is all. We take our passage in the Abraham, Lincoln.”

“As you think proper, sir,” coolly replied Conseil.

“You see, my friend, it has to do with the monster — the famous narwhal. We are going to purge it from the seas. A glorious mission, but a dangerous one! We cannot tell where we may go; these animals can be very capricious. But we will go whether or no; we have got a captain who is pretty wide-awake.”

Our luggage was transported to the deck of the frigate immediately. I hastened on board and asked for Commander Farragut. One of the sailors conducted me to the poop, where I found myself in the presence of a good-looking officer, who held out his hand to me.

“Monsieur Pierre Aronnax?” said he.

“Himself,” replied I. “Commander Farragut?”

“You are welcome, Professor; your cabin is ready for you.”

I bowed, and desired to be conducted to the cabin destined for me.

The Abraham Lincoln had been well chosen and equipped for her new destination. She was a frigate of great speed, fitted with high-pressure engines which admitted a pressure of seven atmospheres. Under this the Abraham Lincoln attained the mean speed of nearly eighteen knots and a third an hour — a considerable speed, but, nevertheless, insufficient to grapple with this gigantic cetacean.

The interior arrangements of the frigate corresponded to its nautical qualities. I was well satisfied with my cabin, which was in the after part, opening upon the gunroom.

“We shall be well off here,” said I to Conseil.

“As well, by your honour’s leave, as a hermit-crab in the shell of a whelk,” said Conseil.

I left Conseil to stow our trunks conveniently away, and remounted the poop in order to survey the preparations for departure.

At that moment Commander Farragut was ordering the last moorings to be cast loose which held the Abraham Lincoln to the pier of Brooklyn. So in a quarter of an hour, perhaps less, the frigate would have sailed without me. I should have missed this extraordinary, supernatural, and incredible expedition, the recital of which may well meet with some suspicion.

But Commander Farragut would not lose a day nor an hour in scouring the seas in which the animal had been sighted. He sent for the engineer.

“Is the steam full on?” asked he.

“Yes, sir,” replied the engineer.

“Go ahead,” cried Commander Farragut.

CHAPTER IV

NED LAND

Captain Farragut was a good seaman, worthy of the frigate he commanded. His vessel and he were one. He was the soul of it. On the question of the monster there was no doubt in his mind, and he would not allow the existence of the animal to be disputed on board. He believed in it, as certain good women believe in the leviathan — by faith, not by reason. The monster did exist, and he had sworn to rid the seas of it. Either Captain Farragut would kill the narwhal, or the narwhal would kill the captain. There was no third course.

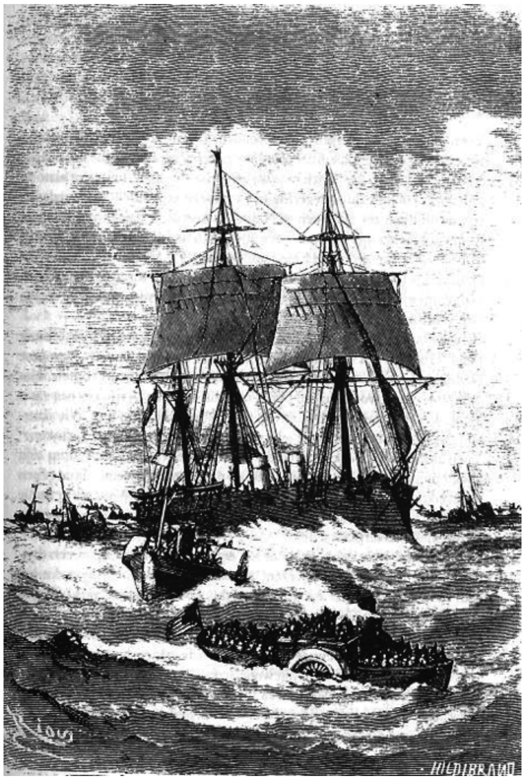

The officers on board shared the opinion of their chief. They were ever chatting, discussing, and calculating the various chances of a meeting, watching narrowly the vast surface of the ocean. More than one took up his quarters voluntarily in the cross-trees, who would have cursed such a berth under any other circumstances. As long as the sun described its daily course, the rigging was crowded with sailors, whose feet were burnt to such an extent by the heat of the deck as to render it unbearable; still the Abraham Lincoln had not yet breasted the suspected waters of the Pacific. As to the ship's company, they desired nothing better than to meet the unicorn, to harpoon it, hoist it on board, and despatch it. They watched the sea with eager attention.

Besides, Captain Farragut had spoken of a certain sum of two thousand dollars, set apart for whoever should first sight the monster, were he cabin-boy, common seaman, or officer.

I leave you to judge how eyes were used on board the Abraham Lincoln.

For my own part I was not behind the others, and, left to no one my share of daily observations. The frigate might have been called the Argus, for a hundred reasons. Only one amongst us, Conseil, seemed to protest by his indifference against the question which so interested us all, and seemed to be out of keeping with the general enthusiasm on board.

I have said that Captain Farragut had carefully provided his ship with every apparatus for catching the gigantic cetacean. No whaler had ever been better armed. We possessed every known engine, from the harpoon thrown by the hand to the barbed arrows of the blunderbuss, and the explosive balls of the duck-gun. On the forecastle lay the perfection of a breech-loading gun, very thick at the breech, and very narrow in the bore, the model of which had been in the Exhibition of 1867. This precious weapon of American origin could throw with ease a conical projectile of nine pounds to a mean distance of ten miles.

Thus the Abraham Lincoln wanted for no means of destruction; and, what was better still she had on board Ned Land, the prince of harpooners.

Ned Land was a Canadian, with an uncommon quickness of hand, and who knew no equal in his dangerous occupation. Skill, coolness, audacity, and cunning he possessed in a superior degree, and it must be a cunning whale to escape the stroke of his harpoon.

Ned Land was about forty years of age; he was a tall man (more than six feet high), strongly built, grave and taciturn, occasionally violent, and very passionate when contradicted. His person attracted attention, but above all the boldness of his look, which gave a singular expression to his face.

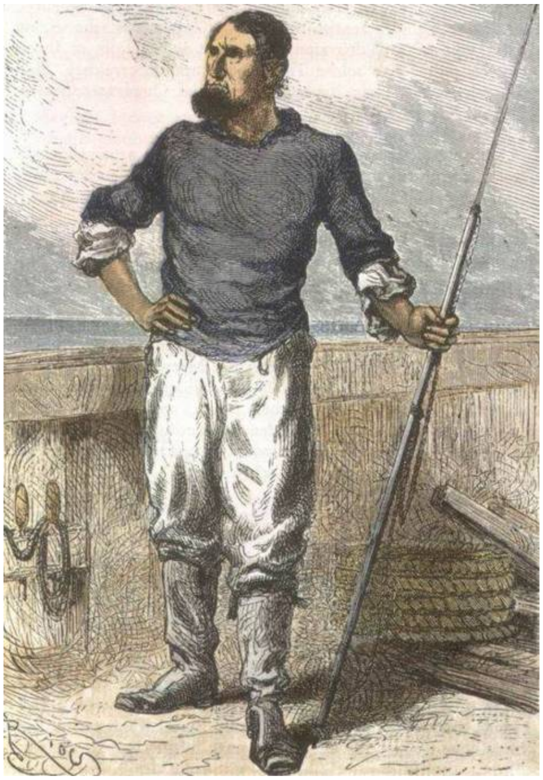

Who calls himself Canadian calls himself French; and, little communicative as Ned Land was, I must admit that he took a certain liking for me. My nationality drew him to me, no doubt. It was an opportunity for him to talk, and for me to hear, that old language of Rabelais, which is still in use in some Canadian provinces. The harpooner's family was originally from Quebec, and was already a tribe of hardy fishermen when this town belonged to France.

Little by little, Ned Land acquired a taste for chatting, and I loved to hear the recital of his adventures in the polar seas. He related his fishing, and his combats, with natural poetry of expression; his recital took the form of an epic poem, and I seemed to be listening to a Canadian Homer singing the Iliad of the regions of the North.

I am portraying this hardy companion as I really knew him. We are old friends now, united in that unchangeable friendship which is born and cemented amidst extreme dangers. Ah, brave Ned! I ask no more than to live a hundred years longer, that I may have more time to dwell the longer on your memory.

Now, what was Ned Land's opinion upon the question of the marine monster? I must admit that he did not believe in the unicorn, and was the only one on board who did not share that universal conviction. He even avoided the subject, which I one day thought it my duty to press upon him. One magnificent evening, the 30th July (that is to say, three weeks after our departure), the frigate was abreast of Cape Blanc, thirty miles to leeward of the coast of Patagonia. We had crossed the tropic of Capricorn, and the Straits of Magellan opened less than seven hundred miles to the south. Before eight days were over the Abraham Lincoln would be ploughing the waters of the Pacific.

Seated on the poop, Ned Land and I were chatting of one thing and another as we looked at this mysterious sea, whose great depths had up to this time been inaccessible to the eye of man. I naturally led up the conversation to the giant unicorn, and examined the various chances of success or failure of the expedition. But, seeing that Ned Land let me speak without saying too much himself, I pressed him more closely.

“Well, Ned,” said I, “is it possible that you are not convinced of the existence of this cetacean that we are following? Have you any particular reason for being so incredulous?”

The harpooner looked at me fixedly for some moments before answering, struck his broad forehead with his hand (a habit of his), as if to collect himself, and said at last, “Perhaps I have, Mr. Aronnax.”

“But, Ned, you, a whaler by profession, familiarised with all the great marine mammalia — YOU ought to be the last to doubt under such circumstances!”

“That is just what deceives you, Professor,” replied Ned. “As a whaler I have followed many a cetacean, harpooned a great number, and killed several; but, however strong or well-armed they may have been, neither their tails nor their weapons would have been able even to scratch the iron plates of a steamer.”

“But, Ned, they tell of ships which the teeth of the narwhal have pierced through and through.”

“Wooden ships — that is possible,” replied the Canadian, “but I have never seen it done; and, until further proof, I deny that whales, cetaceans, or sea-unicorns could ever produce the effect you describe.”

“Well, Ned, I repeat it with a conviction resting on the logic of facts. I believe in the existence of a mammal power fully organised, belonging to the branch of vertebrata, like the whales, the cachalots, or the dolphins, and furnished with a horn of defence of great penetrating power.”

“Hum!” said the harpooner, shaking his head with the air of a man who would not be convinced.

“Notice one thing, my worthy Canadian,” I resumed. “If such an animal is in existence, if it inhabits the depths of the ocean, if it frequents the strata lying miles below the surface of the water, it must necessarily possess an organisation the strength of which would defy all comparison.”

“And why this powerful organisation?” demanded Ned.

“Because it requires incalculable strength to keep one’s self in these strata and resist their pressure. Listen to me. Let us admit that the pressure of the atmosphere is represented by the weight of a column of water thirty-two feet high. In reality the column of water would be shorter, as we are speaking of sea water, the density of which is greater than that of fresh water. Very well, when you dive, Ned, as many times 32 feet of water as there are above you, so many times does your body bear a pressure equal to that of the atmosphere, that is to say, 15 lb. for each square inch of its surface. It follows, then, that at 320 feet this pressure equals that of 10 atmospheres, of 100 atmospheres at 3,200 feet, and of 1,000 atmospheres at 32,000 feet, that is, about 6 miles; which is equivalent to saying that if you could attain this depth in the ocean, each square three-eighths of an inch of the surface of your body would bear a pressure of 5,600 lb. Ah! my brave Ned, do you know how many square inches you carry on the surface of your body?”

“I have no idea, Mr. Aronnax.”

“About 6,500; and as in reality the atmospheric pressure is about 15 lb. to the square inch, your 6,500 square inches bear at this moment a pressure of 97,500 lb.”

“Without my perceiving it?”

“Without your perceiving it. And if you are not crushed by such a pressure, it is because the air penetrates the interior of your body with equal pressure. Hence perfect equilibrium between the interior and exterior pressure, which thus neutralise each other, and which allows you to bear it without inconvenience. But in the water it is another thing.”

“Yes, I understand,” replied Ned, becoming more attentive; “because the water surrounds me, but does not penetrate.”

“Precisely, Ned: so that at 32 feet beneath the surface of the sea you would undergo a pressure of 97,500 lb.; at 320 feet, ten times that pressure; at 3,200 feet, a hundred times that pressure; lastly, at 32,000 feet, a thousand times that pressure would be 97,500,000 lb. — that is to say, that you would be flattened as if you had been drawn from the plates of a hydraulic machine!”

“The devil!” exclaimed Ned.

“Very well, my worthy harpooner, if some vertebrate, several hundred yards long, and large in proportion, can maintain itself in such depths — of those whose surface is represented by millions of square inches, that is by tens of millions of pounds, we must estimate the pressure they undergo. Consider, then, what must be the resistance of their bony structure, and the strength of their organisation to withstand such pressure!”

“Why!” exclaimed Ned Land, “they must be made of iron plates eight inches thick, like the armoured frigates.”

“As you say, Ned. And think what destruction such a mass would cause, if hurled with the speed of an express train against the hull of a vessel.”

“Yes — certainly — perhaps,” replied the Canadian, shaken by these figures, but not yet willing to give in.

“Well, have I convinced you?”

“You have convinced me of one thing, sir, which is that, if such animals do exist at the bottom of the seas, they must necessarily be as strong as you say.”

“But if they do not exist, mine obstinate harpooner, how explain the accident to the Scotia?”

CHAPTER V

AT A VENTURE

The voyage of the Abraham Lincoln was for a long time marked by no special incident. But one circumstance happened which showed the wonderful dexterity of Ned Land, and proved what confidence we might place in him.

The 30th of June, the frigate spoke some American whalers, from whom we learned that they knew nothing about the narwhal. But one of them, the captain of the Monroe, knowing that Ned Land had shipped on board the Abraham Lincoln, begged for his help in chasing a whale they had in sight. Commander Farragut, desirous of seeing Ned Land at work, gave him permission to go on board the Monroe. And fate served our Canadian so well that, instead of one whale, he harpooned two with a double blow, striking one straight to the heart, and catching the other after some minutes' pursuit.

Decidedly, if the monster ever had to do with Ned Land's harpoon, I would not bet in its favour.

The frigate skirted the south-east coast of America with great rapidity. The 3rd of July we were at the opening of the Straits of Magellan, level with Cape Vierges. But Commander Farragut would not take a tortuous passage, but doubled Cape Horn.

The ship's crew agreed with him. And certainly it was possible that they might meet the narwhal in this narrow pass. Many of the sailors affirmed that the monster could not pass there, "that he was too big for that!"

The 6th of July, about three o’clock in the afternoon, the Abraham Lincoln, at fifteen miles to the south, doubled the solitary island, this lost rock at the extremity of the American continent, to which some Dutch sailors gave the name of their native town, Cape Horn. The course was taken towards the north-west, and the next day the screw of the frigate was at last beating the waters of the Pacific.

“Keep your eyes open!” called out the sailors.

And they were opened widely. Both eyes and glasses, a little dazzled, it is true, by the prospect of two thousand dollars, had not an instant’s repose.

I myself, for whom money had no charms, was not the least attentive on board. Giving but few minutes to my meals, but a few hours to sleep, indifferent to either rain or sunshine, I did not leave the poop of the vessel. Now leaning on the netting of the forecastle, now on the taffrail, I devoured with eagerness the soft foam which whitened the sea as far as the eye could reach; and how often have I shared the emotion of the majority of the crew, when some capricious whale raised its black back above the waves! The poop of the vessel was crowded on a moment. The cabins poured forth a torrent of sailors and officers, each with heaving breast and troubled eye watching the course of the cetacean. I looked and looked till I was nearly blind, whilst Conseil kept repeating in a calm voice:

“If, sir, you would not squint so much, you would see better!”

But vain excitement! The Abraham Lincoln checked its speed and made for the animal signalled, a simple whale, or common cachalot, which soon disappeared amidst a storm of abuse.

But the weather was good. The voyage was being accomplished under the most favourable auspices. It was then the bad season in Australia, the July of that zone corresponding to our January in Europe, but the sea was beautiful and easily scanned round a vast circumference.

The 20th of July, the tropic of Capricorn was cut by 105d of longitude, and the 27th of the same month we crossed the Equator on the 110th meridian. This passed, the frigate took a more decided westerly direction, and scoured the central waters of the Pacific. Commander Farragut thought, and with reason, that it was better to remain in deep water, and keep clear of continents or islands, which the beast itself seemed to shun (perhaps because there was not enough water for him! suggested the greater part of the crew). The frigate passed at some distance from the Marquesas and the Sandwich Islands, crossed the tropic of Cancer, and made for the China Seas. We were on the theatre of the last diversions of the monster: and, to say truth, we no longer LIVED on board. The entire ship's crew were undergoing a nervous excitement, of which I can give no idea: they could not eat, they could not sleep — twenty times a day, a misconception or an optical illusion of some sailor seated on the taffrail, would cause dreadful perspirations, and these emotions, twenty times repeated, kept us in a state of excitement so violent that a reaction was unavoidable.

And truly, reaction soon showed itself. For three months, during which a day seemed an age, the Abraham Lincoln furrowed all the waters of the Northern Pacific, running at whales, making sharp deviations from her course, veering suddenly from one tack to another, stopping suddenly, putting on steam, and backing ever and anon at the risk of deranging her machinery, and not one point of the Japanese or American coast was left unexplored.

The warmest partisans of the enterprise now became its most ardent detractors. Reaction mounted from the crew to the captain himself, and certainly, had it not been for the resolute determination on the part of Captain Farragut, the frigate would have headed due southward. This useless search could not last much longer. The Abraham Lincoln had nothing to reproach herself with, she had done her best to succeed. Never had an American ship's crew shown more zeal or patience; its failure could not be placed to their charge — there remained nothing but to return.

This was represented to the commander. The sailors could not hide their discontent, and the service suffered. I will not say there was a mutiny on board, but after a reasonable period of obstinacy, Captain Farragut (as Columbus did) asked for three days' patience. If in three days the monster did not appear, the man at the helm should give three turns of the wheel, and the Abraham Lincoln would make for the European seas.

This promise was made on the 2nd of November. It had the effect of rallying the ship's crew. The ocean was watched with renewed attention. Each one wished for a last glance in which to sum up his remembrance. Glasses were used with feverish activity. It was a grand defiance given to the giant narwhal, and he could scarcely fail to answer the summons and "appear."

Two days passed, the steam was at half pressure; a thousand schemes were tried to attract the attention and stimulate the apathy of the animal in case it should be met in those parts. Large quantities of bacon were trailed in the wake of the ship, to the great satisfaction (I must say) of the sharks. Small craft radiated in all directions round the Abraham Lincoln as she lay to, and did not leave a spot of the sea unexplored. But the night of the 4th of November arrived without the unveiling of this submarine mystery.

The next day, the 5th of November, at twelve, the delay would (morally speaking) expire; after that time, Commander Farragut, faithful to his promise, was to turn the course to the south-east and abandon for ever the northern regions of the Pacific.

The frigate was then in 31° 15’ N. lat. and 136° 42’ E. long. The coast of Japan still remained less than two hundred miles to leeward. Night was approaching. They had just struck eight bells; large clouds veiled the face of the moon, then in its first quarter. The sea undulated peaceably under the stern of the vessel.

At that moment I was leaning forward on the starboard netting. Conseil, standing near me, was looking straight before him. The crew, perched in the ratlines, examined the horizon which contracted and darkened by degrees. Officers with their night glasses scoured the growing darkness: sometimes the ocean sparkled under the rays of the moon, which darted between two clouds, then all trace of light was lost in the darkness.

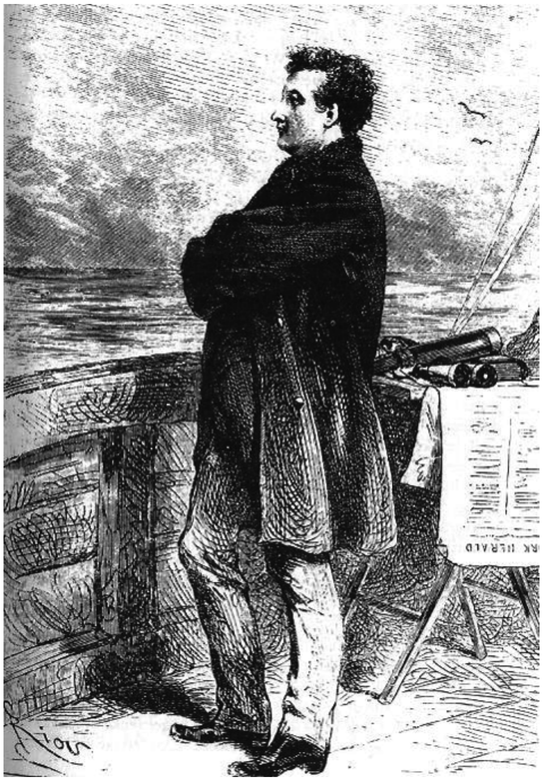

In looking at Conseil, I could see he was undergoing a little of the general influence. At least I thought so. Perhaps for the first time his nerves vibrated to a sentiment of curiosity.

“Come, Conseil,” said I, “this is the last chance of pocketing the two thousand dollars.”

“May I be permitted to say, sir,” replied Conseil, “that I never reckoned on getting the prize; and, had the government of the Union offered a hundred thousand dollars, it would have been none the poorer.”

“You are right, Conseil. It is a foolish affair after all, and one upon which we entered too lightly. What time lost, what useless emotions! We should have been back in France six months ago.”

“In your little room, sir,” replied Conseil, “and in your museum, sir; and I should have already classed all your fossils, sir. And the Babiroussa would have been installed in its cage in the Jardin des Plantes, and have drawn all the curious people of the capital!”

“As you say, Conseil. I fancy we shall run a fair chance of being laughed at for our pains.”

“That’s tolerably certain,” replied Conseil, quietly; “I think they will make fun of you, sir. And, must I say it — — ?”

“Go on, my good friend.”

“Well, sir, you will only get your deserts.”

“Indeed!”

“When one has the honour of being a savant as you are, sir, one should not expose one’s self to — — ”

Conseil had not time to finish his compliment. In the midst of general silence a voice had just been heard. It was the voice of Ned Land shouting:

“Look out there! The very thing we are looking for — on our weather beam!”

CHAPTER VI

AT FULL STEAM

At this cry the whole ship's crew hurried towards the harpooner — commander, officers, masters, sailors, cabin boys; even the engineers left their engines, and the stokers their furnaces.

The order to stop her had been given, and the frigate now simply went on by her own momentum. The darkness was then profound, and, however good the Canadian's eyes were, I asked myself how he had managed to see, and what he had been able to see. My heart beat as if it would break. But Ned Land was not mistaken, and we all perceived the object he pointed to. At two cables' length from the Abraham Lincoln, on the starboard quarter, the sea seemed to be illuminated all over. It was not a mere phosphoric phenomenon. The monster emerged some fathoms from the water, and then threw out that very intense but mysterious light mentioned in the report of several captains. This magnificent irradiation must have been produced by an agent of great SHINING power. The luminous part traced on the sea an immense oval, much elongated, the centre of which condensed a burning heat, whose overpowering brilliancy died out by successive gradations.

"It is only a massing of phosphoric particles," cried one of the officers.

"No, sir, certainly not," I replied. "That brightness is of an essentially electrical nature. Besides, see, see! it moves; it is moving forwards, backwards; it is darting towards us!"

A general cry arose from the frigate.

"Silence!" said the captain. "Up with the helm, reverse the engines."

The steam was shut off, and the Abraham Lincoln, beating to port, described a semicircle.

“Right the helm, go ahead,” cried the captain.

These orders were executed, and the frigate moved rapidly from the burning light.

I was mistaken. She tried to sheer off, but the supernatural animal approached with a velocity double her own.

We gasped for breath. Stupefaction more than fear made us dumb and motionless. The animal gained on us, sporting with the waves. It made the round of the frigate, which was then making fourteen knots, and enveloped it with its electric rings like luminous dust.

Then it moved away two or three miles, leaving a phosphorescent track, like those volumes of steam that the express trains leave behind. All at once from the dark line of the horizon whither it retired to gain its momentum, the monster rushed suddenly towards the Abraham Lincoln with alarming rapidity, stopped suddenly about twenty feet from the hull, and died out — not diving under the water, for its brilliancy did not abate — but suddenly, and as if the source of this brilliant emanation was exhausted. Then it reappeared on the other side of the vessel, as if it had turned and slid under the hull. Any moment a collision might have occurred which would have been fatal to us. However, I was astonished at the manoeuvres of the frigate. She fled and did not attack.

On the captain’s face, generally so impassive, was an expression of unaccountable astonishment.

“Mr. Aronnax,” he said, “I do not know with what formidable being I have to deal, and I will not imprudently risk my frigate in the midst of this darkness. Besides, how attack this unknown thing, how defend one’s self from it? Wait for daylight, and the scene will change.”

“You have no further doubt, captain, of the nature of the animal?”

“No, sir; it is evidently a gigantic narwhal, and an electric one.”

“Perhaps,” added I, “one can only approach it with a torpedo.”

“Undoubtedly,” replied the captain, “if it possesses such dreadful power, it is the most terrible animal that ever was created. That is why, sir, I must be on my guard.”

The crew were on their feet all night. No one thought of sleep. The Abraham Lincoln, not being able to struggle with such velocity, had moderated its pace, and sailed at half speed. For its part, the narwhal, imitating the frigate, let the waves rock it at will, and seemed decided not to leave the scene of the struggle. Towards midnight, however, it disappeared, or, to use a more appropriate term, it “died out” like a large glow-worm. Had it fled? One could only fear, not hope it. But at seven minutes to one o’clock in the morning a deafening whistling was heard, like that produced by a body of water rushing with great violence.

The captain, Ned Land, and I were then on the poop, eagerly peering through the profound darkness.

“Ned Land,” asked the commander, “you have often heard the roaring of whales?”

“Often, sir; but never such whales the sight of which brought me in two thousand dollars. If I can only approach within four harpoons’ length of it!”

“But to approach it,” said the commander, “I ought to put a whaler at your disposal?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“That will be trifling with the lives of my men.”

“And mine too,” simply said the harpooner.

Towards two o’clock in the morning, the burning light reappeared, not less intense, about five miles to windward of the Abraham Lincoln. Notwithstanding the distance, and the noise of the wind and sea, one heard distinctly the loud strokes of the animal’s tail, and even its panting breath. It seemed that, at the moment that the enormous narwhal had come to take breath at the surface of the water, the air was engulfed in its lungs, like the steam in the vast cylinders of a machine of two thousand horse-power.

“Hum!” thought I, “a whale with the strength of a cavalry regiment would be a pretty whale!”

We were on the qui vive till daylight, and prepared for the combat. The fishing implements were laid along the hammock nettings. The second lieutenant loaded the blunder busses, which could throw harpoons to the distance of a mile, and long duck-guns, with explosive bullets, which inflicted mortal wounds even to the most terrible animals. Ned Land contented himself with sharpening his harpoon — a terrible weapon in his hands.

At six o’clock day began to break; and, with the first glimmer of light, the electric light of the narwhal disappeared. At seven o’clock the day was sufficiently advanced, but a very thick sea fog obscured our view, and the best spy glasses could not pierce it. That caused disappointment and anger.

I climbed the mizzen-mast. Some officers were already perched on the mast-heads. At eight o’clock the fog lay heavily on the waves, and its thick scrolls rose little by little. The horizon grew wider and clearer at the same time. Suddenly, just as on the day before, Ned Land’s voice was heard:

“The thing itself on the port quarter!” cried the harpooner.

Every eye was turned towards the point indicated. There, a mile and a half from the frigate, a long blackish body emerged a yard above the waves. Its tail, violently agitated, produced a considerable eddy. Never did a tail beat the sea with such violence. An immense track, of dazzling whiteness, marked the passage of the animal, and described a long curve.

The frigate approached the cetacean. I examined it thoroughly.

The reports of the Shannon and of the Helvetia had rather exaggerated its size, and I estimated its length at only two hundred and fifty feet. As to its dimensions, I could only conjecture them to be admirably proportioned. While I watched this phenomenon, two jets of steam and water were ejected from its vents, and rose to the height of 120 feet; thus I ascertained its way of breathing. I concluded definitely that it belonged to the vertebrate branch, class mammalia.

The crew waited impatiently for their chief’s orders. The latter, after having observed the animal attentively, called the engineer. The engineer ran to him.

“Sir,” said the commander, “you have steam up?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the engineer.

“Well, make up your fires and put on all steam.”

Three hurrahs greeted this order. The time for the struggle had arrived. Some moments after, the two funnels of the frigate vomited torrents of black smoke, and the bridge quaked under the trembling of the boilers.

The Abraham Lincoln, propelled by her wonderful screw, went straight at the animal. The latter allowed it to come within half a cable’s length; then, as if disdaining to dive, it took a little turn, and stopped a short distance off.

This pursuit lasted nearly three-quarters of an hour, without the frigate gaining two yards on the cetacean. It was quite evident that at that rate we should never come up with it.

“Well, Mr. Land,” asked the captain, “do you advise me to put the boats out to sea?”

“No, sir,” replied Ned Land; “because we shall not take that beast easily.”

“What shall we do then?”

“Put on more steam if you can, sir. With your leave, I mean to post myself under the bowsprit, and, if we get within harpooning distance, I shall throw my harpoon.”

“Go, Ned,” said the captain. “Engineer, put on more pressure.”

Ned Land went to his post. The fires were increased, the screw revolved forty-three times a minute, and the steam poured out of the valves. We heaved the log, and calculated that the Abraham Lincoln was going at the rate of 18 1/2 miles an hour.

But the accursed animal swam at the same speed.

For a whole hour the frigate kept up this pace, without gaining six feet. It was humiliating for one of the swiftest sailers in the American navy. A stubborn anger seized the crew; the sailors abused the monster, who, as before, disdained to answer them; the captain no longer contented himself with twisting his beard — he gnawed it.

The engineer was called again.

“You have turned full steam on?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the engineer.

The speed of the Abraham Lincoln increased. Its masts trembled down to their stepping holes, and the clouds of smoke could hardly find way out of the narrow funnels.

They heaved the log a second time.

“Well?” asked the captain of the man at the wheel.

“Nineteen miles and three-tenths, sir.”

“Clap on more steam.”

The engineer obeyed. The manometer showed ten degrees. But the cetacean grew warm itself, no doubt; for without straining itself, it made 19 3/10 miles.

What a pursuit! No, I cannot describe the emotion that vibrated through me. Ned Land kept his post, harpoon in hand. Several times the animal let us gain upon it. — ”We shall catch it! we shall catch it!” cried the Canadian. But just as he was going to strike, the cetacean stole away with a rapidity that could not be estimated at less than thirty miles an hour, and even during our maximum of speed, it bullied the frigate, going round and round it. A cry of fury broke from everyone!

At noon we were no further advanced than at eight o’clock in the morning.

The captain then decided to take more direct means.

“Ah!” said he, “that animal goes quicker than the Abraham Lincoln. Very well! we will see whether it will escape these conical bullets. Send your men to the forecastle, sir.”

The forecastle gun was immediately loaded and slewed round. But the shot passed some feet above the cetacean, which was half a mile off.

“Another, more to the right,” cried the commander, “and five dollars to whoever will hit that infernal beast.”

An old gunner with a grey beard — that I can see now — with steady eye and grave face, went up to the gun and took a long aim. A loud report was heard, with which were mingled the cheers of the crew.

The bullet did its work; it hit the animal, and, sliding off the rounded surface, was lost in two miles depth of sea.

The chase began again, and the captain, leaning towards me, said:

“I will pursue that beast till my frigate bursts up.”

“Yes,” answered I; “and you will be quite right to do it.”

I wished the beast would exhaust itself, and not be insensible to fatigue like a steam engine. But it was of no use. Hours passed, without its showing any signs of exhaustion.

However, it must be said in praise of the Abraham Lincoln that she struggled on indefatigably. I cannot reckon the distance she made under three hundred miles during this unlucky day, November the 6th. But night came on, and overshadowed the rough ocean.

Now I thought our expedition was at an end, and that we should never again see the extraordinary animal. I was mistaken. At ten minutes to eleven in the evening, the electric light reappeared three miles to windward of the frigate, as pure, as intense as during the preceding night.

The narwhal seemed motionless; perhaps, tired with its day’s work, it slept, letting itself float with the undulation of the waves. Now was a chance of which the captain resolved to take advantage.

He gave his orders. The Abraham Lincoln kept up half steam, and advanced cautiously so as not to awake its adversary. It is no rare thing to meet in the middle of the ocean whales so sound asleep that they can be successfully attacked, and Ned Land had harpooned more than one during its sleep. The Canadian went to take his place again under the bowsprit.

The frigate approached noiselessly, stopped at two cables’ lengths from the animal, and following its track. No one breathed; a deep silence reigned on the bridge. We were not a hundred feet from the burning focus, the light of which increased and dazzled our eyes.

At this moment, leaning on the forecastle bulwark, I saw below me Ned Land grappling the martingale in one hand, brandishing his terrible harpoon in the other, scarcely twenty feet from the motionless animal. Suddenly his arm straightened, and the harpoon was thrown; I heard the sonorous stroke of the weapon, which seemed to have struck a hard body. The electric light went out suddenly, and two enormous waterspouts broke over the bridge of the frigate, rushing like a torrent from stem to stern, overthrowing men, and breaking the lashings of the spars. A fearful shock followed, and, thrown over the rail without having time to stop myself, I fell into the sea.

CHAPTER VII

AN UNKNOWN SPECIES OF WHALE

This unexpected fall so stunned me that I have no clear recollection of my sensations at the time. I was at first drawn down to a depth of about twenty feet. I am a good swimmer (though without pretending to rival Byron or Edgar Poe, who were masters of the art), and in that plunge I did not lose my presence of mind. Two vigorous strokes brought me to the surface of the water. My first care was to look for the frigate. Had the crew seen me disappear? Had the Abraham Lincoln veered round? Would the captain put out a boat? Might I hope to be saved?

The darkness was intense. I caught a glimpse of a black mass disappearing in the east, its beacon lights dying out in the distance. It was the frigate! I was lost.

“Help, help!” I shouted, swimming towards the Abraham Lincoln in desperation.

My clothes encumbered me; they seemed glued to my body, and paralysed my movements.

I was sinking! I was suffocating!

“Help!”

This was my last cry. My mouth filled with water; I struggled against being drawn down the abyss. Suddenly my clothes were seized by a strong hand, and I felt myself quickly drawn up to the surface of the sea; and I heard, yes, I heard these words pronounced in my ear:

“If master would be so good as to lean on my shoulder, master would swim with much greater ease.”

I seized with one hand my faithful Conseil’s arm.

“Is it you?” said I, “you?”

“Myself,” answered Conseil; “and waiting master’s orders.”

“That shock threw you as well as me into the sea?”

“No; but, being in my master’s service, I followed him.”

The worthy fellow thought that was but natural.

“And the frigate?” I asked.

“The frigate?” replied Conseil, turning on his back; “I think that master had better not count too much on her.”

“You think so?”

“I say that, at the time I threw myself into the sea, I heard the men at the wheel say, `The screw and the rudder are broken.’

“Broken?”

“Yes, broken by the monster’s teeth. It is the only injury the Abraham Lincoln has sustained. But it is a bad look-out for us — she no longer answers her helm.”

“Then we are lost!”

“Perhaps so,” calmly answered Conseil. “However, we have still several hours before us, and one can do a good deal in some hours.”

Conseil’s imperturbable coolness set me up again. I swam more vigorously; but, cramped by my clothes, which stuck to me like a leaden weight, I felt great difficulty in bearing up. Conseil saw this.

“Will master let me make a slit?” said he; and, slipping an open knife under my clothes, he ripped them up from top to bottom very rapidly. Then he cleverly slipped them off me, while I swam for both of us.

Then I did the same for Conseil, and we continued to swim near to each other.

Nevertheless, our situation was no less terrible. Perhaps our disappearance had not been noticed; and, if it had been, the frigate could not tack, being without its helm. Conseil argued on this supposition, and laid his plans accordingly. This quiet boy was perfectly self-possessed. We then decided that, as our only chance of safety was being picked up by the Abraham Lincoln’s boats, we ought to manage so as to wait for them as long as possible. I resolved then to husband our strength, so that both should not be exhausted at the same time; and this is how we managed: while one of us lay on our back, quite still, with arms crossed, and legs stretched out, the other would swim and push the other on in front. This towing business did not last more than ten minutes each; and relieving each other thus, we could swim on for some hours, perhaps till day-break. Poor chance! but hope is so firmly rooted in the heart of man! Moreover, there were two of us. Indeed I declare (though it may seem improbable) if I sought to destroy all hope — if I wished to despair, I could not.

The collision of the frigate with the cetacean had occurred about eleven o’clock in the evening before. I reckoned then we should have eight hours to swim before sunrise, an operation quite practicable if we relieved each other. The sea, very calm, was in our favour. Sometimes I tried to pierce the intense darkness that was only dispelled by the phosphorescence caused by our movements. I watched the luminous waves that broke over my hand, whose mirror-like surface was spotted with silvery rings. One might have said that we were in a bath of quicksilver.

Near one o’clock in the morning, I was seized with dreadful fatigue. My limbs stiffened under the strain of violent cramp. Conseil was obliged to keep me up, and our preservation devolved on him alone. I heard the poor boy pant; his breathing became short and hurried. I found that he could not keep up much longer.

“Leave me! leave me!” I said to him.

“Leave my master? Never!” replied he. “I would drown first.”

Just then the moon appeared through the fringes of a thick cloud that the wind was driving to the east. The surface of the sea glittered with its rays. This kindly light reanimated us. My head got better again. I looked at all points of the horizon. I saw the frigate! She was five miles from us, and looked like a dark mass, hardly discernible. But no boats!

I would have cried out. But what good would it have been at such a distance! My swollen lips could utter no sounds. Conseil could articulate some words, and I heard him repeat at intervals, “Help! help!”

Our movements were suspended for an instant; we listened. It might be only a singing in the ear, but it seemed to me as if a cry answered the cry from

Conseil.

“Did you hear?” I murmured.

“Yes! Yes!”

And Conseil gave one more despairing cry.

This time there was no mistake! A human voice responded to ours! Was it the voice of another unfortunate creature, abandoned in the middle of the ocean, some other victim of the shock sustained by the vessel? Or rather was it a boat from the frigate, that was hailing us in the darkness?

Conseil made a last effort, and, leaning on my shoulder, while I struck out in a desperate effort, he raised himself half out of the water, then fell back exhausted.

“What did you see?”

“I saw — — ” murmured he; “I saw — but do not talk — reserve all your strength!”

What had he seen? Then, I know not why, the thought of the monster came into my head for the first time! But that voice! The time is past for Jonahs to take refuge in whales’ bellies! However, Conseil was towing me again. He raised his head sometimes, looked before us, and uttered a cry of recognition, which was responded to by a voice that came nearer and nearer. I scarcely heard it. My strength was exhausted; my fingers stiffened; my hand afforded me support no longer; my mouth, convulsively opening, filled with salt water. Cold crept over me. I raised my head for the last time, then I sank.

At this moment a hard body struck me. I clung to it: then I felt that I was being drawn up, that I was brought to the surface of the water, that my chest collapsed — I fainted.

It is certain that I soon came to, thanks to the vigorous rubbings that I received. I half opened my eyes.

“Conseil!” I murmured.

“Does master call me?” asked Conseil.

Just then, by the waning light of the moon which was sinking down to the horizon, I saw a face which was not Conseil’s and which I immediately recognised.

“Ned!” I cried.

“The same, sir, who is seeking his prize!” replied the Canadian.

“Were you thrown into the sea by the shock to the frigate?”

“Yes, Professor; but more fortunate than you, I was able to find a footing almost directly upon a floating island.”

“An island?”

“Or, more correctly speaking, on our gigantic narwhal.”

“Explain yourself, Ned!”

“Only I soon found out why my harpoon had not entered its skin and was blunted.”

“Why, Ned, why?”

“Because, Professor, that beast is made of sheet iron.”

The Canadian’s last words produced a sudden revolution in my brain. I wriggled myself quickly to the top of the being, or object, half out of the water, which served us for a refuge. I kicked it. It was evidently a hard, impenetrable body, and not the soft substance that forms the bodies of the great marine mammalia. But this hard body might be a bony covering, like that of the antediluvian animals; and I should be free to class this monster among amphibious reptiles, such as tortoises or alligators.

Well, no! the blackish back that supported me was smooth, polished, without scales. The blow produced a metallic sound; and, incredible though it may be, it seemed, I might say, as if it was made of riveted plates.

There was no doubt about it! This monster, this natural phenomenon that had puzzled the learned world, and over thrown and misled the imagination of seamen of both hemispheres, it must be owned was a still more astonishing phenomenon, inasmuch as it was a simply human construction.

We had no time to lose, however. We were lying upon the back of a sort of submarine boat, which appeared (as far as I could judge) like a huge fish of steel. Ned Land’s mind was made up on this point. Conseil and I could only agree with him.

Just then a bubbling began at the back of this strange thing (which was evidently propelled by a screw), and it began to move. We had only just time to seize hold of the upper part, which rose about seven feet out of the water, and happily its speed was not great.

“As long as it sails horizontally,” muttered Ned Land, “I do not mind; but, if it takes a fancy to dive, I would not give two straws for my life.”

The Canadian might have said still less. It became really necessary to communicate with the beings, whatever they were, shut up inside the machine. I searched all over the outside for an aperture, a panel, or a manhole, to use a technical expression; but the lines of the iron rivets, solidly driven into the joints of the iron plates, were clear and uniform. Besides, the moon disappeared then, and left us in total darkness.

At last this long night passed. My indistinct remembrance prevents my describing all the impressions it made. I can only recall one circumstance. During some lulls of the wind and sea, I fancied I heard several times vague sounds, a sort of fugitive harmony produced by words of command. What was, then, the mystery of this submarine craft, of which the whole world vainly sought an explanation? What kind of beings existed in this strange boat? What mechanical agent caused its prodigious speed?

Daybreak appeared. The morning mists surrounded us, but they soon cleared off. I was about to examine the hull, which formed on deck a kind of horizontal platform, when I felt it gradually sinking.

“Oh! confound it!” cried Ned Land, kicking the resounding plate. “Open, you inhospitable rascals!”

Happily the sinking movement ceased. Suddenly a noise, like iron works violently pushed aside, came from the interior of the boat. One iron plate was moved, a man appeared, uttered an odd cry, and disappeared immediately.

Some moments after, eight strong men, with masked faces, appeared noiselessly, and drew us down into their formidable machine.

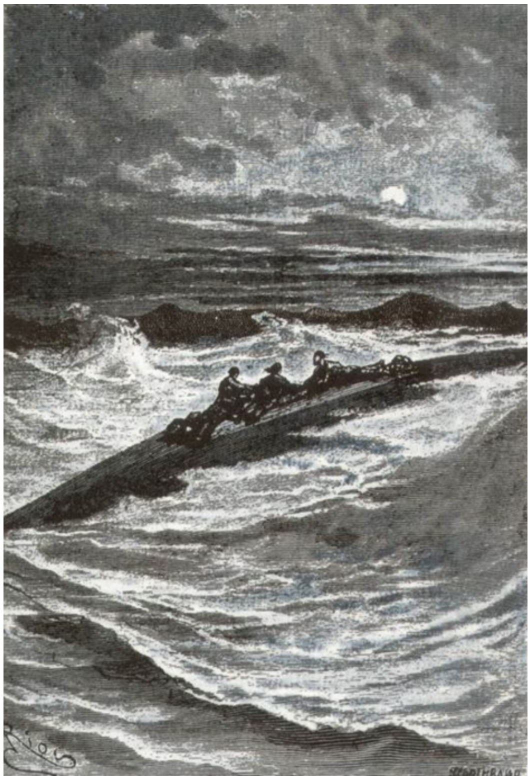

CHAPTER VIII

MOBILIS IN MOBILI

This forcible abduction, so roughly carried out, was accomplished with the rapidity of lightning. I shivered all over. Whom had we to deal with? No doubt some new sort of pirates, who explored the sea in their own way. Hardly had the narrow panel closed upon me, when I was enveloped in darkness. My eyes, dazzled with the outer light, could distinguish nothing. I felt my naked feet cling to the rungs of an iron ladder. Ned Land and Conseil, firmly seized, followed me. At the bottom of the ladder, a door opened, and shut after us immediately with a bang.

We were alone. Where, I could not say, hardly imagine. All was black, and such a dense black that, after some minutes, my eyes had not been able to discern even the faintest glimmer.

Meanwhile, Ned Land, furious at these proceedings, gave free vent to his indignation.

“Confound it!” cried he, “here are people who come up to the Scotch for hospitality. They only just miss being cannibals. I should not be surprised at it, but I declare that they shall not eat me without my protesting.”

“Calm yourself, friend Ned, calm yourself,” replied Conseil, quietly. “Do not cry out before you are hurt. We are not quite done for yet.”

“Not quite,” sharply replied the Canadian, “but pretty near, at all events. Things look black. Happily, my bowie knife I have still, and I can always see well enough to use it. The first of these pirates who lays a hand on me — — ”

“Do not excite yourself, Ned,” I said to the harpooner, “and do not compromise us by useless violence. Who knows that they will not listen to us? Let us rather try to find out where we are.”

I groped about. In five steps I came to an iron wall, made of plates bolted together. Then turning back I struck against a wooden table, near which were ranged several stools. The boards of this prison were concealed under a thick mat, which deadened the noise of the feet. The bare walls revealed no trace of window or door. Conseil, going round the reverse way, met me, and we went back to the middle of the cabin, which measured about twenty feet by ten. As to its height, Ned Land, in spite of his own great height, could not measure it.

Half an hour had already passed without our situation being bettered, when the dense darkness suddenly gave way to extreme light. Our prison was suddenly lighted, that is to say, it became filled with a luminous matter, so strong that I could not bear it at first. In its whiteness and intensity I recognised that electric light which played round the submarine boat like a magnificent phenomenon of phosphorescence. After shutting my eyes involuntarily, I opened them, and saw that this luminous agent came from a half globe, unpolished, placed in the roof of the cabin.

“At last one can see,” cried Ned Land, who, knife in hand, stood on the defensive.

“Yes,” said I; “but we are still in the dark about ourselves.”

“Let master have patience,” said the imperturbable Conseil.

The sudden lighting of the cabin enabled me to examine it minutely. It only contained a table and five stools. The invisible door might be hermetically sealed. No noise was heard. All seemed dead in the interior of this boat. Did it move, did it float on the surface of the ocean, or did it dive into its depths? I could not guess.

A noise of bolts was now heard, the door opened, and two men appeared.

One was short, very muscular, broad-shouldered, with robust limbs, strong head, an abundance of black hair, thick moustache, a quick penetrating look, and the vivacity which characterises the population of Southern France.

The second stranger merits a more detailed description. I made out his prevailing qualities directly: self-confidence — because his head was well set on his shoulders, and his black eyes looked around with cold assurance; calmness — for his skin, rather pale, showed his coolness of blood; energy — evinced by the rapid contraction of his lofty brows; and courage — because his deep breathing denoted great power of lungs.

Whether this person was thirty-five or fifty years of age, I could not say. He was tall, had a large forehead, straight nose, a clearly cut mouth, beautiful teeth, with fine taper hands, indicative of a highly nervous temperament. This man was certainly the most admirable specimen I had ever met. One particular feature was his eyes, rather far from each other, and which could take in nearly a quarter of the horizon at once.

This faculty — (I verified it later) — gave him a range of vision far superior to Ned Land's. When this stranger fixed upon an object, his eyebrows met, his large eyelids closed around so as to contract the range of his vision, and he looked as if he magnified the objects lessened by distance, as if he pierced those sheets of water so opaque to our eyes, and as if he read the very depths of the seas.

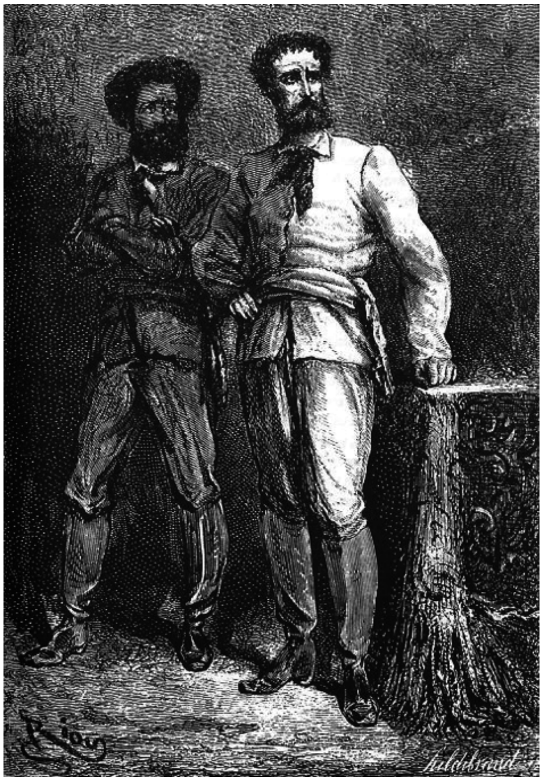

The two strangers, with caps made from the fur of the sea otter, and shod with sea boots of seal’s skin, were dressed in clothes of a particular texture, which allowed free movement of the limbs. The taller of the two, evidently the chief on board, examined us with great attention, without saying a word; then, turning to his companion, talked with him in an unknown tongue. It was a sonorous, harmonious, and flexible dialect, the vowels seeming to admit of very varied accentuation.

The other replied by a shake of the head, and added two or three perfectly incomprehensible words. Then he seemed to question me by a look.

I replied in good French that I did not know his language; but he seemed not to understand me, and my situation became more embarrassing.

“If master were to tell our story,” said Conseil, “perhaps these gentlemen may understand some words.”

I began to tell our adventures, articulating each syllable clearly, and without omitting one single detail. I announced our names and rank, introducing in person Professor Aronnax, his servant Conseil, and master Ned Land, the harpooner.

The man with the soft calm eyes listened to me quietly, even politely, and with extreme attention; but nothing in his countenance indicated that he had understood my story. When I finished, he said not a word.

There remained one resource, to speak English. Perhaps they would know this almost universal language. I knew it — as well as the German language — well enough to read it fluently, but not to speak it correctly. But, anyhow, we must make ourselves understood.

“Go on in your turn,” I said to the harpooner; “speak your best Anglo-Saxon, and try to do better than I.”

Ned did not beg off, and recommenced our story.

To his great disgust, the harpooner did not seem to have made himself more intelligible than I had. Our visitors did not stir. They evidently understood neither the language of England nor of France.

Very much embarrassed, after having vainly exhausted our speaking resources, I knew not what part to take, when Conseil said:

“If master will permit me, I will relate it in German.”

But in spite of the elegant terms and good accent of the narrator, the German language had no success. At last, nonplussed, I tried to remember my first lessons, and to narrate our adventures in Latin, but with no better success. This last attempt being of no avail, the two strangers exchanged some words in their unknown language, and retired.

The door shut.

“It is an infamous shame,” cried Ned Land, who broke out for the twentieth time. “We speak to those rogues in French, English, German, and Latin, and not one of them has the politeness to answer!”

“Calm yourself,” I said to the impetuous Ned; “anger will do no good.”

“But do you see, Professor,” replied our irascible companion, “that we shall absolutely die of hunger in this iron cage?”

“Bah!” said Conseil, philosophically; “we can hold out some time yet.”

“My friends,” I said, “we must not despair. We have been worse off than this. Do me the favour to wait a little before forming an opinion upon the commander and crew of this boat.”

“My opinion is formed,” replied Ned Land, sharply. “They are rascals.”

“Good! and from what country?”

“From the land of rogues!”

“My brave Ned, that country is not clearly indicated on the map of the world; but I admit that the nationality of the two strangers is hard to determine. Neither English, French, nor German, that is quite certain. However, I am inclined to think that the commander and his companion were born in low latitudes. There is southern blood in them. But I cannot decide by their appearance whether they are Spaniards, Turks, Arabians, or Indians. As to their language, it is quite incomprehensible."

"There is the disadvantage of not knowing all languages," said Conseil, "or the disadvantage of not having one universal language."

As he said these words, the door opened. A steward entered. He brought us clothes, coats and trousers, made of a stuff I did not know. I hastened to dress myself, and my companions followed my example. During that time, the steward — dumb, perhaps deaf — had arranged the table, and laid three plates.

"This is something like!" said Conseil.

"Bah!" said the angry harpooner, "what do you suppose they eat here? Tortoise liver, filleted shark, and beef steaks from seadogs."

"We shall see," said Conseil.

The dishes, of bell metal, were placed on the table, and we took our places. Undoubtedly we had to do with civilised people, and, had it not been for the electric light which flooded us, I could have fancied I was in the dining-room of the Adelphi Hotel at Liverpool, or at the Grand Hotel in Paris. I must say, however, that there was neither bread nor wine. The water was fresh and clear, but it was water and did not suit Ned Land's taste. Amongst the dishes which were brought to us, I recognised several fish delicately dressed; but of some, although excellent, I could give no opinion, neither could I tell to what kingdom they belonged, whether animal or vegetable. As to the dinner-service, it was elegant, and in perfect taste. Each utensil — spoon, fork, knife, plate — had a letter engraved on it, with a motto above it, of which this is an exact facsimile:

MOBILIS IN MOBILI N

The letter N was no doubt the initial of the name of the enigmatical person who commanded at the bottom of the seas.

Ned and Conseil did not reflect much. They devoured the food, and I did likewise. I was, besides, reassured as to our fate; and it seemed evident that our hosts would not let us die of want.

However, everything has an end, everything passes away, even the hunger of people who have not eaten for fifteen hours. Our appetites satisfied, we felt overcome with sleep.

“Faith! I shall sleep well,” said Conseil.

“So shall I,” replied Ned Land.

My two companions stretched themselves on the cabin carpet, and were soon sound asleep. For my own part, too many thoughts crowded my brain, too many insoluble questions pressed upon me, too many fancies kept my eyes half open. Where were we? What strange power carried us on? I felt — or rather fancied I felt — the machine sinking down to the lowest beds of the sea. Dreadful nightmares beset me; I saw in these mysterious asylums a world of unknown animals, amongst which this submarine boat seemed to be of the same kind, living, moving, and formidable as they. Then my brain grew calmer, my imagination wandered into vague unconsciousness, and I soon fell into a deep sleep.

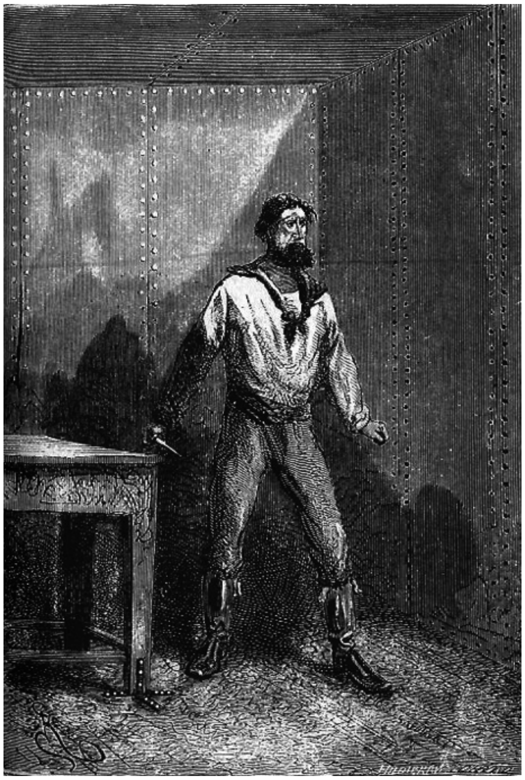

CHAPTER IX

NED LAND’S TEMPERS

How long we slept I do not know; but our sleep must have lasted long, for it rested us completely from our fatigues. I woke first. My companions had not moved, and were still stretched in their corner.

Hardly roused from my somewhat hard couch, I felt my brain freed, my mind clear. I then began an attentive examination of our cell. Nothing was changed inside. The prison was still a prison — the prisoners, prisoners. However, the steward, during our sleep, had cleared the table. I breathed with difficulty. The heavy air seemed to oppress my lungs. Although the cell was large, we had evidently consumed a great part of the oxygen that it contained. Indeed, each man consumes, in one hour, the oxygen contained in more than 176 pints of air, and this air, charged (as then) with a nearly equal quantity of carbonic acid, becomes unbreathable.

It became necessary to renew the atmosphere of our prison, and no doubt the whole in the submarine boat. That gave rise to a question in my mind. How would the commander of this floating dwelling-place proceed? Would he obtain air by chemical means, in getting by heat the oxygen contained in chlorate of potash, and in absorbing carbonic acid by caustic potash? Or — a more convenient, economical, and consequently more probable alternative — would he be satisfied to rise and take breath at the surface of the water, like a whale, and so renew for twenty-four hours the atmospheric provision?

In fact, I was already obliged to increase my respirations to eke out of this cell the little oxygen it contained, when suddenly I was refreshed by a current of pure air, and perfumed with saline emanations. It was an invigorating sea breeze, charged with iodine. I opened my mouth wide, and my lungs saturated themselves with fresh particles.

At the same time I felt the boat rolling. The iron-plated monster had evidently just risen to the surface of the ocean to breathe, after the fashion of whales. I found out from that the mode of ventilating the boat.

When I had inhaled this air freely, I sought the conduit pipe, which conveyed to us the beneficial whiff, and I was not long in finding it. Above the door was a ventilator, through which volumes of fresh air renewed the impoverished atmosphere of the cell.

I was making my observations, when Ned and Conseil awoke almost at the same time, under the influence of this reviving air. They rubbed their eyes, stretched themselves, and were on their feet in an instant.

“Did master sleep well?” asked Conseil, with his usual politeness.

“Very well, my brave boy. And you, Mr. Land?”

“Soundly, Professor. But, I don’t know if I am right or not, there seems to be a sea breeze!”

A seaman could not be mistaken, and I told the Canadian all that had passed during his sleep.

“Good!” said he. “That accounts for those roarings we heard, when the supposed narwhal sighted the Abraham Lincoln.”

“Quite so, Master Land; it was taking breath.”

"Only, Mr. Aronnax, I have no idea what o'clock it is, unless it is dinner-time."

"Dinner-time! my good fellow? Say rather breakfast-time, for we certainly have begun another day."

"So," said Conseil, "we have slept twenty-four hours?"

"That is my opinion."

"I will not contradict you," replied Ned Land. "But, dinner or breakfast, the steward will be welcome, whichever he brings."

"Master Land, we must conform to the rules on board, and I suppose our appetites are in advance of the dinner hour."

"That is just like you, friend Conseil," said Ned, impatiently. "You are never out of temper, always calm; you would return thanks before grace, and die of hunger rather than complain!"

Time was getting on, and we were fearfully hungry; and this time the steward did not appear. It was rather too long to leave us, if they really had good intentions towards us. Ned Land, tormented by the cravings of hunger, got still more angry; and, notwithstanding his promise, I dreaded an explosion when he found himself with one of the crew.

For two hours more Ned Land's temper increased; he cried, he shouted, but in vain. The walls were deaf. There was no sound to be heard in the boat; all was still as death. It did not move, for I should have felt the trembling motion of the hull under the influence of the screw. Plunged in the depths of the waters, it belonged no longer to earth: this silence was dreadful.

I felt terrified, Conseil was calm, Ned Land roared.

Just then a noise was heard outside. Steps sounded on the metal flags. The locks were turned, the door opened, and the steward appeared.

Before I could rush forward to stop him, the Canadian had thrown him down, and held him by the throat. The steward was choking under the grip of his powerful hand.

Conseil was already trying to unclasp the harpooner’s hand from his half-suffocated victim, and I was going to fly to the rescue, when suddenly I was nailed to the spot by hearing these words in French:

“Be quiet, Master Land; and you, Professor, will you be so good as to listen to me?”

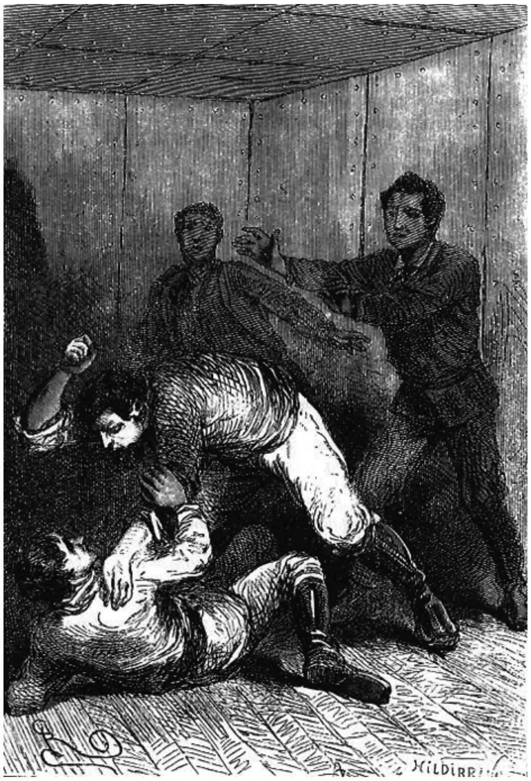

CHAPTER X

THE MAN OF THE SEAS

It was the commander of the vessel who thus spoke.

At these words, Ned Land rose suddenly. The steward, nearly strangled, tottered out on a sign from his master. But such was the power of the commander on board, that not a gesture betrayed the resentment which this man must have felt towards the Canadian. Conseil interested in spite of himself, I stupefied, awaited in silence the result of this scene.

The commander, leaning against the corner of a table with his arms folded, scanned us with profound attention. Did he hesitate to speak? Did he regret the words which he had just spoken in French? One might almost think so.

After some moments of silence, which not one of us dreamed of breaking, "Gentlemen," said he, in a calm and penetrating voice, "I speak French, English, German, and Latin equally well. I could, therefore, have answered you at our first interview, but I wished to know you first, then to reflect. The story told by each one, entirely agreeing in the main points, convinced me of your identity. I know now that chance has brought before me M. Pierre Aronnax, Professor of Natural History at the Museum of Paris, entrusted with a scientific mission abroad, Conseil, his servant, and Ned Land, of Canadian origin, harpooner on board the frigate Abraham Lincoln of the navy of the United States of America."

I bowed assent. It was not a question that the commander put to me. Therefore there was no answer to be made. This man expressed himself with perfect ease, without any accent. His sentences were well turned, his words clear, and his fluency of speech remarkable. Yet, I did not recognise in him a fellow-countryman.

He continued the conversation in these terms:

“You have doubtless thought, sir, that I have delayed long in paying you this second visit. The reason is that, your identity recognised, I wished to weigh maturely what part to act towards you. I have hesitated much. Most annoying circumstances have brought you into the presence of a man who has broken all the ties of humanity. You have come to trouble my existence.”

“Unintentionally!” said I.

“Unintentionally?” replied the stranger, raising his voice a little. “Was it unintentionally that the Abraham Lincoln pursued me all over the seas? Was it unintentionally that you took passage in this frigate? Was it unintentionally that your cannon-balls rebounded off the plating of my vessel? Was it unintentionally that Mr. Ned Land struck me with his harpoon?”

I detected a restrained irritation in these words. But to these recriminations I had a very natural answer to make, and I made it.

“Sir,” said I, “no doubt you are ignorant of the discussions which have taken place concerning you in America and Europe. You do not know that divers accidents, caused by collisions with your submarine machine, have excited public feeling in the two continents. I omit the theories without number by which it was sought to explain that of which you alone possess the secret. But you must understand that, in pursuing you over the high seas of the Pacific, the Abraham Lincoln believed itself to be chasing some powerful sea-monster, of which it was necessary to rid the ocean at any price.”

A half-smile curled the lips of the commander: then, in a calmer tone:

“M. Aronnax,” he replied, “dare you affirm that your frigate would not as soon have pursued and cannonaded a submarine boat as a monster?”

This question embarrassed me, for certainly Captain Farragut might not have hesitated. He might have thought it his duty to destroy a contrivance of this kind, as he would a gigantic narwhal.

“You understand then, sir,” continued the stranger, “that I have the right to treat you as enemies?”

I answered nothing, purposely. For what good would it be to discuss such a proposition, when force could destroy the best arguments?

“I have hesitated some time,” continued the commander; “nothing obliged me to show you hospitality. If I chose to separate myself from you, I should have no interest in seeing you again; I could place you upon the deck of this vessel which has served you as a refuge, I could sink beneath the waters, and forget that you had ever existed. Would not that be my right?”

“It might be the right of a savage,” I answered, “but not that of a civilised man.”

“Professor,” replied the commander, quickly, “I am not what you call a civilised man! I have done with society entirely, for reasons which I alone have the right of appreciating. I do not, therefore, obey its laws, and I desire you never to allude to them before me again!”

This was said plainly. A flash of anger and disdain kindled in the eyes of the Unknown, and I had a glimpse of a terrible past in the life of this man. Not only had he put himself beyond the pale of human laws, but he had made himself independent of them, free in the strictest acceptation of the word, quite beyond their reach! Who then would dare to pursue him at the bottom of the sea, when, on its surface, he defied all attempts made against him?

What vessel could resist the shock of his submarine monitor? What cuirass, however thick, could withstand the blows of his spur? No man could demand from him an account of his actions; God, if he believed in one — his conscience, if he had one — were the sole judges to whom he was answerable.

These reflections crossed my mind rapidly, whilst the stranger personage was silent, absorbed, and as if wrapped up in himself. I regarded him with fear mingled with interest, as, doubtless, OEdiphus regarded the Sphinx.

After rather a long silence, the commander resumed the conversation.

“I have hesitated,” said he, “but I have thought that my interest might be reconciled with that pity to which every human being has a right. You will remain on board my vessel, since fate has cast you there. You will be free; and, in exchange for this liberty, I shall only impose one single condition. Your word of honour to submit to it will suffice.”

“Speak, sir,” I answered. “I suppose this condition is one which a man of honour may accept?”

“Yes, sir; it is this: It is possible that certain events, unforeseen, may oblige me to consign you to your cabins for some hours or some days, as the case may be. As I desire never to use violence, I expect from you, more than all the others, a passive obedience. In thus acting, I take all the responsibility: I acquit you entirely, for I make it an impossibility for you to see what ought not to be seen. Do you accept this condition?”

Then things took place on board which, to say the least, were singular, and which ought not to be seen by people who were not placed beyond the pale of social laws. Amongst the surprises which the future was preparing for me, this might not be the least.

“We accept,” I answered; “only I will ask your permission, sir, to address one question to you — one only.”

“Speak, sir.”

“You said that we should be free on board.”

“Entirely.”

“I ask you, then, what you mean by this liberty?”

“Just the liberty to go, to come, to see, to observe even all that passes here save under rare circumstances — the liberty, in short, which we enjoy ourselves, my companions and I.”

It was evident that we did not understand one another.

“Pardon me, sir,” I resumed, “but this liberty is only what every prisoner has of pacing his prison. It cannot suffice us.”

“It must suffice you, however.”

“What! we must renounce for ever seeing our country, our friends, our relations again?”

“Yes, sir. But to renounce that unendurable worldly yoke which men believe to be liberty is not perhaps so painful as you think.”

“Well,” exclaimed Ned Land, “never will I give my word of honour not to try to escape.”

“I did not ask you for your word of honour, Master Land,” answered the commander, coldly.

“Sir,” I replied, beginning to get angry in spite of my self, “you abuse your situation towards us; it is cruelty.”

“No, sir, it is clemency. You are my prisoners of war. I keep you, when I could, by a word, plunge you into the depths of the ocean. You attacked me. You came to surprise a secret which no man in the world must penetrate — the secret of my whole existence. And you think that I am going to send you back to that world which must know me no more? Never! In retaining you, it is not you whom I guard — it is myself.”

These words indicated a resolution taken on the part of the commander, against which no arguments would prevail.

“So, sir,” I rejoined, “you give us simply the choice between life and death?”

“Simply.”

“My friends,” said I, “to a question thus put, there is nothing to answer. But no word of honour binds us to the master of this vessel.”

“None, sir,” answered the Unknown.

Then, in a gentler tone, he continued:

“Now, permit me to finish what I have to say to you. I know you, M. Aronnax. You and your companions will not, perhaps, have so much to complain of in the chance which has bound you to my fate. You will find amongst the books which are my favourite study the work which you have published on `the depths of the sea.’ I have often read it. You have carried out your work as far as terrestrial science permitted you. But you do not know all — you have not seen all. Let me tell you then, Professor, that you will not regret the time passed on board my vessel. You are going to visit the land of marvels.”

These words of the commander had a great effect upon me. I cannot deny it. My weak point was touched; and I forgot, for a moment, that the contemplation of these sublime subjects was not worth the loss of liberty. Besides, I trusted to the future to decide this grave question. So I contented myself with saying:

“By what name ought I to address you?”

“Sir,” replied the commander, “I am nothing to you but Captain Nemo; and you and your companions are nothing to me but the passengers of the Nautilus.”

Captain Nemo called. A steward appeared. The captain gave him his orders in that strange language which I did not understand. Then, turning towards the Canadian and Conseil:

“A repast awaits you in your cabin,” said he. “Be so good as to follow this man.

“And now, M. Aronnax, our breakfast is ready. Permit me to lead the way.”

“I am at your service, Captain.”

I followed Captain Nemo; and as soon as I had passed through the door, I found myself in a kind of passage lighted by electricity, similar to the waist of a ship. After we had proceeded a dozen yards, a second door opened before me.

I then entered a dining-room, decorated and furnished in severe taste. High oaken sideboards, inlaid with ebony, stood at the two extremities of the room, and upon their shelves glittered china, porcelain, and glass of inestimable value. The plate on the table sparkled in the rays which the luminous ceiling shed around, while the light was tempered and softened by exquisite paintings.

In the centre of the room was a table richly laid out. Captain Nemo indicated the place I was to occupy.

The breakfast consisted of a certain number of dishes, the contents of which were furnished by the sea alone; and I was ignorant of the nature and mode of preparation of some of them. I acknowledged that they were good, but they had a peculiar flavour, which I easily became accustomed to. These different aliments appeared to me to be rich in phosphorus, and I thought they must have a marine origin.

Captain Nemo looked at me. I asked him no questions, but he guessed my thoughts, and answered of his own accord the questions which I was burning to address to him.

“The greater part of these dishes are unknown to you,” he said to me. “However, you may partake of them without fear. They are wholesome and nourishing. For a long time I have renounced the food of the earth, and I am never ill now. My crew, who are healthy, are fed on the same food.”

“So,” said I, “all these eatables are the produce of the sea?”

“Yes, Professor, the sea supplies all my wants. Sometimes I cast my nets in tow, and I draw them in ready to break. Sometimes I hunt in the midst of this element, which appears to be inaccessible to man, and quarry the game which dwells in my submarine forests. My flocks, like those of Neptune’s old shepherds, graze fearlessly in the immense prairies of the ocean. I have a vast property there, which I cultivate myself, and which is always sown by the hand of the Creator of all things.”

“I can understand perfectly, sir, that your nets furnish excellent fish for your table; I can understand also that you hunt aquatic game in your submarine forests; but I cannot understand at all how a particle of meat, no matter how small, can figure in your bill of fare.”

“This, which you believe to be meat, Professor, is nothing else than fillet of turtle. Here are also some dolphins’ livers, which you take to be ragout of pork. My cook is a clever fellow, who excels in dressing these various products of the ocean. Taste all these dishes. Here is a preserve of sea-cucumber, which a Malay would declare to be unrivalled in the world; here is a cream, of which the milk has been furnished by the cetacea, and the sugar by the great fucus of the North Sea; and, lastly, permit me to offer you some preserve of anemones, which is equal to that of the most delicious fruits.”

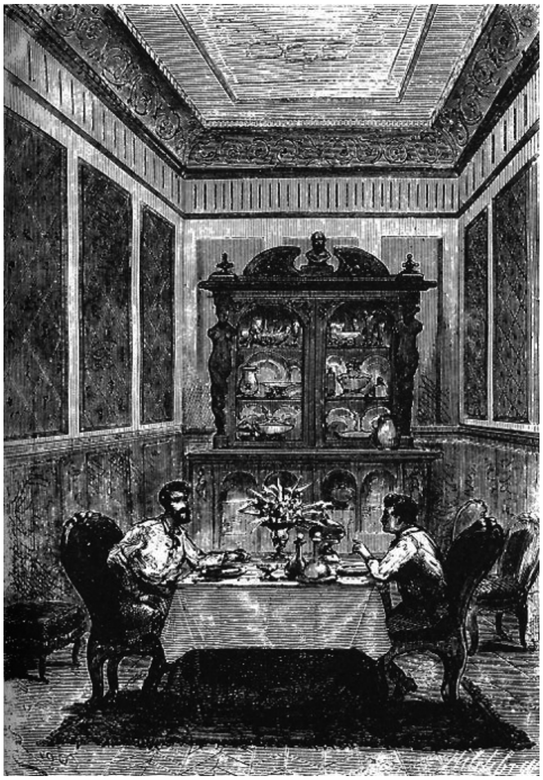

I tasted, more from curiosity than as a connoisseur, whilst Captain Nemo enchanted me with his extraordinary stories.

“You like the sea, Captain?”

“Yes; I love it! The sea is everything. It covers seven tenths of the terrestrial globe. Its breath is pure and healthy. It is an immense desert, where man is never lonely, for he feels life stirring on all sides. The sea is only the embodiment of a supernatural and wonderful existence. It is nothing but love and emotion; it is the `Living Infinite,’ as one of your poets has said. In fact, Professor, Nature manifests herself in it by her three kingdoms — mineral, vegetable, and animal. The sea is the vast reservoir of Nature. The globe began with sea, so to speak; and who knows if it will not end with it? In it is supreme tranquillity. The sea does not belong to despots. Upon its surface men can still exercise unjust laws, fight, tear one another to pieces, and be carried away with terrestrial horrors. But at thirty feet below its level, their reign ceases, their influence is quenched, and their power disappears. Ah! sir, live — live in the bosom of the waters! There only is independence! There I recognise no masters! There I am free!”

Captain Nemo suddenly became silent in the midst of this enthusiasm, by which he was quite carried away. For a few moments he paced up and down, much agitated. Then he became more calm, regained his accustomed coldness of expression, and turning towards me:

“Now, Professor,” said he, “if you wish to go over the Nautilus, I am at your service.”

Captain Nemo rose. I followed him. A double door, contrived at the back of the dining-room, opened, and I entered a room equal in dimensions to that which I had just quitted.

It was a library. High pieces of furniture, of black violet ebony inlaid with brass, supported upon their wide shelves a great number of books uniformly bound. They followed the shape of the room, terminating at the lower part in huge divans, covered with brown leather, which were curved, to afford the greatest comfort. Light movable desks, made to slide in and out at will, allowed one to rest one’s book while reading. In the centre stood an immense table, covered with pamphlets, amongst which were some newspapers, already of old date. The electric light flooded everything; it was shed from four unpolished globes half sunk in the volutes of the ceiling. I looked with real admiration at this room, so ingeniously fitted up, and I could scarcely believe my eyes.

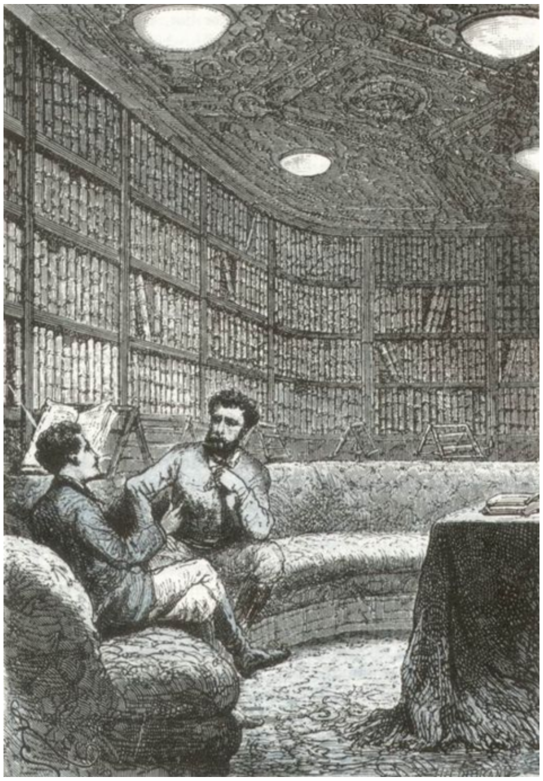

“Captain Nemo,” said I to my host, who had just thrown himself on one of the divans, “this is a library which would do honour to more than one of the continental palaces, and I am absolutely astounded when I consider that it can follow you to the bottom of the seas.”

“Where could one find greater solitude or silence, Professor?” replied Captain Nemo. “Did your study in the Museum afford you such perfect quiet?”

“No, sir; and I must confess that it is a very poor one after yours. You must have six or seven thousand volumes here.”

“Twelve thousand, M. Aronnax. These are the only ties which bind me to the earth. But I had done with the world on the day when my Nautilus plunged for the first time beneath the waters. That day I bought my last volumes, my last pamphlets, my last papers, and from that time I wish to think that men no longer think or write. These books, Professor, are at your service besides, and you can make use of them freely."

I thanked Captain Nemo, and went up to the shelves of the library. Works on science, morals, and literature abounded in every language; but I did not see one single work on political economy; that subject appeared to be strictly proscribed. Strange to say, all these books were irregularly arranged, in whatever language they were written; and this medley proved that the Captain of the Nautilus must have read indiscriminately the books which he took up by chance.

"Sir," said I to the Captain, "I thank you for having placed this library at my disposal. It contains treasures of science, and I shall profit by them."

"This room is not only a library," said Captain Nemo, "it is also a smoking-room."

"A smoking-room!" I cried. "Then one may smoke on board?"

"Certainly."

"Then, sir, I am forced to believe that you have kept up a communication with Havannah."

"Not any," answered the Captain. "Accept this cigar, M. Aronnax; and, though it does not come from Havannah, you will be pleased with it, if you are a connoisseur."

I took the cigar which was offered me; its shape recalled the London ones, but it seemed to be made of leaves of gold. I lighted it at a little brazier, which was supported upon an elegant bronze stem, and drew the first whiffs with the delight of a lover of smoking who has not smoked for two days.

“It is excellent, but it is not tobacco.”

“No!” answered the Captain, “this tobacco comes neither from Havannah nor from the East. It is a kind of sea-weed, rich in nicotine, with which the sea provides me, but somewhat sparingly.”

At that moment Captain Nemo opened a door which stood opposite to that by which I had entered the library, and I passed into an immense drawing-room splendidly lighted.

It was a vast, four-sided room, thirty feet long, eighteen wide, and fifteen high. A luminous ceiling, decorated with light arabesques, shed a soft clear light over all the marvels accumulated in this museum. For it was in fact a museum, in which an intelligent and prodigal hand had gathered all the treasures of nature and art, with the artistic confusion which distinguishes a painter’s studio.

Thirty first-rate pictures, uniformly framed, separated by bright drapery, ornamented the walls, which were hung with tapestry of severe design. I saw works of great value, the greater part of which I had admired in the special collections of Europe, and in the exhibitions of paintings. The several schools of the old masters were represented by a Madonna of Raphael, a Virgin of Leonardo da Vinci, a nymph of Corregio, a woman of Titan, an Adoration of Veronese, an Assumption of Murillo, a portrait of Holbein, a monk of Velasquez, a martyr of Ribera, a fair of Rubens, two Flemish landscapes of Teniers, three little “genre” pictures of Gerard Dow, Metsu, and Paul Potter, two specimens of Gericault and Prudhon, and some sea-pieces of Backhuysen and Vernet. Amongst the works of modern painters were pictures with the signatures of Delacroix, Ingres, Decamps, Troyon, Meissonier, Daubigny, etc.; and some admirable statues in marble and bronze, after the finest antique models, stood upon pedestals in the corners of this magnificent museum. Amazement, as the Captain of the Nautilus had predicted, had already begun to take possession of me.

“Professor,” said this strange man, “you must excuse the unceremonious way in which I receive you, and the disorder of this room.”

“Sir,” I answered, “without seeking to know who you are, I recognise in you an artist.”

“An amateur, nothing more, sir. Formerly I loved to collect these beautiful works created by the hand of man. I sought them greedily, and ferreted them out indefatigably, and I have been able to bring together some objects of great value. These are my last souvenirs of that world which is dead to me. In my eyes, your modern artists are already old; they have two or three thousand years of existence; I confound them in my own mind. Masters have no age.”

“And these musicians?” said I, pointing out some works of Weber, Rossini, Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, Meyerbeer, Herold, Wagner, Auber, Gounod, and a number of others, scattered over a large model piano-organ which occupied one of the panels of the drawing-room.

“These musicians,” replied Captain Nemo, “are the contemporaries of Orpheus; for in the memory of the dead all chronological differences are effaced; and I am dead, Professor; as much dead as those of your friends who are sleeping six feet under the earth!”

Captain Nemo was silent, and seemed lost in a profound reverie. I contemplated him with deep interest, analysing in silence the strange expression of his countenance. Leaning on his elbow against an angle of a costly mosaic table, he no longer saw me, — he had forgotten my presence.

I did not disturb this reverie, and continued my observation of the curiosities which enriched this drawing-room.

Under elegant glass cases, fixed by copper rivets, were classed and labelled the most precious productions of the sea which had ever been presented to the eye of a naturalist. My delight as a professor may be conceived.

The division containing the zoophytes presented the most curious specimens of the two groups of polypi and echinodermes. In the first group, the tubipores, were gorgones arranged like a fan, soft sponges of Syria, ises of the Moluccas, pennatules, an admirable virgularia of the Norwegian seas, variegated unbellulairae, alcyonariae, a whole series of madrepores, which my master Milne Edwards has so cleverly classified, amongst which I remarked some wonderful flabellinae oculinae of the Island of Bourbon, the “Neptune’s car” of the Antilles, superb varieties of corals — in short, every species of those curious polypi of which entire islands are formed, which will one day become continents. Of the echinodermes, remarkable for their coating of spines, asteri, sea-stars, pantacrinae, comatules, asterophons, echini, holothuri, etc. represented individually a complete collection of this group.

A somewhat nervous conchyliologist would certainly have fainted before other more numerous cases, in which were classified the specimens of molluscs. It was a collection of inestimable value, which time fails me to describe minutely. Amongst these specimens I will quote from memory only the elegant royal hammer-fish of the Indian Ocean, whose regular white spots stood out brightly on a red and brown ground, an imperial spondyle, bright-coloured, bristling with spines, a rare specimen in the

European museums — (I estimated its value at not less than L1000); a common hammer-fish of the seas of New Holland, which is only procured with difficulty; exotic buccardia of Senegal; fragile white bivalve shells, which a breath might shatter like a soap-bubble; several varieties of the aspirgillum of Java, a kind of calcareous tube, edged with leafy folds, and much debated by amateurs; a whole series of trochi, some a greenish-yellow, found in the American seas, others a reddish-brown, natives of Australian waters; others from the Gulf of Mexico, remarkable for their imbricated shell; stellari found in the Southern Seas; and last, the rarest of all, the magnificent spur of New Zealand; and every description of delicate and fragile shells to which science has given appropriate names.

Apart, in separate compartments, were spread out chaplets of pearls of the greatest beauty, which reflected the electric light in little sparks of fire; pink pearls, torn from the pinna-marina of the Red Sea; green pearls of the haliotyde iris; yellow, blue and black pearls, the curious productions of the divers molluscs of every ocean, and certain mussels of the water-courses of the North; lastly, several specimens of inestimable value which had been gathered from the rarest pintadines. Some of these pearls were larger than a pigeon’s egg, and were worth as much, and more than that which the traveller Tavernier sold to the Shah of Persia for three millions, and surpassed the one in the possession of the Imaum of Muscat, which I had believed to be unrivalled in the world.

Therefore, to estimate the value of this collection was simply impossible. Captain Nemo must have expended millions in the acquirement of these various specimens, and I was thinking what source he could have drawn from, to have been able thus to gratify his fancy for collecting, when I was interrupted by these words:

“You are examining my shells, Professor? Unquestionably they must be interesting to a naturalist; but for me they have a far greater charm, for I have collected them all with my own hand, and there is not a sea on the face of the globe which has escaped my researches.”

“I can understand, Captain, the delight of wandering about in the midst of such riches. You are one of those who have collected their treasures themselves. No museum in Europe possesses such a collection of the produce of the ocean. But if I exhaust all my admiration upon it, I shall have none left for the vessel which carries it. I do not wish to pry into your secrets: but I must confess that this Nautilus, with the motive power which is confined in it, the contrivances which enable it to be worked, the powerful agent which propels it, all excite my curiosity to the highest pitch. I see suspended on the walls of this room instruments of whose use I am ignorant.”

“You will find these same instruments in my own room, Professor, where I shall have much pleasure in explaining their use to you. But first come and inspect the cabin which is set apart for your own use. You must see how you will be accommodated on board the Nautilus.”

I followed Captain Nemo who, by one of the doors opening from each panel of the drawing-room, regained the waist. He conducted me towards the bow, and there I found, not a cabin, but an elegant room, with a bed, dressing-table, and several other pieces of excellent furniture.

I could only thank my host.

“Your room adjoins mine,” said he, opening a door, “and mine opens into the drawing-room that we have just quitted.”

I entered the Captain’s room: it had a severe, almost a monkish aspect. A small iron bedstead, a table, some articles for the toilet; the whole lighted by a skylight. No comforts, the strictest necessaries only.

Captain Nemo pointed to a seat.

“Be so good as to sit down,” he said. I seated myself, and he began thus:

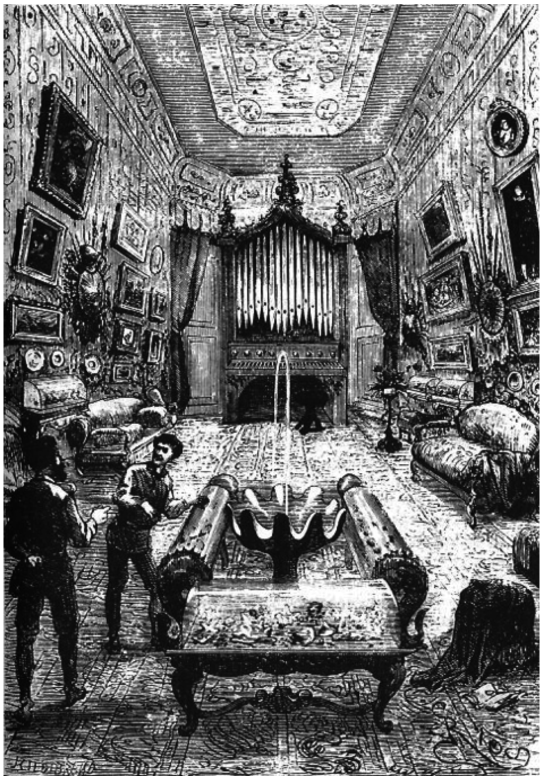

CHAPTER XI

ALL BY ELECTRICITY

“Sir,” said Captain Nemo, showing me the instruments hanging on the walls of his room, “here are the contrivances required for the navigation of the Nautilus. Here, as in the drawing-room, I have them always under my eyes, and they indicate my position and exact direction in the middle of the ocean. Some are known to you, such as the thermometer, which gives the internal temperature of the Nautilus; the barometer, which indicates the weight of the air and foretells the changes of the weather; the hygrometer, which marks the dryness of the atmosphere; the storm-glass, the contents of which, by decomposing, announce the approach of tempests; the compass, which guides my course; the sextant, which shows the latitude by the altitude of the sun; chronometers, by which I calculate the longitude; and glasses for day and night, which I use to examine the points of the horizon, when the Nautilus rises to the surface of the waves.”

“These are the usual nautical instruments,” I replied, “and I know the use of them. But these others, no doubt, answer to the particular requirements of the Nautilus. This dial with movable needle is a manometer, is it not?”

“It is actually a manometer. But by communication with the water, whose external pressure it indicates, it gives our depth at the same time.”

“And these other instruments, the use of which I cannot guess?”

“Here, Professor, I ought to give you some explanations. Will you be kind enough to listen to me?”

He was silent for a few moments, then he said:

“There is a powerful agent, obedient, rapid, easy, which conforms to every use, and reigns supreme on board my vessel. Everything is done by means of it. It lights, warms it, and is the soul of my mechanical apparatus. This agent is electricity.”

“Electricity?” I cried in surprise.

“Yes, sir.”

“Nevertheless, Captain, you possess an extreme rapidity of movement, which does not agree well with the power of electricity. Until now, its dynamic force has remained under restraint, and has only been able to produce a small amount of power.”

“Professor,” said Captain Nemo, “my electricity is not everybody’s. You know what sea-water is composed of. In a thousand grammes are found 96 1/2 per cent. of water, and about 2 2/3 per cent. of chloride of sodium; then, in a smaller quantity, chlorides of magnesium and of potassium, bromide of magnesium, sulphate of magnesia, sulphate and carbonate of lime. You see, then, that chloride of sodium forms a large part of it. So it is this sodium that I extract from the sea-water, and of which I compose my ingredients. I owe all to the ocean; it produces electricity, and electricity gives heat, light, motion, and, in a word, life to the Nautilus.”

“But not the air you breathe?”

“Oh! I could manufacture the air necessary for my consumption, but it is useless, because I go up to the surface of the water when I please. However, if electricity does not furnish me with air to breathe, it works at least the powerful pumps that are stored in spacious reservoirs, and which enable me to prolong at need, and as long as I will, my stay in the depths of the sea. It gives a uniform and unintermittent light, which the sun does not. Now look at this clock; it is electrical, and goes with a regularity that defies the best chronometers. I have divided it into twenty-four hours, like the Italian clocks, because for me there is neither night nor day, sun nor moon, but only that factitious light that I take with me to the bottom of the sea. Look! just now, it is ten o'clock in the morning."

"Exactly."

"Another application of electricity. This dial hanging in front of us indicates the speed of the Nautilus. An electric thread puts it in communication with the screw, and the needle indicates the real speed. Look! now we are spinning along with a uniform speed of fifteen miles an hour."

"It is marvelous! And I see, Captain, you were right to make use of this agent that takes the place of wind, water, and steam."

"We have not finished, M. Aronnax," said Captain Nemo, rising. "If you will allow me, we will examine the stern of the Nautilus."

Really, I knew already the anterior part of this submarine boat, of which this is the exact division, starting from the ship's head: the dining-room, five yards long, separated from the library by a water-tight partition; the library, five yards long; the large drawing-room, ten yards long, separated from the Captain's room by a second water-tight partition; the said room, five yards in length; mine, two and a half yards; and, lastly a reservoir of air, seven and a half yards, that extended to the bows. Total length thirty five yards, or one hundred and five feet. The partitions had doors that were shut hermetically by means of india-rubber instruments, and they ensured the safety of the Nautilus in case of a leak.

I followed Captain Nemo through the waist, and arrived at the centre of the boat. There was a sort of well that opened between two partitions. An iron ladder, fastened with an iron hook to the partition, led to the upper end. I asked the Captain what the ladder was used for.

“It leads to the small boat,” he said.

“What! have you a boat?” I exclaimed, in surprise.

“Of course; an excellent vessel, light and insubmersible, that serves either as a fishing or as a pleasure boat.”

“But then, when you wish to embark, you are obliged to come to the surface of the water?”

“Not at all. This boat is attached to the upper part of the hull of the Nautilus, and occupies a cavity made for it. It is decked, quite water-tight, and held together by solid bolts. This ladder leads to a man-hole made in the hull of the Nautilus, that corresponds with a similar hole made in the side of the boat. By this double opening I get into the small vessel. They shut the one belonging to the Nautilus; I shut the other by means of screw pressure. I undo the bolts, and the little boat goes up to the surface of the sea with prodigious rapidity. I then open the panel of the bridge, carefully shut till then; I mast it, hoist my sail, take my oars, and I’m off.”

“But how do you get back on board?”

“I do not come back, M. Aronnax; the Nautilus comes to me.”

“By your orders?”

“By my orders. An electric thread connects us. I telegraph to it, and that is enough.”

“Really,” I said, astonished at these marvels, “nothing can be more simple.”

After having passed by the cage of the staircase that led to the platform, I saw a cabin six feet long, in which Conseil and Ned Land, enchanted with their repast, were devouring it with avidity. Then a door opened into a kitchen nine feet long, situated between the large store-rooms. There electricity, better than gas itself, did all the cooking. The streams under the furnaces gave out to the sponges of platina a heat which was regularly kept up and distributed. They also heated a distilling apparatus, which, by evaporation, furnished excellent drinkable water. Near this kitchen was a bathroom comfortably furnished, with hot and cold water taps.

Next to the kitchen was the berth-room of the vessel, sixteen feet long. But the door was shut, and I could not see the management of it, which might have given me an idea of the number of men employed on board the Nautilus.

At the bottom was a fourth partition that separated this office from the engine-room. A door opened, and I found myself in the compartment where Captain Nemo — certainly an engineer of a very high order — had arranged his locomotive machinery. This engine-room, clearly lighted, did not measure less than sixty-five feet in length. It was divided into two parts; the first contained the materials for producing electricity, and the second the machinery that connected it with the screw. I examined it with great interest, in order to understand the machinery of the Nautilus.

“You see,” said the Captain, “I use Bunsen’s contrivances, not Ruhmkorff’s. Those would not have been powerful enough. Bunsen’s are fewer in number, but strong and large, which experience proves to be the best. The electricity produced passes forward, where it works, by electro-magnets of great size, on a system of levers and cog-wheels that transmit the movement to the axle of the screw. This one, the diameter of which is nineteen feet, and the thread twenty-three feet, performs about 120 revolutions in a second.”

“And you get then?”

“A speed of fifty miles an hour.”

“I have seen the Nautilus manoeuvre before the Abraham Lincoln, and I have my own ideas as to its speed. But this is not enough. We must see where we go. We must be able to direct it to the right, to the left, above, below. How do you get to the great depths, where you find an increasing resistance, which is rated by hundreds of atmospheres? How do you return to the surface of the ocean? And how do you maintain yourselves in the requisite medium? Am I asking too much?”

“Not at all, Professor,” replied the Captain, with some hesitation; “since you may never leave this submarine boat. Come into the saloon, it is our usual study, and there you will learn all you want to know about the Nautilus.”

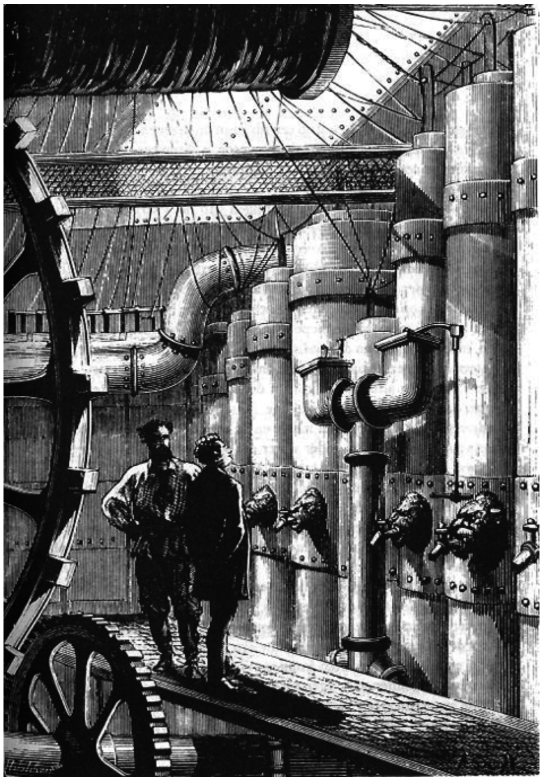

CHAPTER XII

SOME FIGURES

A moment after we were seated on a divan in the saloon smoking. The Captain showed me a sketch that gave the plan, section, and elevation of the Nautilus. Then he began his description in these words:

“Here, M. Aronnax, are the several dimensions of the boat you are in. It is an elongated cylinder with conical ends. It is very like a cigar in shape, a shape already adopted in London in several constructions of the same sort. The length of this cylinder, from stem to stern, is exactly 232 feet, and its maximum breadth is twenty-six feet. It is not built quite like your long-voyage steamers, but its lines are sufficiently long, and its curves prolonged enough, to allow the water to slide off easily, and oppose no obstacle to its passage. These two dimensions enable you to obtain by a simple calculation the surface and cubic contents of the Nautilus. Its area measures 6,032 feet; and its contents about 1,500 cubic yards; that is to say, when completely immersed it displaces 50,000 feet of water, or weighs 1,500 tons.

“When I made the plans for this submarine vessel, I meant that nine-tenths should be submerged: consequently it ought only to displace nine-tenths of its bulk, that is to say, only to weigh that number of tons. I ought not, therefore, to have exceeded that weight, constructing it on the aforesaid dimensions.

“The Nautilus is composed of two hulls, one inside, the other outside, joined by T-shaped irons, which render it very strong. Indeed, owing to this cellular arrangement it resists like a block, as if it were solid. Its sides cannot yield; it coheres spontaneously, and not by the closeness of its rivets; and its perfect union of the materials enables it to defy the roughest seas.

“These two hulls are composed of steel plates, whose density is from .7 to .8 that of water. The first is not less than two inches and a half thick and weighs 394 tons. The second envelope, the keel, twenty inches high and ten thick, weighs only sixty-two tons. The engine, the ballast, the several accessories and apparatus appendages, the partitions and bulkheads, weigh 961.62 tons. Do you follow all this?”

“I do.”

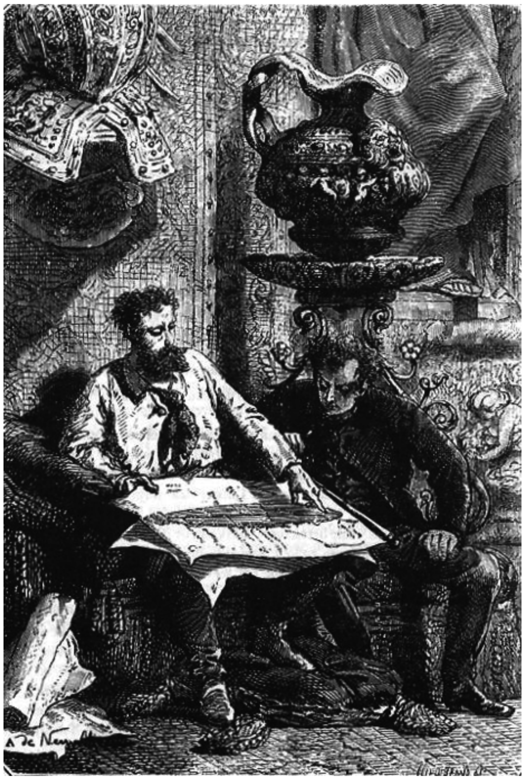

“Then, when the Nautilus is afloat under these circumstances, one-tenth is out of the water. Now, if I have made reservoirs of a size equal to this tenth, or capable of holding 150 tons, and if I fill them with water, the boat, weighing then 1,507 tons, will be completely immersed. That would happen, Professor. These reservoirs are in the lower part of the Nautilus. I turn on taps and they fill, and the vessel sinks that had just been level with the surface."

"Well, Captain, but now we come to the real difficulty. I can understand your rising to the surface; but, diving below the surface, does not your submarine contrivance encounter a pressure, and consequently undergo an upward thrust of one atmosphere for every thirty feet of water, just about fifteen pounds per square inch?"

"Just so, sir."

"Then, unless you quite fill the Nautilus, I do not see how you can draw it down to those depths."

"Professor, you must not confound statics with dynamics or you will be exposed to grave errors. There is very little labour spent in attaining the lower regions of the ocean, for all bodies have a tendency to sink. When I wanted to find out the necessary increase of weight required to sink the Nautilus, I had only to calculate the reduction of volume that sea-water acquires according to the depth."

"That is evident."

"Now, if water is not absolutely incompressible, it is at least capable of very slight compression. Indeed, after the most recent calculations this reduction is only .000436 of an atmosphere for each thirty feet of depth. If we want to sink 3,000 feet, I should keep account of the reduction of bulk under a pressure equal to that of a column of water of a thousand feet. The calculation is easily verified. Now, I have supplementary reservoirs capable of holding a hundred tons. Therefore I can sink to a considerable depth. When I wish to rise to the level of the sea, I only let off the water, and empty all the reservoirs if I want the Nautilus to emerge from the tenth part of her total capacity.”

I had nothing to object to these reasonings.

“I admit your calculations, Captain,” I replied; “I should be wrong to dispute them since daily experience confirms them; but I foresee a real difficulty in the way.”

“What, sir?”

“When you are about 1,000 feet deep, the walls of the Nautilus bear a pressure of 100 atmospheres. If, then, just now you were to empty the supplementary reservoirs, to lighten the vessel, and to go up to the surface, the pumps must overcome the pressure of 100 atmospheres, which is 1,500 lbs. per square inch. From that a power — — ”

“That electricity alone can give,” said the Captain, hastily. “I repeat, sir, that the dynamic power of my engines is almost infinite. The pumps of the Nautilus have an enormous power, as you must have observed when their jets of water burst like a torrent upon the Abraham Lincoln. Besides, I use subsidiary reservoirs only to attain a mean depth of 750 to 1,000 fathoms, and that with a view of managing my machines. Also, when I have a mind to visit the depths of the ocean five or six miles below the surface, I make use of slower but not less infallible means.”

“What are they, Captain?”

“That involves my telling you how the Nautilus is worked.”

“I am impatient to learn.”

“To steer this boat to starboard or port, to turn, in a word, following a horizontal plan, I use an ordinary rudder fixed on the back of the stern-post, and with one wheel and some tackle to steer by. But I can also make the Nautilus rise and sink, and sink and rise, by a vertical movement by means of two inclined planes fastened to its sides, opposite the centre of flotation, planes that move in every direction, and that are worked by powerful levers from the interior. If the planes are kept parallel with the boat, it moves horizontally. If slanted, the Nautilus, according to this inclination, and under the influence of the screw, either sinks diagonally or rises diagonally as it suits me. And even if I wish to rise more quickly to the surface, I ship the screw, and the pressure of the water causes the Nautilus to rise vertically like a balloon filled with hydrogen.”

“Bravo, Captain! But how can the steersman follow the route in the middle of the waters?”

“The steersman is placed in a glazed box, that is raised about the hull of the Nautilus, and furnished with lenses.”

“Are these lenses capable of resisting such pressure?”

“Perfectly. Glass, which breaks at a blow, is, nevertheless, capable of offering considerable resistance. During some experiments of fishing by electric light in 1864 in the Northern Seas, we saw plates less than a third of an inch thick resist a pressure of sixteen atmospheres. Now, the glass that I use is not less than thirty times thicker.”

“Granted. But, after all, in order to see, the light must exceed the darkness, and in the midst of the darkness in the water, how can you see?”

“Behind the steersman’s cage is placed a powerful electric reflector, the rays from which light up the sea for half a mile in front.”

“Ah! bravo, bravo, Captain! Now I can account for this phosphorescence in the supposed narwhal that puzzled us so. I now ask you if the boarding of the Nautilus and of the Scotia, that has made such a noise, has been the result of a chance rencontre?”

“Quite accidental, sir. I was sailing only one fathom below the surface of the water when the shock came. It had no bad result.”

“None, sir. But now, about your rencontre with the Abraham Lincoln?”

“Professor, I am sorry for one of the best vessels in the American navy; but they attacked me, and I was bound to defend myself. I contented myself, however, with putting the frigate hors de combat; she will not have any difficulty in getting repaired at the next port.”

“Ah, Commander! your Nautilus is certainly a marvellous boat.”

“Yes, Professor; and I love it as if it were part of myself. If danger threatens one of your vessels on the ocean, the first impression is the feeling of an abyss above and below. On the Nautilus men’s hearts never fail them. No defects to be afraid of, for the double shell is as firm as iron; no rigging to attend to; no sails for the wind to carry away; no boilers to burst; no fire to fear, for the vessel is made of iron, not of wood; no coal to run short, for electricity is the only mechanical agent; no collision to fear, for it alone swims in deep water; no tempest to brave, for when it dives below the water it reaches absolute tranquillity. There, sir! that is the perfection of vessels! And if it is true that the engineer has more confidence in the vessel than the builder, and the builder than the captain himself, you understand the trust I repose in my Nautilus; for I am at once captain, builder, and engineer."

"But how could you construct this wonderful Nautilus in secret?"

"Each separate portion, M. Aronnax, was brought from different parts of the globe."

"But these parts had to be put together and arranged?"

"Professor, I had set up my workshops upon a desert island in the ocean. There my workmen, that is to say, the brave men that I instructed and educated, and myself have put together our Nautilus. Then, when the work was finished, fire destroyed all trace of our proceedings on this island, that I could have jumped over if I had liked."

"Then the cost of this vessel is great?"

"M. Aronnax, an iron vessel costs L145 per ton. Now the Nautilus weighed 1,500. It came therefore to L67,500, and L80,000 more for fitting it up, and about L200,000, with the works of art and the collections it contains."

"One last question, Captain Nemo."

"Ask it, Professor."

"You are rich?"

"Immensely rich, sir; and I could, without missing it, pay the national debt of France."

I stared at the singular person who spoke thus. Was he playing upon my credulity? The future would decide that.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BLACK RIVER

The portion of the terrestrial globe which is covered by water is estimated at upwards of eighty millions of acres. This fluid mass comprises two billions two hundred and fifty millions of cubic miles, forming a spherical body of a diameter of sixty leagues, the weight of which would be three quintillions of tons. To comprehend the meaning of these figures, it is necessary to observe that a quintillion is to a billion as a billion is to unity; in other words, there are as many billions in a quintillion as there are units in a billion. This mass of fluid is equal to about the quantity of water which would be discharged by all the rivers of the earth in forty thousand years.

During the geological epochs the ocean originally prevailed everywhere. Then by degrees, in the silurian period, the tops of the mountains began to appear, the islands emerged, then disappeared in partial deluges, reappeared, became settled, formed continents, till at length the earth became geographically arranged, as we see in the present day. The solid had wrested from the liquid thirty-seven million six hundred and fifty-seven square miles, equal to twelve billions nine hundred and sixty millions of acres.

The shape of continents allows us to divide the waters into five great portions: the Arctic or Frozen Ocean, the Antarctic, or Frozen Ocean, the Indian, the Atlantic, and the Pacific Oceans.

The Pacific Ocean extends from north to south between the two Polar Circles, and from east to west between Asia and America, over an extent of 145 degrees of longitude. It is the quietest of seas; its currents are broad and slow, it has medium tides, and abundant rain. Such was the ocean that my fate destined me first to travel over under these strange conditions.

“Sir,” said Captain Nemo, “we will, if you please, take our bearings and fix the starting-point of this voyage. It is a quarter to twelve; I will go up again to the surface.”

The Captain pressed an electric clock three times. The pumps began to drive the water from the tanks; the needle of the manometer marked by a different pressure the ascent of the Nautilus, then it stopped.

“We have arrived,” said the Captain.

I went to the central staircase which opened on to the platform, clambered up the iron steps, and found myself on the upper part of the Nautilus.

The platform was only three feet out of water. The front and back of the Nautilus was of that spindle-shape which caused it justly to be compared to a cigar. I noticed that its iron plates, slightly overlaying each other, resembled the shell which clothes the bodies of our large terrestrial reptiles. It explained to me how natural it was, in spite of all glasses, that this boat should have been taken for a marine animal.

Toward the middle of the platform the longboat, half buried in the hull of the vessel, formed a slight excrescence. Fore and aft rose two cages of medium height with inclined sides, and partly closed by thick lenticular glasses; one destined for the steersman who directed the Nautilus, the other containing a brilliant lantern to give light on the road.

The sea was beautiful, the sky pure. Scarcely could the long vehicle feel the broad undulations of the ocean. A light breeze from the east rippled the surface of the waters. The horizon, free from fog, made observation easy. Nothing was in sight. Not a quicksand, not an island. A vast desert.

Captain Nemo, by the help of his sextant, took the altitude of the sun, which ought also to give the latitude. He waited for some moments till its disc touched the horizon. Whilst taking observations not a muscle moved, the instrument could not have been more motionless in a hand of marble.

“Twelve o’clock, sir,” said he. “When you like — — ”

I cast a last look upon the sea, slightly yellowed by the Japanese coast, and descended to the saloon.

“And now, sir, I leave you to your studies,” added the Captain; “our course is E.N.E. our depth is twenty-six fathoms. Here are maps on a large scale by which you may follow it. The saloon is at your disposal, and, with your permission, I will retire.” Captain Nemo bowed, and I remained alone, lost in thoughts all bearing on the commander of the Nautilus.

For a whole hour was I deep in these reflections, seeking to pierce this mystery so interesting to me. Then my eyes fell upon the vast planisphere spread upon the table, and I placed my finger on the very spot where the given latitude and longitude crossed.

The sea has its large rivers like the continents. They are special currents known by their temperature and their colour. The most remarkable of these is known by the name of the Gulf Stream. Science has decided on the globe the direction of five principal currents: one in the North Atlantic, a second in the South, a third in the North Pacific, a fourth in the South, and a fifth in the Southern Indian Ocean. It is even probable that a sixth current existed at one time or another in the Northern Indian Ocean, when the Caspian and Aral Seas formed but one vast sheet of water.

At this point indicated on the planisphere one of these currents was rolling, the Kuro-Scivo of the Japanese, the Black River, which, leaving the Gulf of Bengal, where it is warmed by the perpendicular rays of a tropical sun, crosses the Straits of Malacca along the coast of Asia, turns into the North Pacific to the Aleutian Islands, carrying with it trunks of camphor-trees and other indigenous productions, and edging the waves of the ocean with the pure indigo of its warm water. It was this current that the Nautilus was to follow. I followed it with my eye; saw it lose itself in the vastness of the Pacific, and felt myself drawn with it, when Ned Land and Conseil appeared at the door of the saloon.

My two brave companions remained petrified at the sight of the wonders spread before them.

“Where are we, where are we?” exclaimed the Canadian. “In the museum at Quebec?”

“My friends,” I answered, making a sign for them to enter, “you are not in Canada, but on board the Nautilus, fifty yards below the level of the sea.”

“But, M. Aronnax,” said Ned Land, “can you tell me how many men there are on board? Ten, twenty, fifty, a hundred?”

“I cannot answer you, Mr. Land; it is better to abandon for a time all idea of seizing the Nautilus or escaping from it. This ship is a masterpiece of modern industry, and I should be sorry not to have seen it. Many people would accept the situation forced upon us, if only to move amongst such wonders. So be quiet and let us try and see what passes around us.”

“See!” exclaimed the harpooner, “but we can see nothing in this iron prison! We are walking — we are sailing — blindly.”

Ned Land had scarcely pronounced these words when all was suddenly darkness. The luminous ceiling was gone, and so rapidly that my eyes received a painful impression.

We remained mute, not stirring, and not knowing what surprise awaited us, whether agreeable or disagreeable. A sliding noise was heard: one would have said that panels were working at the sides of the Nautilus.

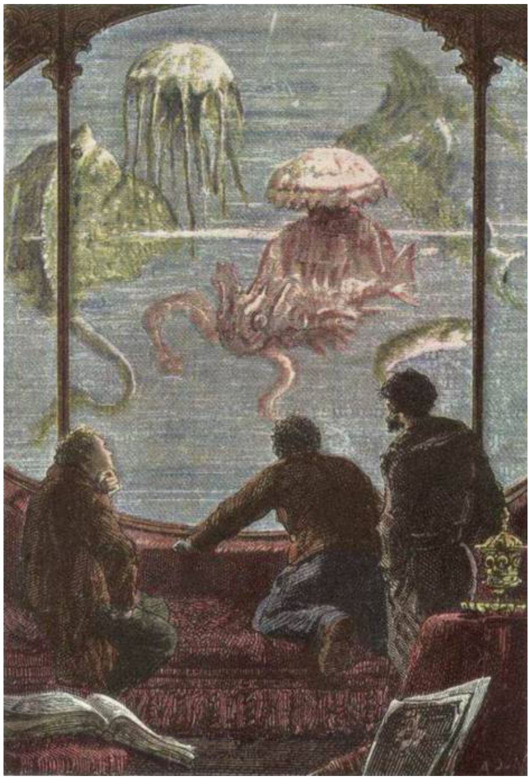

“It is the end of the end!” said Ned Land.

Suddenly light broke at each side of the saloon, through two oblong openings. The liquid mass appeared vividly lit up by the electric gleam. Two crystal plates separated us from the sea. At first I trembled at the thought that this frail partition might break, but strong bands of copper bound them, giving an almost infinite power of resistance.

The sea was distinctly visible for a mile all round the Nautilus. What a spectacle! What pen can describe it? Who could paint the effects of the light through those transparent sheets of water, and the softness of the successive gradations from the lower to the superior strata of the ocean?

We know the transparency of the sea and that its clearness is far beyond that of rock-water. The mineral and organic substances which it holds in suspension heightens its transparency. In certain parts of the ocean at the Antilles, under seventy-five fathoms of water, can be seen with surprising clearness a bed of sand. The penetrating power of the solar rays does not seem to cease for a depth of one hundred and fifty fathoms. But in this middle fluid travelled over by the Nautilus, the electric brightness was produced even in the bosom of the waves. It was no longer luminous water, but liquid light.

On each side a window opened into this unexplored abyss. The obscurity of the saloon showed to advantage the brightness outside, and we looked out as if this pure crystal had been the glass of an immense aquarium.

“You wished to see, friend Ned; well, you see now.”

“Curious! curious!” muttered the Canadian, who, forgetting his ill-temper, seemed to submit to some irresistible attraction; “and one would come further than this to admire such a sight!”

“Ah!” thought I to myself, “I understand the life of this man; he has made a world apart for himself, in which he treasures all his greatest wonders.”

For two whole hours an aquatic army escorted the Nautilus. During their games, their bounds, while rivalling each other in beauty, brightness, and velocity, I distinguished the green labre; the banded mullet, marked by a double line of black; the round-tailed goby, of a white colour, with violet spots on the back; the Japanese scombrus, a beautiful mackerel of these seas, with a blue body and silvery head; the brilliant azurors, whose name alone defies description; some banded spares, with variegated fins of blue and yellow; the woodcocks of the seas, some specimens of which attain a yard in length; Japanese salamanders, spider lampreys, serpents six feet long, with eyes small and lively, and a huge mouth bristling with teeth; with many other species.

Our imagination was kept at its height, interjections followed quickly on each other. Ned named the fish, and Conseil classed them. I was in ecstasies with the vivacity of their movements and the beauty of their forms. Never had it been given to me to surprise these animals, alive and at liberty, in their natural element. I will not mention all the varieties which passed before my dazzled eyes, all the collection of the seas of China and Japan. These fish, more numerous than the birds of the air, came, attracted, no doubt, by the brilliant focus of the electric light.

Suddenly there was daylight in the saloon, the iron panels closed again, and the enchanting vision disappeared. But for a long time I dreamt on, till my eyes fell on the instruments hanging on the partition. The compass still showed the course to be E.N.E. the manometer indicated a pressure of five atmospheres, equivalent to a depth of twenty five fathoms, and the electric log gave a speed of fifteen miles an hour. I expected Captain Nemo, but he did not appear. The clock marked the hour of five.

Ned Land and Conseil returned to their cabin, and I retired to my chamber. My dinner was ready. It was composed of turtle soup made of the most delicate hawks bills, of a surmullet served with puff paste (the liver of which, prepared by itself, was most delicious), and fillets of the emperor-holocanthus, the savour of which seemed to me superior even to salmon.

I passed the evening reading, writing, and thinking. Then sleep overpowered me, and I stretched myself on my couch of zostera, and slept profoundly, whilst the Nautilus was gliding rapidly through the current of the Black River.

CHAPTER XIV

A NOTE OF INVITATION

The next day was the 9th of November. I awoke after a long sleep of twelve hours. Conseil came, according to custom, to know “how I passed the night,” and to offer his services. He had left his friend the Canadian sleeping like a man who had never done anything else all his life. I let the worthy fellow chatter as he pleased, without caring to answer him. I was preoccupied by the absence of the Captain during our sitting of the day before, and hoping to see him to-day.

As soon as I was dressed I went into the saloon. It was deserted. I plunged into the study of the shell treasures hidden behind the glasses.

The whole day passed without my being honoured by a visit from Captain Nemo. The panels of the saloon did not open. Perhaps they did not wish us to tire of these beautiful things.

The course of the Nautilus was E.N.E. her speed twelve knots, the depth below the surface between twenty-five and thirty fathoms.

The next day, 10th of November, the same desertion, the same solitude. I did not see one of the ship’s crew: Ned and Conseil spent the greater part of the day with me. They were astonished at the puzzling absence of the Captain. Was this singular man ill? — had he altered his intentions with regard to us?

After all, as Conseil said, we enjoyed perfect liberty, we were delicately and abundantly fed. Our host kept to his terms of the treaty. We could not complain, and, indeed, the singularity of our fate reserved such wonderful compensation for us that we had no right to accuse it as yet.

That day I commenced the journal of these adventures which has enabled me to relate them with more scrupulous exactitude and minute detail.

11th November, early in the morning. The fresh air spreading over the interior of the Nautilus told me that we had come to the surface of the ocean to renew our supply of oxygen. I directed my steps to the central staircase, and mounted the platform.

It was six o'clock, the weather was cloudy, the sea grey, but calm. Scarcely a billow. Captain Nemo, whom I hoped to meet, would he be there? I saw no one but the steersman imprisoned in his glass cage. Seated upon the projection formed by the hull of the pinnace, I inhaled the salt breeze with delight.

By degrees the fog disappeared under the action of the sun's rays, the radiant orb rose from behind the eastern horizon. The sea flamed under its glance like a train of gunpowder. The clouds scattered in the heights were coloured with lively tints of beautiful shades, and numerous "mare's tails," which betokened wind for that day. But what was wind to this Nautilus, which tempests could not frighten!

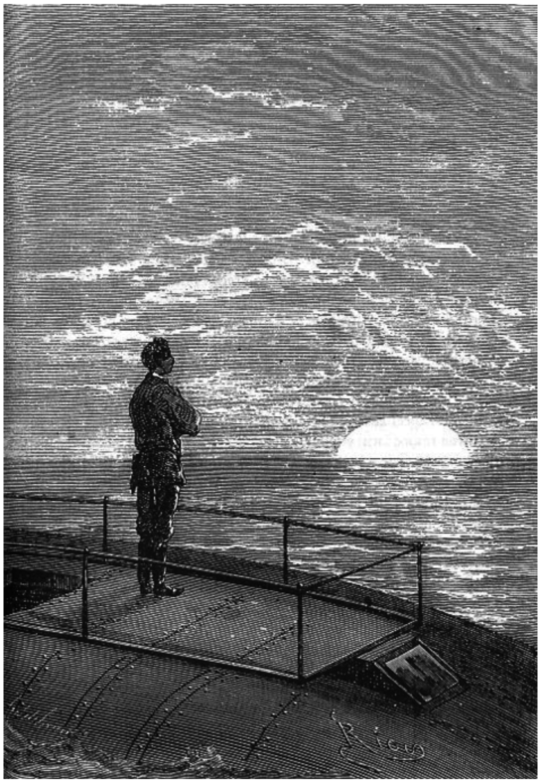

I was admiring this joyous rising of the sun, so gay, and so life-giving, when I heard steps approaching the platform. I was prepared to salute Captain Nemo, but it was his second (whom I had already seen on the Captain's first visit) who appeared. He advanced on the platform, not seeming to see me. With his powerful glass to his eye, he scanned every point of the horizon with great attention. This examination over, he approached the panel and pronounced a sentence in exactly these terms. I have remembered it, for every morning it was repeated under exactly the same conditions. It was thus worded:

"Nautron respoc lorni virch."

What it meant I could not say.

These words pronounced, the second descended. I thought that the Nautilus was about to return to its submarine navigation. I regained the panel and returned to my chamber.

Five days sped thus, without any change in our situation. Every morning I mounted the platform. The same phrase was pronounced by the same individual. But Captain Nemo did not appear.

I had made up my mind that I should never see him again, when, on the 16th November, on returning to my room with Ned and Conseil, I found upon my table a note addressed to me. I opened it impatiently. It was written in a bold, clear hand, the characters rather pointed, recalling the German type. The note was worded as follows:

TO PROFESSOR ARONNAX, On board the Nautilus. 16th of November, 1867.

Captain Nemo invites Professor Aronnax to a hunting-party, which will take place to-morrow morning in the forests of the Island of Crespo. He hopes that nothing will prevent the Professor from being present, and he will with pleasure see him joined by his companions.

CAPTAIN NEMO, Commander of the Nautilus.

“A hunt!” exclaimed Ned.

“And in the forests of the Island of Crespo!” added Conseil.

“Oh! then the gentleman is going on terra firma?” replied Ned Land.

“That seems to me to be clearly indicated,” said I, reading the letter once more.

“Well, we must accept,” said the Canadian. “But once more on dry ground, we shall know what to do. Indeed, I shall not be sorry to eat a piece of fresh venison.”

Without seeking to reconcile what was contradictory between Captain Nemo’s manifest aversion to islands and continents, and his invitation to hunt in a forest, I contented myself with replying:

“Let us first see where the Island of Crespo is.”

I consulted the planisphere, and in 32° 40’ N. lat. and 157° 50’ W. long. I found a small island, recognised in 1801 by Captain Crespo, and marked in the ancient Spanish maps as Rocca de la Plata, the meaning of which is The Silver Rock. We were then about eighteen hundred miles from our starting-point, and the course of the Nautilus, a little changed, was bringing it back towards the southeast.

I showed this little rock, lost in the midst of the North Pacific, to my companions.

“If Captain Nemo does sometimes go on dry ground,” said I, “he at least chooses desert islands.”

Ned Land shrugged his shoulders without speaking, and Conseil and he left me.

After supper, which was served by the steward, mute and impassive, I went to bed, not without some anxiety.

The next morning, the 17th of November, on awakening, I felt that the Nautilus was perfectly still. I dressed quickly and entered the saloon.

Captain Nemo was there, waiting for me. He rose, bowed, and asked me if it was convenient for me to accompany him. As he made no allusion to his absence during the last eight days, I did not mention it, and simply answered that my companions and myself were ready to follow him.

We entered the dining-room, where breakfast was served.

“M. Aronnax,” said the Captain, “pray, share my breakfast without ceremony; we will chat as we eat. For, though I promised you a walk in the forest, I did not undertake to find hotels there. So breakfast as a man who will most likely not have his dinner till very late.”

I did honour to the repast. It was composed of several kinds of fish, and slices of sea-cucumber, and different sorts of seaweed. Our drink consisted of pure water, to which the Captain added some drops of a fermented liquor, extracted by the Kamschatcha method from a seaweed known under the name of Rhodomenia palmata. Captain Nemo ate at first without saying a word. Then he began:

“Sir, when I proposed to you to hunt in my submarine forest of Crespo, you evidently thought me mad. Sir, you should never judge lightly of any man.”

“But Captain, believe me — — ”

“Be kind enough to listen, and you will then see whether you have any cause to accuse me of folly and contradiction.”

“I listen.”

“You know as well as I do, Professor, that man can live under water, providing he carries with him a sufficient supply of breathable air. In submarine works, the workman, clad in an impervious dress, with his head in a metal helmet, receives air from above by means of forcing pumps and regulators.”

“That is a diving apparatus,” said I.

“Just so, but under these conditions the man is not at liberty; he is attached to the pump which sends him air through an india-rubber tube, and if we were obliged to be thus held to the Nautilus, we could not go far.”

“And the means of getting free?” I asked.

“It is to use the Rouquayrol apparatus, invented by two of your own countrymen, which I have brought to perfection for my own use, and which will allow you to risk yourself under these new physiological conditions without any organ whatever suffering. It consists of a reservoir of thick iron plates, in which I store the air under a pressure of fifty atmospheres. This reservoir is fixed on the back by means of braces, like a soldier’s knapsack. Its upper part forms a box in which the air is kept by means of a bellows, and therefore cannot escape unless at its normal tension. In the Rouquayrol apparatus such as we use, two india rubber pipes leave this box and join a sort of tent which holds the nose and mouth; one is to introduce fresh air, the other to let out the foul, and the tongue closes one or the other according to the wants of the respirator. But I, in encountering great pressures at the bottom of the sea, was obliged to shut my head, like that of a diver in a ball of copper; and it is to this ball of copper that the two pipes, the inspirator and the expirator, open.”

“Perfectly, Captain Nemo; but the air that you carry with you must soon be used; when it only contains fifteen per cent. of oxygen it is no longer fit to breathe.”

“Right! But I told you, M. Aronnax, that the pumps of the Nautilus allow me to store the air under considerable pressure, and on those conditions the reservoir of the apparatus can furnish breathable air for nine or ten hours.”

“I have no further objections to make,” I answered. “I will only ask you one thing, Captain — how can you light your road at the bottom of the sea?”

“With the Ruhmkorff apparatus, M. Aronnax; one is carried on the back, the other is fastened to the waist. It is composed of a Bunsen pile, which I do not work with bichromate of potash, but with sodium. A wire is introduced which collects the electricity produced, and directs it towards a particularly made lantern. In this lantern is a spiral glass which contains a small quantity of carbonic gas. When the apparatus is at work this gas becomes luminous, giving out a white and continuous light. Thus provided, I can breathe and I can see.”

“Captain Nemo, to all my objections you make such crushing answers that I dare no longer doubt. But, if I am forced to admit the Rouquayrol and Ruhmkorff apparatus, I must be allowed some reservations with regard to the gun I am to carry.”

“But it is not a gun for powder,” answered the Captain.

“Then it is an air-gun.”

“Doubtless! How would you have me manufacture gun powder on board, without either saltpetre, sulphur, or charcoal?”

“Besides,” I added, “to fire under water in a medium eight hundred and fifty-five times denser than the air, we must conquer very considerable resistance.”

“That would be no difficulty. There exist guns, according to Fulton, perfected in England by Philip Coles and Burley, in France by Furcy, and in Italy by Landi, which are furnished with a peculiar system of closing, which can fire under these conditions. But I repeat, having no powder, I use air under great pressure, which the pumps of the Nautilus furnish abundantly.”

“But this air must be rapidly used?”

“Well, have I not my Rouquayrol reservoir, which can furnish it at need? A tap is all that is required. Besides M. Aronnax, you must see yourself that, during our submarine hunt, we can spend but little air and but few balls.”

“But it seems to me that in this twilight, and in the midst of this fluid, which is very dense compared with the atmosphere, shots could not go far, nor easily prove mortal.”

“Sir, on the contrary, with this gun every blow is mortal; and, however lightly the animal is touched, it falls as if struck by a thunderbolt.”

“Why?”

“Because the balls sent by this gun are not ordinary balls, but little cases of glass. These glass cases are covered with a case of steel, and weighted with a pellet of lead; they are real Leyden bottles, into which the electricity is forced to a very high tension. With the slightest shock they are discharged, and the animal, however strong it may be, falls dead. I must tell you that these cases are size number four, and that the charge for an ordinary gun would be ten.”

“I will argue no longer,” I replied, rising from the table. “I have nothing left me but to take my gun. At all events, I will go where you go.”

Captain Nemo then led me aft; and in passing before Ned’s and Conseil’s cabin, I called my two companions, who followed promptly. We then came to a cell near the machinery-room, in which we put on our walking-dress.

CHAPTER XV

A WALK ON THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

This cell was, to speak correctly, the arsenal and wardrobe of the Nautilus. A dozen diving apparatuses hung from the partition waiting our use.

Ned Land, on seeing them, showed evident repugnance to dress himself in one.

“But, my worthy Ned, the forests of the Island of Crespo are nothing but submarine forests.”

“Good!” said the disappointed harpooner, who saw his dreams of fresh meat fade away. “And you, M. Aronnax, are you going to dress yourself in those clothes?”

“There is no alternative, Master Ned.”

“As you please, sir,” replied the harpooner, shrugging his shoulders; “but, as for me, unless I am forced, I will never get into one.”

“No one will force you, Master Ned,” said Captain Nemo.

“Is Conseil going to risk it?” asked Ned.

“I follow my master wherever he goes,” replied Conseil.

At the Captain’s call two of the ship’s crew came to help us dress in these heavy and impervious clothes, made of india-rubber without seam, and constructed expressly to resist considerable pressure. One would have thought it a suit of armour, both supple and resisting. This suit formed trousers and waistcoat. The trousers were finished off with thick boots, weighted with heavy leaden soles. The texture of the waistcoat was held together by bands of copper, which crossed the chest, protecting it from the great pressure of the water, and leaving the lungs free to act; the sleeves ended in gloves, which in no way restrained the movement of the hands. There was a vast difference noticeable between these consummate apparatuses and the old cork breastplates, jackets, and other contrivances in vogue during the eighteenth century.

Captain Nemo and one of his companions (a sort of Hercules, who must have possessed great strength), Conseil and myself were soon enveloped in the dresses. There remained nothing more to be done but to enclose our heads in the metal box. But, before proceeding to this operation, I asked the Captain’s permission to examine the guns.

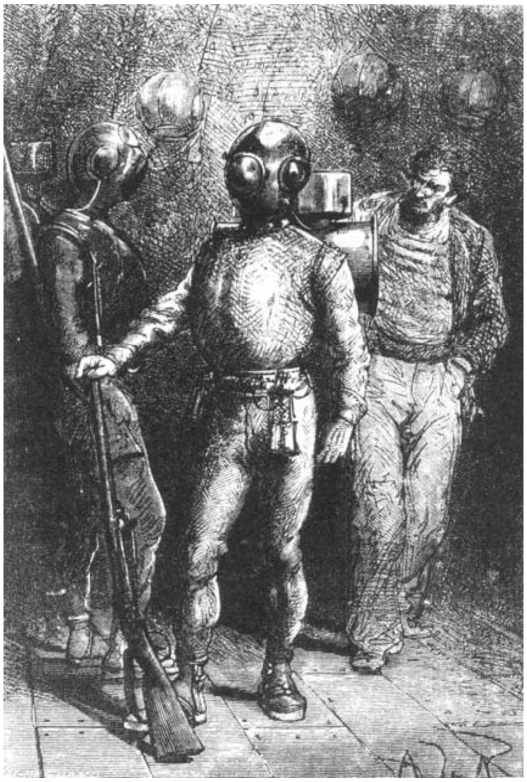

One of the Nautilus men gave me a simple gun, the butt end of which, made of steel, hollow in the centre, was rather large. It served as a reservoir for compressed air, which a valve, worked by a spring, allowed to escape into a metal tube. A box of projectiles in a groove in the thickness of the butt end contained about twenty of these electric balls, which, by means of a spring, were forced into the barrel of the gun. As soon as one shot was fired, another was ready.

“Captain Nemo,” said I, “this arm is perfect, and easily handled: I only ask to be allowed to try it. But how shall we gain the bottom of the sea?”

“At this moment, Professor, the Nautilus is stranded in five fathoms, and we have nothing to do but to start.”

“But how shall we get off?”

“You shall see.”

Captain Nemo thrust his head into the helmet, Conseil and I did the same, not without hearing an ironical “Good sport!” from the Canadian. The upper part of our dress terminated in a copper collar upon which was screwed the metal helmet. Three holes, protected by thick glass, allowed us to see in all directions, by simply turning our head in the interior of the head-dress. As soon as it was in position, the Rouquayrol apparatus on our backs began to act; and, for my part, I could breathe with ease.

With the Ruhmkorff lamp hanging from my belt, and the gun in my hand, I was ready to set out. But to speak the truth, imprisoned in these heavy garments, and glued to the deck by my leaden soles, it was impossible for me to take a step.

But this state of things was provided for. I felt myself being pushed into a little room contiguous to the wardrobe room. My companions followed, towed along in the same way. I heard a water-tight door, furnished with stopper plates, close upon us, and we were wrapped in profound darkness.

After some minutes, a loud hissing was heard. I felt the cold mount from my feet to my chest. Evidently from some part of the vessel they had, by means of a tap, given entrance to the water, which was invading us, and with which the room was soon filled. A second door cut in the side of the Nautilus then opened. We saw a faint light. In another instant our feet trod the bottom of the sea.

And now, how can I retrace the impression left upon me by that walk under the waters? Words are impotent to relate such wonders! Captain Nemo walked in front, his companion followed some steps behind. Conseil and I remained near each other, as if an exchange of words had been possible through our metallic cases. I no longer felt the weight of my clothing, or of my shoes, of my reservoir of air, or my thick helmet, in the midst of which my head rattled like an almond in its shell.

The light, which lit the soil thirty feet below the surface of the ocean, astonished me by its power. The solar rays shone through the watery mass easily, and dissipated all colour, and I clearly distinguished objects at a distance of a hundred and fifty yards. Beyond that the tints darkened into fine gradations of ultramarine, and faded into vague obscurity. Truly this water which surrounded me was but another air denser than the terrestrial atmosphere, but almost as transparent. Above me was the calm surface of the sea. We were walking on fine, even sand, not wrinkled, as on a flat shore, which retains the impression of the billows. This dazzling carpet, really a reflector, repelled the rays of the sun with wonderful intensity, which accounted for the vibration which penetrated every atom of liquid. Shall I be believed when I say that, at the depth of thirty feet, I could see as if I was in broad daylight?

For a quarter of an hour I trod on this sand, sown with the impalpable dust of shells. The hull of the Nautilus, resembling a long shoal, disappeared by degrees; but its lantern, when darkness should overtake us in the waters, would help to guide us on board by its distinct rays.

Soon forms of objects outlined in the distance were discernible. I recognised magnificent rocks, hung with a tapestry of zoophytes of the most beautiful kind, and I was at first struck by the peculiar effect of this medium.

It was then ten in the morning; the rays of the sun struck the surface of the waves at rather an oblique angle, and at the touch of their light, decomposed by refraction as through a prism, flowers, rocks, plants, shells, and polypi were shaded at the edges by the seven solar colours. It was marvellous, a feast for the eyes, this complication of coloured tints, a perfect kaleidoscope of green, yellow, orange, violet, indigo, and blue; in one word, the whole palette of an enthusiastic colourist! Why could I not communicate to Conseil the lively sensations which were mounting to my brain, and rival him in expressions of admiration? For aught I knew, Captain Nemo and his companion might be able to exchange thoughts by means of signs previously agreed upon. So, for want of better, I talked to myself; I declaimed in the copper box which covered my head, thereby expending more air in vain words than was perhaps wise.

Various kinds of isis, clusters of pure tuft-coral, prickly fungi, and anemones formed a brilliant garden of flowers, decked with their collarettes of blue tentacles, sea-stars studding the sandy bottom. It was a real grief to me to crush under my feet the brilliant specimens of molluscs which strewed the ground by thousands, of hammerheads, donaciae (veritable bounding shells), of staircases, and red helmet-shells, angel-wings, and many others produced by this inexhaustible ocean. But we were bound to walk, so we went on, whilst above our heads waved medusae whose umbrellas of opal or rose-pink, escalloped with a band of blue, sheltered us from the rays of the sun and fiery pelagiae, which, in the darkness, would have strewn our path with phosphorescent light.

All these wonders I saw in the space of a quarter of a mile, scarcely stopping, and following Captain Nemo, who beckoned me on by signs. Soon the nature of the soil changed; to the sandy plain succeeded an extent of slimy mud which the Americans call “ooze,” composed of equal parts of silicious and calcareous shells. We then travelled over a plain of seaweed of wild and luxuriant vegetation. This sward was of close texture, and soft to the feet, and rivalled the softest carpet woven by the hand of man. But whilst verdure was spread at our feet, it did not abandon our heads. A light network of marine plants, of that inexhaustible family of seaweeds of which more than two thousand kinds are known, grew on the surface of the water.

I noticed that the green plants kept nearer the top of the sea, whilst the red were at a greater depth, leaving to the black or brown the care of forming gardens and parterres in the remote beds of the ocean.

We had quitted the Nautilus about an hour and a half. It was near noon; I knew by the perpendicularity of the sun’s rays, which were no longer refracted. The magical colours disappeared by degrees, and the shades of emerald and sapphire were effaced. We walked with a regular step, which rang upon the ground with astonishing intensity; the slightest noise was transmitted with a quickness to which the ear is unaccustomed on the earth;

indeed, water is a better conductor of sound than air, in the ratio of four to one. At this period the earth sloped downwards; the light took a uniform tint. We were at a depth of a hundred and five yards and twenty inches, undergoing a pressure of six atmospheres.

At this depth I could still see the rays of the sun, though feebly; to their intense brilliancy had succeeded a reddish twilight, the lowest state between day and night; but we could still see well enough; it was not necessary to resort to the Ruhmkorff apparatus as yet. At this moment Captain Nemo stopped; he waited till I joined him, and then pointed to an obscure mass, looming in the shadow, at a short distance.

“It is the forest of the Island of Crespo,” thought I; and I was not mistaken.

CHAPTER XVI

A SUBMARINE FOREST

We had at last arrived on the borders of this forest, doubtless one of the finest of Captain Nemo's immense domains. He looked upon it as his own, and considered he had the same right over it that the first men had in the first days of the world. And, indeed, who would have disputed with him the possession of this submarine property? What other hardier pioneer would come, hatchet in hand, to cut down the dark copses?

This forest was composed of large tree-plants; and the moment we penetrated under its vast arcades, I was struck by the singular position of their branches — a position I had not yet observed.

Not an herb which carpeted the ground, not a branch which clothed the trees, was either broken or bent, nor did they extend horizontally; all stretched up to the surface of the ocean. Not a filament, not a ribbon, however thin they might be, but kept as straight as a rod of iron. The fuci and llianas grew in rigid perpendicular lines, due to the density of the element which had produced them. Motionless yet, when bent to one side by the hand, they directly resumed their former position. Truly it was the region of perpendicularity!

I soon accustomed myself to this fantastic position, as well as to the comparative darkness which surrounded us. The soil of the forest seemed covered with sharp blocks, difficult to avoid. The submarine flora struck me as being very perfect, and richer even than it would have been in the arctic or tropical zones, where these productions are not so plentiful. But for some minutes I involuntarily confounded the genera, taking animals for plants;

and who would not have been mistaken? The fauna and the flora are too closely allied in this submarine world.

These plants are self-propagated, and the principle of their existence is in the water, which upholds and nourishes them. The greater number, instead of leaves, shoot forth blades of capricious shapes, comprised within a scale of colours pink, carmine, green, olive, fawn, and brown.

“Curious anomaly, fantastic element!” said an ingenious naturalist, “in which the animal kingdom blossoms, and the vegetable does not!”

In about an hour Captain Nemo gave the signal to halt; I, for my part, was not sorry, and we stretched ourselves under an arbour of alariae, the long thin blades of which stood up like arrows.

This short rest seemed delicious to me; there was nothing wanting but the charm of conversation; but, impossible to speak, impossible to answer, I only put my great copper head to Conseil’s. I saw the worthy fellow’s eyes glistening with delight, and, to show his satisfaction, he shook himself in his breastplate of air, in the most comical way in the world.

After four hours of this walking, I was surprised not to find myself dreadfully hungry. How to account for this state of the stomach I could not tell. But instead I felt an insurmountable desire to sleep, which happens to all divers. And my eyes soon closed behind the thick glasses, and I fell into a heavy slumber, which the movement alone had prevented before. Captain Nemo and his robust companion, stretched in the clear crystal, set us the example.

How long I remained buried in this drowsiness I cannot judge, but, when I woke, the sun seemed sinking towards the horizon. Captain Nemo had already risen, and I was beginning to stretch my limbs, when an unexpected apparition brought me briskly to my feet.

A few steps off, a monstrous sea-spider, about thirty-eight inches high, was watching me with squinting eyes, ready to spring upon me. Though my diver’s dress was thick enough to defend me from the bite of this animal, I could not help shuddering with horror. Conseil and the sailor of the Nautilus awoke at this moment. Captain Nemo pointed out the hideous crustacean, which a blow from the butt end of the gun knocked over, and I saw the horrible claws of the monster writhe in terrible convulsions. This incident reminded me that other animals more to be feared might haunt these obscure depths, against whose attacks my diving-dress would not protect me. I had never thought of it before, but I now resolved to be upon my guard. Indeed, I thought that this halt would mark the termination of our walk; but I was mistaken, for, instead of returning to the Nautilus, Captain Nemo continued his bold excursion. The ground was still on the incline, its declivity seemed to be getting greater, and to be leading us to greater depths. It must have been about three o’clock when we reached a narrow valley, between high perpendicular walls, situated about seventy-five fathoms deep. Thanks to the perfection of our apparatus, we were forty-five fathoms below the limit which nature seems to have imposed on man as to his submarine excursions.

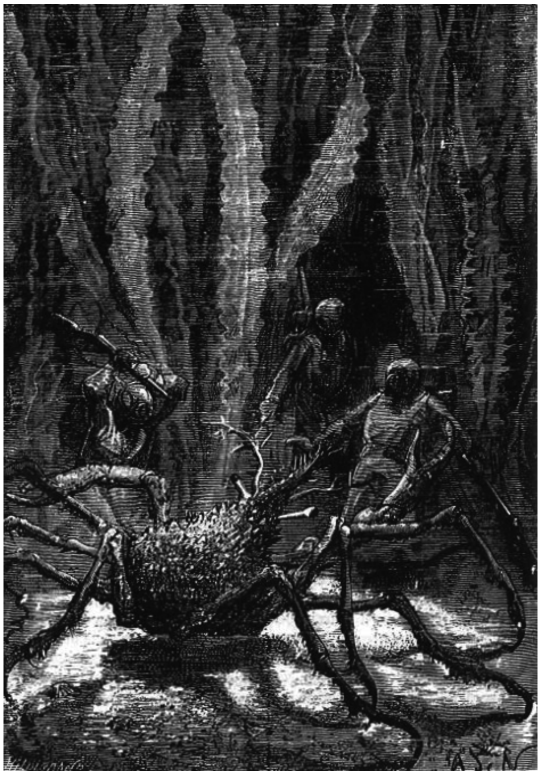

I say seventy-five fathoms, though I had no instrument by which to judge the distance. But I knew that even in the clearest waters the solar rays could not penetrate further. And accordingly the darkness deepened. At ten paces not an object was visible. I was groping my way, when I suddenly saw a brilliant white light. Captain Nemo had just put his electric apparatus into use; his companion did the same, and Conseil and I followed their example. By turning a screw I established a communication between the wire and the spiral glass, and the sea, lit by our four lanterns, was illuminated for a circle of thirty-six yards.

As we walked I thought the light of our Ruhmkorff apparatus could not fail to draw some inhabitant from its dark couch. But if they did approach us, they at least kept at a respectful distance from the hunters. Several times I saw Captain Nemo stop, put his gun to his shoulder, and after some moments drop it and walk on. At last, after about four hours, this marvellous excursion came to an end. A wall of superb rocks, in an imposing mass, rose before us, a heap of gigantic blocks, an enormous, steep granite shore, forming dark grottos, but which presented no practicable slope; it was the prop of the Island of Crespo. It was the earth! Captain Nemo stopped suddenly. A gesture of his brought us all to a halt; and, however desirous I might be to scale the wall, I was obliged to stop. Here ended Captain Nemo's domains. And he would not go beyond them. Further on was a portion of the globe he might not trample upon.

The return began. Captain Nemo had returned to the head of his little band, directing their course without hesitation. I thought we were not following the same road to return to the Nautilus. The new road was very steep, and consequently very painful. We approached the surface of the sea rapidly. But this return to the upper strata was not so sudden as to cause relief from the pressure too rapidly, which might have produced serious disorder in our organisation, and brought on internal lesions, so fatal to divers. Very soon light reappeared and grew, and, the sun being low on the horizon, the refraction edged the different objects with a spectral ring. At ten yards and a half deep, we walked amidst a shoal of little fishes of all kinds, more numerous than the birds of the air, and also more agile; but no aquatic game worthy of a shot had as yet met our gaze, when at that moment I saw the Captain shoulder his gun quickly, and follow a moving object into the shrubs. He fired; I heard a slight hissing, and a creature fell stunned at some distance from us. It was a magnificent sea-otter, an enhydrus, the only exclusively marine quadruped. This otter was five feet long, and must have been very valuable. Its skin, chestnut-brown above and silvery underneath, would have made one of those beautiful furs so sought after in the Russian and Chinese markets: the fineness and the lustre of its coat would certainly fetch L80. I admired this curious mammal, with its rounded head ornamented with short ears, its round eyes, and white whiskers like those of a cat, with webbed feet and nails, and tufted tail. This precious animal, hunted and tracked by fishermen, has now become very rare, and taken refuge chiefly in the northern parts of the Pacific, or probably its race would soon become extinct.

Captain Nemo’s companion took the beast, threw it over his shoulder, and we continued our journey. For one hour a plain of sand lay stretched before us. Sometimes it rose to within two yards and some inches of the surface of the water. I then saw our image clearly reflected, drawn inversely, and above us appeared an identical group reflecting our movements and our actions; in a word, like us in every point, except that they walked with their heads downward and their feet in the air.

Another effect I noticed, which was the passage of thick clouds which formed and vanished rapidly; but on reflection I understood that these seeming clouds were due to the varying thickness of the reeds at the bottom, and I could even see the fleecy foam which their broken tops multiplied on the water, and the shadows of large birds passing above our heads, whose rapid flight I could discern on the surface of the sea.

On this occasion I was witness to one of the finest gun shots which ever made the nerves of a hunter thrill. A large bird of great breadth of wing, clearly visible, approached, hovering over us. Captain Nemo’s companion shouldered his gun and fired, when it was only a few yards above the waves. The creature fell stunned, and the force of its fall brought it within the reach of dexterous hunter’s grasp. It was an albatross of the finest kind.

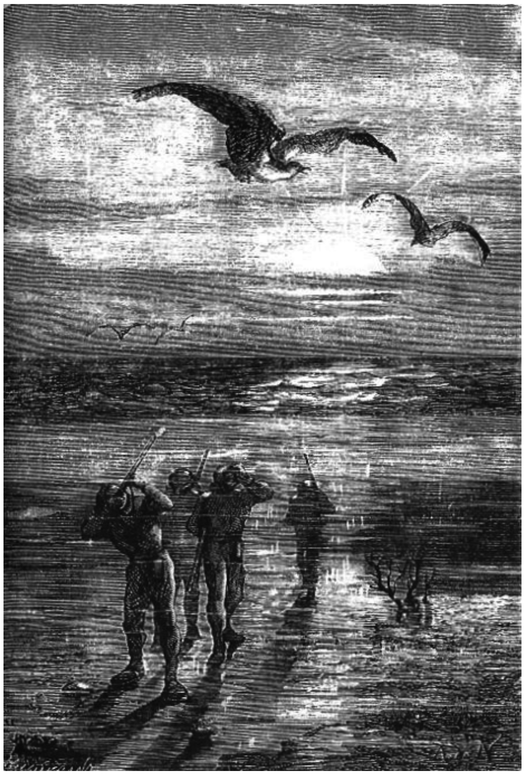

Our march had not been interrupted by this incident. For two hours we followed these sandy plains, then fields of algae very disagreeable to cross. Candidly, I could do no more when I saw a glimmer of light, which, for a half mile, broke the darkness of the waters. It was the lantern of the Nautilus. Before twenty minutes were over we should be on board, and I should be able to breathe with ease, for it seemed that my reservoir supplied air very deficient in oxygen. But I did not reckon on an accidental meeting which delayed our arrival for some time.

I had remained some steps behind, when I presently saw Captain Nemo coming hurriedly towards me. With his strong hand he bent me to the ground, his companion doing the same to Conseil. At first I knew not what to think of this sudden attack, but I was soon reassured by seeing the Captain lie down beside me, and remain immovable.

I was stretched on the ground, just under the shelter of a bush of algae, when, raising my head, I saw some enormous mass, casting phosphorescent gleams, pass blusteringly by.

My blood froze in my veins as I recognised two formidable sharks which threatened us. It was a couple of tintoreas, terrible creatures, with enormous tails and a dull glassy stare, the phosphorescent matter ejected from holes pierced around the muzzle. Monstrous brutes! which would crush a whole man in their iron jaws. I did not know whether Conseil stopped to classify them; for my part, I noticed their silver bellies, and their huge mouths bristling with teeth, from a very unscientific point of view, and more as a possible victim than as a naturalist.

Happily the voracious creatures do not see well. They passed without seeing us, brushing us with their brownish fins, and we escaped by a miracle from a danger certainly greater than meeting a tiger full-face in the forest. Half an hour after, guided by the electric light we reached the Nautilus. The outside door had been left open, and Captain Nemo closed it as soon as we had entered the first cell. He then pressed a knob. I heard the pumps working in the midst of the vessel, I felt the water sinking from around me, and in a few moments the cell was entirely empty. The inside door then opened, and we entered the vestry.

There our diving-dress was taken off, not without some trouble, and, fairly worn out from want of food and sleep, I returned to my room, in great wonder at this surprising excursion at the bottom of the sea.

CHAPTER XVII

FOUR THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE PACIFIC

The next morning, the 18th of November, I had quite recovered from my fatigues of the day before, and I went up on to the platform, just as the second lieutenant was uttering his daily phrase.

I was admiring the magnificent aspect of the ocean when Captain Nemo appeared. He did not seem to be aware of my presence, and began a series of astronomical observations. Then, when he had finished, he went and leant on the cage of the watch-light, and gazed abstractedly on the ocean. In the meantime, a number of the sailors of the Nautilus, all strong and healthy men, had come up onto the platform. They came to draw up the nets that had been laid all night. These sailors were evidently of different nations, although the European type was visible in all of them. I recognised some unmistakable Irishmen, Frenchmen, some Sclaves, and a Greek, or a Candiote. They were civil, and only used that odd language among themselves, the origin of which I could not guess, neither could I question them.

The nets were hauled in. They were a large kind of “chaluts,” like those on the Normandy coasts, great pockets that the waves and a chain fixed in the smaller meshes kept open. These pockets, drawn by iron poles, swept through the water, and gathered in everything in their way. That day they brought up curious specimens from those productive coasts.

I reckoned that the haul had brought in more than nine hundredweight of fish. It was a fine haul, but not to be wondered at. Indeed, the nets are let down for several hours, and enclose in their meshes an infinite variety. We had no lack of excellent food, and the rapidity of the Nautilus and the attraction of the electric light could always renew our supply. These several productions of the sea were immediately lowered through the panel to the steward’s room, some to be eaten fresh, and others pickled.

The fishing ended, the provision of air renewed, I thought that the Nautilus was about to continue its submarine excursion, and was preparing to return to my room, when, without further preamble, the Captain turned to me, saying:

“Professor, is not this ocean gifted with real life? It has its tempers and its gentle moods. Yesterday it slept as we did, and now it has woke after a quiet night. Look!” he continued, “it wakes under the caresses of the sun. It is going to renew its diurnal existence. It is an interesting study to watch the play of its organisation. It has a pulse, arteries, spasms; and I agree with the learned Maury, who discovered in it a circulation as real as the circulation of blood in animals.

“Yes, the ocean has indeed circulation, and to promote it, the Creator has caused things to multiply in it — caloric, salt, and animalculae.”

When Captain Nemo spoke thus, he seemed altogether changed, and aroused an extraordinary emotion in me.

“Also,” he added, “true existence is there; and I can imagine the foundations of nautical towns, clusters of submarine houses, which, like the Nautilus, would ascend every morning to breathe at the surface of the water, free towns, independent cities. Yet who knows whether some despot — — ”

Captain Nemo finished his sentence with a violent gesture. Then, addressing me as if to chase away some sorrowful thought:

“M. Aronnax,” he asked, “do you know the depth of the ocean?”

“I only know, Captain, what the principal soundings have taught us.”

“Could you tell me them, so that I can suit them to my purpose?”

“These are some,” I replied, “that I remember. If I am not mistaken, a depth of 8,000 yards has been found in the North Atlantic, and 2,500 yards in the Mediterranean. The most remarkable soundings have been made in the South Atlantic, near the thirty-fifth parallel, and they gave 12,000 yards, 14,000 yards, and 15,000 yards. To sum up all, it is reckoned that if the bottom of the sea were levelled, its mean depth would be about one and three-quarter leagues.”

“Well, Professor,” replied the Captain, “we shall show you better than that I hope. As to the mean depth of this part of the Pacific, I tell you it is only 4,000 yards.”

Having said this, Captain Nemo went towards the panel, and disappeared down the ladder. I followed him, and went into the large drawing-room. The screw was immediately put in motion, and the log gave twenty miles an hour.

During the days and weeks that passed, Captain Nemo was very sparing of his visits. I seldom saw him. The lieutenant pricked the ship’s course regularly on the chart, so I could always tell exactly the route of the Nautilus.

Nearly every day, for some time, the panels of the drawing-room were opened, and we were never tired of penetrating the mysteries of the submarine world.

The general direction of the Nautilus was south-east, and it kept between 100 and 150 yards of depth. One day, however, I do not know why, being drawn diagonally by means of the inclined planes, it touched the bed of the sea. The thermometer indicated a temperature of 4.25 (cent.): a temperature that at this depth seemed common to all latitudes.

At three o’clock in the morning of the 26th of November the Nautilus crossed the tropic of Cancer at 172° long. On 27th instant it sighted the Sandwich Islands, where Cook died, February 14, 1779. We had then gone 4,860 leagues from our starting-point. In the morning, when I went on the platform, I saw two miles to windward, Hawaii, the largest of the seven islands that form the group. I saw clearly the cultivated ranges, and the several mountain-chains that run parallel with the side, and the volcanoes that overtop Mouna-Rea, which rise 5,000 yards above the level of the sea. Besides other things the nets brought up, were several flabellariae and graceful polypi, that are peculiar to that part of the ocean. The direction of the Nautilus was still to the south-east. It crossed the equator December 1, in 142° long.; and on the 4th of the same month, after crossing rapidly and without anything in particular occurring, we sighted the Marquesas group. I saw, three miles off, Martin’s peak in Nouka-Hiva, the largest of the group that belongs to France. I only saw the woody mountains against the horizon, because Captain Nemo did not wish to bring the ship to the wind. There the nets brought up beautiful specimens of fish: some with azure fins and tails like gold, the flesh of which is unrivalled; some nearly destitute of scales, but of exquisite flavour; others, with bony jaws, and yellow-tinged gills, as good as bonitos; all fish that would be of use to us. After leaving these charming islands protected by the French flag, from the 4th to the 11th of December the Nautilus sailed over about 2,000 miles.

During the daytime of the 11th of December I was busy reading in the large drawing-room. Ned Land and Conseil watched the luminous water through the half-open panels. The Nautilus was immovable. While its reservoirs were filled, it kept at a depth of 1,000 yards, a region rarely visited in the ocean, and in which large fish were seldom seen.

I was then reading a charming book by Jean Mace, The Slaves of the Stomach, and I was learning some valuable lessons from it, when Conseil interrupted me.

“Will master come here a moment?” he said, in a curious voice.

“What is the matter, Conseil?”

“I want master to look.”

I rose, went, and leaned on my elbows before the panes and watched.

In a full electric light, an enormous black mass, quite immovable, was suspended in the midst of the waters. I watched it attentively, seeking to find out the nature of this gigantic cetacean. But a sudden thought crossed my mind. “A vessel!” I said, half aloud.

“Yes,” replied the Canadian, “a disabled ship that has sunk perpendicularly.”

Ned Land was right; we were close to a vessel of which the tattered shrouds still hung from their chains. The keel seemed to be in good order, and it had been wrecked at most some few hours. Three stumps of masts, broken off about two feet above the bridge, showed that the vessel had had to sacrifice its masts. But, lying on its side, it had filled, and it was heeling over to port. This skeleton of what it had once been was a sad spectacle as it lay lost under the waves, but sadder still was the sight of the bridge, where some corpses, bound with ropes, were still lying. I counted five — four men, one of whom was standing at the helm, and a woman standing by the poop, holding an infant in her arms. She was quite young. I could distinguish her features, which the water had not decomposed, by the brilliant light from the Nautilus. In one despairing effort, she had raised her infant above her head — poor little thing! — whose arms encircled its mother's neck. The attitude of the four sailors was frightful, distorted as they were by their convulsive movements, whilst making a last effort to free themselves from the cords that bound them to the vessel. The steersman alone, calm, with a grave, clear face, his grey hair glued to his forehead, and his hand clutching the wheel of the helm, seemed even then to be guiding the three broken masts through the depths of the ocean.

What a scene! We were dumb; our hearts beat fast before this shipwreck, taken as it were from life and photographed in its last moments. And I saw already, coming towards it with hungry eyes, enormous sharks, attracted by the human flesh.

However, the Nautilus, turning, went round the submerged vessel, and in one instant I read on the stern — ”The Florida, Sunderland.”

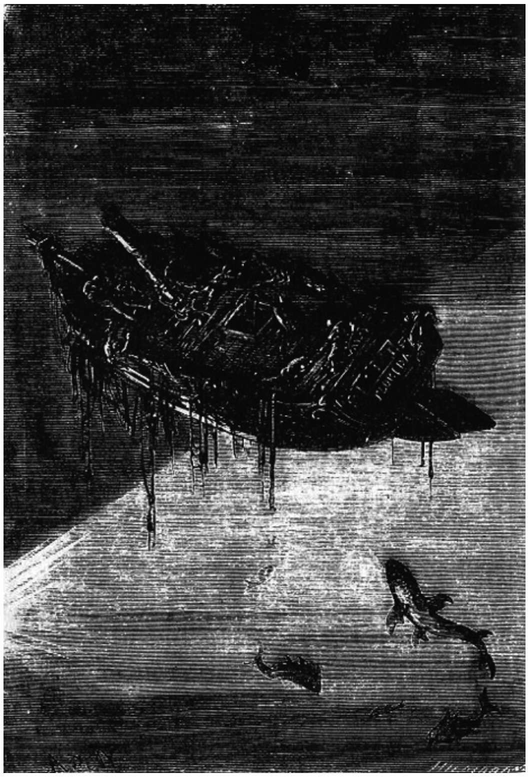

CHAPTER XVIII

VANIKORO

This terrible spectacle was the forerunner of the series of maritime catastrophes that the Nautilus was destined to meet with in its route. As long as it went through more frequented waters, we often saw the hulls of shipwrecked vessels that were rotting in the depths, and deeper down cannons, bullets, anchors, chains, and a thousand other iron materials eaten up by rust. However, on the 11th of December we sighted the Pomotou Islands, the old “dangerous group” of Bougainville, that extend over a space of 500 leagues at E.S.E. to W.N.W. from the Island Ducie to that of Lazareff. This group covers an area of 370 square leagues, and it is formed of sixty groups of islands, among which the Gambier group is remarkable, over which France exercises sway. These are coral islands, slowly raised, but continuous, created by the daily work of polypi. Then this new island will be joined later on to the neighboring groups, and a fifth continent will stretch from New Zealand and New Caledonia, and from thence to the Marquesas.

One day, when I was suggesting this theory to Captain Nemo, he replied coldly:

“The earth does not want new continents, but new men.”

Chance had conducted the Nautilus towards the Island of Clermont-Tonnere, one of the most curious of the group, that was discovered in 1822 by Captain Bell of the Minerva. I could study now the madreporal system, to which are due the islands in this ocean.

Madrepores (which must not be mistaken for corals) have a tissue lined with a calcareous crust, and the modifications of its structure have induced M. Milne Edwards, my worthy master, to class them into five sections. The animalcule that the marine polypus secretes live by millions at the bottom of their cells. Their calcareous deposits become rocks, reefs, and large and small islands. Here they form a ring, surrounding a little inland lake, that communicates with the sea by means of gaps. There they make barriers of reefs like those on the coasts of New Caledonia and the various Pomoton islands. In other places, like those at Reunion and at Maurice, they raise fringed reefs, high, straight walls, near which the depth of the ocean is considerable.

Some cable-lengths off the shores of the Island of Clermont I admired the gigantic work accomplished by these microscopical workers. These walls are specially the work of those madrepores known as milleporas, porites, madrepores, and astraeas. These polypi are found particularly in the rough beds of the sea, near the surface; and consequently it is from the upper part that they begin their operations, in which they bury themselves by degrees with the debris of the secretions that support them. Such is, at least, Darwin’s theory, who thus explains the formation of the *atolls*, a superior theory (to my mind) to that given of the foundation of the madreporical works, summits of mountains or volcanoes, that are submerged some feet below the level of the sea.

I could observe closely these curious walls, for perpendicularly they were more than 300 yards deep, and our electric sheets lighted up this calcareous matter brilliantly. Replying to a question Conseil asked me as to the time these colossal barriers took to be raised, I astonished him much by telling him that learned men reckoned it about the eighth of an inch in a hundred years.

Towards evening Clermont-Tonnerre was lost in the distance, and the route of the Nautilus was sensibly changed. After having crossed the tropic of Capricorn in 135° longitude, it sailed W.N.W. making again for the tropical zone. Although the summer sun was very strong, we did not suffer from heat, for at fifteen or twenty fathoms below the surface, the temperature did not rise above from ten to twelve degrees.

On 15th of December, we left to the east the bewitching group of the Societies and the graceful Tahiti, queen of the Pacific. I saw in the morning, some miles to the windward, the elevated summits of the island. These waters furnished our table with excellent fish, mackerel, bonitos, and some varieties of a sea-serpent.

On the 25th of December the Nautilus sailed into the midst of the New Hebrides, discovered by Quiros in 1606, and that Bougainville explored in 1768, and to which Cook gave its present name in 1773. This group is composed principally of nine large islands, that form a band of 120 leagues N.N.S. to S.S.W. between 15° and 2° S. lat. and 164 deg. and 168° long. We passed tolerably near to the Island of Aurou, that at noon looked like a mass of green woods, surmounted by a peak of great height.

That day being Christmas Day, Ned Land seemed to regret sorely the non-celebration of “Christmas,” the family fete of which Protestants are so fond. I had not seen Captain Nemo for a week, when, on the morning of the 27th, he came into the large drawing-room, always seeming as if he had seen you five minutes before. I was busily tracing the route of the Nautilus on the planisphere. The Captain came up to me, put his finger on one spot on the chart, and said this single word.

“Vanikoro.”

The effect was magical! It was the name of the islands on which La Perouse had been lost! I rose suddenly.

“The Nautilus has brought us to Vanikoro?” I asked.

“Yes, Professor,” said the Captain.

“And I can visit the celebrated islands where the Boussole and the Astrolabe struck?”

“If you like, Professor.”

“When shall we be there?”

“We are there now.”

Followed by Captain Nemo, I went up on to the platform, and greedily scanned the horizon.

To the N.E. two volcanic islands emerged of unequal size, surrounded by a coral reef that measured forty miles in circumference. We were close to Vanikoro, really the one to which Dumont d’Urville gave the name of Isle de la Recherche, and exactly facing the little harbour of Vanou, situated in 16° 4’ S. lat. and 164° 32’ E. long. The earth seemed covered with verdure from the shore to the summits in the interior, that were crowned by Mount Kapogo, 476 feet high. The Nautilus, having passed the outer belt of rocks by a narrow strait, found itself among breakers where the sea was from thirty to forty fathoms deep. Under the verdant shade of some mangroves I perceived some savages, who appeared greatly surprised at our approach. In the long black body, moving between wind and water, did they not see some formidable cetacean that they regarded with suspicion?

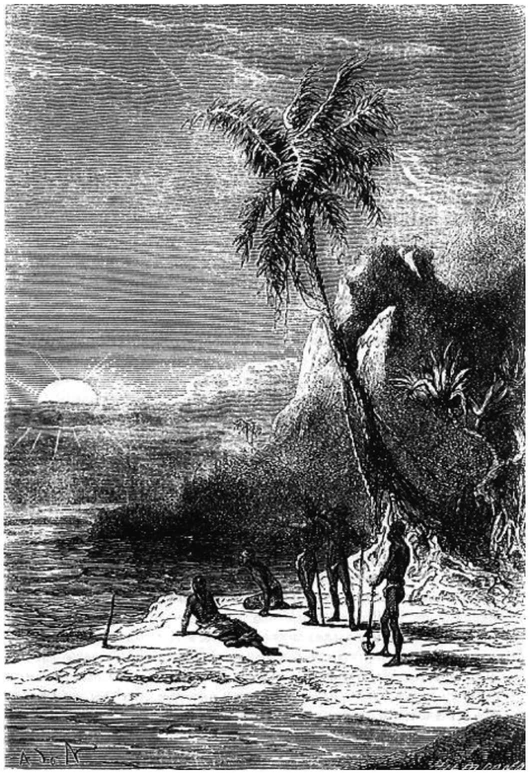

Just then Captain Nemo asked me what I knew about the wreck of La Perouse.

“Only what everyone knows, Captain,” I replied.

“And could you tell me what everyone knows about it?” he inquired, ironically.

“Easily.”

I related to him all that the last works of Dumont d’Urville had made known — works from which the following is a brief account.

La Perouse, and his second, Captain de Langle, were sent by Louis XVI, in 1785, on a voyage of circumnavigation. They embarked in the corvettes Boussole and the Astrolabe, neither of which were again heard of. In 1791, the French Government, justly uneasy as to the fate of these two sloops, manned two large merchantmen, the Recherche and the Esperance, which left Brest the 28th of September under the command of Bruni d’Entrecasteaux.

Two months after, they learned from Bowen, commander of the Albemarle, that the debris of shipwrecked vessels had been seen on the coasts of New Georgia. But D’Entrecasteaux, ignoring this communication — rather uncertain, besides — directed his course towards the Admiralty Islands, mentioned in a report of Captain Hunter’s as being the place where La Perouse was wrecked.

They sought in vain. The Esperance and the Recherche passed before Vanikoro without stopping there, and, in fact, this voyage was most disastrous, as it cost D’Entrecasteaux his life, and those of two of his lieutenants, besides several of his crew.

Captain Dillon, a shrewd old Pacific sailor, was the first to find unmistakable traces of the wrecks. On the 15th of May, 1824, his vessel, the St. Patrick, passed close to Tikopia, one of the New Hebrides. There a Lascar came alongside in a canoe, sold him the handle of a sword in silver that bore the print of characters engraved on the hilt. The Lascar pretended that six years before, during a stay at Vanikoro, he had seen two Europeans that belonged to some vessels that had run aground on the reefs some years ago.

Dillon guessed that he meant La Perouse, whose disappearance had troubled the whole world. He tried to get on to Vanikoro, where, according to the Lascar, he would find numerous debris of the wreck, but winds and tides prevented him.

Dillon returned to Calcutta. There he interested the Asiatic Society and the Indian Company in his discovery. A vessel, to which was given the name of the Recherche, was put at his disposal, and he set out, 23rd January, 1827, accompanied by a French agent.

The Recherche, after touching at several points in the Pacific, cast anchor before Vanikoro, 7th July, 1827, in that same harbour of Vanou where the Nautilus was at this time.

There it collected numerous relics of the wreck — iron utensils, anchors, pulley-strops, swivel-guns, an 18 lb. shot, fragments of astronomical instruments, a piece of crown work, and a bronze clock, bearing this inscription — ”Bazin m’a fait,” the mark of the foundry of the arsenal at Brest about 1785. There could be no further doubt.

Dillon, having made all inquiries, stayed in the unlucky place till October. Then he quitted Vanikoro, and directed his course towards New Zealand; put into Calcutta, 7th April, 1828, and returned to France, where he was warmly welcomed by Charles X.

But at the same time, without knowing Dillon’s movements, Dumont d’Urville had already set out to find the scene of the wreck. And they had learned from a whaler that some medals and a cross of St. Louis had been found in the hands of some savages of Louisiade and New Caledonia. Dumont d’Urville, commander of the Astrolabe, had then sailed, and two months after Dillon had left Vanikoro he put into Hobart Town. There he learned the results of Dillon’s inquiries, and found that a certain James Hobbs, second lieutenant of the Union of Calcutta, after landing on an island situated 8° 18’ S. lat. and 156° 30’ E. long. had seen some iron bars and red stuffs used by the natives of these parts. Dumont d’Urville, much perplexed, and not knowing how to credit the reports of low-class journals, decided to follow Dillon’s track.

On the 10th of February, 1828, the Astrolabe appeared off Tikopia, and took as guide and interpreter a deserter found on the island; made his way to Vanikoro, sighted it on the 12th inst. lay among the reefs until the 14th, and not until the 20th did he cast anchor within the barrier in the harbour of Vanou.

On the 23rd, several officers went round the island and brought back some unimportant trifles. The natives, adopting a system of denials and evasions, refused to take them to the unlucky place. This ambiguous conduct led them to believe that the natives had ill-treated the castaways, and indeed they seemed to fear that Dumont d’Urville had come to avenge La Perouse and his unfortunate crew.

However, on the 26th, appeased by some presents, and understanding that they had no reprisals to fear, they led M. Jacquireot to the scene of the wreck.

There, in three or four fathoms of water, between the reefs of Pacou and Vanou, lay anchors, cannons, pigs of lead and iron, embedded in the limy concretions. The large boat and the whaler belonging to the Astrolabe were sent to this place, and, not without some difficulty, their crews hauled up an anchor weighing 1,800 lbs. a brass gun, some pigs of iron, and two copper swivel-guns.

Dumont d’Urville, questioning the natives, learned too that La Perouse, after losing both his vessels on the reefs of this island, had constructed a smaller boat, only to be lost a second time. Where, no one knew.

But the French Government, fearing that Dumont d’Urville was not acquainted with Dillon’s movements, had sent the sloop Bayonnaise, commanded by Legoarant de Tromelin, to Vanikoro, which had been stationed on the west coast of America. The Bayonnaise cast her anchor before Vanikoro some months after the departure of the Astrolabe, but found no new document; but stated that the savages had respected the monument to La Perouse. That is the substance of what I told Captain Nemo.

“So,” he said, “no one knows now where the third vessel perished that was constructed by the castaways on the island of Vanikoro?”

“No one knows.”

Captain Nemo said nothing, but signed to me to follow him into the large saloon. The Nautilus sank several yards below the waves, and the panels were opened.

I hastened to the aperture, and under the crustations of coral, covered with fungi, syphonules, alcyons, madrepores, through myriads of charming fish — girelles, glyphisidri, pompherides, diacopes, and holocentres — I recognised certain debris that the drags had not been able to tear up — iron stirrups, anchors, cannons, bullets, capstan fittings, the stem of a ship, all objects clearly proving the wreck of some vessel, and now carpeted with living flowers. While I was looking on this desolate scene, Captain Nemo said, in a sad voice:

“Commander La Perouse set out 7th December, 1785, with his vessels La Boussole and the Astrolabe. He first cast anchor at Botany Bay, visited the Friendly Isles, New Caledonia, then directed his course towards Santa Cruz, and put into Namouka, one of the Hapai group. Then his vessels struck on the unknown reefs of Vanikoro. The Boussole, which went first, ran aground on the southerly coast. The Astrolabe went to its help, and ran aground too. The first vessel was destroyed almost immediately. The second, stranded under the wind, resisted some days. The natives made the castaways welcome. They installed themselves in the island, and constructed a smaller boat with the debris of the two large ones. Some sailors stayed willingly at Vanikoro; the others, weak and ill, set out with La Perouse. They directed their course towards the Solomon Islands, and there perished, with everything, on the westerly coast of the chief island of the group, between Capes Deception and Satisfaction."

"How do you know that?"

"By this, that I found on the spot where was the last wreck."

Captain Nemo showed me a tin-plate box, stamped with the French arms, and corroded by the salt water. He opened it, and I saw a bundle of papers, yellow but still readable.

They were the instructions of the naval minister to Commander La Perouse, annotated in the margin in Louis XVI's handwriting.

"Ah! it is a fine death for a sailor!" said Captain Nemo, at last. "A coral tomb makes a quiet grave; and I trust that I and my comrades will find no other."

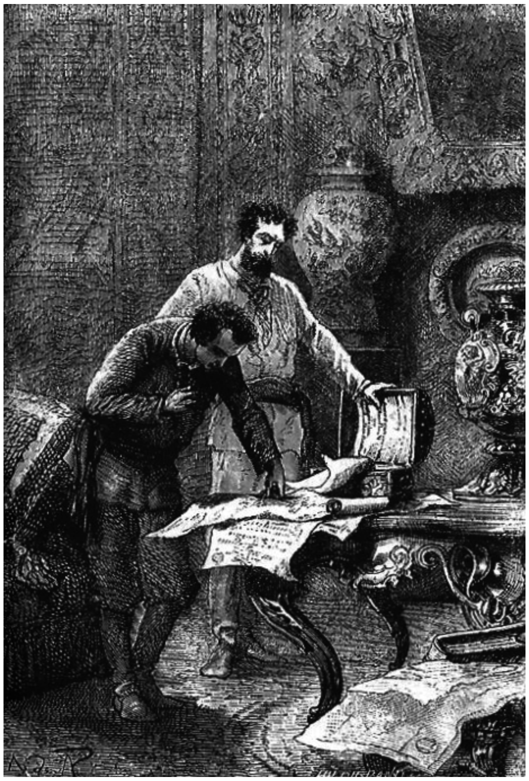

CHAPTER XIX

TORRES STRAITS

During the night of the 27th or 28th of December, the Nautilus left the shores of Vanikoro with great speed. Her course was south-westerly, and in three days she had gone over the 750 leagues that separated it from La Perouse’s group and the south-east point of Papua.

Early on the 1st of January, 1863, Conseil joined me on the platform.

“Master, will you permit me to wish you a happy New Year?”

“What! Conseil; exactly as if I was at Paris in my study at the Jardin des Plantes? Well, I accept your good wishes, and thank you for them. Only, I will ask you what you mean by a `Happy New Year’ under our circumstances? Do you mean the year that will bring us to the end of our imprisonment, or the year that sees us continue this strange voyage?”

“Really, I do not know how to answer, master. We are sure to see curious things, and for the last two months we have not had time for dullness. The last marvel is always the most astonishing; and, if we continue this progression, I do not know how it will end. It is my opinion that we shall never again see the like. I think then, with no offence to master, that a happy year would be one in which we could see everything.”

On 2nd January we had made 11,340 miles, or 5,250 French leagues, since our starting-point in the Japan Seas. Before the ship’s head stretched the dangerous shores of the coral sea, on the north-east coast of Australia. Our boat lay along some miles from the redoubtable bank on which Cook’s vessel was lost, 10th June, 1770. The boat in which Cook was struck on a rock, and, if it did not sink, it was owing to a piece of coral that was broken by the shock, and fixed itself in the broken keel.

I had wished to visit the reef, 360 leagues long, against which the sea, always rough, broke with great violence, with a noise like thunder. But just then the inclined planes drew the Nautilus down to a great depth, and I could see nothing of the high coral walls. I had to content myself with the different specimens of fish brought up by the nets. I remarked, among others, some germons, a species of mackerel as large as a tunny, with bluish sides, and striped with transverse bands, that disappear with the animal's life.

These fish followed us in shoals, and furnished us with very delicate food. We took also a large number of gilt-heads, about one and a half inches long, tasting like dorys; and flying pyrapeds like submarine swallows, which, in dark nights, light alternately the air and water with their phosphorescent light. Among the molluscs and zoophytes, I found in the meshes of the net several species of alcyonarians, echini, hammers, spurs, dials, cerites, and hyalleae. The flora was represented by beautiful floating seaweeds, laminariae, and macrocystes, impregnated with the mucilage that transudes through their pores; and among which I gathered an admirable Nemastoma Geliniarois, that was classed among the natural curiosities of the museum.

Two days after crossing the coral sea, 4th January, we sighted the Papuan coasts. On this occasion, Captain Nemo informed me that his intention was to get into the Indian Ocean by the Strait of Torres. His communication ended there.

The Torres Straits are nearly thirty-four leagues wide; but they are obstructed by an innumerable quantity of islands, islets, breakers, and rocks, that make its navigation almost impracticable; so that Captain Nemo took all needful precautions to cross them. The Nautilus, floating betwixt wind and water, went at a moderate pace. Her screw, like a cetacean’s tail, beat the waves slowly.

Profiting by this, I and my two companions went up on to the deserted platform. Before us was the steersman’s cage, and I expected that Captain Nemo was there directing the course of the Nautilus. I had before me the excellent charts of the Straits of Torres, and I consulted them attentively. Round the Nautilus the sea dashed furiously. The course of the waves, that went from south-east to north-west at the rate of two and a half miles, broke on the coral that showed itself here and there.

“This is a bad sea!” remarked Ned Land.

“Detestable indeed, and one that does not suit a boat like the Nautilus.”

“The Captain must be very sure of his route, for I see there pieces of coral that would do for its keel if it only touched them slightly.”

Indeed the situation was dangerous, but the Nautilus seemed to slide like magic off these rocks. It did not follow the routes of the Astrolabe and the Zelee exactly, for they proved fatal to Dumont d’Urville. It bore more northwards, coasted the Islands of Murray, and came back to the south-west towards Cumberland Passage. I thought it was going to pass it by, when, going back to north-west, it went through a large quantity of islands and islets little known, towards the Island Sound and Canal Mauvais.

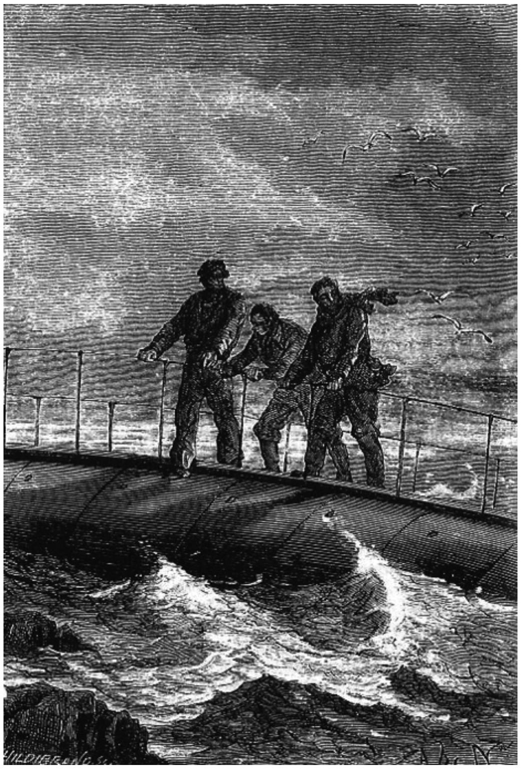

I wondered if Captain Nemo, foolishly imprudent, would steer his vessel into that pass where Dumont d'Urville's two corvettes touched; when, swerving again, and cutting straight through to the west, he steered for the Island of Gilboa.

It was then three in the afternoon. The tide began to recede, being quite full. The Nautilus approached the island, that I still saw, with its remarkable border of screw-pines. He stood off it at about two miles distant. Suddenly a shock overthrew me. The Nautilus just touched a rock, and stayed immovable, laying lightly to port side.

When I rose, I perceived Captain Nemo and his lieutenant on the platform. They were examining the situation of the vessel, and exchanging words in their incomprehensible dialect.

She was situated thus: Two miles, on the starboard side, appeared Gilboa, stretching from north to west like an immense arm. Towards the south and east some coral showed itself, left by the ebb. We had run aground, and in one of those seas where the tides are middling — a sorry matter for the floating of the Nautilus. However, the vessel had not suffered, for her keel was solidly joined. But, if she could neither glide off nor move, she ran the risk of being for ever fastened to these rocks, and then Captain Nemo's submarine vessel would be done for.

I was reflecting thus, when the Captain, cool and calm, always master of himself, approached me.

"An accident?" I asked.

"No; an incident."

"But an incident that will oblige you perhaps to become an inhabitant of this land from which you flee?"

Captain Nemo looked at me curiously, and made a negative gesture, as much as to say that nothing would force him to set foot on terra firma again. Then he said:

"Besides, M. Aronnax, the Nautilus is not lost; it will carry you yet into the midst of the marvels of the ocean. Our voyage is only begun, and I do not wish to be deprived so soon of the honour of your company."

"However, Captain Nemo," I replied, without noticing the ironical turn of his phrase, "the Nautilus ran aground in open sea. Now the tides are not strong in the Pacific; and, if you cannot lighten the Nautilus, I do not see how it will be reinflated."

“The tides are not strong in the Pacific: you are right there, Professor; but in Torres Straits one finds still a difference of a yard and a half between the level of high and low seas. To-day is 4th January, and in five days the moon will be full. Now, I shall be very much astonished if that satellite does not raise these masses of water sufficiently, and render me a service that I should be indebted to her for.”

Having said this, Captain Nemo, followed by his lieutenant, redescended to the interior of the Nautilus. As to the vessel, it moved not, and was immovable, as if the coralline polypi had already walled it up with their in destructible cement.

“Well, sir?” said Ned Land, who came up to me after the departure of the Captain.

“Well, friend Ned, we will wait patiently for the tide on the 9th instant; for it appears that the moon will have the goodness to put it off again.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“And this Captain is not going to cast anchor at all since the tide will suffice?” said Conseil, simply.

The Canadian looked at Conseil, then shrugged his shoulders.

“Sir, you may believe me when I tell you that this piece of iron will navigate neither on nor under the sea again; it is only fit to be sold for its weight. I think, therefore, that the time has come to part company with Captain Nemo.”

“Friend Ned, I do not despair of this stout Nautilus, as you do; and in four days we shall know what to hold to on the Pacific tides. Besides, flight might be possible if we were in sight of the English or Provencal coast; but on the Papuan shores, it is another thing; and it will be time enough to come to that extremity if the Nautilus does not recover itself again, which I look upon as a grave event.”

“But do they know, at least, how to act circumspectly? There is an island; on that island there are trees; under those trees, terrestrial animals, bearers of cutlets and roast beef, to which I would willingly give a trial.”

“In this, friend Ned is right,” said Conseil, “and I agree with him. Could not master obtain permission from his friend Captain Nemo to put us on land, if only so as not to lose the habit of treading on the solid parts of our planet?”

“I can ask him, but he will refuse.”

“Will master risk it?” asked Conseil, “and we shall know how to rely upon the Captain’s amiability.”

To my great surprise, Captain Nemo gave me the permission I asked for, and he gave it very agreeably, without even exacting from me a promise to return to the vessel; but flight across New Guinea might be very perilous, and I should not have counselled Ned Land to attempt it. Better to be a prisoner on board the Nautilus than to fall into the hands of the natives.

At eight o’clock, armed with guns and hatchets, we got off the Nautilus. The sea was pretty calm; a slight breeze blew on land. Conseil and I rowing, we sped along quickly, and Ned steered in the straight passage that the breakers left between them. The boat was well handled, and moved rapidly.

Ned Land could not restrain his joy. He was like a prisoner that had escaped from prison, and knew not that it was necessary to re-enter it.

“Meat! We are going to eat some meat; and what meat!” he replied. “Real game! no, bread, indeed.”

“I do not say that fish is not good; we must not abuse it; but a piece of fresh venison, grilled on live coals, will agreeably vary our ordinary course.”

“Glutton!” said Conseil, “he makes my mouth water.”

“It remains to be seen,” I said, “if these forests are full of game, and if the game is not such as will hunt the hunter himself.”

“Well said, M. Aronnax,” replied the Canadian, whose teeth seemed sharpened like the edge of a hatchet; “but I will eat tiger — loin of tiger — if there is no other quadruped on this island.”

“Friend Ned is uneasy about it,” said Conseil.

“Whatever it may be,” continued Ned Land, “every animal with four paws without feathers, or with two paws without feathers, will be saluted by my first shot.”

“Very well! Master Land’s imprudences are beginning.”

“Never fear, M. Aronnax,” replied the Canadian; “I do not want twenty-five minutes to offer you a dish, of my sort.”

At half-past eight the Nautilus boat ran softly aground on a heavy sand, after having happily passed the coral reef that surrounds the Island of Gilboa.

CHAPTER XX

A FEW DAYS ON LAND

I was much impressed on touching land. Ned Land tried the soil with his feet, as if to take possession of it. However, it was only two months before that we had become, according to Captain Nemo, “passengers on board the Nautilus,” but, in reality, prisoners of its commander.

In a few minutes we were within musket-shot of the coast. The whole horizon was hidden behind a beautiful curtain of forests. Enormous trees, the trunks of which attained a height of 200 feet, were tied to each other by garlands of bindweed, real natural hammocks, which a light breeze rocked. They were mimosas, figs, hibisci, and palm trees, mingled together in profusion; and under the shelter of their verdant vault grew orchids, leguminous plants, and ferns.

But, without noticing all these beautiful specimens of Papuan flora, the Canadian abandoned the agreeable for the useful. He discovered a coco-tree, beat down some of the fruit, broke them, and we drunk the milk and ate the nut with a satisfaction that protested against the ordinary food on the Nautilus.

“Excellent!” said Ned Land.

“Exquisite!” replied Conseil.

“And I do not think,” said the Canadian, “that he would object to our introducing a cargo of coco-nuts on board.”

“I do not think he would, but he would not taste them.”

“So much the worse for him,” said Conseil.

“And so much the better for us,” replied Ned Land. “There will be more for us.”

“One word only, Master Land,” I said to the harpooner, who was beginning to ravage another coco-nut tree. “Coco-nuts are good things, but before filling the canoe with them it would be wise to reconnoitre and see if the island does not produce some substance not less useful. Fresh vegetables would be welcome on board the Nautilus.”

“Master is right,” replied Conseil; “and I propose to reserve three places in our vessel, one for fruits, the other for vegetables, and the third for the venison, of which I have not yet seen the smallest specimen.”

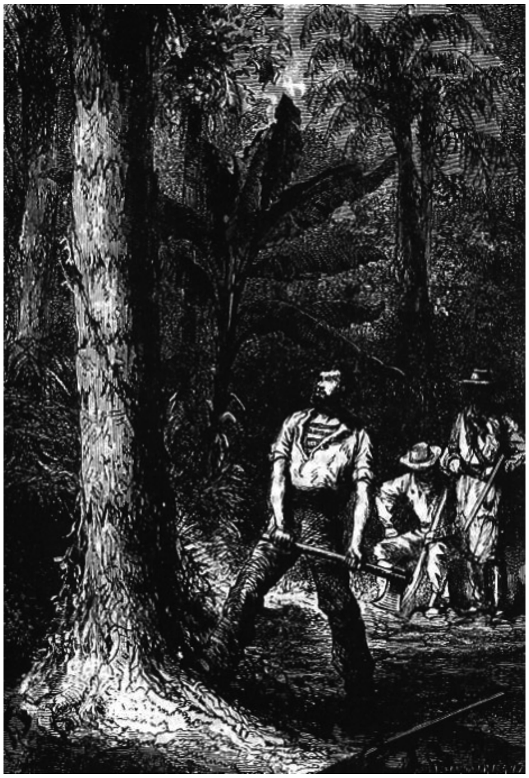

“Conseil, we must not despair,” said the Canadian.

“Let us continue,” I returned, “and lie in wait. Although the island seems uninhabited, it might still contain some individuals that would be less hard than we on the nature of game.”

“Ho! ho!” said Ned Land, moving his jaws significantly.

“Well, Ned!” said Conseil.

“My word!” returned the Canadian, “I begin to understand the charms of anthropophagy.”

“Ned! Ned! what are you saying? You, a man-eater? I should not feel safe with you, especially as I share your cabin. I might perhaps wake one day to find myself half devoured.”

“Friend Conseil, I like you much, but not enough to eat you unnecessarily.”

“I would not trust you,” replied Conseil. “But enough. We must absolutely bring down some game to satisfy this cannibal, or else one of these fine mornings, master will find only pieces of his servant to serve him.”

While we were talking thus, we were penetrating the sombre arches of the forest, and for two hours we surveyed it in all directions.

Chance rewarded our search for eatable vegetables, and one of the most useful products of the tropical zones furnished us with precious food that we missed on board. I would speak of the bread-fruit tree, very abundant in the island of Gilboa; and I remarked chiefly the variety destitute of seeds, which bears in Malaya the name of “rima.”

Ned Land knew these fruits well. He had already eaten many during his numerous voyages, and he knew how to prepare the eatable substance.

Moreover, the sight of them excited him, and he could contain himself no longer.

“Master,” he said, “I shall die if I do not taste a little of this bread-fruit pie.”

“Taste it, friend Ned — taste it as you want. We are here to make experiments — make them.”

“It won’t take long,” said the Canadian.

And, provided with a lentil, he lighted a fire of dead wood that crackled joyously. During this time, Conseil and I chose the best fruits of the bread-fruit. Some had not then attained a sufficient degree of maturity; and their thick skin covered a white but rather fibrous pulp. Others, the greater number yellow and gelatinous, waited only to be picked.

These fruits enclosed no kernel. Conseil brought a dozen to Ned Land, who placed them on a coal fire, after having cut them in thick slices, and while doing this repeating:

“You will see, master, how good this bread is. More so when one has been deprived of it so long. It is not even bread,” added he, “but a delicate pastry. You have eaten none, master?”

“No, Ned.”

“Very well, prepare yourself for a juicy thing. If you do not come for more, I am no longer the king of harpooners.”

After some minutes, the part of the fruits that was exposed to the fire was completely roasted. The interior looked like a white pasty, a sort of soft crumb, the flavour of which was like that of an artichoke.

It must be confessed this bread was excellent, and I ate of it with great relish.

“What time is it now?” asked the Canadian.

“Two o’clock at least,” replied Conseil.

“How time flies on firm ground!” sighed Ned Land.

“Let us be off,” replied Conseil.

We returned through the forest, and completed our collection by a raid upon the cabbage-palms, that we gathered from the tops of the trees, little beans that I recognised as the “abrou” of the Malays, and yams of a superior quality.

We were loaded when we reached the boat. But Ned Land did not find his provisions sufficient. Fate, however, favoured us. Just as we were pushing off, he perceived several trees, from twenty-five to thirty feet high, a species of palm-tree.

At last, at five o’clock in the evening, loaded with our riches, we quitted the shore, and half an hour after we hailed the Nautilus. No one appeared on our arrival. The enormous iron-plated cylinder seemed deserted. The provisions embarked, I descended to my chamber, and after supper slept soundly.

The next day, 6th January, nothing new on board. Not a sound inside, not a sign of life. The boat rested along the edge, in the same place in which we had left it. We resolved to return to the island. Ned Land hoped to be more fortunate than on the day before with regard to the hunt, and wished to visit another part of the forest.

At dawn we set off. The boat, carried on by the waves that flowed to shore, reached the island in a few minutes.

We landed, and, thinking that it was better to give in to the Canadian, we followed Ned Land, whose long limbs threatened to distance us. He wound up the coast towards the west: then, fording some torrents, he gained the high plain that was bordered with admirable forests. Some kingfishers were rambling along the water-courses, but they would not let themselves be approached. Their circumspection proved to me that these birds knew what to expect from bipeds of our species, and I concluded that, if the island was not inhabited, at least human beings occasionally frequented it.

After crossing a rather large prairie, we arrived at the skirts of a little wood that was enlivened by the songs and flight of a large number of birds.

“There are only birds,” said Conseil.

“But they are eatable,” replied the harpooner.

“I do not agree with you, friend Ned, for I see only parrots there.”

“Friend Conseil,” said Ned, gravely, “the parrot is like pheasant to those who have nothing else.”

“And,” I added, “this bird, suitably prepared, is worth knife and fork.”

Indeed, under the thick foliage of this wood, a world of parrots were flying from branch to branch, only needing a careful education to speak the human language. For the moment, they were chattering with parrots of all colours, and grave cockatoos, who seemed to meditate upon some philosophical problem, whilst brilliant red lories passed like a piece of bunting carried away by the breeze, papuans, with the finest azure colours, and in all a variety of winged things most charming to behold, but few eatable.

However, a bird peculiar to these lands, and which has never passed the limits of the Arrow and Papuan islands, was wanting in this collection. But fortune reserved it for me before long.

After passing through a moderately thick copse, we found a plain obstructed with bushes. I saw then those magnificent birds, the disposition of whose long feathers obliges them to fly against the wind. Their undulating flight, graceful aerial curves, and the shading of their colours, attracted and charmed one’s looks. I had no trouble in recognising them.

“Birds of paradise!” I exclaimed.

The Malays, who carry on a great trade in these birds with the Chinese, have several means that we could not employ for taking them. Sometimes they put snares on the top of high trees that the birds of paradise prefer to frequent. Sometimes they catch them with a viscous birdlime that paralyses their movements. They even go so far as to poison the fountains that the birds generally drink from. But we were obliged to fire at them during flight, which gave us few chances to bring them down; and, indeed, we vainly exhausted one half our ammunition.

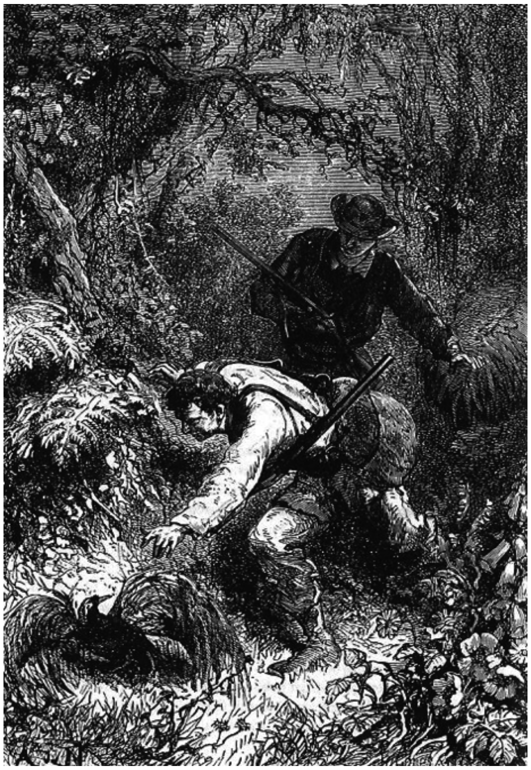

About eleven o’clock in the morning, the first range of mountains that form the centre of the island was traversed, and we had killed nothing. Hunger drove us on. The hunters had relied on the products of the chase, and they were wrong. Happily Conseil, to his great surprise, made a double shot and secured breakfast. He brought down a white pigeon and a wood-pigeon, which, cleverly plucked and suspended from a skewer, was roasted before a red fire of dead wood. While these interesting birds were cooking, Ned prepared the fruit of the bread-tree. Then the wood-pigeons were devoured to the bones, and declared excellent. The nutmeg, with which they are in the habit of stuffing their crops, flavours their flesh and renders it delicious eating.

“Now, Ned, what do you miss now?”

“Some four-footed game, M. Aronnax. All these pigeons are only side-dishes and trifles; and until I have killed an animal with cutlets I shall not be content.”

“Nor I, Ned, if I do not catch a bird of paradise.”

“Let us continue hunting,” replied Conseil. “Let us go towards the sea. We have arrived at the first declivities of the mountains, and I think we had better regain the region of forests.”

That was sensible advice, and was followed out. After walking for one hour we had attained a forest of sago-trees. Some inoffensive serpents glided away from us. The birds of paradise fled at our approach, and truly I despaired of getting near one when Conseil, who was walking in front, suddenly bent down, uttered a triumphal cry, and came back to me bringing a magnificent specimen.

“Ah! bravo, Conseil!”

“Master is very good.”

“No, my boy; you have made an excellent stroke. Take one of these living birds, and carry it in your hand.”

“If master will examine it, he will see that I have not deserved great merit.”

“Why, Conseil?”

“Because this bird is as drunk as a quail.”

“Drunk!”

“Yes, sir; drunk with the nutmegs that it devoured under the nutmeg-tree, under which I found it. See, friend Ned, see the monstrous effects of intemperance!”

"By Jove!" exclaimed the Canadian, "because I have drunk gin for two months, you must needs reproach me!"

However, I examined the curious bird. Conseil was right. The bird, drunk with the juice, was quite powerless. It could not fly; it could hardly walk.

This bird belonged to the most beautiful of the eight species that are found in Papua and in the neighbouring islands. It was the "large emerald bird, the most rare kind." It measured three feet in length. Its head was comparatively small, its eyes placed near the opening of the beak, and also small. But the shades of colour were beautiful, having a yellow beak, brown feet and claws, nut-coloured wings with purple tips, pale yellow at the back of the neck and head, and emerald colour at the throat, chestnut on the breast and belly. Two horned, downy nets rose from below the tail, that prolonged the long light feathers of admirable fineness, and they completed the whole of this marvellous bird, that the natives have poetically named the "bird of the sun."

But if my wishes were satisfied by the possession of the bird of paradise, the Canadian's were not yet. Happily, about two o'clock, Ned Land brought down a magnificent hog; from the brood of those the natives call "bari-outang." The animal came in time for us to procure real quadruped meat, and he was well received. Ned Land was very proud of his shot. The hog, hit by the electric ball, fell stone dead. The Canadian skinned and cleaned it properly, after having taken half a dozen cutlets, destined to furnish us with a grilled repast in the evening. Then the hunt was resumed, which was still more marked by Ned and Conseil's exploits.

Indeed, the two friends, beating the bushes, roused a herd of kangaroos that fled and bounded along on their elastic paws. But these animals did not take to flight so rapidly but what the electric capsule could stop their course.

“Ah, Professor!” cried Ned Land, who was carried away by the delights of the chase, “what excellent game, and stewed, too! What a supply for the Nautilus! Two! three! five down! And to think that we shall eat that flesh, and that the idiots on board shall not have a crumb!”

I think that, in the excess of his joy, the Canadian, if he had not talked so much, would have killed them all. But he contented himself with a single dozen of these interesting marsupians. These animals were small. They were a species of those “kangaroo rabbits” that live habitually in the hollows of trees, and whose speed is extreme; but they are moderately fat, and furnish, at least, estimable food. We were very satisfied with the results of the hunt. Happy Ned proposed to return to this enchanting island the next day, for he wished to depopulate it of all the eatable quadrupeds. But he had reckoned without his host.

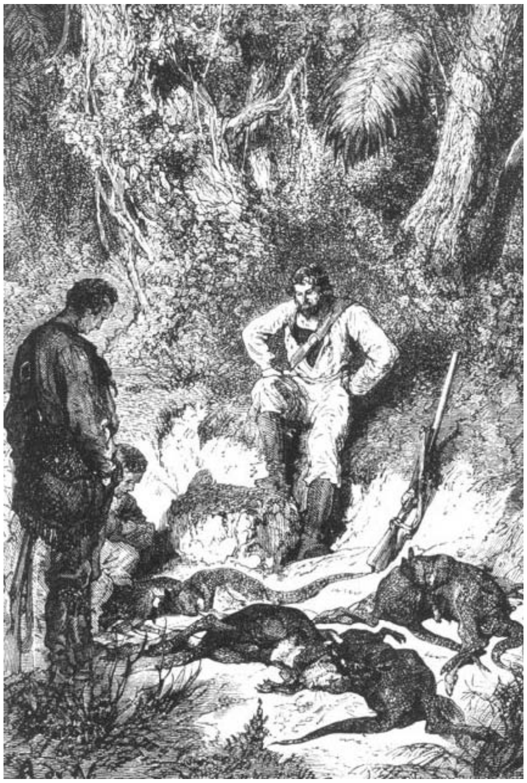

At six o’clock in the evening we had regained the shore; our boat was moored to the usual place. The Nautilus, like a long rock, emerged from the waves two miles from the beach. Ned Land, without waiting, occupied himself about the important dinner business. He understood all about cooking well. The “bari-outang,” grilled on the coals, soon scented the air with a delicious odour.

Indeed, the dinner was excellent. Two wood-pigeons completed this extraordinary menu. The sago pasty, the artocarpus bread, some mangoes, half a dozen pineapples, and the liquor fermented from some coco-nuts, overjoyed us. I even think that my worthy companions’ ideas had not all the plainness desirable.

“Suppose we do not return to the Nautilus this evening?” said Conseil.

“Suppose we never return?” added Ned Land.

Just then a stone fell at our feet and cut short the harpooner’s proposition.

CHAPTER XXI

CAPTAIN NEMO’S THUNDERBOLT

We looked at the edge of the forest without rising, my hand stopping in the action of putting it to my mouth, Ned Land’s completing its office.

“Stones do not fall from the sky,” remarked Conseil, “or they would merit the name aerolites.”

A second stone, carefully aimed, that made a savoury pigeon’s leg fall from Conseil’s hand, gave still more weight to his observation. We all three arose, shouldered our guns, and were ready to reply to any attack.

“Are they apes?” cried Ned Land.

“Very nearly — they are savages.”

“To the boat!” I said, hurrying to the sea.

It was indeed necessary to beat a retreat, for about twenty natives armed with bows and slings appeared on the skirts of a copse that masked the horizon to the right, hardly a hundred steps from us.

Our boat was moored about sixty feet from us. The savages approached us, not running, but making hostile demonstrations. Stones and arrows fell thickly.

Ned Land had not wished to leave his provisions; and, in spite of his imminent danger, his pig on one side and kangaroos on the other, he went tolerably fast. In two minutes we were on the shore. To load the boat with provisions and arms, to push it out to sea, and ship the oars, was the work of an instant. We had not gone two cable-lengths, when a hundred savages, howling and gesticulating, entered the water up to their waists. I watched to see if their apparition would attract some men from the Nautilus on to the platform. But no. The enormous machine, lying off, was absolutely deserted.

Twenty minutes later we were on board. The panels were open. After making the boat fast, we entered into the interior of the Nautilus.

I descended to the drawing-room, from whence I heard some chords. Captain Nemo was there, bending over his organ, and plunged in a musical ecstasy.

“Captain!”

He did not hear me.

“Captain!” I said, touching his hand.

He shuddered, and, turning round, said, “Ah! it is you, Professor? Well, have you had a good hunt, have you botanised successfully?”

“Yes Captain; but we have unfortunately brought a troop of bipeds, whose vicinity troubles me.”

“What bipeds?”

“Savages.”

“Savages!” he echoed, ironically. “So you are astonished, Professor, at having set foot on a strange land and finding savages? Savages! where are there not any? Besides, are they worse than others, these whom you call savages?”

“But Captain — — ”

“How many have you counted?”

“A hundred at least.”

“M. Aronnax,” replied Captain Nemo, placing his fingers on the organ stops, “when all the natives of Papua are assembled on this shore, the Nautilus will have nothing to fear from their attacks.”

The Captain’s fingers were then running over the keys of the instrument, and I remarked that he touched only the black keys, which gave his melodies an essentially Scotch character. Soon he had forgotten my presence, and had plunged into a reverie that I did not disturb. I went up again on to the platform: night had already fallen; for, in this low latitude, the sun sets rapidly and without twilight. I could only see the island indistinctly; but the numerous fires, lighted on the beach, showed that the natives did not think of leaving it. I was alone for several hours, sometimes thinking of the natives — but without any dread of them, for the imperturbable confidence of the Captain was catching — sometimes forgetting them to admire the splendours of the night in the tropics. My remembrances went to France in the train of those zodiacal stars that would shine in some hours’ time. The moon shone in the midst of the constellations of the zenith.

The night slipped away without any mischance, the islanders frightened no doubt at the sight of a monster aground in the bay. The panels were open, and would have offered an easy access to the interior of the Nautilus.

At six o’clock in the morning of the 8th January I went up on to the platform. The dawn was breaking. The island soon showed itself through the dissipating fogs, first the shore, then the summits.

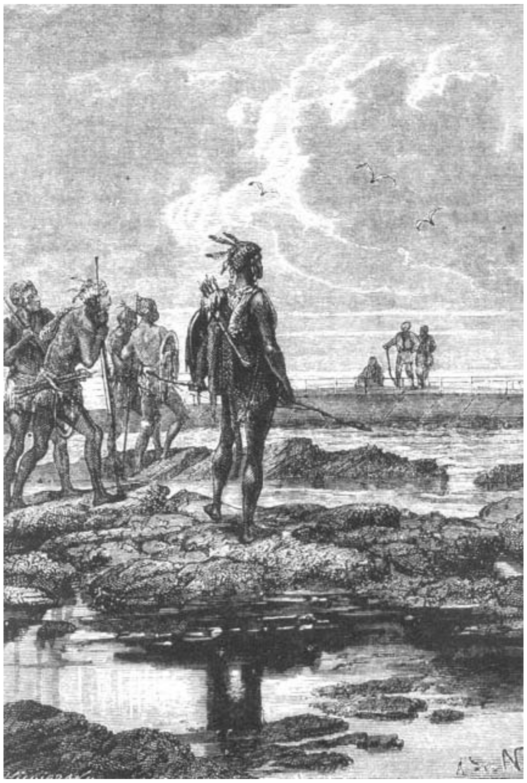

The natives were there, more numerous than on the day before — five or six hundred perhaps — some of them, profiting by the low water, had come on to the coral, at less than two cable-lengths from the Nautilus. I distinguished them easily; they were true Papuans, with athletic figures, men of good race, large high foreheads, large, but not broad and flat, and white teeth. Their woolly hair, with a reddish tinge, showed off on their black shining bodies like those of the Nubians. From the lobes of their ears, cut and distended, hung chaplets of bones. Most of these savages were naked. Amongst them, I remarked some women, dressed from the hips to knees in quite a crinoline of herbs, that sustained a vegetable waistband. Some chiefs had ornamented their necks with a crescent and collars of glass beads, red and white; nearly all were armed with bows, arrows, and shields and carried on their shoulders a sort of net containing those round stones which they cast from their slings with great skill. One of these chiefs, rather near to the Nautilus, examined it attentively. He was, perhaps, a “mado” of high rank, for he was draped in a mat of banana-leaves, notched round the edges, and set off with brilliant colours.

I could easily have knocked down this native, who was within a short length; but I thought that it was better to wait for real hostile demonstrations. Between Europeans and savages, it is proper for the Europeans to parry sharply, not to attack.

During low water the natives roamed about near the Nautilus, but were not troublesome; I heard them frequently repeat the word “Assai,” and by their gestures I understood that they invited me to go on land, an invitation that I declined.

So that, on that day, the boat did not push off, to the great displeasure of Master Land, who could not complete his provisions.

This adroit Canadian employed his time in preparing the viands and meat that he had brought off the island. As for the savages, they returned to the shore about eleven o’clock in the morning, as soon as the coral tops began to disappear under the rising tide; but I saw their numbers had increased considerably on the shore. Probably they came from the neighbouring islands, or very likely from Papua. However, I had not seen a single native canoe. Having nothing better to do, I thought of dragging these beautiful limpid waters, under which I saw a profusion of shells, zoophytes, and marine plants. Moreover, it was the last day that the Nautilus would pass in these parts, if it float in open sea the next day, according to Captain Nemo’s promise.

I therefore called Conseil, who brought me a little light drag, very like those for the oyster fishery. Now to work! For two hours we fished unceasingly, but without bringing up any rarities. The drag was filled with midas-ears, harps, melames, and particularly the most beautiful hammers I have ever seen. We also brought up some sea-slugs, pearl-oysters, and a dozen little turtles that were reserved for the pantry on board.

But just when I expected it least, I put my hand on a wonder, I might say a natural deformity, very rarely met with. Conseil was just dragging, and his net came up filled with divers ordinary shells, when, all at once, he saw me plunge my arm quickly into the net, to draw out a shell, and heard me utter a cry.

“What is the matter, sir?” he asked in surprise. “Has master been bitten?”

“No, my boy; but I would willingly have given a finger for my discovery.”

“What discovery?”

“This shell,” I said, holding up the object of my triumph.

“It is simply an olive porphyry, genus olive, order of the pectinibranchidae, class of gasteropods, sub-class mollusca.”

“Yes, Conseil; but, instead of being rolled from right to left, this olive turns from left to right.”

“Is it possible?”

“Yes, my boy; it is a left shell.”

Shells are all right-handed, with rare exceptions; and, when by chance their spiral is left, amateurs are ready to pay their weight in gold.

Conseil and I were absorbed in the contemplation of our treasure, and I was promising myself to enrich the museum with it, when a stone unfortunately thrown by a native struck against, and broke, the precious object in Conseil’s hand. I uttered a cry of despair! Conseil took up his gun, and aimed at a savage who was poising his sling at ten yards from him. I would have stopped him, but his blow took effect and broke the bracelet of amulets which encircled the arm of the savage.

“Conseil!” cried I. “Conseil!”

“Well, sir! do you not see that the cannibal has commenced the attack?”

“A shell is not worth the life of a man,” said I.

“Ah! the scoundrel!” cried Conseil; “I would rather he had broken my shoulder!”

Conseil was in earnest, but I was not of his opinion. However, the situation had changed some minutes before, and we had not perceived. A score of canoes surrounded the Nautilus. These canoes, scooped out of the trunk of a tree, long, narrow, well adapted for speed, were balanced by means of a long bamboo pole, which floated on the water. They were managed by skilful, half-naked paddlers, and I watched their advance with some uneasiness. It was evident that these Papuans had already had dealings with the Europeans and knew their ships. But this long iron cylinder anchored in the bay, without masts or chimneys, what could they think of it? Nothing good, for at first they kept at a respectful distance. However, seeing it motionless, by degrees they took courage, and sought to familiarise themselves with it. Now this familiarity was precisely what it was necessary to avoid. Our arms, which were noiseless, could only produce a moderate effect on the savages, who have little respect for aught but blustering things. The thunderbolt without the reverberations of thunder would frighten man but little, though the danger lies in the lightning, not in the noise.

At this moment the canoes approached the Nautilus, and a shower of arrows alighted on her.

I went down to the saloon, but found no one there. I ventured to knock at the door that opened into the Captain's room. "Come in," was the answer.

I entered, and found Captain Nemo deep in algebraical calculations of *x* and other quantities.

"I am disturbing you," said I, for courtesy's sake.

"That is true, M. Aronnax," replied the Captain; "but I think you have serious reasons for wishing to see me?"

"Very grave ones; the natives are surrounding us in their canoes, and in a few minutes we shall certainly be attacked by many hundreds of savages."

"Ah!" said Captain Nemo quietly, "they are come with their canoes?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, sir, we must close the hatches."

"Exactly, and I came to say to you — — "

"Nothing can be more simple," said Captain Nemo. And, pressing an electric button, he transmitted an order to the ship's crew.

“It is all done, sir,” said he, after some moments. “The pinnace is ready, and the hatches are closed. You do not fear, I imagine, that these gentlemen could stave in walls on which the balls of your frigate have had no effect?”

“No, Captain; but a danger still exists.”

“What is that, sir?”

“It is that to-morrow, at about this hour, we must open the hatches to renew the air of the Nautilus. Now, if, at this moment, the Papuans should occupy the platform, I do not see how you could prevent them from entering.”

“Then, sir, you suppose that they will board us?”

“I am certain of it.”

“Well, sir, let them come. I see no reason for hindering them. After all, these Papuans are poor creatures, and I am unwilling that my visit to the island should cost the life of a single one of these wretches.”

Upon that I was going away; But Captain Nemo detained me, and asked me to sit down by him. He questioned me with interest about our excursions on shore, and our hunting; and seemed not to understand the craving for meat that possessed the Canadian. Then the conversation turned on various subjects, and, without being more communicative, Captain Nemo showed himself more amiable.

Amongst other things, we happened to speak of the situation of the Nautilus, run aground in exactly the same spot in this strait where Dumont d’Urville was nearly lost. Apropos of this:

“This D’Urville was one of your great sailors,” said the Captain to me, “one of your most intelligent navigators. He is the Captain Cook of you Frenchmen. Unfortunate man of science, after having braved the icebergs of the South Pole, the coral reefs of Oceania, the cannibals of the Pacific, to perish miserably in a railway train! If this energetic man could have reflected during the last moments of his life, what must have been uppermost in his last thoughts, do you suppose?”

So speaking, Captain Nemo seemed moved, and his emotion gave me a better opinion of him. Then, chart in hand, we reviewed the travels of the French navigator, his voyages of circumnavigation, his double detention at the South Pole, which led to the discovery of Adelaide and Louis Philippe, and fixing the hydrographical bearings of the principal islands of Oceania.

“That which your D’Urville has done on the surface of the seas,” said Captain Nemo, “that have I done under them, and more easily, more completely than he. The Astrolabe and the Zelee, incessantly tossed about by the hurricane, could not be worth the Nautilus, quiet repository of labour that she is, truly motionless in the midst of the waters.

“To-morrow,” added the Captain, rising, “to-morrow, at twenty minutes to three p.m. the Nautilus shall float, and leave the Strait of Torres uninjured.”

Having curtly pronounced these words, Captain Nemo bowed slightly. This was to dismiss me, and I went back to my room.

There I found Conseil, who wished to know the result of my interview with the Captain.

“My boy,” said I, “when I feigned to believe that his Nautilus was threatened by the natives of Papua, the Captain answered me very sarcastically. I have but one thing to say to you: Have confidence in him, and go to sleep in peace.”

“Have you no need of my services, sir?”

“No, my friend. What is Ned Land doing?”

“If you will excuse me, sir,” answered Conseil, “friend Ned is busy making a kangaroo-pie which will be a marvel.”

I remained alone and went to bed, but slept indifferently. I heard the noise of the savages, who stamped on the platform, uttering deafening cries. The night passed thus, without disturbing the ordinary repose of the crew. The presence of these cannibals affected them no more than the soldiers of a masked battery care for the ants that crawl over its front.

At six in the morning I rose. The hatches had not been opened. The inner air was not renewed, but the reservoirs, filled ready for any emergency, were now resorted to, and discharged several cubic feet of oxygen into the exhausted atmosphere of the Nautilus.

I worked in my room till noon, without having seen Captain Nemo, even for an instant. On board no preparations for departure were visible.

I waited still some time, then went into the large saloon. The clock marked half-past two. In ten minutes it would be high-tide: and, if Captain Nemo had not made a rash promise, the Nautilus would be immediately detached. If not, many months would pass ere she could leave her bed of coral.

However, some warning vibrations began to be felt in the vessel. I heard the keel grating against the rough calcareous bottom of the coral reef.

At five-and-twenty minutes to three, Captain Nemo appeared in the saloon.

“We are going to start,” said he.

“Ah!” replied I.

“I have given the order to open the hatches.”

“And the Papuans?”

“The Papuans?” answered Captain Nemo, slightly shrugging his shoulders.

“Will they not come inside the Nautilus?”

“How?”

“Only by leaping over the hatches you have opened.”

“M. Aronnax,” quietly answered Captain Nemo, “they will not enter the hatches of the Nautilus in that way, even if they were open.”

I looked at the Captain.

“You do not understand?” said he.

“Hardly.”

“Well, come and you will see.”

I directed my steps towards the central staircase. There Ned Land and Conseil were slyly watching some of the ship’s crew, who were opening the hatches, while cries of rage and fearful vociferations resounded outside.

The port lids were pulled down outside. Twenty horrible faces appeared. But the first native who placed his hand on the stair-rail, struck from behind by some invisible force, I know not what, fled, uttering the most fearful cries and making the wildest contortions.

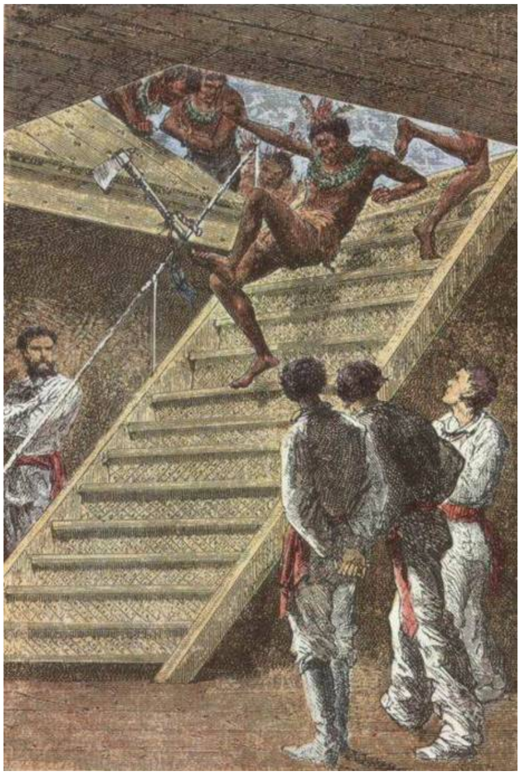

Ten of his companions followed him. They met with the same fate.

Conseil was in ecstasy. Ned Land, carried away by his violent instincts, rushed on to the staircase. But the moment he seized the rail with both hands, he, in his turn, was overthrown.

“I am struck by a thunderbolt,” cried he, with an oath.

This explained all. It was no rail; but a metallic cable charged with electricity from the deck communicating with the platform. Whoever touched it felt a powerful shock — and this shock would have been mortal if Captain Nemo had discharged into the conductor the whole force of the current. It might truly be said that between his assailants and himself he had stretched a network of electricity which none could pass with impunity.

Meanwhile, the exasperated Papuans had beaten a retreat paralysed with terror. As for us, half laughing, we consoled and rubbed the unfortunate Ned Land, who swore like one possessed.

But at this moment the Nautilus, raised by the last waves of the tide, quitted her coral bed exactly at the fortieth minute fixed by the Captain. Her screw swept the waters slowly and majestically. Her speed increased gradually, and, sailing on the surface of the ocean, she quitted safe and sound the dangerous passes of the Straits of Torres.

CHAPTER XXII

“AEGRI SOMNIA”

The following day 10th January, the Nautilus continued her course between two seas, but with such remarkable speed that I could not estimate it at less than thirty-five miles an hour. The rapidity of her screw was such that I could neither follow nor count its revolutions. When I reflected that this marvellous electric agent, after having afforded motion, heat, and light to the Nautilus, still protected her from outward attack, and transformed her into an ark of safety which no profane hand might touch without being thunderstricken, my admiration was unbounded, and from the structure it extended to the engineer who had called it into existence.

Our course was directed to the west, and on the 11th of January we doubled Cape Wessel, situation in 135° long. and 10° S. lat. which forms the east point of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The reefs were still numerous, but more equalised, and marked on the chart with extreme precision. The Nautilus easily avoided the breakers of Money to port and the Victoria reefs to starboard, placed at 130° long. and on the 10th parallel, which we strictly followed.

On the 13th of January, Captain Nemo arrived in the Sea of Timor, and recognised the island of that name in 122° long.

From this point the direction of the Nautilus inclined towards the south-west. Her head was set for the Indian Ocean. Where would the fancy of Captain Nemo carry us next? Would he return to the coast of Asia or would he approach again the shores of Europe? Improbable conjectures both, to a man who fled from inhabited continents. Then would he descend to the south? Was he going to double the Cape of Good Hope, then Cape Horn, and finally go as far as the Antarctic pole? Would he come back at last to the Pacific, where his Nautilus could sail free and independently? Time would show.

After having skirted the sands of Cartier, of Hibernia, Seringapatam, and Scott, last efforts of the solid against the liquid element, on the 14th of January we lost sight of land altogether. The speed of the Nautilus was considerably abated, and with irregular course she sometimes swam in the bosom of the waters, sometimes floated on their surface.

During this period of the voyage, Captain Nemo made some interesting experiments on the varied temperature of the sea, in different beds. Under ordinary conditions these observations are made by means of rather complicated instruments, and with somewhat doubtful results, by means of thermometrical sounding-leads, the glasses often breaking under the pressure of the water, or an apparatus grounded on the variations of the resistance of metals to the electric currents. Results so obtained could not be correctly calculated. On the contrary, Captain Nemo went himself to test the temperature in the depths of the sea, and his thermometer, placed in communication with the different sheets of water, gave him the required degree immediately and accurately.

It was thus that, either by overloading her reservoirs or by descending obliquely by means of her inclined planes, the Nautilus successively attained the depth of three, four, five, seven, nine, and ten thousand yards, and the definite result of this experience was that the sea preserved an average temperature of four degrees and a half at a depth of five thousand fathoms under all latitudes.

On the 16th of January, the Nautilus seemed becalmed only a few yards beneath the surface of the waves. Her electric apparatus remained inactive and her motionless screw left her to drift at the mercy of the currents. I supposed that the crew was occupied with interior repairs, rendered necessary by the violence of the mechanical movements of the machine.

My companions and I then witnessed a curious spectacle. The hatches of the saloon were open, and, as the beacon light of the Nautilus was not in action, a dim obscurity reigned in the midst of the waters. I observed the state of the sea, under these conditions, and the largest fish appeared to me no more than scarcely defined shadows, when the Nautilus found herself suddenly transported into full light. I thought at first that the beacon had been lighted, and was casting its electric radiance into the liquid mass. I was mistaken, and after a rapid survey perceived my error.

The Nautilus floated in the midst of a phosphorescent bed which, in this obscurity, became quite dazzling. It was produced by myriads of luminous animalculae, whose brilliancy was increased as they glided over the metallic hull of the vessel. I was surprised by lightning in the midst of these luminous sheets, as though they had been rivulets of lead melted in an ardent furnace or metallic masses brought to a white heat, so that, by force of contrast, certain portions of light appeared to cast a shade in the midst of the general ignition, from which all shade seemed banished. No; this was not the calm irradiation of our ordinary lightning. There was unusual life and vigour: this was truly living light!

In reality, it was an infinite agglomeration of coloured infusoria, of veritable globules of jelly, provided with a threadlike tentacle, and of which as many as twenty-five thousand have been counted in less than two cubic half-inches of water.

During several hours the Nautilus floated in these brilliant waves, and our admiration increased as we watched the marine monsters disporting themselves like salamanders. I saw there in the midst of this fire that burns not the swift and elegant porpoise (the indefatigable clown of the ocean), and some swordfish ten feet long, those prophetic heralds of the hurricane whose formidable sword would now and then strike the glass of the saloon. Then appeared the smaller fish, the balista, the leaping mackerel, wolf-thorn-tails, and a hundred others which striped the luminous atmosphere as they swam. This dazzling spectacle was enchanting! Perhaps some atmospheric condition increased the intensity of this phenomenon. Perhaps some storm agitated the surface of the waves. But at this depth of some yards, the Nautilus was unmoved by its fury and reposed peacefully in still water.

So we progressed, incessantly charmed by some new marvel. The days passed rapidly away, and I took no account of them. Ned, according to habit, tried to vary the diet on board. Like snails, we were fixed to our shells, and I declare it is easy to lead a snail’s life.

Thus this life seemed easy and natural, and we thought no longer of the life we led on land; but something happened to recall us to the strangeness of our situation.

On the 18th of January, the Nautilus was in 105° long. and 15° S. lat. The weather was threatening, the sea rough and rolling. There was a strong east wind. The barometer, which had been going down for some days, foreboded a coming storm. I went up on to the platform just as the second lieutenant was taking the measure of the horary angles, and waited, according to habit till the daily phrase was said. But on this day it was exchanged for another phrase not less incomprehensible. Almost directly, I saw Captain Nemo appear with a glass, looking towards the horizon.

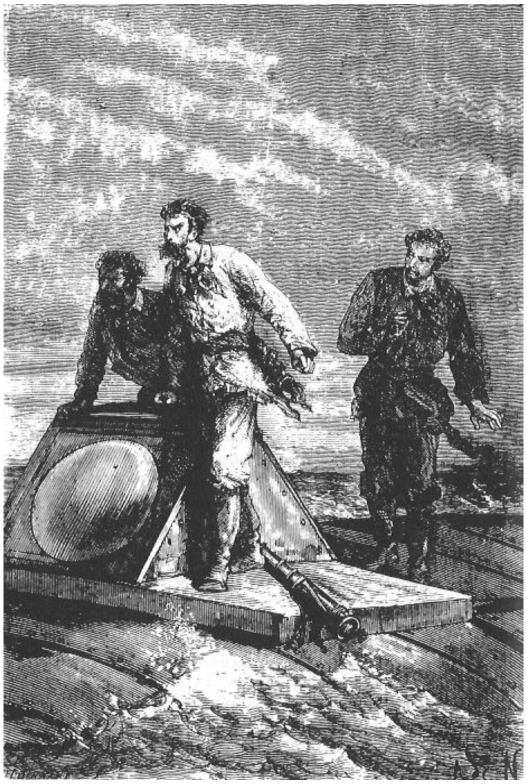

For some minutes he was immovable, without taking his eye off the point of observation. Then he lowered his glass and exchanged a few words with his lieutenant. The latter seemed to be a victim to some emotion that he tried in vain to repress. Captain Nemo, having more command over himself, was cool. He seemed, too, to be making some objections to which the lieutenant replied by formal assurances. At least I concluded so by the difference of their tones and gestures. For myself, I had looked carefully in the direction indicated without seeing anything. The sky and water were lost in the clear line of the horizon.

However, Captain Nemo walked from one end of the platform to the other, without looking at me, perhaps without seeing me. His step was firm, but less regular than usual. He stopped sometimes, crossed his arms, and observed the sea. What could he be looking for on that immense expanse?

The Nautilus was then some hundreds of miles from the nearest coast.

The lieutenant had taken up the glass and examined the horizon steadfastly, going and coming, stamping his foot and showing more nervous agitation than his superior officer. Besides, this mystery must necessarily be solved, and before long; for, upon an order from Captain Nemo, the engine, increasing its propelling power, made the screw turn more rapidly.

Just then the lieutenant drew the Captain's attention again. The latter stopped walking and directed his glass towards the place indicated. He looked long. I felt very much puzzled, and descended to the drawing-room, and took out an excellent telescope that I generally used. Then, leaning on the cage of the watch-light that jutted out from the front of the platform, set myself to look over all the line of the sky and sea.

But my eye was no sooner applied to the glass than it was quickly snatched out of my hands.

I turned round. Captain Nemo was before me, but I did not know him. His face was transfigured. His eyes flashed sullenly; his teeth were set; his stiff body, clenched fists, and head shrunk between his shoulders, betrayed the violent agitation that pervaded his whole frame. He did not move. My glass, fallen from his hands, had rolled at his feet.

Had I unwittingly provoked this fit of anger? Did this incomprehensible person imagine that I had discovered some forbidden secret? No; I was not the object of this hatred, for he was not looking at me; his eye was steadily fixed upon the impenetrable point of the horizon. At last Captain Nemo recovered himself. His agitation subsided. He addressed some words in a foreign language to his lieutenant, then turned to me. “M. Aronnax,” he said, in rather an imperious tone, “I require you to keep one of the conditions that bind you to me.”

"What is it, Captain?"

"You must be confined, with your companions, until I think fit to release you."

"You are the master," I replied, looking steadily at him. "But may I ask you one question?"

"None, sir."

There was no resisting this imperious command, it would have been useless. I went down to the cabin occupied by Ned Land and Conseil, and told them the Captain's determination. You may judge how this communication was received by the Canadian.

But there was not time for altercation. Four of the crew waited at the door, and conducted us to that cell where we had passed our first night on board the Nautilus.

Ned Land would have remonstrated, but the door was shut upon him.

"Will master tell me what this means?" asked Conseil.

I told my companions what had passed. They were as much astonished as I, and equally at a loss how to account for it.

Meanwhile, I was absorbed in my own reflections, and could think of nothing but the strange fear depicted in the Captain's countenance. I was utterly at a loss to account for it, when my cogitations were disturbed by these words from Ned Land:

"Hallo! breakfast is ready."

And indeed the table was laid. Evidently Captain Nemo had given this order at the same time that he had hastened the speed of the Nautilus.

“Will master permit me to make a recommendation?” asked Conseil.

“Yes, my boy.”

“Well, it is that master breakfasts. It is prudent, for we do not know what may happen.”

“You are right, Conseil.”

“Unfortunately,” said Ned Land, “they have only given us the ship’s fare.”

“Friend Ned,” asked Conseil, “what would you have said if the breakfast had been entirely forgotten?”

This argument cut short the harpooner’s recriminations.

We sat down to table. The meal was eaten in silence.

Just then the luminous globe that lighted the cell went out, and left us in total darkness. Ned Land was soon asleep, and what astonished me was that Conseil went off into a heavy slumber. I was thinking what could have caused his irresistible drowsiness, when I felt my brain becoming stupefied. In spite of my efforts to keep my eyes open, they would close. A painful suspicion seized me. Evidently soporific substances had been mixed with the food we had just taken. Imprisonment was not enough to conceal Captain Nemo’s projects from us, sleep was more necessary. I then heard the panels shut. The undulations of the sea, which caused a slight rolling motion, ceased. Had the Nautilus quitted the surface of the ocean? Had it gone back to the motionless bed of water? I tried to resist sleep. It was impossible. My breathing grew weak. I felt a mortal cold freeze my stiffened and half-paralysed limbs. My eye lids, like leaden caps, fell over my eyes. I could not raise them; a morbid sleep, full of hallucinations, bereft me of my being. Then the visions disappeared, and left me in complete insensibility.

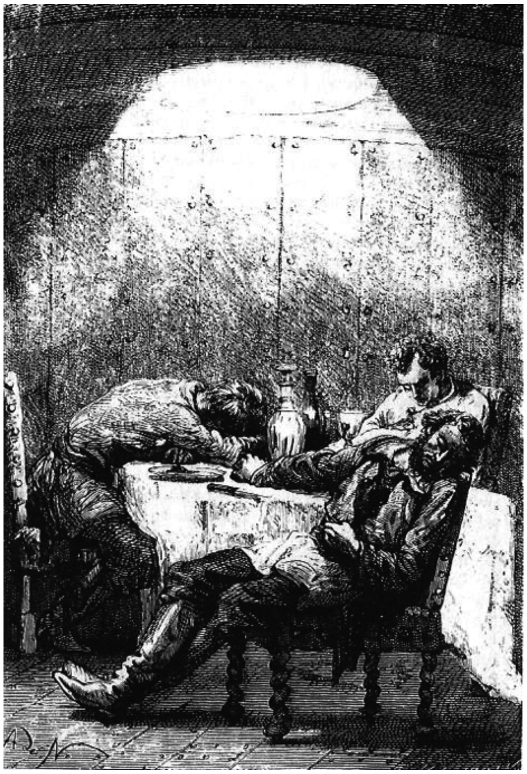

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CORAL KINGDOM

The next day I woke with my head singularly clear. To my great surprise, I was in my own room. My companions, no doubt, had been reinstated in their cabin, without having perceived it any more than I. Of what had passed during the night they were as ignorant as I was, and to penetrate this mystery I only reckoned upon the chances of the future.

I then thought of quitting my room. Was I free again or a prisoner? Quite free. I opened the door, went to the half-deck, went up the central stairs. The panels, shut the evening before, were open. I went on to the platform.

Ned Land and Conseil waited there for me. I questioned them; they knew nothing. Lost in a heavy sleep in which they had been totally unconscious, they had been astonished at finding themselves in their cabin.

As for the Nautilus, it seemed quiet and mysterious as ever. It floated on the surface of the waves at a moderate pace. Nothing seemed changed on board.

The second lieutenant then came on to the platform, and gave the usual order below.

As for Captain Nemo, he did not appear.

Of the people on board, I only saw the impassive steward, who served me with his usual dumb regularity.

About two o’clock, I was in the drawing-room, busied in arranging my notes, when the Captain opened the door and appeared. I bowed. He made a slight inclination in return, without speaking. I resumed my work, hoping that he would perhaps give me some explanation of the events of the preceding night. He made none. I looked at him. He seemed fatigued; his heavy eyes had not been refreshed by sleep; his face looked very sorrowful. He walked to and fro, sat down and got up again, took a chance book, put it down, consulted his instruments without taking his habitual notes, and seemed restless and uneasy. At last, he came up to me, and said:

"Are you a doctor, M. Aronnax?"

I so little expected such a question that I stared some time at him without answering.

"Are you a doctor?" he repeated. "Several of your colleagues have studied medicine."

"Well," said I, "I am a doctor and resident surgeon to the hospital. I practised several years before entering the museum."

"Very well, sir."

My answer had evidently satisfied the Captain. But, not knowing what he would say next, I waited for other questions, reserving my answers according to circumstances.

"M. Aronnax, will you consent to prescribe for one of my men?" he asked.

"Is he ill?"

"Yes."

"I am ready to follow you."

“Come, then.”

I own my heart beat, I do not know why. I saw certain connection between the illness of one of the crew and the events of the day before; and this mystery interested me at least as much as the sick man.

Captain Nemo conducted me to the poop of the Nautilus, and took me into a cabin situated near the sailors’ quarters.

There, on a bed, lay a man about forty years of age, with a resolute expression of countenance, a true type of an Anglo-Saxon.

I leant over him. He was not only ill, he was wounded. His head, swathed in bandages covered with blood, lay on a pillow. I undid the bandages, and the wounded man looked at me with his large eyes and gave no sign of pain as I did it. It was a horrible wound. The skull, shattered by some deadly weapon, left the brain exposed, which was much injured. Clots of blood had formed in the bruised and broken mass, in colour like the dregs of wine.

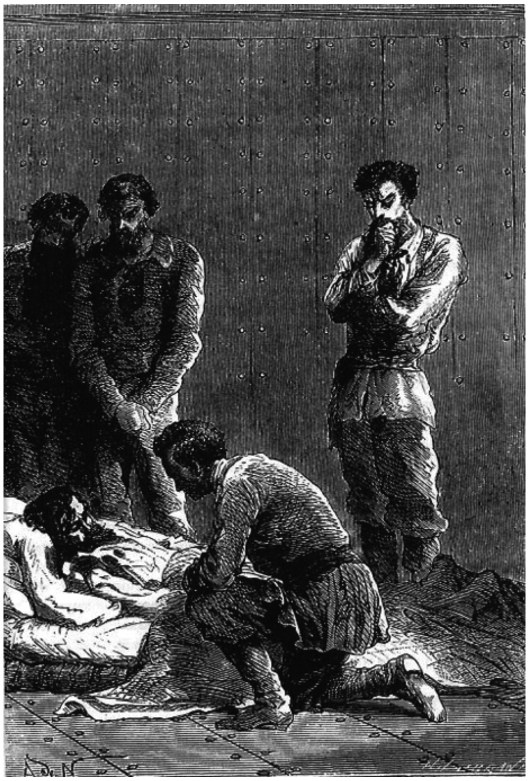

There was both contusion and suffusion of the brain. His breathing was slow, and some spasmodic movements of the muscles agitated his face. I felt his pulse. It was intermittent. The extremities of the body were growing cold already, and I saw death must inevitably ensue. After dressing the unfortunate man’s wounds, I readjusted the bandages on his head, and turned to Captain Nemo.

“What caused this wound?” I asked.

“What does it signify?” he replied, evasively. “A shock has broken one of the levers of the engine, which struck myself. But your opinion as to his state?”

I hesitated before giving it.

“You may speak,” said the Captain. “This man does not understand French.”

I gave a last look at the wounded man.

“He will be dead in two hours.”

“Can nothing save him?”

“Nothing.”

Captain Nemo’s hand contracted, and some tears glistened in his eyes, which I thought incapable of shedding any.

For some moments I still watched the dying man, whose life ebbed slowly. His pallor increased under the electric light that was shed over his death-bed. I looked at his intelligent forehead, furrowed with premature wrinkles, produced probably by misfortune and sorrow. I tried to learn the secret of his life from the last words that escaped his lips.

“You can go now, M. Aronnax,” said the Captain.

I left him in the dying man’s cabin, and returned to my room much affected by this scene. During the whole day, I was haunted by uncomfortable suspicions, and at night I slept badly, and between my broken dreams I fancied I heard distant sighs like the notes of a funeral psalm. Were they the prayers of the dead, murmured in that language that I could not understand?

The next morning I went on to the bridge. Captain Nemo was there before me. As soon as he perceived me he came to me.

“Professor, will it be convenient to you to make a submarine excursion to-day?”

“With my companions?” I asked.

"If they like."

"We obey your orders, Captain."

"Will you be so good then as to put on your cork jackets?"

It was not a question of dead or dying. I rejoined Ned Land and Conseil, and told them of Captain Nemo's proposition. Conseil hastened to accept it, and this time the Canadian seemed quite willing to follow our example.

It was eight o'clock in the morning. At half-past eight we were equipped for this new excursion, and provided with two contrivances for light and breathing. The double door was open; and, accompanied by Captain Nemo, who was followed by a dozen of the crew, we set foot, at a depth of about thirty feet, on the solid bottom on which the Nautilus rested.

A slight declivity ended in an uneven bottom, at fifteen fathoms depth. This bottom differed entirely from the one I had visited on my first excursion under the waters of the Pacific Ocean. Here, there was no fine sand, no submarine prairies, no sea-forest. I immediately recognised that marvellous region in which, on that day, the Captain did the honours to us. It was the coral kingdom.

The light produced a thousand charming varieties, playing in the midst of the branches that were so vividly coloured. I seemed to see the membraneous and cylindrical tubes tremble beneath the undulation of the waters. I was tempted to gather their fresh petals, ornamented with delicate tentacles, some just blown, the others budding, while a small fish, swimming swiftly, touched them slightly, like flights of birds. But if my hand approached these living flowers, these animated, sensitive plants, the whole colony took alarm. The white petals re-entered their red cases, the flowers faded as I looked, and the bush changed into a block of stony knobs.

Chance had thrown me just by the most precious specimens of the zoophyte. This coral was more valuable than that found in the Mediterranean, on the coasts of France, Italy and Barbary. Its tints justified the poetical names of “Flower of Blood,” and “Froth of Blood,” that trade has given to its most beautiful productions. Coral is sold for L20 per ounce; and in this place the watery beds would make the fortunes of a company of coral-divers. This precious matter, often confused with other polypi, formed then the inextricable plots called “macciota,” and on which I noticed several beautiful specimens of pink coral.

But soon the bushes contract, and the arborisations increase. Real petrified thickets, long joints of fantastic architecture, were disclosed before us. Captain Nemo placed himself under a dark gallery, where by a slight declivity we reached a depth of a hundred yards. The light from our lamps produced sometimes magical effects, following the rough outlines of the natural arches and pendants disposed like lustres, that were tipped with points of fire.

At last, after walking two hours, we had attained a depth of about three hundred yards, that is to say, the extreme limit on which coral begins to form. But there was no isolated bush, nor modest brushwood, at the bottom of lofty trees. It was an immense forest of large mineral vegetations, enormous petrified trees, united by garlands of elegant sea-bindweed, all adorned with clouds and reflections. We passed freely under their high branches, lost in the shade of the waves.

Captain Nemo had stopped. I and my companions halted, and, turning round, I saw his men were forming a semi-circle round their chief.

Watching attentively, I observed that four of them carried on their shoulders an object of an oblong shape.

We occupied, in this place, the centre of a vast glade surrounded by the lofty foliage of the submarine forest. Our lamps threw over this place a sort of clear twilight that singularly elongated the shadows on the ground. At the end of the glade the darkness increased, and was only relieved by little sparks reflected by the points of coral.

Ned Land and Conseil were near me. We watched, and I thought I was going to witness a strange scene. On observing the ground, I saw that it was raised in certain places by slight excrescences encrusted with limy deposits, and disposed with a regularity that betrayed the hand of man.

In the midst of the glade, on a pedestal of rocks roughly piled up, stood a cross of coral that extended its long arms that one might have thought were made of petrified blood. Upon a sign from Captain Nemo one of the men advanced; and at some feet from the cross he began to dig a hole with a pickaxe that he took from his belt. I understood all! This glade was a cemetery, this hole a tomb, this oblong object the body of the man who had died in the night! The Captain and his men had come to bury their companion in this general resting-place, at the bottom of this inaccessible ocean!

The grave was being dug slowly; the fish fled on all sides while their retreat was being thus disturbed; I heard the strokes of the pickaxe, which sparkled when it hit upon some flint lost at the bottom of the waters. The hole was soon large and deep enough to receive the body. Then the bearers approached; the body, enveloped in a tissue of white linen, was lowered into the damp grave. Captain Nemo, with his arms crossed on his breast, and all the friends of him who had loved them, knelt in prayer.

The grave was then filled in with the rubbish taken from the ground, which formed a slight mound. When this was done, Captain Nemo and his men rose; then, approaching the grave, they knelt again, and all extended their hands in sign of a last adieu. Then the funeral procession returned to the Nautilus, passing under the arches of the forest, in the midst of thickets, along the coral bushes, and still on the ascent. At last the light of the ship appeared, and its luminous track guided us to the Nautilus. At one o’clock we had returned.

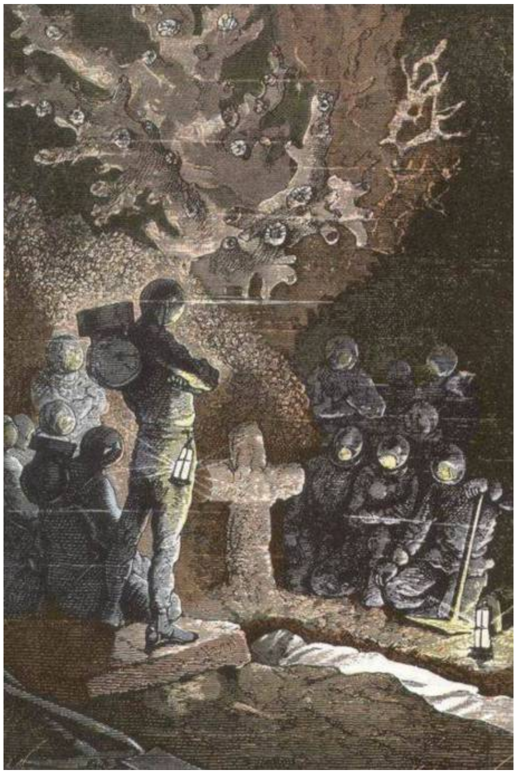

As soon as I had changed my clothes I went up on to the platform, and, a prey to conflicting emotions, I sat down near the binnacle. Captain Nemo joined me. I rose and said to him:

“So, as I said he would, this man died in the night?”

“Yes, M. Aronnax.”

“And he rests now, near his companions, in the coral cemetery?”

“Yes, forgotten by all else, but not by us. We dug the grave, and the polypi undertake to seal our dead for eternity.” And, burying his face quickly in his hands, he tried in vain to suppress a sob. Then he added: “Our peaceful cemetery is there, some hundred feet below the surface of the waves.”

“Your dead sleep quietly, at least, Captain, out of the reach of sharks.”

“Yes, sir, of sharks and men,” gravely replied the Captain.

PART TWO

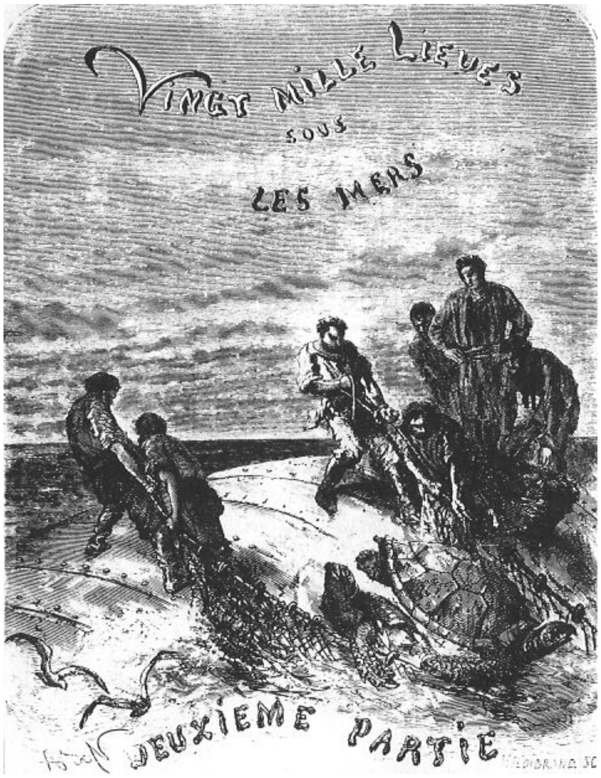
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CHAPTER I

THE INDIAN OCEAN

We now come to the second part of our journey under the sea. The first ended with the moving scene in the coral cemetery which left such a deep impression on my mind. Thus, in the midst of this great sea, Captain Nemo's life was passing, even to his grave, which he had prepared in one of its deepest abysses. There, not one of the ocean's monsters could trouble the last sleep of the crew of the Nautilus, of those friends riveted to each other in death as in life. "Nor any man, either," had added the Captain. Still the same fierce, implacable defiance towards human society!

I could no longer content myself with the theory which satisfied Conseil.

That worthy fellow persisted in seeing in the Commander of the Nautilus one of those unknown servants who return mankind contempt for indifference. For him, he was a misunderstood genius who, tired of earth's deceptions, had taken refuge in this inaccessible medium, where he might follow his instincts freely. To my mind, this explains but one side of Captain Nemo's character. Indeed, the mystery of that last night during which we had been chained in prison, the sleep, and the precaution so violently taken by the Captain of snatching from my eyes the glass I had raised to sweep the horizon, the mortal wound of the man, due to an unaccountable shock of the Nautilus, all put me on a new track. No; Captain Nemo was not satisfied with shunning man. His formidable apparatus not only suited his instinct of freedom, but perhaps also the design of some terrible retaliation.

At this moment nothing is clear to me; I catch but a glimpse of light amidst all the darkness, and I must confine myself to writing as events shall dictate.

That day, the 24th of January, 1868, at noon, the second officer came to take the altitude of the sun. I mounted the platform, lit a cigar, and watched the operation. It seemed to me that the man did not understand French; for several times I made remarks in a loud voice, which must have drawn from him some involuntary sign of attention, if he had understood them; but he remained undisturbed and dumb.

As he was taking observations with the sextant, one of the sailors of the Nautilus (the strong man who had accompanied us on our first submarine excursion to the Island of Crespo) came to clean the glasses of the lantern. I examined the fittings of the apparatus, the strength of which was increased a hundredfold by lenticular rings, placed similar to those in a lighthouse, and which projected their brilliance in a horizontal plane. The electric lamp was combined in such a way as to give its most powerful light. Indeed, it was produced in vacuo, which insured both its steadiness and its intensity. This vacuum economised the graphite points between which the luminous arc was developed — an important point of economy for Captain Nemo, who could not easily have replaced them; and under these conditions their waste was imperceptible. When the Nautilus was ready to continue its submarine journey, I went down to the saloon. The panel was closed, and the course marked direct west.

We were furrowing the waters of the Indian Ocean, a vast liquid plain, with a surface of 1,200,000,000 of acres, and whose waters are so clear and transparent that any one leaning over them would turn giddy. The Nautilus usually floated between fifty and a hundred fathoms deep. We went on so for some days. To anyone but myself, who had a great love for the sea, the hours would have seemed long and monotonous; but the daily walks on the platform, when I steeped myself in the reviving air of the ocean, the sight of the rich waters through the windows of the saloon, the books in the library, the compiling of my memoirs, took up all my time, and left me not a moment of ennui or weariness.

For some days we saw a great number of aquatic birds, sea-mews or gulls. Some were cleverly killed and, prepared in a certain way, made very acceptable water-game. Amongst large-winged birds, carried a long distance from all lands and resting upon the waves from the fatigue of their flight, I saw some magnificent albatrosses, uttering discordant cries like the braying of an ass, and birds belonging to the family of the long-wings.

As to the fish, they always provoked our admiration when we surprised the secrets of their aquatic life through the open panels. I saw many kinds which I never before had a chance of observing.

I shall notice chiefly ostracions peculiar to the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and that part which washes the coast of tropical America. These fishes, like the tortoise, the armadillo, the sea-hedgehog, and the Crustacea, are protected by a breastplate which is neither chalky nor stony, but real bone. In some it takes the form of a solid triangle, in others of a solid quadrangle. Amongst the triangular I saw some an inch and a half in length, with wholesome flesh and a delicious flavour; they are brown at the tail, and yellow at the fins, and I recommend their introduction into fresh water, to which a certain number of sea-fish easily accustom themselves. I would also mention quadrangular ostracions, having on the back four large tubercles; some dotted over with white spots on the lower part of the body, and which may be tamed like birds; trigons provided with spikes formed by the lengthening of their bony shell, and which, from their strange gruntings, are called “seapigs”; also dromedaries with large humps in the shape of a cone, whose flesh is very tough and leathery.

I now borrow from the daily notes of Master Conseil. “Certain fish of the genus petrodon peculiar to those seas, with red backs and white chests, which are distinguished by three rows of longitudinal filaments; and some electrical, seven inches long, decked in the liveliest colours. Then, as specimens of other kinds, some ovoides, resembling an egg of a dark brown colour, marked with white bands, and without tails; diodons, real sea-porcupines, furnished with spikes, and capable of swelling in such a way as to look like cushions bristling with darts; hippocampi, common to every ocean; some pegasi with lengthened snouts, which their pectoral fins, being much elongated and formed in the shape of wings, allow, if not to fly, at least to shoot into the air; pigeon spatulae, with tails covered with many rings of shell; macrognathi with long jaws, an excellent fish, nine inches long, and bright with most agreeable colours; pale-coloured calliomores, with rugged heads; and plenty of chaetpdons, with long and tubular muzzles, which kill insects by shooting them, as from an air-gun, with a single drop of water. These we may call the flycatchers of the seas.

“In the eighty-ninth genus of fishes, classed by Lacepede, belonging to the second lower class of bony, characterised by opercules and bronchial membranes, I remarked the scorpaena, the head of which is furnished with spikes, and which has but one dorsal fin; these creatures are covered, or not, with little shells, according to the sub-class to which they belong. The second sub-class gives us specimens of didactyles fourteen or fifteen inches in length, with yellow rays, and heads of a most fantastic appearance. As to the first sub-class, it gives several specimens of that singular looking fish appropriately called a ‘seafrog,’ with large head, sometimes pierced with holes, sometimes swollen with protuberances, bristling with spikes, and covered with tubercles; it has irregular and hideous horns; its body and tail are covered with callosities; its sting makes a dangerous wound; it is both repugnant and horrible to look at.”

From the 21st to the 23rd of January the Nautilus went at the rate of two hundred and fifty leagues in twenty-four hours, being five hundred and forty miles, or twenty-two miles an hour. If we recognised so many different varieties of fish, it was because, attracted by the electric light, they tried to follow us; the greater part, however, were soon distanced by our speed, though some kept their place in the waters of the Nautilus for a time. The morning of the 24th, in 12° 5’ S. lat. and 94° 33’ long. we observed Keeling Island, a coral formation, planted with magnificent cocos, and which had been visited by Mr. Darwin and Captain Fitzroy. The Nautilus skirted the shores of this desert island for a little distance. Its nets brought up numerous specimens of polypi and curious shells of mollusca. Some precious productions of the species of delphinulae enriched the treasures of Captain Nemo, to which I added an astraea punctifera, a kind of parasite polypus often found fixed to a shell.

Soon Keeling Island disappeared from the horizon, and our course was directed to the north-west in the direction of the Indian Peninsula.

From Keeling Island our course was slower and more variable, often taking us into great depths. Several times they made use of the inclined planes, which certain internal levers placed obliquely to the waterline. In that way we went about two miles, but without ever obtaining the greatest depths of the Indian Sea, which soundings of seven thousand fathoms have never reached. As to the temperature of the lower strata, the thermometer invariably indicated 4° above zero. I only observed that in the upper regions the water was always colder in the high levels than at the surface of the sea.

On the 25th of January the ocean was entirely deserted; the Nautilus passed the day on the surface, beating the waves with its powerful screw and making them rebound to a great height. Who under such circumstances would not have taken it for a gigantic cetacean? Three parts of this day I spent on the platform. I watched the sea. Nothing on the horizon, till about four o’clock a steamer running west on our counter. Her masts were visible for an instant, but she could not see the Nautilus, being too low in the water. I fancied this steamboat belonged to the P.O. Company, which runs from Ceylon to Sydney, touching at King George’s Point and Melbourne.

At five o’clock in the evening, before that fleeting twilight which binds night to day in tropical zones, Conseil and I were astonished by a curious spectacle.

It was a shoal of argonauts travelling along on the surface of the ocean. We could count several hundreds. They belonged to the tubercle kind which are peculiar to the Indian seas.

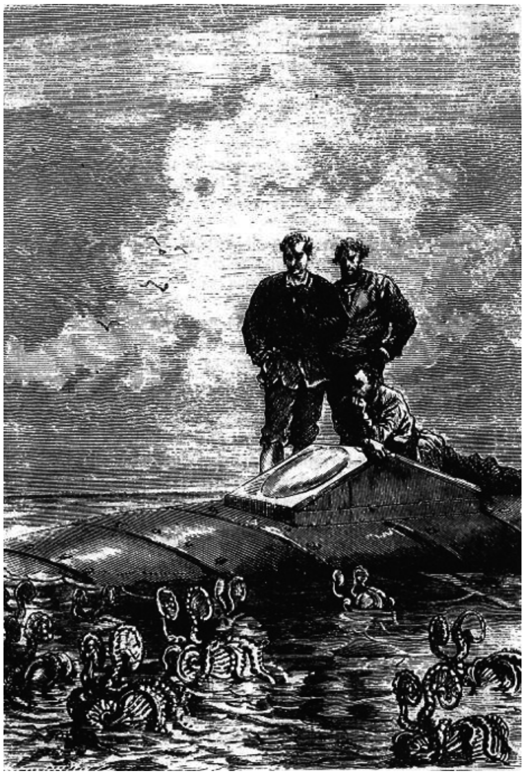

These graceful molluscs moved backwards by means of their locomotive tube, through which they propelled the water already drawn in. Of their eight tentacles, six were elongated, and stretched out floating on the water, whilst the other two, rolled up flat, were spread to the wing like a light sail. I saw their spiral-shaped and fluted shells, which Cuvier justly compares to an elegant skiff. A boat indeed! It bears the creature which secretes it without its adhering to it.

For nearly an hour the Nautilus floated in the midst of this shoal of molluscs. Then I know not what sudden fright they took. But as if at a signal every sail was furled, the arms folded, the body drawn in, the shells turned over, changing their centre of gravity, and the whole fleet disappeared under the waves. Never did the ships of a squadron manoeuvre with more unity.

At that moment night fell suddenly, and the reeds, scarcely raised by the breeze, lay peaceably under the sides of the Nautilus.

The next day, 26th of January, we cut the equator at the eighty-second meridian and entered the northern hemisphere. During the day a formidable troop of sharks accompanied us, terrible creatures, which multiply in these seas and make them very dangerous. They were “cestracio philippi” sharks, with brown backs and whitish bellies, armed with eleven rows of teeth — eyed sharks — their throat being marked with a large black spot surrounded with white like an eye. There were also some Isabella sharks, with rounded snouts marked with dark spots. These powerful creatures often hurled themselves at the windows of the saloon with such violence as to make us feel very insecure. At such times Ned Land was no longer master of himself. He wanted to go to the surface and harpoon the monsters, particularly certain smooth-hound sharks, whose mouth is studded with teeth like a mosaic; and large tiger-sharks nearly six yards long, the last named of which seemed to excite him more particularly. But the Nautilus, accelerating her speed, easily left the most rapid of them behind.

The 27th of January, at the entrance of the vast Bay of Bengal, we met repeatedly a forbidding spectacle, dead bodies floating on the surface of the water. They were the dead of the Indian villages, carried by the Ganges to the level of the sea, and which the vultures, the only undertakers of the country, had not been able to devour. But the sharks did not fail to help them at their funeral work.

About seven o’clock in the evening, the Nautilus, half-immersed, was sailing in a sea of milk. At first sight the ocean seemed lactified. Was it the effect of the lunar rays? No; for the moon, scarcely two days old, was still lying hidden under the horizon in the rays of the sun. The whole sky, though lit by the sidereal rays, seemed black by contrast with the whiteness of the waters.

Conseil could not believe his eyes, and questioned me as to the cause of this strange phenomenon. Happily I was able to answer him.

“It is called a milk sea,” I explained. “A large extent of white wavelets often to be seen on the coasts of Amboyna, and in these parts of the sea.”

“But, sir,” said Conseil, “can you tell me what causes such an effect? for I suppose the water is not really turned into milk.”

“No, my boy; and the whiteness which surprises you is caused only by the presence of myriads of infusoria, a sort of luminous little worm, gelatinous and without colour, of the thickness of a hair, and whose length is not more than seven-thousandths of an inch. These insects adhere to one another sometimes for several leagues."

"Several leagues!" exclaimed Conseil.

"Yes, my boy; and you need not try to compute the number of these infusoria. You will not be able, for, if I am not mistaken, ships have floated on these milk seas for more than forty miles."

Towards midnight the sea suddenly resumed its usual colour; but behind us, even to the limits of the horizon, the sky reflected the whitened waves, and for a long time seemed impregnated with the vague glimmerings of an aurora borealis.

CHAPTER II

A NOVEL PROPOSAL OF CAPTAIN NEMO’S

On the 28th of February, when at noon the Nautilus came to the surface of the sea, in 9° 4’ N. lat. there was land in sight about eight miles to westward. The first thing I noticed was a range of mountains about two thousand feet high, the shapes of which were most capricious. On taking the bearings, I knew that we were nearing the island of Ceylon, the pearl which hangs from the lobe of the Indian Peninsula.

Captain Nemo and his second appeared at this moment. The Captain glanced at the map. Then turning to me, said:

“The Island of Ceylon, noted for its pearl-fisheries. Would you like to visit one of them, M. Aronnax?”

“Certainly, Captain.”

“Well, the thing is easy. Though, if we see the fisheries, we shall not see the fishermen. The annual exportation has not yet begun. Never mind, I will give orders to make for the Gulf of Manaar, where we shall arrive in the night.”

The Captain said something to his second, who immediately went out. Soon the Nautilus returned to her native element, and the manometer showed that she was about thirty feet deep.

“Well, sir,” said Captain Nemo, “you and your companions shall visit the Bank of Manaar, and if by chance some fisherman should be there, we shall see him at work.”

“Agreed, Captain!”

“By the bye, M. Aronnax you are not afraid of sharks?”

“Sharks!” exclaimed I.

This question seemed a very hard one.

“Well?” continued Captain Nemo.

“I admit, Captain, that I am not yet very familiar with that kind of fish.”

“We are accustomed to them,” replied Captain Nemo, “and in time you will be too. However, we shall be armed, and on the road we may be able to hunt some of the tribe. It is interesting. So, till to-morrow, sir, and early.”

This said in a careless tone, Captain Nemo left the saloon. Now, if you were invited to hunt the bear in the mountains of Switzerland, what would you say?

“Very well! to-morrow we will go and hunt the bear.” If you were asked to hunt the lion in the plains of Atlas, or the tiger in the Indian jungles, what would you say?

“Ha! ha! it seems we are going to hunt the tiger or the lion!” But when you are invited to hunt the shark in its natural element, you would perhaps reflect before accepting the invitation. As for myself, I passed my hand over my forehead, on which stood large drops of cold perspiration. “Let us reflect,” said I, “and take our time. Hunting otters in submarine forests, as we did in the Island of Crespo, will pass; but going up and down at the bottom of the sea, where one is almost certain to meet sharks, is quite another thing! I know well that in certain countries, particularly in the

Andaman Islands, the negroes never hesitate to attack them with a dagger in one hand and a running noose in the other; but I also know that few who affront those creatures ever return alive. However, I am not a negro, and if I were I think a little hesitation in this case would not be ill-timed."

At this moment Conseil and the Canadian entered, quite composed, and even joyous. They knew not what awaited them.

"Faith, sir," said Ned Land, "your Captain Nemo — the devil take him! — has just made us a very pleasant offer."

"Ah!" said I, "you know?"

"If agreeable to you, sir," interrupted Conseil, "the commander of the Nautilus has invited us to visit the magnificent Ceylon fisheries to-morrow, in your company; he did it kindly, and behaved like a real gentleman."

"He said nothing more?"

"Nothing more, sir, except that he had already spoken to you of this little walk."

"Sir," said Conseil, "would you give us some details of the pearl fishery?"

"As to the fishing itself," I asked, "or the incidents, which?"

"On the fishing," replied the Canadian; "before entering upon the ground, it is as well to know something about it."

"Very well; sit down, my friends, and I will teach you."

Ned and Conseil seated themselves on an ottoman, and the first thing the Canadian asked was:

“Sir, what is a pearl?”

“My worthy Ned,” I answered, “to the poet, a pearl is a tear of the sea; to the Orientals, it is a drop of dew solidified; to the ladies, it is a jewel of an oblong shape, of a brilliancy of mother-of-pearl substance, which they wear on their fingers, their necks, or their ears; for the chemist it is a mixture of phosphate and carbonate of lime, with a little gelatine; and lastly, for naturalists, it is simply a morbid secretion of the organ that produces the mother-of-pearl amongst certain bivalves.”

“Branch of molluscs,” said Conseil.

“Precisely so, my learned Conseil; and, amongst these testacea the earshell, the tridacnae, the turbots, in a word, all those which secrete mother-of-pearl, that is, the blue, bluish, violet, or white substance which lines the interior of their shells, are capable of producing pearls.”

“Mussels too?” asked the Canadian.

“Yes, mussels of certain waters in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Saxony, Bohemia, and France.”

“Good! For the future I shall pay attention,” replied the Canadian.

“But,” I continued, “the particular mollusc which secretes the pearl is the pearl-oyster, the meleagrina margaritiferct, that precious pintadine. The pearl is nothing but a nacreous formation, deposited in a globular form, either adhering to the oyster shell, or buried in the folds of the creature. On the shell it is fast; in the flesh it is loose; but always has for a kernel a small hard substance, may be a barren egg, may be a grain of sand, around which the pearly matter deposits itself year after year successively, and by thin concentric layers.”

“Are many pearls found in the same oyster?” asked Conseil.

“Yes, my boy. Some are a perfect casket. One oyster has been mentioned, though I allow myself to doubt it, as having contained no less than a hundred and fifty sharks.”

“A hundred and fifty sharks!” exclaimed Ned Land.

“Did I say sharks?” said I hurriedly. “I meant to say a hundred and fifty pearls. Sharks would not be sense.”

“Certainly not,” said Conseil; “but will you tell us now by what means they extract these pearls?”

“They proceed in various ways. When they adhere to the shell, the fishermen often pull them off with pincers; but the most common way is to lay the oysters on mats of the seaweed which covers the banks. Thus they die in the open air; and at the end of ten days they are in a forward state of decomposition. They are then plunged into large reservoirs of sea-water; then they are opened and washed.”

“The price of these pearls varies according to their size?” asked Conseil.

“Not only according to their size,” I answered, “but also according to their shape, their water (that is, their colour), and their lustre: that is, that bright and diapered sparkle which makes them so charming to the eye. The most beautiful are called virgin pearls, or paragons. They are formed alone in the tissue of the mollusc, are white, often opaque, and sometimes have the transparency of an opal; they are generally round or oval. The round are made into bracelets, the oval into pendants, and, being more precious, are sold singly. Those adhering to the shell of the oyster are more irregular in shape, and are sold by weight. Lastly, in a lower order are classed those small pearls known under the name of seed-pearls; they are sold by measure, and are especially used in embroidery for church ornaments."

"But," said Conseil, "is this pearl-fishery dangerous?"

"No," I answered, quickly; "particularly if certain precautions are taken."

"What does one risk in such a calling?" said Ned Land, "the swallowing of some mouthfuls of sea-water?"

"As you say, Ned. By the bye," said I, trying to take Captain Nemo's careless tone, "are you afraid of sharks, brave Ned?"

"I!" replied the Canadian; "a harpooner by profession? It is my trade to make light of them."

"But," said I, "it is not a question of fishing for them with an iron-swivel, hoisting them into the vessel, cutting off their tails with a blow of a chopper, ripping them up, and throwing their heart into the sea!"

"Then, it is a question of — — "

"Precisely."

"In the water?"

"In the water."

"Faith, with a good harpoon! You know, sir, these sharks are ill-fashioned beasts. They turn on their bellies to seize you, and in that time — — "

Ned Land had a way of saying “seize” which made my blood run cold.

“Well, and you, Conseil, what do you think of sharks?”

“Me!” said Conseil. “I will be frank, sir.”

“So much the better,” thought I.

“If you, sir, mean to face the sharks, I do not see why your faithful servant should not face them with you.”

CHAPTER III

A PEARL OF TEN MILLIONS

The next morning at four o’clock I was awakened by the steward whom Captain Nemo had placed at my service. I rose hurriedly, dressed, and went into the saloon.

Captain Nemo was awaiting me.

“M. Aronnax,” said he, “are you ready to start?”

“I am ready.”

“Then please to follow me.”

“And my companions, Captain?”

“They have been told and are waiting.”

“Are we not to put on our diver’s dresses?” asked I.

“Not yet. I have not allowed the Nautilus to come too near this coast, and we are some distance from the Manaar Bank; but the boat is ready, and will take us to the exact point of disembarking, which will save us a long way. It carries our diving apparatus, which we will put on when we begin our submarine journey.”

Captain Nemo conducted me to the central staircase, which led on the platform. Ned and Conseil were already there, delighted at the idea of the “pleasure party” which was preparing. Five sailors from the Nautilus, with their oars, waited in the boat, which had been made fast against the side.

The night was still dark. Layers of clouds covered the sky, allowing but few stars to be seen. I looked on the side where the land lay, and saw nothing but a dark line enclosing three parts of the horizon, from south-west to north west. The Nautilus, having returned during the night up the western coast of Ceylon, was now west of the bay, or rather gulf, formed by the mainland and the Island of Manaar. There, under the dark waters, stretched the pintadine bank, an inexhaustible field of pearls, the length of which is more than twenty miles.

Captain Nemo, Ned Land, Conseil, and I took our places in the stern of the boat. The master went to the tiller; his four companions leaned on their oars, the painter was cast off, and we sheered off.

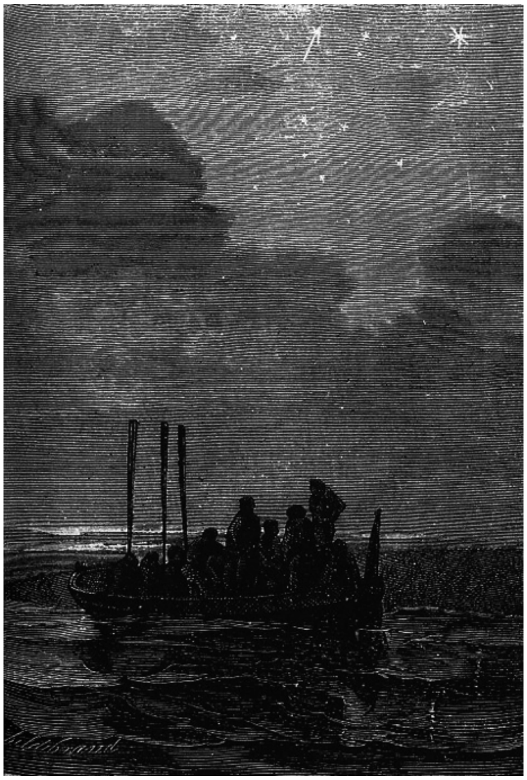

The boat went towards the south; the oarsmen did not hurry. I noticed that their strokes, strong in the water, only followed each other every ten seconds, according to the method generally adopted in the navy. Whilst the craft was running by its own velocity, the liquid drops struck the dark depths of the waves crisply like spats of melted lead. A little billow, spreading wide, gave a slight roll to the boat, and some samphire reeds flapped before it.

We were silent. What was Captain Nemo thinking of? Perhaps of the land he was approaching, and which he found too near to him, contrary to the Canadian's opinion, who thought it too far off. As to Conseil, he was merely there from curiosity.

About half-past five the first tints on the horizon showed the upper line of coast more distinctly. Flat enough in the east, it rose a little to the south. Five miles still lay between us, and it was indistinct owing to the mist on the water. At six o'clock it became suddenly daylight, with that rapidity peculiar to tropical regions, which know neither dawn nor twilight. The solar rays pierced the curtain of clouds, piled up on the eastern horizon, and the radiant orb rose rapidly. I saw land distinctly, with a few trees scattered here and there. The boat neared Manaar Island, which was rounded to the south. Captain Nemo rose from his seat and watched the sea.

At a sign from him the anchor was dropped, but the chain scarcely ran, for it was little more than a yard deep, and this spot was one of the highest points of the bank of pintadines.

"Here we are, M. Aronnax," said Captain Nemo. "You see that enclosed bay? Here, in a month will be assembled the numerous fishing boats of the exporters, and these are the waters their divers will ransack so boldly. Happily, this bay is well situated for that kind of fishing. It is sheltered from the strongest winds; the sea is never very rough here, which makes it favourable for the diver's work. We will now put on our dresses, and begin our walk."

I did not answer, and, while watching the suspected waves, began with the help of the sailors to put on my heavy sea-dress. Captain Nemo and my companions were also dressing. None of the Nautilus men were to accompany us on this new excursion.

Soon we were enveloped to the throat in india-rubber clothing; the air apparatus fixed to our backs by braces. As to the Ruhmkorff apparatus, there was no necessity for it. Before putting my head into the copper cap, I had asked the question of the Captain.

“They would be useless,” he replied. “We are going to no great depth, and the solar rays will be enough to light our walk. Besides, it would not be prudent to carry the electric light in these waters; its brilliancy might attract some of the dangerous inhabitants of the coast most inopportunely.”

As Captain Nemo pronounced these words, I turned to Conseil and Ned Land. But my two friends had already encased their heads in the metal cap, and they could neither hear nor answer.

One last question remained to ask of Captain Nemo.

“And our arms?” asked I; “our guns?”

“Guns! What for? Do not mountaineers attack the bear with a dagger in their hand, and is not steel surer than lead? Here is a strong blade; put it in your belt, and we start.”

I looked at my companions; they were armed like us, and, more than that, Ned Land was brandishing an enormous harpoon, which he had placed in the boat before leaving the Nautilus.

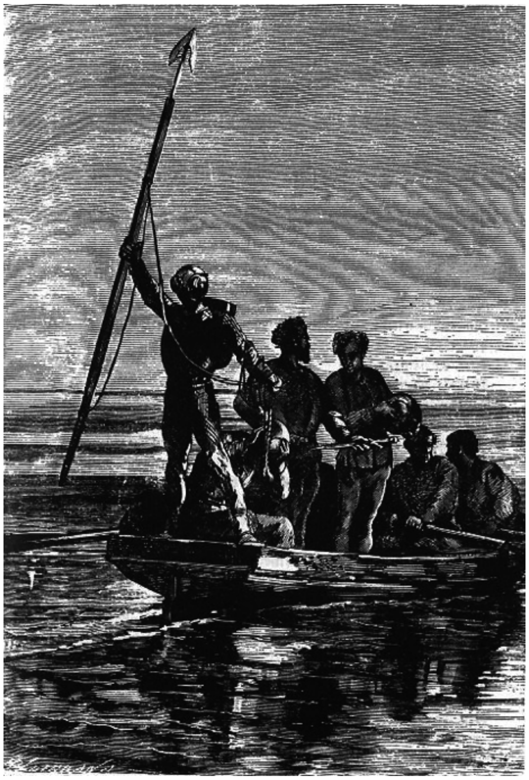

Then, following the Captain’s example, I allowed myself to be dressed in the heavy copper helmet, and our reservoirs of air were at once in activity. An instant after we were landed, one after the other, in about two yards of water upon an even sand. Captain Nemo made a sign with his hand, and we followed him by a gentle declivity till we disappeared under the waves.

Over our feet, like coveys of snipe in a bog, rose shoals of fish, of the genus monoptera, which have no other fins but their tail. I recognized the Javanese, a real serpent two and a half feet long, of a livid colour underneath, and which might easily be mistaken for a conger eel if it were not for the golden stripes on its side. In the genus stromateus, whose bodies are very flat and oval, I saw some of the most brilliant colours, carrying their dorsal fin like a scythe; an excellent eating fish, which, dried and pickled, is known by the name of Karawade; then some tranquebars, belonging to the genus apsiphoroides, whose body is covered with a shell cuirass of eight longitudinal plates.

The heightening sun lit the mass of waters more and more. The soil changed by degrees. To the fine sand succeeded a perfect causeway of boulders, covered with a carpet of molluscs and zoophytes. Amongst the specimens of these branches I noticed some placenae, with thin unequal shells, a kind of ostracion peculiar to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean; some orange lucinae with rounded shells; rockfish three feet and a half long, which raised themselves under the waves like hands ready to seize one. There were also some panopyres, slightly luminous; and lastly, some oculines, like magnificent fans, forming one of the richest vegetations of these seas.

In the midst of these living plants, and under the arbours of the hydrophytes, were layers of clumsy articulates, particularly some raninae, whose carapace formed a slightly rounded triangle; and some horrible looking parthenopes.

At about seven o'clock we found ourselves at last surveying the oyster-banks on which the pearl-oysters are reproduced by millions.

Captain Nemo pointed with his hand to the enormous heap of oysters; and I could well understand that this mine was inexhaustible, for Nature's creative power is far beyond man's instinct of destruction. Ned Land, faithful to his instinct, hastened to fill a net which he carried by his side with some of the finest specimens. But we could not stop. We must follow the Captain, who seemed to guide him self by paths known only to himself. The ground was sensibly rising, and sometimes, on holding up my arm, it was above the surface of the sea. Then the level of the bank would sink capriciously. Often we rounded high rocks scarped into pyramids. In their dark fractures huge crustacea, perched upon their high claws like some war-machine, watched us with fixed eyes, and under our feet crawled various kinds of annelides.

At this moment there opened before us a large grotto dug in a picturesque heap of rocks and carpeted with all the thick warp of the submarine flora. At first it seemed very dark to me. The solar rays seemed to be extinguished by successive gradations, until its vague transparency became nothing more than drowned light. Captain Nemo entered; we followed. My eyes soon accustomed themselves to this relative state of darkness. I could distinguish the arches springing capriciously from natural pillars, standing broad upon their granite base, like the heavy columns of Tuscan architecture. Why had our incomprehensible guide led us to the bottom of this submarine crypt? I was soon to know. After descending a rather sharp declivity, our feet trod the bottom of a kind of circular pit. There Captain Nemo stopped, and with his hand indicated an object I had not yet perceived. It was an oyster of extraordinary dimensions, a gigantic tridacne, a goblet which could have contained a whole lake of holy-water, a basin the breadth of which was more than two yards and a half, and consequently larger than that ornamenting the saloon of the Nautilus. I approached this extraordinary mollusc. It adhered by its filaments to a table of granite, and there, isolated, it developed itself in the calm waters of the grotto. I estimated the weight of this tridacne at 600 lb. Such an oyster would contain 30 lb. of meat; and one must have the stomach of a Gargantua to demolish some dozens of them.

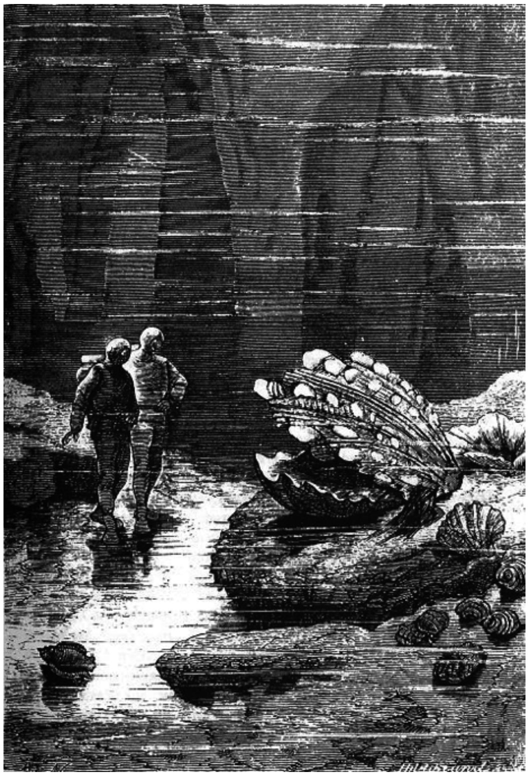

Captain Nemo was evidently acquainted with the existence of this bivalve, and seemed to have a particular motive in verifying the actual state of this tridacne. The shells were a little open; the Captain came near and put his dagger between to prevent them from closing; then with his hand he raised the membrane with its fringed edges, which formed a cloak for the creature. There, between the folded plaits, I saw a loose pearl, whose size equalled that of a coco-nut. Its globular shape, perfect clearness, and admirable lustre made it altogether a jewel of inestimable value. Carried away by my curiosity, I stretched out my hand to seize it, weigh it, and touch it; but the Captain stopped me, made a sign of refusal, and quickly withdrew his dagger, and the two shells closed suddenly. I then understood Captain Nemo's intention. In leaving this pearl hidden in the mantle of the tridacne he was allowing it to grow slowly. Each year the secretions of the mollusc would add new concentric circles. I estimated its value at L500,000 at least.

After ten minutes Captain Nemo stopped suddenly. I thought he had halted previously to returning. No; by a gesture he bade us crouch beside him in a deep fracture of the rock, his hand pointed to one part of the liquid mass, which I watched attentively.

About five yards from me a shadow appeared, and sank to the ground. The disquieting idea of sharks shot through my mind, but I was mistaken; and once again it was not a monster of the ocean that we had anything to do with.

It was a man, a living man, an Indian, a fisherman, a poor devil who, I suppose, had come to glean before the harvest. I could see the bottom of his canoe anchored some feet above his head. He dived and went up successively. A stone held between his feet, cut in the shape of a sugar loaf, whilst a rope fastened him to his boat, helped him to descend more rapidly. This was all his apparatus. Reaching the bottom, about five yards deep, he went on his knees and filled his bag with oysters picked up at random. Then he went up, emptied it, pulled up his stone, and began the operation once more, which lasted thirty seconds.

The diver did not see us. The shadow of the rock hid us from sight. And how should this poor Indian ever dream that men, beings like himself, should be there under the water watching his movements and losing no detail of the fishing? Several times he went up in this way, and dived again. He did not carry away more than ten at each plunge, for he was obliged to pull them from the bank to which they adhered by means of their strong byssus. And how many of those oysters for which he risked his life had no pearl in them! I watched him closely; his manoeuvres were regular; and for the space of half an hour no danger appeared to threaten him.

I was beginning to accustom myself to the sight of this interesting fishing, when suddenly, as the Indian was on the ground, I saw him make a gesture of terror, rise, and make a spring to return to the surface of the sea.

I understood his dread. A gigantic shadow appeared just above the unfortunate diver. It was a shark of enormous size advancing diagonally, his eyes on fire, and his jaws open. I was mute with horror and unable to move.

The voracious creature shot towards the Indian, who threw himself on one side to avoid the shark’s fins; but not its tail, for it struck his chest and stretched him on the ground.

This scene lasted but a few seconds: the shark returned, and, turning on his back, prepared himself for cutting the Indian in two, when I saw Captain Nemo rise suddenly, and then, dagger in hand, walk straight to the monster, ready to fight face to face with him. The very moment the shark was going to snap the unhappy fisherman in two, he perceived his new adversary, and, turning over, made straight towards him.

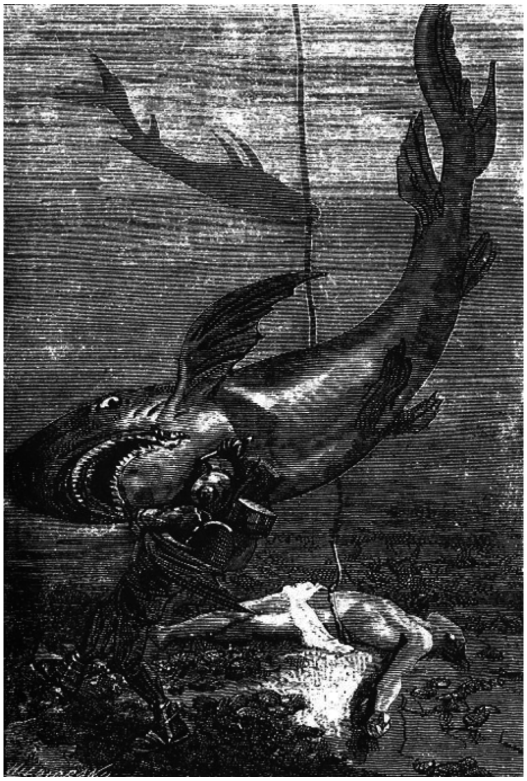

I can still see Captain Nemo’s position. Holding himself well together, he waited for the shark with admirable coolness; and, when it rushed at him, threw himself on one side with wonderful quickness, avoiding the shock, and burying his dagger deep into its side. But it was not all over. A terrible combat ensued.

The shark had seemed to roar, if I might say so. The blood rushed in torrents from its wound. The sea was dyed red, and through the opaque liquid I could distinguish nothing more. Nothing more until the moment when, like lightning, I saw the undaunted Captain hanging on to one of the creature’s fins, struggling, as it were, hand to hand with the monster, and dealing successive blows at his enemy, yet still unable to give a decisive one.

The shark’s struggles agitated the water with such fury that the rocking threatened to upset me.

I wanted to go to the Captain's assistance, but, nailed to the spot with horror, I could not stir.

I saw the haggard eye; I saw the different phases of the fight. The Captain fell to the earth, upset by the enormous mass which leant upon him. The shark's jaws opened wide, like a pair of factory shears, and it would have been all over with the Captain; but, quick as thought, harpoon in hand, Ned Land rushed towards the shark and struck it with its sharp point.

The waves were impregnated with a mass of blood. They rocked under the shark's movements, which beat them with indescribable fury. Ned Land had not missed his aim. It was the monster's death-rattle. Struck to the heart, it struggled in dreadful convulsions, the shock of which overthrew Conseil.

But Ned Land had disentangled the Captain, who, getting up without any wound, went straight to the Indian, quickly cut the cord which held him to his stone, took him in his arms, and, with a sharp blow of his heel, mounted to the surface.

We all three followed in a few seconds, saved by a miracle, and reached the fisherman's boat.

Captain Nemo's first care was to recall the unfortunate man to life again. I did not think he could succeed. I hoped so, for the poor creature's immersion was not long; but the blow from the shark's tail might have been his death-blow.

Happily, with the Captain's and Conseil's sharp friction, I saw consciousness return by degrees. He opened his eyes. What was his surprise, his terror even, at seeing four great copper heads leaning over him! And, above all, what must he have thought when Captain Nemo, drawing from the pocket of his dress a bag of pearls, placed it in his hand! This munificent charity from the man of the waters to the poor Cingalese was accepted with a trembling hand. His wondering eyes showed that he knew not to what super-human beings he owed both fortune and life.

At a sign from the Captain we regained the bank, and, following the road already traversed, came in about half an hour to the anchor which held the canoe of the Nautilus to the earth.

Once on board, we each, with the help of the sailors, got rid of the heavy copper helmet.

Captain Nemo’s first word was to the Canadian.

“Thank you, Master Land,” said he.

“It was in revenge, Captain,” replied Ned Land. “I owed you that.”

A ghastly smile passed across the Captain’s lips, and that was all.

“To the Nautilus,” said he.

The boat flew over the waves. Some minutes after we met the shark’s dead body floating. By the black marking of the extremity of its fins, I recognised the terrible melanopteron of the Indian Seas, of the species of shark so properly called. It was more than twenty-five feet long; its enormous mouth occupied one-third of its body. It was an adult, as was known by its six rows of teeth placed in an isosceles triangle in the upper jaw.

Whilst I was contemplating this inert mass, a dozen of these voracious beasts appeared round the boat; and, without noticing us, threw themselves upon the dead body and fought with one another for the pieces.

At half-past eight we were again on board the Nautilus. There I reflected on the incidents which had taken place in our excursion to the Manaar Bank.

Two conclusions I must inevitably draw from it — one bearing upon the unparalleled courage of Captain Nemo, the other upon his devotion to a human being, a representative of that race from which he fled beneath the sea. Whatever he might say, this strange man had not yet succeeded in entirely crushing his heart.

When I made this observation to him, he answered in a slightly moved tone:

“That Indian, sir, is an inhabitant of an oppressed country; and I am still, and shall be, to my last breath, one of them!”

CHAPTER IV

THE RED SEA

In the course of the day of the 29th of January, the island of Ceylon disappeared under the horizon, and the Nautilus, at a speed of twenty miles an hour, slid into the labyrinth of canals which separate the Maldives from the Laccadives. It coasted even the Island of Kiltan, a land originally coraline, discovered by Vasco da Gama in 1499, and one of the nineteen principal islands of the Laccadive Archipelago, situated between 10° and 14° 30’ N. lat. and 69° 50’ 72” E. long.

We had made 16,220 miles, or 7,500 (French) leagues from our starting-point in the Japanese Seas.

The next day (30th January), when the Nautilus went to the surface of the ocean there was no land in sight. Its course was N.N.E. in the direction of the Sea of Oman, between Arabia and the Indian Peninsula, which serves as an outlet to the Persian Gulf. It was evidently a block without any possible egress. Where was Captain Nemo taking us to? I could not say. This, however, did not satisfy the Canadian, who that day came to me asking where we were going.

“We are going where our Captain’s fancy takes us, Master Ned.”

“His fancy cannot take us far, then,” said the Canadian. “The Persian Gulf has no outlet: and, if we do go in, it will not be long before we are out again.”

“Very well, then, we will come out again, Master Land; and if, after the Persian Gulf, the Nautilus would like to visit the Red Sea, the Straits of

Bab-el-mandeb are there to give us entrance.”

“I need not tell you, sir,” said Ned Land, “that the Red Sea is as much closed as the Gulf, as the Isthmus of Suez is not yet cut; and, if it was, a boat as mysterious as ours would not risk itself in a canal cut with sluices. And again, the Red Sea is not the road to take us back to Europe.”

“But I never said we were going back to Europe.”

“What do you suppose, then?”

“I suppose that, after visiting the curious coasts of Arabia and Egypt, the Nautilus will go down the Indian Ocean again, perhaps cross the Channel of Mozambique, perhaps off the Mascarenhas, so as to gain the Cape of Good Hope.”

“And once at the Cape of Good Hope?” asked the Canadian, with peculiar emphasis.

“Well, we shall penetrate into that Atlantic which we do not yet know. Ah! friend Ned, you are getting tired of this journey under the sea; you are surfeited with the incessantly varying spectacle of submarine wonders. For my part, I shall be sorry to see the end of a voyage which it is given to so few men to make.”

For four days, till the 3rd of February, the Nautilus scoured the Sea of Oman, at various speeds and at various depths. It seemed to go at random, as if hesitating as to which road it should follow, but we never passed the Tropic of Cancer.

In quitting this sea we sighted Muscat for an instant, one of the most important towns of the country of Oman. I admired its strange aspect, surrounded by black rocks upon which its white houses and forts stood in relief. I saw the rounded domes of its mosques, the elegant points of its minarets, its fresh and verdant terraces. But it was only a vision! The Nautilus soon sank under the waves of that part of the sea.

We passed along the Arabian coast of Mahrah and Hadramaut, for a distance of six miles, its undulating line of mountains being occasionally relieved by some ancient ruin. The 5th of February we at last entered the Gulf of Aden, a perfect funnel introduced into the neck of Bab-el-mandeb, through which the Indian waters entered the Red Sea.

The 6th of February, the Nautilus floated in sight of Aden, perched upon a promontory which a narrow isthmus joins to the mainland, a kind of inaccessible Gibraltar, the fortifications of which were rebuilt by the English after taking possession in 1839. I caught a glimpse of the octagon minarets of this town, which was at one time the richest commercial magazine on the coast.

I certainly thought that Captain Nemo, arrived at this point, would back out again; but I was mistaken, for he did no such thing, much to my surprise.

The next day, the 7th of February, we entered the Straits of Bab-el-mandeb, the name of which, in the Arab tongue, means The Gate of Tears.

To twenty miles in breadth, it is only thirty-two in length. And for the Nautilus, starting at full speed, the crossing was scarcely the work of an hour. But I saw nothing, not even the Island of Perim, with which the British Government has fortified the position of Aden. There were too many English or French steamers of the line of Suez to Bombay, Calcutta to Melbourne, and from Bourbon to the Mauritius, furrowing this narrow passage, for the Nautilus to venture to show itself. So it remained prudently below. At last about noon, we were in the waters of the Red Sea.

I would not even seek to understand the caprice which had decided Captain Nemo upon entering the gulf. But I quite approved of the Nautilus entering it. Its speed was lessened: sometimes it kept on the surface, sometimes it dived to avoid a vessel, and thus I was able to observe the upper and lower parts of this curious sea.

The 8th of February, from the first dawn of day, Mocha came in sight, now a ruined town, whose walls would fall at a gunshot, yet which shelters here and there some verdant date-trees; once an important city, containing six public markets, and twenty-six mosques, and whose walls, defended by fourteen forts, formed a girdle of two miles in circumference.

The Nautilus then approached the African shore, where the depth of the sea was greater. There, between two waters clear as crystal, through the open panels we were allowed to contemplate the beautiful bushes of brilliant coral and large blocks of rock clothed with a splendid fur of green variety of sites and landscapes along these sandbanks and algae and fuci. What an indescribable spectacle, and what variety of sites and landscapes along these sandbanks and volcanic islands which bound the Libyan coast! But where these shrubs appeared in all their beauty was on the eastern coast, which the Nautilus soon gained. It was on the coast of Tehama, for there not only did this display of zoophytes flourish beneath the level of the sea, but they also formed picturesque interlacings which unfolded themselves about sixty feet above the surface, more capricious but less highly coloured than those whose freshness was kept up by the vital power of the waters.

What charming hours I passed thus at the window of the saloon! What new specimens of submarine flora and fauna did I admire under the brightness of our electric lantern!

The 9th of February the Nautilus floated in the broadest part of the Red Sea, which is comprised between Souakin, on the west coast, and Komfidah, on the east coast, with a diameter of ninety miles.

That day at noon, after the bearings were taken, Captain Nemo mounted the platform, where I happened to be, and I was determined not to let him go down again without at least pressing him regarding his ulterior projects. As soon as he saw me he approached and graciously offered me a cigar.

“Well, sir, does this Red Sea please you? Have you sufficiently observed the wonders it covers, its fishes, its zoophytes, its parterres of sponges, and its forests of coral? Did you catch a glimpse of the towns on its borders?”

“Yes, Captain Nemo,” I replied; “and the Nautilus is wonderfully fitted for such a study. Ah! it is an intelligent boat!”

“Yes, sir, intelligent and invulnerable. It fears neither the terrible tempests of the Red Sea, nor its currents, nor its sandbanks.”

“Certainly,” said I, “this sea is quoted as one of the worst, and in the time of the ancients, if I am not mistaken, its reputation was detestable.”

“Detestable, M. Aronnax. The Greek and Latin historians do not speak favourably of it, and Strabo says it is very dangerous during the Etesian winds and in the rainy season. The Arabian Edrisi portrays it under the name of the Gulf of Colzoum, and relates that vessels perished there in great numbers on the sandbanks and that no one would risk sailing in the night. It is, he pretends, a sea subject to fearful hurricanes, strewn with inhospitable islands, and `which offers nothing good either on its surface or in its depths.'"

"One may see," I replied, "that these historians never sailed on board the Nautilus."

"Just so," replied the Captain, smiling; "and in that respect moderns are not more advanced than the ancients. It required many ages to find out the mechanical power of steam. Who knows if, in another hundred years, we may not see a second Nautilus? Progress is slow, M. Aronnax."

"It is true," I answered; "your boat is at least a century before its time, perhaps an era. What a misfortune that the secret of such an invention should die with its inventor!"

Captain Nemo did not reply. After some minutes' silence he continued:

"You were speaking of the opinions of ancient historians upon the dangerous navigation of the Red Sea."

"It is true," said I; "but were not their fears exaggerated?"

"Yes and no, M. Aronnax," replied Captain Nemo, who seemed to know the Red Sea by heart. "That which is no longer dangerous for a modern vessel, well rigged, strongly built, and master of its own course, thanks to obedient steam, offered all sorts of perils to the ships of the ancients. Picture to yourself those first navigators venturing in ships made of planks sewn with the cords of the palmtree, saturated with the grease of the seadog, and covered with powdered resin! They had not even instruments wherewith to take their bearings, and they went by guess amongst currents of which they scarcely knew anything. Under such conditions shipwrecks were, and must have been, numerous. But in our time, steamers running between Suez and the South Seas have nothing more to fear from the fury of this gulf, in spite of contrary trade-winds. The captain and passengers do not prepare for their departure by offering propitiatory sacrifices; and, on their return, they no longer go ornamented with wreaths and gilt fillets to thank the gods in the neighbouring temple."

"I agree with you," said I; "and steam seems to have killed all gratitude in the hearts of sailors. But, Captain, since you seem to have especially studied this sea, can you tell me the origin of its name?"

"There exist several explanations on the subject, M. Aronnax. Would you like to know the opinion of a chronicler of the fourteenth century?"

"Willingly."

"This fanciful writer pretends that its name was given to it after the passage of the Israelites, when Pharaoh perished in the waves which closed at the voice of Moses."

"A poet's explanation, Captain Nemo," I replied; "but I cannot content myself with that. I ask you for your personal opinion."

"Here it is, M. Aronnax. According to my idea, we must see in this appellation of the Red Sea a translation of the Hebrew word `Edom'; and if the ancients gave it that name, it was on account of the particular colour of its waters."

"But up to this time I have seen nothing but transparent waves and without any particular colour."

“Very likely; but as we advance to the bottom of the gulf, you will see this singular appearance. I remember seeing the Bay of Tor entirely red, like a sea of blood.”

“And you attribute this colour to the presence of a microscopic seaweed?”

“Yes.”

“So, Captain Nemo, it is not the first time you have overrun the Red Sea on board the Nautilus?”

“No, sir.”

“As you spoke a while ago of the passage of the Israelites and of the catastrophe to the Egyptians, I will ask whether you have met with the traces under the water of this great historical fact?”

“No, sir; and for a good reason.”

“What is it?”

“It is that the spot where Moses and his people passed is now so blocked up with sand that the camels can barely bathe their legs there. You can well understand that there would not be water enough for my Nautilus.”

“And the spot?” I asked.

“The spot is situated a little above the Isthmus of Suez, in the arm which formerly made a deep estuary, when the Red Sea extended to the Salt Lakes. Now, whether this passage were miraculous or not, the Israelites, nevertheless, crossed there to reach the Promised Land, and Pharaoh’s army perished precisely on that spot; and I think that excavations made in the middle of the sand would bring to light a large number of arms and instruments of Egyptian origin."

"That is evident," I replied; "and for the sake of archaeologists let us hope that these excavations will be made sooner or later, when new towns are established on the isthmus, after the construction of the Suez Canal; a canal, however, very useless to a vessel like the Nautilus."

"Very likely; but useful to the whole world," said Captain Nemo. "The ancients well understood the utility of a communication between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean for their commercial affairs: but they did not think of digging a canal direct, and took the Nile as an intermediate. Very probably the canal which united the Nile to the Red Sea was begun by Sesostris, if we may believe tradition. One thing is certain, that in the year 615 before Jesus Christ, Necos undertook the works of an alimentary canal to the waters of the Nile across the plain of Egypt, looking towards Arabia. It took four days to go up this canal, and it was so wide that two triremes could go abreast. It was carried on by Darius, the son of Hystaspes, and probably finished by Ptolemy II. Strabo saw it navigated: but its decline from the point of departure, near Bubastes, to the Red Sea was so slight that it was only navigable for a few months in the year. This canal answered all commercial purposes to the age of Antonius, when it was abandoned and blocked up with sand. Restored by order of the Caliph Omar, it was definitely destroyed in 761 or 762 by Caliph Al-Mansor, who wished to prevent the arrival of provisions to Mohammed-ben-Abdallah, who had revolted against him. During the expedition into Egypt, your General Bonaparte discovered traces of the works in the Desert of Suez; and, surprised by the tide, he nearly perished before regaining Hadjaroth, at the very place where Moses had encamped three thousand years before him."

“Well, Captain, what the ancients dared not undertake, this junction between the two seas, which will shorten the road from Cadiz to India, M. Lesseps has succeeded in doing; and before long he will have changed Africa into an immense island.”

“Yes, M. Aronnax; you have the right to be proud of your countryman. Such a man brings more honour to a nation than great captains. He began, like so many others, with disgust and rebuffs; but he has triumphed, for he has the genius of will. And it is sad to think that a work like that, which ought to have been an international work and which would have sufficed to make a reign illustrious, should have succeeded by the energy of one man. All honour to M. Lesseps!”

“Yes! honour to the great citizen,” I replied, surprised by the manner in which Captain Nemo had just spoken.

“Unfortunately,” he continued, “I cannot take you through the Suez Canal; but you will be able to see the long jetty of Port Said after to-morrow, when we shall be in the Mediterranean.”

“The Mediterranean!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, sir; does that astonish you?”

“What astonishes me is to think that we shall be there the day after to-morrow.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, Captain, although by this time I ought to have accustomed myself to be surprised at nothing since I have been on board your boat.”

“But the cause of this surprise?”

“Well! it is the fearful speed you will have to put on the Nautilus, if the day after to-morrow she is to be in the Mediterranean, having made the round of Africa, and doubled the Cape of Good Hope!”

“Who told you that she would make the round of Africa and double the Cape of Good Hope, sir?”

“Well, unless the Nautilus sails on dry land, and passes above the isthmus — — ”

“Or beneath it, M. Aronnax.”

“Beneath it?”

“Certainly,” replied Captain Nemo quietly. “A long time ago Nature made under this tongue of land what man has this day made on its surface.”

“What! such a passage exists?”

“Yes; a subterranean passage, which I have named the Arabian Tunnel. It takes us beneath Suez and opens into the Gulf of Pelusium.”

“But this isthmus is composed of nothing but quick sands?”

“To a certain depth. But at fifty-five yards only there is a solid layer of rock.”

“Did you discover this passage by chance?” I asked more and more surprised.

“Chance and reasoning, sir; and by reasoning even more than by chance. Not only does this passage exist, but I have profited by it several times. Without that I should not have ventured this day into the impassable Red Sea. I noticed that in the Red Sea and in the Mediterranean there existed a certain number of fishes of a kind perfectly identical. Certain of the fact, I asked myself was it possible that there was no communication between the two seas? If there was, the subterranean current must necessarily run from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, from the sole cause of difference of level. I caught a large number of fishes in the neighbourhood of Suez. I passed a copper ring through their tails, and threw them back into the sea. Some months later, on the coast of Syria, I caught some of my fish ornamented with the ring. Thus the communication between the two was proved. I then sought for it with my Nautilus; I discovered it, ventured into it, and before long, sir, you too will have passed through my Arabian tunnel!”

CHAPTER V

THE ARABIAN TUNNEL

That same evening, in 21° 30’ N. lat. the Nautilus floated on the surface of the sea, approaching the Arabian coast. I saw Djeddah, the most important counting-house of Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and India. I distinguished clearly enough its buildings, the vessels anchored at the quays, and those whose draught of water obliged them to anchor in the roads. The sun, rather low on the horizon, struck full on the houses of the town, bringing out their whiteness. Outside, some wooden cabins, and some made of reeds, showed the quarter inhabited by the Bedouins. Soon Djeddah was shut out from view by the shadows of night, and the Nautilus found herself under water slightly phosphorescent.

The next day, the 10th of February, we sighted several ships running to windward. The Nautilus returned to its submarine navigation; but at noon, when her bearings were taken, the sea being deserted, she rose again to her waterline.

Accompanied by Ned and Conseil, I seated myself on the platform. The coast on the eastern side looked like a mass faintly printed upon a damp fog.

We were leaning on the sides of the pinnace, talking of one thing and another, when Ned Land, stretching out his hand towards a spot on the sea, said:

“Do you see anything there, sir?”

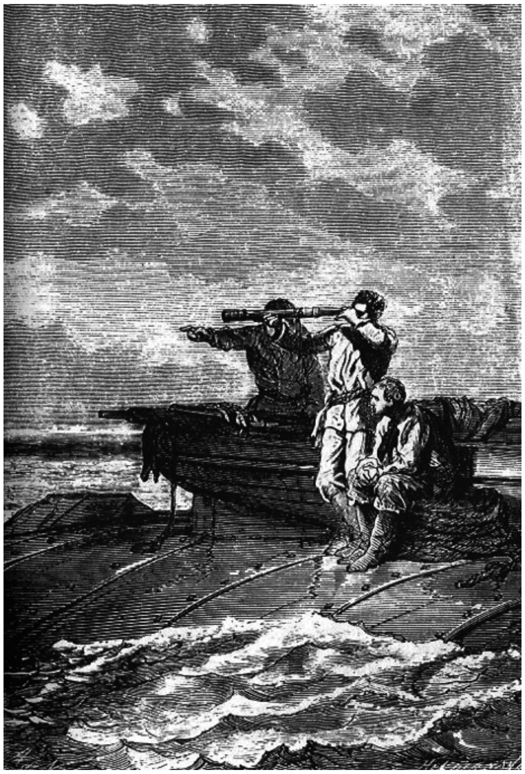

“No, Ned,” I replied; “but I have not your eyes, you know.”

“Look well,” said Ned, “there, on the starboard beam, about the height of the lantern! Do you not see a mass which seems to move?”

“Certainly,” said I, after close attention; “I see something like a long black body on the top of the water.”

And certainly before long the black object was not more than a mile from us. It looked like a great sandbank deposited in the open sea. It was a gigantic dugong!

Ned Land looked eagerly. His eyes shone with covetousness at the sight of the animal. His hand seemed ready to harpoon it. One would have thought he was awaiting the moment to throw himself into the sea and attack it in its element.

At this instant Captain Nemo appeared on the platform. He saw the dugong, understood the Canadian’s attitude, and, addressing him, said:

“If you held a harpoon just now, Master Land, would it not burn your hand?”

“Just so, sir.”

“And you would not be sorry to go back, for one day, to your trade of a fisherman and to add this cetacean to the list of those you have already killed?”

“I should not, sir.”

“Well, you can try.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Ned Land, his eyes flaming.

“Only,” continued the Captain, “I advise you for your own sake not to miss the creature.”

“Is the dugong dangerous to attack?” I asked, in spite of the Canadian’s shrug of the shoulders.

“Yes,” replied the Captain; “sometimes the animal turns upon its assailants and overturns their boat. But for Master Land this danger is not to be feared. His eye is prompt, his arm sure.”

At this moment seven men of the crew, mute and immovable as ever, mounted the platform. One carried a harpoon and a line similar to those employed in catching whales. The pinnace was lifted from the bridge, pulled from its socket, and let down into the sea. Six oarsmen took their seats, and the coxswain went to the tiller. Ned, Conseil, and I went to the back of the boat.

“You are not coming, Captain?” I asked.

“No, sir; but I wish you good sport.”

The boat put off, and, lifted by the six rowers, drew rapidly towards the dugong, which floated about two miles from the Nautilus.

Arrived some cables-length from the cetacean, the speed slackened, and the oars dipped noiselessly into the quiet waters. Ned Land, harpoon in hand, stood in the fore part of the boat. The harpoon used for striking the whale is generally attached to a very long cord which runs out rapidly as the wounded creature draws it after him. But here the cord was not more than ten fathoms long, and the extremity was attached to a small barrel which, by floating, was to show the course the dugong took under the water.

I stood and carefully watched the Canadian’s adversary. This dugong, which also bears the name of the halicore, closely resembles the manatee; its oblong body terminated in a lengthened tail, and its lateral fins in perfect fingers. Its difference from the manatee consisted in its upper jaw, which was armed with two long and pointed teeth which formed on each side diverging tusks.

This dugong which Ned Land was preparing to attack was of colossal dimensions; it was more than seven yards long. It did not move, and seemed to be sleeping on the waves, which circumstance made it easier to capture.

The boat approached within six yards of the animal. The oars rested on the rowlocks. I half rose. Ned Land, his body thrown a little back, brandished the harpoon in his experienced hand.

Suddenly a hissing noise was heard, and the dugong disappeared. The harpoon, although thrown with great force; had apparently only struck the water.

“Curse it!” exclaimed the Canadian furiously; “I have missed it!”

“No,” said I; “the creature is wounded — look at the blood; but your weapon has not stuck in his body.”

“My harpoon! my harpoon!” cried Ned Land.

The sailors rowed on, and the coxswain made for the floating barrel. The harpoon regained, we followed in pursuit of the animal.

The latter came now and then to the surface to breathe. Its wound had not weakened it, for it shot onwards with great rapidity.

The boat, rowed by strong arms, flew on its track. Several times it approached within some few yards, and the Canadian was ready to strike, but the dugong made off with a sudden plunge, and it was impossible to reach it.

Imagine the passion which excited impatient Ned Land! He hurled at the unfortunate creature the most energetic expletives in the English tongue. For my part, I was only vexed to see the dugong escape all our attacks.

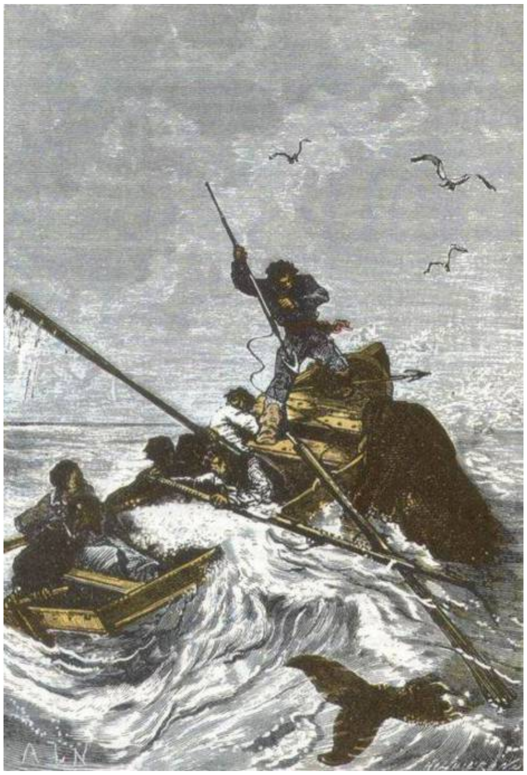

We pursued it without relaxation for an hour, and I began to think it would prove difficult to capture, when the animal, possessed with the perverse idea of vengeance of which he had cause to repent, turned upon the pinnace and assailed us in its turn.

This manoeuvre did not escape the Canadian.

“Look out!” he cried.

The coxswain said some words in his outlandish tongue, doubtless warning the men to keep on their guard.

The dugong came within twenty feet of the boat, stopped, sniffed the air briskly with its large nostrils (not pierced at the extremity, but in the upper part of its muzzle). Then, taking a spring, he threw himself upon us.

The pinnace could not avoid the shock, and half upset, shipped at least two tons of water, which had to be emptied; but, thanks to the coxswain, we caught it sideways, not full front, so we were not quite overturned. While Ned Land, clinging to the bows, belaboured the gigantic animal with blows from his harpoon, the creature's teeth were buried in the gunwale, and it lifted the whole thing out of the water, as a lion does a roebuck. We were upset over one another, and I know not how the adventure would have ended, if the Canadian, still enraged with the beast, had not struck it to the heart.

I heard its teeth grind on the iron plate, and the dugong disappeared, carrying the harpoon with him. But the barrel soon returned to the surface, and shortly after the body of the animal, turned on its back. The boat came up with it, took it in tow, and made straight for the Nautilus.

It required tackle of enormous strength to hoist the dugong on to the platform. It weighed 10,000 lb.

The next day, 11th February, the larder of the Nautilus was enriched by some more delicate game. A flight of sea-swallows rested on the Nautilus. It was a species of the Sterna nilotica, peculiar to Egypt; its beak is black, head grey and pointed, the eye surrounded by white spots, the back, wings, and tail of a greyish colour, the belly and throat white, and claws red. They also took some dozen of Nile ducks, a wild bird of high flavour, its throat and upper part of the head white with black spots.

About five o'clock in the evening we sighted to the north the Cape of Ras-Mohammed. This cape forms the extremity of Arabia Petraea, comprised between the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Acabah.

The Nautilus penetrated into the Straits of Jubal, which leads to the Gulf of Suez. I distinctly saw a high mountain, towering between the two gulfs of Ras-Mohammed. It was Mount Horeb, that Sinai at the top of which Moses saw God face to face.

At six o'clock the Nautilus, sometimes floating, sometimes immersed, passed some distance from Tor, situated at the end of the bay, the waters of which seemed tinted with red, an observation already made by Captain Nemo. Then night fell in the midst of a heavy silence, sometimes broken by the cries of the pelican and other night-birds, and the noise of the waves breaking upon the shore, chafing against the rocks, or the panting of some far-off steamer beating the waters of the Gulf with its noisy paddles.

From eight to nine o'clock the Nautilus remained some fathoms under the water. According to my calculation we must have been very near Suez. Through the panel of the saloon I saw the bottom of the rocks brilliantly lit up by our electric lamp. We seemed to be leaving the Straits behind us more and more.

At a quarter-past nine, the vessel having returned to the surface, I mounted the platform. Most impatient to pass through Captain Nemo's tunnel, I could not stay in one place, so came to breathe the fresh night air.

Soon in the shadow I saw a pale light, half discoloured by the fog, shining about a mile from us.

"A floating lighthouse!" said someone near me.

I turned, and saw the Captain.

“It is the floating light of Suez,” he continued. “It will not be long before we gain the entrance of the tunnel.”

“The entrance cannot be easy?”

“No, sir; for that reason I am accustomed to go into the steersman’s cage and myself direct our course. And now, if you will go down, M. Aronnax, the Nautilus is going under the waves, and will not return to the surface until we have passed through the Arabian Tunnel.”

Captain Nemo led me towards the central staircase; half way down he opened a door, traversed the upper deck, and landed in the pilot’s cage, which it may be remembered rose at the extremity of the platform. It was a cabin measuring six feet square, very much like that occupied by the pilot on the steamboats of the Mississippi or Hudson. In the midst worked a wheel, placed vertically, and caught to the tiller-rope, which ran to the back of the Nautilus. Four light-ports with lenticular glasses, let in a groove in the partition of the cabin, allowed the man at the wheel to see in all directions.

This cabin was dark; but soon my eyes accustomed themselves to the obscurity, and I perceived the pilot, a strong man, with his hands resting on the spokes of the wheel. Outside, the sea appeared vividly lit up by the lantern, which shed its rays from the back of the cabin to the other extremity of the platform.

“Now,” said Captain Nemo, “let us try to make our passage.”

Electric wires connected the pilot’s cage with the machinery room, and from there the Captain could communicate simultaneously to his Nautilus the direction and the speed. He pressed a metal knob, and at once the speed of the screw diminished.

I looked in silence at the high straight wall we were running by at this moment, the immovable base of a massive sandy coast. We followed it thus for an hour only some few yards off.

Captain Nemo did not take his eye from the knob, suspended by its two concentric circles in the cabin. At a simple gesture, the pilot modified the course of the Nautilus every instant.

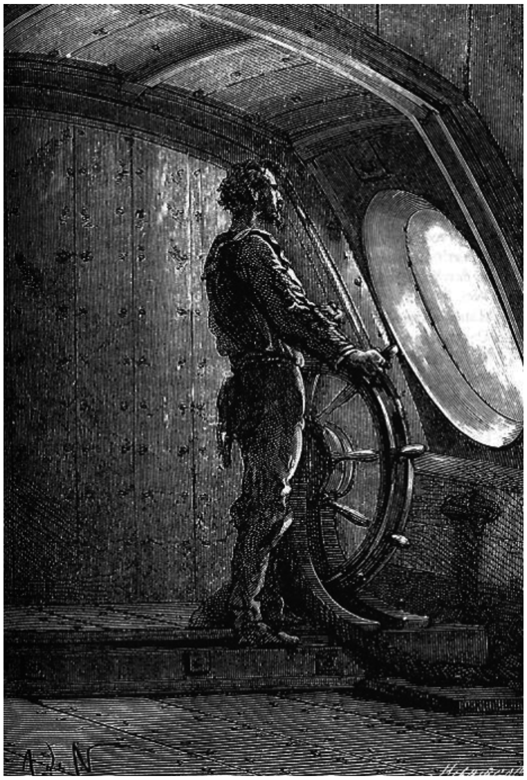

I had placed myself at the port-scuttle, and saw some magnificent substructures of coral, zoophytes, seaweed, and fucus, agitating their enormous claws, which stretched out from the fissures of the rock.

At a quarter-past ten, the Captain himself took the helm. A large gallery, black and deep, opened before us. The Nautilus went boldly into it. A strange roaring was heard round its sides. It was the waters of the Red Sea, which the incline of the tunnel precipitated violently towards the Mediterranean. The Nautilus went with the torrent, rapid as an arrow, in spite of the efforts of the machinery, which, in order to offer more effective resistance, beat the waves with reversed screw.

On the walls of the narrow passage I could see nothing but brilliant rays, straight lines, furrows of fire, traced by the great speed, under the brilliant electric light. My heart beat fast.

At thirty-five minutes past ten, Captain Nemo quitted the helm, and, turning to me, said:

“The Mediterranean!”

In less than twenty minutes, the Nautilus, carried along by the torrent, had passed through the Isthmus of Suez.

CHAPTER VI

THE GRECIAN ARCHIPELAGO

The next day, the 12th of February, at the dawn of day, the Nautilus rose to the surface. I hastened on to the platform. Three miles to the south the dim outline of Pelusium was to be seen. A torrent had carried us from one sea to another. About seven o’clock Ned and Conseil joined me.

“Well, Sir Naturalist,” said the Canadian, in a slightly jovial tone, “and the Mediterranean?”

“We are floating on its surface, friend Ned.”

“What!” said Conseil, “this very night.”

“Yes, this very night; in a few minutes we have passed this impassable isthmus.”

“I do not believe it,” replied the Canadian.

“Then you are wrong, Master Land,” I continued; “this low coast which rounds off to the south is the Egyptian coast. And you who have such good eyes, Ned, you can see the jetty of Port Said stretching into the sea.”

The Canadian looked attentively.

“Certainly you are right, sir, and your Captain is a first-rate man. We are in the Mediterranean. Good! Now, if you please, let us talk of our own little affair, but so that no one hears us.”

I saw what the Canadian wanted, and, in any case, I thought it better to let him talk, as he wished it; so we all three went and sat down near the lantern, where we were less exposed to the spray of the blades.

“Now, Ned, we listen; what have you to tell us?”

“What I have to tell you is very simple. We are in Europe; and before Captain Nemo’s caprices drag us once more to the bottom of the Polar Seas, or lead us into Oceania, I ask to leave the Nautilus.”

I wished in no way to shackle the liberty of my companions, but I certainly felt no desire to leave Captain Nemo.

Thanks to him, and thanks to his apparatus, I was each day nearer the completion of my submarine studies; and I was rewriting my book of submarine depths in its very element. Should I ever again have such an opportunity of observing the wonders of the ocean? No, certainly not! And I could not bring myself to the idea of abandoning the Nautilus before the cycle of investigation was accomplished.

“Friend Ned, answer me frankly, are you tired of being on board? Are you sorry that destiny has thrown us into Captain Nemo’s hands?”

The Canadian remained some moments without answering. Then, crossing his arms, he said:

“Frankly, I do not regret this journey under the seas. I shall be glad to have made it; but, now that it is made, let us have done with it. That is my idea.”

“It will come to an end, Ned.”

“Where and when?”

“Where I do not know — when I cannot say; or, rather, I suppose it will end when these seas have nothing more to teach us.”

“Then what do you hope for?” demanded the Canadian.

“That circumstances may occur as well six months hence as now by which we may and ought to profit.”

“Oh!” said Ned Land, “and where shall we be in six months, if you please, Sir Naturalist?”

“Perhaps in China; you know the Nautilus is a rapid traveller. It goes through water as swallows through the air, or as an express on the land. It does not fear frequented seas; who can say that it may not beat the coasts of France, England, or America, on which flight may be attempted as advantageously as here.”

“M. Aronnax,” replied the Canadian, “your arguments are rotten at the foundation. You speak in the future, `We shall be there! we shall be here!’ I speak in the present, `We are here, and we must profit by it.’”

Ned Land’s logic pressed me hard, and I felt myself beaten on that ground. I knew not what argument would now tell in my favour.

“Sir,” continued Ned, “let us suppose an impossibility: if Captain Nemo should this day offer you your liberty; would you accept it?”

“I do not know,” I answered.

“And if,” he added, “the offer made you this day was never to be renewed, would you accept it?”

“Friend Ned, this is my answer. Your reasoning is against me. We must not rely on Captain Nemo’s good-will. Common prudence forbids him to set us at liberty. On the other side, prudence bids us profit by the first opportunity to leave the Nautilus.”

“Well, M. Aronnax, that is wisely said.”

“Only one observation — just one. The occasion must be serious, and our first attempt must succeed; if it fails, we shall never find another, and Captain Nemo will never forgive us.”

“All that is true,” replied the Canadian. “But your observation applies equally to all attempts at flight, whether in two years’ time, or in two days’. But the question is still this: If a favourable opportunity presents itself, it must be seized.”

“Agreed! And now, Ned, will you tell me what you mean by a favourable opportunity?”

“It will be that which, on a dark night, will bring the Nautilus a short distance from some European coast.”

“And you will try and save yourself by swimming?”

“Yes, if we were near enough to the bank, and if the vessel was floating at the time. Not if the bank was far away, and the boat was under the water.”

“And in that case?”

“In that case, I should seek to make myself master of the pinnace. I know how it is worked. We must get inside, and the bolts once drawn, we shall come to the surface of the water, without even the pilot, who is in the bows, perceiving our flight."

"Well, Ned, watch for the opportunity; but do not forget that a hitch will ruin us."

"I will not forget, sir."

"And now, Ned, would you like to know what I think of your project?"

"Certainly, M. Aronnax."

"Well, I think — I do not say I hope — I think that this favourable opportunity will never present itself."

"Why not?"

"Because Captain Nemo cannot hide from himself that we have not given up all hope of regaining our liberty, and he will be on his guard, above all, in the seas and in the sight of European coasts."

"We shall see," replied Ned Land, shaking his head determinedly.

"And now, Ned Land," I added, "let us stop here. Not another word on the subject. The day that you are ready, come and let us know, and we will follow you. I rely entirely upon you."

Thus ended a conversation which, at no very distant time, led to such grave results. I must say here that facts seemed to confirm my foresight, to the Canadian's great despair. Did Captain Nemo distrust us in these frequented seas? or did he only wish to hide himself from the numerous vessels, of all nations, which ploughed the Mediterranean? I could not tell; but we were oftener between waters and far from the coast. Or, if the Nautilus did emerge, nothing was to be seen but the pilot’s cage; and sometimes it went to great depths, for, between the Grecian Archipelago and Asia Minor we could not touch the bottom by more than a thousand fathoms.

Thus I only knew we were near the Island of Carpathos, one of the Sporades, by Captain Nemo reciting these lines from Virgil:

“Est Carpathio Neptuni gurgite vates,

Caeruleus Proteus,”

as he pointed to a spot on the planisphere.

It was indeed the ancient abode of Proteus, the old shepherd of Neptune’s flocks, now the Island of Scarpanto, situated between Rhodes and Crete. I saw nothing but the granite base through the glass panels of the saloon.

The next day, the 14th of February, I resolved to employ some hours in studying the fishes of the Archipelago; but for some reason or other the panels remained hermetically sealed. Upon taking the course of the Nautilus, I found that we were going towards Candia, the ancient Isle of Crete. At the time I embarked on the Abraham Lincoln, the whole of this island had risen in insurrection against the despotism of the Turks. But how the insurgents had fared since that time I was absolutely ignorant, and it was not Captain Nemo, deprived of all land communications, who could tell me.

I made no allusion to this event when that night I found myself alone with him in the saloon. Besides, he seemed to be taciturn and preoccupied. Then, contrary to his custom, he ordered both panels to be opened, and, going from one to the other, observed the mass of waters attentively. To what end

I could not guess; so, on my side, I employed my time in studying the fish passing before my eyes.

In the midst of the waters a man appeared, a diver, carrying at his belt a leathern purse. It was not a body abandoned to the waves; it was a living man, swimming with a strong hand, disappearing occasionally to take breath at the surface.

I turned towards Captain Nemo, and in an agitated voice exclaimed:

“A man shipwrecked! He must be saved at any price!”

The Captain did not answer me, but came and leaned against the panel.

The man had approached, and, with his face flattened against the glass, was looking at us.

To my great amazement, Captain Nemo signed to him. The diver answered with his hand, mounted immediately to the surface of the water, and did not appear again.

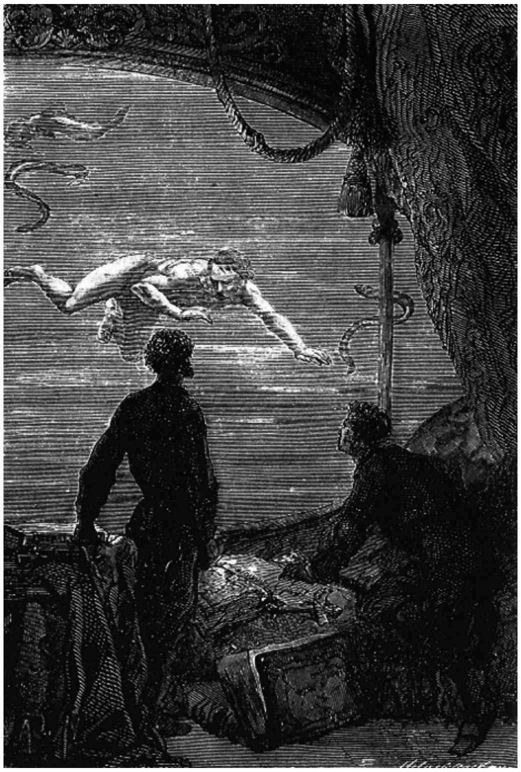

“Do not be uncomfortable,” said Captain Nemo. “It is Nicholas of Cape Matapan, surnamed Pesca. He is well known in all the Cyclades. A bold diver! water is his element, and he lives more in it than on land, going continually from one island to another, even as far as Crete.”

“You know him, Captain?”

“Why not, M. Aronnax?”

Saying which, Captain Nemo went towards a piece of furniture standing near the left panel of the saloon. Near this piece of furniture, I saw a chest bound with iron, on the cover of which was a copper plate, bearing the cypher of the Nautilus with its device.

At that moment, the Captain, without noticing my presence, opened the piece of furniture, a sort of strong box, which held a great many ingots.

They were ingots of gold. From whence came this precious metal, which represented an enormous sum? Where did the Captain gather this gold from? and what was he going to do with it?

I did not say one word. I looked. Captain Nemo took the ingots one by one, and arranged them methodically in the chest, which he filled entirely. I estimated the contents at more than 4,000 lb. weight of gold, that is to say, nearly L200,000.

The chest was securely fastened, and the Captain wrote an address on the lid, in characters which must have belonged to Modern Greece.

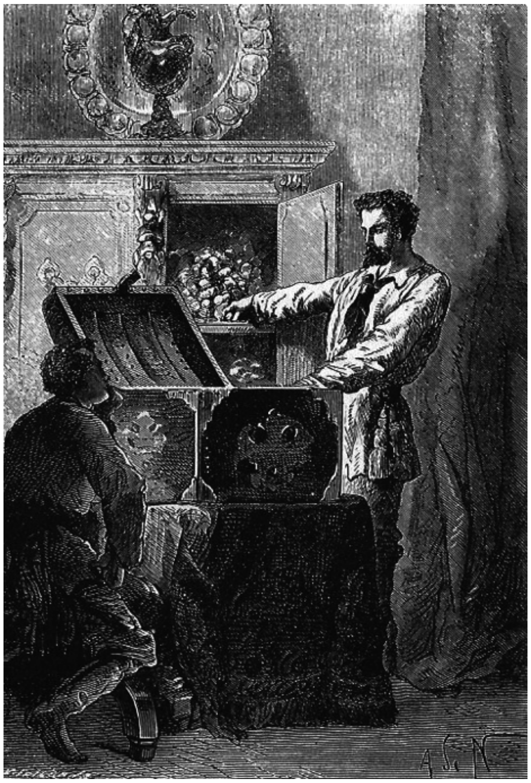

This done, Captain Nemo pressed a knob, the wire of which communicated with the quarters of the crew. Four men appeared, and, not without some trouble, pushed the chest out of the saloon. Then I heard them hoisting it up the iron staircase by means of pulleys.

At that moment, Captain Nemo turned to me.

“And you were saying, sir?” said he.

“I was saying nothing, Captain.”

“Then, sir, if you will allow me, I will wish you good night.”

Whereupon he turned and left the saloon.

I returned to my room much troubled, as one may believe. I vainly tried to sleep — I sought the connecting link between the apparition of the diver and the chest filled with gold. Soon, I felt by certain movements of pitching and tossing that the Nautilus was leaving the depths and returning to the surface.

Then I heard steps upon the platform; and I knew they were unfastening the pinnace and launching it upon the waves. For one instant it struck the side of the Nautilus, then all noise ceased.

Two hours after, the same noise, the same going and coming was renewed; the boat was hoisted on board, replaced in its socket, and the Nautilus again plunged under the waves.

So these millions had been transported to their address. To what point of the continent? Who was Captain Nemo’s correspondent?

The next day I related to Conseil and the Canadian the events of the night, which had excited my curiosity to the highest degree. My companions were not less surprised than myself.

“But where does he take his millions to?” asked Ned Land.

To that there was no possible answer. I returned to the saloon after having breakfast and set to work. Till five o’clock in the evening I employed myself in arranging my notes. At that moment — (ought I to attribute it to some peculiar idiosyncrasy) — I felt so great a heat that I was obliged to take off my coat. It was strange, for we were under low latitudes; and even then the Nautilus, submerged as it was, ought to experience no change of temperature. I looked at the manometer; it showed a depth of sixty feet, to which atmospheric heat could never attain.

I continued my work, but the temperature rose to such a pitch as to be intolerable.

“Could there be fire on board?” I asked myself.

I was leaving the saloon, when Captain Nemo entered; he approached the thermometer, consulted it, and, turning to me, said:

“Forty-two degrees.”

“I have noticed it, Captain,” I replied; “and if it gets much hotter we cannot bear it.”

“Oh, sir, it will not get better if we do not wish it.”

“You can reduce it as you please, then?”

“No; but I can go farther from the stove which produces it.”

“It is outward, then!”

“Certainly; we are floating in a current of boiling water.”

“Is it possible!” I exclaimed.

“Look.”

The panels opened, and I saw the sea entirely white all round. A sulphurous smoke was curling amid the waves, which boiled like water in a copper. I placed my hand on one of the panes of glass, but the heat was so great that I quickly took it off again.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Near the Island of Santorin, sir,” replied the Captain. “I wished to give you a sight of the curious spectacle of a submarine eruption.”

“I thought,” said I, “that the formation of these new islands was ended.”

“Nothing is ever ended in the volcanic parts of the sea,” replied Captain Nemo; “and the globe is always being worked by subterranean fires. Already, in the nineteenth year of our era, according to Cassiodorus and Pliny, a new island, Theia (the divine), appeared in the very place where these islets have recently been formed. Then they sank under the waves, to rise again in the year 69, when they again subsided. Since that time to our days the Plutonian work has been suspended. But on the 3rd of February, 1866, a new island, which they named George Island, emerged from the midst of the sulphurous vapour near Nea Kamenni, and settled again the 6th of the same month. Seven days after, the 13th of February, the Island of Aphroessa appeared, leaving between Nea Kamenni and itself a canal ten yards broad. I was in these seas when the phenomenon occurred, and I was able therefore to observe all the different phases. The Island of Aphroessa, of round form, measured 300 feet in diameter, and 30 feet in height. It was composed of black and vitreous lava, mixed with fragments of felspar. And lastly, on the 10th of March, a smaller island, called Reka, showed itself near Nea Kamenni, and since then these three have joined together, forming but one and the same island."

"And the canal in which we are at this moment?" I asked.

"Here it is," replied Captain Nemo, showing me a map of the Archipelago. "You see, I have marked the new islands."

I returned to the glass. The Nautilus was no longer moving, the heat was becoming unbearable. The sea, which till now had been white, was red, owing to the presence of salts of iron. In spite of the ship's being hermetically sealed, an insupportable smell of sulphur filled the saloon, and the brilliancy of the electricity was entirely extinguished by bright scarlet flames. I was in a bath, I was choking, I was broiled.

"We can remain no longer in this boiling water," said I to the Captain.

"It would not be prudent," replied the impassive Captain Nemo.

An order was given; the Nautilus tacked about and left the furnace it could not brave with impunity. A quarter of an hour after we were breathing fresh air on the surface. The thought then struck me that, if Ned Land had chosen this part of the sea for our flight, we should never have come alive out of this sea of fire.

The next day, the 16th of February, we left the basin which, between Rhodes and Alexandria, is reckoned about 1,500 fathoms in depth, and the Nautilus, passing some distance from Cerigo, quitted the Grecian Archipelago after having doubled Cape Matapan.

CHAPTER VII

THE MEDITERRANEAN IN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS

The Mediterranean, the blue sea par excellence, “the great sea” of the Hebrews, “the sea” of the Greeks, the “mare nostrum” of the Romans, bordered by orange-trees, aloes, cacti, and sea-pines; embalmed with the perfume of the myrtle, surrounded by rude mountains, saturated with pure and transparent air, but incessantly worked by underground fires; a perfect battlefield in which Neptune and Pluto still dispute the empire of the world!

It is upon these banks, and on these waters, says Michelet, that man is renewed in one of the most powerful climates of the globe. But, beautiful as it was, I could only take a rapid glance at the basin whose superficial area is two million of square yards. Even Captain Nemo’s knowledge was lost to me, for this puzzling person did not appear once during our passage at full speed. I estimated the course which the Nautilus took under the waves of the sea at about six hundred leagues, and it was accomplished in forty-eight hours. Starting on the morning of the 16th of February from the shores of Greece, we had crossed the Straits of Gibraltar by sunrise on the 18th.

It was plain to me that this Mediterranean, enclosed in the midst of those countries which he wished to avoid, was distasteful to Captain Nemo. Those waves and those breezes brought back too many remembrances, if not too many regrets. Here he had no longer that independence and that liberty of gait which he had when in the open seas, and his Nautilus felt itself cramped between the close shores of Africa and Europe.

Our speed was now twenty-five miles an hour. It may be well understood that Ned Land, to his great disgust, was obliged to renounce his intended flight. He could not launch the pinnace, going at the rate of twelve or thirteen yards every second. To quit the Nautilus under such conditions would be as bad as jumping from a train going at full speed — an imprudent thing, to say the least of it. Besides, our vessel only mounted to the surface of the waves at night to renew its stock of air; it was steered entirely by the compass and the log.

I saw no more of the interior of this Mediterranean than a traveller by express train perceives of the landscape which flies before his eyes; that is to say, the distant horizon, and not the nearer objects which pass like a flash of lightning.

We were then passing between Sicily and the coast of Tunis. In the narrow space between Cape Bon and the Straits of Messina the bottom of the sea rose almost suddenly. There was a perfect bank, on which there was not more than nine fathoms of water, whilst on either side the depth was ninety fathoms.

The Nautilus had to manoeuvre very carefully so as not to strike against this submarine barrier.

I showed Conseil, on the map of the Mediterranean, the spot occupied by this reef.

“But if you please, sir,” observed Conseil, “it is like a real isthmus joining Europe to Africa.”

“Yes, my boy, it forms a perfect bar to the Straits of Lybia, and the soundings of Smith have proved that in former times the continents between

Cape Boco and Cape Furina were joined."

"I can well believe it," said Conseil.

"I will add," I continued, "that a similar barrier exists between Gibraltar and Ceuta, which in geological times formed the entire Mediterranean."

"What if some volcanic burst should one day raise these two barriers above the waves?"

"It is not probable, Conseil."

"Well, but allow me to finish, please, sir; if this phenomenon should take place, it will be troublesome for M. Lesseps, who has taken so much pains to pierce the isthmus."

"I agree with you; but I repeat, Conseil, this phenomenon will never happen. The violence of subterranean force is ever diminishing. Volcanoes, so plentiful in the first days of the world, are being extinguished by degrees; the internal heat is weakened, the temperature of the lower strata of the globe is lowered by a perceptible quantity every century to the detriment of our globe, for its heat is its life."

"But the sun?"

"The sun is not sufficient, Conseil. Can it give heat to a dead body?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well, my friend, this earth will one day be that cold corpse; it will become uninhabitable and uninhabited like the moon, which has long since lost all its vital heat."

“In how many centuries?”

“In some hundreds of thousands of years, my boy.”

“Then,” said Conseil, “we shall have time to finish our journey — that is, if Ned Land does not interfere with it.”

And Conseil, reassured, returned to the study of the bank, which the Nautilus was skirting at a moderate speed.

During the night of the 16th and 17th February we had entered the second Mediterranean basin, the greatest depth of which was 1,450 fathoms. The Nautilus, by the action of its crew, slid down the inclined planes and buried itself in the lowest depths of the sea.

On the 18th of February, about three o’clock in the morning, we were at the entrance of the Straits of Gibraltar. There once existed two currents: an upper one, long since recognised, which conveys the waters of the ocean into the basin of the Mediterranean; and a lower counter-current, which reasoning has now shown to exist. Indeed, the volume of water in the Mediterranean, incessantly added to by the waves of the Atlantic and by rivers falling into it, would each year raise the level of this sea, for its evaporation is not sufficient to restore the equilibrium. As it is not so, we must necessarily admit the existence of an under-current, which empties into the basin of the Atlantic through the Straits of Gibraltar the surplus waters of the Mediterranean. A fact indeed; and it was this counter-current by which the Nautilus profited. It advanced rapidly by the narrow pass. For one instant I caught a glimpse of the beautiful ruins of the temple of Hercules, buried in the ground, according to Pliny, and with the low island which supports it; and a few minutes later we were floating on the Atlantic.

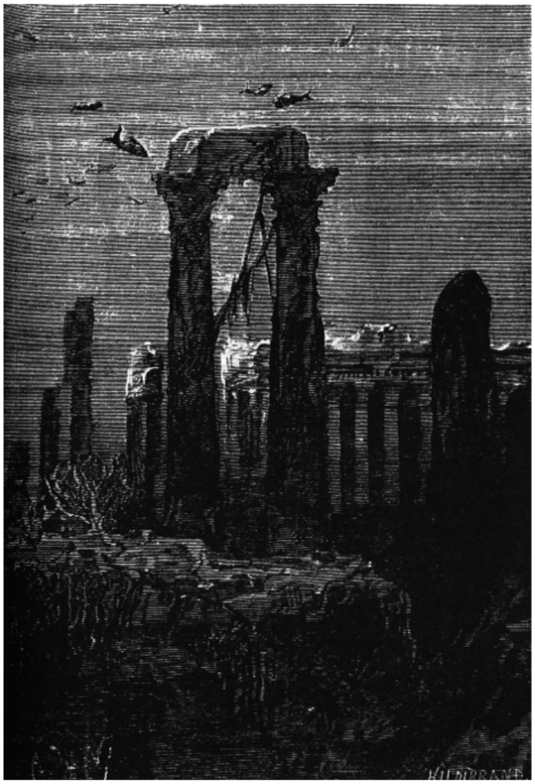
HILDIBRAND

CHAPTER VIII

VIGO BAY

The Atlantic! a vast sheet of water whose superficial area covers twenty-five millions of square miles, the length of which is nine thousand miles, with a mean breadth of two thousand seven hundred — an ocean whose parallel winding shores embrace an immense circumference, watered by the largest rivers of the world, the St. Lawrence, the Mississippi, the Amazon, the Plata, the Orinoco, the Niger, the Senegal, the Elbe, the Loire, and the Rhine, which carry water from the most civilised, as well as from the most savage, countries! Magnificent field of water, incessantly ploughed by vessels of every nation, sheltered by the flags of every nation, and which terminates in those two terrible points so dreaded by mariners, Cape Horn and the Cape of Tempests.

The Nautilus was piercing the water with its sharp spur, after having accomplished nearly ten thousand leagues in three months and a half, a distance greater than the great circle of the earth. Where were we going now, and what was reserved for the future? The Nautilus, leaving the Straits of Gibraltar, had gone far out. It returned to the surface of the waves, and our daily walks on the platform were restored to us.

I mounted at once, accompanied by Ned Land and Conseil. At a distance of about twelve miles, Cape St. Vincent was dimly to be seen, forming the south-western point of the Spanish peninsula. A strong southerly gale was blowing. The sea was swollen and billowy; it made the Nautilus rock violently. It was almost impossible to keep one’s foot on the platform, which the heavy rolls of the sea beat over every instant. So we descended after inhaling some mouthfuls of fresh air.

I returned to my room, Conseil to his cabin; but the Canadian, with a preoccupied air, followed me. Our rapid passage across the Mediterranean had not allowed him to put his project into execution, and he could not help showing his disappointment. When the door of my room was shut, he sat down and looked at me silently.

“Friend Ned,” said I, “I understand you; but you cannot reproach yourself. To have attempted to leave the Nautilus under the circumstances would have been folly.”

Ned Land did not answer; his compressed lips and frowning brow showed with him the violent possession this fixed idea had taken of his mind.

“Let us see,” I continued; “we need not despair yet. We are going up the coast of Portugal again; France and England are not far off, where we can easily find refuge. Now if the Nautilus, on leaving the Straits of Gibraltar, had gone to the south, if it had carried us towards regions where there were no continents, I should share your uneasiness. But we know now that Captain Nemo does not fly from civilised seas, and in some days I think you can act with security.”

Ned Land still looked at me fixedly; at length his fixed lips parted, and he said, “It is for to-night.”

I drew myself up suddenly. I was, I admit, little prepared for this communication. I wanted to answer the Canadian, but words would not come.

“We agreed to wait for an opportunity,” continued Ned Land, “and the opportunity has arrived. This night we shall be but a few miles from the

Spanish coast. It is cloudy. The wind blows freely. I have your word, M. Aronnax, and I rely upon you."

As I was silent, the Canadian approached me.

"To-night, at nine o'clock," said he. "I have warned Conseil. At that moment Captain Nemo will be shut up in his room, probably in bed. Neither the engineers nor the ship's crew can see us. Conseil and I will gain the central staircase, and you, M. Aronnax, will remain in the library, two steps from us, waiting my signal. The oars, the mast, and the sail are in the canoe. I have even succeeded in getting some provisions. I have procured an English wrench, to unfasten the bolts which attach it to the shell of the Nautilus. So all is ready, till to-night."

"The sea is bad."

"That I allow," replied the Canadian; "but we must risk that. Liberty is worth paying for; besides, the boat is strong, and a few miles with a fair wind to carry us is no great thing. Who knows but by to-morrow we may be a hundred leagues away? Let circumstances only favour us, and by ten or eleven o'clock we shall have landed on some spot of terra firma, alive or dead. But adieu now till to-night."

With these words the Canadian withdrew, leaving me almost dumb. I had imagined that, the chance gone, I should have time to reflect and discuss the matter. My obstinate companion had given me no time; and, after all, what could I have said to him? Ned Land was perfectly right. There was almost the opportunity to profit by. Could I retract my word, and take upon myself the responsibility of compromising the future of my companions? To-morrow Captain Nemo might take us far from all land.

At that moment a rather loud hissing noise told me that the reservoirs were filling, and that the Nautilus was sinking under the waves of the Atlantic.

A sad day I passed, between the desire of regaining my liberty of action and of abandoning the wonderful Nautilus, and leaving my submarine studies incomplete.

What dreadful hours I passed thus! Sometimes seeing myself and companions safely landed, sometimes wishing, in spite of my reason, that some unforeseen circumstance, would prevent the realisation of Ned Land's project.

Twice I went to the saloon. I wished to consult the compass. I wished to see if the direction the Nautilus was taking was bringing us nearer or taking us farther from the coast. But no; the Nautilus kept in Portuguese waters.

I must therefore take my part and prepare for flight. My luggage was not heavy; my notes, nothing more.

As to Captain Nemo, I asked myself what he would think of our escape; what trouble, what wrong it might cause him and what he might do in case of its discovery or failure. Certainly I had no cause to complain of him; on the contrary, never was hospitality freer than his. In leaving him I could not be taxed with ingratitude. No oath bound us to him. It was on the strength of circumstances he relied, and not upon our word, to fix us for ever.

I had not seen the Captain since our visit to the Island of Santorin. Would chance bring me to his presence before our departure? I wished it, and I feared it at the same time. I listened if I could hear him walking the room contiguous to mine. No sound reached my ear. I felt an unbearable uneasiness. This day of waiting seemed eternal. Hours struck too slowly to keep pace with my impatience.

My dinner was served in my room as usual. I ate but little; I was too preoccupied. I left the table at seven o’clock. A hundred and twenty minutes (I counted them) still separated me from the moment in which I was to join Ned Land. My agitation redoubled. My pulse beat violently. I could not remain quiet. I went and came, hoping to calm my troubled spirit by constant movement. The idea of failure in our bold enterprise was the least painful of my anxieties; but the thought of seeing our project discovered before leaving the Nautilus, of being brought before Captain Nemo, irritated, or (what was worse) saddened, at my desertion, made my heart beat.

I wanted to see the saloon for the last time. I descended the stairs and arrived in the museum, where I had passed so many useful and agreeable hours. I looked at all its riches, all its treasures, like a man on the eve of an eternal exile, who was leaving never to return.

These wonders of Nature, these masterpieces of art, amongst which for so many days my life had been concentrated, I was going to abandon them for ever! I should like to have taken a last look through the windows of the saloon into the waters of the Atlantic: but the panels were hermetically closed, and a cloak of steel separated me from that ocean which I had not yet explored.

In passing through the saloon, I came near the door let into the angle which opened into the Captain’s room. To my great surprise, this door was ajar. I drew back involuntarily. If Captain Nemo should be in his room, he could see me. But, hearing no sound, I drew nearer. The room was deserted. I pushed open the door and took some steps forward. Still the same monklike severity of aspect.

Suddenly the clock struck eight. The first beat of the hammer on the bell awoke me from my dreams. I trembled as if an invisible eye had plunged into my most secret thoughts, and I hurried from the room.

There my eye fell upon the compass. Our course was still north. The log indicated moderate speed, the manometer a depth of about sixty feet.

I returned to my room, clothed myself warmly — sea boots, an otterskin cap, a great coat of byssus, lined with sealskin; I was ready, I was waiting. The vibration of the screw alone broke the deep silence which reigned on board. I listened attentively. Would no loud voice suddenly inform me that Ned Land had been surprised in his projected flight. A mortal dread hung over me, and I vainly tried to regain my accustomed coolness.

At a few minutes to nine, I put my ear to the Captain’s door. No noise. I left my room and returned to the saloon, which was half in obscurity, but deserted.

I opened the door communicating with the library. The same insufficient light, the same solitude. I placed myself near the door leading to the central staircase, and there waited for Ned Land’s signal.

At that moment the trembling of the screw sensibly diminished, then it stopped entirely. The silence was now only disturbed by the beatings of my own heart. Suddenly a slight shock was felt; and I knew that the Nautilus had stopped at the bottom of the ocean. My uneasiness increased. The Canadian’s signal did not come. I felt inclined to join Ned Land and beg of him to put off his attempt. I felt that we were not sailing under our usual conditions.

At this moment the door of the large saloon opened, and Captain Nemo appeared. He saw me, and without further preamble began in an amiable tone of voice:

“Ah, sir! I have been looking for you. Do you know the history of Spain?”

Now, one might know the history of one’s own country by heart; but in the condition I was at the time, with troubled mind and head quite lost, I could not have said a word of it.

“Well,” continued Captain Nemo, “you heard my question! Do you know the history of Spain?”

“Very slightly,” I answered.

“Well, here are learned men having to learn,” said the Captain. “Come, sit down, and I will tell you a curious episode in this history. Sir, listen well,” said he; “this history will interest you on one side, for it will answer a question which doubtless you have not been able to solve.”

“I listen, Captain,” said I, not knowing what my interlocutor was driving at, and asking myself if this incident was bearing on our projected flight.

“Sir, if you have no objection, we will go back to 1702. You cannot be ignorant that your king, Louis XIV, thinking that the gesture of a potentate was sufficient to bring the Pyrenees under his yoke, had imposed the Duke of Anjou, his grandson, on the Spaniards. This prince reigned more or less badly under the name of Philip V, and had a strong party against him abroad. Indeed, the preceding year, the royal houses of Holland, Austria, and England had concluded a treaty of alliance at the Hague, with the intention of plucking the crown of Spain from the head of Philip V, and placing it on that of an archduke to whom they prematurely gave the title of Charles III.

“Spain must resist this coalition; but she was almost entirely unprovided with either soldiers or sailors. However, money would not fail them, provided that their galleons, laden with gold and silver from America, once entered their ports. And about the end of 1702 they expected a rich convoy which France was escorting with a fleet of twenty-three vessels, commanded by Admiral Chateau-Renaud, for the ships of the coalition were already beating the Atlantic. This convoy was to go to Cadiz, but the Admiral, hearing that an English fleet was cruising in those waters, resolved to make for a French port.

“The Spanish commanders of the convoy objected to this decision. They wanted to be taken to a Spanish port, and, if not to Cadiz, into Vigo Bay, situated on the northwest coast of Spain, and which was not blocked.

“Admiral Chateau-Renaud had the rashness to obey this injunction, and the galleons entered Vigo Bay.

“Unfortunately, it formed an open road which could not be defended in any way. They must therefore hasten to unload the galleons before the arrival of the combined fleet; and time would not have failed them had not a miserable question of rivalry suddenly arisen.

“You are following the chain of events?” asked Captain Nemo.

“Perfectly,” said I, not knowing the end proposed by this historical lesson.

“I will continue. This is what passed. The merchants of Cadiz had a privilege by which they had the right of receiving all merchandise coming from the West Indies. Now, to disembark these ingots at the port of Vigo was depriving them of their rights. They complained at Madrid, and obtained the consent of the weak-minded Philip that the convoy, without discharging its cargo, should remain sequestered in the roads of Vigo until the enemy had disappeared.

“But whilst coming to this decision, on the 22nd of October, 1702, the English vessels arrived in Vigo Bay, when Admiral Chateau-Renaud, in spite of inferior forces, fought bravely. But, seeing that the treasure must fall into the enemy’s hands, he burnt and scuttled every galleon, which went to the bottom with their immense riches.”

Captain Nemo stopped. I admit I could not see yet why this history should interest me.

“Well?” I asked.

“Well, M. Aronnax,” replied Captain Nemo, “we are in that Vigo Bay; and it rests with yourself whether you will penetrate its mysteries.”

The Captain rose, telling me to follow him. I had had time to recover. I obeyed. The saloon was dark, but through the transparent glass the waves were sparkling. I looked.

For half a mile around the Nautilus, the waters seemed bathed in electric light. The sandy bottom was clean and bright. Some of the ship’s crew in their diving-dresses were clearing away half-rotten barrels and empty cases from the midst of the blackened wrecks. From these cases and from these barrels escaped ingots of gold and silver, cascades of piastres and jewels.

The sand was heaped up with them. Laden with their precious booty, the men returned to the Nautilus, disposed of their burden, and went back to this inexhaustible fishery of gold and silver.

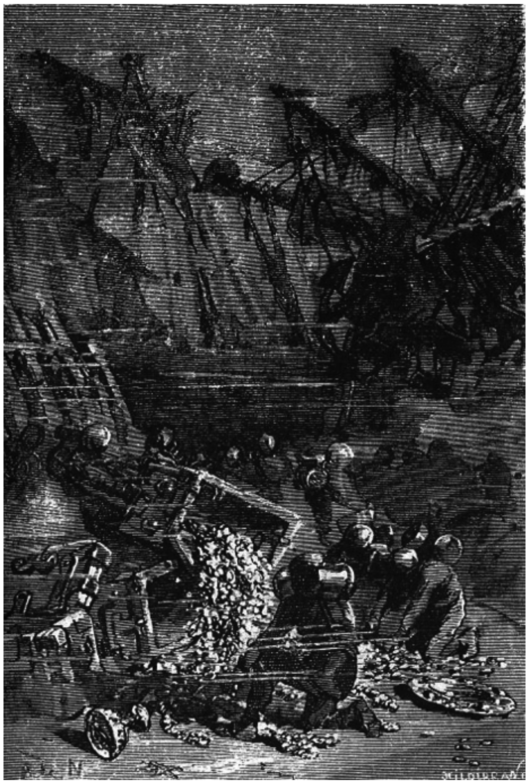

I understood now. This was the scene of the battle of the 22nd of October, 1702. Here on this very spot the galleons laden for the Spanish Government had sunk. Here Captain Nemo came, according to his wants, to pack up those millions with which he burdened the Nautilus. It was for him and him alone America had given up her precious metals. He was heir direct, without anyone to share, in those treasures torn from the Incas and from the conquered of Ferdinand Cortez.

“Did you know, sir,” he asked, smiling, “that the sea contained such riches?”

“I knew,” I answered, “that they value money held in suspension in these waters at two millions.”

“Doubtless; but to extract this money the expense would be greater than the profit. Here, on the contrary, I have but to pick up what man has lost — and not only in Vigo Bay, but in a thousand other ports where shipwrecks have happened, and which are marked on my submarine map. Can you understand now the source of the millions I am worth?”

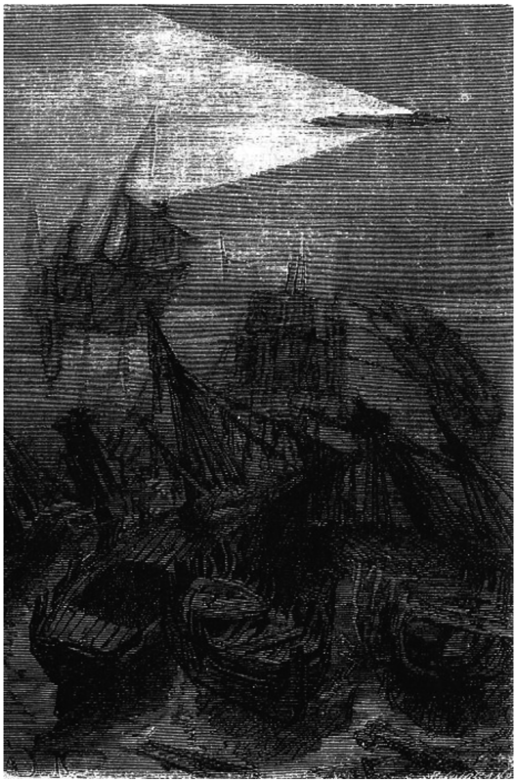

“I understand, Captain. But allow me to tell you that in exploring Vigo Bay you have only been beforehand with a rival society.”

“And which?”

“A society which has received from the Spanish Government the privilege of seeking those buried galleons. The shareholders are led on by the allurement of an enormous bounty, for they value these rich shipwrecks at five hundred millions.”

“Five hundred millions they were,” answered Captain Nemo, “but they are so no longer.”

“Just so,” said I; “and a warning to those shareholders would be an act of charity. But who knows if it would be well received? What gamblers usually regret above all is less the loss of their money than of their foolish hopes. After all, I pity them less than the thousands of unfortunates to whom so much riches well-distributed would have been profitable, whilst for them they will be for ever barren.”

I had no sooner expressed this regret than I felt that it must have wounded Captain Nemo.

“Barren!” he exclaimed, with animation. “Do you think then, sir, that these riches are lost because I gather them? Is it for myself alone, according to your idea, that I take the trouble to collect these treasures? Who told you that I did not make a good use of it? Do you think I am ignorant that there are suffering beings and oppressed races on this earth, miserable creatures to console, victims to avenge? Do you not understand?”

Captain Nemo stopped at these last words, regretting perhaps that he had spoken so much. But I had guessed that, whatever the motive which had forced him to seek independence under the sea, it had left him still a man, that his heart still beat for the sufferings of humanity, and that his immense charity was for oppressed races as well as individuals. And I then understood for whom those millions were destined which were forwarded by Captain Nemo when the Nautilus was cruising in the waters of Crete.

CHAPTER IX

A VANISHED CONTINENT

The next morning, the 19th of February, I saw the Canadian enter my room. I expected this visit. He looked very disappointed.

“Well, sir?” said he.

“Well, Ned, fortune was against us yesterday.”

“Yes; that Captain must needs stop exactly at the hour we intended leaving his vessel.”

“Yes, Ned, he had business at his bankers.”

“His bankers!”

“Or rather his banking-house; by that I mean the ocean, where his riches are safer than in the chests of the State.”

I then related to the Canadian the incidents of the preceding night, hoping to bring him back to the idea of not abandoning the Captain; but my recital had no other result than an energetically expressed regret from Ned that he had not been able to take a walk on the battlefield of Vigo on his own account.

“However,” said he, “all is not ended. It is only a blow of the harpoon lost. Another time we must succeed; and to-night, if necessary — — ”

“In what direction is the Nautilus going?” I asked.

“I do not know,” replied Ned.

“Well, at noon we shall see the point.”

The Canadian returned to Conseil. As soon as I was dressed, I went into the saloon. The compass was not reassuring. The course of the Nautilus was S.S.W. We were turning our backs on Europe.

I waited with some impatience till the ship’s place was pricked on the chart. At about half-past eleven the reservoirs were emptied, and our vessel rose to the surface of the ocean. I rushed towards the platform. Ned Land had preceded me. No more land in sight. Nothing but an immense sea. Some sails on the horizon, doubtless those going to San Roque in search of favourable winds for doubling the Cape of Good Hope. The weather was cloudy. A gale of wind was preparing. Ned raved, and tried to pierce the cloudy horizon. He still hoped that behind all that fog stretched the land he so longed for.

At noon the sun showed itself for an instant. The second profited by this brightness to take its height. Then, the sea becoming more billowy, we descended, and the panel closed.

An hour after, upon consulting the chart, I saw the position of the Nautilus was marked at 16° 17’ long. and 33° 22’ lat. at 150 leagues from the nearest coast. There was no means of flight, and I leave you to imagine the rage of the Canadian when I informed him of our situation.

For myself, I was not particularly sorry. I felt lightened of the load which had oppressed me, and was able to return with some degree of calmness to my accustomed work.

That night, about eleven o’clock, I received a most unexpected visit from Captain Nemo. He asked me very graciously if I felt fatigued from my watch of the preceding night. I answered in the negative.

“Then, M. Aronnax, I propose a curious excursion.”

“Propose, Captain?”

“You have hitherto only visited the submarine depths by daylight, under the brightness of the sun. Would it suit you to see them in the darkness of the night?”

“Most willingly.”

“I warn you, the way will be tiring. We shall have far to walk, and must climb a mountain. The roads are not well kept.”

“What you say, Captain, only heightens my curiosity; I am ready to follow you.”

“Come then, sir, we will put on our diving-dresses.”

Arrived at the robing-room, I saw that neither of my companions nor any of the ship’s crew were to follow us on this excursion. Captain Nemo had not even proposed my taking with me either Ned or Conseil.

In a few moments we had put on our diving-dresses; they placed on our backs the reservoirs, abundantly filled with air, but no electric lamps were prepared. I called the Captain’s attention to the fact.

“They will be useless,” he replied.

I thought I had not heard aright, but I could not repeat my observation, for the Captain’s head had already disappeared in its metal case. I finished harnessing myself. I felt them put an iron-pointed stick into my hand, and some minutes later, after going through the usual form, we set foot on the bottom of the Atlantic at a depth of 150 fathoms. Midnight was near. The waters were profoundly dark, but Captain Nemo pointed out in the distance a reddish spot, a sort of large light shining brilliantly about two miles from the Nautilus. What this fire might be, what could feed it, why and how it lit up the liquid mass, I could not say. In any case, it did light our way, vaguely, it is true, but I soon accustomed myself to the peculiar darkness, and I understood, under such circumstances, the uselessness of the Ruhmkorff apparatus.

As we advanced, I heard a kind of pattering above my head. The noise redoubling, sometimes producing a continual shower, I soon understood the cause. It was rain falling violently, and crisping the surface of the waves. Instinctively the thought flashed across my mind that I should be wet through! By the water! in the midst of the water! I could not help laughing at the odd idea. But, indeed, in the thick diving-dress, the liquid element is no longer felt, and one only seems to be in an atmosphere somewhat denser than the terrestrial atmosphere. Nothing more.

After half an hour’s walk the soil became stony. Medusae, microscopic crustacea, and pennatules lit it slightly with their phosphorescent gleam. I caught a glimpse of pieces of stone covered with millions of zoophytes and masses of sea weed. My feet often slipped upon this sticky carpet of sea weed, and without my iron-tipped stick I should have fallen more than once. In turning round, I could still see the whitish lantern of the Nautilus beginning to pale in the distance.

But the rosy light which guided us increased and lit up the horizon. The presence of this fire under water puzzled me in the highest degree. Was I going towards a natural phenomenon as yet unknown to the savants of the earth? Or even (for this thought crossed my brain) had the hand of man aught to do with this conflagration? Had he fanned this flame? Was I to meet in these depths companions and friends of Captain Nemo whom he was going to visit, and who, like him, led this strange existence? Should I find down there a whole colony of exiles who, weary of the miseries of this earth, had sought and found independence in the deep ocean? All these foolish and unreasonable ideas pursued me. And in this condition of mind, over-excited by the succession of wonders continually passing before my eyes, I should not have been surprised to meet at the bottom of the sea one of those submarine towns of which Captain Nemo dreamed.

Our road grew lighter and lighter. The white glimmer came in rays from the summit of a mountain about 800 feet high. But what I saw was simply a reflection, developed by the clearness of the waters. The source of this inexplicable light was a fire on the opposite side of the mountain.

In the midst of this stony maze furrowing the bottom of the Atlantic, Captain Nemo advanced without hesitation. He knew this dreary road. Doubtless he had often travelled over it, and could not lose himself. I followed him with unshaken confidence. He seemed to me like a genie of the sea; and, as he walked before me, I could not help admiring his stature, which was outlined in black on the luminous horizon.

It was one in the morning when we arrived at the first slopes of the mountain; but to gain access to them we must venture through the difficult paths of a vast copse.

Yes; a copse of dead trees, without leaves, without sap, trees petrified by the action of the water and here and there overtopped by gigantic pines. It was like a coal-pit still standing, holding by the roots to the broken soil, and whose branches, like fine black paper cuttings, showed distinctly on the watery ceiling. Picture to yourself a forest in the Hartz hanging on to the sides of the mountain, but a forest swallowed up. The paths were encumbered with seaweed and fucus, between which grovelled a whole world of crustacea. I went along, climbing the rocks, striding over extended trunks, breaking the sea bind-weed which hung from one tree to the other; and frightening the fishes, which flew from branch to branch. Pressing onward, I felt no fatigue. I followed my guide, who was never tired. What a spectacle! How can I express it? how paint the aspect of those woods and rocks in this medium — their under parts dark and wild, the upper coloured with red tints, by that light which the reflecting powers of the waters doubled? We climbed rocks which fell directly after with gigantic bounds and the low growling of an avalanche. To right and left ran long, dark galleries, where sight was lost. Here opened vast glades which the hand of man seemed to have worked; and I sometimes asked myself if some inhabitant of these submarine regions would not suddenly appear to me.

But Captain Nemo was still mounting. I could not stay behind. I followed boldly. My stick gave me good help. A false step would have been dangerous on the narrow passes sloping down to the sides of the gulfs; but I walked with firm step, without feeling any giddiness. Now I jumped a crevice, the depth of which would have made me hesitate had it been among the glaciers on the land; now I ventured on the unsteady trunk of a tree thrown across from one abyss to the other, without looking under my feet, having only eyes to admire the wild sites of this region.

There, monumental rocks, leaning on their regularly-cut bases, seemed to defy all laws of equilibrium. From between their stony knees trees sprang, like a jet under heavy pressure, and upheld others which upheld them. Natural towers, large scarps, cut perpendicularly, like a “curtain,” inclined at an angle which the laws of gravitation could never have tolerated in terrestrial regions.

Two hours after quitting the Nautilus we had crossed the line of trees, and a hundred feet above our heads rose the top of the mountain, which cast a shadow on the brilliant irradiation of the opposite slope. Some petrified shrubs ran fantastically here and there. Fishes got up under our feet like birds in the long grass. The massive rocks were rent with impenetrable fractures, deep grottos, and unfathomable holes, at the bottom of which formidable creatures might be heard moving. My blood curdled when I saw enormous antennae blocking my road, or some frightful claw closing with a noise in the shadow of some cavity. Millions of luminous spots shone brightly in the midst of the darkness. They were the eyes of giant crustacea crouched in their holes; giant lobsters setting themselves up like halberdiers, and moving their claws with the clicking sound of pincers; titanic crabs, pointed like a gun on its carriage; and frightful-looking poulps, interweaving their tentacles like a living nest of serpents.

We had now arrived on the first platform, where other surprises awaited me. Before us lay some picturesque ruins, which betrayed the hand of man and not that of the Creator. There were vast heaps of stone, amongst which might be traced the vague and shadowy forms of castles and temples, clothed with a world of blossoming zoophytes, and over which, instead of ivy, sea-weed and fucus threw a thick vegetable mantle. But what was this portion of the globe which had been swallowed by cataclysms? Who had placed those rocks and stones like cromlechs of prehistoric times? Where was I? Whither had Captain Nemo’s fancy hurried me?

I would fain have asked him; not being able to, I stopped him — I seized his arm. But, shaking his head, and pointing to the highest point of the mountain, he seemed to say:

“Come, come along; come higher!”

I followed, and in a few minutes I had climbed to the top, which for a circle of ten yards commanded the whole mass of rock.

I looked down the side we had just climbed. The mountain did not rise more than seven or eight hundred feet above the level of the plain; but on the opposite side it commanded from twice that height the depths of this part of the Atlantic. My eyes ranged far over a large space lit by a violent fulguration. In fact, the mountain was a volcano.

At fifty feet above the peak, in the midst of a rain of stones and scoriae, a large crater was vomiting forth torrents of lava which fell in a cascade of fire into the bosom of the liquid mass. Thus situated, this volcano lit the lower plain like an immense torch, even to the extreme limits of the horizon. I said that the submarine crater threw up lava, but no flames. Flames require the oxygen of the air to feed upon and cannot be developed under water; but streams of lava, having in themselves the principles of their incandescence, can attain a white heat, fight vigorously against the liquid element, and turn it to vapour by contact.

Rapid currents bearing all these gases in diffusion and torrents of lava slid to the bottom of the mountain like an eruption of Vesuvius on another Terra del Greco.

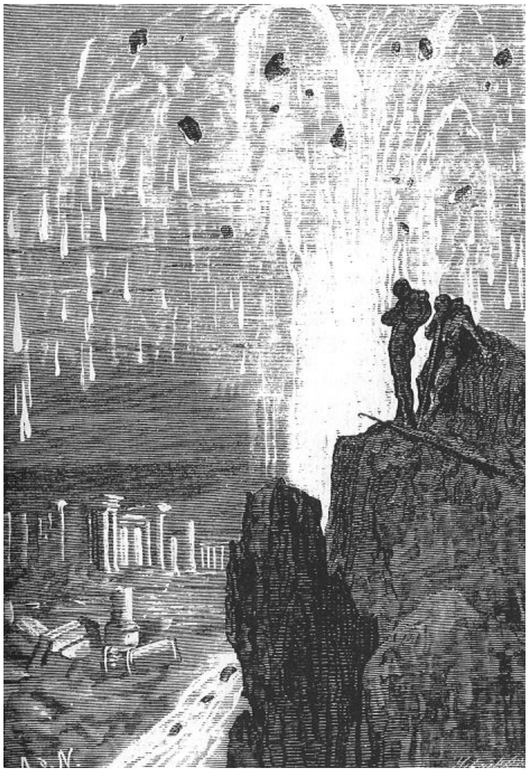

There indeed under my eyes, ruined, destroyed, lay a town — its roofs open to the sky, its temples fallen, its arches dislocated, its columns lying on the ground, from which one would still recognise the massive character of Tuscan architecture. Further on, some remains of a gigantic aqueduct; here the high base of an Acropolis, with the floating outline of a Parthenon; there traces of a quay, as if an ancient port had formerly abutted on the borders of the ocean, and disappeared with its merchant vessels and its war-galleys. Farther on again, long lines of sunken walls and broad, deserted streets — a perfect Pompeii escaped beneath the waters. Such was the sight that Captain Nemo brought before my eyes!

Where was I? Where was I? I must know at any cost. I tried to speak, but Captain Nemo stopped me by a gesture, and, picking up a piece of chalk-stone, advanced to a rock of black basalt, and traced the one word:

ATLANTIS

What a light shot through my mind! Atlantis! the Atlantis of Plato, that continent denied by Origen and Humbolt, who placed its disappearance amongst the legendary tales. I had it there now before my eyes, bearing upon it the unexceptionable testimony of its catastrophe. The region thus engulfed was beyond Europe, Asia, and Lybia, beyond the columns of Hercules, where those powerful people, the Atlantides, lived, against whom the first wars of ancient Greeks were waged.

Thus, led by the strangest destiny, I was treading under foot the mountains of this continent, touching with my hand those ruins a thousand generations old and contemporary with the geological epochs. I was walking on the very spot where the contemporaries of the first man had walked.

Whilst I was trying to fix in my mind every detail of this grand landscape, Captain Nemo remained motionless, as if petrified in mute ecstasy, leaning on a mossy stone. Was he dreaming of those generations long since disappeared? Was he asking them the secret of human destiny? Was it here this strange man came to steep himself in historical recollections, and live again this ancient life — he who wanted no modern one? What would I not have given to know his thoughts, to share them, to understand them! We remained for an hour at this place, contemplating the vast plains under the brightness of the lava, which was some times wonderfully intense. Rapid tremblings ran along the mountain caused by internal bubblings, deep noise, distinctly transmitted through the liquid medium were echoed with majestic grandeur. At this moment the moon appeared through the mass of waters and threw her pale rays on the buried continent. It was but a gleam, but what an indescribable effect! The Captain rose, cast one last look on the immense plain, and then bade me follow him.

We descended the mountain rapidly, and, the mineral forest once passed, I saw the lantern of the Nautilus shining like a star. The Captain walked straight to it, and we got on board as the first rays of light whitened the surface of the ocean.

CHAPTER X

THE SUBMARINE COAL-MINES

The next day, the 20th of February, I awoke very late: the fatigues of the previous night had prolonged my sleep until eleven o’clock. I dressed quickly, and hastened to find the course the Nautilus was taking. The instruments showed it to be still toward the south, with a speed of twenty miles an hour and a depth of fifty fathoms.

The species of fishes here did not differ much from those already noticed. There were rays of giant size, five yards long, and endowed with great muscular strength, which enabled them to shoot above the waves; sharks of many kinds; amongst others, one fifteen feet long, with triangular sharp teeth, and whose transparency rendered it almost invisible in the water.

Amongst bony fish Conseil noticed some about three yards long, armed at the upper jaw with a piercing sword; other bright-coloured creatures, known in the time of Aristotle by the name of the sea-dragon, which are dangerous to capture on account of the spikes on their back.

About four o’clock, the soil, generally composed of a thick mud mixed with petrified wood, changed by degrees, and it became more stony, and seemed strewn with conglomerate and pieces of basalt, with a sprinkling of lava. I thought that a mountainous region was succeeding the long plains; and accordingly, after a few evolutions of the Nautilus, I saw the southerly horizon blocked by a high wall which seemed to close all exit. Its summit evidently passed the level of the ocean. It must be a continent, or at least an island — one of the Canaries, or of the Cape Verde Islands. The bearings not being yet taken, perhaps designedly, I was ignorant of our exact position. In any case, such a wall seemed to me to mark the limits of that Atlantis, of which we had in reality passed over only the smallest part.

Much longer should I have remained at the window admiring the beauties of sea and sky, but the panels closed. At this moment the Nautilus arrived at the side of this high, perpendicular wall. What it would do, I could not guess. I returned to my room; it no longer moved. I laid myself down with the full intention of waking after a few hours' sleep; but it was eight o'clock the next day when I entered the saloon. I looked at the manometer. It told me that the Nautilus was floating on the surface of the ocean. Besides, I heard steps on the platform. I went to the panel. It was open; but, instead of broad daylight, as I expected, I was surrounded by profound darkness. Where were we? Was I mistaken? Was it still night? No; not a star was shining and night has not that utter darkness.

I knew not what to think, when a voice near me said:

“Is that you, Professor?”

“Ah! Captain,” I answered, “where are we?”

“Underground, sir.”

“Underground!” I exclaimed. “And the Nautilus floating still?”

“It always floats.”

“But I do not understand.”

“Wait a few minutes, our lantern will be lit, and, if you like light places, you will be satisfied.”

I stood on the platform and waited. The darkness was so complete that I could not even see Captain Nemo; but, looking to the zenith, exactly above my head, I seemed to catch an undecided gleam, a kind of twilight filling a circular hole. At this instant the lantern was lit, and its vividness dispelled the faint light. I closed my dazzled eyes for an instant, and then looked again. The Nautilus was stationary, floating near a mountain which formed a sort of quay. The lake, then, supporting it was a lake imprisoned by a circle of walls, measuring two miles in diameter and six in circumference. Its level (the manometer showed) could only be the same as the outside level, for there must necessarily be a communication between the lake and the sea. The high partitions, leaning forward on their base, grew into a vaulted roof bearing the shape of an immense funnel turned upside down, the height being about five or six hundred yards. At the summit was a circular orifice, by which I had caught the slight gleam of light, evidently daylight.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“In the very heart of an extinct volcano, the interior of which has been invaded by the sea, after some great convulsion of the earth. Whilst you were sleeping, Professor, the Nautilus penetrated to this lagoon by a natural canal, which opens about ten yards beneath the surface of the ocean. This is its harbour of refuge, a sure, commodious, and mysterious one, sheltered from all gales. Show me, if you can, on the coasts of any of your continents or islands, a road which can give such perfect refuge from all storms.”

“Certainly,” I replied, “you are in safety here, Captain Nemo. Who could reach you in the heart of a volcano? But did I not see an opening at its summit?”

“Yes; its crater, formerly filled with lava, vapour, and flames, and which now gives entrance to the life-giving air we breathe.”

“But what is this volcanic mountain?”

“It belongs to one of the numerous islands with which this sea is strewn — to vessels a simple sandbank — to us an immense cavern. Chance led me to discover it, and chance served me well.”

“But of what use is this refuge, Captain? The Nautilus wants no port.”

“No, sir; but it wants electricity to make it move, and the wherewithal to make the electricity — sodium to feed the elements, coal from which to get the sodium, and a coal-mine to supply the coal. And exactly on this spot the sea covers entire forests embedded during the geological periods, now mineralised and transformed into coal; for me they are an inexhaustible mine.”

“Your men follow the trade of miners here, then, Captain?”

“Exactly so. These mines extend under the waves like the mines of Newcastle. Here, in their diving-dresses, pick axe and shovel in hand, my men extract the coal, which I do not even ask from the mines of the earth. When I burn this combustible for the manufacture of sodium, the smoke, escaping from the crater of the mountain, gives it the appearance of a still-active volcano.”

“And we shall see your companions at work?”

“No; not this time at least; for I am in a hurry to continue our submarine tour of the earth. So I shall content myself with drawing from the reserve of sodium I already possess. The time for loading is one day only, and we continue our voyage. So, if you wish to go over the cavern and make the round of the lagoon, you must take advantage of to-day, M. Aronnax."

I thanked the Captain and went to look for my companions, who had not yet left their cabin. I invited them to follow me without saying where we were. They mounted the platform. Conseil, who was astonished at nothing, seemed to look upon it as quite natural that he should wake under a mountain, after having fallen asleep under the waves. But Ned Land thought of nothing but finding whether the cavern had any exit. After breakfast, about ten o'clock, we went down on to the mountain.

"Here we are, once more on land," said Conseil.

"I do not call this land," said the Canadian. "And besides, we are not on it, but beneath it."

Between the walls of the mountains and the waters of the lake lay a sandy shore which, at its greatest breadth, measured five hundred feet. On this soil one might easily make the tour of the lake. But the base of the high partitions was stony ground, with volcanic locks and enormous pumice-stones lying in picturesque heaps. All these detached masses, covered with enamel, polished by the action of the subterraneous fires, shone resplendent by the light of our electric lantern. The mica dust from the shore, rising under our feet, flew like a cloud of sparks. The bottom now rose sensibly, and we soon arrived at long circuitous slopes, or inclined planes, which took us higher by degrees; but we were obliged to walk carefully among these conglomerates, bound by no cement, the feet slipping on the glassy crystal, felspar, and quartz.

The volcanic nature of this enormous excavation was confirmed on all sides, and I pointed it out to my companions.

“Picture to yourselves,” said I, “what this crater must have been when filled with boiling lava, and when the level of the incandescent liquid rose to the orifice of the mountain, as though melted on the top of a hot plate.”

“I can picture it perfectly,” said Conseil. “But, sir, will you tell me why the Great Architect has suspended operations, and how it is that the furnace is replaced by the quiet waters of the lake?”

“Most probably, Conseil, because some convulsion beneath the ocean produced that very opening which has served as a passage for the Nautilus. Then the waters of the Atlantic rushed into the interior of the mountain. There must have been a terrible struggle between the two elements, a struggle which ended in the victory of Neptune. But many ages have run out since then, and the submerged volcano is now a peaceable grotto.”

“Very well,” replied Ned Land; “I accept the explanation, sir; but, in our own interests, I regret that the opening of which you speak was not made above the level of the sea.”

“But, friend Ned,” said Conseil, “if the passage had not been under the sea, the Nautilus could not have gone through it.”

We continued ascending. The steps became more and more perpendicular and narrow. Deep excavations, which we were obliged to cross, cut them here and there; sloping masses had to be turned. We slid upon our knees and crawled along. But Conseil’s dexterity and the Canadian’s strength surmounted all obstacles. At a height of about 31 feet the nature of the ground changed without becoming more practicable. To the conglomerate and trachyte succeeded black basalt, the first dispread in layers full of bubbles, the latter forming regular prisms, placed like a colonnade supporting the spring of the immense vault, an admirable specimen of natural architecture. Between the blocks of basalt wound long streams of lava, long since grown cold, encrusted with bituminous rays; and in some places there were spread large carpets of sulphur. A more powerful light shone through the upper crater, shedding a vague glimmer over these volcanic depressions for ever buried in the bosom of this extinguished mountain. But our upward march was soon stopped at a height of about two hundred and fifty feet by impassable obstacles. There was a complete vaulted arch overhanging us, and our ascent was changed to a circular walk. At the last change vegetable life began to struggle with the mineral. Some shrubs, and even some trees, grew from the fractures of the walls. I recognised some euphorbias, with the caustic sugar coming from them; heliotropes, quite incapable of justifying their name, sadly drooped their clusters of flowers, both their colour and perfume half gone. Here and there some chrysanthemums grew timidly at the foot of an aloe with long, sickly-looking leaves. But between the streams of lava, I saw some little violets still slightly perfumed, and I admit that I smelt them with delight. Perfume is the soul of the flower, and sea-flowers have no soul.

We had arrived at the foot of some sturdy dragon-trees, which had pushed aside the rocks with their strong roots, when Ned Land exclaimed:

“Ah! sir, a hive! a hive!”

“A hive!” I replied, with a gesture of incredulity.

“Yes, a hive,” repeated the Canadian, “and bees humming round it.”

I approached, and was bound to believe my own eyes. There at a hole bored in one of the dragon-trees were some thousands of these ingenious insects, so common in all the Canaries, and whose produce is so much esteemed. Naturally enough, the Canadian wished to gather the honey, and I could not well oppose his wish. A quantity of dry leaves, mixed with sulphur, he lit with a spark from his flint, and he began to smoke out the bees. The humming ceased by degrees, and the hive eventually yielded several pounds of the sweetest honey, with which Ned Land filled his haversack.

“When I have mixed this honey with the paste of the bread-fruit,” said he, “I shall be able to offer you a succulent cake.”

[Transcriber’s Note: ‘bread-fruit’ has been substituted for ‘artocarpus’ in this ed.]

“‘Pon my word,” said Conseil, “it will be gingerbread.”

“Never mind the gingerbread,” said I; “let us continue our interesting walk.”

At every turn of the path we were following, the lake appeared in all its length and breadth. The lantern lit up the whole of its peaceable surface, which knew neither ripple nor wave. The Nautilus remained perfectly immovable. On the platform, and on the mountain, the ship’s crew were working like black shadows clearly carved against the luminous atmosphere. We were now going round the highest crest of the first layers of rock which upheld the roof. I then saw that bees were not the only representatives of the animal kingdom in the interior of this volcano. Birds of prey hovered here and there in the shadows, or fled from their nests on the top of the rocks. There were sparrow hawks, with white breasts, and kestrels, and down the slopes scampered, with their long legs, several fine fat bustards. I leave anyone to imagine the covetousness of the Canadian at the sight of this savoury game, and whether he did not regret having no gun. But he did his best to replace the lead by stones, and, after several fruitless attempts, he succeeded in wounding a magnificent bird. To say that he risked his life twenty times before reaching it is but the truth; but he managed so well that the creature joined the honey-cakes in his bag. We were now obliged to descend toward the shore, the crest becoming impracticable. Above us the crater seemed to gape like the mouth of a well. From this place the sky could be clearly seen, and clouds, dissipated by the west wind, leaving behind them, even on the summit of the mountain, their misty remnants — certain proof that they were only moderately high, for the volcano did not rise more than eight hundred feet above the level of the ocean. Half an hour after the Canadian’s last exploit we had regained the inner shore. Here the flora was represented by large carpets of marine crystal, a little umbelliferous plant very good to pickle, which also bears the name of pierce-stone and sea-fennel. Conseil gathered some bundles of it. As to the fauna, it might be counted by thousands of crustacea of all sorts, lobsters, crabs, spider-crabs, chameleon shrimps, and a large number of shells, rockfish, and limpets. Three-quarters of an hour later we had finished our circuitous walk and were on board. The crew had just finished loading the sodium, and the Nautilus could have left that instant. But Captain Nemo gave no order. Did he wish to wait until night, and leave the submarine passage secretly? Perhaps so. Whatever it might be, the next day, the Nautilus, having left its port, steered clear of all land at a few yards beneath the waves of the Atlantic.

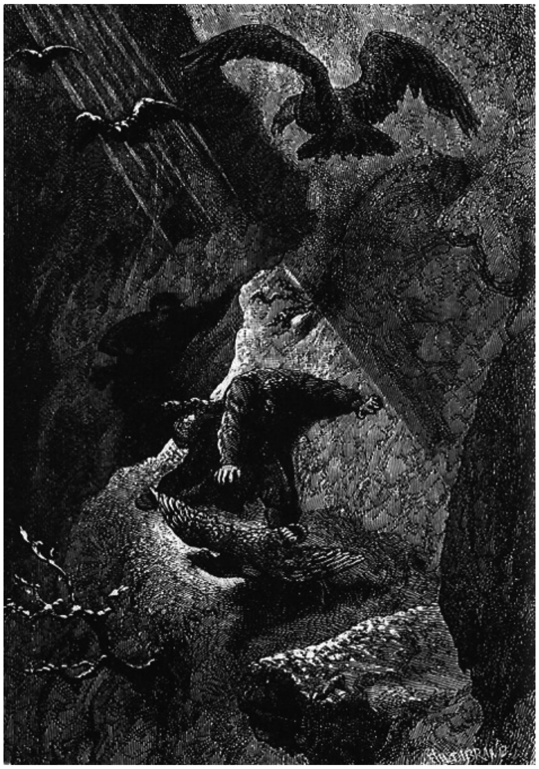
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CHAPTER XI

THE SARGASSO SEA

That day the Nautilus crossed a singular part of the Atlantic Ocean. No one can be ignorant of the existence of a current of warm water known by the name of the Gulf Stream. After leaving the Gulf of Florida, we went in the direction of Spitzbergen. But before entering the Gulf of Mexico, about 45° of N. lat. this current divides into two arms, the principal one going towards the coast of Ireland and Norway, whilst the second bends to the south about the height of the Azores; then, touching the African shore, and describing a lengthened oval, returns to the Antilles. This second arm — it is rather a collar than an arm — surrounds with its circles of warm water that portion of the cold, quiet, immovable ocean called the Sargasso Sea, a perfect lake in the open Atlantic: it takes no less than three years for the great current to pass round it. Such was the region the Nautilus was now visiting, a perfect meadow, a close carpet of seaweed, fucus, and tropical berries, so thick and so compact that the stem of a vessel could hardly tear its way through it. And Captain Nemo, not wishing to entangle his screw in this herbaceous mass, kept some yards beneath the surface of the waves. The name Sargasso comes from the Spanish word “sargazzo” which signifies kelp. This kelp, or berry-plant, is the principal formation of this immense bank. And this is the reason why these plants unite in the peaceful basin of the Atlantic. The only explanation which can be given, he says, seems to me to result from the experience known to all the world. Place in a vase some fragments of cork or other floating body, and give to the water in the vase a circular movement, the scattered fragments will unite in a group in the centre of the liquid surface, that is to say, in the part least agitated. In the phenomenon we are considering, the Atlantic is the vase, the Gulf Stream the circular current, and the Sargasso Sea the central point at which the floating bodies unite.

I share Maury's opinion, and I was able to study the phenomenon in the very midst, where vessels rarely penetrate. Above us floated products of all kinds, heaped up among these brownish plants; trunks of trees torn from the Andes or the Rocky Mountains, and floated by the Amazon or the Mississippi; numerous wrecks, remains of keels, or ships' bottoms, side-planks stove in, and so weighted with shells and barnacles that they could not again rise to the surface. And time will one day justify Maury's other opinion, that these substances thus accumulated for ages will become petrified by the action of the water and will then form inexhaustible coal-mines — a precious reserve prepared by far-seeing Nature for the moment when men shall have exhausted the mines of continents.

In the midst of this inextricable mass of plants and sea weed, I noticed some charming pink halcyons and actiniae, with their long tentacles trailing after them, and medusae, green, red, and blue.

All the day of the 22nd of February we passed in the Sargasso Sea, where such fish as are partial to marine plants find abundant nourishment. The next, the ocean had returned to its accustomed aspect. From this time for nineteen days, from the 23rd of February to the 12th of March, the Nautilus kept in the middle of the Atlantic, carrying us at a constant speed of a hundred leagues in twenty-four hours. Captain Nemo evidently intended accomplishing his submarine programme, and I imagined that he intended, after doubling Cape Horn, to return to the Australian seas of the Pacific. Ned Land had cause for fear. In these large seas, void of islands, we could not attempt to leave the boat. Nor had we any means of opposing Captain Nemo's will. Our only course was to submit; but what we could neither gain by force nor cunning, I liked to think might be obtained by persuasion. This voyage ended, would he not consent to restore our liberty, under an oath never to reveal his existence? — an oath of honour which we should have religiously kept. But we must consider that delicate question with the Captain. But was I free to claim this liberty? Had he not himself said from the beginning, in the firmest manner, that the secret of his life exacted from him our lasting imprisonment on board the Nautilus? And would not my four months' silence appear to him a tacit acceptance of our situation? And would not a return to the subject result in raising suspicions which might be hurtful to our projects, if at some future time a favourable opportunity offered to return to them?

During the nineteen days mentioned above, no incident of any kind happened to signalise our voyage. I saw little of the Captain; he was at work. In the library I often found his books left open, especially those on natural history. My work on submarine depths, conned over by him, was covered with marginal notes, often contradicting my theories and systems; but the Captain contented himself with thus purging my work; it was very rare for him to discuss it with me. Sometimes I heard the melancholy tones of his organ; but only at night, in the midst of the deepest obscurity, when the Nautilus slept upon the deserted ocean. During this part of our voyage we sailed whole days on the surface of the waves. The sea seemed abandoned. A few sailing-vessels, on the road to India, were making for the Cape of Good Hope. One day we were followed by the boats of a whaler, who, no doubt, took us for some enormous whale of great price; but Captain Nemo did not wish the worthy fellows to lose their time and trouble, so ended the chase by plunging under the water. Our navigation continued until the 13th of March; that day the Nautilus was employed in taking soundings, which greatly interested me. We had then made about 13,000 leagues since our departure from the high seas of the Pacific. The bearings gave us 45° 37’ S. lat. and 37° 53’ W. long. It was the same water in which Captain Denham of the Herald sounded 7,000 fathoms without finding the bottom. There, too, Lieutenant Parker, of the American frigate Congress, could not touch the bottom with 15,140 fathoms. Captain Nemo intended seeking the bottom of the ocean by a diagonal sufficiently lengthened by means of lateral planes placed at an angle of 45° with the water-line of the Nautilus. Then the screw set to work at its maximum speed, its four blades beating the waves with in describable force. Under this powerful pressure, the hull of the Nautilus quivered like a sonorous chord and sank regularly under the water.

At 7,000 fathoms I saw some blackish tops rising from the midst of the waters; but these summits might belong to high mountains like the Himalayas or Mont Blanc, even higher; and the depth of the abyss remained incalculable. The Nautilus descended still lower, in spite of the great pressure. I felt the steel plates tremble at the fastenings of the bolts; its bars bent, its partitions groaned; the windows of the saloon seemed to curve under the pressure of the waters. And this firm structure would doubtless have yielded, if, as its Captain had said, it had not been capable of resistance like a solid block. We had attained a depth of 16,000 yards (four leagues), and the sides of the Nautilus then bore a pressure of 1,600 atmospheres, that is to say, 3,200 lb. to each square two-fifths of an inch of its surface.

“What a situation to be in!” I exclaimed. “To overrun these deep regions where man has never trod! Look, Captain, look at these magnificent rocks, these uninhabited grottoes, these lowest receptacles of the globe, where life is no longer possible! What unknown sights are here! Why should we be unable to preserve a remembrance of them?”

“Would you like to carry away more than the remembrance?” said Captain Nemo.

“What do you mean by those words?”

“I mean to say that nothing is easier than to make a photographic view of this submarine region.”

I had not time to express my surprise at this new proposition, when, at Captain Nemo’s call, an objective was brought into the saloon. Through the widely-opened panel, the liquid mass was bright with electricity, which was distributed with such uniformity that not a shadow, not a gradation, was to be seen in our manufactured light. The Nautilus remained motionless, the force of its screw subdued by the inclination of its planes: the instrument was propped on the bottom of the oceanic site, and in a few seconds we had obtained a perfect negative.

But, the operation being over, Captain Nemo said, “Let us go up; we must not abuse our position, nor expose the Nautilus too long to such great pressure.”

“Go up again!” I exclaimed.

“Hold well on.”

I had not time to understand why the Captain cautioned me thus, when I was thrown forward on to the carpet. At a signal from the Captain, its screw was shipped, and its blades raised vertically; the Nautilus shot into the air like a balloon, rising with stunning rapidity, and cutting the mass of waters with a sonorous agitation. Nothing was visible; and in four minutes it had shot through the four leagues which separated it from the ocean, and, after emerging like a flying-fish, fell, making the waves rebound to an enormous height.

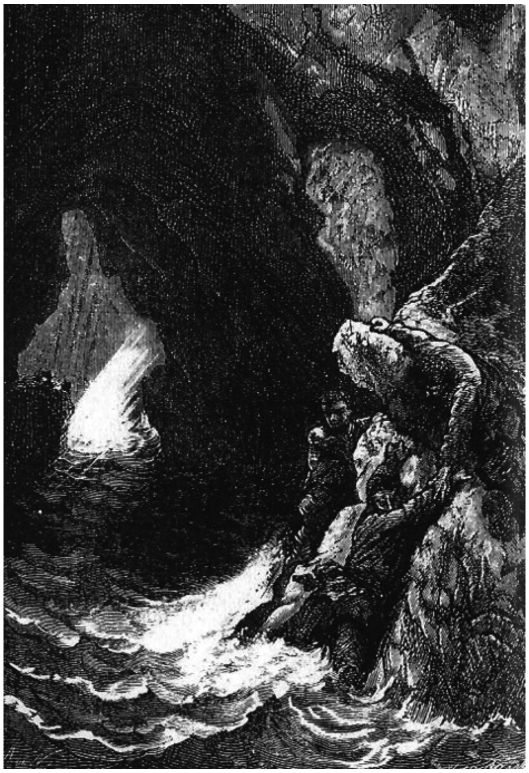

CHAPTER XII

CACHALOTS AND WHALES

During the nights of the 13th and 14th of March, the Nautilus returned to its southerly course. I fancied that, when on a level with Cape Horn, he would turn the helm westward, in order to beat the Pacific seas, and so complete the tour of the world. He did nothing of the kind, but continued on his way to the southern regions. Where was he going to? To the pole? It was madness! I began to think that the Captain's temerity justified Ned Land's fears. For some time past the Canadian had not spoken to me of his projects of flight; he was less communicative, almost silent. I could see that this lengthened imprisonment was weighing upon him, and I felt that rage was burning within him. When he met the Captain, his eyes lit up with suppressed anger; and I feared that his natural violence would lead him into some extreme. That day, the 14th of March, Conseil and he came to me in my room. I inquired the cause of their visit.

“A simple question to ask you, sir,” replied the Canadian.

“Speak, Ned.”

“How many men are there on board the Nautilus, do you think?”

“I cannot tell, my friend.”

“I should say that its working does not require a large crew.”

“Certainly, under existing conditions, ten men, at the most, ought to be enough.”

“Well, why should there be any more?”

“Why?” I replied, looking fixedly at Ned Land, whose meaning was easy to guess. “Because,” I added, “if my surmises are correct, and if I have well understood the Captain’s existence, the Nautilus is not only a vessel: it is also a place of refuge for those who, like its commander, have broken every tie upon earth.”

“Perhaps so,” said Conseil; “but, in any case, the Nautilus can only contain a certain number of men. Could not you, sir, estimate their maximum?”

“How, Conseil?”

“By calculation; given the size of the vessel, which you know, sir, and consequently the quantity of air it contains, knowing also how much each man expends at a breath, and comparing these results with the fact that the Nautilus is obliged to go to the surface every twenty-four hours.”

Conseil had not finished the sentence before I saw what he was driving at.

“I understand,” said I; “but that calculation, though simple enough, can give but a very uncertain result.”

“Never mind,” said Ned Land urgently.

“Here it is, then,” said I. “In one hour each man consumes the oxygen contained in twenty gallons of air; and in twenty-four, that contained in 480 gallons. We must, therefore find how many times 480 gallons of air the Nautilus contains.”

“Just so,” said Conseil.

“Or,” I continued, “the size of the Nautilus being 1,500 tons; and one ton holding 200 gallons, it contains 300,000 gallons of air, which, divided by

480, gives a quotient of 625. Which means to say, strictly speaking, that the air contained in the Nautilus would suffice for 625 men for twenty-four hours."

"Six hundred and twenty-five!" repeated Ned.

"But remember that all of us, passengers, sailors, and officers included, would not form a tenth part of that number."

"Still too many for three men," murmured Conseil.

The Canadian shook his head, passed his hand across his forehead, and left the room without answering.

"Will you allow me to make one observation, sir?" said Conseil. "Poor Ned is longing for everything that he can not have. His past life is always present to him; everything that we are forbidden he regrets. His head is full of old recollections. And we must understand him. What has he to do here? Nothing; he is not learned like you, sir; and has not the same taste for the beauties of the sea that we have. He would risk everything to be able to go once more into a tavern in his own country."

Certainly the monotony on board must seem intolerable to the Canadian, accustomed as he was to a life of liberty and activity. Events were rare which could rouse him to any show of spirit; but that day an event did happen which recalled the bright days of the harpooner. About eleven in the morning, being on the surface of the ocean, the Nautilus fell in with a troop of whales — an encounter which did not astonish me, knowing that these creatures, hunted to death, had taken refuge in high latitudes.

We were seated on the platform, with a quiet sea. The month of October in those latitudes gave us some lovely autumnal days. It was the Canadian — he could not be mistaken — who signalled a whale on the eastern horizon. Looking attentively, one might see its black back rise and fall with the waves five miles from the Nautilus.

“Ah!” exclaimed Ned Land, “if I was on board a whaler, now such a meeting would give me pleasure. It is one of large size. See with what strength its blow-holes throw up columns of air an steam! Confound it, why am I bound to these steel plates?”

“What, Ned,” said I, “you have not forgotten your old ideas of fishing?”

“Can a whale-fisher ever forget his old trade, sir? Can he ever tire of the emotions caused by such a chase?”

“You have never fished in these seas, Ned?”

“Never, sir; in the northern only, and as much in Behring as in Davis Straits.”

“Then the southern whale is still unknown to you. It is the Greenland whale you have hunted up to this time, and that would not risk passing through the warm waters of the equator. Whales are localised, according to their kinds, in certain seas which they never leave. And if one of these creatures went from Behring to Davis Straits, it must be simply because there is a passage from one sea to the other, either on the American or the Asiatic side.”

“In that case, as I have never fished in these seas, I do not know the kind of whale frequenting them!”

“I have told you, Ned.”

“A greater reason for making their acquaintance,” said Conseil.

“Look! look!” exclaimed the Canadian, “they approach: they aggravate me; they know that I cannot get at them!”

Ned stamped his feet. His hand trembled, as he grasped an imaginary harpoon.

“Are these cetaceans as large as those of the northern seas?” asked he.

“Very nearly, Ned.”

“Because I have seen large whales, sir, whales measuring a hundred feet. I have even been told that those of Hullamoch and Umgallick, of the Aleutian Islands, are sometimes a hundred and fifty feet long.”

“That seems to me exaggeration. These creatures are only balaeaopterons, provided with dorsal fins; and, like the cachalots, are generally much smaller than the Greenland whale.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the Canadian, whose eyes had never left the ocean, “they are coming nearer; they are in the same water as the Nautilus.”

Then, returning to the conversation, he said:

“You spoke of the cachalot as a small creature. I have heard of gigantic ones. They are intelligent cetacea. It is said of some that they cover themselves with seaweed and fucus, and then are taken for islands. People encamp upon them, and settle there; lights a fire — — ”

“And build houses,” said Conseil.

“Yes, joker,” said Ned Land. “And one fine day the creature plunges, carrying with it all the inhabitants to the bottom of the sea.”

“Something like the travels of Sinbad the Sailor,” I replied, laughing.

“Ah!” suddenly exclaimed Ned Land, “it is not one whale; there are ten — there are twenty — it is a whole troop! And I not able to do anything! hands and feet tied!”

“But, friend Ned,” said Conseil, “why do you not ask Captain Nemo’s permission to chase them?”

Conseil had not finished his sentence when Ned Land had lowered himself through the panel to seek the Captain. A few minutes afterwards the two appeared together on the platform.

Captain Nemo watched the troop of cetacea playing on the waters about a mile from the Nautilus.

“They are southern whales,” said he; “there goes the fortune of a whole fleet of whalers.”

“Well, sir,” asked the Canadian, “can I not chase them, if only to remind me of my old trade of harpooner?”

“And to what purpose?” replied Captain Nemo; “only to destroy! We have nothing to do with the whale-oil on board.”

“But, sir,” continued the Canadian, “in the Red Sea you allowed us to follow the dugong.”

“Then it was to procure fresh meat for my crew. Here it would be killing for killing’s sake. I know that is a privilege reserved for man, but I do not approve of such murderous pastime. In destroying the southern whale (like the Greenland whale, an inoffensive creature), your traders do a culpable action, Master Land. They have already depopulated the whole of Baffin’s Bay, and are annihilating a class of useful animals. Leave the unfortunate cetacea alone. They have plenty of natural enemies — cachalots, swordfish, and sawfish — without you troubling them.”

The Captain was right. The barbarous and inconsiderate greed of these fishermen will one day cause the disappearance of the last whale in the ocean. Ned Land whistled “Yankee-doodle” between his teeth, thrust his hands into his pockets, and turned his back upon us. But Captain Nemo watched the troop of cetacea, and, addressing me, said:

“I was right in saying that whales had natural enemies enough, without counting man. These will have plenty to do before long. Do you see, M. Aronnax, about eight miles to leeward, those blackish moving points?”

“Yes, Captain,” I replied.

“Those are cachalots — terrible animals, which I have met in troops of two or three hundred. As to those, they are cruel, mischievous creatures; they would be right in exterminating them.”

The Canadian turned quickly at the last words.

“Well, Captain,” said he, “it is still time, in the interest of the whales.”

“It is useless to expose one’s self, Professor. The Nautilus will disperse them. It is armed with a steel spur as good as Master Land’s harpoon, I imagine.”

The Canadian did not put himself out enough to shrug his shoulders. Attack cetacea with blows of a spur! Who had ever heard of such a thing?

“Wait, M. Aronnax,” said Captain Nemo. “We will show you something you have never yet seen. We have no pity for these ferocious creatures. They are nothing but mouth and teeth.”

Mouth and teeth! No one could better describe the macrocephalous cachalot, which is sometimes more than seventy-five feet long. Its enormous head occupies one-third of its entire body. Better armed than the whale, whose upper jaw is furnished only with whalebone, it is supplied with twenty-five large tusks, about eight inches long, cylindrical and conical at the top, each weighing two pounds. It is in the upper part of this enormous head, in great cavities divided by cartilages, that is to be found from six to eight hundred pounds of that precious oil called spermaceti. The cachalot is a disagreeable creature, more tadpole than fish, according to Fredol’s description. It is badly formed, the whole of its left side being (if we may say it), a “failure,” and being only able to see with its right eye. But the formidable troop was nearing us. They had seen the whales and were preparing to attack them. One could judge beforehand that the cachalots would be victorious, not only because they were better built for attack than their inoffensive adversaries, but also because they could remain longer under water without coming to the surface. There was only just time to go to the help of the whales. The Nautilus went under water. Conseil, Ned Land, and I took our places before the window in the saloon, and Captain Nemo joined the pilot in his cage to work his apparatus as an engine of destruction. Soon I felt the beatings of the screw quicken, and our speed increased. The battle between the cachalots and the whales had already begun when the Nautilus arrived. They did not at first show any fear at the sight of this new monster joining in the conflict. But they soon had to guard against its blows. What a battle! The Nautilus was nothing but a formidable harpoon, brandished by the hand of its Captain. It hurled itself against the fleshy mass, passing through from one part to the other, leaving behind it two quivering halves of the animal. It could not feel the formidable blows from their tails upon its sides, nor the shock which it produced itself, much more. One cachalot killed, it ran at the next, tacked on the spot that it might not miss its prey, going forwards and backwards, answering to its helm, plunging when the cetacean dived into the deep waters, coming up with it when it returned to the surface, striking it front or sideways, cutting or tearing in all directions and at any pace, piercing it with its terrible spur. What carnage! What a noise on the surface of the waves! What sharp hissing, and what snorting peculiar to these enraged animals! In the midst of these waters, generally so peaceful, their tails made perfect billows. For one hour this wholesale massacre continued, from which the cachalots could not escape. Several times ten or twelve united tried to crush the Nautilus by their weight. From the window we could see their enormous mouths, studded with tusks, and their formidable eyes. Ned Land could not contain himself; he threatened and swore at them. We could feel them clinging to our vessel like dogs worrying a wild boar in a copse. But the Nautilus, working its screw, carried them here and there, or to the upper levels of the ocean, without caring for their enormous weight, nor the powerful strain on the vessel. At length the mass of cachalots broke up, the waves became quiet, and I felt that we were rising to the surface. The panel opened, and we hurried on to the platform. The sea was covered with mutilated bodies. A formidable explosion could not have divided and torn this fleshy mass with more violence. We were floating amid gigantic bodies, bluish on the back and white underneath, covered with enormous protuberances. Some terrified cachalots were flying towards the horizon. The waves were dyed red for several miles, and the Nautilus floated in a sea of blood: Captain Nemo joined us.

“Well, Master Land?” said he.

“Well, sir,” replied the Canadian, whose enthusiasm had somewhat calmed; “it is a terrible spectacle, certainly. But I am not a butcher. I am a hunter, and I call this a butchery.”

“It is a massacre of mischievous creatures,” replied the Captain; “and the Nautilus is not a butcher’s knife.”

“I like my harpoon better,” said the Canadian.

“Every one to his own,” answered the Captain, looking fixedly at Ned Land.

I feared he would commit some act of violence, which would end in sad consequences. But his anger was turned by the sight of a whale which the Nautilus had just come up with. The creature had not quite escaped from the cachalot’s teeth. I recognised the southern whale by its flat head, which is entirely black. Anatomically, it is distinguished from the white whale and the North Cape whale by the seven cervical vertebrae, and it has two more ribs than its congeners. The unfortunate cetacean was lying on its side, riddled with holes from the bites, and quite dead. From its mutilated fin still hung a young whale which it could not save from the massacre. Its open mouth let the water flow in and out, murmuring like the waves breaking on the shore. Captain Nemo steered close to the corpse of the creature. Two of his men mounted its side, and I saw, not without surprise, that they were drawing from its breasts all the milk which they contained, that is to say, about two or three tons. The Captain offered me a cup of the milk, which was still warm. I could not help showing my repugnance to the drink; but he assured me that it was excellent, and not to be distinguished from cow’s milk. I tasted it, and was of his opinion. It was a useful reserve to us, for in the shape of salt butter or cheese it would form an agreeable variety from our ordinary food. From that day I noticed with uneasiness that Ned Land’s ill-will towards Captain Nemo increased, and I resolved to watch the Canadian’s gestures closely.

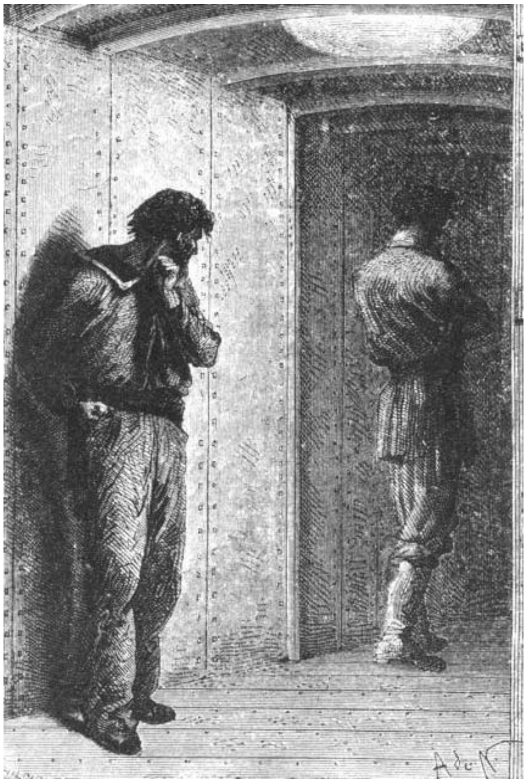

CHAPTER XIII

THE ICEBERG

The Nautilus was steadily pursuing its southerly course, following the fiftieth meridian with considerable speed. Did he wish to reach the pole? I did not think so, for every attempt to reach that point had hitherto failed. Again, the season was far advanced, for in the Antarctic regions the 13th of March corresponds with the 13th of September of northern regions, which begin at the equinoctial season. On the 14th of March I saw floating ice in latitude 55°, merely pale bits of debris from twenty to twenty-five feet long, forming banks over which the sea curled. The Nautilus remained on the surface of the ocean. Ned Land, who had fished in the Arctic Seas, was familiar with its icebergs; but Conseil and I admired them for the first time. In the atmosphere towards the southern horizon stretched a white dazzling band. English whalers have given it the name of “ice blink.” However thick the clouds may be, it is always visible, and announces the presence of an ice pack or bank. Accordingly, larger blocks soon appeared, whose brilliancy changed with the caprices of the fog. Some of these masses showed green veins, as if long undulating lines had been traced with sulphate of copper; others resembled enormous amethysts with the light shining through them. Some reflected the light of day upon a thousand crystal facets. Others shaded with vivid calcareous reflections resembled a perfect town of marble. The more we neared the south the more these floating islands increased both in number and importance.

At 60° lat. every pass had disappeared. But, seeking carefully, Captain Nemo soon found a narrow opening, through which he boldly slipped, knowing, however, that it would close behind him. Thus, guided by this clever hand, the Nautilus passed through all the ice with a precision which quite charmed Conseil; icebergs or mountains, ice-fields or smooth plains, seeming to have no limits, drift-ice or floating ice-packs, plains broken up, called palchs when they are circular, and streams when they are made up of long strips. The temperature was very low; the thermometer exposed to the air marked 2 deg. or 3° below zero, but we were warmly clad with fur, at the expense of the sea-bear and seal. The interior of the Nautilus, warmed regularly by its electric apparatus, defied the most intense cold. Besides, it would only have been necessary to go some yards beneath the waves to find a more bearable temperature. Two months earlier we should have had perpetual daylight in these latitudes; but already we had had three or four hours of night, and by and by there would be six months of darkness in these circumpolar regions. On the 15th of March we were in the latitude of New Shetland and South Orkney. The Captain told me that formerly numerous tribes of seals inhabited them; but that English and American whalers, in their rage for destruction, massacred both old and young; thus, where there was once life and animation, they had left silence and death.

About eight o’clock on the morning of the 16th of March the Nautilus, following the fifty-fifth meridian, cut the Antarctic polar circle. Ice surrounded us on all sides, and closed the horizon. But Captain Nemo went from one opening to another, still going higher. I cannot express my astonishment at the beauties of these new regions. The ice took most surprising forms. Here the grouping formed an oriental town, with innumerable mosques and minarets; there a fallen city thrown to the earth, as it were, by some convulsion of nature. The whole aspect was constantly changed by the oblique rays of the sun, or lost in the greyish fog amidst hurricanes of snow. Detonations and falls were heard on all sides, great overthrows of icebergs, which altered the whole landscape like a diorama. Often seeing no exit, I thought we were definitely prisoners; but, instinct guiding him at the slightest indication, Captain Nemo would discover a new pass. He was never mistaken when he saw the thin threads of bluish water trickling along the ice-fields; and I had no doubt that he had already ventured into the midst of these Antarctic seas before. On the 16th of March, however, the ice-fields absolutely blocked our road. It was not the iceberg itself, as yet, but vast fields cemented by the cold. But this obstacle could not stop Captain Nemo: he hurled himself against it with frightful violence. The Nautilus entered the brittle mass like a wedge, and split it with frightful crackings. It was the battering ram of the ancients hurled by infinite strength. The ice, thrown high in the air, fell like hail around us. By its own power of impulsion our apparatus made a canal for itself; some times carried away by its own impetus, it lodged on the ice-field, crushing it with its weight, and sometimes buried beneath it, dividing it by a simple pitching movement, producing large rents in it. Violent gales assailed us at this time, accompanied by thick fogs, through which, from one end of the platform to the other, we could see nothing. The wind blew sharply from all parts of the compass, and the snow lay in such hard heaps that we had to break it with blows of a pickaxe. The temperature was always at 5 deg. below zero; every outward part of the Nautilus was covered with ice. A rigged vessel would have been entangled in the blocked up gorges. A vessel without sails, with electricity for its motive power, and wanting no coal, could alone brave such high latitudes. At length, on the 18th of March, after many useless assaults, the Nautilus was positively blocked. It was no longer either streams, packs, or ice-fields, but an interminable and immovable barrier, formed by mountains soldered together.

“An iceberg!” said the Canadian to me.

I knew that to Ned Land, as well as to all other navigators who had preceded us, this was an inevitable obstacle. The sun appearing for an instant at noon, Captain Nemo took an observation as near as possible, which gave our situation at 51° 30’ long. and 67° 39’ of S. lat. We had advanced one degree more in this Antarctic region. Of the liquid surface of the sea there was no longer a glimpse. Under the spur of the Nautilus lay stretched a vast plain, entangled with confused blocks. Here and there sharp points and slender needles rising to a height of 200 feet; further on a steep shore, hewn as it were with an axe and clothed with greyish tints; huge mirrors, reflecting a few rays of sunshine, half drowned in the fog. And over this desolate face of nature a stern silence reigned, scarcely broken by the flapping of the wings of petrels and puffins. Everything was frozen — even the noise. The Nautilus was then obliged to stop in its adventurous course amid these fields of ice. In spite of our efforts, in spite of the powerful means employed to break up the ice, the Nautilus remained immovable. Generally, when we can proceed no further, we have return still open to us; but here return was as impossible as advance, for every pass had closed behind us; and for the few moments when we were stationary, we were likely to be entirely blocked, which did indeed happen about two o’clock in the afternoon, the fresh ice forming around its sides with astonishing rapidity. I was obliged to admit that Captain Nemo was more than imprudent. I was on the platform at that moment. The Captain had been observing our situation for some time past, when he said to me:

“Well, sir, what do you think of this?”

“I think that we are caught, Captain.”

“So, M. Aronnax, you really think that the Nautilus cannot disengage itself?”

“With difficulty, Captain; for the season is already too far advanced for you to reckon on the breaking of the ice.”

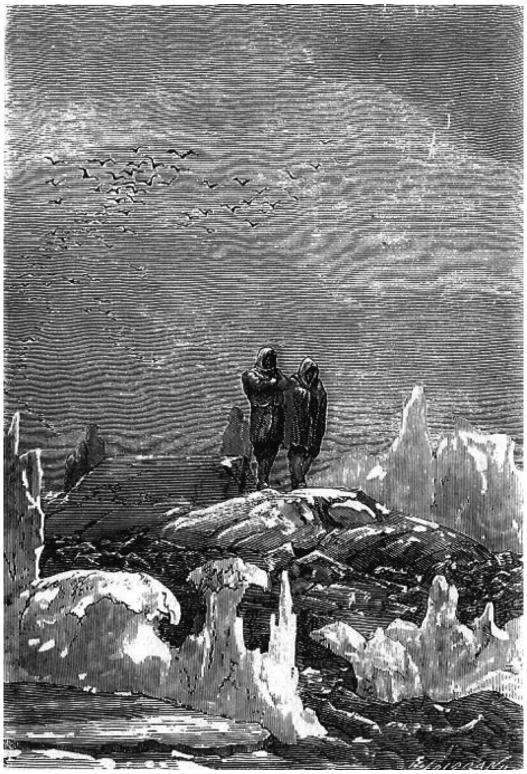

“Ah! sir,” said Captain Nemo, in an ironical tone, “you will always be the same. You see nothing but difficulties and obstacles. I affirm that not only can the Nautilus disengage itself, but also that it can go further still.”

“Further to the South?” I asked, looking at the Captain.

“Yes, sir; it shall go to the pole.”

“To the pole!” I exclaimed, unable to repress a gesture of incredulity.

“Yes,” replied the Captain, coldly, “to the Antarctic pole — to that unknown point from whence springs every meridian of the globe. You know whether I can do as I please with the Nautilus!”

Yes, I knew that. I knew that this man was bold, even to rashness. But to conquer those obstacles which bristled round the South Pole, rendering it more inaccessible than the North, which had not yet been reached by the boldest navigators — was it not a mad enterprise, one which only a maniac would have conceived? It then came into my head to ask Captain Nemo if he had ever discovered that pole which had never yet been trodden by a human creature?

“No, sir,” he replied; “but we will discover it together. Where others have failed, I will not fail. I have never yet led my Nautilus so far into southern seas; but, I repeat, it shall go further yet.”

“I can well believe you, Captain,” said I, in a slightly ironical tone. “I believe you! Let us go ahead! There are no obstacles for us! Let us smash this iceberg! Let us blow it up; and, if it resists, let us give the Nautilus wings to fly over it!”

“Over it, sir!” said Captain Nemo, quietly; “no, not over it, but under it!”

“Under it!” I exclaimed, a sudden idea of the Captain’s projects flashing upon my mind. I understood; the wonderful qualities of the Nautilus were going to serve us in this superhuman enterprise.

“I see we are beginning to understand one another, sir,” said the Captain, half smiling. “You begin to see the possibility — I should say the success — of this attempt. That which is impossible for an ordinary vessel is easy to the Nautilus. If a continent lies before the pole, it must stop before the continent; but if, on the contrary, the pole is washed by open sea, it will go even to the pole.”

“Certainly,” said I, carried away by the Captain’s reasoning; “if the surface of the sea is solidified by the ice, the lower depths are free by the Providential law which has placed the maximum of density of the waters of the ocean one degree higher than freezing-point; and, if I am not mistaken, the portion of this iceberg which is above the water is as one to four to that which is below."

"Very nearly, sir; for one foot of iceberg above the sea there are three below it. If these ice mountains are not more than 300 feet above the surface, they are not more than 900 beneath. And what are 900 feet to the Nautilus?"

"Nothing, sir."

"It could even seek at greater depths that uniform temperature of sea-water, and there brave with impunity the thirty or forty degrees of surface cold."

"Just so, sir — just so," I replied, getting animated.

"The only difficulty," continued Captain Nemo, "is that of remaining several days without renewing our provision of air."

"Is that all? The Nautilus has vast reservoirs; we can fill them, and they will supply us with all the oxygen we want."

"Well thought of, M. Aronnax," replied the Captain, smiling. "But, not wishing you to accuse me of rashness, I will first give you all my objections."

"Have you any more to make?"

"Only one. It is possible, if the sea exists at the South Pole, that it may be covered; and, consequently, we shall be unable to come to the surface."

"Good, sir! but do you forget that the Nautilus is armed with a powerful spur, and could we not send it diagonally against these fields of ice, which would open at the shocks."

"Ah! sir, you are full of ideas to-day."

"Besides, Captain," I added, enthusiastically, "why should we not find the sea open at the South Pole as well as at the North? The frozen poles of the earth do not coincide, either in the southern or in the northern regions; and, until it is proved to the contrary, we may suppose either a continent or an ocean free from ice at these two points of the globe."

"I think so too, M. Aronnax," replied Captain Nemo. "I only wish you to observe that, after having made so many objections to my project, you are now crushing me with arguments in its favour!"

The preparations for this audacious attempt now began. The powerful pumps of the Nautilus were working air into the reservoirs and storing it at high pressure. About four o'clock, Captain Nemo announced the closing of the panels on the platform. I threw one last look at the massive iceberg which we were going to cross. The weather was clear, the atmosphere pure enough, the cold very great, being 12° below zero; but, the wind having gone down, this temperature was not so unbearable. About ten men mounted the sides of the Nautilus, armed with pickaxes to break the ice around the vessel, which was soon free. The operation was quickly performed, for the fresh ice was still very thin. We all went below. The usual reservoirs were filled with the newly-liberated water, and the Nautilus soon descended. I had taken my place with Conseil in the saloon; through the open window we could see the lower beds of the Southern Ocean. The thermometer went up, the needle of the compass deviated on the dial. At about 900 feet, as Captain Nemo had foreseen, we were floating beneath the undulating bottom of the iceberg. But the Nautilus went lower still — it went to the depth of four hundred fathoms. The temperature of the water at the surface showed twelve degrees, it was now only ten; we had gained two.

I need not say the temperature of the Nautilus was raised by its heating apparatus to a much higher degree; every manoeuvre was accomplished with wonderful precision.

“We shall pass it, if you please, sir,” said Conseil.

“I believe we shall,” I said, in a tone of firm conviction.

In this open sea, the Nautilus had taken its course direct to the pole, without leaving the fifty-second meridian. From 67° 30’ to 90 deg. twenty-two degrees and a half of latitude remained to travel; that is, about five hundred leagues. The Nautilus kept up a mean speed of twenty-six miles an hour — the speed of an express train. If that was kept up, in forty hours we should reach the pole.

For a part of the night the novelty of the situation kept us at the window. The sea was lit with the electric lantern; but it was deserted; fishes did not sojourn in these imprisoned waters; they only found there a passage to take them from the Antarctic Ocean to the open polar sea. Our pace was rapid; we could feel it by the quivering of the long steel body. About two in the morning I took some hours’ repose, and Conseil did the same. In crossing the waist I did not meet Captain Nemo: I supposed him to be in the pilot’s cage. The next morning, the 19th of March, I took my post once more in the saloon. The electric log told me that the speed of the Nautilus had been slackened. It was then going towards the surface; but prudently emptying its reservoirs very slowly. My heart beat fast. Were we going to emerge and regain the open polar atmosphere? No! A shock told me that the Nautilus had struck the bottom of the iceberg, still very thick, judging from the deadened sound. We had in deed “struck,” to use a sea expression, but in an inverse sense, and at a thousand feet deep. This would give three thousand feet of ice above us; one thousand being above the water-mark. The iceberg was then higher than at its borders — not a very reassuring fact. Several times that day the Nautilus tried again, and every time it struck the wall which lay like a ceiling above it. Sometimes it met with but 900 yards, only 200 of which rose above the surface. It was twice the height it was when the Nautilus had gone under the waves. I carefully noted the different depths, and thus obtained a submarine profile of the chain as it was developed under the water. That night no change had taken place in our situation. Still ice between four and five hundred yards in depth! It was evidently diminishing, but, still, what a thickness between us and the surface of the ocean! It was then eight. According to the daily custom on board the Nautilus, its air should have been renewed four hours ago; but I did not suffer much, although Captain Nemo had not yet made any demand upon his reserve of oxygen. My sleep was painful that night; hope and fear besieged me by turns: I rose several times. The groping of the Nautilus continued. About three in the morning, I noticed that the lower surface of the iceberg was only about fifty feet deep. One hundred and fifty feet now separated us from the surface of the waters. The iceberg was by degrees becoming an ice-field, the mountain a plain. My eyes never left the manometer. We were still rising diagonally to the surface, which sparkled under the electric rays. The iceberg was stretching both above and beneath into lengthening slopes; mile after mile it was getting thinner. At length, at six in the morning of that memorable day, the 19th of March, the door of the saloon opened, and Captain Nemo appeared.

“The sea is open!!” was all he said.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SOUTH POLE

I rushed on to the platform. Yes! the open sea, with but a few scattered pieces of ice and moving icebergs — a long stretch of sea; a world of birds in the air, and myriads of fishes under those waters, which varied from intense blue to olive green, according to the bottom. The thermometer marked 3° C. above zero. It was comparatively spring, shut up as we were behind this iceberg, whose lengthened mass was dimly seen on our northern horizon.

“Are we at the pole?” I asked the Captain, with a beating heart.

“I do not know,” he replied. “At noon I will take our bearings.”

“But will the sun show himself through this fog?” said I, looking at the leaden sky.

“However little it shows, it will be enough,” replied the Captain.

About ten miles south a solitary island rose to a height of one hundred and four yards. We made for it, but carefully, for the sea might be strewn with banks. One hour afterwards we had reached it, two hours later we had made the round of it. It measured four or five miles in circumference. A narrow canal separated it from a considerable stretch of land, perhaps a continent, for we could not see its limits. The existence of this land seemed to give some colour to Maury’s theory. The ingenious American has remarked that, between the South Pole and the sixtieth parallel, the sea is covered with floating ice of enormous size, which is never met with in the North Atlantic. From this fact he has drawn the conclusion that the Antarctic Circle encloses considerable continents, as icebergs cannot form in open sea, but only on the coasts. According to these calculations, the mass of ice surrounding the southern pole forms a vast cap, the circumference of which must be, at least, 2,500 miles. But the Nautilus, for fear of running aground, had stopped about three cable-lengths from a strand over which reared a superb heap of rocks. The boat was launched; the Captain, two of his men, bearing instruments, Conseil, and myself were in it. It was ten in the morning. I had not seen Ned Land. Doubtless the Canadian did not wish to admit the presence of the South Pole. A few strokes of the oar brought us to the sand, where we ran ashore. Conseil was going to jump on to the land, when I held him back.

“Sir,” said I to Captain Nemo, “to you belongs the honour of first setting foot on this land.”

“Yes, sir,” said the Captain, “and if I do not hesitate to tread this South Pole, it is because, up to this time, no human being has left a trace there.”

Saying this, he jumped lightly on to the sand. His heart beat with emotion. He climbed a rock, sloping to a little promontory, and there, with his arms crossed, mute and motionless, and with an eager look, he seemed to take possession of these southern regions. After five minutes passed in this ecstasy, he turned to us.

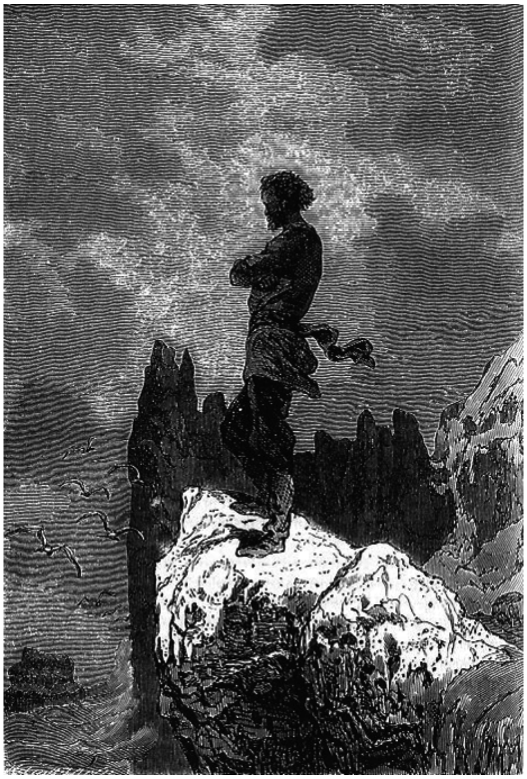

“When you like, sir.”

I landed, followed by Conseil, leaving the two men in the boat. For a long way the soil was composed of a reddish sandy stone, something like crushed brick, scoriae, streams of lava, and pumice-stones. One could not mistake its volcanic origin. In some parts, slight curls of smoke emitted a sulphurous smell, proving that the internal fires had lost nothing of their expansive powers, though, having climbed a high acclivity, I could see no volcano for a radius of several miles. We know that in those Antarctic countries, James Ross found two craters, the Erebus and Terror, in full activity, on the 167th meridian, latitude 77° 32’. The vegetation of this desolate continent seemed to me much restricted. Some lichens lay upon the black rocks; some microscopic plants, rudimentary diatomas, a kind of cells placed between two quartz shells; long purple and scarlet weed, supported on little swimming bladders, which the breaking of the waves brought to the shore. These constituted the meagre flora of this region. The shore was strewn with molluscs, little mussels, and limpets. I also saw myriads of northern clios, one-and-a-quarter inches long, of which a whale would swallow a whole world at a mouthful; and some perfect sea-butterflies, animating the waters on the skirts of the shore.

There appeared on the high bottoms some coral shrubs, of the kind which, according to James Ross, live in the Antarctic seas to the depth of more than 1,000 yards. Then there were little kingfishers and starfish studding the soil. But where life abounded most was in the air. There thousands of birds fluttered and flew of all kinds, deafening us with their cries; others crowded the rock, looking at us as we passed by without fear, and pressing familiarly close by our feet. There were penguins, so agile in the water, heavy and awkward as they are on the ground; they were uttering harsh cries, a large assembly, sober in gesture, but extravagant in clamour. Albatrosses passed in the air, the expanse of their wings being at least four yards and a half, and justly called the vultures of the ocean; some gigantic petrels, and some damiers, a kind of small duck, the underpart of whose body is black and white; then there were a whole series of petrels, some whitish, with brown-bordered wings, others blue, peculiar to the Antarctic seas, and so oily, as I told Conseil, that the inhabitants of the Ferroe Islands had nothing to do before lighting them but to put a wick in.

“A little more,” said Conseil, “and they would be perfect lamps! After that, we cannot expect Nature to have previously furnished them with wicks!”

About half a mile farther on the soil was riddled with ruffs’ nests, a sort of laying-ground, out of which many birds were issuing. Captain Nemo had some hundreds hunted. They uttered a cry like the braying of an ass, were about the size of a goose, slate-colour on the body, white beneath, with a yellow line round their throats; they allowed themselves to be killed with a stone, never trying to escape. But the fog did not lift, and at eleven the sun had not yet shown itself. Its absence made me uneasy. Without it no observations were possible. How, then, could we decide whether we had reached the pole? When I rejoined Captain Nemo, I found him leaning on a piece of rock, silently watching the sky. He seemed impatient and vexed. But what was to be done? This rash and powerful man could not command the sun as he did the sea. Noon arrived without the orb of day showing itself for an instant. We could not even tell its position behind the curtain of fog; and soon the fog turned to snow.

“Till to-morrow,” said the Captain, quietly, and we returned to the Nautilus amid these atmospheric disturbances.

The tempest of snow continued till the next day. It was impossible to remain on the platform. From the saloon, where I was taking notes of incidents happening during this excursion to the polar continent, I could hear the cries of petrels and albatrosses sporting in the midst of this violent storm. The Nautilus did not remain motionless, but skirted the coast, advancing ten miles more to the south in the half-light left by the sun as it skirted the edge of the horizon. The next day, the 20th of March, the snow had ceased. The cold was a little greater, the thermometer showing 2° below zero. The fog was rising, and I hoped that that day our observations might be taken. Captain Nemo not having yet appeared, the boat took Conseil and myself to land. The soil was still of the same volcanic nature; everywhere were traces of lava, scoriae, and basalt; but the crater which had vomited them I could not see. Here, as lower down, this continent was alive with myriads of birds. But their rule was now divided with large troops of sea-mammals, looking at us with their soft eyes. There were several kinds of seals, some stretched on the earth, some on flakes of ice, many going in and out of the sea. They did not flee at our approach, never having had anything to do with man; and I reckoned that there were provisions there for hundreds of vessels.

“Sir,” said Conseil, “will you tell me the names of these creatures?”

“They are seals and morses.”

It was now eight in the morning. Four hours remained to us before the sun could be observed with advantage. I directed our steps towards a vast bay cut in the steep granite shore. There, I can aver that earth and ice were lost to sight by the numbers of sea-mammals covering them, and I involuntarily sought for old Proteus, the mythological shepherd who watched these immense flocks of Neptune. There were more seals than anything else, forming distinct groups, male and female, the father watching over his family, the mother suckling her little ones, some already strong enough to go a few steps. When they wished to change their place, they took little jumps, made by the contraction of their bodies, and helped awkwardly enough by their imperfect fin, which, as with the lamantin, their cousins, forms a perfect forearm. I should say that, in the water, which is their element — the spine of these creatures is flexible; with smooth and close skin and webbed feet — they swim admirably. In resting on the earth they take the most graceful attitudes. Thus the ancients, observing their soft and expressive looks, which cannot be surpassed by the most beautiful look a woman can give, their clear voluptuous eyes, their charming positions, and the poetry of their manners, metamorphosed them, the male into a triton and the female into a mermaid. I made Conseil notice the considerable development of the lobes of the brain in these interesting cetaceans. No mammal, except man, has such a quantity of brain matter; they are also capable of receiving a certain amount of education, are easily domesticated, and I think, with other naturalists, that if properly taught they would be of great service as fishing-dogs. The greater part of them slept on the rocks or on the sand. Amongst these seals, properly so called, which have no external ears (in which they differ from the otter, whose ears are prominent), I noticed several varieties of seals about three yards long, with a white coat, bulldog heads, armed with teeth in both jaws, four incisors at the top and four at the bottom, and two large canine teeth in the shape of a fleur-de-lis. Amongst them glided sea-elephants, a kind of seal, with short, flexible trunks. The giants of this species measured twenty feet round and ten yards and a half in length; but they did not move as we approached.

“These creatures are not dangerous?” asked Conseil.

“No; not unless you attack them. When they have to defend their young their rage is terrible, and it is not uncommon for them to break the fishing-boats to pieces.”

“They are quite right,” said Conseil.

“I do not say they are not.”

Two miles farther on we were stopped by the promontory which shelters the bay from the southerly winds. Beyond it we heard loud bellowings such as a troop of ruminants would produce.

“Good!” said Conseil; “a concert of bulls!”

“No; a concert of morses.”

“They are fighting!”

“They are either fighting or playing.”

We now began to climb the blackish rocks, amid unforeseen stumbles, and over stones which the ice made slippery. More than once I rolled over at the expense of my loins. Conseil, more prudent or more steady, did not stumble, and helped me up, saying:

“If, sir, you would have the kindness to take wider steps, you would preserve your equilibrium better.”

Arrived at the upper ridge of the promontory, I saw a vast white plain covered with morses. They were playing amongst themselves, and what we heard were bellowings of pleasure, not of anger.

As I passed these curious animals I could examine them leisurely, for they did not move. Their skins were thick and rugged, of a yellowish tint, approaching to red; their hair was short and scant. Some of them were four yards and a quarter long. Quieter and less timid than their cousins of the north, they did not, like them, place sentinels round the outskirts of their encampment. After examining this city of morses, I began to think of returning. It was eleven o’clock, and, if Captain Nemo found the conditions favourable for observations, I wished to be present at the operation. We followed a narrow pathway running along the summit of the steep shore. At half-past eleven we had reached the place where we landed. The boat had run aground, bringing the Captain. I saw him standing on a block of basalt, his instruments near him, his eyes fixed on the northern horizon, near which the sun was then describing a lengthened curve. I took my place beside him, and waited without speaking. Noon arrived, and, as before, the sun did not appear. It was a fatality. Observations were still wanting. If not accomplished to-morrow, we must give up all idea of taking any. We were indeed exactly at the 20th of March. To-morrow, the 21st, would be the equinox; the sun would disappear behind the horizon for six months, and with its disappearance the long polar night would begin. Since the September equinox it had emerged from the northern horizon, rising by lengthened spirals up to the 21st of December. At this period, the summer solstice of the northern regions, it had begun to descend; and to-morrow was to shed its last rays upon them. I communicated my fears and observations to Captain Nemo.

“You are right, M. Aronnax,” said he; “if to-morrow I cannot take the altitude of the sun, I shall not be able to do it for six months. But precisely because chance has led me into these seas on the 21st of March, my bearings will be easy to take, if at twelve we can see the sun.”

“Why, Captain?”

“Because then the orb of day described such lengthened curves that it is difficult to measure exactly its height above the horizon, and grave errors may be made with instruments.”

“What will you do then?”

“I shall only use my chronometer,” replied Captain Nemo. “If to-morrow, the 21st of March, the disc of the sun, allowing for refraction, is exactly cut by the northern horizon, it will show that I am at the South Pole.”

“Just so,” said I. “But this statement is not mathematically correct, because the equinox does not necessarily begin at noon.”

“Very likely, sir; but the error will not be a hundred yards and we do not want more. Till to-morrow, then!”

Captain Nemo returned on board. Conseil and I remained to survey the shore, observing and studying until five o’clock. Then I went to bed, not, however, without invoking, like the Indian, the favour of the radiant orb. The next day, the 21st of March, at five in the morning, I mounted the platform. I found Captain Nemo there.

“The weather is lightening a little,” said he. “I have some hope. After breakfast we will go on shore and choose a post for observation.”

That point settled, I sought Ned Land. I wanted to take him with me. But the obstinate Canadian refused, and I saw that his taciturnity and his bad humour grew day by day. After all, I was not sorry for his obstinacy under the circumstances. Indeed, there were too many seals on shore, and we ought not to lay such temptation in this unreflecting fisherman’s way. Breakfast over, we went on shore. The Nautilus had gone some miles further up in the night. It was a whole league from the coast, above which reared a sharp peak about five hundred yards high. The boat took with me Captain Nemo, two men of the crew, and the instruments, which consisted of a chronometer, a telescope, and a barometer. While crossing, I saw numerous whales belonging to the three kinds peculiar to the southern seas; the whale, or the English “right whale,” which has no dorsal fin; the “humpback,” with reeved chest and large, whitish fins, which, in spite of its name, do not form wings; and the fin-back, of a yellowish brown, the liveliest of all the cetacea. This powerful creature is heard a long way off when he throws to a great height columns of air and vapour, which look like whirlwinds of smoke. These different mammals were disporting themselves in troops in the quiet waters; and I could see that this basin of the Antarctic Pole serves as a place of refuge to the cetacea too closely tracked by the hunters. I also noticed large medusae floating between the reeds.

At nine we landed; the sky was brightening, the clouds were flying to the south, and the fog seemed to be leaving the cold surface of the waters.

Captain Nemo went towards the peak, which he doubtless meant to be his observatory. It was a painful ascent over the sharp lava and the pumice-stones, in an atmosphere often impregnated with a sulphurous smell from the smoking cracks. For a man unaccustomed to walk on land, the Captain climbed the steep slopes with an agility I never saw equalled and which a hunter would have envied. We were two hours getting to the summit of this peak, which was half porphyry and half basalt. From thence we looked upon a vast sea which, towards the north, distinctly traced its boundary line upon the sky. At our feet lay fields of dazzling whiteness. Over our heads a pale azure, free from fog. To the north the disc of the sun seemed like a ball of fire, already horned by the cutting of the horizon. From the bosom of the water rose sheaves of liquid jets by hundreds. In the distance lay the Nautilus like a cetacean asleep on the water. Behind us, to the south and east, an immense country and a chaotic heap of rocks and ice, the limits of which were not visible. On arriving at the summit Captain Nemo carefully took the mean height of the barometer, for he would have to consider that in taking his observations. At a quarter to twelve the sun, then seen only by refraction, looked like a golden disc shedding its last rays upon this deserted continent and seas which never man had yet ploughed. Captain Nemo, furnished with a lenticular glass which, by means of a mirror, corrected the refraction, watched the orb sinking below the horizon by degrees, following a lengthened diagonal. I held the chronometer. My heart beat fast. If the disappearance of the half-disc of the sun coincided with twelve o’clock on the chronometer, we were at the pole itself.

“Twelve!” I exclaimed.

“The South Pole!” replied Captain Nemo, in a grave voice, handing me the glass, which showed the orb cut in exactly equal parts by the horizon.

I looked at the last rays crowning the peak, and the shadows mounting by degrees up its slopes. At that moment Captain Nemo, resting with his hand on my shoulder, said:

“I, Captain Nemo, on this 21st day of March, 1868, have reached the South Pole on the ninetieth degree; and I take possession of this part of the globe, equal to one-sixth of the known continents.”

“In whose name, Captain?”

“In my own, sir!”

Saying which, Captain Nemo unfurled a black banner, bearing an “N” in gold quartered on its bunting. Then, turning towards the orb of day, whose last rays lapped the horizon of the sea, he exclaimed:

“Adieu, sun! Disappear, thou radiant orb! rest beneath this open sea, and let a night of six months spread its shadows over my new domains!”

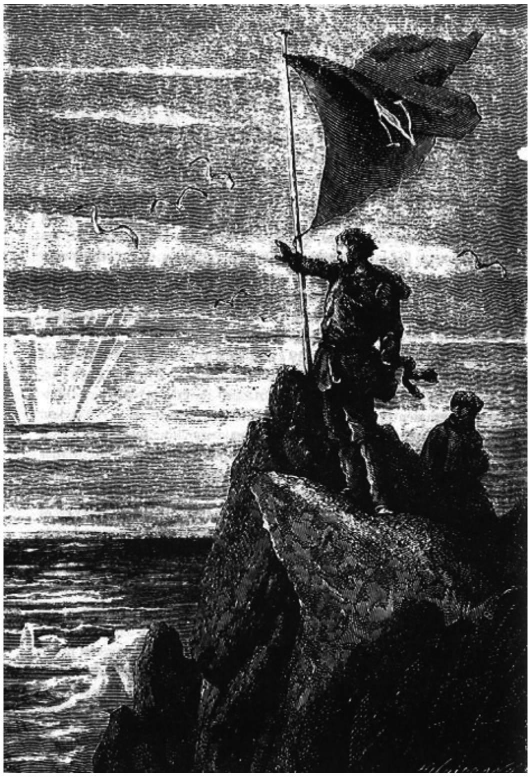

CHAPTER XV

ACCIDENT OR INCIDENT?

The next day, the 22nd of March, at six in the morning, preparations for departure were begun. The last gleams of twilight were melting into night. The cold was great, the constellations shone with wonderful intensity. In the zenith glittered that wondrous Southern Cross — the polar bear of Antarctic regions. The thermometer showed 120 below zero, and when the wind freshened it was most biting. Flakes of ice increased on the open water. The sea seemed everywhere alike. Numerous blackish patches spread on the surface, showing the formation of fresh ice. Evidently the southern basin, frozen during the six winter months, was absolutely inaccessible. What became of the whales in that time? Doubtless they went beneath the icebergs, seeking more practicable seas. As to the seals and morses, accustomed to live in a hard climate, they remained on these icy shores. These creatures have the instinct to break holes in the ice-field and to keep them open. To these holes they come for breath; when the birds, driven away by the cold, have emigrated to the north, these sea mammals remain sole masters of the polar continent. But the reservoirs were filling with water, and the Nautilus was slowly descending. At 1,000 feet deep it stopped; its screw beat the waves, and it advanced straight towards the north at a speed of fifteen miles an hour. Towards night it was already floating under the immense body of the iceberg. At three in the morning I was awakened by a violent shock. I sat up in my bed and listened in the darkness, when I was thrown into the middle of the room. The Nautilus, after having struck, had rebounded violently. I groped along the partition, and by the staircase to the saloon, which was lit by the luminous ceiling. The furniture was upset. Fortunately the windows were firmly set, and had held fast. The pictures on the starboard side, from being no longer vertical, were clinging to the paper, whilst those of the port side were hanging at least a foot from the wall. The Nautilus was lying on its starboard side perfectly motionless. I heard footsteps, and a confusion of voices; but Captain Nemo did not appear. As I was leaving the saloon, Ned Land and Conseil entered.

“What is the matter?” said I, at once.

“I came to ask you, sir,” replied Conseil.

“Confound it!” exclaimed the Canadian, “I know well enough! The Nautilus has struck; and, judging by the way she lies, I do not think she will right herself as she did the first time in Torres Straits.”

“But,” I asked, “has she at least come to the surface of the sea?”

“We do not know,” said Conseil.

“It is easy to decide,” I answered. I consulted the manometer. To my great surprise, it showed a depth of more than 180 fathoms. “What does that mean?” I exclaimed.

“We must ask Captain Nemo,” said Conseil.

“But where shall we find him?” said Ned Land.

“Follow me,” said I, to my companions.

We left the saloon. There was no one in the library. At the centre staircase, by the berths of the ship’s crew, there was no one. I thought that Captain Nemo must be in the pilot’s cage. It was best to wait. We all returned to the saloon. For twenty minutes we remained thus, trying to hear the slightest noise which might be made on board the Nautilus, when Captain Nemo entered. He seemed not to see us; his face, generally so impassive, showed signs of uneasiness. He watched the compass silently, then the manometer; and, going to the planisphere, placed his finger on a spot representing the southern seas. I would not interrupt him; but, some minutes later, when he turned towards me, I said, using one of his own expressions in the Torres Straits:

“An incident, Captain?”

“No, sir; an accident this time.”

“Serious?”

“Perhaps.”

“Is the danger immediate?”

“No.”

“The Nautilus has stranded?”

“Yes.”

“And this has happened — how?”

“From a caprice of nature, not from the ignorance of man. Not a mistake has been made in the working. But we cannot prevent equilibrium from producing its effects. We may brave human laws, but we cannot resist natural ones.”

Captain Nemo had chosen a strange moment for uttering this philosophical reflection. On the whole, his answer helped me little.

“May I ask, sir, the cause of this accident?”

“An enormous block of ice, a whole mountain, has turned over,” he replied. “When icebergs are undermined at their base by warmer water or reiterated shocks their centre of gravity rises, and the whole thing turns over. This is what has happened; one of these blocks, as it fell, struck the Nautilus, then, gliding under its hull, raised it with irresistible force, bringing it into beds which are not so thick, where it is lying on its side.”

“But can we not get the Nautilus off by emptying its reservoirs, that it might regain its equilibrium?”

“That, sir, is being done at this moment. You can hear the pump working. Look at the needle of the manometer; it shows that the Nautilus is rising, but the block of ice is floating with it; and, until some obstacle stops its ascending motion, our position cannot be altered.”

Indeed, the Nautilus still held the same position to starboard; doubtless it would right itself when the block stopped. But at this moment who knows if we may not be frightfully crushed between the two glassy surfaces? I reflected on all the consequences of our position. Captain Nemo never took his eyes off the manometer. Since the fall of the iceberg, the Nautilus had risen about a hundred and fifty feet, but it still made the same angle with the perpendicular. Suddenly a slight movement was felt in the hold. Evidently it was righting a little. Things hanging in the saloon were sensibly returning to their normal position. The partitions were nearing the upright. No one spoke. With beating hearts we watched and felt the straightening. The boards became horizontal under our feet. Ten minutes passed.

“At last we have righted!” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Captain Nemo, going to the door of the saloon.

“But are we floating?” I asked.

“Certainly,” he replied; “since the reservoirs are not empty; and, when empty, the Nautilus must rise to the surface of the sea.”

We were in open sea; but at a distance of about ten yards, on either side of the Nautilus, rose a dazzling wall of ice. Above and beneath the same wall. Above, because the lower surface of the iceberg stretched over us like an immense ceiling. Beneath, because the overturned block, having slid by degrees, had found a resting-place on the lateral walls, which kept it in that position. The Nautilus was really imprisoned in a perfect tunnel of ice more than twenty yards in breadth, filled with quiet water. It was easy to get out of it by going either forward or backward, and then make a free passage under the iceberg, some hundreds of yards deeper. The luminous ceiling had been extinguished, but the saloon was still resplendent with intense light. It was the powerful reflection from the glass partition sent violently back to the sheets of the lantern. I cannot describe the effect of the voltaic rays upon the great blocks so capriciously cut; upon every angle, every ridge, every facet was thrown a different light, according to the nature of the veins running through the ice; a dazzling mine of gems, particularly of sapphires, their blue rays crossing with the green of the emerald. Here and there were opal shades of wonderful softness, running through bright spots like diamonds of fire, the brilliancy of which the eye could not bear. The power of the lantern seemed increased a hundredfold, like a lamp through the lenticular plates of a first-class lighthouse.

“How beautiful! how beautiful!” cried Conseil.

“Yes,” I said, “it is a wonderful sight. Is it not, Ned?”

“Yes, confound it! Yes,” answered Ned Land, “it is superb! I am mad at being obliged to admit it. No one has ever seen anything like it; but the sight may cost us dear. And, if I must say all, I think we are seeing here things which God never intended man to see.”

Ned was right, it was too beautiful. Suddenly a cry from Conseil made me turn.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Shut your eyes, sir! Do not look, sir!” Saying which, Conseil clapped his hands over his eyes.

“But what is the matter, my boy?”

“I am dazzled, blinded.”

My eyes turned involuntarily towards the glass, but I could not stand the fire which seemed to devour them. I understood what had happened. The Nautilus had put on full speed. All the quiet lustre of the ice-walls was at once changed into flashes of lightning. The fire from these myriads of diamonds was blinding. It required some time to calm our troubled looks. At last the hands were taken down.

“Faith, I should never have believed it,” said Conseil.

It was then five in the morning; and at that moment a shock was felt at the bows of the Nautilus. I knew that its spur had struck a block of ice. It must have been a false manoeuvre, for this submarine tunnel, obstructed by blocks, was not very easy navigation. I thought that Captain Nemo, by changing his course, would either turn these obstacles or else follow the windings of the tunnel. In any case, the road before us could not be entirely blocked. But, contrary to my expectations, the Nautilus took a decided retrograde motion.

“We are going backwards?” said Conseil.

“Yes,” I replied. “This end of the tunnel can have no egress.”

“And then?”

“Then,” said I, “the working is easy. We must go back again, and go out at the southern opening. That is all.”

In speaking thus, I wished to appear more confident than I really was. But the retrograde motion of the Nautilus was increasing; and, reversing the screw, it carried us at great speed.

“It will be a hindrance,” said Ned.

“What does it matter, some hours more or less, provided we get out at last?”

“Yes,” repeated Ned Land, “provided we do get out at last!”

For a short time I walked from the saloon to the library. My companions were silent. I soon threw myself on an ottoman, and took a book, which my eyes overran mechanically. A quarter of an hour after, Conseil, approaching me, said, “Is what you are reading very interesting, sir?”

“Very interesting!” I replied.

“I should think so, sir. It is your own book you are reading.”

“My book?”

And indeed I was holding in my hand the work on the Great Submarine Depths. I did not even dream of it. I closed the book and returned to my walk. Ned and Conseil rose to go.

“Stay here, my friends,” said I, detaining them. “Let us remain together until we are out of this block.”

“As you please, sir,” Conseil replied.

Some hours passed. I often looked at the instruments hanging from the partition. The manometer showed that the Nautilus kept at a constant depth of more than three hundred yards; the compass still pointed to south; the log indicated a speed of twenty miles an hour, which, in such a cramped space, was very great. But Captain Nemo knew that he could not hasten too much, and that minutes were worth ages to us. At twenty-five minutes past eight a second shock took place, this time from behind. I turned pale. My companions were close by my side. I seized Conseil’s hand. Our looks expressed our feelings better than words. At this moment the Captain entered the saloon. I went up to him.

“Our course is barred southward?” I asked.

“Yes, sir. The iceberg has shifted and closed every outlet.”

“We are blocked up then?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER XVI

WANT OF AIR

Thus around the Nautilus, above and below, was an impenetrable wall of ice. We were prisoners to the iceberg. I watched the Captain. His countenance had resumed its habitual imperturbability.

“Gentlemen,” he said calmly, “there are two ways of dying in the circumstances in which we are placed.” (This puzzling person had the air of a mathematical professor lecturing to his pupils.) “The first is to be crushed; the second is to die of suffocation. I do not speak of the possibility of dying of hunger, for the supply of provisions in the Nautilus will certainly last longer than we shall. Let us, then, calculate our chances.”

“As to suffocation, Captain,” I replied, “that is not to be feared, because our reservoirs are full.”

“Just so; but they will only yield two days’ supply of air. Now, for thirty-six hours we have been hidden under the water, and already the heavy atmosphere of the Nautilus requires renewal. In forty-eight hours our reserve will be exhausted.”

“Well, Captain, can we be delivered before forty-eight hours?”

“We will attempt it, at least, by piercing the wall that surrounds us.”

“On which side?”

“Sound will tell us. I am going to run the Nautilus aground on the lower bank, and my men will attack the iceberg on the side that is least thick.”

Captain Nemo went out. Soon I discovered by a hissing noise that the water was entering the reservoirs. The Nautilus sank slowly, and rested on the ice at a depth of 350 yards, the depth at which the lower bank was immersed.

“My friends,” I said, “our situation is serious, but I rely on your courage and energy.”

“Sir,” replied the Canadian, “I am ready to do anything for the general safety.”

“Good! Ned,” and I held out my hand to the Canadian.

“I will add,” he continued, “that, being as handy with the pickaxe as with the harpoon, if I can be useful to the Captain, he can command my services.”

“He will not refuse your help. Come, Ned!”

I led him to the room where the crew of the Nautilus were putting on their cork-jackets. I told the Captain of Ned’s proposal, which he accepted. The Canadian put on his sea-costume, and was ready as soon as his companions. When Ned was dressed, I re-entered the drawing-room, where the panes of glass were open, and, posted near Conseil, I examined the ambient beds that supported the Nautilus. Some instants after, we saw a dozen of the crew set foot on the bank of ice, and among them Ned Land, easily known by his stature. Captain Nemo was with them. Before proceeding to dig the walls, he took the soundings, to be sure of working in the right direction. Long sounding lines were sunk in the side walls, but after fifteen yards they were again stopped by the thick wall. It was useless to attack it on the ceiling-like surface, since the iceberg itself measured more than 400 yards in height. Captain Nemo then sounded the lower surface. There ten yards of wall separated us from the water, so great was the thickness of the ice-field. It was necessary, therefore, to cut from it a piece equal in extent to the waterline of the Nautilus. There were about 6,000 cubic yards to detach, so as to dig a hole by which we could descend to the ice-field. The work had begun immediately and carried on with indefatigable energy. Instead of digging round the Nautilus which would have involved greater difficulty, Captain Nemo had an immense trench made at eight yards from the port-quarter. Then the men set to work simultaneously with their screws on several points of its circumference. Presently the pickaxe attacked this compact matter vigorously, and large blocks were detached from the mass. By a curious effect of specific gravity, these blocks, lighter than water, fled, so to speak, to the vault of the tunnel, that increased in thickness at the top in proportion as it diminished at the base. But that mattered little, so long as the lower part grew thinner. After two hours' hard work, Ned Land came in exhausted. He and his comrades were replaced by new workers, whom Conseil and I joined. The second lieutenant of the Nautilus superintended us. The water seemed singularly cold, but I soon got warm handling the pickaxe. My movements were free enough, although they were made under a pressure of thirty atmospheres. When I re-entered, after working two hours, to take some food and rest, I found a perceptible difference between the pure fluid with which the Rouquayrol engine supplied me and the atmosphere of the Nautilus, already charged with carbonic acid. The air had not been renewed for forty-eight hours, and its vivifying qualities were considerably enfeebled. However, after a lapse of twelve hours, we had only raised a block of ice one yard thick, on the marked surface, which was about 600 cubic yards! Reckoning that it took twelve hours to accomplish this much it would take five nights and four days to bring this enterprise to a satisfactory conclusion. Five nights and four days! And we have only air enough for two days in the reservoirs! “Without taking into account,” said

Ned, “that, even if we get out of this infernal prison, we shall also be imprisoned under the iceberg, shut out from all possible communication with the atmosphere.” True enough! Who could then foresee the minimum of time necessary for our deliverance? We might be suffocated before the Nautilus could regain the surface of the waves? Was it destined to perish in this ice-tomb, with all those it enclosed? The situation was terrible. But everyone had looked the danger in the face, and each was determined to do his duty to the last.

As I expected, during the night a new block a yard square was carried away, and still further sank the immense hollow. But in the morning when, dressed in my cork-jacket, I traversed the slushy mass at a temperature of six or seven degrees below zero, I remarked that the side walls were gradually closing in. The beds of water farthest from the trench, that were not warmed by the men’s work, showed a tendency to solidification. In presence of this new and imminent danger, what would become of our chances of safety, and how hinder the solidification of this liquid medium, that would burst the partitions of the Nautilus like glass?

I did not tell my companions of this new danger. What was the good of damping the energy they displayed in the painful work of escape? But when I went on board again, I told Captain Nemo of this grave complication.

“I know it,” he said, in that calm tone which could counteract the most terrible apprehensions. “It is one danger more; but I see no way of escaping it; the only chance of safety is to go quicker than solidification. We must be beforehand with it, that is all.”

On this day for several hours I used my pickaxe vigorously. The work kept me up. Besides, to work was to quit the Nautilus, and breathe directly the pure air drawn from the reservoirs, and supplied by our apparatus, and to quit the impoverished and vitiated atmosphere. Towards evening the trench was dug one yard deeper. When I returned on board, I was nearly suffocated by the carbonic acid with which the air was filled — ah! if we had only the chemical means to drive away this deleterious gas. We had plenty of oxygen; all this water contained a considerable quantity, and by dissolving it with our powerful piles, it would restore the vivifying fluid. I had thought well over it; but of what good was that, since the carbonic acid produced by our respiration had invaded every part of the vessel? To absorb it, it was necessary to fill some jars with caustic potash, and to shake them incessantly. Now this substance was wanting on board, and nothing could replace it. On that evening, Captain Nemo ought to open the taps of his reservoirs, and let some pure air into the interior of the Nautilus; without this precaution we could not get rid of the sense of suffocation. The next day, March 26th, I resumed my miner's work in beginning the fifth yard. The side walls and the lower surface of the iceberg thickened visibly. It was evident that they would meet before the Nautilus was able to disengage itself. Despair seized me for an instant; my pickaxe nearly fell from my hands. What was the good of digging if I must be suffocated, crushed by the water that was turning into stone? — a punishment that the ferocity of the savages even would not have invented! Just then Captain Nemo passed near me. I touched his hand and showed him the walls of our prison. The wall to port had advanced to at least four yards from the hull of the Nautilus. The Captain understood me, and signed me to follow him. We went on board. I took off my cork-jacket and accompanied him into the drawing-room.

"M. Aronnax, we must attempt some desperate means, or we shall be sealed up in this solidified water as in cement."

"Yes; but what is to be done?"

“Ah! if my Nautilus were strong enough to bear this pressure without being crushed!”

“Well?” I asked, not catching the Captain’s idea.

“Do you not understand,” he replied, “that this congelation of water will help us? Do you not see that by its solidification, it would burst through this field of ice that imprisons us, as, when it freezes, it bursts the hardest stones? Do you not perceive that it would be an agent of safety instead of destruction?”

“Yes, Captain, perhaps. But, whatever resistance to crushing the Nautilus possesses, it could not support this terrible pressure, and would be flattened like an iron plate.”

“I know it, sir. Therefore we must not reckon on the aid of nature, but on our own exertions. We must stop this solidification. Not only will the side walls be pressed together; but there is not ten feet of water before or behind the Nautilus. The congelation gains on us on all sides.”

“How long will the air in the reservoirs last for us to breathe on board?”

The Captain looked in my face. “After to-morrow they will be empty!”

A cold sweat came over me. However, ought I to have been astonished at the answer? On March 22, the Nautilus was in the open polar seas. We were at 26°. For five days we had lived on the reserve on board. And what was left of the respirable air must be kept for the workers. Even now, as I write, my recollection is still so vivid that an involuntary terror seizes me and my lungs seem to be without air. Meanwhile, Captain Nemo reflected silently, and evidently an idea had struck him; but he seemed to reject it. At last, these words escaped his lips:

“Boiling water!” he muttered.

“Boiling water?” I cried.

“Yes, sir. We are enclosed in a space that is relatively confined. Would not jets of boiling water, constantly injected by the pumps, raise the temperature in this part and stay the congelation?”

“Let us try it,” I said resolutely.

“Let us try it, Professor.”

The thermometer then stood at 7° outside. Captain Nemo took me to the galleys, where the vast distillatory machines stood that furnished the drinkable water by evaporation. They filled these with water, and all the electric heat from the piles was thrown through the worms bathed in the liquid. In a few minutes this water reached 100°. It was directed towards the pumps, while fresh water replaced it in proportion. The heat developed by the troughs was such that cold water, drawn up from the sea after only having gone through the machines, came boiling into the body of the pump. The injection was begun, and three hours after the thermometer marked 6° below zero outside. One degree was gained. Two hours later the thermometer only marked 4°.

“We shall succeed,” I said to the Captain, after having anxiously watched the result of the operation.

“I think,” he answered, “that we shall not be crushed. We have no more suffocation to fear.”

During the night the temperature of the water rose to 1° below zero. The injections could not carry it to a higher point. But, as the congelation of the sea-water produces at least 2°, I was at least reassured against the dangers of solidification.

The next day, March 27th, six yards of ice had been cleared, twelve feet only remaining to be cleared away. There was yet forty-eight hours' work. The air could not be renewed in the interior of the Nautilus. And this day would make it worse. An intolerable weight oppressed me. Towards three o'clock in the evening this feeling rose to a violent degree. Yawns dislocated my jaws. My lungs panted as they inhaled this burning fluid, which became rarefied more and more. A moral torpor took hold of me. I was powerless, almost unconscious. My brave Conseil, though exhibiting the same symptoms and suffering in the same manner, never left me. He took my hand and encouraged me, and I heard him murmur, "Oh! if I could only not breathe, so as to leave more air for my master!"

Tears came into my eyes on hearing him speak thus. If our situation to all was intolerable in the interior, with what haste and gladness would we put on our cork-jackets to work in our turn! Pickaxes sounded on the frozen ice-beds. Our arms ached, the skin was torn off our hands. But what were these fatigues, what did the wounds matter? Vital air came to the lungs! We breathed! we breathed!

All this time no one prolonged his voluntary task beyond the prescribed time. His task accomplished, each one handed in turn to his panting companions the apparatus that supplied him with life. Captain Nemo set the example, and submitted first to this severe discipline. When the time came, he gave up his apparatus to another and returned to the vitiated air on board, calm, unflinching, unmurmuring.

On that day the ordinary work was accomplished with unusual vigour. Only two yards remained to be raised from the surface. Two yards only separated us from the open sea. But the reservoirs were nearly emptied of air. The little that remained ought to be kept for the workers; not a particle for the Nautilus. When I went back on board, I was half suffocated. What a night! I know not how to describe it. The next day my breathing was oppressed. Dizziness accompanied the pain in my head and made me like a drunken man. My companions showed the same symptoms. Some of the crew had rattling in the throat.

On that day, the sixth of our imprisonment, Captain Nemo, finding the pickaxes work too slowly, resolved to crush the ice-bed that still separated us from the liquid sheet. This man’s coolness and energy never forsook him. He subdued his physical pains by moral force.

By his orders the vessel was lightened, that is to say, raised from the ice-bed by a change of specific gravity. When it floated they towed it so as to bring it above the immense trench made on the level of the water-line. Then, filling his reservoirs of water, he descended and shut himself up in the hole.

Just then all the crew came on board, and the double door of communication was shut. The Nautilus then rested on the bed of ice, which was not one yard thick, and which the sounding leads had perforated in a thousand places. The taps of the reservoirs were then opened, and a hundred cubic yards of water was let in, increasing the weight of the Nautilus to 1,800 tons. We waited, we listened, forgetting our sufferings in hope. Our safety depended on this last chance. Notwithstanding the buzzing in my head, I soon heard the humming sound under the hull of the Nautilus. The ice cracked with a singular noise, like tearing paper, and the Nautilus sank.

“We are off!” murmured Conseil in my ear.

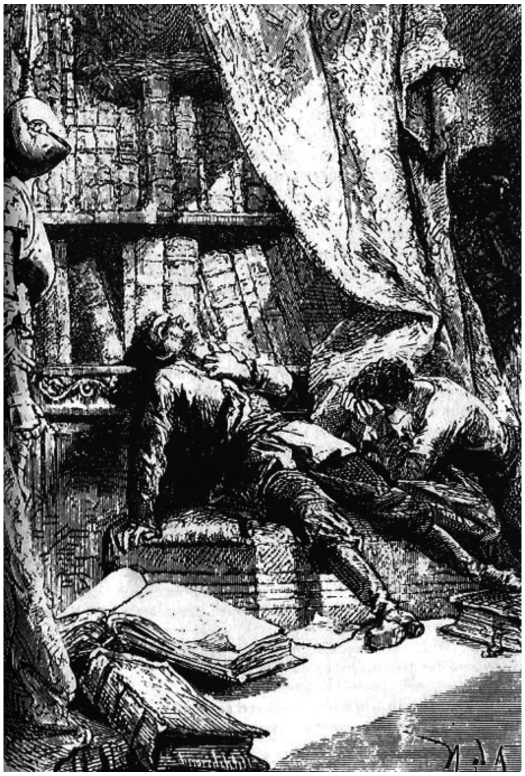

I could not answer him. I seized his hand, and pressed it convulsively. All at once, carried away by its frightful overcharge, the Nautilus sank like a bullet under the waters, that is to say, it fell as if it was in a vacuum. Then all the electric force was put on the pumps, that soon began to let the water out of the reservoirs. After some minutes, our fall was stopped. Soon, too, the manometer indicated an ascending movement. The screw, going at full speed, made the iron hull tremble to its very bolts and drew us towards the north. But if this floating under the iceberg is to last another day before we reach the open sea, I shall be dead first.

Half stretched upon a divan in the library, I was suffocating. My face was purple, my lips blue, my faculties suspended. I neither saw nor heard. All notion of time had gone from my mind. My muscles could not contract. I do not know how many hours passed thus, but I was conscious of the agony that was coming over me. I felt as if I was going to die. Suddenly I came to. Some breaths of air penetrated my lungs. Had we risen to the surface of the waves? Were we free of the iceberg? No! Ned and Conseil, my two brave friends, were sacrificing themselves to save me. Some particles of air still remained at the bottom of one apparatus. Instead of using it, they had kept it for me, and, while they were being suffocated, they gave me life, drop by drop. I wanted to push back the thing; they held my hands, and for some moments I breathed freely. I looked at the clock; it was eleven in the morning. It ought to be the 28th of March. The Nautilus went at a frightful pace, forty miles an hour. It literally tore through the water. Where was Captain Nemo? Had he succumbed? Were his companions dead with him? At the moment the manometer indicated that we were not more than twenty feet from the surface. A mere plate of ice separated us from the atmosphere. Could we not break it? Perhaps. In any case the Nautilus was going to attempt it. I felt that it was in an oblique position, lowering the stern, and raising the bows. The introduction of water had been the means of disturbing its equilibrium. Then, impelled by its powerful screw, it attacked the ice-field from beneath like a formidable battering-ram. It broke it by backing and then rushing forward against the field, which gradually gave way; and at last, dashing suddenly against it, shot forwards on the ice-field, that crushed beneath its weight. The panel was opened — one might say torn off — and the pure air came in in abundance to all parts of the Nautilus.

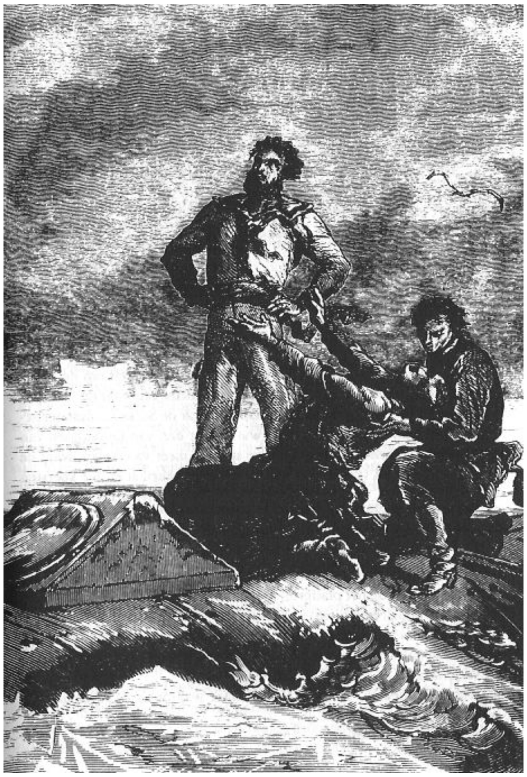

CHAPTER XVII

FROM CAPE HORN TO THE AMAZON

How I got on to the platform, I have no idea; perhaps the Canadian had carried me there. But I breathed, I inhaled the vivifying sea-air. My two companions were getting drunk with the fresh particles. The other unhappy men had been so long without food, that they could not with impunity indulge in the simplest aliments that were given them. We, on the contrary, had no end to restrain ourselves; we could draw this air freely into our lungs, and it was the breeze, the breeze alone, that filled us with this keen enjoyment.

“Ah!” said Conseil, “how delightful this oxygen is! Master need not fear to breathe it. There is enough for everybody.”

Ned Land did not speak, but he opened his jaws wide enough to frighten a shark. Our strength soon returned, and, when I looked round me, I saw we were alone on the platform. The foreign seamen in the Nautilus were contented with the air that circulated in the interior; none of them had come to drink in the open air.

The first words I spoke were words of gratitude and thankfulness to my two companions. Ned and Conseil had prolonged my life during the last hours of this long agony. All my gratitude could not repay such devotion.

“My friends,” said I, “we are bound one to the other for ever, and I am under infinite obligations to you.”

“Which I shall take advantage of,” exclaimed the Canadian.

“What do you mean?” said Conseil.

“I mean that I shall take you with me when I leave this infernal Nautilus.”

“Well,” said Conseil, “after all this, are we going right?”

“Yes,” I replied, “for we are going the way of the sun, and here the sun is in the north.”

“No doubt,” said Ned Land; “but it remains to be seen whether he will bring the ship into the Pacific or the Atlantic Ocean, that is, into frequented or deserted seas.”

I could not answer that question, and I feared that Captain Nemo would rather take us to the vast ocean that touches the coasts of Asia and America at the same time. He would thus complete the tour round the submarine world, and return to those waters in which the Nautilus could sail freely. We ought, before long, to settle this important point. The Nautilus went at a rapid pace. The polar circle was soon passed, and the course shaped for Cape Horn. We were off the American point, March 31st, at seven o’clock in the evening. Then all our past sufferings were forgotten. The remembrance of that imprisonment in the ice was effaced from our minds. We only thought of the future. Captain Nemo did not appear again either in the drawing-room or on the platform. The point shown each day on the planisphere, and, marked by the lieutenant, showed me the exact direction of the Nautilus. Now, on that evening, it was evident, to, my great satisfaction, that we were going back to the North by the Atlantic. The next day, April 1st, when the Nautilus ascended to the surface some minutes before noon, we sighted land to the west. It was Terra del Fuego, which the first navigators named thus from seeing the quantity of smoke that rose from the natives’ huts. The coast seemed low to me, but in the distance rose high mountains. I even thought I had a glimpse of Mount Sarmiento, that rises 2,070 yards above the level of the sea, with a very pointed summit, which, according as it is misty or clear, is a sign of fine or of wet weather. At this moment the peak was clearly defined against the sky. The Nautilus, diving again under the water, approached the coast, which was only some few miles off. From the glass windows in the drawing-room, I saw long seaweeds and gigantic fuci and varech, of which the open polar sea contains so many specimens, with their sharp polished filaments; they measured about 300 yards in length — real cables, thicker than one’s thumb; and, having great tenacity, they are often used as ropes for vessels. Another weed known as velp, with leaves four feet long, buried in the coral concretions, hung at the bottom. It served as nest and food for myriads of crustacea and molluscs, crabs, and cuttlefish. There seals and otters had splendid repasts, eating the flesh of fish with sea-vegetables, according to the English fashion. Over this fertile and luxuriant ground the Nautilus passed with great rapidity. Towards evening it approached the Falkland group, the rough summits of which I recognised the following day. The depth of the sea was moderate. On the shores our nets brought in beautiful specimens of sea weed, and particularly a certain fucus, the roots of which were filled with the best mussels in the world. Geese and ducks fell by dozens on the platform, and soon took their places in the pantry on board.

When the last heights of the Falklands had disappeared from the horizon, the Nautilus sank to between twenty and twenty-five yards, and followed the American coast. Captain Nemo did not show himself. Until the 3rd of April we did not quit the shores of Patagonia, sometimes under the ocean, sometimes at the surface. The Nautilus passed beyond the large estuary formed by the Uraguay. Its direction was northwards, and followed the long windings of the coast of South America. We had then made 1,600 miles since our embarkation in the seas of Japan. About eleven o’clock in the morning the Tropic of Capricorn was crossed on the thirty-seventh meridian, and we passed Cape Frio standing out to sea. Captain Nemo, to Ned Land’s great displeasure, did not like the neighbourhood of the inhabited coasts of Brazil, for we went at a giddy speed. Not a fish, not a bird of the swiftest kind could follow us, and the natural curiosities of these seas escaped all observation.

This speed was kept up for several days, and in the evening of the 9th of April we sighted the most westerly point of South America that forms Cape San Roque. But then the Nautilus swerved again, and sought the lowest depth of a submarine valley which is between this Cape and Sierra Leone on the African coast. This valley bifurcates to the parallel of the Antilles, and terminates at the mouth by the enormous depression of 9,000 yards. In this place, the geological basin of the ocean forms, as far as the Lesser Antilles, a cliff to three and a half miles perpendicular in height, and, at the parallel of the Cape Verde Islands, an other wall not less considerable, that encloses thus all the sunk continent of the Atlantic. The bottom of this immense valley is dotted with some mountains, that give to these submarine places a picturesque aspect. I speak, moreover, from the manuscript charts that were in the library of the Nautilus — charts evidently due to Captain Nemo’s hand, and made after his personal observations. For two days the desert and deep waters were visited by means of the inclined planes. The Nautilus was furnished with long diagonal broadsides which carried it to all elevations. But on the 11th of April it rose suddenly, and land appeared at the mouth of the Amazon River, a vast estuary, the embouchure of which is so considerable that it freshens the sea-water for the distance of several leagues.

The equator was crossed. Twenty miles to the west were the Guianas, a French territory, on which we could have found an easy refuge; but a stiff breeze was blowing, and the furious waves would not have allowed a single boat to face them. Ned Land understood that, no doubt, for he spoke not a word about it. For my part, I made no allusion to his schemes of flight, for I would not urge him to make an attempt that must inevitably fail. I made the time pass pleasantly by interesting studies. During the days of April 11th and 12th, the Nautilus did not leave the surface of the sea, and the net brought in a marvellous haul of Zoophytes, fish and reptiles. Some zoophytes had been fished up by the chain of the nets; they were for the most part beautiful phyctallines, belonging to the actinidian family, and among other species the phyctalis protexta, peculiar to that part of the ocean, with a little cylindrical trunk, ornamented With vertical lines, speckled with red dots, crowning a marvellous blossoming of tentacles. As to the molluscs, they consisted of some I had already observed — turritellas, olive porphyras, with regular lines intercrossed, with red spots standing out plainly against the flesh; odd pteroceras, like petrified scorpions; translucid hyaleas, argonauts, cuttle-fish (excellent eating), and certain species of calmars that naturalists of antiquity have classed amongst the flying-fish, and that serve principally for bait for cod-fishing. I had now an opportunity of studying several species of fish on these shores. Amongst the cartilaginous ones, petromyzons-pricka, a sort of eel, fifteen inches long, with a greenish head, violet fins, grey-blue back, brown belly, silvered and sown with bright spots, the pupil of the eye encircled with gold — a curious animal, that the current of the Amazon had drawn to the sea, for they inhabit fresh waters — tuberculated streaks, with pointed snouts, and a long loose tail, armed with a long jagged sting; little sharks, a yard long, grey and whitish skin, and several rows of teeth, bent back, that are generally known by the name of pantouffles; vespertilios, a kind of red isosceles triangle, half a yard long, to which pectorals are attached by fleshy prolongations that make them look like bats, but that their horny appendage, situated near the nostrils, has given them the name of sea-unicorns; lastly, some species of balistae, the curassavian, whose spots were of a brilliant gold colour, and the capriscus of clear violet, and with varying shades like a pigeon’s throat.

I end here this catalogue, which is somewhat dry perhaps, but very exact, with a series of bony fish that I observed in passing belonging to the apteronotes, and whose snout is white as snow, the body of a beautiful black, marked with a very long loose fleshy strip; odontognathes, armed with spikes; sardines nine inches long, glittering with a bright silver light; a species of mackerel provided with two anal fins; centronotes of a blackish tint, that are fished for with torches, long fish, two yards in length, with fat flesh, white and firm, which, when they arc fresh, taste like eel, and when dry, like smoked salmon; labres, half red, covered with scales only at the bottom of the dorsal and anal fins; chrysoptera, on which gold and silver blend their brightness with that of the ruby and topaz; golden-tailed spares, the flesh of which is extremely delicate, and whose phosphorescent properties betray them in the midst of the waters; orange-coloured spares with long tongues; maigres, with gold caudal fins, dark thorn-tails, anableps of Surinam, etc.

Notwithstanding this “et cetera,” I must not omit to mention fish that Conseil will long remember, and with good reason. One of our nets had hauled up a sort of very flat ray fish, which, with the tail cut off, formed a perfect disc, and weighed twenty ounces. It was white underneath, red above, with large round spots of dark blue encircled with black, very glossy skin, terminating in a bilobed fin. Laid out on the platform, it struggled, tried to turn itself by convulsive movements, and made so many efforts, that one last turn had nearly sent it into the sea. But Conseil, not wishing to let the fish go, rushed to it, and, before I could prevent him, had seized it with both hands. In a moment he was overthrown, his legs in the air, and half his body paralysed, crying —

“Oh! master, master! help me!”

It was the first time the poor boy had spoken to me so familiarly. The Canadian and I took him up, and rubbed his contracted arms till he became sensible. The unfortunate Conseil had attacked a cramp-fish of the most dangerous kind, the cumana. This odd animal, in a medium conductor like water, strikes fish at several yards’ distance, so great is the power of its electric organ, the two principal surfaces of which do not measure less than twenty-seven square feet. The next day, April 12th, the Nautilus approached the Dutch coast, near the mouth of the Maroni. There several groups of sea-cows herded together; they were manatees, that, like the dugong and the stellera, belong to the skenian order. These beautiful animals, peaceable and inoffensive, from eighteen to twenty-one feet in length, weigh at least sixteen hundredweight. I told Ned Land and Conseil that provident nature had assigned an important role to these mammalia. Indeed, they, like the seals, are designed to graze on the submarine prairies, and thus destroy the accumulation of weed that obstructs the tropical rivers.

“And do you know,” I added, “what has been the result since men have almost entirely annihilated this useful race? That the putrefied weeds have poisoned the air, and the poisoned air causes the yellow fever, that desolates these beautiful countries. Enormous vegetations are multiplied under the torrid seas, and the evil is irresistibly developed from the mouth of the Rio de la Plata to Florida. If we are to believe Toussenel, this plague is nothing to what it would be if the seas were cleaned of whales and seals. Then, infested with poulps, medusae, and cuttle-fish, they would become immense centres of infection, since their waves would not possess ‘these vast stomachs that God had charged to infest the surface of the seas.’”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE POULPS

For several days the Nautilus kept off from the American coast. Evidently it did not wish to risk the tides of the Gulf of Mexico or of the sea of the Antilles. April 16th, we sighted Martinique and Guadaloupe from a distance of about thirty miles. I saw their tall peaks for an instant. The Canadian, who counted on carrying out his projects in the Gulf, by either landing or hailing one of the numerous boats that coast from one island to another, was quite disheartened. Flight would have been quite practicable, if Ned Land had been able to take possession of the boat without the Captain’s knowledge. But in the open sea it could not be thought of. The Canadian, Conseil, and I had a long conversation on this subject. For six months we had been prisoners on board the Nautilus. We had travelled 17,000 leagues; and, as Ned Land said, there was no reason why it should come to an end. We could hope nothing from the Captain of the Nautilus, but only from ourselves. Besides, for some time past he had become graver, more retired, less sociable. He seemed to shun me. I met him rarely. Formerly he was pleased to explain the submarine marvels to me; now he left me to my studies, and came no more to the saloon. What change had come over him? For what cause? For my part, I did not wish to bury with me my curious and novel studies. I had now the power to write the true book of the sea; and this book, sooner or later, I wished to see daylight. The land nearest us was the archipelago of the Bahamas. There rose high submarine cliffs covered with large weeds. It was about eleven o’clock when Ned Land drew my attention to a formidable pricking, like the sting of an ant, which was produced by means of large seaweeds.

“Well,” I said, “these are proper caverns for poulps, and I should not be astonished to see some of these monsters.”

“What!” said Conseil; “cuttlefish, real cuttlefish of the cephalopod class?”

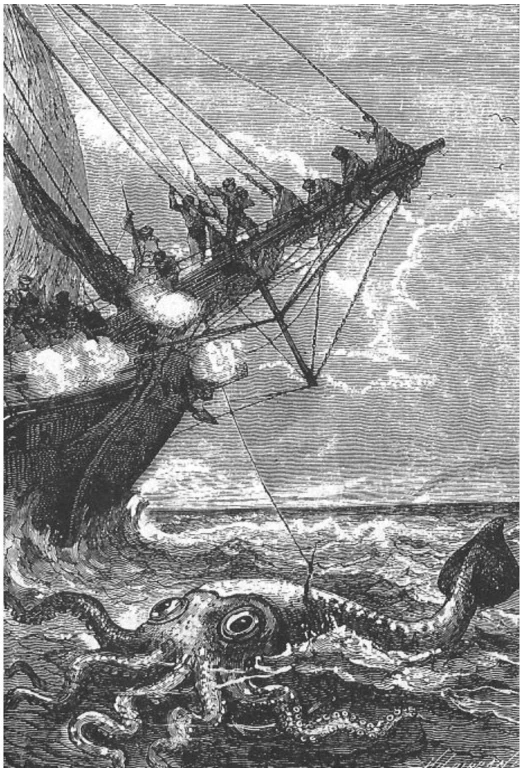

“No,” I said, “poulps of huge dimensions.”

“I will never believe that such animals exist,” said Ned.

“Well,” said Conseil, with the most serious air in the world, “I remember perfectly to have seen a large vessel drawn under the waves by an octopus’s arm.”

“You saw that?” said the Canadian.

“Yes, Ned.”

“With your own eyes?”

“With my own eyes.”

“Where, pray, might that be?”

“At St. Malo,” answered Conseil.

“In the port?” said Ned, ironically.

“No; in a church,” replied Conseil.

“In a church!” cried the Canadian.

“Yes; friend Ned. In a picture representing the poulp in question.”

“Good!” said Ned Land, bursting out laughing.

“He is quite right,” I said. “I have heard of this picture; but the subject represented is taken from a legend, and you know what to think of legends in the matter of natural history. Besides, when it is a question of monsters, the imagination is apt to run wild. Not only is it supposed that these poulps can draw down vessels, but a certain Olaus Magnus speaks of an octopus a mile long that is more like an island than an animal. It is also said that the Bishop of Nidros was building an altar on an immense rock. Mass finished, the rock began to walk, and returned to the sea. The rock was a poulp. Another Bishop, Pontoppidan, speaks also of a poulp on which a regiment of cavalry could manoeuvre. Lastly, the ancient naturalists speak of monsters whose mouths were like gulfs, and which were too large to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar.”

“But how much is true of these stories?” asked Conseil.

“Nothing, my friends; at least of that which passes the limit of truth to get to fable or legend. Nevertheless, there must be some ground for the imagination of the story-tellers. One cannot deny that poulps and cuttlefish exist of a large species, inferior, however, to the cetaceans. Aristotle has stated the dimensions of a cuttlefish as five cubits, or nine feet two inches. Our fishermen frequently see some that are more than four feet long. Some skeletons of poulps are preserved in the museums of Trieste and Montpelier, that measure two yards in length. Besides, according to the calculations of some naturalists, one of these animals only six feet long would have tentacles twenty-seven feet long. That would suffice to make a formidable monster.”

“Do they fish for them in these days?” asked Ned.

“If they do not fish for them, sailors see them at least. One of my friends, Captain Paul Bos of Havre, has often affirmed that he met one of these monsters of colossal dimensions in the Indian seas. But the most astonishing fact, and which does not permit of the denial of the existence of these gigantic animals, happened some years ago, in 1861.”

“What is the fact?” asked Ned Land.

“This is it. In 1861, to the north-east of Teneriffe, very nearly in the same latitude we are in now, the crew of the despatch-boat Alector perceived a monstrous cuttlefish swimming in the waters. Captain Bouguer went near to the animal, and attacked it with harpoon and guns, without much success, for balls and harpoons glided over the soft flesh. After several fruitless attempts the crew tried to pass a slip-knot round the body of the mollusc. The noose slipped as far as the tail fins and there stopped. They tried then to haul it on board, but its weight was so considerable that the tightness of the cord separated the tail from the body, and, deprived of this ornament, he disappeared under the water.”

“Indeed! is that a fact?”

“An indisputable fact, my good Ned. They proposed to name this poulp `Bouguer’s cuttlefish.’”

“What length was it?” asked the Canadian.

“Did it not measure about six yards?” said Conseil, who, posted at the window, was examining again the irregular windings of the cliff.

“Precisely,” I replied.

“Its head,” rejoined Conseil, “was it not crowned with eight tentacles, that beat the water like a nest of serpents?”

“Precisely.”

“Had not its eyes, placed at the back of its head, considerable development?”

“Yes, Conseil.”

“And was not its mouth like a parrot’s beak?”

“Exactly, Conseil.”

“Very well! no offence to master,” he replied, quietly; “if this is not Bouguer’s cuttlefish, it is, at least, one of its brothers.”

I looked at Conseil. Ned Land hurried to the window.

“What a horrible beast!” he cried.

I looked in my turn, and could not repress a gesture of disgust. Before my eyes was a horrible monster worthy to figure in the legends of the marvellous. It was an immense cuttlefish, being eight yards long. It swam crossways in the direction of the Nautilus with great speed, watching us with its enormous staring green eyes. Its eight arms, or rather feet, fixed to its head, that have given the name of cephalopod to these animals, were twice as long as its body, and were twisted like the furies’ hair. One could see the 250 air holes on the inner side of the tentacles. The monster’s mouth, a horned beak like a parrot’s, opened and shut vertically. Its tongue, a horned substance, furnished with several rows of pointed teeth, came out quivering from this veritable pair of shears. What a freak of nature, a bird’s beak on a mollusc! Its spindle-like body formed a fleshy mass that might weigh 4,000 to 5,000 lb.; the, varying colour changing with great rapidity, according to the irritation of the animal, passed successively from livid grey to reddish brown. What irritated this mollusc? No doubt the presence of the Nautilus, more formidable than itself, and on which its suckers or its jaws had no hold. Yet, what monsters these poulps are! what vitality the Creator has given them! what vigour in their movements! and they possess three hearts! Chance had brought us in presence of this cuttlefish, and I did not wish to lose the opportunity of carefully studying this specimen of cephalopods. I overcame the horror that inspired me, and, taking a pencil, began to draw it.

“Perhaps this is the same which the Alector saw,” said Conseil.

“No,” replied the Canadian; “for this is whole, and the other had lost its tail.”

“That is no reason,” I replied. “The arms and tails of these animals are re-formed by renewal; and in seven years the tail of Bouguer’s cuttlefish has no doubt had time to grow.”

By this time other poulps appeared at the port light. I counted seven. They formed a procession after the Nautilus, and I heard their beaks gnashing against the iron hull. I continued my work. These monsters kept in the water with such precision that they seemed immovable. Suddenly the Nautilus stopped. A shock made it tremble in every plate.

“Have we struck anything?” I asked.

“In any case,” replied the Canadian, “we shall be free, for we are floating.”

The Nautilus was floating, no doubt, but it did not move. A minute passed. Captain Nemo, followed by his lieutenant, entered the drawing-room. I had not seen him for some time. He seemed dull. Without noticing or speaking to us, he went to the panel, looked at the poulps, and said something to his lieutenant. The latter went out. Soon the panels were shut. The ceiling was lighted. I went towards the Captain.

“A curious collection of poulps?” I said.

“Yes, indeed, Mr. Naturalist,” he replied; “and we are going to fight them, man to beast.”

I looked at him. I thought I had not heard aright.

“Man to beast?” I repeated.

“Yes, sir. The screw is stopped. I think that the horny jaws of one of the cuttlefish is entangled in the blades. That is what prevents our moving.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Rise to the surface, and slaughter this vermin.”

“A difficult enterprise.”

“Yes, indeed. The electric bullets are powerless against the soft flesh, where they do not find resistance enough to go off. But we shall attack them with the hatchet.”

“And the harpoon, sir,” said the Canadian, “if you do not refuse my help.”

“I will accept it, Master Land.”

“We will follow you,” I said, and, following Captain Nemo, we went towards the central staircase.

There, about ten men with boarding-hatchets were ready for the attack. Conseil and I took two hatchets; Ned Land seized a harpoon. The Nautilus had then risen to the surface. One of the sailors, posted on the top ladderstep, unscrewed the bolts of the panels. But hardly were the screws loosed, when the panel rose with great violence, evidently drawn by the suckers of a poulp’s arm. Immediately one of these arms slid like a serpent down the opening and twenty others were above. With one blow of the axe, Captain Nemo cut this formidable tentacle, that slid wriggling down the ladder. Just as we were pressing one on the other to reach the platform, two other arms, lashing the air, came down on the seaman placed before Captain Nemo, and lifted him up with irresistible power. Captain Nemo uttered a cry, and rushed out. We hurried after him.

What a scene! The unhappy man, seized by the tentacle and fixed to the suckers, was balanced in the air at the caprice of this enormous trunk. He rattled in his throat, he was stifled, he cried, “Help! help!” These words, spoken in French, startled me! I had a fellow-countryman on board, perhaps several! That heart-rending cry! I shall hear it all my life. The unfortunate man was lost. Who could rescue him from that powerful pressure? However, Captain Nemo had rushed to the poulp, and with one blow of the axe had cut through one arm. His lieutenant struggled furiously against other monsters that crept on the flanks of the Nautilus. The crew fought with their axes. The Canadian, Conseil, and I buried our weapons in the fleshy masses; a strong smell of musk penetrated the atmosphere. It was horrible!

For one instant, I thought the unhappy man, entangled with the poulp, would be torn from its powerful suction. Seven of the eight arms had been cut off. One only wriggled in the air, brandishing the victim like a feather. But just as Captain Nemo and his lieutenant threw themselves on it, the animal ejected a stream of black liquid. We were blinded with it. When the cloud dispersed, the cuttlefish had disappeared, and my unfortunate countryman with it. Ten or twelve poulps now invaded the platform and sides of the Nautilus. We rolled pell-mell into the midst of this nest of serpents, that wriggled on the platform in the waves of blood and ink. It seemed as though these slimy tentacles sprang up like the hydra’s heads. Ned Land’s harpoon, at each stroke, was plunged into the staring eyes of the cuttle fish. But my bold companion was suddenly overturned by the tentacles of a monster he had not been able to avoid.

Ah! how my heart beat with emotion and horror! The formidable beak of a cuttlefish was open over Ned Land. The unhappy man would be cut in two. I rushed to his succour. But Captain Nemo was before me; his axe disappeared between the two enormous jaws, and, miraculously saved, the

Canadian, rising, plunged his harpoon deep into the triple heart of the poulp.

“I owed myself this revenge!” said the Captain to the Canadian.

Ned bowed without replying. The combat had lasted a quarter of an hour. The monsters, vanquished and mutilated, left us at last, and disappeared under the waves. Captain Nemo, covered with blood, nearly exhausted, gazed upon the sea that had swallowed up one of his companions, and great tears gathered in his eyes.

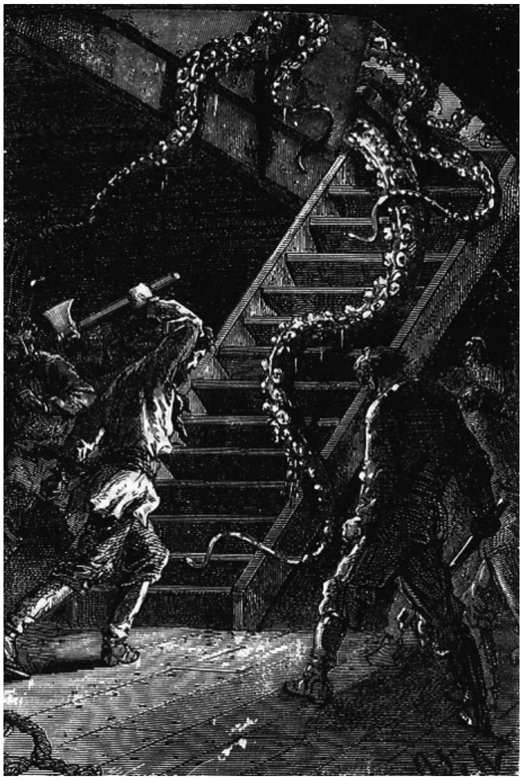

CHAPTER XIX

THE GULF STREAM

This terrible scene of the 20th of April none of us can ever forget. I have written it under the influence of violent emotion. Since then I have revised the recital; I have read it to Conseil and to the Canadian. They found it exact as to facts, but insufficient as to effect. To paint such pictures, one must have the pen of the most illustrious of our poets, the author of The Toilers of the Deep.

I have said that Captain Nemo wept while watching the waves; his grief was great. It was the second companion he had lost since our arrival on board, and what a death! That friend, crushed, stifled, bruised by the dreadful arms of a poulp, pounded by his iron jaws, would not rest with his comrades in the peaceful coral cemetery! In the midst of the struggle, it was the despairing cry uttered by the unfortunate man that had torn my heart. The poor Frenchman, forgetting his conventional language, had taken to his own mother tongue, to utter a last appeal! Amongst the crew of the Nautilus, associated with the body and soul of the Captain, recoiling like him from all contact with men, I had a fellow-countryman. Did he alone represent France in this mysterious association, evidently composed of individuals of divers nationalities? It was one of these insoluble problems that rose up unceasingly before my mind!

Captain Nemo entered his room, and I saw him no more for some time. But that he was sad and irresolute I could see by the vessel, of which he was the soul, and which received all his impressions. The Nautilus did not keep on in its settled course; it floated about like a corpse at the will of the waves. It went at random. He could not tear himself away from the scene of the last struggle, from this sea that had devoured one of his men. Ten days passed thus. It was not till the 1st of May that the Nautilus resumed its northerly course, after having sighted the Bahamas at the mouth of the Bahama Canal. We were then following the current from the largest river to the sea, that has its banks, its fish, and its proper temperatures. I mean the Gulf Stream. It is really a river, that flows freely to the middle of the Atlantic, and whose waters do not mix with the ocean waters. It is a salt river, salter than the surrounding sea. Its mean depth is 1,500 fathoms, its mean breadth ten miles. In certain places the current flows with the speed of two miles and a half an hour. The body of its waters is more considerable than that of all the rivers in the globe. It was on this ocean river that the Nautilus then sailed.

I must add that, during the night, the phosphorescent waters of the Gulf Stream rivalled the electric power of our watch-light, especially in the stormy weather that threatened us so frequently. May 8th, we were still crossing Cape Hatteras, at the height of the North Caroline. The width of the Gulf Stream there is seventy-five miles, and its depth 210 yards. The Nautilus still went at random; all supervision seemed abandoned. I thought that, under these circumstances, escape would be possible. Indeed, the inhabited shores offered anywhere an easy refuge. The sea was incessantly ploughed by the steamers that ply between New York or Boston and the Gulf of Mexico, and overrun day and night by the little schooners coasting about the several parts of the American coast. We could hope to be picked up. It was a favourable opportunity, notwithstanding the thirty miles that separated the Nautilus from the coasts of the Union. One unfortunate circumstance thwarted the Canadian’s plans. The weather was very bad. We were nearing those shores where tempests are so frequent, that country of waterspouts and cyclones actually engendered by the current of the Gulf Stream. To tempt the sea in a frail boat was certain destruction. Ned Land owned this himself. He fretted, seized with nostalgia that flight only could cure.

“Master,” he said that day to me, “this must come to an end. I must make a clean breast of it. This Nemo is leaving land and going up to the north. But I declare to you that I have had enough of the South Pole, and I will not follow him to the North.”

“What is to be done, Ned, since flight is impracticable just now?”

“We must speak to the Captain,” said he; “you said nothing when we were in your native seas. I will speak, now we are in mine. When I think that before long the Nautilus will be by Nova Scotia, and that there near New foundland is a large bay, and into that bay the St. Lawrence empties itself, and that the St. Lawrence is my river, the river by Quebec, my native town — when I think of this, I feel furious, it makes my hair stand on end. Sir, I would rather throw myself into the sea! I will not stay here! I am stifled!”

The Canadian was evidently losing all patience. His vigorous nature could not stand this prolonged imprisonment. His face altered daily; his temper became more surly. I knew what he must suffer, for I was seized with home-sickness myself. Nearly seven months had passed without our having had any news from land; Captain Nemo’s isolation, his altered spirits, especially since the fight with the poulps, his taciturnity, all made me view things in a different light.

“Well, sir?” said Ned, seeing I did not reply.

“Well, Ned, do you wish me to ask Captain Nemo his intentions concerning us?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Although he has already made them known?”

“Yes; I wish it settled finally. Speak for me, in my name only, if you like.”

“But I so seldom meet him. He avoids me.”

“That is all the more reason for you to go to see him.”

I went to my room. From thence I meant to go to Captain Nemo’s. It would not do to let this opportunity of meeting him slip. I knocked at the door. No answer. I knocked again, then turned the handle. The door opened, I went in. The Captain was there. Bending over his work-table, he had not heard me. Resolved not to go without having spoken, I approached him. He raised his head quickly, frowned, and said roughly, “You here! What do you want?”

“To speak to you, Captain.”

“But I am busy, sir; I am working. I leave you at liberty to shut yourself up; cannot I be allowed the same?”

This reception was not encouraging; but I was determined to hear and answer everything.

“Sir,” I said coldly, “I have to speak to you on a matter that admits of no delay.”

“What is that, sir?” he replied, ironically. “Have you discovered something that has escaped me, or has the sea delivered up any new secrets?”

We were at cross-purposes. But, before I could reply, he showed me an open manuscript on his table, and said, in a more serious tone, “Here, M. Aronnax, is a manuscript written in several languages. It contains the sum of my studies of the sea; and, if it please God, it shall not perish with me. This manuscript, signed with my name, complete with the history of my life, will be shut up in a little floating case. The last survivor of all of us on board the Nautilus will throw this case into the sea, and it will go whither it is borne by the waves.”

This man’s name! his history written by himself! His mystery would then be revealed some day.

“Captain,” I said, “I can but approve of the idea that makes you act thus. The result of your studies must not be lost. But the means you employ seem to me to be primitive. Who knows where the winds will carry this case, and in whose hands it will fall? Could you not use some other means? Could not you, or one of yours — — ”

“Never, sir!” he said, hastily interrupting me.

“But I and my companions are ready to keep this manuscript in store; and, if you will put us at liberty — — ”

“At liberty?” said the Captain, rising.

“Yes, sir; that is the subject on which I wish to question you. For seven months we have been here on board, and I ask you to-day, in the name of my companions and in my own, if your intention is to keep us here always?”

“M. Aronnax, I will answer you to-day as I did seven months ago: Whoever enters the Nautilus, must never quit it.”

“You impose actual slavery upon us!”

“Give it what name you please.”

“But everywhere the slave has the right to regain his liberty.”

“Who denies you this right? Have I ever tried to chain you with an oath?”

He looked at me with his arms crossed.

“Sir,” I said, “to return a second time to this subject will be neither to your nor to my taste; but, as we have entered upon it, let us go through with it. I repeat, it is not only myself whom it concerns. Study is to me a relief, a diversion, a passion that could make me forget everything. Like you, I am willing to live obscure, in the frail hope of bequeathing one day, to future time, the result of my labours. But it is otherwise with Ned Land. Every man, worthy of the name, deserves some consideration. Have you thought that love of liberty, hatred of slavery, can give rise to schemes of revenge in a nature like the Canadian’s; that he could think, attempt, and try — — ”

I was silenced; Captain Nemo rose.

“Whatever Ned Land thinks of, attempts, or tries, what does it matter to me? I did not seek him! It is not for my pleasure that I keep him on board! As for you, M. Aronnax, you are one of those who can understand everything, even silence. I have nothing more to say to you. Let this first time you have come to treat of this subject be the last, for a second time I will not listen to you.”

I retired. Our situation was critical. I related my conversation to my two companions.

“We know now,” said Ned, “that we can expect nothing from this man. The Nautilus is nearing Long Island. We will escape, whatever the weather may be.”

But the sky became more and more threatening. Symptoms of a hurricane became manifest. The atmosphere was becoming white and misty. On the horizon fine streaks of cirrhous clouds were succeeded by masses of cumuli. Other low clouds passed swiftly by. The swollen sea rose in huge billows. The birds disappeared with the exception of the petrels, those friends of the storm. The barometer fell sensibly, and indicated an extreme extension of the vapours. The mixture of the storm glass was decomposed under the influence of the electricity that pervaded the atmosphere. The tempest burst on the 18th of May, just as the Nautilus was floating off Long Island, some miles from the port of New York. I can describe this strife of the elements! for, instead of fleeing to the depths of the sea, Captain Nemo, by an unaccountable caprice, would brave it at the surface. The wind blew from the south-west at first. Captain Nemo, during the squalls, had taken his place on the platform. He had made himself fast, to prevent being washed overboard by the monstrous waves. I had hoisted myself up, and made myself fast also, dividing my admiration between the tempest and this extraordinary man who was coping with it. The raging sea was swept by huge cloud-drifts, which were actually saturated with the waves. The Nautilus, sometimes lying on its side, sometimes standing up like a mast, rolled and pitched terribly. About five o’clock a torrent of rain fell, that lulled neither sea nor wind. The hurri cane blew nearly forty leagues an hour. It is under these conditions that it overturns houses, breaks iron gates, displaces twenty-four pounders. However, the Nautilus, in the midst of the tempest, confirmed the words of a clever engineer, “There is no well-constructed hull that cannot defy the sea.” This was not a resisting rock; it was a steel spindle, obedient and movable, without rigging or masts, that braved its fury with impunity. However, I watched these raging waves attentively. They measured fifteen feet in height, and 150 to 175 yards long, and their speed of propagation was thirty feet per second. Their bulk and power increased with the depth of the water. Such waves as these, at the Hebrides, have displaced a mass weighing 8,400 lb. They are they which, in the tempest of December 23rd, 1864, after destroying the town of Yeddo, in Japan, broke the same day on the shores of America. The intensity of the tempest increased with the night. The barometer, as in 1860 at Reunion during a cyclone, fell seven-tenths at the close of day. I saw a large vessel pass the horizon struggling painfully. She was trying to lie to under half steam, to keep up above the waves. It was probably one of the steamers of the line from New York to Liverpool, or Havre. It soon disappeared in the gloom. At ten o’clock in the evening the sky was on fire. The atmosphere was streaked with vivid lightning. I could not bear the brightness of it; while the captain, looking at it, seemed to envy the spirit of the tempest. A terrible noise filled the air, a complex noise, made up of the howls of the crushed waves, the roaring of the wind, and the claps of thunder. The wind veered suddenly to all points of the horizon; and the cyclone, rising in the east, returned after passing by the north, west, and south, in the inverse course pursued by the circular storm of the southern hemisphere. Ah, that Gulf Stream! It deserves its name of the King of Tempests. It is that which causes those formidable cyclones, by the difference of temperature between its air and its currents. A shower of fire had succeeded the rain. The drops of water were changed to sharp spikes. One would have thought that Captain Nemo was courting a death worthy of himself, a death by lightning. As the Nautilus, pitching dreadfully, raised its steel spur in the air, it seemed to act as a conductor, and I saw long sparks burst from it. Crushed and without strength I crawled to the panel, opened it, and descended to the saloon. The storm was then at its height. It was impossible to stand upright in the interior of the Nautilus. Captain Nemo came down about twelve. I heard the reservoirs filling by degrees, and the Nautilus sank slowly beneath the waves. Through the open windows in the saloon I saw large fish terrified, passing like phantoms in the water. Some were struck before my eyes. The Nautilus was still descending. I thought that at about eight fathoms deep we should find a calm. But no! the upper beds were too violently agitated for that. We had to seek repose at more than twenty-five fathoms in the bowels of the deep. But there, what quiet, what silence, what peace! Who could have told that such a hurricane had been let loose on the surface of that ocean?

CHAPTER XX

FROM LATITUDE 47° 24’ TO LONGITUDE 17° 28’

In consequence of the storm, we had been thrown eastward once more. All hope of escape on the shores of New York or St. Lawrence had faded away; and poor Ned, in despair, had isolated himself like Captain Nemo. Conseil and I, however, never left each other. I said that the Nautilus had gone aside to the east. I should have said (to be more exact) the north-east. For some days, it wandered first on the surface, and then beneath it, amid those fogs so dreaded by sailors. What accidents are due to these thick fogs! What shocks upon these reefs when the wind drowns the breaking of the waves! What collisions between vessels, in spite of their warning lights, whistles, and alarm bells! And the bottoms of these seas look like a field of battle, where still lie all the conquered of the ocean; some old and already encrusted, others fresh and reflecting from their iron bands and copper plates the brilliancy of our lantern.

On the 15th of May we were at the extreme south of the Bank of Newfoundland. This bank consists of alluvia, or large heaps of organic matter, brought either from the Equator by the Gulf Stream, or from the North Pole by the counter-current of cold water which skirts the American coast. There also are heaped up those erratic blocks which are carried along by the broken ice; and close by, a vast charnel-house of molluscs, which perish here by millions. The depth of the sea is not great at Newfoundland — not more than some hundreds of fathoms; but towards the south is a depression of 1,500 fathoms. There the Gulf Stream widens. It loses some of its speed and some of its temperature, but it becomes a sea.

It was on the 17th of May, about 500 miles from Heart's Content, at a depth of more than 1,400 fathoms, that I saw the electric cable lying on the bottom. Conseil, to whom I had not mentioned it, thought at first that it was a gigantic sea-serpent. But I undeceived the worthy fellow, and by way of consolation related several particulars in the laying of this cable. The first one was laid in the years 1857 and 1858; but, after transmitting about 400 telegrams, would not act any longer. In 1863 the engineers constructed an other one, measuring 2,000 miles in length, and weighing 4,500 tons, which was embarked on the Great Eastern. This attempt also failed.

On the 25th of May the Nautilus, being at a depth of more than 1,918 fathoms, was on the precise spot where the rupture occurred which ruined the enterprise. It was within 638 miles of the coast of Ireland; and at half-past two in the afternoon they discovered that communication with Europe had ceased. The electricians on board resolved to cut the cable before fishing it up, and at eleven o'clock at night they had recovered the damaged part. They made another point and spliced it, and it was once more submerged. But some days after it broke again, and in the depths of the ocean could not be recaptured. The Americans, however, were not discouraged. Cyrus Field, the bold promoter of the enterprise, as he had sunk all his own fortune, set a new subscription on foot, which was at once answered, and another cable was constructed on better principles. The bundles of conducting wires were each enveloped in gutta-percha, and protected by a wadding of hemp, contained in a metallic covering. The Great Eastern sailed on the 13th of July, 1866. The operation worked well. But one incident occurred. Several times in unrolling the cable they observed that nails had recently been forced into it, evidently with the motive of destroying it. Captain Anderson, the officers, and engineers consulted together, and had it posted up that, if the offender was surprised on board, he would be thrown without further trial into the sea. From that time the criminal attempt was never repeated.

On the 23rd of July the Great Eastern was not more than 500 miles from Newfoundland, when they telegraphed from Ireland the news of the armistice concluded between Prussia and Austria after Sadowa. On the 27th, in the midst of heavy fogs, they reached the port of Heart’s Content. The enterprise was successfully terminated; and for its first despatch, young America addressed old Europe in these words of wisdom, so rarely understood: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men.”

I did not expect to find the electric cable in its primitive state, such as it was on leaving the manufactory. The long serpent, covered with the remains of shells, bristling with foraminiferae, was encrusted with a strong coating which served as a protection against all boring molluscs. It lay quietly sheltered from the motions of the sea, and under a favourable pressure for the transmission of the electric spark which passes from Europe to America in .32 of a second. Doubtless this cable will last for a great length of time, for they find that the gutta-percha covering is improved by the sea-water. Besides, on this level, so well chosen, the cable is never so deeply submerged as to cause it to break. The Nautilus followed it to the lowest depth, which was more than 2,212 fathoms, and there it lay without any anchorage; and then we reached the spot where the accident had taken place in 1863. The bottom of the ocean then formed a valley about 100 miles broad, in which Mont Blanc might have been placed without its summit appearing above the waves. This valley is closed at the east by a perpendicular wall more than 2,000 yards high. We arrived there on the 28th of May, and the Nautilus was then not more than 120 miles from Ireland.

Was Captain Nemo going to land on the British Isles? No. To my great surprise he made for the south, once more coming back towards European seas. In rounding the Emerald Isle, for one instant I caught sight of Cape Clear, and the light which guides the thousands of vessels leaving Glasgow or Liverpool. An important question then arose in my mind. Did the Nautilus dare entangle itself in the Manche? Ned Land, who had reappeared since we had been nearing land, did not cease to question me. How could I answer? Captain Nemo remained invisible. After having shown the Canadian a glimpse of American shores, was he going to show me the coast of France?

But the Nautilus was still going southward. On the 30th of May, it passed in sight of Land’s End, between the extreme point of England and the Scilly Isles, which were left to starboard. If we wished to enter the Manche, he must go straight to the east. He did not do so.

During the whole of the 31st of May, the Nautilus described a series of circles on the water, which greatly interested me. It seemed to be seeking a spot it had some trouble in finding. At noon, Captain Nemo himself came to work the ship’s log. He spoke no word to me, but seemed gloomier than ever. What could sadden him thus? Was it his proximity to European shores? Had he some recollections of his abandoned country? If not, what did he feel? Remorse or regret? For a long while this thought haunted my mind, and I had a kind of presentiment that before long chance would betray the captain’s secrets.

The next day, the 1st of June, the Nautilus continued the same process. It was evidently seeking some particular spot in the ocean. Captain Nemo took the sun’s altitude as he had done the day before. The sea was beautiful, the sky clear. About eight miles to the east, a large steam vessel could be discerned on the horizon. No flag fluttered from its mast, and I could not discover its nationality. Some minutes before the sun passed the meridian, Captain Nemo took his sextant, and watched with great attention. The perfect rest of the water greatly helped the operation. The Nautilus was motionless; it neither rolled nor pitched.

I was on the platform when the altitude was taken, and the Captain pronounced these words: “It is here.”

He turned and went below. Had he seen the vessel which was changing its course and seemed to be nearing us? I could not tell. I returned to the saloon. The panels closed, I heard the hissing of the water in the reservoirs. The Nautilus began to sink, following a vertical line, for its screw communicated no motion to it. Some minutes later it stopped at a depth of more than 420 fathoms, resting on the ground. The luminous ceiling was darkened, then the panels were opened, and through the glass I saw the sea brilliantly illuminated by the rays of our lantern for at least half a mile round us.

I looked to the port side, and saw nothing but an immensity of quiet waters. But to starboard, on the bottom appeared a large protuberance, which at once attracted my attention. One would have thought it a ruin buried under a coating of white shells, much resembling a covering of snow. Upon examining the mass attentively, I could recognise the ever-thickening form of a vessel bare of its masts, which must have sunk. It certainly belonged to past times. This wreck, to be thus encrusted with the lime of the water, must already be able to count many years passed at the bottom of the ocean.

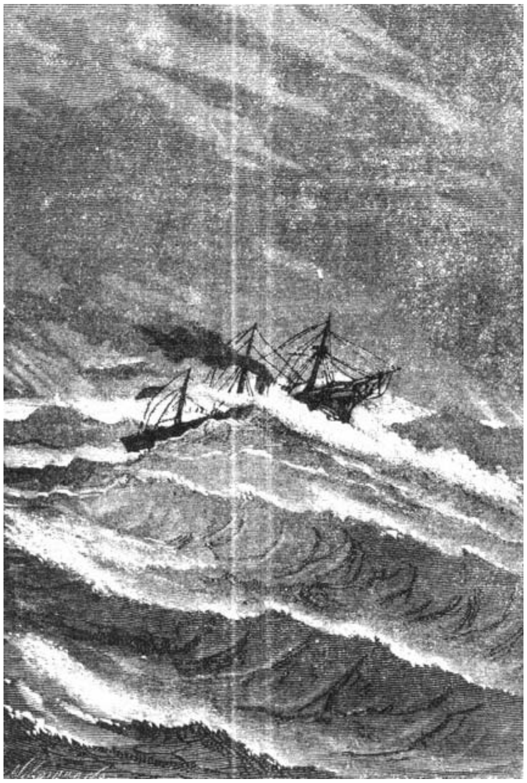

What was this vessel? Why did the Nautilus visit its tomb? Could it have been aught but a shipwreck which had drawn it under the water? I knew not what to think, when near me in a slow voice I heard Captain Nemo say:

“At one time this ship was called the Marseillais. It carried seventy-four guns, and was launched in 1762. In 1778, the 13th of August, commanded by La Poype-Ver trieux, it fought boldly against the Preston. In 1779, on the 4th of July, it was at the taking of Grenada, with the squadron of Admiral Estaing. In 1781, on the 5th of September, it took part in the battle of Comte de Grasse, in Chesapeake Bay. In 1794, the French Republic changed its name. On the 16th of April, in the same year, it joined the squadron of Villaret Joyeuse, at Brest, being entrusted with the escort of a cargo of corn coming from America, under the command of Admiral Van Stebel. On the 11th and 12th Prairal of the second year, this squadron fell in with an English vessel. Sir, to-day is the 13th Prairal, the first of June, 1868. It is now seventy-four years ago, day for day on this very spot, in latitude 47°

24’, longitude 17° 28’, that this vessel, after fighting heroically, losing its three masts, with the water in its hold, and the third of its crew disabled, preferred sinking with its 356 sailors to surrendering; and, nailing its colours to the poop, disappeared under the waves to the cry of `Long live the Republic!’”

“The Avenger!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, sir, the Avenger! A good name!” muttered Captain Nemo, crossing his arms.

CHAPTER XXI

A HECATOMB

The way of describing this unlooked-for scene, the history of the patriot ship, told at first so coldly, and the emotion with which this strange man pronounced the last words, the name of the Avenger, the significance of which could not escape me, all impressed itself deeply on my mind. My eyes did not leave the Captain, who, with his hand stretched out to sea, was watching with a glowing eye the glorious wreck. Perhaps I was never to know who he was, from whence he came, or where he was going to, but I saw the man move, and apart from the savant. It was no common misanthropy which had shut Captain Nemo and his companions within the Nautilus, but a hatred, either monstrous or sublime, which time could never weaken. Did this hatred still seek for vengeance? The future would soon teach me that. But the Nautilus was rising slowly to the surface of the sea, and the form of the Avenger disappeared by degrees from my sight. Soon a slight rolling told me that we were in the open air. At that moment a dull boom was heard. I looked at the Captain. He did not move.

“Captain?” said I.

He did not answer. I left him and mounted the platform. Conseil and the Canadian were already there.

“Where did that sound come from?” I asked.

“It was a gunshot,” replied Ned Land.

I looked in the direction of the vessel I had already seen. It was nearing the Nautilus, and we could see that it was putting on steam. It was within six miles of us.

“What is that ship, Ned?”

“By its rigging, and the height of its lower masts,” said the Canadian, “I bet she is a ship-of-war. May it reach us; and, if necessary, sink this cursed Nautilus.”

“Friend Ned,” replied Conseil, “what harm can it do to the Nautilus? Can it attack it beneath the waves? Can its cannonade us at the bottom of the sea?”

“Tell me, Ned,” said I, “can you recognise what country she belongs to?”

The Canadian knitted his eyebrows, dropped his eyelids, and screwed up the corners of his eyes, and for a few moments fixed a piercing look upon the vessel.

“No, sir,” he replied; “I cannot tell what nation she belongs to, for she shows no colours. But I can declare she is a man-of-war, for a long pennant flutters from her main mast.”

For a quarter of an hour we watched the ship which was steaming towards us. I could not, however, believe that she could see the Nautilus from that distance; and still less that she could know what this submarine engine was. Soon the Canadian informed me that she was a large, armoured, two-decker ram. A thick black smoke was pouring from her two funnels. Her closely-furled sails were stopped to her yards. She hoisted no flag at her mizzen-peak. The distance prevented us from distinguishing the colours of her pennant, which floated like a thin ribbon. She advanced rapidly. If Captain Nemo allowed her to approach, there was a chance of salvation for us.

“Sir,” said Ned Land, “if that vessel passes within a mile of us I shall throw myself into the sea, and I should advise you to do the same.”

I did not reply to the Canadian’s suggestion, but continued watching the ship. Whether English, French, American, or Russian, she would be sure to take us in if we could only reach her. Presently a white smoke burst from the fore part of the vessel; some seconds after, the water, agitated by the fall of a heavy body, splashed the stern of the Nautilus, and shortly afterwards a loud explosion struck my ear.

“What! they are firing at us!” I exclaimed.

“So please you, sir,” said Ned, “they have recognised the unicorn, and they are firing at us.”

“But,” I exclaimed, “surely they can see that there are men in the case?”

“It is, perhaps, because of that,” replied Ned Land, looking at me.

A whole flood of light burst upon my mind. Doubtless they knew now how to believe the stories of the pretended monster. No doubt, on board the Abraham Lincoln, when the Canadian struck it with the harpoon, Commander Farragut had recognised in the supposed narwhal a submarine vessel, more dangerous than a supernatural cetacean. Yes, it must have been so; and on every sea they were now seeking this engine of destruction. Terrible indeed! if, as we supposed, Captain Nemo employed the Nautilus in works of vengeance. On the night when we were imprisoned in that cell, in the midst of the Indian Ocean, had he not attacked some vessel? The man buried in the coral cemetery, had he not been a victim to the shock caused by the Nautilus? Yes, I repeat it, it must be so. One part of the mysterious existence of Captain Nemo had been unveiled; and, if his identity had not been recognised, at least, the nations united against him were no longer hunting a chimerical creature, but a man who had vowed a deadly hatred against them. All the formidable past rose before me. Instead of meeting friends on board the approaching ship, we could only expect pitiless enemies. But the shot rattled about us. Some of them struck the sea and ricochetted, losing themselves in the distance. But none touched the Nautilus. The vessel was not more than three miles from us. In spite of the serious cannonade, Captain Nemo did not appear on the platform; but, if one of the conical projectiles had struck the shell of the Nautilus, it would have been fatal. The Canadian then said, “Sir, we must do all we can to get out of this dilemma. Let us signal them. They will then, perhaps, understand that we are honest folks.”

Ned Land took his handkerchief to wave in the air; but he had scarcely displayed it, when he was struck down by an iron hand, and fell, in spite of his great strength, upon the deck.

“Fool!” exclaimed the Captain, “do you wish to be pierced by the spur of the Nautilus before it is hurled at this vessel?”

Captain Nemo was terrible to hear; he was still more terrible to see. His face was deadly pale, with a spasm at his heart. For an instant it must have ceased to beat. His pupils were fearfully contracted. He did not speak, he roared, as, with his body thrown forward, he wrung the Canadian’s shoulders. Then, leaving him, and turning to the ship of war, whose shot was still raining around him, he exclaimed, with a powerful voice, “Ah, ship of an accursed nation, you know who I am! I do not want your colours to know you by! Look! and I will show you mine!”

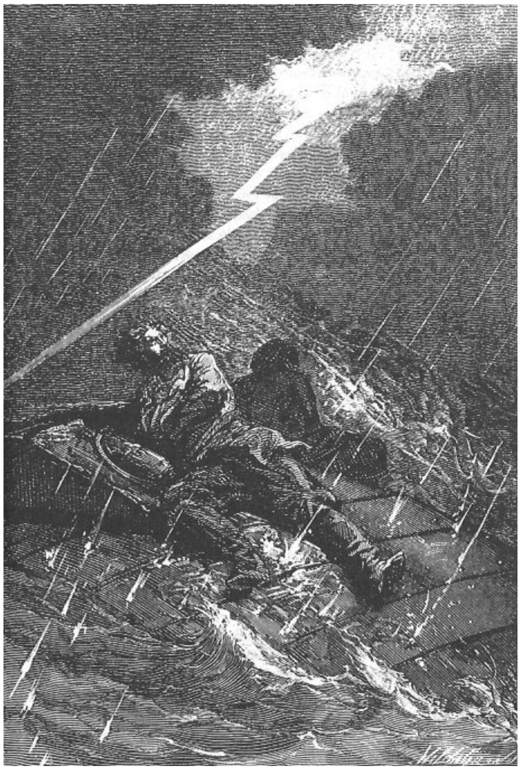

And on the fore part of the platform Captain Nemo unfurled a black flag, similar to the one he had placed at the South Pole. At that moment a shot struck the shell of the Nautilus obliquely, without piercing it; and, rebounding near the Captain, was lost in the sea. He shrugged his shoulders; and, addressing me, said shortly, “Go down, you and your companions, go down!”

“Sir,” I cried, “are you going to attack this vessel?”

“Sir, I am going to sink it.”

“You will not do that?”

“I shall do it,” he replied coldly. “And I advise you not to judge me, sir. Fate has shown you what you ought not to have seen. The attack has begun; go down.”

“What is this vessel?”

“You do not know? Very well! so much the better! Its nationality to you, at least, will be a secret. Go down!”

We could but obey. About fifteen of the sailors surrounded the Captain, looking with implacable hatred at the vessel nearing them. One could feel that the same desire of vengeance animated every soul. I went down at the moment another projectile struck the Nautilus, and I heard the Captain exclaim:

“Strike, mad vessel! Shower your useless shot! And then, you will not escape the spur of the Nautilus. But it is not here that you shall perish! I would not have your ruins mingle with those of the Avenger!”

I reached my room. The Captain and his second had remained on the platform. The screw was set in motion, and the Nautilus, moving with speed, was soon beyond the reach of the ship’s guns. But the pursuit continued, and Captain Nemo contented himself with keeping his distance.

About four in the afternoon, being no longer able to contain my impatience, I went to the central staircase. The panel was open, and I ventured on to the platform. The Captain was still walking up and down with an agitated step. He was looking at the ship, which was five or six miles to leeward.

He was going round it like a wild beast, and, drawing it eastward, he allowed them to pursue. But he did not attack. Perhaps he still hesitated? I wished to mediate once more. But I had scarcely spoken, when Captain Nemo imposed silence, saying:

“I am the law, and I am the judge! I am the oppressed, and there is the oppressor! Through him I have lost all that I loved, cherished, and venerated — country, wife, children, father, and mother. I saw all perish! All that I hate is there! Say no more!”

I cast a last look at the man-of-war, which was putting on steam, and rejoined Ned and Conseil.

“We will fly!” I exclaimed.

“Good!” said Ned. “What is this vessel?”

“I do not know; but, whatever it is, it will be sunk before night. In any case, it is better to perish with it, than be made accomplices in a retaliation the justice of which we cannot judge.”

“That is my opinion too,” said Ned Land, coolly. “Let us wait for night.”

Night arrived. Deep silence reigned on board. The compass showed that the Nautilus had not altered its course. It was on the surface, rolling slightly. My companions and I resolved to fly when the vessel should be near enough either to hear us or to see us; for the moon, which would be full in two or three days, shone brightly. Once on board the ship, if we could not prevent the blow which threatened it, we could, at least we would, do all that circumstances would allow. Several times I thought the Nautilus was preparing for attack; but Captain Nemo contented himself with allowing his adversary to approach, and then fled once more before it.

Part of the night passed without any incident. We watched the opportunity for action. We spoke little, for we were too much moved. Ned Land would have thrown himself into the sea, but I forced him to wait. According to my idea, the Nautilus would attack the ship at her waterline, and then it would not only be possible, but easy to fly.

At three in the morning, full of uneasiness, I mounted the platform. Captain Nemo had not left it. He was standing at the fore part near his flag, which a slight breeze displayed above his head. He did not take his eyes from the vessel. The intensity of his look seemed to attract, and fascinate, and draw it onward more surely than if he had been towing it. The moon was then passing the meridian. Jupiter was rising in the east. Amid this peaceful scene of nature, sky and ocean rivalled each other in tranquillity, the sea offering to the orbs of night the finest mirror they could ever have in which to reflect their image. As I thought of the deep calm of these elements, compared with all those passions brooding imperceptibly within the Nautilus, I shuddered.

The vessel was within two miles of us. It was ever nearing that phosphorescent light which showed the presence of the Nautilus. I could see its green and red lights, and its white lantern hanging from the large foremast. An indistinct vibration quivered through its rigging, showing that the furnaces were heated to the uttermost. Sheaves of sparks and red ashes flew from the funnels, shining in the atmosphere like stars.

I remained thus until six in the morning, without Captain Nemo noticing me. The ship stood about a mile and a half from us, and with the first dawn of day the firing began afresh. The moment could not be far off when, the Nautilus attacking its adversary, my companions and myself should for ever leave this man. I was preparing to go down to remind them, when the second mounted the platform, accompanied by several sailors. Captain Nemo either did not or would not see them. Some steps were taken which might be called the signal for action. They were very simple. The iron balustrade around the platform was lowered, and the lantern and pilot cages were pushed within the shell until they were flush with the deck. The long surface of the steel cigar no longer offered a single point to check its manoeuvres. I returned to the saloon. The Nautilus still floated; some streaks of light were filtering through the liquid beds. With the undulations of the waves the windows were brightened by the red streaks of the rising sun, and this dreadful day of the 2nd of June had dawned.

At five o'clock, the log showed that the speed of the Nautilus was slackening, and I knew that it was allowing them to draw nearer. Besides, the reports were heard more distinctly, and the projectiles, labouring through the ambient water, were extinguished with a strange hissing noise.

“My friends,” said I, “the moment is come. One grasp of the hand, and may God protect us!”

Ned Land was resolute, Conseil calm, myself so nervous that I knew not how to contain myself. We all passed into the library; but the moment I pushed the door opening on to the central staircase, I heard the upper panel close sharply. The Canadian rushed on to the stairs, but I stopped him. A well-known hissing noise told me that the water was running into the reservoirs, and in a few minutes the Nautilus was some yards beneath the surface of the waves. I understood the manoeuvre. It was too late to act. The Nautilus did not wish to strike at the impenetrable cuirass, but below the water-line, where the metallic covering no longer protected it.

We were again imprisoned, unwilling witnesses of the dreadful drama that was preparing. We had scarcely time to reflect; taking refuge in my room, we looked at each other without speaking. A deep stupor had taken hold of my mind: thought seemed to stand still. I was in that painful state of expectation preceding a dreadful report. I waited, I listened, every sense was merged in that of hearing! The speed of the Nautilus was accelerated. It was preparing to rush. The whole ship trembled. Suddenly I screamed. I felt the shock, but comparatively light. I felt the penetrating power of the steel spur. I heard rattlings and scrapings. But the Nautilus, carried along by its propelling power, passed through the mass of the vessel like a needle through sailcloth!

I could stand it no longer. Mad, out of my mind, I rushed from my room into the saloon. Captain Nemo was there, mute, gloomy, implacable; he was looking through the port panel. A large mass cast a shadow on the water; and, that it might lose nothing of her agony, the Nautilus was going down into the abyss with her. Ten yards from me I saw the open shell, through which the water was rushing with the noise of thunder, then the double line of guns and the netting. The bridge was covered with black, agitated shadows.

The water was rising. The poor creatures were crowding the ratlines, clinging to the masts, struggling under the water. It was a human ant-heap overtaken by the sea. Paralysed, stiffened with anguish, my hair standing on end, with eyes wide open, panting, without breath, and without voice, I too was watching! An irresistible attraction glued me to the glass! Suddenly an explosion took place. The compressed air blew up her decks, as if the magazines had caught fire. Then the unfortunate vessel sank more rapidly. Her topmast, laden with victims, now appeared; then her spars, bending under the weight of men; and, last of all, the top of her mainmast. Then the dark mass disappeared, and with it the dead crew, drawn down by the strong eddy.

I turned to Captain Nemo. That terrible avenger, a perfect archangel of hatred, was still looking. When all was over, he turned to his room, opened the door, and entered. I followed him with my eyes. On the end wall beneath his heroes, I saw the portrait of a woman, still young, and two little children. Captain Nemo looked at them for some moments, stretched his arms towards them, and, kneeling down, burst into deep sobs.

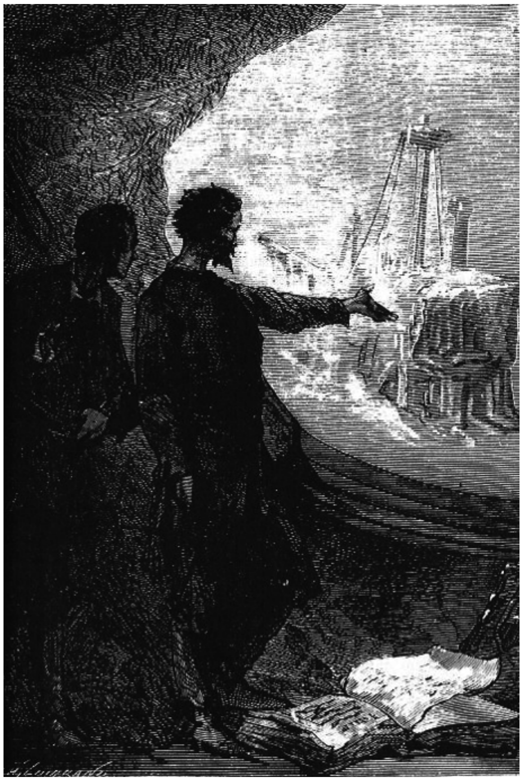

CHAPTER XXII

THE LAST WORDS OF CAPTAIN NEMO

The panels had closed on this dreadful vision, but light had not returned to the saloon: all was silence and darkness within the Nautilus. At wonderful speed, a hundred feet beneath the water, it was leaving this desolate spot. Whither was it going? To the north or south? Where was the man flying to after such dreadful retaliation? I had returned to my room, where Ned and Conseil had remained silent enough. I felt an insurmountable horror for Captain Nemo. Whatever he had suffered at the hands of these men, he had no right to punish thus. He had made me, if not an accomplice, at least a witness of his vengeance. At eleven the electric light reappeared. I passed into the saloon. It was deserted. I consulted the different instruments. The Nautilus was flying northward at the rate of twenty-five miles an hour, now on the surface, and now thirty feet below it. On taking the bearings by the chart, I saw that we were passing the mouth of the Manche, and that our course was hurrying us towards the northern seas at a frightful speed. That night we had crossed two hundred leagues of the Atlantic. The shadows fell, and the sea was covered with darkness until the rising of the moon. I went to my room, but could not sleep. I was troubled with dreadful nightmare. The horrible scene of destruction was continually before my eyes. From that day, who could tell into what part of the North Atlantic basin the Nautilus would take us? Still with unaccountable speed. Still in the midst of these northern fogs. Would it touch at Spitzbergen, or on the shores of Nova Zembla? Should we explore those unknown seas, the White Sea, the Sea of Kara, the Gulf of Obi, the Archipelago of Liarrov, and the unknown coast of Asia? I could not say. I could no longer judge of the time that was passing. The clocks had been stopped on board. It seemed, as in polar countries, that night and day no longer followed their regular course. I felt myself being drawn into that strange region where the foundered imagination of Edgar Poe roamed at will. Like the fabulous Gordon Pym, at every moment I expected to see “that veiled human figure, of larger proportions than those of any inhabitant of the earth, thrown across the cataract which defends the approach to the pole.” I estimated (though, perhaps, I may be mistaken) — I estimated this adventurous course of the Nautilus to have lasted fifteen or twenty days. And I know not how much longer it might have lasted, had it not been for the catastrophe which ended this voyage. Of Captain Nemo I saw nothing whatever now, nor of his second. Not a man of the crew was visible for an instant. The Nautilus was almost incessantly under water. When we came to the surface to renew the air, the panels opened and shut mechanically. There were no more marks on the planisphere. I knew not where we were. And the Canadian, too, his strength and patience at an end, appeared no more. Conseil could not draw a word from him; and, fearing that, in a dreadful fit of madness, he might kill himself, watched him with constant devotion. One morning (what date it was I could not say) I had fallen into a heavy sleep towards the early hours, a sleep both painful and unhealthy, when I suddenly awoke. Ned Land was leaning over me, saying, in a low voice, “We are going to fly.” I sat up.

“When shall we go?” I asked.

“To-night. All inspection on board the Nautilus seems to have ceased. All appear to be stupefied. You will be ready, sir?”

“Yes; where are we?”

“In sight of land. I took the reckoning this morning in the fog — twenty miles to the east.”

“What country is it?”

“I do not know; but, whatever it is, we will take refuge there.”

“Yes, Ned, yes. We will fly to-night, even if the sea should swallow us up.”

“The sea is bad, the wind violent, but twenty miles in that light boat of the Nautilus does not frighten me. Unknown to the crew, I have been able to procure food and some bottles of water.”

“I will follow you.”

“But,” continued the Canadian, “if I am surprised, I will defend myself; I will force them to kill me.”

“We will die together, friend Ned.”

I had made up my mind to all. The Canadian left me. I reached the platform, on which I could with difficulty support myself against the shock of the waves. The sky was threatening; but, as land was in those thick brown shadows, we must fly. I returned to the saloon, fearing and yet hoping to see Captain Nemo, wishing and yet not wishing to see him. What could I have said to him? Could I hide the involuntary horror with which he inspired me? No. It was better that I should not meet him face to face; better to forget him. And yet — — How long seemed that day, the last that I should pass in the Nautilus. I remained alone. Ned Land and Conseil avoided speaking, for fear of betraying themselves. At six I dined, but I was not hungry; I forced myself to eat in spite of my disgust, that I might not weaken myself. At half-past six Ned Land came to my room, saying, “We shall not see each other again before our departure. At ten the moon will not be risen. We will profit by the darkness. Come to the boat; Conseil and I will wait for you.”

The Canadian went out without giving me time to answer. Wishing to verify the course of the Nautilus, I went to the saloon. We were running N.N.E. at frightful speed, and more than fifty yards deep. I cast a last look on these wonders of nature, on the riches of art heaped up in this museum, upon the unrivalled collection destined to perish at the bottom of the sea, with him who had formed it. I wished to fix an indelible impression of it in my mind. I remained an hour thus, bathed in the light of that luminous ceiling, and passing in review those treasures shining under their glasses. Then I returned to my room.

I dressed myself in strong sea clothing. I collected my notes, placing them carefully about me. My heart beat loudly. I could not check its pulsations. Certainly my trouble and agitation would have betrayed me to Captain Nemo's eyes. What was he doing at this moment? I listened at the door of his room. I heard steps. Captain Nemo was there. He had not gone to rest. At every moment I expected to see him appear, and ask me why I wished to fly. I was constantly on the alert. My imagination magnified everything. The impression became at last so poignant that I asked myself if it would not be better to go to the Captain's room, see him face to face, and brave him with look and gesture.

It was the inspiration of a madman; fortunately I resisted the desire, and stretched myself on my bed to quiet my bodily agitation. My nerves were somewhat calmer, but in my excited brain I saw over again all my existence on board the Nautilus; every incident, either happy or unfortunate, which had happened since my disappearance from the Abraham Lincoln — the submarine hunt, the Torres Straits, the savages of Papua, the running ashore, the coral cemetery, the passage of Suez, the Island of Santorin, the Cretan diver, Vigo Bay, Atlantis, the iceberg, the South Pole, the imprisonment in the ice, the fight among the poulps, the storm in the Gulf

Stream, the Avenger, and the horrible scene of the vessel sunk with all her crew. All these events passed before my eyes like scenes in a drama. Then Captain Nemo seemed to grow enormously, his features to assume superhuman proportions. He was no longer my equal, but a man of the waters, the genie of the sea.

It was then half-past nine. I held my head between my hands to keep it from bursting. I closed my eyes; I would not think any longer. There was another half-hour to wait, another half-hour of a nightmare, which might drive me mad.

At that moment I heard the distant strains of the organ, a sad harmony to an undefinable chant, the wail of a soul longing to break these earthly bonds. I listened with every sense, scarcely breathing; plunged, like Captain Nemo, in that musical ecstasy, which was drawing him in spirit to the end of life.

Then a sudden thought terrified me. Captain Nemo had left his room. He was in the saloon, which I must cross to fly. There I should meet him for the last time. He would see me, perhaps speak to me. A gesture of his might destroy me, a single word chain me on board.

But ten was about to strike. The moment had come for me to leave my room, and join my companions.

I must not hesitate, even if Captain Nemo himself should rise before me. I opened my door carefully; and even then, as it turned on its hinges, it seemed to me to make a dreadful noise. Perhaps it only existed in my own imagination.

I crept along the dark stairs of the Nautilus, stopping at each step to check the beating of my heart. I reached the door of the saloon, and opened it gently. It was plunged in profound darkness. The strains of the organ sounded faintly. Captain Nemo was there. He did not see me. In the full light I do not think he would have noticed me, so entirely was he absorbed in the ecstasy.

I crept along the carpet, avoiding the slightest sound which might betray my presence. I was at least five minutes reaching the door, at the opposite side, opening into the library.

I was going to open it, when a sigh from Captain Nemo nailed me to the spot. I knew that he was rising. I could even see him, for the light from the library came through to the saloon. He came towards me silently, with his arms crossed, gliding like a spectre rather than walking. His breast was swelling with sobs; and I heard him murmur these words (the last which ever struck my ear):

“Almighty God! enough! enough!”

Was it a confession of remorse which thus escaped from this man’s conscience?

In desperation, I rushed through the library, mounted the central staircase, and, following the upper flight, reached the boat. I crept through the opening, which had already admitted my two companions.

“Let us go! let us go!” I exclaimed.

“Directly!” replied the Canadian.

The orifice in the plates of the Nautilus was first closed, and fastened down by means of a false key, with which Ned Land had provided himself; the opening in the boat was also closed. The Canadian began to loosen the bolts which still held us to the submarine boat.

Suddenly a noise was heard. Voices were answering each other loudly. What was the matter? Had they discovered our flight? I felt Ned Land slipping a dagger into my hand.

“Yes,” I murmured, “we know how to die!”

The Canadian had stopped in his work. But one word many times repeated, a dreadful word, revealed the cause of the agitation spreading on board the Nautilus. It was not we the crew were looking after!

“The maelstrom! the maelstrom!” Could a more dreadful word in a more dreadful situation have sounded in our ears! We were then upon the dangerous coast of Norway. Was the Nautilus being drawn into this gulf at the moment our boat was going to leave its sides? We knew that at the tide the pent-up waters between the islands of Ferroe and Loffoden rush with irresistible violence, forming a whirlpool from which no vessel ever escapes. From every point of the horizon enormous waves were meeting, forming a gulf justly called the “Navel of the Ocean,” whose power of attraction extends to a distance of twelve miles. There, not only vessels, but whales are sacrificed, as well as white bears from the northern regions.

It is thither that the Nautilus, voluntarily or involuntarily, had been run by the Captain.

It was describing a spiral, the circumference of which was lessening by degrees, and the boat, which was still fastened to its side, was carried along with giddy speed. I felt that sickly giddiness which arises from long-continued whirling round.

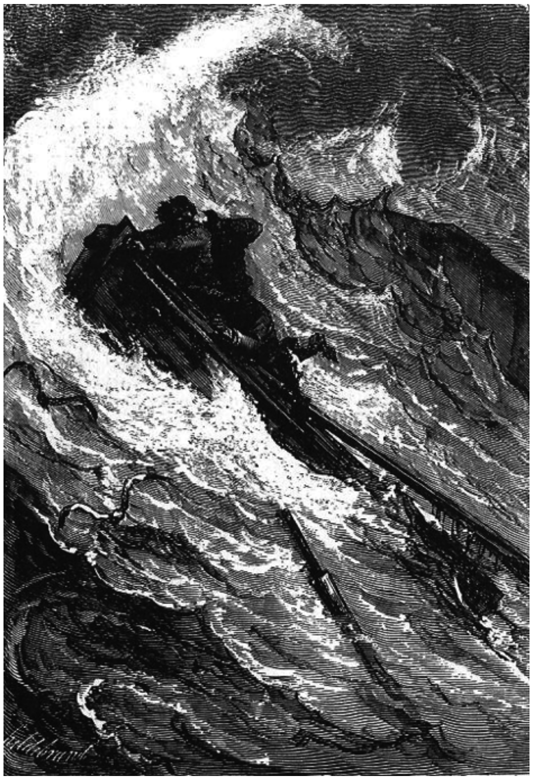

We were in dread. Our horror was at its height, circulation had stopped, all nervous influence was annihilated, and we were covered with cold sweat, like a sweat of agony! And what noise around our frail bark! What roarings repeated by the echo miles away! What an uproar was that of the waters broken on the sharp rocks at the bottom, where the hardest bodies are crushed, and trees worn away, “with all the fur rubbed off,” according to the Norwegian phrase!

What a situation to be in! We rocked frightfully. The Nautilus defended itself like a human being. Its steel muscles cracked. Sometimes it seemed to stand upright, and we with it!

“We must hold on,” said Ned, “and look after the bolts. We may still be saved if we stick to the Nautilus.”

He had not finished the words, when we heard a crashing noise, the bolts gave way, and the boat, torn from its groove, was hurled like a stone from a sling into the midst of the whirlpool.

My head struck on a piece of iron, and with the violent shock I lost all consciousness.

CHAPTER XXIII

CONCLUSION

Thus ends the voyage under the seas. What passed during that night — how the boat escaped from the eddies of the maelstrom — how Ned Land, Conseil, and myself ever came out of the gulf, I cannot tell.

But when I returned to consciousness, I was lying in a fisherman’s hut, on the Loffoden Isles. My two companions, safe and sound, were near me holding my hands. We embraced each other heartily.

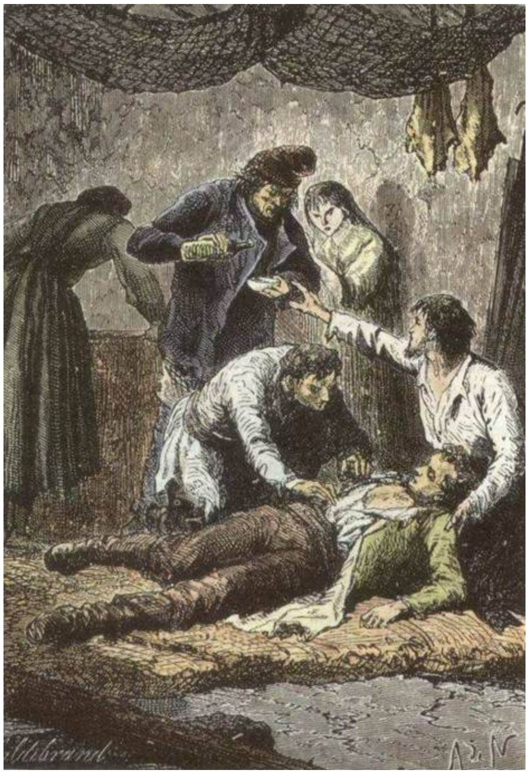

At that moment we could not think of returning to France. The means of communication between the north of Norway and the south are rare. And I am therefore obliged to wait for the steamboat running monthly from Cape North.

And, among the worthy people who have so kindly received us, I revise my record of these adventures once more. Not a fact has been omitted, not a detail exaggerated. It is a faithful narrative of this incredible expedition in an element inaccessible to man, but to which Progress will one day open a road.

Shall I be believed? I do not know. And it matters little, after all. What I now affirm is, that I have a right to speak of these seas, under which, in less than ten months, I have crossed 20,000 leagues in that submarine tour of the world, which has revealed so many wonders.

But what has become of the Nautilus? Did it resist the pressure of the maelstrom? Does Captain Nemo still live? And does he still follow under the ocean those frightful retaliations? Or, did he stop after the last hecatomb?

Will the waves one day carry to him this manuscript containing the history of his life? Shall I ever know the name of this man? Will the missing vessel tell us by its nationality that of Captain Nemo?

I hope so. And I also hope that his powerful vessel has conquered the sea at its most terrible gulf, and that the Nautilus has survived where so many other vessels have been lost! If it be so — if Captain Nemo still inhabits the ocean, his adopted country, may hatred be appeased in that savage heart! May the contemplation of so many wonders extinguish for ever the spirit of vengeance! May the judge disappear, and the philosopher continue the peaceful exploration of the sea! If his destiny be strange, it is also sublime. Have I not understood it myself? Have I not lived ten months of this unnatural life? And to the question asked by Ecclesiastes three thousand years ago, “That which is far off and exceeding deep, who can find it out?” two men alone of all now living have the right to give an answer — —

CAPTAIN NEMO AND MYSELF.

A FLOATING CITY

Anonymous translation, 1904

This adventure novel was first published in 1871 and tells the story of a woman who, on board the ship Great Eastern with her husband, finds that the man she loves is also on board.

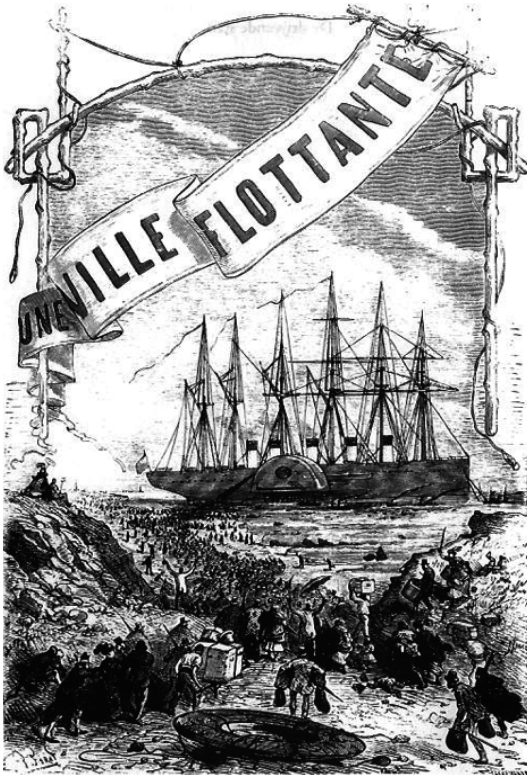
UNE VILLE FLOTTANTE

The original French frontispiece

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CHAPTER I

THE “GREAT EASTERN”

ON the 18th of March, 1867, 1 arrived at Liverpool, intending to take a berth simply as an amateur traveler on board the *Great Eastern,* which in a few days was to sail for New York. I had sometimes thought of paying a visit to North America, and was now tempted to cross the Atlantic on board this gigantic boat. First of all the *Great Eastern,* then the country celebrated by Cooper.

This steamship is indeed a masterpiece of naval construction; more than a vessel, it is a floating city, part of the country, detached from English soil, which after having crossed the sea, unites itself to the American Continent. I pictured to myself this enormous bulk borne on the waves, her defiant struggle with the wind, her boldness before the powerless sea, her indifference to the billows, her stability in the midst of that element which tosses “Warriors “and “Solferinos “like ship’s boats. But my imagination carried me no farther; all these things I did indeed see during the passage, and many others which do not exclusively belong to the maritime domain. If the *Great Eastern* is not merely a nautical engine, but rather a microcosm, and carries a small world with it, an observer will not be astonished to meet here, as on a larger theater, all the instincts, follies, and passions of human nature.

On leaving the station, I went to the Adelphi Hotel. The *Great Eastern* was announced to sail on the 20th of March, and as I wished to witness the last preparations, I asked permission of Captain Anderson, the commander, to take my place on board immediately, which permission he very obligingly granted.

The next day I went down towards the basins which form a double line of docks on the banks of the Mersey. The gate-keepers allowed me to go onto Prince’s Landing- Stage, a kind of movable raft which rises and falls with the tide, and is a landing place for the numerous boats which run between Liverpool, and the opposite town of Birkenhead on the left bank of the Mersey.

The Mersey, like the Thames, is only an insignificant stream, unworthy the name of river, although it empties into the sea. It is an immense depression of the land filled with water, in fact nothing more than a hole, the depth of which allows it to receive ships of the heaviest tonnage, such as the *Great Eastern*, to which almost every other port in the world is closed. Thanks to this natural condition, the streams of the Thames and the Mersey have seen two immense commercial cities, London and Liverpool, built almost at their mouths, and from a similar cause has Glasgow arisen on the Clyde.

At Prince’s Landing-Stage, a small tug in the service of the *Great Eastern* was getting up steam. I went on board and found it already crowded with workmen and mechanics. As the clock in Victoria Tower struck seven, the tender left her moorings and quickly ascended the Mersey with the rising tide.

Scarcely had we started, when I saw on the quay a tall young man, with that aristocratic look which so distinguishes the English officer. I thought I recognized in him a friend whom I had not seen for several years, a captain in the Indian army; but I must have been mistaken, for Captain MacElwin could not have left Bombay, as I ought to have known, besides MacElwin was a gay, careless fellow, and a jovial companion, but this person, if he resembled him in feature, seemed melancholy, and as though burdened with a secret grief. I had not time to observe him more closely, for the tender was moving rapidly away, and the impression founded on this resemblance soon vanished from my mind.

The *Great Eastern* was anchored about three miles up the river, at a depth equal to the height of the tallest houses in Liverpool. She was not to be seen from Prince’s Stage, but I caught a glimpse of her imposing bulk from the first bend in the river.

One would have taken her for a small island, hardly discernible in the mist. She appeared with her bows towards us, having swung round with the tide; but soon the tender altered her course, and the whole length of the steamship was presented to our view; she seemed what in fact she was — enormous! Three or four colliers alongside were pouring their cargoes of coal into her port-holes. Beside the *Great Eastern*, these three-mast ships looked like barges; their chimneys did not even reach the first line of light-ports in her hull; the yards of their gallant-sails did not come up to her bulwarks. The giant could have hoisted these ships on its davits like shore-boats.

Meanwhile the tender approached the *Great Eastern*, whose chains were violently strained by the pressure of the tide, and ranged up to the foot of an immense winding staircase, on the larboard side. In this position the deck of the tender was only on a level with the load water-line of the steamship, to which line she would be depressed when in full cargo, and which still emerged two yards.

The workmen were now hurriedly disembarking and clambering up the numerous steps Which terminated at the fore-part of the ship. I, with head upturned, and my body thrown back surveyed the wheels of the *Great Eastern*, like a tourist looking up a high edifice.

Seen from the side, these wheels looked narrow and contracted, although their paddles were four yards broad, but in front they had a monumental aspect. Their elegant fittings, the arrangements of the whole plan, the stays crossing each other to support the division of the triple center rim, the radius of red spokes, the machinery half lost in the shadow of the wide paddle-boards, all this impressed the mind, and awakened an idea of some gigantic and mysterious power.

With what force must these wooden paddles strike the waves which are now gently breaking over them! what a boiling of water when this powerful engine strikes it blow after blow! what a thundering noise engulfed in this paddle- box cavern! when the *Great Eastern* goes at full speed, under the pressure of wheels measuring fifty-three feet in diameter and 166 in circumference, weighing ninety tons, and making eleven revolutions a minute. The tender had disembarked her crew; I stepped onto the fluted iron steps, and in a few minutes had crossed the fore-part of the *Great Eastern.*

CHAPTER II

OUR PREPARATIONS COMPLETED

THE deck was still nothing but an immense timber-yard given up to an army of workmen. I could not believe I was on board a ship. Several thousand men — workmen, crew, officers, lookers on — mingled and jostled together, some on deck, others in the engine-room; here pacing the upper decks, there scattered in the rigging, all in an indescribable pell-mell. Here fly-wheel cranes were raising enormous pieces of cast-iron, there heavy joists were hoisted by steam- windlasses; above the engine-rooms an iron cylinder, a metal shaft in fact, was balanced. At the bows, the yards creaked as the sails were hoisted; at the stern rose a scaffolding which, doubtless, concealed some building in construction. Building, fixing, carpentering, rigging, and painting, were going on in the midst of the greatest disorder.

My luggage was already on board. I asked to see Captain Anderson, and was told that he had not yet arrived; but one of the stewards undertook to install me, and had my packages carried to one of the aft-cabins.

“My good fellow,” said I to him, “The *Great Eastern* was announced to sail on the 20th of March, but is it possible that we can be ready in twenty-four hours? Can you tell me when we may expect to leave Liverpool?”

But in this respect the steward knew no more than I did, and he left me to myself. I then made up my mind to visit all the ins and outs of this immense ant-hill, and began my walk like a tourist in a foreign town. A black mire — that British mud which is so rarely absent from the pavements of English towns — covered the deck of the steamship; dirty gutters wound here and there. One might have thought oneself in the worst part of Upper

Thames Street, near London Bridge. I walked on, following the upper decks towards the stern. Stretching on either side were two wide streets, or rather boulevards, filled with a compact crowd; thus walking, I came to the center of the steamship between the paddles, united by a double set of bridges.

Here opened the pit containing the machinery of the paddle-wheels, and I had an opportunity of looking at this admirable locomotive engine. About fifty workmen were scattered on the metallic skylights, some clinging to the long suction-pumps fixing the eccentric wheels, others hanging on the cranks riveting iron wedges with’ enormous wrenches. After having cast a rapid glance over these fitting works, I continued my walk till I reached the bows, where the carpenters were finishing the decoration of a large saloon called the “smoking-room,” a magnificent apartment with fourteen windows; the ceiling white and gold, and wainscoted with lemon-colored panels. Then, after having crossed a small triangular space at the bows, I reached the stem, which descends perpendicularly into the water.

Turning round from this extreme point, I saw through an opening in the mists, the stern of the *Great Eastern* at a distance of over two hundred yards.

I returned by the boulevards on the starboard side, avoiding contact with the swaying pulleys and the ropes of the rigging, lashed in all directions by the wind; now keeping out of the way, here of the blows of a fly-wheel crane, and further on, of the flaming scoria which were showering from a forge like a display of fireworks. I could hardly see the tops of the masts, two hundred feet in height, which lost themselves in the mist, increased by the black smoke from the tenders and colliers.

After having passed the great hatchway of the engine- rooms, I observed a “small hotel” on my left, and then the spacious side walls of a palace surmounted by a terrace, the railings of which were being varnished. At last I reached the stern of the steamship, and the place I had already noticed where the scaffolding was erected. Here between the last small deck cabin and the enormous gratings of the hatchways, above whidh rose the four wheels of the rudder, some engineers had just finished placing a steam-engine. The engine was composed of two horizontal cylinders, and presented a system of pinions, levers, and blocks which seemed to me very complicated. I did not understand at first for what it was intended, but it appeared that here, as everywhere else, the preparations were far from complete.

And now, why all these delays? Why so many new arrangements on board the *Great Eastern,* a comparatively new ship? The reason may be briefly explained.

After twenty passages from England to America, one of which was marked by very serious disasters, the use of the *Great Eastern* was temporarily abandoned, and this immense ship, arranged to accommodate passengers, seemed no longer good for anything. When the first attempt to lay the Atlantic cable had failed, — partly because the number of ships which carried it was insufficient — engineers thought of the *Great Eastern.* She alone could store on. board the 2,100 miles of metallic wire, weighing 4,500 tons. She alone, thanks to her perfect indifference to the sea, could unroll and immerse this immense cable. But special arrangements were necessary for storing away the cable in the ship’s hold. Two out of six boilers were removed, and one chimney out of three belonging to the screw engine; in their places large tanks were placed for the cable, which was immersed in water to preserve it from the effects of variation of the atmosphere; the wire thus passed from these tanks of water into the sea without suffering the least contact with the air.

The laying of the cable having been successfully accomplished, and the object in view attained, the *Great Eastern* iwas once more left in her costly idleness. A French company, called the “Great Eastern Company, Limited,” rwas floated with a capital of 2,000,000 francs, with the intention of employing the immense ship for the conveyance of passengers across the Atlantic. Thus the reason for rearranging the ship to this purpose, and the consequent necessity of filling up the tanks and replacing the boilers, of enlarging the saloons in which so many people were to live during the voyage, and of building extra dining saloons, finally the arrangement of a thousand berths in the sides of the gigantic hull.

The *Great Eastern* was freighted to the amount of 25,000 francs a month. Two contracts were arranged with G. Forrester and Co. of Liverpool the first to the amount of 538,750 francs, for making new boilers for the screw; the second to the amount of 662,500 francs for general repairs, and fixings on board.

Before entering upon the last undertaking, the Board of Trade required that the ship’s hull should undergo a strict examination. This costly operation accomplished, a long crack in her exterior plates was carefully repaired at a great expense, and the next proceeding was to fix the new boilers; the driving main-shaft of the wheels, which had been damaged during the last voyage, had to be replaced by a shaft, provided with two eccentric wheels, which insured the solidity of this important part. And now for the first time the *Great Eastern* was to be steered by steam.

It was for this delicate operation that the engineers intended the engine which they had placed at the stern. The steersman standing on the bridge between the signal apparatus of the wheels and the screw, has before his eyes a dial provided with a moving needle, which tells him every moment the position of his rudder. In order to modify it, he has only to press his hand lightly on a small wheel, measuring hardly a foot in diameter, and placed within his reach. Immediately the valves open, the steam from the boilers rushes along the conducting tubes into the two cylinders of the small engine, the pistons move rapidly, and the rudder instantly obeys. If this plan succeeds, a man will be able to direct the gigantic body of the *Great Eastern* with one finger.

For five days operations continued with distracting activity. These delays considerably affected the enterprise of the freighters, but the contractors could do no more. The day for setting sail was finally settled for the 26th of March. The 25th still saw the deck strewn with all kinds of tools.

During this last day, however, little by little the gangways were cleared, the scaffoldings were taken down, the fly-wheel cranes disappeared, the fixing of the engines was accomplished, the last screws and nails were driven in, the reservoirs filled with oil, and the last slab rested on its metal mortise. This day the chief engineer tried the boilers. The engine-rooms were full of steam; leaning over the hatchway, enveloped in a hot mist, I could see nothing, but I heard the long pistons groaning, and the huge cylinders noisily swaying to and fro on their solid swing blocks. The muddy waters of the Mersey were lashed into foam by the slowly revolving paddle-wheels; at the stern, the screw beat the waves with its four blades; the two engines, entirely independent of each other, were in complete working order.

Towards five o’clock a small steamer, intended as a shore- boat for the *Great Eastern*, came alongside. Her movable engine was first hoisted on board by means of windlasses, but as for the steamer herself, she could not be embarked. Her steel hull was so heavy that the davits to which it was attached bent under the weight, undoubtedly this would not have occurred had they supported them with lifts. Therefore they were obliged to abandon the steamer, but there still remained on the *Great Eastern* a string of sixteen boats hanging to the davits.

Everything was finished by evening; not a trace of mud was visible on the well-swept boulevards, for an army of sweepers had been at work. There was a full cargo; provisions, goods, and coal filled the stewards’ room, the store, and the coal houses. However, the steamer had not yet sunk to the load water-line, and did not draw the necessary thirty-three feet. It was an inconvenient position for the wheels, for the paddles not being sufficiently immersed, caused a great diminution in the speed.

Nevertheless it was possible to set sail, and I went to bed with the hope of starting next day. I was not disappointed, for at break of dawn I saw the English, French, and American flags floating from the masts.

CHAPTER III

I MEET A FRIEND

THE *Great Eastern* was indeed preparing to sail. Already volumes of black smoke were issuing from the five chimneys, and hot steam filled the engine-rooms. Some sailors were brightening up the four great fog-cannons which were to salute Liverpool as we sailed by. The top- men climbed the yards, disentangled the rigging, and tightened the shrouds on the thick ropes fastened to the barricades. About eleven o’clock the carpenters and painters put the finishing touches to their work, and then; embarked on board the tender which awaited them. As soon as there was a sufficient, pressure the steam rushed into the cylinders of the rudder engine, and the engineers had the pleasure of seeing that this ingenious contrivance was an entire success.

The weather was fine, with bright gleams of sunshine darting through the rapidly-moving clouds.

The officers were all dispersed about the deck, making preparations for getting under sail. These officials consisted of the captain, the first officer, two assistant officers, five lieutenants, of whom one was a Frenchman, M. H. — , and a volunteer who was also French.

Captain Anderson holds a high place in the commercial marine of England. It is to him we are indebted for the laying of the Transatlantic cable, though it is true that if he succeeded where his predecessors had failed, it was because he worked under more favorable circumstances, having the *Great Eastern* at his command. Be it as it may, his success gained for him the title of “Sir.” I found him to be a very agreeable commander. He was a man of about fifty years of age, with that tawny complexion which remains unchanged by weather or age; a thorough Englishman, with a tall figure, a broad smiling face, and merry eyes; walking with a quiet dignified step, his hands never in his pockets, always irreproachably gloved and elegantly dressed, and invariably with a little piece of his white handkerchief peeping out of the pocket of his blue and gold- laced overcoat The first officer presented a singular contrast to Captain Anderson, and his appearance is easily described: — an active little man, with a very sunburnt skin, a black beard almost covering his face, and legs which defied every lurch of the vessel. A skillful, energetic seaman, he gave his orders in a clear, decided tone, the boatswain repeating them with a voice like the roaring of a hoarse lion. The second officer's name was W — : I think he was a naval officer,

on board the *Great Eastern* by special permission; he had all the appearance of a regular "Jack-tar."

Besides the ship officers, the engines were under the command of a chief engineer, assisted by eight or ten engineering officers, and a battalion of two hundred and fifty men, some stokers, others oilers, who hardly ever left the engine-rooms. This army of men was well occupied night and day, having ten boilers with ten furnaces and about a hundred fires to attend to.

As for the crew of the steamship proper, what with quartermasters, topmen, steersmen, and cabin-boys, it comprised about one hundred men, and besides these, there were two hundred stewards for serving the passengers.

Every man was at his post; the pilot who was to conduct the vessel out of the Mersey had been on board since the evening before. I saw also a French Pilot, who was to make the passage with us, and on her return to take the steamship into anchorage at Brest.

"I begin to think we shall sail to-day," said I to Lieutenant H — .

“We are only waiting for our passengers,” replied my countryman.

“Are there many?”

“Twelve or thirteen hundred.”

At half-past eleven the tender was hailed, laden with passengers, who, as I afterwards learnt, were Californians, Canadians, Americans, Peruvians, English, Germans, and two or three Frenchmen. The tender ranged herself at the foot of a flight of steps, and then began the slow, interminable ascent of passengers and luggage.

The first care of each passenger, when he had once set foot on the steamer, was to go and secure his place in the dining-room; his card, or his name written on a scrap of paper, was enough to insure his possession.

I remained on deck in order to notice all the details of embarkation. At half-past twelve the luggage was all on board, and I saw thousands of packages of every description, from chests large enough to contain a suite of furniture, to elegant little traveling-cases and fanciful American and English trunks, heaped together pell-mell. All these were soon cleared from the deck, and stowed away in the store-rooms; workmen and porters returned to the tender, which steered off, atfer having blackened the side of the *Great Eastern* with her smoke.

I was going back towards the bows, when suddenly I found myself face to face with the young man I had seen on Prince’s Landing-Stage. He stopped on seeing me, and held out his hand, which I warmly shook.

“You, Fabian! “I cried. “You here?”

“Even so, my dear friend.”

“I was not mistaken, then; it was really you I saw on the quay a day or two since.”

“It is likely,” replied Fabian, “but I did not see you.”

“And you are going to America?”

“Certainly! Do you think I could spend a month’s leave better than in traveling?”

“How fortunate that you thought of making your tour in the *Great Eastern!”*

“It was not chance at all, my dear fellow. I read in the newspaper that you were one of the passengers; and as we have not met for some years now, I came on board, in order to make the passage with you.”

“Have you come from India?”

“Yes, by the *Godavery,* which arrived at Liverpool the day before yesterday.”

“And you are traveling, Fabian? “I asked, noticing his pale, sad face.

“To divert my mind, if I can,” interrupted Captain Mac- Elwin, warmly pressing my hand.

CHAPTER IV

AN ACCIDENT

FABIAN left me, to look for his cabin, which, according to the ticket he held in his hand, was number seventy-three of the grand saloon series. At this moment large volumes of smoke curled from the chimneys; the steam hissed with a deafening noise through the escape-pipes, and fell in a fine rain over the deck; a noisy eddying of water announced that the engines were at work. We were at last going to start First of all the anchor had to be raised. The *Great Eastern* swung round with the tide; all was now clear, and Captain Anderson was obliged to choose this moment to set sail, for the width of the *Great Eastern* did not allow of her turning round in the Mersey. He was more master of his ship and more certain of guiding her skillfully in the midst of the numerous boats always plying on the river when stemming the rapid current than when driven by the ebb-tide; the least collision with this gigantic body; would have proved disastrous.

To weigh anchor under these circumstances required considerable exertion, for the pressure of the tide stretched the chains by which the ship was moored, and besides this, a strong southwester blew with full force on her hull, so that it required powerful engines to. hoist the heavy anchors from their muddy beds. An anchor-boat, intended for this purpose, had just stoppered on the chains, but the windlasses were not sufficiently powerful, and they were obliged to use the steam apparatus which the *Great Eastern* had at her disposal.

At the bows was an engine of sixty-six horse-power. In order to raise the anchors it was only necessary to send the steam from the boilers into its cylinders to obtain immediately a considerable power, which could be directly applied to the windlass on which the chains were fastened. This was done; but powerful as it was, this engine was found insufficient, and fifty of the crew were set to turn the capstan with bars, thus the anchors were gradually drawn in, but it was slow work.

I was on the poop at the bows with several other passengers at this moment, watching the details of departure. Near me stood a traveler, who frequently shrugged his shoulders impatiently, and did not spare disparaging jokes on the tardiness of the work. He was a thin, nervous little man, with quick, restless eyes: a physiognomist could easily see that the things of this life always appeared on their funny side to this philosopher of Democrates school, for his risible muscles were never still for a moment; but without describing him further, I need only say I found him a very pleasant fellow-traveler.

“I thought until now, sir,” said he to me, “that engines were made to help men, not men to help engines.”

I was going to reply to this wise observation, when there was a loud cry, and immediately my companion and I were hurled towards the bows; every man at the capstan-bars was knocked down; some got up again, others lay scattered on the deck. A catch had broken, and the capstan being forced round by the frightful pressure of the chains, the men, caught by the rebound, were struck violently on the head and chest. Freed from their broken rope-bands, the capstan-bars flew in all directions like grape-shot, killing four sailors, and wounding twelve others; among the latter was the boatswain, a Scotchman from Dundee.

The spectators hurried towards the unfortunate men, the wounded were taken to the hospital at the stern; as for the four already dead, preparations were immediately made to send them on shore: so lightly do Anglo-Saxons regard death, that this event made very little impression on board.

These unhappy men, killed and wounded, were only tools, which could be replaced at very little expense. The tender, already some distance off, was hailed, and in a few minutes she was alongside.

I went towards the fore-part of the vessel, the staircase had not yet been raised. The four corpses, enveloped in coverings, were let down, and placed on the deck of the tender. One of the surgeons on board embarked to go with them to Liverpool, with injunctions to rejoin the *Great Eastern* as quickly as possible. The tender immediately sheered off, and the sailors went to the bows, to wash the stams of blood from the deck.

I ought to add that one of the passengers, slightly wounded by the breaking of the pinion, took advantage of this circumstance to leave by the tender; he had already had enough of the *Great Eastern.*

I watched the little boat going off full steam, and, turning round I heard my ironical fellow-traveler muttering these words: “A good beginning for a voyage!”

“A very bad one, sir,” said I. “To whom have I the honor of speaking?”

“To Dr. Dean Pitferge.”

CHAPTER V

OFF AT LAST

THE work of weighing anchors was resumed; with the help of the anchor-boat the chains were eased, and the anchors at last left their tenacious depths. A quarter past one sounded from the Birkenhead clock-towers, the moment of departure could not be deferred, if it was intended to make use of the tide. The captain and pilot went on the foot-bridge; one lieutenant placed himself near the screw- signal apparatus, another near that of the paddle-wheel, in case of the failure of the steam-engine; four other steersmen watched at the stern, ready to put in action the great wheels placed on the gratings of the hatchings. The *Great Eastern,* making head against the current, was now only waiting to descend the river with the ebb-tide.

The order for departure was given, the paddles slowly struck the water, the screw bubbled at the stern, and the enormous vessel began to move.

The greater part of the passengers on the poop were gazing at the double landscape of Liverpool and Birkenhead, studded with manufactory chimneys. The Mersey, covered with ships, some lying at anchor, others ascending and descending the river, offered only a winding passage for our steamship. But under the hand of a pilot, sensible to the least inclinations of her rudder, she glided through the narrow passages, like a whale-boat beneath the oar of a vigorous steersman. At one time I thought that we were going to run foul of a brig, which was drifting across the stream, her bows nearly grazing the hull of the *Great Eastern*, but a collision was avoided, and when from the height of the upper deck I looked at this ship, which was not of less than seven or eight hundred tons burden, she seemed to me no larger than the tiny boats which children play with on the lakes of Regent's Park or the Serpentine. It was not long before the *Great Eastern* was opposite the Liverpool landing-stages, but the four cannons which were to have saluted the town, were silent out of respect to the dead, for the tender was disembarking them at this moment; however, loud hurrahs replaced the reports which are the last expressions of national politeness. Immediately there was a vigorous clapping of hands and waving of handkerchiefs, with all the enthusiasm with which the English hail the departure of every vessel, be it only a simple yacht sailing round a bay. But with what shouts they were answered! what echoes they called forth from the quays! There were thousands of spectators on both the Liverpool and Birkenhead sides, and boats laden with sight-seers swarmed on the Mersey. The sailors manning the yards of the *Lord Clyde,* lying at anchor opposite the docks, saluted the giant with their hearty cheers.

But even the noise of the cheering could not drown the frightful discord of several bands playing at the same time. Flags were incessantly hoisted in honor of the *Great Eastern,* but soon the cries grew faint in the distance. Our steamship ranged near the *Tripoli,* a Cunard emigrant- boat, which in spite of her 2,000 tons burden looked like a mere barge; then the houses grew fewer and more scattered on both shores, the landscape was no longer blackened with smoke; and brick walls, with the exception of some long regular buildings intended for workmen's houses, gave way to the open country, with pretty villas dotted here and there. Our last salutation reached us from the platform of the lighthouse and the walls of the bastion.

At three o'clock the *Great Eastern* had crossed the bar of the Mersey, and shaped her course down St. George's Channel. There was a strong sou'wester blowing, and a very heavy swell on the sea, but the steamship did not feel it.

Towards four o’clock the Captain gave orders to heave to; the tender put on full steam to rejoin us, as she was bringing back the doctor. When the boat came alongside a rope-ladder was thrown out, by which he ascended, not without some difficulty. Our more agile pilot slid down by the same way into his boat, which was awaiting him, each rower provided with a cork jacket. Some minutes after he went on board a charming little schooner waiting to catch the breeze.

Our course was immediately continued; under the pressure of the paddles and the screw, the speed of the *Great Eastern* greatly increased; in spite of the wind ahead, she neither rolled nor pitched. Soon the shades of night stretched across the sea, and Holyhead Point was lost in the darkness.

CHAPTER VI

LIFE ON BOARD THE GREAT EASTERN

THE next day, the 27th of March, the *Great Eastern* coasted along the deeply indented Irish shore. I had chosen my cabin at the bows; it was a small room well lighted by two skylights. A second row of cabins separated it from the first saloon, so that neither the noise of conversation, nor the rattling of pianos, which were not wanting on board, could reach me. It was an isolated cabin; the furniture consisted of a sofa, a bedstead, and a toilet-table.

The next morning at seven o'clock, having crossed the first two rooms, I went on deck. A few passengers were already pacing the upper decks; an almost imperceptible swell balanced the steamer; the wind was high, but the sea, protected by the coast, was comparatively calm.

Soon we came in sight of Queenstown, a small "calling- place," before which several fishermen's boats were at work. It is here that all ships bound for Liverpool, whether steamers or sailing-ships, throw out their despatch-bags, which are carried to Dublin in a few hours by an express train always in readiness. From Dublin they are conveyed across the channel to Holyhead by a fast steamer, so that despatches thus sent are one day in advance of the most rapid Transatlantic steamers.

About nine o'clock the bearings of the *Great Eastern* were west-northwest. I was just going on deck, when I met Captain MacElwin, accompanied by a friend, a tall robust man, with a light beard and long mustache wh'.ch mingled with the whiskers and left the chin bare, after the fashion of the day. This tall fellow was the exact type of an English officer; his figure was erect without stiffness, his look calm, his walk dignified but easy; his whole appearance seemd to indicate unusual courage, and I was not mistaken in him. “My friend, Archibald Corsican,” said Fabian to me, “a captain in the 22nd regiment of the Indian army, like myself.”

Thus introduced, Captain Corsican and I bowed.

“We hardly saw each other yesterday, Fabian,” said I, shaking Captain MacElwin’s hand, “we were in the bustle of departure, so that all I know about you is that it was not chance which brought you on board the *Great Eastern.* I must confess that if I have anything to do with your decision —”

“Undoubtedly, my dear fellow,” interrupted Fabian; “Captain Corsican and I came to Liverpool with the intention of taking our berths on board the *China*, a Cunard steamer, when we heard that the *Great Eastern* was going to attempt another passage from England to America; it was a chance we might not get again, and learning that you were on board I did not hestitate, as I had not seen you since we took that delightful trip in the Scandinavian States three years ago; so now you know how it was that the tender brought us here yesterday.”

My dear Fabian,” I replied, “I believe that neither Captain Corsican nor yourself will regret your decision, as a passage across the Atlantic in this huge boat cannot fail to be interesting even to you who are so little used to the sea. But now let us talk about yourself. Your last letter, and it is not more than six weeks since I received it, bore the Bombay post-mark, so that I was justified in believing you were still with your regiment.”

“We were so three weeks ago,” said Fabian, “leading the half-military, half-country life of Indian officers, employing most of our time in hunting; my friend here is a famed tiger-killer; however, as we are both single and without family ties, we thought we would let the poor wild beasts of the peninsula rest for a time, while we came to Europe to breathe a little of our native air. We obtained a year's leave, and traveling by way of the Red Sea, Suez, and France, we reached Old England with the utmost possible speed."

"Old England," said Captain Corsican, smiling; "we are there no longer, Fabian; we are on board an English ship, but it is freighted by a French company, and it is taking us to America; three different flags float over our heads, signifying that we are treading on Franco-Anglo-Americari boards."

"What does it matter," replied Fabian, and a painful expression passed over his face; "what does it matter, so long as it whiles away the time? ' Movement is life;' and it is well to be able to forget the past, and kill the present by continual change. In a few days I shall be at New York, where I hope to meet again my sister and her children, whom I have not seen for several years; then we shall visit the great lakes, and descend the Mississippi as far as New Orleans, where we shall look for sport on the Amazon. Then we are going to Africa, where the lions and elephants will make the Cape their ' rendezvous,' in order to celebrate the arrival of Captain Corsican. Finally, we shall return and impose on the Sepoys the caprices of the metropolis."

Fabian spoke with a nervous volubility, and his breast heaved; evidently there was some great grief weighing on his mind, the cause of which I was at yet ignorant of, but with which Archibald seemed to be well acquainted. He evinced a warm friendship for Fabian, who was several years younger than himself, treating him like a younger brother, with a devotion which almost amounted to heroism.

At this moment our conversation was interrupted by the sound of a horn, which announced the half-past twelve lunch. Four times a day, to the great satisfaction of the passengers, this shrill horn sounded: at half-past eight for breakfast, half-past twelve for lunch, four o’clock for dinner, and at seven for tea. In a few minutes the long streets were deserted, and soon the tables in the immense saloons were filled with guests. I succeeded in getting a place near Fabian and Captain Corsican.

The dining-rooms were provided with four long rows of tables; the glasses and bottles placed in swing-racks kept perfectly steady; the roll of the steamer was almost mper- ceptible, so that the guests — men, women, and children — could eat their lunch without any fear. Numerous waiters were busy carrying round the tastily-arranged dishes, and supplying the demands for wine and beer; the Californians certainly distinguished themselves by their proclivities for champagne. Near her husband sat an old laundress, who had found gold in the San Francisco washing-tubs, emptying a bottle of champagne in no time; two or three pale, delicate-looking young ladies were eagerly devouring slices of red beef; and others discussing with evident satisfaction the merits of rhubarb tart, &c. Everyone worked away in the highest spirits; one could have fancied oneself at a restaurant in the middle of Paris instead of the open sea.

Lunch over, the decks were again filled; people bowed and spoke to each other in passing as formally as if they were walking in Hyde Park; children played and ran about, throwing their balls and bowling hoops as they might have done on the gravel walks of the Tuileries; the greater part of the men walked up and down smoking; the ladies, seated on folding-chairs, worked, read, or talked together, whilst the governesses and nurses looked after the children. A few corpulent Americans swung themselves backwards and forwards in their rocking-chairs; the ship’s officers were continually passing to and fro, some going to their watch on the bridge, others answering the absurd questions put to them by passengers; whilst the tones of an organ and two or three pianos making a distracting discord, reached us through the lulls in the wind.

About three o’clock a loud shouting was heard; the passengers crowded onto the poop; the *Great Eastern* had ranged within two cable-lengths of a vessel which she had overhauled. It was the *Propontis,* on her way to New York, which was saluting the giant of the seas on her passage, which compliment the giant returned.

Land was still in sight at four o’clock, but hardly discernible through the mist which had suddenly surrounded us. Soon we saw the light of Fastenet Beacon, situated on an isolated rock. Night set in, during which we must have doubled Cape Clear, the most southerly point of Ireland.

CHAPTER VII

HINTS OF TROUBLE

ON Wednesday night the weather was very bad, my balance was strangely variable, and I was obliged to lean with my knees and elbows against the sideboard, to prevent myself from falling. Portmanteaus and bags came in and out of my cabin; an unusual hubbub reigned in the adjoining saloon, in which two or three hundred packages were making expeditions from one end to the other, knocking the tables and chairs with loud crashes; doors slammed, the boards creaked, the partitions made that groaning noise peculiar to pine wood; bottles and glasses jingled together in their racks, and a cataract of plates and dishes rolled about on the pantry floors. I heard the irregular roaring of the screw, and the wheels beating the water, sometimes entirely immersed, and at others striking the empty air; by all these signs I concluded that the wind had freshened, and the steamship was no longer indifferent to the billows.

At six o'clock next morning, after passing a sleepless night, I got up and dressed myself, as well as I could with one hand, while with the other I clutched at the sides of my cabin, for without support it was impossible to keep one's feet, and I had quite a serious struggle to get on my overcoat. I left my cabin, and helping myself with hands and feet through the billows of luggage, I crossed the saloon, scrambling up the stairs on my knees, like a Roman peasant devoutly climbing the steps of the "Scala santa" of Pontius Pilate; and at last, reaching the deck, I hung on firmly to the nearest support.

No land in sight; we had doubled Cape Clear in the night, and around us was that vast circumference bounded by the line, where water and sky appear to meet. The slate- colored sea broke in great foamless billows. The *Great Eastern* struck amidships, and supported by no sail, rolled frightfully, her bare masts describing immense circles in the air. There was no heaving to speak of, but the rolling was dreadful, it was impossible to stand upright. The officer on watch, cling lg to the bridge, looked as if he was in a swing.

From one support to another I managed to reach the paddles on the starboard side, the deck was clamp and slippery from the spray and mist: I was just going to fasten myself to a stanchion of the bridge when a body rolled at my feet.

It was Dr. Pitferge, my quaint friend: he scrambled on to his knees, and looking at me said: “That’s all right, the amplitude of the arc, described by the sides of the *Great Eastern,* is forty degrees; that is, twenty degrees below the horizontal, and twenty above it.”

“Indeed!” cried I, laughing, not at the observation, but at the circumstances under which it was made.

“Yes!” replied the Doctor. “During the oscillation the speed of the sides is fifty-nine inches per second, a transatlantic boat half the size takes but the same time to recover her equilibrium.”

“Then,” replied I, “since that is the case, there is an excess of stability in the *Great Eastern”*

“For her, yes, but not for her passengers,” answered Dean Pitferge gayly, “for you see they come back to the horizontal quicker than they care for.”

The Doctor, delighted with his repartee, raised himself, and holding each other up, we managed to reach a seat on the poop. Dean Pitferge had come off very well, with only a few bruises, and I congratulated him on his lucky escape, as he might have broken his neck.

“Oh, it is not over yet,” said he; “there is more trouble coming.”

“To us?”

“To the steamer, and consequently to me, to us, and to all the passengers.”

“If you are speaking seriously, why did you come on board?”

“To see what is going to happen, for I should not be at all ill-pleased to witness a shipwreck!” replied the Doctor, looking at me knowingly.

“Is this the first time you have been on board the *Great Eastern?”*

“No, I have already made several voyages in her, to satisfy my curiosity.”

“You must not complain, then.”

“I do not complain; I merely state facts, and patiently await the hour of the catastrophe.”

Was the Doctor making fun of me? I did not know what to think, his small twinkling eyes looked very roguish; but I thought I would try him further. “Doctor,” I said, “I do not know on what facts your painful prognostics are founded, but allow me to remind you that the *Great Eastern* has crossed the Atlantic twenty times, and most of her passages have been satisfactory.”

“That’s of no consequence; this ship is bewitched, to use a common expression, she cannot escape her fate; I know it, and therefore have no confidence in her. Remember what difficulties the engineers had to launch her; I believe even that Brunei, who built her, died from the ‘ effects of the operation,’ as we doctors say.”

“Ah, Doctor,” said I, “are you inclined to be a materialist?”

“Why ask me that question?”

“Because I have noticed that many who do not believe in God believe in most everything else, even in the evil eye.”

“Make fun if you like, sir,” replied the Doctor, “but allow me to continue my argument. The *Great Eastern* has already ruined several companies. Built for the purpose of carrying emigrants to Australia, she has never once been there; intended to surpass the ocean steamers in speed, she even remains inferior to them.”

“From this,” said I, “it is to be concluded that — ”

“Listen a minute,” interrupted the Doctor. “Already one of her captains has been drowned, and he one of the most skillful, for he knew how to prevent this rolling by keeping the ship a little ahead of the waves.”

“Ah, well!” said I, “the death of that able man is to be regretted.”

“Then,” continued Dean Pitferge, without noticing my incredulity, “strange stories are told about this ship; they say that a passenger who lost his way in the hold of the ship, like a pioneer in the forests of America, has never yet been found.”

“Ah!” exclaimed I ironically, “there’s a fact!”

“They say, also, that during the construction of the boilers an engineer was melted by mistake in the steam- box.”

“Bravo!” cried I; “the melted engineer! *E ben trovato.’ Do you believe it, Doctor?”

“I believe,” replied Pitferge, “I believe quite seriously that our voyage began badly, and that it will end in the same manner.”

“But the *Great Eastern* is a solid structure,” I said, “and built so firmly that she is able to resist the most furious seas like a solid block.”

“Solid she is, undoubtedly,” resumed the doctor; “but let her fall into the hollow of the waves, and see if she will rise again. Maybe she is a giant, but a giant whose strength is not in proportion to her size; her engines are too feeble for her. Have you ever heard speak of her nineteenth passage from Liverpool to New York?”

“No, Doctor.”

“Well, I was on board. We left Liverpool on a Tuesday, the ioth of December; there were numerous passengers, and all full of confidence. Everything went well so long as we were protected by the Irish coast from the billows of the open sea; no rolling, no sea-sickness; the next day, even, the same stability; the passengers were delighted. On the 12th, however, the wind freshened towards morning; the *Great Eastern*, heading the waves, rolled considerably; the passengers, men and women, disappeared into the cabins. At four o’clock the wind blew a hurricane; the furniture began to dance; a mirror in the saloon was broken by a blow from the head of your humble servant; all the crockery was smashed to atoms; there was a frightful uproar; eight shore-boats were torn from the davits in one swoop.

At this moment our situation was serious; the paddle-wheel-engine had to be stopped; an enormous piece of lead, displaced by a lurch of the vessel, threatened to fall into its machinery; however, the screw continued to send us on. Soon the wheels began turning again, but very slowly; one of them had been damaged during the stoppage, and its spokes and paddles scraped the hull of the ship. The engine had to be stopped again, and we had to content ourselves with the screw. The night was fearful; the fury of the tempest was redoubled; the *Great Eastern* had fallen into the trough of the sea and could not right herself; at break of day there was not a piece of iron-work remaining on the wheels. They hoisted a few sails in order to right the ship, but no sooner were they hoisted than they were carried away; confusion reigned everywhere; the cable- chains, torn from their beds, rolled from one side of the ship to the other; a cattle-pen was knocked in, and a cow fell into the ladies’ saloon through the hatchway; another misfortune was the breaking of the rudder-chock, so that steering was no longer possible. Frightful crashes were heard; an oil tank, weighing over three tons, had broken from its fixings, and, rolling across the tween-decks, struck the sides alternately like a battering-ram. Saturday passed in the midst of a general terror, the ship in the trough of the sea all the time. Not until Sunday did the wind begin to abate, an American engineer on board then succeeded in fastening the chains on the rudder; we turned little by little, and the *Great Eastern* righted herself. A week after we left Liverpool we reached Queenstown. Now, who knows, sir, where we shall be in a week?”

CHAPTER VIII

WE SIGHT A WRECK

IT must be confessed the Doctor’s words were not very comforting, the passengers would not have heard them without shuddering. Was he joking, or did he speak seriously? Was it, indeed, true, that he went with the *Great Eastern* in all her voyages, to be present at some catastrophe? Everything is possible for an eccentric, especially when he is English.

However, the *Great Eastern* continued her course, tossing like a canoe, and keeping strictly to the “shortest line “of steamers. It is well known, that on a flat surface, the nearest way from one point to another is by a straight line.

On a sphere it is the curved line formed by the circumference of great circles. Ships have an interest in following this route, in order to make the shortest passage, but sailing vessels cannot pursue this track against a headwind, so that steamers alone are able to maintain a direct course, and take the route of the great circles. This is what the *Great Eastern* did, making a little for the northwest.

The rolling never ceased, that horrible sea-sickness, at the same time contagious and epidemic, made rapid progress. Several of the passengers, with wan, pallid faces, and sunken cheeks, remained on deck, in order to breathe the fresh air, the greater part of them were furious at the unlucky steamship, which was conducting herself like a mere buoy, and at the freighter’s advertisements, which had stated that sea-sickness was “unknown on board.”

At nine o’clock in the morning an object three or four miles off was signaled from the larboard quarter. Was it a waif, the carcass of a whale, or the hull of a ship? As yet it was not distinguishable. A group of convalescent passengers stood on the upper-deck, at the bows, looking at this waif which was floating three hundred miles from the nearest land.

Meanwhile the *Great Eastern* was bearing towards the object signaled; all opera-glasses were promptly raised, and there was no lack of conjecture. Between the Americans, and English, to whom every pretext for a wager is welcome, betting at once commenced. Among the most desperate of the betters I noticed a tall man, whose countenance struck me as one of profound duplicity. His features were stamped with a look of general hatred, which neither a physiognomist, nor physiologist could mistake; his forehead was seamed with a deep furrow, his manner was at the same time audacious and listless, his eyebrows nearly meeting, partly concealed the stony eyes beneath, his shoulders were high and his chin thrust forward, in fact all the indications of insolence and knavery were united in his appearance. He spoke in loud pompous tones, while some of his worthy associates laughed at his coarse jokes. This personage pretended to recognize in the waif the car’ cass of a whale, and he backed his opinion by heavy stakes, which soon found ready acceptance.

These wagers, amounting to several hundred dollars, he lost every one; in fact, the waif was the hull of a ship; the steamer rapidly drew near it, and we could already see the rusty copper of her keel. It was a three-mast ship of about five or six hundred tons, deprived of her masts and rigging, and lying on one side, with broken chains hanging from her davits.

“Had this steamship been abandoned by her crew?” This was now the prevailing question. No one appeared on the deck, but perhaps the shipwrecked ones had taken refuge inside. I saw an object moving for several moments at the bows, but it turned out to be only the remains of the jib lashed to and fro by the wind.

The hull was quite visible at the distance of half a mile; she was a comparatively new ship, and in a perfect state of preservation; her cargo, which had been shifted by the wind, obliged her to lie along on her starboard side.

The *Great Eastern* drew nearer, and, passing round, gave notice of her presence by several shrill whistles; but the waif remained silent, and unanimated; nothing was to be seen, not even a short-boat from the wrecked vessel was visible on the wide expanse of water.

The crew had undoubtedly had time to leave her, but could they have reached land, which was three hundred miles off? Could a frail boat live on a sea like that which had rocked the *Great Eastern* so frightfully? And when could this catastrophe have happened? It was evident that the shipwreck had taken place farther west, for the wind and waves must have driven the hull far out of her course. These questions were destined to remain unanswered.

When the steamship came alongside the stern of the wreck, I could read distinctly the name *Lerida,* but the port she belonged to was not given.

A merchant vessel or a man of war would have had no hesitation in manning this hull which, undoubtedly, contained a valuable cargo, but as the *Great Eastern* was on regular service, she could not take this waif in tow for so many hundreds of miles; it was equally impossible to return and take it to the nearest port. Therefore, to the great regret of the sailors, it had to be abandoned, and it was soon a mere speck in the distance. The group of passengers dispersed, some to the saloons, others to their cabins, and even the lunch bell failed to awaken the slumber- ers, worn out by sea-sickness. About noon Captain. Anderson ordered sail to be hoisted, so that the ship, better supported, did not roll so much.

CHAPTER IX

CHARACTERS AMONG THE PASSENGERS

IN spite of the ship’s disorderly conduct, life on board was becoming organized, for which the Anglo-Saxon nothing is more simple. The steamboat is his street and his house for the time being; the Frenchman, on the contrary, always looks like a traveler.

When the weather was favorable, the boulevards were thronged with promenaders, who managed to maintain the perpendicular, in spite of the ship’s motion, but with the peculiar gyrations of tipsy men. When the passengers did not go on deck, they remained either in their private sitting-rooms or in the grand saloon, and then began the noisy discords of pianos, all played at the same time, which, however, seemed not to affect Saxon ears in the least. Among these amateurs, I noticed a tall, bony woman, who must have been a good musician, for, in order to facilitate reading her piece of music, she had marked all the notes with a number, and the piano keys with a number corresponding, so that if it was note twenty-seven she struck key twenty-seven; if fifty-three, key fifty-three, and so on, perfectly indifferent to the noise around her, or the sound of other pianos in the adjoining saloons, and her equanimity was not even disturbed when some disagreeable little children thumped with their fists on the unoccupied keys.

Whilst this concert was going on, a bystander would carelessly take up one of the books scattered here and there on the tables, and, having found an interesting passage, would read it aloud, whilst his audience listened good humoredly, and complimented him with a flattering murmur of applause. Newspapers were scattered on the sofas, generally American and English, which always look old, although the pages have never been cut; it is a very tiresome operation reading these great sheets, which take up so much room, but the fashion being to leave them uncut, so they remain. One day I had the patience to read the *New York Herald* from beginning to end under these circumstances, and judge if I was rewarded for my trouble when I turned to the column headed “Private”; “M. X. begs the pretty Miss Z — ,

whom he met yesterday in Twenty-fifth Street omnibus, to come to him to-morrow, at his rooms, No. 17, St. Nicholas Hotel; he wishes to speak of marriage with her.” What did the pretty Miss Z — do? I don’t even care to know.

I passed the whole of the afternoon in the grand saloon talking, and observing what was going on about me. Conversation could not fail to be interesting, for my friend Dean Pitferge was sitting near me.

“Have you quite recovered from the effects of your tumble? “I asked him.

“Perfectly,” replied he, “but it’s no go.”

“What is no go? You?”

“No, our steamship; the screw boilers are not working well; we cannot get enough pressure.”

“You are anxious, then, to get to New York?”

“Not in the least; I speak as an engineer, that is all. I am very comfortable here, and shall sincerely regret leaving this collection of originals which chance has thrown together... for my recreation.”

“Originals!” cried I, looking at the passengers who crowded the saloon; “but all those people are very much alike.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed the Doctor, “one can see you have hardly looked at them; the species is the same, I allow, but in that species what a variety there is! Just notice that group of men down there, with their easy-going air, their legs stretched on the sofas, and hats screwed down on their heads. They are Yankees, pure Yankees, from the small states of Maine, Vermont, and Connecticut, the produce of New England. Energetic and intelligent men, rather too much influenced by 4 the Reverends,’ and who have the disagreeable fault of never putting their hands before their mouths when they sneeze. Ah! my dear sir, they are true Saxons, always keenly alive to a bargain; put two Yankees in a room together, and in an hour they will each have gained ten dollars from the other.”

“I will not ask how,” replied I, smiling at the Doctor, “but among them I see a little man with a consequential air, looking like a weather-cock, and dressed in a long overcoat, with rather short black trousers, — who is that gentleman?”

“He is a Protestant minister, a man of ‘ importance’ in Massachusetts, where he is going to join his wife, an ex- governess advantageously implicated in a celebrated lawsuit.”

“And that tall, gloomy-looking fellow, who seems to be absorbed in calculation?”

“That man calculates: in fact,” said the Doctor, “he is forever calculating.”

“Problems?”

“No, his fortune; he is a man of ‘ importance’; at any moment he knows almost to a farthing what he is worth; he is rich, a fourth part of New York is built on his land; a quarter of an hour ago he possessed $1,625,367 and a. half, but now he has only $1,625,367 and a quarter.”

“How came this difference in his fortune?”

“Well! he has just smoked a quarter-dollar cigar.”

Doctor Dean Pitferge amused me with his clever repartees, so I pointed out to him another group stowed away iri a corner of the saloon.

“They,” said he, “are people from the far west, tire tallest, who looks like a head clerk, is a man of ‘ importance/1 the head of a Chicago bank, he always carries an album under his arm, with the principal views of his beloved city. He is, and has reason to be, proud of a city founded in a desert in 1836, which at the present day has a population of more than 400,000 souls. Near him you see a Calif or- nian couple, the young wife is delicate and charming, her well-polished husband was once a plow-boy, who one fine day turned up some nuggets. That gentleman — ”

“Is a man of ‘ importance,’” said I.

“Undoubtedly,” replied the Doctor, “for his assets count by the million.”

“And pray, who may this tall individual be, who moves his head backwards and forwards like the pendulum of a clock?”

“That person,” replied the Doctor, “is the celebrated Cockburn of Rochester, the universal statistician, who has weighed, measured, proportioned, and calculated everything. Question this harmless maniac, he will tell you how) much bread a man of fifty has eaten in his life, and how many cubic feet of air he has breathed. He will tell you how many volumes in quarto the words of a Temple lawyer would fill, and how many miles the postman goes daily carrying nothing but love letters; he will tell you the number of widows who pass in one hour over London Bridge, and what would be the height of a pile of sandwiches consumed by the citizens of the Union in a year; he will tell you — ”

The Doctor, in his excitement, would have continued for a long time in this strain, but other passengers passing us were attracted by the inexhaustible stock of his original remarks. What different characters there were in this crowd of passengers! not one idler, however, for one does not go from one continent to the other without some serious motive. The most part of them were undoubtedly going to seek their fortunes on American ground, forgetting that at twenty years of age a Yankee has made his fortune, and that at twenty-five he is already too old to begin the struggle.

Among these adventurers, inventors, and fortune hunters, Dean Pitferge pointed out to me some singularly interesting characters. Here was a chemist, a rival of Dr. Liebig, who pretended to have discovered the art of condensing all the nutritious parts of a cow into a meat-tablet, no larger than a five-shilling piece. He was going to coin money out of the cattle of the Pampas. Another, the inventor of a portable motive power — a steam horse in a watch case — was going to exhibit his patent in New England. Another, a Frenchman from the “Rue Chapon,” was carrying to America 30,000 cardboard dolls, which said “papa “with a very successful Yankee accent, and he had no doubt but that his fortune was made.

But besides these originals, there were still others whose secrets we could not guess; perhaps among them was some cashier flying from his empty cash box, and a detective making friends with him, only waiting for the end of the passage to take him by the collar; perhaps also we might have found in this crowd clever genii, who always find people ready to believe in them, even when they advocate the affairs of “The Oceanic Company for lighting Polynesia with gas,” or “The Royal Society for making incombustible coal.”

But at this moment my attention was attracted by the entrance of a young couple who seemed to be under the influence of a precocious weariness.

“They are Peruvians, my dear sir,” said the Doctor, “a couple married a year ago, who have been to all parts of the world for their honeymoon. They adored each other in Japan, loved in Australia, bore with one another in India, bored each other in France, quarreled in England, and twill undoubtedly separate in America.”

“And,” said I, “who is that tall, haughty-looking man just coming in? from his appearance I should take him for an officer.”

“He is a Mormon,” replied the doctor, “an elder, Mr. Hatch, one of the great preachers in the city of Saints. What a fine type of manhood he is! Look at his proud eye, his noble countenance, and dignified bearing, so different from the Yankee. Mr. Hatch is returning from Germany and England, where he has preached Mormonism with great success, for there are numbers of this sect in Europe, who are allowed to conform to the laws of their Country.”

“Indeed!” said I; “I quite thought that polygamy was forbidden them in Europe.”

“Undoubtedly, my dear sir, but do not think that polygamy is obligatory on Mormons; Brigham Young has his harem, because it suits him, but all his followers do not imitate him, not even those dwelling on the banks of the Salt Lake.”

“Indeed! and Mr. Hatch?”

“Mr. Hatch has only one wife, and he finds that quite enough; besides, he proposes to explain his system in a meeting that he will hold one of these evenings.”

“The saloon will be filled.”

“Yes,” said Pitferge, “if the gambling does not attract too many of the audience; you know that they play in a room at the bows? There is an Englishman there with an evil, disagreeable face, who seems to take the lead among them, he is a bad man, with a detestable reputation. Have you noticed him?”

From the Doctor’s description, I had no doubt but that he was the same man who that morning had made himself conspicuous by his foolish wagers with regard to the waif. My opinion of him was not wrong. Dean Pitferge told me his name was Harry Drake, and that he was the son of a merchant at Calcutta, a gambler, a dissolute character, a duelist, and now that he was almost ruined, he was most likely going to America to try a life of adventures. “Such people,” added the Doctor, “always find followers willing to flatter them, and this fellow has already formed his circle of scamps, of which he is the center. Among them I have noticed a little short man, with a round face, a turned-up nose, wearing gold spectacles, and having the appearance of a German Jew; he calls himself a doctor, on the way to Quebec; but I take him for a loy? actor and one of Drake’s admirers.”

At this moment Dean Pitferge, who easily skipped from one subject to another, nudged my elbow. I turned my head towards the saloon door; a young man about twenty- eight, and a girl of seventeen, were coming in arm in arm.

“A newly-married pair?” asked I.

“No,” replied the Doctor, in a softened tone, “an engaged couple, who are only waiting for their arrival in New York to get married; they have just made the tour of Europe, of course with their family’s consent, and they know now that they are made for one another. Nice young people; it is a pleasure to look at them. I often see them leaning over the railings of the engine-rooms, counting the turns of the wheels, which do not go half fast enough for their liking. Ah! sir, if our boilers were heated like those two youthful hearts, see how our speed would increase!”

CHAPTER X

A HOPELESS DISEASE

THIS day, at half-past twelve, a steersman posted up on the grand saloon door the following observations: Lat. 510 15’ N. Long. 180 13’ W. Dist.: Fastenet, 323 miles.

This signifies that at noon we were three hundred and twenty-three miles from the Fastenet lighthouse, the last which we had passed on the Irish coast, and at 510 15’ north latitude, and 180 13’ west longitude, from the meridian of Greenwich. It was the ship’s bearing, which the captain thus made known to the passengers every day. By consulting this bearing, and referring it to a chart, the course of the *Great Eastern* might be followed. Up to this time she; had only made three hundred and twenty miles in thirty- six hours, it was not satisfactory, for a steamer at its ordinary speed does not go less than three hundred miles in twenty-four hours.

After having left the Doctor, I spent the rest of the day; with Fabian; we had gone to the stern, which Pitferge called “walking in the country.” There alone, and leaning over the taffrail, we surveyed the great expanse of water, while around us rose the briny vapors distilled from the spray; small rainbows, formed by the refraction of the sun’s rays, spanned the foaming waves. Below us, at a distance of forty feet, the screw was beating the water with a tremendous force, making its copper gleam in the midst of what appeared to be a vast conglomeration of liquefied emeralds, the fleecy track extending as far as the eye could reach, mingled in a milky path of foam from the screw, and the paddle engines, whilst the white and black fringed plumage of the sea-gulls flying above, cast rapid shadows over the sea.

Fabian was looking at the magic of the waves without speaking. What did he see in this liquid mirror, which gave scope to the most capricious flights of imagination? Was some vanished face passing before his eyes, and! bidding him a last farewell? Did he see a drowning shadow in these eddying waters? He seemed to me sadden than usual, and I dared not ask him the cause of his grief.

After the long separation which had estranged us from each other, it was for him to confide in me, and for me to' await his confidences. He had told me as much of his past life as he wished me to know; his life in the Indian garrison, his hunting, and adventures; but not a word had he said of the emotions which swelled in his heart, or the cause of the sighs which heaved his breast; undoubtedly Fabian was not one who tried to lessen his grief by speaking of it, and1 therefore he suffered the more.

Thus we remained leaning over the sea, and as I turned1 my head I saw the great paddles emerging under the regular action of the engine.

Once Fabian said to me, "This track is indeed magnificent. One would think that the waves were amusing themselves with tracing letters! Look at the ' l's ' and e's.'

Am I deceived? No, they are indeed always the same letters."

Fabian's excited imagination saw in these eddyings that which it wished to see. But what could these letters signify? What remembrance did they call forth in Fabian's mind: The latter had resumed his silent contemplation, when suddenly he said to me: "Come to me, come; that gulf will draw me in!"

“What is the matter with you, Fabian,” said I, taking him by both hands; “what is the matter, my friend?”

“I have here,” said he, pressing his hand on his heart. “I have here a disease which will kill me.”

“A disease?” said I to him, “a disease with no hope of cure?”

“No hope.” And without another word Fabian went to the saloon, and then on to his cabin.

CHAPTER XI

I HEAR THE STORY OF FABIAN’S TROUBLE

THE next day, Saturday, 30th of March, the weather was fine; our progress was more rapid, and the *Great Eastern* was now going at the rate of twelve knots an hour.

The wind had set south, and the first officer ordered the mizzen and the top-mast sails to be hoisted, so that the ship was perfectly steady. Under this fine sunny sky the upper decks again became crowded; ladies appeared in fresh costumes, some walking about, others sitting down — I was going to say on the grass-plats beneath the shady trees — and the children resumed their interrupted games. With a few soldiers in uniform, strutting about with their hands in their pockets, one might have fancied oneself on a French promenade.

At noon, the weather being favorable, Captain Anderson and two officers went onto the bridge, in order to take the sun’s altitude; each held a sextant in his hand, and from time to time scanned the southern horizon, towards which their horizon-glasses were inclined.

“Noon,” exclaimed Captain Anderson, after a short time.

Immediately a steersman rang a bell on the bridge, and all the watches on board were regulated by the statement which had just been made.

Half-an-hour later, the following observation was posted up. Lat. 51 ° io’ N. Long. 24° 13’ W. Course, 227 miles. Distance 550.

We had thus made two hundred and twenty-seven miles since noon the day before.

I did not see Fabian once during the day. Several times, uneasy about his absence, I passed his cabin, and was convinced that he had not left it. He must have wished to avoid the crowd on deck, and evidently sought to isolate himself from this tumult. I met Captain Corsican, and for an hour we walked on the poop. He often spoke of Fabian, and I could not help telling him what had passed between Fabian and myself the evening before.

“Yes,” said Captain Corsican, with an emotion he did not try to disguise. “Two years ago Fabian had the right to think himself the happiest of men, and now he is the most unhappy.” Archibald Corsican told me, in a few words, that at Bombay Fabian had known a charming young girl, a Miss Hodges. He loved her, and was beloved by her. Nothing seemed to hinder a marriage between Miss Hodges and Captain MacElwin; when, by her father’s consent, the young girl’s hand was sought by the son of a merchant at Calcutta. It was an old business affair, and Hodges, a harsh, obstinate, and unfeeling man, who happened at this time to be in a delicate position with his Calcutta correspondent, thinking that the marriage would settle everything well, sacrificed his daughter to the interests of his fortune. The poor child could not resist; they put her hand into that of the man she did not and could not love, and who, from all appearance, had no love for her. It was a mere business transaction, and a barbarous deed. The husband carried off his wife the day after they were married, and since then Fabian has never seen her whom he has always loved. This story showed me clearly that the grief which seemed to oppress Fabian was indeed serious.

“What was the young girl’s name?” asked I of Captain Corsican.

“Ellen Hodges,” replied he.

“Ellen, — that name explains the letters which Fabian thought he saw yesterday in the ship’s track. And what is the name of this poor young woman’s husband?” said I to the Captain.

“Harry Drake.”

“Drake!” cried I, “but that man is on board.”

“He ‘here!” exclaimed Corsican, seizing my hand, and looking straight at me.

“Yes,” I replied, “he is on board.”

“Heaven grant that they may not meet!” said the captain gravely. “Happily they do not know each other, at least Fabian does not know Drake; but that name uttered in his hearing would be enough to cause an outburst.”

I then related to Captain Corsican what I knew of Harry Drake, that is to say, what Dr. Dean Pitferge had told me of him. I described him such as he was, an insolent, noisy adventurer, already ruined by gambling, and other vices, and ready to do anything to get money; at this moment Harry Drake passed close to us; I pointed him out to the captain, whose eyes suddenly grew animated, and he made an angry gesture, which I arrested.

“Yes,” said he, “there is the face of a villain. But where is he going?”

“To America, they say, to try and get by chance what he does not care to work for.”

“Poor Ellen!” murmured the captain; “where is she now?”

“Perhaps this wretch has abandoned her, or why should she not be on board?” said Corsican, looking at me.

This idea crossed my mind for the first time, but I rejected it. No; Ellen was not, could not be on board; she could not have escaped Dr. Pitferge’s inquisitive eye. No! she cannot have accompanied Drake on this voyage!

“May what you say be true, sir!” replied Captain Corsican; “for the sight of that poor victim reduced to so much misery would be a terrible blow to Fabian: I do not know what would happen, for Fabian is a man who would kill Drake like a dog. I ask you, as a proof of your friendship, never to lose sight of him; so that if anything should happen, one of us may be near, to throw ourselves between him and his enemy. You understand a duel must not take place between these two men. Neither here nor elsewhere. A woman cannot marry her husband’s murderer, however unworthy that husband may have been.”

I well understood Captain Corsican’s reason. Fabian could not be his own justiciary. It was foreseeing, from a distance, coming events, but how is it that the uncertainty of human things is so little taken into account? A presentiment was boding in my mind. Could it be possible, that in this common life on board, in this every-day mingling together, that Drake’s noisy personality could remain unnoticed by Fabian? An accident, a trifle, a mere name uttered, would it not bring them face to face? Ah! how I longed to hasten the speed of the steamer which carried them both! Before leaving Captain Corsican I promised to keep a watch on our friend, and to observe Drake, whom on his part he engaged not to lose sight of; then he shook my hand, and we parted.

Towards evening a dense mist swept over the ocean, and the darkness was intense. The brilliantly-lighted saloons contrasted singularly with the blackness of the night. Waltzes and ballads followed each other; all received with frantic applause, and even hurrahs were not wanting, when the actor from T — , sitting at the piano, bawled his songs with the self-possession of a strolling player.

CHAPTER XII

SERVICES ON BOARD

THE next day, the 31st of March, was Sunday. How would this day be kept on board? Would it be the English or American Sunday, which closes the “bars “and the “taps” during service hours; which withholds the butcher’s hand from his victim; which keeps the baker’s shovel from the oven; which causes a suspension of business; extinguishes the fires of the manufactories; which closes the shops, opens the churches, and moderates the speed of the railway trains, contrary to the customs m France? Yes, it must be kept thus, or almost thus.

First of all, during the service, although the weather was fine, and we might have gained some knots, the captain did not order the sails to be hoisted, as it would have been “improper.” I thought myself very fortunate that the screw was allowed to continue its work, and when I inquired of a fierce Puritan the reason for this tolerance, “Sir,” said he to me, “that which comes directly from God must be respected; the wind is in His hand, the steam is in the power of man.”

I was willing to content myself with this reason, and in the meantime observed what was going on on board. All the crew were in full uniform, and dressed with extreme propriety. I should not have been surprised to see the stokers working in black clothes; the officers and engineers wore their finest uniforms, with gilt buttons; their shoes shone with a British luster, and rivaled their glazed hats with an intense irradiation. All these good people seemed to have hats and boots of a dazzling brightness. The captain and the first officer set the example, and with new gloves and military attire, glittering and perfumed, they paced up and down the bridges awaiting the hour for service.

The sea was magnificent and resplendent beneath the first rays of a spring sun; not a sail in sight. The *Great Eastern* occupied alone the center of the immense expanse. At ten o'clock the bell on deck tolled slowly and at regular intervals; the ringer, who was a steersman, dressed in his best, managed to obtain from this bell a kind of solemn, religious tone, instead of the metallic peals with which it accompanied the whistling of the boilers, when the ship was surrounded by fog. Involuntarily one looked for the village steeple which was calling to prayer.

At this moment numerous groups appeared at the doors of the cabins, at the bows and stern; the boulevards were soon filled with men, women, and children carefully dressed for the occasion. Friends exchanged quiet greetings; everyone held a prayer-book in his hand, and all were waiting for the last bell which would announce the beginning of service. I saw also piles of Bibles, which were to be distributed in the church, heaped upon trays generally uesd for sandwiches.

The church was the great saloon, formed by the upper- deck at the stern, the exterior of which, from its width and regularity of structure, reminded one very much of the hotel of the Ministere cles Finances, in the Rue de Rivoli. I entered. Numbers of the faithful were already in their places. A profound silcnce reigned among the congregation; the officers occupied the apsis of the church, and, in the midst of them, stood Captain Anderson, as pastor. My friend Dean Pitferge was near him, his quick little eyes running over the whole assembly. I will venture to say he was there more out of curiosity than anything else.

At half-past ten the captain rose, and the service began; he read a chapter from the Old Testament. After each verse the congregation murmured the one following; the shrill soprano voices of the women and children distinctly separate from the baritone of the men. This Biblical dialogue lasted for about haf-an-hour, and the simple, at the same time impressive ceremony, was performed with a puritanical gravity. Captain Anderson assuming the office of pastor on board, in the midst of the vast ocean, and speaking to a crowd of listeners, hanging, as it were, over the verge of an abyss, claimed the respect and attention of the most indifferent. It would have been well if the service had concluded with the reading; but when the captain had finished a speaker arose, who could not fail to arouse feelings of violence and rebellion where tolerance and meditation should reign.

It was the reverend gentleman of whom I have before spoken — a little, fidgety man, an intriguing Yankee; one of those ministers who exercise such a powerful influence over the States of New England. His sermon was already prepared, the occasion was good, and he intended to make use of it. Woud not the good Yorrick have done the same? I looked at Dean Pitferge; the Doctor did not frown, but seemed inclined to try the preacher's zeal.

The latter gravely buttoned his black overcoat, placed his silk cap on the table, drew out his handkerchief, with which he touched his lips lightly, and taking in the assembly at a glance, "In the beginning," said he, "God created America, and rested on the seventh day —

Thereupon I reached the door.

CHAPTER XIII

DR. PITFERGE TELLS OF THE GHOST

AT lunch Dean Pitferge told me that the reverend gentleman had admirably enlarged on his text. Battering rams, armed forts, and submarine torpedoes had figured in his discourse; as for himself, he was made great by the greatness of America. If it pleases America to be thus extolled, I have nothing to say.

Entering the grand saloon, I read the following note, Lat. 50° 8’ N. Long. 30° 44’ W. Course, 255 miles.

Always the same result. We had only made eleven hundred miles, including the three hundred and ten between Fastenet and Liverpool, about a third part of our voyage. During the remainder of the day officers, sailors, and passengers continued to rest in accordance with established custom. Not a piano sounded in the silent saloons; the chess-men did not leave their box, or the cards their case; the billiard-room was deserted. I had an opportunity this day to introduce Dean Pitferge to Captain Coriscan. My original friend very much amused the captain by telling him the stories whispered about the *Great Eastern.* He attempted to prove to him that it was a bewitched ship, to which fatal misfortune must happen. The yarn of the melted engineer greatly pleased the captain, who, being a Scotchman, was a lover of the marvelous, but he could not repress an incredulous smile.

“I see,” said Dr. Pitferge, “the captain has not much faith in my stories.”

“Much! that is saying a great deal,” replied Captain Corsican.

“Will you believe me, captain, if I affirm that this ship is haunted at night?” asked the Doctor, in a serious tone.

“Haunted!” cried the captain; “what next? Ghosts? and you believe in them?”

“I believe,” replied Pitferge, “I believe what people who can be depended on have told me. Now, I know some of the officers on watch, and the sailors also, are quite unanimous on this point, that during the darkness of the night a shadow, a vague form, walks the ship. How it comes there they do not know, neither do they know how it dis- appe?rs.”

“By St. Dunstan!” exclaimed Captain Corsican, “we will watch it well together.”

“To-night?” asked the Doctor.

“To-night, if you like; and you, sir,” added the captain, turning to me, “will you keep us company?”

“No,” said I; “I do not wish to trouble the solitude of this phantom; besides, I would rather think that our Doctor is joking.”

“I am not joking,” replied the obstinate Pitferge.

“Come, Doctor,” said I. “Do you really believe in the dead coming back to the decks of ships?”

“I believe in the dead who come to life again,” replied the Doctor, “and this is the more astonishing as I am a physician.”

“A physician!” cried the captain, drawing back as if the word had made him uneasy.

“Don’t be alarmed, captain,” said the Doctor smuing, good-humoredly; “I don’t practice while traveling.”

CHAPTER XIV

THE GHOST FAILS TO APPEAR

THE next day, the ist of April, the aspect of the sea was truly spring-like; it was as green as the meadows beneath the sun’s rays. The April sunrise on the Atlantic was superb; the waves spread themselves out voluptuously, while porpoises gamboled in the ship’s milky track.

When I met Captain Corsican, he informed me that the ghost announced by the Doctor had not thought proper to make its appearance. Undoubtedly, the night was not dark enough for it. Then the idea crossed my mind that it was a joke of Dean Pitferge’s, sanctioned by the 1st of April; for in America, England, and France this custom is very popular. Mystifiers and mystified were not wanting; some laughed, others were angry; I even believe that blows were exchanged among some of the Saxons, but these blows never ended in fighting; for it is well known that in England duels are liable to very severe punishment; even officers and soldiers are not allowed to fight under any pretext whatever. The homicide is subject to the most painful and ignominious punishments. I remember the Doctor telling me the name of an officer who was sent to a convict prison, for ten years, for having mortally wounded his adversary in a very honorable engagement. One can understand, that in face of this severe law duels have entirely disappeared from British customs.

The weather being so fine, a good observation could be made, which resulted in the following statement: Lat. 48° 47’, and 36° 48’ W. L.; dist. 250 miles only. The slowest of the Transatlantic steamers would have had the right to offer to take us in tow. This state of things very much annoyed Captain Anderson. The engineers attributed the failure of pressure to the insufficient ventilation of the new furnaces; but for my part, I thought that the diminution of speed was owing to the diameter of the wheels having been imprudently made smaller.

However, to-day, about two o’clock, there was an improvement in the ship’s speed; it was the attitude of the two young lovers which revealed this change to me. Leaning against the bulwarks, they murmured joyful words, clapped their hands, and looked smilingly at the escape- pipes, which were placed near the chimneys, the apertures of which were crowned with a white wreath of vapor. The pressure had risen in the screw boilers; as yet it was only a feeble breath of air, a wavering blast; but our young friends drank it in eagerly with their eyes. No, not even Denis Papin could have been more delighted, when he saw the steam half raise the lid of his celebrated saucepan.

“They smoke! they smoke!” cried the young lady, whilst a light breath also escaped from her parted lips.

“Let us go and look at the engine,” said the young man, placing her arm in his. Dean Pitferge had joined me, and we followed the loving couple onto the upper-deck.

“How beautiful is youth!” remarked the Doctor.

“Yes,” said I, “youth affianced.”

Soon we also were leaning over the railing of the engine- rooms. There, in the deep abyss, at a distance of sixty feet below us, we saw the four long horizontal pistons swaying one towards the other, and with each movement moistened by drops of lubricating oil.

In the meanwhile the young man had taken out his watch, and the girl, leaning over his shoulder, followed the movement of the minute-hand, whilst her lover counted the revolutions of the screw. “One minute,” said she.

“Thirty-seven turns,” exclaimed the young man.

“Thirty-seven and a half,” observed the Doctor.

“And a half,” cried the young lady. “You hear, Edward! Thank you, sir,” said she, favoring the worthy Pitferge with one of her most pleasing smiles.

CHAPTER XV

A COLLISION IS NARROWLY AVOIDED

DURING Monday night the sea was very stormy. Once more the partitions began creaking, and again the luggage made its way through the saloons. When I went on deck, about seven o’clock in the morning, the wind had freshened, and it was raining. The officer on watch had ordered the sails to be taken in, so that the steamship, left without any support, rolled dreadfully. All this day, the 2nd of April, the deck was deserted, even the saloons were empty, for the passengers had taken refuge in their cabins; and two- thirds of the guests were missing at lunch and dinner. Whist was impossible, for the tables glided from under the players’ hands. The chess-men were unmanageable. A few of the more fearless stretched themselves on the sofas, reading or sleeping, as many preferred to brave the rain on deck, where the sailors, in their oil-skin jackets and glazed hats, were sedately pacing to and fro. The first officer, well wrapped in his macintosh, and perched on the bridge, was on watch, and in the midst of the hurricane his small eyes sparkled with delight. This was what the little man loved, and the steamer rolled to his liking.

The water from the skies and sea mingled in a dense fog. The atmosphere was gray, and birds flew screeching through the damp mists. At ten o’clock a three-mast ship was hailed, sailing astern of us, but her nationality could not be recognized.

At about eleven o’clock: the wind abated, and veered to the northwest. The rain ceased, almost suddenly, blue sky appeared through the opening in the clouds, the sun, shone out again, and permitted a more or less perfect observation to be made, which was posted up as follows: Lat. 46° 29’ N. Long. 420 25’ W. Dist. 256 miles.

So that, although the pressure of the boilers had risen, the ship’s speed had not increased; but this might be attributed to the westerly wind, which caught the ship ahead, and considerably impeded her progress.

At two o’clock the fog grew dense again, the wind fell and rose at the same time. The thickness of the fog was so intense that the officers on the bridge could not see the men at the bows. These accumulated vapors rising from the sea constitute the greatest danger of navigation. They cause accidents which it is impossible to avoid, and a collision at sea is more to be dreaded than a fire.

Thus, in the midst of the fog, officers and sailors were obliged to keep a strict watch, which soon proved to be necessary, for about three o’clock a three-master appeared at less than two hundred yards from the *Great Eastern*, her sails disabled by a gust of wind, and no longer answering to her helm. The *Great Eastern* turned in time to avoid her, thanks to the promptitude with which the men on watch warned the steersman. These well-regulated signals are given by means of a bell, fastened to the poop at the bows. One ring signifies ship a-head; two, ship-starboard; three, ship a-larboard; and immediately the man at the helm steers in order to avoid a collision.

The wind did not abate until evening; however the rolling was nothing to speak of, as the sea was protected by the Newfoundland heights. An entertainment, by Sir James Anderson, was announced for this day. At the appointed hour the saloon was filled and Sir James Anderson told us the history of The Transatlantic Cable, which he had himself laid. He showed us photographs representing the different engines used for the immersion.

He sent round a model of the splice which was used to fasten together the pieces of cable. Finally, very justly merited, the three cheers with which his lecture was receivd, a great part of which was meant for the Honorable Cyrus Field, promoter of the enterprise, who was present on this occasion.

CHAPTER XVI

A WATCH FOR ICEBERGS

THE next day, the 3rd of April, from early dawn the horizon wore that peculiar aspect which the English call “blink.” It was of that misty white color which signifies that icebergs are not far distant; in fact the *Great Eastern* was plowing those seas on which float the first blocks of ice detached from the icebergs in Davis’s Straits. A special watch was kept, in order to avoid the rude collision with these enormous blocks.

There was a strong westerly wind blowing; strips of clouds, or rather shreds of vapor, hung over the sea, through which glimpses of blue sky appeared. A dull thudding noise came from the waves tossed by the wind, and drops of water, seemingly pulverized, evaporated in foam.

Neither Fabian, Captain Corsican, nor Doctor Pitferge had yet come on deck, so I went towards the bows, where the junction of the bulwarks formed a comfortable angle, a kind of retreat, in which like a hermit, one could retire from the world. I took my place in this corner, sitting on a skylight, and my feet resting on an enormous pulley; the wind being dead ahead passed over without touching me. This was a good place for reflection. From here I had a view of the whole immensity of the ship; I could see the long slanting ropes of the rigging at the stern. On the first level a top-man, hanging in the mizzen-shrouds, held himself up with one hand, whilst with the other he worked with a remarkable dexterity. On the deck below him paced the officer on watch, peering through the mists. On the bridge, at the stern, I caught a glimpse of an officer, his back rounded, and his head muffled in a hood, struggling against the gusts of wind. I could distinguish nothing of the sea, except a bluish horizontal line discernible behind the paddles. Urged on by her powerful engines, the narrow stem of the steamship cut the waves, with a hissing sound, like that when the sides of a boiler are heated by a roaring fire. But the colossal ship, with the wind a-head, and borne on three waves, hardly felt the movement of the sea, which would have shaken any other steamer with its pitchings.

At half-past twelve the notice stated that we were in 44° 53’ North lat. and 470 6’ W. long. and had made two hundred and twenty-seven miles in twenty-four hours only. The young couple must have scolded the wheels which did not turn, and the steam which was not at all strong enough to please them.

About three o’clock the sky, swept by the wind, cleared up; the line of the horizon was once more clearly defined, the wind fell, but for a long while the sea rose in great foam-crested billows. Such a gentle breeze could not cause this swell; one might have said that the Atlantic was still sulky.

At twenty-five minutes to four a three-mast ship was hailed to larboard. She hoisted her name; it was the *Illinois,* an American ship, on her way to England.

At this moment Lieutenant H — informed me that we were passing Cape Race point. We were now in the rich coasts where are obtained cod-fish, three of which would suffice to supply England and America if all the roe were hatched. The day passed without any remarkable occurence; no accident had as yet thrown Fabian and Harry Drake together, for the captain and I never lost

sight of them. In the evening the same harmless amusement, the same reading, and songs in the grand saloon called forth, as usual, frantic applauses. As an extraordinary occurrence a lively discussion broke out between a Northerner and a Texan. The latter demanded an Emperor for the Southern States. Happily this political discussion, which threatened to degenerate into a quarrel, was put to an end to by the timely arrival of an imaginary despatch, addressed to the *Ocean Times* and conceived in these terms: “Captain Semmes, Minister of War, has made the South compensate for its ravages in Alabama.”‘

CHAPTER XVII

THE MAD WOMAN

LEAVING the brilliantly lighted saloon I went on ‘deck with Captain Corsican. The night was dark; not a star in the firmament; an impenetrable gloom surrounded the ship. The windows of the saloon shone like the mouths of furnaces; the man on watch, heavily pacing the poop, was scarcely discernible, but one could breathe the fresh air, and the captain inhaled it with expanded lungs.

“I was stifled in the saloon,” said he; “here at least I can breathe. I require my hundred cubic yards of pure air every twenty-four hours, or I get half suffocated.”

“Breathe, captain, breathe at your ease,” said I to him; “the breeze does not stint your wants. Oxygen is a good thing, but it must be confessed Parisians and Londoners know it only by reputation.”

“Yes,” replied the captain, “and they prefer carbonic acid. Ah well! everyone to his liking; for my own part I detest it, even in champagne.”

Thus talking, we paced up and down the deck on the starboard side, sheltered from the wind by the high partitions of the deck cabins. Great wreaths of smoke, illuminated with sparks, curled from the black chimneys; the noise of the engines accompanied the whistling of the wind in the shouds, which sounded like the cords of a harp. Mingling with this hubbub, each quarter of an hour, came the cry of the sailors on deck, “All’s well, all’s well.”

In fact no precaution had been neglected to insure the safety of the ship on these coasts frequented by icebergs. The captain had a bucket of water drawn every half-hour, in order to ascertain the temperature, and if it had fallen one degree he immediately changed his course, for he knew that the *Peruvian* had been seen but a fortnight since blocked up by icebergs in this latitude; it was therefore a danger to be avoided. His orders for night were to keep a strict look-out. He himself remained on the bridge with an officer each side of him, one at the wheel signal, the other at the screw; besides these a lieutenant and two men kept watch on the poop, whilst a quarter-master with a sailor stood at the stern; the passengers might therefore rest quietly.

After noticing these arrangements we went back again to the stern, as we had made up our minds to stay some time longer, walking on deck like peaceful citizens taking an evening stroll in their town squares.

The place seemed deserted. Soon, however, our eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and we perceived a mart leaning perfectly motionless, with his elbow on the railing. Corsican, after looking at him attentively for some tune, said to me, “It is Fabian.”

It was indeed Fabian. We recognized him, but absorbed as he was in a profound contemplation he did not see us. His eyes were fixed on an angle of the upper deck; I saw them gleam in the dark. What was he looking at? How could he pierce this black gloom? I thought it better to leave him to his reflections, but Captain Corsican went up to him.

“Fabian,” said lie.

Fabian did not answer; He Had not heard. Again Corsican called him. He shuddered, and turned his head for a moment, saying, “Hush.”

Then with his hand he pointed to a shadow which was slowly moving at the further end of the upper deck. It was this almost invisible figure that Fabian was looking at, and smiling sadly he murmured, “The black lady.”

I shuddered. Captain Corsican took hold of my arm, and I felt that he also was trembling. The same thought had struck us both. This shadow was the apparition about which Dean Pitferge had spoken.

Fabian had relapsed into his dreamy contemplation. I, with a heaving breast and awe-struck glance, looked at this human figure, the outline of which was hardly discernible; but presently it became more defined. It came forward, stopped, turned back, and then again advanced, seeming to glide rather than walk. At ten steps from us it stood perfectly still. I was then able to distinguish the figure of a slender female, closely wrapped in a kind of brown burnous, and her face covered with a thick veil.

“A mad woman, a mad woman, is it not?” murmured Fabian.

It was, indeed, a mad woman; but Fabian was not asking us: he was speaking to himself.

In the meantime the poor creature came still nearer to us. I thought I could see her eyes sparkle through her veil, when they were fixed on Fabian. She went up to him, Fabian started to his feet, electrified. The veiled woman put her hand on her heart as though counting its pulsation, then, gliding swiftly away, she disappeared behind the angle of the upper deck. Fabian staggered, and fell on his knees, his hands stretched out before him.

“It is she,” he murmured.

Then shaking his head, “What an hallucination!” he added.

Captain Corsican then took him by the hand.

“Come, Fabian, come,” said he, and he led away his unhappy friend.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE “PILOT’S POOL”

CORSICAN and I could no longer doubt but that it was Ellen, Fabian’s betrothed, and Harry Drake’s wife. Chance had brought all three together on the same ship.

Fabian had not recognized her, although he had cried, “It is she!” But he was not mistaken in saying, “A mad woman!” Ellen iwas mad, undoubtedly; grief, despair, love frozen in her heart, contact with the worthless man who had snatched her from Fabian, ruin and shame had broken her spirit. It was on this subject that Corsican and I spoke the following morning. We had no doubt as to the identity of the young woman; it was Ellen, whom Harry Drake was dragging with him to ths American continent. The Captain’s eyes glowed with a dark fire at the thought of this wretch, and I felt my heart stir within me. What were we against the husband, the master? Nothing. But now, what was most important, was to prevent another meeting between Fabian and Ellen, for Fabian could not fail at last to recognize his betrothed, and thus the catastrophe we wished to avoid would be brought about.

At the same time we had reason to hope that these two poor creatures would not see each other again, as the unhappy Ellen never appeared in the daytime, either in the saloons or on the deck. Only at night, perhaps eluding her jailer, she came out to bathe herself in the damp air, and demand of the wind a smooth passage. In four days, at the latest, the *Great Eastern* must reach New York harbor; therefore we might hope that accident would not dally with our watchfulness, and that Fabian would not discover Ellen; but we made our calculations without thinking of events.

The steamer’s course had been slightly altered in the night, three times the ship, being in water twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit — that is to say, five degrees below zero, had been turned towards the south. There was no longer any doubt of icebergs being very near, for the sky that morning had a peculiarly brilliant aspect; the atmosphere was misty, and the northern sky glittered with an intense reverberation, evidently produced by the powerful reflection from the bergs. There was a piercing wind, and about ten o’clock the deck was powdered by a slight snow-fall; then dense fog surrounded us, in which we gave warning of our approach, by deafening whistles, which scared away the flocks of sea-gulls in the ship’s yards. At half-past ten, the fog having cleared off, a screw steamer appeared on the horizon, a-starboard, the white tops of her chimneys indicating that she was an emigrant ship, belonging to the Inman Company.

Before lunch several of the passengers organized a pool, which could not fail to please those fond of betting and gambling. The result of this pool was not to be known for four days; it was what is called the “pilot’s pool.” When a ship arrives at the land-falls everyone knows that a pilot comes on board; so they divide the twenty-four hours of the day and night into forty-eight half-hours, or ninety-six quarters, according to the number of the passengers. Each player stakes one dollar, and draws one of the half or quarter hours; the winner of the forty-eight or ninety-six dollars is the one during whose quarter of an hour the pilot comes on board. From this it may be seen that the game is very simple; it is not a race-course, but a quarter-of-an- hour race.

It was a Canadian, the Honorable MacAlpine, who undertook the management of the affair. He easily collected ninety-six players, including several professed gamblers, not the least among those ready for gain. I, following the general example, staked my dollar, and fate allotted me the ninety-fourth quarter; it was a bad number, and one which left me no chance of profit. The fact is, these divisions are reckoned from noon to noon, so that there are night as well as day quarters; and as it is very seldom that ships venture close in in the dark, the chance of a pilot coming on board then is very small. However, I easily consoled myself. Going down into the saloon, I saw a lecture announced. The Utah missionary was going to hold a meeting on Mormonism; a good opportunity for those wishing to initiate themselves in the mysteries of the City of Saints; besides, this Elder, Mr. Hatch, was an orator of no mean power. The execution could not fail to be worthy of the work. The announcement of the conference was received yery favorably by the passengers.

The observation posted up was as follows, Lat. 420 32’ N. Long. 510 59’ W. Course, 254 miles.

About three o’clock in the afternoon the steersman signaled a large four-mast steamer, which slightly changed its course, in order to give the *Great Eastern* its number. It was the *Atlanta*, one of the largest boats running between London and New York, calling at Brest on the way. After having saluted us, which we returned, in a short time she was out of sight.

At this moment Dean Pitferge, in a vexed tone, informed me that Mr. Hatch’s lecture was forbidden, as the wives of the puritans on board did not approve of their husbands becoming acquainted with the mysteries of Mormonism.

CHAPTER XIX

FABIAN AND DRAKE MEET

AT four o’clock, the sky, which had been overcast, cleared up, the sea grew calm, and the ship was so steady, one might almost have thought oneself on *terra firm a* — this gave the passengers the idea of getting up races. Epsom turf could not have afforded a better coursing-ground, and as for horses, they were well replaced by pure Scotchmen, as good as any “Gladiator,” or “La Touque.” The news soon spread, sportsmen immediately hurried to the field. An Englishman, the Hon. J. MacCarthy, was appointed commissioner, and the competitors presented themselves without delay. They were half a dozen sailors, kind of centaurs, man and horse at the same time, all ready to try; for the prize.

The two boulevards formed the race-course, the runners were to go three times round the ship, thus making a course of about 1,300 yards, which was quite enough. Soon the galleries were invaded by crowds of spectators, all armed1 with opera-glasses. Some of them had hoisted the “green sail,” no doubt to shelter themselves from the spray of the Atlantic. Carriages were missing, I must confess, but not the rank, where they might have ranged in file. Ladies in gay costumes were hurrying onto the upper-decks; the scene was charming.

Fabian, Captain Corsican, Dr. Pitferge and I had taken our places on the poop, which was what might be called the center of action. Here the real gentlemen riders were assembled; in front of us was the starting and winning post. Betting soon began with a true British animation. Considerable sums of money were staked, but only from the appearance of the racers, whose qualifications had not as yet been inscribed in the “stud-book.” It was not without uneasiness that I saw Harry Drake interfering in the preparations with his usual audacity, discussing, disputing, and settling affairs in a tone which admitted of no reply! Happily, although Fabian had risked some pounds in the race, he appeared quite indifferent to the noise; he kept himself aloof from the others, and it was quite evident his thoughts were far off.

Among the racers who offered themselves, two particularly attracted the public attention. Wilmore, a small, thin, wiry Scotchman, with a broad chest and sharp eyes, was one of the favorites; the other, an Irishman named O’Kelly, a tall, supple fellow, balanced the chance wth Wilmore, in the eyes of connoisseurs. Three to one was asked on him, and for myself partaking the general infatuation I was going to risk a few dollars on him, when the Doctor said to me: “Choose the little one; believe me, the tall one is no go.”

“What do you say?”

“I say,” replied the Doctor, “that the tall one is not genuine; he may have a certain amount of speed, but he has no bottom. The little one, on the contrary, is of pure Scotch race; look how straight his body is on his legs, and how broad and pliant his chest is; he is a man who will lead more than once in the race. Bet on him, I tell you.

I took the learned doctor’s advice, and bet on Wilmore; as to the other four, they were not even discussed.

They drew for places; chance favored the Irishman, who had the rope-side; the six runners were placed along the line, bounded by the posts, so that there was no unfair start to be feared.

The commissioner gave the signal, and the departure was hailed by a loud hurrah. It was soon evident that Wilmore and O’Kelly were professional runners; without taking any notice of their rivals, who passed them breathless, they ran with their bodies thrown slightly forward, heads very erect, arms tightly pressed against their chests, and holding their fists firmly in front.

In the second round O’Kelly and Wilmore were in a line, having distanced their exhausted competitors. They obviously verified the Doctor’s saying, “It is not with the legs, but with the chest that one runs; ham-strings are good, but lungs are better.”

At the last turning but one, the spectators again cheered their favorites. Cries and hurrahs broke forth from all sides.

“The little one will win,” said Pitferge to me. “Look, he is not even panting, and his rival is breathless.”

Wilmore indeed looked calm and pale, whilst O’Kelly was steaming like a damp hay-stack; he was “pumped out,” to use a sportsman’s slang expression, but both of them kept the same line. At last they passed the upper decks; the hatchway of the engine-rooms, the winning-post.

“Hurrah! hurrah! for Wilmore,” cried some.

“Hurrah! for O’Kelly,” chimed in others.

“Wilmore has won.”

“No, they are together.”

The truth was Wilmore had won, but by hardly half a: head so the Honorable MacCarthy decided. However, the discussion continued, and even came to words. The partisans of the Irishman, and particularly Harry Drake, maintained that it was a “dead heat,” and that they ought to go again.

But at this moment, urged on by an irresistible impulse, Fabian went up to Drake, and said to him in a cold tone, “You are wrong, sir, the winner was the Scotch sailor.”

“What do you say?” he asked, in a threatening tone.

“I say you are wrong,” answered Fabian quietly.

“Undoubtedly,” retorted Drake, “because you bet on Wilmore.”

“I was for O’Kelly, like yourself; I lost, and I have paid.”

“Sir,” cried Drake, “do you pretend to teach me — ?”

But he did not finish his sentence, for Captain Corsican had interposed between him and Fabian, with the intention of taking up the quarrel. He treated Drake with supreme contempt, but evidently Drake would not pick a quarrel with him; so when Corsican had finished, he crossed his arms, and addressing himself to Fabian, “This gentleman,” said he, with an evil smile, “this gentleman wants someone to fight his battles for him.”

Fabian grew pale, he would have sprung at Drake, but I held him back, and the scoundrel’s companions dragged him away; not, however, before he had cast a look of hatred at his enemy.

Captain Corsican and I went below with Fabian, who contented himself by saying, “The first opportunity I have, I will box that impudent fellow’s ears.”

CHAPTER XX

I FIND ELLEN’S HIDING PLACE

FROM Thursday night to Saturday the *Great ‘Eastern* was crossing the Gulf Stream, the water of which is of a dark color, the surface of the current forcing its way against the waters of the Atlantic, is even slightly convex. It is, in fact, a river running between two liquid shores, and one of the largest in the world, for it reduces the Amazon and Mississipi to mere brooks in comparison.

This day, the 5th of April, began with a magnificent sunrise, the waves glittered, and a warm southwest wind was wafted through the rigging. It was the beginning of the fine weather; the sun, which had clothed the fields of the continentjwith verdure, caused fresh costumes to bloom on board. Vegetation is sometimes behind-hand, but fashion never. Soon the Boulevards, filled with groups of promenaders, looked like the Champs Elysees on a fine Sunday afternoon in May.

I did not see Captain Corsican once that morning; wishing to hear of Fabian, I went to his cabin, and knocked at the door, but getting no answer I opened it and went in. Fabian was not there. I went on deck again, but could find neither my friends nor the Doctor; the idea then crossed my mind to find out where the unfortunate Ellen was confined. What cabin did she occupy? Where had Drake shut her up? In whose care was the poor creature left, when Drake abandoned her for whole days? Most likely with some disinterested stewardess, or an indifferent nurse. I wished to know how it was, not from any vain motive of curiosity, but simply in Ellen’s and Fabian’s interest, if it was only to prevent a meeting, always to be dreaded.

I began my search with the cabin near the ladies' saloon, and went along the passages of both stories. This inspection was easy enough, as the names of the occupants were written on each door, in order to facilitate the steward's work. I did not see Harry Drake's name, but this did not surprise me much, as I had no doubt he had preferred the more isolated cabins at the stern. In matter of comfort, however, no difference existed between the cabins at the bows and those at the stern, for the *Freighters* had only admitted one class of passengers.

I next went toward the dining saloons, keeping carefully to the side passages which wound between the double row of cabins. All these rooms were occupied, and all had the name of the passengers outside, but Harry Drake's name was not to be seen. This time the absence of his name astonished me, for I thought I had been all over our Floating City, and I was not aware of any part more secluded than this.

I inquired of a steward, who told me there were yet a hundred cabins behind the dining saloons.

"How do you get to them? "I asked.

"By a staircase at the end of the upper deck."

"Thank you, and can you tell me which cabin Mr. Harry Drake occupies?"

"I do not know, sir," replied the steward.

Again I went on deck, and following the steward's direction at last came to the door at the top of the stairs. This staircase did not lead to any large saloons, but simply to a dimly-lighted landing, round which was arranged a double row of cabins. Harry Drake could hardly have found a more favorable place in which to hide Ellen.

The greater part of the cabins were unoccupied. I went along the landing, a few names were written on the doors, but only two or three at the most. Harry Drake's name was not among them, and as I had made a very minute inspection of this compartment, I was very much disappointed at my ill success. I was going away when suddenly a vague, almost inaudible murmur caught my ear; it proceeded from the left side of the passage. I went towards the place; the sounds, at first faint, grew louder, and I distinguished a kind of plaintive song, or rather melopoeia, the words of which did not reach me.

I listened; it was a woman singing, but in this unconscious voice one could recognize a mournful wail. Might not this voice belong to the mad woman? My presentiments could not deceive me. I went quietly nearer to the cabin, which was numbered 775. It was the last in this dim passage, and must have been lighted by the lowest light-ports in the hull of the *Great Eastern;* there was no name on the door, and Harry Drake had no desire that anyone should know the place where he had confined Ellen.

I could not distinctly hear the voice of the unfortunate woman; her song was only a string of unconnected sentences like one speaking in sleep, but at the same time it was sweet and plaintive.

Although I had no means of recognizing her identity, I had no doubt but that it was Ellen singing.

I listened for some minutes, and was just going away, when I heard a step on the landing. Could it be Harry Drake? I did not wish him to find me here, for Fabian's and Ellen's sake; fortunately I could get on deck, without being seen, by a passage leading round the cabins. However, I stopped to know who it really was that I had heard. The darkness partially hid me, and standing behind an angle of the passage I could see without being myself in sight.

In the meantime the sound of the footsteps had ceased, and with it, as a strange coincident, Ellen’s voice. I waited and soon the song began again, and the boards creaked under a stealthy tread; I leaned forward and, in the dim, uncertain light which glimmered through the cracks of the cabin doors, I recognized Fabian.

It was my unhappy friend! What instinct could have led him to this place? Had he then discovered the young woman’s retreat before me? I did not know what to think. Fabian slowly advanced along the passage, listening, following the voice, as if it was a thread drawing him unconsciously on, and in spite of himself. It seemed to me that the song grew fainter as he approached, and that the thread thus held was about to break. Fabian went quite near to the cabin doors and then stopped.

How those sad accents must have rent his heart! and how his whole being must have thrilled as he caught some tone in the voice, which reminded him of the past! But how was it, ignorant as he was of Harry Drake being on board, that he had any suspicion of Ellen’s presence? No, it was impossible; he had only been attracted by the plaintive accents which insensibly responded to the great grief weighing down his spirit Fabian was still listening. What was he going to do? Would he call to the mad woman? And what if Ellen suddenly appeared? Everything was dangerous in this situation! However, Fabian came nearer still to the door of her cabin; the song, which was growing fainter and fainter, suddenly died away, and a piercing shriek was heard.

Had Ellen, by a magnetic communication, felt him whom she loved so near her? Fabian’s attitude was desperate; he had gathered himself up. Was he going to break the door open? I thought he would, so I rushed up to him.

He recognized me; I dragged him away, and he made no resistance, but asked me in a hollow voice, “Do you know who that unhappy woman is?”

“No, Fabian, no.”

“It is the mad woman,” said he, in an unnatural voice, “but this madness is not without remedy. I feel that a little devotion, a little love, would cure the poor woman.”

“Come, Fabian,” said I, “come away.”

We went on deck, but Fabian did not utter another word. I did not leave him, however, until he had reached his cabin.

CHAPTER XXI

WE ENCOUNTER A CYCLONE

SOME moments later I met Captain Corsican, and told him of the scene I had just witnessed. He understood, as well as I did, that the situation of affairs was growing more and more serious. Ah! could I have foreseen all that would happen, how I should have longed to hasten the speed of the *Great Eastern,* and put the broad ocean between Fabian and Harry Drake! On leaving each other, Captain Corsican and I agreed to watch the actors in this drama more narrowly than ever.

About eleven o'clock the English passengers organized a subscription on behalf of the wounded on board, some of whom had not been able to leave the hospital; among them was the boatswain, threatened with an incurable lameness. There was soon a long list of signatures, not however, without some objections having been raised At noon a very exact observation was made — Longitude, '58° 37' west, latitude 410 41' 1!" north, course, 257 miles.

We had the latitude to a second. When the young engaged couple read the notice they did not look remarkably pleased, and they had good reason to be discontented with the steam.

That night was stormy, the steamship, beaten by the waves, rolled frightfully, without being disabled; the furniture was knocked about with loud crashes, and the crockery began its clatter again. The wind had evidently freshened, and besides this the *Great Eastern* was now in those coasts where the sea is always rough.

At six o’clock in the morning I dragged myself to the staircase leading onto the upper decks. By clutching at the balusters, and taking advantage of a lurch or two, I succeeded in climbing the steps, and with some difficulty managed to reach the poop. The place was deserted, if one may so qualify a place where was Dr. Pitferge. The worthy man, with his back rounded as a protection against the wind, was leaning against the railing, with his right leg wound tightly round one of the rails. He beckoned for me to go to him — with his head, of course, for he could not spare his hands, which held him up against the violence of the tempest. After several queer movements, twisting myself like an analide, I reached the upper deck, where I buttressed myself, after the doctor’s fashion. “We are in for it!” cried he to me; “this will last. Heighho! this *Great Eastern!* Just at the moment of arrival, a cyclone, a veritable cyclone is commanded on purpose for her.”

The Doctor spoke in broken sentences, for the wind cut short his words, but I understood him; the word cyclone carried its explanation with it.

It is well known that these whirlwinds, called hurricanes in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, tornadoes on the coast of Africa, simoons in the desert, and typhoons in the Chinese Sea, are tempests of such formidable power, that they imperil the largest ships.

Now the *Great Eastern* was caught in a cyclone. How would this giant make head against it?

“Harm will come to her,” repeated Dean Pitferge. “Look, how she dives into the billows.”

This was, indeed, the exact position of the steamship, whose stern disappeared beneath the mountains of waves, which swept violently against her. It was not possible to see to any distance: there were all the symptoms of a storm, which broke forth in its fury about seven o’clock. The ocean heaved terrifically, the small undulations between the large waves entirely disappeared under an overwhelming wind, the foam-crested billows clashed together, in the wildest uproar, every moment; the waves grew higher, and the *Great Eastern,* cutting through them, pitched frightfully.

“There are but two courses now to choose from,” said the Doctor, with the self-possession of a seaman, “either to put the ship’s head onto the waves, working with a minimum speed, or take flight and give up the struggle with this baffling sea; but Captain Anderson will do neither one thing nor the other.”

“And why not? “I asked.

“Because — ” replied the Doctor, “because something must happen.”

Turning round, I saw the captain, the first officer, and the chief engineer, muffled in their mackintoshes, and clutching at the railing of the bridge; they were enveloped in spray from head to foot. The captain was smiling as usual, the first officer laughed, and showed his white teeth, at the sight of the ship pitching enough to make one think the masts and chimneys were coming down.

Nevertheless I was really astonished at the captain’s obstinacy. At half past seven, the aspect of the Atlantic was terrible; the sea swept right across the deck at the bows. I watched this grand sight; this struggle between the giant and the billows, and to a certain extent I could sympathize with the captain’s wilfullness; but I was forgetting that the power of the sea is infinite, and that nothing made by the hand of man can resist it; and, indeed, powerful as she was, our ship was at last obliged to fly before the tempest.

Suddenly, at about eight o’clock, a violent shock was felt, caused by a formidable swoop of the sea, which struck the ship on her fore larboard quarter.

“That was not a box on the ear, it was a blow in the face,” said the Doctor to me.

And the blow had evidently bruised us, for spars appeared on the crests of the waves. Was it part of our ship that was making off in this manner, or the *debris* of a wreck?

On a sign from the captain, the *Great Eastern* shifted her course, in order to avoid the spars, which threatened to get entangled in the paddles. Looking more attentively, I saw that the sea had carried off the bulwarks on the larboard side, which were fifty feet above the surface of the water; the jambs were broken, the taggers torn away, and the shattered remnants of glass still trembled in their casements. The *Great Eastern* had staggered beneath the shock, but she continued on her way with an indomitable audacity. It was necessary, as quickly as possible, to remove the spars which encumbered the ship at the bows, and in order to do this it was indispensable to avoid the sea, but the steamship obstinately continued to make head against the waves. The spirit of her captain seemed to animate her; he did not want to yield, and yield he would not. An officer and some men were sent to the bows to clear the deck.

“Mind,” said the Doctor to me, “the moment of the catastrophe is not far off.”

The sailors went towards the bows, whilst we fastened ourselves to the second mast, and looked through the spray, which fell in showers over us with each wave. Suddenly there was another swoop more violent than the first, and the sea poured through the barricading by the opened breach, tore off an enormous sheet of cast-iron which covered the bit of the bows, broke away the massive top of the hatchway leading to the crew’s berths, and lashing against the starboard barricadings, swept them off like the sheets of a sail.

The men were knocked down; one of them, an officer, half-drowned, shook his red whiskers, and picked himself up; then seeing one of the sailors lying unconscious across an anchor, he hurried towards him, lifted him on his shoulders and carried him away. At this moment the rest of the crew escaped through the broken hatchway. There were three feet of water in the ‘tween-decks, new spars covered the sea, and amongst other things several thousand of the dolls, which my countryman had thought to acclimatize in America; these little bodies, torn from their cases by the sea, danced on the summits of the waves, and under less serious circumstances the sight would have been truly ludicrous. In the meantime the inundation was gaining on us; large bodies of water were pouring in through the opened gaps, and according to the engineer, the *Great Eastern* shipped more than two thousand tons of water, enough to float a frigate of the largest size.

“Well!” exclaimed the Doctor, whose hat had been blown off in the hurricane, “to keep in this position is impossible; it is fool-hardy to hold on any longer; we ought to take flight, the steamship going with her battered stem ahead, is like a man swimming between two currents, with his mouth open.”

This Captain Anderson understood at last, for I saw him run to the little wheel on the bridge which commanded the movement of the rudder, the steam immediately rushed into the cylinders at the stern, and the giant turning like a canoe made head towards the north, and fled before the storm.

At this moment, the captain, generally so calm and self- possessed, cried angrily, “My ship is disgraced.”

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORM CONTINUES

SCARCELY had the *Great Eastern* tacked and presented her stern to the waves, than the pitching gave way to perfect steadiness; breakfast was served, and the greater part of the passengers, reassured by the ship's stillness, came into the dining-rooms, and took their repast without fear of another shock. Not a plate fell off the table, and not a glass emptied its contents onto the cloth, although the racks had not even been put up. But three-quarters of an hour later the furniture was set in motion again, and the crockery clattered together on the pantry shelves, for the *Great Eastern* had resumed her westerly course, which for the time had been interrupted.

I went on deck again with Dr. Pitferge, who, seeing the man belonging to the dolls, said to him: "Your little people have been put to a severe test, sir; those poor babies will never prattle in the United States."

"Pshaw!" replied the enterprising Parisian, "the stock was insured, and my secret has not perished with it."

It was evident my countryman was not a man to be easily disheartened; he bowed to us with a pleasant smile, and we continued our way to the stern, where a steersman told us that the rudder-chains had been jammed in the interval between the two swoops.

"If that accident had happened when we were turning," said Pitferge to me, "I cannot say what would have become of us, for the sea would have rushed in, in overwhelming torrents; the steam pumps have already begun to reduce the water, but there is more coming yet."

“And what of the unfortunate sailor?” asked I of the Doctor.

“He is severely wounded on his head, poor fellow! he is a young married fisherman, the father of two children, and this is his first voyage. The doctor seems to think there is hope of his recovery, and that is what makes me fear for him, but we shall soon see for ourselves. A report was spread that several men had been washed overboard, but happily there was no foundation for it.”

“We have resumed our course at last,” said I.

“Yes,” replied the Doctor, “the westerly course, against wind and tide, there is no doubt about that,” added he, catching hold of a kevel to prevent himself from rolling on the deck. “Do you know what I should do with the *Great Eastern* if she belonged to me? No. Well, I would make a pleasure boat of her, and charge 10,000 francs a head; there would only be millionaires on board, and people who were not pressed for time. I would take a month or six weeks going from England to America; the ship never against the waves, and the wind always ahead or astern; there should be no rolling, no pitching, and I would pay a 100/. in any case of sea-sickness.”

“That is a practical idea,” said I.

“Yes,” replied Pitferge, “there’s money to be gained or lost by that!”

In the meantime the *Great Eastern* was slowly but steadily continuing her way; the swell was frightful, but her straight stem cut the waves regularly, and shipped no more water. It was no longer a metal mountain making against a mountain of water, but as sedentary as a rock the *Great Eastern* received the billows with perfect indifference. The rain fell in torrents, and we were obliged to take refuse under the eaves of the grand saloon; with the shower the violence of the wind and sea assuaged; the western sky grew clear, and the last black clouds vanished on the opposite horizon; at ten o’clock the hurricane sent us a farewell gust.

At noon an observation was able to be made and was as follows; latitude, 490 50’, north; longitude, 610 5/, west; course, 193 miles.

This considerable diminution in the ship’s speed could only be attributed to the tempest, which during the night and morning had incessantly beaten against the ship, and a tempest so terrible that one of the passengers, almost an inhabitant of the Atlantic, which he had crossed forty-four times, declared he had never seen the like. The engineer even said that during the storm, when the *Great Eastern* was three days in the trough of the sea, the ship had never been attacked with such violence, and it must be repeated that even if this admirable steamship did go at an inferior speed, and rolled decidedly too much, she nevertheless presented a sure security against the fury of the sea, which she resisted like a block, owing to the perfect homogeneity of her construction.

But let me also say, however powerful she might be, it was not right to expose her, without any reason whatever, to a baffling sea; for however strong, however imposing a ship may appear, it is not “disgraced “because it flies before the tempest. A commander ought always to remember that a man’s life is worth more than the mere satisfaction of his own pride. In any case, to be obstinate is blameable, and to be willful is dangerous. A recent incident in which a dreadful catastrophe happened to a Transatlantic steamer shows us that a captain ought not to struggle blindly against the sea, even when he sees the boat of a rival company creeping ahead.

CHAPTER XXIII

FABIAN LEARNS THE NAME OF HIS ENEMY

IN the meantime the pumps were exhausting the lake which had been formed in the hold of the *Great Eastern,* like a lagoon in the middle of an island; powerfully and rapidly worked by steam they speedily restored to the Atlantic that which belonged to it. The rain had ceased and the wind freshened again, but the sky, swept by the tempest, was clear. I stayed several hours after dark walking on deck. Great floods of light poured from the half-opened hatchways of the saloons, and at the stern stretched a phosphorescent light as far as the eye could reach, streaked here and there by the luminous crests of the waves. The stars reflected in the lactescent water appeared and disappeared, as though peering through rapidly driving clouds. Night had spread her somber covering far and near; forward roared the thunder of the wheels, whilst beneath me I heard the clanking of the rudder-chains.

Going back to the saloon door I was surprised to see there a compact crowd of spectators, and to hear vociferous applauses, for, in spite of the day's disasters, the entertainment was taking place as usual. Not a thought of the wounded and, perhaps, dying sailor. The assembly seemed highly animated, and loud hurrahs hailed the appearance of a troop of minstrels on board the *Great Eastern.* The negroes — black, or blackened, according to their origin — were no others than sailors in disguise. They were dressed in cast-off trumpery, ornamented with sea-biscuits for buttons; the opera-glasses which they sported were composed of two bottles fastened together, and their jew's-harps consisted of catgut stretched on cork. These merry-andrews were amusing enough upon the whole; they sang comic songs, and improvised a mixture of puns and cock-and-bull stories. The uproarious cheers with which their performances were greeted only made them increase their contortions and grimaces, until one of them, as nimble as a monkey, finished the performance by dancing the sailor’s hornpipe.

However amusing the minstrels may have been, they had not succeeded in attracting all the passengers. Numbers of them had flocked to their usual haunt, the “smoking-room,” and were eagerly pressing round the gamingtables, where enormous stakes were being made, some defending their acquisitions during the voyage, others trying to conquer fate by making rash wagers at the last moment. The room was in a violent uproar; one could hear the voice of the money agent crying the stakes, the oaths of the losers, the clinking of gold, and the rustling of dollar-bills; then there was a sudden lull, the uproar was silenced by a bold stake, but as soon as the result was known the noise was redoubled.

I very seldom entered the smoking-room, for I have a horror of gambling. It is always a vulgar and often an unhealthy pastime, and it is a vice which does not go alone; the man who gambles will find himself capable of any evil. Here reigned Harry Drake in the midst of his parasites, here also flourished those adventurers who were going to seek their fortunes in America. I always avoided a meeting with these boisterous men, so this evening I passed the door without going in, when my attention was arrested by a violent outburst of cries and curses. I listened, and, after a moment’s silence, to my great astonishment I thought I could distinguish Fabian’s voice. LWhat could he be doing in this place? Had he come here to look for his enemy, and thus the catastrophe, until now avoided, been brought about?

I quickly pushed the door open: at this moment the uproar was at its height. In the midst of the crowd of gamblers I saw Fabian standing facing Harry

Drake. I hurried towards him, Harry Drake had undoubtedly grossly insulted him, for Fabian was aiming a blow with his fist at him, and if it did not reach the place it was intended for, it was only because the Corsican suddenly appeared and stopped him with a quick gesture.

But, addressing himself to his enemy, Fabian said, in a cold, sarcastic tone, “Do you accept that blow?”

“Yes,” replied Drake, “and here is my card!”

Thus, in spite of our efforts, an inevitable fatality had brought these two deadly enemies together. It was too late to separate them now, events must take their course. Captain Corsican looked at me, and I was surprised to see sadness rather than annoyance in his eyes.

In the meantime Fabian picked up the card which Harry Drake had thrown on the table. He held it between the tips of his fingers as if loath to touch it. Captain Corsican was pale, and my heart beat wildly. At last Fabian looked at the card, and read the name on it, then with a voice stifled by passion, he cried, “Harry Drake! you! you! you!”

“The same, Captain MacElwin,” quietly replied his rival.

We were not deceived; if Fabian was ignorant until now of Drake’s name, the latter was only too well aware of Fabian’s presence on the *Great Eastern.*

CHAPTER XXIV

FABIAN RECOGNIZES ELLEN

THE next day, at break of dawn, I went in search of Captain Corsican, whom I found in the grand saloon. He had passed the night with Fabian, who was still suffering from the shock which the name of Ellen’s husband had given him. Did a secret intuition tell him that Drake was not alone on board? Had Ellen’s presence been revealed to him by the appearance of this man? Lastly, could he guess that the poor crazed woman was the young girl whom he so fondly loved? Corsican could not say, for Fabian had not uttered one word all night.

Corsican resented Fabian’s wrongs with a kind of brotherly feeling. The intrepid nature of the latter had from childhood irresistibly attracted him, and he was now in the greatest despair.

“I came in too late,” said he to me. “Before Fabian raised his hand, I ought to have struck that wretch.”

“Useless violence,” replied I. “Harry Drake would not have quarreled with you; he has a grudge against Fabian, and a meeting between the two was inevitable.”

“You are right,” said the captain. “That rascal Has got what he wanted; he knew Fabian, his past life, and his love. Perhaps Ellen, deprived of reason, betrayed her secret thoughts, or, rather, did not Drake before his marriage learn from the loyal young woman all he was ignorant of regarding her past life? Urged on by a base impulse, and finding himself in contact with Fabian, he has waited for an opportunity in which he could assume the part of the offended. This scoundrel ought to be a clever duelist.”

“Yes,” replied I. “He has already had three or four encounters of the kind.”

“My dear sir,” said the captain, “it is not the duel in itself which I fear for Fabian. Captain MacElwin is one of those who never trouble themselves about danger, but it is the result of this engagement which is to be dreaded. If Fabian were to kill this man, however vile he may be, it would place an impossible barrier between Ellen and himself, and Heaven knows, the unhappy woman needs a support, like Fabian, in the state she now is.”

“True,” said I; “nevertheless we can but hope that Harry Drake will fall. Justice is on our side.”

“Certainly,” replied the captain, “but one cannot help feeling distressed to think that even at the risk of my own life I could not have spared Fabian this.’1

“Captain,” said I, taking the hand of this devoted friend, “Drake has not sent his seconds yet, so that, although circumstances are against us, I do not despair.”

“Do you know any means of preventing the duel?”

“None at present; at the same time, if the meeting must take place, it seems to me that it can only do so in America, and before we get there, chance, which has brought about this state of things, will, perhaps, turn the scales in our favor.”

Captain Corsican sHook: his head like a man who had no faith in the efficacy of chance in human affairs. At this moment Fabian went up the stairs leading to the deck. I only saw him for a moment, but I was struck by the deadly pallor of his face. The wound had been reopened, and it was sad to see him wandering aimlessly about, trying to avoid us.

Even friendship may be troublesome at times, and Corsican and I thought it better to respect his grief rather than; interfere with him. But suddenly Fabian turned, and coming towards us, said, “The mad woman was she! It was Ellen, was it not? Poor Ellen!”

He was still doubtful, and went away without waiting for an answer, which we had not the courage to give.

At noon, Drake had not sent Fabian his seconds to my knowledge, and these were preliminaries which could not be dispensed with, if Drake determined to demand immediate satisfaction. Might we not take hope from this delay? I knew that the Saxon race do not regard a debt of honor as we do, and that duels had almost disappeared from English customs, for, as I have already said, not only is there .a severe law against duelists, but, moreover, public opinion is strongly averse to them. At the same time, in this, which was an uncommon case, the engagement had evidently been voluntarily sought for; the offended had, so to speak, provoked the offender, and my reasonings always tended to the same conclusion, that a meeting between Fabian and Drake was inevitable.

The deck was at this moment crowded with passengers and crew returning from service. At half past twelve the observation resulted in the following note: latitude, 40° 33’ north; longitude, 66° 24’ west; course, 214 miles. Thus the *Great Eastern* was only 348 miles from Sandy Hook Point, a narrow tongue of land which forms the entrance to New York harbor; it would not be long before we were in American seas.

I did not see Fabian in his usual place at lunch, but Drake was there, and although talkative, he did not appear to be quite at his ease. Was he trying to drown his fears in wine? I cannot say, but he indulged in bountiful libations with his friends. Several times I saw him leering at me, but insolent as he was, he dared not look me in the face. Was he looking for Fabian among the crowd of guests? I noticed he left the table abruptly before the meal was finished, and I got up immediately, in order to observe him, but he went to his cabin and shut himself up there.

I went up “on “deck. Not a wave disturbed the calm surface of the sea, and the sky was unsullied by a cloud; the two mirrors mutually reflected their azure hue. I met Doctor Pitferge, who gave me bad news of the wounded sailor. The invalid was getting worse, and, in spite of the doctor’s assurance, it was difficult to think that he could recover.

At five o’clock another ship on the horizon, but too far off for her nationality to be recognized. This time it was undoubtedly the *City of Paris.* This meeting with ships, and the salutation between the Atlantic’s visitors, caused great excitement on board. One can understand that as there is little difference between one ship and another, the common danger of facing the uncertain element unites even strangers by a friendly bond. At six o’clock a third ship appeared, the *Philadelphia,* one of the Inman line, used for the transportation of emigrants from Liverpool to New York. We were evidently in frequented seas, and land could not be far off. How I longed to reach it!

Night closed in about half-past seven. As the sun sank below the horizon, the moon grew brighter and for some time hung shining in the heavens. A prayer meeting, held by Captain Anderson, interspersed with hymns, lasted until nine o’clock. The day passed without either Captain Corsican or myself receiving a visit from Drake’s seconds.

CHAPTER XXV

A SAILOR’S BURIAL

THE next day, Monday, the 8th of April, the weather was very fine. I found the Doctor on deck basking in the sun. He came up to me. “Ah well!” said he, “our poor sufferer died in the night. The doctor never gave him up — oh, those doctors! they will never give in. This is the fourth man we have lost since we left Liverpool, the forth gone towards paying the *Great Eastern’s* debt.”

“Poor fellow,” said I, “just as we are nearing port, and the American coast almost in sight. What will become of his widow and little children?”

“Would you have it otherwise, my dear sir? It is the law, the great law! we must die! We must give way to others. It is my opinion we die simply because we are occupying a place which by rights belongs to another. Now can you tell me how many people will have died during my existence if I live to be sixty?”

“I have no idea, Doctor.”

“The calculation is simple enough,” resumed Dean Pitferge. “If I live sixty years, I shall have been in the world 21,900 days, or 525,600 hours, or 31,536,000 minutes, or lastly, 1,892,160,000 seconds, in round numbers 2,000,000,000 seconds. Now in that time two thousand million individuals who were in the way of their successors will have died, and when I have become inconvenient, I shall be put out of the way in the same manner, so that the long and short of the matter is to put off becoming inconvenient as long as possible.”

The Doctor continued for some time arguing on this subject, tending to prove to me a very simple theory, the mortality of human creatures. I did not think it worth while to discuss the point with him, so I let him have his say. Whilst we paced backwards and forwards, the Doctor talking, and I listening, I noticed that the carpenters on board were busy repairing the battered stem. If Captain Anderson did not wish to arrive in New York with damages, the carpenters would have to hurry over their work, for the *Great Eastern* was rapidly speeding through the tranquil waters; this I understood from the lively demeanor of the young lovers, who no longer thought of counting the turns of the wheels. The long pistons expanded, and the enormous cylinders heaving on their axle- swings, looked like a great peal of bells clanging together at random. The wheels made eleven revolutions a minute, and the steamship went at the rate of thirteen miles an hour. At noon the officers dispensed with making an observation; they knew their situation by calculation, and land must be signaled before long.

While I was walking on deck after luncH, Captain Corsican came up. I saw, from the thoughtful expression on his face, that he had something to tell me. “Fabian,” said he, “has received Drake’s seconds. I am to be his second, and he begs me to ask you if you will kindly be present on the occasion. He may rely on you?”

“Yes, captain; so all hope of deferring or preventing this meeting has vanished?”

“All hope.”

“But tell me, how did the quarrel arise?”

“A discussion about the play was a pretext for it, nothing else. The fact is if Fabian was not aware who Harry Drake was, it is quite evident he knew

Fabian, and the name of Fabian is so odious to him that he would gladly slay the man to whom it belongs.”

“Who are Drake’s seconds? “I asked.

“One of them is that actor — ”

“Doctor T — ?”

“Just so; the other is a Yankee I do not know.”

“When are you to expect them?”

“I am waiting for them here.”

And just as he spoke I saw the seconds coming towards us. Doctor T — cleared his throat; he undoubtedly thought a great deal more of himself as the representative of a rogue. His companion, another of Drake’s associates, was one of those extraordinary merchants who has always for sale anything you may ask him to buy.

Doctor T — spoke first, after making a very emphatic bow, which Captain Corsican hardly condescended to acknowledge.

“Gentlemen,” said Doctor T — , in a grave tone, “our friend Drake, a gentleman whose merit and deportment cannot fail to be appreciated by everyone, has sent us to arrange a somewhat delicate affair with you; that is to say, Captain Fabian MacElwin, to whom we first addressed ourselves, referred us to you as his representative. I hope that we shall be able to come to an understanding between ourselves worthy the position of gentlemen touching the delicate object of our mission.”

We made no reply, but allowed the gentleman to become embarrassed with his delicacy.

“Gentlemen,” continued he, “there is not the remotest doubt but that Captain MacElwin is in the wrong. That gentleman has unreasonably, and without the slightest pretext, questioned the honor of Harry Drake’s proceedings in a matter of play, and without any provocation offered him the greatest insult a gentleman could receive.”

These honeyed words made the captain impatient, he bit his mustache, and could refrain speaking no longer. “Come to the point,” said he sharply to Doctor T — , whose speech he had interrupted, “we don’t want so many words; the affair is simple enough; Captain MacElwin raised his hand against Mr. Drake, your friend accepted the blow, he assumes the part of the offended, and demands satisfaction. He has the choice of arms. What next?”

“Does Captain MacElwin accept the challenge?” asked the Doctor, baffled by Corsican’s tone.

“Decidedly.”

“Our friend, Harry Drake, has chosen swords.”

“Very well, and where is the engagement to take place? In New York?”

“No, here on board.”

“On board, be it so; at what time? To-morrow morning?”

“This evening at six o’clock, at the end of the upper deck, which will be deserted at that time.”

“Very well.” Thus saying, the captain took” my arm, and turned his back on Doctor T — .

It was no longer possible to put off the duel. Only a few hours separated us from the moment when Fabian and Harry Drake must meet. What could be the reason of this haste? How was it that Harry Drake had not delayed the duel until he and his enemy had disembarked? Was it because this ship, freighted by a French company, seemed to him the most favorable ground for a meeting which must be a deadly struggle? Or rather, might not Drake have a secret interest in freeing himself of Fabian before the latter could set foot on the American continent, or suspect the presence of Ellen on board, which he must have thought was unknown to all save himself? Yes, it must have been for this reason. “Little matter, after all,” said the captain; “far better to have it over.”

“Shall I ask Doctor Pitferge to be present at the duel as a doctor?”

“Yes, it would be well to do so.”

Corsican left me to go to Fabian. At this moment the bell on deck began tolling, and when I inquired of a steersman the reason of this unusual occurrence, he told me that it was for the burial of the sailor who had died in the night, and that the sad ceremony was about to take place. The sky, until now so clear, became overcast, and dark clouds loomed threateningly in the south.

At the sound of the bell the passengers flocked to the starboard side. The bridges, paddle-boards, bulwarks, masts and shore-boats, hanging from their davits, were crowded with spectators, the officers, sailors, and stokers off duty, stood in ranks on deck.

At two o’clock a group of sailors appeared at the far end of the upper deck, they had left the hospital, and were passing the rudder engine. The corpse, sewn in a piece of sail and stretched on a board, with a cannon ball at the feet, was carried by four men. The body, covered with the British flag, and followed by the dead man’s comrades, slowly advanced into the midst of the spectators, who uncovered their heads as the procession passed. On their arrival at the starboard paddle-wheel, the corpse was deposited on a landing of a staircase which terminated at the main deck.

In front of the row of spectators, standing one above the other, were Captain Anderson and his principal officers in full uniform. The captain, holding a prayer book in his hand, took his hat off, and for some minutes, during a profound silence, which not even the breeze interrupted, he solemnly read the prayer for the dead, every word of which was distinctly audible in the deathlike silence. On a sign from the captain, the body, released by the bearers, sank into the sea. For one moment it floated on the surface, became upright, and then disappeared in a circle of foam.

At this moment the voice of the sailor on watch was heard crying “Land!”

CHAPTER XXVI

LAND IN SIGHT

THE land announced at the moment when the sea was closing over the corpse of the poor sailor was low-lying and of a yellow color. This line of slightly elevated downs was Long Island, a great sandy bank enlivened with vegetation, which stretches along the American coast from Mon- tauk Point to Brooklyn, adjoining New York. Several yachts were coasting along this island, which is covered with villas and pleasure houses, the favorite resorts of the New Yorkers.

Every passenger waved his hand to the land so longed for after the tedious voyage, which had not been exempt from painful accidents. Every telescope was directed towards this first specimen of the American continent, and each saw it under a different aspect. The Yankee beheld in it his motherland; the Southerner regarded these northern lands with a kind of scorn, the scorn of the conquered for the conqueror; the Canadian looked upon it as a man who had only one step to take to call himself a citizen of the Union; the Californian in his mind's eye traversed the plains of the far west, and crossing the Rocky Mountains had already set foot on their inexhaustible mines. The Morinonite, with elevated brow and scornful lip, hardly noticed these shores, but peered beyond to where stood the City of the Saints on the borders of Salt Lake, in the far-off deserts. As for the young lovers, this continent was to them the Promised Land.

In the meanwhile the sky was growing more and more threatening. A dark line of clouds gathered in the zenith, and a suffocating heat penetrated the atmosphere as though a July sun was shining directly above us. "Would you like me to astonish you?” said the Doctor, who had joined me on the gangway.

“Astonish me, Doctor?”

“Well, then, we shall have a storm, perhaps a thunderstorm, before the day is over.”

. “A thunder-storm in the month of April! “I cried with surprise.

“The *Great Eastern* does not trouble herself about seasons,” replied Dean Pitferge, shrugging his shoulders. “It is a tempest called forth expressly on her account. Look at the threatening aspect of those clouds which cover the sky; they look like antediluvian animals, and before long they will devour each other.”

“I confess,” said I, “the sky looks stormy, and were it three months later I should be of your opinion, but not at this time of year.”

“I tell you,” replied the Doctor, growing animated, “the storm will burst out before many hours are past. I feel it like a barometer. Look at those vapors rising in mass, observe that cirrus, those mares’ tails which are blending together, and those thick circles which surround the horizon. Soon there will be a rapid condensing of vapor, which will consequently produce electricity. Besides, the mercury has suddenly fallen, and the prevailing wind is southwest, the only one which can brew a storm in winter.”

“Your observations may be very true, Doctor,” said I, not willing to yield, “but who has ever witnessed a thunder-storm at this season, and in this latitude?”

“We have proof, sir, we have proof on record. Mild winters are often marked by storms. You ought only to have lived in 1772, or even in 1824, and you would have heard the roaring of the thunder, in the first instance in February, and in the second in December. In the month of January, 1837, a thunder-bolt fell near Drammen in Norway, and did considerable mischief. Last year, in the month of February, fishing-smacks from Treport were struck by lightning. If I had time to consult statistics I would soon put you to silence.”

“Well, Doctor, since you will have it so, we shall soon see. At any rate, you are not afraid of thunder?”

“Not I,” replied the Doctor. “The thunder is my friend; better still, it is my doctor.”

“Your doctor?”

“Most certainly. I was struck by lightning in my bed on the 13th July, 1867, at Kew, near London, and it cured me of paralysis in my right arm, when the doctors had given up the case as hopeless.”

“You must be joking.”

“Not at all. It is an economical treatment by electricity. My dear sir, there are many very authentic facts which prove that thunder surpasses the most skillful physicians, and its intervention is truly marvelous in apparently hopeless cases.”

“Nevertheless,” said I, “I have little trust in your doctor, and would not willingly consult him.”

“Because you have never seen him at work. Stay; here is an instance which I have heard of as occurring in 1817. A peasant in Connecticut, who was suffering from asthma, supposed to be incurable, was struck by lightning in a field, and radically cured.”

I believe the Doctor would have liked to make the thunder into pills. “Laugh, ignoramus!” said he to me. “You know nothing either of the weather or medicine!”

CHAPTER XXVII

A STORM BREWING

DEAN PITFERGE left me, but I remained on deck, watching the storm rise. Corsican was still closeted with Fabian, who was undoubtedly making some arrangements in case of misfortune. I then remembered that he had a sister in New York, and I shuddered at the thought that perhaps we should have to carry to her the news of her brother’s death. I should like to have seen Fabian, but I thought it better not to disturb either him or Captain Corsican.

At four o’clock we came in sight of land stretching before Long Island. It was Fire Island. In the center rose a lighthouse, which shone over the surrounding land. The passengers again invaded the upper decks and bridges. All eyes were strained towards the coast, distant about six miles. They were waiting for the moment when the arrival of the pilot should settle the great pool business. It may be thought that those who had night quarters, and I was of the number, had given up all pretensions, and that those with the day quarters, except those included between four and six o’clock, had no longer any chance. Before night the pilot would come on board and settle this affair, so that all the interest was now concentrated in the seven or eight persons to whom fate had attributed the next quarters. The latter were taking advantage of their good luck = — selling, buying, and reselling their chances, bartering with such energy one might almost have faniced oneself in the Royal Exchange.

At sixteen minutes past four a small schooner, bearing towards the steamship, was signaled to starboard. There was no longer any possible doubt of its being the pilot’s boat, and he would be on board in fourteen or fifteen minutes at the most. The struggle was now between the possessors of the second and third quarters from four to five o'clock. Demands and offers were made with renewed vivacity. Then absurd wagers were laid even on the pilot's person, the tenor of which I have faithfully given.

"Ten dollars that the pilot is married."

"Twenty that he is a widower."

"Thirty dollars that he has a mustache."

"Sixty that he has a wart on his nose."

"A hundred dollars that he will step on board with his right foot first."

"He will smoke."

"He will have a pipe in his mouth."

"No! a cigar."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

And twenty other wagers quite as ridiculous, which found those more absurd still to accept them.

In the meanwhile the little schooner was sensibly approaching the steamship, and we could distinguish her graceful proportions. These charming little pilot boats, of about fifty or sixty tons, are good sea boats, skimming over the water like sea-gulls. The schooner, gracefully inclined, was bearing windward in spite of the breeze, which had begun to freshen. Her mast and foresails stood out clearly against the dark background of clouds, and the sea foamed beneath her bows. When at two cables' length from the *Great Eastern,* she suddenly veered and launched a shore-boat. Captain Anderson gave orders to heave to, and for the first time during a fortnight the wheels of the screw were motionless. A man got into the boat, which four sailors quickly pulled to the steamship. A rope ladder was thrown over the side of the giant down to the pilot in his little nutshell, which the latter caught, and, skillfully climbing, sprang on deck.

He was received with joyous cries by the winners, and exclamations of disappointment from the losers. The pool was regulated by the following statements: "The pilot was married."

"He had no wart on his nose."

"He had a light mustache."

"He had jumped on board with both feet."

"Lastly, it was thirty-six minutes past four o'clock when he set foot on the deck of the *Great Eastern"*

The possessor of the thirty-third quarter thus gained the ninety-six dollars, and it was Captain Corsican, who had hardly thought of the unexpected gain. It was not long before he appeared on deck, and when the podl was presented to him, he begged Captain Anderson to keep it for the widow of the young sailor whose death had been caused by the inroad of the sea. The captain shook his hand without saying a word, but a moment afterwards a sailor came up to Corsican, and, bowing awkwardly, "Sir," said he, "my mates have sent me to say that you are a very kind gentleman, and they all thank you in the name of poor Wilson, who cannot thank you for himself."

The captain, moved by the rough sailor's speech, silently pressed his hand.

As for the pilot, he was a man of short stature, with not much of the sailor-look about him. He wore a glazed hat, black trousers, a brown overcoat lined with red, and carried an umbrella. He was master on board now. In springing on deck, before he went to the bridge, he had thrown a bundle of papers among the passengers, who eagerly pounced on them. They were European and American journals — the political and civil bonds which again united the *Great Eastern* to the two continents.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A DUEL WITH SWORDS

THE storm was gathering, and a black arch of clouds had formed over our heads; the atmosphere was misty; nature was evidently about to justify Dr. Pitferge’s presentiments. The steamship had slackened her speed, and the wheels only made three or four revolutions a minute; volumes of white steam escaped from the half-open valves, the anchor-chains were cleared, and the British flag floated from the mainmast; these arrangements Captain Anderson had made preparatory to mooring. The pilot, standing on the top of the starboard paddle, guided the steamship through the narrow passages with skill; but the tide was already turning, so that the *Great Eastern* could not yet cross the bar of the Hudson, and we must wait till next day.

At a quarter to five by the pilot’s orders the anchors were let go; the chains rattled through the hawse-holes with a noise like thunder. I even thought for a moment that the storm had burst forth. When the anchors were firmly embedded in the sand, the *Great Eastern* swung round by the ebb tide, remained motionless, and not a wave disturbed the surface of the water.

At this moment the steward’s trumpet sounded for the last time; it called the passengers to their farewell dinner. The “Society of Freighters “would be prodigal with the champagne, and no one wished to be absent. An hour later the saloons were crowded with guests, and the deck deserted.

However, seven persons left their places unoccupied; the two adversaries, who were going to stake their lives in a duel, the four seconds, and the Doctor, who was to be present at the engagement. The time and the place for the meeting had been well chosen; there was not a creature on deck; the passengers were in the dining-rooms, the sailors in their berths, the officers absorbed with their own particular bot- ties, and not a steersman on board, for the ship was motionless at anchor.

At ten minutes past five the Doctor and I were joined by Fabian and Captain Corsican. I had not seen Fabian since the scene in the smoking-room. He seemed to me sad, but very calm. The thought of the duel troubled him little, apparently; his mind was elsewhere, and his eyes wandered restlessly in search of Ellen. He held out his hand to me without saying a word.

“Has not Harry Drake arrived?” asked the captain of me.

“Not yet,” I replied.

“Let us go to the stern; that is the place of rendezvous.”

Fabian, Captain Corsican, and I walked along the upper decks; the sky was growing dark; we heard the distant roar of thunder rumbling along the horizon. It was like a monotonous bass, enlivened by the hips and hurrahs issuing from the saloons; flashes of lightning darted through the black clouds, and the atmosphere was powerfully charged with electricity.

At twenty minutes past five Harry Drake and his seconds made their appearance. The gentlemen bowed to us, which honor we strictly returned. Drake did not utter a word, but his face showed signs of ill-concealed excitement. He cast a look of malignant hatred on Fabian; but the latter, leaning against the hatchway, did not even see him; so absorbed was he in a profound meditation, he seemed not yet to have thought of the part he was to play in this drama.

In the meanwhile Captain Corsican, addressing himself to the Yankee, one of Drake’s seconds, asked him for the swords, which the latter presented to him. They were battle swords, the basket-hilts of which entirely protected the hand which held them. Corsican took them, bent, and measured them, and then allowed the Yankee to choose. Whilst these preparations were being made, Harry Drake had taken off his hat and jacket, unbuttoned his shirt, and turned up his sleeves; then he seized his sword, and I saw that he was left handed, which gave him, accustomed to right handed antagonists, an unquestionable advantage.

Fabian had not yet left the place where he was standing. One would have thought that these preparations had nothing to do with him. Captain Corsican went up to him, touched him, and showed him the sword. Fabian looked at the glittering steel, and it seemed as if memory came back suddenly. He grasped his sword’ with a firm hand. “R;ght!” he murmured; “I remember!”

Then he placed himself opposite Harry Drake, who immediately assumed the defensive.

“Proceed, gentlemen,” said the captain.

They immediately crossed swords. From the first clashing of steel, several rapid passes on both sides, certain extrications, parries, and thrusts proved to me the equality in strength of the opponents. I augured well for Fabian. He was cool, self-possessed, and almost indifferent to the struggle; certainly less affected by it than were his own seconds. Harry Drake, on the contrary, scowled at him with flashing eyes and clenched teeth, his head bent forward, and his whole countenance indicative of a hatred which deprived him of all composure. He had come there to kill, and kill he would.

After the first engagement, which lasted some minutes, swords were lowered. With the exception of a slight scratch on Fabian’s arm, neither of the combatants had been wounded. They rested, and Drake wiped off the perspiration with which his face was bathed.

The storm now burst forth in all its fury. The thunder was continuous, and broke out in loud deafening reports; the atmosphere was charged with electricity to such an, extent that the swords were gilded with luminous crests, like lightning conductors in the midst of thunder clouds.

After a few moments’ rest, Corsican again gave the signal to proceed, and Fabian and Harry Drake again fell to work.

This time the fight was much more animated; Fabian defending himself with astounding calmness, Drake madly attacking him. Several times I expected a stroke from Fabian, which was not even attempted.

Suddenly, after some quick passes, Drake made a rapid stroke. I thought that Fabian must have been struck in the chest, but, warding off the blow, he struck Harry Drake’s sword smartly. The latter raised and covered himself by a swift semi-circle; whilst the lightning rent the clouds overhead.

Suddenly, and without anything to explain this strange surrender of himself, Fabian dropped his sword. Had he been mortally wounded without our noticing it? The blood rushed wildly to my heart. Fabian’s eyes had grown singularly animated.

“Defend yourself,” roared Drake, drawing himself up like a tiger ready to spring onto his prey.

I thought that it was all over with Fabian, disarmed as he was. Corsican threw himself between him and his enemy, to prevent the latter from striking a defenseless man; but now Harry Drake in his turn stood motionless.

I turned, and saw Ellen, pale as death, her hands stretched out, coming towards the duelists. Fabian, fascinated by this apparition, remained perfectly still.

“You! you!” cried Harry Drake to Ellen; “you here!”

His uplifted blade gleamed as though on fire; one might have said it was the sword of the archangel Michael in the hands of a demon.

Suddenly a brilliant flash of lightning lit up the whole stern. I was almost knocked down, and felt suffocated, for the air was filled with sulphur; but by a powerful effort I regained my senses. I had fallen on one knee, but I got up and looked around. Ellen was leaning on Fabian. Harry Drake seemed petrified, and remained in the same position, but his face had grown black.

Had the unhappy man been struck when attracting the lightning with his blade? Ellen left Fabian, and went up to Drake with her face full of holy compassion. She placed her hand on his shoulder; even this light touch was enough to disturb the equilibrium, and Drake fell to the ground a corpse. Ellen bent over the body, whilst we drew back, terrified. The wretched Harry Drake was dead.

“Struck by lightning,” said Dean Pitferge, catching hold of my arm. “Struck by lightning! Ah! will you not now believe in the intervention of thunder?”

Had Harry Drake indeed been struck by lightning as Dean Pitferge affirmed, or rather, as the doctor on board said, had a blood-vessel broken in his chest? I can only say there was nothing now but a corpse before our eyes.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE STATISTICIAN TO THE FRONT

THE next day, Tuesday, the 9th of April, the *Great Eastern* weighed anchor, and set sail to enter the Hudson, the pilot guiding her with an unerring eye. The storm had spent itself in the night, and the last black clouds disappeared below the horizon. The aspect of the sea was enlivened by a flotilla of schooners, waiting along the coast for the breeze. A small steamer came alongside, and we were boarded by the officer of the New York sanitary commissioners.

It was not long before we passed the light-boat which marks the channels of the Hudson, and ranged near Sandy Hook Point, where a group of spectators greeted us with a volley of hurrahs.

When the *Great Eastern* had gone round the interior bay formed by Sandy Hook Point, through the flotilla of fishing-smacks, I caught a glimpse of the verdant heights of New Jersey, the enormous forts on the bay, then the low line of the great city stretching between the Hudson and East river.

In another hour, after having ranged opposite the New York quays, the *Great Eastern* was moored in the Hudson, and the anchors became entangled in the submarine cable, which must necessarily be broken on her departure.

Then began the disembarkation of all my fellow-voyagers whom I should never see again: Californians, Southerners, Mormonites, and the young lovers. I was waiting for Fabian and Corsican.

I had been obliged to inform Captain Anderson of the incidents relating to the duel which had taken place on board. The doctors made their report, and nothing whatever having been found wrong in the death of Harry Drake, orders were given that the last duties might be rendered to him on land.

At this moment Cockburn, the statistician, who had not spoken to me the whole of the voyage, came up and said: “Do you know, sir, how many turns the wheels have made during our passage?”

“I do not, sir.”

“One hundred thousand, seven hundred and twenty - three.”

“Ah! really sir, and the screw?”

“Six hundred and eight thousand, one hundred and thirty.”

“I am much obliged to you, sir, for the information.”

And the statistician left me without any farewell whatever.

Fabian and Corsican joined me at this moment. Fabian pressed my hand warmly. “Ellen,” said he to me, “Ellen will recover. Her reason came back to her for a moment. Ah! God is just, and He will restore her wholly to us.”

Whilst thus speaking, Fabian smiled as he thought of the future. As for Captain Corsican, he kissed me heartily without any ceremony. “Good-by, good-by, we shall see you again,” he cried to me, when he had taken his place in the tender where were Fabian and Ellen, under the care of Mrs. R — , Captain MacElwin’s sister, who had come to meet her brother.

Then the tender sheered off, taking the first convoy of passengers to the Custom House pier. I watched them as they went farther and farther away, and, seeing Ellen sitting between Fabian and his sister, I could not doubt that care, devotion, and love would restore to this poor mind the reason of which grief had robbed it.

Just then someone took hold of my arm, and I knew it was Dr. Pitferge. “Well,” said he, “and what is going to become of you?”

“My idea was, Doctor, since the *Great Eastern* remains a hundred and ninety-two hours at New York, and as I must return with her, to spend the hundred and ninety-two hours in America. Certainly it is but a week, but a week well spent is, perhaps, long enough to see New York, the Hudson, the Mohawk Valley, Lake Erie, Niagara, and all the country made familiar by Cooper.”

“Ah! you are going to Niagara!” cried Dean Pitferge. “I declare I should not be sorry to see it again, and if my proposal does not seem disagreeable to you — ”

The worthy Doctor amused me with his crotchets. I had taken a fancy to him, and here was a well-instructed guide placed at my service. “That’s settled then,” said I to him.

A quarter of an hour later we embarked on the tender and at three o’clock were comfortably lodged in two rooms of the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

CHAPTER XXX

A WEEK IN AMERICA

A WEEK to spend in America! The *Great Eastern* was to set sail on the 16th of April, and it was now the 9th, and three o'clock in the afternoon, when I set foot on the land of the Union. A week! There are furious tourists and express travelers who would probably find this time enough to visit the whole of North America; but I had no such pretension, not even to visit New York thoroughly, and to write, after this extra rapid inspection, a book on the manners and customs of the Americans. But the constitution and physical aspect of New York is soon seen; it is hardly more varied than a chess-board. The streets, cut at right angles, are called avenues when they are straight, and streets when irregular. The numbers on the principal thoroughfares are a very practical but monotonous arrangement. American cars run through all the avenues. Anyone who has seen one quarter of New York knows the whole of the great city, except, perhaps, that intricacy of streets and confused alleys appropriated by the commercial population.

New York is built on a tongue of land, and all its activity is centered on the end of that tongue; on either side extend the Hudson and East Rivers, arms of the sea, in fact, on which ships are seen and ferry-boats ply, connecting the town on the right hand with Brooklyn, and on the left with the shores of New Jersey.

A single artery intersects the symmetrical quarters of New York, and that is old Broadway, like the Strand of London, and the Boulevard Montmartre of Paris; hardly passable at its lower end, where it is crowded with people, and almost deserted higher up; a street where sheds and marble palaces are huddled together; a stream of carriages, omnibuses, cabs, drays, and wagons, with the pavement for its banks, across which a bridge had been thrown for the traffic of foot passengers. Broadway is New York, and it was there that the Doctor and I walked until evening.

After having dined at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, I ended my day’s work by going to the Barnum Theater, where they were acting a play called “The Streets of New York.” which attracted a large audience. In the fourth act there was a fire, and real fire-engines, worked by real firemen; hence the “great attraction.”

The next morning I left the Doctor to his own affairs, and agreed to meet him at the hotel at two o’clock. I went to No. 25, Thirty-sixth Street, where resided Mrs. R — .

Fabian’s sister. I was impatient to get news of Ellen and my two friends; and here I learnt that, following the Doctor’s advice, Mrs. R — , Fabian, and Corsican had left New York, taking with them the young lady, thinking that the air and quiet of the country might have a beneficial effect on her. A! line from Captain Corsican informed me of this sudden departure. The kind fellow had been to the Fifth Avenue Hotel without meeting me, but he promised to keep me acquainted with their whereabouts. They thought of stopping at the first place that attracted Ellen’s attention, and staying there as long as the charm lasted; he hoped that I should not leave without bidding them a last farewell. Yes, were it but for a few hours, I should be happy to see Ellen, Fabian, and Corsican once again. But such are the drawbacks of traveling, hurried as I was, they gone and I going, each our separate ways, it seemed hardly likely I should see them again.

At two o’clock I returned to the hotel, and found the Doctor in the bar-room, which was full of people. It is a public hall, where travelers and passers-by mingled together, finding gratis iced-water, biscuits, and cheese.

“Well, Doctor,” said I, “when shall we start?”

“At six o’clock this evening.”

“Shall we take the Hudson railroad?”

“No; the *St. John;* a wonderful steamer, another world — a *Great Eastern* of the river. I should have preferred showing you the Hudson by daylight, but the *St. John* only goes at night. To-morrow, at five o’clock in the morning, we shall be at Albany. At six o’clock we shall take the New York Central Railroad, and in the evening we shall sup at Niagara Falls.”

I did not discuss the Doctor’s programme, but accepted it willingly. The hotel lift hoisted us to our rooms, and some minutes later we descended with our tourist knapsacks. A fly took us in a quarter of an hour to the pier on the Hudson, before which was the *St. John,* the chimneys of which were already crowned with wreaths of smoke.

CHAPTER XXXI

ON THE HUDSON RIVER

THE *St. John,* and its sister ship, the *Dean Richmond,* are two of the finest steamships on the river. They are buildings rather than boats; terraces rise one above another, with galleries and verandas. One would almost have thought it was a gardener's floating plantation. There are twenty flag-staffs, fastened with iron tressings, which consolidate the whole building. The two enormous paddle- boxes are painted *al fresco,* like the tympans in the Church of St. Mark, at Venice. Behind each wheel rises the chimney of the two boilers, the latter placed outside, instead of in the hull of the steamship, a good precaution in case of explosion. In the center, between the paddles, is the machinery, which is very simple, consisting only of a single cylinder, a piston worked by a long cross-beam, which rises and falls like the monstrous hammer of a forge, and a single crank, communicating the movement to the axles of the massive wheels.

Passengers were already crowding onto the deck of the *St. John.* Dean Pitferge and I went to secure a cabin; we got one which opened into an immense saloon, a kind of gallery with a vaulted ceiling, supported by a succession of Corinthian pillars. Comfort and luxury everywhere, carpets, sofas, ottomans, paintings, mirrors, even gas, made in a small gasometer on board.

At this moment the gigantic engine trembled and began to work. I went on to the upper terraces. At the stern was a gaily painted house, which was the steersman's room, where four strong men stood at the spokes of the double rudder-wheel. After walking about for a few minutes, I went down onto the deck, between the already heated boilers, from which light blue flames were issuing. Of the Hudson I could see nothing. Night came, and with it a fog thick enough to be cut. The *St. John* snorted in the gloom like a true mastodon; we could hardly catch a glimpse of the lights of the towns scattered along the banks of the river, or the lanterns of ships ascending the dark water with shrill whistles.

At eight o'clock I went into the saloon. The Doctor took me to have supper at a magnificent restaurant placed between the decks, where we were served by an army of black waiters. Dean Pitferge informed me that the number of passengers on board was more than four thousand, reckoning fifteen hundred emigrants stowed away in the lower part of the steamship.

Supper finished, we retired to our comfortable cabin.

At eleven o'clock I was aroused by a slight shock. The *St. John* had stopped. The captain, finding it impossible to proceed in the darkness, had given orders to heave to, and the enormous boat, moored in the channel, slept tranquilly at anchor.

At four o'clock in the morning the *St. John* resumed her course. I got up and went out under one of the verandas. The rain had ceased, the fog cleared off, the water appeared, then the shores; the right bank, dotted with green trees and shrubs, which gave it the appearance of a long cemetery; in the background rose high hills, closing in the horizon by a graceful line; the left bank, on the contrary, was flat and marshy.

Dr. Pitferge had just joined me under the veranda.

“Good-morning, friend,” said he, after having drawn a good breath of air; “do you know we shall not be at Albany in time to catch the train, thanks to that wretched fog. This will modify my programme.”

“So much the worse, Doctor, for we must be economical with our time.”

“Right; we may expect to reach Niagara Falls at night instead of in the evening. That is not my fault, but we must be resigned.”

The *St. John,* in fact, did not moor off the Albany quay before eight o’clock. The train had left, so we were obliged to wait till half-past one. In consequence of this delay we were able to visit the curious old city, which forms the legislative center of the State of New York; the lower town, commercial and thickly populated, on the right bank of the Hudson, and the high town, with its brick houses, public buildings, and its very remarkable museum of fossils. One might almost have thought it a large quarter of New York transported to the side of this hill, up which it rises in the shape of an amphitheater.

At one o’clock, after having breakfasted, we went to the station, which was without any barrier or officials. The train simply stopped in the middle of the street, like an omnibus; one could get up and down at pleasure. The car9 communicate with each other by bridges, which allow the traveler to go from one end of the train to the other. At the appointed time, without seeing either a guard or a porter, without a bell, without any warning, the brisk locomotive, a real gem of workmanship, started, and we were whirled away at the speed of fifty miles an hour. But instead of being boxed up, as one is in European trains, we were at liberty to walk about, buy newspapers and books, without waiting for stations. Refreshment buffets, bookstalls, everything was at hand for the traveler. We were now crossing fields without fences, and forests newly cleared, at the risk of a collision with the felled trees; through new towns, seamed with rails, but still wanting in houses; through cities adorned with the most poetic names of ancient literature — Rome, Syracuse, and Palmyra. It was thus the Mohawk

Valley, the land of Fennimore, which belongs to the American novelist, as does the land of Rob Roy to Walter Scott, glided before our eyes. For a moment Lake Ontario, which Cooper has made the scene of action of his master-work, sparkled on the horizon. All this theater of the grand epopee of Leather Stocking, formerly a savage country, is now a civilized land. The Doctor did not appreciate the change, for he persisted in calling me Hawk's Eye, and would only answer to the name of Chingachgook.

At eleven o'clock at night we changed trains at Rochester; the spray from the cascades fell over the cars in showers. At two o'clock in the morning, after having kept alongside the Niagara for several leagues without seeing it, we arrived at the village of Niagara Falls, and the Doctor conducted me to a most magnificent hotel, grandly named "Cataract House."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FALLS OF THE NIAGARA

THE Niagara is not a stream, not even a river; it is simply a weir sluice, a canal thirty-six miles long, which empties the waters of the Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Erie into the Ontario. The difference in the level of these last two lakes is three hundred and forty feet; this difference uniformly proportioned the whole of the width would hardly have created a “rapid;” but the Falls alone absorb half the difference in level, whence their formidable power.

This Niagarine trench separates the United States from Canada. Its right bank is American and its left English; on one side policemen, on the other not a shadow of one to be seen.

On the morning of the 12th of April, at break of day, the Doctor and I walked down the wide street of Niagara Falls, which is the name of the village situated on the banks of the Falls. It is a kind of small watering-place, three hundred miles from Albany, built in a healthy and charming situation, provided with sumptuous hotels and comfortable villas, which the Yankees and Canadians frequent in the season. The weather was magnificent, the sun warmed the cold atmosphere, a dull, distant roar was heard, and I saw vapors on the horizon which could not be clouds.

“Is that the Falls? “I asked of the Doctor.

“Patience!” replied Pitferge.

In a few minutes we were on the banks of the Niagara. The river was flowing peacefully along; it was clear, and not deep, with numerous projections of gray rock emerging here and there. The roar of the cataract grew louder and louder, but as yet we could not see it. A wooden bridge, supported by iron arches, united the left bank to an island in the midst of the current; onto this bridge the Doctor led me. Above, stretched the river as far as the eye could reach; down the stream, that is to say on our right, the first unevenness of a rapid was noticeable; then, at half a mile from the bridge, the earth suddenly gave way, and clouds of spray filled the air. This was the American fall, which we could not see. Beyond, on the Canadian side, lay a peaceful country, with hills, villas, and bare trees.

“Don’t look! don’t look!” cried the Doctor to me; “reserve yourself, shut your eyes, and do not open them until I tell you!”

I hardly listened to my original friend, but continued to look. The bridge crossed, we set foot on the island known as Goat Island. It is a piece of land of about seventy acres, covered with trees, and intersected with lovely avenues with carriage drives. It is like a bouquet thrown between the American and Canadian Falls, separated from the shore by a distance of three hundred yards. We ran under the great trees, climbed the slopes, and went down the steps; the thundering roar of the falls was redoubled, and the air saturated with spray.

“Look!” cried the Doctor.

Coming from behind a mass of rock, the Niagara appeared in all its splendor. At this spot it meets with a sharp angle of land, and falling round it, forms the Canadian cascade, called the “Horse-shoe Fall,” which falls from a height of one hundred and fifty-eight feet, and is two miles broad.

In this, one of the most beautiful spots in the world, Nature has combined everything to astonish the eye. The fall of the Niagara singularly favors the effects of light and shade; the sunbeams falling on the water, capriciously diversify the color; and those who have seen this effect, must admit that it is without parallel. In fact, near Goat Island the foam is white; it is then a fall of snow, or a heap of melted silver, pouring into the abyss. In the center of the cataract the color of the water is a most beautiful sea-green, which indicates its depth, so that the *Detroit,* a ship drawing twenty feet and launched on the current, was able to descend the falls without grazing. Towards the Canadian shore the whirlpool, on the contrary, looks like metal shining beneath the luminous rays, and it is melted gold which is now poured into the gulf. Below, the river is invisible from the vapors which rise over it. I caught glimpses, however, of enormous blocks of ice accumulated by the cold of winter; they take the form of monsters, which, with open jaws, hourly absorb the hundred millions of tons poured into them by the inexhaustible Niagara. Half a mile below the cataract the river again became tranquil, and presented a smooth surface, which the winds of April had not yet been able to ruffle.

“And now for the middle of the torrent,” said the Doctor to me.

I could not imagine what the Doctor meant by those words, until he pointed to a tower built on the edge of a rock some hundred feet from the shore, almost overhanging the precipice. This monument, raised in 1833, by a certain audacious being, one Judge Porter, is called the “Terrapin Tower.”

We went down the steps of Goat Island, and, coming to the height of the upper course of the Niagara, I saw a bridge, or rather some planks, thrown from one rock to the other, which united the tower with the banks of the river. The bridge was but a few feet from the abyss, and below it roared the torrent. We ventured on these planks, and in a few minutes reached the rock which supported Terrapin Tower. This round tower, forty-five feet in height, is built of stone, with a circular balcony at its summit, and a roof covered with red stucco. The winding staircase, on which thousands of names are cut, is wooden. Once at the top of the tower, there is nothing to do but cling to the balcony and look.

The tower is in the midst of the cataract. From its summit the eye plunges into the depths of the abyss, and peers into the very jaws of the ice monsters, as they swallow the torrent. One feels the rock tremble which supports it. It is impossible to hear anything but the roaring of the surging water. The spray rises to the top of the monument, and splendid rainbows are formed by the sun shining on the vaporized water.

By a simple optical illusion, the tower seems to move with a frightful rapidity, but, happily, in the opposite direction to the fall, for, with the contrary illusion, it would be impossible to look at the gulf from giddiness.

Breathless and shivering, we went for a moment inside the tower, and the Doctor took the opportunity of saying to me, “This Terrapin Tower, my dear sir, will some day fall into the abyss, and perhaps sooner than is expected.”

“Ah! indeed!”

“There is no doubt about it. The great Canadian Fall recedes insensibly, but still, it recedes. The tower, when it was first built in 1833, was much farther from the cataract. Geologists say that the fall, in the space of thirty-five thousand years, will be found at Queenstown, seven miles up the stream. According to Mr. Bakewell, it recedes a yard in a year; but according to Sir Charles Lyell one foot only. The time will come when the rock which supports the tower, worn away by the water, will glide down the Falls of the cataract. Well, my dear sir, remember this: the day when the Terrapin Tower falls, there will be some eccentrics who will descend the Niagara with it.”

I looked at the Doctor, as if to ask him if he would be of that number, but he signed for me to follow him, and we went out again to look at the “Horse-shoe Fall,” and the surrounding country. We could now distinguish the American Fall, slightly curtailed and separated by a projection of the island, where there is another small central cataract one hundred feet wide; the American cascade, equally fine, falls perpendicularly. Its height is one hundred and sixty-four feet. But in order to have a good view of it it is necessary to stand facing it, on the Canadian side.

All day we wandered on the banks of the Niagara, irresistibly drawn back to the tower, where the roar of the water, the spray, the sunlight playing on the vapors, the excitement, and the briny odor of the cataract, holds you in a perpetual ecstasy. Then we went back to Goat Island to get the Fall from every point of view, without ever being wearied of looking at it. The Doctor would have taken me to see the “Grotto of Winds,” hollowed out underneath the central Fall, but access to it was not allowed, on account of the frequent falling away of the rocks.

At five o’clock we went back to the hotel, and after a hasty dinner, served in the American fashion, we returned to Goat Island. The Doctor wished to go and see the “Three Sisters,” charming little islets scattered at the head of the island; then, with the return of evening, he led me back to the tottering rock of Terrapin Tower.

The last rays of the setting sun had disappeared behind the gray hills, and the moon shed her soft clear light over the landscape. The shadow of the tower stretched across the abyss; farther down the stream the water glided silently along, crowned with a light mist. The Canadian shore, already plunged in darkness, contrasted vividly with the moon-lit banks of Goat Island, and the village of Niagara Falls. Below us, the gulf, magnified by the uncertain light, looked like a bottomless abyss, in which roared the formidable torrent. What an effect! What artist could ever depict such a scene, either with the pen or paint-brush? For some minutes a moving light appeared on the horizon; it (was the signal light of a train crossing the Niagara bridge at a distance of two miles from us. Here we remained silent and motionless on the top of the tower until midnight, leaning over the waters which possessed such a fascination. Once, when the moon-beams caught the liquid dust at a certain angle, I had a glimpse of a milky band of transparent ribbon trembling in the shadows. It was a lunar rainbow, a pale irradiation of the queen of the night, whose soft light was refracted through the mist of the cataract.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE DOCTOR AND I MEET CORSICAN AGAIN;

THE next day, the 13th of April, the Doctor’s programme announced a visit to the Canadian shore. We had only to follow the heights of the bank of the Niagara for two miles to reach the suspension bridge. We started at seven o’clock in the morning. From the winding path on the right bank we could see the tranquil waters of the river, which no longer felt the perturbation of its fall.

At half-past seven we reached the suspension bridge. It is the bridge, on which the Great Western and New York Central Railroads meet, and the only one which gives access to Canada on the confines of the State of New York. This suspension bridge is formed of two platforms; the upper one for trains, and the lower for carriages and pedestrians. Imagination seems to lose itself in contemplating this stupendous work. This viaduct, over which trains can pass, is suspended at a height of two hundred and fifty feet above the Niagara, again transformed into a rapid at this spot. This suspension bridge, built by John A. Roebling, is eight hundred feet long, and twenty-four wide; the iron props fastened to the shore prevent it from swinging; the chains which support it, formed of four thousand wires, are ten inches in diameter, and can bear a weight of twelve thousand four hundred tons. The bridge itself weighs but eight hundred tons, and cost five hundred thousand dollars. Just as we reached the center a train passed over our heads, and we felt the platform bend under its weight.

It is a little below this bridge that Blondin crossed the Niagara, on a rope stretched from one shore to the other, and not, as is generally supposed, across the falls. However, the undertaking was none the less perilous; but if Blondin astonished us by his daring, what must we think of his friend who accompanied him, riding on his back during this aerial promenade?

Perhaps he was a glutton," said the Doctor, "and Blondin made wonderful omelets on his tight-rope."

We were now on Canadian ground, and we walked up the left bank of the Niagara, in order to see the Falls under a new aspect. Half an hour later we reached the English hotel, where the Doctor ordered our breakfast, whilst I glanced through the "Travelers' Book," where figured several thousand names: among the most celebrated I noticed the following: — Robert Peel, Lady Franklin, Comte de Paris, Due de Chartres, Prince de Joinville, Louis Napoleon (1846), Prince and Princess Napoleon, Barnum (with his address), Maurice Sand (1865), Agassiz (1854), Almonte, Prince Hohenlohe, Rothschild, Bertin (Paris), Lady Elgin, Burkhardt (1832), etc.

"And now let us go under the Falls," said the Doctor to me, when we had finished breakfast.

I followed Dean Pitferge. A negro conducted us to the dressing-room, where we were provided with waterproof trousers, mackintoshes, and glazed hats. Thus equipped, pur guide led us down a slippery path, obstructed by sharp- edged stones, to the lower level of Niagara. Then we passed behind the great fall through clouds of spray, the cataract falling before us like the curtain of a theater before the actors. But what a theater! Soaked, blinded, deafened, we could neither see nor hear in this cavern as hermetically closed by the liquid sheets of the cataract as though Nature had sealed it in by a wall of granite.

At nine o’clock we returned to the hotel, where they relieved us of our streaming clothes. Returning to the bank, I uttered a cry of surprise and joy, “Captain Corsican!”

The captain heard, and came towards me.

“You here!” he cried; “what a pleasure to see you again!”

“And Fabian and Ellen? “I asked, shaking his hands.

“They are here, and going on as well as possible; Fabian full of hope, almost merry; and our poor Ellen little by little regaining reason.”

“But how is it that I meet you at Niagara?”

“Niagara,” repeated Corsican. “Well, it is the principal resort of English and Americans in the warm months. They come here to breathe, to be cured by the sublime spectacle of the Falls. Our Ellen seemed to be struck at first sight by this glorious scenery, and we have come to stay on the banks of the Niagara. You see that villa, 4 Clifton House,’ in the midst of those trees, half way up the hill; that is where we all live, with Mrs. R — , Fabian’s sister,

who is devoted to our poor friend.”

“Has Ellen recognized Fabian?” I asked.

“No, not yet,” replied the captain. “You are aware, however, that at the moment when Drake was struck dead, Ellen had a brief interval of consciousness. Her reason became clear in the gloom which surrounded her, but this did not last long. At the same time, since we brought her to breathe this fresh air in this quiet place,the doctor has discovered a sensible improvement in her condition. She is calm, her sleep is tranquil, and there is a look in her eyes as though she were trying to think of something past."

"Ah," my dear friend;" cried I, "you will cure her. But where are Fabian and his betrothed?"

"Look!" said Corsican, and he pointed towards the shore of the Niagara. In the direction indicated by the captain I saw Fabian, who had not yet noticed us. He was standing on a rock, and a few feet in front of him sat Ellen perfectly motionless, Fabian watching her all the time. This spot on the left bank is known by the name of "Table Rock." It is a kind of rocky promontory jutting out into the river, which roars at a distance of four hundred feet below. Formerly it was more extensive, but the crumbling away of large pieces of rock has now reduced it to a surface a few yards square.

Ellen seemed absorbed in speechless ecstasy. From this place the aspect of the Falls is "most sublime," as say the guides, and they are right. It gives a view of two cataracts; on the right the "Canadian Fall," the crest of which, crowned with vapors, shut in the horizon on one side, like the horizon of the sea. In front is the "American Fall," and above, the elegant village of Niagara Falls, half hidden in the trees; on the left, the whole perspective of the river flowing rapidly between its high banks, and below the torrent struggling against the overthrown ice-bergs.

Corsican, the Doctor, and I went towards Table Rock,

but I did not want to disturb Fabian. Ellen was as motionless as a statue. What impression was this scene making on her mind? Was reason gradually coming back to her under the influence of the grand spectacle? Suddenly I saw Fabian step towards her. Ellen had risen quickly, and was going near to the abyss, with her arms extended towards the gulf; but all at once she stopped, and passed her hand rapidly across her forehead, as if she would drive away some thought Fabian, pale as death, but self-possessed, with one bound placed himself between Ellen and the chasm; the latter shook back her fair hair, and her graceful figure staggered. Did she see Fabian? No. One would have said it was a dead person coming back to being, and looking round for life!

Captain Corsican and I dared not move, although, being so near the abyss, we dreaded some catastrophe; but the Doctor kept us back.

“Let Fabian alone,” said he.

I heard the sobs which escaped from the young woman’s heaving breast, the inarticulate words from her lips; she seemed trying to speak, but could not. At last she uttered these words, “My God! my God! where am I, where ami?”

She was conscious that someone was near her, for she half turned round, her whole face seemed transfigured.

There was a new light in her eyes, as she saw Fabian, trembling and speechless, standing before her with outstretched arms. “Fabian! Fabian!” cried she, at last.

Fabian caught her in his arms, where she fell in an unconscious state. He uttered a piercing cry, thinking that Ellen was dead, but the Doctor interposed. “Don’t be alarmed,” said he; “this crisis will be the means of saving her!”

Ellen was carried to Clifton House and put to bed, where she recovered consciousness and slept peacefully. Fabian, encouraged by the Doctor, was full of hope. Ellen had recognized him! Coming back to us, he said to me. “We shall save her, we shall save her! Every day I watch her coming back to life. To-day, to-morrow, perhaps she will be restored to me. Ah! the just God be praised! We will stay here as long as it is necessary for her, shall we not, Archibald?”

The captain clasped Fabian in his arms; then the latter turned to the Doctor and me. He loaded us with thanks, and inspired us with the hope which filled his breast, and never was there better reason for hope — Ellen’s recovery was near at hand.

But we must be starting, and there was hardly an hour for us to reach Niagara Falls. Ellen was still sleeping when we left our dear friends. Fabian and Corsican bid us a last farewell, after having promised we should have news of Ellen by telegram, and at noon we left Clifton House.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE RETURN TO EUROPE

SOME minutes later we were descending a long flight of steps on the Canadian side, which led to the banks of the river, covered with huge sheets of ice. Here a boat was waiting to take us to “America.” One passenger had already taken his place in it. He was an engineer from Kentucky, and acquainted the Doctor with his name and1 profession. We embarked without loss of time, and by dint of steering, so as to avoid the blocks of ice, reached the middle of the river, where the current offered a clear passage. From here we had a last view of the magnificent Niagara cataract. Our companion observed it with a thoughtful air.

“Is it not grand, sir? Is it not magnificent?” said I.

“Yes,” replied he; “but what a waste of mechanical force; what a mill might be turned with such a fall as that!”

Never did I feel more inclined to pitch an engineer into the water!

On the other bank a small and almost vertical railroad, worked by a rope on the American side, hoisted us to the top. At half-past one we took the express, which put us down at Buffalo at a quarter past two. After visiting this large new town, and tasting the water of Lake Erie, we again took the New York Central Railroad at six o’clock in the evening. The next day, on leaving the comfortable beds of a “sleeping car,” we found ourselves at Albany, and the Hudson Railroad, which runs along the left bank of the river, brought us to New York a few hours later.

The next day, the 15th of April, in company with the indefatigable Doctor, I went over the city, East River, and Brooklyn. In the evening I bade farewell to the good Dean Pitferge, and I felt, in leaving him, that I left a friend.

Tuesday, the 16th" of April, was the day fixed for the departure of the *Great Eastern.* At eleven o'clock I went to Thirty-seventh pier, where the tender was to await the passengers. It was already filled with people and luggage when I embarked. Just as the tender was leaving the quay someone caught hold of my arm, and turning round I saw Dr. Pitferge.

"You! "I cried; "and are you going back to Europe?"

"Yes, my dear sir."

"By the *Great Eastern?"*

*"*Undoubtedly," replied the amiable original, smiling; "I have considered the matter, and have come to the conclusion that I must go. Only think, this may be the *Great Eastern's last voyage; the one which she will never complete*

The bell for departure had rung, when one of the waiters from the Fifth Avenue Hotel came running up to me, and put a telegram into my hands, dated from Niagara: "Ellen has awakened; her reason has entirely returned to her, and the doctor has every hope of her recovery."

I communicated this good news to Dean Pitferge.

"Every hope for her indeed! every hope!" said my fellow-traveler, in a sarcastic tone. "I also have every hope for her, but what good does that do? Anyone may have great hopes for you, for me, for all of us, but at the same time he may be just as much wrong as right."'

Twelve days later we reached Brest, and the day following Paris. The return passage was made without any misfortune, to the great displeasure of Dean Pitferge, who always expected to see the great ship wrecked.

And now, when I am sitting at my own table, if I had not my daily notes before me, I should think that the *Great Eastern*, that floating city in which I lived for a month, the meeting of Ellen and Fabian, the peerless Niagara, all these were the visions of a dream. Ah! how delightful is traveling, “even when one does return,” in spite of what the Doctor may say to the contrary.

For eight months I heard nothing of my original, but one day the post brought me a letter, covered with many- colored stamps, which began with these words, “On board the *Corinqnay*, Auckland Rocks. At last we have been shipwrecked.” And ended thus, “Was never in better health.

“Very heartily yours.

“DEAN PITFERGE.”

THE END

THE ADVENTURES OF THREE ENGLISHMEN AND THREE RUSSIANS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Translated by Ellen E. Frewer

First published in 1872, this novel features six scientists, who depart to South Africa to measure the meridian. During their mission, the Crimean war breaks out, and the members of the expedition find themselves citizens of enemy countries.

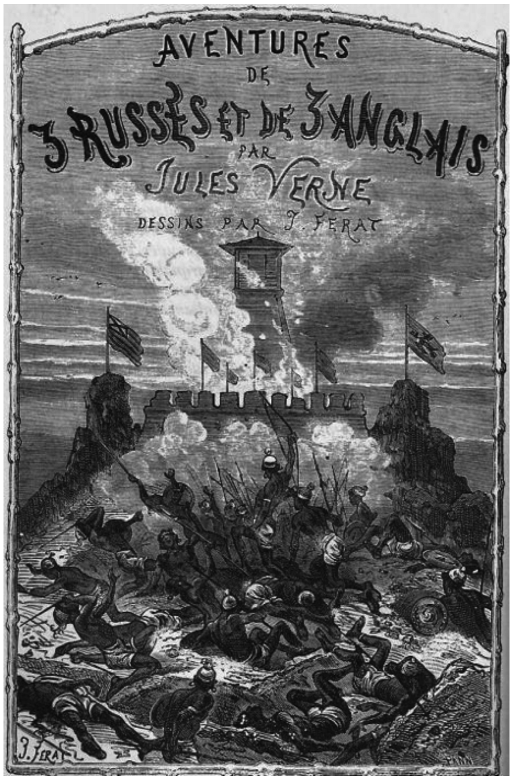
AVENTURES
DE
3 RUSSES ET DE 3 ANGLAIS
PAR
JULES VERNE
DESSINS PAR J. FERAT
J. FERAT

The original frontispiece

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CHAPTER I.

ON THE BANKS OF THE ORANGE RIVER.

On the 27th of January, 1854, two men lay stretched at the foot of an immense weeping willow, chatting, and at the same time watching most attentively the waters of the Orange River. This river, the Groote of the Dutch, and the Gariep of the Hottentots, may well vie with the other three great arteries of Africa — the Nile, the Niger, and the Zambesi. Like those, it has its periodical risings, its rapids and cataracts. Travellers whose names are known over part of its course, Thompson, Alexander, and Burchell, have each in their turn praised the clearness of its waters, and the beauty of its shores.

At this point the river, as it approached the Duke of York Mountains, offered a magnificent spectacle to the view. Insurmountable rocks, imposing masses of stone, and trunks of trees that had become mineralized by the action of the weather, deep caverns, impenetrable forests, not yet disturbed by the settler’s axe, all these, shut in by a background formed by the mountains of the Gariep, made up a scene matchless in its magnificence. There, too, the waters of the river, on account of the extreme narrowness of their bed, and the sudden falling away of the soil, rushed down from a height of 400 feet. Above the fall there were only surging sheets of water, broken here and there by points of rock wreathed with green boughs; below, there was only a dark whirlpool of tumultuous waters, crowned with a thick cloud of damp vapour, and striped with all the colours of the rainbow. From this gulf there arose a deafening roar, increased and varied by the echoes of the valley.

Of these two men, who had evidently been brought into this part of South Africa by the chances of an exploration, one lent only a vague attention to the beauties of nature that were opened to his view. This indifferent traveller was a hunting bushman, a fine type of that brave, bright-eyed, rapidly-gesticulating race of men, who lead a wandering life in the woods. Bushman, a word derived from the Dutch "Bochjesman," is literally "a man of the bushes," and is applied to the wandering tribes that scour the country in the N.W. of Cape Colony. Not a family of these bushmen is sedentary; they pass their lives in roaming over the region lying between the Orange River and the mountains of the East, in pillaging farms, and in destroying the crops of the overbearing colonists, by whom they have been driven back towards the interior of the country, where more rocks than plants abound.

This bushman, a man of about forty years of age, was very tall, and evidently possessed great muscular strength, for even when at rest his body presented the attitude of action. The clearness, ease, and freedom of his movements stamped him as an energetic character, a man cast in the same mould as the celebrated "Leather-stocking," the hero of the Canadian prairies, though perhaps possessing less calmness than Cooper's favourite hunter, as could be seen by the transient deepening of colour in his face, whenever he was animated by any unusual emotion.

The bushman was no longer a savage like the rest of his race, the ancient Laquas; for, born of an English father and a Hottentot mother, the half-breed, through his association with strangers, had gained more than he had lost, and spoke the paternal tongue fluently. His costume, half-Hottentot, half-European, consisted of a red flannel shirt, a loose coat and breeches of antelope hide, and leggings made of the skin of a wild cat; from his neck hung a little bag containing a knife, a pipe, and some tobacco; he wore on his head a kind of skull-cap of sheep-skin; a belt, made from the thick thong of some wild animal, encircled his waist; and on his naked wrists were rings of ivory, wrought with remarkable skill. From his shoulders flowed a "kross," a kind of hanging mantle, cut out of a tiger's skin, and falling as low as the knees. A dog of native breed was sleeping near him, while he himself was smoking a bone pipe in quick puffs, giving unequivocal signs of impatience.

"Come, let's be calm, Mokoum," said his interlocutor. "You are truly the most impatient of mortals whenever you are not hunting; but do understand, my worthy companion, that we can't change what is. Those whom we are expecting will come sooner or later — to-morrow, if not to-day."

The bushman's companion was a young man, from twenty-five to twenty-six years of age, and quite a contrast to him. His calm temperament was shown in every action; and it could be decided without a moment's hesitation that he was an Englishman. His much too homely costume proved him to be unaccustomed to travelling. He gave one the idea of a clerk who had wandered into a savage country, and one looked involuntarily to see if he carried a pen behind his ear, like a cashier, clerk, accountant, or some other variety of the great family of the bureaucracy.

In truth, this young man was not a traveller, but a distinguished *savant,* William Emery, an astronomer attached to the Observatory at the Cape — a useful establishment, which has for a long time rendered true services to science.

The scholar, rather out of his element, perhaps, in this uninhabited region of South Africa, several hundred miles from Cape Town, could hardly manage to curb the impatience of his companion.

“Mr. Emery,” replied the hunter in good English, “here we have been for eight days at the place appointed on the Orange, the cataract of Morgheda. It is indeed a long time since it has befallen a member of my family to remain eight days in one place: you forget that we are rovers, and that our feet burn at lingering here.”

“My friend Mokoum,” replied the astronomer, “those we are waiting for are coming from England, and surely we can allow them eight days of grace: we must take into account the length of the passage, and the hindrances which a steam-vessel must meet with in ascending the Orange; and, in short, the thousand difficulties belonging to such an undertaking. We have been told to make every preparation for a journey of exploration in South Africa, and that being done, to come here to the Falls of Morgheda and wait for my colleague. Colonel Everest, of the Cambridge Observatory. Well, here are the Falls of Morgheda, we are at the place appointed, and we are waiting: what more do you want, my worthy bushman?”

The hunter doubtless did want more, for his fingers played feverishly with the lock of his rifle, an excellent Manton, a weapon of precision with conical shot, and which could bring down a wild cat or an antelope at a distance of eight or nine hundred yards. Thus it may be seen that the bushman had put aside the quiver of aloes and the poisoned darts of his fellow-countrymen for the use of European weapons.

“But are you not mistaken, Mr. Emery?” replied Mokoum. “Is it really at the Falls of Morgheda, and towards the end of this month of January, that they have appointed to meet you?”

“Yes, my friend,” quietly answered William Emery, “and here is the letter from Mr. Airy, the director of the Greenwich Observatory, which will show you that I am not mistaken.”

The bushman took the letter that his companion gave him. He turned it over and over like a man not very familiar with the mysteries of penmanship; then giving it back to William Emery, he said,

“Tell me again what the blotted piece of paper says.”

The young astronomer, endowed with a patience proof against every thing, began again, for the twentieth time, the story he had so often told to his friend the hunter. At the end of the foregoing year, William Emery had received a letter telling him of the approaching arrival of Colonel Everest, and an international scientific commission in Southern Africa. What the plans of the commission were, and why it came to the extremity of the continent of Africa, Emery could not say, Mr. Airy’s letter being silent on that point; but following the instructions that he had received, he hastened to Lattakoo, one of the most northern stations in the Hottentot country, to prepare waggons, provisions, and, in short, every thing that could be wanted for the victualling of a Bochjesman caravan. Then, as he knew the reputation of the native hunter, Mokoum, who had accompanied Anderson in his hunting expeditions in Western Africa, and the intrepid David Livingstone on his first journey of exploration to Lake Ngami and the falls of the Zambesi, he offered him the command of this same caravan.

This done, it was arranged that the bushman, who knew the country perfectly, should lead William Emery along the banks of the Orange to the Morgheda Falls, the place appointed for the scientific commission to join them. This commission was to take its passage in the British frigate “Augusta,” to reach the mouth of the Orange on the western coast of Africa, as high as Cape Voltas, and to ascend the river as far as the cataracts. William Emery and Mokoum had therefore brought a waggon, which they had left at the bottom of the valley, to carry the strangers and their baggage to Lattakoo, unless they preferred getting there by the Orange and its affluents, after they had avoided the Falls of Morgheda by a land journey of some miles.

This story ended, and at length really impressed on the bushman's mind, he advanced to the edge of the gulf to whose bottom the foaming river threw itself with a crash: the astronomer followed, for there a projecting point commanded a view of the river, below the cataract, for a distance of several miles.

For some minutes Mokoum and his companion gazed attentively at the part of the river where it resumed its tranquillity about a quarter of a mile below them, but not an object, either boat or pirogue, disturbed its course. It was then three o'clock. The month of January here corresponds to the July of northern countries, and the sun, almost vertical in lat. 29°, heated the atmosphere till the thermometer stood at 105° Fahrenheit in the shade. If it had not been for the westerly breeze, which moderated the heat a little, the temperature would have been unbearable for any but a bushman. Still, the young astronomer, with his cool temperament, all bone and all nerves, did not feel it too much: the thick foliage of the trees which overhung the abyss protected him from the direct attacks of the sun's rays. Not a bird enlivened the solitude during these hot hours of the day; not an animal left the cool shade of the bushes to trust itself along the glades; not a sound would have been heard in this deserted region, even if the cataract had not filled the whole air with its roar.

After gazing for ten minutes, Mokoum turned to William Emery, stamping impatiently with his large foot; his penetrating eyes had discovered nothing.

"Supposing your people don't come?" he asked the astronomer.

“They’ll come, my brave hunter,” answered William Emery: “they are men of their word, and punctual, like all astronomers. Besides, what fault do you find with them? The letter says they are to arrive at the end of January; this is the 27th, and these gentlemen have still a right to four more days before they need to reach the Morgheda Falls.”

“And supposing they have not come at the end of those four days?” asked the bushman.

“Well! then, master hunter, there will be a chance for us to show our patience, for we will wait for them until I have certain proof that they are not coming at all.”

“By our god Ko!” cried the bushman in a sonorous voice, “you are a man who would wait until the Gariep had emptied all its roaring waters into that abyss!”

“No, hunter, no,” replied Emery in his ever quiet tone; “but we must let reason govern our actions; and what does reason tell us? This: — that if Colonel Everest and his companions, wearied with a tiresome journey, in want perhaps, and lost in this lonely country, were not to find us at the place of rendezvous, we should be to blame in every way. If any thing went wrong, the responsibility would rest on us; we ought, therefore, to stay at our post as long as it is our duty to do so. And besides, we want for nothing here: our waggon is waiting for us at the bottom of the valley, and gives us shelter at night; we have plenty of provisions; nature here is magnificent and worthy of our admiration; and it is quite a new pleasure to me to spend a few days in these splendid forests on the banks of this matchless river. As for you, Mokoum, what can you want more. Game, both hairy and feathered, abounds in the forests, and your rifle keeps us supplied with venison. Hunt, my brave hunter! kill time by killing deer and buffaloes! Go, my good bushman; I'll watch for the loiterers meanwhile, and *your* feet, at any rate, will run no risk of taking root."

The hunter thought the astronomer's advice was good, and decided that he would go for a few hours and beat the neighbouring bushes and brushwood. Lions, hyenas, and leopards would not disturb such a Nimrod as he, so well accustomed to the African forests. He whistled to his dog Top, an animal of the hyena breed from the desert of Kalahari, and a descendant of that race of which the Balabas formerly made pointers. The intelligent creature, as impatient, seemingly, as his master, bounded up, and showed by his joyous barking how much he was gratified at the bushman's intention. Soon both man and dog disappeared among the thick masses of wood which crowned the background of the cataract.

William Emery, now alone, again stretched himself at the foot of the willow, and while he was waiting for the heat to send him to sleep, began to think over his actual position. Here he was, far away from any inhabited spot, on the banks of the Orange river, a river as yet but little explored. He was waiting for Europeans, fellow-countrymen who had left their homes to run the risks of a distant expedition. But what was the expedition for? What scientific problem could it want to solve in the deserts of South Africa? What observation could it be trying to take in lat. 30° S.? That was just what Mr. Airy, the director of the Greenwich Observatory, did not tell in his letter. As for Emery himself, they asked for his co-operation as for that of a scientific man who was familiar with the climate of those southern latitudes, and as he was openly engaged in scientific labours, he was quite at the disposal of his colleagues in the United Kingdom.

As the young astronomer lay musing over all these things, and asking himself a thousand questions which he could not answer, his eyelids became heavy, and at length he slept soundly. When he awoke, the sun was already hidden behind the western hills, whose picturesque outline stood out sharply against the bright horizon. Some gnawings of hunger told him that supper-time was near; it was, in fact, six o’clock, and just the hour for returning to the waggon at the bottom of the valley.

At that very moment a report resounded from a grove of arborescent heaths, from twelve to fifteen feet high, which was growing along the slope of the hills on the right. Almost immediately the bushman and Top made their appearance at the edge of the wood, the former dragging behind him the animal that he had just shot.

“Come, come, master purveyor!” cried Emery, “what have you got for supper?”

“A springbok, Mr. William,” replied the hunter, throwing down an animal with horns curved like a lyre.

It was a kind of antelope, more generally known by the name of “leaping buck,” and which is to be met with in every part of South Africa. It is a charming animal, with its cinnamon-coloured back, and its croup covered with tufts of silky hair of a dazzling whiteness, whilst its under part is in shades of chestnut brown; its flesh, always excellent eating, was on this occasion to form the evening repast.

The hunter and the astronomer, lifting the beast by means of a pole placed across their shoulders, now left the head of the cataract, and in half an hour reached their encampment in a narrow gorge of the valley, where the waggon, guarded by two Bochjesman drivers, was waiting for them.

CHAPTER II.

OFFICIAL PRESENTATIONS.

For the next three days, the 28th, 29th, and 30th of January, Mokoum and William Emery never left the place of rendezvous. While the bushman, carried away by his hunting instincts, pursued the game and deer in the wooded district lying near the cataract, the young astronomer watched the river. The sight of this grand, wild nature enchanted him, and filled his soul with new emotions. Accustomed as he was to bend over his figures and catalogues day and night, hardly ever leaving the eye-piece of his telescope, watching the passage of stars across the meridian and their occupations, he delighted in the open-air life in the almost impenetrable woods which covered the slope of the hills, and on the lonely peaks that were sprinkled by the spray from the Morgheda as with a damp dust. It was joy to him to take in the poetry of these vast solitudes, and to refresh his mind, so wearied with his mathematical speculations; and so he beguiled the tediousness of his waiting, and became a new man, both in mind and body. Thus did the novelty of his situation explain his unvarying patience, which the bushman could not share in the least; so there were continually on the part of Mokoum the same recriminations, and on the part of Emery the same quiet answers, which, however, did not quiet the nervous hunter in the smallest degree.

And now the 31st of January had come, the last day fixed in Airy’s letter. If the expected party did not then arrive, Emery would be in a very embarrassing position; the delay might be indefinitely prolonged. How long, then, ought he to wait?

“Mr. William,” said the hunter, “why shouldn’t we go to meet these strangers? We cannot miss them; there is only one road, that by the river, and if they are coming up, as your bit of paper says they are, we are sure to meet them.”

“That is a capital idea of yours, Mokoum,” replied the astronomer: “we will go on and look out below the falls. We can get back to the encampment by the side valleys in the south. But tell me, my good bushman, you know nearly the whole course of the river, do you not?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the hunter, “I have ascended it twice from Cape Voltas to its juncture with the Hart on the frontier of the Transvaal Republic.”

“And it is navigable all the way, except at the Falls of Morgheda?”

“Just so, sir,” replied the bushman. “But I should add that at the end of the dry season the Orange has not much water till within five or six miles of its mouth; there is then a bar, where the swell from the west breaks very violently.”

“That doesn’t matter,” answered the astronomer, “because at the time that our friends want to land it will be all right. There is nothing then to keep them back, so they will come.”

The bushman said nothing, but shouldering his gun, and whistling to Top, he led the way down the narrow path which met the river again 400 feet lower.

It was then nine o’clock in the morning, and the two explorers (for such they might truly be called) followed the river by its left bank. Their way did not offer the smooth and easy surface of an embankment or towing-path, for the river-banks were covered with brushwood, and quite hidden in a bower of every variety of plants; and the festoons of the “cynauchum filiform,” mentioned by Burchell, hanging from tree to tree, formed quite a network of verdure in their path; the bushman’s knife, however, did not long remain inactive, and he cut down the obstructive branches without mercy. William Emery drank in the fragrant air, here especially impregnated with the camphor-like odour of the countless blooms of the diosma. Happily there were sometimes more open places along the bank devoid of vegetation, where the river flowed quietly, and abounded in fish, and these enabled the hunter and his companion to make better progress westward, so that by eleven o’clock they had gone about four miles.

The wind being in the west, the roar of the cataract could not be heard at that distance, but on the other hand, all sounds below the falls were very distinct.

William Emery and the hunter, as they stood, could see straight down the river for three or four miles. Chalk cliffs, 200 feet high, overhung and shut in its bed on either side.

“Let us stop and rest here,” said the astronomer; “I haven’t your hunter’s legs, Mokoum, and am more used to the starry paths of the heavens than to those on terra firma; so let us have a rest; we can see three or four miles down the river from here, and if the steamer should turn that last bend we are sure to see it.”

The young astronomer seated himself against a giant euphorbia, forty feet high, and in that position looked down the river, while the hunter, little used to sitting, continued to walk along the bank, and Top roused up clouds of wild birds, to which, however, his master gave no heed.

They had been here about half an hour, when William Emery noticed that Mokoum, who was standing about 100 feet below him, gave signs of a closer attention. Was it likely that he had seen the long-expected boat?

The astronomer, leaving his mossy couch, started for the spot where the hunter stood, and came up to him in a very few moments.

“Do you see any thing, Mokoum?” he asked.

“I “see” nothing, Mr. William,” answered the bushman, “but it seems to me that there is an unusual murmur down the river, different to the natural sounds that are so familiar to my ears.”

And then, telling his companion to be quiet, he lay down with his ear on the ground, and listened attentively.

In a few minutes he got up, and shaking his head, said, —

“I was mistaken; the noise I thought I heard was nothing but the breeze among the leaves or the murmur of the water over the stones at the edge; and yet — ”

The hunter listened again, but again heard nothing.

“Mokoum,” then said Mr. William Emery, “if the noise you thought you heard is caused by the machinery of a steamboat, you would hear better by stooping to the level of the river; water always conducts sound more clearly and quickly than air.”

“You are right, Mr. William,” answered Mokoum, “for more than once I have found out the passage of a hippopotamus across the river in that way.”

The bushman went nimbly down the bank, clinging to the creepers and tufts of grass on his way. When he got to the level of the river, he went in to his knees, and stooping down, laid his ear close to the water.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, in a few minutes, “I was not mistaken; there is a sound, some miles down, as if the waters were being violently beaten; it is a continual monotonous splashing which is introduced into the current.”

“Is it like a screw?” asked the astronomer.

“Perhaps it is, Mr. Emery; they are not far off.”

William Emery did not hesitate to believe his companion’s assertion, for he knew that the hunter was endowed with great delicacy of sense, whether he used his eyes, nose, or ears. Mokoum climbed up the bank again, and they determined to wait in that place, as they could easily see down the river from there.

Half an hour passed, which to Emery, in spite of his calmness, appeared interminable. Ever so many times he fancied he saw the dim outline of a boat gliding along the water, but he was always mistaken. At last an exclamation from the bushman made his heart leap.

“Smoke!” cried Mokoum.

Looking in the direction indicated by the bushman, Emery could just see a light streak rolling round the bend of the river: there was no longer any doubt.

The vessel advanced rapidly, and he could soon make out the funnel pouring forth a torrent of black smoke mingling with white steam. They had evidently made up their fires to increase their speed, so as to reach the appointed place on the exact day. The vessel was still about seven miles from the Falls of Morgheda.

It was then twelve o’clock, and as it was not a good place for landing, the astronomer determined to return to the foot of the cataract: he told his plan to the hunter, who only answered by turning back along the path he had just cleared along the left bank of the stream. Emery followed, and, turning round for the last time at a bend in the river, saw the British flag floating from the stern of the vessel.

The return to the falls was soon effected, and in an hour’s time the bushman and the astronomer halted a quarter of a mile below the cataract; for there the shore, hollowed into a semicircle, formed a little creek, and as the water was deep right up to the bank, the steamboat could easily land its passengers.

The vessel could not be far off now, and it had certainly gained on the two pedestrians, although they had walked so fast; it was not yet in sight, for the lofty trees which hung quite over the river-banks into the water, and the slope of the banks themselves, did not allow of an extensive view. But although they could not hear the sound made by the steam, the shrill whistle of the machinery broke in distinctly on the monotonous roar of the cataract; and as this whistling continued, it was evident that it was a signal from the boat to announce its arrival near the falls.

The hunter replied by letting off his gun, the report being repeated with a crash by the echoes of the shore.

At last the vessel was in sight, and William Emery and his companion were seen by those on board.

At a sign from the astronomer the vessel turned, and glided quietly alongside the bank; a rope was thrown ashore, which the bushman seized and twisted round the broken stump of a tree, and immediately a tall man sprang lightly on to the bank, and went towards the astronomer, whilst his companions landed in their turn.

William Emery also advanced to meet the stranger, saying inquiringly,

“Colonel Everest?”

“Mr. William Emery?” answered the Colonel.

The astronomer bowed and shook hands.

“Gentlemen,” then said Colonel Everest, “let me introduce you to Mr. William Emery, of the Cape Town Observatory, who has kindly come as far as the Morgheda Falls to meet us.”

Four of the passengers who stood near Colonel Everest bowed to the young astronomer, who did the same; and then the Colonel, with his British self-possession, introduced them officially, saying, —

“Mr. Emery, Sir John Murray, of the county of Devon, your fellow-countryman; Mr. Matthew Strux, of the Poulkowa Observatory; Mr. Nicholas Palander, of the Helsingfors Observatory; and Mr. Michael Zorn, of the Kiew Observatory, three scientific gentlemen who represent the Russian government in our international commission.”

CHAPTER III.

THE LAND JOURNEY.

These introductions over, William Emery put himself at the disposal of the new arrivals, for in his position of astronomer at the Cape, he was inferior in rank to Colonel Everest, a delegate of the English Government, and, with Matthew Strux, joint president of the commission. He knew, as well, that he was a distinguished man of science, famous for his reductions of the nebulae and his calculations of the occupations of the stars. He was a cold, methodical man, of about fifty years of age, every hour of his life being portioned out with mathematical accuracy. Nothing unforeseen ever happened to him, and his punctuality in every thing was like that of the stars in passing the meridian, and it might be said that all his doings were regulated by the chronometer. William Emery knew all this, and had therefore never doubted that the commission would arrive on the appointed day.

During this time he was waiting for the Colonel to tell him the object of this mission to South Africa; but as he was still silent on the point, Emery thought it better not to ask any questions, as very likely the hour fixed in the Colonel’s mind for the subject had not yet come.

Emery also knew by repute the wealthy Sir John Murray, who (almost a rival to Sir James Ross and Lord Elgin) was, although without office, an honour to England by his scientific labours. His pecuniary sacrifices to science were likewise considerable, for he had devoted £20,000 to the establishment of a giant reflector, a match for the telescope at Parson Town, by whose means the elements of a number of double stars had just been determined. He was a man of about forty years of age, with an aristocratic bearing, but whose character it was impossible to discover through his imperturbable exterior.

As to the three Russians, Strux, Palander, and Zorn, their names were also well known to William Emery, although he was not personally acquainted with them. Nicholas Palander and Michael Zorn paid a certain amount of deference to Matthew Strux, as was due to his position, if it had not been to his merit.

The only remark that Emery made was that they were in equal numbers, three English and three Russians; and the crew of the “Queen and Czar” (for that was the name of the steamboat) consisted of ten men, five English and five Russians.

“Mr. Emery,” said Colonel Everest, when the introductions were over, “we are now as well acquainted as if we had travelled together from London to Cape Voltas. Besides, your labours have already earned you a just renown, and on that account I hold you in high esteem. It was at my request that the English Government appointed you to assist in our operations in South Africa.”

William Emery bowed in acknowledgment, and thought that he was now going to hear the object of the scientific commission to the southern hemisphere; but still Colonel Everest did not explain it.

“Mr. Emery,” he went on, “are your preparations complete?”

“Quite, Colonel,” replied the astronomer. “According to the directions in Mr. Airy’s letter, I left Cape Town a month ago, and went to the station at Lattakoo, and there I collected all the materials for an expedition into the interior of Africa, provisions, waggons, horses, and bushmen. There is an escort of 100 armed men waiting for you at Lattakoo, and they will be under the command of a clever and celebrated hunter, whom I now beg to present to you, the bushman Mokoum."

"The bushman Mokoum!" cried the Colonel (if his usual cold tone could justify such a verb), "the bushman Mokoum! I know his name perfectly well."

"It is the name of a clever, brave African," added Sir John Murray, turning to the hunter, who was not at all discomposed by the grand airs of the Europeans.

"The hunter Mokoum," said William Emery, as he introduced his companion,

"Your name is well known in the United Kingdom, bushman," replied Colonel Everest. "You were the friend of Anderson and the guide of David Livingstone, whose friend I have the honour of being. I thank you in the name of England, and I congratulate Mr. Emery on having chosen you as the chief of our caravan. Such a hunter as you must be a connoisseur of fire-arms, and as we have a very fair supply, I shall beg you to take your choice of the one which will suit you the best; we know that it will be in good hands."

A smile of satisfaction played round the bushman's lips, for although he was no doubt gratified by the recognition of his services in England, yet the Colonel's offer touched him the most: he then returned thanks in polite terms, and stepped aside, while Emery and the Europeans continued their conversation.

The young astronomer went through all the details of the expedition he had prepared, and the Colonel seemed delighted. He was anxious to reach Lattakoo as quickly as possible, as the caravan ought to start at the beginning of March, after the rainy season.

“Will you be kind enough to decide how you will get to the town, Colonel Everest?” said William Emery.

“By the Orange River, and one of its affluents, the Kuruman, which flows close to Lattakoo.”

“True,” replied the astronomer, “but however well your vessel may travel, it cannot possibly ascend the cataract of Morgheda!”

“We will go round the cataract, Mr. Emery,” replied the Colonel, “and by making a land journey of a few miles, we can re-embark above the falls; and from there to Lattakoo, if I am not mistaken, the rivers are navigable for a vessel that does not draw much water.”

“No doubt, Colonel,” answered William Emery, “but this steamboat is too heavy...”

“Mr. Emery,” interrupted the Colonel, “this vessel is a masterpiece from Leard and Co’s manufactory in Liverpool. It takes to pieces, and is put together again with the greatest ease, a key and a few bolts being all that is required by men used to the work. You brought a waggon to the falls, did you not?”

“Yes, Colonel,” answered Emery, “our encampment is not a mile away.”

“Well, I must beg the bushman to have the waggon brought to the landing-place, and it will then be loaded with the portions of the vessel and its machinery, which also takes to pieces; and we shall then get up to the spot where the Orange becomes navigable."

Colonel Everest's orders were obeyed. The bushman disappeared quickly in the underwood, promising to be back in less than an hour, and while he was gone, the steamboat was rapidly unloaded. The cargo was not very considerable; it consisted of some cases of philosophical instruments; a fair collection of guns of Purdey Moore's manufacture, of Edinburgh; some kegs of brandy; some canisters of preserved meat; cases of ammunition; portmanteaus reduced to the smallest size; tent-cloths and all their utensils, looking as if they had come out of a travelling-bazaar; a carefully packed gutta-percha canoe, which took up no more room than a well-folded counterpane; some materials for encamping, &c. &c.; and lastly, a fanshaped mitrailleuse, a machine not then brought to perfection, but formidable enough to terrify any enemy who might come across their path.

All these were placed on the bank; and the engine, of 8-horse power, was divided into three parts: the boiler and its tubes; the mechanism, which was parted from the boiler by a turn of a key; and the screw attached to the false stern-post. When these had been successively carried away, the inside of the vessel was left free.

Besides the space reserved for the machinery and the stores, it was divided into a fore-cabin for the use of the crew, and an aft-cabin, occupied by Colonel Everest and his companions. In the twinkling of an eye the partitions vanished, all the chests and bedsteads were lifted out, and now the vessel was reduced to a mere shell, thirty-five feet long, and composed of three parts, like the "Mâ-Robert," the steam-vessel used by Dr. Livingstone in his first voyage up the Zambesi. It was made of galvanized steel, so that it was light, and at the same time resisting. The bolts, which fastened the plates over a framework of the same metal, kept them firm, and also prevented the possibility of a leakage.

William Emery was truly astounded at the simplicity of the work and the rapidity with which it was executed.

The waggon, under the guidance of Mokoum and the two Bochjesmen, had only arrived an hour when they were ready to load it. This waggon, rather a primitive vehicle, was mounted on four massive wheels, each couple being about twenty feet apart; it was a regular American “car” in length. This clumsy machine, with its creaking axles projecting a good foot beyond the wheels, was drawn by six tame buffaloes, two and two, who were extremely sensitive to the long goad carried by their driver. It required nothing less than such beasts as these to move the vehicle when heavily laden, for in spite of the adroitness of the “leader,” it stuck in the mire more than once.

The crew of the “Queen and Czar” now proceeded to load the waggon so as to balance it well every where. The dexterity of sailors is proverbial, and the lading of the vehicle was like play to the brave men. They laid the larger pieces of the boat on the strongest part of the waggon, immediately over the axles of the wheels, so that the cases, chests, barrels, and the lighter and more fragile packages easily found room between them. As to the travellers themselves, a four miles’ walk was nothing to them.

By three o’clock the loading was finished, and Colonel Everest gave the signal for starting. He and his companions, with William Emery as guide, took the lead, while the bushman, the crew, and the drivers of the waggon followed more slowly.

They performed the journey without fatigue, for the slopes that led to the upper course of the Orange made their road easy, by making it longer, and this was a happy thing for the heavily-laden waggon, as it would thus reach its goal more surely, if more slowly.

The different members of the commission clambered lightly up the side of the hill, and the conversation became general, but there was still no mention of the object of the expedition. The Europeans were admiring the splendid scenes that were opened to their view, for this grand nature, so beautiful in its wildness, charmed them as it had charmed the young astronomer, and their voyage had not yet surfeited them with the natural beauties of this African region, though they admired every thing with a quiet admiration, and, English-like, would not do any thing that might seem “improper.” However, the cataract drew forth some graceful applause, and although they clapped perhaps with only the tips of their fingers, yet it was enough to show that “nil admirari” was not quite their motto.

Besides, William Emery thought it his duty to do the honours of South Africa to his guests; for he was at home, and like certain over-enthusiastic citizens, he did not spare a detail of his African park.

Towards half-past four they had passed the cataract of Morgheda, and being now on level ground, the upper part of the river lay before them as far as their eye could reach, and they encamped on the bank to await the arrival of the waggon.

It appeared at the top of the hill about five o’clock, having accomplished the journey in safety, and Colonel Everest ordered it to be unloaded immediately, announcing that they were to start at day-break the next morning.

All the night was passed in different occupations. The shell of the vessel was put together again in less than an hour; then the machinery of the screw was put into its place; the metal partitions were fixed between the cabins; the store-rooms were refurnished, and the different packages neatly arranged on board, and every thing done so quickly that it told a great deal in favour of the crew of the “Queen and Czar.” These Englishmen and Russians were picked men, clever and well disciplined, and thoroughly to be depended on.

The next day, the 1st of February, the boat was ready to receive its passengers at daybreak. Already there was a volume of black smoke pouring from the funnel, and the engineer, to put the machinery in motion, was causing jets of white steam to fly across the smoke. The machine being at high pressure, without a condenser, the steam escaped at every stroke of the piston, according to the system applied to locomotives; and as to the boiler, with its ingeniously contrived tubes, presenting a large surface to the furnace, it only required half an hour to furnish a sufficient quantity of steam. They had laid in a good stock of ebony and guiacum, which were plentiful in the neighbourhood, and they were now lighting the great fire with this valuable wood.

At six o’clock Colonel Everest gave the signal for starting, and passengers and crew went on board the “Queen and Czar.” The hunter, who was acquainted with the course of the river, followed, leaving the two Bochjesmen to take the waggon back to Lattakoo.

Just as the vessel was slipping its cable. Colonel Everest turned to the astronomer, and said, —

“By-the-bye, Mr. Emery, you know why we have come here?”

“I have not the least idea, Colonel.”

“It is very simple, Mr. Emery: we have come to measure an arc of meridian in South Africa.”

CHAPTER IV.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE MÈTRE.

The idea of an invariable and constant system of measurement, of which nature herself should furnish the exact value, may be said to have existed in the mind of man from the earliest ages. It was of the highest importance, however, that this measurement should be accurately determined, whatever had been the cataclysms of which our earth had been the scene, and it is certain that the ancients felt the same, though they failed in methods and appliances for carrying out the work with sufficient accuracy.

The best way of obtaining a constant measurement was to connect it with the terrestrial sphere, whose circumference must be considered as invariable, and then to measure the whole or part of that circumference mathematically.

The ancients had tried to do this, and Aristotle, according to some contemporary philosophers, reckoned that the stadium, or Egyptian cubit, formed the hundred-thousandth part of the distance between the pole and the equator, and Eratosthenes in the time of the Ptolemies, calculated the value of a degree along the Nile, between Syene and Alexandria, pretty correctly; but Posidonius and Ptolemy were not sufficiently accurate in the same kind of geodetic operations that they undertook; neither were their successors.

Picard, for the first time in France, began to regulate the methods that were used for measuring a degree, and in 1669, by measuring the celestial and terrestrial arcs between Paris and Amiens, found that a degree was equal to 57,060 toises, equivalent to 364,876 English feet, or about 69.1 miles.

Picard’s measurement was continued either way across the French territory as far as Dunkirk and Collioure by Dominic Cassini and Lahire (1683 — 1718), and it was verified in 1739, from Dunkirk to Perpignan, by Francis Cassini and Lacaille; and at length Méchain carried it as far as Barcelona in Spain; but after his death (for he succumbed to the fatigue attending his operations) the measurement of the meridian in France was interrupted until it was subsequently taken up by Arago and Biot in 1807. These two men prolonged it as far as the Balearic Isles, so that the arc now extended from Dunkirk to Formentera, being equally divided by the parallel of lat. 45° N. half way between the pole and the equator; and under these conditions it was not necessary to take the depression of the earth into account in order to find the value of the quadrant of the meridian. This measurement gave 57,025 toises as the mean value of an arc of a degree in France.

It can be seen that up to that time Frenchmen especially had undertaken to determine that delicate point, and it was likewise the French Convention that, according to Talleyrand’s proposition, passed a resolution in 1790, charging the Academy of Sciences to invent an invariable system of weights and measures. Just at that time the statement signed by the illustrious names of Borda, Lagrange, Laplace, Monge, and Condorcet, proposed that the unit of measure should be the “mètre” the ten-millionth part of the quadrant of the meridian; and that the unit of weight should be the “gramme”, a cubic centimètre of distilled water at the freezing-point; and that the multiples and subdivisions of every measure should be formed decimally.

Later, the determinations of the value of a terrestrial degree were carried on in different parts of the world, for the earth being not spherical, but elliptic, it required much calculation to find the depression at the poles.

In 1736, Maupertuis, Clairaut, Camus, Lemonnier, Outhier, and the Swedish Celsius measured a northern arc in Lapland, and found the length of an arc of a degree to be 57,419 toises.

In 1745, La Condamine, Bouguer, and Godin, set sail for Peru, where they were joined by the Spanish officers Juan and Antonio Ulloa, and they then found that the Peruvian arc contained 56,737 toises.

In 1752, Lacaille reported 57,037 toises as the length of the arc he had measured at the Cape of Good Hope.

In 1754, Father Boscowitch and Father le Maire began a survey of the Papal States, and in the course of their operations found the arc between Rome and Rimini to be 56,973 toises.

In 1762 and 1763, Beccaria reckoned the degree in Piedmont at 57,468 toises, and in 1768, the astronomers Mason and Dixon, in North America, on the confines of Maryland and Pennsylvania, found that the value of the degree in America was 56,888 toises.

Since the beginning of the 19th century numbers of other arcs have been measured, in Bengal, the East Indies, Piedmont, Finland, Courland, East Prussia, Denmark, &c. but the English and Russians were less active than other nations in trying to decide this delicate point, their principal geodetic operation being that undertaken by General Roy in 1784, for the purpose of determining the difference of longitude between Paris and Greenwich.

It may be concluded from all the above-mentioned measurements that the mean value of a degree is 57,000 toises, or 25 ancient French leagues, and by multiplying this mean value by the 360 degrees contained in the circumference, it is found that the earth measures 9000 leagues round.

But, as may be seen from the figures above, the measurements of the different arcs in different parts of the world do not quite agree. Nevertheless, by taking this average of 57,000 toises for the value of a degree, the value of the metre, that is to say, the ten-millionth part of the quadrant of the meridian, may be deduced, and is found to be 0.513074 of the whole line, or 39.37079 English inches.

In reality, this value is rather too small, for later calculations (taking into account the depression of the earth at the poles, which is 1/299.15 and not 1/334, as was thought at first) now give nearly 10,000,856 mètres instead of 10,000,000 for the length of the quadrant of the meridian. The difference of 856 mètres is hardly noticeable in such a long distance; but nevertheless, mathematically speaking, it cannot be said that the mètre, as it is now used, represents the ten-millionth part of the quadrant of the terrestrial meridian exactly; there is an error of about 1/5000 of a line, i.e. 1/5000 of the twelfth part of an inch.

The mètre, thus determined, was still not adopted by all the civilized nations. Belgium, Spain, Piedmont, Greece, Holland, the old Spanish colonies, the republics of the Equator, New Granada, and Costa Rica, took a fancy to it immediately; but notwithstanding the evident superiority of this metrical system to every other, England had refused to use it.

Perhaps if it had not been for the political disturbances which arose at the close of the 18th century, the inhabitants of the United Kingdom would have accepted the system, for when the Constituent Assembly issued its decree on the 8th of May, 1790, the members of the Royal Society in England were invited to co-operate with the French Academicians. They had to decide whether the measure of the mètre should be founded on the length of the pendulum that beats the sexagesimal second, or whether they should take a fraction of one of the great circles of the earth for a unit of length; but events prevented the proposed conference, and so it was not until the year 1854 that England, having long seen the advantage of the metrical system, and that scientific and commercial societies were being founded to spread the reform, resolved to adopt it.

But still the English Government wished to keep their resolution a secret until the new geodetic operations that they had commenced should enable them to assign a more correct value to the terrestrial degree, and they thought they had better act in concert with the Russian Government, who were also hesitating about adopting the system.

A Commission of three Englishmen and three Russians was therefore chosen from among the most eminent members of the scientific societies, and we have seen that they were Colonel Everest, Sir John Murray, and William Emery, for England; and Matthew Strux, Nicholas Palander, and Michael Zorn, for Russia.

The international Commission having met in London, decided first of all that the measure of an arc of meridian should be taken in the Southern hemisphere, and that another arc should subsequently be measured in the Northern hemisphere, so that from the two operations they might hope to deduce an exact value which should satisfy all the conditions of the programme.

It now remained to choose between the different English possessions in the Southern hemisphere, Cape Colony, Australia, and New Zealand. The two last, lying quite at the antipodes of Europe, would involve the Commission in a long voyage, and, besides, the Maoris and Australians, who were often at war with their invaders, might render the proposed operation difficult; while Cape Colony, on the contrary, offered real advantages. In the first place, it was under the same meridian as parts of European Russia, so that after measuring an arc of meridian in South Africa, they could measure a second one in the empire of the Czar, and still keep their operations a secret; secondly, the voyage from England to South Africa was comparatively short; and thirdly, these English and Russian philosophers would find an excellent opportunity there of analyzing the labours of the French astronomer Lacaille, who had worked in the same place, and of proving whether he was correct in giving 57,037 toises as the measurement of a degree of meridian at the Cape of Good Hope.

It was therefore decided that the geodetic operation should be commenced at the Cape, and as the two Governments approved of the decision, large credits were opened, and two sets of all the instruments required in a triangulation were manufactured. The astronomer William Emery was asked to make preparations for an exploration in the interior of South Africa, and the frigate “Augusta,” of the royal navy, received orders to convey the members of the Commission and their suite to the mouth of the Orange River.

It should here be added, that besides the scientific question, there was also a question of national vainglory that excited these philosophers to join in a common labour; for, in reality, they were anxious to out-do France in her numerical calculations, and to surpass in precision the labours of her most illustrious astronomers, and that in the heart of a savage and almost unknown land. Thus the members of the Anglo-Russian Commission had resolved to sacrifice every thing, even their lives, in order to obtain a result that should be favourable to science, and at the same time glorious for their country.

And this is how it came to pass that the astronomer William Emery found himself at the Morgheda Falls, on the banks of the Orange River, at the end of January, 1854.

CHAPTER V.

A HOTTENTOT VILLAGE.

The voyage along the upper course of the river was soon accomplished, and although the weather soon became rainy, the passengers, comfortably installed in the ship’s cabin, suffered no inconvenience from the torrents of rain which usually fall at that season. The “Queen and Czar” shot along rapidly, for there were neither rapids nor shallows, and the current was not sufficiently strong to retard her progress.

Every aspect of the river-banks was enchanting; forest followed upon forest, and quite a world of birds dwell among the leafy branches. Here and there were groups of trees belonging to the family of the “proteaceæ,” and especially the “wagenboom” with its reddish marbled-wood forming a curious contrast with its deep blue leaves and large pale yellow flowers: then there were the “zwartebasts” with their black bark, and the “karrees” with dark evergreen foliage. The banks were shaded every where by weeping willows, while the underwood extended beyond for several miles. Every now and then vast open tracks presented themselves unexpectedly, large plains, covered with innumerable colocynths, mingled with “sugar-bushes,” out of which flew clouds of sweet-singing little birds, called “suiker-vogels” by the Cape colonists.

The winged world offered many varieties, all of which were pointed out to Sir John Murray by the bushman. Sir John was a great lover of game, both hairy and feathered, and thus a sort of intimacy arose between him and Mokoum, to whom, according to Colonel Everest’s promise, he had given an excellent long-range rifle, made on the Pauly system. It would be useless to attempt a description of the bushman’s delight when he found himself in possession of such a splendid weapon.

The two hunters understood each other well, for though so learned, Sir John Murray passed for one of the most brilliant fox-hunters in old Caledonia, and he listened to the bushman’s stories with an interest amounting to envy. His eyes sparkled when Mokoum showed him the wild ruminants in the woods; here a herd of fifteen to twenty giraffes; there, buffaloes six feet high, with towering black horns: farther on, fierce gnus with horses’ tails; and again, herds of “caamas,” a large kind of deer, with bright eyes, and horns forming a threatening-looking triangle; and every where, in the dense forests as well as in the open plains, the innumerable varieties of antelopes which abound in Southern Africa; the spurious chamois, the gems-bok, the gazelle, the duiker-bok, and the spring-bok. Was not all this something to tempt a hunter, and could the fox-hunts of the Scottish lowlands vie with the exploits of a Gumming, an Anderson, or a Baldwin?

It must be confessed that Sir John Murray’s companions were less excited than himself at these magnificent specimens of wild game. William Emery was watching his colleagues attentively, and trying to discover their character under their cold exterior. Colonel Everest and Matthew Strux, men of about the same age, were equally cold, reserved, and formal; they always spoke with a measured slowness, and from morning to night it seemed as if they had never met before. That any intimacy should ever be established between two such important personages was a thing not to be hoped for; two icebergs, placed side by side would join in time, but two scientific men, each holding a high position, never.

Nicholas Palander, a man of about fifty-five years of age, was one of those who have never been young, and who will never be old. The astronomer of

Helsingfors, constantly absorbed in his calculations, might be a very admirably constructed machine, but still he was nothing but a machine, a kind of abacus, or universal reckoner. He was the calculator of the Anglo-Russian Commission, and one of those prodigies who work out multiplications to five figures in their head, like a fifty-year-old Mondeux.

Michael Zorn more nearly resembled William Emery in age, enthusiasm, and good humour. His amiable qualities did not prevent his being an astronomer of great merit, having attained an early celebrity. The discoveries made by him at the Kiew Observatory concerning the nebula of Andromeda had attracted attention in scientific Europe, and yet with this undoubted merit he had a great deal of modesty, and was always in the background.

William Emery and Michael Zorn were becoming great friends, united by the same tastes and aspirations; and most generally they were talking together, while Colonel Everest and Matthew Strux were coldly watching each other, and Palander was mentally extracting cube roots without noticing the lovely scenes on the banks, and Sir John Murray and the bushman were forming plans for hunting down whole hecatombs of victims.

No incident marked the voyage along the upper course of the Orange. Sometimes the granite cliffs which shut in the winding bed of the river seemed to forbid further progress, and often the wooded islands which dotted the current seemed to render the route uncertain; but the bushman never hesitated, and the “Queen and Czar” always chose the right route, and passed round the cliffs without hindrance. The helmsman never had to repent of having followed Mokoum’s directions.

In four days the steamboat had passed over the 240 miles between the cataract of Morgheda and the Kuruman, an affluent which flowed exactly past the town of Lattakoo, whither Colonel Everest's expedition was bound. About thirty leagues above the falls the river bends from its general direction, which is east and west, and flows southeast as far as the acute angle which the territory of Cape Colony makes in the north, and then turning to the northeast, it loses itself in the wooded country of the Transvaal Republic.

It was early in the morning of the 5th of February, in a driving rain, that the "Queen and Czar" arrived at Klaarwater, a Hottentot village, close to the meeting of the Orange and Kuruman. Colonel Everest, unwilling to lose a moment, passed quickly by the few Bochjesmen cabins that form the village, and under the pressure of her screw, the vessel began to ascend the affluent. The rapid current was to be attributed, as the passengers remarked, to a peculiarity in the river, for the Kuruman being wide at its source, was lessened as it descended by the influence of the sun's rays; but at this season, swollen by the rains, and further increased by the waters of a sub-affluent, the Moschona, it became very deep and rapid. The fires were therefore made up, and the vessel ascended the Kuruman at the rate of three miles an hour.

During the voyage the bushman pointed out a good many hippopotami in the water; but these great pachyderms, clumsy, thickset beasts, from eight to ten feet long, which the Dutch at the Cape call "sea-cows," were by no means of an aggressive nature, and the hissing of the steam and the panting of the screw quite frightened them, the boat appearing to them like some great monster which they ought to distrust, and in fact, the arsenal on board would have rendered approach very difficult. Sir John Murray would have very much liked to try his explosive bullets on the fleshy masses, but the bushman assured him that there would be no lack of hippopotami in the more northerly rivers, so he determined to wait for a more favourable opportunity.

The 150 miles which separated the mouth of the Kuruman from the station of Lattakoo were traversed in fifty hours, and on the 7th of February the travellers had reached the end of their journey.

As soon as the steamboat was moored to the bank which served as a quay, a man of fifty years of age, with a grave air but kind countenance, stepped on board, and offered his hand to William Emery, The astronomer introduced the new-comer to his travelling companions, as —

“The Rev. Thomas Dale, of the London Missionary Society, Governor of the station of Lattakoo.”

The Europeans bowed to Mr. Dale, who gave them welcome, and put himself at their service.

The town of Lattakoo, or rather the village of that name is the most northerly of the Cape Missionary stations, and is divided into Old and New. The first, which the “Queen and Czar” now reached, had 12,000 inhabitants at the beginning of the century, but they have since emigrated to the north-east, and the town, now fallen into decay, has been replaced by New Lattakoo, which is built close by, on a plain which was formerly covered with acacias, and thither Mr. Dale conducted the Europeans. It consisted of about forty groups of houses, and contained 5000 or 6000 inhabitants of the tribe of the Bechuanas.

Dr. Livingstone stayed in this town for three months before his first voyage up the Zambesi in 1840, previously to crossing the whole of Central Africa, from the bay of Loanda to the port of Kilmana on the coast of Mozambique.

When they reached New Lattakoo, Colonel Everest presented a letter from Dr. Livingstone, which commended the Anglo-Russian Commission to his friends in South Africa. Mr. Dale read it with much pleasure, and returned it to the Colonel, saying that he might find it useful on his journey, as the name of David Livingstone was known and honoured throughout that part of Africa.

The members of the Commission were lodged in the missionary establishment, a large house built on an eminence and surrounded by an impenetrable hedge like a fortification. The Europeans could be more comfortably lodged here than with the Bechuanas; not that their dwellings were not kept properly in order; on the contrary, the smooth clay floors did not show a particle of dust, and the long-thatched roofs were quite rain-proof; but at best, their houses were little better than huts with a round hole for a door, hardly large enough to admit a man; moreover, they all lived in common, and close contact with the Bechuanas would scarcely have been agreeable.

The chief of the tribe, one Moulibahan, lived at Lattakoo, and thought it right to come and pay his respects to the Europeans. He was rather a fine man, without the thick lips and flat nose of the negro, with a round face not so shrunken in its lower part as that of the other Hottentots. He was dressed in a cloak of skins, sewn together with considerable art, and an apron called a “pujoke.” He wore a leather skull-cap, and sandals of ox-hide: ivory rings were wound round his arms, and from his ears hung brass plates about four inches long — a kind of ear-ring — which is also a charm; an antelope’s tail stood up in his skull-cap, and his hunting-stick was surmounted by a tuft of small black ostrich feathers. The natural colour of his body was quite invisible through the thick coating of ochre with which he was besmeared from head to foot, while some ineffaceable incisions in his legs denoted the number of enemies he had slain.

The chief, as grave as Matthew Strux himself, stepped up to the Europeans, and took them in turn by the nose. The Russians permitted this to be done quite gravely, the English rather more reluctantly, but still it had to be done, for according to African custom, it denoted a solemn engagement to fulfil the duties of hospitality to the Europeans.

When the ceremony was over, Moulibahan retired without having uttered a word.

“And now that we are naturalized Bechuanas,” said Colonel Everest, “let us begin our operations without losing a day or an hour.”

And indeed no time was lost; still, such is the variety of detail required in the organization of an expedition of this character, the Commission was not ready to start until the beginning of March. That, however, was the time appointed by Colonel Everest; because then the rainy season just being over, the water, preserved in the fissures of the earth, would furnish a valuable resource to travellers in the desert.

On the 2nd of March, then, the whole caravan, under Mokoum’s command, was ready. The Europeans took farewell of the missionaries at Lattakoo, and left the village at seven o’clock in the morning.

“Where are we going, Colonel?” asked William Emery, as the caravan passed the last house in the town.

“Straight on, Mr. Emery,” answered the Colonel, “until we reach a suitable place for establishing a base.”

At eight o’clock the caravan had passed over the low shrubby hills which skirt the town, and soon the desert, with its dangers, fatigues, and risks, lay unfolded before the travellers.

CHAPTER VI.

BETTER ACQUAINTANCE.

The escort under the bushman's command was composed of 100 men, all Bochjesmen — an industrious, good-tempered people, capable of enduring great physical fatigue. In former times, before the arrival of the missionaries, these Bochjesmen were a lying, inhospitable race, thinking of nothing but murder and pillage, and ever taking advantage of an enemy's sleep to massacre him. To a great extent the missionaries have modified these barbarous habits, but the natives are still more or less farm-pillagers and cattle-lifters.

Ten waggons, like the vehicle which Mokoum had taken to the Morgheda Falls, formed the bulk of the expedition. Two of these were like moving houses, fitted up as they were with a certain amount of comfort, and served as an encampment for the Europeans; so that Colonel Everest and his companions were followed about by a wooden habitation with dry flooring, and well tilted with waterproof cloth, and furnished with beds and toilet furniture Thus, on arriving at each place of encampment, the tent was always ready pitched.

Of these waggons, one was appropriated to Colonel Everest and his countrymen, Sir John Murray and William Emery: the other was used by the Russians, Matthew Strux, Nicholas Palander, and Michael Zorn. Two more, arranged in the same way, belonged, one to the five Englishmen and the other to the five Russians who composed the crew of the "Queen and Czar."

The hull and machinery of the steamboat, taken to pieces and laid on one of the waggons, followed the travellers, in case the Commission might come across some of the numerous lakes which are found in the interior of the continent.

The remaining waggons carried the tools, provisions, baggage, arms, and ammunition, as well as the instruments required for the proposed triangular survey. The provisions of the Bochjesmen consisted principally of antelope, buffalo, or elephant meat, preserved in long strips, being dried in the sun or by a slow fire: thus economizing the use of salt, here very scarce. In the place of bread, the Bochjesmen depended on the earth-nuts of the arachis, the bulbs of various species of mesembryanthemums, and other native productions. Animal food would be provided by the hunters of the party, who, adroitly employing their bows and lances, would scour the plains and revictual the caravan.

Six native oxen, long-legged, high-shouldered, and with great horns, were attached to each waggon with harness of buffalo hide. Thus the primitive vehicles moved slowly though surely on their massive wheels, ready alike for heights or valleys.

For the travellers to ride there were provided small black or grey Spanish horses, good-tempered, brave animals, imported from South America, and much esteemed at the Cape. Among the troops of quadrupeds were also half-a-dozen tame quaggas, a kind of ass with plump bodies and slender legs, who make a noise like the barking of a dog. They were to be used in the smaller expeditions necessary to the geodetic operations, and were adapted to carry the instruments where the waggons could not venture.

The only exception to the others was the bushman, who rode a splendid zebra with remarkable grace and dexterity. This animal (the beauty of whose coat with its brown stripes especially excited the admiration of the connoisseur Sir John Murray) was naturally defiant and suspicious, and would not have borne any other rider than Mokoum, who had broken it in for his own use.

Some dogs of a half-savage breed, sometimes wrongly called “hyena-hunters,” ran by the side of the waggons, their shape and long ears reminding one of the European brach-hound.

Such was the caravan which was about to bury itself in the deserts. The oxen advanced calmly under the guidance of their drivers, ever and again pricking them in the flank with their “jambox;” and it was strange to see the troop winding along the hills in marching order.

After leaving Lattakoo, whither was the expedition going?

Colonel Everest had said, “Straight on;” and indeed he and Matthew Strux could not yet follow a fixed course. What they wanted, before commencing their trigonometrical operations, was a vast level plain, on which to establish the base of the first of the triangles, which, like a network, were to cover for several degrees the southern part of Africa.

The Colonel explained to the bushman what he wanted, and with the calmness of one to whom scientific language is familiar, talked to him of triangles, adjacent angles, bases, meridians, zenith distances, and the like. Mokoum let him go on for a few moments, then interrupted him with an impatient movement, saying, “Colonel, I don’t know any thing about your angles, bases, and meridians. I don’t understand even in the least what you are going to do in the desert: but that is your business. You are asking for a large level plain; oh well, I can find you that.”

And at his orders, the caravan, having just ascended the Lattakoo hills, turned down again towards the south-west. This took them rather more to the south of the village, towards the plain watered by the Kuruman, and here the bushman expected to find a suitable place for the Colonel's plans.

From that day, he always took the head of the caravan. Sir John Murray, well mounted, never left him, and from time to time the report of a gun made his colleagues aware that he was making acquaintance with the African game. The Colonel, quite absorbed in contemplating the difficulties of the expedition, let his horse carry him on. Matthew Strux, sometimes on horseback, sometimes in the waggon, according to the nature of the ground, seldom opened his lips. Nicholas Palander, as bad a rider as could be, was generally on foot; at other times he shut himself up in his vehicle, and there lost himself in the profoundest mathematical abstractions.

Although William Emery and Michael Zorn occupied separate waggons at night, they were always together when the caravan was on the march. Every day and every incident of the journey bound them in a closer friendship. From one stage to another they rode, talked, and argued together. Sometimes they fell behind the train, and sometimes rode on several miles ahead of it, when the plain extended as far as they could see. They were free here and lost amidst the wildness of nature. How they forgot figures and problems, calculations and observations, and chatted of every thing but science! They were no longer astronomers contemplating the starry firmament, but were more like two youths escaped from school, revelling in the dense forests and boundless plains. They laughed like ordinary mortals. Both of them had excellent dispositions, open, amiable, and devoted, forming a strange contrast to Colonel Everest and Matthew Strux, who were formal, not to say stiff. These two chiefs were often the subject of their conversation, and Emery learnt a good deal about them from his friend.

“Yes,” said Michael Zorn, that day, “I watched them well on board the `Augusta,’ and I profess I think they are jealous of each other. And if Colonel Everest appears to be at the head of things, Matthew Strux is not less than his equal: the Russian Government has clearly established his position. One chief is as imperious as the other; and besides, I tell you again, there is the worst of all jealousy between them, the jealousy of the learned.”

“And that for which there is the least occasion,” answered Emery, “because in discoveries every thing has its value, and each one derives equal benefit. But, my dear Zorn, if, as I believe, your observations are correct, it is unfortunate for our expedition: in such a work there ought to be a perfect understanding.”

“No doubt,” replied Zorn, “and I fear that that understanding does not exist. Think of our confusion, if every detail, the choice of a base, the method of calculating, the position of the stations, the verification of the figures, opens a fresh discussion every time! Unless I am much mistaken I forbode a vast deal of quibbling when we come to compare our registers, and the observations we shall have made to the minutest fraction.”

“You frighten me,” said Emery. “It would be sorrowful to carry an enterprise of this kind so far, and then to fail for want of concord. Let us hope that your fears may not be realized.”

“I hope they may not,” answered the young Russian; “but I say again, I assisted at certain scientific discussions on the voyage, which showed me that both Colonel Everest and his rival are undeniably obstinate, and that at heart there is a miserable jealousy between them,” “But these two gentlemen are never apart,” observed Emery. “You never find one without the other; they are as inseparable as ourselves.”

“True,” replied Zorn, “they are never apart all day long, but then they never exchange ten words: they only keep watch on each other. If one doesn’t manage to annihilate the other, we shall indeed work under deplorable conditions.”

“And for yourself,” asked William, hesitatingly, “which of the two would you wish — ”

“My dear William,” replied Zorn with much frankness, “I shall loyally accept him as chief who can command respect as such. This is a question of science, and I have no prejudice in the matter. Matthew Strux and the Colonel are both remarkable and worthy men: England and Russia should profit equally from their labours; therefore it matters little whether the work is directed by an Englishman or a Russian. Are you not of my opinion?”

“Quite,” answered Emery; “therefore do not let us be distracted by absurd prejudices, and let us as far as possible use our efforts for the common good. Perhaps it will be possible to ward off the blows of the two adversaries; and besides there is your fellow countryman, Nicholas Palander — ”

“He!” laughed Zorn, “he will neither see, hear, nor comprehend any thing! He would make calculations to any extent; but he is neither Russian, Prussian, English, or Chinese; he is not even an inhabitant of this sublunary sphere; he is Nicholas Palander, that’s all.”

“I cannot say the same for my countryman. Sir John Murray,” said Emery. “He is a thorough Englishman, and a most determined hunter, and he would sooner follow the traces of an elephant and giraffe than give himself any trouble about a scientific argument. We must therefore depend upon ourselves, Zorn, to neutralize the antipathy between our chiefs. Whatever happens, we must hold together.”

“Ay, whatever happens,” replied Zorn, holding out his hand to his friend.

The bushman still continued to guide the caravan down towards the south-west. At midday, on the 4th of March, it reached the base of the long wooded hills which extend from Lattakoo. Mokoum was not mistaken; he had led the expedition towards the plain, but it was still undulated, and therefore unfitted for an attempt at triangulation. The march continued uninterrupted, and Mokoum rode at the head of the riders and waggons, while Sir John Murray, Emery, and Zorn pushed on in advance.

Towards the end of the day, they all arrived at a station occupied by one of the wandering “boers,” or farmers, who are induced by the richness of the pasture-land to make temporary abodes in various parts of the country.

The colonist, a Dutchman, and head of a large family, received the Colonel and his companions most hospitably, and would take no remuneration in return. He was one of those brave, industrious men, whose slender capital, intelligently employed in the breeding of oxen, cows, and goats, soon produces a fortune. When the pasturage is exhausted, the farmer, like a patriarch of old, seeks for new springs and fertile prairies, pitching his camp afresh where the conditions seem favourable.

The farmer opportunely told Colonel Everest of a wide plain, fifteen miles away, which would be found quite flat.

The caravan started next morning at daybreak. The only incident that broke the monotony of the long morning march, was Sir John Murray's taking a shot, at a distance of more than 1000 yards, at a gnu, a curious animal about five feet high, with the muzzle of an ox, a long white tail, and pointed horns. It fell with a heavy groan, much to the astonishment of the bushman, who was surprised at seeing the animal struck at such a distance. The gnu generally affords a considerable quantity of excellent meat, and was accordingly in high esteem among the hunters of the caravan.

The site indicated by the farmer was reached about midday. It was a boundless prairie stretching to the north without the slightest undulation. No better spot for measuring a base could be imagined, and the bushman, after a short investigation, returned to Colonel Everest with the announcement that they had reached the place they were seeking.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BASE OF THE TRIANGLE.

The work undertaken by the Commission was a triangulation for the purpose of measuring an arc of meridian. Now the direct measurement of one or more degrees by means of metal rods would be impracticable. In no part of the world is there a region so vast and unbroken as to admit of so delicate an operation. Happily, there is an easier way of proceeding by dividing the region through which the meridian passes into a number of imaginary triangles, whose solution is comparatively easy.

These triangles are obtained by observing signals, either natural or artificial, such as church-towers, posts, or reverberatory lamps, by means of the theodolite or repeating-circle. Every signal is the vertex of a triangle, whose angles are exactly determined by the instruments, so that a good observer with a proper telescope can take the bearings of any object whatever, a tower by day, or a lamp by night. Sometimes the sides of the triangles are many miles in length, and when Arago connected the coast of Valencia in Spain with the Balearic Islands, one of the sides measured 422,555 toises.

When one side and two angles of any triangle are known, the other sides and angle maybe found; by taking, therefore, a side of one of the known triangles for a new base, and by measuring the angles adjacent to the base, new triangles can be successively formed along the whole length of the arc; and since every straight line in the network of triangles is known, the length of the arc can be easily determined. The values of the sides and angles may be obtained by the theodolite and repeating circle, but the “first” side, the base of the whole system, must be actually measured on the ground, and this operation requires the utmost care.

When Delambre and Méchain measured the meridian of France from Dunkirk to Barcelona, they took for their base a straight line, 12,150 metres in length, in the road from Melun to Lieusaint, and they were no less than 42 days in measuring it. Colonel Everest and Matthew Strux designed proceeding in the same way, and it will be seen how much precision was necessary.

The work was begun on the 5th of March, much to the astonishment of the Bochjesmen, who could not at all understand it. Mokoum thought it strange for these learned men to measure the earth with rods six feet long; but any way, he had done his duty; they had asked him for a level plain, and he had found it for them.

The place was certainly well chosen. Covered with dry, short grass, the plain was perfectly level as far as the horizon. Behind lay a line of hills forming the southern boundary of the Kalahari desert; towards the north the plain seemed boundless. To the east, the sides of the table-land of Lattakoo disappeared in gentle slopes; and in the west, where the ground was lower, the soil became marshy, as it imbibed the stagnant water which fed the affluents of the Kuruman.

“I think, Colonel Everest,” said Strux, after he had surveyed the grassy level, “that when our base is established, we shall be able here also to fix the extremity of our meridian.”

“Likely enough,” replied the Colonel. “We must find out too, whether the arc meets with any obstacles that may impede the survey. Let us measure the base, and we will decide afterwards whether it will be better to join it by a series of auxiliary triangles to those which the arc must cross.”

They thus resolved to proceed to the measurement of the base. It would be a long operation, for they wanted to obtain even more correct results than those obtained by the French philosophers at Melun. This would be a matter of some difficulty: since when a new base was measured afterwards near Perpignan to verify the calculations, there was only an error of 11 inches in a distance of 330,000 toises.

Orders were given for encamping, and a Bochjesman village, a kind of kraal, was formed on the plain. The waggons were arranged in a circle like the houses, the English and Russian flags floating over their respective quarters. The centre was common ground. The horses and buffaloes, which by day grazed outside, were driven in by night to the interior, to save them from attacks of the wild beasts around.

Mokoum took upon himself to arrange the hunting expedition for revictualling; and Sir John Murray, whose presence was not indispensable in the measurement of the base, looked after the provisions, and served out the rations of preserved meat and fresh venison. Thanks to the skill and experience of Mokoum and his companions, game was never wanting. They scoured the district for miles round, and the report of their guns resounded at all hours.

The survey began on the next day, Zorn and Emery being charged with the preliminaries.

“Come along,” said Zorn, “and good luck be with us.”

The primary operation consisted in tracing a line on the ground where it was especially level. This chanced to be from S.E. to N.W. and pickets being placed at short intervals to mark the direction, Zorn carefully verified the correctness of their position by means of the thread-wires of his telescope.

For more than eight miles (the proposed length of the base) was the measurement continued, and the young men performed their work with scrupulous fidelity.

The next step was to adjust the rods for the actual measurement, apparently a very simple operation, but which, in fact, demands the most continuous caution, as the success of a triangulation in a great measure is contingent on its preciseness.

On the morning of the 10th, twelve wooden pedestals were planted along the line, securely fastened in their position, and prepared to support the rods. Colonel Everest and Matthew Strux, assisted by their young coadjutors, placed the rods in position, and Nicholas Palander stood ready, pencil in hand, to write down in a double register the figures transmitted to him.

The rods employed were six in number, and exactly two toises in length. They were made of platinum, as being (under ordinary circumstances) unaffected by any condition of the atmosphere. In order, however, to provide against any change of temperature, each was covered with a rod of copper somewhat shorter than itself, and a microscopic vernier was attached, to indicate any contraction or expansion that might occur. The rods were next placed lengthwise, with a small interval between each, in order to avoid the slight shock which might result from immediate contact. Colonel Everest and Matthew Strux with their own hands placed the first rod. About a hundred toises farther on, they had marked a point of sight, and as the rods were each provided with iron projections, it was not difficult to place them exactly in the proper direction. Emery and Zorn, lying on the ground, saw that the projections stood exactly in the middle of the sight.

“Now,” said Colonel Everest, “we must define our exact starting-point. We will drop a line from the end of our first rod, and that will definitely mark the extremity of our base.”

“Yes,” answered Strux, “but we must take into account the radius of the line.”

“Of course,” said the Colonel.

The starting-point determined, the work went on. The next proceeding was to determine the inclination of the base with the horizon.

“We do not, I believe, pretend,” said Colonel Everest, “to place the rod in a position which is perfectly horizontal.”

“No,” answered Strux, “it is enough to find the angle which each rod makes with the horizon, and we can then deduce the true inclination.”

Thus agreed, they proceeded with their observations, employing their spirit-level, and testing every result by the vernier. As Palander was about to inscribe the record, Strux requested that the level should be reversed, in order that by the division of the two registers a closer approximation to truth might be attained. This mode of double observation was continued throughout the operations.

Two important points were now obtained: the direction of the rod with regard to the base, and the angle which it made with the horizon. The results were inscribed in two registers, and signed by the members of the Commission.

There were still two further observations, no less important, to be made: the variation of the rod caused by differences of temperature, and the exact distance measured by it. The former was easily determined by comparing the difference in length between the platinum and copper rods. The microscope gave the variation of the platinum, and this was entered in the double register, to be afterwards reduced to 16° Centigrade.

They had now to observe the distance actually measured. To obtain this result, it was necessary to place the second rod at the end of the first, leaving a small space between them. When the second rod was adjusted with the same care as the former, it only remained to measure the interval between the two. A small tongue of platinum, known as a slider, was attached to the end of the platinum bar that was not covered by the copper, and this Colonel Everest slipped gently along until it touched the next rod. The slider was marked off into 10,000ths of a toise, and as a vernier with its microscope gave the 100,000ths, the space could be very accurately determined. The result was immediately registered.

Michael Zorn, considering that the covered platinum might be sooner affected by heat than the uncovered copper, suggested another precaution: accordingly they erected a small awning to protect the rod from the sun’s rays.

For more than a month were these minutiæ patiently carried on. As soon as four bars were adjusted, and the requisite observations complete, the last of the rods was carried to the front. It was impossible to measure more than 220 to 230 toises a day, and sometimes, when the wind was violent, operations were altogether suspended.

Every evening, about three quarters of an hour before it became too dark to read the verniers, they left off work, after taking various anxious precautions. They brought forward temporarily the rod “No. 1,” and marked the point of its termination. Here they made a hole, and drove in a stake with a leaden plate attached. They then replaced “No. 1” in its original position, after observing the inclination, the thermometric variation, and the direction. They noted the prolongation measured by rod “No. 4,” and then with a plumb-line touching the foremost end of rod “No. 1,” they made a mark on the leaden plate. They carefully traced through this point two lines at right angles, one signifying the base, the other the perpendicular. The plate was then covered with a wooden lid, the hole filled in, and the stake left buried till the morning. Thus, if any accident had happened to their apparatus during the night they would not be obliged to begin afresh. The next day, the plate was uncovered, and rod “No. 1” replaced in the same position as on the evening before, by means of the plumb-line, whose point ought to fall exactly on the point intersected by the two straight lines.

These operations were carried on for thirty-eight days along the plain, and every figure was registered doubly, and verified, compared, and approved, by each member of the Commission.

Few discussions arose between Colonel Everest and his Russian colleague; and if sometimes the smallest fraction of a toise gave occasion for some polite cavillings, they always yielded to the opinion of the majority. One question alone called for the intervention of Sir John Murray. This was about the length of the base. It was certain that the longer the base, the easier would be the measurement of the opposite angle. Colonel Everest proposed 6000 toises, nearly the same as the base measured at Melun; but Matthew Strux wished that it should be 10,000 toises, since the ground permitted. Colonel Everest, however, remained firm, and Strux seemed equally determined not to yield. After a few plausible arguments, personalities began: they were no longer two astronomers, but an Englishman and a Russian. Happily the debate was interrupted by some days of bad weather, which allowed their tempers to cool. It was subsequently decided by the majority that they should “split the difference,” and assign 8000 toises as the measurement of the base. The work was at length completed. Any error which occurred, in spite of their extreme precision, might be afterwards corrected by measuring a new base from the northern extremity of the meridian.

The base measured exactly 8037.75 toises, and upon this they were now to place their series of triangles.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TWENTY-FOURTH MERIDIAN.

The measurement of the base occupied thirty-eight days, from the 6th of March to the 13th of April, and without loss of time the chiefs decided to begin the triangles.

The first operation was to find the southern extremity of the arc, and the same being done at the northern extremity, the difference would give the number of degrees measured.

On the 14th they began to find their latitude. Emery and Zorn had already on the preceding nights taken the altitude of numerous stars, and their work was so accurate that the greatest error was not more than 2”, and even this was probably owing to the refraction caused by the changes in the atmospheric strata.

The latitude thus carefully sought was found to be 27.951789°.

They then found the longitude, and marked the spot on an excellent large scale map of South Africa, which showed the most recent geographical discoveries, and also the routes of travellers and naturalists, such as Livingstone, Anderson, Magyar, Baldwin, Burchell, and Lichtenstein. They then had to choose on what meridian they would measure their arc. The longer this arc is the less influence have the errors in the determination of latitude. The arc from Dunkirk to Formentera, on the meridian of Paris, was exactly 9°56’.

They had to choose their meridian with great circumspection. Any natural obstacles, such as mountains or large tracts of water, would seriously impede their operations; but happily, this part of Africa seemed well suited to their purpose, since the risings in the ground were inconsiderable, and the few watercourses easily traversed. Only dangers, and not obstacles, need check their labours.

This district is occupied by the Kalahari desert, a vast region extending from the Orange River to Lake Ngami, from lat. 20° S. to lat. 29°. In width, it extends from the Atlantic on the west as far as long. 25° E. Dr. Livingstone followed its extreme eastern boundary when he travelled as far as Lake Ngami and the Zambesi Falls. Properly speaking, it does not deserve the name of desert. It is not like the sands of Sahara, which are devoid of vegetation, and almost impassable on account of their aridity. The Kalahari produces many plants; its soil is covered with abundant grass; it contains dense groves and forests; animals abound, wild game and beasts of prey; and it is inhabited and traversed by sedentary and wandering tribes of Bushmen and Bakalaharis. But the true obstacle to its exploration is the dearth of water which prevails through the greater part of the year, when the rivers are dried up. However, at this time, just at the end of the rainy season, they could depend upon considerable reservoirs of stagnant water, preserved in pools and rivulets.

Such were the particulars given by Mokoum. He had often visited the Kalahari, sometimes on his own account as a hunter, and sometimes as a guide to some geographical exploration.

It had now to be actually considered whether the meridian should be taken from one of the extremities of the base, thus avoiding a series of auxiliary triangles.

After some discussion, it was decided that the southern extremity of the base would serve for a starting-point. It was the twenty-fourth meridian east from Greenwich, and extended over seven degrees of latitude, from 20° to 27°, without any apparent natural obstacle. Towards the north it certainly crossed the eastern end of Lake Ngami, but Arago had met with greater difficulties than this when he applied his geodesy to connect the coast of Spain with the Balearic Islands.

It was accordingly decided that meridian 24° should be measured, since, if it were afterwards prolonged into Europe, a northern arc of the same meridian might be measured on Russian territory.

The astronomers proceeded at once to choose a station which should form the vertex of the first triangle.

This was a solitary tree to the right of the meridian, standing on a mound about ten miles away. It was distinctly visible from each extremity of the base, and its slender top facilitated the taking of its bearings. The angle made by the tree with the south-east extremity of the base was first observed, with the help of one of Borda's repeating circles.

The two telescopes were adjusted so that their axes were exactly in the plane of the circle, in such a way that their position represented the angular distance between the tree and the north-west extremity of the base. This admirably constructed instrument corrects nearly all the errors of observation, and indeed, if the repetitions are numerous, the errors tend to counterbalance and correct each other.

The Commission had four repeating circles: two for measuring angles, and two more with vertical circles for obtaining zenith distances, and so calculating in a single night, to the smallest fraction of a second, the latitude of any station. And indeed, in this important survey, it was not only necessary to obtain the value of the angles of the triangles, but also to measure the meridian altitude of the stars, that being equal to the latitude of each station.

The work began on the 14th of April, Colonel Everest, Zorn, and Palander observed the angle at the south-east extremity of the base, while Strux, Emery, and Sir John Murray observed that at the north-west extremity.

Meantime the camp was raised, and the bullocks harnessed, and Mokoum conducted the caravan to the first station as a halting-place. Two caravans, with their drivers, accompanied the observers, to carry the instruments.

The weather was bright, but had the atmosphere been unfavourable by day, the observations would have been made by night by means of reverberators or electric lamps.

On the first day, the two angles were measured, and the result inscribed on the double register; and the astronomers all met in the evening at the camp which had been formed round the tree which had served for their point of sight.

It was an immense baobab, more than 80 feet in circumference. Its syenite-coloured bark gave it a peculiar appearance. The whole caravan found room beneath its wide branches, which were inhabited by crowds of squirrels, which greedily devoured the white pulp of its egg-shaped fruit.

Supper was prepared for the Europeans by the ship’s cook. There was no lack of venison, for the hunters had scoured the neighbourhood, and killed some antelopes; and soon the air was filled with an odour of broiled meat, which still further aroused the appetite of the hungry savants.

After the comforting repast, the astronomers retired to their respective waggons, whilst Mokoum placed sentinels round the camp. Large fires of the dead branches of the baobab burnt throughout the night, and kept at a respectful distance the tawny beasts, who were attracted by the odour of the recking flesh.

After two hours’ sleep, however, Emery and Zorn got up, their observations not yet finished. They must find the altitudes of some stars to determine the latitude of the station, and both, regardless of the day’s fatigues, stood at their telescopes, and rigorously determined the change of zenith caused by the removal from the first station to the second, while the laugh of the hyena and the roar of the lion resounded over the sombre plain.

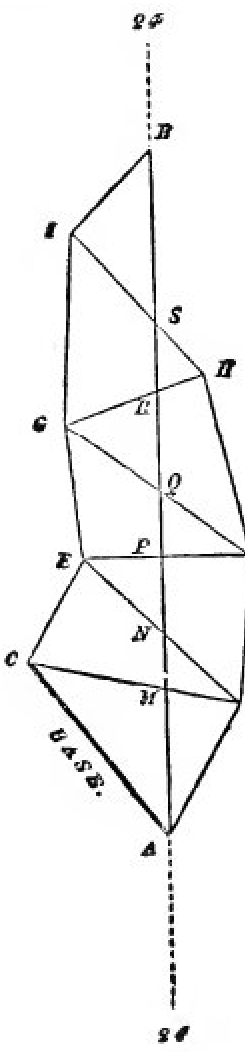
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CHAPTER IX.

THE KRAAL.

The next day operations were continued. The angle made by the baobab with the extremities of the base was measured, and the first triangle solved. Two more stations were chosen to the right and left of the meridian; one formed by a distinct mound, six miles away; the other, marked out by a post about seven miles distant.

The triangulation went on uninterruptedly for a month, and by the 15th of May the observers had advanced northwards 1°, having formed seven triangles. During this first series of operations, the Colonel and Strux were rarely together. The division of labour separated them, and the circumstance of their daily work being several miles apart was a guarantee against any dispute. Each evening they returned to their several abodes, and although at intervals discussions arose about the choice of stations, there was no serious altercation. Hence Zorn and his friend were in hopes that the survey would proceed without any open rupture.

After advancing 1° from the south, the observers found themselves in the same parallel with Lattakoo, from which they were distant 35 miles to the west.

Here a large kraal had lately been formed, and as it was a marked halting-place, Sir John Murray proposed that they should stay for several days. Zorn and Emery could take advantage of the rest, to take the altitude of the sun; and Palander would employ himself in reducing the measurements made at different points of sight to the uniform level of the sea. Sir John himself wanted to be free from scientific observations, that he might divert himself with his gun among the fauna of the country. A kraal, as it is termed by the natives of South Africa, is a kind of moving village, wandering from one pasturage to another. It is an enclosure composed ordinarily of about thirty habitations, and containing several hundred inhabitants. The kraal now reached was formed by a group of more than sixty huts, enclosed for protection from wild animals by a palisade of prickly aloes, and situated on the banks of a small affluent of the Kuruman. The huts, made of waterproof rush mats fastened to wooden beams, were like low hives. The doorway, protected by a skin, was so small that it could only be entered on hands and knees, and from this, the only aperture, issued such dense wreaths of smoke as would make existence in these abodes problematical to any but a Bochjesman or a Hottentot.

The whole population was roused by the arrival of the caravan. The dogs, of which there was one for the protection of each cabin, barked furiously, and about 200 warriors, armed with assagais, knives, and clubs, and protected by their leathern shields, marched forward.

A few words from Mokoum to one of the chiefs soon dispelled all hostile feeling, and the caravan obtained permission to encamp on the very banks of the stream. The Bochjesmen did not even refuse to share the pastures, which extended for miles away.

Mokoum having first given orders for the waggons to be placed in a circle as usual, mounted his zebra, and set off in company with Sir John Murray, who rode his accustomed horse. The hunters took their dogs and rifles, showing their intention of attacking the wild beasts, and went towards the woods.

“I hope, Mokoum,” said Sir John, “that you are going to keep the promise you made at the Morgheda Falls, that you would bring me into the best sporting country in the world. But understand, I have not come here for hares or foxes; I can get them at home. Before another hour — ”

“Hour!” replied the bushman. “You are rather too fast. A little patience, please. For myself, I am never patient except when hunting, and then I make amends for all my impatience at other times. Don’t you know, Sir John, that the chase of large beasts is quite a science. Here you must wait and watch. You must not step or even look too quickly. For my part, I have laid in wait for days together for a buffalo or gemsbok, and if I have had success at last, I have not considered my trouble in vain.”

“Very good,” replied Sir John, “I can show you as much patience as you can wish; but mind, the halt only lasts for three or four days, and we must lose no time.”

“There is something in that,” said the bushman, so calmly that Emery would not have recognized his companion of the Orange River; “we will just kill that which comes first. Sir John, antelope or deer, gnu or gazelle, any thing must do for hunters in a hurry.”

“Antelope or gazelle!” cried Sir John, “why, what more could I ask, my good fellow?”

“As long as your honour is satisfied I have nothing more to say,” said the bushman, somewhat ironically. “I thought that you would not let me off with any thing less than a rhinoceros or two, or at least an elephant”

“Any thing and any where,” said Sir John, “we only waste time in talking.”

The horses were put to a hand-gallop, and the hunters advanced quickly towards the forest. The plain rose with a gentle slope towards the north-east. It was dotted here and there with shrubs in full bloom, from which issued a viscous resin, transparent and odorous, of which the colonists make a balm for wounds. In picturesque groups rose the “nwanas,” a kind of sycamore fig, whose trunks, leafless to the height of 30 or 40 feet, supported a spreading parasol of verdure. Among the foliage chattered swarms of screaming parrots, eagerly pecking the sour figs. Farther on were mimosas with their yellow clusters, “silver trees,” shaking their silky tufts, and aloes with spikes so red that they might pass for coral plants torn from the depths of the sea. The ground, enamelled with amaryllis with their bluish foliage, was smooth and easy for the horses, and in less than an hour after leaving the kraal, the sportsmen reached the wood. For several miles extended a forest of acacias, the entangled branches scarcely allowing a ray of sunlight to penetrate to the ground below, which was encumbered by brambles and long grass.

The hunters had little difficulty, however, in urging on both horse and zebra, in spite of every obstacle, resting at the recurring glades to examine the thickets around them. The first day was not very favourable. In vain was the forest scoured; not a single beast stirred, and Sir John’s thoughts turned more than once to the plains of Scotland, where a shot is rarely long delayed. Mokoum evinced neither surprise nor vexation; to him it was not a hunt, but merely a rush across the forest.

Towards six in the evening they had to think about returning. Sir John was more vexed than he would allow. Rather than that he, the renowned hunter, should return empty-handed, he resolved to shoot whatever first came within range, and fortune seemed to favour him.

They were not more than three miles from the kraal when a hare (of the species called “lepus rupestris”) darted from a bush about 150 paces in front of them. Sir John did not hesitate a moment, and sent his explosive ball after the poor little animal.

The bushman gave a cry of indignation at such a ball being employed for such an aim; but the Englishman, eager for his prey, galloped to the spot where the victim fell. In vain! the only vestiges of the hare were the bloody morsels on the ground. Whilst the dogs rummaged in the brushwood, Sir John looked keenly about, and cried, —

“I am sure I hit it!”

“Rather too well,” replied the bushman quietly.

And sure enough, the hare had been blown into countless fragments.

Sir John, greatly mortified, remounted his horse, and returned to camp, without uttering another word.

The next day the bushman waited for Sir John Murray to propose another expedition; but the Englishman applied himself for a time to his scientific instruments. For pastime he watched the occupants of the kraal as they practised with their bows, or played on the “gorah,” an instrument composed of a piece of catgut stretched on a bow, and kept in vibration by blowing through an ostrich feather. He remarked that the women, while occupied in their domestic duties, smoked “matokouané” that is, the unwholesome hemp-plant, a practice indulged in by most of the natives. According to some travellers, this inhaling of hemp increases physical strength to the damage of mental energy; and, indeed, many of the Bochjesmen appeared stupefied from its effects.

At dawn, however, the following day, Sir John Murray was aroused by the appearance of Mokoum, who said, “I think, sir, we may be fortunate enough to-day to find something better than a hare.”

Sir John, not heeding the satire, declared himself ready; and the two hunters, accordingly, were off betimes. This time, Sir John, instead of his formidable rifle, carried a simple gun of Goldwin’s, as being a more suitable weapon. True, there was a chance of meeting some prowling beast from the forest; but he had the hare on his mind, and would sooner use small shot against a lion than repeat an incident unprecedented in the annals of sport.

Fortune, to-day, was more favourable to the hunters. They brought down a couple of harrisbucks, a rare kind of black antelope, very difficult to shoot. These were charming animals, four feet high, with long diverging horns shaped like scimitars. The tips of their noses were narrow; they had black hoofs, close soft hair, and pointed ears. Their face and belly, white as snow, contrasted well with their black back, over which fell a wavy mane. Hunters may well be proud of such shots, for the harrisbuck has always been the *desideratum* of the Delegorgues, Vahlbergs. Cummings, and Baldwins, and it is one of the finest specimens of the southern fauna.

But what made the Englishman’s heart beat fastest, was Mokoum’s showing him certain marks on the edge of the thick underwood, not far from a deep pool, surrounded by giant euphorbias, and whose surface was dotted with sky-blue water-lilies.

“Come and lie in ambush here to-morrow, sir,” said Mokoum, “and this time you may bring your rifle. Look at these fresh footprints.”

“What are they? Can they be an elephant’s?” asked Sir John.

“Yes,” replied Mokoum, “and, unless I am mistaken, of a male full-grown.”

Eagerly, then, was the engagement made for the following day. Sir John’s horse, as they returned, carried the harrisbucks. These fine creatures, so rarely captured, excited the admiration of the whole caravan, and all congratulated Sir John, except perhaps Matthew Strux, who knew little of animals, except the Great Bear, the Centaur, Pegasus, and other celestial fauna.

At four o’clock the next morning, the hunters, attended by their dogs, were already hidden in the underwood. They had discovered by new footmarks that the elephants came in a troop to drink at the pool. Their grooved rifles carried explosive bullets. Silent and still, they watched for about half-an-hour, when they observed a movement in the grove, about fifty paces from the pool. Sir John seized his gun, but the bushman made him a sign to restrain his impatience. Soon large shadows appeared: the thickets rustled under the violence of some pressure; the brushwood snapped and crackled, and the sound of a loud breathing was perceptible through the branches. It was the herd of elephants. Half-a-dozen gigantic creatures, almost as large as those of India, advanced slowly towards the pool. The increasing daylight allowed Sir John, struck with admiration, to notice especially a male of enormous size. His colossal proportions appeared in the partial light even greater than they really were. While his trunk was extended above the underwood, with his curved tusks he struck the great stems, which groaned under the shock. The bushman leant down close to Sir John’s ear, and whispered, —

“Will he suit you?”

Sir John made a sign of affirmation.

“Then,” said Mokoum, “we will separate him from the rest.”

At this instant, the elephants reached the edge of the pool, and their spongy feet sank into the soft mud. They pumped up the water with their trunks, and poured it into their throats with a loud gurgling. The great male looked uneasily about him, and seemed to scent some approaching danger.

Suddenly the bushman gave a peculiar cry. The dogs, barking furiously, darted from concealment, and rushed to-wards the herd. At the same moment, Mokoum, charging his companion to remain where he was, went off on his zebra to intercept the elephant’s retreat. The animal made no attempt to take flight, and Sir John, with his finger on the lock of his rifle, watched him closely. The brute beat the trees, and lashed his tail furiously, showing signs not of uneasiness, but of anger. Now, for the first time, catching sight of his enemy, he rushed upon him at once.

Sir John was about sixty paces distant; and waiting till the elephant came within forty paces, he aimed at his flank and fired. But a movement of the horse made his aim unsteady, and the ball only entered the soft flesh without meeting any obstacle sufficient to make it explode.

The enraged beast increased its pace, which was rather a rapid walk than a run, and would have soon distanced the horse. Sir John’s horse reared, and rushed from the thicket, his master unable to hold him in. The elephant followed, ears erect, and bellowing like a trumpet. Sir John, thus carried away, held on to his horse tightly with his knees, and endeavoured to slip a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle. Still the elephant gained on him. They were soon beyond the wood, and out on the plain. Sir John vigorously used his spurs, and the two dogs rushed panting in the rear. The elephant was not two lengths behind. Sir John could hear the hissing of his trunk, and almost feel his strong breath. Every moment he expected to be dragged from his saddle by the living lasso. All at once the horse sunk on his hind-quarters, struck by the elephant on his haunches. He neighed, and sprung to one side, thus saving Sir John. The elephant, unable to check his course, passed on, and sweeping the ground with his trunk, caught up one of the dogs, and shook it in the air with tremendous violence. No resource remained except to re-enter the wood, and the horse's instinct carried him thither. The elephant continued to give chase, brandishing the unlucky dog, whose head he smashed against a sycamore as he rushed into the forest. The horse darted into a dense thicket entangled with prickly creepers, and stopped.

Sir John, torn and bleeding, but not for an instant discomposed, turned round, and shouldering his rifle, took aim at the elephant close to the shoulder, through the net-work of creepers. The ball exploded as it struck the bone. The animal staggered, and almost at the same moment a second shot from the edge of the wood struck his left flank. He fell on his knees near a little pool, half-hidden in the grass. There, pumping up the water with his trunk, he began to wash his wounds, uttering plaintive cries. The bushman now appeared, shouting, “He is ours, he is ours!”

And in truth the animal was mortally wounded. He groaned piteously, and breathed hard. His tail moved feebly, and his trunk, fed from the pool of his blood, poured back a crimson stream on the surrounding brushwood. Gradually failed his strength, and the great beast was dead.

Sir John Murray now emerged from the grove. He was half naked, little of his hunting costume remaining but rags. But he felt as though he could have given his very skin for this triumph.

“A glorious fellow!” he exclaimed, as he examined the carcase; “but rather too big to carry home.”

“True, sir,” answered Mokoum; “we will cut him up on the spot, and carry off the choice parts. Look at his magnificent tusks! Twenty-five pounds a-piece at least! And ivory at five shillings a-pound will mount up.”

Thus talking, the hunter proceeded to cut up the animal. He took off the tusks with his hatchet, and contented himself with the feet and trunk, as choice morsels with which to regale the members of the Commission. This operation took some time, and he and his companion did not get back to camp before midday. The bushman had the elephant’s feet cooked according to the African method. that is, by burying them in a hole previously heated, like an oven, with hot coals.

The delicacy was fully appreciated by all, not excepting the phlegmatic Palander, and Sir John Murray received a hearty round of compliments.

CHAPTER X.

THE RAPID.

During their sojourn by the kraal, Colonel Everest and Matthew Strux had been absolutely strangers. On the eve of their departure for their divided labours, they had ceremoniously taken leave one of the other, and had not since met.

The caravan continued its northward route, and the weather being favourable, during the next ten days two fresh triangles were measured. The vast verdant wilderness was intersected by streams flowing between rows of the willow-like “karree-hout,” from which the Bochjesmen make their bows. Large tracts of desert land occurred, where every trace of moisture disappeared, leaving the soil utterly bare but for the cropping-up occasionally of those mucilaginous plants which no aridity can kill. For miles there was no natural object that could be used for a station, and consequently the astronomers were obliged to employ natural objects for their point of sight. This caused considerable loss of time, but was not attended with much real difficulty. The crew of the “Queen and Czar” were employed in this part of the work, and performed their task well and rapidly; but the same jealousy that divided their chiefs crept in sometimes among the seamen. Zorn and Emery did all they could to neutralize any unpleasantness, but the discussions sometimes took a serious character. The Colonel and Strux continually interfered in behalf of their countrymen, whether they were right or wrong, but they only succeeded in making matters worse. After a while Zorn and Emery were the only members of the party who had preserved a perfect concord. Even Sir John Murray and Nicholas Palander (generally absorbed as they were, the one in his calculations, the other in his hunting), began to join the fray.

One day the dispute went so far that Strux said to the Colonel, “You must please to moderate your tone with astronomers from Poulkowa: remember it was their telescope that showed that the disc of Uranus is circular.”

“Yes,” replied the Colonel; “but ours at Cambridge enabled us to classify the nebula of Andromeda.”

The irritation was evident, and at times seemed to imperil the fate of the triangulation. Hitherto the discussions had had no injurious effect, but perhaps rather served to keep every operation more scrupulously exact.

On the 30th the weather suddenly changed. In any other region a storm and torrents of rain might have been expected: angry-looking clouds covered the sky, and lightning, unaccompanied by thunder, gleamed through the mass of vapour. But condensation did not ensue — not a drop of rain fell on to the thirsty soil. The sky remained overcast for some days, and the fog rendered the points of sight invisible at the distance of a mile. The astronomers, however, would not lose time, and determined to set up lighted signals and work at night. The bushman prudently advised caution, lest the electric lights should attract the wild beasts too closely to their quarters; and in fact, during the night, the yelp of the jackal and the hoarse laugh of the hyena, like that of a drunken negro, could plainly be heard.

In the midst of this clamour, in which the roar of a lion could sometimes be distinguished, the astronomers felt rather distracted, and the measurements were taken at least less rapidly, if not less accurately. To take zenith distances while gleaming eyes might be gazing at them through the darkness, required imperturbable composure and the utmost *sang-froid*. But these qualities were not wanting in the members of the Commission, and after a few days they regained their presence of mind, and worked away in the midst of the beasts as calmly as if they were in their own observatories. Armed hunters attended them at every station, and no inconsiderable number of hyenas fell by their balls. Sir Joha thought this way of surveying delightful, and whilst his eye was at his telescope his hand was on his gun, and more than once he made a shot in the interval between two observations.

Nothing occurred to check the steady progress of the survey, so that the astronomers hoped before the end of June to measure a second degree of the meridian.

On the 17th they found that their path was crossed by an affluent of the Kuruman. The Europeans could easily take their instruments across in their india-rubber canoe; but Mokoum would have to take the caravan to a ford which he remembered some miles below. The river was about half-a-mile wide, and its rapid current, broken here and there by rocks and stems of trees embedded in the mud, offered considerable danger to any light craft. Matthew Strux did not fail to represent this, but finding that his companions did not recoil from the attempt he gave way.

Nicholas Palander alone was to accompany the caravan in its *détour*. He was too much absorbed in his calculations to give any thought to danger; but his presence was not indispensable to his companions, and the boat would only hold a limited number of passengers. Accordingly, he gave up his place to an Englishman of the crew of the “Queen and Czar,” who would be more useful under the circumstances.

After making an arrangement to meet to the north of the rapid, the caravan disappeared down the left bank of the stream, leaving Colonel Everest, Strux, Emery, Zorn, Sir John, two sailors, and a Bochjesman, who was the pioneer of the caravan, and had been recommended by Mokoum as having much experience in African rapids.

“A pretty river,” observed Zorn to his friend, as the sailors were preparing the boat.

“Very so, but hard to cross,” answered Emery. “These rapids have not long to live, and therefore enjoy life. With a few weeks of this dry season there will hardly remain enough of this swollen torrent to water a caravan. It is soon exhausted; such is the law of nature, moral and physical. But we must not waste time in moralizing. See, the boat is equipped, and I am all anxiety to see her performances.”

In a few minutes the boat was launched beside a sloping bank of red granite. Here, sheltered by a projecting rock, the water quietly bathed the reeds and creepers. The instruments and provisions were put in the boat, and the passengers seated themselves so as not to interfere with the action of the oars. The Bochjesman took the helm; he spoke but a few words of English, and advised the travellers to keep a profound silence while they were crossing. The boat soon felt the influence of the current. The sailors carefully obeyed every order of the Bochjesman. Sometimes they had to raise their oars to avoid some half-emerged stump; sometimes to row hard across a whirlpool.

When the current became too strong they could only guide the light boat as it drifted with the stream. The native, tiller in hand, sat watchful and motionless, prepared for every danger. The Europeans were half uneasy at their novel situation; they seemed carried away by an irresistible force. The Colonel and Strux gazed at each other without a word; Sir John, with his rifle between his knees, watched the numerous birds that skimmed the water; and the two younger astronomers gazed with admiration at the banks, past which they flew with dizzy speed. The light boat soon reached the true rapid, which it was necessary to cross obliquely. At a word from the Bochjesman, the sailors put forth their strength; but, despite all their efforts, they were carried down parallel to the banks. The tiller and oars had no longer any effect, and the situation became really perilous; a rock or stump of a tree would inevitably have overturned the boat.

In spite of the manifest peril, no one uttered a word.

The Bochjesman half rose, and watched the direction which he could not control. Two hundred yards distant rose an islet of stones and trees, which it was impossible to avoid. In a few seconds the boat apparently must be lost; but the shock came with less violence than had seemed inevitable.

The boat lurched and shipped a little water, but the passengers kept their places. They were astonished to observe that what they had presumed to be rock had moved, and was plunging about in the rush of the waters.

It was an immense hippopotamus, ten feet long, which had been carried by the current against the islet, and dared not venture out again into the rapid. Feeling the shock, he raised and shook his head, looking about him with his little dull eyes, and with his mouth wide open, showing his great canine teeth. He rushed furiously on the boat, which he threatened to bite to pieces.

But Sir John Murray’s presence of mind did not forsake him. Quietly shouldering his rifle, he fired at the animal near the ear. The hippopotamus did not quit his hold, but shook the boat as a dog would a hare. A second shot was soon lodged in his head. The blow was mortal. After pushing the boat with a last effort off the islet, the fleshy mass sank in the deep water.

Before the dismayed voyagers could collect their thoughts, they were whirled obliquely into the rapid. A hundred yards below, a sharp bend in the river broke the current; thither was the boat carried, and was arrested by a violent shock. Safe and sound the whole party leapt to the bank. They were about two miles below the spot where they had embarked.

CHAPTER XI.

A MISSING COMPANION.

In continuing the survey the astronomers had to be on their guard against the serpents that infested the region, venomous mambas, ten to twelve feet long, whose bite would have been fatal.

Four days after the passage of the rapid, the observers found themselves in a wooded country. The trees, however, were not so high as to interfere with their labours, and at all points rose eminences which afforded excellent sites for the posts and electric lamps. The district, lying considerably lower than the rest of the plain, was moist and fertile. Emery noticed thousands of Hottentot fig-trees, whose sour fruit is much relished by the Bochjesmen. From the ground arose a soft odour from the “kucumakranti,” a yellow fruit two or three inches long, growing from bulbous roots like the colchicum, and eagerly devoured by the native children. Here, too, in this more watered country, reappeared the fields of colocynths and borders of the mint so successfully naturalized in England. Notwithstanding its fertility, the country appeared little frequented by the wandering tribes, and not a kraal or a camp-fire was to be seen; yet water was abundant, forming some considerable streams and lagoons.

The astronomers halted to await the caravan. The time fixed by Mokoum had just expired, and if he had reckoned well, he would join them to-day. The day, however, passed on, and no Bochjesman appeared. Sir John conjectured that the hunter had probably been obliged to ford farther south than he had expected, since the river was unusually swollen. Another day passed and the caravan had not appeared. The Colonel became uneasy; he could not go on, and the delay might affect the success of the operations.

Matthew Strux said that it had always been his wish to accompany the caravan, and that if his advice had been followed they would not have found themselves in this predicament; but he would not admit that the responsibility rested on the Russians. Colonel Everest began to protest against these insinuations, but Sir John interposed, saying that what was done could not be undone, and that all the recriminations in the world would make no difference.

It was then decided that if the caravan did not appear on the following day, Emery and Zorn, under the guidance of the Bochjesman, should start to ascertain the reason of the delay. For the rest of the day the rivals kept apart, and Sir John passed his time in beating the surrounding woods. He failed in finding any game, but from a naturalist's point of view he ought to have been satisfied, since he brought down two fine specimens of African birds. One was a kind of partridge, a francolin, thirteen inches long, with short legs, dark grey back, red beak and claws, and elegant wings, shaded with brown. The other bird, with a red throat and white tail, was a species of falcon. The Bochjesman pioneer cleverly took off the skins, in order that they should be preserved entire.

The next day was half over, and the two young men were just about to start on their search, when a distant bark arrested them. Soon Mokoum, on his zebra, emerged at full speed from the thicket of aloes on the left, and advanced towards the camp.

“Welcome,” cried Sir John joyfully, “we had almost given you up, and apart from you I should be inconsolable. I am only successful when you are with me. We will celebrate your return in a glass of usquebaugh.”

Mokoum made no answer, but anxiously scanned and counted the Europeans. Colonel Everest perceived his perplexity, and as he was dismounting, said,

“For whom are you looking, Mokoum?”

“For Mr. Palander,” replied the bushman.

“Is he not with you?” said the Colonel,

“Not now,” answered Mokoum. “I thought I should find him with you. He is lost!”

At these words, Matthew Strux stepped forward.

“Lost!” he cried. “He was confided to your care. You are responsible for his safety, and it is not. enough to say he is lost.”

Mokoum’s face flushed, and he answered impatiently, —

“Why should you expect me to take care of one who can’t take care of himself? Why blame me? If Mr. Palander is lost, it is by his own folly. Twenty times I have found him absorbed in his figures, and have brought him back to the caravan. But the evening before last he disappeared, and I have not seen him since. Perhaps if you are so clever, you can spy him out with your telescope.”

The bushman would doubtless have become more irritable still, if Sir John had not pacified him. Matthew Strux had not been able to get in a word, but now turned round unexpectedly to the Colonel, saying, —

“I shall not abandon my countryman. I suppose that if Sir John Murray or Mr. Emery were lost, you would suspend operations; and I don’t see why you should do less for a Russian than for an Englishman.”

“Mr. Strux,” cried the Colonel, folding his arms, and fixing his eyes on his adversary, “do you wish to insult me? Why should you suppose that we will not seek this blundering calculator?”

“Sir!” said Strux.

“Yes, blundering,” repeated the Colonel. “And to return to what you said, I maintain that any embarrassment to the progress of the operations from this circumstance would be due to the Russians alone.”

“Colonel,” cried Strux, with gleaming eyes, “your words are hasty.”

“My words, on the contrary, are well weighed. Let it be understood that operations are suspended until Mr. Palander is found. Are you ready to start?”

“I was ready before you spoke a word,” answered Strux sharply.

The caravan having now arrived, the disputants each went to his waggon. On the way Sir John could not help saying, —

“It is lucky that the stupid fellow has not carried off the double register.”

“Just what I was thinking,” said the Colonel.

The Englishmen proceeded more strictly to interrogate Mokoum. He told them that Palander had been missing for two days, and had last been seen alongside of the caravan about twelve miles from the encampment; that after missing him, he at once set out to seek for him, but being unsuccessful in all his search, had concluded that he must have made his way to his companions.

Mokoum proposed that they should now explore the woods to the north-east, adding that they must not lose an hour if they wanted to find him alive, knowing that no one could wander with impunity for two days in a country infested like that with wild beasts. Where any one else could find a subsistence, Palander, ever engrossed by his figures, would inevitably die of starvation. At one o’clock, guided by the hunter, they mounted and left the camp. The grotesque attitudes of Strux, as he clung uneasily to his steed, caused considerable diversion to his companions, who, however, were polite enough to pass no remark.

Before leaving the camp, Mokoum asked the pioneer to lend him his keen-scented dog. The sagacious animal, after scenting a hat belonging to Palander, darted off in a north-easterly direction, whilst his master urged him on by a peculiar whistle. The little troop followed, and soon disappeared in the underwood.

All the day the Colonel and his companions followed the dog, who seemed instinctively to know what was required of him. They shouted, they fired their guns, but night came on when they had scoured the woods for five miles round, and they were at length obliged to rest until the following day. They spent the night in a grove, before which the bushman had prudently kindled a wood fire. Some wild howls were heard, by no means reassuring. Hours passed in arguing about Palander, and discussing plans for his assistance. The English showed as much devotion as Strux could desire; and it was decided that all work should be adjourned till the Russian was found, alive or dead.

After a weary night the day dawned. The horses were saddled, and the little troop again followed the dog. Towards the north-east they arrived at a district almost swampy in its character. The small water-courses increased in number, but they were easily forded, care being taken to avoid the crocodiles, of which Sir John, for the first time in his life, now saw some specimens. The bushman would not permit that time should be wasted in any attack upon the reptiles, and restrained Sir John, who was always on the *qui-vive* to discharge a ball. Whenever a crocodile, snapping its prey with its formidable jaw, put its head out of water, the horses set off at a gallop to escape.

The troop of riders went on over woods, plains, and marshes, noting the most insignificant tokens: here a broken bough; there a freshly-trodden tuft of grass; or farther on some inexplicable mark; but no trace of Palander.

When they had advanced ten miles north of the last encampment, and were about to turn south-east, the dog suddenly gave signs of agitation. He barked, and in an excited way wagged his tail. Sniffing the dry grass, he ran on a few steps, and returned to the same spot.

“The dog scents something,” exclaimed the bushman.

“It seems,” said Sir John, “he is on a right track. Listen to his yelping: he seems to be talking to himself. He will be an invaluable creature if he scents out Palander.”

Strux did not quite relish the way in which his countryman was treated as a head of game; but the important thing now was to find him, and they all waited to follow the dog, as soon as he should be sure of the scent.

Very soon the animal, with a loud yelp, bounded over the thicket and disappeared. The horses could not follow through the dense forest, but were obliged to take a circuitous path. The dog was certainly on the right track now, the only question was whether Palander was alive or dead.

In a few minutes the yelping ceased, and the bushman and Sir John, who were in advance, were becoming uneasy, when suddenly the barking began again outside the forest, about half a mile away. The horses were spurred in that direction, and soon reached the confines of the marsh. The dog could distinctly be heard, but, on account of the lofty reeds, could not be seen. The riders dismounted, and tied their horses to a tree. With difficulty they made their way through the reeds, and reached a large space covered with water and aquatic plants. In the lowest part lay the brown waters of a lagoon half a mile square. The dog stopped at the muddy edge, and barked furiously.

“There he is!” cried Mokoum.

And sure enough, on a stump at the extremity of a sort of peninsula, sat Nicholas Palander, pencil in hand, and a note-book on his knees, wrapt in calculations. His friends could not suppress a cry. About twenty paces off a number of crocodiles, quite unknown to him, lay watching, and evidently designing an attack.

“Make haste,” said Mokoum, in a low voice; “I don’t understand why these animals don’t rush on him.”

“They are waiting till he is gamey,” said Sir John, alluding to the idea common among the natives that these reptiles never touch fresh meat.

The bushman and Sir John, telling their companions to wait for them, passed round the lagoon, and reached the narrow isthmus by which alone they could get near Palander. They had not gone two hundred steps, when the crocodiles, leaving the water, made straight towards their prey. Palander saw nothing, but went on writing.

“Be quick and calm,” whispered Mokoum, “or all is lost.”

Both, kneeling down, aimed at the nearest reptiles, and fired. Two monsters rolled into the water with broken backs, and the rest simultaneously disappeared beneath the surface.

At the sound of the guns Palander raised his head. He recognized his companions, and ran towards them waving his note-book, and like the philosopher of old exclaiming “Eureka!” he cried, “I have found it!”

“What have you found?” asked Sir John.

“An error in the last decimal of a logarithm of James Wolston’s.”

It was a fact. The worthy man had discovered the error, and had secured a right to the prize offered by Wolston’s editor. For four days had the astronomer wandered in solitude. Truly Ampère, with his unrivalled gift of abstraction, could not have done better!

CHAPTER XII.

A STATION TO SIR JOHN’S LIKING.

So the Russian mathematician was found! When they asked him how he had passed those four days, he could not tell; he thought the whole story of the crocodiles was a joke, and did not believe it. He had not been hungry; he had lived upon figures. Matthew Strux would not reproach his countryman before his colleagues, but there was every reason to believe that in private he gave him a severe reprimand.

The geodetic operations were now resumed, and went on as usual till the 28th of June, when they had measured the base of the 15th triangle, which would conclude the second and commence the third degree of the meridian.

Here a physical difficulty arose. The country was so thickly covered with underwood, that although the artificial signals could be erected, they could not be discerned at any distance. One station was recognized as available for an electric lamp. This was a mountain 1200 feet high, about thirty miles to the north-west. The choice of this would make the sides of this triangle considerably longer than any of the former, but it was at length determined to adopt it. Colonel Everest, Emery, Zorn, three sailors, and two Bochjesmen, were appointed to establish the lighted signal, the distance being too great to work otherwise than at night.

The little troop, accompanied by mules laden with the instruments and provisions, set off in the morning. The Colonel did not expect to reach the base of the mountain till the following day, and however few might be the difficulties of the ascent, the observers in the camp would not see the lighted signal till the night of the 29th or 30th.

In the interval of waiting, Strux and Palander went to their usual occupations, while Sir John and the bushman shot antelopes. They found opportunity of hunting a giraffe, which is considered fine sport. Coming across a herd of twenty, but so wild that they could not approach within 500 yards, they succeeded in detaching a female from the herd. The animal set off at first at a slow trot, allowing the horsemen to gain upon her; but when she found them near, she twisted her tail, and started at full speed. The hunters followed for about two miles, when a ball from Sir John's rifle threw her on to her side, and made her an easy victim.

In the course of the next night the two Russians took some altitudes of the stars, which enabled them to determine the latitude of the encampment. The following night was clear and dry, without moon and stars, and the observers impatiently watched for the appearance of the electric light. Strux, Palander, and Sir John relieved guard at the telescope, but no light appeared.

They concluded that the ascent of the mountain had offered serious difficulty, and again postponed their observations till the next night.

Great, however, was their surprise, when, about two o'clock in the afternoon, Colonel Everest and his companions suddenly reappeared in camp.

In answer to inquiries whether he had found the mountain inaccessible. Colonel Everest replied that although in itself the mountain was entirely accessible, it was so guarded that they had found it necessary to come back for reinforcements.

"Do you mean," said Sir John, "that the natives were assembled in force?"

“Yes, natives with four paws and black manes, who have eaten up one of our horses.”

The Colonel went on to say that the mountain was only to be approached by a spur on the south-west side. In the narrow defile leading to the spur a troop of lions had taken up their abode. These he had endeavoured to dislodge, but, insufficiently armed, he was compelled to beat a retreat, after losing one of his horses by a single blow of a lion’s paw.

The recital kindled the interest of Sir John and the bushman. Clearly it was a station worth conquering, and an expedition was at once arranged. All the Europeans, without exception, were eager to join, but it was necessary that some should remain at the camp to measure the angles at the base of the triangle, therefore the Colonel resolved to stay behind with Strux and Palander, while Sir John, Emery, and Zorn (to whose entreaties their chiefs had been obliged to yield), Mokoum, and three natives on whose courage he could rely, made up the party for the attack.

They started at four in the afternoon, and by nine were within two miles of the mountain. Here they dismounted, and made their arrangements for the night. No fire was kindled, Mokoum being unwilling to provoke a nocturnal attack from the animals, which he wished to meet by daylight.

Throughout the night the roar of the lions could almost incessantly be heard. Not one of the hunters slept for so much as an hour, and Mokoum took advantage of their wakefulness to give them some advice from his own experience.

“From what Colonel Everest tells us,” he said calmly, “these are black-maned lions, the fiercest and most dangerous species of any. They leap for a distance of sixteen to twenty paces, and I should advise you to avoid their first bound. Should the first fail, they rarely take a second. We will attack them as they re-enter their den at daybreak; they are always less fierce when they are well filled. But they will defend themselves well, for here, in this uninhabited district, they are unusually ferocious. Measure your distance well before you fire; let the animal approach, and take a sure aim near the shoulder. We must leave our horses behind; the sight of a lion terrifies them, and therefore the safety of their rider is imperilled. We must fight on foot, and I rely on your calmness.”

All listened with silent attention: Mokoum was now the patient hunter. Although the lion seldom attacks a man without provocation, yet his fury, when once aroused, is terrible; and therefore the bushman enjoined composure on his companions, especially on Sir John, who was often carried away by his boldness.

“Shoot at a lion,” said Mokoum, “as calmly as if you were shooting a partridge.”

At four o’clock, only a few red streaks being visible in the far east, the hunters tied up their horses securely and left their halting-place.

“Examine your guns, and be careful that your cartridges are in good trim,” continued Mokoum, to those who carried rifles; for the three natives were armed otherwise, satisfied with their bows of aloe, which already had rendered them good service.

The party, in a compact group, turned towards the defile, which had been partially reconnoitred the evening before. They crept, like Red Indians, silently between the trees, and soon reached the narrow gorge which formed the entrance. Here, winding between piles of granite, began the path leading to the first slopes of the spur. Midway the path had been widened by a landslip, and here was the cave tenanted by the lions.

It was then arranged that Sir John, one of the natives, and Mokoum, should creep along the upper edge of the defile, with the intention of driving out the animals to the lower extremity of the gorge. There the two young Europeans and the other two Bochjesmen should be in ambush to receive the fugitive beasts with shot and arrows.

No spot could be better adapted for the manœuvres. The forked branches of a gigantic sycamore afforded a safe position, since lions do not climb; and the hunters, perched at a considerable height, could escape their bounds and aim at them under favourable conditions.

William Emery objected to the plan as being dangerous for Sir John and the bushman, but the latter would hear of no modification, and Emery reluctantly acquiesced.

Day now began to dawn, and the mountain-top was glowing in the sun. Mokoum, after seeing his four companions installed in the sycamore, started off with Sir John and the Bochjesman, and soon mounted the devious path which lay on the right edge of the defile. Cautiously examining their path, they continued to advance. In the event of the lions having returned to their den and being at repose, it would be possible to make short work of them.

After about a quarter of an hour the hunters, reaching the landslip before the cave to which Zorn had directed them, crouched down and examined the spot. It seemed a wide excavation, though at present they could hardly estimate the size. The entrance was marked by piles of bones and remains of animals, demonstrating, beyond doubt, that it was the lions’ retreat

Contrary to the hunter’s expectation, the cave seemed deserted. He crept to the entrance and satisfied himself that it was really empty. Calling his companions, who joined him immediately, he said, —

“Our game has not returned, Sir John, but it will not be long: I think we had better install ourselves in its place. Better to be besieged than besiegers, especially as we have an armed succour at hand. What do you think?”

“I am at your orders, Mokoum,” replied Sir John.

All three accordingly entered. It was a deep grotto, strewn with bones and stained with blood. Repeating their scrutiny, lest they should be mistaken as to the cave being empty, they hastened to barricade the entrance by piling up stones, the intervening spaces being filled with boughs and dry brushwood. This only occupied a few minutes, the mouth of the cave being comparatively narrow. They then went behind their loop-holes, and awaited their prey, which was not long in coming. A lion and two lionesses approached within a hundred yards of the cave. The lion, tossing his mane and sweeping the ground with his tail, carried in his teeth an entire antelope, which he shook with as much ease as a cat would a mouse. The two lionesses frisked along at his side.

Sir John afterwards confessed that it was a moment ot no little trepidation; he felt his pulses beat fast, and was conscious of something like fear; but he was soon himself again. His two companions retained their composure undisturbed.

At the sight of the barricade, the beasts paused. They were within sixty paces. With a harsh roar from the lion, they all three rushed into a thicket on the right, a little below the spot where the hunters had first stopped. Their tawny backs and gleaming eyes were distinctly visible through the foliage.

“The partridges are there,” whispered Sir John; “let us each take one.”

“No,” answered Mokoum softly, “the brood is not all here, and the report of a gun would frighten the rest. Bochjesman, are you sure of your arrow at this distance?”

“Yes, Mokoum,” said the native.

“Then aim at the male’s left flank, and pierce his heart.”

The Bochjesman bent his bow, and the arrow whistled through the brushwood. With a loud roar, the lion made a bound and fell. He lay motionless, and his sharp teeth stood out in strong relief against his blood-stained lips.

“Well done, Bochjesman!” said Mokoum.

At this moment the lionesses, leaving the thicket, flung themselves on the lion’s body. Attracted by their roar, two other lions and a third lioness appeared round the corner of the defile. Bristling with anger, they looked twice their ordinary size, and bounded forward with terrific roars.

“Now for the rifles,” cried the bushman, “we must shoot them on the wing, since they will not perch.”

The bushman took deliberate aim, and one lion fell, as it were paralyzed. The other, his paw broken by Sir John’s bullet, rushed towards the barricade, followed by the infuriated lionesses. Unless the rifles could now be brought successfully to bear, the three animals would succeed in entering their den. The hunters retired; their guns were quickly reloaded; two or three lucky shots, and all would be well; but an unforeseen circumstance occurred which rendered the hunters’ situation to the last degree alarming.

All at once a dense smoke filled the cave. One of the wads, falling on the dry brushwood, had set it alight, and soon a sheet of flames, fanned by the wind, lay between the men and the beasts. The lions recoiled, but the hunters would be suffocated if they remained where they were. It was a terrible moment, but they dared not hesitate.

“Come out! come out!” cried Mokoum.

They pushed aside the brushwood with the butt ends of their guns, knocked down the stones, and, half choked, leaped out of the cloud of smoke.

The native and Sir John had hardly time to collect their senses when they were both knocked over. The African, struck on the chest by one of the lionesses, lay motionless on the ground; Sir John, who received a blow from the tail of the other, thought his leg was broken, and fell on his knees. But just as the animal turned upon him, a ball from the bushman arrested her, and, meeting a bone, exploded in her body. At this instant Zorn, Emery, and the two Bochjesmen appeared opportunely, although unsummoned, hastening up the defile. Two lions and one lioness were dead; but two lionesses and the lion with the broken paw were still sufficiently formidable. The rifles, however, performed their duty. A second lioness fell, struck in both head and flank. The third lioness and the wounded lion bounded over the young men’s heads, and amid a last salute of balls and arrows disappeared round the corner of the defile.

Sir John uttered a loud hurrah. The lions were conquered, four carcasses measured the ground.

With his friend’s assistance, Sir John was soon on his feet again; his leg was not broken. The native soon recovered his consciousness, being merely stunned by the blow from the animal’s head. An hour later, the little troop, without further trace of the fugitive couple, regained the thicket where they had left their horses.

“Well,” said Mokoum to Sir John, “I hope you like our African partridges.”

“Delightful! delightful!” said Sir John, rubbing his leg, “but what tails they have, to be sure!”

CHAPTER XIII.

PACIFICATION BY FIRE.

At the camp Colonel Everest and his colleagues, with a natural impatience, anxiously abided the result of the lion-hunt. If the chase proved successful, the light would appear in the course of the night. The Colonel and Strux passed the day uneasily; Palander, always engrossed, forgot that any danger menaced his friends. It might be said of him, as of the mathematician Bouvard, “He will continue to calculate while he continues to live;” for apart from his calculations life for him would have lost its purpose.

The two chiefs certainly thought quite as much of the accomplishment of their survey as of any danger incurred by their companions; they would themselves have braved any peril rather than have a physical obstacle to arrest their operations.

At length, after a day that seemed interminable, the night arrived. Punctually every half-hour the Colonel and Matthew Strux silently relieved guard at the telescope, each desiring to be the first to discover the light. But hours passed on, and no light appeared. At last, at a quarter to three, Colonel Everest arose, and calmly said. “The signal!”

The Russian, although he did not utter a word, could scarcely conceal the chagrin which he felt at chance favouring the Colonel.

The angle was then carefully measured, and was found to be exactly 73°58’42”.413.

Colonel Everest being anxious to join his companions as soon as possible, the camp was raised at dawn, and by midday all the members of the

Commission had met once more. The incidents of the lion-hunt were recounted, and the victors heartily congratulated.

During the morning Sir John, Emery, and Zorn had proceeded to the summit of the mountain, and had thence measured the angular distance of a new station situated a few miles to the west of the meridian. Palander also announced that the measurement of the second degree was now complete.

For five weeks all went on well. The weather was fine, and the country, being only slightly undulated, offered fair sites for the stations. Provisions were abundant, and Sir John's revictualling expeditions provided full many a variety of antelopes and buffaloes. The general health was good, and water could always be found. Even the discussions between the Colonel and Strux were less violent, and each seemed to vie with the other in zeal for success, when a local difficulty occurred which for a while hindered the work and revived hostilities.

It was the 11th of August. During the night the caravan had passed through a wooded country, and in the morning halted before an immense forest extending beyond the horizon. Imposing masses of foliage formed a verdant curtain which was of indescribable beauty. There were the "gounda," the "mosokoso," and the "mokoumdon," a wood much sought for ship-building; great ebony trees, their bark covering a perfectly black wood; "bauhinias," with fibre of iron; "buchneras," with their orange-coloured flowers; magnificent "roodeblatts," with whitish trunks, crowned with crimson foliage, and thousands of "guaiacums," measuring fifteen feet in circumference. There was ever a murmur like that of the surf on a sandy coast; it was the wind, which, passing across the branches, was calmed on the skirts of the forest. In answer to a question from the Colonel, Mokoum said, —

“It is the forest of Rovouma.”

“What is its size?”

“It is about forty-five miles wide, and ten long.”

“How shall we cross it?”

“Cross it we cannot,” said Mokoum. “There is but one resource: we must go round either to the east or to the west.”

At this intelligence the chiefs were much perplexed. In the forest they could not establish stations; to pass round would involve them in an additional series of perhaps ten auxiliary triangles.

Here was a difficulty of no little magnitude. Encamping in the shade of a magnificent grove about half a mile from the forest, the astronomers assembled in council. The question of surveying across the mass of trees was at once set aside, and it now remained to determine whether they should make the circuit to the east or the west, since the meridian passed as nearly as possible through the centre of the forest. On this point arose a violent discussion between the Colonel and Strux. The two rivals recovered their old animosity, and the discussion ended in a serious altercation. Their colleagues attempted to interfere, but to no purpose. The Englishman wished to turn to the right, since that direction approached the route taken by Dr. Livingstone in his expedition to the Zambesi Falls, and the country would on that account be more known and frequented. The Russian, on the contrary, insisted on going to the left, but apparently for no other reason than to thwart the Colonel. The quarrel went so far that a separation between the members of the Commission seemed imminent. Zorn, Emery, Sir John, and Palander withdrew and left their chiefs to themselves. Such was their obstinacy that it seemed as if the survey must continue from this point in two oblique series of triangles.

The day passed away without any reconciliation, and the next morning Sir John, finding matters still in the same condition, proposed to Mokoum to beat the neighbourhood. Perhaps meanwhile the astronomers would come to an understanding: any way, some fresh venison would not be despised.

Mokoum, always ready, whistled to his dog Top, and the two hunters ventured several miles from the encampment. The conversation naturally turned on the subject of the difficulty.

“I expect,” said the bushman, “we shall be encamped some time here. Our two chiefs are like ill-paired oxen, one pulls one way and the other another, and the consequence is that the waggon makes no headway.”

“It is all very sad,” answered Sir John, “and looks like a separation. The interests of science are compromised, otherwise I should be indifferent to it all. I should amuse myself with my gun until the rivals made it up.”

“Do you think they will make it up? For my part, I am almost afraid that our halt will be indefinitely prolonged.”

“I fear so, Mokoum,” replied Sir John. “The matter is so trivial, and it is no question of science. Our chiefs would doubtless have yielded to a scientific argument, but they will never make concession in a pure matter of opinion. How unfortunate that the meridian happens to cross this forest!”

“Hang the forests!” exclaimed the bushman, “don’t let them stop your measuring, if you want to measure. But I can’t see the good of your getting at the length and breadth of the earth? Who will be any better off when every thing is reduced to feet and inches? I should just like to think of the globe as infinite; to measure it is to make it small. No, Sir John, if I were to live for ever, I could never understand the use of your operations.”

Sir John could not help smiling. They had often debated the subject, and the ignorant child of nature could evidently not enter into the interest attached to the survey. Whenever Sir John attempted to convince him, he answered eloquently with arguments stamped with a genuine naturalness, of which Sir John, half-*savant* and half-hunter, could fully appreciate the charm.

Thus conversing, the hunters pursued the rock-hares, the shrill-toned plovers, the partridges (with brown, yellow, and black plumage), and other small game. But Sir John had all the sport to himself. The bushman seldom fired; he was pre-occupied. The quarrel between the two astronomers seemed to trouble him more than it did his companion, and the variety of game hardly attracted his notice.

In truth there was an idea floating through his brain, which, little by little, took more definite form. Sir John heard him talking to himself, and watched him as he quietly let the game pass by, as engrossed as Palander himself. Two or three times in the course of the day he drew near Sir John and said, —

“So you really think that Colonel Everest and Mr. Strux will not come to terms?”

Sir John invariably replied that agreement seemed unlikely, and that he feared there would be a separation between Englishmen and Russians. The last time Mokoum received this answer he added, —

“Well, you may be easy; I have found a means to satisfy both the chiefs. Before to-morrow, if the wind is favourable, they will have nothing to quarrel about.”

“What do you mean to do, Mokoum?”

“Never mind, Sir John.”

“Very well, I will leave it to you. You deserve to have your name preserved in the annals of science.”

“That would be too great an honour for me. Sir John,” answered the bushman, and then continued silently to ponder over his project. Sir John made no further inquiries, but could not at all guess how the bushman proposed to re-unite the two adversaries.

Towards evening the hunters returned to camp, and found matters even worse than before. The oft-repeated intervention of Zorn and Emery had been of no avail, and the quarrel had now reached such a height that reconciliation seemed impossible. It appeared only too probable that the survey would be continued in two separate directions. The thought of this was sorrowful to Emery and Zorn, who were now so nearly bound by mutual sympathy. Sir John guessed their thoughts, and was eager to reassure them; but however much he was secretly disposed to trust to the bushman, he abstained from raising any hopes which might be fallacious.

Throughout the evening Mokoum did not leave his ordinary occupations. He arranged the sentinels, and took the usual precautions. Sir John began to think that he had forgotten his promise. Before going to rest he tried to sound Colonel Everest, whom he found immovably resolved that, unless Strux yielded, the English and Russians must part. “There arc things,” added the Colonel, in a tone of decision, “that cannot be borne, even from a colleague.”

Sir John, very uneasy, retired to his bed, and being fatigued with his day’s sport, was soon asleep. Towards eleven o’clock he was suddenly aroused by the natives running to and fro in the camp. He quickly rose, and found every one on their feet. The forest was on fire. In the dark night, against the black sky, the curtain of flame seemed to rise to the zenith; and in this incredibly short time the fire had extended for several miles.

Sir John looked at Mokoum, who, standing near, made no answer to his glance; but he at once understood. The fire was designed to open a road through that forest which had stood impervious for ages. The wind, from the south, was favourable. The air, rushing as from a ventilator, accelerated the conflagration, and furnished an ever fresh supply of oxygen. It animated the flames, and kept the kindled branches burning like a myriad brands. The scattered fragments became new centres for fresh outbreaks of flame; the scene of the fire became larger, and the heat grew intense. The dead wood piled under the dark foliage crackled, and ever and anon louder reports and a brighter light told that the resinous trees were burning like torches. Then followed explosions like cannonades, as the great trunks of ironwood burst asunder with a reverberation as of bombs. The sky reflected the glow, and the clouds carried the rosy glare high aloft. Showers of sparks emitted from the wreaths of smoke studded the heavens like red-hot stars.

Then, on every side, were heard the howls, shrieks, and bellowings of herds of bewildered hyenas, buffaloes, and lions; elephants rushed in every direction, like huge dark spectres, and disappeared beyond the horizon.

The fire continued throughout the following day and night; and when day broke on the 14th a vast space, several miles wide, had been opened across the forest. A passage was now free for the meridian. The daring genius of Mokoum had arrested the disaster which threatened the survey.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DECLARATION OF WAR.

All pretext for quarrelling being now removed, the Colonel and Strux, somewhat rancorous at heart, recommenced their joint labours. About five miles to the left of the gap made by the conflagration, rose an eminence which would serve as the vertex of a new triangle. When the requisite observations were complete, the caravan set off across the burnt forest.

The road was paved with embers. The soil was still burning, and here and there smouldered stumps of trees, while a hot steam rose around. In many places lay the blackened carcases of animals which had been unable to make their escape. Wreaths of smoke gave evidence that the fire was not yet extinct, and might still be rekindled by the wind. Had the flames burst out again the caravan must inevitably have been destroyed. Towards the middle of the day, however, it was safely encamped at the foot of the hill. Here was a mass of rock which seemed to have been arranged by the hand of man. It was a kind of cromlech — a surprising erection to find in that locality — resembling the structures attributed to the Druids, and which ever furnish fresh interest to the archæologist. The most credible suggestion was that it must be the remains of some primitive African altar.

The two young astronomers and Sir John Murray wished to visit the fantastic construction, and, accompanied by the bushman, they ascended the slope. They were not above twenty paces from the cromlech when a man, hitherto concealed behind one of the massy stones at the base, appeared for a moment, and, descending the hill, stole quickly away into a thicket that had been untouched by the fire. The momentary glance was enough for the bushman. “A Makololo!” he cried, and rushed after the native. Sir John followed, and both in vain searched the wood. The native, knowing the short paths, had escaped where the most experienced hunter could not have traced him. When the incident was related to Colonel Everest he sent for Mokoum, and asked him who the man was? what he was doing? and why he had followed him?

“He is a Makololo, Colonel,” replied Mokoum. “He belongs to one of the northern tribes that haunt the affluents of the Zambesi. Not only is he an enemy of us Bochjesmen, but he is a plunderer of all who venture into the country; he was spying us, and we shall be lucky if we have not cause to regret that we couldn’t get hold ot him.”

“But what have we to fear from a band of robbers?” asked the Colonel; “are not our numbers sufficient to resist them?”

“At present, yes,” replied the bushman; “but in the north these tribes are more frequent, and it is difficult to avoid them. If this Makololo is a spy, as I suspect, he will not fail in putting several hundred of these robbers on our track, and then, Colonel, I would not give a farthing for all your triangles.”

The Colonel was vexed. He knew that the bushman was not the man to exaggerate danger, and that all he said ought to be duly weighed. The intentions of the native were certainly suspicious; his sudden appearance and immediate flight showed that he was caught deliberately spying. No doubt he would announce the approach of the Commission to the tribes of the north. There was, however, no help for it now; the caravan must continue its march with extra precautions.

On the 17th of August the astronomers completed their twenty-second triangle, and with it the third degree of the meridian. Finding by the map that the village of Kolobeng was about 100 miles to the north-east, they resolved to turn thither for a few days' rest. For nearly six months they had had no communication with the civilized world, and at Kolobeng, an important village and missionary station, they would probably hear news from Europe, besides being able to re-provision the caravan.

The remarkable cromlech was at once chosen as the landmark whence subsequent operations should commence, and the Colonel gave the signal for departure. With no further incident the caravan reached Kolobeng on the 22nd. The village was merely a mass of native huts, the uniformity of which was relieved by the depôt of the missionaries who had settled there. Formerly called Lepelolé, it is marked on some maps Litoubarouka. Here Dr. Livingstone stayed for some months in 1843, to learn the habits of the Bechuanas, or Bakouins, as they are more generally termed in this part of the country.

With all hospitality the missionaries received the Europeans, and put every available resource at their disposal. Livingstone's house was still to be seen, sacked and ruined, as when visited by Baldwin; the Boers had not spared it in their incursion of 1852.

All eagerly asked for news from Europe; but their curiosity could not be immediately satisfied, as no courier had reached the mission in the last six months; but in about a week the principal said they expected journals and despatches, since they had already heard of the arrival of a carrier on the banks of the Upper Zambesi. A week was just the period that the astronomers desired for their rest, and all except Palander, who constantly revised his calculations, passed the time in a complete *far nieute*. The stern Matthew Strux held himself aloof from his English colleagues, and Emery and Zorn took many walks in the neighbourhood. The firmest friendship united these two, and they believed that nothing could break the closeness of their sympathy.

On the 30th the eagerly-expected messenger arrived. He was a native of Kilmaine, a town by the delta of the Zambesi. A merchantman from the Mauritius, trading in gum and ivory, had landed on that coast early in July, and delivered the despatches for the missionaries. The papers were dated two months back, for the native had taken four weeks to ascend the Zambesi.

On the arrival of the messenger, the principal of the mission had handed to Colonel Everest a bundle of European newspapers, chiefly the *Times*, the *Daily News*, and the *Journal des Débats*. The intelligence they contained had, under the circumstances, a special importance, and produced an unexpected emotion among the entire party.

The members of the Commission were altogether in the chief room of the mission. Colonel Everest drew out the *Daily News* for the 13th of May, with the intention of reading aloud to his colleagues. Scarcely had he glanced at the first leading article, when his brow contracted, and the paper trembled in his hand. In a few moments he recovered his usual composure.

“What does the paper say, Colonel?” asked Sir John.

“It is grave news, gentlemen,” said the Colonel, “that I have to communicate.”

He kept the paper in his hand, and his colleagues waited eagerly for him to speak. To the surprise of all he rose, and, advancing to Matthew Strux, said, —

“Before communicating the intelligence conveyed in this paper, I should wish to make an observation to you.”

“I am ready to hear any thing you may say,” said Strux, much astonished.

The Colonel then said solemnly, —

“Mr. Strux, hitherto there has been between us a rivalry more personal than scientific, which has rendered our cooperation in the common cause somewhat difficult. This, I believe, is to be attributed to the fact of there being two of us at the head of this expedition. To avoid antagonism, there should be only one chief to every enterprise. You agree with me, do you not?”

Strux bowed in assent. The Colonel went on, —

“This position, unpleasant for each of us, must, through recent circumstances, now be changed. First, sir, let me say that I esteem you highly, as your position in the scientific world demands. I beg you to believe that I regret all that has passed between us.”

These words were uttered with great dignity, even with pride. There was no humiliation in the voluntary apology, so nobly expressed, and neither Strux nor his colleagues could guess his motive. Perhaps the Russian, not having the same incentive, was not equally disposed to forget any personal resentment. However, mastering his ill-feeling, he replied, —

“With you, Colonel, I think that no rivalry on our part should be permitted to injure the scientific work with which we are entrusted. I likewise hold you in the esteem that your talents deserve, and in future I will do all in my power to efface any personality from our relations. But you spoke of a change; I do not understand — ”

“You will soon be made to understand, Mr. Strux,” replied the Colonel, with a touch of sadness in his tone, “but first give me your hand.”

“Here it is,” rejoined Strux, with a slight hesitation. Without another word the astronomers joined hands.

“Now you are friends,” cried Sir John.

“Alas! no,” said the Colonel, dropping the Russian’s hand; “henceforth we are enemies, separated by an abyss which must keep us apart even on the territory of science.”

Then turning to his colleagues, he added, —

“Gentlemen, war is declared between England and Russia, See, the news is conveyed by these English, French, and Russian newspapers.

And, in truth, the war of 1854 had begun. The English, with their allies the French and Turks, were fighting before Sebastopol, and the Eastern question was being submitted to the ordeal of a naval conflict on the Black Sea.”

The Colonel’s words fell like a thunderbolt. The English and Russians, with their strong sentiment of nationality, started to their feet. Those three words, “War is declared,” were enough. They were no longer companions united in a common labour, but already eyed one another as avowed antagonists. Such is the influence of these national duels on the heart of man. An instinctive impulse had divided the Europeans — Nicholas Palander himself yielding to the feeling: Emery and Zorn alone regarded each other with more of sadness than animosity, and regretted that they had not shaken hands before Colonel Everest's communication. No further conversation ensued; exchanging bows, English and Russians retired.

This novel situation, although it would not interrupt the survey, would render its continuation more difficult. For the interest of its country, each party desired to pursue the operations; but the measurements must be carried along two different meridians. In a formal interview subsequently arranged between the chiefs, it was decided by lot that the Russians should continue the meridian already begun, while the English should choose an arc 60 or 80 miles to the west, and unite it to the first by a series of auxiliary triangles; they would then continue their survey as far as lat. 20°.

All these arrangements were made without any outbreak: personal rivalry was swallowed up by national feeling, and the Colonel and Strux did not exchange an uncivil word, but kept within the strictest limits of politeness.

The caravan was equally divided, each party preserving its own stores. The steam-boat fell by lot to the Russians.

Mokoum, especially attached to Sir John, followed the English caravan. The pioneer, equally experienced, headed the Russians. Each party retained its instruments and one of the registers.

On the 31st of August the Commission divided. The English cordially thanked the missionaries for their kind hospitality, and started first to connect their last station with their new meridian.

If, before their departure, any one had entered the privacy of the inner room, he would have seen Emery grasping the hand of Zorn, once his friend, but now, by the will of their Majesties the Queen of England and the Czar of Russia, no longer friend, but foe.

CHAPTER XV.

A GEOMETRIC PROGRESSION.

After the separation the English astronomers continued their labours with the same care and precision as hitherto. Three had now to do the work of six, and consequently the survey advanced more slowly, and was attended with more fatigue; but they were not the men to spare themselves; the desire that the Russians should not surpass them in any way sustained them in their task, to which they gave all their time and thoughts. Emery had to indulge in fewer reveries, and Sir John could not so often spare his time for hunting. A new programme was drawn up, assigning to each astronomer his proper share of the labour. Sir John and the Colonel undertook all observations both in the sky and in the field; while Emery replaced Palander as calculator. All questions were decided in common, and there was no longer any fear that disagreement should arise. Mokoum was still the guide and hunter to the caravan. The English sailors, who formed half the crew of the “Queen and Czar,” had, of course, followed their countrymen; and although the Russians were in possession of the steam-vessel, the India-rubber boat, which was large enough for ordinary purposes, was the property of the English. The provision-waggons were divided, thus impartially ensuring the revictualling of each caravan. The natives likewise had to be severed into two equal troops, not without some natural signs of displeasure on their part; far from their own pasturages and water-courses, in a region inhabited by wandering tribes hostile to the tribes of the south, they could scarcely be reconciled to the prospect of separation. But at length, by the help of the bushman and the pioneer, who told them that the two detachments would be comparatively a short distance apart, they consented to the arrangement.

On leaving Kolobeng the English caravan re-entered the burnt forest and arrived at the cromlech which had served for their last station. Operations were resumed, and a large triangle carried the observers at once ten or twelve miles to the west of the old meridian.

Six days later the auxiliary series of triangles was finished, and Colonel Everest and his colleagues, after consulting the maps, chose the new arc one degree west of the other, being 23° east of the meridian of Greenwich. They were not more than sixty miles from the Russians, but this distance put any collision between the two parties out of the question, as it was improbable that their triangles would cross.

All through September the weather was fine and clear. The country was fertile and varied, but scantily populated. The forests, which were few, being broken by wide, open tracts, and with occasional mounds occurring in the prairies, made the district extremely favourable for the observations. The region was well provided with natural productions. The sweet scent of many of the flowers attracted swarms of scarabæi, and more especially a kind of bee as nearly as possible like the European, depositing in clefts of rocks and holes of trees a white liquid honey with a delicious flavour. Occasionally at night large animals ventured near the camp; there were giraffes, varieties of antelopes, hyenas, rhinoceroses, and elephants. But Sir John would not be distracted, he resolutely discarded his rifle for his telescope.

Under these circumstances, Mokoum and some of the natives became purveyors to the caravan, and Sir John had some difficulty in restraining his excitement when he heard the report of their guns. The bushman shot three prairie-buffaloes, the Bokolokolos of the Bechuanas, formidable animals, with glossy black skins, short strong legs, fierce eyes, and small heads crowned with thick black horns. They were a welcome addition to the fresh venison which formed the ordinary fare.

The natives prepared the buffalo-meat as the Indians of the north do their pemmican. The Europeans watched their proceedings with interest, though at first with some repugnance. The flesh, after being cut into thin slices and dried in the sun, was wrapped in a tanned skin, and beaten with flails till it was reduced to a powder. It was then pressed tightly into leathern sacks, and moistened with boiling tallowy suet collected from the animal itself. To this they added some marrow and berries, whose saccharine matter modified the nitrous elements of the meat. This compound, after being mixed and beaten, formed, when cold, a cake as hard as a stone. Mokoum, who considered his pemmican a national delicacy, begged the astronomers to taste the preparation. At first they found it extremely unpalatable, but, becoming accustomed to the flavour, they soon learnt to partake of it with great relish. Highly nourishing, and not at all likely to be tainted, containing, moreover, its nutritive elements closely compacted, this pemmican was exactly suited to meet the wants of a caravan travelling in an unknown country. The bushman soon had several hundred pounds in reserve, and they were thus secure from any immediate want.

Days and nights passed away in observations. Emery was always thinking of his friend, and deploring the fate which had so suddenly severed the bond of their friendship. He had no one to sympathize with his admiration of the wild characteristics of the scenery, and, with something of Palander’s enthusiasm, found refuge in his calculations. Colonel Everest was cold and calm as ever exhibiting no interest in any thing beyond his professional pursuits. As for Sir John, he suppressed his murmurs, but sighed over the loss of his freedom. Fortune, however, sometimes made amends; for although he had no leisure for hunting, the wild beasts occasionally took the initiative, and came near, interrupting his observations. He then considered defence legitimate, and rejoiced to be able to make the duties of the astronomer and of the hunter to be compatible.

One day he had a serious rencontre with an old rhinoceros, which cost him “rather dear.” For some time the animal had been prowling about the flanks of the caravan. By the blackness of his skin Mokoum had recognized the “chucuroo” (such is the native for this animal) as a dangerous beast, and one which, more agile than the white species, often attacks man and beast without any provocation.

On this day Sir John and Mokoum had set off to reconnoitre a hill six miles away, on which the Colonel wished to establish an indicating-post. With a certain foreboding. Sir John had brought his rifle with conical shot instead of his ordinary gun; for although the rhinoceros had not been seen for two days, yet he did not consider it advisable to traverse unarmed an unknown country. Mokoum and his companions had already unsuccessfully chased the beast, which probably now had abandoned its designs. There was no reason to regret the precaution. The adventurers had reached the summit of the hill, when at the base, close to a thicket, of no large extent, appeared the chucuroo. He was a formidable animal; his small eyes sparkled, and his horns, planted firmly one over the other on his bony nose, furnished a most powerful weapon of attack.

The bushman caught sight of him first, as he crouched about half a mile distant in a grove of lentisk.

“Sir John,” he cried, “fortune favours you: here is your chucuroo!”

“The rhinoceros!” exclaimed Sir John, with kindling eyes, for he had never before been so near the animal.

“Yes; a magnificent beast, and he seems inclined to cut off our retreat,” said the bushman. “Why he should attack us, I can hardly say; his tribe is not carnivorous: but any way, there he is, and we must hunt him out.”

“Is it possible for him to get up here to us?” asked Sir John.

“No; his legs are too short and thick, but he will wait.”

“Well, let him wait,” said Sir John; “and when we have examined this station, we will try and get him out”

They then proceeded with their reconnoitring, and chose a spot on which to erect the indicating-post. They also noticed other eminences to the north-west which would be of use in constructing a subsequent triangle.

Their work ended, Sir John turned to the bushman, saying, “When you like, Mokoum.”

“I am at your orders, Sir John: the rhinoceros is still waiting.”

“Well, let us go down, a ball from my rifle will soon settle matters.”

“A ball!” cried Mokoum; “you don’t know a rhinoceros. He won’t fall with one ball, however well it may be aimed.”

“Nonsense!” began Sir John, “that is because people don’t use conical shot.”

“Conical or round,” rejoined the bushman, “the first will not bring down such an animal as that.”

“Well,” said Sir John, carried away by his self-confidence, “as you have your doubts, I will show you what our European weapons can do.”

And he loaded his rifle, to be ready to take aim as soon as he should be at a convenient distance.

“One moment, Sir John,” said the bushman, rather piqued, “will you bet with me?”

“Certainly,” said Sir John.

“I am only a poor man,” continued Mokoum, “but I will willingly bet you half-a-crown against your first ball.”

“Done!” replied Sir John instantly. “Half-a-crown to you if the rhinoceros doesn’t fall to my first shot.”

The hunters descended the steep slope, and were soon posted within range of the rhinoceros. The beast was perfectly motionless, and on that account presented an easy aim.

Sir John thought his chance so good, that at the last moment he turned to Mokoum and said, —

“Do you keep to your bargain?”

“Yes,” replied the bushman.

The rhinoceros still being as motionless as a target, Sir John could aim wherever he thought the blow would be mortal. He chose the muzzle, and, his pride being roused, he aimed with the utmost care, and fired. The ball failed in reaching the flesh; it had merely shattered to fragments the extremity of one of the horns. The animal did not appear to experience the slightest shock.

“That counts nothing,” said the bushman, “you didn’t touch the flesh.”

“Yes, it counts,” replied Sir John, rather vexed; “I have lost my wager. But come now, double or quits?”

“As you please, Sir John, but you will lose.”

“We shall see.”

The rifle was carefully re-loaded, and Sir John, taking rather a random aim, fired a second time; but meeting the horny skin of the haunch, the ball, notwithstanding its force, fell to the ground. The rhinoceros moved a few steps.

“A crown to me,” said Mokoum,

“Will you stake it again?” asked Sir John, “double or quits.”

“By all means,” said Mokoum.

This time Sir John, who had begun to get angry, regained his composure, and aimed at the animal’s forehead. The ball rebounded, as if it had struck a metal plate.

“Half-a-sovereign,” said the bushman calmly.

“Yes, and another,” cried Sir John, exasperated.

The shot penetrated the skin, and the rhinoceros made a tremendous bound; but instead of falling, he rushed furiously upon the bushes, which he tore and crushed violently.

“I think he still moves,” said the bushman quietly.

Sir John was beside himself; his composure again deserted him, and he risked the sovereign he owed the bushman on a fifth ball. He continued to lose again and again, but persisted in doubling the stake at every shot. At length the animal, pierced to the heart, fell, impotent to rise to its feet.

Sir John uttered a loud hurrah; he had killed his rhinoceros. He had forgotten his disappointment, but he did not forget his bets. It was startling to find that the perpetually redoubled stakes had mounted at the ninth shot to 32*l.* Sir John congratulated himself on his escape from such a debt of honour; but in his enthusiasm he presented Mokoum with several gold pieces which the bushman received with his usual equanimity.

CHAPTER XVI.

DANGER IN DISGUISE.

By the end of September the astronomers had accomplished half their task. Their diminished numbers added to their fatigue, so that, notwithstanding their zeal, they occasionally had to recruit themselves by resting for several days. The heat was very overpowering. October in lat. 24° S. corresponds to April in Algeria, and for some hours after mid-day work was impossible. The bushman was alone uneasy at the delay, for he was aware that the arc was about to pass through a singular region called a "karroo," similar to that at the foot of the Roggeveld mountains in Cape Colony. In the damp season this district presents signs of the greatest fertility; after a few days of rain the soil is covered with a dense verdure; in a very short time flowers and plants spring up every where; pasturage increases, and water-courses are formed; troops of antelopes descend from the heights and take possession of these unexpected prairies. But this strange effort of nature is of short duration. In a month, or six weeks at most, all the moisture is absorbed by the sun; the soil becomes hardened, and chokes the fresh germs; vegetation disappears in a few days; the animals fly the region; and where for a while there was a rich fertility, the desert again asserts its dominion.

This karroo had to be crossed before reaching the permanent desert bordering on Lake Ngami. The bushman was naturally eager to traverse this region before the extreme aridity should have exhausted the springs. He explained his reasons to the Colonel, who perfectly understood, and promised to hurry on the work, without suffering its precision to be affected. Since, on account of the state ot the atmosphere, measuring was not always practicable, the operations were not unfrequently retarded, and the bushman became seriously concerned lest when they reached the karroo its character of fertility should have disappeared.

Meanwhile the astronomers could not fail to appreciate the magnificence around. Never had they been in finer country. In spite of the high temperature, the streams kept up a constant freshness, and thousands ot flocks would have found inexhaustible pasturage. Clumps of luxuriant trees rose here and there, giving the prospect at times the appearance of an English park.

Colonel Everest was comparatively indifferent to these beauties, but the others were fully alive to the romantic aspect of this temporary relief to the African deserts, Emery now especially regretted the alienation of his friend Zorn, and often thought how they would have mutually delighted in the charming scenery around them.

The advance of the caravan was enlivened by the movements as well as by the song-notes of a variety of birds. Some of these were edible, and the hunters shot some brace of “korans,” a sort of bustard peculiar to the South African plains, and some “dikkops,” whose flesh is very delicate eating. They were frequently followed by voracious crows, instinctively seeking to avert attention from their eggs in their nests of sand. In addition to these, blue cranes with white throats, red flamingoes, like flames in the thinly scattered brushwood, herons, curlews, snipes, “kalas,” often perching on a buffalo’s neck, plovers, ibises, which might have flown from some hieroglyphic obelisk, hundreds of enormous pelicans marching in file, — all were observed to find congenial habitats in this district, where man alone is the stranger. But of all the varieties of the feathered race, the most noticeable was the ingenious weaver-bird, whose green nests, woven with rushes and blades of grass, hung like immense pears from the branches of the willows. Emery, taking them for a new species of fruit, gathered one or two, and was much surprised to hear them twitter like sparrows. There seemed some excuse for the ancient travellers in Africa, who reported that certain trees in the country bore fruit producing living birds.

The karroo was reached while still it was lovely in its verdure. Gnus, with their pointed hoofs, caamas, elks, chamois, and gazelles abounded. Sir John could not resist the temptation to obtain two days' leave from the Colonel, which he devoted with all his energy to his favourite pastime. Under the guidance of the bushman, while Emery accompanied as an amateur, he obtained many a success to inscribe in his journal, and many a trophy to carry back to his Highland home. His hand, skilful with the delicate instruments of the survey, was at home still more on his gun; and his eye, keen to discern the remotest of stars, was quick to detect the nearest movement of a gazelle. It was ever with something of self-denial that he laid aside the character of the hunter to resume the duties of the astronomer. The bushman's uneasiness was ere long renewed. On the second day of Sir John's interval of recreation, Mokoum had espied, nearly two miles to the right, a herd of about twenty of the species of antelope known as the oryx. He told Sir John at once, and advised him to take advantage of the fortune that awaited him, adding that the oryx was extremely difficult to capture, and could outstrip the fleetest horse, and that Cumraing himself had not brought down more than four.

This was more than enough to arouse the Englishman. He chose his best gun, his best horse, and his best dogs, and, in his impatience preceding the bushman, he turned towards the copse bordering the plain where the antelopes had been seen. In an hour they reined in their horses, and Mokoum, concealed by a grove of sycamores, pointed out to his companion the herd grazing several hundred paces to leeward. He remarked that one oryx kept apart.

“He is a sentinel,” he said, “and doubtless cunning enough. At the slightest danger, he will give his signal, and the whole troop will make their escape. We must fire from a long distance, and hit at the first shot.”

Sir John nodded in reply, and sought for a favourable position.

The oryxes continued quietly grazing. The sentinel, as though the breeze had brought suspicions of danger, often raised his head, and looked warily around. But he was too far away for the hunters to fire at him with success, and to chase the herd over the plain was out of the question. The only hope of a lucky issue was that the herd might approach the copse.

Fortune seemed propitious. Gradually following the lead of the sentinel male, the herd drew near the wood, their instinct, perchance, making them aware that it was safer than the plain. When their direction was seen, the bushman asked his companion to dismount. The horses were tied to a sycamore, and their heads covered to secure them from taking alarm.

Followed by the dogs, the hunters glided through the creepers and brushwood till they were within three hundred paces of the troop. Then, crouching in ambush, and waiting with loaded guns, they could admire the beauty of the animals. By a strange freak of nature, the females were armed with horns more formidable than those of the males. The whole herd approached the wood, and awhile remained stationary. The sentinel oryx, as it seemed, was urging them to leave the plain; he appeared to be driving them, something like a sheep-collie congregates a flock, into a compact mass. The herd seemed strangely indifferent, and indisposed to submit to the guidance of their leader. The bushman was perplexed; he could not understand the relative movements of the sentinel and the herd.

Sir John began to get impatient. He fidgeted with his rifle, sometimes wanting to fire, sometimes to advance; and the bushman had some trouble to restrain him. An hour passed away in this manner, when suddenly one of the dogs gave a loud bark, and rushed towards the plain. The bushman felt angry enough to send a ball into the excited brute. The oryxes fled, and Sir John saw at once that pursuit was useless; in a few seconds they were no more than black specks in the grass. But to the bushman's astonishment it was not the old male which had given the signal for flight. The oryx remained in its place, without attempting to follow, and only tried to hide in the grass.

"Strange," said the bushman; "what ails the creature? Is he hurt, or crippled with age?"

"We shall soon see," said Sir John, advancing towards the animal.

The oryx crouched more and more in the grass; only the tips of his long horns were visible above the surface; but as he did not try to escape. Sir John could easily get near him. When within a hundred paces he took aim, and fired. The ball had struck the head, for the horns sunk into the grass. The hunters ran hastily to the spot. The bushman held in his hand his hunting-knife, in case the animal should still live. This precaution was unnecessary; the oryx was so dead, that when Sir John took hold of the horns, he pulled nothing but an empty flabby skin, containing not so much as a bone.

"By St. Andrew! these things happen to no one but me," he cried, in a tone so comical that any one but the immovable Mokoum would have laughed outright. But Mokoum did not even smile. His compressed lips and contracted brow showed him to be utterly bewildered. With his arms crossed, he looked quickly right and left.

Suddenly he caught sight of a little red leather bag, ornamented with arabesques, on the ground, which he picked up and examined carefully.

“What’s that?” asked Sir John.

“A Makololo’s pouch,” replied Mokoum.

“How did it get there?”

“The owner let it fall as he fled.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Mokoum, clenching his fists, “that the Makololo was in the oryx skin, and you have missed him.”

Sir John had not time to express his astonishment, when Mokoum, observing a movement in the distance, with all speed seized his gun and fired.

He and Sir John hastened to the suspected spot. But the place was empty: they could perceive by the trampled grass that some one had just been there; but the Makololo was gone, and it was useless to think of pursuit across the prairie.

The two hunters returned, much discomposed. The presence of a Makololo at the cromlech, together with his disguise, not unfrequently adopted by oryx hunters, showed that he had systematically followed the caravan. It was not without design that he was keeping watch upon the Europeans and their escort. The more they advanced to the north, the greater danger there would be of being attacked by the plunderers.

Emery was inclined to banter Sir John on his return from his holiday without booty; but Sir John replied, —

“I hadn’t a chance, William; the first oryx I hunted was dead before I shot at him.”

CHAPTER XVII.

AN UNEXPECTED BLIGHT.

After the oryx hunt the bushman had a long conversation with the Colonel. He felt sure, he said, that they were watched and followed, and that the only reason why they had not been attacked before was because the Makololos wished to get them farther north, where their hordes were larger. The question thus arose whether, in presence of this danger, they should retrace their steps; but they were reluctant to suffer that which nature had favoured to be interrupted by the attacks of a few African savages. The Colonel, aware of the importance of the question, asked the bushman to tell him all he knew about the Makololos.

Mokoum explained that they were the most northerly branch ot the great tribe of the Bechuanas. In 1850 Dr. Livingstone, during his first journey to the Zambesi, was received at Sesheki, the usual residence of Sebitouani, the chief of the Makololos. This native was a man of remarkable intelligence, and a formidable warrior. In 1824 he had menaced the Cape frontier, and, little by little, had gained an ascendency over the tribes of Central Africa, and had united them in a compact group. In the year before the arrival of the Anglo-Russian expedition the chief had died in Livingstone’s arms, and his son Sekeleton succeeded him.

At first Sekeleton was very friendly towards the Europeans who visited the Zambesi, and Dr. Livingstone had no complaint to make. But after the departure of the famous traveller, not only strangers but the neighbouring tribes were harassed by Sekeleton and his warriors. To these vexations succeeded pillage on a large scale, and the Makololos scoured the district between Lake Ngami and the Upper Zambesi. Consequently nothing was more dangerous than for a caravan to venture across this region without a considerable escort, especially when its progress had been previously known.

Such was the history given by Mokoum. He said that he thought it right to tell the Colonel the whole truth, adding, that for his own part (if the Colonel so wished) he should not hesitate to continue the march.

Colonel Everest consulted with his colleagues, and it was settled that the work, at all risks, should be continued. Something more than half of the project was now accomplished, and, whatever happened, the English owed it to themselves and their country not to abandon their undertaking. The series of triangles was resumed. On the 27th the tropic of Capricorn was passed, and on the 3rd of November, with the completion of the forty-first triangle, a fifth degree was added to the meridian.

For a month the survey went on rapidly, without meeting a single natural obstacle. Mokoum, always on the alert, kept a constant look-out at the head and flanks of the caravan, and forbade the hunters to venture too great a distance away. No immediate danger, however, seemed to threaten the little troop, and they were sanguine that the bushman’s fears might prove groundless. There was no further trace of the native who, after eluding them at the cromlech, had taken so strange a part in the oryx chase: nor did any other aggressor appear. Still, at various intervals, the bushman observed signs of trepidation among the Bochjesmen under his command. The incidents of the flight from the old cromlech, and the stratagem of the oryx hunt, could not be concealed from them, and they were perpetually expecting an attack. A deadly antipathy existed between tribe and tribe, and, in the event of a collision, the defeated party could entertain no hope of mercy. The Bochjesmen were already 300 miles from their home, and there was every prospect of their being carried 200 more. It is true that, before engaging them, Mokoum had been careful to inform them of the length and difficulties of the journey, and they were not men to shrink from fatigue; but now, when to these was added the danger of a conflict with implacable enemies, regret was mingled with murmuring, and dissatisfaction was exhibited with ill-humour, and although Mokoum pretended neither to hear nor to see, he was silently conscious ot an increasing anxiety.

On the 2nd of December a circumstance occurred which still further increased the spirit of complaint amongst this superstitious people, and provoked them to a kind of rebellion. Since the previous evening the weather had become dull. The atmosphere, saturated with vapour, gave signs of being heavily charged with electric fluid. There was every prospect of the recurrence of one of the storms which in this tropical district are seldom otherwise than violent. During the morning the sky became covered with sinister-looking clouds, piled together like bales of down of contrasted colours, the yellowish hue distinctly relieving the masses of dark grey. The sun was wan, the heat was overpowering, and the barometer fell rapidly; the air was so still that not a leaf fluttered.

Although the astronomers had not been unconscious of the change of weather, they had not thought it necessary to suspend their labours. Emery, attended by two sailors and four natives in charge of a waggon, was sent two miles east of the meridian to establish a post for the vertex of the next triangle. He was occupied in securing his point of sight, when a current of cold air caused a rapid condensation, which appeared to contribute immediately to a development of electric matter. Instantly there fell a violent shower of hail, and by a rare phenomenon the hailstones were luminous, so that it seemed to be raining drops of boiling silver. The storm increased; sparks flashed from the ground, and jets of light gleamed from the iron settings of the waggon. Dr. Livingstone relates that he has seen tiles broken, and horses and antelopes killed, by the violence of these hailstorms.

Without losing a moment, Emery left his work for the purpose of calling his men to the waggon, which would afford better shelter than a tree. But he had hardly left the top of the hill, when a dazzling flash, instantly followed by a peal of thunder, inflamed the air.

Emery was thrown down, and lay prostrate, as though he were actually dead. The two sailors, dazzled for a moment, were not long in rushing towards him, and were relieved to find that the thunderbolt had spared him. He had been enveloped by the fluid, which, collected by the compass which he held in his hand, had been diverted in its course, so as to leave him not seriously injured. Raised by the sailors, he soon came to himself; but he had narrowly escaped. Two natives, twenty paces apart, lay lifeless at the foot of the post. One had been struck by the full force of the thunderbolt, and was a black and shattered corpse, while his clothes remained entire; the other had been locally struck on the skull by the destructive fluid, and had been killed at once. The three men had been undeniably struck by a single flash. This trisection of a flash of lightning is an unusual but not unknown occurrence, and the angular division was very large. The Bochjesmen were at first overwhelmed by the sudden death of their comrades, but soon, in spite of the cries of the sailors and at the risk of being struck themselves, they rushed back to the camp. The two sailors, having first provided for the protection of Emery, conveyed the two dead bodies to the waggon, and then found shelter for themselves, being sorely bruised by the hailstones, which fell like a shower of marbles. For three quarters of an hour the storm continued to rage; the hail then abated so as to allow the waggon to return to camp.

The news of the death of the natives had preceded them, and had produced a deplorable effect on the minds of the Bochjesmen, who already looked upon the trigonometrical operations with the terror of superstition. They assembled in secret council, and some more timid than the rest declared they would go no farther. The rebellious disposition began to look serious, and it took all the bushman's influence to arrest an actual revolt. Colonel Everest offered the poor men an increase of pay; but contentment was not to be restored without much trouble. It was a matter of emergency; had the natives deserted, the position of the caravan, without escort and without drivers, would have been perilous in the extreme. At length, however, the difficulty was overcome, and after the burial of the natives, the camp was raised, and the little troop proceeded to the hill where the two had met their death.

Emery felt the shock for some days: his left hand, which had held the compass, was almost paralyzed; but after a time it recovered, and he was able to resume his work.

For eighteen days no special incident occurred. The Makololos did not appear, and Mokoum, though still distrustful, exhibited fewer indications of alarm. They were not more than fifty miles from the desert; and the karroo was still verdant, and enriched by abundant water. They thought that neither man nor beast could want for any thing in this region so rich in game and pasturage; but they had reckoned without the locusts, against whose appearance there is no security in the agricultural districts of South Africa.

On the evening of the 20th, about an hour before sunset the camp was arranged for the night. A light northerly breeze refreshed the atmosphere. The three Englishmen and Mokoum, resting at the foot of a tree, discussed their plans for the future. It was arranged that during the night the astronomers should take the altitude of some stars, in order accurately to find their latitude. Every thing seemed favourable for the operations; in a cloudless sky the moon was nearly new, and the constellations might be expected to be clear and resplendent. Great was the disappointment, therefore, when Emery, rising and pointing to the north, said, —

“The horizon is overcast: I begin to fear our anticipations of a fine night will hardly be verified.”

“Yes,” replied Sir John, “I see a cloud is rising, and if the wind should freshen, it might overspread the sky.”

“There is not another storm coming, I hope,” interposed the Colonel.

“We are in the tropics,” said Emery, “and it would not be surprising; for to-night I begin to have misgivings about our observations.”

“What is your opinion, Mokoum?” asked the Colonel of the bushman.

Mokoum looked attentively towards the north. The cloud was bounded by a long clear curve, as definite as though traced by a pair of compasses. It marked off a section of some miles on the horizon, and its appearance, black as smoke, seemed to excite the apprehensions of the bushman. At times it reflected a reddish light from the setting sun, as though it were rather a solid mass than any collection of vapour. Without direct reply to the Colonel’s appeal, Mokoum simply said that it was strange.

In a few minutes one of the Bochjesmen announced that the horses and cattle showed signs of agitation, and would not be driven to the interior of the camp.

“Well, let them stay outside,” said Mokoum; and in answer to the suggestion that there would be danger from the wild beasts around, he added significantly, “Oh, the wild beasts will be too much occupied to pay any attention to them.”

After the native had gone back. Colonel Everest turned to ask what the bushman meant; but he had moved away, and was absorbed in watching the advance of the cloud, of which, too accurately, he was aware of the origin.

The dark mass approached. It hung low and appeared to be but a few hundred feet from the ground. Mingling with the sound of the wind was heard a peculiar rustling, which seemed to proceed from the cloud itself. At this moment, above the cloud against the sky, appeared thousands of black specks, fluttering up and down, plunging in and out, and breaking the distinctness of the outline.

“What are those moving specks of black?” asked Sir John.

“They are vultures, eagles, falcons, and kites,” answered Mokoum, “from afar they have followed the cloud, and will never leave it until it is destroyed or dispersed.”

“But the cloud?”

“Is not a cloud at all,” answered the bushman, extending his hand towards the sombre mass, which by this time had spread over a quarter of the sky. “It is a living host; to say the truth, it is a swarm of locusts.”

The hunter was not mistaken. The Europeans were about to witness one of those terrible invasions of grasshoppers which are unhappily too frequent, and in one night change the most fertile country into an arid desert. These locusts, now arriving by millions, were the “grylli devastorii” of the naturalists, and travellers have seen for a distance of fifty miles the beach covered with piles of these insects to the height of four feet.

“Yes,” continued the bushman, “these living clouds are a true scourge to the country, and it will be lucky if we escape without harm.”

“But we have no crops and pasturages of our own,” said the Colonel; “what have we to fear?”

“Nothing, if they merely pass over our heads; every thing, if they settle on the country over which we must travel. They will not leave a leaf on the trees, nor a blade of grass on the ground; and you forget, Colonel, that if our own sustenance is secure, that of our animals is not. What do you suppose will become of us in the middle of a devastated district?”

The astronomers were silent for a time, and contemplated the animated mass before them. The cries of the eagles and falcons, who were devouring the insects by thousands, sounded above the redoubled murmur.

“Do you think they will settle here?” said Emery.

“I fear so,” answered Mokoum, “the wind carries them here direct. The sun is setting, and the fresh evening breeze will bear them down; should they settle on the trees, bushes, and prairies, why, then I tell you — ;” but the bushman could not finish his sentence. In an instant the enormous cloud which overshadowed them settled on the ground. Nothing could be seen as far as the horizon but the thickening mass. The camp was bestrewed; waggons and tents alike were veiled beneath the living hail. The Englishmen, moving knee-deep in the insects, crushed them by hundreds at every step.

Although there was no lack of agencies at work for their destruction, their aggregate defied all check. The birds, with hoarse cries, darted down from above, and devoured them greedily; from below, the snakes consumed them in enormous quantities; the horses, buffaloes, mules, and dogs fed on them with great relish; and lions and hyenas, elephants and rhinoceroses, swallowed them down by bushels. The very Bochjesmen welcomed these “shrimps of the air” like celestial manna; the insects even preyed on each other, but their numbers still resisted all sources of destruction.

The bushman entreated the English to taste the dainty. Thousands of young locusts, of a green colour, an inch to an inch and a half long, and about as thick as a quill, were caught. Before they have deposited their eggs, they are considered a great delicacy by connoisseurs, and are more tender than the old insects, which are of a yellowish tinge, and sometimes measure four inches in length. After half an hour’s boiling and seasoning with salt, pepper, and vinegar, the bushman served up a tempting dish to the three Englishmen. The insects, dismembered of head, legs, and skin, were eaten just like shrimps, and were found extremely savoury. Sir John, who ate some hundreds, recommended his people to take advantage of the opportunity to make a large provision.

At night they were all about to seek their usual beds; but the interior of the waggons had not escaped the invasion. It was impossible to enter without crushing the locusts, and to sleep under such conditions was not an agreeable prospect. Accordingly, as the night was clear and the stars bright, the astronomers were rejoiced to pursue their contemplated operations, and deemed it more pleasant than burying themselves to the neck in a coverlet of locusts. Moreover, they would not have had a moment’s sleep, on account of the howling of the beasts which were attracted by their unusual prey.

The next day the sun rose in a clear horizon, and commenced its course over a brilliant sky foreboding heat. A dull rustling of scales among the locusts showed that they were about to carry their devastations elsewhere; and towards eight o'clock the mass rose like the unfurling of an immense veil, and obscured the sun. It grew dusk as if night were returning, and with the freshening of the wind the whole mass was in motion. For two hours, with a deafening noise, the cloud passed over the darkened camp, and disappeared beyond the western horizon.

After their departure the bushman's predictions were found to be entirely realized. All was demolished, and the soil was brown and bare. Every branch was stripped to utter nakedness. It was like a sudden winter settling in the height of summer, or like the dropping of a desert into the midst of a land of plenty. The Oriental proverb which describes the devastating fury of the Osmanlis might justly be applied to these locusts, "Where the Turk has passed, the grass springs up no more."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DESERT.

It was indeed no better than a desert which now lay before the travellers. When, on the 25th of December, they completed the measurement of another degree, and reached the northern boundary of the karroo, they found no difference between the district they had been traversing and the new country, the real desert, arid and scorching, over which they were now about to pass. The animals belonging to the caravan suffered greatly from the dearth alike of pasturage and water. The last drops of rain in the pools had dried up, and it was an acrid soil, a mixture of clay and sand, very unfavourable to vegetation. The waters of the rainy season filtered quickly through the sandy strata, so that the region was incapable of preserving for any length of time a particle of moisture. More than once has Dr. Livingstone carried his adventurous explorations across one of these barren districts. The very atmosphere was so dry, that iron left in the open air did not rust, and the distinguished traveller relates that the leaves hung weak and shrivelled; that the mimosas remained closed by day as well as by night; that the scarabæi, laid on the ground, expired in a few seconds; and that the mercury in the ball of a thermometer buried three inches in the soil rose at midday to 134° Fahrenheit.

These records which Livingstone had made were now verified by the astronomers between the karroo and Lake Ngami. The suffering and fatigue, especially of the animals, continually increased, and the dry dusty grass afforded them but little nourishment. Nothing ventured on the desert; the birds had flown beyond the Zambesi for fruit and flowers, and the wild beasts shunned the plain which offered them no prey. During the first fortnight in January the hunters caught sight of a few couples of those antelopes which are able to exist without water for several weeks. There were some oryxes like those in whose pursuit Sir John had sustained so great a disappointment, and there were besides, some dappled, soft-eyed caamas, which venture beyond the green pasturages, and which are much esteemed for the quality of their flesh.

To travel under that burning sun through the stifling atmosphere, to work for days and nights in the oppressive sultriness, was fatiguing in the extreme. The reserve of water evaporated continuously, so they were obliged to ration themselves to a painfully limited allowance. However, ever, such were their zeal and courage that they mastered all their troubles, and not a single detail of their task was neglected. On the 25th of January they completed their seventh degree, the number of triangles constructed having amounted to fifty-seven.

Only a comparatively small portion of the desert had now to be traversed, and the bushman thought that they would be able to reach Lake Ngami before their provision was exhausted. The Colonel and his companions thus had definite hopes, and were inspirited to persevere. But the hired Bochjesmen, who knew nothing of any scientific ardour, and who had been long ago reluctant to pursue their journey, could hardly be encouraged to hold out: unquestionably they suffered greatly, and were objects for commiseration. Already, too, some beasts of burden, overcome by hard work and scanty food, had been left behind, and it was to be feared that more would fall into the same helpless condition. Mokoum had a difficult task to perform, and as murmurs and recriminations increased, his influence more and more lost its weight. It became evident that the want of water would be a serious obstacle, and that the expedition must either retrace its steps, or, at the risk of meeting the Russians, turn to the right of the meridian, to seek some of the villages which were known to be scattered along Livingstone’s route.

It was not long, however, before the bushman one morning came to the Colonel, and declared himself powerless against the increasing difficulties. The drivers, he said, refused to obey him; and there were continued scenes of insubordination, in which all the natives joined. The Colonel perfectly well understood the situation; but stern to himself, he was stern to others. He refused to suspend his operations, and declared that although he went alone, he would continue to advance. His two companions of course agreed, and professed themselves ready to follow him. Renewed efforts of Mokoum persuaded the natives to venture a little farther: he felt sure that the caravan could not be more than five or six days’ march from Lake Ngami, and once there, the animals could find pasturage and shade, and the men an abundance of fresh water. All these considerations he laid before the principal Bochjesmen. He showed them that it was really best to advance northwards. If they turned to the west, their march would be perilous, and to turn back was only to find the karroo desolate and dry. The natives at length yielded to his solicitations, and the almost exhausted caravan continued its course.

Happily this vast plain was in itself favourable to all astronomical observations, so that no delay arose from any natural obstruction. On one occasion there sprang up a sudden hope that nature was about to restore to them a supply of the water of which she had been so niggardly. A lagoon, a mile or two in extent, was discovered on the horizon. The reflection was indubitably of water, proving that what they saw was no mirage, due to the unequal density of the atmospheric strata. The caravan speedily turned in that direction, and the lagoon was reached towards five in the evening. Some of the horses broke away from their drivers, and galloped to the longed-for water. Having smelt it, they plunged in to their chests, but almost immediately returned to the bank. They had not drunk, and when the Bochjesmen arrived they found themselves by the side of a lagoon so impregnated with salt that its water could not be touched. Disappointment was keen, it was little short of despair. Mokoum thought that he should never induce the natives to proceed; but fortunately the only hope was in advancing, and even the natives were alive to the conviction that Lake Ngami was the nearest point where water could be procured. In four days, unless retarded by its labours, the expedition must reach the shores of the lake.

Every day was momentous. To economize time, Colonel Everest formed larger triangles and established fewer posts. No efforts were spared to hurry on the progress of the survey. Notwithstanding the application of every energy, the painful sojourn in the desert was prolonged, and it was not until the 21st of February that the level ground began to be rough and undulating. A mountain 500 or 600 feet high was descried about fifteen miles to the north-west. The bushman recognized it as Mount Scorzef, and, pointing to the north, said, —

“Lake Ngami is there.”

“The Ngami! the Ngami!” echoed the natives, with noisy demonstration. They wished to hurry on in advance over the fifteen miles, but Mokoum restrained them, asserting that the country was infested by Makololos, and that it was important to keep together. Colonel Everest, himself eager to reach the lake, resolved to connect by a single triangle the station he was now occupying with Mount Scorzef. The instruments were therefore arranged, and the angle of the last triangle which had been already measured from the south was measured again from the station. Mokoum, in his impatience, only established a temporary camp; he hoped to reach the lake before night; but he neglected none of his usual precautions, and prudently sent out horsemen right and left to explore the underwood. Since the oryx-chase the Makololos seemed indeed to have abandoned their watch, still he would not incur any risk of being taken by surprise.

Thus carefully guarded by the bushman, the astronomers constructed their triangle. According to Emery's calculations it would carry them nearly to the twentieth parallel, the proposed limit of their arc. A few more triangles on the other side of Lake Ngami would complete their eighth degree; to verify the calculations, a new base would subsequently be measured directly on the ground, and the great enterprise would be ended. The ardour of the astronomers increased as they approached the fulfilment of their task.

Meanwhile there was considerable curiosity as to what the Russians on their side had accomplished. For six months the members of the commission had been separated, and it seemed probable to the English that the Russians had not suffered so much from heat and thirst, since their course had lain nearer Livingstone's route, and therefore in less arid regions. After leaving Kolobeng they would come across various villages to the right of their meridian, where they could easily revictual their caravan. But still it was not unlikely that in this less arid, though more frequented country, Matthew Strux's little band had been more exposed to the attacks of the plundering Makololos, and this was the more probable, since they seemed to have abandoned the pursuit of the English caravan.

Although the Colonel, ever engrossed, had no thought to bestow on these things, Sir John and Emery had often discussed the doings of their former comrades. They wondered whether they would come across them again, and whether they would find that they had obtained the same mathematical result as themselves, and whether the two computations of a degree in South Africa would be identical. Emery did not cease to entertain kind memories of his friend, knowing well that Zorn, for his part, would never forget him.

The measurement of the angles was now resumed. To obtain the angle at the station they now occupied, they had to observe two points of sight. One of these was formed by the conical summit of Mount Scorzef, and the other by a sharp peak three or four miles to the left of the meridian, whose direction was easily obtained by one of the telescopes of the repeating circle. Mount Scorzef was much more distant; its position would compel the observers to diverge considerably to the right of the meridian, but on examination they found they had no other choice. The station was therefore observed with the second telescope of the repeating circle, and the angular distance between Mount Scorzef and the smaller peak was obtained.

Notwithstanding the impatience of the natives. Colonel Everest, as calmly as though he were in his own observatory, made many successive registries from the graduated circle of his telescope, and then, by taking the average of all his readings, he obtained a result rigorously exact.

The day glided on, and it was not until the darkness prevented the reading of the instruments, that the Colonel brought his observations to an end, saying, —

“I am at your orders, Mokoum; we will start as soon as you like.”

“And none too soon,” replied Mokoum; “better had we accomplished our journey by daylight.”

The proposal to start met with unanimous approval, and by seven o’clock the thirsty party were once more on the march.

Some strange foreboding seemed weighing on the mind of Mokoum, and he urged the three Europeans to look carefully to their rifles and to be well provided with ammunition. The night grew dark, the moon and stars were repeatedly veiled in mist, but the atmosphere near the ground was clear. The bushman’s keen vision was ever watching the flanks and front of the caravan, and his unwonted disquietude could not fail to be noticed by Sir John, who was likewise on the watch. They toiled through the weary evening, occasionally stopping to gather together the loiterers, and at ten o’clock they were still six miles from the lake. The animals gasped for breath in an atmosphere so dry that the hygrometer could not have detected a trace of moisture.

Mokoum was indefatigable in his endeavours to keep the disorganized party close together; but, in spite of his remonstrances, the caravan no longer presented a compact nucleus. Men and beasts stretched out into a long file, and some oxen had sunk exhausted to the ground. The dismounted horsemen could hardly drag themselves along, and any stragglers could have been easily carried off by the smallest band of natives. Mokoum went in evident anxiety from one to another, and with word and gestures tried to rally the troop; but his success was far from complete, and already, without his knowledge, some of his men were missing.

By eleven o’clock the foremost waggons were hardly more than three miles from their destination. In the gloom of night Mount Scorzef stood out distinctly in its solitary height, like an enormous pyramid, and the obscurity made its dimensions appear greater than they actually were. Unless Mokoum were mistaken, Lake Ngami lay just behind Mount Scorzef, so that the caravan must pass round its base in order to reach the tract of fresh water by the shortest route.

The bushman, in company with the three Europeans, took the lead, and prepared to turn to the left, when suddenly some distinct, though distant reports, arrested their attention. They reined in their horses, and listened with a natural anxiety. In a country where the natives use only lances and arrows the report of European fire-arms was rather startling. The Colonel and Sir John simultaneously asked the bushman from whence the sound could proceed. Mokoum asserted that he could perceive a light in the shadow at the summit of Mount Scorzef, and that he had no doubt that the Makololos were attacking a party of Europeans.

“Europeans!” cried Emery.

“Yes,” replied Mokoum; “these reports can only be produced by European weapons.”

“But what Europeans could they be?” began Sir John.

“Be who they may,” broke in the Colonel, “we must go to their assistance.”

“Yes; come on,” said Emery, with no little excitement.

Before setting off for the mountain, Mokoum, for the last time, tried to rally the small band. But when the bushman turned round the caravan was dispersed, the horses unyoked, the waggons forsaken, and a few scattered shadows were flying along the plain towards the south.

“The cowards!” he cried; then turning to the English, he said, “Well, we must go on.”

The Englishmen and the bushman, gathering up all the remaining strength of their horses, darted on to the north. After a while they could plainly distinguish the war-cry of the Makololos. Whatever was their number, it was evident they were making an attack on Mount Scorzef from the summit of which the flashes of fire continued. Groups of men could be faintly distinguished ascending the sides. Soon the Colonel and his companions were on the rear of the besiegers. Abandoning their worn-out steeds, and shouting loud enough to be heard by the besieged, they fired at the mass of natives. The rapidity with which they re-loaded caused the Makololos to imagine themselves assailed by a large troop. The sudden attack surprised them, and, letting fly a shower of arrows and assagais, they retreated. Without losing a moment, the Colonel, Sir John, Emery, the bushman, and the sailors, never desisting from firing, darted among the group of natives, of whose bodies no less than fifteen soon strewed the ground.

The Makololos divided. The Europeans rushed into the gap, and, overpowering the foremost, ascended the slope backwards. In a few minutes they had reached the summit, which was now entirely in darkness, the besieged having suspended their fire for fear of injuring those who had come so opportunely to their aid.

They were the Russian astronomers. Strux, Palander, Zorn, and their five sailors, all were there: but of all the natives belonging to their caravan there remained but the faithful pioneer. The Bochjesmen had been as faithless to them as they had been to the English.

The instant the Colonel appeared, Strux darted from the top of a low wall that crowned the summit.

“The English!” he cried.

“Yes,” replied the Colonel gravely; “but now neither Russian nor English. Nationalities be forgotten; for mutual defence we are kinsmen, in that we are one and all Europeans!”

CHAPTER XIX.

SCIENCE UNDAUNTED.

Noble words were those just uttered by the Colonel. In the face of the Makololos it was no time for hesitation or discussion, and English and Russians, forgetting their national quarrel, were now re-united for mutual defence more firmly than ever. Emery and Zorn had warmly greeted each other, and the others had sealed their new alliance with a grasp of the hand.

The first care of the English was to quench their thirst. Water, drawn from the lake, was plentiful in the Russian camp. Then, as soon as the Makololos were quiet enough to afford some respite, the astronomers, sheltered by a sort of casemate forming part of a deserted fortress, talked of all that had happened since their separation at Kolobeng.

It appeared that the same reason had brought the Russians so far to the left of their meridian as had caused the English to turn to the right of theirs. Mount Scorzef, halfway between the two arcs, was the only height in that district which would serve as a station on the banks of Lake Ngami. Each of the meridians crossed the lake, whose opposite shores it was necessary to unite trigonometrically by a large triangle. Naturally, therefore, the two rival expeditions met on the only mountain which could serve their purpose.

Matthew Strux then gave some details of his operations. After leaving Kolobeng, the Russian party had continued without irregularity. The old meridian, which had fallen by lot to the Russians, fell across a fertile and slightly undulated country, which offered every facility for the formation of the triangles. Like the English, they had suffered from the heat, but they had experienced no hardship from the want of water. Streams were abundant, and kept up a wholesome moisture. The horses and oxen had roamed over an immense pasturage, across verdant prairies broken by forests and underwood. The wild animals by night had been safely kept at a distance by sentinels and fires, nor had any natives been seen except those stationary in the villages in which Dr. Livingstone had always found a hospitable reception. All through the journey the Bochjesmen of the caravan had given no cause for complaint, nor was it until the previous day, when the Makololos to the number of 200 or 300 had appeared on the plain, that they had shown themselves faithless, and deserted. For thirty-six hours the expedition had now occupied the little fortress. The Makololos had attacked them in the evening, after plundering the waggons left at the foot of the hill. The instruments fortunately, having been carried into the fort, were secure. The steamboat had also escaped the ravages of the natives; it had been immediately put together by the sailors, and was now at anchor in a little creek of Lake Ngami, behind the enormous rocks that formed the base of the mountain. Mount Scorzef sloped with sudden abruptness down to the lake, and there was no danger of an attack from that side.

Such was Matthew Strux’s account. Colonel Everest, in his turn, related the incidents of his march, the fatigues and difficulties, and the revolt of the Bochjesmen, and it was found by comparison that the Russians had had a less harassing journey than their rivals.

The night of the 21st passed quietly. The bushman and sailors kept watch under the walls of the fort; the Makololos on their part did not renew any attack, but the bivouac-fires at the foot of the mountain proved that they had not relinquished their project.

At daybreak the Europeans left their casemate for the purpose of reconnoitring the plain. The early morning light illumined the vast extent of country as far as the horizon. Towards the south lay the desert, with its burnt brown grass and barren aspect. Close under the mountain was the circular camp, containing a swarm of 400 to 500 natives. The fires were still alight, and some pieces of venison broiling on the hot embers. The encampment was something more than temporary; the Makololos were evidently determined not to abandon their prey. Either vengeance or an instinctive thirst for blood appeared to be prompting them, since all the valuables of both caravans, the waggons, horses, oxen, and provisions, had fallen into their power; or perhaps it might be that they coveted the fire-arms which the Europeans carried, and of which they made such terrible use.

The united English and Russians held a long consultation with the bushman, and it was felt that they could not relax their watch until they should arrive at a definite decision. This decision must depend on a variety of circumstances, and first of all it was necessary to understand exactly the position of Mount Scorzef.

The mountain overlooked to the south, east, and west the vast desert which the astronomers, having traversed it, knew extended southwards to the karroo. In the west could be discerned the faint outlines of the hills bordering the fertile country of the Makololos, one of whose capitals, Maketo, lies about a hundred miles north-west of Lake Ngami.

To the north the mountain commanded a country which was a great contrast to the arid steppes of the south. There were water, trees, and pasturage. For a hundred miles east and west lay the wide Eake Ngami, while from north to south its length was not more than 30 to 40 miles. Beyond appeared a gentle, undulated country, enriched with forests and watered by the affluents of the Zambesi, and shut in to the extreme north by a low chain of mountains. This wide oasis was caused by the great artery, the Zambesi, which is to South Africa what the Danube is to Europe, or the Amazon to South America.

The side of the mountain towards the lake, steep as it was, was not so steep but that the sailors could accomplish an ascent and descent by a narrow way which passed from point to point. They thus contrived to reach the spot where the “Queen and Czar” lay hid, and, obtaining a supply of water, enabled the little garrison to hold out in the deserted fort as long as their provisions lasted.

The astronomers wondered why this little fort had been placed on the top of the mountain. Mokoum, who had visited the country as Livingstone’s guide, explained that formerly the neighbourhood of Lake Ngami was frequented by traders in ivory and ebony. The ivory was furnished by the elephants and rhinoceroses; but the ebony trade was but too often another name for that traffic in human beings which is still carried on by the slave-traders in the region of the Zambesi. A great number of prisoners are made in the wars and pillages in the interior of the country, and these prisoners are sold as slaves. Mount Scorzef had been a centre of encampment for the ivory-traders, and it was there that they had been accustomed to rest before descending the Zambesi. They had fortified their position, to protect themselves and their slaves from depredations, since it was not an uncommon occurrence for the prisoners to be recaptured for fresh sale by the very men who had recently sold them. The route of the traders was now changed; they no longer passed the shores of the lake, and the little fort was falling into ruins. All that remained was an enclosure in the form of the sector of a circle, from the centre of which rose a small casemated redoubt, pierced with loop-holes, and surmounted by a small wooden turret.

But notwithstanding the condition of ruin into which it had fallen, the fortress offered the Europeans a welcome retreat. Behind the thick sandstone walls, and armed with their rapidly-loading guns, they were confident that they could keep back an army of Makololos, and, unless their provisions and ammunition failed, they would be able to complete their observations.

At present they had plenty of ammunition; the coffer in which it was contained had been placed on the same waggon which carried the steamboat, and had therefore escaped the rapacity of the natives.

The great difficulty would be the possible failure of provisions. The Colonel and Strux made a careful inspection of the store, and found that there was only enough to last the eighteen men for two days. After a short breakfast, the astronomers and the bushman, leaving the sailors still to keep watch round the walls, assembled in the redoubt to discuss their situation.

“I cannot understand,” said Mokoum, “why you are so uneasy. You say that we have only provisions for two days; but why stay here? Let us leave to-morrow, or even to-day. The Makololos need not hinder us; they could not cross the lake, and in the steamboat we may reach the northern shore in a few hours.”

The astronomers looked at each other; the idea, natural as it was, had not struck them before. Sir John was the first to speak.

“But we have not yet completed the measurement of our meridian.”

“Will the Makololos have any regard for your meridian?” asked the hunter.

"Very likely not," answered Sir John; "but *we* have a regard for it, and will not leave our undertaking incomplete. I am sure my colleagues agree with me."

"Yes," said the Colonel, speaking for all; "as long as one of us survives, and is able to put his eye to his telescope, the survey shall go on. If necessary, we will take our observations with our instrument in one hand and our gun in the other, even to the last extremity."

The energetic philosophers shouted out their resolution to proceed at every hazard.

When it was thus decided that the survey should at all risks be continued, the question arose as to the choice of the next station,

"Although there will be a difficulty," said Strux, "in joining Mount Scorzef trigonometrically to a station to the north of the lake, it is not impracticable. I have fixed on a peak in the extreme north-east, so that the side of the triangle will cross the lake obliquely."

"Well," said the Colonel, "if the peak exists, I do not see any difficulty."

"The only difficulty," replied Strux, "consists in the distance."

"What is the distance?"

"Over a hundred miles, and a lighted signal must be carried to the top of the peak."

"Assuredly that can be done," said the Colonel.

"And all that time, how are we to defend ourselves against the Makololos?" asked the bushman.

"We will manage that too."

Mokoum said that he would obey the Colonel's orders, and the conversation ended. The whole party left the casemate, and Strux pointed out the peak he had chosen. It was the conical peak of Volquiria, 300 feet high, and just visible in the horizon. Notwithstanding the distance, a powerful reflector could thence be discerned by means of a magnifying telescope, and the curvature of the earth's surface, which Strux had taken into account, would not be any obstacle. The real difficulty was how the lamp should be hoisted to the top of the mountain. The angle made at Mount Scorzef with Mount Volquiria and the preceding station would probably complete the measurement of the meridian, so that the operation was all important, Zorn and Emery offered to take this journey of a hundred miles in an unknown country, and, accompanied by the pioneer, prepared to start.

One of the canoes of birch-bark, which are manufactured by the natives with great dexterity, would be sufficient to carry them over the lake. Mokoum and the pioneer descended to the shore, where were growing some dwarf birches, and in a very short time had accomplished their task, and prepared the canoe.

At eight o'clock in the evening the newly-constructed craft was loaded with instruments, the apparatus for the reverberator, provisions, arms, and ammunition. It was arranged that the astronomers should meet again in a small creek known to both Mokoum and the pioneer; it was also agreed that as soon as the reverberator on Mount Volquiria should be perceived, Colonel Everest should light a signal on Mount Scorzef, so that Emery and Zorn, in their turn, might take the direction.

The young men took leave of their colleagues, and descended the mountain in the obscurity of night, having been preceded by the pioneer and two sailors, one English and one Russian. The mooring was loosened, and the frail boat turned quietly across the lake.

CHAPTER XX.

STANDING A SIEGE.

Not without anxiety had the astronomers witnessed the departure of their young colleagues: they could not tell what dangers awaited them in that unknown country. Mokoum tried to reassure them by praising the courage of the pioneer, and besides, he said, the Makololos were too much occupied around Mount Scorzef to beat the country to the north of Lake Ngami. He instinctively felt that the Colonel and his party were in a more dangerous position than the two young astronomers.

The sailors and Mokoum kept watch in turns through the night. But “the reptiles,” as the bushman termed the Makololos, did not venture another attack. They seemed to be waiting for reinforcements, in order to invade the mountain from all sides, and overcome by their numbers the resistance of the besieged.

The hunter was not mistaken in his conjectures; and when daylight appeared Colonel Everest perceived a sensible increase in the number of the natives. Their camp, carefully arranged round the base of the mountain, shut off escape on every side except that towards the lake. This side could not be invested, so that unless unforeseen circumstances occurred, retreat to the water was always practicable. But the Europeans had no thought of escaping: they occupied a post of honour, and were all agreed that it must not be abandoned. No allusion was ever made to the war between England and Russia, and both parties strove together to accomplish their scientific labour.

The interval of waiting for the signal on Mount Volquiria was employed in completing the measurement of the preceding triangle and in finding the exact latitude of Mount Scorzcf by means of the altitudes of the stars.

Mokoum was called upon to say what would be the shortest possible space of time that must elapse before Emery and Zorn could reach Mount Volquiria. He replied that as the journey was to be performed on foot, and the country was continually crossed by rivers, he did not think that they could arrive in less than five days at least. They therefore adopted a maximum of six days, and portioned out their supplies to serve for that period. Their reserve was very limited, consisting only of a few pounds of biscuit, preserved meat, and pemmican, and had already been diminished by the portion furnished to the pioneer's little troop. Colonel Everest and his companions, anxiously anticipating the sixth day, decided that the daily ration must be reduced to a third of their previous allowance. The thirteen men would doubtless suffer much from this small amount of nourishment, but there was an unflinching determination to bear up bravely.

“Besides,” said Sir John, “we have room enough to hunt.”

Mokoum shook his head doubtfully: he thought that game would be rare on the mountain. However, his gun need not be idle, and leaving the astronomers to examine and correct their registers, he set off with Sir John.

The Makololos were quietly encamped, and apparently patient in their intention of reducing the besieged by famine. The two hunters reconnoitred the mountain. The fort occupied a space of ground measuring not more than a quarter of a mile in its widest part. The soil was covered with flints and grass, dotted here and there with low shrubs, and bright with gladioli. Red heaths, silvery-leaved protese, and ericæ with wavy fronds, formed the flora of the mountain, and beneath the angles formed by the projections of rock sprung up thorny bushes ten feet high, with bunches of a sweet-smelling white flower. The bushman was ignorant of its name, but it was doubtless the *Arduina bispinosa*, which bears fruit like the barberry.

After an hour's search Sir John had seen no trace of game. Some little birds with dark wings and red beaks flew out of the bushes, but at the first shot they disappeared, no more to return. It was evident that the garrison must not depend on the products of the chase for sustenance.

"We can fish in the lake," said Sir John, standing and contemplating the fine extent of water.

"To fish without net or line," replied the bushman, "is as difficult as to lay hands on birds on the wing. But we will not despair; chance has hitherto favoured us."

"Chance! nay, not chance, but Providence," said Sir John. "That does not forsake us; it has brought us to the Russians, and will no doubt carry us on to our goal."

"And will Providence feed us, Sir John?" asked the bushman.

"No doubt, Mokoum," said Sir John encouragingly; and the bushman thought to himself that no blind trust in Providence should prevent him from using his own best exertions.

The 25th brought no change in the relative positions of besiegers and besieged. The Makololos, having brought in the plundered waggons, remained in their camp. Herds and flocks were grazing in the pasturages at the foot of the mountain, and some women and children, who had joined the tribe, went about and pursued their ordinary occupations. From time to time, some chief, recognizable by the richness of the skins which he wore, ascended the slope of the mountain and tried to examine the approaches to the summit; but the report of a rifle always took him speedily back to the plain. The Makololos then raised their war-cry, brandished their assagais, and all became quiet.

The following day the natives made a more serious attempt, and about fifty of them at once scaled three sides of the mountain. The whole garrison turned out to the foot of the enclosure, and the European arms caused considerable ravage among the Makololos. Five or six were killed, and the rest abandoned their project, but it was quite evident that if several hundred were to assault the mountain simultaneously, the besieged would find it difficult to face them on all sides. Sir John now thought of the mitrailleuse, which was the principal weapon of the "Queen and Czar," and proposed that it should be brought up to defend the front of the fortress. It was a difficult task to hoist the machine up the rocks, which in some parts were almost perpendicular; but the sailors showed themselves so agile and daring, that in the course of the day the mitrailleuse was installed in the embrasure of the embattled enclosure. Thence, its twenty-five muzzles, arranged in the shape of a fan, would cover the front of the fort, and the natives would thus early make acquaintance with the engine of death which in after-years was to effect such devastation amongst the civilized armies of the European continent.

The dry air and clear sky had enabled the astronomers each night to pursue their observations. They had found the latitude of Mount Scorzef to be 19°{37}, which result confirmed their opinion that they were less than half a degree from the northern extremity of their meridian, and that consequently the next triangle would complete the series.

The night passed without any fresh alarm. If circumstances had favoured the pioneer, he and his companions would reach Mount Volquiria the following day, so that the astronomers kept unflagging watch through the next night for the appearance of the light. Strux and the Colonel had already pointed the telescope to the peak, so that it was continuously embraced in the field of the object-glass, otherwise it would have been difficult to discern on a dark night; as it was, the light would doubtless be perceived immediately on its appearance.

All day Sir John beat fruitlessly the bushes and long grass. He could not unearth a single animal that was fit to eat. The very birds, disturbed from their retreats, had gone to the underwood on the shore for shelter. Sir John was extremely vexed, inasmuch as he was not hunting merely for personal gratification, but to supply the necessities of the party. Perhaps he himself suffered from hunger more than his three colleagues, whose attention was more riveted by their application to science. The sailors and Mokoum suffered equally with Sir John. One more day and their scanty reserve would be at an end, and if the pioneer’s expedition were delayed, they would soon be exposed to a severe extremity of hunger.

The dark, calm night was passed in watching; but the horizon remained wrapped in shade, and no light appeared in the object-glass of the telescope. The minimum of time, however, allowed to the expedition had hardly expired, and they felt that they were bound to exhibit patience for a while.

The next day the garrison ate their last morsel of meat and biscuit; but their courage did not fail, and, though they should be obliged to feed on what herbs they could gather, they were resolved to hold out.

The succeeding night passed without any result. More than once the astronomers believed that they had seen the light, but it was always proved to be a star in the misty horizon.

On the 1st of March they were compelled absolutely to fast. Having been for some time accustomed to meagre and inadequate nourishment, they passed the first day without much acute suffering, but on the morrow they began to experience the pangs of craving. Sir John and Mokoum, haggard-eyed, and sensitive to the gnawings of hunger, wandered over the top of the mountain; but no game whatever was to be seen. They began to think that, as the Colonel had said, they should literally have to feed on grass. If they only had the stomachs of ruminants, thought poor Sir John, as he eyed the abundant pasturage, they would be able to hold out; but still no game, still not even a bird! He gazed intently over the lake, in which the sailors had fished in vain; and it was impossible to get near the wary aquatic birds that skimmed the tranquil waters.

At last, worn out with fatigue, Sir John and his companion lay down on the grass at the foot of a mound of earth some five or six feet high. Here they fell, not precisely into a sleep, but into a heavy torpor, which for a while benumbed their sufferings. How long this drowsiness would have lasted neither of them could have said; but in about an hour Sir John was aroused by a disagreeable pricking. He tried to slumber again, but the pricking continued, and at last impatiently he opened his eyes.

He was entirely covered, face, hands, and clothes, with swarms of white ants. He started to his feet, and his sudden movement aroused the bushman, who was covered in the same way. But to Sir John’s great surprise, the bushman, instead of shaking off the insects, carried them by handfuls to his mouth, and devoured them greedily. Sir John’s first sensation was disgust at his voracity.

“Come, eat, do as I do!” said the bushman; “it is the rice of the Bochjesmen.”

And that was, in truth, the native term for these insects. The Bochjesmen feed on both the black and white species, but they consider the white to be of superior quality. The only drawback is, that they must be swallowed in large quantities to satisfy any longing for food. The Africans generally mix them with the gum of the mimosa, thus rendering them capable of affording a less unsubstantial meal; but as the mimosa did not grow on Mount Scorzef, the bushman had to content himself with his rice *au naturel*.

Sir John, in spite of his repugnance, resolved to imitate him. The insects poured forth by thousands from their enormous ant-hill, which was none other than the mound of earth by which the weary sufferers had reclined. Sir John took them by handfuls, and carried them to his lips; he did not dislike the flavour, which was a grateful acid; and gradually he felt his hunger moderated.

Mokoum did not forget his companions in misfortune. He ran to the fort, and brought out the garrison. The sailors were without difficulty induced to attack the singular food, and although the astronomers hesitated a moment, yet, encouraged by Sir John’s example, and half dead with inanition, they soon at least assuaged the intenseness of their hunger by devouring considerable quantities of these ants.

But an unexpected incident procured for the starving men a more solid meal. In order to lay in a provision of the insects, Mokoum resolved to destroy one side of the enormous ant-hill. It consisted of a central conical mound, with smaller cones arranged at intervals round its base. The hunter had already made several blows with his hatchet, when a singular grunting sound from the centre attracted his attention: he paused in his work of destruction, and listened, while his companions watched him in silence. He struck a few more blows, and the groan was repeated more audibly than before. The bushman rubbed his hands, whilst his eyes evidently sparkled. Once more attacking the ant-hill, he opened a cavity about a foot wide. The ants were escaping on every side; but of them he took no heed, leaving the sailors to collect them in sacks. All at once a strange animal appeared at the mouth of the hole. It was a quadruped with a long snout, small mouth, and flexible tongue, which protruded to a great length; its ears were straight, its legs short, and its tail long and pointed. Long grey bristles with a reddish tinge covered its lank body, and its feet were armed with enormous claws. Mokoum killed it at once with a sharp blow on the snout. “There is our supper,” he said. “It has been some time coming, but it will not taste the worse for that. Now for a fire, and a ramrod for a spit, and we will feast as we have never feasted in our lives.”

The bushman speedily began to skin the animal, which was a species of octeropus or ant-eater, very common in South Africa, and known to the Dutch at the Cape under the name of “earth-pig.” Swarms of ants are devoured by this creature, which catches them by means of its long glutinous tongue.

The meal was soon cooked; perhaps it would have been better for a few more turns of the spit, but the hungry men were impatient. The firm, wholesome flesh was declared to be excellent, although slightly impregnated with the acid of the ants.

After the repast the Europeans felt re-invigorated, and animated with more steadfast purpose to persevere; and in truth there was need of encouragement. All through the following night no light appeared on Mount Volquiria.

CHAPTER XXI.

SUSPENSE.

It was now the ninth day since Zorn and Emery had started on their expedition. Their colleagues, detained on the summit of Mount Scorzef, began to give way to the fear that they had fallen into some irretrievable misfortune. They were all well aware that the young astronomers would omit nothing that lay in their power to ensure the success of their enterprise, and they dreaded lest their courageous spirit should have exposed them to danger, or betrayed them into the hands of the wandering tribes. They waited always impatiently for the moment when the sun sank behind the horizon, that they might begin their nightly watch, and then all their hopes seemed concentrated on the field of their telescope.

All through the 3rd of March, wandering up and down the slopes, hardly exchanging a word, they suffered as they had never suffered before; not even the heat and fatigues of the desert, nor the tortures of thirst, had equalled the pain that arose from their apprehensions. The last morsel of the ant-eater had been devoured, and nothing now remained but the insufficient nourishment afforded by the ants.

Night came, dark and calm, and extremely favourable to their operations; but although the Colonel and Strux watched alternately with the utmost perseverance, no light appeared, and the sun's rays soon rendered any longer observations futile.

There was still nothing immediate to fear from the Makololos; they seemed resolved to reduce the besieged by famine, and it seemed hardly likely that they would desist from their project. The unhappy Europeans were tortured afresh with hunger, and could only diminish their sufferings by devouring the bulbs of the gladioli that sprang up between the rocks.

Yet they were hardly prisoners; their detention was voluntary. At any moment the steamboat would have carried them to a fertile land, where game and fruit abounded. Several times they discussed the propriety of sending Mokoum to the northern shore to hunt for the little garrison; but this manœuvre might be discovered by the natives; and there would be a risk to the steam-vessel, and consequently to the whole party, in the event of finding other hostile tribes to the north of the lake: accordingly the proposal was rejected, and it was decided that they must abide in company, and that all or none must depart. To leave Mount Scorzef before the observations were complete was an idea that was not entertained for a moment; the astronomers were determined to wait patiently until the faintest hope of success should be extinguished.

“We are no worse off,” remarked the Colonel in the course of the day to his assembled companions, “than Arago, Biot, and Rodriguez were when they were measuring the arc from Dunkirk to Ivica: they were uniting the Spanish coast and the island by a triangle of which the sides were more than eighty miles long. Rodriguez was installed on an isolated peak, and kept up lighted lamps at night, while the French astronomers lived in tents a hundred miles away in the desert of Las Palmas. For sixty nights Arago and Biot watched for the signal, and, discouraged at last, were about to renounce their labour, when, on the sixty-first night, appeared a light, which it was impossible to confound with a star. Surely, gentlemen, if those French astronomers could watch for sixty-one nights in the interests of science, we English and Russians must not give up at the end of nine.”

The Colonel’s companions most heartily approved the sentiment; but they could have said that Arago and Biot did not endure the tortures of hunger during their long vigil.

In the course of the day Mokoum perceived an unusual agitation in the Makololo camp. He thought at first that they were about to raise the siege, but, after some contemplation, he discovered that their intentions were evidently hostile, and that they would probably assault the mountain in the course of the night. All the women and children, under the protection of a few men, left the encampment, and turned eastward to the shores of the lake. It was probable that the natives were about to make a last attack on the fortress before retiring finally to Maketo. The bushman communicated his opinion to the Europeans. They resolved to keep a closer watch all night, and to have their guns in readiness. The enclosure of the fort was broken in several places, and as the number of the natives was now largely increased they would find no difficulty in forcing their way through the gaps. Colonel Everest therefore thought it prudent to have the steamboat in readiness for a retreat. The engineer received orders to light the fire, but not until sunset, lest the smoke should reveal the presence of the vessel to the natives; and to keep up the steam, in order to start at the first signal. The evening repast was composed of white ants and gladiolus bulbs — a meagre supper for men about to fight with several hundred savages; but they were resolute, and staunchly awaited the engagement which appeared imminent.

Towards six o’clock, when night was coming on with its tropical celerity, the engineer descended the mountain, and proceeded to light the fire of the steamboat. It was still the Colonel’s intention not to effect an escape until the last extremity: moreover, he was firm in his determination to abide until the night was advanced, that he might give himself the last chance of observing the signal from Mount Volquiria. The sailors were placed at the foot of the rampart, with orders to defend the breaches to the last. All arms were ready, and the mitrailleuse, armed with the heaviest ammunition that they had in store, spread its formidable mouth across the embrasure.

For several hours the Colonel and Strux, posted in the narrow donjon, kept a constant watch on the peak of Volquiria. The horizon was dark, while the finest of the southern constellations were resplendent in the zenith. There was no wind, and not a sound broke the imposing stillness of nature. The bushman, however, posted on a projection of rock, heard sounds which gradually became more distinct. He was not mistaken; the Makololos were at length commencing their assault on the mountain.

Until ten o’clock the assailants did not move; their fires were extinguished, and camp and plain were alike wrapped in obscurity. Suddenly Mokoum saw shadows moving up the mountain, till the besiegers seemed but a few hundred feet from the plateau on which stood the fort.

“Now then, quick and ready!” cried Mokoum.

The garrison immediately advanced to the south side of the fort, and opened a running fire on the assailants. The Makololos answered by a war-cry, and, in spite of the firing, continued to advance. In the light caused by the flash of the guns, the Europeans perceived such swarms of natives that resistance seemed impossible. But still they trusted that their well-directed balls were doing considerable execution, and they discerned that not a few of the natives were rolling down the sides of the mountam. Hitherto, however, nothing arrested them: with savage cries they continued to press on in compacted order, without even waiting to hurl a single dart. Colonel Everest put himself at the head of his little troop, who seconded him admirably, not excepting Palander, who probably was handling a gun for almost the first time. Sir John, now on one rock now on another, sometimes kneeling sometimes lying, did wonders, and his gun, heated with the rapidity of the repeated loading, began to burn his hands. Mokoum, as ever, was patient, bold, and undaunted in his confidence.

But the valour and precision of the besieged could avail nothing against the torrent of numbers. Where one native fell, he was replaced by twenty more, and, after a somewhat prolonged opposition, Colonel Everest felt that he must be overpowered. Not only did the natives swarm up the south slope of the mountain, but they made an ascent also by the side slopes. They did not hesitate to use the dead bodies of the fallen as stepping-stones, and they even lifted them up, and sheltered themselves behind them, as they mounted. The scene revealed by the flash of the fire-arms was appalling, and the Europeans saw enough to make them fully aware that they could expect no quarter, and that they were being assaulted by barbarians as savage as tigers.

At half-past ten the foremost natives had reached the plateau. The besieged, who were still uninjured (the natives not yet having employed their arrows and assagais), were thoroughly conscious they were impotent to carry on a combat hand to hand. The Colonel, in a calm, clear voice that could be heard above the tumult, gave the order to retire. With a last discharge the little band withdrew behind the walls. Loud cries greeted their retreat, and the natives immediately made a nearer approach in their attempt to scale the central breach.

A strange and unlooked for reception awaited them. Suddenly at first, and subsequently repeated at intervals but of a few minutes, there was a growling reverberation as of rolling thunder. The sinister sound was the report of the exploding mitrailleuse, which Sir John had been prepared to employ, and now worked with all his energy. Its twenty-five muzzles spread over a wide range, and the balls, continually supplied by a self-adjusting arrangement, fell like hail among the assailants. The natives, swept down at each discharge, responded at first with a howl and then with a harmless shower of arrows.

“She plays well,” said the bushman, approaching Sir John, “When you have played your tune, let me play mine.”

But there was no need for Sir John to be relieved; the mitrailleuse was soon silent. The Makololos were struck with consternation, and had sought shelter from the torrent of grape-shot, having retired under the flanks of the fort, leaving the plateau strewn with numbers of their dead.

In this instant of respite the Colonel and Strux regained the donjon, and there, collecting themselves to a composure as complete as if they were under the dome of an observatory, they kept a constant eye upon their telescope, and scanned the peak of Volquiria. When, after a short period of rest, the yells of the Makololos made them aware that the combat was renewed, they only persevered in their determination, and resolved that they would alternately remain to guard their invaluable instrument.

The combat, in truth, had been renewed. The range of the mitrailleuse was inadequate to reach all the natives, who, uttering their cries of mortal vengeance, rallied again, and swarmed up every opening. The besieged, protected by their fire-arms, defended the breaches foot by foot; they had only received a few scratches from the points of the assagais, and were able to continue the fight for half an hour with unabated ardour.

Towards half-past eleven, while the Colonel was in the thick of the fray, in the middle of an angry fusillade, Matthew Strux appeared at his side. His eye was wild and radiant: an arrow had just pierced his hat and quivered above his head.

“The signal! the signal!” he cried.

The Colonel was incredulous, but ascertaining the correctness of the welcome announcement, discharged his rifle for the last time, and with an exuberant shout of rejoicing, rushed towards the donjon, followed by his intrepid colleague. There, kneeling down, he placed his eye to the telescope, and perceived with the utmost delight the signal, so long delayed and yet so patiently expected.

It was truly a marvellous sight to see these two astronomers work during the tumult of the conflict. The natives had by their numbers forced the enclosure, and Sir John and the bushman were contending for every step. The Europeans fought with their balls and hatchets, while the Makololos responded with their arrows and assagais.

Meanwhile the Colonel and Strux intently continued their observations, and Palander, equally composed, noted down their oft-repeated readings. More than once an arrow grazed their head, and broke against the inner wall of the donjon. But their eye was ever fixed on the signal, and reading the indications of the vernier, they incessantly verified each other’s calculations.

“Only once more,” said Strux, sliding the telescope along the graduated scale. An instant later, and it would have been too late for any observations, but the direction of the light was calculated to the minutest fraction of a second; and at that very instant an enormous stone, hurled by a native, sent the register flying from Palander’s hands, and smashed the repeating-circle.

They must now fly in order to save the result which they had obtained at the cost of such continuous labour. The natives had already penetrated the casemate, and might at any moment appear in the donjon. The Colonel and his colleagues caught up their guns, and Palander his precious register, and all escaped through one of the breaches. Their companions, some slightly wounded, were ready to cover their retreat, but just as they were about to descend the north side of the mountain, Strux remembered that they had failed to kindle the signal. In fact, for the completion of the survey, it was necessary that the two astronomers on Mount Volquiria should in their turn observe the summit of Mount Scorzef, and were doubtless anxiously expecting the answering light.

The Colonel recognized the imperative necessity for yet one more effort, and whilst his companions, with almost superhuman energy, repulsed the natives, he re-entered the donjon. This donjon was formed of an intricate framework of dry wood, which would readily ignite by the application of a flame. The Colonel set it alight with the powder from the priming of his gun, and, rushing out, rejoined his companions. In a few moments, rolling their mitrailleuse before them, the Europeans, under a shower of arrows and various missiles, were descending the mountain, and, in their turn, driving back the natives with a deadly fire, reached the steamboat. The engineer, according to orders, had kept up the steam. The mooring was loosened, the screw set in motion, and the “Queen and Czar” advanced rapidly over the dark waters. They were shortly far enough out to see the summit of the mountain. The donjon was blazing like a beacon, and its light would be easily discerned from the peak of Volquiria. A resounding cheer of triumph from English and Russians greeted the bonfire they had left behind.

Emery and Zorn would have no cause for complaint; they had exhibited the twinkling of a star, and had been answered by the glowing of a sun.

CHAPTER XXII.

HIDE AND SEEK.

When daylight re-appeared, the vessel was nearing the northern shore of the lake. There was no trace of natives, consequently the Colonel and his companions, who had been ready armed, laid aside their guns as the “Queen and Czar” drew up in a little bay hollowed in the rocks.

The bushman, Sir John, and one of the sailors set out at once to reconnoitre the neighbourhood. They could perceive no sign of Makololos, and fortunately they found game in abundance. Troops of antelopes grazed in the long grass and in the shelter of the thickets, and a number of aquatic birds frequented the shores of the lake. The hunters returned with ample provision, and the whole party could enjoy the savoury venison, a supply of which was now unlikely to fail them again.

The camp was arranged under the great willows near the lake, on the banks of a small river. The Colonel and Strux had arranged to meet on the northern shore with the pioneer’s little party, and the rest afforded by the few days of expectation was gratefully enjoyed by all. Palander employed himself in rectifying and adjusting the results of the latest observations, while Mokoum and Sir John hunted most vigorously over the fertile, well-watered country, abounding in game, of which the Englishman would have been delighted, had it been in his power, to complete a purchase on behalf of the British government.

Three days after, on the 8th of March, some gun-shots announced the arrival of the remainder of the party for whom they tarried. Emery, Zorn, the two sailors, and the pioneer, were all in perfect health. Their theodolite, the only instrument remaining to the Commission, was safe.

The young astronomers and their companions were received with joyous congratulations. In a few words they related that their journey had not been devoid of difficulty. For two days they had lost their way in the forests that skirted the mountainous district, and with only the vague indications of the compass they would never have reached Mount Volquiria, if it had not been for the shrewd intelligence of the pioneer. The ascent of the mountain was rough, and the delay had caused the young astronomers as much impatience as it had their colleagues on Mount Scorzef. They had carefully, by, barometrical observations, calculated that the summit of Volquiria was 3200 feet above the level of the sea. The light, increased by a strong reflector, was first lighted on the night of the 4th; thus the observers on Mount Scorzef had perceived it as soon as it appeared.

Emery and Zorn had easily discerned the intense fire caused by the burning fortress, and with the theodolite had completed the measurement of the triangle.

“And did you determine the latitude of the peak?” said the Colonel to Emery,

“Yes, most accurately,” replied Emery; “we found it to be 19°37’35.337”.”

“Well, gentlemen,” said the Colonel, “we may say that our task is ended. We have measured, by means of sixty-three triangles, an arc of more than eight degrees in length; and when we have rigidly corrected our results, we shall know the exact value of the degree, and consequently of the *mètre*, in this part of the globe.”

A cheer of satisfaction could not be repressed amongst the others.

“And now,” added the Colonel, “we have only to descend the Zambesi in order to reach the Indian Ocean: is it not so, Mr. Strux.?”

“It is so,” answered Strux; “but I think we ought still to adopt some means of testing our previous operations. Let us continue our triangles until we find a place suitable for the direct measurement of a base. The agreement between the lengths of the base, obtained by the calculations and by the direct measurement, will alone tell what degree of accuracy we ought to attribute to our observations.”

Strux’s proposition was unanimously adopted. It was agreed to construct a series of subsidiary triangles until a side could be measured with the platinum rods. The steamboat, descending the affluents of the Zambesi, was to await the travellers below the celebrated Victoria Falls.

Every thing being arranged, the little troop, with the exception of four sailors on board the “Queen and Czar,” started the next day at sunrise. Some stations had been chosen to the east and the angles measured, and along this favourable country, they hoped easily to accomplish their auxiliary series. The bushman had adroitly caught a quagga, of which, willing or unwilling, he made a beast of burden to carry the theodolite, the measuring-rods, and some other luggage of the caravan.

The journey proceeded rapidly. The undulated country afforded many points of sight for the small accessory triangles. The weather was fine, and it was not needful to have recourse to nocturnal observations. The travellers could nearly always find shelter in the woods, and, besides, the heat was not insufferable, since some vapours arose from the pools and streams which tempered the sun’s rays.

Every want was supplied by the hunters, and there was no longer any thing to be feared from the natives, who seemed to be more to the south of Lake Ngami.

Matthew Strux and the Colonel seemed to have forgotten all their personal rivalry, and although there was no close intimacy between them, they were on the most perfect terms of courtesy.

Day after day, during a period of three weeks, the observations steadily proceeded. For the measurement of a base the astronomers required a tract of land that should be level for several miles, and the very undulations of the soil that were desirable for the establishment of the points of sight were unfavourable for that observation. They proceeded to the north-east, sometimes following the right bank of the Cnobi, one of the principal tributaries of the Upper Zambesi, in order to avoid Maketo, the chief settlement of the Makololos.

They had now every reason to anticipate that their return would be happily accomplished, and that no further natural obstacle would occur, and they hoped that their difficulties were all at an end. The country which they were traversing was comparatively well known and they could not be far from the villages of the Zambesi which Livingstone had lately visited. They thus thought with reason that all the most arduous part of their task was over, when an incident, of which the consequences might have been serious, almost compromised the result of the whole expedition.

Nicholas Palander was the hero, or rather was nearly being the victim, of the adventure.

The intrepid but thoughtless calculator, unwarned by his escape from the crocodiles, had still the habit of withdrawing himself from his companions.

In an open country there was no great danger in this, but in woods Palander’s abstraction might lead to serious consequences. Strux and the bushman gave him many warnings, and Palander, though much astonished at what he considered an excess of prudence, promised to conform to their wishes.

On the 27th, some hours had passed since Strux and Mokoum had seen any thing of Palander. The little troop were travelling through thickets of low trees and shrubs, extending as far as the horizon. It was important to keep together, as it would be difficult to discover the track of any one lost in the wood. But seeing and fearing nothing, Palander, who had been posted, pencil in one hand, the register in the other, on the left flank of the troop, was not long in disappearing.

When, towards four o’clock, Strux and his companions found that Palander was no longer with them, they became extremely anxious. His former aberrations were still fresh in their remembrance, and it was probably the abstracted calculator alone by whom they had been forgotten.

The march was stopped, and they all shouted in vain.

The bushman and the sailors dispersed for a quarter of a mile in each direction, beating the bushes, trampling through the woods and long grass, firing off their guns, but yet without success.

They became still more uneasy, especially Matthew Strux, to whose anxiety was joined an extreme irritation against his unlucky colleague. This was not the first time that Palander had served them thus, and if the Colonel had laid any blame on him, Strux would not have known what to say.

Under the circumstances, the only thing to be done was to encamp in the wood, and begin a more careful search.

The Colonel and his companions had just arranged to place their camp near a glade of considerable extent, when a cry, unlike any thing human, resounded at some distance to the left. Almost immediately, running at full speed, appeared Palander. His head was bare, his hair dishevelled, and his clothes torn in some parts almost to rags. His companions plied him with questions; but the unhappy man, with haggard and distended eye, whose compressed nostrils still further hindered his short jerking respiration, could not bring out a word.

What had happened? why had he wandered away? and why did he appear so terrified? At last, to their repeated questions, he gasped out, in almost unintelligible accents, something about the registers.

The astronomers shuddered; the registers, on which was inscribed every result of their operations, and which the calculator had never allowed out of his possession, even when asleep, these registers were missing. No matter whether Palander had lost them, or whether they had been stolen from him; they were gone, and all their labour was in vain!

While his companions, mutely terrified, only looked at each other, Matthew Strux could no longer restrain his anger. He burst forth into all manner of invective against the miserable man, threatening him with the displeasure of the Russian government, and adding, that if he did not suffer under the knout he should linger out his life in Siberia.

To all this Palander answered but by a movement of the head: he seemed to acquiesce in all these condemnations, and even thought the judgment would be too lenient.

“But perhaps he has been robbed,” said the Colonel at last.

“What matters?” cried Strux, beside himself; “what business had he so far away from us, after our continual warning?”

“True,” replied Sir John, “but we ought to know whether he has lost the registers or been robbed of them. Has any one robbed you, Palander?” continued he, turning to the poor man, who had sunk down with fatigue.

Palander made a sign of affirmation.

“Who?” continued Sir John. “Natives? Makololos?”

Palander shook his head.

“Well, then, Europeans?” asked Sir John.

“No,” answered Palander in a stifled voice.

“Who then?” shouted Strux, shaking his clenched fists in Palander’s face.

“They were neither natives — nor white men — but monkeys,” stammered out Palander at last.

It was a fact that the unhappy man had been robbed by a monkey, and if the consequences of the incident had been less serious, the whole party would have broken out into laughter.

Mokoum explained that what had just happened was of frequent occurrence. Many times, to his knowledge, had travellers been rifled by these pig-headed chacmas, a species of baboon very common in South African forests. The calculator had been plundered by these animals, though not without a struggle, as his ragged garments testified. Still, in the judgment of his companions, there was no excuse to be made: if he had remained in his proper place this irreparable loss would not have occurred.

“We did not take the trouble,” began Colonel Everest, “to measure an arc of meridian in South Africa for a blunderer like you — ”

He did not finish his sentence, conscious that it was useless to continue to abuse the unhappy man, whom Strux had not ceased to load with every variety of vituperation. The Europeans were, without exception, quite overpowered by emotion; but Mokoum, who was less sensitive to the importance of the loss, retained his self-possession.

“Perhaps even yet,” he said, “something may be done to assist you in your perplexity. These chacmas are always careful of their stolen goods, and if we find the robber we shall find the registers with him. But time is precious, and none must be lost.”

The bushman had opened a ray of hope. Palander revived at the suggestion: he arranged his tattered clothes as best he could, and having accepted the jacket of one sailor and the hat of another, declared himself ready to lead his companions to the scene of his adventure.

They all started off towards the west, and passed the night and the ensuing day without any favourable result. In many places, by traces on the ground and the bark of the trees, the bushman and the pioneer recognized unmistakable vestiges of the baboons, of which Palander affirmed that he was sure he had seen no less than ten. The party was soon on their track, and advanced with the utmost precaution, the bushman affirming that he could only count on success in his search by taking the chacmas by surprise, since they were sagacious animals, such as could only be approached by some device of secrecy.

Early the following morning one of the Russian sailors, who was somewhat in front, perceived, if not the actual thief, yet one of its associates. He prudently returned to the little troop, who came at once to a halt. The Europeans, who had resolved to obey Mokoum in every thing, awaited his instructions. The bushman begged them to remain in quietness where they were, and, taking Sir John and the pioneer, turned towards the part of the wood already visited by the sailor, carefully keeping under shelter of the trees and bushwood.

In a short time the bushman and his two companions caught sight of one chacma, and almost immediately of nine or ten more, gambolling among the branches. Crouching behind a tree, they attentively watched the animals, Their long tails were continually sweeping the ground, and their powerful muscles, sharp teeth, and pointed claws, rendered them formidable even to the beasts of prey. These chacmas are the terror of the Boers, whose fields of corn and maize, and occasionally whose habitations, are plundered by them.

Not one of the animals had as yet espied the hunters. but they all continued their sport, yelping and barking as though they were great ill-favoured dogs. The important point for determination was, whether the actual purloiner of the missing documents was there. All doubt was put aside when the pioneer pointed out a chacma wrapped in a rag of Palander’s coat. Sir John felt that this creature must be secured at any price, but he was obliged to act with great circumspection, aware as he was that a single false movement would cause the whole herd to decamp at once.

“Stay here,” said Mokoum to the pioneer; “Sir John and I will return to our companions, and set about surrounding the animals; but meanwhile do not lose sight of them.”

The pioneer remained at his post, while Sir John and the bushman returned to Colonel Everest. The only means of securing the suspected culprit was to surround the whole troop. To accomplish this, the Europeans divided into separate detachments; one composed of Strux, Emery, Zorn, and three sailors, was to join the pioneer, and to form a semicircle around him; and the other, comprising the Colonel, Mokoum, Sir John, Palander, and the other three sailors, made a *détour* to the left, in order to fall back upon the herd from the other side

Implicitly following the bushman’s advice, they all advanced with the utmost caution. Their guns were ready, and it was agreed that the chacma with the rags should be the aim for every shot.

Mokoum kept a watchful eye upon Palander, and insisted upon his marching close to himself, lest his unguardedness should betray him into some fresh folly. The worthy astronomer was almost beside himself in consternation at his loss, and evidently thought it a question of life or death.

After marching with the frequent halts which the policy of being unobserved suggested, and continuing to diverge for half an hour, the bushman considered that they might now fall back. He and his companions, each about twenty paces apart, advanced like a troop of Pawnies on a war-trail, without a word or gesture, avoiding even the least rustling in the branches.

Suddenly the bushman stopped; the rest instantly followed his example, and standing with their finger on the lock of their guns, were ready to raise them to their shoulder.

The band of chacmas was in sight, they were already sensible of some danger, and seemed on the look-out. The great animal which had stolen the registers had, to their fancy, an appearance of being especially agitated. It had been already recognized by Palander, who muttered something like an imprecation between his teeth.

The chacma looked as if it was making signs to its companions: some females, with their young ones on their shoulders, had collected in a group, and the males went to and fro around them.

The hunters still drew on, one and all keeping a steady eye direct towards the ostensible thief. All at once, by an involuntary movement, Palander's gun went off in his hands.

Sir John broke out into an exclamation of disgust, and instantly afterwards fired.

Ten reports followed: three chacmas lay dead on the ground, and the rest, with a prodigious bound, passed over the hunters' heads.

The robber baboon alone remained: it darted at the trunk of a sycamore, which it climbed with an amazing agility, and disappeared among the branches.

The bushman, having keenly surveyed the spot, asserted that the registers were there concealed, and fearing lest the chacma should escape across the trees, he calmly aimed and fired. The animal, wounded in the leg, fell from branch to branch. In one of its fore-claws it was seen to clutch the registers, which it had taken from a fork of the tree.

At the sight, Palander, with a leap like a chamois, darted at the chacma, and a tremendous struggle ensued. The cries of both man and beast mingled in harsh and discordant strain, and the hunters dared not take aim at the chacma for fear of wounding their comrade.

Strux, beside himself with rage, shouted again and again that they should fire, and in his furious agitation he would probably have done so, if it had not been that he was accidentally without a cartridge for his gun, which had been already discharged.

The combat continued; sometimes Palander, sometimes the chacma, was uppermost. The astronomer, his shoulders lacerated by the creature’s claws, tried to strangle his adversary. At last the bushman, seizing a favourable moment, made a sudden dash, and killed the ape with one blow of his hatchet.

Nicholas Palander, bleeding, exhausted, and insensible, was picked up by his colleagues: in his last effort he had recaptured his registers, which he was found unconsciously grasping to his bosom.

The carcase of the chacma was conveyed with glee to the camp. At the evening repast it furnished a delicious meal to the hunters. To all of them, but especially to Palander, not only had the excitement of the chase quickened their appetite for the palatable dish, but the relish was heightened by the gratifying knowledge that vengeance was satisfied.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOMEWARD BOUND.

Palander’s wounds were not serious: the bushman dressed the contused limbs with herbs, and the worthy astronomer, sustained by his triumph, was soon able to travel. Any exuberance on his part, however, was of short duration, and he quickly became again engrossed in his world of figures. He only now retained one of the registers, because it had been thought prudent that Emery should take possession of the other. Under the circumstances, Palander made the surrender with entire good-humour.

The operation of seeking a plain suitable for a base was now resumed. On the 1st of April the march was somewhat retarded by wide marshes; to these succeeded numerous pools, whose waters spread a pestilential odour; but, by forming larger triangles, Colonel Everest and his companions soon escaped the unhealthy region.

The whole party were in excellent spirits. Zorn and Emery often congratulated themselves on the apparent concord that existed between their chiefs. Zorn one day expressed his hope to his friend that when they returned to Europe they would find that peace had been concluded between England and Russia, so that they might remain as good friends as they had been in Africa.

Emery replied that he acquiesced entirely in the hope: in days when war is seldom long protracted they might be sanguine all would be terminated by the date of their return.

Zorn had already understood from Emery that it was not his intention to return immediately to the Cape, and expressed his hope that he might introduce him to the observatory at Kiew. This proposal Emery expressed his desire to embrace, and added that he should indulge the expectation that Zorn would at some future time visit the Cape.

With these mutual assignations they made their plans for future astronomical researches, ever reiterating their hopes that the war would be at an end.

“Anyhow,” observed Emery, “Russia and England will be at peace before the Colonel and Strux; I have no trust in any reconciliation of theirs.”

For themselves, they could only repeat their pledges of mutual good-will.

Eleven days after the adventure with the chacmas, the little troop, not far from the Zambesi Falls, arrived at a level plain several miles in extent, and perfectly adapted for the establishment of a base. On the edge of the plain rose a native village, composed of a few huts containing a small number of inhabitants, who kindly received the Europeans. Colonel Everest found the proximity of the natives very opportune, since the measurement of the base would occupy a month, and being without waggons, or any materials for an encampment, he would have had no resource but to pass the time in the open air, with no other shelter than that afforded by the foliage.

The astronomers took up their abode in the huts, which were quickly appropriated for the use of their new occupants. Their requirements were but small; their one thought was directed towards verifying their calculations by measuring the last side of their last triangle.

The astronomers at once proceeded to their work. The trestles and platinum rods were arranged with all the care that had been applied to the earliest base. Nothing was neglected; all the conditions of the atmosphere, and the variations of the thermometer, were taken into account, and the Commission, without flagging, brought every energy to bear upon their final operation.

The work, which lasted for five weeks, was completed on the 15th of May. When the lengths obtained had been estimated and reduced to the mean level of the sea at the temperature of 61° Fahrenheit, Palander and Emery presented to their colleagues the following numbers: —

	Toises.
New base actually measured	5075.25
The same base deduced trigonometrlcally from the entire series	5075.11
Difference between the calculation and the observation	.14

Thus there was only a difference of less than 1/6 of a toise that is to say, less than ten inches; yet the first base and the last were six hundred miles apart.

When the meridian of France was measured from Dunkirk to Perpignan, the difference between the base at Melunand that at Perpignan was eleven inches. The agreement obtained by the Anglo-Russian Commission was still more remarkable, and thus made the work accomplished in the deserts of Africa, amid dangers of every kind, more perfect than any previous geodetic operation.

The accuracy of this unprecedented result was greeted by the astronomers with repeated cheers.

According to Palander’s reductions, the value of a degree in this part of the world was 57037 toises. This was within a toise, the same as was found by Lacaille at the Cape in 1752: thus, at the interval of a century, the French astronomer and the members of the Anglo-Russian Commission had arrived at almost exactly the same result.

To deduce the value of the mètre, they would have to wait the issue of the operations which were to be afterwards undertaken in the northern hemisphere. This value was to be the 1/10000000 of the quadrant of the terrestrial meridian. According to previous calculations, the quadrant, taking the depression of the earth into account, comprised 10,000,856 metres, which brought the exact length of the mètre to .013074 of a toise, or 3 feet 0 inches 11.296 lines. Whether this was correct the subsequent labours of the Commission would have to decide.

• • • • •

The astronomers had now entirely finished their task, and it only remained for them to reach the mouth of the Zambesi, by following inversely the route afterwards taken by Dr. Livingstone in his second voyage from 1858 to 1864.

On the 25th of May, after a somewhat laborious journey across a country intersected with rivers, they reached the Victoria Falls. These fine cataracts fully justified their native name, which signifies “sounding smoke.” Sheets of water a mile wide, crowned with a double rainbow, rushed from a height twice that of Niagara. Across the deep basalt chasm the enormous torrent produced a roar like peal after peal of thunder.

Below the cataract, where the river regained its calmness, the steamboat, which had arrived a fortnight previously by an inferior affluent of the Zambesi, awaited the astronomers, who soon took their places on board.

There were two to be left behind. Mokoum and the pioneer stood on the bank. In Mokoum the English were leaving, not only a devoted guide, but one whom they might call a friend. Sir John was especially sorry to part from him, and had offered to take him to Europe, and there entertain him as long as he pleased to remain. But Mokoum had previous engagements; in fact, he was to accompany Livingstone on the second voyage which the brave traveller was about to undertake up the Zambesi, and Mokoum was not a man to depart from his word. He was presented with a substantial recompense, and, what he prized still more, the kind assurances of regard of the Europeans, who acknowledged how much they owed to him. As the steamer left the shore to take the current in the middle of the river, Sir John’s last gesture was to wave an adieu to his associate.

The descent of the great river, whose banks were dotted with numerous villages, was soon accomplished. The natives, regarding with superstitious admiration the smoking vessel as it moved by mysterious mechanism, made no attempt to obstruct its progress.

On the 15th of June the Colonel and his companions arrived at Quilimane, one of the principal towns at the mouth of the Zambesi. Their first thought was to ask for news of the war. They found that it had not yet come to a termination, and that Sebastopol was still holding out against the allied armies. This was a disappointment to the Europeans, now so united in one scientific object; but they received the intelligence in silence, and prepared to start. An Austrian merchant-vessel, “La Novara,” was just setting out for Suez; in that they resolved to take their passage.

Three days after, as they were on the point of embarking, the Colonel assembled his colleagues, and in a calm voice reminded them how in the last eighteen months they had together experienced many trials, and how they had been rewarded by accomplishing a work which would call forth the admiration of all scientific Europe. He could not refrain from giving expression to his trust that they would feel themselves bound in the common fellowship of a true alliance.

Strux bowed slightly, but did not interrupt the Colonel, who proceeded to deplore the tidings of the continuation of warfare. When he referred to the expected capitulation of Sebastopol, Strux indignantly rejected the possibility of such an event, which no union of France and England, he maintained, could ever effect.

There was, however, it was admitted on all hands, a propriety in the Russians and English submitting to the national status of hostility. The necessities of their position were thus clearly defined, and under these conditions they embarked in company on board “La Novara.”

In a few days they arrived at Suez. At the moment of separation Emery grasped Zorn's hand, and said, —

"We are always friends, Michael!"

"Always and every where, William!" ejaculated Zorn; and with this sentiment of mutual devotion they parted.

The Commission was dissolved.

THE END.

THE FUR COUNTRY

Translated by N. D’Anvers

This adventure novel was first published in 1873 and was serialised in *Magasin d’Éducation et de Récréation*. The narrative is set in 1859 and concerns Lt. Jasper Hobson and other members of the Hudson’s Bay Company, who travel through the Northwest Territories of Canada to Cape Bathurst on the Arctic Ocean on the mission to create a fort.

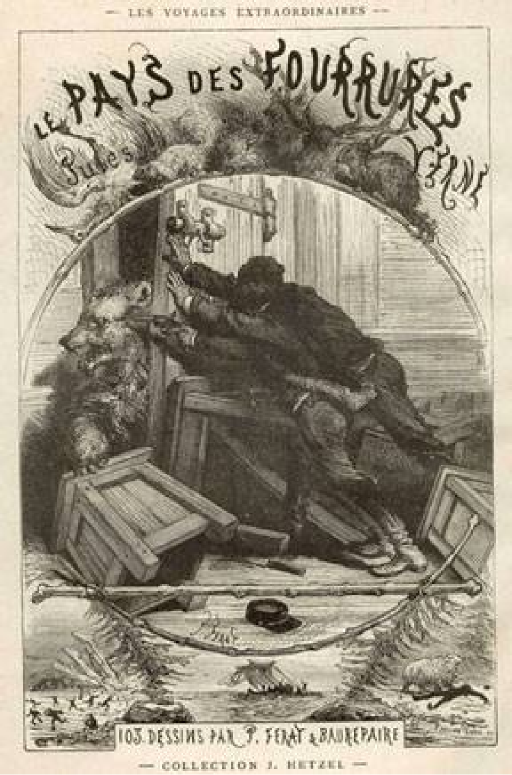

— LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES —

LE PAYS DES FOURRURES

Jules Verne

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The title page from the French first edition

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PART I

CHAPTER I.

A SOIRÉE AT FORT RELIANCE.

On the evening of the 17th March 1859, Captain Craventy gave a fête at Fort Reliance. Our readers must not at once imagine a grand entertainment, such as a court ball, or a musical soirée with a fine orchestra. Captain Craventy's reception was a very simple affair, yet he had spared no pains to give it *éclat*.

In fact, under the auspices of Corporal Joliffe, the large room on the ground-floor was completely transformed. The rough walls, constructed of roughly-hewn trunks of trees piled up horizontally, were still visible, it is true, but their nakedness was disguised by arms and armour, borrowed from the arsenal of the fort, and by an English tent at each corner of the room. Two lamps suspended by chains, like chandeliers, and provided with tin reflectors, relieved the gloomy appearance of the blackened beams of the ceiling, and sufficiently illuminated the misty atmosphere of the room. The narrow windows, some of them mere loop-holes, were so encrusted with hoar-frost, that it was impossible to look through them; but two or three pieces of red bunting, tastily arranged about them, challenged the admiration of all who entered. The floor, of rough joists of wood laid parallel with each other, had been carefully swept by Corporal Joliffe. No sofas, chairs, or other modern furniture, impeded the free circulation of the guests. Wooden benches half fixed against the walls, huge blocks of wood cut with the axe, and two tables with clumsy legs, were all the appliances of luxury the saloon could boast of. But the partition wall, with a narrow door leading into the next room, was decorated in a style alike costly and picturesque. From the beams hung magnificent furs admirably arranged, the equal of which could not be seen in the more favoured regions of Regent

Street or the Perspective-Newski. It seemed as if the whole fauna of the ice-bound North were here represented by their finest skins. The eye wandered from the furs of wolves, grey bears, polar bears, otters, wolverenes, beavers, muskrats, water pole-cats, ermines, and silver foxes; and above this display was an inscription in brilliantly-coloured and artistically shaped cardboard — the motto of the world-famous Hudson's Bay Company —

"PROPELLE CUTUM."

"Really, Corporal Joliffe, you have surpassed yourself !" said Captain Craventy to his subordinate.

"I think I have, I think I have !" replied the Corporal; "but honour to whom honour is due, Mrs Joliffe deserves part of your commendation; she assisted me in everything."

"A wonderful woman, Corporal."

"Her equal is not to be found, Captain."

An immense brick and earthenware stove occupied the centre of the room, with a huge iron pipe passing from it through the ceiling, and conducting the dense black smoke into the outer air. This stove contained a roaring fire constantly fed with fresh shovelfuls of coal by the stoker, an old soldier specially appointed to the service. Now and then a gust of wind drove back a volume of smoke into the room, dimming the brightness of the lamps, and adding fresh blackness to the beams of the ceiling, whilst tongues of flame shot forth from the stove. But the guests of Fort Reliance thought little of this slight inconvenience; the stove warmed them, and they could not pay too dearly for its cheering heat, so terribly cold was it outside in the cutting north wind.

The storm could be heard raging without, the snow fell fast, becoming rapidly solid and coating the already frosted window panes with fresh ice. The whistling wind made its way through the cranks and chinks of the doors and windows, and occasionally the rattling noise drowned every other sound. Presently an awful silence ensued. Nature seemed to be taking breath; but suddenly the squall recommenced with terrific fury. The house was shaken to its foundations, the planks cracked, the beams groaned. A stranger less accustomed than the *habitués* of the fort to the war of the elements, would have asked if the end of the world were come.

But, with two exceptions, Captain Craventy's guests troubled themselves little about the weather, and if they had been outside they would have felt no more fear than the stormy petrels disporting themselves in the midst of the tempest. Two only of the assembled company did not belong to the ordinary society of the neighbourhood, two women, whom we shall introduce when we have enumerated Captain Craventy's other guests: these were, Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson, Sergeant Long, Corporal Joliffe, and his bright active Canadian wife, a certain Mac-Nab and his wife, both Scotch, John Rae, married to an Indian woman of the country, and some sixty soldiers or employés of the Hudson's Bay Company. The neighbouring forts also furnished their contingent of guests, for in these remote lands people look upon each other as neighbours although their homes may be a hundred miles apart. A good many employés or traders came from Fort Providence or Fort Resolution, of the Great Slave Lake district, and even from Fort Chippeway and Fort Liard further south. A rare break like this in the monotony of their secluded lives, in these hyberborean regions, was joyfully welcomed by all the exiles, and even a few Indian chiefs, about a dozen, had accepted Captain Craventy's invitation. They were not, however, accompanied by their wives, the luckless squaws being still looked upon as little better than slaves. The presence of these natives is accounted for by the fact that they are in constant intercourse with the traders, and supply the greater number of furs which pass through the hands of the Hudson’s Bay Company, in exchange for other commodities. They are mostly Chippeway Indians, well grown men with hardy constitutions. Their complexions are of the peculiar reddish black colour always ascribed in Europe to the evil spirits of fairyland. They wear very picturesque cloaks of skins and mantles of fur, with a head-dross of eagle’s feathers spread out like a lady’s fan, and quivering with every motion of their thick black hair.

Such was the company to whom the Captain was doing the honours of Fort Reliance. There was no dancing for want of music, but the “buffet” admirably supplied the want of the hired musicians of the European balls. On the table rose a pyramidal pudding made by Mrs Joliffe’s own hands; it was an immense truncated cone, composed of flour, fat, rein-deer venison, and musk beef. The eggs, milk, and citron prescribed in recipe books were, it is true, wanting, but their absence was atoned for by its huge proportions. Mrs Joliffe served out slice after slice with liberal hands, yet there remained enough and to spare. Piles of sandwiches also figured on the table, in which ship biscuits took the place of thin slices of English bread and butter, and dainty morsels of corned beef that of the ham and stuffed veal of the old world. The sharp teeth of the Chippeway Indians made short work of the tough biscuits; and for drink there was plenty of whisky and gin handed round in little pewter pots, not to speak of a great bowl of punch which was to close the entertainment, and of which the Indians talked long afterwards in their wigwams.

Endless were the compliments paid to the Joliffes that evening, but they deserved them; how zealously they waited on the guests, with what easy grace they distributed the refreshments! They did not need prompting, they anticipated the wishes of each one. The sandwiches were succeeded by slices of the inexhaustible pudding, the pudding by glasses of gin or whisky.

“No, thank you, Mr Joliffe.”

“You are too good, Corporal; but let me have time to breathe.”

“Mrs Joliffe, I assure you, I can eat no more.”

“Corporal Joliffe, I am at your mercy.”

“No more, Mrs Joliffe, no more, thank you!”

Such were the replies met with on every side by the zealous pair, but their powers of persuasion were such that the most reluctant yielded in the end. The quantities of food and drink consumed were really enormous. The hubbub of conversation increased. The soldiery and employés became excited. Here the talk was of hunting, there of trade. What plans were laid for next season! The entire fauna of the Arctic regions would scarcely supply game enough for these enterprising hunters. They already saw bears, foxes, and musk oxen, falling beneath their bullets, and pole-cats by hundreds caught in their traps. Their imagination pictured the costly furs piled up in the magazines of the Company, which was this year to realise hitherto unheard of profits. And whilst the spirits thus freely circulated inflamed the imagination of the Europeans, the large doses of Captain Craventy’s “fire-water” imbibed by the Indians had an opposite effect. Too proud to show admiration, too cautious to make promises, the taciturn chiefs listened gravely and silently to the babel of voices around them.

The captain enjoying the hurly burly, and pleased to see the poor people, brought back as it were to the civilised world, enjoying themselves so thoroughly, was here, there, and everywhere, answering all inquiries about the fête with the words

“Ask Joliffe, ask Joliffe !”

And they asked Joliffe, who had a gracious word for every body.

Some of those employed in the garrison and civil service of Fort Reliance must here receive a few words of special notice, for they were presently to go through experiences of a most terrible nature, which no human perspicacity could possibly have foreseen. Amongst others we must name Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson, Sergeant Long, Corporal and Mrs Joliffe, and the two foreign women already alluded to, in whose honour Captain Craventy’s fête was given.

Jaspar Hobson was a man of forty years of age. He was short and slight, with little muscular power; but a force of will which carried him successfully through all trials, and enabled him to rise superior to adverse circumstances. He was “a child of the Company.” His father, Major Hobson, an Irishman from Dublin, who had now been dead for some time, lived for many years at Fort Assiniboin with his wife. There Jaspar Hobson was born. His childhood and youth were spent at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. His father brought him up strictly, and he became a man in self-control and courage whilst yet a boy in years. Jaspar Hobson was no mere hunter, but a soldier, a brave and intelligent officer. During the struggles in Oregon of the Hudson’s Bay Company with the rival companies of the Union, he distinguished himself by his zeal and intrepidity, and rapidly rose to the rank of lieutenant. His well-known merit led to his appointment to the command of an expedition to the north, the aim of which was to explore the northern shores of the Great Bear Lake, and to found a fort on the confines of the American continent. Jaspar Hobson was to set out on his journey early in April.

If the lieutenant was the type of a good officer, Sergeant Long was that of a good soldier. He was a man of fifty years of age, with a rough beard that looked as if it were made of cocoa-nut fibre. Constitutionally brave, and disposed to obey rather than to command. He had no ambition but to obey the orders he received never questioning them, however strange they might appear, never reasoning for himself when on duty for the Company-a true machine in uniform; but a perfect machine, never wearing out; ever on the march, yet never showing signs of fatigue. Perhaps Sergeant Long was rather hard upon his men, as he was upon himself. He would not tolerate the slightest infraction of discipline, and mercilessly ordered men into confinement for the slightest neglect, whilst he himself had never been reprimanded. In a word, he was a man born to obey, and this self-annihilation suited his passive temperament. Men such as he are the materials of which a formidable army is formed. They are the arms of the service, obeying a single head. Is not this the only really powerful organisation? The two types of fabulous mythology, Briareus with a hundred arms and Hydra with a hundred heads, well represent the two kinds of armies; and in a conflict between them, which would be victorious? Briareus without a doubt !

We have already made acquaintance with Corporal Joliffe. He was the busy bee of the party, but it was pleasant to hear him humming. He would have made a better major-domo than a soldier; and he was himself aware of this. So he called himself the “Corporal in charge of details,” but he would have lost himself a hundred times amongst these details, had not little Mrs Joliffe guided him with a firm hand. So it came to pass, that Corporal Joliffe obeyed his wife without owning it, doubtless thinking to himself, like the philosopher Sancho, “a woman’s advice is no such great thing, but he must be a fool who does not listen to it.”

It is now time to say a few words of the two foreign women already alluded to more than once. They were both about forty years old, and one of them well deserved to take first rank amongst celebrated female travellers. The name of Paulina Barnett, the rival of the Pfeiffers, Tinnis, and Haimaires of Hull, has been several times honourably mentioned at the meetings of the Royal Geographical Society. In her journeys up the Brahmaputra, as far as the mountains of Thibet, across an unknown corner of New Holland, from Swan Bay to the Gulf of Carpentaria, Paulina Barnett had given proof of the qualities of a great traveller. She had been a widow for fifteen years, and her passion for travelling led her constantly to explore new lands. She was tall, and her face, framed in long braids of hair, already touched with white, was full of energy. She was near-sighted, and a double eye-glass rested upon her long straight nose, with its mobile nostrils. We must confess that her walk was somewhat masculine, and her whole appearance was suggestive of moral power, rather than of female grace. She was an Englishwoman from Yorkshire, possessed of some fortune, the greater part of which was expended in adventurous expeditions, and some new scheme of exploration had now brought her to Fort Reliance. Having crossed the equinoctial regions, she was doubtless anxious to penetrate to the extreme limits of the hyperborean. Her presence at the fort was an event. The governor of the Company had given her a special letter of recommendation to Captain Craventy, according to which the latter was to do all in his power to forward the design of the celebrated traveller to reach the borders of the Arctic Ocean. A grand enterprise! To follow in the steps of Hearne, Mackenzie, Rae, Franklin, and others. What fatigues, what trials, what dangers would have to be gone through in the conflict with the terrible elements of the Polar climate! How could a woman dare to venture where so many explorers have drawn back or perished? But the stranger now shut up in Fort Reliance was no ordinary woman; she was Paulina Barnett, a laureate of the Royal Society.

We must add that the celebrated traveller was accompanied by a servant named Madge. This faithful creature was not merely a servant, but a devoted and courageous friend, who lived only for her mistress. A Scotchwoman of the old type, whom a Caleb might have married without loss of dignity. Madge was about five years older than Mrs Barnett, and was tall and strongly built. The two were on the most intimate terms; Paulina looked upon Madge as an elder sister, and Madge treated Paulina as her daughter.

It was in honour of Paulina Barnett that Captain Craventy was this evening treating his employés and the Chippeway Indians. In fact, the lady traveller was to join the expedition of Jaspar Hobson for the exploration of the north. It was for Paulina Barnett that the large saloon of the factory resounded with joyful hurrahs. And it was no wonder that the stove consumed a hundredweight of coal on this memorable evening, for the cold outside was twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit below zero, and Fort Reliance is situated in 61° 47’ N. Lat. at least four degrees from the Polar circle.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUDSON’S BAY FUR COMPANY.

“Captain Craventy?”

“Mrs Barnett?”

What do you think of your Lieutenant, Jaspar Hobson?”

“I think he is an officer who will go far.”

“What do you mean by the words, Will go far? Do you mean that he will go beyond the Twenty-fourth parallel?”

Captain Craventy could not help smiling at Mrs Paulina Barnett’s question. They were talking together near the stove, whilst the guests were passing backwards and forwards between the eating and drinking tables.

“Madam,” replied the Captain, “all that a man can do, will be done by Jaspar Hobson. The Company has charged him to explore the north of their possessions, and to establish a factory as near as possible to the confines of the American continent, and he will establish it.”

“That is a great responsibility for Lieutenant Hobson !” said the traveller.

“It is, madam, but Jaspar Hobson has never yet drawn back from a task imposed upon him, however formidable it may have appeared.”

“I can quite believe it, Captain,” replied Mrs Barnett, “and we shall now see the Lieutenant at work. But what induces the Company to construct a fort on the shores of the Arctic Ocean?”

“They have a powerful motive, madam,” replied the Captain.

“I may add a double motive. At no very distant date, Russia will probably cede her American possessions to the Government of the United States. [*1] When this cession has taken place, the Company will find access to the Pacific Ocean extremely difficult, unless the North-west passage discovered by Mc’Clure be practicable. [*1 Captain Craventy’s prophecy has since been realised.] Fresh explorations will decide this, for the Admiralty is about to send a vessel which will coast along the North American continent, from Behring Strait to Coronation Gulf, on the eastern side of which the new-Art is to be established. If the enterprise succeed, this point will become an important factory, the centre of the northern fur trade. The transport of furs across the Indian territories involves a vast expenditure of time and money, whereas, if the new route be available, steamers will take them from the new fort to the Pacific Ocean in a few days.”

“That would indeed be an important result of the enterprise, if this North-west passage can really be used,” replied Mrs Paulina Barnett; “but I think you spoke of a double motive.”

“I did, madam,” said the Captain, “and I alluded to a matter of vital interest to the Company. But I must beg of you to allow me to explain to you in a few words how the present state of things came about, how it is in fact that the very source of the trade of this once flourishing Company is in danger of destruction.”

The Captain then proceeded to give a brief sketch of the history of the famous Hudson’s Bay Company.

In the earliest times men employed the skins and furs of animals as clothing. The fur trade is therefore of very great antiquity. Luxury in dress increased to such an extent, that sumptuary laws were enacted to control too great extravagance, especially in furs, for which there was a positive passion. Vair and the furs of Siberian squirrels were prohibited at the middle of the 12th century.

In 1553 Russia founded several establishments in the northern steppes, and England lost no time in following her example. The trade in sables, ermines, and beavers, was carried on through the agency of the Samoiedes; but during the reign of Elizabeth, a royal decree restricted the use of costly furs to such an extent, that for several years this branch of industry was completely paralysed.

On the 2nd May, 1670, a licence to trade in furs in the Hudson's Bay Territory was granted to the Company, which numbered several men of high rank amongst its shareholders : the Duke of York, the Duke of Albemarle, the Earl of Shaftesbury, &c. Its capital was then only £8420. Private companies were formidable rivals to its success; and French agents, making Canada their headquarters, ventured on hazardous but most lucrative expeditions. The active competition of these bold hunters threatened the very existence of the infant Company.

The conquest of Canada, however, somewhat lessened the danger of its position. Three years after the taking of Quebec, 1776, the fur trade received a new impulse. English traders became familiar with the difficulties of trade of this kind; they learned the customs of the country, the ways of the Indians and their system of exchange of goods, but for all this the Company as yet made no profits whatever. Moreover, towards 1784 some merchants of Montreal combined to explore the fur country, and founded that powerful North-west Company, which soon became the centre of the fur trade. In 1798 the new Company shipped furs to the value of no less than £120,000, and the existence of the Hudson’s Bay Company was again threatened.

We must add, that the North-west Company shrank from no act, however iniquitous, if its interests were at stake. Its agents imposed on their own employés, speculated on the misery of the Indians, robbed them when they had themselves made them drunk, setting at defiance the Act of Parliament forbidding the sale of spirituous liquors on Indian territory; and consequently realising immense profits, in spite of the competition of the various Russian and American companies which had sprung up — the American Fur Company amongst others, founded in 1809, with a capital of a million of dollars, which was carrying on operations on the west of the Rocky Mountains.

The Hudson’s Bay Company was probably in greater danger of ruin than any other; but in 1821, after much discussion, a treaty was made, in accordance with which its old rival the North-west Company became amalgamated with it, the two receiving the common title of “The Hudson’s Bay Fur Company.”

Now the only rival of this important association is the American St Louis Fur Company. The Hudson’s Bay Company has numerous establishments scattered over a domain extending over 3,700,000 square miles. Its principal factories are situated on James Bay, at the mouth of the Severn, in the south, and towards the frontiers of Upper Canada, on Lakes Athapeskow, Winnipeg, Superior, Methye, Buffalo, and near the Colombia, Mackenzie, Saskatchewan, and Assiniboin rivers, &c. Fort York, commanding the course of the river Nelson, is the headquarters of the Company, and contains its principal fur depôt. Moreover, in 1842 it took a lease of all the Russian establishments in North America at an annual rent of £40,000, so that it is now working on its own account the vast tracts of country between the Mississippi and the Pacific Ocean. It has sent out intrepid explorers in every direction: Hearne, towards the Polar Sea, in 1770, to the discovery of the Coppermine River; Franklin, in 1819 to 1822, along 5550 miles of the American coast; Mackenzie, who, after having discovered the river to which he gave his name, reached the shores of the Pacific at 52° 24’ N. Lat. The following is a list of the quantities of skins and furs despatched to Europe by the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1833-34, which will give an exact idea of the extent of its trade: —

Beavers........ .	1,074
Skins and young Beavers. .	92,288
Musk Rats.......	694,092
Badgers........	1,069
Bears........ .	7,451
Ermines........	491

Foes	9,937
Lynxes	14,255
Sables	64,490
Polecats	25,100
Otters	22,303
Racoons	713
Swans,	7,918
Wolves	8,484
Wolverines	1,571

Such figures ought to bring in a large profit to the Hudson’s Bay Company, but unfortunately they have not been maintained, and for the last twenty years have been decreasing.

The cause of this decline was the subject of Captain Craventy’s explanation to Mrs Paulina Barnett.

“Until 1839, madam,” said he, “the Company was in a flourishing condition. In that year the number of furs exported was 2,350,000, but since then the trade has gradually declined, and this number is now reduced by one-half at least.”

“But what do you suppose is the cause of this extraordinary decrease in the exportation of furs?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“The depopulation of the hunting territories, caused by the activity, and, I must add, the want of foresight of the hunters. The game was trapped and killed without mercy. These massacres were conducted in the most reckless and short-sighted fashion. Even females with young and their little ones did not escape. The consequence is, that the animals whose fur is valuable have become extremely rare. The otter has almost entirely disappeared, and is only to be found near the islands of the North Pacific. Small colonies of beavers have taken refuge on the shores of the most distant rivers. It is the same with many other animals, compelled to flee before the invasion of the hunters. The traps, once crowded with game, are now empty. The price of skins is rising just when a great demand exists for furs. Hunters have gone away in disgust, leaving none but the most intrepid and indefatigable, who now penetrate to the very confines of the American continent.”

“Yes,” said Mrs Paulina Barnett, “the fact of the fur-bearing animals having taken refuge beyond the polar circle, is a sufficient explanation of the Company’s motive in founding a factory on the borders of the Arctic Ocean.”

“Not only so, madam,” replied the Captain, “the Company is also compelled to seek a more northern centre of operations, for an Act of Parliament has lately greatly reduced its domain.”

“And the motive for this reduction?” inquired the traveller.

“A very important question of political economy was involved, madam; one which could not fail greatly to interest the statesmen of Great Britain. In a word, the interests of the Company and those of civilisation are antagonistic. It is to the interest of the Company to keep the territory belonging to it in a wild uncultivated condition. Every attempt at clearing ground was pitilessly put a stop to, as it drove away the wild animals, so that the monopoly enjoyed by the Hudson’s Bay Company was detrimental to all agricultural enterprise. All questions not immediately relating to their own particular trade, were relentlessly put aside by the governors of the association. It was this despotic, and, in a certain sense, immoral system, which provoked the measures taken by Parliament, and, in 1837, a commission appointed by the Colonial Secretary decided that it was necessary to annex to Canada all the territories suitable for cultivation, such as the Red River and Saskatchewan districts, and to leave to the Company only that portion of its land which appeared to be incapable of future civilisation. The next year the Company lost the western slopes of the Rocky Mountains, which it held direct from the Colonial Office, and you will now understand, madam, how the agents of the Company, having lost their power over their old territories, are determined before giving up their trade to try to work the little known countries of the north, and so open a communication with the Pacific by means of the North-west passage.”

Mrs Paulina Barnett was now well informed as to the ulterior projects of the celebrated Company. Captain Craventy had given her a graphic sketch of the situation, and it is probable he would have entered into further details, had not an incident cut short his harangue.

Corporal Joliffe announced in a loud voice that, with Mrs Joliffe’s assistance, he was about to mix the punch. This news was received as it deserved. The bowl — or rather, the basin — was filled with the precious liquid. It contained no less than ten pints of coarse rum. Sugar, measured out by Mrs Joliffe, was piled up at the bottom, and on the top floated slices of lemon shrivelled with age. Nothing remained to be done but to light this alcoholic lake, and the Corporal, match in hand, awaited the order of his Captain, as if he were about to spring a mine.

“All right, Joliffe !” at last said Captain Craventy.

The light was applied to the bowl, and in a moment the punch was in flames, whilst the guests applauded and clapped their hands. Ten minutes afterwards, full glasses of the delightful beverage were circulating amongst the guests, fresh bidders for them coming forward in endless succession, like speculators on the Stock Exchange.

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! three cheers for Mrs Barnett! A cheer for the Captain.”

In the midst of these joyful shouts cries were heard from outside. Silence immediately fell upon the company assembled.

“Sergeant Long,” said the Captain, “go and see what is the matter.”

And at his chief’s order, the Sergeant, leaving his glass unfinished, left the room.

CHAPTER III.

A SAVANT THAWED.

Sergeant Long hastened to the narrow passage from which opened the outer door of the fort, and heard the cries redoubled, and combined with violent blows on the postern gate, surrounded by high walls, which gave access to the court. The Sergeant pushed open the door, and plunging into the snow, already a foot deep; he waded through it, although half-blinded by the cutting sleet, and nipped by the terrible cold.

“What the devil does any one want at this time of night?” exclaimed the Sergeant to himself, as he mechanically removed the heavy bars of the gate; “none but Esquimaux would dare to brave such a temperature as this!”

“Open! open! open!” they shouted from without.

“I am opening,” replied Sergeant Long, who really seemed to be a long time about it.

At last the door swung open, and the Sergeant was almost upset by a sledge, drawn by six dogs, which dashed past him like a flash of lightning. Worthy Sergeant Long only just escaped being crushed, but he got up without a murmur, closed the gate, and returned to the house at his ordinary pace, that is to say, at the rate of seventy-five strides a minute.

But Captain Craventy, Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson, and Corporal Joliffe were already outside, braving the intense cold, and staring at the sledge, white with snow, which had just drawn up in front of them.

A man completely enveloped in furs now descended from it, “Fort Reliance?;” he inquired.

“The same,” replied the Captain.

“Captain Craventy?”

“Behold him! Who are you?”

“A courier of the Company.”

“Are you alone?”

“No, I bring a traveller.”

“A traveller! And what does he want?”

“He is come to see the moon.”

At this reply, Captain Craventy said to himself the man must be a fool. But there was no time to announce this opinion, for the courier had taken an inert mass from the sledge, a kind of bag covered with snow, and was about to carry it into the house, when the Captain inquired

“What is that bag?”

“It is my traveller,” replied the courier.

“Who is this traveller?”

“The astronomer, Thomas Black.”

“But he is frozen.”

“Well, he must be thawed.”

Thomas Black, carried by the Sergeant, the Corporal, and the courier, now made his entrance into the house of the fort, and was taken to a room on the first floor, the temperature of which was bearable, thanks to a glowing stove. He was laid upon a bed, and the Captain took his hand.

It was literally frozen. The wrappers and furred mantles, in which Thomas Black was rolled up like a parcel requiring care, were removed, and revealed a man of about fifty. He was short and stout, his hair was already touched with grey, his beard was untrimmed, his eyes were closed, and his lips pressed together as if glued to one another. If he breathed at all, it was so slightly that the frost-work on the windows would not have been affected by it. Joliffe undressed him, and turned him rapidly on to his face and back again, with the words —

“Come, come, sir, when do you mean to return to consciousness?”

But the visitor who had arrived in so strange a manner showed no signs of returning life, and Corporal Joliffe could think of no better means to restore the lost vital heat than to give him a bath in the bowl of hot punch.

Very happily for Thomas Black, however, Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson had another idea.

“Snow, bring snow!” he cried.

There was plenty of it in the court of Fort Reliance; and whilst the Sergeant went to fetch the snow, Joliffe removed all the astronomer’s clothes. The body of the unfortunate man was covered with white frost-bitten patches. It was urgently necessary to restore the circulation of the blood in the affected portions. This result Jaspar Hobson hoped to obtain by vigorous friction with the snow. We know that this is the means generally employed in the polar countries to set going afresh the circulation of the blood arrested by the intense cold, even as the rivers are arrested in their courses by the icy touch of winter. Sergeant Loin soon returned, and he and Joliffe gave the new arrival such a rubbing as he had probably never before received. It was no soft and agreeable friction, but a vigorous shampooing most lustily performed, more like the scratching of a curry-comb than the caresses of a human hand.

And during the operation the loquacious Corporal continued to exhort the unconscious traveller.

“Come, come, sir. What do you mean by getting frozen like this. Now, don’t be so obstinate !”

Probably it was obstinacy which kept Thomas Black from deigning to show a sign of life. At the end of half an hour the rubbers began to despair, and were about to discontinue their exhausting efforts, when the poor man sighed several times.

“He lives; he is coming to !” cried Jaspar Hobson.

After having warmed the outside of his body, Corporal Joliffe hurried to do the same for the inside, and hastily fetched a few glasses of the punch. The traveller really felt much revived by them; the colour returned to his cheeks, expression to his eyes, and words to his lips, so that Captain Craventy began to hope that he should have an explanation from Thomas Black himself of his strange arrival at the fort in such a terrible condition.

At last the traveller, well covered with wraps, rose on his elbow, and said in a voice still faint

“Fort Reliance?”

“The same,” replied the Captain.

“Captain Craventy?”

“He is before you, and is happy to bid you welcome. But may I inquire what brings you to Fort Reliance?”

“He is come to see the moon,” replied the courier, who evidently thought this a happy answer.

It satisfied Thomas Black too, for he bent his head in assent and resumed —

“Lieutenant Hobson?”

“I am here,” replied the Lieutenant.

“You have not yet started?”

“Not. yet, sir.”

“Then,” replied Thomas Black, “I have only to thank you, and to go to sleep until to-morrow morning.”

The Captain and his companions retired, leaving their strange visitor to his repose. Half an hour later the *fête* was at an end, and the guests had regained their respective homes, either in the different rooms of the fort, or the scattered houses outside the enceinte.

The next day Thomas Black was rather better. His vigorous constitution had thrown off the effects of the terrible chill he had had. Any one else would have died from it; but he was not like other men.

And now who was this astronomer? Where did he come from? Why had he undertaken this journey across the territories of the Company in the depth of winter? What did the courier’s reply signify? — To see the moon! The moon could be seen anywhere; there was no need to come to the hyperborean regions to look at it!

Such were the thoughts which passed through Captain Craventy’s mind. But the next day, after an hour’s talk with his new guest, he had learned all he wished to know.

Thomas Black was an astronomer attached to the Greenwich Observatory, so brilliantly presided over by Professor Airy. Mr Black was no theorist, but a sagacious and intelligent observer; and in the twenty years during which he had devoted himself to astronomy, he had rendered great services to the science of ouranography. In private life he was a simple nonentity; he existed only for astronomy; he lived in the heavens, not upon the earth; and was a true descendant of the witty La Fontaine’s savant who fell into a well. He could talk of nothing but stars and constellations. He ought to have lived in a telescope. As an observer be had not his rival; his patience was inexhaustible; he could watch for months for a cosmical phenomenon. He had a specialty of his own, too; he had studied luminous meteors and shooting stars, and his discoveries in this branch of astronomical science were considerable. When ever minute observations or exact measurements and definitions were required, Thomas Black was chosen for the service; for his clearness of sight was something remarkable. The power of observation is not given to everyone, and it will not therefore be surprising that the Greenwich astronomer should have been chosen for the mission we are about to describe, which involved results so interesting for selenographic science.

We know that during a total eclipse of the sun the moon is surrounded by a luminous corona. But what is the origin of this corona? Is it a real substance? or is it only an effect of the diffraction of the sun’s rays near the moon? This is a question which science has hitherto been unable to answer.

As early as 1706 this luminous halo was scientifically described. The corona was minutely examined during the total eclipse of 1715 by Lonville and Halley, by Maraldi in 1724, by Antonio de’Ulloa in 1778, and by Bonditch and Ferrer in 1806; but their theories were so contradictory that no definite conclusion could be arrived at. During the total eclipse of 1842, learned men of all nations — Airy, Arago, Keytal, Langier, Mauvais, Otto, Struve, Petit, Baily, &c. — endeavoured to solve the mystery of the origin of the phenomenon; but in spite of all their efforts, “the disagreement,” says Arago, “of the observations taken in different places by skilful astronomers of one and the same eclipse, have involved the question in fresh obscurity, so that it is now impossible to come to any certain conclusion as to the cause of the phenomenon.” Since this was written, other total eclipses have been studied with no better results.

Yet the solution of the question is of such vast importance to selenographic science that no price would be too great to pay for it. A fresh opportunity was now about to occur to study the much-discussed corona. A total eclipse of the sun — total, at least, for the extreme north of America, for Spain and North Africa — was to take place on July 18th, 1860. It was arranged between the astronomers of different countries that simultaneous observations should be taken at the various points of the zone where the eclipse would be total. Thomas Black was chosen for the expedition to

North America, and was now much in the same situation as the English astronomers who were transported to Norway and Sweden on the occasion of the eclipse of 1851.

It will readily be imagined that Thomas Black seized with avidity the opportunity offered him of studying this luminous halo. He was also to examine into the nature of the red prominences which appear on different parts of the edge of the terrestrial satellite when the totality of the eclipse has commenced; and should he be able satisfactorily to establish their origin, he would be entitled to the applause of the learned men of all Europe.

Thomas Black eagerly prepared for his journey. He obtained urgent letters of recommendation to the principal agents of the Hudson's Bay Company. He ascertained that an expedition was to go to the extreme north of the continent to found a new fort. It was an opportunity not to be lost; so he set out, crossed the Atlantic, landed at New York, traversed the lakes to the Red River settlement, and pressed on from fort to fort in a sledge, under the escort of a courier of the Company; in spite of the severity of the winter, braving all the dangers of a journey across the Arctic regions, and arriving at Fort Reliance on the 19th March in the condition we have described.

Such was the explanation given by the astronomer to Captain Craventy. He at once placed himself entirely at Mr Black's service, but could not refrain from inquiring why he had been in such a great hurry to arrive, when the eclipse was not to take place until the following year, 1860?

"But, Captain," replied the astronomer, "I heard that the Company was sending an expedition along the northern coast of America, and I did not wish to miss the departure of Lieutenant Hobson."

“Mr Black,” replied the Captain, “if the Lieutenant had already started, I should have felt it my duty to accompany you myself to the shores of the Polar Sea.”

And with fresh assurances of his willingness to serve him, the Captain again bade his new guest welcome to Fort Reliance.

CHAPTER IV.

A FACTORY.

One of the largest of the lakes beyond the 61st parallel is that called the Great Slave Lake; it is two hundred and fifty miles long by fifty across, and is situated exactly at 61° 25’ N. lat. and 114° W. long. The surrounding districts slope down to it, and it completely fills a vast natural hollow. The position of the lake in the very centre of the hunting districts. once swarming with game, early attracted the attention of the Company. Numerous streams either take their rise from it or flow into it-the Mackenzie, the Athabasca, &c.; and several important forts have been constructed on its shores — Fort Providence on the north, and Fort Resolution on the south. Fort Reliance is situated on the north-east extremity, and is about three hundred miles from the Chesterfield inlet, a long narrow estuary formed by the waters of Hudson’s Bay.

The Great Slave Lake is dotted with little islands, the granite and gneiss of which they are formed jutting up in several places. Its northern banks are clothed with thick woods, shutting out the barren frozen district beyond, not inaptly called the “Cursed Land.” The southern regions, on the other band, are flat, without a rise of any kind, and the soil is mostly calcareous. The large ruminants of the polar districts — the buffaloes or bisons, the flesh of which forms almost the only food of the Canadian and native hunters — seldom go further north than the Great Slave Lake.

The trees on the northern shores of the lake form magnificent forests. We need not be astonished at meeting with such fine vegetation in this remote district. The Great Slave Lake is not really in a higher latitude than Stockholm or Christiania. We have only to remember that the isothermal lines, or belts of equal heat, along which heat is distributed in equal quantities, do not follow the terrestrial parallels, and that with the same latitude, America is ever so much colder than Europe. In April the streets of New York are still white with snow, yet the latitude of New York is nearly the same as that of the Azores. The nature of a country, its position with regard to the oceans, and even the conformation of its soil, all influence its climate.

In summer Fort Reliance was surrounded with masses of verdure, refreshing to the sight after the long dreary winter. Timber was plentiful in these forests, which consisted almost entirely of poplar, pine, and birch. The islets on the lake produced very fine willows. Game was abundant in the underwood, even during the bad season. Further south the hunters from the fort successfully pursued bisons, elks, and Canadian porcupines, the flesh of which is excellent. The waters of the Slave Lake were full of fish; trout in them attained to an immense size, their weight often exceeding forty pounds. Pikes, voracious lobes, a sort of charr or grayling called “blue fish,” and countless legions of tittamegs, the *Coregonus* of naturalists, disported themselves in the water, so that the inhabitants of Fort Reliance were well supplied with food. Nature provided for all their wants; and clothed in the skins of foxes, martens, bears, and other Arctic animals, they were able to brave the rigour of the winter.

The fort, properly so called, consisted of a wooden house with a ground-floor and one upper storey. In it lived the commandant and his officers. The barracks for the soldiers, the magazines of the Company, and the offices where exchanges were made, surrounded this house. A little chapel, which wanted nothing but a clergyman, and a powder-magazine, completed the buildings of the settlement. The whole was surrounded by palisades twenty-five feet high, defended by a small bastion with a pointed roof at each of the four corners of the parallelogram formed by the enceinte. The fort was thus protected from surprise, a necessary precaution in the days when the Indians, instead of being the purveyors of the Company, fought for the independence of their native land, and when the agents and soldiers of rival associations disputed the possession of the rich fur country.

At that time the Hudson’s Bay Company employed about a million men on its territories. It held supreme authority over them, an authority which could even inflict death. The governors of the factories could regulate salaries, and arbitrarily fix the price of provisions and furs; and as a result of this irresponsible power, they often realised a profit of no less than three hundred per cent.

We shall see from the following table, taken from the “Voyage of Captain Robert Lade,” on what terms exchanges were formerly made with those Indians who have since become the best hunters of the Company. Beavers’ skins were then the currency employed in buying and selling.

The Indians paid —

For one gun,

10 beavers’ skins

“half a pound of powder,

1 “

“four pounds of shot,

1 “

“one axe,

1 “

“six knives,

1 “

“one pound of glass beads,

1 “

“one laced coat,

6 “

“one coat not laced,

5 “

“one laced female dress,

6 “

“one pound of tobacco,

1 “

“one box of powder,

1 “

“one comb and one looking glass,

2 “

But a few years ago beaver-skins became so scarce that the currency had to be changed. Bison-furs are now the medium of trade. When an Indian presents himself at the fort, the agents of the Company give him as many pieces of wood as he brings skins, and he exchanges these pieces of wood for manufactured articles on the premises; and as the Company fix the price of the articles they buy and sell, they cannot fail to realise large profits.

Such was the mode of proceeding in Fort Reliance and other factories; so that Mrs Paulina Barnett was able to watch the working of the system during her stay, which extended until the 16th April. Many a long talk did she have with Lieutenant Hobson, many were the projects they formed, and firmly were they both determined to allow no obstacle to check their advance. As for Thomas Black, he never opened his lips except when his own special mission was discussed. He was wrapped up in the subject of the luminous corona and red prominences of the moon; he lived but to solve the problem, and in the end made Mrs Paulina Barnett nearly as enthusiastic as himself. How eager the two were to cross the Arctic Circle, and how far off the 18th July 1860 appeared to both, but especially to the impatient Greenwich astronomer, can easily be imagined.

The preparations for departure could not be commenced until the middle of March, and a month passed before they were completed. In fact, it was a formidable undertaking to organise such an expedition for crossing the Polar regions. Everything had to betaken with them-food, clothes, tools, arms, ammunition, and a nondescript collection of various requisites.

The troops, under the command of Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson, were one chief and two subordinate officers, with ten soldiers, three of whom took their wives with them. They were all picked men, chosen by Captain Craventy on account of their energy and resolution. We append a list of the whole party: —

1. Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson.

11. Sabine, soldier.

2. Sergeant Long.

12. Hope, do.

3. Corporal Joliffe.

13. Kellet, do.

4. Petersen, soldier

14. Mrs Rae

5. Belcher, do.

15. Mrs Joliffe.

6. Rae, do

16. Mrs Mac-Nab.

7. Marbre, do

17. Mrs Paulina Barnett.

8. Garry, do

18. Madge.

9. Pond, do

19. Thomas Black

10. Mac-Nab, do.

In all, nineteen persons to be transported several hundreds of miles through a desert and imperfectly-known country.

With this project in view, however, the Company had collected everything necessary for the expedition. A dozen sledges, with their teams of dogs, were in readiness. These primitive vehicles consisted of strong but light planks joined together by transverse bands. A piece of curved wood, turning up at the end like a skate, was fixed beneath the sledge, enabling it to cleave the snow without sinking deeply into it. Six swift and intelligent dogs, yoked two and two, and controlled by the long thong brandished by the driver, drew the sledges, and could go at a rate of fifteen miles an hour.

The wardrobe of the travellers consisted of garments made of reindeer-skins, lined throughout with thick furs. All wore linen next the skin as a protection against the sudden changes of temperature frequent in these latitudes. Each one, officer or soldier, male or female, wore seal-skin boots sewn with twine, in the manufacture of which the natives excel. These boots are absolutely impervious, and are so flexible that they are admirably adapted for walking. Pine-wood snow-shoes, two or three feet long, capable of supporting the weight of a man on the most brittle snow, and enabling him to pass over it with the rapidity of a skater on ice, can be fastened to the soles of the seal-skin boots. Fur caps and deer-skin belts completed the costumes.

For arms, Lieutenant Hobson had the regulation musketoons provided by the Company, pistols, ordnance sabres, and plenty of ammunition; for tools : axes, saws, adzes, and other instruments required in carpentering. Then there was the collection of all that would be needed for setting up a factory in the remote district for which they were bound : a stove; a smelting furnace, two airpumps for ventilation, an India-rubber boat, only inflated when required, &c. &c.

The party might have relied for provisions on the hunters amongst them. Some of the soldiers were skilful trackers of game, and there were plenty of reindeer in the Polar regions. Whole tribes of Indians, or Esquimaux, deprived of bread and all other nourishment, subsist entirely on this venison, which is both abundant and palatable. But as delays and difficulties had to be allowed for, a certain quantity of provisions was taken with them. The flesh of the bison, elk, and deer, amassed in the large *battues* on the south of the lake; corned beef, which will keep for any length of time; and some Indian preparations, in which the flesh of animals, ground to powder, retains its nutritive properties in a very small bulk, requiring no cooking, and forming a very nourishing diet, were amongst the stores provided in case of need.

Lieutenant Hobson likewise took several casks of rum and whisky; but he was firmly resolved to economise these spirits, so injurious to the health in cold latitudes, as much as possible. The Company had placed at his disposal a little portable medicine-chest, containing formidable quantities of lime-juice, lemons, and other simple remedies necessary to check, or if possible to prevent, the scorbutic affections which take such a terrible form in these regions.

All the men had been chosen with great care; none were too stout or too thin, and all had for years been accustomed to the severity of the climate, and could therefore more easily endure the fatigues of an expedition to the Polar Sea. They were all brave, high-spirited fellows, who had taken service of their own accord. Double pay had been promised them during their stay at the confines of the American continent, should they succeed in making a settlement beyond the seventieth parallel.

The sledge provided for Mrs Barnett and her faithful Madge was rather more comfortable than the others. She did not wish to be treated better than her travelling companions, but yielded to the urgent request of Captain Craventy, who was but carrying out the wishes of the Company.

The vehicle which brought Thomas Black to Fort Reliance also conveyed him and his scientific apparatus from it. A few astronomical instruments, of which there were not many in those days-a telescope for his selenographic observations, a sextant for taking the latitude, a chronometer for determining the longitudes, a few maps, a few books, were all stored away in this sledge, and Thomas Black relied upon his faithful dogs to lose nothing by the way.

Of course the food for the various teams was not forgotten. There were altogether no less than seventy-two dogs, quite a herd to provide for by the way, and it was the business of the hunters to cater for them. These strong intelligent animals were bought of the Chippeway Indians, who know well how to train them for their arduous calling.

The little company was most skilfully organised. The zeal of Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson was beyond all praise. Proud of his mission, and devoted to his task; he neglected nothing which could insure success. Corporal Joliffe, always a busybody, exerted himself without producing any very tangible results; but his wife was most useful and devoted; and Mrs Paulina Barnett had already struck up a great friendship with the brisk little Canadian woman, whose fair hair and large soft eyes were so pleasant to look at.

We need scarcely add that Captain Craventy did all in his power to further the enterprise. The instructions he had received from the Company showed what great importance they attached to the success of the expedition, and the establishment of a new factory beyond the seventieth parallel. We may therefore safely affirm that every human effort likely to insure success which could be made was made; but who could tell what insurmountable difficulties nature might place in the path of the brave Lieutenant I who could tell what awaited him and his devoted little band.

CHAPTER V.

FROM FORT RELIANCE TO FORT ENTERPRISE.

The first fine days came at last. The green carpet of the hills began to appear here and there where the snow had melted. A few migratory birds from the south-such as swans, bald-headed eagles, &c. — passed through the warmer air. The poplars, birches, and willows began to bud, and the redheaded ducks, of which there are so many species in North America, to skim the surface of the numerous pools formed by the melted snow. Guillemots, puffins, and eider ducks sought colder latitudes; and little shrews no bigger than a hazel-nut ventured from their holes, tracing strange figures on the ground with their tiny-pointed tails. It was intoxicating once more to breathe the fresh air of spring, and to bask in the sunbeams. Nature awoke once more from her heavy sleep in the long winter night, and smiled as she opened her eyes.

The renovation of creation in spring is perhaps more impressive in the Arctic regions than in any other portion of the globe, on account of the greater contrast with what has gone before.

The thaw was not, however, complete. The thermometer, it is true, marked 41° Fahrenheit above zero; but the mean temperature of the nights kept the surface of the snowy plains solid — a good thing for the passage of sledges, of which Jaspar Hobson meant to avail himself before the thaw became complete.

The ice of the lake was still unbroken. During the last month several successful hunting expeditions had been made across the vast smooth plains, which were already frequented by game. Mrs Barnett was astonished at the skill with which the men used their snow-shoes, scudding along at the pace of a horse in full gallop. Following Captain Craventy's advice, the lady herself practised walking in these contrivances, and she soon became very expert in sliding over the snow.

During the last few days several bands of Indians had arrived at the fort to exchange the spoils of the winter chase for manufactured goods. The season had been bad. There were a good many polecats and sables; but the furs of beavers, otters, lynxes, ermines, and foxes were scarce. It was therefore a wise step for the Company to endeavour to explore a new country, where the wild animals had hitherto escaped the rapacity of man.

On the morning of the 16th April Lieutenant Jaspar Hobson and his party were ready to start. The route across the known districts, between the Slave Lake and that of the Great Bear beyond the Arctic Circle, was already determined. Jaspar Hobson was to make for Fort Confidence, on the northern extremity of the latter lake; and he was to revictual at Fort Enterprise, a station two hundred miles further to the north-west, on the shores of the Snare Lake, By travelling at the rate of fifteen miles a day the Lieutenant hoped to halt there about the beginning of May.

From this point the expedition was to take the shortest route to Cape Bathurst, on the North American coast. It was agreed that in a year Captain Craventy should send a convoy with provisions to Cape Bathurst, and that a detachment of the Lieutenant's men was to go to meet this convoy, to guide it to the spot where the new fort was to be erected. This plan was a guarantee against any adverse circumstances, and left a means of communication with their fellow-creatures open to the Lieutenant and his voluntary companions in exile.

On the 16th April dogs and sledges were awaiting the travellers at the postern gate. Captain Craventy called the men of the party together and said a few kind words to them. He urged them above all things to stand by one another in the perils they might be called upon to meet; reminded them that the enterprise upon which they were about to enter required self-denial and devotion, and that submission to their officers was an indispensable condition of success. Cheers greeted the Captain’s speech, the adieux were quickly made, and each one took his place in the sledge assigned to him. Jaspar Hobson and Sergeant Long went first; then Mrs Paulina Barnett and Madge, the latter dexterously wielding the long Esquimaux whip, terminating in a stiff thong. Thomas Black and one of the soldiers, the Canadian, Petersen, occupied the third sledge ;and the others followed, Corporal and Mrs Joliffe bringing up the rear. According to the orders of Lieutenant Hobson, each driver kept as nearly as possible at the same distance from the preceding sledge, so as to avoid all confusion — a necessary precaution, as a collision between two sledges going at full speed, might have had disastrous results.

On leaving Fort Reliance, Jaspar Hobson at once directed his course towards the north-west. The first thing to be done was to cross the large river connecting Lakes Slave and Wolmsley, which was, however, still frozen so hard as to be undistinguishable from the vast white plains around. A uniform carpet of snow covered the whole country, and the sledges, drawn by their swift teams, sped rapidly over the firm smooth surface.

The weather was fine, but still very cold. The sun, scarce above the horizon, described a lengthened curve; and its rays, reflected on the snow, gave more light than heat. Fortunately not a breath of air stirred, and this lessened the severity of the cold, although the rapid pace of the sledges through the keen atmosphere must have been trying to any one not inured to the rigour of a Polar climate.

“A good beginning,” said Jaspar Hobson to the Sergeant, who sat motionless beside him as if rooted to his seat; “the journey has commenced favourably. The sky is cloudless; the temperature propitious, our equipages shoot along like express trains, and as long as this fine weather lasts we shall get on capitally. What do you think, Sergeant Long?”

“I agree with you, Lieutenant,” replied the Sergeant, who never differed from his chief.

“Like myself, Sergeant, you are determined to push on as far north as possible — are you not?” resumed Lieutenant Hobson.

“You have but to command to be obeyed, Lieutenant.”

“I know it, Sergeant; I know that with you to bear is to obey. Would that all our men understood as you do the importance of our mission, and would devote themselves body and soul to the interests of the Company! Ah, Sergeant Long, I know if I gave you an impossible order — “

“Lieutenant, there is no such thing as an impossible order.”

“What? Suppose now I ordered you to go to the North Pole?”

“Lieutenant, I should go !”

“And to comeback!” added Jaspar Hobson with a smile.

“I should come back,” replied Sergeant Long simply.

During this colloquy between Lieutenant Hobson and his Sergeant a slight ascent compelled the sledges to slacken speed, and Mrs Barnett and Madge also exchanged a few sentences. These two intrepid women, in their otter-skin caps and white bear-skin mantles, gazed in astonishment upon the rugged scenery around them, and at the white outlines of the huge glaciers standing out against the horizon. They had already left behind them the hills of the northern banks of the Slave Lake, with their summits crowned with the gaunt skeletons of trees. The vast plains stretched before them in apparently endless succession. The rapid flight and cries of a few birds of passage alone broke the monotony of the scene. Now and then a troop of swans, with plumage so white that the keenest sight could not distinguish them from the snow when they settled on the ground, rose into view in the clear blue atmosphere and pursued their journey to the north.

“What an extraordinary country !” exclaimed Mrs Paulina Barnett. “What a difference between these Polar regions and the green prairies of Australia! You remember, Madge, how we suffered from the heat on the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria — you remember the cloudless sky and the parching sunbeams?”

My dear,” replied Madge, “I have not the gift of remembering like you. You retain your impressions, I forget mine.”

“What, Madge !” cried Mrs Barnett, “you have forgotten the tropical heat of India arid Australia? You have no recollection of our agonies when water failed us in the desert, when the pitiless sun scorched us to the bone, when even the night brought us no relief from our sufferings !”

“No, Paulina,” replied Madge, wrapping her furs more closely round her, “no, I remember nothing. How could I now recollect the sufferings to which you allude — the heat, the agonies of thirst — when we are surrounded on every side by ice, and I have but to stretch my arm out of this sledge to pick up a handful of snow? You talk to me of heat, when we are freezing beneath our bearskins; you recall the broiling rays of the sun when its April beams cannot melt the icicles on our lips! No, child, no, don’t try to persuade me it’s hot anywhere else; don’t tell me I ever complained of being too warm, for I sha’n’t believe you!”

Mrs Paulina Barnett could not help smiling.

“So, poor Madge,” she said, “you are very cold!”

“Yes, child, I am cold; but I rather like this climate. I’ve no doubt it’s very healthy, and I think North America will agree with me. It’s really a very fine country !”

“Yes, Madge; it is a fine country, and we have as yet seen none of the wonders it contains. But wait until we reach the Arctic Ocean; wait until the winter shuts us in with its gigantic icebergs and thick covering of snow; wait till the northern storms break over us, and the glories of the Aurora Borealis and of the splendid constellations of the Polar skies are spread out above our heads; wait till we have lived through the strange long six months’ night, and then indeed you will understand the infinite variety, the infinite beauty, of our Creator’s handiwork !”

Thus spoke Mrs Paulina Barnett, carried away by her vivid imagination. She could see nothing but beauty in these deserted regions, with their rigorous climate. Her enthusiasm got the better for the time of her judgment. Her sympathy with nature enabled her to read the touching poetry of the ice-bound north-the poetry embodied in the Sagas, and sung by the bards of the time of Ossian. But Madge, more matter of fact than her mistress, disguised from herself neither the dangers of an expedition to the

Arctic Ocean, nor the sufferings involved in wintering only thirty degrees at the most from the North Pole.

And indeed the most robust had sometimes succumbed to the fatigues, privations, and mental and bodily agonies endured in this severe climate. Jaspar Hobson had not, it is true, to press on to the very highest latitudes of the globe,; he had not to reach the pole itself, or to follow in the steps of Parry, Ross, Mc'Clure, Kean, Morton, and others. But after once crossing the Arctic Circle, there is little variation in the temperature; it does not increase in coldness in proportion to the elevation reached. Granted that Jaspar Hobson did not think of going beyond the seventieth parallel, we must still remember that Franklin and his unfortunate companions died of cold and hunger before they had penetrated beyond 68° N. lat.

Very different was the talk in the sledge occupied by Mr and Mrs Joliffe. Perhaps the gallant Corporal had too often drunk to the success of the expedition on starting; for, strange to say, he was disputing with his little wife. Yes, he was actually contradicting her, which never happened except under extraordinary circumstances!

“No, Mrs Joliffe,” he was saying, “no, you have nothing to fear. A sledge is not more difficult to guide than a pony-carriage, and the devil take me if I can't manage a team of dogs !”

“I don't question your skill,” replied Mrs Joliffe; “I only ask you not to go so fast. You are in front of the whole caravan now, and I hear Lieutenant Hobson calling out to you to resume your proper place behind.”

“Let him call, Mrs Joliffe, let him call.”

And the Corporal, urging on his dogs with a fresh cut of the whip, dashed along at still greater speed.

“Take care, Joliffe,” repeated his little wife; “not so fast, we are going down hill.”

“Down hill, Mrs Joliffe; you call that down hill? why, it’s up hill!”

“I tell you we are going down!” repeated poor Mrs Joliffe.

“And I tell you we are going up; look how the dogs pull !”

Whoever was right, the dogs became uneasy. The ascent was, in fact, pretty steep; the sledge dashed along at a reckless pace, and was already considerably in advance of the rest of the party. Mr and Mrs Joliffe bumped up and down every instant, the surface of the snow became more and more uneven, and the pair, flung first to one side and then to the other, knocked against each other and the sledge, and were horribly bruised and shaken. But the Corporal would listen neither to the advice of his wife nor to the shouts of Lieutenant Hobson. The latter, seeing the danger of this reckless course, urged on his own animals, and the rest of the caravan followed at a rapid pace.

But the Corporal became more and more excited-the speed of his equipage delighted him. He shouted, he gesticulated, and flourished his long whip like an accomplished sportsman.

“Wonderful things these whips!” he cried; “the Esquimaux wield them with unrivalled skill !”

“But you are not an Esquimaux!” cried Mrs Joliffe, trying in vain to arrest the arm of her imprudent husband.

“I have heard tell,” resumed the Corporal — ” I’ve heard tell that the Esquimaux can touch any dog they like in any part, that they can even cut out a bit of one of their ears with the stiff thong at the end of the whip. I am going to try.”

“Don’t try, don’t try, Joliffe !” screamed the poor little woman, frightened out of her wits.

“Don’t be afraid, Mrs Joliffe, don’t be afraid; I know what I can do. The fifth dog on the right is misbehaving himself;. I will correct him a little!”

But Corporal Joliffe was evidently not yet enough of an Esquimaux to be able to manage the whip with its thong four feet longer than the sledge; for it unrolled with an ominous hiss, and rebounding, twisted itself round Corporal Joliffe’s own neck, sending his fur cap into the air, perhaps with one of his ears in it.

At this moment the dogs flung themselves on one side, the sledge was overturned, and the pair were flung into the snow. Fortunately it was thick and soft, so that they escaped unhurt. But what a disgrace for the Corporal! how reproachfully his little wife looked at him, and how stern was the reprimand of Lieutenant Hobson!

The sledge was picked up, but it was decided that henceforth the reins of the dogs, like those of the household, were to be in the hands of Mrs Joliffe. The crest-fallen Corporal was obliged to submit, and the interrupted journey was resumed.

No incident worth mentioning occurred during the next fifteen days. The weather continued favourable, the cold was not too severe, and on the 1st May the expedition arrived at Fort Enterprise.

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CHAPTER VI.

A WAPITI DUEL.

Two hundred miles had been traversed since the expedition left Fort Reliance. The travellers, taking advantage of the long twilight, pressed on day and night, and were literally overcome with fatigue when they reached Fort Enterprise, near the shores of Lake Snare.

This fort was no more than a depôt of provisions, of little importance, erected a few years before by the Hudson’s Bay Company. It served as a resting-place for the men taking the convoys of furs from the Great Bear Lake, some three hundred miles further to the north-west. About a dozen soldiers formed the garrison. The fort consisted of a wooden house surrounded by palisades. But few as were the comforts it offered, Lieutenant Hobson’s companions gladly took refuge in it and rested there for two days.

The gentle influence of the Arctic spring was beginning to be felt. Here and there the snow had melted, and the temperature of the nights was no longer below freezing point. A few delicate mosses and slender grasses clothed the rugged ground with their soft verdure; and from between the stones peeped the moist calices of tiny, almost colourless, flowers. These faint signs of reawakening vegetation, after the long night of winter, were refreshing to eyes weary of the monotonous whiteness of the snow; and the scattered specimens of the Flora of the Arctic regions were welcomed with delight.

Mrs Paulina Barnett and Jaspar Hobson availed themselves of this leisure time to visit the shores of the little lake. They were both students and enthusiastic lovers of nature. Together they wandered amongst the ice masses, already beginning to break up, and the waterfalls created by the action of the rays of the sun. The surface itself of Lake Snare was still intact, not a crack denoted the approaching thaw; but it was strewn with the ruins of mighty icebergs, which assumed all manner of picturesque forms, and the beauty of which was heightened when the light, diffracted by the sharp edges of the ice, touched them with all manner of colours. One might have fancied that a rainbow, crushed in a powerful hand, bad been flung upon the ground, its fragments crossing each other as they fell.

“What a beautiful scene!” exclaimed Mrs Paulina Barnett. “These prismatic effects vary at every change of our position. Does it not seem as if we were bending over the opening of an immense kaleidoscope, or are you already weary of a sight so new and interesting to me?”

“No, madam,” replied the Lieutenant; “although I was born and bred on this continent, its beauties never pall upon me. But if your enthusiasm is so great when you see this scenery with the sun shining upon it, what will it be when you are privileged to behold the terrible grandeur of the winter? To own the truth, I think the sun, so much thought of in temperate latitudes, spoils my Arctic home.”

“Indeed!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, smiling at the Lieutenant’s last remark; “for my part, I think the sun a capital travelling companion, and I shall not be disposed to grumble at the warmth it gives even in the Polar regions !”

“Ah, madam,” replied Jaspar Hobson, “I am one of those who think it best to visit Russia in the winter, and the Sahara Desert in the summer. You then see their peculiar characteristics to advantage. The sun is a star of the torrid and temperate zones, and is out of place thirty degrees from the North Pole. The true sky of this country is the pure frigid sky of winter, bright with constellations, and sometimes flushed with the glory of the Aurora Borealis.

This land is the land of the night, not of the day; and you have yet to make acquaintance with the delights and marvels of the long Polar night.”

“Have you ever visited the temperate zones of Europe and America?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“Yes, madam; and I admired them as they deserved. But I returned home with fresh love and enthusiasm for my native land. Cold is my element, and no merit is due to me for braving it. It has no power over me; and, like the Esquimaux. I can live for months together in a snow hut.”

“Really, Lieutenant Hobson, it is quite cheering to hear our dreaded enemy spoken of in such terms. I hope to prove myself worthy to be your companion, and wherever you venture, we will venture together.”

“I agree, madam, I agree; and may all the women and soldiers accompanying me show themselves as resolute as you. If so, God helping us, we shall indeed advance far.”

“You have nothing to complain of yet,” observed the lady. “Not a single accident has occurred, the weather has been propitious, the cold not too severe-everything has combined to aid us.”

“Yes, madam; but the sun which you admire so much will soon create difficulties for us, and strew obstacles in our path.”

“What do you mean, Lieutenant Hobson?”

“I mean that the heat will soon have changed the aspect of the country; that the melted ice will impede the sliding of the sledges; that the ground will become rough and uneven; that our panting dogs will no longer carry us along with the speed of an arrow; that the rivers and lakes will resume their liquid state, and that we shall have to ford or go round them. All these changes, madam, due to the influence of the solar rays, will cause delays, fatigue, and dangers, the very least of which will be the breaking of the brittle snow beneath our feet, or the falling of the avalanches from the summits of the icebergs. For all this we have to thank the gradual rise of the sun higher and higher above the horizon. Bear this in mind, madam: of the four elements of the old creation, only one is necessary to us here, the air; the other three, fire, earth, and water, are *de trop* in the Arctic regions.”

Of course the Lieutenant was exaggerating, and Mrs Barnett could easily have retorted with counter-arguments; but she liked to hear his raptures in praise of his beloved country, and she felt that his enthusiasm was a guarantee that he would shrink from no obstacle.

Yet Jaspar Hobson was right when he said the sun would cause difficulties. This was seen when the party set out again on the 4th May, three days later. The thermometer, even in the coldest part of the night, marked more than 32° Fahrenheit. A complete thaw set in, the vast white sheet of snow resolved itself into water. The irregularities of the rocky soil caused constant jolting of the sledges, and the passengers were roughly shaken. The roads were so heavy that the dogs had to go at a slow trot, and the reins were therefore again entrusted to the hands of the imprudent Corporal Joliffe. Neither shouts nor flourishings of the whip had the slightest effect on the jaded animals.

From time to time the travellers lightened the sledges by walking little way. This mode of locomotion suited the hunters, who were now gradually approaching the best districts for game in the whole of English America. Mrs Paulina Barnett and Madge took a great interest in the chase, whilst Thomas Black professed absolute indifference to all athletic exercise. He had not come all this distance to hunt the polecat or the ermine, but merely to look at the moon at the moment when her disc should cover that of the sun. When the queen of the night rose above the horizon, the impatient astronomer would gaze at her with eager eyes, and one day the Lieutenant said to him

“It would be a bad look-out for you, Mr Black, if by any unlucky chance the moon should fail to keep her appointment on the 16th July 1860.”

“Lieutenant Hobson,” gravely replied the astronomer, “if the moon were guilty of such a breach of good manners, I should indeed have cause to complain.”

The chief hunters of the expedition were the soldiers Marbre and Sabine, both very expert at their business. Their skill was wonderful; and the cleverest Indians would not have surpassed them in keenness of sight, precision of aim, or manual address. They were alike trappers and hunters, and were acquainted with all the nets and snares for taking sables, otters, wolves, foxes, bears, &c. No artifice was unknown to them, and Captain Craventy had shown his wisdom in choosing two such intelligent men to accompany the little troop.

Whilst on the march however, Marbre and Sabine had no time for setting traps. They could not separate from the others for more than an hour or two at a time, and were obliged to be content with the game which passed within range of their rifles. Still they were fortunate enough to kill two of the large American ruminants, seldom met with in such elevated latitudes.

On the morning of the 15th May the hunters asked permission to follow some fresh traces they had found, and the Lieutenant not only granted it, but himself accompanied them with Mrs Paulina Barnett, and they went several miles out of their route towards the east.

The impressions were evidently the result of the passage of about half-a-dozen large deer. There could be no mistake about it; Marbre and Sabine were positive on that point, and could even have named the species to which the animals belonged.

“You seem surprised to have met with traces of these animals here, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett.

“Well, madam,” replied Hobson, “this species is rarely seen beyond 57° N. lat. We generally hunt them at the south of the Slave Lake, where they feed upon the shoots of willows and poplars, and certain wild roses to which they are very partial.”

“I suppose these creatures, like those with valuable furs, have fled from the districts scoured by the hunters.”

“I see no other explanation of their presence at 65° N. lat.” replied the Lieutenant-”that is, if the men are not mistaken as to the origin of the footprints.”

“No, no, sir,” cried Sabine; “Marbre and I are not mistaken. These traces were left by deer, the deer we hunters call red deer, and the natives wapitis.”

“He is quite right,” added Marbre; “old trappers like us are not to be taken in; besides, don’t you hear that peculiar whistling sound?”

The party had now reached the foot of a little hill, and as the snow had almost disappeared from its sides they were able to climb it, and hastened to the summit, the peculiar whistling noticed by Marbre becoming louder, mingled with cries resembling the braying of an ass, and proving that the two hunters were riot mistaken.

Once at the top of the hill, the adventurers looked eagerly towards the east. The undulating plains were still white with snow, but its dazzling surface was here and there relieved with patches of stunted light green vegetation. A few gaunt shrubs stretched forth their bare and shrivelled branches, and huge icebergs with precipitous sides stood out against the grey background of the sky.

“Wapitis! wapitis!-there they are !” cried Sabine and Marbre at once, pointing to a group of animals distinctly visible about a quarter of a mile to the east.

“What are they doing?” asked Mrs Barnett.

“They are fighting, madam,” replied Hobson; “they always do when the heat of the Polar sun inflames their blood-another deplorable result of the action of the radiant orb of day !”

From where they stood the party could easily watch the group of wapitis. They were fine specimens of the family of deer known under the various names of stags with rounded antlers, American stags, roebucks, grey elks and red elks, &c. These graceful creatures have slender legs and brown skins with patches of red hair, the colour of which becomes darker in the warmer season. The fierce males are easily distinguished from the females by their fine white antlers, the latter being entirely without these ornaments. These wapitis were once very numerous all over North America, and the United States imported a great many; but clearings were begun on every side, the forest trees fell beneath the axe of the pioneer of civilisation, and the wapitis took refuge in the more peaceful districts of Canada; but they were soon again disturbed, and wandered to the shores of Hudson's Bay. So that although the wapiti thrives in a cold country, Lieutenant Hobson was right in saying that it seldom penetrates beyond 57° N. latitude; and the specimens now found had doubtless fled before the Chippeway Indians, who hunt them without mercy.

The wapitis were so engrossed in their desperate struggle that they were unconscious of the approach of the hunters; but they would probably not have ceased fighting, had they been aware of it. Marbre and Sabine, aware of their peculiarity in this respect, might therefore have advanced fearlessly upon them, and have taken aim at leisure.

Lieutenant Hobson suggested that they should do so.

"Beg pardon, sir," replied Marbre; "but let us spare our powder and shot. These beasts are engaged in a war to the death, and we shall arrive in plenty of time to pick up the vanquished."

"Have these wapitis a commercial value?" asked Mrs Paulina Barnett.

"Yes, madam," replied Hobson; "and their skin, which is not quite so thick as that of the elk, properly so called makes very valuable leather. By rubbing this skin with the fat and brains of the animal itself, it is rendered flexible, and neither damp nor dryness injures it. The Indians are therefore always eager to procure the skins of the wapitis."

"Does not the flesh make admirable venison?"

"Pretty good, madam; only pretty good. It is tough, and does not taste very nice; the fat becomes hard directly it is taken from the fire, and sticks to the teeth. It is certainly inferior as an article of food to the flesh of other deer;

but when meat is scarce we are glad enough to eat it, and it supports life as well as anything else.”

Mrs Barnett and Lieutenant Hobson had been chatting together for some minutes, when, with the exception of two, the wapitis suddenly ceased fighting. Was their rage satiated?- or had they perceived the hunters, and felt the approach of danger? Whatever the cause, all but two fine creatures fled a towards the east With incredible speed; in a few instants they were out of sight, and the swiftest horse could not have caught them up.

Meanwhile, however, two magnificent specimens remained on the field of battle. Heads down, antlers to antlers, hind legs stretched and quivering, they butted at each other without a moment’s pause. Like two wrestlers struggling for a prize which neither will yield, they would not separate, but whirled round and round together on their front legs as if riveted to one another. What implacable rage !” exclaimed Mrs Barnett.

“Yes,” replied the Lieutenant; “the wapitis really are most spiteful beasts. I have no doubt they are fighting out an old quarrel.”

“Would not this be the time to approach them, when they are blinded with rage?”

“There’s plenty of time, ma’am,” said Sabine; “they won’t escape us now. They will not stir from where they are when we are three steps from them, the rifles at our shoulders, and our fingers on the triggers !”

Indeed? Yes, madam,” added Hobson, who had carefully examined the wapitis after the hunter’s remark; “and whether at our hands or from the teeth of wolves, those wapitis will meet death where they now stand.”

“I don’t understand what you mean, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett.

“Well, go nearer, madam,” he replied; “don’t be afraid of startling the animals; for, as our hunter says, they are no longer capable of flight.”

The four now descended the hill, and in a few minutes gained the theatre of the struggle. The wapitis had not moved. They were pushing at each other like a couple of rams, and seemed to be inseparably glued together.

In fact, in the heat of the combat the antlers of the two creatures had become entangled together to such an extent that they could no longer separate without breaking them. This often happens in the hunting districts. It is not at all uncommon to find antlers thus connected lying on the ground; the poor encumbered animals soon die of hunger, or they become an easy prey to wild beasts.

Two bullets put an end to the fight between the wapitis; and Marbre and Sabine taking immediate possession, carried off their skins to be subsequently prepared, leaving their bleeding carcasses to be devoured by wolves and bears.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARCTIC CIRCLE.

The expedition continued to advance towards the north-west; but the great inequalities of the ground made it hard work for the dogs to get along, and the poor creatures, who could hardly be held in when they started, were now quiet enough. Eight or ten miles a day were as much as they could accomplish, although Lieutenant Hobson urged them on to the utmost.

He was anxious to get to Fort Confidence, on the further side of the Great Bear Lake, where he hoped to obtain some useful information. Had the Indians frequenting the northern banks of the lake been able to cross the districts on the shores of the sea? was the Arctic Ocean open at this time of year? These were grave questions, the reply to which would decide the fate of the new factory.

The country through which the little troop was now passing was intersected by numerous streams, mostly tributaries of the two large rivers, the Mackenzie and Coppermine, which flow from the south to the north, and empty themselves into the Arctic Ocean. Lakes, lagoons, and numerous pools are formed between these two principal arteries; and as they were no longer frozen over, the sledges could not venture upon them, and were compelled to go around them, which caused considerable delay. Lieutenant Hobson was certainly right in saying that winter is the time to visit the hyperborean regions, for they are then far easier to traverse. Mrs Paulina Barnett had reason to own the justice of this assertion than once.

This region, included in the “Cursed Land,” was, besides, completely deserted, as are the greater portion of the districts of the extreme north of America. It has been estimated that there is but one inhabitant to every ten square miles. Besides the scattered natives, there are some few thousand agents or soldiers of the different fur-trading companies; but they mostly congregate in the southern districts and about the various factories. No human footprints gladdened the eyes of the travellers, the only traces on the sandy soil were those of ruminants and rodents. Now and then a fierce polar bear was seen, and Mrs Paulina Barnett expressed her surprise at not meeting more of these terrible carnivorous beasts, of whose daily attacks on whalers and persons shipwrecked in Baffin's Bay and on the coasts of Greenland and Spitzbergen she had read in the accounts of those who had wintered in the Arctic regions.

"Wait for the winter, madam," replied the Lieutenant; "wait till the cold makes them hungry, and then you will perhaps see as many as you care about !"

On the 23d May, after a long and fatiguing journey, the expedition at last reached the Arctic Circle. We know that this latitude 23° 27' 57" from the North Pole, forms the mathematical limit beyond which the rays of the sun do not penetrate in the winter, when the northern districts of the globe are turned away from the orb of day. Here, then, the travellers entered the true Arctic region, the northern Frigid Zone.

The latitude had been very carefully obtained by means of most accurate instruments, which were handled with equal skill by the astronomer and by Lieutenant Hobson. Mrs Barnett was present at the operation, and had the satisfaction of hearing that she was at last about to cross the Arctic Circle. It was with a feeling of just pride that she received the intelligence.

"You have already passed through the two Torrid Zones in your previous journeys," said the Lieutenant, "and now you are on the verge of the Arctic Circle. Few explorers have ventured into such totally different regions.

Some, so to speak, have a specialty for hot countries, and choose Africa or Australia as the field for their investigations. Such were Barth, Burton, Livingstone Speke, Douglas, Stuart, &c. Others, on the contrary, have a passion for the Arctic regions, still so little known. Mackenzie, Franklin, Penny, Kane, Parry, Rae, &c. preceded us on our present journey; but we must congratulate you, Mrs Barnett, on being a more cosmopolitan traveller than all of them."

"I must see everything or at least try to see everything, Lieutenant," replied. Mrs Paulina; "and I think the dangers and difficulties are about equal everywhere. Although we have not to dread the fevers of the unhealthy torrid regions, or the attacks of the fierce black races, in this Frigid Zone, the cold is a no less formidable enemy; and I suspect that the white bears we are liable to meet with here will give us quite as warm a reception as would the tiers of Thibet or the lions of Africa. In Torrid and Frigid Zones alike there are vast unexplored tracts which will long defy the efforts of the boldest adventurers."

"Yes, madam," replied Jaspar Hobson; "but I think the hyperborean regions will longer resist thorough exploration. The natives are the chief obstacle in tropical regions, and I am well aware how many travellers have fallen victims to savages. But civilisation will necessarily subdue the wild races sooner or later; whereas in the Arctic and Antarctic Zones it is not the inhabitants who arrest the progress of the explorer, but Nature herself who repels those who approach her, and paralyses their energies with the bitter cold !"

"You think, then, that the secrets of the most remote districts of Africa and Australia will have been fathomed before the Frigid Zone has been entirely examined?"

“Yes, madam,” replied the Lieutenant; “and I think my opinion is founded on facts. The most intrepid discoverers of the Arctic regions - Parry, Penny, Franklin, M’Clure, Dane, and Morton — did not get beyond 83° north latitude, seven degrees from the pole — whereas Australia has several times been crossed from south to north by the bold Stuart; and even Africa, with all its terrors, was traversed by Livingstone from the Bay of Loanga to the mouth of the Zambesi. We are, therefore, nearer to geographical knowledge of the equatorial countries than of the Polar districts.”

“Do you think that the Pole itself will ever be reached by man?” inquired Mrs Paulina Barnett.

“Certainly,” replied Hobson, adding with a smile, “by man or woman. But I think other means must be tried of reaching this point, where all the meridians of the globe cross each other, than those hitherto adopted by travellers. We hear of the open sea, of which certain explorers are said to have caught a glimpse. But if such a sea, free from ice, really exist, it is very difficult to get at, and no one can say positively whether it extends to the North Pole. For my part, I think an open sea would increase rather than lessen the difficulties of explorers. As for me, I would rather count upon firm footing, whether on ice or rock, all the way. Then I would organise successive expeditions, establishing depôts of provisions and fuel nearer and nearer to the Pole; and so, with plenty of time, plenty of money, and perhaps the sacrifice of a good many lives, I should in the end solve the great scientific problem. I should, I think, at last reach the hitherto inaccessible goal !”

“I think you are right, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett; “and if ever you try the experiment, I should not be afraid to join you, and would gladly go to set up the Union Jack at the North Pole. But that is not our present object.”

“Not our *immediate* object, madam,” replied Hobson; “but when once the projects of the Company are realised, when the new fort has been erected on the confines of the American continent, it may become the natural starting-point of all expeditions to the north. Besides, should the fur-yielding animals, too zealously hunted, take refuge at the Pole, we should have to follow them.”

“Unless costly furs should go out of fashion,” replied Mrs Barnett.

“O madam,” cried the Lieutenant, “there will always be some pretty woman whose wish for a sable muff or an ermine tippet must be gratified !”

“I am afraid so,” said Mrs Barnett, laughing; “and probably the first discoverer of the Pole will have been led thither in pursuit of a sable or a silver fox.”

“That is my conviction,” replied Hobson. “Such is human nature, and greed of gain will always carry a man further than zeal for science.”

“What! do *you* utter such sentiments?” exclaimed Mrs Barnett.

“Well, madam, what am I but an *employé* of the Hudson’s Bay Company? and does the Company risk its capital and agents with any other hope than an increase of profits?”

“Lieutenant Hobson,” said Mrs Barnett, “I think I know you well enough to assert that on occasion you would be ready to devote body and soul to science. If a purely geographical question called you to the Pole, I feel sure you would not hesitate to go. But,” she added, with a smile, “the solution of this great problem is still far distant. We have but just reached the verge of the Arctic Circle, but I hope we may cross it without any very great difficulty.”

“That I fear is doubtful,” said the Lieutenant, who had been attentively examining the sky during their conversation. “The weather has looked threatening for the last few days. Look at the uniformly grey hue of the heavens. That mist will presently resolve itself into snow; and if the wind should rise ever so little, we shall have to battle with a fearful storm. I wish we were at the Great Bear Lake !”

“Do not let us lose any time, then,” said Mrs Barnett, rising; “give the signal to start at once.”

The Lieutenant needed no urging. Had he been alone, or accompanied by a few men as energetic as himself, he would have pressed on day and night; but he was obliged to make allowance for the fatigue of others, although he never spared himself. He therefore granted a few hours of rest to his little party, and it was not until three in the afternoon that they again set out.

Jaspar Hobson was not mistaken in prophesying a change in the weather. It came very soon. During the afternoon of the same day the mist became thicker, and assumed a yellowish and threatening hue. The Lieutenant, although very uneasy, allowed none of his anxiety to appear, but had a long consultation with Sergeant Long whilst the dogs of his sledge were laboriously preparing to start.

Unfortunately, the district now to be traversed was very unsuitable for sledges. The ground was very uneven; ravines were of frequent occurrence; and masses of granite or half-thawed icebergs blocked up the road, causing constant delay. The poor dogs did their best, but the drivers’ whips no longer produced any effect upon them.

And so the Lieutenant and his men were often obliged to walk to rest the exhausted animals, to push the sledges, or even sometimes to lift them when the roughness of the ground threatened to upset them. The incessant fatigue was, however, borne by all without a murmur. Thomas Black alone, absorbed in his one idea, never got out of his sledge, and indeed be was so corpulent that all exertion was disagreeable to him.

The nature of the soil changed from the moment of entering the Arctic Circle. Some geological convulsion had evidently upheaved the enormous blocks strewn upon the surface. The vegetation, too, was of a more distinctive character. Wherever they were sheltered from the keen north winds, the flanks of the hills were clothed not only with shrubs, but with large trees, all of the same species — pines, willows, and firs — proving by their presence that a certain amount of vegetative force is retained even in the Frigid Zone. Jaspar Hobson hoped to find such specimens of the Arctic Flora even on the verge of the Polar Sea; for these trees would supply him with wood to build his fort, and fuel to warm its inhabitants. The same thought passed through the minds of his companions, and they could not help wondering at the contrast between this comparatively fertile region, and the long white plains stretching between the Great Slave Lake and Fort Enterprise.

At night the yellow mist became more opaque; the wind rose, the snow began to fall in large flakes, and the ground was soon covered with a thick white carpet. In less than an hour the snow was a foot deep, and as it did not freeze but remained in a liquid state, the sledges could only advance with extreme difficulty; the curved fronts stuck in the soft substance, and the dogs were obliged to stop again and again.

Towards eight o’clock in the evening the wind became very boisterous. The snow, driven before it, was flung upon the ground or whirled in the air, forming one huge whirlpool. The dogs, beaten back by the squall and blinded with snow, could advance no further. The party was then in a narrow gorge between huge icebergs, over which the storm raged with fearful fury. Pieces of ice, broken off by the hurricane, were hurled into the pass; partial avalanches, any one of which could have crushed the sledges and their inmates, added to its dangers, and to press on became impossible. The Lieutenant no longer insisted, and after consulting with Sergeant Long, gave the order to halt. It was now necessary to find a shelter from the snow-drift; but this was no difficult matter to men accustomed to Polar expeditions. Jaspar Hobson and his men knew well what they had to do under the circumstances. It was not the first time they had been surprised by a tempest some hundred miles from the forts of the Company, without so much as an Esquimaux hut or Indian hovel in which to lay their heads.

“To the icebergs! to the icebergs !” cried Jaspar Hobson.

Every one understood what he meant. Snow houses were to be hollowed out of the frozen masses, or rather holes were to be dug, in which each person could cower until the storm was over. Knives and hatchets were soon at work on the brittle masses of ice, and in three-quarters of an hour some ten dens had been scooped out large enough to contain two or three persons each. The dogs were left to themselves, their own instinct leading them to find sufficient shelter under the snow.

Before ten o’clock all the travellers were crouching in the snow houses, in groups of two or three, each choosing congenial companions. Mrs Barnett, Madge, and Lieutenant Hobson occupied one hut, Thomas Black and Sergeant Long another, and so on. These retreats were warm, if not comfortable; and the Esquimaux and Indians have no other refuge even in the bitterest cold. The adventurers could therefore fearlessly await the end of the storm as long as they took care not to let the openings of their holes become blocked up with the snow, which they had to shovel away every half hour. So violent was the storm that even the Lieutenant and his soldiers could scarcely set foot outside. Fortunately, all were provided with sufficient food, and were able to endure their beaver-like existence without suffering from cold or hunger

For forty-eight hours the fury of the tempest continued to increase. The wind roared in the narrow pass, and tore off the tops of the icebergs. Loud reports, repeated twenty times by the echoes, gave notice of the fall of avalanches, and Jaspar Hobson began to fear that his further progress would be barred by the masses of *debris* accumulated between the mountains. Other sounds mingled with these reports, which Lieutenant Hobson knew too well, and he did not disguise from Mrs Barnett that bears were prowling about the pass. But fortunately these terrible animals were too much occupied with their own concerns to discover the retreat of the travellers; neither the dogs nor the sledges, buried in the snow, attracted their attention, and they passed on without doing any harm.

The last night, that of the 25th or 26th May, was even more terrible. So great was the fury of the hurricane that a general overthrow of icebergs appeared imminent. A fearful death would then have awaited the unfortunate travellers beneath the ruins of the broken masses. The blocks of ice cracked with an awful noise, and certain oscillations gave warning that breaches had been made threatening their solidity. However, no great crash occurred, the huge mountains remained intact, and towards the end of the night one of those sudden changes so frequent in the Arctic regions took place; the tempest ceased suddenly beneath the influence of intense cold, and with the first dawn of day peace was restored.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GREAT BEAR LAKE.

This sudden increase of cold was most fortunate. Even in temperate climes there are generally three or four bitter days in May; and they were most serviceable now in consolidating the freshly-fallen snow, and making it practicable for sledges. Lieutenant Hobson, therefore, lost no time in resuming his journey, urging on the dogs to their utmost speed.

The route was, however, slightly changed. Instead of bearing due north, the expedition advanced towards the west, following, so to speak, the curve of the Arctic Circle. The Lieutenant was most anxious to reach Fort Confidence, built on the northern extremity of the Great Bear Lake. These few cold days were of the greatest service to him; he advanced rapidly, no obstacle was encountered, and his little troop arrived at the factory on the 30th May.

At this time Forts Confidence and Good Hope were the most advanced posts of the Company in the north. Fort Confidence was a most important position, built on the northern extremity of the lake, close to its waters, which being frozen over in winter, and navigable in summer, afforded easy access to Fort Franklin, on the southern shores, and promoted the coming and going of the Indian hunters with their daily spoils. Many were the hunting and fishing expeditions which started from Forts Confidence and Good Hope, especially from the former. The Great Bear Lake is quite a Mediterranean Sea, extending over several degrees of latitude and longitude. Its shape is very irregular : two promontories jut into it towards the centre, and the upper portion forms a triangle; its appearance, as a whole, much resembling the extended skin of a ruminant without the head.

Fort Confidence was built at the end of the “right paw,” at least two hundred miles from Coronation Gulf, one of the numerous estuaries which irregularly indent the coast of North America. It was therefore situated beyond the Arctic Circle, but three degrees south of the seventieth parallel, north of which the Hudson’s Bay Company proposed forming a new settlement.

Fort Confidence, as a whole, much resembled other factories further south. It consisted of a house for the officers, barracks for the soldiers, and magazines for the furs - all of wood, surrounded by palisades. The captain in command was then absent. He had gone towards the east on a hunting expedition with a few Indians and soldiers. The last season had not been good, costly furs had been scarce; but to make up for this the lake had supplied plenty of otter-skins. The stock of them had, however, just been sent to the central factories in the south, so that the magazines of Fort Confidence were empty on the arrival of our party.

In the absence of the Captain a Sergeant did the honours of the fort to Jaspar Hobson and his companions. This second officer, Felton by name was a brother-in-law of Sergeant Long. He showed the greatest readiness to assist the views of the Lieutenant, who being anxious to rest his party, decided on remaining two or three days at Fort Confidence. In the absence of the little garrison there was plenty of room, and dogs and men were soon comfortably installed. The best room in the largest house was of course given to Mrs Paulina Barnett, who was delighted with the politeness of Sergeant Felton.

Jaspar Hobson’s first care was to ask Felton if any Indians from the north were then beating the shores of the Great Bear Lake

“Yes, Lieutenant,” replied the Sergeant; “we have just received notice of the encampment of a party of Hare Indians on the other northern extremity of the lake.”

“How far from here?” inquired Hobson.

“About thirty miles,” replied Sergeant Felton. “Do you wish to enter into communication with these Indians?”

“Yes,” said Hobson; they may be able to give me some valuable information about the districts bordering on the Arctic Ocean, and bounded by Cape Bathurst. Should the site be favourable, I propose constructing our new fort somewhere about there.”

“Well, Lieutenant, nothing is easier than to go to the Hare encampment.”

“Along the shores of the lake?”

“No, across it; it is now free from ice, and the wind is favourable. We will place a cutter and a boatman at your service, and in a few hours you will be in the Indian settlement.”

“Thank you, Sergeant; to-morrow, then.” Whenever you like, Lieutenant.”

The start was fixed for the next morning; and when Mrs Paulina Barnett heard of the plan, she begged the Lieutenant to allow her to accompany him, which of course he readily did.

But now to tell how the rest of this first day was passed. Mrs Barnett, Hobson, two or three soldiers, Madge, Mrs Mac-Nab, and Joliffe explored the shores of the lake under the guidance of Felton. The neighbourhood was by no means barren of vegetation; the hills, now free from snow, were crowned by resinous trees of the Scotch pine species. These trees, which attain a height of some forty feet, supply the inhabitants of the forts with plenty of fuel through the long winter. Their thick trunks and dark gloomy branches form a striking feature of the landscape; but the regular clumps of equal height, sloping down to the very edge of the water, are somewhat monotonous. Between the groups of trees the soil was clothed with a sort of whitish weed, which perfumed the air with a sweet thymy odour. Sergeant Felton informed his guests that this plant was called the "herb of incense "on account of the fragrance it emits when burnt.

Some hundred steps from the fort the party came to a little natural harbour shut in by high granite rocks, which formed an admirable protection from the heavy surf. Here was anchored the fleet of Fort Confidence, consisting of a single fishing-boat — the very one which was to take Mrs Barnett and Hobson to the Indian encampment the next day. From this harbour an extensive view was obtained of the lake; its waters slightly agitated by the wind, with its irregular shores broken by jagged capes and intersected by creeks. The wooded heights beyond, with here and there the rugged outline of a floating iceberg standing out against the clear blue air, formed the background on the north; whilst on the south a regular sea horizon, a circular line clearly cutting sky and water, and at this moment glittering in the sunbeams, bounded the sight.

The whole scene was rich in animal and vegetable life. The surface of the water, the shores strewn with flints and blocks of granite, the slopes with their tapestry of herbs, the tree-crowned hill-tops, were all alike frequented by various specimens of the feathered tribe. Several varieties of ducks, uttering their different cries and calls, eider ducks, whistlers spotted redshanks, "old women," those loquacious birds whose beak is never closed, skimmed the surface of the lake. Hundreds of puffins and guillemots with outspread wings darted about in every direction, and beneath the trees strutted ospreys two feet high-a kind of hawk with a grey body, blue beak and claws, and orange-coloured eyes, which build their huge nests of marine plants in the forked branches of trees. The hunter Sabine managed to bring down a couple of these gigantic ospreys, which measured nearly six feet from tip to tip of their wings, and were therefore magnificent specimens of these migratory birds, who feed entirely on fish, and take refuge on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico when winter sets in, only visiting the higher latitudes of North America during the short summer.

But the most interesting event of the day was the capture of an otter, the skin of which was worth several hundred roubles.

The furs of these valuable amphibious creatures were once much sought after in China; and although the demand for them has considerably decreased in the Celestial Empire, they still command very high prices in the Russian market. Russian traders, ready to buy up sea-otter skins, travel all along the coasts of New Cornwall as far as the Arctic Ocean; and of course, thus hunted, the animal is becoming very rare. It has taken refuge further and further north, and the trackers have now to pursue it on the shores of the Kamtchatka Sea, and in the islands of the Behring Archipelago.

“But,” added Sergeant Felton, after the preceding explanation, “American inland otters are not to be despised, and those which frequent the Great Bear Lake are worth from £50 to £60 each.”

The Sergeant was right; magnificent otters are found in these waters, and he himself skilfully tracked and killed one in the presence of his visitors which was scarcely inferior in value to those from Kamtchatka itself. The creature measured three feet from the muzzle to the end of its tail; it had webbed feet, short legs, and its fur, darker on the upper than on the under part of its body, was long and silky.

“A good shot, Sergeant,” said Lieutenant Hobson, who with Mrs Barnett had been attentively examining the magnificent fur of the dead animal.

“Yes, Lieutenant,” replied Felton; “and if each day brought us such a skin as that, we should have nothing to complain of. But much time is wasted in watching these animals, who swim and dive with marvellous rapidity. We generally hunt them at night, as they very seldom venture from their homes in the trunks of trees or the holes of rocks in the daytime, and even expert hunters find it very difficult to discover their retreats.”

“And are these otters also becoming scarcer and scarcer?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“Yes, madam,” replied the Sergeant; “and when this species becomes extinct, the profits of the Company will sensibly decline. All the hunters try to obtain its fur, and the Americans in particular are formidable rivals to us. Did you not meet any American agents on your journey up, Lieutenant?”

“Not one,” replied Hobson. “Do they ever penetrate as far as this?”

“Oh yes !” said the Sergeant; “and when you hear of their approach, I advise you to be on your guard.”

“Are these agents, then, highway robbers?” asked Mrs Paulina Barnett.

“No, madam,” replied the Sergeant; “but they are formidable rivals, and when game is scarce, hunters often come to blows about it. I daresay that if the Company’s attempt to establish a fort on the verge of the Arctic Ocean be successful, its example will at once be followed by these Americans, whom Heaven confound!”

“Bah!” exclaimed the Lieutenant; “the hunting districts are vast, and there’s room beneath the sun for everybody. As for us, let’s make a start to begin with. Let us press on as long as we have firm ground beneath our feet, and God be with us!”

After a walk of three hours the visitors returned to Fort Confidence, where a good meal of fish and fresh venison awaited them. Sergeant Long did the honours of the table, and after a little pleasant conversation, all retired to rest to forget their fatigues in a healthy and refreshing sleep.

The next day, May 31st, Mrs Barnett and Jaspar Hobson were on foot at five A.M. The Lieutenant intended to devote this day to visiting the Indian encampment, and obtaining as much useful information as possible. He asked Thomas Black to go with him, but the astronomer preferred to remain on *terra firma*. He wished to make a few astronomical observations, and to determine exactly the latitude and longitude of Fort Confidence; so that Mrs Barnett and Jaspar Hobson had to cross the lake alone, under the guidance of an old boatman named Norman, who had long been in the Company’s service.

The two travellers were accompanied by Sergeant Long as far as the little harbour, where they found old Norman ready to embark. Their little vessel was but an open fishing-boat, six feet long, rigged like a cutter, which one man could easily manage The weather was beautiful, and the slight breeze blowing from the north-east was favourable to the crossing. Sergeant Felton took leave of his guests with many apologies for being unable to accompany them in the absence of his chief. The boat was let loose from its moorings, and tacking to starboard, shot across the clear waters of the lake.

The little trip passed pleasantly enough. The taciturn old sailor sat silent in the stern of the boat with the tiller tucked under his arm. Mrs Barnett and Lieutenant Hobson, seated opposite to each other, examined with interest the scenery spread out before them. The boat skirted the northern shores of the lake at about three miles' distance, following a rectilinear direction, so that the wooded heights sloping gradually to the west were distinctly visible. From this side the district north of the lake appeared perfectly flat, and the horizon receded to a considerable distance. The whole of this coast contrasted strongly with the sharp angle, at the extremity of which rose Fort Confidence, framed in green pines. The flag of the Company was still visible floating from the tower of the fort. The oblique rays of the sun lit up the surface of the water, and striking on the floating icebergs, seemed to convert them into molten silver of dazzling brightness. No trace remained of the solid ice-mountains of the winter but these moving relies, which the solar rays could scarcely dissolve, and which seemed, as it were, to protest against the brilliant but not very powerful Polar sun, now describing a diurnal arc of considerable length.

Mrs Barnett and the Lieutenant, as was their custom, communicated to each other the thoughts suggested by the strange scenes through which they were passing. They laid up a store of pleasant recollections for the future whilst the beat floated rapidly along upon the peaceful waves.

The party started at six in the morning, and at nine they neared the point on the northern bank at which they were to land. The Indian encampment was situated at the north-west angle of the Great Bear Lake. Before ten o'clock old Norman ran the boat aground on a low bank at the foot of a cliff of moderate height. Mrs Barnett and the Lieutenant landed at once. Two or three Indians, with their chief, wearing gorgeous plumes, hastened to meet them, and addressed them in fairly intelligible English.

These Hare Indians, like the Copper and Beaver Indians, all belong to the Chippeway race, and differ but little in customs and costumes from their fellow-tribes. They are in constant communication with the factories, and have become, so to speak, “Britainised” — at least as much so as is possible for savages. They bring the spoils of the chase to the forts, and there exchange them for the necessaries of life, which they no longer provide for themselves. They are in the pay of the Company, they live upon it, and it is not surprising that they have lost all originality. To find a native race as yet uninfluenced by contact with Europeans we must go to still higher latitudes, to the ice-bound regions frequented by the Esquimaux, who, like the Greenlanders, are the true children of Arctic lands.

Mrs Barnett and Jaspar Hobson accompanied the Indians to their camp, about half a mile from the shore, and found some thirty natives there, men, women, and children, who supported themselves by hunting and fishing on the borders of the lake. These Indians had just come from the northernmost districts of the American continent, and were able to give the Lieutenant some valuable, although necessarily incomplete, information on the actual state of the sea-coast near the seventieth parallel. The Lieutenant heard with considerable satisfaction that a party of Americans or Europeans had been seen oil the confines of the Polar Sea, and that it was open at this time of year. About Cape Bathurst, properly so called, the point for which he intended to make, the Hare Indians could tell him nothing. Their chief said, however, that the district between the Great Bear Lake and Cape Bathurst was very difficult to cross, being hilly and intersected by streams, at this season of the year free from ice. He advised the Lieutenant to go down the Coppermine river, from the north-east of the lake, which would take him to the coast by the shortest route. Once at the Arctic Ocean, it would be easy to skirt along its shores and to choose the best spot at Which to halt.

Lieutenant Hobson thanked the Indian chief, and took leave after giving him a few presents. Then accompanied by Mrs Barnett, he explored the neighbourhood of the camp, not returning to the boat until nearly three o’clock in the afternoon.

CHAPTER IX.

A STORM ON THE LAKE.

The old sailor was impatiently awaiting the return of the travellers; for during the last hour the weather had changed, and the appearance of the sky was calculated to render any one accustomed to read the signs of the clouds uneasy. The sun was obscured by a thick mist, the wind had fallen, but - an ominous moaning was heard from the south of the lake. These symptoms of an approaching change of temperature were developed with all the rapidity peculiar to these elevated latitudes.

“Let us be off, sir! let us be off!” cried old Norman, looking anxiously at the fog above his head. “Let us start without losing an instant. There are terrible signs in the air!”

“Indeed,” exclaimed the Lieutenant, “the appearance of the sky is quite changed, and we never noticed it, Mrs Barnett!”

“Are you afraid of a storm?” inquired the lady of old Norman.

“Yes, madam,” replied the old sailor; “and the storms on the Great Bear Lake are often terrible. The hurricane rages as if upon the open Atlantic Ocean. This sudden fog bodes us no good; but the tempest may hold back for three or four hours, and by that time we shall be at Fort Confidence. Let us then start without a moment’s delay, for the boat would not be safe near these rocks.”

The Lieutenant, feeling that the old man, accustomed as he was to navigate these waters, was better able to judge than himself, decided to follow his advice, and embarked at once with Mrs Barnett.

But just as they were pushing off, old Norman, as if possessed by some sudden presentiment, murmured —

“Perhaps it would be better to wait.”

Lieutenant Hobson overheard these words, and looked inquiringly at the old boatman, already seated at the helm. Had he been alone he would not have hesitated to start, but as Mrs Barnett was with him caution was necessary. The lady at once saw and understood his hesitation.

“Never mind about me, Lieutenant,” she said; “act as if I were not present. Let us start immediately , as our brave guide suggests.”

“We are off, then,” cried Norman, letting go the moorings, “to the fort by the shortest route.”

For about an hour the bark made little head. The sail, scarcely filled by the fitful breeze, flapped against the mast. The fog became thicker. The waves began to rise and the boat to rock considerably; for the approaching hurricane affected the water sooner than the atmosphere itself. The two travellers sat still and silent, whilst the old sailor peered into the darkness with bloodshot eyes. Prepared for all contingencies, he awaited the shock of the wind, ready to pay out rapidly should the attack be very violent. The conflict of the elements had not, however, as yet commenced; and all would have been well if they bad been able to advance, but after an hour’s sail they were still only about two hours’ distance from the Indian encampment. A few gusts of wind from the shore drove them out of their course, and the dense fog rendered it impossible for them to make out the coast-line. Should the wind settle in the north it would probably go hard with the light boat, which, unable to hold its own course, would be drifted out into the lake no one knew where.

“We are scarcely advancing at all,” said the Lieutenant to old Norman.

“No, sir,” replied Norman; “the wind is not strong enough to fill the sail, and if it were, I fear it comes from the wrong quarter. If so,” he added, pointing to the south, “we may see Fort Franklin before Fort Confidence.”

“Well,” said Mrs Barnett cheerfully, “our trip will have been all the more complete. This is a magnificent lake, well worth exploring from north to south. I suppose, Norman, one might get back even from Fort Franklin?”

“Yes, madam, if we ever reach it,” replied the old man. “But tempests lasting fifteen days are by no means rare on this lake; and if our bad luck should drive us to the south, it may be a month before Lieutenant Hobson again sees Fort Confidence.”

“Let us be careful, then,” said the Lieutenant; “for such a delay, would hinder our projects very much. Do the best you can under the circumstances, and if you think it would be prudent, go back to the north. I don’t suppose Mrs Barnett would mind a walk of twenty or twenty-five miles.”

I should be glad enough to go back to the north, Lieutenant,” replied Norman, “if it were still possible. But look, the wind seems likely to settle against us. All I can attempt is to get to the cape on the north-east, and if it doesn’t blow too hard, I hope to succeed.”

But at about half-past four the storm broke. The shrill whistling of the wind was heard far above their heads, but the state of the atmosphere prevented it from as yet descending upon the lake; this was, however, only delayed for a brief space of time. The cries of frightened birds flying through the fog mingled with the noise of the wind. Suddenly the mist was torn open, and revealed low jagged masses of rain-cloud chased towards the south. The fears of the old sailor were realised. The wind blew from the north, and it was not long before the travellers learned the meaning of a squall upon the lake.

“Look out!” cried old Norman, tightening sail so as to get his boat ahead of the wind, whilst keeping her under control of the helm.

The squall came. It caught the boat upon the flank, and it was turned over on its side; but recovering itself, it was flung upon the crest of a wave. The billows surged as if upon an open sea. The waters of the lake not being very deep, struck against the bottom and rebounded to an immense height.

“Help! help!” cried old Norman, hurriedly struggling to haul down his sail.

Mrs Barnett and Hobson endeavoured to come to his assistance, but without success, for they knew noticing of the management of a boat. Norman, unable to leave the helm, and the halliards being entangled at the top of the mast, could not take in the sail. Every moment the boat threatened to capsize, and heavy seas broke over its sides. The sky became blacker and blacker, cold rain mingled with snow fell in torrents, whilst the squall redoubled its fury, lashing the crests of the waves into foam.

“Cut it! cut it!” screamed Norman above the roaring of the storm.

The Lieutenant, his cap blown away and his eyes blinded by the spray, seized Norman’s knife and cut the halliard like a harp-string; but the wet cordage no longer acted in the grooves of the pulleys, and the yard remained attached to the top of the mast.

Norman, totally unable to make head against the wind, now resolved to tack about for the south, dangerous as it would be to have the boat before the wind, pursued by waves advancing at double its speed. Yes, to tack, although this course would probably bring them all to the southern shores of the lake, far away from their destination.

The Lieutenant and his brave companion were well aware of the danger which threatened them. The frail boat could not long resist the blows of the waves, it would either be crushed or capsized; the lives of those within it were in the hands of God.

But neither yielded to despair; clinging to the sides of the boat, wet to the skin, chilled to the bone by the cutting blast, they strove to gaze through the thick mist and fog. All trace of the land had disappeared, and so great was the obscurity that at a cable’s length from the boat clouds and waves could not be distinguished from each other. Now and then the two travellers looked inquiringly into old Norman’s face, who, with teeth set and hands clutching the tiller; tried to keep his boat as much as possible under wind.

But the violence of the squall became such that the boat could not long maintain this course. The waves which struck its bow would soon have inevitably crushed it; the front planks were already beginning to separate, and when its whole weight was flung into the hollows of the waves it seemed as if it could rise no more.

“We must tack, we must tack, whatever happens !” murmured the old sailor.

And pushing the tiller and paying out sail, he turned the head of the boat to the south. The sail, stretched to the utmost, brought the boat round with giddy rapidity, and the immense waves, chased by the wind, threatened to engulf the little bark. This was the great danger of shifting with the wind right aft. The billows hurled themselves in rapid succession upon the boat, which could not evade them. It filled rapidly, and the water bad to be baled out without a moment's pause, or it must have foundered. As they got nearer and nearer to the middle of the lake the waves became rougher. Nothing there broke the fury of the wind; no clumps of trees, no hills, checked for a moment the headlong course of the hurricane. Now and then momentary glimpses were obtained through the fog of icebergs dancing like buoys upon the waves, and driven towards the south of the lake.

It was half-past five. Neither Norman nor the Lieutenant had any idea of where they were, or whither they were going. They had lost all control over the boat, and were at the mercy of the winds and waves.

And now at about a hundred feet behind the boat a huge wave upreared its foam-crowned crest, whilst in front a black whirlpool was formed by the sudden sinking of the water. All surface agitation, crushed by the wind, had disappeared around this awful gulf, which, growing deeper and blacker every moment, drew the devoted little vessel towards its fatal embrace. Ever nearer came the mighty wave, all lesser billows sinking into insignificance before it. It gained upon the boat, another moment and it would crush it to atoms. Norman, looking round, saw its approach; and Mrs Barnett and the Lieutenant, with eyes fixed and staring, awaited in fearful suspense the blow from which there was no escape. The wave broke over them with the noise of thunder; it enveloped the stern of the boat in foam, a fearful crash was heard, and a cry burst from the lips of the Lieutenant and his companion, smothered beneath the liquid mass.

They thought that all was over, and that the boat had sunk; but no, it rose once more, although more than half filled with water.

The Lieutenant uttered a cry of despair. Where was Norman? The poor old sailor had disappeared !

Mrs Paulina Barnett looked inquiringly at Hobson.

“Norman!” he repeated, pointing to his empty place.

“Unhappy man !” murmured Mrs Barnett; and at the risk of being flung from the boat rocking on the waves, the two started to their feet and looked around them. But they could see and hear nothing. No cry for help broke upon their ears. No dead body floated in the white foam. The old sailor had met his death in the element he loved so well.

Mrs Barnett and Hobson sank back upon their seats. They were now alone, and must see to their own safety; but neither of them knew anything of the management of a boat, and even an experienced hand could scarcely have controlled it now. They were at the mercy of the waves, and the bark, with distended sail, swept along in mad career. What could the Lieutenant do to check or direct its course?

What a terrible situation for our travellers, to be thus overtaken by a tempest in a frail bark which they could not manage !

“We are lost!” said the Lieutenant.

“No, Lieutenant,” replied Mrs Barnett; “let us make another effort. Heaven helps those who help themselves !”

Lieutenant Hobson now for the first time realised with how intrepid a woman fate had thrown him.

The first thing to be done was to get rid of the water which weighed down the boat. Another wave shipped would have filled it in a moment, and it must have sunk at once. The vessel lightened, it would have a better chance of rising on the waves; and the two set to work to bale out the water. This was no easy task; for fresh waves constantly broke over them, and the scoop could not be laid aside for an instant. Mrs Barnett was indefatigable, and the Lieutenant, leaving the baling to her, took the helm himself, and did the best he could to guide the boat with the wind right aft.

To add to the danger, night, or rather darkness, for in these latitudes night only lasts a few hours at this time of year, fell upon them. Scarce a ray of light penetrated through the heavy clouds and fog. They could not see two yards before them, and the boat must have been dashed to pieces had it struck a floating iceberg. This danger was indeed imminent, for the loose ice-masses advance with such rapidity that it is impossible to get out of their way.

“You have no control over the helm?” said Mrs Barnett in a slight lull of the storm.

No, madam he replied; “and you must prep are for the worst.”

“I am ready!” replied the courageous woman simply.

As she spoke a loud rippling sound was heard. The sail, torn away by the wind, disappeared like a white cloud. The boat sped rapidly along for a few instants, and then stopped suddenly, the waves buffeting it about like an abandoned wreck. Mrs Barnett and Hobson, flung to the bottom of the boat, bruised, shaken, and torn, felt that all was lost. Not a shred of canvas was left to aid in navigating the craft; and what with the spray, the snow, and the rain, they could scarcely see each other, whilst the uproar drowned their voices. Expecting every moment to perish, they remained for an hour in painful suspense, commending themselves to God, who alone could save them.

Neither of them could have said how long they waited when they were aroused by a violent shock.

The boat had just struck an enormous iceberg, a floating block with rugged, slippery sides, to which it would be impossible to cling.

At this sudden blow, which could not have been parried, the bow of the boat was split open, and the water poured into it in torrents.

“We are sinking! we are sinking !” cried Jasper Hobson.

He was right. The boat was settling down; the water had already reached the seats.

“Madam, madam, I am here! I will not leave you!” added the Lieutenant.

“No, no,” cried Mrs Barnett : “alone, you may save yourself; together, we should perish. Leave me! leave me!”

“Never!” cried Hobson.

But he had scarcely pronounced this word when the boat, struck by another wave, filled and sank.

Both were drawn under water by the eddy caused by the sudden settling down of the boat, but in a few instants they rose to the surface. Hobson was a strong swimmer, and struck out with one arm, supporting his companion with the other. But it was evident that he could not long sustain a conflict with the furious waves, and that he must perish with her he wished to save.

At this moment a strange sound attracted his attention. It was not the cry of a frightened bird, but the shout of a human voice! By one supreme effort Hobson raised himself above the waves and looked around him.

But he could distinguish nothing in the thick fog. And yet he again beard cries, this time nearer to him. Some bold men were coming to his succour! Alas! if it were so, they would arrive too late. Encumbered by his clothes, the Lieutenant felt himself sinking with the unfortunate lady, whose head he could scarcely keep above the water. With a last despairing effort he uttered a heartrending cry and disappeared beneath the waves.

It was, however, no mistake-he had heard voices. Three men, wandering about by the lake, had seen the boat in danger, and put off to its rescue. They were Esquimaux, the only men who could have hoped to weather such a storm, for theirs are the only boats constructed to escape destruction in these fearful tempests.

The Esquimaux boat or *kayak is* a long pirogue raised at each end, made of a light framework of wood, covered with stretched seal-skins strongly stitched with the sinews of the Walrus. In the upper part of the boat; also covered with skins, is an opening in which the Esquimaux takes his place, fastening his waterproof jacket to the back of his seat; so that he is actually joined to his bark, which riot a drop of water can penetrate. This light, easily-managed *kayak,* floating as it does, on the crests of the waves, can never be submerged; and if it be sometimes capsized, a blow of the paddle rights it again directly; so that it is able to live and make way in seas in which any other boat would certainly be dashed to pieces.

The three Esquimaux, guided by the Lieutenant's last despairing cry, arrived at the scene of the wreck joints in time. Hobson and Mrs Barnett, already half drowned, felt themselves drawn up by powerful hands; but in the darkness they were unable to discover who were their deliverers. One of the men took the Lieutenant and laid him across his own boat, another did the sane for Mrs Barnett, and the three *kayaks*, skilfully managed with the paddles, six feet long, sped rapidly over the white foam.

Half an hour afterwards, the shipwrecked travellers were lying on the sandy beach three miles above Fort Providence.

The old sailor alone was missing !

CHAPTER X.

A RETROSPECT.

It was about ten o’clock the same night when Mrs Barnett and Lieutenant Hobson knocked at the postern gate of the fort. Great was the joy on seeing them, for they had been given up for lost; but this joy was turned to mourning at the news of the death of Norman. The brave fellow had been beloved by all, and his loss was sincerely mourned. The intrepid and devoted Esquimaux received phlegmatically the earnest expressions of gratitude of those they had saved, and could riot be persuaded to come to the fort. What they had done seemed to them only natural, and these were not the first persons they had rescued; so they quietly returned to their wild life of adventure on the lake, where they hunted the otters and water-birds day and night.

For the next three nights the party rested. Hobson always intended to set out on June 2d; and on that day, all having recovered from their fatigues and the storm having abated, the order was given to start.

Sergeant Felton had done all in his power to make his guests comfortable and to aid their enterprise; some of the jaded dogs were replaced by fresh animals, and now the Lieutenant found all his sledges drawn up in good order at the door of the enceinte, and awaiting the travellers.

The adieux were soon over. Each one thanked Sergeant Felton for his hospitality, and Mrs Paulina Barnett was most profuse in her expressions of gratitude. A hearty shake of the hand between the Sergeant and his brother-in-law, Long, completed the leave-taking, Each pair got into the sledge assigned to them; but this time Mrs Barnett and the Lieutenant shared one vehicle, Madge and Sergeant Long following them.

According to the advice of the Indian chief, Hobson determined to get to the coast by the shortest route, and to take a north-easterly direction. After consulting, his map, which merely gave a rough outline of the configuration of the country, it seemed best to him to descend the valley of the Coppermine, a large river which flows into Coronation Gulf.

The distance between Fort Confidence and the mouth of this river is only a degree and a half-that is to say, about eighty-five or ninety miles. The deep hollow formed by the gulf is bounded on the north by Cape Krusenstein, and from it the coast juts out towards the north-west, ending in Cape Bathurst, which is above the seventieth parallel.

The Lieutenant, therefore, now changed the route he had hitherto followed, directing his course to the east, so as to reach the river in a few hours.

In the afternoon of the next day, June 3d, the river was gained. It was now free from ice, and its clear and rapid waters flowed through a vast valley, intersected by numerous but easily fordable streams. The sledges advanced pretty rapidly, and as they went along, Hobson gave his companion some account of the country through which they were passing. A sincere friendship founded on mutual esteem, had sprung up between these two. Mrs Paulina Barnett was an earnest student with a special gift for discovery, and was therefore always glad to converse with travellers and explorers. Hobson, who knew his beloved North America by heart, was able to answer all her inquiries fully.

“About ninety years ago,” he said, “the territory through which the Coppermine flows was unknown, and we are indebted for its discovery to the agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company. But as always happens in scientific matters, in seeking one thing, another was found. Columbus was trying to find Asia, and discovered America.”

“And what were the agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company seeking? The famous North-West Passage?”

“No, madam,” replied the young Lieutenant. “A century ago the Company had no interest in the opening of a new route, which would have been more valuable to its rivals than to it. It is even said that in 1741 a certain Christopher Middleton, sent to explore these latitudes, was publicly charged with receiving a bribe of £500 from the Company to say that there was not, and could not be, a sea passage between the oceans.”

“That was not much to the credit of the celebrated Company,” said Mrs Barnett.

“I do not defend it in the matter,” replied Hobson; “and its interference was severely censured by Parliament in 1746, when a reward of £20,000 was offered by the Government for the discovery of the passage in question. In that year two intrepid explorers, William Moor and Francis Smith, penetrated as far as Repulse Bay in the hope of discovering the much-longed-for passage. But they were unsuccessful, and returned to England after an absence of a year and a half.”

“But did not other captains follow in their steps, resolved to conquer where they had failed?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“No, madam; and in spite of the large reward offered by Parliament, no attempt was made to resume explorations in English America until thirty years afterwards, when some agents of the Company took up the unfinished task of Captains Moor and Smith.”

“The Company had then relinquished the narrow-minded egotistical position it had taken up?”

“No, madam, not yet. Samuel Hearne, the agent, only went to reconnoitre the position of a copper-mine which native miners had reported. On November 6, 1769, this agent left Fort Prince of Wales, on the river Churchill, near the western shores of Hudson’s Bay. He pressed boldly on to the north-west; but the excessive cold and the exhaustion of his provisions compelled him to return without accomplishing anything. Fortunately he was not easily discouraged, and on February 23d of the next year he set out again, this time taking some Indians with him. Great hardships were endured in this second journey. The fish and game on which Hearne had relied often failed him; and he had once nothing to eat for seven days but wild fruit, bits of old leather, and burnt bones. He was again compelled to return to the fort a disappointed man. But he did not even yet despair, and started a third time, December 7th, 1770; and after a struggle of nineteen months, he discovered the Coppermine river, July 13th, 1772, the course of which he followed to its mouth. According to his own account, he saw the open sea, and in any case he was the first to penetrate to the northern coast of America.”

“But the North-West Passage-that is to say, the direct communication by sea between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans — was not then discovered?”

“Oh no, madam,” replied the Lieutenant; “and what countless adventurous sailors have since gone to seek it! Phipps in 1773, James Cook and Clerke in 1776 to 1779, Kotzebue in 1815 to 1818, Ross, Parry, Franklin, and others have attempted this difficult task; but it was reserved to M’Clure in our own day to pass from one ocean to the other across the Polar Sea.”

“Well, Lieutenant, that was a geographical discovery of which we English may well be proud. But do tell me if the Hudson’s Bay Company did not adopt more generous views, and send out some other explorer after the return of Hearne.”

“It did, madam; and it was thanks to it that Captain Franklin was able to accomplish his voyage of 1819 to 1822 between the river discovered by Hearne and Cape Turnagain. This expedition endured great fatigue and hardships; provisions often completely failed, and two Canadians were assassinated and eaten by their comrades. But in spite of all his sufferings, Captain Franklin explored no less than five thousand five hundred and fifty miles of the hitherto unknown coast of North America!”

“He was indeed a man of energy,” added Mrs Barnett; “and he gave proof of his great qualities in starting on a fresh Polar expedition after all he had gone through.”

“Yes,” replied the Lieutenant; “and he met a terrible death in the land his own intrepidity had discovered. It has now been proved, however, that all his companions did not perish with him. Many are doubtless still wandering about on the vast ice-fields. I cannot think of their awful condition without a shudder. One day,” be added earnestly, and with strange emotion — ” one day I will search the unknown lands where the dreadful catastrophe took place, and — “

“And,” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, pressing his hand, “I will accompany you. Yes, this idea has occurred to me more than once, as it has to you; and my heart beats high when I think that fellow countrymen of my own-Englishmen-are awaiting succour.”

“Which will come too late for most of them, madam,” said the Lieutenant; “but rest assured some will even yet be saved.”

“God grant it, Lieutenant!” replied Mrs Barnett; “and it appears to me that the agents of the Company, living as they do close to the coast, are better fitted than any one else to fulfil this duty of humanity.”

“I agree with you, madam; they are, as they have often proved, inured to the rigours of the Arctic climate. Was it not they who aided Captain Back in his voyage in 1834, when he discovered King William’s Land, where Franklin met his fate? Was it not two of us, Dease and Simpson, who were sent by the Governor of Hudson’s Bay to explore the shores of the Polar Sea in 1838, and whose courageous efforts first discovered Victoria Land? It is my opinion that the future reserves for the Hudson’s Bay Company the final conquest of the Arctic regions. Gradually its factories are advancing further and further north, following the retreat of the fur-yielding animals; and one day a fort will be erected on the Pole itself, that mathematical point where meet all the meridians of the globe.”

During this and the succeeding journeys Jaspar Hobson related his own adventures since he entered the service of the Company his struggles with the agents of rival associations, and his efforts to explore the unknown districts of the north or west; and Mrs Barnett, on her side, told of her travels in the tropics. She spoke of all she had done, and of all she hoped still to accomplish; so that the long hours, lightened by pleasant conversation, passed rapidly away.

Meanwhile the dogs advanced at full gallop towards the north. The Coppermine valley widened sensibly as they neared the Arctic Ocean. The hills on either side sank lower and lower, and only scattered clumps of resinous trees broke the monotony of the landscape. A few blocks of ice, drifted down by the river, still resisted the action of the sun; but each day their number decreased, and a canoe, or even a good-sized boat, might easily have descended the stream, the course of which was unimpeded by any natural barrier or aggregation of rocks. The bed of the Coppermine was both deep and wide; its waters were very clear, and being fed by the melted snow, flowed on at a considerable pace, never, however, forming dangerous rapids. Its course, at first very sinuous, became gradually less and less winding, and at last stretched along in a straight line for several miles. Its banks, composed of fine firm sand, and clothed in part with short dry herbage, were wide and level, so that the long train of sledges sped rapidly over them.

The expedition travelled day and night-if we can speak of the night, when the sun, describing an almost horizontal circle, scarcely disappeared at all. The true night only lasted two hours, and the dawn succeeded the twilight almost immediately. The weather was fine; the sky clear, although somewhat misty on the horizon; and everything combined to favour the travellers.

For two days they kept along the river-banks without meeting with any difficulties. They saw but few fur-bearing animals; but there were plenty of birds, which might have been counted by thousands. The absence of otters, sables, beavers, ermines, foxes, &c. did not trouble the Lieutenant much, for he supposed that they had been driven further north by over-zealous tracking; and indeed the marks of encampments, extinguished fires, &c. told of the more or less recent passage of native hunters. Hobson knew that he would have to penetrate a good deal further north, and that part only of his journey would be accomplished when he got to the mouth of the Coppermine river. He was therefore most eager to reach the limit of Hearne’s exploration, and pressed on as rapidly as possible.

Every one shared the Lieutenant’s impatience, and resolutely resisted fatigue in order to reach the Arctic Ocean with the least possible delay. They were drawn onwards by an indefinable attraction; the glory of the unknown dazzled their sight. Probably real hardships would commence when they did arrive at the much-desired coast. But no matter, they longed to battle with difficulties, and to press straight onwards to their aim. The district they were now traversing could have no direct interest for them; the real exploration would only commence on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Each one, then, would gladly hail the arrival in the elevated western districts for which they were bound, cut across though they were by the seventieth parallel of north latitude.

On the 5th June, four days after leaving Fort Confidence the river widened considerably. The western banks, curving slightly, ran almost due north; whilst the eastern rounded off into the coastline, stretching away as far as the eye could reach.

Lieutenant Hobson paused, and waving his hand to his companions, pointed to the boundless ocean.

CHAPTER XI.

ALONG THE COAST.

Coronation Gulf, the large estuary dotted with the islands forming the Duke of York Archipelago, which the party had now reached, was a sheet of water with irregular banks, let in, as it were, into the North American continent. At its western angle opened the mouth of the Coppermine; and on the east a long narrow creek called Bathurst Inlet ran into the mainland, from which stretched the jagged broken coast with its pointed capes and rugged promontories, ending in that confusion of straits, sounds, and channels which gives such a strange appearance to the maps of North America. On the other side the coast turned abruptly to the north beyond the mouth of the Coppermine River, and ended in Cape Krusenstern.

After consulting with Sergeant Long, Lieutenant Hobson decided to give his party a day's rest here.

The exploration, properly so called, which was to enable the Lieutenant to fix upon a suitable site for the establishment of a fort, was now really about to begin. The Company had advised him to keep as much as possible above the seventieth parallel, and on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. To obey his orders Hobson was obliged to keep to the west; for on the east — with the exception, perhaps, of the land of Boothia, crossed by the seventieth parallel — the whole country belongs rather to the Arctic Circle, and the geographical conformation of Boothia is as yet but imperfectly known.

After carefully ascertaining the latitude and longitude, and verifying his position by the map, the Lieutenant found that he was a hundred miles below the seventieth degree. But beyond Cape Krusenstern, the coast-line, running in a north-easterly direction, abruptly crosses the seventieth parallel at a sharp angle near the one hundred and thirtieth meridian, and at about the same elevation as Cape Bathurst, the spot named as a rendezvous by Captain Craventy. He must therefore make for that point, and should the site appear suitable the new fort would be erected there.

“There,” said the Lieutenant to his subordinate, Long, “we shall be in the position ordered by the Company. There the sea, open for a great part of the year, will allow the vessels from Behring Strait to come right up to the fort, bringing us fresh provisions and taking away our commodities.”

“Not to mention,” added Sergeant Long, “that our men will be entitled to double pay all the time they are beyond the seventieth parallel.”

“Of course that is understood,” replied Hobson; “and I daresay they will accept it without a murmur.”

“Well then, Lieutenant,” said Long simply, “we have now only to start for Cape Bathurst.”

But as a day of rest had been promised, the start did not actually take place until the next day, June 6th.

The second part of the journey would naturally be very different from the first. The rules with regard to the sledges keeping their rank need no longer be enforced, and each couple drove as it pleased them. Only short distances were traversed at a time; halts were made at every angle of the coast, and the party often walked. Lieutenant Hobson only urged two things upon his companions not to go further than three miles from the coast, and to rally their forces twice a day, at twelve o’clock and in the evening. At night they all encamped in tents.

The weather continued very fine and the temperature moderate, maintaining a mean height of 59° Fahrenheit above zero. Two or three times sudden snowstorms came on; but they did not last long, and exercised no sensible influence upon the temperature.

The whole of the American coast between Capes Krusenstern and Parry, comprising an extent of more than two hundred and fifty miles, was examined with the greatest care between the 6th and 20th of June. Geographical observations were accurately taken, and Hobson, most effectively aided by Thomas Black, was able to rectify certain errors in previous marine surveys; whilst the primary object of the expedition — the examination into the quality and quantity of the game in the surrounding districts-was not neglected.

Were these lands well stocked with game? Could they count with certainty not only on a good supply of furs, but also of meat? Would the resources of the country provide a fort with provisions in the summer months at least? Such were the grave questions which Lieutenant Hobson had to solve, and which called for immediate attention. We give a summary of the conclusions at which he arrived.

Game, properly so called, of the kind for which Corporal Joliffe amongst others had a special predilection, was not abundant. There were plenty of birds of the duck tribe; but only a few Polar hares, difficult of approach, poorly represented the rodents of the north. There seemed, however, to be a good many bears about. Marbre and Sabine had come upon the fresh traces of several. Some were even seen and tracked; but, as a rule, they kept at a respectful distance. In the winter, however, driven by famine from higher latitudes, there would probably be more than enough of these ravenous beasts prowling about the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

“There is certainly no denying,” said Corporal Joliffe, “that bear’s flesh is very good eating when once it’s in the larder; but there is something very problematical about it beforehand, and it’s always just possible that the hunters themselves may meet the fate they intended for the bears!”

This was true enough. It was no use counting upon the bears to provision their fort. Fortunately traces were presently found of herds of a far more useful animal, the flesh of which is the principal food of the Indians and Esquimaux. We allude to the reindeer; and Corporal Joliffe announced with the greatest satisfaction that there were plenty of these ruminants on this coast. The ground was covered with the lichen to which they are so partial, and which they cleverly dig out from under the snow.

There could be no mistake as to the footprints left by the reindeer, as, like the camel, they have a small nail-like hoof with a convex surface. Large herds, sometimes numbering several thousand animals, are seen running wild in certain parts of America. Being easily domesticated, they are employed to draw sledges; and they also supply the factories with excellent milk, more nourishing than that of cows. Their dead bodies are not less useful. Their thick skin provides clothes, their hair makes very good thread, and their flesh is palatable; so that they are really the most valuable animals to be found in these latitudes, and Hobson, being assured of their presence, was relieved from half his anxiety.

As he advanced he had also reason to be satisfied with regard to the fur-bearing animals. By the little streams rose many beaver lodges and musk-rat tunnels. Badgers, lynxes, ermines, wolverenes, sables, polecats, &c. frequented these districts, hitherto undisturbed by hunters. They had thus far come to no trace of the presence of man, and the animals had chosen their refuge well. Footprints were also found of the fine blue and silver foxes, which are becoming more and more rare, and the fur of which is worth its weight in gold. Sabine and Mac-Nab might many a time have shot a very valuable animal on this excursion, but the Lieutenant had wisely forbidden all hunting of the kind. He did not wish to alarm the animals before the approaching season-that is to say, before the winter months, when their furs become thicker and more beautiful. It was also desirable not to overload the sledges. The hunters saw the force of his reasoning; but for all that, their fingers itched when they came within shot-range of a sable or some valuable fox. Their Lieutenant's orders were, however, not to be disobeyed.

Polar bears and birds were, therefore, all that the hunters had to practise upon in this second stage of their journey. The former, however, not yet rendered bold by hunger, soon scampered off, and no serious struggle with them ensued.

The poor birds suffered for the enforced immunity of the quadrupeds. White-headed eagles, huge birds with a harsh screeching cry; fishing hawks, which build their nests in dead trees and migrate to the Arctic regions in the summer; snow buntings with pure white plumage, wild geese, which afford the best food of all the *Anseres* tribe; ducks with red heads and black breasts; ash-coloured crows, a kind of mocking jay of extreme ugliness; eider ducks; scoters or black divers, &c. &c. whose mingled cries awake the echoes of the Arctic regions, fell victims by hundreds to the unerring aim of Marbre and Sabine. These birds haunt the high latitudes by millions, and it would -be impossible to form an accurate estimate of their number on the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Their flesh formed a very pleasant addition to the daily rations of biscuit and corned beef, and we can understand that the hunters laid up a good stock of them in the fifteen days during which they were debarred from attacking more valuable game.

There would then be no lack of animal food; the magazines of the Company would be well stocked with game, and its offices filled with furs and traders; but something more was wanted to insure success to the undertaking. Would it be possible to obtain a sufficient supply of fuel to contend with the rigour of an Arctic winter at so elevated a latitude?

Most fortunately the coast, was well wooded; the hills which sloped down towards the sea were crowned with green trees, amongst which the pine predominated. Some of the woods might even be called forests, and would constitute an admirable reserve of timber for the fort. Here and there Hobson noticed isolated groups of willows, poplars, dwarf birch-trees, and numerous thickets of arbutus. At this time of the warm season all these trees were covered with verdure, and were an unexpected and refreshing sight to eyes so long accustomed to the rugged, barren polar landscape. The ground at the foot of the hills was carpeted with a short herbage devoured with avidity by the reindeer, and forming their only sustenance in winter. On the whole, then, the Lieutenant had reason to congratulate himself on having chosen the north-west of the American continent for the foundation of a new settlement.

We have said that these territories, so rich in animals, were apparently deserted by men. The travellers saw neither Esquimaux, who prefer the districts round Hudson’s Bay, nor Indians, who seldom venture so far beyond the Arctic Circle. And indeed in these remote latitudes hunters may be overtaken by storms, or be suddenly surprised by winter, and cut off from all communication with their fellow-creatures. We can easily imagine that Lieutenant Hobson was by no means sorry not to meet any rival explorers. What he wanted was an unoccupied country, a deserted land, suitable as a refuge for the fur-bearing animals; and in this matter he had the full sympathy of Mrs Barnett, who, as the guest of the Company, naturally took a great interest in the success of its schemes.

Fancy, then, the disappointment of the Lieutenant, when on the morning of the 20th June he came to an encampment but recently abandoned.

It was situated at the end of a narrow creek called Darnley Bay, of which Cape Parry is the westernmost point. There at the foot of a little hill were the stakes which had served to mark the limits of the camp, and heaps of cinders, the extinct embers of the fires.

The whole party met at this encampment, and all understood how great a disappointment it involved for Lieutenant Hobson.

“What a pity!” he exclaimed. “I would rather have met a whole family of polar bears!”

“But I daresay the men who encamped here are already far off,” said Mrs Barnett; “very likely they have returned to their usual hunting grounds.”

“That is as it may be,” replied the Lieutenant. “If these be the traces of Esquimaux, they are more likely to have gone on than to have turned back; and if they be those of Indians, they are probably, like ourselves, seeking a new hunting district; and in either case it will be very unfortunate for us.”

“But,” said Mrs Barnett, “cannot we find out to what race the travellers do belong? Can’t we ascertain if they be Esquimaux or Indians from the south? I should think tribes of such a different origin, and of such dissimilar customs, would not encamp in the same manner.”

Mrs Barnett was right; they might possibly solve the mystery after a thorough examination of the ground.

Jaspar Hobson and others set to work, carefully examining every trace, every object left behind, every mark on the ground; but in vain, there was nothing to guide them to a decided opinion. The bones of some animals scattered about told them nothing, and the Lieutenant, much annoyed, was about to abandon the useless search, when he heard an exclamation from Mrs Joliffe, who had wandered a little way to the left.

All hurried towards the young Canadian, who remained fixed to the spot, looking attentively at the ground before her.

As her companions came up she said —

“You are looking for traces, Lieutenant; well, here are some.”

And Mrs Joliffe pointed to a good many footprints clearly visible in the firm clay.

These might reveal something; for the feet of the Indians and Esquimaux, as well as their boots, are totally different from each other.

But what chiefly struck Lieutenant Hobson was the strange arrangement of these impressions. They were evidently made by a human foot, a shod foot; but, strange to say, the ball alone appeared to have touched the ground! The marks were very numerous, close together, often crossing one another, but confined to a very small circle.

Jaspar Hobson called the attention of the rest of the party to this singular circumstance.

“These were not made by a person walking,” he said.

“Nor by a person jumping,” added Mrs Barnett; “for there is no mark of a heel.”

“No,” said Mrs Joliffe; “these footprints were left by a dancer.”

She was right, as further examination proved. They were the marks left by a dancer, and a dancer engaged in some light and graceful exercise, for they were neither clumsy nor deep.

But who could the light-hearted individual be who had been impelled to dance in this sprightly fashion some degrees above the Arctic Circle?

“It was certainly not an Esquimaux,” said the Lieutenant.

“Nor an Indian,” cried Corporal Joliffe.

“No, it was a Frenchman,” said Sergeant Long quietly.

And all agreed that none but a Frenchman could have been capable of dancing on such a spot.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MIDNIGHT SUN.

Sergeant Long’s assertion must appear to have been founded on insufficient evidence. That there had been dancing no one could deny, but that the dancer was a Frenchman, however probable, could not be considered proved.

However, the Lieutenant shared the opinion of his subordinate, which did not appear too positive to any of the party, who all agreed in feeling sure that some travellers, with at least one compatriot of Vestris amongst them, had recently encamped on this spot.

Of course Lieutenant Hobson was by no means pleased at this he was afraid of having been preceded by rivals in the north-western districts of English America; and secret as the Company had kept its scheme, it had doubtless been divulged in the commercial centres of Canada and the United States.

The Lieutenant resumed his interrupted march; but he was full of care and anxiety, although he would not now have dreamed of retracing his steps.

“Frenchmen are then sometimes met with in these high latitudes?” was Mrs Barnett’s natural question after this incident.

“Yes, madam,” replied the Lieutenant; “or if not exactly Frenchmen, the descendants of the masters of Canada when it belonged to France, which comes to much the same thing. These men are in fact our most formidable rivals.”

“But I thought,” resumed Mrs Barnett, “that after the absorption by the Hudson’s Bay Company of the old North-West Company, that it had no longer any rivals on the American continent.”

“Although there is no longer any important association for trading in furs except our own, there are a good many perfectly independent private companies, mostly American, which have retained French agents or their descendants in their employ.”

“Are these agents then held in such high esteem?” asked Mrs Barnett.

“Yes, madam, and with good reason. During the ninety-four years of French supremacy in Canada, French agents always proved themselves superior to ours. We must be just even to our rivals.”

“Especially to our rivals,” added Mrs Barnett.

“Yes, especially... At that time French hunters, starting from Montreal, their headquarters, pressed on to the north with greater hardihood than any others. They lived for years with the Indian tribes, sometimes intermarrying with them. The natives called them the ‘Canadian travellers,’ and were on the most intimate terms with them. They were bold, clever fellows, expert at navigating streams, light-hearted and merry, adapting themselves to circumstances with the easy flexibility of their race, and always ready to sing or dance.”

“And do you suppose that hunting is the only object of the party whose traces we have just discovered?”

“I don’t think any other hypotheses at all likely,” replied Hobson. “They are sure to be seeking new hunting grounds. But as we cannot possibly stop them, we must make haste to begin our own operations, and compete boldly with all rivals.”

Lieutenant Hobson was now prepared for the competition he could not prevent, and he urged on the march of his party as much as possible, hoping that his rivals might not follow him beyond the seventieth parallel.

The expedition now descended towards the south for some twenty miles, in order the more easily to pass round Franklin Bay. The country was still covered with verdure, and the quadrupeds and birds already enumerated were as plentiful as ever; so that they could reasonably hope that the whole of the north-western coasts of the American continent were populated in the same manner.

The ocean which bathed these shores stretched away as far as the eye could reach Recent atlases give no land beyond the north American coast-line, and it is only the icebergs which impede the free navigation of the open sea from Behring Strait to the Pole itself.

On the 4th July the travellers skirted round another deep bay called Washburn Bay, and reached the furthest point of a little lake, until then imperfectly known, covering but a small extent of territory, scarcely two square miles-in fact it was rather a lagoon, or large pond of sweet water, than a lake.

The sledges went on easily and rapidly, and the appearance of the country was most encouraging to the explorers. It seemed that the extremity of Cape Bathurst would be a most favourable site for the new fort, as with this lagoon behind them, and the sea open for four or five months in the warm season, and giving access to the great highway of Behring Strait, before them, it would be easy for the exiles to lay in fresh provisions and to export their commodities.

On the 5th June, about three o'clock in the afternoon, the party at last halted at the extremity of Cape Bathurst. It remained to ascertain the exact position of this cape, which the maps place above the seventieth parallel. It was, however, impossible to rely upon the marine surveys of the coast, as they had never yet been made with exactitude. Jaspar Hobson decided to wait and ascertain the latitude and longitude.

"What prevents us from settling here?" asked Corporal Joliffe. "You will own, Lieutenant, that it is a very inviting spot."

"It will seem more inviting still if you get double pay here, my worthy Corporal," replied Hobson.

"No doubt," said Joliffe; "and the orders of the Company must be obeyed."

"Then wait patiently till to-morrow," added Hobson; "and if we find that Cape Bathurst is really beyond 70° north latitude, we will pitch our tent here."

The site was indeed admirably suited for the foundation of a new settlement. The wooded heights surrounding the lagoon would supply plenty of pine, birch, and other woods for the construction of the fort, and for stocking, it with' fuel. The Lieutenant and some of his companions went to the very edge of the cape, and found that towards the west the coast-line formed a lengthened curve, beyond which icebergs of a considerable height shut out the view. The water of the lagoon, instead of being brackish as they expected from its close vicinity to the sea, was perfectly sweet; but had it not been so, drinkable water would not have failed the little colony, as a fresh and limpid stream ran a few yards to the south-east of Cape Bathurst, and emptied itself into the Arctic Ocean through a narrow inlet, which, protected by a singular accumulation of sand and earth instead of by rocks, would have afforded a refuge to several vessels from the winds of the offing, and might be turned to account for the anchorage of the ships which it was hoped would come to the new settlement from Behring Strait. Out of compliment to the lady of the party, and much to her delight, Lieutenant Hobson named the stream Paulina river, and the little harbour Port Barnett.

By building the fort a little behind the actual cape, the principal house and the magazines would be quite sheltered from the coldest winds. The elevation of the cape would help to protect them from the snow-drifts, which sometimes completely bury large buildings beneath their heavy avalanches in a few hours. There was plenty of room between the foot of the promontory and the bank of the lagoon for all the constructions necessary to a fort. It could even be surrounded by palisades, which would break the shock of the icebergs; and the cape itself might be surrounded with a fortified redoubt, if the vicinity of rivals should render such a purely defensive erection necessary; and the Lieutenant, although with no idea of commencing anything of the kind as yet, naturally rejoiced at having met with an easily defensible position.

The weather remained fine, and it was quite warm enough. There was not a cloud upon the sky; but, of course, the clear blue air of temperate and torrid zones could not be expected here, and the atmosphere was generally charged with a light mist. What would Cape Bathurst be like in the long winter night of four months when the ice-mountains became fixed and rigid, and the hoarse north wind swept down upon the icebergs in all its fury? None of the party gave a thought to that time now; for the weather was beautiful, the verdant landscape smiled, and the waves sparkled in the sunbeams, whilst the temperature remained warm and pleasant.

A provisional camp, the sledges forming its only material, was arranged for the night on the banks of the lagoon; and towards evening Mrs Barnett, the Lieutenant, Sergeant Long, and even Thomas Black, explored the surrounding district in order to ascertain its resources. It appeared to be in every respect suitable; and Hobson was eager for the next day, that he might determine the exact situations, and find out if it fulfilled the conditions imposed by the Company.

“Well, Lieutenant,” said the astronomer when the examination was over, “this is really a charming spot, such as I should not have imagined could have existed beyond the Arctic Circle.”

“Ah, Mr Black!” cried Hobson, “the finest countries in the world are to be found here, and I am impatient to ascertain our latitude and longitude.”

“Especially the latitude,” said the astronomer, whose eclipse was never out of his thoughts; “and I expect your brave companions are as eager as yourself. Double pay beyond the seventieth parallel!”

“But, Mr Black,” said Mrs Barnett, “do you not yourself take an interest a purely scientific interest, in getting beyond that parallel?”

“Of course, madam, of course I am anxious to get beyond it, but not so terribly eager. According to our calculations, however, made with absolute accuracy, the solar eclipse which I am ordered to watch will only be total to an observer placed beyond the seventieth degree, and on this account I share the Lieutenant’s impatience to determine the position of Cape Bathurst.”

“But I understand, Mr Black,” said Mrs Barnett, “that this solar eclipse will not take place until the 18th July 1860?”

“Yes, madam, on the 18th July 1860.”

“And it is now only the 15th June 1859! So that the phenomenon will not be visible for more than a year!”

“I am quite aware of it, Mrs Barnett,” replied the astronomer; “but if I had not started till next year I should have run a risk of being too late.”

“You would, Mr Black,” said Hobson, “and you did well to start a year beforehand. You are now quite sure not to miss your eclipse. I own that our journey from Fort Reliance has been accomplished under exceptionally favourable circumstances. *We* have had little fatigue and few delays. To tell you the truth, I did not expect to get to this part of the coast until the middle of August; and if the eclipse had been expected this year, instead of next; you really might have been too late. Moreover, we do not yet know if we are beyond the seventieth parallel.”

“I do not in the least regret the journey I have taken in your company, Lieutenant, and I shall patiently wait until next year for my eclipse. The fair Phœbe, I fancy, is a sufficiently grand lady to be waited for.”

The next day, July 6th, a little after noon, Hobson and the astronomer made their preparations for taking the exact bearings of Cape Bathurst. The sun shone clearly enough for them to take the outlines exactly. At this season of the year, too, it had reached its maximum height above the horizon; and consequently its culmination, on its transit across the meridian, would facilitate the work of the two observers.

Already the night before, and the same morning, by raking different altitudes, and by means of a calculation of right ascensions, the Lieutenant and the astronomer had ascertained the longitude with great accuracy. But it was about the latitude that Hobson was most anxious; for what would the meridian of Cape Bathurst matter to him should it not be situated beyond the seventieth parallel?

Noon approached. The men of the expedition gathered round the observers with their sextants ready in their hands. The brave fellows awaited the result of the observation with an impatience which will be readily understood. It was now to be decided whether they had come to the end of their journey, or whether they must search still further for a spot fulfilling the conditions imposed by the Company.

Probably no good result would have followed upon further explorations, According to the maps of North America-imperfect, it is true-the western coast beyond Cape Bathurst sloped down below the seventieth parallel, not again rising above it until it entered Russian America, where the English had as yet no right to settle; so that Hobson had shown considerable judgment in directing his course to Cape Bathurst after a thorough examination of the maps of these northern regions. This promontory is, in fact, the only one which juts out beyond the seventieth parallel along the whole of the North American continent, properly so called-that is to say, in English America. It remained to be proved that it really occupied the position assigned to it in maps.

At this moment the sun was approaching the culminating-point of its course, and the two observers pointed the telescopes of their sextants upon it. By means of inclined mirrors attached to the instruments, the sun ought apparently to go back to the horizon itself; and the moment when it seemed to touch it with the lower side of its disc would be precisely that at which it would occupy the highest point of the diurnal arc, and consequently the exact moment when it would pass the meridian-in other words, it would be noon at the place where the observation was taken.

All watched in anxious silence.

“Noon!” cried Jaspar Hobson and the astronomer at once.

The telescopes were immediately lowered. The Lieutenant and Thomas Black read on the graduated limbs the value of the angles they had just obtained, and at once proceeded to note down their observations.

A few minutes afterwards, Lieutenant Hobson rose and said, addressing his companions

“My friends, from this date, July 6th, I promise you double pay in the name of the Hudson’s Bay Company!”

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah for the Company!” shouted the worthy companions of the Lieutenant with one voice.

Cape Bathurst and its immediate neighbourhood were in very truth above the seventieth degree of north latitude.

We give the result of these simultaneous observations, which agreed to a second.

Longitude, 127° 36’ 12” west of the meridian of Greenwich.

Latitude, 70° 44’ 37” north.

And that very evening these hardy pioneers, encamped so far from the inhabited world, watched the mighty luminary of day touch the edges of the western horizon without dipping beneath it.

For the first time they saw the shining of the midnight sun.

CHAPTER XIII.

FORT HOPE.

The site of the new fort was now finally determined on. It would be impossible to find a better situation than on the level ground behind Cape Bathurst, on the eastern bank of the lagoon Hobson determined to commence the construction of the principal house at once. Meanwhile all must accommodate themselves as best they could; and the sledges were ingeniously utilised to form a provisional encampment.

His men being very skilful, the Lieutenant hoped to have the principal house ready in a month. It was to be large enough to accommodate for a time the nineteen persons of the party. Later, and before the excessive cold set in, if there should be time, the barracks for the soldiers and the magazines for the furs and skins were to be built. There was not much chance of getting it all done before the end of September; and after that date, the winter, with its first bitter frosts and long nights, would arrest all further progress.

Of the ten soldiers chosen by Captain Craventy, two-Marbre and Sabine-were skilful hunters; the other eight handled the hatchet with as much address as the musket. Like sailors, they could turn their hands to anything, and were now to be treated more like workmen than soldiers, for they were to build a fort which there was as yet no enemy to attack. Petersen, Belcher, Rae, Garry, Pond, Hope, and Kellet formed a body of clever, zealous carpenters, under the able superintendence of lilac-Nab, a Scotchman from Stirling, who had had considerable experience in the building both of houses and boats. The men were well provided with tools-hatchets, centre-bits, adzes, planes, hand-saws, mallets, hammers, chisels, &c. &c. Rae was most skilful at blacksmith’s work, and with the aid of a little portable forge he was able to make all the pins, tenons, bolts, nails, screws, nuts, &e. required in carpentry. They had no mason in the party; but none was wanted, as all the buildings of the factories in the north are of wood. Fortunately there were plenty of trees about Cape Bathurst, although as Hobson had already remarked to Mrs Barnett, there was not a rock, a stone, not even a flint or a pebble, to be seen. The shore was strewn with innumerable quantities of bivalve shells broken by the surf, and with seaweed or zoophytes, mostly sea-urchins and asteriadæ; but the soil consisted entirely of earth and sand, without a morsel of silica or broken granite; and the cape itself was but an accumulation of soft earth, the particles of which were scarcely held together by the vegetation with which it was clothed.

In the afternoon of the same day, July 6th Hobson and Mac-Nab the carpenter went to choose the site of the principal house on the plateau at the foot of Cape Bathurst. From this point the view embraced the lagoon and the western districts to a distance of ten or twelve miles. On the right, about four miles off, towered icebergs of a considerable height. partly draped in mist; whilst on the left stretched apparently boundless plains, vast steppes which it would be impossible to distinguish from the frozen surface of the lagoon or from the sea itself in the winter.

The spot chosen, Hobson and Mac-Nab set out the outer walls of the house with the line. This outline formed a rectangle measuring sixty feet on the larger side, and thirty on the smaller. The façade of the house would therefore have a length of sixty feet it was to have a door and three windows on the side of the promontory, where the inner court was to be situated, and four windows on the side of the lagoon. The door was to open at the left corner, instead of in the middle, of the back of the house, for the sake of warmth. This arrangement would impede the entrance of the outer air to the further rooms, and add considerably to the comfort of the inmates of the fort.

According to the simple plan agreed upon by the Lieutenant and his master-carpenter, there were to be four compartments in the house: the first to be an antechamber with a double door to keep out the wind; the second to serve as a kitchen, that the cooking which would generate damp, might be all done quite away from the living-rooms; the third, a large hall, where the daily meals were to be served in common; and the fourth, to be divided into several cabins, like the state-rooms on board ship.

The soldiers were to occupy the dining-hall provisionally, and a kind of camp-bed was arranged for them at the end of the room. The Lieutenant, Mrs Barnett, Thomas Black, Madge, Mrs Joliffe, Mrs Mac-Nab, and Mrs Rae were to lodge in the cabins of the fourth compartment. They would certainly be packed pretty closely; but it was only a temporary state of things, and when the barracks were constructed, the principal house would be reserved to the officer in command, his sergeant, Thomas Black, Mrs Barnett, and her faithful Madge, who never left her. Then the fourth compartment might perhaps be divided into three cabins, instead of four; for to avoid corners as much as possible is a rule which should never be forgotten by those who winter in high latitudes Nooks and corners are, in fact, so many receptacles of ice. The partitions impede the ventilation; and the moisture, generated in the air, freezes readily, and makes the atmosphere of the rooms unhealthy causing grave maladies to those who sleep in them.

On this account many navigators who have to winter in the midst of ice have one large room in the centre of their vessel, which is shared by officers and sailors in common. For obvious reasons, however, Hobson could not adopt this plan.

From the preceding description we shall have seen that the future house was to consist merely of a ground-floor. The roof was to be high, and its sides to slope considerably, so that water could easily run off them. The snow would, however, settle upon them; and when once they were covered with it, the house would be, so to speak, hermetically closed, and the inside temperature would be kept at the same mean height. Snow is, in fact, a very bad conductor of beat: it prevents it from entering, it is true; but, what is more important in an Arctic winter, it also keeps it from getting out.

The carpenter was to build two chimneys-one above the kitchen, the other in connection with the stove of the large dining-room, which was to heat it and the compartment containing the cabins. The architectural effect of the whole would certainly be poor; but the house would be as comfortable as possible, and what more could any one desire?

Certainly an artist who had once seen it would not soon forget this winter residence, set down in the gloomy Arctic twilight in the midst of snow-drifts, half hidden by icicles, draped in white from roof to foundation, its walls encrusted with snow, and the smoke from its fires assuming strangely-contorted forms in the wind.

But now to tell of the actual construction of this house, as yet existing only in imagination. This, of course, was the business of Mac-Nab and his men; and while the carpenters were at work, the foraging party to whom the commissariat was entrusted would not be idle. There was plenty for every one to do.

The first step was to choose suitable timber, and a species of Scotch fir was decided on, which grew conveniently upon the neighbouring hills, and seemed altogether well adapted to the multifarious uses to which it would be put. For in the rough and ready style of habitation which they were planning, there could be no variety of material; and every part of the house-outside and inside walls, flooring, ceiling, partitions, rafters, ridges, framework, and tiling-would have to be contrived of planks, beams, and timbers. As may readily be supposed, finished workmanship was riot necessary for such a description of building, and Mac-Nab was able to proceed very rapidly without endangering the safety of the building. About a hundred of these firs were chosen and felled-they were neither barked nor squared-and formed so many timbers, averaging some twenty feet in length. The axe and the chisel did not touch them except at the ends, in order to form the tenons and mortises by which they were to be secured to one another. Very few days sufficed to complete this part of the work, and the timbers were brought down by the dogs to the site fixed on for the principal building. To start with, the Bite had been carefully levelled. The soil, a mixture of fine earth and sand, had been beaten and consolidated with heavy blows. The brushwood with which it was originally covered was burnt, and the thick layer of ashes thus produced would prevent the damp from penetrating the floors. A clean and dry foundation having been thus secured on which to lay the first joists, upright posts were fixed at each corner of the site, and at the extremities of the inside walls, to form the skeleton of the building. The posts were sunk to a depth of some feet in the ground, after their ends had been hardened in the fire; and were slightly hollowed at each side to receive the crossbeams of the outer wall, between which the openings for the doors and windows had been arranged for. These posts were held together at the top by horizontal beams well let into the mortises, and consolidating the whole building. On these horizontal beams, which represented the architraves of the two fronts, rested the high trusses of the roof, which overhung the walls like the eaves of a chalet. Above this squared architrave were laid the joists of the ceiling, and those of the floor upon the layer of ashes.

The timbers, both in the inside and outside walls, were only laid side by side. To insure their being properly joined, Rae the blacksmith drove strong iron bolts through them at intervals; and when even this contrivance proved insufficient to close the interstices as hermetically as was necessary, Mac-Nab had recourse to calking, a process which seamen find invaluable in rendering vessels water-tight; only as a substitute for tow he used a sort of dry moss, with which the eastern side of the cape was covered, driving it into the crevices with calking- irons and a hammer, filling up each hollow with layers of hot tar, obtained without difficulty from the pine-trees, and thus making the walls and boarding impervious to the rain and damp of the winter season.

The door and windows in the two fronts were roughly but strongly built, and the small panes of the latter glazed with isinglass, which, though rough, yellow, and almost opaque, was yet the best substitute for glass which the resources of the country afforded; and its imperfections really mattered little, as the windows were sure to be always open in fine weather; while during, the long night of the Arctic winter they would be useless, and have to be kept closed and defended by heavy shutters with strong bolts against the violence of the gales. Meanwhile the house was being quickly fitted up inside. By means of a double door between the outer and inner halls a too sudden change of temperature was avoided, and the wind was prevented from blowing with unbroken force into the rooms. The air-pumps, brought from Fort Reliance, were so fixed as to let in fresh air whenever excessive cold prevented the opening of doors or windows -one being made to eject the impure air from within, the other to renew the supply; for the Lieutenant had given his whole mind to this important matter.

The principal cooking utensil was a large iron furnace, which had been brought piecemeal from Fort Reliance, and which the carpenter put up without any difficulty. The chimneys for the kitchen and ball, however, seemed likely to tax the ingenuity of the workmen to the utmost, as no material within their reach was strong enough for the purpose, and stone, as we have said before, was nowhere to be found in the country around Cape Bathurst.

The difficulty appeared insurmountable, when the invincible Lieutenant suggested that they should utilise the shells with which the shore was strewed.

“Make chimneys of shells!” cried the carpenter.

“Yes, Mac-Nab,” replied Hobson; “we must collect the shells, grind them, burn them, and make them into lime, then mould the lime into bricks, and use them in the same way.”

“Let us try the shells, by all means,” replied the carpenter; and so the idea was put in practice at once, and many tons collected of calcareous shells identical with those found in the lowest stratum of the Tertiary formations.

A furnace was constructed for the decomposition of the carbonate which is so large an ingredient of these shells, and thus the lime required was obtained in the space of a few hours. It would perhaps be too much to say that the substance thus made was as entirely satisfactory as if it had gone through all the usual processes; but it answered its purpose, and strong conical chimneys soon adorned the roof, to the great satisfaction of Mrs

Paulina Barnett, who congratulated the originator of the scheme warmly on its success, only adding laughingly, that she hoped the chimneys would riot smoke.

“Of course they will smoke, madam,” replied Hobson coolly; “all chimneys do!”

All this was finished within a month, and on the 6th of August they were to take possession of the new house.

While Mac-Nab and his men were working so hard, the foraging party, with the Lieutenant at its head, had been exploring the environs of Cape Bathurst, and satisfied themselves that there would be no difficulty in supplying the Company’s demands for fur and feathers, so soon as they could set about hunting in earnest. In the meantime they prepared the way for future sport, contenting themselves for the present with the capture of a few couples of reindeer, which they intended to domesticate for the sake of their milk and their young. They were kept in a paddock about fifty yards from the house, and entrusted to the care of Mac-Nabs wife, an Indian woman, well qualified to take charge of them.

The care of the household fell to Mrs Paulina Barnett, and this good woman, with Madge’s help, was invaluable in providing for all the small wants, which would inevitably have escaped the notice of the men.

After scouring the country within a radius of several miles, the Lieutenant notified, as the result of his observations, that the territory on which they had established themselves, and to which he gave the name of Victoria Land, was a large peninsula about one hundred and fifty square miles in extent, with very clearly-defined boundaries, connected with the American continent by an isthmus, extending from the lower end of Washburn Bay on the east, as fair as the corresponding slope on the opposite coast. The Lieutenant next proceeded to ascertain what were the resources of the lake and river, and found great reason to be satisfied with the result of his examination. The shallow waters of the lake teemed with trout, pike, and other available fresh-water fish; and the little river was a favourite resort of salmon and shoals of white bait and smelts. The supply of sea-fish was not so good; and though many a grampus and whale passed by in the offing, the latter probably flying from the harpoons of the Behring Strait fishermen there were no means of capturing them unless one by chance happened to get stranded on the coast; nor would Hobson allow any of the seals which abounded on the western shore to be taken until a satisfactory conclusion should be arrived at as to how to use them to the best advantage.

The colonists now considered themselves fairly installed stalled in their new abode, and after due deliberation unanimously agreed to bestow upon the settlement the name of Fort Good Hope.

Alas! the auspicious title was never to be inscribed upon a map. The undertaking, begun so bravely and with such prospects of success, was destined never to be carried out, and another disaster would have to be added to the long list of failures in Arctic enterprise.

CHAPTER XIV.

SOME EXCURSIONS.

It did not take long to furnish the new abode. A camp-bed was set up in the hall, and the carpenter Mac-Nab constructed a most substantial table, around which were ranged fixed benches. A few movable seats and two enormous presses completed the furniture of this apartment. The inner room, which was also ready, was divided by solid partitions into six dormitories, the two end ones alone being lighted by windows looking to the front and back. The only furniture was a bed and a table. Mrs Paulina Barnett and Madge were installed in one which looked immediately out upon the lake. Hobson offered the other with the window in it to Thomas Black, and the astronomer took immediate possession of it. The Lieutenant’s own room was a dark cell adjoining the hall, with no window but a bull’s eye pierced through the partition. Mrs Joliffe, Mrs Mac-Nab, and Mrs Rae, with their husbands, occupied the other dormitories. These good people agreed so well together that it would have been a pity to separate them. Moreover, an addition was expected shortly to the little colony; and Mac-Nab had already gone so far as to secure the services of Mrs Barnett as god-mother, an honour which gave the good woman much satisfaction. The sledges had been entirely unloaded, and the bedding carried into the different rooms. All utensils, stores, and provisions which were not required for immediate use were stowed away in a garret, to which a ladder gave access. The winter clothing-such as boots, overcoats, furs, and skins-were also taken there, and protected from the damp in large chests. As soon as these arrangements were completed, the Lieutenant began to provide for the heating of the house.

Knowing that the most energetic measures were necessary to combat the severity of the Arctic winter, and that during the weeks of intensest cold there would be no possibility of leaving the house to forage for supplies, he ordered a quantity of fuel to be brought from the wooded hills in the neighbourhood, and took care to obtain a plentiful store of oil from the seals which abounded on the shore.

In obedience to his orders, and under his directions, the house was provided with a condensing apparatus which would receive the internal moisture, and was so constructed that the ice which would form in it could easily be removed.

This question of heating was a very serious one to the Lieutenant.

“I am a native of the Polar regions, madam,” he often said to Mrs Barnett; “I have some experience in these matters, and I have read over and over again books written by those who have wintered in these latitudes. It is impossible to take too many precautions in preparing to pass a winter in the Arctic regions, and nothing must be left to chance where a single neglect may prove fatal to the enterprise.”

“Very true, Mr Hobson,” replied Mrs Barnett; “and you have evidently made up your mind to conquer the cold; but there is the food to be thought of too.”

“Yes, indeed; I have been thinking of that, and mean to make all possible use of the produce of the country so as to economise our stores. As soon as we can, we will make some foraging expeditions. We need not think about the furs at present, for there will be plenty of time during the winter to stock the Company’s depôts. Besides, the furred animals have not got their winter clothing on yet, and the skins would lose fifty per cent. of their value if taken now. Let us content ourselves for the present with provisioning Fort Hope. Reindeer, elk, - and any wapitis that may have ventured so far north are the only game worth our notice just now; it will be no small undertaking to provide food for twenty people and sixty dogs."

The Lieutenant loved order, and determined to do everything in the most methodical manner, feeling confident that if his companions would help him to the utmost of their power, nothing need be wanting to the success of the expedition.

The weather at this season was almost always fine, and might be expected to continue so for five weeks longer, when the snow would begin to fall. It was very important that the carpenters-should make all possible use of the interval; and as soon as the principal house was finished, Hobson set them to work to build an enormous kennel or shed in which to keep the teams of dogs. This doghouse was built at the very foot of the promontory, against the hill, and about forty yards to the right of the house. Barracks for the accommodation of the men were to be built opposite this kennel on the left, while the store and powder magazines were to occupy the front of the enclosure.

Hobson determined with almost excessive prudence to have the Factory enclosed before the winter set in. A strong fence of pointed stakes, planted firmly in the ground, was set up as a protection against the inroads of wild animals or the hostilities of the natives. The Lieutenant had not forgotten an outrage which had been committed along the coast at no great distance from Fort Hope, and he well knew how essential it was to be safe from a *coup de main*. The factory was therefore entirely encircled, and at each extremity of the lagoon Mac-Nab undertook to erect a wooden sentry-box commanding the coast-line, from which a watch could be kept without any danger. The men worked indefatigably, and it seemed likely that everything would be finished before the cold season set in.

In the meantime hunting parties were organised. The capture of seals being put off for a more convenient season, the sportsmen prepared to supply the fort with game, which might be dried and preserved for consumption during the bad season.

Accordingly Marbre and Sabine, sometimes accompanied by the Lieutenant and Sergeant Long, whose experience was invaluable, scoured the country daily for miles round; and it was no uncommon sight to see Mrs Paulina Barnett join them and step briskly along shouldering her gun bravely, and never allowing herself to be outstripped by her companions.

Throughout the month of August these expeditions were continued with great success, and the store of provisions increased rapidly. Marbre and Sabine were skilled in all the artifices which sportsmen employ in stalking their prey-particularly the reindeer, which are exceedingly wary. How patiently they would face the wind lest the creature's keen sense of smell should warn it of their approach! and how cunningly they lured it on to its destruction by displaying the magnificent antlers of some former victim above the birch-bushes !

They found a useful alley *(sic)* in a certain little traitorous bird to which the Indians have given the name of "monitor." It is a kind of daylight owl, about the size of a pigeon, and has earned its name by its habit of calling the attention of hunters to their quarry, by uttering a sharp note like the cry of a child.

When about fifty reindeer, or, to give them their Indian name, "caribous," had been brought down by the guns, the flesh was cut into long strips for food, the skins being kept to be tanned and used for shoe-leather.

Besides the caribous, there were also plenty of Polar hares, which formed an agreeable addition to the larder. They were much less timorous than the European species, and allowed themselves to be caught in great numbers. They belong to the rodent family, and have long ears, brown eyes, and a soft fur resembling swan's down. They weigh from ten to fifteen pounds each, and their flesh is excellent. Hundreds of them were cared for winter use, and the remainder converted into excellent pies by the skilful hands of Mrs Joliffe.

While making provision for future wants, the daily supplies were not neglected. In addition to the Polar bares, which underwent every variety of culinary treatment from Mrs Joliffe, and won for her compliments innumerable from hunters and workmen alike, many waterfowl figured in the bill of fare. Besides the ducks which abounded on the shores of the lagoon, large flocks of grouse congregated round the clumps of stunted willows. They belong, as their zoological name implies, to the partridge family, and might be aptly described as white partridges with long black-spotted feathers in the tail. The Indians call them willow-fowl; but to a European sportsman they are neither more nor less than blackcock *(Tetrao tetrix).* When roasted slightly before a quick clear fire they proved delicious.

Then there were the supplies furnished by lake and stream. Sergeant Long was a first-rate angler, and nothing could surpass the skill and patience with which he whipped the water and cast his s line. The faithful Madge, another worthy disciple of Isaak Walton was perhaps his only equal. Day after day the two sallied forth together rod in hand, to spend the day in mute companionship by the river-side, whence they were sure to return in triumph laden with some splendid specimens of the salmon tribe.

But to return to our sportsmen; they soon found that their hunting excursions were not to be free from peril. Hobson perceived with some alarm that bears were very numerous in the neighbourhood and that scarcely a day passed without one or more of them being sighted. Sometimes these unwelcome visitors belonged to the family of brown bears, so common throughout the whole “Cursed Land; “but now and then a solitary specimen of the formidable Polar bear warned the hunters what dangers they might have to encounter so soon as the first frost should drive great numbers of these fearful animals to the neighbourhood of Cape Bathurst. Every book of Arctic explorations is full of accounts of the frequent perils to which travellers and whalers are exposed from the ferocity of these animals.

Now and then, too, a distant pack of wolves was seen, which receded like a wave at the approach of the hunters, or the sound of their bark was heard as they followed the trail of a reindeer or wapiti. These creatures were large grey wolves, about three feet high, with long tails, whose fur becomes white in the winter. They abounded in this part of the country, where food was plentiful; and frequented wooded spots, where they lived in holes like foxes. During the temperate season, when they could get as much as they wanted to eat, they were scarcely dangerous, and fled with the characteristic cowardice of their race at the first sign of pursuit; but when impelled by hunger, their numbers rendered them very formidable; and from the fact of their lairs being close at hand, they never left the country even in the depth of winter.

One day the sportsmen returned to Fort Hope, bringing with them an unpleasant-looking animal, which neither Mrs Paulina Barnett nor the astronomer, Thomas Black, had ever before seen. It was a carnivorous creature of the plantigrada family, and greatly resembled the American glutton, being strongly built, with short legs, and, like all animals of the feline tribe, a very supple back; its eyes were small and horny, and it was armed with curved claws and formidable jaws.

“What is this horrid creature?” inquired Mrs Paulina Barnett of Sabine, who replied in his usual sententious manner —

“A Scotchman would call it a ‘quick-hatch,’ an Indian an ‘okelcoo-haw-gew,’ and a Canadian a ‘carcajou.”‘

“And what do you call it?”

“A wolverene, ma’am,” returned Sabine, much delighted with the elegant way in which he had rounded his sentence.

The wolverene, as this strange quadruped is called by zoologists, lives in hollow trees or rocky caves, whence it issues at night and creates great havoc amongst beavers, musk-rats, and other rodents, sometimes fighting with a fox or a wolf for its spoils. Its chief characteristics are great cunning, immense muscular power, and an acute sense of smell. It is found in very high latitudes; and the short fur with which it is clothed becomes almost black in the winter months, and forms a large item in the Company’s exports.

During their excursions the settlers paid as much attention to the Flora of the country as to its Fauna; but in those regions vegetation, has necessarily a hard struggle for existence, as it must brave every season of the year, whereas the animals are able to migrate to a warmer climate during the winter.

The hills on the eastern side, of the lake were well covered with pine and fir trees; and Jaspar also noticed the “tacamahac,” a species of poplar which grows to a great height and shoots forth yellowish leaves which turn green in the autumn. These trees and larches were, however, few and sickly looking, as if they found the oblique rays of the sun insufficient to make them thrive. The black fir, or Norway spruce fir, throve better, especially when situated in ravines well sheltered from the north wind. The young shoots of this tree are very valuable, yielding a favourite beverage known in North America as “spruce-beer.” A good crop of these branchlets was gathered in and stored in the cellar of Fort Hope. There were also the dwarf birch, a shrub about two feet high, native to very cold climates, and whole thickets of cedars, which are so valuable for fuel.

Of vegetables which could be easily grown and used for food, this barren land yielded but few; and Mrs Joliffe, who took a great interest in “economic “botany, only met with .two plants which were available in cooking.

One of these, a bulb, very difficult to classify, because its leaves fall off just at the flowering season, turned out to be a wild leek, and yielded a good crop of onions, each about the size of an egg.

The other plant was that known throughout North America as “Labrador tea;” it grew abundantly on the shores of the lagoon between the clumps of willow and arbutus, and formed the principal food of the Polar hares. Steeped in boiling water, and flavoured with a few drops of brandy or gin, it formed an excellent beverage, and served to economise the supply of China tea which the party had brought from Fort Reliance.

Knowing the scarcity of vegetables, Jaspar Hobson had plenty of seeds with him, chiefly sorrel and scurvy-grass (Cochlearia), the antiscorbutic properties of which are invaluable in these latitudes. In choosing the site of the settlement, such care bad been taken to find a spot sheltered from the keen blasts, which shrivel vegetation like a fire, that there was every chance of these seeds yielding a good crop in the ensuing season.

The dispensary of the new fort contained other antiscorbutics, in the shape of casks of lemon and lime juice, both of which are absolutely indispensable to an Arctic expedition. Still the greatest economy was necessary with regard to the stores, as a long period of bad weather might cut off the communication between Fort Hope and the southern stations.

CHAPTER XV.

FIFTEEN MILES FROM CAPE BATHURST.

September had now commenced, and as upon the most favourable calculation only three more weeks would intervene before the bad season set in and interrupted the labours of the explorers, the greatest haste was necessary in completing the new buildings, and Mae-Nab and his workmen surpassed themselves in industry. The dog-house was on the eve of being finished, and very little remained to be done to the palisading which was, to encircle the fort. An inner court had been constructed, in the shape of a half-moon, fenced with tall pointed stakes, fifteen feet high, to which a postern gave entrance. Jaspar Hobson favoured the system of an unbroken enclosure with detached forts (a great improvement upon the tactics of Vauban and Cormontaigne), and knew that to make his defence complete the summit of Cape Bathurst, which was the key of the position, must be fortified; until that could be done, however, he thought the palisading would be a sufficient protection, at least against quadrupeds.

The next thing was to lay in a supply of oil and lights, and accordingly an expedition was organised to a spot about fifteen miles distant where seals were plentiful, Mrs Paulina Barnett being invited to accompany the sportsmen, not indeed for the sake of watching the poor creatures slaughtered, but to satisfy her curiosity with regard to the country around Cape Bathurst, and to see some cliff’s on that part of the coast which were worthy of notice. The Lieutenant chose as his other companions, Sergeant Long, and the soldiers Petersen, Hope, and Kellet, and the party set off at eight o’clock in the morning in two sledges, each drawn by six dogs, on which the bodies of the seals were to be brought back. The weather was fine, but the fog which lay low along the horizon veiled the rays of the sun, whose yellow disk was now beginning to disappear for some hours during the night, a circumstance which attracted the Lieutenant’s attention, for reasons which we will explain.

That part of the shore to the west of Cape Bathurst rises but a few inches above the level of the sea, and the tides are-or are said to be-very high in the Arctic Ocean-many navigators, such as Parry, Franklin, the two Rosses, M’Clure, and M’Clintock, having observed that when the sun and moon were in conjunction the waters were sometimes twenty-five feet above the ordinary level. How then was it to be explained that the sea did not at high tide inundate Cape Bathurst, which possessed no natural defences such as cliffs or downs? What was it, in fact, which prevented the entire submersion of the whole district, and the meeting of the waters of the lake with those of the Arctic Ocean?

Jaspar Hobson could not refrain from remarking on this peculiarity to Mrs Barnett, who replied somewhat hastily that she supposed that there were-in spite of all that had been said to the contrary-no tides in the Arctic Ocean.

“On the contrary, madam,” said Hobson, “all navigators agree that the ebb and flow of Polar seas are very distinctly marked, and it is impossible to believe that they can have been mistaken on such a subject.”

“How is it, then,” inquired Mrs Barnett, “that this land is not flooded when it is scarcely ten feet above the sea level at low tide?”

“That is just what puzzles me,” said Hobson; “for I have been attentively watching the tides all through this month, and during that time they have not varied more than a foot, and I feel certain, that even during the September equinox, they will not rise more than a foot and a half all along the shores of Cape Bathurst.”

“Can you not explain this phenomenon?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“Well, madam,” replied the Lieutenant, “two conclusions are open to us, either of which I find it difficult to believe; such men as Franklin, Parry, Ross, and others, are mistaken, and there are no tides on this part of the American coast; or, as in the Mediterranean, to which the waters of the Atlantic have not free ingress, the straits are too narrow to be affected by the ocean currents.”

“The latter would appear to be the more reasonable hypothesis, Mr Hobson.”

“It is riot, however, thoroughly satisfactory,” said the Lieutenant, “and I feel sure that if we could but find it, there is some simple and natural explanation of the phenomenon.”

After a monotonous journey along a flat and sandy shore, the party reached their destination, and, having unharnessed the teams, they were left behind lest they should startle the seals.

At the first glance around them, all were equally struck with the contrast between the appearance of this district and that of Cape Bathurst.

Here the coast line was broken and fretted, showing manifest traces of its igneous origin; whereas the site of the fort was of sedimentary formation and aqueous origin. Stone, so conspicuously absent at the cape, was here plentiful; the black sand and porous lava were strewn with huge boulders deeply imbedded in the soil, and there were large quantities of the aluminium, silica, and felspar pebbles peculiar to the crystalline strata of one class of igneous rocks. Glittering Labrador stones, and many other kinds of felspar, red, green, and blue, were sprinkled on the unfrequented beach, with grey and yellow pummice-stone, and lustrous variegated obsidian. Tall cliffs, rising some two hundred feet above the sea, frowned down upon the bay; and the Lieutenant resolved to climb them, and obtain a good view of the eastern side of the country. For this there was plenty of time, as but few of the creatures they had come to seek were as yet to be seen, and the proper time for the attack would be when they assembled for the afternoon siesta in which the. amphibious mammalia always indulge. The Lieutenant, however, quickly discovered that the animals frequenting this coast were not, as he had been led to suppose, true seals, although they belonged to the Phocidæ family, but morses or walruses, sometimes called sea-cows. They resemble the seals in general form, but the canine teeth of the upper jaw curved down-wards are much more largely developed.

Following the coast line, which curved considerably, and to which they gave the name of “Walruses’ Bay,” the party soon reached the foot of the cliff, and Petersen, Hope, and Kellet, took up their position as sentinels on the little promontory, whilst Mrs Barnett, Hobson, and Long, after promising not to lose sight of their comrades, and to be on the look-out for their signal, proceeded to climb the cliff, the summit of which they reached in about a quarter of an hour. From this position they were able to survey the whole surrounding country; at their feet lay the vast sea, stretching northwards as far as the eye .could reach, its expanse so entirely unbroken by islands or icebergs that the travellers came to the conclusion, that this portion of the Arctic waters was navigable as far as Behring Straits, and that during the summer season the North-West Passage to Cape Bathurst would, be open to the Company’s ships. On the west, the aspect of the country explained the presence of the volcanic *débris* on the shore; for at a distance of about ten miles was a chain of granitic hills, of conical form, with blunted crests, looking as if their summits had been cut off, and with jagged tremulous outlines standing out against the sky. They bad hitherto escaped the notice of our party, as they were concealed by the cliffs on the Cape Bathurst side, and Jaspar Hobson examined them in silence, but with great attention, before he proceeded to stud the eastern side, which consisted of a long strip of perfectly level coast-line stretching away to Cape Bathurst. Any one provided with a good field-glass would have been able to distinguish the fort of Good Hope, and perhaps even the cloud of blue smoke, which was no doubt at that very moment issuing from Mrs Joliffe's kitchen chimney.

The country behind them seemed to possess two entirely distinct characters; to the east and south the cape was bounded by a vast plain, many hundreds of square miles in extent, while behind the cliff, from "Walruses' Bay" to the mountains mentioned above, the country had undergone terrible convulsions, showing clearly that it owed its origin to volcanic eruptions. The Lieutenant was much struck with this marked contrast, and Sergeant Long asked him whether he thought the mountains on the western horizon were volcanoes.

"Undoubtedly," said Hobson; "all these pumice-stones and pebbles have been discharged by them to this distance, and if we were to go two or three miles farther, we should find ourselves treading upon nothing but lava and ashes."

"Do you suppose," inquired the Sergeant, "that all these volcanoes are still active?"

"That I cannot tell you yet."

"But there is no smoke issuing from any of them," added the Sergeant.

“That proves nothing; your pipe is not always in your mouth, and it is just the same with volcanoes, they are not always smoking.”

“I see,” said the Sergeant; “but it is a great puzzle to me how volcanoes can exist at all. on Polar continents.”

“Well, there are riot many of them !” said Mrs Barnett.

“No, madam,” replied Jaspar, “but they are not so very rare either; they are to be found in Jan Mayen’s Land, the Aleutian Isles, Kamtchatka, Russian America, and Iceland, as well as in the Antarctic circle, in Tierra del Fuego, and Australasia. They are the chimneys of the great furnace in the centre of the earth, where Nature makes her chemical experiments, and it appears to me that the Creator of all things has taken care to place these safety-valves wherever they were most needed.”

“I suppose so,” replied the Sergeant; “and yet it does seem very strange to find them in this icy climate.”

“Why should they not be here as well as anywhere else, Sergeant? I should say that ventilation holes are likely to be more numerous at the Poles than at the Equator !”

“Why so?” asked the Sergeant in much surprise.

“Because, if these safety-valves are forced open by the pressure of subterranean gases, it will most likely be at the spots where the surface of the earth is thinest, and as the globe is flattened at the poles, it would appear natural that-but Kellet is making signs to us,” added the Lieutenant, breaking off abruptly; “will you join us, Mrs Barnett?”

“No, thank you. I will stay here until we return to the fort. I don’t care to watch the walrus slaughtered!”

“Very well,” replied Hobson, “only don’t forget to join us in an hour’s time, meanwhile you can enjoy the view.”

The beach was soon reached, and some hundred walrus had collected, either waddling about on their clumsy webbed feet, or sleeping in family groups. Some few of the larger males-creatures nearly four feet long, clothed with very short reddish fur-kept guard over the herd.

Great caution was required in approaching these formidable looking animals, and the hunters took advantage of every bit of cover afforded by rocks and inequalities of the ground, so as to get within easy range of them and cut off their retreat to the sea.

On land these creatures are clumsy and awkward, moving in jerks or with creeping motions like huge caterpillars, but in water -their native element — they are nimble and even graceful; indeed their strength is so great, that they have been known to overturn the whalers in pursuit of them.

As the hunters drew near the sentinels took alarm, and raising their heads looked searchingly around them; but before they could warn their companions of danger, Hobson and Kellet rushed upon them from one side, the Sergeant, Petersen, and Hope from the other, and after lodging a ball in each of their bodies, despatched them with their spears, whilst the rest of the herd plunged into the sea.

The victory was an easy one; the five victims were very large and their tusks, though slightly rough, of the best quality. They were chiefly valuable, however, on account of the oil; of which-being in excellent condition-they would yield a large quantity. The bodies were packed in the sledges, and proved no light weight for the dogs.

It was now one o’clock, and Mrs Barnett having joined them, the party set out on foot-the sledges being full-to return to the fort. There were but ten miles to be traversed, but ten miles in a straight line is a weary journey, proving the truth of the adage “It’s a long lane that has no turning.” They beguiled the tediousness of the way by chatting pleasantly, and Mrs Barnett was ready to join in the conversation, or to listen with interest to the accounts the worthy soldiers gave of former adventures; but in spite of the brave struggle against *ennui* they advanced but slowly, and the poor dogs found it hard work to drag the heavily-laden sledges over the rough ground. Had it been covered with frozen snow the distance would have been accomplished in a couple of hours.

The merciful Lieutenant often ordered a halt to give the teams breathing-time, and the Sergeant remarked that it would be much more convenient for the inhabitants of the fort, if the morses would settle a little nearer Cape Bathurst.

“They could riot find a suitable spot,” replied the Lieutenant, with a melancholy shake of the head.

“Why not?” inquired Mrs Barnett with some surprise.

“Because they only congregate where the slope of the beach is gradual enough to allow of their creeping up easily from the sea. Now Cape Bathurst rises abruptly, like a perpendicular wall, from water three hundred fathoms deep. It is probable that ages ago portion of the continent was rent away in some violent volcanic convulsion, and flung into the Arctic Ocean. Hence the absence of morses on the beach of our cape.”

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO SHOTS.

The first half of September passed rapidly away. Had Fort Hope been situated at the Pole itself, that is to say, twenty degrees farther north, the polar night would have set in on the 21st of that month But under the seventieth parallel the sun would be visible above the horizon for another month. Nevertheless, the temperature was already decidedly colder, the thermometer fell during the night to 31° Fahrenheit; and thin coatings of ice appeared here and there, to be dissolved again in the day-time.

But the settlers were able to await the coming of winter without alarm; they had a more than sufficient store of provisions, their supply of dried venison had largely increased, another score of morses had been killed, the tame rein-deer were warmly and comfortably housed, and a huge wooden shed behind the house was filled with fuel. In short, everything was prepared for the Polar night.

And now all the wants of the inhabitants of the fort being provided for, it was time to think of the interests of the Company. The Arctic creatures had now assumed their winter furs, and were therefore of the greatest value, and Hobson organised shooting parties for the remainder of the fine weather, intending to set traps when the snow should prevent further excursions.

They would have plenty to do to satisfy the requirements of the Company, for so far north it was of no use to depend on the Indians, who are generally the purveyors of the factories.

The first expedition was to the haunt of a family of beavers, long since noted by the watchful Lieutenant, on a tributary of the stream already referred to. It is true, the fur of the beaver is not now as valuable as when it was used for hats, and fetched £16 per kilogramme (rather more than 2 lb.); but it still commands a high price as the animal is becoming very scarce, in consequence of the reckless way in which it has been hunted.

When the party reached their destination, the Lieutenant called Mrs Barnett’s attention to the great ingenuity displayed by beavers in the construction of their submarine city. There were some hundred animals in the little colony now to be invaded, and they lived together in pairs in the “holes” or “vaults” they had hollowed out near the stream. They had already commenced their preparations for the winter, and were hard at work constructing their dams and laying up their piles of wood. A dam of admirable structure had already been built across the stream, which was deep and rapid enough not to freeze far below the surface, even in the severest weather. This dam, which was convex towards the current, consisted of a collection of upright stakes interlaced with branches and roots, the whole being cemented together and rendered watertight with the clayey mud of the river, previously pounded by the animals’ feet. The beavers use their tails-which are large and flat, with scales instead of hair at the root-for plastering over their buildings and beating the clay into shape.

“The object of this dam,” said the Lieutenant to Mrs Barnett, “is to secure to the beavers a sufficient depth of water at all seasons of the year, and to enable the engineers of the tribe to build the round buts .called houses or lodges, the tops of which you can just see. They are extremely solid structures, and the walls made of stick, clay, roots, &c. are two feet thick. They can only be entered from below the water, and their owners have therefore to dive when they go home-an admirable arrangement for their protection. Each lodge contains two stories; in the lower the winter stock of branches, bark, and roots, is laid up, and the upper is the residence of the householder and his family."

"There is, however, not a beaver in sight," said Mrs Barnett; "is this a deserted village?"

"Oh no," replied the Lieutenant, "the inhabitants are now all asleep and resting; they only work in the night, and we mean to surprise them in their holes."

This was, in fact, easily done, and in an hour's time about a hundred of the ill-fated rodents had been captured, twenty of which were of very great value, their fur being black, and therefore especially esteemed. That of the others was also long, glossy, and silky, but of a reddish hue mixed with chestnut brown. Beneath the long fur, the beavers have a second coat of close short hair of a greyish-white colour.

The hunters returned to the fort much delighted with the result of their expedition. The beavers' skins were warehoused and labelled as "parchments" or "young beavers," according to their value.

Excursions of a similar kind were carried on throughout the month of September, and during the first half of October, with equally happy results.

A few badgers were taken, the skin being used as an ornament for the collars of draught horses, and the hair for making brushes of every variety. These carnivorous creatures belong to the bear family, and the specimens obtained by Hobson were of the genus peculiar to North America, sometimes called the Taxel badger.

Another animal of the rodent family, nearly as industrious as the beaver, largely contributed to the stores of the Company. This was the musk-rat or musquash. Its head and body are about a foot long and its tail ten inches. Its fur is in considerable demand. These creatures, like the rest of their family, multiply with extreme rapidity, and a great number were easily unearthed.

In the pursuit of lynxes and wolverines or gluttons, fire-arms bad to be used. The lynx has all the suppleness and agility of the feline tribe to which it belongs, and is formidable even to the rein-deer; Marbre and Sabine were, however, well up to their work, and succeeded in killing more than sixty of them. A few wolverines or gluttons were also despatched, their fur is reddish-brown, and that of the lynx, light-red with black spots; both are of considerable value.

Very few ermines or stoats were seen, and Jaspar Hobson ordered his men to spare any which happened to cross their path until the winter, when they should have assumed their beautiful snow-white coats with the one black spot at the tip of the tail. At present the upper fur was reddish-brown and the under yellowish white, so that, as Sabine expressed it, it was desirable to let them “ripen,” or, in other words,-to wait for the cold to bleach them.

Their cousins, the polecats, however, which emit so disagreeable an odour, fell victims in great numbers to the hunters, who either tracked them to their homes in hollow trees, or shot them as they glided through the branches.

Martens, properly so-called, were hunted with great zeal. Their fur is in considerable demand, although not so valuable as that of the sable, which becomes a dark lustrous brown in the winter. The latter did not, however, come in the way of our hunters, as it only frequents the north of Europe and Asia as far as Kamtchatka, and is chiefly hunted by the inhabitants of

Siberia. They had to be cone tent with the polecats and pine-martens, called “Canada- martens,” which frequent the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

All the weasels and martens are very difficult to catch; they wriggle their long supple bodies through the smallest apertures with great ease, and thus elude their pursuers. In the winter, however, they are easily taken in traps, and Marbre and Sabine looked forward to make up for lost time then, when, said they, “there shall be plenty of their furs in the Company’s stores.”

We have now only to mention the Arctic or blue and silver foxes, to complete the list of animals which swelled the profits of the Hudson’s Bay Company.

The furs of these foxes are esteemed in the Russian and English markets above all others, and that of the blue fox is the most valuable of all. This pretty creature has a black muzzle, and the fur is not as one would suppose blue, but whitish-brown; its great price-six times that of any other kind-arises from its superior softness, thickness, and length. A cloak belonging to the Emperor of Russia, composed entirely of fur from the neck of the blue fox (the fur from the neck is considered better than that from any other part), was shown at the London Exhibition of 1851, and valued at £3400 sterling.

Several of these foxes were sighted at Cape Bathurst, but all escaped the hunters; whilst only about a dozen silver foxes fell into their hands. The fur of the latter-of a lustrous black dotted with white-is much sought after in England and Russia, although it does not command so high a price as that of the foxes mentioned above.

One of the silver foxes captured was a splendid creature, with a coal-black fur tipped with white at the extreme end of the tail, and with a dash of the same on the forehead. The circumstances attending its death deserve relation in detail, as they proved that Hobson was right in the precautions he had taken

On the morning of the 24th September, two sledges conveyed Mrs Barnett, the Lieutenant, Sergeant Long. Marbre, and Sabine, to Walruses' Bay. Some traces of foxes had been noticed the evening before, amongst some rocks clothed with scanty herbage and the direction taken by the animals was very clearly indicated. The hunters followed up the trail of a large animal, and were rewarded by bringing down a very fine silver fox.

Several other animals of the same species were sighted, and the hunters divided into two parties-Marbre and Sabine going after one foe, and Mrs Barnett, Hobson, and the Sergeant, trying to cut off the retreat of another fine animal hiding behind some rocks.

Great caution and some artifice was necessary to deal with this crafty animal, which took care not to expose itself to a shot. The pursuit lasted for half-an-hour without success; but at last the poor creature, with the sea on one side and its three enemies on the other, had recourse in its desperation to a flying leap, thinking thus to escape with its life. But Hobson was too quick for it; and as it bounded by like a flash of lightning, it was struck by a shot, and to every one's surprise, the report of the Lieutenant's gun was succeeded by that of another, and a second ball entered the body of the fox, which fell to the ground mortally wounded.

“Hurrah! hurrah !” cried Hobson, “it is mine!”

“And mine!” said another voice, and a stranger stept forward and placed his foot upon the fox just as the Lieutenant was about to raise it.

Hobson drew back in astonishment. He thought the second ball had been fired by the Sergeant, and found himself face to face with a stranger whose gun was still smoking.

The rivals gazed at each other in silence.

The rest of the party now approached, and the stranger was quickly joined by twelve comrades, four of whom were like himself “Canadian travellers,” and eight Chippeway Indians.

The leader was a tall man-a fine specimen of his class-those Canadian trappers described in the romances of Washington Irving, whose competition Hobson had dreaded with such good reason. He wore the traditional costume ascribed to his fellow-hunters by the great American writer; a blanket loosely arranged about his person, a striped cotton shirt, wide cloth trousers, leather gaiters, deerskin mocassins, and a sash of checked woollen stuff round the waist, from which were suspended his knife, tobacco-pouch, pipe, and a few useful tools.

Hobson was right. The man before him was a Frenchman, or at least a descendant of the French Canadians, perhaps an agent of the American Company come to act as a spy on the settlers in the fort. The other four Canadians wore a costume resembling that of their leader, but of coarser materials.

The Frenchman bowed politely to Mrs Barnett, and the Lieutenant was the first to break the silence, during which he had not removed his eyes from his rival’s face.

“This fox is mine, sir,” he said quietly.

“It is if you killed it !” replied the other in good English, but with a slightly foreign accent.

“Excuse me, sir,” replied Hobson rather sharply, “it is mine in any case.”

The stranger smiled. scornfully at this lofty reply, so exactly what be expected from an agent of the Hudson’s Bay Company, which claims supremacy over all the northern districts, from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

“Do you mean to say,” he said at last, gracefully toying with his gun, “that you consider the Hudson’s Bay Company mistress of the whole of North America?”

“Of course I do,” said Hobson; “and if, as I imagine, you belong to an American company —

“To the St Louis Fur Company,” replied the stranger with a bow.

“I think,” added the Lieutenant, “that you will find it difficult to show the grants entitling you to any privileges here.”

“Grants! privileges !” cried the Canadian scornfully, “old world terms which are out of place in America !”

“You are not now on American but on English ground,” replied the Lieutenant proudly.

“This is no time for such a discussion,” said the hunter rather warmly. “We all know the old claims made by the English in general, and the Hudson’s Bay Company in particular, to these hunting grounds; but I expect coming events will soon alter this state of things, and America will be America from the Straits of Magellan to the North Pole !”

“I do not agree with you,” replied Hobson dryly.

“Well, sir, however that may be,” said the Canadian, “let us suffer this international question to remain in abeyance for the present. Whatever rights the Company may arrogate to itself, it is very clear that in the extreme north of the continent, and especially on the coast, the territory belongs to whoever occupies it. You have founded a factory on Cape Bathurst, therefore we will respect your domain, and you on your side will avoid ours, when the St Louis fur-traders have established their projected fort at another point on the northern shore of America.”

The Lieutenant frowned at this speech, for he well knew what complications would arise in the future when the Hudson’s Bay Company would be compelled to struggle for supremacy with powerful rivals, and that quarrelling and even bloodshed would ensue; he could not, however, but acknowledge that this was not the time to begin the discussion, and he was not sorry when the hunter, whose manners, to tell the truth, were very polite, placed the dispute on another footing.

“As for this present matter,” said the Canadian, “it is of minor importance, and we must settle it according to the rules of the chase. Our guns are of different calibre, and our balls can be easily distinguished; let the fox belong to whichever of us really killed it.”

The proposition was a fair one, and the body of the victim was examined accordingly. One ball had entered at the side, the other at the heart; and the latter was from the gun of the Canadian.

“The fox is your property, sir,” said Jaspar Hobson, vainly endeavouring to conceal his chagrin at seeing this valuable spoil fall into the enemy’s hands.

The Canadian took it, but instead of throwing it over his shoulder and carrying it off, he turned to Mrs Barnett, and said “Ladies are fond of beautiful furs, and although, perhaps, if they knew better what dangers and difficulties have to be surmounted in order to obtain them, they might not care so much about them, they are not likely to refuse to wear them on that account, and I hope, madam, you will favour me by accepting this one in remembrance of our meeting.”

Mrs Barnett hesitated for a moment, but the gift was offered with so much courtesy and kindliness of manner, that it would have seemed churlish to refuse, and she therefore accepted it with many thanks.

This little ceremony over, the stranger again bowed politely, and, followed by his comrades, quickly disappeared behind the rocks, whilst the Lieutenant and his party returned to Fort Good Hope. Hobson was very silent and thoughtful all the way; for he could not but feel that the existence of a rival company would greatly compromise the success of his undertaking, and lead to many future difficulties.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE APPROACH OF WINTER.

It was the 21st of September. The sun was then passing through the autumnal equinox, that is to say, the day and night were of equal length all over the world. These successive alternations of light and darkness were hailed with delight by the inhabitants of the fort. It is easier to sleep in the absence of the sun, and darkness refreshes and strengthens the eyes, weary with the unchanging brightness of several months of daylight.

We know that during the equinox the tides are generally at their greatest height; we have high water or flood, for the sun and moon being in conjunction, their double influence is brought to bear upon the waters. It was, therefore, necessary to note carefully the approaching tide at Cape Bathurst. Jaspar Hobson had made bench marks some days before, so as to estimate exactly the amount of vertical displacement of the waters between high and low tide; he found, however, that in spite of all the reports of previous observers, the combined solar and lunar influence was hardly felt in this part of the Arctic Ocean. There was scarcely any tide at all, and the statements of navigators on the subject were contradicted.

“There is certainly something unnatural here !” said Lieutenant Hobson to himself.

He did not in fact know what to think, but other cares soon occupied his mind, and he did not long endeavour to get to the rights of this singular peculiarity.

On the 29th September the state of the atmosphere changed considerably. The thermometer fell to 41° Fahrenheit, and the sky became covered with clouds which were soon converted into heavy rain. The bad season was approaching.

Before the ground should be covered with snow, Mrs Joliffe was busy sowing the seeds of *Cochlearia* (scurvy grass) and sorrel, in the hope that as they were very hardy, and would be well protected from the rigour of the winter by the snow itself, they would come up in the spring. Her garden, consisting of several acres hidden behind the cliff of the cape, had been prepared beforehand, and it was sown during the last days of September.

Hobson made his companions assume their winter garments before the great cold set in, and all were soon suitably clothed in the linen under vests, deerskin cloaks, sealskin pantaloons, fur bonnets, and waterproof boots with which they were provided. We may also say that the rooms were suitably dressed; the wooden walls were hung with skins, in order to prevent the formation upon them of coats of ice in sudden falls of temperature. About this time, Rae set up his condensers for collecting the vapour suspended in the air, which were to be emptied twice a week. The heat of the stove was regulated according to the variations of the external temperature, so as to keep the thermometer of the rooms at 50° Fahrenheit. The house would soon be covered with thick snow, which would prevent any waste of the internal warmth, and by this combination of natural and artificial protections they hoped to be able successfully to contend with their two most formidable enemies, cold and damp.

On the 2nd October the thermometer fell still lower, and the first snow storm came on; there was but little wind, and there were therefore none of those violent whirlpools of snow called drifts, but a vast white carpet of uniform thickness soon clothed the cape, the *enceinte* of fort, and the coast. The waters of the lake and sea, not yet petrified by the icy hand of winter, were of a dull, gloomy, greyish hue, and on the northern horizon the first icebergs stood out against the misty sky. The blockade had not yet commenced, but nature was collecting her materials, soon to be cemented by the cold into an impenetrable barrier.

The “young ice “was rapidly forming on the liquid surfaces of sea and lake. The lagoon was the first to freeze over; large whitish-grey patches appeared here and there, signs of a hard frost setting in, favoured by the calmness of the atmosphere. and after a night during which the thermometer had remained at 15° Fahrenheit, the surface of the lake was smooth and firm enough to satisfy the most fastidious skaters of the Serpentine. On the verge of the horizon, the sky assumed that peculiar appearance which whalers call ice-blink, and which is the result of the glare of light reflected obliquely from the surface of the ice against the opposite atmosphere. Vast tracts of the ocean became gradually solidified, the ice-fields, formed by the accumulation of icicles, became welded to the coast, presenting a surface broken and distorted by the action of the waves, and contrasting strongly with the smooth mirror of the lake. Here and there floated these long pieces, scarcely cemented together at the edges, known as “drift ice,” and the “hummocks,” or protuberances caused by the squeezing of one piece against another, were also of frequent occurrence.

In a few days the aspect of Cape Bathurst and the surrounding districts was completely changed. Mrs Barnett’s delight and enthusiasm knew no bounds; everything was new to her, and she would have thought no fatigue or suffering too great to be endured for the sake of witnessing such a spectacle. She could imagine nothing more sublime than this invasion of winter with all its mighty forces, this conquest of the northern regions by the cold. All trace of the distinctive features of the country had disappeared; the land was metamorphosed, a new country was springing into being before her admiring eyes, a country gifted with a grand and touching beauty. Details were lost, only the large outlines were given, scarcely marked out against the misty sky. One transformation scene followed another with magic rapidity. The ocean, which but lately lifted up its mighty waves, was hushed and still; the verdant soil of various hues was replaced by a carpet of dazzling whiteness; the woods of trees of different kinds were converted into groups of gaunt skeletons draped in hoar-frost; the radiant orb of day had become a pale disc, languidly running its allotted course in the thick fog, and visible but for a few hours a day, whilst the sea horizon, no longer clearly cut against the sky, was hidden by an endless chain of icebergs, broken into countless rugged forms, and building up that impenetrable ice-wall, which Nature has set up between the Pole and the bold explorers who endeavour to reach it.

We can well understand to how many discussions and conversations the altered appearance of the country gave rise. Thomas Black was the only one who remained indifferent to the sublime beauty of the scene. But what could one expect of an astronomer so wrapped up in his one idea, that he might be said to be present in the little colony in the body, but absent in spirit? He lived in the contemplation of the heavenly bodies, passing from the examination of one constellation to that of another, roving in imagination through the vast realms of space, peopled by countless radiant orbs, and fuming with rage when fogs or clouds hid the objects of his devotion from his sight. Hobson consoled him by promising him fine cold nights admirably suited to astronomical observations, when he could watch the beautiful Aurora Borealis, the lunar halos, and other phenomena of Polar countries worthy even of his admiration.

The cold was not at this time too intense; there was no wind, and it is the wind which makes the cold so sharp and biting. Hunting was vigorously carried on for some days. The magazines became stocked with new furs, and fresh stores of provisions were laid up. Partridges and ptarmigans on their way to the south passed over the fort in great numbers, and supplied fresh and wholesome meat. Polar or Arctic hares were plentiful, and had already assumed their white winter robes. About a hundred of these rodents formed a valuable addition to the reserves of the colony.

There were also large flocks of the whistling swan or hooper, one of the finest species of North America. The hunters killed several couples of them, handsome birds, four or five feet in entire length, with white plumage, touched with copper colour on the head and upper part of neck. They were on their way to a more hospitable zone, where they could find the aquatic plants and insects they required for food, and they sped through the air at a rapid pace, for it is as much their native element as water. Trumpeter swans, with a cry like the shrill tone of a clarion, which are about the same size as the hoopers, but have black feet and beaks, also passed in great numbers, but neither Marbre nor Sabine were fortunate enough to bring down any of them. However, they shouted out “au revoir” in significant tones, for they knew that they would return with the first breezes of spring and that they could then be easily caught. Their skin, plumage, and down, are all of great value, and they are therefore eagerly hunted. In some favourable years tens of thousands of them have been exported, fetching half a guinea a piece.

During these excursions, which only lasted for a few hours, and were often interrupted by bad weather, packs of wolves were often met with. There was no need to go far to find them, for, rendered bold by hunger, they already ventured close to the factory. Their scent is very keen, and they were attracted by the smell from the kitchen. During the night they could be heard howling in a threatening manner. Although not dangerous individually, these carnivorous beasts are formidable in packs, and the hunters therefore took care to be well armed when they went beyond the enceinte of the fort.

The bears were still more aggressive. Not a day passed without several of these animals being seen. At night they would come close up to the enclosure, and sane were even wounded with shot, but got off, staining the snow with their blood, so that up to October 10th not one had left its warm and valuable fur in the hands of the hunters. Hobson would not have them molested, rightly judging that with such formidable creatures it was best to remain on the defensive, and it was not improbable that, urged on by hunger, they might attack Fort Hope before very long. Then the little colony could defend itself, and provision its stores at the same time.

For a few days the weather continued dry and cold, the surface of the snow was firm and suitable for walking, so that a few excursions were made without difficulty along the coast on the south of the fort. The Lieutenant was anxious to ascertain if the agents of the St Louis Fur Company had left the country. No traces were, however, found of their return march, and it was therefore concluded that they had gone down to some southern fort to pass the winter by another route.

The few fine days were soon over, and in the first week of November the wind veered round to the south, making the temperature warmer, it is true, but also bringing heavy snow-storms. The ground was soon covered with a soft Cushion several feet thick, which had to be cleared away round the house every day, whilst a lane was made through it to the postern, the shed, and the stable of the dogs and rein-deer. Excursions became more and more rare, and it was impossible to walk without snow-shoes.

When the snow has become hardened by frost, it easily sustains the weight of a man; but when it is soft and yielding, and the unfortunate pedestrian sinks into it up to his knees, the snow-shoes used by Indians are invaluable.

Lieutenant Hobson and his companions were quite accustomed to walk in them, and could glide about over the snow as rapidly as skaters on ice; Mrs Barnett had early practised wearing them, and was quite as expert in their use as the rest of the party. The frozen lake as well as the coast was scoured by these indefatigable explorers, who were even able to advance several miles from the shore on the solid surface of the ocean now covered with ice several feet thick. It was, however, very tiring work, for the ice-fields were rugged and uneven, strewn with piled-up ridges of ice and hummocks which had to be turned. Further out a chain of icebergs, some five hundred feet high, barred their progress. These mighty icebergs, broken into fantastic and picturesque forms, were a truly magnificent spectacle. Here they looked like the whitened ruins of a town with curtains battered in, and monuments and columns overthrown; there like some volcanic land torn and convulsed by earthquakes and eruptions; a confusion of glaciers and glittering ice-peaks with snowy ramparts and buttresses, valleys, and crevasses, mountains and hillocks, tossed and distorted like the famous Alps of Switzerland. A few scattered birds, petrels, guillemots, and puffins, lingering behind their fellows, still enlivened the vast solitude with their piercing cries; huge white bears roamed about amongst the hummocks, their dazzling coats scarcely distinguishable from the shining ice-truly there was enough to interest and excite our adventurous lady traveller, and even Madge, the faithful Madge, shared the enthusiasm of her mistress. How far, how very far, were both from the tropic zones of India or Australia!

The frozen ocean was firm enough to have allowed of the passage of a park of artillery, or the erection of a monument, and many were the excursions on its surface until the sudden lowering of the temperature rendered all exertion so exhausting that they had to be discontinued. The pedestrians were out of breath after taking a few steps, and the dazzling whiteness of the glittering snow could not be endured by the naked eye; indeed, the *reverberation* or flickering glare of the undulatory reflection of the light from the surface of the snow, has been known to cause several cases of blindness amongst the Esquimaux.

A singular phenomenon due to the refraction of rays of light was now observed: distances, depths, and heights lost their true proportions, five or six yards of ice looked like two, and many were the falls and ludicrous results of this optical illusion.

On October 14th the thermometer marked 3° Fahrenheit below zero, a severe temperature to endure, especially when the north wind blows strongly. The air seemed to be made of needles, and those who ventured out of the house were in great danger of being frost-bitten, when death or mortification would ensue if the suspended circulation of the blood were not restored by immediate friction with snow. Garry, Belcher, Hope, and other members of the little community were attacked by frost-bite, but the parts affected being rubbed in time they escaped without serious injury.

It will readily be understood that all manual labour had now become impossible. The days were extremely short, the sun was only above the horizon for a few hours and the actual winter, implying entire confinement within doors, was about to commence. The last Arctic birds forsook the gloomy shores of the Polar Sea, only a few pairs of those speckled quails remained which the Indians appropriately call “winter birds,” because they wait in the Arctic regions until the commencement of the Polar night, but they too were soon to take their departure.

Lieutenant Hobson, therefore, urged on the setting of the traps and snares which were to remain in different parts of Cape Bathurst throughout the winter.

These traps consisted merely of rough joists supported on a square, formed of three pieces of wood so balanced as to fall on the least touch-in fact, the same sort of trap as that used for snaring birds in fields on a large scale. The end of the horizontal piece of wood was baited with venison, and every animal of a moderate height, a fox or a marten, for instance, which touched it with its paw, could not fail to be crushed. Such were the traps set in the winter over a space of several miles by the famous hunters whose adventurous life has been so poetically described by Cooper. Some thirty of these snares were set round Fort Hope, and were to be visited at pretty frequent intervals.

On the 12th November a new member was born to the little colony. Mrs Mac-Nab was safely confined of a fine healthy boy, of whom the head carpenter was extremely proud. Mrs Barnett stood god-mother to the child, which received the name of Michael Hope. The ceremony of baptism was performed with considerable solemnity, and a kind of *fête* was held in honour of the little creature which had just come into the world beyond the 70th degree N. Lat.

A few days afterwards, on November .20th, the sun sunk below the horizon not to appear again for two months. The Polar night had commenced!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE POLAR NIGHT.

The long night was ushered in by a violent storm. The cold was perhaps a little less severe, but the air was very damp, and, in spite of every precaution, the humidity penetrated into the house, and the condensers, which were emptied every morning, contained several pounds of ice.

Outside drifts whirled past like waterspouts-the snow seemed no longer to fall horizontally but vertically. The Lieutenant was obliged to insist upon the door being kept shut, for had it been opened the passages would immediately have become blocked up. The explorers were literally prisoners.

The window shutters were hermetically closed, and the lamps were kept burning through the long hours of the sleepless night.

But although darkness reigned without, the noise of the tempest replaced the silence usually so complete in these high latitudes. The roaring of the wind between the house and the cliff never ceased for a moment, the house trembled to its foundations, and had it not been for the solidity of its construction, must have succumbed to the violence of the hurricane. Fortunately the accumulation of snow round the walls broke the force of the squall, and Mac-Nabs only fear was for the chimneys, which were liable to be blown over. However, they remained firm, although they had constantly to be freed from the snow which blocked up the openings.

In the midst of the whistling of the wind, loud reports were heard, of which Mrs Barnett could not conjecture the cause. It was the falling of icebergs in the offing. The echoes caught up the sounds, which were rolled along like the reverberations of thunder. The ,,round shook as the ice-fields split open, crushed by the falling of these mighty mountains, and none but those thoroughly inured to the horrors of these wild rugged climates could witness these strange phenomena without a shudder. Lieutenant Hobson and his companions were accustomed to all these things, and Mrs Barnett and Madge were gradually becoming so, and were, besides, not altogether unfamiliar with those terrible winds which move at the rate of forty miles an hour, and overturn twenty-four pounders. Here, however, the darkness and the snow aggravated the dread might of the storm; that which was not crushed was buried and smothered, and, probably twelve hours after the commencement of the tempest, house, kennel, shed, and enceinte would have disappeared beneath a bed of snow of uniform thickness.

The time was not wasted during this long imprisonment. All these good people agreed together perfectly, and neither ill-humour nor *ennui* marred the contentment of the little party shut up in such a narrow space. They were used to life under similar conditions at Forts Enterprise and Reliance, and there was nothing to excite Mrs Barnett's surprise in their ready accommodation of themselves to circumstances.

Part of the day was occupied with work, part with reading and games. Garments had to be made and mended, arms to be kept bright and in good repair, boots to be manufactured, and the daily journal to be issued in which Lieutenant Hobson recorded the slightest events of this northern wintering-the weather, the temperature, the direction of the wind, the appearance of meteors so frequent in the Polar regions, &c. &c. Then the house had to be kept in order, the rooms must be swept, and the stores of furs must be visited every day to see if they were free from damp; the fires and stoves, too, required constant superintendence, and perpetual vigilance was necessary to prevent the accumulation of particles of moisture in the corners.

To each one was assigned a task, the duty of each one was laid down in rules fixed up in the large room, so that without being overworked, the occupants of the fort were never without something to do. Thomas Black screwed and unscrewed his instruments, and looked over his astronomical calculations, remaining almost always shut up in his cabin, fretting and funning at the storm which prevented him from making nocturnal observations. The three married women had also plenty to see to : Mrs Mac-Nab busied herself with her baby who got on wonderfully, whilst Mrs Joliffe, assisted by Mrs Rae, and with the Corporal always at her heels, presided in the kitchen.

When work was done the entire party assembled in the large room, spending the whole of Sunday together. Reading was the chief amusement. The Bible and some books of travels were the whole library of the fort; but they were all the good folks required. Mrs Barnett generally read aloud, and her audience listened with delight. The Bible and accounts of adventures received a fresh charm when read out in her clear earnest voice; her gestures were so expressive that imaginary persons seemed to live when she spoke of them, and all were glad when she took up the book. She was, in fact, the life and soul of the little community, eager alike to give and receive instruction; she combined the charm and grace of a woman with the energy of a man, and she consequently became the idol of the rough soldiers, who would have willingly laid down their lives in her service. Mrs Barnett shared everything with her companions, never holding herself aloof or remaining shut up in her cabin, but working zealously amongst the others, drawing out the most reticent by her intelligent questions and warm sympathy. Good humour and good health prevailed throughout the little community, and neither bands nor tongues were idle.

The storm, however, showed no signs of abating. The party had now been confined to the house for three days, and the snow-drifts were as wild and furious as ever. Lieutenant Hobson began to get anxious. It was becoming imperatively necessary to renew the air of the rooms, which was too much charged with carbonic acid. The light of the lamps began to pale in the unhealthy atmosphere, and the air-pumps would not act, the pipes being choked up with ice; they were not, in fact, intended to be used when the house was buried in snow. It was necessary to take counsel; the Lieutenant and Sergeant Long put their heads together, and it was decided on November 23d that, as the wind beat with rather less violence on the front of the house, one of the windows at the end of the passage on that side should be opened.

This was no light matter. It was easy enough to open the window from inside, but the shutter outside was encrusted over with thick lumps of ice, and resisted every effort to move it. It had to be taken off its hinges, and the hard mass of snow was then attacked with pickaxe and shovel; it was at least ten feet thick, and it was not until a kind of channel bad been scooped out that the outer air was admitted.

Hobson, the Sergeant, several soldiers, and Mrs Barnett herself ventured to creep through this tunnel or channel, but not without considerable difficulty, for the wind rushed in with fearful fury.

What a scene was presented by Cape Bathurst and the surrounding plain. It was mid-day, and but a few faint twilight rays glimmered upon the southern horizon. The cold was not so intense as one would have supposed, and the thermometer marked only 15° Fahrenheit above zero; but the snow-drifts whirled along with terrific force, and all would inevitably have been thrown to the ground, had not the snow in which they were standing up to their waists helped to sustain them against the gusts of wind. Everything around them was white, the walls of the enceinte, and the whole of the house even to the roof were completely covered over, and nothing but a few blue wreaths of smoke would have betrayed the existence of a human habitation to a stranger.

Under the circumstances the “promenade “was soon over; but Mrs Barnett bad made good use of her time, and would never forget the awful beauty of the Polar regions in a snow-storm, a beauty upon which few women had been privileged to look.

A few moments sufficed to renew the atmosphere of the house, and all unhealthy vapours were quickly dispersed by the introduction of a pure and refreshing current of air.

The Lieutenant and his companions hurried in, and the window was again closed; but after that the snow before it was removed every day for the sake of ventilation.

The entire week passed in a similar manner; fortunately the rein-deer and dogs had plenty of food, so that there was no need to visit them. The eight days during which the occupants of the fort were imprisoned so closely, could not fail to be somewhat irksome to strong men, soldiers and hunters, accustomed to plenty of exercise in the open air; and we must own that listening to reading aloud gradually lost its charm, and even cribbage became uninteresting. The last thought at night was a hope that the tempest might have ceased in the morning, a hope disappointed every day. Fresh snow constantly accumulated upon the windows, the wind roared, the icebergs burst with a crash like thunder, the smoke was forced back into the rooms, and there were no signs of a diminution of the fury of the storm.

At last, however, on the 28th November the Aneroid barometer in the large room gave notice of an approaching change in the state of the atmosphere. It rose rapidly, whilst the thermometer outside fell almost suddenly to less than four degrees below zero. These were symptoms which could not be mistaken, and on the 29th November the silence all around the fort told that the tempest had ceased.

Every one was eager to get out, tine confinement had lasted long enough. The door could not be opened, and all had to get through the window, and clear away the fresh accumulation of snow; this time, however, it was no soft mass they had to remove, but compact blocks of ice, which required pick-axes to break them up.

It took about half-an-hour to clear a passage, and then every one in the fort, except Mrs Mac-Nab, who was not yet up, hastened into the interior court, glad once more to be able to walk about.

The cold was still intense, but the wind having gone down it was possible to endure it, although great care was necessary to escape serious consequences on leaving the heated rooms for the open air, the difference between the temperature inside and outside being some fifty-four degrees.

It was eight o’clock in the morning. Myriads of brilliant constellations studded the sky, and at the zenith shone the Pole star. Although in both hemispheres there are in reality but 5000 fixed stars visible to the naked eye, their number appeared to the observers incalculable. Exclamations of admiration burst involuntarily from the lips of the delighted astronomer as he gazed into the cloudless heavens, once more undimmed by mists or vapours. Never had a more beautiful sky been spread out before the eyes of an astronomer.

Whilst Thomas Black was raving in ecstasy, dead to all terrestrial matters, his companions had wandered as far as the enceinte. The snow was as bard as a rock, And so slippery that there were a good many tumbles, but no serious injuries.

It is needless to state that the court of the fort was completely filled up. The roof of the house alone appeared above the white mass, the surface of which had been worn smooth by the action of the wind; of the palisade nothing was visible but the top of the stakes, and the least nimble of the wild animals they dreaded could easily have climbed over them. But what was to be done? It was no use to think of clearing away a mass of frozen snow ten feet thick, extending over so large an extent of ground. All they could attempt would be to dig away the ice inside the enceinte, so as to form a kind of moat, the counterscarp of which would protect the palisade. But alas the winter was only beginning, and a fresh tempest might at any time fill in the ditch a few hours.

Whilst the Lieutenant was examining the works, which could no more protect his fort than a single sunbeam could melt the solid layer of snow,- Mrs Joliffe suddenly exclaimed:

“And our dogs! our reindeer!”

It was indeed time to think about the poor animals. The dog house and stable being lower than the house were probably entirely covered, and the supply of air had perhaps been completely cut off. Some hurried to the dog-house, others to the reindeer stable, and all fears were quickly dispelled. The wall of ice, which connected the northern corner of the house with the cliff, had partly protected the two buildings, and the snow round them was not more than four feet thick, so that the apertures left in the walls had not been closed up. The animals were all well, and when the door was opened, the dogs rushed out barking with delight.

The cold was so intense, that after an hour’s walk every one began to think of the glowing stove in the large room at home. There was nothing left to be done outside, the traps buried beneath ten feet of snow could not be visited, so all returned to the house, the window, was closed, and the party sat down to the dinner awaiting them with sharpened appetites.

We can readily imagine that the conversation turned on the intensity of the cold, which had so rapidly converted the soft snow into a solid mass. It was no light matter, and might to a certain extent compromise the safety of the little colony.

“But, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett, “can we not count upon a few days’ thaw-will not all this snow be rapidly converted into water?”

“Oh no, madam,” replied Hobson, “a thaw at this time of year is not at all likely. Indeed I expect the thermometer will fall still lower, and it is very much to be regretted that we were unable to remove the snow when it was soft.”

What, you think the temperature likely to become much colder?”

“I do most certainly, madam, 4° below zero-what is that at this latitude?”

“What would it be if we were at the Pole itself?”

“The Pole, madam, is probably not the coldest point of the globe, for most navigators agree that the sea is there open. From certain peculiarities of its geographical position it would appear that a certain spot on the shores of North Georgia, 95° longitude and 78° latitude, has the coldest mean temperature in the world: 2° below zero all the year round. It is, therefore, called the ‘pole of cold.’”

“But,” said Mrs Barnett, “we are more than 8° further south than that famous point.”

“Well, I don’t suppose we shall suffer as much at Cape Bathurst as we might have done in North Georgia. I only tell you of the ‘pole of cold,’ that you may not confound it with the Pole properly so-called when the lowness of the temperature is discussed. Great cold has besides been experienced on other points of the globe. The difference is, that the low temperature is not there maintained.”

“To what places do you allude?” inquired Mrs Barnett; “I assure you I take the greatest interest in this matter of degrees of cold.”

“As far as I can remember, madam,” replied the Lieutenant, Arctic explorers state that at Melville Island the temperature fell to 61° below zero, and at Port Felix to 65°.”

“But Melville Island and Port Felix are some degrees farther north latitude than Cape Bathurst, are they not?”

“Yes, madam, but in a certain sense we may say that their latitude proves nothing. A combination of different atmospheric conditions is requisite to produce intense cold. Local and other causes largely modify climate. If I remember rightly in 1845... Sergeant Long, you were at Fort Reliance at that date?

“Yes, sir,” replied Long.

“Well, was it not in January of that year that the cold was so excessive?”

“Yes it was, I remember only too well that the thermometer marked 70° below zero.”

“What!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, “at Fort Reliance, on the Great Slave Lake?”

“Yes, madam,” replied the Lieutenant, “and that was at 65° north latitude only, which is the same parallel as that of Christiania and St Petersburg.”

“Then we must be prepared for everything.”

“Yes, indeed, we must when we winter in Arctic countries.”

During the 29th and 30th November, the cold did not decrease, and it was necessary to keep up huge fires to prevent the freezing in all the corners of the house of the moisture in the atmosphere. Fortunately there was plenty of fuel, and it was not spared. A mean temperature of 52° Fahrenheit was maintained indoors in spite of the intensity of the cold without.

Thomas Black was so anxious to take stellar observations, now that the sky was so clear, that he braved the rigour of the outside temperature, hoping to be able to examine some of the magnificent constellations twinkling on the zenith. But he was compelled to desist-his instruments “burnt” his hands!”Burnt “is the only word to express the sensation produced by touching a metallic body subjected to the influence of intense cold. Exactly similar results are produced by the sudden introduction of heat into an animate body, and the sudden withdrawal of the same from it, as the astronomer found to his cost when he left the skin of his fingers on his instruments. He had to give up taking observations.

However, the heavens made him the best amends in their power by displaying the most beautiful and indescribable phenomena of a lunar halo and an Aurora Borealis.

The lunar halo was a white corona with a pale red edge encircling the moon. This luminous meteor was about forty-five degrees in diameter, and was the result of the diffraction of the lunar rays through the small prismatic ice-crystals floating in the atmosphere. The queen of the night shone with renewed splendour and heightened beauty from the centre of the luminous ring, the colour and consistency of which resembled the milky transparent lunar rainbows which have been so often described by astronomers.

Fifteen hours later the heavens were lit up by a magnificent Aurora Borealis, the arch of which extended over more than a hundred geographical degrees. The vertex of this arch was situated in the magnetic meridian, and, as is often the case, the rays darted by the luminous meteor were of all the colours of the rainbow, red predominating. Here and there. the stars seemed to be floating in blood Glowing lines of throbbing colour spread from the dark segment on the horizon, some of them passing the zenith and quenching the light of the moon in their electric waves, which oscillated and trembled as if swept by a current of air.

No description could give an adequate idea of the glory which flushed the northern sky, converting it into a vast dome of fire, but after the magnificent spectacle had been enjoyed for about half an hour, it suddenly disappeared-not fading gradually away after concentration of its rays, or a diminution of its splendour, but dying abruptly, as if an invisible hand had cut off the supply of electricity which gave it life.

It was time it was over, for the sake of Thomas Black, for in another five minutes he would have been frozen where he stood !

CHAPTER XIX.

A NEIGHBOURLY VISIT.

On the 2nd December; the intensity of the cold decreased. The phenomena of the lunar halo and Aurora Borealis were symptoms which a meteorologist would have been at no loss to interpret. They implied the existence of a certain quantity of watery vapour in the atmosphere, and the barometer fell slightly, whilst the thermometer rose to 15° above zero.

Although this temperature would have seemed very cold to the inhabitants of a temperate zone, it was easily endured by the colonists. The absence of wind made a great difference, and Hobson having noticed that the upper layers of snow were becoming softer, ordered his men to clear it away from the outer approaches of the enceinte. Mac-Nab and his subordinates set to work zealously, and completed their task in a few days. The traps were now uncovered and re-set. A good many footprints showed that there were plenty of furred animals about the cape, and as they could not get any other food, it was probable that the bait in the snares would soon attract them. In accordance with the advice of Marbre the hunter, a reindeer trap was constructed iii the Esquimaux style. A trench was dug twelve feet deep, and of a uniform width of ten feet. A see-saw plank, which would rebound when lowered, was laid across it. A bait of herbs was placed at one end of the plank, and any animal venturing to take them, was inevitably flung to the bottom of the pit, and the plank immediately returning to its former position, would allow of the trapping of another animal in the same manner. Once in, there was no getting out. The only difficulty Marbre had to contend with in making his trap, was the extreme hardness of the ground to be dug out, but both he and the Lieutenant were not a little surprised at finding beneath some five feet of earth and sand a bed of snow, as hard as a rock, which appeared to be very thick.

After closely examining the geological structure of the ground, Hobson observed:

“This part of the coast must have been subjected to intense cold for a considerable length of time a great many years ago. Probably the ice rests on a bed of granite, and the earth and sand upon it have accumulated gradually.”

“Well, sir, our trap won’t be any the worse for that, the reindeer will find a slippery wall, which it will be impossible for them to climb.”

Marbre was right, as the event proved.

On the 5th September, he and Sabine were on their way to the trench, when they heard loud growls. They stood still and listened.

“It’s no reindeer making that noise, “said Marbre, “I know well enough what creature has fallen into our pit.”

“A bear?” replied Sabine.

“Yes,” said Marbre, whose eyes glistened with delight.

“Well,” remarked Sabine, “we won’t grumble at that, bears’ steaks are as good as reindeers’, and we get the fur in! Come along.”

The two hunters were armed. They quickly slipped balls into their guns, which were already loaded with lead, and hurried to the trap. The see-saw plank had swung back into its place, but the bait had disappeared, having probably been dragged down, into the trench. The growls became louder and fiercer, and looking down the hunters saw that it was indeed a bear they had taken. A huge mass was huddled together in one corner of the pit, looking in the gloom like a pile of white fur with two glittering eyes. The sides of the trench had been ploughed up by the creature’s sharp claws, and had they been made of earth instead of ice, it would certainly have managed to scramble out, but it could get no hold on the slippery surface, and it had only managed to enlarge its prison, not to escape from it.

Under the circumstances the capture was easy. Two balls carefully aimed put an end to the bear’s life, and the next thing to do was to get it out of the pit. The two hunters returned to the fort for reinforcements, and ten of the soldiers, provided with ropes, returned with them. It was not without considerable difficulty that the body was hauled up. It was a huge creature, six feet long, weighing six hundred pounds, and must have possessed immense strength. It belonged to the sub-order of white bears, and had the flattened head, long neck, short and slightly curved claws, narrow muzzle, and smooth white fur characteristic of the species. The edible portions of this valuable animal were confided to Mrs Joliffe, and b her carefully prepared for the table.

The next week the traps were in full activity. Some twenty martens were taken, in all the beauty of their winter clothing, but only two or three foxes. These cunning creatures divined the snare laid for them, and scratching up the ground near the trap, they often managed to run off with the bait without being caught. This made Sabine beside himself with rage for,” he said, “such a subterfuge was unworthy of a respectable fox.”

About the 10th December, the wind having veered round to the south-west, the snow again began to fall, but not in thick flakes, or in large quantities.

The wind being high, however, the cold was severely felt, and it was necessary to settle in-doors again, and resume domestic occupations. Hobson distributed lime lozenges and lime juice to every one as a precaution against the scorbutic affections, which damp cold produces. No symptoms of scurvy had fortunately as yet appeared amongst the occupants of the fort, thanks to the sanitary precautions taken.

The winter solstice was now approaching, when the darkness of the Polar night would be most profound, as the sun would be at the lowest maximum point below the horizon of the northern hemisphere. At midnight the southern edges of the long white plains were touched with a faint glimmer of twilight, that was all, and it would be impossible to imagine anything more melancholy than the gloomy stillness and darkness of the vast expanse.

Hobson felt more secure from the attacks of wild beasts, now that the approaches to the enceinte had been cleared of snow, which was a fortunate circumstance, as ominous growlings were heard, the nature of which no one could mistake.

There was no fear of visits from Indian hunters or Canadians at this time of year, but an incident occurred proving that these districts were not altogether depopulated even in the winter, and which was quite an episode in the long dreary dark months. Some human beings still lingered on the coast hunting morses and camping under the snow. They belonged to the race of Esquimaux, °` or eaters of raw flesh,” which is scattered over the continent of North America, from Baffin’s Bay to Behring Strait, seldom, however, advancing farther south than the Great Slave Lake.

On the morning of the 14th December, or rather nine hours before midday, Sergeant Long, on his return from an excursion along the coast, ended his report to the Lieutenant by saying, that if his eyes had not deceived him, a tribe of nomads were encamped about four miles from the fort, near a little cape jutting out from the coast.

“What do you suppose these nomads are?” inquired Hobson.

“Either men or morses,” replied the Sergeant. “There’s no medium!”

The brave Sergeant would have been considerably surprised if any one had told him that some naturalists admit the existence of the “medium,” the idea of which he scouted; and certain savants have with some humour classed the Esquimaux as an “intermediate species “between roan and the sea-cow.

Lieutenant Hobson, Mrs Barnett, Madge, and a few others at once went to ascertain the truth of the report. Well wrapt up, and on their guard against a sudden chill, their feet cased in furred boots, and guns and hatchets in their hands, they issued from the postern, and made their way over the frozen snow along the coast, strewn with masses of ice.

The moon, already in the last quarter, shed a few faint rays through the mists which shrouded the ice-fields. After marching for about an hour, the Lieutenant began to think that the Sergeant had been mistaken, and that what he had seen were morses, who had returned to their native element through the holes in the ice which they always keep open.

But Long, pointing to a grey wreath of smoke curling out of a conical protuberance on the ice-field some hundred steps off, contented himself with observing quietly —

“The morses are smoking, then !”

As he spoke some living creatures came out of the but dragging themselves along the snow. They were Esquimaux, but whether male or female none but a native could have said, for their costumes were all exactly alike.

Indeed, without in the least sharing the opinion of the naturalist quoted above, any one might have taken the rough shaggy figures for seals or some other amphibious animals. There were six of them-four full-grown, and two children. Although very short, they were broad-chested and muscular. They had the flat noses, long eye-lashes, large mouths, thick lips, long black coarse hair, and beardless chins of their race. Their costume consisted of a round coat made of the skin of the walrus, a hood, boots, trousers, and mittens of the same material. They gazed at the Europeans in silence.

“Does any one understand Esquimaux?” inquired the Lieutenant.

No one was acquainted with that idiom, and every one started when a voice immediately exclaimed in English, “Welcome! welcome !”

It was an Esquimaux, and, as they learned later, a woman, who, approaching Mrs Barnett, held out her hand.

The lady, much surprised, replied in a few words, which the native girl readily understood, and the whole family was invited to follow the Europeans to the fort.

The Esquimaux looked searchingly at the strangers, and after a few moments’ hesitation they accompanied the Lieutenant, keeping close together, however:

Arrived at the enceinte, the native woman, seeing the house, of the existence of which she had had no idea, exclaimed —

“House! snow-house!”

She asked if it were made of snow, which was a natural question enough, for the house was all but hidden beneath the white mass which covered the ground. She was made to understand that it was built of wood; she then turned and said a few words to her companions, who made signs of acquiescence, and they all passed through the postern, and were taken to the large room in the chief building.

They removed their hoods, and it became possible to distinguish sexes. There were two men, about forty or fifty years old, with yellowish-red complexions, sharp teeth, and projecting cheek-bones, which gave them something of the appearance of carnivorous animals; two women, still young whose matted hair was adorned with the teeth and claws of Polar bears; and two children, about five or six years old, poor little creatures with intelligent faces, who looked about them with wide wondering eyes.

“I believe the Esquimaux are always hungry,” said Hobson, “so I don’t suppose our guests would object to a slice of venison.”

In obedience to the Lieutenant’s order, Joliffe brought some reindeer-venison, which the poor creatures devoured with greedy avidity; but the young woman who had answered in English behaved with greater refinement, and watched Mrs Barnett and the women of the fort without once removing her eyes from them. Presently noticing the baby in Mrs Mac-Nabs arms; she rose and ran up to it, speaking to it in a soft voice, and caressing it tenderly.

Indeed if not exactly superior, the young girl was certainly more civilised than her companions, which was especially noticeable when, being attacked by a slight fit of coughing, she put her hand before her mouth in the manner enjoined by the first rules of civilised society.

This significant gesture did not escape any one, and Mrs Barnett, who chatted for some time with the Esquimaux woman, learned from her in a few short sentences that she had been for a year in the service of the Danish governor of Upper Navik, whose wife was English, and that she had left Greenland to follow her family to the hunting grounds. The two men were her brothers; the other woman was her sister-in-law, married to one of the men, and mother of the two children. They were all returning from Melbourne Island, on the eastern coast of English America, and were making for Point Barrow, on the western coast of Russian America, the home of their tribe, and- were considerably astonished to find a factory established on Cape Bathurst. Indeed the two men shook their heads when they spoke of it. Did they disapprove of the construction of a fort at this particular point of the coast? Did they think the situation ill-chosen? In spite of all his endeavours, Hobson could get no satisfactory reply to these questions, or rather he could not understand the answers he received.

The name of the young girl was Kalumah, and she seemed to have taken a great fancy to Mrs Barnett. But sociable as she was, she appeared to feel no regret at having left the governor of Upper Navik, and to be sincerely attached to her relations.

After refreshing themselves with the reindeer-venison, and drinking half-a-pint of rum, in which the children had their share, the Esquimaux took leave of their hosts; but before saying goodbye, the young girl invited Mrs Barnett to visit their snow-hut, and the lady promised to do so the next day, weather permitting.

The next day was fine, and accompanied by Madge, Lieutenant Hobson, and a few soldiers, well armed in case any bears should be prowling about, Mrs Barnett set out for “Cape Esquimaux,” as they had named the spot where the little colony had encamped.

Kalumah hastened forward to meet her friend of yesterday, and pointed to the but with an, air of pride. It was a large cone of snow, with an opening in the summit, through which the smoke from the fire inside made its way. These snow-houses, called *igloos* in the language of the Esquimaux, are constructed with great rapidity, and are admirably suited to the climate. In them their owners can endure a temperature 40° below zero, without fires, and without suffering much. In the summer the Esquimaux encamp in tents made of seal and reindeer skins, which are called *tupics*.

It was no easy matter to get into this hut. The only opening was a hole close to the ground, and it was necessary to creep through a kind of passage three or four feet long, which is about the thickness of the walls of these snow-houses. But a traveller by profession, a *laureate* of the Royal Society, could not hesitate, and Mrs Paulina Barnett did not hesitate! Followed by Madge, she bravely entered the narrow tunnel in imitation of her guide. Lieutenant Hobson and his men dispensed with paying their respects inside.

And Mrs Barnett soon discovered that the chief difficulty was not getting into the but, but remaining in it when there. The room was heated by a fire, on which the bones of morses were burning; and the air was full of the smell of the fetid oil of a lamp, of greasy garments, and the flesh of the amphibious animals which form the chief article of an Esquimaux’s diet. It was suffocating and sickening! Madge could not stand it, and hurried out at once, but Mrs Barnett, rather than hurt the feelings of the young native, showed superhuman courage, and extended her visit over five long minutes!-five centuries! The two children and their mother were at home, but the men had gone to hunt morses four or five miles from their camp.

Once out of the hut, Mrs Barnett drew a long sigh of relief, and the colour returned to her blanched cheeks.

“Well, madam,” inquired the Lieutenant, “what do you think of Esquimaux houses?”

“The ventilation leaves something to be desired !” she replied simply.

The interesting native family remained encamped near Cape Esquimaux for eight days. The men passed twelve hours out of every twenty-four hunting morses. With a patience which none but sportsmen could understand, they would watch for the amphibious animals near the holes through which they come up to the surface of the ice-field to breathe. When the morse appears, a rope with a running noose is flung round its body a little below the head, and it is dragged on to the ice-field, often with considerable difficulty, and killed with hatchets. It is really more like fishing than bunting. It is considered a great treat to drink the warm blood of the walrus, and the Esquimaux often indulge in it to excess.

Kalumah came to the fort every day in spite of the severity of the weather. She was never tired of going through the different rooms, and watching Mrs Joliffe at her cooking or sewing. She asked the English name of everything, and talked for hours together with Mrs Barnett, if the term “talking” can be applied to an exchange of words after long deliberation on both sides. When Mrs Barnett read aloud, Kalumah listened with great attention, although she probably understood nothing of what she heard.

The young native girl had a sweet voice, and sometimes sang some strange melancholy rhythmical songs with a peculiar metre, and, if we may so express it, a frosty ring about them, peculiarly characteristic of their origin.

Mrs Barnett had the patience to translate one of these Greenland sagas, which was sung to a sad air, interspersed with long pauses, and filled with strange intervals, which produced an indescribable effect. We give an English rendering of Mrs Barnett's translation, which may give a faint idea of this strange hyperborean poetry.

GREENLAND SONG

Dark Is the sky,

The sun sinks wearily;

My trembling heart, with sorrow filled,

Aches drearily !

My sweet child at my songs is smiling still,

While at his tender heart the icicles lie chill.

Child of my dreams I

Thy love doth cheer me;

The cruel biting frost I brave

But to be near thee!

Ah me, Ah me, could these hot tears of mine

But melt the icicles around that heart of thine!

Could we once more

Meet heart to heart,

Thy little hands close clasped in mine,

No more to part.

Then on thy chill heart rays from heaven above

Should fall, and softly melt it with the warmth of love!

On the 20th December the Esquimaux family came to take leave of the occupants of the fort. Kalumah was sorry to part with Mrs Barnett, who would gladly have retained her in her service, but the young native could not be persuaded to leave her own people; she promised, however, to return to Fort Hope in the summer.

Her farewell was touching. She presented Mrs Barnett with a copper ring, and received in exchange a necklace of black beads, which she immediately put on. Hobson gave the poor people a good stock of provisions, which they packed in their sledge; and after a few words of grateful acknowledgment from Kalumah, the whole party set out towards the west, quickly disappearing in the thick fogs on the shore.

CHAPTER XX.

MERCURY FREEZES.

A few days of dry calm weather favoured the operations of the hunters, but they did not venture far from the fort; the abundance of game rendered it unnecessary to do so, and Lieutenant Hobson could justly congratulate himself on having chosen so favourable a situation for the new settlement. A great number of furred animals of all kinds were taken in the traps, and Sabine and Marbre killed a good many Polar hares. Some twenty starving wolves were shot. Hunger rendered the latter animals aggressive, and bands of them gathered about the fort, filling the air with hoarse howls, and amongst the "hummocks "on the ice-fields sometimes prowled huge bears, whose movements were watched with great interest.

On the 25th December all excursions had again to be given up. The wind veered suddenly to the north, and the cold became exceedingly severe. It was impossible to remain out of doors without being frost-bitten. The Fahrenheit thermometer fell to 18° below zero, and the gale roared like a volley of musketry. Hobson took care to provide the animals with food enough to last several weeks.

Christmas Day, the day of home-gatherings so dear to the heart of all Englishmen, was kept with due solemnity. The colonists returned thanks to God for preserving them through so many perils; and the workmen, who had a holiday in honour of the day, afterwards assembled with their masters and the ladies round a well-filled board, on which figured two huge Christmas puddings.

In the evening a huge bowl of punch flamed in the centre of the table; the lamps were put out, and for a time the room was lighted only by the livid flames of the spirit, the familiar objects assuming strange fantastic forms. The spirits of the soldiers rose as they watched the flickering illumination, and their excitement was not lessened after imbibing some of the burning liquid.

But now the flames began to pale; bluish tongues still fitfully licked the plump sides of the national pudding for a few minutes, and then died away.

Strange to say, although the lamps had not been relit, the room did not become dark on the extinction of the flames. A bright red light was streaming through the window, which had passed unnoticed in the previous illumination.

The revellers started to their feet, and looked at each other in astonishment.

“A fire !” cried several.

But unless the house itself were burning, there could not be a fire anywhere near Cape Bathurst.

The Lieutenant rushed to the window, and at once understood the cause of the phenomenon. It was an eruption.

Indeed, above the western cliffs beyond Walruses’ Bay the horizon was on fire. The summits of the igneous hills, some miles from Cape Bathurst, could not be seen; but the sheaf of flame shot up to a considerable height, lighting up the whole country in a weird, unearthly manner.

“It is more beautiful than the Aurora Borealis!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett.

Thomas Black indignantly protested against this assertion. A terrestrial phenomenon more beautiful than a meteor! But no one was disposed to argue with him about it, for all hurried out, in spite of the bitter gale and biting cold, to watch the glorious spectacle of the flashing sheaf of flames standing out against the black background of the night sky.

Had not the mouths and ears of the party been cased in furs, they would have been able to hear the rumbling noise of the eruption, and to tell each other of the impressions made upon them by this magnificent sight; but, as it was, they could neither speak nor hear. They might well be content, however, with gazing upon such a glorious scene-a scene which once looked upon could never be forgotten. The glowing sheets of flames contrasted alike with the gloomy darkness of the heavens and the dazzling whiteness of the far-stretching carpet of snow, and produced effects of light and shade which no pen or pencil could adequately portray. The throbbing reverberations spread beyond the zenith, gradually quenching the light of all the stars. The white ground became dashed with golden tints, the hummocks on the ice-field and the huge icebergs in the background reflecting the glimmering colours like so many glowing mirrors. The rays of light, striking on the edges or surfaces of the ice, became bent and diffracted; the angles and varying inclinations on which they fell fretting them into fringes of colour, and reflecting them back with changed and heightened beauty. It was like a fairy scene in which ice and snow combined to add *éclat* to a m*êlee* of rays in which luminous s waves rushed upon each other, breaking into coloured ripples.

But the excessive cold soon drove the admiring spectators back to their warm dwelling, and many a nose paid dearly for the feast enjoyed by the eyes.

During the following .days the cold became doubly severe. The mercurial thermometer was of course no longer of any use for marking degrees, and an alcohol thermometer had to be used. On the night of the 28th to the 29th December the column fell to 32° below zero.

The stoves were piled up with fuel, but the temperature in the house could not be maintained above 20° degrees. The bedrooms were exceedingly cold, and ten feet from the stove, in the large room, its heat could not be felt at all. The little baby had tine warmest corner, and its cradle was rocked in turn by those who came to the fire. Opening doors or windows was strictly forbidden, as the vapour in the rooms would immediately have been converted into snow, and in the passage the breathing of the inmates already produced that result. Every now and then dull reports were heard, which startled those unaccustomed to living in such high latitudes. They were caused by the cracking of the trunks of trees, of which the walls were composed under the influence of the intense cold. The stock of rum and gin stowed away in n the garret had to be brought down into the sitting-room, as the alcohol was freezing and sinking to the bottom of the bottles. The spruce-beer made from a decoction of young fir-branchlets burst the barrels in which it was kept as it froze, whilst all solid bodies resisted the introduction of heat as if they were petrified. Wood burnt very slowly, and Hobson was obliged to sacrifice some of the walrus-oil to quicken its combustion. Fortunately the chimneys drew well, so that there was no disagreeable smell inside, although for a long distance outside the air was impregnated with the fetid odour of the smoke from Fort Hope, which a casual observer might therefore have pronounced an unhealthy building.

One symptom we must notice was the great thirst from which every one suffered. To relieve it, different liquids had to be melted at the fire, for it-would have been dangerous to eat ice. Another effect of the cold was intense drowsiness, which Hobson earnestly entreated his companions to resist. Some appeared unable to do so; but Mrs Barnett was invaluable in setting an example of constant activity: always brave, she kept herself awake, and encouraged others by her kindness, brightness, and sympathy. Sometimes she read aloud accounts of travels, or sang some old familiar English song, in the chorus of which all joined. These joyous strains roused up the sleepers whether they would or no, and their voices soon swelled the chorus. The long days of imprisonment passed wearily by, and the Lieutenant, consulting the outside thermometer through the windows, announced that the cold was still on the increase. On the 31st December, the mercury was all frozen hard , in the cistern of the instrument, so that the temperature was 44° below freezing point.

The next day, 1st January 1860, Lieutenant Hobson wished Mrs Barnett a happy new year, and complimented her on the courage and good temper with which she endured the miseries of this northern winter. The astronomer was not forgotten in the universal interchange of good wishes amongst the members of the little colony; but his only thought on entering another year was, that it was the beginning of that in which the great eclipse was to take place. Fortunately the general health still remained good, and any symptoms of scurvy were promptly checked by the use of lime-juice and lime-lozenges.

It would not do, however, to rejoice too soon. The winter had still to last three months. The sun would doubtless reappear above the horizon in due time; but there was no reason to think that the cold had reached its maximum intensity, especially as in most northern countries February is the month during which the temperature falls lowest. However that might be, there was no decrease in the severity of the weather during the first days of the new year, and on the 8th January the alcohol thermometer placed outside the window of the passage marked 66° below zero. A few degrees more and the minimum temperature at Fort Reliance in 1835 would be reached!

Jaspar Hobson grew more and more uneasy at the continued severity of the cold. He began to fear that the furred animals would have to seek a less rigorous climate further south, which would of course thwart all his plans for hunting in the early spring. Moreover, he sometimes heard subterranean rumblings, which were evidently connected with the volcanic eruption. The western horizon still glowed with the reflection of the burning lava, and it was evident that some great convulsion was going on in the bowels of the earth. Might not the close vicinity of an active volcano be dangerous to the new fort f Such was the question which the subterranean rumblings forced upon the mind of the Lieutenant, but he kept his vague apprehensions to himself

Of course under these circumstances no one dreamt of leaving the house. The animals were well provided for, and being accustomed to long fasts in the winter, required no attention from their masters, so that there really was no necessity for any exposure out of doors. It was difficult enough to endure the inside temperature, even with the help of a plentiful combustion of wood and oil; for, in spite of every precaution, damp crept into the ill-ventilated rooms, and layers of ice, increasing in thickness every day, were formed upon the beams. The condensers were choked up, and one of them burst from the pressure of the ice.

Lieutenant Hobson did not spare his fuel; he was, in fact, rather lavish of it in his anxiety to raise the temperature, which, when the fires got low-as of course sometimes happened-fell to 15° Fahrenheit. The men on guard, who relieved each other every hour, had strict orders to keep up the fires, and great was the dismay of the Lieutenant when Sergeant Long said to him one day —

“We shall be out of wood soon !”

“Out of wood !” exclaimed Hobson.

“I mean our stock is getting low, and we must lay in fresh stores soon. Of course I know, though, that it will be at the risk of his life that any one goes out in this cold !”

“Yes,” replied Hobson. “It was a mistake not to build the wooden shed close to the house, and to make no direct communication with it. I see that now it is too late. I ought not to have forgotten that we were going to winter beyond the seventieth parallel. But what’s done can’t be undone. How long will the wood last?”

“There is enough to feed the furnace and stove for another two or three days,” replied the Sergeant.

“Let us hope by that time that the severity of the cold may have decreased, and that we may venture across the court of the fort without danger.”

“I doubt it, sir,” replied Long, shaking his head. “The atmosphere is very clear, the wind is still in the north, and I shall not be surprised if this temperature is maintained. for another fifteen days-until the new moon, in fact.”

“Well, my brave fellow,” said the Lieutenant, “we won’t die of cold if we can help it, and the day we have to brave the outside air “

“We will brave it, sir,” said Long.

Hobson pressed his subordinate’s hand, well knowing the poor fellow’s devotion.

We might fancy that Hobson and the Sergeant were exaggerating when they alluded to fatal results from sudden exposure to the open air, but they spoke from experience, gained from long residence in the rigorous Polar regions. They had seen strong men fall fainting on the ice under similar circumstances; their breath failed them, and they were taken up in a state of suffocation. Incredible as such facts may appear, they have been of frequent occurrence amongst those who have wintered in the extreme north. In their journey along the shores of Hudson’s Bay in 1746, Moor and Smith saw many incidents of this kind,-some of their companions were killed, struck down by the cold, and there can be no doubt that sudden death may result from braving a temperature in which rnercury freezes.

Such was the distressing state of things at Fort Hope, when a new danger arose to aggravate the sufferings of the colonists.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE LARGE POLAR BEARS.

The only one of the four windows through which it was possible to look into the court of the fort was that opening at the end of the entrance passage. The outside shutters had not been closed; but before it could be seen through it had to be washed with boiling water, as the panes were covered with a thick coating of ice. This was done several times a day by the Lieutenant’s orders, when the districts surrounding the fort were carefully examined, and the state of the sky, and of the alcohol thermometer placed outside, were accurately noted.

On the 6th January, towards eleven o’clock in the morning, Kellet, whose turn it was to look out, suddenly called the Sergeant, and pointed to some moving masses indistinctly visible in the gloom. Long, approaching the window observed quietly —

“They are bears!”

In fact half-a-dozen of these formidable animals had succeeded in getting over the palisades, and, attracted by the smoke from the chimneys, were advancing upon the house.

On hearing of the approach of the bears, Hobson at once ordered the window of the passage to be barricaded inside; it was the only unprotected opening in the house, and when it was secured it appeared impossible for the bears to effect an entrance. The window was, therefore, quickly closed up with bars, which the carpenter Mac-Nab wedged firmly in, leaving a narrow slit through which to watch the movements of the unwelcome visitors.

“Now,” observed the head carpenter, “these gentlemen can’t get in without our permission, and we have time to hold a council of war.”

“Well, Lieutenant,” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, “nothing has been wanting to our northern winter! After the cold come the bears.”

“Not after,” replied the Lieutenant, “but, which is a serious matter, *with* the cold, and a cold ago intense that we cannot venture outside! I really don’t know how we shall get rid .of these tiresome brutes.”

“I suppose they will soon get tired of prowling about,” said the lady, “and return as they came.”

Hobson shook his head as if he had his doubts.

“You don’t know these animals, madam. They are famished with hunger, and will not go until we make them!”

“Are you anxious, then?”

“Yes and no,” replied the Lieutenant. “I don’t think the bears will get in; but neither do I see how we can get out, should it become necessary for us to do so.”

With these words Hobson turned to the window, and Mrs Barnett joined the other women, who had gathered round the Sergeant, and were listening to what he had to say about the bears. He spoke like a man well up in his subject, for he had had- many an encounter with these formidable carnivorous creatures, which are often met with even towards the south, where, however, they can be safely attacked, whilst here the siege would be a regular blockade, for the cold would quite prevent any attempt at a sortie.

Throughout the whole day the movements of the bears were attentively watched. Every now and then one of them would lay his great head against the window-pane and an ominous growl was heard.

The Lieutenant and the Sergeant took counsel together, and it was agreed that if their enemies showed no sign of beating a retreat, they would drill a few loopholes in the walls of the house, and fire at them. But it was decided to put off this desperate measure for a day or two, as it was desirable to avoid giving access to the outer air; the inside temperature being already far too low. The walrus oil to be burnt was frozen so hard that it had to be broken up with hatchets.

The day passed without any incident. The bears went and came, prowling round the house, but attempting no direct attack. Watch was kept all night, and at four o'clock in the morning they seemed to have left the court-at any rate, they were nowhere to be seen.

But about seven o'clock Marbre went up to the loft to fetch some provisions, and on his return announced that the bears were walking about on the roof.

Hobson, the Sergeant, Mac-Nab, and two or three soldiers seized their arms, and rushed to the ladder in the passage, which. communicated with the loft by a trap-door. The cold was, however, so intense in the loft that the men could not hold the barrels of their guns, and their breath froze as it left their lips and floated about them as snow.

Marbre was right; the bears were all on the roof, and the sound of their feet and their growls could be distinctly heard. Their great claws caught in the laths of the roof beneath the ice, and there was some danger that they might have sufficient strength to tear away the woodwork.

The Lieutenant and his men, becoming giddy and faint from the intense cold, were soon obliged to go down, and Hobson announced the state of affairs in as hopeful a tone as he could assume.

“The bears,” he said, “are now upon the roof. We ourselves have nothing to fear, as they can’t get into our rooms; but they may force an entrance to the loft, and devour the furs stowed away there. Now these furs belong to the Company, and it is our duty to preserve them from injury I ask you then, my friends, to aid me in removing them to a place of safety.”

All eagerly volunteered, and relieving each other in parties of two or three, for none could have supported the intense severity of the cold for long at a time, they managed to carry all the furs into the large room in about an hour.

Whilst the work was proceeding, the bears continued their efforts to get in, and tried to lift up the rafters of .the roof. In some places the laths became broken by their weight, and poor Mac-Nab was in despair; he had not reckoned upon such a contingency when he constructed the roof, and expected to see it give way every moment.

The day passed, however, without any change in the situation. The bears did not get in; but a no less formidable enemy, the cold, gradually penetrated into every room. The fires in the stoves burnt low; the fuel in reserve was almost exhausted; and before twelve o’clock, the last piece of wood would be burnt, and the genial warmth of the stove would no longer cheer the unhappy colonists.

Death would then await them-death in its most fearful form, from cold. The poor creatures, huddled together round the stove, felt that their own vital heat must soon become exhausted, but not a word of complaint passed their lips. The women bore their sufferings with the greatest heroism, and Mrs Mac-Nab pressed her baby convulsively to her ice-cold breast. Some of the soldiers slept, or rather were wrapped in a heavy torpor, which could scarcely be called sleep.

At three o’clock in the morning Hobson consulted the thermometer hanging in the large room, about ten feet from the stove.

It marked 4° Fahrenheit below zero.

The Lieutenant pressed his hand to his forehead, and looked mournfully at his silent companions without a word. His half-condensed breath shrouded his face in a white cloud, and he was standing rooted to the spot when a hand was laid upon his shoulder. He started, and looked round to see Mrs Barnett beside him.

“Something must be done, Lieutenant Hobson !” exclaimed the energetic woman; “we cannot die like this without an effort to save ourselves !”

“Yes,” replied the Lieutenant, feeling revived by the moral courage of his companion-” yes, something must be done !” and he called together Long, Mac-Nab, and Rae the blacksmith, as the bravest men in his party. All, together with Mrs Barnett, hastened to the window, and having washed the panes with boiling water, they consulted the thermometer outside.

“Seventy-two degrees !” cried Hobson. “My friends, two courses only are open to us, we can risk our lives to get a fresh supply of fuel, or we can burn the benches, beds, partition walls, and everything in the house to feed our stoves for a few days longer. A desperate alternative, for the cold may last for some time yet; there is no sign of a change in the weather.”

“Let us risk our lives to get fuel !” said Sergeant Long.

All agreed that it would be the best course, and without another word each one set to work to prepare for the emergency.

The following were the precautions taken to save the lives of those who were about to risk themselves for the sake of the general good : —

The shed in which the wood was stored was about fifty steps on the left, behind, the principal house. It was decided that one of the men should try and run to the shed. He was to take one rope wound round his body, and to carry another in his hand, one end of which was to be held by one of his comrades. Once at the shed, he was to load one of the sledges there with fuel, and tie one rope to the front, and the other to the back of the vehicle, so that it could be dragged backwards and forwards between the house and the shed without much danger. A tug violently shaking one or the other cord would be the signal that the sledge was filled with fuel at the shed, or unloaded at the house.

A very clever plan, certainly; but two things might defeat it. The door of the shed might be so blocked up with ice that it would be very difficult to open it, or the bears might come down from the roof and prowl about the court. Two risks to be run !

Long, Mac-Nab, and Rae, all three volunteered for the perilous service; but the Sergeant reminded the other two that they were married, and insisted upon being the first to venture.

When the Lieutenant expressed a wish to go himself, Mrs Barnett said earnestly, “You are our chief; you]nave no right to expose yourself. Let Sergeant Long go.”

Hobson could not but realise that his office imposed caution, and being called upon to decide which of his companions should go, be chose the Sergeant. Mrs Barnett pressed the brave man’s hand with ill-concealed emotion; and the rest of the colonists, asleep or stupefied, knew nothing of the attempt about to be made to save their lives.

Two long ropes were got ready. The Sergeant wound one round his body above the warm furs, worth some thousand pounds sterling, in which he was encased, and tied the other to his belt, on which he hung a tinder-box and a loaded revolver. Just before starting he swallowed down half a glass of rum, as he said, “to insure a good load of wood.”

Hobson, Rae, and Mac-Nab accompanied the brave fellow through the kitchen, where the fire had just gone out, and into the passage. Rae climbed up to the trap-door of the loft, and peeping through it, made sure that the bears were still on the roof. The moment for action had arrived.

One door of the passage was open, and in spite of the thick furs in which they were wrapped, all felt chilled to the very marrow of their bones; and when the second door was pushed open, they recoiled for an instant, panting for breath, whilst the moisture held in suspension in the air of the passage covered the walls and the floor with fine snow.

The weather outside was extremely dry, and the stars shone with extraordinary brilliancy. Sergeant Long rushed out without a moment’s hesitation, dragging the cord behind him, one end of which was held by his companions; the outer door was pushed to, and Hobson, Mae-Nab, and Rae went back to the passage and closed the second door, behind which they waited. If Long did not return in a few minutes, they might conclude that his enterprise had succeeded, and that, safe in the shed, he was loading the first train with fuel. Ten minutes at the most ought to suffice for this operation, if he had been able to get the door open.

When the Sergeant was fairly off, Hobson and Mac-Nab walked together towards the end of the passage.

Meanwhile Rae had been watching the bears and the loft. It was so dark that all hoped Long’s movements would escape the notice of the hungry animals.

Ten minutes elapsed, and the three watchers went back to the narrow space between the two doors, waiting for the signal to be given to drag in the sledge.

Five minutes more. The cord remained motionless in their hands! Their anxiety can be imagined. It was a quarter of an hour since the Sergeant had started, plenty of time for all he had to do, and he had given no signal.

Hobson waited a few minutes longer, and then tightening his hold of the end of the rope, he made a sign to his companions to pull with him. If the load of wood were not quite ready, the Sergeant could easily stop it from being dragged away.

The rope was pulled vigorously. A heavy object seemed to slide along the snow. In a few moments it reached the outer door.

It was the body of the Sergeant, with the rope round his waist. Poor Long had never reached the shed. He had fallen fainting to the ground, and after twenty minutes’ exposure to such a temperature there was little hope that he would revive.

A cry of grief and despair burst from the lips of Mac-Nab and Rae. They lifted their unhappy comrade from the ground, and carried him into the passage; but as the Lieutenant was closing the outer door, something pushed violently against it, and a horrible growl was heard.

“Help!” cried Hobson.

Mac-Nab and Rae rushed to their officer’s assistance; but Mrs Barnett had been beforehand with them and was struggling with all her strength to help Hobson to close the door. In vain; the monstrous brute, throwing the whole weight of its body against it, would force its way into the passage in another moment.

Mrs Barnett, whose presence of mind did not forsake her now, seized one of the pistols in the Lieutenant’s belt, and waiting quietly until the animal shoved its head between the door and the wall, discharged the contents into its open mouth.

The bear fell backwards, mortally wounded no doubt, and the door was shut and securely fastened.

The body of the Sergeant was then carried into the large room. But, alas! the fire was dying out. How was it possible to restore the vital heat with no means of obtaining warmth?

“I will go — I will go and fetch some wood !” cried the blacksmith Rae.

“Yes, Rae, we will go together!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, whose courage was unabated.

“No, my friends, no!” cried Hobson; “you would fall victims to the cold, or the bears, or both. Let us burn all there is to burn in the house, and leave the rest to God !”

And the poor half-frozen settlers rose and laid about them with their hatchets like madmen. Benches, tables, and partition walls were thrown down, broken up, crushed to pieces, and piled up in the stove of the large room and kitchen furnace. Very soon good fires were burning, on which a few drops of walrus-oil were poured, so that the temperature of the rooms quickly rose a dozen degrees.

Every effort was made to restore the Sergeant. He was rubbed with warm rum, and gradually the circulation of his blood was restored. The white blotches with which parts of his body were covered began to disappear; but he had suffered dreadfully, and several hours elapsed before he could articulate a word. He was laid in a warm bed, and Mrs Barnett and Madge watched by him until the next morning.

Meanwhile Hobson, Mac-Nab, and Rae consulted bow best to escape from their terrible situation. It was impossible to shut their eyes to the fact that in two days this fresh supply of fuel would be exhausted, and then, if the cold continued, what would become of them all? The new moon had risen forty-eight hours ago, and there was no sign of a change in the weather! The north wind still swept the face of the country with its icy breath; the barometer remained at “fine dry weather; “and there was not a vapour to be seen above the endless succession of ice-fields. There was reason to fear that the intense cold would last a long time yet, but what was to be done? Would it do to try once more to get to the wood-shed, when the bears had been roused by the shot, and rendered doubly dangerous? Would it be possible to attack these dreadful creatures in the open air I No, it would be madness, and certain death for all!

Fortunately the temperature of the rooms had now become more bearable, and in the morning Mrs Joliffe served up a breakfast of hot meat and tea. Hot grog was served out, and the brave Sergeant was able to take his share. The heat from the stoves warmed the bodies and reanimated the drooping courage of the poor colonists, who were now ready to attack the bears at a word from Hobson. But the Lieutenant, thinking the forces unequally matched, would not risk the attempt; and it appeared likely that the day would pass without any incident worthy of note, when at about three o'clock in the afternoon a great noise was heard on the top of the house.

"There they are!" cried two or three soldiers, hastily arming themselves with hatchets and pistols.

It was evident that the bears had torn away one of the rafters of the roof, and got into the loft.

"Let every one remain where he is!" cried the Lieutenant. "Rae, the trap !"

The blacksmith rushed into the passage, scaled the ladder, and shut and securely fastened the trap-door.

A dreadful noise was now heard-growling, stamping of feet, and tearing of claws. It was doubtful whether the danger of the anxious listeners was increased, or the reverse. Some were of opinion that if all the bears were in the loft, it would be easier to attack them. They would be less formidable in a narrow space, and there would not be the same risk of suffocation from cold. Of course a conflict with such fierce creatures must still. be very perilous, but it no longer appeared so desperate as before.

It was now debated whether it would be better to go and attack the besiegers, or to remain on the defensive. Only one soldier could get through the narrow trap-door at a time, and this mace Hobson hesitate, and finally resolve to wait. The Sergeant and others, whose bravery none could doubt, agreed that he was in the right, and it might be possible that some new incident would occur to modify the situation. It was almost impossible for the bears to break through the beams of the ceiling, as they had the rafters of the roof, so that there was little fear that they would get on to the ground-floor.

The day passed by in anxious expectation, and at night no one could sleep for the uproar made by the furious beasts.

The next day, about nine o'clock, a fresh complication compelled Hobson to take active steps.

He knew that the pipes of the stove and kitchen furnace ran all along the loft, and being made of lime-bricks but imperfectly cemented together, they could not resist great pressure for any length of time. Now some of the bears scratched at the masonry, whilst others leant against the pipes for the sake of the warmth from the stove; so that the bricks began to give way, and soon the stoves and furnace ceased to draw.

This really was an irreparable misfortune, which would have disheartened less energetic men. But things were not yet at their worst. Whilst the fire became lower and lower, a thick, nauseous, acrid smoke filled the house; the pipes were broken, and the smoke soon became so thick that the lamps went out. Hobson now saw that he must leave the house if he wished to escape suffocation, but to leave the house would be to perish with cold. At this fresh misfortune some of the women screamed; and Hobson, seizing a hatchet, shouted in a loud voice

“To the bears! to the bears, my friends !”

It was the forlorn-hope. These terrible creatures must be destroyed. All rushed into the passage and made for the ladder, Hobson leading the way. The trap-door was opened, and a few shots were fired into the black whirlpool of smoke. Mingled howls and screams were heard, and blood began to flow on both sides; but the fearful conflict was waged in profound darkness.

In the midst of the mêlée a terrible rumbling sound suddenly drowned the tumult, the ground became violently agitated, and the house rocked as if it were being torn up from its foundations. The beams of the walls separated, and through the openings Hobson and his companions saw the terrified bears rushing away into the darkness, howling with rage and fright.

CHAPTER XXII.

FIVE MONTHS MORE.

A violent earthquake had shaken Cape Bathurst. Such convulsions were probably frequent in this volcanic region, and the connection between them and eruptions was once more demonstrated.

Hobson well understood the significance of what had occurred, and waited in anxious suspense. He knew that the earth might open and swallow up the little colony; but only one shock was felt, and that was rather a rebound than a vertical upheaval, which made the house lean over towards the lake, and burst open its walls. Immediately after this one shock, the ground again became firm and motionless.

The house, although damaged, was still habitable; the breaches in the walls were quickly repaired, and the pipes of the chimneys were patched together again somehow

Fortunately the wounds the soldiers had received in their struggle with the bears were slight, and merely required dressing.

Two miserable days ensued, during which the woodwork of the beds and the planks of the partition walls were burnt, and the most pressing repairs executed by Mac-Nab and his men. The piles, well driven into the earth, had not yielded; but it was evident that the earthquake had caused a sinking of the level of the coast on which the fort was built, which might seriously compromise the safety of the building. Hobson was most anxious to ascertain the extent of the alteration of elevation, but the pitiless cold prevented him from venturing outside.

But at last there were symptoms of an approaching change in the weather. The stars shone with rather less brilliancy, and on the 11th January the barometer fell slightly; hazy vapours floated in the air, the condensation of which would raise the temperature; and on the 12th January the wind veered to the south-west, and snow fell at irregular intervals.

The thermometer outside suddenly rose to 15° above zero, and to the frozen colonists it was like the beginning of spring.

At eleven o’clock the same morning all were out of doors. They were like a band of captives unexpectedly set free. They were, however, absolutely forbidden to go beyond the enceinte of the fort, in case of awkward meetings.

The sun had not yet reappeared above the horizon, but it approached it nearly enough to produce a long twilight, during which objects could be distinctly seen to a distance of two miles; and Hobson’s first thought was to ascertain what difference the earthquake had produced in the appearance of the surrounding districts.

Certain changes had been effected. The crest of the promontory of Cape Bathurst had been broken off, and large pieces of the cliff had been flung upon the beach. The whole mass of the cape seemed to have been bent towards the lake, altering the elevation of the plateau on which the fort was built. The soil on the west appeared to have been depressed, whilst that on the east had been elevated. One of the results of this change of level would unfortunately be, that when the thaw set in, the waters of the lake and of Paulina river, in obedience to the law, requiring liquids to maintain their level, would inundate a portion of the western coast. The stream would probably scoop out another bed, and the natural harbour at its mouth would be destroyed. The hills on the eastern bank seemed to be considerably depressed, but the cliffs on the west were too far off for any accurate observations to be made. The important alteration produced by the earthquake may, in fact, be summed up in a very few words : the horizontal character of the ground was replaced by a slope from east to west.

“Well, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett, laughing, “you were good enough to give my name to the port and river, and now there will be neither Paulina river nor Port Barnett. I must say I have been hardly used.”

“Well, madam,” replied Hobson, “although the river is gone, the lake remains, and we will call it Lake Barnett. I hope that it at least will remain true to you.”

Mr and Mrs Joliffe, on leaving the house, had hurried, one to the doghouse, the other to the reindeer-stable. The dogs had not suffered much from their lone, confinement, and rushed into the court barking with delight. One reindeer had died, but the others, though thin, appeared to be in good health.

“Well, madam,” said the Lieutenant, “we have got through our troubles better than we could have expected.”

“I never despaired,” replied the lady. “The miseries of an Arctic -winter would not conquer men like you and your companions.”

“To own the truth, madam,” replied Hobson, “I never experienced such intense cold before, in all the years I have spent in the north; and if it had lasted many days longer we should all have been lost.”

“The earthquake came in the nick of time then, not only to drive away the bears, but also to modify the extremity of the cold?”

“Perhaps so, madam. All natural phenomena influence each other to a certain extent. But the volcanic structure of the soil makes me rather uneasy. I cannot but regret the close vicinity of this active volcano. If the lava from it cannot reach us, the earthquakes connected with it can. Just look at our house now!”

“Oh, all that can be put right when the fine weather comes, and you will make it all the stronger for the painful experience you have gained.”

“Of course we shall, but meanwhile I am afraid you won’t find it very comfortable.”

“Are you speaking to me, Lieutenant? to an old traveller like me? I shall imagine myself one of the crew of a small vessel, and now that it does not pitch and toss, I shall have no fear of being sea-sick.”

“What you say does not surprise me,” replied Hobson; “we all know your grandeur of character, your moral courage and imperturbable good temper. You have done much to help us all to bear our troubles, and I thank you in my own name and that of my men.”

“You flatter me, Lieutenant; you flatter me.”

“No, no; I only say what every one thinks. But may I ask you one question. You know that next June, Captain Craventy is to send us a convoy with provisions, which will take back our furs to Fort Reliance. I suppose our friend Thomas Black, after having seen his eclipse, will return with the Captain’s men. Do you mean to accompany him?”

“Do you mean to send me back?” asked the lady with a smile.

“O madam !” —

“Well, my superior officer,” replied Mrs Barnett, extending her hand to the Lieutenant, “I shall ask you to allow me to spend another winter at Fort Hope. Next year one of the Company’s ships will probably anchor off Cape Bathurst, and I shall return in it. Having come overland, I should like to go back by Behring Strait.”

The Lieutenant was delighted with his companion’s decision. The two had become sincerely attached to each other, and had many tastes and qualities in common. The hour of separation could not fail to be painful to both; and who could tell what further trials awaited `the colonists, in which their combine, influence might sustain the courage of the rest?

On the 20th January the sun at last reappeared, and the Polar night was at an end. It only remained above the horizon for a few minutes, and was greeted with joyous hurrahs by the settlers. From this date the days gradually increased in length.

Throughout the month of February, and until the 15th March, there were abrupt transitions from fine to bad weather. The fine days were so cold that the hunters could not go out; and in the bad weather snowstorms kept them in. It was only between whiles that any outdoor work could be done; and long excursions were out of the question. There was no necessity for them, however, as the traps were in full activity. In the latter end of the winter, martens, foxes, ermines, wolverines, and other valuable animals were taken in large numbers, and the trappers had plenty to do.

In March an excursion was ventured on as far as Walruses’ Bay and it was noticed that the earthquake had considerably altered the form of the cliffs, which were much depressed; whilst the igneous hills beyond, with their summits wrapped in mist, seemed to look larger and more threatening than ever.

About the 20th March the hunters sighted the first swans migrating from the south, and uttering shrill cries as they flew. A few snow buntings and winter hawks were also seen. But the ground was still covered with thick layers of frozen snow, and the sun was powerless to melt the hard surface of the lake and sea.

The breaking up of the frost did not commence until early in April. The ice burst with a noise like the discharge of artillery.

Sudden changes took place in the appearance of the icebergs broken by collisions, undermined by the action of the water once more set free, huge masses rolled over with an awful crash, in consequence of the displacement of their centre of gravity, causing fractures and fissures in the ice-fields which greatly accelerated their breaking up.

At this time the mean temperature was 32° above zero, so that the upper layer of ice on the beach rapidly dissolved, whilst the chain of icebergs, drifted along by the currents of the Polar Sea, gradually drew back and became lost in the fogs on the horizon. On the 15th April the sea was open, and a vessel from the Pacific Ocean coming through Behring Strait, could certainly have skirted along the American coast, and have anchored off Cape Bathurst.

Whilst the ice was disappearing from the ocean, Lake Barnett was also laying aside its slippery armour, much to the delight of the thousands of ducks and other water-fowl which began to teem upon its banks. As Hobson had foreseen, however, the level of the lake was affected by the slope of the soil. That part of the beach which stretched away from the enceinte of the fort, and was bounded on the east by wooded hills, had increased considerably in extent; and Hobson estimated that the waters of the lake had receded five hundred paces on the eastern bank. As a natural consequence, the water on the western side had risen, and if not held back by some natural barrier, would inundate the country.

On the whole, it was fortunate that the slope was from east to west; for had it been from west to east, the factory must have been submerged.

The little river dried up as soon as the thaw set free its waters. It might almost be said to have run back to its source, so abrupt was the slope of its bed from north to south.

“We have now to erase a river from the map of the Arctic regions,” observed Hobson to his Sergeant. “It would have been embarrassing if we had been dependent on the truant for drinkable water. Fortunately we have still Lake Barnett, and I don’t suppose our thirsty men will drain it quite dry.”

“Yes, we’ve got the lake,” replied the Sergeant; “but do you think its waters have remained sweet?”

Hobson started and looked at his subordinate with knitted brows. It had not occurred to him that a fissure in the ground might have established a communication between the lake and the sea! Should it be so, ruin must ensue, and the factory would inevitably have to be abandoned after all.

The Lieutenant and Hobson rushed to the lake and found their fears groundless. Its waters were still sweet.

Early in May the snow had disappeared in several places, and a scanty vegetation clothed the soil. Tiny mosses and slender grasses timidly pushed up their stems above the ground, and the sorrel and cochlearia seeds which Mrs Joliffe had planted began to sprout. The carpet of snow had protected them through the bitter winter; but they had still to be saved from the beaks of birds and the teeth of rodents. This arduous and important task was confided to the worthy Corporal, who acquitted himself of it with the zeal and devotion of a scarecrow in a kitchen garden.

The long days had now returned, and hunting was resumed.

Hobson was anxious to have a good stock of furs for the agents from Fort Reliance to take charge of when they arrived, as they would do in a few weeks. Marbre, Sabine, and the others, therefore, commenced the campaign. Their excursions were neither long nor fatiguing : they never went further than two miles from Cape Bathurst, for they had never before been in a district so well stocked with game; and they were both surprised and delighted. :Martens, reindeer, hares, caribous, foxes, and ermines passed close to their guns.

One thing, however, excited some regret in the minds of the colonists, not a trace was to be seen of their old enemies the bears; and it seemed as if they had taken all their relations with them. Perhaps the earthquake had frightened them away, for they have a very delicate nervous organisation, if such an expression can be applied to a mere quadruped. It was a pity they were gone, for vengeance could not be wreaked upon them.

The month of May was very wet. Rain and snow succeeded each other. The mean temperature was only 41° above zero. Fogs were of frequent occurrence, and so thick that it would often have been imprudent to go any distance from the fort. Petersen and Kellet once caused their companions grave anxiety by disappearing for forty-eight hours. They had lost their way, and turned to the south when they thought they were near to Walruses' Bay. They came back exhausted and half dead with hunger.

June came at last, and with it really fine warm weather. The colonists were able to leave off their winter clothing. They worked zealously at repairing the house, the foundations of which had to be propped up; and Hobson also ordered the construction of a large magazine at the southern corner of the court. The quantity of game justified the expenditure of time and labour involved : the number of furs collected was already considerable, and it was necessary to have some place set aside in which to keep them.

The Lieutenant now expected every day the arrival of the detachment to be sent by Captain Craventy. A good many things were still required for the new settlement. The stores were getting low; and if the party had left the fort in the beginning of May, they ought to reach Cape Bathurst towards the middle of June. It will be remembered that the Captain and his Lieutenant had fixed upon the cape as the spot of rendezvous, and Hobson having constructed his fort on it, there was no fear of the reinforcements failing to find him.

From the 15th June the districts surrounding the cape were carefully watched. The British flag waved from the summit of the cliff, and could be seen at a considerable distance. It was probable that the convoy would follow the Lieutenant's example, and skirt along the coast from Coronation Gulf. If not exactly the shortest, it was the surest route, at a time when, the sea being free from ice, the coast-line could be easily followed.

When the month of June passed without the arrival of the expected party, Hobson began to feel rather uneasy, especially as the country again became wrapped in fogs. He began to fear that the agents might lose their way, and often talked the matter over with Mrs Barnett, Mac-Nab, and Rae.

Thomas Black made no attempt to conceal his uneasiness, for he was anxious to return with the party from Fort Reliance as soon as he had seen his eclipse; and should anything keep them back from coming, he would have to resign himself to another winter, a prospect which did not please him at all; and in reply to his eager questions, Hobson could say little to reassure him.

The 4th July dawned. No news! Some men sent to the southeast to reconnoitre, returned, bringing no tidings.

Either the agents had never started, or they had lost their way. The latter hypothesis was unfortunately the more probable. Hobson knew Captain Craventy, and felt confident that he had sent off the convoy at the time named.

His increasing anxiety will therefore be readily understood. The fine season was rapidly passing away. Another two months and the Arctic winter, with its bitter winds, its whirlpools of snow, and its long nights, would again set in.

Hobson, as we well know, was not a man to yield to misfortune without a struggle. Something must be done, and with the ready concurrence of the astronomer the following plan was decided on.

It was now the 5th July. In another fortnight-July 18th-the solar eclipse was to take place, and after that Thomas Black would be free to leave Fort Hope. It was therefore agreed that if by that time the agents had not arrived, a convoy of a few men and four or five sledges should leave the factory, and make for the Great Slave Lake, taking with them some of the most valuable furs; and if no accident befell them, they might hope to arrive at Fort Reliance in six weeks at the latest-that is to say, towards the end of August.

This matter settled, Thomas Black shrank back into his shell, and became once more the man of one idea, awaiting the moment when the moon, passing between the orb of day and “himself,” should totally eclipse the disc of the sun.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ECLIPSE OF THE 18TH JULY 1860.

The mists did not disperse. The sun shone feebly through thick curtains of fog, and the astronomer began to have a great dread lest the eclipse should not be visible after all. Sometimes the fog was so dense that the summit of the cape could not be seen from the court of the fort.

Hobson got more and more uneasy. He had no longer any doubt that the convoy had gone astray in the strange land; moreover, vague apprehensions and sad forebodings increased his depression. He could not look into the future with any confidence — why, he would have found it impossible to explain. Everything apparently combined to reassure him. In spite of the great rigour of the winter, his little colony was in excellent health. No quarrels had arisen amongst the colonists, and their zeal and enthusiasm was still unabated. The surrounding districts were well stocked with game, the harvest of furs had surpassed his expectations, and the Company might well be satisfied with the result of the enterprise. Even if no fresh supply of provisions arrived, the resources of the country were such that the prospect of a second winter need awake no misgivings. Why, then, was Lieutenant Hobson losing hope and confidence?

He and Mrs Barnett had many a talk on the subject; and the latter did all she could to raise the drooping spirits of the commanding officer, urging upon him all the considerations enumerated above; and one day walking with him along the beach, she pleaded the cause of Cape Bathurst and the factory, built at the cost of-so much suffering, with more than usual eloquence.

“Yes, yes, madam, you are right,” replied Hobson; “but we can’t help our presentiments. I am no visionary. Twenty times in my soldier’s life I have been in critical circumstances, and have never lost presence of mind for one instant; and now for the first time in my life I am uneasy about the future. If I had to face a positive danger, I should have no fear; but a vague uncertain peril of which I have only a presentiment “

“What danger do you mean?” inquired Mrs Barnett; “a danger from men, from animals, or the elements?”

“Of animals I have no dread whatever, madam; it is for them to tremble before the hunters of Cape Bathurst, nor do I fear men; these districts are frequented by none but Esquimaux, and the Indians seldom venture so far north.”

“Besides, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett, “the Canadians, whose arrival you so much feared in the fine season, have never appeared.”

“I am very sorry for it, madam.”

“What! you regret the absence of the rivals who are so evidently hostile to your Company?”

“Madam, I am both glad and sorry that they have not come; that will of course puzzle you. But observe that the expected convoy from Fort Reliance has not arrived. It is the same with. the agents of the St Louis Fur Company; they might have come, and they have not done so. Not a single Esquimaux has visited this part of the coast during the summer either” —

“And what do you conclude from all this?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“I conclude that it is not so *easy* to get to Cape Bathurst or to Fort Hope as we could wish.”

The lady looked into the Lieutenant’s anxious face, struck with the melancholy and significant intonation of the word *easy.*

“Lieutenant Hobson,” she said earnestly, “if you fear neither men nor animals, I must conclude that your anxiety has reference to the elements.”

“Madam,” he replied, “I do not know if my spirit be broken, or if my presentiments blind me, but there seems to me to be something uncanny about this district. If I had known it better I should not have settled down in it. I have already called your attention to certain peculiarities, which to me appear inexplicable; the total absence of stones everywhere, and the clear-cut line of the coast. I can’t make out about the primitive formation of this end of the continent. I know that the vicinity of a volcano may cause some phenomena; but you remember what I said to you on the subject of the tides?”

“Oh yes, perfectly.”

“Where the sea ought according to the observations of explorers in these latitudes, to have risen fifteen or twenty feet, it has scarcely risen one !”

“Yes; but that you accounted for by the irregular distribution of land and the narrowness of the straits.”

“I *tried* to account for it, that is all,” replied Hobson; “but the day before yesterday I noticed a still more extraordinary phenomenon, which I cannot even try to explain, and I doubt if the greatest *savants* could do so either.”

Mrs Barnett looked inquiringly at Hobson.

“What has happened?” she exclaimed.

“Well, the day before yesterday, madam, when the moon was full, and according to the almanac the tide ought to have been very high, the sea did not even rise one foot, as it did before-it did not *rise* at all.”

“Perhaps you may be mistaken observed Mrs Barnett.

“I am not mistaken. I saw it with my own eyes. The day before yesterday, July 4th, there was positively no tide on the coast of Cape Bathurst.”

“And what do you conclude from that?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“I conclude madam,” replied the Lieutenant, “either that the laws of nature are changed, or that this district is very peculiarly situated... or rather... I conclude nothing... I explain nothing... I am puzzled... I do not understand it; and therefore... therefore I am anxious.”

Mrs Barnett asked no more questions. Evidently the total absence of tides was as unnatural and inexplicable as would be the absence of the sun from the meridian at noon. Unless the earthquake had so modified the conformation of the coast of the Arctic regions as to account for it-but no, such an idea could not be entertained by any one accustomed to note terrestrial phenomena.

As for supposing that the Lieutenant could be mistaken in his observations, that was impossible; and that very day he and Mrs Barnett, by means of beach-marks made on the beach, ascertained beyond all doubt that whereas a year before the sea rose a foot, there was now no tide whatever.

The matter was kept a profound secret, as Hobson was unwilling to render his companions anxious. But he might often be seen standing motionless and silent upon the summit of the cape, gazing across the sea, which was now open, and stretched away as far as the eye could reach.

During the month of July hunting the furred animals was discontinued, as the martens, foxes, and others had already lost their winter beauty. No game was brought down but that required for food, such as caribous, Polar hares, &c. which, strange to say, instead of being scared away by the guns, continued to multiply near the fort. Mrs Barnett did not fail to note this peculiar, and, as the event proved, significant fact.

No change had taken place in the situation on the 15th July. No news from Fort Reliance. The expected convoy did not arrive, and Hobson resolved to execute his project of sending to Captain Craventy, as Captain Craventy did not come to him.

Of course none but Sergeant Long could be appointed to the command of the little troop, although the faithful fellow would rather not have been separated from his Lieutenant. A considerable time must necessarily elapse before he could get back to Fort Hope. He would have to pass the winter at Fort Reliance, and return the next summer. Eight months at least! It is true either Mac-Nab or Rae could have taken the Sergeant’s place; but then they were married, and the one being a master carpenter, and the other the only blacksmith, the colonists could not well have dispensed with their services.

Such were the grounds on which the Lieutenant chose Long, and the Sergeant submitted with military obedience. The four soldiers elected to accompany him were Belcher, Pond, Petersen, and Kellet, who declared their readiness to start.

Four sledges and their teams of dogs were told off for the service. They were to take a good stock of provisions, and the most valuable of the furs.

Foxes, ermines, martens, swans, lynxes, musk-rats, gluttons, &c. all contributed to the precious convoy. The start was fixed for the morning of the 19th July, the day after the eclipse. Of course Thomas Black was to accompany the Sergeant, and one sledge was to convoy his precious person and instruments.

The worthy savant endured agonies of suspense in the few days preceding the phenomenon which he awaited with so much impatience. He might well be anxious; for one day it was fine and another wet, now mists obscured the sun, or thick fogs hid it all together; and the wind veered to every point of the horizon with provoking fickleness and uncertainty. What if during the few moments of the eclipse the queen of the night and the great orb of day should be wrapped in an opaque cloud at the critical moment, so that he, the astronomer, Thomas Black, come so far to watch the phenomenon, should be unable to see the luminous corona or the red prominences! How terrible would be the disappointment! How many dangers, how much suffering, how much fatigue, would have been gone through in vain !

“To have come so far to see the moon, and not to see it!” he cried in a comically piteous tone.

No, he could not face the thought and early of an evening he would climb to the summit of the cape and gaze into the heavens. The fair Phoebe was nowhere to be seen; for it being three days before new moon, she was accompanying the sun in his daily course, and her light was quenched in his beams.

Many a time did Thomas Black relieve his over-burdened heart by pouring out his troubles to Mrs Barnett. The good lady felt sincerely sorry for him, and one day, anxious to reassure him, she told him that the barometer showed a certain tendency to rise, and reminded him that they were in the fine season.

The fine season !” cried the poor astronomer” shrugging his shoulders. “Who can speak of a fine season in such a country as this?”

“Well, but, Mr Black,” said Mrs Barnett, “suppose, for the sake of argument, that you miss this eclipse by any unlucky chance, I suppose there will be another some day. The eclipse of July 18th will not be the last of this century.”

“No, madam, no,” returned Black; “there will be five more total eclipses of the sun before 1900. One on the 31st December 1861, which will be total for the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the Sahara Desert; a second on the 22d December 1870, total for the Azores, the south of Spain, Algeria, Sicily, and Turkey; a third on the 19th August 1887, total for the north-east of Germany, the south of Russia, and Central Asia; a fourth on the 9th April 1896, visible in Greenland, Lapland, and Siberia; and lastly, a fifth on the 28th May 1900, which will be total for the United States, Spain, Algeria, and

Egypt.”

“Well, Mr Black,” resumed Mrs Barnett, “if you lose the eclipse of the 18th July 1860, you can console yourself by looking forward to that of the 31st December 1861. It will only be seventeen months !”

“I can console myself, madam,” said the astronomer gravely, “by looking forward to that of 1896. I shall have to wait not seventeen months but thirty-six years !”

“May I ask why?”

“Because of all the eclipses, it alone-that of 9th August 1896-will be total for places in high latitudes, such as Lapland, Siberia, or Greenland.”

“But what is the special interest of an observation taken in these elevated latitudes?”

“What special interest?” cried Thomas Black; why, a scientific interest of the highest importance. Eclipses have very rarely been watched near the Pole, where the sun, being very little above the horizon, is considerably increased in size. The disc of the moon which is to intervene between us and the sun is subject to a similar apparent extension, and therefore it may be that the red prominences and the luminous corona can be more thoroughly examined This, madam, is why I have travelled all this distance to watch the eclipse above the seventieth parallel. A similar opportunity will not occur until 1896, and who can tell if I shall be alive then?”

To this burst of enthusiasm there was no reply to be made; and the astronomer’s anxiety and depression increased, for the inconstant weather seemed more and more disposed to play him some ill-natured trick.

It was very fine on the 16th July, but the next day it was cloudy and misty and Thomas Black became really ill. The feverish state he had been in for so long seemed likely to result in a serious illness. Mrs Barnett and Hobson tried in vain to soothe him, and Sergeant Long and the others could not understand how it was possible to be so unhappy for love of the moon.”

At last the great day-the 18th July-dawned. According to the calculations of astronomers, the total eclipse was to last four minutes thirty-seven seconds-that is to say, from forty-three minutes fifteen seconds past eleven to forty-seven minutes fifty-seven seconds past eleven A.M.

“What do I ask? what do I ask?” moaned the astronomer, tearing his hair. “Only one little corner of the sky free from clouds! only the small space in which the eclipse is to take place I And for how long? For four short minutes! After that, let it snow, let it thunder, let the elements break loose in fury, I should care no more for it all than a snail for a chronometer.”

It is not to be denied that Thomas Black had some grounds for his fears. It really seemed likely that observations would be impossible. At daybreak the horizon was shrouded in mists Heavy clouds were coming up from the south, and covering the very portion of the sky in which the eclipse was to take place. But doubtless the patron saint of astronomers had pity on poor Black, for towards eight o’clock a slight wind arose and swept tire mists and clouds from the sky, leaving it bright and clear!

A cry of gratitude burst from the lips of the astronomer, and his heart beat high with newly-awakened hope. The sun shone brightly, and the moon, so soon to darken it, was as yet invisible in its glorious beams.

Thomas Black’s instruments were already carefully placed on the promontory, and having pointed them towards the southern horizon, he awaited the event with calmness restored, and the coolness necessary for taking his observation. What was there left to fear?

Nothing, unless it was that the sky might fall upon his head! At nine o’clock there was not a cloud, not a vapour left upon the sky from the zenith to the horizon. Never were circumstances more favourable to an astronomical observation.

The whole party were anxious to take part in the observation, and all gathered round the astronomer on Cape Bathurst. Gradually the sun rose above the horizon, describing an extended arc above the vast plain stretching away to the south. No one spoke, but awaited the eclipse in solemn silence.

Towards half-past nine the eclipse commenced The disc of the moon seemed to graze that of the sun. But the moon’s *shadow* was not to fall completely on the earth, hiding the sun, until between forty three minutes past eleven and forty-seven minutes fifty-seven seconds past eleven. That was the time fixed in the almanacs, and every one knows that no error can creep into them, established, verified, and controlled as they are by the scientific men of all the observatories in the world.

The astronomer had brought a good many glasses with him, and he distributed them amongst his companions, that all might watch the progress of the phenomenon without injury to the eyes.

The brown disc of the moon gradually advanced, and terrestrial objects began to assume a peculiar orange hue, whilst the atmosphere on tire zenith completely changed colour. At a quarter-past ten half the disc of the sun was darkened, and a few dogs which happened to be at liberty showed signs of uneasiness and bowled piteously. The wild ducks, thinking night had come, began to utter sleepy calls -and to seek their nests, and the mothers gathered their little ones under their wings. The hush of eventide fell upon all animated nature.

At eleven o’clock two-thirds of the sun were covered, and all terrestrial objects became a kind of vinous red. A gloomy twilight set in, to be succeeded during the four minutes of totality by absolute darkness. A few planets, amongst t others Mercury and Venus, began to appear, and some constellations — Caplet, [symbol] and [symbol] of Taurus, and [symbol] of Orion. The darkness deepened every moment.

Thomas Black remained motionless with his eye glued to the glass of his instrument, eagerly watching the progress of the phenomenon. At forty-three minutes past eleven the discs of the two luminaries ought to be exactly opposite to each other, that of the moon completely hiding that of the sun.

“Forty-three minutes past eleven,” announced Hobson, who was attentively watching the minute hand of his chronometer.

Thomas Black remained motionless, stooping over his instrument. Half a minute passed, and then the astronomer [astonomer] drew himself up, with eyes distended and eager. Once more he bent over the telescope, and cried in a choked voice —

“She is going! she is going! The moon, the moon is going! She is disappearing, running away !”

True enough the disc of the moon was gliding away from that of the sun without having completely covered it !

The astronomer had fallen backwards, completely overcome. The four minutes were past. The luminous corona had not appeared !

“What is the matter?” inquired Hobson.

“The matter is,” screamed the poor astronomer, “that the eclipse was not total-not total for this portion of the globe! Do you hear? It was not to-t-a-1! I say not to-t-a-l! !”

“Then your almanacs are incorrect.”

“Incorrect! Don’t tell that to me, if you please, Lieutenant Hobson !”

“But what then?” said Hobson, suddenly changing countenance.

“Why,” said Black, “we are not after all on the seventieth parallel !”

“Only fancy !” cried Mrs Barnett.

“We can soon prove it,” said the astronomer whose eyes flashed with rage and disappointment. “The sun will pass the meridian in a few minutes... My sextant-quick... make haste !”

One of the soldiers rushed to the house and fetched the instrument required.

The astronomer pointed it upon the sun; he watched the orb of day pass the meridian, and rapidly noted down a few calculations.

“What was the situation of Cape Bathurst a year ago when we took the latitude?” he inquired.

“Seventy degrees, forty-four minutes, and thirty-seven seconds,” replied Hobson.

“Well, sir, it is now seventy-three degrees, seven minutes, and twenty seconds! You see we are not under the seventieth parallel !

“Or rather we are no longer there !” muttered Hobson.

A sudden light had broken in upon his mind, all the phenomena hitherto so inexplicable were now explained.

Cape Bathurst had drifted three degrees farther north since the arrival of the Lieutenant and his companions !

PART II

CHAPTER I.

A FLOATING FORT.

And so Fort Hope, founded by Lieutenant Hobson on the borders of the Polar Sea, had drifted! Was the courageous agent of the Company to blame for this? No; any one might have been deceived as he had been. No human prevision could have foreseen such a calamity. He meant to build upon a rock, and he had not even built upon sand. The peninsula of Victoria, which the best maps of English America join to the American continent, had been torn suddenly away from it. This peninsula was in fact nothing but an immense piece of ice, five hundred square miles in extent, converted by successive deposits of sand and earth into apparently solid ground well clothed with vegetation. Connected with the mainland for thousands of centuries, the earthquake of the 8th of January had dragged it away from its moorings, and it was now a floating island, at the mercy of the winds and waves, and had been carried along the Arctic Ocean by powerful currents for the last three months!

Yes, Fort Hope was built upon ice! Hobson at once understood the mysterious change in their latitude. The isthmus — that is to say, the neck of land which connected the peninsula of Victoria with the mainland — had been snapped in two by a subterranean convulsion connected with the eruption of the volcano some months before. As long as the northern winter continued, the frozen sea maintained things as they were; but when the thaw came, when the ice fields, melted beneath the rays of the sun, and the huge icebergs, driven out into the offing, drew back to the farthest limits of the horizon — when the sea at last became open, the whole peninsula drifted away, with its woods, its cliffs, its promontories, its inland lagoon, and its coast-line, under the influence of a current about which nothing was known.

For months this drifting had been going on unnoticed by the colonists, who even when hunting did not go far from Fort Hope. Beach-marks, if they had been made, would have been useless; for heavy mists obscured everything at a short distance, the ground remained apparently firm and motionless, and there was, in short, nothing to hint to the Lieutenant and his men that they had become islanders. The position of the new island with regard to the rising and setting of the sun was the same as before. Had the cardinal points changed their position, had the island turned round, the Lieutenant, the astronomer, or Mrs Barnett, would certainly have noticed and understood the change; but in its course the island had thus far followed a parallel of latitude, and its motion, though rapid, had been imperceptible.

Although Hobson had no doubt of the moral and physical courage and determination of his companions, he determined not to acquaint them with the truth. It would be time enough to tell them of their altered position when it had been thoroughly studied. Fortunately the good fellows, soldiers or workmen, took little notice of the astronomical observations, and not being able to see the consequences involved, they did not trouble themselves about the change of latitude just announced.

The Lieutenant determined to conceal his anxiety, and seeing no remedy for the misfortune, mastered his emotion by a strong effort, and tried to console Thomas Black, who was lamenting his disappointment and tearing his hair.

The astronomer had no doubt about the misfortune of which he was the victim. Not having, like the Lieutenant, noticed the peculiarities of the district, he did not look beyond the one fact in which he was interested: on the day fixed, at the time named, the moon had not completely eclipsed the sun. And what could he conclude but that, to the disgrace of observatories, the almanacs were false, and that the long desired eclipse, his own eclipse, Thomas Black's, which he had come so far and through so many dangers to see, had not been "total" for this particular district under the seventieth parallel! No, no, it was impossible to believe it; he could not face the terrible certainty, and he was overwhelmed with disappointment. He was soon to learn the truth, however.

Meanwhile Hobson let his men imagine that the failure of the eclipse could only interest himself and the astronomer, and they returned to their ordinary occupations; but as they were leaving, Corporal Joliffe stopped suddenly and said, touching his cap —

"May I ask you one question, sir?"

"Of course, Corporal; say on," replied the Lieutenant, who wondered what was coming.

But Joliffe hesitated, and his little wife nudged his elbow.

"Well, Lieutenant," resumed the Corporal, "it's just about the seventieth degree of latitude — if we are not where we thought we were."

The Lieutenant frowned.

"Well," he replied evasively, "we made a mistake in our reckoning... our first observation was wrong;... but what does that concern you?"

"Please, sir, it's because of the pay," replied Joliffe with a scowl. "You know well enough that the Company promised us double pay."

Hobson drew a sigh of relief. It will be remembered that the men had been promised higher pay if they succeeded in settling on or above the seventieth degree north latitude, and Joliffe, who always had an eye to the main chance, had looked upon the whole matter from a monetary point of view, and was afraid the bounty would be withheld.

“You needn’t be afraid,” said Hobson with a smile; “and you can tell your brave comrades that our mistake, which is really inexplicable, will not in the least prejudice your interests. We are not below, but above the seventieth parallel, and so you will get your double pay.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you,” replied Joliffe with a beaming face. “It isn’t that we think much about money, but that the money sticks to us.”

And with this sage remark the men drew off, little dreaming what a strange and fearful change had taken place in the position of the country.

Sergeant Long was about to follow the others when Hobson stopped him with the words —

“Remain here, Sergeant Long.”

The subordinate officer turned on his heel and waited for the Lieutenant to address him.

All had now left the cape except Mrs Barnett, Madge, Thomas Black, and the two officers.

Since the eclipse Mrs Barnett had not uttered a word. She looked inquiringly at Hobson, who tried to avoid meeting her eyes.

For some time not another word was spoken. All involuntarily turned towards the south, where the broken isthmus was situated; but from their position they could only see the sea horizon on the north. Had Cape Bathurst been situated a few hundred feet more above the level of the ocean, they would have been able at a glance to ascertain the limits of their island home.

All were deeply moved at the sight of Fort Hope and all its occupants borne away from all solid ground, and floating at the mercy of winds and waves.

“Then, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett at last, “all the strange phenomena you observed are now explained!”

“Yes, madam,” he replied, “everything is explained. The peninsula of Victoria, now an island, which we thought firm ground with an immovable foundation, is nothing more than a vast sheet of ice welded for centuries to the American continent. Gradually the wind has strewn it with earth and sand, and scattered over them the seeds from which have sprung the trees and mosses with which it is clothed. Rain-water filled the lagoon, and produced the little river; vegetation transformed the appearance of the ground; but beneath the lake, beneath the soil of earth and sand — in a word, beneath our feet is a foundation of ice, which floats upon the water by reason of its being specifically lighter than it. Yes, it is a sheet of ice which bears us up, and is carrying us away, and this is why we have not found a single flint or stone upon its surface. This is why its shores are perpendicular, this is why we found ice ten feet below the surface when we dug the reindeer pit — this, in short, is why the tide was not noticeable on the peninsula, which rose and sank with the ebb and flow of the waves!”

“Everything is indeed explained,” said Mrs Barnett, “and your presentiments did not deceive you; but can you explain why the tides, which do not affect us at all now, were to a slight extent perceptible on our arrival?”

“Simply because, madam, on our arrival the peninsula was still connected by means of its flexible isthmus with the American continent. It offered a certain resistance to the current, and on its northern shores the tide rose two feet beyond low-water mark, instead of the twenty we reasonably expected. But from the moment when the earthquake broke the connecting link, from the moment when the peninsula became an island free from all control, it rose and sank with the ebb and flow of the tide; and, as we noticed together at full moon a few days ago, no sensible difference was produced on our shores.”

In spite of his despair, Thomas Black listened attentively to Hobson’s explanations, and could not but see the reasonableness of his deductions, but he was furious at such a rare, unexpected, and, as he said, “ridiculous” phenomenon occurring just so as to make him miss the eclipse, and he said not a word, but maintained a gloomy, even haughty silence.

“Poor Mr Black,” said Mrs Barnett, “it must be owned that an astronomer was never more hardly used than you since the world began!”

“In any case, however,” said Hobson, turning to her, “we have neither of us anything to reproach ourselves with. No one can find fault with us. Nature alone is to blame. The earthquake cut off our communication with the mainland, and converted our peninsula into a floating island, and this explains why the furred and other animals imprisoned like ourselves, have become so numerous round the fort!”

“This, too, is why the rivals you so much dreaded have not visited us, Lieutenant!” exclaimed Madge.

“And this,” added the Sergeant, “accounts for the non-arrival of the convoy sent to Cape Bathurst by Captain Craventy.”

“And this is why,” said Mrs. Barnett, looking at the Lieutenant, “I must give up all hope of returning to Europe this year at least!”

The tone of voice in which the lady made this last remark showed that she resigned herself to her fate more readily than could have been expected. She seemed suddenly to have made up her mind to make the best of the situation, which would no doubt give her an opportunity of making a great many interesting observations. And after all, what good would grumbling have done? Recriminations were worse than useless. They could not have altered their position, or have checked the course of the wandering island, and there was no means of reuniting it to a continent. No; God alone could decide the future of Fort Hope. They must bow to His will.

CHAPTER II.

WHERE ARE WE?

It was necessary carefully to study the unexpected and novel situation in which the agents of the Company now found themselves, and Hobson did so with his chart before him.

He could not ascertain the longitude of Victoria Island — the original name being retained — until the next day, and the latitude had already been taken. For the longitude, the altitude of the sun must be ascertained before and after noon, and two hour angles must be measured.

At two o’clock P.M. Hobson and Black took the height of the sun above the horizon with the sextant, and they hoped to recommence the same operation the next morning towards ten o’clock A.M. so as to be able to infer from the two altitudes obtained the exact point of the Arctic Ocean then occupied by their island.

The party did not, however, at once return to the fort, but remained talking together for some little time on the promontory. Madge declared she was quite resigned, and evidently thought only of her mistress, at whom she could not look without emotion; she could not bear to think of the sufferings and trials her “dear girl” might have to go through in the future. She was ready to lay down her life for “Paulina,” but what good could that do now. She knew, however, that Mrs Barnett was not a woman to sink under her misfortunes, and indeed at present there was really no need for any one to despair.

There was no immediate danger to be dreaded, and a catastrophe might even yet be avoided. This Hobson carefully explained to his companions.

Two dangers threatened the island floating along the coast of North America, only two.

It would be drawn by the currents of the open sea to the high Polar latitudes, from which there is no return.

Or the current would take it to the south, perhaps through the Behring Strait into the Pacific Ocean.

In the former contingency, the colonists, shut in by ice and surrounded by impassable icebergs, would have no means of communication with their fellow-creatures, and would die of cold and hunger in the solitudes of the north.

In the latter contingency, Victoria Island, driven by the currents to the western waters of the Pacific, would gradually melt and go to pieces beneath the feet of its inhabitants.

In either case death would await the Lieutenant and his companions, and the fort, erected at the cost of so much labour and suffering, would be destroyed.

But it was scarcely probable that either of these events would happen. The season was already considerably advanced, and in less than three months the sea would again be rendered motion less by the icy hand of the Polar winter. The ocean would again be converted into an ice-field, and by means of sledges they might get to the nearest land — the coast of Russian America if the island remained in the east, or the coast of Asia if it were driven to the west.

“For,” added Hobson, “we have absolutely no control over our floating island. Having no sail to hoist, as in a boat, we cannot guide it in the least. Where it takes us we must go.”

All that Hobson said was clear, concise, and to the point. There could be no doubt that the bitter cold of winter would solder Victoria Island to the vast ice-field, and it was highly probable that it would drift neither too far north nor too far south. To have to cross a few hundred miles of ice was no such terrible prospect for brave and resolute men accustomed to long excursions in the Arctic regions. It would be necessary, it was true, to abandon Fort Hope — the object of so many hopes, and to lose the benefit of all their exertions, but what of that? The factory, built upon a shifting soil, could be of no further use to the Company. Sooner or later it would be swallowed up by the ocean, and what was the good of useless regrets? It must, therefore, be deserted as soon as circumstances should permit.

The only thing against the safety of the colonists was — and the Lieutenant dwelt long on this point — that during the eight or nine weeks which must elapse before the solidification of the Arctic Ocean, Victoria Island might be dragged too far north or south.

Arctic explorers had often told of pieces of ice being drifted an immense distance without any possibility of stopping them.

Everything then depended on the force and direction of the currents from the opening of Behring Strait; and it would be necessary carefully to ascertain all that a chart of the Arctic Ocean could tell. Hobson had such a chart, and invited all who were with him on the cape to come to his room and look at it; but before going down to the fort he once more urged upon them the necessity of keeping their situation a secret.

“It is not yet desperate,” he said, “and it is therefore quite unnecessary to damp the spirits of our comrades, who will perhaps not be able to understand, as we do, all the chances in our favour.”

“Would it not be prudent to build a boat large enough to hold us all, and strong enough to carry us a few hundred miles over the sea?” observed Mrs Barnett.

“It would be prudent certainly,” said Hobson, “and we will do it. I must think of some pretext for beginning the work at once, and give the necessary orders to the head carpenter. But taking to a boat can only be a forlorn hope when everything else has failed. We must try all we can to avoid being on the island when the ice breaks up, and we must make for the mainland as soon as ever the sea is frozen over.”

Hobson was right. It would take about three months to build a thirty or thirty-five ton vessel, and the sea would not be open when it was finished. It would be very dangerous to embark the whole party when the ice was breaking up all round, and he would be well out of his difficulties if he could get across the ice to firm ground before the next thaw set in. This was why Hobson thought a boat a forlorn hope, a desperate makeshift, and every one agreed with him.

Secrecy was once more promised, for it was felt that Hobson was the best judge of the matter, and a few minutes later the five conspirators were seated together in the large room of Fort Hope, which was then deserted, eagerly examining an excellent map of the oceanic and atmospheric currents of the Arctic Ocean, special attention being naturally given to that part of the Polar Sea between Cape Bathurst and Behring Strait.

Two principal currents divide the dangerous latitudes comprehended between the Polar Circle and the imperfectly known zone, called the North-West Passage since McClure’s daring discovery — at least only two have been hitherto noticed by marine surveyors.

One is called the Kamtchatka Current. It takes its rise in the offing outside the peninsula of that name, follows the coast of Asia, and passes through Behring Strait, touching Cape East, a promontory of Siberia. After running due north for about six hundred miles from the strait, it turns suddenly to the east, pretty nearly following the same parallel as McClure’s Passage, and probably doing much to keep that communication open for a few mouths in the warm season.

The other current, called Behring Current, flows just the other way. After running from east to west at about a hundred miles at the most from the coast, it comes into collision, so to speak, with the Kamtchatka Current at the opening of the strait, and turning to the south approaches the shores of Russian America, crosses Behring Sea, and finally breaks on the kind of circular dam formed by the Aleutian Islands.

Hobson’s map gave a very exact summary of the most recent nautical observations, so that it could be relied on.

The Lieutenant examined it carefully before speaking, and then pressing his hand to his head, as if oppressed by some sad presentiment, he observed —

“Let us hope that fate will not take us to remote northern latitudes. Our wandering island would run a risk of never returning.”

“Why, Lieutenant?” broke in Mrs Barnett.

“Why, madam?” replied Hobson; “look well at this part of the Arctic Ocean, and you will readily understand why. Two currents, both dangerous for us, run opposite ways. When they meet, the island must necessarily become stationary, and that at a great distance from any land. At that point it will have to remain for the winter, and when the next thaw sets in, it will either follow the Kamtchatka Current to the deserted regions of the north-west, or it will float down with the Behring Current to be swallowed up by the Pacific Ocean.”

“That will not happen, Lieutenant,” said Madge in a tone of earnest conviction; “God would never permit that.”

“I can’t make out,” said Mrs Barnett, “whereabouts in the Polar Sea we are at this moment; for I see but one current from the offing of Cape Bathurst which bears directly to the north-west, and that is the dangerous Kamtchatka Current. Are you not afraid that it has us in its fatal embrace, and is carrying us with it to the shores of North Georgia?”

“I think not,” replied Hobson, after a moment’s reflection.

“Why not?”

“Because it is a very rapid current, madam; and if we had been following it for three months, we should have had some land in sight by this time, and there is none, absolutely none!”

“Where, then, do you suppose we are?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“Most likely between the Kamtchatka Current and the coast, perhaps in some vast eddy unmarked upon the map.”

“That cannot be, Lieutenant,” replied Mrs Barnett, quickly.

“Why not, madam, why not?”

“Because if Victoria Island were in an eddy, it would have veered round to a certain extent, and our position with regard to the cardinal points would have changed in the last three months, which is certainly not the case.”

“You are right, madam, you are quite right. The only explanation I can think of is, that there is some other current, not marked on our map. Oh, that to morrow were here that I might find out our longitude; really this uncertainty is terrible!”

“To-morrow will come,” observed Madge.

There was nothing to do but to wait. The party therefore separated, all returning to their ordinary occupations. Sergeant Long informed his comrades that the departure for Fort Reliance, fixed for the next day, was put off. He gave as reasons that the season was too far advanced to get to the southern factory before the great cold set in, that the astronomer was anxious to complete his meteorological observations, and would therefore submit to another winter in the north, that game was so plentiful provisions from Fort Reliance were not needed. &c. &c. But about all these matters the brave fellows cared little.

Lieutenant Hobson ordered his men to spare the furred animals in future, and only to kill edible game, so as to lay up fresh stores for the coming winter; he also forbade them to go more than two miles from the fort, not wishing Marbre and Sabine to come suddenly upon a sea-horizon, where the isthmus connecting the peninsula of Victoria with the mainland was visible a few months before. The disappearance of the neck of land would inevitably have betrayed everything.

The day appeared endless to Lieutenant Hobson. Again and again he returned to Cape Bathurst either alone, or accompanied by Mrs Barnett. The latter, inured to danger, showed no fear; she even joked the Lieutenant about his floating island being perhaps, after all, the proper conveyance for going to the North Pole. “With a favourable current might they not reach that hitherto inaccessible point of the globe?”

Lieutenant Hobson shook his head as he listened to his companion’s fancy, and kept his eyes fixed upon the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of some land, no matter what, in the distance. But no, sea and sky met in an absolutely unbroken circular line, confirming Hobson’s opinion that Victoria Island was drifting to the west rather than in any other direction.

“Lieutenant,” at last said Mrs Barnett, “don’t you mean to make a tour of our island as soon as possible?”

“Yes, madam, of course; as soon as I have taken our bearings, I mean to ascertain the form and extent of our dominions. It seems, however, that the fracture was made at the isthmus itself, so that the whole peninsula has become an island.”

“A strange destiny is ours, Lieutenant,” said Mrs Barnett. “Others return from their travels to add new districts to geographical maps, but we shall have to efface the supposed peninsula of Victoria!”

The next day, July 18th, the sky was very clear, and at ten o’clock in the morning Hobson obtained a satisfactory altitude of the sun, and, comparing it with that of the observation of the day before, he ascertained exactly the longitude in which they were.

The island was then in 157° 37’ longitude west from Greenwich.

The latitude obtained the day before at noon almost immediately after the eclipse was, as we know, 73° 7’ 20” north.

The spot was looked out on the map in the presence of Mrs Barnett and Sergeant Long.

It was indeed a most anxious moment, and the following result was arrived at.

The wandering island was moving in a westerly direction, borne along by a current unmarked on the chart, and unknown to hydrographers, which was evidently carrying it towards Behring Strait. All the dangers foreseen by Hobson were then imminent, if Victoria Island did not again touch the mainland before the winter.

“But how far are we from the American continent? that is the most important point just at present,” said Mrs Barnett.

Hobson took his compasses, and carefully measured the narrowest part of the sea between the coast and the seventieth parallel.

“We are actually more than two hundred and fifty miles from Point Barrow, the northernmost extremity of Russian America,” he replied.

“We ought to know, then, how many miles the island has drifted since it left the mainland,” said Sergeant Long.

“Seven hundred miles at least,” replied Hobson, after having again consulted the chart.

“And at about what time do you suppose the drifting commenced?”

“Most likely towards the end of April; the ice-field broke up then, and the icebergs which escaped melting drew back to the north. We may, therefore, conclude that Victoria Island has been moving along with the current parallel with the coast at an average rate of ten miles a day.”

“No very rapid pace after all!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett.

“Too fast, madam, when you think where we may be taken during the two months in which the sea will remain open in this part of the Arctic Ocean.”

The three friends remained silent, and looked fixedly at the chart of the fearful Polar regions, towards which they were being irresistibly drawn, and which have hitherto successfully resisted all attempts to explore them.

“There is, then, nothing to be done? Nothing to try?” said Mrs Barnett after a pause.

“Nothing, madam,” replied Hobson; “nothing whatever. We must wait; we must all pray for the speedy arrival of the Arctic winter generally so much dreaded by sailors, but which alone can save us now. The winter will bring ice, our only anchor of salvation, the only power which can arrest the course of this wandering island.”

CHAPTER III.

A TOUR OF THE ISLAND.

From that day, July 18th, it was decided that the bearings should be taken as on board a vessel whenever the state of the atmosphere rendered the operation possible. Was not the island, in fact, a disabled ship, tossed about without sails or helm.

The next day after taking the bearings, Hobson announced that without change of latitude the island had advanced several miles farther west. Mac-Nab was ordered to commence the construction of a huge boat, Hobson telling him, in explanation, that he proposed making a reconnaissance of the coast as far as Russian America next summer. The carpenter asked no further questions, but proceeded to choose his wood, and fixed upon the beach at the foot of Cape Bathurst as his dockyard, so that he might easily be able to launch his vessel.

Hobson intended to set out the same day on his excursion round the island in which he and his comrades were imprisoned. Many changes might take place in the configuration of this sheet of ice, subject as it was to the influence of the variable temperature of the waves, and it was important to determine its actual form at the present time, its area, and its thickness in different parts. The point of rupture, which was most likely at the isthmus itself, ought to be examined with special care; the fracture being still fresh, it might be possible to ascertain the exact arrangement of the stratified layers of ice and earth of which the soil of the island was composed.

But in the afternoon the sky clouded over suddenly, and a violent squall, accompanied with thick mists, swept down upon the fort. Presently torrents of rain fell, and large hailstones rattled on the roof, whilst a few distant claps of thunder were heard, a phenomenon of exceedingly rare occurrence in such elevated latitudes.

Hobson was obliged to put off his trip, and wait until the fury of the elements abated, but during the 20th, 2lst, and 22d July, no change occurred. The storm raged, the floods of heaven were let loose, and the waves broke upon the beach with a deafening roar. Liquid avalanches were flung with such force upon Cape Bathurst, that there was reason to dread that it might give way; its stability was, in fact, somewhat problematical, as it consisted merely of an aggregation of sand and earth, without any firm foundation. Vessels at sea might well be pitied in this fearful gale, but the floating island was of too vast a bulk to be affected by the agitation of the waves, and remained indifferent to their fury.

During the night of the 22d July the tempest suddenly ceased. A strong breeze from the north-east dispelled the last mists upon the horizon. The barometer rose a few degrees, and the weather appeared likely to favour Hobson’s expedition.

He was to be accompanied by Mrs Barnett and Sergeant Long, and expected to be absent a day or two. The little party took some salt meat, biscuits, and a few flasks of rum with them, and there was nothing in their excursion to surprise the rest of the colonists. The days were just then very long, the sun only disappearing below the horizon for a few hours.

There were no wild animals to be feared now. The bears seemed to have fled by instinct from the peninsula whilst it was still connected with the mainland, but to neglect no precaution each of the three explorers was provided with a gun. The Lieutenant and his subordinate also carried hatchets and ice-chisels, which a traveller in the Polar regions should never be without.

During the absence of the Lieutenant and the Sergeant, the command of the fort fell to Corporal Joliffe, or rather to his little wife, and Hobson knew that he could trust her. Thomas Black could not be depended on; he would not even join the exploring party; he promised, however, to watch the northern latitudes very carefully, and to note any change which should take place in the sea or the position of the cape during the absence of the Lieutenant.

Mrs Barnett had endeavoured to reason with the unfortunate astronomer, but he would listen to nothing. He felt that Nature had deceived him, and that he could never forgive her.

After many a hearty farewell, the Lieutenant and his two companions left the fort by the postern gate, and, turning to the west, followed the lengthened curve of the coast between Capes Bathurst and Esquimaux.

It was eight o’clock in the morning; the oblique rays of the sun struck upon the beach, and touched it with many a brilliant tint, the angry billows of the sea were sinking to rest, and the birds, ptarmigans, guillemots, puffins, and petrels, driven away by the storm, were returning by thousands. Troops of ducks were hastening back to Lake Barnett, flying close, although they knew it not, to Mrs Joliffe’s saucepan. Polar hares, martens, musk rats, and ermines rose before the travellers and fled at their approach, but not with any great appearance of haste or terror. The animals evidently felt drawn towards their old enemies by a common danger.

“They know well enough that they are hemmed in by the sea and cannot quit the island,” observed Hobson.

“They are all in the habit of seeking warmer climates in the south in the winter, are they not?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“Yes, madam, but unless they are presently able to cross the ice-field, they will have to remain prisoners like ourselves, and I am afraid the greater number will die of cold or hunger.

“I hope they will be good enough to supply us with food for a long time,” observed the Sergeant,” and I think it is very fortunate that they had not the sense to run away before the rupture of the isthmus.”

“The birds will, however, leave us?” added Mrs Barnett.

“Oh yes, madam, everything with wings will go, they can traverse long distances without fatigue, and, more fortunate than ourselves, they will regain *terra firma*.”

“Could we not use them as messengers?” asked Mrs Barnett.

“A good idea, madam, a capital idea,” said Hobson. “We might easily catch some hundreds of these birds, and tie a paper round their necks with our exact situation written upon it. John Ross in 1848 tried similar means to acquaint the survivors of the Franklin expedition with the presence of his ships, the *Enterprise* and the *Investigator* in the Polar seas. He caught some hundreds of white foxes in traps, rivetted a copper collar round the neck of each with all the necessary information engraved upon it, and then set them free in every direction.”

“Perhaps some of the messengers may have fallen into the hands of the shipwrecked wanderers.”

“Perhaps so,” replied Hobson; “I know that an old fox was taken by Captain Hatteras during his voyage of discovery, wearing a collar half worn away and hidden beneath his thick white fur. What we cannot do with the quadrupeds, we will do with the birds.”

Chatting thus and laying plans for the future, the three explorers continued to follow the coast. They noticed no change; the abrupt cliffs covered with earth and sand showed no signs of a recent alteration in the extent of the island. It was, however, to be feared that the vast sheet of ice would be worn away at the base by the action of the warm currents, and on this point Hobson was naturally anxious.

By eleven o’clock in the morning the eight miles between Capes Bathurst and Esquimaux had been traversed. A few traces of the encampment of Kalumah’s party still remained; of course the snow huts had entirely disappeared, but some cinders and walrus bones marked the spot.

The three explorers halted here for a short time, they intended to pass the few short hours of the night at Walruses’ Bay, which they hoped to reach In a few hours. They breakfasted seated on a slightly rising ground covered with a scanty and stunted herbage. Before their eyes lay the ocean bounded by a clearly-defined sea-horizon, without a sail or an iceberg to break the monotony of the vast expanse of water.

“Should you be very much surprised if some vessel came In sight now, Lieutenant?” inquired Mrs Barnett.

“I should be very agreeably surprised, madam,” replied Hobson. “It is not at all uncommon for whalers to come as far north as this, especially now that the Arctic Ocean is frequented by whales and chacholots, but you must remember that it is the 23rd July, and the summer is far advanced. The whole fleet of whaling vessels is probably now in Gulf Kotzebue, at the entrance to the strait. Whalers shun the sudden changes in the Arctic Ocean, and with good reason. They dread being shut in the ice; and the icebergs, avalanches, and, ice-fields they avoid, are the very things for which we earnestly pray.”

“They will come, Lieutenant,” said Long; “have patience, in another two months the waves will no longer break upon the shores of Cape Esquimaux.”

“Cape Esquimaux!” observed Mrs Barnett with a smile. “That name, like those we gave to the other parts of the peninsula, may turn out unfortunate too. We have lost Port Barnett and Paulina River; who can tell whether Cape Esquimaux and Walruses’ Bay may not also disappear in time?”

“They too will disappear, madam,” replied Hobson, “and after them the whole of Victoria Island, for nothing now connects it with a continent, and it is doomed to destruction. This result is inevitable, and our choice of geographical names will be thrown away; but fortunately the Royal Society has not yet adopted them, and Sir Roderick Murchison will have nothing to efface on his maps.”

“One name he will,” exclaimed the Sergeant.

“Which?” inquired Hobson.

“Cape Bathurst,” replied Long.

“Ah, yes, you are right. Cape Bathurst must now be removed from maps of the Polar regions.”

Two hours’ rest were all the explorers cared for, and at one o’clock they prepared to resume their journey.

Before starting Hobson once more looked round him from the summit of Cape Esquimaux; but seeing nothing worthy of notice, he rejoined Mrs Barnett and Sergeant Long.

“Madam,” he said, addressing the lady, “you have not forgotten the family of natives we met here last winter?”

“Oh no, I have always held dear little Kalumah in friendly remembrance. She promised to come and see us again at Fort Hope, but she will not be able to do so. But why do you ask me about the natives now?”

“Because I remember something to which, much to my regret, I did not at the time attach sufficient importance.”

“What was that?”

“You remember the uneasy surprise the men manifested at finding a big a factory at the foot of Cape Bathurst.”

“Oh yes, perfectly.”

“You remember that I tried to make out what the natives meant, and that I could not do so?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well,” added Hobsou, “I know now why they shook their heads. From tradition, experience, or something, the Esquimaux knew what the peninsula really was, they knew we had not built on firm ground. But as things had probably remained as they were for centuries, they thought there was no immediate danger, and that it was not worth while to explain themselves."

"Very likely you are right," replied Mrs Barnett; "but I feel sure that Kalumah had no suspicion of her companion's fears, or she would have warned us."

Hobson quite agreed with Mrs Barnett, and Sergeant Long observed —

"It really seems to have been by a kind of fatality that we settled ourselves upon this peninsula just before it was torn away from the mainland. I suppose, Lieutenant, that it had been connected for a very long time, perhaps for centuries."

"You might say for thousands and thousands of years, Sergeant," replied Hobson. "Remember that the soil on which we are treading has been brought here by the wind, little by little, that the sand has accumulated grain by grain! Think of the time it must have taken for the seeds of firs, willows, and arbutus to become shrubs and trees! Perhaps the sheet of ice on which we float was welded to the continent before the creation of man!"

"Well," cried Long, "it really might have waited a few centuries longer before it drifted. How much anxiety and how many dangers we might then have been spared!"

Sergeant Long's most sensible remark closed the conversation, and the journey was resumed.

From Cape Esquimaux to Walruses' Bay the coast ran almost due south, following the one hundred and twenty-seventh meridian. Looking behind them they could see one corner of the lagoon, its waters sparkling in the sunbeams, and a little beyond the wooded heights in which it was framed. Large eagles soared above their heads, their cries and the loud flapping of their wings breaking the stillness, and furred animals of many kinds, martens, polecats, ermines, &c. crouching behind some rising ground, or hiding amongst the stunted bushes and willows, gazed inquiringly at the intruders. They seemed to understand that they had nothing to fear. Hobson caught a glimpse of a few beavers wandering about, evidently ill at ease, and puzzled at the disappearance of the little river. With no ledges to shelter them, and no stream by which to build a new home, they were doomed to die of cold when the severe frost set in. Sergeant Long also saw a troop of wolves crossing the plain.

It was evident that specimens of the whole Arctic Fauna were imprisoned on the island, and there was every reason to fear that, when famished with hunger, all the carnivorous beasts would be formidable enemies to the occupants of Fort Hope.

Fortunately, however, one race of animals appeared to be quite unrepresented. Not a single white bear was seen! Once the Sergeant thought he saw an enormous white mass moving about on the other side of a clump of willows, but on close examination decided that he was mistaken.

The coast near Walruses’ Bay was, on the whole, only slightly elevated above the sea-level, and in the distance the waves broke into running foam as they do upon a sloping beach. It was to be feared that the soil had little stability, but there was no means of judging of the modifications which had taken place since their last visit, and Hobson much regretted that he had not made bench marks about Cape Bathurst before he left, that he might judge of the amount of sinking or depression which took place. He determined, however, to take this precaution on his return.

It will be understood that, under the circumstances, the party did not advance very rapidly. A pause was often made to examine the soil, or to see if there were any sign of an approaching fracture on the coast, and sometimes the explorers wandered inland for half a mile. Here and there the Sergeant planted branches of willow or birch to serve as landmarks for the future, especially wherever undermining seemed to be going on rapidly and the solidity of the ground was doubtful. By this means it would be easy to ascertain the changes which might take place.

They did advance, however, and at three o'clock in the afternoon they were only three miles from Walruses' Bay, and Hobson called Mrs Barnett's attention to the important changes which had been effected by the rupture of the isthmus.

Formerly the south-western horizon was shut in by a long slightly curved coast-line, formed by the shores of Liverpool Bay. Now a sea-line bounded the view, the continent having disappeared. Victoria Island ended in an abrupt angle where it had broken off, and all felt sure that on turning round that angle the ocean would be spread out before them, and that its waves would bathe the whole of the southern side of the island, which was once the connecting-link between Walruses' Bay and Washburn Bay.

Mrs Barnett could not look at the changed aspect of the scene without emotion. She had expected it, and yet her heart beat almost audibly. She gazed across the sea for the missing continent, which was now left several hundred miles behind, and it rushed upon her mind with a fresh shock that she would never set foot on America again. Her agitation was indeed excusable, and it was shared by the Lieutenant and the Sergeant.

All quickened their steps, eager to reach the abrupt angle in the south. The ground rose slightly as they advanced, and the layers of earth and sand became thicker; this of course was explained by the former proximity of this part of the coast to the true continent. The thickness of the crust of ice and of the layer of earth at the point of junction increasing, as it probably did, every century, explained the long resistance of the isthmus, which nothing but some extraordinary convulsion could have overcome. Such a convulsion was the earthquake of the 8th January, which, although it had only affected the continent of North America, had sufficed to break the connecting-link, and to launch Victoria Island upon the wide ocean.

At four o’clock P.M. the angle was reached. Walruses’ Bay, formed by an indentation of the firm ground, had disappeared! It had remained behind with the continent

“By my faith, madam!” exclaimed the Sergeant, “it’s lucky for you we didn’t call it Paulina Barnett Bay!”

“Yes,” replied the lady, “I begin to think I am an unlucky godmother for newly-discovered places.”

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT ENCAMPMENT.

And so Hobson had not been mistaken about the point of rupture. It was the isthmus which had yielded in the shock of the earthquake. Not a trace was to be seen of the American continent, not a single cliff, even the volcano on the west had disappeared. Nothing but the sea everywhere.

The island on this side ended in a cape, coming to an almost sharp point, and it was evident that the substratum of ice, fretted by the warmer waters of the current and exposed to all the fury of the elements, must rapidly dissolve.

The explorers resumed their march, following the course of the fracture, which ran from west to east in an almost straight line. Its edges were not jagged or broken, but clear cut, as if the division had been made with a sharp instrument, and here and there the conformation of the soil could be easily examined. The banks- half ice, half sand and earth-rose some ten feet from the water. They were perfectly perpendicular, without the slightest slope, and in some places there were traces of recent landslips. Sergeant Long pointed to several small blocks of ice floating in the offing, and rapidly melting, which had evidently been broken off from their island. The action of the warm surf would, of course, soon eat away the new coast-line, which time had not yet clothed with a kind of cement of snow and sand, such as covered the rest of the beach, and altogether the state of things was very far from reassuring.

Before taking any rest, Mrs Barnett, Hobson, and Long, were anxious to finish their examination of the southern edge of the island. There would be plenty of daylight, for the sun would not set until eleven o’clock P.M. The briliant orb of day was slowly advancing along the western horizon, and its oblique rays cast long shadows of themselves before the explorers, who conversed at intervals after long silent pauses, during which they gazed at the sea and thought of the dark future before them.

Hobson intended to encamp for the night at Washburn Bay. When there eighteen miles would have been traversed, and, if he were not mistaken, half his circular journey would be accomplished. After a few hours' repose he meant to return to Fort Hope along the western coast.

No fresh incident marked the exploration of the short distance between Walruses' Bay and Washburn Bay, and at seven o'clock in the evening the spot chosen for the encampment was reached. A similar change had taken place here. Of Washburn Bay, nothing remained but the curve formed by the coast-line of the island, and which was once its northern boundary. It stretched away without a break for seven miles to the cape they had named Cape Michael. This side of the island did not appear to have suffered at all in consequence of the rupture. The thickets of pine and birch, massed a little behind the cape, were in their fullest beauty at this time of year, and a good many furred animals were disporting themselves on the plain.

A halt was made at Washburn Bay, and the explorers were able to enjoy an extended view on the south, although they could not see any great distance on the north. The sun was so low on the horizon, that its rays were intercepted by the rising ground on the west, and did not reach the little bay. It was not, however, yet night, nor could it be called twilight, as the sun had not set.

“Lieutenant,” said Long, “if by some miracle a bell were now to ring, what do you suppose it would mean?”

"That it was supper-time," replied Hobson. "Don't you agree with me, Mrs Barnett?"

"Indeed I do," replied the lady addressed, "and as our cloth is spread for us, let us sit down. This moss, although slightly worn, will suit us admirably, and was evidently intended for us by Providence."

The bag of provisions was opened; some salt meat, a hare paté from Mrs Joliffe's larder, with a few biscuits, formed their frugal supper.

The meal was quickly over, and Hobson returned to the southwest angle of the island, whilst Mrs Barnett rested at the foot of a low fir tree, and Sergeant Long made ready the night quarters.

The Lieutenant was anxious to examine the piece of ice which formed the island, to ascertain, if possible, something of its structure. A little bank, produced by a landslip, enabled him to step down to the level of the sea, and from there he was able to look closely at the steep wall which formed the coast. Where he stood the soil rose scarcely three feet above the water. The upper part consisted of a thin layer of earth and sand mixed with crushed shells; and the lower of hard, compact, and, if we may so express it, "metallic" ice, strong enough to support the upper soil of the island.

This layer of ice was not more than one foot above the sea-level. In consequence of the recent fracture, it was easy to see the regular disposition of the sheets of ice piled up horizontally, and which had evidently been produced by successive frosts in comparatively quieter waters.

We know that freezing commences on the surface of liquids, and as the cold increases, the thickness of the crust becomes greater, the solidification proceeding from the top downwards. That at least is the case in waters that are at rest; it has, however, been observed that the very reverse is the case in running waters-the ice forming at the bottom, and subsequently rising to the surface.

It was evident, then, that the floe which formed the foundation of Victoria Island had been formed in calm waters on the shores of the North American continent. The freezing had evidently commenced on the surface, and the thaw would begin at the bottom, according to a well-known law; so that the ice-field would gradually decrease in weight as it became thawed by the warmer waters through which it was passing, and the general level of the island would sink in proportion.

This was the great danger.

As we have just stated, Hobson noticed that the solid ice, the ice-field properly so called, was only about one foot above the sea-level! We know that four-fifths of a floating mass of ice are always submerged. For one foot of an iceberg or ice-field above the water, there are four below it. It must, however, be remarked that the density, or rather specific weight of floating ice, varies considerably according to its mode of formation or origin. The ice-masses which proceed from sea water, porous, opaque, and tinged with blue or green, according as they are struck by the rays of the sun, are lighter than ice formed from fresh water. All things considered, and making due allowance for the weight of the mineral and vegetable layer above the ice. Hobson concluded it to be about four or five feet thick below the sea-level. The different declivities of the island, the little hills and rising ground, would of course only affect the upper soil, and it might reasonably be supposed that the wandering island was not immersed more than five feet.

This made Hobson very anxious. Only five feet! Setting aside the causes of dissolution to which the ice-field might be subjected, would not the slightest shock cause a rupture of the surface? Might not a rough sea or a gale of wind cause a dislocation of the ice-field, which would lead to its breaking up into small portions, and to its final decomposition? Oh for the speedy arrival of the winter, with its bitter cold! Would that the column of mercury were frozen in its cistern! Nothing but the rigour of an Arctic winter could consolidate and thicken the foundation of their island, and establish a means of communication between it and the continent.

Hobson returned to the halting-place little cheered by his discoveries, and found Long busy making arrangements for the night; for he had no idea of sleeping beneath the open sky, although Mrs Barnett declared herself quite ready to do so. He told the Lieutenant that he intended to dig a hole in the ice big enough to hold three persons — in fact to make a kind of snow-hut, in which they would be protected from the cold night air.

“In the land of the Esquimaux,” he said, “nothing is wiser than to do as the Esquimaux do.”

Hobson approved, but advised the Sergeant not to dig too deeply, as the ice was not more than five feet thick.

Long set to work. With the aid of his hatchet and ice-chisel he had soon cleared away the earth, and hollowed out a kind of passage sloping gently down to the crust of ice.

He next attacked the brittle mass, which had been covered over with sand and earth for so many centuries. It would not take more than an hour to hollow out a subterranean retreat, or rather a burrow with walls of ice, which would keep in the heat, and therefore serve well for a resting-place during the short night.

Whilst Long was working away like a white ant, Hobson communicated the result of his observations to Mrs Barnett. He did not disguise from her that the construction of Victoria Island rendered him very uneasy. He felt sure that the thinness of the ice would lead to the opening of ravines on the surface before long; where, it would be impossible to foresee, and of course it would be equally impossible to prevent them. The wandering Island might at any moment settle down in consequence of a change in its specific gravity, or break up into more or less numerous islets, the duration of which must necessarily be ephemeral. He judged, therefore, that it would be best for the members of the colony to keep together as much as possible, and not to leave the fort, that they might all share the same chances.

Hobson was proceeding further to unfold his views when cries for help were heard.

Mrs Barnett started to her feet, and both looked round in every direction, but nothing was to be seen.

The cries were now redoubled, and Hobson exclaimed —

“The Sergeant! the Sergeant!”

And followed by Mrs Barnett, he rushed towards the burrow, and he had scarcely reached the opening of the snow-house before he saw Sergeant Long clutching with both hands at his knife, which he had stuck in the wall of ice, and calling out loudly, although with the most perfect self-possession.

His head and arms alone were visible. Whilst he was digging, the ice had given way suddenly beneath him, and he was plunged into water up to his waist.

Hobson merely said —

“Keep hold!”

And creeping through the passage, he was soon at the edge of the hole. The poor Sergeant seized his hand, and he was soon rescued from his perilous position.

“Good God! Sergeant!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett; “what has happened?”

“Nothing,” replied Long, shaking himself like a wet spaniel, “except that the ice gave way under me, and I took a compulsory bath.”

“You forgot what I told you about not digging too deeply, then,” said Hobson.

“Beg pardon, sir; I hadn’t cut through fifteen inches of the ice, and I expect there was a kind of cavern where I was working-the ice did not touch the water. It was just like going through a ceiling. If I hadn’t been able to hang on by my knife, I should have slipped under the island like a fool, and that would have been a pity, wouldn’t it, madam?”

“A very great pity, my brave fellow,” said Mrs Barnett, pressing his hand.

Long’s explanation was correct; for some reason or another — most likely from an accumulation of air-the ice had formed a kind of vault above the water, and of course it soon gave way under the weight of the Sergeant and the blows of his chisel.

The same thing might happen in other parts of the island, which was anything but reassuring. Where could they be certain of treading on firm ground? Might not the earth give way beneath their feet at any minute?

What heart, however brave, would not have sunk at the thought of the thin partition between them and the awful gulf of the ocean?

Sergeant Long, however, thought but little of his bath, and was ready to begin mining in some other place. This Mrs Barnett would not allow. A night in the open air would do her no harm; the shelter of the coppice near would be protection enough for them all; and Sergeant Long was obliged to submit.

The camp was, therefore, moved back some thirty yards from the beach, to a rising ground on which grew a few clumps of pines and willows which could scarcely be called a wood. Towards ten o’clock the disc of the sun began to dip below the horizon, and before it disappeared for the few hours of the night a crackling fire of dead branches was blazing at the camp.

Long had now a fine opportunity of drying his legs, of which he gladly availed himself. He and Hobson talked together earnestly until twilight set in, and Mrs Barnett occasionally joined in the conversation, doing the best she could to cheer the disheartened Lieutenant. The sky was bright with stars, and the holy influence of the night could not fail to calm his troubled spirit. The wind murmured softly amongst the pines; even the sea appeared to be wrapt in slumber, its bosom slightly heaving with the swell, which died away upon the beach with a faint rippling sound. All creation was hushed, not even the wail of a sea bird broke upon the ear, the crisp crackling of the dead branches was exchanged for a steady flame, and nothing but the voices of the wanderers broke the sublime, the awful silence of the night.

“Who would imagine,” said Mrs Barnett, “that we were floating on the surface of the ocean! It really requires an effort to realise it, for the sea which is carrying us along in its fatal grasp appears to be absolutely motionless!”

“Yes, madam,” replied Hobson;” and if the floor of our carriage were solid, if I did not know that sooner or later the keel of our boat will be missing, that some day its hull will burst open, and finally, if I knew where we are going, I should rather enjoy floating on the ocean like this.”

“Well, Lieutenant,” rejoined Mrs Barnett, “could there be a pleasanter mode of travelling than ours? We feel no motion. Our island has exactly the same speed as the current which is bearing it away. Is it not like a balloon voyage in the air? What could be more delightful than advancing with one’s house, garden, park, &c.? A wandering island, with a solid insubmersible foundation, would really be the most comfortable and wonderful conveyance that could possibly be imagined. I have heard of hanging gardens. Perhaps some day floating parks will be invented which will carry us all over the globe! Their size will render them insensible to the action of the waves, they will have nothing to fear from storms, and perhaps with a favourable wind they might be guided by means of immense sails! What marvels of vegetation would be spread before the eyes of the passengers when they passed from temperate to torrid zones! With skilful pilots, well acquainted with the currents, it might be possible to remain in one latitude, and enjoy a perpetual spring.”

Hobson could not help smiling at Mrs Barnett’s fancies. The brave woman ran on with such an easy flow of words, she talked with as little effort as Victoria Island moved. And was she not right? It would have been a very pleasant mode of travelling if there had been no danger of their conveyance melting and being swallowed up by the sea.

The night passed on, and the explorers slept a few hours. At daybreak they breakfasted, and thoroughly enjoyed their meal. The warmth and rest had refreshed them, and they resumed their journey at about six o’clock A.M.

From Cape Michael to the former Port Barnett the coast ran in an almost straight line from south to north for about eleven miles. There was nothing worthy of note about it; the shores were low and pretty even all the way, and seemed to have suffered no alteration since the breaking of the isthmus. Long, in obedience to the Lieutenant, made bench marks along the beach, that any future change might be easily noted.

Hobson was naturally anxious to get back to Fort Hope the same day, and Mrs Barnett was also eager to return to her friends. It was of course desirable under the circumstances that the commanding officer should not be long absent from the fort

All haste was therefore made, and by taking a short cut they arrived at noon at the little promontory which formerly protected Port Barnett from the east winds.

It was not more than eight miles from this point to Fort Hope, and before four o’clock P.M the shouts of Corporal Joliffe welcomed their return to the factory.

CHAPTER V.

FROM JULY 25TH TO AUGUST 20TH.

Hobson’s first care on his return to the fort, was to make inquiries of Thomas Black as to the situation of the little colony. No change had taken place for the last twenty-four hours, but, as subsequently appeared, the island had floated one degree of latitude further south, whilst still retaining its motion towards the west. It was now at the same distance from the equator as Icy Cape, a little promontory of western Alaska, and two hundred miles from the American coast. The speed of the current seemed to be less here than in the eastern part of the Arctic Ocean, but the island continued to advance, and, much to Hobson’s annoyance, towards the dreaded Behring Strait. It was now only the 24th July, and a current of average speed would carry it in another month through the strait and into the heated waves of the Pacific, where it would melt “like a lump of sugar in a glass of water.”

Mrs Barnett acquainted Madge with the result of the exploration of the island. She explained to her the arrangement of the layers of earth and ice at the part where the isthmus had been broken off; told her that the thickness of the ice below the sea level was estimated at five feet; related the accident to Sergeant Long — in short, she made her fully understand the reasons there were to fear the breaking up or sinking of the ice field.

The rest of the colony had, however, no suspicion of the truth; a feeling of perfect security prevailed. It never occurred to any of the brave fellows that Fort Hope was floating above an awful abyss, and that the lives of all its inhabitants were in danger. All were in good health, the weather was fine, and the climate pleasant and bracing. The baby Michael got on wonderfully; he was beginning to toddle about between the house and the palisade; and Corporal Joliffe, who was extremely fond of him, was already beginning to teach him to hold a gun, and to understand the first duties of a soldier. Oh, if Mrs Joliffe would but present him with such a son! but, alas! the blessing of children, for which he and his wife prayed every day, was as yet denied to them.

Meanwhile the soldiers had plenty to do.

Mac-Nab and his men — Petersen, Belcher, Garry, Pond, and Hope — worked zealously at the construction of a boat, a difficult task, likely to occupy them for several months. But as their vessel would be of no use until next year after the thaw, they neglected none of their duties at the factory on its account. Hobson let things go on as if the future of the factory were not compromised, and persevered in keeping the men in ignorance. This serious question was often discussed by the officer and his “staff,” and Mrs Barnett and Madge differed from their chief on the subject. They thought it would be better to tell the whole truth; the men were brave and energetic, not likely to yield to despair, and the shock would not be great if they heard of it now, instead of only when their situation was so hopeless that it could not be concealed. But in spite of the justice of these remarks, Hobson would not yield, and he was supported by Sergeant Long. Perhaps, after all, they were right; they were both men of long experience, and knew the temper of their men.

And so the work of provisioning and strengthening the fort proceeded. The palisaded enceinte was repaired with new stakes, and made higher in many places, so that it really formed a very strong fortification. Mac-Nab also put into execution, with his chief’s approval, a plan he had long had at heart. At the corners abutting on the lake he built two little pointed sentry-boxes, which completed the defences; and Corporal Joliffe anticipated with delight the time when he should be sent to relieve guard: he felt that they gave a military look to the buildings, and made them really imposing.

The palisade was now completely finished, and Mac-Nab, remembering the sufferings of the last winter, built a new wood shed close up against the house itself, with a door of communication inside, so that there would be no need to go outside at all. By this contrivance the fuel would always be ready to hand. On the left side of the house, opposite the shed, Mac-Nab constructed a large sleeping-room for the soldiers, so that the camp-bed could be removed from the common room. This room was also to be used for meals, and work. The three married couples had private rooms walled off, so that the large house was relieved of them as well as of all the other soldiers. A magazine for furs only was also erected behind the house near the powder-magazine, leaving the loft free for stores; and the rafters and ribs of the latter were bound with iron cramps, that they might be able to resist all attacks. Mac-Nab also intended to build a little wooden chapel, which had been included in Hobson's original plan of the factory; but its erection was put off until the next summer.

With what eager interest would the Lieutenant have once watched the progress of his establishment! Had he been building on firm ground, with what delight would he have watched the houses, sheds, and magazines rising around him! He remembered the scheme of crowning Cape Bathurst with a redoubt for the protection of Fort Hope with a sigh. The very name of the factory, "Fort Hope," made his heart sink within him; for should it not more truly be called "Fort Despair?"

These various works took up the whole summer, and there was no time for ennui. The construction of the boat proceeded rapidly. Mac-Nab meant it to be of about thirty tons measurement, which would make it large enough to carry some twenty passengers several hundred miles in the fine season. The carpenter had been fortunate enough to find some bent pieces of wood, so that he was able quickly to form the first ribs of the vessel, and soon the stern and sternpost, fixed to the keel, were upon the dockyard at the foot of Cape Bathurst.

Whilst the carpenters were busy with hatchets, saws, and adzes, the hunters were eagerly hunting the reindeer and Polar hares, which abounded near the fort. The Lieutenant, however, told Marbre and Sabine not to go far away, stating as a reason, that until the buildings were completed he did not wish to attract the notice of rivals. The truth was, he did not wish the changes which had taken place to be noticed.

One day Marbre inquired if it was not now time to go to Walruses' Bay, and get a fresh supply of morse-oil for burning, and Hobson replied rather hastily —

"No, Marbre; it would be useless."

The Lieutenant knew only too well that Walruses' Bay was two hundred miles away, and that there were no morses to be hunted on the island.

It must not be supposed that Hobson considered the situation desperate even now. He often assured Mrs Barnett, Madge, and Long that he was convinced the island would hold together until the bitter cold of winter should thicken its foundation and arrest its course at one and the same time.

After his journey of discovery, Hobson estimated exactly the area of his new dominions. The island measured more than forty miles round, from which its superficial area[r] would appear to be about one hundred and forty miles at the least. By way of comparison, we may say that Victoria Island was rather larger than St Helena, and its area was about the same as that of Paris within the line of fortifications. If then it should break up into fragments, the separate parts might still be of sufficient size to be habitable for some time.

When Mrs Barnett expressed her surprise that a floating ice-field could be so large, Hobson replied by reminding her of the observations of Arctic navigators. Parry, Penny, and Franklin had met with ice-fields in the Polar seas one hundred miles long and fifty broad. Captain Kellet abandoned his boat on an ice-field measuring at least three hundred square miles, and what was Victoria Island compared to it?

Its size was, however, sufficient to justify a hope that it would resist the action of the warm currents until the cold weather set in. Hobson would not allow himself to doubt; his despair arose rather from the knowledge that the fruit of all his cares, anxieties, and dangers must eventually be swallowed up by the deep, and it was no wonder that he could take no interest in the works that were going on.

Mrs Barnett kept up a good heart through it all; she encouraged her comrades in their work, and took her share in it, as if she had still a future to look forward to. Seeing what an interest Mrs Joliffe took in her plants, she joined her every day in the garden. There was now a fine crop of sorrel and scurvy-grass — thanks to the Corporal's unwearying exertions to keep off the birds of every kind, which congregated by hundreds.

The taming of the reindeer had been quite successful; there were now a good many young, and little Michael had been partly brought up on the milk of the mothers. There were now some thirty head in the herd which grazed near the fort, and a supply of the herbage on which they feed was dried and laid up for the winter. These useful animals, which are easily domesticated, were already quite familiar with all the colonists, and did not go far from the enceinte. Some of them were used in sledges to carry timber backwards and forwards. A good many reindeer, still wild, now fell into the trap half way between the fort and Port Barnett. It will be remembered that a large bear was once taken in it; but nothing of the kind occurred this season — none fell victims but the reindeer, whose flesh was salted and laid by for future use. Twenty at least were taken, which in the ordinary course of things would have gone down to the south in the winter.

One day, however, the reindeer-trap suddenly became useless in consequence of the conformation of the soil. After visiting it as usual, the hunter Marbre approached Hobson, and said to him in a significant tone — —

“I have just paid my daily visit to the reindeer-trap, sir.”

“Well, Marbre, I hope you have been as successful to-day as yesterday, and have caught a couple of reindeer,” replied Hobson.

“No, sir, no,” replied Marbre, with some embarrassment.

“Your trap has not yielded its ordinary contingent then?”

“No, sir; and if any animal had fallen in, it would certainly have been drowned!”

“Drowned!” cried the Lieutenant, looking at the hunter with an anxious expression.

“Yes, sir,” replied Marbre, looking attentively at his superior, “the pit is full of water.”

“Ah!” said Hobson, in the tone of a man who attached no importance to that, “you know your pit was partly hollowed out of ice; its walls have melted with the heat of the sun, and then “ — —

“Beg pardon for interrupting you, sir,” said Marbre; “but the water cannot have been produced by the melting of ice.”

“Why not, Marbre?” “Because if it came from ice it would be sweet, as you explained to me once before. Now the water in our pit is salt!”

Master of himself as he was, Hobson could not help changing countenance slightly, and he had not a word to say.

“Besides,” added Marbre, “I wanted to sound the trench, to see how deep the water was, and to my great surprise, I can tell you, I could not find the bottom.”

“Well, Marbre,” replied Hobson hastily, “there is nothing so wonderful in that. Some fracture of the soil has established a communication between the sea and the trap. So don’t be uneasy about it, my brave fellow, but leave the trap alone for the present, and be content with setting snares near the fort.”

Marbre touched his cap respectfully, and turned on his heel, but not before he had given his chief a searching glance.

Hobson remained very thoughtful for a few moments. Marbre’s tidings were of grave importance. It was evident that the bottom of the trench, gradually melted by the warm waters of the sea, had given way.

Hobson at once called the Sergeant, and having acquainted him with the incident, they went together, unnoticed by their companions, to the beach at the foot of Cape Bathurst, where they had made the bench-marks.

They examined them carefully, and found that since they last did so, the floating island had sunk six inches.

“We are sinking gradually,” murmured Sergeant Long. “The ice is wearing away.”

“Oh for the winter! the winter!” cried Hobson, stamping his foot upon the ground.

But as yet, alas! there was no sign of the approach of the cold season. The thermometer maintained a mean height of 59° Fahrenheit, and during the few hours of the night the column of mercury scarcely went down three degrees.

Preparations for the approaching winter went on apace, and there was really nothing wanting to Fort Hope, although it had not been revictualled by Captain Craventy’s detachment. The long hours of the Arctic night might be awaited in perfect security. The stores were of course carefully husbanded. There still remained plenty of spirits, only small quantities having been consumed; and there was a good stock of biscuits, which, once gone, could not be replaced. Fresh venison and salt meat were to be had in abundance, and with some antiscorbutic vegetables, the diet was most healthy; and all the members of the little colony were well.

A good deal of timber was cut in the woods clothing the eastern slopes of Lake Barnett. Many were the birch-trees, pines, and firs which fell beneath the axe of Mac-Nab, and were dragged to the house by the tamed reindeer. The carpenter did not spare the little forest, although he cut his wood judiciously; for he never dreamt that timber might fail him, imagining, as he did, Victoria Island to be a peninsula, and knowing the districts near Cape Michael to be rich in different species of trees.

Many a time did the unconscious carpenter congratulate his Lieutenant on having chosen a spot so favoured by Heaven. Woods, game, furred animals, a lagoon teeming with fish, plenty of herbs for the animals, and, as Corporal Joliffe would have added, double pay for the men. Was not Cape Bathurst a corner of a privileged land, the like of which was not to be found in the whole Arctic regions? Truly Hobson was a favourite of Heaven, and ought to return thanks to Providence every day for the discovery of this unique spot.

Ah, Mac-Nab, you little knew how you wrung the heart of your master when you talked in that strain!

The manufacture of winter garments was not neglected in the factory. Mrs Barnett, Madge, Mrs Mac-Nab, Mrs Rae, and Mrs Joliffe — when she could leave her fires — were alike indefatigable. Mrs Barnett knew that they would all have to leave the fort in the depth of winter, and was determined that every one should be warmly clothed. They would have to face the bitterest cold for a good many days during the Polar night, if Victoria Island should halt far from the continent. Boots and clothes ought indeed to be strong and well made, for crossing some hundreds of miles under such circumstances. Mrs Barnett and Madge devoted all their energies to the matter in hand, and the furs, which they knew it would be impossible to save, were turned to good account. They were used double, so that the soft hair was both inside and outside of the clothes; and when wearing them, the whole party would be as richly attired as the grandest princesses, or the most wealthy ladies. Those not in the secret were rather surprised at the free use made of the Company's property; but Hobson's authority was not to be questioned, and really martens, polecats, musk-rats, beavers, and foxes multiplied with such rapidity near the fort, that all the furs used could easily be replaced by a few shots, or the setting of a few traps; and when Mrs Mac-Nab saw the beautiful ermine coat which had been made for her baby, her delight was unbounded, and she no longer wondered at anything.

So passed the days until the middle of the month of August. The weather continued fine, and any mists which gathered on the horizon were quickly dispersed by the sunbeams.

Every day Hobson took the bearings, taking care, however, to go some distance from the fort, that suspicions might not be aroused, and he also visited different parts of the island, and was reassured by finding that no important changes appeared to be taking place.

On the 16th August Victoria Island was situated in 167° 27’ west longitude, and 70° 49’ north latitude. It had, therefore, drifted slightly to the south, but without getting any nearer to the American coast, which curved considerably.

The distance traversed by the island since the fracture of the isthmus, or rather since the last thaw, could not be less than eleven or twelve hundred miles to the west.

But what was this distance compared to the vast extent of the ocean? Had not boats been known to be drifted several thousands of miles by currents? Was not this the case with the English ship *Resolute*, the American brig *Advance*, and with the *Fox*, all of which were carried along upon ice-fields until the winter arrested their advance?

CHAPTER VI.

TEN DAYS OF TEMPEST

From the 17th to the 20th August the weather continued fine, and the temperature moderate. The mists on the horizon were not resolved into clouds, and altogether the weather was exceptionally beautiful for such an elevated position. It will be readily understood, however, that Hobson could take no pleasure in the fineness of the climate.

On the 21st August, however, the barometer gave notice of an approaching change. The column of mercury suddenly fell considerably, the sun was completely hidden at the moment of culmination, and Hobson was unable to take his bearings.

The next day the wind changed and blew strongly from the north-west, torrents of rain falling at intervals. Meanwhile, however, the temperature did not change to any sensible extent, the thermometer remaining at 54° Fahrenheit.

Fortunately the proposed works were now all finished, and MacNab had completed the carcass of his boat, which was planked and ribbed. Hunting might now be neglected a little, as the stores were complete, which was fortunate, for the weather became very bad. The wind was high, the rain incessant, and thick fogs rendered it impossible to go beyond the enceinte of the fort.

“What do you think of this change in the weather, Lieutenant?” inquired Mrs Barnett on the morning of the 27th August; “might it not be in our favour?”

“I should not like to be sure of it, madam,” replied Hobson; “but anything is better for us than the magnificent weather we have lately had, during which the sun made the waters warmer and warmer. Then, too, the wind from the north-west is so very strong that it may perhaps drive us nearer to the American continent.”

“Unfortunately,” observed Long, “we can’t take our bearings every day now. It’s impossible to see either sun, moon, or stars in this fog. Fancy attempting to take an altitude now!”

“We shall see well enough to recognise America, if we get anywhere near it,” said Mrs Barnett. “Whatever land we approach will be welcome. It will most likely be some part of Russian America — probably Western Alaska.”

“You are right, madam,” said Hobson; “for, unfortunately, in the whole Arctic Ocean there is not an island, an islet, or even a rock to which we could fasten our vessel!”

“Well,” rejoined Mrs Barnett, “why should not our conveyance take us straight to the coasts of Asia? Might not the currents carry us past the opening of Bearing Strait and land us on the shores of Siberia?”

“No, madam, no,” replied Hobson; “our ice-field would soon meet the Kamtchatka current, and be carried by it to the northwest. It is more likely, however, that this wind will drive us towards the shores of Russian America.”

“We must keep watch, then,” said Mrs Barnett, “and ascertain our position as soon as possible.”

“We shall indeed keep watch,” replied Hobson, “although this fog is very much against us If we should be driven on to the coast, the shock will be felt even if we cannot see. Let’s hope the island will not fall to pieces in this storm! That is at present our principal danger. Well, when it comes we shall see what there is to be done, and meanwhile we must wait patiently.”

Of course this conversation was not held in the public room, where the soldiers and women worked together. It was in her own room, with the window looking out on the court, that Mrs Barnett received visitors. It was almost impossible to see indoors even in the daytime, and the wind could be heard rushing by outside like an avalanche. Fortunately, Cape Bathurst protected the house from the north-east winds, but the sand and earth from its summit were hurled down upon the roof with a noise like the pattering of hail. Mac Nab began to feel fresh uneasiness about his chimneys, which it was absolutely necessary to keep in good order. With the roaring of the wind was mingled that of the sea, as its huge waves broke upon the beach. The storm had become a hurricane.

In spite of the fury of the gale, Hobson determined on the morning of the 28th of August to climb to the summit of Cape Bathurst, in order to examine the state of the horizon, the sea, and the sky. He therefore wrapped himself up, taking care to have nothing about him likely to give hold the wind, and set out.

He got to the foot of the cape without much difficulty. The sand and earth blinded him, it is true, but protected by the cliff he had not as yet actually faced the wind. The fatigue began when he attempted to climb the almost perpendicular sides of the promontory; but by clutching at the tufts of herbs with which they were covered, he managed to get to the top, but there the fury of the gale was such that he could neither remain standing nor seated;

he was therefore forced to fling himself upon his face behind the little coppice and cling to some shrubs, only raising his head and shoulders above the ground.

The appearance of sea and sky was indeed terrible. The spray dashed over the Lieutenant’s head, and half-a-mile from the cape water and clouds were confounded together in a thick mist. Low jagged rain-clouds were chased along the heavens with giddy rapidity, and heavy masses of vapour were piled upon the zenith. Every now and then an awful stillness fell upon the land, and the only sounds were the breaking of the surf upon the beach and the roaring of the angry billows; but then the tempest recommenced with redoubled fury, and Hobson felt the cape tremble to its foundations. Sometimes the rain poured down with such violence that it resembled grape-shot.

It was indeed a terrible hurricane from the very worst quarter of the heavens. This north-east wind might blow for a long time and cause all manner of havoc. Yet Hobson, who would generally have grieved over the destruction around him, did not complain, — on the contrary, he rejoiced; for if, as he hoped, the island held together, it must be driven to the south-west by this wind, so much more powerful than the currents. And the south-west meant land — hope — safety! Yes, for his own sake, and for that of all with him, he hoped that the hurricane would last until it had flung them upon the laud, no matter where. That which would have been fatal to a ship was the best thing that could happen to the floating island.

For a quarter of an hour Hobson remained crouching upon the ground, clutching at the shrubs like a drowning man at a spar, lashed by the wind, drenched by the rain and the spray, struggling to estimate all the chances of safety the storm might afford him. At the end of that time he let himself slide down the cape, and fought his way to Fort Hope.

Hobson's first care was to tell his comrades that the hurricane was not yet at its height, and that it would probably last a long time yet. He announced these tidings with the manner of one bringing good news, and every one looked at him in astonishment. Their chief officer really seemed to take a delight in the fury of the elements.

On the 30th Hobson again braved the tempest, not this time climbing the cape, but going down to the beach. What was his joy at noticing some long weeds floating on the top of the waves, of a kind which did not grow on Victoria Island. Christopher Columbus' delight was not greater when he saw the sea-weed which told him of the proximity of land.

The Lieutenant hurried back to the fort, and told Mrs Barnett and Sergeant Long of his discovery. He had a good mind to tell every one the whole truth now, but a strange presentiment kept him silent.

The occupants of the fort had plenty to amuse them in the long days of compulsory confinement. They went on improving the inside of the various buildings, and dug trenches in the court to carry away the rain-water. Mac-Nab, a hammer in one hand and a nail in the other, was always busy at a job in some corner or another, and nobody took much note of the tempest outside in the daytime; but at night it was impossible to sleep, the wind beat upon the buildings like a battering-ram; between the house and the cape sometimes whirled a huge waterspout of extraordinary dimensions; the planks cracked, the beams seemed about to separate, and there was danger of the whole structure tumbling down. Mac-Nab and his men lived in a state of perpetual dread, and had to be continually on the watch.

Meanwhile, Hobson was uneasy about the stability of the island itself, rather than that of the house upon it. The tempest became so violent, and the sea so rough, that there was really a danger of the dislocation of the ice-field. It seemed impossible for it to resist much longer, diminished as it was in thickness and subject to the perpetual action of the waves. It is true that its inhabitants did not feel any motion, on account of its vast extent, but it suffered from it none the less. The point at issue was simply: — Would the island last until it was flung upon the coast, or would it fall to pieces before it touched firm ground?

There could be no doubt that thus far it had resisted. As the Lieutenant explained to Mrs Barnett, had it already been broken, had the ice-field already divided into a number of islets, the occupants of the fort must have noticed it, for the different pieces would have been small enough to be affected by the motion of the sea, and the people on any one of them would have been pitched about like passengers on a boat. This was not the case, and in his daily observations Lieutenant Hobson had noticed no movement whatever, not so much as a trembling of the island, which appeared as firm and motionless as when it was still connected by its isthmus with the mainland.

But the breaking up, which had not yet taken place, might happen at any minute.

Hobson was most anxious to ascertain whether Victoria Island, driven by the north-west wind out of the current, had approached the continent. Everything, in fact, depended upon this, which was their last chance of safety. But without sun, moon, or stars, instruments were of course useless, as no observations could be taken, and the exact position of the island could not be determined. If, then, they were approaching the land, they would only know it when the land came in sight, and Hobson's only means of ascertaining anything in time to be of any service, was to get to the south of his dangerous dominions. The position of Victoria Island with regard to the cardinal points had not sensibly altered all the time. Cape Bathurst still pointed to the north, as it did when it was the advanced post of North America. It was, therefore, evident that if Victoria Island should come alongside of the continent, it would touch it with its southern side, — the communication would, in a word, be re-established by means of the broken isthmus; it was, therefore, imperative to ascertain what was going on in that direction.

Hobson determined to go to Cape Michael, however terrible the storm might be, but he meant to keep the real motive of his reconnaissance a secret from his companions. Sergeant Long was to accompany him.

About four o'clock P.M. on the 31st August, Hobson sent for the Sergeant in his own room, that they might arrange together for all eventualities.

"Sergeant Long," he began, "it is necessary that we should, without delay, ascertain the position of Victoria Island, and above all whether this wind has, as I hope, driven it near to the American continent."

"I quite agree with you, sir," replied Long, "and the sooner we find out the better"

"But it will necessitate our going down to the south of the island."

"I am ready, sir."

"I know, Sergeant, that you are always ready to do your duty, but you will not go alone. Two of us ought to go, that we may be able to let our comrades know if any land is in sight; and besides I must see for myself... we will go together.”

“When you like, Lieutenant, just when you think best.”

“We will start this evening at nine o’clock, when everybody else has gone to bed”

“Yes, they would all want to come with us,” said Long, “and they must not know why we go so far from the factory.”

“No, they must not know,” replied Hobson, “and if I can, I will keep the knowledge of our awful situation from them until the end.”

“It is agreed then, sir?”

“Yes. You will take a tinder-box and some touchwood [Footnote: A fungus used as tinder (*Polyporous igniarius*).] with you, so that we can make a signal if necessary — if land is in sight in the south, for instance”

“Yes, sir.”

“We shall have a rough journey, Sergeant.”

“What does that matter, sir, but by the way — the lady?”

“I don’t think I shall tell her. She would want to go with us.”

“And she could not,” said the Sergeant, “a woman could not battle with such a gale. Just see how its fury is increasing at this moment!”

Indeed the house was rocking to such an extent that it seemed likely to be torn from its foundations.

“No,” said Hobson, “courageous as she is, she could not, she ought not to accompany us. But on second thought, it will be best to tell her of our project. She ought to know in case any accident should befall us”

“Yes,” replied Long, “we ought not to keep anything from her, and if we do not come back”...

“At nine o’clock then, Sergeant.”

“At nine o’clock.”

And with a military salute Sergeant Long retired.

A few minutes later Hobson was telling Mrs Barnett of his scheme. As he expected the brave woman insisted on accompanying him, and was quite ready to face the tempest. Hobson did not dissuade her by dwelling on the dangers of the expedition, he merely said that her presence was necessary at the fort during his absence, and that her remaining would set his mind at ease. If any accident happened to him it would be a comfort to know that she would take his place.

Mrs Barnett understood and said no more about going; but only urged Hobson not to risk himself unnecessarily. To remember that he was the chief officer, that his life was not his own, but necessary to the safety of all. The Lieutenant promised to be as prudent as possible; but added that the examination of the south of the island must be made at once, and he would make it. The next day Mrs Barnett merely told her companions that the Lieutenant and the Sergeant had gone to make a final reconnaissance before the winter set in.

CHAPTER VII.

A FIRE AND A CRY.

The Lieutenant and the Sergeant spent the evening in the large room of the fort, where all were assembled except the astronomer, who still remained shut up in his cabin. The men were busy over their various occupations, some cleaning their arms, others mending or sharpening their tools. The women were stitching away industriously, and Mrs Paulina Barnett was reading aloud; but she was often interrupted not only by the noise of the wind, which shook the walls of the house like a battering-ram, but by the cries of the baby. Corporal Joliffe, who had undertaken to amuse him, had enough to do. The young gentleman had ridden upon his playmate's knees until they were worn out, and the Corporal at last put the indefatigable little cavalier on the large table, where he rolled about to his heart's content until he fell asleep.

At eight o'clock prayers were read as usual, the lamps were extinguished, and all retired to rest.

When every one was asleep, Hobson and Long crept cautiously across the large room and gained the passage, where they found Mrs Barnett, who wished to press their hands once more.

"Till to-morrow," she said to the Lieutenant.

"Yes," replied Hobson, "to-morrow, madam, without fail."

"But if you are delayed?"

"You must wait patiently for us," replied the Lieutenant, "for if in examining the southern horizon we should see a fire, which is not unlikely this dark night, we should know that we were near the coasts of New Georgia, and then it would be desirable for me to ascertain our position by daylight. In fact, we may be away forty eight hours. If, however, we can get to Cape Michael before midnight, we shall be back at the fort to-morrow evening. So wait patiently, madam, and believe that we shall incur no unnecessary risk.”

“But,” added the lady, “suppose you don’t get back to morrow, suppose you are away more than two days?”

“Then we shall not return at all,” replied Hobson simply.

The door was opened, Mrs Barnett closed it behind the Lieutenant and his companion and went back to her own room, where Madge awaited her, feeling anxious and thoughtful.

Hobson and Long made their way across the inner court through a whirlwind which nearly knocked them down; but clinging to each other, and leaning on their iron-bound staffs, they reached the postern gates, and set out [beween] between the hills and the eastern bank of the lagoon.

A faint twilight enabled them to see their way. The moon, which was new the night before, would not appear above the horizon, and there was nothing to lessen the gloom of the darkness, which would, however, last but a few hours longer.

The wind and rain were as violent as ever. The Lieutenant and his companion wore impervious boots and water-proof cloaks well pulled in at the waist, and the hood completely covering their heads. Thus protected they got along at a rapid pace, for the wind was behind them, and sometimes drove them on rather faster than they cared to go. Talking was quite out of the question, and they did not attempt it, for they were deafened by the hurricane, and out of breath with the buffeting they received.

Hobson did not mean to follow the coast, the windings of which would have taken him a long way round, and have brought him face to face with the wind, which swept over the sea with nothing to break its fury. His idea was to cut across in a straight line from Cape Bathurst to Cape Michael, and he was provided with a pocket compass with which to ascertain his bearings. He hoped by this means to cross the ten or eleven miles between him and his goal, just before the twilight faded and gave place to the two hours of real darkness.

Bent almost double, with rounded shoulders and stooping heads, the two pressed on. As long as they kept near the lake they did not meet the gale full face, the little hills crowned with trees afforded them some protection, the wind howled fearfully as it bent and distorted the branches, almost tearing the trunks up by the roots; but it partly exhausted its strength, and even the rain when it reached the explorers was converted into impalpable mist, so that for about four miles they did not suffer half as much as they expected to.

But when they reached the southern skirts of the wood, where the hills disappeared, and there were neither trees nor rising ground, the wind swept along with awful force, and involuntarily they paused for a moment. They were still six miles from Cape Michael.

“We are going to have a bad time of it,” shouted Lieutenant Hobson in the Sergeant’s ear.

“Yes, the wind and rain will conspire to give us a good beating,” answered Long.

“I am afraid that now and then we shall have hail as well,” added Hobson.

“It won’t be as deadly as grape-shot,” replied Long coolly, “and we have both been through that, and so forwards!”

“Forwards, my brave comrade!”

It was then ten o’clock. The twilight was fading away, dying as if drowned in the mists or quenched by the wind and the rain. There was still, however, some light, and the Lieutenant struck his flint, and consulted his compass, passing a piece of burning touchwood over it, and then, drawing his cloak more closely around him, he plunged after the Sergeant across the unprotected plain.

At the first step, both were flung violently to the ground, but they managed to scramble up, and clinging to each other with their backs bent like two old crippled peasants, they struck into a kind of ambling trot.

There was a kind of awful grandeur in the storm to which neither was insensible. Jagged masses of mist and ragged rain-clouds swept along the ground. The loose earth and sand were whirled into the air and flung down again like grape-shot, and the lips of Hobson and his companion were wet with salt spray, although the sea was two or three miles distant at least.

During the rare brief pauses in the gale, they stopped and took breath, whilst the Lieutenant ascertained their position as accurately as possible.

The tempest increased as the night advanced, the air and water seemed to be absolutely confounded together, and low down on the horizon was formed one of those fearful waterspouts which can overthrow houses, tear up forests, and which the vessels whose safety they threaten attack with artillery. It really seemed as if the ocean itself was being torn from its bed and flung over the devoted little island.

Hobson could not help wondering how it was that the ice-field which supported it was not broken in a hundred places in this violent convulsion of the sea, the roaring of which could be distinctly heard where he stood. Presently Long, who was a few steps in advance, stopped suddenly, and turning round managed to make the Lieutenant hear the broken words —

“Not that way!”

“Why not?”

“The sea!”

“What, the sea! We cannot possibly have got to the southeast coast!”

“Look, look, Lieutenant!”

It was true, a vast sheet of water was indistinctly visible before them, and large waves were rolling up and breaking at the Lieutenant’s feet.

Hobson again had recourse to his flint, and with the aid of some lighted touchwood consulted the needle of his compass very carefully.

“No,” he said, “the sea is farther to the left, we have not yet passed the wood between us and Cape Michael.”

“Then it is” — —

“It is a fracture of the island!” cried Hobson, as both were compelled to fling themselves to the ground before the wind, “either a large portion of our land has been broken off and drifted away, or a gulf has been made, which we can go round. Forwards!”

They struggled to their feet and turned to the right towards the centre of the island. For about ten minutes they pressed on in silence, fearing, not without reason, that all communication with the south of the island would be found to be cut off. Presently, however, they no longer heard the noise of the breakers.

“It is only a gulf.” screamed Hobson in the Sergeant’s ear. “Let us turn round.”

And they resumed their original direction towards the south, but both knew only too well that they had a fearful danger to face, for that portion of the island on which they were was evidently cracked for a long distance, and might at any moment separate entirely; should it do so under the influence of the waves, they would inevitably be drifted away, whither they knew not. Yet they did not hesitate, but plunged into the mist, not even pausing to wonder if they should ever get back.

What anxious forebodings must, however, have pressed upon the heart of the Lieutenant. Could he now hope that the island would hold together until the winter? had not the inevitable breaking up already commenced? If the wind should not drive them on to the coast, were they not doomed to perish very soon, to be swallowed up by the deep, leaving no trace behind them? What a fearful prospect for all the unconscious inhabitants of the fort!

But through it all the two men, upheld by the consciousness of a duty to perform, bravely struggled on against the gale, which nearly tore them to pieces, along the new beach, the foam sometimes bathing their feet, and presently gained the large wood which shut in Cape Michael. This they would have to cross to get to the coast by the shortest route, and they entered it in complete darkness, the wind thundering among the branches over their heads. Everything seemed to be breaking to pieces around them, the dislocated branches intercepted their passage, and every moment they ran a risk of being crushed beneath a falling tree, or they stumbled over a stump they had not been able to see in the gloom. The noise of the waves on the other side of the wood was a sufficient guide to their steps, and sometimes the furious breakers shook the weakened ground beneath their feet. Holding each other's hands lest they should lose each other, supporting each other, and the one helping the other up when he fell over some obstacle, they at last reached the point for which they were bound.

But the instant they quitted the shelter of the wood a perfect whirlwind tore them asunder, and flung them upon the ground.

"Sergeant, Sergeant! Where are you?" cried Hobson with all the strength of his lungs.

"Here, here!" roared Long in reply.

And creeping on the ground they struggled to reach each other; but it seemed as if a powerful hand rivetted them to the spot on which they had fallen, and it was only after many futile efforts that they managed to reach each other. Having done so, they tied their belts together to prevent another separation, and crept along the sand to a little rising ground crowned by a small clump of pines. Once there they were a little more protected, and they proceeded to dig themselves a hole, in which they crouched in a state of absolute exhaustion and prostration.

It was half-past eleven o'clock P.M.

For some minutes neither spoke. With eyes half closed they lay in a kind of torpor, whilst the trees above them bent beneath the wind, and their branches rattled like the bones of a skeleton. But yet again they roused themselves from this fatal lethargy, and a few mouthfuls of rum from the Sergeant's flask revived them.

"Let us hope these trees will hold," at last observed Hobson.

"And that our hole will not blow away with them," added the Sergeant, crouching in the soft sand.

"Well!" said Hobson, "here we are at last, a few feet from Cape Michael, and as we came to make observations, let us make them. I have a presentiment, Sergeant, only a presentiment, remember, that we are not far from firm ground!"

Had the southern horizon been visible the two adventurers would have been able to see two-thirds of it from their position; but it was too dark to make out anything, and if the hurricane had indeed driven them within sight of land, they would not be able to see it until daylight, unless a fire should be lighted on the continent.

As the Lieutenant had told Mrs Barnett, fishermen often visited that part of North America, which is called New Georgia, and there are a good many small native colonies, the members of which collect the teeth of mammoths, these fossil elephants being very numerous in these latitudes. A few degrees farther south, on the island of Sitka, rises New-Archangel, the principal settlement in Russian America, and the head-quarters of the Russian Fur Company, whose jurisdiction once extended over the whole of the Aleutian Islands. The shores of the Arctic Ocean are, however, the favourite resort of hunters, especially since the Hudson's Bay Company took a lease of the districts formerly in the hands of the Russians; and Hobson, although he knew nothing of the country, was well acquainted with the habits of those who were likely to visit it at this time of the year, and was justified in thinking that he might meet fellow-countrymen, perhaps even members of his own Company, or, failing them, some native Indians, scouring the coasts.

But could the Lieutenant reasonably hope that Victoria Island had been driven towards the coast?

“Yes, a hundred times yes,” he repeated to the Sergeant again and again. “For seven days a hurricane has been blowing from the northeast, and although I know that the island is very flat, and there is not much for the wind to take hold of, still all these little hills and woods spread out like sails must have felt the influence of the wind to a certain extent. Moreover, the sea which bears us along feels its power, and large waves are certainly running in shore. It is impossible for us to have remained in the current which was dragging us to the west, we must have been driven out of it, and towards the south. Last time we took our bearings we were two hundred miles from the coast, and in seven days “ — —

“Your reasonings are very just, Lieutenant,” replied the Sergeant, “and I feel that whether the wind helps us or not, God will not forsake us. It cannot be His will that so many unfortunate creatures should perish, and I put my trust in Him!”

The two talked on in broken sentences, making each other hear above the roaring of the storm, and struggling to pierce the gloom which closed them in on every side; but they could see nothing, not a ray of light broke the thick darkness.

About half past one A.M. the hurricane ceased for a few minutes, whilst the fury of the sea seemed to be redoubled, and the large waves, lashed into foam, broke over each other with a roar like thunder.

Suddenly Hobson seizing his companion’s arm shouted —

“Sergeant, do you hear?”

“What?”

“The noise of the sea?”

“Of course I do, sir,” replied Long, listening more attentively, “and the sound of the breakers seems to me not” — —

“Not exactly the same... isn’t it Sergeant; listen, listen, it is like the sound of surf!... it seems as if the waves were breaking against rocks!”

Hobson and the Sergeant now listened intently, the monotonous sound of the waves dashing against each other in the offing was certainly exchanged for the regular rolling sound produced by the breaking of water against a hard body; they heard the reverberating echoes which told of the neighbourhood of rocks, and they knew that along the whole of the coast of their island there was not a single stone, and nothing more sonorous than the earth and sand of which it was composed!

Could they have been deceived? The Sergeant tried to rise to listen better, but he was immediately flung down by the hurricane, which recommenced with renewed violence. The lull was over, and again the noise of the waves was drowned in the shrill whistling of the wind, and the peculiar echo could no longer be made out.

The anxiety of the two explorers will readily be imagined. They again crouched down in their hole, doubting whether it would not perhaps be prudent to leave even this shelter, for they felt the sand giving way beneath them, and the pines cracking at their very roots. They persevered, however, in gazing towards the south, every nerve strained to the utmost, in the effort to distinguish objects through the darkness.

The first grey twilight of the dawn might soon be expected to appear, and a little before half-past two A.M. Long suddenly exclaimed:

“I see it!”

“What?”

“A fire!”

“A fire?”

“Yes, there — over there!”

And he pointed to the south-west. Was he mistaken? No, for Hobson also made out a faint glimmer in the direction indicated.

“Yes!” he cried, “yes, Sergeant, a fire; there is land there!”

“Unless it is a fire on board ship,” replied Long.

“A ship at sea in this weather!” exclaimed Hobson, “impossible! No, no, there is land there, land I tell you, a few miles from us!”

“Well, let us make a signal!”

“Yes, Sergeant, we will reply to the fire on the mainland by a fire on our island!”

Of course neither Hobson nor Long had a torch, but above their heads rose resinous pines distorted by the hurricane.

“Your flint, Sergeant,” said Hobson.

Long at once struck his flint, lighted the touchwood, and creeping along the sand climbed to the foot of the thicket of firs, where he was soon joined by the Lieutenant. There was plenty of deadwood about, and they piled it up at the stems of the trees, set fire to it, and soon, the wind helping them, they had the satisfaction of seeing the whole thicket in a blaze

“Ah!” said Hobson, “as we saw their fire, they will see ours!”

The firs burnt with a lurid glare like a large torch. The dried resin in the old trunks aided the conflagration, and they were rapidly consumed. At last the crackling ceased, the flames died away, and all was darkness.

Hobson and Long looked in vain for an answering fire — nothing was to be seen. For ten minutes they watched, hoping against hope, and were just beginning to despair, when suddenly a cry was heard, a distinct cry for help. It was a human voice, and it came from the sea.

Hobson and Long, wild with eager anxiety, let themselves slide down to the shore.

The cry was not, however, repeated.

The daylight was now gradually beginning to appear, and the violence of the tempest seemed to be decreasing. Soon it was light enough for the horizon to be examined.

But there was no land in sight, sea and sky were still blended in one unbroken circle.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. PAULINA BARNETT’S EXCURSION.

The whole morning Hobson and Sergeant Long wandered about the coast. The weather was much improved, the rain had ceased, and the wind had veered round to the south-east with extraordinary suddenness, without unfortunately decreasing in violence, causing fresh anxiety to the Lieutenant, who could no longer hope to reach the mainland.

The south-east wind would drive the wandering island farther from the continent, and fling it into the dangerous currents, which must drift it to the north of the Arctic Ocean.

How could they even be sure that they had really approached the coast during the awful night just over. Might it not have been merely a fancy of the Lieutenant’s? The air was now clear, and they could look round a radius of several miles; yet there was nothing in the least resembling land within sight. Might they not adopt the Sergeant’s suggestion, that a ship had passed the island during the night, that the fire and cry were alike signals of sailors in distress? And if it had been a vessel, must it not have foundered in such a storm?

Whatever the explanation there was no sign of a wreck to be seen either in the offing or on the beach, and the waves, now driven along by the wind from the land, were large enough to have overwhelmed any vessel.

“Well, Lieutenant,” said Sergeant Long, “what is to be done?’”

“We must remain upon our island,” replied the Lieutenant, pressing his hand to his brow; “we must remain on our island and wait for winter; it alone can save us."

It was now mid-day, and Hobson, anxious to get back to Fort Hope before the evening, at once turned towards Cape Bathurst.

The wind, being now on their backs, helped them along as it had done before. They could not help feeling very uneasy, as they were naturally afraid that the island might have separated into two parts in the storm. The gulf observed the night before might have spread farther, and if so they would be cut off from their friends.

They soon reached the wood they had crossed the night before. Numbers of trees were lying on the ground, some with broken stems, others torn up by the roots from the soft soil, which had not afforded them sufficient support. The few which remained erect were stripped of their leaves, and their naked branches creaked and moaned as the south-east wind swept over them.

Two miles beyond this desolated forest the wanderers arrived at the edge of the gulf they had seen the night before without being able to judge of its extent. They examined it carefully, and found that it was about fifty feet wide, cutting the coast line straight across near Cape Michael and what was formerly Fort Barnett, forming a kind of estuary running more than a mile and a half inland. If the sea should again become rough in a fresh storm, this gulf would widen more and more.

Just as Hobson approached the beach, he saw a large piece of ice separate from the island and float away!

"Ah!" murmured Long, "that is the danger!"

Both then turned hurriedly to the west, and walked as fast as they could round the huge gulf, making direct for Fort Hope.

They noticed no other changes by the way, and towards four o’clock they crossed the court and found all their comrades at their usual occupations.

Hobson told his men that he had wished once more before the winter to see if there were any signs of the approach of Captain Craventy’s convoy, and that his expedition had been fruitless.

“Then, sir,” observed Marbre, “I suppose we must give up all idea of seeing our comrades from Fort Reliance for this year at least?”

“I think you must,” replied Hobson simply, re-entering the public room.

Mrs Barnett and Madge were told of the two chief events of the exploration: the fire and the cry. Hobson was quite sure that neither lib nor the Sergeant were mistaken. The fire had really been seen, the cry had really been heard; and after a long consultation every one came to the conclusion that a ship in distress had passed within sight during the night, and that the island had not approached the American coast.

The south-east wind quickly chased away the clouds and mists, so that Hobson hoped to be able to take his bearings the next day. The night was colder and a fine snow fell, which quickly covered the ground. This first sign of winter was hailed with delight by all who knew of the peril of their situation.

On the 2nd September the sky gradually became free from vapours of all kinds, and the sun again appeared. Patiently the Lieutenant awaited its culmination; at noon he took the latitude, and two hours later a calculation of hour-angles gave him the longitude.

The following were the results obtained: Latitude, 70° 57’; longitude, 170° 30’.

So that, in spite of the violence of the hurricane, the island had remained in much the same latitude, although it had been drifted somewhat farther west. They were now abreast of Behring Strait, but four hundred miles at least north of Capes East and Prince of Wales, which jut out on either side at the narrowest part of the passage.

The situation was, therefore, more dangerous than ever, as the island was daily getting nearer to the dangerous Kamtchatka Current, which, if it once seized it in its rapid waters, might carry it far away to the north. Its fate would now soon be decided. It would either stop where the two currents met, and there be shut in by the ice of the approaching winter, or it would be drifted away and lost in the solitudes of the remote hyperborean regions.

Hobson was painfully moved on ascertaining the true state of things, and being anxious to conceal his emotion, he shut himself up in his own room and did not appear again that day. With his chart before him, he racked his brains to find some way out of the difficulties with which be was beset.

The temperature fell some degrees farther the same day, and the mists, which had collected above the south-eastern horizon the day before, resolved themselves into snow during the night, so that the next day the white carpet was two inches thick. Winter was coming at last.

On September 3rd Mrs Barnett resolved to go a few miles along the coast towards Cape Esquimaux. She wished to see for herself the changes lately produced. If she had mentioned her project to the Lieutenant, he would certainly have offered to accompany her; but she did not wish to disturb him, and decided to go without him, taking Madge with her. There was really nothing to fear, the only formidable animals, the bears, seemed to have quite deserted the island after the earthquake; and two women might, without danger, venture on a walk of a few hours without an escort.

Madge agreed at once to Mrs Barnett’s proposal, and without a word to any one they set out at eight o’clock A.M. provided with an ice-chisel, a flask of spirits, and a wallet of provisions.

After leaving Cape Bathurst they turned to the west. The sun was already dragging its slow course along the horizon, for at this time of year it would only be a few degrees above it at its culmination. But its oblique rays were clear and powerful, and the snow was already melting here and there beneath their influence.

The coast was alive with flocks of birds of many kinds; ptarmigans, guillemots, puffins, wild geese, and ducks of every variety fluttered about, uttering their various cries, skimming the surface of the sea or of the lagoon, according as their tastes led them to prefer salt or fresh water.

Mrs Barnett had now a capital opportunity of seeing how many furred animals haunted the neighbourhood of Fort Hope. Martens, ermines, musk-rats, and foxes were numerous, and the magazines of the factory might easily have been filled with their skins, but what good would that be now? The inoffensive creatures, knowing that hunting was suspended, went and came fearlessly, venturing close up to the palisade, and becoming tamer every day. Their instinct doubtless told them that they and their old enemies were alike prisoners on the island, and a common danger bound them together. It struck Mrs Barnett as strange that the two enthusiastic hunters

— Marbre and Sabine — should obey the Lieutenant’s orders to spare the furred animals without remonstrance or complaint, and appeared not even to wish to shoot the valuable game around them. It was true the foxes and others had not yet assumed their winter robes, but this was not enough to explain the strange indifference of the two hunters.

Whilst walking at a good pace and talking over their strange situation, Mrs Barnett and Madge carefully noted the peculiarities of the sandy coast. The ravages recently made by the sea were distinctly visible. Fresh landslips enabled them to see new fractures in the ice distinctly. The strand, fretted away in many places, had sunk to an enormous extent, and the waves washed along a level beach when the perpendicular shores had once checked their advance. It was evident that parts of the island were now only on a level with the ocean.

“O Madge!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, pointing to the long smooth tracts on which the curling waves broke in rapid succession, “our situation has indeed become aggravated by the awful storm! It is evident that the level of the whole island is gradually becoming lower. It is now only a question of time. Will the winter come soon enough to save us? Everything depends upon that.”

“The winter will come, my dear girl,” replied Madge with her usual unshaken confidence. “We have already had two falls of snow. Ice is [begininng] beginning to accumulate, and God will send it us in time, I feel sure.”

“You are right. Madge, we must have faith!” said Mrs Barnett. “We women who do not trouble ourselves about the scientific reasons for physical phenomena can hope, when men who are better informed, perhaps, despair. That is one of our blessings, which our Lieutenant unfortunately does not share. He sees the significance of facts, he reflects, he calculates, he reckons up the time still remaining to us, and I see that he is beginning to lose all hope.”

“He is a brave, energetic man, for all that,” replied Madge.

“Yes,” added Mrs Barnett, “and if it be in the power of man to save us, he will do it.”

By nine o’clock the two women had walked four miles. They were often obliged to go inland for some little distance, to avoid parts of the coast already invaded by the sea. Here and there the waves had encroached half-a-mile beyond the former high-water line, and the thickness of the ice-field had been considerably reduced. There was danger that it would soon yield in many places, and that new bays would be formed all along the coast.

As they got farther from the fort Mrs Barnett noticed that the number of furred animals decreased considerably. The poor creatures evidently felt more secure near a human habitation. The only formidable animals which had not been led by instinct to escape in time from the dangerous island were a few wolves, savage beasts which even a common danger did not conciliate. Mrs Barnett and Madge saw several wandering about on the plains, but they did not approach, and soon disappeared behind the hills on the south of the lagoon.

“What will become of all these imprisoned animals,” said Madge, “when all food fails them, and they are famished with hunger in the winter?”

“They will not be famished in a hurry, Madge,” replied Mrs Barnett, “and we shall have nothing to fear from them; all the martens, ermines, and Polar hares, which we spare will fall an easy prey to them. That is not our danger;

the brittle ground beneath our feet, which may at any moment give way, is our real peril. Only look how the sea is advancing here. It already covers half the plain, and the waves, still comparatively warm, are eating away our island above and below at the same time! If the cold does not stop it very soon, the sea will shortly join the lake, and we shall lose our lagoon as we lost our river and our port!"

"Well, if that should happen it will indeed be an irreparable misfortune!" exclaimed Madge.

"Why?" asked Mrs Barnett, looking inquiringly at her companion.

"Because we shall have no more fresh water," replied Madge.

"Oh, we shall not want for fresh water, Madge," said Mrs Barnett; "the rain, the snow, the ice, the icebergs of the ocean, the very ice-field on which we float, will supply us with that; no, no, that is not our danger."

About ten o'clock Mrs Barnett and Madge had readied the rising ground above Cape Esquimaux, but at least two miles inland, for they had found it impossible to follow the coast, worn away as it was by the sea. Being rather tired with the many *détours* they had had to make, they decided to rest a few minutes before setting off on their return to Fort Hope. A little hill crowned by a clump of birch trees and a few shrubs afforded a pleasant shelter, and a bank covered with yellow moss, from which the snow had melted, served them as a seat. The little wallet was opened, and they shared their simple repast like sisters.

Half an hour later, Mrs Barnett proposed that they should climb along the promontory to the sea, and find out the exact state of Cape Esquimaux. She was anxious to know if the point of it had resisted the storm, and Madge declared herself ready to follow “her dear girl” wherever she went, but at the same time reminded her that they were eight or nine miles from Cape Bathurst already, and that they must not make Lieutenant Hobson uneasy by too long an absence.

But some presentiment made Mrs Barnett insist upon doing as she proposed, and she was right, as the event proved. It would only delay them half an hour after all.

They had not gone a quarter of a mile before Mrs Barnett stopped suddenly, and pointed to some clear and regular impressions upon the snow. These marks must have been made within the last nine or ten hours, or the last fall of snow would have covered them over.

“What animal has passed along here, I wonder?” said Madge.

“It was not an animal,” said Mrs Barnett, bending down to examine the marks more closely, “not a quadruped certainly, for its four feet would have left impressions very different from these. Look, Madge, they are the footprints of a human person!”

“But who could have been here?” inquired Madge; “none of the soldiers or women have left the fort, and we are on an island, remember. You must be mistaken, my dear; but we will follow the marks, and see where they lead us.”

They did so, and fifty paces farther on both again paused.

“Look, Madge, look!” cried Mrs Barnett, seizing her companion’s arm, “and then say if I am mistaken.”

Near the footprints there were marks of a heavy body having been dragged along the snow, and the impression of a hand.

“It is the hand of a woman or a child!” cried Madge.

“Yes!” replied Mrs Barnett; “a woman or a child has fallen here exhausted, and risen again to stumble farther on; look, the footprints again, and father on more falls!”

“Who, who could it have been?” exclaimed Madge.

“How can I tell?” replied Mrs Barnett. “Some unfortunate creature imprisoned like ourselves for three or four months perhaps. Or some shipwrecked wretch flung upon the coast in the storm. You remember the fire and the cry of which Sergeant Long and Lieutenant Hobson spoke. Come, come, Madge, there may be some one in danger for us to save!

And Mrs Barnett, dragging Madge with her, ran along following the traces, and further on found that they were stained with blood.

The brave, tender-hearted woman, had spoken of saving some one in danger; had she then forgotten that there was no safety for any upon the island, doomed sooner or later to be swallowed up by the ocean?

The impressions on the ground led towards Cape Esquimaux. And the two carefully traced them, but the footprints presently disappeared, whilst the blood-stains increased, making an irregular pathway along the snow. It was evident the poor wretch had been unable to walk farther, and had crept along on hands and knees; here and there fragments of torn clothes were scattered about, bits of sealskin and fur.

“Come, come,” cried Mrs Barnett, whose heart beat violently.

Madge followed her, they were only a few yards from Cape Esquimaux, which now rose only a few feet upon the sea-level against the background of the sky, and was quite deserted.

The impressions now led them to the right of the cape, and running along they soon climbed to the top, but there was still nothing, absolutely nothing, to be seen. At the foot of the cape, where the slight ascent began, the traces turned to the right, and led straight to the sea.

Mrs Barnett was turning to the right also, but just as she was stepping on to the beach, Madge, who had been following her and looking about uneasily, caught hold of her hand, and exclaimed —

“Stop! stop!” “No, Madge, no!” cried Mrs Barnett, who was drawn along by a kind of instinct in spite of herself.

“Stop, stop, and look!” cried Madge, tightening her hold on her mistress’s hand.

On the beach, about fifty paces from Cape Esquimaux, a large white mass was moving about and growling angrily.

It was an immense Polar bear, and the two women watched it with beating hearts. It was pacing round and round a bundle of fur on the ground, which it smelt at every now and then, lifting it up and letting it fall again. The bundle of fur looked like the dead body of a walrus.

Mrs Barnett and Madge did not know what to think, whether to advance or to retreat, but presently as the body was moved about a kind of hood fell back from the head, and some long locks of brown hair were thrown over the snow.

“It is a woman! a woman!” cried Mrs Barnett, eager to rush to her assistance and find out if she were dead or alive!

“Stop!” repeated Madge, holding her back; “the bear won’t harm her.”

And, indeed, the formidable creature merely turned the body over, and showed no inclination of tearing it with its dreadful claws. It went away and came back apparently uncertain what to do. It had not yet perceived the two women who were so anxiously watching it.

Suddenly a loud crack was heard. The earth shook, and it seemed as if the whole of Cape Esquimaux were about to be plunged into the sea.

A large piece of the island had broken away, and a huge piece of ice, the centre of gravity of which had been displaced by the alteration in its specific weight, drifted away, carrying with it the bear and the body of the woman.

Mrs Barnett screamed, and would have flung herself upon the broken ice before it floated away, if Madge had not clutched her hand firmly, saying quietly — —

“Stop! stop!”

At the noise produced by the breaking off of the piece of ice, the bear started back with a fearful growl, and, leaving the body, rushed to the side where the fracture had taken place; but he was already some forty feet from the coast, and in his terror he ran round and round the islet, tearing up the ground with his claws, and stamping the sand and snow about him.

Presently he returned to the motionless body, and, to the horror of the two women, seized it by the clothes with his teeth, and carrying it to the edge of the ice, plunged with it into the sea.

Being a powerful swimmer, like the whole race of Arctic bears, he soon gained the shores of the island. With a great exertion of strength he managed to climb up the ice, and having reached the surface of the island he quietly laid down the body he had brought with him.

Mrs Barnett could no longer be held back, and, shaking off Madge’s hold, she rushed to the beach, never thinking of the danger she ran in facing a formidable carnivorous creature.

The bear, seeing her approach, reared upon his hind legs, and came towards her, but at about ten paces off he paused, shook his great head, and turning round with a low growl, quietly walked away towards the centre of the island, without once looking behind him. He, too, was evidently affected by the mysterious fear which had tamed all the wild animals on the island.

Mrs Barnett was soon bending over the body stretched about the snow.

A cry of astonishment burst from her lips:

“Madge, Madge, come!” she exclaimed.

Madge approached and looked long and fixedly at the inanimate body. It was the young Esquimaux girl Kalumah!

CHAPTER IX.

KALUMAH'S ADVENTURES.

Kalumah on the floating island, two hundred miles from the American coast. It was almost incredible!

The first thing to be ascertained was whether the poor creature still breathed. Was it possible to restore her to life? Mrs Barnett loosened her clothes, and found that her body was not yet quite cold. Her heart beat very feebly, but it did beat. The blood they had seen came from a slight wound in her hand; Madge bound it up with her handkerchief, and the bleeding soon ceased.

At the same time Mrs Barnett raised the poor girl's head, and managed to pour a few drops of rum between her parted lips. She then bathed her forehead and temples with cold water, and waited.

A few minutes passed by, and neither of the watchers were able to utter a word, so anxious were they lest the faint spark of life remaining to the young Esquimaux should be quenched.

But at last Kalumah's breast heaved with a faint sigh, her hands moved feebly, and presently she opened her eyes, and recognising her preserver she murmured —

"Mrs Barnett! Mrs Barnett!"

The lady was not a little surprised at hearing her own name. Had Kalumah voluntarily sought the floating island, and did she expect to find her old European friends on it? If so, how had she come to know it, and how had she managed to reach the island, two hundred miles from the mainland?

How could she have guessed that the ice-field as bearing Mrs Barnett and all the occupants of Fort Hope away from the American coast? Really it all seemed quite inexplicable.

“She lives — she will recover!” exclaimed Madge, who felt the vital heat and pulsation returning to the poor bruised body.

“Poor child, poor child’” said Mrs Barnett, much affected; “she murmured my name when she was at the point of death.”

But now Kalumah again half opened her eyes, and looked about her with a dreamy unsatisfied expression, presently, however, seeing Mrs Barnett, her face brightened, the same name again burst from her lips, and painfully raising her hand she let it fall on that of her friend.

The anxious care of the two women soon revived Kalumah, whose extreme exhaustion arose not only from fatigue but also from hunger. She had eaten nothing for forty-eight hours. Some pieces of cold venison and a little rum refreshed her, and she soon felt able to accompany her newly-found friends to the fort.

Before starting, however, Kalumah, seated on the sand between Mrs Barnett and Madge, overwhelmed them with thanks and expressions of attachment. Then she told her story: she had not forgotten the Europeans of Fort Hope, and the thought of Mrs Paulina Barnett had been ever present with her. It was not by chance, as we shall see, that she had come to Victoria Island.

The following is a brief summary of what Kalumah related to Mrs Barnett: —

Our readers will remember the young Esquimaux’s promise to come and see her friends at Fort Hope again in the fine season of the next year. The long Polar night being over, and the month of May having come round, Kalumah set out to fulfil her pledge. She left Russian America, where she had wintered, and accompanied by one of her brothers-in-law, started for the peninsula of Victoria.

Six weeks later, towards the middle of June, she got to that part of British America which is near Cape Bathurst. She at once recognised the volcanic mountains shutting in Liverpool Bay, and twenty miles farther east she came to Walruses’ Bay, where her people had so often hunted morses and seals.

But beyond the bay on the north, there was nothing to be seen. The coast suddenly sank to the south-east in an almost straight line. Cape Esquimaux and Cape Bathurst had alike disappeared.

Kalumah understood what had happened. Either the whole of the peninsula had been swallowed up by the waves, or it was floating away as an island, no one knew whither!

Kalumah’s tears flowed fast at the loss of those whom she had come so far to see.

Her brother-in-law, however, had not appeared surprised at the catastrophe. A kind of legend or tradition had been handed down amongst the nomad tribes of North America, that Cape Bathurst did not form part of the mainland, but had been joined on to it thousands of years before, and would sooner or later be torn away in some convulsion of nature. Hence the surprise at finding the factory founded by Hobson at the foot of the cape. But with the unfortunate reserve characteristic of their race, and perhaps also under the influence of that enmity which all natives feel for those who settle in their country, they said nothing to the Lieutenant, whose fort was already finished. Kalumah knew nothing of this tradition, which after all rested on no trustworthy evidence, and probably belonged to the many northern legends relating to the creation. This was how it was that the colonists of Fort Hope were not warned of the danger they ran in settling on such a spot.

Had a word in season been spoken to Hobson he would certainly have gone farther in search of some firmer foundation for his fort than this soil, certain peculiarities of which he had noticed at the first.

When Kalumah had made quite sure that all trace of Cape Bathurst was gone, she explored the coast as far as the further side of Washburn Bay, but without finding any sign of those she sought, and at last there was nothing left for her to do but to return to the fisheries of Russian America.

She and her brother-in-law left Walruses' Bay at the end of June, and following the coast got back to New Georgia towards the end of July, after an absolutely fruitless journey.

Kalumah now gave up all hope of again seeing Mrs Barnett and the other colonists of Fort Hope. She concluded that they had all been swallowed up by the ocean long ago.

At this part of her tale the young Esquimaux looked at Mrs Barnett with eyes full of tears, and pressed her hand [affectionaly] affectionately, and then she murmured her thanks to God for her own preservation through the means of her friend.

Kalumah on her return home resumed her customary occupations, and worked with the rest of her tribe at the fisheries near Icy Cape, a point a little above the seventieth parallel, and more than six hundred miles from Cape Bathurst.

Nothing worthy of note happened during the first half of the month of April; but towards the end the storm began which had caused Hobson so much uneasiness, and which had apparently extended its ravages over the whole of the Arctic Ocean and beyond Behring Strait. It was equally violent at Icy Cape and on Victoria Island, and, as the Lieutenant ascertained in taking his bearings, the latter was then not more than two hundred miles from the coast.

As Mrs Barnett listened to Kalumah, her previous information enabled her rapidly to find the key to the strange events which had taken place, and to account for the arrival of the young native on the island.

During the first days of the storm the Esquimaux of Icy Cape were confined to their huts. They could neither get out nor fish. But during the night of the 31st August a kind of presentiment led Kalumah to venture down to the beach, and, braving the wind and rain in all their fury, she peered anxiously through the darkness at the waves rising mountains high.

Presently she thought she saw a huge mass driven along by the hurricane parallel with the coast. Gifted with extremely keen sight — as are all these wandering tribes accustomed to the long dark Polar nights — she felt sure that she was not mistaken.

Something of vast bulk was passing two miles from the coast, and that something could be neither a whale, a boat, nor, at this time of the year, even an iceberg.

But Kalumah did not stop to reason. The truth flashed upon her like a revelation. Before her excited imagination rose the images of her friends. She saw them all once more, Mrs Barnett, Madge, Lieutenant Hobson, the baby she had covered with kisses at Fort Hope. Yes, they were passing, borne along in the storm on a floating ice-field!

Kalumah did not doubt or hesitate a moment. She felt that she must tell the poor shipwrecked people, which she was sure they were, of the close vicinity of the land. She ran to her hut, seized a torch of tow and resin, such as the Esquimaux use when fishing at night, lit it and waved it on the beach at the summit of Icy Cape.

This was the fire which Hobson and Long had seen when crouching on Cape Michael on the night of the 31st August.

Imagine the delight and excitement of the young Esquimaux when a signal replied to hers, when she saw the huge fire lit by Lieutenant Hobson, the reflection of which reached the American coast, although he did not dream that he was so near it.

But it quickly went out, the lull in the storm only lasted a few minutes, and the fearful gale, veering round to the south-east, swept along with redoubled violence.

Kalumah feared that her “prey,” so she called the floating island, was about to escape her, and that it would not be driven on to the shore. She saw it fading away, and knew that it would soon disappear in the darkness and be lost to her on the boundless ocean.

It was indeed a terrible moment for the young native, and she determined at all hazards to let her friends know of their situation. There might yet be time for them to take some steps for their deliverance, although every hour took them farther from the continent.

She did not hesitate a moment, her kayak was at hand, the frail bark in which she had more than once braved the storms of the Arctic Ocean, she pushed it down to the sea, hastily laced on the sealskin jacket fastened to the canoe, and, the long paddle in her hand, she plunged into the darkness.

Mrs Barnett here pressed the brave child to her heart, and Madge shed tears of sympathy.

When launched upon the roaring ocean, Kalumah found the change of wind in her favour. The waves dashed over her kayak, it is true, but they were powerless to harm the light boat, which floated on their crests like a straw. It was capsized several times, but a stroke of the paddle righted it at once.

After about an hour’s hard work, Kalumah could see the wandering island more distinctly, and had no longer any doubt of effecting her purpose, as she was but a quarter of a mile from the beach.

It was then that she uttered the cry which Hobson and Long had heard.

But, alas! Kalumah now felt herself being carried away towards the west by a powerful current, which could take firmer hold of her kayak than of the floating island!

In vain she struggled to beat back with her paddle, the light boat shot along like an arrow. She uttered scream after scream, but she was unheard, for she was already far away, and when the day broke the coasts of Alaska and the island she had wished to reach, were but two distant masses on the horizon.

Did she despair? Not yet. It was impossible to get back to the American continent in the teeth of the terrible wind which was driving the island before it at a rapid pace, taking it out two hundred miles in thirty-six hours, and assisted by the current from the coast.

There was but one thing left to do. To get to the island by keeping in the same current which was drifting it away.

But, alas! the poor girl’s strength was not equal to her courage, she was faint from want of food, and, exhausted as she was, she could no longer wield her paddle.

For some hours she struggled on, and seemed to be approaching the island, although those on it could not see her, as she was but a speck upon the ocean. She struggled on until her stiffened arms and bleeding hands fell powerless, and, losing consciousness, she was floated along in her frail kayak at the mercy of winds and waves.

She did not know how long this lasted, she remembered nothing more, until a sudden shock roused her, her kayak had struck against something, it opened beneath her, and she was plunged into cold water, the freshness of which revived her. A few moments later, she was flung upon the sand in a dying state by a large wave.

This had taken place the night before, just before dawn — that is to say, about two or three o’clock in the morning. Kalumah had then been seventy hours at sea since she embarked!

The young native had no idea where she had been thrown, whether on the continent or on the floating island, which she had so bravely sought, but she hoped the latter. Yes, hoped that she had reached her friends, although she knew that the wind and current had driven them into the open sea, and not towards the coast!

The thought revived her, and, shattered as she was, she struggled to her feet, and tried to follow the coast.

She had, in fact, been providentially thrown on that portion of Victoria Island which was formerly the upper corner of Walruses' Bay. But, worn away as it was by the waves, she did not recognise the land with which she had once been familiar.

She tottered on, stopped, and again struggled to advance; the beach before her appeared endless, she had so often to go round where the sea had encroached upon the sand. And so dragging herself along, stumbling and scrambling up again, she at last approached the little wood where Mrs. Barnett and Madge had halted that very morning. We know that the two women found the footprints left by Kalumah in the snow not far from this very spot, and it was at a short distance farther on that the poor girl fell for the last time. Exhausted by fatigue and hunger, she still managed to creep along on hands and knees for a few minutes longer.

A great hope kept her from despair, for she had at last recognised Cape Esquimaux, at the foot of which she and her people had encamped the year before. She knew now that she was but eight miles from the factory, and that she had only to follow the path she had so often traversed when she went to visit her friends at Fort Hope.

Yes, this hope sustained her, but she had scarcely reached the beach when her forces entirely failed her, and she again lost all consciousness. But for Mrs Barnett she would have died.

“But, dear lady,” she added, “I knew that you would come to my rescue, and that God would save me by your means.”

We know the rest. We know the providential instinct which led Mrs Barnett and Madge to explore this part of the coast on this very day, and the presentiment which made them visit Cape Esquimaux after they had rested, and before returning to Fort Hope. We know too — as Mrs Barnett related to Kalumah — how the piece of ice had floated away, and how the bear had acted under the circumstances.

“And after all,” added Mrs Barnett with a smile, “it was not I who saved you, but the good creature without whose aid you would never have come back to us, and if ever we see him again we will treat him with the respect due to your preserver.”

During this long conversation Kalumah was rested and refreshed, and Mrs Barnett proposed that they should return to the fort at once, as she had already been too long away. The young girl immediately rose ready to start.

Mrs Barnett was indeed most anxious to tell the Lieutenant of all that had happened during the night of the storm, when the wandering island had neared the American continent, but she urged Kalumah to keep her adventures secret, and to say nothing about the situation of the island. She would naturally be supposed to have come along the coast, in fulfilment of the promise she had made to visit her friends in the fine season. Her arrival would tend only to strengthen the belief of the colonists that no changes had taken place in the country around Cape Bathurst, and to set at rest the doubts any of them might have entertained.

It was about three o’clock when Madge and Mrs Barnett, with Kalumah hanging on her arm, set out towards the east, and before five o’clock in the afternoon they all arrived at the postern of the fort.

CHAPTER X.

THE KAMTCHATKA CURRENT.

We can readily imagine the reception given to Kalumah by all at the fort. It seemed to them that the communication with the outer world was reopened. Mrs Mac-Nab, Mrs Rae and Mrs Joliffe overwhelmed her with caresses, but Kalumah's first thought was for the little child, she caught sight of him immediately, and running to him covered him with kisses.

The young native was charmed and touched with the hospitality of her European hosts. A positive *fête* was held in her honour and every one was delighted that she would have to remain at the fort for the winter, the season being too far advanced for her to get back to the settlements of Russian America before the cold set in.

But if all the settlers were agreeably surprised at the appearance of Kalumah, what must Lieutenant Hobson have thought when he saw her leaning on Mrs Barnett's arm. A sudden hope flashed across his mind like lightning, and as quickly died away: perhaps in spite of the evidence of his daily observations Victoria Island had run aground somewhere on the continent unnoticed by any of them.

Mrs Barnett read the Lieutenant's thoughts in his face, and shook her head sadly.

He saw that no change had taken place in their situation, and waited until Mrs Barnett was able to explain Kalumah's appearance.

A few minutes later he was walking along the beach with the lady, listening with great interest to her account of Kalumah's adventures.

So he had been right in all his conjectures. The north-east hurricane had driven the island out of the current. The ice-field had approached within a mile at least of the American continent. It had not been a fire on board ship which they had seen, or the cry of a shipwrecked mariner which they had heard. The mainland had been close at hand, and had the north-east wind blown hard for another hour Victoria Island would have struck against the coast of Russian America. And then at this critical moment a fatal, a terrible wind had driven the island away from the mainland back to the open sea, and it was again in the grasp of the irresistible current, and was being carried along with a speed which nothing could check, the mighty south-east wind aiding its headlong course, to that terribly dangerous spot where it would be exposed to contrary attractions, either of which might lead to its destruction and that of all the unfortunate people dragged along with it.

For the hundredth time the Lieutenant and Mrs Barnett discussed all the bearings of the case, and then Hobson inquired if any important changes had taken place in the appearance of the districts between Cape Bathurst and Walruses’ Bay?

Mrs Barnett replied that in some places the level of the coast appeared to be lowered, and that the waves now covered tracts of sand which were formerly out of their reach. She related what had happened at Cape Esquimaux, and the important fracture which had taken place at that part of the coast.

Nothing could have been less satisfactory. It was evident that the ice-field forming the foundation of the island was breaking up. What had happened at Cape Esquimaux might at any moment be reproduced at Cape Bathurst. At any hour of the day or night the houses of the factory might be swallowed up by the deep, and the only thing which could save them was the winter, the bitter winter which was fortunately rapidly approaching.

The next day, September 4th, when Hobson took his bearings, he found that the position of Victoria Island had not sensibly changed since the day before. It had remained motionless between the two contrary currents, which was on the whole the very best thing that could have happened.

“If only the cold would fix us where we are, if the ice wall would shut us in, and the sea become petrified around us,” exclaimed Hobson, “I should feel that our safety was assured. We are but two hundred miles from the coast at this moment, and by venturing across the frozen ice fields we might perhaps reach either Russian America or Kamtchatka. Winter, winter at any price, let the winter set in, no matter how rapidly.”

Meanwhile, according to the Lieutenant’s orders, the preparations for the winter were completed. Enough forage to last the dogs the whole of the Polar night was stored up. They were all in good health, but getting rather fat with having nothing to do. They could not be taken too much care of, as they would have to work terribly hard in the journey across the ice after the abandonment of Fort Hope. It was most important to keep up their strength, and they were fed on raw reindeer venison, plenty of which was easily attainable.

The tame reindeer also prospered, their stable was comfortable, and a good supply of moss was laid by for them in the magazines of the fort. The females provided Mrs Joliffe with plenty of milk for her daily culinary needs.

The Corporal and his little wife had also sown fresh seeds, encouraged by the success of the last in the warm season. The ground had been prepared beforehand for the planting of scurvy-grass and Labrador Tea. It was important that there should be no lack of these valuable anti-scorbutics.

The sheds were filled with wood up to the very roof. Winter might come as soon as it liked now, and freeze the mercury in the cistern of the thermometer, there was no fear that they would again be reduced to burn their furniture as they had the year before. Mac-Nab and his men had become wise by experience, and the chips left from the boat-building added considerably to their stock of fuel.

About this time a few animals were taken which had already assumed their winter furs, such as martens, polecats, blue foxes, and ermines. Marbre and Sabine had obtained leave from the Lieutenant to set some traps outside the enceinte. He did not like to refuse them this permission, lest they should become discontented, as he had really no reason to assign for putting a stop to the collecting of furs, although he knew full well that the destination of these harmless creatures could do nobody any good. Their flesh was, however, useful for feeding the dogs, and enabled them to economise the reindeer venison.

All was now prepared for the winter, and the soldiers worked with an energy which they would certainly not have shown if they had been told the secret of their situation.

During the next few days the bearings were taken with the greatest care, but no change was noticeable in the situation of Victoria Island; and Hobson, finding that it was motionless, began to have fresh hope. Although there were as yet no symptoms of winter in inorganic nature, the temperature maintaining a mean height of 49° Fahrenheit, some swans flying to the south in search of a warmer climate was a good omen. Other birds capable of a long-sustained flight over vast tracts of the ocean began to desert the island. They knew full well that the continent of America and of Asia, with their less severe climates and their plentiful resources of every kind, were not far off, and that their wings were strong enough to carry them there. A good many of these birds were caught; and by Mrs Barnett's advice the Lieutenant tied round their necks a stiff cloth ticket, on which was inscribed the position of the wandering island, and the names of its inhabitants. The birds were then set free, and their captors watched them wing their way to the south with envious eyes.

Of course none were in the secret of the sending forth of these messengers, except Mrs Barnett, Madge, Kalumah, Hobson, and Long.

The poor quadrupeds were unable to seek their usual winter refuges in the south. Under ordinary circumstances the reindeer, Polar hares, and even the wolves would have left early in September for the shores of the Great Bear and Slave Lakes, a good many degrees farther south; but now the sea was an insurmountable barrier, and they, too, would have to wait until the winter should render it passable. Led by instinct they had doubtless tried to leave the island, but, turned back by the water, the instinct of self-preservation had brought them to the neighbourhood of Fort Hope, to be near the men who were once their hunters and most formidable enemies, but were now, like themselves, rendered comparatively inoffensive by their imprisonment.

The observations of the 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th September, revealed no alteration in the position of Victoria Island. The large eddy between the two currents kept it stationary. Another fifteen days, another three weeks of this state of things, and Hobson felt that they might be saved.

But they were not yet out of danger, and many terrible, almost supernatural, trials still awaited the inhabitants of Fort Hope.

On the 10th of September observations showed a displacement of Victoria Island. Only a slight displacement, but in a northerly direction.

Hobson was in dismay; the island was finally in the grasp of the Kamtchatka Current, and was drifting towards the unknown latitudes where the large icebergs come into being; it was on its way to the vast solitudes of the Arctic Ocean, interdicted to the human race, from which there is no return.

Hobson did not hide this new danger from those who were in the secret of the situation. Mrs Barnett, Madge, Kalumah, and Sergeant Long received this fresh blow with courage and resignation.

“Perhaps,” said Mrs Barnett, “the island may stop even yet. Perhaps it will move slowly. Let us hope on... and wait! The winter is not far off, and we are going to meet it. In any case God’s will be done!” “My friends,” said Hobson earnestly, “do you not think I ought now to tell our comrades. You see in what a terrible position we are and all that may await us! Is it not taking too great a responsibility to keep them in ignorance of the peril they are in?”

“I should wait a little longer,” replied Mrs Barnett without hesitation; “I would not give them all over to despair until the last chance is gone.”

“That is my opinion also,” said Long.

Hobson had thought the same, and was glad to find that his companions agreed with him in the matter.

On the 11th and 12th September, the motion towards the north was more noticeable. Victoria Island was drifting at a rate of from twelve to thirteen miles a day, so that each day took them the same distance farther from the land and nearer to the north. They were, in short, following the decided course made by the Kamtchatka Current, and would quickly pass that seventieth degree which once cut across the extremity of Cape Bathurst, and beyond which no land of any kind was to be met with in this part of the Arctic Ocean.

Every day Hobson looked out their position on the map, and saw only too clearly to what awful solitudes the wandering island was drifting.

The only hope left consisted, as Mrs Barnett had said, in the fact that they were going to meet the winter. In thus drifting towards the north they would soon encounter those ice-cold waters, which would consolidate and strengthen the foundations of the island. But if the danger of being swallowed up by the waves was decreased, would not the unfortunate colonists have an immense distance to traverse to get back from these remote northern regions? Had the boat been finished, Lieutenant Hobson would not have hesitated to embark the whole party in it, but in spite of the zealous efforts of the carpenter it was not nearly ready, and indeed it taxed Mac-Nab’s powers to the uttermost to construct a vessel on which to trust the lives of twenty persons in such a dangerous sea

By the 16th September Victoria Island was between seventy-three and eighty miles north of the spot where its course had been arrested for a few days between the Behring and Kamtchatka Cur rents There were now, however, many signs of the approach of winter Snow fell frequently and in large flakes The column of mercury fell gradually The mean temperature was still 44° Fahrenheit during the day, but at night it fell to 32°. The sun described an extremely lengthened curve above the horizon, not rising more than a few degrees even at noon, and disappearing for eleven hours out of every twenty four.

At last, on the night of the 16th September, the first signs of ice appeared upon the sea in the shape of small isolated crystals like snow, which stained the clear surface of the water As was noticed by the famous explorer Scoresby, these crystals immediately calmed the waves, like the oil which sailors pour upon the sea to produce a momentary cessation of its agitation These crystals showed a tendency to weld themselves together, but they were broken and separated by the motion of the water as soon as they had combined to any extent.

Hobson watched the appearance of the “young ice” with extreme attention. He knew that twenty four hours would suffice to make the ice-crust two or three inches thick, strong enough in fact to bear the weight of a man He therefore expected that Victoria Island would shortly be arrested in its course to the north.

But the day ended the work of the night, and if the speed of the island slackened during the darkness in consequence of the obstacles in its path, they were removed in the next twelve hours, and the island was carried rapidly along again by the powerful current.

The distance from the northern regions became daily less, and nothing could be done to lessen the evil.

At the autumnal equinox on the 21st of September, the day and night were of equal length, and from that date the night gradually became longer and longer. The winter was coming at last, but it did not set in rapidly or with any rigour Victoria Island was now nearly a degree farther north than the seventieth parallel, and on this 21st September, a rotating motion was for the first time noticed, a motion estimated by Hobson at about a quarter of the circumference.

Imagine the anxiety of the unfortunate Lieutenant. The secret he had so long carefully kept was now about to be betrayed by nature to the least clear sighted. Of course the rotation altered the cardinal points of the island. Cape Bathurst no longer pointed to the north, but to the east. The sun, moon, and stars rose and set on a different horizon, and it was impossible that men like Mac-Nab, Rae, Marbre and others, accustomed to note the signs of the heavens, could fail to be struck by the change, and understand its meaning.

To Hobson's great satisfaction, however, the brave soldiers appeared to notice nothing, the displacement with regard to the cardinal points was not, it was true, very considerable, and it was often too foggy for the rising and setting of the heavenly bodies to be accurately observed.

Unfortunately the rotation appeared to be accompanied by an increase of speed. From that date Victoria Island drifted at the rate of a mile an hour. It advanced farther and farther north, farther and farther away from all land. Hobson did not even yet despair, for it was not in his nature to do so, but he felt confused and astray, and longed for the winter with all his heart.

At last the temperature began to fall still lower. Snow fell plentifully on the 23d and 24th September, and increased the thickness of the coating of ice on the sea. Gradually the vast ice-field was formed on every side, the island in its advance continually broke it up, but each day it became firmer and better able to resist. The sea succumbed to the petrifying hand of winter, and became frozen as far as the eye could reach, and on September 27th, when the bearings were taken, it was found that Victoria Island had not moved since the day before. It was imprisoned in a vast ice-field, it was motionless in longitude 177° 22’, and latitude 77° 57’ — more than six hundred miles from any continent.

CHAPTER XI

A COMMUNICATION FROM LIEUTENANT HOBSON.

Such was the situation. To use Sergeant Long’s expression, the island had “cast anchor,” and was as stationary as when the isthmus connected it with the mainland. But six hundred miles now separated it from inhabited countries, six hundred miles which would have to be traversed in sledges across the solidified surface of the sea, amongst the icebergs which the cold would build up, in the bitterest months of the Arctic winter.

It would be a fearful undertaking, but hesitation was impossible. The winter, for which Lieutenant Hobson had so ardently longed, had come at last, and arrested the fatal march of the island to the north. It would throw a bridge six hundred miles long from their desolate home to the continents on the south, and the new chances of safety must not be neglected, every effort must be made to restore the colonists, so long lost in the hyperborean regions, to their friends.

As Hobson explained to his companions, it would be madness to linger till the spring should again thaw the ice, which would be to abandon themselves once more to the capricious Behring currents. They must wait until the sea was quite firmly frozen over, which at the most would be in another three or four weeks. Meanwhile the Lieutenant proposed making frequent excursions on the ice-field encircling the island, in order to ascertain its thickness, its suitability for the passage of sledges, and the best route to take across it so as to reach the shores of Asia or America.

“Of course,” observed Hobson to Mrs Barnett and Sergeant Long, “we would all rather make for Russian America than Asia, if a choice is open to us.”

“Kalumah will be very useful to us,” said Mrs Barnett, “for as a native she will be thoroughly acquainted with the whole of Alaska.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Hobson, “her arrival was most fortunate for us. Thanks to her, we shall be easily able to get to the settlement of Fort Michael on Norton Sound, perhaps even to New Archangel, a good deal farther south, where we can pass the rest of the winter.”

“Poor Fort Hope!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, “it goes to my heart to think of abandoning it on this island. It has been built at the cost of so much trouble and fatigue, everything about it has been so admirably arranged by you, Lieutenant! I feel as if my heart would break when we leave it finally.”

“You will not suffer more than I shall, madam,” replied Hobson, “and perhaps not so much. It is the chief work of my life; I have devoted all my powers to the foundation of Fort Hope, so unfortunately named, and I shall never cease to regret having to leave it. And what will the Company say which confided this task to me, for after all I am` but its humble agent.”

“It will say,” cried Mrs Barnett with enthusiasm, “it will say that you have done your duty, that you are not responsible for the caprices of nature, which is ever more powerful than man. It will understand that you could not foresee what has happened, for it was beyond the penetration of the most far-sighted man, and it will know that it owes the preservation of the whole party to your prudence and moral courage.”

“Thank you, madam,” replied the Lieutenant, pressing Mrs Barnett’s hand, “thank you for your warm-hearted words. But I have had some experience of men, and I know that success is always admired and failure condemned. But the will of Heaven be done!”

Sergeant Long, anxious to turn the Lieutenant from his melancholy thoughts, now began to talk about the preparations for the approaching departure, and asked if it was not time to tell his comrades the truth.

“Let us wait a little longer,” replied Hobson. “We have saved the poor fellows much anxiety and worry already, let us keep silent until the day is fixed for the start, and then we will reveal the whole truth.”

This point being decided, the ordinary occupations of the factory went on for a few weeks longer.

How different was the situation of the colonists a year ago, when they were all looking forward to the future in happy unconsciousness!

A year ago the first symptoms of the cold season were appearing, even as they were now. The “young ice” was gradually forming along the coast. The lagoon, its waters being quieter than those of the sea, was the first to freeze over. The temperature remained about one or two degrees above freezing point in the day, and fell to three or four degrees below in the night. Hobson again made his men assume their winter garments, the linen vests and furs before described. The condensers were again set up inside the house, the air vessel and air-pumps were cleaned, the traps were set round the palisades on different parts of Cape Bathurst, and Marbre and Sabine got plenty of game, and finally the last touches were given to the inner rooms of the principal house.

Although Fort Hope was now about two degrees farther north than at the same time the year before, there was no sensible difference in the state of the temperature. The fact is, the distance between the seventieth and seventy-second parallels is not great enough to affect the mean height of the thermometer, on the contrary, it really seemed to be less cold than at the beginning of the winter before. Perhaps, however, that was because the colonists were now, to a certain extent, acclimatised.

Certainly the winter did not set in so abruptly as last time. The weather was very damp, and the atmosphere was always charged with vapour, which fell now as rain now as snow. In Lieutenant Hobson's opinion, at least, it was not nearly cold enough.

The sea froze all round the island, it is true, but not in a regular or continuous sheet of ice. Large blackish patches here and there showed that the icicles were not thoroughly cemented together. Loud resonant noises were constantly heard, produced by the breaking of the ice field when the rain melted the imperfectly welded edges of the blocks composing it. There was no rapid accumulation of lump upon lump such as is generally seen in intense cold. Icebergs and hummocks were few and scattered, and no ice-wall as yet shut in the horizon.

"This season would have been just the thing for the explorers of the North West Passage, or the seekers of the North Pole," repeated Sergeant Long again and again, "but it is most unfavourable for us, and very much against our ever getting back to our own land!"

This went on throughout October, and Hobson announced that the mean temperature was no lower than 32° Fahrenheit, and it is well known that several days of cold, 7° or 8° below zero, are required for the sea to freeze hard.

Had proof been needed that the ice-field was impassable, a fact noticed by Mrs Barnett and Hobson would have sufficed.

The animals imprisoned in the island, the furred animals, reindeer, wolves, &c. would have left the island had it been possible to cross the sea, but they continued to gather in large numbers round the factory, and to seek the vicinity of man. The wolves came actually within musket-range of the enceinte to devour the martens and Polar hares, which were their only food. The famished reindeer having neither moss nor herbs on which to browse, roved about Cape Bathurst in herds. A solitary bear, no doubt the one to which Mrs Barnett and Kalumah felt they owed a debt of gratitude, often passed to and fro amongst the trees of the woods, on the banks of the lagoon, and the presence of all these animals, especially of the ruminants, which require an exclusively vegetable diet, proved that flight was impossible.

We have said that the thermometer remained at freezing point, and Hobson found on consulting his journal that at the same time the year before, it had already marked 20° Fahrenheit below zero, proving how unequally cold is distributed in the capricious Polar regions.

The colonists therefore did not suffer much, and were not confined to the house at all. It was, however, very damp indeed, rain mixed with snow fell constantly, and the falling of the barometer proved that the atmosphere was charged with vapour.

Throughout October the Lieutenant and Long made many excursions to ascertain the state of the ice-field in the offing; one day they went to Cape Michael, another to the edge of the former Walruses’ Bay, anxious to see if it would be possible to cross to the continent of America or Asia, or if the start would have to be put off.

But the surface of the ice-field was covered with puddles of water, and in some parts riddled with holes, which would certainly have been impassable for sledges. It seemed as if it would be scarcely safe for a single traveller to venture across the half-liquid, half-solid masses. It was easy to see that the cold had been neither severe nor equally maintained, for the ice consisted of an accumulation of sharp points, crystals, prisms, polyhedrons, and figures of every variety, like an aggregation of stalactites. It was more like a glacier than a "field," and even if it had been practicable, walking on it would have been very tiring.

Hobson and Long managed with great difficulty to scramble over a mile or two towards the south, but at the expense of a vast amount of time, so that they were compelled to admit that they must wait some time yet, and they returned to Fort Hope disappointed and disheartened.

The first days of November came, and the temperature fell a little, but only a very few degrees, which was not nearly enough. Victoria Island was wrapped in damp fogs, and the lamps had to be lit during the day. It was necessary, however, to economise the oil as much as possible, as the supply was running short. No fresh stores had been brought by Captain Craventy's promised convoy, and there were no more walruses to be hunted. Should the dark winter be prolonged, the colonists would be compelled to have recourse to the fat of animals, perhaps even to the resin of the firs, to get a little light. The days were already very short, and the pale disc of the sun, yielding no warmth, and deprived of all its brightness, only appeared above the horizon for a few hours at a time. Yes, winter had come with its mists, its rain, and its snow, but without the long desired cold.

On the 11th November something of a fête was held at Fort Hope. Mrs Joliffe served up a few extras at dinner, for it was the anniversary of the birth of little Michael Mac-Nab. He was now a year old, and was the delight of everybody. He had large blue eyes and fair curly hair, like his father, the head carpenter, who was very proud of the resemblance. At dessert the baby was solemnly weighed. It was worth something to see him struggling in the scales, and to hear his astonished cries! He actually weighed thirty-four pounds! The announcement of this wonderful weight was greeted with loud cheers, and Mrs Mac-Nab was congratulated by everybody on her fine boy. Why Corporal Joliffe felt that he ought to share the compliments it is difficult to imagine, unless it was as a kind of foster-father or nurse to the baby. He had carried the child about, dandled and rocked him so often, that he felt he had something to do with his specific weight!

The next day, November 12th, the sun did not appear above the horizon. The long Polar night was beginning nine days sooner than it had done the year before, in consequence of the difference in the latitude of Victoria Island then and now.

The disappearance of the sun did not, however, produce any change in the state of the atmosphere. The temperature was as changeable as ever. The thermometer fell one day and rose the next. Rain and snow succeeded each other. The wind was soft, and did not settle in any quarter, but often veered round to every point of the compass in the course of a single day. The constant damp was very unhealthy, and likely to lead to scorbutic affections amongst the colonists, but fortunately, although the lime juice and lime lozenges were running short, and no fresh stock had been obtained, the scurvy-grass and sorrel had yielded a very good crop, and, by the advice of Lieutenant Hobson, a portion of them was eaten daily.

Every effort must, however, be made to get away from Fort Hope. Under the circumstances, three months would scarcely be long enough for them all to get to the nearest continent. It was impossible to risk being overtaken by the thaw on the ice-field, and therefore if they started at all it must be at the end of November.

The journey would have been difficult enough, even if the ice had been rendered solid everywhere by a severe winter, and in this uncertain weather it was a most serious matter.

On the 13th November, Hobson, Mrs Barnett, and the Sergeant met to decide on the day of departure. The Sergeant was of opinion that they ought to leave the island as soon as possible.

“For,” he said, “we must make allowance for all the possible delays during a march of six hundred miles. We ought to reach the continent before March, or we may be surprised by the thaw, and then we shall be in a worse predicament than we are on our island.”

“But,” said Mrs Barnett, “is the sea firm enough for us to cross it?”

“I think it is,” said Long, “and the ice gets thicker every day. The barometer, too, is gradually rising, and by the time our preparations are completed, which will be in about another week, I think, I hope that the really cold weather will have set in.”

“The winter has begun very badly,” said Hobson, “in fact everything seems to combine against us. Strange seasons have often been experienced on these seas, I have heard of whalers being able to navigate in places where, even in the summer at another time they would not have had an inch of water beneath their keels. In my opinion there is not a day to be lost, and I cannot sufficiently regret that the ordinary temperature of these regions does not assist us.”

“It will later,” said Mrs Barnett, “and we must be ready to take advantage of every chance in our favour. When do you propose starting, Lieutenant?”

“At the end of November at the latest,” replied Hobson, “but if in a week hence our preparations are finished, and the route appears practicable, we will start then.”

“Very well,” said Long, “we will get ready without losing an instant.”

“Then,” said Mrs Barnett, “you will now tell our companions of the situation in which they are placed?”

“Yes, madam, the moment to speak and the time for action have alike arrived.”

“And when do you propose enlightening them?”

“At once. Sergeant Long,” he added, turning to his subordinate, who at once drew himself up in a military attitude, “call all your men together in the large room to receive a communication.”

Sergeant Long touched his cap, and turning on his heel left the room without a word.

For some minutes Mrs Barnett and Hobson were left alone, but neither of them spoke.

The Sergeant quickly returned, and told Hobson that his orders were executed.

The Lieutenant and the lady at once went into the large room. All the members of the colony, men and women, were assembled in the dimly lighted room.

Hobson came forward, and standing in the centre of the group said very gravely —

“My friends, until to-day I have felt it my duty, in order to spare you useless anxiety, to conceal from you the situation of our fort. An earthquake separated us from the continent. Cape Bathurst has broken away from the mainland. Our peninsula is but an island of ice, a wandering island” — —

At this moment Marbre stepped forward, and said quietly.

“We knew it, sir!”

CHAPTER XII.

A CHANCE TO BE TRIED.

The brave fellows knew it then! And that they might not add to the cares of their chief, they had pretended to know nothing, and had worked away at the preparations for the winter with the same zeal as the year before.

Tears of emotion stood in Hobson's eyes, and he made no attempt to conceal them, but seizing Marbre's outstretched hand, he pressed it in his own.

Yes, the soldiers all knew it, for Marbre had guessed it long ago. The filling of the reindeer trap with salt water, the non-arrival of the detachment from Fort Reliance, the observations of latitude and longitude taken every day, which would have been useless on firm ground, the precautions observed by Hobson to prevent any one seeing him take the bearings, the fact of the animals remaining on the island after winter had set in, and the change in the position of the cardinal points during the last few days, which they had noticed at once, had all been tokens easily interpreted by the inhabitants of Fort Hope. The arrival of Kalumah had puzzled them, but they had concluded that she had been thrown upon the island in the storm, and they were right, as we are aware.

Marbre, upon whom the truth had first dawned, confided his suspicions to Mac-Nab the carpenter and Rae the blacksmith. All three faced the situation calmly enough, and agreed that they ought to tell their comrades and wives, but decided to let the Lieutenant think they knew nothing, and to obey him without question as before.

"You are indeed brave fellows, my friends," exclaimed Mrs Barnett, who was much touched by this delicate feeling, "you are true soldiers!"

"Our Lieutenant may depend upon us," said Mac-Nab, "he has done his duty, and we will do ours."

"I know you will, dear comrades," said Hobson, "and if only Heaven will help and not forsake us, we will help ourselves."

The Lieutenant then related all that had happened since the time when the earthquake broke the isthmus, and converted the districts round Cape Bathurst into an island. He told how, when the sea became free from ice in the spring, the new island had been drifted more than two hundred miles away from the coast by an unknown current, how the hurricane had driven it back within sight of land, how it had again been carried away in the night of the 31st August, and, lastly, how Kalumah had bravely risked her life to come to the aid of her European friends. Then he enumerated the changes the island had undergone, explaining how the warmer waters had worn it away, and his fear that it might be carried to the Pacific, or seized by the Kamtchatka Current, concluding his narrative by stating that the wandering island had finally stopped on the 27th of last September.

The chart of the Arctic seas was then brought, and Hobson pointed out the position occupied by the island — six hundred miles from all land.

He ended by saying that the situation was extremely dangerous, that the island would inevitably be crushed when the ice broke up, and that, before having recourse to the boat — which could not be used until the next summer — they must try to get back to the American continent by crossing the ice-field.

“We shall have six hundred miles to go in the cold and darkness of the Polar night. It will be hard work, my friends, but you know as well as I do that there can be no shrinking from the task.”

“When you give the signal to start, Lieutenant, we will follow you,” said Mac-Nab.

All being of one mind, the preparations for departure were from that date rapidly pushed forward. The men bravely faced the fact that they would have six hundred miles to travel under very trying circumstances. Sergeant Long superintended the works, whilst Hobson, the two hunters, and Mrs Barnett, often went to test the firmness of the ice-field. Kalumah frequently accompanied them, and her remarks, founded on experience, might possibly be of great use to the Lieutenant. Unless they were prevented they were to start on the 20th November, and there was not a moment to lose.

As Hobson had foreseen, the wind having risen, the temperature fell slightly, and the column of mercury marked 24° Fahrenheit.

Snow, which soon became hardened, replaced the rain of the preceding days. A few more days of such cold and sledges could be used. The little bay hollowed out of the cliffs of Cape Michael was partly filled with ice and snow; but it must not be forgotten that its calmer waters froze more quickly than those of the open sea, which were not yet in a satisfactory condition.

The wind continued to blow almost incessantly, and with considerable violence, but the motion of waves interfered with the regular formation and consolidation of the ice. Large pools of water occurred here and there between the pieces of ice, and it was impossible to attempt to cross it.

“The weather is certainly getting colder,” observed Mrs Barnett to Lieutenant Hobson, as they were exploring the south of the island together on the 10th November, “the temperature is becoming lower and lower, and these liquid spaces will soon freeze over.”

“I think you are right, madam,” replied Hobson, “but the way in which they will freeze over will not be very favourable to our plans. The pieces of ice are small, and their jagged edges will stick up all over the surface, making it very rough, so that if our sledges get over it at all, it will only be with very great difficulty.”

“But,” resumed Mrs Barnett, “if I am not mistaken, a heavy fall of snow, lasting a few days or even a few hours, would suffice to level the entire surface!”

“Yes, yes,” replied Hobson, “but if snow should fall, it will be because the temperature has risen; and if it rises, the ice-field will break up again, so that either contingency will be against us!”

“It really would be a strange freak of fortune if we should experience a temperate instead of an Arctic winter in the midst of the Polar Sea!” observed Mrs Barnett.

“It has happened before, madam, it has happened before. Let me remind you of the great severity of last cold season; now it has been noticed that two long bitter winters seldom succeed each other, and the whalers of the northern seas know it well. A bitter winter when we should have been glad of a mild one, and a mild one when we so sorely need the reverse. It must be owned, we have been strangely unfortunate thus far! And when I think of six hundred miles to cross with women and a child!”...

And Hobson pointed to the vast white plain, with strange irregular markings like *guipure* work, stretching away into the infinite

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And Hobson pointed to the vast white plain, with strange irregular markings like *guipure* work, stretching away into the infinite distance. Sad and desolate enough it looked, the imperfectly frozen surface cracking every now and then with an ominous sound. A pale moon, its light half quenched in the damp mists, rose but a few degrees above the gloomy horizon and shot a few faint beams upon the melancholy scene. The half-darkness and the refraction combined doubled the size of every object. Icebergs of moderate height assumed gigantic proportions, and were in some cases distorted into the forms of fabulous monsters. Birds passed overhead with loud flapping of wings, and in consequence of this optical illusion the smallest of them appeared as large as a condor or a vulture. In the midst of the icebergs yawned apparently huge black tunnels, into which the boldest man would scarcely dare to venture, and now and then sudden convulsions took place, as the icebergs, worn away at the base, heeled over with a crash, the sonorous echoes taking up the sounds and carrying them along. The rapid changes resembled the transformation scenes of fairyland, and terrible indeed must all those phenomena have appeared to the luckless colonists who were about to venture across the ice-field!

In spite of her moral and physical courage Mrs Barnett could not control an involuntary shudder. Soul and body alike shrunk from the awful prospect, and she was tempted to shut her eyes and stop her ears that she might see and hear no more. When the moon was for a moment veiled behind a heavy cloud, the gloom of the Polar landscape became still more awe-inspiring, and before her mind’s eye rose a vision of the caravan of men and women struggling across these vast solitudes in the midst of hurricanes, snow-storms, avalanches, and in the thick darkness of the Arctic night!

Mrs Barnett, however, forced herself to look; she wished to accustom her eyes to these scenes, and to teach herself not to shrink from facing their terrors. But as she gazed a cry suddenly burst from her lips, and seizing Hobson’s hand, she pointed to a huge object, of ill-defined dimensions, moving about in the uncertain light, scarcely a hundred paces from where they stood.

It was a white monster of immense size, more than a hundred feet high. It was pacing slowly along over the broken ice, bounding from one piece to another, and beating the air with its huge feet, between which it could have held ten large dogs at least. It, too, seemed to be seeking a practicable path across the ice — it, too, seemed anxious to fly from the doomed island. The ice gave way beneath its weight, and it had often considerable difficulty in regaining its feet.

The monster made its way thus for about a quarter of a mile across the ice, and then, its farther progress being barred, it turned round and advanced towards the spot where Mrs Barnett and the Lieutenant stood.

Hobson seized the gun which was slung over his shoulder and presented it at the animal, but almost immediately lowering the weapon, he said to Mrs Barnett —

“A bear, madam, only a bear, the size of which has been greatly magnified by refraction.”

It was, in fact, a Polar bear, and Mrs Barnett drew a long breath of relief as she understood the optical illusion of which she had been the victim. Then an idea struck her.

“It is my bear!” she exclaimed, “the bear with the devotion of a Newfoundland dog! Probably the only one still on the island. But what is he doing here?”

“He is trying to get away,” replied Hobson, shaking his head. “He is trying to escape from this doomed island, and he cannot do so! He is proving to us that we cannot pass where he has had to turn back!”

Hobson was right, the imprisoned animal had tried to leave the island and to get to the continent, and having failed it was returning to the coast. Shaking its head and growling, it passed some twenty paces from the two watchers, and, either not seeing them or disdaining to take any notice of them, it walked heavily on towards Cape Michael, and soon disappeared behind the rising ground.

Lieutenant Hobson and Mrs Barnett returned sadly and silently to the fort.

The preparations for departure went on as rapidly, however, as if it were possible to leave the island. Nothing was neglected to promote the success of the undertaking, every possible danger had to be foreseen, and not only had the ordinary difficulties and dangers of a journey across the ice to be allowed for, but also the sudden changes of weather peculiar to the Polar regions, which so obstinately resist every attempt to explore them.

The teams of dogs required special attention. They were allowed to run about near the fort, that they might regain the activity of which too long a rest had, to some extent, deprived them, and they were soon in a condition to make a long march.

The sledges were carefully examined and repaired. The rough surface of the ice-field would give them many violent shocks, and they were therefore thoroughly overhauled by Mac-Nab and his men, the inner framework and the curved fronts being carefully repaired and strengthened.

Two large waggon sledges were built, one for the transport of provisions, the other for the peltries. These were to be drawn by the tamed reindeer, which had been well trained for the service. The peltries or furs were articles of luxury with which it was not perhaps quite prudent to burden the travellers, but Hobson was anxious to consider the interests of the Company as much as possible, although he was resolved to abandon them, *en route*, if they harassed or impeded his march. No fresh risk was run of injury of the furs, for of course they would have been lost if left at the factory.

It was of course quite another matter with the provisions, of which a good and plentiful supply was absolutely necessary. It was of no use to count on the product of the chase this time. As soon as the passage of the ice-field became practicable, all the edible game would get on ahead and reach the mainland before the caravan. One waggon sledge was therefore packed with salt meat, corned beef, hare patès, dried fish, biscuits — the stock of which was unfortunately getting low — and an ample reserve of sorrel, scurvy-grass, rum, spirits of wine, for making warm drinks, &c. &c. Hobson would have been glad to take some fuel with him, as he would not meet with a tree, a shrub, or a bit of moss throughout the march of six hundred miles, nor could he hope for pieces of wreck or timber cast up by the sea, but he did not dare to overload his sledges with wood. Fortunately there was no lack of warm comfortable garments, and in case of need they could draw upon the reserve of peltries in the waggon.

Thomas Black, who since his misfortune had altogether retired from the world, shunning his companions, taking part in none of the consultations, and remaining shut up in his own room, reappeared as soon as the day of departure was definitely fixed. But even then he attended to nothing but the sledge which was to carry his person, his instruments, and his registers. Always very silent, it was now impossible to get a word out of him. He had forgotten everything, even that he was a scientific man, and since he had been deceived about the eclipse, since the solution of the problem of the red prominences of the moon had escaped him, he had taken no notice of any of the peculiar phenomena of the high latitudes, such as the Aurora Borealis, halos, parhelia, &c.

During the last few days every one worked so hard that all was ready for the start on the morning of the 18th November.

But, alas! the ice-field was still impassable. Although the thermometer had fallen slightly, the cold had not been severe enough to freeze the surface of the sea, with any uniformity, and the snow which fell was fine and intermittent. Hobson, Marbre, and Sabine went along the coast every day from Cape Michael to what was once the corner of the old Walruses’ Bay. They even ventured out about a mile and a half upon the ice-field, but were compelled to admit that it was broken by rents, crevasses, and fissures in every direction. Not only would it be impossible for sledges to cross it, it was dangerous for unencumbered pedestrians. Hobson and his two men underwent the greatest fatigue in these short excursions, and more than once they ran a risk of being unable to get back to Victoria Island across the ever-changing, ever-moving blocks of ice.

Really all nature seemed to be in league against the luckless colonists.

On the 18th and 19th November, the thermometer rose, whilst the barometer fell. Fatal results were to be feared from this change in the state of the atmosphere. Whilst the cold decreased the sky became covered with clouds, which presently resolved themselves into heavy rain instead of the sadly-needed snow, the column of mercury standing at 34° Fahrenheit. These showers of comparatively warm water melted the snow and ice in many places, and the result can easily be imagined. It really seemed as if a thaw were setting in, and there were symptoms of a general breaking up of the ice-field. In spite of the dreadful weather, however, Hobson went to the south of the island every day, and every day returned more disheartened than before.

On the 20th, a tempest resembling in violence that of the month before, broke upon the gloomy Arctic solitudes, compelling the colonists to give up going out, and to remain shut up in Fort Hope for two days.

CHAPTER XIII.

ACROSS THE ICE-FIELD.

At last, on the 22d of November, the weather moderated. In a few hours the storm suddenly ceased. The wind veered round to the north, and the thermometer fell several degrees. A few birds capable of a long-sustained flight took wing and disappeared. There really seemed to be a likelihood that the temperature was at last going to become what it ought to be at this time of the year in such an elevated latitude. The colonists might well regret that it was not now what it had been during the last cold season, when the column of mercury fell to 72° Fahrenheit below zero.

Hobson determined no longer to delay leaving Victoria Island, and on the morning of the 22d the whole of the little colony was ready to leave the island, which was now firmly welded to the ice-field, and by its means connected with the American continent, six hundred miles away.

At half-past eleven A.M. Hobson gave the signal of departure. The sky was grey but clear, and lighted up from the horizon to the zenith by a magnificent Aurora Borealis. The dogs were harnessed to the sledges, and three couple of reindeer to the waggon sledges. Silently they wended their way towards Cape Michael, where they would quit the island, properly so called, for the ice-field.

The caravan at first skirted along the wooded hill on the east of Lake Barnett, but as they were rounding the coiner all paused to look round for the last time at Cape Bathurst, which they were leaving never to return. A few snow-encrusted rafters stood out in the light of the Aurora Borealis, a few white lines marked the boundaries of the enceinte of the factory, a — white mass here and there, a few blue wreaths of smoke from the expiring fire never to be rekindled; this was all that could be seen of Fort Hope, now useless and deserted, but erected at the cost of so much labour and so much anxiety.

“Farewell, farewell, to our poor Arctic home!” exclaimed Mrs. Barnett, waving her hand for the last time; and all sadly and silently resumed their journey.

At one o’clock the detachment arrived at Cape Michael, after having rounded the gulf which the cold had imperfectly frozen over. Thus far the difficulties of the journey had not been very great, for the ground of the island was smooth compared to the ice-field, which was strewn with icebergs, hummocks, and packs, between which, practicable passes had to be found at the cost of an immense amount of fatigue.

Towards the evening of the same day the party had advanced several miles on the ice-field, and a halt for the night was ordered; the encampment was to be formed by hollowing out snow-houses in the Esquimaux style. The work was quickly accomplished with the ice-chisels, and at eight o’clock, after a salt meat supper, every one had crept into the holes, which are much warmer than anybody would imagine.

Before retiring, however, Mrs. Barnett asked the Lieutenant how far he thought they had come.

“Not more than ten miles, I think,” replied Hobson.

“Ten from six hundred!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett. “At this rate, it will take us three months to get to the American continent!”

“Perhaps more, madam,” replied Hobson, “for we shall not be able to get on faster than this. We are not travelling as we were last year over the frozen plains between Fort Reliance and Cape Bathurst; but on a distorted ice-field crushed by the pressure of the icebergs across which there is no easy route. I expect to meet with almost insurmountable difficulties on the way; may we be able to conquer them! It is not of so much importance, however, to march quickly as to preserve our health, and I shall indeed think myself fortunate if all my comrades answer to their names in the roll-call on our arrival at Fort Reliance. Heaven grant we may have all landed at some point, no matter where, of the American continent in three months’ time; if so, we shall never be able to return thanks enough.”

The night passed without incident; but during the long vigil which he kept, Hobson fancied he noticed certain ill-omened tremblings on the spot he had chosen for his encampment, and could not but fear that the vast ice-field was insufficiently cemented, and that there would be numerous rents in the surface which would greatly impede his progress, and render communication with firm ground very uncertain. Moreover, before he started, he had observed that none of the animals had left the vicinity of the fort, and they would certainly have sought a warmer climate had not their instinct warned them of obstacles in their way. Yet the Lieutenant felt that he had only done his duty in making this attempt to restore his little colony to an inhabited land, before the setting in of the thaw, and whether he succeeded or had to turn back he would have no reason to reproach himself.

The next day, November 23d, the detachment could not even advance ten miles towards the east, so great were the difficulties met with. The ice-field was fearfully distorted, and here and there many layers of ice were piled one upon another, doubtless driven along by the irresistible force of the ice-wall into the vast funnel of the Arctic Ocean. Hence a confusion of masses of ice, which looked as if they had been suddenly dropped by a hand incapable of holding them, and strewn about in every direction.

It was clear that a caravan of sledges, drawn by dogs and reindeer, could not possibly get over these blocks; and it was equally clear that a path could not be cut through them with the hatchet or ice-chisel. Some of the icebergs assumed extraordinary forms, and there were groups which looked like towns falling into ruins. Some towered three or four hundred feet above the level of the ice-field, and were capped with tottering masses of debris, which the slightest shake or shock or gust of wind would bring down in avalanches.

The greatest precautions were, therefore, necessary in rounding these ice-mountains, and orders were given not to speak above a whisper, and not to excite the dogs by cracking the whips in these dangerous passes.

But an immense amount of time was lost in looking for practicable passages, and the travellers were worn out with fatigue, often going ten miles round before they could advance one in the required direction towards the east. The only comfort was that the ground still remained firm beneath their feet.

On the 24th November, however, fresh obstacles arose, which Hobson really feared, with considerable reason, would be insurmountable.

After getting over one wall of ice which rose some twenty miles from Victoria Island, the party found themselves on a much less undulating ice-field, the different portions of which had evidently not been subjected to any great pressure. It was clear that in consequence of the direction of the currents the influence of the masses of permanent ice in the north had not here been felt, and Hobson and his comrades soon found that this ice-field was intersected with wide and deep crevasses not yet frozen over. The temperature here was comparatively warm, and the thermometer maintained a mean height of more than 34° Fahrenheit. Salt water, as is well known, does not freeze so readily as fresh, but requires several degrees of cold below freezing point before it becomes solidified, and the sea was therefore still liquid. All the icebergs and floes here had come from latitudes farther north, and, if we may so express it, lived upon the cold they had brought with them. The whole of the southern portion of the Arctic Ocean was most imperfectly frozen, and a warm rain was falling, which hastened the dissolution of what ice there was.

On the 24th November the advance of the travellers was absolutely arrested by a crevasse full of rough water strewn with small icicles — a crevasse not more than a hundred feet wide, it is true, but probably many miles long.

For two whole hours the party skirted along the western edge of this gap, in the hope of coming to the end of it and getting to the other side, so as to resume their march to the east, but it was all in vain, they were obliged to give it up and encamp on the wrong side.

Hobson and Long, however, proceeded for another quarter of a mile along the interminable crevasse, mentally cursing the mildness of the winter which had brought them into such a strait.

“We must pass somehow,” said Long, “for we can’t stay where we are.”

“Yes, yes,” replied the Lieutenant, “and we shall pass it, either by going up to the north, or down to the south, it must end somewhere. But after we have got round this we shall come to others, and so it will go on perhaps for hundred of miles, as long as this uncertain and most unfortunate weather continues!”

“Well, Lieutenant, we must ascertain the truth once for all before we resume our journey,” said the Sergeant.

“We must indeed, Sergeant,” replied Hobson firmly, “or we shall run a risk of not having crossed half the distance between us and America after travelling five or six hundred miles out of our way. Yes, before going farther, I must make quite sure of the state of the ice-field, and that is what I am about to do.”

And without another word Hobson stripped himself, plunged into the half-frozen water, and being a powerful swimmer a few strokes soon brought him to the other side of the crevasse, when he disappeared amongst the icebergs.

A few hours later the Lieutenant reached the encampment, to which Long had already returned, in an exhausted condition. He took Mrs Barnett and the Sergeant aside, and told them that the ice-field was impracticable, adding —

“Perhaps one man on foot without a sledge or any encumbrances might get across, but for a caravan it is impossible. The crevasses increase towards the east, and a boat would really be of more use than a sledge if we wish to reach the American coast”

“Well,” said Long, “if one man could cross, ought not one of us to attempt it, and go and seek assistance for the rest.”

“I thought of trying it myself,” replied Hobson.

“You, Lieutenant!”

“You, sir!” cried Mrs Barnett and Long in one breath.

These two exclamations showed Hobson how unexpected and inopportune his proposal appeared. How could he, the chief of the expedition, think of deserting those confided to him, even although it was in their interests and at great risk to himself. It was quite impossible, and the Lieutenant did not insist upon it.

“Yes,” he said, “I understand how it appears to you, my friends, and I will not abandon you. It would, indeed, be quite useless for any one to attempt the passage; he would not succeed, he would fall by the way, and find a watery grave when the thaw sets in. And even suppose he reached New Archangel, how could he come to our rescue? Would he charter a vessel to seek for us? Suppose he did, it could not start until after the thaw. And who can tell where the currents will then have taken Victoria Island, either yet farther north or to the Behring Sea!

“Yes, Lieutenant, you are right,” replied Long; “let us remain together, and if we are to be saved in a boat, there is Mac-Nab’s on Victoria Island, and for it at least we shall not have to wait!”

Mrs Barnett had listened without saying a word, but she understood that the ice-field being impassible. they had now nothing to depend on but the carpenter’s boat, and that they would have to wait bravely for the thaw.

“What are you going to do, then?” she inquired at last.

“Return to Victoria Island.”

“Let us return then, and God be with us!”

The rest of the travellers had now gathered round the Lieutenant, and he laid his plans before them.

At first all were disposed to rebel, the poor creatures had been counting on getting back to their homes, and felt absolutely crushed at the disappointment, but they soon recovered their dejection and declared themselves ready to obey.

Hobson then told them the results of the examination he had just made. They learnt that the obstacles in their way on the east were so numerous that it would be absolutely impossible to pass with the sledges and their contents, and as the journey would last several months, the provisions, &c. could not be dispensed with.

“We are now,” added the Lieutenant, “cut off from all communication with the mainland, and by going farther towards the east we run a risk, after enduring great fatigues, of finding it impossible to get back to the island, now our only refuge. If the thaw should overtake us on the ice-field, we are lost. I have not disguised nor have I exaggerated the truth, and I know, my friends, that I am speaking to men who have found that I am not a man to turn back from difficulties. But I repeat, the task we have set ourselves is impossible!”

The men trusted their chief implicitly. They knew his courage and energy, and felt as they listened to his words that it was indeed impossible to cross the ice. It was decided to start on the return journey to Fort Hope the next day, and it was accomplished under most distressing circumstances. The weather was dreadful, squalls swept down upon the ice-field, and rain fell in torrents. The difficulty of finding the way in the darkness through the labyrinth of icebergs can well be imagined!

It took no less than four days and four nights to get back to the island. Several teams of dogs with their sledges fell into the crevasses, but thanks to Hobson’s skill, prudence, and devotion, he lost not one of his party. But what terrible dangers and fatigues they had to go through, and how awful was the prospect of another winter on the wandering island to the unfortunate colonists!

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WINTER MONTHS.

The party did not arrive at Fort Hope until the 28th, after a most arduous journey. They had now nothing to depend on but the boat, and that they could not use until the sea was open, which would not be for six months.

Preparations for another winter were therefore made. The sledges were unloaded, the provisions put back in the pantry, and the clothes, arms, furs, &c. in the magazines. The dogs returned to their dog-house, and the reindeer to their stable.

Great was the despair of Thomas Black at this return to seclusion. The poor astronomer carried his instruments, his books, and his MSS. back to his room, and more angry than ever with “the evil fate which pursued him,” he held himself aloof from everything which went on in the factory.

All were again settled at their usual winter avocations the day after their arrival, and the monotonous winter life once more commenced. Needlework, mending the clothes, taking care of the furs, some of which might yet be saved, the observation of the weather, the examination of the ice-field, and reading aloud, were the daily occupations. Mrs Barnett was, as before, the leader in everything, and her influence was everywhere felt. If, as sometimes happened, now that all were uneasy about the future, a slight disagreement occurred between any of the soldiers, a few words from Mrs Barnett soon set matters straight, for she had acquired wonderful power over the little world in which she moved, and she always used it for the good of the community.

Kalumah had become a great favourite with everybody, for she was always pleasant and obliging. Mrs Barnett had undertaken her education, and she got on quickly, for she was both intelligent and eager to learn. She improved her English speaking, and also taught her to read and write in that language. There were, however, twelve masters for Kalumah, all eager to assist in this branch of her education, as the soldiers had all been taught reading, writing, and arithmetic either in England or in English colonies.

The building of the boat proceeded rapidly, and it was to be planked and decked before the end of the month. Mac-Nab and some of his men worked hard in the darkness outside, with no light but the flames of burning resin, whilst others were busy making the rigging in the magazines of the factory. Although the season was now far advanced, the weather still remained very undecided. The cold was sometimes intense, but owing to the prevalence of west winds it never lasted long.

Thus passed the whole of December, rain and intermittent falls of snow succeeded each other, the temperature meanwhile varying from 26° to 34° Fahrenheit. The consumption of fuel was moderate, although there was no need to economise it, the reserves being considerable. It was otherwise with the oil, upon which they depended for light, for the stock was getting so low that the Lieutenant could at last only allow the lamps to be lit for a few hours every day. He tried using reindeer fat for lighting the house, but the smell of it was so unbearable that every one preferred being in the dark. All work had of course to be given up for the time, and very tedious did the long dark hours appear.

Some Auroræ Borealis and two or three lunar halos appeared at full moon, and Thomas Black might now have minutely observed all these phenomenon, and have made precise calculations on their intensity, their coloration, connection with the electric state of the atmosphere, and their influence upon the magnetic needle, &c. But the astronomer did not even leave his room. His spirit was completely crushed.

On the 30th December the light of the moon revealed a long circular line of icebergs shutting in the horizon on the north and east of Victoria Island. This was the ice-wall, the frozen masses of which were piled up to a height of some three or four hundred feet. Two-thirds of the island were hemmed in by this mighty barrier, and it seemed probable that the blockade would become yet more complete.

The sky was clear for the first week of January. The new year, 1861, opened with very cold weather, and the column of mercury fell to 8° Fahrenheit. It was the lowest temperature that had yet been experienced in this singular winter, although it was anything but low for such a high latitude.

The Lieutenant felt it his duty once more to take the latitude and longitude of the island by means of stellar observations, and found that its position had not changed at all.

About this time, in spite of all their economy, the oil seemed likely to fail altogether. The sun would not appear above the horizon before early in February, so that there was a month to wait, during which there was a danger of the colonists having to remain in complete darkness. Thanks to the young Esquimaux, however, a fresh supply of oil for the lamps was obtained.

On the 3rd January Kalumah walked to Cape Bathurst to examine the state of the ice. All along the south of the island the ice-field was very compact, the icicles of which it was composed were more firmly welded together, there were no liquid spaces between them, and the surface of the floe, though rough, was perfectly firm everywhere. This was no doubt caused by the pressure of the chain of icebergs on the horizon, which drove the ice towards the north, and squeezed it against the island.

Although she saw no crevasses or rents, the young native noticed many circular holes neatly cut in the ice, the use of which she knew perfectly well. They were the holes kept open by seals imprisoned beneath the solid crust of ice, and by which they came to the surface to breathe and look for mosses under the snow on the coast.

Kalumah knew that in the winter bears will crouch patiently near these holes, and watching for the moment when the seal comes out of the water, they rush upon it, hug it to death in their paws, and carry it off. She knew, too, that the Esquimaux, not less patient than the bears, also watch for the appearance of these animals, and throwing a running noose over their heads when they push them up, drag them to the surface.

What bears and Esquimaux could do might certainly also be done by skilful hunters, and Kalumah hastened back to the fort to tell the Lieutenant of what she had seen, feeling sure that where these holes were seals were not far off.

Hobson sent for the hunters, and the young native described to them the way in which the Esquimaux capture these animals in the winter, and begged them to try.

She had not finished speaking before Sabine had a strong rope with a running noose ready in his hand and accompanied by Hobson, Mrs Barnett, Kalumah, and two or three soldiers, the hunters hurried to Cape Bathurst, and whilst the women remained on the beach, the men made their way to the holes pointed out by Kalumah. Each one was provided with a rope, and stationed himself at a different hole.

A long time of waiting ensued — no sign of the seals, but at last the water in the hole Marbre had chosen began to bubble, and a head with long tusks appeared. It was that of a walrus. Marbre flung his running noose skilfully over its neck and pulled it tightly. His comrades rushed to his assistance, and with some difficulty the huge beast was dragged upon the ice, and despatched with hatchets.

It was a great success, and the colonists were delighted with this novel fishing. Other walruses were taken in the same way, and furnished plenty of oil, which, though not strictly of the right sort, did very well for the lamps, and there was no longer any lack of light in any of the rooms of Fort Hope.

The cold was even now not very severe, and had the colonists been on the American mainland they could only have rejoiced in the mildness of the winter. They were sheltered by the chain of icebergs from the north and west winds, and the month of January passed on with the thermometer never many degrees below freezing point, so that the sea round Victoria Island was never frozen hard. Fissures of more or less extent broke the regularity of the surface in the offing, as was proved by the continued presence of the ruminants and furred animals near the factory, all of which had become strangely tame, forming in fact part of the menagerie of the colony.

According to Hobson's orders, all these creatures were unmolested. It would have been useless to kill them, and a reindeer was only occasionally slaughtered to obtain a fresh supply of venison. Some of the furred animals even ventured into the enceinte, and they were not driven away. The martens and foxes were in all the splendour of their winter clothing, and under ordinary circumstances would have been of immense value. These rodents found plenty of moss under the snow, thanks to the mildness of the season, and did not therefore live upon the reserves of the factory.

It was with some apprehensions for the future that the end of the winter was awaited, but Mrs Barnett did all in her power to brighten the monotonous existence of her companions in exile.

Only one incident occurred in the month of January, and that one was distressing enough. On the 7th, Michael Mac-Nab was taken ill — severe headache, great thirst and alternations of shivering and fever, soon reduced the poor little fellow to a sad state. His mother and father, and indeed all his friends, were in very great trouble. No one knew what to do, as it was impossible to say what his illness was, but Madge, who retained her senses about her, advised cooling drinks and poultices. Kalumah was indefatigable, remaining day and night by her favourite’s bedside, and refusing to take any rest.

About the third day there was no longer any doubt as to the nature of the malady. A rash came out all over the child’s body, and it was evident that he had malignant scarlatina, which would certainly produce internal inflammation.

Children of a year old are rarely attacked with this terrible disease, but cases do occasionally occur. The medicine-chest of the factory was necessarily insufficiently stocked, but Madge, who had nursed several patients through scarlet lever, remembered that tincture of belladonna was recommended, and administered one or two drops to the little invalid every day. The greatest care was taken lest he should catch cold; he was at once removed to his parents’ room, and the rash soon came out freely. Tiny red points appeared on his tongue, his lips, and even on the globes of his eyes.

Two days later his skin assumed a violet hue, then it became white and fell off in scales.

It was now that double care was required to combat the great internal inflammation, which proved the severity of the attack, Nothing was neglected, the boy was, in fact, admirably nursed, and on the 20th January, twelve days after he was taken ill, he was pronounced out of danger.

Great was the joy in the factory. The baby was the child of the fort, of the regiment! He was born in the terrible northern latitudes, in the colony itself, he had been named Michael Hope, and he had come to be regarded as a kind of talisman in the dangers and difficulties around, and all felt sure that God would not take him from them.

Poor Kalumah would certainly not have survived him had he died, but he gradually recovered, and fresh hope seemed to come back when he was restored to the little circle.

The 23d of January was now reached, after all these distressing alternations of hope and fear. The situation of Victoria Island had not changed in the least, and it was still wrapped in the gloom of the apparently interminable Polar night. Snow fell abundantly for some days, and was piled up on the ground to the height of two feet.

On the 27th a somewhat alarming visit was received at the fort. The soldiers Belcher and Pond, when on guard in front of the enceinte in the morning, saw a huge bear quietly advancing towards the fort. They hurried into the large room, and told Mrs Barnett of the approach of the formidable carnivorous beast.

“Perhaps it is only our bear again,” observed Mrs Barnett to Hobson, and accompanied by him, and followed by the Sergeant, Sabine, and some soldiers provided with guns, — he fearlessly walked to the postern.

The bear was now about two hundred paces off, and was walking along without hesitation, as if he had some settled plan in view.

“I know him!” cried Mrs Barnett, “it is your bear, Kalumah, your preserver!”

“Oh, don’t kill my bear!” exclaimed the young Esquimaux.

“He shall not be killed,” said the Lieutenant, “don’t injure him, my good fellows,” he added to the men, “he will probably return as he came.”

“But suppose he intends coming into the enceinte?” said Long, who had his doubts as to the friendly propensities of Polar bears.

“Let him come, Sergeant,” said Mrs Barnett, “he is a prisoner like ourselves, and you know prisoners” —

“Don’t eat each other,” added Hobson. “True, but only when they belong to the same species For your sake, however, we will spare this fellow-sufferer, and only defend ourselves if he attack us. I think, however, it will be as prudent to go back to the House. We must not put too strong a temptation in the way of our carnivorous friend!”

This was certainly good advice, and all returned to the large room, the windows were closed, but not the shutters.

Through the panes the movements of the visitor were watched. The bear, finding the postern unfastened, quietly pushed open the door, looked in, carefully examined the premises, and finally entered the enceinte. Having reached the centre, he examined the buildings around him, went towards the reindeer stable and dog-house, listened for a moment to the howlings of the dogs and the uneasy noises made by the reindeer, then continued his walk round the palisade, and at last came and leant his great head against one of the windows of the large room.

To own the truth everybody started back, several of the soldiers seized their guns, and Sergeant Long began to fear he had let the joke go too far.

But Kalumah came forward, and looked through the thin partition with her sweet eyes. The bear seemed to recognise her, at least so she thought, and doubtless satisfied with his inspection, he gave a hearty growl, and turning away left the enceinte, as Hobson had prophesied, as he entered it.

This was the bear’s first and last visit to the fort, and on his departure everything went on as quietly as before.

The little boy’s recovery progressed favourably, and at the end of the month he was as rosy and as bright as ever.

At noon on the 3rd of February, the northern horizon was touched with a faint glimmer of light which did not fade away for an hour, and the yellow disc of the sun appeared for an instant for the first time since the commencement of the long Polar night.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST EXPLORING EXPEDITION.

From this date, February 3rd, the sun rose each day higher above the horizon, the nights were, however, still very long, and, as is often the case in February, the cold increased, the thermometer marking only 1° Fahrenheit, the lowest temperature experienced throughout this extraordinary winter.

“When does the thaw commence in these northern seas?” inquired Mrs Barnett of the Lieutenant.

“In ordinary seasons,” replied Hobson, “the ice does not break up until early in May; but the winter has been so mild that unless a very hard frost should now set in, the thaw may commence at the beginning of April. At least that is my opinion.” “We shall still have two months to wait then?”

“Yes, two months, for it would not be prudent to launch our boat too soon amongst the floating ice; and I think our best plan will be to wait until our island has leached the narrowest part of Behring Strait, which is not more than two hundred miles wide.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, considerably surprised at the Lieutenant’s reply. “Have you forgotten that it was the Kamtchatka Current which brought us where we now are, and which may seize us again when the thaw sets in and carry us yet farther north?”

“I do not think it will, madam; indeed I feel quite sure that that will not happen. The thaw always takes place in from north to south, and although the Kamtchatka Current runs the other way, the ice always goes down the

Behring Current. Other reasons there are for my opinion which I cannot now enumerate. But the icebergs invariably drift towards the Pacific, and are there melted by its warmer waters. Ask Kalumah if I am not right. She knows these latitudes well, and will tell you that the thaw always proceeds from the north to the south.”

Kalumah when questioned confirmed all that the Lieutenant had said, so that it appeared probable that the island would be drifted to the south like a huge ice-floe, that is to say, to the narrowest part of Behring Strait, which is much frequented in the summer by the fishermen of New Archangel, who are the most experienced mariners of those waters. Making allowance for all delays they might then hope to set foot on the continent before May, and although the cold had not been very intense there was every reason to believe that the foundations of Victoria Island had been thickened and strengthened by a fresh accumulation of ice at the base, and that it would hold together for several months to come.

There was then nothing for the colonists to do but to wait patiently, — still to wait!

The convalescence of little Michael continued to progress favourably. On the 20th of February he went out for the first time, forty days after he was taken ill. By this we mean that he went from his bedroom into the large room, where he was petted and made much of. His mother, acting by Madge’s advice, put off weaning him for some little time, and he soon got back his strength. The soldiers had made many little toys for him during his illness, and he was now as happy as any child in the wide world.

The last week of February was very wet, rain and snow falling alternately. A strong wind blew from the north-west, and the temperature was low enough for large quantities of snow to fall; the gale, however, increased in violence, and on the side of Cape Bathurst and the chain of icebergs the noise of the tempest was deafening. The huge ice-masses were flung against each other, and fell with a roar like that of thunder. The ice on the north was compressed and piled up on the shores of the island. There really seemed to be a danger that the cape itself-which was but a kind of iceberg capped with earth and sand-would be flung down.

Some large pieces of ice, in spite of their weight, were driven to the very foot of the palisaded enceinte; but fortunately for the factory the cape retained its position; had it given way all the buildings must inevitably have been crushed beneath it.

It will be easily understood that the position of Victoria Island, at the opening of a narrow strait about which the ice accumulated in large quantities, was extremely perilous, for it might at any time be swept by a horizontal avalanche, or crushed beneath the huge blocks of ice driven inland from the offing, and so become engulfed before the thaw. This was a new danger to be added to all the others already threatening the little band. Mrs Barnett, seeing the awful power of the pressure in the offing, and the violence with which the moving masses of ice crushed upon each other, realised the full magnitude of the peril they would all be in when the thaw commenced. She often mentioned her fears to the Lieutenant, and he shook his head like a man who had no reply to make.

Early in March the squall ceased, and the full extent of the transformation of the ice-field was revealed. It seemed as if by a kind of *glissade* the chain of icebergs had drawn nearer to the island. In some parts it was not two miles distant, and it advanced like a glacier on the move, with the difference that the latter has a descending and the ice-wall a horizontal motion. Between the lofty chain of ice-mountains the ice-field was fearfully distorted: strewn with hummocks, broken obelisks, shattered blocks, overturned pyramids, it resembled a tempest-tossed sea or a ruined town, in which not a building or a monument had remained standing, and above it all the mighty icebergs reared their snowy crests, standing out against the sky with their pointed peaks, their rugged cones, and solid buttresses, forming a fitting frame for the weird fantastic landscape at their feet.

At this date the little vessel was quite finished. This boat was rather heavy in shape, as might have been expected, but she did credit to Mac-Nab, and shaped as she was like a barge at the bows, she ought the better to withstand the shocks of the floating ice. She might have been taken for one of those Dutch boats which venture upon the northern waters. Her rig, which was completed, consisted, like that of a cutter, of a mainsail and a jib carried on a single mast. The tent canvass of the factory had been made use of for sailcloth.

This boat would carry the whole colony, and if, as the Lieutenant hoped, the island were drifted to Behring Strait, the vessel would easily make her way to land, even from the widest part of the passage. There was then nothing to be done but wait for the thaw.

Hobson now decided to make a long excursion to the south to ascertain the state of the ice-field, to see whether there were any signs of its breaking up, to examine the chain of icebergs by which it was hemmed in, to make sure, in short, whether it would really be useless to attempt to cross to the American continent. Many incidents might occur, many fresh dangers might arise before the thaw, and it would therefore be but prudent to make a reconnaissance on the ice-field.

The expedition was organised and the start fixed for March 7th. Hobson, Mrs Barnett, Kalumah, Marbre, and Sabine were to go, and, if the route should be practicable, they would try and find a passage across the chain of icebergs. In any case, however, they were not to be absent for more than forty-eight hours.

A good stock of provisions was prepared, and, well provided for every contingency, the little party left Fort Hope on the morning of the 7th March aid turned towards Cape Michael.

The thermometer then marked 32° Fahrenheit. The atmosphere was misty, but the weather was perfectly calm. The sun was now above the horizon for seven or eight hours a day, and its oblique rays afforded plenty of light.

At nine o’clock, after a short halt, the party descended the slope of Cape Michael and made their way across the ice-fields in a southeasterly direction. On this side the ice wall rose not three miles from the cape.

The march was of course very slow. Every minute a crevasse had to be turned, or a hummock too high to be climbed. It was evident that a sledge could not have got over the rough distorted surface, which consisted of an accumulation of blocks of ice of every shape and size, some of which really seemed to retain their equilibrium by a miracle. Others had been but recently overturned, as could be seen from the clearly cut fractures and sharp corners. Not a sign was to be seen of any living creature, no footprints told of the passage of man or beast, and the very birds had deserted these awful solitudes.

Mrs Barnett was astonished at the scene before her, and asked the Lieutenant how they could possibly have crossed the ice-fields if they had started in December, and he replied by reminding her that it was then in a very different condition; the enormous pressure of the advancing icebergs had not then commenced, the surface of the sea was comparatively even, and the only danger was from its insufficient solidification. The irregularities which now barred their passage did not exist early in the winter.

They managed, however, to advance towards the mighty ice-wall, Kalumah generally leading the way. Like a chamois on the Alpine rocks, the young girl firmly treaded the ice-masses with a swiftness of foot and an absence of hesitation which was really marvellous. She knew by instinct the best way through the labyrinth of icebergs, and was an unerring guide to her companions.

About noon the base of the ice-wall was reached, but it had taken three hours to get over three miles.

The icy barrier presented a truly imposing appearance, rising as it did more than four hundred feet above the ice-field. The various strata of which it was formed were clearly defined, and the glistening surface was tinged with many a delicately-shaded hue. Jasper-like ribbons of green and blue alternated with streaks and dashes of all the colours of the rainbow, strewn with enamelled arabesques, sparkling crystals, and delicate ice-flowers. No cliff, however strangely distorted, could give any idea of this marvellous half opaque, half transparent ice-wall, and no description could do justice to the wonderful effects of *chiara-oscuro* produced upon it.

It would not do, however, to approach too near to these beetling cliffs, the solidity of which was very doubtful. Internal fractures and rents were already commencing, the work of destruction and decomposition was proceeding rapidly, aided by the imprisoned air-bubbles; and the fragility of the huge structure, built up by the cold, was manifest to every eye. It could not survive the Arctic winter, it was doomed to melt beneath the sunbeams, and it contained material enough to feed large rivers.

Lieutenant Hobson had warned his companions of the danger of the avalanches which constantly fall from the summits of the icebergs, and they did not therefore go far along their base. That this prudence was necessary was proved by the falling of a huge block, at two o’clock, at the entrance to a kind of valley which they were about to cross. It must have weighed more than a hundred tons, and it was dashed upon the ice-field with a fearful crash, bursting like a bomb-shell. Fortunately no one was hurt by the splinters.

From two to five o’clock the explorers followed a narrow winding path leading down amongst the icebergs; they were anxious to know if it led right through them, but could not at once ascertain. In this valley, as it might be called, they were able to examine the internal structure of the icy barrier. The blocks of which it was built up were here arranged with greater symmetry than outside. In some places trunks of trees were seen embedded in the ice, all, however, of Tropical not Polar species, which had evidently been brought to Arctic regions by the Gulf Stream, and would be taken back to the ocean when the thaw should have converted into water the ice which now held them in its chill embrace.

At five o’clock it became too dark to go any further. The travellers had not gone more than about two miles in the valley, but it was so sinuous, that it was impossible to estimate exactly the distance traversed.

The signal to halt was given by the Lieutenant, and Marbre and Sabine quickly dug out a grotto in the ice with their chisels, into which the whole party crept, and after a good supper all were soon asleep.

Every one was up at eight o’clock the next morning, and Hobson decided to follow the valley for another mile, in the hope of finding out whether it went right through the ice-wall. The direction of the pass, judging from the position of the sun, had now changed from north to south east, and as early as eleven o’clock the party came out on the opposite side of the chain of icebergs. The passage was therefore proved to run completely through the barrier.

The aspect of the ice-field on the eastern side was exactly similar to that on the west. The same confusion of ice-masses, the same accumulation of hummocks and icebergs, as far as the eye could reach, with occasional alternations of smooth surfaces of small extent, intersected by numerous crevasses, the edges of which were already melting fast. The same complete solitude, the same desertion, not a bird, not an animal to be seen.

Mrs Barnett climbed to the top of the hummock, and there remained for an hour, gazing upon the sad and desolate Polar landscape before her. Her thoughts involuntarily flew back to the miserable attempt to escape that had been made five months before. Once more she saw the men and women of the hapless caravan encamped in the darkness of these frozen solitudes, or struggling against insurmountable difficulties to reach the mainland.

At last the Lieutenant broke in upon her reverie, and said —

“Madam, it is more than twenty-four hours since we left the fort. We now know the thickness of the ice-wall, and as we promised not to be away longer than forty-eight hours, I think it is time to retrace our steps.”

Mrs Barnett saw the justice of the Lieutenant’s remark. They had ascertained that the barrier of ice was of moderate thickness, that it would melt away quickly enough to allow of the passage of Mac-Nab’s boat after the thaw, and it would therefore be well to hasten back lest a snow-storm or change in the weather of any kind should render return through the winding valley difficult.

The party breakfasted and set out on the return journey about one o’clock P.M.

The night was passed as before in an ice-cavern, and the route resumed at eight o’clock the next morning, March 9th.

The travellers now turned their backs upon the sun, as they were making for the west, but the weather was fine, and the orb of day, already high in the heavens, flung some of its rays across the valley and lit up the glittering ice-walls on either side.

Mrs Barnett and Kalumah were a little behind the rest of the party chatting together, and looking about them as they wound through the narrow passages pointed out by Marbre and Sabine. They expected to get out of the valley quickly, and be back at the fort before sunset, as they had only two or three miles of the island to cross after leaving the ice. This would be a few hours after the time fixed, but not long enough to cause any serious anxiety to their friends at home.

They made their calculation without allowing for an incident which no human perspicacity could possibly have foreseen.

It was about ten o’clock when Marbre and Sabine, who were some twenty paces in advance of the rest, suddenly stopped and appeared to be debating some point. When the others came up, Sabine was holding out his compass to Marbre, who was staring at it with an expression of the utmost astonishment.

“What an extraordinary thing!” he exclaimed, and added, turning to the Lieutenant —

“Will you tell me, sir, the position of the island with regard to the ice-wall, is it on the east or west?”

“On the west,” replied Hobson, not a little surprised at the question, “you know that well enough, Marbre”

“I know it well enough! I know it well enough!” repeated Marbre, shaking his head, “and if it is on the west, we are going wrong, and away from the inland!”

“What, away from the island!” exclaimed the Lieutenant, struck with the hunter’s air of conviction.

“We are indeed, sir,” said Marbre; “look at the compass; my name is not Marbre if it does not show that we are walking towards the east not the west!”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett.

“Look, madam,” said Sabine.

It was true. The needle pointed in exactly the opposite direction to that expected. Hobson looked thoughtful and said nothing.

“We must have made a mistake when we left the ice cavern this morning,” observed Sabine, “we ought to have turned to the left instead of to the right.”

“No, no,” said Mrs Barnett, “I am sure we did not make a mistake!”

“But” — — said Marbre.

“But,” interrupted Mrs Barnett, “look at the sun. Does it no longer rise in the east? Now as we turned our backs on it this morning, and it is still behind us, we must be walking towards the west, so that when we get out of the valley on the western side of the chain of icebergs, we must come to the island we left there.”

Marbre, struck dumb by this irrefutable argument, crossed his arms and said no more.

“Then if so,” said Sabine, “the sun and the compass are in complete contradiction of each other?”

“At this moment they are,” said Hobson, “and the reason is simple enough; in these high northern latitudes, and in latitudes in the neighbourhood of the magnetic pole, the compasses are sometimes disturbed, and the deviation of their needles is so great as entirely to mislead travellers.”

“All right then,” said Marbre, “we have only to go on keeping our backs to the sun.”

“Certainly,” replied Lieutenant Hobson, “there can be no hesitation which to choose, the sun or our compass, nothing disturbs the sun.”

The march was resumed, the sun was still behind them, and there was really no objection to be made to Hobson’s theory, founded, as it was, upon the position then occupied by the radiant orb of day.

The little troop marched on, but they did not get out of the valley as soon as they expected. Hobson had counted on leaving the ice-wall before noon, and it was past two when they reached the opening of the narrow pass.

Strange as was this delay, it had not made any one uneasy, and the astonishment of all can readily be imagined when, on stepping on to the ice field, at the base of the chain of icebergs, no sign was to be seen of Victoria Island, which ought to have been opposite to them.

Yes! — The island, which on this side had been such a conspicuous object, owing to the height of Cape Michael crowned with trees, had disappeared. In its place stretched a vast ice-field lit up by the sunbeams.

All looked around them, and then at each other in amazement.

“The island ought to be there!” cried Sabine.

“But it is not there,” said Marbre. “Oh, sir — Lieutenant — where is it? what has become of it?”

But Hobson had not a word to say in reply, and Mrs Barnett was equally dumfounded.

Kalumah now approached Lieutenant Hobson, and touching his arm, she said —

“We went wrong in the valley, we went up it instead of down it, we shall only get back to where we were yesterday by crossing the chain of icebergs. Come, come!”

Hobson and the others mechanically followed Kalumah, and trusting in the young native’s sagacity, retraced their steps. Appearances were, however, certainly against her, for they were now walking towards the sun in an easterly direction.

Kalumah did not explain her motives, but muttered as she went along —

“Let us make haste!”

All were quite exhausted, and could scarcely get along, when they found themselves on the other side of the ice-wall, after a walk of three hours. The night had now fallen, and it was too dark to see if the island was there, but they were not long left in doubt.

At about a hundred paces off, burning torches were moving about, whilst reports of guns and shouts were heard.

The explorers replied, and were soon joined by Sergeant Long and others, amongst them Thomas Black, whose anxiety as to the fate of his friends had at last roused him from his torpor. The poor fellows left on the island had been in a terrible state of uneasiness, thinking that Hobson and his party had lost their way. They were right, but what was it that had made them think so?

Twenty-four hours before, the immense ice-field and the island had turned half round, and in consequence of this displacement they were no longer on the west, but on the east of the ice-wall!

CHAPTER XVI

THE BREAK-UP OF THE ICE

Two hours later all had returned to Fort Hope, and the next day the sun for the first time shone upon that part of the coast which was formerly on the west of the island. Kalumah, to whom this phenomenon was familiar, had been right, and if the sun had not been the guilty party neither had the compass!

The position of Victoria Island with regard to the cardinal points was again completely changed. Since it had broken loose from the mainland the island — and not only the island, but the vast ice field in which it was enclosed — had turned half round. This displacement proved that the ice-field was not connected with the continent, and that the thaw would soon set in.

“Well, Lieutenant,” said Mrs. Barnett, “this change of front is certainly in our favour. Cape Bathurst and Fort Hope are now turned towards the north-east, in other words towards the point nearest to the continent, and the ice-wall, through which our boat could only have made its way by a difficult and dangerous passage, is no longer between us and America. And so all is for the best, is it not?” added Mrs. Barnett with a smile.

“Indeed it is,” replied Hobson, who fully realised all that was involved in this change of the position of Victoria Island.

No incident occurred between the 10th and 21st March, but there were indications of the approaching change of season. The temperature varied from 43° to 50° Fahrenheit, and it appeared likely that the breaking up of the ice would commence suddenly. Fresh crevasses opened, and the unfrozen water flooded the surface of the ice. As the whalers poetically express it, the “wounds of the ice-field bled copiously,” and the opening of these “wounds” was accompanied by a sound like the roar of artillery. A warm rain fell for several hours, and accelerated the dissolution of the solid coating of the ocean.

The birds, ptarmigans, puffins, ducks, &c. which had deserted the island in the beginning of the winter, now returned in large numbers. Marbre and Sabine killed a few of them, and on some were found the tickets tied round their necks by the Lieutenant several months before. Flocks of white trumpeter swans also reappeared, and filled the air with their loud clarion tones; whilst the quadrupeds, rodents, and carnivora alike continued to frequent the vicinity of the fort like tame domestic animals.

Whenever the state of the sky permitted, which was almost every day, Hobson took the altitude of the sun. Sometimes Mrs Barnett, who had become quite expert in handling the sextant, assisted him, or took the observation in his stead. It was now most important to note the very slightest changes in the latitude and longitude of the island. It was still doubtful to which current it would be subject after the thaw, and the question whether it would be drifted north or south was the chief subject of the discussions between the Lieutenant and Mrs Barnett.

The brave lady had always given proof of an energy superior to that of most of her sex, and now she was to be seen every day braving fatigue, and venturing on to the half decomposed, or “pancake” ice, in all weathers, through snow or rain, and on her return to the factory ready to cheer and help everybody, and to superintend all that was going on. We must add that her efforts were ably seconded by the faithful Madge.

Mrs Barnett had compelled herself to look the future firmly in the face, and although she could not fail to fear for the safety of all, and sad presentiments haunted her, she never allowed herself to betray any uneasiness. Her courage and confidence never seemed to waver, she was as ever the kind encouraging friend of each and all, and none could have dreamt of the conflict of spirit going on beneath her quiet exterior demeanour. Lieutenant Hobson's admiration of her character was unbounded, and he had also entire confidence in Kalumah, often trusting to her natural instinct as implicitly as a hunter to that of his dog.

The young Esquimaux was, in fact, very intelligent, and familiar from babyhood with the phenomena of the Polar regions. On board a whaler she might have advantageously replaced many an ice-master or pilot whose business it is to guide a boat amongst the ice.

Every day Kalumah went to examine the state of the ice-field.

The nature of the noise produced by the breaking of the icebergs in the distance was enough to tell her how far the decomposition had advanced. No foot was surer than hers upon the ice, no one could spring more lightly forwards than she when her instinct told her that the smooth surface was rotten underneath, and she would scud across an ice-field riddled with fissures without a moment's hesitation.

From the 20th to the 30th March, the thaw made rapid progress. Rain fell abundantly and accelerated the dissolution of the ice. It was to be hoped that the ice-field would soon open right across, and that in about fifteen days Hobson would be able to steer his boat into the open sea. He was determined to lose no time, as he did not know but that the Kamtchatka Current might sweep the island to the north before it could come under the influence of the Behring Current.

“But,” Kalumah repeated again and again, “there is no fear of that, the breaking up of the ice does not proceed upwards but downwards. The danger is there!” she added, pointing to the south in the direction of the vast Pacific Ocean.

The young girl’s confidence on this point reassured Hobson, for he had no reason now to dread the falling to pieces of the island in the warm waters of the Pacific. He meant everybody to be on board the boat before that could happen, and they would not have far to go to get to one or the other continent, as the strait is in reality a kind of funnel through which the waters flow between Cape East on the Asiatic side and Cape Prince of Wales on the American.

This will explain the eager attention with which the slightest change in the position of the island was noticed. The bearings were taken every day, and everything was prepared for an approaching and perhaps sudden and hurried embarkation.

Of course all the ordinary avocations of the factory were now discontinued. There was no hunting or setting of traps. The magazines were already piled up with furs, most of which would be lost. The hunters and trappers had literally nothing to do; but Mac-Nab and his men, having finished their boat, employed their leisure time in strengthening the principal house of the fort, which would probably be subjected to considerable pressure from the accumulation of ice on the coast during the further progress of the thaw, unless indeed Cape Bathurst should prove a sufficient protection. Strong struts were fixed against the outside walls, vertical props were placed inside the rooms to afford additional support to the beams of the ceiling, and the roof was strengthened so that it could bear a considerable weight. These various works were completed early in April, and their utility, or rather their vital importance, was very soon manifested.

Each day brought fresh symptoms of returning spring, which seemed likely to set in early after this strangely mild Polar winter. A few tender shoots appeared upon the trees, and the newly-thawed sap swelled the bark of beeches, willows, and arbutus. Tiny mosses tinged with pale green the slopes under the direct influence of the sunbeams; but they were not likely to spread much, as the greedy rodents collected about the fort pounced upon and devoured them almost before they were above the ground.

Great were the sufferings of Corporal Joliffe at this time. We know that he had undertaken to protect the plot of ground cultivated by his wife. Under ordinary circumstances he would merely have had to drive away feathered pilferers, such as guillemots or puffins, from his sorrel and scurvy grass. A scarecrow would have been enough to get rid of them, still more the Corporal in person. But now all the rodents and ruminants of the Arctic fauna combined to lay siege to his territory; reindeer, Polar hares, musk-rats, shrews, martens, &c. braved all the threatening gestures of the Corporal, and the poor man was in despair, for whilst he was defending one end of his field the enemy was preying upon the other.

It would certainly have been wiser to let the poor creatures enjoy unmolested the crops which could be of no use to the colonists, as the fort was to be so soon abandoned, and Mrs Barnett tried to persuade the angry Corporal to do so, when he came to her twenty times a day with the same wearisome tale, but he would not listen to her:

“To lose the fruit of all our trouble!” he repeated; “to leave an establishment which was prospering so well! To give up the plants Mrs Joliffe and I sowed so carefully!... O madam, sometimes I feel disposed to let you all go, and stay here with my wife! I am sure the Company would give up all claim on the island to us” — —

Mrs Barnett could not help laughing at this absurd speech, and sent the Corporal to his little wife, who had long ago resigned herself to the loss of her sorrel, scurvy grass, and other medicinal herbs.

We must here remark, that the health of all the colonists remained good, they had at least escaped illness; the baby, too, was now quite well again, and throve admirably in the mild weather of the early spring.

The thaw continued to proceed rapidly from the 2nd to the 5th April. The weather was warm but cloudy, and rain fell frequently in large drops. The wind blew from the south west, and was laden with the heated dust of the continent. Unfortunately the sky was so hazy, that it was quite impossible to take observations, neither sun, moon, nor stars could be seen through the heavy mists, and this was the more provoking, as it was of the greatest importance to note the slightest movements of the island.

It was on the night of the 7th April that the actual breaking up of the ice commenced. In the morning the Lieutenant, Mrs Barnett, Kalumah, and Sergeant Long, had climbed to the summit of Cape Bathurst, and saw that a great change had taken place in the chain of icebergs. The huge barrier had parted nearly in the middle, and now formed two separate masses, the larger of which seemed to be moving northwards.

Was it the Kamtchatka Current which produced this motion? Would the floating island take the same direction? The intense anxiety of the Lieutenant and his companions can easily be imagined. Their fate might now be decided in a few hours, and if they should be drifted some hundred miles to the north, it would be very difficult to reach the continent in a vessel so small as theirs.

Unfortunately it was impossible to ascertain the nature or extent of the displacement which was going on. One thing was, however, evident, the island was not yet moving, at least not in the same direction as the ice-wall. It therefore seemed probable that whilst part of the ice field was floating to the north, that portion immediately surrounding the island still remained stationary.

This displacement of the icebergs did not in the least alter the opinion of the young Esquimaux. Kalumah still maintained that the thaw would proceed from north to south, and that the ice wall would shortly feel the influence of the Behring Current. To make herself more easily understood, she traced the direction of the current on the sand with a little piece of wood, and made signs that in following it the island must approach the American continent. No argument could shake her conviction on this point, and it was almost impossible not to feel reassured when listening to the confident expressions of the intelligent native girl.

The events of the 8th, 9th, and 10th April, seemed, however, to prove Kalumah to be in the wrong. The northern portion of the chain of icebergs drifted farther and farther north. The breaking up of the ice proceeded rapidly and with a great noise, and the ice field opened all round the island with a deafening crash. Out of doors it was impossible to hear one’s self speak, a ceaseless roar like that of artillery drowned every other sound.

About half a mile from the coast on that part of the island overlooked by Cape Bathurst, the blocks of ice were already beginning to crowd together, and to pile themselves upon each other. The ice-wall had broken up into numerous separate icebergs, which were drifting towards the north. At least it seemed as if they were moving in that direction. Hobson became more and more uneasy, and nothing that Kalumah could say reassured him. He replied by counter-arguments, which could not shake her faith in her own belief.

At last, on the morning of the 11th April, Hobson showed Kalumah the last icebergs disappearing in the north, and again endeavoured to prove to her that facts were against her.

“No, no!” replied Kalumah, with an air of greater conviction than ever, “no, the icebergs are not going to the north, but our island is going to the south!”

She might perhaps be right after all, and Hobson was much struck by this last reply. It was really possible that the motion of the icebergs towards the north was only apparent, and that Victoria Island, dragged along with the ice-field, was drifting towards the strait. But it was impossible to ascertain whether this were really the case, as neither the latitude nor longitude could be taken.

The situation was aggravated by a phenomenon peculiar to the Polar regions, which rendered it still darker and more impossible to take observations of any kind.

At the very time of the breaking up of the ice, the temperature fell several degrees. A dense mist presently enveloped the Arctic latitudes, but not an ordinary mist. The soil was covered with a white crust, totally distinct from hoar-frost — it was, in fact, a watery vapour which congeals on its precipitation. The minute particles of which this mist was composed formed a thick layer on trees, shrubs, the walls of the fort, and any projecting surface which bristled with pyramidal or prismatic crystals, the apexes of which pointed to the wind.

Hobson at once understood the nature of this atmospheric phenomenon, which whalers and explorers have often noticed in the spring in the Polar regions.

“It is not a mist or fog,” he said to his companions, “it is a ‘frost-rime’, a dense vapour which remains in a state of complete congelation.”

But whether a fog or a frozen mist this phenomenon was none the less to be regretted, for it rose a hundred feet at least above the level of the sea, and it was so opaque that the colonists could not see each other when only two or three paces apart.

Every one’s disappointment was very great. Nature really seemed determined to try them to the uttermost. When the break up of the ice had come at last, when the wandering island was to leave the spot in which it had so long been imprisoned, and its movements ought to be watched with the greatest care, this fog prevented all observations.

This state of things continued for four days. The frost-rime did not disappear until the 15th April, but on the morning of that date a strong wind from the south rent it open and dispersed it.

The sun shone brightly once more, and Hobson eagerly seized his instruments. He took the altitude, and found that the exact position of Victoria Island was then: Latitude, 69° 57’; longitude, 179° 33’.

Kalumah was right, Victoria Island, in the grasp of the Behring Current, was drifting towards the south.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE AVALANCHE.

The colonists were then at last approaching the more frequented latitudes of Behring Sea. There was no longer any danger that they would be drifted to the north, and all they had to do was to watch the displacement of the island, and to estimate the speed of its motion, which would probably be very unequal, on account of the obstacles in its path. Hobson most carefully noted every incident, taking alternately solar and stellar altitudes, and the next day, April 16th, after ascertaining the bearings, he calculated that if its present speed were maintained, Victoria Island would reach the Arctic Circle, from which it was now separated at the most by four degrees of latitude, towards the beginning of May.

It was probable that, when the island reached the narrowest portion of the strait, it would remain stationary until the thaw broke it up, the boat would then be launched, and the colonists would set sail for the American continent.

Everything was ready for an immediate embarkation, and the inhabitants of the island waited with greater patience and confidence than ever. They felt, poor things, that the end of their trials was surely near at last, and that nothing could prevent their landing on one side or the other of the strait in a few days.

This prospect cheered them up wonderfully, and the gaiety natural to them all, which they had lost in the terrible anxiety they had so long endured, was restored. The common meals were quite festal, as there was no need for economising the stores under present circumstances. The influence of the spring became more and more sensibly felt, and every one enjoyed the balmy air, and breathed more freely than before.

During the next few days, several excursions were made to the interior of the island and along the coast. Everywhere the furred animals, &c. still abounded, for even now they could not cross to the continent, the connection between it and the ice-field being broken, and their continued presence was a fresh proof that the island was no longer stationary.

No change had taken place on the island at Cape Esquimaux, Cape Michael, along the coast, or on the wooded heights of the interior, and the banks of the lagoon. The large gulf which had opened near Cape Michael during the storm had closed in the winter, and there was no other fissure on the surface of the soil.

During these excursions, bands of wolves were seen scudding across parts of the island. Of all the animals these fierce carnivorous beasts were the only ones which the feeling of a common danger had not tamed.

Kalumah’s preserver was seen several times. This worthy bear paced to and fro on the deserted plains in melancholy mood, pausing in his walk as the explorers passed, and sometimes following them to the fort, knowing well that he had nothing to fear from them.

On the 20th April Lieutenant Hobson ascertained that the wandering island was still drifting to the south. All that remained of the ice-wall, that is to say, the southern portion of the icebergs, followed it, but as there were no bench marks, the changes of position could only be estimated by astronomical observations.

Hobson took several soundings in different parts of the ground, especially at the foot of Cape Bathurst, and on the shores of the lagoon. He was anxious to ascertain the thickness of the layer of ice supporting the earth and sand, and found that it had not increased during the winter, and that the general level of the island did not appear to have risen higher above that of the sea. The conclusion he drew from these facts was, that no time should be lost in getting away from the fragile island, which would rapidly break up and dissolve in the warmer waters of the Pacific.

About the 25th April the bearing of the island was again changed, the whole ice-field had moved round from east to west twelve points, so that Cape Bathurst pointed to the north-west. The last remains of the ice-wall now shut in the northern horizon, so that there could be no doubt that the ice-field was moving freely in the strait, and that it nowhere touched any land.

The fatal moment was approaching. Diurnal or nocturnal observations gave the exact position of the island, and consequently of the ice-field. On the 30th of April, both were together drifting across Kotzebue Sound, a large triangular gulf running some distance inland on the American coast, and bounded on the south by Cape Prince of Wales, which might, perhaps, arrest the course of the island if it should deviate in the very least from the middle of the narrow pass.

The weather was now pretty fine, and the column of mercury often marked 50° Fahrenheit. The colonists had left off their winter garments some weeks before, and held themselves in constant readiness to leave the island. Thomas Black had already transported his instruments and books into the boat, which was waiting on the beach. A good many provisions had also been embarked and some of the most valuable furs.

On the 2d of May a very carefully taken observation showed that Victoria Island had a tendency to drift towards the east, and consequently to reach the American continent. This was fortunate, as they were now out of danger of being taken any farther by the Kamtchatka Current, which, as is well known, runs along the coast of Asia. At last the tide was turning in favour of the colonists!

“I think our bad fortune is at last at an end,” observed Sergeant Long to Mrs Barnett, “and that our misfortunes are really over; I don’t suppose there are any more dangers to be feared now.”

“I quite agree with you,” replied Mrs Barnett, “and it is very fortunate that we had to give up our journey across the ice-field a few months ago; we ought to be very thankful that it was impassible!”

Mrs Barnett was certainly justified in speaking as she did, for what fearful fatigues and sufferings they would all have had to undergo in crossing five hundred miles of ice in the darkness of the Polar night!

On the 5th May, Hobson announced that Victoria Island had just crossed the Arctic Circle. It had at last re-entered that zone of the terrestrial sphere in which at one period of the year the sun does not set. The poor people all felt that they were returning to the inhabited globe.

The event of crossing the Arctic Circle was celebrated in much the same way as crossing the Equator for the first time would be on board ship, and many a glass of spirits was drank in honour of the event.

There was now nothing left to do but to wait till the broken and half-melted ice should allow of the passage of the boat, which was to bear the whole colony to the land.

During the 7th May the island turned round to the extent of another quarter of its circumference. Cape Bathurst now pointed due north, and those masses of the old chain of icebergs which still remained standing were now above it, so that it occupied much the same position as that assigned to it in maps when it vas united to the American continent. The island had gradually turned completely round, and the sun had risen successively on every point of its shores.

The observations of the 8th May showed that the island had become stationary near the middle of the passage, at least forty miles from Cape Prince of Wales, so that land was now at a comparatively short distance from it, and the safety of all seemed to be secured.

In the evening a good supper was served in the large room, and the healths of Mrs Barnett and of Lieutenant Hobson were proposed.

The same night the Lieutenant determined to go and see if any changes had taken place in the ice-field on the south, hoping that a practicable passage might have been opened.

Mrs Barnett was anxious to accompany him, but he persuaded her to rest a little instead, and started off, accompanied only by Sergeant Long.

Mrs Barnett, Madge, and Kalumah returned to the principal house after seeing them off, and the soldiers and women had already gone to bed in the different apartments assigned to them.

It was a fine night, there was no moon, but the stars shone very brightly, and as the ice-field vividly reflected their light, it was possible to see for a considerable distance.

It was nine o’clock when the two explorers left the fort and turned towards that part of the coast between Port Barnett and Cape Michael. They followed the beach for about two miles, and found the ice-field in a state of positive chaos. The sea was one vast aggregation of crystals of every size, it looked as if it had been petrified suddenly when tossing in a tempest, and, alas, there was even now no free passage between the ice-masses — it would be impossible for a boat to pass yet.

Hobson and Long remained on the ice-field talking and looking about them until midnight, and then seeing that there was still nothing to do but to wait, they decided to go back to Fort Hope and rest for a few hours.

They had gone some hundred paces, and had reached the dried-up bed of Paulina River, when an unexpected noise arrested them. It was a distant rumbling from the northern part of the ice-field, and it became louder and louder until it was almost deafening. Something dreadful was going on in the quarter from which it came, and Hobson fancied he felt the ice beneath his feet trembling, which was certainly far from reassuring.

“The noise comes from the chain of icebergs,” exclaimed Long, “what can be going on there?”

Hobson did not answer, but feeling dreadfully anxious he rushed towards the fort dragging his companion after him.

“To the fort! to the fort.” he cried at last, “the ice may have opened, we may be able to launch our boat on the sea!”

And the two ran as fast as ever they could towards Fort Hope by the shortest way.

A thousand conjectures crowded upon them. From what new phenomenon did the unexpected noise proceed? Did the sleeping inhabitants of the fort know what was going on? They must certainly have heard the noise, for, in vulgar language, it was loud enough to wake the dead.

Hobson and Long crossed the two miles between them and Fort Hope in twenty minutes, but before they reached the enceinte they saw the men and women they had left asleep hurrying away in terrified disorder, uttering cries of despair.

The carpenter Mac-Nab, seeing the Lieutenant, ran towards him with his little boy in his arms.

“Look, sir, look!” he cried, drawing his master towards a little hill which rose a few yards behind the fort.

Hobson obeyed, and saw that part of the ice-wall, which, when he left, was two or three miles off in the offing, had fallen upon the coast of the island. Cape Bathurst no longer existed, the mass of earth and sand of which it was composed had been swept away by the icebergs and scattered over the palisades. The principal house and all the buildings connected with it on the north were buried beneath the avalanche. Masses of ice were crowding upon each other and tumbling over with an awful crash, crushing everything beneath them. It was like an army of icebergs taking possession of the island.

The boat which had been built at the foot of the cape was completely destroyed. The last hope of the unfortunate colonists was gone!

As they stood watching the awful scene, the buildings, formerly occupied by the soldiers and women, and from which they had escaped in time, gave way beneath an immense block of ice which fell upon them. A cry of despair burst from the lips of the houseless outcasts.

“And the others, where are they?” cried the Lieutenant in heart-rending tones.

“There!” replied Mac-Nab, pointing to the heap of sand, earth, and ice, beneath which the principal house had entirely disappeared.

Yes, the illustrious lady traveller, Madge, Kalumah, and Thomas Black, were buried beneath the avalanche which had surprised them in their sleep!

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALL AT WORK.

Fearful catastrophe had occurred. The ice-wall had been flung upon the wandering island, the volume below the water being five times that of the projecting part, it had come under the influence of the submarine currents, and, opening a way for itself between the broken ice-masses, it had fallen bodily upon Victoria Island, which, driven along by this mighty propelling force, was drifting rapidly to the south.

Mac-Nab and his companions, aroused by the noise of the avalanche dashing down upon the dog-house, stable, and principal house, had been able to escape in time, but now the work of destruction was complete. Not a trace remained of the buildings in which they had slept, and the island was bearing all its inhabitants with it to the unfathomable depths of the ocean! Perhaps, however, Mrs Barnett, Madge, Kalumah, and the astronomer, were still living! Dead or alive they must be dug out.

At this thought Hobson recovered his composure and shouted —

“Get shovels and pickaxes! The house is strong! it may have held together! Let us set to work!”

There were plenty of tools and pickaxes, but it was really impossible to approach the enceinte. The masses of ice were rolling down from the summits of the icebergs, and some parts of the ice-wall still towered amongst the ruins two hundred feet above the island. The force with which the tossing masses, which seemed to be surging all along the northern horizon, were overthrown can be imagined; the whole coast between the former Cape Bathurst and Cape Esquimaux was not only hemmed in, but literally invaded by these moving mountains, which, impelled by a force they could not resist, had already advanced more than a quarter of a mile inland.

Every moment the trembling of the ground and a loud report gave notice that another of these masses had rolled over, and there was a danger that the island would sink beneath the weight thrown upon it. A very apparent lowering of the level had taken place all along that part of the coast near Cape Bathurst, it was evidently gradually sinking down, and the sea had already encroached nearly as far as the lagoon.

The situation of the colonists was truly terrible, unable as they were to attempt to save their companions, and driven from the enceinte by the crashing avalanches, over which they had no power whatever. They could only wait, a prey to the most awful forebodings.

Day dawned at last, and how fearful a scene was presented by the districts around Cape Bathurst! The horizon was shut in on every side by ice-masses, but their advance appeared to be checked for the moment at least. The ruins of the ice-wall were at rest, and it was only now and then that a few blocks rolled down from the still tottering crests of the remaining icebergs. But the whole mass — a great part of its volume being sunk beneath the surface of the sea — was in the grasp of a powerful current, and was driving the island along with it to the south, that is to say, to the ocean, in the depths of which they would alike be engulfed.

Those who were thus borne along upon the island were not fully conscious of the peril in which they stood. They had their comrades to save, and amongst them the brave woman who had so won all their hearts, and for whom they would gladly have laid down their lives. The time for action had come, they could again approach the palisades, and there was not a moment to lose, as the poor creatures had already been buried beneath the avalanche for six hours.

We have already said that Cape Bathurst no longer existed. Struck by a huge iceberg it had fallen bodily upon the factory, breaking the boat and crushing the dog-house and stable with the poor creatures in them. The principal house next disappeared beneath the masses of earth and sand, upon which rolled blocks of ice to a height of fifty or sixty feet. The court of the fort was filled up, of the palisade not a post was to be seen, and it was from beneath this accumulation of earth, sand, and ice, that the victims were to be dug out.

Before beginning to work Hobson called the head carpenter to him, and asked if he thought the house could bear the weight of the avalanche.

“I think so, sir,” replied Mac-Nab; “in fact, I may almost say I am sure of it. You remember how we strengthened it, it has been ‘casemated,’ and the vertical beams between the ceilings and floors must have offered great resistance; moreover, the layer of earth and sand with which the roof was first covered must have broken the shock of the fall of the blocks of ice from the icebergs.” “God grant you may be right, Mac-Nab,” replied Hobson, “and that we may be spared the great grief of losing our friends!”

The Lieutenant then sent for Mrs Joliffe, and asked her if plenty of provisions had been left in the house.

“Oh, yes,” replied Mrs Joliffe, “there was plenty to eat in the pantry and kitchen.”

“And any water?”

“Yes, water and rum too.”

“All right, then,” said Hobson, “they will not be starved — but how about air?”

To this question Mac-Nab could make no reply, and if, as he hoped, the house had not given way, the want of air would be the chief danger of the four victims. By prompt measures, however, they might yet be saved, and the first thing to be done was to open a communication with the outer air.

All set to work zealously, men and women alike seizing shovels and pickaxes. The masses of ice, sand, and earth, were vigorously attacked at the risk of provoking fresh downfalls; but the proceedings were ably directed by Mac-Nab.

It appeared to him best to begin at the top of the accumulated masses, so as to roll down loose blocks on the side of the lagoon. The smaller pieces were easily dealt with, with pick and crowbar, but the large blocks had to be broken up. Some of great size were melted with the aid of a large fire of resinous wood, and every means was tried to destroy or get rid of the ice in the shortest possible time.

But so great was the accumulation, that although all worked without pause, except when they snatched a little food, there was no sensible diminution in its amount when the sun disappeared below the horizon. It was not, however, really of quite so great a height as before, and it was determined to go on working from above through the night, and when there was no longer any danger of fresh falls Mac-Nab hoped to be able to sink a vertical shaft in the compact mass, so as to admit the outer air to the house as soon as possible.

All night long the party worked at the excavation, attacking the masses with iron and heat, as the one or the other seemed more likely to be effective. The men wielded the pickaxe whilst the women kept up the fires; but all were animated by one purpose — the saving of the lives of Mrs Barnett, Madge, Kalumah, and the astronomer.

When morning dawned the poor creatures had been buried for thirty hours in air necessarily very impure under so thick a cover.

The progress made in the night had been so great that Mac-Nab prepared to sink his shaft, which he meant to go straight down to the top of the house; and which, according to his calculation, would not have to be more than fifty feet deep. It would be easy enough to sink this shaft through the twenty feet of ice; but great difficulty would be experienced when the earth and sand were reached, as, being very brittle, they would of course constantly fill in the shaft, and its sides would therefore have to be lined. Long pieces of wood were prepared for this purpose, and the boring proceeded. Only three men could work at it together, and the soldiers relieved each other constantly, so that the excavation seemed likely to proceed rapidly.

As might be supposed the poor fellows alternated between hope and fear when some obstacle delayed them. When a sudden fall undid their work they felt discouraged, and nothing but Mac-Nab's steady voice could have rallied them. As the men toiled in turn at their weary task the women stood watching them from the foot of a hill, saying little, but often praying silently. They had now nothing to do but to prepare the food, which the men devoured in their short intervals of repose.

The boring proceeded without any very great difficulty, but the ice was so hard that the progress was but slow. At the end of the second day Mac-Nab had nearly reached the layer of earth and sand, and could not hope to get to the top of the house before the end of the next day.

Night fell, but the work was continued by the light of torches. A “snow-house” was hastily dug out in one of the hummocks on the shore as a temporary shelter for the women and the little boy. The wind had veered to the south-west, and a cold rain began to fall, accompanied with occasional squalls; but neither the Lieutenant nor his men dreamt of leaving off work.

Now began the worst part of the task. It was really impossible to bore in the shifting masses of sand and earth, and it became necessary to prop up the sides of the shaft with wood, the loose earth being drawn to the surface in a bucket hung on a rope. Of course under the circumstances the work could not proceed rapidly, falls might occur at any moment, and the miners were in danger of being buried in their turn.

Mac-Nab was generally the one to remain at the bottom of the narrow shaft, directing the excavation, and frequently sounding with a long pick, but as it met with no resistance, it was evident that it did not reach the roof of the house.

When the morning once more dawned, only ten feet had been excavated in the mass of earth and sand, so that twenty remained to be bored through before the roof of the house could be reached, that is to say, if it had not given way, and still occupied the position it did before the fall of the avalanche.

It was now fifty-four hours since Mrs Barnett and her companions were buried!

Mac-Nab and the Lieutenant often wondered if they on their side had made any effort to open a communication with the outer air. They felt sure that with her usual courage, Mrs Barnett would have tried to find some way out if her movements were free. Some tools had been left in the house, and Kellet, one of the carpenter’s men, remembered leaving his pickaxe in the kitchen. The prisoners might have broken open one of the doors and begun to pierce a gallery across the layer of earth. But such a gallery could only be driven in a horizontal direction, and would be a much longer business than the sinking of a shaft from above, for the masses flung down by the avalanche, although only sixty feet deep, covered a space more than five hundred feet in diameter. Of course the prisoners could not be aware of this fact, and if they should succeed in boring their horizontal gallery, it would be eight days at least before they could cut through the last layer of ice, and by that time they would be totally deprived of air, if not of food.

Nevertheless the Lieutenant carefully went over every portion of the accumulation himself, and listened intently for any sounds of subterranean digging, but he heard nothing.

On the return of day the men toiled with fresh energy, bucket after bucket was drawn to the surface of the shaft loaded with earth. The clumsy wooden props answered admirably in keeping the earth from filling in the pit, a few falls occurred, but they were rapidly checked, and no fresh misfortunes occurred throughout the day, except that the soldier Garry received a blow on the head from a falling block of ice. The wound was not however severe, and he would not leave his work.

At four o’clock the shaft was fifty feet deep altogether, having been sunk through twenty feet of ice and thirty of sand and earth.

It was at this depth that Mac-Nab had expected to reach the roof of the house, if it had resisted the pressure of the avalanche.

He was then at the bottom of the shaft, and his disappointment and dismay can be imagined when, on driving his pickaxe into the ground as far as it would go, it met with no resistance whatever.

Sabine was with him, and for a few moments he remained with his arms crossed, silently looking at his companion.

“No roof then?” inquired the hunter.

“Nothing whatever,” replied the carpenter, “but let us work on, the roof has bent of course, but the floor of the loft cannot have given way. Another ten feet and we shall come to that floor, or else” — —

Mac-Nab did not finish his sentence, and the two resumed their work with the strength of despair.

At six o’clock in the evening, another ten or twelve feet had been dug out.

Mac-Nab sounded again, nothing yet, his pick still sunk in the shifting earth, and flinging it from him, he buried his face in his hands and muttered —

“Poor things, poor things!” He then climbed to the opening of the shaft by means of the wood-work.

The Lieutenant and the Sergeant were together in greater anxiety than ever, and taking them aside, the carpenter told them of his dreadful disappointment.

“Then,” observed Hobson, “the house must have been crushed by the avalanche, and the poor people in it” — —

“No!” cried the head-carpenter with earnest conviction, “no, it cannot have been crushed, it must have resisted, strengthened as it was. It cannot — it cannot have been crushed!”

“Well, then, what has happened?” said the Lieutenant in a broken voice, his eyes filling with tears.

“Simply this,” replied Mac Nab, “the house itself has remained intact, but the ground on which it was built must have sunk. The house has gone through the crust of ice which forma the foundation of the island. It has not been crushed, but engulfed, and the poor creatures in it” — —

“Are drowned!” cried Long.

“Yes, Sergeant, drowned without a moment’s notice — drowned like passengers on a foundered vessel!”

For some minutes the three men remained silent. Mac-Nab’s idea was probably correct. Nothing was more likely than that the ice forming the foundation of the island had given way under such enormous pressure. The vertical props which supported the beams of the ceiling, and rested on those of the floor, had evidently aided the catastrophe by their weight, and the whole house had been engulfed.

“Well, Mac-Nab,” said Hobson at last, “if we cannot find them alive” — —

“We must recover their bodies,” added the head carpenter.

“And with these words Mac-Nab, accompanied by the Lieutenant, went back to his work at the bottom of the shaft without a word to any of his comrades of the terrible form his anxiety had now assumed.

The excavation continued throughout the night, the men relieving each other every hour, and Hobson and Mac-Nab watched them at work without a moment’s rest.

At three o’clock in the morning Kellet’s pickaxe struck against something hard, which gave out a ringing sound. The head carpenter felt it almost before he heard it.

“We have reached them!” cried the soldier, “they are saved.”

“Hold your tongue, and go on working,” replied the Lieutenant in a choked voice.

It was now seventy-six hours since the avalanche fell upon the house!

Kellet and his companion Pond resumed their work. The shaft must have nearly reached the level of the sea, and Mac Nab therefore felt that all hope was gone.

In less than twenty minutes the hard body which Kellet had struck was uncovered, and proved to be one of the rafters of the roof. The carpenter flung himself to the bottom of the shaft, and seizing a pickaxe sent the laths of the roof flying on every side. In a few moments a large aperture was made, and a figure appeared at it which it was difficult to recognise in the darkness.

It was Kalumah!

“Help! help!” she murmured feebly.

Hobson let himself down through the opening, and found himself up to the waist in ice-cold water. Strange to say, the roof had not given way, but as Mac-Nab had supposed, the house had sunk, and was full of water. The water did not, however, yet fill the loft, and was not more than a foot above the floor. There was still a faint hope!

The Lieutenant, feeling his way in the darkness, came across a motionless body, and dragging it to the opening he consigned it to Pond and Kellet. It was Thomas Black.

Madge, also senseless, was next found; and she and the astronomer were drawn up to the surface of the ground with ropes, where the open air gradually restored them to consciousness.

Mrs Barnett was still missing, but Kalumah led Hobson to the very end of the loft, and there he found the unhappy lady motionless and insensible, with her head scarcely out of the water.

The Lieutenant lifted her in his arms and carried her to the opening, and a few moments later he had reached the outer air with his burden, followed by Mac-Nab with Kalumah.

Every one gathered round Mrs Barnett in silent anxiety, and poor Kalumah, exhausted as she was, flung herself across her friend’s body.

Mrs Barnett still breathed, her heart still beat feebly, and revived by the pure fresh air she at last opened her eyes.

A cry of joy burst from every lip, a cry of gratitude to Heaven for the great mercy vouchsafed, which was doubtless heard above.

Day was now breaking in the east, the sun was rising above the horizon, lighting up the ocean with its brilliant beams, and Mrs Barnett painfully staggered to her feet. Looking round her from the summit of the new mountain formed by the avalanche, which overlooked the whole island, she murmured in a changed and hollow voice — —

“The sea! the sea!”

Yes, the ocean now encircled the wandering island, the sea was open at last, and a true sea-horizon shut in the view from east to west.

CHAPTER XIX.

BEHRING SEA.

The island, driven by the ice-wall, had then drifted at a great speed into Behring Sea, after crossing the strait without running aground on its shores! It was still hurrying on before the icy barrier, which was in the grasp of a powerful submarine current, hastening onwards on to its inevitable dissolution in the warmer waters of the Pacific, and the boat on which all had depended was useless!

As soon as Mrs Barnett had entirely recovered consciousness, she related in a few words the history of the seventy-four hours spent in the house now in the water. Thomas Black, Madge, and Kalumah had been aroused by the crash of the avalanche, and had rushed to the doors or windows. There was no longer any possibility of getting out, the mass of earth and sand, which was but a moment before Cape Bathurst, completely covered the house, and almost immediately afterwards the prisoners heard the crash of the huge ice-masses which were flung upon the factory.

In another quarter of an hour all felt that the house, whilst resisting the enormous pressure, was sinking through the soil of the island. They knew that the crust of the ice must have given way, and that the house would fill with water!

To seize a few provisions remaining in the pantry, and to take refuge in the loft, was the work of a moment. This the poor creatures did from a dim instinct of self-preservation, but what hope could they really have of being saved! However, the loft seemed likely to resist, and two blocks of ice abutting from the roof saved it from being immediately crushed.

Whilst thus imprisoned the poor creatures could hear the constant falls from the icebergs, whilst the sea was gradually rising through the lower rooms. They must either be crushed or drowned!

But by little short of a miracle, the roof of the house, with its strong framework, resisted the pressure, and after sinking a certain depth the house remained stationary, with the water rather above the floor of the loft. The prisoners were obliged to take refuge amongst the rafters of the roof, and there they remained for many hours. Kalumah devoted herself to the service of the others, and carried food to them through the water. They could make no attempt to save themselves, succour could only come from without.

It was a terrible situation, for breathing was difficult in the vitiated air deficient as it was in oxygen, and charged with a great excess of carbonic acid... A few hours later Hobson would only have found the corpses of his friends!

The horror of the position was increased by the gushing of the water through the lower rooms, which convinced Mrs Barnett that the island was drifting to the south. She had, in fact, guessed the whole truth; she knew that the ice-wall had heeled over and fallen upon the island, and concluded that the boat was destroyed. It was this last fact which gave such terrible significance to her first words when she looked around her after her swoon—

“The sea! the sea!”

Those about her, however, could think of nothing yet but the fact, that they had saved her for whom they would have died, and with her Madge, Kalumah, and Thomas Black. Thus far not one of those who had joined the

Lieutenant in his disastrous expedition had succumbed to any of the fearful dangers through which they had passed.

But matters were not yet at their worst, and fresh troubles were soon to hasten the final catastrophe.

Hobson's first care after Mrs Barnett's recovery was to take the bearings of the inland. It was listless now to think of quitting it, as the sea was open and their boat destroyed. A few ruins alone remained of the mighty ice-wall, the upper portion of which had crushed Cape Bathurst whilst the submerged base was driving the island to the south.

The instruments and maps belonging to the astronomer were found in the ruins of the house, and were fortunately uninjured. The weather was cloudy, but Hobson succeeded in taking the altitude of the sun with sufficient accuracy for his purpose.

We give the result obtained at noon on the 12th May. Victoria Island was then situated in longitude 168°12' west of Greenwich, and in latitude 63°37' N. The exact spot was looked out on the chart, and proved to be in Norton Sound, between Cape Tchaplin on the Asiatic and Cape Stephens on the American coast, but a hundred miles from either.

"We must give up all hope of making the land of the continent then!" said Mrs Barnett.

"Yes, madam," replied Hobson; "all hope of that is at an end; the current is carrying us with great rapidity out into the offing, and our only chance is, that we may pass within sight of a whaler."

“Well, but,” added Mrs Barnett, “if we cannot make the land of either continent, might not the current drive us on to one of the islands of Behring Sea?”

There was, in fact, a slight possibility that such a thing might happen, and all eagerly clutched at the hope, like a drowning man at a plank. There are plenty of islands in Behring Sea, St Lawrence, St Matthew, Nunivak, St Paul, George island, &c. The wandering island was in fact at that moment not far from St Lawrence, which is of a considerable size, and surrounded with islets; and should it pass it without stopping, there was yet a hope that the cluster of the Aleutian Islands, bounding Behring Sea on the south, might arrest its course.

Yes! St Lawrence might be a harbour of refuge for the colonists, and if it failed them, St Matthew, and the group of islets of which it is the centre, would still be left. It would not do, however, to count upon the Aleutian Islands, which were more than eight hundred miles away, and which they might never reach. Long, long before they got so far, Victoria Island, worn away by the warm sea-waves, and melted by the rays of the sun, which was already in the sign of Gemini, would most likely have sunk to the bottom of the ocean.

There is, however, no fixed point beyond which floating ice does not advance. It approaches nearer to the equator in the southern than in the northern hemisphere. Icebergs have been seen off the Cape of Good Hope, at about thirty-six degrees south latitude, but those which come down from the Arctic Ocean have never passed forty degrees north latitude. The weather conditions, which are of course variable, determine the exact locality where ice will melt; in severe and prolonged winters it remains solid in comparatively low latitudes, and *vice versa* in early springs.

Now the warm season of 1861 had set in very early, and this would hasten the dissolution of Victoria Island. The waters of Behring Sea had already changed from blue to green, as the great navigator Hudson observed they always do on the approach of icebergs, so that a catastrophe might be expected at any moment.

Hobson determined to do his best to avert the coming misfortune, and ordered a raft to be constructed which would carry the whole colony, and might be guided to the continent somehow or other. There was every chance of meeting vessels now that the whaling season had commenced, and Mac-Nab was commissioned to make a large solid raft which would float when Victoria Island was engulfed.

But first of all, it was necessary to construct some shelter for the homeless inhabitants of the island. The simple plan appeared to be to dig out the old barracks, which had been built on to the principal house, and the walls of which were still standing. Every one set to work with a hearty good-will, and in a few days a shelter was provided from the inclemencies of the fickle weather.

Search was also made in the ruins of the large house, and a good many articles of more or less value were saved from the submerged rooms — tools, arms, furniture, the air pumps, and the air vessel, &c.

On the 13th May all hope of drifting on to the island of St Lawrence had to be abandoned. When the bearings were taken, it was found that they were passing at a considerable distance to the east of that island; and, as Hobson was well aware, currents do not run against natural obstacles, but turn them, so that little hope could be entertained of thus making the land. It is true the network of islands in the Catherine Archipelago, scattered over several degrees of latitude, might stop the island if it ever got so far. But, as we have before stated, that was not probable, although it was advancing at great speed; for this speed must decrease considerably when the ice-wall which was driving it along should be broken away or dissolved, unprotected as it was from the heat of the sun by any covering of earth or sand.

Lieutenant Hobson, Mrs Barnett, Sergeant Long, and the head carpenter often discussed these matters, and came to the conclusion that the island could certainly never reach the Aleutian group with so many chances against it.

On the 14th May, Mac-Nab and his men commenced the construction of a huge raft. It had to be as high as possible above the water, to prevent the waves from breaking over it, so that it was really a formidable undertaking. The blacksmith, Rae, had fortunately found a large number of the iron bolts which had been brought from Fort Reliance, and they were invaluable for firmly fastening together the different portions of the framework of the raft.

We must describe the novel site for the building of the raft suggested by Lieutenant Hobson. Instead of joining the timbers and planks together on the ground, they were joined on the surface of the lake. The different pieces of wood were prepared on the banks, and launched separately. They were then easily fitted together on the water. This mode of proceeding had two advantages: —

1. The carpenter would be able at once to judge of the point of flotation, and the stability which should be given to the raft. 2. When Victoria Island melted, the raft would already be floating, and would not be liable to the shocks it would receive if on land when the inevitable break-up came.

Whilst these works were going on, Hobson would wander about on the beach, either alone or with Mrs Barnett, examining the state of the sea, and the ever-changing windings of the coast-line, worn by the constant action of the waves. He would gaze upon the vast deserted ocean, from which the very icebergs had now disappeared, watching, ever watching, like a shipwrecked mariner, for the vessel which never came. The ocean solitudes were only frequented by cetacea, which came to feed upon the microscopic anima[l]culae which form their principal food, and abound in the green waters. Now and then floating trees of different kinds, which had been brought by the great ocean currents from warm latitudes, passed the island on their way to the north.

On the 16th May, Mrs Barnett and Madge were walking together on that part of the island between the former Cape Bathurst and Port Barnett. It was a fine warm day, and there had been no traces of snow on the ground for some time; all that recalled the bitter cold of the Polar regions were the relics left by the ice-wall on the northern part of the island; but even these were rapidly melting, and every day fresh waterfalls poured from their summits and bathed their sides. Very soon the sun would have completely dissolved every atom of ice.

Strange indeed was the aspect of Victoria Island. But for their terrible anxiety, the colonists must have gazed at it with eager interest. The ground was more prolific than it could have been in any former spring, transferred as it was to milder latitudes. The little mosses and tender flowers grew rapidly, and Mrs Joliffe’s garden was wonderfully successful. The vegetation of every kind, hitherto checked by the rigour of the Arctic winter, was not only more abundant, but more brilliantly coloured. The hues of leaves and flowers were no longer pale and watery, but warm and glowing, like the sunbeams which called them forth. The arbutus, willow, birch, fir, and pine trees were clothed with dark verdure; the sap — sometimes heated in a temperature of 68° Fahrenheit — burst open the young buds; in a word, the Arctic landscape was completely transformed, for the island was now beneath the same parallel of latitude as Christiania or Stockholm, that is to say, in one of the finest districts of the temperate zones.

But Mrs Barnett had now no eyes for these wonderful phenomena of nature. The shadow of the coming doom clouded her spirit. She shared the feeling of depression manifested by the hundreds of animals now collected round the factory. The foxes, martens, ermines, lynxes, beavers, musk-rats, gluttons, and even the wolves, rendered less savage by their instinctive knowledge of a common danger, approached nearer and nearer to their old enemy man, as if man could save them. It was a tacit, a touching acknowledgment of human superiority, under circumstances in which that superiority could be of absolutely no avail.

No! Mrs Barnett cared no longer for the beauties of nature, and gazed without ceasing upon the boundless, pitiless, infinite ocean with its unbroken horizon.

“Poor Madge!” she said at last to her faithful companion; “it was I who brought you to this terrible pass — you who have followed me everywhere, and whose fidelity deserved a far different recompense! Can you forgive me?”

“There is but one thing I could never have forgiven you,” replied Madge, — ”a death I did not share!”

“Ah, Madge!” cried Mrs Barnett, “if my death could save the lives of all these poor people, how gladly would I die!”

“My dear girl,” replied Madge, “have you lost all hope at last?”

“I have indeed,” murmured Mrs Barnett, hiding her face on Madge’s shoulder.

The strong masculine nature had given way at last, and Mrs Barnett was for a moment a feeble woman. Was not her emotion excusable in so awful a situation?

Mrs Barnett sobbed aloud, and large tears rolled down her cheeks.

Madge kissed and caressed her, and tried all she could to reassure her; and presently, raising her head, her poor mistress said —

“Do not tell them, Madge, how I have given way — do not betray that I have wept.”

“Of course not,” said Madge, “and they would not believe me if I did. It was but a moment’s weakness. Be yourself, dear girl; cheer up, and take fresh courage.”

“Do you mean to say you still hope yourself!” exclaimed Mrs Barnett, looking anxiously into her companion’s face.

“I still hope!” said Madge simply.

But a few days afterwards, every chance of safety seemed to be indeed gone, when the wandering island passed outside the St Matthew group, and drifted away from the last land in Behring Sea!

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE OFFING.

Victoria Island was now floating in the widest part of Behring Sea, six hundred miles from the nearest of the Aleutian Islands, and two hundred miles from the nearest land, which was on the east. Supposing no accident happened, it would be three weeks at least before this southern boundary of Behring Sea could be reached.

Could the island last so long? Might it not burst open at any moment, subject as it was even now to the constant action of tepid water, the mean temperature of which was more than 50° Fahrenheit?

Lieutenant Hobson pressed on the construction of the raft as rapidly as possible, and the lower framework was already floating on the lagoon. Mac-Nab wished to make it as strong as possible, for it would have a considerable distance to go to reach the Aleutian Islands, unless they were fortunate enough to meet with a whaler.

No important alteration had lately taken place in the general configuration of the island. Reconaissances were taken everyday, but great caution was necessary, as a fracture of the ground might at any moment cut off the explorers from the rest of the party.

The wide gulf near Cape Michael, which the winter had closed, had reopened gradually, and now ran a mile inland, as far as the dried-up bed of the little river. It was probable that it was soon to extend to the bed itself, which was of course of little thickness, having been hollowed out by the stream. Should it do so, the whole district between Cape Michael and Port Barnett, bounded on the west by the river bed, would disappear — that is to say, the colonists would lose a good many square miles of their domain. On this account Hobson warned every one not to wander far, as a rough sea would be enough to bring about the dreaded catastrophe.

Soundings were, however, taken, in several places with a view to ascertaining where the ice was thickest, and it was found that, near Cape Bathurst, not only was the layer of earth and sand of greater extent — which was of little importance — but the crust of ice was thicker than anywhere else. This was a most fortunate circumstance, and the holes made in sounding were kept open, so that the amount of diminution in the base of the island could be estimated every day. This diminution was slow but sure, and, making allowance for the unfortunate fact that the island was drifting into warmer waters, it was decided that it was impossible for it to last another three weeks.

The next week, from the 19th to the 25th May, the weather was very bad. A fearful storm broke over the island, accompanied by flash after flash of lightning and peals of thunder. The sea rose high, lashed by a powerful north-west wind, and its waves broke over the doomed island, making it tremble ominously. The little colony were on the watch, ready on an emergency to embark in the raft, the scaffolding of which was nearly finished, and some provisions and fresh water were taken on board.

Rain heavy enough to penetrate to the ice-crust fell in large quantities during this storm, and melted it in many places. On the slopes of some of the hills the earth was washed away, leaving the white foundations bare. These ravines were hastily filled up with soil to protect the ice from the action of the warm air and rain, and but for this precaution the soil would have been everywhere perforated.

Great havoc was caused amongst the woods by this storm; the earth and sand were washed away from the roots of the trees, which fell in large numbers. In a single night the aspect of the country between the lake and the former Port Barnett was completely changed. A few groups of birch trees and thickets of firs alone remained — a fact significant of approaching decomposition, which no human skill could prevent! Every one knew and felt that the ephemeral inland was gradually succumbing — every one, except perhaps Thomas Black, who was still gloomily indifferent to all that was going on.

On the 23d of May, during the storm, the hunter Sabine left the house in the thick fog, and was nearly drowned in a large hole which had opened during the night on the site formerly occupied by the principal house of the factory.

Hitherto, as we are aware, the house, three quarters submerged, and buried beneath a mass of earth and sand, had remained fixed in the ice-crust beneath the island; but now the sea had evidently enlarged the crevasse, and the house with all it contained had sunk to rise no more. Earth and sand were pouring through this fissure, at the bottom of which surged the tempest-tossed waves

Sabine’s comrades, hearing his cries, rushed to his assistance, and were just in time to save him as he was still clinging to the slippery walls of the abyss. He escaped with a ducking which might have had tragic consequences.

A little later the beams and planks of the house, which had slid under the island, were seen floating about in the offing like the spars of a wrecked vessel. This was the worst evil the storm had wrought, and would compromise the solidity of the island yet more, as the waves would now eat away the ice all round the crevasse.

In the course of the 25th May, the wind veered to the north-east, and although it blew strongly, it was no longer a hurricane; the rain ceased, and the sea became calmer. After a quiet night the sun rose upon the desolate scene, the Lieutenant was able to take the bearings accurately, and obtained the following result: —

At noon on the 25th May, Victoria Island was in latitude 56° 13’, and longitude 170° 23’.

It had therefore advanced at great speed, having drifted nearly eight hundred miles since the breaking up of the ice set it free in Behring Strait two months before.

This great speed made the Lieutenant once more entertain a slight hope. He pointed out the Aleutian Islands on the map to his comrades, and said —

“Look at these islands; they are not now two hundred miles from us, and we may reach them in eight days.”

“Eight days!” repeated Long, shaking his head; “eight days is a long time.”

“I must add,” continued Hobson, “that if our island had followed the hundred and sixty-eighth meridian, it would already have reached the parallel of these islands, but in consequence of a deviation of the Behring current, it is bearing in a south-westerly direction.”

The Lieutenant was right, the current seemed likely to drag the island away from all land, even out of sight of the Aleutian Islands, which only extend as far as the hundred and seventieth meridian.

Mrs Barnett examined the map in silence. She saw the pencil-mark which denoted the exact spot then occupied by the island.

The map was made on a large scale, and the point representing the island looked but a speck upon the vast expanse of the Behring Sea. She traced back the route by which the island had come to its present position, marvelling at the fatality, or rather the immutable law, by which the currents which had borne it along had avoided all land, sheering clear of islands, and never touching either continent; and she saw the boundless Pacific Ocean, towards which she and all with her were hurrying.

She mused long upon this melancholy subject, and at last exclaimed suddenly —

“Could not the course of the island be controlled? Eight days at this pace would bring us to the last island of the Aleutian group.”

“Those eight days are in the hands of God,” replied Lieutenant Hobson gravely; “we can exercise no control upon them. Help can only come to us from above; there is nothing left for us to try.”

“I know, I know!” said Mrs Barnett; “but Heaven helps those who help themselves. Is there really nothing we can do?”

Hobson shook his head doubtfully. His only hope was in the raft, and he was undecided whether to embark every one on it at once, contrive some sort of a sail with clothes, &c. and try to reach the nearest land, or to wait yet a little longer.

He consulted Sergeant Long, Mac-Nab, Rae, Marbre, and Sabine, in whom he had great confidence, and all agreed that it would be unwise to abandon the island before they were obliged. The raft, constantly swept as it would be by the waves, could only be a last resource, and would not move at half the pace of the island, still driven towards the south by the remains of the ice-wall. The wind generally blew from the east, and would be likely to drift the raft out into the offing away from all land. They must still wait then, always wait; for the island was drifting rapidly towards the Aleutians. When they really approached the group they would be able to see what it would be best to do.

This was certainly the wisest course to take. In eight days, if the present speed were maintained, the island would either stop at the southern boundary of Behring Sea, or be dragged to the south west to the waters of the Pacific Ocean, where certain destruction awaited it.

But the adverse fate which seemed all along to have followed the hapless colonists had yet another blow in store for them: the speed on which they counted was now to fail them, as everything else had done.

During the night of the 26th May, the orientation of the island changed once more; and this time the results of the displacement were extremely serious. The island turned half round, and the icebergs still remaining of the huge ice-wall, which had shut in the northern horizon, were now on the south.

In the morning the shipwrecked travellers — what name could be more appropriate? — saw the sun rise above Cape Esquimaux instead of above Port Barnett.

Hardly a hundred yards off rose the icebergs, rapidly melting, but still of a considerable size, which till then had driven the island before them. The southern horizon was now partly shut in by them.

What would be the consequences of this fresh change of position? Would not the icebergs now float away from the island, with which they were no longer connected?

All were oppressed with a presentiment of some new misfortune, and understood only too well what Kellet meant when he exclaimed —

“This evening we shall have lost our screw!’”

By this Kellet meant that the icebergs, being before instead of behind the island, would soon leave it, and as it was they which imparted to it its rapid motion, in consequence of their very great draught of water — their volume being six or seven feet below the sea level for every one above — they would now go on without it, impelled by the submarine current, whilst Victoria Island, not deep enough in the water to come under the influence of the current, would be left floating helplessly on the waves.

Yes! Kellet was right; the island would then be like a vessel with disabled masts and a broken screw.

No one answered the soldier’s remark, and a quarter of an hour had not elapsed before a loud cracking sound was heard. The summits of the icebergs trembled, large masses broke away, and the icebergs, irresistibly drawn along by the submarine current, drifted rapidly to the south.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ISLAND BECOMES AN ISLET.

Three hours later the last relics of the ice-wall had disappeared, proving that the island now remained stationary, and that all the force of the current was deep down below the waves, not on the surface of the sea.

The bearings were taken at noon with the greatest care and twenty-four hours later it was found that Victoria Island had not advanced one mile.

The only remaining hope was that some vessel should sight the poor shipwrecked creatures, either whilst still on the island, or after they had taken to their raft.

The island was now in 54° 33’ latitude, and 177° 19’ longitude, several hundred miles from the nearest land, namely, the Aleutian Islands.

Hobson once more called his comrades together, and asked them what they thought it would be best to do.

All agreed that they should remain on the island until it broke up, as it was too large to be affected by the state of the sea, and only take to the raft when the dissolution actually commenced. Once on the frail vessel, they must wait.

Still wait!

The raft was now finished. Mac-Nab had made one large shed or cabin big enough to hold every one, and to afford some little shelter from the weather. A mast had been prepared, which could be put up if necessary, and the sails intended for the boat had long been ready. The whole structure was strong, although clumsy; and if the wind were favourable, and the sea not too rough, this rude assortment of planks and timbers might save the lives of the whole party.

“Nothing,” observed Mrs Barnett, — ”nothing is impossible to Him who rules the winds and waves.”

Hobson carefully looked over the stores of provisions. The reserves had been much damaged by the avalanche, but there were plenty of animals still on the island, and the abundant shrubs and mosses supplied them with food. A few reindeer and hares were slaughtered by the hunters, and their flesh salted for future needs.

The health of the colonists was on the whole good. They had suffered little in the preceding mild winter, and all the mental trials they had gone through had not affected their physical well-being. They were, however, looking forward with something of a shrinking horror to the moment when they would have to abandon their island home, or, to speak more correctly, when it abandoned them. It was no wonder that they did not like the thought of floating on the ocean in a rude structure of wood subject to all the caprices of winds and waves. Even in tolerably fine weather seas would be shipped and every one constantly drenched with saltwater. Moreover, it must be remembered that the men were none of them sailors, accustomed to navigation, and ready to risk their lives on a few planks, but soldiers, trained for service on land. Their island was fragile, it is true, and rested on a thin crust of ice; but then it was covered with a productive soil, trees and shrubs flourished upon it, its huge bulk rendered it insensible to the motion of the waves, and it might have been supposed to be stationary. They had, in fact, become attached to Victoria Island, on which they had lived nearly two years; every inch of the ground had become familiar to them; they had tilled the soil, and had come safely through so many perils in their wandering home, that in leaving it they felt as if they were parting from an old and sorely-tried friend.

Hobson fully sympathised with the feelings of his men, and understood their repugnance to embarking on the raft; but then he also knew that the catastrophe could not now be deferred much longer, and ominous symptoms already gave warning of its rapid approach.

We will now describe this raft. It was thirty feet square, and its deck rose two feet above the water. Its bulwarks would therefore keep out the small but not the large waves. In the centre the carpenter had built a regular deck-house, which would hold some twenty people. Round it were large lockers for the provisions and water-casks, all firmly fixed to the deck with iron bolts. The mast, thirty feet high, was fastened to the deck-house, and strengthened with stays attached to the corners of the raft. This mast was to have a square sail, which would only be useful when the wind was aft. A sort of rudder was fixed to this rough structure, the fittings of which were necessarily incomplete.

Such was the raft constructed by the head carpenter, on which twenty-one persons were to embark. It was floating peacefully on the little lake, strongly moored to the shore.

It was certainly constructed with more care than if it had been put together in haste on a vessel at sea doomed to immediate destruction. It was stronger and better fitted up; but, after all, it was but a raft.

On the 1st June a new incident occurred. Hope, one of the soldiers, went to fetch some water from the lake for culinary purposes, and when Mrs Joliffe tasted it, she found that it was salt. She called Hope, and said she wanted fresh, not salt water.

The man replied that he had brought it from the lake as usual, and as he and Mrs Joliffe were disputing about it, the Lieutenant happened to come in. Hearing Hope's repeated [asertions] assertions that he had fetched the water from the lake, he turned pale and hurried to the lagoon.

The waters were quite salt; the bottom of the lake had evidently given way, and the sea had flowed in.

The fact quickly became known, and every one was seized with a terrible dread.

"No more fresh water!" exclaimed all the poor creatures together.

Lake Barnett had in fact disappeared, as Paulina River had done before.

Lieutenant Hobson hastened to reassure his comrades about drinkable water.

"There will be plenty of ice, my friends," he said. "We can always melt a piece of our island, and," he added, with a ghastly attempt at a smile, "I don't suppose we shall drink it all."

It is, in fact, well known that salt separates from sea-water in freezing and evaporation. A few blocks of ice were therefore "disinterred," if we may so express it, and melted for daily use, and to fill the casks on board the raft.

It would not do, however, to neglect this fresh warning given by nature. The invasion of the lake by the sea proved that the base of the island was rapidly melting. At any moment the ground might give way, and Hobson forbade his men to leave the factory, as they might be drifted away before they were aware of it.

The animals seemed more keenly alive than ever to approaching danger; they gathered yet more closely round the firmer part, and after the disappearance of the fresh water lake, they came to lick the blocks of ice. They were all uneasy, and some seemed to be seized with madness, especially the wolves, who rushed wildly towards the factory, and dashed away again howling piteously. The furred animals remained huddled together round the large well where the principal house had formerly stood. There were several hundreds of them, of different species, and the solitary bear roamed backwards and forwards, showing no more hostility to the quadrupeds than to men.

The number of birds, which had hitherto been considerable, now decreased. During the last few days all those capable of long-sustained flight — such as swans, &c, migrated towards the Aleutian Islands in the south, where they would find a sure refuge. This significant and ominous fact was noticed by Mrs Barnett and Madge, who were walking together on the beach.

“There is plenty of food for these birds on the island,” observed Mrs Barnett, “and yet they leave it — they have a good reason, no doubt.”

“Yes,” replied Madge; “their instinct of self-preservation makes them take flight, and they give us a warning by which we ought to profit. The animals also appear more uneasy than usual.”

Hobson now decided to take the greater part of the provisions and all the camping apparatus on board the raft, and when that was done, to embark with the whole party.

The sea was, however, very rough, and the waters of the former lake — now a kind of Mediterranean in miniature — were greatly agitated. The waves, confined in the narrow space, dashed mountains high, and broke violently upon the steep banks. The raft tossed up and down, and shipped sea after sea. The embarkation of provisions, &c. had to be put off.

Every one wished to pass one more quiet night on land, and Hobson yielded against his better judgment, determined, if it were calmer the next day, to proceed with the embarkation.

The night was more peaceful than had been expected; the wind went down, and the sea became calmer; it had but been swept by one of those sudden and brief hurricanes peculiar to these latitudes.

At eight o'clock in the evening the tumult ceased, and a slight surface agitation of the waters of lake and sea alone remained.

It was some slight comfort that the island would not now be broken up suddenly, as it must have done had the storm continued. Its dissolution was, of course, still close at hand, but would not, it was hoped, be sudden and abrupt.

The storm was succeeded by a slight fog, which seemed likely to thicken during the night. It came from the north, and owing to the changed position of the island, would probably cover the greater part of it.

Before going to bed, Hobson went down and examined the moorings of the raft, which were fastened to some strong birch-trees. To make security doubly sure, he tightened them, and the worst that could now happen would be, that the raft would drift out on to the lagoon, which was not large enough to be lost upon it.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FOUR FOLLOWING DAYS.

The night was calm, and in the morning the Lieutenant resolved to order the embarkation of everything and everybody that very day. He, therefore, went down to the lake to look at the raft.

The fog was still thick, but the sunbeams were beginning to struggle through it. The clouds had been swept away by the hurricane of the preceding day, and it seemed likely to be hot.

When Hobson reached the banks of the lake, the fog was still too dense for him to make out anything on its surface, and he was waiting for it to clear away, when he was joined by Mrs Barnett, Madge, and several others.

The fog gradually cleared off, drawing back to the end of the lake, but the raft was nowhere to be seen.

Presently a gust of wind completely swept away the fog.

The raft was gone! There was no longer a lake! The boundless ocean stretched away before the astonished colonists!

Hobson could not check a cry of despair; and when he and his companions turned round and saw the sea on every side, they realised with a shock of horror that their island was now nothing more than an islet!

During the night six-sevenths of the district once belonging to Cape Bathurst had silently floated away, without producing a shock of any kind, so completely had the ice been worn away by the constant action of the waves, the raft had drifted out into the offing, and those whose last hope it had been could not see a sign of it on the desolate sea.

The unfortunate colonists were now overwhelmed with despair; their last hope gone, they were hanging above an awful abyss ready to swallow them up; and some of the soldiers in a fit of madness were about to throw themselves into the sea, when Mrs Barnett flung herself before them, entreating them to desist. They yielded, some of them weeping like children.

The awful situation of the colonists was indeed manifest enough, and we may well pity the Lieutenant surrounded by the miserable despairing creatures. Twenty-one persons on an islet of ice which must quickly melt beneath their feet! The wooded hills had disappeared with the mass of the island now engulfed; not a tree was left. There was no wood remaining but the planks of the rough lodging, which would not be nearly enough to build a raft to hold so many. A few days of life were all the colonists could now hope for; June had set in, the mean temperature exceeded 68° Fahrenheit, and the islet must rapidly melt.

As a forlorn hope, Hobson thought he would make a reconaissance of his limited domain, and see if any part of it was thicker than where they were all now encamped. In this excursion he was accompanied by Mrs Barnett and Madge.

“Do you still hope!” inquired the lady of her faithful companion.

“I hope ever!” replied Madge.

Mrs Barnett did not answer, but walked rapidly along the coast at the Lieutenant’s side. No alteration had taken place between Cape Bathurst and

Cape Esquimaux, that is to say, for a distance of eight miles. It was at Cape Esquimaux that the fracture had taken place, and running inland, it followed a curved line as far as the beginning of the lagoon, from which point the shores of the lake, now bathed by the waves of the sea, formed the new coast-line. Towards the upper part of the lagoon there was another fracture, running as far as the coast, between Cape Bathurst and what was once Port Barnett, so that the islet was merely an oblong strip, not more than a mile wide anywhere.

Of the hundred and forty square miles which once formed the total superficial area of the island, only twenty remained.

Hobson most carefully examined the new conformation of the islet, and found that its thickest part was still at the site of the former factory. He decided, therefore, to retain the encampment where it was, and, strange to say, the instinct of the quadrupeds still led them to congregate about it.

A great many of the animals had, however, disappeared with the rest of the island, amongst them many of the dogs which had escaped the former catastrophe. Most of the quadrupeds remaining were rodents; and the bear, which seemed terribly puzzled, paced round and round the islet like a caged animal.

About five o’clock in the evening the three explorers returned to the camp. The men and women were gathered together in gloomy silence in the rough shelter still remaining to them, and Mrs Joliffe was preparing some food. Sabine, who was less overcome than his comrades, was wandering about in the hope of getting some fresh venison, and the astronomer was sitting apart from every one, gazing at the sea in an absent indifferent manner, as if nothing could ever rouse or astonish him again.

The Lieutenant imparted the results of his excursion to the whole patty. He told them that they were safer where they were than they would be on any other spot, and he urged them not to wander about, as there were signs of another approaching fracture half way between the camp and Cape Esquimaux. The superficial area of the islet would soon be yet further reduced, and they could do nothing, absolutely nothing.

The day was really quite hot. The ice which had been “disinterred” for drinkable water melted before it was brought near the fire. Thin pieces of the ice crust of the steep beach fell off into the sea, and it was evident that the general level of the islet was being lowered by the constant wearing away of its base in the tepid waters.

No one slept the next night. Who could have closed his eyes with the knowledge that the abyss beneath might open at any moment? — who but the little unconscious child who still smiled in his mother’s arms, and was never for one instant out of them?

The next morning, June 4th, the sun rose in a cloudless sky. No change had taken place in the conformation of the islet during the night.

In the course of this day a terrified blue fox rushed into the shed, and could not be induced to leave it. The martens, ermines, polar hares, musk-rats, and beavers literally swarmed upon the site of the former factory. The wolves alone were unrepresented, and had probably all been swallowed up with the rest of the island. The bear no longer wandered from Cape Bathurst, and the furred animals seemed quite unconscious of its presence; nor did the colonists notice it much, absorbed as they were in the contemplation of the approaching doom, which had broken down all the ordinary distinctions of race.

A little before noon a sudden hope — too soon to end in disappointment — revived the drooping spirits of the colonists.

Sabine, who had been standing for some time on the highest part of the islet looking at the sea, suddenly cried —

“A boat! a boat!”

It was as if an electric shock had suddenly ran through the group, for all started up and rushed towards the hunter.

The Lieutenant looked at him inquiringly, and the man pointed to a white vapour on the horizon. Not a word was spoken, but all watched in breathless silence as the form of a vessel gradually rose against the sky.

It was indeed a ship, and most likely a whaler. There was no doubt about it, and at the end of an hour even the keel was visible.

Unfortunately this vessel appeared on the east of the islet, that is to say, on the opposite side to that from which the raft had drifted, so that there could be no hope that it was coming to their rescue after meeting with the raft, which would have suggested the fact of fellow-creatures being in danger.

The question now was, would those in this vessel perceive the islet? Would they be able to make out signals on it? Alas! in broad daylight, with a bright sun shining, it was not likely they would. Had it been night some of the planks of the remaining shed might have made a fire large enough to be seen at a considerable distance, but the boat would probably have disappeared before the darkness set in; and, although it seemed of little use, signals were made, and guns fired on the islet.

The vessel was certainly approaching, and seemed to be a large three-master, evidently a whaler from New Archangel, which was on its way to Behring Strait after having doubled the peninsula of Alaska. It was to the windward of the islet, and tacking to starboard with its lower sails, top sails, and top-gallant sails all set. It was steadily advancing to the north. A sailor would have seen at a glance that it was not bearing towards the islet, but it might even yet perceive it, and alter its course.

“If it does see us,” whispered Hobson in Long’s ear, “it is more likely to avoid us than to come nearer.”

The Lieutenant was right, for there is nothing vessels dread more in these latitudes than the approach of icebergs and ice-floes; they look upon them as floating rocks, against which there is a danger of striking, especially in the night, and they therefore hasten to change their course when ice is sighted; and this vessel would most likely do the same, if it noticed the islet at all.

The alternations of hope and despair through which the anxious watchers passed may be imagined, but cannot be described. Until two o’clock in the afternoon they were able to believe that Heaven had at last taken pity on them — that help was coming — that their safety was assured. The vessel continued to approach in an oblique direction, and was presently not more than six miles from the islet. Signal after signal was tried, gun after gun fired, and some of the planks of the shed were burnt.

All in vain — either they were not seen, or the vessel was anxious to avoid the islet.

At half-past two it luffed slightly, and bore away to the northeast.

In another hour a white vapour was all that was visible, and that soon disappeared.

On this the soldier Kellet burst into a roar of hysterical laughter, and flinging himself on the ground, rolled over and over like a madman.

Mrs Barnett turned and looked Madge full in the face, as if to ask her if she still hoped, and Madge turned away her head.

On this same ill-fated day a crackling noise was heard, and the greater part of the islet broke off, and plunged into the sea. The cries of the drowning animals rent the air, and the islet was reduced to the narrow strip between the site of the engulfed house and Cape Bathurst. It was now merely a piece of ice.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON A PIECE OF ICE.

A piece of ice, a jagged triangular strip of ice, measuring one hundred feet at its base, and scarcely five hundred in its greatest extent; and on it twenty-one human beings, some hundred furred animals, a few dogs, and a large bear, which was at this moment crouching at the very edge!

Yes! all the luckless colonists were there. Not one had yet been swallowed up. The last rupture had occurred when they were all in the shed. Thus far fate had spared them, probably that they might all perish together.

A silent sleepless night ensued. No one spoke or moved, for the slightest shake or blow might suffice to break the ice.

No one would touch the salt-meat served round by Mrs Joliffe. What would be the good of eating?

Nearly every one remained in the open air, feeling that it would be better to be drowned in the open sea than in a narrow wooden shed.

The next day, June 5th, the sun shone brightly down upon the heads of the doomed band of wanderers. All were still silent, and seemed anxious to avoid each other. Many gazed with troubled anxious eyes at the perfect circle of the horizon, of which the miserable little strip of ice formed the centre. But the sea was absolutely deserted — not a sail, not an ice-floe, not an islet! Their own piece of ice was probably the very last floating on the Behring Sea.

The temperature continued to rise. The wind had gone down, and a terrible calm had set in, a gentle swell heaved the surface of the sea, and the morsel of earth and ice, which was all that was left of Victoria Island, rose and sank without change of position, like a wreck — and what was it but a wreck?

But a wreck, a piece of woodwork, a broken mast, or a few planks, remain floating; they offer some resistance to the waves, they will not melt; but this bit of ice, this solidified water, must dissolve with the heat of the sun!

This piece of ice had formed the thickest part of the island, and this will explain its having lasted so long. A layer of earth and plenty of vegetation covered it, and the base of ice must have been of considerable thickness. The long bitter Polar winters must have “fed it with fresh ice,” in the countless centuries during which it was connected with the mainland. Even now its mean height was five or six feet above the sea level, and its base was probably of about the same thickness. Although in these quiet waters it was not likely to be broken, it could not fail gradually to melt, and the rapid dissolution could actually be watched at the edges, for as the long waves licked the sides, piece after piece of ground with its verdant covering sank to rise no more.

On this 5th June a fall of this nature occurred at about one o’clock P.M. on the site of the shed itself, which was very near the edge of the ice. There was fortunately no one in it at the time, and all that was saved was a few planks, and two or three of the timbers of the roofs. Most of the cooking utensils and all the astronomical instruments were lost. The colonists were now obliged to take refuge on the highest part of the islet, where nothing protected them from the weather, but fortunately a few tools had been left there, with the air pumps and the air-vessel, which Hobson had employed for catching a little of the rain-water for drinking purposes, as he no longer dared to draw for a supply upon the ice, every atom of which was of value.

At about four o’clock P.M. the soldier Kellet, the same who had already given signs of insanity, came to Mrs Barnett and said quietly —

“I am going to drown myself, ma’am.”

“What, Kellet?” exclaimed the lady.

“I tell you I am going to drown myself,” replied the soldier. “I have thought the matter well over: there is no escape for us, and I prefer dying at once to waiting to be killed.”

“Kellet!” said Mrs Barnett, taking the man’s hand and looking into his face, which was strangely composed, “you will not do that?”

“Yes, I will, ma’am; and as you have always been very good to us all, I wanted to wish you good-bye. Good-bye, ma’am!”

And Kellet turned towards the sea. Mrs Barnett, terrified at his manner, threw herself upon him and held him back. Her cries brought Hobson and Long to her assistance, and they did all in their power to dissuade the unhappy man from carrying out his purpose, but he was not to be moved, and merely shook his head.

His mind was evidently disordered, and it was useless to reason with him. It was a terrible moment, as his example might lead some of his comrades to commit suicide also. At all hazards he must be prevented from doing as he threatened.

“Kellet,” said Mrs Barnett gently, with a half smile, “we have always been very good friends, have we not?”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Kellet calmly.

“Well, Kellet, if you like we will die together, but not to-day.”

“What, ma’am?”

“No, my brave fellow, I am not ready; but to-morrow, to-morrow if you like.”

The soldier looked more fixedly than ever at the courageous woman, and seemed to hesitate an instant; then he cast a glance of fierce longing at the sea, and passing his hand over his eyes, said —

“To-morrow!”

And without another word he quietly turned away and went back to his comrades.

“Poor fellow.” murmured Mrs Barnett; “I have asked him to wait till to-morrow, and who can say whether we shall not all be drowned by that time!”

Throughout that night Hobson remained motionless upon the beach, pondering whether there might not yet be some means to check the dissolution of the islet — if it might not yet be possible to preserve it until they came in sight of land of some sort.

Mrs Barnett and Madge did not leave each other for an instant. Kalumah crouched like a dog at the feet of her mistress, and tried to keep her warm. Mrs Mac-Nab, wrapped in a few furs, the remains of the rich stores of Fort Hope, had fallen into a kind of torpor, with her baby clasped in her arms.

The stars shone with extraordinary brilliancy, and no sounds broke the stillness of the night but the rippling of the waves and the splash of pieces of ice as they fell into the sea. The colonists, stretched upon the ground in scattered groups, were as motionless as corpses on an abandoned wreck.

Sometimes Sergeant Long rose and peered into the night-mists, bat seeing nothing, he resumed his horizontal position. The bear, looking like a great white snowball, cowered motionless at the very edge of the strip of ice.

This night also passed away without any incident to modify the situation. The grey morning dawned in the east, and the sun rose and dispersed the shadows of the night.

The Lieutenant’s first care, as soon as it was light, was to examine the piece of ice. Its perimeter was still more reduced, and, alas! its mean height above the sea level had sensibly diminished. The waves, quiet as they were, washed over the greater part of it; the summit of the little hill alone was still beyond their reach.

Long, too, saw the changes which had taken place during the night, and felt that all hope was gone.

Mrs Barnett joined Lieutenant Hobson, and said to him —

“It will be to-day then!”

“Yes, madam, and you will keep your promise to Kellet!”

“Lieutenant Hobson,” said the lady solemnly, “have we done all in our power!”

“We have, madam.”

“Then God’s will be done!”

One last attempt was, however, made during the day. A strong breeze set in from the offing, that is to say, a wind bearing to the south-east, the direction in which were situated the nearest of the Aleutian Islands. How far off no one could say, as without instruments the bearings of the island could not be taken. It was not likely to have drifted far, however, unless under the influence of the current, as it gave no hold to the wind.

Still it was just possible that they might be nearer land than they thought. If only a current, the direction of which it was impossible to ascertain, had taken them nearer to the much-longed-for Aleutian Islands, then, as the wind was bearing down upon those very islands, it might drive the strip of ice before it if a sail of some kind could be concocted. The ice had still several hours to float, and in several hours the land might come in sight, or, if not the land, some coasting or fishing vessel.

A forlorn hope truly, but it suggested an idea to the Lieutenant which he resolved to carry out. Could not a sail be contrived on the islet as on an ordinary raft? There could be no difficulty in that; and when Hobson suggested it to Mac-Nab, he exclaimed —

“You are quite right, sir;” adding to his men, “bring out all the canvas there is!”

Every one was quite revived by this plan, slight as was the chance it afforded, and all lent a helping hand, even Kellet, who had not yet reminded Mrs Barnett of her promise.

A beam, which had once formed part of the roof of the barracks, was sunk deep into the earth and sand of which the little hill was composed, and firmly fixed with ropes arranged like shrouds and a stay. A sail made of all the clothes and coverlets still remaining fastened on to a strong pole for a yard, was hoisted on the mast This sail, or rather collection of sails, suitably set, swelled in the breeze, and by the wake it left, it was evident that the strip of ice was rapidly moving towards the south-east.

It was a success, and every one was cheered with newly-awakened hope. They were no longer stationary; they were advancing slowly, it was true, but still they were advancing. The carpenter was particularly elated; all eagerly scanned the horizon, and had they been told that no land could be sighted, they would have refused to believe it.

So it appeared, however; for the strip of ice floated along on the waves for three hours in the centre of an absolutely circular and unbroken horizon. The poor colonists still hoped on.

Towards three o’clock, the Lieutenant took the Sergeant aside, and said to him —

“We are advancing at the cost of the solidity and duration of our islet.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I mean that the ice is being rapidly fretted away as it moves along. Its speed is hastening its dissolution, and since we set sail it has diminished one-third.”

“Are you quite sure?”

“Absolutely certain. The ice is longer and flatter. Look, the sea la not more than ten feet from the hill!”

It was true, and the result was what might naturally have been expected from the motion of the ice.

“Sergeant,” resumed Hobson, “do you think we ought to take down our sail?”

“I think,” replied Long, after a moment’s reflection, “that we should consult our comrades. We ought all to share the responsibility of a decision now.”

The Lieutenant bent his head in assent, and the two returned to their old position on the little hill.

Hobson put the case before the whole party.

“The speed we have given to the ice,” he said, “is causing it to wear away rapidly, and will perhaps hasten the inevitable catastrophe by a few hours. My friends, you must decide whether we shall still go on.”

“Forwards!” cried all with one voice.

So it was decided, and, as it turned out, the decision was fraught with consequences of incalculable importance.

At six o’clock P.M. Madge rose, and pointing to a point on the south-east, cried —

“Land!”

Every one started up as if struck by lightning. Land there was indeed, on the south-east, twelve miles from the island.

“More sail! more sail!” shouted Hobson.

He was understood, and fresh materials were hastily brought. On the shrouds a sort of studding sail was rigged up of clothes, furs, everything, in short, that could give hold to the wind.

The speed increased as the wind freshened, but the ice was melting everywhere; it trembled beneath the feet of the anxious watchers, and might open at any moment. But they would not think of that; they were buoyed up with hope; safety was at hand, on the land they were rapidly nearing. They shouted — they made signals — they were in a delirium of excitement.

At half-past seven the ice was much nearer the land, but it was visibly melting, and sinking rapidly; water was gushing from it, and the waves were washing over it, sweeping off the terrified quadrupeds before the eyes of the colonists. Every instant they expected the whole mass to be engulfed, and it was necessary to lighten it like a sinking vessel. Every means was tried to check the dissolution; the earth and sand were carefully spread about, especially at the edges of the ice, to protect it from the direct influence of the sunbeams; and furs were laid here and there, as being bad conductors of heat. But it was all of no avail; the lower portion of the ice began to crack, and several fissures opened in the surface. It was now but a question of moments!

Night set in, and there was nothing left for the poor colonists to do to quicken the speed of the islet. Some of them tried to paddle about on planks. The coast was still four miles to windward.

It was a dark gloomy night, without any moon, and Hobson, whose heroic courage did not even now fail him, shouted —

“A signal, my friends! a signal!” A pile was made of all the remaining combustibles — two or three planks and a beam. It was set fire to, and bright flames soon shot up, but the strip of ice continued to melt and sink. Presently the little hill alone remained above water, and on it the despairing wretches, with the few animals left alive, huddled together, the bear growling fiercely.

The water was still rising, and there was no sign that any one on land had seen the signal. In less than a quarter of an hour they must all be swallowed up.

Could nothing be done to make the ice last longer? In three hours, three short hours, they might reach the land, which was now but three miles to windward.

“Oh!” cried Hobson, “if only I could stop the ice from melting! I would give my life to know how! Yes, I would give my life!”

“There is one way,” suddenly replied a voice.

It was Thomas Black who spoke, the astronomer, who had not opened his lips for so long, and who had long since appeared dead to all that was going on.

“Yes,” he continued, “there is one way of checking the dissolution of the ice — there is one way of saving us all.”

All gathered eagerly round the speaker, and looked at him inquiringly. They thought they must have misheard what he said.

“Well!” asked Hobson, “what way do you mean?”

“To the pumps!” replied Black simply.

Was he mad? Did he take the ice for a sinking vessel, with ten feet of water in the hold?

The air pumps were at hand, together with the air vessel, which Hobson had been using as a reservoir for drinking water, but of what use could they be? Could they harden the ice, which was melting all over?

“He is mad!” exclaimed Long.

“To the pumps!” repeated the astronomer; “fill the reservoir with air!”

“Do as he tells you!” cried Mrs Barnett.

The pumps were attached to the reservoir, the cover of which was closed and bolted. The pumps were then at once set to work, and the air was condensed under the pressure of several atmospheres. Then Black, taking one of the leather pipes connected with the reservoir, and opening the cock, let the condensed air escape, walking round the ice wherever it was melting.

Every one was astonished at the effect produced. Wherever the air was projected by the astronomer, the fissures filled up, and the surface re-froze.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” shouted all with one voice.

It was tiring enough to work the pumps, but there were plenty of volunteers. The edges of the ice were again solidified, as if under the influence of intense cold.

“You have saved us, Mr Black,” said Lieutenant Hobson.

“Nothing could be more natural,” replied the astronomer quietly.

Nothing, in fact, could have been more natural; and the physical effect produced may be described as follows: —

There were two reasons for the relegation: — First, under the pressure of the air, the water vaporised on the surface of the ice produced intense cold, and the compressed air in expanding abstracted the heat from the thawed surface, which immediately re-froze. Wherever the ice was opening the cold cemented the edges, so that it gradually regained its original solidity.

This went on for several hours, and the colonists, buoyed up by hope, toiled on with unwearying zeal.

They were nearing the coast, and when they were about a quarter of a mile from it, the bear plunged into the sea, and swimming to the shore, soon disappeared.

A few minutes afterwards the ice ran aground upon a beach, and the few animals still upon it hurried away in the darkness. The colonists “disembarked,” and falling on their knees, returned thanks to God for their miraculous deliverance.

CHAPTER XXIV

CONCLUSION.

It was on the island of Blejinie, the last of the Aleutian group, at the extreme south of Behring Sea, that all the colonists of Fort Hope at last landed, after having traversed eighteen hundred miles since the breaking-up of the ice. They were hospitably received by some Aleutian fishermen who had hurried to their assistance, and were soon able to communicate with some English agents of the Hudson's Bay Company.

After all the details we have given, it is needless to dwell on the courage and energy of the brave little band, which had proved itself worthy of its noble leader. We know how all struggled with their misfortunes, and how patiently they had submitted to the will of God. We have seen Mrs Barnett cheering every one by her example and sympathy; and we know that neither she nor those with her yielded to despair when the peninsula on which Fort Hope had been built was converted into a wandering island, when that island became an islet, and the islet a strip of ice, nor even when that strip of ice was melting beneath the combined influence of sun and waves. If the scheme of the Company was a failure, if the new fort had perished, no one could possibly blame Hobson or his companions, who had gone through such extraordinary and unexpected trials. Of the nineteen persons under the Lieutenant's charge, not one was missing, and he had even two new members in his little colony, Kalumah and Mrs Barnett's godson, Michael Mac-Nab.

Six days after their rescue the shipwrecked mariners arrived at New Archangel, the capital of Russian America.

Here the friends, bound together by so many dangers shared, must part, probably for ever! Hobson and his men were to return to Fort Reliance across English America, whilst Mrs Barnett, accompanied by Kalumah, who would not leave her, Madge, and Thomas Black, intended to go back to Europe via San Francisco and the United States.

But whilst they were still altogether, the Lieutenant, addressing Mrs Barnett, said with considerable emotion —

“God bless you, madam, for all you have been to us. You have been our comforter, our consoler, the very soul of our little world; and I thank you in the name of all.”

Three cheers for Mrs Barnett greeted this speech, and each soldier begged to shake her by the hand, whilst the women embraced her affectionately.

The Lieutenant himself had conceived so warm an affection for the lady who had so long been his friend and counsellor, that he could not bid her good-bye without great emotion.

“Can it be that we shall never meet again?” he exclaimed.

“No, Lieutenant,” replied Mrs Barnett;” we must, we shall meet again. If you do not come and see me in Europe, I will come back to you at Fort Reliance, or to the new factory you will found some day yet.”

On hearing this, Thomas Black, who had regained the use of his tongue since he had landed on *terra firma*, came forward and said, with an air of the greatest conviction —

“Yes, we shall meet again in thirty-six years. My friends, I missed the eclipse of 1860, but I will not miss that which will take place under exactly similar conditions in the same latitudes in 1896. And therefore I appoint a meeting with you, Lieutenant, and with you, my dear madam, on the confines of the Arctic Ocean thirty six years hence.”

AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS

Anonymous translation, 1874

This famous adventure novel was first published in 1873 and tells the story, Phileas Fogg and his newly employed French valet Passepartout. Together they attempt to circumnavigate the world in 80 days, following a brash £20,000 wager made at Fogg's London club. The novel has since been adapted many times in many formats, inspiring audiences across the world.

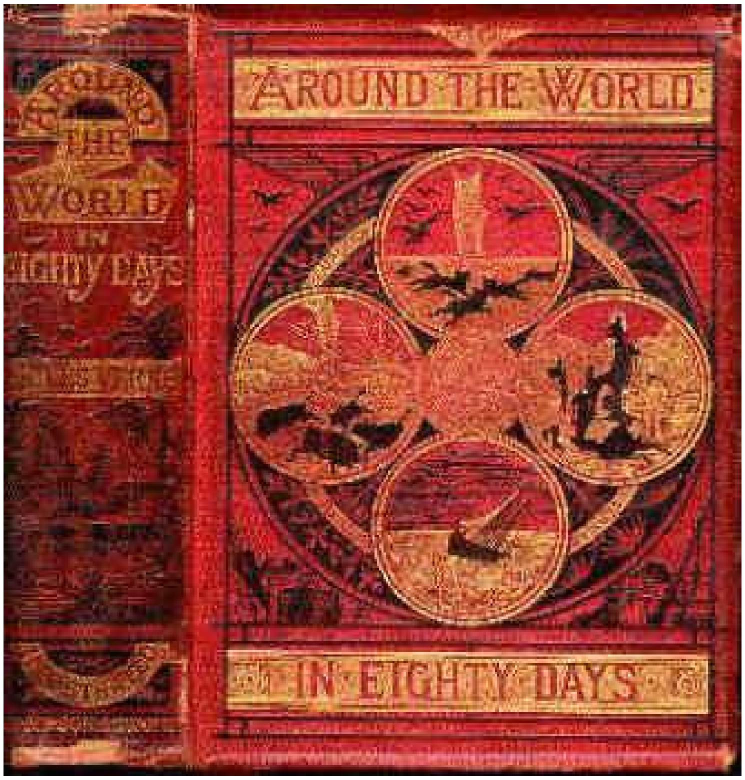
AROUND THE WORLD
IN EIGHTY DAYS
AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS

The first UK edition

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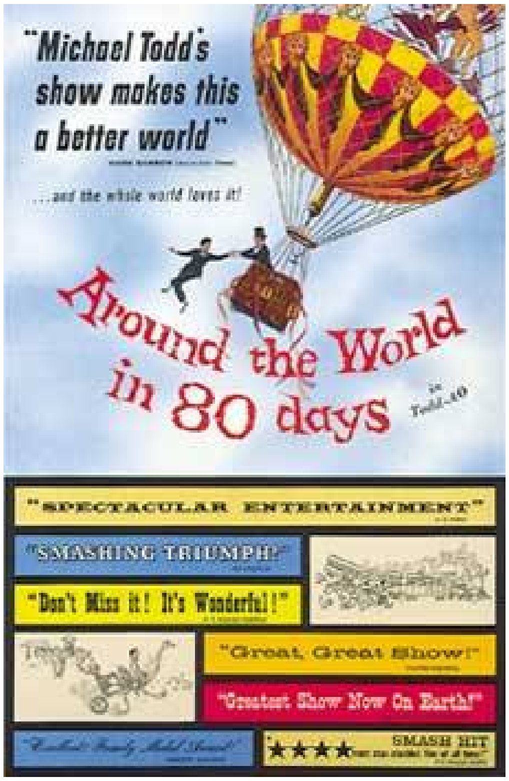
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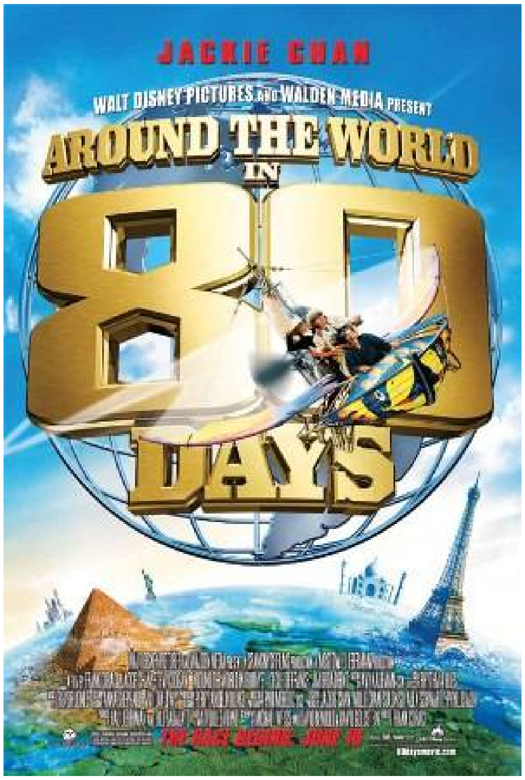
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CHAPTER I

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG AND PASSEPARTOUT ACCEPT EACH OTHER, THE ONE AS MASTER, THE OTHER AS MAN

Mr. Phileas Fogg lived, in 1872, at No. 7, Saville Row, Burlington Gardens, the house in which Sheridan died in 1814. He was one of the most noticeable members of the Reform Club, though he seemed always to avoid attracting attention; an enigmatical personage, about whom little was known, except that he was a polished man of the world. People said that he resembled Byron — at least that his head was Byronic; but he was a bearded, tranquil Byron, who might live on a thousand years without growing old.

Certainly an Englishman, it was more doubtful whether Phileas Fogg was a Londoner. He was never seen on ‘Change, nor at the Bank, nor in the counting-rooms of the “City”; no ships ever came into London docks of which he was the owner; he had no public employment; he had never been entered at any of the Inns of Court, either at the Temple, or Lincoln’s Inn, or Gray’s Inn; nor had his voice ever resounded in the Court of Chancery, or in the Exchequer, or the Queen’s Bench, or the Ecclesiastical Courts. He certainly was not a manufacturer; nor was he a merchant or a gentleman farmer. His name was strange to the scientific and learned societies, and he never was known to take part in the sage deliberations of the Royal Institution or the London Institution, the Artisan’s Association, or the Institution of Arts and Sciences. He belonged, in fact, to none of the numerous societies which swarm in the English capital, from the Harmonic to that of the Entomologists, founded mainly for the purpose of abolishing pernicious insects.

Phileas Fogg was a member of the Reform, and that was all.

The way in which he got admission to this exclusive club was simple enough.

He was recommended by the Barings, with whom he had an open credit. His cheques were regularly paid at sight from his account current, which was always flush.

Was Phileas Fogg rich? Undoubtedly. But those who knew him best could not imagine how he had made his fortune, and Mr. Fogg was the last person to whom to apply for the information. He was not lavish, nor, on the contrary, avaricious; for, whenever he knew that money was needed for a noble, useful, or benevolent purpose, he supplied it quietly and sometimes anonymously. He was, in short, the least communicative of men. He talked very little, and seemed all the more mysterious for his taciturn manner. His daily habits were quite open to observation; but whatever he did was so exactly the same thing that he had always done before, that the wits of the curious were fairly puzzled.

Had he travelled? It was likely, for no one seemed to know the world more familiarly; there was no spot so secluded that he did not appear to have an intimate acquaintance with it. He often corrected, with a few clear words, the thousand conjectures advanced by members of the club as to lost and unheard-of travellers, pointing out the true probabilities, and seeming as if gifted with a sort of second sight, so often did events justify his predictions. He must have travelled everywhere, at least in the spirit.

It was at least certain that Phileas Fogg had not absented himself from London for many years. Those who were honoured by a better acquaintance with him than the rest, declared that nobody could pretend to have ever seen him anywhere else. His sole pastimes were reading the papers and playing whist. He often won at this game, which, as a silent one, harmonised with his nature; but his winnings never went into his purse, being reserved as a fund for his charities. Mr. Fogg played, not to win, but for the sake of playing. The game was in his eyes a contest, a struggle with a difficulty, yet a motionless, unwearying struggle, congenial to his tastes.

Phileas Fogg was not known to have either wife or children, which may happen to the most honest people; either relatives or near friends, which is certainly more unusual. He lived alone in his house in Saville Row, whither none penetrated. A single domestic sufficed to serve him. He breakfasted and dined at the club, at hours mathematically fixed, in the same room, at the same table, never taking his meals with other members, much less bringing a guest with him; and went home at exactly midnight, only to retire at once to bed. He never used the cosy chambers which the Reform provides for its favoured members. He passed ten hours out of the twenty-four in Saville Row, either in sleeping or making his toilet. When he chose to take a walk it was with a regular step in the entrance hall with its mosaic flooring, or in the circular gallery with its dome supported by twenty red porphyry Ionic columns, and illumined by blue painted windows. When he breakfasted or dined all the resources of the club — its kitchens and pantries, its buttery and dairy — aided to crowd his table with their most succulent stores; he was served by the gravest waiters, in dress coats, and shoes with swan-skin soles, who proffered the viands in special porcelain, and on the finest linen; club decanters, of a lost mould, contained his sherry, his port, and his cinnamon-spiced claret; while his beverages were refreshingly cooled with ice, brought at great cost from the American lakes.

If to live in this style is to be eccentric, it must be confessed that there is something good in eccentricity.

The mansion in Saville Row, though not sumptuous, was exceedingly comfortable. The habits of its occupant were such as to demand but little from the sole domestic, but Phileas Fogg required him to be almost superhumanly prompt and regular. On this very 2nd of October he had dismissed James Forster, because that luckless youth had brought him shaving-water at eighty-four degrees Fahrenheit instead of eighty-six; and he was awaiting his successor, who was due at the house between eleven and half-past.

Phileas Fogg was seated squarely in his armchair, his feet close together like those of a grenadier on parade, his hands resting on his knees, his body straight, his head erect; he was steadily watching a complicated clock which indicated the hours, the minutes, the seconds, the days, the months, and the years. At exactly half-past eleven Mr. Fogg would, according to his daily habit, quit Saville Row, and repair to the Reform.

A rap at this moment sounded on the door of the cosy apartment where Phileas Fogg was seated, and James Forster, the dismissed servant, appeared.

“The new servant,” said he.

A young man of thirty advanced and bowed.

“You are a Frenchman, I believe,” asked Phileas Fogg, “and your name is John?”

“Jean, if monsieur pleases,” replied the newcomer, “Jean Passepartout, a surname which has clung to me because I have a natural aptness for going out of one business into another. I believe I’m honest, monsieur, but, to be outspoken, I’ve had several trades. I’ve been an itinerant singer, a circus-rider, when I used to vault like Leotard, and dance on a rope like Blondin. Then I got to be a professor of gymnastics, so as to make better use of my talents; and then I was a sergeant fireman at Paris, and assisted at many a big fire. But I quitted France five years ago, and, wishing to taste the sweets of domestic life, took service as a valet here in England. Finding myself out of place, and hearing that Monsieur Phileas Fogg was the most exact and settled gentleman in the United Kingdom, I have come to monsieur in the hope of living with him a tranquil life, and forgetting even the name of Passepartout.”

“Passepartout suits me,” responded Mr. Fogg. “You are well recommended to me; I hear a good report of you. You know my conditions?”

“Yes, monsieur.”

“Good! What time is it?”

“Twenty-two minutes after eleven,” returned Passepartout, drawing an enormous silver watch from the depths of his pocket.

“You are too slow,” said Mr. Fogg.

“Pardon me, monsieur, it is impossible — ”

“You are four minutes too slow. No matter; it’s enough to mention the error. Now from this moment, twenty-nine minutes after eleven, a.m. this Wednesday, 2nd October, you are in my service.”

Phileas Fogg got up, took his hat in his left hand, put it on his head with an automatic motion, and went off without a word.

Passepartout heard the street door shut once; it was his new master going out. He heard it shut again; it was his predecessor, James Forster, departing in his turn. Passepartout remained alone in the house in Saville Row.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT IS CONVINCED THAT HE HAS AT LAST FOUND HIS IDEAL

“Faith,” muttered Passepartout, somewhat flurried, “I’ve seen people at Madame Tussaud’s as lively as my new master!”

Madame Tussaud’s “people,” let it be said, are of wax, and are much visited in London; speech is all that is wanting to make them human.

During his brief interview with Mr. Fogg, Passepartout had been carefully observing him. He appeared to be a man about forty years of age, with fine, handsome features, and a tall, well-shaped figure; his hair and whiskers were light, his forehead compact and unwrinkled, his face rather pale, his teeth magnificent. His countenance possessed in the highest degree what physiognomists call “repose in action,” a quality of those who act rather than talk. Calm and phlegmatic, with a clear eye, Mr. Fogg seemed a perfect type of that English composure which Angelica Kauffmann has so skilfully represented on canvas. Seen in the various phases of his daily life, he gave the idea of being perfectly well-balanced, as exactly regulated as a Leroy chronometer. Phileas Fogg was, indeed, exactitude personified, and this was betrayed even in the expression of his very hands and feet; for in men, as well as in animals, the limbs themselves are expressive of the passions.

He was so exact that he was never in a hurry, was always ready, and was economical alike of his steps and his motions. He never took one step too many, and always went to his destination by the shortest cut; he made no superfluous gestures, and was never seen to be moved or agitated. He was the most deliberate person in the world, yet always reached his destination at the exact moment.

He lived alone, and, so to speak, outside of every social relation; and as he knew that in this world account must be taken of friction, and that friction retards, he never rubbed against anybody.

As for Passepartout, he was a true Parisian of Paris. Since he had abandoned his own country for England, taking service as a valet, he had in vain searched for a master after his own heart. Passepartout was by no means one of those pert dunces depicted by Moliere with a bold gaze and a nose held high in the air; he was an honest fellow, with a pleasant face, lips a trifle protruding, soft-mannered and serviceable, with a good round head, such as one likes to see on the shoulders of a friend. His eyes were blue, his complexion rubicund, his figure almost portly and well-built, his body muscular, and his physical powers fully developed by the exercises of his younger days. His brown hair was somewhat tumbled; for, while the ancient sculptors are said to have known eighteen methods of arranging Minerva’s tresses, Passepartout was familiar with but one of dressing his own: three strokes of a large-tooth comb completed his toilet.

It would be rash to predict how Passepartout’s lively nature would agree with Mr. Fogg. It was impossible to tell whether the new servant would turn out as absolutely methodical as his master required; experience alone could solve the question. Passepartout had been a sort of vagrant in his early years, and now yearned for repose; but so far he had failed to find it, though he had already served in ten English houses. But he could not take root in any of these; with chagrin, he found his masters invariably whimsical and irregular, constantly running about the country, or on the look-out for adventure. His last master, young Lord Longferry, Member of Parliament, after passing his nights in the Haymarket taverns, was too often brought home in the morning on policemen’s shoulders. Passepartout, desirous of respecting the gentleman whom he served, ventured a mild remonstrance on such conduct; which, being ill-received, he took his leave. Hearing that Mr. Phileas Fogg was looking for a servant, and that his life was one of unbroken regularity, that he neither travelled nor stayed from home overnight, he felt sure that this would be the place he was after. He presented himself, and was accepted, as has been seen.

At half-past eleven, then, Passepartout found himself alone in the house in Saville Row. He begun its inspection without delay, scouring it from cellar to garret. So clean, well-arranged, solemn a mansion pleased him; it seemed to him like a snail’s shell, lighted and warmed by gas, which sufficed for both these purposes. When Passepartout reached the second story he recognised at once the room which he was to inhabit, and he was well satisfied with it. Electric bells and speaking-tubes afforded communication with the lower stories; while on the mantel stood an electric clock, precisely like that in Mr. Fogg’s bedchamber, both beating the same second at the same instant. “That’s good, that’ll do,” said Passepartout to himself.

He suddenly observed, hung over the clock, a card which, upon inspection, proved to be a programme of the daily routine of the house. It comprised all that was required of the servant, from eight in the morning, exactly at which hour Phileas Fogg rose, till half-past eleven, when he left the house for the Reform Club — all the details of service, the tea and toast at twenty-three minutes past eight, the shaving-water at thirty-seven minutes past nine, and the toilet at twenty minutes before ten. Everything was regulated and foreseen that was to be done from half-past eleven a.m. till midnight, the hour at which the methodical gentleman retired.

Mr. Fogg’s wardrobe was amply supplied and in the best taste. Each pair of trousers, coat, and vest bore a number, indicating the time of year and season at which they were in turn to be laid out for wearing; and the same system was applied to the master’s shoes. In short, the house in Saville Row, which must have been a very temple of disorder and unrest under the illustrious but dissipated Sheridan, was cosiness, comfort, and method idealised. There was no study, nor were there books, which would have been quite useless to Mr. Fogg; for at the Reform two libraries, one of general literature and the other of law and politics, were at his service. A moderate-sized safe stood in his bedroom, constructed so as to defy fire as well as burglars; but Passepartout found neither arms nor hunting weapons anywhere; everything betrayed the most tranquil and peaceable habits.

Having scrutinised the house from top to bottom, he rubbed his hands, a broad smile overspread his features, and he said joyfully, “This is just what I wanted! Ah, we shall get on together, Mr. Fogg and I! What a domestic and regular gentleman! A real machine; well, I don’t mind serving a machine.”

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH A CONVERSATION TAKES PLACE WHICH SEEMS LIKELY TO COST PHILEAS FOGG DEAR

Phileas Fogg, having shut the door of his house at half-past eleven, and having put his right foot before his left five hundred and seventy-five times, and his left foot before his right five hundred and seventy-six times, reached the Reform Club, an imposing edifice in Pall Mall, which could not have cost less than three millions. He repaired at once to the dining-room, the nine windows of which open upon a tasteful garden, where the trees were already gilded with an autumn colouring; and took his place at the habitual table, the cover of which had already been laid for him. His breakfast consisted of a side-dish, a broiled fish with Reading sauce, a scarlet slice of roast beef garnished with mushrooms, a rhubarb and gooseberry tart, and a morsel of Cheshire cheese, the whole being washed down with several cups of tea, for which the Reform is famous. He rose at thirteen minutes to one, and directed his steps towards the large hall, a sumptuous apartment adorned with lavishly-framed paintings. A flunkey handed him an uncut Times, which he proceeded to cut with a skill which betrayed familiarity with this delicate operation. The perusal of this paper absorbed Phileas Fogg until a quarter before four, whilst the Standard, his next task, occupied him till the dinner hour. Dinner passed as breakfast had done, and Mr. Fogg re-appeared in the reading-room and sat down to the Pall Mall at twenty minutes before six. Half an hour later several members of the Reform came in and drew up to the fireplace, where a coal fire was steadily burning. They were Mr. Fogg’s usual partners at whist: Andrew Stuart, an engineer; John Sullivan and Samuel Fallentin, bankers; Thomas Flanagan, a brewer; and

Gauthier Ralph, one of the Directors of the Bank of England — all rich and highly respectable personages, even in a club which comprises the princes of English trade and finance.

“Well, Ralph,” said Thomas Flanagan, “what about that robbery?”

“Oh,” replied Stuart, “the Bank will lose the money.”

“On the contrary,” broke in Ralph, “I hope we may put our hands on the robber. Skilful detectives have been sent to all the principal ports of America and the Continent, and he’ll be a clever fellow if he slips through their fingers.”

“But have you got the robber’s description?” asked Stuart.

“In the first place, he is no robber at all,” returned Ralph, positively.

“What! a fellow who makes off with fifty-five thousand pounds, no robber?”

“No.”

“Perhaps he’s a manufacturer, then.”

“The Daily Telegraph says that he is a gentleman.”

It was Phileas Fogg, whose head now emerged from behind his newspapers, who made this remark. He bowed to his friends, and entered into the conversation. The affair which formed its subject, and which was town talk, had occurred three days before at the Bank of England. A package of banknotes, to the value of fifty-five thousand pounds, had been taken from the principal cashier’s table, that functionary being at the moment engaged in registering the receipt of three shillings and sixpence. Of course, he could not have his eyes everywhere. Let it be observed that the Bank of England reposes a touching confidence in the honesty of the public. There are neither guards nor gratings to protect its treasures; gold, silver, banknotes are freely exposed, at the mercy of the first comer. A keen observer of English customs relates that, being in one of the rooms of the Bank one day, he had the curiosity to examine a gold ingot weighing some seven or eight pounds. He took it up, scrutinised it, passed it to his neighbour, he to the next man, and so on until the ingot, going from hand to hand, was transferred to the end of a dark entry; nor did it return to its place for half an hour. Meanwhile, the cashier had not so much as raised his head. But in the present instance things had not gone so smoothly. The package of notes not being found when five o'clock sounded from the ponderous clock in the "drawing office," the amount was passed to the account of profit and loss. As soon as the robbery was discovered, picked detectives hastened off to Liverpool, Glasgow, Havre, Suez, Brindisi, New York, and other ports, inspired by the proffered reward of two thousand pounds, and five per cent. on the sum that might be recovered. Detectives were also charged with narrowly watching those who arrived at or left London by rail, and a judicial examination was at once entered upon.

There were real grounds for supposing, as the Daily Telegraph said, that the thief did not belong to a professional band. On the day of the robbery a well-dressed gentleman of polished manners, and with a well-to-do air, had been observed going to and fro in the paying room where the crime was committed. A description of him was easily procured and sent to the detectives; and some hopeful spirits, of whom Ralph was one, did not despair of his apprehension. The papers and clubs were full of the affair, and everywhere people were discussing the probabilities of a successful pursuit; and the Reform Club was especially agitated, several of its members being Bank officials.

Ralph would not concede that the work of the detectives was likely to be in vain, for he thought that the prize offered would greatly stimulate their zeal and activity. But Stuart was far from sharing this confidence; and, as they placed themselves at the whist-table, they continued to argue the matter. Stuart and Flanagan played together, while Phileas Fogg had Fallentin for his partner. As the game proceeded the conversation ceased, excepting between the rubbers, when it revived again.

“I maintain,” said Stuart, “that the chances are in favour of the thief, who must be a shrewd fellow.”

“Well, but where can he fly to?” asked Ralph. “No country is safe for him.”

“Pshaw!”

“Where could he go, then?”

“Oh, I don’t know that. The world is big enough.”

“It was once,” said Phileas Fogg, in a low tone. “Cut, sir,” he added, handing the cards to Thomas Flanagan.

The discussion fell during the rubber, after which Stuart took up its thread.

“What do you mean by `once’? Has the world grown smaller?”

“Certainly,” returned Ralph. “I agree with Mr. Fogg. The world has grown smaller, since a man can now go round it ten times more quickly than a hundred years ago. And that is why the search for this thief will be more likely to succeed.”

“And also why the thief can get away more easily.”

“Be so good as to play, Mr. Stuart,” said Phileas Fogg.

But the incredulous Stuart was not convinced, and when the hand was finished, said eagerly: “You have a strange way, Ralph, of proving that the world has grown smaller. So, because you can go round it in three months — ”

“In eighty days,” interrupted Phileas Fogg.

“That is true, gentlemen,” added John Sullivan. “Only eighty days, now that the section between Rothal and Allahabad, on the Great Indian Peninsula Railway, has been opened. Here is the estimate made by the Daily Telegraph:

From London to Suez via Mont Cenis and Brindisi, by rail and steamboats	7 days
From Suez to Bombay, by steamer	13 “
From Bombay to Calcutta, by rail	3 “
From Calcutta to Hong Kong, by steamer	13 “
From Hong Kong to Yokohama (Japan), by steamer	6 “
From Yokohama to San Francisco, by steamer	22 “

From San Francisco to New York, by rail.......... 7 “

From New York to London, by steamer and rail...... 9 “

— — — -

Total................................ 80 days.”

“Yes, in eighty days!” exclaimed Stuart, who in his excitement made a false deal. “But that doesn’t take into account bad weather, contrary winds, shipwrecks, railway accidents, and so on.”

“All included,” returned Phileas Fogg, continuing to play despite the discussion.

“But suppose the Hindoos or Indians pull up the rails,” replied Stuart; “suppose they stop the trains, pillage the luggage-vans, and scalp the passengers!”

“All included,” calmly retorted Fogg; adding, as he threw down the cards, “Two trumps.”

Stuart, whose turn it was to deal, gathered them up, and went on: “You are right, theoretically, Mr. Fogg, but practically — ”

“Practically also, Mr. Stuart.”

“I’d like to see you do it in eighty days.”

“It depends on you. Shall we go?”

“Heaven preserve me! But I would wager four thousand pounds that such a journey, made under these conditions, is impossible.”

“Quite possible, on the contrary,” returned Mr. Fogg.

“Well, make it, then!”

“The journey round the world in eighty days?”

“Yes.”

“I should like nothing better.”

“When?”

“At once. Only I warn you that I shall do it at your expense.”

“It’s absurd!” cried Stuart, who was beginning to be annoyed at the persistency of his friend. “Come, let’s go on with the game.”

“Deal over again, then,” said Phileas Fogg. “There’s a false deal.”

Stuart took up the pack with a feverish hand; then suddenly put them down again.

“Well, Mr. Fogg,” said he, “it shall be so: I will wager the four thousand on it.”

“Calm yourself, my dear Stuart,” said Fallentin. “It’s only a joke.”

“When I say I’ll wager,” returned Stuart, “I mean it.” “All right,” said Mr. Fogg; and, turning to the others, he continued: “I have a deposit of twenty thousand at Baring’s which I will willingly risk upon it.”

“Twenty thousand pounds!” cried Sullivan. “Twenty thousand pounds, which you would lose by a single accidental delay!”

“The unforeseen does not exist,” quietly replied Phileas Fogg.

“But, Mr. Fogg, eighty days are only the estimate of the least possible time in which the journey can be made.”

“A well-used minimum suffices for everything.”

“But, in order not to exceed it, you must jump mathematically from the trains upon the steamers, and from the steamers upon the trains again.”

“I will jump — mathematically.”

“You are joking.”

“A true Englishman doesn’t joke when he is talking about so serious a thing as a wager,” replied Phileas Fogg, solemnly. “I will bet twenty thousand pounds against anyone who wishes that I will make the tour of the world in eighty days or less; in nineteen hundred and twenty hours, or a hundred and fifteen thousand two hundred minutes. Do you accept?”

“We accept,” replied Messrs. Stuart, Fallentin, Sullivan, Flanagan, and Ralph, after consulting each other.

“Good,” said Mr. Fogg. “The train leaves for Dover at a quarter before nine. I will take it.”

“This very evening?” asked Stuart.

“This very evening,” returned Phileas Fogg. He took out and consulted a pocket almanac, and added, “As today is Wednesday, the 2nd of October, I shall be due in London in this very room of the Reform Club, on Saturday, the 21st of December, at a quarter before nine p.m.; or else the twenty thousand pounds, now deposited in my name at Baring’s, will belong to you, in fact and in right, gentlemen. Here is a cheque for the amount.”

A memorandum of the wager was at once drawn up and signed by the six parties, during which Phileas Fogg preserved a stoical composure. He certainly did not bet to win, and had only staked the twenty thousand pounds, half of his fortune, because he foresaw that he might have to expend the other half to carry out this difficult, not to say unattainable, project. As for his antagonists, they seemed much agitated; not so much by the value of their stake, as because they had some scruples about betting under conditions so difficult to their friend.

The clock struck seven, and the party offered to suspend the game so that Mr. Fogg might make his preparations for departure.

“I am quite ready now,” was his tranquil response. “Diamonds are trumps: be so good as to play, gentlemen.”

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG ASTOUNDS PASSEPARTOUT, HIS SERVANT

Having won twenty guineas at whist, and taken leave of his friends, Phileas Fogg, at twenty-five minutes past seven, left the Reform Club.

Passepartout, who had conscientiously studied the programme of his duties, was more than surprised to see his master guilty of the inexactness of appearing at this unaccustomed hour; for, according to rule, he was not due in Saville Row until precisely midnight.

Mr. Fogg repaired to his bedroom, and called out, “Passepartout!”

Passepartout did not reply. It could not be he who was called; it was not the right hour.

“Passepartout!” repeated Mr. Fogg, without raising his voice.

Passepartout made his appearance.

“I’ve called you twice,” observed his master.

“But it is not midnight,” responded the other, showing his watch.

“I know it; I don’t blame you. We start for Dover and Calais in ten minutes.”

A puzzled grin overspread Passepartout’s round face; clearly he had not comprehended his master.

“Monsieur is going to leave home?”

“Yes,” returned Phileas Fogg. “We are going round the world.”

Passepartout opened wide his eyes, raised his eyebrows, held up his hands, and seemed about to collapse, so overcome was he with stupefied astonishment.

“Round the world!” he murmured.

“In eighty days,” responded Mr. Fogg. “So we haven’t a moment to lose.”

“But the trunks?” gasped Passepartout, unconsciously swaying his head from right to left.

“We’ll have no trunks; only a carpet-bag, with two shirts and three pairs of stockings for me, and the same for you. We’ll buy our clothes on the way. Bring down my mackintosh and traveling-cloak, and some stout shoes, though we shall do little walking. Make haste!”

Passepartout tried to reply, but could not. He went out, mounted to his own room, fell into a chair, and muttered: “That’s good, that is! And I, who wanted to remain quiet!”

He mechanically set about making the preparations for departure. Around the world in eighty days! Was his master a fool? No. Was this a joke, then? They were going to Dover; good! To Calais; good again! After all, Passepartout, who had been away from France five years, would not be sorry to set foot on his native soil again. Perhaps they would go as far as Paris, and it would do his eyes good to see Paris once more. But surely a gentleman so chary of his steps would stop there; no doubt — but, then, it was none the less true that he was going away, this so domestic person hitherto!

By eight o’clock Passepartout had packed the modest carpet-bag, containing the wardrobes of his master and himself; then, still troubled in mind, he carefully shut the door of his room, and descended to Mr. Fogg.

Mr. Fogg was quite ready. Under his arm might have been observed a red-bound copy of Bradshaw’s Continental Railway Steam Transit and General Guide, with its timetables showing the arrival and departure of steamers and railways. He took the carpet-bag, opened it, and slipped into it a goodly roll of Bank of England notes, which would pass wherever he might go.

“You have forgotten nothing?” asked he.

“Nothing, monsieur.”

“My mackintosh and cloak?”

“Here they are.”

“Good! Take this carpet-bag,” handing it to Passepartout. “Take good care of it, for there are twenty thousand pounds in it.”

Passepartout nearly dropped the bag, as if the twenty thousand pounds were in gold, and weighed him down.

Master and man then descended, the street-door was double-locked, and at the end of Saville Row they took a cab and drove rapidly to Charing Cross. The cab stopped before the railway station at twenty minutes past eight. Passepartout jumped off the box and followed his master, who, after paying the cabman, was about to enter the station, when a poor beggar-woman, with a child in her arms, her naked feet smeared with mud, her head covered with a wretched bonnet, from which hung a tattered feather, and her shoulders shrouded in a ragged shawl, approached, and mournfully asked for alms.

Mr. Fogg took out the twenty guineas he had just won at whist, and handed them to the beggar, saying, “Here, my good woman. I’m glad that I met you;” and passed on.

Passepartout had a moist sensation about the eyes; his master’s action touched his susceptible heart.

Two first-class tickets for Paris having been speedily purchased, Mr. Fogg was crossing the station to the train, when he perceived his five friends of the Reform.

“Well, gentlemen,” said he, “I’m off, you see; and, if you will examine my passport when I get back, you will be able to judge whether I have accomplished the journey agreed upon.”

“Oh, that would be quite unnecessary, Mr. Fogg,” said Ralph politely. “We will trust your word, as a gentleman of honour.”

“You do not forget when you are due in London again?” asked Stuart.

“In eighty days; on Saturday, the 21st of December, 1872, at a quarter before nine p.m. Good-bye, gentlemen.”

Phileas Fogg and his servant seated themselves in a first-class carriage at twenty minutes before nine; five minutes later the whistle screamed, and the train slowly glided out of the station.

The night was dark, and a fine, steady rain was falling. Phileas Fogg, snugly ensconced in his corner, did not open his lips. Passepartout, not yet recovered from his stupefaction, clung mechanically to the carpet-bag, with its enormous treasure.

Just as the train was whirling through Sydenham, Passepartout suddenly uttered a cry of despair.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“Alas! In my hurry — I — I forgot — ”

“What?”

“To turn off the gas in my room!”

“Very well, young man,” returned Mr. Fogg, coolly; “it will burn — at your expense.”

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH A NEW SPECIES OF FUNDS, UNKNOWN TO THE MONEYED MEN, APPEARS ON ‘CHANGE

Phileas Fogg rightly suspected that his departure from London would create a lively sensation at the West End. The news of the bet spread through the Reform Club, and afforded an exciting topic of conversation to its members. From the club it soon got into the papers throughout England. The boasted “tour of the world” was talked about, disputed, argued with as much warmth as if the subject were another Alabama claim. Some took sides with Phileas Fogg, but the large majority shook their heads and declared against him; it was absurd, impossible, they declared, that the tour of the world could be made, except theoretically and on paper, in this minimum of time, and with the existing means of travelling. The Times, Standard, Morning Post, and Daily News, and twenty other highly respectable newspapers scouted Mr. Fogg’s project as madness; the Daily Telegraph alone hesitatingly supported him. People in general thought him a lunatic, and blamed his Reform Club friends for having accepted a wager which betrayed the mental aberration of its proposer.

Articles no less passionate than logical appeared on the question, for geography is one of the pet subjects of the English; and the columns devoted to Phileas Fogg’s venture were eagerly devoured by all classes of readers. At first some rash individuals, principally of the gentler sex, espoused his cause, which became still more popular when the Illustrated London News came out with his portrait, copied from a photograph in the Reform Club. A few readers of the Daily Telegraph even dared to say, “Why not, after all? Stranger things have come to pass.”

At last a long article appeared, on the 7th of October, in the bulletin of the Royal Geographical Society, which treated the question from every point of view, and demonstrated the utter folly of the enterprise.

Everything, it said, was against the travellers, every obstacle imposed alike by man and by nature. A miraculous agreement of the times of departure and arrival, which was impossible, was absolutely necessary to his success. He might, perhaps, reckon on the arrival of trains at the designated hours, in Europe, where the distances were relatively moderate; but when he calculated upon crossing India in three days, and the United States in seven, could he rely beyond misgiving upon accomplishing his task? There were accidents to machinery, the liability of trains to run off the line, collisions, bad weather, the blocking up by snow — were not all these against Phileas Fogg? Would he not find himself, when travelling by steamer in winter, at the mercy of the winds and fogs? Is it uncommon for the best ocean steamers to be two or three days behind time? But a single delay would suffice to fatally break the chain of communication; should Phileas Fogg once miss, even by an hour; a steamer, he would have to wait for the next, and that would irrevocably render his attempt vain.

This article made a great deal of noise, and, being copied into all the papers, seriously depressed the advocates of the rash tourist.

Everybody knows that England is the world of betting men, who are of a higher class than mere gamblers; to bet is in the English temperament. Not only the members of the Reform, but the general public, made heavy wagers for or against Phileas Fogg, who was set down in the betting books as if he were a race-horse. Bonds were issued, and made their appearance on ‘Change; “Phileas Fogg bonds” were offered at par or at a premium, and a great business was done in them. But five days after the article in the bulletin of the Geographical Society appeared, the demand began to subside: “Phileas Fogg” declined. They were offered by packages, at first of five, then of ten, until at last nobody would take less than twenty, fifty, a hundred!

Lord Albemarle, an elderly paralytic gentleman, was now the only advocate of Phileas Fogg left. This noble lord, who was fastened to his chair, would have given his fortune to be able to make the tour of the world, if it took ten years; and he bet five thousand pounds on Phileas Fogg. When the folly as well as the uselessness of the adventure was pointed out to him, he contented himself with replying, “If the thing is feasible, the first to do it ought to be an Englishman.”

The Fogg party dwindled more and more, everybody was going against him, and the bets stood a hundred and fifty and two hundred to one; and a week after his departure an incident occurred which deprived him of backers at any price.

The commissioner of police was sitting in his office at nine o’clock one evening, when the following telegraphic dispatch was put into his hands:

Suez to London.

Rowan, Commissioner of Police, Scotland Yard:

I’ve found the bank robber, Phileas Fogg. Send with out delay warrant of arrest to Bombay.

Fix, Detective.

The effect of this dispatch was instantaneous. The polished gentleman disappeared to give place to the bank robber. His photograph, which was hung with those of the rest of the members at the Reform Club, was minutely examined, and it betrayed, feature by feature, the description of the robber which had been provided to the police. The mysterious habits of Phileas Fogg were recalled; his solitary ways, his sudden departure; and it seemed clear that, in undertaking a tour round the world on the pretext of a wager, he had had no other end in view than to elude the detectives, and throw them off his track.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH FIX, THE DETECTIVE, BETRAYS A VERY NATURAL IMPATIENCE

The circumstances under which this telegraphic dispatch about Phileas Fogg was sent were as follows:

The steamer Mongolia, belonging to the Peninsular and Oriental Company, built of iron, of two thousand eight hundred tons burden, and five hundred horse-power, was due at eleven o’clock a.m. on Wednesday, the 9th of October, at Suez. The Mongolia plied regularly between Brindisi and Bombay via the Suez Canal, and was one of the fastest steamers belonging to the company, always making more than ten knots an hour between Brindisi and Suez, and nine and a half between Suez and Bombay.

Two men were promenading up and down the wharves, among the crowd of natives and strangers who were sojourning at this once straggling village — now, thanks to the enterprise of M. Lesseps, a fast-growing town. One was the British consul at Suez, who, despite the prophecies of the English Government, and the unfavourable predictions of Stephenson, was in the habit of seeing, from his office window, English ships daily passing to and fro on the great canal, by which the old roundabout route from England to India by the Cape of Good Hope was abridged by at least a half. The other was a small, slight-built personage, with a nervous, intelligent face, and bright eyes peering out from under eyebrows which he was incessantly twitching. He was just now manifesting unmistakable signs of impatience, nervously pacing up and down, and unable to stand still for a moment. This was Fix, one of the detectives who had been dispatched from England in search of the bank robber; it was his task to narrowly watch every passenger who arrived at Suez, and to follow up all who seemed to be suspicious characters, or bore a resemblance to the description of the criminal, which he had received two days before from the police headquarters at London. The detective was evidently inspired by the hope of obtaining the splendid reward which would be the prize of success, and awaited with a feverish impatience, easy to understand, the arrival of the steamer Mongolia.

“So you say, consul,” asked he for the twentieth time, “that this steamer is never behind time?”

“No, Mr. Fix,” replied the consul. “She was bespoken yesterday at Port Said, and the rest of the way is of no account to such a craft. I repeat that the Mongolia has been in advance of the time required by the company’s regulations, and gained the prize awarded for excess of speed.”

“Does she come directly from Brindisi?”

“Directly from Brindisi; she takes on the Indian mails there, and she left there Saturday at five p.m. Have patience, Mr. Fix; she will not be late. But really, I don’t see how, from the description you have, you will be able to recognise your man, even if he is on board the Mongolia.”

“A man rather feels the presence of these fellows, consul, than recognises them. You must have a scent for them, and a scent is like a sixth sense which combines hearing, seeing, and smelling. I’ve arrested more than one of these gentlemen in my time, and, if my thief is on board, I’ll answer for it; he’ll not slip through my fingers.”

“I hope so, Mr. Fix, for it was a heavy robbery.”

"A magnificent robbery, consul; fifty-five thousand pounds! We don't often have such windfalls. Burglars are getting to be so contemptible nowadays! A fellow gets hung for a handful of shillings!"

"Mr. Fix," said the consul, "I like your way of talking, and hope you'll succeed; but I fear you will find it far from easy. Don't you see, the description which you have there has a singular resemblance to an honest man?"

"Consul," remarked the detective, dogmatically, "great robbers always resemble honest folks. Fellows who have rascally faces have only one course to take, and that is to remain honest; otherwise they would be arrested off-hand. The artistic thing is, to unmask honest countenances; it's no light task, I admit, but a real art."

Mr. Fix evidently was not wanting in a tinge of self-conceit.

Little by little the scene on the quay became more animated; sailors of various nations, merchants, ship-brokers, porters, fellahs, bustled to and fro as if the steamer were immediately expected. The weather was clear, and slightly chilly. The minarets of the town loomed above the houses in the pale rays of the sun. A jetty pier, some two thousand yards along, extended into the roadstead. A number of fishing-smacks and coasting boats, some retaining the fantastic fashion of ancient galleys, were discernible on the Red Sea.

As he passed among the busy crowd, Fix, according to habit, scrutinised the passers-by with a keen, rapid glance.

It was now half-past ten.

“The steamer doesn’t come!” he exclaimed, as the port clock struck.

“She can’t be far off now,” returned his companion.

“How long will she stop at Suez?”

“Four hours; long enough to get in her coal. It is thirteen hundred and ten miles from Suez to Aden, at the other end of the Red Sea, and she has to take in a fresh coal supply.”

“And does she go from Suez directly to Bombay?”

“Without putting in anywhere.”

“Good!” said Fix. “If the robber is on board he will no doubt get off at Suez, so as to reach the Dutch or French colonies in Asia by some other route. He ought to know that he would not be safe an hour in India, which is English soil.”

“Unless,” objected the consul, “he is exceptionally shrewd. An English criminal, you know, is always better concealed in London than anywhere else.”

This observation furnished the detective food for thought, and meanwhile the consul went away to his office. Fix, left alone, was more impatient than ever, having a presentiment that the robber was on board the Mongolia. If he had indeed left London intending to reach the New World, he would naturally take the route via India, which was less watched and more difficult to watch than that of the Atlantic. But Fix’s reflections were soon interrupted by a succession of sharp whistles, which announced the arrival of the Mongolia. The porters and fellahs rushed down the quay, and a dozen boats pushed off from the shore to go and meet the steamer. Soon her gigantic hull appeared passing along between the banks, and eleven o’clock struck as she anchored in the road. She brought an unusual number of passengers, some of whom remained on deck to scan the picturesque panorama of the town, while the greater part disembarked in the boats, and landed on the quay.

Fix took up a position, and carefully examined each face and figure which made its appearance. Presently one of the passengers, after vigorously pushing his way through the importunate crowd of porters, came up to him and politely asked if he could point out the English consulate, at the same time showing a passport which he wished to have visaed. Fix instinctively took the passport, and with a rapid glance read the description of its bearer. An involuntary motion of surprise nearly escaped him, for the description in the passport was identical with that of the bank robber which he had received from Scotland Yard.

“Is this your passport?” asked he.

“No, it’s my master’s.”

“And your master is — ”

“He stayed on board.”

“But he must go to the consul’s in person, so as to establish his identity.”

“Oh, is that necessary?”

“Quite indispensable.”

“And where is the consulate?”

“There, on the corner of the square,” said Fix, pointing to a house two hundred steps off.

“I’ll go and fetch my master, who won’t be much pleased, however, to be disturbed.”

The passenger bowed to Fix, and returned to the steamer.

CHAPTER VII

WHICH ONCE MORE DEMONSTRATES THE USELESSNESS OF PASSPORTS AS AIDS TO DETECTIVES

The detective passed down the quay, and rapidly made his way to the consul’s office, where he was at once admitted to the presence of that official.

“Consul,” said he, without preamble, “I have strong reasons for believing that my man is a passenger on the Mongolia.” And he narrated what had just passed concerning the passport.

“Well, Mr. Fix,” replied the consul, “I shall not be sorry to see the rascal’s face; but perhaps he won’t come here — that is, if he is the person you suppose him to be. A robber doesn’t quite like to leave traces of his flight behind him; and, besides, he is not obliged to have his passport countersigned.”

“If he is as shrewd as I think he is, consul, he will come.”

“To have his passport visaed?”

“Yes. Passports are only good for annoying honest folks, and aiding in the flight of rogues. I assure you it will be quite the thing for him to do; but I hope you will not visa the passport.”

“Why not? If the passport is genuine I have no right to refuse.”

“Still, I must keep this man here until I can get a warrant to arrest him from London.”

“Ah, that’s your look-out. But I cannot — ”

The consul did not finish his sentence, for as he spoke a knock was heard at the door, and two strangers entered, one of whom was the servant whom Fix had met on the quay. The other, who was his master, held out his passport with the request that the consul would do him the favour to visa it. The consul took the document and carefully read it, whilst Fix observed, or rather devoured, the stranger with his eyes from a corner of the room.

“You are Mr. Phileas Fogg?” said the consul, after reading the passport.

“I am.”

“And this man is your servant?”

“He is: a Frenchman, named Passepartout.”

“You are from London?”

“Yes.”

“And you are going — ”

“To Bombay.”

“Very good, sir. You know that a visa is useless, and that no passport is required?”

“I know it, sir,” replied Phileas Fogg; “but I wish to prove, by your visa, that I came by Suez.”

“Very well, sir.”

The consul proceeded to sign and date the passport, after which he added his official seal. Mr. Fogg paid the customary fee, coldly bowed, and went out, followed by his servant.

“Well?” queried the detective.

“Well, he looks and acts like a perfectly honest man,” replied the consul.

“Possibly; but that is not the question. Do you think, consul, that this phlegmatic gentleman resembles, feature by feature, the robber whose description I have received?”

“I concede that; but then, you know, all descriptions — ”

“I’ll make certain of it,” interrupted Fix. “The servant seems to me less mysterious than the master; besides, he’s a Frenchman, and can’t help talking. Excuse me for a little while, consul.”

Fix started off in search of Passepartout.

Meanwhile Mr. Fogg, after leaving the consulate, repaired to the quay, gave some orders to Passepartout, went off to the Mongolia in a boat, and descended to his cabin. He took up his note-book, which contained the following memoranda:

“Left London, Wednesday, October 2nd, at 8.45 p.m. “Reached Paris, Thursday, October 3rd, at 7.20 a.m. “Left Paris, Thursday, at 8.40 a.m. “Reached Turin by Mont Cenis, Friday, October 4th, at 6.35 a.m. “Left Turin, Friday, at 7.20 a.m. “Arrived at Brindisi, Saturday, October 5th, at 4 p.m. “Sailed on the Mongolia, Saturday, at 5 p.m. “Reached Suez, Wednesday, October 9th, at 11 a.m. “Total of hours spent, 158+; or, in days, six days and a half.”

These dates were inscribed in an itinerary divided into columns, indicating the month, the day of the month, and the day for the stipulated and actual arrivals at each principal point Paris, Brindisi, Suez, Bombay, Calcutta, Singapore, Hong Kong, Yokohama, San Francisco, New York, and London — from the 2nd of October to the 21st of December; and giving a space for setting down the gain made or the loss suffered on arrival at each locality. This methodical record thus contained an account of everything needed, and Mr. Fogg always knew whether he was behind-hand or in advance of his time. On this Friday, October 9th, he noted his arrival at Suez, and observed that he had as yet neither gained nor lost. He sat down quietly to breakfast in his cabin, never once thinking of inspecting the town, being one of those Englishmen who are wont to see foreign countries through the eyes of their domestics.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT TALKS RATHER MORE, PERHAPS, THAN IS PRUDENT

Fix soon rejoined Passepartout, who was lounging and looking about on the quay, as if he did not feel that he, at least, was obliged not to see anything.

“Well, my friend,” said the detective, coming up with him, “is your passport visaed?”

“Ah, it’s you, is it, monsieur?” responded Passepartout. “Thanks, yes, the passport is all right.”

“And you are looking about you?”

“Yes; but we travel so fast that I seem to be journeying in a dream. So this is Suez?”

“Yes.”

“In Egypt?”

“Certainly, in Egypt.”

“And in Africa?”

“In Africa.”

“In Africa!” repeated Passepartout. “Just think, monsieur, I had no idea that we should go farther than Paris; and all that I saw of Paris was between twenty minutes past seven and twenty minutes before nine in the morning, between the Northern and the Lyons stations, through the windows of a car, and in a driving rain! How I regret not having seen once more Pere la Chaise and the circus in the Champs Elysees!”

“You are in a great hurry, then?”

“I am not, but my master is. By the way, I must buy some shoes and shirts. We came away without trunks, only with a carpet-bag.”

“I will show you an excellent shop for getting what you want.”

“Really, monsieur, you are very kind.”

And they walked off together, Passepartout chatting volubly as they went along.

“Above all,” said he; “don’t let me lose the steamer.”

“You have plenty of time; it’s only twelve o’clock.”

Passepartout pulled out his big watch. “Twelve!” he exclaimed; “why, it’s only eight minutes before ten.”

“Your watch is slow.”

“My watch? A family watch, monsieur, which has come down from my great-grandfather! It doesn’t vary five minutes in the year. It’s a perfect chronometer, look you.”

“I see how it is,” said Fix. “You have kept London time, which is two hours behind that of Suez. You ought to regulate your watch at noon in each country.”

“I regulate my watch? Never!”

“Well, then, it will not agree with the sun.”

“So much the worse for the sun, monsieur. The sun will be wrong, then!”

And the worthy fellow returned the watch to its fob with a defiant gesture. After a few minutes silence, Fix resumed: “You left London hastily, then?”

“I rather think so! Last Friday at eight o’clock in the evening, Monsieur Fogg came home from his club, and three-quarters of an hour afterwards we were off.”

“But where is your master going?”

“Always straight ahead. He is going round the world.”

“Round the world?” cried Fix.

“Yes, and in eighty days! He says it is on a wager; but, between us, I don’t believe a word of it. That wouldn’t be common sense. There’s something else in the wind.”

“Ah! Mr. Fogg is a character, is he?”

“I should say he was.”

“Is he rich?”

“No doubt, for he is carrying an enormous sum in brand new banknotes with him. And he doesn’t spare the money on the way, either: he has offered a large reward to the engineer of the Mongolia if he gets us to Bombay well in advance of time.”

“And you have known your master a long time?”

“Why, no; I entered his service the very day we left London.”

The effect of these replies upon the already suspicious and excited detective may be imagined. The hasty departure from London soon after the robbery; the large sum carried by Mr. Fogg; his eagerness to reach distant countries; the pretext of an eccentric and foolhardy bet — all confirmed Fix in his theory. He continued to pump poor Passepartout, and learned that he really knew little or nothing of his master, who lived a solitary existence in London, was said to be rich, though no one knew whence came his riches, and was mysterious and impenetrable in his affairs and habits. Fix felt sure that Phileas Fogg would not land at Suez, but was really going on to Bombay.

“Is Bombay far from here?” asked Passepartout.

“Pretty far. It is a ten days’ voyage by sea.”

“And in what country is Bombay?”

“India.”

“In Asia?”

“Certainly.”

“The deuce! I was going to tell you there’s one thing that worries me — my burner!”

“What burner?”

“My gas-burner, which I forgot to turn off, and which is at this moment burning at my expense. I have calculated, monsieur, that I lose two shillings every four and twenty hours, exactly sixpence more than I earn; and you will understand that the longer our journey — ”

Did Fix pay any attention to Passepartout’s trouble about the gas? It is not probable. He was not listening, but was cogitating a project. Passepartout and he had now reached the shop, where Fix left his companion to make his purchases, after recommending him not to miss the steamer, and hurried back to the consulate. Now that he was fully convinced, Fix had quite recovered his equanimity.

“Consul,” said he, “I have no longer any doubt. I have spotted my man. He passes himself off as an odd stick who is going round the world in eighty days.”

“Then he’s a sharp fellow,” returned the consul, “and counts on returning to London after putting the police of the two countries off his track.”

“We’ll see about that,” replied Fix.

“But are you not mistaken?”

“I am not mistaken.”

“Why was this robber so anxious to prove, by the visa, that he had passed through Suez?”

“Why? I have no idea; but listen to me.”

He reported in a few words the most important parts of his conversation with Passepartout.

“In short,” said the consul, “appearances are wholly against this man. And what are you going to do?”

“Send a dispatch to London for a warrant of arrest to be dispatched instantly to Bombay, take passage on board the Mongolia, follow my rogue to India, and there, on English ground, arrest him politely, with my warrant in my hand, and my hand on his shoulder.”

Having uttered these words with a cool, careless air, the detective took leave of the consul, and repaired to the telegraph office, whence he sent the dispatch which we have seen to the London police office. A quarter of an hour later found Fix, with a small bag in his hand, proceeding on board the Mongolia; and, ere many moments longer, the noble steamer rode out at full steam upon the waters of the Red Sea.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH THE RED SEA AND THE INDIAN OCEAN PROVE PROPITIOUS TO THE DESIGNS OF PHILEAS FOGG

The distance between Suez and Aden is precisely thirteen hundred and ten miles, and the regulations of the company allow the steamers one hundred and thirty-eight hours in which to traverse it. The Mongolia, thanks to the vigorous exertions of the engineer, seemed likely, so rapid was her speed, to reach her destination considerably within that time. The greater part of the passengers from Brindisi were bound for India some for Bombay, others for Calcutta by way of Bombay, the nearest route thither, now that a railway crosses the Indian peninsula. Among the passengers was a number of officials and military officers of various grades, the latter being either attached to the regular British forces or commanding the Sepoy troops, and receiving high salaries ever since the central government has assumed the powers of the East India Company: for the sub-lieutenants get 280 pounds, brigadiers, 2,400 pounds, and generals of divisions, 4,000 pounds. What with the military men, a number of rich young Englishmen on their travels, and the hospitable efforts of the purser, the time passed quickly on the Mongolia. The best of fare was spread upon the cabin tables at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and the eight o’clock supper, and the ladies scrupulously changed their toilets twice a day; and the hours were whirled away, when the sea was tranquil, with music, dancing, and games.

But the Red Sea is full of caprice, and often boisterous, like most long and narrow gulfs. When the wind came from the African or Asian coast the Mongolia, with her long hull, rolled fearfully. Then the ladies speedily disappeared below; the pianos were silent; singing and dancing suddenly ceased. Yet the good ship ploughed straight on, unretarded by wind or wave, towards the straits of Bab-el-Mandeb. What was Phileas Fogg doing all this time? It might be thought that, in his anxiety, he would be constantly watching the changes of the wind, the disorderly raging of the billows — every chance, in short, which might force the Mongolia to slacken her speed, and thus interrupt his journey. But, if he thought of these possibilities, he did not betray the fact by any outward sign.

Always the same impassible member of the Reform Club, whom no incident could surprise, as unvarying as the ship's chronometers, and seldom having the curiosity even to go upon the deck, he passed through the memorable scenes of the Red Sea with cold indifference; did not care to recognise the historic towns and villages which, along its borders, raised their picturesque outlines against the sky; and betrayed no fear of the dangers of the Arabic Gulf, which the old historians always spoke of with horror, and upon which the ancient navigators never ventured without propitiating the gods by ample sacrifices. How did this eccentric personage pass his time on the Mongolia? He made his four hearty meals every day, regardless of the most persistent rolling and pitching on the part of the steamer; and he played whist indefatigably, for he had found partners as enthusiastic in the game as himself. A tax-collector, on the way to his post at Goa; the Rev. Decimus Smith, returning to his parish at Bombay; and a brigadier-general of the English army, who was about to rejoin his brigade at Benares, made up the party, and, with Mr. Fogg, played whist by the hour together in absorbing silence.

As for Passepartout, he, too, had escaped sea-sickness, and took his meals conscientiously in the forward cabin. He rather enjoyed the voyage, for he was well fed and well lodged, took a great interest in the scenes through which they were passing, and consoled himself with the delusion that his master’s whim would end at Bombay. He was pleased, on the day after leaving Suez, to find on deck the obliging person with whom he had walked and chatted on the quays.

“If I am not mistaken,” said he, approaching this person, with his most amiable smile, “you are the gentleman who so kindly volunteered to guide me at Suez?”

“Ah! I quite recognise you. You are the servant of the strange Englishman — ”

“Just so, monsieur — ”

“Fix.”

“Monsieur Fix,” resumed Passepartout, “I’m charmed to find you on board. Where are you bound?”

“Like you, to Bombay.”

“That’s capital! Have you made this trip before?”

“Several times. I am one of the agents of the Peninsular Company.”

“Then you know India?”

“Why yes,” replied Fix, who spoke cautiously.

“A curious place, this India?”

“Oh, very curious. Mosques, minarets, temples, fakirs, pagodas, tigers, snakes, elephants! I hope you will have ample time to see the sights.”

"I hope so, Monsieur Fix. You see, a man of sound sense ought not to spend his life jumping from a steamer upon a railway train, and from a railway train upon a steamer again, pretending to make the tour of the world in eighty days! No; all these gymnastics, you may be sure, will cease at Bombay."

"And Mr. Fogg is getting on well?" asked Fix, in the most natural tone in the world.

"Quite well, and I too. I eat like a famished ogre; it's the sea air."

"But I never see your master on deck."

"Never; he hasn't the least curiosity."

"Do you know, Mr. Passepartout, that this pretended tour in eighty days may conceal some secret errand — perhaps a diplomatic mission?"

"Faith, Monsieur Fix, I assure you I know nothing about it, nor would I give half a crown to find out."

After this meeting, Passepartout and Fix got into the habit of chatting together, the latter making it a point to gain the worthy man's confidence. He frequently offered him a glass of whiskey or pale ale in the steamer bar-room, which Passepartout never failed to accept with graceful alacrity, mentally pronouncing Fix the best of good fellows.

Meanwhile the Mongolia was pushing forward rapidly; on the 13th, Mocha, surrounded by its ruined walls whereon date-trees were growing, was sighted, and on the mountains beyond were espied vast coffee-fields. Passepartout was ravished to behold this celebrated place, and thought that, with its circular walls and dismantled fort, it looked like an immense coffee-cup and saucer. The following night they passed through the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, which means in Arabic The Bridge of Tears, and the next day they put in at Steamer Point, north-west of Aden harbour, to take in coal. This matter of fuelling steamers is a serious one at such distances from the coal-mines; it costs the Peninsular Company some eight hundred thousand pounds a year. In these distant seas, coal is worth three or four pounds sterling a ton.

The Mongolia had still sixteen hundred and fifty miles to traverse before reaching Bombay, and was obliged to remain four hours at Steamer Point to coal up. But this delay, as it was foreseen, did not affect Phileas Fogg's programme; besides, the Mongolia, instead of reaching Aden on the morning of the 15th, when she was due, arrived there on the evening of the 14th, a gain of fifteen hours.

Mr. Fogg and his servant went ashore at Aden to have the passport again visaed; Fix, unobserved, followed them. The visa procured, Mr. Fogg returned on board to resume his former habits; while Passepartout, according to custom, sauntered about among the mixed population of Somalis, Banyans, Parsees, Jews, Arabs, and Europeans who comprise the twenty-five thousand inhabitants of Aden. He gazed with wonder upon the fortifications which make this place the Gibraltar of the Indian Ocean, and the vast cisterns where the English engineers were still at work, two thousand years after the engineers of Solomon.

“Very curious, very curious,” said Passepartout to himself, on returning to the steamer. “I see that it is by no means useless to travel, if a man wants to see something new.” At six p.m. the Mongolia slowly moved out of the roadstead, and was soon once more on the Indian Ocean. She had a hundred and sixty-eight hours in which to reach Bombay, and the sea was favourable, the wind being in the north-west, and all sails aiding the engine. The steamer rolled but little, the ladies, in fresh toilets, reappeared on deck, and the singing and dancing were resumed. The trip was being accomplished most successfully, and Passepartout was enchanted with the congenial companion which chance had secured him in the person of the delightful Fix. On Sunday, October 20th, towards noon, they came in sight of the Indian coast: two hours later the pilot came on board. A range of hills lay against the sky in the horizon, and soon the rows of palms which adorn Bombay came distinctly into view. The steamer entered the road formed by the islands in the bay, and at half-past four she hauled up at the quays of Bombay.

Phileas Fogg was in the act of finishing the thirty-third rubber of the voyage, and his partner and himself having, by a bold stroke, captured all thirteen of the tricks, concluded this fine campaign with a brilliant victory.

The Mongolia was due at Bombay on the 22nd; she arrived on the 20th. This was a gain to Phileas Fogg of two days since his departure from London, and he calmly entered the fact in the itinerary, in the column of gains.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT IS ONLY TOO GLAD TO GET OFF WITH THE LOSS OF HIS SHOES

Everybody knows that the great reversed triangle of land, with its base in the north and its apex in the south, which is called India, embraces fourteen hundred thousand square miles, upon which is spread unequally a population of one hundred and eighty millions of souls. The British Crown exercises a real and despotic dominion over the larger portion of this vast country, and has a governor-general stationed at Calcutta, governors at Madras, Bombay, and in Bengal, and a lieutenant-governor at Agra.

But British India, properly so called, only embraces seven hundred thousand square miles, and a population of from one hundred to one hundred and ten millions of inhabitants. A considerable portion of India is still free from British authority; and there are certain ferocious rajahs in the interior who are absolutely independent. The celebrated East India Company was all-powerful from 1756, when the English first gained a foothold on the spot where now stands the city of Madras, down to the time of the great Sepoy insurrection. It gradually annexed province after province, purchasing them of the native chiefs, whom it seldom paid, and appointed the governor-general and his subordinates, civil and military. But the East India Company has now passed away, leaving the British possessions in India directly under the control of the Crown. The aspect of the country, as well as the manners and distinctions of race, is daily changing.

Formerly one was obliged to travel in India by the old cumbrous methods of going on foot or on horseback, in palanquins or unwieldy coaches; now fast steamboats ply on the Indus and the Ganges, and a great railway, with branch lines joining the main line at many points on its route, traverses the peninsula from Bombay to Calcutta in three days. This railway does not run in a direct line across India. The distance between Bombay and Calcutta, as the bird flies, is only from one thousand to eleven hundred miles; but the deflections of the road increase this distance by more than a third.

The general route of the Great Indian Peninsula Railway is as follows: Leaving Bombay, it passes through Salcette, crossing to the continent opposite Tannah, goes over the chain of the Western Ghauts, runs thence north-east as far as Burhampoor, skirts the nearly independent territory of Bundelcund, ascends to Allahabad, turns thence eastwardly, meeting the Ganges at Benares, then departs from the river a little, and, descending south-eastward by Burdivan and the French town of Chandernagor, has its terminus at Calcutta.

The passengers of the Mongolia went ashore at half-past four p.m.; at exactly eight the train would start for Calcutta.

Mr. Fogg, after bidding good-bye to his whist partners, left the steamer, gave his servant several errands to do, urged it upon him to be at the station promptly at eight, and, with his regular step, which beat to the second, like an astronomical clock, directed his steps to the passport office. As for the wonders of Bombay its famous city hall, its splendid library, its forts and docks, its bazaars, mosques, synagogues, its Armenian churches, and the noble pagoda on Malabar Hill, with its two polygonal towers — he cared not a straw to see them. He would not deign to examine even the masterpieces of Elephanta, or the mysterious hypogea, concealed south-east from the docks, or those fine remains of Buddhist architecture, the Kanherian grottoes of the island of Salcette.

Having transacted his business at the passport office, Phileas Fogg repaired quietly to the railway station, where he ordered dinner. Among the dishes served up to him, the landlord especially recommended a certain giblet of “native rabbit,” on which he prided himself.

Mr. Fogg accordingly tasted the dish, but, despite its spiced sauce, found it far from palatable. He rang for the landlord, and, on his appearance, said, fixing his clear eyes upon him, “Is this rabbit, sir?”

“Yes, my lord,” the rogue boldly replied, “rabbit from the jungles.”

“And this rabbit did not mew when he was killed?”

“Mew, my lord! What, a rabbit mew! I swear to you — ”

“Be so good, landlord, as not to swear, but remember this: cats were formerly considered, in India, as sacred animals. That was a good time.”

“For the cats, my lord?”

“Perhaps for the travellers as well!”

After which Mr. Fogg quietly continued his dinner. Fix had gone on shore shortly after Mr. Fogg, and his first destination was the headquarters of the Bombay police. He made himself known as a London detective, told his business at Bombay, and the position of affairs relative to the supposed robber, and nervously asked if a warrant had arrived from London. It had not reached the office; indeed, there had not yet been time for it to arrive. Fix was sorely disappointed, and tried to obtain an order of arrest from the director of the Bombay police. This the director refused, as the matter concerned the London office, which alone could legally deliver the warrant. Fix did not insist, and was fain to resign himself to await the arrival of the important document; but he was determined not to lose sight of the mysterious rogue as long as he stayed in Bombay. He did not doubt for a moment, any more than Passepartout, that Phileas Fogg would remain there, at least until it was time for the warrant to arrive.

Passepartout, however, had no sooner heard his master's orders on leaving the Mongolia than he saw at once that they were to leave Bombay as they had done Suez and Paris, and that the journey would be extended at least as far as Calcutta, and perhaps beyond that place. He began to ask himself if this bet that Mr. Fogg talked about was not really in good earnest, and whether his fate was not in truth forcing him, despite his love of repose, around the world in eighty days!

Having purchased the usual quota of shirts and shoes, he took a leisurely promenade about the streets, where crowds of people of many nationalities — Europeans, Persians with pointed caps, Banyas with round turbans, Sindes with square bonnets, Parsees with black mitres, and long-robed Armenians — were collected. It happened to be the day of a Parsee festival. These descendants of the sect of Zoroaster — the most thrifty, civilised, intelligent, and austere of the East Indians, among whom are counted the richest native merchants of Bombay — were celebrating a sort of religious carnival, with processions and shows, in the midst of which Indian dancing-girls, clothed in rose-coloured gauze, looped up with gold and silver, danced airily, but with perfect modesty, to the sound of viols and the clanging of tambourines. It is needless to say that Passepartout watched these curious ceremonies with staring eyes and gaping mouth, and that his countenance was that of the greenest booby imaginable.

Unhappily for his master, as well as himself, his curiosity drew him unconsciously farther off than he intended to go. At last, having seen the Parsee carnival wind away in the distance, he was turning his steps towards the station, when he happened to espy the splendid pagoda on Malabar Hill, and was seized with an irresistible desire to see its interior. He was quite ignorant that it is forbidden to Christians to enter certain Indian temples, and that even the faithful must not go in without first leaving their shoes outside the door. It may be said here that the wise policy of the British Government severely punishes a disregard of the practices of the native religions.

Passepartout, however, thinking no harm, went in like a simple tourist, and was soon lost in admiration of the splendid Brahmin ornamentation which everywhere met his eyes, when of a sudden he found himself sprawling on the sacred flagging. He looked up to behold three enraged priests, who forthwith fell upon him; tore off his shoes, and began to beat him with loud, savage exclamations. The agile Frenchman was soon upon his feet again, and lost no time in knocking down two of his long-gowned adversaries with his fists and a vigorous application of his toes; then, rushing out of the pagoda as fast as his legs could carry him, he soon escaped the third priest by mingling with the crowd in the streets.

At five minutes before eight, Passepartout, hatless, shoeless, and having in the squabble lost his package of shirts and shoes, rushed breathlessly into the station.

Fix, who had followed Mr. Fogg to the station, and saw that he was really going to leave Bombay, was there, upon the platform. He had resolved to follow the supposed robber to Calcutta, and farther, if necessary.

Passepartout did not observe the detective, who stood in an obscure corner; but Fix heard him relate his adventures in a few words to Mr. Fogg.

“I hope that this will not happen again,” said Phileas Fogg coldly, as he got into the train. Poor Passepartout, quite crestfallen, followed his master without a word. Fix was on the point of entering another carriage, when an idea struck him which induced him to alter his plan.

“No, I’ll stay,” muttered he. “An offence has been committed on Indian soil. I’ve got my man.”

Just then the locomotive gave a sharp screech, and the train passed out into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG SECURES A CURIOUS MEANS OF CONVEYANCE AT A FABULOUS PRICE

The train had started punctually. Among the passengers were a number of officers, Government officials, and opium and indigo merchants, whose business called them to the eastern coast. Passepartout rode in the same carriage with his master, and a third passenger occupied a seat opposite to them. This was Sir Francis Cromarty, one of Mr. Fogg's whist partners on the Mongolia, now on his way to join his corps at Benares. Sir Francis was a tall, fair man of fifty, who had greatly distinguished himself in the last Sepoy revolt. He made India his home, only paying brief visits to England at rare intervals; and was almost as familiar as a native with the customs, history, and character of India and its people. But Phileas Fogg, who was not travelling, but only describing a circumference, took no pains to inquire into these subjects; he was a solid body, traversing an orbit around the terrestrial globe, according to the laws of rational mechanics. He was at this moment calculating in his mind the number of hours spent since his departure from London, and, had it been in his nature to make a useless demonstration, would have rubbed his hands for satisfaction. Sir Francis Cromarty had observed the oddity of his travelling companion — although the only opportunity he had for studying him had been while he was dealing the cards, and between two rubbers — and questioned himself whether a human heart really beat beneath this cold exterior, and whether Phileas Fogg had any sense of the beauties of nature. The brigadier-general was free to mentally confess that, of all the eccentric persons he had ever met, none was comparable to this product of the exact sciences.

Phileas Fogg had not concealed from Sir Francis his design of going round the world, nor the circumstances under which he set out; and the general only saw in the wager a useless eccentricity and a lack of sound common sense. In the way this strange gentleman was going on, he would leave the world without having done any good to himself or anybody else.

An hour after leaving Bombay the train had passed the viaducts and the Island of Salcette, and had got into the open country. At Callyan they reached the junction of the branch line which descends towards south-eastern India by Kandallah and Pounah; and, passing Pauwell, they entered the defiles of the mountains, with their basalt bases, and their summits crowned with thick and verdant forests. Phileas Fogg and Sir Francis Cromarty exchanged a few words from time to time, and now Sir Francis, reviving the conversation, observed, “Some years ago, Mr. Fogg, you would have met with a delay at this point which would probably have lost you your wager.”

“How so, Sir Francis?”

“Because the railway stopped at the base of these mountains, which the passengers were obliged to cross in palanquins or on ponies to Kandallah, on the other side.”

“Such a delay would not have deranged my plans in the least,” said Mr. Fogg. “I have constantly foreseen the likelihood of certain obstacles.”

“But, Mr. Fogg,” pursued Sir Francis, “you run the risk of having some difficulty about this worthy fellow’s adventure at the pagoda.” Passepartout, his feet comfortably wrapped in his travelling-blanket, was sound asleep and did not dream that anybody was talking about him. “The Government is very severe upon that kind of offence. It takes particular care that the religious customs of the Indians should be respected, and if your servant were caught — ”

“Very well, Sir Francis,” replied Mr. Fogg; “if he had been caught he would have been condemned and punished, and then would have quietly returned to Europe. I don’t see how this affair could have delayed his master.”

The conversation fell again. During the night the train left the mountains behind, and passed Nassik, and the next day proceeded over the flat, well-cultivated country of the Khandeish, with its straggling villages, above which rose the minarets of the pagodas. This fertile territory is watered by numerous small rivers and limpid streams, mostly tributaries of the Godavery.

Passepartout, on waking and looking out, could not realise that he was actually crossing India in a railway train. The locomotive, guided by an English engineer and fed with English coal, threw out its smoke upon cotton, coffee, nutmeg, clove, and pepper plantations, while the steam curled in spirals around groups of palm-trees, in the midst of which were seen picturesque bungalows, viharis (sort of abandoned monasteries), and marvellous temples enriched by the exhaustless ornamentation of Indian architecture. Then they came upon vast tracts extending to the horizon, with jungles inhabited by snakes and tigers, which fled at the noise of the train; succeeded by forests penetrated by the railway, and still haunted by elephants which, with pensive eyes, gazed at the train as it passed. The travellers crossed, beyond Milligaum, the fatal country so often stained with blood by the sectaries of the goddess Kali. Not far off rose Ellora, with its graceful pagodas, and the famous Aurungabad, capital of the ferocious Aureng-Zeb, now the chief town of one of the detached provinces of the kingdom of the Nizam. It was thereabouts that Feringhea, the Thuggee chief, king of the stranglers, held his sway. These ruffians, united by a secret bond, strangled victims of every age in honour of the goddess Death, without ever shedding blood; there was a period when this part of the country could scarcely be travelled over without corpses being found in every direction. The English Government has succeeded in greatly diminishing these murders, though the Thuggees still exist, and pursue the exercise of their horrible rites.

At half-past twelve the train stopped at Burhampoor where Passepartout was able to purchase some Indian slippers, ornamented with false pearls, in which, with evident vanity, he proceeded to encase his feet. The travellers made a hasty breakfast and started off for Assurghur, after skirting for a little the banks of the small river Tapty, which empties into the Gulf of Cambray, near Surat.

Passepartout was now plunged into absorbing reverie. Up to his arrival at Bombay, he had entertained hopes that their journey would end there; but, now that they were plainly whirling across India at full speed, a sudden change had come over the spirit of his dreams. His old vagabond nature returned to him; the fantastic ideas of his youth once more took possession of him. He came to regard his master's project as intended in good earnest, believed in the reality of the bet, and therefore in the tour of the world and the necessity of making it without fail within the designated period. Already he began to worry about possible delays, and accidents which might happen on the way. He recognised himself as being personally interested in the wager, and trembled at the thought that he might have been the means of losing it by his unpardonable folly of the night before. Being much less cool-headed than Mr. Fogg, he was much more restless, counting and recounting the days passed over, uttering maledictions when the train stopped, and accusing it of sluggishness, and mentally blaming Mr. Fogg for not having bribed the engineer. The worthy fellow was ignorant that, while it was possible by such means to hasten the rate of a steamer, it could not be done on the railway.

The train entered the defiles of the Sutpour Mountains, which separate the Khandeish from Bundelcund, towards evening. The next day Sir Francis Cromarty asked Passepartout what time it was; to which, on consulting his watch, he replied that it was three in the morning. This famous timepiece, always regulated on the Greenwich meridian, which was now some seventy-seven degrees westward, was at least four hours slow. Sir Francis corrected Passepartout's time, whereupon the latter made the same remark that he had done to Fix; and upon the general insisting that the watch should be regulated in each new meridian, since he was constantly going eastward, that is in the face of the sun, and therefore the days were shorter by four minutes for each degree gone over, Passepartout obstinately refused to alter his watch, which he kept at London time. It was an innocent delusion which could harm no one.

The train stopped, at eight o'clock, in the midst of a glade some fifteen miles beyond Rothal, where there were several bungalows, and workmen's cabins. The conductor, passing along the carriages, shouted, "Passengers will get out here!"

Phileas Fogg looked at Sir Francis Cromarty for an explanation; but the general could not tell what meant a halt in the midst of this forest of dates and acacias.

Passepartout, not less surprised, rushed out and speedily returned, crying: "Monsieur, no more railway!"

"What do you mean?" asked Sir Francis.

“I mean to say that the train isn’t going on.”

The general at once stepped out, while Phileas Fogg calmly followed him, and they proceeded together to the conductor.

“Where are we?” asked Sir Francis.

“At the hamlet of Kholby.”

“Do we stop here?”

“Certainly. The railway isn’t finished.”

“What! not finished?”

“No. There’s still a matter of fifty miles to be laid from here to Allahabad, where the line begins again.”

“But the papers announced the opening of the railway throughout.”

“What would you have, officer? The papers were mistaken.”

“Yet you sell tickets from Bombay to Calcutta,” retorted Sir Francis, who was growing warm.

“No doubt,” replied the conductor; “but the passengers know that they must provide means of transportation for themselves from Kholby to Allahabad.”

Sir Francis was furious. Passepartout would willingly have knocked the conductor down, and did not dare to look at his master.

“Sir Francis,” said Mr. Fogg quietly, “we will, if you please, look about for some means of conveyance to Allahabad.”

“Mr. Fogg, this is a delay greatly to your disadvantage.”

“No, Sir Francis; it was foreseen.”

“What! You knew that the way — ”

“Not at all; but I knew that some obstacle or other would sooner or later arise on my route. Nothing, therefore, is lost. I have two days, which I have already gained, to sacrifice. A steamer leaves Calcutta for Hong Kong at noon, on the 25th. This is the 22nd, and we shall reach Calcutta in time.”

There was nothing to say to so confident a response.

It was but too true that the railway came to a termination at this point. The papers were like some watches, which have a way of getting too fast, and had been premature in their announcement of the completion of the line. The greater part of the travellers were aware of this interruption, and, leaving the train, they began to engage such vehicles as the village could provide four-wheeled palkigharis, waggons drawn by zebus, carriages that looked like perambulating pagodas, palanquins, ponies, and what not.

Mr. Fogg and Sir Francis Cromarty, after searching the village from end to end, came back without having found anything.

“I shall go afoot,” said Phileas Fogg.

Passepartout, who had now rejoined his master, made a wry grimace, as he thought of his magnificent, but too frail Indian shoes. Happily he too had been looking about him, and, after a moment’s hesitation, said, “Monsieur, I think I have found a means of conveyance.”

“What?”

“An elephant! An elephant that belongs to an Indian who lives but a hundred steps from here.”

“Let’s go and see the elephant,” replied Mr. Fogg.

They soon reached a small hut, near which, enclosed within some high palings, was the animal in question. An Indian came out of the hut, and, at their request, conducted them within the enclosure. The elephant, which its owner had reared, not for a beast of burden, but for warlike purposes, was half domesticated. The Indian had begun already, by often irritating him, and feeding him every three months on sugar and butter, to impart to him a ferocity not in his nature, this method being often employed by those who train the Indian elephants for battle. Happily, however, for Mr. Fogg, the animal’s instruction in this direction had not gone far, and the elephant still preserved his natural gentleness. Kiouni — this was the name of the beast — could doubtless travel rapidly for a long time, and, in default of any other means of conveyance, Mr. Fogg resolved to hire him. But elephants are far from cheap in India, where they are becoming scarce, the males, which alone are suitable for circus shows, are much sought, especially as but few of them are domesticated. When therefore Mr. Fogg proposed to the Indian to hire Kiouni, he refused point-blank. Mr. Fogg persisted, offering the excessive sum of ten pounds an hour for the loan of the beast to Allahabad. Refused. Twenty pounds? Refused also. Forty pounds? Still refused. Passepartout jumped at each advance; but the Indian declined to be tempted. Yet the offer was an alluring one, for, supposing it took the elephant fifteen hours to reach Allahabad, his owner would receive no less than six hundred pounds sterling.

Phileas Fogg, without getting in the least flurried, then proposed to purchase the animal outright, and at first offered a thousand pounds for him.

The Indian, perhaps thinking he was going to make a great bargain, still refused.

Sir Francis Cromarty took Mr. Fogg aside, and begged him to reflect before he went any further; to which that gentleman replied that he was not in the habit of acting rashly, that a bet of twenty thousand pounds was at stake, that the elephant was absolutely necessary to him, and that he would secure him if he had to pay twenty times his value. Returning to the Indian, whose small, sharp eyes, glistening with avarice, betrayed that with him it was only a question of how great a price he could obtain. Mr. Fogg offered first twelve hundred, then fifteen hundred, eighteen hundred, two thousand pounds. Passepartout, usually so rubicund, was fairly white with suspense.

At two thousand pounds the Indian yielded.

“What a price, good heavens!” cried Passepartout, “for an elephant.”

It only remained now to find a guide, which was comparatively easy. A young Parsee, with an intelligent face, offered his services, which Mr. Fogg accepted, promising so generous a reward as to materially stimulate his zeal. The elephant was led out and equipped. The Parsee, who was an accomplished elephant driver, covered his back with a sort of saddle-cloth, and attached to each of his flanks some curiously uncomfortable howdahs. Phileas Fogg paid the Indian with some banknotes which he extracted from the famous carpet-bag, a proceeding that seemed to deprive poor Passepartout of his vitals. Then he offered to carry Sir Francis to Allahabad, which the brigadier gratefully accepted, as one traveller the more would not be likely to fatigue the gigantic beast. Provisions were purchased at Kholby, and, while Sir Francis and Mr. Fogg took the howdahs on either side, Passepartout got astride the saddle-cloth between them. The Parsee perched himself on the elephant’s neck, and at nine o’clock they set out from the village, the animal marching off through the dense forest of palms by the shortest cut.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG AND HIS COMPANIONS VENTURE ACROSS THE INDIAN FORESTS, AND WHAT ENSUED

In order to shorten the journey, the guide passed to the left of the line where the railway was still in process of being built. This line, owing to the capricious turnings of the Vindhia Mountains, did not pursue a straight course. The Parsee, who was quite familiar with the roads and paths in the district, declared that they would gain twenty miles by striking directly through the forest.

Phileas Fogg and Sir Francis Cromarty, plunged to the neck in the peculiar howdahs provided for them, were horribly jostled by the swift trotting of the elephant, spurred on as he was by the skilful Parsee; but they endured the discomfort with true British phlegm, talking little, and scarcely able to catch a glimpse of each other. As for Passepartout, who was mounted on the beast’s back, and received the direct force of each concussion as he trod along, he was very careful, in accordance with his master’s advice, to keep his tongue from between his teeth, as it would otherwise have been bitten off short. The worthy fellow bounced from the elephant’s neck to his rump, and vaulted like a clown on a spring-board; yet he laughed in the midst of his bouncing, and from time to time took a piece of sugar out of his pocket, and inserted it in Kiouni’s trunk, who received it without in the least slackening his regular trot.

After two hours the guide stopped the elephant, and gave him an hour for rest, during which Kiouni, after quenching his thirst at a neighbouring spring, set to devouring the branches and shrubs round about him. Neither

Sir Francis nor Mr. Fogg regretted the delay, and both descended with a feeling of relief. “Why, he’s made of iron!” exclaimed the general, gazing admiringly on Kiouni.

“Of forged iron,” replied Passepartout, as he set about preparing a hasty breakfast.

At noon the Parsee gave the signal of departure. The country soon presented a very savage aspect. Copses of dates and dwarf-palms succeeded the dense forests; then vast, dry plains, dotted with scanty shrubs, and sown with great blocks of syenite. All this portion of Bundelcund, which is little frequented by travellers, is inhabited by a fanatical population, hardened in the most horrible practices of the Hindoo faith. The English have not been able to secure complete dominion over this territory, which is subjected to the influence of rajahs, whom it is almost impossible to reach in their inaccessible mountain fastnesses. The travellers several times saw bands of ferocious Indians, who, when they perceived the elephant striding across-country, made angry and threatening motions. The Parsee avoided them as much as possible. Few animals were observed on the route; even the monkeys hurried from their path with contortions and grimaces which convulsed Passepartout with laughter.

In the midst of his gaiety, however, one thought troubled the worthy servant. What would Mr. Fogg do with the elephant when he got to Allahabad? Would he carry him on with him? Impossible! The cost of transporting him would make him ruinously expensive. Would he sell him, or set him free? The estimable beast certainly deserved some consideration. Should Mr. Fogg choose to make him, Passepartout, a present of Kiouni, he would be very much embarrassed; and these thoughts did not cease worrying him for a long time.

The principal chain of the Vindhias was crossed by eight in the evening, and another halt was made on the northern slope, in a ruined bungalow. They had gone nearly twenty-five miles that day, and an equal distance still separated them from the station of Allahabad.

The night was cold. The Parsee lit a fire in the bungalow with a few dry branches, and the warmth was very grateful, provisions purchased at Kholby sufficed for supper, and the travellers ate ravenously. The conversation, beginning with a few disconnected phrases, soon gave place to loud and steady snores. The guide watched Kiouni, who slept standing, bolstering himself against the trunk of a large tree. Nothing occurred during the night to disturb the slumberers, although occasional growls front panthers and chatterings of monkeys broke the silence; the more formidable beasts made no cries or hostile demonstration against the occupants of the bungalow. Sir Francis slept heavily, like an honest soldier overcome with fatigue. Passepartout was wrapped in uneasy dreams of the bouncing of the day before. As for Mr. Fogg, he slumbered as peacefully as if he had been in his serene mansion in Saville Row.

The journey was resumed at six in the morning; the guide hoped to reach Allahabad by evening. In that case, Mr. Fogg would only lose a part of the forty-eight hours saved since the beginning of the tour. Kiouni, resuming his rapid gait, soon descended the lower spurs of the Vindhias, and towards noon they passed by the village of Kallenger, on the Cani, one of the branches of the Ganges. The guide avoided inhabited places, thinking it safer to keep the open country, which lies along the first depressions of the basin of the great river. Allahabad was now only twelve miles to the north-east. They stopped under a clump of bananas, the fruit of which, as healthy as bread and as succulent as cream, was amply partaken of and appreciated.

At two o’clock the guide entered a thick forest which extended several miles; he preferred to travel under cover of the woods. They had not as yet had any unpleasant encounters, and the journey seemed on the point of being successfully accomplished, when the elephant, becoming restless, suddenly stopped.

It was then four o’clock.

“What’s the matter?” asked Sir Francis, putting out his head.

“I don’t know, officer,” replied the Parsee, listening attentively to a confused murmur which came through the thick branches.

The murmur soon became more distinct; it now seemed like a distant concert of human voices accompanied by brass instruments. Passepartout was all eyes and ears. Mr. Fogg patiently waited without a word. The Parsee jumped to the ground, fastened the elephant to a tree, and plunged into the thicket. He soon returned, saying:

“A procession of Brahmins is coming this way. We must prevent their seeing us, if possible.”

The guide unloosed the elephant and led him into a thicket, at the same time asking the travellers not to stir. He held himself ready to bestride the animal at a moment’s notice, should flight become necessary; but he evidently thought that the procession of the faithful would pass without perceiving them amid the thick foliage, in which they were wholly concealed.

The discordant tones of the voices and instruments drew nearer, and now droning songs mingled with the sound of the tambourines and cymbals. The head of the procession soon appeared beneath the trees, a hundred paces away; and the strange figures who performed the religious ceremony were easily distinguished through the branches. First came the priests, with mitres on their heads, and clothed in long lace robes. They were surrounded by men, women, and children, who sang a kind of lugubrious psalm, interrupted at regular intervals by the tambourines and cymbals; while behind them was drawn a car with large wheels, the spokes of which represented serpents entwined with each other. Upon the car, which was drawn by four richly caparisoned zebus, stood a hideous statue with four arms, the body coloured a dull red, with haggard eyes, dishevelled hair, protruding tongue, and lips tinted with betel. It stood upright upon the figure of a prostrate and headless giant.

Sir Francis, recognising the statue, whispered, “The goddess Kali; the goddess of love and death.”

“Of death, perhaps,” muttered back Passepartout, “but of love — that ugly old hag? Never!”

The Parsee made a motion to keep silence.

A group of old fakirs were capering and making a wild ado round the statue; these were striped with ochre, and covered with cuts whence their blood issued drop by drop — stupid fanatics, who, in the great Indian ceremonies, still throw themselves under the wheels of Juggernaut. Some Brahmins, clad in all the sumptuousness of Oriental apparel, and leading a woman who faltered at every step, followed. This woman was young, and as fair as a European. Her head and neck, shoulders, ears, arms, hands, and toes were loaded down with jewels and gems with bracelets, earrings, and rings; while a tunic bordered with gold, and covered with a light muslin robe, betrayed the outline of her form.

The guards who followed the young woman presented a violent contrast to her, armed as they were with naked sabres hung at their waists, and long damascened pistols, and bearing a corpse on a palanquin. It was the body of an old man, gorgeously arrayed in the habiliments of a rajah, wearing, as in life, a turban embroidered with pearls, a robe of tissue of silk and gold, a scarf of cashmere sewed with diamonds, and the magnificent weapons of a Hindoo prince. Next came the musicians and a rearguard of capering fakirs, whose cries sometimes drowned the noise of the instruments; these closed the procession.

Sir Francis watched the procession with a sad countenance, and, turning to the guide, said, “A suttee.”

The Parsee nodded, and put his finger to his lips. The procession slowly wound under the trees, and soon its last ranks disappeared in the depths of the wood. The songs gradually died away; occasionally cries were heard in the distance, until at last all was silence again.

Phileas Fogg had heard what Sir Francis said, and, as soon as the procession had disappeared, asked: “What is a suttee?”

“A suttee,” returned the general, “is a human sacrifice, but a voluntary one. The woman you have just seen will be burned to-morrow at the dawn of day.”

“Oh, the scoundrels!” cried Passepartout, who could not repress his indignation.

“And the corpse?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“Is that of the prince, her husband,” said the guide; “an independent rajah of Bundelcund.”

“Is it possible,” resumed Phileas Fogg, his voice betraying not the least emotion, “that these barbarous customs still exist in India, and that the English have been unable to put a stop to them?”

“These sacrifices do not occur in the larger portion of India,” replied Sir Francis; “but we have no power over these savage territories, and especially here in Bundelcund. The whole district north of the Vindhias is the theatre of incessant murders and pillage.”

“The poor wretch!” exclaimed Passepartout, “to be burned alive!”

“Yes,” returned Sir Francis, “burned alive. And, if she were not, you cannot conceive what treatment she would be obliged to submit to from her relatives. They would shave off her hair, feed her on a scanty allowance of rice, treat her with contempt; she would be looked upon as an unclean creature, and would die in some corner, like a scurvy dog. The prospect of so frightful an existence drives these poor creatures to the sacrifice much more than love or religious fanaticism. Sometimes, however, the sacrifice is really voluntary, and it requires the active interference of the Government to prevent it. Several years ago, when I was living at Bombay, a young widow asked permission of the governor to be burned along with her husband’s body; but, as you may imagine, he refused. The woman left the town, took refuge with an independent rajah, and there carried out her self-devoted purpose.”

While Sir Francis was speaking, the guide shook his head several times, and now said: “The sacrifice which will take place to-morrow at dawn is not a voluntary one.”

“How do you know?”

“Everybody knows about this affair in Bundelcund.”

“But the wretched creature did not seem to be making any resistance,” observed Sir Francis.

“That was because they had intoxicated her with fumes of hemp and opium.”

“But where are they taking her?”

“To the pagoda of Pillaji, two miles from here; she will pass the night there.”

“And the sacrifice will take place — ”

“To-morrow, at the first light of dawn.”

The guide now led the elephant out of the thicket, and leaped upon his neck. Just at the moment that he was about to urge Kiouni forward with a peculiar whistle, Mr. Fogg stopped him, and, turning to Sir Francis Cromarty, said, “Suppose we save this woman.”

“Save the woman, Mr. Fogg!”

“I have yet twelve hours to spare; I can devote them to that.”

“Why, you are a man of heart!”

“Sometimes,” replied Phileas Fogg, quietly; “when I have the time.”

CHAPTER XIII

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT RECEIVES A NEW PROOF THAT FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE

The project was a bold one, full of difficulty, perhaps impracticable. Mr. Fogg was going to risk life, or at least liberty, and therefore the success of his tour. But he did not hesitate, and he found in Sir Francis Cromarty an enthusiastic ally.

As for Passepartout, he was ready for anything that might be proposed. His master's idea charmed him; he perceived a heart, a soul, under that icy exterior. He began to love Phileas Fogg.

There remained the guide: what course would he adopt? Would he not take part with the Indians? In default of his assistance, it was necessary to be assured of his neutrality.

Sir Francis frankly put the question to him.

“Officers,” replied the guide, “I am a Parsee, and this woman is a Parsee. Command me as you will.”

“Excellent!” said Mr. Fogg.

“However,” resumed the guide, “it is certain, not only that we shall risk our lives, but horrible tortures, if we are taken.”

“That is foreseen,” replied Mr. Fogg. “I think we must wait till night before acting.”

“I think so,” said the guide.

The worthy Indian then gave some account of the victim, who, he said, was a celebrated beauty of the Parsee race, and the daughter of a wealthy Bombay merchant. She had received a thoroughly English education in that city, and, from her manners and intelligence, would be thought an European. Her name was Aouda. Left an orphan, she was married against her will to the old rajah of Bundelcund; and, knowing the fate that awaited her, she escaped, was retaken, and devoted by the rajah’s relatives, who had an interest in her death, to the sacrifice from which it seemed she could not escape.

The Parsee’s narrative only confirmed Mr. Fogg and his companions in their generous design. It was decided that the guide should direct the elephant towards the pagoda of Pillaji, which he accordingly approached as quickly as possible. They halted, half an hour afterwards, in a copse, some five hundred feet from the pagoda, where they were well concealed; but they could hear the groans and cries of the fakirs distinctly.

They then discussed the means of getting at the victim. The guide was familiar with the pagoda of Pillaji, in which, as he declared, the young woman was imprisoned. Could they enter any of its doors while the whole party of Indians was plunged in a drunken sleep, or was it safer to attempt to make a hole in the walls? This could only be determined at the moment and the place themselves; but it was certain that the abduction must be made that night, and not when, at break of day, the victim was led to her funeral pyre. Then no human intervention could save her.

As soon as night fell, about six o’clock, they decided to make a reconnaissance around the pagoda. The cries of the fakirs were just ceasing; the Indians were in the act of plunging themselves into the drunkenness caused by liquid opium mingled with hemp, and it might be possible to slip between them to the temple itself.

The Parsee, leading the others, noiselessly crept through the wood, and in ten minutes they found themselves on the banks of a small stream, whence, by the light of the rosin torches, they perceived a pyre of wood, on the top of which lay the embalmed body of the rajah, which was to be burned with his wife. The pagoda, whose minarets loomed above the trees in the deepening dusk, stood a hundred steps away.

“Come!” whispered the guide.

He slipped more cautiously than ever through the brush, followed by his companions; the silence around was only broken by the low murmuring of the wind among the branches.

Soon the Parsee stopped on the borders of the glade, which was lit up by the torches. The ground was covered by groups of the Indians, motionless in their drunken sleep; it seemed a battlefield strewn with the dead. Men, women, and children lay together.

In the background, among the trees, the pagoda of Pillaji loomed distinctly. Much to the guide’s disappointment, the guards of the rajah, lighted by torches, were watching at the doors and marching to and fro with naked sabres; probably the priests, too, were watching within.

The Parsee, now convinced that it was impossible to force an entrance to the temple, advanced no farther, but led his companions back again. Phileas Fogg and Sir Francis Cromarty also saw that nothing could be attempted in that direction. They stopped, and engaged in a whispered colloquy.

“It is only eight now,” said the brigadier, “and these guards may also go to sleep.”

“It is not impossible,” returned the Parsee.

They lay down at the foot of a tree, and waited.

The time seemed long; the guide ever and anon left them to take an observation on the edge of the wood, but the guards watched steadily by the glare of the torches, and a dim light crept through the windows of the pagoda.

They waited till midnight; but no change took place among the guards, and it became apparent that their yielding to sleep could not be counted on. The other plan must be carried out; an opening in the walls of the pagoda must be made. It remained to ascertain whether the priests were watching by the side of their victim as assiduously as were the soldiers at the door.

After a last consultation, the guide announced that he was ready for the attempt, and advanced, followed by the others. They took a roundabout way, so as to get at the pagoda on the rear. They reached the walls about half-past twelve, without having met anyone; here there was no guard, nor were there either windows or doors.

The night was dark. The moon, on the wane, scarcely left the horizon, and was covered with heavy clouds; the height of the trees deepened the darkness.

It was not enough to reach the walls; an opening in them must be accomplished, and to attain this purpose the party only had their pocket-knives. Happily the temple walls were built of brick and wood, which could be penetrated with little difficulty; after one brick had been taken out, the rest would yield easily.

They set noiselessly to work, and the Parsee on one side and Passepartout on the other began to loosen the bricks so as to make an aperture two feet wide. They were getting on rapidly, when suddenly a cry was heard in the interior of the temple, followed almost instantly by other cries replying from the outside. Passepartout and the guide stopped. Had they been heard? Was the alarm being given? Common prudence urged them to retire, and they did so, followed by Phileas Fogg and Sir Francis. They again hid themselves in the wood, and waited till the disturbance, whatever it might be, ceased, holding themselves ready to resume their attempt without delay. But, awkwardly enough, the guards now appeared at the rear of the temple, and there installed themselves, in readiness to prevent a surprise.

It would be difficult to describe the disappointment of the party, thus interrupted in their work. They could not now reach the victim; how, then, could they save her? Sir Francis shook his fists, Passepartout was beside himself, and the guide gnashed his teeth with rage. The tranquil Fogg waited, without betraying any emotion.

“We have nothing to do but to go away,” whispered Sir Francis.

“Nothing but to go away,” echoed the guide.

“Stop,” said Fogg. “I am only due at Allahabad tomorrow before noon.”

“But what can you hope to do?” asked Sir Francis. “In a few hours it will be daylight, and — ”

“The chance which now seems lost may present itself at the last moment.”

Sir Francis would have liked to read Phileas Fogg’s eyes. What was this cool Englishman thinking of? Was he planning to make a rush for the young woman at the very moment of the sacrifice, and boldly snatch her from her executioners?

This would be utter folly, and it was hard to admit that Fogg was such a fool. Sir Francis consented, however, to remain to the end of this terrible drama. The guide led them to the rear of the glade, where they were able to observe the sleeping groups.

Meanwhile Passepartout, who had perched himself on the lower branches of a tree, was resolving an idea which had at first struck him like a flash, and which was now firmly lodged in his brain.

He had commenced by saying to himself, “What folly!” and then he repeated, “Why not, after all? It’s a chance perhaps the only one; and with such sots!” Thinking thus, he slipped, with the suppleness of a serpent, to the lowest branches, the ends of which bent almost to the ground.

The hours passed, and the lighter shades now announced the approach of day, though it was not yet light. This was the moment. The slumbering multitude became animated, the tambourines sounded, songs and cries arose; the hour of the sacrifice had come. The doors of the pagoda swung open, and a bright light escaped from its interior, in the midst of which Mr. Fogg and Sir Francis espied the victim. She seemed, having shaken off the stupor of intoxication, to be striving to escape from her executioner. Sir Francis’s heart throbbed; and, convulsively seizing Mr. Fogg’s hand, found in it an open knife. Just at this moment the crowd began to move. The young woman had again fallen into a stupor caused by the fumes of hemp, and passed among the fakirs, who escorted her with their wild, religious cries.

Phileas Fogg and his companions, mingling in the rear ranks of the crowd, followed; and in two minutes they reached the banks of the stream, and stopped fifty paces from the pyre, upon which still lay the rajah’s corpse. In the semi-obscurity they saw the victim, quite senseless, stretched out beside her husband’s body. Then a torch was brought, and the wood, heavily soaked with oil, instantly took fire.

At this moment Sir Francis and the guide seized Phileas Fogg, who, in an instant of mad generosity, was about to rush upon the pyre. But he had quickly pushed them aside, when the whole scene suddenly changed. A cry of terror arose. The whole multitude prostrated themselves, terror-stricken, on the ground.

The old rajah was not dead, then, since he rose of a sudden, like a spectre, took up his wife in his arms, and descended from the pyre in the midst of the clouds of smoke, which only heightened his ghostly appearance.

Fakirs and soldiers and priests, seized with instant terror, lay there, with their faces on the ground, not daring to lift their eyes and behold such a prodigy.

The inanimate victim was borne along by the vigorous arms which supported her, and which she did not seem in the least to burden. Mr. Fogg and Sir Francis stood erect, the Parsee bowed his head, and Passepartout was, no doubt, scarcely less stupefied.

The resuscitated rajah approached Sir Francis and Mr. Fogg, and, in an abrupt tone, said, “Let us be off!”

It was Passepartout himself, who had slipped upon the pyre in the midst of the smoke and, profiting by the still overhanging darkness, had delivered the young woman from death! It was Passepartout who, playing his part with a happy audacity, had passed through the crowd amid the general terror.

A moment after all four of the party had disappeared in the woods, and the elephant was bearing them away at a rapid pace. But the cries and noise, and a ball which whizzed through Phileas Fogg’s hat, apprised them that the trick had been discovered.

The old rajah’s body, indeed, now appeared upon the burning pyre; and the priests, recovered from their terror, perceived that an abduction had taken place. They hastened into the forest, followed by the soldiers, who fired a volley after the fugitives; but the latter rapidly increased the distance between them, and ere long found themselves beyond the reach of the bullets and arrows.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG DESCENDS THE WHOLE LENGTH OF THE BEAUTIFUL VALLEY OF THE GANGES WITHOUT EVER THINKING OF SEEING IT

The rash exploit had been accomplished; and for an hour Passepartout laughed gaily at his success. Sir Francis pressed the worthy fellow’s hand, and his master said, “Well done!” which, from him, was high commendation; to which Passepartout replied that all the credit of the affair belonged to Mr. Fogg. As for him, he had only been struck with a “queer” idea; and he laughed to think that for a few moments he, Passepartout, the ex-gymnast, ex-sergeant fireman, had been the spouse of a charming woman, a venerable, embalmed rajah! As for the young Indian woman, she had been unconscious throughout of what was passing, and now, wrapped up in a travelling-blanket, was reposing in one of the howdahs.

The elephant, thanks to the skilful guidance of the Parsee, was advancing rapidly through the still darksome forest, and, an hour after leaving the pagoda, had crossed a vast plain. They made a halt at seven o’clock, the young woman being still in a state of complete prostration. The guide made her drink a little brandy and water, but the drowsiness which stupefied her could not yet be shaken off. Sir Francis, who was familiar with the effects of the intoxication produced by the fumes of hemp, reassured his companions on her account. But he was more disturbed at the prospect of her future fate. He told Phileas Fogg that, should Aouda remain in India, she would inevitably fall again into the hands of her executioners. These fanatics were scattered throughout the county, and would, despite the

English police, recover their victim at Madras, Bombay, or Calcutta. She would only be safe by quitting India for ever.

Phileas Fogg replied that he would reflect upon the matter.

The station at Allahabad was reached about ten o'clock, and, the interrupted line of railway being resumed, would enable them to reach Calcutta in less than twenty-four hours. Phileas Fogg would thus be able to arrive in time to take the steamer which left Calcutta the next day, October 25th, at noon, for Hong Kong.

The young woman was placed in one of the waiting-rooms of the station, whilst Passepartout was charged with purchasing for her various articles of toilet, a dress, shawl, and some furs; for which his master gave him unlimited credit. Passepartout started off forthwith, and found himself in the streets of Allahabad, that is, the City of God, one of the most venerated in India, being built at the junction of the two sacred rivers, Ganges and Jumna, the waters of which attract pilgrims from every part of the peninsula. The Ganges, according to the legends of the Ramayana, rises in heaven, whence, owing to Brahma's agency, it descends to the earth.

Passepartout made it a point, as he made his purchases, to take a good look at the city. It was formerly defended by a noble fort, which has since become a state prison; its commerce has dwindled away, and Passepartout in vain looked about him for such a bazaar as he used to frequent in Regent Street. At last he came upon an elderly, crusty Jew, who sold second-hand articles, and from whom he purchased a dress of Scotch stuff, a large mantle, and a fine otter-skin pelisse, for which he did not hesitate to pay seventy-five pounds. He then returned triumphantly to the station.

The influence to which the priests of Pillaji had subjected Aouda began gradually to yield, and she became more herself, so that her fine eyes resumed all their soft Indian expression.

When the poet-king, Ucaf Uddaul, celebrates the charms of the queen of Ahmehnagara, he speaks thus:

“Her shining tresses, divided in two parts, encircle the harmonious contour of her white and delicate cheeks, brilliant in their glow and freshness. Her ebony brows have the form and charm of the bow of Kama, the god of love, and beneath her long silken lashes the purest reflections and a celestial light swim, as in the sacred lakes of Himalaya, in the black pupils of her great clear eyes. Her teeth, fine, equal, and white, glitter between her smiling lips like dewdrops in a passion-flower’s half-enveloped breast. Her delicately formed ears, her vermilion hands, her little feet, curved and tender as the lotus-bud, glitter with the brilliancy of the loveliest pearls of Ceylon, the most dazzling diamonds of Golconda. Her narrow and supple waist, which a hand may clasp around, sets forth the outline of her rounded figure and the beauty of her bosom, where youth in its flower displays the wealth of its treasures; and beneath the silken folds of her tunic she seems to have been modelled in pure silver by the godlike hand of Vicvarcarma, the immortal sculptor.”

It is enough to say, without applying this poetical rhapsody to Aouda, that she was a charming woman, in all the European acceptation of the phrase. She spoke English with great purity, and the guide had not exaggerated in saying that the young Parsee had been transformed by her bringing up.

The train was about to start from Allahabad, and Mr. Fogg proceeded to pay the guide the price agreed upon for his service, and not a farthing more; which astonished Passepartout, who remembered all that his master owed to the guide’s devotion. He had, indeed, risked his life in the adventure at Pillaji, and, if he should be caught afterwards by the Indians, he would with difficulty escape their vengeance. Kiouni, also, must be disposed of. What should be done with the elephant, which had been so dearly purchased? Phileas Fogg had already determined this question.

“Parsee,” said he to the guide, “you have been serviceable and devoted. I have paid for your service, but not for your devotion. Would you like to have this elephant? He is yours.”

The guide’s eyes glistened.

“Your honour is giving me a fortune!” cried he.

“Take him, guide,” returned Mr. Fogg, “and I shall still be your debtor.”

“Good!” exclaimed Passepartout. “Take him, friend. Kiouni is a brave and faithful beast.” And, going up to the elephant, he gave him several lumps of sugar, saying, “Here, Kiouni, here, here.”

The elephant grunted out his satisfaction, and, clasping Passepartout around the waist with his trunk, lifted him as high as his head. Passepartout, not in the least alarmed, caressed the animal, which replaced him gently on the ground.

Soon after, Phileas Fogg, Sir Francis Cromarty, and Passepartout, installed in a carriage with Aouda, who had the best seat, were whirling at full speed towards Benares. It was a run of eighty miles, and was accomplished in two hours. During the journey, the young woman fully recovered her senses. What was her astonishment to find herself in this carriage, on the railway, dressed in European habiliments, and with travellers who were quite strangers to her! Her companions first set about fully reviving her with a little liquor, and then Sir Francis narrated to her what had passed, dwelling upon the courage with which Phileas Fogg had not hesitated to risk his life to save her, and recounting the happy sequel of the venture, the result of Passepartout’s rash idea. Mr. Fogg said nothing; while Passepartout, abashed, kept repeating that “it wasn’t worth telling.”

Aouda pathetically thanked her deliverers, rather with tears than words; her fine eyes interpreted her gratitude better than her lips. Then, as her thoughts strayed back to the scene of the sacrifice, and recalled the dangers which still menaced her, she shuddered with terror.

Phileas Fogg understood what was passing in Aouda’s mind, and offered, in order to reassure her, to escort her to Hong Kong, where she might remain safely until the affair was hushed up — an offer which she eagerly and gratefully accepted. She had, it seems, a Parsee relation, who was one of the principal merchants of Hong Kong, which is wholly an English city, though on an island on the Chinese coast.

At half-past twelve the train stopped at Benares. The Brahmin legends assert that this city is built on the site of the ancient Casi, which, like Mahomet’s tomb, was once suspended between heaven and earth; though the Benares of to-day, which the Orientalists call the Athens of India, stands quite unpoetically on the solid earth, Passepartout caught glimpses of its brick houses and clay huts, giving an aspect of desolation to the place, as the train entered it.

Benares was Sir Francis Cromarty’s destination, the troops he was rejoining being encamped some miles northward of the city. He bade adieu to Phileas Fogg, wishing him all success, and expressing the hope that he would come that way again in a less original but more profitable fashion. Mr. Fogg lightly pressed him by the hand. The parting of Aouda, who did not forget what she owed to Sir Francis, betrayed more warmth; and, as for Passepartout, he received a hearty shake of the hand from the gallant general.

The railway, on leaving Benares, passed for a while along the valley of the Ganges. Through the windows of their carriage the travellers had glimpses of the diversified landscape of Behar, with its mountains clothed in verdure, its fields of barley, wheat, and corn, its jungles peopled with green alligators, its neat villages, and its still thickly-leaved forests. Elephants were bathing in the waters of the sacred river, and groups of Indians, despite the advanced season and chilly air, were performing solemnly their pious ablutions. These were fervent Brahmins, the bitterest foes of Buddhism, their deities being Vishnu, the solar god, Shiva, the divine impersonation of natural forces, and Brahma, the supreme ruler of priests and legislators. What would these divinities think of India, anglicised as it is to-day, with steamers whistling and scudding along the Ganges, frightening the gulls which float upon its surface, the turtles swarming along its banks, and the faithful dwelling upon its borders?

The panorama passed before their eyes like a flash, save when the steam concealed it fitfully from the view; the travellers could scarcely discern the fort of Chupenie, twenty miles south-westward from Benares, the ancient stronghold of the rajahs of Behar; or Ghazipur and its famous rose-water factories; or the tomb of Lord Cornwallis, rising on the left bank of the Ganges; the fortified town of Buxar, or Patna, a large manufacturing and trading-place, where is held the principal opium market of India; or Monghir, a more than European town, for it is as English as Manchester or Birmingham, with its iron foundries, edgetool factories, and high chimneys puffing clouds of black smoke heavenward.

Night came on; the train passed on at full speed, in the midst of the roaring of the tigers, bears, and wolves which fled before the locomotive; and the marvels of Bengal, Golconda ruined Gour, Murshedabad, the ancient capital, Burdwan, Hugly, and the French town of Chandernagor, where Passepartout would have been proud to see his country's flag flying, were hidden from their view in the darkness.

Calcutta was reached at seven in the morning, and the packet left for Hong Kong at noon; so that Phileas Fogg had five hours before him.

According to his journal, he was due at Calcutta on the 25th of October, and that was the exact date of his actual arrival. He was therefore neither behind-hand nor ahead of time. The two days gained between London and Bombay had been lost, as has been seen, in the journey across India. But it is not to be supposed that Phileas Fogg regretted them.

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH THE BAG OF BANKNOTES DISGORGES SOME THOUSANDS OF POUNDS MORE

The train entered the station, and Passepartout jumping out first, was followed by Mr. Fogg, who assisted his fair companion to descend. Phileas Fogg intended to proceed at once to the Hong Kong steamer, in order to get Aouda comfortably settled for the voyage. He was unwilling to leave her while they were still on dangerous ground.

Just as he was leaving the station a policeman came up to him, and said, “Mr. Phileas Fogg?”

“I am he.”

“Is this man your servant?” added the policeman, pointing to Passepartout.

“Yes.”

“Be so good, both of you, as to follow me.”

Mr. Fogg betrayed no surprise whatever. The policeman was a representative of the law, and law is sacred to an Englishman. Passepartout tried to reason about the matter, but the policeman tapped him with his stick, and Mr. Fogg made him a signal to obey.

“May this young lady go with us?” asked he.

“She may,” replied the policeman.

Mr. Fogg, Aouda, and Passepartout were conducted to a palkigahri, a sort of four-wheeled carriage, drawn by two horses, in which they took their places and were driven away. No one spoke during the twenty minutes which elapsed before they reached their destination. They first passed through the “black town,” with its narrow streets, its miserable, dirty huts, and squalid population; then through the “European town,” which presented a relief in its bright brick mansions, shaded by coconut-trees and bristling with masts, where, although it was early morning, elegantly dressed horsemen and handsome equipages were passing back and forth.

The carriage stopped before a modest-looking house, which, however, did not have the appearance of a private mansion. The policeman having requested his prisoners for so, truly, they might be called-to descend, conducted them into a room with barred windows, and said: “You will appear before Judge Obadiah at half-past eight.”

He then retired, and closed the door.

“Why, we are prisoners!” exclaimed Passepartout, falling into a chair.

Aouda, with an emotion she tried to conceal, said to Mr. Fogg: “Sir, you must leave me to my fate! It is on my account that you receive this treatment, it is for having saved me!”

Phileas Fogg contented himself with saying that it was impossible. It was quite unlikely that he should be arrested for preventing a suttee. The complainants would not dare present themselves with such a charge. There was some mistake. Moreover, he would not, in any event, abandon Aouda, but would escort her to Hong Kong.

“But the steamer leaves at noon!” observed Passepartout, nervously.

“We shall be on board by noon,” replied his master, placidly.

It was said so positively that Passepartout could not help muttering to himself, “Parbleu that’s certain! Before noon we shall be on board.” But he was by no means reassured.

At half-past eight the door opened, the policeman appeared, and, requesting them to follow him, led the way to an adjoining hall. It was evidently a court-room, and a crowd of Europeans and natives already occupied the rear of the apartment.

Mr. Fogg and his two companions took their places on a bench opposite the desks of the magistrate and his clerk. Immediately after, Judge Obadiah, a fat, round man, followed by the clerk, entered. He proceeded to take down a wig which was hanging on a nail, and put it hurriedly on his head.

“The first case,” said he. Then, putting his hand to his head, he exclaimed, “Heh! This is not my wig!”

“No, your worship,” returned the clerk, “it is mine.”

“My dear Mr. Oysterpuff, how can a judge give a wise sentence in a clerk’s wig?”

The wigs were exchanged.

Passepartout was getting nervous, for the hands on the face of the big clock over the judge seemed to go around with terrible rapidity.

“The first case,” repeated Judge Obadiah.

“Phileas Fogg?” demanded Oysterpuff.

“I am here,” replied Mr. Fogg.

“Passepartout?”

“Present,” responded Passepartout.

“Good,” said the judge. “You have been looked for, prisoners, for two days on the trains from Bombay.”

“But of what are we accused?” asked Passepartout, impatiently.

“You are about to be informed.”

“I am an English subject, sir,” said Mr. Fogg, “and I have the right — ”

“Have you been ill-treated?”

“Not at all.”

“Very well; let the complainants come in.”

A door was swung open by order of the judge, and three Indian priests entered.

“That’s it,” muttered Passepartout; “these are the rogues who were going to burn our young lady.”

The priests took their places in front of the judge, and the clerk proceeded to read in a loud voice a complaint of sacrilege against Phileas Fogg and his servant, who were accused of having violated a place held consecrated by the Brahmin religion.

“You hear the charge?” asked the judge.

“Yes, sir,” replied Mr. Fogg, consulting his watch, “and I admit it.”

“You admit it?”

“I admit it, and I wish to hear these priests admit, in their turn, what they were going to do at the pagoda of Pillaji.”

The priests looked at each other; they did not seem to understand what was said.

“Yes,” cried Passepartout, warmly; “at the pagoda of Pillaji, where they were on the point of burning their victim.”

The judge stared with astonishment, and the priests were stupefied.

“What victim?” said Judge Obadiah. “Burn whom? In Bombay itself?”

“Bombay?” cried Passepartout.

“Certainly. We are not talking of the pagoda of Pillaji, but of the pagoda of Malabar Hill, at Bombay.”

“And as a proof,” added the clerk, “here are the desecrator’s very shoes, which he left behind him.”

Whereupon he placed a pair of shoes on his desk.

“My shoes!” cried Passepartout, in his surprise permitting this imprudent exclamation to escape him.

The confusion of master and man, who had quite forgotten the affair at Bombay, for which they were now detained at Calcutta, may be imagined.

Fix the detective, had foreseen the advantage which Passepartout's escapade gave him, and, delaying his departure for twelve hours, had consulted the priests of Malabar Hill. Knowing that the English authorities dealt very severely with this kind of misdemeanour, he promised them a goodly sum in damages, and sent them forward to Calcutta by the next train. Owing to the delay caused by the rescue of the young widow, Fix and the priests reached the Indian capital before Mr. Fogg and his servant, the magistrates having been already warned by a dispatch to arrest them should they arrive. Fix's disappointment when he learned that Phileas Fogg had not made his appearance in Calcutta may be imagined. He made up his mind that the robber had stopped somewhere on the route and taken refuge in the southern provinces. For twenty-four hours Fix watched the station with feverish anxiety; at last he was rewarded by seeing Mr. Fogg and Passepartout arrive, accompanied by a young woman, whose presence he was wholly at a loss to explain. He hastened for a policeman; and this was how the party came to be arrested and brought before Judge Obadiah.

Had Passepartout been a little less preoccupied, he would have espied the detective ensconced in a corner of the court-room, watching the proceedings with an interest easily understood; for the warrant had failed to reach him at Calcutta, as it had done at Bombay and Suez.

Judge Obadiah had unfortunately caught Passepartout's rash exclamation, which the poor fellow would have given the world to recall.

"The facts are admitted?" asked the judge.

"Admitted," replied Mr. Fogg, coldly.

"Inasmuch," resumed the judge, "as the English law protects equally and sternly the religions of the Indian people, and as the man Passepartout has admitted that he violated the sacred pagoda of Malabar Hill, at Bombay, on the 20th of October, I condemn the said Passepartout to imprisonment for fifteen days and a fine of three hundred pounds.”

“Three hundred pounds!” cried Passepartout, startled at the largeness of the sum.

“Silence!” shouted the constable.

“And inasmuch,” continued the judge, “as it is not proved that the act was not done by the connivance of the master with the servant, and as the master in any case must be held responsible for the acts of his paid servant, I condemn Phileas Fogg to a week’s imprisonment and a fine of one hundred and fifty pounds.”

Fix rubbed his hands softly with satisfaction; if Phileas Fogg could be detained in Calcutta a week, it would be more than time for the warrant to arrive. Passepartout was stupefied. This sentence ruined his master. A wager of twenty thousand pounds lost, because he, like a precious fool, had gone into that abominable pagoda!

Phileas Fogg, as self-composed as if the judgment did not in the least concern him, did not even lift his eyebrows while it was being pronounced. Just as the clerk was calling the next case, he rose, and said, “I offer bail.”

“You have that right,” returned the judge.

Fix’s blood ran cold, but he resumed his composure when he heard the judge announce that the bail required for each prisoner would be one thousand pounds.

“I will pay it at once,” said Mr. Fogg, taking a roll of bank-bills from the carpet-bag, which Passepartout had by him, and placing them on the clerk’s desk.

“This sum will be restored to you upon your release from prison,” said the judge. “Meanwhile, you are liberated on bail.”

“Come!” said Phileas Fogg to his servant.

“But let them at least give me back my shoes!” cried Passepartout angrily.

“Ah, these are pretty dear shoes!” he muttered, as they were handed to him. “More than a thousand pounds apiece; besides, they pinch my feet.”

Mr. Fogg, offering his arm to Aouda, then departed, followed by the crestfallen Passepartout. Fix still nourished hopes that the robber would not, after all, leave the two thousand pounds behind him, but would decide to serve out his week in jail, and issued forth on Mr. Fogg’s traces. That gentleman took a carriage, and the party were soon landed on one of the quays.

The Rangoon was moored half a mile off in the harbour, its signal of departure hoisted at the mast-head. Eleven o’clock was striking; Mr. Fogg was an hour in advance of time. Fix saw them leave the carriage and push off in a boat for the steamer, and stamped his feet with disappointment.

“The rascal is off, after all!” he exclaimed. “Two thousand pounds sacrificed! He’s as prodigal as a thief! I’ll follow him to the end of the world if necessary; but, at the rate he is going on, the stolen money will soon be exhausted.”

The detective was not far wrong in making this conjecture. Since leaving London, what with travelling expenses, bribes, the purchase of the elephant, bails, and fines, Mr. Fogg had already spent more than five thousand pounds on the way, and the percentage of the sum recovered from the bank robber promised to the detectives, was rapidly diminishing.

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH FIX DOES NOT SEEM TO UNDERSTAND IN THE LEAST WHAT IS SAID TO HIM

The Rangoon — one of the Peninsular and Oriental Company's boats plying in the Chinese and Japanese seas — was a screw steamer, built of iron, weighing about seventeen hundred and seventy tons, and with engines of four hundred horse-power. She was as fast, but not as well fitted up, as the Mongolia, and Aouda was not as comfortably provided for on board of her as Phileas Fogg could have wished. However, the trip from Calcutta to Hong Kong only comprised some three thousand five hundred miles, occupying from ten to twelve days, and the young woman was not difficult to please.

During the first days of the journey Aouda became better acquainted with her protector, and constantly gave evidence of her deep gratitude for what he had done. The phlegmatic gentleman listened to her, apparently at least, with coldness, neither his voice nor his manner betraying the slightest emotion; but he seemed to be always on the watch that nothing should be wanting to Aouda's comfort. He visited her regularly each day at certain hours, not so much to talk himself, as to sit and hear her talk. He treated her with the strictest politeness, but with the precision of an automaton, the movements of which had been arranged for this purpose. Aouda did not quite know what to make of him, though Passepartout had given her some hints of his master's eccentricity, and made her smile by telling her of the wager which was sending him round the world. After all, she owed Phileas Fogg her life, and she always regarded him through the exalting medium of her gratitude.

Aouda confirmed the Parsee guide’s narrative of her touching history. She did, indeed, belong to the highest of the native races of India. Many of the Parsee merchants have made great fortunes there by dealing in cotton; and one of them, Sir Jametsee Jeejeebhoy, was made a baronet by the English government. Aouda was a relative of this great man, and it was his cousin, Jeejeeh, whom she hoped to join at Hong Kong. Whether she would find a protector in him she could not tell; but Mr. Fogg essayed to calm her anxieties, and to assure her that everything would be mathematically — he used the very word — arranged. Aouda fastened her great eyes, “clear as the sacred lakes of the Himalaya,” upon him; but the intractable Fogg, as reserved as ever, did not seem at all inclined to throw himself into this lake.

The first few days of the voyage passed prosperously, amid favourable weather and propitious winds, and they soon came in sight of the great Andaman, the principal of the islands in the Bay of Bengal, with its picturesque Saddle Peak, two thousand four hundred feet high, looming above the waters. The steamer passed along near the shores, but the savage Papuans, who are in the lowest scale of humanity, but are not, as has been asserted, cannibals, did not make their appearance.

The panorama of the islands, as they steamed by them, was superb. Vast forests of palms, arecs, bamboo, teakwood, of the gigantic mimosa, and tree-like ferns covered the foreground, while behind, the graceful outlines of the mountains were traced against the sky; and along the coasts swarmed by thousands the precious swallows whose nests furnish a luxurious dish to the tables of the Celestial Empire. The varied landscape afforded by the Andaman Islands was soon passed, however, and the Rangoon rapidly approached the Straits of Malacca, which gave access to the China seas.

What was detective Fix, so unluckily drawn on from country to country, doing all this while? He had managed to embark on the Rangoon at Calcutta without being seen by Passepartout, after leaving orders that, if the warrant should arrive, it should be forwarded to him at Hong Kong; and he hoped to conceal his presence to the end of the voyage. It would have been difficult to explain why he was on board without awakening Passepartout's suspicions, who thought him still at Bombay. But necessity impelled him, nevertheless, to renew his acquaintance with the worthy servant, as will be seen.

All the detective's hopes and wishes were now centred on Hong Kong; for the steamer's stay at Singapore would be too brief to enable him to take any steps there. The arrest must be made at Hong Kong, or the robber would probably escape him for ever. Hong Kong was the last English ground on which he would set foot; beyond, China, Japan, America offered to Fogg an almost certain refuge. If the warrant should at last make its appearance at Hong Kong, Fix could arrest him and give him into the hands of the local police, and there would be no further trouble. But beyond Hong Kong, a simple warrant would be of no avail; an extradition warrant would be necessary, and that would result in delays and obstacles, of which the rascal would take advantage to elude justice.

Fix thought over these probabilities during the long hours which he spent in his cabin, and kept repeating to himself, "Now, either the warrant will be at Hong Kong, in which case I shall arrest my man, or it will not be there; and this time it is absolutely necessary that I should delay his departure. I have failed at Bombay, and I have failed at Calcutta; if I fail at Hong Kong, my reputation is lost: Cost what it may, I must succeed! But how shall I prevent his departure, if that should turn out to be my last resource?"

Fix made up his mind that, if worst came to worst, he would make a confidant of Passepartout, and tell him what kind of a fellow his master really was. That Passepartout was not Fogg's accomplice, he was very certain. The servant, enlightened by his disclosure, and afraid of being himself implicated in the crime, would doubtless become an ally of the detective. But this method was a dangerous one, only to be employed when everything else had failed. A word from Passepartout to his master would ruin all. The detective was therefore in a sore strait. But suddenly a new idea struck him. The presence of Aouda on the Rangoon, in company with Phileas Fogg, gave him new material for reflection.

Who was this woman? What combination of events had made her Fogg's travelling companion? They had evidently met somewhere between Bombay and Calcutta; but where? Had they met accidentally, or had Fogg gone into the interior purposely in quest of this charming damsel? Fix was fairly puzzled. He asked himself whether there had not been a wicked elopement; and this idea so impressed itself upon his mind that he determined to make use of the supposed intrigue. Whether the young woman were married or not, he would be able to create such difficulties for Mr. Fogg at Hong Kong that he could not escape by paying any amount of money.

But could he even wait till they reached Hong Kong? Fogg had an abominable way of jumping from one boat to another, and, before anything could be effected, might get full under way again for Yokohama.

Fix decided that he must warn the English authorities, and signal the Rangoon before her arrival. This was easy to do, since the steamer stopped at Singapore, whence there is a telegraphic wire to Hong Kong. He finally resolved, moreover, before acting more positively, to question Passepartout.

It would not be difficult to make him talk; and, as there was no time to lose, Fix prepared to make himself known.

It was now the 30th of October, and on the following day the Rangoon was due at Singapore.

Fix emerged from his cabin and went on deck. Passepartout was promenading up and down in the forward part of the steamer. The detective rushed forward with every appearance of extreme surprise, and exclaimed, “You here, on the Rangoon?”

“What, Monsieur Fix, are you on board?” returned the really astonished Passepartout, recognising his crony of the Mongolia. “Why, I left you at Bombay, and here you are, on the way to Hong Kong! Are you going round the world too?”

“No, no,” replied Fix; “I shall stop at Hong Kong — at least for some days.”

“Hum!” said Passepartout, who seemed for an instant perplexed. “But how is it I have not seen you on board since we left Calcutta?”

“Oh, a trifle of sea-sickness — I’ve been staying in my berth. The Gulf of Bengal does not agree with me as well as the Indian Ocean. And how is Mr. Fogg?”

“As well and as punctual as ever, not a day behind time! But, Monsieur Fix, you don’t know that we have a young lady with us.”

“A young lady?” replied the detective, not seeming to comprehend what was said.

Passepartout thereupon recounted Aouda’s history, the affair at the Bombay pagoda, the purchase of the elephant for two thousand pounds, the rescue, the arrest, and sentence of the Calcutta court, and the restoration of Mr. Fogg and himself to liberty on bail. Fix, who was familiar with the last events, seemed to be equally ignorant of all that Passepartout related; and the later was charmed to find so interested a listener.

“But does your master propose to carry this young woman to Europe?”

“Not at all. We are simply going to place her under the protection of one of her relatives, a rich merchant at Hong Kong.”

“Nothing to be done there,” said Fix to himself, concealing his disappointment. “A glass of gin, Mr. Passepartout?”

“Willingly, Monsieur Fix. We must at least have a friendly glass on board the Rangoon.”

CHAPTER XVII

SHOWING WHAT HAPPENED ON THE VOYAGE FROM SINGAPORE TO HONG KONG

The detective and Passepartout met often on deck after this interview, though Fix was reserved, and did not attempt to induce his companion to divulge any more facts concerning Mr. Fogg. He caught a glimpse of that mysterious gentleman once or twice; but Mr. Fogg usually confined himself to the cabin, where he kept Aouda company, or, according to his inveterate habit, took a hand at whist.

Passepartout began very seriously to conjecture what strange chance kept Fix still on the route that his master was pursuing. It was really worth considering why this certainly very amiable and complacent person, whom he had first met at Suez, had then encountered on board the Mongolia, who disembarked at Bombay, which he announced as his destination, and now turned up so unexpectedly on the Rangoon, was following Mr. Fogg's tracks step by step. What was Fix's object? Passepartout was ready to wager his Indian shoes — which he religiously preserved — that Fix would also leave Hong Kong at the same time with them, and probably on the same steamer.

Passepartout might have cudgelled his brain for a century without hitting upon the real object which the detective had in view. He never could have imagined that Phileas Fogg was being tracked as a robber around the globe. But, as it is in human nature to attempt the solution of every mystery, Passepartout suddenly discovered an explanation of Fix's movements, which was in truth far from unreasonable. Fix, he thought, could only be an agent of Mr. Fogg’s friends at the Reform Club, sent to follow him up, and to ascertain that he really went round the world as had been agreed upon.

“It’s clear!” repeated the worthy servant to himself, proud of his shrewdness. “He’s a spy sent to keep us in view! That isn’t quite the thing, either, to be spying Mr. Fogg, who is so honourable a man! Ah, gentlemen of the Reform, this shall cost you dear!”

Passepartout, enchanted with his discovery, resolved to say nothing to his master, lest he should be justly offended at this mistrust on the part of his adversaries. But he determined to chaff Fix, when he had the chance, with mysterious allusions, which, however, need not betray his real suspicions.

During the afternoon of Wednesday, 30th October, the Rangoon entered the Strait of Malacca, which separates the peninsula of that name from Sumatra. The mountainous and craggy islets intercepted the beauties of this noble island from the view of the travellers. The Rangoon weighed anchor at Singapore the next day at four a.m. to receive coal, having gained half a day on the prescribed time of her arrival. Phileas Fogg noted this gain in his journal, and then, accompanied by Aouda, who betrayed a desire for a walk on shore, disembarked.

Fix, who suspected Mr. Fogg’s every movement, followed them cautiously, without being himself perceived; while Passepartout, laughing in his sleeve at Fix’s manoeuvres, went about his usual errands.

The island of Singapore is not imposing in aspect, for there are no mountains; yet its appearance is not without attractions. It is a park checkered by pleasant highways and avenues. A handsome carriage, drawn by a sleek pair of New Holland horses, carried Phileas Fogg and Aouda into the midst of rows of palms with brilliant foliage, and of clove-trees, whereof the cloves form the heart of a half-open flower. Pepper plants replaced the prickly hedges of European fields; sago-bushes, large ferns with gorgeous branches, varied the aspect of this tropical clime; while nutmeg-trees in full foliage filled the air with a penetrating perfume. Agile and grinning bands of monkeys skipped about in the trees, nor were tigers wanting in the jungles.

After a drive of two hours through the country, Aouda and Mr. Fogg returned to the town, which is a vast collection of heavy-looking, irregular houses, surrounded by charming gardens rich in tropical fruits and plants; and at ten o'clock they re-embarked, closely followed by the detective, who had kept them constantly in sight.

Passepartout, who had been purchasing several dozen mangoes — a fruit as large as good-sized apples, of a dark-brown colour outside and a bright red within, and whose white pulp, melting in the mouth, affords gourmands a delicious sensation — was waiting for them on deck. He was only too glad to offer some mangoes to Aouda, who thanked him very gracefully for them.

At eleven o'clock the Rangoon rode out of Singapore harbour, and in a few hours the high mountains of Malacca, with their forests, inhabited by the most beautifully-furred tigers in the world, were lost to view. Singapore is distant some thirteen hundred miles from the island of Hong Kong, which is a little English colony near the Chinese coast. Phileas Fogg hoped to accomplish the journey in six days, so as to be in time for the steamer which would leave on the 6th of November for Yokohama, the principal Japanese port.

The Rangoon had a large quota of passengers, many of whom disembarked at Singapore, among them a number of Indians, Ceylonese, Chinamen, Malays, and Portuguese, mostly second-class travellers.

The weather, which had hitherto been fine, changed with the last quarter of the moon. The sea rolled heavily, and the wind at intervals rose almost to a storm, but happily blew from the south-west, and thus aided the steamer’s progress. The captain as often as possible put up his sails, and under the double action of steam and sail the vessel made rapid progress along the coasts of Anam and Cochin China. Owing to the defective construction of the Rangoon, however, unusual precautions became necessary in unfavourable weather; but the loss of time which resulted from this cause, while it nearly drove Passepartout out of his senses, did not seem to affect his master in the least. Passepartout blamed the captain, the engineer, and the crew, and consigned all who were connected with the ship to the land where the pepper grows. Perhaps the thought of the gas, which was remorselessly burning at his expense in Saville Row, had something to do with his hot impatience.

“You are in a great hurry, then,” said Fix to him one day, “to reach Hong Kong?”

“A very great hurry!”

“Mr. Fogg, I suppose, is anxious to catch the steamer for Yokohama?”

“Terribly anxious.”

“You believe in this journey around the world, then?”

“Absolutely. Don’t you, Mr. Fix?”

“I? I don’t believe a word of it.”

“You’re a sly dog!” said Passepartout, winking at him.

This expression rather disturbed Fix, without his knowing why. Had the Frenchman guessed his real purpose? He knew not what to think. But how could Passepartout have discovered that he was a detective? Yet, in speaking as he did, the man evidently meant more than he expressed.

Passepartout went still further the next day; he could not hold his tongue.

“Mr. Fix,” said he, in a bantering tone, “shall we be so unfortunate as to lose you when we get to Hong Kong?”

“Why,” responded Fix, a little embarrassed, “I don’t know; perhaps — ”

“Ah, if you would only go on with us! An agent of the Peninsular Company, you know, can’t stop on the way! You were only going to Bombay, and here you are in China. America is not far off, and from America to Europe is only a step.”

Fix looked intently at his companion, whose countenance was as serene as possible, and laughed with him. But Passepartout persisted in chaffing him by asking him if he made much by his present occupation.

“Yes, and no,” returned Fix; “there is good and bad luck in such things. But you must understand that I don’t travel at my own expense.”

“Oh, I am quite sure of that!” cried Passepartout, laughing heartily.

Fix, fairly puzzled, descended to his cabin and gave himself up to his reflections. He was evidently suspected; somehow or other the Frenchman had found out that he was a detective. But had he told his master? What part was he playing in all this: was he an accomplice or not? Was the game, then, up? Fix spent several hours turning these things over in his mind, sometimes thinking that all was lost, then persuading himself that Fogg was ignorant of his presence, and then undecided what course it was best to take.

Nevertheless, he preserved his coolness of mind, and at last resolved to deal plainly with Passepartout. If he did not find it practicable to arrest Fogg at Hong Kong, and if Fogg made preparations to leave that last foothold of English territory, he, Fix, would tell Passepartout all. Either the servant was the accomplice of his master, and in this case the master knew of his operations, and he should fail; or else the servant knew nothing about the robbery, and then his interest would be to abandon the robber.

Such was the situation between Fix and Passepartout. Meanwhile Phileas Fogg moved about above them in the most majestic and unconscious indifference. He was passing methodically in his orbit around the world, regardless of the lesser stars which gravitated around him. Yet there was near by what the astronomers would call a disturbing star, which might have produced an agitation in this gentleman’s heart. But no! the charms of Aouda failed to act, to Passepartout’s great surprise; and the disturbances, if they existed, would have been more difficult to calculate than those of Uranus which led to the discovery of Neptune.

It was every day an increasing wonder to Passepartout, who read in Aouda’s eyes the depths of her gratitude to his master. Phileas Fogg, though brave and gallant, must be, he thought, quite heartless. As to the sentiment which this journey might have awakened in him, there was clearly no trace of such a thing; while poor Passepartout existed in perpetual reveries.

One day he was leaning on the railing of the engine-room, and was observing the engine, when a sudden pitch of the steamer threw the screw out of the water. The steam came hissing out of the valves; and this made Passepartout indignant.

“The valves are not sufficiently charged!” he exclaimed. “We are not going. Oh, these English! If this was an American craft, we should blow up, perhaps, but we should at all events go faster!”

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG, PASSEPARTOUT, AND FIX GO EACH ABOUT HIS BUSINESS

The weather was bad during the latter days of the voyage. The wind, obstinately remaining in the north-west, blew a gale, and retarded the steamer. The Rangoon rolled heavily and the passengers became impatient of the long, monstrous waves which the wind raised before their path. A sort of tempest arose on the 3rd of November, the squall knocking the vessel about with fury, and the waves running high. The Rangoon reefed all her sails, and even the rigging proved too much, whistling and shaking amid the squall. The steamer was forced to proceed slowly, and the captain estimated that she would reach Hong Kong twenty hours behind time, and more if the storm lasted.

Phileas Fogg gazed at the tempestuous sea, which seemed to be struggling especially to delay him, with his habitual tranquillity. He never changed countenance for an instant, though a delay of twenty hours, by making him too late for the Yokohama boat, would almost inevitably cause the loss of the wager. But this man of nerve manifested neither impatience nor annoyance; it seemed as if the storm were a part of his programme, and had been foreseen. Aouda was amazed to find him as calm as he had been from the first time she saw him.

Fix did not look at the state of things in the same light. The storm greatly pleased him. His satisfaction would have been complete had the Rangoon been forced to retreat before the violence of wind and waves. Each delay filled him with hope, for it became more and more probable that Fogg would be obliged to remain some days at Hong Kong; and now the heavens themselves became his allies, with the gusts and squalls. It mattered not that they made him sea-sick — he made no account of this inconvenience; and, whilst his body was writhing under their effects, his spirit bounded with hopeful exultation.

Passepartout was enraged beyond expression by the unpropitious weather. Everything had gone so well till now! Earth and sea had seemed to be at his master's service; steamers and railways obeyed him; wind and steam united to speed his journey. Had the hour of adversity come? Passepartout was as much excited as if the twenty thousand pounds were to come from his own pocket. The storm exasperated him, the gale made him furious, and he longed to lash the obstinate sea into obedience. Poor fellow! Fix carefully concealed from him his own satisfaction, for, had he betrayed it, Passepartout could scarcely have restrained himself from personal violence.

Passepartout remained on deck as long as the tempest lasted, being unable to remain quiet below, and taking it into his head to aid the progress of the ship by lending a hand with the crew. He overwhelmed the captain, officers, and sailors, who could not help laughing at his impatience, with all sorts of questions. He wanted to know exactly how long the storm was going to last; whereupon he was referred to the barometer, which seemed to have no intention of rising. Passepartout shook it, but with no perceptible effect; for neither shaking nor maledictions could prevail upon it to change its mind.

On the 4th, however, the sea became more calm, and the storm lessened its violence; the wind veered southward, and was once more favourable. Passepartout cleared up with the weather. Some of the sails were unfurled, and the Rangoon resumed its most rapid speed. The time lost could not, however, be regained. Land was not signalled until five o'clock on the morning of the 6th; the steamer was due on the 5th. Phileas Fogg was twenty-four hours behind-hand, and the Yokohama steamer would, of course, be missed.

The pilot went on board at six, and took his place on the bridge, to guide the Rangoon through the channels to the port of Hong Kong. Passepartout longed to ask him if the steamer had left for Yokohama; but he dared not, for he wished to preserve the spark of hope, which still remained till the last moment. He had confided his anxiety to Fix who — the sly rascal! — tried to console him by saying that Mr. Fogg would be in time if he took the next boat; but this only put Passepartout in a passion.

Mr. Fogg, bolder than his servant, did not hesitate to approach the pilot, and tranquilly ask him if he knew when a steamer would leave Hong Kong for Yokohama.

“At high tide to-morrow morning,” answered the pilot.

“Ah!” said Mr. Fogg, without betraying any astonishment.

Passepartout, who heard what passed, would willingly have embraced the pilot, while Fix would have been glad to twist his neck.

“What is the steamer’s name?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“The Carnatic.”

“Ought she not to have gone yesterday?”

“Yes, sir; but they had to repair one of her boilers, and so her departure was postponed till to-morrow.”

“Thank you,” returned Mr. Fogg, descending mathematically to the saloon.

Passepartout clasped the pilot’s hand and shook it heartily in his delight, exclaiming, “Pilot, you are the best of good fellows!”

The pilot probably does not know to this day why his responses won him this enthusiastic greeting. He remounted the bridge, and guided the steamer through the flotilla of junks, tankas, and fishing boats which crowd the harbour of Hong Kong.

At one o’clock the Rangoon was at the quay, and the passengers were going ashore.

Chance had strangely favoured Phileas Fogg, for had not the Carnatic been forced to lie over for repairing her boilers, she would have left on the 6th of November, and the passengers for Japan would have been obliged to await for a week the sailing of the next steamer. Mr. Fogg was, it is true, twenty-four hours behind his time; but this could not seriously imperil the remainder of his tour.

The steamer which crossed the Pacific from Yokohama to San Francisco made a direct connection with that from Hong Kong, and it could not sail until the latter reached Yokohama; and if Mr. Fogg was twenty-four hours late on reaching Yokohama, this time would no doubt be easily regained in the voyage of twenty-two days across the Pacific. He found himself, then, about twenty-four hours behind-hand, thirty-five days after leaving London.

The Carnatic was announced to leave Hong Kong at five the next morning. Mr. Fogg had sixteen hours in which to attend to his business there, which was to deposit Aouda safely with her wealthy relative.

On landing, he conducted her to a palanquin, in which they repaired to the Club Hotel. A room was engaged for the young woman, and Mr. Fogg, after seeing that she wanted for nothing, set out in search of her cousin Jeejeeh. He instructed Passepartout to remain at the hotel until his return, that Aouda might not be left entirely alone.

Mr. Fogg repaired to the Exchange, where, he did not doubt, every one would know so wealthy and considerable a personage as the Parsee merchant. Meeting a broker, he made the inquiry, to learn that Jeejeeh had left China two years before, and, retiring from business with an immense fortune, had taken up his residence in Europe — in Holland the broker thought, with the merchants of which country he had principally traded. Phileas Fogg returned to the hotel, begged a moment's conversation with Aouda, and without more ado, apprised her that Jeejeeh was no longer at Hong Kong, but probably in Holland.

Aouda at first said nothing. She passed her hand across her forehead, and reflected a few moments. Then, in her sweet, soft voice, she said: "What ought I to do, Mr. Fogg?"

"It is very simple," responded the gentleman. "Go on to Europe."

"But I cannot intrude — "

"You do not intrude, nor do you in the least embarrass my project. Passepartout!"

"Monsieur."

"Go to the Carnatic, and engage three cabins."

Passepartout, delighted that the young woman, who was very gracious to him, was going to continue the journey with them, went off at a brisk gait to obey his master's order.

CHAPTER XIX

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT TAKES A TOO GREAT INTEREST IN HIS MASTER, AND WHAT COMES OF IT

Hong Kong is an island which came into the possession of the English by the Treaty of Nankin, after the war of 1842; and the colonising genius of the English has created upon it an important city and an excellent port. The island is situated at the mouth of the Canton River, and is separated by about sixty miles from the Portuguese town of Macao, on the opposite coast. Hong Kong has beaten Macao in the struggle for the Chinese trade, and now the greater part of the transportation of Chinese goods finds its depot at the former place. Docks, hospitals, wharves, a Gothic cathedral, a government house, macadamised streets, give to Hong Kong the appearance of a town in Kent or Surrey transferred by some strange magic to the antipodes.

Passepartout wandered, with his hands in his pockets, towards the Victoria port, gazing as he went at the curious palanquins and other modes of conveyance, and the groups of Chinese, Japanese, and Europeans who passed to and fro in the streets. Hong Kong seemed to him not unlike Bombay, Calcutta, and Singapore, since, like them, it betrayed everywhere the evidence of English supremacy. At the Victoria port he found a confused mass of ships of all nations: English, French, American, and Dutch, men-of-war and trading vessels, Japanese and Chinese junks, sempas, tankas, and flower-boats, which formed so many floating parterres. Passepartout noticed in the crowd a number of the natives who seemed very old and were dressed in yellow. On going into a barber’s to get shaved he learned that these ancient men were all at least eighty years old, at which age they are permitted to wear yellow, which is the Imperial colour. Passepartout, without exactly knowing why, thought this very funny.

On reaching the quay where they were to embark on the Carnatic, he was not astonished to find Fix walking up and down. The detective seemed very much disturbed and disappointed.

“This is bad,” muttered Passepartout, “for the gentlemen of the Reform Club!” He accosted Fix with a merry smile, as if he had not perceived that gentleman’s chagrin. The detective had, indeed, good reasons to inveigh against the bad luck which pursued him. The warrant had not come! It was certainly on the way, but as certainly it could not now reach Hong Kong for several days; and, this being the last English territory on Mr. Fogg’s route, the robber would escape, unless he could manage to detain him.

“Well, Monsieur Fix,” said Passepartout, “have you decided to go with us so far as America?”

“Yes,” returned Fix, through his set teeth.

“Good!” exclaimed Passepartout, laughing heartily. “I knew you could not persuade yourself to separate from us. Come and engage your berth.”

They entered the steamer office and secured cabins for four persons. The clerk, as he gave them the tickets, informed them that, the repairs on the Carnatic having been completed, the steamer would leave that very evening, and not next morning, as had been announced.

“That will suit my master all the better,” said Passepartout. “I will go and let him know.”

Fix now decided to make a bold move; he resolved to tell Passepartout all. It seemed to be the only possible means of keeping Phileas Fogg several days longer at Hong Kong. He accordingly invited his companion into a tavern which caught his eye on the quay. On entering, they found themselves in a large room handsomely decorated, at the end of which was a large camp-bed furnished with cushions. Several persons lay upon this bed in a deep sleep. At the small tables which were arranged about the room some thirty customers were drinking English beer, porter, gin, and brandy; smoking, the while, long red clay pipes stuffed with little balls of opium mingled with essence of rose. From time to time one of the smokers, overcome with the narcotic, would slip under the table, whereupon the waiters, taking him by the head and feet, carried and laid him upon the bed. The bed already supported twenty of these stupefied sots.

Fix and Passepartout saw that they were in a smoking-house haunted by those wretched, cadaverous, idiotic creatures to whom the English merchants sell every year the miserable drug called opium, to the amount of one million four hundred thousand pounds — thousands devoted to one of the most despicable vices which afflict humanity! The Chinese government has in vain attempted to deal with the evil by stringent laws. It passed gradually from the rich, to whom it was at first exclusively reserved, to the lower classes, and then its ravages could not be arrested. Opium is smoked everywhere, at all times, by men and women, in the Celestial Empire; and, once accustomed to it, the victims cannot dispense with it, except by suffering horrible bodily contortions and agonies. A great smoker can smoke as many as eight pipes a day; but he dies in five years. It was in one of these dens that Fix and Passepartout, in search of a friendly glass, found themselves. Passepartout had no money, but willingly accepted Fix’s invitation in the hope of returning the obligation at some future time.

They ordered two bottles of port, to which the Frenchman did ample justice, whilst Fix observed him with close attention. They chatted about the journey, and Passepartout was especially merry at the idea that Fix was going to continue it with them. When the bottles were empty, however, he rose to go and tell his master of the change in the time of the sailing of the Carnatic.

Fix caught him by the arm, and said, “Wait a moment.”

“What for, Mr. Fix?”

“I want to have a serious talk with you.”

“A serious talk!” cried Passepartout, drinking up the little wine that was left in the bottom of his glass. “Well, we’ll talk about it to-morrow; I haven’t time now.”

“Stay! What I have to say concerns your master.”

Passepartout, at this, looked attentively at his companion. Fix’s face seemed to have a singular expression. He resumed his seat.

“What is it that you have to say?”

Fix placed his hand upon Passepartout’s arm, and, lowering his voice, said, “You have guessed who I am?”

“Parbleu!” said Passepartout, smiling.

“Then I’m going to tell you everything — ”

“Now that I know everything, my friend! Ah! that’s very good. But go on, go on. First, though, let me tell you that those gentlemen have put themselves to a useless expense.”

“Useless!” said Fix. “You speak confidently. It’s clear that you don’t know how large the sum is.”

“Of course I do,” returned Passepartout. “Twenty thousand pounds.”

“Fifty-five thousand!” answered Fix, pressing his companion’s hand.

“What!” cried the Frenchman. “Has Monsieur Fogg dared — fifty-five thousand pounds! Well, there’s all the more reason for not losing an instant,” he continued, getting up hastily.

Fix pushed Passepartout back in his chair, and resumed: “Fifty-five thousand pounds; and if I succeed, I get two thousand pounds. If you’ll help me, I’ll let you have five hundred of them.”

“Help you?” cried Passepartout, whose eyes were standing wide open.

“Yes; help me keep Mr. Fogg here for two or three days.”

“Why, what are you saying? Those gentlemen are not satisfied with following my master and suspecting his honour, but they must try to put obstacles in his way! I blush for them!”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that it is a piece of shameful trickery. They might as well waylay Mr. Fogg and put his money in their pockets!”

“That’s just what we count on doing.”

“It’s a conspiracy, then,” cried Passepartout, who became more and more excited as the liquor mounted in his head, for he drank without perceiving it. “A real conspiracy! And gentlemen, too. Bah!”

Fix began to be puzzled.

“Members of the Reform Club!” continued Passepartout. “You must know, Monsieur Fix, that my master is an honest man, and that, when he makes a wager, he tries to win it fairly!”

“But who do you think I am?” asked Fix, looking at him intently.

“Parbleu! An agent of the members of the Reform Club, sent out here to interrupt my master’s journey. But, though I found you out some time ago, I’ve taken good care to say nothing about it to Mr. Fogg.”

“He knows nothing, then?”

“Nothing,” replied Passepartout, again emptying his glass.

The detective passed his hand across his forehead, hesitating before he spoke again. What should he do? Passepartout’s mistake seemed sincere, but it made his design more difficult. It was evident that the servant was not the master’s accomplice, as Fix had been inclined to suspect.

“Well,” said the detective to himself, “as he is not an accomplice, he will help me.”

He had no time to lose: Fogg must be detained at Hong Kong, so he resolved to make a clean breast of it.

“Listen to me,” said Fix abruptly. “I am not, as you think, an agent of the members of the Reform Club — ”

“Bah!” retorted Passepartout, with an air of raillery.

“I am a police detective, sent out here by the London office.”

“You, a detective?”

“I will prove it. Here is my commission.”

Passepartout was speechless with astonishment when Fix displayed this document, the genuineness of which could not be doubted.

“Mr. Fogg’s wager,” resumed Fix, “is only a pretext, of which you and the gentlemen of the Reform are dupes. He had a motive for securing your innocent complicity.”

“But why?”

“Listen. On the 28th of last September a robbery of fifty-five thousand pounds was committed at the Bank of England by a person whose description was fortunately secured. Here is his description; it answers exactly to that of Mr. Phileas Fogg.”

“What nonsense!” cried Passepartout, striking the table with his fist. “My master is the most honourable of men!”

“How can you tell? You know scarcely anything about him. You went into his service the day he came away; and he came away on a foolish pretext, without trunks, and carrying a large amount in banknotes. And yet you are bold enough to assert that he is an honest man!”

“Yes, yes,” repeated the poor fellow, mechanically.

“Would you like to be arrested as his accomplice?”

Passepartout, overcome by what he had heard, held his head between his hands, and did not dare to look at the detective. Phileas Fogg, the saviour of Aouda, that brave and generous man, a robber! And yet how many presumptions there were against him! Passepartout essayed to reject the suspicions which forced themselves upon his mind; he did not wish to believe that his master was guilty.

“Well, what do you want of me?” said he, at last, with an effort.

“See here,” replied Fix; “I have tracked Mr. Fogg to this place, but as yet I have failed to receive the warrant of arrest for which I sent to London. You must help me to keep him here in Hong Kong — ”

“I! But I — ”

“I will share with you the two thousand pounds reward offered by the Bank of England.”

“Never!” replied Passepartout, who tried to rise, but fell back, exhausted in mind and body.

“Mr. Fix,” he stammered, “even should what you say be true — if my master is really the robber you are seeking for — which I deny — I have been, am, in his service; I have seen his generosity and goodness; and I will never betray him — not for all the gold in the world. I come from a village where they don’t eat that kind of bread!”

“You refuse?”

“I refuse.”

“Consider that I’ve said nothing,” said Fix; “and let us drink.”

“Yes; let us drink!”

Passepartout felt himself yielding more and more to the effects of the liquor. Fix, seeing that he must, at all hazards, be separated from his master, wished to entirely overcome him. Some pipes full of opium lay upon the table. Fix slipped one into Passepartout’s hand. He took it, put it between his lips, lit it, drew several puffs, and his head, becoming heavy under the influence of the narcotic, fell upon the table.

“At last!” said Fix, seeing Passepartout unconscious. “Mr. Fogg will not be informed of the Carnatic’s departure; and, if he is, he will have to go without this cursed Frenchman!”

And, after paying his bill, Fix left the tavern.

CHAPTER XX

IN WHICH FIX COMES FACE TO FACE WITH PHILEAS FOGG

While these events were passing at the opium-house, Mr. Fogg, unconscious of the danger he was in of losing the steamer, was quietly escorting Aouda about the streets of the English quarter, making the necessary purchases for the long voyage before them. It was all very well for an Englishman like Mr. Fogg to make the tour of the world with a carpet-bag; a lady could not be expected to travel comfortably under such conditions. He acquitted his task with characteristic serenity, and invariably replied to the remonstrances of his fair companion, who was confused by his patience and generosity:

“It is in the interest of my journey — a part of my programme.”

The purchases made, they returned to the hotel, where they dined at a sumptuously served table-d’hote; after which Aouda, shaking hands with her protector after the English fashion, retired to her room for rest. Mr. Fogg absorbed himself throughout the evening in the perusal of The Times and Illustrated London News.

Had he been capable of being astonished at anything, it would have been not to see his servant return at bedtime. But, knowing that the steamer was not to leave for Yokohama until the next morning, he did not disturb himself about the matter. When Passepartout did not appear the next morning to answer his master’s bell, Mr. Fogg, not betraying the least vexation, contented himself with taking his carpet-bag, calling Aouda, and sending for a palanquin.

It was then eight o’clock; at half-past nine, it being then high tide, the Carnatic would leave the harbour. Mr. Fogg and Aouda got into the palanquin, their luggage being brought after on a wheelbarrow, and half an hour later stepped upon the quay whence they were to embark. Mr. Fogg then learned that the Carnatic had sailed the evening before. He had expected to find not only the steamer, but his domestic, and was forced to give up both; but no sign of disappointment appeared on his face, and he merely remarked to Aouda, “It is an accident, madam; nothing more.”

At this moment a man who had been observing him attentively approached. It was Fix, who, bowing, addressed Mr. Fogg: “Were you not, like me, sir, a passenger by the Rangoon, which arrived yesterday?”

“I was, sir,” replied Mr. Fogg coldly. “But I have not the honour — ”

“Pardon me; I thought I should find your servant here.”

“Do you know where he is, sir?” asked Aouda anxiously.

“What!” responded Fix, feigning surprise. “Is he not with you?”

“No,” said Aouda. “He has not made his appearance since yesterday. Could he have gone on board the Carnatic without us?”

“Without you, madam?” answered the detective. “Excuse me, did you intend to sail in the Carnatic?”

“Yes, sir.”

“So did I, madam, and I am excessively disappointed. The Carnatic, its repairs being completed, left Hong Kong twelve hours before the stated time, without any notice being given; and we must now wait a week for another steamer."

As he said "a week" Fix felt his heart leap for joy. Fogg detained at Hong Kong for a week! There would be time for the warrant to arrive, and fortune at last favoured the representative of the law. His horror may be imagined when he heard Mr. Fogg say, in his placid voice, "But there are other vessels besides the Carnatic, it seems to me, in the harbour of Hong Kong."

And, offering his arm to Aouda, he directed his steps toward the docks in search of some craft about to start. Fix, stupefied, followed; it seemed as if he were attached to Mr. Fogg by an invisible thread. Chance, however, appeared really to have abandoned the man it had hitherto served so well. For three hours Phileas Fogg wandered about the docks, with the determination, if necessary, to charter a vessel to carry him to Yokohama; but he could only find vessels which were loading or unloading, and which could not therefore set sail. Fix began to hope again.

But Mr. Fogg, far from being discouraged, was continuing his search, resolved not to stop if he had to resort to Macao, when he was accosted by a sailor on one of the wharves.

"Is your honour looking for a boat?"

"Have you a boat ready to sail?"

"Yes, your honour; a pilot-boat — No. 43 — the best in the harbour."

"Does she go fast?"

"Between eight and nine knots the hour. Will you look at her?"

“Yes.”

“Your honour will be satisfied with her. Is it for a sea excursion?”

“No; for a voyage.”

“A voyage?”

“Yes, will you agree to take me to Yokohama?”

The sailor leaned on the railing, opened his eyes wide, and said, “Is your honour joking?”

“No. I have missed the Carnatic, and I must get to Yokohama by the 14th at the latest, to take the boat for San Francisco.”

“I am sorry,” said the sailor; “but it is impossible.”

“I offer you a hundred pounds per day, and an additional reward of two hundred pounds if I reach Yokohama in time.”

“Are you in earnest?”

“Very much so.”

The pilot walked away a little distance, and gazed out to sea, evidently struggling between the anxiety to gain a large sum and the fear of venturing so far. Fix was in mortal suspense.

Mr. Fogg turned to Aouda and asked her, “You would not be afraid, would you, madam?”

“Not with you, Mr. Fogg,” was her answer.

The pilot now returned, shuffling his hat in his hands.

“Well, pilot?” said Mr. Fogg.

“Well, your honour,” replied he, “I could not risk myself, my men, or my little boat of scarcely twenty tons on so long a voyage at this time of year. Besides, we could not reach Yokohama in time, for it is sixteen hundred and sixty miles from Hong Kong.”

“Only sixteen hundred,” said Mr. Fogg.

“It’s the same thing.”

Fix breathed more freely.

“But,” added the pilot, “it might be arranged another way.”

Fix ceased to breathe at all.

“How?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“By going to Nagasaki, at the extreme south of Japan, or even to Shanghai, which is only eight hundred miles from here. In going to Shanghai we should not be forced to sail wide of the Chinese coast, which would be a great advantage, as the currents run northward, and would aid us.”

“Pilot,” said Mr. Fogg, “I must take the American steamer at Yokohama, and not at Shanghai or Nagasaki.”

“Why not?” returned the pilot. “The San Francisco steamer does not start from Yokohama. It puts in at Yokohama and Nagasaki, but it starts from Shanghai.”

“You are sure of that?”

“Perfectly.”

“And when does the boat leave Shanghai?”

“On the 11th, at seven in the evening. We have, therefore, four days before us, that is ninety-six hours; and in that time, if we had good luck and a south-west wind, and the sea was calm, we could make those eight hundred miles to Shanghai.”

“And you could go — ”

“In an hour; as soon as provisions could be got aboard and the sails put up.”

“It is a bargain. Are you the master of the boat?”

“Yes; John Bunsby, master of the Tankadere.”

“Would you like some earnest-money?”

“If it would not put your honour out — ”

“Here are two hundred pounds on account sir,” added Phileas Fogg, turning to Fix, “if you would like to take advantage — ”

“Thanks, sir; I was about to ask the favour.”

“Very well. In half an hour we shall go on board.”

“But poor Passepartout?” urged Aouda, who was much disturbed by the servant’s disappearance.

“I shall do all I can to find him,” replied Phileas Fogg.

While Fix, in a feverish, nervous state, repaired to the pilot-boat, the others directed their course to the police-station at Hong Kong. Phileas Fogg there gave Passepartout's description, and left a sum of money to be spent in the search for him. The same formalities having been gone through at the French consulate, and the palanquin having stopped at the hotel for the luggage, which had been sent back there, they returned to the wharf.

It was now three o'clock; and pilot-boat No. 43, with its crew on board, and its provisions stored away, was ready for departure.

The Tankadere was a neat little craft of twenty tons, as gracefully built as if she were a racing yacht. Her shining copper sheathing, her galvanised iron-work, her deck, white as ivory, betrayed the pride taken by John Bunsby in making her presentable. Her two masts leaned a trifle backward; she carried brigantine, foresail, storm-jib, and standing-jib, and was well rigged for running before the wind; and she seemed capable of brisk speed, which, indeed, she had already proved by gaining several prizes in pilot-boat races. The crew of the Tankadere was composed of John Bunsby, the master, and four hardy mariners, who were familiar with the Chinese seas. John Bunsby, himself, a man of forty-five or thereabouts, vigorous, sunburnt, with a sprightly expression of the eye, and energetic and self-reliant countenance, would have inspired confidence in the most timid.

Phileas Fogg and Aouda went on board, where they found Fix already installed. Below deck was a square cabin, of which the walls bulged out in the form of cots, above a circular divan; in the centre was a table provided with a swinging lamp. The accommodation was confined, but neat.

“I am sorry to have nothing better to offer you,” said Mr. Fogg to Fix, who bowed without responding.

The detective had a feeling akin to humiliation in profiting by the kindness of Mr. Fogg.

“It’s certain,” thought he, “though rascal as he is, he is a polite one!”

The sails and the English flag were hoisted at ten minutes past three. Mr. Fogg and Aouda, who were seated on deck, cast a last glance at the quay, in the hope of espying Passepartout. Fix was not without his fears lest chance should direct the steps of the unfortunate servant, whom he had so badly treated, in this direction; in which case an explanation the reverse of satisfactory to the detective must have ensued. But the Frenchman did not appear, and, without doubt, was still lying under the stupefying influence of the opium.

John Bunsby, master, at length gave the order to start, and the Tankadere, taking the wind under her brigantine, foresail, and standing-jib, bounded briskly forward over the waves.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH THE MASTER OF THE “TANKADERE” RUNS GREAT RISK OF LOSING A REWARD OF TWO HUNDRED POUNDS

This voyage of eight hundred miles was a perilous venture on a craft of twenty tons, and at that season of the year. The Chinese seas are usually boisterous, subject to terrible gales of wind, and especially during the equinoxes; and it was now early November.

It would clearly have been to the master’s advantage to carry his passengers to Yokohama, since he was paid a certain sum per day; but he would have been rash to attempt such a voyage, and it was imprudent even to attempt to reach Shanghai. But John Bunsby believed in the Tankadere, which rode on the waves like a seagull; and perhaps he was not wrong.

Late in the day they passed through the capricious channels of Hong Kong, and the Tankadere, impelled by favourable winds, conducted herself admirably.

“I do not need, pilot,” said Phileas Fogg, when they got into the open sea, “to advise you to use all possible speed.”

“Trust me, your honour. We are carrying all the sail the wind will let us. The poles would add nothing, and are only used when we are going into port.”

“Its your trade, not mine, pilot, and I confide in you.”

Phileas Fogg, with body erect and legs wide apart, standing like a sailor, gazed without staggering at the swelling waters. The young woman, who was seated aft, was profoundly affected as she looked out upon the ocean, darkening now with the twilight, on which she had ventured in so frail a vessel. Above her head rustled the white sails, which seemed like great white wings. The boat, carried forward by the wind, seemed to be flying in the air.

Night came. The moon was entering her first quarter, and her insufficient light would soon die out in the mist on the horizon. Clouds were rising from the east, and already overcast a part of the heavens.

The pilot had hung out his lights, which was very necessary in these seas crowded with vessels bound landward; for collisions are not uncommon occurrences, and, at the speed she was going, the least shock would shatter the gallant little craft.

Fix, seated in the bow, gave himself up to meditation. He kept apart from his fellow-travellers, knowing Mr. Fogg’s taciturn tastes; besides, he did not quite like to talk to the man whose favours he had accepted. He was thinking, too, of the future. It seemed certain that Fogg would not stop at Yokohama, but would at once take the boat for San Francisco; and the vast extent of America would ensure him impunity and safety. Fogg’s plan appeared to him the simplest in the world. Instead of sailing directly from England to the United States, like a common villain, he had traversed three quarters of the globe, so as to gain the American continent more surely; and there, after throwing the police off his track, he would quietly enjoy himself with the fortune stolen from the bank. But, once in the United States, what should he, Fix, do? Should he abandon this man? No, a hundred times no! Until he had secured his extradition, he would not lose sight of him for an hour. It was his duty, and he would fulfil it to the end. At all events, there was one thing to be thankful for; Passepartout was not with his master; and it was above all important, after the confidences Fix had imparted to him, that the servant should never have speech with his master.

Phileas Fogg was also thinking of Passepartout, who had so strangely disappeared. Looking at the matter from every point of view, it did not seem to him impossible that, by some mistake, the man might have embarked on the Carnatic at the last moment; and this was also Aouda's opinion, who regretted very much the loss of the worthy fellow to whom she owed so much. They might then find him at Yokohama; for, if the Carnatic was carrying him thither, it would be easy to ascertain if he had been on board.

A brisk breeze arose about ten o'clock; but, though it might have been prudent to take in a reef, the pilot, after carefully examining the heavens, let the craft remain rigged as before. The Tankadere bore sail admirably, as she drew a great deal of water, and everything was prepared for high speed in case of a gale.

Mr. Fogg and Aouda descended into the cabin at midnight, having been already preceded by Fix, who had lain down on one of the cots. The pilot and crew remained on deck all night.

At sunrise the next day, which was 8th November, the boat had made more than one hundred miles. The log indicated a mean speed of between eight and nine miles. The Tankadere still carried all sail, and was accomplishing her greatest capacity of speed. If the wind held as it was, the chances would be in her favour. During the day she kept along the coast, where the currents were favourable; the coast, irregular in profile, and visible sometimes across the clearings, was at most five miles distant. The sea was less boisterous, since the wind came off land — a fortunate circumstance for the boat, which would suffer, owing to its small tonnage, by a heavy surge on the sea.

The breeze subsided a little towards noon, and set in from the south-west. The pilot put up his poles, but took them down again within two hours, as the wind freshened up anew.

Mr. Fogg and Aouda, happily unaffected by the roughness of the sea, ate with a good appetite, Fix being invited to share their repast, which he accepted with secret chagrin. To travel at this man's expense and live upon his provisions was not palatable to him. Still, he was obliged to eat, and so he ate.

When the meal was over, he took Mr. Fogg apart, and said, "sir" — this "sir" scorched his lips, and he had to control himself to avoid collaring this "gentleman" — "sir, you have been very kind to give me a passage on this boat. But, though my means will not admit of my expending them as freely as you, I must ask to pay my share — "

"Let us not speak of that, sir," replied Mr. Fogg.

"But, if I insist — "

"No, sir," repeated Mr. Fogg, in a tone which did not admit of a reply. "This enters into my general expenses."

Fix, as he bowed, had a stifled feeling, and, going forward, where he ensconced himself, did not open his mouth for the rest of the day.

Meanwhile they were progressing famously, and John Bunsby was in high hope. He several times assured Mr. Fogg that they would reach Shanghai in time; to which that gentleman responded that he counted upon it. The crew set to work in good earnest, inspired by the reward to be gained. There was not a sheet which was not tightened not a sail which was not vigorously hoisted; not a lurch could be charged to the man at the helm. They worked as desperately as if they were contesting in a Royal yacht regatta.

By evening, the log showed that two hundred and twenty miles had been accomplished from Hong Kong, and Mr. Fogg might hope that he would be able to reach Yokohama without recording any delay in his journal; in which case, the many misadventures which had overtaken him since he left London would not seriously affect his journey.

The Tankadere entered the Straits of Fo-Kien, which separate the island of Formosa from the Chinese coast, in the small hours of the night, and crossed the Tropic of Cancer. The sea was very rough in the straits, full of eddies formed by the counter-currents, and the chopping waves broke her course, whilst it became very difficult to stand on deck.

At daybreak the wind began to blow hard again, and the heavens seemed to predict a gale. The barometer announced a speedy change, the mercury rising and falling capriciously; the sea also, in the south-east, raised long surges which indicated a tempest. The sun had set the evening before in a red mist, in the midst of the phosphorescent scintillations of the ocean.

John Bunsby long examined the threatening aspect of the heavens, muttering indistinctly between his teeth. At last he said in a low voice to Mr. Fogg, “Shall I speak out to your honour?”

“Of course.”

“Well, we are going to have a squall.”

“Is the wind north or south?” asked Mr. Fogg quietly.

“South. Look! a typhoon is coming up.”

“Glad it’s a typhoon from the south, for it will carry us forward.”

“Oh, if you take it that way,” said John Bunsby, “I’ve nothing more to say.” John Bunsby’s suspicions were confirmed. At a less advanced season of the year the typhoon, according to a famous meteorologist, would have passed away like a luminous cascade of electric flame; but in the winter equinox it was to be feared that it would burst upon them with great violence.

The pilot took his precautions in advance. He reefed all sail, the pole-masts were dispensed with; all hands went forward to the bows. A single triangular sail, of strong canvas, was hoisted as a storm-jib, so as to hold the wind from behind. Then they waited.

John Bunsby had requested his passengers to go below; but this imprisonment in so narrow a space, with little air, and the boat bouncing in the gale, was far from pleasant. Neither Mr. Fogg, Fix, nor Aouda consented to leave the deck.

The storm of rain and wind descended upon them towards eight o’clock. With but its bit of sail, the Tankadere was lifted like a feather by a wind, an idea of whose violence can scarcely be given. To compare her speed to four times that of a locomotive going on full steam would be below the truth.

The boat scudded thus northward during the whole day, borne on by monstrous waves, preserving always, fortunately, a speed equal to theirs. Twenty times she seemed almost to be submerged by these mountains of water which rose behind her; but the adroit management of the pilot saved her. The passengers were often bathed in spray, but they submitted to it philosophically. Fix cursed it, no doubt; but Aouda, with her eyes fastened upon her protector, whose coolness amazed her, showed herself worthy of him, and bravely weathered the storm. As for Phileas Fogg, it seemed just as if the typhoon were a part of his programme.

Up to this time the Tankadere had always held her course to the north; but towards evening the wind, veering three quarters, bore down from the north-west. The boat, now lying in the trough of the waves, shook and rolled terribly; the sea struck her with fearful violence. At night the tempest increased in violence. John Bunsby saw the approach of darkness and the rising of the storm with dark misgivings. He thought awhile, and then asked his crew if it was not time to slacken speed. After a consultation he approached Mr. Fogg, and said, “I think, your honour, that we should do well to make for one of the ports on the coast.”

“I think so too.”

“Ah!” said the pilot. “But which one?”

“I know of but one,” returned Mr. Fogg tranquilly.

“And that is — ”

“Shanghai.”

The pilot, at first, did not seem to comprehend; he could scarcely realise so much determination and tenacity. Then he cried, “Well — yes! Your honour is right. To Shanghai!”

So the Tankadere kept steadily on her northward track.

The night was really terrible; it would be a miracle if the craft did not founder. Twice it could have been all over with her if the crew had not been constantly on the watch. Aouda was exhausted, but did not utter a complaint. More than once Mr. Fogg rushed to protect her from the violence of the waves.

Day reappeared. The tempest still raged with undiminished fury; but the wind now returned to the south-east. It was a favourable change, and the Tankadere again bounded forward on this mountainous sea, though the waves crossed each other, and imparted shocks and counter-shocks which would have crushed a craft less solidly built. From time to time the coast was visible through the broken mist, but no vessel was in sight. The Tankadere was alone upon the sea.

There were some signs of a calm at noon, and these became more distinct as the sun descended toward the horizon. The tempest had been as brief as terrific. The passengers, thoroughly exhausted, could now eat a little, and take some repose.

The night was comparatively quiet. Some of the sails were again hoisted, and the speed of the boat was very good. The next morning at dawn they espied the coast, and John Bunsby was able to assert that they were not one hundred miles from Shanghai. A hundred miles, and only one day to traverse them! That very evening Mr. Fogg was due at Shanghai, if he did not wish to miss the steamer to Yokohama. Had there been no storm, during which several hours were lost, they would be at this moment within thirty miles of their destination.

The wind grew decidedly calmer, and happily the sea fell with it. All sails were now hoisted, and at noon the Tankadere was within forty-five miles of Shanghai. There remained yet six hours in which to accomplish that distance. All on board feared that it could not be done, and every one — Phileas Fogg, no doubt, excepted — felt his heart beat with impatience. The boat must keep up an average of nine miles an hour, and the wind was becoming calmer every moment! It was a capricious breeze, coming from the coast, and after it passed the sea became smooth. Still, the Tankadere was so light, and her fine sails caught the fickle zephyrs so well, that, with the aid of the currents John Bunsby found himself at six o'clock not more than ten miles from the mouth of Shanghai River. Shanghai itself is situated at least twelve miles up the stream. At seven they were still three miles from Shanghai. The pilot swore an angry oath; the reward of two hundred pounds was evidently on the point of escaping him. He looked at Mr. Fogg. Mr. Fogg was perfectly tranquil; and yet his whole fortune was at this moment at stake.

At this moment, also, a long black funnel, crowned with wreaths of smoke, appeared on the edge of the waters. It was the American steamer, leaving for Yokohama at the appointed time.

“Confound her!” cried John Bunsby, pushing back the rudder with a desperate jerk.

“Signal her!” said Phileas Fogg quietly.

A small brass cannon stood on the forward deck of the Tankadere, for making signals in the fogs. It was loaded to the muzzle; but just as the pilot was about to apply a red-hot coal to the touchhole, Mr. Fogg said, “Hoist your flag!”

The flag was run up at half-mast, and, this being the signal of distress, it was hoped that the American steamer, perceiving it, would change her course a little, so as to succour the pilot-boat.

“Fire!” said Mr. Fogg. And the booming of the little cannon resounded in the air.

CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT FINDS OUT THAT, EVEN AT THE ANTIPODES, IT IS CONVENIENT TO HAVE SOME MONEY IN ONE'S POCKET

The Carnatic, setting sail from Hong Kong at half-past six on the 7th of November, directed her course at full steam towards Japan. She carried a large cargo and a well-filled cabin of passengers. Two state-rooms in the rear were, however, unoccupied — those which had been engaged by Phileas Fogg.

The next day a passenger with a half-stupefied eye, staggering gait, and disordered hair, was seen to emerge from the second cabin, and to totter to a seat on deck.

It was Passepartout; and what had happened to him was as follows: Shortly after Fix left the opium den, two waiters had lifted the unconscious Passepartout, and had carried him to the bed reserved for the smokers. Three hours later, pursued even in his dreams by a fixed idea, the poor fellow awoke, and struggled against the stupefying influence of the narcotic. The thought of a duty unfulfilled shook off his torpor, and he hurried from the abode of drunkenness. Staggering and holding himself up by keeping against the walls, falling down and creeping up again, and irresistibly impelled by a kind of instinct, he kept crying out, "The Carnatic! the Carnatic!"

The steamer lay puffing alongside the quay, on the point of starting. Passepartout had but few steps to go; and, rushing upon the plank, he crossed it, and fell unconscious on the deck, just as the Carnatic was moving off. Several sailors, who were evidently accustomed to this sort of scene, carried the poor Frenchman down into the second cabin, and Passepartout did not wake until they were one hundred and fifty miles away from China. Thus he found himself the next morning on the deck of the Carnatic, and eagerly inhaling the exhilarating sea-breeze. The pure air sobered him. He began to collect his sense, which he found a difficult task; but at last he recalled the events of the evening before, Fix's revelation, and the opium-house.

"It is evident," said he to himself, "that I have been abominably drunk! What will Mr. Fogg say? At least I have not missed the steamer, which is the most important thing."

Then, as Fix occurred to him: "As for that rascal, I hope we are well rid of him, and that he has not dared, as he proposed, to follow us on board the Carnatic. A detective on the track of Mr. Fogg, accused of robbing the Bank of England! Pshaw! Mr. Fogg is no more a robber than I am a murderer."

Should he divulge Fix's real errand to his master? Would it do to tell the part the detective was playing. Would it not be better to wait until Mr. Fogg reached London again, and then impart to him that an agent of the metropolitan police had been following him round the world, and have a good laugh over it? No doubt; at least, it was worth considering. The first thing to do was to find Mr. Fogg, and apologise for his singular behaviour.

Passepartout got up and proceeded, as well as he could with the rolling of the steamer, to the after-deck. He saw no one who resembled either his master or Aouda. "Good!" muttered he; "Aouda has not got up yet, and Mr. Fogg has probably found some partners at whist."

He descended to the saloon. Mr. Fogg was not there. Passepartout had only, however, to ask the purser the number of his master's state-room. The purser replied that he did not know any passenger by the name of Fogg.

"I beg your pardon," said Passepartout persistently. "He is a tall gentleman, quiet, and not very talkative, and has with him a young lady — "

"There is no young lady on board," interrupted the purser. "Here is a list of the passengers; you may see for yourself."

Passepartout scanned the list, but his master's name was not upon it. All at once an idea struck him.

"Ah! am I on the Carnatic?"

"Yes."

"On the way to Yokohama?"

"Certainly."

Passepartout had for an instant feared that he was on the wrong boat; but, though he was really on the Carnatic, his master was not there.

He fell thunderstruck on a seat. He saw it all now. He remembered that the time of sailing had been changed, that he should have informed his master of that fact, and that he had not done so. It was his fault, then, that Mr. Fogg and Aouda had missed the steamer. Yes, but it was still more the fault of the traitor who, in order to separate him from his master, and detain the latter at Hong Kong, had inveigled him into getting drunk! He now saw the detective's trick; and at this moment Mr. Fogg was certainly ruined, his bet was lost, and he himself perhaps arrested and imprisoned! At this thought

Passepartout tore his hair. Ah, if Fix ever came within his reach, what a settling of accounts there would be!

After his first depression, Passepartout became calmer, and began to study his situation. It was certainly not an enviable one. He found himself on the way to Japan, and what should he do when he got there? His pocket was empty; he had not a solitary shilling, not so much as a penny. His passage had fortunately been paid for in advance; and he had five or six days in which to decide upon his future course. He fell to at meals with an appetite, and ate for Mr. Fogg, Aouda, and himself. He helped himself as generously as if Japan were a desert, where nothing to eat was to be looked for.

At dawn on the 13th the Carnatic entered the port of Yokohama. This is an important port of call in the Pacific, where all the mail-steamers, and those carrying travellers between North America, China, Japan, and the Oriental islands put in. It is situated in the bay of Yeddo, and at but a short distance from that second capital of the Japanese Empire, and the residence of the Tycoon, the civil Emperor, before the Mikado, the spiritual Emperor, absorbed his office in his own. The Carnatic anchored at the quay near the custom-house, in the midst of a crowd of ships bearing the flags of all nations.

Passepartout went timidly ashore on this so curious territory of the Sons of the Sun. He had nothing better to do than, taking chance for his guide, to wander aimlessly through the streets of Yokohama. He found himself at first in a thoroughly European quarter, the houses having low fronts, and being adorned with verandas, beneath which he caught glimpses of neat peristyles. This quarter occupied, with its streets, squares, docks, and warehouses, all the space between the “promontory of the Treaty” and the river. Here, as at Hong Kong and Calcutta, were mixed crowds of all races, Americans and English, Chinamen and Dutchmen, mostly merchants ready to buy or sell anything. The Frenchman felt himself as much alone among them as if he had dropped down in the midst of Hottentots.

He had, at least, one resource to call on the French and English consuls at Yokohama for assistance. But he shrank from telling the story of his adventures, intimately connected as it was with that of his master; and, before doing so, he determined to exhaust all other means of aid. As chance did not favour him in the European quarter, he penetrated that inhabited by the native Japanese, determined, if necessary, to push on to Yeddo.

The Japanese quarter of Yokohama is called Benten, after the goddess of the sea, who is worshipped on the islands round about. There Passepartout beheld beautiful fir and cedar groves, sacred gates of a singular architecture, bridges half hid in the midst of bamboos and reeds, temples shaded by immense cedar-trees, holy retreats where were sheltered Buddhist priests and sectaries of Confucius, and interminable streets, where a perfect harvest of rose-tinted and red-cheeked children, who looked as if they had been cut out of Japanese screens, and who were playing in the midst of short-legged poodles and yellowish cats, might have been gathered.

The streets were crowded with people. Priests were passing in processions, beating their dreary tambourines; police and custom-house officers with pointed hats encrusted with lac and carrying two sabres hung to their waists; soldiers, clad in blue cotton with white stripes, and bearing guns; the Mikado’s guards, enveloped in silken doubles, hauberks and coats of mail; and numbers of military folk of all ranks — for the military profession is as much respected in Japan as it is despised in China — went hither and thither in groups and pairs. Passepartout saw, too, begging friars, long-robed pilgrims, and simple civilians, with their warped and jet-black hair, big heads, long busts, slender legs, short stature, and complexions varying from copper-colour to a dead white, but never yellow, like the Chinese, from whom the Japanese widely differ. He did not fail to observe the curious equipages — carriages and palanquins, barrows supplied with sails, and litters made of bamboo; nor the women — whom he thought not especially handsome — who took little steps with their little feet, whereon they wore canvas shoes, straw sandals, and clogs of worked wood, and who displayed tight-looking eyes, flat chests, teeth fashionably blackened, and gowns crossed with silken scarfs, tied in an enormous knot behind an ornament which the modern Parisian ladies seem to have borrowed from the dames of Japan.

Passepartout wandered for several hours in the midst of this motley crowd, looking in at the windows of the rich and curious shops, the jewellery establishments glittering with quaint Japanese ornaments, the restaurants decked with streamers and banners, the tea-houses, where the odorous beverage was being drunk with saki, a liquor concocted from the fermentation of rice, and the comfortable smoking-houses, where they were puffing, not opium, which is almost unknown in Japan, but a very fine, stringy tobacco. He went on till he found himself in the fields, in the midst of vast rice plantations. There he saw dazzling camellias expanding themselves, with flowers which were giving forth their last colours and perfumes, not on bushes, but on trees, and within bamboo enclosures, cherry, plum, and apple trees, which the Japanese cultivate rather for their blossoms than their fruit, and which queerly-fashioned, grinning scarecrows protected from the sparrows, pigeons, ravens, and other voracious birds. On the branches of the cedars were perched large eagles; amid the foliage of the weeping willows were herons, solemnly standing on one leg; and on every hand were crows, ducks, hawks, wild birds, and a multitude of cranes, which the Japanese consider sacred, and which to their minds symbolise long life and prosperity.

As he was strolling along, Passepartout espied some violets among the shrubs.

“Good!” said he; “I’ll have some supper.”

But, on smelling them, he found that they were odourless.

“No chance there,” thought he.

The worthy fellow had certainly taken good care to eat as hearty a breakfast as possible before leaving the Carnatic; but, as he had been walking about all day, the demands of hunger were becoming importunate. He observed that the butchers stalls contained neither mutton, goat, nor pork; and, knowing also that it is a sacrilege to kill cattle, which are preserved solely for farming, he made up his mind that meat was far from plentiful in Yokohama — nor was he mistaken; and, in default of butcher’s meat, he could have wished for a quarter of wild boar or deer, a partridge, or some quails, some game or fish, which, with rice, the Japanese eat almost exclusively. But he found it necessary to keep up a stout heart, and to postpone the meal he craved till the following morning. Night came, and Passepartout re-entered the native quarter, where he wandered through the streets, lit by vari-coloured lanterns, looking on at the dancers, who were executing skilful steps and boundings, and the astrologers who stood in the open air with their telescopes. Then he came to the harbour, which was lit up by the resin torches of the fishermen, who were fishing from their boats.

The streets at last became quiet, and the patrol, the officers of which, in their splendid costumes, and surrounded by their suites, Passepartout thought seemed like ambassadors, succeeded the bustling crowd. Each time a company passed, Passepartout chuckled, and said to himself: “Good! another Japanese embassy departing for Europe!”

CHAPTER XXIII

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT'S NOSE BECOMES OUTRAGEOUSLY LONG

The next morning poor, jaded, famished Passepartout said to himself that he must get something to eat at all hazards, and the sooner he did so the better. He might, indeed, sell his watch; but he would have starved first. Now or never he must use the strong, if not melodious voice which nature had bestowed upon him. He knew several French and English songs, and resolved to try them upon the Japanese, who must be lovers of music, since they were for ever pounding on their cymbals, tam-tams, and tambourines, and could not but appreciate European talent.

It was, perhaps, rather early in the morning to get up a concert, and the audience prematurely aroused from their slumbers, might not possibly pay their entertainer with coin bearing the Mikado's features. Passepartout therefore decided to wait several hours; and, as he was sauntering along, it occurred to him that he would seem rather too well dressed for a wandering artist. The idea struck him to change his garments for clothes more in harmony with his project; by which he might also get a little money to satisfy the immediate cravings of hunger. The resolution taken, it remained to carry it out.

It was only after a long search that Passepartout discovered a native dealer in old clothes, to whom he applied for an exchange. The man liked the European costume, and ere long Passepartout issued from his shop accoutred in an old Japanese coat, and a sort of one-sided turban, faded with long use. A few small pieces of silver, moreover, jingled in his pocket.

“Good!” thought he. “I will imagine I am at the Carnival!”

His first care, after being thus “Japanesed,” was to enter a tea-house of modest appearance, and, upon half a bird and a little rice, to breakfast like a man for whom dinner was as yet a problem to be solved.

“Now,” thought he, when he had eaten heartily, “I mustn’t lose my head. I can’t sell this costume again for one still more Japanese. I must consider how to leave this country of the Sun, of which I shall not retain the most delightful of memories, as quickly as possible.”

It occurred to him to visit the steamers which were about to leave for America. He would offer himself as a cook or servant, in payment of his passage and meals. Once at San Francisco, he would find some means of going on. The difficulty was, how to traverse the four thousand seven hundred miles of the Pacific which lay between Japan and the New World.

Passepartout was not the man to let an idea go begging, and directed his steps towards the docks. But, as he approached them, his project, which at first had seemed so simple, began to grow more and more formidable to his mind. What need would they have of a cook or servant on an American steamer, and what confidence would they put in him, dressed as he was? What references could he give?

As he was reflecting in this wise, his eyes fell upon an immense placard which a sort of clown was carrying through the streets. This placard, which was in English, read as follows:

ACROBATIC JAPANESE TROUPE,

HONOURABLE WILLIAM BATULCAR, PROPRIETOR, LAST REPRESENTATIONS,

PRIOR TO THEIR DEPARTURE TO THE UNITED STATES, OF THE

LONG NOSES! LONG NOSES!

UNDER THE DIRECT PATRONAGE OF THE GOD TINGOU! GREAT ATTRACTION!

“The United States!” said Passepartout; “that’s just what I want!”

He followed the clown, and soon found himself once more in the Japanese quarter. A quarter of an hour later he stopped before a large cabin, adorned with several clusters of streamers, the exterior walls of which were designed to represent, in violent colours and without perspective, a company of jugglers.

This was the Honourable William Batulcar’s establishment. That gentleman was a sort of Barnum, the director of a troupe of mountebanks, jugglers, clowns, acrobats, equilibrists, and gymnasts, who, according to the placard, was giving his last performances before leaving the Empire of the Sun for the States of the Union.

Passepartout entered and asked for Mr. Batulcar, who straightway appeared in person.

“What do you want?” said he to Passepartout, whom he at first took for a native.

“Would you like a servant, sir?” asked Passepartout.

“A servant!” cried Mr. Batulcar, caressing the thick grey beard which hung from his chin. “I already have two who are obedient and faithful, have never left me, and serve me for their nourishment and here they are,” added he, holding out his two robust arms, furrowed with veins as large as the strings of a bass-viol.

“So I can be of no use to you?”

“None.”

“The devil! I should so like to cross the Pacific with you!”

“Ah!” said the Honourable Mr. Batulcar. “You are no more a Japanese than I am a monkey! Who are you dressed up in that way?”

“A man dresses as he can.”

“That’s true. You are a Frenchman, aren’t you?”

“Yes; a Parisian of Paris.”

“Then you ought to know how to make grimaces?”

“Why,” replied Passepartout, a little vexed that his nationality should cause this question, “we Frenchmen know how to make grimaces, it is true but not any better than the Americans do.”

“True. Well, if I can’t take you as a servant, I can as a clown. You see, my friend, in France they exhibit foreign clowns, and in foreign parts French clowns.”

“Ah!”

“You are pretty strong, eh?”

“Especially after a good meal.”

“And you can sing?”

“Yes,” returned Passepartout, who had formerly been wont to sing in the streets.

“But can you sing standing on your head, with a top spinning on your left foot, and a sabre balanced on your right?”

“Humph! I think so,” replied Passepartout, recalling the exercises of his younger days.

“Well, that’s enough,” said the Honourable William Batulcar.

The engagement was concluded there and then.

Passepartout had at last found something to do. He was engaged to act in the celebrated Japanese troupe. It was not a very dignified position, but within a week he would be on his way to San Francisco.

The performance, so noisily announced by the Honourable Mr. Batulcar, was to commence at three o’clock, and soon the deafening instruments of a Japanese orchestra resounded at the door. Passepartout, though he had not been able to study or rehearse a part, was designated to lend the aid of his sturdy shoulders in the great exhibition of the “human pyramid,” executed by the Long Noses of the god Tingou. This “great attraction” was to close the performance.

Before three o’clock the large shed was invaded by the spectators, comprising Europeans and natives, Chinese and Japanese, men, women and children, who precipitated themselves upon the narrow benches and into the boxes opposite the stage. The musicians took up a position inside, and were vigorously performing on their gongs, tam-tams, flutes, bones, tambourines, and immense drums.

The performance was much like all acrobatic displays; but it must be confessed that the Japanese are the first equilibrists in the world.

One, with a fan and some bits of paper, performed the graceful trick of the butterflies and the flowers; another traced in the air, with the odorous smoke of his pipe, a series of blue words, which composed a compliment to the audience; while a third juggled with some lighted candles, which he extinguished successively as they passed his lips, and relit again without interrupting for an instant his juggling. Another reproduced the most singular combinations with a spinning-top; in his hands the revolving tops seemed to be animated with a life of their own in their interminable whirling; they ran over pipe-stems, the edges of sabres, wires and even hairs stretched across the stage; they turned around on the edges of large glasses, crossed bamboo ladders, dispersed into all the corners, and produced strange musical effects by the combination of their various pitches of tone. The jugglers tossed them in the air, threw them like shuttlecocks with wooden battledores, and yet they kept on spinning; they put them into their pockets, and took them out still whirling as before.

It is useless to describe the astonishing performances of the acrobats and gymnasts. The turning on ladders, poles, balls, barrels, &c. was executed with wonderful precision.

But the principal attraction was the exhibition of the Long Noses, a show to which Europe is as yet a stranger.

The Long Noses form a peculiar company, under the direct patronage of the god Tingou. Attired after the fashion of the Middle Ages, they bore upon their shoulders a splendid pair of wings; but what especially distinguished them was the long noses which were fastened to their faces, and the uses which they made of them. These noses were made of bamboo, and were five, six, and even ten feet long, some straight, others curved, some ribboned, and some having imitation warts upon them. It was upon these appendages, fixed tightly on their real noses, that they performed their gymnastic exercises. A dozen of these sectaries of Tingou lay flat upon their backs, while others, dressed to represent lightning-rods, came and frolicked on their noses, jumping from one to another, and performing the most skilful leapings and somersaults.

As a last scene, a “human pyramid” had been announced, in which fifty Long Noses were to represent the Car of Juggernaut. But, instead of forming a pyramid by mounting each other’s shoulders, the artists were to group themselves on top of the noses. It happened that the performer who had hitherto formed the base of the Car had quitted the troupe, and as, to fill this part, only strength and adroitness were necessary, Passepartout had been chosen to take his place.

The poor fellow really felt sad when — melancholy reminiscence of his youth! — he donned his costume, adorned with vari-coloured wings, and fastened to his natural feature a false nose six feet long. But he cheered up when he thought that this nose was winning him something to eat.

He went upon the stage, and took his place beside the rest who were to compose the base of the Car of Juggernaut. They all stretched themselves on the floor, their noses pointing to the ceiling. A second group of artists disposed themselves on these long appendages, then a third above these, then a fourth, until a human monument reaching to the very cornices of the theatre soon arose on top of the noses. This elicited loud applause, in the midst of which the orchestra was just striking up a deafening air, when the pyramid tottered, the balance was lost, one of the lower noses vanished from the pyramid, and the human monument was shattered like a castle built of cards!

It was Passepartout’s fault. Abandoning his position, clearing the footlights without the aid of his wings, and, clambering up to the right-hand gallery, he fell at the feet of one of the spectators, crying, “Ah, my master! my master!”

“You here?”

“Myself.”

“Very well; then let us go to the steamer, young man!”

Mr. Fogg, Aouda, and Passepartout passed through the lobby of the theatre to the outside, where they encountered the Honourable Mr. Batulcar, furious with rage. He demanded damages for the “breakage” of the pyramid; and Phileas Fogg appeased him by giving him a handful of banknotes.

At half-past six, the very hour of departure, Mr. Fogg and Aouda, followed by Passepartout, who in his hurry had retained his wings, and nose six feet long, stepped upon the American steamer.

CHAPTER XXIV

DURING WHICH MR. FOGG AND PARTY CROSS THE PACIFIC OCEAN

What happened when the pilot-boat came in sight of Shanghai will be easily guessed. The signals made by the Tankadere had been seen by the captain of the Yokohama steamer, who, espying the flag at half-mast, had directed his course towards the little craft. Phileas Fogg, after paying the stipulated price of his passage to John Busby, and rewarding that worthy with the additional sum of five hundred and fifty pounds, ascended the steamer with Aouda and Fix; and they started at once for Nagasaki and Yokohama.

They reached their destination on the morning of the 14th of November. Phileas Fogg lost no time in going on board the Carnatic, where he learned, to Aouda's great delight — and perhaps to his own, though he betrayed no emotion — that Passepartout, a Frenchman, had really arrived on her the day before.

The San Francisco steamer was announced to leave that very evening, and it became necessary to find Passepartout, if possible, without delay. Mr. Fogg applied in vain to the French and English consuls, and, after wandering through the streets a long time, began to despair of finding his missing servant. Chance, or perhaps a kind of presentiment, at last led him into the Honourable Mr. Batulcar's theatre. He certainly would not have recognised Passepartout in the eccentric mountebank's costume; but the latter, lying on his back, perceived his master in the gallery. He could not help starting, which so changed the position of his nose as to bring the "pyramid" pell-mell upon the stage.

All this Passepartout learned from Aouda, who recounted to him what had taken place on the voyage from Hong Kong to Shanghai on the Tankadere, in company with one Mr. Fix.

Passepartout did not change countenance on hearing this name. He thought that the time had not yet arrived to divulge to his master what had taken place between the detective and himself; and, in the account he gave of his absence, he simply excused himself for having been overtaken by drunkenness, in smoking opium at a tavern in Hong Kong.

Mr. Fogg heard this narrative coldly, without a word; and then furnished his man with funds necessary to obtain clothing more in harmony with his position. Within an hour the Frenchman had cut off his nose and parted with his wings, and retained nothing about him which recalled the sectary of the god Tingou.

The steamer which was about to depart from Yokohama to San Francisco belonged to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, and was named the General Grant. She was a large paddle-wheel steamer of two thousand five hundred tons; well equipped and very fast. The massive walking-beam rose and fell above the deck; at one end a piston-rod worked up and down; and at the other was a connecting-rod which, in changing the rectilinear motion to a circular one, was directly connected with the shaft of the paddles. The General Grant was rigged with three masts, giving a large capacity for sails, and thus materially aiding the steam power. By making twelve miles an hour, she would cross the ocean in twenty-one days. Phileas Fogg was therefore justified in hoping that he would reach San Francisco by the 2nd of December, New York by the 11th, and London on the 20th — thus gaining several hours on the fatal date of the 21st of December.

There was a full complement of passengers on board, among them English, many Americans, a large number of coolies on their way to California, and several East Indian officers, who were spending their vacation in making the tour of the world. Nothing of moment happened on the voyage; the steamer, sustained on its large paddles, rolled but little, and the Pacific almost justified its name. Mr. Fogg was as calm and taciturn as ever. His young companion felt herself more and more attached to him by other ties than gratitude; his silent but generous nature impressed her more than she thought; and it was almost unconsciously that she yielded to emotions which did not seem to have the least effect upon her protector. Aouda took the keenest interest in his plans, and became impatient at any incident which seemed likely to retard his journey.

She often chatted with Passepartout, who did not fail to perceive the state of the lady's heart; and, being the most faithful of domestics, he never exhausted his eulogies of Phileas Fogg's honesty, generosity, and devotion. He took pains to calm Aouda's doubts of a successful termination of the journey, telling her that the most difficult part of it had passed, that now they were beyond the fantastic countries of Japan and China, and were fairly on their way to civilised places again. A railway train from San Francisco to New York, and a transatlantic steamer from New York to Liverpool, would doubtless bring them to the end of this impossible journey round the world within the period agreed upon.

On the ninth day after leaving Yokohama, Phileas Fogg had traversed exactly one half of the terrestrial globe. The General Grant passed, on the 23rd of November, the one hundred and eightieth meridian, and was at the very antipodes of London. Mr. Fogg had, it is true, exhausted fifty-two of the eighty days in which he was to complete the tour, and there were only twenty-eight left. But, though he was only half-way by the difference of meridians, he had really gone over two-thirds of the whole journey; for he had been obliged to make long circuits from London to Aden, from Aden to Bombay, from Calcutta to Singapore, and from Singapore to Yokohama. Could he have followed without deviation the fiftieth parallel, which is that of London, the whole distance would only have been about twelve thousand miles; whereas he would be forced, by the irregular methods of locomotion, to traverse twenty-six thousand, of which he had, on the 23rd of November, accomplished seventeen thousand five hundred. And now the course was a straight one, and Fix was no longer there to put obstacles in their way!

It happened also, on the 23rd of November, that Passepartout made a joyful discovery. It will be remembered that the obstinate fellow had insisted on keeping his famous family watch at London time, and on regarding that of the countries he had passed through as quite false and unreliable. Now, on this day, though he had not changed the hands, he found that his watch exactly agreed with the ship’s chronometers. His triumph was hilarious. He would have liked to know what Fix would say if he were aboard!

“The rogue told me a lot of stories,” repeated Passepartout, “about the meridians, the sun, and the moon! Moon, indeed! moonshine more likely! If one listened to that sort of people, a pretty sort of time one would keep! I was sure that the sun would some day regulate itself by my watch!”

Passepartout was ignorant that, if the face of his watch had been divided into twenty-four hours, like the Italian clocks, he would have no reason for exultation; for the hands of his watch would then, instead of as now indicating nine o’clock in the morning, indicate nine o’clock in the evening, that is, the twenty-first hour after midnight precisely the difference between London time and that of the one hundred and eightieth meridian. But if Fix had been able to explain this purely physical effect, Passepartout would not have admitted, even if he had comprehended it. Moreover, if the detective had been on board at that moment, Passepartout would have joined issue with him on a quite different subject, and in an entirely different manner.

Where was Fix at that moment?

He was actually on board the General Grant.

On reaching Yokohama, the detective, leaving Mr. Fogg, whom he expected to meet again during the day, had repaired at once to the English consulate, where he at last found the warrant of arrest. It had followed him from Bombay, and had come by the Carnatic, on which steamer he himself was supposed to be. Fix's disappointment may be imagined when he reflected that the warrant was now useless. Mr. Fogg had left English ground, and it was now necessary to procure his extradition!

"Well," thought Fix, after a moment of anger, "my warrant is not good here, but it will be in England. The rogue evidently intends to return to his own country, thinking he has thrown the police off his track. Good! I will follow him across the Atlantic. As for the money, heaven grant there may be some left! But the fellow has already spent in travelling, rewards, trials, bail, elephants, and all sorts of charges, more than five thousand pounds. Yet, after all, the Bank is rich!"

His course decided on, he went on board the General Grant, and was there when Mr. Fogg and Aouda arrived. To his utter amazement, he recognised Passepartout, despite his theatrical disguise. He quickly concealed himself in his cabin, to avoid an awkward explanation, and hoped — thanks to the number of passengers — to remain unperceived by Mr. Fogg's servant.

On that very day, however, he met Passepartout face to face on the forward deck. The latter, without a word, made a rush for him, grasped him by the throat, and, much to the amusement of a group of Americans, who immediately began to bet on him, administered to the detective a perfect volley of blows, which proved the great superiority of French over English pugilistic skill.

When Passepartout had finished, he found himself relieved and comforted. Fix got up in a somewhat rumpled condition, and, looking at his adversary, coldly said, “Have you done?”

“For this time — yes.”

“Then let me have a word with you.”

“But I — ”

“In your master’s interests.”

Passepartout seemed to be vanquished by Fix’s coolness, for he quietly followed him, and they sat down aside from the rest of the passengers.

“You have given me a thrashing,” said Fix. “Good, I expected it. Now, listen to me. Up to this time I have been Mr. Fogg’s adversary. I am now in his game.”

“Aha!” cried Passepartout; “you are convinced he is an honest man?”

“No,” replied Fix coldly, “I think him a rascal. Sh! don’t budge, and let me speak. As long as Mr. Fogg was on English ground, it was for my interest to detain him there until my warrant of arrest arrived. I did everything I could to keep him back. I sent the Bombay priests after him, I got you intoxicated at Hong Kong, I separated you from him, and I made him miss the Yokohama steamer.”

Passepartout listened, with closed fists.

“Now,” resumed Fix, “Mr. Fogg seems to be going back to England. Well, I will follow him there. But hereafter I will do as much to keep obstacles out of his way as I have done up to this time to put them in his path. I’ve changed my game, you see, and simply because it was for my interest to change it. Your interest is the same as mine; for it is only in England that you will ascertain whether you are in the service of a criminal or an honest man.”

Passepartout listened very attentively to Fix, and was convinced that he spoke with entire good faith.

“Are we friends?” asked the detective.

“Friends? — no,” replied Passepartout; “but allies, perhaps. At the least sign of treason, however, I’ll twist your neck for you.”

“Agreed,” said the detective quietly.

Eleven days later, on the 3rd of December, the General Grant entered the bay of the Golden Gate, and reached San Francisco.

Mr. Fogg had neither gained nor lost a single day.

CHAPTER XXV

IN WHICH A SLIGHT GLIMPSE IS HAD OF SAN FRANCISCO

It was seven in the morning when Mr. Fogg, Aouda, and Passepartout set foot upon the American continent, if this name can be given to the floating quay upon which they disembarked. These quays, rising and falling with the tide, thus facilitate the loading and unloading of vessels. Alongside them were clippers of all sizes, steamers of all nationalities, and the steamboats, with several decks rising one above the other, which ply on the Sacramento and its tributaries. There were also heaped up the products of a commerce which extends to Mexico, Chili, Peru, Brazil, Europe, Asia, and all the Pacific islands.

Passepartout, in his joy on reaching at last the American continent, thought he would manifest it by executing a perilous vault in fine style; but, tumbling upon some worm-eaten planks, he fell through them. Put out of countenance by the manner in which he thus “set foot” upon the New World, he uttered a loud cry, which so frightened the innumerable cormorants and pelicans that are always perched upon these movable quays, that they flew noisily away.

Mr. Fogg, on reaching shore, proceeded to find out at what hour the first train left for New York, and learned that this was at six o’clock p.m.; he had, therefore, an entire day to spend in the Californian capital. Taking a carriage at a charge of three dollars, he and Aouda entered it, while Passepartout mounted the box beside the driver, and they set out for the International Hotel.

From his exalted position Passepartout observed with much curiosity the wide streets, the low, evenly ranged houses, the Anglo-Saxon Gothic churches, the great docks, the palatial wooden and brick warehouses, the numerous conveyances, omnibuses, horse-cars, and upon the side-walks, not only Americans and Europeans, but Chinese and Indians. Passepartout was surprised at all he saw. San Francisco was no longer the legendary city of 1849 — a city of banditti, assassins, and incendiaries, who had flocked hither in crowds in pursuit of plunder; a paradise of outlaws, where they gambled with gold-dust, a revolver in one hand and a bowie-knife in the other: it was now a great commercial emporium.

The lofty tower of its City Hall overlooked the whole panorama of the streets and avenues, which cut each other at right-angles, and in the midst of which appeared pleasant, verdant squares, while beyond appeared the Chinese quarter, seemingly imported from the Celestial Empire in a toy-box. Sombreros and red shirts and plumed Indians were rarely to be seen; but there were silk hats and black coats everywhere worn by a multitude of nervously active, gentlemanly-looking men. Some of the streets — especially Montgomery Street, which is to San Francisco what Regent Street is to London, the Boulevard des Italiens to Paris, and Broadway to New York — were lined with splendid and spacious stores, which exposed in their windows the products of the entire world.

When Passepartout reached the International Hotel, it did not seem to him as if he had left England at all.

The ground floor of the hotel was occupied by a large bar, a sort of restaurant freely open to all passers-by, who might partake of dried beef, oyster soup, biscuits, and cheese, without taking out their purses. Payment was made only for the ale, porter, or sherry which was drunk. This seemed “very American” to Passepartout. The hotel refreshment-rooms were comfortable, and Mr. Fogg and Aouda, installing themselves at a table, were abundantly served on diminutive plates by negroes of darkest hue.

After breakfast, Mr. Fogg, accompanied by Aouda, started for the English consulate to have his passport visaed. As he was going out, he met Passepartout, who asked him if it would not be well, before taking the train, to purchase some dozens of Enfield rifles and Colt’s revolvers. He had been listening to stories of attacks upon the trains by the Sioux and Pawnees. Mr. Fogg thought it a useless precaution, but told him to do as he thought best, and went on to the consulate.

He had not proceeded two hundred steps, however, when, “by the greatest chance in the world,” he met Fix. The detective seemed wholly taken by surprise. What! Had Mr. Fogg and himself crossed the Pacific together, and not met on the steamer! At least Fix felt honoured to behold once more the gentleman to whom he owed so much, and, as his business recalled him to Europe, he should be delighted to continue the journey in such pleasant company.

Mr. Fogg replied that the honour would be his; and the detective — who was determined not to lose sight of him — begged permission to accompany them in their walk about San Francisco — a request which Mr. Fogg readily granted.

They soon found themselves in Montgomery Street, where a great crowd was collected; the side-walks, street, horsecar rails, the shop-doors, the windows of the houses, and even the roofs, were full of people. Men were going about carrying large posters, and flags and streamers were floating in the wind; while loud cries were heard on every hand.

“Hurrah for Camerfield!”

“Hurrah for Mandiboy!”

It was a political meeting; at least so Fix conjectured, who said to Mr. Fogg, “Perhaps we had better not mingle with the crowd. There may be danger in it.”

“Yes,” returned Mr. Fogg; “and blows, even if they are political are still blows.”

Fix smiled at this remark; and, in order to be able to see without being jostled about, the party took up a position on the top of a flight of steps situated at the upper end of Montgomery Street. Opposite them, on the other side of the street, between a coal wharf and a petroleum warehouse, a large platform had been erected in the open air, towards which the current of the crowd seemed to be directed.

For what purpose was this meeting? What was the occasion of this excited assemblage? Phileas Fogg could not imagine. Was it to nominate some high official — a governor or member of Congress? It was not improbable, so agitated was the multitude before them.

Just at this moment there was an unusual stir in the human mass. All the hands were raised in the air. Some, tightly closed, seemed to disappear suddenly in the midst of the cries — an energetic way, no doubt, of casting a vote. The crowd swayed back, the banners and flags wavered, disappeared an instant, then reappeared in tatters. The undulations of the human surge reached the steps, while all the heads floundered on the surface like a sea agitated by a squall. Many of the black hats disappeared, and the greater part of the crowd seemed to have diminished in height.

“It is evidently a meeting,” said Fix, “and its object must be an exciting one. I should not wonder if it were about the Alabama, despite the fact that that question is settled.”

“Perhaps,” replied Mr. Fogg, simply.

“At least, there are two champions in presence of each other, the Honourable Mr. Camerfield and the Honourable Mr. Mandiboy.”

Aouda, leaning upon Mr. Fogg’s arm, observed the tumultuous scene with surprise, while Fix asked a man near him what the cause of it all was. Before the man could reply, a fresh agitation arose; hurrahs and excited shouts were heard; the staffs of the banners began to be used as offensive weapons; and fists flew about in every direction. Thumps were exchanged from the tops of the carriages and omnibuses which had been blocked up in the crowd. Boots and shoes went whirling through the air, and Mr. Fogg thought he even heard the crack of revolvers mingling in the din, the rout approached the stairway, and flowed over the lower step. One of the parties had evidently been repulsed; but the mere lookers-on could not tell whether Mandiboy or Camerfield had gained the upper hand.

“It would be prudent for us to retire,” said Fix, who was anxious that Mr. Fogg should not receive any injury, at least until they got back to London. “If there is any question about England in all this, and we were recognised, I fear it would go hard with us.”

“An English subject — ” began Mr. Fogg.

He did not finish his sentence; for a terrific hubbub now arose on the terrace behind the flight of steps where they stood, and there were frantic shouts of, “Hurrah for Mandiboy! Hip, hip, hurrah!”

It was a band of voters coming to the rescue of their allies, and taking the Camerfield forces in flank. Mr. Fogg, Aouda, and Fix found themselves between two fires; it was too late to escape. The torrent of men, armed with loaded canes and sticks, was irresistible. Phileas Fogg and Fix were roughly hustled in their attempts to protect their fair companion; the former, as cool as ever, tried to defend himself with the weapons which nature has placed at the end of every Englishman’s arm, but in vain. A big brawny fellow with a red beard, flushed face, and broad shoulders, who seemed to be the chief of the band, raised his clenched fist to strike Mr. Fogg, whom he would have given a crushing blow, had not Fix rushed in and received it in his stead. An enormous bruise immediately made its appearance under the detective’s silk hat, which was completely smashed in.

“Yankee!” exclaimed Mr. Fogg, darting a contemptuous look at the ruffian.

“Englishman!” returned the other. “We will meet again!”

“When you please.”

“What is your name?”

“Phileas Fogg. And yours?”

“Colonel Stamp Proctor.”

The human tide now swept by, after overturning Fix, who speedily got upon his feet again, though with tattered clothes. Happily, he was not seriously hurt. His travelling overcoat was divided into two unequal parts, and his trousers resembled those of certain Indians, which fit less compactly than they are easy to put on. Aouda had escaped unharmed, and Fix alone bore marks of the fray in his black and blue bruise.

“Thanks,” said Mr. Fogg to the detective, as soon as they were out of the crowd.

“No thanks are necessary,” replied. Fix; “but let us go.”

“Where?”

“To a tailor’s.”

Such a visit was, indeed, opportune. The clothing of both Mr. Fogg and Fix was in rags, as if they had themselves been actively engaged in the contest between Camerfield and Mandiboy. An hour after, they were once more suitably attired, and with Aouda returned to the International Hotel.

Passepartout was waiting for his master, armed with half a dozen six-barrelled revolvers. When he perceived Fix, he knit his brows; but Aouda having, in a few words, told him of their adventure, his countenance resumed its placid expression. Fix evidently was no longer an enemy, but an ally; he was faithfully keeping his word.

Dinner over, the coach which was to convey the passengers and their luggage to the station drew up to the door. As he was getting in, Mr. Fogg said to Fix, “You have not seen this Colonel Proctor again?”

“No.”

“I will come back to America to find him,” said Phileas Fogg calmly. “It would not be right for an Englishman to permit himself to be treated in that way, without retaliating.”

The detective smiled, but did not reply. It was clear that Mr. Fogg was one of those Englishmen who, while they do not tolerate duelling at home, fight abroad when their honour is attacked.

At a quarter before six the travellers reached the station, and found the train ready to depart. As he was about to enter it, Mr. Fogg called a porter, and said to him: “My friend, was there not some trouble to-day in San Francisco?”

“It was a political meeting, sir,” replied the porter.

“But I thought there was a great deal of disturbance in the streets.”

“It was only a meeting assembled for an election.”

“The election of a general-in-chief, no doubt?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“No, sir; of a justice of the peace.”

Phileas Fogg got into the train, which started off at full speed.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG AND PARTY TRAVEL BY THE PACIFIC RAILROAD

“From ocean to ocean” — so say the Americans; and these four words compose the general designation of the “great trunk line” which crosses the entire width of the United States. The Pacific Railroad is, however, really divided into two distinct lines: the Central Pacific, between San Francisco and Ogden, and the Union Pacific, between Ogden and Omaha. Five main lines connect Omaha with New York.

New York and San Francisco are thus united by an uninterrupted metal ribbon, which measures no less than three thousand seven hundred and eighty-six miles. Between Omaha and the Pacific the railway crosses a territory which is still infested by Indians and wild beasts, and a large tract which the Mormons, after they were driven from Illinois in 1845, began to colonise.

The journey from New York to San Francisco consumed, formerly, under the most favourable conditions, at least six months. It is now accomplished in seven days.

It was in 1862 that, in spite of the Southern Members of Congress, who wished a more southerly route, it was decided to lay the road between the forty-first and forty-second parallels. President Lincoln himself fixed the end of the line at Omaha, in Nebraska. The work was at once commenced, and pursued with true American energy; nor did the rapidity with which it went on injuriously affect its good execution. The road grew, on the prairies, a mile and a half a day. A locomotive, running on the rails laid down the evening before, brought the rails to be laid on the morrow, and advanced upon them as fast as they were put in position.

The Pacific Railroad is joined by several branches in Iowa, Kansas, Colorado, and Oregon. On leaving Omaha, it passes along the left bank of the Platte River as far as the junction of its northern branch, follows its southern branch, crosses the Laramie territory and the Wahsatch Mountains, turns the Great Salt Lake, and reaches Salt Lake City, the Mormon capital, plunges into the Tuilla Valley, across the American Desert, Cedar and Humboldt Mountains, the Sierra Nevada, and descends, via Sacramento, to the Pacific — its grade, even on the Rocky Mountains, never exceeding one hundred and twelve feet to the mile.

Such was the road to be traversed in seven days, which would enable Phileas Fogg — at least, so he hoped — to take the Atlantic steamer at New York on the 11th for Liverpool.

The car which he occupied was a sort of long omnibus on eight wheels, and with no compartments in the interior. It was supplied with two rows of seats, perpendicular to the direction of the train on either side of an aisle which conducted to the front and rear platforms. These platforms were found throughout the train, and the passengers were able to pass from one end of the train to the other. It was supplied with saloon cars, balcony cars, restaurants, and smoking-cars; theatre cars alone were wanting, and they will have these some day.

Book and news dealers, sellers of edibles, drinkables, and cigars, who seemed to have plenty of customers, were continually circulating in the aisles.

The train left Oakland station at six o’clock. It was already night, cold and cheerless, the heavens being overcast with clouds which seemed to threaten snow. The train did not proceed rapidly; counting the stoppages, it did not run more than twenty miles an hour, which was a sufficient speed, however, to enable it to reach Omaha within its designated time.

There was but little conversation in the car, and soon many of the passengers were overcome with sleep. Passepartout found himself beside the detective; but he did not talk to him. After recent events, their relations with each other had grown somewhat cold; there could no longer be mutual sympathy or intimacy between them. Fix’s manner had not changed; but Passepartout was very reserved, and ready to strangle his former friend on the slightest provocation.

Snow began to fall an hour after they started, a fine snow, however, which happily could not obstruct the train; nothing could be seen from the windows but a vast, white sheet, against which the smoke of the locomotive had a greyish aspect.

At eight o’clock a steward entered the car and announced that the time for going to bed had arrived; and in a few minutes the car was transformed into a dormitory. The backs of the seats were thrown back, bedsteads carefully packed were rolled out by an ingenious system, berths were suddenly improvised, and each traveller had soon at his disposition a comfortable bed, protected from curious eyes by thick curtains. The sheets were clean and the pillows soft. It only remained to go to bed and sleep which everybody did — while the train sped on across the State of California.

The country between San Francisco and Sacramento is not very hilly. The Central Pacific, taking Sacramento for its starting-point, extends eastward to meet the road from Omaha. The line from San Francisco to Sacramento runs in a north-easterly direction, along the American River, which empties into San Pablo Bay. The one hundred and twenty miles between these cities were accomplished in six hours, and towards midnight, while fast asleep, the travellers passed through Sacramento; so that they saw nothing of that important place, the seat of the State government, with its fine quays, its broad streets, its noble hotels, squares, and churches.

The train, on leaving Sacramento, and passing the junction, Roclin, Auburn, and Colfax, entered the range of the Sierra Nevada. ‘Cisco was reached at seven in the morning; and an hour later the dormitory was transformed into an ordinary car, and the travellers could observe the picturesque beauties of the mountain region through which they were steaming. The railway track wound in and out among the passes, now approaching the mountain-sides, now suspended over precipices, avoiding abrupt angles by bold curves, plunging into narrow defiles, which seemed to have no outlet. The locomotive, its great funnel emitting a weird light, with its sharp bell, and its cow-catcher extended like a spur, mingled its shrieks and bellowings with the noise of torrents and cascades, and twined its smoke among the branches of the gigantic pines.

There were few or no bridges or tunnels on the route. The railway turned around the sides of the mountains, and did not attempt to violate nature by taking the shortest cut from one point to another.

The train entered the State of Nevada through the Carson Valley about nine o’clock, going always northeasterly; and at midday reached Reno, where there was a delay of twenty minutes for breakfast.

From this point the road, running along Humboldt River, passed northward for several miles by its banks; then it turned eastward, and kept by the river until it reached the Humboldt Range, nearly at the extreme eastern limit of Nevada.

Having breakfasted, Mr. Fogg and his companions resumed their places in the car, and observed the varied landscape which unfolded itself as they passed along the vast prairies, the mountains lining the horizon, and the creeks, with their frothy, foaming streams. Sometimes a great herd of buffaloes, massing together in the distance, seemed like a moveable dam. These innumerable multitudes of ruminating beasts often form an insurmountable obstacle to the passage of the trains; thousands of them have been seen passing over the track for hours together, in compact ranks. The locomotive is then forced to stop and wait till the road is once more clear.

This happened, indeed, to the train in which Mr. Fogg was travelling. About twelve o’clock a troop of ten or twelve thousand head of buffalo encumbered the track. The locomotive, slackening its speed, tried to clear the way with its cow-catcher; but the mass of animals was too great. The buffaloes marched along with a tranquil gait, uttering now and then deafening bellowings. There was no use of interrupting them, for, having taken a particular direction, nothing can moderate and change their course; it is a torrent of living flesh which no dam could contain.

The travellers gazed on this curious spectacle from the platforms; but Phileas Fogg, who had the most reason of all to be in a hurry, remained in his seat, and waited philosophically until it should please the buffaloes to get out of the way.

Passepartout was furious at the delay they occasioned, and longed to discharge his arsenal of revolvers upon them.

“What a country!” cried he. “Mere cattle stop the trains, and go by in a procession, just as if they were not impeding travel! Parbleu! I should like to know if Mr. Fogg foresaw this mishap in his programme! And here’s an engineer who doesn’t dare to run the locomotive into this herd of beasts!”

The engineer did not try to overcome the obstacle, and he was wise. He would have crushed the first buffaloes, no doubt, with the cow-catcher; but the locomotive, however powerful, would soon have been checked, the train would inevitably have been thrown off the track, and would then have been helpless.

The best course was to wait patiently, and regain the lost time by greater speed when the obstacle was removed. The procession of buffaloes lasted three full hours, and it was night before the track was clear. The last ranks of the herd were now passing over the rails, while the first had already disappeared below the southern horizon.

It was eight o’clock when the train passed through the defiles of the Humboldt Range, and half-past nine when it penetrated Utah, the region of the Great Salt Lake, the singular colony of the Mormons.

CHAPTER XXVII

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT UNDERGOES, AT A SPEED OF TWENTY MILES AN HOUR, A COURSE OF MORMON HISTORY

During the night of the 5th of December, the train ran south-easterly for about fifty miles; then rose an equal distance in a north-easterly direction, towards the Great Salt Lake.

Passepartout, about nine o’clock, went out upon the platform to take the air. The weather was cold, the heavens grey, but it was not snowing. The sun’s disc, enlarged by the mist, seemed an enormous ring of gold, and Passepartout was amusing himself by calculating its value in pounds sterling, when he was diverted from this interesting study by a strange-looking personage who made his appearance on the platform.

This personage, who had taken the train at Elko, was tall and dark, with black moustache, black stockings, a black silk hat, a black waistcoat, black trousers, a white cravat, and dogskin gloves. He might have been taken for a clergyman. He went from one end of the train to the other, and affixed to the door of each car a notice written in manuscript.

Passepartout approached and read one of these notices, which stated that Elder William Hitch, Mormon missionary, taking advantage of his presence on train No. 48, would deliver a lecture on Mormonism in car No. 117, from eleven to twelve o’clock; and that he invited all who were desirous of being instructed concerning the mysteries of the religion of the “Latter Day Saints” to attend.

“I’ll go,” said Passepartout to himself. He knew nothing of Mormonism except the custom of polygamy, which is its foundation.

The news quickly spread through the train, which contained about one hundred passengers, thirty of whom, at most, attracted by the notice, ensconced themselves in car No. 117. Passepartout took one of the front seats. Neither Mr. Fogg nor Fix cared to attend.

At the appointed hour Elder William Hitch rose, and, in an irritated voice, as if he had already been contradicted, said, “I tell you that Joe Smith is a martyr, that his brother Hiram is a martyr, and that the persecutions of the United States Government against the prophets will also make a martyr of Brigham Young. Who dares to say the contrary?”

No one ventured to gainsay the missionary, whose excited tone contrasted curiously with his naturally calm visage. No doubt his anger arose from the hardships to which the Mormons were actually subjected. The government had just succeeded, with some difficulty, in reducing these independent fanatics to its rule. It had made itself master of Utah, and subjected that territory to the laws of the Union, after imprisoning Brigham Young on a charge of rebellion and polygamy. The disciples of the prophet had since redoubled their efforts, and resisted, by words at least, the authority of Congress. Elder Hitch, as is seen, was trying to make proselytes on the very railway trains.

Then, emphasising his words with his loud voice and frequent gestures, he related the history of the Mormons from Biblical times: how that, in Israel, a Mormon prophet of the tribe of Joseph published the annals of the new religion, and bequeathed them to his son Mormon; how, many centuries later, a translation of this precious book, which was written in Egyptian, was made by Joseph Smith, junior, a Vermont farmer, who revealed himself as a mystical prophet in 1825; and how, in short, the celestial messenger appeared to him in an illuminated forest, and gave him the annals of the Lord.

Several of the audience, not being much interested in the missionary's narrative, here left the car; but Elder Hitch, continuing his lecture, related how Smith, junior, with his father, two brothers, and a few disciples, founded the church of the "Latter Day Saints," which, adopted not only in America, but in England, Norway and Sweden, and Germany, counts many artisans, as well as men engaged in the liberal professions, among its members; how a colony was established in Ohio, a temple erected there at a cost of two hundred thousand dollars, and a town built at Kirkland; how Smith became an enterprising banker, and received from a simple mummy showman a papyrus scroll written by Abraham and several famous Egyptians.

The Elder's story became somewhat wearisome, and his audience grew gradually less, until it was reduced to twenty passengers. But this did not disconcert the enthusiast, who proceeded with the story of Joseph Smith's bankruptcy in 1837, and how his ruined creditors gave him a coat of tar and feathers; his reappearance some years afterwards, more honourable and honoured than ever, at Independence, Missouri, the chief of a flourishing colony of three thousand disciples, and his pursuit thence by outraged Gentiles, and retirement into the Far West.

Ten hearers only were now left, among them honest Passepartout, who was listening with all his ears. Thus he learned that, after long persecutions, Smith reappeared in Illinois, and in 1839 founded a community at Nauvoo, on the Mississippi, numbering twenty-five thousand souls, of which he became mayor, chief justice, and general-in-chief; that he announced himself, in 1843, as a candidate for the Presidency of the United States; and that finally, being drawn into ambuscade at Carthage, he was thrown into prison, and assassinated by a band of men disguised in masks.

Passepartout was now the only person left in the car, and the Elder, looking him full in the face, reminded him that, two years after the assassination of Joseph Smith, the inspired prophet, Brigham Young, his successor, left Nauvoo for the banks of the Great Salt Lake, where, in the midst of that fertile region, directly on the route of the emigrants who crossed Utah on their way to California, the new colony, thanks to the polygamy practised by the Mormons, had flourished beyond expectations.

“And this,” added Elder William Hitch, “this is why the jealousy of Congress has been aroused against us! Why have the soldiers of the Union invaded the soil of Utah? Why has Brigham Young, our chief, been imprisoned, in contempt of all justice? Shall we yield to force? Never! Driven from Vermont, driven from Illinois, driven from Ohio, driven from Missouri, driven from Utah, we shall yet find some independent territory on which to plant our tents. And you, my brother,” continued the Elder, fixing his angry eyes upon his single auditor, “will you not plant yours there, too, under the shadow of our flag?”

“No!” replied Passepartout courageously, in his turn retiring from the car, and leaving the Elder to preach to vacancy.

During the lecture the train had been making good progress, and towards half-past twelve it reached the northwest border of the Great Salt Lake. Thence the passengers could observe the vast extent of this interior sea, which is also called the Dead Sea, and into which flows an American Jordan. It is a picturesque expanse, framed in lofty crags in large strata, encrusted with white salt — a superb sheet of water, which was formerly of larger extent than now, its shores having encroached with the lapse of time, and thus at once reduced its breadth and increased its depth.

The Salt Lake, seventy miles long and thirty-five wide, is situated three miles eight hundred feet above the sea. Quite different from Lake Asphaltite, whose depression is twelve hundred feet below the sea, it contains considerable salt, and one quarter of the weight of its water is solid matter, its specific weight being 1,170, and, after being distilled, 1,000. Fishes are, of course, unable to live in it, and those which descend through the Jordan, the Weber, and other streams soon perish.

The country around the lake was well cultivated, for the Mormons are mostly farmers; while ranches and pens for domesticated animals, fields of wheat, corn, and other cereals, luxuriant prairies, hedges of wild rose, clumps of acacias and milk-wort, would have been seen six months later. Now the ground was covered with a thin powdering of snow.

The train reached Ogden at two o’clock, where it rested for six hours, Mr. Fogg and his party had time to pay a visit to Salt Lake City, connected with Ogden by a branch road; and they spent two hours in this strikingly American town, built on the pattern of other cities of the Union, like a checker-board, “with the sombre sadness of right-angles,” as Victor Hugo expresses it. The founder of the City of the Saints could not escape from the taste for symmetry which distinguishes the Anglo-Saxons. In this strange country, where the people are certainly not up to the level of their institutions, everything is done “squarely” — cities, houses, and follies.

The travellers, then, were promenading, at three o’clock, about the streets of the town built between the banks of the Jordan and the spurs of the Wahsatch Range. They saw few or no churches, but the prophet’s mansion, the court-house, and the arsenal, blue-brick houses with verandas and porches, surrounded by gardens bordered with acacias, palms, and locusts. A clay and pebble wall, built in 1853, surrounded the town; and in the principal street were the market and several hotels adorned with pavilions. The place did not seem thickly populated. The streets were almost deserted, except in the vicinity of the temple, which they only reached after having traversed several quarters surrounded by palisades. There were many women, which was easily accounted for by the "peculiar institution" of the Mormons; but it must not be supposed that all the Mormons are polygamists. They are free to marry or not, as they please; but it is worth noting that it is mainly the female citizens of Utah who are anxious to marry, as, according to the Mormon religion, maiden ladies are not admitted to the possession of its highest joys. These poor creatures seemed to be neither well off nor happy. Some — the more well-to-do, no doubt — wore short, open, black silk dresses, under a hood or modest shawl; others were habited in Indian fashion.

Passepartout could not behold without a certain fright these women, charged, in groups, with conferring happiness on a single Mormon. His common sense pitied, above all, the husband. It seemed to him a terrible thing to have to guide so many wives at once across the vicissitudes of life, and to conduct them, as it were, in a body to the Mormon paradise with the prospect of seeing them in the company of the glorious Smith, who doubtless was the chief ornament of that delightful place, to all eternity. He felt decidedly repelled from such a vocation, and he imagined — perhaps he was mistaken — that the fair ones of Salt Lake City cast rather alarming glances on his person. Happily, his stay there was but brief. At four the party found themselves again at the station, took their places in the train, and the whistle sounded for starting. Just at the moment, however, that the locomotive wheels began to move, cries of "Stop! stop!" were heard.

Trains, like time and tide, stop for no one. The gentleman who uttered the cries was evidently a belated Mormon. He was breathless with running. Happily for him, the station had neither gates nor barriers. He rushed along the track, jumped on the rear platform of the train, and fell, exhausted, into one of the seats.

Passepartout, who had been anxiously watching this amateur gymnast, approached him with lively interest, and learned that he had taken flight after an unpleasant domestic scene.

When the Mormon had recovered his breath, Passepartout ventured to ask him politely how many wives he had; for, from the manner in which he had decamped, it might be thought that he had twenty at least.

“One, sir,” replied the Mormon, raising his arms heavenward — ”one, and that was enough!”

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN WHICH PASSEPARTOUT DOES NOT SUCCEED IN MAKING ANYBODY LISTEN TO REASON

The train, on leaving Great Salt Lake at Ogden, passed northward for an hour as far as Weber River, having completed nearly nine hundred miles from San Francisco. From this point it took an easterly direction towards the jagged Wahsatch Mountains. It was in the section included between this range and the Rocky Mountains that the American engineers found the most formidable difficulties in laying the road, and that the government granted a subsidy of forty-eight thousand dollars per mile, instead of sixteen thousand allowed for the work done on the plains. But the engineers, instead of violating nature, avoided its difficulties by winding around, instead of penetrating the rocks. One tunnel only, fourteen thousand feet in length, was pierced in order to arrive at the great basin.

The track up to this time had reached its highest elevation at the Great Salt Lake. From this point it described a long curve, descending towards Bitter Creek Valley, to rise again to the dividing ridge of the waters between the Atlantic and the Pacific. There were many creeks in this mountainous region, and it was necessary to cross Muddy Creek, Green Creek, and others, upon culverts.

Passepartout grew more and more impatient as they went on, while Fix longed to get out of this difficult region, and was more anxious than Phileas Fogg himself to be beyond the danger of delays and accidents, and set foot on English soil.

At ten o’clock at night the train stopped at Fort Bridger station, and twenty minutes later entered Wyoming Territory, following the valley of Bitter Creek throughout. The next day, 7th December, they stopped for a quarter of an hour at Green River station. Snow had fallen abundantly during the night, but, being mixed with rain, it had half melted, and did not interrupt their progress. The bad weather, however, annoyed Passepartout; for the accumulation of snow, by blocking the wheels of the cars, would certainly have been fatal to Mr. Fogg’s tour.

“What an idea!” he said to himself. “Why did my master make this journey in winter? Couldn’t he have waited for the good season to increase his chances?”

While the worthy Frenchman was absorbed in the state of the sky and the depression of the temperature, Aouda was experiencing fears from a totally different cause.

Several passengers had got off at Green River, and were walking up and down the platforms; and among these Aouda recognised Colonel Stamp Proctor, the same who had so grossly insulted Phileas Fogg at the San Francisco meeting. Not wishing to be recognised, the young woman drew back from the window, feeling much alarm at her discovery. She was attached to the man who, however coldly, gave her daily evidences of the most absolute devotion. She did not comprehend, perhaps, the depth of the sentiment with which her protector inspired her, which she called gratitude, but which, though she was unconscious of it, was really more than that. Her heart sank within her when she recognised the man whom Mr. Fogg desired, sooner or later, to call to account for his conduct. Chance alone, it was clear, had brought Colonel Proctor on this train; but there he was, and it was necessary, at all hazards, that Phileas Fogg should not perceive his adversary.

Aouda seized a moment when Mr. Fogg was asleep to tell Fix and Passepartout whom she had seen.

“That Proctor on this train!” cried Fix. “Well, reassure yourself, madam; before he settles with Mr. Fogg; he has got to deal with me! It seems to me that I was the more insulted of the two.”

“And, besides,” added Passepartout, “I’ll take charge of him, colonel as he is.”

“Mr. Fix,” resumed Aouda, “Mr. Fogg will allow no one to avenge him. He said that he would come back to America to find this man. Should he perceive Colonel Proctor, we could not prevent a collision which might have terrible results. He must not see him.”

“You are right, madam,” replied Fix; “a meeting between them might ruin all. Whether he were victorious or beaten, Mr. Fogg would be delayed, and — ”

“And,” added Passepartout, “that would play the game of the gentlemen of the Reform Club. In four days we shall be in New York. Well, if my master does not leave this car during those four days, we may hope that chance will not bring him face to face with this confounded American. We must, if possible, prevent his stirring out of it.”

The conversation dropped. Mr. Fogg had just woke up, and was looking out of the window. Soon after Passepartout, without being heard by his master or Aouda, whispered to the detective, “Would you really fight for him?”

“I would do anything,” replied Fix, in a tone which betrayed determined will, “to get him back living to Europe!”

Passepartout felt something like a shudder shoot through his frame, but his confidence in his master remained unbroken.

Was there any means of detaining Mr. Fogg in the car, to avoid a meeting between him and the colonel? It ought not to be a difficult task, since that gentleman was naturally sedentary and little curious. The detective, at least, seemed to have found a way; for, after a few moments, he said to Mr. Fogg, “These are long and slow hours, sir, that we are passing on the railway.”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Fogg; “but they pass.”

“You were in the habit of playing whist,” resumed Fix, “on the steamers.”

“Yes; but it would be difficult to do so here. I have neither cards nor partners.”

“Oh, but we can easily buy some cards, for they are sold on all the American trains. And as for partners, if madam plays — ”

“Certainly, sir,” Aouda quickly replied; “I understand whist. It is part of an English education.”

“I myself have some pretensions to playing a good game. Well, here are three of us, and a dummy — ”

“As you please, sir,” replied Phileas Fogg, heartily glad to resume his favourite pastime even on the railway.

Passepartout was dispatched in search of the steward, and soon returned with two packs of cards, some pins, counters, and a shelf covered with cloth.

The game commenced. Aouda understood whist sufficiently well, and even received some compliments on her playing from Mr. Fogg. As for the detective, he was simply an adept, and worthy of being matched against his present opponent.

“Now,” thought Passepartout, “we’ve got him. He won’t budge.”

At eleven in the morning the train had reached the dividing ridge of the waters at Bridger Pass, seven thousand five hundred and twenty-four feet above the level of the sea, one of the highest points attained by the track in crossing the Rocky Mountains. After going about two hundred miles, the travellers at last found themselves on one of those vast plains which extend to the Atlantic, and which nature has made so propitious for laying the iron road.

On the declivity of the Atlantic basin the first streams, branches of the North Platte River, already appeared. The whole northern and eastern horizon was bounded by the immense semi-circular curtain which is formed by the southern portion of the Rocky Mountains, the highest being Laramie Peak. Between this and the railway extended vast plains, plentifully irrigated. On the right rose the lower spurs of the mountainous mass which extends southward to the sources of the Arkansas River, one of the great tributaries of the Missouri.

At half-past twelve the travellers caught sight for an instant of Fort Halleck, which commands that section; and in a few more hours the Rocky Mountains were crossed. There was reason to hope, then, that no accident would mark the journey through this difficult country. The snow had ceased falling, and the air became crisp and cold. Large birds, frightened by the locomotive, rose and flew off in the distance. No wild beast appeared on the plain. It was a desert in its vast nakedness.

After a comfortable breakfast, served in the car, Mr. Fogg and his partners had just resumed whist, when a violent whistling was heard, and the train stopped. Passepartout put his head out of the door, but saw nothing to cause the delay; no station was in view.

Aouda and Fix feared that Mr. Fogg might take it into his head to get out; but that gentleman contented himself with saying to his servant, “See what is the matter.”

Passepartout rushed out of the car. Thirty or forty passengers had already descended, amongst them Colonel Stamp Proctor.

The train had stopped before a red signal which blocked the way. The engineer and conductor were talking excitedly with a signal-man, whom the station-master at Medicine Bow, the next stopping place, had sent on before. The passengers drew around and took part in the discussion, in which Colonel Proctor, with his insolent manner, was conspicuous.

Passepartout, joining the group, heard the signal-man say, “No! you can’t pass. The bridge at Medicine Bow is shaky, and would not bear the weight of the train.”

This was a suspension-bridge thrown over some rapids, about a mile from the place where they now were. According to the signal-man, it was in a ruinous condition, several of the iron wires being broken; and it was impossible to risk the passage. He did not in any way exaggerate the condition of the bridge. It may be taken for granted that, rash as the Americans usually are, when they are prudent there is good reason for it.

Passepartout, not daring to apprise his master of what he heard, listened with set teeth, immovable as a statue.

“Hum!” cried Colonel Proctor; “but we are not going to stay here, I imagine, and take root in the snow?”

“Colonel,” replied the conductor, “we have telegraphed to Omaha for a train, but it is not likely that it will reach Medicine Bow is less than six hours.”

“Six hours!” cried Passepartout.

“Certainly,” returned the conductor, “besides, it will take us as long as that to reach Medicine Bow on foot.”

“But it is only a mile from here,” said one of the passengers.

“Yes, but it’s on the other side of the river.”

“And can’t we cross that in a boat?” asked the colonel.

“That’s impossible. The creek is swelled by the rains. It is a rapid, and we shall have to make a circuit of ten miles to the north to find a ford.”

The colonel launched a volley of oaths, denouncing the railway company and the conductor; and Passepartout, who was furious, was not disinclined to make common cause with him. Here was an obstacle, indeed, which all his master’s banknotes could not remove.

There was a general disappointment among the passengers, who, without reckoning the delay, saw themselves compelled to trudge fifteen miles over a plain covered with snow. They grumbled and protested, and would certainly have thus attracted Phileas Fogg's attention if he had not been completely absorbed in his game.

Passepartout found that he could not avoid telling his master what had occurred, and, with hanging head, he was turning towards the car, when the engineer, a true Yankee, named Forster called out, "Gentlemen, perhaps there is a way, after all, to get over."

"On the bridge?" asked a passenger.

"On the bridge."

"With our train?"

"With our train."

Passepartout stopped short, and eagerly listened to the engineer.

"But the bridge is unsafe," urged the conductor.

"No matter," replied Forster; "I think that by putting on the very highest speed we might have a chance of getting over."

"The devil!" muttered Passepartout.

But a number of the passengers were at once attracted by the engineer's proposal, and Colonel Proctor was especially delighted, and found the plan a very feasible one. He told stories about engineers leaping their trains over rivers without bridges, by putting on full steam; and many of those present avowed themselves of the engineer’s mind.

“We have fifty chances out of a hundred of getting over,” said one.

“Eighty! ninety!”

Passepartout was astounded, and, though ready to attempt anything to get over Medicine Creek, thought the experiment proposed a little too American. “Besides,” thought he, “there’s a still more simple way, and it does not even occur to any of these people! Sir,” said he aloud to one of the passengers, “the engineer’s plan seems to me a little dangerous, but — ”

“Eighty chances!” replied the passenger, turning his back on him.

“I know it,” said Passepartout, turning to another passenger, “but a simple idea — ”

“Ideas are no use,” returned the American, shrugging his shoulders, “as the engineer assures us that we can pass.”

“Doubtless,” urged Passepartout, “we can pass, but perhaps it would be more prudent — ”

“What! Prudent!” cried Colonel Proctor, whom this word seemed to excite prodigiously. “At full speed, don’t you see, at full speed!”

“I know — I see,” repeated Passepartout; “but it would be, if not more prudent, since that word displeases you, at least more natural — ”

“Who! What! What’s the matter with this fellow?” cried several.

The poor fellow did not know to whom to address himself.

“Are you afraid?” asked Colonel Proctor.

“I afraid? Very well; I will show these people that a Frenchman can be as American as they!”

“All aboard!” cried the conductor.

“Yes, all aboard!” repeated Passepartout, and immediately. “But they can’t prevent me from thinking that it would be more natural for us to cross the bridge on foot, and let the train come after!”

But no one heard this sage reflection, nor would anyone have acknowledged its justice. The passengers resumed their places in the cars. Passepartout took his seat without telling what had passed. The whist-players were quite absorbed in their game.

The locomotive whistled vigorously; the engineer, reversing the steam, backed the train for nearly a mile — retiring, like a jumper, in order to take a longer leap. Then, with another whistle, he began to move forward; the train increased its speed, and soon its rapidity became frightful; a prolonged screech issued from the locomotive; the piston worked up and down twenty strokes to the second. They perceived that the whole train, rushing on at the rate of a hundred miles an hour, hardly bore upon the rails at all.

And they passed over! It was like a flash. No one saw the bridge. The train leaped, so to speak, from one bank to the other, and the engineer could not stop it until it had gone five miles beyond the station. But scarcely had the train passed the river, when the bridge, completely ruined, fell with a crash into the rapids of Medicine Bow.

CHAPTER XXIX

IN WHICH CERTAIN INCIDENTS ARE NARRATED WHICH ARE ONLY TO BE MET WITH ON AMERICAN RAILROADS

The train pursued its course, that evening, without interruption, passing Fort Saunders, crossing Cheyne Pass, and reaching Evans Pass. The road here attained the highest elevation of the journey, eight thousand and ninety-two feet above the level of the sea. The travellers had now only to descend to the Atlantic by limitless plains, levelled by nature. A branch of the "grand trunk" led off southward to Denver, the capital of Colorado. The country round about is rich in gold and silver, and more than fifty thousand inhabitants are already settled there.

Thirteen hundred and eighty-two miles had been passed over from San Francisco, in three days and three nights; four days and nights more would probably bring them to New York. Phileas Fogg was not as yet behind-hand.

During the night Camp Walbach was passed on the left; Lodge Pole Creek ran parallel with the road, marking the boundary between the territories of Wyoming and Colorado. They entered Nebraska at eleven, passed near Sedgwick, and touched at Julesburg, on the southern branch of the Platte River.

It was here that the Union Pacific Railroad was inaugurated on the 23rd of October, 1867, by the chief engineer, General Dodge. Two powerful locomotives, carrying nine cars of invited guests, amongst whom was Thomas C. Durant, vice-president of the road, stopped at this point; cheers were given, the Sioux and Pawnees performed an imitation Indian battle, fireworks were let off, and the first number of the Railway Pioneer was printed by a press brought on the train. Thus was celebrated the inauguration of this great railroad, a mighty instrument of progress and civilisation, thrown across the desert, and destined to link together cities and towns which do not yet exist. The whistle of the locomotive, more powerful than Amphion’s lyre, was about to bid them rise from American soil.

Fort McPherson was left behind at eight in the morning, and three hundred and fifty-seven miles had yet to be traversed before reaching Omaha. The road followed the capricious windings of the southern branch of the Platte River, on its left bank. At nine the train stopped at the important town of North Platte, built between the two arms of the river, which rejoin each other around it and form a single artery, a large tributary, whose waters empty into the Missouri a little above Omaha.

The one hundred and first meridian was passed.

Mr. Fogg and his partners had resumed their game; no one — not even the dummy — complained of the length of the trip. Fix had begun by winning several guineas, which he seemed likely to lose; but he showed himself a not less eager whist-player than Mr. Fogg. During the morning, chance distinctly favoured that gentleman. Trumps and honours were showered upon his hands.

Once, having resolved on a bold stroke, he was on the point of playing a spade, when a voice behind him said, “I should play a diamond.”

Mr. Fogg, Aouda, and Fix raised their heads, and beheld Colonel Proctor.

Stamp Proctor and Phileas Fogg recognised each other at once.

“Ah! it’s you, is it, Englishman?” cried the colonel; “it’s you who are going to play a spade!”

“And who plays it,” replied Phileas Fogg coolly, throwing down the ten of spades.

“Well, it pleases me to have it diamonds,” replied Colonel Proctor, in an insolent tone.

He made a movement as if to seize the card which had just been played, adding, “You don’t understand anything about whist.”

“Perhaps I do, as well as another,” said Phileas Fogg, rising.

“You have only to try, son of John Bull,” replied the colonel.

Aouda turned pale, and her blood ran cold. She seized Mr. Fogg’s arm and gently pulled him back. Passepartout was ready to pounce upon the American, who was staring insolently at his opponent. But Fix got up, and, going to Colonel Proctor said, “You forget that it is I with whom you have to deal, sir; for it was I whom you not only insulted, but struck!”

“Mr. Fix,” said Mr. Fogg, “pardon me, but this affair is mine, and mine only. The colonel has again insulted me, by insisting that I should not play a spade, and he shall give me satisfaction for it.”

“When and where you will,” replied the American, “and with whatever weapon you choose.”

Aouda in vain attempted to retain Mr. Fogg; as vainly did the detective endeavour to make the quarrel his. Passepartout wished to throw the colonel out of the window, but a sign from his master checked him. Phileas Fogg left the car, and the American followed him upon the platform. “Sir,” said Mr. Fogg to his adversary, “I am in a great hurry to get back to Europe, and any delay whatever will be greatly to my disadvantage.”

“Well, what’s that to me?” replied Colonel Proctor.

“Sir,” said Mr. Fogg, very politely, “after our meeting at San Francisco, I determined to return to America and find you as soon as I had completed the business which called me to England.”

“Really!”

“Will you appoint a meeting for six months hence?”

“Why not ten years hence?”

“I say six months,” returned Phileas Fogg; “and I shall be at the place of meeting promptly.”

“All this is an evasion,” cried Stamp Proctor. “Now or never!”

“Very good. You are going to New York?”

“No.”

“To Chicago?”

“No.”

“To Omaha?”

“What difference is it to you? Do you know Plum Creek?”

“No,” replied Mr. Fogg.

“It’s the next station. The train will be there in an hour, and will stop there ten minutes. In ten minutes several revolver-shots could be exchanged.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Fogg. “I will stop at Plum Creek.”

“And I guess you’ll stay there too,” added the American insolently.

“Who knows?” replied Mr. Fogg, returning to the car as coolly as usual. He began to reassure Aouda, telling her that blusterers were never to be feared, and begged Fix to be his second at the approaching duel, a request which the detective could not refuse. Mr. Fogg resumed the interrupted game with perfect calmness.

At eleven o’clock the locomotive’s whistle announced that they were approaching Plum Creek station. Mr. Fogg rose, and, followed by Fix, went out upon the platform. Passepartout accompanied him, carrying a pair of revolvers. Aouda remained in the car, as pale as death.

The door of the next car opened, and Colonel Proctor appeared on the platform, attended by a Yankee of his own stamp as his second. But just as the combatants were about to step from the train, the conductor hurried up, and shouted, “You can’t get off, gentlemen!”

“Why not?” asked the colonel.

“We are twenty minutes late, and we shall not stop.”

“But I am going to fight a duel with this gentleman.”

“I am sorry,” said the conductor; “but we shall be off at once. There’s the bell ringing now.”

The train started.

“I’m really very sorry, gentlemen,” said the conductor. “Under any other circumstances I should have been happy to oblige you. But, after all, as you have not had time to fight here, why not fight as we go along?”

“That wouldn’t be convenient, perhaps, for this gentleman,” said the colonel, in a jeering tone.

“It would be perfectly so,” replied Phileas Fogg.

“Well, we are really in America,” thought Passepartout, “and the conductor is a gentleman of the first order!”

So muttering, he followed his master.

The two combatants, their seconds, and the conductor passed through the cars to the rear of the train. The last car was only occupied by a dozen passengers, whom the conductor politely asked if they would not be so kind as to leave it vacant for a few moments, as two gentlemen had an affair of honour to settle. The passengers granted the request with alacrity, and straightway disappeared on the platform.

The car, which was some fifty feet long, was very convenient for their purpose. The adversaries might march on each other in the aisle, and fire at their ease. Never was duel more easily arranged. Mr. Fogg and Colonel Proctor, each provided with two six-barrelled revolvers, entered the car. The seconds, remaining outside, shut them in. They were to begin firing at the first whistle of the locomotive. After an interval of two minutes, what remained of the two gentlemen would be taken from the car.

Nothing could be more simple. Indeed, it was all so simple that Fix and Passepartout felt their hearts beating as if they would crack. They were listening for the whistle agreed upon, when suddenly savage cries resounded in the air, accompanied by reports which certainly did not issue from the car where the duellists were. The reports continued in front and the whole length of the train. Cries of terror proceeded from the interior of the cars.

Colonel Proctor and Mr. Fogg, revolvers in hand, hastily quitted their prison, and rushed forward where the noise was most clamorous. They then perceived that the train was attacked by a band of Sioux.

This was not the first attempt of these daring Indians, for more than once they had waylaid trains on the road. A hundred of them had, according to their habit, jumped upon the steps without stopping the train, with the ease of a clown mounting a horse at full gallop.

The Sioux were armed with guns, from which came the reports, to which the passengers, who were almost all armed, responded by revolver-shots.

The Indians had first mounted the engine, and half stunned the engineer and stoker with blows from their muskets. A Sioux chief, wishing to stop the train, but not knowing how to work the regulator, had opened wide instead of closing the steam-valve, and the locomotive was plunging forward with terrific velocity.

The Sioux had at the same time invaded the cars, skipping like enraged monkeys over the roofs, thrusting open the doors, and fighting hand to hand with the passengers. Penetrating the baggage-car, they pillaged it, throwing the trunks out of the train. The cries and shots were constant. The travellers defended themselves bravely; some of the cars were barricaded, and sustained a siege, like moving forts, carried along at a speed of a hundred miles an hour.

Aouda behaved courageously from the first. She defended herself like a true heroine with a revolver, which she shot through the broken windows whenever a savage made his appearance. Twenty Sioux had fallen mortally wounded to the ground, and the wheels crushed those who fell upon the rails as if they had been worms. Several passengers, shot or stunned, lay on the seats.

It was necessary to put an end to the struggle, which had lasted for ten minutes, and which would result in the triumph of the Sioux if the train was not stopped. Fort Kearney station, where there was a garrison, was only two miles distant; but, that once passed, the Sioux would be masters of the train between Fort Kearney and the station beyond.

The conductor was fighting beside Mr. Fogg, when he was shot and fell. At the same moment he cried, “Unless the train is stopped in five minutes, we are lost!”

“It shall be stopped,” said Phileas Fogg, preparing to rush from the car.

“Stay, monsieur,” cried Passepartout; “I will go.”

Mr. Fogg had not time to stop the brave fellow, who, opening a door unperceived by the Indians, succeeded in slipping under the car; and while the struggle continued and the balls whizzed across each other over his head, he made use of his old acrobatic experience, and with amazing agility worked his way under the cars, holding on to the chains, aiding himself by the brakes and edges of the sashes, creeping from one car to another with marvellous skill, and thus gaining the forward end of the train.

There, suspended by one hand between the baggage-car and the tender, with the other he loosened the safety chains; but, owing to the traction, he would never have succeeded in unscrewing the yoking-bar, had not a violent concussion jolted this bar out. The train, now detached from the engine, remained a little behind, whilst the locomotive rushed forward with increased speed.

Carried on by the force already acquired, the train still moved for several minutes; but the brakes were worked and at last they stopped, less than a hundred feet from Kearney station.

The soldiers of the fort, attracted by the shots, hurried up; the Sioux had not expected them, and decamped in a body before the train entirely stopped.

But when the passengers counted each other on the station platform several were found missing; among others the courageous Frenchman, whose devotion had just saved them.

CHAPTER XXX

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG SIMPLY DOES HIS DUTY

Three passengers including Passepartout had disappeared. Had they been killed in the struggle? Were they taken prisoners by the Sioux? It was impossible to tell.

There were many wounded, but none mortally. Colonel Proctor was one of the most seriously hurt; he had fought bravely, and a ball had entered his groin. He was carried into the station with the other wounded passengers, to receive such attention as could be of avail.

Aouda was safe; and Phileas Fogg, who had been in the thickest of the fight, had not received a scratch. Fix was slightly wounded in the arm. But Passepartout was not to be found, and tears coursed down Aouda’s cheeks.

All the passengers had got out of the train, the wheels of which were stained with blood. From the tyres and spokes hung ragged pieces of flesh. As far as the eye could reach on the white plain behind, red trails were visible. The last Sioux were disappearing in the south, along the banks of Republican River.

Mr. Fogg, with folded arms, remained motionless. He had a serious decision to make. Aouda, standing near him, looked at him without speaking, and he understood her look. If his servant was a prisoner, ought he not to risk everything to rescue him from the Indians? “I will find him, living or dead,” said he quietly to Aouda.

“Ah, Mr. — Mr. Fogg!” cried she, clasping his hands and covering them with tears.

“Living,” added Mr. Fogg, “if we do not lose a moment.”

Phileas Fogg, by this resolution, inevitably sacrificed himself; he pronounced his own doom. The delay of a single day would make him lose the steamer at New York, and his bet would be certainly lost. But as he thought, “It is my duty,” he did not hesitate.

The commanding officer of Fort Kearney was there. A hundred of his soldiers had placed themselves in a position to defend the station, should the Sioux attack it.

“Sir,” said Mr. Fogg to the captain, “three passengers have disappeared.”

“Dead?” asked the captain.

“Dead or prisoners; that is the uncertainty which must be solved. Do you propose to pursue the Sioux?”

“That’s a serious thing to do, sir,” returned the captain. “These Indians may retreat beyond the Arkansas, and I cannot leave the fort unprotected.”

“The lives of three men are in question, sir,” said Phileas Fogg.

“Doubtless; but can I risk the lives of fifty men to save three?”

“I don’t know whether you can, sir; but you ought to do so.”

“Nobody here,” returned the other, “has a right to teach me my duty.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Fogg, coldly. “I will go alone.”

“You, sir!” cried Fix, coming up; “you go alone in pursuit of the Indians?”

“Would you have me leave this poor fellow to perish — him to whom every one present owes his life? I shall go.”

“No, sir, you shall not go alone,” cried the captain, touched in spite of himself. “No! you are a brave man. Thirty volunteers!” he added, turning to the soldiers.

The whole company started forward at once. The captain had only to pick his men. Thirty were chosen, and an old sergeant placed at their head.

“Thanks, captain,” said Mr. Fogg.

“Will you let me go with you?” asked Fix.

“Do as you please, sir. But if you wish to do me a favour, you will remain with Aouda. In case anything should happen to me — ”

A sudden pallor overspread the detective’s face. Separate himself from the man whom he had so persistently followed step by step! Leave him to wander about in this desert! Fix gazed attentively at Mr. Fogg, and, despite his suspicions and of the struggle which was going on within him, he lowered his eyes before that calm and frank look.

“I will stay,” said he.

A few moments after, Mr. Fogg pressed the young woman’s hand, and, having confided to her his precious carpet-bag, went off with the sergeant and his little squad. But, before going, he had said to the soldiers, “My friends, I will divide five thousand dollars among you, if we save the prisoners.”

It was then a little past noon.

Aouda retired to a waiting-room, and there she waited alone, thinking of the simple and noble generosity, the tranquil courage of Phileas Fogg. He had sacrificed his fortune, and was now risking his life, all without hesitation, from duty, in silence.

Fix did not have the same thoughts, and could scarcely conceal his agitation. He walked feverishly up and down the platform, but soon resumed his outward composure. He now saw the folly of which he had been guilty in letting Fogg go alone. What! This man, whom he had just followed around the world, was permitted now to separate himself from him! He began to accuse and abuse himself, and, as if he were director of police, administered to himself a sound lecture for his greenness.

“I have been an idiot!” he thought, “and this man will see it. He has gone, and won’t come back! But how is it that I, Fix, who have in my pocket a warrant for his arrest, have been so fascinated by him? Decidedly, I am nothing but an ass!”

So reasoned the detective, while the hours crept by all too slowly. He did not know what to do. Sometimes he was tempted to tell Aouda all; but he could not doubt how the young woman would receive his confidences. What course should he take? He thought of pursuing Fogg across the vast white plains; it did not seem impossible that he might overtake him. Footsteps were easily printed on the snow! But soon, under a new sheet, every imprint would be effaced.

Fix became discouraged. He felt a sort of insurmountable longing to abandon the game altogether. He could now leave Fort Kearney station, and pursue his journey homeward in peace.

Towards two o’clock in the afternoon, while it was snowing hard, long whistles were heard approaching from the east. A great shadow, preceded by a wild light, slowly advanced, appearing still larger through the mist, which gave it a fantastic aspect. No train was expected from the east, neither had there been time for the succour asked for by telegraph to arrive; the train from Omaha to San Francisco was not due till the next day. The mystery was soon explained.

The locomotive, which was slowly approaching with deafening whistles, was that which, having been detached from the train, had continued its route with such terrific rapidity, carrying off the unconscious engineer and stoker. It had run several miles, when, the fire becoming low for want of fuel, the steam had slackened; and it had finally stopped an hour after, some twenty miles beyond Fort Kearney. Neither the engineer nor the stoker was dead, and, after remaining for some time in their swoon, had come to themselves. The train had then stopped. The engineer, when he found himself in the desert, and the locomotive without cars, understood what had happened. He could not imagine how the locomotive had become separated from the train; but he did not doubt that the train left behind was in distress.

He did not hesitate what to do. It would be prudent to continue on to Omaha, for it would be dangerous to return to the train, which the Indians might still be engaged in pillaging. Nevertheless, he began to rebuild the fire in the furnace; the pressure again mounted, and the locomotive returned, running backwards to Fort Kearney. This it was which was whistling in the mist.

The travellers were glad to see the locomotive resume its place at the head of the train. They could now continue the journey so terribly interrupted.

Aouda, on seeing the locomotive come up, hurried out of the station, and asked the conductor, “Are you going to start?”

“At once, madam.”

“But the prisoners, our unfortunate fellow-travellers — ”

“I cannot interrupt the trip,” replied the conductor. “We are already three hours behind time.”

“And when will another train pass here from San Francisco?”

“To-morrow evening, madam.”

“To-morrow evening! But then it will be too late! We must wait — ”

“It is impossible,” responded the conductor. “If you wish to go, please get in.”

“I will not go,” said Aouda.

Fix had heard this conversation. A little while before, when there was no prospect of proceeding on the journey, he had made up his mind to leave Fort Kearney; but now that the train was there, ready to start, and he had only to take his seat in the car, an irresistible influence held him back. The station platform burned his feet, and he could not stir. The conflict in his mind again began; anger and failure stifled him. He wished to struggle on to the end.

Meanwhile the passengers and some of the wounded, among them Colonel Proctor, whose injuries were serious, had taken their places in the train. The buzzing of the over-heated boiler was heard, and the steam was escaping from the valves. The engineer whistled, the train started, and soon disappeared, mingling its white smoke with the eddies of the densely falling snow.

The detective had remained behind.

Several hours passed. The weather was dismal, and it was very cold. Fix sat motionless on a bench in the station; he might have been thought asleep. Aouda, despite the storm, kept coming out of the waiting-room, going to the end of the platform, and peering through the tempest of snow, as if to pierce the mist which narrowed the horizon around her, and to hear, if possible, some welcome sound. She heard and saw nothing. Then she would return, chilled through, to issue out again after the lapse of a few moments, but always in vain.

Evening came, and the little band had not returned. Where could they be? Had they found the Indians, and were they having a conflict with them, or were they still wandering amid the mist? The commander of the fort was anxious, though he tried to conceal his apprehensions. As night approached, the snow fell less plentifully, but it became intensely cold. Absolute silence rested on the plains. Neither flight of bird nor passing of beast troubled the perfect calm.

Throughout the night Aouda, full of sad forebodings, her heart stifled with anguish, wandered about on the verge of the plains. Her imagination carried her far off, and showed her innumerable dangers. What she suffered through the long hours it would be impossible to describe.

Fix remained stationary in the same place, but did not sleep. Once a man approached and spoke to him, and the detective merely replied by shaking his head.

Thus the night passed. At dawn, the half-extinguished disc of the sun rose above a misty horizon; but it was now possible to recognise objects two miles off. Phileas Fogg and the squad had gone southward; in the south all was still vacancy. It was then seven o'clock.

The captain, who was really alarmed, did not know what course to take.

Should he send another detachment to the rescue of the first? Should he sacrifice more men, with so few chances of saving those already sacrificed? His hesitation did not last long, however. Calling one of his lieutenants, he was on the point of ordering a reconnaissance, when gunshots were heard. Was it a signal? The soldiers rushed out of the fort, and half a mile off they perceived a little band returning in good order.

Mr. Fogg was marching at their head, and just behind him were Passepartout and the other two travellers, rescued from the Sioux.

They had met and fought the Indians ten miles south of Fort Kearney. Shortly before the detachment arrived, Passepartout and his companions had begun to struggle with their captors, three of whom the Frenchman had felled with his fists, when his master and the soldiers hastened up to their relief.

All were welcomed with joyful cries. Phileas Fogg distributed the reward he had promised to the soldiers, while Passepartout, not without reason, muttered to himself, "It must certainly be confessed that I cost my master dear!"

Fix, without saying a word, looked at Mr. Fogg, and it would have been difficult to analyse the thoughts which struggled within him. As for Aouda, she took her protector’s hand and pressed it in her own, too much moved to speak.

Meanwhile, Passepartout was looking about for the train; he thought he should find it there, ready to start for Omaha, and he hoped that the time lost might be regained.

“The train! the train!” cried he.

“Gone,” replied Fix.

“And when does the next train pass here?” said Phileas Fogg.

“Not till this evening.”

“Ah!” returned the impassible gentleman quietly.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN WHICH FIX, THE DETECTIVE, CONSIDERABLY FURTHERS THE INTERESTS OF PHILEAS FOGG

Phileas Fogg found himself twenty hours behind time. Passepartout, the involuntary cause of this delay, was desperate. He had ruined his master!

At this moment the detective approached Mr. Fogg, and, looking him intently in the face, said:

“Seriously, sir, are you in great haste?”

“Quite seriously.”

“I have a purpose in asking,” resumed Fix. “Is it absolutely necessary that you should be in New York on the 11th, before nine o’clock in the evening, the time that the steamer leaves for Liverpool?”

“It is absolutely necessary.”

“And, if your journey had not been interrupted by these Indians, you would have reached New York on the morning of the 11th?”

“Yes; with eleven hours to spare before the steamer left.”

“Good! you are therefore twenty hours behind. Twelve from twenty leaves eight. You must regain eight hours. Do you wish to try to do so?”

“On foot?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“No; on a sledge,” replied Fix. “On a sledge with sails. A man has proposed such a method to me.”

It was the man who had spoken to Fix during the night, and whose offer he had refused.

Phileas Fogg did not reply at once; but Fix, having pointed out the man, who was walking up and down in front of the station, Mr. Fogg went up to him. An instant after, Mr. Fogg and the American, whose name was Mudge, entered a hut built just below the fort.

There Mr. Fogg examined a curious vehicle, a kind of frame on two long beams, a little raised in front like the runners of a sledge, and upon which there was room for five or six persons. A high mast was fixed on the frame, held firmly by metallic lashings, to which was attached a large brigantine sail. This mast held an iron stay upon which to hoist a jib-sail. Behind, a sort of rudder served to guide the vehicle. It was, in short, a sledge rigged like a sloop. During the winter, when the trains are blocked up by the snow, these sledges make extremely rapid journeys across the frozen plains from one station to another. Provided with more sails than a cutter, and with the wind behind them, they slip over the surface of the prairies with a speed equal if not superior to that of the express trains.

Mr. Fogg readily made a bargain with the owner of this land-craft. The wind was favourable, being fresh, and blowing from the west. The snow had hardened, and Mudge was very confident of being able to transport Mr. Fogg in a few hours to Omaha. Thence the trains eastward run frequently to Chicago and New York. It was not impossible that the lost time might yet be recovered; and such an opportunity was not to be rejected.

Not wishing to expose Aouda to the discomforts of travelling in the open air, Mr. Fogg proposed to leave her with Passepartout at Fort Kearney, the servant taking upon himself to escort her to Europe by a better route and under more favourable conditions. But Aouda refused to separate from Mr. Fogg, and Passepartout was delighted with her decision; for nothing could induce him to leave his master while Fix was with him.

It would be difficult to guess the detective's thoughts. Was this conviction shaken by Phileas Fogg's return, or did he still regard him as an exceedingly shrewd rascal, who, his journey round the world completed, would think himself absolutely safe in England? Perhaps Fix's opinion of Phileas Fogg was somewhat modified; but he was nevertheless resolved to do his duty, and to hasten the return of the whole party to England as much as possible.

At eight o'clock the sledge was ready to start. The passengers took their places on it, and wrapped themselves up closely in their travelling-cloaks. The two great sails were hoisted, and under the pressure of the wind the sledge slid over the hardened snow with a velocity of forty miles an hour.

The distance between Fort Kearney and Omaha, as the birds fly, is at most two hundred miles. If the wind held good, the distance might be traversed in five hours; if no accident happened the sledge might reach Omaha by one o'clock.

What a journey! The travellers, huddled close together, could not speak for the cold, intensified by the rapidity at which they were going. The sledge sped on as lightly as a boat over the waves. When the breeze came skimming the earth the sledge seemed to be lifted off the ground by its sails. Mudge, who was at the rudder, kept in a straight line, and by a turn of his hand checked the lurches which the vehicle had a tendency to make. All the sails were up, and the jib was so arranged as not to screen the brigantine. A top-mast was hoisted, and another jib, held out to the wind, added its force to the other sails. Although the speed could not be exactly estimated, the sledge could not be going at less than forty miles an hour.

“If nothing breaks,” said Mudge, “we shall get there!”

Mr. Fogg had made it for Mudge’s interest to reach Omaha within the time agreed on, by the offer of a handsome reward.

The prairie, across which the sledge was moving in a straight line, was as flat as a sea. It seemed like a vast frozen lake. The railroad which ran through this section ascended from the south-west to the north-west by Great Island, Columbus, an important Nebraska town, Schuyler, and Fremont, to Omaha. It followed throughout the right bank of the Platte River. The sledge, shortening this route, took a chord of the arc described by the railway. Mudge was not afraid of being stopped by the Platte River, because it was frozen. The road, then, was quite clear of obstacles, and Phileas Fogg had but two things to fear — an accident to the sledge, and a change or calm in the wind.

But the breeze, far from lessening its force, blew as if to bend the mast, which, however, the metallic lashings held firmly. These lashings, like the chords of a stringed instrument, resounded as if vibrated by a violin bow. The sledge slid along in the midst of a plaintively intense melody.

“Those chords give the fifth and the octave,” said Mr. Fogg.

These were the only words he uttered during the journey. Aouda, cosily packed in furs and cloaks, was sheltered as much as possible from the attacks of the freezing wind. As for Passepartout, his face was as red as the sun’s disc when it sets in the mist, and he laboriously inhaled the biting air. With his natural buoyancy of spirits, he began to hope again. They would reach New York on the evening, if not on the morning, of the 11th, and there was still some chances that it would be before the steamer sailed for Liverpool.

Passepartout even felt a strong desire to grasp his ally, Fix, by the hand. He remembered that it was the detective who procured the sledge, the only means of reaching Omaha in time; but, checked by some presentiment, he kept his usual reserve. One thing, however, Passepartout would never forget, and that was the sacrifice which Mr. Fogg had made, without hesitation, to rescue him from the Sioux. Mr. Fogg had risked his fortune and his life. No! His servant would never forget that!

While each of the party was absorbed in reflections so different, the sledge flew past over the vast carpet of snow. The creeks it passed over were not perceived. Fields and streams disappeared under the uniform whiteness. The plain was absolutely deserted. Between the Union Pacific road and the branch which unites Kearney with Saint Joseph it formed a great uninhabited island. Neither village, station, nor fort appeared. From time to time they sped by some phantom-like tree, whose white skeleton twisted and rattled in the wind. Sometimes flocks of wild birds rose, or bands of gaunt, famished, ferocious prairie-wolves ran howling after the sledge. Passepartout, revolver in hand, held himself ready to fire on those which came too near. Had an accident then happened to the sledge, the travellers, attacked by these beasts, would have been in the most terrible danger; but it held on its even course, soon gained on the wolves, and ere long left the howling band at a safe distance behind.

About noon Mudge perceived by certain landmarks that he was crossing the Platte River. He said nothing, but he felt certain that he was now within twenty miles of Omaha. In less than an hour he left the rudder and furled his sails, whilst the sledge, carried forward by the great impetus the wind had given it, went on half a mile further with its sails unspread.

It stopped at last, and Mudge, pointing to a mass of roofs white with snow, said: “We have got there!”

Arrived! Arrived at the station which is in daily communication, by numerous trains, with the Atlantic seaboard!

Passepartout and Fix jumped off, stretched their stiffened limbs, and aided Mr. Fogg and the young woman to descend from the sledge. Phileas Fogg generously rewarded Mudge, whose hand Passepartout warmly grasped, and the party directed their steps to the Omaha railway station.

The Pacific Railroad proper finds its terminus at this important Nebraska town. Omaha is connected with Chicago by the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad, which runs directly east, and passes fifty stations.

A train was ready to start when Mr. Fogg and his party reached the station, and they only had time to get into the cars. They had seen nothing of Omaha; but Passepartout confessed to himself that this was not to be regretted, as they were not travelling to see the sights.

The train passed rapidly across the State of Iowa, by Council Bluffs, Des Moines, and Iowa City. During the night it crossed the Mississippi at Davenport, and by Rock Island entered Illinois. The next day, which was the 10th, at four o’clock in the evening, it reached Chicago, already risen from its ruins, and more proudly seated than ever on the borders of its beautiful Lake Michigan.

Nine hundred miles separated Chicago from New York; but trains are not wanting at Chicago. Mr. Fogg passed at once from one to the other, and the locomotive of the Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne, and Chicago Railway left at full speed, as if it fully comprehended that that gentleman had no time to lose. It traversed Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey like a flash, rushing through towns with antique names, some of which had streets and car-tracks, but as yet no houses. At last the Hudson came into view; and, at a quarter-past eleven in the evening of the 11th, the train stopped in the station on the right bank of the river, before the very pier of the Cunard line.

The China, for Liverpool, had started three-quarters of an hour before!

CHAPTER XXXII

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG ENGAGES IN A DIRECT STRUGGLE WITH BAD FORTUNE

The China, in leaving, seemed to have carried off Phileas Fogg's last hope. None of the other steamers were able to serve his projects. The Pereire, of the French Transatlantic Company, whose admirable steamers are equal to any in speed and comfort, did not leave until the 14th; the Hamburg boats did not go directly to Liverpool or London, but to Havre; and the additional trip from Havre to Southampton would render Phileas Fogg's last efforts of no avail. The Inman steamer did not depart till the next day, and could not cross the Atlantic in time to save the wager.

Mr. Fogg learned all this in consulting his Bradshaw, which gave him the daily movements of the trans-Atlantic steamers.

Passepartout was crushed; it overwhelmed him to lose the boat by three-quarters of an hour. It was his fault, for, instead of helping his master, he had not ceased putting obstacles in his path! And when he recalled all the incidents of the tour, when he counted up the sums expended in pure loss and on his own account, when he thought that the immense stake, added to the heavy charges of this useless journey, would completely ruin Mr. Fogg, he overwhelmed himself with bitter self-accusations. Mr. Fogg, however, did not reproach him; and, on leaving the Cunard pier, only said: “We will consult about what is best to-morrow. Come.”

The party crossed the Hudson in the Jersey City ferryboat, and drove in a carriage to the St. Nicholas Hotel, on Broadway. Rooms were engaged, and the night passed, briefly to Phileas Fogg, who slept profoundly, but very long to Aouda and the others, whose agitation did not permit them to rest.

The next day was the 12th of December. From seven in the morning of the 12th to a quarter before nine in the evening of the 21st there were nine days, thirteen hours, and forty-five minutes. If Phileas Fogg had left in the China, one of the fastest steamers on the Atlantic, he would have reached Liverpool, and then London, within the period agreed upon.

Mr. Fogg left the hotel alone, after giving Passepartout instructions to await his return, and inform Aouda to be ready at an instant's notice. He proceeded to the banks of the Hudson, and looked about among the vessels moored or anchored in the river, for any that were about to depart. Several had departure signals, and were preparing to put to sea at morning tide; for in this immense and admirable port there is not one day in a hundred that vessels do not set out for every quarter of the globe. But they were mostly sailing vessels, of which, of course, Phileas Fogg could make no use.

He seemed about to give up all hope, when he espied, anchored at the Battery, a cable's length off at most, a trading vessel, with a screw, well-shaped, whose funnel, puffing a cloud of smoke, indicated that she was getting ready for departure.

Phileas Fogg hailed a boat, got into it, and soon found himself on board the Henrietta, iron-hulled, wood-built above. He ascended to the deck, and asked for the captain, who forthwith presented himself. He was a man of fifty, a sort of sea-wolf, with big eyes, a complexion of oxidised copper, red hair and thick neck, and a growling voice.

“The captain?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“I am the captain.”

“I am Phileas Fogg, of London.”

“And I am Andrew Speedy, of Cardiff.”

“You are going to put to sea?”

“In an hour.”

“You are bound for — ”

“Bordeaux.”

“And your cargo?”

“No freight. Going in ballast.”

“Have you any passengers?”

“No passengers. Never have passengers. Too much in the way.”

“Is your vessel a swift one?”

“Between eleven and twelve knots. The Henrietta, well known.”

“Will you carry me and three other persons to Liverpool?”

“To Liverpool? Why not to China?”

“I said Liverpool.”

“No!”

“No?”

“No. I am setting out for Bordeaux, and shall go to Bordeaux.”

“Money is no object?”

“None.”

The captain spoke in a tone which did not admit of a reply.

“But the owners of the Henrietta — ” resumed Phileas Fogg.

“The owners are myself,” replied the captain. “The vessel belongs to me.”

“I will freight it for you.”

“No.”

“I will buy it of you.”

“No.”

Phileas Fogg did not betray the least disappointment; but the situation was a grave one. It was not at New York as at Hong Kong, nor with the captain of the Henrietta as with the captain of the Tankadere. Up to this time money had smoothed away every obstacle. Now money failed.

Still, some means must be found to cross the Atlantic on a boat, unless by balloon — which would have been venturesome, besides not being capable of being put in practice. It seemed that Phileas Fogg had an idea, for he said to the captain, “Well, will you carry me to Bordeaux?”

“No, not if you paid me two hundred dollars.”

“I offer you two thousand.”

“Apiece?”

“Apiece.”

“And there are four of you?”

“Four.”

Captain Speedy began to scratch his head. There were eight thousand dollars to gain, without changing his route; for which it was well worth conquering the repugnance he had for all kinds of passengers. Besides, passenger’s at two thousand dollars are no longer passengers, but valuable merchandise. “I start at nine o’clock,” said Captain Speedy, simply. “Are you and your party ready?”

“We will be on board at nine o’clock,” replied, no less simply, Mr. Fogg.

It was half-past eight. To disembark from the Henrietta, jump into a hack, hurry to the St. Nicholas, and return with Aouda, Passepartout, and even the inseparable Fix was the work of a brief time, and was performed by Mr. Fogg with the coolness which never abandoned him. They were on board when the Henrietta made ready to weigh anchor.

When Passepartout heard what this last voyage was going to cost, he uttered a prolonged “Oh!” which extended throughout his vocal gamut.

As for Fix, he said to himself that the Bank of England would certainly not come out of this affair well indemnified. When they reached England, even if Mr. Fogg did not throw some handfuls of bank-bills into the sea, more than seven thousand pounds would have been spent!

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG SHOWS HIMSELF EQUAL TO THE OCCASION

An hour after, the Henrietta passed the lighthouse which marks the entrance of the Hudson, turned the point of Sandy Hook, and put to sea. During the day she skirted Long Island, passed Fire Island, and directed her course rapidly eastward.

At noon the next day, a man mounted the bridge to ascertain the vessel's position. It might be thought that this was Captain Speedy. Not the least in the world. It was Phileas Fogg, Esquire. As for Captain Speedy, he was shut up in his cabin under lock and key, and was uttering loud cries, which signified an anger at once pardonable and excessive.

What had happened was very simple. Phileas Fogg wished to go to Liverpool, but the captain would not carry him there. Then Phileas Fogg had taken passage for Bordeaux, and, during the thirty hours he had been on board, had so shrewdly managed with his banknotes that the sailors and stokers, who were only an occasional crew, and were not on the best terms with the captain, went over to him in a body. This was why Phileas Fogg was in command instead of Captain Speedy; why the captain was a prisoner in his cabin; and why, in short, the Henrietta was directing her course towards Liverpool. It was very clear, to see Mr. Fogg manage the craft, that he had been a sailor.

How the adventure ended will be seen anon. Aouda was anxious, though she said nothing. As for Passepartout, he thought Mr. Fogg's manoeuvre simply glorious. The captain had said “between eleven and twelve knots,” and the Henrietta confirmed his prediction.

If, then — for there were “ifs” still — the sea did not become too boisterous, if the wind did not veer round to the east, if no accident happened to the boat or its machinery, the Henrietta might cross the three thousand miles from New York to Liverpool in the nine days, between the 12th and the 21st of December. It is true that, once arrived, the affair on board the Henrietta, added to that of the Bank of England, might create more difficulties for Mr. Fogg than he imagined or could desire.

During the first days, they went along smoothly enough. The sea was not very unpropitious, the wind seemed stationary in the north-east, the sails were hoisted, and the Henrietta ploughed across the waves like a real trans-Atlantic steamer.

Passepartout was delighted. His master’s last exploit, the consequences of which he ignored, enchanted him. Never had the crew seen so jolly and dexterous a fellow. He formed warm friendships with the sailors, and amazed them with his acrobatic feats. He thought they managed the vessel like gentlemen, and that the stokers fired up like heroes. His loquacious good-humour infected everyone. He had forgotten the past, its vexations and delays. He only thought of the end, so nearly accomplished; and sometimes he boiled over with impatience, as if heated by the furnaces of the Henrietta. Often, also, the worthy fellow revolved around Fix, looking at him with a keen, distrustful eye; but he did not speak to him, for their old intimacy no longer existed.

Fix, it must be confessed, understood nothing of what was going on. The conquest of the Henrietta, the bribery of the crew, Fogg managing the boat like a skilled seaman, amazed and confused him. He did not know what to think. For, after all, a man who began by stealing fifty-five thousand pounds might end by stealing a vessel; and Fix was not unnaturally inclined to conclude that the Henrietta under Fogg's command, was not going to Liverpool at all, but to some part of the world where the robber, turned into a pirate, would quietly put himself in safety. The conjecture was at least a plausible one, and the detective began to seriously regret that he had embarked on the affair.

As for Captain Speedy, he continued to howl and growl in his cabin; and Passepartout, whose duty it was to carry him his meals, courageous as he was, took the greatest precautions. Mr. Fogg did not seem even to know that there was a captain on board.

On the 13th they passed the edge of the Banks of Newfoundland, a dangerous locality; during the winter, especially, there are frequent fogs and heavy gales of wind. Ever since the evening before the barometer, suddenly falling, had indicated an approaching change in the atmosphere; and during the night the temperature varied, the cold became sharper, and the wind veered to the south-east.

This was a misfortune. Mr. Fogg, in order not to deviate from his course, furled his sails and increased the force of the steam; but the vessel's speed slackened, owing to the state of the sea, the long waves of which broke against the stern. She pitched violently, and this retarded her progress. The breeze little by little swelled into a tempest, and it was to be feared that the Henrietta might not be able to maintain herself upright on the waves.

Passepartout's visage darkened with the skies, and for two days the poor fellow experienced constant fright. But Phileas Fogg was a bold mariner, and knew how to maintain headway against the sea; and he kept on his course, without even decreasing his steam. The Henrietta, when she could not rise upon the waves, crossed them, swamping her deck, but passing safely. Sometimes the screw rose out of the water, beating its protruding end, when a mountain of water raised the stern above the waves; but the craft always kept straight ahead.

The wind, however, did not grow as boisterous as might have been feared; it was not one of those tempests which burst, and rush on with a speed of ninety miles an hour. It continued fresh, but, unhappily, it remained obstinately in the south-east, rendering the sails useless.

The 16th of December was the seventy-fifth day since Phileas Fogg's departure from London, and the Henrietta had not yet been seriously delayed. Half of the voyage was almost accomplished, and the worst localities had been passed. In summer, success would have been well-nigh certain. In winter, they were at the mercy of the bad season. Passepartout said nothing; but he cherished hope in secret, and comforted himself with the reflection that, if the wind failed them, they might still count on the steam.

On this day the engineer came on deck, went up to Mr. Fogg, and began to speak earnestly with him. Without knowing why it was a presentiment, perhaps Passepartout became vaguely uneasy. He would have given one of his ears to hear with the other what the engineer was saying. He finally managed to catch a few words, and was sure he heard his master say, "You are certain of what you tell me?"

"Certain, sir," replied the engineer. "You must remember that, since we started, we have kept up hot fires in all our furnaces, and, though we had coal enough to go on short steam from New York to Bordeaux, we haven't enough to go with all steam from New York to Liverpool." "I will consider," replied Mr. Fogg.

Passepartout understood it all; he was seized with mortal anxiety. The coal was giving out! “Ah, if my master can get over that,” muttered he, “he’ll be a famous man!” He could not help imparting to Fix what he had overheard.

“Then you believe that we really are going to Liverpool?”

“Of course.”

“Ass!” replied the detective, shrugging his shoulders and turning on his heel.

Passepartout was on the point of vigorously resenting the epithet, the reason of which he could not for the life of him comprehend; but he reflected that the unfortunate Fix was probably very much disappointed and humiliated in his self-esteem, after having so awkwardly followed a false scent around the world, and refrained.

And now what course would Phileas Fogg adopt? It was difficult to imagine. Nevertheless he seemed to have decided upon one, for that evening he sent for the engineer, and said to him, “Feed all the fires until the coal is exhausted.”

A few moments after, the funnel of the Henrietta vomited forth torrents of smoke. The vessel continued to proceed with all steam on; but on the 18th, the engineer, as he had predicted, announced that the coal would give out in the course of the day.

“Do not let the fires go down,” replied Mr. Fogg. “Keep them up to the last. Let the valves be filled.”

Towards noon Phileas Fogg, having ascertained their position, called Passepartout, and ordered him to go for Captain Speedy. It was as if the honest fellow had been commanded to unchain a tiger. He went to the poop, saying to himself, “He will be like a madman!”

In a few moments, with cries and oaths, a bomb appeared on the poop-deck. The bomb was Captain Speedy. It was clear that he was on the point of bursting. “Where are we?” were the first words his anger permitted him to utter. Had the poor man be an apoplectic, he could never have recovered from his paroxysm of wrath.

“Where are we?” he repeated, with purple face.

“Seven hundred and seven miles from Liverpool,” replied Mr. Fogg, with imperturbable calmness.

“Pirate!” cried Captain Speedy.

“I have sent for you, sir — ”

“Pickaroon!”

“ — sir,” continued Mr. Fogg, “to ask you to sell me your vessel.”

“No! By all the devils, no!”

“But I shall be obliged to burn her.”

“Burn the Henrietta!”

“Yes; at least the upper part of her. The coal has given out.”

“Burn my vessel!” cried Captain Speedy, who could scarcely pronounce the words. “A vessel worth fifty thousand dollars!”

“Here are sixty thousand,” replied Phileas Fogg, handing the captain a roll of bank-bills. This had a prodigious effect on Andrew Speedy. An American can scarcely remain unmoved at the sight of sixty thousand dollars. The captain forgot in an instant his anger, his imprisonment, and all his grudges against his passenger. The Henrietta was twenty years old; it was a great bargain. The bomb would not go off after all. Mr. Fogg had taken away the match.

“And I shall still have the iron hull,” said the captain in a softer tone.

“The iron hull and the engine. Is it agreed?”

“Agreed.”

And Andrew Speedy, seizing the banknotes, counted them and consigned them to his pocket.

During this colloquy, Passepartout was as white as a sheet, and Fix seemed on the point of having an apoplectic fit. Nearly twenty thousand pounds had been expended, and Fogg left the hull and engine to the captain, that is, near the whole value of the craft! It was true, however, that fifty-five thousand pounds had been stolen from the Bank.

When Andrew Speedy had pocketed the money, Mr. Fogg said to him, “Don’t let this astonish you, sir. You must know that I shall lose twenty thousand pounds, unless I arrive in London by a quarter before nine on the evening of the 21st of December. I missed the steamer at New York, and as you refused to take me to Liverpool — ”

"And I did well!" cried Andrew Speedy; "for I have gained at least forty thousand dollars by it!" He added, more sedately, "Do you know one thing, Captain — "

"Fogg."

"Captain Fogg, you've got something of the Yankee about you."

And, having paid his passenger what he considered a high compliment, he was going away, when Mr. Fogg said, "The vessel now belongs to me?"

"Certainly, from the keel to the truck of the masts — all the wood, that is."

"Very well. Have the interior seats, bunks, and frames pulled down, and burn them."

It was necessary to have dry wood to keep the steam up to the adequate pressure, and on that day the poop, cabins, bunks, and the spare deck were sacrificed. On the next day, the 19th of December, the masts, rafts, and spars were burned; the crew worked lustily, keeping up the fires. Passepartout hewed, cut, and sawed away with all his might. There was a perfect rage for demolition.

The railings, fittings, the greater part of the deck, and top sides disappeared on the 20th, and the Henrietta was now only a flat hulk. But on this day they sighted the Irish coast and Fastnet Light. By ten in the evening they were passing Queenstown. Phileas Fogg had only twenty-four hours more in which to get to London; that length of time was necessary to reach Liverpool, with all steam on. And the steam was about to give out altogether!

"Sir," said Captain Speedy, who was now deeply interested in Mr. Fogg's project, "I really commiserate you. Everything is against you. We are only opposite Queenstown."

"Ah," said Mr. Fogg, "is that place where we see the lights Queenstown?"

"Yes."

"Can we enter the harbour?"

"Not under three hours. Only at high tide."

"Stay," replied Mr. Fogg calmly, without betraying in his features that by a supreme inspiration he was about to attempt once more to conquer ill-fortune.

Queenstown is the Irish port at which the trans-Atlantic steamers stop to put off the mails. These mails are carried to Dublin by express trains always held in readiness to start; from Dublin they are sent on to Liverpool by the most rapid boats, and thus gain twelve hours on the Atlantic steamers.

Phileas Fogg counted on gaining twelve hours in the same way. Instead of arriving at Liverpool the next evening by the Henrietta, he would be there by noon, and would therefore have time to reach London before a quarter before nine in the evening.

The Henrietta entered Queenstown Harbour at one o'clock in the morning, it then being high tide; and Phileas Fogg, after being grasped heartily by the hand by Captain Speedy, left that gentleman on the levelled hulk of his craft, which was still worth half what he had sold it for.

The party went on shore at once. Fix was greatly tempted to arrest Mr. Fogg on the spot; but he did not. Why? What struggle was going on within him? Had he changed his mind about “his man”? Did he understand that he had made a grave mistake? He did not, however, abandon Mr. Fogg. They all got upon the train, which was just ready to start, at half-past one; at dawn of day they were in Dublin; and they lost no time in embarking on a steamer which, disdaining to rise upon the waves, invariably cut through them.

Phileas Fogg at last disembarked on the Liverpool quay, at twenty minutes before twelve, 21st December. He was only six hours distant from London.

But at this moment Fix came up, put his hand upon Mr. Fogg’s shoulder, and, showing his warrant, said, “You are really Phileas Fogg?”

“I am.”

“I arrest you in the Queen’s name!”

CHAPTER XXXIV

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG AT LAST REACHES LONDON

Phileas Fogg was in prison. He had been shut up in the Custom House, and he was to be transferred to London the next day.

Passepartout, when he saw his master arrested, would have fallen upon Fix had he not been held back by some policemen. Aouda was thunderstruck at the suddenness of an event which she could not understand. Passepartout explained to her how it was that the honest and courageous Fogg was arrested as a robber. The young woman's heart revolted against so heinous a charge, and when she saw that she could attempt to do nothing to save her protector, she wept bitterly.

As for Fix, he had arrested Mr. Fogg because it was his duty, whether Mr. Fogg were guilty or not.

The thought then struck Passepartout, that he was the cause of this new misfortune! Had he not concealed Fix's errand from his master? When Fix revealed his true character and purpose, why had he not told Mr. Fogg? If the latter had been warned, he would no doubt have given Fix proof of his innocence, and satisfied him of his mistake; at least, Fix would not have continued his journey at the expense and on the heels of his master, only to arrest him the moment he set foot on English soil. Passepartout wept till he was blind, and felt like blowing his brains out.

Aouda and he had remained, despite the cold, under the portico of the Custom House. Neither wished to leave the place; both were anxious to see Mr. Fogg again.

That gentleman was really ruined, and that at the moment when he was about to attain his end. This arrest was fatal. Having arrived at Liverpool at twenty minutes before twelve on the 21st of December, he had till a quarter before nine that evening to reach the Reform Club, that is, nine hours and a quarter; the journey from Liverpool to London was six hours.

If anyone, at this moment, had entered the Custom House, he would have found Mr. Fogg seated, motionless, calm, and without apparent anger, upon a wooden bench. He was not, it is true, resigned; but this last blow failed to force him into an outward betrayal of any emotion. Was he being devoured by one of those secret rages, all the more terrible because contained, and which only burst forth, with an irresistible force, at the last moment? No one could tell. There he sat, calmly waiting — for what? Did he still cherish hope? Did he still believe, now that the door of this prison was closed upon him, that he would succeed?

However that may have been, Mr. Fogg carefully put his watch upon the table, and observed its advancing hands. Not a word escaped his lips, but his look was singularly set and stern. The situation, in any event, was a terrible one, and might be thus stated: if Phileas Fogg was honest he was ruined; if he was a knave, he was caught.

Did escape occur to him? Did he examine to see if there were any practicable outlet from his prison? Did he think of escaping from it? Possibly; for once he walked slowly around the room. But the door was locked, and the window heavily barred with iron rods. He sat down again, and drew his journal from his pocket. On the line where these words were written, “21st December, Saturday, Liverpool,” he added, “80th day, 11.40 a.m.” and waited.

The Custom House clock struck one. Mr. Fogg observed that his watch was two hours too fast.

Two hours! Admitting that he was at this moment taking an express train, he could reach London and the Reform Club by a quarter before nine, p.m. His forehead slightly wrinkled.

At thirty-three minutes past two he heard a singular noise outside, then a hasty opening of doors. Passepartout’s voice was audible, and immediately after that of Fix. Phileas Fogg’s eyes brightened for an instant.

The door swung open, and he saw Passepartout, Aouda, and Fix, who hurried towards him.

Fix was out of breath, and his hair was in disorder. He could not speak. “Sir,” he stammered, “sir — forgive me — most — unfortunate resemblance — robber arrested three days ago — you are free!”

Phileas Fogg was free! He walked to the detective, looked him steadily in the face, and with the only rapid motion he had ever made in his life, or which he ever would make, drew back his arms, and with the precision of a machine knocked Fix down.

“Well hit!” cried Passepartout, “Parbleu! that’s what you might call a good application of English fists!”

Fix, who found himself on the floor, did not utter a word. He had only received his deserts. Mr. Fogg, Aouda, and Passepartout left the Custom House without delay, got into a cab, and in a few moments descended at the station.

Phileas Fogg asked if there was an express train about to leave for London. It was forty minutes past two. The express train had left thirty-five minutes before. Phileas Fogg then ordered a special train.

There were several rapid locomotives on hand; but the railway arrangements did not permit the special train to leave until three o’clock.

At that hour Phileas Fogg, having stimulated the engineer by the offer of a generous reward, at last set out towards London with Aouda and his faithful servant.

It was necessary to make the journey in five hours and a half; and this would have been easy on a clear road throughout. But there were forced delays, and when Mr. Fogg stepped from the train at the terminus, all the clocks in London were striking ten minutes before nine.

Having made the tour of the world, he was behind-hand five minutes. He had lost the wager!

CHAPTER XXXV

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG DOES NOT HAVE TO REPEAT HIS ORDERS TO PASSEPARTOUT TWICE

The dwellers in Saville Row would have been surprised the next day, if they had been told that Phileas Fogg had returned home. His doors and windows were still closed, no appearance of change was visible.

After leaving the station, Mr. Fogg gave Passepartout instructions to purchase some provisions, and quietly went to his domicile.

He bore his misfortune with his habitual tranquillity. Ruined! And by the blundering of the detective! After having steadily traversed that long journey, overcome a hundred obstacles, braved many dangers, and still found time to do some good on his way, to fail near the goal by a sudden event which he could not have foreseen, and against which he was unarmed; it was terrible! But a few pounds were left of the large sum he had carried with him. There only remained of his fortune the twenty thousand pounds deposited at Barings, and this amount he owed to his friends of the Reform Club. So great had been the expense of his tour that, even had he won, it would not have enriched him; and it is probable that he had not sought to enrich himself, being a man who rather laid wagers for honour’s sake than for the stake proposed. But this wager totally ruined him.

Mr. Fogg’s course, however, was fully decided upon; he knew what remained for him to do.

A room in the house in Saville Row was set apart for Aouda, who was overwhelmed with grief at her protector’s misfortune. From the words which Mr. Fogg dropped, she saw that he was meditating some serious project.

Knowing that Englishmen governed by a fixed idea sometimes resort to the desperate expedient of suicide, Passepartout kept a narrow watch upon his master, though he carefully concealed the appearance of so doing.

First of all, the worthy fellow had gone up to his room, and had extinguished the gas burner, which had been burning for eighty days. He had found in the letter-box a bill from the gas company, and he thought it more than time to put a stop to this expense, which he had been doomed to bear.

The night passed. Mr. Fogg went to bed, but did he sleep? Aouda did not once close her eyes. Passepartout watched all night, like a faithful dog, at his master's door.

Mr. Fogg called him in the morning, and told him to get Aouda's breakfast, and a cup of tea and a chop for himself. He desired Aouda to excuse him from breakfast and dinner, as his time would be absorbed all day in putting his affairs to rights. In the evening he would ask permission to have a few moment's conversation with the young lady.

Passepartout, having received his orders, had nothing to do but obey them. He looked at his imperturbable master, and could scarcely bring his mind to leave him. His heart was full, and his conscience tortured by remorse; for he accused himself more bitterly than ever of being the cause of the irretrievable disaster. Yes! if he had warned Mr. Fogg, and had betrayed Fix's projects to him, his master would certainly not have given the detective passage to Liverpool, and then —

Passepartout could hold in no longer.

“My master! Mr. Fogg!” he cried, “why do you not curse me? It was my fault that — ”

“I blame no one,” returned Phileas Fogg, with perfect calmness. “Go!”

Passepartout left the room, and went to find Aouda, to whom he delivered his master’s message.

“Madam,” he added, “I can do nothing myself — nothing! I have no influence over my master; but you, perhaps — ”

“What influence could I have?” replied Aouda. “Mr. Fogg is influenced by no one. Has he ever understood that my gratitude to him is overflowing? Has he ever read my heart? My friend, he must not be left alone an instant! You say he is going to speak with me this evening?”

“Yes, madam; probably to arrange for your protection and comfort in England.”

“We shall see,” replied Aouda, becoming suddenly pensive.

Throughout this day (Sunday) the house in Saville Row was as if uninhabited, and Phileas Fogg, for the first time since he had lived in that house, did not set out for his club when Westminster clock struck half-past eleven.

Why should he present himself at the Reform? His friends no longer expected him there. As Phileas Fogg had not appeared in the saloon on the evening before (Saturday, the 21st of December, at a quarter before nine), he had lost his wager. It was not even necessary that he should go to his bankers for the twenty thousand pounds; for his antagonists already had his cheque in their hands, and they had only to fill it out and send it to the Barings to have the amount transferred to their credit.

Mr. Fogg, therefore, had no reason for going out, and so he remained at home. He shut himself up in his room, and busied himself putting his affairs in order. Passepartout continually ascended and descended the stairs. The hours were long for him. He listened at his master's door, and looked through the keyhole, as if he had a perfect right so to do, and as if he feared that something terrible might happen at any moment. Sometimes he thought of Fix, but no longer in anger. Fix, like all the world, had been mistaken in Phileas Fogg, and had only done his duty in tracking and arresting him; while he, Passepartout... This thought haunted him, and he never ceased cursing his miserable folly.

Finding himself too wretched to remain alone, he knocked at Aouda's door, went into her room, seated himself, without speaking, in a corner, and looked ruefully at the young woman. Aouda was still pensive.

About half-past seven in the evening Mr. Fogg sent to know if Aouda would receive him, and in a few moments he found himself alone with her.

Phileas Fogg took a chair, and sat down near the fireplace, opposite Aouda. No emotion was visible on his face. Fogg returned was exactly the Fogg who had gone away; there was the same calm, the same impassibility.

He sat several minutes without speaking; then, bending his eyes on Aouda, "Madam," said he, "will you pardon me for bringing you to England?"

"I, Mr. Fogg!" replied Aouda, checking the pulsations of her heart.

“Please let me finish,” returned Mr. Fogg. “When I decided to bring you far away from the country which was so unsafe for you, I was rich, and counted on putting a portion of my fortune at your disposal; then your existence would have been free and happy. But now I am ruined.”

“I know it, Mr. Fogg,” replied Aouda; “and I ask you in my turn, will you forgive me for having followed you, and — who knows? — for having, perhaps, delayed you, and thus contributed to your ruin?”

“Madam, you could not remain in India, and your safety could only be assured by bringing you to such a distance that your persecutors could not take you.”

“So, Mr. Fogg,” resumed Aouda, “not content with rescuing me from a terrible death, you thought yourself bound to secure my comfort in a foreign land?”

“Yes, madam; but circumstances have been against me. Still, I beg to place the little I have left at your service.”

“But what will become of you, Mr. Fogg?”

“As for me, madam,” replied the gentleman, coldly, “I have need of nothing.”

“But how do you look upon the fate, sir, which awaits you?”

“As I am in the habit of doing.”

“At least,” said Aouda, “want should not overtake a man like you. Your friends — ”

“I have no friends, madam.”

“Your relatives — ”

“I have no longer any relatives.”

“I pity you, then, Mr. Fogg, for solitude is a sad thing, with no heart to which to confide your griefs. They say, though, that misery itself, shared by two sympathetic souls, may be borne with patience.”

“They say so, madam.”

“Mr. Fogg,” said Aouda, rising and seizing his hand, “do you wish at once a kinswoman and friend? Will you have me for your wife?”

Mr. Fogg, at this, rose in his turn. There was an unwonted light in his eyes, and a slight trembling of his lips. Aouda looked into his face. The sincerity, rectitude, firmness, and sweetness of this soft glance of a noble woman, who could dare all to save him to whom she owed all, at first astonished, then penetrated him. He shut his eyes for an instant, as if to avoid her look. When he opened them again, “I love you!” he said, simply. “Yes, by all that is holiest, I love you, and I am entirely yours!”

“Ah!” cried Aouda, pressing his hand to her heart.

Passepartout was summoned and appeared immediately. Mr. Fogg still held Aouda’s hand in his own; Passepartout understood, and his big, round face became as radiant as the tropical sun at its zenith.

Mr. Fogg asked him if it was not too late to notify the Reverend Samuel Wilson, of Marylebone parish, that evening.

Passepartout smiled his most genial smile, and said, “Never too late.”

It was five minutes past eight.

“Will it be for to-morrow, Monday?”

“For to-morrow, Monday,” said Mr. Fogg, turning to Aouda.

“Yes; for to-morrow, Monday,” she replied.

Passepartout hurried off as fast as his legs could carry him.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN WHICH PHILEAS FOGG’S NAME IS ONCE MORE AT A PREMIUM ON ‘CHANGE

It is time to relate what a change took place in English public opinion when it transpired that the real bankrobber, a certain James Strand, had been arrested, on the 17th day of December, at Edinburgh. Three days before, Phileas Fogg had been a criminal, who was being desperately followed up by the police; now he was an honourable gentleman, mathematically pursuing his eccentric journey round the world.

The papers resumed their discussion about the wager; all those who had laid bets, for or against him, revived their interest, as if by magic; the “Phileas Fogg bonds” again became negotiable, and many new wagers were made. Phileas Fogg’s name was once more at a premium on ‘Change.

His five friends of the Reform Club passed these three days in a state of feverish suspense. Would Phileas Fogg, whom they had forgotten, reappear before their eyes! Where was he at this moment? The 17th of December, the day of James Strand’s arrest, was the seventy-sixth since Phileas Fogg’s departure, and no news of him had been received. Was he dead? Had he abandoned the effort, or was he continuing his journey along the route agreed upon? And would he appear on Saturday, the 21st of December, at a quarter before nine in the evening, on the threshold of the Reform Club saloon?

The anxiety in which, for three days, London society existed, cannot be described. Telegrams were sent to America and Asia for news of Phileas Fogg. Messengers were dispatched to the house in Saville Row morning and evening. No news. The police were ignorant what had become of the detective, Fix, who had so unfortunately followed up a false scent. Bets increased, nevertheless, in number and value. Phileas Fogg, like a racehorse, was drawing near his last turning-point. The bonds were quoted, no longer at a hundred below par, but at twenty, at ten, and at five; and paralytic old Lord Albemarle bet even in his favour.

A great crowd was collected in Pall Mall and the neighbouring streets on Saturday evening; it seemed like a multitude of brokers permanently established around the Reform Club. Circulation was impeded, and everywhere disputes, discussions, and financial transactions were going on. The police had great difficulty in keeping back the crowd, and as the hour when Phileas Fogg was due approached, the excitement rose to its highest pitch.

The five antagonists of Phileas Fogg had met in the great saloon of the club. John Sullivan and Samuel Fallentin, the bankers, Andrew Stuart, the engineer, Gauthier Ralph, the director of the Bank of England, and Thomas Flanagan, the brewer, one and all waited anxiously.

When the clock indicated twenty minutes past eight, Andrew Stuart got up, saying, “Gentlemen, in twenty minutes the time agreed upon between Mr. Fogg and ourselves will have expired.”

“What time did the last train arrive from Liverpool?” asked Thomas Flanagan.

“At twenty-three minutes past seven,” replied Gauthier Ralph; “and the next does not arrive till ten minutes after twelve.”

“Well, gentlemen,” resumed Andrew Stuart, “if Phileas Fogg had come in the 7:23 train, he would have got here by this time. We can, therefore, regard the bet as won.”

“Wait; don’t let us be too hasty,” replied Samuel Fallentin. “You know that Mr. Fogg is very eccentric. His punctuality is well known; he never arrives too soon, or too late; and I should not be surprised if he appeared before us at the last minute.”

“Why,” said Andrew Stuart nervously, “if I should see him, I should not believe it was he.”

“The fact is,” resumed Thomas Flanagan, “Mr. Fogg’s project was absurdly foolish. Whatever his punctuality, he could not prevent the delays which were certain to occur; and a delay of only two or three days would be fatal to his tour.”

“Observe, too,” added John Sullivan, “that we have received no intelligence from him, though there are telegraphic lines all along is route.”

“He has lost, gentleman,” said Andrew Stuart, “he has a hundred times lost! You know, besides, that the China the only steamer he could have taken from New York to get here in time arrived yesterday. I have seen a list of the passengers, and the name of Phileas Fogg is not among them. Even if we admit that fortune has favoured him, he can scarcely have reached America. I think he will be at least twenty days behind-hand, and that Lord Albemarle will lose a cool five thousand.”

“It is clear,” replied Gauthier Ralph; “and we have nothing to do but to present Mr. Fogg’s cheque at Barings to-morrow.”

At this moment, the hands of the club clock pointed to twenty minutes to nine.

“Five minutes more,” said Andrew Stuart.

The five gentlemen looked at each other. Their anxiety was becoming intense; but, not wishing to betray it, they readily assented to Mr. Fallentin’s proposal of a rubber.

“I wouldn’t give up my four thousand of the bet,” said Andrew Stuart, as he took his seat, “for three thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine.”

The clock indicated eighteen minutes to nine.

The players took up their cards, but could not keep their eyes off the clock. Certainly, however secure they felt, minutes had never seemed so long to them!

“Seventeen minutes to nine,” said Thomas Flanagan, as he cut the cards which Ralph handed to him.

Then there was a moment of silence. The great saloon was perfectly quiet; but the murmurs of the crowd outside were heard, with now and then a shrill cry. The pendulum beat the seconds, which each player eagerly counted, as he listened, with mathematical regularity.

“Sixteen minutes to nine!” said John Sullivan, in a voice which betrayed his emotion.

One minute more, and the wager would be won. Andrew Stuart and his partners suspended their game. They left their cards, and counted the seconds.

At the fortieth second, nothing. At the fiftieth, still nothing.

At the fifty-fifth, a loud cry was heard in the street, followed by applause, hurrahs, and some fierce growls.

The players rose from their seats.

At the fifty-seventh second the door of the saloon opened; and the pendulum had not beat the sixtieth second when Phileas Fogg appeared, followed by an excited crowd who had forced their way through the club doors, and in his calm voice, said, “Here I am, gentlemen!”

CHAPTER XXXVII

IN WHICH IT IS SHOWN THAT PHILEAS FOGG GAINED NOTHING BY HIS TOUR AROUND THE WORLD, UNLESS IT WERE HAPPINESS

Yes; Phileas Fogg in person.

The reader will remember that at five minutes past eight in the evening — about five and twenty hours after the arrival of the travellers in London — Passepartout had been sent by his master to engage the services of the Reverend Samuel Wilson in a certain marriage ceremony, which was to take place the next day.

Passepartout went on his errand enchanted. He soon reached the clergyman’s house, but found him not at home. Passepartout waited a good twenty minutes, and when he left the reverend gentleman, it was thirty-five minutes past eight. But in what a state he was! With his hair in disorder, and without his hat, he ran along the street as never man was seen to run before, overturning passers-by, rushing over the sidewalk like a waterspout.

In three minutes he was in Saville Row again, and staggered back into Mr. Fogg’s room.

He could not speak.

“What is the matter?” asked Mr. Fogg.

“My master!” gasped Passepartout — ”marriage — impossible — ”

"Impossible?"

"Impossible — for to-morrow."

"Why so?"

"Because to-morrow — is Sunday!"

"Monday," replied Mr. Fogg.

"No — to-day is Saturday."

"Saturday? Impossible!"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" cried Passepartout. "You have made a mistake of one day! We arrived twenty-four hours ahead of time; but there are only ten minutes left!"

Passepartout had seized his master by the collar, and was dragging him along with irresistible force.

Phileas Fogg, thus kidnapped, without having time to think, left his house, jumped into a cab, promised a hundred pounds to the cabman, and, having run over two dogs and overturned five carriages, reached the Reform Club.

The clock indicated a quarter before nine when he appeared in the great saloon.

Phileas Fogg had accomplished the journey round the world in eighty days!

Phileas Fogg had won his wager of twenty thousand pounds!

How was it that a man so exact and fastidious could have made this error of a day? How came he to think that he had arrived in London on Saturday, the twenty-first day of December, when it was really Friday, the twentieth, the seventy-ninth day only from his departure?

The cause of the error is very simple.

Phileas Fogg had, without suspecting it, gained one day on his journey, and this merely because he had travelled constantly eastward; he would, on the contrary, have lost a day had he gone in the opposite direction, that is, westward.

In journeying eastward he had gone towards the sun, and the days therefore diminished for him as many times four minutes as he crossed degrees in this direction. There are three hundred and sixty degrees on the circumference of the earth; and these three hundred and sixty degrees, multiplied by four minutes, gives precisely twenty-four hours — that is, the day unconsciously gained. In other words, while Phileas Fogg, going eastward, saw the sun pass the meridian eighty times, his friends in London only saw it pass the meridian seventy-nine times. This is why they awaited him at the Reform Club on Saturday, and not Sunday, as Mr. Fogg thought.

And Passepartout’s famous family watch, which had always kept London time, would have betrayed this fact, if it had marked the days as well as the hours and the minutes!

Phileas Fogg, then, had won the twenty thousand pounds; but, as he had spent nearly nineteen thousand on the way, the pecuniary gain was small. His object was, however, to be victorious, and not to win money. He divided the one thousand pounds that remained between Passepartout and the unfortunate Fix, against whom he cherished no grudge. He deducted, however, from Passepartout’s share the cost of the gas which had burned in his room for nineteen hundred and twenty hours, for the sake of regularity.

That evening, Mr. Fogg, as tranquil and phlegmatic as ever, said to Aouda: “Is our marriage still agreeable to you?”

“Mr. Fogg,” replied she, “it is for me to ask that question. You were ruined, but now you are rich again.”

“Pardon me, madam; my fortune belongs to you. If you had not suggested our marriage, my servant would not have gone to the Reverend Samuel Wilson’s, I should not have been apprised of my error, and — ”

“Dear Mr. Fogg!” said the young woman.

“Dear Aouda!” replied Phileas Fogg.

It need not be said that the marriage took place forty-eight hours after, and that Passepartout, glowing and dazzling, gave the bride away. Had he not saved her, and was he not entitled to this honour?

The next day, as soon as it was light, Passepartout rapped vigorously at his master’s door. Mr. Fogg opened it, and asked, “What’s the matter, Passepartout?”

“What is it, sir? Why, I’ve just this instant found out — ”

“What?”

“That we might have made the tour of the world in only seventy-eight days.”

“No doubt,” returned Mr. Fogg, “by not crossing India. But if I had not crossed India, I should not have saved Aouda; she would not have been my wife, and — ”

Mr. Fogg quietly shut the door.

Phileas Fogg had won his wager, and had made his journey around the world in eighty days. To do this he had employed every means of conveyance — steamers, railways, carriages, yachts, trading-vessels, sledges, elephants. The eccentric gentleman had throughout displayed all his marvellous qualities of coolness and exactitude. But what then? What had he really gained by all this trouble? What had he brought back from this long and weary journey?

Nothing, say you? Perhaps so; nothing but a charming woman, who, strange as it may appear, made him the happiest of men!

Truly, would you not for less than that make the tour around the world?

THE MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

Anonymous translation, 1875

First published in 1874, this novel is a sequel to *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and *In Search of the Castaways*, though it is very different in theme. The novel concerns the adventures of five Americans on an uncharted island in the South Pacific. The story begins in the American Civil War, during the siege of Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederate States of America. As famine and death ravage the city, five northern prisoners of war decide to escape by the unusual means of hijacking a balloon.

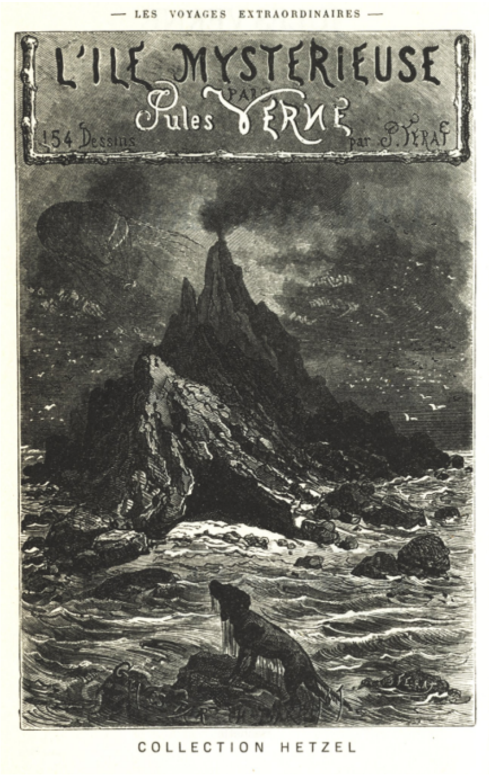
— LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES —
L'ILE MYSTERIEUSE
PAR
Jules VERNE
154 Dessins par J. Férat
COLLECTION HETZEL

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PART 1. DROPPED FROM THE CLOUDS

CHAPTER 1

“Are we rising again?” “No. On the contrary.” “Are we descending?” “Worse than that, captain! we are falling!” “For Heaven’s sake heave out the ballast!” “There! the last sack is empty!” “Does the balloon rise?” “No!” “I hear a noise like the dashing of waves. The sea is below the car! It cannot be more than 500 feet from us!” “Overboard with every weight!... everything!”

Such were the loud and startling words which resounded through the air, above the vast watery desert of the Pacific, about four o’clock in the evening of the 23rd of March, 1865.

Few can possibly have forgotten the terrible storm from the northeast, in the middle of the equinox of that year. The tempest raged without intermission from the 18th to the 26th of March. Its ravages were terrible in America, Europe, and Asia, covering a distance of eighteen hundred miles, and extending obliquely to the equator from the thirty-fifth north parallel to the fortieth south parallel. Towns were overthrown, forests uprooted, coasts devastated by the mountains of water which were precipitated on them, vessels cast on the shore, which the published accounts numbered by hundreds, whole districts leveled by waterspouts which destroyed everything they passed over, several thousand people crushed on land or drowned at sea; such were the traces of its fury, left by this devastating tempest. It surpassed in disasters those which so frightfully ravaged Havana and Guadalupe, one on the 25th of October, 1810, the other on the 26th of July, 1825.

But while so many catastrophes were taking place on land and at sea, a drama not less exciting was being enacted in the agitated air.

In fact, a balloon, as a ball might be carried on the summit of a waterspout, had been taken into the circling movement of a column of air and had traversed space at the rate of ninety miles an hour, turning round and round as if seized by some aerial maelstrom.

Beneath the lower point of the balloon swung a car, containing five passengers, scarcely visible in the midst of the thick vapor mingled with spray which hung over the surface of the ocean.

Whence, it may be asked, had come that plaything of the tempest? From what part of the world did it rise? It surely could not have started during the storm. But the storm had raged five days already, and the first symptoms were manifested on the 18th. It cannot be doubted that the balloon came from a great distance, for it could not have traveled less than two thousand miles in twenty-four hours.

At any rate the passengers, destitute of all marks for their guidance, could not have possessed the means of reckoning the route traversed since their departure. It was a remarkable fact that, although in the very midst of the furious tempest, they did not suffer from it. They were thrown about and whirled round and round without feeling the rotation in the slightest degree, or being sensible that they were removed from a horizontal position.

Their eyes could not pierce through the thick mist which had gathered beneath the car. Dark vapor was all around them. Such was the density of the atmosphere that they could not be certain whether it was day or night. No reflection of light, no sound from inhabited land, no roaring of the ocean could have reached them, through the obscurity, while suspended in those elevated zones. Their rapid descent alone had informed them of the dangers which they ran from the waves. However, the balloon, lightened of heavy articles, such as ammunition, arms, and provisions, had risen into the higher layers of the atmosphere, to a height of 4,500 feet. The voyagers, after having discovered that the sea extended beneath them, and thinking the dangers above less dreadful than those below, did not hesitate to throw overboard even their most useful articles, while they endeavored to lose no more of that fluid, the life of their enterprise, which sustained them above the abyss.

The night passed in the midst of alarms which would have been death to less energetic souls. Again the day appeared and with it the tempest began to moderate. From the beginning of that day, the 24th of March, it showed symptoms of abating. At dawn, some of the lighter clouds had risen into the more lofty regions of the air. In a few hours the wind had changed from a hurricane to a fresh breeze, that is to say, the rate of the transit of the atmospheric layers was diminished by half. It was still what sailors call “a close-reefed topsail breeze,” but the commotion in the elements had none the less considerably diminished.

Towards eleven o’clock, the lower region of the air was sensibly clearer. The atmosphere threw off that chilly dampness which is felt after the passage of a great meteor. The storm did not seem to have gone farther to the west. It appeared to have exhausted itself. Could it have passed away in electric sheets, as is sometimes the case with regard to the typhoons of the Indian Ocean?

But at the same time, it was also evident that the balloon was again slowly descending with a regular movement. It appeared as if it were, little by little, collapsing, and that its case was lengthening and extending, passing from a spherical to an oval form. Towards midday the balloon was hovering above the sea at a height of only 2,000 feet. It contained 50,000 cubic feet of gas, and, thanks to its capacity, it could maintain itself a long time in the air, although it should reach a great altitude or might be thrown into a horizontal position.

Perceiving their danger, the passengers cast away the last articles which still weighed down the car, the few provisions they had kept, everything, even to their pocket-knives, and one of them, having hoisted himself on to the circles which united the cords of the net, tried to secure more firmly the lower point of the balloon.

It was, however, evident to the voyagers that the gas was failing, and that the balloon could no longer be sustained in the higher regions. They must infallibly perish!

There was not a continent, nor even an island, visible beneath them. The watery expanse did not present a single speck of land, not a solid surface upon which their anchor could hold.

It was the open sea, whose waves were still dashing with tremendous violence! It was the ocean, without any visible limits, even for those whose gaze, from their commanding position, extended over a radius of forty miles. The vast liquid plain, lashed without mercy by the storm, appeared as if covered with herds of furious chargers, whose white and disheveled crests were streaming in the wind. No land was in sight, not a solitary ship could be seen. It was necessary at any cost to arrest their downward course, and to prevent the balloon from being engulfed in the waves. The voyagers directed all their energies to this urgent work. But, notwithstanding their efforts, the balloon still fell, and at the same time shifted with the greatest rapidity, following the direction of the wind, that is to say, from the northeast to the southwest.

Frightful indeed was the situation of these unfortunate men. They were evidently no longer masters of the machine. All their attempts were useless. The case of the balloon collapsed more and more. The gas escaped without any possibility of retaining it. Their descent was visibly accelerated, and soon after midday the car hung within 600 feet of the ocean.

It was impossible to prevent the escape of gas, which rushed through a large rent in the silk. By lightening the car of all the articles which it contained, the passengers had been able to prolong their suspension in the air for a few hours. But the inevitable catastrophe could only be retarded, and if land did not appear before night, voyagers, car, and balloon must to a certainty vanish beneath the waves.

They now resorted to the only remaining expedient. They were truly dauntless men, who knew how to look death in the face. Not a single murmur escaped from their lips. They were determined to struggle to the last minute, to do anything to retard their fall. The car was only a sort of willow basket, unable to float, and there was not the slightest possibility of maintaining it on the surface of the sea.

Two more hours passed and the balloon was scarcely 400 feet above the water.

At that moment a loud voice, the voice of a man whose heart was inaccessible to fear, was heard. To this voice responded others not less determined. “Is everything thrown out?” “No, here are still 2,000 dollars in gold.” A heavy bag immediately plunged into the sea. “Does the balloon rise?” “A little, but it will not be long before it falls again.” “What still remains to be thrown out?” “Nothing.” “Yes! the car!” “Let us catch hold of the net, and into the sea with the car.”

This was, in fact, the last and only mode of lightening the balloon. The ropes which held the car were cut, and the balloon, after its fall, mounted 2,000 feet. The five voyagers had hoisted themselves into the net, and clung to the meshes, gazing at the abyss.

The delicate sensibility of balloons is well known. It is sufficient to throw out the lightest article to produce a difference in its vertical position. The apparatus in the air is like a balance of mathematical precision. It can be thus easily understood that when it is lightened of any considerable weight its movement will be impetuous and sudden. So it happened on this occasion. But after being suspended for an instant aloft, the balloon began to redescend, the gas escaping by the rent which it was impossible to repair.

The men had done all that men could do. No human efforts could save them now.

They must trust to the mercy of Him who rules the elements.

At four o’clock the balloon was only 500 feet above the surface of the water.

A loud barking was heard. A dog accompanied the voyagers, and was held pressed close to his master in the meshes of the net.

“Top has seen something,” cried one of the men. Then immediately a loud voice shouted, —

“Land! land!” The balloon, which the wind still drove towards the southwest, had since daybreak gone a considerable distance, which might be reckoned by hundreds of miles, and a tolerably high land had, in fact, appeared in that direction. But this land was still thirty miles off. It would not take less than an hour to get to it, and then there was the chance of falling to leeward.

An hour! Might not the balloon before that be emptied of all the fluid it yet retained?

Such was the terrible question! The voyagers could distinctly see that solid spot which they must reach at any cost. They were ignorant of what it was, whether an island or a continent, for they did not know to what part of the world the hurricane had driven them. But they must reach this land, whether inhabited or desolate, whether hospitable or not.

It was evident that the balloon could no longer support itself! Several times already had the crests of the enormous billows licked the bottom of the net, making it still heavier, and the balloon only half rose, like a bird with a wounded wing. Half an hour later the land was not more than a mile off, but the balloon, exhausted, flabby, hanging in great folds, had gas in its upper part alone. The voyagers, clinging to the net, were still too heavy for it, and soon, half plunged into the sea, they were beaten by the furious waves. The balloon-case bulged out again, and the wind, taking it, drove it along like a vessel. Might it not possibly thus reach the land?

But, when only two fathoms off, terrible cries resounded from four pairs of lungs at once. The balloon, which had appeared as if it would never again rise, suddenly made an unexpected bound, after having been struck by a tremendous sea. As if it had been at that instant relieved of a new part of its weight, it mounted to a height of 1,500 feet, and here it met a current of wind, which instead of taking it directly to the coast, carried it in a nearly parallel direction.

At last, two minutes later, it reproached obliquely, and finally fell on a sandy beach, out of the reach of the waves.

The voyagers, aiding each other, managed to disengage themselves from the meshes of the net. The balloon, relieved of their weight, was taken by the wind, and like a wounded bird which revives for an instant, disappeared into space.

But the car had contained five passengers, with a dog, and the balloon only left four on the shore.

The missing person had evidently been swept off by the sea, which had just struck the net, and it was owing to this circumstance that the lightened balloon rose the last time, and then soon after reached the land. Scarcely had the four castaways set foot on firm ground, than they all, thinking of the absent one, simultaneously exclaimed, “Perhaps he will try to swim to land! Let us save him! let us save him!”

CHAPTER 2

Those whom the hurricane had just thrown on this coast were neither aeronauts by profession nor amateurs. They were prisoners of war whose boldness had induced them to escape in this extraordinary manner.

A hundred times they had almost perished! A hundred times had they almost fallen from their torn balloon into the depths of the ocean. But Heaven had reserved them for a strange destiny, and after having, on the 20th of March, escaped from Richmond, besieged by the troops of General Ulysses Grant, they found themselves seven thousand miles from the capital of Virginia, which was the principal stronghold of the South, during the terrible War of Secession. Their aerial voyage had lasted five days.

The curious circumstances which led to the escape of the prisoners were as follows:

That same year, in the month of February, 1865, in one of the coups de main by which General Grant attempted, though in vain, to possess himself of Richmond, several of his officers fell into the power of the enemy and were detained in the town. One of the most distinguished was Captain Cyrus Harding. He was a native of Massachusetts, a first-class engineer, to whom the government had confided, during the war, the direction of the railways, which were so important at that time. A true Northerner, thin, bony, lean, about forty-five years of age; his close-cut hair and his beard, of which he only kept a thick mustache, were already getting gray. He had one-of those finely-developed heads which appear made to be struck on a medal, piercing eyes, a serious mouth, the physiognomy of a clever man of the military school. He was one of those engineers who began by handling the hammer and pickaxe, like generals who first act as common soldiers.

Besides mental power, he also possessed great manual dexterity. His muscles exhibited remarkable proofs of tenacity. A man of action as well as a man of thought, all he did was without effort to one of his vigorous and sanguine temperament. Learned, clear-headed, and practical, he fulfilled in all emergencies those three conditions which united ought to insure human success — activity of mind and body, impetuous wishes, and powerful will. He might have taken for his motto that of William of Orange in the 17th century: “I can undertake and persevere even without hope of success.” Cyrus Harding was courage personified. He had been in all the battles of that war. After having begun as a volunteer at Illinois, under Ulysses Grant, he fought at Paducah, Belmont, Pittsburg Landing, at the siege of Corinth, Port Gibson, Black River, Chattanooga, the Wilderness, on the Potomac, everywhere and valiantly, a soldier worthy of the general who said, “I never count my dead!” And hundreds of times Captain Harding had almost been among those who were not counted by the terrible Grant; but in these combats where he never spared himself, fortune favored him till the moment when he was wounded and taken prisoner on the field of battle near Richmond. At the same time and on the same day another important personage fell into the hands of the Southerners. This was no other than Gideon Spilett, a reporter for the New York Herald, who had been ordered to follow the changes of the war in the midst of the Northern armies.

Gideon Spilett was one of that race of indomitable English or American chroniclers, like Stanley and others, who stop at nothing to obtain exact information, and transmit it to their journal in the shortest possible time. The newspapers of the Union, such as the New York Herald, are genuine powers, and their reporters are men to be reckoned with. Gideon Spilett ranked among the first of those reporters: a man of great merit, energetic, prompt and ready for anything, full of ideas, having traveled over the whole world, soldier and artist, enthusiastic in council, resolute in action, caring neither for trouble, fatigue, nor danger, when in pursuit of information, for himself first, and then for his journal, a perfect treasury of knowledge on all sorts of curious subjects, of the unpublished, of the unknown, and of the impossible. He was one of those intrepid observers who write under fire, “reporting” among bullets, and to whom every danger is welcome.

He also had been in all the battles, in the first rank, revolver in one hand, note-book in the other; grape-shot never made his pencil tremble. He did not fatigue the wires with incessant telegrams, like those who speak when they have nothing to say, but each of his notes, short, decisive, and clear, threw light on some important point. Besides, he was not wanting in humor. It was he who, after the affair of the Black River, determined at any cost to keep his place at the wicket of the telegraph office, and after having announced to his journal the result of the battle, telegraphed for two hours the first chapters of the Bible. It cost the New York Herald two thousand dollars, but the New York Herald published the first intelligence.

Gideon Spilett was tall. He was rather more than forty years of age. Light whiskers bordering on red surrounded his face. His eye was steady, lively, rapid in its changes. It was the eye of a man accustomed to take in at a glance all the details of a scene. Well built, he was inured to all climates, like a bar of steel hardened in cold water.

For ten years Gideon Spilett had been the reporter of the New York Herald, which he enriched by his letters and drawings, for he was as skilful in the use of the pencil as of the pen. When he was captured, he was in the act of making a description and sketch of the battle. The last words in his note-book were these: “A Southern rifleman has just taken aim at me, but — ” The Southerner notwithstanding missed Gideon Spilett, who, with his usual fortune, came out of this affair without a scratch.

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett, who did not know each other except by reputation, had both been carried to Richmond. The engineer's wounds rapidly healed, and it was during his convalescence that he made acquaintance with the reporter. The two men then learned to appreciate each other. Soon their common aim had but one object, that of escaping, rejoining Grant's army, and fighting together in the ranks of the Federals.

The two Americans had from the first determined to seize every chance; but although they were allowed to wander at liberty in the town, Richmond was so strictly guarded, that escape appeared impossible. In the meanwhile Captain Harding was rejoined by a servant who was devoted to him in life and in death. This intrepid fellow was a Negro born on the engineer's estate, of a slave father and mother, but to whom Cyrus, who was an Abolitionist from conviction and heart, had long since given his freedom. The once slave, though free, would not leave his master. He would have died for him. He was a man of about thirty, vigorous, active, clever, intelligent, gentle, and calm, sometimes naive, always merry, obliging, and honest. His name was Nebuchadnezzar, but he only answered to the familiar abbreviation of Neb.

When Neb heard that his master had been made prisoner, he left Massachusetts without hesitating an instant, arrived before Richmond, and by dint of stratagem and shrewdness, after having risked his life twenty times over, managed to penetrate into the besieged town. The pleasure of Harding on seeing his servant, and the joy of Neb at finding his master, can scarcely be described.

But though Neb had been able to make his way into Richmond, it was quite another thing to get out again, for the Northern prisoners were very strictly watched. Some extraordinary opportunity was needed to make the attempt with any chance of success, and this opportunity not only did not present itself, but was very difficult to find.

Meanwhile Grant continued his energetic operations. The victory of Petersburg had been very dearly bought. His forces, united to those of Butler, had as yet been unsuccessful before Richmond, and nothing gave the prisoners any hope of a speedy deliverance.

The reporter, to whom his tedious captivity did not offer a single incident worthy of note, could stand it no longer. His usually active mind was occupied with one sole thought — how he might get out of Richmond at any cost. Several times had he even made the attempt, but was stopped by some insurmountable obstacle. However, the siege continued; and if the prisoners were anxious to escape and join Grant's army, certain of the besieged were no less anxious to join the Southern forces. Among them was one Jonathan Forster, a determined Southerner. The truth was, that if the prisoners of the Secessionists could not leave the town, neither could the Secessionists themselves while the Northern army invested it. The Governor of Richmond for a long time had been unable to communicate with General Lee, and he very much wished to make known to him the situation of the town, so as to hasten the march of the army to their relief. Thus Jonathan Forster accordingly conceived the idea of rising in a balloon, so as to pass over the besieging lines, and in that way reach the Secessionist camp.

The Governor authorized the attempt. A balloon was manufactured and placed at the disposal of Forster, who was to be accompanied by five other persons. They were furnished with arms in case they might have to defend themselves when they alighted, and provisions in the event of their aerial voyage being prolonged.

The departure of the balloon was fixed for the 18th of March. It should be effected during the night, with a northwest wind of moderate force, and the aeronauts calculated that they would reach General Lee’s camp in a few hours.

But this northwest wind was not a simple breeze. From the 18th it was evident that it was changing to a hurricane. The tempest soon became such that Forster’s departure was deferred, for it was impossible to risk the balloon and those whom it carried in the midst of the furious elements.

The balloon, inflated on the great square of Richmond, was ready to depart on the first abatement of the wind, and, as may be supposed, the impatience among the besieged to see the storm moderate was very great.

The 18th, the 19th of March passed without any alteration in the weather. There was even great difficulty in keeping the balloon fastened to the ground, as the squalls dashed it furiously about.

The night of the 19th passed, but the next morning the storm blew with redoubled force. The departure of the balloon was impossible.

On that day the engineer, Cyrus Harding, was accosted in one of the streets of Richmond by a person whom he did not in the least know. This was a sailor named Pencroft, a man of about thirty-five or forty years of age, strongly built, very sunburnt, and possessed of a pair of bright sparkling eyes and a remarkably good physiognomy. Pencroft was an American from the North, who had sailed all the ocean over, and who had gone through every possible and almost impossible adventure that a being with two feet and no wings would encounter. It is needless to say that he was a bold, dashing fellow, ready to dare anything and was astonished at nothing. Pencroft at the beginning of the year had gone to Richmond on business, with a young boy of fifteen from New Jersey, son of a former captain, an orphan, whom he loved as if he had been his own child. Not having been able to leave the town before the first operations of the siege, he found himself shut up, to his great disgust; but, not accustomed to succumb to difficulties, he resolved to escape by some means or other. He knew the engineer-officer by reputation; he knew with what impatience that determined man chafed under his restraint. On this day he did not, therefore, hesitate to accost him, saying, without circumlocution, “Have you had enough of Richmond, captain?”

The engineer looked fixedly at the man who spoke, and who added, in a low voice, —

“Captain Harding, will you try to escape?”

“When?” asked the engineer quickly, and it was evident that this question was uttered without consideration, for he had not yet examined the stranger who addressed him. But after having with a penetrating eye observed the open face of the sailor, he was convinced that he had before him an honest man.

“Who are you?” he asked briefly.

Pencroft made himself known.

“Well,” replied Harding, “and in what way do you propose to escape?”

“By that lazy balloon which is left there doing nothing, and which looks to me as if it was waiting on purpose for us — ”

There was no necessity for the sailor to finish his sentence. The engineer understood him at once. He seized Pencroft by the arm, and dragged him to his house. There the sailor developed his project, which was indeed extremely simple. They risked nothing but their lives in its execution. The hurricane was in all its violence, it is true, but so clever and daring an engineer as Cyrus Harding knew perfectly well how to manage a balloon. Had he himself been as well acquainted with the art of sailing in the air as he was with the navigation of a ship, Pencroft would not have hesitated to set out, of course taking his young friend Herbert with him; for, accustomed to brave the fiercest tempests of the ocean, he was not to be hindered on account of the hurricane.

Captain Harding had listened to the sailor without saying a word, but his eyes shone with satisfaction. Here was the long-sought-for opportunity — he was not a man to let it pass. The plan was feasible, though, it must be confessed, dangerous in the extreme. In the night, in spite of their guards, they might approach the balloon, slip into the car, and then cut the cords which held it. There was no doubt that they might be killed, but on the other hand they might succeed, and without this storm! — Without this storm the balloon would have started already and the looked-for opportunity would not have then presented itself.

“I am not alone!” said Harding at last.

“How many people do you wish to bring with you?” asked the sailor.

“Two; my friend Spilett, and my servant Neb.”

“That will be three,” replied Pencroft; “and with Herbert and me five. But the balloon will hold six — ”

“That will be enough, we will go,” answered Harding in a firm voice.

This “we” included Spilett, for the reporter, as his friend well knew, was not a man to draw back, and when the project was communicated to him he approved of it unreservedly. What astonished him was, that so simple an idea had not occurred to him before. As to Neb, he followed his master wherever his master wished to go.

“This evening, then,” said Pencroft, “we will all meet out there.”

“This evening, at ten o’clock,” replied Captain Harding; “and Heaven grant that the storm does not abate before our departure.”

Pencroft took leave of the two friends, and returned to his lodging, where young Herbert Brown had remained. The courageous boy knew of the sailor’s plan, and it was not without anxiety that he awaited the result of the proposal being made to the engineer. Thus five determined persons were about to abandon themselves to the mercy of the tempestuous elements!

No! the storm did not abate, and neither Jonathan Forster nor his companions dreamed of confronting it in that frail car.

It would be a terrible journey. The engineer only feared one thing; it was that the balloon, held to the ground and dashed about by the wind, would be torn into shreds. For several hours he roamed round the nearly-deserted square, surveying the apparatus. Pencroft did the same on his side, his hands in his pockets, yawning now and then like a man who did not know how to kill the time, but really dreading, like his friend, either the escape or destruction of the balloon. Evening arrived. The night was dark in the extreme. Thick mists passed like clouds close to the ground. Rain fell mingled with snow, it was very cold. A mist hung over Richmond. It seemed as if the violent storm had produced a truce between the besiegers and the besieged, and that the cannon were silenced by the louder detonations of the storm. The streets of the town were deserted. It had not even appeared necessary in that horrible weather to place a guard in the square, in the midst of which plunged the balloon. Everything favored the departure of the prisoners, but what might possibly be the termination of the hazardous voyage they contemplated in the midst of the furious elements?—

“Dirty weather!” exclaimed Pencroft, fixing his hat firmly on his head with a blow of his fist; “but pshaw, we shall succeed all the same!”

At half-past nine, Harding and his companions glided from different directions into the square, which the gas-lamps, extinguished by the wind, had left in total obscurity. Even the enormous balloon, almost beaten to the ground, could not be seen. Independently of the sacks of ballast, to which the cords of the net were fastened, the car was held by a strong cable passed through a ring in the pavement. The five prisoners met by the car. They had not been perceived, and such was the darkness that they could not even see each other.

Without speaking a word, Harding, Spilett, Neb, and Herbert took their places in the car, while Pencroft by the engineer’s order detached successively the bags of ballast. It was the work of a few minutes only, and the sailor rejoined his companions.

The balloon was then only held by the cable, and the engineer had nothing to do but to give the word.

At that moment a dog sprang with a bound into the car. It was Top, a favorite of the engineer. The faithful creature, having broken his chain, had followed his master. He, however, fearing that its additional weight might impede their ascent, wished to send away the animal.

“One more will make but little difference, poor beast!” exclaimed Pencroft, heaving out two bags of sand, and as he spoke letting go the cable; the balloon ascending in an oblique direction, disappeared, after having dashed the car against two chimneys, which it threw down as it swept by them.

Then, indeed, the full rage of the hurricane was exhibited to the voyagers. During the night the engineer could not dream of descending, and when day broke, even a glimpse of the earth below was intercepted by fog.

Five days had passed when a partial clearing allowed them to see the wide extending ocean beneath their feet, now lashed into the maddest fury by the gale.

Our readers will recollect what befell these five daring individuals who set out on their hazardous expedition in the balloon on the 20th of March. Five days afterwards four of them were thrown on a desert coast, seven thousand miles from their country! But one of their number was missing, the man who was to be their guide, their leading spirit, the engineer, Captain Harding! The instant they had recovered their feet, they all hurried to the beach in the hopes of rendering him assistance.

CHAPTER 3

The engineer, the meshes of the net having given way, had been carried off by a wave. His dog also had disappeared. The faithful animal had voluntarily leaped out to help his master. “Forward,” cried the reporter; and all four, Spilett, Herbert, Pencroft, and Neb, forgetting their fatigue, began their search. Poor Neb shed bitter tears, giving way to despair at the thought of having lost the only being he loved on earth.

Only two minutes had passed from the time when Cyrus Harding disappeared to the moment when his companions set foot on the ground. They had hopes therefore of arriving in time to save him. “Let us look for him! let us look for him!” cried Neb.

“Yes, Neb,” replied Gideon Spilett, “and we will find him too!”

“Living, I trust!”

“Still living!”

“Can he swim?” asked Pencroft.

“Yes,” replied Neb, “and besides, Top is there.”

The sailor, observing the heavy surf on the shore, shook his head.

The engineer had disappeared to the north of the shore, and nearly half a mile from the place where the castaways had landed. The nearest point of the beach he could reach was thus fully that distance off.

It was then nearly six o’clock. A thick fog made the night very dark. The castaways proceeded toward the north of the land on which chance had thrown them, an unknown region, the geographical situation of which they could not even guess. They were walking upon a sandy soil, mingled with stones, which appeared destitute of any sort of vegetation. The ground, very unequal and rough, was in some places perfectly riddled with holes, making walking extremely painful. From these holes escaped every minute great birds of clumsy flight, which flew in all directions. Others, more active, rose in flocks and passed in clouds over their heads. The sailor thought he recognized gulls and cormorants, whose shrill cries rose above the roaring of the sea.

From time to time the castaways stopped and shouted, then listened for some response from the ocean, for they thought that if the engineer had landed, and they had been near to the place, they would have heard the barking of the dog Top, even should Harding himself have been unable to give any sign of existence. They stopped to listen, but no sound arose above the roaring of the waves and the dashing of the surf. The little band then continued their march forward, searching into every hollow of the shore.

After walking for twenty minutes, the four castaways were suddenly brought to a standstill by the sight of foaming billows close to their feet. The solid ground ended here. They found themselves at the extremity of a sharp point on which the sea broke furiously.

“It is a promontory,” said the sailor; “we must retrace our steps, holding towards the right, and we shall thus gain the mainland.”

“But if he is there,” said Neb, pointing to the ocean, whose waves shone of a snowy white in the darkness. “Well, let us call again,” and all uniting their voices, they gave a vigorous shout, but there came no reply. They waited for a lull, then began again; still no reply.

The castaways accordingly returned, following the opposite side of the promontory, over a soil equally sandy and rugged. However, Pencroft observed that the shore was more equal, that the ground rose, and he declared that it was joined by a long slope to a hill, whose massive front he thought that he could see looming indistinctly through the mist. The birds were less numerous on this part of the shore; the sea was also less tumultuous, and they observed that the agitation of the waves was diminished. The noise of the surf was scarcely heard. This side of the promontory evidently formed a semicircular bay, which the sharp point sheltered from the breakers of the open sea. But to follow this direction was to go south, exactly opposite to that part of the coast where Harding might have landed. After a walk of a mile and a half, the shore presented no curve which would permit them to return to the north. This promontory, of which they had turned the point, must be attached to the mainland. The castaways, although their strength was nearly exhausted, still marched courageously forward, hoping every moment to meet with a sudden angle which would set them in the first direction. What was their disappointment, when, after trudging nearly two miles, having reached an elevated point composed of slippery rocks, they found themselves again stopped by the sea.

“We are on an islet,” said Pencroft, “and we have surveyed it from one extremity to the other.”

The sailor was right; they had been thrown, not on a continent, not even on an island, but on an islet which was not more than two miles in length, with even a less breadth.

Was this barren spot the desolate refuge of sea-birds, strewn with stones and destitute of vegetation, attached to a more important archipelago? It was impossible to say. When the voyagers from their car saw the land through the mist, they had not been able to reconnoiter it sufficiently. However, Pencroft, accustomed with his sailor eyes to piece through the gloom, was almost certain that he could clearly distinguish in the west confused masses which indicated an elevated coast. But they could not in the dark determine whether it was a single island, or connected with others. They could not leave it either, as the sea surrounded them; they must therefore put off till the next day their search for the engineer, from whom, alas! not a single cry had reached them to show that he was still in existence.

“The silence of our friend proves nothing,” said the reporter. “Perhaps he has fainted or is wounded, and unable to reply directly, so we will not despair.”

The reporter then proposed to light a fire on a point of the islet, which would serve as a signal to the engineer. But they searched in vain for wood or dry brambles; nothing but sand and stones were to be found. The grief of Neb and his companions, who were all strongly attached to the intrepid Harding, can be better pictured than described. It was too evident that they were powerless to help him. They must wait with what patience they could for daylight. Either the engineer had been able to save himself, and had already found a refuge on some point of the coast, or he was lost for ever! The long and painful hours passed by. The cold was intense. The castaways suffered cruelly, but they scarcely perceived it. They did not even think of taking a minute’s rest. Forgetting everything but their chief, hoping or wishing to hope on, they continued to walk up and down on this sterile spot, always returning to its northern point, where they could approach nearest to the scene of the catastrophe. They listened, they called, and then uniting their voices, they endeavored to raise even a louder shout than before, which would be transmitted to a great distance. The wind had now fallen almost to a calm, and the noise of the sea began also to subside. One of

Neb’s shouts even appeared to produce an echo. Herbert directed Pencroft’s attention to it, adding, “That proves that there is a coast to the west, at no great distance.” The sailor nodded; besides, his eyes could not deceive him. If he had discovered land, however indistinct it might appear, land was sure to be there. But that distant echo was the only response produced by Neb’s shouts, while a heavy gloom hung over all the part east of the island.

Meanwhile, the sky was clearing little by little. Towards midnight the stars shone out, and if the engineer had been there with his companions he would have remarked that these stars did not belong to the Northern Hemisphere. The Polar Star was not visible, the constellations were not those which they had been accustomed to see in the United States; the Southern Cross glittered brightly in the sky.

The night passed away. Towards five o’clock in the morning of the 25th of March, the sky began to lighten; the horizon still remained dark, but with daybreak a thick mist rose from the sea, so that the eye could scarcely penetrate beyond twenty feet or so from where they stood. At length the fog gradually unrolled itself in great heavily moving waves.

It was unfortunate, however, that the castaways could distinguish nothing around them. While the gaze of the reporter and Neb were cast upon the ocean, the sailor and Herbert looked eagerly for the coast in the west. But not a speck of land was visible. “Never mind,” said Pencroft, “though I do not see the land, I feel it... it is there... there... as sure as the fact that we are no longer at Richmond.” But the fog was not long in rising. It was only a fine-weather mist. A hot sun soon penetrated to the surface of the island. About half-past six, three-quarters of an hour after sunrise, the mist became more transparent. It grew thicker above, but cleared away below. Soon the isle appeared as if it had descended from a cloud, then the sea showed itself around them, spreading far away towards the east, but bounded on the west by an abrupt and precipitous coast.

Yes! the land was there. Their safety was at least provisionally insured. The islet and the coast were separated by a channel about half a mile in breadth, through which rushed an extremely rapid current.

However, one of the castaways, following the impulse of his heart, immediately threw himself into the current, without consulting his companions, without saying a single word. It was Neb. He was in haste to be on the other side, and to climb towards the north. It had been impossible to hold him back. Pencroft called him in vain. The reporter prepared to follow him, but Pencroft stopped him. "Do you want to cross the channel?" he asked. "Yes," replied Spilett. "All right!" said the seaman; "wait a bit; Neb is well able to carry help to his master. If we venture into the channel, we risk being carried into the open sea by the current, which is running very strong; but, if I'm not wrong, it is ebbing. See, the tide is going down over the sand. Let us have patience, and at low water it is possible we may find a fordable passage." "You are right," replied the reporter, "we will not separate more than we can help."

During this time Neb was struggling vigorously against the current. He was crossing in an oblique direction. His black shoulders could be seen emerging at each stroke. He was carried down very quickly, but he also made way towards the shore. It took more than half an hour to cross from the islet to the land, and he reached the shore several hundred feet from the place which was opposite to the point from which he had started.

Landing at the foot of a high wall of granite, he shook himself vigorously; and then, setting off running, soon disappeared behind a rocky point, which projected to nearly the height of the northern extremity of the islet.

Neb’s companions had watched his daring attempt with painful anxiety, and when he was out of sight, they fixed their attention on the land where their hope of safety lay, while eating some shell-fish with which the sand was strewn. It was a wretched repast, but still it was better than nothing. The opposite coast formed one vast bay, terminating on the south by a very sharp point, which was destitute of all vegetation, and was of a very wild aspect. This point abutted on the shore in a grotesque outline of high granite rocks. Towards the north, on the contrary, the bay widened, and a more rounded coast appeared, trending from the southwest to the northeast, and terminating in a slender cape. The distance between these two extremities, which made the bow of the bay, was about eight miles. Half a mile from the shore rose the islet, which somewhat resembled the carcass of a gigantic whale. Its extreme breadth was not more than a quarter of a mile.

Opposite the islet, the beach consisted first of sand, covered with black stones, which were now appearing little by little above the retreating tide. The second level was separated by a perpendicular granite cliff, terminated at the top by an unequal edge at a height of at least 300 feet. It continued thus for a length of three miles, ending suddenly on the right with a precipice which looked as if cut by the hand of man. On the left, above the promontory, this irregular and jagged cliff descended by a long slope of conglomerated rocks till it mingled with the ground of the southern point. On the upper plateau of the coast not a tree appeared. It was a flat tableland like that above Cape Town at the Cape of Good Hope, but of reduced proportions; at least so it appeared seen from the islet. However, verdure was not wanting to the right beyond the precipice. They could easily distinguish a confused mass of great trees, which extended beyond the limits of their view. This verdure relieved the eye, so long wearied by the continued ranges of granite. Lastly, beyond and above the plateau, in a northwesterly direction and at a distance of at least seven miles, glittered a white summit which reflected the sun’s rays. It was that of a lofty mountain, capped with snow.

The question could not at present be decided whether this land formed an island, or whether it belonged to a continent. But on beholding the convulsed masses heaped up on the left, no geologist would have hesitated to give them a volcanic origin, for they were unquestionably the work of subterranean convulsions.

Gideon Spilett, Pencroft, and Herbert attentively examined this land, on which they might perhaps have to live many long years; on which indeed they might even die, should it be out of the usual track of vessels, as was likely to be the case.

“Well,” asked Herbert, “what do you say, Pencroft?”

“There is some good and some bad, as in everything,” replied the sailor. “We shall see. But now the ebb is evidently making. In three hours we will attempt the passage, and once on the other side, we will try to get out of this scrape, and I hope may find the captain.” Pencroft was not wrong in his anticipations. Three hours later at low tide, the greater part of the sand forming the bed of the channel was uncovered. Between the islet and the coast there only remained a narrow channel which would no doubt be easy to cross.

About ten o’clock, Gideon Spilett and his companions stripped themselves of their clothes, which they placed in bundles on their heads, and then ventured into the water, which was not more than five feet deep. Herbert, for whom it was too deep, swam like a fish, and got through capitally. All three arrived without difficulty on the opposite shore. Quickly drying themselves in the sun, they put on their clothes, which they had preserved from contact with the water, and sat down to take counsel together what to do next.

CHAPTER 4

All at once the reporter sprang up, and telling the sailor that he would rejoin them at that same place, he climbed the cliff in the direction which the Negro Neb had taken a few hours before. Anxiety hastened his steps, for he longed to obtain news of his friend, and he soon disappeared round an angle of the cliff. Herbert wished to accompany him.

“Stop here, my boy,” said the sailor; “we have to prepare an encampment, and to try and find rather better grub than these shell-fish. Our friends will want something when they come back. There is work for everybody.”

“I am ready,” replied Herbert.

“All right,” said the sailor; “that will do. We must set about it regularly. We are tired, cold, and hungry; therefore we must have shelter, fire, and food. There is wood in the forest, and eggs in nests; we have only to find a house.”

“Very well,” returned Herbert, “I will look for a cave among the rocks, and I shall be sure to discover some hole into which we can creep.”

“All right,” said Pencroft; “go on, my boy.”

They both walked to the foot of the enormous wall over the beach, far from which the tide had now retreated; but instead of going towards the north, they went southward. Pencroft had remarked, several hundred feet from the place at which they landed, a narrow cutting, out of which he thought a river or stream might issue. Now, on the one hand it was important to settle themselves in the neighborhood of a good stream of water, and on the other it was possible that the current had thrown Cyrus Harding on the shore there.

The cliff, as has been said, rose to a height of three hundred feet, but the mass was unbroken throughout, and even at its base, scarcely washed by the sea, it did not offer the smallest fissure which would serve as a dwelling. It was a perpendicular wall of very hard granite, which even the waves had not worn away. Towards the summit fluttered myriads of sea-fowl, and especially those of the web-footed species with long, flat, pointed beaks — a clamorous tribe, bold in the presence of man, who probably for the first time thus invaded their domains. Pencroft recognized the skua and other gulls among them, the voracious little sea-mew, which in great numbers nestled in the crevices of the granite. A shot fired among this swarm would have killed a great number, but to fire a shot a gun was needed, and neither Pencroft nor Herbert had one; besides this, gulls and sea-mews are scarcely eatable, and even their eggs have a detestable taste. However, Herbert, who had gone forward a little more to the left, soon came upon rocks covered with sea-weed, which, some hours later, would be hidden by the high tide. On these rocks, in the midst of slippery wrack, abounded bivalve shell-fish, not to be despised by starving people. Herbert called Pencroft, who ran up hastily.

“Here are mussels!” cried the sailor; “these will do instead of eggs!”

“They are not mussels,” replied Herbert, who was attentively examining the molluscs attached to the rocks; “they are lithodomes.”

“Are they good to eat?” asked Pencroft.

“Perfectly so.”

“Then let us eat some lithodomes.”

The sailor could rely upon Herbert; the young boy was well up in natural history, and always had had quite a passion for the science. His father had encouraged him in it, by letting him attend the lectures of the best professors in Boston, who were very fond of the intelligent, industrious lad. And his turn for natural history was, more than once in the course of time, of great use, and he was not mistaken in this instance. These lithodomes were oblong shells, suspended in clusters and adhering very tightly to the rocks. They belong to that species of molluscous perforators which excavate holes in the hardest stone; their shell is rounded at both ends, a feature which is not remarked in the common mussel.

Pencroft and Herbert made a good meal of the lithodomes, which were then half opened to the sun. They ate them as oysters, and as they had a strong peppery taste, they were palatable without condiments of any sort.

Their hunger was thus appeased for the time, but not their thirst, which increased after eating these naturally-spiced molluscs. They had then to find fresh water, and it was not likely that it would be wanting in such a capriciously uneven region. Pencroft and Herbert, after having taken the precaution of collecting an ample supply of lithodomes, with which they filled their pockets and handkerchiefs, regained the foot of the cliff.

Two hundred paces farther they arrived at the cutting, through which, as Pencroft had guessed, ran a stream of water, whether fresh or not was to be ascertained. At this place the wall appeared to have been separated by some violent subterranean force. At its base was hollowed out a little creek, the farthest part of which formed a tolerably sharp angle. The watercourse at that part measured one hundred feet in breadth, and its two banks on each side were scarcely twenty feet high. The river became strong almost directly between the two walls of granite, which began to sink above the mouth; it then suddenly turned and disappeared beneath a wood of stunted trees half a mile off.

“Here is the water, and yonder is the wood we require!” said Pencroft. “Well, Herbert, now we only want the house.”

The water of the river was limpid. The sailor ascertained that at this time — that is to say, at low tide, when the rising floods did not reach it — it was sweet. This important point established, Herbert looked for some cavity which would serve them as a retreat, but in vain; everywhere the wall appeared smooth, plain, and perpendicular.

However, at the mouth of the watercourse and above the reach of the high tide, the convulsions of nature had formed, not a grotto, but a pile of enormous rocks, such as are often met with in granite countries and which bear the name of “Chimneys.”

Pencroft and Herbert penetrated quite far in among the rocks, by sandy passages in which light was not wanting, for it entered through the openings which were left between the blocks, of which some were only sustained by a miracle of equilibrium; but with the light came also air — a regular corridor-gale — and with the wind the sharp cold from the exterior. However, the sailor thought that by stopping-up some of the openings with a mixture of stones and sand, the Chimneys could be rendered habitable. Their geometrical plan represented the typographical sign “&,” which signifies “et cetera” abridged, but by isolating the upper mouth of the sign, through which the south and west winds blew so strongly, they could succeed in making the lower part of use.

“Here’s our work,” said Pencroft, “and if we ever see Captain Harding again, he will know how to make something of this labyrinth.”

“We shall see him again, Pencroft,” cried Herbert, “and when he returns he must find a tolerable dwelling here. It will be so, if we can make a fireplace in the left passage and keep an opening for the smoke.”

“So we can, my boy,” replied the sailor, “and these Chimneys will serve our turn. Let us set to work, but first come and get a store of fuel. I think some branches will be very useful in stopping up these openings, through which the wind shrieks like so many fiends.”

Herbert and Pencroft left the Chimneys, and, turning the angle, they began to climb the left bank of the river. The current here was quite rapid, and drifted down some dead wood. The rising tide — and it could already be perceived — must drive it back with force to a considerable distance. The sailor then thought that they could utilize this ebb and flow for the transport of heavy objects.

After having walked for a quarter of an hour, the sailor and the boy arrived at the angle which the river made in turning towards the left. From this point its course was pursued through a forest of magnificent trees. These trees still retained their verdure, notwithstanding the advanced season, for they belonged to the family of “coniferae,” which is spread over all the regions of the globe, from northern climates to the tropics. The young naturalist recognized especially the “deedara,” which are very numerous in the Himalayan zone, and which spread around them a most agreeable odor. Between these beautiful trees sprang up clusters of firs, whose opaque open parasol boughs spread wide around. Among the long grass, Pencroft felt that his feet were crushing dry branches which crackled like fireworks.

“Well, my boy,” said he to Herbert, “if I don’t know the name of these trees, at any rate I reckon that we may call them ‘burning wood,’ and just now that’s the chief thing we want.”

“Let us get a supply,” replied Herbert, who immediately set to work.

The collection was easily made. It was not even necessary to lop the trees, for enormous quantities of dead wood were lying at their feet; but if fuel was not wanting, the means of transporting it was not yet found. The wood, being very dry, would burn rapidly; it was therefore necessary to carry to the Chimneys a considerable quantity, and the loads of two men would not be sufficient. Herbert remarked this.

“Well, my boy,” replied the sailor, “there must be some way of carrying this wood; there is always a way of doing everything. If we had a cart or a boat, it would be easy enough.”

“But we have the river,” said Herbert.

“Right,” replied Pencroft; “the river will be to us like a road which carries of itself, and rafts have not been invented for nothing.”

“Only,” observed Herbert, “at this moment our road is going the wrong way, for the tide is rising!”

“We shall be all right if we wait till it ebbs,” replied the sailor, “and then we will trust it to carry our fuel to the Chimneys. Let us get the raft ready.”

The sailor, followed by Herbert, directed his steps towards the river. They both carried, each in proportion to his strength, a load of wood bound in fagots. They found on the bank also a great quantity of dead branches in the midst of grass, among which the foot of man had probably never before trod. Pencroft began directly to make his raft. In a kind of little bay, created by a point of the shore which broke the current, the sailor and the lad placed some good-sized pieces of wood, which they had fastened together with dry creepers. A raft was thus formed, on which they stacked all they had collected, sufficient, indeed, to have loaded at least twenty men. In an hour the work was finished, and the raft moored to the bank, awaited the turning of the tide.

There were still several hours to be occupied, and with one consent Pencroft and Herbert resolved to gain the upper plateau, so as to have a more extended view of the surrounding country.

Exactly two hundred feet behind the angle formed by the river, the wall, terminated by a fall of rocks, died away in a gentle slope to the edge of the forest. It was a natural staircase. Herbert and the sailor began their ascent; thanks to the vigor of their muscles they reached the summit in a few minutes; and proceeded to the point above the mouth of the river.

On attaining it, their first look was cast upon the ocean which not long before they had traversed in such a terrible condition. They observed, with emotion, all that part to the north of the coast on which the catastrophe had taken place. It was there that Cyrus Harding had disappeared. They looked to see if some portion of their balloon, to which a man might possibly cling, yet existed. Nothing! The sea was but one vast watery desert. As to the coast, it was solitary also. Neither the reporter nor Neb could be anywhere seen. But it was possible that at this time they were both too far away to be perceived.

“Something tells me,” cried Herbert, “that a man as energetic as Captain Harding would not let himself be drowned like other people. He must have reached some point of the shore; don’t you think so, Pencroft?”

The sailor shook his head sadly. He little expected ever to see Cyrus Harding again; but wishing to leave some hope to Herbert: “Doubtless, doubtless,” said he; “our engineer is a man who would get out of a scrape to which any one else would yield.”

In the meantime he examined the coast with great attention. Stretched out below them was the sandy shore, bounded on the right of the river’s mouth by lines of breakers. The rocks which were visible appeared like amphibious monsters reposing in the surf. Beyond the reef, the sea sparkled beneath the sun’s rays. To the south a sharp point closed the horizon, and it could not be seen if the land was prolonged in that direction, or if it ran southeast and southwest, which would have made this coast a very long peninsula. At the northern extremity of the bay the outline of the shore was continued to a great distance in a wider curve. There the shore was low, flat, without cliffs, and with great banks of sand, which the tide left uncovered. Pencroft and Herbert then returned towards the west. Their attention was first arrested by the snow-topped mountain which rose at a distance of six or seven miles. From its first declivities to within two miles of the coast were spread vast masses of wood, relieved by large green patches, caused by the presence of evergreen trees. Then, from the edge of this forest to the shore extended a plain, scattered irregularly with groups of trees. Here and there on the left sparkled through glades the waters of the little river; they could trace its winding course back towards the spurs of the mountain, among which it seemed to spring. At the point where the sailor had left his raft of wood, it began to run between the two high granite walls; but if on the left bank the wall remained clear and abrupt, on the right bank, on the contrary, it sank gradually, the massive sides changed to isolated rocks, the rocks to stones, the stones to shingle running to the extremity of the point.

“Are we on an island?” murmured the sailor.

“At any rate, it seems to be big enough,” replied the lad.

“An island, ever so big, is an island all the same!” said Pencroft.

But this important question could not yet be answered. A more perfect survey had to be made to settle the point. As to the land itself, island or continent, it appeared fertile, agreeable in its aspect, and varied in its productions.

“This is satisfactory,” observed Pencroft; “and in our misfortune, we must thank Providence for it.”

“God be praised!” responded Herbert, whose pious heart was full of gratitude to the Author of all things.

Pencroft and Herbert examined for some time the country on which they had been cast; but it was difficult to guess after so hasty an inspection what the future had in store for them.

They then returned, following the southern crest of the granite platform, bordered by a long fringe of jagged rocks, of the most whimsical shapes. Some hundreds of birds lived there nestled in the holes of the stone; Herbert, jumping over the rocks, startled a whole flock of these winged creatures.

“Oh!” cried he, “those are not gulls nor sea-mews!”

“What are they then?” asked Pencroft.

“Upon my word, one would say they were pigeons!”

“Just so, but these are wild or rock pigeons. I recognize them by the double band of black on the wing, by the white tail, and by their slate-colored plumage. But if the rock-pigeon is good to eat, its eggs must be excellent, and we will soon see how many they may have left in their nests!”

“We will not give them time to hatch, unless it is in the shape of an omelet!” replied Pencroft merrily.

“But what will you make your omelet in?” asked Herbert; “in your hat?”

“Well!” replied the sailor, “I am not quite conjuror enough for that; we must come down to eggs in the shell, my boy, and I will undertake to despatch the hardest!”

Pencroft and Herbert attentively examined the cavities in the granite, and they really found eggs in some of the hollows. A few dozen being collected, were packed in the sailor’s handkerchief, and as the time when the tide would be full was approaching, Pencroft and Herbert began to redescend towards the watercourse. When they arrived there, it was an hour after midday. The tide had already turned. They must now avail themselves of the ebb to take the wood to the mouth. Pencroft did not intend to let the raft go away in the current without guidance, neither did he mean to embark on it himself to steer it. But a sailor is never at a loss when there is a question of cables or ropes, and Pencroft rapidly twisted a cord, a few fathoms long, made of dry creepers. This vegetable cable was fastened to the after-part of the raft, and the sailor held it in his hand while Herbert, pushing off the raft with a long pole, kept it in the current. This succeeded capitally. The enormous load of wood drifted down the current. The bank was very equal; there was no fear that the raft would run aground, and before two o’clock they arrived at the river’s mouth, a few paces from the Chimneys.

CHAPTER 5

Pencroft’s first care, after unloading the raft, was to render the cave habitable by stopping up all the holes which made it draughty. Sand, stones, twisted branches, wet clay, closed up the galleries open to the south winds. One narrow and winding opening at the side was kept, to lead out the smoke and to make the fire draw. The cave was thus divided into three or four rooms, if such dark dens with which a donkey would scarcely have been contented deserved the name. But they were dry, and there was space to stand upright, at least in the principal room, which occupied the center. The floor was covered with fine sand, and taking all in all they were well pleased with it for want of a better.

“Perhaps,” said Herbert, while he and Pencroft were working, “our companions have found a superior place to ours.”

“Very likely,” replied the seaman; “but, as we don’t know, we must work all the same. Better to have two strings to one’s bow than no string at all!”

“Oh!” exclaimed Herbert, “how jolly it will be if they were to find Captain Harding and were to bring him back with them!”

“Yes, indeed!” said Pencroft, “that was a man of the right sort.”

“Was!” exclaimed Herbert, “do you despair of ever seeing him again?”

“God forbid!” replied the sailor. Their work was soon done, and Pencroft declared himself very well satisfied.

“Now,” said he, “our friends can come back when they like. They will find a good enough shelter.”

They now had only to make a fireplace and to prepare the supper — an easy task. Large flat stones were placed on the ground at the opening of the narrow passage which had been kept. This, if the smoke did not take the heat out with it, would be enough to maintain an equal temperature inside. Their wood was stowed away in one of the rooms, and the sailor laid in the fireplace some logs and brushwood. The seaman was busy with this, when Herbert asked him if he had any matches.

“Certainly,” replied Pencroft, “and I may say happily, for without matches or tinder we should be in a fix.”

“Still we might get fire as the savages do,” replied Herbert, “by rubbing two bits of dry stick one against the other.”

“All right; try, my boy, and let’s see if you can do anything besides exercising your arms.”

“Well, it’s a very simple proceeding, and much used in the islands of the Pacific.”

“I don’t deny it,” replied Pencroft, “but the savages must know how to do it or employ a peculiar wood, for more than once I have tried to get fire in that way, but I could never manage it. I must say I prefer matches. By the bye, where are my matches?”

Pencroft searched in his waistcoat for the box, which was always there, for he was a confirmed smoker. He could not find it; he rummaged the pockets of his trousers, but, to his horror, he could nowhere discover the box.

“Here’s a go!” said he, looking at Herbert. “The box must have fallen out of my pocket and got lost! Surely, Herbert, you must have something — a tinder-box — anything that can possibly make fire!”

“No, I haven’t, Pencroft.”

The sailor rushed out, followed by the boy. On the sand, among the rocks, near the river’s bank, they both searched carefully, but in vain. The box was of copper, and therefore would have been easily seen.

“Pencroft,” asked Herbert, “didn’t you throw it out of the car?”

“I knew better than that,” replied the sailor; “but such a small article could easily disappear in the tumbling about we have gone through. I would rather even have lost my pipe! Confound the box! Where can it be?”

“Look here, the tide is going down,” said Herbert; “let’s run to the place where we landed.”

It was scarcely probable that they would find the box, which the waves had rolled about among the pebbles, at high tide, but it was as well to try. Herbert and Pencroft walked rapidly to the point where they had landed the day before, about two hundred feet from the cave. They hunted there, among the shingle, in the clefts of the rocks, but found nothing. If the box had fallen at this place it must have been swept away by the waves. As the sea went down, they searched every little crevice with no result. It was a grave loss in their circumstances, and for the time irreparable. Pencroft could not hide his vexation; he looked very anxious, but said not a word. Herbert tried to console him by observing, that if they had found the matches, they would, very likely, have been wetted by the sea and useless.

“No, my boy,” replied the sailor; “they were in a copper box which shut very tightly; and now what are we to do?”

“We shall certainly find some way of making a fire,” said Herbert. “Captain Harding or Mr. Spilett will not be without them.”

“Yes,” replied Pencroft; “but in the meantime we are without fire, and our companions will find but a sorry repast on their return.”

“But,” said Herbert quickly, “do you think it possible that they have no tinder or matches?”

“I doubt it,” replied the sailor, shaking his head, “for neither Neb nor Captain Harding smoke, and I believe that Mr. Spilett would rather keep his note-book than his match-box.”

Herbert did not reply. The loss of the box was certainly to be regretted, but the boy was still sure of procuring fire in some way or other. Pencroft, more experienced, did not think so, although he was not a man to trouble himself about a small or great grievance. At any rate, there was only one thing to be done — to await the return of Neb and the reporter; but they must give up the feast of hard eggs which they had meant to prepare, and a meal of raw flesh was not an agreeable prospect either for themselves or for the others.

Before returning to the cave, the sailor and Herbert, in the event of fire being positively unattainable, collected some more shell-fish, and then silently retraced their steps to their dwelling.

Pencroft, his eyes fixed on the ground, still looked for his box. He even climbed up the left bank of the river from its mouth to the angle where the raft had been moored. He returned to the plateau, went over it in every direction, searched among the high grass on the border of the forest, all in vain.

It was five in the evening when he and Herbert re-entered the cave. It is useless to say that the darkest corners of the passages were ransacked before they were obliged to give it up in despair. Towards six o’clock, when the sun was disappearing behind the high lands of the west, Herbert, who was walking up and down on the strand, signalized the return of Neb and Spilett.

They were returning alone!... The boy’s heart sank; the sailor had not been deceived in his forebodings; the engineer, Cyrus Harding, had not been found!

The reporter, on his arrival, sat down on a rock, without saying anything. Exhausted with fatigue, dying of hunger, he had not strength to utter a word.

As to Neb, his red eyes showed how he had cried, and the tears which he could not restrain told too clearly that he had lost all hope.

The reporter recounted all that they had done in their attempt to recover Cyrus Harding. He and Neb had surveyed the coast for a distance of eight miles and consequently much beyond the place where the balloon had fallen the last time but one, a fall which was followed by the disappearance of the engineer and the dog Top. The shore was solitary; not a vestige of a mark. Not even a pebble recently displaced; not a trace on the sand; not a human footstep on all that part of the beach. It was clear that that portion of the shore had never been visited by a human being. The sea was as deserted as the land, and it was there, a few hundred feet from the coast, that the engineer must have found a tomb.

As Spilett ended his account, Neb jumped up, exclaiming in a voice which showed how hope struggled within him, “No! he is not dead! he can’t be dead! It might happen to any one else, but never to him! He could get out of anything!” Then his strength forsaking him, “Oh! I can do no more!” he murmured.

“Neb,” said Herbert, running to him, “we will find him! God will give him back to us! But in the meantime you are hungry, and you must eat something.”

So saying, he offered the poor Negro a few handfuls of shell-fish, which was indeed wretched and insufficient food. Neb had not eaten anything for several hours, but he refused them. He could not, would not live without his master.

As to Gideon Spilett, he devoured the shell-fish, then he laid himself down on the sand, at the foot of a rock. He was very weak, but calm. Herbert went up to him, and taking his hand, “Sir,” said he, “we have found a shelter which will be better than lying here. Night is advancing. Come and rest! To-morrow we will search farther.”

The reporter got up, and guided by the boy went towards the cave. On the way, Pencroft asked him in the most natural tone, if by chance he happened to have a match or two.

The reporter stopped, felt in his pockets, but finding nothing said, “I had some, but I must have thrown them away.”

The seaman then put the same question to Neb and received the same answer.

“Confound it!” exclaimed the sailor.

The reporter heard him and seizing his arm, “Have you no matches?” he asked.

“Not one, and no fire in consequence.”

“Ah!” cried Neb, “if my master was here, he would know what to do!”

The four castaways remained motionless, looking uneasily at each other. Herbert was the first to break the silence by saying, “Mr. Spilett, you are a smoker and always have matches about you; perhaps you haven’t looked well, try again, a single match will be enough!”

The reporter hunted again in the pockets of his trousers, waistcoat, and great-coat, and at last to Pencroft’s great joy, no less to his extreme surprise, he felt a tiny piece of wood entangled in the lining of his waistcoat. He seized it with his fingers through the stuff, but he could not get it out. If this was a match and a single one, it was of great importance not to rub off the phosphorus.

“Will you let me try?” said the boy, and very cleverly, without breaking it, he managed to draw out the wretched yet precious little bit of wood which was of such great importance to these poor men. It was unused.

“Hurrah!” cried Pencroft; “it is as good as having a whole cargo!” He took the match, and, followed by his companions, entered the cave.

This small piece of wood, of which so many in an inhabited country are wasted with indifference and are of no value, must here be used with the greatest caution.

The sailor first made sure that it was quite dry; that done, “We must have some paper,” said he.

“Here,” replied Spilett, after some hesitation tearing a leaf out of his note-book.

Pencroft took the piece of paper which the reporter held out to him, and knelt down before the fireplace. Some handfuls of grass, leaves, and dry moss were placed under the fagots and disposed in such a way that the air could easily circulate, and the dry wood would rapidly catch fire.

Pencroft then twisted the piece of paper into the shape of a cone, as smokers do in a high wind, and poked it in among the moss. Taking a small, rough stone, he wiped it carefully, and with a beating heart, holding his breath, he gently rubbed the match. The first attempt did not produce any effect. Pencroft had not struck hard enough, fearing to rub off the phosphorus.

“No, I can’t do it,” said he, “my hand trembles, the match has missed fire; I cannot, I will not!” and rising, he told Herbert to take his place.

Certainly the boy had never in all his life been so nervous. Prometheus going to steal the fire from heaven could not have been more anxious. He did not hesitate, however, but struck the match directly.

A little spluttering was heard and a tiny blue flame sprang up, making a choking smoke. Herbert quickly turned the match so as to augment the flame, and then slipped it into the paper cone, which in a few seconds too caught fire, and then the moss.

A minute later the dry wood crackled and a cheerful flame, assisted by the vigorous blowing of the sailor, sprang up in the midst of the darkness.

“At last!” cried Pencroft, getting up; “I was never so nervous before in all my life!”

The flat stones made a capital fireplace. The smoke went quite easily out at the narrow passage, the chimney drew, and an agreeable warmth was not long in being felt.

They must now take great care not to let the fire go out, and always to keep some embers alight. It only needed care and attention, as they had plenty of wood and could renew their store at any time.

Pencroft's first thought was to use the fire by preparing a more nourishing supper than a dish of shell-fish. Two dozen eggs were brought by Herbert. The reporter leaning up in a corner, watched these preparations without saying anything. A threefold thought weighed on his mind. Was Cyrus still alive? If he was alive, where was he? If he had survived from his fall, how was it that he had not found some means of making known his existence? As to Neb, he was roaming about the shore. He was like a body without a soul.

Pencroft knew fifty ways of cooking eggs, but this time he had no choice, and was obliged to content himself with roasting them under the hot cinders. In a few minutes the cooking was done, and the seaman invited the reporter to take his share of the supper. Such was the first repast of the castaways on this unknown coast. The hard eggs were excellent, and as eggs contain everything indispensable to man's nourishment, these poor people thought themselves well off, and were much strengthened by them. Oh! if only one of them had not been missing at this meal! If the five prisoners who escaped from Richmond had been all there, under the piled-up rocks, before this clear, crackling fire on the dry sand, what thanksgiving must they have rendered to Heaven! But the most ingenious, the most learned, he who was their unquestioned chief, Cyrus Harding, was, alas! missing, and his body had not even obtained a burial-place.

Thus passed the 25th of March. Night had come on. Outside could be heard the howling of the wind and the monotonous sound of the surf breaking on the shore. The waves rolled the shingle backwards and forwards with a deafening noise.

The reporter retired into a dark corner after having shortly noted down the occurrences of the day; the first appearance of this new land, the loss of their leader, the exploration of the coast, the incident of the matches, etc.; and then overcome by fatigue, he managed to forget his sorrows in sleep. Herbert went to sleep directly. As to the sailor, he passed the night with one eye on the fire, on which he did not spare fuel. But one of the castaways did not sleep in the cave. The inconsolable, despairing Neb, notwithstanding all that his companions could say to induce him to take some rest, wandered all night long on the shore calling on his master.

CHAPTER 6

The inventory of the articles possessed by these castaways from the clouds, thrown upon a coast which appeared to be uninhabited, was soon made out. They had nothing, save the clothes which they were wearing at the time of the catastrophe. We must mention, however, a note-book and a watch which Gideon Spilett had kept, doubtless by inadvertence, not a weapon, not a tool, not even a pocket-knife; for while in the car they had thrown out everything to lighten the balloon. The imaginary heroes of Daniel Defoe or of Wyss, as well as Selkirk and Raynal shipwrecked on Juan Fernandez and on the archipelago of the Aucklands, were never in such absolute destitution. Either they had abundant resources from their stranded vessels, in grain, cattle, tools, ammunition, or else some things were thrown up on the coast which supplied them with all the first necessities of life. But here, not any instrument whatever, not a utensil. From nothing they must supply themselves with everything.

And yet, if Cyrus Harding had been with them, if the engineer could have brought his practical science, his inventive mind to bear on their situation, perhaps all hope would not have been lost. Alas! they must hope no longer again to see Cyrus Harding. The castaways could expect nothing but from themselves and from that Providence which never abandons those whose faith is sincere.

But ought they to establish themselves on this part of the coast, without trying to know to what continent it belonged, if it was inhabited, or if they were on the shore of a desert island?

It was an important question, and should be solved with the shortest possible delay. From its answer they would know what measures to take.

However, according to Pencroft's advice, it appeared best to wait a few days before commencing an exploration. They must, in fact, prepare some provisions and procure more strengthening food than eggs and molluscs. The explorers, before undertaking new fatigues, must first of all recruit their strength.

The Chimneys offered a retreat sufficient for the present. The fire was lighted, and it was easy to preserve some embers. There were plenty of shell-fish and eggs among the rocks and on the beach. It would be easy to kill a few of the pigeons which were flying by hundreds about the summit of the plateau, either with sticks or stones. Perhaps the trees of the neighboring forest would supply them with eatable fruit. Lastly, the sweet water was there.

It was accordingly settled that for a few days they would remain at the Chimneys so as to prepare themselves for an expedition, either along the shore or into the interior of the country. This plan suited Neb particularly. As obstinate in his ideas as in his presentiments, he was in no haste to abandon this part of the coast, the scene of the catastrophe. He did not, he would not believe in the loss of Cyrus Harding. No, it did not seem to him possible that such a man had ended in this vulgar fashion, carried away by a wave, drowned in the floods, a few hundred feet from a shore. As long as the waves had not cast up the body of the engineer, as long as he, Neb, had not seen with his eyes, touched with his hands the corpse of his master, he would not believe in his death! And this idea rooted itself deeper than ever in his determined heart. An illusion perhaps, but still an illusion to be respected, and one which the sailor did not wish to destroy. As for him, he hoped no longer, but there was no use in arguing with Neb. He was like the dog who will not leave the place where his master is buried, and his grief was such that most probably he would not survive him.

This same morning, the 26th of March, at daybreak, Neb had set out on the shore in a northerly direction, and he had returned to the spot where the sea, no doubt, had closed over the unfortunate Harding.

That day’s breakfast was composed solely of pigeon’s eggs and lithodomes. Herbert had found some salt deposited by evaporation in the hollows of the rocks, and this mineral was very welcome.

The repast ended, Pencroft asked the reporter if he wished to accompany Herbert and himself to the forest, where they were going to try to hunt. But on consideration, it was thought necessary that someone should remain to keep in the fire, and to be at hand in the highly improbable event of Neb requiring aid. The reporter accordingly remained behind.

“To the chase, Herbert,” said the sailor. “We shall find ammunition on our way, and cut our weapons in the forest.” But at the moment of starting, Herbert observed, that since they had no tinder, it would perhaps be prudent to replace it by another substance.

“What?” asked Pencroft.

“Burnt linen,” replied the boy. “That could in case of need serve for tinder.”

The sailor thought it very sensible advice. Only it had the inconvenience of necessitating the sacrifice of a piece of handkerchief. Notwithstanding, the thing was well worth while trying, and a part of Pencroft’s large checked handkerchief was soon reduced to the state of a half-burnt rag. This inflammable material was placed in the central chamber at the bottom of a little cavity in the rock, sheltered from all wind and damp.

It was nine o’clock in the morning. The weather was threatening and the breeze blew from the southeast. Herbert and Pencroft turned the angle of the Chimneys, not without having cast a look at the smoke which, just at that place, curled round a point of rock: they ascended the left bank of the river.

Arrived at the forest, Pencroft broke from the first tree two stout branches which he transformed into clubs, the ends of which Herbert rubbed smooth on a rock. Oh! what would they not have given for a knife!

The two hunters now advanced among the long grass, following the bank. From the turning which directed its course to the southwest, the river narrowed gradually and the channel lay between high banks, over which the trees formed a double arch. Pencroft, lest they should lose themselves, resolved to follow the course of the stream, which would always lead them back to the point from which they started. But the bank was not without some obstacles: here, the flexible branches of the trees bent level with the current; there, creepers and thorns which they had to break down with their sticks. Herbert often glided among the broken stumps with the agility of a young cat, and disappeared in the underwood. But Pencroft called him back directly, begging him not to wander away. Meanwhile, the sailor attentively observed the disposition and nature of the surrounding country. On the left bank, the ground, which was flat and marshy, rose imperceptibly towards the interior. It looked there like a network of liquid threads which doubtless reached the river by some underground drain. Sometimes a stream ran through the underwood, which they crossed without difficulty. The opposite shore appeared to be more uneven, and the valley of which the river occupied the bottom was more clearly visible. The hill, covered with trees disposed in terraces, intercepted the view. On the right bank walking would have been difficult, for the declivities fell suddenly, and the trees bending over the water were only sustained by the strength of their roots.

It is needless to add that this forest, as well as the coast already surveyed, was destitute of any sign of human life. Pencroft only saw traces of quadrupeds, fresh footprints of animals, of which he could not recognize the species. In all probability, and such was also Herbert's opinion, some had been left by formidable wild beasts which doubtless would give them some trouble; but nowhere did they observe the mark of an axe on the trees, nor the ashes of a fire, nor the impression of a human foot. On this they might probably congratulate themselves, for on any land in the middle of the Pacific the presence of man was perhaps more to be feared than desired. Herbert and Pencroft speaking little, for the difficulties of the way were great, advanced very slowly, and after walking for an hour they had scarcely gone more than a mile. As yet the hunt had not been successful. However, some birds sang and fluttered in the foliage, and appeared very timid, as if man had inspired them with an instinctive fear. Among others, Herbert described, in a marshy part of the forest, a bird with a long pointed beak, closely resembling the king-fisher, but its plumage was not fine, though of a metallic brilliancy.

"That must be a jacamar," said Herbert, trying to get nearer.

"This will be a good opportunity to taste jacamar," replied the sailor, "if that fellow is in a humor to be roasted!"

Just then, a stone cleverly thrown by the boy, struck the creature on the wing, but the blow did not disable it, and the jacamar ran off and disappeared in an instant.

"How clumsy I am!" cried Herbert.

“No, no, my boy!” replied the sailor. “The blow was well aimed; many a one would have missed it altogether! Come, don’t be vexed with yourself. We shall catch it another day!”

As the hunters advanced, the trees were found to be more scattered, many being magnificent, but none bore eatable fruit. Pencroft searched in vain for some of those precious palm-trees which are employed in so many ways in domestic life, and which have been found as far as the fortieth parallel in the Northern Hemisphere, and to the thirty-fifth only in the Southern Hemisphere. But this forest was only composed of coniferae, such as deodaras, already recognized by Herbert, and Douglas pine, similar to those which grow on the northwest coast of America, and splendid firs, measuring a hundred and fifty feet in height.

At this moment a flock of birds, of a small size and pretty plumage, with long glancing tails, dispersed themselves among the branches strewing their feathers, which covered the ground as with fine down. Herbert picked up a few of these feathers, and after having examined them, —

“These are couroucous,” said he.

“I should prefer a moor-cock or guinea-fowl,” replied Pencroft, “still, if they are good to eat — ”

“They are good to eat, and also their flesh is very delicate,” replied Herbert. “Besides, if I don’t mistake, it is easy to approach and kill them with a stick.”

The sailor and the lad, creeping among the grass, arrived at the foot of a tree, whose lower branches were covered with little birds. The couroucous were waiting the passage of insects which served for their nourishment.

Their feathery feet could be seen clasping the slender twigs which supported them.

The hunters then rose, and using their sticks like scythes, they mowed down whole rows of these couroucous, who never thought of flying away, and stupidly allowed themselves to be knocked off. A hundred were already heaped on the ground, before the others made up their minds to fly.

“Well,” said Pencroft, “here is game, which is quite within the reach of hunters like us. We have only to put out our hands and take it!”

The sailor having strung the couroucous like larks on flexible twigs, they then continued their exploration. The stream here made a bend towards the south, but this detour was probably not prolonged for the river must have its source in the mountain, and be supplied by the melting of the snow which covered the sides of the central cone.

The particular object of their expedition was, as has been said, to procure the greatest possible quantity of game for the inhabitants of the Chimneys. It must be acknowledged that as yet this object had not been attained. So the sailor actively pursued his researches, though he exclaimed, when some animal which he had not even time to recognize fled into the long grass, “If only we had had the dog Top!” But Top had disappeared at the same time as his master, and had probably perished with him.

Towards three o’clock new flocks of birds were seen through certain trees, at whose aromatic berries they were pecking, those of the juniper-tree among others. Suddenly a loud trumpet call resounded through the forest. This strange and sonorous cry was produced by a game bird called grouse in the United States. They soon saw several couples, whose plumage was rich chestnut-brown mottled with dark brown, and tail of the same color.

Herbert recognized the males by the two wing-like appendages raised on the neck. Pencroft determined to get hold of at least one of these gallinaceae, which were as large as a fowl, and whose flesh is better than that of a pullet. But it was difficult, for they would not allow themselves to be approached. After several fruitless attempts, which resulted in nothing but scaring the grouse, the sailor said to the lad, —

“Decidedly, since we can’t kill them on the wing, we must try to take them with a line.”

“Like a fish?” cried Herbert, much surprised at the proposal.

“Like a fish,” replied the sailor quite seriously. Pencroft had found among the grass half a dozen grouse nests, each having three or four eggs. He took great care not to touch these nests, to which their proprietors would not fail to return. It was around these that he meant to stretch his lines, not snares, but real fishing-lines. He took Herbert to some distance from the nests, and there prepared his singular apparatus with all the care which a disciple of Izaak Walton would have used. Herbert watched the work with great interest, though rather doubting its success. The lines were made of fine creepers, fastened one to the other, of the length of fifteen or twenty feet. Thick, strong thorns, the points bent back (which were supplied from a dwarf acacia bush) were fastened to the ends of the creepers, by way of hooks. Large red worms, which were crawling on the ground, furnished bait.

This done, Pencroft, passing among the grass and concealing himself skillfully, placed the end of his lines armed with hooks near the grouse nests; then he returned, took the other ends and hid with Herbert behind a large tree. There they both waited patiently; though, it must be said, that Herbert did not reckon much on the success of the inventive Pencroft.

A whole half-hour passed, but then, as the sailor had surmised, several couple of grouse returned to their nests. They walked along, pecking the ground, and not suspecting in any way the presence of the hunters, who, besides, had taken care to place themselves to leeward of the gallinaceae.

The lad felt at this moment highly interested. He held his breath, and Pencroft, his eyes staring, his mouth open, his lips advanced, as if about to taste a piece of grouse, scarcely breathed.

Meanwhile, the birds walked about the hooks, without taking any notice of them. Pencroft then gave little tugs which moved the bait as if the worms had been still alive.

The sailor undoubtedly felt much greater anxiety than does the fisherman, for he does not see his prey coming through the water. The jerks attracted the attention of the gallinaceae, and they attacked the hooks with their beaks. Three voracious grouse swallowed at the same moment bait and hook. Suddenly with a smart jerk, Pencroft "struck" his line, and a flapping of wings showed that the birds were taken.

"Hurrah!" he cried, rushing towards the game, of which he made himself master in an instant.

Herbert clapped his hands. It was the first time that he had ever seen birds taken with a line, but the sailor modestly confessed that it was not his first attempt, and that besides he could not claim the merit of invention.

"And at any rate," added he, "situated as we are, we must hope to hit upon many other contrivances."

The grouse were fastened by their claws, and Pencroft, delighted at not having to appear before their companions with empty hands, and observing that the day had begun to decline, judged it best to return to their dwelling.

The direction was indicated by the river, whose course they had only to follow, and, towards six o’clock, tired enough with their excursion, Herbert and Pencroft arrived at the Chimneys.

CHAPTER 7

Gideon Spilett was standing motionless on the shore, his arms crossed, gazing over the sea, the horizon of which was lost towards the east in a thick black cloud which was spreading rapidly towards the zenith. The wind was already strong, and increased with the decline of day. The whole sky was of a threatening aspect, and the first symptoms of a violent storm were clearly visible.

Herbert entered the Chimneys, and Pencroft went towards the reporter. The latter, deeply absorbed, did not see him approach.

“We are going to have a dirty night, Mr. Spilett!” said the sailor: “Petrels delight in wind and rain.”

The reporter, turning at the moment, saw Pencroft, and his first words were, —

“At what distance from the coast would you say the car was, when the waves carried off our companion?”

The sailor had not expected this question. He reflected an instant and replied, —

“Two cables lengths at the most.”

“But what is a cable’s length?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“About a hundred and twenty fathoms, or six hundred feet.”

“Then,” said the reporter, “Cyrus Harding must have disappeared twelve hundred feet at the most from the shore?”

"About that," replied Pencroft.

"And his dog also?"

"Also."

"What astonishes me," rejoined the reporter, "while admitting that our companion has perished, is that Top has also met his death, and that neither the body of the dog nor of his master has been cast on the shore!"

"It is not astonishing, with such a heavy sea," replied the sailor. "Besides, it is possible that currents have carried them farther down the coast."

"Then, it is your opinion that our friend has perished in the waves?" again asked the reporter.

"That is my opinion."

"My own opinion," said Gideon Spilett, "with due deference to your experience, Pencroft, is that in the double fact of the absolute disappearance of Cyrus and Top, living or dead, there is something unaccountable and unlikely."

"I wish I could think like you, Mr. Spilett," replied Pencroft; "unhappily, my mind is made up on this point." Having said this, the sailor returned to the Chimneys. A good fire crackled on the hearth. Herbert had just thrown on an armful of dry wood, and the flame cast a bright light into the darkest parts of the passage.

Pencroft immediately began to prepare the dinner. It appeared best to introduce something solid into the bill of fare, for all needed to get up their strength. The strings of couroucous were kept for the next day, but they plucked a couple of grouse, which were soon spitted on a stick, and roasting before a blazing fire.

At seven in the evening Neb had not returned. The prolonged absence of the Negro made Pencroft very uneasy. It was to be feared that he had met with an accident on this unknown land, or that the unhappy fellow had been driven to some act of despair. But Herbert drew very different conclusions from this absence. According to him, Neb’s delay was caused by some new circumstances which had induced him to prolong his search. Also, everything new must be to the advantage of Cyrus Harding. Why had Neb not returned unless hope still detained him? Perhaps he had found some mark, a footstep, a trace which had put him in the right path. Perhaps he was at this moment on a certain track. Perhaps even he was near his master.

Thus the lad reasoned. Thus he spoke. His companions let him talk. The reporter alone approved with a gesture. But what Pencroft thought most probable was, that Neb had pushed his researches on the shore farther than the day before, and that he had not as yet had time to return.

Herbert, however, agitated by vague presentiments, several times manifested an intention to go to meet Neb. But Pencroft assured him that that would be a useless course, that in the darkness and deplorable weather he could not find any traces of Neb, and that it would be much better to wait. If Neb had not made his appearance by the next day, Pencroft would not hesitate to join him in his search.

Gideon Spilett approved of the sailor’s opinion that it was best not to divide, and Herbert was obliged to give up his project; but two large tears fell from his eyes.

The reporter could not refrain from embracing the generous boy.

Bad weather now set in. A furious gale from the southeast passed over the coast. The sea roared as it beat over the reef. Heavy rain was dashed by the storm into particles like dust. Ragged masses of vapor drove along the beach, on which the tormented shingles sounded as if poured out in cart-loads, while the sand raised by the wind added as it were mineral dust to that which was liquid, and rendered the united attack insupportable. Between the river's mouth and the end of the cliff, eddies of wind whirled and gusts from this maelstrom lashed the water which ran through the narrow valley. The smoke from the fireplace was also driven back through the opening, filling the passages and rendering them uninhabitable.

Therefore, as the grouse were cooked, Pencroft let the fire die away, and only preserved a few embers buried under the ashes.

At eight o'clock Neb had not appeared, but there was no doubt that the frightful weather alone hindered his return, and that he must have taken refuge in some cave, to await the end of the storm or at least the return of day. As to going to meet him, or attempting to find him, it was impossible.

The game constituted the only dish at supper; the meat was excellent, and Pencroft and Herbert, whose long excursion had rendered them very hungry, devoured it with infinite satisfaction.

Their meal concluded, each retired to the corner in which he had rested the preceding night, and Herbert was not long in going to sleep near the sailor, who had stretched himself beside the fireplace.

Outside, as the night advanced, the tempest also increased in strength, until it was equal to that which had carried the prisoners from Richmond to this land in the Pacific. The tempests which are frequent during the seasons of the equinox, and which are so prolific in catastrophes, are above all terrible over this immense ocean, which opposes no obstacle to their fury. No description can give an idea of the terrific violence of the gale as it beat upon the unprotected coast.

Happily the pile of rocks which formed the Chimneys was solid. It was composed of enormous blocks of granite, a few of which, insecurely balanced, seemed to tremble on their foundations, and Pencroft could feel rapid quiverings under his head as it rested on the rock. But he repeated to himself, and rightly, that there was nothing to fear, and that their retreat would not give way. However he heard the noise of stones torn from the summit of the plateau by the wind, falling down on to the beach. A few even rolled on to the upper part of the Chimneys, or flew off in fragments when they were projected perpendicularly. Twice the sailor rose and intrenched himself at the opening of the passage, so as to take a look in safety at the outside. But there was nothing to be feared from these showers, which were not considerable, and he returned to his couch before the fireplace, where the embers glowed beneath the ashes.

Notwithstanding the fury of the hurricane, the uproar of the tempest, the thunder, and the tumult, Herbert slept profoundly. Sleep at last took possession of Pencroft, whom a seafaring life had habituated to anything. Gideon Spilett alone was kept awake by anxiety. He reproached himself with not having accompanied Neb. It was evident that he had not abandoned all hope. The presentiments which had troubled Herbert did not cease to agitate him also. His thoughts were concentrated on Neb. Why had Neb not returned? He tossed about on his sandy couch, scarcely giving a thought to the struggle of the elements. Now and then, his eyes, heavy with fatigue, closed for an instant, but some sudden thought reopened them almost immediately.

Meanwhile the night advanced, and it was perhaps two hours from morning, when Pencroft, then sound asleep, was vigorously shaken.

“What’s the matter?” he cried, rousing himself, and collecting his ideas with the promptitude usual to seamen.

The reporter was leaning over him, and saying, —

“Listen, Pencroft, listen!”

The sailor strained his ears, but could hear no noise beyond those caused by the storm.

“It is the wind,” said he.

“No,” replied Gideon Spilett, listening again, “I thought I heard — ”

“What?”

“The barking of a dog!”

“A dog!” cried Pencroft, springing up.

“Yes — barking — ”

“It’s not possible!” replied the sailor. “And besides, how, in the roaring of the storm — ”

“Stop — listen — ” said the reporter.

Pencroft listened more attentively, and really thought he heard, during a lull, distant barking.

“Well!” said the reporter, pressing the sailor’s hand.

"Yes — yes!" replied Pencroft.

"It is Top! It is Top!" cried Herbert, who had just awoke; and all three rushed towards the opening of the Chimneys. They had great difficulty in getting out. The wind drove them back. But at last they succeeded, and could only remain standing by leaning against the rocks. They looked about, but could not speak. The darkness was intense. The sea, the sky, the land were all mingled in one black mass. Not a speck of light was visible.

The reporter and his companions remained thus for a few minutes, overwhelmed by the wind, drenched by the rain, blinded by the sand.

Then, in a pause of the tumult, they again heard the barking, which they found must be at some distance.

It could only be Top! But was he alone or accompanied? He was most probably alone, for, if Neb had been with him, he would have made his way more directly towards the Chimneys. The sailor squeezed the reporter's hand, for he could not make himself heard, in a way which signified "Wait!" then he reentered the passage.

An instant after he issued with a lighted fagot, which he threw into the darkness, whistling shrilly.

It appeared as if this signal had been waited for; the barking immediately came nearer, and soon a dog bounded into the passage. Pencroft, Herbert, and Spilett entered after him.

An armful of dry wood was thrown on the embers. The passage was lighted up with a bright flame.

“It is Top!” cried Herbert.

It was indeed Top, a magnificent Anglo-Norman, who derived from these two races crossed the swiftness of foot and the acuteness of smell which are the preeminent qualities of coursing dogs. It was the dog of the engineer, Cyrus Harding. But he was alone! Neither Neb nor his master accompanied him!

How was it that his instinct had guided him straight to the Chimneys, which he did not know? It appeared inexplicable, above all, in the midst of this black night and in such a tempest! But what was still more inexplicable was, that Top was neither tired, nor exhausted, nor even soiled with mud or sand! — Herbert had drawn him towards him, and was patting his head, the dog rubbing his neck against the lad’s hands.

“If the dog is found, the master will be found also!” said the reporter.

“God grant it!” responded Herbert. “Let us set off! Top will guide us!”

Pencroft did not make any objection. He felt that Top’s arrival contradicted his conjectures. “Come along then!” said he.

Pencroft carefully covered the embers on the hearth. He placed a few pieces of wood among them, so as to keep in the fire until their return. Then, preceded by the dog, who seemed to invite them by short barks to come with him, and followed by the reporter and the boy, he dashed out, after having put up in his handkerchief the remains of the supper.

The storm was then in all its violence, and perhaps at its height. Not a single ray of light from the moon pierced through the clouds. To follow a straight course was difficult. It was best to rely on Top’s instinct. They did so. The reporter and Herbert walked behind the dog, and the sailor brought up the rear. It was impossible to exchange a word. The rain was not very heavy, but the wind was terrific.

However, one circumstance favored the seaman and his two companions. The wind being southeast, consequently blew on their backs. The clouds of sand, which otherwise would have been insupportable, from being received behind, did not in consequence impede their progress. In short, they sometimes went faster than they liked, and had some difficulty in keeping their feet; but hope gave them strength, for it was not at random that they made their way along the shore. They had no doubt that Neb had found his master, and that he had sent them the faithful dog. But was the engineer living, or had Neb only sent for his companions that they might render the last duties to the corpse of the unfortunate Harding?

After having passed the precipice, Herbert, the reporter, and Pencroft prudently stepped aside to stop and take breath. The turn of the rocks sheltered them from the wind, and they could breathe after this walk or rather run of a quarter of an hour.

They could now hear and reply to each other, and the lad having pronounced the name of Cyrus Harding, Top gave a few short barks, as much as to say that his master was saved.

“Saved, isn’t he?” repeated Herbert; “saved, Top?”

And the dog barked in reply.

They once more set out. The tide began to rise, and urged by the wind it threatened to be unusually high, as it was a spring tide. Great billows thundered against the reef with such violence that they probably passed entirely over the islet, then quite invisible. The mole no longer protected the coast, which was directly exposed to the attacks of the open sea.

As soon as the sailor and his companions left the precipice, the wind struck them again with renewed fury. Though bent under the gale they walked very quickly, following Top, who did not hesitate as to what direction to take.

They ascended towards the north, having on their left an interminable extent of billows, which broke with a deafening noise, and on their right a dark country, the aspect of which it was impossible to guess. But they felt that it was comparatively flat, for the wind passed completely over them, without being driven back as it was when it came in contact with the cliff.

At four o’clock in the morning, they reckoned that they had cleared about five miles. The clouds were slightly raised, and the wind, though less damp, was very sharp and cold. Insufficiently protected by their clothing, Pencroft, Herbert and Spilett suffered cruelly, but not a complaint escaped their lips. They were determined to follow Top, wherever the intelligent animal wished to lead them.

Towards five o’clock day began to break. At the zenith, where the fog was less thick, gray shades bordered the clouds; under an opaque belt, a luminous line clearly traced the horizon. The crests of the billows were tipped with a wild light, and the foam regained its whiteness. At the same time on the left the hilly parts of the coast could be seen, though very indistinctly.

At six o’clock day had broken. The clouds rapidly lifted. The seaman and his companions were then about six miles from the Chimneys. They were following a very flat shore bounded by a reef of rocks, whose heads scarcely emerged from the sea, for they were in deep water. On the left, the country appeared to be one vast extent of sandy downs, bristling with thistles. There was no cliff, and the shore offered no resistance to the ocean but a chain of irregular hillocks. Here and there grew two or three trees, inclined towards the west, their branches projecting in that direction. Quite behind, in the southwest, extended the border of the forest.

At this moment, Top became very excited. He ran forward, then returned, and seemed to entreat them to hasten their steps. The dog then left the beach, and guided by his wonderful instinct, without showing the least hesitation, went straight in among the downs. They followed him. The country appeared an absolute desert. Not a living creature was to be seen.

The downs, the extent of which was large, were composed of hillocks and even of hills, very irregularly distributed. They resembled a Switzerland modeled in sand, and only an amazing instinct could have possibly recognized the way.

Five minutes after having left the beach, the reporter and his two companions arrived at a sort of excavation, hollowed out at the back of a high mound. There Top stopped, and gave a loud, clear bark. Spilett, Herbert, and Pencroft dashed into the cave.

Neb was there, kneeling beside a body extended on a bed of grass.

The body was that of the engineer, Cyrus Harding.

CHAPTER 8

Neb did not move. Pencroft only uttered one word.

“Living?” he cried.

Neb did not reply. Spilett and the sailor turned pale. Herbert clasped his hands, and remained motionless. The poor Negro, absorbed in his grief, evidently had neither seen his companions nor heard the sailor speak.

The reporter knelt down beside the motionless body, and placed his ear to the engineer’s chest, having first torn open his clothes.

A minute — an age! — passed, during which he endeavored to catch the faintest throb of the heart.

Neb had raised himself a little and gazed without seeing. Despair had completely changed his countenance. He could scarcely be recognized, exhausted with fatigue, broken with grief. He believed his master was dead.

Gideon Spilett at last rose, after a long and attentive examination.

“He lives!” said he.

Pencroft knelt in his turn beside the engineer, he also heard a throbbing, and even felt a slight breath on his cheek.

Herbert at a word from the reporter ran out to look for water. He found, a hundred feet off, a limpid stream, which seemed to have been greatly increased by the rains, and which filtered through the sand; but nothing in which to put the water, not even a shell among the downs. The lad was obliged to content himself with dipping his handkerchief in the stream, and with it hastened back to the grotto.

Happily the wet handkerchief was enough for Gideon Spilett, who only wished to wet the engineer’s lips. The cold water produced an almost immediate effect. His chest heaved and he seemed to try to speak.

“We will save him!” exclaimed the reporter.

At these words hope revived in Neb’s heart. He undressed his master to see if he was wounded, but not so much as a bruise was to be found, either on the head, body, or limbs, which was surprising, as he must have been dashed against the rocks; even the hands were uninjured, and it was difficult to explain how the engineer showed no traces of the efforts which he must have made to get out of reach of the breakers.

But the explanation would come later. When Cyrus was able to speak he would say what had happened. For the present the question was, how to recall him to life, and it appeared likely that rubbing would bring this about; so they set to work with the sailor’s jersey.

The engineer, revived by this rude shampooing, moved his arm slightly and began to breathe more regularly. He was sinking from exhaustion, and certainly, had not the reporter and his companions arrived, it would have been all over with Cyrus Harding.

“You thought your master was dead, didn’t you?” said the seaman to Neb.

“Yes! quite dead!” replied Neb, “and if Top had not found you, and brought you here, I should have buried my master, and then have lain down on his grave to die!”

It had indeed been a narrow escape for Cyrus Harding!

Neb then recounted what had happened. The day before, after having left the Chimneys at daybreak, he had ascended the coast in a northerly direction, and had reached that part of the shore which he had already visited.

There, without any hope he acknowledged, Neb had searched the beach, among the rocks, on the sand, for the smallest trace to guide him. He examined particularly that part of the beach which was not covered by the high tide, for near the sea the water would have obliterated all marks. Neb did not expect to find his master living. It was for a corpse that he searched, a corpse which he wished to bury with his own hands!

He sought long in vain. This desert coast appeared never to have been visited by a human creature. The shells, those which the sea had not reached, and which might be met with by millions above high-water mark, were untouched. Not a shell was broken.

Neb then resolved to walk along the beach for some miles. It was possible that the waves had carried the body to quite a distant point. When a corpse floats a little distance from a low shore, it rarely happens that the tide does not throw it up, sooner or later. This Neb knew, and he wished to see his master again for the last time.

“I went along the coast for another two miles, carefully examining the beach, both at high and low water, and I had despaired of finding anything, when yesterday, above five in the evening, I saw footprints on the sand.”

“Footprints?” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Yes!” replied Neb.

“Did these footprints begin at the water’s edge?” asked the reporter.

“No,” replied Neb, “only above high-water mark, for the others must have been washed out by the tide.”

“Go on, Neb,” said Spilett.

“I went half crazy when I saw these footprints. They were very clear and went towards the downs. I followed them for a quarter of a mile, running, but taking care not to destroy them. Five minutes after, as it was getting dark, I heard the barking of a dog. It was Top, and Top brought me here, to my master!”

Neb ended his account by saying what had been his grief at finding the inanimate body, in which he vainly sought for the least sign of life. Now that he had found him dead he longed for him to be alive. All his efforts were useless! Nothing remained to be done but to render the last duties to the one whom he had loved so much! Neb then thought of his companions. They, no doubt, would wish to see the unfortunate man again. Top was there. Could he not rely on the sagacity of the faithful animal? Neb several times pronounced the name of the reporter, the one among his companions whom Top knew best.

Then he pointed to the south, and the dog bounded off in the direction indicated to him.

We have heard how, guided by an instinct which might be looked upon almost as supernatural, Top had found them.

Neb’s companions had listened with great attention to this account.

It was unaccountable to them how Cyrus Harding, after the efforts which he must have made to escape from the waves by crossing the rocks, had not received even a scratch. And what could not be explained either was how the engineer had managed to get to this cave in the downs, more than a mile from the shore.

“So, Neb,” said the reporter, “it was not you who brought your master to this place.”

“No, it was not I,” replied the Negro.

“It’s very clear that the captain came here by himself,” said Pencroft.

“It is clear in reality,” observed Spilett, “but it is not credible!”

The explanation of this fact could only be produced from the engineer’s own lips, and they must wait for that till speech returned. Rubbing had re-established the circulation of the blood. Cyrus Harding moved his arm again, then his head, and a few incomprehensible words escaped him.

Neb, who was bending over him, spoke, but the engineer did not appear to hear, and his eyes remained closed. Life was only exhibited in him by movement, his senses had not as yet been restored.

Pencroft much regretted not having either fire, or the means of procuring it, for he had, unfortunately, forgotten to bring the burnt linen, which would easily have ignited from the sparks produced by striking together two flints. As to the engineer’s pockets, they were entirely empty, except that of his waistcoat, which contained his watch. It was necessary to carry Harding to the Chimneys, and that as soon as possible. This was the opinion of all.

Meanwhile, the care which was lavished on the engineer brought him back to consciousness sooner than they could have expected. The water with which they wetted his lips revived him gradually. Pencroft also thought of mixing with the water some moisture from the titra’s flesh which he had brought. Herbert ran to the beach and returned with two large bivalve shells. The sailor concocted something which he introduced between the lips of the engineer, who eagerly drinking it opened his eyes.

Neb and the reporter were leaning over him.

“My master! my master!” cried Neb.

The engineer heard him. He recognized Neb and Spilett, then his other two companions, and his hand slightly pressed theirs.

A few words again escaped him, which showed what thoughts were, even then, troubling his brain. This time he was understood. Undoubtedly they were the same words he had before attempted to utter.

“Island or continent?” he murmured.

“Bother the continent,” cried Pencroft hastily; “there is time enough to see about that, captain! we don’t care for anything, provided you are living.”

The engineer nodded faintly, and then appeased to sleep.

They respected this sleep, and the reporter began immediately to make arrangements for transporting Harding to a more comfortable place. Neb, Herbert, and Pencroft left the cave and directed their steps towards a high mound crowned with a few distorted trees. On the way the sailor could not help repeating, —

“Island or continent! To think of that, when at one’s last gasp! What a man!”

Arrived at the summit of the mound, Pencroft and his two companions set to work, with no other tools than their hands, to despoil of its principal branches a rather sickly tree, a sort of marine fir; with these branches they made a litter, on which, covered with grass and leaves, they could carry the engineer.

This occupied them nearly forty minutes, and it was ten o’clock when they returned to Cyrus Harding whom Spilett had not left.

The engineer was just awaking from the sleep, or rather from the drowsiness, in which they had found him. The color was returning to his cheeks, which till now had been as pale as death. He raised himself a little, looked around him, and appeared to ask where he was.

“Can you listen to me without fatigue, Cyrus?” asked the reporter.

“Yes,” replied the engineer.

“It’s my opinion,” said the sailor, “that Captain Harding will be able to listen to you still better, if he will have some more grouse jelly, — for we have grouse, captain,” added he, presenting him with a little of this jelly, to which he this time added some of the flesh.

Cyrus Harding ate a little of the grouse, and the rest was divided among his companions, who found it but a meager breakfast, for they were suffering extremely from hunger.

“Well!” said the sailor, “there is plenty of food at the Chimneys, for you must know, captain, that down there, in the south, we have a house, with rooms, beds, and fireplace, and in the pantry, several dozen of birds, which our Herbert calls couroucous. Your litter is ready, and as soon as you feel strong enough we will carry you home."

"Thanks, my friend," replied the engineer; "wait another hour or two, and then we will set out. And now speak, Spilett."

The reporter then told him all that had occurred. He recounted all the events with which Cyrus was unacquainted, the last fall of the balloon, the landing on this unknown land, which appeared a desert (whatever it was, whether island or continent), the discovery of the Chimneys, the search for him, not forgetting of course Neb's devotion, the intelligence exhibited by the faithful Top, as well as many other matters.

"But," asked Harding, in a still feeble voice, "you did not, then, pick me up on the beach?"

"No," replied the reporter.

"And did you not bring me to this cave?"

"No."

"At what distance is this cave from the sea?"

"About a mile," replied Pencroft; "and if you are astonished, captain, we are not less surprised ourselves at seeing you in this place!"

"Indeed," said the engineer, who was recovering gradually, and who took great interest in these details, "indeed it is very singular!"

“But,” resumed the sailor, “can you tell us what happened after you were carried off by the sea?”

Cyrus Harding considered. He knew very little. The wave had torn him from the balloon net. He sank at first several fathoms. On returning to the surface, in the half light, he felt a living creature struggling near him. It was Top, who had sprung to his help. He saw nothing of the balloon, which, lightened both of his weight and that of the dog, had darted away like an arrow.

There he was, in the midst of the angry sea, at a distance which could not be less than half a mile from the shore. He attempted to struggle against the billows by swimming vigorously. Top held him up by his clothes; but a strong current seized him and drove him towards the north, and after half an hour of exertion, he sank, dragging Top with him into the depths. From that moment to the moment in which he recovered to find himself in the arms of his friends he remembered nothing.

“However,” remarked Pencroft, “you must have been thrown on to the beach, and you must have had strength to walk here, since Neb found your footmarks!”

“Yes... of course,” replied the engineer, thoughtfully; “and you found no traces of human beings on this coast?”

“Not a trace,” replied the reporter; “besides, if by chance you had met with some deliverer there, just in the nick of time, why should he have abandoned you after having saved you from the waves?”

“You are right, my dear Spilett. Tell me, Neb,” added the engineer, turning to his servant, “it was not you who... you can’t have had a moment of unconsciousness... during which no, that’s absurd... Do any of the footsteps still remain?” asked Harding.

“Yes, master,” replied Neb; “here, at the entrance, at the back of the mound, in a place sheltered from the rain and wind. The storm has destroyed the others.”

“Pencroft,” said Cyrus Harding, “will you take my shoe and see if it fits exactly to the footprints?”

The sailor did as the engineer requested. While he and Herbert, guided by Neb, went to the place where the footprints were to be found, Cyrus remarked to the reporter, —

“It is a most extraordinary thing!”

“Perfectly inexplicable!” replied Gideon Spilett.

“But do not dwell upon it just now, my dear Spilett, we will talk about it by-and-by.”

A moment after the others entered.

There was no doubt about it. The engineer’s shoe fitted exactly to the footmarks. It was therefore Cyrus Harding who had left them on the sand.

“Come,” said he, “I must have experienced this unconsciousness which I attributed to Neb. I must have walked like a somnambulist, without any knowledge of my steps, and Top must have guided me here, after having dragged me from the waves... Come, Top! Come, old dog!”

The magnificent animal bounded barking to his master, and caresses were lavished on him. It was agreed that there was no other way of accounting for the rescue of Cyrus Harding, and that Top deserved all the honor of the affair.

Towards twelve o’clock, Pencroft having asked the engineer if they could now remove him, Harding, instead of replying, and by an effort which exhibited the most energetic will, got up. But he was obliged to lean on the sailor, or he would have fallen.

“Well done!” cried Pencroft; “bring the captain’s litter.”

The litter was brought; the transverse branches had been covered with leaves and long grass. Harding was laid on it, and Pencroft, having taken his place at one end and Neb at the other, they started towards the coast. There was a distance of eight miles to be accomplished; but, as they could not go fast, and it would perhaps be necessary to stop frequently, they reckoned that it would take at least six hours to reach the Chimneys. The wind was still strong, but fortunately it did not rain. Although lying down, the engineer, leaning on his elbow, observed the coast, particularly inland. He did not speak, but he gazed; and, no doubt, the appearance of the country, with its inequalities of ground, its forests, its various productions, were impressed on his mind. However, after traveling for two hours, fatigue overcame him, and he slept.

At half-past five the little band arrived at the precipice, and a short time after at the Chimneys.

They stopped, and the litter was placed on the sand; Cyrus Harding was sleeping profoundly, and did not awake.

Pencroft, to his extreme surprise, found that the terrible storm had quite altered the aspect of the place. Important changes had occurred; great blocks of stone lay on the beach, which was also covered with a thick carpet of sea-weed, algae, and wrack. Evidently the sea, passing over the islet, had been carried right up to the foot of the enormous curtain of granite. The soil in front of the cave had been torn away by the violence of the waves. A horrid presentiment flashed across Pencroft's mind. He rushed into the passage, but returned almost immediately, and stood motionless, staring at his companions... The fire was out; the drowned cinders were nothing but mud; the burnt linen, which was to have served as tinder, had disappeared! The sea had penetrated to the end of the passages, and everything was overthrown and destroyed in the interior of the Chimneys!

CHAPTER 9

In a few words, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, and Neb were made acquainted with what had happened. This accident, which appeared so very serious to Pencroft, produced different effects on the companions of the honest sailor.

Neb, in his delight at having found his master, did not listen, or rather, did not care to trouble himself with what Pencroft was saying.

Herbert shared in some degree the sailor’s feelings.

As to the reporter, he simply replied, —

“Upon my word, Pencroft, it’s perfectly indifferent to me!”

“But, I repeat, that we haven’t any fire!”

“Pooh!”

“Nor any means of relighting it!”

“Nonsense!”

“But I say, Mr. Spilett — ”

“Isn’t Cyrus here?” replied the reporter.

“Is not our engineer alive? He will soon find some way of making fire for us!”

“With what?”

“With nothing.”

What had Pencroft to say? He could say nothing, for, in the bottom of his heart he shared the confidence which his companions had in Cyrus Harding. The engineer was to them a microcosm, a compound of every science, a possessor of all human knowledge. It was better to be with Cyrus in a desert island, than without him in the most flourishing town in the United States. With him they could want nothing; with him they would never despair. If these brave men had been told that a volcanic eruption would destroy the land, that this land would be engulfed in the depths of the Pacific, they would have imperturbably replied, —

“Cyrus is here!”

While in the palanquin, however, the engineer had again relapsed into unconsciousness, which the jolting to which he had been subjected during his journey had brought on, so that they could not now appeal to his ingenuity. The supper must necessarily be very meager. In fact, all the grouse flesh had been consumed, and there no longer existed any means of cooking more game. Besides, the couroucous which had been reserved had disappeared. They must consider what was to be done.

First of all, Cyrus Harding was carried into the central passage. There they managed to arrange for him a couch of sea-weed which still remained almost dry. The deep sleep which had overpowered him would no doubt be more beneficial to him than any nourishment.

Night had closed in, and the temperature, which had modified when the wind shifted to the northwest, again became extremely cold. Also, the sea having destroyed the partitions which Pencroft had put up in certain places in the passages, the Chimneys, on account of the draughts, had become scarcely habitable. The engineer’s condition would, therefore, have been bad enough, if his companions had not carefully covered him with their coats and waistcoats.

Supper, this evening, was of course composed of the inevitable lithodomes, of which Herbert and Neb picked up a plentiful supply on the beach. However, to these molluscs, the lad added some edible sea-weed, which he gathered on high rocks, whose sides were only washed by the sea at the time of high tides. This sea-weed, which belongs to the order of Fucacae, of the genus Sargassum, produces, when dry, a gelatinous matter, rich and nutritious. The reporter and his companions, after having eaten a quantity of lithodomes, sucked the sargassum, of which the taste was very tolerable. It is used in parts of the East very considerably by the natives. “Never mind!” said the sailor, “the captain will help us soon.” Meanwhile the cold became very severe, and unhappily they had no means of defending themselves from it.

The sailor, extremely vexed, tried in all sorts of ways to procure fire. Neb helped him in this work. He found some dry moss, and by striking together two pebbles he obtained some sparks, but the moss, not being inflammable enough, did not take fire, for the sparks were really only incandescent, and not at all of the same consistency as those which are emitted from flint when struck in the same manner. The experiment, therefore, did not succeed.

Pencroft, although he had no confidence in the proceeding, then tried rubbing two pieces of dry wood together, as savages do. Certainly, the movement which he and Neb exhibited, if it had been transformed into heat, according to the new theory, would have been enough to heat the boiler of a steamer! It came to nothing. The bits of wood became hot, to be sure, but much less so than the operators themselves.

After working an hour, Pencroft, who was in a complete state of perspiration, threw down the pieces of wood in disgust.

“I can never be made to believe that savages light their fires in this way, let them say what they will,” he exclaimed. “I could sooner light my arms by rubbing them against each other!”

The sailor was wrong to despise the proceeding. Savages often kindle wood by means of rapid rubbing. But every sort of wood does not answer for the purpose, and besides, there is “the knack,” following the usual expression, and it is probable that Pencroft had not “the knack.”

Pencroft’s ill humor did not last long. Herbert had taken the bits of wood which he had turned down, and was exerting himself to rub them. The hardy sailor could not restrain a burst of laughter on seeing the efforts of the lad to succeed where he had failed.

“Rub, my boy, rub!” said he.

“I am rubbing,” replied Herbert, laughing, “but I don’t pretend to do anything else but warm myself instead of shivering, and soon I shall be as hot as you are, my good Pencroft!”

This soon happened. However, they were obliged to give up, for this night at least, the attempt to procure fire. Gideon Spilett repeated, for the twentieth time, that Cyrus Harding would not have been troubled for so small a difficulty. And, in the meantime, he stretched himself in one of the passages on his bed of sand. Herbert, Neb, and Pencroft did the same, while Top slept at his master’s feet.

Next day, the 28th of March, when the engineer awoke, about eight in the morning, he saw his companions around him watching his sleep, and, as on the day before, his first words were: —

“Island or continent?” This was his uppermost thought.

“Well!” replied Pencroft, “we don’t know anything about it, captain!”

“You don’t know yet?”

“But we shall know,” rejoined Pencroft, “when you have guided us into the country.”

“I think I am able to try it,” replied the engineer, who, without much effort, rose and stood upright.

“That’s capital!” cried the sailor.

“I feel dreadfully weak,” replied Harding. “Give me something to eat, my friends, and it will soon go off. You have fire, haven’t you?”

This question was not immediately replied to. But, in a few seconds —

“Alas! we have no fire,” said Pencroft, “or rather, captain, we have it no longer!”

And the sailor recounted all that had passed the day before. He amused the engineer by the history of the single match, then his abortive attempt to procure fire in the savages’ way.

“We shall consider,” replied the engineer, “and if we do not find some substance similar to tinder — ”

"Well?" asked the sailor.

"Well, we will make matches.

"Chemicals?"

"Chemicals!"

"It is not more difficult than that," cried the reporter, striking the sailor on the shoulder.

The latter did not think it so simple, but he did not protest. All went out. The weather had become very fine. The sun was rising from the sea's horizon, and touched with golden spangles the prismatic rugosities of the huge precipice.

Having thrown a rapid glance around him, the engineer seated himself on a block of stone. Herbert offered him a few handfuls of shell-fish and sargassum, saying, —

"It is all that we have, Captain Harding."

"Thanks, my boy," replied Harding; "it will do — for this morning at least."

He ate the wretched food with appetite, and washed it down with a little fresh water, drawn from the river in an immense shell.

His companions looked at him without speaking. Then, feeling somewhat refreshed, Cyrus Harding crossed his arms, and said, —

"So, my friends, you do not know yet whether fate has thrown us on an island, or on a continent?"

“No, captain,” replied the boy.

“We shall know to-morrow,” said the engineer; “till then, there is nothing to be done.”

“Yes,” replied Pencroft.

“What?”

“Fire,” said the sailor, who, also, had a fixed idea.

“We will make it, Pencroft,” replied Harding.

“While you were carrying me yesterday, did I not see in the west a mountain which commands the country?”

“Yes,” replied Spilett, “a mountain which must be rather high — ”

“Well,” replied the engineer, “we will climb to the summit to-morrow, and then we shall see if this land is an island or a continent. Till then, I repeat, there is nothing to be done.”

“Yes, fire!” said the obstinate sailor again.

“But he will make us a fire!” replied Gideon Spilett, “only have a little patience, Pencroft!”

The seaman looked at Spilett in a way which seemed to say, “If it depended upon you to do it, we wouldn’t taste roast meat very soon”; but he was silent.

Meanwhile Captain Harding had made no reply. He appeared to be very little troubled by the question of fire. For a few minutes he remained absorbed in thought; then again speaking, —

“My friends,” said he, “our situation is, perhaps, deplorable; but, at any rate, it is very plain. Either we are on a continent, and then, at the expense of greater or less fatigue, we shall reach some inhabited place, or we are on an island. In the latter case, if the island is inhabited, we will try to get out of the scrape with the help of its inhabitants; if it is desert, we will try to get out of the scrape by ourselves.”

“Certainly, nothing could be plainer,” replied Pencroft.

“But, whether it is an island or a continent,” asked Gideon Spilett, “whereabouts do you think, Cyrus, this storm has thrown us?”

“I cannot say exactly,” replied the engineer, “but I presume it is some land in the Pacific. In fact, when we left Richmond, the wind was blowing from the northeast, and its very violence greatly proves that it could not have varied. If the direction has been maintained from the northeast to the southwest, we have traversed the States of North Carolina, of South Carolina, of Georgia, the Gulf of Mexico, Mexico, itself, in its narrow part, then a part of the Pacific Ocean. I cannot estimate the distance traversed by the balloon at less than six to seven thousand miles, and, even supposing that the wind had varied half a quarter, it must have brought us either to the archipelago of Mendava, either on the Pomotous, or even, if it had a greater strength than I suppose, to the land of New Zealand. If the last hypothesis is correct, it will be easy enough to get home again. English or Maoris, we shall always find some one to whom we can speak. If, on the contrary, this is the coast of a desert island in some tiny archipelago, perhaps we shall be able to reconnoiter it from the summit of that peak which overlooks the country, and then we shall see how best to establish ourselves here as if we are never to go away.”

“Never?” cried the reporter. “You say ‘Never,’ my dear Cyrus?”

“Better to put things at the worst at first,” replied the engineer, “and reserve the best for a surprise.”

“Well said,” remarked Pencroft. “It is to be hoped, too, that this island, if it be one, is not situated just out of the course of ships; that would be really unlucky!”

“We shall not know what we have to rely on until we have first made the ascent of the mountain,” replied the engineer.

“But to-morrow, captain,” asked Herbert, “shall you be in a state to bear the fatigue of the ascent?”

“I hope so,” replied the engineer, “provided you and Pencroft, my boy, show yourselves quick and clever hunters.”

“Captain,” said the sailor, “since you are speaking of game, if on my return, I was as certain of roasting it as I am of bringing it back — ”

“Bring it back all the same, Pencroft,” replied Harding.

It was then agreed that the engineer and the reporter were to pass the day at the Chimneys, so as to examine the shore and the upper plateau. Neb, Herbert, and the sailor were to return to the forest, renew their store of wood, and lay violent hands on every creature, feathered or hairy, which might come within their reach.

They set out accordingly about ten o’clock in the morning, Herbert confident, Neb joyous, Pencroft murmuring aside, —

"If, on my return, I find a fire at the house, I shall believe that the thunder itself came to light it." All three climbed the bank; and arrived at the angle made by the river, the sailor, stopping, said to his two companions, —

"Shall we begin by being hunters or wood-men?"

"Hunters," replied Herbert. "There is Top already in quest."

"We will hunt, then," said the sailor, "and afterwards we can come back and collect our wood."

This agreed to, Herbert, Neb, and Pencroft, after having torn three sticks from the trunk of a young fir, followed Top, who was bounding about among the long grass.

This time, the hunters, instead of following the course of the river, plunged straight into the heart of the forest. There were still the same trees, belonging, for the most part, to the pine family. In certain places, less crowded, growing in clumps, these pines exhibited considerable dimensions, and appeared to indicate, by their development, that the country was situated in a higher latitude than the engineer had supposed. Glades, bristling with stumps worn away by time, were covered with dry wood, which formed an inexhaustible store of fuel. Then, the glade passed, the underwood thickened again, and became almost impenetrable.

It was difficult enough to find the way among the groups of trees, without any beaten track. So the sailor from time to time broke off branches which might be easily recognized. But, perhaps, he was wrong not to follow the watercourse, as he and Herbert had done on their first excursion, for after walking an hour not a creature had shown itself. Top, running under the branches, only roused birds which could not be approached. Even the couroucous were invisible, and it was probable that the sailor would be obliged to return to the marshy part of the forest, in which he had so happily performed his grouse fishing.

“Well, Pencroft,” said Neb, in a slightly sarcastic tone, “if this is all the game which you promised to bring back to my master, it won’t need a large fire to roast it!”

“Have patience,” replied the sailor, “it isn’t the game which will be wanting on our return.”

“Have you not confidence in Captain Harding?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t believe that he will make fire?”

“I shall believe it when the wood is blazing in the fireplace.”

“It will blaze, since my master has said so.”

“We shall see!”

Meanwhile, the sun had not reached the highest point in its course above the horizon. The exploration, therefore, continued, and was usefully marked by a discovery which Herbert made of a tree whose fruit was edible. This was the stone-pine, which produces an excellent almond, very much esteemed in the temperate regions of America and Europe. These almonds were in a perfect state of maturity, and Herbert described them to his companions, who feasted on them.

“Come,” said Pencroft, “sea-weed by way of bread, raw mussels for meat, and almonds for dessert, that’s certainly a good dinner for those who have not a single match in their pocket!”

“We mustn’t complain,” said Herbert.

“I am not complaining, my boy,” replied Pencroft, “only I repeat, that meat is a little too much economized in this sort of meal.”

“Top has found something!” cried Neb, who ran towards a thicket, in the midst of which the dog had disappeared, barking. With Top’s barking were mingled curious gruntings.

The sailor and Herbert had followed Neb. If there was game there this was not the time to discuss how it was to be cooked, but rather, how they were to get hold of it.

The hunters had scarcely entered the bushes when they saw Top engaged in a struggle with an animal which he was holding by the ear. This quadruped was a sort of pig nearly two feet and a half long, of a blackish brown color, lighter below, having hard scanty hair; its toes, then strongly fixed in the ground, seemed to be united by a membrane. Herbert recognized in this animal the capybara, that is to say, one of the largest members of the rodent order.

Meanwhile, the capybara did not struggle against the dog. It stupidly rolled its eyes, deeply buried in a thick bed of fat. Perhaps it saw men for the first time.

However, Neb having tightened his grasp on his stick, was just going to fell the pig, when the latter, tearing itself from Top’s teeth, by which it was only held by the tip of its ear, uttered a vigorous grunt, rushed upon Herbert, almost overthrew him, and disappeared in the wood.

“The rascal!” cried Pencroft.

All three directly darted after Top, but at the moment when they joined him the animal had disappeared under the waters of a large pond shaded by venerable pines.

Neb, Herbert, and Pencroft stopped, motionless. Top plunged into the water, but the capybara, hidden at the bottom of the pond, did not appear.

“Let us wait,” said the boy, “for he will soon come to the surface to breathe.”

“Won’t he drown?” asked Neb.

“No,” replied Herbert, “since he has webbed feet, and is almost an amphibious animal. But watch him.”

Top remained in the water. Pencroft and his two companions went to different parts of the bank, so as to cut off the retreat of the capybara, which the dog was looking for beneath the water.

Herbert was not mistaken. In a few minutes the animal appeared on the surface of the water. Top was upon it in a bound, and kept it from plunging again. An instant later the capybara, dragged to the bank, was killed by a blow from Neb’s stick.

“Hurrah!” cried Pencroft, who was always ready with this cry of triumph.

“Give me but a good fire, and this pig shall be gnawed to the bones!”

Pencroft hoisted the capybara on his shoulders, and judging by the height of the sun that it was about two o’clock, he gave the signal to return.

Top’s instinct was useful to the hunters, who, thanks to the intelligent animal, were enabled to discover the road by which they had come. Half an hour later they arrived at the river.

Pencroft soon made a raft of wood, as he had done before, though if there was no fire it would be a useless task, and the raft following the current, they returned towards the Chimneys.

But the sailor had not gone fifty paces when he stopped, and again uttering a tremendous hurrah, pointed towards the angle of the cliff, —

“Herbert! Neb! Look!” he shouted.

Smoke was escaping and curling up among the rocks.

CHAPTER 10

In a few minutes the three hunters were before a crackling fire. The captain and the reporter were there. Pencroft looked from one to the other, his capybara in his hand, without saying a word.

“Well, yes, my brave fellow,” cried the reporter.

“Fire, real fire, which will roast this splendid pig perfectly, and we will have a feast presently!”

“But who lighted it?” asked Pencroft.

“The sun!”

Gideon Spilett was quite right in his reply. It was the sun which had furnished the heat which so astonished Pencroft. The sailor could scarcely believe his eyes, and he was so amazed that he did not think of questioning the engineer.

“Had you a burning-glass, sir?” asked Herbert of Harding.

“No, my boy,” replied he, “but I made one.”

And he showed the apparatus which served for a burning-glass. It was simply two glasses which he had taken from his own and the reporter’s watches. Having filled them with water and rendered their edges adhesive by means of a little clay, he thus fabricated a regular burning-glass, which, concentrating the solar rays on some very dry moss, soon caused it to blaze.

The sailor considered the apparatus; then he gazed at the engineer without saying a word, only a look plainly expressed his opinion that if Cyrus

Harding was not a magician, he was certainly no ordinary man. At last speech returned to him, and he cried, —

“Note that, Mr. Spilett, note that down on your paper!”

“It is noted,” replied the reporter.

Then, Neb helping him, the seaman arranged the spit, and the capybara, properly cleaned, was soon roasting like a suckling-pig before a clear, crackling fire.

The Chimneys had again become more habitable, not only because the passages were warmed by the fire, but because the partitions of wood and mud had been re-established.

It was evident that the engineer and his companions had employed their day well. Cyrus Harding had almost entirely recovered his strength, and had proved it by climbing to the upper plateau. From this point his eye, accustomed to estimate heights and distances, was fixed for a long time on the cone, the summit of which he wished to reach the next day. The mountain, situated about six miles to the northwest, appeared to him to measure 3,500 feet above the level of the sea. Consequently the gaze of an observer posted on its summit would extend over a radius of at least fifty miles. Therefore it was probable that Harding could easily solve the question of “island or continent,” to which he attached so much importance.

They supped capitally. The flesh of the capybara was declared excellent. The sargassum and the almonds of the stone-pine completed the repast, during which the engineer spoke little. He was preoccupied with projects for the next day.

Once or twice Pencroft gave forth some ideas upon what it would be best to do; but Cyrus Harding, who was evidently of a methodical mind, only shook his head without uttering a word.

“To-morrow,” he repeated, “we shall know what we have to depend upon, and we will act accordingly.”

The meal ended, fresh armfuls of wood were thrown on the fire, and the inhabitants of the Chimneys, including the faithful Top, were soon buried in a deep sleep.

No incident disturbed this peaceful night, and the next day, the 29th of March, fresh and active they awoke, ready to undertake the excursion which must determine their fate.

All was ready for the start. The remains of the capybara would be enough to sustain Harding and his companions for at least twenty-four hours.

Besides, they hoped to find more food on the way. As the glasses had been returned to the watches of the engineer and reporter, Pencroft burned a little linen to serve as tinder. As to flint, that would not be wanting in these regions of Plutonic origin. It was half-past seven in the morning when the explorers, armed with sticks, left the Chimneys. Following Pencroft’s advice, it appeared best to take the road already traversed through the forest, and to return by another route. It was also the most direct way to reach the mountain. They turned the south angle and followed the left bank of the river, which was abandoned at the point where it formed an elbow towards the southwest. The path, already trodden under the evergreen trees, was found, and at nine o’clock Cyrus Harding and his companions had reached the western border of the forest. The ground, till then, very little undulated, boggy at first, dry and sandy afterwards, had a gentle slope, which ascended from the shore towards the interior of the country. A few very timid animals were seen under the forest-trees. Top quickly started them, but his master soon called him back, for the time had not come to commence hunting; that would be attended to later. The engineer was not a man who would allow himself to be diverted from his fixed idea. It might even have been said that he did not observe the country at all, either in its configuration or in its natural productions, his great aim being to climb the mountain before him, and therefore straight towards it he went. At ten o'clock a halt of a few minutes was made. On leaving the forest, the mountain system of the country appeared before the explorers. The mountain was composed of two cones; the first, truncated at a height of about two thousand five hundred feet, was sustained by buttresses, which appeared to branch out like the talons of an immense claw set on the ground. Between these were narrow valleys, bristling with trees, the last clumps of which rose to the top of the lowest cone. There appeared to be less vegetation on that side of the mountain which was exposed to the northeast, and deep fissures could be seen which, no doubt, were watercourses.

On the first cone rested a second, slightly rounded, and placed a little on one side, like a great round hat cocked over the ear. A Scotchman would have said, "His bonnet was a thocht ajee." It appeared formed of bare earth, here and there pierced by reddish rocks.

They wished to reach the second cone, and proceeding along the ridge of the spurs seemed to be the best way by which to gain it.

"We are on volcanic ground," Cyrus Harding had said, and his companions following him began to ascend by degrees on the back of a spur, which, by a winding and consequently more accessible path, joined the first plateau.

The ground had evidently been convulsed by subterranean force. Here and there stray blocks, numerous debris of basalt and pumice-stone, were met with. In isolated groups rose fir-trees, which, some hundred feet lower, at the bottom of the narrow gorges, formed massive shades almost impenetrable to the sun’s rays.

During the first part of the ascent, Herbert remarked on the footprints which indicated the recent passage of large animals.

“Perhaps these beasts will not let us pass by willingly,” said Pencroft.

“Well,” replied the reporter, who had already hunted the tiger in India, and the lion in Africa, “we shall soon learn how successfully to encounter them. But in the meantime we must be upon our guard!”

They ascended but slowly.

The distance, increased by detours and obstacles which could not be surmounted directly, was long. Sometimes, too, the ground suddenly fell, and they found themselves on the edge of a deep chasm which they had to go round. Thus, in retracing their steps so as to find some practicable path, much time was employed and fatigue undergone for nothing. At twelve o’clock, when the small band of adventurers halted for breakfast at the foot of a large group of firs, near a little stream which fell in cascades, they found themselves still half way from the first plateau, which most probably they would not reach till nightfall. From this point the view of the sea was much extended, but on the right the high promontory prevented their seeing whether there was land beyond it. On the left, the sight extended several miles to the north; but, on the northwest, at the point occupied by the explorers, it was cut short by the ridge of a fantastically-shaped spur, which formed a powerful support of the central cone.

At one o’clock the ascent was continued. They slanted more towards the southwest and again entered among thick bushes. There under the shade of the trees fluttered several couples of gallinaceae belonging to the pheasant species. They were tragopans, ornamented by a pendant skin which hangs over their throats, and by two small, round horns, planted behind the eyes. Among these birds, which were about the size of a fowl, the female was uniformly brown, while the male was gorgeous in his red plumage, decorated with white spots. Gideon Spilett, with a stone cleverly and vigorously thrown, killed one of these tragopans, on which Pencroft, made hungry by the fresh air, had cast greedy eyes.

After leaving the region of bushes, the party, assisted by resting on each other’s shoulders, climbed for about a hundred feet up a steep acclivity and reached a level place, with very few trees, where the soil appeared volcanic. It was necessary to ascend by zigzags to make the slope more easy, for it was very steep, and the footing being exceedingly precarious required the greatest caution. Neb and Herbert took the lead, Pencroft the rear, the captain and the reporter between them. The animals which frequented these heights — and there were numerous traces of them — must necessarily belong to those races of sure foot and supple spine, chamois or goat. Several were seen, but this was not the name Pencroft gave them, for all of a sudden — ”Sheep!” he shouted.

All stopped about fifty feet from half-a-dozen animals of a large size, with strong horns bent back and flattened towards the point, with a woolly fleece, hidden under long silky hair of a tawny color.

They were not ordinary sheep, but a species usually found in the mountainous regions of the temperate zone, to which Herbert gave the name of the musmon.

“Have they legs and chops?” asked the sailor.

“Yes,” replied Herbert.

“Well, then, they are sheep!” said Pencroft.

The animals, motionless among the blocks of basalt, gazed with an astonished eye, as if they saw human bipeds for the first time. Then their fears suddenly aroused, they disappeared, bounding over the rocks.

“Good-bye, till we meet again,” cried Pencroft, as he watched them, in such a comical tone that Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, and Neb could not help laughing.

The ascent was continued. Here and there were traces of lava. Sulphur springs sometimes stopped their way, and they had to go round them. In some places the sulphur had formed crystals among other substances, such as whitish cinders made of an infinity of little feldspar crystals.

In approaching the first plateau formed by the truncating of the lower cone, the difficulties of the ascent were very great. Towards four o’clock the extreme zone of the trees had been passed. There only remained here and there a few twisted, stunted pines, which must have had a hard life in resisting at this altitude the high winds from the open sea. Happily for the engineer and his companions the weather was beautiful, the atmosphere tranquil; for a high breeze at an elevation of three thousand feet would have hindered their proceedings. The purity of the sky at the zenith was felt through the transparent air. A perfect calm reigned around them. They could not see the sun, then hid by the vast screen of the upper cone, which masked the half-horizon of the west, and whose enormous shadow stretching to the shore increased as the radiant luminary sank in its diurnal course. Vapor —

mist rather than clouds — began to appear in the east, and assume all the prismatic colors under the influence of the solar rays.

Five hundred feet only separated the explorers from the plateau, which they wished to reach so as to establish there an encampment for the night, but these five hundred feet were increased to more than two miles by the zigzags which they had to describe. The soil, as it were, slid under their feet.

The slope often presented such an angle that they slipped when the stones worn by the air did not give a sufficient support. Evening came on by degrees, and it was almost night when Cyrus Harding and his companions, much fatigued by an ascent of seven hours, arrived at the plateau of the first cone. It was then necessary to prepare an encampment, and to restore their strength by eating first and sleeping afterwards. This second stage of the mountain rose on a base of rocks, among which it would be easy to find a retreat. Fuel was not abundant. However, a fire could be made by means of the moss and dry brushwood, which covered certain parts of the plateau. While the sailor was preparing his hearth with stones which he put to this use, Neb and Herbert occupied themselves with getting a supply of fuel. They soon returned with a load of brushwood. The steel was struck, the burnt linen caught the sparks of flint, and, under Neb’s breath, a crackling fire showed itself in a few minutes under the shelter of the rocks. Their object in lighting a fire was only to enable them to withstand the cold temperature of the night, as it was not employed in cooking the bird, which Neb kept for the next day. The remains of the capybara and some dozens of the stone-pine almonds formed their supper. It was not half-past six when all was finished.

Cyrus Harding then thought of exploring in the half-light the large circular layer which supported the upper cone of the mountain. Before taking any rest, he wished to know if it was possible to get round the base of the cone in the case of its sides being too steep and its summit being inaccessible. This question preoccupied him, for it was possible that from the way the hat inclined, that is to say, towards the north, the plateau was not practicable. Also, if the summit of the mountain could not be reached on one side, and if, on the other, they could not get round the base of the cone, it would be impossible to survey the western part of the country, and their object in making the ascent would in part be altogether unattained.

The engineer, accordingly, regardless of fatigue, leaving Pencroft and Neb to arrange the beds, and Gideon Spilett to note the incidents of the day, began to follow the edge of the plateau, going towards the north. Herbert accompanied him.

The night was beautiful and still, the darkness was not yet deep. Cyrus Harding and the boy walked near each other, without speaking. In some places the plateau opened before them, and they passed without hindrance. In others, obstructed by rocks, there was only a narrow path, in which two persons could not walk abreast. After a walk of twenty minutes, Cyrus Harding and Herbert were obliged to stop. From this point the slope of the two cones became one. No shoulder here separated the two parts of the mountain. The slope, being inclined almost seventy degrees, the path became impracticable.

But if the engineer and the boy were obliged to give up thoughts of following a circular direction, in return an opportunity was given for ascending the cone.

In fact, before them opened a deep hollow. It was the rugged mouth of the crater, by which the eruptive liquid matter had escaped at the periods when the volcano was still in activity. Hardened lava and crusted scoria formed a sort of natural staircase of large steps, which would greatly facilitate the ascent to the summit of the mountain.

Harding took all this in at a glance, and without hesitating, followed by the lad, he entered the enormous chasm in the midst of an increasing obscurity.

There was still a height of a thousand feet to overcome. Would the interior acclivities of the crater be practicable? It would soon be seen. The persevering engineer resolved to continue his ascent until he was stopped. Happily these acclivities wound up the interior of the volcano and favored their ascent.

As to the volcano itself, it could not be doubted that it was completely extinct. No smoke escaped from its sides; not a flame could be seen in the dark hollows; not a roar, not a mutter, no trembling even issued from this black well, which perhaps reached far into the bowels of the earth. The atmosphere inside the crater was filled with no sulphurous vapor. It was more than the sleep of a volcano; it was its complete extinction. Cyrus Harding's attempt would succeed.

Little by little, Herbert and he climbing up the sides of the interior, saw the crater widen above their heads. The radius of this circular portion of the sky, framed by the edge of the cone, increased obviously. At each step, as it were, that the explorers made, fresh stars entered the field of their vision. The magnificent constellations of the southern sky shone resplendently. At the zenith glittered the splendid Antares in the Scorpion, and not far was Alpha Centauri, which is believed to be the nearest star to the terrestrial globe. Then, as the crater widened, appeared Fomalhaut of the Fish, the

Southern Triangle, and lastly, nearly at the Antarctic Pole, the glittering Southern Cross, which replaces the Polar Star of the Northern Hemisphere.

It was nearly eight o’clock when Cyrus Harding and Herbert set foot on the highest ridge of the mountain at the summit of the cone.

It was then perfectly dark, and their gaze could not extend over a radius of two miles. Did the sea surround this unknown land, or was it connected in the west with some continent of the Pacific? It could not yet be made out. Towards the west, a cloudy belt, clearly visible at the horizon, increased the gloom, and the eye could not discover if the sky and water were blended together in the same circular line.

But at one point of the horizon a vague light suddenly appeared, which descended slowly in proportion as the cloud mounted to the zenith.

It was the slender crescent moon, already almost disappearing; but its light was sufficient to show clearly the horizontal line, then detached from the cloud, and the engineer could see its reflection trembling for an instant on a liquid surface. Cyrus Harding seized the lad’s hand, and in a grave voice, —

“An island!” said he, at the moment when the lunar crescent disappeared beneath the waves.

CHAPTER 11

Half an hour later Cyrus Harding and Herbert had returned to the encampment. The engineer merely told his companions that the land upon which fate had thrown them was an island, and that the next day they would consult. Then each settled himself as well as he could to sleep, and in that rocky hole, at a height of two thousand five hundred feet above the level of the sea, through a peaceful night, the islanders enjoyed profound repose.

The next day, the 30th of March, after a hasty breakfast, which consisted solely of the roasted tragopan, the engineer wished to climb again to the summit of the volcano, so as more attentively to survey the island upon which he and his companions were imprisoned for life perhaps, should the island be situated at a great distance from any land, or if it was out of the course of vessels which visited the archipelagoes of the Pacific Ocean. This time his companions followed him in the new exploration. They also wished to see the island, on the productions of which they must depend for the supply of all their wants.

It was about seven o'clock in the morning when Cyrus Harding, Herbert, Pencroft, Gideon Spilett, and Neb quitted the encampment. No one appeared to be anxious about their situation. They had faith in themselves, doubtless, but it must be observed that the basis of this faith was not the same with Harding as with his companions. The engineer had confidence, because he felt capable of extorting from this wild country everything necessary for the life of himself and his companions; the latter feared nothing, just because Cyrus Harding was with them. Pencroft especially, since the incident of the relighted fire, would not have despaired for an instant, even if he was on a bare rock, if the engineer was with him on the rock.

“Pshaw,” said he, “we left Richmond without permission from the authorities! It will be hard if we don’t manage to get away some day or other from a place where certainly no one will detain us!”

Cyrus Harding followed the same road as the evening before. They went round the cone by the plateau which formed the shoulder, to the mouth of the enormous chasm. The weather was magnificent. The sun rose in a pure sky and flooded with his rays all the eastern side of the mountain.

The crater was reached. It was just what the engineer had made it out to be in the dark; that is to say, a vast funnel which extended, widening, to a height of a thousand feet above the plateau. Below the chasm, large thick streaks of lava wound over the sides of the mountain, and thus marked the course of the eruptive matter to the lower valleys which furrowed the northern part of the island.

The interior of the crater, whose inclination did not exceed thirty five to forty degrees, presented no difficulties nor obstacles to the ascent. Traces of very ancient lava were noticed, which probably had overflowed the summit of the cone, before this lateral chasm had opened a new way to it.

As to the volcanic chimney which established a communication between the subterranean layers and the crater, its depth could not be calculated with the eye, for it was lost in obscurity. But there was no doubt as to the complete extinction of the volcano.

Before eight o’clock Harding and his companions were assembled at the summit of the crater, on a conical mound which swelled the northern edge.

“The sea, the sea everywhere!” they cried, as if their lips could not restrain the words which made islanders of them.

The sea, indeed, formed an immense circular sheet of water all around them! Perhaps, on climbing again to the summit of the cone, Cyrus Harding had had a hope of discovering some coast, some island shore, which he had not been able to perceive in the dark the evening before. But nothing appeared on the farthest verge of the horizon, that is to say over a radius of more than fifty miles. No land in sight. Not a sail. Over all this immense space the ocean alone was visible — the island occupied the center of a circumference which appeared to be infinite.

The engineer and his companions, mute and motionless, surveyed for some minutes every point of the ocean, examining it to its most extreme limits. Even Pencroft, who possessed a marvelous power of sight, saw nothing; and certainly if there had been land at the horizon, if it appeared only as an indistinct vapor, the sailor would undoubtedly have found it out, for nature had placed regular telescopes under his eyebrows.

From the ocean their gaze returned to the island which they commanded entirely, and the first question was put by Gideon Spilett in these terms:

“About what size is this island?”

Truly, it did not appear large in the midst of the immense ocean.

Cyrus Harding reflected a few minutes; he attentively observed the perimeter of the island, taking into consideration the height at which he was placed; then, —

“My friends,” said he, “I do not think I am mistaken in giving to the shore of the island a circumference of more than a hundred miles.”

“And consequently an area?”

“That is difficult to estimate,” replied the engineer, “for it is so uneven.”

If Cyrus Harding was not mistaken in his calculation, the island had almost the extent of Malta or Zante, in the Mediterranean, but it was at the same time much more irregular and less rich in capes, promontories, points, bays, or creeks. Its strange form caught the eye, and when Gideon Spilett, on the engineer’s advice, had drawn the outline, they found that it resembled some fantastic animal, a monstrous leviathan, which lay sleeping on the surface of the Pacific.

This was in fact the exact shape of the island, which it is of consequence to know, and a tolerably correct map of it was immediately drawn by the reporter.

The east part of the shore, where the castaways had landed, formed a wide bay, terminated by a sharp cape, which had been concealed by a high point from Pencroft on his first exploration. At the northeast two other capes closed the bay, and between them ran a narrow gulf, which looked like the half-open jaws of a formidable dog-fish.

From the northeast to the southwest the coast was rounded, like the flattened cranium of an animal, rising again, forming a sort of protuberance which did not give any particular shape to this part of the island, of which the center was occupied by the volcano.

From this point the shore ran pretty regularly north and south, broken at two-thirds of its perimeter by a narrow creek, from which it ended in a long tail, similar to the caudal appendage of a gigantic alligator.

This tail formed a regular peninsula, which stretched more than thirty miles into the sea, reckoning from the cape southeast of the island, already mentioned; it curled round, making an open roadstead, which marked out the lower shore of this strangely-formed land.

At the narrowest part, that is to say between the Chimneys and the creek on the western shore, which corresponded to it in latitude, the island only measured ten miles; but its greatest length, from the jaws at the northeast to the extremity of the tail of the southwest, was not less than thirty miles.

As to the interior of the island, its general aspect was this, very woody throughout the southern part from the mountain to the shore, and arid and sandy in the northern part. Between the volcano and the east coast Cyrus Harding and his companions were surprised to see a lake, bordered with green trees, the existence of which they had not suspected. Seen from this height, the lake appeared to be on the same level as the ocean, but, on reflection, the engineer explained to his companions that the altitude of this little sheet of water must be about three hundred feet, because the plateau, which was its basin, was but a prolongation of the coast.

“Is it a freshwater lake?” asked Pencroft.

“Certainly,” replied the engineer, “for it must be fed by the water which flows from the mountain.”

“I see a little river which runs into it,” said Herbert, pointing out a narrow stream, which evidently took its source somewhere in the west.

“Yes,” said Harding; “and since this stream feeds the lake, most probably on the side near the sea there is an outlet by which the surplus water escapes. We shall see that on our return.”

This little winding watercourse and the river already mentioned constituted the water-system, at least such as it was displayed to the eyes of the explorers. However, it was possible that under the masses of trees which covered two-thirds of the island, forming an immense forest, other rivers ran towards the sea. It might even be inferred that such was the case, so rich did this region appear in the most magnificent specimens of the flora of the temperate zones. There was no indication of running water in the north, though perhaps there might be stagnant water among the marshes in the northeast; but that was all, in addition to the downs, sand, and aridity which contrasted so strongly with the luxuriant vegetation of the rest of the island.

The volcano did not occupy the central part; it rose, on the contrary, in the northwestern region, and seemed to mark the boundary of the two zones. At the southwest, at the south, and the southeast, the first part of the spurs were hidden under masses of verdure. At the north, on the contrary, one could follow their ramifications, which died away on the sandy plains. It was on this side that, at the time when the mountain was in a state of eruption, the discharge had worn away a passage, and a large heap of lava had spread to the narrow jaw which formed the northeastern gulf.

Cyrus Harding and his companions remained an hour at the top of the mountain. The island was displayed under their eyes, like a plan in relief with different tints, green for the forests, yellow for the sand, blue for the water. They viewed it in its tout-ensemble, nothing remained concealed but the ground hidden by verdure, the hollows of the valleys, and the interior of the volcanic chasms.

One important question remained to be solved, and the answer would have a great effect upon the future of the castaways.

Was the island inhabited?

It was the reporter who put this question, to which after the close examination they had just made, the answer seemed to be in the negative.

Nowhere could the work of a human hand be perceived. Not a group of huts, not a solitary cabin, not a fishery on the shore. No smoke curling in the air betrayed the presence of man. It is true, a distance of nearly thirty miles separated the observers from the extreme points, that is, of the tail which extended to the southwest, and it would have been difficult, even to Pencroft's eyes, to discover a habitation there. Neither could the curtain of verdure, which covered three-quarters of the island, be raised to see if it did not shelter some straggling village. But in general the islanders live on the shores of the narrow spaces which emerge above the waters of the Pacific, and this shore appeared to be an absolute desert.

Until a more complete exploration, it might be admitted that the island was uninhabited. But was it frequented, at least occasionally, by the natives of neighboring islands? It was difficult to reply to this question. No land appeared within a radius of fifty miles. But fifty miles could be easily crossed, either by Malay proas or by the large Polynesian canoes. Everything depended on the position of the island, of its isolation in the Pacific, or of its proximity to archipelagoes. Would Cyrus Harding be able to find out their latitude and longitude without instruments? It would be difficult. Since he was in doubt, it was best to take precautions against a possible descent of neighboring natives.

The exploration of the island was finished, its shape determined, its features made out, its extent calculated, the water and mountain systems ascertained. The disposition of the forests and plains had been marked in a general way on the reporter's plan. They had now only to descend the mountain slopes again, and explore the soil, in the triple point of view, of its mineral, vegetable, and animal resources.

But before giving his companions the signal for departure, Cyrus Harding said to them in a calm, grave voice, —

“Here, my friends, is the small corner of land upon which the hand of the Almighty has thrown us. We are going to live here; a long time, perhaps. Perhaps, too, unexpected help will arrive, if some ship passes by chance. I say by chance, because this is an unimportant island; there is not even a port in which ships could anchor, and it is to be feared that it is situated out of the route usually followed, that is to say, too much to the south for the ships which frequent the archipelagoes of the Pacific, and too much to the north for those which go to Australia by doubling Cape Horn. I wish to hide nothing of our position from you — ”

“And you are right, my dear Cyrus,” replied the reporter, with animation. “You have to deal with men. They have confidence in you, and you can depend upon them. Is it not so, my friends?”

“I will obey you in everything, captain,” said Herbert, seizing the engineer’s hand.

“My master always, and everywhere!” cried Neb.

“As for me,” said the sailor, “if I ever grumble at work, my name’s not Jack Pencroft, and if you like, captain, we will make a little America of this island! We will build towns, we will establish railways, start telegraphs, and one fine day, when it is quite changed, quite put in order and quite civilized, we will go and offer it to the government of the Union. Only, I ask one thing.”

“What is that?” said the reporter.

“It is, that we do not consider ourselves castaways, but colonists, who have come here to settle.” Harding could not help smiling, and the sailor’s idea was adopted. He then thanked his companions, and added, that he would rely on their energy and on the aid of Heaven.

“Well, now let us set off to the Chimneys!” cried Pencroft.

“One minute, my friends,” said the engineer. “It seems to me it would be a good thing to give a name to this island, as well as to, the capes, promontories, and watercourses, which we can see.

“Very good,” said the reporter. “In the future, that will simplify the instructions which we shall have to give and follow.”

“Indeed,” said the sailor, “already it is something to be able to say where one is going, and where one has come from. At least, it looks like somewhere.”

“The Chimneys, for example,” said Herbert.

“Exactly!” replied Pencroft. “That name was the most convenient, and it came to me quite of myself. Shall we keep the name of the Chimneys for our first encampment, captain?”

“Yes, Pencroft, since you have so christened it.”

“Good! as for the others, that will be easy,” returned the sailor, who was in high spirits. “Let us give them names, as the Robinsons did, whose story Herbert has often read to me; Providence Bay, Whale Point, Cape Disappointment!”

“Or, rather, the names of Captain Harding,” said Herbert, “of Mr. Spilett, of Neb! — ”

“My name!” cried Neb, showing his sparkling white teeth.

“Why not?” replied Pencroft. “Port Neb, that would do very well! And Cape Gideon — ”

“I should prefer borrowing names from our country,” said the reporter, “which would remind us of America.”

“Yes, for the principal ones,” then said Cyrus Harding; “for those of the bays and seas, I admit it willingly. We might give to that vast bay on the east the name of Union Bay, for example; to that large hollow on the south, Washington Bay; to the mountain upon which we are standing, that of Mount Franklin; to that lake which is extended under our eyes, that of Lake Grant; nothing could be better, my friends. These names will recall our country, and those of the great citizens who have honored it; but for the rivers, gulfs, capes, and promontories, which we perceive from the top of this mountain, rather let us choose names which will recall their particular shape. They will impress themselves better on our memory, and at the same time will be more practical. The shape of the island is so strange that we shall not be troubled to imagine what it resembles. As to the streams which we do not know as yet, in different parts of the forest which we shall explore later, the creeks which afterwards will be discovered, we can christen them as we find them. What do you think, my friends?”

The engineer’s proposal was unanimously agreed to by his companions. The island was spread out under their eyes like a map, and they had only to give names to all its angles and points. Gideon Spilett would write them down, and the geographical nomenclature of the island would be definitely adopted. First, they named the two bays and the mountain, Union Bay, Washington Bay, and Mount Franklin, as the engineer had suggested.

“Now,” said the reporter, “to this peninsula at the southwest of the island, I propose to give the name of Serpentine Peninsula, and that of Reptile-end to the bent tail which terminates it, for it is just like a reptile’s tail.”

“Adopted,” said the engineer.

“Now,” said Herbert, pointing to the other extremity of the island, “let us call this gulf which is so singularly like a pair of open jaws, Shark Gulf.”

“Capital!” cried Pencroft, “and we can complete the resemblance by naming the two parts of the jaws Mandible Cape.”

“But there are two capes,” observed the reporter.

“Well,” replied Pencroft, “we can have North Mandible Cape and South Mandible Cape.”

“They are inscribed,” said Spilett.

“There is only the point at the southeastern extremity of the island to be named,” said Pencroft.

“That is, the extremity of Union Bay?” asked Herbert.

“Claw Cape,” cried Neb directly, who also wished to be godfather to some part of his domain.

In truth, Neb had found an excellent name, for this cape was very like the powerful claw of the fantastic animal which this singularly-shaped island represented.

Pencroft was delighted at the turn things had taken, and their imaginations soon gave to the river which furnished the settlers with drinking water and near which the balloon had thrown them, the name of the Mercy, in true gratitude to Providence. To the islet upon which the castaways had first landed, the name of Safety Island; to the plateau which crowned the high granite precipice above the Chimneys, and from whence the gaze could embrace the whole of the vast bay, the name of Prospect Heights.

Lastly, all the masses of impenetrable wood which covered the Serpentine Peninsula were named the forests of the Far West.

The nomenclature of the visible and known parts of the island was thus finished, and later, they would complete it as they made fresh discoveries.

As to the points of the compass, the engineer had roughly fixed them by the height and position of the sun, which placed Union Bay and Prospect Heights to the east. But the next day, by taking the exact hour of the rising and setting of the sun, and by marking its position between this rising and setting, he reckoned to fix the north of the island exactly, for, in consequence of its situation in the Southern Hemisphere, the sun, at the precise moment of its culmination, passed in the north and not in the south, as, in its apparent movement, it seems to do, to those places situated in the Northern Hemisphere.

Everything was finished, and the settlers had only to descend Mount Franklin to return to the Chimneys, when Pencroft cried out, —

“Well! we are preciously stupid!”

“Why?” asked Gideon Spilett, who had closed his notebook and risen to depart.

“Why! our island! we have forgotten to christen it!”

Herbert was going to propose to give it the engineer’s name and all his companions would have applauded him, when Cyrus Harding said simply,—

“Let us give it the name of a great citizen, my friend; of him who now struggles to defend the unity of the American Republic! Let us call it Lincoln Island!”

The engineer’s proposal was replied to by three hurrahs.

And that evening, before sleeping, the new colonists talked of their absent country; they spoke of the terrible war which stained it with blood; they could not doubt that the South would soon be subdued, and that the cause of the North, the cause of justice, would triumph, thanks to Grant, thanks to Lincoln!

Now this happened the 30th of March, 1865. They little knew that sixteen days afterwards a frightful crime would be committed in Washington, and that on Good Friday Abraham Lincoln would fall by the hand of a fanatic.

CHAPTER 12

They now began the descent of the mountain. Climbing down the crater, they went round the cone and reached their encampment of the previous night. Pencroft thought it must be breakfast-time, and the watches of the reporter and engineer were therefore consulted to find out the hour.

That of Gideon Spilett had been preserved from the sea-water, as he had been thrown at once on the sand out of reach of the waves. It was an instrument of excellent quality, a perfect pocket chronometer, which the reporter had not forgotten to wind up carefully every day.

As to the engineer's watch, it, of course, had stopped during the time which he had passed on the downs.

The engineer now wound it up, and ascertaining by the height of the sun that it must be about nine o'clock in the morning, he put his watch at that hour.

"No, my dear Spilett, wait. You have kept the Richmond time, have you not?"

"Yes, Cyrus."

"Consequently, your watch is set by the meridian of that town, which is almost that of Washington?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Very well, keep it thus. Content yourself with winding it up very, exactly, but do not touch the hands. This may be of use to us.

“What will be the good of that?” thought the sailor.

They ate, and so heartily, that the store of game and almonds was totally exhausted. But Pencroft was not at all uneasy, they would supply themselves on the way. Top, whose share had been very much to his taste, would know how to find some fresh game among the brushwood. Moreover, the sailor thought of simply asking the engineer to manufacture some powder and one or two fowling-pieces; he supposed there would be no difficulty in that.

On leaving the plateau, the captain proposed to his companions to return to the Chimneys by a new way. He wished to reconnoiter Lake Grant, so magnificently framed in trees. They therefore followed the crest of one of the spurs, between which the creek that supplied the lake probably had its source. In talking, the settlers already employed the names which they had just chosen, which singularly facilitated the exchange of their ideas. Herbert and Pencroft — the one young and the other very boyish — were enchanted, and while walking, the sailor said,

“Hey, Herbert! how capital it sounds! It will be impossible to lose ourselves, my boy, since, whether we follow the way to Lake Grant, or whether we join the Mercy through the woods of the Far West, we shall be certain to arrive at Prospect Heights, and, consequently, at Union Bay!”

It had been agreed, that without forming a compact band, the settlers should not stray away from each other. It was very certain that the thick forests of the island were inhabited by dangerous animals, and it was prudent to be on their guard. In general, Pencroft, Herbert, and Neb walked first, preceded by Top, who poked his nose into every bush. The reporter and the engineer went together, Gideon Spilett ready to note every incident, the engineer silent for the most part, and only stepping aside to pick up one thing or another, a mineral or vegetable substance, which he put into his pocket, without making any remark.

“What can he be picking up?” muttered Pencroft. “I have looked in vain for anything that’s worth the trouble of stooping for.”

Towards ten o’clock the little band descended the last declivities of Mount Franklin. As yet the ground was scantily strewn with bushes and trees. They were walking over yellowish calcinated earth, forming a plain of nearly a mile long, which extended to the edge of the wood. Great blocks of that basalt, which, according to Bischof, takes three hundred and fifty millions of years to cool, strewed the plain, very confused in some places. However, there were here no traces of lava, which was spread more particularly over the northern slopes.

Cyrus Harding expected to reach, without incident, the course of the creek, which he supposed flowed under the trees at the border of the plain, when he saw Herbert running hastily back, while Neb and the sailor were hiding behind the rocks.

“What’s the matter, my boy?” asked Spilett.

“Smoke,” replied Herbert. “We have seen smoke among the rocks, a hundred paces from us.”

“Men in this place?” cried the reporter.

“We must avoid showing ourselves before knowing with whom we have to deal,” replied Cyrus Harding. “I trust that there are no natives on this island; I dread them more than anything else. Where is Top?”

“Top is on before.”

“And he doesn’t bark?”

“No.”

“That is strange. However, we must try to call him back.”

In a few moments, the engineer, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert had rejoined their two companions, and like them, they kept out of sight behind the heaps of basalt.

From thence they clearly saw smoke of a yellowish color rising in the air.

Top was recalled by a slight whistle from his master, and the latter, signing to his companions to wait for him, glided away among the rocks. The colonists, motionless, anxiously awaited the result of this exploration, when a shout from the engineer made them hasten forward. They soon joined him, and were at once struck with a disagreeable odor which impregnated the atmosphere.

The odor, easily recognized, was enough for the engineer to guess what the smoke was which at first, not without cause, had startled him.

“This fire,” said he, “or rather, this smoke is produced by nature alone. There is a sulphur spring there, which will cure all our sore throats.”

“Captain!” cried Pencroft. “What a pity that I haven’t got a cold!”

The settlers then directed their steps towards the place from which the smoke escaped. They there saw a sulphur spring which flowed abundantly between the rocks, and its waters discharged a strong sulphuric acid odor, after having absorbed the oxygen of the air.

Cyrus Harding, dipping in his hand, felt the water oily to the touch. He tasted it and found it rather sweet. As to its temperature, that he estimated at ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit. Herbert having asked on what he based this calculation, —

“Its quite simple, my boy,” said he, “for, in plunging my hand into the water, I felt no sensation either of heat or cold. Therefore it has the same temperature as the human body, which is about ninety-five degrees.”

The sulphur spring not being of any actual use to the settlers, they proceeded towards the thick border of the forest, which began some hundred paces off.

There, as they had conjectured, the waters of the stream flowed clear and limpid between high banks of red earth, the color of which betrayed the presence of oxide of iron. From this color, the name of Red Creek was immediately given to the watercourse.

It was only a large stream, deep and clear, formed of the mountain water, which, half river, half torrent, here rippling peacefully over the sand, there falling against the rocks or dashing down in a cascade, ran towards the lake, over a distance of a mile and a half, its breadth varying from thirty to forty feet. Its waters were sweet, and it was supposed that those of the lake were so also. A fortunate circumstance, in the event of their finding on its borders a more suitable dwelling than the Chimneys.

As to the trees, which some hundred feet downwards shaded the banks of the creek, they belonged, for the most part, to the species which abound in the temperate zone of America and Tasmania, and no longer to those coniferae observed in that portion of the island already explored to some miles from Prospect Heights. At this time of the year, the commencement of the month of April, which represents the month of October, in this hemisphere, that is, the beginning of autumn, they were still in full leaf. They consisted principally of casuarinas and eucalypti, some of which next year would yield a sweet manna, similar to the manna of the East. Clumps of Australian cedars rose on the sloping banks, which were also covered with the high grass called "tussac" in New Holland; but the cocoanut, so abundant in the archipelagoes of the Pacific, seemed to be wanting in the island, the latitude, doubtless, being too low.

"What a pity!" said Herbert, "such a useful tree, and which has such beautiful nuts!"

As to the birds, they swarmed among the scanty branches of the eucalypti and casuarinas, which did not hinder the display of their wings. Black, white, or gray cockatoos, paroquets, with plumage of all colors, kingfishers of a sparkling green and crowned with red, blue lories, and various other birds appeared on all sides, as through a prism, fluttering about and producing a deafening clamor. Suddenly, a strange concert of discordant voices resounded in the midst of a thicket. The settlers heard successively the song of birds, the cry of quadrupeds, and a sort of clacking which they might have believed to have escaped from the lips of a native. Neb and Herbert rushed towards the bush, forgetting even the most elementary principles of prudence. Happily, they found there, neither a formidable wild beast nor a dangerous native, but merely half a dozen mocking and singing birds, known as mountain pheasants. A few skillful blows from a stick soon put an end to their concert, and procured excellent food for the evening's dinner.

Herbert also discovered some magnificent pigeons with bronzed wings, some superbly crested, others draped in green, like their congeners at Port-

Macquarie; but it was impossible to reach them, or the crows and magpies which flew away in flocks.

A charge of small shot would have made great slaughter among these birds, but the hunters were still limited to sticks and stones, and these primitive weapons proved very insufficient.

Their insufficiency was still more clearly shown when a troop of quadrupeds, jumping, bounding, making leaps of thirty feet, regular flying mammiferae, fled over the thickets, so quickly and at such a height, that one would have thought that they passed from one tree to another like squirrels.

“Kangaroos!” cried Herbert.

“Are they good to eat?” asked Pencroft.

“Stewed,” replied the reporter, “their flesh is equal to the best venison! —”

Gideon Spilett had not finished this exciting sentence when the sailor, followed by Neb and Herbert, darted on the kangaroos tracks. Cyrus Harding called them back in vain. But it was in vain too for the hunters to pursue such agile game, which went bounding away like balls. After a chase of five minutes, they lost their breath, and at the same time all sight of the creatures, which disappeared in the wood. Top was not more successful than his masters.

“Captain,” said Pencroft, when the engineer and the reporter had rejoined them, “Captain, you see quite well we can’t get on unless we make a few guns. Will that be possible?”

“Perhaps,” replied the engineer, “but we will begin by first manufacturing some bows and arrows, and I don’t doubt that you will become as clever in the use of them as the Australian hunters.”

“Bows and arrows!” said Pencroft scornfully. “That’s all very well for children!”

“Don’t be proud, friend Pencroft,” replied the reporter. “Bows and arrows were sufficient for centuries to stain the earth with blood. Powder is but a thing of yesterday, and war is as old as the human race — unhappily.”

“Faith, that’s true, Mr. Spilett,” replied the sailor, “and I always speak too quickly. You must excuse me!”

Meanwhile, Herbert constant to his favorite science, Natural History, reverted to the kangaroos, saying, —

“Besides, we had to deal just now with the species which is most difficult to catch. They were giants with long gray fur; but if I am not mistaken, there exist black and red kangaroos, rock kangaroos, and rat kangaroos, which are more easy to get hold of. It is reckoned that there are about a dozen species.”

“Herbert,” replied the sailor sententiously, “there is only one species of kangaroos to me, that is ‘kangaroo on the spit,’ and it’s just the one we haven’t got this evening!”

They could not help laughing at Master Pencroft’s new classification. The honest sailor did not hide his regret at being reduced for dinner to the singing pheasants, but fortune once more showed itself obliging to him.

In fact, Top, who felt that his interest was concerned went and ferreted everywhere with an instinct doubled by a ferocious appetite. It was even probable that if some piece of game did fall into his clutches, none would be left for the hunters, if Top was hunting on his own account; but Neb watched him and he did well.

Towards three o’clock the dog disappeared in the brushwood and gruntings showed that he was engaged in a struggle with some animal. Neb rushed after him, and soon saw Top eagerly devouring a quadruped, which ten seconds later would have been past recognizing in Top’s stomach. But fortunately the dog had fallen upon a brood, and besides the victim he was devouring, two other rodents — the animals in question belonged to that order — lay strangled on the turf.

Neb reappeared triumphantly holding one of the rodents in each hand. Their size exceeded that of a rabbit, their hair was yellow, mingled with green spots, and they had the merest rudiments of tails.

The citizens of the Union were at no loss for the right name of these rodents. They were maras, a sort of agouti, a little larger than their congeners of tropical countries, regular American rabbits, with long ears, jaws armed on each side with five molars, which distinguish the agouti.

“Hurrah!” cried Pencroft, “the roast has arrived! and now we can go home.”

The walk, interrupted for an instant, was resumed. The limpid waters of the Red Creek flowed under an arch of casuannas, banksias, and gigantic gum-trees. Superb lilacs rose to a height of twenty feet. Other arborescent species, unknown to the young naturalist, bent over the stream, which could be heard murmuring beneath the bowers of verdure.

Meanwhile the stream grew much wider, and Cyrus Harding supposed that they would soon reach its mouth. In fact, on emerging from beneath a thick clump of beautiful trees, it suddenly appeared before their eyes.

The explorers had arrived on the western shore of Lake Grant. The place was well worth looking at. This extent of water, of a circumference of nearly seven miles and an area of two hundred and fifty acres, reposed in a border of diversified trees. Towards the east, through a curtain of verdure, picturesquely raised in some places, sparkled an horizon of sea. The lake was curved at the north, which contrasted with the sharp outline of its lower part. Numerous aquatic birds frequented the shores of this little Ontario, in which the thousand isles of its American namesake were represented by a rock which emerged from its surface, some hundred feet from the southern shore. There lived in harmony several couples of kingfishers perched on a stone, grave, motionless, watching for fish, then darting down, they plunged in with a sharp cry, and reappeared with their prey in their beaks. On the shores and on the islets, strutted wild ducks, pelicans, water-hens, red-beaks, philedons, furnished with a tongue like a brush, and one or two specimens of the splendid menura, the tail of which expands gracefully like a lyre.

As to the water of the lake, it was sweet, limpid, rather dark, and from certain bubblings, and the concentric circles which crossed each other on the surface, it could not be doubted that it abounded in fish.

“This lake is really beautiful!” said Gideon Spilett. “We could live on its borders!”

“We will live there!” replied Harding.

The settlers, wishing to return to the Chimneys by the shortest way, descended towards the angle formed on the south by the junction of the lake's bank. It was not without difficulty that they broke a path through the thickets and brushwood which had never been put aside by the hand of men, and they thus went towards the shore, so as to arrive at the north of Prospect Heights. Two miles were cleared in this direction, and then, after they had passed the last curtain of trees, appeared the plateau, carpeted with thick turf, and beyond that the infinite sea.

To return to the Chimneys, it was enough to cross the plateau obliquely for the space of a mile, and then to descend to the elbow formed by the first detour of the Mercy. But the engineer desired to know how and where the overplus of the water from the lake escaped, and the exploration was prolonged under the trees for a mile and a half towards the north. It was most probable that an overfall existed somewhere, and doubtless through a cleft in the granite. This lake was only, in short, an immense center basin, which was filled by degrees by the creek, and its waters must necessarily pass to the sea by some fall. If it was so, the engineer thought that it might perhaps be possible to utilize this fall and borrow its power, actually lost without profit to any one. They continued then to follow the shores of Lake Grant by climbing the plateau; but, after having gone a mile in this direction, Cyrus Harding had not been able to discover the overfall, which, however, must exist somewhere.

It was then half-past four. In order to prepare for dinner it was necessary that the settlers should return to their dwelling. The little band retraced their steps, therefore, and by the left bank of the Mercy, Cyrus Harding and his companions arrived at the Chimneys.

The fire was lighted, and Neb and Pencroft, on whom the functions of cooks naturally devolved, to the one in his quality of Negro, to the other in that of sailor, quickly prepared some broiled agouti, to which they did great justice.

The repast at length terminated; at the moment when each one was about to give himself up to sleep, Cyrus Harding drew from his pocket little specimens of different sorts of minerals, and just said, —

“My friends, this is iron mineral, this a pyrite, this is clay, this is lime, and this is coal. Nature gives us these things. It is our business to make a right use of them. To-morrow we will commence operations.”

CHAPTER 13

“Well, captain, where are we going to begin?” asked Pencroft next morning of the engineer.

“At the beginning,” replied Cyrus Harding.

And in fact, the settlers were compelled to begin “at the very beginning.” They did not possess even the tools necessary for making tools, and they were not even in the condition of nature, who, “having time, husbands her strength.” They had no time, since they had to provide for the immediate wants of their existence, and though, profiting by acquired experience, they had nothing to invent, still they had everything to make; their iron and their steel were as yet only in the state of minerals, their earthenware in the state of clay, their linen and their clothes in the state of textile material.

It must be said, however, that the settlers were “men” in the complete and higher sense of the word. The engineer Harding could not have been seconded by more intelligent companions, nor with more devotion and zeal. He had tried them. He knew their abilities.

Gideon Spilett, a talented reporter, having learned everything so as to be able to speak of everything, would contribute largely with his head and hands to the colonization of the island. He would not draw back from any task: a determined sportsman, he would make a business of what till then had only been a pleasure to him.

Herbert, a gallant boy, already remarkably well informed in the natural sciences, would render greater service to the common cause.

Neb was devotion personified. Clever, intelligent, indefatigable, robust, with iron health, he knew a little about the work of the forge, and could not fail to be very useful in the colony.

As to Pencroft, he had sailed over every sea, a carpenter in the dockyards in Brooklyn, assistant tailor in the vessels of the state, gardener, cultivator, during his holidays, etc. and like all seamen, fit for anything, he knew how to do everything.

It would have been difficult to unite five men, better fitted to struggle against fate, more certain to triumph over it.

“At the beginning,” Cyrus Harding had said. Now this beginning of which the engineer spoke was the construction of an apparatus which would serve to transform the natural substances. The part which heat plays in these transformations is known. Now fuel, wood or coal, was ready for immediate use, an oven must be built to use it.

“What is this oven for?” asked Pencroft.

“To make the pottery which we have need of,” replied Harding.

“And of what shall we make the oven?”

“With bricks.”

“And the bricks?”

“With clay. Let us start, my friends. To save trouble, we will establish our manufactory at the place of production. Neb will bring provisions, and there will be no lack of fire to cook the food.”

“No,” replied the reporter; “but if there is a lack of food for want of instruments for the chase?”

“Ah, if we only had a knife!” cried the sailor.

“Well?” asked Cyrus Harding.

“Well! I would soon make a bow and arrows, and then there could be plenty of game in the larder!”

“Yes, a knife, a sharp blade.” said the engineer, as if he was speaking to himself.

At this moment his eyes fell upon Top, who was running about on the shore. Suddenly Harding’s face became animated.

“Top, here,” said he.

The dog came at his master’s call. The latter took Top’s head between his hands, and unfastening the collar which the animal wore round his neck, he broke it in two, saying, —

“There are two knives, Pencroft!”

Two hurrahs from the sailor was the reply. Top’s collar was made of a thin piece of tempered steel. They had only to sharpen it on a piece of sandstone, then to raise the edge on a finer stone. Now sandstone was abundant on the beach, and two hours after the stock of tools in the colony consisted of two sharp blades, which were easily fixed in solid handles.

The production of these their first tools was hailed as a triumph. It was indeed a valuable result of their labor, and a very opportune one. They set out.

Cyrus Harding proposed that they should return to the western shore of the lake, where the day before he had noticed the clayey ground of which he possessed a specimen. They therefore followed the bank of the Mercy, traversed Prospect Heights, and after a walk of five miles or more they reached a glade, situated two hundred feet from Lake Grant.

On the way Herbert had discovered a tree, the branches of which the Indians of South America employ for making their bows. It was the crejimba, of the palm family, which does not bear edible fruit. Long straight branches were cut, the leaves stripped off; it was shaped, stronger in the middle, more slender at the extremities, and nothing remained to be done but to find a plant fit to make the bow-string. This was the “hibiscus heterophyllus,” which furnishes fibers of such remarkable tenacity that they have been compared to the tendons of animals. Pencroft thus obtained bows of tolerable strength, for which he only wanted arrows. These were easily made with straight stiff branches, without knots, but the points with which they must be armed, that is to say, a substance to serve in lieu of iron, could not be met with so easily. But Pencroft said, that having done his part of the work, chance would do the rest.

The settlers arrived on the ground which had been discovered the day before. Being composed of the sort of clay which is used for making bricks and tiles, it was very useful for the work in question. There was no great difficulty in it. It was enough to scour the clay with sand, then to mold the bricks and bake them by the heat of a wood fire.

Generally bricks are formed in molds, but the engineer contented himself with making them by hand. All that day and the day following were employed in this work. The clay, soaked in water, was mixed by the feet and hands of the manipulators, and then divided into pieces of equal size. A practiced workman can make, without a machine, about ten thousand bricks in twelve hours; but in their two days work the five brickmakers on Lincoln Island had not made more than three thousand, which were ranged near each other, until the time when their complete desiccation would permit them to be used in building the oven, that is to say, in three or four days.

It was on the 2nd of April that Harding had employed himself in fixing the orientation of the island, or, in other words, the precise spot where the sun rose. The day before he had noted exactly the hour when the sun disappeared beneath the horizon, making allowance for the refraction. This morning he noted, no less exactly, the hour at which it reappeared. Between this setting and rising twelve hours, twenty-four minutes passed. Then, six hours, twelve minutes after its rising, the sun on this day would exactly pass the meridian and the point of the sky which it occupied at this moment would be the north. At the said hour, Cyrus marked this point, and putting in a line with the sun two trees which would serve him for marks, he thus obtained an invariable meridian for his ulterior operations.

The settlers employed the two days before the oven was built in collecting fuel. Branches were cut all round the glade, and they picked up all the fallen wood under the trees. They were also able to hunt with greater success, since Pencroft now possessed some dozen arrows armed with sharp points. It was Top who had famished these points, by bringing in a porcupine, rather inferior eating, but of great value, thanks to the quills with which it bristled. These quills were fixed firmly at the ends of the arrows, the flight of which was made more certain by some cockatoos’ feathers. The reporter and Herbert soon became very skilful archers. Game of all sorts in consequence abounded at the Chimneys, capybaras, pigeons, agouties, grouse, etc. The greater part of these animals were killed in the part of the forest on the left bank of the Mercy, to which they gave the name of Jacamar Wood, in remembrance of the bird which Pencroft and Herbert had pursued when on their first exploration.

This game was eaten fresh, but they preserved some capybara hams, by smoking them above a fire of green wood, after having perfumed them with sweet-smelling leaves. However, this food, although very strengthening, was always roast upon roast, and the party would have been delighted to hear some soup bubbling on the hearth, but they must wait till a pot could be made, and, consequently, till the oven was built.

During these excursions, which were not extended far from the brick-field, the hunters could discern the recent passage of animals of a large size, armed with powerful claws, but they could not recognize the species. Cyrus Harding advised them to be very careful, as the forest probably enclosed many dangerous beasts.

And he did right. Indeed, Gideon Spilett and Herbert one day saw an animal which resembled a jaguar. Happily the creature did not attack them, or they might not have escaped without a severe wound. As soon as he could get a regular weapon, that is to say, one of the guns which Pencroft begged for, Gideon Spilett resolved to make desperate war against the ferocious beasts, and exterminate them from the island.

The Chimneys during these few days was not made more comfortable, for the engineer hoped to discover, or build if necessary, a more convenient dwelling. They contented themselves with spreading moss and dry leaves on the sand of the passages, and on these primitive couches the tired workers slept soundly.

They also reckoned the days they had passed on Lincoln Island, and from that time kept a regular account. The 5th of April, which was Wednesday, was twelve days from the time when the wind threw the castaways on this shore.

On the 6th of April, at daybreak, the engineer and his companions were collected in the glade, at the place where they were going to perform the operation of baking the bricks. Naturally this had to be in the open air, and not in a kiln, or rather, the agglomeration of bricks made an enormous kiln, which would bake itself. The fuel, made of well-prepared fagots, was laid on the ground and surrounded with several rows of dried bricks, which soon formed an enormous cube, to the exterior of which they contrived air-holes. The work lasted all day, and it was not till the evening that they set fire to the fagots. No one slept that night, all watching carefully to keep up the fire.

The operation lasted forty-eight hours, and succeeded perfectly. It then became necessary to leave the smoking mass to cool, and during this time Neb and Pencroft, guided by Cyrus Harding, brought, on a hurdle made of interlaced branches, loads of carbonate of lime and common stones, which were very abundant, to the north of the lake. These stones, when decomposed by heat, made a very strong quicklime, greatly increased by slacking, at least as pure as if it had been produced by the calcination of chalk or marble. Mixed with sand the lime made excellent mortar.

The result of these different works was, that, on the 9th of April, the engineer had at his disposal a quantity of prepared lime and some thousands of bricks.

Without losing an instant, therefore, they began the construction of a kiln to bake the pottery, which was indispensable for their domestic use. They succeeded without much difficulty. Five days after, the kiln was supplied with coal, which the engineer had discovered lying open to the sky towards the mouth of the Red Creek, and the first smoke escaped from a chimney twenty feet high. The glade was transformed into a manufactory, and Pencroft was not far wrong in believing that from this kiln would issue all the products of modern industry.

In the meantime what the settlers first manufactured was a common pottery in which to cook their food. The chief material was clay, to which Harding added a little lime and quartz. This paste made regular “pipe-clay,” with which they manufactured bowls, cups molded on stones of a proper size, great jars and pots to hold water, etc. The shape of these objects was clumsy and defective, but after they had been baked in a high temperature, the kitchen of the Chimneys was provided with a number of utensils, as precious to the settlers as the most beautifully enameled china. We must mention here that Pencroft, desirous to know if the clay thus prepared was worthy of its name of pipe-clay, made some large pipes, which he thought charming, but for which, alas! he had no tobacco, and that was a great privation to Pencroft. “But tobacco will come, like everything else!” he repeated, in a burst of absolute confidence.

This work lasted till the 15th of April, and the time was well employed. The settlers, having become potters, made nothing but pottery. When it suited Cyrus Harding to change them into smiths, they would become smiths. But the next day being Sunday, and also Easter Sunday, all agreed to sanctify the day by rest. These Americans were religious men, scrupulous observers of the precepts of the Bible, and their situation could not but develop sentiments of confidence towards the Author of all things.

On the evening of the 15th of April they returned to the Chimneys, carrying with them the pottery, the furnace being extinguished until they could put it to a new use. Their return was marked by a fortunate incident; the engineer discovered a substance which replaced tinder. It is known that a spongy, velvety flesh is procured from a certain mushroom of the genus polyporous. Properly prepared, it is extremely inflammable, especially when it has been previously saturated with gunpowder, or boiled in a solution of nitrate or chlorate of potash. But, till then, they had not found any of these polypores or even any of the morels which could replace them. On this day, the engineer, seeing a plant belonging to the wormwood genus, the principal species of which are absinthe, balm-mint, tarragon, etc. gathered several tufts, and, presenting them to the sailor, said, —

“Here, Pencroft, this will please you.”

Pencroft looked attentively at the plant, covered with long silky hair, the leaves being clothed with soft down.

“What’s that, captain?” asked Pencroft. “Is it tobacco?”

“No,” replied Harding, “it is wormwood; Chinese wormwood to the learned, but to us it will be tinder.”

When the wormwood was properly dried it provided them with a very inflammable substance, especially afterwards when the engineer had impregnated it with nitrate of potash, of which the island possessed several beds, and which is in truth saltpeter.

The colonists had a good supper that evening. Neb prepared some agouti soup, a smoked capybara ham, to which was added the boiled tubercules of the “caladium macrorhizum,” an herbaceous plant of the arum family. They had an excellent taste, and were very nutritious, being something similar to the substance which is sold in England under the name of “Portland sago”;

they were also a good substitute for bread, which the settlers in Lincoln Island did not yet possess.

When supper was finished, before sleeping, Harding and his companions went to take the air on the beach. It was eight o'clock in the evening; the night was magnificent. The moon, which had been full five days before, had not yet risen, but the horizon was already silvered by those soft, pale shades which might be called the dawn of the moon. At the southern zenith glittered the circumpolar constellations, and above all the Southern Cross, which some days before the engineer had greeted on the summit of Mount Franklin.

Cyrus Harding gazed for some time at this splendid constellation, which has at its summit and at its base two stars of the first magnitude, at its left arm a star of the second, and at its right arm a star of the third magnitude.

Then, after some minutes thought —

"Herbert," he asked of the lad, "is not this the 15th of April?"

"Yes, captain," replied Herbert.

"Well, if I am not mistaken, to-morrow will be one of the four days in the year in which the real time is identical with average time; that is to say, my boy, that to-morrow, to within some seconds, the sun will pass the meridian just at midday by the clocks. If the weather is fine I think that I shall obtain the longitude of the island with an approximation of some degrees."

"Without instruments, without sextant?" asked Gideon Spilett.

"Yes," replied the engineer. "Also, since the night is clear, I will try, this very evening, to obtain our latitude by calculating the height of the

Southern Cross, that is, from the southern pole above the horizon. You understand, my friends, that before undertaking the work of installation in earnest it is not enough to have found out that this land is an island; we must, as nearly as possible, know at what distance it is situated, either from the American continent or Australia, or from the principal archipelagoes of the Pacific."

"In fact," said the reporter, "instead of building a house it would be more important to build a boat, if by chance we are not more than a hundred miles from an inhabited coast."

"That is why," returned Harding, "I am going to try this evening to calculate the latitude of Lincoln Island, and to-morrow, at midday, I will try to calculate the longitude."

If the engineer had possessed a sextant, an apparatus with which the angular distance of objects can be measured with great precision, there would have been no difficulty in the operation. This evening by the height of the pole, the next day by the passing of the sun at the meridian, he would obtain the position of the island. But as they had not one he would have to supply the deficiency.

Harding then entered the Chimneys. By the light of the fire he cut two little flat rulers, which he joined together at one end so as to form a pair of compasses, whose legs could separate or come together. The fastening was fixed with a strong acacia thorn which was found in the wood pile. This instrument finished, the engineer returned to the beach, but as it was necessary to take the height of the pole from above a clear horizon, that is, a sea horizon, and as Claw Cape hid the southern horizon, he was obliged to look for a more suitable station. The best would evidently have been the shore exposed directly to the south; but the Mercy would have to be crossed, and that was a difficulty. Harding resolved, in consequence, to make his observation from Prospect Heights, taking into consideration its height above the level of the sea — a height which he intended to calculate next day by a simple process of elementary geometry.

The settlers, therefore, went to the plateau, ascending the left bank of the Mercy, and placed themselves on the edge which looked northwest and southeast, that is, above the curiously-shaped rocks which bordered the river.

This part of the plateau commanded the heights of the left bank, which sloped away to the extremity of Claw Cape, and to the southern side of the island. No obstacle intercepted their gaze, which swept the horizon in a semi-circle from the cape to Reptile End. To the south the horizon, lighted by the first rays of the moon, was very clearly defined against the sky.

At this moment the Southern Cross presented itself to the observer in an inverted position, the star Alpha marking its base, which is nearer to the southern pole.

This constellation is not situated as near to the antarctic pole as the Polar Star is to the arctic pole. The star Alpha is about twenty-seven degrees from it, but Cyrus Harding knew this and made allowance for it in his calculation. He took care also to observe the moment when it passed the meridian below the pole, which would simplify the operation.

Cyrus Harding pointed one leg of the compasses to the horizon, the other to Alpha, and the space between the two legs gave him the angular distance which separated Alpha from the horizon. In order to fix the angle obtained, he fastened with thorns the two pieces of wood on a third placed transversely, so that their separation should be properly maintained.

That done, there was only the angle to calculate by bringing back the observation to the level of the sea, taking into consideration the depression of the horizon, which would necessitate measuring the height of the cliff. The value of this angle would give the height of Alpha, and consequently that of the pole above the horizon, that is to say, the latitude of the island, since the latitude of a point of the globe is always equal to the height of the pole above the horizon of this point.

The calculations were left for the next day, and at ten o’clock every one was sleeping soundly.

CHAPTER 14

The next day, the 16th of April, and Easter Sunday, the settlers issued from the Chimneys at daybreak, and proceeded to wash their linen. The engineer intended to manufacture soap as soon as he could procure the necessary materials — soda or potash, fat or oil. The important question of renewing their wardrobe would be treated of in the proper time and place. At any rate their clothes would last at least six months longer, for they were strong, and could resist the wear of manual labor. But all would depend on the situation of the island with regard to inhabited land. This would be settled to-day if the weather permitted.

The sun rising above a clear horizon, announced a magnificent day, one of those beautiful autumn days which are like the last farewells of the warm season.

It was now necessary to complete the observations of the evening before by measuring the height of the cliff above the level of the sea.

“Shall you not need an instrument similar to the one which you used yesterday?” said Herbert to the engineer.

“No, my boy,” replied the latter, “we are going to proceed differently, but in as precise a way.”

Herbert, wishing to learn everything he could, followed the engineer to the beach. Pencroft, Neb, and the reporter remained behind and occupied themselves in different ways.

Cyrus Harding had provided himself with a straight stick, twelve feet long, which he had measured as exactly as possible by comparing it with his own height, which he knew to a hair. Herbert carried a plumb-line which Harding had given him, that is to say, a simple stone fastened to the end of a flexible fiber. Having reached a spot about twenty feet from the edge of the beach, and nearly five hundred feet from the cliff, which rose perpendicularly, Harding thrust the pole two feet into the sand, and wedging it up carefully, he managed, by means of the plumb-line, to erect it perpendicularly with the plane of the horizon.

That done, he retired the necessary distance, when, lying on the sand, his eye glanced at the same time at the top of the pole and the crest of the cliff. He carefully marked the place with a little stick.

Then addressing Herbert — ”Do you know the first principles of geometry?” he asked.

“Slightly, captain,” replied Herbert, who did not wish to put himself forward.

“You remember what are the properties of two similar triangles?”

“Yes,” replied Herbert; “their homologous sides are proportional.”

“Well, my boy, I have just constructed two similar right-angled triangles; the first, the smallest, has for its sides the perpendicular pole, the distance which separates the little stick from the foot of the pole and my visual ray for hypothenuse; the second has for its sides the perpendicular cliff, the height of which we wish to measure, the distance which separates the little stick from the bottom of the cliff, and my visual ray also forms its hypothenuse, which proves to be prolongation of that of the first triangle.”

“Ah, captain, I understand!” cried Herbert. “As the distance from the stick to the pole is to the distance from the stick to the base of the cliff, so is the height of the pole to the height of the cliff.”

“Just so, Herbert,” replied the engineer; “and when we have measured the two first distances, knowing the height of the pole, we shall only have a sum in proportion to do, which will give us the height of the cliff, and will save us the trouble of measuring it directly.”

The two horizontal distances were found out by means of the pole, whose length above the sand was exactly ten feet.

The first distance was fifteen feet between the stick and the place where the pole was thrust into the sand.

The second distance between the stick and the bottom of the cliff was five hundred feet.

These measurements finished, Cyrus Harding and the lad returned to the Chimneys.

The engineer then took a flat stone which he had brought back from one of his previous excursions, a sort of slate, on which it was easy to trace figures with a sharp shell. He then proved the following proportions: —

$$15:500::10:x$$

$$500 \times 10 = 5000$$

$$5000 / 15 = 333.3$$

From which it was proved that the granite cliff measured 333 feet in height.

Cyrus Harding then took the instrument which he had made the evening before, the space between its two legs giving the angular distance between the star Alpha and the horizon. He measured, very exactly, the opening of this angle on a circumference which he divided into 360 equal parts. Now, this angle by adding to it the twenty-seven degrees which separated Alpha from the antarctic pole, and by reducing to the level of the sea the height of the cliff on which the observation had been made, was found to be fifty-three degrees. These fifty-three degrees being subtracted from ninety degrees — the distance from the pole to the equator — there remained thirty-seven degrees. Cyrus Harding concluded, therefore, that Lincoln Island was situated on the thirty-seventh degree of the southern latitude, or taking into consideration through the imperfection of the performance, an error of five degrees, that it must be situated between the thirty-fifth and the fortieth parallel.

There was only the longitude to be obtained, and the position of the island would be determined, The engineer hoped to attempt this the same day, at twelve o’clock, at which moment the sun would pass the meridian.

It was decided that Sunday should be spent in a walk, or rather an exploring expedition, to that side of the island between the north of the lake and Shark Gulf, and if there was time they would push their discoveries to the northern side of Cape South Mandible. They would breakfast on the downs, and not return till evening.

At half-past eight the little band was following the edge of the channel. On the other side, on Safety Islet, numerous birds were gravely strutting. They were divers, easily recognized by their cry, which much resembles the braying of a donkey. Pencroft only considered them in an eatable point of view, and learnt with some satisfaction that their flesh, though blackish, is not bad food.

Great amphibious creatures could also be seen crawling on the sand; seals, doubtless, who appeared to have chosen the islet for a place of refuge. It was impossible to think of those animals in an alimentary point of view, for their oily flesh is detestable; however, Cyrus Harding observed them attentively, and without making known his idea, he announced to his companions that very soon they would pay a visit to the islet. The beach was strewn with innumerable shells, some of which would have rejoiced the heart of a conchologist; there were, among others, the phasianella, the terebratual, etc. But what would be of more use, was the discovery, by Neb, at low tide, of a large oysterbed among the rocks, nearly five miles from the Chimneys.

“Neb will not have lost his day,” cried Pencroft, looking at the spacious oyster-bed.

“It is really a fortunate discovery,” said the reporter, “and as it is said that each oyster produces yearly from fifty to sixty thousand eggs, we shall have an inexhaustible supply there.”

“Only I believe that the oyster is not very nourishing,” said Herbert.

“No,” replied Harding. “The oyster contains very little nitrogen, and if a man lived exclusively on them, he would have to eat not less than fifteen to sixteen dozen a day.”

“Capital!” replied Pencroft. “We might swallow dozens and dozens without exhausting the bed. Shall we take some for breakfast?”

And without waiting for a reply to this proposal, knowing that it would be approved of, the sailor and Neb detached a quantity of the molluscs. They put them in a sort of net of hibiscus fiber, which Neb had manufactured, and which already contained food; they then continued to climb the coast between the downs and the sea.

From time to time Harding consulted his watch, so as to be prepared in time for the solar observation, which had to be made exactly at midday.

All that part of the island was very barren as far as the point which closed Union Bay, and which had received the name of Cape South Mandible. Nothing could be seen there but sand and shells, mingled with debris of lava. A few sea-birds frequented this desolate coast, gulls, great albatrosses, as well as wild duck, for which Pencroft had a great fancy. He tried to knock some over with an arrow, but without result, for they seldom perched, and he could not hit them on the wing.

This led the sailor to repeat to the engineer, —

“You see, captain, so long as we have not one or two fowling-pieces, we shall never get anything!”

“Doubtless, Pencroft,” replied the reporter, “but it depends on you. Procure us some iron for the barrels, steel for the hammers, saltpeter. coal and sulphur for powder, mercury and nitric acid for the fulminate, and lead for the shot, and the captain will make us first-rate guns.”

“Oh!” replied the engineer, “we might, no doubt, find all these substances on the island, but a gun is a delicate instrument, and needs very particular tools. However, we shall see later!”

“Why,” cried Pencroft, “were we obliged to throw overboard all the weapons we had with us in the car, all our implements, even our pocket-knives?”

“But if we had not thrown them away, Pencroft, the balloon would have thrown us to the bottom of the sea!” said Herbert.

“What you say is true, my boy,” replied the sailor.

Then passing to another idea, — ”Think,” said he, “how astounded Jonathan Forster and his companions must have been when, next morning, they found the place empty, and the machine flown away!”

“I am utterly indifferent about knowing what they may have thought,” said the reporter.

“It was all my idea, that!” said Pencroft, with a satisfied air.

“A splendid idea, Pencroft!” replied Gideon Spilett, laughing, “and which has placed us where we are.”

“I would rather be here than in the hands of the Southerners,” cried the sailor, “especially since the captain has been kind enough to come and join us again.”

“So would I, truly!” replied the reporter. “Besides, what do we want? Nothing.”

“If that is not — everything!” replied Pencroft, laughing and shrugging his shoulders. “But, some day or other, we shall find means of going away!”

“Sooner, perhaps, than you imagine, my friends,” remarked the engineer, “if Lincoln Island is but a medium distance from an inhabited island, or from a continent. We shall know in an hour. I have not a map of the Pacific, but my memory has preserved a very clear recollection of its southern part. The latitude which I obtained yesterday placed New Zealand to the west of Lincoln Island, and the coast of Chile to the east. But between these two countries, there is a distance of at least six thousand miles. It has, therefore, to be determined what point in this great space the island occupies, and this the longitude will give us presently, with a sufficient approximation, I hope.”

“Is not the archipelago of the Pomoutous the nearest point to us in latitude?” asked Herbert.

“Yes,” replied the engineer, “but the distance which separates us from it is more than twelve hundred miles.”

“And that way?” asked Neb, who followed the conversation with extreme interest, pointing to the south.

“That way, nothing,” replied Pencroft.

“Nothing, indeed,” added the engineer.

“Well, Cyrus,” asked the reporter, “if Lincoln Island is not more than two or three thousand miles from New Zealand or Chile?”

“Well,” replied the engineer, “instead of building a house we will build a boat, and Master Pencroft shall be put in command — ”

“Well then,” cried the sailor, “I am quite ready to be captain — as soon as you can make a craft that’s able to keep at sea!”

“We shall do it, if it is necessary,” replied Cyrus Harding.

But while these men, who really hesitated at nothing, were talking, the hour approached at which the observation was to be made. What Cyrus Harding was to do to ascertain the passage of the sun at the meridian of the island, without an instrument of any sort, Herbert could not guess.

The observers were then about six miles from the Chimneys, not far from that part of the downs in which the engineer had been found after his enigmatical preservation. They halted at this place and prepared for breakfast, for it was half-past eleven. Herbert went for some fresh water from a stream which ran near, and brought it back in a jug, which Neb had provided.

During these preparations Harding arranged everything for his astronomical observation. He chose a clear place on the shore, which the ebbing tide had left perfectly level. This bed of fine sand was as smooth as ice, not a grain out of place. It was of little importance whether it was horizontal or not, and it did not matter much whether the stick six feet high, which was planted there, rose perpendicularly. On the contrary, the engineer inclined it towards the south, that is to say, in the direction of the coast opposite to the sun, for it must not be forgotten that the settlers in Lincoln Island, as the island was situated in the Southern Hemisphere, saw the radiant planet describe its diurnal arc above the northern, and not above the southern horizon.

Herbert now understood how the engineer was going to proceed to ascertain the culmination of the sun, that is to say its passing the meridian of the island or, in other words, determine due south. It was by means of the shadow cast on the sand by the stick, a way which, for want of an instrument, would give him a suitable approach to the result which he wished to obtain.

In fact, the moment when this shadow would reach its minimum of length would be exactly twelve o’clock, and it would be enough to watch the extremity of the shadow, so as to ascertain the instant when, after having successively diminished, it began to lengthen. By inclining his stick to the side opposite to the sun, Cyrus Harding made the shadow longer, and consequently its modifications would be more easily ascertained. In fact, the longer the needle of a dial is, the more easily can the movement of its point be followed. The shadow of the stick was nothing but the needle of a dial. The moment had come, and Cyrus Harding knelt on the sand, and with little wooden pegs, which he stuck into the sand, he began to mark the successive diminutions of the stick’s shadow. His companions, bending over him, watched the operation with extreme interest. The reporter held his chronometer in his hand, ready to tell the hour which it marked when the shadow would be at its shortest. Moreover, as Cyrus Harding was working on the 16th of April, the day on which the true and the average time are identical, the hour given by Gideon Spilett would be the true hour then at Washington, which would simplify the calculation. Meanwhile as the sun slowly advanced, the shadow slowly diminished, and when it appeared to Cyrus Harding that it was beginning to increase, he asked, “What o’clock is it?”

“One minute past five,” replied Gideon Spilett directly. They had now only to calculate the operation. Nothing could be easier. It could be seen that there existed, in round numbers, a difference of five hours between the meridian of Washington and that of Lincoln Island, that is to say, it was midday in Lincoln Island when it was already five o’clock in the evening in Washington. Now the sun, in its apparent movement round the earth, traverses one degree in four minutes, or fifteen degrees an hour. Fifteen degrees multiplied by five hours give seventy-five degrees.

Then, since Washington is 77deg 3’ 11” as much as to say seventy-seven degrees counted from the meridian of Greenwich which the Americans take for their starting-point for longitudes concurrently with the English — it followed that the island must be situated seventy-seven and seventy-five degrees west of the meridian of Greenwich, that is to say, on the hundred and fifty-second degree of west longitude.

Cyrus Harding announced this result to his companions, and taking into consideration errors of observation, as he had done for the latitude, he believed he could positively affirm that the position of Lincoln Island was between the thirty-fifth and the thirty-seventh parallel, and between the hundred and fiftieth and the hundred and fifty-fifth meridian to the west of the meridian of Greenwich.

The possible fault which he attributed to errors in the observation was, it may be seen, of five degrees on both sides, which, at sixty miles to a degree, would give an error of three hundred miles in latitude and longitude for the exact position.

But this error would not influence the determination which it was necessary to take. It was very evident that Lincoln Island was at such a distance from every country or island that it would be too hazardous to attempt to reach one in a frail boat.

In fact, this calculation placed it at least twelve hundred miles from Tahiti and the islands of the archipelago of the Pomoutous, more than eighteen hundred miles from New Zealand, and more than four thousand five hundred miles from the American coast!

And when Cyrus Harding consulted his memory, he could not remember in any way that such an island occupied, in that part of the Pacific, the situation assigned to Lincoln Island.

CHAPTER 15

The next day, the 17th of April, the sailor’s first words were addressed to Gideon Spilett.

“Well, sir,” he asked, “what shall we do to-day?”

“What the captain pleases,” replied the reporter.

Till then the engineer’s companions had been brickmakers and potters, now they were to become metallurgists.

The day before, after breakfast, they had explored as far as the point of Mandible Cape, seven miles distant from the Chimneys. There, the long series of downs ended, and the soil had a volcanic appearance. There were no longer high cliffs as at Prospect Heights, but a strange and capricious border which surrounded the narrow gulf between the two capes, formed of mineral matter, thrown up by the volcano. Arrived at this point the settlers retraced their steps, and at nightfall entered the Chimneys; but they did not sleep before the question of knowing whether they could think of leaving Lincoln Island or not was definitely settled.

The twelve hundred miles which separated the island from the Pomoutous Island was a considerable distance. A boat could not cross it, especially at the approach of the bad season. Pencroft had expressly declared this. Now, to construct a simple boat even with the necessary tools, was a difficult work, and the colonists not having tools they must begin by making hammers, axes, adzes, saws, augers, planes, etc. which would take some time. It was decided, therefore, that they would winter at Lincoln Island, and that they would look for a more comfortable dwelling than the Chimneys, in which to pass the winter months.

Before anything else could be done it was necessary to make the iron ore, of which the engineer had observed some traces in the northwest part of the island, fit for use by converting it either into iron or into steel.

Metals are not generally found in the ground in a pure state. For the most part they are combined with oxygen or sulphur. Such was the case with the two specimens which Cyrus Harding had brought back, one of magnetic iron, not carbonated, the other a pyrite, also called sulphuret of iron. It was, therefore the first, the oxide of iron, which they must reduce with coal, that is to say, get rid of the oxygen, to obtain it in a pure state. This reduction is made by subjecting the ore with coal to a high temperature, either by the rapid and easy Catalan method, which has the advantage of transforming the ore into iron in a single operation, or by the blast furnace, which first smelts the ore, then changes it into iron, by carrying away the three to four per cent. of coal, which is combined with it.

Now Cyrus Harding wanted iron, and he wished to obtain it as soon as possible. The ore which he had picked up was in itself very pure and rich. It was the oxydulous iron, which is found in confused masses of a deep gray color; it gives a black dust, crystallized in the form of the regular octahedron. Native lodestones consist of this ore, and iron of the first quality is made in Europe from that with which Sweden and Norway are so abundantly supplied. Not far from this vein was the vein of coal already made use of by the settlers. The ingredients for the manufacture being close together would greatly facilitate the treatment of the ore. This is the cause of the wealth of the mines in Great Britain, where the coal aids the manufacture of the metal extracted from the same soil at the same time as itself.

“Then, captain,” said Pencroft, “we are going to work iron ore?”

“Yes, my friend,” replied the engineer, “and for that — something which will please you — we must begin by having a seal hunt on the islet.”

“A seal hunt!” cried the sailor, turning towards Gideon Spilett. “Are seals needed to make iron?”

“Since Cyrus has said so!” replied the reporter.

But the engineer had already left the Chimneys, and Pencroft prepared for the seal hunt, without having received any other explanation.

Cyrus Harding, Herbert, Gideon Spilett, Neb, and the sailor were soon collected on the shore, at a place where the channel left a ford passable at low tide. The hunters could therefore traverse it without getting wet higher than the knee.

Harding then put his foot on the islet for the first, and his companions for the second time.

On their landing some hundreds of penguins looked fearlessly at them. The hunters, armed with sticks, could have killed them easily, but they were not guilty of such useless massacre, as it was important not to frighten the seals, who were lying on the sand several cable lengths off. They also respected certain innocent-looking birds, whose wings were reduced to the state of stumps, spread out like fins, ornamented with feathers of a scaly appearance. The settlers, therefore, prudently advanced towards the north point, walking over ground riddled with little holes, which formed nests for the sea-birds. Towards the extremity of the islet appeared great black heads floating just above the water, having exactly the appearance of rocks in motion.

These were the seals which were to be captured. It was necessary, however, first to allow them to land, for with their close, short hair, and their fusiform conformation, being excellent swimmers, it is difficult to catch them in the sea, while on land their short, webbed feet prevent their having more than a slow, waddling movement.

Pencroft knew the habits of these creatures, and he advised waiting till they were stretched on the sand, when the sun, before long, would send them to sleep. They must then manage to cut off their retreat and knock them on the head.

The hunters, having concealed themselves behind the rocks, waited silently.

An hour passed before the seals came to play on the sand. They could count half a dozen. Pencroft and Herbert then went round the point of the islet, so as to take them in the rear, and cut off their retreat. During this time Cyrus Harding, Spilett, and Neb, crawling behind the rocks, glided towards the future scene of combat.

All at once the tall figure of the sailor appeared. Pencroft shouted. The engineer and his two companions threw themselves between the sea and the seals. Two of the animals soon lay dead on the sand, but the rest regained the sea in safety.

“Here are the seals required, captain!” said the sailor, advancing towards the engineer.

“Capital,” replied Harding. “We will make bellows of them!”

“Bellows!” cried Pencroft. “Well! these are lucky seals!”

It was, in fact, a blowing-machine, necessary for the treatment of the ore that the engineer wished to manufacture with the skins of the amphibious creatures. They were of a medium size, for their length did not exceed six feet. They resembled a dog about the head.

As it was useless to burden themselves with the weight of both the animals, Neb and Pencroft resolved to skin them on the spot, while Cyrus Harding and the reporter continued to explore the islet.

The sailor and the Negro cleverly performed the operation, and three hours afterwards Cyrus Harding had at his disposal two seals' skins, which he intended to use in this state, without subjecting them to any tanning process.

The settlers waited till the tide was again low, and crossing the channel they entered the Chimneys.

The skins had then to be stretched on a frame of wood and sewn by means of fibers so as to preserve the air without allowing too much to escape. Cyrus Harding had nothing but the two steel blades from Top's collar, and yet he was so clever, and his companions aided him with so much intelligence, that three days afterwards the little colony's stock of tools was augmented by a blowing-machine, destined to inject the air into the midst of the ore when it should be subjected to heat — an indispensable condition to the success of the operation.

On the morning of the 20th of April began the “metallic period,” as the reporter called it in his notes. The engineer had decided, as has been said, to operate near the veins both of coal and ore. Now, according to his observations, these veins were situated at the foot of the northeast spurs of Mount Franklin, that is to say, a distance of six miles from their home. It was impossible, therefore, to return every day to the Chimneys, and it was agreed that the little colony should camp under a hut of branches, so that the important operation could be followed night and day.

This settled, they set out in the morning. Neb and Pencroft dragged the bellows on a hurdle; also a quantity of vegetables and animals, which they besides could renew on the way.

The road led through Jacamar Wood, which they traversed obliquely from southeast to northwest, and in the thickest part. It was necessary to beat a path, which would in the future form the most direct road to Prospect Heights and Mount Franklin. The trees, belonging to the species already discovered, were magnificent. Herbert found some new ones, among others some which Pencroft called “sham leeks”; for, in spite of their size, they were of the same liliaceous family as the onion, chive, shallot, or asparagus. These trees produce ligneous roots which, when cooked, are excellent; from them, by fermentation, a very agreeable liquor is made. They therefore made a good store of the roots.

The journey through the wood was long; it lasted the whole day, and so allowed plenty of time for examining the flora and fauna. Top, who took special charge of the fauna, ran through the grass and brushwood, putting up all sorts of game. Herbert and Gideon Spilett killed two kangaroos with bows and arrows, and also an animal which strongly resembled both a hedgehog and an ant-eater. It was like the first because it rolled itself into a ball, and bristled with spines, and the second because it had sharp claws, a long slender snout which terminated in a bird’s beak, and an extendible tongue, covered with little thorns which served to hold the insects.

“And when it is in the pot,” asked Pencroft naturally, “what will it be like?”

“An excellent piece of beef,” replied Herbert.

“We will not ask more from it,” replied the sailor.

During this excursion they saw several wild boars, which however, did not offer to attack the little band, and it appeared as if they would not meet with any dangerous beasts; when, in a thick part of the wood, the reporter thought he saw, some paces from him, among the lower branches of a tree, an animal which he took for a bear, and which he very tranquilly began to draw. Happily for Gideon Spilett, the animal in question did not belong to the redoubtable family of the plantigrades. It was only a koala, better known under the name of the sloth, being about the size of a large dog, and having stiff hair of a dirty color, the paws armed with strong claws, which enabled it to climb trees and feed on the leaves. Having identified the animal, which they did not disturb, Gideon Spilett erased “bear” from the title of his sketch, putting koala in its place, and the journey was resumed.

At five o’clock in the evening, Cyrus Harding gave the signal to halt. They were now outside the forest, at the beginning of the powerful spurs which supported Mount Franklin towards the west. At a distance of some hundred feet flowed the Red Creek, and consequently plenty of fresh water was within their reach.

The camp was soon organized. In less than an hour, on the edge of the forest, among the trees, a hut of branches interlaced with creepers, and pasted over with clay, offered a tolerable shelter. Their geological researches were put off till the next day. Supper was prepared, a good fire blazed before the hut, the roast turned, and at eight o’clock, while one of the settlers watched to keep up the fire, in case any wild beasts should prowl in the neighborhood, the others slept soundly.

The next day, the 21st of April, Cyrus Harding accompanied by Herbert, went to look for the soil of ancient formation, on which he had already discovered a specimen of ore. They found the vein above ground, near the source of the creek, at the foot of one of the northeastern spurs. This ore, very rich in iron, enclosed in its fusible veinstone, was perfectly suited to the mode of reduction which the engineer intended to employ; that is, the Catalan method, but simplified, as it is used in Corsica. In fact, the Catalan method, properly so called, requires the construction of kilns and crucibles, in which the ore and the coal, placed in alternate layers, are transformed and reduced, But Cyrus Harding intended to economize these constructions, and wished simply to form, with the ore and the coal, a cubic mass, to the center of which he would direct the wind from his bellows. Doubtless, it was the proceeding employed by Tubalcain, and the first metallurgists of the inhabited world. Now that which had succeeded with the grandson of Adam, and which still yielded good results in countries rich in ore and fuel, could not but succeed with the settlers in Lincoln Island.

The coal, as well as the ore, was collected without trouble on the surface of the ground. They first broke the ore into little pieces, and cleansed them with the hand from the impurities which soiled their surface. Then coal and ore were arranged in heaps and in successive layers, as the charcoal-burner does with the wood which he wishes to carbonize. In this way, under the influence of the air projected by the blowing-machine, the coal would be transformed into carbonic acid, then into oxide of carbon, its use being to reduce the oxide of iron, that is to say, to rid it of the oxygen.

Thus the engineer proceeded. The bellows of sealskin, furnished at its extremity with a nozzle of clay, which had been previously fabricated in the pottery kiln, was established near the heap of ore. Using the mechanism which consisted of a frame, cords of fiber and counterpoise, he threw into the mass an abundance of air, which by raising the temperature also concurred with the chemical transformation to produce in time pure iron.

The operation was difficult. All the patience, all the ingenuity of the settlers was needed; but at last it succeeded, and the result was a lump of iron, reduced to a spongy state, which it was necessary to shingle and fagot, that is to say, to forge so as to expel from it the liquefied veinstone. These amateur smiths had, of course, no hammer; but they were in no worse a situation than the first metallurgist, and therefore did what, no doubt, he had to do.

A handle was fixed to the first lump, and was used as a hammer to forge the second on a granite anvil, and thus they obtained a coarse but useful metal. At length, after many trials and much fatigue, on the 25th of April several bars of iron were forged, and transformed into tools, crowbars, pincers, pickaxes, spades, etc. which Pencroft and Neb declared to be real jewels. But the metal was not yet in its most serviceable state, that is, of steel. Now steel is a combination of iron and coal, which is extracted, either from the liquid ore, by taking from it the excess of coal, or from the iron by adding to it the coal which was wanting. The first, obtained by the decarburation of the metal, gives natural or puddled steel; the second, produced by the carburation of the iron, gives steel of cementation.

It was the last which Cyrus Harding intended to forge, as he possessed iron in a pure state. He succeeded by heating the metal with powdered coal in a crucible which had previously been manufactured from clay suitable for the purpose.

He then worked this steel, which is malleable both when hot or cold, with the hammer. Neb and Pencroft, cleverly directed, made hatchets, which, heated red-hot, and plunged suddenly into cold water, acquired an excellent temper.

Other instruments, of course roughly fashioned, were also manufactured; blades for planes, axes, hatchets, pieces of steel to be transformed into saws, chisels; then iron for spades, pickaxes, hammers, nails, etc. At last, on the 5th of May, the metallic period ended, the smiths returned to the Chimneys, and new work would soon authorize them to take a fresh title.

CHAPTER 16

It was the 6th of May, a day which corresponds to the 6th of November in the countries of the Northern Hemisphere. The sky had been obscured for some days, and it was of importance to make preparations for the winter. However, the temperature was not as yet much lower, and a centigrade thermometer, transported to Lincoln Island, would still have marked an average of ten to twelve degrees above zero. This was not surprising, since Lincoln Island, probably situated between the thirty-fifth and fortieth parallel, would be subject, in the Southern Hemisphere, to the same climate as Sicily or Greece in the Northern Hemisphere. But as Greece and Sicily have severe cold, producing snow and ice, so doubtless would Lincoln Island in the severest part of the winter and it was advisable to provide against it.

In any case if cold did not yet threaten them, the rainy season would begin, and on this lonely island, exposed to all the fury of the elements, in mid-ocean, bad weather would be frequent, and probably terrible. The question of a more comfortable dwelling than the Chimneys must therefore be seriously considered and promptly resolved on.

Pencroft, naturally, had some predilection for the retreat which he had discovered, but he well understood that another must be found. The Chimneys had been already visited by the sea, under circumstances which are known, and it would not do to be exposed again to a similar accident.

“Besides,” added Cyrus Harding, who this day was talking of these things with his companions, “we have some precautions to take.”

“Why? The island is not inhabited,” said the reporter.

“That is probable,” replied the engineer, “although we have not yet explored the interior; but if no human beings are found, I fear that dangerous animals may abound. It is necessary to guard against a possible attack, so that we shall not be obliged to watch every night, or to keep up a fire. And then, my friends, we must foresee everything. We are here in a part of the Pacific often frequented by Malay pirates — ”

“What!” said Herbert, “at such a distance from land?”

“Yes, my boy,” replied the engineer. “These pirates are bold sailors as well as formidable enemies, and we must take measures accordingly.”

“Well,” replied Pencroft, “we will fortify ourselves against savages with two legs as well as against savages with four. But, captain, will it not be best to explore every part of the island before undertaking anything else?”

“That would be best,” added Gideon Spilett.

“Who knows if we might not find on the opposite side one of the caverns which we have searched for in vain here?”

“That is true,” replied the engineer, “but you forget, my friends, that it will be necessary to establish ourselves in the neighborhood of a watercourse, and that, from the summit of Mount Franklin, we could not see towards the west, either stream or river. Here, on the contrary, we are placed between the Mercy and Lake Grant, an advantage which must not be neglected. And, besides, this side, looking towards the east, is not exposed as the other is to the trade-winds, which in this hemisphere blow from the northwest.”

“Then, captain,” replied the sailor, “let us build a house on the edge of the lake. Neither bricks nor tools are wanting now. After having been brickmakers, potters, smelters, and smiths, we shall surely know how to be masons!”

“Yes, my friend; but before coming to any decision we must consider the matter thoroughly. A natural dwelling would spare us much work, and would be a surer retreat, for it would be as well defended against enemies from the interior as those from outside.”

“That is true, Cyrus,” replied the reporter, “but we have already examined all that mass of granite, and there is not a hole, not a cranny!”

“No, not one!” added Pencroft. “Ah, if we were able to dig out a dwelling in that cliff, at a good height, so as to be out of the reach of harm, that would be capital! I can see that on the front which looks seaward, five or six rooms — ”

“With windows to light them!” said Herbert, laughing.

“And a staircase to climb up to them!” added Neb.

“You are laughing,” cried the sailor, “and why? What is there impossible in what I propose? Haven’t we got pickaxes and spades? Won’t Captain Harding be able to make powder to blow up the mine? Isn’t it true, captain, that you will make powder the very day we want it?”

Cyrus Harding listened to the enthusiastic Pencroft developing his fanciful projects. To attack this mass of granite, even by a mine, was Herculean work, and it was really vexing that nature could not help them at their need. But the engineer did not reply to the sailor except by proposing to examine the cliff more attentively, from the mouth of the river to the angle which terminated it on the north.

They went out, therefore, and the exploration was made with extreme care, over an extent of nearly two miles. But in no place in the bare, straight cliff, could any cavity be found. The nests of the rock pigeons which fluttered at its summit were only, in reality, holes bored at the very top, and on the irregular edge of the granite.

It was a provoking circumstance, and as to attacking this cliff, either with pickaxe or with powder, so as to effect a sufficient excavation, it was not to be thought of. It so happened that, on all this part of the shore, Pencroft had discovered the only habitable shelter, that is to say, the Chimneys, which now had to be abandoned.

The exploration ended, the colonists found themselves at the north angle of the cliff, where it terminated in long slopes which died away on the shore. From this place, to its extreme limit in the west, it only formed a sort of declivity, a thick mass of stones, earth, and sand, bound together by plants, bushes, and grass inclined at an angle of only forty-five degrees. Clumps of trees grew on these slopes, which were also carpeted with thick grass. But the vegetation did not extend far, and a long, sandy plain, which began at the foot of these slopes, reached to the beach.

Cyrus Harding thought, not without reason, that the overplus of the lake must overflow on this side. The excess of water furnished by the Red Creek must also escape by some channel or other. Now the engineer had not yet found this channel on any part of the shore already explored, that is to say, from the mouth of the stream on the west of Prospect Heights.

The engineer now proposed to his companions to climb the slope, and to return to the Chimneys by the heights, while exploring the northern and eastern shores of the lake. The proposal was accepted, and in a few minutes

Herbert and Neb were on the upper plateau. Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Pencroft followed with more sedate steps.

The beautiful sheet of water glittered through the trees under the rays of the sun. In this direction the country was charming. The eye feasted on the groups of trees. Some old trunks, bent with age, showed black against the verdant grass which covered the ground. Crowds of brilliant cockatoos screamed among the branches, moving prisms, hopping from one bough to another.

The settlers instead of going directly to the north bank of the lake, made a circuit round the edge of the plateau, so as to join the mouth of the creek on its left bank. It was a detour of more than a mile and a half. Walking was easy, for the trees widely spread, left a considerable space between them. The fertile zone evidently stopped at this point, and vegetation would be less vigorous in the part between the course of the Creek and the Mercy.

Cyrus Harding and his companions walked over this new ground with great care. Bows, arrows, and sticks with sharp iron points were their only weapons. However, no wild beast showed itself, and it was probable that these animals frequented rather the thick forests in the south; but the settlers had the disagreeable surprise of seeing Top stop before a snake of great size, measuring from fourteen to fifteen feet in length. Neb killed it by a blow from his stick. Cyrus Harding examined the reptile, and declared it not venomous, for it belonged to that species of diamond serpents which the natives of New South Wales rear. But it was possible that others existed whose bite was mortal such as the deaf vipers with forked tails, which rise up under the feet, or those winged snakes, furnished with two ears, which enable them to proceed with great rapidity. Top, the first moment of surprise over, began a reptile chase with such eagerness, that they feared for his safety. His master called him back directly.

The mouth of the Red Creek, at the place where it entered into the lake, was soon reached. The explorers recognized on the opposite shore the point which they had visited on their descent from Mount Franklin. Cyrus Harding ascertained that the flow of water into it from the creek was considerable. Nature must therefore have provided some place for the escape of the overplus. This doubtless formed a fall, which, if it could be discovered, would be of great use.

The colonists, walking apart, but not straying far from each other, began to skirt the edge of the lake, which was very steep. The water appeared to be full of fish, and Pencroft resolved to make some fishing-rods, so as to try and catch some.

The northeast point was first to be doubled. It might have been supposed that the discharge of water was at this place, for the extremity of the lake was almost on a level with the edge of the plateau. But no signs of this were discovered, and the colonists continued to explore the bank, which, after a slight bend, descended parallel to the shore.

On this side the banks were less woody, but clumps of trees, here and there, added to the picturesqueness of the country. Lake Grant was viewed from thence in all its extent, and no breath disturbed the surface of its waters. Top, in beating the bushes, put up flocks of birds of different kinds, which Gideon Spilett and Herbert saluted with arrows. One was hit by the lad, and fell into some marshy grass. Top rushed forward, and brought a beautiful swimming bird, of a slate color, short beak, very developed frontal plate, and wings edged with white. It was a “coot,” the size of a large partridge, belonging to the group of macrodactyls which form the transition between the order of wading birds and that of palmipeds. Sorry game, in truth, and its flavor is far from pleasant. But Top was not so particular in these things as his masters, and it was agreed that the coot should be for his supper.

The settlers were now following the eastern bank of the lake, and they would not be long in reaching the part which they already knew. The engineer was much surprised at not seeing any indication of the discharge of water. The reporter and the sailor talked with him, and he could not conceal his astonishment.

At this moment Top, who had been very quiet till then, gave signs of agitation. The intelligent animal went backwards and forwards on the shore, stopped suddenly, and looked at the water, one paw raised, as if he was pointing at some invisible game; then he barked furiously, and was suddenly silent.

Neither Cyrus Harding nor his companions had at first paid any attention to Top's behavior; but the dog's barking soon became so frequent that the engineer noticed it.

“What is there, Top?” he asked.

The dog bounded towards his master, seeming to be very uneasy, and then rushed again towards the bank. Then, all at once, he plunged into the lake.

“Here, Top!” cried Cyrus Harding, who did not like his dog to venture into the treacherous water.

“What's happening down there?” asked Pencroft, examining the surface of the lake.

“Top smells some amphibious creature,” replied Herbert.

“An alligator, perhaps,” said the reporter.

“I do not think so,” replied Harding. “Alligators are only met with in regions less elevated in latitude.”

Meanwhile Top had returned at his master’s call, and had regained the shore: but he could not stay quiet; he plunged in among the tall grass, and guided by instinct, he appeared to follow some invisible being which was slipping along under the surface of the water. However the water was calm; not a ripple disturbed its surface. Several times the settlers stopped on the bank, and observed it attentively. Nothing appeared. There was some mystery there.

The engineer was puzzled.

“Let us pursue this exploration to the end,” said he.

Half an hour after they had all arrived at the southeast angle of the lake, on Prospect Heights. At this point the examination of the banks of the lake was considered finished, and yet the engineer had not been able to discover how and where the waters were discharged. “There is no doubt this overflow exists,” he repeated, “and since it is not visible it must go through the granite cliff at the west!”

“But what importance do you attach to knowing that, my dear Cyrus?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Considerable importance,” replied the engineer; “for if it flows through the cliff there is probably some cavity, which it would be easy to render habitable after turning away the water.”

“But is it not possible, captain, that the water flows away at the bottom of the lake,” said Herbert, “and that it reaches the sea by some subterranean passage?”

“That might be,” replied the engineer, “and should it be so we shall be obliged to build our house ourselves, since nature has not done it for us.”

The colonists were about to begin to traverse the plateau to return to the Chimneys, when Top gave new signs of agitation. He barked with fury, and before his master could restrain him, he had plunged a second time into the lake.

All ran towards the bank. The dog was already more than twenty feet off, and Cyrus was calling him back, when an enormous head emerged from the water, which did not appear to be deep in that place.

Herbert recognized directly the species of amphibian to which the tapering head, with large eyes, and adorned with long silky mustaches, belonged.

“A lamantin!” he cried.

It was not a lamantin, but one of that species of the order of cetaceans, which bear the name of the “dugong,” for its nostrils were open at the upper part of its snout. The enormous animal rushed on the dog, who tried to escape by returning towards the shore. His master could do nothing to save him, and before Gideon Spilett or Herbert thought of bending their bows, Top, seized by the dugong, had disappeared beneath the water.

Neb, his iron-tipped spear in his hand, wished to go to Top’s help, and attack the dangerous animal in its own element.

“No, Neb,” said the engineer, restraining his courageous servant.

Meanwhile, a struggle was going on beneath the water, an inexplicable struggle, for in his situation Top could not possibly resist; and judging by the bubbling of the surface it must be also a terrible struggle, and could not but terminate in the death of the dog! But suddenly, in the middle of a foaming circle, Top reappeared. Thrown in the air by some unknown power, he rose ten feet above the surface of the lake, fell again into the midst of the agitated waters, and then soon gained the shore, without any severe wounds, miraculously saved.

Cyrus Harding and his companions could not understand it. What was not less inexplicable was that the struggle still appeared to be going on. Doubtless, the dugong, attacked by some powerful animal, after having released the dog, was fighting on its own account. But it did not last long. The water became red with blood, and the body of the dugong, emerging from the sheet of scarlet which spread around, soon stranded on a little beach at the south angle of the lake. The colonists ran towards it. The dugong was dead. It was an enormous animal, fifteen or sixteen feet long, and must have weighed from three to four thousand pounds. At its neck was a wound, which appeared to have been produced by a sharp blade.

What could the amphibious creature have been, who, by this terrible blow had destroyed the formidable dugong? No one could tell, and much interested in this incident, Harding and his companions returned to the Chimneys.

CHAPTER 17

The next day, the 7th of May, Harding and Gideon Spilett, leaving Neb to prepare breakfast, climbed Prospect Heights, while Herbert and Pencroft ascended by the river, to renew their store of wood.

The engineer and the reporter soon reached the little beach on which the dugong had been stranded. Already flocks of birds had attacked the mass of flesh, and had to be driven away with stones, for Cyrus wished to keep the fat for the use of the colony. As to the animal’s flesh it would furnish excellent food, for in the islands of the Malay Archipelago and elsewhere, it is especially reserved for the table of the native princes. But that was Neb’s affair.

At this moment Cyrus Harding had other thoughts. He was much interested in the incident of the day before. He wished to penetrate the mystery of that submarine combat, and to ascertain what monster could have given the dugong so strange a wound. He remained at the edge of the lake, looking, observing; but nothing appeared under the tranquil waters, which sparkled in the first rays of the rising sun.

At the beach, on which lay the body of the dugong, the water was tolerably shallow, but from this point the bottom of the lake sloped gradually, and it was probable that the depth was considerable in the center. The lake might be considered as a large center basin, which was filled by the water from the Red Creek.

“Well, Cyrus,” said the reporter, “there seems to be nothing suspicious in this water.”

"No, my dear Spilett," replied the engineer, "and I really do not know how to account for the incident of yesterday."

"I acknowledge," returned Spilett, "that the wound given this creature is, at least, very strange, and I cannot explain either how Top was so vigorously cast up out of the water. One could have thought that a powerful arm hurled him up, and that the same arm with a dagger killed the dugong!"

"Yes," replied the engineer, who had become thoughtful; "there is something there that I cannot understand. But do you better understand either, my dear Spilett, in what way I was saved myself — how I was drawn from the waves, and carried to the downs? No! Is it not true? Now, I feel sure that there is some mystery there, which, doubtless, we shall discover some day. Let us observe, but do not dwell on these singular incidents before our companions. Let us keep our remarks to ourselves, and continue our work."

It will be remembered that the engineer had not as yet been able to discover the place where the surplus water escaped, but he knew it must exist somewhere. He was much surprised to see a strong current at this place. By throwing in some bits of wood he found that it set towards the southern angle. He followed the current, and arrived at the south point of the lake.

There was there a sort of depression in the water, as if it was suddenly lost in some fissure in the ground.

Harding listened; placing his ear to the level of the lake, he very distinctly heard the noise of a subterranean fall.

"There," said he, rising, "is the discharge of the water; there, doubtless, by a passage in the granite cliff, it joins the sea, through cavities which we can use to our profit. Well, I can find it!”

The engineer cut a long branch, stripped it of its leaves, and plunging it into the angle between the two banks, he found that there was a large hole one foot only beneath the surface of the water. This hole was the opening so long looked for in vain, and the force of the current was such that the branch was torn from the engineer’s hands and disappeared.

“There is no doubt about it now,” repeated Harding. “There is the outlet, and I will lay it open to view!”

“How?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“By lowering the level of the water of the lake three feet.”

“And how will you lower the level?”

“By opening another outlet larger than this.”

“At what place, Cyrus?”

“At the part of the bank nearest the coast.”

“But it is a mass of granite!” observed Spilett.

“Well,” replied Cyrus Harding, “I will blow up the granite, and the water escaping, will subside, so as to lay bare this opening — ”

“And make a waterfall, by falling on to the beach,” added the reporter.

“A fall that we shall make use of!” replied Cyrus. “Come, come!”

The engineer hurried away his companion, whose confidence in Harding was such that he did not doubt the enterprise would succeed. And yet, how was this granite wall to be opened without powder, and with imperfect instruments? Was not this work upon which the engineer was so bent above their strength?

When Harding and the reporter entered the Chimneys, they found Herbert and Pencroft unloading their raft of wood.

“The woodmen have just finished, captain.” said the sailor, laughing, “and when you want masons — ”

“Masons, — no, but chemists,” replied the engineer.

“Yes,” added the reporter, “we are going to blow up the island — ”

“Blow up the island?” cried Pencroft.

“Part of it, at least,” replied Spilett.

“Listen to me, my friends,” said the engineer. And he made known to them the result of his observations.

According to him, a cavity, more or less considerable, must exist in the mass of granite which supported Prospect Heights, and he intended to penetrate into it. To do this, the opening through which the water rushed must first be cleared, and the level lowered by making a larger outlet. Therefore an explosive substance must be manufactured, which would make a deep trench in some other part of the shore. This was what Harding was going to attempt with the minerals which nature placed at his disposal.

It is useless to say with what enthusiasm all, especially Pencroft, received this project. To employ great means, open the granite, create a cascade, that suited the sailor. And he would just as soon be a chemist as a mason or bootmaker, since the engineer wanted chemicals. He would be all that they liked, “even a professor of dancing and deportment,” said he to Neb, if that was ever necessary.

Neb and Pencroft were first of all told to extract the grease from the dugong, and to keep the flesh, which was destined for food. Such perfect confidence had they in the engineer, that they set out directly, without even asking a question. A few minutes after them, Cyrus Harding, Herbert, and Gideon Spilett, dragging the hurdle, went towards the vein of coals, where those shistose pyrites abound which are met with in the most recent transition soil, and of which Harding had already found a specimen. All the day being employed in carrying a quantity of these stones to the Chimneys, by evening they had several tons.

The next day, the 8th of May, the engineer began his manipulations. These shistose pyrites being composed principally of coal, flint, alumina, and sulphuret of iron — the latter in excess — it was necessary to separate the sulphuret of iron, and transform it into sulphate as rapidly as possible. The sulphate obtained, the sulphuric acid could then be extracted.

This was the object to be attained. Sulphuric acid is one of the agents the most frequently employed, and the manufacturing importance of a nation can be measured by the consumption which is made of it. This acid would later be of great use to the settlers, in the manufacturing of candles, tanning skins, etc. but this time the engineer reserved it for another use.

Cyrus Harding chose, behind the Chimneys, a site where the ground was perfectly level. On this ground he placed a layer of branches and chopped wood, on which were piled some pieces of shistose pyrites, buttressed one against the other, the whole being covered with a thin layer of pyrites, previously reduced to the size of a nut.

This done, they set fire to the wood, the heat was communicated to the shist, which soon kindled, since it contains coal and sulphur. Then new layers of bruised pyrites were arranged so as to form an immense heap, the exterior of which was covered with earth and grass, several air-holes being left, as if it was a stack of wood which was to be carbonized to make charcoal.

They then left the transformation to complete itself, and it would not take less than ten or twelve days for the sulphuret of iron to be changed to sulphate of iron and the alumina into sulphate of alumina, two equally soluble substances, the others, flint, burnt coal, and cinders, not being so.

While this chemical work was going on, Cyrus Harding proceeded with other operations, which were pursued with more than zeal, — it was eagerness.

Neb and Pencroft had taken away the fat from the dugong, and placed it in large earthen pots. It was then necessary to separate the glycerine from the fat by saponifying it. Now, to obtain this result, it had to be treated either with soda or lime. In fact, one or other of these substances, after having attacked the fat, would form a soap by separating the glycerine, and it was just this glycerine which the engineer wished to obtain. There was no want of lime, only treatment by lime would give calcareous soap, insoluble, and consequently useless, while treatment by soda would furnish, on the contrary, a soluble soap, which could be put to domestic use. Now, a practical man, like Cyrus Harding, would rather try to obtain soda. Was this difficult? No; for marine plants abounded on the shore, glass-wort, ficoides, and all those fucaceae which form wrack. A large quantity of these plants was collected, first dried, then burnt in holes in the open air. The combustion of these plants was kept up for several days, and the result was a compact gray mass, which has been long known under the name of “natural soda.”

This obtained, the engineer treated the fat with soda, which gave both a soluble soap and that neutral substance, glycerine.

But this was not all. Cyrus Harding still needed, in view of his future preparation, another substance, nitrate of potash, which is better known under the name of salt niter, or of saltpeter.

Cyrus Harding could have manufactured this substance by treating the carbonate of potash, which would be easily extracted from the cinders of the vegetables, by azotic acid. But this acid was wanting, and he would have been in some difficulty, if nature had not happily furnished the saltpeter, without giving them any other trouble than that of picking it up. Herbert found a vein of it at the foot of Mount Franklin, and they had nothing to do but purify this salt.

These different works lasted a week. They were finished before the transformation of the sulphuret into sulphate of iron had been accomplished. During the following days the settlers had time to construct a furnace of bricks of a particular arrangement, to serve for the distillation of the sulphate or iron when it had been obtained. All this was finished about the 18th of May, nearly at the time when the chemical transformation terminated. Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Neb, and Pencroft, skillfully directed by the engineer, had become most clever workmen. Before all masters, necessity is the one most listened to, and who teaches the best.

When the heap of pyrites had been entirely reduced by fire, the result of the operation, consisting of sulphate of iron, sulphate of alumina, flint, remains of coal, and cinders was placed in a basinful of water. They stirred this mixture, let it settle, then decanted it, and obtained a clear liquid containing in solution sulphate of iron and sulphate of alumina, the other matters remaining solid, since they are insoluble. Lastly, this liquid being partly evaporated, crystals of sulphate of iron were deposited, and the not evaporated liquid, which contained the sulphate of alumina, was thrown away.

Cyrus Harding had now at his disposal a large quantity of these sulphate of iron crystals, from which the sulphuric acid had to be extracted. The making of sulphuric acid is a very expensive manufacture. Considerable works are necessary — a special set of tools, an apparatus of platina, leaden chambers, unassailable by the acid, and in which the transformation is performed, etc. The engineer had none of these at his disposal, but he knew that, in Bohemia especially, sulphuric acid is manufactured by very simple means, which have also the advantage of producing it to a superior degree of concentration. It is thus that the acid known under the name of Nordhausen acid is made.

To obtain sulphuric acid, Cyrus Harding had only one operation to make, to calcine the sulphate of iron crystals in a closed vase, so that the sulphuric acid should distil in vapor, which vapor, by condensation, would produce the acid.

The crystals were placed in pots, and the heat from the furnace would distil the sulphuric acid. The operation was successfully completed, and on the 20th of May, twelve days after commencing it, the engineer was the possessor of the agent which later he hoped to use in so many different ways.

Now, why did he wish for this agent? Simply to produce azotic acid; and that was easy, since saltpeter, attacked by sulphuric acid, gives azotic, or nitric, acid by distillation.

But, after all, how was he going to employ this azotic acid? His companions were still ignorant of this, for he had not informed them of the result at which he aimed.

However, the engineer had nearly accomplished his purpose, and by a last operation he would procure the substance which had given so much trouble.

Taking some azotic acid, he mixed it with glycerine, which had been previously concentrated by evaporation, subjected to the water-bath, and he obtained, without even employing a refrigerant mixture, several pints of an oily yellow mixture.

This last operation Cyrus Harding had made alone, in a retired place, at a distance from the Chimneys, for he feared the danger of an explosion, and when he showed a bottle of this liquid to his friends, he contented himself with saying, —

“Here is nitro-glycerine!”

It was really this terrible production, of which the explosive power is perhaps tenfold that of ordinary powder, and which has already caused so many accidents. However, since a way has been found to transform it into dynamite, that is to say, to mix with it some solid substance, clay or sugar, porous enough to hold it, the dangerous liquid has been used with some security. But dynamite was not yet known at the time when the settlers worked on Lincoln Island.

“And is it that liquid that is going to blow up our rocks?” said Pencroft incredulously.

“Yes, my friend,” replied the engineer, “and this nitro-glycerine will produce so much the more effect, as the granite is extremely hard, and will oppose a greater resistance to the explosion.”

“And when shall we see this, captain?”

“To-morrow, as soon as we have dug a hole for the mine, replied the engineer.”

The next day, the 21st of May, at daybreak, the miners went to the point which formed the eastern shore of Lake Grant, and was only five hundred feet from the coast. At this place, the plateau inclined downwards from the waters, which were only restrained by their granite case. Therefore, if this case was broken, the water would escape by the opening and form a stream, which, flowing over the inclined surface of the plateau, would rush on to the beach. Consequently, the level of the lake would be greatly lowered, and the opening where the water escaped would be exposed, which was their final aim.

Under the engineer’s directions, Pencroft, armed with a pickaxe, which he handled skillfully and vigorously, attacked the granite. The hole was made on the point of the shore, slanting, so that it should meet a much lower level than that of the water of the lake. In this way the explosive force, by scattering the rock, would open a large place for the water to rush out.

The work took some time, for the engineer, wishing to produce a great effect, intended to devote not less than seven quarts of nitro-glycerine to the operation. But Pencroft, relieved by Neb, did so well, that towards four o'clock in the evening, the mine was finished.

Now the question of setting fire to the explosive substance was raised. Generally, nitro-glycerine is ignited by caps of fulminate, which in bursting cause the explosion. A shock is therefore needed to produce the explosion, for, simply lighted, this substance would burn without exploding.

Cyrus Harding could certainly have fabricated a percussion cap. In default of fulminate, he could easily obtain a substance similar to guncotton, since he had azotic acid at his disposal. This substance, pressed in a cartridge, and introduced among the nitro-glycerine, would burst by means of a fuse, and cause the explosion.

But Cyrus Harding knew that nitro-glycerine would explode by a shock. He resolved to employ this means, and try another way, if this did not succeed.

In fact, the blow of a hammer on a few drops of nitro-glycerine, spread out on a hard surface, was enough to create an explosion. But the operator could not be there to give the blow, without becoming a victim to the operation. Harding, therefore, thought of suspending a mass of iron, weighing several pounds, by means of a fiber, to an upright just above the mine. Another long fiber, previously impregnated with sulphur, was attached to the middle of the first, by one end, while the other lay on the ground several feet distant from the mine. The second fiber being set on fire, it would burn till it reached the first. This catching fire in its turn, would break, and the mass of iron would fall on the nitro-glycerine. This apparatus being then arranged, the engineer, after having sent his companions to a distance, filled the hole, so that the nitro-glycerine was on a level with the opening; then he threw a few drops of it on the surface of the rock, above which the mass of iron was already suspended.

This done, Harding lit the end of the sulphured fiber, and leaving the place, he returned with his companions to the Chimneys.

The fiber was intended to burn five and twenty minutes, and, in fact, five and twenty minutes afterwards a most tremendous explosion was heard. The island appeared to tremble to its very foundation. Stones were projected in the air as if by the eruption of a volcano. The shock produced by the displacing of the air was such, that the rocks of the Chimneys shook. The settlers, although they were more than two miles from the mine, were thrown on the ground.

They rose, climbed the plateau, and ran towards the place where the bank of the lake must have been shattered by the explosion.

A cheer escaped them! A large rent was seen in the granite! A rapid stream of water rushed foaming across the plateau and dashed down a height of three hundred feet on to the beach!

CHAPTER 18

Cyrus Harding’s project had succeeded, but, according to his usual habit he showed no satisfaction; with closed lips and a fixed look, he remained motionless. Herbert was in ecstasies, Neb bounded with joy, Pencroft nodded his great head, murmuring these words, —

“Come, our engineer gets on capitally!”

The nitro-glycerine had indeed acted powerfully. The opening which it had made was so large that the volume of water which escaped through this new outlet was at least treble that which before passed through the old one. The result was, that a short time after the operation the level of the lake would be lowered two feet, or more.

The settlers went to the Chimneys to take some pickaxes, iron-tipped spears, string made of fibers, flint and steel; they then returned to the plateau, Top accompanying them.

On the way the sailor could not help saying to the engineer, —

“Don’t you think, captain, that by means of that charming liquid you have made, one could blow up the whole of our island?”

“Without any doubt, the island, continents, and the world itself,” replied the engineer. “It is only a question of quantity.”

“Then could you not use this nitro-glycerine for loading firearms?” asked the sailor.

“No, Pencroft; for it is too explosive a substance. But it would be easy to make some guncotton, or even ordinary powder, as we have azotic acid, saltpeter, sulphur, and coal. Unhappily, it is the guns which we have not got.

“Oh, captain,” replied the sailor, “with a little determination — ”

Pencroft had erased the word “impossible” from the dictionary of Lincoln Island.

The settlers, having arrived at Prospect Heights, went immediately towards that point of the lake near which was the old opening now uncovered. This outlet had now become practicable, since the water no longer rushed through it, and it would doubtless be easy to explore the interior.

In a few minutes the settlers had reached the lower point of the lake, and a glance showed them that the object had been attained.

In fact, in the side of the lake, and now above the surface of the water, appeared the long-looked-for opening. A narrow ridge, left bare by the retreat of the water, allowed them to approach it. This orifice was nearly twenty feet in width, but scarcely two in height. It was like the mouth of a drain at the edge of the pavement, and therefore did not offer an easy passage to the settlers; but Neb and Pencroft, taking their pickaxes, soon made it of a suitable height.

The engineer then approached, and found that the sides of the opening, in its upper part at least, had not a slope of more than from thirty to thirty-five degrees. It was therefore practicable, and, provided that the declivity did not increase, it would be easy to descend even to the level of the sea. If then, as was probable, some vast cavity existed in the interior of the granite, it might, perhaps, be of great use.

“Well, captain, what are we stopping for?” asked the sailor, impatient to enter the narrow passage. “You see Top has got before us!”

“Very well,” replied the engineer. “But we must see our way. Neb, go and cut some resinous branches.”

Neb and Herbert ran to the edge of the lake, shaded with pines and other green trees, and soon returned with some branches, which they made into torches. The torches were lighted with flint and steel, and Cyrus Harding leading, the settlers ventured into the dark passage, which the overplus of the lake had formerly filled.

Contrary to what might have been supposed, the diameter of the passage increased as the explorers proceeded, so that they very soon were able to stand upright. The granite, worn by the water for an infinite time, was very slippery, and falls were to be dreaded. But the settlers were all attached to each other by a cord, as is frequently done in ascending mountains. Happily some projections of the granite, forming regular steps, made the descent less perilous. Drops, still hanging from the rocks, shone here and there under the light of the torches, and the explorers guessed that the sides were clothed with innumerable stalactites. The engineer examined this black granite. There was not a stratum, not a break in it. The mass was compact, and of an extremely close grain. The passage dated, then, from the very origin of the island. It was not the water which little by little had hollowed it. Pluto and not Neptune had bored it with his own hand, and on the wall traces of an eruptive work could be distinguished, which all the washing of the water had not been able totally to efface.

The settlers descended very slowly. They could not but feel a certain awe, in this venturing into these unknown depths, for the first time visited by human beings. They did not speak, but they thought; and the thought came to more than one, that some polypus or other gigantic cephalopod might inhabit the interior cavities, which were in communication with the sea. However, Top kept at the head of the little band, and they could rely on the sagacity of the dog, who would not fail to give the alarm if there was any need for it.

After having descended about a hundred feet, following a winding road, Harding who was walking on before, stopped, and his companions came up with him. The place where they had halted was wider, so as to form a cavern of moderate dimensions. Drops of water fell from the vault, but that did not prove that they oozed through the rock. They were simply the last traces left by the torrent which had so long thundered through this cavity, and the air there was pure though slightly damp, but producing no mephitic exhalation.

“Well, my dear Cyrus,” said Gideon Spilett, “here is a very secure retreat, well hid in the depths of the rock, but it is, however, uninhabitable.”

“Why uninhabitable?” asked the sailor.

“Because it is too small and too dark.”

“Couldn’t we enlarge it, hollow it out, make openings to let in light and air?” replied Pencroft, who now thought nothing impossible.

“Let us go on with our exploration,” said Cyrus Harding. “Perhaps lower down, nature will have spared us this labor.”

“We have only gone a third of the way,” observed Herbert.

“Nearly a third,” replied Harding, “for we have descended a hundred feet from the opening, and it is not impossible that a hundred feet farther down

— ”

“Where is Top?” asked Neb, interrupting his master.

They searched the cavern, but the dog was not there.

“Most likely he has gone on,” said Pencroft.

“Let us join him,” replied Harding.

The descent was continued. The engineer carefully observed all the deviations of the passage, and notwithstanding so many detours, he could easily have given an account of its general direction, which went towards the sea.

The settlers had gone some fifty feet farther, when their attention was attracted by distant sounds which came up from the depths. They stopped and listened. These sounds, carried through the passage as through an acoustic tube, came clearly to the ear.

“That is Top barking!” cried Herbert.

“Yes,” replied Pencroft, “and our brave dog is barking furiously!”

“We have our iron-tipped spears,” said Cyrus Harding. “Keep on your guard, and forward!”

“It is becoming more and more interesting,” murmured Gideon Spilett in the sailor’s ear, who nodded. Harding and his companions rushed to the help of their dog. Top’s barking became more and more perceptible, and it seemed strangely fierce. Was he engaged in a struggle with some animal whose retreat he had disturbed? Without thinking of the danger to which they might be exposed, the explorers were now impelled by an irresistible curiosity, and in a few minutes, sixteen feet lower they rejoined Top.

There the passage ended in a vast and magnificent cavern.

Top was running backwards and forwards, barking furiously. Pencroft and Neb, waving their torches, threw the light into every crevice; and at the same time, Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert, their spears raised, were ready for any emergency which might arise. The enormous cavern was empty. The settlers explored it in every direction. There was nothing there, not an animal, not a human being; and yet Top continued to bark. Neither caresses nor threats could make him be silent.

“There must be a place somewhere, by which the waters of the lake reached the sea,” said the engineer.

“Of course,” replied Pencroft, “and we must take care not to tumble into a hole.”

“Go, Top, go!” cried Harding.

The dog, excited by his master’s words, ran towards the extremity of the cavern, and there redoubled his barking.

They followed him, and by the light of the torches, perceived the mouth of a regular well in the granite. It was by this that the water escaped; and this time it was not an oblique and practicable passage, but a perpendicular well, into which it was impossible to venture.

The torches were held over the opening: nothing could be seen. Harding took a lighted branch, and threw it into the abyss. The blazing resin, whose illuminating power increased still more by the rapidity of its fall, lighted up the interior of the well, but yet nothing appeared. The flame then went out with a slight hiss, which showed that it had reached the water, that is to say, the level of the sea.

The engineer, calculating the time employed in its fall, was able to calculate the depth of the well, which was found to be about ninety feet.

The floor of the cavern must thus be situated ninety feet above the level of the sea.

“Here is our dwelling,” said Cyrus Harding.

“But it was occupied by some creature,” replied Gideon Spilett, whose curiosity was not yet satisfied.

“Well, the creature, amphibious or otherwise, has made off through this opening,” replied the engineer, “and has left the place for us.”

“Never mind,” added the sailor, “I should like very much to be Top just for a quarter of an hour, for he doesn’t bark for nothing!”

Cyrus Harding looked at his dog, and those of his companions who were near him might have heard him murmur these words, —

“Yes, I believe that Top knows more than we do about a great many things.”

However, the wishes of the settlers were for the most part satisfied. Chance, aided by the marvelous sagacity of their leader, had done them great service. They had now at their disposal a vast cavern, the size of which could not be properly calculated by the feeble light of their torches, but it would certainly be easy to divide it into rooms, by means of brick partitions, or to use it, if not as a house, at least as a spacious apartment. The water which had left it could not return. The place was free.

Two difficulties remained; firstly, the possibility of lighting this excavation in the midst of solid rock; secondly, the necessity of rendering the means of access more easy. It was useless to think of lighting it from above, because of the enormous thickness of the granite which composed the ceiling; but perhaps the outer wall next the sea might be pierced. Cyrus Harding, during the descent, had roughly calculated its obliqueness, and consequently the length of the passage, and was therefore led to believe that the outer wall could not be very thick. If light was thus obtained, so would a means of access, for it would be as easy to pierce a door as windows, and to establish an exterior ladder.

Harding made known his ideas to his companions.

“Then, captain, let us set to work!” replied Pencroft. “I have my pickaxe, and I shall soon make my way through this wall. Where shall I strike?”

“Here,” replied the engineer, showing the sturdy sailor a considerable recess in the side, which would much diminish the thickness.

Pencroft attacked the granite, and for half an hour, by the light of the torches, he made the splinters fly around him. Neb relieved him, then Spilett took Neb’s place.

This work had lasted two hours, and they began to fear that at this spot the wall would not yield to the pickaxe, when at a last blow given by Gideon Spilett, the instrument, passing through the rock, fell outside.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” cried Pencroft.

The wall only measured there three feet in thickness.

Harding applied his eye to the aperture, which overlooked the ground from a height of eighty feet. Before him was extended the sea-coast, the islet, and beyond the open sea.

Floods of light entered by this hole, inundating the splendid cavern and producing a magic effect! On its left side it did not measure more than thirty feet in height and breadth, but on the right it was enormous, and its vaulted roof rose to a height of more than eighty feet.

In some places granite pillars, irregularly disposed, supported the vaulted roof, as those in the nave of a cathedral, here forming lateral piers, there elliptical arches, adorned with pointed moldings, losing themselves in dark bays, amid the fantastic arches of which glimpses could be caught in the shade, covered with a profusion of projections formed like so many pendants. This cavern was a picturesque mixture of all the styles of Byzantine, Roman, or Gothic architecture ever produced by the hand of man. And yet this was only the work of nature. She alone had hollowed this fairy Alhambra in a mass of granite.

The settlers were overwhelmed with admiration. Where they had only expected to find a narrow cavity, they had found a sort of marvelous palace, and Neb had taken off his hat, as if he had been transported into a temple!

Cries of admiration issued from every mouth. Hurrahs resounded, and the echo was repeated again and again till it died away in the dark naves.

“Ah, my friends!” exclaimed Cyrus Harding, “when we have lighted the interior of this place, and have arranged our rooms and storehouses in the left part, we shall still have this splendid cavern, which we will make our study and our museum!”

“And we will call it? — ” asked Herbert.

“Granite House,” replied Harding; a name which his companions again saluted with a cheer.

The torches were now almost consumed, and as they were obliged to return by the passage to reach the summit of the plateau, it was decided to put off the work necessary for the arrangement of their new dwelling till the next day.

Before departing, Cyrus Harding leaned once more over the dark well, which descended perpendicularly to the level of the sea. He listened attentively. No noise was heard, not even that of the water, which the undulations of the surge must sometimes agitate in its depths. A flaming branch was again thrown in. The sides of the well were lighted up for an instant, but as at the first time, nothing suspicious was seen.

If some marine monster had been surprised unawares by the retreat of the water, he would by this time have regained the sea by the subterranean passage, before the new opening had been offered to him.

Meanwhile, the engineer was standing motionless, his eyes fixed on the gulf, without uttering a word.

The sailor approached him, and touching his arm, “Captain!” said he.

“What do you want, my friend?” asked the engineer, as if he had returned from the land of dreams.

“The torches will soon go out.”

“Forward!” replied Cyrus Harding.

The little band left the cavern and began to ascend through the dark passage. Top closed the rear, still growling every now and then. The ascent was painful enough. The settlers rested a few minutes in the upper grotto, which made a sort of landing-place halfway up the long granite staircase. Then they began to climb again.

Soon fresher air was felt. The drops of water, dried by evaporation, no longer sparkled on the walls. The flaring torches began to grow dim. The one which Neb carried went out, and if they did not wish to find their way in the dark, they must hasten.

This was done, and a little before four o’clock, at the moment when the sailor’s torch went out in its turn, Cyrus Harding and his companions passed out of the passage.

CHAPTER 19

The next day, the 22nd of May, the arrangement of their new dwelling was commenced. In fact, the settlers longed to exchange the insufficient shelter of the Chimneys for this large and healthy retreat, in the midst of solid rock, and sheltered from the water both of the sea and sky. Their former dwelling was not, however, to be entirely abandoned, for the engineer intended to make a manufactory of it for important works. Cyrus Harding's first care was to find out the position of the front of Granite House from the outside. He went to the beach, and as the pickaxe when it escaped from the hands of the reporter must have fallen perpendicularly to the foot of the cliff, the finding it would be sufficient to show the place where the hole had been pierced in the granite.

The pickaxe was easily found, and the hole could be seen in a perpendicular line above the spot where it was stuck in the sand. Some rock pigeons were already flying in and out of the narrow opening; they evidently thought that Granite House had been discovered on purpose for them. It was the engineer's intention to divide the right portion of the cavern into several rooms, preceded by an entrance passage, and to light it by means of five windows and a door, pierced in the front. Pencroft was much pleased with the five windows, but he could not understand the use of the door, since the passage offered a natural staircase, through which it would always be easy to enter Granite House.

"My friend," replied Harding, "if it is easy for us to reach our dwelling by this passage, it will be equally easy for others besides us. I mean, on the contrary, to block up that opening, to seal it hermetically, and, if it is necessary, to completely hide the entrance by making a dam, and thus causing the water of the lake to rise."

“And how shall we get in?” asked the sailor.

“By an outside ladder,” replied Cyrus Harding, “a rope ladder, which, once drawn up, will render access to our dwelling impossible.”

“But why so many precautions?” asked Pencroft. “As yet we have seen no dangerous animals. As to our island being inhabited by natives, I don’t believe it!”

“Are you quite sure of that, Pencroft?” asked the engineer, looking at the sailor.

“Of course we shall not be quite sure, till we have explored it in every direction,” replied Pencroft.

“Yes,” said Harding, “for we know only a small portion of it as yet. But at any rate, if we have no enemies in the interior, they may come from the exterior, for parts of the Pacific are very dangerous. We must be provided against every contingency.”

Cyrus Harding spoke wisely; and without making any further objection, Pencroft prepared to execute his orders.

The front of Granite House was then to be lighted by five windows and a door, besides a large bay window and some smaller oval ones, which would admit plenty of light to enter into the marvelous nave which was to be their chief room. This facade, situated at a height of eighty feet above the ground, was exposed to the east, and the rising sun saluted it with its first rays. It was found to be just at that part of the cliff which was between the projection at the mouth of the Mercy and a perpendicular line traced above the heap of rocks which formed the Chimneys. Thus the winds from the northeast would only strike it obliquely, for it was protected by the projection. Besides, until the window-frames were made, the engineer meant to close the openings with thick shutters, which would prevent either wind or rain from entering, and which could be concealed in need.

The first work was to make the openings. This would have taken too long with the pickaxe alone, and it is known that Harding was an ingenious man. He had still a quantity of nitro-glycerine at his disposal, and he employed it usefully. By means of this explosive substance the rock was broken open at the very places chosen by the engineer. Then, with the pickaxe and spade, the windows and doors were properly shaped, the jagged edges were smoothed off, and a few days after the beginning of the work, Granite House was abundantly lighted by the rising sun, whose rays penetrated into its most secret recesses. Following the plan proposed by Cyrus Harding, the space was to be divided into five compartments looking out on the sea; to the right, an entry with a door, which would meet the ladder; then a kitchen, thirty feet long; a dining-room, measuring forty feet; a sleeping-room, of equal size; and lastly, a "Visitor's room," petitioned for by Pencroft, and which was next to the great hall. These rooms, or rather this suite of rooms, would not occupy all the depth of the cave. There would be also a corridor and a storehouse, in which their tools, provisions, and stores would be kept. All the productions of the island, the flora as well as the fauna, were to be there in the best possible state of preservation, and completely sheltered from the damp. There was no want of space, so that each object could be methodically arranged. Besides, the colonists had still at their disposal the little grotto above the great cavern, which was like the garret of the new dwelling.

This plan settled, it had only to be put into execution. The miners became brickmakers again, then the bricks were brought to the foot of Granite

House. Till then, Harding and his companions had only entered the cavern by the long passage. This mode of communication obliged them first to climb Prospect Heights, making a detour by the river's bank, and then to descend two hundred feet through the passage, having to climb as far when they wished to return to the plateau. This was a great loss of time, and was also very fatiguing. Cyrus Harding, therefore, resolved to proceed without any further delay to the fabrication of a strong rope ladder, which, once raised, would render Granite House completely inaccessible.

This ladder was manufactured with extreme care, and its uprights, formed of the twisted fibers of a species of cane, had the strength of a thick cable. As to the rounds, they were made of a sort of red cedar, with light, strong branches; and this apparatus was wrought by the masterly hand of Pencroft.

Other ropes were made with vegetable fibers, and a sort of crane with a tackle was fixed at the door. In this way bricks could easily be raised into Granite House. The transport of the materials being thus simplified, the arrangement of the interior could begin immediately. There was no want of lime, and some thousands of bricks were there ready to be used. The framework of the partitions was soon raised, very roughly at first, and in a short time, the cave was divided into rooms and storehouses, according to the plan agreed upon.

These different works progressed rapidly under the direction of the engineer, who himself handled the hammer and the trowel. No labor came amiss to Cyrus Harding, who thus set an example to his intelligent and zealous companions. They worked with confidence, even gaily, Pencroft always having some joke to crack, sometimes carpenter, sometimes rope-maker, sometimes mason, while he communicated his good humor to all the members of their little world. His faith in the engineer was complete;

nothing could disturb it. He believed him capable of undertaking anything and succeeding in everything. The question of boots and clothes — assuredly a serious question, — that of light during the winter months, utilizing the fertile parts of the island, transforming the wild flora into cultivated flora, it all appeared easy to him; Cyrus Harding helping, everything would be done in time. He dreamed of canals facilitating the transport of the riches of the ground; workings of quarries and mines; machines for every industrial manufacture; railroads; yes, railroads! of which a network would certainly one day cover Lincoln Island.

The engineer let Pencroft talk. He did not put down the aspirations of this brave heart. He knew how communicable confidence is; he even smiled to hear him speak, and said nothing of the uneasiness for the future which he felt. In fact, in that part of the Pacific, out of the course of vessels, it was to be feared that no help would ever come to them. It was on themselves, on themselves alone, that the settlers must depend, for the distance of Lincoln Island from all other land was such, that to hazard themselves in a boat, of a necessarily inferior construction, would be a serious and perilous thing.

“But,” as the sailor said, “they quite took the wind out of the sails of the Robinsons, for whom everything was done by a miracle.”

In fact, they were energetic; an energetic man will succeed where an indolent one would vegetate and inevitably perish.

Herbert distinguished himself in these works. He was intelligent and active; understanding quickly, he performed well; and Cyrus Harding became more and more attached to the boy. Herbert had a lively and reverent love for the engineer. Pencroft saw the close sympathy which existed between the two, but he was not in the least jealous. Neb was Neb: he was what he would be always, courage, zeal, devotion, self-denial personified. He had the same faith in his master that Pencroft had, but he showed it less vehemently. When the sailor was enthusiastic, Neb always looked as if he would say, “Nothing could be more natural.” Pencroft and he were great friends.

As to Gideon Spilett, he took part in the common work, and was not less skilful in it than his companions, which always rather astonished the sailor. A “journalist,” clever, not only in understanding, but in performing everything.

The ladder was finally fixed on the 28th of May. There were not less than a hundred rounds in this perpendicular height of eighty feet. Harding had been able, fortunately, to divide it in two parts, profiting by an overhanging of the cliff which made a projection forty feet above the ground. This projection, carefully leveled by the pickaxe, made a sort of platform, to which they fixed the first ladder, of which the oscillation was thus diminished one-half, and a rope permitted it to be raised to the level of Granite House. As to the second ladder, it was secured both at its lower part, which rested on the projection, and at its upper end, which was fastened to the door. In short the ascent had been made much easier. Besides, Cyrus Harding hoped later to establish an hydraulic apparatus, which would avoid all fatigue and loss of time, for the inhabitants of Granite House.

The settlers soon became habituated to the use of this ladder. They were light and active, and Pencroft, as a sailor, accustomed to run up the masts and shrouds, was able to give them lessons. But it was also necessary to give them to Top. The poor dog, with his four paws, was not formed for this sort of exercise. But Pencroft was such a zealous master, that Top ended by properly performing his ascents, and soon mounted the ladder as readily as his brethren in the circus. It need not be said that the sailor was proud of his pupil. However, more than once Pencroft hoisted him on his back, which Top never complained of.

It must be mentioned here, that during these works, which were actively conducted, for the bad season was approaching, the alimentary question was not neglected. Every day, the reporter and Herbert, who had been voted purveyors to the colony, devoted some hours to the chase. As yet, they only hunted in Jacamar Wood, on the left of the river, because, for want of a bridge or boat, the Mercy had not yet been crossed. All the immense woods, to which the name of the Forests of the Far West had been given, were not explored. They reserved this important excursion for the first fine days of the next spring. But Jacamar Wood was full of game; kangaroos and boars abounded, and the hunters iron-tipped spears and bows and arrows did wonders. Besides, Herbert discovered towards the southwest point of the lagoon a natural warren, a slightly damp meadow, covered with willows and aromatic herbs which scented the air, such as thyme, basil, savory, all the sweet-scented species of the labiated plants, which the rabbits appeared to be particularly fond of.

On the reporter observing that since the table was spread for the rabbits, it was strange that the rabbits themselves should be wanting, the two sportsmen carefully explored the warren. At any rate, it produced an abundance of useful plants, and a naturalist would have had a good opportunity of studying many specimens of the vegetable kingdom. Herbert gathered several shoots of the basil, rosemary, balm, betony, etc. which possess different medicinal properties, some pectoral, astringent, febrifuge, others anti-spasmodic, or anti-rheumatic. When, afterwards, Pencroft asked the use of this collection of herbs, —

“For medicine,” replied the lad, “to treat us when we are ill.”

“Why should we be ill, since there are no doctors in the island?” asked Pencroft quite seriously.

There was no reply to be made to that, but the lad went on with his collection all the same, and it was well received at Granite House. Besides these medicinal herbs, he added a plant known in North America as “Oswego tea,” which made an excellent beverage.

At last, by searching thoroughly, the hunters arrived at the real site of the warren. There the ground was perforated like a sieve.

“Here are the burrows!” cried Herbert.

“Yes,” replied the reporter, “so I see.”

“But are they inhabited?”

“That is the question.”

This was soon answered. Almost immediately, hundreds of little animals, similar to rabbits, fled in every direction, with such rapidity that even Top could not overtake them. Hunters and dog ran in vain; these rodents escaped them easily. But the reporter resolved not to leave the place, until he had captured at least half-a-dozen of the quadrupeds. He wished to stock their larder first, and domesticate those which they might take later. It would not have been difficult to do this, with a few snares stretched at the openings of the burrows. But at this moment they had neither snares, nor anything to make them of. They must, therefore, be satisfied with visiting each hole, and rummaging in it with a stick, hoping by dint of patience to do what could not be done in any other way.

At last, after half an hour, four rodents were taken in their holes. They were similar to their European brethren, and are commonly known by the name of American rabbits.

This produce of the chase was brought back to Granite House, and figured at the evening repast. The tenants of the warren were not at all to be despised, for they were delicious. It was a valuable resource of the colony, and it appeared to be inexhaustible.

On the 31st of May the partitions were finished. The rooms had now only to be furnished, and this would be work for the long winter days. A chimney was established in the first room, which served as a kitchen. The pipe destined to conduct the smoke outside gave some trouble to these amateur bricklayers. It appeared simplest to Harding to make it of brick clay; as creating an outlet for it to the upper plateau was not to be thought of, a hole was pierced in the granite above the window of the kitchen, and the pipe met it like that of an iron stove. Perhaps the winds which blew directly against the facade would make the chimney smoke, but these winds were rare, and besides, Master Neb, the cook, was not so very particular about that.

When these interior arrangements were finished, the engineer occupied himself in blocking up the outlet by the lake, so as to prevent any access by that way. Masses of rock were rolled to the entrance and strongly cemented together. Cyrus Harding did not yet realize his plan of drowning this opening under the waters of the lake, by restoring them to their former level by means of a dam. He contented himself with hiding the obstruction with grass and shrubs, which were planted in the interstices of the rocks, and which next spring would sprout thickly. However, he used the waterfall so as to lead a small stream of fresh water to the new dwelling. A little trench, made below their level, produced this result; and this derivation from a pure and inexhaustible source yielded twenty-five or thirty gallons a day. There would never be any want of water at Granite House. At last all was finished, and it was time, for the bad season was near. Thick shutters closed the windows of the facade, until the engineer had time to make glass.

Gideon Spilett had very artistically arranged on the rocky projections around the windows plants of different kinds, as well as long streaming grass, so that the openings were picturesquely framed in green, which had a pleasing effect.

The inhabitants of this solid, healthy, and secure dwelling, could not but be charmed with their work. The view from the windows extended over a boundless horizon, which was closed by the two Mandible Capes on the north, and Claw Cape on the south. All Union Bay was spread before them. Yes, our brave settlers had reason to be satisfied, and Pencroft was lavish in his praise of what he humorously called, “his apartments on the fifth floor above the ground!”

CHAPTER 20

The winter season set in with the month of June, which corresponds with the month of December in the Northern Hemisphere. It began with showers and squalls, which succeeded each other without intermission. The tenants of Granite House could appreciate the advantages of a dwelling which sheltered them from the inclement weather. The Chimneys would have been quite insufficient to protect them against the rigor of winter, and it was to be feared that the high tides would make another irruption. Cyrus Harding had taken precautions against this contingency, so as to preserve as much as possible the forge and furnace which were established there.

During the whole of the month of June the time was employed in different occupations, which excluded neither hunting nor fishing, the larder being, therefore, abundantly supplied. Pencroft, so soon as he had leisure, proposed to set some traps, from which he expected great results. He soon made some snares with creepers, by the aid of which the warren henceforth every day furnished its quota of rodents. Neb employed nearly all his time in salting or smoking meat, which insured their always having plenty of provisions. The question of clothes was now seriously discussed, the settlers having no other garments than those they wore when the balloon threw them on the island. These clothes were warm and good; they had taken great care of them as well as of their linen, and they were perfectly whole, but they would soon need to be replaced. Moreover, if the winter was severe, the settlers would suffer greatly from cold.

On this subject the ingenuity of Harding was at fault. They must provide for their most pressing wants, settle their dwelling, and lay in a store of food; thus the cold might come upon them before the question of clothes had been settled. They must therefore make up their minds to pass this first winter without additional clothing. When the fine season came round again, they would regularly hunt those musmons which had been seen on the expedition to Mount Franklin, and the wool once collected, the engineer would know how to make it into strong warm stuff... How? He would consider.

“Well, we are free to roast ourselves at Granite House!” said Pencroft. “There are heaps of fuel, and no reason for sparing it.”

“Besides,” added Gideon Spilett, “Lincoln Island is not situated under a very high latitude, and probably the winters here are not severe. Did you not say, Cyrus, that this thirty-fifth parallel corresponded to that of Spain in the other hemisphere?”

“Doubtless,” replied the engineer, “but some winters in Spain are very cold! No want of snow and ice; and perhaps Lincoln Island is just as rigourously tried. However, it is an island, and as such, I hope that the temperature will be more moderate.”

“Why, captain?” asked Herbert.

“Because the sea, my boy, may be considered as an immense reservoir, in which is stored the heat of the summer. When winter comes, it restores this heat, which insures for the regions near the ocean a medium temperature, less high in summer, but less low in winter.”

“We shall prove that,” replied Pencroft. “But I don’t want to bother myself about whether it will be cold or not. One thing is certain, that is that the days are already short, and the evenings long. Suppose we talk about the question of light.”

“Nothing is easier,” replied Harding.

“To talk about?” asked the sailor.

“To settle.”

“And when shall we begin?”

“To-morrow, by having a seal hunt.”

“To make candles?”

“Yes.”

Such was the engineer’s project; and it was quite feasible, since he had lime and sulphuric acid, while the amphibians of the islet would furnish the fat necessary for the manufacture.

They were now at the 4th of June. It was Whit Sunday and they agreed to observe this feast. All work was suspended, and prayers were offered to Heaven. But these prayers were now thanksgivings. The settlers in Lincoln Island were no longer the miserable castaways thrown on the islet. They asked for nothing more — they gave thanks. The next day, the 5th of June, in rather uncertain weather, they set out for the islet. They had to profit by the low tide to cross the Channel, and it was agreed that they would construct, for this purpose, as well as they could, a boat which would render communication so much easier, and would also permit them to ascend the Mercy, at the time of their grand exploration of the southwest of the island, which was put off till the first fine days.

The seals were numerous, and the hunters, armed with their iron-tipped spears, easily killed half-a-dozen. Neb and Pencroft skinned them, and only brought back to Granite House their fat and skin, this skin being intended for the manufacture of boots.

The result of the hunt was this: nearly three hundred pounds of fat, all to be employed in the fabrication of candles.

The operation was extremely simple, and if it did not yield absolutely perfect results, they were at least very useful. Cyrus Harding would only have had at his disposal sulphuric acid, but by heating this acid with the neutral fatty bodies he could separate the glycerine; then from this new combination, he easily separated the olein, the margarin, and the stearin, by employing boiling water. But to simplify the operation, he preferred to saponify the fat by means of lime. By this he obtained a calcareous soap, easy to decompose by sulphuric acid, which precipitated the lime into the state of sulphate, and liberated the fatty acids.

From these three acids-oleic, margaric, and stearic-the first, being liquid, was driven out by a sufficient pressure. As to the two others, they formed the very substance of which the candles were to be molded.

This operation did not last more than four and twenty hours. The wicks, after several trials, were made of vegetable fibers, and dipped in the liquefied substance, they formed regular stearic candles, molded by the hand, which only wanted whiteness and polish. They would not doubtless have the advantages of the wicks which are impregnated with boracic acid, and which vitrify as they burn and are entirely consumed, but Cyrus Harding having manufactured a beautiful pair of snuffers, these candles would be greatly appreciated during the long evenings in Granite House.

During this month there was no want of work in the interior of their new dwelling. The joiners had plenty to do. They improved their tools, which were very rough, and added others also.

Scissors were made among other things, and the settlers were at last able to cut their hair, and also to shave, or at least trim their beards. Herbert had none, Neb but little, but their companions were bristling in a way which justified the making of the said scissors.

The manufacture of a hand-saw cost infinite trouble, but at last an instrument was obtained which, when vigorously handled, could divide the ligneous fibers of the wood. They then made tables, seats, cupboards, to furnish the principal rooms, and bedsteads, of which all the bedding consisted of grass mattresses. The kitchen, with its shelves, on which rested the cooking utensils, its brick stove, looked very well, and Neb worked away there as earnestly as if he was in a chemist's laboratory.

But the joiners had soon to be replaced by carpenters. In fact, the waterfall created by the explosion rendered the construction of two bridges necessary, one on Prospect Heights, the other on the shore. Now the plateau and the shore were transversely divided by a watercourse, which had to be crossed to reach the northern part of the island. To avoid it the colonists had been obliged to make a considerable detour, by climbing up to the source of the Red Creek. The simplest thing was to establish on the plateau, and on the shore, two bridges from twenty to five and twenty feet in length. All the carpenter's work that was needed was to clear some trees of their branches: this was a business of some days. Directly the bridges were established, Neb and Pencroft profited by them to go to the oyster-bed which had been discovered near the downs. They dragged with them a sort of rough cart, which replaced the former inconvenient hurdle, and brought back some thousands of oysters, which soon increased among the rocks and formed a bed at the mouth of the Mercy. These molluscs were of excellent quality, and the colonists consumed some daily.

It has been seen that Lincoln Island, although its inhabitants had as yet only explored a small portion of it, already contributed to almost all their wants. It was probable that if they hunted into its most secret recesses, in all the wooded part between the Mercy and Reptile Point, they would find new treasures.

The settlers in Lincoln Island had still one privation. There was no want of meat, nor of vegetable products; those ligneous roots which they had found, when subjected to fermentation, gave them an acid drink, which was preferable to cold water; they also made sugar, without canes or beet-roots, by collecting the liquor which distils from the “acer saceharinum,” a sort of maple-tree, which flourishes in all the temperate zones, and of which the island possessed a great number; they made a very agreeable tea by employing the herbs brought from the warren; lastly, they had an abundance of salt, the only mineral which is used in food... but bread was wanting.

Perhaps in time the settlers could replace this want by some equivalent, it was possible that they might find the sago or the breadfruit tree among the forests of the south, but they had not as yet met with these precious trees. However, Providence came directly to their aid, in an infinitesimal proportion it is true, but Cyrus Harding, with all his intelligence, all his ingenuity, would never have been able to produce that which, by the greatest chance, Herbert one day found in the lining of his waistcoat, which he was occupied in setting to rights.

On this day, as it was raining in torrents, the settlers were assembled in the great hall in Granite House, when the lad cried out all at once, —

“Look here, captain — A grain of corn!”

And he showed his companions a grain — a single grain — which from a hole in his pocket had got into the lining of his waistcoat.

The presence of this grain was explained by the fact that Herbert, when at Richmond, used to feed some pigeons, of which Pencroft had made him a present.

“A grain of corn?” said the engineer quickly.

“Yes, captain; but one, only one!”

“Well, my boy,” said Pencroft, laughing, “we’re getting on capitally, upon my word! What shall we make with one grain of corn?”

“We will make bread of it,” replied Cyrus Harding.

“Bread, cakes, tarts!” replied the sailor. “Come, the bread that this grain of corn will make won’t choke us very soon!”

Herbert, not attaching much importance to his discovery, was going to throw away the grain in question; but Harding took it, examined it, found that it was in good condition, and looking the sailor full in the face — ”Pencroft,” he asked quietly, “do you know how many ears one grain of corn can produce?”

“One, I suppose!” replied the sailor, surprised at the question.

“Ten, Pencroft! And do you know how many grains one ear bears?”

“No, upon my word.”

“About eighty!” said Cyrus Harding. “Then, if we plant this grain, at the first crop we shall reap eight hundred grains which at the second will produce six hundred and forty thousand; at the third, five hundred and twelve millions; at the fourth, more than four hundred thousands of millions! There is the proportion.”

Harding’s companions listened without answering. These numbers astonished them. They were exact, however.

“Yes, my friends,” continued the engineer, “such are the arithmetical progressions of prolific nature; and yet what is this multiplication of the grain of corn, of which the ear only bears eight hundred grains, compared to the poppy-plant, which bears thirty-two thousand seeds; to the tobacco-plant, which produces three hundred and sixty thousand? In a few years, without the numerous causes of destruction, which arrests their fecundity, these plants would overrun the earth.”

But the engineer had not finished his lecture.

“And now, Pencroft,” he continued, “do you know how many bushels four hundred thousand millions of grains would make?”

“No,” replied the sailor; “but what I do know is, that I am nothing better than a fool!”

“Well, they would make more than three millions, at a hundred and thirty thousand a bushel, Pencroft.”

“Three millions!” cried Pencroft.

“Three millions.”

“In four years?”

“In four years,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and even in two years, if, as I hope, in this latitude we can obtain two crops a year.”

At that, according to his usual custom, Pencroft could not reply otherwise than by a tremendous hurrah.

“So, Herbert,” added the engineer, “you have made a discovery of great importance to us. Everything, my friends, everything can serve us in the condition in which we are. Do not forget that, I beg of you.”

“No, captain, no, we shan’t forget it,” replied Pencroft; “and if ever I find one of those tobacco-seeds, which multiply by three hundred and sixty thousand, I assure you I won’t throw it away! And now, what must we do?”

“We must plant this grain,” replied Herbert.

“Yes,” added Gideon Spilett, “and with every possible care, for it bears in itself our future harvests.”

“Provided it grows!” cried the sailor.

“It will grow,” replied Cyrus Harding.

This was the 20th of June. The time was then propitious for sowing this single precious grain of corn. It was first proposed to plant it in a pot, but upon reflection it was decided to leave it to nature, and confide it to the earth. This was done that very day, and it is needless to add, that every precaution was taken that the experiment might succeed.

The weather having cleared, the settlers climbed the height above Granite House. There, on the plateau, they chose a spot, well sheltered from the wind, and exposed to all the heat of the midday sun. The place was cleared, carefully weeded, and searched for insects and worms; then a bed of good earth, improved with a little lime, was made; it was surrounded by a railing; and the grain was buried in the damp earth.

Did it not seem as if the settlers were laying the first stone of some edifice? It recalled to Pencroft the day on which he lighted his only match, and all the anxiety of the operation. But this time the thing was more serious. In fact, the castaways would have been always able to procure fire, in some mode or other, but no human power could supply another grain of corn, if unfortunately this should be lost!

CHAPTER 21

From this time Pencroft did not let a single day pass without going to visit what he gravely called his “corn-field.” And woe to the insects which dared to venture there! No mercy was shown them.

Towards the end of the month of June, after incessant rain, the weather became decidedly colder, and on the 29th a Fahrenheit thermometer would certainly have announced only twenty degrees above zero, that is considerably below the freezing-point. The next day, the 30th of June, the day which corresponds to the 31st of December in the northern year, was a Friday. Neb remarked that the year finished on a bad day, but Pencroft replied that naturally the next would begin on a good one, which was better.

At any rate it commenced by very severe cold. Ice accumulated at the mouth of the Mercy, and it was not long before the whole expanse of the lake was frozen.

The settlers had frequently been obliged to renew their store of wood. Pencroft also had wisely not waited till the river was frozen, but had brought enormous rafts of wood to their destination. The current was an indefatigable moving power, and it was employed in conveying the floating wood to the moment when the frost enchained it. To the fuel which was so abundantly supplied by the forest, they added several cartloads of coal, which had to be brought from the foot of the spurs of Mount Franklin. The powerful heat of the coal was greatly appreciated in the low temperature, which on the 4th of July fell to eight degrees of Fahrenheit, that is, thirteen degrees below zero. A second fireplace had been established in the dining-room, where they all worked together at their different avocations. During this period of cold, Cyrus Harding had great cause to congratulate himself on having brought to Granite House the little stream of water from Lake Grant. Taken below the frozen surface, and conducted through the passage, it preserved its fluidity, and arrived at an interior reservoir which had been hollowed out at the back part of the storeroom, while the overflow ran through the well to the sea.

About this time, the weather being extremely dry, the colonists, clothed as warmly as possible, resolved to devote a day to the exploration of that part of the island between the Mercy and Claw Cape. It was a wide extent of marshy land, and they would probably find good sport, for water-birds ought to swarm there.

They reckoned that it would be about eight or nine miles to go there, and as much to return, so that the whole of the day would be occupied. As an unknown part of the island was about to be explored, the whole colony took part in the expedition. Accordingly, on the 5th of July, at six o'clock in the morning, when day had scarcely broken, Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Neb, and Pencroft, armed with spears, snares, bows and arrows, and provided with provisions, left Granite House, preceded by Top, who bounded before them.

Their shortest way was to cross the Mercy on the ice, which then covered it.

"But," as the engineer justly observed, "that could not take the place of a regular bridge!" So, the construction of a regular bridge was noted in the list of future works.

It was the first time that the settlers had set foot on the right bank of the Mercy, and ventured into the midst of those gigantic and superb coniferae now sprinkled over with snow.

But they had not gone half a mile when from a thicket a whole family of quadrupeds, who had made a home there, disturbed by Top, rushed forth into the open country.

“Ah! I should say those are foxes!” cried Herbert, when he saw the troop rapidly decamping.

They were foxes, but of a very large size, who uttered a sort of barking, at which Top seemed to be very much astonished, for he stopped short in the chase, and gave the swift animals time to disappear.

The dog had reason to be surprised, as he did not know Natural History. But, by their barking, these foxes, with reddish-gray hair, black tails terminating in a white tuft, had betrayed their origin. So Herbert was able, without hesitating, to give them their real name of “Arctic foxes.” They are frequently met with in Chile, in the Falkland Islands, and in all parts of America traversed by the thirtieth and fortieth parallels. Herbert much regretted that Top had not been able to catch one of these carnivora.

“Are they good to eat?” asked Pencroft, who only regarded the representatives of the fauna in the island from one special point of view.

“No,” replied Herbert; “but zoologists have not yet found out if the eye of these foxes is diurnal or nocturnal, or whether it is correct to class them in the genus dog, properly so called.”

Harding could not help smiling on hearing the lad’s reflection, which showed a thoughtful mind. As to the sailor, from the moment when he found that the foxes were not classed in the genus eatable, they were nothing to him. However, when a poultry-yard was established at Granite

House, he observed that it would be best to take some precautions against a probable visit from these four-legged plunderers, and no one disputed this.

After having turned the point, the settlers saw a long beach washed by the open sea. It was then eight o’clock in the morning. The sky was very clear, as it often is after prolonged cold; but warmed by their walk, neither Harding nor his companions felt the sharpness of the atmosphere too severely. Besides there was no wind, which made it much more bearable. A brilliant sun, but without any calorific action, was just issuing from the ocean. The sea was as tranquil and blue as that of a Mediterranean gulf, when the sky is clear. Claw Cape, bent in the form of a yataghan, tapered away nearly four miles to the southeast. To the left the edge of the marsh was abruptly ended by a little point. Certainly, in this part of Union Bay, which nothing sheltered from the open sea, not even a sandbank, ships beaten by the east winds would have found no shelter. They perceived by the tranquillity of the sea, in which no shallows troubled the waters, by its uniform color, which was stained by no yellow shades, by the absence of even a reef, that the coast was steep and that the ocean there covered a deep abyss. Behind in the west, but at a distance of four miles, rose the first trees of the forests of the Far West. They might have believed themselves to be on the desolate coast of some island in the Antarctic regions which the ice had invaded. The colonists halted at this place for breakfast. A fire of brushwood and dried seaweed was lighted, and Neb prepared the breakfast of cold meat, to which he added some cups of Oswego tea.

While eating they looked around them. This part of Lincoln Island was very sterile, and contrasted with all the western part. The reporter was thus led to observe that if chance had thrown them at first on the shore, they would have had but a deplorable idea of their future domain.

“I believe that we should not have been able to reach it,” replied the engineer, “for the sea is deep, and there is not a rock on which we could have taken refuge. Before Granite House, at least, there were sandbanks, an islet, which multiplied our chances of safety. Here, nothing but the depths!”

“It is singular enough,” remarked Spilett, “that this comparatively small island should present such varied ground. This diversity of aspect, logically only belongs to continents of a certain extent. One would really say, that the western part of Lincoln Island, so rich and so fertile, is washed by the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, and that its shores to the north and the southeast extend over a sort of Arctic sea.”

“You are right, my dear Spilett,” replied Cyrus Harding, “I have also observed this. I think the form and also the nature of this island strange. It is a summary of all the aspects which a continent presents, and I should not be surprised if it was a continent formerly.”

“What! a continent in the middle of the Pacific?” cried Pencroft.

“Why not?” replied Cyrus Harding. “Why should not Australia, New Ireland, Australasia, united to the archipelagoes of the Pacific, have once formed a sixth part of the world, as important as Europe or Asia, as Africa or the two Americas? To my mind, it is quite possible that all these islands, emerging from this vast ocean, are but the summits of a continent, now submerged, but which was above the waters at a prehistoric period.”

“As the Atlantis was formerly,” replied Herbert.

“Yes, my boy... if, however, it existed.”

“And would Lincoln Island have been a part of that continent?” asked Pencroft.

“It is probable,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and that would sufficiently, explain the variety of productions which are seen on its surface.”

“And the great number of animals which still inhabit it,” added Herbert.

“Yes, my boy,” replied the engineer, “and you furnish me with an argument to support my theory. It is certain, after what we have seen, that animals are numerous in this island, and what is more strange, that the species are extremely varied. There is a reason for that, and to me it is that Lincoln Island may have formerly been a part of some vast continent which had gradually sunk below the Pacific.”

“Then, some fine day,” said Pencroft, who did not appear to be entirely convinced, “the rest of this ancient continent may disappear in its turn, and there will be nothing between America and Asia.”

“Yes,” replied Harding, “there will be new continents which millions and millions of animalculae are building at this moment.”

“And what are these masons?” asked Pencroft.

“Coral insects,” replied Cyrus Harding. “By constant work they made the island of Clermont-Tonnerre, and numerous other coral islands in the Pacific Ocean. Forty-seven millions of these insects are needed to weigh a grain, and yet, with the sea-salt they absorb, the solid elements of water which they assimilate, these animalculae produce limestone, and this limestone forms enormous submarine erections, of which the hardness and solidity equal granite. Formerly, at the first periods of creation, nature employing fire, heaved up the land, but now she entrusts to these microscopic creatures the task of replacing this agent, of which the dynamic power in the interior of the globe has evidently diminished — which is proved by the number of volcanoes on the surface of the earth, now actually extinct. And I believe that centuries succeeding to centuries, and insects to insects, this Pacific may one day be changed into a vast continent, which new generations will inhabit and civilize in their turn."

"That will take a long time," said Pencroft.

"Nature has time for it," replied the engineer.

"But what would be the use of new continents?" asked Herbert. "It appears to me that the present extent of habitable countries is sufficient for humanity. Yet nature does nothing uselessly."

"Nothing uselessly, certainly," replied the engineer, "but this is how the necessity of new continents for the future, and exactly on the tropical zone occupied by the coral islands, may be explained. At least to me this explanation appears plausible."

"We are listening, captain," said Herbert.

"This is my idea: philosophers generally admit that some day our globe will end, or rather that animal and vegetable life will no longer be possible, because of the intense cold to which it will be subjected. What they are not agreed upon, is the cause of this cold. Some think that it will arise from the falling of the temperature, which the sun will experience after millions of years; others, from the gradual extinction of the fires in the interior of our globe, which have a greater influence on it than is generally supposed. I hold to this last hypothesis, grounding it on the fact that the moon is really a cold star, which is no longer habitable, although the sun continues to throw on its surface the same amount of heat. If, then, the moon has become cold, it is because the interior fires to which, as do all the stars of the stellar world, it owes its origin, are completely extinct. Lastly, whatever may be the cause, our globe will become cold some day, but this cold will only operate gradually. What will happen, then? The temperate zones, at a more or less distant period, will not be more habitable than the polar regions now are. Then the population of men, as well as the animals, will flow towards the latitudes which are more directly under the solar influence. An immense emigration will take place. Europe, Central Asia, North America, will gradually be abandoned, as well as Australasia and the lower parts of South America. The vegetation will follow the human emigration. The flora will retreat towards the Equator at the same time as the fauna. The central parts of South America and Africa will be the continents chiefly inhabited. The Laplanders and the Samoides will find the climate of the polar regions on the shores of the Mediterranean. Who can say, that at this period, the equatorial regions will not be too small, to contain and nourish terrestrial humanity? Now, may not provident nature, so as to give refuge to all the vegetable and animal emigration, be at present laying the foundation of a new continent under the Equator, and may she not have entrusted these insects with the construction of it? I have often thought of all these things, my friends, and I seriously believe that the aspect of our globe will some day be completely changed; that by the raising of new continents the sea will cover the old, and that, in future ages, a Columbus will go to discover the islands of Chimborazo, of the Himalayas, or of Mont Blanc, remains of a submerged America, Asia, and Europe. Then these new continents will become, in their turn, uninhabitable; heat will die away, as does the heat from a body when the soul has left it; and life will disappear from the globe, if not for ever, at least for a period. Perhaps then, our spheroid will rest —

will be left to death — to revive some day under superior conditions! But all that, my friends, is the secret of the Author of all things; and beginning by the work of the insects, I have perhaps let myself be carried too far, in investigating the secrets of the future.

“My dear Cyrus,” replied Spilett, “these theories are prophecies to me, and they will be accomplished some day.”

“That is the secret of God,” said the engineer.

“All that is well and good,” then said Pencroft, who had listened with all his might, “but will you tell me, captain, if Lincoln Island has been made by your insects?”

“No,” replied Harding; “it is of a purely volcanic origin.”

“Then it will disappear some day?”

“That is probable.”

“I hope we won’t be here then.”

“No, don’t be uneasy, Pencroft; we shall not be here then, as we have no wish to die here, and hope to get away some time.”

“In the meantime,” replied Gideon Spilett, “let us establish ourselves here as if forever. There is no use in doing things by halves.”

This ended the conversation. Breakfast was finished, the exploration was continued, and the settlers arrived at the border of the marshy region. It was a marsh of which the extent, to the rounded coast which terminated the island at the southeast, was about twenty square miles. The soil was formed of clayey flint-earth, mingled with vegetable matter, such as the remains of rushes, reeds, grass, etc. Here and there beds of grass, thick as a carpet, covered it. In many places icy pools sparkled in the sun. Neither rain nor any river, increased by a sudden swelling, could supply these ponds. They therefore naturally concluded that the marsh was fed by the infiltrations of the soil and it was really so. It was also to be feared that during the heat miasmas would arise, which might produce fevers.

Above the aquatic plants, on the surface of the stagnant water, fluttered numbers of birds. Wild duck, teal, snipe lived there in flocks, and those fearless birds allowed themselves to be easily approached.

One shot from a gun would certainly have brought down some dozen of the birds, they were so close together. The explorers were, however, obliged to content themselves with bows and arrows. The result was less, but the silent arrow had the advantage of not frightening the birds, while the noise of firearms would have dispersed them to all parts of the marsh. The hunters were satisfied, for this time, with a dozen ducks, which had white bodies with a band of cinnamon, a green head, wings black, white, and red, and flattened beak. Herbert called them tadorns. Top helped in the capture of these birds, whose name was given to this marshy part of the island. The settlers had here an abundant reserve of aquatic game. At some future time they meant to explore it more carefully, and it was probable that some of the birds there might be domesticated, or at least brought to the shores of the lake, so that they would be more within their reach.

About five o’clock in the evening Cyrus Harding and his companions retraced their steps to their dwelling by traversing Tadorn’s Fens, and crossed the Mercy on the ice-bridge.

At eight in the evening they all entered Granite House.

CHAPTER 22

This intense cold lasted till the 15th of August, without, however, passing the degree of Fahrenheit already mentioned. When the atmosphere was calm, the low temperature was easily borne, but when the wind blew, the poor settlers, insufficiently clothed, felt it severely. Pencroft regretted that Lincoln Island was not the home of a few families of bears rather than of so many foxes and seals.

“Bears,” said he, “are generally very well dressed, and I ask no more than to borrow for the winter the warm cloaks which they have on their backs.”

“But,” replied Neb, laughing, “perhaps the bears would not consent to give you their cloaks, Pencroft. These beasts are not St. Martins.”

“We would make them do it, Neb, we would make them,” replied Pencroft, in quite an authoritative tone.

But these formidable carnivora did not exist in the island, or at any rate they had not yet shown themselves.

In the meanwhile, Herbert, Pencroft, and the reporter occupied themselves with making traps on Prospect Heights and at the border of the forest.

According to the sailor, any animal, whatever it was, would be a lawful prize, and the rodents or carnivora which might get into the new snares would be well received at Granite House.

The traps were besides extremely simple; being pits dug in the ground, a platform of branches and grass above, which concealed the opening, and at the bottom some bait, the scent of which would attract animals. It must be mentioned also, that they had not been dug at random, but at certain places where numerous footprints showed that quadrupeds frequented the ground. They were visited every day, and at three different times, during the first days, specimens of those Antarctic foxes which they had already seen on the right bank of the Mercy were found in them.

“Why, there are nothing but foxes in this country!” cried Pencroft, when for the third time he drew one of the animals out of the pit. Looking at it in great disgust, he added, “beasts which are good for nothing!”

“Yes,” said Gideon Spilett, “they are good for something!”

“And what is that?”

“To make bait to attract other creatures!”

The reporter was right, and the traps were henceforward baited with the foxes carcasses.

The sailor had also made snares from the long tough fibers of a certain plant, and they were even more successful than the traps. Rarely a day passed without some rabbits from the warren being caught. It was always rabbit, but Neb knew how to vary his sauces and the settlers did not think of complaining.

However, once or twice in the second week of August, the traps supplied the hunters with other animals more useful than foxes, namely, several of those small wild boars which had already been seen to the north of the lake. Pencroft had no need to ask if these beasts were eatable. He could see that by their resemblance to the pig of America and Europe.

“But these are not pigs,” said Herbert to him, “I warn you of that, Pencroft.”

“My boy,” replied the sailor, bending over the trap and drawing out one of these representatives of the family of sus by the little appendage which served it as a tail. “Let me believe that these are pigs.”

“Why?”

“Because that pleases me!”

“Are you very fond of pig then, Pencroft?”

“I am very fond of pig,” replied the sailor, “particularly of its feet, and if it had eight instead of four, I should like it twice as much!”

As to the animals in question, they were peccaries belonging to one of the four species which are included in the family, and they were also of the species of Tajacu, recognizable by their deep color and the absence of those long teeth with which the mouths of their congeners are armed. These peccaries generally live in herds, and it was probable that they abounded in the woody parts of the island.

At any rate, they were eatable from head to foot, and Pencroft did not ask more from them.

Towards the 15th of August, the state of the atmosphere was suddenly moderated by the wind shifting to the northwest. The temperature rose some degrees, and the accumulated vapor in the air was not long in resolving into snow. All the island was covered with a sheet of white, and showed itself to its inhabitants under a new aspect. The snow fell abundantly for several days, and it soon reached a thickness of two feet.

The wind also blew with great violence, and at the height of Granite House the sea could be heard thundering against the reefs. In some places, the wind, eddying round the corners, formed the snow into tall whirling columns, resembling those waterspouts which turn round on their base, and which vessels attack with a shot from a gun. However, the storm, coming from the northwest, blew across the island, and the position of Granite House preserved it from a direct attack.

But in the midst of this snow-storm, as terrible as if it had been produced in some polar country, neither Cyrus Harding nor his companions could, notwithstanding their wish for it, venture forth, and they remained shut up for five days, from the 20th to the 25th of August. They could hear the tempest raging in Jacamar Wood, which would surely suffer from it. Many of the trees would no doubt be torn up by the roots, but Pencroft consoled himself by thinking that he would not have the trouble of cutting them down.

“The wind is turning woodman, let it alone,” he repeated.

Besides, there was no way of stopping it, if they had wished to do so.

How grateful the inhabitants of Granite House then were to Heaven for having prepared for them this solid and immovable retreat! Cyrus Harding had also his legitimate share of thanks, but after all, it was Nature who had hollowed out this vast cavern, and he had only discovered it. There all were in safety, and the tempest could not reach them. If they had constructed a house of bricks and wood on Prospect Heights, it certainly would not have resisted the fury of this storm. As to the Chimneys, it must have been absolutely uninhabitable, for the sea, passing over the islet, would beat furiously against it. But here, in Granite House, in the middle of a solid mass, over which neither the sea nor air had any influence, there was nothing to fear.

During these days of seclusion the settlers did not remain inactive.

There was no want of wood, cut up into planks, in the storeroom, and little by little they completed their furnishing; constructing the most solid of tables and chairs, for material was not spared. Neb and Pencroft were very proud of this rather heavy furniture, which they would not have changed on any account.

Then the carpenters became basket-makers, and they did not succeed badly in this new manufacture. At the point of the lake which projected to the north, they had discovered an osier-bed in which grew a large number of purple osiers. Before the rainy season, Pencroft and Herbert had cut down these useful shrubs, and their branches, well prepared, could now be effectively employed. The first attempts were somewhat crude, but in consequence of the cleverness and intelligence of the workmen, by consulting, and recalling the models which they had seen, and by emulating each other, the possessions of the colony were soon increased by several baskets of different sizes. The storeroom was provided with them, and in special baskets Neb placed his collection of rhizomes, stone-pine almonds, etc.

During the last week of the month of August the weather moderated again. The temperature fell a little, and the tempest abated. The colonists sallied out directly. There was certainly two feet of snow on the shore, but they were able to walk without much difficulty on the hardened surface. Cyrus Harding and his companions climbed Prospect Heights.

What a change! The woods, which they had left green, especially in the part at which the firs predominated, had disappeared under a uniform color. All was white, from the summit of Mount Franklin to the shore, the forests, the plains, the lake, the river. The waters of the Mercy flowed under a roof of ice, which, at each rising and ebbing of the tide, broke up with loud crashes. Numerous birds fluttered over the frozen surface of the lake. Ducks and snipe, teal and guillemots were assembled in thousands. The rocks among which the cascade flowed were bristling with icicles. One might have said that the water escaped by a monstrous gargoyle, shaped with all the imagination of an artist of the Renaissance. As to the damage caused by the storm in the forest, that could not as yet be ascertained; they would have to wait till the snowy covering was dissipated.

Gideon Spilett, Pencroft, and Herbert did not miss this opportunity of going to visit their traps. They did not find them easily, under the snow with which they were covered. They had also to be careful not to fall into one or other of them, which would have been both dangerous and humiliating; to be taken in their own snares! But happily they avoided this unpleasantness, and found their traps perfectly intact. No animal had fallen into them, and yet the footprints in the neighborhood were very numerous, among others, certain very clear marks of claws. Herbert did not hesitate to affirm that some animal of the feline species had passed there, which justified the engineer’s opinion that dangerous beasts existed in Lincoln Island. These animals doubtless generally lived in the forests of the Far West, but pressed by hunger, they had ventured as far as Prospect Heights. Perhaps they had smelled out the inhabitants of Granite House. “Now, what are these feline creatures?” asked Pencroft. “They are tigers,” replied Herbert. “I thought those beasts were only found in hot countries?”

“On the new continent,” replied the lad, “they are found from Mexico to the Pampas of Buenos Aires. Now, as Lincoln Island is nearly under the same latitude as the provinces of La Plata, it is not surprising that tigers are to be met with in it.”

“Well, we must look out for them,” replied Pencroft.

However, the snow soon disappeared, quickly dissolving under the influence of the rising temperature. Rain fell, and the sheet of white soon vanished. Notwithstanding the bad weather, the settlers renewed their stores of different things, stone-pine almonds, rhizomes, syrup from the maple-tree, for the vegetable part; rabbits from the warren, agouties, and kangaroos for the animal part. This necessitated several excursions into the forest, and they found that a great number of trees had been blown down by the last hurricane. Pencroft and Neb also pushed with the cart as far as the vein of coal, and brought back several tons of fuel. They saw in passing that the pottery kiln had been severely damaged by the wind, at least six feet of it having been blown off.

At the same time as the coal, the store of wood was renewed at Granite House, and they profited by the current of the Mercy having again become free, to float down several rafts. They could see that the cold period was not ended.

A visit was also paid to the Chimneys, and the settlers could not but congratulate themselves on not having been living there during the hurricane. The sea had left unquestionable traces of its ravages. Sweeping over the islet, it had furiously assailed the passages, half filling them with sand, while thick beds of seaweed covered the rocks. While Neb, Herbert, and Pencroft hunted or collected wood, Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett busied themselves in putting the Chimneys to rights, and they found the forge and the bellows almost unhurt, protected as they had been from the first by the heaps of sand.

The store of fuel had not been made uselessly. The settlers had not done with the rigorous cold. It is known that, in the Northern Hemisphere, the month of February is principally distinguished by rapid fallings of the temperature. It is the same in the Southern Hemisphere, and the end of the month of August, which is the February of North America, does not escape this climatic law.

About the 25th, after another change from snow to rain, the wind shifted to the southeast, and the cold became, suddenly, very severe. According to the engineer’s calculation, the mercurial column of a Fahrenheit thermometer would not have marked less than eight degrees below zero, and this intense cold, rendered still more painful by a sharp gale, lasted for several days. The colonists were again shut up in Granite House, and as it was necessary to hermetically seal all the openings of the facade, only leaving a narrow passage for renewing the air, the consumption of candles was considerable. To economize them, the cavern was often only lighted by the blazing hearths, on which fuel was not spared. Several times, one or other of the settlers descended to the beach in the midst of ice which the waves heaped up at each tide, but they soon climbed up again to Granite House, and it was not without pain and difficulty that their hands could hold to the rounds of the ladder. In consequence of the intense cold, their fingers felt as if burned when they touched the rounds. To occupy the leisure hours, which the tenants of Granite House now had at their disposal, Cyrus Harding undertook an operation which could be performed indoors.

We know that the settlers had no other sugar at their disposal than the liquid substance which they drew from the maple, by making deep incisions in the tree. They contented themselves with collecting this liquor in jars and employing it in this state for different culinary purposes, and the more so, as on growing old, this liquid began to become white and to be of a syrupy consistence.

But there was something better to be made of it, and one day Cyrus Harding announced that they were going to turn into refiners.

“Refiners!” replied Pencroft. “That is rather a warm trade, I think.”

“Very warm,” answered the engineer.

“Then it will be seasonable!” said the sailor.

This word refining need not awake in the mind thoughts of an elaborate manufactory with apparatus and numerous workmen. No! to crystallize this liquor, only an extremely easy operation is required. Placed on the fire in large earthen pots, it was simply subjected to evaporation, and soon a scum arose to its surface. As soon as this began to thicken, Neb carefully removed it with a wooden spatula; this accelerated the evaporation, and at the same time prevented it from contracting an empyreumatic flavor.

After boiling for several hours on a hot fire, which did as much good to the operators as the substance operated upon, the latter was transformed into a thick syrup. This syrup was poured into clay molds, previously fabricated in the kitchen stove, and to which they had given various shapes. The next day this syrup had become cold, and formed cakes and tablets. This was sugar of rather a reddish color, but nearly transparent and of a delicious taste.

The cold continued to the middle of September, and the prisoners in Granite House began to find their captivity rather tedious. Nearly every day they attempted sorties which they could not prolong. They constantly worked at the improvement of their dwelling. They talked while working. Harding instructed his companions in many things, principally explaining to them the practical applications of science. The colonists had no library at their disposal; but the engineer was a book which was always at hand, always open at the page which one wanted, a book which answered all their questions, and which they often consulted. The time thus passed away pleasantly, these brave men not appearing to have any fears for the future.

However, all were anxious to see, if not the fine season, at least the cessation of the insupportable cold. If only they had been clothed in a way to meet it, how many excursions they would have attempted, either to the downs or to Tadorn’s Fens! Game would have been easily approached, and the chase would certainly have been most productive. But Cyrus Harding considered it of importance that no one should injure his health, for he had need of all his hands, and his advice was followed.

But it must be said, that the one who was most impatient of this imprisonment, after Pencroft perhaps, was Top. The faithful dog found Granite House very narrow. He ran backwards and forwards from one room to another, showing in his way how weary he was of being shut up. Harding often remarked that when he approached the dark well which communicated with the sea, and of which the orifice opened at the back of the storeroom, Top uttered singular growlings. He ran round and round this hole, which had been covered with a wooden lid. Sometimes even he tried to put his paws under the lid, as if he wished to raise it. He then yelped in a peculiar way, which showed at once anger and uneasiness.

The engineer observed this maneuver several times.

What could there be in this abyss to make such an impression on the intelligent animal? The well led to the sea, that was certain. Could narrow passages spread from it through the foundations of the island? Did some marine monster come from time to time, to breathe at the bottom of this well? The engineer did not know what to think, and could not refrain from dreaming of many strange improbabilities. Accustomed to go far into the regions of scientific reality, he would not allow himself to be drawn into the regions of the strange and almost of the supernatural; but yet how to explain why Top, one of those sensible dogs who never waste their time in barking at the moon, should persist in trying with scent and hearing to fathom this abyss, if there was nothing there to cause his uneasiness? Top's conduct puzzled Cyrus Harding even more than he cared to acknowledge to himself.

At all events, the engineer only communicated his impressions to Gideon Spilett, for he thought it useless to explain to his companions the suspicions which arose from what perhaps was only Top's fancy.

At last the cold ceased. There had been rain, squalls mingled with snow, hailstorms, gusts of wind, but these inclemencies did not last. The ice melted, the snow disappeared; the shore, the plateau, the banks of the Mercy, the forest, again became practicable. This return of spring delighted the tenants of Granite House, and they soon only passed it in the hours necessary for eating and sleeping.

They hunted much in the second part of September, which led Pencroft to again entreat for the firearms, which he asserted had been promised by Cyrus Harding. The latter, knowing well that without special tools it would be nearly impossible for him to manufacture a gun which would be of any use, still drew back and put off the operation to some future time, observing in his usual dry way, that Herbert and Spilett had become very skilful archers, so that many sorts of excellent animals, agouties, kangaroos, capybaras, pigeons, bustards, wild ducks, snipes, in short, game both with fur and feathers, fell victims to their arrows, and that, consequently, they could wait. But the obstinate sailor would listen to nothing of this, and he would give the engineer no peace till he promised to satisfy his desire. Gideon Spilett, however, supported Pencroft.

“If, which may be doubted,” said he, “the island is inhabited by wild beasts, we must think how to fight with and exterminate them. A time may come when this will be our first duty.”

But at this period, it was not the question of firearms which occupied Harding, but that of clothes. Those which the settlers wore had passed this winter, but they would not last until next winter. Skins of carnivora or the wool of ruminants must be procured at any price, and since there were plenty of musmons, it was agreed to consult on the means of forming a flock which might be brought up for the use of the colony. An enclosure for the domestic animals, a poultry-yard for the birds, in a word to establish a sort of farm in the island, such were the two important projects for the fine season.

In consequence and in view of these future establishments, it became of much importance that they should penetrate into all the yet unknown parts of Lincoln Island, that is to say, through that thick forest which extended on the right bank of the Mercy, from its mouth to the extremity of the Serpentine Peninsula, as well as on the whole of its western side. But this needed settled weather, and a month must pass before this exploration could be profitably undertaken.

They therefore waited with some impatience, when an incident occurred which increased the desire the settlers had to visit the whole of their domain.

It was the 24th of October. On this day, Pencroft had gone to visit his traps, which he always kept properly baited. In one of them he found three animals which would be very welcome for the larder. They were a female peccary and her two young ones.

Pencroft then returned to Granite House, enchanted with his capture, and, as usual, he made a great show of his game.

“Come, we shall have a grand feast, captain!” he exclaimed. “And you too, Mr. Spilett, you will eat some!”

“I shall be very happy,” replied the reporter; “but what is it that I am going to eat?”

“Suckling-pig.”

“Oh, indeed, suckling-pig, Pencroft? To hear you, I thought that you were bringing back a young partridge stuffed with truffles!”

“What?” cried Pencroft. “Do you mean to say that you turn up your nose at suckling-pig?’

“No,” replied Gideon Spilett, without showing any enthusiasm; “provided one doesn’t eat too much.”

“That’s right, that’s right,” returned the sailor, who was not pleased whenever he heard his chase made light of. “You like to make objections. Seven months ago, when we landed on the island, you would have been only too glad to have met with such game!”

“Well, well,” replied the reporter, “man is never perfect, nor contented.”

“Now,” said Pencroft, “I hope that Neb will distinguish himself. Look here! These two little peccaries are not more than three months old! They will be as tender as quails! Come along, Neb, come! I will look after the cooking myself.”

And the sailor, followed by Neb, entered the kitchen, where they were soon absorbed in their culinary labors.

They were allowed to do it in their own way. Neb, therefore, prepared a magnificent repast — the two little peccaries, kangaroo soup, a smoked ham, stone-pine almonds, Oswego tea; in fact, all the best that they had, but among all the dishes figured in the first rank the savory peccaries.

At five o’clock dinner was served in the dining-room of Granite House. The kangaroo soup was smoking on the table. They found it excellent.

To the soup succeeded the peccaries, which Pencroft insisted on carving himself, and of which he served out monstrous portions to each of the guests.

These suckling-pigs were really delicious, and Pencroft was devouring his share with great gusto, when all at once a cry and an oath escaped him.

“What’s the matter?” asked Cyrus Harding.

“The matter? the matter is that I have just broken a tooth!” replied the sailor.

“What, are there pebbles in your peccaries?” said Gideon Spilett.

“I suppose so,” replied Pencroft, drawing from his lips the object which had cost him a grinder — !

It was not a pebble — it was a leaden bullet.

PART 2. ABANDONED

CHAPTER 1

It was now exactly seven months since the balloon voyagers had been thrown on Lincoln Island. During that time, notwithstanding the researches they had made, no human being had been discovered. No smoke even had betrayed the presence of man on the surface of the island. No vestiges of his handiwork showed that either at an early or at a late period had man lived there. Not only did it now appear to be uninhabited by any but themselves, but the colonists were compelled to believe that it never had been inhabited. And now, all this scaffolding of reasonings fell before a simple ball of metal, found in the body of an inoffensive rodent! In fact, this bullet must have issued from a firearm, and who but a human being could have used such a weapon?

When Pencroft had placed the bullet on the table, his companions looked at it with intense astonishment. All the consequences likely to result from this incident, notwithstanding its apparent insignificance, immediately took possession of their minds. The sudden apparition of a supernatural being could not have startled them more completely.

Cyrus Harding did not hesitate to give utterance to the suggestions which this fact, at once surprising and unexpected, could not fail to raise in his mind. He took the bullet, turned it over and over, rolled it between his finger and thumb; then, turning to Pencroft, he asked, —

“Are you sure that the peccary wounded by this bullet was not more than three months old?”

“Not more, captain,” replied Pencroft. “It was still sucking its mother when I found it in the trap.”

“Well,” said the engineer, “that proves that within three months a gun-shot was fired in Lincoln Island.”

“And that a bullet,” added Gideon Spilett, “wounded, though not mortally, this little animal.”

“That is unquestionable,” said Cyrus Harding, “and these are the deductions which must be drawn from this incident: that the island was inhabited before our arrival, or that men have landed here within three months. Did these men arrive here voluntarily or involuntarily, by disembarking on the shore or by being wrecked? This point can only be cleared up later. As to what they were, Europeans or Malays, enemies or friends of our race, we cannot possibly guess; and if they still inhabit the island, or if they have left it, we know not. But these questions are of too much importance to be allowed to remain long unsettled.”

“No! a hundred times no! a thousand times no!” cried the sailor, springing up from the table. “There are no other men than ourselves on Lincoln Island! By my faith! The island isn’t large and if it had been inhabited, we should have seen some of the inhabitants long before this!”

“In fact, the contrary would be very astonishing,” said Herbert.

“But it would be much more astonishing, I should think,” observed the reporter, “if this peccary had been born with a bullet in its inside!”

“At least,” said Neb seriously, “if Pencroft has not had — ”

“Look here, Neb,” burst out Pencroft. “Do you think I could have a bullet in my jaw for five or six months without finding it out? Where could it be hidden?” he asked, opening his mouth to show the two-and-thirty teeth with which it was furnished. “Look well, Neb, and if you find one hollow tooth in this set, I will let you pull out half a dozen!”

“Neb’s supposition is certainly inadmissible,” replied Harding, who, notwithstanding the gravity of his thoughts, could not restrain a smile. “It is certain that a gun has been fired in the island, within three months at most. But I am inclined to think that the people who landed on this coast were only here a very short time ago, or that they just touched here; for if, when we surveyed the island from the summit of Mount Franklin, it had been inhabited, we should have seen them or we should have been seen ourselves. It is therefore, probable that within only a few weeks castaways have been thrown by a storm on some part of the coast. However that may be, it is of consequence to us to have this point settled.”

“I think that we should act with caution,” said the reporter.

“Such is my advice,” replied Cyrus Harding, “for it is to be feared that Malay pirates have landed on the island!”

“Captain,” asked the sailor, “would it not be a good plan, before setting out, to build a canoe in which we could either ascend the river, or, if we liked, coast round the inland? It will not do to be unprovided.”

“Your idea is good, Pencroft,” replied the engineer, “but we cannot wait for that. It would take at least a month to build a boat.”

“Yes, a real boat,” replied the sailor; “but we do not want one for a sea voyage, and in five days at the most, I will undertake to construct a canoe fit to navigate the Mercy.”

“Five days,” cried Neb, “to build a boat?”

“Yes, Neb; a boat in the Indian fashion.”

“Of wood?” asked the Negro, looking still unconvinced.

“Of wood,” replied Pencroft, “of rather of bark. I repeat, captain, that in five days the work will be finished!”

“In five days, then, be it,” replied the engineer.

“But till that time we must be very watchful,” said Herbert.

“Very watchful indeed, my friends,” replied Harding; “and I beg you to confine your hunting excursions to the neighborhood of Granite House.”

The dinner ended less gaily than Pencroft had hoped.

So, then, the island was, or had been, inhabited by others than the settlers. Proved as it was by the incident of the bullet, it was hereafter an unquestionable fact, and such a discovery could not but cause great uneasiness among the colonists.

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett, before sleeping, conversed long about the matter. They asked themselves if by chance this incident might not have some connection with the inexplicable way in which the engineer had been saved, and the other peculiar circumstances which had struck them at different times. However, Cyrus Harding, after having discussed the pros and cons of the question, ended by saying, —

“In short, would you like to know my opinion, my dear Spilett?”

“Yes, Cyrus.”

“Well, then, it is this: however minutely we explore the island, we shall find nothing.”

The next day Pencroft set to work. He did not mean to build a boat with boards and planking, but simply a flat-bottomed canoe, which would be well suited for navigating the Mercy — above all, for approaching its source, where the water would naturally be shallow. Pieces of bark, fastened one to the other, would form a light boat; and in case of natural obstacles, which would render a portage necessary, it would be easily carried. Pencroft intended to secure the pieces of bark by means of nails, to insure the canoe being water-tight.

It was first necessary to select the trees which would afford a strong and supple bark for the work. Now the last storm had brought down a number of large birch-trees, the bark of which would be perfectly suited for their purpose. Some of these trees lay on the ground, and they had only to be barked, which was the most difficult thing of all, owing to the imperfect tools which the settlers possessed. However, they overcame all difficulties.

While the sailor, seconded by the engineer, thus occupied himself without losing an hour, Gideon Spilett and Herbert were not idle.

They were made purveyors to the colony. The reporter could not but admire the boy, who had acquired great skill in handling the bow and spear. Herbert also showed great courage and much of that presence of mind which may justly be called “the reasoning of bravery.” These two companions of the chase, remembering Cyrus Harding’s recommendations, did not go beyond a radius of two miles round Granite House; but the borders of the forest furnished a sufficient tribute of agoutis, capybaras, kangaroos, peccaries, etc.; and if the result from the traps was less than during the cold, still the warren yielded its accustomed quota, which might have fed all the colony in Lincoln Island.

Often during these excursions, Herbert talked with Gideon Spilett on the incident of the bullet, and the deductions which the engineer drew from it, and one day — it was the 26th of October — he said — ”But, Mr. Spilett, do you not think it very extraordinary that, if any castaways have landed on the island, they have not yet shown themselves near Granite House?”

“Very astonishing if they are still here,” replied the reporter, “but not astonishing at all if they are here no longer!”

“So you think that these people have already quitted the island?” returned Herbert.

“It is more than probable, my boy; for if their stay was prolonged, and above all, if they were still here, some accident would have at last betrayed their presence.”

“But if they were able to go away,” observed the lad, “they could not have been castaways.”

“No, Herbert; or, at least, they were what might be called provisional castaways. It is very possible that a storm may have driven them to the island without destroying their vessel, and that, the storm over, they went away again.”

“I must acknowledge one thing,” said Herbert, “it is that Captain Harding appears rather to fear than desire the presence of human beings on our island.”

“In short,” responded the reporter, “there are only Malays who frequent these seas, and those fellows are ruffians which it is best to avoid.”

“It is not impossible, Mr. Spilett,” said Herbert, “that some day or other we may find traces of their landing.”

“I do not say no, my boy. A deserted camp, the ashes of a fire, would put us on the track, and this is what we will look for in our next expedition.”

The day on which the hunters spoke thus, they were in a part of the forest near the Mercy, remarkable for its beautiful trees. There, among others, rose, to a height of nearly 200 feet above the ground, some of those superb coniferae, to which, in New Zealand, the natives give the name of Kauris.

“I have an idea, Mr. Spilett,” said Herbert. “If I were to climb to the top of one of these kauris, I could survey the country for an immense distance round.”

“The idea is good,” replied the reporter; “but could you climb to the top of those giants?”

“I can at least try,” replied Herbert.

The light and active boy then sprang on the first branches, the arrangement of which made the ascent of the kauri easy, and in a few minutes he arrived at the summit, which emerged from the immense plain of verdure.

From this elevated situation his gaze extended over all the southern portion of the island, from Claw Cape on the southeast, to Reptile End on the southwest. To the northwest rose Mount Franklin, which concealed a great part of the horizon.

But Herbert, from the height of his observatory, could examine all the yet unknown portion of the island, which might have given shelter to the strangers whose presence they suspected.

The lad looked attentively. There was nothing in sight on the sea, not a sail, neither on the horizon nor near the island. However, as the bank of trees hid the shore, it was possible that a vessel, especially if deprived of her masts, might lie close to the land and thus be invisible to Herbert.

Neither in the forests of the Far West was anything to be seen. The wood formed an impenetrable screen, measuring several square miles, without a break or an opening. It was impossible even to follow the course of the Mercy, or to ascertain in what part of the mountain it took its source. Perhaps other creeks also ran towards the west, but they could not be seen.

But at last, if all indication of an encampment escaped Herbert's sight could he not even catch a glimpse of smoke, the faintest trace of which would be easily discernible in the pure atmosphere?

For an instant Herbert thought he could perceive a slight smoke in the west, but a more attentive examination showed that he was mistaken. He strained his eyes in every direction, and his sight was excellent. No, decidedly there was nothing there.

Herbert descended to the foot of the kauri, and the two sportsmen returned to Granite House. There Cyrus Harding listened to the lad's account, shook his head and said nothing. It was very evident that no decided opinion could be pronounced on this question until after a complete exploration of the island.

Two days after — the 28th of October — another incident occurred, for which an explanation was again required.

While strolling along the shore about two miles from Granite House, Herbert and Neb were fortunate enough to capture a magnificent specimen of the order of chelonia. It was a turtle of the species Midas, the edible green turtle, so called from the color both of its shell and fat.

Herbert caught sight of this turtle as it was crawling among the rocks to reach the sea.

“Help, Neb, help!” he cried.

Neb ran up.

“What a fine animal!” said Neb; “but how are we to catch it?”

“Nothing is easier, Neb,” replied Herbert. “We have only to turn the turtle on its back, and it cannot possibly get away. Take your spear and do as I do.”

The reptile, aware of danger, had retired between its carapace and plastron. They no longer saw its head or feet, and it was motionless as a rock.

Herbert and Neb then drove their sticks underneath the animal, and by their united efforts managed without difficulty to turn it on its back. The turtle, which was three feet in length, would have weighed at least four hundred pounds.

“Capital!” cried Neb; “this is something which will rejoice friend Pencroft’s heart.”

In fact, the heart of friend Pencroft could not fail to be rejoiced, for the flesh of the turtle, which feeds on wrack-grass, is extremely savory. At this moment the creature’s head could be seen, which was small, flat, but widened behind by the large temporal fossae hidden under the long roof.

“And now, what shall we do with our prize?” said Neb. “We can’t drag it to Granite House!”

“Leave it here, since it cannot turn over,” replied Herbert, “and we will come back with the cart to fetch it.”

“That is the best plan.”

However, for greater precaution, Herbert took the trouble, which Neb deemed superfluous, to wedge up the animal with great stones; after which the two hunters returned to Granite House, following the beach, which the tide had left uncovered. Herbert, wishing to surprise Pencroft, said nothing about the “superb specimen of a chelonian” which they had turned over on the sand; but, two hours later, he and Neb returned with the cart to the place where they had left it. The “superb specimen of a chelonian” was no longer there!

Neb and Herbert stared at each other first; then they stared about them. It was just at this spot that the turtle had been left. The lad even found the stones which he had used, and therefore he was certain of not being mistaken.

“Well!” said Neb, “these beasts can turn themselves over, then?’’

“It appears so,” replied Herbert, who could not understand it at all, and was gazing at the stones scattered on the sand.

“Well, Pencroft will be disgusted!”

“And Captain Harding will perhaps be very perplexed how to explain this disappearance,” thought Herbert.

“Look here,” said Neb, who wished to hide his ill-luck, “we won’t speak about it.”

“On the contrary, Neb, we must speak about it,” replied Herbert.

And the two, taking the cart, which there was now no use for, returned to Granite House.

Arrived at the dockyard, where the engineer and the sailor were working together, Herbert recounted what had happened.

“Oh! the stupids!” cried the sailor, “to have let at least fifty meals escape!”

“But, Pencroft,” replied Neb, “it wasn’t our fault that the beast got away; as I tell you, we had turned it over on its back!”

“Then you didn’t turn it over enough!” returned the obstinate sailor.

“Not enough!” cried Herbert.

And he told how he had taken care to wedge up the turtle with stones.

“It is a miracle, then!” replied Pencroft.

“I thought, captain,” said Herbert, “that turtles, once placed on their backs, could not regain their feet, especially when they are of a large size?’

“That is true, my boy,” replied Cyrus Harding.

"Then how did it manage?"

"At what distance from the sea did you leave this turtle?" asked the engineer, who, having suspended his work, was reflecting on this incident.

"Fifteen feet at the most," replied Herbert.

"And the tide was low at the time?"

"Yes, captain."

"Well," replied the engineer, "what the turtle could not do on the sand it might have been able to do in the water. It turned over when the tide overtook it, and then quietly returned to the deep sea."

"Oh! what stupids we were!" cried Neb.

"That is precisely what I had the honor of telling you before!" returned the sailor.

Cyrus Harding had given this explanation, which, no doubt, was admissible. But was he himself convinced of the accuracy of this explanation? It cannot be said that he was.

CHAPTER 2

On the 9th of October the bark canoe was entirely finished. Pencroft had kept his promise, and a light boat, the shell of which was joined together by the flexible twigs of the crejimba, had been constructed in five days. A seat in the stern, a second seat in the middle to preserve the equilibrium, a third seat in the bows, rowlocks for the two oars, a scull to steer with, completed the little craft, which was twelve feet long, and did not weigh more than two hundred pounds. The operation of launching it was extremely simple. The canoe was carried to the beach and laid on the sand before Granite House, and the rising tide floated it. Pencroft, who leaped in directly, maneuvered it with the scull and declared it to be just the thing for the purpose to which they wished to put it.

"Hurrah!" cried the sailor, who did not disdain to celebrate thus his own triumph. "With this we could go round — "

"The world?" asked Gideon Spilett.

"No, the island. Some stones for ballast, a mast and a sail, which the captain will make for us some day, and we shall go splendidly! Well, captain — and you, Mr. Spilett; and you, Herbert; and you, Neb — aren't you coming to try our new vessel? Come along! we must see if it will carry all five of us!"

This was certainly a trial which ought to be made. Pencroft soon brought the canoe to the shore by a narrow passage among the rocks, and it was agreed that they should make a trial of the boat that day by following the shore as far as the first point at which the rocks of the south ended.

As they embarked, Neb cried, —

“But your boat leaks rather, Pencroft.”

“That’s nothing, Neb,” replied the sailor; “the wood will get seasoned. In two days there won’t be a single leak, and our boat will have no more water in her than there is in the stomach of a drunkard. Jump in!”

They were soon all seated, and Pencroft shoved off. The weather was magnificent, the sea as calm as if its waters were contained within the narrow limits of a lake. Thus the boat could proceed with as much security as if it was ascending the tranquil current of the Mercy.

Neb took one of the oars, Herbert the other, and Pencroft remained in the stern in order to use the scull.

The sailor first crossed the channel, and steered close to the southern point of the islet. A light breeze blew from the south. No roughness was found either in the channel or the green sea. A long swell, which the canoe scarcely felt, as it was heavily laden, rolled regularly over the surface of the water. They pulled out about half a mile distant from the shore, that they might have a good view of Mount Franklin.

Pencroft afterwards returned towards the mouth of the river. The boat then skirted the shore, which, extending to the extreme point, hid all Tadorn’s Fens.

This point, of which the distance was increased by the irregularity of the coast, was nearly three miles from the Mercy. The settlers resolved to go to its extremity, and only go beyond it as much as was necessary to take a rapid survey of the coast as far as Claw Cape.

The canoe followed the windings of the shore, avoiding the rocks which fringed it, and which the rising tide began to cover. The cliff gradually sloped away from the mouth of the river to the point. This was formed of granite rocks, capriciously distributed, very different from the cliff at Prospect Heights, and of an extremely wild aspect. It might have been said that an immense cartload of rocks had been emptied out there. There was no vegetation on this sharp promontory, which projected two miles from the forest, and it thus represented a giant's arm stretched out from a leafy sleeve.

The canoe, impelled by the two oars, advanced without difficulty. Gideon Spilett, pencil in one hand and notebook in the other, sketched the coast in bold strokes. Neb, Herbert, and Pencroft chatted, while examining this part of their domain, which was new to them, and, in proportion as the canoe proceeded towards the south, the two Mandible Capes appeared to move, and surround Union Bay more closely.

As to Cyrus Harding, he did not speak; he simply gazed, and by the mistrust which his look expressed, it appeared that he was examining some strange country.

In the meantime, after a voyage of three-quarters of an hour, the canoe reached the extremity of the point, and Pencroft was preparing to return, when Herbert, rising, pointed to a black object, saying, —

"What do I see down there on the beach?"

All eyes turned towards the point indicated.

"Why," said the reporter, "there is something. It looks like part of a wreck half buried in the sand."

“Ah!” cried Pencroft, “I see what it is!”

“What?” asked Neb.

“Barrels, barrels, which perhaps are full,” replied the sailor.

“Pull to the shore, Pencroft!” said Cyrus.

A few strokes of the oar brought the canoe into a little creek, and its passengers leaped on shore.

Pencroft was not mistaken. Two barrels were there, half buried in the sand, but still firmly attached to a large chest, which, sustained by them, had floated to the moment when it stranded on the beach.

“There has been a wreck, then, in some part of the island,” said Herbert.

“Evidently,” replied Spilett.

“But what’s in this chest?” cried Pencroft, with very natural impatience. “What’s in this chest? It is shut up, and nothing to open it with! Well, perhaps a stone — ”

And the sailor, raising a heavy block, was about to break in one of the sides of the chest, when the engineer arrested his hand.

“Pencroft,” said he, “can you restrain your impatience for one hour only?”

“But, captain, just think! Perhaps there is everything we want in there!”

“We shall find that out, Pencroft,” replied the engineer; “but trust to me, and do not break the chest, which may be useful to us. We must convey it to Granite House, where we can open it easily, and without breaking it. It is quite prepared for a voyage; and since it has floated here, it may just as well float to the mouth of the river."

"You are right, captain, and I was wrong, as usual," replied the sailor.

The engineer's advice was good. In fact, the canoe probably would not have been able to contain the articles possibly enclosed in the chest, which doubtless was heavy, since two empty barrels were required to buoy it up. It was, therefore, much better to tow it to the beach at Granite House.

And now, whence had this chest come? That was the important question. Cyrus Harding and his companions looked attentively around them, and examined the shore for several hundred steps. No other articles or pieces of wreck could be found. Herbert and Neb climbed a high rock to survey the sea, but there was nothing in sight — neither a dismasted vessel nor a ship under sail.

However, there was no doubt that there had been a wreck. Perhaps this incident was connected with that of the bullet? Perhaps strangers had landed on another part of the island? Perhaps they were still there? But the thought which came naturally to the settlers was, that these strangers could not be Malay pirates, for the chest was evidently of American or European make.

All the party returned to the chest, which was of an unusually large size. It was made of oak wood, very carefully closed and covered with a thick hide, which was secured by copper nails. The two great barrels, hermetically sealed, but which sounded hollow and empty, were fastened to its sides by strong ropes, knotted with a skill which Pencroft directly pronounced sailors alone could exhibit. It appeared to be in a perfect state of preservation, which was explained by the fact that it had stranded on a sandy beach, and not among rocks. They had no doubt whatever, on examining it carefully, that it had not been long in the water, and that its arrival on this coast was recent. The water did not appear to have penetrated to the inside, and the articles which it contained were no doubt uninjured.

It was evident that this chest had been thrown overboard from some dismasted vessel driven towards the island, and that, in the hope that it would reach the land, where they might afterwards find it, the passengers had taken the precaution to buoy it up by means of this floating apparatus.

“We will tow this chest to Granite House,” said the engineer, “where we can make an inventory of its contents; then, if we discover any of the survivors from the supposed wreck, we can return it to those to whom it belongs. If we find no one — ”

“We will keep it for ourselves!” cried Pencroft. “But what in the world can there be in it?”

The sea was already approaching the chest, and the high tide would evidently float it. One of the ropes which fastened the barrels was partly unlashed and used as a cable to unite the floating apparatus with the canoe. Pencroft and Neb then dug away the sand with their oars, so as to facilitate the moving of the chest, towing which the boat soon began to double the point, to which the name of Flotsam Point was given.

The chest was heavy, and the barrels were scarcely sufficient to keep it above water. The sailor also feared every instant that it would get loose and sink to the bottom of the sea. But happily his fears were not realized, and an hour and a half after they set out — all that time had been taken up in going a distance of three miles — the boat touched the beach below Granite House.

Canoe and chest were then hauled up on the sands; and as the tide was then going out, they were soon left high and dry. Neb, hurrying home, brought back some tools with which to open the chest in such a way that it might be injured as little as possible, and they proceeded to its inventory. Pencroft did not try to hide that he was greatly excited.

The sailor began by detaching the two barrels, which, being in good condition, would of course be of use. Then the locks were forced with a cold chisel and hammer, and the lid thrown back. A second casing of zinc lined the interior of the chest, which had been evidently arranged that the articles which it enclosed might under any circumstances be sheltered from damp.

“Oh!” cried Neb, “suppose it’s jam!

“I hope not,” replied the reporter.

“If only there was — ” said the sailor in a low voice.

“What?” asked Neb, who overheard him.

“Nothing!”

The covering of zinc was torn off and thrown back over the sides of the chest, and by degrees numerous articles of very varied character were produced and strewn about on the sand. At each new object Pencroft uttered fresh hurrahs, Herbert clapped his hands, and Neb danced up and down. There were books which made Herbert wild with joy, and cooking utensils which Neb covered with kisses!

In short, the colonists had reason to be extremely satisfied, for this chest contained tools, weapons, instruments, clothes, books; and this is the exact list of them as stated in Gideon Spilett’s note-book: — Tools: — 3 knives with several blades, 2 woodmen’s axes, 2 carpenter’s hatchets, 3 planes, 2 adzes, 1 twibil or mattock, 6 chisels, 2 files, 3 hammers, 3 gimlets, 2 augers, 10 bags of nails and screws, 3 saws of different sizes, 2 boxes of needles.

Weapons: — 2 flint-lock guns, 2 for percussion caps, 2 breach-loader carbines, 5 boarding cutlasses, 4 sabers, 2 barrels of powder, each containing twenty-five pounds; 12 boxes of percussion caps.

Instruments: — 1 sextant, 1 double opera-glass, 1 telescope, 1 box of mathematical instruments, 1 mariner’s compass, 1 Fahrenheit thermometer, 1 aneroid barometer, 1 box containing a photographic apparatus, object-glass, plates, chemicals, etc.

Clothes: — 2 dozen shirts of a peculiar material resembling wool, but evidently of a vegetable origin; 3 dozen stockings of the same material.

Utensils: — 1 iron pot, 6 copper saucepans, 3 iron dishes, 10 metal plates, 2 kettles, 1 portable stove, 6 table-knives.

Books: — 1 Bible, 1 atlas, 1 dictionary of the different Polynesian idioms, 1 dictionary of natural science, in six volumes; 3 reams of white paper, 2 books with blank pages.

“It must be allowed,” said the reporter, after the inventory had been made, “that the owner of this chest was a practical man! Tools, weapons, instruments, clothes, utensils, books — nothing is wanting! It might really be said that he expected to be wrecked, and had prepared for it beforehand.”

“Nothing is wanting, indeed,” murmured Cyrus Harding thoughtfully.

“And for a certainty,” added Herbert, “the vessel which carried this chest and its owner was not a Malay pirate!”

“Unless,” said Pencroft, “the owner had been taken prisoner by pirates — ”

“That is not admissible,” replied the reporter. “It is more probable that an American or European vessel has been driven into this quarter, and that her passengers, wishing to save necessaries at least, prepared this chest and threw it overboard.”

“Is that your opinion, captain?” asked Herbert.

“Yes, my boy,” replied the engineer, “that may have been the case. It is possible that at the moment, or in expectation of a wreck, they collected into this chest different articles of the greatest use in hopes of finding it again on the coast — ”

“Even the photographic box!” exclaimed the sailor incredulously.

“As to that apparatus,” replied Harding, “I do not quite see the use of it; and a more complete supply of clothes or more abundant ammunition would have been more valuable to us as well as to any other castaways!”

“But isn’t there any mark or direction on these instruments, tools, or books, which would tell us something about them?” asked Gideon Spilett.

That might be ascertained. Each article was carefully examined, especially the books, instruments and weapons. Neither the weapons nor the instruments, contrary to the usual custom, bore the name of the maker; they were, besides, in a perfect state, and did not appear to have been used. The same peculiarity marked the tools and utensils; all were new, which proved that the articles had not been taken by chance and thrown into the chest, but, on the contrary, that the choice of things had been well considered and arranged with care. This was also indicated by the second case of metal which had preserved them from damp, and which could not have been soldered in a moment of haste.

As to the dictionaries of natural science and Polynesian idioms, both were English; but they neither bore the name of the publisher nor the date of publication.

The same with the Bible printed in English, in quarto, remarkable from a typographic point of view, and which appeared to have been often used.

The atlas was a magnificent work, comprising maps of every country in the world, and several planispheres arranged upon Mercator’s projection, and of which the nomenclature was in French — but which also bore neither date nor name of publisher.

There was nothing, therefore, on these different articles by which they could be traced, and nothing consequently of a nature to show the nationality of the vessel which must have recently passed these shores.

But, wherever the chest might have come from, it was a treasure to the settlers on Lincoln Island. Till then, by making use of the productions of nature, they had created everything for themselves, and, thanks to their intelligence, they had managed without difficulty. But did it not appear as if Providence had wished to reward them by sending them these productions of human industry? Their thanks rose unanimously to Heaven.

However, one of them was not quite satisfied: it was Pencroft. It appeared that the chest did not contain something which he evidently held in great esteem, for in proportion as they approached the bottom of the box, his hurrahs diminished in heartiness, and, the inventory finished, he was heard to mutter these words: — ”That’s all very fine, but you can see that there is nothing for me in that box!”

This led Neb to say, —

“Why, friend Pencroft, what more do you expect?”

“Half a pound of tobacco,” replied Pencroft seriously, “and nothing would have been wanting to complete my happiness!”

No one could help laughing at this speech of the sailor’s.

But the result of this discovery of the chest was, that it was now more than ever necessary to explore the island thoroughly. It was therefore agreed that the next morning at break of day, they should set out, by ascending the Mercy so as to reach the western shore. If any castaways had landed on the coast, it was to be feared they were without resources, and it was therefore the more necessary to carry help to them without delay.

During the day the different articles were carried to Granite House, where they were methodically arranged in the great hall. This day — the 29th of October — happened to be a Sunday, and, before going to bed, Herbert asked the engineer if he would not read them something from the Gospel.

“Willingly,” replied Cyrus Harding.

He took the sacred volume, and was about to open it, when Pencroft stopped him, saying, — ”Captain, I am superstitious. Open at random and read the first verse which, your eye falls upon. We will see if it applies to our situation.”

Cyrus Harding smiled at the sailor’s idea, and, yielding to his wish, he opened exactly at a place where the leaves were separated by a marker.

Immediately his eyes were attracted by a cross which, made with a pencil, was placed against the eighth verse of the seventh chapter of the Gospel of St. Matthew. He read the verse, which was this: —

“For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth.”

CHAPTER 3

The next day, the 30th of October, all was ready for the proposed exploring expedition, which recent events had rendered so necessary. In fact, things had so come about that the settlers in Lincoln Island no longer needed help for themselves, but were even able to carry it to others.

It was therefore agreed that they should ascend the Mercy as far as the river was navigable. A great part of the distance would thus be traversed without fatigue, and the explorers could transport their provisions and arms to an advanced point in the west of the island.

It was necessary to think not only of the things which they should take with them, but also of those which they might have by chance to bring back to Granite House. If there had been a wreck on the coast, as was supposed, there would be many things cast up, which would be lawfully their prizes. In the event of this, the cart would have been of more use than the light canoe, but it was heavy and clumsy to drag, and therefore more difficult to use; this led Pencroft to express his regret that the chest had not contained, besides “his halfpound of tobacco,” a pair of strong New Jersey horses, which would have been very useful to the colony!

The provisions, which Neb had already packed up, consisted of a store of meat and of several gallons of beer, that is to say enough to sustain them for three days, the time which Harding assigned for the expedition. They hoped besides to supply themselves on the road, and Neb took care not to forget the portable stove.

The only tools the settlers took were the two woodmen’s axes, which they could use to cut a path through the thick forests, as also the instruments, the telescope and pocket-compass.

For weapons they selected the two flint-lock guns, which were likely to be more useful to them than the percussion fowling-pieces, the first only requiring flints which could be easily replaced, and the latter needing fulminating caps, a frequent use of which would soon exhaust their limited stock. However, they took also one of the carbines and some cartridges. As to the powder, of which there was about fifty pounds in the barrel, a small supply of it had to be taken, but the engineer hoped to manufacture an explosive substance which would allow them to husband it. To the firearms were added the five cutlasses well sheathed in leather, and, thus supplied, the settlers could venture into the vast forest with some chance of success.

It is useless to add that Pencroft, Herbert, and Neb, thus armed, were at the summit of their happiness, although Cyrus Harding made them promise not to fire a shot unless it was necessary.

At six in the morning the canoe put off from the shore; all had embarked, including Top, and they proceeded to the mouth of the Mercy.

The tide had begun to come up half an hour before. For several hours, therefore, there would be a current, which it was well to profit by, for later the ebb would make it difficult to ascend the river. The tide was already strong, for in three days the moon would be full, and it was enough to keep the boat in the center of the current, where it floated swiftly along between the high banks without its being necessary to increase its speed by the aid of the oars. In a few minutes the explorers arrived at the angle formed by the Mercy and exactly at the place where, seven months before, Pencroft had made his first raft of wood.

After this sudden angle the river widened and flowed under the shade of great evergreen firs.

The aspect of the banks was magnificent. Cyrus Harding and his companions could not but admire the lovely effects so easily produced by nature with water and trees. As they advanced the forest element diminished. On the right bank of the river grew magnificent specimens of the ulmaceae tribe, the precious elm, so valuable to builders, and which withstands well the action of water. Then there were numerous groups belonging to the same family, among others one in particular, the fruit of which produces a very useful oil. Further on, Herbert remarked the lardizabala, a twining shrub which, when bruised in water, furnishes excellent cordage; and two or three ebony trees of a beautiful black, crossed with capricious veins.

From time to time, in certain places where the landing was easy, the canoe was stopped, when Gideon Spilett, Herbert, and Pencroft, their guns in their hands, and preceded by Top, jumped on shore. Without expecting game, some useful plant might be met with, and the young naturalist was delighted with discovering a sort of wild spinach, belonging to the order of chenopodiaceae, and numerous specimens of cruciferae, belonging to the cabbage tribe, which it would certainly be possible to cultivate by transplanting. There were cresses, horseradish, turnips, and lastly, little branching hairy stalks, scarcely more than three feet high, which produced brownish grains.

“Do you know what this plant is?” asked Herbert of the sailor.

“Tobacco!” cried Pencroft, who evidently had never seen his favorite plant except in the bowl of his pipe.

“No, Pencroft,” replied Herbert; “this is not tobacco, it is mustard.”

“Mustard be hanged!” returned the sailor; “but if by chance you happen to come across a tobacco-plant, my boy, pray don’t scorn that!”

“We shall find it some day!” said Gideon Spilett.

“Well!” exclaimed Pencroft, “when that day comes, I do not know what more will be wanting in our island!”

These different plants, which had been carefully rooted up, were carried to the canoe, where Cyrus Harding had remained buried in thought.

The reporter, Herbert, and Pencroft in this manner frequently disembarked, sometimes on the right bank, sometimes on the left bank of the Mercy.

The latter was less abrupt, but the former more wooded. The engineer ascertained by consulting his pocket-compass that the direction of the river from the first turn was obviously southwest and northeast, and nearly straight for a length of about three miles. But it was to be supposed that this direction changed beyond that point, and that the Mercy continued to the north-west, towards the spurs of Mount Franklin, among which the river rose.

During one of these excursions, Gideon Spilett managed to get hold of two couples of living gallinaceae. They were birds with long, thin beaks, lengthened necks, short wings, and without any appearance of a tail. Herbert rightly gave them the name of tinamous, and it was resolved that they should be the first tenants of their future poultry-yard.

But till then the guns had not spoken, and the first report which awoke the echoes of the forest of the Far West was provoked by the appearance of a beautiful bird, resembling the kingfisher.

“I recognize him!” cried Pencroft, and it seemed as if his gun went off by itself.

“What do you recognize?” asked the reporter.

“The bird which escaped us on our first excursion, and from which we gave the name to that part of the forest.”

“A jacamar!” cried Herbert.

It was indeed a jacamar, of which the plumage shines with a metallic luster. A shot brought it to the ground, and Top carried it to the canoe. At the same time half a dozen lories were brought down. The lory is of the size of a pigeon, the plumage dashed with green, part of the wings crimson, and its crest bordered with white. To the young boy belonged the honor of this shot, and he was proud enough of it. Lories are better food than the jacamar, the flesh of which is rather tough, but it was difficult to persuade Pencroft that he had not killed the king of eatable birds. It was ten o’clock in the morning when the canoe reached a second angle of the Mercy, nearly five miles from its mouth. Here a halt was made for breakfast under the shade of some splendid trees. The river still measured from sixty to seventy feet in breadth, and its bed from five to six feet in depth. The engineer had observed that it was increased by numerous affluents, but they were unnavigable, being simply little streams. As to the forest, including Jacamar Wood, as well as the forests of the Far West, it extended as far as the eye could reach. In no place, either in the depths of the forests or under the trees on the banks of the Mercy, was the presence of man revealed. The explorers could not discover one suspicious trace. It was evident that the woodman’s axe had never touched these trees, that the pioneer’s knife had never severed the creepers hanging from one trunk to another in the midst of tangled brushwood and long grass. If castaways had landed on the island, they could not have yet quitted the shore, and it was not in the woods that the survivors of the supposed shipwreck should be sought.

The engineer therefore manifested some impatience to reach the western coast of Lincoln Island, which was at least five miles distant according to his estimation.

The voyage was continued, and as the Mercy appeared to flow not towards the shore, but rather towards Mount Franklin, it was decided that they should use the boat as long as there was enough water under its keel to float it. It was both fatigue spared and time gained, for they would have been obliged to cut a path through the thick wood with their axes. But soon the flow completely failed them, either the tide was going down, and it was about the hour, or it could no longer be felt at this distance from the mouth of the Mercy. They had therefore to make use of the oars. Herbert and Neb each took one, and Pencroft took the scull. The forest soon became less dense, the trees grew further apart and often quite isolated. But the further they were from each other the more magnificent they appeared, profiting, as they did, by the free, pure air which circulated around them.

What splendid specimens of the flora of this latitude! Certainly their presence would have been enough for a botanist to name without hesitation the parallel which traversed Lincoln Island.

“Eucalypti!” cried Herbert.

They were, in fact, those splendid trees, the giants of the extratropical zone, the congeners of the Australian and New Zealand eucalyptus, both situated under the same latitude as Lincoln Island. Some rose to a height of two hundred feet. Their trunks at the base measured twenty feet in circumference, and their bark was covered by a network of farrows containing a red, sweet-smelling gum. Nothing is more wonderful or more singular than those enormous specimens of the order of the myrtaceae, with their leaves placed vertically and not horizontally, so that an edge and not a surface looks upwards, the effect being that the sun’s rays penetrate more freely among the trees.

The ground at the foot of the eucalypti was carpeted with grass, and from the bushes escaped flights of little birds, which glittered in the sunlight like winged rubies.

“These are something like trees!” cried Neb; “but are they good for anything?”

“Pooh!” replied Pencroft. “Of course there are vegetable giants as well as human giants, and they are no good, except to show themselves at fairs!”

“I think that you are mistaken, Pencroft,” replied Gideon Spilett, “and that the wood of the eucalyptus has begun to be very advantageously employed in cabinet-making.”

“And I may add,” said Herbert, “that the eucalyptus belongs to a family which comprises many useful members; the guava-tree, from whose fruit guava jelly is made; the clove-tree, which produces the spice; the pomegranate-tree, which bears pomegranates; the Eugeacia Cauliflora, the fruit of which is used in making a tolerable wine; the Ugui myrtle, which contains an excellent alcoholic liquor; the Caryophyllus myrtle, of which the bark forms an esteemed cinnamon; the Eugenia Pimenta, from whence comes Jamaica pepper; the common myrtle, from whose buds and berries spice is sometimes made; the Eucalyptus manifera, which yields a sweet sort of manna; the Guinea Eucalyptus, the sap of which is transformed into beer by fermentation; in short, all those trees known under the name of gum-trees or iron-bark trees in Australia, belong to this family of the myrtaceae, which contains forty-six genera and thirteen hundred species!”

The lad was allowed to run on, and he delivered his little botanical lecture with great animation. Cyrus Harding listened smiling, and Pencroft with an indescribable feeling of pride.

“Very good, Herbert,” replied Pencroft, “but I could swear that all those useful specimens you have just told us about are none of them giants like these!”

“That is true, Pencroft.”

“That supports what I said,” returned the sailor, “namely, that these giants are good for nothing!”

“There you are wrong, Pencroft,” said the engineer; “these gigantic eucalypti, which shelter us, are good for something.”

“And what is that?”

“To render the countries which they inhabit healthy. Do you know what they are called in Australia and New Zealand?”

“No, captain.”

“They are called ‘fever trees.’”

“Because they give fevers?”

“No, because they prevent them!”

“Good. I must note that,” said the reporter.

“Note it then, my dear Spilett; for it appears proved that the presence of the eucalyptus is enough to neutralize miasmas. This natural antidote has been tried in certain countries in the middle of Europe and the north of Africa where the soil was absolutely unhealthy, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants has been gradually ameliorated. No more intermittent fevers prevail in the regions now covered with forests of the myrtaceae. This fact is now beyond doubt, and it is a happy circumstance for us settlers in Lincoln Island.”

“Ah! what an island! What a blessed island!” cried Pencroft. “I tell you, it wants nothing — unless it is — ”

“That will come, Pencroft, that will be found,” replied the engineer; “but now we must continue our voyage and push on as far as the river will carry our boat!”

The exploration was therefore continued for another two miles in the midst of country covered with eucalypti, which predominated in the woods of this portion of the island. The space which they occupied extended as far as the eye could reach on each side of the Mercy, which wound along between high green banks. The bed was often obstructed by long weeds, and even by pointed rocks, which rendered the navigation very difficult. The action of the oars was prevented, and Pencroft was obliged to push with a pole. They found also that the water was becoming shallower and shallower, and that the canoe must soon stop. The sun was already sinking towards the horizon, and the trees threw long shadows on the ground. Cyrus Harding, seeing that he could not hope to reach the western coast of the island in one journey, resolved to camp at the place where any further navigation was prevented by want of water. He calculated that they were still five or six miles from the coast, and this distance was too great for them to attempt during the night in the midst of unknown woods.

The boat was pushed on through the forest, which gradually became thicker again, and appeared also to have more inhabitants; for if the eyes of the sailor did not deceive him, he thought he saw bands of monkeys springing among the trees. Sometimes even two or three of these animals stopped at a little distance from the canoe and gazed at the settlers without manifesting any terror, as if, seeing men for the first time, they had not yet learned to fear them. It would have been easy to bring down one of these quadramani with a gunshot, and Pencroft was greatly tempted to fire, but Harding opposed so useless a massacre. This was prudent, for the monkeys, or apes rather, appearing to be very powerful and extremely active, it was useless to provoke an unnecessary aggression, and the creatures might, ignorant of the power of the explorers’ firearms, have attacked them. It is true that the sailor considered the monkeys from a purely alimentary point of view, for those animals which are herbivorous make very excellent game; but since they had an abundant supply of provisions, it was a pity to waste their ammunition.

Towards four o’clock, the navigation of the Mercy became exceedingly difficult, for its course was obstructed by aquatic plants and rocks. The banks rose higher and higher, and already they were approaching the spurs of Mount Franklin. The source could not be far off, since it was fed by the water from the southern slopes of the mountain.

“In a quarter of an hour,” said the sailor, “we shall be obliged to stop, captain.”

“Very well, we will stop, Pencroft, and we will make our encampment for the night.”

“At what distance are we from Granite House?” asked Herbert.

“About seven miles,” replied the engineer, “taking into calculation, however, the detours of the river, which has carried us to the northwest.”

“Shall we go on?” asked the reporter.

“Yes, as long as we can,” replied Cyrus Harding. “To-morrow, at break of day, we will leave the canoe, and in two hours I hope we shall cross the distance which separates us from the coast, and then we shall have the whole day in which to explore the shore.”

“Go ahead!” replied Pencroft.

But soon the boat grated on the stony bottom of the river, which was now not more than twenty feet in breadth. The trees met like a bower overhead, and caused a half-darkness. They also heard the noise of a waterfall, which showed that a few hundred feet up the river there was a natural barrier.

Presently, after a sudden turn of the river, a cascade appeared through the trees. The canoe again touched the bottom, and in a few minutes it was moored to a trunk near the right bank.

It was nearly five o’clock. The last rays of the sun gleamed through the thick foliage and glanced on the little waterfall, making the spray sparkle with all the colors of the rainbow. Beyond that, the Mercy was lost in the bushwood, where it was fed from some hidden source. The different streams which flowed into it increased it to a regular river further down, but here it was simply a shallow, limpid brook.

It was agreed to camp here, as the place was charming. The colonists disembarked, and a fire was soon lighted under a clump of trees, among the branches of which Cyrus Harding and his companions could, if it was necessary, take refuge for the night.

Supper was quickly devoured, for they were very hungry, and then there was only sleeping to think of. But, as roarings of rather a suspicious nature had been heard during the evening, a good fire was made up for the night, so as to protect the sleepers with its crackling flames. Neb and Pencroft also watched by turns, and did not spare fuel. They thought they saw the dark forms of some wild animals prowling round the camp among the bushes, but the night passed without incident, and the next day, the 31st of October, at five o’clock in the morning, all were on foot, ready for a start.

CHAPTER 4

It was six o’ clock in the morning when the settlers, after a hasty breakfast, set out to reach by the shortest way, the western coast of the island. And how long would it take to do this? Cyrus Harding had said two hours, but of course that depended on the nature of the obstacles they might meet with. As it was probable that they would have to cut a path through the grass, shrubs, and creepers, they marched axe in hand, and with guns also ready, wisely taking warning from the cries of the wild beasts heard in the night.

The exact position of the encampment could be determined by the bearing of Mount Franklin, and as the volcano arose in the north at a distance of less than three miles, they had only to go straight towards the southwest to reach the western coast. They set out, having first carefully secured the canoe. Pencroft and Neb carried sufficient provision for the little band for at least two days. It would not thus be necessary to hunt. The engineer advised his companions to refrain from firing, that their presence might not be betrayed to any one near the shore. The first hatchet blows were given among the brushwood in the midst of some mastic-trees, a little above the cascade; and his compass in his hand, Cyrus Harding led the way.

The forest here was composed for the most part of trees which had already been met with near the lake and on Prospect Heights. There were deodars, Douglas firs, casuarinas, gum trees, eucalypti, hibiscus, cedars, and other trees, generally of a moderate size, for their number prevented their growth.

Since their departure, the settlers had descended the slopes which constituted the mountain system of the island, on to a dry soil, but the luxuriant vegetation of which indicated it to be watered either by some subterranean marsh or by some stream. However, Cyrus Harding did not remember having seen, at the time of his excursion to the crater, any other watercourses but the Red Creek and the Mercy.

During the first part of their excursion, they saw numerous troops of monkeys who exhibited great astonishment at the sight of men, whose appearance was so new to them. Gideon Spilett jokingly asked whether these active and merry quadrupeds did not consider him and his companions as degenerate brothers.

And certainly, pedestrians, hindered at each step by bushes, caught by creepers, barred by trunks of trees, did not shine beside those supple animals, who, bounding from branch to branch, were hindered by nothing on their course. The monkeys were numerous, but happily they did not manifest any hostile disposition.

Several pigs, agoutis, kangaroos, and other rodents were seen, also two or three koalas, at which Pencroft longed to have a shot.

“But,” said he, “you may jump and play just now; we shall have one or two words to say to you on our way back!”

At half-past nine the way was suddenly found to be barred by an unknown stream, from thirty to forty feet broad, whose rapid current dashed foaming over the numerous rocks which interrupted its course. This creek was deep and clear, but it was absolutely unnavigable.

“We are cut off!” cried Neb.

“No,” replied Herbert, “it is only a stream, and we can easily swim over.”

“What would be the use of that?” returned Harding. “This creek evidently runs to the sea. Let us remain on this side and follow the bank, and I shall be much astonished if it does not lead us very quickly to the coast. Forward!”

“One minute,” said the reporter. “The name of this creek, my friends? Do not let us leave our geography incomplete.”

“All right!” said Pencroft.

“Name it, my boy,” said the engineer, addressing the lad.

“Will it not be better to wait until we have explored it to its mouth?” answered Herbert.

“Very well,” replied Cyrus Harding. “Let us follow it as fast as we can without stopping.”

“Still another minute!” said Pencroft.

“What’s the matter?” asked the reporter.

“Though hunting is forbidden, fishing is allowed, I suppose,” said the sailor.

“We have no time to lose,” replied the engineer.

“Oh! five minutes!” replied Pencroft, “I only ask for five minutes to use in the interest of our breakfast!”

And Pencroft, lying down on the bank, plunged his arm into the water, and soon pulled up several dozen of fine crayfish from among the stones.

“These will be good!” cried Neb, going to the sailor’s aid.

“As I said, there is everything in this island, except tobacco!” muttered Pencroft with a sigh.

The fishing did not take five minutes, for the crayfish were swarming in the creek. A bag was filled with the crustaceae, whose shells were of a cobalt blue. The settlers then pushed on.

They advanced more rapidly and easily along the bank of the river than in the forest. From time to time they came upon the traces of animals of a large size who had come to quench their thirst at the stream, but none were actually seen, and it was evidently not in this part of the forest that the peccary had received the bullet which had cost Pencroft a grinder.

In the meanwhile, considering the rapid current, Harding was led to suppose that he and his companions were much farther from the western coast than they had at first supposed. In fact, at this hour, the rising tide would have turned back the current of the creek, if its mouth had only been a few miles distant. Now, this effect was not produced, and the water pursued its natural course. The engineer was much astonished at this, and frequently consulted his compass, to assure himself that some turn of the river was not leading them again into the Far West.

However, the creek gradually widened and its waters became less tumultuous. The trees on the right bank were as close together as on the left bank, and it was impossible to distinguish anything beyond them; but these masses of wood were evidently uninhabited, for Top did not bark, and the intelligent animal would not have failed to signal the presence of any stranger in the neighborhood.

At half-past ten, to the great surprise of Cyrus Harding, Herbert, who was a little in front, suddenly stopped and exclaimed, —

“The sea!”

In a few minutes more, the whole western shore of the island lay extended before the eyes of the settlers.

But what a contrast between this and the eastern coast, upon which chance had first thrown them. No granite cliff, no rocks, not even a sandy beach. The forest reached the shore, and the tall trees bending over the water were beaten by the waves. It was not such a shore as is usually formed by nature, either by extending a vast carpet of sand, or by grouping masses of rock, but a beautiful border consisting of the most splendid trees. The bank was raised a little above the level of the sea, and on this luxuriant soil, supported by a granite base, the fine forest trees seemed to be as firmly planted as in the interior of the island.

The colonists were then on the shore of an unimportant little harbor, which would scarcely have contained even two or three fishing-boats. It served as a neck to the new creek, of which the curious thing was that its waters, instead of joining the sea by a gentle slope, fell from a height of more than forty feet, which explained why the rising tide was not felt up the stream. In fact, the tides of the Pacific, even at their maximum elevation, could never reach the level of the river, and, doubtless, millions of years would pass before the water would have worn away the granite and hollowed a practicable mouth.

It was settled that the name of Falls River should be given to this stream. Beyond, towards the north, the forest border was prolonged for a space of nearly two miles; then the trees became scarcer, and beyond that again the picturesque heights described a nearly straight line, which ran north and south. On the contrary, all the part of the shore between Falls River and

Reptile End was a mass of wood, magnificent trees, some straight, others bent, so that the long sea-swell bathed their roots. Now, it was this coast, that is, all the Serpentine Peninsula, that was to be explored, for this part of the shore offered a refuge to castaways, which the other wild and barren side must have refused.

The weather was fine and clear, and from a height of a hillock on which Neb and Pencroft had arranged breakfast, a wide view was obtained. There was, however, not a sail in sight; nothing could be seen along the shore as far as the eye could reach. But the engineer would take nothing for granted until he had explored the coast to the very extremity of the Serpentine Peninsula.

Breakfast was soon despatched, and at half-past eleven the captain gave the signal for departure. Instead of proceeding over the summit of a cliff or along a sandy beach, the settlers were obliged to remain under cover of the trees so that they might continue on the shore.

The distance which separated Falls River from Reptile End was about twelve miles. It would have taken the settlers four hours to do this, on a clear ground and without hurrying themselves; but as it was they needed double the time, for what with trees to go round, bushes to cut down, and creepers to chop away, they were impeded at every step, these obstacles greatly lengthening their journey.

There was, however, nothing to show that a shipwreck had taken place recently. It is true that, as Gideon Spilett observed, any remains of it might have drifted out to sea, and they must not take it for granted that because they could find no traces of it, a ship had not been castaway on the coast.

The reporter’s argument was just, and besides, the incident of the bullet proved that a shot must have been fired in Lincoln Island within three months.

It was already five o’clock, and there were still two miles between the settlers and the extremity of the Serpentine Peninsula. It was evident that after having reached Reptile End, Harding and his companions would not have time to return before dark to their encampment near the source of the Mercy. It would therefore be necessary to pass the night on the promontory. But they had no lack of provisions, which was lucky, for there were no animals on the shore, though birds, on the contrary, abound — jacamars, couroucous, tragopans, grouse, lories, parrots, cockatoos, pheasants, pigeons, and a hundred others. There was not a tree without a nest, and not a nest which was not full of flapping wings.

Towards seven o’clock the weary explorers arrived at Reptile End. Here the seaside forest ended, and the shore resumed the customary appearance of a coast, with rocks, reefs, and sands. It was possible that something might be found here, but darkness came on, and the further exploration had to be put off to the next day.

Pencroft and Herbert hastened on to find a suitable place for their camp. Among the last trees of the forest of the Far West, the boy found several thick clumps of bamboos.

“Good,” said he; “this is a valuable discovery.”

“Valuable?” returned Pencroft.

“Certainly,” replied Herbert. “I may say, Pencroft, that the bark of the bamboo, cut into flexible laths, is used for making baskets; that this bark, mashed into a paste, is used for the manufacture of Chinese paper; that the stalks furnish, according to their size, canes and pipes and are used for conducting water; that large bamboos make excellent material for building, being light and strong, and being never attacked by insects. I will add that by sawing the bamboo in two at the joint, keeping for the bottom the part of the transverse film which forms the joint, useful cups are obtained, which are much in use among the Chinese. No! you don't care for that. But — "

"But what?"

"But I can tell you, if you are ignorant of it, that in India these bamboos are eaten like asparagus."

"Asparagus thirty feet high!" exclaimed the sailor. "And are they good?"

"Excellent," replied Herbert. "Only it is not the stems of thirty feet high which are eaten, but the young shoots."

"Perfect, my boy, perfect!" replied Pencroft.

"I will also add that the pith of the young stalks, preserved in vinegar, makes a good pickle."

"Better and better, Herbert!"

"And lastly, that the bamboos exude a sweet liquor which can be made into a very agreeable drink."

"Is that all?" asked the sailor.

"That is all!"

"And they don't happen to do for smoking?"

“No, my poor Pencroft.”

Herbert and the sailor had not to look long for a place in which to pass the night. The rocks, which must have been violently beaten by the sea under the influence of the winds of the southwest, presented many cavities in which shelter could be found against the night air. But just as they were about to enter one of these caves a loud roaring arrested them.

“Back!” cried Pencroft. “Our guns are only loaded with small shot, and beasts which can roar as loud as that would care no more for it than for grains of salt!” And the sailor, seizing Herbert by the arm, dragged him behind a rock, just as a magnificent animal showed itself at the entrance of the cavern.

It was a jaguar of a size at least equal to its Asiatic congeners, that is to say, it measured five feet from the extremity of its head to the beginning of its tail. The yellow color of its hair was relieved by streaks and regular oblong spots of black, which contrasted with the white of its chest. Herbert recognized it as the ferocious rival of the tiger, as formidable as the puma, which is the rival of the largest wolf!

The jaguar advanced and gazed around him with blazing eyes, his hair bristling as if this was not the first time he had scented men.

At this moment the reporter appeared round a rock, and Herbert, thinking that he had not seen the jaguar, was about to rush towards him, when Gideon Spilett signed to him to remain where he was. This was not his first tiger, and advancing to within ten feet of the animal he remained motionless, his gun to his shoulder, without moving a muscle. The jaguar collected itself for a spring, but at that moment a shot struck it in the eyes, and it fell dead.

Herbert and Pencroft rushed towards the jaguar. Neb and Harding also ran up, and they remained for some instants contemplating the animal as it lay stretched on the ground, thinking that its magnificent skin would be a great ornament to the hall at Granite House.

“Oh, Mr. Spilett, how I admire and envy you!” cried Herbert, in a fit of very natural enthusiasm.

“Well, my boy,” replied the reporter, “you could have done the same.”

“I! with such coolness! — ”

“Imagine to yourself, Herbert, that the jaguar is only a hare, and you would fire as quietly as possible.”

“That is,” rejoined Pencroft, “that it is not more dangerous than a hare!”

“And now,” said Gideon Spilett, “since the jaguar has left its abode, I do not see, my friends, why we should not take possession of it for the night.”

“But others may come,” said Pencroft.

“It will be enough to light a fire at the entrance of the cavern,” said the reporter, “and no wild beasts will dare to cross the threshold.”

“Into the jaguar’s house, then!” replied the sailor, dragging after him the body of the animal.

While Neb skinned the jaguar, his companions collected an abundant supply of dry wood from the forest, which they heaped up at the cave.

Cyrus Harding, seeing the clump of bamboos, cut a quantity, which he mingled with the other fuel.

This done, they entered the grotto, of which the floor was strewn with bones, the guns were carefully loaded, in case of a sudden attack, they had supper, and then just before they lay down to rest, the heap of wood piled at the entrance was set fire to. Immediately, a regular explosion, or rather a series of reports, broke the silence! The noise was caused by the bamboos, which, as the flames reached them, exploded like fireworks. The noise was enough to terrify even the boldest of wild beasts.

It was not the engineer who had invented this way of causing loud explosions, for, according to Marco Polo, the Tartars have employed it for many centuries to drive away from their encampments the formidable wild beasts of Central Asia.

CHAPTER 5

Cyrus Harding and his companions slept like innocent marmots in the cave which the jaguar had so politely left at their disposal.

At sunrise all were on the shore at the extremity of the promontory, and their gaze was directed towards the horizon, of which two-thirds of the circumference were visible. For the last time the engineer could ascertain that not a sail nor the wreck of a ship was on the sea, and even with the telescope nothing suspicious could be discovered.

There was nothing either on the shore, at least, in the straight line of three miles which formed the south side of the promontory, for beyond that, rising ground had the rest of the coast, and even from the extremity of the Serpentine Peninsula Claw Cape could not be seen.

The southern coast of the island still remained to be explored. Now should they undertake it immediately, and devote this day to it?

This was not included in their first plan. In fact, when the boat was abandoned at the sources of the Mercy, it had been agreed that after having surveyed the west coast, they should go back to it, and return to Granite House by the Mercy. Harding then thought that the western coast would have offered refuge, either to a ship in distress, or to a vessel in her regular course; but now, as he saw that this coast presented no good anchorage, he wished to seek on the south what they had not been able to find on the west.

Gideon Spilett proposed to continue the exploration, that the question of the supposed wreck might be completely settled, and he asked at what distance Claw Cape might be from the extremity of the peninsula.

“About thirty miles,” replied the engineer, “if we take into consideration the curvings of the coast.”

“Thirty miles!” returned Spilett. “That would be a long day’s march. Nevertheless, I think that we should return to Granite House by the south coast.”

“But,” observed Herbert, “from Claw Cape to Granite House there must be at least another ten miles.

“Make it forty miles in all,” replied the engineer, “and do not hesitate to do it. At least we should survey the unknown shore, and then we shall not have to begin the exploration again.”

“Very good,” said Pencroft. “But the boat?”

“The boat has remained by itself for one day at the sources of the Mercy,” replied Gideon Spilett; “it may just as well stay there two days! As yet, we have had no reason to think that the island is infested by thieves!”

“Yet,” said the sailor, “when I remember the history of the turtle, I am far from confident of that.”

“The turtle! the turtle!” replied the reporter. “Don’t you know that the sea turned it over?”

“Who knows?” murmured the engineer.

“But, — ” said Neb.

Neb had evidently something to say, for he opened his mouth to speak and yet said nothing.

“What do you want to say, Neb?” asked the engineer.

“If we return by the shore to Claw Cape,” replied Neb, “after having doubled the Cape, we shall be stopped — ”

“By the Mercy! of course,” replied Herbert, “and we shall have neither bridge nor boat by which to cross.”

“But, captain,” added Pencroft, “with a few floating trunks we shall have no difficulty in crossing the river.”

“Never mind,” said Spilett, “it will be useful to construct a bridge if we wish to have an easy access to the Far West!”

“A bridge!” cried Pencroft. “Well, is not the captain the best engineer in his profession? He will make us a bridge when we want one. As to transporting you this evening to the other side of the Mercy, and that without wetting one thread of your clothes, I will take care of that. We have provisions for another day, and besides we can get plenty of game. Forward!”

The reporter’s proposal, so strongly seconded by the sailor, received general approbation, for each wished to have their doubts set at rest, and by returning by Claw Cape the exploration would be ended. But there was not an hour to lose, for forty miles was a long march, and they could not hope to reach Granite House before night.

At six o’clock in the morning the little band set out. As a precaution the guns were loaded with ball, and Top, who led the van, received orders to beat about the edge of the forest.

From the extremity of the promontory which formed the tail of the peninsula the coast was rounded for a distance of five miles, which was rapidly passed over, without even the most minute investigations bringing to light the least trace of any old or recent landings; no debris, no mark of an encampment, no cinders of a fire, nor even a footprint!

From the point of the peninsula on which the settlers now were their gaze could extend along the southwest. Twenty-five miles off the coast terminated in the Claw Cape, which loomed dimly through the morning mists, and which, by the phenomenon of the mirage, appeared as if suspended between land and water.

Between the place occupied by the colonists and the other side of the immense bay, the shore was composed, first, of a tract of low land, bordered in the background by trees; then the shore became more irregular, projecting sharp points into the sea, and finally ended in the black rocks which, accumulated in picturesque disorder, formed Claw Cape.

Such was the development of this part of the island, which the settlers took in at a glance, while stopping for an instant.

“If a vessel ran in here,” said Pencroft, “she would certainly be lost. Sandbanks and reefs everywhere! Bad quarters!”

“But at least something would be left of the ship,” observed the reporter.

“There might be pieces of wood on the rocks, but nothing on the sands,” replied the sailor.

“Why?”

“Because the sands are still more dangerous than the rocks, for they swallow up everything that is thrown on them. In a few days the hull of a ship of several hundred tons would disappear entirely in there!”

“So, Pencroft,” asked the engineer, “if a ship has been wrecked on these banks, is it not astonishing that there is now no trace of her remaining?”

“No, captain, with the aid of time and tempest. However, it would be surprising, even in this case, that some of the masts or spars should not have been thrown on the beach, out of reach of the waves.”

“Let us go on with our search, then,” returned Cyrus Harding.

At one o’clock the colonists arrived at the other side of Washington Bay, they having now gone a distance of twenty miles.

They then halted for breakfast.

Here began the irregular coast, covered with lines of rocks and sandbanks. The long sea-swell could be seen breaking over the rocks in the bay, forming a foamy fringe. From this point to Claw Cape the beach was very narrow between the edge of the forest and the reefs.

Walking was now more difficult, on account of the numerous rocks which encumbered the beach. The granite cliff also gradually increased in height, and only the green tops of the trees which crowned it could be seen.

After half an hour’s rest, the settlers resumed their journey, and not a spot among the rocks was left unexamined. Pencroft and Neb even rushed into the surf whenever any object attracted their attention. But they found nothing, some curious formations of the rocks having deceived them. They ascertained, however, that eatable shellfish abounded there, but these could not be of any great advantage to them until some easy means of communication had been established between the two banks of the Mercy, and until the means of transport had been perfected.

Nothing therefore which threw any light on the supposed wreck could be found on this shore, yet an object of any importance, such as the hull of a ship, would have been seen directly, or any of her masts and spars would have been washed on shore, just as the chest had been, which was found twenty miles from here. But there was nothing.

Towards three o’clock Harding and his companions arrived at a snug little creek. It formed quite a natural harbor, invisible from the sea, and was entered by a narrow channel.

At the back of this creek some violent convulsion had torn up the rocky border, and a cutting, by a gentle slope, gave access to an upper plateau, which might be situated at least ten miles from Claw Cape, and consequently four miles in a straight line from Prospect Heights. Gideon Spilett proposed to his companions that they should make a halt here. They agreed readily, for their walk had sharpened their appetites; and although it was not their usual dinner-hour, no one refused to strengthen himself with a piece of venison. This luncheon would sustain them until their supper, which they intended to take at Granite House. In a few minutes the settlers, seated under a clump of fine sea-pines, were devouring the provisions which Neb produced from his bag.

This spot was raised from fifty to sixty feet above the level of the sea. The view was very extensive, but beyond the cape it ended in Union Bay. Neither the islet nor Prospect Heights was visible, and could not be from thence, for the rising ground and the curtain of trees closed the northern horizon.

It is useless to add that notwithstanding the wide extent of sea which the explorers could survey, and though the engineer swept the horizon with his glass, no vessel could be found.

The shore was of course examined with the same care from the edge of the water to the cliff, and nothing could be discovered even with the aid of the instrument.

“Well,” said Gideon Spilett, “it seems we must make up our minds to console ourselves with thinking that no one will come to dispute with us the possession of Lincoln Island!”

“But the bullet,” cried Herbert. “That was not imaginary, I suppose!”

“Hang it, no!” exclaimed Pencroft, thinking of his absent tooth.

“Then what conclusion may be drawn?” asked the reporter.

“This,” replied the engineer, “that three months or more ago, a vessel, either voluntarily or not, came here.”

“What! then you admit, Cyrus, that she was swallowed up without leaving any trace?” cried the reporter.

“No, my dear Spilett; but you see that if it is certain that a human being set foot on the island, it appears no less certain that he has now left it.”

“Then, if I understand you right, captain,” said Herbert, “the vessel has left again?”

“Evidently.”

“And we have lost an opportunity to get back to our country?” said Neb.

“I fear so.”

“Very well, since the opportunity is lost, let us go on; it can’t be helped,” said Pencroft, who felt home-sickness for Granite House.

But just as they were rising, Top was heard loudly barking; and the dog issued from the wood, holding in his mouth a rag soiled with mud.

Neb seized it. It was a piece of strong cloth!

Top still barked, and by his going and coming, seemed to invite his master to follow him into the forest.

“Now there’s something to explain the bullet!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“A castaway!” replied Herbert.

“Wounded, perhaps!” said Neb.

“Or dead!” added the reporter.

All ran after the dog, among the tall pines on the border of the forest. Harding and his companions made ready their firearms, in case of an emergency.

They advanced some way into the wood, but to their great disappointment, they as yet saw no signs of any human being having passed that way. Shrubs and creepers were uninjured, and they had even to cut them away with the axe, as they had done in the deepest recesses of the forest. It was difficult to fancy that any human creature had ever passed there, but yet Top went backward and forward, not like a dog who searches at random, but like a dog being endowed with a mind, who is following up an idea.

In about seven or eight minutes Top stopped in a glade surrounded with tall trees. The settlers gazed around them, but saw nothing, neither under the bushes nor among the trees.

“What is the matter, Top?” said Cyrus Harding.

Top barked louder, bounding about at the foot of a gigantic pine. All at once Pencroft shouted, — ”Ho, splendid! capital!”

“What is it?” asked Spilett.

“We have been looking for a wreck at sea or on land!”

“Well?”

“Well; and here we’ve found one in the air!”

And the sailor pointed to a great white rag, caught in the top of the pine, a fallen scrap of which the dog had brought to them.

“But that is not a wreck!” cried Gideon Spilett.

“I beg your pardon!” returned Pencroft.

“Why? is it — ?”

“It is all that remains of our airy boat, of our balloon, which has been caught up aloft there, at the top of that tree!”

Pencroft was not mistaken, and he gave vent to his feelings in a tremendous hurrah, adding, —

“There is good cloth! There is what will furnish us with linen for years. There is what will make us handkerchiefs and shirts! Ha, ha, Mr. Spilett, what do you say to an island where shirts grow on the trees?”

It was certainly a lucky circumstance for the settlers in Lincoln Island that the balloon, after having made its last bound into the air, had fallen on the island and thus given them the opportunity of finding it again, whether they kept the case under its present form, or whether they wished to attempt another escape by it, or whether they usefully employed the several hundred yards of cotton, which was of fine quality. Pencroft’s joy was therefore shared by all.

But it was necessary to bring down the remains of the balloon from the tree, to place it in security, and this was no slight task. Neb, Herbert, and the sailor, climbing to the summit of the tree, used all their skill to disengage the now reduced balloon.

The operation lasted two hours, and then not only the case, with its valve, its springs, its brasswork, lay on the ground, but the net, that is to say a considerable quantity of ropes and cordage, and the circle and the anchor. The case, except for the fracture, was in good condition, only the lower portion being torn.

It was a fortune which had fallen from the sky.

“All the same, captain,” said the sailor, “if we ever decide to leave the island, it won’t be in a balloon, will it? These airboats won’t go where we want them to go, and we have had some experience in that way! Look here, we will build a craft of some twenty tons, and then we can make a main-sail, a foresail, and a jib out of that cloth. As to the rest of it, that will help to dress us.”

“We shall see, Pencroft,” replied Cyrus Harding; “we shall see.”

“In the meantime, we must put it in a safe place,” said Neb.

They certainly could not think of carrying this load of cloth, ropes, and cordage, to Granite House, for the weight of it was very considerable, and while waiting for a suitable vehicle in which to convey it, it was of importance that this treasure should not be left longer exposed to the mercies of the first storm. The settlers, uniting their efforts, managed to drag it as far as the shore, where they discovered a large rocky cavity, which owing to its position could not be visited either by the wind or rain.

“We needed a locker, and now we have one,” said Pencroft; “but as we cannot lock it up, it will be prudent to hide the opening. I don’t mean from two-legged thieves, but from those with four paws!”

At six o’clock, all was stowed away, and after having given the creek the very suitable name of “Port Balloon,” the settlers pursued their way along Claw Cape. Pencroft and the engineer talked of the different projects which it was agreed to put into execution with the briefest possible delay. It was necessary first of all to throw a bridge over the Mercy, so as to establish an easy communication with the south of the island; then the cart must be taken to bring back the balloon, for the canoe alone could not carry it, then they would build a decked boat, and Pencroft would rig it as a cutter, and they would be able to undertake voyages of circumnavigation round the island, etc.

In the meanwhile night came on, and it was already dark when the settlers reached Flotsam Point, where they had found the precious chest.

The distance between Flotsam Point and Granite House was another four miles, and it was midnight when, after having followed the shore to the mouth of the Mercy, the settlers arrived at the first angle formed by the Mercy.

There the river was eighty feet in breadth, which was awkward to cross, but as Pencroft had taken upon himself to conquer this difficulty, he was compelled to do it. The settlers certainly had reason to be pretty tired. The journey had been long, and the task of getting down the balloon had not rested either their arms or legs. They were anxious to reach Granite House to eat and sleep, and if the bridge had been constructed, in a quarter of an hour they would have been at home.

The night was very dark. Pencroft prepared to keep his promise by constructing a sort of raft, on which to make the passage of the Mercy. He and Neb, armed with axes, chose two trees near the water, and began to attack them at the base.

Cyrus Harding and Spilett, seated on the bank, waited till their companions were ready for their help, while Herbert roamed about, though without going to any distance. All at once, the lad, who had strolled by the river, came running back, and, pointing up the Mercy, exclaimed, —

“What is floating there?”

Pencroft stopped working, and seeing an indistinct object moving through the gloom, —

“A canoe!” cried he.

All approached, and saw to their extreme surprise, a boat floating down the current.

“Boat ahoy!” shouted the sailor, without thinking that perhaps it would be best to keep silence.

No reply. The boat still drifted onward, and it was not more than twelve feet off, when the sailor exclaimed, —

“But it is our own boat! she has broken her moorings, and floated down the current. I must say she has arrived very opportunely.”

“Our boat?” murmured the engineer.

Pencroft was right. It was indeed the canoe, of which the rope had undoubtedly broken, and which had come alone from the sources of the Mercy. It was very important to seize it before the rapid current should have swept it away out of the mouth of the river, but Neb and Pencroft cleverly managed this by means of a long pole.

The canoe touched the shore. The engineer leaped in first, and found, on examining the rope, that it had been really worn through by rubbing against the rocks.

“Well,” said the reporter to him, in a low voice, “this is a strange thing.”

“Strange indeed!” returned Cyrus Harding.

Strange or not, it was very fortunate. Herbert, the reporter, Neb, and Pencroft, embarked in turn. There was no doubt about the rope having been worn through, but the astonishing part of the affair was, that the boat should arrive just at the moment when the settlers were there to seize it on its way, for a quarter of an hour earlier or later it would have been lost in the sea.

If they had been living in the time of genii, this incident would have given them the right to think that the island was haunted by some supernatural being, who used his power in the service of the castaways!

A few strokes of the oar brought the settlers to the mouth of the Mercy. The canoe was hauled up on the beach near the Chimneys, and all proceeded towards the ladder of Granite House.

But at that moment, Top barked angrily, and Neb, who was looking for the first steps, uttered a cry.

There was no longer a ladder!

CHAPTER 6

Cyrus Harding stood still, without saying a word. His companions searched in the darkness on the wall, in case the wind should have moved the ladder, and on the ground, thinking that it might have fallen down... But the ladder had quite disappeared. As to ascertaining if a squall had blown it on the landing-place, half way up, that was impossible in the dark.

“If it is a joke,” cried Pencroft, “it is a very stupid one! To come home and find no staircase to go up to your room by — that’s nothing for weary men to laugh at.”

Neb could do nothing but cry out “Oh! oh! oh!”

“I begin to think that very curious things happen in Lincoln Island!” said Pencroft.

“Curious?” replied Gideon Spilett, “not at all, Pencroft, nothing can be more natural. Some one has come during our absence, taken possession of our dwelling and drawn up the ladder.”

“Some one,” cried the sailor. “But who?”

“Who but the hunter who fired the bullet?” replied the reporter.

“Well, if there is any one up there,” replied Pencroft, who began to lose patience, “I will give them a hail, and they must answer.”

And in a stentorian voice the sailor gave a prolonged “Halloo!” which was echoed again and again from the cliff and rocks.

The settlers listened and they thought they heard a sort of chuckling laugh, of which they could not guess the origin. But no voice replied to Pencroft, who in vain repeated his vigorous shouts.

There was something indeed in this to astonish the most apathetic of men, and the settlers were not men of that description. In their situation every incident had its importance, and, certainly, during the seven months which they had spent on the island, they had not before met with anything of so surprising a character.

Be that as it may, forgetting their fatigue in the singularity of the event, they remained below Granite House, not knowing what to think, not knowing what to do, questioning each other without any hope of a satisfactory reply, every one starting some supposition each more unlikely than the last. Neb bewailed himself, much disappointed at not being able to get into his kitchen, for the provisions which they had had on their expedition were exhausted, and they had no means of renewing them.

“My friends,” at last said Cyrus Harding, “there is only one thing to be done at present; wait for day, and then act according to circumstances. But let us go to the Chimneys. There we shall be under shelter, and if we cannot eat, we can at least sleep.”

“But who is it that has played us this cool trick?” again asked Pencroft, unable to make up his mind to retire from the spot.

Whoever it was, the only thing practicable was to do as the engineer proposed, to go to the Chimneys and there wait for day. In the meanwhile Top was ordered to mount guard below the windows of Granite House, and when Top received an order he obeyed it without any questioning. The brave dog therefore remained at the foot of the cliff while his master with his companions sought a refuge among the rocks.

To say that the settlers, notwithstanding their fatigue, slept well on the sandy floor of the Chimneys would not be true. It was not only that they were extremely anxious to find out the cause of what had happened, whether it was the result of an accident which would be discovered at the return of day, or whether on the contrary it was the work of a human being; but they also had very uncomfortable beds. That could not be helped, however, for in some way or other at that moment their dwelling was occupied, and they could not possibly enter it.

Now Granite House was more than their dwelling, it was their warehouse. There were all the stores belonging to the colony, weapons, instruments, tools, ammunition, provisions, etc. To think that all that might be pillaged and that the settlers would have all their work to do over again, fresh weapons and tools to make, was a serious matter. Their uneasiness led one or other of them also to go out every few minutes to see if Top was keeping good watch. Cyrus Harding alone waited with his habitual patience, although his strong mind was exasperated at being confronted with such an inexplicable fact, and he was provoked at himself for allowing a feeling to which he could not give a name, to gain an influence over him. Gideon Spilett shared his feelings in this respect, and the two conversed together in whispers of the inexplicable circumstance which baffled even their intelligence and experience.

“It is a joke,” said Pencroft; “it is a trick some one has played us. Well, I don’t like such jokes, and the joker had better look out for himself, if he falls into my hands, I can tell him.”

As soon as the first gleam of light appeared in the east, the colonists, suitably armed, repaired to the beach under Granite House. The rising sun now shone on the cliff and they could see the windows, the shutters of which were closed, through the curtains of foliage.

All here was in order; but a cry escaped the colonists when they saw that the door, which they had closed on their departure, was now wide open.

Some one had entered Granite House — there could be no more doubt about that.

The upper ladder, which generally hung from the door to the landing, was in its place, but the lower ladder was drawn up and raised to the threshold. It was evident that the intruders had wished to guard themselves against a surprise.

Pencroft hailed again.

No reply.

“The beggars,” exclaimed the sailor. “There they are sleeping quietly as if they were in their own house. Hallo there, you pirates, brigands, robbers, sons of John Bull!”

When Pencroft, being a Yankee, treated any one to the epithet of “son of John Bull,” he considered he had reached the last limits of insult.

The sun had now completely risen, and the whole facade of Granite House became illuminated by its rays; but in the interior as well as on the exterior all was quiet and calm.

The settlers asked if Granite House was inhabited or not, and yet the position of the ladder was sufficient to show that it was; it was also certain that the inhabitants, whoever they might be, had not been able to escape. But how were they to be got at?

Herbert then thought of fastening a cord to an arrow, and shooting the arrow so that it should pass between the first rounds of the ladder which hung from the threshold. By means of the cord they would then be able to draw down the ladder to the ground, and so re-establish the communication between the beach and Granite House. There was evidently nothing else to be done, and, with a little skill, this method might succeed. Very fortunately bows and arrows had been left at the Chimneys, where they also found a quantity of light hibiscus cord. Pencroft fastened this to a well-feathered arrow. Then Herbert fixing it to his bow, took a careful aim for the lower part of the ladder.

Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, Pencroft, and Neb drew back, so as to see if anything appeared at the windows. The reporter lifted his gun to his shoulder and covered the door.

The bow was bent, the arrow flew, taking the cord with it, and passed between the two last rounds.

The operation had succeeded.

Herbert immediately seized the end of the cord, but, at that moment when he gave it a pull to bring down the ladder, an arm, thrust suddenly out between the wall and the door, grasped it and dragged it inside Granite House.

“The rascals!” shouted the sailor. “If a ball can do anything for you, you shall not have long to wait for it.

“But who was it?” asked Neb.

“Who was it? Didn’t you see?”

“No.”

“It was a monkey, a sapajou, an orangoutang, a baboon, a gorilla, a sagoin. Our dwelling has been invaded by monkeys, who climbed up the ladder during our absence.”

And, at this moment, as if to bear witness to the truth of the sailor’s words, two or three quadrumana showed themselves at the windows, from which they had pushed back the shutters, and saluted the real proprietors of the place with a thousand hideous grimaces.

“I knew that it was only a joke,” cried Pencroft; “but one of the jokers shall pay the penalty for the rest.”

So saying, the sailor, raising his piece, took a rapid aim at one of the monkeys and fired. All disappeared, except one who fell mortally wounded on the beach. This monkey, which was of a large size, evidently belonged to the first order of the quadrumana. Whether this was a chimpanzee, an orangoutang, or a gorilla, he took rank among the anthropoid apes, who are so called from their resemblance to the human race. However, Herbert declared it to be an orangoutang.

“What a magnificent beast!” cried Neb.

“Magnificent, if you like,” replied Pencroft; “but still I do not see how we are to get into our house.”

“Herbert is a good marksman,” said the reporter, “and his bow is here. He can try again.”

“Why, these apes are so cunning,” returned Pencroft; “they won’t show themselves again at the windows and so we can’t kill them; and when I think of the mischief they may do in the rooms and storehouse — ”

“Have patience,” replied Harding; “these creatures cannot keep us long at bay.”

“I shall not be sure of that till I see them down here,” replied the sailor. “And now, captain, do you know how many dozens of these fellows are up there?”

It was difficult to reply to Pencroft, and as for the young boy making another attempt, that was not easy; for the lower part of the ladder had been drawn again into the door, and when another pull was given, the line broke and the ladder remained firm. The case was really perplexing. Pencroft stormed. There was a comic side to the situation, but he did not think it funny at all. It was certain that the settlers would end by reinstating themselves in their domicile and driving out the intruders, but when and how? this is what they were not able to say.

Two hours passed, during which the apes took care not to show themselves, but they were still there, and three or four times a nose or a paw was poked out at the door or windows, and was immediately saluted by a gun-shot.

"Let us hide ourselves," at last said the engineer. "Perhaps the apes will think we have gone quite away and will show themselves again. Let Spilett and Herbert conceal themselves behind those rocks and fire on all that may appear."

The engineer's orders were obeyed, and while the reporter and the lad, the best marksmen in the colony, posted themselves in a good position, but out of the monkeys' sight, Neb, Pencroft, and Cyrus climbed the plateau and entered the forest in order to kill some game, for it was now time for breakfast and they had no provisions remaining.

In half an hour the hunters returned with a few rock pigeons, which they roasted as well as they could. Not an ape had appeared. Gideon Spilett and Herbert went to take their share of the breakfast, leaving Top to watch under the windows. They then, having eaten, returned to their post.

Two hours later, their situation was in no degree improved. The quadrumana gave no sign of existence, and it might have been supposed that they had disappeared; but what seemed more probable was that, terrified by the death of one of their companions, and frightened by the noise of the firearms, they had retreated to the back part of the house or probably even into the store-room. And when they thought of the valuables which this storeroom contained, the patience so much recommended by the engineer, fast changed into great irritation, and there certainly was room for it.

"Decidedly it is too bad," said the reporter; "and the worst of it is, there is no way of putting an end to it."

"But we must drive these vagabonds out somehow," cried the sailor. "We could soon get the better of them, even if there are twenty of the rascals; but for that, we must meet them hand to hand. Come now, is there no way of getting at them?”

“Let us try to enter Granite House by the old opening at the lake,” replied the engineer.

“Oh!” shouted the sailor, “and I never thought of that.”

This was in reality the only way by which to penetrate into Granite House so as to fight with and drive out the intruders. The opening was, it is true, closed up with a wall of cemented stones, which it would be necessary to sacrifice, but that could easily be rebuilt. Fortunately, Cyrus Harding had not as yet effected his project of hiding this opening by raising the waters of the lake, for the operation would then have taken some time.

It was already past twelve o’clock, when the colonists, well armed and provided with picks and spades, left the Chimneys, passed beneath the windows of Granite House, after telling Top to remain at his post, and began to ascend the left bank of the Mercy, so as to reach Prospect Heights.

But they had not made fifty steps in this direction, when they heard the dog barking furiously.

And all rushed down the bank again.

Arrived at the turning, they saw that the situation had changed.

In fact, the apes, seized with a sudden panic, from some unknown cause, were trying to escape. Two or three ran and clambered from one window to another with the agility of acrobats. They were not even trying to replace the ladder, by which it would have been easy to descend; perhaps in their terror they had forgotten this way of escape. The colonists, now being able to take aim without difficulty, fired. Some, wounded or killed, fell back into the rooms, uttering piercing cries. The rest, throwing themselves out, were dashed to pieces in their fall, and in a few minutes, so far as they knew, there was not a living quadrumana in Granite House.

At this moment the ladder was seen to slip over the threshold, then unroll and fall to the ground.

“Hullo!” cried the sailor, “this is queer!”

“Very strange!” murmured the engineer, leaping first up the ladder.

“Take care, captain!” cried Pencroft, “perhaps there are still some of these rascals.

“We shall soon see,” replied the engineer, without stopping however.

All his companions followed him, and in a minute they had arrived at the threshold. They searched everywhere. There was no one in the rooms nor in the storehouse, which had been respected by the band of quadrumana.

“Well now, and the ladder,” cried the sailor; “who can the gentleman have been who sent us that down?”

But at that moment a cry was heard, and a great orang, who had hidden himself in the passage, rushed into the room, pursued by Neb.

“Ah, the robber!” cried Pencroft.

And hatchet in hand, he was about to cleave the head of the animal, when Cyrus Harding seized his arm, saying, —

“Spare him, Pencroft.”

“Pardon this rascal?”

“Yes! it was he who threw us the ladder!”

And the engineer said this in such a peculiar voice that it was difficult to know whether he spoke seriously or not.

Nevertheless, they threw themselves on the orang, who defended himself gallantly, but was soon overpowered and bound.

“There!” said Pencroft. “And what shall we make of him, now we’ve got him?”

“A servant!” replied Herbert.

The lad was not joking in saying this, for he knew how this intelligent race could be turned to account.

The settlers then approached the ape and gazed at it attentively. He belonged to the family of anthropoid apes, of which the facial angle is not much inferior to that of the Australians and Hottentots. It was an orangoutang, and as such, had neither the ferocity of the gorilla, nor the stupidity of the baboon. It is to this family of the anthropoid apes that so many characteristics belong which prove them to be possessed of an almost human intelligence. Employed in houses, they can wait at table, sweep rooms, brush clothes, clean boots, handle a knife, fork, and spoon properly, and even drink wine... doing everything as well as the best servant that ever walked upon two legs. Buffon possessed one of these apes, who served him for a long time as a faithful and zealous servant.

The one which had been seized in the hall of Granite House was a great fellow, six feet high, with an admirably poportioned frame, a broad chest, head of a moderate size, the facial angle reaching sixty-five degrees, round skull, projecting nose, skin covered with soft glossy hair, in short, a fine specimen of the anthropoids. His eyes, rather smaller than human eyes, sparkled with intelligence; his white teeth glittered under his mustache, and he wore a little curly brown beard.

“A handsome fellow!” said Pencroft; “if we only knew his language, we could talk to him.”

“But, master,” said Neb, “are you serious? Are we going to take him as a servant?”

“Yes, Neb,” replied the engineer, smiling. “But you must not be jealous.”

“And I hope he will make an excellent servant,” added Herbert. “He appears young, and will be easy to educate, and we shall not be obliged to use force to subdue him, nor draw his teeth, as is sometimes done. He will soon grow fond of his masters if they are kind to him.”

“And they will be,” replied Pencroft, who had forgotten all his rancor against “the jokers.”

Then, approaching the orang, —

“Well, old boy!” he asked, “how are you?”

The orang replied by a little grunt which did not show any anger.

“You wish to join the colony?” again asked the sailor. “You are going to enter the service of Captain Cyrus Harding?”

Another respondent grunt was uttered by the ape.

“And you will be satisfied with no other wages than your food?”

Third affirmative grunt.

“This conversation is slightly monotonous,” observed Gideon Spilett.

“So much the better,” replied Pencroft; “the best servants are those who talk the least. And then, no wages, do you hear, my boy? We will give you no wages at first, but we will double them afterwards if we are pleased with you.”

Thus the colony was increased by a new member. As to his name the sailor begged that in memory of another ape which he had known, he might be called Jupiter, and Jup for short.

And so, without more ceremony, Master Jup was installed in Granite House.

CHAPTER 7

The settlers in Lincoln Island had now regained their dwelling, without having been obliged to reach it by the old opening, and were therefore spared the trouble of mason's work. It was certainly lucky, that at the moment they were about to set out to do so, the apes had been seized with that terror, no less sudden than inexplicable, which had driven them out of Granite House. Had the animals discovered that they were about to be attacked from another direction? This was the only explanation of their sudden retreat.

During the day the bodies of the apes were carried into the wood, where they were buried; then the settlers busied themselves in repairing the disorder caused by the intruders, disorder but not damage, for although they had turned everything in the rooms topsy-turvy, yet they had broken nothing. Neb relighted his stove, and the stores in the larder furnished a substantial repast, to which all did ample justice.

Jup was not forgotten, and he ate with relish some stonepine almonds and rhizome roots, with which he was abundantly supplied. Pencroft had unfastened his arms, but judged it best to have his legs tied until they were more sure of his submission.

Then, before retiring to rest, Harding and his companions seated round their table, discussed those plans, the execution of which was most pressing. The most important and most urgent was the establishment of a bridge over the Mercy, so as to form a communication with the southern part of the island and Granite House; then the making of an enclosure for the musmons or other woolly animals which they wished to capture.

These two projects would help to solve the difficulty as to their clothing, which was now serious. The bridge would render easy the transport of the balloon case, which would furnish them with linen, and the inhabitants of the enclosure would yield wool which would supply them with winter clothes.

As to the enclosure, it was Cyrus Harding’s intention to establish it at the sources of the Red Creek, where the ruminants would find fresh and abundant pasture. The road between Prospect Heights and the sources of the stream was already partly beaten, and with a better cart than the first, the material could be easily conveyed to the spot, especially if they could manage to capture some animals to draw it.

But though there might be no inconvenience in the enclosure being so far from Granite House, it would not be the same with the poultry-yard, to which Neb called the attention of the colonists. It was indeed necessary that the birds should be close within reach of the cook, and no place appeared more favorable for the establishment of the said poultry-yard than that portion of the banks of the lake which was close to the old opening.

Water-birds would prosper there as well as others, and the couple of tinamous taken in their last excursion would be the first to be domesticated.

The next day, the 3rd of November, the new works were begun by the construction of the bridge, and all hands were required for this important task. Saws, hatchets, and hammers were shouldered by the settlers, who, now transformed into carpenters, descended to the shore.

There Pencroft observed, —

“Suppose, that during our absence, Master Jup takes it into his head to draw up the ladder which he so politely returned to us yesterday?”

“Let us tie its lower end down firmly,” replied Cyrus Harding.

This was done by means of two stakes securely fixed in the sand. Then the settlers, ascending the left bank of the Mercy, soon arrived at the angle formed by the river.

There they halted, in order to ascertain if the bridge could be thrown across. The place appeared suitable.

In fact, from this spot, to Port Balloon, discovered the day before on the southern coast, there was only a distance of three miles and a half, and from the bridge to the Port, it would be easy to make a good cart-road which would render the communication between Granite House and the south of the island extremely easy.

Cyrus Harding now imparted to his companions a scheme for completely isolating Prospect Heights so as to shelter it from the attacks both of quadrupeds and quadrumana. In this way, Granite House, the Chimneys, the poultry-yard, and all the upper part of the plateau which was to be used for cultivation, would be protected against the depredations of animals. Nothing could be easier than to execute this project, and this is how the engineer intended to set to work.

The plateau was already defended on three sides by water-courses, either artificial or natural. On the northwest, by the shores of Lake Grant, from the entrance of the passage to the breach made in the banks of the lake for the escape of the water.

On the north, from this breach to the sea, by the new water-course which had hollowed out a bed for itself across the plateau and shore, above and below the fall, and it would be enough to dig the bed of this creek a little deeper to make it impracticable for animals, on all the eastern border by the sea itself, from the mouth of the aforesaid creek to the mouth of the Mercy.

Lastly, on the south, from the mouth to the turn of the Mercy where the bridge was to be established.

The western border of the plateau now remained between the turn of the river and the southern angle of the lake, a distance of about a mile, which was open to all comers. But nothing could be easier than to dig a broad deep ditch, which could be filled from the lake, and the overflow of which would throw itself by a rapid fall into the bed of the Mercy. The level of the lake would, no doubt, be somewhat lowered by this fresh discharge of its waters, but Cyrus Harding had ascertained that the volume of water in the Red Creek was considerable enough to allow of the execution of this project.

“So then,” added the engineer, “Prospect Heights will become a regular island, being surrounded with water on all sides, and only communicating with the rest of our domain by the bridge which we are about to throw across the Mercy, the two little bridges already established above and below the fall; and, lastly, two other little bridges which must be constructed, one over the canal which I propose to dig, the other across to the left bank of the Mercy. Now, if these bridges can be raised at will, Prospect Heights will be guarded from any surprise.”

The bridge was the most urgent work. Trees were selected, cut down, stripped of their branches, and cut into beams, joists, and planks. The end of the bridge which rested on the right bank of the Mercy was to be firm, but the other end on the left bank was to be movable, so that it might be raised by means of a counterpoise, as some canal bridges are managed.

This was certainly a considerable work, and though it was skillfully conducted, it took some time, for the Mercy at this place was eighty feet wide. It was therefore necessary to fix piles in the bed of the river so as to sustain the floor of the bridge and establish a pile-driver to act on the tops of these piles, which would thus form two arches and allow the bridge to support heavy loads.

Happily there was no want of tools with which to shape the wood, nor of iron-work to make it firm, nor of the ingenuity of a man who had a marvelous knowledge of the work, nor lastly, the zeal of his companions, who in seven months had necessarily acquired great skill in the use of their tools; and it must be said that not the least skilful was Gideon Spilett, who in dexterity almost equaled the sailor himself. “Who would ever have expected so much from a newspaper man!” thought Pencroft.

The construction of the Mercy bridge lasted three weeks of regular hard work. They even breakfasted on the scene of their labors, and the weather being magnificent, they only returned to Granite House to sleep.

During this period it may be stated that Master Jup grew more accustomed to his new masters, whose movements he always watched with very inquisitive eyes. However, as a precautionary measure, Pencroft did not as yet allow him complete liberty, rightly wishing to wait until the limits of the plateau should be settled by the projected works. Top and Jup were good friends and played willingly together, but Jup did everything solemnly.

On the 20th of November the bridge was finished. The movable part, balanced by the counterpoise, swung easily, and only a slight effort was needed to rise it; between its hinge and the last cross-bar on which it rested when closed, there existed a space of twenty feet, which was sufficiently wide to prevent any animals from crossing.

The settlers now began to talk of fetching the balloon-case, which they were anxious to place in perfect security; but to bring it, it would be necessary to take a cart to Port Balloon, and consequently, necessary to beat a road through the dense forests of the Far West. This would take some time. Also, Neb and Pencroft having gone to examine into the state of things at Port Balloon, and reported that the stock of cloth would suffer no damage in the grotto where it was stored, it was decided that the work at Prospect Heights should not be discontinued.

“That,” observed Pencroft, “will enable us to establish our poultry-yard under better conditions, since we need have no fear of visits from foxes nor the attacks of other beasts.”

“Then,” added Neb, “we can clear the plateau, and transplant wild plants to it.”

“And prepare our second corn-field!” cried the sailor with a triumphant air.

In fact, the first corn-field sown with a single grain had prospered admirably, thanks to Pencroft’s care. It had produced the ten ears foretold by the engineer, and each ear containing eighty grains, the colony found itself in possession of eight hundred grains, in six months, which promised a double harvest each year.

These eight hundred grains, except fifty, which were prudently reserved, were to be sown in a new field, but with no less care than was bestowed on the single grain.

The field was prepared, then surrounded with a strong palisade, high and pointed, which quadrupeds would have found difficulty in leaping. As to birds, some scarecrows, due to Pencroft's ingenious brain, were enough to frighten them. The seven hundred and fifty grains deposited in very regular furrows were then left for nature to do the rest.

On the 21st of November, Cyrus Harding began to plan the canal which was to close the plateau on the west, from the south angle of Lake Grant to the angle of the Mercy. There was there two or three feet of vegetable earth, and below that granite. It was therefore necessary to manufacture some more nitro-glycerine, and the nitro-glycerine did its accustomed work. In less than a fortnight a ditch, twelve feet wide and six deep, was dug out in the hard ground of the plateau. A new trench was made by the same means in the rocky border of the lake, forming a small stream, to which they gave the name of Creek Glycerine, and which was thus an affluent of the Mercy. As the engineer had predicted, the level of the lake was lowered, though very slightly. To complete the enclosure the bed of the stream on the beach was considerably enlarged, and the sand supported by means of stakes.

By the end of the first fortnight of December these works were finished, and Prospect Heights — that is to say, a sort of irregular pentagon, having a perimeter of nearly four miles, surrounded by a liquid belt — was completely protected from depredators of every description.

During the month of December, the heat was very great. In spite of it, however, the settlers continued their work, and as they were anxious to possess a poultry-yard they forthwith commenced it.

It is useless to say that since the enclosing of the plateau had been completed, Master Jup had been set at liberty. He did not leave his masters, and evinced no wish to escape. He was a gentle animal, though very powerful and wonderfully active. He was already taught to make himself useful by drawing loads of wood and carting away the stones which were extracted from the bed of Creek Glycerine.

The poultry-yard occupied an area of two hundred square yards, on the southeastern bank of the lake. It was surrounded by a palisade, and in it were constructed various shelters for the birds which were to populate it. These were simply built of branches and divided into compartments, made ready for the expected guests.

The first were the two tinamous, which were not long in having a number of young ones; they had for companions half a dozen ducks, accustomed to the borders of the lake. Some belonged to the Chinese species, of which the wings open like a fan, and which by the brilliancy of their plumage rival the golden pheasants. A few days afterwards, Herbert snared a couple of gallinaceae, with spreading tails composed of long feathers, magnificent alectors, which soon became tame. As to pelicans, kingfishers, water-hens, they came of themselves to the shores of the poultry-yard, and this little community, after some disputes, cooing, screaming, clucking, ended by settling down peacefully, and increased in encouraging proportion for the future use of the colony.

Cyrus Harding, wishing to complete his performance, established a pigeon-house in a corner of the poultry-yard. There he lodged a dozen of those pigeons which frequented the rocks of the plateau. These birds soon became accustomed to returning every evening to their new dwelling, and showed more disposition to domesticate themselves than their congeners, the wood-pigeons.

Lastly, the time had come for turning the balloon-case to use, by cutting it up to make shirts and other articles; for as to keeping it in its present form, and risking themselves in a balloon filled with gas, above a sea of the limits of which they had no idea, it was not to be thought of.

It was necessary to bring the case to Granite House, and the colonists employed themselves in rendering their heavy cart lighter and more manageable. But though they had a vehicle, the moving power was yet to be found.

But did there not exist in the island some animal which might supply the place of the horse, ass, or ox? That was the question.

“Certainly,” said Pencroft, “a beast of burden would be very useful to us until the captain has made a steam cart, or even an engine, for some day we shall have a railroad from Granite House to Port Balloon, with a branch line to Mount Franklin!”

One day, the 23rd of December, Neb and Top were heard shouting and barking, each apparently trying to see who could make the most noise. The settlers, who were busy at the Chimneys, ran, fearing some vexatious incident.

What did they see? Two fine animals of a large size that had imprudently ventured on the plateau, when the bridges were open. One would have said they were horses, or at least donkeys, male and female, of a fine shape, dove-colored, the legs and tail white, striped with black on the head and neck. They advanced quietly without showing any uneasiness, and gazed at the men, in whom they could not as yet recognize their future masters.

“These are onagers!” cried Herbert, “animals something between the zebra and the quagga!”

“Why not donkeys?” asked Neb.

“Because they have not long ears, and their shape is more graceful!”

“Donkeys or horses,” interrupted Pencroft, “they are ‘moving powers,’ as the captain would say, and as such must be captured!”

The sailor, without frightening the animals, crept through the grass to the bridge over Creek Glycerine, lowered it, and the onagers were prisoners.

Now, should they seize them with violence and master them by force? No. It was decided that for a few days they should be allowed to roam freely about the plateau, where there was an abundance of grass, and the engineer immediately began to prepare a stable near the poultry-yard, in which the onagers might find food, with a good litter, and shelter during the night.

This done, the movements of the two magnificent creatures were left entirely free, and the settlers avoided even approaching them so as to terrify them. Several times, however, the onagers appeared to wish to leave the plateau, too confined for animals accustomed to the plains and forests. They were then seen following the water-barrier which everywhere presented itself before them, uttering short neighs, then galloping through the grass, and becoming calmer, they would remain entire hours gazing at the woods, from which they were cut off for ever!

In the meantime harness of vegetable fiber had been manufactured, and some days after the capture of the onagers, not only the cart was ready, but a straight road, or rather a cutting, had been made through the forests of the Far West, from the angle of the Mercy to Port Balloon. The cart might then be driven there, and towards the end of December they tried the onagers for the first time.

Pencroft had already coaxed the animals to come and eat out of his hand, and they allowed him to approach without making any difficulty, but once harnessed they reared and could with difficulty be held in. However, it was not long before they submitted to this new service, for the onager, being less refractory than the zebra, is frequently put in harness in the mountainous regions of Southern Africa, and it has even been acclimatized in Europe, under zones of a relative coolness.

On this day all the colony, except Pencroft who walked at the animals' heads, mounted the cart, and set out on the road to Port Balloon.

Of course they were jolted over the somewhat rough road, but the vehicle arrived without any accident, and was soon loaded with the case and rigging of the balloon.

At eight o'clock that evening the cart, after passing over the Mercy bridge, descended the left bank of the river, and stopped on the beach. The onagers being unharnessed, were thence led to their stable, and Pencroft before going to sleep gave vent to his feelings in a deep sigh of satisfaction that awoke all the echoes of Granite House.

CHAPTER 8

The first week of January was devoted to the manufacture of the linen garments required by the colony. The needles found in the box were used by sturdy if not delicate fingers, and we may be sure that what was sewn was sewn firmly.

There was no lack of thread, thanks to Cyrus Harding’s idea of re-employing that which had been already used in the covering of the balloon. This with admirable patience was all unpicked by Gideon Spilett and Herbert, for Pencroft had been obliged to give this work up, as it irritated him beyond measure; but he had no equal in the sewing part of the business. Indeed, everybody knows that sailors have a remarkable aptitude for tailoring.

The cloth of which the balloon-case was made was then cleaned by means of soda and potash, obtained by the incineration of plants, in such a way that the cotton, having got rid of the varnish, resumed its natural softness and elasticity; then, exposed to the action of the atmosphere, it soon became perfectly white. Some dozen shirts and sock — the latter not knitted, of course, but made of cotton — were thus manufactured. What a comfort it was to the settlers to clothe themselves again in clean linen, which was doubtless rather rough, but they were not troubled about that! and then to go to sleep between sheets, which made the couches at Granite House into quite comfortable beds!

It was about this time also that they made boots of seal-leather, which were greatly needed to replace the shoes and boots brought from America. We may be sure that these new shoes were large enough and never pinched the feet of the wearers.

With the beginning of the year 1866 the heat was very great, but the hunting in the forests did not stand still. Agouties, peccaries, capybaras, kangaroos, game of all sorts, actually swarmed there, and Spilett and Herbert were too good marksmen ever to throw away their shot uselessly.

Cyrus Harding still recommended them to husband the ammunition, and he took measures to replace the powder and shot which had been found in the box, and which he wished to reserve for the future. How did he know where chance might one day cast his companions and himself in the event of their leaving their domain? They should, then, prepare for the unknown future by husbanding their ammunition and by substituting for it some easily renewable substance.

To replace lead, of which Harding had found no traces in the island, he employed granulated iron, which was easy to manufacture. These bullets, not having the weight of leaden bullets, were made larger, and each charge contained less, but the skill of the sportsmen made up this deficiency. As to powder, Cyrus Harding would have been able to make that also, for he had at his disposal saltpeter, sulphur, and coal; but this preparation requires extreme care, and without special tools it is difficult to produce it of a good quality. Harding preferred, therefore, to manufacture pyroxyle, that is to say gun-cotton, a substance in which cotton is not indispensable, as the elementary tissue of vegetables may be used, and this is found in an almost pure state, not only in cotton, but in the textile fiber of hemp and flax, in paper, the pith of the elder, etc. Now, the elder abounded in the island towards the mouth of Red Creek, and the colonists had already made coffee of the berries of these shrubs, which belong to the family of the caprifoliaceae.

The only thing to be collected, therefore, was elder-pith, for as to the other substance necessary for the manufacture of pyroxyle, it was only fuming azotic acid. Now, Harding having sulphuric acid at his disposal, had already been easily able to produce azotic acid by attacking the saltpeter with which nature supplied him. He accordingly resolved to manufacture and employ pyroxyle, although it has some inconveniences, that is to say, a great inequality of effect, an excessive inflammability, since it takes fire at one hundred and seventy degrees instead of two hundred and forty, and lastly, an instantaneous deflagration which might damage the firearms. On the other hand, the advantages of pyroxyle consist in this, that it is not injured by damp, that it does not make the gun-barrels dirty, and that its force is four times that of ordinary powder.

To make pyroxyle, the cotton must be immersed in the fuming azotic acid for a quarter of an hour, then washed in cold water and dried. Nothing could be more simple.

Cyrus Harding had only at his disposal the ordinary azotic acid and not the fuming or monohydrate azotic acid, that is to say, acid which emits white vapors when it comes in contact with damp air; but by substituting for the latter ordinary azotic acid, mixed, in the proportion of from three to five volumes of concentrated sulphuric acid, the engineer obtained the same result. The sportsmen of the island therefore soon had a perfectly prepared substance, which, employed discreetly, produced admirable results.

About this time the settlers cleared three acres of the plateau, and the rest was preserved in a wild state, for the benefit of the onagers. Several excursions were made into the Jacamar Wood and the forests of the Far West, and they brought back from thence a large collection of wild vegetables, spinach, cress, radishes, and turnips, which careful culture would soon improve, and which would temper the regimen on which the settlers had till then subsisted. Supplies of wood and coal were also carted. Each excursion was at the same time a means of improving the roads, which gradually became smoother under the wheels of the cart.

The rabbit-warren still continued to supply the larder of Granite House. As fortunately it was situated on the other side of Creek Glycerine, its inhabitants could not reach the plateau nor ravage the newly-made plantation. The oyster-bed among the rocks was frequently renewed and furnished excellent molluscs. Besides that, the fishing, either in the lake or the Mercy, was very profitable, for Pencroft had made some lines, armed with iron hooks, with which they frequently caught fine trout, and a species of fish whose silvery sides were speckled with yellow, and which were also extremely savory. Master Neb, who was skilled in the culinary art, knew how to vary agreeably the bill of fare. Bread alone was wanting at the table of the settlers, and as has been said, they felt this privation greatly.

The settlers hunted too the turtles which frequented the shores of Cape Mandible. At this place the beach was covered with little mounds, concealing perfectly spherical turtles’ eggs, with white hard shells, the albumen of which does not coagulate as that of birds’ eggs. They were hatched by the sun, and their number was naturally considerable, as each turtle can lay annually two hundred and fifty.

“A regular egg-field,” observed Gideon Spilett, “and we have nothing to do but to pick them up.”

But not being contented with simply the produce, they made chase after the producers, the result of which was that they were able to bring back to Granite House a dozen of these chelonians, which were really valuable from an alimentary point of view. The turtle soup, flavored with aromatic herbs, often gained well-merited praises for its preparer, Neb.

We must here mention another fortunate circumstance by which new stores for the winter were laid in. Shoals of salmon entered the Mercy, and ascended the country for several miles. It was the time at which the females, going to find suitable places in which to spawn, precede the males and make a great noise through the fresh water. A thousand of these fish, which measured about two feet and a half in length, came up the river, and a large quantity were retained by fixing dams across the stream. More than a hundred were thus taken, which were salted and stored for the time when winter, freezing up the streams, would render fishing impracticable. By this time the intelligent Jup was raised to the duty of valet. He had been dressed in a jacket, white linen breeches, and an apron, the pockets of which were his delight. The clever orang had been marvelously trained by Neb, and any one would have said that the Negro and the ape understood each other when they talked together. Jup had besides a real affection for Neb, and Neb returned it. When his services were not required, either for carrying wood or for climbing to the top of some tree, Jup passed the greatest part of his time in the kitchen, where he endeavored to imitate Neb in all that he saw him do. The black showed the greatest patience and even extreme zeal in instructing his pupil, and the pupil exhibited remarkable intelligence in profiting by the lessons he received from his master.

Judge then of the pleasure Master Jup gave to the inhabitants of Granite House when, without their having had any idea of it, he appeared one day, napkin on his arm, ready to wait at table. Quick, attentive, he acquitted himself perfectly, changing the plates, bringing dishes, pouring out water, all with a gravity which gave intense amusement to the settlers, and which enraptured Pencroft.

"Jup, some soup!"

"Jup, a little agouti!"

"Jup, a plate!"

"Jup! Good Jup! Honest Jup!"

Nothing was heard but that, and Jup without ever being disconcerted, replied to every one, watched for everything, and he shook his head in a knowing way when Pencroft, referring to his joke of the first day, said to him, —

"Decidedly, Jup, your wages must be doubled."

It is useless to say that the orang was now thoroughly domesticated at Granite House, and that he often accompanied his masters to the forest without showing any wish to leave them. It was most amusing to see him walking with a stick which Pencroft had given him, and which he carried on his shoulder like a gun. If they wished to gather some fruit from the summit of a tree, how quickly he climbed for it. If the wheel of the cart stuck in the mud, with what energy did Jup with a single heave of his shoulder put it right again.

"What a jolly fellow he is!" cried Pencroft often. "If he was as mischievous as he is good, there would be no doing anything with him!"

It was towards the end of January the colonists began their labors in the center of the island. It had been decided that a corral should be established near the sources of the Red Creek, at the foot of Mount Franklin, destined to contain the ruminants, whose presence would have been troublesome at

Granite House, and especially for the musmons, who were to supply the wool for the settlers’ winter garments.

Each morning, the colony, sometimes entire, but more often represented only by Harding, Herbert, and Pencroft, proceeded to the sources of the Creek, a distance of not more than five miles, by the newly beaten road to which the name of Corral Road had been given.

There a site was chosen, at the back of the southern ridge of the mountain. It was a meadow land, dotted here and there with clumps of trees, and watered by a little stream, which sprung from the slopes which closed it in on one side. The grass was fresh, and it was not too much shaded by the trees which grew about it. This meadow was to be surrounded by a palisade, high enough to prevent even the most agile animals from leaping over. This enclosure would be large enough to contain a hundred musmons and wild goats, with all the young ones they might produce.

The perimeter of the corral was then traced by the engineer, and they would then have proceeded to fell the trees necessary for the construction of the palisade, but as the opening up of the road had already necessitated the sacrifice of a considerable number, those were brought and supplied a hundred stakes, which were firmly fixed in the ground.

The construction of this corral did not take less than three weeks, for besides the palisade, Cyrus Harding built large sheds, in which the animals could take shelter. These buildings had also to be made very strong, for musmons are powerful animals, and their first fury was to be feared. The stakes, sharpened at their upper end and hardened by fire, had been fixed by means of cross-bars, and at regular distances props assured the solidity of the whole.

The corral finished, a raid had to be made on the pastures frequented by the ruminants. This was done on the 7th of February, on a beautiful summer's day, and every one took part in it. The onagers, already well trained, were ridden by Spilett and Herbert, and were of great use.

The maneuver consisted simply in surrounding the musmons and goats, and gradually narrowing the circle around them. Cyrus Harding, Pencroft, Neb, and Jup, posted themselves in different parts of the wood, while the two cavaliers and Top galloped in a radius of half a mile round the corral.

The musmons were very numerous in this part of the island. These fine animals were as large as deer; their horns were stronger than those of the ram, and their gray-colored fleece was mixed with long hair.

This hunting day was very fatiguing. Such going and coming, and running and riding and shouting! Of a hundred musmons which had been surrounded, more than two-thirds escaped, but at last, thirty of these animals and ten wild goats were gradually driven back towards the corral, the open door of which appearing to offer a means of escape, they rushed in and were prisoners.

In short, the result was satisfactory, and the settlers had no reason to complain. There was no doubt that the flock would prosper, and that at no distant time not only wool but hides would be abundant.

That evening the hunters returned to Granite House quite exhausted. However, notwithstanding their fatigue, they returned the next day to visit the corral. The prisoners had been trying to overthrow the palisade, but of course had not succeeded, and were not long in becoming more tranquil.

During the month of February, no event of any importance occurred. The daily labors were pursued methodically, and, as well as improving the roads to the corral and to Port Balloon, a third was commenced, which, starting from the enclosure, proceeded towards the western coast. The yet unknown portion of Lincoln Island was that of the wood-covered Serpentine Peninsula, which sheltered the wild beasts, from which Gideon Spilett was so anxious to clear their domain.

Before the cold season should appear the most assiduous care was given to the cultivation of the wild plants which had been transplanted from the forest to Prospect Heights. Herbert never returned from an excursion without bringing home some useful vegetable. One day, it was some specimens of the chicory tribe, the seeds of which by pressure yield an excellent oil; another, it was some common sorrel, whose antiscorbutic qualities were not to be despised; then, some of those precious tubers, which have at all times been cultivated in South America, potatoes, of which more than two hundred species are now known. The kitchen garden, now well stocked and carefully defended from the birds, was divided into small beds, where grew lettuces, kidney potatoes, sorrel, turnips, radishes, and other coneiferae. The soil on the plateau was particularly fertile, and it was hoped that the harvests would be abundant.

They had also a variety of different beverages, and so long as they did not demand wine, the most hard to please would have had no reason to complain. To the Oswego tea, and the fermented liquor extracted from the roots of the dragonnier, Harding had added a regular beer, made from the young shoots of the spruce-fir, which, after having been boiled and fermented, made that agreeable drink called by the Anglo-Americans spring-beer.

Towards the end of the summer, the poultry-yard was possessed of a couple of fine bustards, which belonged to the houbara species, characterized by a sort of feathery mantle; a dozen shovelers, whose upper mandible was prolonged on each side by a membraneous appendage; and also some magnificent cocks, similar to the Mozambique cocks, the comb, caruncle, and epidermis being black. So far, everything had succeeded, thanks to the activity of these courageous and intelligent men. Nature did much for them, doubtless; but faithful to the great precept, they made a right use of what a bountiful Providence gave them.

After the heat of these warm summer days, in the evening when their work was finished and the sea-breeze began to blow, they liked to sit on the edge of Prospect Heights, in a sort of veranda, covered with creepers, which Neb had made with his own hands. There they talked, they instructed each other, they made plans, and the rough good-humor of the sailor always amused this little world, in which the most perfect harmony had never ceased to reign.

They often spoke of their country, of their dear and great America. What was the result of the War of Secession? It could not have been greatly prolonged. Richmond had doubtless soon fallen into the hands of General Grant. The taking of the capital of the Confederates must have been the last action of this terrible struggle. Now the North had triumphed in the good cause, how welcome would have been a newspaper to the exiles in Lincoln Island! For eleven months all communication between them and the rest of their fellow-creatures had been interrupted, and in a short time the 24th of March would arrive, the anniversary of the day on which the balloon had thrown them on this unknown coast. They were then mere castaways, not even knowing how they should preserve their miserable lives from the fury of the elements! And now, thanks to the knowledge of their captain, and their own intelligence, they were regular colonists, furnished with arms, tools, and instruments; they had been able to turn to their profit the animals, plants, and minerals of the island, that is to say, the three kingdoms of Nature.

Yes; they often talked of all these things and formed still more plans.

As to Cyrus Harding he was for the most part silent, and listened to his companions more often than he spoke to them. Sometimes he smiled at Herbert’s ideas or Pencroft’s nonsense, but always and everywhere he pondered over those inexplicable facts, that strange enigma, of which the secret still escaped him!

CHAPTER 9

The weather changed during the first week of March. There had been a full moon at the commencement of the month, and the heat was excessive. The atmosphere was felt to be full of electricity, and a period of some length of tempestuous weather was to be feared.

Indeed, on the 2nd, peals of thunder were heard, the wind blew from the east, and hail rattled against the facade of Granite House like volleys of grape-shot. The door and windows were immediately closed, or everything in the rooms would have been drenched. On seeing these hailstones, some of which were the size of a pigeon's egg, Pencroft's first thought was that his cornfield was in serious danger.

He directly rushed to his field, where little green heads were already appearing, and by means of a great cloth, he managed to protect his crop.

This bad weather lasted a week, during which time the thunder rolled without cessation in the depths of the sky.

The colonists, not having any pressing work out of doors, profited by the bad weather to work at the interior of Granite House, the arrangement of which was becoming more complete from day to day. The engineer made a turning-lathe, with which he turned several articles both for the toilet and the kitchen, particularly buttons, the want of which was greatly felt. A gunrack had been made for the firearms, which were kept with extreme care, and neither tables nor cupboards were left incomplete. They sawed, they planed, they filed, they turned; and during the whole of this bad season, nothing was heard but the grinding of tools or the humming of the turning-lathe which responded to the growling of the thunder.

Master Jup had not been forgotten, and he occupied a room at the back, near the storeroom, a sort of cabin with a cot always full of good litter, which perfectly suited his taste.

“With good old Jup there is never any quarreling,” often repeated Pencroft, “never any improper reply. What a servant, Neb, what a servant!”

Of course Jup was now well used to service. He brushed their clothes, he turned the spit, he waited at table, he swept the rooms, he gathered wood, and he performed another admirable piece of service which delighted Pencroft — he never went to sleep without first coming to tuck up the worthy sailor in his bed.

As to the health of the members of the colony, bipeds or bimana, quadrumana or quadrupeds, it left nothing to be desired. With their life in the open air, on this salubrious soil, under that temperate zone, working both with head and hands, they could not suppose that illness would ever attack them.

All were indeed wonderfully well. Herbert had already grown two inches in the year. His figure was forming and becoming more manly, and he promised to be an accomplished man, physically as well as morally. Besides he improved himself during the leisure hours which manual occupations left to him; he read the books found in the case; and after the practical lessons which were taught by the very necessity of their position, he found in the engineer for science, and the reporter for languages, masters who were delighted to complete his education.

The tempest ended about the 9th of March, but the sky remained covered with clouds during the whole of this last summer month. The atmosphere, violently agitated by the electric commotions, could not recover its former purity, and there was almost invariably rain and fog, except for three or four fine days on which several excursions were made. About this time the female onager gave birth to a young one which belonged to the same sex as its mother, and which throve capitally. In the corral, the flock of musmons had also increased, and several lambs already bleated in the sheds, to the great delight of Neb and Herbert, who had each their favorite among these newcomers. An attempt was also made for the domestication of the peccaries, which succeeded well. A sty was constructed under the poultry-yard, and soon contained several young ones in the way to become civilized, that is to say, to become fat under Neb's care. Master Jup, entrusted with carrying them their daily nourishment, leavings from the kitchen, etc. acquitted himself conscientiously of his task. He sometimes amused himself at the expense of his little pensioners by tweaking their tails; but this was mischief, and not wickedness, for these little twisted tails amused him like a plaything, and his instinct was that of a child. One day in this month of March, Pencroft, talking to the engineer, reminded Cyrus Harding of a promise which the latter had not as yet had time to fulfil.

"You once spoke of an apparatus which would take the place of the long ladders at Granite House, captain," said he; "won't you make it some day?"

"Nothing will be easier; but is this a really useful thing?"

"Certainly, captain. After we have given ourselves necessaries, let us think a little of luxury. For us it may be luxury, if you like, but for things it is necessary. It isn't very convenient to climb up a long ladder when one is heavily loaded."

"Well, Pencroft, we will try to please you," replied Cyrus Harding.

"But you have no machine at your disposal."

"We will make one."

"A steam machine?"

"No, a water machine."

And, indeed, to work his apparatus there was already a natural force at the disposal of the engineer which could be used without great difficulty. For this, it was enough to augment the flow of the little stream which supplied the interior of Granite House with water. The opening among the stones and grass was then increased, thus producing a strong fall at the bottom of the passage, the overflow from which escaped by the inner well. Below this fall the engineer fixed a cylinder with paddles, which was joined on the exterior with a strong cable rolled on a wheel, supporting a basket. In this way, by means of a long rope reaching to the ground, which enabled them to regulate the motive power, they could rise in the basket to the door of Granite House.

It was on the 17th of March that the lift acted for the first time, and gave universal satisfaction. Henceforward all the loads, wood, coal, provisions, and even the settlers themselves, were hoisted by this simple system, which replaced the primitive ladder, and, as may be supposed, no one thought of regretting the change. Top particularly was enchanted with this improvement, for he had not, and never could have possessed Master Jup's skill in climbing ladders, and often it was on Neb's back, or even on that of the orang that he had been obliged to make the ascent to Granite House. About this time, too, Cyrus Harding attempted to manufacture glass, and he at first put the old pottery-kiln to this new use. There were some difficulties to be encountered; but, after several fruitless attempts, he succeeded in setting up a glass manufactory, which Gideon Spilett and Herbert, his usual assistants, did not leave for several days. As to the substances used in the composition of glass, they are simply sand, chalk, and soda, either carbonate or sulphate. Now the beach supplied sand, lime supplied chalk, sea-weeds supplied soda, pyrites supplied sulphuric acid, and the ground supplied coal to heat the kiln to the wished-for temperature. Cyrus Harding thus soon had everything ready for setting to work.

The tool, the manufacture of which presented the most difficulty, was the pipe of the glass-maker, an iron tube, five or six feet long, which collects on one end the material in a state of fusion. But by means of a long, thin piece of iron rolled up like the barrel of a gun, Pencroft succeeded in making a tube soon ready for use.

On the 28th of March the tube was heated. A hundred parts of sand, thirty-five of chalk, forty of sulphate of soda, mixed with two or three parts of powdered coal, composed the substance, which was placed in crucibles. When the high temperature of the oven had reduced it to a liquid, or rather a pasty state, Cyrus Harding collected with the tube a quantity of the paste: he turned it about on a metal plate, previously arranged, so as to give it a form suitable for blowing, then he passed the tube to Herbert, telling him to blow at the other extremity.

And Herbert, swelling out his cheeks, blew so much and so well into the tube-taking care to twirl it round at the same time — that his breath dilated the glassy mass. Other quantities of the substance in a state of fusion were added to the first, and in a short time the result was a bubble which measured a foot in diameter. Harding then took the tube out of Herbert’s hands, and, giving it a pendulous motion, he ended by lengthening the malleable bubble so as to give it a cylindroconic shape.

The blowing operation had given a cylinder of glass terminated by two hemispheric caps, which were easily detached by means of a sharp iron dipped in cold water; then, by the same proceeding, this cylinder was cut lengthways, and after having been rendered malleable by a second heating, it was extended on a plate and spread out with a wooden roller.

The first pane was thus manufactured, and they had only to perform this operation fifty times to have fifty panes. The windows at Granite House were soon furnished with panes; not very white, perhaps, but still sufficiently transparent.

As to bottles and tumblers, that was only play. They were satisfied with them, besides, just as they came from the end of the tube. Pencroft had asked to be allowed to "blow" in his turn, and it was great fun for him; but he blew so hard that his productions took the most ridiculous shapes, which he admired immensely.

Cyrus Harding and Herbert, while hunting one day, had entered the forest of the Far West, on the left bank of the Mercy, and, as usual, the lad was asking a thousand questions of the engineer, who answered them heartily. Now, as Harding was not a sportsman, and as, on the other side, Herbert was talking chemistry and natural philosophy, numbers of kangaroos, capybaras, and agouties came within range, which, however, escaped the lad's gun; the consequence was that the day was already advanced, and the two hunters were in danger of having made a useless excursion, when Herbert, stopping, and uttering a cry of joy, exclaimed, —

"Oh, Captain Harding, do you see that tree?" and he pointed to a shrub, rather than a tree, for it was composed of a single stem, covered with a scaly bark, which bore leaves streaked with little parallel veins.

“And what is this tree which resembles a little palm?” asked Harding.

“It is a ‘cycas revoluta,’ of which I have a picture in our dictionary of Natural History!” said Herbert.

“But I can’t see any fruit on this shrub!” observed his companion.

“No, captain,” replied Herbert; “but its stem contains a flour with which nature has provided us all ready ground.”

“It is, then, the bread-tree?”

“Yes, the bread-tree.”

“Well, my boy,” replied the engineer, “this is a valuable discovery, since our wheat harvest is not yet ripe; I hope that you are not mistaken!”

Herbert was not mistaken: he broke the stem of a cycas, which was composed of a glandulous tissue, containing a quantity of floury pith, traversed with woody fiber, separated by rings of the same substance, arranged concentrically. With this fecula was mingled a mucilaginous juice of disagreeable flavor, but which it would be easy to get rid of by pressure. This cellular substance was regular flour of a superior quality, extremely nourishing; its exportation was formerly forbidden by the Japanese laws.

Cyrus Harding and Herbert, after having examined that part of the Far West where the cycas grew, took their bearings, and returned to Granite House, where they made known their discovery.

The next day the settlers went to collect some, and returned to Granite House with an ample supply of cycas stems. The engineer constructed a press, with which to extract the mucilaginous juice mingled with the fecula, and he obtained a large quantity of flour, which Neb soon transformed into cakes and puddings. This was not quite real wheaten bread, but it was very like it.

Now, too, the onager, the goats, and the sheep in the corral furnished daily the milk necessary to the colony. The cart, or rather a sort of light carriole which had replaced it, made frequent journeys to the corral, and when it was Pencroft’s turn to go he took Jup, and let him drive, and Jup, cracking his whip, acquitted himself with his customary intelligence.

Everything prospered, as well in the corral as in Granite House, and certainly the settlers, if it had not been that they were so far from their native land, had no reason to complain. They were so well suited to this life, and were, besides, so accustomed to the island, that they could not have left its hospitable soil without regret!

And yet so deeply is the love of his country implanted in the heart of man, that if a ship had unexpectedly come in sight of the island, the colonists would have made signals, would have attracted her attention, and would have departed!

It was the 1st of April, a Sunday, Easter Day, which Harding and his companions sanctified by rest and prayer. The day was fine, such as an October day in the Northern Hemisphere might be.

All, towards the evening after dinner, were seated under the veranda on the edge of Prospect Heights, and they were watching the darkness creeping up from the horizon. Some cups of the infusion of elder-berries, which took the place of coffee, had been served by Neb. They were speaking of the island and of its isolated situation in the Pacific, which led Gideon Spilett to say, —

“My dear Cyrus, have you ever, since you possessed the sextant found in the case, again taken the position of our island?”

“No,” replied the engineer.

“But it would perhaps be a good thing to do it with this instrument, which is more perfect than that which you before used.”

“What is the good?” said Pencroft. “The island is quite comfortable where it is!”

“Well, who knows,” returned the reporter, “who knows but that we may be much nearer inhabited land than we think?”

“We shall know to-morrow,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and if it had not been for the occupations which left me no leisure, we should have known it already.”

“Good!” said Pencroft. “The captain is too good an observer to be mistaken, and, if it has not moved from its place, the island is just where he put it.”

“We shall see.”

On the next day, therefore, by means of the sextant, the engineer made the necessary observations to verify the position which he had already obtained, and this was the result of his operation. His first observation had given him the situation of Lincoln Island, —

In west longitude: from 150° to 155°;

In south latitude: from 30° to 35°

The second gave exactly:

In longitude: 150° 30’

In south latitude: 34° 57’

So then, notwithstanding the imperfection of his apparatus, Cyrus Harding had operated with so much skill that his error did not exceed five degrees.

“Now,” said Gideon Spilett, “since we possess an atlas as well as a sextant, let us see, my dear Cyrus, the exact position which Lincoln Island occupies in the Pacific.”

Herbert fetched the atlas, and the map of the Pacific was opened, and the engineer, compass in hand, prepared to determine their position.

Suddenly the compasses stopped, and he exclaimed,

“But an island exists in this part of the Pacific already!”

“An island?” cried Pencroft.

“Tabor Island.”

“An important island?”

“No, an islet lost in the Pacific, and which perhaps has never been visited.”

“Well, we will visit it,” said Pencroft.

“We?”

“Yes, captain. We will build a decked boat, and I will undertake to steer her. At what distance are we from this Tabor Island?”

“About a hundred and fifty miles to the northeast,” replied Harding.

“A hundred and fifty miles! And what’s that?” returned Pencroft. “In forty-eight hours, with a good wind, we should sight it!”

And, on this reply, it was decided that a vessel should be constructed in time to be launched towards the month of next October, on the return of the fine season.

CHAPTER 10

When Pencroft had once got a plan in his head, he had no peace till it was executed. Now he wished to visit Tabor Island, and as a boat of a certain size was necessary for this voyage, he determined to build one.

What wood should he employ? Elm or fir, both of which abounded in the island? They decided for the fir, as being easy to work, but which stands water as well as the elm.

These details settled, it was agreed that since the fine season would not return before six months, Cyrus Harding and Pencroft should work alone at the boat. Gideon Spilett and Herbert were to continue to hunt, and neither Neb nor Master Jup, his assistant, were to leave the domestic duties which had devolved upon them.

Directly the trees were chosen, they were felled, stripped of their branches, and sawn into planks as well as sawyers would have been able to do it. A week after, in the recess between the Chimneys and the cliff, a dockyard was prepared, and a keel five-and-thirty feet long, furnished with a stern-post at the stern and a stem at the bows, lay along the sand.

Cyrus Harding was not working in the dark at this new trade. He knew as much about ship-building as about nearly everything else, and he had at first drawn the model of his ship on paper. Besides, he was ably seconded by Pencroft, who, having worked for several years in a dockyard in Brooklyn, knew the practical part of the trade. It was not until after careful calculation and deep thought that the timbers were laid on the keel.

Pencroft, as may be believed, was all eagerness to carry out his new enterprise, and would not leave his work for an instant.

A single thing had the honor of drawing him, but for one day only, from his dockyard. This was the second wheat-harvest, which was gathered in on the 15th of April. It was as much a success as the first, and yielded the number of grains which had been predicted.

“Five bushels, captain,” said Pencroft, after having scrupulously measured his treasure.

“Five bushels,” replied the engineer; “and a hundred and thirty thousand grains a bushel will make six hundred and fifty thousand grains.”

“Well, we will sow them all this time,” said the sailor, “except a little in reserve.”

“Yes, Pencroft, and if the next crop gives a proportionate yield, we shall have four thousand bushels.”

“And shall we eat bread?”

“We shall eat bread.”

“But we must have a mill.

“We will make one.”

The third corn-field was very much larger than the two first, and the soil, prepared with extreme care, received the precious seed. That done, Pencroft returned to his work.

During this time Spilett and Herbert hunted in the neighborhood, and they ventured deep into the still unknown parts of the Far West, their guns loaded with ball, ready for any dangerous emergency. It was a vast thicket of magnificent trees, crowded together as if pressed for room. The exploration of these dense masses of wood was difficult in the extreme, and the reporter never ventured there without the pocket-compass, for the sun scarcely pierced through the thick foliage and it would have been very difficult for them to retrace their way. It naturally happened that game was more rare in those situations where there was hardly sufficient room to move; two or three large herbivorous animals were however killed during the last fortnight of April. These were koalas, specimens of which the settlers had already seen to the north of the lake, and which stupidly allowed themselves to be killed among the thick branches of the trees in which they took refuge. Their skins were brought back to Granite House, and there, by the help of sulphuric acid, they were subjected to a sort of tanning process which rendered them capable of being used.

On the 30th of April, the two sportsmen were in the depth of the Far West, when the reporter, preceding Herbert a few paces, arrived in a sort of clearing, into which the trees more sparsely scattered had permitted a few rays to penetrate. Gideon Spilett was at first surprised at the odor which exhaled from certain plants with straight stalks, round and branchy, bearing grape-like clusters of flowers and very small berries. The reporter broke off one or two of these stalks and returned to the lad, to whom he said, —

“What can this be, Herbert?”

“Well, Mr. Spilett,” said Herbert, “this is a treasure which will secure you Pencroft’s gratitude forever.”

“Is it tobacco?”

“Yes, and though it may not be of the first quality, it is none the less tobacco!”

“Oh, good old Pencroft! Won’t he be pleased! But we must not let him smoke it all, he must give us our share.”

“Ah! an idea occurs to me, Mr. Spilett,” replied Herbert. “Don’t let us say anything to Pencroft yet; we will prepare these leaves, and one fine day we will present him with a pipe already filled!”

“All right, Herbert, and on that day our worthy companion will have nothing left to wish for in this world.”

The reporter and the lad secured a good store of the precious plant, and then returned to Granite House, where they smuggled it in with as much precaution as if Pencroft had been the most vigilant and severe of custom-house officers.

Cyrus Harding and Neb were taken into confidence, and the sailor suspected nothing during the whole time, necessarily somewhat long, which was required in order to dry the small leaves, chop them up, and subject them to a certain torrefaction on hot stones. This took two months; but all these manipulations were successfully carried on unknown to Pencroft, for, occupied with the construction of his boat, he only returned to Granite House at the hour of rest.

For some days they had observed an enormous animal two or three miles out in the open sea swimming around Lincoln Island. This was a whale of the largest size, which apparently belonged to the southern species, called the “Cape Whale.”

“What a lucky chance it would be if we could capture it!” cried the sailor. “Ah! if we only had a proper boat and a good harpoon, I would say ‘After the beast,’ for he would be well worth the trouble of catching!”

“Well, Pencroft,” observed Harding, “I should much like to watch you handling a harpoon. It would be very interesting.”

“I am astonished,” said the reporter, “to see a whale in this comparatively high latitude.”

“Why so, Mr. Spilett?” replied Herbert. “We are exactly in that part of the Pacific which English and American whalemen call the whale field, and it is here, between New Zealand and South America, that the whales of the Southern Hemisphere are met with in the greatest numbers.”

And Pencroft returned to his work, not without uttering a sigh of regret, for every sailor is a born fisherman, and if the pleasure of fishing is in exact proportion to the size of the animal, one can judge how a whaler feels in sight of a whale. And if this had only been for pleasure! But they could not help feeling how valuable such a prize would have been to the colony, for the oil, fat, and bones would have been put to many uses.

Now it happened that this whale appeared to have no wish to leave the waters of the island. Therefore, whether from the windows of Granite House, or from Prospect Heights, Herbert and Gideon Spilett, when they were not hunting, or Neb, unless presiding over his fires, never left the telescope, but watched all the animal’s movements. The cetacean, having entered far into Union Bay, made rapid furrows across it from Mandible Cape to Claw Cape, propelled by its enormously powerful flukes, on which it supported itself, and making its way through the water at the rate little short of twelve knots an hour. Sometimes also it approached so near to the island that it could be clearly distinguished. It was the southern whale, which is completely black, the head being more depressed than that of the northern whale.

They could also see it throwing up from its air-holes to a great height a cloud of vapor, or of water, for, strange as it may appear, naturalists and whalers are not agreed on this subject. Is it air or is it water which is thus driven out? It is generally admitted to be vapor, which, condensing suddenly by contact with the cold air, falls again as rain.

However, the presence of this mammifer preoccupied the colonists. It irritated Pencroft especially, as he could think of nothing else while at work. He ended by longing for it, like a child for a thing which it has been denied. At night he talked about it in his sleep, and certainly if he had had the means of attacking it, if the sloop had been in a fit state to put to sea, he would not have hesitated to set out in pursuit.

But what the colonists could not do for themselves chance did for them, and on the 3rd of May shouts from Neb, who had stationed himself at the kitchen window, announced that the whale was stranded on the beach of the island.

Herbert and Gideon Spilett, who were just about to set out hunting, left their guns, Pencroft threw down his ax, and Harding and Neb joining their companions, all rushed towards the scene of action.

The stranding had taken place on the beach of Flotsam Point, three miles from Granite House, and at high tide. It was therefore probable that the cetacean would not be able to extricate itself easily; at any rate it was best to hasten, so as to cut off its retreat if necessary. They ran with pick-axes and iron-tipped poles in their hands, passed over the Mercy bridge, descended the right bank of the river, along the beach, and in less than twenty minutes the settlers were close to the enormous animal, above which flocks of birds already hovered.

“What a monster!” cried Neb.

And the exclamation was natural, for it was a southern whale, eighty feet long, a giant of the species, probably not weighing less than a hundred and fifty thousand pounds!

In the meanwhile, the monster thus stranded did not move, nor attempt by struggling to regain the water while the tide was still high.

It was dead, and a harpoon was sticking out of its left side.

“There are whalers in these quarters, then?” said Gideon Spilett directly.

“Oh, Mr. Spilett, that doesn’t prove anything!” replied Pencroft. “Whales have been known to go thousands of miles with a harpoon in the side, and this one might even have been struck in the north of the Atlantic and come to die in the south of the Pacific, and it would be nothing astonishing.”

Pencroft, having torn the harpoon from the animal’s side, read this inscription on it:

MARIA STELLA, VINEYARD

“A vessel from the Vineyard! A ship from my country!” he cried. “The ‘Maria Stella!’ A fine whaler, ‘pon my word; I know her well! Oh, my friends, a vessel from the Vineyard! — a whaler from the Vineyard!”

And the sailor brandishing the harpoon, repeated, not without emotion, the name which he loved so well — the name of his birthplace.

But as it could not be expected that the “Maria Stella” would come to reclaim the animal harpooned by her, they resolved to begin cutting it up before decomposition should commence. The birds, who had watched this rich prey for several days, had determined to take possession of it without further delay, and it was necessary to drive them off by firing at them repeatedly.

The whale was a female, and a large quantity of milk was taken from it, which, according to the opinion of the naturalist Duffenbach, might pass for cow’s milk, and, indeed, it differs from it neither in taste, color, nor density.

Pencroft had formerly served on board a whaling-ship, and he could methodically direct the operation of cutting up, a sufficiently disagreeable operation lasting three days, but from which the settlers did not flinch, not even Gideon Spilett, who, as the sailor said, would end by making a “real good castaway.”

The blubber, cut in parallel slices of two feet and a half in thickness, then divided into pieces which might weigh about a thousand pounds each, was melted down in large earthen pots brought to the spot, for they did not wish to taint the environs of Granite House, and in this fusion it lost nearly a third of its weight.

But there was an immense quantity of it; the tongue alone yielded six thousand pounds of oil, and the lower lip four thousand. Then, besides the fat, which would insure for a long time a store of stearine and glycerine, there were still the bones, for which a use could doubtless be found, although there were neither umbrellas nor stays used at Granite House. The upper part of the mouth of the cetacean was, indeed, provided on both sides with eight hundred horny blades, very elastic, of a fibrous texture, and fringed at the edge like great combs, at which the teeth, six feet long, served to retain the thousands of animalculae, little fish, and molluscs, on which the whale fed.

The operation finished, to the great satisfaction of the operators, the remains of the animal were left to the birds, who would soon make every vestige of it disappear, and their usual daily occupations were resumed by the inmates of Granite House.

However, before returning to the dockyard, Cyrus Harding conceived the idea of fabricating certain machines, which greatly excited the curiosity of his companions. He took a dozen of the whale's bones, cut them into six equal parts, and sharpened their ends.

“This machine is not my own invention, and it is frequently employed by the Aleutian hunters in Russian America. You see these bones, my friends; well, when it freezes, I will bend them, and then wet them with water till they are entirely covered with ice, which will keep them bent, and I will strew them on the snow, having previously covered them with fat. Now, what will happen if a hungry animal swallows one of these baits? Why, the heat of his stomach will melt the ice, and the bone, springing straight, will pierce him with its sharp points.”

“Well! I do call that ingenious!” said Pencroft.

“And it will spare the powder and shot,” rejoined Cyrus Harding.

“That will be better than traps!” added Neb.

In the meanwhile the boat-building progressed, and towards the end of the month half the planking was completed. It could already be seen that her shape was excellent, and that she would sail well.

Pencroft worked with unparalleled ardor, and only a sturdy frame could have borne such fatigue; but his companions were preparing in secret a reward for his labors, and on the 31st of May he was to meet with one of the greatest joys of his life.

On that day, after dinner, just as he was about to leave the table, Pencroft felt a hand on his shoulder.

It was the hand of Gideon Spilett, who said, —

“One moment, Master Pencroft, you mustn’t sneak off like that! You’ve forgotten your dessert.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spilett,” replied the sailor, “I am going back to my work.”

“Well, a cup of coffee, my friend?”

“Nothing more.”

“A pipe, then?”

Pencroft jumped up, and his great good-natured face grew pale when he saw the reporter presenting him with a ready-filled pipe, and Herbert with a glowing coal.

The sailor endeavored to speak, but could not get out a word; so, seizing the pipe, he carried it to his lips, then applying the coal, he drew five or six great whiffs. A fragrant blue cloud soon arose, and from its depths a voice was heard repeating excitedly, —

“Tobacco! real tobacco!”

“Yes, Pencroft,” returned Cyrus Harding, “and very good tobacco too!”

“O, divine Providence; sacred Author of all things!” cried the sailor. “Nothing more is now wanting to our island.”

And Pencroft smoked, and smoked, and smoked.

“And who made this discovery?” he asked at length. “You, Herbert, no doubt?”

“No, Pencroft, it was Mr. Spilett.”

“Mr. Spilett!” exclaimed the sailor, seizing the reporter, and clasping him to his breast with such a squeeze that he had never felt anything like it before.

“Oh Pencroft,” said Spilett, recovering his breath at last, “a truce for one moment. You must share your gratitude with Herbert, who recognized the plant, with Cyrus, who prepared it, and with Neb, who took a great deal of trouble to keep our secret.”

“Well, my friends, I will repay you some day,” replied the sailor. “Now we are friends for life.”

CHAPTER 11

Winter arrived with the month of June, which is the December of the northern zones, and the great business was the making of warm and solid clothing.

The musmons in the corral had been stripped of their wool, and this precious textile material was now to be transformed into stuff.

Of course Cyrus Harding, having at his disposal neither carders, combers, polishers, stretchers, twisters, mule-jenny, nor self-acting machine to spin the wool, nor loom to weave it, was obliged to proceed in a simpler way, so as to do without spinning and weaving. And indeed he proposed to make use of the property which the filaments of wool possess when subjected to a powerful pressure of mixing together, and of manufacturing by this simple process the material called felt. This felt could then be obtained by a simple operation which, if it diminished the flexibility of the stuff, increased its power of retaining heat in proportion. Now the wool furnished by the musmons was composed of very short hairs, and was in a good condition to be felted.

The engineer, aided by his companions, including Pencroft, who was once more obliged to leave his boat, commenced the preliminary operations, the subject of which was to rid the wool of that fat and oily substance with which it is impregnated, and which is called grease. This cleaning was done in vats filled with water, which was maintained at the temperature of seventy degrees, and in which the wool was soaked for four-and-twenty hours; it was then thoroughly washed in baths of soda, and, when sufficiently dried by pressure, it was in a state to be compressed, that is to say, to produce a solid material, rough, no doubt, and such as would have no value in a manufacturing center of Europe or America, but which would be highly esteemed in the Lincoln Island markets.

This sort of material must have been known from the most ancient times, and, in fact, the first woolen stuffs were manufactured by the process which Harding was now about to employ. Where Harding's engineering qualifications now came into play was in the construction of the machine for pressing the wool; for he knew how to turn ingeniously to profit the mechanical force, hitherto unused, which the waterfall on the beach possessed to move a fulling-mill.

Nothing could be more rudimentary. The wool was placed in troughs, and upon it fell in turns heavy wooden mallets; such was the machine in question, and such it had been for centuries until the time when the mallets were replaced by cylinders of compression, and the material was no longer subjected to beating, but to regular rolling.

The operation, ably directed by Cyrus Harding, was a complete success. The wool, previously impregnated with a solution of soap, intended on the one hand to facilitate the interlacing, the compression, and the softening of the wool, and on the other to prevent its diminution by the beating, issued from the mill in the shape of thick felt cloth. The roughnesses with which the staple of wool is naturally filled were so thoroughly entangled and interlaced together that a material was formed equally suitable either for garments or bedclothes. It was certainly neither merino, muslin, cashmere, rep, satin, alpaca, cloth, nor flannel. It was "Lincolnian felt," and Lincoln Island possessed yet another manufacture. The colonists had now warm garments and thick bedclothes, and they could without fear await the approach of the winter of 1866-67.

The severe cold began to be felt about the 20th of June, and, to his great regret, Pencroft was obliged to suspend his boat-building, which he hoped to finish in time for next spring.

The sailor’s great idea was to make a voyage of discovery to Tabor Island, although Harding could not approve of a voyage simply for curiosity’s sake, for there was evidently nothing to be found on this desert and almost arid rock. A voyage of a hundred and fifty miles in a comparatively small vessel, over unknown seas, could not but cause him some anxiety. Suppose that their vessel, once out at sea, should be unable to reach Tabor Island, and could not return to Lincoln Island, what would become of her in the midst of the Pacific, so fruitful of disasters?

Harding often talked over this project with Pencroft, and he found him strangely bent upon undertaking this voyage, for which determination he himself could give no sufficient reason.

“Now,” said the engineer one day to him, “I must observe, my friend, that after having said so much, in praise of Lincoln Island, after having spoken so often of the sorrow you would feel if you were obliged to forsake it, you are the first to wish to leave it.”

“Only to leave it for a few days,” replied Pencroft, “only for a few days, captain. Time to go and come back, and see what that islet is like!”

“But it is not nearly as good as Lincoln Island.”

“I know that beforehand.”

“Then why venture there?”

“To know what is going on in Tabor Island.”

“But nothing is going on there; nothing could happen there.”

“Who knows?”

“And if you are caught in a hurricane?”

“There is no fear of that in the fine season,” replied Pencroft. “But, captain, as we must provide against everything, I shall ask your permission to take Herbert only with me on this voyage.”

“Pencroft,” replied the engineer, placing his hand on the sailor’s shoulder, “if any misfortune happens to you, or to this lad, whom chance has made our child, do you think we could ever cease to blame ourselves?”

“Captain Harding,” replied Pencroft, with unshaken confidence, “we shall not cause you that sorrow. Besides, we will speak further of this voyage, when the time comes to make it. And I fancy, when you have seen our tight-rigged little craft, when you have observed how she behaves at sea, when we sail round our island, for we will do so together — I fancy, I say, that you will no longer hesitate to let me go. I don’t conceal from you that your boat will be a masterpiece.”

“Say ‘our’ boat, at least, Pencroft,” replied the engineer, disarmed for the moment. The conversation ended thus, to be resumed later on, without convincing either the sailor or the engineer.

The first snow fell towards the end of the month of June. The corral had previously been largely supplied with stores, so that daily visits to it were not requisite; but it was decided that more than a week should never be allowed to pass without someone going to it.

Traps were again set, and the machines manufactured by Harding were tried. The bent whalebones, imprisoned in a case of ice, and covered with a thick outer layer of fat, were placed on the border of the forest at a spot where animals usually passed on their way to the lake.

To the engineer's great satisfaction, this invention, copied from the Aleutian fishermen, succeeded perfectly. A dozen foxes, a few wild boars, and even a jaguar, were taken in this way, the animals being found dead, their stomachs pierced by the unbent bones.

An incident must here be related, not only as interesting in itself, but because it was the first attempt made by the colonists to communicate with the rest of mankind.

Gideon Spilett had already several times pondered whether to throw into the sea a letter enclosed in a bottle, which currents might perhaps carry to an inhabited coast, or to confide it to pigeons.

But how could it be seriously hoped that either pigeons or bottles could cross the distance of twelve hundred miles which separated the island from any inhabited land? It would have been pure folly.

But on the 30th of June the capture was effected, not without difficulty, of an albatross, which a shot from Herbert's gun had slightly wounded in the foot. It was a magnificent bird, measuring ten feet from wing to wing, and which could traverse seas as wide as the Pacific.

Herbert would have liked to keep this superb bird, as its wound would soon heal, and he thought he could tame it; but Spilett explained to him that they should not neglect this opportunity of attempting to communicate by this messenger with the lands of the Pacific; for if the albatross had come from some inhabited region, there was no doubt but that it would return there so soon as it was set free.

Perhaps in his heart Gideon Spilett, in whom the journalist sometimes came to the surface, was not sorry to have the opportunity of sending forth to take its chance an exciting article relating the adventures of the settlers in Lincoln Island. What a success for the authorized reporter of the New York Herald, and for the number which should contain the article, if it should ever reach the address of its editor, the Honorable James Bennett!

Gideon Spilett then wrote out a concise account, which was placed in a strong waterproof bag, with an earnest request to whoever might find it to forward it to the office of the New York Herald. This little bag was fastened to the neck of the albatross, and not to its foot, for these birds are in the habit of resting on the surface of the sea; then liberty was given to this swift courier of the air, and it was not without some emotion that the colonists watched it disappear in the misty west.

“Where is he going to?” asked Pencroft.

“Towards New Zealand,” replied Herbert.

“A good voyage to you,” shouted the sailor, who himself did not expect any great result from this mode of correspondence.

With the winter, work had been resumed in the interior of Granite House, mending clothes and different occupations, among others making the sails for their vessel, which were cut from the inexhaustible balloon-case.

During the month of July the cold was intense, but there was no lack of either wood or coal. Cyrus Harding had established a second fireplace in the dining-room, and there the long winter evenings were spent. Talking while they worked, reading when the hands remained idle, the time passed with profit to all.

It was real enjoyment to the settlers when in their room, well lighted with candles, well warmed with coal, after a good dinner, elderberry coffee smoking in the cups, the pipes giving forth an odoriferous smoke, they could hear the storm howling without. Their comfort would have been complete, if complete comfort could ever exist for those who are far from their fellow-creatures, and without any means of communication with them. They often talked of their country, of the friends whom they had left, of the grandeur of the American Republic, whose influence could not but increase; and Cyrus Harding, who had been much mixed up with the affairs of the Union, greatly interested his auditors by his recitals, his views, and his prognostics.

It chanced one day that Spilett was led to say —

“But now, my dear Cyrus, all this industrial and commercial movement to which you predict a continual advance, does it not run the danger of being sooner or later completely stopped?”

“Stopped! And by what?”

“By the want of coal, which may justly be called the most precious of minerals.”

“Yes, the most precious indeed,” replied the engineer; “and it would seem that nature wished to prove that it was so by making the diamond, which is simply pure carbon crystallized.”

"You don't mean to say, captain," interrupted Pencroft, "that we burn diamonds in our stoves in the shape of coal?"

"No, my friend," replied Harding.

"However," resumed Gideon Spilett, "you do not deny that some day the coal will be entirely consumed?"

"Oh! the veins of coal are still considerable, and the hundred thousand miners who annually extract from them a hundred millions of hundredweights have not nearly exhausted them."

"With the increasing consumption of coal," replied Gideon Spilett, "it can be foreseen that the hundred thousand workmen will soon become two hundred thousand, and that the rate of extraction will be doubled."

"Doubtless; but after the European mines, which will be soon worked more thoroughly with new machines, the American and Australian mines will for a long time yet provide for the consumption in trade."

"For how long a time?" asked the reporter.

"For at least two hundred and fifty or three hundred years."

"That is reassuring for us, but a bad look-out for our great-grandchildren!" observed Pencroft.

"They will discover something else," said Herbert.

"It is to be hoped so," answered Spilett, "for without coal there would be no machinery, and without machinery there would be no railways, no steamers, no manufactories, nothing of that which is indispensable to modern civilization!”

“But what will they find?” asked Pencroft. “Can you guess, captain?”

“Nearly, my friend.”

“And what will they burn instead of coal?”

“Water,” replied Harding.

“Water!” cried Pencroft, “water as fuel for steamers and engines! water to heat water!”

“Yes, but water decomposed into its primitive elements,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and decomposed doubtless, by electricity, which will then have become a powerful and manageable force, for all great discoveries, by some inexplicable laws, appear to agree and become complete at the same time. Yes, my friends, I believe that water will one day be employed as fuel, that hydrogen and oxygen which constitute it, used singly or together, will furnish an inexhaustible source of heat and light, of an intensity of which coal is not capable. Some day the coalrooms of steamers and the tenders of locomotives will, instead of coal, be stored with these two condensed gases, which will burn in the furnaces with enormous calorific power. There is, therefore, nothing to fear. As long as the earth is inhabited it will supply the wants of its inhabitants, and there will be no want of either light or heat as long as the productions of the vegetable, mineral or animal kingdoms do not fail us. I believe, then, that when the deposits of coal are exhausted we shall heat and warm ourselves with water. Water will be the coal of the future.”

“I should like to see that,” observed the sailor.

“You were born too soon, Pencroft,” returned Neb, who only took part in the discussion by these words.

However, it was not Neb’s speech which interrupted the conversation, but Top’s barking, which broke out again with that strange intonation which had before perplexed the engineer. At the same time Top began to run round the mouth of the well, which opened at the extremity of the interior passage.

“What can Top be barking in that way for?” asked Pencroft.

“And Jup be growling like that?” added Herbert.

In fact the orang, joining the dog, gave unequivocal signs of agitation, and, singular to say, the two animals appeared more uneasy than angry.

“It is evident,” said Gideon Spilett, “that this well is in direct communication with the sea, and that some marine animal comes from time to time to breathe at the bottom.”

“That’s evident,” replied the sailor, “and there can be no other explanation to give. Quiet there, Top!” added Pencroft, turning to the dog, “and you, Jup, be off to your room!”

The ape and the dog were silent. Jup went off to bed, but Top remained in the room, and continued to utter low growls at intervals during the rest of the evening. There was no further talk on the subject, but the incident, however, clouded the brow of the engineer.

During the remainder of the month of July there was alternate rain and frost. The temperature was not so low as during the preceding winter, and its maximum did not exceed eight degrees Fahrenheit. But although this winter was less cold, it was more troubled by storms and squalls; the sea besides often endangered the safety of the Chimneys. At times it almost seemed as if an under-current raised these monstrous billows which thundered against the wall of Granite House.

When the settlers, leaning from their windows, gazed on the huge watery masses breaking beneath their eyes, they could not but admire the magnificent spectacle of the ocean in its impotent fury. The waves rebounded in dazzling foam, the beach entirely disapppearing under the raging flood, and the cliff appearing to emerge from the sea itself, the spray rising to a height of more than a hundred feet.

During these storms it was difficult and even dangerous to venture out, owing to the frequently falling trees; however, the colonists never allowed a week to pass without having paid a visit to the corral. Happily, this enclosure, sheltered by the southeastern spur of Mount Franklin, did not greatly suffer from the violence of the hurricanes, which spared its trees, sheds, and palisades; but the poultry-yard on Prospect Heights, being directly exposed to the gusts of wind from the east, suffered considerable damage. The pigeon-house was twice unroofed and the paling blown down. All this required to be remade more solidly than before, for, as may be clearly seen, Lincoln Island was situated in one of the most dangerous parts of the Pacific. It really appeared as if it formed the central point of vast cyclones, which beat it perpetually as the whip does the top, only here it was the top which was motionless and the whip which moved. During the first week of the month of August the weather became more moderate, and the atmosphere recovered the calm which it appeared to have lost forever. With the calm the cold again became intense, and the thermometer fell to eight degrees Fahrenheit, below zero.

On the 3rd of August an excursion which had been talked of for several days was made into the southeastern part of the island, towards Tadorn Marsh. The hunters were tempted by the aquatic game which took up their winter quarters there. Wild duck, snipe, teal and grebe abounded there, and it was agreed that a day should be devoted to an expedition against these birds.

Not only Gideon Spilett and Herbert, but Pencroft and Neb also took part in this excursion. Cyrus Harding alone, alleging some work as an excuse, did not join them, but remained at Granite House.

The hunters proceeded in the direction of Port Balloon, in order to reach the marsh, after having promised to be back by the evening. Top and Jup accompanied them. As soon as they had passed over the Mercy Bridge, the engineer raised it and returned, intending to put into execution a project for the performance of which he wished to be alone.

Now this project was to minutely explore the interior well, the mouth of which was on a level with the passage of Granite House, and which communicated with the sea, since it formerly supplied a way to the waters of the lake.

Why did Top so often run round this opening? Why did he utter such strange barks when a sort of uneasiness seemed to draw him towards this well? Why did Jup join Top in a sort of common anxiety? Had this well branches besides the communication with the sea? Did it spread towards other parts of the island? This is what Cyrus Harding wished to know. He had resolved, therefore, to attempt the exploration of the well during the absence of his companions, and an opportunity for doing so had now presented itself.

It was easy to descend to the bottom of the well by employing the rope ladder which had not been used since the establishment of the lift. The engineer drew the ladder to the hole, the diameter of which measured nearly six feet, and allowed it to unroll itself after having securely fastened its upper extremity. Then, having lighted a lantern, taken a revolver, and placed a cutlass in his belt, he began the descent.

The sides were everywhere entire; but points of rock jutted out here and there, and by means of these points it would have been quite possible for an active creature to climb to the mouth of the well.

The engineer remarked this; but although he carefully examined these points by the light of his lantern, he could find no impression, no fracture which could give any reason to suppose that they had either recently or at any former time been used as a staircase. Cyrus Harding descended deeper, throwing the light of his lantern on all sides.

He saw nothing suspicious.

When the engineer had reached the last rounds he came upon the water, which was then perfectly calm. Neither at its level nor in any other part of the well, did any passage open, which could lead to the interior of the cliff. The wall which Harding struck with the hilt of his cutlass sounded solid. It was compact granite, through which no living being could force a way. To arrive at the bottom of the well and then climb up to its mouth it was necessary to pass through the channel under the rocky subsoil of the beach, which placed it in communication with the sea, and this was only possible for marine animals. As to the question of knowing where this channel ended, at what point of the shore, and at what depth beneath the water, it could not be answered.

Then Cyrus Harding, having ended his survey, re-ascended, drew up the ladder, covered the mouth of the well, and returned thoughtfully to the diningroom, saying to himself, —

“I have seen nothing, and yet there is something there!”

CHAPTER 12

In the evening the hunters returned, having enjoyed good sport, and being literally loaded with game; indeed, they had as much as four men could possibly carry. Top wore a necklace of teal and Jup wreaths of snipe round his body.

“Here, master,” cried Neb; “here’s something to employ our time! Preserved and made into pies we shall have a welcome store! But I must have some one to help me. I count on you, Pencroft.”

“No, Neb,” replied the sailor; “I have the rigging of the vessel to finish and to look after, and you will have to do without me.”

“And you, Mr. Herbert?”

“I must go to the corral to-morrow, Neb,” replied the lad.

“It will be you then, Mr. Spilett, who will help me?”

“To oblige you, Neb, I will,” replied the reporter; “but I warn you that if you disclose your recipes to me, I shall publish them.”

“Whenever you like, Mr. Spilett,” replied Neb; “whenever you like.”

And so the next day Gideon Spilett became Neb’s assistant and was installed in his culinary laboratory. The engineer had previously made known to him the result of the exploration which he had made the day before, and on this point the reporter shared Harding’s opinion, that although he had found nothing, a secret still remained to be discovered!

The frost continued for another week, and the settlers did not leave Granite House unless to look after the poultry-yard. The dwelling was filled with appetizing odors, which were emitted from the learned manipulation of Neb and the reporter. But all the results of the chase were not made into preserved provisions; and as the game kept perfectly in the intense cold, wild duck and other fowl were eaten fresh, and declared superior to all other aquatic birds in the known world.

During this week, Pencroft, aided by Herbert, who handled the sailmaker's needle with much skill, worked with such energy that the sails of the vessel were finished. There was no want of cordage. Thanks to the rigging which had been discovered with the case of the balloon, the ropes and cables from the net were all of good quality, and the sailor turned them all to account. To the sails were attached strong bolt ropes, and there still remained enough from which to make the halyards, shrouds, and sheets, etc. The blocks were manufactured by Cyrus Harding under Pencroft's directions by means of the turning lathe. It therefore happened that the rigging was entirely prepared before the vessel was finished. Pencroft also manufactured a flag, that flag so dear to every true American, containing the stars and stripes of their glorious Union. The colors for it were supplied from certain plants used in dyeing, and which were very abundant in the island; only to the thirty-seven stars, representing the thirty-seven States of the Union, which shine on the American flag, the sailor added a thirty-eighth, the star of "the State of Lincoln," for he considered his island as already united to the great republic. "And," said he, "it is so already in heart, if not in deed!"

In the meantime, the flag was hoisted at the central window of Granite House, and the settlers saluted it with three cheers.

The cold season was now almost at an end, and it appeared as if this second winter was to pass without any unusual occurrence, when on the night of the 11th of August, the plateau of Prospect Heights was menaced with complete destruction.

After a busy day the colonists were sleeping soundly, when towards four o'clock in the morning they were suddenly awakened by Top's barking.

The dog was not this time barking near the mouth of the well, but at the threshold of the door, at which he was scratching as if he wished to burst it open. Jup was also uttering piercing cries.

"Hello, Top!" cried Neb, who was the first awake. But the dog continued to bark more furiously than ever.

"What's the matter now?" asked Harding.

And all dressing in haste rushed to the windows, which they opened.

Beneath their eyes was spread a sheet of snow which looked gray in the dim light. The settlers could see nothing, but they heard a singular yelping noise away in the darkness. It was evident that the beach had been invaded by a number of animals which could not be seen.

"What are they?" cried Pencroft.

"Wolves, jaguars, or apes?" replied Neb.

"They have nearly reached the plateau," said the reporter.

"And our poultry-yard," exclaimed Herbert, "and our garden!"

"Where can they have crossed?" asked Pencroft.

“They must have crossed the bridge on the shore,” replied the engineer, “which one of us must have forgotten to close.”

“True,” said Spilett, “I remember having left it open.”

“A fine job you have made of it, Mr. Spilett,” cried the sailor.

“What is done cannot be undone,” replied Cyrus Harding. “We must consult what it will now be best to do.”

Such were the questions and answers which were rapidly exchanged between Harding and his companions. It was certain that the bridge had been crossed, that the shore had been invaded by animals, and that whatever they might be they could by ascending the left bank of the Mercy reach Prospect Heights. They must therefore be advanced against quickly and fought with if necessary.

“But what are these beasts?” was asked a second time, as the yelpings were again heard more loudly than before. These yelps made Herbert start, and he remembered having heard them before during his first visit to the sources of the Red Creek.

“They are colpeo foxes!” he exclaimed.

“Forward!” shouted the sailor.

And all arming themselves with hatchets, carbines, and revolvers, threw themselves into the lift and soon set foot on the shore.

Colpeos are dangerous animals when in great numbers and irritated by hunger, nevertheless the colonists did not hesitate to throw themselves into the midst of the troop, and their first shots vividly lighting up the darkness made their assailants draw back.

The chief thing was to hinder these plunderers from reaching the plateau, for the garden and the poultry-yard would then have been at their mercy, and immense, perhaps irreparable mischief, would inevitably be the result, especially with regard to the corn-field. But as the invasion of the plateau could only be made by the left bank of the Mercy, it was sufficient to oppose the colpeos on the narrow bank between the river and the cliff of granite.

This was plain to all, and, by Cyrus Harding's orders, they reached the spot indicated by him, while the colpeos rushed fiercely through the gloom. Harding, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Pencroft and Neb posted themselves in impregnable line. Top, his formidable jaws open, preceded the colonists, and he was followed by Jup, armed with knotty cudgel, which he brandished like a club.

The night was extremely dark, it was only by the flashes from the revolvers as each person fired that they could see their assailants, who were at least a hundred in number, and whose eyes were glowing like hot coals.

"They must not pass!" shouted Pencroft.

"They shall not pass!" returned the engineer.

But if they did not pass it was not for want of having attempted it. Those in the rear pushed on the foremost assailants, and it was an incessant struggle with revolvers and hatchets. Several colpeos already lay dead on the ground, but their number did not appear to diminish, and it might have been supposed that reinforcements were continually arriving over the bridge.

The colonists were soon obliged to fight at close quarters, not without receiving some wounds, though happily very slight ones. Herbert had, with a shot from his revolver, rescued Neb, on whose back a colpeo had sprung like a tiger cat. Top fought with actual fury, flying at the throats of the foxes and strangling them instantaneously. Jup wielded his weapon valiantly, and it was in vain that they endeavored to keep him in the rear. Endowed doubtless with sight which enabled him to pierce the obscurity, he was always in the thick of the fight uttering from time to time — a sharp hissing sound, which was with him the sign of great rejoicing.

At one moment he advanced so far, that by the light from a revolver he was seen surrounded by five or six large colpeos, with whom he was coping with great coolness.

However, the struggle was ended at last, and victory was on the side of the settlers, but not until they had fought for two long hours! The first signs of the approach of day doubtless determined the retreat of their assailants, who scampered away towards the North, passing over the bridge, which Neb ran immediately to raise. When day had sufficiently lighted up the field of battle, the settlers counted as many as fifty dead bodies scattered about on the shore.

“And Jup!” cried Pencroft; “where is Jup?” Jup had disappeared. His friend Neb called him, and for the first time Jup did not reply to his friend’s call.

Everyone set out in search of Jup, trembling lest he should be found among the slain; they cleared the place of the bodies which stained the snow with their blood. Jup was found in the midst of a heap of colpeos whose broken jaws and crushed bodies showed that they had to do with the terrible club of the intrepid animal.

Poor Jup still held in his hand the stump of his broken cudgel, but deprived of his weapon he had been overpowered by numbers, and his chest was covered with severe wounds.

“He is living,” cried Neb, who was bending over him.

“And we will save him,” replied the sailor. “We will nurse him as if he was one of ourselves.”

It appeared as if Jup understood, for he leaned his head on Pencroft’s shoulder as if to thank him. The sailor was wounded himself, but his wound was insignificant, as were those of his companions; for thanks to their firearms they had been almost always able to keep their assailants at a distance. It was therefore only the orang whose condition was serious.

Jup, carried by Neb and Pencroft, was placed in the lift, and only a slight moan now and then escaped his lips. He was gently drawn up to Granite House. There he was laid on a mattress taken from one of the beds, and his wounds were bathed with the greatest care. It did not appear that any vital part had been reached, but Jup was very weak from loss of blood, and a high fever soon set in after his wounds had been dressed. He was laid down, strict diet was imposed, “just like a real person,” as Neb said, and they made him swallow several cups of a cooling drink, for which the ingredients were supplied from the vegetable medicine chest of Granite House. Jup was at first restless, but his breathing gradually became more regular, and he was left sleeping quietly. From time to time Top, walking on tip-toe, as one might say, came to visit his friend, and seemed to approve of all the care that had been taken of him. One of Jup’s hands hung over the side of his bed, and Top licked it with a sympathizing air.

They employed the day in interring the dead, who were dragged to the forest of the Far West, and there buried deep.

This attack, which might have had such serious consequences, was a lesson to the settlers, who from this time never went to bed until one of their number had made sure that all the bridges were raised, and that no invasion was possible.

However, Jup, after having given them serious anxiety for several days, began to recover. His constitution brought him through, the fever gradually subsided, and Gideon Spilett, who was a bit of a doctor, pronounced him quite out of danger. On the 16th of August, Jup began to eat. Neb made him nice little sweet dishes, which the invalid devoured with great relish, for if he had a pet failing it was that of being somewhat of a gourmend, and Neb had never done anything to cure him of this fault.

“What would you have?” said he to Gideon Spilett, who sometimes expostulated with him for spoiling the ape. “Poor Jup has no other pleasure than that of the palate, and I am only too glad to be able to reward his services in this way!”

Ten days after taking to his bed, on the 21st of August, Master Jup arose. His wounds were healed, and it was evident that he would not be long in regaining his usual strength and agility. Like all convalescents, he was tremendously hungry, and the reporter allowed him to eat as much as he liked, for he trusted to that instinct, which is too often wanting in reasoning beings, to keep the orang from any excess. Neb was delighted to see his pupil’s appetite returning.

“Eat away, my Jup,” said he, “and don’t spare anything; you have shed your blood for us, and it is the least I can do to make you strong again!”

On the 25th of August Neb's voice was heard calling to his companions.

"Captain, Mr. Spilett, Mr. Herbert, Pencroft, come! come!"

The colonists, who were together in the dining-room, rose at Neb's call, who was then in Jup's room.

"What's the matter?" asked the reporter.

"Look," replied Neb, with a shout of laughter. And what did they see? Master Jup smoking calmly and seriously, sitting crosslegged like a Turk at the entrance to Granite House!

"My pipe," cried Pencroft. "He has taken my pipe! Hello, my honest Jup, I make you a present of it! Smoke away, old boy, smoke away!"

And Jup gravely puffed out clouds of smoke which seemed to give him great satisfaction. Harding did not appear to be much astonished at this incident, and he cited several examples of tame apes, to whom the use of tobacco had become quite familiar.

But from this day Master Jup had a pipe of his own, the sailor's ex-pipe, which was hung in his room near his store of tobacco. He filled it himself, lighted it with a glowing coal, and appeared to be the happiest of quadrumana. It may readily be understood that this similarity of tastes of Jup and Pencroft served to tighten the bonds of friendship which already existed between the honest ape and the worthy sailor.

"Perhaps he is really a man," said Pencroft sometimes to Neb. "Should you be surprised to hear him beginning to speak to us some day?"

“My word, no,” replied Neb. “What astonishes me is that he hasn’t spoken to us before, for now he wants nothing but speech!”

“It would amuse me all the same,” resumed the sailor, “if some fine day he said to me, ‘Suppose we change pipes, Pencroft.’”

“Yes,” replied Neb, “what a pity he was born dumb!”

With the month of September the winter ended, and the works were again eagerly commenced. The building of the vessel advanced rapidly, she was already completely decked over, and all the inside parts of the hull were firmly united with ribs bent by means of steam, which answered all the purposes of a mold.

As there was no want of wood, Pencroft proposed to the engineer to give a double lining to the hull, to insure the strength of the vessel.

Harding, not knowing what the future might have in store for them, approved the sailor’s idea of making the craft as strong as possible. The interior and deck of the vessel was entirely finished towards the 15th of September. For calking the seams they made oakum of dry seaweed, which was hammered in between the planks; then these seams were covered with boiling tar, which was obtained in great abundance from the pines in the forest.

The management of the vessel was very simple. She had from the first been ballasted with heavy blocks of granite walled up, in a bed of lime, twelve thousand pounds of which they stowed away.

A deck was placed over this ballast, and the interior was divided into two cabins; two benches extended along them and served also as lockers. The foot of the mast supported the partition which separated the two cabins, which were reached by two hatchways let into the deck.

Pencroft had no trouble in finding a tree suitable for the mast. He chose a straight young fir, with no knots, and which he had only to square at the step, and round off at the top. The ironwork of the mast, the rudder and the hull had been roughly but strongly forged at the Chimneys. Lastly, yards, masts, boom, spars, oars, etc. were all furnished by the first week in October, and it was agreed that a trial trip should be taken round the island, so as to ascertain how the vessel would behave at sea, and how far they might depend upon her.

During all this time the necessary works had not been neglected. The corral was enlarged, for the flock of musmons and goats had been increased by a number of young ones, who had to be housed and fed. The colonists had paid visits also to the oyster bed, the warren, the coal and iron mines, and to the till then unexplored districts of the Far West forest, which abounded in game. Certain indigenous plants were discovered, and those fit for immediate use contributed to vary the vegetable stores of Granite House.

They were a species of ficoide, some similar to those of the Cape, with eatable fleshy leaves, others bearing seeds containing a sort of flour.

On the 10th of October the vessel was launched. Pencroft was radiant with joy, the operation was perfectly successful; the boat completely rigged, having been pushed on rollers to the water’s edge, was floated by the rising tide, amid the cheers of the colonists, particularly of Pencroft, who showed no modesty on this occasion. Besides his importance was to last beyond the finishing of the vessel, since, after having built her, he was to command her. The grade of captain was bestowed upon him with the approbation of all. To satisfy Captain Pencroft, it was now necessary to give a name to the vessel, and, after many propositions had been discussed, the votes were all in favor of the “Bonadventure.” As soon as the “Bonadventure” had been lifted by the rising tide, it was seen that she lay evenly in the water, and would be easily navigated. However, the trial trip was to be made that very day, by an excursion off the coast. The weather was fine, the breeze fresh, and the sea smooth, especially towards the south coast, for the wind was blowing from the northwest.

“All hands on board,” shouted Pencroft; but breakfast was first necessary, and it was thought best to take provisions on board, in the event of their excursion being prolonged until the evening.

Cyrus Harding was equally anxious to try the vessel, the model of which had originated with him, although on the sailor’s advice he had altered some parts of it, but he did not share Pencroft’s confidence in her, and as the latter had not again spoken of the voyage to Tabor Island, Harding hoped he had given it up. He would have indeed great reluctance in letting two or three of his companions venture so far in so small a boat, which was not of more than fifteen tons’ burden.

At half-past ten everybody was on board, even Top and Jup, and Herbert weighed the anchor, which was fast in the sand near the mouth of the Mercy. The sail was hoisted, the Lincolnian flag floated from the masthead, and the “Bonadventure,” steered by Pencroft, stood out to sea.

The wind blowing out of Union Bay she ran before it, and thus showed her owners, much to their satisfaction, that she possessed a remarkably fast pair of heels, according to Pencroft’s mode of speaking. After having doubled Flotsam Point and Claw Cape, the captain kept her close hauled, so as to sail along the southern coast of the island, when it was found she sailed admirably within five points of the wind. All hands were enchanted, they had a good vessel, which, in case of need, would be of great service to them, and with fine weather and a fresh breeze the voyage promised to be charming.

Pencroft now stood off the shore, three or four miles across from Port Balloon. The island then appeared in all its extent and under a new aspect, with the varied panorama of its shore from Claw Cape to Reptile End, the forests in which dark firs contrasted with the young foliage of other trees and overlooked the whole, and Mount Franklin whose lofty head was still whitened with snow.

“How beautiful it is!” cried Herbert.

“Yes, our island is beautiful and good,” replied Pencroft. “I love it as I loved my poor mother. It received us poor and destitute, and now what is wanting to us five fellows who fell on it from the sky?”

“Nothing,” replied Neb; “nothing, captain.”

And the two brave men gave three tremendous cheers in honor of their island!

During all this time Gideon Spilett, leaning against the mast, sketched the panorama which was developed before his eyes.

Cyrus Harding gazed on it in silence.

“Well, Captain Harding,” asked Pencroft, “what do you think of our vessel?”

“She appears to behave well,” replied the engineer.

“Good! And do you think now that she could undertake a voyage of some extent?”

“What voyage, Pencroft?”

“One to Tabor Island, for instance.”

“My friend,” replied Harding, “I think that in any pressing emergency we need not hesitate to trust ourselves to the ‘Bonadventure’ even for a longer voyage; but you know I should see you set off to Tabor Island with great uneasiness, since nothing obliges you to go there.”

“One likes to know one’s neighbors,” returned the sailor, who was obstinate in his idea. “Tabor Island is our neighbor, and the only one! Politeness requires us to go at least to pay a visit.”

“By Jove,” said Spilett, “our friend Pencroft has become very particular about the proprieties all at once!”

“I am not particular about anything at all,” retorted the sailor, who was rather vexed by the engineer’s opposition, but who did not wish to cause him anxiety.

“Consider, Pencroft,” resumed Harding, “you cannot go alone to Tabor Island.”

“One companion will be enough for me.”

“Even so,” replied the engineer, “you will risk depriving the colony of Lincoln Island of two settlers out of five.”

“Out of six,” answered Pencroft; “you forget Jup.”

“Out of seven,” added Neb; “Top is quite worth another.”

“There is no risk at all in it, captain,” replied Pencroft.

“That is possible, Pencroft; but I repeat it is to expose ourselves uselessly.”

The obstinate sailor did not reply, and let the conversation drop, quite determined to resume it again. But he did not suspect that an incident would come to his aid and change into an act of humanity that which was at first only a doubtful whim.

After standing off the shore the “Bonadventure” again approached it in the direction of Port Balloon. It was important to ascertain the channels between the sandbanks and reefs, that buoys might be laid down since this little creek was to be the harbor.

They were not more than half a mile from the coast, and it was necessary to tack to beat against the wind. The “Bonadventure” was then going at a very moderate rate, as the breeze, partly intercepted by the high land, scarcely swelled her sails, and the sea, smooth as glass, was only rippled now and then by passing gusts.

Herbert had stationed himself in the bows that he might indicate the course to be followed among the channels, when all at once he shouted, —

“Luff, Pencroft, luff!”

“What’s the matter,” replied the sailor; “a rock?”

“No — wait,” said Herbert; “I don’t quite see. Luff again — right — now.”

So saying, Herbert, leaning over the side, plunged his arm into the water, and pulled it out, exclaiming, —

“A bottle!”

He held in his hand a corked bottle which he had just seized a few cables’ length from the shore.

Cyrus Harding took the bottle. Without uttering a single word he drew the cork, and took from it a damp paper, on which were written these words: —

“Castaway... Tabor island: 153deg W. long. 37deg 11’ S. lat.”

CHAPTER 13

“A castaway!” exclaimed Pencroft; “left on this Tabor Island not two hundred miles from us! Ah, Captain Harding, you won’t now oppose my going.”

“No, Pencroft,” replied Cyrus Harding; “and you shall set out as soon as possible.”

“To-morrow?”

“To-morrow!”

The engineer still held in his hand the paper which he had taken from the bottle. He contemplated it for some instants, then resumed,

“From this document, my friends, from the way in which it is worded, we may conclude this: first, that the castaway on Tabor Island is a man possessing a considerable knowledge of navigation, since he gives the latitude and longitude of the island exactly as we ourselves found it, and to a second of approximation; secondly, that he is either English or American, as the document is written in the English language.”

“That is perfectly logical,” answered Spilett; “and the presence of this castaway explains the arrival of the case on the shores of our island. There must have been a wreck, since there is a castaway. As to the latter, whoever he may be, it is lucky for him that Pencroft thought of building this boat and of trying her this very day, for a day later and this bottle might have been broken on the rocks.”

“Indeed,” said Herbert, “it is a fortunate chance that the ‘Bonadventure’ passed exactly where the bottle was still floating!”

“Does not this appear strange to you?” asked Harding of Pencroft.

“It appears fortunate, that’s all,” answered the sailor. “Do you see anything extraordinary in it, captain? The bottle must go somewhere, and why not here as well as anywhere else?”

“Perhaps you are right, Pencroft,” replied the engineer; “and yet — ”

“But,” observed Herbert, “there’s nothing to prove that this bottle has been floating long in the sea.”

“Nothing,” replied Gideon Spilett, “and the document appears even to have been recently written. What do you think about it, Cyrus?”

During this conversation Pencroft had not remained inactive. He had put the vessel about, and the “Bonadventure,” all sails set, was running rapidly towards Claw Cape.

Every one was thinking of the castaway on Tabor Island. Should they be in time to save him? This was a great event in the life of the colonists! They themselves were but castaways, but it was to be feared that another might not have been so fortunate, and their duty was to go to his succor.

Claw Cape was doubled, and about four o’clock the “Bonadventure” dropped her anchor at the mouth of the Mercy.

That same evening the arrangements for the new expedition were made. It appeared best that Pencroft and Herbert, who knew how to work the vessel, should undertake the voyage alone. By setting out the next day, the 10th of October, they would arrive on the 13th, for with the present wind it would not take more than forty-eight hours to make this passage of a hundred and fifty miles. One day in the island, three or four to return, they might hope therefore that on the 17th they would again reach Lincoln Island. The weather was fine, the barometer was rising, the wind appeared settled, everything then was in favor of these brave men whom an act of humanity was taking far from their island.

Thus it had been agreed that Cyrus Harding, Neb, and Gideon Spilett should remain at Granite House, but an objection was raised, and Spilett, who had not forgotten his business as reporter to the New York Herald, having declared that he would go by swimming rather than lose such an opportunity, he was admitted to take a part in the voyage.

The evening was occupied in transporting on board the “Bonadventure,” articles of bedding, utensils, arms, ammunition, a compass, provisions for a week; this being rapidly done, the colonists ascended to Granite House.

The next day, at five o’clock in the morning, the farewells were said, not without some emotion on both sides, and Pencroft setting sail made towards Claw Cape, which had to be doubled in order to proceed to the southwest.

The “Bonadventure” was already a quarter of a mile from the coast when the passengers perceived on the heights of Granite House two men waving their farewells; they were Cyrus Harding and Neb.

“Our friends,” exclaimed Spilett, “this is our first separation in fifteen months.”

Pencroft, the reporter and Herbert waved in return, and Granite House soon disappeared behind the high rocks of the Cape.

During the first part of the day the “Bonadventure” was still in sight of the southern coast of Lincoln Island, which soon appeared just like a green basket, with Mount Franklin rising from the center. The heights, diminished by distance, did not present an appearance likely to tempt vessels to touch there. Reptile End was passed in about an hour, though at a distance of about ten miles.

At this distance it was no longer possible to distinguish anything of the Western Coast, which stretched away to the ridges of Mount Franklin, and three hours after the last of Lincoln Island sank below the horizon.

The “Bonadventure” behaved capitally. Bounding over the waves she proceeded rapidly on her course. Pencroft had hoisted the foresail, and steering by the compass followed a rectilinear direction. From time to time Herbert relieved him at the helm, and the lad’s hand was so firm that the sailor had not a point to find fault with.

Gideon Spilett chatted sometimes with one, sometimes with the other, if wanted he lent a hand with the ropes, and Captain Pencroft was perfectly satisfied with his crew.

In the evening the crescent moon, which would not be in its first quarter until the 16th, appeared in the twilight and soon set again. The night was dark but starry, and the next day again promised to be fine.

Pencroft prudently lowered the foresail, not wishing to be caught by a sudden gust while carrying too much canvas; it was perhaps an unnecessary precaution on such a calm night, but Pencroft was a prudent sailor and cannot be blamed for it.

The reporter slept part of the night. Pencroft and Herbert took turns for a spell of two hours each at the helm. The sailor trusted Herbert as he would himself, and his confidence was justified by the coolness and judgment of the lad. Pencroft gave him his directions as a commander to his steersman, and Herbert never allowed the “Bonadventure” to swerve even a point. The night passed quickly, as did the day of the 12th of October. A south-easterly direction was strictly maintained. Unless the “Bonadventure” fell in with some unknown current she would come exactly within sight of Tabor Island.

As to the sea over which the vessel was then sailing, it was absolutely deserted. Now and then a great albatross or frigate bird passed within gunshot, and Gideon Spilett wondered if it was to one of them that he had confided his last letter addressed to the New York Herald. These birds were the only beings that appeared to frequent this part of the ocean between Tabor and Lincoln Islands.

“And yet,” observed Herbert, “this is the time that whalers usually proceed towards the southern part of the Pacific. Indeed I do not think there could be a more deserted sea than this.”

“It is not quite so deserted as all that,” replied Pencroft.

“What do you mean?” asked the reporter.

“We are on it. Do you take our vessel for a wreck and us for porpoises?”

And Pencroft laughed at his joke.

By the evening, according to calculation, it was thought that the “Bonadventure” had accomplished a distance of a hundred and twenty miles since her departure from Lincoln Island, that is to say in thirty-six hours, which would give her a speed of between three and four knots an hour. The breeze was very slight and might soon drop altogether. However, it was hoped that the next morning by break of day, if the calculation had been correct and the course true, they would sight Tabor Island.

Neither Gideon Spilett, Herbert, nor Pencroft slept that night. In the expectation of the next day they could not but feel some emotion. There was so much uncertainty in their enterprise! Were they near Tabor Island? Was the island still inhabited by the castaway to whose succor they had come? Who was this man? Would not his presence disturb the little colony till then so united? Besides, would he be content to exchange his prison for another? All these questions, which would no doubt be answered the next day, kept them in suspense, and at the dawn of day they all fixed their gaze on the western horizon.

“Land!” shouted Pencroft at about six o’clock in the morning.

And it was impossible that Pencroft should be mistaken, it was evident that land was there. Imagine the joy of the little crew of the “Bonadventure.” In a few hours they would land on the beach of the island!

The low coast of Tabor Island, scarcely emerging from the sea, was not more than fifteen miles distant.

The head of the “Bonadventure,” which was a little to the south of the island, was set directly towards it, and as the sun mounted in the east, its rays fell upon one or two headlands.

“This is a much less important isle than Lincoln Island,” observed Herbert, “and is probably due like ours to some submarine convulsion.”

At eleven o’clock the “Bonadventure” was not more than two miles off, and Pencroft, while looking for a suitable place at which to land, proceeded very cautiously through the unknown waters. The whole of the island could now be surveyed, and on it could be seen groups of gum and other large trees, of the same species as those growing on Lincoln Island. But the astonishing thing was that no smoke arose to show that the island was inhabited, no signal whatever appeared on the shore!

And yet the document was clear enough; there was a castaway, and this castaway should have been on the watch.

In the meanwhile the “Bonadventure” entered the winding channels among the reefs, and Pencroft observed every turn with extreme care. He had put Herbert at the helm, posting himself in the bows, inspecting the water, while he held the halliard in his hand, ready to lower the sail at a moment’s notice. Gideon Spilett with his glass eagerly scanned the shore, though without perceiving anything.

However, at about twelve o’clock the keel of the “Bonadventure” grated on the bottom. The anchor was let go, the sails furled, and the crew of the little vessel landed.

And there was no reason to doubt that this was Tabor Island, since according to the most recent charts there was no island in this part of the Pacific between New Zealand and the American Coast.

The vessel was securely moored, so that there should be no danger of her being carried away by the receding tide; then Pencroft and his companions, well armed, ascended the shore, so as to gain an elevation of about two hundred and fifty or three hundred feet which rose at a distance of half a mile.

“From the summit of that hill,” said Spilett, “we can no doubt obtain a complete view of the island, which will greatly facilitate our search.”

“So as to do here,” replied Herbert, “that which Captain Harding did the very first thing on Lincoln Island, by climbing Mount Franklin.”

“Exactly so,” answered the reporter, “and it is the best plan.”

While thus talking the explorers had advanced along a clearing which terminated at the foot of the hill. Flocks of rock-pigeons and sea-swallows, similar to those of Lincoln Island, fluttered around them. Under the woods which skirted the glade on the left they could hear the bushes rustling and see the grass waving, which indicated the presence of timid animals, but still nothing to show that the island was inhabited.

Arrived at the foot of the hill, Pencroft, Spilett, and Herbert climbed it in a few minutes, and gazed anxiously round the horizon.

They were on an islet, which did not measure more than six miles in circumference, its shape not much bordered by capes or promontories, bays or creeks, being a lengthened oval. All around, the lonely sea extended to the limits of the horizon. No land nor even a sail was in sight.

This woody islet did not offer the varied aspects of Lincoln Island, arid and wild in one part, but fertile and rich in the other. On the contrary this was a uniform mass of verdure, out of which rose two or three hills of no great height. Obliquely to the oval of the island ran a stream through a wide meadow falling into the sea on the west by a narrow mouth.

“The domain is limited,” said Herbert.

“Yes,” rejoined Pencroft: “It would have been too small for us.”

“And moreover,” said the reporter, “it appears to be uninhabited.”

“Indeed,” answered Herbert, “nothing here betrays the presence of man.”

“Let us go down,” said Pencroft, “and search.”

The sailor and his two companions returned to the shore, to the place where they had left the “Bonadventure.”

They had decided to make the tour of the island on foot, before exploring the interior; so that not a spot should escape their investigations. The beach was easy to follow, and only in some places was their way barred by large rocks, which, however, they easily passed round. The explorers proceeded towards the south, disturbing numerous flocks of sea-birds and herds of seals, which threw themselves into the sea as soon as they saw the strangers at a distance.

“Those beasts yonder,” observed the reporter, “do not see men for the first time. They fear them, therefore they must know them.”

An hour after their departure they arrived on the southern point of the islet, terminated by a sharp cape, and proceeded towards the north along the western coast, equally formed by sand and rocks, the background bordered with thick woods.

There was not a trace of a habitation in any part, not the print of a human foot on the shore of the island, which after four hours’ walking had been gone completely round.

It was to say the least very extraordinary, and they were compelled to believe that Tabor Island was not or was no longer inhabited. Perhaps, after all the document was already several months or several years old, and it was possible in this case, either that the castaway had been enabled to return to his country, or that he had died of misery.

Pencroft, Spilett, and Herbert, forming more or less probable conjectures, dined rapidly on board the “Bonadventure” so as to be able to continue their excursion until nightfall. This was done at five o’clock in the evening, at which hour they entered the wood.

Numerous animals fled at their approach, being principally, one might say, only goats and pigs, which were obviously European species.

Doubtless some whaler had landed them on the island, where they had rapidly increased. Herbert resolved to catch one or two living, and take them back to Lincoln Island.

It was no longer doubtful that men at some period or other had visited this islet, and this became still more evident when paths appeared trodden through the forest, felled trees, and everywhere traces of the hand of man; but the trees were becoming rotten, and had been felled many years ago; the marks of the axe were velveted with moss, and the grass grew long and thick on the paths, so that it was difficult to find them.

“But,” observed Gideon Spilett, “this not only proves that men have landed on the island, but also that they lived on it for some time. Now, who were these men? How many of them remain?”

“The document,” said Herbert, “only spoke of one castaway.”

“Well, if he is still on the island,” replied Pencroft, “it is impossible but that we shall find him.”

The exploration was continued. The sailor and his companions naturally followed the route which cut diagonally across the island, and they were thus obliged to follow the stream which flowed towards the sea.

If the animals of European origin, if works due to a human hand, showed incontestably that men had already visited the island, several specimens of the vegetable kingdom did not prove it less. In some places, in the midst of clearings, it was evident that the soil had been planted with culinary plants, at probably the same distant period.

What, then, was Herbert’s joy, when he recognized potatoes, chicory, sorrel, carrots, cabbages, and turnips, of which it was sufficient to collect the seed to enrich the soil of Lincoln Island.

“Capital, jolly!” exclaimed Pencroft. “That will suit Neb as well as us. Even if we do not find the castaway, at least our voyage will not have been useless, and God will have rewarded us.”

“Doubtless,” replied Gideon Spilett, “but to see the state in which we find these plantations, it is to be feared that the island has not been inhabited for some time.”

“Indeed,” answered Herbert, “an inhabitant, whoever he was, could not have neglected such an important culture!”

“Yes,” said Pencroft, “the castaway has gone.”

“We must suppose so.”

“It must then be admitted that the document has already a distant date?”

“Evidently.”

“And that the bottle only arrived at Lincoln Island after having floated in the sea a long time.”

“Why not?” returned Pencroft. “But night is coming on,” added he, “and I think that it will be best to give up the search for the present.”

“Let us go on board, and to-morrow we will begin again,” said the reporter.

This was the wisest course, and it was about to be followed when Herbert, pointing to a confused mass among the trees, exclaimed, —

“A hut!”

All three immediately ran towards the dwelling. In the twilight it was just possible to see that it was built of planks and covered with a thick tarpaulin.

The half-closed door was pushed open by Pencroft, who entered with a rapid step.

The hut was empty!

CHAPTER 14

Pencroft, Herbert, and Gideon Spilett remained silent in the midst of the darkness.

Pencroft shouted loudly.

No reply was made.

The sailor then struck a light and set fire to a twig. This lighted for a minute a small room, which appeared perfectly empty. At the back was a rude fireplace, with a few cold cinders, supporting an armful of dry wood. Pencroft threw the blazing twig on it, the wood crackled and gave forth a bright light.

The sailor and his two companions then perceived a disordered bed, of which the damp and yellow coverlets proved that it had not been used for a long time. In the corner of the fireplace were two kettles, covered with rust, and an overthrown pot. A cupboard, with a few moldy sailor’s clothes; on the table a tin plate and a Bible, eaten away by damp; in a corner a few tools, a spade, pickaxe, two fowling-pieces, one of which was broken; on a plank, forming a shelf, stood a barrel of powder, still untouched, a barrel of shot, and several boxes of caps, all thickly covered with dust, accumulated, perhaps, by many long years.

“There is no one here,” said the reporter.

“No one,” replied Pencroft.

“It is a long time since this room has been inhabited,” observed Herbert.

“Yes, a very long time!” answered the reporter.

“Mr. Spilett,” then said Pencroft, “instead of returning on board, I think that it would be well to pass the night in this hut.”

“You are right, Pencroft,” answered Gideon Spilett, “and if its owner returns, well! perhaps he will not be sorry to find the place taken possession of.”

“He will not return,” said the sailor, shaking his head.

“You think that he has quitted the island?” asked the reporter.

“If he had quitted the island he would have taken away his weapons and his tools,” replied Pencroft. “You know the value which castaways set on such articles as these the last remains of a wreck. No! no!” repeated the sailor, in a tone of conviction; “no, he has not left the island! If he had escaped in a boat made by himself, he would still less have left these indispensable and necessary articles. No! he is on the island!”

“Living?” asked Herbert.

“Living or dead. But if he is dead, I suppose he has not buried himself, and so we shall at least find his remains!”

It was then agreed that the night should be passed in the deserted dwelling, and a store of wood found in a corner was sufficient to warm it. The door closed, Pencroft, Herbert and Spilett remained there, seated on a bench, talking little but wondering much. They were in a frame of mind to imagine anything or expect anything. They listened eagerly for sounds outside. The door might have opened suddenly, and a man presented himself to them without their being in the least surprised, notwithstanding all that the hut revealed of abandonment, and they had their hands ready to press the hands of this man, this castaway, this unknown friend, for whom friends were waiting.

But no voice was heard, the door did not open. The hours thus passed away.

How long the night appeared to the sailor and his companions! Herbert alone slept for two hours, for at his age sleep is a necessity. They were all three anxious to continue their exploration of the day before, and to search the most secret recesses of the islet! The inferences deduced by Pencroft were perfectly reasonable, and it was nearly certain that, as the hut was deserted, and the tools, utensils, and weapons were still there, the owner had succumbed. It was agreed, therefore, that they should search for his remains, and give them at least Christian burial.

Day dawned; Pencroft and his companions immediately proceeded to survey the dwelling. It had certainly been built in a favorable situation, at the back of a little hill, sheltered by five or six magnificent gum-trees. Before its front and through the trees the axe had prepared a wide clearing, which allowed the view to extend to the sea. Beyond a lawn, surrounded by a wooden fence falling to pieces, was the shore, on the left of which was the mouth of the stream.

The hut had been built of planks, and it was easy to see that these planks had been obtained from the hull or deck of a ship. It was probable that a disabled vessel had been cast on the coast of the island, that one at least of the crew had been saved, and that by means of the wreck this man, having tools at his disposal, had built the dwelling.

And this became still more evident when Gideon Spilett, after having walked around the hut, saw on a plank, probably one of those which had formed the armor of the wrecked vessel, these letters already half effaced:

BR — TAN — A

“Britannia,” exclaimed Pencroft, whom the reporter had called; “it is a common name for ships, and I could not say if she was English or American!”

“It matters very little, Pencroft!”

“Very little indeed,” answered the sailor, “and we will save the survivor of her crew if he is still living, to whatever country he may belong. But before beginning our search again let us go on board the ‘Bonadventure’.”

A sort of uneasiness had seized Pencroft upon the subject of his vessel. Should the island be inhabited after all, and should some one have taken possession of her? But he shrugged his shoulders at such an unreasonable supposition. At any rate the sailor was not sorry to go to breakfast on board. The road already trodden was not long, scarcely a mile. They set out on their walk, gazing into the wood and thickets through which goats and pigs fled in hundreds.

Twenty minutes after leaving the hut Pencroft and his companions reached the western coast of the island, and saw the “Bonadventure” held fast by her anchor, which was buried deep in the sand.

Pencroft could not restrain a sigh of satisfaction. After all this vessel was his child, and it is the right of fathers to be often uneasy when there is no occasion for it.

They returned on board, breakfasted, so that it should not be necessary to dine until very late; then the repast being ended, the exploration was continued and conducted with the most minute care. Indeed, it was very probable that the only inhabitant of the island had perished. It was therefore more for the traces of a dead than of a living man that Pencroft and his companions searched. But their searches were vain, and during the half of that day they sought to no purpose among the thickets of trees which covered the islet. There was then scarcely any doubt that, if the castaway was dead, no trace of his body now remained, but that some wild beast had probably devoured it to the last bone.

“We will set off to-morrow at daybreak,” said Pencroft to his two companions, as about two o’clock they were resting for a few minutes under the shade of a clump of firs.

“I should think that we might without scruple take the utensils which belonged to the castaway,” added Herbert.

“I think so, too,” returned Gideon Spilett, “and these arms and tools will make up the stores of Granite House. The supply of powder and shot is also most important.”

“Yes,” replied Pencroft, “but we must not forget to capture a couple or two of those pigs, of which Lincoln Island is destitute.”

“Nor to gather those seeds,” added Herbert, “which will give us all the vegetables of the Old and the New Worlds.”

“Then perhaps it would be best,” said the reporter, “to remain a day longer on Tabor Island, so as to collect all that may be useful to us.”

“No, Mr. Spilett,” answered Pencroft, “I will ask you to set off to-morrow at daybreak. The wind seems to me to be likely to shift to the west, and after having had a fair wind for coming we shall have a fair wind for going back.”

“Then do not let us lose time,” said Herbert, rising.

“We won’t waste time,” returned Pencroft. “You, Herbert, go and gather the seeds, which you know better than we do. While you do that, Mr. Spilett and I will go and have a pig hunt, and even without Top I hope we shall manage to catch a few!”

Herbert accordingly took the path which led towards the cultivated part of the islet, while the sailor and the reporter entered the forest.

Many specimens of the porcine race fled before them, and these animals, which were singularly active, did not appear to be in a humor to allow themselves to be approached.

However, after an hour’s chase, the hunters had just managed to get hold of a couple lying in a thicket, when cries were heard resounding from the north part of the island, With the cries were mingled terrible yells, in which there was nothing human.

Pencroft and Gideon Spilett were at once on their feet, and the pigs by this movement began to run away, at the moment when the sailor was getting ready the rope to bind them.

“That’s Herbert’s voice,” said the reporter.

“Run!” exclaimed Pencroft.

And the sailor and Spilett immediately ran at full speed towards the spot from whence the cries proceeded.

They did well to hasten, for at a turn of the path near a clearing they saw the lad thrown on the ground and in the grasp of a savage being, apparently a gigantic ape, who was about to do him some great harm.

To rush on this monster, throw him on the ground in his turn, snatch Herbert from him, then bind him securely, was the work of a minute for Pencroft and Gideon Spilett. The sailor was of Herculean strength, the reporter also very powerful, and in spite of the monster's resistance he was firmly tied so that he could not even move.

"You are not hurt, Herbert?" asked Spilett.

"No, no!"

"Oh, if this ape had wounded him!" exclaimed Pencroft.

"But he is not an ape," answered Herbert.

At these words Pencroft and Gideon Spilett looked at the singular being who lay on the ground. Indeed it was not an ape; it was a human being, a man. But what a man! A savage in all the horrible acceptation of the word, and so much the more frightful that he seemed fallen to the lowest degree of brutishness!

Shaggy hair, untrimmed beard descending to the chest, the body almost naked except a rag round the waist, wild eyes, enormous hands with immensely long nails, skin the color of mahogany, feet as hard as if made of horn, such was the miserable creature who yet had a claim to be called a man. But it might justly be asked if there were yet a soul in this body, or if the brute instinct alone survived in it!

"Are you quite sure that this is a man, or that he has ever been one?" said Pencroft to the reporter.

"Alas! there is no doubt about it," replied Spilett.

"Then this must be the castaway?" asked Herbert.

"Yes," replied Gideon Spilett, "but the unfortunate man has no longer anything human about him!"

The reporter spoke the truth. It was evident that if the castaway had ever been a civilized being, solitude had made him a savage, or worse, perhaps a regular man of the woods. Hoarse sounds issued from his throat between his teeth, which were sharp as the teeth of a wild beast made to tear raw flesh.

Memory must have deserted him long before, and for a long time also he had forgotten how to use his gun and tools, and he no longer knew how to make a fire! It could be seen that he was active and powerful, but the physical qualities had been developed in him to the injury of the moral qualities. Gideon Spilett spoke to him. He did not appear to understand or even to hear. And yet on looking into his eyes, the reporter thought he could see that all reason was not extinguished in him. However, the prisoner did not struggle, nor even attempt to break his bonds. Was he overwhelmed by the presence of men whose fellow he had once been? Had he found in some corner of his brain a fleeting remembrance which recalled him to humanity? If free, would he attempt to fly, or would he remain? They could not tell, but they did not make the experiment; and after gazing attentively at the miserable creature, —

"Whoever he may be," remarked Gideon Spilett, "whoever he may have been, and whatever he may become, it is our duty to take him with us to

Lincoln Island.”

“Yes, yes!” replied Herbert, “and perhaps with care we may arouse in him some gleam of intelligence.”

“The soul does not die,” said the reporter, “and it would be a great satisfaction to rescue one of God’s creatures from brutishness.”

Pencroft shook his head doubtfully.

“We must try at any rate,” returned the reporter; “humanity commands us.”

It was indeed their duty as Christians and civilized beings. All three felt this, and they well knew that Cyrus Harding would approve of their acting thus.

“Shall we leave him bound?” asked the sailor.

“Perhaps he would walk if his feet were unfastened,” said Herbert.

“Let us try,” replied Pencroft.

The cords which shackled the prisoner’s feet were cut off, but his arms remained securely fastened. He got up by himself and did not manifest any desire to run away. His hard eyes darted a piercing glance at the three men, who walked near him, but nothing denoted that he recollected being their fellow, or at least having been so. A continual hissing sound issued from his lips, his aspect was wild, but he did not attempt to resist.

By the reporter’s advice the unfortunate man was taken to the hut. Perhaps the sight of the things that belonged to him would make some impression on him! Perhaps a spark would be sufficient to revive his obscured intellect, to rekindle his dulled soul. The dwelling was not far off. In a few minutes they arrived there, but the prisoner remembered nothing, and it appeared that he had lost consciousness of everything.

What could they think of the degree of brutishness into which this miserable being had fallen, unless that his imprisonment on the islet dated from a very distant period and after having arrived there a rational being solitude had reduced him to this condition.

The reporter then thought that perhaps the sight of fire would have some effect on him, and in a moment one of those beautiful flames, that attract even animals, blazed up on the hearth. The sight of the flame seemed at first to fix the attention of the unhappy object, but soon he turned away and the look of intelligence faded. Evidently there was nothing to be done, for the time at least, but to take him on board the “Bonadventure.” This was done, and he remained there in Pencroft’s charge.

Herbert and Spilett returned to finish their work; and some hours after they came back to the shore, carrying the utensils and guns, a store of vegetables, of seeds, some game, and two couple of pigs.

All was embarked, and the “Bonadventure” was ready to weigh anchor and sail with the morning tide.

The prisoner had been placed in the fore-cabin, where he remained quiet, silent, apparently deaf and dumb.

Pencroft offered him something to eat, but he pushed away the cooked meat that was presented to him and which doubtless did not suit him. But on the sailor showing him one of the ducks which Herbert had killed, he pounced on it like a wild beast, and devoured it greedily.

“You think that he will recover his senses?” asked Pencroft. “It is not impossible that our care will have an effect upon him, for it is solitude that has made him what he is, and from this time forward he will be no longer alone.”

“The poor man must no doubt have been in this state for a long time,” said Herbert.

“Perhaps,” answered Gideon Spilett.

“About what age is he?” asked the lad.

“It is difficult to say,” replied the reporter, “for it is impossible to see his features under the thick beard which covers his face, but he is no longer young, and I suppose he might be about fifty.”

“Have you noticed, Mr. Spilett, how deeply sunk his eyes are?” asked Herbert.

“Yes, Herbert, but I must add that they are more human than one could expect from his appearance.”

“However, we shall see,” replied Pencroft, “and I am anxious to know what opinion Captain Harding will have of our savage. We went to look for a human creature, and we are bringing back a monster! After all, we did what we could.”

The night passed, and whether the prisoner slept or not could not be known, but at any rate, although he had been unbound, he did not move. He was like a wild animal, which appears stunned at first by its capture, and becomes wild again afterwards.

At daybreak the next morning, the 15th of October, the change of weather predicted by Pencroft occurred. The wind having shifted to the northwest favored the return of the “Bonadventure,” but at the same time it freshened, which might render navigation more difficult.

At five o’clock in the morning the anchor was weighed. Pencroft took a reef in the mainsail, and steered towards the north-east, so as to sail straight for Lincoln Island.

The first day of the voyage was not marked by any incident. The prisoner remained quiet in the fore-cabin, and as he had been a sailor it appeared that the motion of the vessel might produce on him a salutary reaction. Did some recollection of his former calling return to him? However that might be, he remained tranquil, astonished rather than depressed.

The next day the wind increased, blowing more from the north, consequently in a less favorable direction for the “Bonadventure.” Pencroft was soon obliged to sail close-hauled, and without saying anything about it he began to be uneasy at the state of the sea, which frequently broke over the bows. Certainly, if the wind did not moderate, it would take a longer time to reach Lincoln Island than it had taken to make Tabor Island.

Indeed, on the morning of the 17th, the “Bonadventure” had been forty-eight hours at sea, and nothing showed that she was near the island. It was impossible, besides, to estimate the distance traversed, or to trust to the reckoning for the direction, as the speed had been very irregular.

Twenty-four hours after there was yet no land in sight. The wind was right ahead and the sea very heavy. The sails were close-reefed, and they tacked frequently. On the 18th, a wave swept completely over the “Bonadventure”;

and if the crew had not taken the precaution of lashing themselves to the deck, they would have been carried away.

On this occasion Pencroft and his companions, who were occupied with loosing themselves, received unexpected aid from the prisoner, who emerged from the hatchway as if his sailor’s instinct had suddenly returned, broke a piece out of the bulwarks with a spar so as to let the water which filled the deck escape. Then the vessel being clear, he descended to his cabin without having uttered a word. Pencroft, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert, greatly astonished, let him proceed.

Their situation was truly serious, and the sailor had reason to fear that he was lost on the wide sea without any possibility of recovering his course.

The night was dark and cold. However, about eleven o’clock, the wind fell, the sea went down, and the speed of the vessel, as she labored less, greatly increased.

Neither Pencroft, Spilett, nor Herbert thought of taking an hour’s sleep. They kept a sharp look-out, for either Lincoln Island could not be far distant and would be sighted at daybreak, or the “Bonadventure,” carried away by currents, had drifted so much that it would be impossible to rectify her course. Pencroft, uneasy to the last degree, yet did not despair, for he had a gallant heart, and grasping the tiller he anxiously endeavored to pierce the darkness which surrounded them.

About two o’clock in the morning he started forward, —

“A light! a light!” he shouted.

Indeed, a bright light appeared twenty miles to the northeast. Lincoln Island was there, and this fire, evidently lighted by Cyrus Harding, showed them the course to be followed. Pencroft, who was bearing too much to the north, altered his course and steered towards the fire, which burned brightly above the horizon like a star of the first magnitude.

CHAPTER 15

The next day, the 20th of October, at seven o’clock in the morning, after a voyage of four days, the “Bonadventure” gently glided up to the beach at the mouth of the Mercy.

Cyrus Harding and Neb, who had become very uneasy at the bad weather and the prolonged absence of their companions, had climbed at daybreak to the plateau of Prospect Heights, and they had at last caught sight of the vessel which had been so long in returning.

“God be praised! there they are!” exclaimed Cyrus Harding.

As to Neb in his joy, he began to dance, to twirl round, clapping his hands and shouting, “Oh! my master!” A more touching pantomime than the finest discourse.

The engineer’s first idea, on counting the people on the deck of the “Bonadventure,” was that Pencroft had not found the castaway of Tabor Island, or at any rate that the unfortunate man had refused to leave his island and change one prison for another.

Indeed Pencroft, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert were alone on the deck of the “Bonadventure.”

The moment the vessel touched, the engineer and Neb were waiting on the beach, and before the passengers had time to leap on to the sand, Harding said: “We have been very uneasy at your delay, my friends! Did you meet with any accident?”

“No,” replied Gideon Spilett; “on the contrary, everything went wonderfully well. We will tell you all about it.”

“However,” returned the engineer, “your search has been unsuccessful, since you are only three, just as you went!”

“Excuse me, captain,” replied the sailor, “we are four.”

“You have found the castaway?”

“Yes.”

“And you have brought him?”

“Yes.”

“Living?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he? Who is he?”

“He is,” replied the reporter, “or rather he was a man! There, Cyrus, that is all we can tell you!”

The engineer was then informed of all that had passed during the voyage, and under what conditions the search had been conducted; how the only dwelling in the island had long been abandoned; how at last a castaway had been captured, who appeared no longer to belong to the human species.

“And that’s just the point,” added Pencroft, “I don’t know if we have done right to bring him here.”

“Certainly you have, Pencroft,” replied the engineer quickly.

“But the wretched creature has no sense!”

“That is possible at present,” replied Cyrus Harding, “but only a few months ago the wretched creature was a man like you and me. And who knows what will become of the survivor of us after a long solitude on this island? It is a great misfortune to be alone, my friends; and it must be believed that solitude can quickly destroy reason, since you have found this poor creature in such a state!”

“But, captain,” asked Herbert, “what leads you to think that the brutishness of the unfortunate man began only a few months back?”

“Because the document we found had been recently written,” answered the engineer, “and the castaway alone can have written it.”

“Always supposing,” observed Gideon Spilett, “that it had not been written by a companion of this man, since dead.”

“That is impossible, my dear Spilett.”

“Why so?” asked the reporter.

“Because the document would then have spoken of two castaways,” replied Harding, “and it mentioned only one.”

Herbert then in a few words related the incidents of the voyage, and dwelt on the curious fact of the sort of passing gleam in the prisoner’s mind, when for an instant in the height of the storm he had become a sailor.

“Well, Herbert,” replied the engineer, “you are right to attach great importance to this fact. The unfortunate man cannot be incurable, and despair has made him what he is; but here he will find his fellow-men, and since there is still a soul in him, this soul we shall save!”

The castaway of Tabor Island, to the great pity of the engineer and the great astonishment of Neb, was then brought from the cabin which he occupied in the fore part of the “Bonadventure”; when once on land he manifested a wish to run away.

But Cyrus Harding approaching, placed his hand on his shoulder with a gesture full of authority, and looked at him with infinite tenderness. Immediately the unhappy man, submitting to a superior will, gradually became calm, his eyes fell, his head bent, and he made no more resistance.

“Poor fellow!” murmured the engineer.

Cyrus Harding had attentively observed him. To judge by his appearance this miserable being had no longer anything human about him, and yet Harding, as had the reporter already, observed in his look an indefinable trace of intelligence.

It was decided that the castaway, or rather the stranger as he was thenceforth termed by his companions, should live in one of the rooms of Granite House, from which, however, he could not escape. He was led there without difficulty, and with careful attention, it might, perhaps, be hoped that some day he would be a companion to the settlers in Lincoln Island.

Cyrus Harding, during breakfast, which Neb had hastened to prepare, as the reporter, Herbert, and Pencroft were dying of hunger, heard in detail all the incidents which had marked the voyage of exploration to the islet. He agreed with his friends on this point, that the stranger must be either English or American, the name Britannia leading them to suppose this, and, besides, through the bushy beard, and under the shaggy, matted hair, the engineer thought he could recognize the characteristic features of the Anglo-Saxon.

“But, by the bye,” said Gideon Spilett, addressing Herbert, “you never told us how you met this savage, and we know nothing, except that you would have been strangled, if we had not happened to come up in time to help you!”

“Upon my word,” answered Herbert, “it is rather difficult to say how it happened. I was, I think, occupied in collecting my plants, when I heard a noise like an avalanche falling from a very tall tree. I scarcely had time to look round. This unfortunate man, who was without doubt concealed in a tree, rushed upon me in less time than I take to tell you about it, and unless Mr. Spilett and Pencroft — ”

“My boy!” said Cyrus Harding, “you ran a great danger, but, perhaps, without that, the poor creature would have still hidden himself from your search, and we should not have had a new companion.”

“You hope, then, Cyrus, to succeed in reforming the man?” asked the reporter.

“Yes,” replied the engineer.

Breakfast over, Harding and his companions left Granite House and returned to the beach. They there occupied themselves in unloading the “Bonadventure,” and the engineer, having examined the arms and tools, saw nothing which could help them to establish the identity of the stranger.

The capture of pigs, made on the islet, was looked upon as being very profitable to Lincoln Island, and the animals were led to the sty, where they soon became at home.

The two barrels, containing the powder and shot, as well as the box of caps, were very welcome. It was agreed to establish a small powder-magazine, either outside Granite House or in the Upper Cavern, where there would be no fear of explosion. However, the use of pyroxyle was to be continued, for this substance giving excellent results, there was no reason for substituting ordinary powder.

When the unloading of the vessel was finished, —

“Captain,” said Pencroft, “I think it would be prudent to put our ‘Bonadventure’ in a safe place.”

“Is she not safe at the mouth of the Mercy?” asked Cyrus Harding.

“No, captain,” replied the sailor. “Half of the time she is stranded on the sand, and that works her. She is a famous craft, you see, and she behaved admirably during the squall which struck us on our return.”

“Could she not float in the river?”

“No doubt, captain, she could; but there is no shelter there, and in the east winds, I think that the ‘Bonadventure’ would suffer much from the surf.”

“Well, where would you put her, Pencroft?”

“In Port Balloon,” replied the sailor. “That little creek, shut in by rocks, seems to me to be just the harbor we want.”

“Is it not rather far?”

“Pooh! it is not more than three miles from Granite House, and we have a fine straight road to take us there!”

“Do it then, Pencroft, and take your ‘Bonadventure’ there,” replied the engineer, “and yet I would rather have her under our more immediate protection. When we have time, we must make a little harbor for her.”

“Famous!” exclaimed Pencroft. “A harbor with a lighthouse, a pier, and dock! Ah! really with you, captain, everything becomes easy.”

“Yes, my brave Pencroft,” answered the engineer, “but on condition, however, that you help me, for you do as much as three men in all our work.”

Herbert and the sailor then re-embarked on board the “Bonadventure,” the anchor was weighed, the sail hoisted, and the wind drove her rapidly towards Claw Cape. Two hours after, she was reposing on the tranquil waters of Port Balloon.

During the first days passed by the stranger in Granite House, had he already given them reason to think that his savage nature was becoming tamed? Did a brighter light burn in the depths of that obscured mind? In short, was the soul returning to the body?

Yes, to a certainty, and to such a degree, that Cyrus Harding and the reporter wondered if the reason of the unfortunate man had ever been totally extinguished. At first, accustomed to the open air, to the unrestrained liberty which he had enjoyed on Tabor Island, the stranger manifested a sullen fury, and it was feared that he might throw himself onto the beach, out of one of the windows of Granite House. But gradually he became calmer, and more freedom was allowed to his movements.

They had reason to hope, and to hope much. Already, forgetting his carnivorous instincts, the stranger accepted a less bestial nourishment than that on which he fed on the islet, and cooked meat did not produce in him the same sentiment of repulsion which he had showed on board the “Bonadventure.” Cyrus Harding had profited by a moment when he was sleeping, to cut his hair and matted beard, which formed a sort of mane and gave him such a savage aspect. He had also been clothed more suitably, after having got rid of the rag which covered him. The result was that, thanks to these attentions, the stranger resumed a more human appearance, and it even seemed as if his eyes had become milder. Certainly, when formerly lighted up by intelligence, this man’s face must have had a sort of beauty.

Every day, Harding imposed on himself the task of passing some hours in his company. He came and worked near him, and occupied himself in different things, so as to fix his attention. A spark, indeed, would be sufficient to reillumine that soul, a recollection crossing that brain to recall reason. That had been seen, during the storm, on board the “Bonadventure!” The engineer did not neglect either to speak aloud, so as to penetrate at the same time by the organs of hearing and sight the depths of that torpid intelligence. Sometimes one of his companions, sometimes another, sometimes all joined him. They spoke most often of things belonging to the navy, which must interest a sailor.

At times, the stranger gave some slight attention to what was said, and the settlers were soon convinced that he partly understood them. Sometimes the expression of his countenance was deeply sorrowful, a proof that he suffered mentally, for his face could not be mistaken; but he did not speak, although at different times, however, they almost thought that words were about to issue from his lips. At all events, the poor creature was quite quiet and sad!

But was not his calm only apparent? Was not his sadness only the result of his seclusion? Nothing could yet be ascertained. Seeing only certain objects and in a limited space, always in contact with the colonists, to whom he would soon become accustomed, having no desires to satisfy, better fed, better clothed, it was natural that his physical nature should gradually improve; but was he penetrated with the sense of a new life? or rather, to employ a word which would be exactly applicable to him, was he not becoming tamed, like an animal in company with his master? This was an important question, which Cyrus Harding was anxious to answer, and yet he did not wish to treat his invalid roughly! Would he ever be a convalescent?

How the engineer observed him every moment! How he was on the watch for his soul, if one may use the expression! How he was ready to grasp it! The settlers followed with real sympathy all the phases of the cure undertaken by Harding. They aided him also in this work of humanity, and all, except perhaps the incredulous Pencroft, soon shared both his hope and his faith.

The calm of the stranger was deep, as has been said, and he even showed a sort of attachment for the engineer, whose influence he evidently felt. Cyrus Harding resolved then to try him, by transporting him to another scene, from that ocean which formerly his eyes had been accustomed to contemplate, to the border of the forest, which might perhaps recall those where so many years of his life had been passed!

“But,” said Gideon Spilett, “can we hope that he will not escape, if once set at liberty?”

“The experiment must be tried,” replied the engineer.

“Well!” said Pencroft. “When that fellow is outside, and feels the fresh air, he will be off as fast as his legs can carry him!”

“I do not think so,” returned Harding.

“Let us try,” said Spilett.

“We will try,” replied the engineer.

This was on the 30th of October, and consequently the castaway of Tabor Island had been a prisoner in Granite House for nine days. It was warm, and a bright sun darted its rays on the island. Cyrus Harding and Pencroft went to the room occupied by the stranger, who was found lying near the window and gazing at the sky.

“Come, my friend,” said the engineer to him.

The stranger rose immediately. His eyes were fixed on Cyrus Harding, and he followed him, while the sailor marched behind them, little confident as to the result of the experiment.

Arrived at the door, Harding and Pencroft made him take his place in the lift, while Neb, Herbert, and Gideon Spilett waited for them before Granite House. The lift descended, and in a few moments all were united on the beach.

The settlers went a short distance from the stranger, so as to leave him at liberty.

He then made a few steps toward the sea, and his look brightened with extreme animation, but he did not make the slightest attempt to escape. He was gazing at the little waves which, broken by the islet, rippled on the sand.

“This is only the sea,” observed Gideon Spilett, “and possibly it does not inspire him with any wish to escape!”

“Yes,” replied Harding, “we must take him to the plateau, on the border of the forest. There the experiment will be more conclusive.”

“Besides, he could not run away,” said Neb, “since the bridge is raised.”

“Oh!” said Pencroft, “that isn’t a man to be troubled by a stream like Creek Glycerine! He could cross it directly, at a single bound!”

“We shall soon see,” Harding contented himself with replying, his eyes not quitting those of his patient.

The latter was then led towards the mouth of the Mercy, and all climbing the left bank of the river, reached Prospect Heights.

Arrived at the spot on which grew the first beautiful trees of the forest, their foliage slightly agitated by the breeze, the stranger appeared greedily to drink in the penetrating odor which filled the atmosphere, and a long sigh escaped from his chest.

The settlers kept behind him, ready to seize him if he made any movement to escape!

And, indeed, the poor creature was on the point of springing into the creek which separated him from the forest, and his legs were bent for an instant as if for a spring, but almost immediately he stepped back, half sank down, and a large tear fell from his eyes.

“Ah!” exclaimed Cyrus Harding, “you have become a man again, for you can weep!”

CHAPTER 16

Yes! the unfortunate man had wept! Some recollection doubtless had flashed across his brain, and to use Cyrus Harding’s expression, by those tears he was once more a man.

The colonists left him for some time on the plateau, and withdrew themselves to a short distance, so that he might feel himself free; but he did not think of profiting by this liberty, and Harding soon brought him back to Granite House. Two days after this occurrence, the stranger appeared to wish gradually to mingle with their common life. He evidently heard and understood, but no less evidently was he strangely determined not to speak to the colonists; for one evening, Pencroft, listening at the door of his room, heard these words escape from his lips: —

“No! here! I! never!”

The sailor reported these words to his companions.

“There is some painful mystery there!” said Harding.

The stranger had begun to use the laboring tools, and he worked in the garden. When he stopped in his work, as was often the case, he remained retired within himself, but on the engineer’s recommendation, they respected the reserve which he apparently wished to keep. If one of the settlers approached him, he drew back, and his chest heaved with sobs, as if overburdened!

Was it remorse that overwhelmed him thus? They were compelled to believe so, and Gideon Spilett could not help one day making this observation, —

“If he does not speak it is because he has, I fear, things too serious to be told!”

They must be patient and wait.

A few days later, on the 3rd of November, the stranger, working on the plateau, had stopped, letting his spade drop to the ground, and Harding, who was observing him from a little distance, saw that tears were again flowing from his eyes. A sort of irresistible pity led him towards the unfortunate man, and he touched his arm lightly.

“My friend!” said he.

The stranger tried to avoid his look, and Cyrus Harding having endeavored to take his hand, he drew back quickly.

“My friend,” said Harding in a firmer voice, “look at me, I wish it!”

The stranger looked at the engineer, and seemed to be under his power, as a subject under the influence of a mesmerist. He wished to run away. But then his countenance suddenly underwent a transformation. His eyes flashed. Words struggled to escape from his lips. He could no longer contain himself! At last he folded his arms; then, in a hollow voice, — ”Who are you?” he asked Cyrus Harding.

“Castaways, like you,” replied the engineer, whose emotion was deep. “We have brought you here, among your fellow-men.”

“My fellow-men!... I have none!”

“You are in the midst of friends.”

“Friends! — for me! friends!” exclaimed the stranger, hiding his face in his hands. “No — never — leave me! leave me!”

Then he rushed to the side of the plateau which overlooked the sea, and remained there a long time motionless.

Harding rejoined his companions and related to them what had just happened.

“Yes! there is some mystery in that man’s life,” said Gideon Spilett, “and it appears as if he had only re-entered society by the path of remorse.”

“I don’t know what sort of a man we have brought here,” said the sailor. “He has secrets — ”

“Which we will respect,” interrupted Cyrus Harding quickly. “If he has committed any crime, he has most fearfully expiated it, and in our eyes he is absolved.”

For two hours the stranger remained alone on the shore, evidently under the influence of recollections which recalled all his past life — a melancholy life doubtless — and the colonists, without losing sight of him, did not attempt to disturb his solitude. However, after two hours, appearing to have formed a resolution, he came to find Cyrus Harding. His eyes were red with the tears he had shed, but he wept no longer. His countenance expressed deep humility. He appeared anxious, timorous, ashamed, and his eyes were constantly fixed on the ground.

“Sir,” said he to Harding, “your companions and you, are you English?”

“No,” answered the engineer, “we are Americans.”

“Ah!” said the stranger, and he murmured, “I prefer that!”

“And you, my friend?” asked the engineer.

“English,” replied he hastily.

And as if these few words had been difficult to say, he retreated to the beach, where he walked up and down between the cascade and the mouth of the Mercy, in a state of extreme agitation.

Then, passing one moment close to Herbert, he stopped and in a stifled voice, —

“What month?” he asked.

“December,” replied Herbert.

“What year?”

“1866.”

“Twelve years! twelve years!” he exclaimed.

Then he left him abruptly.

Herbert reported to the colonists the questions and answers which had been made.

“This unfortunate man,” observed Gideon Spilett, “was no longer acquainted with either months or years!”

“Yes!” added Herbert, “and he had been twelve years already on the islet when we found him there!”

“Twelve years!” rejoined Harding. “Ah! twelve years of solitude, after a wicked life, perhaps, may well impair a man’s reason!”

“I am induced to think,” said Pencroft, “that this man was not wrecked on Tabor Island, but that in consequence of some crime he was left there.”

“You must be right, Pencroft,” replied the reporter, “and if it is so it is not impossible that those who left him on the island may return to fetch him some day!”

“And they will no longer find him,” said Herbert.

“But then,” added Pencroft, “they must return, and — ”

“My friends,” said Cyrus Harding, “do not let us discuss this question until we know more about it. I believe that the unhappy man has suffered, that he has severely expiated his faults, whatever they may have been, and that the wish to unburden himself stifles him. Do not let us press him to tell us his history! He will tell it to us doubtless, and when we know it, we shall see what course it will be best to follow. He alone besides can tell us, if he has more than a hope, a certainty, of returning some day to his country, but I doubt it!”

“And why?” asked the reporter.

“Because that, in the event of his being sure of being delivered at a certain time, he would have waited the hour of his deliverance and would not have thrown this document into the sea. No, it is more probable that he was condemned to die on that islet, and that he never expected to see his fellow-creatures again!”

“But,” observed the sailor, “there is one thing which I cannot explain.”

“What is it?”

“If this man had been left for twelve years on Tabor Island, one may well suppose that he had been several years already in the wild state in which we found him!”

“That is probable,” replied Cyrus Harding.

“It must then be many years since he wrote that document!”

“No doubt,” and yet the document appears to have been recently written!

“Besides, how do you know that the bottle which enclosed the document may not have taken several years to come from Tabor Island to Lincoln Island?”

“That is not absolutely impossible,” replied the reporter.

“Might it not have been a long time already on the coast of the island?”

“No,” answered Pencroft, “for it was still floating. We could not even suppose that after it had stayed for any length of time on the shore, it would have been swept off by the sea, for the south coast is all rocks, and it would certainly have been smashed to pieces there!”

“That is true,” rejoined Cyrus Harding thoughtfully.

“And then,” continued the sailor, “if the document was several years old, if it had been shut up in that bottle for several years, it would have been injured by damp. Now, there is nothing of the kind, and it was found in a perfect state of preservation.”

The sailor’s reasoning was very just, and pointed out an incomprehensible fact, for the document appeared to have been recently written, when the colonists found it in the bottle. Moreover, it gave the latitude and longitude of Tabor Island correctly, which implied that its author had a more complete knowledge of hydrography than could be expected of a common sailor.

“There is in this, again, something unaccountable,” said the engineer, “but we will not urge our companion to speak. When he likes, my friends, then we shall be ready to hear him!”

During the following days the stranger did not speak a word, and did not once leave the precincts of the plateau. He worked away, without losing a moment, without taking a minute’s rest, but always in a retired place. At meal times he never came to Granite House, although invited several times to do so, but contented himself with eating a few raw vegetables. At nightfall he did not return to the room assigned to him, but remained under some clump of trees, or when the weather was bad crouched in some cleft of the rocks. Thus he lived in the same manner as when he had no other shelter than the forests of Tabor Island, and as all persuasion to induce him to improve his life was in vain, the colonists waited patiently. And the time was near, when, as it seemed, almost involuntarily urged by his conscience, a terrible confession escaped him.

On the 10th of November, about eight o’clock in the evening, as night was coming on, the stranger appeared unexpectedly before the settlers, who were assembled under the veranda. His eyes burned strangely, and he had quite resumed the wild aspect of his worst days.

Cyrus Harding and his companions were astounded on seeing that, overcome by some terrible emotion, his teeth chattered like those of a person in a fever. What was the matter with him? Was the sight of his fellow-creatures insupportable to him? Was he weary of this return to a civilized mode of existence? Was he pining for his former savage life? It appeared so, as soon he was heard to express himself in these incoherent sentences: —

“Why am I here?... By what right have you dragged me from my islet?... Do you think there could be any tie between you and me?... Do you know who I am — what I have done — why I was there — alone? And who told you that I was not abandoned there — that I was not condemned to die there?... Do you know my past?... How do you know that I have not stolen, murdered — that I am not a wretch — an accursed being — only fit to live like a wild beast, far from all — speak — do you know it?”

The colonists listened without interrupting the miserable creature, from whom these broken confessions escaped, as it were, in spite of himself. Harding wishing to calm him, approached him, but he hastily drew back.

“No! no!” he exclaimed; “one word only — am I free?”

“You are free,” answered the engineer.

“Farewell, then!” he cried, and fled like a madman.

Neb, Pencroft, and Herbert ran also towards the edge of the wood — but they returned alone.

“We must let him alone!” said Cyrus Harding.

“He will never come back!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“He will come back,” replied the engineer.

Many days passed; but Harding — was it a sort of presentiment? — persisted in the fixed idea that sooner or later the unhappy man would return.

“It is the last revolt of his wild nature,” said he, “which remorse has touched, and which renewed solitude will terrify.”

In the meanwhile, works of all sorts were continued, as well on Prospect Heights as at the corral, where Harding intended to build a farm. It is unnecessary to say that the seeds collected by Herbert on Tabor Island had been carefully sown. The plateau thus formed one immense kitchen-garden, well laid out and carefully tended, so that the arms of the settlers were never in want of work. There was always something to be done. As the esculents increased in number, it became necessary to enlarge the simple beds, which threatened to grow into regular fields and replace the meadows. But grass abounded in other parts of the island, and there was no fear of the onagers being obliged to go on short allowance. It was well worth while, besides, to turn Prospect Heights into a kitchen-garden, defended by its deep belt of creeks, and to remove them to the meadows, which had no need of protection against the depredations of quadrumana and quadrapeds.

On the 15th of November, the third harvest was gathered in. How wonderfully had the field increased in extent, since eighteen months ago, when the first grain of wheat was sown! The second crop of six hundred thousand grains produced this time four thousand bushels, or five hundred millions of grains!

The colony was rich in corn, for ten bushels alone were sufficient for sowing every year to produce an ample crop for the food both of men and beasts. The harvest was completed, and the last fortnight of the month of November was devoted to the work of converting it into food for man. In fact, they had corn, but not flour, and the establishment of a mill was necessary. Cyrus Harding could have utilized the second fall which flowed into the Mercy to establish his motive power, the first being already occupied with moving the felting mill, but, after some consultation, it was decided that a simple windmill should be built on Prospect Heights. The building of this presented no more difficulty than the building of the former, and it was moreover certain that there would be no want of wind on the plateau, exposed as it was to the sea breezes.

“Not to mention,” said Pencroft, “that the windmill will be more lively and will have a good effect in the landscape!”

They set to work by choosing timber for the frame and machinery of the mill. Some large stones, found at the north of the lake, could be easily transformed into millstones, and as to the sails, the inexhaustible case of the balloon furnished the necessary material.

Cyrus Harding made his model, and the site of the mill was chosen a little to the right of the poultry-yard, near the shore of the lake. The frame was to rest on a pivot supported with strong timbers, so that it could turn with all the machinery it contained according as the wind required it. The work advanced rapidly. Neb and Pencroft had become very skilful carpenters, and had nothing to do but to copy the models provided by the engineer.

Soon a sort of cylindrical box, in shape like a pepper-pot, with a pointed roof, rose on the spot chosen. The four frames which formed the sails had been firmly fixed in the center beam, so as to form a certain angle with it, and secured with iron clamps. As to the different parts of the internal mechanism, the box destined to contain the two millstones, the fixed stone and the moving stone, the hopper, a sort of large square trough, wide at the top, narrow at the bottom, which would allow the grain to fall on the stones, the oscillating spout intended to regulate the passing of the grain, and lastly the bolting machine, which by the operation of sifting, separates the bran from the flour, were made without difficulty. The tools were good, and the work not difficult, for in reality, the machinery of a mill is very simple. This was only a question of time.

Every one had worked at the construction of the mill, and on the 1st of December it was finished. As usual, Pencroft was delighted with his work, and had no doubt that the apparatus was perfect.

“Now for a good wind,” said he, “and we shall grind our first harvest splendidly!”

“A good wind, certainly,” answered the engineer, “but not too much, Pencroft.”

“Pooh! our mill would only go the faster!”

“There is no need for it to go so very fast,” replied Cyrus Harding. “It is known by experience that the greatest quantity of work is performed by a mill when the number of turns made by the sails in a minute is six times the number of feet traversed by the wind in a second. A moderate breeze, which passes over twenty-four feet to the second, will give sixteen turns to the sails during a minute, and there is no need of more.”

“Exactly!” cried Herbert, “a fine breeze is blowing from the northeast, which will soon do our business for us.”

There was no reason for delaying the inauguration of the mill, for the settlers were eager to taste the first piece of bread in Lincoln Island. On this morning two or three bushels of wheat were ground, and the next day at breakfast a magnificent loaf, a little heavy perhaps, although raised with yeast, appeared on the table at Granite House. Every one munched away at it with a pleasure which may be easily understood.

In the meanwhile, the stranger had not reappeared. Several times Gideon Spilett and Herbert searched the forest in the neighborhood of Granite House, without meeting or finding any trace of him. They became seriously uneasy at this prolonged absence. Certainly, the former savage of Tabor island could not be perplexed how to live in the forest, abounding in game, but was it not to be feared that he had resumed his habits, and that this freedom would revive in him his wild instincts? However, Harding, by a sort of presentiment, doubtless, always persisted in saying that the fugitive would return.

“Yes, he will return!” he repeated with a confidence which his companions could not share. “When this unfortunate man was on Tabor Island, he knew himself to be alone! Here, he knows that fellow-men are awaiting him! Since he has partially spoken of his past life, the poor penitent will return to tell the whole, and from that day he will belong to us!”

The event justified Cyrus Harding’s predictions. On the 3rd of December, Herbert had left the plateau to go and fish on the southern bank of the lake. He was unarmed, and till then had never taken any precautions for defense, as dangerous animals had not shown themselves on that part of the island.

Meanwhile, Pencroft and Neb were working in the poultry-yard, while Harding and the reporter were occupied at the Chimneys in making soda, the store of soap being exhausted.

Suddenly cries resounded, —

“Help! help!”

Cyrus Harding and the reporter, being at too great a distance, had not been able to hear the shouts. Pencroft and Neb, leaving the poultry-yard in all haste, rushed towards the lake.

But before then, the stranger, whose presence at this place no one had suspected, crossed Creek Glycerine, which separated the plateau from the forest, and bounded up the opposite bank.

Herbert was there face to face with a fierce jaguar, similar to the one which had been killed on Reptile End. Suddenly surprised, he was standing with his back against a tree, while the animal gathering itself together was about to spring.

But the stranger, with no other weapon than a knife, rushed on the formidable animal, who turned to meet this new adversary.

The struggle was short. The stranger possessed immense strength and activity. He seized the jaguar’s throat with one powerful hand, holding it as in a vise, without heeding the beast’s claws which tore his flesh, and with the other he plunged his knife into its heart.

The jaguar fell. The stranger kicked away the body, and was about to fly at the moment when the settlers arrived on the field of battle, but Herbert, clinging to him, cried, —

“No, no! you shall not go!”

Harding advanced towards the stranger, who frowned when he saw him approaching. The blood flowed from his shoulder under his torn shirt, but he took no notice of it.

“My friend,” said Cyrus Harding, “we have just contracted a debt of gratitude to you. To save our boy you have risked your life!”

“My life!” murmured the stranger. “What is that worth? Less than nothing!”

“You are wounded?”

“It is no matter.”

“Will you give me your hand?”

And as Herbert endeavored to seize the hand which had just saved him, the stranger folded his arms, his chest heaved, his look darkened, and he appeared to wish to escape, but making a violent effort over himself, and in an abrupt tone, —

“Who are you?” he asked, “and what do you claim to be to me?”

It was the colonists’ history which he thus demanded, and for the first time. Perhaps this history recounted, he would tell his own.

In a few words Harding related all that had happened since their departure from Richmond; how they had managed, and what resources they now had at their disposal.

The stranger listened with extreme attention.

Then the engineer told who they all were, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Pencroft, Neb, himself, and, he added, that the greatest happiness they had felt since their arrival in Lincoln Island was on the return of the vessel from Tabor Island, when they had been able to include among them a new companion.

At these words the stranger’s face flushed, his head sunk on his breast, and confusion was depicted on his countenance.

“And now that you know us,” added Cyrus Harding, “will you give us your hand?”

“No,” replied the stranger in a hoarse voice; “no! You are honest men! And I — ”

CHAPTER 17

These last words justified the colonists’ presentiment. There had been some mournful past, perhaps expiated in the sight of men, but from which his conscience had not yet absolved him. At any rate the guilty man felt remorse, he repented, and his new friends would have cordially pressed the hand which they sought; but he did not feel himself worthy to extend it to honest men! However, after the scene with the jaguar, he did not return to the forest, and from that day did not go beyond the enclosure of Granite House.

What was the mystery of his life? Would the stranger one day speak of it? Time alone could show. At any rate, it was agreed that his secret should never be asked from him, and that they would live with him as if they suspected nothing.

For some days their life continued as before. Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett worked together, sometimes chemists, sometimes experimentalists. The reporter never left the engineer except to hunt with Herbert, for it would not have been prudent to allow the lad to ramble alone in the forest; and it was very necessary to be on their guard. As to Neb and Pencroft, one day at the stables and poultry-yard, another at the corral, without reckoning work in Granite House, they were never in want of employment.

The stranger worked alone, and he had resumed his usual life, never appearing at meals, sleeping under the trees in the plateau, never mingling with his companions. It really seemed as if the society of those who had saved him was insupportable to him!

“But then,” observed Pencroft, “why did he entreat the help of his fellow-creatures? Why did he throw that paper into the sea?”

“He will tell us why,” invariably replied Cyrus Harding.

“When?”

“Perhaps sooner than you think, Pencroft.”

And, indeed, the day of confession was near.

On the 10th of December, a week after his return to Granite House, Harding saw the stranger approaching, who, in a calm voice and humble tone, said to him: “Sir, I have a request to make of you.”

“Speak,” answered the engineer, “but first let me ask you a question.”

At these words the stranger reddened, and was on the point of withdrawing. Cyrus Harding understood what was passing in the mind of the guilty man, who doubtless feared that the engineer would interrogate him on his past life.

Harding held him back.

“Comrade,” said he, “we are not only your companions but your friends. I wish you to believe that, and now I will listen to you.”

The stranger pressed his hand over his eyes. He was seized with a sort of trembling, and remained a few moments without being able to articulate a word.

“Sir,” said he at last, “I have come to beg you to grant me a favor.”

“What is it?”

“You have, four or five miles from here, a corral for your domesticated animals. These animals need to be taken care of. Will you allow me to live there with them?”

Cyrus Harding gazed at the unfortunate man for a few moments with a feeling of deep commiseration; then, —

“My friend,” said he, “the corral has only stables hardly fit for animals.”

“It will be good enough for me, sir.”

“My friend,” answered Harding, “we will not constrain you in anything. You wish to live at the corral, so be it. You will, however, be always welcome at Granite House. But since you wish to live at the corral we will make the necessary arrangements for your being comfortably established there.”

“Never mind that, I shall do very well.”

“My friend,” answered Harding, who always intentionally made use of this cordial appellation, “you must let us judge what it will be best to do in this respect.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied the stranger as he withdrew.

The engineer then made known to his companions the proposal which had been made to him, and it was agreed that they should build a wooden house at the corral, which they would make as comfortable as possible.

That very day the colonists repaired to the corral with the necessary tools, and a week had not passed before the house was ready to receive its tenant. It was built about twenty feet from the sheds, and from there it was easy to overlook the flock of sheep, which then numbered more than eighty. Some furniture, a bed, table, bench, cupboard, and chest were manufactured, and a gun, ammunition, and tools were carried to the corral.

The stranger, however, had seen nothing of his new dwelling, and he had allowed the settlers to work there without him, while he occupied himself on the plateau, wishing, doubtless, to put the finishing stroke to his work. Indeed, thanks to him, all the ground was dug up and ready to be sowed when the time came.

It was on the 20th of December that all the arrangements at the corral were completed. The engineer announced to the stranger that his dwelling was ready to receive him, and the latter replied that he would go and sleep there that very evening.

On this evening the colonists were gathered in the diningroom of Granite House. It was then eight o'clock, the hour at which their companion was to leave them. Not wishing to trouble him by their presence, and thus imposing on him the necessity of saying farewells which might perhaps be painful to him, they had left him alone and ascended to Granite House.

Now, they had been talking in the room for a few minutes, when a light knock was heard at the door. Almost immediately the stranger entered, and without any preamble, —

"Gentlemen," said he, "before I leave you, it is right that you should know my history. I will tell it you."

These simple words profoundly impressed Cyrus Harding and his companions. The engineer rose.

“We ask you nothing, my friend,” said he; “it is your right to be silent.”

“It is my duty to speak.”

“Sit down, then.”

“No, I will stand.”

“We are ready to hear you,” replied Harding.

The stranger remained standing in a corner of the room, a little in the shade. He was bareheaded, his arms folded across his chest, and it was in this posture that in a hoarse voice, speaking like some one who obliges himself to speak, he gave the following recital, which his auditors did not once interrupt: —

“On the 20th of December, 1854, a steam-yacht, belonging to a Scotch nobleman, Lord Glenarvan, anchored off Cape Bernouilli, on the western coast of Australia, in the thirty-seventh parallel. On board this yacht were Lord Glenarvan and his wife, a major in the English army, a French geographer, a young girl, and a young boy. These two last were the children of Captain Grant, whose ship, the ‘Britannia,’ had been lost, crew and cargo, a year before. The ‘Duncan’ was commanded by Captain John Mangles, and manned by a crew of fifteen men.

“This is the reason the yacht at this time lay off the coast of Australia. Six months before, a bottle, enclosing a document written in English, German, and French, had been found in the Irish Sea, and picked up by the ‘Duncan.’ This document stated in substance that there still existed three survivors from the wreck of the ‘Britannia,’ that these survivors were Captain Grant and two of his men, and that they had found refuge on some land, of which the document gave the latitude, but of which the longitude, effaced by the sea, was no longer legible.

“This latitude was 37deg 11’ south; therefore, the longitude being unknown, if they followed the thirty-seventh parallel over continents and seas, they would be certain to reach the spot inhabited by Captain Grant and his two companions. The English Admiralty having hesitated to undertake this search, Lord Glenarvan resolved to attempt everything to find the captain. He communicated with Mary and Robert Grant, who joined him. The ‘Duncan’ yacht was equipped for the distant voyage, in which the nobleman’s family and the captain’s children wished to take part, and the ‘Duncan,’ leaving Glasgow, proceeded towards the Atlantic, passed through the Straits of Magellan, and ascended the Pacific as far as Patagonia, where, according to a previous interpretation of the document, they supposed that Captain Grant was a prisoner among the Indians.

“The ‘Duncan’ disembarked her passengers on the western coast of Patagonia, and sailed to pick them up again on the eastern coast at Cape Corrientes. Lord Glenarvan traversed Patagonia, following the thirty-seventh parallel, and having found no trace of the captain, he re-embarked on the 13th of November, so as to pursue his search through the Ocean.

“After having unsuccessfully visited the islands of Tristan d’Acunha and Amsterdam, situated in her course, the ‘Duncan,’ as I have said, arrived at Cape Bernouilli, on the Australian coast, on the 20th of December, 1854.

“It was Lord Glenarvan’s intention to traverse Australia as he had traversed America, and he disembarked. A few miles from the coast was established a farm, belonging to an Irishman, who offered hospitality to the travelers. Lord Glenarvan made known to the Irishman the cause which had brought him to these parts, and asked if he knew whether a three-masted English vessel, the ‘Britannia,’ had been lost less than two years before on the west coast of Australia.

“The Irishman had never heard of this wreck, but, to the great surprise of the bystanders, one of his servants came forward and said, —

“‘My lord, praise and thank God! If Captain Grant is still living, he is living on the Australian shores.’

“‘Who are you?’ asked Lord Glenarvan.

“‘A Scotchman like yourself, my lord,’ replied the man; ‘I am one of Captain Grant’s crew — one of the castaways of the “Britannia.’”

“This man was called Ayrton. He was, in fact, the boatswain’s mate of the ‘Britannia,’ as his papers showed. But, separated from Captain Grant at the moment when the ship struck upon the rocks, he had till then believed that the captain with all his crew had perished, and that he, Ayrton, was the sole survivor of the ‘Britannia.’

“‘Only,’ he added, ‘it was not on the west coast, but on the east coast of Australia that the vessel was lost, and if Captain Grant is still living, as his document indicates, he is a prisoner among the natives, and it is on the other coast that he must be looked for.’

“This man spoke in a frank voice and with a confident look; his words could not be doubted. The irishman, in whose service he had been for more than a year, answered for his trustworthiness. Lord Glenarvan, therefore, believed in the fidelity of this man and, by his advice, resolved to cross Australia, following the thirty-seventh parallel. Lord Glenarvan, his wife, the two children, the major, the Frenchman, Captain Mangles, and a few sailors composed the little band under the command of Ayrton, while the ‘Duncan,’ under charge of the mate, Tom Austin, proceeded to Melbourne, there to await Lord Glenarvan’s instructions.

“They set out on the 23rd of December, 1854.

“It is time to say that Ayrton was a traitor. He was, indeed, the boatswain’s mate of the ‘Britannia,’ but, after some dispute with his captain, he endeavored to incite the crew to mutiny and seize the ship, and Captain Grant had landed him, on the 8th of April, 1852, on the west coast of Australia, and then sailed, leaving him there, as was only just.

“Therefore this wretched man knew nothing of the wreck of the ‘Britannia’; he had just heard of it from Glenarvan’s account. Since his abandonment, he had become, under the name of Ben Joyce, the leader of the escaped convicts; and if he boldly maintained that the wreck had taken place on the east coast, and led Lord Glenarvan to proceed in that direction, it was that he hoped to separate him from his ship, seize the ‘Duncan,’ and make the yacht a pirate in the Pacific.”

Here the stranger stopped for a moment. His voice trembled, but he continued, —

“The expedition set out and proceeded across Australia. It was inevitably unfortunate, since Ayrton, or Ben Joyce, as he may be called, guided it, sometimes preceded, sometimes followed by his band of convicts, who had been told what they had to do.

“Meanwhile, the ‘Duncan’ had been sent to Melbourne for repairs. It was necessary, then, to get Lord Glenarvan to order her to leave Melbourne and go to the east coast of Australia, where it would be easy to seize her. After having led the expedition near enough to the coast, in the midst of vast forests with no resources, Ayrton obtained a letter, which he was charged to carry to the mate of the ‘Duncan’ — a letter which ordered the yacht to repair immediately to the east coast, to Twofold Bay, that is to say a few days’ journey from the place where the expedition had stopped. It was there that Ayrton had agreed to meet his accomplices, and two days after gaining possession of the letter, he arrived at Melbourne.

“So far the villain had succeeded in his wicked design. He would be able to take the ‘Duncan’ into Twofold Bay, where it would be easy for the convicts to seize her, and her crew massacred, Ben Joyce would become master of the seas. But it pleased God to prevent the accomplishment of these terrible projects.

“Ayrton, arrived at Melbourne, delivered the letter to the mate, Tom Austin, who read it and immediately set sail, but judge of Ayrton’s rage and disappointment, when the next day he found that the mate was taking the vessel, not to the east coast of Australia, to Twofold Bay, but to the east coast of New Zealand. He wished to stop him, but Austin showed him the letter!... And indeed, by a providential error of the French geographer, who had written the letter, the east coast of New Zealand was mentioned as the place of destination.

“All Ayrton’s plans were frustrated! He became outrageous. They put him in irons. He was then taken to the coast of New Zealand, not knowing what would become of his accomplices, or what would become of Lord Glenarvan.

“The ‘Duncan’ cruised about on this coast until the 3rd of March. On that day Ayrton heard the report of guns. The guns on the ‘Duncan’ were being fired, and soon Lord Glenarvan and his companions came on board.

“This is what had happened.

“After a thousand hardships, a thousand dangers, Lord Glenarvan had accomplished his journey, and arrived on the east coast of Australia, at Twofold Bay. ‘No “Duncan!’ He telegraphed to Melbourne. They answered, “Duncan” sailed on the 18th instant. Destination unknown.’

“Lord Glenarvan could only arrive at one conclusion; that his honest yacht had fallen into the hands of Ben Joyce, and had become a pirate vessel!

“However, Lord Glenarvan would not give up. He was a bold and generous man. He embarked in a merchant vessel, sailed to the west coast of New Zealand, traversed it along the thirty-seventh parallel, without finding any trace of Captain Grant; but on the other side, to his great surprise, and by the will of Heaven, he found the ‘Duncan,’ under command of the mate, who had been waiting for him for five weeks!

“This was on the 3rd of March, 1855. Lord Glenarvan was now on board the ‘Duncan,’ but Ayrton was there also. He appeared before the nobleman, who wished to extract from him all that the villain knew about Captain Grant. Ayrton refused to speak. Lord Glenarvan then told him, that at the first port they put into, he would be delivered up to the English authorities. Ayrton remained mute.

“The ‘Duncan’ continued her voyage along the thirty-seventh parallel. In the meanwhile, Lady Glenarvan undertook to vanquish the resistance of the ruffian.

“At last, her influence prevailed, and Ayrton, in exchange for what he could tell, proposed that Lord Glenarvan should leave him on some island in the Pacific, instead of giving him up to the English authorities. Lord Glenarvan, resolving to do anything to obtain information about Captain Grant, consented.

“Ayrton then related all his life, and it was certain that he knew nothing from the day on which Captain Grant had landed him on the Australian coast.

“Nevertheless, Lord Glenarvan kept the promise which he had given. The ‘Duncan’ continued her voyage and arrived at Tabor Island. It was there that Ayrton was to be landed, and it was there also that, by a veritable miracle, they found Captain Grant and two men, exactly on the thirty-seventh parallel.

“The convict, then, went to take their place on this desert islet, and at the moment he left the yacht these words were pronounced by Lord Glenarvan:—

“‘Here, Ayrton, you will be far from any land, and without any possible communication with your fellow-creatures. You cannot escape from this islet on which the ‘Duncan’ leaves you. You will be alone, under the eye of a God who reads the depths of the heart, but you will be neither lost nor forgotten, as was Captain Grant. Unworthy as you are to be remembered by men, men will remember you. I know where you are Ayrton, and I know where to find you. I will never forget it!

“And the ‘Duncan,’ making sail, soon disappeared. This was 18th of March, 1855.

> (The events which have just been briefly related are taken
>
> from a work which some of our readers have no doubt read,

> and which is entitled, “Captain Grant’s children.” They will remark on this occasion, as well as later, some discrepancy in the dates; but later again, they will understand why the real dates were not at first given.)

“Ayrton was alone, but he had no want of either ammunition, weapons, tools, or seeds.

“At his, the convict’s disposal, was the house built by honest Captain Grant. He had only to live and expiate in solitude the crimes which he had committed.

“Gentlemen, he repented, he was ashamed of his crimes and was very miserable! He said to himself, that if men came some day to take him from that islet, he must be worthy to return among them! How he suffered, that wretched man! How he labored to recover himself by work! How he prayed to be reformed by prayer! For two years, three years, this went on, but Ayrton, humbled by solitude, always looking for some ship to appear on the horizon, asking himself if the time of expiation would soon be complete, suffered as none other suffered! Oh! how dreadful was this solitude, to a heart tormented by remorse!

“But doubtless Heaven had not sufficiently punished this unhappy man, for he felt that he was gradually becoming a savage! He felt that brutishness was gradually gaining on him!

“He could not say if it was after two or three years of solitude, but at last he became the miserable creature you found!

"I have no need to tell you, gentlemen, that Ayrton, Ben Joyce, and I, are the same."

Cyrus Harding and his companions rose at the end of this account. It is impossible to say how much they were moved! What misery, grief, and despair lay revealed before them!

"Ayrton," said Harding, rising, "you have been a great criminal, but Heaven must certainly think that you have expiated your crimes! That has been proved by your having been brought again among your fellow-creatures. Ayrton, you are forgiven! And now you will be our companion?"

Ayrton drew back.

"Here is my hand!" said the engineer.

Ayrton grasped the hand which Harding extended to him, and great tears fell from his eyes.

"Will you live with us?" asked Cyrus Harding.

"Captain Harding, leave me some time longer," replied Ayrton, "leave me alone in the hut in the corral!"

"As you like, Ayrton," answered Cyrus Harding. Ayrton was going to withdraw, when the engineer addressed one more question to him: —

"One word more, my friend. Since it was your intention to live alone, why did you throw into the sea the document which put us on your track?"

"A document?" repeated Ayrton, who did not appear to know what he meant.

“Yes, the document which we found enclosed in a bottle, giving us the exact position of Tabor Island!”

Ayrton passed his hand over his brow, then after having thought, “I never threw any document into the sea!” he answered.

“Never?” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Never!”

And Ayrton, bowing, reached the door and departed.

CHAPTER 18

“Poor man!” said Herbert, who had rushed to the door, but returned, having seen Ayrton slide down the rope on the lift and disappear in the darkness.

“He will come back,” said Cyrus Harding.

“Come, now, captain,” exclaimed Pencroft, “what does that mean? What! wasn’t it Ayrton who threw that bottle into the sea? Who was it then?”

Certainly, if ever a question was necessary to be made, it was that one!

“It was he,” answered Neb, “only the unhappy man was half-mad.”

“Yes!” said Herbert, “and he was no longer conscious of what he was doing.”

“It can only be explained in that way, my friends,” replied Harding quickly, “and I understand now how Ayrton was able to point out exactly the situation of Tabor Island, since the events which had preceded his being left on the island had made it known to him.”

“However,” observed Pencroft, “if he was not yet a brute when he wrote that document, and if he threw it into the sea seven or eight years ago, how is it that the paper has not been injured by damp?”

“That proves,” answered Cyrus Harding, “that Ayrton was deprived of intelligence at a more recent time than he thinks.”

“Of course it must be so,” replied Pencroft, “without that the fact would be unaccountable.”

“Unaccountable indeed,” answered the engineer, who did not appear desirous to prolong the conversation.

“But has Ayrton told the truth?” asked the sailor.

“Yes,” replied the reporter. “The story which he has told is true in every point. I remember quite well the account in the newspapers of the yacht expedition undertaken by Lord Glenarvan, and its result.”

“Ayrton has told the truth,” added Harding. “Do not doubt it, Pencroft, for it was painful to him. People tell the truth when they accuse themselves like that!”

The next day — the 21st of December — the colonists descended to the beach, and having climbed the plateau they found nothing of Ayrton. He had reached his house in the corral during the night and the settlers judged it best not to agitate him by their presence. Time would doubtless perform what sympathy had been unable to accomplish.

Herbert, Pencroft, and Neb resumed their ordinary occupations. On this day the same work brought Harding and the reporter to the workshop at the Chimneys.

“Do you know, my dear Cyrus,” said Gideon Spilett, “that the explanation you gave yesterday on the subject of the bottle has not satisfied me at all! How can it be supposed that the unfortunate man was able to write that document and throw the bottle into the sea without having the slightest recollection of it?”

“Nor was it he who threw it in, my dear Spilett.”

“You think then — ”

“I think nothing, I know nothing!” interrupted Cyrus Harding. “I am content to rank this incident among those which I have not been able to explain to this day!”

“Indeed, Cyrus,” said Spilett, “these things are incredible! Your rescue, the case stranded on the sand, Top’s adventure, and lastly this bottle... Shall we never have the answer to these enigmas?”

“Yes!” replied the engineer quickly, “yes, even if I have to penetrate into the bowels of this island!”

“Chance will perhaps give us the key to this mystery!”

“Chance! Spilett! I do not believe in chance, any more than I believe in mysteries in this world. There is a reason for everything unaccountable which has happened here, and that reason I shall discover. But in the meantime we must work and observe.”

The month of January arrived. The year 1867 commenced. The summer occupations were assiduously continued. During the days which followed, Herbert and Spilett having gone in the direction of the corral, ascertained that Ayrton had taken possession of the habitation which had been prepared for him. He busied himself with the numerous flock confided to his care, and spared his companions the trouble of coming every two or three days to visit the corral. Nevertheless, in order not to leave Ayrton in solitude for too long a time, the settlers often paid him a visit.

It was not unimportant either, in consequence of some suspicions entertained by the engineer and Gideon Spilett, that this part of the island should be subject to a surveillance of some sort, and that Ayrton, if any incident occurred unexpectedly, should not neglect to inform the inhabitants of Granite House of it.

Nevertheless it might happen that something would occur which it would be necessary to bring rapidly to the engineer's knowledge. Independently of facts bearing on the mystery of Lincoln Island, many others might happen, which would call for the prompt interference of the colonists, — such as the sighting of a vessel, a wreck on the western coast, the possible arrival of pirates, etc.

Therefore Cyrus Harding resolved to put the corral in instantaneous communication with Granite House.

It was on the 10th of January that he made known his project to his companions.

"Why! how are you going to manage that, captain?" asked Pencroft. "Do you by chance happen to think of establishing a telegraph?"

"Exactly so," answered the engineer.

"Electric?" cried Herbert.

"Electric," replied Cyrus Harding. "We have all the necessary materials for making a battery, and the most difficult thing will be to stretch the wires, but by means of a drawplate I think we shall manage it."

"Well, after that," returned the sailor, "I shall never despair of seeing ourselves some day rolling along on a railway!"

They then set to work, beginning with the most difficult thing, for, if they failed in that, it would be useless to manufacture the battery and other accessories.

The iron of Lincoln Island, as has been said, was of excellent quality, and consequently very fit for being drawn out. Harding commenced by manufacturing a drawplate, that is to say, a plate of steel, pierced with conical holes of different sizes, which would successively bring the wire to the wished-for tenacity. This piece of steel, after having been tempered, was fixed in as firm a way as possible in a solid framework planted in the ground, only a few feet from the great fall, the motive power of which the engineer intended to utilize. In fact as the fulling-mill was there, although not then in use, its beam moved with extreme power would serve to stretch out the wire by rolling it round itself. It was a delicate operation, and required much care. The iron, prepared previously in long thin rods, the ends of which were sharpened with the file, having been introduced into the largest hole of the drawplate, was drawn out by the beam which wound it round itself, to a length of twenty-five or thirty feet, then unrolled, and the same operation was performed successively through the holes of a less size. Finally, the engineer obtained wires from forty to fifty feet long, which could be easily fastened together and stretched over the distance of five miles, which separated the corral from the bounds of Granite House.

It did not take more than a few days to perform this work, and indeed as soon as the machine had been commenced, Cyrus Harding left his companions to follow the trade of wiredrawers, and occupied himself with manufacturing his battery.

It was necessary to obtain a battery with a constant current. It is known that the elements of modern batteries are generally composed of retort coal, zinc, and copper. Copper was absolutely wanting to the engineer, who, notwithstanding all his researches, had never been able to find any trace of it in Lincoln Island, and was therefore obliged to do without it. Retort coal, that is to say, the hard graphite which is found in the retorts of gas manufactories, after the coal has been dehydrogenized, could have been obtained, but it would have been necessary to establish a special apparatus, involving great labor. As to zinc, it may be remembered that the case found at Flotsam Point was lined with this metal, which could not be better utilized than for this purpose.

Cyrus Harding, after mature consideration, decided to manufacture a very simple battery, resembling as nearly as possible that invented by Becquerel in 1820, and in which zinc only is employed. The other substances, azotic acid and potash, were all at his disposal.

The way in which the battery was composed was as follows, and the results were to be attained by the reaction of acid and potash on each other. A number of glass bottles were made and filled with azotic acid. The engineer corked them by means of a stopper through which passed a glass tube, bored at its lower extremity, and intended to be plunged into the acid by means of a clay stopper secured by a rag. Into this tube, through its upper extremity, he poured a solution of potash, previously obtained by burning and reducing to ashes various plants, and in this way the acid and potash could act on each other through the clay.

Cyrus Harding then took two slips of zinc, one of which was plunged into azotic acid, the other into a solution of potash. A current was immediately produced, which was transmitted from the slip of zinc in the bottle to that in the tube, and the two slips having been connected by a metallic wire the slip in the tube became the positive pole, and that in the bottle the negative pole of the apparatus. Each bottle, therefore, produced as many currents as united would be sufficient to produce all the phenomena of the electric telegraph. Such was the ingenious and very simple apparatus constructed by Cyrus Harding, an apparatus which would allow them to establish a telegraphic communication between Granite House and the corral.

On the 6th of February was commenced the planting along the road to the corral, of posts furnished with glass insulators, and intended to support the wire. A few days after, the wire was extended, ready to produce the electric current at a rate of twenty thousand miles a second.

Two batteries had been manufactured, one for Granite House, the other for the corral; for if it was necessary the corral should be able to communicate with Granite House it might also be useful that Granite House should be able to communicate with the corral.

As to the receiver and manipulator, they were very simple. At the two stations the wire was wound round a magnet, that is to say, round a piece of soft iron surrounded with a wire. The communication was thus established between the two poles; the current, starting from the positive pole, traversed the wire, passed through the magnet which was temporarily magnetized, and returned through the earth to the negative pole. If the current was interrupted, the magnet immediately became unmagnetized. It was sufficient to place a plate of soft iron before the magnet, which, attracted during the passage of the current, would fall back when the current was interrupted. This movement of the plate thus obtained, Harding could easily fasten to it a needle arranged on a dial, bearing the letters of the alphabet, and in this way communicate from one station to the other.

All was completely arranged by the 12th of February. On this day, Harding, having sent the current through the wire, asked if all was going on well at the corral, and received in a few moments a satisfactory reply from Ayrton.

Pencroft was wild with joy, and every morning and evening he sent a telegram to the corral, which always received an answer.

This mode of communication presented two very real advantages: firstly, because it enabled them to ascertain that Ayrton was at the corral; and secondly, that he was thus not left completely isolated. Besides, Cyrus Harding never allowed a week to pass without going to see him, and Ayrton came from time to time to Granite House, where he always found a cordial welcome.

The fine season passed away in the midst of the usual work. The resources of the colony, particularly in vegetables and corn, increased from day to day, and the plants brought from Tabor Island had succeeded perfectly.

The plateau of Prospect Heights presented an encouraging aspect. The fourth harvest had been admirable and it may be supposed that no one thought of counting whether the four hundred thousand millions of grains duly appeared in the crop. However, Pencroft had thought of doing so, but Cyrus Harding having told him that even if he managed to count three hundred grains a minute, or nine thousand an hour, it would take him nearly five thousand five-hundred years to finish his task, the honest sailor considered it best to give up the idea.

The weather was splendid, the temperature very warm in the day time, but in the evening the sea-breezes tempered the heat of the atmosphere and procured cool nights for the inhabitants of Granite House. There were, however, a few storms, which, although they were not of long duration, swept over Lincoln Island with extraordinary fury. The lightning blazed and the thunder continued to roll for some hours.

At this period the little colony was extremely prosperous.

The tenants of the poultry-yard swarmed, and they lived on the surplus, but it became necessary to reduce the population to a more moderate number. The pigs had already produced young, and it may be understood that their care for these animals absorbed a great part of Neb and Pencroft's time. The onagers, who had two pretty colts, were most often mounted by Gideon Spilett and Herbert, who had become an excellent rider under the reporter's instruction, and they also harnessed them to the cart either for carrying wood and coal to Granite House, or different mineral productions required by the engineer.

Several expeditions were made about this time into the depths of the Far West Forests. The explorers could venture there without having anything to fear from the heat, for the sun's rays scarcely penetrated through the thick foliage spreading above their heads. They thus visited all the left bank of the Mercy, along which ran the road from the corral to the mouth of Falls River.

But in these excursions the settlers took care to be well armed, for they met with savage wild boars, with which they often had a tussle. They also, during this season, made fierce war against the jaguars. Gideon Spilett had vowed a special hatred against them, and his pupil Herbert seconded him well. Armed as they were, they no longer feared to meet one of those beasts. Herbert's courage was superb, and the reporter's sang-froid astonishing. Already twenty magnificent skins ornamented the dining-room of Granite House, and if this continued, the jaguar race would soon be extinct in the island, the object aimed at by the hunters.

The engineer sometimes took part in the expeditions made to the unknown parts of the island, which he surveyed with great attention. It was for other traces than those of animals that he searched the thickets of the vast forest, but nothing suspicious ever appeared. Neither Top nor Jup, who accompanied him, ever betrayed by their behavior that there was anything strange there, and yet more than once again the dog barked at the mouth of the well, which the engineer had before explored without result.

At this time Gideon Spilett, aided by Herbert, took several views of the most picturesque parts of the island, by means of the photographic apparatus found in the cases, and of which they had not as yet made any use.

This apparatus, provided with a powerful object-glass, was very complete. Substances necessary for the photographic reproduction, collodion for preparing the glass plate, nitrate of silver to render it sensitive, hyposulfate of soda to fix the prints obtained, chloride of ammonium in which to soak the paper destined to give the positive proof, acetate of soda and chloride of gold in which to immerse the paper, nothing was wanting. Even the papers were there, all prepared, and before laying in the printing-frame upon the negatives, it was sufficient to soak them for a few minutes in the solution of nitrate of silver.

The reporter and his assistant became in a short time very skilful operators, and they obtained fine views of the country, such as the island, taken from Prospect Heights with Mount Franklin in the distance, the mouth of the Mercy, so picturesquely framed in high rocks, the glade and the corral, with the spurs of the mountain in the background, the curious development of Claw Cape, Flotsam Point, etc.

Nor did the photographers forget to take the portraits of all the inhabitants of the island, leaving out no one.

“It multiplies us,” said Pencroft.

And the sailor was enchanted to see his own countenance, faithfully reproduced, ornamenting the walls of Granite House, and he stopped as willingly before this exhibition as he would have done before the richest shop-windows in Broadway.

But it must be acknowledged that the most successful portrait was incontestably that of Master Jup. Master Jup had sat with a gravity not to be described, and his portrait was lifelike!

“He looks as if he was just going to grin!” exclaimed Pencroft.

And if Master Jup had not been satisfied, he would have been very difficult to please; but he was quite contented and contemplated his own countenance with a sentimental air which expressed some small amount of conceit.

The summer heat ended with the month of March. The weather was sometimes rainy, but still warm. The month of March, which corresponds to the September of northern latitudes, was not so fine as might have been hoped. Perhaps it announced an early and rigorous winter.

It might have been supposed one morning — the 21 st — that the first snow had already made its appearance. In fact Herbert looking early from one of the windows of Granite House, exclaimed, —

“Hallo! the islet is covered with snow!”

“Snow at this time?” answered the reporter, joining the boy.

Their companions were soon beside them, but could only ascertain one thing, that not only the islet but all the beach below Granite House was covered with one uniform sheet of white.

“It must be snow!” said Pencroft.

“Or rather it’s very like it!” replied Neb.

“But the thermometer marks fifty-eight degrees!” observed Gideon Spilett.

Cyrus Harding gazed at the sheet of white without saying anything, for he really did not know how to explain this phenomenon, at this time of year and in such a temperature.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Pencroft, “all our plants will be frozen!”

And the sailor was about to descend, when he was preceded by the nimble Jup, who slid down to the sand.

But the orang had not touched the ground, when the snowy sheet arose and dispersed in the air in such innumerable flakes that the light of the sun was obscured for some minutes.

“Birds!” cried Herbert.

They were indeed swarms of sea-birds, with dazzling white plumage. They had perched by thousands on the islet and on the shore, and they disappeared in the distance, leaving the colonists amazed as if they had been present at some transformation scene, in which summer succeeded winter at the touch of a fairy’s wand. Unfortunately the change had been so sudden, that neither the reporter nor the lad had been able to bring down one of these birds, of which they could not recognize the species.

A few days after came the 26th of March, the day on which, two years before, the castaways from the air had been thrown upon Lincoln Island.

CHAPTER 19

Two years already! and for two years the colonists had had no communication with their fellow-creatures! They were without news from the civilized world, lost on this island, as completely as if they had been on the most minute star of the celestial hemisphere!

What was now happening in their country? The picture of their native land was always before their eyes, the land torn by civil war at the time they left it, and which the Southern rebellion was perhaps still staining with blood! It was a great sorrow to them, and they often talked together of these things, without ever doubting however that the cause of the North must triumph, for the honor of the American Confederation.

During these two years not a vessel had passed in sight of the island; or, at least, not a sail had been seen. It was evident that Lincoln Island was out of the usual track, and also that it was unknown, — as was besides proved by the maps, — for though there was no port, vessels might have visited it for the purpose of renewing their store of water. But the surrounding ocean was deserted as far as the eye could reach, and the colonists must rely on themselves for regaining their native land.

However, one chance of rescue existed, and this chance was discussed one day on the first week of April, when the colonists were gathered together in the dining-room of Granite House.

They had been talking of America, of their native country, which they had so little hope of ever seeing again.

“Decidedly we have only one way,” said Spilett, “one single way for leaving Lincoln Island, and that is, to build a vessel large enough to sail several hundred miles. It appears to me, that when one has built a boat it is just as easy to build a ship!”

“And in which we might go to the Pomoutous,” added Herbert, “just as easily as we went to Tabor Island.”

“I do not say no,” replied Pencroft, who had always the casting vote in maritime questions; “I do not say no, although it is not exactly the same thing to make a long as a short voyage! If our little craft had been caught in any heavy gale of wind during the voyage to Tabor Island, we should have known that land was at no great distance either way; but twelve hundred miles is a pretty long way, and the nearest land is at least that distance!”

“Would you not, in that case, Pencroft, attempt the adventure?” asked the reporter.

“I will attempt anything that is desired, Mr. Spilett,” answered the sailor, “and you know well that I am not a man to flinch!”

“Remember, besides, that we number another sailor amongst us now,” remarked Neb.

“Who is that?” asked Pencroft.

“Ayrton.”

“If he will consent to come,” said Pencroft.

“Nonsense!” returned the reporter; “do you think that if Lord Glenarvan’s yacht had appeared at Tabor Island, while he was still living there, Ayrton would have refused to depart?”

“You forget, my friends,” then said Cyrus Harding, “that Ayrton was not in possession of his reason during the last years of his stay there. But that is not the question. The point is to know if we may count among our chances of being rescued, the return of the Scotch vessel. Now, Lord Glenarvan promised Ayrton that he would return to take him off from Tabor Island when he considered that his crimes were expiated, and I believe that he will return.”

“Yes,” said the reporter, “and I will add that he will return soon, for it is twelve years since Ayrton was abandoned.”

“Well!” answered Pencroft, “I agree with you that the nobleman will return, and soon too. But where will he touch? At Tabor Island, and not at Lincoln Island.”

“That is the more certain,” replied Herbert, “as Lincoln Island is not even marked on the map.”

“Therefore, my friends,” said the engineer, “we ought to take the necessary precautions for making our presence and that of Ayrton on Lincoln Island known at Tabor Island.”

“Certainly,” answered the reporter, “and nothing is easier than to place in the hut, which was Captain Grant’s and Ayrton’s dwelling, a notice which Lord Glenarvan and his crew cannot help finding, giving the position of our island.”

“It is a pity,” remarked the sailor, “that we forgot to take that precaution on our first visit to Tabor Island.”

“And why should we have done it?” asked Herbert. “At that time we did not know Ayrton’s history; we did not know that any one was likely to come some day to fetch him, and when we did know his history, the season was too advanced to allow us to return then to Tabor Island.”

“Yes,” replied Harding, “it was too late, and we must put off the voyage until next spring.”

“But suppose the Scotch yacht comes before that,” said Pencroft.

“That is not probable,” replied the engineer, “for Lord Glenarvan would not choose the winter season to venture into these seas. Either he has already returned to Tabor Island, since Ayrton has been with us, that is to say, during the last five months and has left again; or he will not come till later, and it will be time enough in the first fine October days to go to Tabor Island, and leave a notice there.”

“We must allow,” said Neb, “that it will be very unfortunate if the ‘Duncan’ has returned to these parts only a few months ago!”

“I hope that it is not so,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and that Heaven has not deprived us of the best chance which remains to us.”

“I think,” observed the reporter, “that at any rate we shall know what we have to depend on when we have been to Tabor Island, for if the yacht has returned there, they will necessarily have left some traces of their visit.”

“That is evident,” answered the engineer. “So then, my friends, since we have this chance of returning to our country, we must wait patiently, and if it is taken from us we shall see what will be best to do.”

“At any rate,” remarked Pencroft, “it is well understood that if we do leave Lincoln Island, it will not be because we were uncomfortable there!”

“No, Pencroft,” replied the engineer, “it will be because we are far from all that a man holds dearest in the world, his family, his friends, his native land!”

Matters being thus decided, the building of a vessel large enough to sail either to the Archipelagoes in the north, or to New Zealand in the west, was no longer talked of, and they busied themselves in their accustomed occupations, with a view to wintering a third time in Granite House.

However, it was agreed that before the stormy weather came on, their little vessel should be employed in making a voyage round the island. A complete survey of the coast had not yet been made, and the colonists had but an imperfect idea of the shore to the west and north, from the mouth of Falls River to the Mandible Capes, as well as of the narrow bay between them, which opened like a shark’s jaws.

The plan of this excursion was proposed by Pencroft, and Cyrus Harding fully acquiesced in it, for he himself wished to see this part of his domain.

The weather was variable, but the barometer did not fluctuate by sudden movements, and they could therefore count on tolerable weather. However, during the first week of April, after a sudden barometrical fall, a renewed rise was marked by a heavy gale of wind, lasting five or six days; then the needle of the instrument remained stationary at a height of twenty-nine inches and nine-tenths, and the weather appeared propitious for an excursion.

The departure was fixed for the 16th of April, and the “Bonadventure,” anchored in Port Balloon, was provisioned for a voyage which might be of some duration.

Cyrus Harding informed Ayrton of the projected expedition, and proposed that he should take part in it, but Ayrton preferring to remain on shore, it was decided that he should come to Granite House during the absence of his companions. Master Jup was ordered to keep him company, and made no remonstrance.

On the morning of the 16th of April all the colonists, including Top, embarked. A fine breeze blew from the south-west, and the “Bonadventure” tacked on leaving Port Balloon so as to reach Reptile End. Of the ninety miles which the perimeter of the island measured, twenty included the south coast between the port and the promontory. The wind being right ahead it was necessary to hug the shore.

It took the whole day to reach the promontory, for the vessel on leaving port had only two hours of ebb tide and had therefore to make way for six hours against the flood. It was nightfall before the promontory was doubled.

The sailor then proposed to the engineer that they should continue sailing slowly with two reefs in the sail. But Harding preferred to anchor a few cable-lengths from the shore, so as to survey that part of the coast during the day. It was agreed also that as they were anxious for a minute exploration of the coast they should not sail during the night, but would always, when the weather permitted it, be at anchor near the shore.

The night was passed under the promontory, and the wind having fallen, nothing disturbed the silence. The passengers, with the exception of the sailor, scarcely slept as well on board the “Bonadventure” as they would have done in their rooms at Granite House, but they did sleep however. Pencroft set sail at break of day, and by going on the larboard tack they could keep close to the shore.

The colonists knew this beautiful wooded coast, since they had already explored it on foot, and yet it again excited their admiration. They coasted along as close in as possible, so as to notice everything, avoiding always the trunks of trees which floated here and there. Several times also they anchored, and Gideon Spilett took photographs of the superb scenery.

About noon the “Bonadventure” arrived at the mouth of Falls River. Beyond, on the left bank, a few scattered trees appeared, and three miles further even these dwindled into solitary groups among the western spurs of the mountain, whose arid ridge sloped down to the shore.

What a contrast between the northern and southern part of the coast! In proportion as one was woody and fertile so was the other rugged and barren! It might have been designated as one of those iron coasts, as they are called in some countries, and its wild confusion appeared to indicate that a sudden crystallization had been produced in the yet liquid basalt of some distant geological sea. These stupendous masses would have terrified the settlers if they had been cast at first on this part of the island! They had not been able to perceive the sinister aspect of this shore from the summit of Mount Franklin, for they overlooked it from too great a height, but viewed from the sea it presented a wild appearance which could not perhaps be equaled in any corner of the globe.

The “Bonadventure” sailed along this coast for the distance of half a mile. It was easy to see that it was composed of blocks of all sizes, from twenty to three hundred feet in height, and of all shapes, round like towers, prismatic like steeples, pyramidal like obelisks, conical like factory chimneys. An iceberg of the Polar seas could not have been more capricious in its terrible sublimity! Here, bridges were thrown from one rock to another; there, arches like those of a wave, into the depths of which the eye could not penetrate; in one place, large vaulted excavations presented a monumental aspect; in another, a crowd of columns, spires, and arches, such as no Gothic cathedral ever possessed. Every caprice of nature, still more varied than those of the imagination, appeared on this grand coast, which extended over a length of eight or nine miles.

Cyrus Harding and his companions gazed, with a feeling of surprise bordering on stupefaction. But, although they remained silent, Top, not being troubled with feelings of this sort, uttered barks which were repeated by the thousand echoes of the basaltic cliff. The engineer even observed that these barks had something strange in them, like those which the dog had uttered at the mouth of the well in Granite House.

“Let us go close in,” said he.

And the “Bonadventure” sailed as near as possible to the rocky shore. Perhaps some cave, which it would be advisable to explore, existed there? But Harding saw nothing, not a cavern, not a cleft which could serve as a retreat to any being whatever, for the foot of the cliff was washed by the surf. Soon Top’s barks ceased, and the vessel continued her course at a few cables-length from the coast.

In the northwest part of the island the shore became again flat and sandy. A few trees here and there rose above a low, marshy ground, which the colonists had already surveyed, and in violent contrast to the other desert shore, life was again manifested by the presence of myriads of water-fowl. That evening the “Bonadventure” anchored in a small bay to the north of the island, near the land, such was the depth of water there. The night passed quietly, for the breeze died away with the last light of day, and only rose again with the first streaks of dawn.

As it was easy to land, the usual hunters of the colony, that is to say, Herbert and Gideon Spilett, went for a ramble of two hours or so, and returned with several strings of wild duck and snipe. Top had done wonders, and not a bird had been lost, thanks to his zeal and cleverness.

At eight o'clock in the morning the "Bonadventure" set sail, and ran rapidly towards North Mandible Cape, for the wind was right astern and freshening rapidly.

"However," observed Pencroft, "I should not be surprised if a gale came up from the west. Yesterday the sun set in a very red-looking horizon, and now, this morning, those mares-tails don't forbode anything good."

These mares-tails are cirrus clouds, scattered in the zenith, their height from the sea being less than five thousand feet. They look like light pieces of cotton wool, and their presence usually announces some sudden change in the weather.

"Well," said Harding, "let us carry as much sail as possible, and run for shelter into Shark Gulf. I think that the 'Bonadventure' will be safe there."

"Perfectly," replied Pencroft, "and besides, the north coast is merely sand, very uninteresting to look at."

"I shall not be sorry," resumed the engineer, "to pass not only to-night but to-morrow in that bay, which is worth being carefully explored."

"I think that we shall be obliged to do so, whether we like it or not," answered Pencroft, "for the sky looks very threatening towards the west.

Dirty weather is coming on!”

“At any rate we have a favorable wind for reaching Cape Mandible,” observed the reporter.

“A very fine wind,” replied the sailor; “but we must tack to enter the gulf, and I should like to see my way clear in these unknown quarters.”

“Quarters which appear to be filled with rocks,” added Herbert, “if we judge by what we saw on the south coast of Shark Gulf.”

“Pencroft,” said Cyrus Harding, “do as you think best, we will leave it to you.”

“Don’t make your mind uneasy, captain,” replied the sailor, “I shall not expose myself needlessly! I would rather a knife were run into my ribs than a sharp rock into those of my ‘Bonadventure!’”

That which Pencroft called ribs was the part of his vessel under water, and he valued it more than his own skin.

“What o’clock is it?” asked Pencroft.

“Ten o’clock,” replied Gideon Spilett.

“And what distance is it to the Cape, captain?”

“About fifteen miles,” replied the engineer.

“That’s a matter of two hours and a half,” said the sailor, “and we shall be off the Cape between twelve and one o’clock. Unluckily, the tide will be turning at that moment, and will be ebbing out of the gulf. I am afraid that it will be very difficult to get in, having both wind and tide against us.”

"And the more so that it is a full moon to-day," remarked Herbert, "and these April tides are very strong."

"Well, Pencroft," asked Harding, "can you not anchor off the Cape?"

"Anchor near land, with bad weather coming on!" exclaimed the sailor. "What are you thinking of, captain? We should run aground, of a certainty!"

"What will you do then?"

"I shall try to keep in the offing until the flood, that is to say, till about seven in the evening, and if there is still light enough I will try to enter the gulf; if not, we must stand off and on during the night, and we will enter to-morrow at sunrise."

"As I told you, Pencroft, we will leave it to you," answered Harding.

"Ah!" said Pencroft, "if there was only a lighthouse on the coast, it would be much more convenient for sailors."

"Yes," replied Herbert, "and this time we shall have no obliging engineer to light a fire to guide us into port!"

"Why, indeed, my dear Cyrus," said Spilett, "we have never thanked you; but frankly, without that fire we should never have been able — "

"A fire?" asked Harding, much astonished at the reporter's words.

"We mean, captain," answered Pencroft, "that on board the 'Bonadventure' we were very anxious during the few hours before our return, and we should have passed to windward of the island, if it had not been for the precaution you took of lighting a fire the night of the 19th of October, on Prospect Heights."

"Yes, yes! That was a lucky idea of mine!" replied the engineer.

"And this time," continued the sailor, "unless the idea occurs to Ayrton, there will be no one to do us that little service!"

"No! No one!" answered Cyrus Harding.

A few minutes after, finding himself alone in the bows of the vessel, with the reporter, the engineer bent down and whispered, —

"If there is one thing certain in this world, Spilett, it is that I never lighted any fire during the night of the 19th of October, neither on Prospect Heights nor on any other part of the island!"

CHAPTER 20

Things happened as Pencroft had predicted, he being seldom mistaken in his prognostications. The wind rose, and from a fresh breeze it soon increased to a regular gale; that is to say, it acquired a speed of from forty to forty-five miles an hour, before which a ship in the open sea would have run under close-reefed topsails. Now, as it was nearly six o'clock when the "Bonadventure" reached the gulf, and as at that moment the tide turned, it was impossible to enter. They were therefore compelled to stand off, for even if he had wished to do so, Pencroft could not have gained the mouth of the Mercy. Hoisting the jib to the mainmast by way of a storm-sail, he hove to, putting the head of the vessel towards the land.

Fortunately, although the wind was strong the sea, being sheltered by the land, did not run very high. They had then little to fear from the waves, which always endanger small craft. The "Bonadventure" would doubtlessly not have capsized, for she was well ballasted, but enormous masses of water falling on the deck might injure her if her timbers could not sustain them. Pencroft, as a good sailor, was prepared for anything. Certainly, he had great confidence in his vessel, but nevertheless he awaited the return of day with some anxiety.

During the night, Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett had no opportunity for talking together, and yet the words pronounced in the reporter's ear by the engineer were well worth being discussed, together with the mysterious influence which appeared to reign over Lincoln Island. Gideon Spilett did not cease from pondering over this new and inexplicable incident, the appearance of a fire on the coast of the island. The fire had actually been seen! His companions, Herbert and Pencroft, had seen it with him! The fire had served to signalize the position of the island during that dark night, and they had not doubted that it was lighted by the engineer’s hand; and here was Cyrus Harding expressly declaring that he had never done anything of the sort! Spilett resolved to recur to this incident as soon as the “Bonadventure” returned, and to urge Cyrus Harding to acquaint their companions with these strange facts. Perhaps it would be decided to make in common a complete investigation of every part of Lincoln Island.

However that might be, on this evening no fire was lighted on these yet unknown shores, which formed the entrance to the gulf, and the little vessel stood off during the night.

When the first streaks of dawn appeared in the western horizon, the wind, which had slightly fallen, shifted two points, and enabled Pencroft to enter the narrow gulf with greater ease. Towards seven o’clock in the morning, the “Bonadventure,” weathering the North Mandible Cape, entered the strait and glided on to the waters, so strangely enclosed in the frame of lava.

“Well,” said Pencroft, “this bay would make admirable roads, in which a whole fleet could lie at their ease!”

“What is especially curious,” observed Harding, “is that the gulf has been formed by two rivers of lava, thrown out by the volcano, and accumulated by successive eruptions. The result is that the gulf is completely sheltered on all sides, and I believe that even in the stormiest weather, the sea here must be as calm as a lake.”

“No doubt,” returned the sailor, “since the wind has only that narrow entrance between the two capes to get in by, and, besides, the north cape protects that of the south in a way which would make the entrance of gusts very difficult. I declare our ‘Bonadventure’ could stay here from one end of the year to the other, without even dragging at her anchor!”

“It is rather large for her!” observed the reporter.

“Well! Mr. Spilett,” replied the sailor, “I agree that it is too large for the ‘Bonadventure,’ but if the fleets of the Union were in want of a harbor in the Pacific, I don’t think they would ever find a better place than this!”

“We are in the shark’s mouth,” remarked Neb, alluding to the form of the gulf.

“Right into its mouth, my honest Neb!” replied Herbert, “but you are not afraid that it will shut upon us, are you?”

“No, Mr. Herbert,” answered Neb, “and yet this gulf here doesn’t please me much! It has a wicked look!”

“Hallo!” cried Pencroft, “here is Neb turning up his nose at my gulf, just as I was thinking of presenting it to America!”

“But, at any rate, is the water deep enough?” asked the engineer, “for a depth sufficient for the keel of the ‘Bonadventure’ would not be enough for those of our iron-clads.”

“That is easily found out,” replied Pencroft.

And the sailor sounded with a long cord, which served him as a lead-line, and to which was fastened a lump of iron. This cord measured nearly fifty fathoms, and its entire length was unrolled without finding any bottom.

“There,” exclaimed Pencroft, “our iron-clads can come here after all! They would not run aground!”

“Indeed,” said Gideon Spilett, “this gulf is a regular abyss, but, taking into consideration the volcanic origin of the island, it is not astonishing that the sea should offer similar depressions.”

“One would say too,” observed Herbert, “that these cliffs were perfectly perpendicular; and I believe that at their foot, even with a line five or six times longer, Pencroft would not find bottom.”

“That is all very well,” then said the reporter, “but I must point out to Pencroft that his harbor is wanting in one very important respect!”

“And what is that, Mr. Spilett?”

“An opening, a cutting of some sort, to give access to the interior of the island. I do not see a spot on which we could land.” And, in fact, the steep lava cliffs did not afford a single place suitable for landing. They formed an insuperable barrier, recalling, but with more wildness, the fiords of Norway. The “Bonadventure,” coasting as close as possible along the cliffs, did not discover even a projection which would allow the passengers to leave the deck.

Pencroft consoled himself by saying that with the help of a mine they could soon open out the cliff when that was necessary, and then, as there was evidently nothing to be done in the gulf, he steered his vessel towards the strait and passed out at about two o’clock in the afternoon.

“Ah!” said Neb, uttering a sigh of satisfaction.

One might really say that the honest Negro did not feel at his ease in those enormous jaws.

The distance from Mandible Cape to the mouth of the Mercy was not more than eight miles. The head of the “Bonadventure” was put towards Granite House, and a fair wind filling her sails, she ran rapidly along the coast.

To the enormous lava rocks succeeded soon those capricious sand dunes, among which the engineer had been so singularly recovered, and which seabirds frequented in thousands.

About four o’clock, Pencroft leaving the point of the islet on his left, entered the channel which separated it from the coast, and at five o’clock the anchor of the “Bonadventure” was buried in the sand at the mouth of the Mercy.

The colonists had been absent three days from their dwelling. Ayrton was waiting for them on the beach, and Jup came joyously to meet them, giving vent to deep grunts of satisfaction.

A complete exploration of the coast of the island had now been made, and no suspicious appearances had been observed. If any mysterious being resided on it, it could only be under cover of the impenetrable forest of the Serpentine Peninsula, to which the colonists had not yet directed their investigations.

Gideon Spilett discussed these things with the engineer, and it was agreed that they should direct the attention of their companions to the strange character of certain incidents which had occurred on the island, and of which the last was the most unaccountable.

However, Harding, returning to the fact of a fire having been kindled on the shore by an unknown hand, could not refrain from repeating for the twentieth time to the reporter, —

“But are you quite sure of having seen it? Was it not a partial eruption of the volcano, or perhaps some meteor?”

“No, Cyrus,” answered the reporter, “it was certainly a fire lighted by the hand of man. Besides; question Pencroft and Herbert. They saw it as I saw it myself, and they will confirm my words.”

In consequence, therefore, a few days after, on the 25th of April, in the evening, when the settlers were all collected on Prospect Heights, Cyrus Harding began by saying, —

“My friends, I think it my duty to call your attention to certain incidents which have occurred in the island, on the subject of which I shall be happy to have your advice. These incidents are, so to speak, supernatural — ”

“Supernatural!” exclaimed the sailor, emitting a volume of smoke from his mouth. “Can it be possible that our island is supernatural?”

“No, Pencroft, but mysterious, most certainly,” replied the engineer; “unless you can explain that which Spilett and I have until now failed to understand.”

“Speak away, captain,” answered the sailor.

“Well, have you understood,” then said the engineer, “how was it that after falling into the sea, I was found a quarter of a mile into the interior of the island, and that, without my having any consciousness of my removal there?”

“Unless, being unconscious — ” said Pencroft.

“That is not admissible,” replied the engineer. “But to continue. Have you understood how Top was able to discover your retreat five miles from the cave in which I was lying?”

“The dog’s instinct — ” observed Herbert.

“Singular instinct!” returned the reporter, “since notwithstanding the storm of rain and wind which was raging during that night, Top arrived at the Chimneys, dry and without a speck of mud!”

“Let us continue,” resumed the engineer. “Have you understood how our dog was so strangely thrown up out of the water of the lake, after his struggle with the dugong?”

“No! I confess, not at all,” replied Pencroft, “and the wound which the dugong had in its side, a wound which seemed to have been made with a sharp instrument; that can’t be understood, either.”

“Let us continue again,” said Harding. “Have you understood, my friends, how that bullet got into the body of the young peccary; how that case happened to be so fortunately stranded, without there being any trace of a wreck; how that bottle containing the document presented itself so opportunely, during our first sea-excursion; how our canoe, having broken its moorings, floated down the current of the Mercy and rejoined us at the very moment we needed it; how after the ape invasion the ladder was so obligingly thrown down from Granite House; and lastly, how the document, which Ayrton asserts was never written by him, fell into our hands?”

As Cyrus Harding thus enumerated, without forgetting one, the singular incidents which had occurred in the island, Herbert, Neb, and Pencroft stared at each other, not knowing what to reply, for this succession of incidents, grouped thus for the first time, could not but excite their surprise to the highest degree.

"'Pon my word," said Pencroft at last, "you are right, captain, and it is difficult to explain all these things!"

"Well, my friends," resumed the engineer, "a last fact has just been added to these, and it is no less incomprehensible than the others!"

"What is it, captain?" asked Herbert quickly.

"When you were returning from Tabor Island, Pencroft," continued the engineer, "you said that a fire appeared on Lincoln Island?"

"Certainly," answered the sailor.

"And you are quite certain of having seen this fire?"

"As sure as I see you now."

"You also, Herbert?"

"Why, captain," cried Herbert, "that fire was blazing like a star of the first magnitude!"

"But was it not a star?" urged the engineer.

"No," replied Pencroft, "for the sky was covered with thick clouds, and at any rate a star would not have been so low on the horizon. But Mr. Spilett saw it as well as we, and he will confirm our words."

"I will add," said the reporter, "that the fire was very bright, and that it shot up like a sheet of lightning."

“Yes, yes! exactly,” added Herbert, “and it was certainly placed on the heights of Granite House.”

“Well, my friends,” replied Cyrus Harding, “during the night of the 19th of October, neither Neb nor I lighted any fire on the coast.”

“You did not!” exclaimed Pencroft, in the height of his astonishment, not being able to finish his sentence.

“We did not leave Granite House,” answered Cyrus Harding, “and if a fire appeared on the coast, it was lighted by another hand than ours!”

Pencroft, Herbert, and Neb were stupefied. No illusion could be possible, and a fire had actually met their eyes during the night of the 19th of October. Yes! they had to acknowledge it, a mystery existed! An inexplicable influence, evidently favorable to the colonists, but very irritating to their curiosity, was executed always in the nick of time on Lincoln Island. Could there be some being hidden in its profoundest recesses? It was necessary at any cost to ascertain this.

Harding also reminded his companions of the singular behavior of Top and Jup when they prowled round the mouth of the well, which placed Granite House in communication with the sea, and he told them that he had explored the well, without discovering anything suspicious. The final resolve taken, in consequence of this conversation, by all the members of the colony, was that as soon as the fine season returned they would thoroughly search the whole of the island.

But from that day Pencroft appeared to be anxious. He felt as if the island which he had made his own personal property belonged to him entirely no longer, and that he shared it with another master, to whom, willing or not, he felt subject. Neb and he often talked of those unaccountable things, and both, their natures inclining them to the marvelous, were not far from believing that Lincoln Island was under the dominion of some supernatural power.

In the meanwhile, the bad weather came with the month of May, the November of the northern zones. It appeared that the winter would be severe and forward. The preparations for the winter season were therefore commenced without delay.

Nevertheless, the colonists were well prepared to meet the winter, however hard it might be. They had plenty of felt clothing, and the musmons, very numerous by this time, had furnished an abundance of wool necessary for the manufacture of this warm material.

It is unnecessary to say that Ayrton had been provided with this comfortable clothing. Cyrus Harding proposed that he should come to spend the bad season with them in Granite House, where he would be better lodged than at the corral, and Ayrton promised to do so, as soon as the last work at the corral was finished. He did this towards the middle of April. From that time Ayrton shared the common life, and made himself useful on all occasions; but still humble and sad, he never took part in the pleasures of his companions.

For the greater part of this, the third winter which the settlers passed in Lincoln Island, they were confined to Granite House. There were many violent storms and frightful tempests, which appeared to shake the rocks to their very foundations. Immense waves threatened to overwhelm the island, and certainly any vessel anchored near the shore would have been dashed to pieces. Twice, during one of these hurricanes, the Mercy swelled to such a degree as to give reason to fear that the bridges would be swept away, and it was necessary to strengthen those on the shore, which disappeared under the foaming waters, when the sea beat against the beach.

It may well be supposed that such storms, comparable to water-spouts in which were mingled rain and snow, would cause great havoc on the plateau of Prospect Heights. The mill and the poultry-yard particularly suffered. The colonists were often obliged to make immediate repairs, without which the safety of the birds would have been seriously threatened.

During the worst weather, several jaguars and troops of quadrumana ventured to the edge of the plateau, and it was always to be feared that the most active and audacious would, urged by hunger, manage to cross the stream, which besides, when frozen, offered them an easy passage. Plantations and domestic animals would then have been infallibly destroyed, without a constant watch, and it was often necessary to make use of the guns to keep those dangerous visitors at a respectful distance. Occupation was not wanting to the colonists, for without reckoning their out-door cares, they had always a thousand plans for the fitting up of Granite House.

They had also some fine sporting excursions, which were made during the frost in the vast Tadorn Marsh. Gideon Spilett and Herbert, aided by Jup and Top, did not miss a shot in the midst of myriads of wild-duck, snipe, teal, and others. The access to these hunting-grounds was easy; besides, whether they reached them by the road to Port Balloon, after having passed the Mercy Bridge, or by turning the rocks from Flotsam Point, the hunters were never distant from Granite House more than two or three miles.

Thus passed the four winter months, which were really rigorous, that is to say, June, July, August, and September. But, in short, Granite House did not suffer much from the inclemency of the weather, and it was the same with the corral, which, less exposed than the plateau, and sheltered partly by Mount Franklin, only received the remains of the hurricanes, already broken by the forests and the high rocks of the shore. The damages there were consequently of small importance, and the activity and skill of Ayrton promptly repaired them, when some time in October he returned to pass a few days in the corral.

During this winter, no fresh inexplicable incident occurred. Nothing strange happened, although Pencroft and Neb were on the watch for the most insignificant facts to which they attached any mysterious cause. Top and Jup themselves no longer growled round the well or gave any signs of uneasiness. It appeared, therefore, as if the series of supernatural incidents was interrupted, although they often talked of them during the evenings in Granite House, and they remained thoroughly resolved that the island should be searched, even in those parts the most difficult to explore. But an event of the highest importance, and of which the consequences might be terrible, momentarily diverted from their projects Cyrus Harding and his companions.

It was the month of October. The fine season was swiftly returning. Nature was reviving; and among the evergreen foliage of the coniferae which formed the border of the wood, already appeared the young leaves of the banksias, deodars, and other trees.

It may be remembered that Gideon Spilett and Herbert had, at different times, taken photographic views of Lincoln Island.

Now, on the 17th of this month of October, towards three o’clock in the afternoon, Herbert, enticed by the charms of the sky, thought of reproducing Union Bay, which was opposite to Prospect Heights, from Cape Mandible to Claw Cape.

The horizon was beautifully clear, and the sea, undulating under a soft breeze, was as calm as the waters of a lake, sparkling here and there under the sun’s rays.

The apparatus had been placed at one of the windows of the dining-room at Granite House, and consequently overlooked the shore and the bay. Herbert proceeded as he was accustomed to do, and the negative obtained, he went away to fix it by means of the chemicals deposited in a dark nook of Granite House.

Returning to the bright light, and examining it well, Herbert perceived on his negative an almost imperceptible little spot on the sea horizon. He endeavored to make it disappear by reiterated washing, but could not accomplish it.

“It is a flaw in the glass,” he thought.

And then he had the curiosity to examine this flaw with a strong magnifier which he unscrewed from one of the telescopes.

But he had scarcely looked at it, when he uttered a cry, and the glass almost fell from his hands.

Immediately running to the room in which Cyrus Harding then was, he extended the negative and magnifier towards the engineer, pointing out the little spot.

Harding examined it; then seizing his telescope he rushed to the window.

The telescope, after having slowly swept the horizon, at last stopped on the looked-for spot, and Cyrus Harding, lowering it, pronounced one word only, —

“A vessel!”

And in fact a vessel was in sight, off Lincoln Island!

PART 3. THE SECRET OF THE ISLAND

CHAPTER 1

It was now two years and a half since the castaways from the balloon had been thrown on Lincoln Island, and during that period there had been no communication between them and their fellow-creatures. Once the reporter had attempted to communicate with the inhabited world by confiding to a bird a letter which contained the secret of their situation, but that was a chance on which it was impossible to reckon seriously. Ayrton, alone, under the circumstances which have been related, had come to join the little colony. Now, suddenly, on this day, the 17th of October, other men had unexpectedly appeared in sight of the island, on that deserted sea!

There could be no doubt about it! A vessel was there! But would she pass on, or would she put into port? In a few hours the colonists would definitely know what to expect.

Cyrus Harding and Herbert having immediately called Gideon Spilett, Pencroft, and Neb into the dining-room of Granite House, told them what had happened. Pencroft, seizing the telescope, rapidly swept the horizon, and stopping on the indicated point, that is to say, on that which had made the almost imperceptible spot on the photographic negative, —

“I’m blessed but it is really a vessel!” he exclaimed, in a voice which did not express any great amount of satisfaction.

“Is she coming here?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Impossible to say anything yet,” answered Pencroft, “for her rigging alone is above the horizon, and not a bit of her hull can be seen.”

“What is to be done?” asked the lad.

“Wait,” replied Harding.

And for a considerable time the settlers remained silent, given up to all the thoughts, and the emotions, all the fears, all the hopes, which were aroused by this incident — the most important which had occurred since their arrival in Lincoln Island. Certainly, the colonists were not in the situation of castaways abandoned on a sterile islet, constantly contending against a cruel nature for their miserable existence, and incessantly tormented by the longing to return to inhabited countries. Pencroft and Neb, especially, who felt themselves at once so happy and so rich, would not have left their island without regret. They were accustomed, besides, to this new life in the midst of the domain which their intelligence had as it were civilized. But at any rate this ship brought news from the world, perhaps even from their native land. It was bringing fellow-creatures to them, and it may be conceived how deeply their hearts were moved at the sight!

From time to time Pencroft took the glass and rested himself at the window. From thence he very attentively examined the vessel, which was at a distance of twenty miles to the east. The colonists had as yet, therefore, no means of signalizing their presence. A flag would not have been perceived; a gun would not have been heard; a fire would not have been visible. However, it was certain that the island, overtopped by Mount Franklin, could not escape the notice of the vessel’s lookout. But why was the ship coming there? Was it simple chance which brought it to that part of the Pacific, where the maps mentioned no land except Tabor Island, which itself was out of the route usually followed by vessels from the Polynesian Archipelagoes, from New Zealand, and from the American coast? To this question, which each one asked himself, a reply was suddenly made by Herbert.

“Can it be the ‘Duncan’?” he cried.

The “Duncan,” as has been said, was Lord Glenarvan’s yacht, which had left Ayrton on the islet, and which was to return there someday to fetch him. Now, the islet was not so far distant from Lincoln Island, but that a vessel, standing for the one, could pass in sight of the other. A hundred and fifty miles only separated them in longitude, and seventy in latitude.

“We must tell Ayrton,” said Gideon Spilett, “and send for him immediately. He alone can say if it is the ‘Duncan.’”

This was the opinion of all, and the reporter, going to the telegraphic apparatus which placed the corral in communication with Granite House, sent this telegram: — ”Come with all possible speed.”

In a few minutes the bell sounded.

“I am coming,” replied Ayrton.

Then the settlers continued to watch the vessel.

“If it is the ‘Duncan,’” said Herbert, “Ayrton will recognize her without difficulty, since he sailed on board her for some time.”

“And if he recognizes her,” added Pencroft, “it will agitate him exceedingly!”

“Yes,” answered Cyrus Harding; “but now Ayrton is worthy to return on board the ‘Duncan,’ and pray Heaven that it is indeed Lord Glenarvan’s yacht, for I should be suspicious of any other vessel. These are ill-famed seas, and I have always feared a visit from Malay pirates to our island.”

“We could defend it,’, cried Herbert.

“No doubt, my boy,” answered the engineer smiling, “but it would be better not to have to defend it.”

“A useless observation,” said Spilett. “Lincoln Island is unknown to navigators, since it is not marked even on the most recent maps. Do you think, Cyrus, that that is a sufficient motive for a ship, finding herself unexpectedly in sight of new land, to try and visit rather than avoid it?”

“Certainly,” replied Pencroft.

“I think so too,” added the engineer. “It may even be said that it is the duty of a captain to come and survey any land or island not yet known, and Lincoln Island is in this position.”

“Well,” said Pencroft, “suppose this vessel comes and anchors there a few cables-lengths from our island, what shall we do?”

This sudden question remained at first without any reply. But Cyrus Harding, after some moments’ thought, replied in the calm tone which was usual to him, —

“What we shall do, my friends? What we ought to do is this: — we will communicate with the ship, we will take our passage on board her, and we will leave our island, after having taken possession of it in the name of the United States. Then we will return with any who may wish to follow us to colonize it definitely, and endow the American Republic with a useful station in this part of the Pacific Ocean!”

“Hurrah!” exclaimed Pencroft, “and that will be no small present which we shall make to our country! The colonization is already almost finished;

names are given to every part of the island; there is a natural port, fresh water, roads, a telegraph, a dockyard, and manufactories; and there will be nothing to be done but to inscribe Lincoln Island on the maps!”

“But if anyone seizes it in our absence?” observed Gideon Spilett.

“Hang it!” cried the sailor. “I would rather remain all alone to guard it: and trust to Pencroft, they shouldn’t steal it from him, like a watch from the pocket of a swell!”

For an hour it was impossible to say with any certainty whether the vessel was or was not standing towards Lincoln Island. She was nearer, but in what direction was she sailing? This Pencroft could not determine. However, as the wind was blowing from the northeast, in all probability the vessel was sailing on the starboard tack. Besides, the wind was favorable for bringing her towards the island, and, the sea being calm, she would not be afraid to approach although the shallows were not marked on the chart.

Towards four o’clock — an hour after he had been sent for — Ayrton arrived at Granite House. He entered the dining-room saying, —

“At your service, gentlemen.”

Cyrus Harding gave him his hand, as was his custom to do, and, leading him to the window, —

“Ayrton,” said he, “we have begged you to come here for an important reason. A ship is in sight of the island.”

Ayrton at first paled slightly, and for a moment his eyes became dim; then, leaning out the window, he surveyed the horizon, but could see nothing.

“Take this telescope,” said Spilett, “and look carefully, Ayrton, for it is possible that this ship may be the ‘Duncan’ come to these seas for the purpose of taking you home again.”

“The ‘Duncan!’” murmured Ayrton. “Already?” This last word escaped Ayrton’s lips as if involuntarily, and his head drooped upon his hands.

Did not twelve years’ solitude on a desert island appear to him a sufficient expiation? Did not the penitent yet feel himself pardoned, either in his own eyes or in the eyes of others?

“No,” said he, “no! it cannot be the ‘Duncan’!”

“Look, Ayrton,” then said the engineer, “for it is necessary that we should know beforehand what to expect.”

Ayrton took the glass and pointed it in the direction indicated. During some minutes he examined the horizon without moving, without uttering a word. Then, —

“It is indeed a vessel,” said he, “but I do not think she is the ‘Duncan.’”

“Why do you not think so?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Because the ‘Duncan’ is a steam-yacht, and I cannot perceive any trace of smoke either above or near that vessel.”

“Perhaps she is simply sailing,” observed Pencroft. “The wind is favorable for the direction which she appears to be taking, and she may be anxious to economize her coal, being so far from land.”

“It is possible that you may be right, Mr. Pencroft,” answered Ayrton, “and that the vessel has extinguished her fires. We must wait until she is nearer, and then we shall soon know what to expect.”

So saying, Ayrton sat down in a corner of the room and remained silent. The colonists again discussed the strange ship, but Ayrton took no part in the conversation. All were in such a mood that they found it impossible to continue their work. Gideon Spilett and Pencroft were particularly nervous, going, coming, not able to remain still in one place. Herbert felt more curiosity. Neb alone maintained his usual calm manner. Was not his country that where his master was? As to the engineer, he remained plunged in deep thought, and in his heart feared rather than desired the arrival of the ship. In the meanwhile, the vessel was a little nearer the island. With the aid of the glass, it was ascertained that she was a brig, and not one of those Malay proas, which are generally used by the pirates of the Pacific. It was, therefore, reasonable to believe that the engineer’s apprehensions would not be justified, and that the presence of this vessel in the vicinity of the island was fraught with no danger.

Pencroft, after a minute examination, was able positively to affirm that the vessel was rigged as a brig, and that she was standing obliquely towards the coast, on the starboard tack, under her topsails and top-gallant-sails. This was confirmed by Ayrton. But by continuing in this direction she must soon disappear behind Claw Cape, as the wind was from the southwest, and to watch her it would be then necessary to ascend the height of Washington Bay, near Port Balloon — a provoking circumstance, for it was already five o’clock in the evening, and the twilight would soon make any observation extremely difficult.

“What shall we do when night comes on?” asked Gideon Spilett. “Shall we light a fire, so as to signal our presence on the coast?”

This was a serious question, and yet, although the engineer still retained some of his presentiments, it was answered in the affirmative. During the night the ship might disappear and leave for ever, and, this ship gone, would another ever return to the waters of Lincoln Island? Who could foresee what the future would then have in store for the colonists?

“Yes,” said the reporter, “we ought to make known to that vessel, whoever she may be, that the island is inhabited. To neglect the opportunity which is offered to us might be to create everlasting regrets.”

It was therefore decided that Neb and Pencroft should go to Port Balloon, and that there, at nightfall, they should light an immense fire, the blaze of which would necessarily attract the attention of the brig.

But at the moment when Neb and the sailor were preparing to leave Granite House, the vessel suddenly altered her course, and stood directly for Union Bay. The brig was a good sailer, for she approached rapidly. Neb and Pencroft put off their departure, therefore, and the glass was put into Ayrton’s hands, that he might ascertain for certain whether the ship was or was not the “Duncan.” The Scotch yacht was also rigged as a brig. The question was, whether a chimney could be discerned between the two masts of the vessel, which was now at a distance of only five miles.

The horizon was still very clear. The examination was easy, and Ayrton soon let the glass fall again, saying —

“It is not the ‘Duncan’! It could not be!”

Pencroft again brought the brig within the range of the telescope, and could see that she was of between three and four hundred tons burden, wonderfully narrow, well-masted, admirably built, and must be a very rapid sailer. But to what nation did she belong? That was difficult to say.

“And yet,” added the sailor, “a flag is floating from her peak, but I cannot distinguish the colors of it.”

“In half an hour we shall be certain about that,” answered the reporter. “Besides, it is very evident that the intention of the captain of this ship is to land, and, consequently, if not today, to-morrow at the latest, we shall make his acquaintance.”

“Never mind!” said Pencroft. “It is best to know whom we have to deal with, and I shall not be sorry to recognize that fellow’s colors!”

And, while thus speaking, the sailor never left the glass. The day began to fade, and with the day the breeze fell also. The brig’s ensign hung in folds, and it became more and more difficult to observe it.

“It is not the American flag,” said Pencroft from time to time, “nor the English, the red of which could be easily seen, nor the French or German colors, nor the white flag of Russia, nor the yellow of Spain. One would say it was all one color. Let’s see: in these seas, what do we generally meet with? The Chilean flag? — but that is tri-color. Brazilian? — it is green. Japanese? — it is yellow and black, while this — ”

At that moment the breeze blew out the unknown flag. Ayrton seizing the telescope which the sailor had put down, put it to his eye, and in a hoarse voice, —

“The black flag!” he exclaimed.

And indeed the somber bunting was floating from the mast of the brig, and they had now good reason for considering her to be a suspicious vessel!

Had the engineer, then, been right in his presentiments? Was this a pirate vessel? Did she scour the Pacific, competing with the Malay proas which still infest it? For what had she come to look at the shores of Lincoln Island? Was it to them an unknown island, ready to become a magazine for stolen cargoes? Had she come to find on the coast a sheltered port for the winter months? Was the settlers’ honest domain destined to be transformed into an infamous refuge — the headquarters of the piracy of the Pacific?

All these ideas instinctively presented themselves to the colonists’ imaginations. There was no doubt, besides, of the signification which must be attached to the color of the hoisted flag. It was that of pirates! It was that which the “Duncan” would have carried, had the convicts succeeded in their criminal design! No time was lost before discussing it.

“My friends,” said Cyrus Harding, “perhaps this vessel only wishes to survey the coast of the island. Perhaps her crew will not land. There is a chance of it. However that may be, we ought to do everything we can to hide our presence here. The windmill on Prospect Heights is too easily seen. Let Ayrton and Neb go and take down the sails. We must also conceal the windows of Granite House with thick branches. All the fires must be extinguished, so that nothing may betray the presence of men on the island.”

“And our vessel?” said Herbert.

“Oh,” answered Pencroft, “she is sheltered in Port Balloon, and I defy any of those rascals there to find her!”

The engineer’s orders were immediately executed. Neb and Ayrton ascended the plateau, and took the necessary precautions to conceal any indication of a settlement. While they were thus occupied, their companions went to the border of Jacamar Wood, and brought back a large quantity of branches and creepers, which would at some distance appear as natural foliage, and thus disguise the windows in the granite cliff. At the same time, the ammunition and guns were placed ready so as to be at hand in case of an unexpected attack.

When all these precautions had been taken, —

“My friends,” said Harding, and his voice betrayed some emotion, “if the wretches endeavor to seize Lincoln Island, we shall defend it — shall we not?”

“Yes, Cyrus,” replied the reporter, “and if necessary we will die to defend it!”

The engineer extended his hand to his companions, who pressed it warmly. Ayrton remained in his corner, not joining the colonists. Perhaps he, the former convict, still felt himself unworthy to do so!

Cyrus Harding understood what was passing in Ayrton’s mind, and going to him —

“And you, Ayrton,” he asked, “what will you do?”

“My duty,” answered Ayrton.

He then took up his station near the window and gazed through the foliage.

It was now half-past seven. The sun had disappeared twenty minutes ago behind Granite House. Consequently the Eastern horizon was becoming obscured. In the meanwhile the brig continued to advance towards Union Bay. She was now not more than two miles off, and exactly opposite the plateau of Prospect Heights, for after having tacked off Claw Cape, she had drifted towards the north in the current of the rising tide. One might have said that at this distance she had already entered the vast bay, for a straight line drawn from Claw Cape to Cape Mandible would have rested on her starboard quarter.

Was the brig about to penetrate far into the bay? That was the first question. When once in the bay, would she anchor there? That was the second. Would she not content herself with only surveying the coast, and stand out to sea again without landing her crew? They would know this in an hour. The colonists could do nothing but wait.

Cyrus Harding had not seen the suspected vessel hoist the black flag without deep anxiety. Was it not a direct menace against the work which he and his companions had till now conducted so successfully? Had these pirates — for the sailors of the brig could be nothing else — already visited the island, since on approaching it they had hoisted their colors. Had they formerly invaded it, so that certain unaccountable peculiarities might be explained in this way? Did there exist in the as yet unexplored parts some accomplice ready to enter into communication with them?

To all these questions which he mentally asked himself, Harding knew not what to reply; but he felt that the safety of the colony could not but be seriously threatened by the arrival of the brig.

However, he and his companions were determined to fight to the last gasp. It would have been very important to know if the pirates were numerous and better armed than the colonists. But how was this information to be obtained?

Night fell. The new moon had disappeared. Profound darkness enveloped the island and the sea. No light could pierce through the heavy piles of clouds on the horizon. The wind had died away completely with the twilight. Not a leaf rustled on the trees, not a ripple murmured on the shore. Nothing could be seen of the ship, all her lights being extinguished, and if she was still in sight of the island, her whereabouts could not be discovered.

“Well! who knows?” said Pencroft. “Perhaps that cursed craft will stand off during the night, and we shall see nothing of her at daybreak.”

As if in reply to the sailor’s observation, a bright light flashed in the darkness, and a cannon-shot was heard.

The vessel was still there and had guns on board.

Six seconds elapsed between the flash and the report.

Therefore the brig was about a mile and a quarter from the coast.

At the same time, the chains were heard rattling through the hawse-holes.

The vessel had just anchored in sight of Granite House!

CHAPTER 2

There was no longer any doubt as to the pirates’ intentions. They had dropped anchor at a short distance from the island, and it was evident that the next day by means of their boats they purposed to land on the beach!

Cyrus Harding and his companions were ready to act, but, determined though they were, they must not forget to be prudent. Perhaps their presence might still be concealed in the event of the pirates contenting themselves with landing on the shore without examining the interior of the island. It might be, indeed, that their only intention was to obtain fresh water from the Mercy, and it was not impossible that the bridge, thrown across a mile and a half from the mouth, and the manufactory at the Chimneys might escape their notice.

But why was that flag hoisted at the brig’s peak? What was that shot fired for? Pure bravado doubtless, unless it was a sign of the act of taking possession. Harding knew now that the vessel was well armed. And what had the colonists of Lincoln Island to reply to the pirates’ guns? A few muskets only.

“However,” observed Cyrus Harding, “here we are in an impregnable position. The enemy cannot discover the mouth of the outlet, now that it is hidden under reeds and grass, and consequently it would be impossible for them to penetrate into Granite House.”

“But our plantations, our poultry-yard, our corral, all, everything!” exclaimed Pencroft, stamping his foot. “They may spoil everything, destroy everything in a few hours!”

“Everything, Pencroft,” answered Harding, “and we have no means of preventing them.”

“Are they numerous? that is the question,” said the reporter. “If they are not more than a dozen, we shall be able to stop them, but forty, fifty, more perhaps!”

“Captain Harding,” then said Ayrton, advancing towards the engineer, “will you give me leave?”

“For what, my friend?”

“To go to that vessel to find out the strength of her crew.”

“But Ayrton — ” answered the engineer, hesitating, “you will risk your life — ”

“Why not, sir?”

“That is more than your duty.”

“I have more than my duty to do,” replied Ayrton.

“Will you go to the ship in the boat?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“No, sir, but I will swim. A boat would be seen where a man may glide between wind and water.”

“Do you know that the brig is a mile and a quarter from the shore?” said Herbert.

“I am a good swimmer, Mr. Herbert.”

“I tell you it is risking your life,” said the engineer.

“That is no matter,” answered Ayrton. “Captain Harding, I ask this as a favor. Perhaps it will be a means of raising me in my own eyes!”

“Go, Ayrton,” replied the engineer, who felt sure that a refusal would have deeply wounded the former convict, now become an honest man.

“I will accompany you,” said Pencroft.

“You mistrust me!” said Ayrton quickly.

Then more humbly, —

“Alas!”

“No! no!” exclaimed Harding with animation, “no, Ayrton, Pencroft does not mistrust you. You interpret his words wrongly.”

“Indeed,” returned the sailor, “I only propose to accompany Ayrton as far as the islet. It may be, although it is scarcely possible, that one of these villains has landed, and in that case two men will not be too many to hinder him from giving the alarm. I will wait for Ayrton on the islet, and he shall go alone to the vessel, since he has proposed to do so.” These things agreed to, Ayrton made preparations for his departure. His plan was bold, but it might succeed, thanks to the darkness of the night. Once arrived at the vessel’s side, Ayrton, holding on to the main chains, might reconnoiter the number and perhaps overhear the intentions of the pirates.

Ayrton and Pencroft, followed by their companions, descended to the beach. Ayrton undressed and rubbed himself with grease, so as to suffer less from the temperature of the water, which was still cold. He might, indeed, be obliged to remain in it for several hours.

Pencroft and Neb, during this time, had gone to fetch the boat, moored a few hundred feet higher up, on the bank of the Mercy, and by the time they returned, Ayrton was ready to start. A coat was thrown over his shoulders, and the settlers all came round him to press his hand.

Ayrton then shoved off with Pencroft in the boat.

It was half-past ten in the evening when the two adventurers disappeared in the darkness. Their companions returned to wait at the Chimneys.

The channel was easily traversed, and the boat touched the opposite shore of the islet. This was not done without precaution, for fear lest the pirates might be roaming about there. But after a careful survey, it was evident that the islet was deserted. Ayrton then, followed by Pencroft, crossed it with a rapid step, scaring the birds nestled in the holes of the rocks; then, without hesitating, he plunged into the sea, and swam noiselessly in the direction of the ship, in which a few lights had recently appeared, showing her exact situation. As to Pencroft, he crouched down in a cleft of the rock, and awaited the return of his companion.

In the meanwhile, Ayrton, swimming with a vigorous stroke, glided through the sheet of water without producing the slightest ripple. His head just emerged above it and his eyes were fixed on the dark hull of the brig, from which the lights were reflected in the water. He thought only of the duty which he had promised to accomplish, and nothing of the danger which he ran, not only on board the ship, but in the sea, often frequented by sharks. The current bore him along and he rapidly receded from the shore.

Half an hour afterwards, Ayrton, without having been either seen or heard, arrived at the ship and caught hold of the main-chains. He took breath, then, hoisting himself up, he managed to reach the extremity of the cutwater. There were drying several pairs of sailors' trousers. He put on a pair. Then settling himself firmly, he listened. They were not sleeping on board the brig. On the contrary, they were talking, singing, laughing. And these were the sentences, accompanied with oaths, which principally struck Ayrton: —

"Our brig is a famous acquisition."

"She sails well, and merits her name of the 'Speedy.'"

"She would show all the navy of Norfolk a clean pair of heels."

"Hurrah for her captain!"

"Hurrah for Bob Harvey!"

What Ayrton felt when he overheard this fragment of conversation may be understood when it is known that in this Bob Harvey he recognized one of his old Australian companions, a daring sailor, who had continued his criminal career. Bob Harvey had seized, on the shores of Norfolk Island this brig, which was loaded with arms, ammunition, utensils, and tools of all sorts, destined for one of the Sandwich Islands. All his gang had gone on board, and pirates after having been convicts, these wretches, more ferocious than the Malays themselves, scoured the Pacific, destroying vessels, and massacring their crews.

The convicts spoke loudly, they recounted their deeds, drinking deeply at the same time, and this is what Ayrton gathered. The actual crew of the

“Speedy” was composed solely of English prisoners, escaped from Norfolk Island.

Here it may be well to explain what this island was. In 29deg 2’ south latitude, and 165deg 42’ east longitude, to the east of Australia, is found a little island, six miles in circumference, overlooked by Mount Pitt, which rises to a height of 1,100 feet above the level of the sea. This is Norfolk Island, once the seat of an establishment in which were lodged the most intractable convicts from the English penitentiaries. They numbered 500, under an iron discipline, threatened with terrible punishments, and were guarded by 150 soldiers, and 150 employed under the orders of the governor. It would be difficult to imagine a collection of greater ruffians. Sometimes, — although very rarely, — notwithstanding the extreme surveillance of which they were the object, many managed to escape, and seizing vessels which they surprised, they infested the Polynesian Archipelagoes.

Thus had Bob Harvey and his companions done. Thus had Ayrton formerly wished to do. Bob Harvey had seized the brig “Speedy,” anchored in sight of Norfolk Island; the crew had been massacred; and for a year this ship had scoured the Pacific, under the command of Harvey, now a pirate, and well known to Ayrton!

The convicts were, for the most part, assembled under the poop; but a few, stretched on the deck, were talking loudly.

The conversation still continued amid shouts and libations. Ayrton learned that chance alone had brought the “Speedy” in sight of Lincoln Island; Bob Harvey had never yet set foot on it; but, as Cyrus Harding had conjectured, finding this unknown land in his course, its position being marked on no chart, he had formed the project of visiting it, and, if he found it suitable, of making it the brig's headquarters.

As to the black flag hoisted at the "Speedy's" peak, and the gun which had been fired, in imitation of men-of-war when they lower their colors, it was pure piratical bravado. It was in no way a signal, and no communication yet existed between the convicts and Lincoln Island.

The settlers' domain was now menaced with terrible danger. Evidently the island, with its water, its harbor, its resources of all kinds so increased in value by the colonists, and the concealment afforded by Granite House, could not but be convenient for the convicts; in their hands it would become an excellent place of refuge, and, being unknown, it would assure them, for a long time perhaps, impunity and security. Evidently, also, the lives of the settlers would not be respected, and Bob Harvey and his accomplices' first care would be to massacre them without mercy. Harding and his companions had, therefore, not even the choice of flying and hiding themselves in the island, since the convicts intended to reside there, and since, in the event of the "Speedy" departing on an expedition, it was probable that some of the crew would remain on shore, so as to settle themselves there. Therefore, it would be necessary to fight, to destroy every one of these scoundrels, unworthy of pity, and against whom any means would be right. So thought Ayrton, and he well knew that Cyrus Harding would be of his way of thinking.

But was resistance and, in the last place, victory possible? That would depend on the equipment of the brig, and the number of men which she carried.

This Ayrton resolved to learn at any cost, and as an hour after his arrival the vociferations had begun to die away, and as a large number of the convicts were already buried in a drunken sleep, Ayrton did not hesitate to venture onto the “Speedy’s” deck, which the extinguished lanterns now left in total darkness. He hoisted himself onto the cutwater, and by the bowsprit arrived at the forecastle. Then, gliding among the convicts stretched here and there, he made the round of the ship, and found that the “Speedy” carried four guns, which would throw shot of from eight to ten pounds in weight. He found also, on touching them that these guns were breech-loaders. They were therefore, of modern make, easily used, and of terrible effect.

As to the men lying on the deck, they were about ten in number, but it was to be supposed that more were sleeping down below. Besides, by listening to them, Ayrton had understood that there were fifty on board. That was a large number for the six settlers of Lincoln Island to contend with! But now, thanks to Ayrton’s devotion, Cyrus Harding would not be surprised, he would know the strength of his adversaries, and would make his arrangements accordingly.

There was nothing more for Ayrton to do but to return, and render to his companions an account of the mission with which he had charged himself, and he prepared to regain the bows of the brig, so that he might let himself down into the water. But to this man, whose wish was, as he had said, to do more than his duty, there came an heroic thought. This was to sacrifice his own life, but save the island and the colonists. Cyrus Harding evidently could not resist fifty ruffians, all well armed, who, either by penetrating by main force into Granite House, or by starving out the besieged, could obtain from them what they wanted. And then he thought of his preservers — those who had made him again a man, and an honest mm, those to whom he owed all — murdered without pity, their works destroyed, their island turned into a pirates’ den! He said to himself that he, Ayrton, was the principal cause of so many disasters, since his old companion, Bob Harvey, had but realized his own plans, and a feeling of horror took possession of him. Then he was seized with an irresistible desire to blow up the brig and with her, all whom she had on board. He would perish in the explosion, but he would have done his duty.

Ayrton did not hesitate. To reach the powder-room, which is always situated in the after-part of a vessel, was easy. There would be no want of powder in a vessel which followed such a trade, and a spark would be enough to destroy it in an instant.

Ayrton stole carefully along the between-decks, strewn with numerous sleepers, overcome more by drunkenness than sleep. A lantern was lighted at the foot of the mainmast, round which was hung a gun-rack, furnished with weapons of all sorts.

Ayrton took a revolver from the rack, and assured himself that it was loaded and primed. Nothing more was needed to accomplish the work of destruction. He then glided towards the stern, so as to arrive under the brig's poop at the powder-magazine.

It was difficult to proceed along the dimly lighted deck without stumbling over some half-sleeping convict, who retorted by oaths and kicks. Ayrton was, therefore, more than once obliged to halt. But at last he arrived at the partition dividing the aftercabin, and found the door opening into the magazine itself.

Ayrton, compelled to force it open, set to work. It was a difficult operation to perform without noise, for he had to break a padlock. But under his vigorous hand, the padlock broke, and the door was open.

At that moment a hand was laid on Ayrton's shoulder.

“What are you doing here?” asked a tail man, in a harsh voice, who, standing in the shadow, quickly threw the light of a lantern in Ayrton’s face.

Ayrton drew beck. In the rapid flash of the lantern, he had recognized his former accomplice, Bob Harvey, who could not have known him, as he must have thought Ayrton long since dead.

“What are you doing here?” again said Bob Harvey, seizing Ayrton by the waistband.

But Ayrton, without replying, wrenched himself from his grasp and attempted to rush into the magazine. A shot fired into the midst of the powder-casks, and all would be over!

“Help, lads!” shouted Bob Harvey.

At his shout two or three pirates awoke, jumped up, and, rushing on Ayrton, endeavored to throw him down. He soon extricated himself from their grasp. He fired his revolver, and two of the convicts fell, but a blow from a knife which he could not ward off made a gash in his shoulder.

Ayrton perceived that he could no longer hope to carry out his project. Bob Harvey had reclosed the door of the powder-magazine, and a movement on the deck indicated a general awakening of the pirates. Ayrton must reserve himself to fight at the side of Cyrus Harding. There was nothing for him but flight!

But was flight still possible? It was doubtful, yet Ayrton resolved to dare everything in order to rejoin his companions.

Four barrels of the revolver were still undischarged. Two were fired — one, aimed at Bob Harvey, did not wound him, or at any rate only slightly, and Ayrton, profiting by the momentary retreat of his adversaries, rushed towards the companion-ladder to gain the deck. Passing before the lantern, he smashed it with a blow from the butt of his revolver. A profound darkness ensued, which favored his flight. Two or three pirates, awakened by the noise, were descending the ladder at the same moment.

A fifth shot from Ayrton laid one low, and the others drew back, not understanding what was going on. Ayrton was on deck in two bounds, and three seconds later, having discharged his last barrel in the face of a pirate who was about to seize him by the throat, he leaped over the bulwarks into the sea.

Ayrton had not made six strokes before shots were splashing around him like hail.

What were Pencroft’s feelings, sheltered under a rock on the islet! What were those of Harding, the reporter, Herbert, and Neb, crouched in the Chimneys, when they heard the reports on board the brig! They rushed out on to the beach, and, their guns shouldered, they stood ready to repel any attack.

They had no doubt about it themselves! Ayrton, surprised by the pirates, had been murdered, and, perhaps, the wretches would profit by the night to make a descent on the island!

Half an hour was passed in terrible anxiety. The firing had ceased, and yet neither Ayrton nor Pencroft had reappeared. Was the islet invaded? Ought they not to fly to the help of Ayrton and Pencroft? But how? The tide being high at that time, rendered the channel impassable. The boat was not there! We may imagine the horrible anxiety which took possession of Harding and his companions!

At last, towards half-past twelve, a boat, carrying two men, touched the beach. It was Ayrton, slightly wounded in the shoulder, and Pencroft, safe and sound, whom their friends received with open arms.

All immediately took refuge in the Chimneys. There Ayrton recounted all that had passed, even to his plan for blowing up the brig, which he had attempted to put into execution.

All hands were extended to Ayrton, who did not conceal from them that their situation was serious. The pirates had been alarmed. They knew that Lincoln Island was inhabited. They would land upon it in numbers and well armed. They would respect nothing. Should the settlers fall into their hands, they must expect no mercy!

“Well, we shall know how to die!” said the reporter.

“Let us go in and watch,” answered the engineer.

“Have we any chance of escape, captain?” asked the sailor.

“Yes, Pencroft.”

“Hum! six against fifty!”

“Yes! six! without counting — ”

“Who?” asked Pencroft.

Cyrus did not reply, but pointed upwards.

CHAPTER 3

The night passed without incident. The colonists were on the qui vive, and did not leave their post at the Chimneys. The pirates, on their side, did not appear to have made any attempt to land. Since the last shots fired at Ayrton not a report, not even a sound, had betrayed the presence of the brig in the neighborhood of the island. It might have been fancied that she had weighed anchor, thinking that she had to deal with her match, and had left the coast.

But it was no such thing, and when day began to dawn the settlers could see a confused mass through the morning mist. It was the “Speedy.”

“These, my friends,” said the engineer, “are the arrangements which appear to me best to make before the fog completely clears away. It hides us from the eyes of the pirates, and we can act without attracting their attention. The most important thing is, that the convicts should believe that the inhabitants of the island are numerous, and consequently capable of resisting them. I therefore propose that we divide into three parties. The first of which shall be posted at the Chimneys, the second at the mouth of the Mercy. As to the third, I think it would be best to place it on the islet, so as to prevent, or at all events delay, any attempt at landing. We have the use of two rifles and four muskets. Each of us will be armed, and, as we are amply provided with powder and shot, we need not spare our fire. We have nothing to fear from the muskets nor even from the guns of the brig. What can they do against these rocks? And, as we shall not fire from the windows of Granite House, the pirates will not think of causing irreparable damage by throwing shell against it. What is to be feared is, the necessity of meeting hand-to-hand, since the convicts have numbers on their side. We must therefore try to prevent them from landing, but without discovering ourselves. Therefore, do not economize the ammunition. Fire often, but with a sure aim. We have each eight or ten enemies to kill, and they must be killed!”

Cyrus Harding had clearly represented their situation, although he spoke in the calmest voice, as if it was a question of directing a piece of work and not ordering a battle. His companions approved these arrangements without even uttering a word. There was nothing more to be done but for each to take his place before the fog should be completely dissipated. Neb and Pencroft immediately ascended to Granite House and brought back a sufficient quantity of ammunition. Gideon Spilett and Ayrton, both very good marksmen, were armed with the two rifles, which carried nearly a mile. The four other muskets were divided among Harding, Neb, Pencroft, and Herbert.

The posts were arranged in the following manner: —

Cyrus Harding and Herbert remained in ambush at the Chimneys, thus commanding the shore to the foot of Granite House.

Gideon Spilett and Neb crouched among the rocks at the mouth of the Mercy, from which the drawbridges had been raised, so as to prevent any one from crossing in a boat or landing on the opposite shore.

As to Ayrton and Pencroft, they shoved off in the boat, and prepared to cross the channel and to take up two separate stations on the islet. In this way, shots being fired from four different points at once, the convicts would be led to believe that the island was both largely peopled and strongly defended.

In the event of a landing being effected without their having been able to prevent it, and also if they saw that they were on the point of being cut off by the brig’s boat, Ayrton and Pencroft were to return in their boat to the shore and proceed towards the threatened spot.

Before starting to occupy their posts, the colonists for the last time wrung each other’s hands.

Pencroft succeeded in controlling himself sufficiently to suppress his emotion when he embraced Herbert, his boy! and then they separated.

In a few moments Harding and Herbert on one side, the reporter and Neb on the other, had disappeared behind the rocks, and five minutes later Ayrton and Pencroft, having without difficulty crossed the channel, disembarked on the islet and concealed themselves in the clefts of its eastern shore.

None of them could have been seen, for they themselves could scarcely distinguish the brig in the fog.

It was half-past six in the morning.

Soon the fog began to clear away, and the topmasts of the brig issued from the vapor. For some minutes great masses rolled over the surface of the sea, then a breeze sprang up, which rapidly dispelled the mist.

The “Speedy” now appeared in full view, with a spring on her cable, her head to the north, presenting her larboard side to the island. Just as Harding had calculated, she was not more than a mile and a quarter from the coast.

The sinister black flag floated from the peak.

The engineer, with his telescope, could see that the four guns on board were pointed at the island. They were evidently ready to fire at a moment’s notice.

In the meanwhile the “Speedy” remained silent. About thirty pirates could be seen moving on the deck. A few more on the poop; two others posted in the shrouds, and armed with spyglasses, were attentively surveying the island.

Certainly, Bob Harvey and his crew would not be able easily to give an account of what had happened during the night on board the brig. Had this half-naked man, who had forced the door of the powder-magazine, and with whom they had struggled, who had six times discharged his revolver at them, who had killed one and wounded two others, escaped their shot? Had he been able to swim to shore? Whence did he come? What had been his object? Had his design really been to blow up the brig, as Bob Harvey had thought? All this must be confused enough to the convicts’ minds. But what they could no longer doubt was that the unknown island before which the “Speedy” had cast anchor was inhabited, and that there was, perhaps, a numerous colony ready to defend it. And yet no one was to be seen, neither on the shore, nor on the heights. The beach appeared to be absolutely deserted. At any rate, there was no trace of dwellings. Had the inhabitants fled into the interior? Thus probably the pirate captain reasoned, and doubtless, like a prudent man, he wished to reconnoiter the locality before he allowed his men to venture there.

During an hour and a half, no indication of attack or landing could be observed on board the brig. Evidently Bob Harvey was hesitating. Even with his strongest telescopes he could not have perceived one of the settlers crouched among the rocks. It was not even probable that his attention had been awakened by the screen of green branches and creepers hiding the windows of Granite House, and showing rather conspicuously on the bare rock. Indeed, how could he imagine that a dwelling was hollowed out, at that height, in the solid granite? From Claw Cape to the Mandible Capes, in all the extent of Union Bay, there was nothing to lead him to suppose that the island was or could be inhabited.

At eight o'clock, however, the colonists observed a movement on board the "Speedy." A boat was lowered, and seven men jumped into her. They were armed with muskets; one took the yoke-lines, four others the oars, and the two others, kneeling in the bows, ready to fire, reconnoitered the island. Their object was no doubt to make an examination but not to land, for in the latter case they would have come in larger numbers. The pirates from their look-out could have seen that the coast was sheltered by an islet, separated from it by a channel half a mile in width. However, it was soon evident to Cyrus Harding, on observing the direction followed by the boat, that they would not attempt to penetrate into the channel, but would land on the islet.

Pencroft and Ayrton, each hidden in a narrow cleft of the rock, saw them coming directly towards them, and waited till they were within range.

The boat advanced with extreme caution. The oars only dipped into the water at long intervals. It could now be seen that one of the convicts held a lead-line in his hand, and that he wished to fathom the depth of the channel hollowed out by the current of the Mercy. This showed that it was Bob Harvey's intention to bring his brig as near as possible to the coast. About thirty pirates, scattered in the rigging, followed every movement of the boat, and took the bearings of certain landmarks which would allow them to approach without danger. The boat was not more than two cables-lengths off the islet when she stopped. The man at the tiller stood up and looked for the best place at which to land.

At that moment two shots were heard. Smoke curled up from among the rocks of the islet. The man at the helm and the man with the lead-line fell backwards into the boat. Ayrton’s and Pencroft’s balls had struck them both at the same moment.

Almost immediately a louder report was heard, a cloud of smoke issued from the brig’s side, and a ball, striking the summit of the rock which sheltered Ayrton and Pencroft, made it fly in splinters, but the two marksmen remained unhurt.

Horrible imprecations burst from the boat, which immediately continued its way. The man who had been at the tiller was replaced by one of his comrades, and the oars were rapidly plunged into the water. However, instead of returning on board as might have been expected, the boat coasted along the islet, so as to round its southern point. The pirates pulled vigorously at their oars that they might get out of range of the bullets.

They advanced to within five cables-lengths of that part of the shore terminated by Flotsam Point, and after having rounded it in a semicircular line, still protected by the brig’s guns, they proceeded towards the mouth of the Mercy.

Their evident intention was to penetrate into the channel, and cut off the colonists posted on the islet, in such a way, that whatever their number might be, being placed between the fire from the boat and the fire from the brig, they would find themselves in a very disadvantageous position.

A quarter of an hour passed while the boat advanced in this direction. Absolute silence, perfect calm reigned in the air and on the water.

Pencroft and Ayrton, although they knew they ran the risk of being cut off, had not left their post, both that they did not wish to show themselves as yet to their assailants, and expose themselves to the “Speedy’s” guns, and that they relied on Neb and Gideon Spilett, watching at the mouth of the river, and on Cyrus Harding and Herbert, in ambush among the rocks at the Chimneys.

Twenty minutes after the first shots were fired, the boat was less than two cables-lengths off the Mercy. As the tide was beginning to rise with its accustomed violence, caused by the narrowness of the straits, the pirates were drawn towards the river, and it was only by dint of hard rowing that they were able to keep in the middle of the channel. But, as they were passing within good range of the mouth of the Mercy, two balls saluted them, and two more of their number were laid in the bottom of the boat. Neb and Spilett had not missed their aim.

The brig immediately sent a second ball on the post betrayed by the smoke, but without any other result than that of splintering the rock.

The boat now contained only three able men. Carried on by the current, it shot through the channel with the rapidity of an arrow, passed before Harding and Herbert, who, not thinking it within range, withheld their fire, then, rounding the northern point of the islet with the two remaining oars, they pulled towards the brig.

Hitherto the settlers had nothing to complain of. Their adversaries had certainly had the worst of it. The latter already counted four men seriously wounded if not dead; they, on the contrary, unwounded, had not missed a shot. If the pirates continued to attack them in this way, if they renewed their attempt to land by means of a boat, they could be destroyed one by one.

It was now seen how advantageous the engineer's arrangements had been. The pirates would think that they had to deal with numerous and well-armed adversaries, whom they could not easily get the better of.

Half an hour passed before the boat, having to pull against the current, could get alongside the “Speedy.” Frightful cries were heard when they returned on board with the wounded, and two or three guns were fired with no results.

But now about a dozen other convicts, maddened with rage, and possibly by the effect of the evening’s potations, threw themselves into the boat. A second boat was also lowered, in which eight men took their places, and while the first pulled straight for the islet, to dislodge the colonists from thence the second maneuvered so as to force the entrance of the Mercy.

The situation was evidently becoming very dangerous for Pencroft and Ayrton, and they saw that they must regain the mainland.

However, they waited till the first boat was within range, when two well-directed balls threw its crew into disorder. Then, Pencroft and Ayrton, abandoning their posts, under fire from the dozen muskets, ran across the islet at full speed, jumped into their boat, crossed the channel at the moment the second boat reached the southern end, and ran to hide themselves in the Chimneys.

They had scarcely rejoined Cyrus Harding and Herbert, before the islet was overrun with pirates in every direction. Almost at the same moment, fresh reports resounded from the Mercy station, to which the second boat was rapidly approaching. Two, out of the eight men who manned her, were mortally wounded by Gideon Spilett and Neb, and the boat herself, carried irresistibly onto the reefs, was stove in at the mouth of the Mercy. But the six survivors, holding their muskets above their heads to preserve them from contact with the water, managed to land on the right bank of the river.

Then, finding they were exposed to the fire of the ambush there, they fled in the direction of Flotsam Point, out of range of the balls.

The actual situation was this: on the islet were a dozen convicts, of whom some were no doubt wounded, but who had still a boat at their disposal; on the island were six, but who could not by any possibility reach Granite House, as they could not cross the river, all the bridges being raised.

“Hallo,” exclaimed Pencroft as he rushed into the Chimneys, “hallo, captain! What do you think of it, now?”

“I think,” answered the engineer, “that the combat will now take a new form, for it cannot be supposed that the convicts will be so foolish as to remain in a position so unfavorable for them!”

“They won’t cross the channel,” said the sailor. “Ayrton and Mr. Spilett’s rifles are there to prevent them. You know that they carry more than a mile!”

“No doubt,” replied Herbert; “but what can two rifles do against the brig’s guns?”

“Well, the brig isn’t in the channel yet, I fancy!” said Pencroft.

“But suppose she does come there?” said Harding.

“That’s impossible, for she would risk running aground and being lost!”

“It is possible,” said Ayrton. “The convicts might profit by the high tide to enter the channel, with the risk of grounding at low tide, it is true; but then, under the fire from her guns, our posts would be no longer tenable.”

“Confound them!” exclaimed Pencroft, “it really seems as if the blackguards were preparing to weigh anchor.”

“Perhaps we shall be obliged to take refuge in Granite House!” observed Herbert.

“We must wait!” answered Cyrus Harding.

“But Mr. Spilett and Neb?” said Pencroft.

“They will know when it is best to rejoin us. Be ready, Ayrton. It is yours and Spilett’s rifles which must speak now.”

It was only too true. The “Speedy” was beginning to weigh her anchor, and her intention was evidently to approach the islet. The tide would be rising for an hour and a half, and the ebb current being already weakened, it would be easy for the brig to advance. But as to entering the channel, Pencroft, contrary to Ayrton’s opinion, could not believe that she would dare to attempt it.

In the meanwhile, the pirates who occupied the islet had gradually advanced to the opposite shore, and were now only separated from the mainland by the channel.

Being armed with muskets alone, they could do no harm to the settlers, in ambush at the Chimneys and the mouth of the Mercy; but, not knowing the latter to be supplied with long-range rifles, they on their side did not believe themselves to be exposed. Quite uncovered, therefore, they surveyed the islet, and examined the shore.

Their illusion was of short duration. Ayrton’s and Gideon Spilett’s rifles then spoke, and no doubt imparted some very disagreeable intelligence to two of the convicts, for they fell backwards.

Then there was a general helter-skelter. The ten others, not even stopping to pick up their dead or wounded companions, fled to the other side of the islet, tumbled into the boat which had brought them, and pulled away with all their strength.

“Eight less!” exclaimed Pencroft. “Really, one would have thought that Mr. Spilett and Ayrton had given the word to fire together!”

“Gentlemen,” said Ayrton, as he reloaded his gun, “this is becoming more serious. The brig is making sail!”

“The anchor is weighed!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Yes, and she is already moving.”

In fact, they could distinctly hear the creaking of the windlass. The “Speedy” was at first held by her anchor; then, when that had been raised, she began to drift towards the shore. The wind was blowing from the sea; the jib and the foretopsail were hoisted, and the vessel gradually approached the island.

From the two posts of the Mercy and the Chimneys they watched her without giving a sign of life, but not without some emotion. What could be more terrible for the colonists than to be exposed, at a short distance, to the brig’s guns, without being able to reply with any effect? How could they then prevent the pirates from landing?

Cyrus Harding felt this strongly, and he asked himself what it would be possible to do. Before long, he would be called upon for his determination. But what was it to be? To shut themselves up in Granite House, to be besieged there, to remain there for weeks, for months even, since they had an abundance of provisions? So far good! But after that? The pirates would not the less be masters of the island, which they would ravage at their pleasure, and in time, they would end by having their revenge on the prisoners in Granite House.

However, one chance yet remained; it was that Bob Harvey, after all, would not venture his ship into the channel, and that he would keep outside the islet. He would be still separated from the coast by half a mile, and at that distance his shot could not be very destructive.

“Never!” repeated Pencroft, “Bob Harvey will never, if he is a good seaman, enter that channel! He knows well that it would risk the brig, if the sea got up ever so little! And what would become of him without his vessel?”

In the meanwhile the brig approached the islet, and it could be seen that she was endeavoring to make the lower end. The breeze was light, and as the current had then lost much of its force, Bob Harvey had absolute command over his vessel.

The route previously followed by the boats had allowed her to reconnoiter the channel, and she boldly entered it.

The pirate’s design was now only too evident; he wished to bring her broadside to bear on the Chimneys and from there to reply with shell and ball to the shot which had till then decimated her crew.

Soon the “Speedy” reached the point of the islet; she rounded it with ease; the mainsail was braced up, and the brig hugging the wind, stood across the mouth of the Mercy.

“The scoundrels! they are coming!” said Pencroft.

At that moment, Cyrus Harding, Ayrton, the sailor, and Herbert, were rejoined by Neb and Gideon Spilett.

The reporter and his companion had judged it best to abandon the post at the Mercy, from which they could do nothing against the ship, and they had acted wisely. It was better that the colonists should be together at the moment when they were about to engage in a decisive action. Gideon Spilett and Neb had arrived by dodging behind the rocks, though not without attracting a shower of bullets, which had not, however, reached them.

“Spilett! Neb!” cried the engineer. “You are not wounded?”

“No,” answered the reporter, “a few bruises only from the ricochet! But that cursed brig has entered the channel!”

“Yes,” replied Pencroft, “and in ten minutes she will have anchored before Granite House!”

“Have you formed any plan, Cyrus?” asked the reporter.

“We must take refuge in Granite House while there is still time, and the convicts cannot see us.”

“That is, my opinion, too,” replied Gideon Spilett, “but once shut up — ”

“We must be guided by circumstances,” said the engineer.

“Let us be off, then, and make haste!” said the reporter.

“Would you not wish, captain, that Ayrton and I should remain here?” asked the sailor.

“What would be the use of that, Pencroft?” replied Harding. “No. We will not separate!”

There was not a moment to be lost. The colonists left the Chimneys. A bend of the cliff prevented them from being seen by those in the brig, but two or three reports, and the crash of bullets on the rock, told them that the “Speedy” was at no great distance.

To spring into the lift, hoist themselves up to the door of Granite House, where Top and Jup had been shut up since the evening before, to rush into the large room, was the work of a minute only.

It was quite time, for the settlers, through the branches, could see the “Speedy,” surrounded with smoke, gliding up the channel. The firing was incessant, and shot from the four guns struck blindly, both on the Mercy post, although it was not occupied, and on the Chimneys. The rocks were splintered, and cheers accompanied each discharge. However, they were hoping that Granite House would be spared, thanks to Harding’s precaution of concealing the windows when a shot, piercing the door, penetrated into the passage.

“We are discovered!” exclaimed Pencroft.

The colonists had not, perhaps, been seen, but it was certain that Bob Harvey had thought proper to send a ball through the suspected foliage which concealed that part of the cliff. Soon he redoubled his attack, when another ball having torn away the leafy screen, disclosed a gaping aperture in the granite.

The colonists’ situation was desperate. Their retreat was discovered. They could not oppose any obstacle to these missiles, nor protect the stone, which flew in splinters around them. There was nothing to be done but to take refuge in the upper passage of Granite House, and leave their dwelling to be devastated, when a deep roar was heard, followed by frightful cries!

Cyrus Harding and his companions rushed to one of the windows —

The brig, irresistibly raised on a sort of water-spout, had just split in two, and in less than ten seconds she was swallowed up with all her criminal crew!

CHAPTER 4

“She has blown up!” cried Herbert.

“Yes! blown up, just as if Ayrton had set fire to the powder!” returned Pencroft, throwing himself into the lift together with Neb and the lad.

“But what has happened?” asked Gideon Spilett, quite stunned by this unexpected catastrophe.

“Oh! this time, we shall know — ” answered the engineer quickly.

“What shall we know? — ”

“Later! later! Come, Spilett. The main point is that these pirates have been exterminated!”

And Cyrus Harding, hurrying away the reporter and Ayrton, joined Pencroft, Neb, and Herbert on the beach.

Nothing could be seen of the brig, not even her masts. After having been raised by the water-spout, she had fallen on her side, and had sunk in that position, doubtless in consequence of some enormous leak. But as in that place the channel was not more than twenty feet in depth, it was certain that the sides of the submerged brig would reappear at low water.

A few things from the wreck floated on the surface of the water, a raft could be seen consisting of spare spars, coops of poultry with their occupants still living, boxes and barrels, which gradually came to the surface, after having escaped through the hatchways, but no pieces of the wreck appeared, neither planks from the deck, nor timber from the hull, — which rendered the sudden disappearance of the “Speedy” perfectly inexplicable.

However, the two masts, which had been broken and escaped from the shrouds and stays came up, and with their sails, some furled and the others spread. But it was not necessary to wait for the tide to bring up these riches, and Ayrton and Pencroft jumped into the boat with the intention of towing the pieces of wreck either to the beach or to the islet. But just as they were shoving off, an observation from Gideon Spilett arrested them.

“What about those six convicts who disembarked on the right bank of the Mercy?” said he.

In fact, it would not do to forget that the six men whose boat had gone to pieces on the rocks had landed at Flotsam Point.

They looked in that direction. None of the fugitives were visible. It was probable that, having seen their vessel engulfed in the channel, they had fled into the interior of the island.

“We will deal with them later,” said Harding. “As they are armed, they will still be dangerous; but as it is six against six, the chances are equal. To the most pressing business first.”

Ayrton and Pencroft pulled vigorously towards the wreck.

The sea was calm and the tide very high, as there had been a new moon but two days before. A whole hour at least would elapse before the hull of the brig could emerge from the water of the channel.

Ayrton and Pencroft were able to fasten the masts and spars by means of ropes, the ends of which were carried to the beach. There, by the united efforts of the settlers the pieces of wreck were hauled up. Then the boat picked up all that was floating, coops, barrels, and boxes, which were immediately carried to the Chimneys.

Several bodies floated also. Among them, Ayrton recognized that of Bob Harvey, which he pointed out to his companion, saying with some emotion, —

“That is what I have been, Pencroft.”

“But what you are no longer, brave Ayrton!” returned the sailor warmly.

It was singular enough that so few bodies floated. Only five or six were counted, which were already being carried by the current towards the open sea. Very probably the convicts had not had time to escape, and the ship lying over on her side, the greater number of them had remained below. Now the current, by carrying the bodies of these miserable men out to sea, would spare the colonists the sad task of burying them in some corner of their island.

For two hours, Cyrus Harding and his companions were solely occupied in hauling up the spars on to the sand, and then in spreading the sails which were perfectly uninjured, to dry. They spoke little, for they were absorbed in their work, but what thoughts occupied their minds!

The possession of this brig, or rather all that she contained, was a perfect mine of wealth. In fact, a ship is like a little world in miniature, and the stores of the colony would be increased by a large number of useful articles. It would be, on a large scale, equivalent to the chest found at Flotsam Point.

“And besides,” thought Pencroft, “why should it be impossible to refloat the brig? If she has only a leak, that may be stopped up; a vessel from three to four hundred tons, why she is a regular ship compared to our ‘Bonadventure’! And we could go a long distance in her! We could go anywhere we liked! Captain Harding, Ayrton and I must examine her! She would be well worth the trouble!”

In fact, if the brig was still fit to navigate, the colonists’ chances of returning to their native land were singularly increased. But, to decide this important question, it was necessary to wait until the tide was quite low, so that every part of the brig’s hull might be examined.

When their treasures had been safely conveyed on shore, Harding and his companions agreed to devote some minutes to breakfast. They were almost famished; fortunately, the larder was not far off, and Neb was noted for being an expeditious cook. They breakfasted, therefore, near the Chimneys, and during their repast, as may be supposed, nothing was talked of but the event which had so miraculously saved the colony.

“Miraculous is the word,” repeated Pencroft, “for it must be acknowledged that those rascals blew up just at the right moment! Granite House was beginning to be uncomfortable as a habitation!”

“And can you guess, Pencroft,” asked the reporter, “how it happened, or what can have occasioned the explosion?”

“Oh! Mr. Spilett, nothing is more simple,” answered Pencroft. “A convict vessel is not disciplined like a man-of-war! Convicts are not sailors. Of course the powder-magazine was open, and as they were firing incessantly, some careless or clumsy fellow just blew up the vessel!”

“Captain Harding,” said Herbert, “what astonishes me is that the explosion has not produced more effect. The report was not loud, and besides there are so few planks and timbers torn out. It seems as if the ship had rather foundered than blown up.”

“Does that astonish you, my boy?” asked the engineer.

“Yes, captain.”

“And it astonishes me also, Herbert,” replied he, “but when we visit the hull of the brig, we shall no doubt find the explanation of the matter.”

“Why, captain,” said Pencroft, “you don’t suppose that the ‘Speedy’ simply foundered like a ship which has struck on a rock?”

“Why not,” observed Neb, “if there are rocks in the channel?”

“Nonsense, Neb,” answered Pencroft, “you did not look at the right moment. An instant before she sank, the brig, as I saw perfectly well, rose on an enormous wave, and fell back on her larboard side. Now, if she had only struck, she would have sunk quietly and gone to the bottom like an honest vessel.”

“It was just because she was not an honest vessel!” returned Neb.

“Well, we shall soon see, Pencroft,” said the engineer.

“We shall soon see,” rejoined the sailor, “but I would wager my head there are no rocks in the channel. Look here, captain, to speak candidly, do you mean to say that there is anything marvelous in the occurrence?”

Cyrus Harding did not answer.

“At any rate,” said Gideon Spilett, “whether rock or explosion, you will agree, Pencroft, that it occurred just in the nick of time!”

"Yes! yes!" replied the sailor, "but that is not the question. I ask Captain Harding if he sees anything supernatural in all this."

"I cannot say, Pencroft," said the engineer. "That is all the answer I can make."

A reply which did not satisfy Pencroft at all. He stuck to "an explosion," and did not wish to give it up. He would never consent to admit that in that channel, with its fine sandy bed, just like the beach, which he had often crossed at low water, there could be an unknown rock.

And besides, at the time the brig foundered, it was high water, that is to say, there was enough water to carry the vessel clear over any rocks which would not be uncovered at low tide. Therefore, there could not have been a collision. Therefore, the vessel had not struck. So she had blown up.

And it must be confessed that the sailor's arguments were reasonable.

Towards half-past one, the colonists embarked in the boat to visit the wreck. It was to be regretted that the brig's two boats had not been saved; but one, as has been said, had gone to pieces at the mouth of the Mercy, and was absolutely useless; the other had disappeared when the brig went down, and had not again been seen, having doubtless been crushed.

The hull of the "Speedy" was just beginning to issue from the water. The brig was lying right over on her side, for her masts being broken, pressed down by the weight of the ballast displaced by the shock, the keel was visible along her whole length. She had been regularly turned over by the inexplicable but frightful submarine action, which had been at the same time manifested by an enormous water-spout.

The settlers rowed round the hull, and in proportion as the tide went down, they could ascertain, if not the cause which had occasioned the catastrophe, at least the effect produced.

Towards the bows, on both sides of the keel, seven or eight feet from the beginning of the stem, the sides of the brig were frightfully torn. Over a length of at least twenty feet there opened two large leaks, which would be impossible to stop up. Not only had the copper sheathing and the planks disappeared, reduced, no doubt, to powder, but also the ribs, the iron bolts, and treenails which united them. From the entire length of the hull to the stern the false keel had been separated with an unaccountable violence, and the keel itself, torn from the carline in several places, was split in all its length.

“I’ve a notion!” exclaimed Pencroft, “that this vessel will be difficult to get afloat again.”

“It will be impossible,” said Ayrton.

“At any rate,” observed Gideon Spilett to the sailor, “the explosion, if there has been one, has produced singular effects! It has split the lower part of the hull, instead of blowing up the deck and topsides! These great rents appear rather to have been made by a rock than by the explosion of a powder-magazine.”

“There is not a rock in the channel!” answered the sailor. “I will admit anything you like, except the rock.”

“Let us try to penetrate into the interior of the brig,” said the engineer; “perhaps we shall then know what to think of the cause of her destruction.”

This was the best thing to be done, and it was agreed, besides, to take an inventory of all the treasures on board, and to arrange their preservation.

Access to the interior of the brig was now easy. The tide was still going down and the deck was practicable. The ballast, composed of heavy masses of iron, had broken through in several places. The noise of the sea could be heard as it rushed out at the holes in the hull.

Cyrus Harding and his companions, hatchets in hand, advanced along the shattered deck. Cases of all sorts encumbered it, and, as they had been but a very short time in the water, their contents were perhaps uninjured.

They then busied themselves in placing all this cargo in safety. The water would not return for several hours, and these hours must be employed in the most profitable way. Ayrton and Pencroft had, at the entrance made in the hull, discovered tackle, which would serve to hoist up the barrels and chests. The boat received them and transported them to the shore. They took the articles as they came, intending to sort them afterwards.

At any rate, the settlers saw at once, with extreme satisfaction, that the brig possessed a very varied cargo — an assortment of all sorts of articles, utensils, manufactured goods, and tools — such as the ships which make the great coasting-trade of Polynesia are usually laden with. It was probable that they would find a little of everything, and they agreed that it was exactly what was necessary for the colony of Lincoln Island.

However — and Cyrus Harding observed it in silent astonishment — not only, as has been said, had the hull of the brig enormously suffered from the shock, whatever it was, that had occasioned the catastrophe, but the interior arrangements had been destroyed, especially towards the bows. Partitions and stanchions were smashed, as if some tremendous shell had burst in the interior of the brig. The colonists could easily go fore and aft, after having removed the cases as they were extricated. They were not heavy bales, which would have been difficult to remove, but simple packages, of which the stowage, besides, was no longer recognizable.

The colonists then reached the stern of the brig — the part formerly surmounted by the poop. It was there that, following Ayrton’s directions, they must look for the powder-magazine. Cyrus Harding thought that it had not exploded; that it was possible some barrels might be saved, and that the powder, which is usually enclosed in metal coverings might not have suffered from contact with the water.

This, in fact, was just what had happened. They extricated from among a large number of shot twenty barrels, the insides of which were lined with copper. Pencroft was convinced by the evidence of his own eyes that the destruction of the “Speedy” could not be attributed to an explosion. That part of the hull in which the magazine was situated was, moreover, that which had suffered least.

“It may be so,” said the obstinate sailor; “but as to a rock, there is not one in the channel!”

“Then, how did it happen?” asked Herbert.

“I don’t know,” answered Pencroft, “Captain Harding doesn’t know, and nobody knows or ever will know!”

Several hours had passed during these researches, and the tide began to flow. Work must be suspended for the present. There was no fear of the brig being carried away by the sea, for she was already fixed as firmly as if moored by her anchors.

They could, therefore, without inconvenience, wait until the next day to resume operations; but, as to the vessel itself, she was doomed, and it would be best to hasten to save the remains of her hull, as she would not be long in disappearing in the quicksands of the channel.

It was now five o’clock in the evening. It had been a hard day’s work for the men. They ate with good appetite, and notwithstanding their fatigue, they could not resist, after dinner, their desire of inspecting the cases which composed the cargo of the “Speedy.”

Most of them contained clothes, which, as may be believed, was well received. There were enough to clothe a whole colony — linen for every one’s use, shoes for every one’s feet.

“We are too rich!” exclaimed Pencroft, “But what are we going to do with all this?”

And every moment burst forth the hurrahs of the delighted sailor when he caught sight of the barrels of gunpowder, firearms and sidearms, balls of cotton, implements of husbandry, carpenter’s, joiner’s, and blacksmith’s tools, and boxes of all kinds of seeds, not in the least injured by their short sojourn in the water. Ah, two years before, how these things would have been prized! And now, even though the industrious colonists had provided themselves with tools, these treasures would find their use.

There was no want of space in the store-rooms of Granite House, but that daytime would not allow them to stow away the whole. It would not do also to forget that the six survivors of the “Speedy’s” crew had landed on the island, for they were in all probability scoundrels of the deepest dye, and it was necessary that the colonists should be on their guard against them. Although the bridges over the Mercy were raised, the convicts would not be stopped by a river or a stream and, rendered desperate, these wretches would be capable of anything.

They would see later what plan it would be best to follow; but in the meantime it was necessary to mount guard over cases and packages heaped up near the Chimneys, and thus the settlers employed themselves in turn during the night.

The morning came, however, without the convicts having attempted any attack. Master Jup and Top, on guard at the foot of Granite House, would have quickly given the alarm. The three following days — the 19th, 20th, and 21st of October — were employed in saving everything of value, or of any use whatever, either from the cargo or rigging of the brig. At low tide they overhauled the hold — at high tide they stowed away the rescued articles. A great part of the copper sheathing had been torn from the hull, which every day sank lower. But before the sand had swallowed the heavy things which had fallen through the bottom, Ayrton and Pencroft, diving to the bed of the channel, recovered the chains and anchors of the brig, the iron of her ballast, and even four guns, which, floated by means of empty casks, were brought to shore.

It may be seen that the arsenal of the colony had gained by the wreck, as well as the storerooms of Granite House. Pencroft, always enthusiastic in his projects, already spoke of constructing a battery to command the channel and the mouth of the river. With four guns, he engaged to prevent any fleet, “however powerful it might be,” from venturing into the waters of Lincoln Island!

In the meantime, when nothing remained of the brig but a useless hulk, bad weather came on, which soon finished her. Cyrus Harding had intended to blow her up, so as to collect the remains on the shore, but a strong gale from the northeast and a heavy sea compelled him to economize his powder.

In fact, on the night of the 23rd, the hull entirely broke up, and some of the wreck was cast up on the beach.

As to the papers on board, it is useless to say that, although he carefully searched the lockers of the poop, Harding did not discover any trace of them. The pirates had evidently destroyed everything that concerned either the captain or the owners of the “Speedy,” and, as the name of her port was not painted on her counter, there was nothing which would tell them her nationality. However, by the shape of her boats Ayrton and Pencroft believed that the brig was of English build.

A week after the castrophe — or, rather, after the fortunate, though inexplicable, event to which the colony owed its preservation — nothing more could be seen of the vessel, even at low tide. The wreck had disappeared, and Granite House was enriched by nearly all it had contained.

However, the mystery which enveloped its strange destruction would doubtless never have been cleared away if, on the 30th of November, Neb, strolling on the beach, had not found a piece of a thick iron cylinder, bearing traces of explosion. The edges of this cylinder were twisted and broken, as if they had been subjected to the action of some explosive substance.

Neb brought this piece of metal to his master, who was then occupied with his companions in the workshop of the Chimneys.

Cyrus Harding examined the cylinder attentively, then, turning to Pencroft, —

“You persist, my friend,” said he, “in maintaining that the ‘Speedy’ was not lost in consequence of a collision?”

“Yes, captain,” answered the sailor. “You know as well as I do that there are no rocks in the channel.”

“But suppose she had run against this piece of iron?” said the engineer, showing the broken cylinder.

“What, that bit of pipe!” exclaimed Pencroft in a tone of perfect incredulity.

“My friends,” resumed Harding, “you remember that before she foundered the brig rose on the summit of a regular waterspout?”

“Yes, captain,” replied Herbert.

“Well, would you like to know what occasioned that waterspout? It was this,” said the engineer, holding up the broken tube.

“That?” returned Pencroft.

“Yes! This cylinder is all that remains of a torpedo!”

“A torpedo!” exclaimed the engineer’s companions.

“And who put the torpedo there?” demanded Pencroft, who did not like to yield.

“All that I can tell you is, that it was not I,” answered Cyrus Harding; “but it was there, and you have been able to judge of its incomparable power!”

CHAPTER 5

So, then, all was explained by the submarine explosion of this torpedo. Cyrus Harding could not be mistaken, as, during the war of the Union, he had had occasion to try these terrible engines of destruction. It was under the action of this cylinder, charged with some explosive substance, nitro-glycerine, picrate, or some other material of the same nature, that the water of the channel had been raised like a dome, the bottom of the brig crushed in, and she had sunk instantly, the damage done to her hull being so considerable that it was impossible to refloat her. The “Speedy” had not been able to withstand a torpedo that would have destroyed an ironclad as easily as a fishing-boat!

Yes! all was explained, everything — except the presence of the torpedo in the waters of the channel!

“My friends, then,” said Cyrus Harding, “we can no longer be in doubt as to the presence of a mysterious being, a castaway like us, perhaps, abandoned on our island, and I say this in order that Ayrton may be acquainted with all the strange events which have occurred during these two years. Who this beneficent stranger is, whose intervention has, so fortunately for us, been manifested on many occasions, I cannot imagine. What his object can be in acting thus, in concealing himself after rendering us so many services, I cannot understand: But his services are not the less real, and are of such a nature that only a man possessed of prodigious power, could render them. Ayrton is indebted to him as much as we are, for, if it was the stranger who saved me from the waves after the fall from the balloon, evidently it was he who wrote the document, who placed the bottle in the channel, and who has made known to us the situation of our companion. I will add that it was he who guided that chest, provided with everything we wanted, and stranded it on Flotsam Point; that it was he who lighted that fire on the heights of the island, which permitted you to land; that it was he who fired that bullet found in the body of the peccary; that it was he who plunged that torpedo into the channel, which destroyed the brig; in a word, that all those inexplicable events, for which we could not assign a reason, are due to this mysterious being. Therefore, whoever he may be, whether shipwrecked, or exiled on our island, we shall be ungrateful, if we think ourselves freed from gratitude towards him. We have contracted a debt, and I hope that we shall one day pay it."

"You are right in speaking thus, my dear Cyrus," replied Gideon Spilett. "Yes, there is an almost all-powerful being, hidden in some part of the island, and whose influence has been singularly useful to our colony. I will add that the unknown appears to possess means of action which border on the supernatural, if in the events of practical life the supernatural were recognizable. Is it he who is in secret communication with us by the well in Granite House, and has he thus a knowledge of all our plans? Was it he who threw us that bottle, when the vessel made her first cruise? Was it he who threw Top out of the lake, and killed the dugong? Was it he, who as everything leads us to believe, saved you from the waves, and that under circumstances in which any one else would not have been able to act? If it was he, he possesses a power which renders him master of the elements."

The reporter's reasoning was just, and every one felt it to be so.

"Yes," rejoined Cyrus Harding, "if the intervention of a human being is not more questionable for us, I agree that he has at his disposal means of action beyond those possessed by humanity. There is a mystery still, but if we discover the man, the mystery will be discovered also. The question, then, is, ought we to respect the incognito of this generous being, or ought we to do everything to find him out? What is your opinion on the matter?”

“My opinion,” said Pencroft, “is that, whoever he may be, he is a brave man, and he has my esteem!”

“Be it so,” answered Harding, “but that is not an answer, Pencroft.”

“Master,” then said Neb, “my idea is, that we may search as long as we like for this gentleman whom you are talking about, but that we shall not discover him till he pleases.”

“That’s not bad, what you say, Neb,” observed Pencroft.

“I am of Neb’s opinion,” said Gideon Spilett, “but that is no reason for not attempting the adventure. Whether we find this mysterious being or not, we shall at least have fulfilled our duty towards him.”

“And you, my boy, give us your opinion,” said the engineer, turning to Herbert.

“Oh,” cried Herbert, his countenance full of animation, “how I should like to thank him, he who saved you first, and who has now saved us!”

“Of course, my boy,” replied Pencroft, “so would I and all of us. I am not inquisitive, but I would give one of my eyes to see this individual face to face! It seems to me that he must be handsome, tall, strong, with a splendid beard, radiant hair, and that he must be seated on clouds, a great ball in his hands!”

“But, Pencroft,” answered Spilett, “you are describing a picture of the Creator.”

“Possibly, Mr. Spilett,” replied the sailor, “but that is how I imagine him!”

“And you, Ayrton?” asked the engineer.

“Captain Harding,” replied Ayrton, “I can give you no better advice in this matter. Whatever you do will be best; when you wish me to join you in your researches, I am ready to follow you.

“I thank you, Ayrton,” answered Cyrus Harding, “but I should like a more direct answer to the question I put to you. You are our companion; you have already endangered your life several times for us, and you, as well as the rest, ought to be consulted in the matter of any important decision. Speak, therefore.”

“Captain Harding,” replied Ayrton, “I think that we ought to do everything to discover this unknown benefactor. Perhaps he is alone. Perhaps he is suffering. Perhaps he has a life to be renewed. I, too, as you said, have a debt of gratitude to pay him. It was he, it could be only he who must have come to Tabor Island, who found there the wretch you knew, and who made known to you that there was an unfortunate man there to be saved. Therefore it is, thanks to him, that I have become a man again. No, I will never forget him!”

“That is settled, then,” said Cyrus Harding. “We will begin our researches as soon as possible. We will not leave a corner of the island unexplored. We will search into its most secret recesses, and will hope that our unknown friend will pardon us in consideration of our intentions!”

For several days the colonists were actively employed in haymaking and the harvest. Before putting their project of exploring the yet unknown parts of the island into execution, they wished to get all possible work finished. It was also the time for collecting the various vegetables from the Tabor Island plants. All was stowed away, and happily there was no want of room in Granite House, in which they might have housed all the treasures of the island. The products of the colony were there, methodically arranged, and in a safe place, as may be believed, sheltered as much from animals as from man.

There was no fear of damp in the middle of that thick mass of granite. Many natural excavations situated in the upper passage were enlarged either by pick-axe or mine, and Granite House thus became a general warehouse, containing all the provisions, arms, tools, and spare utensils — in a word, all the stores of the colony.

As to the guns obtained from the brig, they were pretty pieces of ordnance, which, at Pencroft’s entreaty, were hoisted by means of tackle and pulleys, right up into Granite House; embrasures were made between the windows, and the shining muzzles of the guns could soon be seen through the granite cliff. From this height they commanded all Union Bay. It was like a little Gibraltar, and any vessel anchored off the islet would inevitably be exposed to the fire of this aerial battery.

“Captain,” said Pencroft one day, it was the 8th of November, “now that our fortifications are finished, it would be a good thing if we tried the range of our guns.”

“Do you think that is useful?” asked the engineer.

“It is more than useful, it is necessary! Without that how are we to know to what distance we can send one of those pretty shot with which we are provided?”

“Try them, Pencroft,” replied the engineer. “However, I think that in making the experiment, we ought to employ, not the ordinary powder, the supply of which, I think, should remain untouched, but the pyroxyle which will never fail us.”

“Can the cannon support the shock of the pyroxyle?” asked the reporter, who was not less anxious than Pencroft to try the artillery of Granite House.

“I believe so. However,” added the engineer, “we will be prudent.” The engineer was right in thinking that the guns were of excellent make. Made of forged steel, and breech-loaders, they ought consequently to be able to bear a considerable charge, and also have an enormous range. In fact, as regards practical effect, the transit described by the ball ought to be as extended as possible, and this tension could only be obtained under the condition that the projectile should be impelled with a very great initial velocity.

“Now,” said Harding to his companions, “the initial velocity is in proportion to the quantity of powder used. In the fabrication of these pieces, everything depends on employing a metal with the highest possible power of resistance, and steel is incontestably that metal of all others which resists the best. I have, therefore, reason to believe that our guns will bear without risk the expansion of the pyroxyle gas, and will give excellent results.”

“We shall be a great deal more certain of that when we have tried them!” answered Pencroft.

It is unnecessary to say that the four cannons were in perfect order. Since they had been taken from the water, the sailor had bestowed great care upon them. How many hours he had spent, in rubbing, greasing, and polishing them, and in cleaning the mechanism! And now the pieces were as brilliant as if they had been on board a frigate of the United States Navy.

On this day, therefore, in presence of all the members of the colony, including Master Jup and Top, the four cannon were successively tried. They were charged with pyroxyle, taking into consideration its explosive power, which, as has been said, is four times that of ordinary powder: the projectile to be fired was cylindroconic.

Pencroft, holding the end of the quick-match, stood ready to fire.

At Harding’s signal, he fired. The shot, passing over the islet, fell into the sea at a distance which could not be calculated with exactitude.

The second gun was pointed at the rocks at the end of Flotsam Point, and the shot striking a sharp rock nearly three miles from Granite House, made it fly into splinters. It was Herbert who had pointed this gun and fired it, and very proud he was of his first shot. Pencroft only was prouder than he! Such a shot, the honor of which belonged to his dear boy.

The third shot, aimed this time at the downs forming the upper side of Union Bay, struck the sand at a distance of four miles, then having ricocheted: was lost in the sea in a cloud of spray.

For the fourth piece Cyrus Harding slightly increased the charge, so as to try its extreme range. Then, all standing aside for fear of its bursting, the match was lighted by means of a long cord.

A tremendous report was heard, but the piece had held good, and the colonists rushing to the windows, saw the shot graze the rocks of Mandible Cape, nearly five miles from Granite House, and disappear in Shark Gulf.

“Well, captain,” exclaimed Pencroft, whose cheers might have rivaled the reports themselves, “what do you say of our battery? All the pirates in the Pacific have only to present themselves before Granite House! Not one can land there now without our permission!”

“Believe me, Pencroft,” replied the engineer, “it would be better not to have to make the experiment.”

“Well,” said the sailor, “what ought to be done with regard to those six villains who are roaming about the island? Are we to leave them to overrun our forests, our fields, our plantations? These pirates are regular jaguars, and it seems to me we ought not to hesitate to treat them as such! What do you think, Ayrton?” added Pencroft, turning to his companion.

Ayrton hesitated at first to reply, and Cyrus Harding regretted that Pencroft had so thoughtlessly put this question. And he was much moved when Ayrton replied in a humble tone, —

“I have been one of those jaguars, Mr. Pencroft. I have no right to speak.”

And with a slow step he walked away.

Pencroft understood.

“What a brute I am!” he exclaimed. “Poor Ayrton! He has as much right to speak here as any one!”

“Yes,” said Gideon Spilett, “but his reserve does him honor, and it is right to respect the feeling which he has about his sad past.”

“Certainly, Mr. Spilett,” answered the sailor, “and there is no fear of my doing so again. I would rather bite my tongue off than cause Ayrton any pain! But to return to the question. It seems to me that these ruffians have no right to any pity, and that we ought to rid the island of them as soon as possible."

"Is that your opinion, Pencroft?" asked the engineer.

"Quite my opinion."

"And before hunting them mercilessly, you would not wait until they had committed some fresh act of hostility against us?"

"Isn't what they have done already enough?" asked Pencroft, who did not understand these scruples.

"They may adopt other sentiments!" said Harding, "and perhaps repent."

"They repent!" exclaimed the sailor, shrugging his shoulders.

"Pencroft, think of Ayrton!" said Herbert, taking the sailor's hand. "He became an honest man again!"

Pencroft looked at his companions one after the other. He had never thought of his proposal being met with any objection. His rough nature could not allow that they ought to come to terms with the rascals who had landed on the island with Bob Harvey's accomplices, the murderers of the crew of the "Speedy," and he looked upon them as wild beasts which ought to be destroyed without delay and without remorse.

"Come!" said be. "Everybody is against me! You wish to be generous to those villains! Very well; I hope we mayn't repent it!"

“What danger shall we run,” said Herbert, “if we take care to be always on our guard?”

“Hum!” observed the reporter, who had not given any decided opinion. “They are six and well armed. If they each lay hid in a corner, and each fired at one of us, they would soon be masters of the colony!”

“Why have they not done so?” said Herbert. “No doubt because it was not their interest to do it. Besides, we are six also.”

“Well, well!” replied Pencroft, whom no reasoning could have convinced. “Let us leave these good people to do what they like, and don’t think anything more about them!”

“Come, Pencroft,” said Neb, “don’t make yourself out so bad as all that! Suppose one of these unfortunate men were here before you, within good range of your guns, you would not fire.”

“I would fire on him as I would on a mad dog, Neb,” replied Pencroft coldly.

“Pencroft,” said the engineer, “you have always shown much deference to my advice; will you, in this matter, yield to me?”

“I will do as you please, Captain Harding,” answered the sailor, who was not at all convinced.

“Very well, wait, and we will not attack them unless we are attacked first.”

Thus their behavior towards the pirates was agreed upon, although Pencroft augured nothing good from it. They were not to attack them, but were to be on their guard. After all, the island was large and fertile. If any sentiment of honesty yet remained in the bottom of their hearts, these wretches might perhaps be reclaimed. Was it not their interest in the situation in which they found themselves to begin a new life? At any rate, for humanity’s sake alone, it would be right to wait. The colonists would no longer as before, be able to go and come without fear. Hitherto they had only wild beasts to guard against, and now six convicts of the worst description, perhaps, were roaming over their island. It was serious, certainly, and to less brave men, it would have been security lost! No matter! At present, the colonists had reason on their side against Pencroft. Would they be right in the future? That remained to be seen.

CHAPTER 6

However, the chief business of the colonists was to make that complete exploration of the island which had been decided upon, and which would have two objects: to discover the mysterious being whose existence was now indisputable, and at the same time to find out what had become of the pirates, what retreat they had chosen, what sort of life they were leading, and what was to be feared from them. Cyrus Harding wished to set out without delay; but as the expedition would be of some days duration, it appeared best to load the cart with different materials and tools in order to facilitate the organization of the encampments. One of the onagers, however, having hurt its leg, could not be harnessed at present, and a few days’ rest was necessary. The departure was, therefore, put off for a week, until the 20th of November. The month of November in this latitude corresponds to the month of May in the northern zones. It was, therefore, the fine season. The sun was entering the tropic of Capricorn, and gave the longest days in the year. The time was, therefore, very favorable for the projected expedition, which, if it did not accomplish its principal object, would at any rate be fruitful in discoveries, especially of natural productions, since Harding proposed to explore those dense forests of the Far West, which stretched to the extremity of the Serpentine Peninsula.

During the nine days which preceded their departure, it was agreed that the work on Prospect Heights should be finished off.

Moreover, it was necessary for Ayrton to return to the corral, where the domesticated animals required his care. It was decided that he should spend two days there, and return to Granite House after having liberally supplied the stables.

As he was about to start, Harding asked him if he would not like one of them to accompany him, observing that the island was less safe than formerly. Ayrton replied that this was unnecessary, as he was enough for the work, and that besides he apprehended no danger. If anything occurred at the corral, or in the neighborhood, he could instantly warn the colonists by sending a telegram to Granite House.

Ayrton departed at dawn on the 9th, taking the cart drawn by one onager, and two hours after, the electric wire announced that he had found all in order at the corral.

During these two days Harding busied himself in executing a project which would completely guard Granite House against any surprise. It was necessary to completely conceal the opening of the old outlet, which was already walled up and partly hidden under grass and plants, at the southern angle of Lake Grant. Nothing was easier, since if the level of the lake was raised two or three feet, the opening would be quite beneath it. Now, to raise this level they had only to establish a dam at the two openings made by the lake, and by which were fed Creek Glycerine and Falls River.

The colonists worked with a will, and the two dams which besides did not exceed eight feet in width by three in height, were rapidly erected by means of well-cemented blocks of stone.

This work finished, it would have been impossible to guess that at that part of the lake, there existed a subterranean passage through which the overflow of the lake formerly escaped.

Of course the little stream which fed the reservoir of Granite House and worked the lift, had been carefully preserved, and the water could not fail.

The lift once raised, this sure and comfortable retreat would be safe from any surprise.

This work had been so quickly done, that Pencroft, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert found time to make an expedition to Port Balloon, The sailor was very anxious to know if the little creek in which the “Bonadventure” was moored, had been visited by the convicts.

“These gentlemen,” he observed, “landed on the south coast, and if they followed the shore, it is to be feared that they may have discovered the little harbor, and in that case, I wouldn’t give half-a-dollar for our ‘Bonadventure.’”

Pencroft’s apprehensions were not without foundation, and a visit to Port Balloon appeared to be very desirable. The sailor and his companions set off on the 10th of November, after dinner, well armed. Pencroft, ostentatiously slipping two bullets into each barrel of his rifle, shook his head in a way which betokened nothing good to any one who approached too near him, whether “man or beast,” as he said. Gideon Spilett and Herbert also took their guns, and about three o’clock all three left Granite House.

Neb accompanied them to the turn of the Mercy, and after they had crossed, he raised the bridge. It was agreed that a gunshot should announce the colonists’ return, and that at the signal Neb should return and reestablish the communication between the two banks of the river.

The little band advanced directly along the road which led to the southern coast of the island. This was only a distance of three miles and a half, but Gideon Spilett and his companions took two hours to traverse it. They examined all the border of the road, the thick forest, as well as Tabor

Marsh. They found no trace of the fugitives who, no doubt, not having yet discovered the number of the colonists, or the means of defense which they had at their disposal, had gained the less accessible parts of the island.

Arrived at Port Balloon, Pencroft saw with extreme satisfaction that the “Bonadventure” was tranquilly floating in the narrow creek. However, Port Balloon was so well hidden among high rocks, that it could scarcely be discovered either from the land or the sea.

“Come,” said Pencroft, “the blackguards have not been there yet. Long grass suits reptiles best, and evidently we shall find them in the Far West.”

“And it’s very lucky, for if they had found the ‘Bonadventure’,” added Herbert, “they would have gone off in her, and we should have been prevented from returning to Tabor Island.”

“Indeed,” remarked the reporter, “it will be important to take a document there which will make known the situation of Lincoln Island, and Ayrton’s new residence, in case the Scotch yacht returns to fetch him.”

“Well, the ‘Bonadventure’ is always there, Mr. Spilett,” answered the sailor. “She and her crew are ready to start at a moment’s notice!”

“I think, Pencroft, that that is a thing to be done after our exploration of the island is finished. It is possible after all that the stranger, if we manage to find him, may know as much about Tabor Island as about Lincoln Island. Do not forget that he is certainly the author of the document, and he may, perhaps, know how far we may count on the return of the yacht!”

“But!” exclaimed Pencroft, “who in the world can he be? The fellow knows us and we know nothing about him! If he is a simple castaway, why should he conceal himself! We are honest men, I suppose, and the society of honest men isn't unpleasant to any one. Did he come here voluntarily? Can he leave the island if he likes? Is he here still? Will he remain any longer?"

Chatting thus, Pencroft, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert got on board and looked about the deck of the "Bonadventure." All at once, the sailor having examined the bitts to which the cable of the anchor was secured, —

"Hallo," he cried, "this is queer!"

"What is the matter, Pencroft?" asked the reporter.

"The matter is, that it was not I who made this knot!"

And Pencroft showed a rope which fastened the cable to the bitt itself.

"What, it was not you?" asked Gideon Spilett.

"No! I can swear to it. This is a reef knot, and I always make a running bowline."

"You must be mistaken, Pencroft."

"I am not mistaken!" declared the sailor. "My hand does it so naturally, and one's hand is never mistaken!"

"Then can the convicts have been on board?" asked Herbert.

"I know nothing about that," answered Pencroft, "but what is certain, is that some one has weighed the 'Bonadventure's' anchor and dropped it again! And look here, here is another proof! The cable of the anchor has been run out, and its service is no longer at the hawse-hole. I repeat that some one has been using our vessel!"

“But if the convicts had used her, they would have pillaged her, or rather gone off with her.”

“Gone off! where to — to Tabor Island?” replied Pencroft. “Do you think, they would risk themselves in a boat of such small tonnage?”

“We must, besides, be sure that they know of the islet,” rejoined the reporter.

“However that may be,” said the sailor, “as sure as my name is Bonadventure Pencroft, of the Vineyard, our ‘Bonadventure’ has sailed without us!”

The sailor was positive that neither Gideon Spilett nor Herbert could dispute his statement. It was evident that the vessel had been moved, more or less, since Pencroft had brought her to Port Balloon. As to the sailor, he had not the slightest doubt that the anchor had been raised and then dropped again. Now, what was the use of these two maneuvers, unless the vessel had been employed in some expedition?

“But how was it we did not see the ‘Bonadventure’ pass in the sight of the island?” observed the reporter, who was anxious to bring forward every possible objection.

“Why, Mr. Spilett,” replied the sailor, “they would only have to start in the night with a good breeze, and they would be out of sight of the island in two hours.”

“Well,” resumed Gideon Spilett, “I ask again, what object could the convicts have had in using the ‘Bonadventure,’ and why, after they had made use of her, should they have brought her back to port?”

“Why, Mr. Spilett,” replied the sailor, “we must put that among the unaccountable things, and not think anything more about it. The chief thing is that the ‘Bonadventure’ was there, and she is there now. Only, unfortunately, if the convicts take her a second time, we shall very likely not find her again in her place!”

“Then, Pencroft,” said Herbert, “would it not be wisest to bring the ‘Bonadventure’ off to Granite House?”

“Yes and no,” answered Pencroft, “or rather no. The mouth of the Mercy is a bad place for a vessel, and the sea is heavy there.”

“But by hauling her up on the sand, to the foot of the Chimneys?”

“Perhaps yes,” replied Pencroft. “At any rate, since we must leave Granite House for a long expedition, I think the ‘Bonadventure’ will be safer here during our absence, and we shall do best to leave her here until the island is rid of these blackguards.”

“That is exactly my opinion,” said the reporter. “At any rate in the event of bad weather, she will not be exposed here as she would be at the mouth of the Mercy.”

“But suppose the convicts pay her another visit,” said Herbert.

“Well, my boy,” replied Pencroft, “not finding her here, they would not be long in finding her on the sands of Granite House, and, during our absence, nothing could hinder them from seizing her! I agree, therefore, with Mr. Spilett, that she must be left in Port Balloon. But, if on our return we have not rid the island of those rascals, it will be prudent to bring our boat to Granite House, until the time when we need not fear any unpleasant visits.”

“That’s settled. Let us be off,” said the reporter.

Pencroft, Herbert, and Gideon Spilett, on their return to Granite House, told the engineer all that had passed, and the latter approved of their arrangements both for the present and the future. He also promised the sailor that he would study that part of the channel situated between the islet and the coast, so as to ascertain if it would not be possible to make an artificial harbor there by means of dams. In this way, the “Bonadventure” would be always within reach, under the eyes of the colonists, and if necessary, under lock and key.

That evening a telegram was sent to Ayrton, requesting him to bring from the corral a couple of goats, which Neb wished to acclimatize to the plateau. Singularly enough, Ayrton did not acknowledge the receipt of the despatch, as he was accustomed to do. This could not but astonish the engineer. But it might be that Ayrton was not at that moment in the corral, or even that he was on his way back to Granite House. In fact, two days had already passed since his departure, and it had been decided that on the evening of the 10th or at the latest the morning of the 11th, he should return. The colonists waited, therefore, for Ayrton to appear on Prospect Heights. Neb and Herbert even watched at the bridge so as to be ready to lower it the moment their companion presented himself.

But up to ten in the evening, there were no signs of Ayrton. It was, therefore, judged best to send a fresh despatch, requiring an immediate reply.

The bell of the telegraph at Granite House remained mute.

The colonists’ uneasiness was great. What had happened? Was Ayrton no longer at the corral, or if he was still there, had he no longer control over his movements? Could they go to the corral in this dark night?

They consulted. Some wished to go, the others to remain.

“But,” said Herbert, “perhaps some accident has happened to the telegraphic apparatus, so that it works no longer?”

“That may be,” said the reporter.

“Wait till to-morrow,” replied Cyrus Harding. “It is possible, indeed, that Ayrton has not received our despatch, or even that we have not received his.”

They waited, of course not without some anxiety.

At dawn of day, the 11th of November, Harding again sent the electric current along the wire and received no reply.

He tried again: the same result.

“Off to the corral,” said he.

“And well armed!” added Pencroft.

It was immediately decided that Granite House should not be left alone and that Neb should remain there. After having accompanied his friends to Creek Glycerine, he raised the bridge; and waiting behind a tree he watched for the return of either his companions or Ayrton.

In the event of the pirates presenting themselves and attempting to force the passage, he was to endeavor to stop them by firing on them, and as a last resource he was to take refuge in Granite House, where, the lift once raised, he would be in safety.

Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, and Pencroft were to repair to the corral, and if they did not find Ayrton, search the neighboring woods.

At six o'clock in the morning, the engineer and his three companions had passed Creek Glycerine, and Neb posted himself behind a small mound crowned by several dragon trees, on the left bank of the stream.

The colonists, after leaving the plateau of Prospect Heights, immediately took the road to the corral. They shouldered their guns, ready to fire on the slightest hostile demonstration. The two rifles and the two guns had been loaded with ball.

The wood was thick on each side of the road and might easily have concealed the convicts, who owing to their weapons would have been really formidable.

The colonists walked rapidly and in silence. Top preceded them, sometimes running on the road, sometimes taking a ramble into the wood, but always quiet and not appearing to fear anything unusual. And they could be sure that the faithful dog would not allow them to be surprised, but would bark at the least appearance of danger.

Cyrus Harding and his companions followed beside the road the wire which connected the corral with Granite House. After walking for nearly two miles, they had not as yet discovered any explanation of the difficulty. The posts were in good order, the wire regularly extended. However, at that moment the engineer observed that the wire appeared to be slack, and on arriving at post No. 74, Herbert, who was in advance stopped, exclaiming, —

"The wire is broken!"

His companions hurried forward and arrived at the spot where the lad was standing. The post was rooted up and lying across the path. The unexpected explanation of the difficulty was here, and it was evident that the despatches from Granite House had not been received at the corral, nor those from the corral at Granite House.

“It wasn’t the wind that blew down this post,” observed Pencroft.

“No,” replied Gideon Spilett. “The earth has been dug up round its foot, and it has been torn up by the hand of man.”

“Besides, the wire is broken,” added Herbert, showing that the wire had been snapped.

“Is the fracture recent?” asked Harding.

“Yes,” answered Herbert, “it has certainly been done quite lately.”

“To the corral! to the corral!” exclaimed the sailor.

The colonists were now half way between Granite House and the corral, having still two miles and a half to go. They pressed forward with redoubled speed.

Indeed, it was to be feared that some serious accident had occurred in the corral. No doubt, Ayrton might have sent a telegram which had not arrived, but this was not the reason why his companions were so uneasy, for, a more unaccountable circumstance, Ayrton, who had promised to return the evening before, had not reappeared. In short, it was not without a motive that all communication had been stopped between the corral and Granite

House, and who but the convicts could have any interest in interrupting this communication?

The settlers hastened on, their hearts oppressed with anxiety. They were sincerely attached to their new companion. Were they to find him struck down by the hands of those of whom he was formerly the leader?

Soon they arrived at the place where the road led along the side of the little stream which flowed from the Red Creek and watered the meadows of the corral. They then moderated their pace so that they should not be out of breath at the moment when a struggle might be necessary. Their guns were in their hands ready cocked. The forest was watched on every side. Top uttered sullen groans which were rather ominous.

At last the palisade appeared through the trees. No trace of any damage could be seen. The gate was shut as usual. Deep silence reigned in the corral. Neither the accustomed bleating of the sheep nor Ayrton’s voice could be heard.

“Let us enter,” said Cyrus Harding.

And the engineer advanced, while his companions, keeping watch about twenty paces behind him, were ready to fire at a moment’s notice.

Harding raised the inner latch of the gate and was about to push it back, when Top barked loudly. A report sounded and was responded to by a cry of pain.

Herbert, struck by a bullet, lay stretched on the ground.

CHAPTER 7

At Herbert’s cry, Pencroft, letting his gun fall, rushed towards him.

“They have killed him!” he cried. “My boy! They have killed him!”

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett ran to Herbert.

The reporter listened to ascertain if the poor lad’s heart was still beating.

“He lives,” said he, “but he must be carried — ”

“To Granite House? that is impossible!” replied the engineer.

“Into the corral, then!” said Pencroft.

“In a moment,” said Harding.

And he ran round the left corner of the palisade. There he found a convict, who aiming at him, sent a ball through his hat. In a few seconds, before he had even time to fire his second barrel, he fell, struck to the heart by Harding’s dagger, more sure even than his gun.

During this time, Gideon Spilett and the sailor hoisted themselves over the palisade, leaped into the enclosure, threw down the props which supported the inner door, ran into the empty house, and soon, poor Herbert was lying on Ayrton’s bed. In a few moments, Harding was by his side.

On seeing Herbert senseless, the sailor’s grief was terrible.

He sobbed, he cried, he tried to beat his head against the wall.

Neither the engineer nor the reporter could calm him. They themselves were choked with emotion. They could not speak.

However, they knew that it depended on them to rescue from death the poor boy who was suffering beneath their eyes. Gideon Spilett had not passed through the many incidents by which his life had been checkered without acquiring some slight knowledge of medicine. He knew a little of everything, and several times he had been obliged to attend to wounds produced either by a sword-bayonet or shot. Assisted by Cyrus Harding, he proceeded to render the aid Herbert required.

The reporter was immediately struck by the complete stupor in which Herbert lay, a stupor owing either to the hemorrhage, or to the shock, the ball having struck a bone with sufficient force to produce a violent concussion.

Herbert was deadly pale, and his pulse so feeble that Spilett only felt it beat at long intervals, as if it was on the point of stopping.

These symptoms were very serious.

Herbert’s chest was laid bare, and the blood having been stanched with handkerchiefs, it was bathed with cold water.

The contusion, or rather the contused wound appeared, — an oval below the chest between the third and fourth ribs. It was there that Herbert had been hit by the bullet.

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett then turned the poor boy over; as they did so, he uttered a moan so feeble that they almost thought it was his last sigh.

Herberts back was covered with blood from another contused wound, by which the ball had immediately escaped.

“God be praised!” said the reporter, “the ball is not in the body, and we shall not have to extract it.”

“But the heart?” asked Harding.

“The heart has not been touched; if it had been, Herbert would be dead!”

“Dead!” exclaimed Pencroft, with a groan.

The sailor had only heard the last words uttered by the reporter.

“No, Pencroft,” replied Cyrus Harding, “no! He is not dead. His pulse still beats. He has even uttered a moan. But for your boy’s sake, calm yourself. We have need of all our self-possession.”

“Do not make us lose it, my friend.”

Pencroft was silent, but a reaction set in, and great tears rolled down his cheeks.

In the meanwhile, Gideon Spilett endeavored to collect his ideas, and proceed methodically. After his examination he had no doubt that the ball, entering in front, between the seventh and eighth ribs, had issued behind between the third and fourth. But what mischief had the ball committed in its passage? What important organs had been reached? A professional surgeon would have had difficulty in determining this at once, and still more so the reporter.

However, he knew one thing, this was that he would have to prevent the inflammatory strangulation of the injured parts, then to contend with the local inflammation and fever which would result from the wound, perhaps mortal! Now, what styptics, what antiphlogistics ought to be employed? By what means could inflammation be prevented?

At any rate, the most important thing was that the two wounds should be dressed without delay. It did not appear necessary to Gideon Spilett that a fresh flow of blood should be caused by bathing them in tepid water, and compressing their lips. The hemorrhage had been very abundant, and Herbert was already too much enfeebled by the loss of blood.

The reporter, therefore, thought it best to simply bathe the two wounds with cold water.

Herbert was placed on his left side, and was maintained in that position.

“He must not be moved.” said Gideon Spilett. “He is in the most favorable position for the wounds in his back and chest to suppurate easily, and absolute rest is necessary.”

“What! can’t we carry him to Granite House?” asked Pencroft.

“No, Pencroft,” replied the reporter.

“I’ll pay the villains off!” cried the sailor, shaking his fist in a menacing manner.

“Pencroft!” said Cyrus Harding.

Gideon Spilett had resumed his examination of the wounded boy. Herbert was still so frightfully pale, that the reporter felt anxious.

“Cyrus,” said he, “I am not a surgeon. I am in terrible perplexity. You must aid me with your advice, your experience!”

“Take courage, my friend,” answered the engineer, pressing the reporter’s hand. “Judge coolly. Think only of this: Herbert must be saved!”

These words restored to Gideon Spilett that self-possession which he had lost in a moment of discouragement on feeling his great responsibility. He seated himself close to the bed. Cyrus Harding stood near. Pencroft had torn up his shirt, and was mechanically making lint.

Spilett then explained to Cyrus Harding that he thought he ought first of all to stop the hemorrhage, but not close the two wounds, or cause their immediate cicatrization, for there had been internal perforation, and the suppuration must not be allowed to accumulate in the chest.

Harding approved entirely, and it was decided that the two wounds should be dressed without attempting to close them by immediate coaptation.

And now did the colonists possess an efficacious agent to act against the inflammation which might occur?

Yes. They had one, for nature had generously lavished it. They had cold water, that is to say, the most powerful sedative that can be employed against inflammation of wounds, the most efficacious therapeutic agent in grave cases, and the one which is now adopted by all physicians. Cold water has, moreover, the advantage of leaving the wound in absolute rest, and preserving it from all premature dressing, a considerable advantage, since it has been found by experience that contact with the air is dangerous during the first days.

Gideon Spilett and Cyrus Harding reasoned thus with their simple good sense, and they acted as the best surgeon would have done. Compresses of linen were applied to poor Herbert's two wounds, and were kept constantly wet with cold water.

The sailor had at first lighted a fire in the hut, which was not wanting in things necessary for life. Maple sugar, medicinal plants, the same which the lad had gathered on the banks of Lake Grant, enabled them to make some refreshing drinks, which they gave him without his taking any notice of it. His fever was extremely high, and all that day and night passed without his becoming conscious.

Herbert's life hung on a thread, and this thread might break at any moment. The next day, the 12th of November, the hopes of Harding and his companions slightly revived. Herbert had come out of his long stupor. He opened his eyes, he recognized Cyrus Harding, the reporter, and Pencroft. He uttered two or three words. He did not know what had happened. They told him, and Spilett begged him to remain perfectly still, telling him that his life was not in danger, and that his wounds would heal in a few days. However, Herbert scarcely suffered at all, and the cold water with which they were constantly bathed, prevented any inflammation of the wounds. The suppuration was established in a regular way, the fever did not increase, and it might now be hoped that this terrible wound would not involve any catastrophe. Pencroft felt the swelling of his heart gradually subside. He was like a sister of mercy, like a mother by the bed of her child.

Herbert dozed again, but his sleep appeared more natural.

"Tell me again that you hope, Mr. Spilett," said Pencroft. "Tell me again that you will save Herbert!"

“Yes, we will save him!” replied the reporter. “The wound is serious, and, perhaps, even the ball has traversed the lungs, but the perforation of this organ is not fatal.”

“God bless you!” answered Pencroft.

As may be believed, during the four-and-twenty hours they had been in the corral, the colonists had no other thought than that of nursing Herbert. They did not think either of the danger which threatened them should the convicts return, or of the precautions to be taken for the future.

But on this day, while Pencroft watched by the sick-bed, Cyrus Harding and the reporter consulted as to what it would be best to do.

First of all they examined the corral. There was not a trace of Ayrton. Had the unhappy man been dragged away by his former accomplices? Had he resisted, and been overcome in the struggle? This last supposition was only too probable. Gideon Spilett, at the moment he scaled the palisade, had clearly seen some one of the convicts running along the southern spur of Mount Franklin, towards whom Top had sprung. It was one of those whose object had been so completely defeated by the rocks at the mouth of the Mercy. Besides, the one killed by Harding, and whose body was found outside the enclosure, of course belonged to Bob Harvey’s crew.

As to the corral, it had not suffered any damage. The gates were closed, and the animals had not been able to disperse in the forest. Nor could they see traces of any struggle, any devastation, either in the hut, or in the palisade. The ammunition only, with which Ayrton had been supplied, had disappeared with him.

“The unhappy man has been surprised,” said Harding, “and as he was a man to defend himself, he must have been overpowered.”

“Yes, that is to be feared!” said the reporter. “Then, doubtless, the convicts installed themselves in the corral where they found plenty of everything, and only fled when they saw us coming. It is very evident, too, that at this moment Ayrton, whether living or dead, is not here!”

“We shall have to beat the forest,” said the engineer, “and rid the island of these wretches. Pencroft’s presentiments were not mistaken, when he wished to hunt them as wild beasts. That would have spared us all these misfortunes!”

“Yes,” answered the reporter, “but now we have the right to be merciless!”

“At any rate,” said the engineer, “we are obliged to wait some time, and to remain at the corral until we can carry Herbert without danger to Granite House.”

“But Neb?” asked the reporter.

“Neb is in safety.”

“But if, uneasy at our absence, he would venture to come?”

“He must not come!” returned Cyrus Harding quickly. “He would be murdered on the road!”

“It is very probable, however, that he will attempt to rejoin us!”

“Ah, if the telegraph still acted, he might be warned! But that is impossible now! As to leaving Pencroft and Herbert here alone, we could not do it!

Well, I will go alone to Granite House."

"No, no! Cyrus," answered the reporter, "you must not expose yourself! Your courage would be of no avail. The villains are evidently watching the corral, they are hidden in the thick woods which surround it, and if you go we shall soon have to regret two misfortunes instead of one!"

"But Neb?" repeated the engineer. "It is now four-and-twenty hours since he has had any news of us! He will be sure to come!"

"And as he will be less on his guard than we should be ourselves," added Spilett, "he will be killed!"

"Is there really no way of warning him?"

While the engineer thought, his eyes fell on Top, who, going backwards and forwards seemed to say, —

"Am not I here?"

"Top!" exclaimed Cyrus Harding.

The animal sprang at his master's call.

"Yes, Top will go," said the reporter, who had understood the engineer.

"Top can go where we cannot! He will carry to Granite House the news of the corral, and he will bring back to us that from Granite House!"

"Quick!" said Harding. "Quick!"

Spilett rapidly tore a leaf from his note-book, and wrote these words: —

"Herbert wounded. We are at the corral. Be on your guard. Do not leave Granite House. Have the convicts appeared in the neighborhood? Reply by Top."

This laconic note contained all that Neb ought to know, and at the same time asked all that the colonists wished to know. It was folded and fastened to Top's collar in a conspicuous position.

"Top, my dog," said the engineer, caressing the animal, "Neb, Top! Neb! Go, go!"

Top bounded at these words. He understood, he knew what was expected of him. The road to the corral was familiar to him. In less than an hour he could clear it, and it might be hoped that where neither Cyrus Harding nor the reporter could have ventured without danger, Top, running among the grass or in the wood, would pass unperceived.

The engineer went to the gate of the corral and opened it.

"Neb, Top! Neb!" repeated the engineer, again pointing in the direction of Granite House.

Top sprang forwards, then almost immediately disappeared.

"He will get there!" said the reporter.

"Yes, and he will come back, the faithful animal!"

"What o'clock is it?" asked Gideon Spilett.

"Ten."

"In an hour he may be here. We will watch for his return."

The gate of the corral was closed. The engineer and the reporter re-entered the house. Herbert was still in a sleep. Pencroft kept the compresser always wet. Spilett, seeing there was nothing he could do at that moment, busied himself in preparing some nourishment, while attentively watching that part of the enclosure against the hill, at which an attack might be expected.

The settlers awaited Top’s return with much anxiety. A little before eleven o’clock, Cyrus Harding and the reporter, rifle in hand, were behind the gate, ready to open it at the first bark of their dog.

They did not doubt that if Top had arrived safely at Granite House, Neb would have sent him back immediately.

They had both been there for about ten minutes, when a report was heard, followed by repeated barks.

The engineer opened the gate, and seeing smoke a hundred feet off in the wood, he fired in that direction.

Almost immediately Top bounded into the corral, and the gate was quickly shut.

“Top, Top!” exclaimed the engineer, taking the dog’s great honest head between his hands.

A note was fastened to his neck, and Cyrus Harding read these words, traced in Neb’s large writing: — ”No pirates in the neighborhood of Granite House. I will not stir. Poor Mr. Herbert!”

CHAPTER 8

So the convicts were still there, watching the corral, and determined to kill the settlers one after the other. There was nothing to be done but to treat them as wild beasts. But great precautions must be taken, for just now the wretches had the advantage on their side, seeing, and not being seen, being able to surprise by the suddenness of their attack, yet not to be surprised themselves. Harding made arrangements, therefore, for living in the corral, of which the provisions would last for a tolerable length of time. Ayrton's house had been provided with all that was necessary for existence, and the convicts, scared by the arrival of the settlers, had not had time to pillage it. It was probable, as Gideon Spilett observed, that things had occurred as follows:

The six convicts, disembarking on the island, had followed the southern shore, and after having traversed the double shore of the Serpentine Peninsula, not being inclined to venture into the Far West woods, they had reached the mouth of Falls River. From this point, by following the right bank of the watercourse, they would arrive at the spurs of Mount Franklin, among which they would naturally seek a retreat, and they could not have been long in discovering the corral, then uninhabited. There they had regularly installed themselves, awaiting the moment to put their abominable schemes into execution. Ayrton's arrival had surprised them, but they had managed to overpower the unfortunate man, and — the rest may be easily imagined!

Now, the convicts, — reduced to five, it is true, but well armed, — were roaming the woods, and to venture there was to expose themselves to their attacks, which could be neither guarded against nor prevented.

“Wait! There is nothing else to be done!” repeated Cyrus Harding. “When Herbert is cured, we can organize a general battle of the island, and have satisfaction of these convicts. That will be the object of our grand expedition at the same time — ”

“As the search for our mysterious protector,” added Gideon Spilett, finishing the engineer’s sentence. “And it must be acknowledged, my dear Cyrus, that this time his protection was wanting at the very moment when it was most necessary to us!”

“Who knows?” replied the engineer.

“What do you mean?” asked the reporter.

“That we are not at the end of our trouble yet, my dear Spilett, and that his powerful intervention may have another opportunity of exercising itself. But that is not the question now. Herbert’s life before everything.”

This was the colonists’ saddest thought. Several days passed, and the poor boy’s state was happily no worse. Cold water, always kept at a suitable temperature, had completely prevented the inflammation of the wounds. It even seemed to the reporter that this water, being slightly sulphurous, — which was explained by the neighborhood of the volcano, had a more direct action on the healing. The suppuration was much less abundant, and thanks to the incessant care by which he was surrounded! — Herbert returned to life, and his fever abated. He was besides subjected to a severe diet, and consequently his weakness was and would be extreme; but there was no want of refreshing drinks, and absolute rest was of the greatest benefit to him. Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Pencroft had become very skilful in dressing the lad’s wounds. All the linen in the house had been sacrificed. Herbert’s wounds, covered with compresses and lint, were pressed neither too much nor too little, so as to cause their cicatrization without effecting any inflammatory reaction. The reporter used extreme care in the dressing, knowing well the importance of it, and repeating to his companions that which most surgeons willingly admit, that it is perhaps rarer to see a dressing well done than an operation well performed.

In ten days, on the 22nd of November, Herbert was considerably better. He had begun to take some nourishment.

The color was returning to his cheeks, and his bright eyes smiled at his nurses. He talked a little, notwithstanding Pencroft's efforts, who talked incessantly to prevent him from beginning to speak, and told him the most improbable stories. Herbert had questioned him on the subject of Ayrton, whom he was astonished not to see near him, thinking that he was at the corral. But the sailor, not wishing to distress Herbert, contented himself by replying that Ayrton had rejoined Neb, so as to defend Granite House.

"Humph!" said Pencroft, "these pirates! they are gentlemen who have no right to any consideration! And the captain wanted to win them by kindness! I'll send them some kindness, but in the shape of a good bullet!"

"And have they not been seen again?" asked Herbert.

"No, my boy," answered the sailor, "but we shall find them, and when you are cured we shall see if the cowards who strike us from behind will dare to meet us face to face!"

"I am still very weak, my poor Pencroft!"

"Well! your strength will return gradually! What's a ball through the chest? Nothing but a joke! I've seen many, and I don't think much of them!"

At last things appeared to be going on well, and if no complication occurred, Herbert’s recovery might be regarded as certain. But what would have been the condition of the colonists if his state had been aggravated, — if, for example, the ball had remained in his body, if his arm or his leg had had to be amputated?

“No,” said Spilett more than once, “I have never thought of such a contingency without shuddering!”

“And yet, if it had been necessary to operate,” said Harding one day to him, “you would not have hesitated?”

“No, Cyrus!” said Gideon Spilett, “but thank God that we have been spared this complication!”

As in so many other conjectures, the colonists had appealed to the logic of that simple good sense of which they had made use so often, and once more, thanks to their general knowledge, it had succeeded! But might not a time come when all their science would be at fault? They were alone on the island. Now, men in all states of society are necessary to each other. Cyrus Harding knew this well, and sometimes he asked if some circumstance might not occur which they would be powerless to surmount. It appeared to him besides, that he and his companions, till then so fortunate, had entered into an unlucky period. During the two years and a half which had elapsed since their escape from Richmond, it might be said that they had had everything their own way. The island had abundantly supplied them with minerals, vegetables, animals, and as Nature had constantly loaded them, their science had known how to take advantage of what she offered them.

The wellbeing of the colony was therefore complete. Moreover, in certain occurrences an inexplicable influence had come to their aid!... But all that could only be for a time.

In short, Cyrus Harding believed that fortune had turned against them.

In fact, the convicts’ ship had appeared in the waters of the island, and if the pirates had been, so to speak, miraculously destroyed, six of them, at least, had escaped the catastrophe. They had disembarked on the island, and it was almost impossible to get at the five who survived. Ayrton had no doubt been murdered by these wretches, who possessed firearms, and at the first use that they had made of them, Herbert had fallen, wounded almost mortally. Were these the first blows aimed by adverse fortune at the colonists? This was often asked by Harding. This was often repeated by the reporter; and it appeared to him also that the intervention, so strange, yet so efficacious, which till then had served them so well, had now failed them. Had this mysterious being, whatever he was, whose existence could not be denied, abandoned the island? Had he in his turn succumbed?

No reply was possible to these questions. But it must not be imagined that because Harding and his companions spoke of these things, they were men to despair. Far from that. They looked their situation in the face, they analyzed the chances, they prepared themselves for any event, they stood firm and straight before the future, and if adversity was at last to strike them, it would find in them men prepared to struggle against it.

CHAPTER 9

The convalescence of the young invalid was regularly progressing. One thing only was now to be desired, that his state would allow him to be brought to Granite House. However well built and supplied the corral house was, it could not be so comfortable as the healthy granite dwelling. Besides, it did not offer the same security, and its tenants, notwithstanding their watchfulness, were here always in fear of some shot from the convicts. There, on the contrary, in the middle of that impregnable and inaccessible cliff, they would have nothing to fear, and any attack on their persons would certainly fail. They therefore waited impatiently for the moment when Herbert might be moved without danger from his wound, and they were determined to make this move, although the communication through Jacamar Wood was very difficult.

They had no news from Neb, but were not uneasy on that account. The courageous Negro, well entrenched in the depths of Granite House, would not allow himself to be surprised. Top had not been sent again to him, as it appeared useless to expose the faithful dog to some shot which might deprive the settlers of their most useful auxiliary.

They waited, therefore, although they were anxious to be reunited at Granite House. It pained the engineer to see his forces divided, for it gave great advantage to the pirates. Since Ayrton’s disappearance they were only four against five, for Herbert could not yet be counted, and this was not the least care of the brave boy, who well understood the trouble of which he was the cause.

The question of knowing how, in their condition, they were to act against the pirates, was thoroughly discussed on the 29th of November by Cyrus

Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Pencroft, at a moment when Herbert was asleep and could not hear them.

“My friends,” said the reporter, after they had talked of Neb and of the impossibility of communicating with him, “I think, — like you, that to venture on the road to the corral would be to risk receiving a gunshot without being able to return it. But do you not think that the best thing to be done now is to openly give chase to these wretches?”

“That is just what I was thinking,” answered Pencroft. “I believe we’re not fellows to be afraid of a bullet, and as for me, if Captain Harding approves, I’m ready to dash into the forest! Why, hang it, one man is equal to another!”

“But is he equal to five?” asked the engineer.

“I will join Pencroft,” said the reporter, “and both of us, well-armed and accompanied by Top — ”

“My dear Spilett, and you, Pencroft,” answered Harding, “let us reason coolly. If the convicts were hid in one spot of the island, if we knew that spot, and had only to dislodge them, I would undertake a direct attack; but is there not occasion to fear, on the contrary, that they are sure to fire the first shot?”

“Well, captain,” cried Pencroft, “a bullet does not always reach its mark.”

“That which struck Herbert did not miss, Pencroft,” replied the engineer. “Besides, observe that if both of you left the corral I should remain here alone to defend it. Do you imagine that the convicts will not see you leave it, that they will not allow you to enter the forest, and that they will not attack it during your absence, knowing that there is no one here but a wounded boy and a man?”

“You are right, captain,” replied Pencroft, his chest swelling with sullen anger. “You are right; they will do all they can to retake the corral, which they know to be well stored; and alone you could not hold it against them.”

“Oh, if we were only at Granite House!”

“If we were at Granite House,” answered the engineer, “the case would be very different. There I should not be afraid to leave Herbert with one, while the other three went to search the forests of the island. But we are at the corral, and it is best to stay here until we can leave it together.”

Cyrus Harding’s reasoning was unanswerable, and his companions understood it well.

“If only Ayrton was still one of us!” said Gideon Spilett. “Poor fellow! his return to social life will have been but of short duration.”

“If he is dead,” added Pencroft, in a peculiar tone.

“Do you hope, then, Pencroft, that the villains have spared him?” asked Gideon Spilett.

“Yes, if they had any interest in doing so.”

“What! you suppose that Ayrton finding his old companions, forgetting

all that he owes us — ”

“Who knows?” answered the sailor, who did not hazard this shameful supposition without hesitating.

“Pencroft,” said Harding, taking the sailor’s arm, “that is a wicked idea of yours, and you will distress me much if you persist in speaking thus. I will answer for Ayrton’s fidelity.”

“And I also,” added the reporter quickly.

“Yes, yes, captain, I was wrong,” replied Pencroft; “it was a wicked idea indeed that I had, and nothing justifies it. But what can I do? I’m not in my senses. This imprisonment in the corral wearies me horribly, and I have never felt so excited as I do now.

“Be patient, Pencroft,” replied the engineer. “How long will it be, my dear Spilett, before you think Herbert may be carried to Granite House?”

“That is difficult to say, Cyrus,” answered the reporter, “for any imprudence might involve terrible consequences. But his convalescence is progressing, and if he continues to gain strength, in eight days from now — well, we shall see.”

Eight days! That would put off the return to Granite House until the first days of December. At this time two months of spring had already passed. The weather was fine, and the heat began to be great. The forests of the island were in full leaf, and the time was approaching when the usual crops ought to be gathered. The return to the plateau of Prospect Heights would, therefore, be followed by extensive agricultural labors, interrupted only by the projected expedition through the island.

It can, therefore, be well understood how injurious this seclusion in the corral must have been to the colonists.

But if they were compelled to bow before necessity, they did not do so without impatience.

Once or twice the reporter ventured out into the road and made the tour of the palisade. Top accompanied him, and Gideon Spilett, his gun cocked, was ready for any emergency.

He met with no misadventure and found no suspicious traces. His dog would have warned him of any danger, and, as Top did not bark, it might be concluded that there was nothing to fear at the moment at least, and that the convicts were occupied in another part of the island.

However, on his second sortie, on the 27th of November, Gideon Spilett, who had ventured a quarter of a mile into the woods, towards the south of the mountain, remarked that Top scented something. The dog had no longer his unconcerned manner; he went backwards and forwards, ferreting among the grass and bushes as if his smell had revealed some suspicious object to him.

Gideon Spilett followed Top, encouraged him, excited him by his voice, while keeping a sharp look-out, his gun ready to fire, and sheltering himself behind the trees. It was not probable that Top scented the presence of man, for in that case, he would have announced it by half-uttered, sullen, angry barks. Now, as he did not growl, it was because danger was neither near nor approaching.

Nearly five minutes passed thus, Top rummaging, the reporter following him prudently when, all at once, the dog rushed towards a thick bush, and drew out a rag.

It was a piece of cloth, stained and torn, which Spilett immediately brought back to the corral. There it was examined by the colonists, who found that it was a fragment of Ayrton's waistcoat, a piece of that felt, manufactured solely by the Granite House factory.

"You see, Pencroft," observed Harding, "there has been resistance on the part of the unfortunate Ayrton. The convicts have dragged him away in spite of himself! Do you still doubt his honesty?"

"No, captain," answered the sailor, "and I repented of my suspicion a long time ago! But it seems to me that something may be learned from the incident."

"What is that?" asked the reporter.

"It is that Ayrton was not killed at the corral! That they dragged him away living, since he has resisted. Therefore, perhaps, he is still living!"

"Perhaps, indeed," replied the engineer, who remained thoughtful.

This was a hope, to which Ayrton's companions could still hold. Indeed, they had before believed that, surprised in the corral, Ayrton had fallen by a bullet, as Herbert had fallen. But if the convicts had not killed him at first, if they had brought him living to another part of the island, might it not be admitted that he was still their prisoner? Perhaps, even, one of them had found in Ayrton his old Australian companion Ben Joyce, the chief of the escaped convicts. And who knows but that they had conceived the impossible hope of bringing back Ayrton to themselves? He would have been very useful to them, if they had been able to make him turn traitor!

This incident was, therefore, favorably interpreted at the corral, and it no longer appeared impossible that they should find Ayrton again. On his side, if he was only a prisoner, Ayrton would no doubt do all he could to escape from the hands of the villains, and this would be a powerful aid to the settlers!

“At any rate,” observed Gideon Spilett, “if happily Ayrton did manage to escape, he would go directly to Granite House, for he could not know of the attempted assassination of which Herbert has been a victim, and consequently would never think of our being imprisoned in the corral.”

“Oh! I wish that he was there, at Granite House!” cried Pencroft, “and that we were there, too! For, although the rascals can do nothing to our house, they may plunder the plateau, our plantations, our poultry-yard!”

Pencroft had become a thorough farmer, heartily attached to his crops. But it must be said that Herbert was more anxious than any to return to Granite House, for he knew how much the presence of the settlers was needed there. And it was he who was keeping them at the corral! Therefore, one idea occupied his mind — to leave the corral, and when! He believed he could bear removal to Granite House. He was sure his strength would return more quickly in his room, with the air and sight of the sea!

Several times he pressed Gideon Spilett, but the latter, fearing, with good reason, that Herbert’s wounds, half healed, might reopen on the way, did not give the order to start.

However, something occurred which compelled Cyrus Harding and his two friends to yield to the lad’s wish, and God alone knew that this determination might cause them grief and remorse.

It was the 29th of November, seven o’clock in the evening. The three settlers were talking in Herbert’s room, when they heard Top utter quick barks.

Harding, Pencroft, and Spilett seized their guns and ran out of the house. Top, at the foot of the palisade, was jumping, barking, but it was with pleasure, not anger.

“Some one is coming.”

“Yes.”

“It is not an enemy!”

“Neb, perhaps?”

“Or Ayrton?”

These words had hardly been exchanged between the engineer and his two companions when a body leaped over the palisade and fell on the ground inside the corral.

It was Jup, Master Jup in person, to whom Top immediately gave a most cordial reception.

“Jup!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Neb has sent him to us,” said the reporter.

“Then,” replied the engineer, “he must have some note on him.”

Pencroft rushed up to the orang. Certainly if Neb had any important matter to communicate to his master he could not employ a more sure or more rapid messenger, who could pass where neither the colonists could, nor even Top himself.

Cyrus Harding was not mistaken. At Jup's neck hung a small bag, and in this bag was found a little note traced by Neb's hand.

The despair of Harding and his companions may be imagined when they read these words: —

"Friday, six o'clock in the morning.

"Plateau invaded by convicts.

"Neb."

They gazed at each other without uttering a word, then they re-entered the house. What were they to do? The convicts on Prospect Heights! that was disaster, devastation, ruin.

Herbert, on seeing the engineer, the reporter, and Pencroft re-enter, guessed that their situation was aggravated, and when he saw Jup, he no longer doubted that some misfortune menaced Granite House.

"Captain Harding," said he, "I must go; I can bear the journey. I must go."

Gideon Spilett approached Herbert; then, having looked at him, —

"Let us go, then!" said he.

The question was quickly decided whether Herbert should be carried on a litter or in the cart which had brought Ayrton to the corral. The motion of the litter would have been more easy for the wounded lad, but it would have necessitated two bearers, that is to say, there would have been two guns less for defense if an attack was made on the road. Would they not, on the contrary, by employing the cart leave every arm free? Was it impossible to place the mattress on which Herbert was lying in it, and to advance with so much care that any jolt should be avoided? It could be done.

The cart was brought. Pencroft harnessed the onager. Cyrus Harding and the reporter raised Herbert's mattress and placed it on the bottom of the cart. The weather was fine. The sun's bright rays glanced through the trees.

"Are the guns ready?" asked Cyrus Harding.

They were. The engineer and Pencroft, each armed with a double-barreled gun, and Gideon Spilett carrying his rifle, had nothing to do but start.

"Are you comfortable, Herbert?" asked the engineer.

"Ah, captain," replied the lad, "don't be uneasy, I shall not die on the road!"

While speaking thus, it could be seen that the poor boy had called up all his energy, and by the energy of a powerful will had collected his failing strength.

The engineer felt his heart sink painfully. He still hesitated to give the signal for departure; but that would have driven Herbert to despair — killed him perhaps.

"Forward!" said Harding.

The gate of the corral was opened. Jup and Top, who knew when to be silent, ran in advance. The cart came out, the gate was reclosed, and the onager, led by Pencroft, advanced at a slow pace.

Certainly, it would have been safer to have taken a different road than that which led straight from the corral to Granite House, but the cart would have met with great difficulties in moving under the trees. It was necessary, therefore, to follow this way, although it was well known to the convicts.

Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett walked one on each side of the cart, ready to answer to any attack. However, it was not probable that the convicts would have yet left the plateau of Prospect Heights.

Neb's note had evidently been written and sent as soon as the convicts had shown themselves there. Now, this note was dated six o'clock in the morning, and the active orang, accustomed to come frequently to the corral, had taken scarcely three quarters of an hour to cross the five miles which separated it from Granite House. They would, therefore, be safe at that time, and if there was any occasion for firing, it would probably not be until they were in the neighborhood of Granite House. However, the colonists kept a strict watch. Top and Jup, the latter armed with his club, sometimes in front, sometimes beating the wood at the sides of the road, signalized no danger.

The cart advanced slowly under Pencroft's guidance. It had left the corral at half-past seven. An hour after, four out of the five miles had been cleared, without any incident having occurred. The road was as deserted as all that part of the Jacamar Wood which lay between the Mercy and the lake. There was no occasion for any warning. The wood appeared as deserted as on the day when the colonists first landed on the island.

They approached the plateau. Another mile and they would see the bridge over Creek Glycerine. Cyrus Harding expected to find it in its place; supposing that the convicts would have crossed it, and that, after having passed one of the streams which enclosed the plateau, they would have taken the precaution to lower it again, so as to keep open a retreat.

At length an opening in the trees allowed the sea-horizon to be seen. But the cart continued its progress, for not one of its defenders thought of abandoning it.

At that moment Pencroft stopped the onager, and in a hoarse voice, —

“Oh! the villains!” he exclaimed.

And he pointed to a thick smoke rising from the mill, the sheds, and the buildings at the poultry-yard.

A man was moving about in the midst of the smoke. It was Neb.

His companions uttered a shout. He heard, and ran to meet them.

The convicts had left the plateau nearly half-an-hour before, having devastated it!

“And Mr. Herbert?” asked Neb.

Gideon Spilett returned to the cart.

Herbert had lost consciousness!

CHAPTER 10

Of the convicts, the dangers which menaced Granite House, the ruins with which the plateau was covered, the colonists thought no longer. Herbert’s critical state outweighed all other considerations. Would the removal prove fatal to him by causing some internal injury? The reporter could not affirm it, but he and his companions almost despaired of the result. The cart was brought to the bend of the river. There some branches, disposed as a liner, received the mattress on which lay the unconscious Herbert. Ten minutes after, Cyrus Harding, Spilett, and Pencroft were at the foot of the cliff, leaving Neb to take the cart on to the plateau of Prospect Heights. The lift was put in motion, and Herbert was soon stretched on his bed in Granite House.

What cares were lavished on him to bring him back to life! He smiled for a moment on finding himself in his room, but could scarcely even murmur a few words, so great was his weakness. Gideon Spilett examined his wounds. He feared to find them reopened, having been imperfectly healed. There was nothing of the sort. From whence, then, came this prostration? why was Herbert so much worse? The lad then fell into a kind of feverish sleep, and the reporter and Pencroft remained near the bed. During this time, Harding told Neb all that had happened at the corral, and Neb recounted to his master the events of which the plateau had just been the theater.

It was only during the preceding night that the convicts had appeared on the edge of the forest, at the approaches to Creek Glycerine. Neb, who was watching near the poultry-yard, had not hesitated to fire at one of the pirates, who was about to cross the stream; but in the darkness he could not tell whether the man had been hit or not. At any rate, it was not enough to frighten away the band, and Neb had only just time to get up to Granite House, where at least he was in safety.

But what was he to do there? How prevent the devastations with which the convicts threatened the plateau? Had Neb any means by which to warn his master? And, besides, in what situation were the inhabitants of the corral themselves? Cyrus Harding and his companions had left on the 11th of November, and it was now the 29th. It was, therefore, nineteen days since Neb had had other news than that brought by Top — disastrous news: Ayrton disappeared, Herbert severely wounded, the engineer, reporter, and sailor, as it were, imprisoned in the corral!

What was he to do? asked poor Neb. Personally he had nothing to fear, for the convicts could not reach him in Granite House. But the buildings, the plantations, all their arrangements at the mercy of the pirates! Would it not be best to let Cyrus Harding judge of what he ought to do, and to warn him, at least, of the danger which threatened him?

Neb then thought of employing Jup, and confiding a note to him. He knew the orang's great intelligence, which had been often put to the proof. Jup understood the word corral, which had been frequently pronounced before him, and it may be remembered, too, that he had often driven the cart thither in company with Pencroft. Day had not yet dawned. The active orang would know how to pass unperceived through the woods, of which the convicts, besides, would think he was a native.

Neb did not hesitate. He wrote the note, he tied it to Jup's neck, he brought the ape to the door of Granite House, from which he let down a long cord to the ground; then, several times he repeated these words, —

"Jup Jup! corral, corral!"

The creature understood, seized the cord, glided rapidly down the beach, and disappeared in the darkness without the convicts' attention having been in the least excited.

"You did well, Neb," said Harding, "but perhaps in not warning us you would have done still better!"

And, in speaking thus, Cyrus Harding thought of Herbert, whose recovery the removal had so seriously checked.

Neb ended his account. The convicts had not appeared at all on the beach. Not knowing the number of the island's inhabitants, they might suppose that Granite House was defended by a large party. They must have remembered that during the attack by the brig numerous shot had been fired both from the lower and upper rocks, and no doubt they did not wish to expose themselves. But the plateau of Prospect Heights was open to them, and not covered by the fire of Granite House. They gave themselves up, therefore, to their instinct of destruction, — plundering, burning, devastating everything, — and only retiring half an hour before the arrival of the colonists, whom they believed still confined in the corral.

On their retreat, Neb hurried out. He climbed the plateau at the risk of being perceived and fired at, tried to extinguish the fire which was consuming the buildings of the poultry-yard, and had struggled, though in vain, against it until the cart appeared at the edge of the wood.

Such had been these serious events. The presence of the convicts constituted a permanent source of danger to the settlers in Lincoln Island, until then so happy, and who might now expect still greater misfortunes.

Spilett remained in Granite House with Herbert and Pencroft, while Cyrus Harding, accompanied by Neb, proceeded to judge for himself of the extent of the disaster.

It was fortunate that the convicts had not advanced to the foot of Granite House. The workshop at the Chimneys would in that case not have escaped destruction. But after all, this evil would have been more easily reparable than the ruins accumulated on the plateau of Prospect Heights. Harding and Neb proceeded towards the Mercy, and ascended its left bank without meeting with any trace of the convicts; nor on the other side of the river, in the depths of the wood, could they perceive any suspicious indications.

Besides, it might be supposed that in all probability either the convicts knew of the return of the settlers to Granite House, by having seen them pass on the road from the corral, or, after the devastation of the plateau, they had penetrated into Jacamar Wood, following the course of the Mercy, and were thus ignorant of their return.

In the former case, they must have returned towards the corral, now without defenders, and which contained valuable stores.

In the latter, they must have regained their encampment, and would wait on opportunity to recommence the attack.

It was, therefore, possible to prevent them, but any enterprise to clear the island was now rendered difficult by reason of Herbert’s condition. Indeed, their whole force would have been barely sufficient to cope with the convicts, and just now no one could leave Granite House.

The engineer and Neb arrived on the plateau. Desolation reigned everywhere. The fields had been trampled over; the ears of wheat, which were nearly full-grown, lay on the ground. The other plantations had not suffered less.

The kitchen-garden was destroyed. Happily, Granite House possessed a store of seed which would enable them to repair these misfortunes.

As to the wall and buildings of the poultry-yard and the onagers stable, the fire had destroyed all. A few terrified creatures roamed over the plateau. The birds, which during the fire had taken refuge on the waters of the lake, had already returned to their accustomed spot, and were dabbling on the banks. Everything would have to be reconstructed.

Cyrus Harding’s face, which was paler than usual, expressed an internal anger which he commanded with difficulty, but he did not utter a word. Once more he looked at his devastated fields, and at the smoke which still rose from the ruins, then he returned to Granite House.

The following days were the saddest of any that the colonists had passed on the island! Herbert’s weakness visibly increased. It appeared that a more serious malady, the consequence of the profound physiological disturbance he had gone through, threatened to declare itself, and Gideon Spilett feared such an aggravation of his condition that he would be powerless to fight against it!

In fact, Herbert remained in an almost continuous state of drowsiness, and symptoms of delirium began to manifest themselves. Refreshing drinks were the only remedies at the colonists’ disposal. The fever was not as yet very high, but it soon appeared that it would probably recur at regular intervals. Gideon Spilett first recognized this on the 6th of December.

The poor boy, whose fingers, nose, and ears had become extremely pale, was at first seized with slight shiverings, horripilations, and tremblings. His pulse was weak and irregular, his skin dry, his thirst intense. To this soon succeeded a hot fit; his face became flushed; his skin reddened; his pulse quick; then a profuse perspiration broke out after which the fever seemed to diminish. The attack had lasted nearly five hours.

Gideon Spilett had not left Herbert, who, it was only too certain, was now seized by an intermittent fever, and this fever must be cured at any cost before it should assume a more serious aspect.

“And in order to cure it,” said Spilett to Cyrus Harding, “we need a febrifuge.”

“A febrifuge — ” answered the engineer. “We have neither Peruvian bark, nor sulphate of quinine.”

“No,” said Gideon Spilett, “but there are willows on the border of the lake, and the bark of the willow might, perhaps, prove to be a substitute for quinine.”

“Let us try it without losing a moment,” replied Cyrus Harding.

The bark of the willow has, indeed, been justly considered as a succedaneum for Peruvian bark, as has also that of the horse-chestnut tree, the leaf of the holly, the snake-root, etc. It was evidently necessary to make trial of this substance, although not so valuable as Peruvian bark, and to employ it in its natural state, since they had no means for extracting its essence.

Cyrus Harding went himself to cut from the trunk of a species of black willow, a few pieces of bark; he brought them back to Granite House, and reduced them to a powder, which was administered that same evening to Herbert.

The night passed without any important change. Herbert was somewhat delirious, but the fever did not reappear in the night, and did not return either during the following day.

Pencroft again began to hope. Gideon Spilett said nothing. It might be that the fever was not quotidian, but tertian, and that it would return next day. Therefore, he awaited the next day with the greatest anxiety.

It might have been remarked besides that during this period Herbert remained utterly prostrate, his head weak and giddy. Another symptom alarmed the reporter to the highest degree. Herbert’s liver became congested, and soon a more intense delirium showed that his brain was also affected.

Gideon Spilett was overwhelmed by this new complication. He took the engineer aside.

“It is a malignant fever,” said he.

“A malignant fever!” cried Harding. “You are mistaken, Spilett. A malignant fever does not declare itself spontaneously; its germ must previously have existed.”

“I am not mistaken,” replied the reporter. “Herbert no doubt contracted the germ of this fever in the marshes of the island. He has already had one attack; should a second come on and should we not be able to prevent a third, he is lost.”

“But the willow bark?”

“That is insufficient,” answered the reporter, “and the third attack of a malignant fever, which is not arrested by means of quinine, is always fatal.”

Fortunately, Pencroft heard nothing of this conversation or he would have gone mad.

It may be imagined what anxiety the engineer and the reporter suffered during the day of the 7th of December and the following night.

Towards the middle of the day the second attack came on. The crisis was terrible. Herbert felt himself sinking. He stretched his arms towards Cyrus Harding, towards Spilett, towards Pencroft. He was so young to die! The scene was heart-rending. They were obliged to send Pencroft away.

The fit lasted five hours. It was evident that Herbert could not survive a third.

The night was frightful. In his delirium Herbert uttered words which went to the hearts of his companions. He struggled with the convicts, he called to Ayrton, he poured forth entreaties to that mysterious being, — that powerful unknown protector, — whose image was stamped upon his mind; then he again fell into a deep exhaustion which completely prostrated him. Several times Gideon Spilett thought that the poor boy was dead.

The next day, the 8th of December, was but a succession of the fainting fits. Herbert’s thin hands clutched the sheets. They had administered further doses of pounded bark, but the reporter expected no result from it.

“If before tomorrow morning we have not given him a more energetic febrifuge,” said the reporter, “Herbert will be dead.”

Night arrived — the last night, it was too much to be feared, of the good, brave, intelligent boy, so far in advance of his years, and who was loved by all as their own child. The only remedy which existed against this terrible malignant fever, the only specific which could overcome it, was not to be found in Lincoln Island.

During the night of the 8th of December, Herbert was seized by a more violent delirium. His liver was fearfully congested, his brain affected, and already it was impossible for him to recognize any one.

Would he live until the next day, until that third attack which must infallibly carry him off? It was not probable. His strength was exhausted, and in the intervals of fever he lay as one dead.

Towards three o’clock in the morning Herbert uttered a piercing cry. He seemed to be torn by a supreme convulsion. Neb, who was near him, terrified, ran into the next room where his companions were watching.

Top, at that moment, barked in a strange manner.

All rushed in immediately and managed to restrain the dying boy, who was endeavoring to throw himself out of his bed, while Spilett, taking his arm, felt his pulse gradually quicken.

It was five in the morning. The rays of the rising sun began to shine in at the windows of Granite House. It promised to be a fine day, and this day was to be poor Herbert’s last!

A ray glanced on the table placed near the bed.

Suddenly Pencroft, uttering a cry, pointed to the table.

On it lay a little oblong box, of which the cover bore these words: —
”SULPHATE OF QUININE.”

CHAPTER 11

Gideon Spilett took the box and opened it. It contained nearly two hundred grains of a white powder, a few particles of which he carried to his lips. The extreme bitterness of the substance precluded all doubt; it was certainly the precious extract of quinine, that pre-eminent antifebrile.

This powder must be administered to Herbert without delay. How it came there might be discussed later.

“Some coffee!” said Spilett.

In a few moments Neb brought a cup of the warm infusion. Gideon Spilett threw into it about eighteen grains of quinine, and they succeeded in making Herbert drink the mixture.

There was still time, for the third attack of the malignant fever had not yet shown itself. How they longed to be able to add that it would not return!

Besides, it must be remarked, the hopes of all had now revived. The mysterious influence had been again exerted, and in a critical moment, when they had despaired of it.

In a few hours Herbert was much calmer. The colonists could now discuss this incident. The intervention of the stranger was more evident than ever. But how had he been able to penetrate during the night into Granite House? It was inexplicable, and, in truth, the proceedings of the genius of the island were not less mysterious than was that genius himself. During this day the sulphate of quinine was administered to Herbert every three hours.

The next day some improvement in Herbert’s condition was apparent. Certainly, he was not out of danger, intermittent fevers being subject to frequent and dangerous relapses, but the most assiduous care was bestowed on him. And besides, the specific was at hand; nor, doubtless, was he who had brought it far distant! And the hearts of all were animated by returning hope.

This hope was not disappointed. Ten days after, on the 20th of December, Herbert's convalescence commenced.

He was still weak, and strict diet had been imposed upon him, but no access of fever supervened. And then, the poor boy submitted with such docility to all the prescriptions ordered him! He longed so to get well!

Pencroft was as a man who has been drawn up from the bottom of an abyss. Fits of joy approaching delirium seized him. When the time for the third attack had passed by, he nearly suffocated the reporter in his embrace. Since then, he always called him Dr. Spilett.

The real doctor, however, remained undiscovered.

"We will find him!" repeated the sailor.

Certainly, this man, whoever he was, might expect a somewhat too energetic embrace from the worthy Pencroft!

The month of December ended, and with it the year 1867, during which the colonists of Lincoln Island had of late been so severely tried. They commenced the year 1868 with magnificent weather, great heat, and a tropical temperature, delightfully cooled by the sea-breeze. Herbert's recovery progressed, and from his bed, placed near one of the windows of Granite House, he could inhale the fresh air, charged with ozone, which could not fail to restore his health. His appetite returned, and what numberless delicate, savory little dishes Neb prepared for him!

“It is enough to make one wish to have a fever oneself!” said Pencroft.

During all this time, the convicts did not once appear in the vicinity of Granite House. There was no news of Ayrton, and though the engineer and Herbert still had some hopes of finding him again, their companions did not doubt but that the unfortunate man had perished. However, this uncertainty could not last, and when once the lad should have recovered, the expedition, the result of which must be so important, would be undertaken. But they would have to wait a month, perhaps, for all the strength of the colony must be put into requisition to obtain satisfaction from the convicts.

However, Herbert’s convalescence progressed rapidly. The congestion of the liver had disappeared, and his wounds might be considered completely healed.

During the month of January, important work was done on the plateau of Prospect Heights; but it consisted solely in saving as much as was possible from the devastated crops, either of corn or vegetables. The grain and the plants were gathered, so as to provide a new harvest for the approaching half-season. With regard to rebuilding the poultry-yard, wall, or stables, Cyrus Harding preferred to wait. While he and his companions were in pursuit of the convicts, the latter might very probably pay another visit to the plateau, and it would be useless to give them an opportunity of recommencing their work of destruction. When the island should be cleared of these miscreants, they would set about rebuilding. The young convalescent began to get up in the second week of January, at first for one hour a day, then two, then three. His strength visibly returned, so vigorous was his constitution. He was now eighteen years of age. He was tall, and promised to become a man of noble and commanding presence. From this time his recovery, while still requiring care, — and Dr. Spilett was very strict, — made rapid progress. Towards the end of the month, Herbert was already walking about on Prospect Heights, and the beach.

He derived, from several sea-baths, which he took in company with Pencroft and Neb, the greatest possible benefit. Cyrus Harding thought he might now settle the day for their departure, for which the 15th of February was fixed. The nights, very clear at this time of year, would be favorable to the researches they intended to make all over the island.

The necessary preparations for this exploration were now commenced, and were important, for the colonists had sworn not to return to Granite House until their twofold object had been achieved; on the one hand, to exterminate the convicts, and rescue Ayrton, if he was still living; on the other, to discover who it was that presided so effectually over the fortunes of the colony.

Of Lincoln Island, the settlers knew thoroughly all the eastern coast from Claw Cape to the Mandible Capes, the extensive Tadorn Marsh, the neighborhood of Lake Grant, Jacamar Wood, between the road to the corral and the Mercy, the courses of the Mercy and Red Creek, and lastly, the spurs of Mount Franklin, among which the corral had been established.

They had explored, though only in an imperfect manner, the vast shore of Washington Bay from Claw Cape to Reptile End, the woody and marshy border of the west coast, and the interminable downs, ending at the open mouth of Shark Gulf. But they had in no way surveyed the woods which covered the Serpentine Peninsula, all to the right of the Mercy, the left bank of Falls River, and the wilderness of spurs and valleys which supported three quarters of the base of Mount Franklin, to the east, the north, and the west, and where doubtless many secret retreats existed. Consequently, many millions of acres of the island had still escaped their investigations.

It was, therefore, decided that the expedition should be carried through the Far West, so as to include all that region situated on the right of the Mercy.

It might, perhaps, be better worth while to go direct to the corral, where it might be supposed that the convicts had again taken refuge, either to pillage or to establish themselves there. But either the devastation of the corral would have been an accomplished fact by this time, and it would be too late to prevent it, or it had been the convicts’ interest to entrench themselves there, and there would be still time to go and turn them out on their return.

Therefore, after some discussion, the first plan was adhered to, and the settlers resolved to proceed through the wood to Reptile End. They would make their way with their hatchets, and thus lay the first draft of a road which would place Granite House in communication with the end of the peninsula for a length of from sixteen to seventeen miles.

The cart was in good condition. The onagers, well rested, could go a long journey. Provisions, camp effects, a portable stove, and various utensils were packed in the cart, as also weapons and ammunition, carefully chosen from the now complete arsenal of Granite House. But it was necessary to remember that the convicts were, perhaps, roaming about the woods, and that in the midst of these thick forests a shot might quickly be fired and received. It was therefore resolved that the little band of settlers should remain together and not separate under any pretext whatever.

It was also decided that no one should remain at Granite House. Top and Jup themselves were to accompany the expedition; the inaccessible dwelling needed no guard. The 14th of February, eve of the departure, was consecrated entirely to repose, and — thanksgiving addressed by the colonists to the Creator. A place in the cart was reserved for Herbert, who, though thoroughly convalescent, was still a little weak. The next morning, at daybreak, Cyrus Harding took the necessary measures to protect Granite House from any invasion. The ladders, which were formerly used for the ascent, were brought to the Chimneys and buried deep in the sand, so that they might be available on the return of the colonists, for the machinery of the lift had been taken to pieces, and nothing of the apparatus remained. Pencroft stayed the last in Granite House in order to finish this work, and he then lowered himself down by means of a double rope held below, and which, when once hauled down, left no communication between the upper landing and the beach.

The weather was magnificent.

“We shall have a warm day of it,” said the reporter, laughing.

“Pooh! Dr. Spilett,” answered Pencroft, “we shall walk under the shade of the trees and shan’t even see the sun!”

“Forward!” said the engineer.

The cart was waiting on the beach before the Chimneys. The reporter made Herbert take his place in it during the first hours at least of the journey, and the lad was obliged to submit to his doctor’s orders.

Neb placed himself at the onagers’ heads. Cyrus Harding, the reporter, and the sailor, walked in front. Top bounded joyfully along. Herbert offered a seat in his vehicle to Jup, who accepted it without ceremony. The moment for departure had arrived, and the little band set out.

The cart first turned the angle of the mouth of the Mercy, then, having ascended the left bank for a mile, crossed the bridge, at the other side of which commenced the road to Port Balloon, and there the explorers, leaving this road on their left, entered the cover of the immense woods which formed the region of the Far West.

For the first two miles the widely scattered trees allowed the cart to pass with ease; from time to time it became necessary to cut away a few creepers and bushes, but no serious obstacle impeded the progress of the colonists.

The thick foliage of the trees threw a grateful shade on the ground. Deodars, Douglas firs, casuarinas, banksias, gum-trees, dragon-trees, and other well-known species, succeeded each other far as the eye could reach. The feathered tribes of the island were all represented — grouse, jacamars, pheasants, lories, as well as the chattering cockatoos, parrots, and paroquets. Agouties, kangaroos, and capybaras fled swiftly at their approach; and all this reminded the settlers of the first excursions they had made on their arrival at the island.

“Nevertheless,” observed Cyrus Harding, “I notice that these creatures, both birds and quadrupeds, are more timid than formerly. These woods have, therefore, been recently traversed by the convicts, and we shall certainly find some traces of them.”

And, in fact, in several places they could distinguish traces, more or less recent, of the passage of a band of men — here branches broken off the trees, perhaps to mark out the way; there the ashes of a fire, and footprints in clayey spots; but nothing which appeared to belong to a settled encampment.

The engineer had recommended his companions to refrain from hunting. The reports of the firearms might give the alarm to the convicts, who were, perhaps, roaming through the forest. Moreover, the hunters would necessarily ramble some distance from the cart, which it was dangerous to leave unguarded.

In the afterpart of the day, when about six miles from Granite House, their progress became much more difficult. In order to make their way through some thickets, they were obliged to cut down trees. Before entering such places Harding was careful to send in Top and Jup, who faithfully accomplished their commission, and when the dog and orang returned without giving any warning, there was evidently nothing to fear, either from convicts or wild beasts, two varieties of the animal kingdom, whose ferocious instincts placed them on the same level. On the evening of the first day the colonists encamped about nine miles from Granite House, on the border of a little stream falling into the Mercy, and of the existence of which they had till then been ignorant; it evidently, however, belonged to the hydiographical system to which the soil owed its astonishing fertility. The settlers made a hearty meal, for their appetites were sharpened, and measures were then taken that the night might be passed in safety. If the engineer had had only to deal with wild beasts, jaguars or others, he would have simply lighted fires all around his camp, which would have sufficed for its defense; but the convicts would be rather attracted than terrified by the flames, and it was, therefore, better to be surrounded by the profound darkness of night.

The watch was, however, carefully organized. Two of the settlers were to watch together, and every two hours it was agreed that they should be relieved by their comrades. And so, notwithstanding his wish to the contrary, Herbert was exempted from guard. Pencroft and Gideon Spilett in one party, the engineer and Neb in another, mounted guard in turns over the camp.

The night, however, was but of few hours. The darkness was due rather to the thickness of the foliage than to the disappearance of the sun. The silence was scarcely disturbed by the howling of jaguars and the chattering of the monkeys, the latter appearing to particularly irritate Master Jup. The night passed without incident, and on the next day, the 15th of February, the journey through the forest, tedious rather than difficult, was continued. This day they could not accomplish more than six miles, for every moment they were obliged to cut a road with their hatchets.

Like true settlers, the colonists spared the largest and most beautiful trees, which would besides have cost immense labor to fell, and the small ones only were sacrificed, but the result was that the road took a very winding direction, and lengthened itself by numerous detours.

During the day Herbert discovered several new specimens not before met with in the island, such as the tree-fern, with its leaves spread out like the waters of a fountain, locust-trees, on the long pods of which the onagers browsed greedily, and which supplied a sweet pulp of excellent flavor. There, too, the colonists again found groups of magnificent kauries, their cylindrical trunks, crowded with a cone of verdure, rising to a height of two hundred feet. These were the tree-kings of New Zealand, as celebrated as the cedars of Lebanon.

As to the fauna, there was no addition to those species already known to the hunters. Nevertheless, they saw, though unable to get near them, a couple of those large birds peculiar to Australia, a sort of cassowary, called emu, five feet in height, and with brown plumage, which belong to the tribe of waders. Top darted after them as fast as his four legs could carry him, but the emus distanced him with ease, so prodigious was their speed.

As to the traces left by the convicts, a few more were discovered. Some footprints found near an apparently recently extinguished fire were attentively examined by the settlers. By measuring them one after the other, according to their length and breadth, the marks of five men’s feet were easily distinguished. The five convicts had evidently camped on this spot; but, — and this was the object of so minute an examination, — a sixth footprint could not be discovered, which in that case would have been that of Ayrton.

“Ayrton was not with them!” said Herbert.

“No,” answered Pencroft, “and if he was not with them, it was because the wretches had already murdered him! but then these rascals have not a den to which they may be tracked like tigers!”

“No,” replied the reporter, “it is more probable that they wander at random, and it is their interest to rove about until the time when they will be masters of the island!”

“The masters of the island!” exclaimed the sailor; “the masters of the island!...” he repeated, and his voice was choked, as if his throat was seized in an iron grasp. Then in a calmer tone, “Do you know, Captain Harding,” said he, “what the ball is which I have rammed into my gun?”

“No, Pencroft!”

“It is the ball that went through Herbert’s chest, and I promise you it won’t miss its mark!”

But this just retaliation would not bring Ayrton back to life, and from the examination of the footprints left in the ground, they must, alas! conclude that all hopes of ever seeing him again must be abandoned.

That evening they encamped fourteen miles from Granite House, and Cyrus Harding calculated that they could not be more than five miles from Reptile Point.

And indeed, the next day the extremity of the peninsula was reached, and the whole length of the forest had been traversed; but there was nothing to indicate the retreat in which the convicts had taken refuge, nor that, no less secret, which sheltered the mysterious unknown.

CHAPTER 12

The next day, the 18th of February, was devoted to the exploration of all that wooded region forming the shore from Reptile End to Falls River. The colonists were able to search this forest thoroughly, for, as it was comprised between the two shores of the Serpentine Peninsula, it was only from three to four miles in breadth. The trees, both by their height and their thick foliage, bore witness to the vegetative power of the soil, more astonishing here than in any other part of the island. One might have said that a corner from the virgin forests of America or Africa had been transported into this temperate zone. This led them to conclude that the superb vegetation found a heat in this soil, damp in its upper layer, but warmed in the interior by volcanic fires, which could not belong to a temperate climate. The most frequently occurring trees were knaries and eucalypti of gigantic dimensions.

But the colonists' object was not simply to admire the magnificent vegetation. They knew already that in this respect Lincoln Island would have been worthy to take the first rank in the Canary group, to which the first name given was that of the Happy Isles. Now, alas! their island no longer belonged to them entirely; others had taken possession of it, miscreants polluted its shores, and they must be destroyed to the last man.

No traces were found on the western coast, although they were carefully sought for. No more footprints, no more broken branches, no more deserted camps.

"This does not surprise me," said Cyrus Harding to his companions. "The convicts first landed on the island in the neighborhood of Flotsam Point, and they immediately plunged into the Far West forests, after crossing

Tadorn Marsh. They then followed almost the same route that we took on leaving Granite House. This explains the traces we found in the wood. But, arriving on the shore, the convicts saw at once that they would discover no suitable retreat there, and it was then that, going northwards again, they came upon the corral.”

“Where they have perhaps returned,” said Pencroft.

“I do not think so,” answered the engineer, “for they would naturally suppose that our researches would be in that direction. The corral is only a storehouse to them, and not a definitive encampment.”

“I am of Cyrus’ opinion,” said the reporter, “and I think that it is among the spurs of Mount Franklin that the convicts will have made their lair.”

“Then, captain, straight to the corral!” cried Pencroft. “We must finish them off, and till now we have only lost time!”

“No, my friend,” replied the engineer; “you forget that we have a reason for wishing to know if the forests of the Far West do not contain some habitation. Our exploration has a double object, Pencroft. If, on the one hand, we have to chastise crime, we have, on the other, an act of gratitude to perform.”

“That was well said, captain,” replied the sailor, “but, all the same, it is my opinion that we shall not find the gentleman until he pleases.”

And truly Pencroft only expressed the opinion of all. It was probable that the stranger’s retreat was not less mysterious than was he himself.

That evening the cart halted at the mouth of Falls River. The camp was organized as usual, and the customary precautions were taken for the night.

Herbert, become again the healthy and vigorous lad he was before his illness, derived great benefit from this life in the open air, between the sea breezes and the vivifying air from the forests. His place was no longer in the cart, but at the head of the troop.

The next day, the 19th of February, the colonists, leaving the shore, where, beyond the mouth, basalts of every shape were so picturesquely piled up, ascended the river by its left bank. The road had been already partly cleared in their former excursions made from the corral to the west coast. The settlers were now about six miles from Mount Franklin.

The engineer’s plan was this: — To minutely survey the valley forming the bed of the river, and to cautiously approach the neighborhood of the corral; if the corral was occupied, to seize it by force; if it was not, to entrench themselves there and make it the center of the operations which had for their object the exploration of Mount Franklin.

This plan was unanimously approved by the colonists, for they were impatient to regain entire possession of their island.

They made their way then along the narrow valley separating two of the largest spurs of Mount Franklin. The trees, crowded on the river’s bank, became rare on the upper slopes of the mountain. The ground was hilly and rough, very suitable for ambushes, and over which they did not venture without extreme precaution. Top and Jup skirmished on the flanks, springing right and left through the thick brushwood, and emulating each other in intelligence and activity. But nothing showed that the banks of the stream had been recently frequented — nothing announced either the presence or the proximity of the convicts. Towards five in the evening the cart stopped nearly 600 feet from the palisade. A semicircular screen of trees still hid it.

It was necessary to reconnoiter the corral, in order to ascertain if it was occupied. To go there openly, in broad daylight, when the convicts were probably in ambush, would be to expose themselves, as poor Herbert had done, to the firearms of the ruffians. It was better, then, to wait until night came on.

However, Gideon Spilett wished without further delay to reconnoiter the approaches to the corral, and Pencroft, who was quite out of patience, volunteered to accompany him.

“No, my friends,” said the engineer, “wait till night. I will not allow one of you to expose himself in open day.”

“But, captain — ” answered the sailor, little disposed to obey.

“I beg of you, Pencroft,” said the engineer.

“Very well!” replied the sailor, who vented his anger in another way, by bestowing on the convicts the worst names in his maritime vocabulary.

The colonists remained, therefore, near the cart, and carefully watched the neighboring parts of the forest.

Three hours passed thus. The wind had fallen, and absolute silence reigned under the great trees. The snapping of the smallest twig, a footstep on the dry leaves, the gliding of a body among the grass, would have been heard without difficulty. All was quiet. Besides, Top, lying on the grass, his head stretched out on his paws, gave no sign of uneasiness. At eight o’clock the day appeared far enough advanced for the reconnaissance to be made under favorable conditions. Gideon Spilett declared himself ready to set out accompanied by Pencroft. Cyrus Harding consented. Top and Jup were to remain with the engineer, Herbert, and Neb, for a bark or a cry at a wrong moment would give the alarm.

“Do not be imprudent,” said Harding to the reporter and Pencroft, “you have not to gain possession of the corral, but only to find out whether it is occupied or not.”

“All right,” answered Pencroft.

And the two departed.

Under the trees, thanks to the thickness of their foliage, the obscurity rendered any object invisible beyond a radius of from thirty to forty feet. The reporter and Pencroft, halting at any suspicious sound, advanced with great caution.

They walked a little distance apart from each other so as to offer a less mark for a shot. And, to tell the truth, they expected every moment to hear a report. Five minutes after leaving the cart, Gideon Spilett and Pencroft arrived at the edge of the wood before the clearing beyond which rose the palisade.

They stopped. A few straggling beams still fell on the field clear of trees. Thirty feet distant was the gate of the corral, which appeared to be closed. This thirty feet, which it was necessary to cross from the wood to the palisade, constituted the dangerous zone, to borrow a ballistic term: in fact, one or more bullets fired from behind the palisade might knock over any one who ventured on to this zone. Gideon Spilett and the sailor were not men to draw back, but they knew that any imprudence on their part, of which they would be the first victims, would fall afterwards on their companions. If they themselves were killed, what would become of Harding, Neb, and Herbert?

But Pencroft, excited at feeling himself so near the corral where he supposed the convicts had taken refuge, was about to press forward, when the reporter held him back with a grasp of iron.

“In a few minutes it will be quite dark,” whispered Spilett in the sailor’s ear, “then will be the time to act.”

Pencroft, convulsively clasping the butt-end of his gun, restrained his energies, and waited, swearing to himself.

Soon the last of the twilight faded away. Darkness, which seemed as if it issued from the dense forest, covered the clearing. Mount Franklin rose like an enormous screen before the western horizon, and night spread rapidly over all, as it does in regions of low latitudes. Now was the time.

The reporter and Pencroft, since posting themselves on the edge of the wood, had not once lost sight of the palisade. The corral appeared to be absolutely deserted. The top of the palisade formed a line, a little darker than the surrounding shadow, and nothing disturbed its distinctness. Nevertheless, if the convicts were there, they must have posted one of their number to guard against any surprise.

Spilett grasped his companion’s hand, and both crept towards the corral, their guns ready to fire.

They reached the gate without the darkness being illuminated by a single ray of light.

Pencroft tried to push open the gate, which, as the reporter and he had supposed, was closed. However, the sailor was able to ascertain that the outer bars had not been put up. It might, then, be concluded that the convicts were there in the corral, and that very probably they had fastened the gate in such a way that it could not be forced open.

Gideon Spilett and Pencroft listened.

Not a sound could be heard inside the palisade. The musmons and the goats, sleeping no doubt in their huts, in no way disturbed the calm of night.

The reporter and the sailor hearing nothing, asked themselves whether they had not better scale the palisades and penetrate into the corral. This would have been contrary to Cyrus Harding's instructions.

It is true that the enterprise might succeed, but it might also fail. Now, if the convicts were suspecting nothing, if they knew nothing of the expedition against them, if, lastly, there now existed a chance of surprising them, ought this chance to be lost by inconsiderately attempting to cross the palisades?

This was not the reporter's opinion. He thought it better to wait until all the settlers were collected together before attempting to penetrate into the corral. One thing was certain, that it was possible to reach the palisade without being seen, and also that it did not appear to be guarded. This point settled, there was nothing to be done but to return to the cart, where they would consult.

Pencroft probably agreed with this decision, for he followed the reporter without making any objection when the latter turned back to the wood.

In a few minutes the engineer was made acquainted with the state of affairs.

“Well,” said he, after a little thought, “I now have reason to believe that the convicts are not in the corral.”

“We shall soon know,” said Pencroft, “when we have scaled the palisade.”

“To the corral, my friends!” said Cyrus Harding.

“Shall we leave the cart in the wood?” asked Neb.

“No,” replied the engineer, “it is our wagon of ammunition and provisions, and, if necessary, it would serve as an entrenchment.”

“Forward, then!” said Gideon Spilett.

The cart emerged from the wood and began to roll noiselessly towards the palisade. The darkness was now profound, the silence as complete as when Pencroft and the reporter crept over the ground. The thick grass completely muffled their footsteps. The colonists held themselves ready to fire. Jup, at Pencroft’s orders, kept behind. Neb led Top in a leash, to prevent him from bounding forward.

The clearing soon came in sight. It was deserted. Without hesitating, the little band moved towards the palisade. In a short space of time the dangerous zone was passed. Neb remained at the onagers’ heads to hold them. The engineer, the reporter, Herbert, and Pencroft, proceeded to the door, in order to ascertain if it was barricaded inside. It was open!

“What do you say now?” asked the engineer, turning to the sailor and Spilett.

Both were stupefied.

“I can swear,” said Pencroft, “that this gate was shut just now!”

The colonists now hesitated. Were the convicts in the corral when Pencroft and the reporter made their reconnaissance? It could not be doubted, as the gate then closed could only have been opened by them. Were they still there, or had one of their number just gone out?

All these questions presented themselves simultaneously to the minds of the colonists, but how could they be answered?

At that moment, Herbert, who had advanced a few steps into the enclosure, drew back hurriedly, and seized Harding’s hand.

“What’s the matter?” asked the engineer.

“A light!”

“In the house?”

“Yes!”

All five advanced and indeed, through the window fronting them, they saw glimmering a feeble light. Cyrus Harding made up his mind rapidly. “It is our only chance,” said he to his companions, “of finding the convicts collected in this house, suspecting nothing! They are in our power! Forward!” The colonists crossed through the enclosure, holding their guns ready in their hands. The cart had been left outside under the charge of Jup and Top, who had been prudently tied to it.

Cyrus Harding, Pencroft, and Gideon Spilett on one side, Herbert and Neb on the other, going along by the palisade, surveyed the absolutely dark and deserted corral.

In a few moments they were near the closed door of the house.

Harding signed to his companions not to stir, and approached the window, then feebly lighted by the inner light.

He gazed into the apartment.

On the table burned a lantern. Near the table was the bed formerly used by Ayrton.

On the bed lay the body of a man.

Suddenly Cyrus Harding drew back, and in a hoarse voice, — ”Ayrton!” he exclaimed.

Immediately the door was forced rather than opened, and the colonists rushed into the room.

Ayrton appeared to be asleep. His countenance showed that he had long and cruelly suffered. On his wrists and ankles could be seen great bruises.

Harding bent over him.

“Ayrton!” cried the engineer, seizing the arm of the man whom he had just found again under such unexpected circumstances.

At this exclamation Ayrton opened his eyes, and, gazing at Harding, then at the others, —

“You!” he cried, “you?”

“Ayrton! Ayrton!” repeated Harding.

“Where am I?”

“In the house in the corral!”

“Alone?”

“Yes!”

“But they will come back!” cried Ayrton. “Defend yourselves! defend yourselves!”

And he fell back exhausted.

“Spilett,” exclaimed the engineer, “we may be attacked at any moment. Bring the cart into the corral. Then, barricade the door, and all come back here.”

Pencroft, Neb, and the reporter hastened to execute the engineer’s orders. There was not a moment to be lost. Perhaps even now the cart was in the hands of the convicts!

In a moment the reporter and his two companions had crossed the corral and reached the gate of the palisade behind which Top was heard growling sullenly.

The engineer, leaving Ayrton for an instant, came out ready to fire. Herbert was at his side. Both surveyed the crest of the spur overlooking the corral. If the convicts were lying in ambush there, they might knock the settlers over one after the other.

At that moment the moon appeared in the east, above the black curtain of the forest, and a white sheet of light spread over the interior of the enclosure. The corral, with its clumps of trees, the little stream which watered it, its wide carpet of grass, was suddenly illuminated. From the side of the mountain, the house and a part of the palisade stood out white in the moonlight. On the opposite side towards the door, the enclosure remained dark. A black mass soon appeared. This was the cart entering the circle of light, and Cyrus Harding could hear the noise made by the door, as his companions shut it and fastened the interior bars.

But, at that moment, Top, breaking loose, began to bark furiously and rush to the back of the corral, to the right of the house.

“Be ready to fire, my friends!” cried Harding.

The colonists raised their pieces and waited the moment to fire.

Top still barked, and Jup, running towards the dog, uttered shrill cries.

The colonists followed him, and reached the borders of the little stream, shaded by large trees. And there, in the bright moonlight, what did they see? Five corpses, stretched on the bank!

They were those of the convicts who, four months previously, had landed on Lincoln Island!

CHAPTER 13

How had it happened? who had killed the convicts? Was it Ayrton? No, for a moment before he was dreading their return.

But Ayrton was now in a profound stupor, from which it was no longer possible to rouse him. After uttering those few words he had again become unconscious, and had fallen back motionless on the bed.

The colonists, a prey to a thousand confused thoughts, under the influence of violent excitement, waited all night, without leaving Ayrton’s house, or returning to the spot where lay the bodies of the convicts. It was very probable that Ayrton would not be able to throw any light on the circumstances under which the bodies had been found, since he himself was not aware that he was in the corral. But at any rate he would be in a position to give an account of what had taken place before this terrible execution. The next day Ayrton awoke from his torpor, and his companions cordially manifested all the joy they felt, on seeing him again, almost safe and sound, after a hundred and four days separation.

Ayrton then in a few words recounted what had happened, or, at least, as much as he knew.

The day after his arrival at the corral, on the 10th of last November, at nightfall, he was surprised by the convicts, who had scaled the palisade. They bound and gagged him; then he was led to a dark cavern, at the foot of Mount Franklin, where the convicts had taken refuge.

His death had been decided upon, and the next day the convicts were about to kill him, when one of them recognized him and called him by the name which he bore in Australia. The wretches had no scruples as to murdering Ayrton! They spared Ben Joyce!

But from that moment Ayrton was exposed to the importunities of his former accomplices. They wished him to join them again, and relied upon his aid to enable them to gain possession of Granite House, to penetrate into that hitherto inaccessible dwelling, and to become masters of the island, after murdering the colonists!

Ayrton remained firm. The once convict, now repentant and pardoned, would rather die than betray his companions. Ayrton — bound, gagged, and closely watched — lived in this cave for four months.

Nevertheless the convicts had discovered the corral a short time after their arrival in the island, and since then they had subsisted on Ayrton's stores, but did not live at the corral.

On the 11th of November, two of the villains, surprised by the colonists' arrival, fired at Herbert, and one of them returned, boasting of having killed one of the inhabitants of the island; but he returned alone. His companion, as is known, fell by Cyrus Harding's dagger.

Ayrton's anxiety and despair may be imagined when he learned the news of Herbert's death. The settlers were now only four, and, as it seemed, at the mercy of the convicts. After this event, and during all the time that the colonists, detained by Herbert's illness, remained in the corral, the pirates did not leave their cavern, and even after they had pillaged the plateau of Prospect Heights, they did not think it prudent to abandon it.

The ill-treatment inflicted on Ayrton was now redoubled. His hands and feet still bore the bloody marks of the cords which bound him day and night.

Every moment he expected to be put to death, nor did it appear possible that he could escape.

Matters remained thus until the third week of February. The convicts, still watching for a favorable opportunity, rarely quitted their retreat, and only made a few hunting excursions, either to the interior of the island, or the south coast.

Ayrton had no further news of his friends, and relinquished all hope of ever seeing them again. At last, the unfortunate man, weakened by ill-treatment, fell into a prostration so profound that sight and hearing failed him. From that moment, that is to say, since the last two days, he could give no information whatever of what had occurred.

“But, Captain Harding,” he added, “since I was imprisoned in that cavern, how is it that I find myself in the corral?”

“How is it that the convicts are lying yonder dead, in the middle of the enclosure?” answered the engineer.

“Dead!” cried Ayrton, half rising from his bed, notwithstanding his weakness.

His companions supported him. He wished to get up, and with their assistance he did so. They then proceeded together towards the little stream.

It was now broad daylight.

There, on the bank, in the position in which they had been stricken by death in its most instantaneous form, lay the corpses of the five convicts!

Ayrton was astounded. Harding and his companions looked at him without uttering a word. On a sign from the engineer, Neb and Pencroft examined the bodies, already stiffened by the cold.

They bore no apparent trace of any wound.

Only, after carefully examining them, Pencroft found on the forehead of one, on the chest of another, on the back of this one, on the shoulder of that, a little red spot, a sort of scarcely visible bruise, the cause of which it was impossible to conjecture.

“It is there that they have been struck!” said Cyrus Harding.

“But with what weapon?” cried the reporter.

“A weapon, lightning-like in its effects, and of which we have not the secret!”

“And who has struck the blow?” asked Pencroft.

“The avenging power of the island,” replied Harding, “he who brought you here, Ayrton, whose influence has once more manifested itself, who does for us all that which we cannot do for ourselves, and who, his will accomplished, conceals himself from us.”

“Let us make search for him, then!” exclaimed Pencroft.

“Yes, we will search for him,” answered Harding, “but we shall not discover this powerful being who performs such wonders, until he pleases to call us to him!”

This invisible protection, which rendered their own action unavailing, both irritated and piqued the engineer. The relative inferiority which it proved was of a nature to wound a haughty spirit. A generosity evinced in such a manner as to elude all tokens of gratitude, implied a sort of disdain for those on whom the obligation was conferred, which in Cyrus Harding's eyes marred, in some degree, the worth of the benefit.

"Let us search," he resumed, "and God grant that we may some day be permitted to prove to this haughty protector that he has not to deal with ungrateful people! What would I not give could we repay him, by rendering him in our turn, although at the price of our lives, some signal service!"

From this day, the thoughts of the inhabitants of Lincoln Island were solely occupied with the intended search. Everything incited them to discover the answer to this enigma, an answer which would only be the name of a man endowed with a truly inexplicable, and in some degree superhuman power.

In a few minutes, the settlers re-entered the house, where their influence soon restored to Ayrton his moral and physical energy. Neb and Pencroft carried the corpses of the convicts into the forest, some distance from the corral, and buried them deep in the ground.

Ayrton was then made acquainted with the facts which had occurred during his seclusion. He learned Herbert's adventures, and through what various trials the colonists had passed. As to the settlers, they had despaired of ever seeing Ayrton again, and had been convinced that the convicts had ruthlessly murdered him.

"And now," said Cyrus Harding, as he ended his recital, "a duty remains for us to perform. Half of our task is accomplished, but although the convicts are no longer to be feared, it is not owing to ourselves that we are once more masters of the island.”

“Well!” answered Gideon Spilett, “let us search all this labyrinth of the spurs of Mount Franklin. We will not leave a hollow, not a hole unexplored! Ah! if ever a reporter found himself face to face with a mystery, it is I who now speak to you, my friends!”

“And we will not return to Granite House until we have found our benefactor,” said Herbert.

“Yes,” said the engineer, “we will do all that it is humanly possible to do, but I repeat we shall not find him until he himself permits us.”

“Shall we stay at the corral?” asked Pencroft.

“We shall stay here,” answered Harding. “Provisions are abundant, and we are here in the very center of the circle we have to explore. Besides, if necessary, the cart will take us rapidly to Granite House.”

“Good!” answered the sailor. “Only I have a remark to make.”

“What is it?”

“Here is the fine season getting on, and we must not forget that we have a voyage to make.”

“A voyage?” said Gideon Spilett.

“Yes, to Tabor Island,” answered Pencroft. “It is necessary to carry a notice there to point out the position of our island and say that Ayrton is here in case the Scotch yacht should come to take him off. Who knows if it is not already too late?"

"But, Pencroft," asked Ayrton, "how do you intend to make this voyage?"

"In the 'Bonadventure.'"

"The 'Bonadventure!'" exclaimed Ayrton. "She no longer exists."

"My 'Bonadventure' exists no longer!" shouted Pencroft, bounding from his seat.

"No," answered Ayrton. "The convicts discovered her in her little harbor only eight days ago, they put to sea in her — "

"And?" said Pencroft, his heart beating.

"And not having Bob Harvey to steer her, they ran on the rocks, and the vessel went to pieces."

"Oh, the villains, the cutthroats, the infamous scoundrels!" exclaimed Pencroft.

"Pencroft," said Herbert, taking the sailor's hand, "we will build another 'Bonadventure' — a larger one. We have all the ironwork — all the rigging of the brig at our disposal."

"But do you know," returned Pencroft, "that it will take at least five or six months to build a vessel of from thirty to forty tons?"

"We can take our time," said the reporter, "and we must give up the voyage to Tabor Island for this year."

“Oh, my ‘Bonadventure!’ my poor ‘Bonadventure!’” cried Pencroft, almost broken-hearted at the destruction of the vessel of which he was so proud.

The loss of the “Bonadventure” was certainly a thing to be lamented by the colonists, and it was agreed that this loss should be repaired as soon as possible. This settled, they now occupied themselves with bringing their researches to bear on the most secret parts of the island.

The exploration was commenced at daybreak on the 19th of February, and lasted an entire week. The base of the mountain, with its spurs and their numberless ramifications, formed a labyrinth of valleys and elevations. It was evident that there, in the depths of these narrow gorges, perhaps even in the interior of Mount Franklin itself, was the proper place to pursue their researches. No part of the island could have been more suitable to conceal a dwelling whose occupant wished to remain unknown. But so irregular was the formation of the valleys that Cyrus Harding was obliged to conduct the exploration in a strictly methodical manner.

The colonists first visited the valley opening to the south of the volcano, and which first received the waters of Falls River. There Ayrton showed them the cavern where the convicts had taken refuge, and in which he had been imprisoned until his removal to the corral. This cavern was just as Ayrton had left it. They found there a considerable quantity of ammunition and provisions, conveyed thither by the convicts in order to form a reserve.

The whole of the valley bordering on the cave, shaded by fir and other trees, was thoroughly explored, and on turning the point of the southwestern spur, the colonists entered a narrower gorge similar to the picturesque columns of basalt on the coast. Here the trees were fewer. Stones took the place of grass. Goats and musmons gambolled among the rocks. Here began the barren part of the island. It could already be seen that, of the numerous valleys branching off at the base of Mount Franklin, three only were wooded and rich in pasturage like that of the corral, which bordered on the west on the Falls River valley, and on the east on the Red Creek valley. These two streams, which lower down became rivers by the absorption of several tributaries, were formed by all the springs of the mountain and thus caused the fertility of its southern part. As to the Mercy, it was more directly fed from ample springs concealed under the cover of Jacamar Wood, and it was by springs of this nature, spreading in a thousand streamlets, that the soil of the Serpentine Peninsula was watered.

Now, of these three well-watered valleys, either might have served as a retreat to some solitary who would have found there everything necessary for life. But the settlers had already explored them, and in no part had they discovered the presence of man.

Was it then in the depths of those barren gorges, in the midst of the piles of rock, in the rugged northern ravines, among the streams of lava, that this dwelling and its occupant would be found?

The northern part of Mount Franklin was at its base composed solely of two valleys, wide, not very deep, without any appearance of vegetation, strewn with masses of rock, paved with lava, and varied with great blocks of mineral. This region required a long and careful exploration. It contained a thousand cavities, comfortless no doubt, but perfectly concealed and difficult of access.

The colonists even visited dark tunnels, dating from the volcanic period, still black from the passage of the fire, and penetrated into the depths of the mountain. They traversed these somber galleries, waving lighted torches; they examined the smallest excavations; they sounded the shallowest depths, but all was dark and silent. It did not appear that the foot of man had ever before trodden these ancient passages, or that his arm had ever displaced one of these blocks, which remained as the volcano had cast them up above the waters, at the time of the submersion of the island.

However, although these passages appeared to be absolutely deserted, and the obscurity was complete, Cyrus Harding was obliged to confess that absolute silence did not reign there.

On arriving at the end of one of these gloomy caverns, extending several hundred feet into the interior of the mountain, he was surprised to hear a deep rumbling noise, increased in intensity by the sonorousness of the rocks.

Gideon Spilett, who accompanied him, also heard these distant mutterings, which indicated a revivification of the subterranean fires. Several times both listened, and they agreed that some chemical process was taking place in the bowels of the earth.

“Then the volcano is not totally extinct?” said the reporter.

“It is possible that since our exploration of the crater,” replied Cyrus Harding, “some change has occurred. Any volcano, although considered extinct, may evidently again burst forth.”

“But if an eruption of Mount Franklin occurred,” asked Spilett, “would there not be some danger to Lincoln Island?”

“I do not think so,” answered the reporter. “The crater, that is to say, the safety-valve, exists, and the overflow of smoke and lava, would escape, as it did formerly, by this customary outlet.”

"Unless the lava opened a new way for itself towards the fertile parts of the island!"

"And why, my dear Spilett," answered Cyrus Harding, "should it not follow the road naturally traced out for it?"

"Well, volcanoes are capricious," returned the reporter.

"Notice," answered the engineer, "that the inclination of Mount Franklin favors the flow of water towards the valleys which we are exploring just now. To turn aside this flow, an earthquake would be necessary to change the mountain's center of gravity."

"But an earthquake is always to be feared at these times," observed Gideon Spilett.

"Always," replied the engineer, "especially when the subterranean forces begin to awake, as they risk meeting with some obstruction, after a long rest. Thus, my dear Spilett, an eruption would be a serious thing for us, and it would be better that the volcano should not have the slightest desire to wake up. But we could not prevent it, could we? At any rate, even if it should occur, I do not think Prospect Heights would be seriously threatened. Between them and the mountain, the ground is considerably depressed, and if the lava should ever take a course towards the lake, it would be cast on the downs and the neighboring parts of Shark Gulf."

"We have not yet seen any smoke at the top of the mountain, to indicate an approaching eruption," said Gideon Spilett.

"No," answered Harding, "not a vapor escapes from the crater, for it was only yesterday that I attentively surveyed the summit. But it is probable that at the lower part of the chimney, time may have accumulated rocks, cinders, hardened lava, and that this valve of which I spoke, may at any time become overcharged. But at the first serious effort, every obstacle will disappear, and you may be certain, my dear Spilett, that neither the island, which is the boiler, nor the volcano, which is the chimney, will burst under the pressure of gas. Nevertheless, I repeat, it would be better that there should not be an eruption."

"And yet we are not mistaken," remarked the reporter. "Mutterings can be distinctly heard in the very bowels of the volcano!"

"You are right," said the engineer, again listening attentively. "There can be no doubt of it. A commotion is going on there, of which we can neither estimate the importance nor the ultimate result."

Cyrus Harding and Spilett, on coming out, rejoined their companions, to whom they made known the state of affairs.

"Very well!" cried Pencroft, "The volcano wants to play his pranks! Let him try, if he likes! He will find his master!"

"Who?" asked Neb.

"Our good genius, Neb, our good genius, who will shut his mouth for him, if he so much as pretends to open it!"

As may be seen, the sailor's confidence in the tutelary deity of his island was absolute, and, certainly, the occult power, manifested until now in so many inexplicable ways, appeared to be unlimited; but also it knew how to escape the colonists' most minute researches, for, in spite of all their efforts, in spite of the more than zeal, — the obstinacy, — with which they carried on their exploration, the retreat of the mysterious being could not be discovered.

From the 19th to the 20th of February the circle of investigation was extended to all the northern region of Lincoln Island, whose most secret nooks were explored. The colonists even went the length of tapping every rock. The search was extended to the extreme verge of the mountain. It was explored thus to the very summit of the truncated cone terminating the first row of rocks, then to the upper ridge of the enormous hat, at the bottom of which opened the crater.

They did more; they visited the gulf, now extinct, but in whose depths the rumbling could be distinctly heard. However, no sign of smoke or vapor, no heating of the rock, indicated an approaching eruption. But neither there, nor in any other part of Mount Franklin, did the colonists find any traces of him of whom they were in search.

Their investigations were then directed to the downs. They carefully examined the high lava-cliffs of Shark Gulf from the base to the crest, although it was extremely difficult to reach even the level of the gulf. No one! — nothing!

Indeed, in these three words was summed up so much fatigue uselessly expended, so much energy producing no results, that somewhat of anger mingled with the discomfiture of Cyrus Harding and his companions.

It was now time to think of returning, for these researches could not be prolonged indefinitely. The colonists were certainly right in believing that the mysterious being did not reside on the surface of the island, and the wildest fancies haunted their excited imaginations. Pencroft and Neb, particularly, were not contented with the mystery, but allowed their imaginations to wander into the domain of the supernatural.

On the 25th of February the colonists re-entered Granite House, and by means of the double cord, carried by an arrow to the threshold of the door, they re-established communication between their habitation and the ground.

A month later they commemorated, on the 25th of March, the third anniversary of their arrival on Lincoln Island.

CHAPTER 14

Three years had passed away since the escape of the prisoners from Richmond, and how often during those three years had they spoken of their country, always present in their thoughts!

They had no doubt that the civil war was at an end, and to them it appeared impossible that the just cause of the North had not triumphed. But what had been the incidents of this terrible war? How much blood had it not cost? How many of their friends must have fallen in the struggle? They often spoke of these things, without as yet being able to foresee the day when they would be permitted once more to see their country. To return thither, were it but for a few days, to renew the social link with the inhabited world, to establish a communication between their native land and their island, then to pass the longest, perhaps the best, portion of their existence in this colony, founded by them, and which would then be dependent on their country, was this a dream impossible to realize?

There were only two ways of accomplishing it — either a ship must appear off Lincoln Island, or the colonists must themselves build a vessel strong enough to sail to the nearest land.

“Unless,” said Pencroft, “our good genius, himself provides us with the means of returning to our country.”

And, really, had any one told Pencroft and Neb that a ship of 300 tons was waiting for them in Shark Gulf or at Port Balloon, they would not even have made a gesture of surprise. In their state of mind nothing appeared improbable.

But Cyrus Harding, less confident, advised them to confine themselves to fact, and more especially so with regard to the building of a vessel — a really urgent work, since it was for the purpose of depositing, as soon as possible, at Tabor Island a document indicating Ayrton’s new residence.

As the “Bonadventure” no longer existed, six months at least would be required for the construction of a new vessel. Now winter was approaching, and the voyage would not be made before the following spring.

“We have time to get everything ready for the fine season,” remarked the engineer, who was consulting with Pencroft about these matters. “I think, therefore, my friend, that since we have to rebuild our vessel it will be best to give her larger dimensions. The arrival of the Scotch yacht at Tabor Island is very uncertain. It may even be that, having arrived several months ago, she has again sailed after having vainly searched for some trace of Ayrton. Will it not then be best to build a ship which, if necessary, could take us either to the Polynesian Archipelago or to New Zealand? What do you think?”

“I think, captain,” answered the sailor; “I think that you are as capable of building a large vessel as a small one. Neither the wood nor the tools are wanting. It is only a question of time.”

“And how many months would be required to build a vessel of from 250 to 300 tons?” asked Harding.

“Seven or eight months at least,” replied Pencroft. “But it must not be forgotten that winter is drawing near, and that in severe frost wood is difficult to work. We must calculate on several weeks delay, and if our vessel is ready by next November we may think ourselves very lucky.”

“Well,” replied Cyrus Harding, “that will be exactly the most favorable time for undertaking a voyage of any importance, either to Tabor Island or to a more distant land.”

“So it will, captain,” answered the sailor. “Make out your plans then; the workmen are ready, and I imagine that Ayrton can lend us a good helping hand.”

The colonists, having been consulted, approved the engineer’s plan, and it was, indeed, the best thing to be done. It is true that the construction of a ship of from two to three hundred tons would be great labor, but the colonists had confidence in themselves, justified by their previous success.

Cyrus Harding then busied himself in drawing the plan of the vessel and making the model. During this time his companions employed themselves in felling and carting trees to furnish the ribs, timbers, and planks. The forest of the Far West supplied the best oaks and elms. They took advantage of the opening already made on their last excursion to form a practicable road, which they named the Far West Road, and the trees were carried to the Chimneys, where the dockyard was established. As to the road in question, the choice of trees had rendered its direction somewhat capricious, but at the same time it facilitated the access to a large part of the Serpentine Peninsula.

It was important that the trees should be quickly felled and cut up, for they could not be used while yet green, and some time was necessary to allow them to get seasoned. The carpenters, therefore, worked vigorously during the month of April, which was troubled only by a few equinoctial gales of some violence. Master Jup aided them dexterously, either by climbing to the top of a tree to fasten the ropes or by lending his stout shoulders to carry the lopped trunks.

All this timber was piled up under a large shed, built near the Chimneys, and there awaited the time for use.

The month of April was tolerably fine, as October often is in the northern zone. At the same time other work was actively continued, and soon all trace of devastation disappeared from the plateau of Prospect Heights. The mill was rebuilt, and new buildings rose in the poultry-yard. It had appeared necessary to enlarge their dimensions, for the feathered population had increased considerably. The stable now contained five onagers, four of which were well broken, and allowed themselves to be either driven or ridden, and a little colt. The colony now possessed a plow, to which the onagers were yoked like regular Yorkshire or Kentucky oxen. The colonists divided their work, and their arms never tired. Then who could have enjoyed better health than these workers, and what good humor enlivened the evenings in Granite House as they formed a thousand plans for the future!

As a matter of course Ayrton shared the common lot in every respect, and there was no longer any talk of his going to live at the corral. Nevertheless he was still sad and reserved, and joined more in the work than in the pleasures of his companions. But he was a valuable workman at need — strong, skilful, ingenious, intelligent. He was esteemed and loved by all, and he could not be ignorant of it.

In the meanwhile the corral was not abandoned. Every other day one of the settlers, driving the cart or mounted on an onager, went to look after the flock of musmons and goats and bring back the supply of milk required by Neb. These excursions at the same time afforded opportunities for hunting. Therefore Herbert and Gideon Spilett, with Top in front, traversed more often than their companions the road to the corral, and with the capital guns which they carried, capybaras, agouties, kangaroos, and wild pigs for large game, ducks, grouse, jacamars, and snipe for small game, were never wanting in the house. The produce of the warren, of the oyster-bed, several turtles which were taken, excellent salmon which came up the Mercy, vegetables from the plateau, wild fruit from the forest, were riches upon riches, and Neb, the head cook, could scarcely by himself store them away.

The telegraphic wire between the corral and Granite House had of course been repaired, and it was worked whenever one or other of the settlers was at the corral and found it necessary to spend the night there. Besides, the island was safe now and no attacks were to be feared, at any rate from men.

However, that which had happened might happen again. A descent of pirates, or even of escaped convicts, was always to be feared. It was possible that companions or accomplices of Bob Harvey had been in the secret of his plans, and might be tempted to imitate him. The colonists, therefore, were careful to observe the sea around the island, and every day their telescope covered the horizon enclosed by Union and Washington Bays. When they went to the corral they examined the sea to the west with no less attention, and by climbing the spur their gaze extended over a large section of the western horizon.

Nothing suspicious was discerned, but still it was necessary for them to be on their guard.

The engineer one evening imparted to his friends a plan which he had conceived for fortifying the corral. It appeared prudent to him to heighten the palisade and to flank it with a sort of blockhouse, which, if necessary, the settlers could hold against the enemy. Granite House might, by its very position, be considered impregnable; therefore the corral with its buildings, its stores, and the animals it contained, would always be the object of pirates, whoever they were, who might land on the island, and should the colonists be obliged to shut themselves up there they ought also to be able to defend themselves without any disadvantage. This was a project which might be left for consideration, and they were, besides, obliged to put off its execution until the next spring.

About the 15th of May the keel of the new vessel lay along the dockyard, and soon the stem and stern-post, mortised at each of its extremities, rose almost perpendicularly. The keel, of good oak, measured 110 feet in length, this allowing a width of five-and-twenty feet to the midship beam. But this was all the carpenters could do before the arrival of the frosts and bad weather. During the following week they fixed the first of the stern timbers, but were then obliged to suspend work.

During the last days of the month the weather was extremely bad. The wind blew from the east, sometimes with the violence of a tempest. The engineer was somewhat uneasy on account of the dockyard shed — which besides, he could not have established in any other place near to Granite House — for the islet only imperfectly sheltered the shore from the fury of the open sea, and in great storms the waves beat against the very foot of the granite cliff.

But, very fortunately, these fears were not realized. The wind shifted to the southeast, and there the beach of Granite House was completely covered by Flotsam Point.

Pencroft and Ayrton, the most zealous workmen at the new vessel, pursued their labor as long as they could. They were not men to mind the wind tearing at their hair, nor the rain wetting them to the skin, and a blow from a hammer is worth just as much in bad as in fine weather. But when a severe frost succeeded this wet period, the wood, its fibers acquiring the hardness of iron, became extremely difficult to work, and about the 10th of June shipbuilding was obliged to be entirely discontinued.

Cyrus Harding and his companions had not omitted to observe how severe was the temperature during the winters of Lincoln Island. The cold was comparable to that experienced in the States of New England, situated at almost the same distance from the equator. In the northern hemisphere, or at any rate in the part occupied by British America and the north of the United States, this phenomenon is explained by the flat conformation of the territories bordering on the pole, and on which there is no intumescence of the soil to oppose any obstacle to the north winds; here, in Lincoln Island, this explanation would not suffice.

“It has even been observed,” remarked Harding one day to his companions, “that in equal latitudes the islands and coast regions are less tried by the cold than inland countries. I have often heard it asserted that the winters of Lombardy, for example, are not less rigorous than those of Scotland, which results from the sea restoring during the winter the heat which it received during the summer. Islands are, therefore, in a better situation for benefiting by this restitution.”

“But then, Captain Harding,” asked Herbert, “why does Lincoln Island appear to escape the common law?”

“That is difficult to explain,” answered the engineer. “However, I should be disposed to conjecture that this peculiarity results from the situation of the island in the Southern Hemisphere, which, as you know, my boy, is colder than the Northern Hemisphere.”

“Yes,” said Herbert, “and icebergs are met with in lower latitudes in the south than in the north of the Pacific.”

“That is true,” remarked Pencroft, “and when I have been serving on board whalers I have seen icebergs off Cape Horn.”

“The severe cold experienced in Lincoln Island,” said Gideon Spilett, “may then perhaps be explained by the presence of floes or icebergs comparatively near to Lincoln Island.”

“Your opinion is very admissible indeed, my dear Spilett,” answered Cyrus Harding, “and it is evidently to the proximity of icebergs that we owe our rigorous winters. I would draw your attention also to an entirely physical cause, which renders the Southern colder than the Northern Hemisphere. In fact, since the sun is nearer to this hemisphere during the summer, it is necessarily more distant during the winter. This explains then the excess of temperature in the two seasons, for, if we find the winters very cold in Lincoln Island, we must not forget that the summers here, on the contrary, are very hot.”

“But why, if you please, captain,” asked Pencroft, knitting his brows, “why should our hemisphere, as you say, be so badly divided? It isn’t just, that!”

“Friend Pencroft,” answered the engineer, laughing, “whether just or not, we must submit to it, and here lies the reason for this peculiarity. The earth does not describe a circle around the sun, but an ellipse, as it must by the laws of rational mechanics. Now, the earth occupies one of the foci of the ellipse, and so at one point in its course is at its apogee, that is, at its farthest from the sun, and at another point it is at its perigee, or nearest to the sun. Now it happens that it is during the winter of the southern countries that it is at its most distant point from the sun, and consequently, in a situation for those regions to feel the greatest cold. Nothing can be done to prevent that, and men, Pencroft, however learned they may be, can never change anything of the cosmographical order established by God Himself.”

“And yet,” added Pencroft, “the world is very learned. What a big book, captain, might be made with all that is known!”

“And what a much bigger book still with all that is not known!” answered Harding.

At last, for one reason or another, the month of June brought the cold with its accustomed intensity, and the settlers were often confined to Granite House. Ah! how wearisome this imprisonment was to them, and more particularly to Gideon Spilett.

“Look here,” said he to Neb one day, “I would give you by notarial deed all the estates which will come to me some day, if you were a good enough fellow to go, no matter where, and subscribe to some newspaper for me! Decidedly the thing that is most essential to my happiness is the knowing every morning what has happened the day before in other places than this!”

Neb began to laugh.

“‘Pon my word,” he replied, “the only thing I think about is my daily work!”

The truth was that indoors as well as out there was no want of work.

The colony of Lincoln Island was now at its highest point of prosperity, achieved by three years of continued hard work. The destruction of the brig had been a new source of riches. Without speaking of the complete rig which would serve for the vessel now on the stocks, utensils and tools of all sorts, weapons and ammunition, clothes and instruments, were now piled in the storerooms of Granite House. It had not even been necessary to resort again to the manufacture of the coarse felt materials. Though the colonists had suffered from cold during their first winter, the bad season might now come without their having any reason to dread its severity. Linen was plentiful also, and besides, they kept it with extreme care. From chloride of sodium, which is nothing else than sea salt, Cyrus Harding easily extracted the soda and chlorine. The soda, which it was easy to change into carbonate of soda, and the chlorine, of which he made chloride of lime, were employed for various domestic purposes, and especially in bleaching linen. Besides, they did not wash more than four times a year, as was done by families in the olden times, and it may be added, that Pencroft and Gideon Spilett, while waiting for the postman to bring him his newspaper, distinguished themselves as washermen.

So passed the winter months, June, July, and August. They were severe, and the average observations of the thermometer did not give more than eight degrees of Fahrenheit. It was therefore lower in temperature than the preceding winter. But then, what splendid fires blazed continually on the hearths of Granite House, the smoke marking the granite wall with long, zebra-like streaks! Fuel was not spared, as it grew naturally a few steps from them. Besides, the chips of the wood destined for the construction of the ship enabled them to economize the coal, which required more trouble to transport.

Men and animals were all well. Master Jup was a little chilly, it must be confessed. This was perhaps his only weakness, and it was necessary to make him a well-padded dressing-gown. But what a servant he was, clever, zealous, indefatigable, not indiscreet, not talkative, and he might have been with reason proposed as a model for all his biped brothers in the Old and New Worlds!

“As for that,” said Pencroft, “when one has four hands at one’s service, of course one’s work ought to be done so much the better!”

And indeed the intelligent creature did it well.

During the seven months which had passed since the last researches made round the mountain, and during the month of September, which brought back fine weather, nothing was heard of the genius of the island. His power was not manifested in any way. It is true that it would have been superfluous, for no incident occurred to put the colonists to any painful trial.

Cyrus Harding even observed that if by chance the communication between the unknown and the tenants of Granite House had ever been established through the granite, and if Top’s instinct had as it were felt it, there was no further sign of it during this period. The dog’s growling had entirely ceased, as well as the uneasiness of the orang. The two friends — for they were such — no longer prowled round the opening of the inner well, nor did they bark or whine in that singular way which from the first the engineer had noticed. But could he be sure that this was all that was to be said about this enigma, and that he should never arrive at a solution? Could he be certain that some conjuncture would not occur which would bring the mysterious personage on the scene? who could tell what the future might have in reserve?

At last the winter was ended, but an event, the consequences of which might be serious occurred in the first days of the returning spring.

On the 7th of September, Cyrus Harding, having observed the crater, saw smoke curling round the summit of the mountain, its first vapors rising in the air.

CHAPTER 15

The colonists, warned by the engineer, left their work and gazed in silence at the summit of Mount Franklin.

The volcano had awoke, and the vapor had penetrated the mineral layer heaped at the bottom of the crater. But would the subterranean fires provoke any violent eruption? This was an event which could not be foreseen. However, even while admitting the possibility of an eruption, it was not probable that the whole of Lincoln Island would suffer from it. The flow of volcanic matter is not always disastrous, and the island had already undergone this trial, as was shown by the streams of lava hardened on the northern slopes of the mountain. Besides, from the shape of the crater — the opening broken in the upper edge — the matter would be thrown to the side opposite the fertile regions of the island.

However, the past did not necessarily answer for the future. Often, at the summit of volcanoes, the old craters close and new ones open. This had occurred in the two hemispheres — at Etna, Popocatepetl, at Orizabaand on the eve of an eruption there is everything to be feared. In fact, an earthquake — a phenomenon which often accompanies volcanic eruption — is enough to change the interior arrangement of a mountain, and to open new outlets for the burning lava.

Cyrus Harding explained these things to his companions, and, without exaggerating the state of things, he told them all the pros and cons. After all, they could not prevent it. It did not appear likely that Granite House would be threatened unless the ground was shaken by an earthquake. But the corral would be in great danger should a new crater open in the southern side of Mount Franklin.

From that day the smoke never disappeared from the top of the mountain, and it could even be perceived that it increased in height and thickness, without any flame mingling in its heavy volumes. The phenomenon was still concentrated in the lower part of the central crater.

However, with the fine days work had been continued. The building of the vessel was hastened as much as possible, and, by means of the waterfall on the shore, Cyrus Harding managed to establish an hydraulic sawmill, which rapidly cut up the trunks of trees into planks and joists. The mechanism of this apparatus was as simple as those used in the rustic sawmills of Norway. A first horizontal movement to move the piece of wood, a second vertical movement to move the saw — this was all that was wanted; and the engineer succeeded by means of a wheel, two cylinders, and pulleys properly arranged. Towards the end of the month of September the skeleton of the vessel, which was to be rigged as a schooner, lay in the dockyard. The ribs were almost entirely completed, and, all the timbers having been sustained by a provisional band, the shape of the vessel could already be seen. The schooner, sharp in the bows, very slender in the after-part, would evidently be suitable for a long voyage, if wanted; but laying the planking would still take a considerable time. Very fortunately, the iron work of the pirate brig had been saved after the explosion. From the planks and injured ribs Pencroft and Ayrton had extracted the bolts and a large quantity of copper nails. It was so much work saved for the smiths, but the carpenters had much to do.

Shipbuilding was interrupted for a week for the harvest, the haymaking, and the gathering in of the different crops on the plateau. This work finished, every moment was devoted to finishing the schooner. When night came the workmen were really quite exhausted. So as not to lose any time they had changed the hours for their meals; they dined at twelve o’clock, and only had their supper when daylight failed them. They then ascended to Granite House, when they were always ready to go to bed.

Sometimes, however, when the conversation bore on some interesting subject the hour for sleep was delayed for a time. The colonists then spoke of the future, and talked willingly of the changes which a voyage in the schooner to inhabited lands would make in their situation. But always, in the midst of these plans, prevailed the thought of a subsequent return to Lincoln Island. Never would they abandon this colony, founded with so much labor and with such success, and to which a communication with America would afford a fresh impetus. Pencroft and Neb especially hoped to end their days there.

“Herbert,” said the sailor, “you will never abandon Lincoln Island?”

“Never, Pencroft, and especially if you make up your mind to stay there.”

“That was made up long ago, my boy,” answered Pencroft. “I shall expect you. You will bring me your wife and children, and I shall make jolly chaps of your youngsters!”

“That’s agreed,” replied Herbert, laughing and blushing at the same time.

“And you, Captain Harding,” resumed Pencroft enthusiastically, “you will be still the governor of the island! Ah, how many inhabitants could it support? Ten thousand at least!”

They talked in this way, allowing Pencroft to run on, and at last the reporter actually started a newspaper — the New Lincoln Herald!

So is man’s heart. The desire to perform a work which will endure, which will survive him, is the origin of his superiority over all other living creatures here below. It is this which has established his dominion, and this it is which justifies it, over all the world.

After that, who knows if Jup and Top had not themselves their little dream of the future.

Ayrton silently said to himself that he would like to see Lord Glenarvan again and show himself to all restored.

One evening, on the 15th of October, the conversation was prolonged later than usual. It was nine o'clock. Already, long badly concealed yawns gave warning of the hour of rest, and Pencroft was proceeding towards his bed, when the electric bell, placed in the dining-room, suddenly rang.

All were there, Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Ayrton, Pencroft, Neb. Therefore none of the colonists were at the corral.

Cyrus Harding rose. His companions stared at each other, scarcely believing their ears.

“What does that mean?” cried Neb. “Was it the devil who rang it?”

No one answered.

“The weather is stormy,” observed Herbert. “Might not its influence of electricity — ”

Herbert did not finish his phrase. The engineer, towards whom all eyes were turned, shook his head negatively.

“We must wait,” said Gideon Spilett. “If it is a signal, whoever it may be who has made it, he will renew it.”

“But who do you think it is?” cried Neb.

“Who?” answered Pencroft, “but he — ”

The sailor’s sentence was cut short by a new tinkle of the bell.

Harding went to the apparatus, and sent this question to the corral: —

“What do you want?”

A few moments later the needle, moving on the alphabetic dial, gave this reply to the tenants of Granite House: —

“Come to the corral immediately.”

“At last!” exclaimed Harding.

Yes! At last! The mystery was about to be unveiled. The colonists’ fatigue had disappeared before the tremendous interest which was about to urge them to the corral, and all wish for rest had ceased. Without having uttered a word, in a few moments they had left Granite House, and were standing on the beach. Jup and Top alone were left behind. They could do without them.

The night was black. The new moon had disappeared at the same time as the sun. As Herbert had observed, great stormy clouds formed a lowering and heavy vault, preventing any star rays. A few lightning flashes, reflections from a distant storm, illuminated the horizon.

It was possible that a few hours later the thunder would roll over the island itself. The night was very threatening.

But however deep the darkness was, it would not prevent them from finding the familiar road to the corral.

They ascended the left bank of the Mercy, reached the plateau, passed the bridge over Creek Glycerine, and advanced through the forest.

They walked at a good pace, a prey to the liveliest emotions. There was no doubt but that they were now going to learn the long-searched-for answer to the enigma, the name of that mysterious being, so deeply concerned in their life, so generous in his influence, so powerful in his action! Must not this stranger have indeed mingled with their existence, have known the smallest details, have heard all that was said in Granite House, to have been able always to act in the very nick of time?

Every one, wrapped up in his own reflections, pressed forward. Under the arch of trees the darkness was such that even the edge of the road could not be seen. Not a sound in the forest. Both animals and birds, influenced by the heaviness of the atmosphere, remained motionless and silent. Not a breath disturbed the leaves. The footsteps of the colonists alone resounded on the hardened ground.

During the first quarter of an hour the silence was only interrupted by this remark from Pencroft: —

“We ought to have brought a torch.”

And by this reply from the engineer: —

“We shall find one at the corral.”

Harding and his companions had left Granite House at twelve minutes past nine. At forty-seven minutes past nine they had traversed three out of the five miles which separated the mouth of the Mercy from the corral.

At that moment sheets of lightning spread over the island and illumined the dark trees. The flashes dazzled and almost blinded them. Evidently the storm would not be long in bursting forth.

The flashes gradually became brighter and more rapid. Distant thunder growled in the sky. The atmosphere was stifling.

The colonists proceeded as if they were urged onwards by some irresistible force.

At ten o’clock a vivid flash showed them the palisade, and as they reached the gate the storm burst forth with tremendous fury.

In a minute the corral was crossed, and Harding stood before the hut.

Probably the house was occupied by the stranger, since it was from thence that the telegram had been sent. However, no light shone through the window.

The engineer knocked at the door.

No answer.

Cyrus Harding opened the door, and the settlers entered the room, which was perfectly dark. A light was struck by Neb, and in a few moments the lantern was lighted and the light thrown into every corner of the room.

There was no one there. Everything was in the state in which it had been left.

“Have we been deceived by an illusion?” murmured Cyrus Harding.

No! that was not possible! The telegram had clearly said, —

“Come to the corral immediately.”

They approached the table specially devoted to the use of the wire. Everything was in order — the pile on the box containing it, as well as all the apparatus.

“Who came here the last time?” asked the engineer.

“I did, captain,” answered Ayrton.

“And that was — ”

“Four days ago.”

“Ah! a note!” cried Herbert, pointing to a paper lying on the table.

On this paper were written these words in English: —

“Follow the new wire.”

“Forward!” cried Harding, who understood that the despatch had not been sent from the corral, but from the mysterious retreat, communicating directly with Granite House by means of a supplementary wire joined to the old one.

Neb took the lighted lantern, and all left the corral. The storm then burst forth with tremendous violence. The interval between each lightning-flash and each thunder-clap diminished rapidly. The summit of the volcano, with its plume of vapor, could be seen by occasional flashes.

There was no telegraphic communication in any part of the corral between the house and the palisade; but the engineer, running straight to the first post, saw by the light of a flash a new wire hanging from the isolator to the ground.

“There it is!” said he.

This wire lay along the ground, and was surrounded with an isolating substance like a submarine cable, so as to assure the free transmission of the current. It appeared to pass through the wood and the southern spurs of the mountain, and consequently it ran towards the west.

“Follow it!” said Cyrus Harding.

And the settlers immediately pressed forward, guided by the wire.

The thunder continued to roar with such violence that not a word could be heard. However, there was no occasion for speaking, but to get forward as fast as possible.

Cyrus Harding and his companions then climbed the spur rising between the corral valley and that of Falls River, which they crossed at its narrowest part. The wire, sometimes stretched over the lower branches of the trees, sometimes lying on the ground, guided them surely. The engineer had supposed that the wire would perhaps stop at the bottom of the valley, and that the stranger’s retreat would be there.

Nothing of the sort. They were obliged to ascend the south-western spur, and re-descend on that arid plateau terminated by the strangely-wild basalt cliff. From time to time one of the colonists stooped down and felt for the wire with his hands; but there was now no doubt that the wire was running directly towards the sea. There, to a certainty, in the depths of those rocks, was the dwelling so long sought for in vain.

The sky was literally on fire. Flash succeeded flash. Several struck the summit of the volcano in the midst of the thick smoke. It appeared there as if the mountain was vomiting flame. At a few minutes to eleven the colonists arrived on the high cliff overlooking the ocean to the west. The wind had risen. The surf roared 500 feet below.

Harding calculated that they had gone a mile and a half from the corral.

At this point the wire entered among the rocks, following the steep side of a narrow ravine. The settlers followed it at the risk of occasioning a fall of the slightly-balanced rocks, and being dashed into the sea. The descent was extremely perilous, but they did not think of the danger; they were no longer masters of themselves, and an irresistible attraction drew them towards this mysterious place as the magnet draws iron.

Thus they almost unconsciously descended this ravine, which even in broad daylight would have been considered impracticable.

The stones rolled and sparkled like fiery balls when they crossed through the gleams of light. Harding was first — Ayrton last. On they went, step by step. Now they slid over the slippery rock; then they struggled to their feet and scrambled on.

At last the wire touched the rocks on the beach. The colonists had reached the bottom of the basalt cliff.

There appeared a narrow ridge, running horizontally and parallel with the sea. The settlers followed the wire along it. They had not gone a hundred paces when the ridge by a moderate incline sloped down to the level of the sea.

The engineer seized the wire and found that it disappeared beneath the waves.

His companions were stupefied.

A cry of disappointment, almost a cry of despair, escaped them! Must they then plunge beneath the water and seek there for some submarine cavern? In their excited state they would not have hesitated to do it.

The engineer stopped them.

He led his companions to a hollow in the rocks, and there —

“We must wait,” said he. “The tide is high. At low water the way will be open.”

“But what can make you think-” asked Pencroft.

“He would not have called us if the means had been wanting to enable us to reach him!”

Cyrus Harding spoke in a tone of such thorough conviction that no objection was raised. His remark, besides, was logical. It was quite possible that an opening, practicable at low water, though hidden now by the high tide, opened at the foot of the cliff.

There was some time to wait. The colonists remained silently crouching in a deep hollow. Rain now began to fall in torrents. The thunder was re-echoed among the rocks with a grand sonorousness.

The colonists’ emotion was great. A thousand strange and extraordinary ideas crossed their brains, and they expected some grand and superhuman apparition, which alone could come up to the notion they had formed of the mysterious genius of the island.

At midnight, Harding carrying the lantern, descended to the beach to reconnoiter.

The engineer was not mistaken. The beginning of an immense excavation could be seen under the water. There the wire, bending at a right angle, entered the yawning gulf.

Cyrus Harding returned to his companions, and said simply, —

“In an hour the opening will be practicable.”

“It is there, then?” said Pencroft.

“Did you doubt it?” returned Harding.

“But this cavern must be filled with water to a certain height,” observed Herbert.

“Either the cavern will be completely dry,” replied Harding, “and in that case we can traverse it on foot, or it will not be dry, and some means of transport will be put at our disposal.”

An hour passed. All climbed down through the rain to the level of the sea. There was now eight feet of the opening above the water. It was like the arch of a bridge, under which rushed the foaming water.

Leaning forward, the engineer saw a black object floating on the water. He drew it towards him. It was a boat, moored to some interior projection of the cave. This boat was iron-plated. Two oars lay at the bottom.

“Jump in!” said Harding.

In a moment the settlers were in the boat. Neb and Ayrton took the oars, Pencroft the rudder. Cyrus Harding in the bows, with the lantern, lighted the way.

The elliptical roof, under which the boat at first passed, suddenly rose; but the darkness was too deep, and the light of the lantern too slight, for either the extent, length, height, or depth of the cave to be ascertained. Solemn silence reigned in this basaltic cavern. Not a sound could penetrate into it, even the thunder peals could not pierce its thick sides.

Such immense caves exist in various parts of the world, natural crypts dating from the geological epoch of the globe. Some are filled by the sea; others contain entire lakes in their sides. Such is Fingal’s Cave, in the island of Staffa, one of the Hebrides; such are the caves of Morgat, in the bay of Douarnenez, in Brittany, the caves of Bonifacio, in Corsica, those of Lyse-Fjord, in Norway; such are the immense Mammoth caverns in Kentucky, 500 feet in height, and more than twenty miles in length! In many parts of the globe, nature has excavated these caverns, and preserved them for the admiration of man.

Did the cavern which the settlers were now exploring extend to the center of the island? For a quarter of an hour the boat had been advancing, making detours, indicated to Pencroft by the engineer in short sentences, when all at once, —

“More to the right!” he commanded.

The boat, altering its course, came up alongside the right wall. The engineer wished to see if the wire still ran along the side.

The wire was there fastened to the rock.

“Forward!” said Harding.

And the two oars, plunging into the dark waters, urged the boat onwards.

On they went for another quarter of an hour, and a distance of half-a-mile must have been cleared from the mouth of the cave, when Harding’s voice was again heard.

“Stop!” said he.

The boat stopped, and the colonists perceived a bright light illuminating the vast cavern, so deeply excavated in the bowels of the island, of which nothing had ever led them to suspect the existence.

At a height of a hundred feet rose the vaulted roof, supported on basalt shafts. Irregular arches, strange moldings, appeared on the columns erected by nature in thousands from the first epochs of the formation of the globe. The basalt pillars, fitted one into the other, measured from forty to fifty feet in height, and the water, calm in spite of the tumult outside, washed their base. The brilliant focus of light, pointed out by the engineer, touched every point of rocks, and flooded the walls with light.

By reflection the water reproduced the brilliant sparkles, so that the boat appeared to be floating between two glittering zones. They could not be mistaken in the nature of the irradiation thrown from the glowing nucleus, whose clear rays were shattered by all the angles, all the projections of the cavern. This light proceeded from an electric source, and its white color betrayed its origin. It was the sun of this cave, and it filled it entirely.

At a sign from Cyrus Harding the oars again plunged into the water, causing a regular shower of gems, and the boat was urged forward towards the light, which was now not more than half a cable’s length distant.

At this place the breadth of the sheet of water measured nearly 350 feet, and beyond the dazzling center could be seen an enormous basaltic wall, blocking up any issue on that side. The cavern widened here considerably, the sea forming a little lake. But the roof, the side walls, the end cliff, all the prisms, all the peaks, were flooded with the electric fluid, so that the brilliancy belonged to them, and as if the light issued from them.

In the center of the lake a long cigar-shaped object floated on the surface of the water, silent, motionless. The brilliancy which issued from it escaped from its sides as from two kilns heated to a white heat. This apparatus, similar in shape to an enormous whale, was about 250 feet long, and rose about ten or twelve above the water.

The boat slowly approached it, Cyrus Harding stood up in the bows. He gazed, a prey to violent excitement. Then, all at once, seizing the reporter’s arm, —

“It is he! It can only be he!” he cried, “he! — ”

Then, falling back on the seat, he murmured a name which Gideon Spilett alone could hear.

The reporter evidently knew this name, for it had a wonderful effect upon him, and he answered in a hoarse voice, —

“He! an outlawed man!”

“He!” said Harding.

At the engineer’s command the boat approached this singular floating apparatus. The boat touched the left side, from which escaped a ray of light through a thick glass.

Harding and his companions mounted on the platform. An open hatchway was there. All darted down the opening.

At the bottom of the ladder was a deck, lighted by electricity. At the end of this deck was a door, which Harding opened.

A richly-ornamented room, quickly traversed by the colonists, was joined to a library, over which a luminous ceiling shed a flood of light.

At the end of the library a large door, also shut, was opened by the engineer.

An immense saloon — a sort of museum, in which were heaped up, with all the treasures of the mineral world, works of art, marvels of industry — appeared before the eyes of the colonists, who almost thought themselves suddenly transported into a land of enchantment.

Stretched on a rich sofa they saw a man, who did not appear to notice their presence.

Then Harding raised his voice, and to the extreme surprise of his companions, he uttered these words, —

“Captain Nemo, you asked for us! We are here. — ”

CHAPTER 16

At these words the reclining figure rose, and the electric light fell upon his countenance; a magnificent head, the forehead high, the glance commanding, beard white, hair abundant and falling over the shoulders.

His hand rested upon the cushion of the divan from which he had just risen. He appeared perfectly calm. It was evident that his strength had been gradually undermined by illness, but his voice seemed yet powerful, as he said in English, and in a tone which evinced extreme surprise, —

“Sir, I have no name.”

“Nevertheless, I know you!” replied Cyrus Harding.

Captain Nemo fixed his penetrating gaze upon the engineer, as though he were about to annihilate him.

Then, falling back amid the pillows of the divan, —

“After all, what matters now?” he murmured; “I am dying!”

Cyrus Harding drew near the captain, and Gideon Spilett took his hand — it was of a feverish heat. Ayrton, Pencroft, Herbert, and Neb stood respectfully apart in an angle of the magnificent saloon, whose atmosphere was saturated with the electric fluid.

Meanwhile Captain Nemo withdrew his hand, and motioned the engineer and the reporter to be seated.

All regarded him with profound emotion. Before them they beheld that being whom they had styled the “genius of the island,” the powerful protector whose intervention, in so many circumstances, had been so efficacious, the benefactor to whom they owed such a debt of gratitude! Their eyes beheld a man only, and a man at the point of death, where Pencroft and Neb had expected to find an almost supernatural being!

But how happened it that Cyrus Harding had recognized Captain Nemo? why had the latter so suddenly risen on hearing this name uttered, a name which he had believed known to none? —

The captain had resumed his position on the divan, and leaning on his arm, he regarded the engineer, seated near him.

“You know the name I formerly bore, sir?” he asked.

“I do,” answered Cyrus Harding, “and also that of this wonderful submarine vessel — ”

“The ‘Nautilus’?” said the captain, with a faint smile.

“The ‘Nautilus.’”

“But do you — do you know who I am?”

“I do.”

“It is nevertheless many years since I have held any communication with the inhabited world; three long years have I passed in the depth of the sea, the only place where I have found liberty! Who then can have betrayed my secret?”

“A man who was bound to you by no tie, Captain Nemo, and who, consequently, cannot be accused of treachery.”

“The Frenchman who was cast on board my vessel by chance sixteen years since?”

“The same.”

“He and his two companions did not then perish in the maelstrom, in the midst of which the ‘Nautilus’ was struggling?”

“They escaped, and a book has appeared under the title of ‘Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea,’ which contains your history.”

“The history of a few months only of my life!” interrupted the captain impetuously.

“It is true,” answered Cyrus Harding, “but a few months of that strange life have sufficed to make you known.”

“As a great criminal, doubtless!” said Captain Nemo, a haughty smile curling his lips. “Yes, a rebel, perhaps an outlaw against humanity!”

The engineer was silent.

“Well, sir?”

“It is not for me to judge you, Captain Nemo,” answered Cyrus Harding, “at any rate as regards your past life. I am, with the rest of the world, ignorant of the motives which induced you to adopt this strange mode of existence, and I cannot judge of effects without knowing their causes; but what I do know is, that a beneficent hand has constantly protected us since our arrival on Lincoln Island, that we all owe our lives to a good, generous, and powerful being, and that this being so powerful, good and generous, Captain Nemo, is yourself!”

“It is I,” answered the captain simply.

The engineer and the reporter rose. Their companions had drawn near, and the gratitude with which their hearts were charged was about to express itself in their gestures and words.

Captain Nemo stopped them by a sign, and in a voice which betrayed more emotion than he doubtless intended to show.

“Wait till you have heard all,” he said.

And the captain, in a few concise sentences, ran over the events of his life.

His narrative was short, yet he was obliged to summon up his whole remaining energy to arrive at the end. He was evidently contending against extreme weakness. Several times Cyrus Harding entreated him to repose for a while, but he shook his head as a man to whom the morrow may never come, and when the reporter offered his assistance, —

“It is useless,” he said; “my hours are numbered.”

Captain Nemo was an Indian, the Prince Dakkar, son of a rajah of the then independent territory of Bundelkund. His father sent him, when ten years of age, to Europe, in order that he might receive an education in all respects complete, and in the hopes that by his talents and knowledge he might one day take a leading part in raising his long degraded and heathen country to a level with the nations of Europe.

From the age of ten years to that of thirty Prince Dakkar, endowed by Nature with her richest gifts of intellect, accumulated knowledge of every kind, and in science, literature, and art his researches were extensive and profound.

He traveled over the whole of Europe. His rank and fortune caused him to be everywhere sought after; but the pleasures of the world had for him no attractions. Though young and possessed of every personal advantage, he was ever grave — somber even — devoured by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and cherishing in the recesses of his heart the hope that he might become a great and powerful ruler of a free and enlightened people.

Still, for long the love of science triumphed over all other feelings. He became an artist deeply impressed by the marvels of art, a philosopher to whom no one of the higher sciences was unknown, a statesman versed in the policy of European courts. To the eyes of those who observed him superficially he might have passed for one of those cosmopolitans, curious of knowledge, but disdaining action; one of those opulent travelers, haughty and cynical, who move incessantly from place to place, and are of no country.

The history of Captain Nemo has, in fact, been published under the title of "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea." Here, therefore, will apply the observation already made as to the adventures of Ayrton with regard to the discrepancy of dates. Readers should therefore refer to the note already published on this point.

This artist, this philosopher, this man was, however, still cherishing the hope instilled into him from his earliest days.

Prince Dakkar returned to Bundelkund in the year 1849. He married a noble Indian lady, who was imbued with an ambition not less ardent than that by which he was inspired. Two children were born to them, whom they tenderly loved. But domestic happiness did not prevent him from seeking to carry out the object at which he aimed. He waited an opportunity. At length, as he vainly fancied, it presented itself.

Instigated by princes equally ambitious and less sagacious and more unscrupulous than he was, the people of India were persuaded that they might successfully rise against their English rulers, who had brought them out of a state of anarchy and constant warfare and misery, and had established peace and prosperity in their country. Their ignorance and gross superstition made them the facile tools of their designing chiefs.

In 1857 the great sepoy revolt broke out. Prince Dakkar, under the belief that he should thereby have the opportunity of attaining the object of his long-cherished ambition, was easily drawn into it. He forthwith devoted his talents and wealth to the service of this cause. He aided it in person; he fought in the front ranks; he risked his life equally with the humblest of the wretched and misguided fanatics; he was ten times wounded in twenty engagements, seeking death but finding it not, but at length the sanguinary rebels were utterly defeated, and the atrocious mutiny was brought to an end.

Never before had the British power in India been exposed to such danger, and if, as they had hoped, the sepoys had received assistance from without, the influence and supremacy in Asia of the United Kingdom would have been a thing of the past.

The name of Prince Dakkar was at that time well known. He had fought openly and without concealment. A price was set upon his head, but he managed to escape from his pursuers.

Civilization never recedes; the law of necessity ever forces it onwards. The sepoys were vanquished, and the land of the rajahs of old fell again under the rule of England.

Prince Dakkar, unable to find that death he courted, returned to the mountain fastnesses of Bundelkund. There, alone in the world, overcome by disappointment at the destruction of all his vain hopes, a prey to profound disgust for all human beings, filled with hatred of the civilized world, he realized the wreck of his fortune, assembled some score of his most faithful companions, and one day disappeared, leaving no trace behind.

Where, then, did he seek that liberty denied him upon the inhabited earth? Under the waves, in the depths of the ocean, where none could follow.

The warrior became the man of science. Upon a deserted island of the Pacific he established his dockyard, and there a submarine vessel was constructed from his designs. By methods which will at some future day be revealed he had rendered subservient the illimitable forces of electricity, which, extracted from inexhaustible sources, was employed for all the requirements of his floating equipage, as a moving, lighting, and heating agent. The sea, with its countless treasures, its myriads of fish, its numberless wrecks, its enormous mammalia, and not only all that nature supplied, but also all that man had lost in its depths, sufficed for every want of the prince and his crew — and thus was his most ardent desire accomplished, never again to hold communication with the earth. He named his submarine vessel the “Nautilus,” called himself simply Captain Nemo, and disappeared beneath the seas.

During many years this strange being visited every ocean, from pole to pole. Outcast of the inhabited earth in these unknown worlds he gathered incalculable treasures. The millions lost in the Bay of Vigo, in 1702, by the galleons of Spain, furnished him with a mine of inexhaustible riches which he devoted always, anonymously, in favor of those nations who fought for the independence of their country.

(This refers to the resurrection of the Candiotes, who were, in

fact, largely assisted by Captain Nemo.)

For long, however, he had held no communication with his fellow-creatures, when, during the night of the 6th of November, 1866, three men were cast on board his vessel. They were a French professor, his servant, and a Canadian fisherman. These three men had been hurled overboard by a collision which had taken place between the "Nautilus" and the United States frigate "Abraham Lincoln," which had chased her.

Captain Nemo learned from this professor that the "Nautilus," taken now for a gigantic mammal of the whale species, now for a submarine vessel carrying a crew of pirates, was sought for in every sea.

He might have returned these three men to the ocean, from whence chance had brought them in contact with his mysterious existence. Instead of doing this he kept them prisoners, and during seven months they were enabled to behold all the wonders of a voyage of twenty thousand leagues under the sea.

One day, the 22nd of June, 1867, these three men, who knew nothing of the past history of Captain Nemo, succeeded in escaping in one of the "Nautilus's" boats. But as at this time the "Nautilus" was drawn into the vortex of the maelstrom, off the coast of Norway, the captain naturally believed that the fugitives, engulfed in that frightful whirlpool, found their death at the bottom of the abyss. He was unaware that the Frenchman and his two companions had been miraculously cast on shore, that the fishermen of the Lofoten Islands had rendered them assistance, and that the professor, on his return to France, had published that work in which seven months of the strange and eventful navigation of the “Nautilus” were narrated and exposed to the curiosity of the public.

For a long time after this, Captain Nemo continued to live thus, traversing every sea. But one by one his companions died, and found their last resting-place in their cemetery of coral, in the bed of the Pacific. At last Captain Nemo remained the solitary survivor of all those who had taken refuge with him in the depths of the ocean.

He was now sixty years of age. Although alone, he succeeded in navigating the “Nautilus” towards one of those submarine caverns which had sometimes served him as a harbor.

One of these ports was hollowed beneath Lincoln Island, and at this moment furnished an asylum to the “Nautilus.”

The captain had now remained there six years, navigating the ocean no longer, but awaiting death, and that moment when he should rejoin his former companions, when by chance he observed the descent of the balloon which carried the prisoners of the Confederates. Clad in his diving dress he was walking beneath the water at a few cables’ length from the shore of the island, when the engineer had been thrown into the sea. Moved by a feeling of compassion the captain saved Cyrus Harding.

His first impulse was to fly from the vicinity of the five castaways; but his harbor refuge was closed, for in consequence of an elevation of the basalt, produced by the influence of volcanic action, he could no longer pass through the entrance of the vault. Though there was sufficient depth of water to allow a light craft to pass the bar, there was not enough for the “Nautilus,” whose draught of water was considerable.

Captain Nemo was compelled, therefore, to remain. He observed these men thrown without resources upon a desert island, but had no wish to be himself discovered by them. By degrees he became interested in their efforts when he saw them honest, energetic, and bound to each other by the ties of friendship. As if despite his wishes, he penetrated all the secrets of their existence. By means of the diving dress he could easily reach the well in the interior of Granite House, and climbing by the projections of rock to its upper orifice he heard the colonists as they recounted the past, and studied the present and future. He learned from them the tremendous conflict of America with America itself, for the abolition of slavery. Yes, these men were worthy to reconcile Captain Nemo with that humanity which they represented so nobly in the island.

Captain Nemo had saved Cyrus Harding. It was he also who had brought back the dog to the Chimneys, who rescued Top from the waters of the lake, who caused to fall at Flotsam Point the case containing so many things useful to the colonists, who conveyed the canoe back into the stream of the Mercy, who cast the cord from the top of Granite House at the time of the attack by the baboons, who made known the presence of Ayrton upon Tabor Island, by means of the document enclosed in the bottle, who caused the explosion of the brig by the shock of a torpedo placed at the bottom of the canal, who saved Herbert from certain death by bringing the sulphate of quinine; and finally, it was he who had killed the convicts with the electric balls, of which he possessed the secret, and which he employed in the chase of submarine creatures. Thus were explained so many apparently supernatural occurrences, and which all proved the generosity and power of the captain.

Nevertheless, this noble misanthrope longed to benefit his proteges still further. There yet remained much useful advice to give them, and, his heart being softened by the approach of death, he invited, as we are aware, the colonists of Granite House to visit the “Nautilus,” by means of a wire which connected it with the corral. Possibly he would not have done this had he been aware that Cyrus Harding was sufficiently acquainted with his history to address him by the name of Nemo.

The captain concluded the narrative of his life. Cyrus Harding then spoke; he recalled all the incidents which had exercised so beneficent an influence upon the colony, and in the names of his companions and himself thanked the generous being to whom they owed so much.

But Captain Nemo paid little attention; his mind appeared to be absorbed by one idea, and without taking the proffered hand of the engineer, —

“Now, sir,” said he, “now that you know my history, your judgment!”

In saying this, the captain evidently alluded to an important incident witnessed by the three strangers thrown on board his vessel, and which the French professor had related in his work, causing a profound and terrible sensation. Some days previous to the flight of the professor and his two companions, the “Nautilus,” being chased by a frigate in the north of the Atlantic had hurled herself as a ram upon this frigate, and sunk her without mercy.

Cyrus Harding understood the captain’s allusion, and was silent.

“It was an enemy’s frigate,” exclaimed Captain Nemo, transformed for an instant into the Prince Dakkar, “an enemy’s frigate! It was she who attacked me — I was in a narrow and shallow bay — the frigate barred my way — and I sank her!”

A few moments of silence ensued; then the captain demanded, —

“What think you of my life, gentlemen?”

Cyrus Harding extended his hand to the ci-devant prince and replied gravely, “Sir, your error was in supposing that the past can be resuscitated, and in contending against inevitable progress. It is one of those errors which some admire, others blame; which God alone can judge. He who is mistaken in an action which he sincerely believes to be right may be an enemy, but retains our esteem. Your error is one that we may admire, and your name has nothing to fear from the judgment of history, which does not condemn heroic folly, but its results.”

The old man’s breast swelled with emotion, and raising his hand to heaven, —

“Was I wrong, or in the right?” he murmured.

Cyrus Harding replied, “All great actions return to God, from whom they are derived. Captain Nemo, we, whom you have succored, shall ever mourn your loss.”

Herbert, who had drawn near the captain, fell on his knees and kissed his hand.

A tear glistened in the eyes of the dying man. “My child,” he said, “may God bless you!”

CHAPTER 17

Day had returned. No ray of light penetrated into the profundity of the cavern. It being high-water, the entrance was closed by the sea. But the artificial light, which escaped in long streams from the skylights of the "Nautilus" was as vivid as before, and the sheet of water shone around the floating vessel.

An extreme exhaustion now overcame Captain Nemo, who had fallen back upon the divan. It was useless to contemplate removing him to Granite House, for he had expressed his wish to remain in the midst of those marvels of the "Nautilus" which millions could not have purchased, and to wait there for that death which was swiftly approaching.

During a long interval of prostration, which rendered him almost unconscious, Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett attentively observed the condition of the dying man. It was apparent that his strength was gradually diminishing. That frame, once so robust, was now but the fragile tenement of a departing soul. All of life was concentrated in the heart and head.

The engineer and reporter consulted in whispers. Was it possible to render any aid to the dying man? Might his life, if not saved, be prolonged for some days? He himself had said that no remedy could avail, and he awaited with tranquillity that death which had for him no terrors.

"We can do nothing," said Gideon Spilett.

"But of what is he dying?" asked Pencroft.

"Life is simply fading out," replied the reporter.

“Nevertheless,” said the sailor, “if we move him into the open air, and the light of the sun, he might perhaps recover.”

“No, Pencroft,” answered the engineer, “it is useless to attempt it. Besides, Captain Nemo would never consent to leave his vessel. He has lived for a dozen years on board the ‘Nautilus,’ and on board the ‘Nautilus’ he desires to die.”

Without doubt Captain Nemo heard Cyrus Harding’s reply, for he raised himself slightly, and in a voice more feeble, but always intelligible, —

“You are right, sir,” he said. “I shall die here — it is my wish; and therefore I have a request to make of you.”

Cyrus Harding and his companions had drawn near the divan, and now arranged the cushions in such a manner as to better support the dying man.

They saw his eyes wander over all the marvels of this saloon, lighted by the electric rays which fell from the arabesques of the luminous ceiling. He surveyed, one after the other, the pictures hanging from the splendid tapestries of the partitions, the chef-d’oeuvres of the Italian, Flemish, French, and Spanish masters; the statues of marble and bronze on their pedestals; the magnificent organ, leaning against the after-partition; the aquarium, in which bloomed the most wonderful productions of the sea — marine plants, zoophytes, chaplets of pearls of inestimable value; and, finally, his eyes rested on this device, inscribed over the pediment of the museum — the motto of the “Nautilus” —

“Mobilis in mobile.”

His glance seemed to rest fondly for the last time on these masterpieces of art and of nature, to which he had limited his horizon during a sojourn of so many years in the abysses of the seas.

Cyrus Harding respected the captain’s silence, and waited till he should speak.

After some minutes, during which, doubtless, he passed in review his whole life, Captain Nemo turned to the colonists and said,

“You consider yourselves, gentlemen, under some obligations to me?”

“Captain, believe us that we would give our lives to prolong yours.”

“Promise, then,” continued Captain Nemo, “to carry out my last wishes, and I shall be repaid for all I have done for you.”

“We promise,” said Cyrus Harding.

And by this promise he bound both himself and his companions.

“Gentlemen,” resumed the captain, “to-morrow I shall be dead.”

Herbert was about to utter an exclamation, but a sign from the captain arrested him.

“To-morrow I shall die, and I desire no other tomb than the ‘Nautilus.’ It is my grave! All my friends repose in the depths of the ocean; their resting-place shall be mine.”

These words were received with profound silence.

“Pay attention to my wishes,” he continued. “The ‘Nautilus’ is imprisoned in this grotto, the entrance of which is blocked up; but, although egress is impossible, the vessel may at least sink in the abyss, and there bury my remains.”

The colonists listened reverently to the words of the dying man.

“To-morrow, after my death, Mr. Harding,” continued the captain, “yourself and companions will leave the ‘Nautilus,’ for all the treasures it contains must perish with me. One token alone will remain with you of Prince Dakkar, with whose history you are now acquainted. That coffer yonder contains diamonds of the value of many millions, most of them mementoes of the time when, husband and father, I thought happiness possible for me, and a collection of pearls gathered by my friends and myself in the depths of the ocean. Of this treasure at a future day, you may make good use. In the hands of such men as yourself and your comrades, Captain Harding, money will never be a source of danger. From on high I shall still participate in your enterprises, and I fear not but that they will prosper.”

After a few moments’ repose, necessitated by his extreme weakness, Captain Nemo continued, —

“To-morrow you will take the coffer, you will leave the saloon, of which you will close the door; then you will ascend on to the deck of the ‘Nautilus,’ and you will lower the mainhatch so as entirely to close the vessel.”

“It shall be done, captain,” answered Cyrus Harding.

“Good. You will then embark in the canoe which brought you hither; but, before leaving the ‘Nautilus,’ go to the stern and there open two large stopcocks which you will find upon the water-line. The water will penetrate into the reservoirs, and the ‘Nautilus’ will gradually sink beneath the water to repose at the bottom of the abyss.”

And comprehending a gesture of Cyrus Harding, the captain added, —

“Fear nothing! You will but bury a corpse!”

Neither Cyrus Harding nor his companions ventured to offer any observation to Captain Nemo. He had expressed his last wishes, and they had nothing to do but to conform to them.

“I have your promise, gentlemen?” added Captain Nemo.

“You have, captain,” replied the engineer.

The captain thanked the colonists by a sign, and requested them to leave him for some hours. Gideon Spilett wished to remain near him, in the event of a crisis coming on, but the dying man refused, saying, “I shall live until to-morrow, sir.”

All left the saloon, passed through the library and the dining-room, and arrived forward, in the machine-room where the electrical apparatus was established, which supplied not only heat and light, but the mechanical power of the “Nautilus.”

The “Nautilus” was a masterpiece containing masterpieces with itself, and the engineer was struck with astonishment.

The colonists mounted the platform, which rose seven or eight feet above the water. There they beheld a thick glass lenticular covering, which protected a kind of large eye, from which flashed forth light. Behind this eye was apparently a cabin containing the wheels of the rudder, and in which was stationed the helmsman, when he navigated the “Nautilus” over the bed of the ocean, which the electric rays would evidently light up to a considerable distance.

Cyrus Harding and his companions remained for a time silent, for they were vividly impressed by what they had just seen and heard, and their hearts were deeply touched by the thought that he whose arm had so often aided them, the protector whom they had known but a few hours, was at the point of death.

Whatever might be the judgment pronounced by posterity upon the events of this, so to speak, extra-human existence, the character of Prince Dakkar would ever remain as one of those whose memory time can never efface.

“What a man!” said Pencroft. “Is it possible that he can have lived at the bottom of the sea? And it seems to me that perhaps he has not found peace there any more than elsewhere!”

“The ‘Nautilus,’” observed Ayrton, “might have enabled us to leave Lincoln Island and reach some inhabited country.”

“Good Heavens!” exclaimed Pencroft, “I for one would never risk myself in such a craft. To sail on the seas, good, but under the seas, never!”

“I believe, Pencroft,” answered the reporter, “that the navigation of a submarine vessel such as the ‘Nautilus’ ought to be very easy, and that we should soon become accustomed to it. There would be no storms, no lee-shore to fear. At some feet beneath the surface the waters of the ocean are as calm as those of a lake.”

“That may be,” replied the sailor, “but I prefer a gale of wind on board a well-found craft. A vessel is built to sail on the sea, and not beneath it.”

“My friends,” said the engineer, “it is useless, at any rate as regards the ‘Nautilus,’ to discuss the question of submarine vessels. The ‘Nautilus’ is not ours, and we have not the right to dispose of it. Moreover, we could in no case avail ourselves of it. Independently of the fact that it would be impossible to get it out of this cavern, whose entrance is now closed by the uprising of the basaltic rocks, Captain Nemo’s wish is that it shall be buried with him. His wish is our law, and we will fulfil it.”

After a somewhat prolonged conversation, Cyrus Harding and his companions again descended to the interior of the “Nautilus.” There they took some refreshment and returned to the saloon.

Captain Nemo had somewhat rallied from the prostration which had overcome him, and his eyes shone with their wonted fire. A faint smile even curled his lips.

The colonists drew around him.

“Gentlemen,” said the captain, “you are brave and honest men. You have devoted yourselves to the common weal. Often have I observed your conduct. I have esteemed you — I esteem you still! Your hand, Mr. Harding.”

Cyrus Harding gave his hand to the captain, who clasped it affectionately.

“It is well!” he murmured.

He resumed, —

“But enough of myself. I have to speak concerning yourselves, and this Lincoln Island, upon which you have taken refuge. You now desire to leave it?”

“To return, captain!” answered Pencroft quickly.

“To return, Pencroft?” said the captain, with a smile. “I know, it is true, your love for this island. You have helped to make it what it now is, and it seems to you a paradise!”

“Our project, captain,” interposed Cyrus Harding, “is to annex it to the United States, and to establish for our shipping a port so fortunately situated in this part of the Pacific.”

“Your thoughts are with your country, gentlemen,” continued the captain; “your toils are for her prosperity and glory. You are right. One’s native land! — there should one live! there die! And I die far from all I loved!”

“You have some last wish to transmit,” said the engineer with emotion, “some souvenir to send to those friends you have left in the mountains of India?”

“No, Captain Harding; no friends remain to me! I am the last of my race, and to all whom I have known I have long been as are the dead. — But to return to yourselves. Solitude, isolation, are painful things, and beyond human endurance. I die of having thought it possible to live alone! You should, therefore, dare all in the attempt to leave Lincoln Island, and see once more the land of your birth. I am aware that those wretches have destroyed the vessel you have built.”

“We propose to construct a vessel,” said Gideon Spilett, “sufficiently large to convey us to the nearest land; but if we should succeed, sooner or later we shall return to Lincoln Island. We are attached to it by too many recollections ever to forget it.”

“It is here that we have known Captain Nemo,” said Cyrus Harding.

“It is here only that we can make our home!” added Herbert.

“And here shall I sleep the sleep of eternity, if — ” replied the captain.

He paused for a moment, and, instead of completing the sentence, said simply, —

“Mr. Harding, I wish to speak with you — alone!”

The engineer’s companions, respecting the wish, retired.

Cyrus Harding remained but a few minutes alone with Captain Nemo, and soon recalled his companions; but he said nothing to them of the private matters which the dying man had confided to him.

Gideon Spilett now watched the captain with extreme care. It was evident that he was no longer sustained by his moral energy, which had lost the power of reaction against his physical weakness.

The day closed without change. The colonists did not quit the “Nautilus” for a moment. Night arrived, although it was impossible to distinguish it from day in the cavern.

Captain Nemo suffered no pain, but he was visibly sinking. His noble features, paled by the approach of death, were perfectly calm. Inaudible words escaped at intervals from his lips, bearing upon various incidents of his checkered career. Life was evidently ebbing slowly and his extremities were already cold.

Once or twice more he spoke to the colonists who stood around him, and smiled on them with that last smile which continues after death.

At length, shortly after midnight, Captain Nemo by a supreme effort succeeded in folding his arms across his breast, as if wishing in that attitude to compose himself for death.

By one o'clock his glance alone showed signs of life. A dying light gleamed in those eyes once so brilliant. Then, murmuring the words, "God and my country!" he quietly expired.

Cyrus Harding, bending low closed the eyes of him who had once been the Prince Dakkar, and was now not even Captain Nemo.

Herbert and Pencroft sobbed aloud. Tears fell from Ayrton's eyes. Neb was on his knees by the reporter's side, motionless as a statue.

Then Cyrus Harding, extending his hand over the forehead of the dead, said solemnly, "May his soul be with God!" Turning to his friends, he added, "Let us pray for him whom we have lost!"

Some hours later the colonists fulfilled the promise made to the captain by carrying out his dying wishes.

Cyrus Harding and his companions quitted the "Nautilus," taking with them the only memento left them by their benefactor, the coffer which contained wealth amounting to millions.

The marvelous saloon, still flooded with light, had been carefully closed. The iron door leading on deck was then securely fastened in such a manner as to prevent even a drop of water from penetrating to the interior of the “Nautilus.”

The colonists then descended into the canoe, which was moored to the side of the submarine vessel.

The canoe was now brought around to the stern. There, at the water-line, were two large stop-cocks communicating with the reservoirs employed in the submersion of the vessel.

The stop-cocks were opened, the reservoirs filled, and the “Nautilus,” slowly sinking, disappeared beneath the surface of the lake.

But the colonists were yet able to follow its descent through the waves. The powerful light it gave forth lighted up the translucent water, while the cavern became gradually obscure. At length this vast effusion of electric light faded away, and soon after the “Nautilus,” now the tomb of Captain Nemo, reposed in its ocean bed.

CHAPTER 18

At break of day the colonists regained in silence the entrance of the cavern, to which they gave the name of “Dakkar Grotto,” in memory of Captain Nemo. It was now low-water, and they passed without difficulty under the arcade, washed on the right by the sea.

The canoe was left here, carefully protected from the waves. As additional precaution, Pencroft, Neb, and Ayrton drew it up on a little beach which bordered one of the sides of the grotto, in a spot where it could run no risk of harm.

The storm had ceased during the night. The last low mutterings of the thunder died away in the west. Rain fell no longer, but the sky was yet obscured by clouds. On the whole, this month of October, the first of the southern spring, was not ushered in by satisfactory tokens, and the wind had a tendency to shift from one point of the compass to another, which rendered it impossible to count upon settled weather.

Cyrus Harding and his companions, on leaving Dakkar Grotto, had taken the road to the corral. On their way Neb and Herbert were careful to preserve the wire which had been laid down by the captain between the corral and the grotto, and which might at a future time be of service.

The colonists spoke but little on the road. The various incidents of the night of October 15th had left a profound impression on their minds. The unknown being whose influence had so effectually protected them, the man whom their imagination had endowed with supernatural powers, Captain Nemo, was no more. His “Nautilus” and he were buried in the depths of the abyss. To each one of them their existence seemed even more isolated than before. They had been accustomed to count upon the intervention of that power which existed no longer, and Gideon Spilett, and even Cyrus Harding, could not escape this impression. Thus they maintained a profound silence during their journey to the corral.

Towards nine in the morning the colonists arrived at Granite House.

It had been agreed that the construction of the vessel should be actively pushed forward, and Cyrus Harding more than ever devoted his time and labor to this object. It was impossible to divine what future lay before them. Evidently the advantage to the colonists would be great of having at their disposal a substantial vessel, capable of keeping the sea even in heavy weather, and large enough to attempt, in case of need, a voyage of some duration. Even if, when their vessel should be completed, the colonists should not resolve to leave Lincoln Island as yet, in order to gain either one of the Polynesian Archipelagoes of the Pacific or the shores of New Zealand, they might at least, sooner or later, proceed to Tabor Island, to leave there the notice relating to Ayrton. This was a precaution rendered indispensable by the possibility of the Scotch yacht reappearing in those seas, and it was of the highest importance that nothing should be neglected on this point.

The works were then resumed. Cyrus Harding, Pencroft, and Ayrton, assisted by Neb, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert, except when unavoidably called off by other necessary occupations, worked without cessation. It was important that the new vessel should be ready in five months — that is to say, by the beginning of March — if they wished to visit Tabor Island before the equinoctial gales rendered the voyage impracticable. Therefore the carpenters lost not a moment. Moreover, it was unnecessary to manufacture rigging, that of the “Speedy” having been saved entire, so that the hull only of the vessel needed to be constructed.

The end of the year 1868 found them occupied by these important labors, to the exclusion of almost all others. At the expiration of two months and a half the ribs had been set up and the first planks adjusted. It was already evident that the plans made by Cyrus Harding were admirable, and that the vessel would behave well at sea.

Pencroft brought to the task a devouring energy, and would even grumble when one or the other abandoned the carpenter’s axe for the gun of the hunter. It was nevertheless necessary to keep up the stores of Granite House, in view of the approaching winter. But this did not satisfy Pencroft. The brave, honest sailor was not content when the workmen were not at the dockyard. When this happened he grumbled vigorously, and, by way of venting his feelings, did the work of six men.

The weather was very unfavorable during the whole of the summer season. For some days the heat was overpowering, and the atmosphere, saturated with electricity, was only cleared by violent storms. It was rarely that the distant growling of the thunder could not be heard, like a low but incessant murmur, such as is produced in the equatorial regions of the globe.

The 1st of January, 1869, was signalized by a storm of extreme violence, and the thunder burst several times over the island. Large trees were struck by the electric fluid and shattered, and among others one of those gigantic nettle-trees which had shaded the poultry-yard at the southern extremity of the lake. Had this meteor any relation to the phenomena going on in the bowels of the earth? Was there any connection between the commotion of the atmosphere and that of the interior of the earth? Cyrus Harding was inclined to think that such was the case, for the development of these storms was attended by the renewal of volcanic symptoms.

It was on the 3rd of January that Herbert, having ascended at daybreak to the plateau of Prospect Heights to harness one of the onagers, perceived an enormous hat-shaped cloud rolling from the summit of the volcano.

Herbert immediately apprised the colonists, who at once joined him in watching the summit of Mount Franklin.

“Ah!” exclaimed Pencroft, “those are not vapors this time! It seems to me that the giant is not content with breathing; he must smoke!”

This figure of speech employed by the sailor exactly expressed the changes going on at the mouth of the volcano. Already for three months had the crater emitted vapors more or less dense, but which were as yet produced only by an internal ebullition of mineral substances. But now the vapors were replaced by a thick smoke, rising in the form of a grayish column, more than three hundred feet in width at its base, and which spread like an immense mushroom to a height of from seven to eight hundred feet above the summit of the mountain.

“The fire is in the chimney,” observed Gideon Spilett.

“And we can’t put it out!” replied Herbert.

“The volcano ought to be swept,” observed Neb, who spoke as if perfectly serious.

“Well said, Neb!” cried Pencroft, with a shout of laughter; “and you’ll undertake the job, no doubt?”

Cyrus Harding attentively observed the dense smoke emitted by Mount Franklin, and even listened, as if expecting to hear some distant muttering.

Then, turning towards his companions, from whom he had gone somewhat apart, he said, —

“The truth is, my friends, we must not conceal from ourselves that an important change is going forward. The volcanic substances are no longer in a state of ebullition, they have caught fire, and we are undoubtedly menaced by an approaching eruption.”

“Well, captain,” said Pencroft, “we shall witness the eruption; and if it is a good one, we’ll applaud it. I don’t see that we need concern ourselves further about the matter.”

“It may be so,” replied Cyrus Harding, “for the ancient track of the lava is still open; and thanks to this, the crater has hitherto overflowed towards the north. And yet — ”

“And yet, as we can derive no advantage from an eruption, it might be better it should not take place,” said the reporter.

“Who knows?” answered the sailor. “Perhaps there may be some valuable substance in this volcano, which it will spout forth, and which we may turn to good account!”

Cyrus Harding shook his head with the air of a man who augured no good from the phenomenon whose development had been so sudden. He did not regard so lightly as Pencroft the results of an eruption. If the lava, in consequence of the position of the crater, did not directly menace the wooded and cultivated parts of the island, other complications might present themselves. In fact, eruptions are not unfrequently accompanied by earthquakes; and an island of the nature of Lincoln Island, formed of substances so varied, basalt on one side, granite on the other, lava on the north, rich soil on the south, substances which consequently could not be firmly attached to each other, would be exposed to the risk of disintegration. Although, therefore, the spreading of the volcanic matter might not constitute a serious danger, any movement of the terrestrial structure which should shake the island might entail the gravest consequences.

“It seems to me,” said Ayrton, who had reclined so as to place his ear to the ground, “it seems to me that I can hear a dull, rumbling sound, like that of a wagon loaded with bars of iron.”

The colonists listened with the greatest attention, and were convinced that Ayrton was not mistaken. The rumbling was mingled with a subterranean roar, which formed a sort of rinforzando, and died slowly away, as if some violent storm had passed through the profundities of the globe. But no explosion properly so termed, could be heard. It might therefore be concluded that the vapors and smoke found a free passage through the central shaft; and that the safety-valve being sufficiently large, no convulsion would be produced, no explosion was to be apprehended.

“Well, then!” said Pencroft, “are we not going back to work? Let Mount Franklin smoke, groan, bellow, or spout forth fire and flame as much as it pleases, that is no reason why we should be idle! Come, Ayrton, Neb, Herbert, Captain Harding, Mr. Spilett, every one of us must turn to at our work to-day! We are going to place the keelson, and a dozen pair of hands would not be too many. Before two months I want our new ‘Bonadventure’ — for we shall keep the old name, shall we not? — to float on the waters of Port Balloon! Therefore there is not an hour to lose!”

All the colonists, their services thus requisitioned by Pencroft, descended to the dockyard, and proceeded to place the keelson, a thick mass of wood which forms the lower portion of a ship and unites firmly the timbers of the hull. It was an arduous undertaking, in which all took part.

They continued their labors during the whole of this day, the 3rd of January, without thinking further of the volcano, which could not, besides, be seen from the shore of Granite House. But once or twice, large shadows, veiling the sun, which described its diurnal arc through an extremely clear sky, indicated that a thick cloud of smoke passed between its disc and the island. The wind, blowing on the shore, carried all these vapors to the westward. Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett remarked these somber appearances, and from time to time discussed the evident progress of the volcanic phenomena, but their work went on without interruption. It was, besides, of the first importance from every point of view, that the vessel should be finished with the least possible delay. In presence of the eventualities which might arise, the safety of the colonists would be to a great extent secured by their ship. Who could tell that it might not prove some day their only refuge?

In the evening, after supper, Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, and Herbert again ascended the plateau of Prospect Heights. It was already dark, and the obscurity would permit them to ascertain if flames or incandescent matter thrown up by the volcano were mingled with the vapor and smoke accumulated at the mouth of the crater.

“The crater is on fire!” said Herbert, who, more active than his companion, first reached the plateau.

Mount Franklin, distant about six miles, now appeared like a gigantic torch, around the summit of which turned fuliginous flames. So much smoke, and possibly scoriae and cinders were mingled with them, that their light gleamed but faintly amid the gloom of the night. But a kind of lurid brilliancy spread over the island, against which stood out confusedly the wooded masses of the heights. Immense whirlwinds of vapor obscured the sky, through which glimmered a few stars.

“The change is rapid!” said the engineer.

“That is not surprising,” answered the reporter. “The reawakening of the volcano already dates back some time. You may remember, Cyrus, that the first vapors appeared about the time we searched the sides of the mountain to discover Captain Nemo’s retreat. It was, if I mistake not, about the 15th of October.”

“Yes,” replied Herbert, “two months and a half ago!”

“The subterranean fires have therefore been smoldering for ten weeks,” resumed Gideon Spilett, “and it is not to be wondered at that they now break out with such violence!”

“Do not you feel a certain vibration of the soil?” asked Cyrus Harding.

“Yes,” replied Gideon Spilett, “but there is a great difference between that and an earthquake.”

“I do not affirm that we are menaced with an earthquake,” answered Cyrus Harding, “may God preserve us from that! No; these vibrations are due to the effervescence of the central fire. The crust of the earth is simply the shell of a boiler, and you know that such a shell, under the pressure of steam, vibrates like a sonorous plate. It is this effect which is being produced at this moment.”

“What magnificent flames!” exclaimed Herbert.

At this instant a kind of bouquet of flames shot forth from the crater, the brilliancy of which was visible even through the vapors. Thousands of luminous sheets and barbed tongues of fire were cast in various directions. Some, extending beyond the dome of smoke, dissipated it, leaving behind an incandescent powder. This was accompanied by successive explosions, resembling the discharge of a battery of machine-guns.

Cyrus Harding, the reporter, and Herbert, after spending an hour on the plateau of Prospect Heights, again descended to the beach, and returned to Granite House. The engineer was thoughtful and preoccupied, so much so, indeed, that Gideon Spilett inquired if he apprehended any immediate danger, of which the eruption might directly or indirectly be the cause.

“Yes, and no,” answered Cyrus Harding.

“Nevertheless,” continued the reporter, “would not the greatest misfortune which could happen to us be an earthquake which would overturn the island? Now, I do not suppose that this is to be feared, since the vapors and lava have found a free outlet.”

“True,” replied Cyrus Harding, “and I do not fear an earthquake in the sense in which the term is commonly applied to convulsions of the soil provoked by the expansion of subterranean gases. But other causes may produce great disasters.”

“How so, my dear Cyrus?’

“I am not certain. I must consider. I must visit the mountain. In a few days I shall learn more on this point.”

Gideon Spilett said no more, and soon, in spite of the explosions of the volcano, whose intensity increased, and which were repeated by the echoes of the island, the inhabitants of Granite House were sleeping soundly.

Three days passed by — the 4th, 5th, and 6th of January. The construction of the vessel was diligently continued, and without offering further explanations the engineer pushed forward the work with all his energy. Mount Franklin was now hooded by a somber cloud of sinister aspect, and, amid the flames, vomiting forth incandescent rocks, some of which fell back into the crater itself. This caused Pencroft, who would only look at the matter in the light of a joke, to exclaim, —

“Ah! the giant is playing at cup and ball; he is a conjurer.”

In fact, the substances thrown up fell back again in to the abyss, and it did not seem that the lava, though swollen by the internal pressure, had yet risen to the orifice of the crater. At any rate, the opening on the northeast, which was partly visible, poured out no torrent upon the northern slope of the mountain.

Nevertheless, however pressing was the construction of the vessel, other duties demanded the presence of the colonists on various portions of the island. Before everything it was necessary to go to the corral, where the flocks of musmons and goats were enclosed, and replenish the provision of forage for those animals. It was accordingly arranged that Ayrton should proceed thither the next day, the 7th of January; and as he was sufficient for the task, to which he was accustomed, Pencroft and the rest were somewhat surprised on hearing the engineer say to Ayrton —

“As you are going to-morrow to the corral I will accompany you.”

“But, Captain Harding,” exclaimed the sailor, “our working days will not be many, and if you go also we shall be two pair of hands short!”

“We shall return to-morrow,” replied Cyrus Harding, “but it is necessary that I should go to the corral. I must learn how the eruption is progressing.”

“The eruption! always the eruption!” answered Pencroft, with an air of discontent. “An important thing, truly, this eruption! I trouble myself very little about it.”

Whatever might be the sailor’s opinion, the expedition projected by the engineer was settled for the next day. Herbert wished to accompany Cyrus Harding, but he would not vex Pencroft by his absence.

The next day, at dawn, Cyrus Harding and Ayrton, mounting the cart drawn by two onagers, took the road to the corral and set off at a round trot.

Above the forest were passing large clouds, to which the crater of Mount Franklin incessantly added fuliginous matter. These clouds, which rolled heavily in the air, were evidently composed of heterogeneous substances. It was not alone from the volcano that they derived their strange opacity and weight. Scoriae, in a state of dust, like powdered pumice-stone, and grayish ashes as small as the finest feculae, were held in suspension in the midst of their thick folds. These ashes are so fine that they have been observed in the air for whole months. After the eruption of 1783 in Iceland for upwards of a year the atmosphere was thus charged with volcanic dust through which the rays of the sun were only with difficulty discernible.

But more often this pulverized matter falls, and this happened on the present occasion. Cyrus Harding and Ayrton had scarcely reached the corral when a sort of black snow like fine gunpowder fell, and instantly changed the appearance of the soil. Trees, meadows, all disappeared beneath a covering several inches in depth. But, very fortunately, the wind blew from the northeast, and the greater part of the cloud dissolved itself over the sea.

“This is very singular, Captain Harding,” said Ayrton.

“It is very serious,” replied the engineer. “This powdered pumice-stone, all this mineral dust, proves how grave is the convulsion going forward in the lower depths of the volcano.”

“But can nothing be done?”

“Nothing, except to note the progress of the phenomenon. Do you, therefore, Ayrton, occupy yourself with the necessary work at the corral. In the meantime I will ascend just beyond the source of Red Creek and examine the condition of the mountain upon its northern aspect. Then — ”

“Well, Captain Harding?”

“Then we will pay a visit to Dakkar Grotto. I wish to inspect it. At any rate I will come back for you in two hours.”

Ayrton then proceeded to enter the corral, and, while awaiting the engineer’s return, busied himself with the musmons and goats which seemed to feel a certain uneasiness in presence of these first signs of an eruption.

Meanwhile Cyrus Harding ascended the crest of the eastern spur, passed Red Creek, and arrived at the spot where he and his companions had discovered a sulphurous spring at the time of their first exploration.

How changed was everything! Instead of a single column of smoke he counted thirteen, forced through the soil as if violently propelled by some piston. It was evident that the crust of the earth was subjected in this part of the globe to a frightful pressure. The atmosphere was saturated with gases and carbonic acid, mingled with aqueous vapors. Cyrus Harding felt the volcanic tufa with which the plain was strewn, and which was but pulverized cinders hardened into solid blocks by time, tremble beneath him, but he could discover no traces of fresh lava.

The engineer became more assured of this when he observed all the northern part of Mount Franklin. Pillars of smoke and flame escaped from the crater; a hail of scoriae fell on the ground; but no current of lava burst from the mouth of the volcano, which proved that the volcanic matter had not yet attained the level of the superior orifice of the central shaft.

“But I would prefer that it were so,” said Cyrus Harding to himself. “At any rate, I should then know that the lava had followed its accustomed track. Who can say that it may not take a new course? But the danger does not consist in that! Captain Nemo foresaw it clearly! No, the danger does not lie there!”

Cyrus Harding advanced towards the enormous causeway whose prolongation enclosed the narrow Shark Gulf. He could now sufficiently examine on this side the ancient channels of the lava. There was no doubt in his mind that the most recent eruption had occurred at a far-distant epoch.

He then returned by the same way, listening attentively to the subterranean mutterings which rolled like long-continued thunder, interrupted by deafening explosions. At nine in the morning he reached the corral.

Ayrton awaited him.

“The animals are cared for, Captain Harding,” said Ayrton.

“Good, Ayrton.”

“They seem uneasy, Captain Harding.”

“Yes, instinct speaks through them, and instinct is never deceived.”

“Are you ready?”

“Take a lamp, Ayrton,” answered the engineer; “we will start at once.”

Ayrton did as desired. The onagers, unharnessed, roamed in the corral. The gate was secured on the outside, and Cyrus Harding, preceding Ayrton, took the narrow path which led westward to the shore.

The soil they walked upon was choked with the pulverized matter fallen from the cloud. No quadruped appeared in the woods. Even the birds had fled. Sometimes a passing breeze raised the covering of ashes, and the two colonists, enveloped in a whirlwind of dust, lost sight of each other. They were then careful to cover their eyes and mouths with handkerchiefs, for they ran the risk of being blinded and suffocated.

It was impossible for Cyrus Harding and Ayrton, with these impediments, to make rapid progress. Moreover, the atmosphere was close, as if the oxygen had been partly burned up, and had become unfit for respiration. At every hundred paces they were obliged to stop to take breath. It was therefore past ten o’clock when the engineer and his companion reached the crest of the enormous mass of rocks of basalt and porphyry which composed the northwest coast of the island.

Ayrton and Cyrus Harding commenced the descent of this abrupt declivity, following almost step for step the difficult path which, during that stormy night, had led them to Dakkar Grotto. In open day the descent was less perilous, and, besides, the bed of ashes which covered the polished surface of the rock enabled them to make their footing more secure.

The ridge at the end of the shore, about forty feet in height, was soon reached. Cyrus Harding recollected that this elevation gradually sloped towards the level of the sea. Although the tide was at present low, no beach could be seen, and the waves, thickened by the volcanic dust, beat upon the basaltic rocks.

Cyrus Harding and Ayrton found without difficulty the entrance to Dakkar Grotto, and paused for a moment at the last rock before it.

“The iron boat should be there,” said the engineer.

“It is here, Captain Harding,” replied Ayrton, drawing towards him the fragile craft, which was protected by the arch of the vault.

“On board, Ayrton!”

The two colonists stepped into the boat. A slight undulation of the waves carried it farther under the low arch of the crypt, and there Ayrton, with the aid of flint and steel, lighted the lamp. He then took the oars, and the lamp having been placed in the bow of the boat, so that its rays fell before them, Cyrus Harding took the helm and steered through the shades of the grotto.

The “Nautilus” was there no longer to illuminate the cavern with its electric light. Possibly it might not yet be extinguished, but no ray escaped from the depths of the abyss in which reposed all that was mortal of Captain Nemo.

The light afforded by the lamp, although feeble, nevertheless enabled the engineer to advance slowly, following the wall of the cavern. A deathlike silence reigned under the vaulted roof, or at least in the anterior portion, for soon Cyrus Harding distinctly heard the rumbling which proceeded from the bowels of the mountain.

“That comes from the volcano,” he said.

Besides these sounds, the presence of chemical combinations was soon betrayed by their powerful odor, and the engineer and his companion were almost suffocated by sulphurous vapors.

“This is what Captain Nemo feared,” murmured Cyrus Harding, changing countenance. “We must go to the end, notwithstanding.”

“Forward!” replied Ayrton, bending to his oars and directing the boat towards the head of the cavern.

Twenty-five minutes after entering the mouth of the grotto the boat reached the extreme end.

Cyrus Harding then, standing up, cast the light of the lamp upon the walls of the cavern which separated it from the central shaft of the volcano. What was the thickness of this wall? It might be ten feet or a hundred feet — it was impossible to say. But the subterranean sounds were too perceptible to allow of the supposition that it was of any great thickness.

The engineer, after having explored the wall at a certain height horizontally, fastened the lamp to the end of an oar, and again surveyed the basaltic wall at a greater elevation.

There, through scarcely visible clefts and joinings, escaped a pungent vapor, which infected the atmosphere of the cavern. The wall was broken by large cracks, some of which extended to within two or three feet of the water's edge.

Cyrus Harding thought for a brief space. Then he said in a low voice, —

"Yes! the captain was right! The danger lies there, and a terrible danger!"

Ayrton said not a word, but, upon a sign from Cyrus Harding, resumed the oars, and half an hour later the engineer and he reached the entrance of Dakkar Grotto.

CHAPTER 19

The next day, the 8th day of January, after a day and night passed at the corral, where they left all in order, Cyrus Harding and Ayrton arrived at Granite House.

The engineer immediately called his companions together, and informed them of the imminent danger which threatened Lincoln Island, and from which no human power could deliver them.

“My friends,” he said, and his voice betrayed the depth of his emotion, “our island is not among those which will endure while this earth endures. It is doomed to more or less speedy destruction, the cause of which it bears within itself, and from which nothing can save it.”

The colonists looked at each other, then at the engineer. They did not clearly comprehend him.

“Explain yourself, Cyrus!” said Gideon Spilett.

“I will do so,” replied Cyrus Harding, “or rather I will simply afford you the explanation which, during our few minutes of private conversation, was given me by Captain Nemo.”

“Captain Nemo!” exclaimed the colonists.

“Yes, and it was the last service he desired to render us before his death!”

“The last service!” exclaimed Pencroft, “the last service! You will see that though he is dead he will render us others yet!”

“But what did the captain say?” inquired the reporter.

“I will tell you, my friends,” said the engineer. “Lincoln Island does not resemble the other islands of the Pacific, and a fact of which Captain Nemo has made me cognizant must sooner or later bring about the subversion of its foundation.”

“Nonsense! Lincoln Island, it can’t be!” cried Pencroft, who, in spite of the respect he felt for Cyrus Harding, could not prevent a gesture of incredulity.

“Listen, Pencroft,” resumed the engineer, “I will tell you what Captain Nemo communicated to me, and which I myself confirmed yesterday, during the exploration of Dakkar Grotto.

“This cavern stretches under the island as far as the volcano, and is only separated from its central shaft by the wall which terminates it. Now, this wall is seamed with fissures and clefts which already allow the sulphurous gases generated in the interior of the volcano to escape.”

“Well?” said Pencroft, his brow suddenly contracting.

“Well, then, I saw that these fissures widen under the internal pressure from within, that the wall of basalt is gradually giving way and that after a longer or shorter period it will afford a passage to the waters of the lake which fill the cavern.”

“Good!” replied Pencroft, with an attempt at pleasantry. “The sea will extinguish the volcano, and there will be an end of the matter!”

“Not so!” said Cyrus Harding, “should a day arrive when the sea, rushing through the wall of the cavern, penetrates by the central shaft into the interior of the island to the boiling lava, Lincoln Island will that day be blown into the air — just as would happen to the island of Sicily were the Mediterranean to precipitate itself into Mount Etna.”

The colonists made no answer to these significant words of the engineer. They now understood the danger by which they were menaced.

It may be added that Cyrus Harding had in no way exaggerated the danger to be apprehended. Many persons have formed an idea that it would be possible to extinguish volcanoes, which are almost always situated on the shores of a sea or lake, by opening a passage for the admission of the water. But they are not aware that this would be to incur the risk of blowing up a portion of the globe, like a boiler whose steam is suddenly expanded by intense heat. The water, rushing into a cavity whose temperature might be estimated at thousands of degrees, would be converted into steam with a sudden energy which no enclosure could resist.

It was not therefore doubtful that the island, menaced by a frightful and approaching convulsion, would endure only so long as the wall of Dakkar Grotto itself should endure. It was not even a question of months, nor of weeks, but of days; it might be of hours.

The first sentiment which the colonists felt was that of profound sorrow. They thought not so much of the peril which menaced themselves personally, but of the destruction of the island which had sheltered them, which they had cultivated, which they loved so well, and had hoped to render so flourishing. So much effort ineffectually expended, so much labor lost.

Pencroft could not prevent a large tear from rolling down his cheek, nor did he attempt to conceal it.

Some further conversation now took place. The chances yet in favor of the colonists were discussed; but finally it was agreed that there was not an hour to be lost, that the building and fitting of the vessel should be pushed forward with their utmost energy, and that this was the sole chance of safety for the inhabitants of Lincoln Island.

All hands, therefore, set to work on the vessel. What could it avail to sow, to reap, to hunt, to increase the stores of Granite House? The contents of the storehouse and outbuildings contained more than sufficient to provide the ship for a voyage, however long might be its duration. But it was imperative that the ship should be ready to receive them before the inevitable catastrophe should arrive.

Their labors were now carried on with feverish ardor. By the 23rd of January the vessel was half-decked over. Up to this time no change had taken place on the summit of the volcano. Vapor and smoke mingled with flames and incandescent stones were thrown up from the crater. But during the night of the 23rd, in consequence of the lava attaining the level of the first stratum of the volcano, the hat-shaped cone which formed over the latter disappeared. A frightful sound was heard. The colonists at first thought the island was rent asunder, and rushed out of Granite House.

This occurred about two o’clock in the morning.

The sky appeared on fire. The superior cone, a mass of rock a thousand feet in height, and weighing thousands of millions of pounds, had been thrown down upon the island, making it tremble to its foundation. Fortunately, this cone inclined to the north, and had fallen upon the plain of sand and tufa stretching between the volcano and the sea. The aperture of the crater being thus enlarged projected towards the sky a glare so intense that by the simple effect of reflection the atmosphere appeared red-hot. At the same time a torrent of lava, bursting from the new summit, poured out in long cascades, like water escaping from a vase too full, and a thousand tongues of fire crept over the sides of the volcano.

“The corral! the corral!” exclaimed Ayrton.

It was, in fact, towards the corral that the lava was rushing as the new crater faced the east, and consequently the fertile portions of the island, the springs of Red Creek and Jacamar Wood, were menaced with instant destruction.

At Ayrton’s cry the colonists rushed to the onagers’ stables. The cart was at once harnessed. All were possessed by the same thought — to hasten to the corral and set at liberty the animals it enclosed.

Before three in the morning they arrived at the corral. The cries of the terrified musmons and goats indicated the alarm which possessed them. Already a torrent of burning matter and liquefied minerals fell from the side of the mountain upon the meadows as far as the side of the palisade. The gate was burst open by Ayrton, and the animals, bewildered with terror, fled in all directions.

An hour afterwards the boiling lava filled the corral, converting into vapor the water of the little rivulet which ran through it, burning up the house like dry grass, and leaving not even a post of the palisade to mark the spot where the corral once stood.

To contend against this disaster would have been folly — nay, madness. In presence of Nature’s grand convulsions man is powerless.

It was now daylight — the 24th of January. Cyrus Harding and his companions, before returning to Granite House, desired to ascertain the probable direction this inundation of lava was about to take. The soil sloped gradually from Mount Franklin to the east coast, and it was to be feared that, in spite of the thick Jacamar Wood, the torrent would reach the plateau of Prospect Heights.

“The lake will cover us,” said Gideon Spilett.

“I hope so!” was Cyrus Harding’s only reply.

The colonists were desirous of reaching the plain upon which the superior cone of Mount Franklin had fallen, but the lava arrested their progress. It had followed, on one side, the valley of Red Creek, and on the other that of Falls River, evaporating those watercourses in its passage. There was no possibility of crossing the torrent of lava; on the contrary, the colonists were obliged to retreat before it. The volcano, without its crown, was no longer recognizable, terminated as it was by a sort of flat table which replaced the ancient crater. From two openings in its southern and eastern sides an unceasing flow of lava poured forth, thus forming two distinct streams. Above the new crater a cloud of smoke and ashes, mingled with those of the atmosphere, massed over the island. Loud peals of thunder broke, and could scarcely be distinguished from the rumblings of the mountain, whose mouth vomited forth ignited rocks, which, hurled to more than a thousand feet, burst in the air like shells. Flashes of lightning rivaled in intensity the volcano’s eruption.

Towards seven in the morning the position was no longer tenable by the colonists, who accordingly took shelter in the borders of Jacamar Wood. Not only did the projectiles begin to rain around them, but the lava, overflowing the bed of Red Creek, threatened to cut off the road to the corral. The nearest rows of trees caught fire, and their sap, suddenly transformed into vapor, caused them to explode with loud reports, while others, less moist, remained unhurt in the midst of the inundation.

The colonists had again taken the road to the corral. They proceeded but slowly, frequently looking back; but, in consequence of the inclination of the soil, the lava gained rapidly in the east, and as its lower waves became solidified others, at boiling heat, covered them immediately.

Meanwhile, the principal stream of Red Creek Valley became more and more menacing. All this portion of the forest was on fire, and enormous wreaths of smoke rolled over the trees, whose trunks were already consumed by the lava.

The colonists halted near the lake, about half a mile from the mouth of Red Creek. A question of life or death was now to be decided.

Cyrus Harding, accustomed to the consideration of important crises, and aware that he was addressing men capable of hearing the truth, whatever it might be, then said, —

“Either the lake will arrest the progress of the lava, and a part of the island will be preserved from utter destruction, or the stream will overrun the forests of the Far West, and not a tree or plant will remain on the surface of the soil. We shall have no prospect but that of starvation upon these barren rocks — a death which will probably be anticipated by the explosion of the island.”

“In that case,” replied Pencroft, folding his arms and stamping his foot, “what’s the use of working any longer on the vessel?”

“Pencroft,” answered Cyrus Harding, “we must do our duty to the last!”

At this instant the river of lava, after having broken a passage through the noble trees it devoured in its course, reached the borders of the lake. At this point there was an elevation of the soil which, had it been greater, might have sufficed to arrest the torrent.

“To work!” cried Cyrus Harding.

The engineer’s thought was at once understood. It might be possible to dam, as it were, the torrent, and thus compel it to pour itself into the lake.

The colonists hastened to the dockyard. They returned with shovels, picks, axes, and by means of banking the earth with the aid of fallen trees they succeeded in a few hours in raising an embankment three feet high and some hundreds of paces in length. It seemed to them, when they had finished, as if they had scarcely been working more than a few minutes.

It was not a moment too soon. The liquefied substances soon after reached the bottom of the barrier. The stream of lava swelled like a river about to overflow its banks, and threatened to demolish the sole obstacle which could prevent it from overrunning the whole Far West. But the dam held firm, and after a moment of terrible suspense the torrent precipitated itself into Grant Lake from a height of twenty feet.

The colonists, without moving or uttering a word, breathlessly regarded this strife of the two elements.

What a spectacle was this conflict between water and fire! What pen could describe the marvelous horror of this scene — what pencil could depict it? The water hissed as it evaporated by contact with the boiling lava. The vapor whirled in the air to an immeasurable height, as if the valves of an immense boiler had been suddenly opened. But, however considerable might be the volume of water contained in the lake, it must eventually be absorbed, because it was not replenished, while the stream of lava, fed from an inexhaustible source, rolled on without ceasing new waves of incandescent matter.

The first waves of lava which fell in the lake immediately solidified and accumulated so as speedily to emerge from it. Upon their surface fell other waves, which in their turn became stone, but a step nearer the center of the lake. In this manner was formed a pier which threatened to gradually fill up the lake, which could not overflow, the water displaced by the lava being evaporated. The hissing of the water rent the air with a deafening sound, and the vapor, blown by the wind, fell in rain upon the sea. The pier became longer and longer, and the blocks of lava piled themselves one on another. Where formerly stretched the calm waters of the lake now appeared an enormous mass of smoking rocks, as if an upheaving of the soil had formed immense shoals. Imagine the waters of the lake aroused by a hurricane, then suddenly solidified by an intense frost, and some conception may be formed of the aspect of the lake three hours after the eruption of this irresistible torrent of lava.

This time water would be vanquished by fire.

Nevertheless it was a fortunate circumstance for the colonists that the effusion of lava should have been in the direction of Lake Grant. They had before them some days' respite. The plateau of Prospect Heights, Granite House, and the dockyard were for the moment preserved. And these few days it was necessary to employ in planking and carefully calking the vessel, and launching her. The colonists would then take refuge on board the vessel, content to rig her after she should be afloat on the waters. With the danger of an explosion which threatened to destroy the island there could be no security on shore. The walls of Granite House, once so sure a retreat, might at any moment fall in upon them.

During the six following days, from the 25th to the 30th of January, the colonists accomplished as much of the construction of their vessel as twenty men could have done. They hardly allowed themselves a moment's repose, and the glare of the flames which shot from the crater enabled them to work night and day. The flow of lava continued, but perhaps less abundantly. This was fortunate, for Lake Grant was almost entirely choked up, and if more lava should accumulate it would inevitably spread over the plateau of Prospect Heights, and thence upon the beach.

But if the island was thus partially protected on this side, it was not so with the western part.

In fact, the second stream of lava, which had followed the valley of Falls River, a valley of great extent, the land on both sides of the creek being flat, met with no obstacle. The burning liquid had then spread through the forest of the Far West. At this period of the year, when the trees were dried up by a tropical heat, the forest caught fire instantaneously, in such a manner that the conflagration extended itself both by the trunks of the trees and by their higher branches, whose interlacement favored its progress. It even appeared that the current of flame spread more rapidly among the summits of the trees than the current of lava at their bases.

Thus it happened that the wild animals, jaguars, wild boars, capybaras, koalas, and game of every kind, mad with terror, had fled to the banks of the Mercy and to the Tadorn Marsh, beyond the road to Port Balloon. But the colonists were too much occupied with their task to pay any attention to even the most formidable of these animals. They had abandoned Granite House, and would not even take shelter at the Chimneys, but encamped under a tent, near the mouth of the Mercy.

Each day Cyrus Harding and Gideon Spilett ascended the plateau of Prospect Heights. Sometimes Herbert accompanied them, but never Pencroft, who could not bear to look upon the prospect of the island now so utterly devastated.

It was, in truth, a heart-rending spectacle. All the wooded part of the island was now completely bare. One single clump of green trees raised their heads at the extremity of Serpentine Peninsula. Here and there were a few grotesque blackened and branchless stumps. The side of the devastated forest was even more barren than Tadorn Marsh. The eruption of lava had been complete. Where formerly sprang up that charming verdure, the soil was now nothing but a savage mass of volcanic tufa. In the valleys of the Falls and Mercy rivers no drop of water now flowed towards the sea, and should Lake Grant be entirely dried up, the colonists would have no means of quenching their thirst. But, fortunately the lava had spared the southern corner of the lake, containing all that remained of the drinking water of the island. Towards the northwest stood out the rugged and well-defined outlines of the sides of the volcano, like a gigantic claw hovering over the island. What a sad and fearful sight, and how painful to the colonists, who, from a fertile domain covered with forests, irrigated by watercourses, and enriched by the produce of their toils, found themselves, as it were, transported to a desolate rock, upon which, but for their reserves of provisions, they could not even gather the means of subsistence!

“It is enough to break one’s heart!” said Gideon Spilett, one day.

“Yes, Spilett,” answered the engineer. “May God grant us the time to complete this vessel, now our sole refuge!”

“Do not you think, Cyrus, that the violence of the eruption has somewhat lessened? The volcano still vomits forth lava, but somewhat less abundantly, if I mistake not.”

“It matters little,” answered Cyrus Harding. “The fire is still burning in the interior of the mountain, and the sea may break in at any moment. We are in the condition of passengers whose ship is devoured by a conflagration which they cannot extinguish, and who know that sooner or later the flames must reach the powder-magazine. To work, Spilett, to work, and let us not lose an hour!”

During eight days more, that is to say until the 7th of February, the lava continued to flow, but the eruption was confined within the previous limits. Cyrus Harding feared above all lest the liquefied matter should overflow the shore, for in that event the dockyard could not escape. Moreover, about this time the colonists felt in the frame of the island vibrations which alarmed them to the highest degree.

It was the 20th of February. Yet another month must elapse before the vessel would be ready for sea. Would the island hold together till then? The intention of Pencroft and Cyrus Harding was to launch the vessel as soon as the hull should be complete. The deck, the upperworks, the interior woodwork and the rigging might be finished afterwards, but the essential point was that the colonists should have an assured refuge away from the island. Perhaps it might be even better to conduct the vessel to Port Balloon, that is to say, as far as possible from the center of eruption, for at the mouth of the Mercy, between the islet and the wall of granite, it would run the risk of being crushed in the event of any convulsion. All the exertions of the voyagers were therefore concentrated upon the completion of the hull.

Thus the 3rd of March arrived, and they might calculate upon launching the vessel in ten days.

Hope revived in the hearts of the colonists, who had, in this fourth year of their sojourn on Lincoln island, suffered so many trials. Even Pencroft lost in some measure the somber taciturnity occasioned by the devastation and ruin of his domain. His hopes, it is true, were concentrated upon his vessel.

“We shall finish it,” he said to the engineer, “we shall finish it, captain, and it is time, for the season is advancing and the equinox will soon be here. Well, if necessary, we must put in to Tabor island to spend the winter. But think of Tabor island after Lincoln Island. Ah, how unfortunate! Who could have believed it possible?”

“Let us get on,” was the engineer’s invariable reply.

And they worked away without losing a moment.

“Master,” asked Neb, a few days later, “do you think all this could have happened if Captain Nemo had been still alive?”

“Certainly, Neb,” answered Cyrus Harding.

“I, for one, don’t believe it!” whispered Pencroft to Neb.

“Nor I!” answered Neb seriously.

During the first week of March appearances again became menacing. Thousands of threads like glass, formed of fluid lava, fell like rain upon the island. The crater was again boiling with lava which overflowed the back of the volcano. The torrent flowed along the surface of the hardened tufa, and destroyed the few meager skeletons of trees which had withstood the first eruption. The stream, flowing this time towards the southwest shore of Lake Grant, stretched beyond Creek Glycerine, and invaded the plateau of Prospect Heights. This last blow to the work of the colonists was terrible. The mill, the buildings of the inner court, the stables, were all destroyed. The affrighted poultry fled in all directions. Top and Jup showed signs of the greatest alarm, as if their instinct warned them of an impending catastrophe. A large number of the animals of the island had perished in the first eruption. Those which survived found no refuge but Tadorn Marsh, save a few to which the plateau of Prospect Heights afforded asylum. But even this last retreat was now closed to them, and the lava-torrent, flowing over the edge of the granite wall, began to pour down upon the beach its cataracts of fire. The sublime horror of this spectacle passed all description. During the night it could only be compared to a Niagara of molten fluid, with its incandescent vapors above and its boiling masses below.

The colonists were driven to their last entrenchment, and although the upper seams of the vessel were not yet calked, they decided to launch her at once.

Pencroft and Ayrton therefore set about the necessary preparations for the launching, which was to take place the morning of the next day, the 9th of March.

But during the night of the 8th an enormous column of vapor escaping from the crater rose with frightful explosions to a height of more than three thousand feet. The wall of Dakkar Grotto had evidently given way under the pressure of gases, and the sea, rushing through the central shalt into the igneous gulf, was at once converted into vapor. But the crater could not afford a sufficient outlet for this vapor. An explosion, which might have been heard at a distance of a hundred miles, shook the air. Fragments of mountains fell into the Pacific, and, in a few minutes, the ocean rolled over the spot where Lincoln island once stood.

CHAPTER 20

An isolated rock, thirty feet in length, twenty in breadth, scarcely ten from the water's edge, such was the only solid point which the waves of the Pacific had not engulfed.

It was all that remained of the structure of Granite House! The wall had fallen headlong and been then shattered to fragments, and a few of the rocks of the large room were piled one above another to form this point. All around had disappeared in the abyss; the inferior cone of Mount Franklin, rent asunder by the explosion; the lava jaws of Shark Gulf, the plateau of Prospect Heights, Safety Islet, the granite rocks of Port Balloon, the basalts of Dakkar Grotto, the long Serpentine Peninsula, so distant nevertheless from the center of the eruption. All that could now be seen of Lincoln Island was the narrow rock which now served as a refuge to the six colonists and their dog Top.

The animals had also perished in the catastrophe; the birds, as well as those representing the fauna of the island — all either crushed or drowned, and the unfortunate Jup himself had, alas! found his death in some crevice of the soil.

If Cyrus Harding, Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Pencroft, Neb, and Ayrton had survived, it was because, assembled under their tent, they had been hurled into the sea at the instant when the fragments of the island rained down on every side.

When they reached the surface they could only perceive, at half a cable's length, this mass of rocks, towards which they swam and on which they found footing.

On this barren rock they had now existed for nine days. A few provisions taken from the magazine of Granite House before the catastrophe, a little fresh water from the rain which had fallen in a hollow of the rock, was all that the unfortunate colonists possessed. Their last hope, the vessel, had been shattered to pieces. They had no means of quitting the reef; no fire, nor any means of obtaining it. It seemed that they must inevitably perish.

This day, the 18th of March, there remained only provisions for two days, although they limited their consumption to the bare necessaries of life. All their science and intelligence could avail them nothing in their present position. They were in the hand of God.

Cyrus Harding was calm, Gideon Spilett more nervous, and Pencroft, a prey to sullen anger, walked to and fro on the rock. Herbert did not for a moment quit the engineer’s side, as if demanding from him that assistance he had no power to give. Neb and Ayrton were resigned to their fate.

“Ah, what a misfortune! what a misfortune!” often repeated Pencroft. “If we had but a walnut-shell to take us to Tabor Island! But we have nothing, nothing!”

“Captain Nemo did right to die,” said Neb.

During the five ensuing days Cyrus Harding and his unfortunate companions husbanded their provisions with the most extreme care, eating only what would prevent them from dying of starvation. Their weakness was extreme. Herbert and Neb began to show symptoms of delirium.

Under these circumstances was it possible for them to retain even the shadow of a hope? No! What was their sole remaining chance? That a vessel should appear in sight of the rock? But they knew only too well from experience that no ships ever visited this part of the Pacific. Could they calculate that, by a truly providential coincidence, the Scotch yacht would arrive precisely at this time in search of Ayrton at Tabor Island? It was scarcely probable; and, besides, supposing she should come there, as the colonists had not been able to deposit a notice pointing out Ayrton's change of abode, the commander of the yacht, after having explored Tabor Island without results, would again set sail and return to lower latitudes.

No! no hope of being saved could be retained, and a horrible death, death from hunger and thirst, awaited them upon this rock.

Already they were stretched on the rock, inanimate, and no longer conscious of what passed around them. Ayrton alone, by a supreme effort, from time to time raised his head, and cast a despairing glance over the desert ocean.

But on the morning of the 24th of March Ayrton's arms were extended toward a point in the horizon; he raised himself, at first on his knees, then upright, and his hand seemed to make a signal.

A sail was in sight off the rock. She was evidently not without an object. The reef was the mark for which she was making in a direct line, under all steam, and the unfortunate colonists might have made her out some hours before if they had had the strength to watch the horizon.

"The 'Duncan'!" murmured Ayrton — and fell back without sign of life.

When Cyrus Harding and his companions recovered consciousness, thanks to the attention lavished upon them, they found themselves in the cabin of a steamer, without being able to comprehend how they had escaped death.

A word from Ayrton explained everything.

“The ‘Duncan’!” he murmured.

“The ‘Duncan’!” exclaimed Cyrus Harding. And raising his hand to Heaven, he said, “Oh! Almighty God! mercifully hast Thou preserved us!”

It was, in fact, the “Duncan,” Lord Glenarvan’s yacht, now commanded by Robert, son of Captain Grant, who had been despatched to Tabor Island to find Ayrton, and bring him back to his native land after twelve years of expiation.

The colonists were not only saved, but already on the way to their native country.

“Captain Grant,” asked Cyrus Harding, “who can have suggested to you the idea, after having left Tabor Island, where you did not find Ayrton, of coming a hundred miles farther northeast?”

“Captain Harding,” replied Robert Grant, “it was in order to find, not only Ayrton, but yourself and your companions.”

“My companions and myself?”

“Doubtless, at Lincoln Island.”

“At Lincoln Island!” exclaimed in a breath Gideon Spilett, Herbert, Neb, and Pencroft, in the highest degree astonished.

“How could you be aware of the existence of Lincoln Island?” inquired Cyrus Harding, “it is not even named in the charts.”

“I knew of it from a document left by you on Tabor Island,” answered Robert Grant.

“A document!” cried Gideon Spilett.

“Without doubt, and here it is,” answered Robert Grant, producing a paper which indicated the longitude and latitude of Lincoln Island, “the present residence of Ayrton and five American colonists.”

“It is Captain Nemo!” cried Cyrus Harding, after having read the notice, and recognized that the handwriting was similar to that of the paper found at the corral.

“Ah!” said Pencroft, “it was then he who took our ‘Bonadventure’ and hazarded himself alone to go to Tabor Island!”

“In order to leave this notice,” added Herbert.

“I was then right in saying,” exclaimed the sailor, “that even after his death the captain would render us a last service.”

“My friends,” said Cyrus Harding, in a voice of the profoundest emotion, “may the God of mercy have had pity on the soul of Captain Nemo, our benefactor.”

The colonists uncovered themselves at these last words of Cyrus Harding, and murmured the name of Captain Nemo.

Then Ayrton, approaching the engineer, said simply, “Where should this coffer be deposited?”

It was the coffer which Ayrton had saved at the risk of his life, at the very instant that the island had been engulfed, and which he now faithfully handed to the engineer.

“Ayrton! Ayrton!” said Cyrus Harding, deeply touched. Then, addressing Robert Grant, “Sir,” he added, “you left behind you a criminal; you find in his place a man who has become honest by penitence, and whose hand I am proud to clasp in mine.”

Robert Grant was now made acquainted with the strange history of Captain Nemo and the colonists of Lincoln Island. Then, observation being taken of what remained of this shoal, which must henceforward figure on the charts of the Pacific, the order was given to make all sail.

A few weeks afterwards the colonists landed in America, and found their country once more at peace after the terrible conflict in which right and justice had triumphed.

Of the treasures contained in the coffer left by Captain Nemo to the colonists of Lincoln Island, the larger portion was employed in the purchase of a vast territory in the State of Iowa. One pearl alone, the finest, was reserved from the treasure and sent to Lady Glenarvan in the name of the castaways restored to their country by the “Duncan.”

There, upon this domain, the colonists invited to labor, that is to say, to wealth and happiness, all those to whom they had hoped to offer the hospitality of Lincoln Island. There was founded a vast colony to which they gave the name of that island sunk beneath the waters of the Pacific. A river there was called the Mercy, a mountain took the name of Mount Franklin, a small lake was named Lake Grant, and the forests became the forests of the Far West. It might have been an island on terra firma.

There, under the intelligent hands of the engineer and his companions, everything prospered. Not one of the former colonists of Lincoln Island was absent, for they had sworn to live always together. Neb was with his master; Ayrton was there ready to sacrifice himself for all; Pencroft was more a farmer than he had ever been a sailor; Herbert, who completed his studies under the superintendence of Cyrus Harding, and Gideon Spilett, who founded the New Lincoln Herald, the best-informed journal in the world.

There Cyrus Harding and his companions received at intervals visits from Lord and Lady Glenarvan, Captain John Mangles and his wife, the sister of Robert Grant, Robert Grant himself, Major McNab, and all those who had taken part in the history both of Captain Grant and Captain Nemo.

There, to conclude, all were happy, united in the present as they had been in the past; but never could they forget that island upon which they had arrived poor and friendless, that island which, during four years had supplied all their wants, and of which there remained but a fragment of granite washed by the waves of the Pacific, the tomb of him who had borne the name of Captain Nemo.

THE SURVIVORS OF THE CHANCELLOR

Translated by George M. Towle

This 1875 novel concerns the final and imperilled voyage of the British sailing ship, the Chancellor, told from the perspective of one of its passengers in the form of a diary.

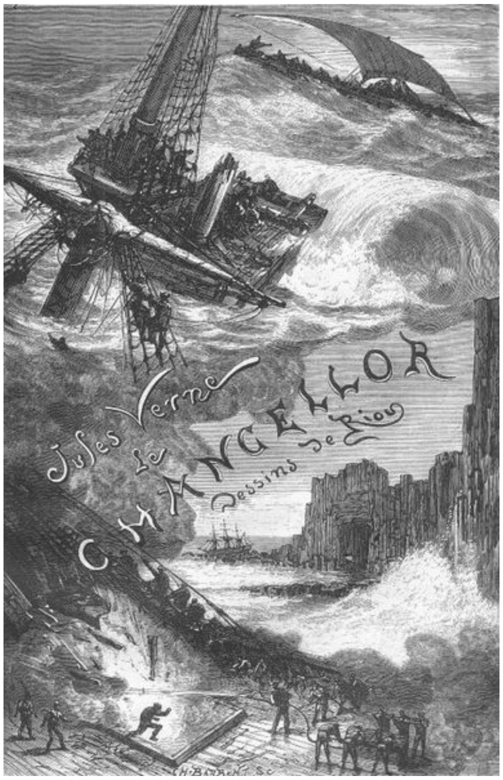
Jules Verne
Le
CHANCELLOR
Dessins de Riou
H. BARBANT SC.

An original illustration

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CHAPTER I THE CHANCELLOR

CHARLESTON, September 27, 1898. — It is high tide, and three o’clock in the afternoon when we leave the Battery quay; the ebb carries us off shore, and as Captain Huntly has hoisted both main and top sails, the northerly breeze drives the Chancellor briskly across the bay. Fort Sumter ere long is doubled, the sweeping batteries of the mainland on our left are soon passed, and by four o’clock the rapid current of the ebbing tide has carried us through the harbor mouth.

But as yet we have not reached the open sea we have still to thread our way through the narrow channels which the surge has hollowed out amongst the sand-banks. The captain takes a southwest course, rounding the lighthouse at the corner of the fort; the sails are closely trimmed; the last sandy point is safely coasted, and at length, at seven o’clock in the evening, we are out free upon the wide At- lantic.

The Chancellor is a fine square-rigged three-master, of 900 tons burden, and belongs to the wealthy Liverpool firm of Laird Brothers. She is two years old, is sheathed and secured with copper, her decks being of teak, and the base of all her masts, except the mizzen, with all their fittings, being of iron. She is registered first class, A 1, and is now on her third voyage between Charleston and Liverpool. As she wended her way through the channels of Charleston harbor, it was the British flag that was lowered from her masthead; but without colors at all, no sailor could have hesitated for a moment in telling her nationality, — for Eng- lish she was, and nothing but English from her water-line upward to the truck of her masts.

I must now relate how it happens that I have taken my passage on board the Chancellor on her return voyage to England.

At present there is no direct steamship service between South Carolina and Great Britain, and all who wish to cross must go either northward to New York or southward to New Orleans. It is quite true that if I had chosen a start from New York I might have found plenty of vessels be- longing to English, French, or Hamburg lines, any of which would have conveyed me by a rapid voyage to my destina- tion; and it is equally true that if I had selected New Or- leans for my embarkation I could readily have reached Europe by one of the vessels of the National Steam Naviga- tion Company, which join the French transatlantic line of Colon and Aspinwall. But it was fated to be otherwise.

One day, as I was loitering about the Charleston quays, my eye lighted on this vessel. There was something about the Chancellor that pleased me, and a kind of involuntary impulse took me on board, where I found the internal ar- rangements perfectly comfortable. Yielding to the idea that a voyage in a sailing vessel had certain charms beyond the transit in a steamer, and reckoning that with wind and wave in my favor there would be little material difference in time; considering, moreover, that in these low latitudes the weather in early autumn is fine and unbroken, I came to my decision, and proceeded forthwith to secure my pas- sage by this route to Europe.

Have I done right or wrong? Whether I shall have rea- son to regret my determination is a problem to be solved in the future. However, I will begin to record the incidents of our daily experience, dubious as I feel whether the lines of my chronicle will ever find a reader.

CHAPTER II CREW AND PASSENGERS

SEPTEMBER 28. — John Silas Huntly, the captain of the Chancellor, has the reputation of being a most experienced navigator of the Atlantic. He is a Scotchman by birth, a native of Dundee, and is about fifty years of age. He is of the middle height and slight build, and has a small head, which he has a habit of holding a little over his left shoulder. I do not pretend to be much of a physiognomist, but I am inclined to believe that my few hours' acquaintance with our captain has given me considerable insight into his charac- ter. That he is a good seaman and thoroughly understands his duties I could not for a moment venture to deny; but that he is a man of resolute temperament, or that he pos- sesses the amount of courage that would render him, phy- sically or morally, capable of coping with any great emergency, I confess I cannot believe. I observed a certain heaviness and dejection about his whole carriage. His wavering glances, the listless motion of his hands, and his slow, unsteady gait, all seem to me to indicate a weak and sluggish disposition. He does not appear as though he could be energetic enough ever to be stubborn; he never frowns, sets his teeth, or clenches his fists. There is some- thing enigmatical about him; however, I shall study him closely, and do what I can to understand the man who, as commander of a vessel, should be to those around him "second only to God."

Unless I am greatly mistaken there is another man on board who, if circumstances should require it, would take the more prominent position — I mean the mate. I have hitherto, however, had so little opportunity of observing his character, that I must defer saying more about him at present.

Besides the captain and this mate, whose name is Robert Curtis, our crew consists of Walter, the lieutenant, the boat- swain, and fourteen sailors, all English or Scotch, making eighteen altogether, a number quite sufficient for working a vessel of 900 tons burden. Up to this time my sole ex- perience of their capabilities is, that under the command of the mate, they brought us skillfully enough through the narrow channels of Charleston; and I have no reason to doubt that they are well up to their work.

My list of the ship’s officials is incomplete unless I men- tion Hobart the steward and Jynxstrop the negro cook.

In addition to these, the Chancellor carries eight pas- sengers, including myself. Hitherto, the bustle of em- barkation, the arrangement of cabins, and all the variety of preparations inseparable from starting on a voyage for at least twenty or five-and-twenty days have precluded the formation of any acquaintanceships; but the monotony of the voyage, the close proximity into which we must be thrown, and the natural curiosity to know something of each other’s affairs, will doubtless lead us in due time to an ex- change of ideas. Two days have elapsed and I have not even seen all the passengers. Probably sea-sickness has prevented some of them from making an appearance at the common table. One thing, however, I do know; namely, that there are two ladies occupying the stern cabin, the win- dows of which are in the aft-board of the vessel.

I have seen the ship’s list, and subjoin a list of the pas- sengers. They are as follows:

Mr. and Mrs. Kear, Americans, of Buffalo.

Miss Herbey, a young English lady, companion to Mrs.

Kear.

M. Letourneur and his son Andre, Frenchmen, of Havre.

William Falsten, a Manchester engineer.

John Ruby, a Cardiff merchant; and myself, J. R. Kazallon, of London.

CHAPTER III BILL OF LADING

SEPTEMBER 29. — Captain Huntly’s bill of lading, that is to say, the document that describes the Chancellor’s cargo and the conditions of transport, is couched in the following terms:

Bronsfield and Co. Agents, Charleston:

I, John Silas Huntly, of Dundee, Scotland, commander of the ship Chancellor, of about 900 tons burden, now at Charleston, do purpose, by the blessing of God, at the earli- est convenient season, and by the direct route, to sail for the port of Liverpool, where I shall obtain my discharge. I do hereby acknowledge that I have received from you, Messrs. Bronsfield and Co. Commission Agents, Charles- ton, and have placed the same under the gun-deck of the aforesaid ship, seventeen hundred bales of cotton, of the estimated value of 26,000 L. all in good condition, marked and numbered as in the margin; which goods I do undertake to transport to Liverpool, and there to deliver, free from injury (save only such injury as shall have been caused by the chances of the sea), to Messrs. Laird Brothers, or to their order, or to their representatives, who shall on due delivery of the said freight pay me the sum of 2,000 L. inclu- sive, according to the charter-party, and damages in addi- tion, according to the usages and customs of the sea.

And for the fulfillment of the above covenant, I have pledged and do pledge my person, my property, and my interest in the vessel aforesaid, with all its appurtenances. In witness whereof, I have signed three agreements all of the same purport, on the condition that when the terms of one are accomplished, the other two shall be absolutely null and void.

Given at Charleston, September 13th, 1869.

J. S. HUNTLY.

From the foregoing document it will be understood that the Chancellor is conveying 1,700 bales of cotton to Liver- pool; that the shippers are Bronsfield, of Charleston, and the consignees are Laird Brothers of Liverpool. The ship was constructed with the especial design of carrying cotton, and the entire hold, with the exception of a very limited space reserved for passenger’s luggage, is closely packed with the bales. The lading was performed with the utmost care, each bale being pressed into its proper place by the aid of screw-jacks, so that the whole freight forms one solid and compact mass; not an inch of space is wasted, and the vessel is thus made capable of carrying her full complement of cargo.

CHAPTER IV SOMETHING ABOUT MY FELLOW PASSENGERS

SEPTEMBER 30 to October 6. — The Chancellor is a rapid sailer, and more than a match for many a vessel of the same dimensions. She scuds along merrily in the freshen- ing breeze, leaving in her wake, far as the eye can reach, a long white line of foam as well defined as a delicate strip of lace stretched upon an azure ground.

The Atlantic is not visited by many gales, and I have every reason to believe that the rolling and pitching of the vessel no longer incommode any of the passengers, who are all more or less accustomed to the sea. A vacant seat at our table is now very rare; we are beginning to know some- thing about each other, and our daily life, in consequence, is becoming somewhat less monotonous.

M. Letourneur, our French fellow-passenger, often has a chat with me. He is a fine tall man, about fifty years of age, with white hair and a grizzly beard. To say the truth, he looks older than he really is: his drooping head, his dejected manner, and his eye, ever and again suffused with tears, indicate that he is haunted by some deep and abiding sorrow. He never laughs; he rarely even smiles, and then only on his son; his countenance ordinarily bearing a look of bitterness tempered by affection, while his general ex- pression is one of caressing tenderness. It excites an invol- untary commiseration to learn that M. Letourneur is con- suming himself by exaggerated reproaches on account of the infirmity of an afflicted son.

Andre Letourneur is about twenty years of age, with a gentle, interesting countenance, but, to the irrepressible grief of his father, is a hopeless cripple. His left leg is miserably deformed, and he is quite unable to walk without the assistance of a stick. It is obvious that the father’s life is bound up with that of his son; his devotion is unceas- ing; every thought, every glance is for Andre; he seems to anticipate his most trifling wish, watches his slightest move- ment, and his arm is ever ready to support or otherwise assist the child whose sufferings he more than shares.

M. Letourneur seems to have taken a peculiar fancy to myself, and constantly talks about Andre. This morning, in the course of conversation, I said:

“You have a good son, M. Letourneur. I have just been talking to him. He is a most intelligent young man.”

“Yes, Mr. Kazallon,” replied M. Letourneur, brighten- ing up into a smile, “his afflicted frame contains a noble mind. He is like his mother, who died at his birth.”

“He is full of reverence and love for you, sir,” I re- marked.

“Dear boy!” muttered the father half to himself. “Ah, Mr. Kazallon,” he continued, “you do not know what it is to a father to have a son a cripple, beyond hope of cure.”

“M. Letourneur,” I answered, “you take more than your share of the affliction which has fallen upon you and your son. That M. Andre is entitled to the very greatest com- miseration no one can deny; but you should remember, that after all a physical infirmity is not so hard to bear as mental grief. Now, I have watched your son pretty closely, and unless I am much mistaken there is nothing that troubles him so much as the sight of your own sorrow.”

“But I never let him see it,” he broke in hastily. “My sole thought is how to divert him. I have discovered that, in spite of his physical weakness, he delights in traveling; so for the last few years we have been constantly on the move. We first went all over Europe, and are now re- turning from visiting the principal places in the United States. I never allowed my son to go to college, but in- structed him entirely myself, and these travels, I hope, will serve to complete his education. He is very intelligent, and has a lively imagination, and I am sometimes tempted to hope that in contemplating the wonders of nature he forgets his own infirmity.”

“Yes, sir, of course he does,” I assented.

“But,” continued M. Letourneur, taking my hand, “al- though, perhaps, HE may forget, I can never forget. Ah, sir, do you suppose that Andre can ever forgive his parents for bringing him into the world a cripple?”

The remorse of the unhappy father was very distressing, and I was about to say a few kind words of sympathy when Andre himself made his appearance. M. Letourneur has- tened toward him and assisted him up the few steep steps that led to the poop.

As soon as Andre was comfortably seated on one of the benches, and his father had taken his place by his side, I joined them, and we fell into conversation upon ordinary topics, discussing the various points of the Chancellor, the probable length of the passage, and the different details of our life on board. I find that M. Letourneur’s estimate of Captain Huntly’s character very much coincides with my own, and that, like me, he is impressed with the man’s un- decided manner and sluggish appearance. Like me, too, he has formed a very favorable opinion of Robert Curtis, the mate, a man of about thirty years of age, of great muscular power, with a frame and a will that seem ever ready for action.

While we were still talking of him, Curtis himself came on deck, and as I watched his movements I could not help being struck with his physical development; his erect and easy carriage, his fearless glance and slightly contracted brow all betoken a man of energy, thoroughly endowed with the calmness and courage that are indispensable to the true sailor. He seems a kind-hearted fellow, too, and is al- ways ready to assist and amuse young Letourneur, who evi- dently enjoys his company. After he had scanned the weather and examined the trim of the sails, he joined our party and proceeded to give us some information about those of our fellow-passengers with whom at present we have made but slight acquaintance.

Mr. Kear, the American, who is accompanied by his wife, has made a large fortune in the petroleum springs in the United States. He is a man of about fifty, a most uninter- esting companion, being overwhelmed with a sense of his own wealth and importance, and consequently supremely indifferent to all around him. His hands are always in his pockets, and the chink of money seems to follow him wherever he goes. Vain and conceited, a fool as well as an egotist, he struts about like a peacock showing its plumage, and to borrow the words of the physiognomist Gratiolet, “il se flaire, il se savoure, il se goute.” Why he should have taken his passage on board a mere merchant vessel instead of enjoying the luxuries of a transatlantic steamer, I am altogether at a loss to explain.

The wife is an insignificant, insipid woman, of about forty years of age. She never reads, never talks, and I believe I am not wrong in saying, never thinks. She seems to look without seeing, and listen without hearing, and her sole occupation consists in giving her orders to her com- panion, Miss Herbey, a young English girl of about twenty.

Miss Herbey is extremely pretty. Her complexion is fair and her eyes deep blue, while her pleasing countenance is altogether free from that insignificance of feature which is not unfrequently alleged to be characteristic of English beauty. Her mouth would be charming if she ever smiled, but, exposed as she is to the ridiculous whims and fancies of a capricious mistress, her lips rarely relax from their ordinary grave expression. Yet, humiliating as her posi- tion must be, she never utters a word of open complaint, but quietly and gracefully performs her duties, accepting without a murmur the paltry salary which the bumptious petroleum-merchant condescends to allow her.

The Manchester engineer, William Falsten, looks like a thorough Englishman. He has the management of some extensive hydraulic works in South Carolina, and is now on his way to Europe to obtain some improved apparatus, and more especially to visit the mines worked by centrifugal force, belonging to the firm of Messrs. Cail. He is forty- five years of age, with all his interests so entirely absorbed by his machinery that he seems to have neither a thought nor a care beyond his mechanical calculations. Once let him engage you in conversation, and there is no chance of escape; you have no help for it but to listen as patiently as you can until he has completed the explanation of his designs.

The last of our fellow-passengers, Mr. Ruby, is the type of a vulgar tradesman. Without any originality or magnanimity in his composition, he has spent twenty years of his life in mere buying and selling, and as he has gener- ally contrived to do business at a profit, he has realized a considerable fortune. What he is going to do with the money, he does not seem able to say: his ideas do not go beyond retail trade, his mind having been so long closed to all other impressions that it appears incapable of thought or reflection on any subject besides. Pascal says, “L’homme est visiblement fait pour penser. C’est toute sa dignite et tout son merite;” but to Mr. Ruby the phrase seems altogether inapplicable.

CHAPTER V AN UNUSUAL ROUTE

OCTOBER 7. — This is the tenth day since we left Charles- ton, and I should think our progress has been very rapid. Robert Curtis, the mate, with whom I continue to have many a friendly chat, informed me that we could not be far off the Bermudas; the ship’s bearings, he said, were lat. 32 deg. 20’ N. and long. 64 deg. 50’ W. so that he had every reason to believe that we should sight St. George’s Island before night.

“The Bermudas!” I exclaimed. “But how is it we are off the Bermudas? I should have thought that a vessel sail- ing from Charleston to Liverpool, would have kept north- ward, and have followed the track of the Gulf Stream.”

“Yes, indeed, sir,” replied Curtis, “that is the usual course; but you see that this time the captain hasn’t chosen to take it.”

“But why not?” I persisted.

“That’s not for me to say, sir; he ordered us eastward, and eastward we go.”

“Haven’t you called his attention to it?” I inquired.

Curtis acknowledged that he had already pointed out what an unusual route they were taking, but that the cap- tain had said that he was quite aware what he was about. The mate made no further remark; but the knit of his brow, as he passed his hand mechanically across his forehead, made me fancy that he was inclined to speak out more strongly.

“All very well, Curtis,” I said, “but I don’t know what to think about trying new routes. Here we are at the 7th of October, and if we are to reach Europe before the bad weather sets in, I should suppose there is not a day to be lost."

"Right, sir, quite right; there is not a day to be lost."

Struck by his manner, I ventured to add, "Do you mind,

Curtis, giving me your honest opinion of Captain Huntly?"

He hesitated a moment, and then replied shortly, "He is my captain, sir."

This evasive answer of course put an end to any further interrogation on my part.

Curtis was not mistaken. At about three o'clock the look-out man sung out that there was land to windward, and descried what seemed as if it might be a line of smoke in the northeast horizon. At six, I went on deck with M. Letourneur and his son, and we could then distinctly make out the low group of the Bermudas, encircled by their formidable chain of breakers.

"There," said Andre Letourneur to me, as we stood gaz- ing at the distant land, "there lies the enchanted archipel- ago, sung by your poet Moore. The exile Waller, too, as long ago as 1643, wrote an enthusiastic panegyric on the islands, and I have been told that at one time English ladies would wear no other bonnets than such as were made of the leaves of the Bermuda palm."

"Yes," I replied, "the Bermudas were all the rage in the seventeenth century, although latterly they have fallen into comparative oblivion."

"But let me tell you, M. Andre," interposed Curtis, who had as usual joined our party, "that although poets may rave, and be as enthusiastic as they like about these islands, sailors will tell a different tale. The hidden reefs that lie in a semicircle about two or three leagues from shore make the attempt to land a very dangerous piece of business. And another thing, I know. Let the natives boast as they will about their splendid climate, they are visited by the most frightful hurricanes. They get the fag-end of the storms that rage over the Antilles; and the fag-end of a storm is like the tail of a whale; it's just the strongest bit of it. I don't think you'll find a sailor listening much to your poets — your Moores, and your Wallers."

"No doubt you are right, Mr. Curtis," said Andre, smil- ing, "but poets are like proverbs; you can always find one to contradict another. Although Waller and Moore have chosen to sing the praises of the Bermudas, it has been sup- posed that Shakspeare was depicting them in the terrible scenes that are found in 'The Tempest.'"

I may mention that there was not another of our fellow- passengers who took the trouble to come on deck and give a glance at this strange cluster of islands. Miss Herbey, it is true, was making an attempt to join us, but she had barely reached the poop, when Mrs. Kear's languid voice was heard recalling her for some trifling service to her side.

CHAPTER VI THE SARGASSO SEA

OCTOBER 8 to October 13. — The wind is blowing hard from the northeast, and the Chancellor, under low-reefed top-sail and fore-sail, and laboring against a heavy sea, has been obliged to be brought ahull. The joists and girders all creak again until one's teeth are set on edge. I am the only passenger not remaining below; but I prefer being on deck notwithstanding the driving rain, fine as dust, which penetrates to the very skin. We have been driven along in this fashion for the best part of two days; the "stiffish breeze" has gradually freshened into "a gale"; the top-gallants have been lowered, and, as I write, the wind is blowing with a velocity of fifty or sixty miles an hour. Al- though the Chancellor has many good points, her drift is considerable, and we have been carried far to the south; we can only guess at our precise position, as the cloudy at- mosphere entirely precludes us from taking the sun's alti- tude.

All along, throughout this period, my fellow-passengers are totally ignorant of the extraordinary course that we are taking. England lies to the northeast, yet we are sailing directly southeast, and Robert Curtis owns that he is quite be- wildered; he cannot comprehend why the captain, ever since this northeasterly gale has been blowing, should persist in allowing the ship to drive to the south, instead of tacking to the northwest until she gets into better quarters.

I was alone with Robert Curtis to-day upon the poop, and could not help saying to him, "Curtis, is your captain mad?"

"Perhaps, sir, I might be allowed to ask what YOU think upon that matter," was his cautious reply.

“Well, to say the truth,” I answered. “I can hardly tell; but I confess there is every now and then a wandering in his eye, and an odd look on his face that I do not like. Have you ever sailed with him before?”

“No; this is our first voyage together. Again last night I spoke to him about the route we were taking, but he only said he knew all about it, and that it was all right.”

“What do Lieutenant Walter and your boatswain think of it all?” I inquired.

“Think; why, they think just the same as I do,” replied the mate; “but if the captain chooses to take the ship to China we should obey his orders.”

“But surely,” I exclaimed, “there must be some limit to your obedience! Suppose the man is actually mad, what then?”

“If he should be mad enough, Mr. Kazallon, to bring the vessel into any real danger, I shall know what to do.”

With this assurance I am forced to be content. Matters, however, have taken a different turn to what I bargained for when I took my passage on board the Chancellor. The weather has become worse and worse. As I have already said, the ship under her large low-reefed top-sail and fore stay-sail has been brought ahull, that is to say, she copes directly with the wind, by presenting her broad bows to the sea; and so we go on still drift, drift, continually to the south.

How southerly our course has been is very apparent; for upon the night of the 11th we fairly entered upon that por- tion of the Atlantic which is known as the Sargasso Sea. An extensive tract of water is this, inclosed by the warm current of the Gulf Stream, and thickly covered with the wrack, called by the Spaniards “sargasso,” the abundance of which so seriously impeded the progress of Columbus’s vessel on his first voyage.

Each morning at daybreak the Atlantic has presented an aspect so remarkable, that at my solicitation, M. Letourneur and his son have ventured upon deck to witness the unusual spectacle. The squally gusts make the metal shrouds vibrate like harp-strings; and unless we were on our guard to keep our clothes wrapped tightly to us, they would have been torn off our backs in shreds. The scene presented to our eyes is one of strangest interest. The sea, carpeted thickly with masses of prolific fucus, is a vast unbroken plain of vegetation, through which the vessel makes her way as a plow. Long strips of seaweed caught up by the wind become entangled in the rigging, and hang between the masts in festoons of verdure; while others, varying from two to three hundred feet in length, twine themselves up to the very mast-head, from whence they float like streaming pennants. For many hours now, the Chancellor has been contending with this formidable accumulation of algae; her masts are circled with hydrophytes; her rigging is wreathed everywhere with creepers, fantastic as the untrammeled ten- drils of a vine, and as she works her arduous course, there are times when I can only compare her to an animated grove of verdure making its mysterious way over some illimitable prairie.

CHAPTER VII VOICES IN THE NIGHT

OCTOBER 14. — At last we are free from the sea of vegeta- tion, the boisterous gale has moderated into a steady breeze, the sun is shining brightly, the weather is warm and genial, and thus, two reefs in her topsails, briskly and merrily sails the Chancellor.

Under conditions so favorable, we have been able to take the ship’s bearings: our latitude, we find, is 21 deg. 33’ N. our longitude, 50 deg. 17’ W.

Incomprehensible altogether is the conduct of Captain Huntly. Here we are, already more than ten degrees south of the point from which we started, and yet still we are per- sistently following a southeasterly course! I cannot bring myself to the conclusion that the man is mad. I have had various conversations with him: he has always spoken rationally and sensibly. He shows no tokens of insanity. Perhaps his case is one of those in which insanity is partial, and where the mania is of a character which extends only to the matters connected with his profession. Yet it is un- accountable.

I can get nothing out of Curtis; he listens coldly when- ever I allude to the subject, and only repeats what he has said before, that nothing short of an overt act of madness on the part of the captain could induce him to supersede the captain’s authority, and that the imminent peril of the ship could alone justify him in taking so decided a measure.

Last evening I went to my cabin about eight o’clock, and after an hour’s reading by the light of my cabin-lamp, I retired to my berth and was soon asleep. Some hours later I was aroused by an unaccustomed noise on deck. There were heavy footsteps hurrying to and fro, and the voices of the men were loud and eager, as if the crew were agitated by some strange disturbance. My first impression was, that some tacking had been ordered which rendered it needful to fathom the yards; but the vessel continuing to lie to star- board convinced me that this was not the origin of the commotion. I was curious to know the truth, and made all haste I could to go on deck; but before I was ready, the noise had ceased. I heard Captain Huntly return to his cabin, and accordingly I retired again to my own berth. Whatever may have been the meaning of the maneuver, I cannot tell; it did not seem to result in any improvement in the ship's pace; still it must be owned there was not much wind to speed us along.

At six o'clock this morning I mounted the poop and made as keen a scrutiny as I could of everything on board. Everything appeared as usual. The Chancellor was run- ning on the larboard tack, and carried low-sails, top-sails, and gallant-sails. Well braced she was; and under a fresh, but not uneasy breeze, was making no less than eleven knots an hour.

Shortly afterward M. Letourneur and Andre came on deck. The young man enjoyed the early morning air, laden with its briny fragrance, and I assisted him to mount the poop. In answer to my inquiry as to whether they had been disturbed by any bustle in the night, Andre replied that he did not wake at all, and had heard nothing.

“I am glad, my boy,” said the father, “that you have slept so soundly. I heard the noise of which Mr. Kazallon speaks. It must have been about three o'clock this morning, and it seemed to me as though they were shouting. I thought I heard them say; ‘Here, quick, look to the hatches!’ but as nobody was called up, I presumed that nothing serious was the matter.”

As he spoke I cast my eye at the panel-slides, which fore and aft of the main-mast open into the hold. They seemed to be all close as usual, but I now observed for the first time that they were covered with heavy tarpauling. Wondering in my own mind what could be the reason for these ex- tra precautions I did not say anything to M. Letourneur, but determined to wait until the mate should come on watch, when he would doubtless give me, I thought, an explanation of the mystery.

The sun rose gloriously, with every promise of a fine dry day. The waning moon was yet above the western horizon, for as it still wants three days to her last quarter she does not set until 10:57 A. M. On consulting my almanac, I find that there will be a new moon on the 24th, and that on that day, little as it may affect us here in mid- ocean, the phenomenon of the high sygyzian tides will take place on the shores of every continent and island.

At the breakfast hour M. Letourneur and Andre went below for a cup of tea, and I remained on the poop alone. As I expected, Curtis appeared, that he might relieve Lieu- tenant Walter of the watch. I advanced to meet him, but be- fore he even wished me good morning, I saw him cast a quick and searching glance upon the deck, and then, with a slightly contracted brow, proceed to examine the state of the weather and the trim of the sails.

“Where is Captain Huntly?” he said to Walter.

“I have seen nothing of him,” answered the lieutenant; “is there anything fresh up?”

“Nothing whatever,” was the curt reply.

They then conversed for a few moments in an undertone, and I could see that Walter by his gesture gave a negative answer to some question which the mate had asked him. “Send me the boatswain, Walter,” said Curtis aloud as the lieutenant moved away.

The boatswain immediately appeared, and another con- versation was carried on in whispers. The man repeatedly shook his head as he replied to Curtis's inquiries, and then, in obedience to orders, called the men who were on watch, and made them plentifully water the tarpauling that covered the great hatchway.

Curious to fathom the mystery I went up to Curtis and began to talk with him upon ordinary topics, hoping that he would himself introduce the subject that was uppermost in my mind; finding, however, that he did not allude to it, I asked him point blank:

“What was the matter in the night, Curtis?”

He looked at me steadily, but made no reply.

“What was it?” I repeated. “M. Letourneur and my- self were both of us disturbed by a very unusual commotion overhead.”

“Oh, a mere nothing,” he said at length; “the man at the helm had made a false move, and we had to pipe hands to brace the ship a bit; but it was soon all put to rights. It was nothing, nothing at all.”

I said no more; but I can not resist the impression that Robert Curtis has not acted with me in his usual straight- forward manner.

CHAPTER VIII FIRE ON BOARD

OCTOBER 15 to October 18. — The wind is still in the northeast. There is no change in the Chancellor's course, and to an unprejudiced eye all would appear to be going on as usual. But I have an uneasy consciousness that something is not quite right. Why should the hatchways be so hermetically closed as though a mutinous crew was imprisoned between decks? I can not help thinking too that there is something in the sailors so constantly standing in groups and breaking off their talk so suddenly whenever we approach; and several times I have caught the word "hatches" which arrested M. Letourneur's attention on the night of the disturbance.

On the 15th, while I was walking on the forecastle, I overheard one of the sailors, a man named Owen, say to his mates:

"Now I just give you all warning that I am not going to wait until the last minute. Everyone for himself, say I."

"Why, what do you mean to do?" asked Jynxstrop, the cook.

"Pshaw!" said Owen, "do you suppose that longboats were only made for porpoises?"

Something at that moment occurred to interrupt the conversation, and I heard no more. It occurred to me whether there was not some conspiracy among the crew, of which probably Curtis had already detected the symptoms. I am quite aware that some sailors are most rebelliously disposed, and required to be ruled with a rod of iron.

Yesterday and to-day I have observed Curtis remonstrating somewhat vehemently with Captain Huntly, but there is no obvious result arising from their interviews; the cap- tain apparently being bent upon some purpose, of which it is only too manifest that the mate decidedly disapproves.

Captain Huntly is undoubtedly laboring under strong nervous excitement; and M. Letourneur has more than once remarked how silent he has become at meal-times; for al- though Curtis continually endeavors to start some subject of general interest, yet neither Mr. Falsten, Mr. Kear, nor Mr. Ruby are the men to take it up, and consequently the conversation flags hopelessly, and soon drops. The pas- sengers too are now, with good cause, beginning to murmur at the length of the voyage, and Mr. Kear, who considers that the very elements ought to yield to his convenience, lets the captain know by his consequential and haughty manner that he holds him responsible for the delay.

During the course of yesterday the mate gave repeated orders for the deck to be watered again and again, and al- though as a general rule this is a business which is done, once for all, in the early morning, the crew did not utter a word of complaint at the additional work thus imposed upon them. The tarpaulins on the hatches have thus been kept con- tinually wet, so that their close and heavy texture is rendered quite impervious to the air. The Chancellor’s pumps afford a copious supply of water, so that I should not suppose that even the daintiest and most luxurious craft belonging to an aristocratic yacht club was ever subject to a more thorough scouring. I tried to reconcile myself to the belief that it was the high temperature of the tropical regions upon which we are entering, that rendered such extra sousings a neces- sity, and recalled to my recollection how, during the night of the 13th, I had found the atmosphere below deck so stifling, that in spite of the heavy swell I was obliged to open the porthole of my cabin, on the starboard side, to get a breath of air.

This morning at daybreak I went on deck. The sun had scarcely risen, and the air was fresh and cool, in strange con- trast to the heat which below the poop had been quite op- pressive. The sailors as usual were washing the deck. A great sheet of water, supplied continuously by the pumps, was rolling in tiny wavelets, and escaping now to starboard, now to larboard through the scupper-holes. After watch- ing the men for a while as they ran about bare-footed, I could not resist the desire to join them, so taking off my shoes and stockings, I proceeded to dabble in the flowing water.

Great was my amazement to find the deck perfectly hot to my feet! Curtis heard my exclamation of surprise, and be- fore I could put my thoughts into words, said:

“Yes! there is fire on board!”

CHAPTER IX CURTIS EXPLAINS THE SITUATION

OCTOBER 19. — Everything, then, is clear. The uneas- iness of the crew, their frequent conferences, Owen’s mys- terious words, the constant scourings of the deck and the oppressive heat of the cabins which had been noticed even by my fellow-passengers, all are explained.

After his grave communication, Curtis remained silent. I shivered with a thrill of horror; a calamity the most ter- rible that can befall a voyager stared me in the face, and it was some seconds before I could recover sufficient com- posure to inquire when the fire was first discovered.

“Six days ago,” replied the mate.

“Six days ago!” I exclaimed; “why, then, it was that night.”

“Yes,” he said, interrupting me; “it was the night you heard the disturbance upon deck. The men on watch no- ticed a slight smoke issuing from the large hatchway and immediately called Captain Huntly and myself. We found beyond all doubt, that the cargo was on fire, and what was worse, that there was no possibility of getting at the seat of the combustion. What could we do? Why, we took the only precaution that was practicable under the circumstances, and resolved most carefully to exclude every breath of air from penetrating into the hold. For some time I hoped that we had been successful. I thought that the fire was stifled; but during the last three days there is every reason to make us know that it has been gaining strength. Do what we will, the deck gets hotter and hotter, and unless it were kept constantly wet, it would be unbearable to the feet. But I am glad, Mr. Kazallon,” he added; “that you have made the discovery. It is better that you should know it.” I listened in silence. I was now fully aroused to the gravity of the situation and thoroughly comprehended how we were in the very face of a calamity which it seemed that no human power could avert.

“Do you know what has caused the fire?” I presently inquired.

“It probably arose,” he answered, “from the spontaneous combustion of the cotton. The case is rare, but it is far from unknown. Unless the cotton is perfectly dry when it is shipped, its confinement in a damp or ill-ventilated hold will sometimes cause it to ignite; and I have no doubt it is this that has brought about our misfortune.”

“But after all,” I said, “the cause matters very little.

Is there no remedy? Is there nothing to be done?”

“Nothing, Mr. Kazallon,” he said. “As I told you before, we have adopted the only possible measure within our power to check the fire. At one time I thought of knocking a hole in the ship’s timbers just on her water-line, and letting in just as much water as the pumps could afterward get rid of again; but we found the combustion was right in the middle of the cargo and that we should be obliged to flood the entire hold before we could get at the right place. That scheme consequently was no good. During the night, I had the deck bored in various places and water poured down through the holes; but that again seemed of no use. There is only one thing that can be done; we must persevere in excluding most carefully every breath of outer air, so that perhaps the conflagration, deprived of oxygen, may smoulder itself out. That is our only hope.”

“But, you say the fire is increasing?”

“Yes; and that shows that in spite of all our care there is some aperture which we have not been able to discover, by which, somehow or other, air gets into the hold.”

“Have you ever heard of a vessel surviving such cir- cumstances?” I asked.

“Yes, Mr. Kazallon,” said Curtis; “it is not at all an unusual thing for ships laden with cotton to arrive at Liver- pool or Havre with a portion of their cargo consumed; and I have myself known more than one captain run into port with his deck scorching his very feet, and who, to save his vessel and the remainder of his freight has been compelled to un- load with the utmost expedition. But, in such cases, of course the fire has been more or less under control through- out the voyage; with us, it is increasing day by day, and I tell you I am convinced there is an aperture somewhere which has escaped our notice.”

“But would it not be advisable for us to retrace our course, and make for the nearest land?”

“Perhaps it would,” he answered. “Walter and I, and the boatswain, are going to talk the matter over seriously with the captain to-day. But, between ourselves, I have taken the responsibility upon myself; I have already changed the tack to the southwest; we are now straight be- fore the wind, and consequently we are sailing toward the coast.”

“I need hardly ask,” I added; “whether any of the other passengers are at all aware of the imminent danger in which we are placed.”

“None of them,” he said; “not in the least; and I hope you will not enlighten them. We don’t want terrified women and cowardly men to add to our embarrassment; the crew are under orders to keep a strict silence on the subject. Silence is indispensable.”

I promised to keep the matter a profound secret, as I fully entered into Curtis’s views as to the absolute necessity for concealment.

CHAPTER X PICRATE OF POTASH ON BOARD

OCTOBER 20 and 21. — The Chancellor is now crowded with all the canvas she can carry, and at times her topmasts threaten to snap with the pressure. But Curtis is ever on the alert; he never leaves his post beside the man at the helm, and without compromising the safety of the vessel, he contrives, by tacking to the breeze, to urge her on at her utmost speed.

All day long on the 20th the passengers were assembled on the poop. Evidently they found the heat of the cabins painfully oppressive, and most of them lay stretched upon benches and quietly enjoyed the gentle rolling of the vessel. The increasing heat of the deck did not reveal itself to their well-shod feet, and the constant scouring of the boards did not excite any suspicion in their torpid minds. M. Letourneur, it is true, did express his surprise that the crew of an ordinary merchant vessel should be distinguished by such extraordinary cleanliness; but as I replied to him in a very casual tone, he passed no further remark. I could not help regretting that I had given Curtis my pledge of silence, and longed intensely to communicate the melancholy secret to the energetic Frenchman; for at times when I re- flect upon the eight-and-twenty victims who may probably, only too soon, be a prey to the relentless flames, my heart seems ready to burst.

The important consultation between captain, mate, lieuten- ant and boatswain has taken place. Curtis has confided the result to me. He says that Huntly, the captain, is com- pletely demoralized; he has lost all power and energy; and practically leaves the command of the ship to him. It is now certain the fire is beyond control, and that sooner or later it will burst out in full violence. The temperature of the crew's quarters has already become almost unbearable. One solitary hope remains; it is that we may reach the shore before the final catastrophe occurs. The Lesser Antilles are the nearest land; and although they are some five or six hundred miles away, if the wind remains northeast there is yet a chance of reaching them in time.

Carrying royals and studding-sails, the Chancellor during the last four-and-twenty hours has held a steady course. M. Letourneur is the only one of all the passengers who has re- marked the change of tack; Curtis, however, has set all speculation on his part at rest by telling him that he wanted to get ahead of the wind, and that he was tacking to the west to catch a favorable current.

To-day, the 21st, all has gone on as usual; and as far as the observation of the passengers has reached, the ordinary routine has been undisturbed. Curtis indulges the hope even yet that by excluding the air the fire may be stifled be- fore it ignites the general cargo; he has hermetically closed every accessible aperture, and has even taken the precaution of plugging the orifices of the pumps, under the impression that their suction-tubes, running as they do to the bottom of the hold, may possibly be channels for conveying some molecules of air. Altogether, he considers it a good sign that the combustion has not betrayed itself by some external issue of smoke.

The day would have passed without any incident worth recording, if I had not chanced to overhear a fragment of a conversation which demonstrated that our situation, hitherto precarious enough, had now become most appalling.

As I was sitting on the poop, two of my fellow-passengers, Falsten, the engineer, and Ruby, the merchant, whom I had observed to be often in company, were engaged in conversa- tion almost close to me. What they said was evidently not intended for my hearing, but my attention was directed to- ward them by some very emphatic gestures of dissatisfaction on the part of Falsten, and I could not forbear listening to what followed.

“Preposterous! shameful!” exclaimed Falsten; “nothing could be more imprudent.”

“Pooh! pooh!” replied Ruby, “it’s all right; it is not the first time I have done it.”

“But don’t you know that any shock at any time might cause an explosion?”

“Oh, it’s all properly secured,” said Ruby, “tight enough;

I have no fears on that score, Mr. Falsten.”

“But why,” asked Falsten, “did you not inform the cap- tain?”

“Just because if I had informed him, he would not have taken the case on board.”

The wind dropped for a few seconds; and for a brief in- terval I could not catch what passed; but I could see that Falsten continued to remonstrate, while Ruby answered by shrugging his shoulders. At length I heard Falsten say.

“Well, at any rate, the captain must be informed of this, and the package shall be thrown overboard. I don’t want to be blown up.”

I started. To what could the engineer be alluding? Evi- dently he had not the remotest suspicion that the cargo was already on fire. In another moment the words “picrate of potash” brought me to my feet, and with an involuntary impulse I rushed up to Ruby, and seized him by the shoulder.

“Is there picrate of potash on board?” I almost shrieked.

“Yes,” said Falsten, “a case containing thirty pounds.”

“Where is it?” I cried.

“Down in the hold, with the cargo.”

CHAPTER XI THE PASSENGERS DISCOVER THEIR DANGER

WHAT my feelings were I cannot describe; but it was hardly in terror so much as with a kind of resignation that I made my way to Curtis on the forecastle, and made him aware that the alarming character of our situation was now complete, as there was enough explosive matter on board to blow up a mountain. Curtis received the information as coolly as it was delivered, and after I had made him acquainted with all the particulars said, “Not a word of this must be mentioned to anyone else, Mr. Kazallon. Where is Ruby, now?”

“On the poop,” I said.

“Will you then come with me, sir?”

Ruby and Falsten were sitting just as I had left them. Curtis walked straight up to Ruby, and asked him whether what he had been told was true.

“Yes, quite true,” said Ruby, complacently, thinking that the worst that could befall him would be that he might be convicted of a little smuggling.

I observed that Curtis was obliged for a moment or two to clasp his hands tightly together behind his back to prevent himself from seizing the unfortunate passenger by the throat; but suppressing his indignation, he proceeded quietly, though sternly, to interrogate him about the facts of the case. Ruby only confirmed what I had already told him. With characteristic Anglo-Saxon incautiousness he had brought on board, with the rest of his baggage, a case containing no less than thirty pounds of picrate, and had allowed the explosive matter to be stowed in the hold with as little compunction as a Frenchman would feel in smuggling a single bottle of wine. He had not informed the captain of the dangerous nature of the contents of the package, because he was perfectly aware that he would have been refused permission to bring the package on board.

“Anyway,” he said, with a shrug of his shoulders, “you can’t hang me for it; and if the package gives you so much concern, you are quite at liberty to throw it into the sea. My luggage is insured.”

I was beside myself with fury; and not being endowed with Curtis’s reticence and self-control, before he could interfere to stop me, I cried out:

“You fool! don’t you know that there is fire on board?”

In an instant I regretted my words. Most earnestly I wished them unuttered. But it was too late — their effect upon Ruby was electrical. He was paralyzed with terror; his limbs stiffened convulsively; his eye was dilated; he gasped for breath, and was speechless. All of a sudden he threw up his arms, and, as though he momentarily expected an explosion, he darted down from the poop, and paced frantically up and down the deck, gesticulating like a madman, and shouting:

“Fire on board! Fire! Fire!”

On hearing the outcry, all the crew, supposing that the fire had now in reality broken out, rushed on deck; the rest of the passengers soon joined them, and the scene that ensued was one of the utmost confusion. Mrs. Kear fell down senseless on the deck, and her husband, occupied in looking after himself, left her to the tender mercies of Miss Herbey. Curtis endeavored to silence Ruby’s ravings, whilst I, in as few words as I could, made M. Letourneur aware of the extent to which the cargo was on fire. The father’s first thought was for Andre, but the young man preserved an admirable composure, and begged his father not to be alarmed, as the danger was not immediate. Meanwhile the sailors had loosened all the tacklings of the long-boat, and were pre- paring to launch it, when Curtis’s voice was heard peremp- torily bidding them to desist; he assured them that the fire had made no further progress; that Mr. Ruby had been unduly excited and not conscious of what he had said; and he pledged his word that when the right moment should ar- rive he would allow them all to leave the ship; but that mo- ment, he said, had not yet come.

At the sound of a voice which they had learned to honor and respect, the crew paused in their operations, and the long-boat remained suspended in its place. Fortunately, even Ruby himself in the midst of his ravings, had not dropped a word about the picrate that had been deposited in the hold; for although the mate had a power over the sailors that Captain Huntly had never possessed, I feel cer- tain that if the true state of the case had been known, noth- ing on earth would have prevented some of them, in their consternation, from effecting an escape. As it was, only Curtis, Falsten, and myself were cognizant of the terrible secret.

As soon as order was restored, the mate and I joined Falsten on the poop, where he had remained throughout the panic, and where we found him with folded arms, deep in thought, as it might be, solving some hard mechanical prob- lem. He promised, at my request, that he would reveal nothing of the new danger to which we were exposed through Ruby’s imprudence. Curtis himself took the re- sponsibility of informing Captain Huntly of our critical situation.

In order to insure complete secrecy, it was necessary to secure the person of the unhappy Ruby, who, quite beside himself, continued to rave up and down the deck with the incessant cry of “Fire! fire!” Accordingly Curtis gave or- ders to some of his men to seize him and gag him; and before he could make any resistance the miserable man was captured and safely lodged in confinement in his own cabin.

CHAPTER XII CURTIS BECOMES CAPTAIN

OCTOBER 22. — Curtis has told the captain everything; for he persists in ostensibly recognizing him as his superior officer, and refuses to conceal from him our true situation. Captain Huntly received the communication in perfect silence, and merely passing his hand across his forehead as though to banish some distressing thought, re-entered his cabin without a word.

Curtis, Lieutenant Walter, Falsten, and myself have been discussing the chances of our safety, and I am surprised to find with how much composure we can all survey our anxious predicament.

“There is no doubt,” said Curtis, “that we must abandon all hope of arresting the fire; the heat toward the bow has already become well-nigh unbearable, and the time must come when the flames will find a vent through the deck. If the sea is calm enough for us to make use of the boats, well and good; we shall of course get quit of the ship as quietly as we can; if, on the other hand the weather should be adverse, or the wind be boisterous, we must stick to our place, and contend with the flames to the very last; perhaps, after all, we shall fare far better with the fire as a declared enemy than as a hidden one.”

Falsten and I agreed with what he said, and I pointed out to him that he had quite overlooked the fact of there being thirty pounds of explosive matter in the hold.

“No,” he gravely replied, “I have not forgotten it, but it is a circumstance of which I do not trust myself to think. I dare not run the risk of admitting air into the hold by going down to search for the powder, and yet I know not at what moment it may explode. No; it is a matter that I cannot take at all into my reckoning; it must remain in higher hands than mine.”

We bowed our heads in a silence which was solemn. In the present state of the weather, immediate flight was, we knew, impossible.

After considerable pause, Mr. Falsten, as calmly as though he were delivering some philosophic dogma, quietly observed:

“The explosion, if I may use the formula of science, is not necessary, but contingent.”

“But tell me, Mr. Falsten,” I asked, “is it possible for picrate of potash to ignite without concussion?”

“Certainly it is,” replied the engineer. “Under ordinary circumstances, picrate of potash although not MORE inflam- mable than common powder, yet possesses the SAME degree of inflammability.”

We now prepared to go on deck. As we left the saloon, in which we had been sitting, Curtis seized my hand.

“Oh, Mr. Kazallon,” he exclaimed, “if you only knew the bitterness of the agony I feel at seeing this fine vessel doomed to be devoured by flames, and at being so powerless to save her.” Then quickly recovering himself, he continued: “But I am forgetting myself; you, if no other, must know what I am suffering. It is all over now,” he said more cheerfully.

“Is our condition quite desperate?” I asked.

“It is just this,” he answered deliberately, “we are over a mine, and already the match has been applied to the train. How long that train may be, ‘tis not for me to say.”

And with these words he left me.

The other passengers, in common with the crew, are still in entire ignorance of the extremity of peril to which we are exposed, although they are all aware that there is fire in the hold. As soon as the fact was announced, Mr. Kear, after communicating to Curtis his instructions that he thought he should have the fire immediately extinguished, and intimat- ing that he held him responsible for all contingencies that might happen, retired to his cabin, where he has remained ever since, fully occupied in collecting and packing together the more cherished articles of his property and without the semblance of a care or a thought for his unfortunate wife, whose condition, in spite of her ludicrous complaints, was truly pitiable. Miss Herbey, however, is unrelaxing in her attentions, and the unremitted diligence with which she fulfills her offices of duty, commands my highest ad- miration.

OCTOBER 23. — This morning, Captain Huntly sent for Curtis into his cabin, and the mate has since made me ac- quainted with what passed between them.

“Curtis,” began the captain, his haggard eye betraying only too plainly some mental derangement, “I am a sailor, am I not?”

“Certainly, captain,” was the prompt acquiescence of the mate.

“I do not know how it is,” continued the captain, “but I seem bewildered; I can not recollect anything. Are we not bound for Liverpool? Ah! yes! of course. And have we kept a northeasterly direction since we left?”

“No, sir, according to your orders we have been sailing southeast, and here we are in the tropics.”

“And what is the name of the ship?”

“The Chancellor, sir.”

“Yes, yes, the Chancellor, so it is. Well, Curtis, I really can’t take her back to the north. I hate the sea, the very sight of it makes me ill, I would much rather not leave my cabin.”

Curtis went on to tell me how he had tried to persuade him that with a little time and care he would soon recover his indisposition, and feel himself again; but the captain had interrupted him by saying:

“Well, well; we shall see by-and-by; but for the present you must take this for my positive order; you must, from this time, at once take the command of the ship, and act just as if I were not on board. Under present circumstances, I can do nothing. My brain is all in a whirl, you can not tell what I am suffering;” and the unfortunate man pressed both his hands convulsively against his forehead.

“I weighed the matter carefully for a moment,” added Curtis, “and seeing what his condition too truly was, I acquiesced in all that he required and withdrew, promising him that all his orders should be obeyed.”

After hearing these particulars, I could not help remarking how fortunate it was that the captain had resigned of his own accord, for although he might not be actually insane, it was very evident that his brain was in a very morbid condition.

“I succeeded him at a very critical moment,” said Curtis thoughtfully; “but I shall endeavor to do my duty.”

A short time afterward he sent for his boatswain and ordered him to assemble the crew at the foot of the main-mast. As soon as the men were together, he addressed them very calmly, but very firmly.

“My men,” he said, “I have to tell you that Captain Huntly, on account of the dangerous situation in which circumstances have placed us, and for other reasons known to myself, has thought right to resign his command to me. From this time forward, I am captain of this vessel.”

Thus quietly and simply was the change effected, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that the Chancellor is now under the command of a conscientious, energetic man, who will shirk nothing that he believes to be for our common good. M. Letourneur, Andre, Mr. Falsten, and myself immediately offered him our best wishes, in which Lieutenant Walter and the boatswain most cordially joined.

The ship still holds her course southwest, and Curtis crowds on all sail and makes as speedily as possible for the nearest of the Lesser Antilles.

CHAPTER XIII BETWEEN FIRE AND WATER

OCTOBER 24 to 29. — For the last five days the sea has been very heavy, and although the Chancellor sails with wind and wave in her favor, yet her progress is considerably impeded. Here on board this veritable fire-ship I cannot help contemplating with a longing eye this vast ocean that surrounds us. The water supply should be all we need.

“Why not bore the deck?” I said to Curtis. “Why not admit the water by tons into the hold? What could be the harm? The fire would be quenched; and what would be easier than to pump the water out again?”

“I have already told you, Mr. Kazallon,” said Curtis, “that the very moment we admit the air, the flames will rush forth to the very top of the masts. No; we must have courage and patience; we must wait. There is nothing whatever to be done, except to close every aperture.”

The fire continued to progress even more rapidly than we had hitherto suspected. The heat gradually drove the passengers nearly all on deck, and the two stern cabins, lighted, as I said, by their windows in the aft-board were the only quarters below that were inhabitable. Of these Mrs. Kear occupied one, and Curtis reserved the other for Ruby, who, a raving maniac, had to be kept rigidly under restraint. I went down occasionally to see him, but invariably found him in a state of abject terror, uttering horrible shrieks, as though possessed with the idea that he was being scorched by the most excruciating heat.

Once or twice, too, I looked in upon the ex-captain. He was always calm and spoke quite rationally on any subject except his own profession; but in connection with that he prated away the merest nonsense. He suffered greatly, but steadily declined all my offers of attention, and pertina- ciously refused to leave his cabin.

To-day, an acrid, nauseating smoke made its way through the panelings that partition off the quarters of the crew. At once Curtis ordered the partition to be enveloped in wet tar- paulin, but the fumes penetrated even this, and filled the whole neighborhood of the ship’s bows with a reeking vapor that was positively stifling. As we listened, too, we could hear a dull rumbling sound, but we were as mystified as ever to comprehend where the air could have entered that was evidently fanning the flames. Only too certainly, it was now becoming a question not of days nor even of hours before we must be prepared for the final catastrophe. The sea was still running high, and escape by the boats was plainly impossible. Fortunately, as I have said, the main- mast and the mizzen are of iron; otherwise the great heat at their base would long ago have brought them down and our chances of safety would have been very much imperiled; but by crowding on sail the Chancellor in the full northeast wind continued to make her way with undiminished speed.

It is now a fortnight since the fire was first discovered, and the proper working of the ship has gradually become a more and more difficult matter. Even with thick shoes any attempt to walk upon deck up to the forecastle was soon im- practicable, and the poop, simply because its floor is elevated somewhat above the level of the hold, is now the only avail- able standing-place. Water began to lose its effect upon the scorched and shriveling planks; the resin oozed out from the knots in the wood, the seams burst open, and the tar, melted by the heat, followed the rollings of the vessel, and formed fantastic patterns about the deck.

Then to complete our perplexity, the wind shifted sud- denly round to the northwest, whence it blew a perfect hur- ricane. To no purpose did Curtis do everything in his power to bring the ship ahull; every effort was in vain; the Chancellor could not bear her trysail, so there was nothing to be done but to let her go with the wind, and drift further and further from the land for which we are longing so eagerly.

To-day, the 29th, the tempest seemed to reach its height; the waves appeared to us mountains high, and dashed the spray most violently across the deck. A boat could not live a moment in such a sea.

Our situation is terrible. We all wait in silence, some few on the forecastle, the great proportion of us on the poop. As for the picrate, for the time we have quite for- gotten its existence; indeed it might almost seem as though its explosion would come as a relief, for no catastrophe, how- ever terrible, could far exceed the torture of our suspense.

While he had still the remaining chance, Curtis rescued from the store-room such few provisions as the heat of the compartment allowed him to obtain; and a lot of cases of salt meat and biscuits, a cask of brandy, some barrels of fresh water, together with some sails and wraps, a compass and other instruments are now lying packed in a mass all ready for prompt removal to the boats whenever we shall be obliged to leave the ship.

About eight o’clock in the evening, a noise is heard, dis- tinct even above the raging of the hurricane. The panels of the deck are upheaved, and volumes of black smoke issue up- ward as if from a safety-valve. A universal consternation seizes one and all; we must leave the volcano which is about to burst beneath our feet. The crew run to Curtis for or- ders. He hesitates; looks first at the huge and threatening waves; looks then at the boats. The long-boat is there, sus- pended right along the center of the deck;

but it is impossible to approach it now; the yawl, however, hoisted on the starboard side, and the whale-boat suspended aft, are still available. The sailors make frantically for the yawl.

“Stop, stop,” shouts Curtis; “do you mean to cut off our last and only chance of safety? Would you launch a boat in such a sea as this?”

A few of them, with Owen at their head, give no heed to what he says. Rushing to the poop, and seizing a cutlass, Curtis shouts again:

“Touch the tackling of the davit, one of you; only touch it, and I’ll cleave your skull.”

Awed by his determined manner, the men retire, some clambering into the shrouds, while others mount to the very top of the masts.

At eleven o’clock, several loud reports are heard, caused by the bursting asunder of the partitions of the hold. Clouds of smoke issue from the front, followed by a long tongue of lambent flame that seems to encircle the mizzen-mast. The fire now reaches to the cabin of Mrs. Kear, who, shrieking wildly, is brought on deck by Miss Herbey. A moment more, and Silas Huntly makes his appearance, his face all blackened with the grimy smoke; he bows to Curtis, as he passes, and then proceeds in the calmest manner to mount the aft-shrouds, and installs himself at the very top of the mizzen.

The sight of Huntly recalls to my recollection the prisoner still below, and my first impulse is to rush to the staircase and do what I can to set him free. But the maniac has already eluded his confinement, and with singed hair and his clothes already alight, rushes upon deck. Like a salamander he passes across the burning deck with unscathed feet, and glides through the stifling smoke with unchoked breath. Not a sound escapes his lips.

Another loud report; the long-boat is shivered into frag- ments; the middle panel bursts the tarpaulin that covered it, and a stream of fire, free at length from the restraint that had held it, rises half-mast high.

“The picrate! the picrate!” shrieks the madman; “we shall all be blown up! the picrate will blow us all up.”

And in an instant, before we can get near him, he has buried himself, through the open hatchway, down into the fiery furnace below.

CHAPTER XIV BREAKERS TO STARBOARD!

OCTOBER 20. — Night. — The scene, as night came on, was terrible indeed. Notwithstanding the desperateness of our situation, however, there was not one of us so paralyzed by fear, but that we fully realized the horror of it all.

Poor Ruby, indeed, is lost and gone, but his last words were productive of serious consequences. The sailors caught his cry of “Picrate, picrate!” and being thus for the first time made aware of the true nature of their peril, they resolved at every hazard to accomplish their escape. Beside themselves with terror, they either did not, or would not, see that no boat could brave the tremendous waves that were raging around, and accordingly they made a frantic rush to- ward the yawl. Curtis again made a vigorous endeavor to prevent them, but this time all in vain; Owen urged them on, and already the tackling was loosened, so that the boat was swung over to the ship’s side. For a moment it hung sus- pended in mid-air, and then, with a final effort from the sailors, it was quickly lowered into the sea. But scarcely had it touched the water, when it was caught by an enor- mous wave which, recoiling with resistless violence, dashed it to atoms against the Chancellor’s side.

The men stood aghast; they were dumbfounded. Long- boat and yawl both gone, there was nothing now remaining to us but a small whale-boat. Not a word was spoken; not a sound was heard but the hoarse whistling of the wind, and the mournful roaring of the flames. From the center of the ship, which was hollowed out like a furnace, there issued a column of sooty vapor that ascended to the sky. All the passengers, and several of the crew, took refuge in the aft-quarters of the poop. Mrs. Kear was lying sense- less on one of the hen-coops, with Miss Herbey sitting pas- sively at her side;

M. Letourneur held his son tightly clasped to his bosom. I saw Falsten calmly consult his watch, and note down the time in his memorandum-book, but I was far from sharing his composure, for I was overcome by a nervous agitation that I could not suppress.

As far as we knew, Lieutenant Walter, the boatswain, and such of the crew as were not with us, were safe in the bow; but it was impossible to tell how they were faring, be- cause the sheet of fire intervened like a curtain, and cut off all communication between stem and stern.

I broke the dismal silence, saying, “All over now Curtis.”

“No, sir, not yet,” he replied, “now that the panel is open we will set to work, and pour water with all our might down into the furnace, and may be, we shall put it out, even yet.”

“But how can you work your pumps while the deck is burning? and how can you get at your men beyond that sheet of flame?”

He made no answer to my impetuous questions, and find- ing he had nothing more to say, I repeated that it was all over now.

After a pause, he said, “As long as a plank of the ship remains to stand on, Mr. Kazallon, I shall not give up my hope.”

But the conflagration raged with redoubled fury, the sea around us was lighted with a crimson glow, and the clouds above shone with a lurid glare. Long jets of fire darted across the hatchways, and we were forced to take refuge on the taffrail at the extreme end of the poop. Mrs. Kear was laid in the whale-boat that hung from the stern. Miss Herbey persisting to the last in retaining her post by her side.

No pen could adequately portray the horrors of this fear- ful night. The Chancellor under bare poles, was driven, like a gigantic fire-ship with frightful velocity across the raging ocean; her very speed as it were, making common cause with the hurricane to fan the fire that was consuming her. Soon there could be no alternative between throwing ourselves into the sea, or perishing in the flames.

But where, all this time, was the picrate? Perhaps, after all, Ruby had deceived us and there was no volcano, such as we dreaded, below our feet.

At half-past eleven, when the tempest seems at its very height, there is heard a peculiar roar distinguishable even above the crash of the elements. The sailors in an instant recognize its import.

“Breakers to starboard!” is the cry.

Curtis leaps on to the netting, casts a rapid glance at the snow-white billows, and turning to the helmsman shouts with all his might, “Starboard the helm!”

But it is too late. There is a sudden shock; the ship is caught up by an enormous wave; she rises upon her beam ends; several times she strikes the ground; the mizzen-mast snaps short off level with the deck, falls into the sea, and the Chancellor is motionless.

CHAPTER XV SHIPWRECKED

THE night of the 29th continued. — It was not yet mid- night; the darkness was most profound, and we could see nothing. But was it probable that we had stranded on the coast of America?

Very shortly after the ship had thus come to a stand-still a clanking of chains was heard proceeding from her bows.

“That is well,” said Curtis; “Walter and the boatswain have cast both the anchors. Let us hope they will hold.”

Then, clinging to the netting, he clambered along the starboard side, on which the ship had heeled, as far as the flames would allow him. He clung to the holdfasts of the shrouds, and in spite of the heavy seas that dashed against the vessel he maintained his position for a considerable time, evidently listening to some sound that had caught his ear in the midst of the tempest. In about a quarter of an hour he returned to the poop.

“Heaven be praised!” he said, “the water is coming in, and perhaps may get the better of the fire.”

“True,” said I, “but what then?”

“That,” he replied, “is a question for bye-and-bye. We can think now only of the present.”

Already I fancied that the violence of the flames was somewhat abated, and that the two opposing elements were in fierce contention. Some plank in the ship’s side was evidently stove in, admitting free passage for the waves. But how, when the water had mastered the fire, should we be able to master the water? Our natural course would be to use the pumps, but these, in the very midst of the con- flagration, were quite unavailable.

For three long hours, in anxious suspense, we watched, and waited. Where we were we could not tell. One thing alone was certain; the tide was ebbing beneath us, and the waves were relaxing in their violence. Once let the fire be extinguished, and then, perhaps, there would be room to hope that the next high tide would set us afloat.

Toward half-past four in the morning the curtain of fire and smoke, which had shut off communication between the two extremities of the ship, became less dense, and we could faintly distinguish that party of the crew who had taken refuge in the forecastle; and before long, although it was impracticable to step upon the deck, the lieutenant and the boatswain contrived to clamber over the gunwale, along the rails, and joined Curtis on the poop.

Here they held a consultation, to which I was admitted. They were all of opinion that nothing could be done until daylight should give us something of an idea of our actual position. If we then found that we were near the shore, we would, weather permitting, endeavor to land, either in the boat or upon a raft. If, on the other hand, no land were in sight, and the Chancellor were ascertained to be stranded on some isolated reef, all we could do would be to get her afloat, and put her into condition for reaching the nearest coast. Curtis told us that it was long since he had been able to take any observation of latitude, but there was no doubt the northwest wind had driven us far to the south; and he thought, as he was ignorant of the existence of any reef in this part of the Atlantic, that it was just possible that we had been driven on to the coast of some portion of South America.

I reminded him that we were in momentary expectation of an explosion, and suggested that it would be advisable to abandon the ship and take refuge on the reef. But he would not hear of such a proceeding, said that the reef would probably be covered at high tide, and persisted in the original resolution, that no decided action could be taken before the daylight appeared.

I immediately reported this decision of the captain to my fellow-passengers. None of them seemed to realize the new danger to which the Chancellor may be exposed by be- ing cast upon an unknown reef, hundreds of miles it may be from land. All are for the time possessed with one idea, one hope; and that is, that the fire may now be quenched and the explosion averted.

And certainly their hopes seem in a fair way of being ful- filled. Already the raging flames that poured forth from the hatches have given place to dense black smoke, and al- though occasionally some fiery streaks dart across the dusky fumes, yet they are instantly extinguished. The waves are doing what pumps and buckets could never have effected; by their inundation they are steadily stifling the fire which was as steadily spreading to the whole bulk of the 1,700 bales of cotton.

CHAPTER XVI SILAS HUNTLY RESCUED FROM THE WAVES

OCTOBER 30. — At the first gleam of daylight we eagerly scanned the southern and western horizons, but the morn- ing mists limited our view. Land was nowhere to be seen. The tide was now almost at its lowest ebb, and the color of the few peaks of rock that jutted up around us showed that the reef on which we had stranded was of basaltic formation. There were now only about six feet of water around the Chancellor, though with a full freight she draws about fifteen. It was remarkable how far she had been carried on to the shelf of rock, but the number of times that she had touched the bottom before she finally ran aground left us no doubt that she had been lifted up and borne along on the top of an enormous wave. She now lies with her stern considerably higher than her bows, a position which renders walking upon the deck anything but an easy matter, moreover as the tide receded she heeled over so much to lar- board that at one time Curtis feared she would altogether capsize; that fear, however, since the tide has reached its lowest mark, has happily proved groundless.

At six o’clock some violent blows were felt against the ship’s side, and at the same time a voice was distinguished, shouting loudly, “Curtis! Curtis!” Following the direc- tion of the cries we saw that the broken mizzen-mast was being washed against the vessel, and in the dusky morning twilight we could make out the figure of a man clinging to the rigging. Curtis, at the peril of his life, hastened to bring the man on board. It proved to be none other than Silas Huntly, who, after being carried overboard with the mast, had thus, almost by a miracle, escaped a watery grave. Without a word of thanks to his deliverer, the ex-captain, passive, like an automaton, passed on and took his seat in the most secluded corner of the poop. The broken mizzen may, perhaps, be of service to us at some future time, and with that idea it has been rescued from the waves and lashed securely to the stern.

By this time it was light enough to see for a distance of three miles round; but as yet nothing could be discerned to make us think that we were near a coast. The line of breakers ran for about a mile from southwest to northeast, and two hundred fathoms to the north of the ship an ir- regular mass of rocks formed a small islet. This islet rose about fifty feet above the sea, and was consequently above the level of the highest tides; while a sort of causeway, available at low water, would enable us to reach the island, if necessity required. But there the reef ended; beyond it the sea again resumed its somber hue, betokening deep water. In all probability, then, this was a solitary shoal, unattached to a shore, and the gloom of a bitter disappoint- ment began to weigh upon our spirits.

In another hour the mists had totally disappeared, and it was broad daylight. I and M. Letourneur stood watching Curtis as he continued eagerly to scan the western horizon. Astonishment was written on his countenance; to him it appeared perfectly incredible that, after our course for so long had been due south from the Bermudas, no land should be in sight. But not a speck, however minute, broke the clearly-defined line that joined sea and sky. After a time Curtis made his way along the netting to the shrouds, and swung himself quickly up to the top of the mainmast. For several minutes he remained there examining the open space around, then seizing one of the backstays he glided down and rejoined us on the poop.

“No land in sight,” he said, in answer to our eager looks.

At this point Mr. Kear interposed, and in a gruff, ill- tempered tone, asked Curtis where we were. Curtis replied that he did not know.

“You don’t know, sir? Then all I can say is that you ought to know!” exclaimed the petroleum merchant.

“That may be, sir; but at present I am as ignorant of our whereabouts as you are yourself,” said Curtis.

“Well,” said Mr. Kear, “just please to know that I don’t want to stay forever on your everlasting ship, so I beg you will make haste and start off again.”

Curtis condescended to make no other reply than a shrug of the shoulders, and turning away he informed M. Letourneur and myself that if the sun came out he intended to take its altitude and find out to what part of the ocean we had been driven.

His next care was to distribute preserved meat and biscuit among the passengers and crew already half fainting with hunger and fatigue, and then he set to work to devise measures for setting the ship afloat.

The conflagration was greatly abated; no flames now appeared, and although some black smoke still issued from the interior, yet its volume was far less than before. The first step was to discover how much water had entered the hold. The deck was still too hot to walk upon; but after two hours’ irrigation the boards became sufficiently cool for the boatswain to proceed to take some soundings, and he shortly afterward announced that there were five feet of water below. This the captain determined should not be pumped out at present, as he wanted it thoroughly to do its duty before he got rid of it.

The next subject for consideration was whether it would be advisable to abandon the vessel, and to take refuge on the reef. Curtis thought not; and the lieutenant and the boatswain agreed with him. The chances of an explosion were greatly diminished, as it had been ascertained that the water had reached that part of the hold in which Ruby’s luggage had been deposited; while, on the other hand, in the event of rough weather, our position even upon the most elevated points of rock might be very critical. It was accordingly resolved that both passengers and crew were safest on board.

Acting upon this decision we proceeded to make a kind of encampment on the poop, and a few mattresses that were rescued uninjured have been given up for the use of the two ladies. Such of the crew as had saved their hammocks have been told to place them under the forecastle where they would have to stow themselves as best they could, their ordinary quarters being absolutely uninhabitable.

Fortunately, although the store-room has been considerably exposed to the heat, its contents are not very seriously damaged, and all the barrels of water and the greater part of the provisions are quite intact. The stock of spare sails, which had been packed away in front, is also free from injury. The wind has dropped considerably since the early morning, and the swell in the sea is far less heavy. On the whole our spirits are reviving and we begin to think we may yet find a way out of our troubles.

M. Letourneur, his son, and I, have just had a long conversation about the ship’s officers. We consider their conduct, under the late trying circumstances, to have been most exemplary, and their courage, energy, and endurance to have been beyond all praise. Lieutenant Walter, the boatswain, and Dowlas the carpenter have all alike distinguished themselves, and made us feel that they are men to be relied on. As for Curtis, words can scarcely be found to express our admiration of his character; he is the same as he has ever been, the very life of his crew, cheering them on by word or gesture; finding an expedient for every difficulty, and always foremost in every action.

The tide turned at seven this morning, and by eleven all the rocks were submerged, none of them being visible ex- cept the cluster of those which formed the rim of a small and almost circular basin from 230 to 300 feet in diameter, in the north angle of which the ship is lying. As the tide rose the white breakers disappeared, and the sea, fortunately for the Chancellor, was pretty calm; otherwise the dashing of the waves against her sides, as she lies motionless, might have been attended by serious consequences.

As might be supposed, the height of the water in the hold increased with the tide from five feet to nine; but this was rather a matter of congratulation, inasmuch as it sufficed to inundate another layer of cotton.

At half-past eleven the sun, which had been behind the clouds since ten o’clock, broke forth brightly. The captain, who had already in the morning been able to calculate an horary angle, now prepared to take the meridian altitude, and succeeded at midday in making his observation most satisfactorily. After retiring for a short time to calculate the result, he returned to the poop and announced that we are in lat. 18 deg. 5’ N. and long. 45 deg. 53’ W. but that the reef on which we are aground is not marked on the charts. The only explanation that can be given for the omission is that the islet must be of recent formation, and has been caused by some subterranean volcanic disturbance. But whatever may be the solution of the mystery, here we are 800 miles from land; for such, on consulting the map, we find to be the actual distance to the coast of Guiana, which is the near- est shore. Such is the position to which we have been brought, in the first place, by Huntly’s senseless obstinacy, and, secondly, by the furious northwest gale.

Yet, after all, the captain’s communication does not dis- hearten us. As I said before, our spirits are reviving. We have escaped the peril of fire; the fear of explosion is past and gone: and oblivious of the fact that the ship with a hold full of water is only too likely to founder when she puts out to sea, we feel a confidence in the future that for- bids us to despond.

Meanwhile Curtis prepares to do all that common sense demands. He proposes, when the fire is quite extinguished, to throw overboard the whole, or the greater portion of the cargo, including, of course, the picrate; he will next plug up the leak, and then, with a lightened ship, he will take advantage of the first high tide to quit the reef as speedily as possible.

CHAPTER XVII M. LETOURNEUR IS PESSIMISTIC

OCTOBER 30. — Once again I talked to M. Letourneur about our situation, and endeavored to animate him with the hope that we should not be detained for long in our present pre- dicament; but he could not be brought to take a very san- guine view of our prospects.

“But surely,” I protested, “it will not be difficult to throw overboard a few hundred bales of cotton; two or three days at most will suffice for that.”

“Likely enough,” he replied, “when the business is once begun; but you must remember, Mr. Kazallon, that the very heart of the cargo is still smoldering, and that it will still be several days before anyone will be able to venture into the hold. Then the leak, too, that has to be caulked; and, unless it is stopped up very effectually, we shall only be doomed most certainly to perish at sea. Don’t then, be deceiving yourself; it must be three weeks at least before you can ex- pect to put out to sea. I can only hope meanwhile that the weather will continue propitious; it wouldn’t take many storms to knock the Chancellor, shattered as she is, com- pletely into pieces.”

Here, then, was the suggestion of a new danger to which we were to be exposed; the fire might be extinguished, the water might be got rid of by the pumps, but, after all, we must be at the mercy of the wind and waves; and, although the rocky island might afford a temporary refuge from the tempest, what was to become of passengers and crew if the vessel should be reduced to a total wreck? I made no remonstrance, however, to this view of our case, but merely asked M. Letourneur if he had confidence in Robert Curtis?

“Perfect confidence,” he answered; “and I acknowledge it most gratefully, as a providential circumstance, that Cap- tain Huntly had given him the command in time. What- ever man can do I know that Curtis will not leave undone to extricate us from our dilemma.”

Prompted by this conversation with M. Letourneur I took the first opportunity of trying to ascertain from Curtis himself how long he reckoned we should be obliged to re- main upon the reef; but he merely replied, that it must de- pend upon circumstances, and that he hoped the weather would continue favorable. Fortunately the barometer is rising steadily, and there is every sign of a prolonged calm.

Meantime Curtis is taking active measures for totally extinguishing the fire. He is at no great pains to spare the cargo, and as the bales that lie just above the level of the water are still a-light he has resorted to the expedient of thoroughly saturating the upper layers of the cotton, in order that the combustion may be stifled between the mois- ture descending from above and that ascending from below. This scheme has brought the pumps once more into requisi- tion. At present the crew are adequate to the task of work- ing them, but I and some of our fellow-passengers are ready to offer our assistance whenever it shall be necessary.

With no immediate demand upon our labor, we are thrown upon our own resources for passing our time. M. Letourneur, Andre, and myself, have frequent conversa- tions; I also devote an hour or two to my diary. Falsten holds little communication with any of us, but remains ab- sorbed in his calculations, and amuses himself by tracing mechanical diagrams with ground-plan, section, elevation, all complete. It would be a happy inspiration if he could invent some mighty engine that could set us all afloat again. Mr. and Mrs. Kear, too, hold themselves aloof from their fellow-passengers, and we are not sorry to be relieved from the necessity of listening to their incessant grumbling; un- fortunately, however, they carry off Miss Herbey with them, so that we enjoy little or nothing of the young lady's society. As for Silas Huntly, he has become a complete nonen- tity; he exists, it is true, but merely, it would seem, to vegetate.

Hobart, the steward, an obsequious, sly sort of fellow, goes through his routine of duties just as though the vessel were pursuing her ordinary course; and, as usual, is con- tinually falling out with Jynxstrop, the cook, an impudent, ill-favored negro, who interferes with the other sailors in a manner which, I think, ought not to be allowed.

Since it appears likely that we shall have abundance of time on our hands, I have proposed to M. Letourneur and his son that we shall together explore the reef on which we are stranded. It is not very probable that we shall be able to discover much about the origin of this strange accumula- tion of rocks, yet the attempt will at least occupy us for some hours, and will relieve us from the monotony of our confinement on board. Besides, as the reef is not marked in any of the maps, I could not but believe that it would be rendering a service to hydrography if we were to take an accurate plan of the rocks, of which Curtis could afterward verify the true position by a second observation made with a closer precision than the one he has already taken.

M. Letourneur agrees to my proposal, Curtis has promised to let us have the boat and some sounding-lines, and to allow one of the sailors to accompany us; so to-morrow morning, we hope to make our little voyage of investigation.

CHAPTER XVIII WE EXPLORE THE REEF

OCTOBER 31 to November 5. — Our first proceeding on the morning of the 31st was to make the proposed tour of the reef, which is about a quarter of a mile long. With the aid of our sounding-lines we found that the water was deep, right up to the very rocks, and that no shelving shores prevented us coasting along them. There was not a shadow of doubt as to the rock being of purely volcanic origin, up- heaved by some mighty subterranean convulsion. It is formed of blocks of basalt, arranged in perfect order, of which the regular prisms give the whole mass the effect of being one gigantic crystal; and the remarkable transparency of the sea enabled us plainly to observe the curious shafts of the prismatic columns that support the marvelous sub- structure.

“This is indeed a singular island,” said M. Letourneur; “evidently it is of quite recent origin.”

“Yes, father,” said Andre, “and I should think it has been caused by a phenomenon similar to those which pro- duced the Julia Island, off the coast of Sicily, or the group of the Santorini, in the Grecian Archipelago. One could almost fancy that it had been created expressly for the Chancellor to strand upon.”

“It is very certain,” I observed, “that some upheaving has lately taken place. This is by no means an unfrequented part of the Atlantic, so that it is not at all likely that it could have escaped the notice of sailors if it had been always in existence; yet it is not marked even in the most modern charts. We must try and explore it thoroughly and give future navigators the benefit of our observations.”

“But, perhaps, it will disappear as it came,” said Andre. “You are no doubt aware, Mr. Kazallon, that these volcanic islands sometimes have a very transitory existence. Not im- possibly, by the time it gets marked upon the maps it may no longer be here.”

“Never mind, my boy,” answered his father, “it is bet- ter to give warning of a danger that does not exist than overlook one that does. I dare say the sailors will not grumble much, if they don’t find a reef where we have marked one.”

“No, I dare say not, father,” said Andre, “and after all this island is very likely as firm as a continent. However, if it is to disappear, I expect Captain Curtis would be glad to see it take its departure as soon as possible after he has finished his repairs; it would save him a world of trouble in getting his ship afloat.”

“Why, what a fellow you are, Andre!” I said, laugh- ing; “I believe you would like to rule Nature with a magic wand, first of all, you would call up a reef from the depth of the ocean to give the Chancellor time to extinguish her flames, and then you would make it disappear just that the ship might be free again.”

Andre smiled; then, in a more serious tone, he expressed his gratitude for the timely help that had been vouchsafed us in our hour of need.

The more we examined the rocks that formed the base of the little island, the more we became convinced that its formation was quite recent. Not a mollusk, not a tuft of seaweed was found clinging to the sides of the rocks; not a germ had the wind carried to its surface, not a bird had taken refuge amid the crags upon its summits. To a lover of natural history, the spot did not yield a single point of interest; the geologist alone would find subject of study in the basaltic mass.

When we reached the southern point of the island I pro- posed that we should disembark. My companions readily assented, young Letourneur jocosely observing that if the little island was destined to vanish, it was quite right that it should first be visited by human beings. The boat was accordingly brought alongside, and we set foot upon the reef, and began to ascend the gradual slope that leads to its highest elevation.

The walking was not very rough, and as Andre could get along tolerably well without the assistance of an arm, he led the way, his father and I following close behind. A quarter of an hour sufficed to bring us to the loftiest point in the islet, when we seated ourselves on the basaltic prism that crowned its summit.

Andre took a sketch-book from his pocket, and proceeded to make a drawing of the reef. Scarcely had he completed the outline when his father exclaimed:

“Why, Andre, you have drawn a ham!”

“Something uncommonly like it, I confess,” replied Andre. “I think we had better ask Captain Curtis to let us call our island Ham Rock.”

“Good,” said I; “though sailors will need to keep it at a respectful distance, for they will scarcely find that their teeth are strong enough to tackle it.”

M. Letourneur was quite correct; the outline of the reef as it stood clearly defined against the deep green water resembled nothing so much as a fine York ham, of which the little creek, where the Chancellor had been stranded, corresponded to the hollow place above the knuckle. The tide at this time was low, and the ship now lay heeled over very much to the starboard side, the few points of rock that emerged in the extreme south of the reef plainly marking the narrow passage through which she had been forced before she finally ran aground.

As soon as Andre had finished his sketch we descended by a slope as gradual as that by which we had come up, and made our way toward the west. We had not gone very far when a beautiful grotto, perfect as an architectural struc- ture, arrested our attention. M. Letourneur and Andre, who have visited the Hebrides, pronounced it to be a Fingal’s cave in miniature; a Gothic chapel that might form a fit vestibule for the cathedral cave of Staffa. The basaltic rocks had cooled down into the same regular concentric prisms; there was the same dark canopied roof with its interstices filled up with its yellow lutings; the same precision of outline in the prismatic angles, sharp as though chiseled by a sculptor’s hand; the same sonorous vibration of the air across the basaltic rocks, of which the Gaelic poets have feigned that the harps of the Fingal minstrelsy were made. But whereas at Staffa the floor of the cave is always covered with a sheet of water, here the grotto was beyond the reach of all but the highest waves, while the prismatic shafts them- selves formed quite a solid pavement.

After remaining nearly an hour in our newly-discovered grotto we returned to the Chancellor, and communicated the result of our explorations to Curtis, who entered the island upon his chart, by the name Andre Letourneur had pro- posed.

Since its discovery we have not permitted a day to pass without spending some time in our Ham Rock grotto. Curtis has taken an opportunity of visiting it, but he is too preoccupied with other matters to have much interest to spare for the wonders of nature. Falsten, too, came once and examined the character of the rocks, knocking and chipping them about with all the mercilessness of a geologist. Mr. Kear would not trouble himself to leave the ship; and although I asked his wife to join us in one of our excursions she declined, upon the plea that the fatigue, as well as the inconvenience of embarking in the boat, would be more than she could bear.

Miss Herbey, only to thankful to escape even for an hour from her capricious mistress, eagerly accepted M. Letour- neur's invitation to pay a visit to the reef, but to her great disappointment Mrs. Kear at first refused point-blank to allow her to leave the ship. I felt intensely annoyed, and resolved to intercede in Miss Herbey's favor; and as I had already rendered that self-indulgent lady sundry services which she though she might probably be glad again to ac- cept, I gained my point, and Miss Herbey has several times been permitted to accompany us across the rocks, where the young girl's delight at her freedom has been a pleasure to behold.

Sometimes we fish along the shore, and then enjoy a luncheon in the grotto, while the basalt columns vibrate like harps to the breeze. This arid reef, little as it is, compared with the cramped limits of the Chancellor's deck is like some vast domain; soon there will be scarcely a stone with which we are not familiar, scarcely a portion of its surface which we have not trodden, and I am sure that when the hour of departure arrives we shall leave it with regret.

In the course of conversation, Andre Letourneur one day happened to say that he believed the island of Staffa be- longed to the Macdonald family, who let it for the small sum of L.12 a year.

“I suppose then,” said Miss Herbey, “that we should hardly get more than half-a-crown a year for our pet little island.”

“I don’t think you would get a penny for it. Miss Herbey; but are you thinking of taking a lease?” I said laughing.

“Not at present,” she said; then added, with a half-sup- pressed sigh, “and yet it is a place where I have seemed to know what it is to be really happy.”

Andre murmured some expression of assent, and we all felt that there was something touching in the words of the orphaned, friendless girl who had found her long-lost sense of happiness on a lonely rock in the Atlantic.

CHAPTER XIX THE CARGO UNLOADED

NOVEMBER 6 to November 15. — For the first five days after the Chancellor had run aground, there was a dense black smoke continually rising from the hold; but it gradually diminished until the 6th of November, when we might consider that the fire was extinguished. Curtis, nevertheless, deemed it prudent to persevere in working the pumps, which he did until the entire hull of the ship, right up to the deck, had been completely inundated.

The rapidity, however, with which the water, at every retreat of the tide, drained off to the level of the sea, was an indication that the leak must be of considerable magnitude; and such, on investigation, proved to be the case. One of the sailors, named Flaypole, dived one day at low water to examine the extent of the damage, and found that the hole was not much less than four feet square, and was situated thirty feet fore of the helm, and two feet above the rider of the keel; three planks had been stove in by a sharp point of rock and it was only a wonder that the violence with which the heavily-laden vessel had been thrown ashore did not result in the smashing in of many parts beside.

As it would be a couple of days or more before the hold would be in a condition for the bales of cotton to be removed for the carpenter to examine the damage from the interior of the ship, Curtis employed the interval in having the broken mizzen-mast repaired. Dowlas the carpenter, with considerable skill, contrived to mortise it into its former stump. and made the junction thoroughly secure by strong iron-belts and bolts. The shrouds, the stays and backstays, were then carefully refitted, some of the sails were changed, and the whole of the running rigging was renewed. Injury, to some extent, had been done to the poop and to the crew's lockers in the front; but time and labor were all that were wanted to make them good; and with such a will did every- body set to work that it was not long before all the cabins were again available for use.

On the 8th the unlading of the ship commenced. Pulleys and tackling were put over the hatches, and passengers and crew together proceeded to haul up the heavy bales which had been deluged so frequently by water that the cotton was all but spoiled. One by one the sodden bales were placed in the boat to be transported to the reef. After the first layer of cotton had been removed it became necessary to drain off part of the water that filled the hold. For this purpose the leak in the side had somehow or other to be stopped, and this was an operation which was cleverly accomplished by Dowlas and Flaypole, who contrived to dive at low tide and nail a sheet of copper over the entire hole. This, how- ever, of itself would have been utterly inadequate to sustain the pressure that would arise from the action of the pumps; so Curtis ordered that a number of the bales should be piled up inside against the broken planks. The scheme succeeded very well, and as the water got lower and lower in the hold the men were enabled to résumé their task of unlading.

Curtis thinks it quite probable that the leaks may be mended from the interior. By far the best way of repairing the damage would be to careen the ship, and to shift the planking, but the appliances are wanting for such an un- dertaking; moreover, any bad weather which might occur while the ship was on her flank would only too certainly be fatal to her altogether. But the captain has very little doubt that by some device or other he shall manage to patch up the hole in such a way as will insure our reaching land in safety.

After two days’ toil the water was entirely reduced, and without further difficulty the unlading was completed. All of us, including even Andre

Letourneur, have been taking our turn at the pumps, for the work is so extremely fatiguing that the crew require some occasional respite; arms and back soon become strained and weary with the incessant swing of the handles, and I can well understand the dislike which sailors always express to the labor.

One thing there is which is much in our favor; the ship lies on a firm and solid bottom, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that we are not contending with a flood that encroaches faster than it can be resisted. Heaven grant that we may not be called to make like efforts, and to make them hopelessly, for a foundering ship!

CHAPTER XX EXAMINATION OF THE HOLD

NOVEMBER 15 to 20. — The examination of the hold has at last been made. Among the first things that were found was the case of picrate, perfectly intact, having neither been injured by the water, nor of course reached by the flames. Why it was not at once pitched into the sea I cannot say; but it was merely conveyed to the extremity of the island, and there it remains.

While they were below, Curtis and Dowlas made them- selves acquainted with the full extent of the mischief that had been done by the conflagration. They found that the deck and the cross-beams that supported it had been much less injured than they expected, and the thick, heavy planks had only been scorched very superficially. But the action of the fire on the flanks of the ship had been of a much more serious character; a long portion of the inside boarding had been burned away, and the very ribs of the vessel were con- siderably damaged; the oakum caulkings had all started away from the butt-ends and seams; so much so that it was little short of a miracle that the whole ship had not long since gaped completely open.

The captain and the carpenter returned to the deck with anxious faces. Curtis lost no time in assembling pas- sengers and crew, and announcing to them the facts of the case.

“My friends,” he said, “I am here to tell you that the Chancellor has sustained far greater injuries than we sus- pected, and that her hull is very seriously damaged. If we had been stranded anywhere else than on a barren reef, that may at any time be overwhelmed by a tempestuous sea, I should not have hesitated to take the ship to pieces, and con- struct a smaller vessel that might have carried us safely to land; but I dare not run the risk of remaining here. We are now 800 miles from the coast of Paramaribo, the nearest portion of Dutch Guiana, and in ten or twelve days, if the weather should be favorable, I believe we could reach the shore. What I now propose to do is to stop the leak by the best means we can command, and make at once for the nearest port."

As no better plan seemed to suggest itself, Curtis's proposal was unanimously accepted. Dowlas and his assistants im- mediately set to work to repair the charred frame-work of the ribs, and to stop the leak; they took care thoroughly to calk from the outside all the seams that were above low water mark; lower than that they were unable to work, and had to content themselves with such repairs as they could effect in the interior. But after all the pains there is no doubt the Chancellor is not fit for a long voyage, and would be condemned as unseaworthy at any port at which we might put in.

To-day the 20th, Curtis having done all that human power could do to repair his ship, determined to put her to sea.

Ever since the Chancellor had been relieved of her cargo, and of the water in her hold, she had been able to float in the little natural basin into which she had been driven. The basin was enclosed on either hand by rocks that remained uncovered even at high water, but was sufficiently wide to allow the vessel to turn quite round at its broadest part, and by means of hawsers fastened on the reef to be brought with her bows towards the south; while, to prevent her being carried back on to the reef, she has been anchored fore and aft.

To all appearance, then, it seemed as though it would be an easy matter to put the Chancellor to sea; if the wind were favorable the sails would be hoisted; if otherwise, she would have to be towed through the narrow passage. All seemed simple. But unlooked-for difficulties had yet to be surmounted.

The mouth of the passage is guarded by a kind of ridge of basalt, which at high tide we knew was barely covered with sufficient water to float the Chancellor, even when entirely unfreighted. To be sure she had been carried over the obstacle once before, but then, as I have already said, she had been caught up by an enormous wave, and might have been said to be LIFTED over the barrier into her present position. Besides, on that ever memorable night, there had not only been the ordinary spring-tide, but an equinoctial tide, such a one as could not be expected to occur again for many months. Waiting was out of the question; so Curtis determined to run the risk, and to take advantage of the spring-tide, which would occur to-day, to make an attempt to get the ship, lightened as she was, over the bar; after which, he might ballast her sufficiently to sail.

The wind was blowing from the northwest, and consequently right in the direction of the passage. The captain, however, after a consultation, preferred to tow the ship over the ridge, as he considered it was scarcely safe to allow a vessel of doubtful stability at full sail to charge an obstacle that would probably bring her to a dead lock. Before the operation was commenced, Curtis took the precaution of having an anchor ready in the stern, for, in the event of the attempt being unsuccessful, it would be necessary to bring the ship back to her present moorings. Two more anchors were next carried outside the passage, which was not more than two hundred feet in length. The chains were attached to the windlass, the sailors worked at the hand-spikes, and at four o'clock in the afternoon the Chancellor was in motion.

High tide would be at twenty minutes past four, and at ten minutes before that time the ship had been hauled as far as her sea-range would allow; her keel grazed the ridge, and her progress was arrested. When the lowest part of her stern, however, just cleared the obstruction, Curtis deemed that there was no longer any reason why the mechanical ac- tion of the wind should not be brought to bear and con- tribute its assistance. Without delay, all sails were unfurled and trimmed to the wind. The tide was exactly at its height, passengers and crew together were at the windlass, M. Letourneur, Andre, Falsten, and myself being at the star- board bar. Curtis stood upon the poop, giving his chief attention to the sails; the lieutenant was on the forecastle; the boatswain by the helm. The sea seemed propitiously calm and; as it swelled gently to and fro, lifted the ship several times.

“Now, my boys,” said Curtis, in his calm clear voice, “all together! Off!”

Round went the windlass; click, click, clanked the chains as link by link they were forced through the hawse-holes.

The breeze freshened, and the masts gave to the pressure of the sails, but round and round we went, keeping time in regular monotony to the sing-song tune hummed by one of the sailors.

We had gained about twenty feet, and were redoubling our efforts when the ship grounded again.

And now no effort would avail; all was in vain; the tide began to turn: and the Chancellor would not advance an inch. Was there time to go back? She would inevitably go to pieces if left balanced upon the ridge. In an instant the cap- tain has ordered the sails to be furled, and the anchor dropped from the stern.

One moment of terrible anxiety, and all is well.

The Chancellor tacks to stern, and glides back into the basin, which is once more her prison.

“Well, captain,” says the boatswain, “what’s to be done now?”

“I don’t know,” said Curtis, “but we shall get across somehow.”

CHAPTER XXI THE “CHANCELLOR” RELEASED FROM HER PRISON

NOVEMBER 21 TO 24. — There was assuredly no time to be lost before we ought to leave Ham Rock reef. The barom- eter had been falling ever since the morning, the sea was getting rougher, and there was every symptom that the weather, hitherto so favorable, was on the point of breaking; and in the event of a gale the Chancellor must inevitably be dashed to pieces on the rocks.

In the evening, when the tide was quite low, and the rocks uncovered, Curtis, the boatswain, and Dowlas went to exam- ine the ridge which had proved so serious an obstruction. Falsten and I accompanied them. We came to the conclu- sion that the only way of effecting a passage was by cutting away the rocks with pikes over a surface measuring ten feet by six. An extra depth of nine or ten inches would give a sufficient gauge, and the channel might be accurately marked out by buoys; in this way it was conjectured the ship might be got over the ridge and so reach the deep water beyond.

“But this basalt is as hard as granite,” said the boatswain; “besides, we can only get at it at low water, and conse- quently could only work at it for two hours out of the twenty-four.”

“All the more reason why we should begin at once, boat- swain,” said Curtis.

“But if it is to take us a month, captain, perhaps by that time the ship may be knocked to atoms. Couldn’t we man- age to blow up the rock? we have got some powder aboard.”

“Not enough for that,” said the boatswain.

“You have something better than powder,” said Falsten.

“What’s that?” asked the captain.

“Picrate of potash,” was the reply.

And so the explosive substance with which poor Ruby had so grievously imperiled the vessel was now to serve her in good stead, and I now saw what a lucky thing it was that the case had been deposited safely on the reef, instead of be- ing thrown into the sea.

The sailors went off at once for their pikes, and Dowlas and his assistants, under the direction of Falsten, who, as an engineer, understood such matters, proceeded to hollow out a mine wherein to deposit the powder. At first we hoped that everything would be ready for the blasting to take place on the following morning, but when daylight appeared we found that the men, although they had labored with a will, had only been able to work for an hour at low water and that four tides must ebb before the mine had been sunk to the required depth.

Not until eight o’clock on the morning of the 23d was the work complete. The hole was bored obliquely in the rock, and was large enough to contain about ten pounds of explosive matter. Just as the picrate was being introduced into the aperture, Falsten interposed:

“Stop,” he said, “I think it will be best to mix the picrate with common powder, as that will allow us to fire the mine with a match instead of the gun-priming which would be necessary to produce a shock. Besides, it is an understood thing that the addition of gunpowder renders picrate far more effective in blasting such rocks as this, as then the violence of the picrate prepares the way for the powder which, slower in its action, will complete the disseverment of the basalt.”

Falsten is not a great talker, but what he does say is al- ways very much to the point. His good advice was imme- diately followed; the two substances were mixed together, and after a match had been introduced the compound was rammed closely into the hole.

Notwithstanding that the Chancellor was at a distance from the rocks that insured her from any danger of being injured by the explosion, it was thought advisable that the passengers and crew should take refuge in the grotto at the extremity of the reef, and even Mr. Kear, in spite of his many objections, was forced to leave the ship. Falsten, as soon as he had set fire to the match, joined us in our retreat.

The train was to burn for ten minutes, and at the end of that time the explosion took place; the report, on account of the depth of the mine, being muffled, and much less noisy than we had expected. But the operation had been perfectly successful. Before we reached the ridge we could see that the basalt had been literally reduced to powder, and that a little channel, already being filled by the rising tide, had been cut right through the obstacle. A loud hurrah rang through the air; our prison-doors were opened, and we were prison- ers no more.

At high tide the Chancellor weighed anchor and floated out into the sea, but she was not in a condition to sail until she had been ballasted; and for the next twenty-four hours the crew were busily employed in taking up blocks of stone, and such of the bales of cotton as had sustained the least amount of injury.

In the course of the day, M. Letourneur, Andre, Miss Herbey, and I took a farewell walk round the reef, and Andre, with artistic skill, carved on the wall of the grotto the word Chancellor — the designation of Ham Rock, which we had given to the reef — and the date of our running aground. Then we bade adieu to the scene of our three weeks’ sojourn, where we had passed days that to some at least of our party will be reckoned as far from being the least happy of their lives.

At high tide this morning, the 24th, with low, top, and gallant sails all set, the Chancellor started on her onward way, and two hours later the last peak of Ham Rock had vanished below the horizon.

CHAPTER XXII A NEW DANGER

NOVEMBER 24 to December1. — Here we were then once more at sea, and although on board a ship of which the stability was very questionable, we had hopes, if the wind continued favorable, of reaching the coast of Guiana in the course of a few days.

Our way was southwest and consequently with the wind, and although Curtis would not crowd on all sail lest the extra speed should have a tendency to spring the leak afresh, the Chancellor made a progress that was quite satisfactory. Life on board began to fall back into its former routine; the feeling of insecurity and the consciousness that we were merely retracing our path doing much, however, to destroy the animated intercourse that would otherwise go on be- tween passenger and passenger.

The first few days passed without any incident worth re- cording, then on the 29th, the wind shifted to the north, and it became necessary to brace the yards, trim the sails, and take a starboard tack. This made the ship lurch very much on one side, and as Curtis felt that she was laboring far too heavily, he clewed up the top-gallants, prudently reckoning that, under the circumstances, caution was far more impor- tant than speed.

The night came on dark and foggy. The breeze fresh- ened considerably, and, unfortunately for us, hailed from the northwest. Although we carried no topsails at all, the ship seemed to heel over more than ever. Most of the passengers had retired to their cabins, but all the crew remained on deck, while Curtis never quitted his post upon the poop.

Toward two o’clock in the morning I was myself prepar- ing to go to my cabin, when Burke, one of the sailors who had been down into the hold, came on deck with the cry:

“Two feet of water below.”

In an instant Curtis and the boatswain had descended the ladder. The startling news was only too true; the sea-water was entering the hold, but whether the leak had sprung afresh, or whether the caulking in some of the seams was insufficient, it was then impossible to determine; all that could be done was to let the ship go with the wind, and wait for day.

At daybreak they sounded again — “Three feet of water!” was the report. I glanced at Curtis — his lips were white, but he had not lost his self-possession. He quietly informed such of the passengers as were already on deck of the new danger that threatened us; it was better that they should know the worst, and the fact could not be long concealed. I told M. Letourneur that I could not help hoping that there might yet be time to reach the land before the last crisis came. Falsten was about to give vent to an expression of despair, but he was soon silenced by Miss Herbey asserting her confidence that all would yet be well.

Curtis at once divided the crew into two sets, and made them work incessantly, turn and turn about, at the pumps. The men applied themselves to their task with resignation rather than with ardor; the labor was hard and scarcely repaid them; the pumps were constantly getting out of order, the valves being choked up by the ashes and bits of cotton that were floating about in the hold, while every moment that was spent in cleaning or repairing them was so much time lost.

Slowly but surely the water continued to rise, and on the following morning the soundings gave five feet for its depth. I noticed that Curtis’s brow contracted each time that the boatswain or the lieutenant brought him their report. There was no doubt it was only a question of time, and not for an instant must the efforts for keeping down the level be re- laxed. Already the ship had sunk a foot lower in the water, and as her weight increased she no longer rose buoyantly with the waves, but pitched and rolled considerably.

All yesterday and last night the pumping continued, but still the sea gained upon us. The crew are weary and dis- couraged, but the second officer and the boatswain set them a fine example of endurance, and the passengers have now begun to take their turn at the pumps.

But all are conscious of toiling almost against hope; we are no longer secured firmly to the solid soil of the Ham Rock reef, but we are floating over an abyss which daily, nay hourly, threatens to swallow us into its depths.

CHAPTER XXIII AN ATTEMPT AT MUTINY

DECEMBER 2 and 3. — For four hours we have succeeded in keeping the water in the hold to one level; now, however, it is very evident that the time cannot be far distant when the pumps will be quite unequal to their task.

Yesterday Curtis, who does not allow himself a minute's rest, made a personal inspection of the hold. I, with the boatswain and carpenter, accompanied him. After dislodging some of the bales of cotton we could hear a splashing, or rather gurgling sound; but whether the water was entering at the original aperture, or whether it found its way in through a general dislocation of the seams, we were unable to discover. But, whichever might be the case, Curtis determined to try a plan which, by cutting off communication between the interior and exterior of the vessel, might, if only for a few hours, render her hull more water-tight. For this purpose he had some strong, well tarred sails drawn upward by ropes from below the keel, as high as the previous leaking place, and then fastened closely and securely to the side of the hull. The scheme was dubious, and the operation difficult, but for a time it was effectual, and at the close of the day the level of the water had actually been reduced by several inches. The diminution was small enough, but the consciousness that more water was escaping through the scupper-holes than was finding its way into the hold gave us fresh courage to persevere with our work.

The night was dark, but the captain carried all the sail he could, eager to take every possible advantage of the wind, which was freshening considerably. If he could have sighted a ship he would have made signals of distress, and would not have hesitated to transfer the passengers, and even have allowed the crew to follow, if they were ready to forsake him; for himself his mind was made up — he should remain on board the

Chancellor until she foundered beneath his feet. No sail, however, hove in sight; consequently escape by such means was out of our power.

During the night the canvas covering yielded to the pres- sure of the waves, and this morning, after taking the sound- ing, the boatswain could not suppress an oath when he an- nounced, “Six feet of water in the hold!”

The ship, then, was filling once again, and already had sunk considerably below her previous water-line. With aching arms and bleeding hands we worked harder than ever at the pumps, and Curtis makes those who are not pumping form a line and pass buckets, with all the speed they can, from hand to hand.

But all in vain! At half-past eight more water is re- ported in the hold, and some of the sailors, overcome by de- spair, refuse to work one minute longer.

The first to abandon his post was Owen, a man whom I have mentioned before as exhibiting something of a mu- tinous spirit. He is about forty years of age, and altogether unprepossessing in appearance; his face is bare, with the exception of a reddish beard, which terminates in a point; his forehead is furrowed with sinister looking wrinkles, his lips curl inward, and his ears protrude, while his bleared and bloodshot eyes are encircled with thick red rings.

Among the five or six other men who had struck work I noticed Jynxstrop, the cook, who evidently shared all Owen’s ill-feelings.

Twice did Curtis order the men back to the pumps, and twice did Owen, acting as spokesman for the rest, refuse; and when Curtis made a step forward as though to approach him, he said savagely:

“I advise you not to touch me,” and walked away to the forecastle.

Curtis descended to his cabin, and almost immediately re- turned with a loaded revolver in his hand.

For a moment Owen surveyed the captain with a frown of defiance; but at a sign from Jynxstrop he seemed to recollect himself, and, with the remainder of the men, he returned to his work.

CHAPTER XXIV CURTIS RESOLVES TO ABANDON THE SHIP

DECEMBER 4. — The first attempt at mutiny being thus happily suppressed, it is to be hoped that Curtis will succeed as well in future. An insubordinate crew would render us powerless indeed.

Throughout the night the pumps were kept, without respite, steadily at work, but without producing the least sensible benefit. The ship became so water-logged and heavy that she hardly rose at all to the waves, which consequently often washed over the deck and contributed their part toward aggravating our case. Our situation was rapidly becoming as terrible as it had been when the fire was raging in the midst of us; and the prospect of being swallowed by the devouring billows was no less formidable than that of perishing in the flames.

Curtis kept the men up to the mark, and, willing or unwilling, they had no alternative but to work on as best they might; but in spite of all their efforts, the water perpetually rose, till, at length, the men in the hold who were passing the buckets found themselves immersed up to their waists, and were obliged to come on deck.

This morning, after a somewhat protracted consultation with Walter and the boatswain, Curtis resolved to abandon the ship. The only remaining boat was far too small to hold us all, and it would therefore be necessary to construct a raft that should carry those who could not find room in her. Dowlas, the carpenter, Mr. Falsten, and ten sailors were told off to put the raft in hand, the rest of the crew being ordered to continue their work assiduously at the pumps, until the time came and everything was ready for embarkation.

Hatchet or saw in hand, the carpenter and his assistants made a beginning without delay, by cutting and trimming the spare yards and extra spars to a proper length. These were then lowered into the sea — which was propitiously calm — so as to favor the operation (which otherwise would have been very difficult) of lashing them together into a firm framework, about forty feet long and twenty-five feet wide, upon which the platform was to be supported.

I kept my own place steadily at the pumps, and Andre Le- tourneur worked at my side. I often noticed his father glance at him sorrowfully, as though he wondered what would become of him if he had to struggle with waves to which even the strongest man could hardly fail to succumb. But come what may, his father will never forsake him, and I myself shall not be wanting in rendering him whatever assistance I can.

Mrs. Kear, who had been for some time in a state of drowsy unconsciousness, was not informed of the immediate danger; but when Miss Herbey, looking somewhat pale with fatigue, paid one of her flying visits to the deck, I warned her to take every precaution for herself, and to be ready for any emergency.

“Thank you, doctor, I am always ready,” she cheerfully replied, and returned to her duties below. I saw Andre follow the young girl with his eyes, and a look of melancholy interest passed over his countenance.

Toward eight o’clock in the evening the framework for the raft was almost complete, and the men were lower- ing empty barrels, which had first been securely bunged, and were lashing them to the woodwork to insure its floating.

Two hours later and suddenly there arose the startling cry, “We are sinking! we are sinking!”

Up to the poop rushed Mr. Kear, followed immediately by Falsten and Miss Herbey, who were bearing the inanimate form of Mrs. Kear. Curtis ran to his cabin, instantly returning with a chart, a sextant, and a compass in his hand.

The scene that followed will ever be engraven in my memory; the cries of distress, the general confusion, the frantic rush of the sailors toward the raft that was not yet ready to support them, can never be forgotten. The whole period of my life seemed to be concentrated into that terrible moment when the planks bent below my feet and the ocean yawned beneath me.

Some of the sailors had taken their delusive refuge in the shrouds, and I was preparing to follow them when a hand was laid upon my shoulder.. Turning round I beheld M. Letourneur, with tears in his eyes, pointing toward his son. “Yes, my friend,” I said, pressing his hand, “we will save him, if possible.”

But Curtis had already caught hold of the young man, and was hurrying him to the main-mast shrouds, when the Chancellor, which had been scudding along rapidly with the wind, stopped suddenly, with a violent shock, and began to settle. The sea rose over my ankles, and almost instinctively I clutched at the nearest rope. All at once, when it seemed all over, the ship ceased to sink, and hung motionless in mid-ocean.

CHAPTER XXV WHILE THERE’S LIFE THERE’S HOPE

NIGHT of December 4. — Curtis caught young Letourneur again in his arms, and, running with him across the flooded deck, deposited him safely in the starboard shrouds, whither his father and I climbed up beside him.

I now had time to look about me. The night was not very dark, and I could see that Curtis had returned to his post upon the poop; while in the extreme aft near the taff- rail, which was still above water, I could distinguish the forms of Mr. and Mrs. Kear, Miss Herbey, and Mr. Fal- sten. The lieutenant and the boatswain were on the far end of the forecastle; the remainder of the crew in the shrouds and top-masts.

By the assistance of his father, who carefully guided his feet up the rigging, Andre was hoisted into the main-top. Mrs. Kear could not be induced to join him in his elevated position, in spite of being told that if the wind were to freshen she would inevitably be washed overboard by the waves; nothing could induce her to listen to remonstrances, and she insisted upon remaining on the poop — Miss Herbey, of course, staying by her side.

As soon as the captain saw the Chancellor was no longer sinking, he set to work to take down all the sails — yards and all — and the top-gallants, in the hope that by removing everything that could compromise the equilibrium of the ship he might diminish the chance of her capsizing altogether.

“But may she not founder at any moment?” I said to

Curtis, when I had joined him for a while upon the poop.

“Everything depends upon the weather,” he replied, in his calmest manner; “that, of course, may change at any hour. One thing, however, is certain, the Chancellor pre- serves her equilibrium for the present.”

“But do you mean to say,” I further asked, “that she can sail with two feet of water over her deck?”

“No, Mr. Kazallon, she can’t sail, but she can drift with the wind; and if the wind remains in its present quarter, in the course of a few days we might possibly sight the coast. Besides, we shall have our raft as a last resource; in a few hours it will be ready, and at daybreak we can embark.”

“You have not, then,” I added, “abandoned all hope even yet?” I marveled at his composure.

“While there’s life there’s hope, you know, Mr. Kazallon; out of a hundred chances, ninety-nine may be against us, but perhaps the odd one may be in our favor. Besides, I believe that our case is not without precedent. In the year 1795, a three-master, the Juno, was precisely in the same half-sunk, water-logged condition as ourselves; and yet, with her passengers and crew clinging to her top-masts, she drifted for twenty days, until she came in sight of land, when those who had survived the deprivation and fatigue were saved. So let us not despair; let us hold on to the hope that the survivors of the Chancellor may be equally fortunate.”

I was only too conscious that there was not much to be said in support of Curtis’s sanguine view of things, and that the force of reason pointed all the other way; but I said nothing, deriving what comfort I could from the fact that the captain did not yet despond of an ultimate rescue.

As it was necessary to be prepared to abandon the ship almost at a moment’s notice, Dowlas was making every exertion to hurry on the construction of the raft. A little before midnight he was on the point of conveying some planks for this purpose, when, to his astonishment and horror, he found that the framework had totally disap- peared. The ropes that had attached it to the vessel had snapped as she became vertically displaced, and probably it had been adrift for more than an hour.

The crew were frantic at this new misfortune, and shout- ing “Overboard with the masts!” they began to cut down the rigging preparatory to taking possession of the masts for a new raft.

But here Curtis interposed:

“Back to your places, my men; back to your places. The ship will not sink yet, so don’t touch a rope until I give you leave.”

The firmness of the captain’s voice brought the men to their senses, and although some of them could ill disguise their reluctance, all returned to their posts.

When daylight had sufficiently advanced Curtis mounted the mast, and looked around for the missing raft; but it was nowhere to be seen. The sea was far too rough for the men to venture to take out the whale-boat in search of it, and there was no choice but to set to work and to construct a new raft immediately.

Since the sea has become so much rougher, Mrs. Kear has been induced to leave the poop, and has managed to join M. Letourneur and his son on the main-top, where she lies in a state of complete prostration. I need hardly add that Miss Herbey continues in her unwearied attendance. The space to which these four people are limited is necessarily very small, nowhere measuring twelve feet across: to prevent them losing their balance some spars have been lashed from shroud to shroud, and for the convenience of the two ladies Curtis has contrived to make a temporary awning of a sail. Mr. Kear has installed himself with Silas Huntly on the foretop.

A few cases of preserved meat and biscuit and some barrels of water, that floated between the masts after the submersion of the deck, have been hoisted to the top-mast and fastened firmly to the stays. These are now our only provisions.

CHAPTER XXVI MR. KEAR MAKES A BUSINESS DEAL

DECEMBER 5. — The day was very hot. December in latitude 16 deg. N. is a summer month, and unless a breeze should rise to temper the burning sun, we might expect to suffer from an oppressive heat.

The sea still remained very rough, and as the heavy waves broke over the ship as though she were a reef, the foam flew up to the very top-masts, and our clothes were perpetually drenched by the spray.

The Chancellor’s hull is three-fourths immerged; besides the three masts and the bowsprit, to which the whale-boat was suspended, the poop and the forecastle are the only portions that now are visible; and as the intervening section of the deck is quite below the water, these appear to be connected only by the framework of the netting that runs along the vessel’s sides. Communication between the top-masts is extremely difficult, and would be absolutely precluded, were it not that the sailors, with practiced dexterity, manage to hoist themselves about by means of the stays. For the passengers, cowering on their narrow and unstable platform, the spectacle of the raging sea below was truly terrific; every wave that dashed over the ship shook the masts till they trembled again, and one could venture scarcely to look or to think lest he should be tempted to cast himself into the vast abyss.

Meanwhile, the crew worked away with all their remaining vigor at the second raft, for which the top-gallants and yards were all obliged to be employed; the planks, too, which were continually being loosened and broken away by the violence of the waves from the partitions of the ship, were rescued before they had drifted out of reach, and were brought into use. The symptoms of the ship foundering did not appear to be immediate; so that Curtis insisted upon the raft being made with proper care to insure its strength; we were still several hundred miles from the coast of Guiana, and for so long a voyage it was indispensable to have a struc- ture of considerable solidity. The reasonableness of this was self-apparent, and as the crew had recovered their as- surance they spared no pains to accomplish their work effec- tually.

Of all the number, there was but one, an Irishman, named O'Ready, who seemed to question the utility of all their toil. He shook his head with an oracular gravity. He is an old- ish man, not less than sixty, with his hair and beard bleached with the storms of many travels. As I was making my way toward the poop, he came up to me and began talking.

“And why, bedad, I'd like to know, why is it that they'll all be afther lavin' the ship?”

He turned his quid with the most serene composure, and continued:

“And isn't it me myself that's been wrecked nine times already? and sure, poor fools are they that ever have put their trust in rafts or boats; sure and they found a wathery grave. Nay, nay; while the ould ship lasts, let's stick to her, says I.”

Having thus unburdened his mind he relapsed into si- lence, and soon went away.

About three o'clock I noticed that Mr. Kear and Silas Huntly were holding an animated conversation in the fore- top. The petroleum merchant had evidently some difficulty in bringing the ex-captain round to his opinion, for I saw him several times shake his head as he gave long and scrutinizing looks at the sea and sky. In less than an hour after- ward I saw Huntly let himself down by the forestays and clamber along to the fore-castle, where he joined the group of sailors, and I lost sight of him.

I attached little importance to the incident, and shortly afterward joined the party in the main-top, where we con- tinued talking for some hours. The heat was intense, and if it had not been for the shelter afforded by the sail-tent, would have been unbearable. At five o’clock we took as re- freshment some dried meat and biscuit, each individual be- ing also allowed half a glass of water. Mrs. Kear prostrate with fever, could not touch a mouthful; and nothing could be done by Miss Herbey to relieve her, beyond occasionally moistening her parched lips. The unfortunate lady suffers greatly, and sometimes I am inclined to think that she will succumb to the exposure and privation. Not once had her husband troubled himself about her; but when shortly after- ward I heard him hail some of the sailors on the fore-castle and ask them to help him down from the foretop, I began to think that the selfish fellow was coming to join his wife.

At first the sailors took no notice of his request, but on his repeating it with the promise of paying them handsomely for their services, two of them, Burke and Sandon, swung themselves along the netting into the shrouds, and were soon at his side.

A long discussion ensued. The men evidently were ask- ing more than Mr. Kear was inclined to give, and at one time it seemed as though the negotiation would fall through altogether. But at length the bargain was struck, and I saw Mr. Kear take a bundle of paper dollars from his waistcoat pocket, and hand a number of them over to one of the men. The man counted them carefully, and from the time it took him, I should think that he could not have pocketed anything less than a hundred dollars.

The next business was to get Mr. Kear down from the foretop, and Burke and Sandon proceeded to tie a rope round his waist, which they afterward fastened to the fore- stay; then, in a way which provoked shouts of laughter from their mates, they gave the unfortunate man a shove, and sent him rolling down like a bundle of dirty clothes on to the forecastle.

I was quite mistaken as to his object. Mr. Kear had no intention of looking after his wife, but remained by the side of Silas Huntly until the gathering darkness hid them both from view.

As night drew on, the wind grew calmer, but the sea re- mained very rough. The moon had been up ever since four in the afternoon, though she only appeared at rare intervals between the clouds. Some long lines of vapor on the hori- zon were tinged with a rosy glare that foreboded a strong breeze for the morrow, and all felt anxious to know from which quarter the breeze would come, for any but a north- easter would bear the frail raft on which we were to embark far away from land.

About eight o’clock in the evening, Curtis mounted to the main-top, but he seemed preoccupied and anxious, and did not speak to anyone. He remained for a quarter of an hour, then after silently pressing my hand, he returned to his old post.

I laid myself down in the narrow space at my disposal, and tried to sleep; but my mind was filled with strange fore- bodings, and sleep was impossible. The very calmness of the atmosphere was oppressive; scarcely a breath of air vibrated through the metal rigging, and yet the sea rose with a heavy swell as though it felt the warnings of a coming tempest.

All at once, at about eleven o’clock, the moon burst brightly forth through a rift in the clouds, and the waves sparkled again as if illuminated by a submarine glimmer. I start up and look around me. Is it merely imagination? or do I really see a black speck floating, on the dazzling white- ness of the waters, a speck that cannot be a rock, because it rises and falls with the heaving motion of the billows? But the moon once again becomes overclouded; the sea is darkened, and I return to my uneasy couch close to the lar- board shrouds.

CHAPTER XXVII THE WHALE-BOAT MISSING

DECEMBER 6. — I must have fallen asleep for a few hours, when, at four o'clock in the morning, I was rudely aroused by the roaring of the wind, and could distinguish Curtis's voice as he shouted in the brief intervals between the heavy gusts.

I got up, and holding tightly to the purlin — for the waves made the masts tremble with their violence — I tried to look around and below me. The sea was literally raging beneath, and great masses of livid-looking foam were dashing be- tween the masts, which were oscillating terrifically. It was still dark, and I could only faintly distinguish two figures in the stern, whom, by the sound of their voices, that I caught occasionally above the tumult, I made out to be Curtis and the boatswain.

Just at that moment a sailor, who had mounted to the main-top to do something to the rigging, passed close be- hind me.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“The wind has changed,” he answered, adding something which I could not hear distinctly, but which sounded like “dead against us.”

Dead against us! then. thought I, the wind had shifted to the southwest, and my last night's forebodings had been correct.

When daylight at length appeared, I found the wind, al- though not blowing actually from the southwest, had veered round to the northwest, a change which was equally dis- astrous to us, inasmuch as it was carrying us away from land. Moreover, the ship had sunk considerably during the night, and there were now five feet of water above deck; the side netting had completely disappeared, and the fore- castle and the poop were now all but on a level with the sea, which washed over them incessantly. With all possible ex- pedition Curtis and his crew were laboring away at their raft, but the violence of the swell materially impeded their operations, and it became a matter of doubt as to whether the woodwork would not fall asunder before it could be properly fastened together.

As I watched the men at their work, M. Letourneur, with one arm supporting his son, came out and stood by my side.

“Don’t you think this main-top will soon give way?” he said, as the narrow platform on which we stood creaked and groaned with the swaying of the masts.

Miss Herbey heard his words and pointing toward Mrs. Kear, who was lying prostrate at her feet, asked what we thought ought to be done.

“We can do nothing but stay where we are,” I replied.

“No,” said Andre, “this is our best refuge; I hope you are not afraid.”

“Not for myself,” said the young girl quietly, “only for those to whom life is precious.”

At a quarter to eight we heard the boatswain calling to the sailors in the bows.

“Ay, ay, sir,” said one of the men — O’Ready, I think.

“Where’s the whale-boat?” shouted the boatswain in a loud voice.

“I don’t know, sir. Not with us,” was the reply.

“She’s gone adrift, then!”

And sure enough the whale-boat was no longer hanging from the bowsprit; and in a moment the discovery was made that Mr. Kear, Silas Huntly, and three sailors, — a Scotch- man and two Englishmen, — were missing. Afraid that the Chancellor would founder before the completion of the raft, Kear and Huntly had plotted together to effect their escape, and had bribed the three sailors to seize the only remaining boat.

This, then, was the black speck that I had seen during the night. The miserable husband had deserted his wife, the faithless captain had abandoned the ship that had once been under his command.

“There are five saved, then,” said the boatswain.

“Faith, an it’s five lost ye’ll be maning,” said O’Ready; and the state of the sea fully justified his opinion.

The crew were furious when they heard of the surrepti- tious flight, and loaded the fugitives with all the invectives they could lay their tongues to. So enraged were they at the dastardly trick of which they had been made the dupes, that if chance should bring the deserters again on board I should be sorry to answer for the consequences.

In accordance with my advice, Mrs. Kear has not been in- formed of her husband’s disappearance. The unhappy lady is wasting away with a fever for which we are powerless to supply a remedy, for the medicine-chest was lost when the ship began to sink. Nevertheless, I do not think we have anything to regret on that score, feeling, as I do, that in a case like Mrs. Kear’s, drugs would be of no avail.

CHAPTER XXVIII MRS. KEAR SUCCUMBS TO FEVER

DECEMBER 6 continued. — The Chancellor no longer main- tained her equilibrium; we felt that she was gradually going down, and her hull was probably breaking up. The main- top was already only ten feet above water, while the bow- sprit, with the exception of the extreme end, that rose obliquely from the waves, was entirely covered.

The Chancellor’s last day, we felt, had come.

Fortunately the raft was all but finished, and unless Curtis preferred to wait till morning, we should be able to embark in the evening.

The raft is a very solid structure. The spars that form the framework are crossed one above another and lashed together with stout ropes, so that the whole pile rises a couple of feet above the water. The upper platform is constructed from the planks that were broken from the ship’s sides by the violence of the waves, and which had not drifted away. The afternoon has been employed in charging the raft with such provisions, sails, tools, and instruments as we have been able to save.

And how can I attempt to give any idea of the feelings with which, one and all, we now contemplated the fate be- fore us? For my own part, I was possessed rather by a benumbed indifference than by any sense of genuine resigna- tion. M. Letourneur was entirely absorbed in his son, who, in his turn, thought only of his father, at the same time exhibiting a Christian fortitude, which was shown by no one else of the party except Miss Herbey, who faced her danger with the same brave composure. Incredible as it may seem, Falsten remained the same as ever, occupying himself with writing down figures and memoranda in his pocketbook. Mrs. Kear, in spite of all that Miss Herbey could do for her, was evidently dying.

With regard to the sailors, two or three of them were calm enough, but the rest had well-nigh lost their wits. Some of the more ill-disposed among them seemed inclined to run into excesses; and their conduct, under the bad in- fluence of Owen and Jynxstrop, made it doubtful whether they would submit to control when once we were limited to the narrow dimensions of the raft. Lieutenant Walter, al- though his courage never failed him, was worn out with bodily fatigue, and obliged to give up all active labor; but Curtis and the boatswain were resolute, energetic and firm as ever. To borrow an expression from the language of metallurgic art, they were men “at the highest degree of hardness.”

At five o’clock one of our companions in misfortune was released from her sufferings. Mrs. Kear, after a most dis- tressing illness, through which her young companion tended her with the most devoted care, has breathed her last. A few deep sighs and all was over, and I doubt whether the sufferer was ever conscious of the peril of her situation.

The night passed on without further incident. Toward morning I touched the dead woman’s hand, and it was cold and stiff. The corpse could not remain any longer on the main-top, and after Miss Herbey and I had carefully wrapped the garments about it, with a few short prayers the body of the first victim of our miseries was committed to the deep.

As the sea closed over the body I heard one of the men in the shrouds say:

“There goes a carcass that we shall be sorry we have thrown away!”

I looked round sharply. It was Owen who had spoken. But horrible as were his words, the conviction was forced upon my mind that the day could not be far distant when we must want for food.

CHAPTER XXIX WE EMBARK ON THE RAFT

DECEMBER 7. — The ship was sinking rapidly; the water had risen to the fore-top; the poop and forecastle were completely submerged; the top of the bowsprit had disap- peared, and only the three mast-tops projected from the waves.

But all was ready on the raft; an erection had been made on the fore to hold a mast, which was supported by shrouds fastened to the sides of the platform; this mast carried a large royal.

Perhaps, after all, these few frail planks will carry us to the shore which the Chancellor has failed to reach; at any rate, we cannot yet resign all hope.

We were just on the point of embarking at 7 A. M. when the Chancellor all at once began to sink so rapidly that the carpenter and men who were on the raft were obliged with all speed to cut the ropes that secured it to the vessel, to pre- vent it from being swallowed up in the eddying waters.

Anxiety, the most intense, took possession of us all. At the very moment when the ship was descending into the fathomless abyss, the raft, our only hope of safety, was drifting off before our eyes. Two of the sailors and an apprentice, beside themselves with terror, threw themselves headlong into the sea; but it was evident from the very first they were quite powerless to combat the winds and waves. Escape was impossible; they could neither reach the raft nor return to the ship. Curtis tied a rope round his waist and tried to swim to their assistance; but long be- fore he could reach them, the unfortunate men, after a vain struggle for life, sank below the waves and were seen no more. Curtis, bruised and beaten with the surf that raged about the mast-heads, was hauled back to the ship.

Meantime, Dowlas and his men, by means of some spars which they used as oars, were exerting themselves to bring back the raft, which had drifted about two cables’-lengths away; but, in spite of all their efforts, it was fully an hour — an hour which seemed to us, waiting as we were with the water up to the level of the top masts, like an eternity — be- fore they succeeded in bringing the raft alongside, and lash- ing it once again to the Chancellor’s main-mast.

Not a moment was then to be lost. The waves were eddying like a whirlpool around the submerged vessel, and numbers of enormous airbubbles were rising to the surface of the water.

The time was come. At Curtis’s word, “Embark!” we all hurried to the raft. Andre, who insisted upon seeing Miss Herbey go first, was helped safely on to the platform, where his father immediately joined him. In a very few minutes all except Curtis and old O’Ready had left the Chancellor.

Curtis remained standing on the main-top, deeming it not only his duty, but his right, to be the last to leave the vessel he had loved so well, and the loss of which he so much de- plored.

“Now then, old fellow, off of this!” cried the captain to the old Irishman, who did not move.

“And is it quite sure ye are that she’s sinkin’?” he said.

“Ay, ay! sure enough, my man; and you’d better look sharp.”

“Faith, then, and I think I will;” and not a moment too soon (for the water was up to his waist) he jumped on to the raft.

Having cast one last, lingering look around him, Curtis then left the ship; the rope was cut, and we went slowly adrift.

All eyes were fixed upon the spot where the Chancellor lay foundering. The top of the mizzen was the first to dis- appear, then followed the main-top; and soon, of what had been a noble vessel, not a vestige was to be seen.

CHAPTER XXX OUR SITUATION CRITICAL

WILL this frail boat, forty feet by twenty, bear us in safety? Sink it cannot; the material of which it is com- posed is of a kind that must surmount the waves. But it is questionable whether it will hold together. The cords that bind it will have a tremendous strain to bear in resist- ing the violence of the sea. The most sanguine among us trembles to face the future; the most confident dares to think only of the present. After the manifold perils of the last seventy-two days' voyage all are too agitated to look forward without dismay to what in all human probability must be a time of the direst distress.

Vain as the task may seem, I will not pause in my work of registering the events of our drama, as scene after scene they are unfolded before our eyes.

Of the twenty-eight persons who left Charleston in the Chancellor, only eighteen are left to huddle together upon this narrow raft; this number includes the five passengers, namely, M. Letourneur, Andre, Miss Herbey, Falsten, and myself; the ship's officers, Captain Curtis, Lieutenant Wal- ter, the boatswain, Hobart the steward, Jynxstrop the cook, and Dowlas the carpenter; and seven sailors, Austin, Owen, Wilson, O'Ready, Burke, Sandon, and Flaypole.

Such are the passengers on the raft; it is but a brief task to enumerate their resources.

The greater part of the provisions in the store-room were destroyed at the time when the ship's deck was submerged, and the small quantity that Curtis has been able to save will be very inadequate to supply the wants of eighteen people, who too probably have many days to wait ere they sight either land or a passing vessel. One cask of biscuit, an- other of preserved meat, a small keg of brandy, and two barrels of water complete our store, so that the utmost frugality in the distribution of our daily rations becomes absolutely necessary.

Of spare clothes we have positively none; a few sails will serve for shelter by day, and covering by night. Dowlas has his carpenter’s tools, we have each a pocket- knife, and O’Ready an old tin pot, of which he takes the most tender care; in addition to these, we are in possession of a sextant, a compass, a chart, and a metal tea-kettle, everything else that was placed on deck in readiness for the first raft having been lost in the partial submersion of the vessel.

Such then is our situation; critical indeed, but after all perhaps not desperate. We have one great fear; some there are among us whose courage, moral as well as physical, may give way, and over failing spirits such as these we may have no control.

CHAPTER XXXI FIRST DAY ON THE RAFT

DECEMBER 7 continued. — Our first day on the raft has passed without any special incident. At eight o'clock this morning Curtis asked our attention for a moment.

"My friends," he said, "listen to me. Here on this raft, just as when we were on board the Chancellor, I consider myself your captain; and as your captain, I expect that all of you will strictly obey my orders. Let me beg of you, one and all, to think solely of our common welfare; let us work with one heart and with one soul, and may Heaven protect us!"

After delivering these few words with an emotion that evidenced their earnestness, the captain consulted his com- pass, and found that the freshening breeze was blowing from the north. This was fortunate for us, and no time was to be lost in taking advantage of it to speed us on our dubious way. Dowlas was occupied in fixing the mast into the socket that had already been prepared for its reception, and in order to support it more firmly he placed spurs of wood, forming arched buttresses, on either side. While he was thus employed the boatswain and the other seamen were stretching the large royal sail on the yard that had been reserved for that purpose.

By half-past nine the mast was hoisted, and held firmly in its place by some shrouds attached securely to the sides of the raft; then the sail was run up and trimmed to the wind, and the raft began to make a perceptible progress under the brisk breeze.

As soon as we had once started, the carpenter set to work to contrive some sort of a rudder, that would enable us to maintain our desired direction. Curtis and Falsten assisted him with some serviceable suggestions, and in a couple of hours’ time he had made and fixed to the back of the raft a kind of paddle, very similar to those used by the Malays.

At noon, after the necessary preliminary observations, Curtis took the altitude of the sun. The result gave lat. 15 deg. 7’ N. by long. 49 deg. 35’ W. as our position, which, on consulting the chart, proved to be about 650 miles northeast of the coast of Paramaribo in Dutch Guiana.

Now even under the most favorable circumstances, with trade-winds and weather always in our favor, we can not by any chance hope to make more than ten or twelve miles a day, so that the voyage cannot possibly be performed under a period of two months. To be sure there is the hope to be indulged that we may fall in with a passing vessel, but as the part of the Atlantic into which we have been driven is intermediate between the tracks of the French and English transatlantic steamers either from the Antilles or the Brazils, we cannot reckon at all upon a contingency happen- ing in our favor; while if a calm should set in, or worse still, if the wind were to blow from the east, not only two months, but twice, nay, three times that length of time will be required to accomplish the passage.

At best, however, our provisions, even though used with the greatest care, will barely last three months. Curtis has called us into consultation, and as the working of the raft does not require such labor as to exhaust our physical strength, all have agreed to submit to a regimen which, although it will suffice to keep us alive, will certainly not fully satisfy the cravings of hunger and thirst.

As far as we can estimate we have somewhere about 500 lbs. of meat and about the same quantity of biscuit. To make this last for three months we ought not to consume very much more than 5 lbs. a day of each, which, when divided among eighteen people, will make the daily ration 5 oz. of meat and 5 oz. of biscuit for each person. Of water we have certainly not more than 200 gallons, but by reduc- ing each person’s allowance to a pint a day, we hope to eke out that, too, over the space of three months.

It is arranged that the food shall be distributed under the boatswain’s superintendence every morning at ten o’clock. Each person will then receive his allowance of meat and bis- cuit, which may be eaten when and how he pleases. The water will be given out twice a day — at ten in the morn- ing and six in the evening; but as the only drinking-vessels in our possession are the teakettle and the old Irishman’s tin pot, the water has to be consumed immediately on distribu- tion. As for the brandy, of which there are only five gallons, it will be doled out with the strictest limitation, and no one will be allowed to touch it except with the captain’s express permission.

I should not forget that there are two sources from which we may hope to increase our store. First, any rain that may fall will add to our supply of water, and two empty barrels have been placed ready to receive it; secondly, we hope to do something in the way of fishing, and the sailors have already begun to prepare some lines.

All have mutually agreed to abide by the rules that have been laid down, for all are fully aware that by nothing but the most precise regimen can we hope to avert the horrors of famine, and forewarned by the fate of many who in similar circumstances have miserably perished, we are determined to do all that prudence can suggest for hus- banding our stores.

CHAPTER XXXII WE CATCH A SUPPLY OF FISH

DECEMBER 8 to 17. — When night came we wrapped our- selves in our sails. For my own part, worn out with the fatigue of the long watch in the top-mast, I slept for several hours; M. Letourneur and Andre did the same, and Miss Herbey obtained sufficient rest to relieve the tired expression that her countenance had lately being wearing. The night passed quietly. As the raft was not very heavily laden the waves did not break over it at all, and we were consequently able to keep ourselves perfectly dry. To say the truth, it was far better for us that the sea should remain somewhat boisterous, for any diminution in the swell of the waves would indicate that the wind had dropped, and it was with a feeling of regret that when the morning came I had to note down “weather calm” in my journal.

In these low latitudes the heat in the day-time is so in- tense, and the sun burns with such an incessant glare, that the entire atmosphere becomes pervaded with a glowing vapor. The wind, too, blows only in fitful gusts, and through long intervals of perfect calm the sails flap idly and uselessly against the mast. Curtis and the boatswain, how- ever, are of opinion that we are not entirely dependent on the wind. Certain indications, which a sailor’s eye alone could detect, make them almost sure that we are being carried along by a westerly current, that flows at the rate of three or four miles an hour. If they are not mistaken, this is a circumstance that may materially assist our pro- gress, and at which we can hardly fail to rejoice, for the high temperature often makes our scanty allowance of water quite inadequate to allay our thirst.

But with all our hardships I must confess that our con- dition is far preferable to what it was when we were still clinging to the Chancellor.

Here at least we have a com- paratively solid platform beneath our feet, and we are re- lieved from the incessant dread of being carried down with a foundering vessel. In the day time we can move about with a certain amount of freedom, discuss the weather, watch the sea, and examine our fishing-lines; while at night we can rest securely under the shelter of our sails.

“I really think, Mr. Kazallon,” said Andre Letourneur to me a few days after we had embarked, “that our time on board the raft passes as pleasantly as it did upon Ham Rock; and the raft has one advantage even over the reef, for it is capable of motion.”

“Yes, Andre,” I replied, “as long as the wind continues favorable the raft has decidedly the advantage; but sup- posing the wind shifts; what then?”

“Oh, we mustn’t think about that,” he said; “let us keep up our courage while we can.”

I felt that he was right, and that the dangers we had escaped should make us more hopeful for the future; and I think that nearly all of us are inclined to share his opin- ion.

Whether the captain is equally sanguine I am unable to say. He holds himself very much aloof, and as he evi- dently feels that he has the great responsibility of saving other lives than his own, we are reluctant to disturb his silent meditations.

Such of the crew as are not on watch spend the greater portion of their time in dozing on the fore part of the raft. The aft, by the captain’s orders, has been reserved for the use of us passengers, and by erecting some uprights we have contrived to make a sort of tent, which affords some shelter from the sun. On the whole our bill of health is tolerably satisfactory. Lieutenant Walter is the only invalid, and he, in spite of all our careful nursing, seems to get weaker every day.

Andre Letourneur is the life of our party, and I have never appreciated the young man so well. His originality of perception makes his conversation both lively and interesting, and as he talks, his wan and suffering countenance lights up with an intelligent animation. His father seems to become more devoted to him than ever, and I have seen him sit for an hour at a time, with his hand resting on his son's, listening eagerly to his every word.

Miss Herbey occasionally joins in our conversation, but although we all do our best to make her forget that she has lost those who should have been her natural protectors, M. Letourneur is the only one among us to whom she speaks without a certain reserve. To him, whose age gives him something of the authority of a father, she has told the history of her life — a life of patience and self-denial such as not unfrequently falls to the lot of orphans. She had been, she said, two years with Mrs. Kear, and although now left alone in the world, homeless and without resources, hope for the future does not fail her. The young lady's modest deportment and energy of character command the respect of all on board, and I do not think that even the coarsest of the sailors has either by word or gesture acted toward her in a way that she could deem offensive.

The 12th, 13th, and 14th of December passed away without any change in our condition. The wind continued to blow in irregular gusts, but always in the same direction, and the helm, or rather the paddle at the back of the raft, has never once required shifting; and the watch, who are posted on the fore, under orders to examine the sea with the most scrupulous attention, have had no change of any kind to report.

At the end of the week we found ourselves growing ac- customed to our limited diet, and as we had no manual exer- tion, and no wear and tear of our physical constitution, we managed very well. Our greatest deprivation was the short supply of water, for, as I said before, the unmitigated heat made our thirst at times very painful.

On the 15th we held high festival. A shoal of fish, of the sparus tribe, swarmed round the raft, and although our tackle consisted merely of long cords baited with morsels of dried meat stuck upon bent nails, the fish were so voracious that in the course of a couple of days we had caught as many as weighed almost 200 lbs. some of which were grilled, and others boiled in sea-water over a fire made on the fore part of the raft. This marvelous haul was doubly welcome, in- asmuch as it not only afforded us a change of diet, but enabled us to economize our stores; if only some rain had fallen at the same time we would have been more than satisfied.

Unfortunately the shoal of fish did not remain long in our vicinity. On the 17th they all disappeared, and some sharks, not less than twelve or fifteen feet long, belonging to the species of the spotted dog-fish, took their place. These horrible creatures have black backs and fins, covered with white spots and stripes. Here, on our low raft, we seemed almost on a level with them, and more than once their tails have struck the spars with terrible violence. The sailors manage to keep them at a distance by means of handspikes, but I shall not be surprised if they persist in following us, instinctively intelligent that we are destined to become their prey. For myself, I confess that they give me a feeling of uneasiness; they seem to me like monsters of ill-omen.

CHAPTER XXXIII MUTINY ON THE RAFT

DECEMBER 18 to 20. — On the 18th the wind freshened a little, but as it blew from the same favorable quarter we did not complain, and only took the precaution of putting an extra support to the mast, so that it should not snap with the tension of the sail. This done, the raft was carried along with something more than its ordinary speed, and left a long line of foam in its wake.

In the afternoon the sky became slightly over-clouded, and the heat consequently less oppressive. The swell made it more difficult for the raft to keep its balance, and we shipped two or three heavy seas; but the carpenter managed to make with some planks a kind of wall about a couple of feet high, which protected us from the direct action of the waves. Our casks of food and water were secured to the raft with double ropes, for we dared not run the risk of their being carried overboard, an accident that would at once have reduced us to the direst distress.

In the course of the day the sailors gathered some of the marine plants known by the name of sargassos, very similar to those we saw in such profusion between the Bermudas and Ham Rock. I advised my companions to chew the laminary tangles, which they would find contained a saccharine juice, affording considerable relief to their parched lips and throats.

The remainder of the day passed without incident. I should not, however, omit to mention that the frequent con- ferences held among the sailors, especially between Owen, Burke, Flaypole, Wilson, and Jynxstrop, the negro, aroused some uneasy suspicions in my mind. What was the sub- ject of their conversation I could not discover, for they became silent immediately that a passenger or one of the officers approached them. When

I mentioned the matter to Curtis I found he had already noticed these secret in- terviews, and that they had given him enough concern to make him determined to keep a strict eye upon Jynxstrop and Owen, who, rascals as they were themselves, were evi- dently trying to disaffect their mates.

On the 19th the heat was again excessive. The sky was cloudless, and as there was not enough wind to fill the sail the raft lay motionless upon the surface of the water. Some of the sailors found a transient alleviation for their thirst by plunging into the sea, but as we were fully aware that the water all around was infested with sharks, none of us was rash enough to follow their example, though if, as seems likely, we remain long becalmed, we shall probably in time overcome our fears, and feel constrained to indulge ourselves with a bath.

The health of Lieutenant Walter continues to cause us grave anxiety, the young man being weakened by attacks of intermittent fever. Except for the loss of the medicine- chest we might have temporarily reduced this by quinine; but it is only too evident that the poor fellow is consump- tive, and that that hopeless malady is making ravages upon him that no medicine could permanently arrest. His sharp, dry cough, his short breathing, his profuse perspirations, more especially in the morning; the pinched-in nose, the hollow cheeks, of which the general pallor is only relieved by a hectic flush, the contracted lips, the too brilliant eye and wasted form — all bear witness to a slow but sure de- cay.

To-day, the 20th, the temperature is as high as ever, and the raft still motionless. The rays of the sun penetrate even through the shelter of our tent, where we sit literally gasp- ing with the heat. The impatience with which we awaited the moment when the boatswain should dole out our meager allowance of water, and the eagerness with which those lukewarm drops were swallowed, can only be realized by those who for themselves have endured the agonies of thirst.

Lieutenant Walter suffers more than any of us from the scarcity of water, and I noticed that Miss Herbey reserved almost the whole of her own share for his use. Kind and compassionate as ever, the young girl does all that lies in her power to relieve the poor fellow’s sufferings.

“Mr. Kazallon,” she said to me this morning, “that young man gets manifestly weaker every day.”

“Yes, Miss Herbey,” I replied, “and how sorrowful it is that we can do nothing for him, absolutely nothing.”

“Hush!” she said, with her wonted consideration, “perhaps he will hear what we are saying.”

And then she sat down near the edge of the raft, where, with her head resting on her hands, she remained lost in thought.

An incident sufficiently unpleasant occurred to-day. For nearly an hour Owen, Flaypole, Burke and Jynxstrop had been engaged in close conversation and, although their voices were low, their gestures had betrayed that they were animated by some strong excitement. At the conclusion of the colloquy Owen got up and walked deliberately to the quarter of the raft that has been reserved for the use of the passengers.

“Where are you off to now, Owen?” said the boatswain.

“That’s my business,” said the man insolently, and pursued his course.

The boatswain was about to stop him, but before he could interfere Curtis was standing and looking Owen steadily in the face.

“Ah, captain, I’ve got a word from my mates to say to you,” he said, with all the effrontery imaginable.

“Say on, then,” said the captain coolly.

“We should like to know about that little keg of brandy.

Is it being kept for the porpoises or the officers?”

Finding that he obtained no reply, he went on:

“Look here, captain, what we want is to have our grog served out every morning as usual.”

“Then you certainly will not,” said the captain.

“What! what!” exclaimed Owen, “don’t you mean to let us have our grog?”

“Once and for all, no.”

For a moment, with a malicious grin upon his lips, Owen stood confronting the captain; then, as though thinking bet- ter of himself, he turned round and rejoined his companions, who were still talking together in an undertone.

When I was afterward discussing the matter with Curtis, I asked him whether he was sure he had done right in re- fusing the brandy.

“Right!” he cried, “to be sure I have. Allow those men to have brandy! I would throw it all overboard first.”

CHAPTER XXXIV A SQUALL

DECEMBER 21. — No further disturbance has taken place among the men. For a few hours the fish appeared again, and we caught a great many of them, and stored them away in an empty barrel. This addition to our stock of pro- visions makes us hope that food, at least, will not fail us.

Usually the nights in the tropics are cool, but to-day, as the evening drew on, the wonted freshness did not return, but the air remained stifling and oppressive, while heavy masses of vapor hung over the water.

There was no moonlight; there would be a new moon at half-past one in the morning, but the night was singularly dark, except for dazzling flashes of summer lightning that from time to time illuminated the horizon far and wide. There was, however, no answering roll of thunder, and the silence of the atmosphere seemed almost awful.

For a couple of hours, in the vain hope of catching a breath of air, Miss Herbey, Andre Letourneur, and I, sat watching the imposing struggle of the electric vapors. The clouds appeared like embattled turrets crested with flame, and the very sailors, coarse-minded men as they were, seemed struck with the grandeur of the spectacle, and re- garded attentively, though with an anxious eye, the pre- liminary tokens of a coming storm. Until midnight we kept our seats upon the stern of the raft, while the lightning ever and again shed around us a livid glare similar to that produced by adding salt to lighted alcohol.

“Are you afraid of a storm. Miss Herbey?” said Andre to the girl.

“No, Mr. Andre, my feelings are always rather those of awe than of fear," she replied. "I consider a storm one of

the sublimest phenomena that we can behold — don't you

think so too?"

"Yes, and especially when the thunder is pealing," he said; "that majestic rolling, far different to the sharp crash of artillery, rises and falls like the long-drawn notes of the grandest music, and I can safely say that the tones of the most accomplished artiste have never moved me like that incomparable voice of nature."

"Rather a deep bass, though," I said, laughing.

"That may be," he answered; "but I wish we might hear it now, for this silent lightning is somewhat unexpressive."

"Never mind that, Andre," I said; "enjoy a storm when it comes, if you like, but pray don't wish for it."

"And why not?" said he; "a storm will bring us wind, you know."

"And water, too," added Miss Herbey, "the water of which we are so seriously in need."

The young people evidently wished to regard the storm from their own point of view, and although I could have opposed plenty of common sense to their poetical sentiments, I said no more, but let them talk on as they pleased for fully an hour.

Meanwhile the sky was becoming quite over-clouded, and after the zodiacal constellations had disappeared in the mists that hung round the horizon, one by one the stars above our heads were veiled in dark rolling masses of vapor, from which every instant there issued forth sheets of electricity that formed a vivid background to the dark gray fragments of cloud that floated beneath.

Sleep, even if we wished it, would have been impossible in that stifling temperature. The lightning increased in brilliancy and appeared from all quarters of the horizon, each flash covering large arcs, varying from l00 deg. to 150 deg. leaving the atmosphere pervaded by one incessant phosphorescent glow.

The thunder became at length more and more distinct, the reports, if I may use the expression, being “round,” rather than rolling. It seemed almost as though the sky were padded with heavy clouds of which the elasticity muffled the sound of the electric bursts.

Hitherto, the sea had been calm, almost stagnant as a pond. Now, however, long undulations took place, which the sailors recognized, all too well, as being the rebound pro- duced by a distant tempest. A ship, in such a case, would have been instantly brought ahull, but no maneuvering could be applied to our raft, which could only drift before the blast.

At one o’clock in the morning one vivid flash, followed, after the interval of a few seconds, by a loud report of thunder, announced that the storm was rapidly approaching. Suddenly the horizon was enveloped in a vaporous fog, and seemed to contract until it was close around us. At the same instant the voice of one of the sailors was heard shout- ing:

“A squall! a squall!”

CHAPTER XXXV TWO SAILORS WASHED OVERBOARD

DECEMBER 21, night. — The boatswain rushed to the halliards that supported the sail, and instantly lowered the yard; not a moment too soon, for with the speed of an arrow the squall was upon us, and if it had not been for the sailor’s timely warning we must all have been knocked down and probably precipitated into the sea; as it was, our tent on the back of the raft was carried away.

The raft itself, however, being so nearly level with the water, had little peril to encounter from the actual wind; but from the mighty waves now raised by the hurricane we had everything to dread. At first the waves had been crushed and flattened as it were by the pressure of the air, but now, as though strengthened by the reaction, they rose with the utmost fury. The raft followed the motions of the increasing swell, and was tossed up and down, to and fro, and from side to side with the most violent oscillations.

“Lash yourselves tight,” cried the boatswain, as he threw us some ropes; and in a few moments with Curtis’s assis- tance, M. Letourneur, and Andre, Falsten and myself were fastened so firmly to the raft, that nothing but its total dis- ruption could carry us away. Miss Herbey was bound by a rope passed round her waist to one of the uprights that had supported our tent, and by the glare of the lightning I could see that her countenance was as serene and composed as ever.

Then the storm began to rage indeed. Flash followed flash, peal followed peal in quick succession. Our eyes were blinded, our ears deafened, with the roar and glare. The clouds above, the ocean beneath, seemed verily to have taken fire, and several times I saw forked lightnings dart upward from the crest of the waves, and mingle with those that radiated from the fiery vault above. A strong odor of sulphur pervaded the air, but though thunderbolts fell thick around us, not one touched our raft.

By two o’clock the storm had reached its height. The hurricane had increased, and the heavy waves, heated to a strange heat by the general temperature, dashed over us until we were drenched to the skin. Curtis, Dowlas, the boatswain, and the sailors did what they could to strengthen the raft with additional ropes. M. Letourneur placed him- self in front of Andre, to shelter him from the waves. Miss Herbey stood upright and motionless as a statue.

Soon dense masses of lurid clouds came rolling up, and a crackling, like the rattle of musketry, resounded through the air. This was produced by a series of electrical con- cussions, in which volleys of hailstones were discharged from the cloud-batteries above. In fact, as the storm-sheet came in contact with a current of cold air, hail was formed with great rapidity, and hailstones, large as nuts, came pelt- ing down, making the platform of the raft re-echo with a metallic ring.

For about half an hour the meteoric shower continued to descend, and during that time the wind slightly abated in violence; but after having shifted from quarter to quar- ter, it once more blew with all its former fury. The shrouds were broken, but happily the mast, already bending almost double, was removed by the men from its socket be- fore it should be snapped short off.. One gust caught away the tiller, which went adrift beyond all power of recovery, and the same blast blew down several of the planks that formed the low parapet on the larboard side, so that the waves dashed in without hindrance through the breach.

The carpenter and his mates tried to repair the damage, but, tossed from wave to wave, the raft was inclined to an angle of more than forty-five degrees, making it impossible for them to keep their footing, and rolling one over another, they were thrown down by the violent shocks. Why they were not altogether carried away, why we were not all hurled into the sea, was to me a mystery. Even if the cords that bound us should retain their hold, it seemed perfectly incredible that the raft itself should not be overturned, so that we should be carried down and stifled in the seething waters.

At last, toward three in the morning, when the hurricane seemed to be raging more fiercely than ever, the raft, caught up on the crest of an enormous wave, stood literally per- pendicularly on its edge. For an instant, by the illumina- tion of the lightning, we beheld ourselves raised to an incomprehensible height above the foaming breakers. Cries of terror escaped our lips. All must be over now! But no; another moment, and the raft had resumed its horizontal position. Safe, indeed, we were, but the tremendous up- heaval was not without its melancholy consequences.

The cords that secured the cases of provisions had burst asunder. One case rolled overboard, and the side of one of the water-barrels was staved in, so that the water which it contained was rapidly escaping. Two of the sailors rushed forward to rescue the case of preserved meat; but one of them caught his foot between the planks of the plat- form, and, unable to disengage it, the poor fellow stood uttering cries of distress.

I tried to go to his assistance, and had already untied the cord that was around me; but I was too late.

Another heavy sea dashed over us, and by the light of a dazzling flash I saw the unhappy man, although he had managed without assistance to disengage his foot, washed overboard before it was in my power to get near him. His companion had also disappeared.

The same ponderous wave laid me prostrate on the plat- form, and as my head came in collision with the corner of a spar, for a time I lost all consciousness.

CHAPTER XXXVI WE LOSE NEARLY ALL OUR PROVISIONS

DECEMBER 22. — Daylight came at length, and the sun broke through and dispersed the clouds that the storm had left behind. The struggle of the elements, while it lasted, had been terrific, but the swoon into which I was thrown by my fall prevented me from observing the final incidents of the visitation. All that I know is, that shortly after we had shipped the heavy sea, that I have mentioned, a shower of rain had the effect of calming the severity of the hurri- cane, and tended to diminish the electric tension of the atmosphere.

Thanks to the kind care of M. Letourneur and Miss Her- bey, I recovered consciousness, but I believe that it is to Robert Curtis that I owe my real deliverance, for he it was that prevented me from being carried away by a second heavy wave.

The tempest, fierce as it was, did not last more than a few hours; but even in that short space of time what an irrepar- able loss we have sustained, and what a load of misery seems stored up for us in the future!

Of the two sailors who perished in the storm, one was Austin, a fine active young man of about eight-and-twenty; the other was old O'Ready, the survivor of so many ship- wrecks. Our party is thus reduced to sixteen souls, leav- ing a total barely exceeding half the number of those who embarked on board the Chancellor at Charleston.

Curtis's first care had been to take a strict account of the remnant of our provisions. Of all the torrents of rain that fell in the night we were unhappily unable to catch a single drop; but water will not fail us yet, for about four- teen gallons still remain in the bottom of the broken barrel, while the second barrel has not been touched. But of food we have next to nothing. The cases containing the dried meat, and the fish that we had preserved, have both been washed away, and all that now remains to us is about sixty pounds of biscuit. Sixty pounds of biscuit between sixteen persons! Eight days, with half a pound a day apiece, will consume it all.

The day has passed away in silence. A general depres- sion has fallen upon all; the specter of famine has appeared among us, and each has remained wrapped in his own gloomy meditations, though each has doubtless but one idea dominant in his mind.

Once, as I passed near the group of sailors lying on the fore part of the raft, I heard Flaypole say with a sneer:

“Those who are going to die had better make haste about it.”

“Yes,” said Owen, “and leave their share of food to others.”

At the regular hour each person received his half-pound of biscuit. Some, I noticed, swallowed it ravenously; others reserved it for another time. Falsten divided his ration into several portions, corresponding, I believe, to the number of meals to which he was ordinarily accustomed. What prudence he shows! If any one survives this misery, I think it will be he.

CHAPTER XXXVII LIEUTENANT WALTER’S CONDITION

DECEMBER 23 to 30. — After the storm the wind settled back into its old quarter, blowing pretty briskly from the northeast. As the breeze was all in our favor it was important to make the most of it, and after Dowlas had carefully readjusted the mast, the sail was once more hoisted, and we were carried along at the rate of two or two and a half knots an hour. A new rudder, formed of a spar and a good-sized plank, has been fitted in the place of the one we lost, but with the wind in its present quarter it is in little requisition. The platform of the raft has been repaired, the disjointed planks have been closed by means of ropes and wedges, and that portion of the parapet that was washed away has been replaced, so that we are no longer wetted by the waves. In fact, nothing has been left undone to insure the solidity of our raft, and to render it capable of resisting the wear and tear of the wind and waves. But the dangers of wind and waves are not those which we have most to dread.

Together with the unclouded sky came a return of the tropical heat, which during the preceding days had caused us such serious inconvenience; fortunately on the 23d the excessive warmth was somewhat tempered by the breeze, and as the tent was once again put up, we were able to find shelter under it by turns.

But the want of food was beginning to tell upon us sadly, and our sunken cheeks and wasted forms were visible tokens of what we were enduring. With most of us hunger seemed to attack the entire nervous system, and the constriction of the stomach produced an acute sensation of pain. A narcotic, such as opium or tobacco, might have availed to soothe, if not to cure, the gnawing agony; but of sedatives we had none, so the pain must be endured.

One alone there was among us who did not feel the pangs of hunger. Lieutenant Walter seemed as it were to feed upon the fever that raged within him; but then he was the victim of the most torturing thirst. Miss Herbey, besides reserving for him a portion of her own insufficient allowance, obtained from the captain a small extra supply of water with which every quarter of an hour she moistened the parched lips of the young man, who, almost too weak to speak, could only express his thanks by a grateful smile. Poor fellow! all our care cannot avail to save him now; he is doomed, most surely doomed to die.

On the 23d he seemed to be conscious of his condition, for he made a sign to me to sit down by his side, and then summoning up all his strength to speak, he asked me in a few broken words how long I thought he had to live?

Slight as my hesitation was, Walter noticed it immed- iately.

“The truth,” he said; “tell me the plain truth.”

“My dear fellow, I am not a doctor, you know,” I be- gan,” and I can scarcely judge — ”

“Never mind,” he interrupted, “tell me just what you think.”

I looked at him attentively for some moments, then laid my ear against his chest. In the last few days his malady had made fearfully rapid strides, and it was only too evi- dent that one lung had already ceased to act, while the other was scarcely capable of performing the work of respiration. The young man was now suffering from the fever which is the sure symptom of the approaching end in all tuberculous complaints.

The lieutenant kept his eye fixed upon me with a look of eager inquiry. I knew not what to say, and sought to evade his question.

“My dear boy,” I said, “in our present circumstances not one of us can tell how long he has to live. Not one of us knows what may happen in the course of the next eight days.”

“The next eight days,” he murmured, as he looked eagerly into my face.

And then, turning away his head, he seemed to fall into a sort of doze.

The 24th, 25th, and 26th passed without any alteration in our circumstances, and strange, nay, incredible as it may sound, we began to get accustomed to our condition of star- vation. Often, when reading the histories of shipwrecks, I have suspected the accounts to be greatly exaggerated; but now I fully realize their truth, and marvel when I find on how little nutriment it is possible to exist for so long a time. To our daily half-pound of biscuit the captain has thought to add a few drops of brandy, and the stimulant helps con- siderably to sustain our strength. If we had the same pro- visions for two months, or even for one, there might be room for hope; but our supplies diminish rapidly, and the time is fast approaching when of food and drink there will be none.

The sea had furnished us with food once, and, difficult as the task of fishing had now become, at all hazards the attempt must be made again. Accordingly the carpenter and the boatswain set to work and made lines out of some untwisted hemp, to which they fixed some nails that they pulled out of the flooring of the raft, and bent into proper shape. The boatswain regarded his device with evident satisfaction.

“I don’t mean to say,” said he to me, “that these nails are first-rate fish-hooks; but, one thing I do know, and that is, with proper bait they will act as well as the best. But this biscuit is no good at all. Let me but just get hold of one fish, and I shall know fast enough how to use it to catch some more.”

And the true difficulty was how to catch the first fish. It was evident that fish were not abundant in these waters, nevertheless the lines were cast. But the biscuit with which they were baited dissolved at once in the water, and we did not get a single bite. For two days the attempt was made in vain, and as it only involved what seemed a lavish waste of our only means of subsistence, it was given up in de- spair.

To-day, the 30th, as a last resource, the boatswain tried what a piece of colored rag might do by way of attracting some voracious fish, and having obtained from Miss Her- bey a little piece of the red shawl she wears, he fastened it to his hook. But still no success; for when, after several hours, he examined his lines, the crimson shred was still hanging intact as he had fixed it. The man was quite dis- couraged at his failure.

“But there will be plenty of bait before long,” he said to me in a solemn undertone.

“What do you mean?” said I, struck by his significant manner.

“You’ll know soon enough,” he answered.

What did he insinuate? The words, coming from a man usually so reserved, have haunted me all night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII MUTINY AGAIN

JANUARY 1 to 5. — More than three months had elapsed since we left Charleston in the Chancellor, and for no less than twenty days had we now been borne along on our raft at the mercy of the wind and waves. Whether we were approaching the American coast, or whether we were drifting farther and farther to sea, it was now impossible to determine, for, in addition to the other disasters caused by the hurricane, the captain’s instruments had been hopelessly smashed, and Curtis had no longer any compass by which to direct his course, nor a sextant by which he might make an observation.

Desperate, however, as our condition might be judged, hope did not entirely abandon our hearts, and day after day, hour after hour were our eyes strained toward the far horizon, and many and many a time did our imagination shape out the distant land. But ever and again the illusion vanished; a cloud, a mist, perhaps even a wave, was all that had deceived us; no land, no sail ever broke the gray line that united sea and sky, and our raft remained the center of the wide and dreary waste.

On the 1st of January, we swallowed our last morsel of biscuit. The first of January! New Year’s Day! What a rush of sorrowful recollections overwhelmed our minds! Had we not always associated the opening of another year with new hopes, new plans, and coming joys? And now, where were we? Could we dare to look at one another, and breathe a New Year’s greeting?

The boatswain approached me with a peculiar look on his countenance.

“You are surely not going to wish me a happy New

Year?” I said.

“No indeed, sir,” he replied, “I was only going to wish you well through the first day of it; and that is pretty good assurance on my part, for we have not another crumb to eat.”

True as it was, we scarcely realized the fact of there being actually nothing until on the following morning the hour came round for the distribution of the scanty ration, and then, indeed, the truth was forced upon us in a new and startling light. Toward evening I was seized with violent pains in the stomach, accompanied by a constant desire to yawn and gape that was most distressing; but in a couple of hours the extreme agony passed away, and on the 3d I was surprised to find that I did not suffer more. I felt, it is true, that there was some great void within myself, but the sensation was quite as much moral as physical. My head was so heavy that I could not hold it up; it was swim- ming with giddiness, as though I were looking over a precipice.

My symptoms were not shared by all my companions, some of whom endured the most frightful tortures. Dow- las and the boatswain especially, who were naturally large eaters, uttered involuntary cries of agony, and were obliged to gird themselves tightly with ropes to subdue the excruciating pain that was gnawing their very vitals.

And this was only the second day of our misery! What would we not have given for half, nay, for a quarter of the meager ration which a few days back we deemed so inade- quate to supply our wants, and which now, eked out crumb by crumb, might, perhaps, serve for several days? In the streets of a besieged city, dire as the distress may be, some gutter, some rubbish-heap, some corner may yet be found that will furnish a dry bone or a scrap of refuse that may for a moment allay the pangs of hunger; but these bare planks, so many times washed clean by the relentless waves, offer nothing to our eager search, and after every fragment of food that the wind has carried into the interstices has been scraped out and devoured, our resources are literally at an end.

The nights seem even longer than the days. Sleep, when it comes, brings no relief; it is rather a feverish stupor, broken and disturbed by frightful nightmares. Last night, however, overcome by fatigue, I managed to rest for several hours.

At six o'clock this morning I was roused by the sound of angry voices, and, starting up, I saw Owen and Jynxstrop, with Flaypole, Wilson, Burke, and Sandon, standing in a threatening attitude. They had taken possession of the carpenter's tools, and now, armed with hatchets, chisels, and hammers, they were preparing to attack the captain, the boatswain, and Dowlas. I attached myself in a moment to Curtis's party. Falsten followed my example, and although our knives were the only weapons at our disposal, we were ready to defend ourselves to the very last extremity.

Owen and his men advanced toward us. The miserable wretches were all drunk, for during the night they had knocked a hole in the brandy-barrel, and had recklessly swallowed its contents. What they wanted they scarcely seemed to know, but Owen and Jynxstrop, not quite so much intoxicated as the rest, seemed to be urging them on to massacre the captain and the officers.

"Down with the captain! Overboard with Curtis! Owen shall take the command!" they shouted from time to time in their drunken fury; and, armed as they were, they appeared completely masters of the situation.

“Now, then, down with your arms!” said Curtis sternly, as he advanced to meet them.

“Overboard with the captain!” howled Owen, as by word and gesture he urged on his accomplices.

Curtis pushed aside the excited rascals, and, walking straight up to Owen, asked him what he wanted.

“What do we want? Why, we want no more captains; we are all equals now.”

Poor stupid fool! as though misery and privation had not already reduced us all to the same level.

“Owen,” said the captain once again, “down with your arms!”

“Come on, all of you,” shouted Owen to his companions, without giving the slightest heed to Curtis’s words.

A regular struggle ensued. Owen and Wilson attacked Curtis, who defended himself with a piece of spar; Burke and Flaypole rushed upon Falsten and the boatswain, while I was left to confront the negro Jynxstrop, who attempted to strike me with the hammer which he brandished in his hand. I endeavored to paralyze his movements by pinioning his arms, but the rascal was my superior in muscular strength. After wrestling for a few minutes, I felt that he was getting the mastery over me, when all of a sudden he rolled over on to the platform, dragging me with him. Andre Letour- neur had caught hold of one of his legs, and thus saved my life. Jynxstrop dropped his weapon in his fall; I seized it instantly, and was about to cleave the fellow’s skull, when I was myself arrested by Andre’s hand upon my arm.

By this time the mutineers had been driven back to the forepart of the raft, and Curtis, who had managed to parry the blows which had been aimed at him, had caught hold of a hatchet, with which he was preparing to strike Owen. But Owen made a sidelong movement to avoid the blow, and the weapon caught Wilson full in the chest. The unfortunate man rolled over the side of the raft and instantly disappeared.

“Save him! save him!” shouted the boatswain.

“It’s too late; he’s dead!” said Dowlas.

“Ah, well! he’ll do for — ” began the boatswain; but he did not finish his sentence.

Wilson’s death, however, put an end to the fray. Flaypole and Burke were lying prostrate in a drunken stupor, and Jynxstrop was soon overpowered, and lashed tightly to the foot of the mast. The carpenter and boatswain seized hold of Owen.

“Now then,” said Curtis, as he raised his blood-stained hatchet, “make your peace with God, for you have not a moment to live.”

“Oh, you want to eat me, do you?” sneered Owen, with the most hardened effrontery.

But the audacious reply saved his life; Curtis turned as pale as death, the hatchet dropped from his hand, and he went and seated himself moodily on the farthest corner of the raft.

CHAPTER XXXIX A FATHER’S LOVE

JANUARY 5 and 6. — The whole scene made a deep impres- sion on our minds, and Owen’s speech coming as a sort of climax, brought before us our misery with a force that was well-nigh overwhelming.

As soon as I recovered my composure, I did not forget to thank Andre Letourneur for the act of intervention that had saved my life.

“Do you thank me for that, Mr. Kazallon?” he said; “it has only served to prolong your misery.”

“Never mind, M. Letourneur,” said Miss Herbey; “you did your duty.”

Enfeebled and emaciated as the young girl is, her sense of duty never deserts her; and although her torn and be- draggled garments float dejectedly about her body, she never utters a word of complaint, and never loses courage.

“Mr. Kazallon,” she said to me, “do you think we are fated to die of hunger?”

“Yes, Miss Herbey, I do,” I replied, in a hard, cold tone.

“How long do you suppose we have to live?” she asked again.

“I cannot say; perhaps we shall linger on longer than we imagine.”

“The strongest constitutions suffer the most, do they not?” she said.

“Yes; but they have one consolation — they die the soon- est,” I replied, coldly.

Had every spark of humanity died out of my breast, that I thus brought the girl face to face with the terrible truth, without a word of hope or comfort? The eyes of Andre and his father, dilated with hunger, were fixed upon me, and I saw reproach and astonishment written in their faces.

Afterward, when we were quite alone, Miss Herbey asked me if I would grant her a favor.

“Certainly, Miss Herbey; anything you like to ask,” I replied; and this time my manner was kinder and more genial.

“Mr. Kazallon,” she said, “I am weaker than you, and shall probably die first. Promise me that, if I do, you will throw me into the sea!”

“Oh, Miss Herbey,” I began, “it was very wrong of me to speak to you as I did!”

“No, no,” she replied, half smiling; “you were quite right. But it is a weakness of mine; I don’t mind what they do with me as long as I am alive, but when I am dead — ” She stopped and shuddered. “Oh, promise me that you will throw me into the sea!”

I gave her the melancholy promise, which she acknowl- edged by pressing my hand feebly with her emaciated fingers.

Another night passed away. At times my sufferings were so intense that cries of agony involuntarily escaped my lips; then I became calmer, and sank into a kind of lethargy. When I awoke, I was surprised to find my companions still alive.

The one of our party who seems to bear his privations the best is Hobart the steward, a man with whom hitherto I have had very little to do. He is small, with a fawning expression remarkable for its indecision, and has a smile which is incessantly playing round his lips; he goes about with his eyes half closed, as though he wished to conceal his thoughts, and there is something altogether false and hypocritical about his whole demeanor. I cannot say that he bears his privations without a murmur, for he sighs and moans incessantly; but, with it all, I cannot but think that there is a want of genuineness in his manner, and that the privation has not really told upon him as much as it has upon the rest of us. I have my suspicions about the man, and intend to watch him carefully.

To-day, the 6th, M. Letourneur drew me aside to the stern of the raft, saying he had a secret to communicate, but that he wished neither to be seen nor heard speaking to me. I withdrew with him to the larboard corner of the raft, and, as it was growing dusk, nobody observed what we were doing.

“Mr. Kazallon,” M. Letourneur began, in a low voice, “Andre is dying of hunger; he is growing weaker and weaker, and oh! I cannot, will not, see him die!”

He spoke passionately, almost fiercely, and I fully under- stood his feelings. Taking his hand, I tried to reassure him.

“We will not despair yet,” I said; “perhaps some pass- ing ship — ”

“Ship!” he cried, impatiently, “don’t try to console me with empty commonplaces; you know as well as I do that there is no chance of falling in with a passing ship.” Then, breaking off suddenly, he asked: “How long is it since my son and all of you have had anything to eat?”

Astonished at his question, I replied that it was now four days since the biscuit had failed.

“Four days,” he repeated; “well, then, it is eight since I have tasted anything. I have been saving my share for my son.”

Tears rushed to my eyes; for a few moments I was unable to speak, and could only once more grasp his hand in silence.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked, at length.

“Hush! not so loud; someone will hear us,” he said, low- ering his voice; “I want you to offer it to Andre as though it came from yourself. He would not accept it from me; he would think I had been depriving myself for him. Let me implore you to do me this service; and for your trouble,” — and here he gently stroked my hand — “for your trouble you shall have a morsel for yourself.”

I trembled like a child as I listened to the poor father’s words; and my heart was ready to burst when I felt a tiny piece of biscuit slipped into my hand.

“Give it him,” M. Letourneur went on under his breath, “give it him; but do not let anyone see you; the monsters would murder you if they knew it! This is only for to- day; I will give you some more to-morrow.”

The poor fellow did not trust me — and well he might not — for I had the greatest difficulty to withstand the tempta- tion to carry the biscuit to my mouth. But I resisted the impulse, and those alone who have suffered like me can know what the effort was.

Night came on with the rapidity peculiar to these low lati- tudes, and I glided gently up to Andre, and slipped the piece of biscuit into his hand as “a present from myself.”

The young man clutched at it eagerly.

“But my father?” he said, inquiringly.

I assured him that his father and I had each had our share, and that he must eat this now, and perhaps I should be able to bring him some more another time. Andre asked no more questions, and eagerly devoured the morsel of food.

So this evening at least, notwithstanding M. Letourneur’s offer, I have tasted nothing.

CHAPTER XL DEATH OF LIEUTENANT WALTER

JANUARY 7. — During the last few days, since the wind has freshened, the salt water constantly dashing over the raft has terribly punished the feet and legs of some of the sailors. Owen, whom the boatswain ever since the revolt has kept bound to the mast, is in a deplorable state, and, at our request, has been released from his restraint. Sandon and Burke are also suffering from the severe smarting caused in this way, and it is only owing to our more sheltered position on the aft-part of the raft, that we have not all shared the same inconvenience.

To-day the boatswain, maddened by starvation, laid hands upon everything that met his voracious eyes, and I could hear the grating of his teeth as he gnawed at fragments of sails and bits of wood, instinctively endeavoring to fill his stomach by putting the mucus into circulation. At length, by dint of an eager search, he came upon a piece of leather hanging to one of the spars that supported the platform. He snatched it off and devoured it greedily; and, as it was animal matter, it really seemed as though the absorption of the substance afforded him some temporary relief. In- stantly we all followed his example; a leather hat, the rims of caps, in short, anything that contained any animal matter at all, were gnawed and sucked with the utmost avidity. Never shall I forget the scene. We were no longer human — the impulses and instincts of brute beasts seemed to actuate our every movement.

For a moment the pangs of hunger were somewhat allayed; but some of us revolted against the loathsome food, and were seized either with violent nausea or absolute sick- ness. I must be pardoned for giving these distressing de- tails; but how otherwise can I depict the misery, moral and physical, which we are enduring? And with it all, I dare not venture to hope that we have reached the climax of our sufferings.

The conduct of Hobart, during the scene that I have just described, has only served to confirm my previous suspicions of him. He took no part in the almost fiendish energy with which we gnawed at our scraps of leather; and, although by his conduct of perpetual groanings, he might be considered to be dying of inanition, yet to me he has the appearance of being singularly exempt from the tortures which we are all enduring. But whether the hypocrite is being sustained by some secret store of food, I have been unable to discover.

Whenever the breeze drops the heat is overpowering; but although our allowance of water is very meager, at present the pangs of hunger far exceed the pain of thirst. It has often been remarked that extreme thirst is far less endurable than extreme hunger. Is it possible that still greater agonies are in store for us? I cannot, dare not, believe it. For- tunately, the broken barrel still contains a few pints of water, and the other one has not yet been opened. But I am glad to say that notwithstanding our diminished numbers, and in spite of some opposition, the captain has thought right to reduce the daily allowance to half a pint for each person. As for the brandy, of which there is only a quart now left, it has been stowed away safely in the stern of the raft.

This evening has ended the sufferings of another of our companions, making our number now only fourteen. My attentions and Miss Herbey’s nursing could do nothing for Lieutenant Walter, and about half-past seven he expired in my arms.

Before he died, in a few broken words, he thanked Miss Herbey and myself for the kindness we had shown him. A crumpled letter fell from his hand,

and in a voice that was scarcely audible from weakness, he said :

“It is my mother’s letter; the last I had from her — she was expecting me home; but she will never see me more. Oh, put it to my lips — let me kiss it before I die. Mother! mother! Oh, my God!”

I placed the letter in his cold hand, and raised it to his lips; his eye lighted for a moment; we heard the faint sound of a kiss; and all was over!

CHAPTER XLI HUMAN FLESH FOR BAIT

JANUARY 8. — All night I remained by the side of the poor fellow’s corpse, and several times Miss Herbey joined me in my mournful watch.

Before daylight dawned, the body was quite cold, and as I knew there must be no delay in throwing it overboard, I asked Curtis to assist me in the sad office. The body was frightfully emaciated, and I had every hope that it would not float.

As soon as it was quite light, taking every precaution that no one should see what we were about, Curtis and I proceeded to our melancholy task. We took a few articles from the lieutenant’s pockets, which we purposed, if either of us should survive, to remit to his mother. But as we wrapped him in his tattered garments that would have to suffice for his winding sheet, I started back with a thrill of horror. The right foot had gone, leaving the leg a bleeding stump.

No doubt that, overcome by fatigue, I must have fallen asleep for an interval during the night, and some one had taken advantage of my slumber to mutilate the corpse. But who could have been guilty of so foul a deed? Curtis looked around with anger flashing in his eye; but all seemed as usual, and the silence was only broken by a few groans of agony.

But there was no time to be lost; perhaps we were already observed, and more horrible scenes might be likely to occur. Curtis said a few short prayers, and we cast the body into the sea. It sank immediately.

“They are feeding the sharks well, and no mistake,” said a voice behind me.

I turned round quickly, and found that it was Jynxstrop who had spoken.

As the boatswain now approached, I asked him whether he thought it possible that any of the wretched men could have taken the dead man’s foot.

“Oh, yes, I dare say,” he replied in a significant tone, “and perhaps they thought they were right.”

“Right! what do you mean?” I exclaimed.

“Well, sir,” he said coldly, “isn’t it better to eat a dead man than a living one?”

I was at a loss to comprehend him, and, turning away, laid myself down at the end of the raft.

Toward eleven o’clock a most suspicious incident occurred. The boatswain, who had cast his lines early in the morning, caught three large cod, each more than thirty inches long, of the species which, when dried, is known by the name of stock-fish. Scarcely had he hauled them on board when the sailors made a dash at them, and it was with the utmost dif- ficulty that Curtis, Falsten and myself could restore order, so that we might divide the fish into equal portions. Three cod were not much among fourteen starving persons, but, small as the quantity was, it was allotted in strictly equal shares. Most of us devoured the food raw, almost I might say, alive; only Curtis, Andre, and Miss Herbey having the patience to wait until their allowance had been boiled at a fire which they made with a few scraps of wood. For my- self, I confess that I swallowed my portion of fish as it was — raw and bleeding. M. Letourneur followed my example; the poor man devoured his food like a famished wolf, and it is only a wonder to me how, after his lengthened fast, he came to be alive at all.

The boatswain’s delight at his success was excessive, and amounted almost to delirium. I went up to him, and en- couraged him to repeat his attempt.

“Oh, yes,” he said; “I’ll try again. I’ll try again.”

“And why not try at once?” I asked.

“Not now,” he said evasively; “the night is the best time for catching large fish. Besides, I must manage to get some bait, for we have been improvident enough not to save a single scrap.”

“But you have succeeded once without bait; why may you not succeed again?”

“Oh, I had some very good bait last night,” he said.

I stared at him in amazement. He steadily returned my gaze, but said nothing.

“Have you none left?” at last I asked.

“Yes!” he almost whispered, and left me without another word.

Our meal, meager as it had been, served to rally our shat- tered energies; our hopes were slightly raised; there was no reason why the boatswain should not have the same good luck again.

One evidence of the degree to which our spirits were re- vived was that our minds were no longer fixed upon the miserable present and hopeless future, but we began to recall and discuss the past; and M. Letourneur, Andre, Mr. Fal- sten and I, held a long conversation with the captain about the various incidents of our eventful voyage, speaking of our lost companions, of the fire, or the stranding of the ship, of our sojourn on Ham Rock, of the springing of the leak, of our terrible voyage in the top-masts, of the construction of the raft, and of the storm. All these things seemed to have happened so long ago, and yet we were living still. Living, did I say? Ay, if such an existence as ours could be called a life, fourteen of us were living still. Who would be the next to go? We should then be thirteen.

“An unlucky number!” said Andre, with a mournful smile.

During the night the boatswain cast his lines from the stern of the raft, and, unwilling to trust them to anyone else, remained watching them himself. In the morning I went to ascertain what success had attended his patience. It was scarcely light, and with eager eyes he was peering down into the water. He had neither seen nor heard me coming.

“Well, boatswain!” I said, touching him on the shoulder.

He turned round quickly.

“Those villainous sharks have eaten every morsel of my bait,” he said, in a desponding voice.

“And you have no more left?” I asked.

“No more,” he said. Then grasping my arm, he added, “and that only shows me that it is no good doing things by halves.”

The truth flashed upon me at once, and I laid my hand upon his mouth. Poor Walter!

CHAPTER XLII OXIDE OF COPPER POISONING

JANUARY 9 and10. — On the 9th the wind dropped, and there was a dead calm; not a ripple disturbed the surface of the long undulations as they rose and fell beneath us; and if it were not for the slight current which is carrying us we know not whither, the raft would be absolutely stationary.

The heat was intolerable; our thirst more intolerable still; and now it was that for the first time I fully realized how the insufficiency of drink could cause torture more unendurable than the pangs of hunger. Mouth, throat, pharynx, all alike were parched and dry, every gland becoming hard as horn under the action of the hot air we breathed. At my urgent solicitation, the captain was for once induced to double our allowance of water; and this relaxation of the ordinary rule enabled us to attempt to slake our thirst four times in the day, instead of only twice. I use the word “attempt” advisedly; for the water at the bottom of the barrel though kept covered by a sail, became so warm that it was perfectly flat and unrefreshing.

It was a most trying day, and the sailors relapsed into a condition of deep despondency. The moon was nearly full, but when she rose the breeze did not return. Continuance of high temperature in daytime is a sure proof that we have been carried far to the south, and here, on this illimitable ocean, we have long ceased even to look for land; it might almost seem as though this globe of ours had veritably be- come a liquid sphere!

To-day we are still becalmed, and the temperature is as high as ever. The air is heated like a furnace, and the sun scorches like fire. The torments of famine are all forgotten; our thoughts are concentrated with fevered expectation upon the longed-for moment when Curtis shall dole out the scanty measure of lukewarm water that makes up our ration. Oh for one good draught, even if it should exhaust the whole supply! At least, it seems as if we then could die in peace!

About noon we were startled by sharp cries of agony, and looking round, I saw Owen writhing in the most horrible convulsions. I went toward him, for, detestable as his con- duct had been, common humanity prompted me to see whether I could afford him any relief. But before I reached him, a shout from Flaypole arrested my attention. The man was up in the mast, and with great excitement pointing to the east.

“A ship! A ship!” he cried.

In an instant all were on their feet. Even Owen stopped his cries and stood erect. It was quite true that in the direc- tion indicated by Flaypole there was a white speck visible upon the horizon. But did it move? Would the sailors with their keen vision pronounce it to be a sail? A silence the most profound fell upon us all. I glanced at Curtis as he stood with folded arms intently gazing at the distant point. His brow was furrowed, and he contracted every fea- ture, as with half-closed eyes he concentrated his power of vision upon that one faint spot in the far off horizon.

But at length he dropped his arms and shook his head. I looked again, but the spot was no longer there. If it were a ship, that ship had disappeared; but probably it had been a mere reflection, or, more likely still, only the crest of some curling wave.

A deep dejection followed this phantom ray of hope. All returned to their accustomed places. Curtis alone remained motionless, but his eye no longer scanned the distant view.

Owen now began to shriek more wildly than ever. He presented truly a most melancholy sight; he writhed with the most hideous contortions, and had all the appearance of suffering from tetanus. His throat was contracted by repeated spasms, his tongue was parched, his body swollen, and his pulse, though feeble, was rapid and irregular. The poor wretch's symptoms were precisely such as to lead us to suspect that he had taken some corrosive poison. Of course it was quite out of our power to administer any antidote; all that we could devise was to make him swallow something that might act as an emetic. I asked Curtis for a little of the lukewarm water. As the contents of the broken barrel were now exhausted, the captain, in order to comply with my request, was about to tap the other barrel, when Owen started suddenly to his knees, and with a wild, unearthly shriek, exclaimed:

"No! no! no! of that water I will not touch a drop."

I supposed he did not understand what we were going to do, and endeavored to explain; but all in vain; he persisted in refusing to taste the water in the second barrel. I then tried to induce vomiting by tickling his uvula, and he brought off some bluish secretion from his stomach, the character of which confirmed our previous suspicions — that he had been poisoned by oxide of copper. We now felt convinced that any effort on our part to save him would be of no avail. The vomiting, however, had for the time relieved him, and he was able to speak.

Curtis and I both implored him to let us know what he had taken to bring about consequences so serious. His reply fell upon us as a startling blow.

The ill-fated wretch had stolen several pints of water from the barrel that had been untouched, and that water had poisoned him!

CHAPTER XLIII OWEN’S DEATH

JANUARY 11 to 14. — Owen’s convulsions returned with in- creased violence, and in the course of the night he expired in terrible agony. His body was thrown overboard almost directly, it had decomposed so rapidly that the flesh had not even consistency enough for any fragments of it to be re- served for the boatswain to use to bait his lines. A plague the man had been to us in his life; in his death he was now of no service!

And now, perhaps still more than ever, did the horror of our situation stare us in the face. There was no doubt that the poisoned barrel had at some time or other contained copperas; but what strange fatality had converted it into a water cask, or what fatality, stranger still, had caused it to be brought on board the raft, was a problem that none could solve. Little, however, did it matter now; the fact was evi- dent — the barrel was poisoned, and of water we had not a drop.

One and all, we fell into the gloomiest silence. We were too irritable to bear the sound of each other’s voices; and it did not require a word — a mere look or gesture was enough — to provoke us to anger that was little short of madness. How it was that we did not all become raving maniacs, I cannot tell.

Throughout the 12th no drain of moisture crossed our lips, and not a cloud arose to warrant the expectation of a passing shower; in the shade, if shade it might be called, the thermometer would have registered at least 100 deg. and per- haps considerably more.

No change next day. The salt water began to chafe my legs, but although the smarting was at times severe, it was an inconvenience to which I gave little heed; others who had suffered from the same trouble had become no worse. Oh! if this water that surrounds us could be reduced to vapor or to ice! its particles of salt extracted, it would be available for drink. But no! we have no appliances, and we must suffer on.

At the risk of being devoured by the sharks, the boatswain and two sailors took a morning bath, and as their plunge seemed to freshen them, I and three of my companions resolved to follow their example. We had never learned to swim, and had to be fastened to the end of a rope and lowered into the water, while Curtis, during the half hour of our bath, kept a sharp lookout to give warning of any danger from approaching sharks. No recommendation, however, on our part, nor any representation of the benefit we felt we had derived, could induce Miss Herbey to allay her sufferings in the same way.

At about eleven o’clock, the captain came up to me, and whispered in my ear:

“Don’t say a word, Mr. Kazallon; I do not want to raise false hopes, but I think I see a ship.”

It was as well that the captain had warned me; otherwise,

I should have raised an involuntary shout of joy; as it was

I had the greatest difficulty in restraining my expressions of

delight.

“Look behind to larboard,” he continued in an undertone.

Affecting an indifference which I was far from feeling, I cast an anxious glance to that quarter of the horizon of which he spoke, and there, although mine was not a nautical eye, I could plainly distinguish the outline of a ship under sail.

Almost at the same moment the boatswain who happened to be looking in the same direction, raised the cry, “Ship ahoy!”

Whether it was that no one believed it, or whether all energies were exhausted, certain it is that the announcement produced none of the effects that might have been expected. Not a soul exhibited the slightest emotion, and it was only when the boatswain had several times sung out his tidings that all eyes turned to the horizon. There, most undeniably, was the ship, but the question rose at once to the minds of all, and to the lips of many, “Would she see us?”

The sailors immediately began discussing the build of the vessel, and made all sorts of conjectures as to the direction she was taking. Curtis was far more deliberate in his judg- ment. After examining her attentively for some time, he said, “She is a brig running close upon the wind, on the star- board tack. If she keeps her course for a couple of hours, she will come right athwart our tracks.”

A couple of hours! The words sounded to our ears like a couple of centuries. The ship might change her course at any moment; closely trimmed as she was, it was very probable that she was only tacking about to catch the wind, in which case, as soon as she felt a breeze, she would résumé her larboard tack and make away again. On the other hand, if she was really sailing with the wind, she would come nearer to us, and there would be good ground for hope.

Meantime, no exertion must be spared, and no means left untried, to make our position known. The brig was about twelve miles to the east of us, so that it was out of the question to think of any cries of ours being overheard; but Curtis gave directions that every possible signal should be made. We had no firearms by which we could attract attention, and nothing else occurred to us beyond hoisting a flag of distress. Miss Herbey's red shawl, as being of a color most distinguishable against the background of sea and sky, was run up to the mast-head, and was caught by the light breeze that just then was ruffling the surface of the water. As a drowning man clutches at a straw, so our hearts bounded with hope every time that our poor flag fluttered in the wind.

For an hour our feelings alternated between hope and despair. The ship was evidently making her way in the direction of the raft, but every now and then she seemed to stop, and then our hearts would almost stand still with agony lest she was going to put about. She carried all her canvas, even to her royals and stay-sails, but her hull was only partially visible above the horizon.

How slowly she advanced! The breeze was very, very feeble, and perhaps soon it would drop altogether! We felt that we would give years of our life to know the result of the coming hour.

At half past twelve the captain and the boatswain considered that the brig was about nine miles away; she had, therefore, gained only three miles in an hour and a half, and it was doubtful whether the light breeze that had been passing over our heads had reached her at all. I fancied, too, that her sails were no longer filled, but were hanging loose against her masts. Turning to the direction of the wind, I tried to make out some chance of a rising breeze; but no, the waves were calm and torpid, and the little puff of air that had aroused our hopes had died away across the sea.

I stood aft with M. Letourneur, Andre and Miss Herbey, and our glances perpetually wandered from the distant ship to our captain’s face. Curtis stood leaning against the mast, with the boatswain by his side; their eyes seemed never for a moment to cease to watch the brig, but their countenances clearly expressed the varying emotions that passed through their minds. Not a word was uttered, nor was the silence broken, until the carpenter exclaimed, in accents of despair:

“She’s putting about!”

All started up — some to their knees, others to their feet. The boatswain dropped a frightful oath. The ship was still nine miles away, and at such a distance it was impossible for our signal to be seen; our tiny raft, a mere speck upon the waters, would be lost in the intense irradiation of the sun-beams. If only we could be seen, no doubt all would be well; no captain would have the barbarous inhumanity to leave us to our fate; but there had been no chance; only too well we knew that we had not been within range of sight.

“My friends,” said Curtis, “we must make a fire; it is our last and only chance.”

Some planks were quickly loosened and thrown into a heap upon the fore part of the raft. They were damp and troublesome to light; but the very dampness made the smoke more dense, and ere long a tall column of dusky fumes was rising straight upward in the air. If darkness should come on before the brig was completely out of view, the flames, we hoped might still be visible. But the hours passed on; the fire died out; and yet no signs of help.

The temper of resignation now deserted me entirely; faith, hope, confidence — all vanished from my mind, and, like the boatswain, I swore long and loudly. A gentle hand was laid upon my arm, and turning round I saw Miss Herbey with her finger pointing to the sky. I could stand it no longer, but gliding underneath the tent I hid my face in my hands and wept aloud.

Meanwhile the brig had altered her track, and was moving slowly to the east. Three hours later and the keenest eye could not have discerned her top-sails above the horizon.

CHAPTER XLIV THE DEPTHS OF DESPAIR

JANUARY 15. — After this further shattering of our ex- cited hopes, death alone now stares us in the face; slow and lingering as that death may be, sooner or later it must in- evitably come.

To-day some clouds that rose in the west have brought us a few puffs of wind; and in spite of our prostration, we ap- preciate the moderation, slight as it is, in the temperature. To my parched throat the air seemed a little less trying; but it is now seven days since the boatswain took his haul of fish, and during that period we had eaten nothing; even Andre Letourneur finished yesterday, the last morsel of the biscuit which his sorrowful and self-denying father had in- trusted to my charge.

Jynxstrop, the negro, has broken loose from his confine- ment, but Curtis has taken no measures for putting him again under restraint. It is not to be apprehended that the miserable fellow and his accomplices, weakened as they are by their protracted fast, will attempt to do us any mischief now.

Some huge sharks made their appearance to-day, cleaving the water rapidly with their great black fins. The monsters came up close to the edge of the raft, and Flaypole, who was leaning over, narrowly escaped having his arm snapped off by one of them. I could not help regarding them as living sepulchers, which ere long might swallow up our miserable carcasses; yet, withal, I profess that my feelings were those of fascination rather than horror.

The boatswain, who stood with clenched teeth and dilated eye, regarded these sharks from quite another point of view. He thought about devouring the sharks, not about the sharks devouring him; and if he could succeed in catching one, I doubt if one of us would reject the tough and untempting flesh. He determined to make the attempt, and as he had no whirl which he could fasten to his rope he set to work to find something that might serve as a substitute. Curtis and Dowlas were consulted, and after a short conversation, during which they kept throwing bits of rope and spars into the water in order to entice the sharks to remain by the raft, Dowlas went and fetched his carpenter’s tool, which is at once a hatchet and a hammer. Of this he proposed to make the whirl of which they were in need, under the hope that either the sharp edge of the adze or the pointed extremity opposite would stick firmly into the jaws of any shark that might swallow it. The wooden handle of the hammer was secured to the rope, which, in its turn was tightly fastened to the raft.

With eager, almost breathless, excitement we stood watch- ing the preparations, at the same time using every means in our power to attract the attention of the sharks. As soon as the whirl was ready the boatswain began to think about bait, and, talking rapidly to himself, ransacked every corner of the raft, as though he expected to find some dead body coming opportunely to sight. But his search ended in noth- ing; and the only plan that suggested itself was again to have recourse to Miss Herbey’s red shawl, of which a frag- ment was wrapped around the head of the hammer. After testing the strength of his line, and reassuring himself that it was fastened firmly both to the hammer and to the raft, the boatswain lowered it into the water.

The sea was quite transparent, and any object was clearly visible to a depth of two hundred feet below the surface. Leaning over the low parapet of the raft we looked on in breathless silence, as the scarlet rag, distinct as it was against the blue mass of water, made its slow descent. But one by one the sharks seemed to disappear. They could not, how- ever, have gone far away, and it was not likely that any- thing in the shape of bait dropped near them would long escape their keen voracity.

Suddenly, without speaking, the boatswain raised his hand and pointed to a dark mass skimming along the surface of the water, and making straight in our direction. It was a shark, certainly not less than twelve feet long. As soon as the creature was about four fathoms from the raft, the boatswain gently drew in his line until the whirl was in such a position that the shark must cross right over it; at the same time he shook the line a little, that he might give the whirl the appearance, if he could, of being something alive and moving. As the creature came near, my heart beat violently; I could see its eyes flashing above the waves; and its gaping jaws, as it turned half over on its back, exhibited long rows of pointed teeth.

I know not who it was, but some one at that moment uttered an involuntary cry of horror. The shark came to a standstill, turned about, and escaped quite out of sight. The boatswain was pale with anger.

“The first man who speaks,” he said, “I will kill him on the spot.”

Again he applied himself to his task. The whirl was again lowered, this time to the depth of twenty fathoms, but for half an hour or more not a shark could be distin- guished; but as the waters far below seemed somehow to be troubled I could not help believing that some of the brutes at least were still there.

All at once, with a violent jerk, the cord was wrested from the boatswain’s hands; firmly attached, however, as it was to the raft, it was not lost. The bait had been seized by a shark, and the iron had made good its hold upon the crea- ture’s flesh.

“Now, then, my lads,” cried the boatswain, “haul away!”

Passengers and sailors, one and all, put forth what strength they had to drag the rope, but so violent were the creature’s struggles that it required all our efforts (and it is needless to say they were willing enough) to bring it to the surface. At length, after exertions that almost exhausted us, the water became agitated by the violent flappings of the tail and fins; and looking down I saw the huge carcass of the shark writhing convulsively amid waves that were stained with blood.

“Steady! steady!” said the boatswain, as the head ap- peared above

The whirl had passed right through the jaw into the mid- dle of the throat, so that no struggle on the part of the ani- mal could possibly release it. Dowlas seized the hatchet, ready to dispatch the brute the moment it should be landed on the raft. A short sharp snap was heard. The shark had closed its jaws, and bitten through the wooden handle of the hammer. Another moment and it had turned round and was completely gone.

A howl of despair burst from all our lips. All the labor and the patience, all had been in vain. Dowlas made a few more unsuccessful attempts, but as the whirl was lost, and they had no means of replacing it, there was no further room for hope. They did, indeed, lower some cords twisted into running knots, but (as might have been ex- pected) these only slipped over, without holding, the slimy bodies of the sharks. As a last resource the boatswain allowed his naked leg to hang over the side of the raft; the monsters, however, were proof even against this at- traction.

Reduced once again to a gloomy despondency, all turned to their places, to await the end that can not now be long deferred.

Just as I moved away I heard the boatswain say to

Curtis:

“Captain, when shall we draw lots?”

The captain made no reply.

CHAPTER XLV OUR THIRST RELIEVED

JANUARY 16. — If the crew of any passing vessel had caught sight of us as we lay still and inanimate upon our sail-cloth, they would scarcely, at first sight, have hesitated to pronounce us dead.

My sufferings were terrible; tongue, lips, and throat were so parched and swollen that if food had been at hand I question whether I could have swallowed it. So ex- asperated were the feelings of us all, however, that we glanced at each other with looks as savage as though we were about to slaughter and without delay eat up one an- other.

The heat was aggravated by the atmosphere being some- what stormy. Heavy vapors gathered on the horizon, and there was a look as if it were raining all around. Longing eyes and gasping mouths turned involuntarily toward the clouds, and M. Letourneur, on bended knee, was raising his hands, as it might be in supplication to the relentless skies.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning. I listened for dis- tant rumblings which might announce an approaching storm, but although the vapors had obstructed the sun's rays, they no longer presented the appearance of being charged with electricity. Thus our prognostications ended in disappointment; the clouds, which in the early morning had been marked by the distinctness of their outline, had melted one into another and assumed an uniform dull gray tint; in fact, we were enveloped in an ordinary fog. But was it not still possible that this fog might turn to rain?

Happily this hope was destined to be realized; for in a very short time, Dowlas, with a shout of delight, declared that rain was actually coming; and sure enough, not half a mile from the raft, the dark parallel streaks against the sky testified that there at least rain was falling. I fancied I could see the drops rebounding from the surface of the water. The wind was fresh and bringing the cloud right on toward us, yet we could not suppress our trepidation lest it should exhaust itself before it reached us.

But no; very soon large heavy drops began to fall, and the storm-cloud, passing over our heads, was outpouring its contents upon us. The shower, however, was very transient; already a bright streak of light along the horizon marked the limit of the cloud and warned us that we must be quick to make the most of what it had to give us. Curtis had placed the broken barrel in the position that was most exposed, and every sail was spread out to the fullest extent our dimensions would allow.

We all laid ourselves down flat upon our backs and kept our mouths wide open. The rain splashed into my face, wetted my lips, and trickled down my throat. Never can I describe the ecstasy with which I imbibed that renovating moisture. The parched and swollen glands relaxed, I breathed afresh, and my whole being seemed revived with a strange and requickened life.

The rain lasted about twenty minutes, when the cloud, only half exhausted, passed quite away from over us.

We grasped each other's hands as we rose from the platform on which we had been lying, and mutual congratulations, mingled with gratitude, poured forth from our long silent lips. Hope, however evanescent it might be, for the moment had returned, and we yielded to the expectation that, ere long, other and more abundant clouds might come and replenish our store.

The next consideration was how to preserve and economize what little had been collected by the barrel, or imbibed by the outspread sails. It was found that only a few pints of rain-water had fallen into the barrel; to this small quantity the sailors were about to add what they could by wringing out the saturated sails, when Curtis made them desist from their intention.

“Stop, stop!” he said “we must wait a moment; we must see whether this water from the sails is drinkable.”

I looked at him in amazement. Why should not this be as drinkable as the other? He squeezed a few drops out of one of the folds of a sail into a tin pot, and put it to his lips. To my surprise, he rejected it immediately, and upon tasting it for myself I found it not merely brackish, but briny as the sea itself. The fact was that the canvas had been so long exposed to the action of the waves, that it had become thoroughly impregnated by salt, which of course was taken up again by the water that fell upon it. Dis- appointed we were; but with several pints of water in our possession, we were not only contented for the present, but sanguine in our prospect for the future.

CHAPTER XLVI MY FAST IS BROKEN

JANUARY 17. — As a natural consequence of the allevia- tion of our thirst, the pangs of hunger returned more vio- lently than ever. Although we had no bait, and even if we had we could not use it for want of a whirl, we could not help asking whether no possible means could be devised for securing one out of the many sharks that were still per- petually swarming about the raft. Armed with knives, like the Indians in the pearl fisheries, was it not practicable to attack the monsters in their own element? Curtis ex- pressed his willingness personally to make the attempt, but so numerous were the sharks that we would not for one moment hear of his risking his life in a venture of which the danger was as great as the success was doubtful.

By plunging into the sea, or by gnawing at a piece of metal, we could always, or at least often, do something that cheated us into believing that we were mitigating the pains of thirst; but with hunger it was different. The prospect, too, of rain seemed hopeful, while for getting food there appeared no chance; and, as we knew that nothing could compensate for the lack of nutritive matter, we were soon all cast down again. Shocking to confess, it would be untrue to deny that we surveyed each other with the eye of an eager longing; and I need hardly explain to what a degree of savageness the one idea that haunted us had re- duced our feelings.

Ever since the storm-cloud brought us the too transient shower the sky has been tolerably clear, and although at that time the wind had slightly freshened, it has since dropped, and the sail hangs idly against our mast. Except for the trifling relief it brings by modifying the tempera- ture, we care little now for any breeze. Ignorant as we are as to what quarter of the Atlantic we have been carried by the currents, it matters very little to us from what direc- tion the wind may blow if only it would bring, in rain or dew, the moisture of which we are so dreadfully in need.

My brain is haunted by most horrible nightmares; not that I suppose I am in anyway more distressed than my companions, who are lying in their usual places, vainly endeavoring to forget their sufferings in sleep.

After a time I fell into a restless, dreamy doze. I was neither asleep nor awake. How long I remained in that state of stupor I could hardly say, but at length a strange sensation brought me to myself. Was I dreaming, or was there not really some unaccustomed odor floating in the air? My nostrils became distended, and I could scarcely suppress a cry of astonishment; but some instinct kept me quiet, and I laid myself down again with the puzzled sen- sation sometimes experienced when we have forgotten a word or name. Only a few minutes, however, had elapsed before another still more savory puff induced me to take several long inhalations. Suddenly, the truth seemed to flash across my mind. “Surely,” I muttered to myself, “this must be cooked meat that I can smell.”

Again and again I sniffed, and became more convinced than ever that my senses were not deceiving me. But from what part of the raft could the smell proceed? I rose to my knees, and having satisfied myself that the odor came from the front, I crept stealthily as a cat under the sails and between the spars in that direction. Following the promptings of my scent, rather than my vision, like a blood- hound in track of his prey. I searched everywhere I could, now finding, now losing, the smell according to my change of position, or the dropping of the wind. At length I got the true scent, once for all, so that I could go straight to the object for which I was in search.

Approaching the starboard angle of the raft, I came to the conclusion that the smell that had thus keenly ex- cited my cravings was the smell of smoked bacon; the mem- branes of my tongue almost bristled with the intenseness of my longing.

Crawling along a little farther, under a thick roll of sail-cloth, I was not long in securing my prize. Forcing my arm below the roll, I felt my hand in contact with some- thing wrapped up in paper. I clutched it up, and carried it off to a place where I could examine it by the help of the light of the moon that had now made its appearance above the horizon. I almost shrieked for joy. It was a piece of bacon. True, it did not weigh many ounces, but small as it was it would suffice to alleviate the pangs of hunger for one day at least. I was just on the point of raising it to my mouth, when a hand was laid upon my arm. It was only by a most determined effort that I kept myself from screaming out. One instant more, and I found myself face to face with Hobart.

In a moment I understood all. Plainly this rascal Ho- bart had saved some provisions from the wreck, upon which he had been subsisting ever since. The steward had pro- vided for himself, while all around him were dying of starvation. Detestable wretch! This accounts for the inconsistency of his well-to-do looks and his pitiable groans. Vile hypocrite!

Yet why, it struck me, should I complain? Was not I reaping the benefit of that secret store that he, for himself, had saved?

But Hobart had no idea of allowing me the peaceable possession of what he held to be his own. He made a dash at the fragment of bacon, and seemed determined to wrest it from my grasp. We struggled with each other, but although our wrestling was very violent, it was very noise- less.

We were both of us aware that it was absolutely neces- sary that not one of those on board should know anything at all about the prize for which we were contending. Nor was my own determination lessened by hearing him groan out that it was his last, his only morsel. “His!” I thought; “it shall be mine now!”

And still careful that no noise of commotion should arise, I threw him on his back, and grasping his throat so that he gurgled again, I held him down until, in rapid mouth- fuls, I had swallowed the last scrap of the food for which we had fought so hard.

I released my prisoner, and quietly crept back to my own quarters.

And not a soul is aware that I have broken my fast!

CHAPTER XLVII HOBART HANGS HIMSELF

JANUARY 18. — After this excitement I awaited the ap- proach of day with a strange anxiety. My conscience told me that Hobart had the right to denounce me in the pres- ence of all my fellow-passengers; yet my alarm was vain. The idea of my proceedings being exposed by him was quite absurd; in a moment he would himself be murdered without pity by the crew, if it should be revealed that, un- known to them, he had been living on some private store which, by clandestine cunning, he had reserved. But, in spite of my anxiety, I had a longing for day to come.

The bit of food that I had thus stolen was very small; but small as it was it had alleviated my hunger; and I was now tortured with remorse, because I had not shared the meager morsel with my fellow-sufferers. Miss Herbey, Andre, his father, all had been forgotten, and from the bot- tom of my heart I repented of my cruel selfishness.

Meantime the moon rose high in the heavens, and the first streaks of dawn appeared. There is no twilight in these low latitudes, and the full daylight came well nigh at once. I had not closed my eyes since my encounter with the steward, and ever since the first blush of day I had labored under the impression that I could see some unusual dark mass half way up the mast. But although it again and again caught my eye, it hardly roused my curiosity, and I did not rise from the bundle of sails on which I was lying to ascertain what it really was. But no sooner did the rays of the sun fall upon it than I saw at once that it was the body of a man, attached to a rope, and swinging to and fro with the motion of the raft.

A horrible presentiment carried me to the foot of the mast, and, just as I had guessed, Hobart had hanged him- self. I could not for a moment doubt that it was I myself that had impelled him to the suicide. A cry of horror had scarcely escaped my lips, when my fellow-passengers were at my side, and the rope was cut. Then came the sailors. And what was it that made the group gather so eagerly around the body? Was it a humane desire to see whether any sparks of life remained? No, indeed; the corpse was cold, and the limbs were rigid; there was no chance that animation should be restored. What then was it that kept them lingering so close around? It was only too apparent what they were about to do.

But I did not, could not, look. I refused to take part in the horrible repast that was proposed. Neither would Miss Herbey, Andre, nor his father, consent to alleviate their pangs of hunger by such revolting means. I know nothing for certain as to what Curtis did, and I did not venture to inquire; but of the others, — Falsten, Dowlas, the boatswain, and all the rest, — I know that, to assuage their cravings, they consented to reduce themselves to the level of beasts of prey; they were transformed from human beings into ravenous brutes.

The four of us who sickened at the idea of partaking of the horrid meal withdrew to the seclusion of our tent; it was bad enough to hear, without witnessing the appalling operation. But, in truth, I had the greatest difficulty in the world in preventing Andre from rushing out upon the can- nibals, and snatching the odious food from their clutches. I represented to him the hopelessness of his attempt, and tried to reconcile him by telling him that if they liked the food they had a right to it. Hobart had not been mur- dered; he had died by his own hand; and, after all, as the boatswain had once remarked to me, “It was better to eat a dead man than a live one.”

Do what I would, however, I could not quiet Andre’s feeling of abhorrence; in his disgust and loathing he seemed for the time to have quite forgotten his own sufferings.

Meanwhile, there was no concealing the truth that we were ourselves dying of starvation, while our eight com- panions would probably, by their loathsome diet, escape that frightful destiny. Owing to his secret hoard of provisions Hobart had been by far the strongest among us; he had been supported, so that no organic disease had affected his tissues, and really might be said to be in good health when his chagrin drove him to his desperate suicide. But what was I thinking of! whither were my meditations carrying me away? was it not coming to pass that the cannibals were rousing my envy instead of exciting my horror?

Very shortly after this I heard Dowlas talking about the possibility of obtaining salt by evaporating seawater in the sun; “and then,” he added, “we can salt down the rest.”

The boatswain assented to what the carpenter had said, and probably the suggestion was adopted.

Silence, the most profound, now reigns upon the raft. I presume that nearly all have gone to sleep. One thing I do know, that they are no longer hungry.

CHAPTER XLVIII HOBART'S BODY STOLEN

JANUARY 19. — All through the day the sky remained un- clouded and the heat intense; and night came on without bringing much sensible moderation in the temperature. I was unable to get any sleep, and, toward morning, was dis- turbed by hearing an angry clamor going on outside the tent; it aroused M. Letourneur, Andre, and Miss Herbey, as much as myself, and we were anxious to ascertain the cause of the tumult.

The boatswain, Dowlas, and all the sailors were storming at each other in frightful rage; and Curtis, who had come forward from the stern, was endeavoring to pacify them.

"But who has done it? we must know who has done it," said Dowlas, scowling with vindictive passion on the group around him.

"There's a thief," howled out the boatswain, "and he shall be found! Let's know who has taken it."

"I haven't taken it!" "Nor I! Nor I!" cried the sailors one after another.

And then they set to work again to ransack every quarter of the raft; they rolled every spar aside, they overturned everything on board, and only grew more and more incensed with anger as their search proved fruitless."

"Can YOU tell us," said the boatswain, coming up to me, "who is the thief?"

"Thief!" I replied. "I don't know what you mean."

And while we were speaking the others all came up to- gether, and told me that they had looked everywhere else, and that they were going now to search the tent.

“Shame!” I said. “You ought to allow those whom you know to be dying of hunger at least to die in peace. There is not one of us who has left the tent all night. Why suspect us?”

“Now just look here, Mr. Kazallon,” said the boatswain, in a voice which he was endeavoring to calm down into moderation, “we are not accusing you of anything; we know well enough you, and all the rest of you, had a right to your shares as much as anybody; but that isn’t it. It’s all gone somewhere, every bit.”

“Yes,” said Sandon gruffly; “it’s all gone somewheres, and we are going to search the tent.”

Resistance was useless, and Miss Herbey, M. Letourneur, and Andre were all turned out.

I confess I was very fearful. I had a strong suspicion that for the sake of his son, for whom he was ready to ven- ture anything, M. Letourneur had committed the theft; in that case I knew that nothing would have prevented the in- furiated men from tearing the devoted father to pieces. I beckoned to Curtis for protection, and he came and stood beside me. He said nothing, but waited with his hands in his pockets, and I think I am not mistaken in my belief that there was some sort of a weapon in each.

To my great relief the search was ineffectual. There was no doubt that the carcass of the suicide had been thrown overboard, and the rage of the disappointed cannibals knew no bounds.

Yet who had ventured to do the deed? I looked at M. Letourneur and Miss Herbey; but their countenances at once betrayed their ignorance. Andre turned his face away, and his eyes did not meet my own. Probably it is he; but, if it be, I wonder whether he has reckoned up the consequences of so rash an act.

CHAPTER XLIX THE NEGRO BECOMES INSANE

JANUARY 20 to 22. — For the day or two after the horrible repast of the 18th those who had partaken of it appeared to suffer comparatively little either from hunger or thirst; but for the four of us who had tasted nothing, the agony of suffering grew more and more intense. It was enough to make us repine over the loss of the provision that had so mysteriously gone; and if any one of us should die, I doubt whether the survivors would a second time resist the temptation to assuage their pangs by tasting human flesh.

Before long, all the cravings of hunger began to return to the sailors, and I could see their eyes greedily glancing upon us, starved as they knew us to be, as though they were reckoning our hours, and already were preparing to consume us as their prey.

As is always the case with shipwrecked men, we were tormented by thirst far more than by hunger; and if, in the height of our sufferings, we had been offered our choice between a few drops of water and a few crumbs of biscuit, I do not doubt that we should, without exception, have preferred to take the water.

And what a mockery to our condition did it seem that all this while there was water, water, nothing but water, everywhere around us! Again and again, incapable of comprehending how powerless it was to relieve me, I put a few drops within my lips, but only with the invariable result of bringing on a most trying nausea, and rendering my thirst more unendurable than before.

Forty-two days had passed since we quitted the sinking Chancellor. There could be no hope now; all of us must die, and by the most deplorable of deaths. I was quite conscious that a mist was gathering over my brain; I felt my senses sinking into a condition of torpor; I made an effort, but all in vain, to master the delirium that I was aware was taking possession of my reason. It is out of my power to decide for how long I lost my consciousness; but when I came to myself I found that Miss Herbey had folded some wet bandages around my forehead. I am somewhat better; but I am weakened, mind and body, and I am conscious that I have not long to live.

A frightful fatality occurred to-day. The scene was terrible. Jynxstrop the negro went raving mad. Curtis and several of the men tried their utmost to control him, but in spite of everything he broke loose, and tore up and down the raft, uttering fearful yells. He had gained possession of a handspike, and rushed upon us all with the ferocity of an infuriated tiger; how we contrived to escape mischief from his attacks, I know not. All at once, by one of those unaccountable impulses of madness, his rage turned against himself. With his teeth and nails he gnawed and tore away at his own flesh; dashing the blood into our faces, he shrieked out with a demoniacal grin, “Drink, drink!” and flinging us gory morsels, kept saying “Eat, eat!” In the midst of his insane shrieks he made a sudden pause, then dashing back again from the stern to the front, he made a bound and disappeared beneath the waves.

Falsten, Dowlas, and the boatswain, made a rush that at least they might secure the body; but it was too late; all that they could see was a crimson circle in the water, and some huge sharks disporting themselves around the spot.

CHAPTER L ALL HOPE GONE

JANUARY 23. — Only eleven of us now remain; and the probability is very great that every day must now carry off at least its one victim, and perhaps more. The end of the tragedy is rapidly approaching, and save for the chance, which is next to an impossibility, of our sighting land, or being picked up by a passing vessel, ere another week has elapsed not a single survivor of the Chancellor will remain.

The wind freshened considerably in the night, and it is now blowing pretty briskly from the northeast. It has filled our sail, and the white foam in our wake is an indication that we are making some progress. The captain reckons that we must be advancing at the rate of about three miles an hour.

Curtis and Falsten are certainly in the best condition among us, and in spite of their extreme emaciation they bear up wonderfully under the protracted hardships we have all endured. Words cannot describe the melancholy state to which poor Miss Herbey bodily is reduced; her whole being seems absorbed into her soul, but that soul is brave and resolute as ever, living in heaven rather than on earth. The boatswain, strong, energetic man that he was, has shrunk into a mere shadow of his former self, and I doubt whether anyone would recognize him to be the same man. He keeps perpetually to one corner of the raft, his head dropped upon his chest, and his long, bony hands lying upon knees that project sharply from his worn-out trowsers. Unlike Miss Herbey, his spirit seems to have sunk into apathy, and it is at times difficult to believe that he is living at all, so motion- less and statue-like does he sit.

Silence continues to reign upon the raft. Not a sound, not even a groan, escapes our lips. We do not exchange ten words in the course of the day, and the few syllables that our parched tongues and swollen lips can pronounce are almost unintelligible. Wasted and bloodless, we are no longer human beings; we are specters.

CHAPTER LI FLAYPOLE BECOMES DELIRIOUS

JANUARY 24. — 1 have inquired more than once of Curtis if he has the faintest idea to what quarter of the Atlantic we have drifted, and each time he has been unable to give me a decided answer, though from his general observation of the direction of the wind and currents he imagines that we have been carried westward, that is to say, toward the land.

To-day the breeze has dropped entirely, but the heavy swell is still upon the sea, and is an unquestionable sign that a tempest has been raging at no great distance. The raft labors hard against the waves, and Curtis, Falsten, and the boatswain, employ the little energy that remains to them in strengthening the joints. Why do they give themselves such trouble? Why not let the few frail planks part asunder, and allow the ocean to terminate our miserable existence? Certain it seems that our sufferings must have reached their utmost limit, and nothing could exceed the torture that we are enduring. The sky pours down upon us a heat like that of molten lead, and the sweat that saturates the tattered clothes that hang about our bodies goes far to aggravate the agonies of our thirst. No words of mine can describe this dire distress; these sufferings are beyond human estimate.

Even bathing, the only means of refreshment that we possessed, has now become impossible, for ever since Jynx- strop's death the sharks have hung about the raft in shoals.

To-day I tried to gain a few drops of fresh water by evaporation, but even with the exercise of the greatest pa- tience, it was with the utmost difficulty that I obtained enough to moisten a little scrap of linen; and the only kettle that we had was so old and battered, that it would not bear the fire, so that I was obliged to give up the attempt in despair.

Falsten is now almost exhausted, and if he survives us at all, it can only be for a few days. Whenever I raised my head I always failed to see him, but he was probably lying sheltered somewhere beneath the sails. Curtis was the only man who remained on his feet, but with indomitable pluck he continued to stand on the front of the raft, waiting, watching, hoping. To look at him, with his unflagging energy, almost tempted me to imagine that he did well to hope, but I dared not entertain one sanguine thought, and there I lay, waiting, nay, longing for death.

How many hours passed away thus I cannot tell, but after a time a loud peal of laughter burst upon my ear. Someone else, then, was going mad, I thought; but the idea did not rouse me in the least. The laughter was repeated with greater vehemence, but I never raised my head. Presently I caught a few incoherent words.

“Fields, fields, gardens and trees! Look, there’s an inn under the trees! Quick, quick! brandy, gin, water! a guinea a drop! I’ll pay for it! I’ve lots of money! lots! lots!”

Poor deluded wretch! I thought again; the wealth of a nation could not buy a drop of water here. There was silence for a minute, when all of a sudden I heard the shout of “Land! land!”

The words acted upon me like an electric shock, and, with a frantic effort, I started to my feet. No land, indeed, was visible, but Flaypole, laughing, singing, and gesticulating, was raging up and down the raft. Sight, taste, and hearing — all were gone; but the cerebral derangement supplied their place, and in imagination the maniac was conversing with absent friends, inviting them into the George Inn at Cardiff, offering them gin, whiskey, and, above all, water! Stumbling at every step, and singing in a cracked, discordant voice, he staggered about among us like an intoxicated man. With the loss of his senses all his sufferings had vanished, and his thirst was appeased. It was hard not to wish to be a partaker of his hallucination.

Dowlas, Falsten, and the boatswain, seemed to think that the unfortunate wretch would, like Jynxstrop, put an end to himself by leaping into the sea; but, determined this time to preserve the body, that it might serve a better purpose than merely feeding the sharks, they rose and followed the madman everywhere he went, keeping a strict eye upon his every movement.

But the matter did not end as they expected. As though he were really intoxicated by the stimulants of which he had been raving, Flaypole at last sank down in a heap in a cor- ner of the raft, where he lay lost in a heavy slumber.

CHAPTER LII I DECIDE TO COMMIT SUICIDE

JANUARY 25. — Last night was very misty, and for some unaccountable reason, one of the hottest that can be imagined. The atmosphere was really so stifling, that it seemed as if it only required a spark to set it alight. The raft was not only quite stationary, but did not even rise and fall with any motion of the waves.

During the night I tried to count how many there were now on board, but I was utterly unable to collect my ideas sufficiently to make the enumeration. Sometimes I counted ten, sometimes twelve, and although I knew that eleven, since Jynxstrop was dead, was the correct number, I could never bring my reckoning right. Of one thing I felt quite sure, and that was that the number would very soon be ten. I was convinced that I could myself last but very little longer. All the events and associations of my life passed rapidly through my brain. My country, my friends, and my family all appeared as it were in a vision, and seemed as though they had come to bid me a last farewell.

Toward morning I woke from my sleep, if the languid stupor into which I had fallen was worthy of that name. One fixed idea had taken possession of my brain — I would put an end to myself; and I felt a sort of pleasure as I gloated over the power that I had to terminate my sufferings. I told Curtis, with the utmost composure, of my intention, and he received the intelligence as calmly as it was delivered.

“Of course you will do as you please,” he said; “for my own part, I shall not abandon my post. It is my duty to remain here; and unless death comes to carry me away, I shall stay where I am to the very last.”

The dull gray fog still hung heavily over the ocean, but the sun was evidently shining above the mist, and would, in course of time, dispel the vapor. Toward seven o’clock I fancied I heard the cries of birds above my head. The sound was repeated three times, and as I went up to the cap- tain to ask him about it, I heard him mutter to himself:

“Birds! Why, that looks as if land were not far off.”

But although Curtis might still cling to the hope of reach- ing land, I knew not what it was to have one sanguine thought. For me there was neither continent nor island; the world was one fluid sphere, uniform, monotonous, as in the most primitive period of its formation. Nevertheless it must be owned that it was with a certain amount of im- patience that I awaited the rising of the mist, for I was anxious to shake off the phantom fallacies that Curtis’s words had suggested to my mind.

Not till eleven o’clock did the fog begin to break, and as it rolled in heavy folds along the surface of the water, I could every now and then catch glimpses of a clear blue sky beyond. Fierce sunbeams pierced the cloud-rifts, scorching and burning our bodies like red-hot iron; but it was only above our heads that there was any sunlight to condense the vapor; the horizon was still quite invisible. There was no wind, and for half an hour longer the fog hung heavily round the raft, while Curtis, leaning against the side, strove to penetrate the obscurity. At length the sun burst forth in full power, and, sweeping the surface of the ocean, dispelled the fog and left the horizon open to our eyes.

There, exactly as we had seen it for the last six weeks, was the circle that bounded sea and sky — unbroken, definite, distinct as ever! Curtis gazed with intensest scrutiny, but did not speak a word. I pitied him sincerely, for he alone of us all felt that he had not the right to put an end to his misery.

For myself, I had fully determined that if I lived till the following day, I would die by my own hand. Whether my companions were still alive, I hardly cared to know; it seemed as though days had passed since I had seen them.

Night drew on, but I could not sleep for a moment. To- ward two o’clock in the morning my thirst was so intense that I was unable to suppress loud cries of agony. Was there nothing that would serve to quench the fire that was burning within me? What if, instead of drinking the blood of others, I were to drink my own? It would be all un- availing, I was well aware; but scarcely had the thought crossed my mind, than I proceeded to put it into execution. I unclasped my knife, and, stripping my arm, with a steady thrust I opened a small vein. The blood oozed out slowly, drop by drop, and as I eagerly swallowed the source of my very life, I felt that for a moment my torments were re- lieved. But only for a moment; all energy had failed my pulses, and almost immediately the blood had ceased to flow.

How long it seemed before the morning dawned! and when that morning came it brought another fog, heavy as before, that again shut out the horizon. The fog was hot as the burning steam that issues from a boiler. It was to be my last day upon earth, and I felt that I should like to press the hand of a friend before I died. Curtis was stand- ing near, and crawling up to him, I took his hand in my own. He seemed to know that I was taking my farewell, and with one last lingering hope he endeavored to restrain me. But all in vain; my mind was finally made up.

I should have liked to speak once again to M. Letourneur, Andre, and Miss Herbey, but my courage failed me. I knew that the young girl would read my resolution in my eyes, and that she would speak to me of duty, and of God, and of eternity, and I dared not meet her gaze; and I would not run the risk of being persuaded to wait until a lingering death should overtake me. I returned to the back of the raft, and after making several efforts, I managed to get on to my feet. I cast one long look at the pitiless ocean and the unbroken horizon; if a sail or the outline of a coast had broken on my view, I believe that I should only have deemed myself the victim of an illusion; but nothing of the kind appeared, and the sea was dreary as a desert.

It was ten o’clock in the morning. The pangs of hunger and the torments of thirst were racking me with redoubled vigor. All instinct of self-preservation had left me, and I felt that the hour had come when I must cease to suffer. Just as I was on the point of casting myself headlong into the sea, a voice, which I recognized as Dowlas’s, broke upon my ear.

“Captain,” he said, “we are going to draw lots.”

Involuntarily I paused; I did not take my plunge, but returned to my place upon the raft.

CHAPTER LIII WE DECIDE TO DRAW LOTS

JANUARY 26. — All heard and understood the proposition; in fact it had been in contemplation for several days, but no one had ventured to put the idea into words. However, it was done now; lots were to be drawn, and to each would be assigned his share of the body of the one ordained by fate to be the victim. For my own part, I profess that I was quite resigned for the lot to fall upon myself. I thought I heard Andre Letourneur beg for an exception to be made in favor of Miss Herbey; but the sailors raised a murmur of dissent. As there were eleven of us on board, there were ten chances to one in each one's favor — a proportion which would be diminished if Miss Herbey were excluded; so that the young lady was forced to take her chance among the rest.

It was then half-past ten, and the boatswain, who had been roused from his lethargy by what the carpenter had said, insisted that the drawing should take place immediately. There was no reason for delaying the fatal lottery. There was not one of us that clung in the least to life; and we knew that, at the worst, whoever should be doomed to die, would only precede the rest by a few days, or even hours. All that we desired was just once to slake our raging thirst and moderate our gnawing hunger.

How all the names found their way to the bottom of a hat I cannot tell. Very likely Falsten wrote them upon a leaf torn from his memorandum-book. But be that as it may, the eleven names were there, and it was unanimously agreed that the last name drawn should be the victim.

But who would draw the names? There was hesitation for a moment; then "I will," said a voice behind me. Turn- ing round, I beheld M. Letourneur standing with out- stretched hand, and with his long white hair falling over his thin livid face that was almost sublime in its calmness. I divined at once the reason of this voluntary offer; I knew that it was the father's devotion in self-sacrifice that led him to undertake the office.

"As soon as you please," said the boatswain.

M. Letourneur proceeded to draw out the folded strips of paper, one by one, and, after reading out loud the name upon it, handed it to its owner.

The first name called was that of Burke, who uttered a cry of delight; then followed Flaypole and the boatswain. What his name really was I never could exactly learn. Then came Falsten, Curtis, Sandon. More than half had now been called, and my name had not yet been drawn. I calculated my remaining chance; it was still four to one in my favor.

M. Letourneur continued his painful task. Since Burke's first exclamation of joy not a sound had escaped our lips, but all were listening in breathless silence. The seventh name was Miss Herbey's, but the young girl heard it with- out a start. Then came mine, yes, mine! and the ninth was was that of Letourneur.

"Which one?" asked the boatswain.

"Andre," said M. Letourneur.

With one cry Andre fell back senseless. Only two names now remained in the hat — those of Dowlas and M. Letour- neur himself.

"Go on!" almost roared the carpenter, surveying his partner in peril as though he could devour him. M. Le- tourneur almost had a smile upon his lips, as he drew forth the last paper but one, and with a firm, unfaltering voice, marvelous for his age, unfolded it slowly, and read the name of Dowlas. The carpenter gave a yell of relief as he heard the word.

M. Letourneur took the last bit of paper from the hat, and, without looking at it, tore it to pieces. But, unper- ceived by all but myself, one little fragment flew into a corner of the raft. I crawled toward it and picked it up. On one side of it was written Andr — ; the rest of the word was torn away. M. Letourneur saw what I had done, and, rushing toward me, snatched the paper from my hands, and flung it into the sea.

CHAPTER LIV MISS HERBEY PLEADS FOR ONE DAY MORE

JANUARY 26. — I understood it all; the devoted father hav- ing nothing more to give, had given his life for his son.

M. Letourneur was no longer a human being in the eyes of the famished creatures who were now yearning to see him sacrificed to their cravings. At the very sight of the victim thus provided, all the tortures of hunger returned with redoubled violence. With lips distended, and teeth dis- played, they waited like a herd of carnivora until they could attack their prey with brutal voracity; it seemed almost doubtful whether they would not fall upon him while still alive. It seemed impossible that any appeal to their human- ity could, at such a moment, have any weight; nevertheless, the appeal was made, and, incredible as it may seem, pre- vailed.

Just as the boatswain was about to act the part of butcher, and Dowlas stood, hatchet in hand, ready to complete the barbarous work, Miss Herbey advanced, or rather crawled, toward them.

“My friends,” she pleaded, “will you not wait just one more day? If no land or ship is in sight to-morrow, then I suppose our poor companion must become your victim. But allow him one more day; in the name of mercy I en- treat, I implore you.”

My heart bounded as she made her pitiful appeal. It seemed to me as though the noble girl had spoken with an inspiration on her lips, and I fancied that, perhaps, in super- natural vision she had viewed the coast or the ship of which she spoke; and one more day was not much to us who had already suffered so long, and endured so much.

Curtis and Falsten agreed with me, and we all united to support Miss Herbey’s merciful petition. The sailors did not utter a murmur, and the boatswain in a smothered voice said:

“Very well, we will wait till daybreak to-morrow,” and threw down his hatchet.

To-morrow, then, unless land or a sail appear, the horrible sacrifice will be accomplished. Stifling their sufferings by a strenuous effort, all returned to their places. The sailors crouched beneath the sails, caring nothing about scanning the ocean. Food was in store for them to-morrow, and that was enough for them.

As soon as Andre Letourneur came to his senses, his first thought was for his father, and I saw him count the pas- sengers on the raft. He looked puzzled; when he lost con- sciousness there had been only two names left in the hat, those of his father and the carpenter; and yet M. Letourneur and Dowlas were both there still. Miss Herbey went up to him and told him quietly that the drawing of the lots had not yet been finished. Andre asked no further ques- tion, but took his father’s hand. M. Letourneur’s countenance was calm and serene; he seemed to be conscious of nothing except that the life of his son was spared, and as the two sat conversing in an undertone at the back of the raft, their whole existence seemed bound up in each other.

Meantime, I could not disabuse my mind of the impres- sion caused by Miss Herbey’s intervention. Something told me that help was near at hand, and that we were approach- ing the termination of our suspense and misery; the chimeras that were floating through my brain resolved themselves into realities, so that nothing appeared to me more certain than that either land or sail, be they miles away, would be dis- covered somewhere to leeward.

I imparted my convictions to M. Letourneur and his son. Andre was as sanguine as myself; poor boy! he little thinks what a loss there is in store for him to-morrow. His father listened gravely to all we said, and whatever he might think in his own mind, he did not give us any discouragement; Heaven, he said, he was sure would still spare the survivors of the Chancellor, and then he lavished on his son caresses which he deemed to be his last.

Some time afterward, when I was alone with him, M.

Letourneur whispered in my ear:

“Mr. Kazallon, I commend my boy to your care, and mark you, he must never know — ”

His voice was choked with tears, and he could not finish his sentence.

But I was full of hope, and, without a moment’s inter- mission, I kept my eyes fixed upon the unbroken horizon. Curtis, Miss Herbey, Falsten, and even the boatswain, were also eagerly scanning the broad expanse of the sea.

Night has come on; but I have still a profound conviction that through the darkness some ship will approach, and that at daybreak our raft will be observed.

CHAPTER LV FRESH WATER

JANUARY 27. — I did not close my eyes all night, and was keenly alive to the faintest sounds, and every ripple of the water, and every murmur of the waves, broke distinctly on my ear. One thing I noticed and accepted as a happy omen; not a single shark now lingered round the raft. The wan- ing moon rose at a quarter to one, and through the feeble glimmer which she cast across the ocean, many and many a time I fancied I caught sight of the longed-for sail, lying only a few cables'-lengths away.

But when morning came, the sun rose once again upon a desert ocean, and my hopes began to fade. Neither ship nor shore had appeared, and as the shocking hour of execu- tion drew near, my dreams of deliverance melted away; I shuddered in my very soul as I was brought face to face with the stern reality. I dared not look upon the victim, and whenever his eyes, so full of calmness and resignation, met my own, I turned away my head. I felt choked with horror, and my brain reeled as though I were intoxi- cated.

It was now six o'clock, and all hope had vanished from my breast; my heart beat rapidly, and a cold sweat of agony broke out all over me. Curtis and the boatswain stood by the mast attentively scanning the horizon. The boatswain's countenance was terrible to look upon; one could see that although he would not forestall the hour, he was determined not to wait a moment after it arrived. As for the captain, it was impossible to tell what really passed within his mind; his face was livid, and his whole existence seemed concen- trated in the exercise of his power of vision. The sailors were crawling about the platform, with their eyes gleaming, like the wild beasts ready to pounce upon their devoted prey.

I could no longer keep my place, and glided along to the front of the raft. The boatswain was still standing intent on his watch, but all of a sudden, in a voice that made me start, he shouted:

“Now then, time’s up!” and followed by Dowlas, Burke,

Flaypole, and Sandon, ran to the back of the raft. As

Dowlas seized the hatchet convulsively, Miss Herbey could

not suppress a cry of terror. Andre started to his feet.

“What are you going to do to my father?” he asked in accents choked with emotion.

“My boy,” said M. Letourneur, “the lot has fallen upon me, and I must die!”

“Never!” shrieked Andre, throwing his arms about his father. “They shall kill me first. It was I who threw Hobart’s body into the sea, and it is I who ought to die!” But the words of the unhappy youth had no other effect than to increase the fury of the men who were so stanchly bent upon their bloody purpose.

“Come, come, no more fuss,” said Dowlas, as he tore the young man away from his father’s embrace.

Andre fell upon his back, in which position two of the sailors held him down so tightly that he could not move, while Burke and Sandon carried off their victim to the front.

All this had taken place much more rapidly than I have been able to describe it. I was transfixed with horror, and much as I wished to throw myself between M. Letourneur and his executioners, I seemed to be rooted to the spot where I was standing.

Meantime the sailors had been taking off some of M. Letourneur’s clothes, and his neck and shoulders were al- ready bare.

“Stop a moment!” he said in a tone in which was the ring of indomitable courage. “Stop! I don’t want to de- prive you of your ration; but I suppose you will not require to eat the whole of me to-day.”

The sailors, taken back by his suggestion, stared at him with amazement.

“There are ten of you,” he went on. “My two arms will give you each a meal; cut them off for to-day, and to- morrow you shall have the rest of me.”

“Agreed!” cried Dowlas; and as M. Letourneur held out his bare arms, quick as lightning the carpenter raised his hatchet.

Curtis and I could bear this scene no longer; while we were alive to prevent it, this butchery should not be per- mitted, and we rushed forward simultaneously to snatch the victim from his murderers. A furious struggle ensued, and in the midst of the melee, I was seized by one of the sailors, and hurled violently into the sea.

Closing my lips, I tried to die of suffocation in the water; but in spite of myself, my mouth opened, and a few drops trickled down my throat.

Merciful Heaven! the water was fresh!

CHAPTER LVI NEAR THE COAST OF SOUTH AMERICA

JANUARY 27 continued. — A change came over me as if

by miracle. No longer had I any wish to die, and already

Curtis, who had heard my cries, was throwing me a rope.

I seized it eagerly, and was hauled up on to the raft.

“Fresh water!” were the first words I uttered.

“Fresh water?” cried Curtis; “why then, my friends, we are not far from land!”

It was not too late: the blow had not been struck, and so the victim had not yet fallen. Curtis and Andre (who had regained his liberty) had fought with the cannibals, and it was just as they were yielding to over-powering numbers that my voice had made itself heard.

The struggle came to an end. As soon as the words “fresh water” had escaped my lips, I leaned over the side of the raft and swallowed the life-giving liquid in greedy draughts. Miss Herbey was the first to follow my example, but soon Curtis, Falsten, and all the rest were on their knees and drinking eagerly. The rough sailors seemed as if by a magic touch transformed back from ravenous beasts to human beings, and I saw several of them raise their hands to heaven in silent gratitude. Andre and his father were the last to drink.

“But where are we?” I asked at length.

“The land is there,” said Curtis, pointing toward the west.

We all stared at the captain as though he were mocking us: no land was in sight, and the raft, just as ever, was the center of a watery waste. Yet our senses had not deceived us; the water we had been drinking was perfectly fresh.

“Yes,” repeated the captain, “land is certainly there, not more than twenty miles to leeward.”

“What land?” inquired the boatswain.

“South America,” answered Curtis, “and near the Amazon; no other river has a current strong enough to freshen the ocean twenty miles from shore!”

CHAPTER LVII LAND AHOY!

JANUARY 27 continued. — Curtis, no doubt, was right. The discharge from the mouth of the Amazon is enormously large, but we had probably drifted into the only spot in the Atlantic where we could find fresh water so far from land. Yet land undoubtedly was there, and the breeze was carrying us onward slowly but surely to our deliverance.

Miss Herbey's voice was heard pouring out fervent praise to Heaven, and we were all glad to unite our thanksgivings with hers. Then the whole of us (with the exception of Andre and his father, who remained by themselves together at the stern) clustered in a group, and kept our expectant gaze upon the horizon.

We had not long to wait. Before an hour had passed,

Curtis leaped in ecstasy and raised the joyous shout of

"Land ahoy!"

... .

My journal has come to a close.

I have only to relate, as briefly as possible, the circumstances that finally brought us to our destination.

A few hours after we first sighted land the raft was off Cape Magoari, on the island of Marajo, and was observed by some fishermen, who, with kind-hearted alacrity picked us up and tended us most carefully. They conveyed us to Para, where we became the objects of unbounded sympathy.

The raft was brought to land in latitude 0 deg. 12’ north, so that since we abandoned the Chancellor we had drifted at least fifteen degrees to the southwest. Except for the in- fluence of the Gulf Stream we must have been carried far, far to the south, and in that case we should never have reached the mouth of the Amazon, and must inevitably have been lost.

Of the thirty-two souls — nine passengers and twenty- three seamen — who left Charleston on board the ship, only five passengers and six seamen remain. Eleven of us alone survive.

An official account of our rescue was drawn up by the Brazilian authorities. Those who signed were Miss Her- bey, J. R. Kazallon, M. Letourneur, Andre Letourneur, Mr. Falsten, the boatswain, Dowlas, Burke, Flaypole, San- don, and last, though not least, “Robert Curtis, Captain.”

At Para we soon found facilities for continuing our homeward route. A vessel took us to Cayenne, where we secured a passage on board one of the steamers of the French Transatlantic Aspinwall line, the Ville de St. Nazaire, which conveyed us to Europe.

After all the dangers and privations which we have under- gone together, it is scarcely necessary to say that there has arisen between the surviving passengers of the Chancellor a bond of friendship too indissoluble, I believe, for either time or circumstance to destroy; Curtis must ever remain the honored and valued friend of those whose welfare he consulted so faithfully in their misfortunes; his conduct was beyond all praise.

When we were fairly on our homeward way, Miss Herbey by chance intimated to us her intention of retiring from the world and devoting the remainder of her life to the care of the sick and suffering.

“Then why not come and look after my son?” said M. Letourneur, adding, “he is an invalid, and he requires, as he deserves, the best of nursing.”

Miss Herbey, after some deliberation, consented to be- come a member of their family, and finds in M. Letourneur a father, and in Andre a brother. A brother, I say; but may we not hope that she may be united by a dearer and a closer tie, and that the noble-hearted girl may experience the happiness that she so richly deserves?

MICHAEL STROGOFF

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

Translated by Agnes Kinloch Kingston

This novel was first published 1876 and it is considered to be one Verne’s greatest achievements as a novelist. Unlike many of his works, *Michael Strogoff* is not of the genre of science fiction. The novel tells the story of Michael Strogoff, a 30-year-old native of Omsk, who is a courier for Tsar Alexander II of Russia. The Tartar Khan, Feofar, incites a rebellion and separates the Russian Far East from the mainland, severing telegraph lines.

Verne, near to the time of publication

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I A FETE AT THE NEW PALACE

“SIRE, a fresh dispatch.”

“Whence?”

“From Tomsk?”

“Is the wire cut beyond that city?”

“Yes, sire, since yesterday.”

“Telegraph hourly to Tomsk, General, and keep me informed of all that occurs.”

“Sire, it shall be done,” answered General Kissoff.

These words were exchanged about two hours after midnight, at the moment when the fete given at the New Palace was at the height of its splendor.

During the whole evening the bands of the Preobra-jensky and Paulowsky regiments had played without cessation polkas, mazurkas, schottisches, and waltzes from among the choicest of their repertoires. Innumerable couples of dancers whirled through the magnificent saloons of the palace, which stood at a few paces only from the “old house of stones” — in former days the scene of so many terrible dramas, the echoes of whose walls were this night awakened by the gay strains of the musicians.

The grand-chamberlain of the court, was, besides, well seconded in his arduous and delicate duties. The grand-dukes and their aides-de-camp, the chamberlains-in-waiting and other officers of the palace, presided personally in the arrangement of the dances. The grand duchesses, covered with diamonds, the ladies-in-waiting in their most exquisite costumes, set the example to the wives of the military and civil dignitaries of the ancient “city of white stone.” When, therefore, the signal for the “polonaise” resounded through the saloons, and the guests of all ranks took part in that measured promenade, which on occasions of this kind has all the importance of a national dance, the mingled costumes, the sweeping robes adorned with lace, and uniforms covered with orders, presented a scene of dazzling splendor, lighted by hundreds of lusters multiplied tenfold by the numerous mirrors adorning the walls.

The grand saloon, the finest of all those contained in the New Palace, formed to this procession of exalted personages and splendidly dressed women a frame worthy of the magnificence they displayed. The rich ceiling, with its gilding already softened by the touch of time, appeared as if glittering with stars. The embroidered drapery of the curtains and doors, falling in gorgeous folds, assumed rich and varied hues, broken by the shadows of the heavy masses of damask.

Through the panes of the vast semicircular bay-windows the light, with which the saloons were filled, shone forth with the brilliancy of a conflagration, vividly illuminating the gloom in which for some hours the palace had been shrouded. The attention of those of the guests not taking part in the dancing was attracted by the contrast. Resting in the recesses of the windows, they could discern, standing out dimly in the darkness, the vague outlines of the countless towers, domes, and spires which adorn the ancient city. Below the sculptured balconies were visible numerous sentries, pacing silently up and down, their rifles carried horizontally on the shoulder, and the spikes of their helmets glittering like flames in the glare of light issuing from the palace. The steps also of the patrols could be heard beating time on the stones beneath with even more regularity than the feet of the dancers on the floor of the saloon. From time to time the watchword was repeated from post to post, and occasionally the notes of a trumpet, mingling with the strains of the orchestra, penetrated into their midst. Still farther down, in front of the facade, dark masses obscured the rays of light which proceeded from the windows of the New Palace. These were boats descending the course of a river, whose waters, faintly illumined by a few lamps, washed the lower portion of the terraces.

The principal personage who has been mentioned, the giver of the fete, and to whom General Kissoff had been speaking in that tone of respect with which sovereigns alone are usually addressed, wore the simple uniform of an officer of chasseurs of the guard. This was not affectation on his part, but the custom of a man who cared little for dress, his contrasting strongly with the gorgeous costumes amid which he moved, encircled by his escort of Georgians, Cossacks, and Circassians — a brilliant band, splendidly clad in the glittering uniforms of the Caucasus.

This personage, of lofty stature, affable demeanor, and physiognomy calm, though bearing traces of anxiety, moved from group to group, seldom speaking, and appearing to pay but little attention either to the merriment of the younger guests or the graver remarks of the exalted dignitaries or members of the diplomatic corps who represented at the Russian court the principal governments of Europe. Two or three of these astute politicians — physiognomists by virtue of their profession — failed not to detect on the countenance of their host symptoms of disquietude, the source of which eluded their penetration; but none ventured to interrogate him on the subject.

It was evidently the intention of the officer of chasseurs that his own anxieties should in no way cast a shade over the festivities; and, as he was a personage whom almost the population of a world in itself was wont to obey, the gayety of the ball was not for a moment checked.

Nevertheless, General Kissoff waited until the officer to whom he had just communicated the dispatch forwarded from Tomsk should give him permission to withdraw; but the latter still remained silent. He had taken the telegram, he had read it carefully, and his visage became even more clouded than before. Involuntarily he sought the hilt of his sword, and then passed his hand for an instant before his eyes, as though, dazzled by the brilliancy of the light, he wished to shade them, the better to see into the recesses of his own mind.

“We are, then,” he continued, after having drawn General Kissoff aside towards a window, “since yesterday without intelligence from the Grand Duke?”

“Without any, sire; and it is to be feared that in a short time dispatches will no longer cross the Siberian frontier.”

“But have not the troops of the provinces of Amoor and Irkutsk, as those also of the Trans-Balkan territory, received orders to march immediately upon Irkutsk?”

“The orders were transmitted by the last telegram we were able to send beyond Lake Baikal.”

“And the governments of Yeniseisk, Omsk, Semipolatinsk, and Tobolsk — are we still in direct communication with them as before the insurrection?”

“Yes, sire; our dispatches have reached them, and we are assured at the present moment that the Tartars have not advanced beyond the Irtish and the Obi.”

“And the traitor Ivan Ogareff, are there no tidings of him?”

“None,” replied General Kissoff. “The head of the police cannot state whether or not he has crossed the frontier.”

“Let a description of him be immediately dispatched to Nijni-Novgorod, Perm, Ekaterenburg, Kasirnov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Tomsk, and to all the telegraphic stations with which communication is yet open.”

“Your majesty’s orders shall be instantly carried out.”

“You will observe the strictest silence as to this.”

The General, having made a sign of respectful assent, bowing low, mingled with the crowd, and finally left the apartments without his departure being remarked.

The officer remained absorbed in thought for a few moments, when, recovering himself, he went among the various groups in the saloon, his countenance reassuming that calm aspect which had for an instant been disturbed.

Nevertheless, the important occurrence which had occasioned these rapidly exchanged words was not so unknown as the officer of the chasseurs of the guard and General Kissoff had possibly supposed. It was not spoken of officially, it is true, nor even officiously, since tongues were not free; but a few exalted personages had been informed, more or less exactly, of the events which had taken place beyond the frontier. At any rate, that which was only slightly known, that which was not matter of conversation even between members of the corps diplomatique, two guests, distinguished by no uniform, no decoration, at this reception in the New Palace, discussed in a low voice, and with apparently very correct information.

By what means, by the exercise of what acuteness had these two ordinary mortals ascertained that which so many persons of the highest rank and importance scarcely even suspected? It is impossible to say. Had they the gifts of foreknowledge and foresight? Did they possess a supplementary sense, which enabled them to see beyond that limited horizon which bounds all human gaze? Had they obtained a peculiar power of divining the most secret events? Was it owing to the habit, now become a second nature, of living on information, that their mental constitution had thus become really transformed? It was difficult to escape from this conclusion.

Of these two men, the one was English, the other French; both were tall and thin, but the latter was sallow as are the southern Provencals, while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman. The Anglo-Norman, formal, cold, grave, parsimonious of gestures and words, appeared only to speak or gesticulate under the influence of a spring operating at regular intervals. The Gaul, on the contrary, lively and petulant, expressed himself with lips, eyes, hands, all at once, having twenty different ways of explaining his thoughts, whereas his interlocutor seemed to have only one, immutably stereotyped on his brain.

The strong contrast they presented would at once have struck the most superficial observer; but a physiognomist, regarding them closely, would have defined their particular characteristics by saying, that if the Frenchman was “all eyes,” the Englishman was “all ears.”

In fact, the visual apparatus of the one had been singularly perfected by practice. The sensibility of its retina must have been as instantaneous as that of those conjurors who recognize a card merely by a rapid movement in cutting the pack or by the arrangement only of marks invisible to others. The Frenchman indeed possessed in the highest degree what may be called "the memory of the eye."

The Englishman, on the contrary, appeared especially organized to listen and to hear. When his aural apparatus had been once struck by the sound of a voice he could not forget it, and after ten or even twenty years he would have recognized it among a thousand. His ears, to be sure, had not the power of moving as freely as those of animals who are provided with large auditory flaps; but, since scientific men know that human ears possess, in fact, a very limited power of movement, we should not be far wrong in affirming that those of the said Englishman became erect, and turned in all directions while endeavoring to gather in the sounds, in a manner apparent only to the naturalist. It must be observed that this perfection of sight and hearing was of wonderful assistance to these two men in their vocation, for the Englishman acted as correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, and the Frenchman, as correspondent of what newspaper, or of what newspapers, he did not say; and when asked, he replied in a jocular manner that he corresponded with "his cousin Madeleine." This Frenchman, however, neath his careless surface, was wonderfully shrewd and sagacious. Even while speaking at random, perhaps the better to hide his desire to learn, he never forgot himself. His loquacity even helped him to conceal his thoughts, and he was perhaps even more discreet than his confrere of the Daily Telegraph. Both were present at this fete given at the New Palace on the night of the 15th of July in their character of reporters.

It is needless to say that these two men were devoted to their mission in the world — that they delighted to throw themselves in the track of the most unexpected intelligence — that nothing terrified or discouraged them from succeeding — that they possessed the imperturbable sang froid and the genuine intrepidity of men of their calling. Enthusiastic jockeys in this steeplechase, this hunt after information, they leaped hedges, crossed rivers, sprang over fences, with the ardor of pure-blooded racers, who will run "a good first" or die!

Their journals did not restrict them with regard to money — the surest, the most rapid, the most perfect element of information known to this day. It must also be added, to their honor, that neither the one nor the other ever looked over or listened at the walls of private life, and that they only exercised their vocation when political or social interests were at stake. In a word, they made what has been for some years called "the great political and military reports."

It will be seen, in following them, that they had generally an independent mode of viewing events, and, above all, their consequences, each having his own way of observing and appreciating.

The French correspondent was named Alcide Jolivet. Harry Blount was the name of the Englishman. They had just met for the first time at this fete in the New Palace, of which they had been ordered to give an account in their papers. The dissimilarity of their characters, added to a certain amount of jealousy, which generally exists between rivals in the same calling, might have rendered them but little sympathetic. However, they did not avoid each other, but endeavored rather to exchange with each other the chat of the day. They were sportsmen, after all, hunting on the same ground. That which one missed might be advantageously secured by the other, and it was to their interest to meet and converse.

This evening they were both on the look out; they felt, in fact, that there was something in the air.

“Even should it be only a wildgoose chase,” said Alcide Jolivet to himself, “it may be worth powder and shot.”

The two correspondents therefore began by cautiously sounding each other.

“Really, my dear sir, this little fete is charming!” said Alcide Jolivet pleasantly, thinking himself obliged to begin the conversation with this eminently French phrase.

“I have telegraphed already, ‘splendid!’” replied Harry Blount calmly, employing the word specially devoted to expressing admiration by all subjects of the United Kingdom.

“Nevertheless,” added Alcide Jolivet, “I felt compelled to remark to my cousin — ”

“Your cousin?” repeated Harry Blount in a tone of surprise, interrupting his brother of the pen.

“Yes,” returned Alcide Jolivet, “my cousin Madeleine. It is with her that I correspond, and she likes to be quickly and well informed, does my cousin. I therefore remarked to her that, during this fete, a sort of cloud had appeared to overshadow the sovereign’s brow.”

“To me, it seemed radiant,” replied Harry Blount, who perhaps, wished to conceal his real opinion on this topic.

“And, naturally, you made it ‘radiant,’ in the columns of the Daily Telegraph.”

“Exactly.”

“Do you remember, Mr. Blount, what occurred at Zakret in 1812?”

“I remember it as well as if I had been there, sir,” replied the English correspondent.

“Then,” continued Alcide Jolivet, “you know that, in the middle of a fete given in his honor, it was announced to the Emperor Alexander that Napoleon had just crossed the Niemen with the vanguard of the French army. Nevertheless the Emperor did not leave the fete, and notwithstanding the extreme gravity of intelligence which might cost him his empire, he did not allow himself to show more uneasiness.”

“Than our host exhibited when General Kissoff informed him that the telegraphic wires had just been cut between the frontier and the government of Irkutsk.”

“Ah! you are aware of that?”

“I am!”

“As regards myself, it would be difficult to avoid knowing it, since my last telegram reached Udinsk,” observed Alcide Jolivet, with some satisfaction.

“And mine only as far as Krasnoiarsk,” answered Harry Blount, in a no less satisfied tone.

“Then you know also that orders have been sent to the troops of Nikolaevsk?”

“I do, sir; and at the same time a telegram was sent to the Cossacks of the government of Tobolsk to concentrate their forces.”

“Nothing can be more true, Mr. Blount; I was equally well acquainted with these measures, and you may be sure that my dear cousin shall know of them to-morrow.”

“Exactly as the readers of the Daily Telegraph shall know it also, M. Jolivet.”

“Well, when one sees all that is going on...”

“And when one hears all that is said...”

“An interesting campaign to follow, Mr. Blount.”

“I shall follow it, M. Jolivet!”

“Then it is possible that we shall find ourselves on ground less safe, perhaps, than the floor of this ball-room.”

“Less safe, certainly, but — ”

“But much less slippery,” added Alcide Jolivet, holding up his companion, just as the latter, drawing back, was about to lose his equilibrium.

Thereupon the two correspondents separated, pleased that the one had not stolen a march on the other.

At that moment the doors of the rooms adjoining the great reception saloon were thrown open, disclosing to view several immense tables beautifully laid out, and groaning under a profusion of valuable china and gold plate. On the central table, reserved for the princes, princesses, and members of the corps diplomatique, glittered an epergne of inestimable price, brought from London, and around this chef-d'oeuvre of chased gold reflected under the light of the lusters a thousand pieces of most beautiful service from the manufactories of Sevres.

The guests of the New Palace immediately began to stream towards the supper-rooms.

At that moment. General Kissoff, who had just re-entered, quickly approached the officer of chasseurs.

“Well?” asked the latter abruptly, as he had done the former time.

“Telegrams pass Tomsk no longer, sire.”

“A courier this moment!”

The officer left the hall and entered a large antechamber adjoining. It was a cabinet with plain oak furniture, situated in an angle of the New Palace. Several pictures, amongst others some by Horace Vernet, hung on the wall.

The officer hastily opened a window, as if he felt the want of air, and stepped out on a balcony to breathe the pure atmosphere of a lovely July night. Beneath his eyes, bathed in moonlight, lay a fortified inclosure, from which rose two cathedrals, three palaces, and an arsenal. Around this inclosure could be seen three distinct towns: Kitai-Gorod, Beloi-Gorod, Zemlianai-Gorod — European, Tartar, and Chinese quarters of great extent, commanded by towers, belfries, minarets, and the cupolas of three hundred churches, with green domes, surmounted by the silver cross. A little winding river, here and there reflected the rays of the moon.

This river was the Moskowa; the town Moscow; the fortified inclosure the Kremlin; and the officer of chasseurs of the guard, who, with folded arms and thoughtful brow, was listening dreamily to the sounds floating from the New Palace over the old Muscovite city, was the Czar.

CHAPTER II RUSSIANS AND TARTARS

THE Czar had not so suddenly left the ball-room of the New Palace, when the fete he was giving to the civil and military authorities and principal people of Moscow was at the height of its brilliancy, without ample cause; for he had just received information that serious events were taking place beyond the frontiers of the Ural. It had become evident that a formidable rebellion threatened to wrest the Siberian provinces from the Russian crown.

Asiatic Russia, or Siberia, covers a superficial area of 1,790,208 square miles, and contains nearly two millions of inhabitants. Extending from the Ural Mountains, which separate it from Russia in Europe, to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, it is bounded on the south by Turkestan and the Chinese Empire; on the north by the Arctic Ocean, from the Sea of Kara to Behring’s Straits. It is divided into several governments or provinces, those of Tobolsk, Yeniseisk, Irkutsk, Omsk, and Yakutsk; contains two districts, Okhotsk and Kamtschatka; and possesses two countries, now under the Muscovite dominion — that of the Kirghiz and that of the Tshouktshes. This immense extent of steppes, which includes more than one hundred and ten degrees from west to east, is a land to which criminals and political offenders are banished.

Two governor-generals represent the supreme authority of the Czar over this vast country. The higher one resides at Irkutsk, the far capital of Eastern Siberia. The River Tchouna separates the two Siberias.

No rail yet furrows these wide plains, some of which are in reality extremely fertile. No iron ways lead from those precious mines which make the Siberian soil far richer below than above its surface. The traveler journeys in summer in a kibick or telga; in winter, in a sledge.

An electric telegraph, with a single wire more than eight thousand versts in length, alone affords communication between the western and eastern frontiers of Siberia. On issuing from the Ural, it passes through Ekaterenburg, Kasirnov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Elamsk, Kolyvan, Tomsk, Krasnoiarsk, Nijni-Udinsk, Irkutsk, Verkne-Nertschink, Strelink, Albazine, Blagowstenks, Radde, Orlomskaya, Alexandrowskoe, and Nikolaevsk; and six roubles and nineteen copecks are paid for every word sent from one end to the other. From Irkutsk there is a branch to Kiatka, on the Mongolian frontier; and from thence, for thirty copecks a word, the post conveys the dispatches to Pekin in a fortnight.

It was this wire, extending from Ekaterenburg to Nikolaevsk, which had been cut, first beyond Tomsk, and then between Tomsk and Kolyvan.

This was why the Czar, to the communication made to him for the second time by General Kissoff, had answered by the words, “A courier this moment!”

The Czar remained motionless at the window for a few moments, when the door was again opened. The chief of police appeared on the threshold.

“Enter, General,” said the Czar briefly, “and tell me all you know of Ivan Ogareff.”

“He is an extremely dangerous man, sire,” replied the chief of police.

“He ranked as colonel, did he not?”

“Yes, sire.”

“Was he an intelligent officer?”

“Very intelligent, but a man whose spirit it was impossible to subdue; and possessing an ambition which stopped at nothing, he became involved in secret intrigues, and was degraded from his rank by his Highness the Grand Duke, and exiled to Siberia.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Two years since. Pardoned after six months of exile by your majesty’s favor, he returned to Russia.”

“And since that time, has he not revisited Siberia?”

“Yes, sire; but he voluntarily returned there,” replied the chief of police, adding, and slightly lowering his voice, “there was a time, sire, when NONE returned from Siberia.”

“Well, whilst I live, Siberia is and shall be a country whence men CAN return.”

The Czar had the right to utter these words with some pride, for often, by his clemency, he had shown that Russian justice knew how to pardon.

The head of the police did not reply to this observation, but it was evident that he did not approve of such half-measures. According to his idea, a man who had once passed the Ural Mountains in charge of policemen, ought never again to cross them. Now, it was not thus under the new reign, and the chief of police sincerely deplored it. What! no banishment for life for other crimes than those against social order! What! political exiles returning from Tobolsk, from Yakutsk, from Irkutsk! In truth, the chief of police, accustomed to the despotic sentences of the ukase which formerly never pardoned, could not understand this mode of governing. But he was silent, waiting until the Czar should interrogate him further. The questions were not long in coming.

“Did not Ivan Ogareff,” asked the Czar, “return to Russia a second time, after that journey through the Siberian provinces, the object of which remains unknown?”

“He did.”

“And have the police lost trace of him since?”

“No, sire; for an offender only becomes really dangerous from the day he has received his pardon.”

The Czar frowned. Perhaps the chief of police feared that he had gone rather too far, though the stubbornness of his ideas was at least equal to the boundless devotion he felt for his master. But the Czar, disdaining to reply to these indirect reproaches cast on his policy, continued his questions. “Where was Ogareff last heard of?”

“In the province of Perm.”

“In what town?”

“At Perm itself.”

“What was he doing?”

“He appeared unoccupied, and there was nothing suspicious in his conduct.”

“Then he was not under the surveillance of the secret police?”

“No, sire.”

“When did he leave Perm?”

“About the month of March?”

“To go...?”

“Where, is unknown.”

“And it is not known what has become of him?”

“No, sire; it is not known.”

“Well, then, I myself know,” answered the Czar. “I have received anonymous communications which did not pass through the police department; and, in the face of events now taking place beyond the frontier, I have every reason to believe that they are correct.”

“Do you mean, sire,” cried the chief of police, “that Ivan Ogareff has a hand in this Tartar rebellion?”

“Indeed I do; and I will now tell you something which you are ignorant of. After leaving Perm, Ivan Ogareff crossed the Ural mountains, entered Siberia, and penetrated the Kirghiz steppes, and there endeavored, not without success, to foment rebellion amongst their nomadic population. He then went so far south as free Turkestan; there, in the provinces of Bokhara, Khokhand, and Koondooz, he found chiefs willing to pour their Tartar hordes into Siberia, and excite a general rising in Asiatic Russia. The storm has been silently gathering, but it has at last burst like a thunderclap, and now all means of communication between Eastern and Western Siberia have been stopped. Moreover, Ivan Ogareff, thirsting for vengeance, aims at the life of my brother!”

The Czar had become excited whilst speaking, and now paced up and down with hurried steps. The chief of police said nothing, but he thought to himself that, during the time when the emperors of Russia never pardoned an exile, schemes such as those of Ivan Ogareff could never have been realized. Approaching the Czar, who had thrown himself into an armchair, he asked, “Your majesty has of course given orders so that this rebellion may be suppressed as soon as possible?”

“Yes,” answered the Czar. “The last telegram which reached Nijni-Udinsk would set in motion the troops in the governments of Yenisei, Irkutsk, Yakutsk, as well as those in the provinces of the Amoor and Lake Baikal. At the same time, the regiments from Perm and Nijni-Novgorod, and the Cossacks from the frontier, are advancing by forced marches towards the Ural Mountains; but some weeks must pass before they can attack the Tartars.”

“And your majesty’s brother, his Highness the Grand Duke, is now isolated in the government of Irkutsk, and is no longer in direct communication with Moscow?”

“That is so.”

“But by the last dispatches, he must know what measures have been taken by your majesty, and what help he may expect from the governments nearest Irkutsk?”

“He knows that,” answered the Czar; “but what he does not know is, that Ivan Ogareff, as well as being a rebel, is also playing the part of a traitor, and that in him he has a personal and bitter enemy. It is to the Grand Duke that Ogareff owes his first disgrace; and what is more serious is, that this man is not known to him. Ogareff’s plan, therefore, is to go to Irkutsk, and, under an assumed name, offer his services to the Grand Duke. Then, after gaining his confidence, when the Tartars have invested Irkutsk, he will betray the town, and with it my brother, whose life he seeks. This is what I have learned from my secret intelligence; this is what the Grand Duke does not know; and this is what he must know!”

“Well, sire, an intelligent, courageous courier...”

“I momentarily expect one.”

“And it is to be hoped he will be expeditious,” added the chief of police; “for, allow me to add, sire, that Siberia is a favorable land for rebellions.”

“Do you mean to say. General, that the exiles would make common cause with the rebels?” exclaimed the Czar.

“Excuse me, your majesty,” stammered the chief of police, for that was really the idea suggested to him by his uneasy and suspicious mind.

“I believe in their patriotism,” returned the Czar.

“There are other offenders besides political exiles in Siberia,” said the chief of police.

“The criminals? Oh, General, I give those up to you! They are the vilest, I grant, of the human race. They belong to no country. But the insurrection, or rather, the rebellion, is not to oppose the emperor; it is raised against

Russia, against the country which the exiles have not lost all hope of again seeing — and which they will see again. No, a Russian would never unite with a Tartar, to weaken, were it only for an hour, the Muscovite power!"

The Czar was right in trusting to the patriotism of those whom his policy kept, for a time, at a distance. Clemency, which was the foundation of his justice, when he could himself direct its effects, the modifications he had adopted with regard to applications for the formerly terrible ukases, warranted the belief that he was not mistaken. But even without this powerful element of success in regard to the Tartar rebellion, circumstances were not the less very serious; for it was to be feared that a large part of the Kirghiz population would join the rebels.

The Kirghiz are divided into three hordes, the greater, the lesser, and the middle, and number nearly four hundred thousand "tents," or two million souls. Of the different tribes some are independent and others recognize either the sovereignty of Russia or that of the Khans of Khiva, Khokhand, and Bokhara, the most formidable chiefs of Turkestan. The middle horde, the richest, is also the largest, and its encampments occupy all the space between the rivers Sara Sou, Irtish, and the Upper Ishim, Lake Saisang and Lake Aksakal. The greater horde, occupying the countries situated to the east of the middle one, extends as far as the governments of Omsk and Tobolsk. Therefore, if the Kirghiz population should rise, it would be the rebellion of Asiatic Russia, and the first thing would be the separation of Siberia, to the east of the Yenisei.

It is true that these Kirghiz, mere novices in the art of war, are rather nocturnal thieves and plunderers of caravans than regular soldiers. As M. Levchine says, "a firm front or a square of good infantry could repel ten times the number of Kirghiz; and a single cannon might destroy a frightful number.”

That may be; but to do this it is necessary for the square of good infantry to reach the rebellious country, and the cannon to leave the arsenals of the Russian provinces, perhaps two or three thousand versts distant. Now, except by the direct route from Ekaterenburg to Irkutsk, the often marshy steppes are not easily practicable, and some weeks must certainly pass before the Russian troops could reach the Tartar hordes.

Omsk is the center of that military organization of Western Siberia which is intended to overawe the Kirghiz population. Here are the bounds, more than once infringed by the half-subdued nomads, and there was every reason to believe that Omsk was already in danger. The line of military stations, that is to say, those Cossack posts which are ranged in echelon from Omsk to Semipolatinsk, must have been broken in several places. Now, it was to be feared that the “Grand Sultans,” who govern the Kirghiz districts would either voluntarily accept, or involuntarily submit to, the dominion of Tartars, Mussulmen like themselves, and that to the hate caused by slavery was not united the hate due to the antagonism of the Greek and Mussulman religions. For some time, indeed, the Tartars of Turkestan had endeavored, both by force and persuasion, to subdue the Kirghiz hordes.

A few words only with respect to these Tartars. The Tartars belong more especially to two distinct races, the Caucasian and the Mongolian. The Caucasian race, which, as Abel de Remusat says, “is regarded in Europe as the type of beauty in our species, because all the nations in this part of the world have sprung from it,” includes also the Turks and the Persians. The purely Mongolian race comprises the Mongols, Manchoux, and Thibetans.

The Tartars who now threatened the Russian Empire, belonged to the Caucasian race, and occupied Turkestan. This immense country is divided into different states, governed by Khans, and hence termed Khanats. The principal khanats are those of Bokhara, Khokhand, Koondooz, etc. At this period, the most important and the most formidable khanat was that of Bokhara. Russia had already been several times at war with its chiefs, who, for their own interests, had supported the independence of the Kirghiz against the Muscovite dominion. The present chief, Feofar-Khan, followed in the steps of his predecessors.

The khanat of Bokhara has a population of two million five hundred thousand inhabitants, an army of sixty thousand men, trebled in time of war, and thirty thousand horsemen. It is a rich country, with varied animal, vegetable, and mineral products, and has been increased by the accession of the territories of Balkh, Aukoi, and Meimaneh. It possesses nineteen large towns. Bokhara, surrounded by a wall measuring more than eight English miles, and flanked with towers, a glorious city, made illustrious by Avicenna and other learned men of the tenth century, is regarded as the center of Mussulman science, and ranks among the most celebrated cities of Central Asia. Samarcand, which contains the tomb of Tamerlane and the famous palace where the blue stone is kept on which each new khan must seat himself on his accession, is defended by a very strong citadel. Karschi, with its triple cordon, situated in an oasis, surrounded by a marsh peopled with tortoises and lizards, is almost impregnable, Is-chardjoui is defended by a population of twenty thousand souls. Protected by its mountains, and isolated by its steppes, the khanat of Bokhara is a most formidable state; and Russia would need a large force to subdue it.

The fierce and ambitious Feofar now governed this corner of Tartary. Relying on the other khans — principally those of Khokhand and

Koondooz, cruel and rapacious warriors, all ready to join an enterprise so dear to Tartar instincts — aided by the chiefs who ruled all the hordes of Central Asia, he had placed himself at the head of the rebellion of which Ivan Ogareff was the instigator. This traitor, impelled by insane ambition as much as by hate, had ordered the movement so as to attack Siberia. Mad indeed he was, if he hoped to rupture the Muscovite Empire. Acting under his suggestion, the Emir — which is the title taken by the khans of Bokhara — had poured his hordes over the Russian frontier. He invaded the government of Semipolatinsk, and the Cossacks, who were only in small force there, had been obliged to retire before him. He had advanced farther than Lake Balkhash, gaining over the Kirghiz population on his way. Pillaging, ravaging, enrolling those who submitted, taking prisoners those who resisted, he marched from one town to another, followed by those impedimenta of Oriental sovereignty which may be called his household, his wives and his slaves — all with the cool audacity of a modern Ghengis-Khan. It was impossible to ascertain where he now was; how far his soldiers had marched before the news of the rebellion reached Moscow; or to what part of Siberia the Russian troops had been forced to retire. All communication was interrupted. Had the wire between Kolyvan and Tomsk been cut by Tartar scouts, or had the Emir himself arrived at the Yeniseisk provinces? Was all the lower part of Western Siberia in a ferment? Had the rebellion already spread to the eastern regions? No one could say. The only agent which fears neither cold nor heat, which can neither be stopped by the rigors of winter nor the heat of summer, and which flies with the rapidity of lightning — the electric current — was prevented from traversing the steppes, and it was no longer possible to warn the Grand Duke, shut up in Irkutsk, of the danger threatening him from the treason of Ivan Ogareff.

A courier only could supply the place of the interrupted current. It would take this man some time to traverse the five thousand two hundred versts between Moscow and Irkutsk. To pass the ranks of the rebels and invaders he must display almost superhuman courage and intelligence. But with a clear head and a firm heart much can be done.

“Shall I be able to find this head and heart?” thought the Czar.

CHAPTER III MICHAEL STROGOFF MEETS THE CZAR

THE door of the imperial cabinet was again opened and General Kissoff was announced.

“The courier?” inquired the Czar eagerly.

“He is here, sire,” replied General Kissoff.

“Have you found a fitting man?”

“I will answer for him to your majesty.”

“Has he been in the service of the Palace?”

“Yes, sire.”

“You know him?”

“Personally, and at various times he has fulfilled difficult missions with success.”

“Abroad?”

“In Siberia itself.”

“Where does he come from?”

“From Omsk. He is a Siberian.”

“Has he coolness, intelligence, courage?”

“Yes, sire; he has all the qualities necessary to succeed, even where others might possibly fail.”

“What is his age?”

“Thirty.”

“Is he strong and vigorous?”

“Sire, he can bear cold, hunger, thirst, fatigue, to the very last extremities.”

“He must have a frame of iron.”

“Sire, he has.”

“And a heart?”

“A heart of gold.”

“His name?”

“Michael Strogoff.”

“Is he ready to set out?”

“He awaits your majesty’s orders in the guard-room.”

“Let him come in,” said the Czar.

In a few moments Michael Strogoff, the courier, entered the imperial library. He was a tall, vigorous, broad-shouldered, deep-chested man. His powerful head possessed the fine features of the Caucasian race. His well-knit frame seemed built for the performance of feats of strength. It would have been a difficult task to move such a man against his will, for when his feet were once planted on the ground, it was as if they had taken root. As he doffed his Muscovite cap, locks of thick curly hair fell over his broad, massive forehead. When his ordinarily pale face became at all flushed, it arose solely from a more rapid action of the heart. His eyes, of a deep blue, looked with clear, frank, firm gaze. The slightly-contracted eyebrows indicated lofty heroism — ”the hero’s cool courage,” according to the definition of the physiologist. He possessed a fine nose, with large nostrils; and a well-shaped mouth, with the slightly-projecting lips which denote a generous and noble heart.

Michael Strogoff had the temperament of the man of action, who does not bite his nails or scratch his head in doubt and indecision. Sparing of gestures as of words, he always stood motionless like a soldier before his superior; but when he moved, his step showed a firmness, a freedom of movement, which proved the confidence and vivacity of his mind.

Michael Strogoff wore a handsome military uniform something resembling that of a light-cavalry officer in the field — boots, spurs, half tightly-fitting trousers, brown pelisse, trimmed with fur and ornamented with yellow braid. On his breast glittered a cross and several medals.

Michael Strogoff belonged to the special corps of the Czar’s couriers, ranking as an officer among those picked men. His most discernible characteristic — particularly in his walk, his face, in the whole man, and which the Czar perceived at a glance — was, that he was “a fulfiller of orders.” He therefore possessed one of the most serviceable qualities in Russia — one which, as the celebrated novelist Tourgueneff says, “will lead to the highest positions in the Muscovite empire.”

In short, if anyone could accomplish this journey from Moscow to Irkutsk, across a rebellious country, surmount obstacles, and brave perils of all sorts, Michael Strogoff was the man.

A circumstance especially favorable to the success of his plan was, that he was thoroughly acquainted with the country which he was about to traverse, and understood its different dialects — not only from having traveled there before, but because he was of Siberian origin.

His father — old Peter Strogoff, dead ten years since — inhabited the town of Omsk, situated in the government of the same name; and his mother, Marfa Strogoff, lived there still. There, amid the wild steppes of the provinces of Omsk and Tobolsk, had the famous huntsman brought up his son Michael to endure hardship. Peter Strogoff was a huntsman by profession. Summer and winter — in the burning heat, as well as when the cold was sometimes fifty degrees below zero — he scoured the frozen plains, the thickets of birch and larch, the pine forests; setting traps; watching for small game with his gun, and for large game with the spear or knife. The large game was nothing less than the Siberian bear, a formidable and ferocious animal, in size equaling its fellow of the frozen seas. Peter Strogoff had killed more than thirty-nine bears — that is to say, the fortieth had fallen under his blows; and, according to Russian legends, most huntsmen who have been lucky enough up to the thirty-ninth bear, have succumbed to the fortieth.

Peter Strogoff had, however, passed the fatal number without even a scratch. From that time, his son Michael, aged eleven years, never failed to accompany him to the hunt, carrying the ragatina or spear to aid his father, who was armed only with the knife. When he was fourteen, Michael Strogoff had killed his first bear, quite alone — that was nothing; but after stripping it he dragged the gigantic animal’s skin to his father’s house, many versts distant, exhibiting remarkable strength in a boy so young.

This style of life was of great benefit to him, and when he arrived at manhood he could bear any amount of cold, heat, hunger, thirst, or fatigue. Like the Yakout of the northern countries, he was made of iron. He could go four-and-twenty hours without eating, ten nights without sleeping, and could make himself a shelter in the open steppe where others would have been frozen to death. Gifted with marvelous acuteness, guided by the instinct of the Delaware of North America, over the white plain, when every object is hidden in mist, or even in higher latitudes, where the polar night is prolonged for many days, he could find his way when others would have had no idea whither to turn. All his father’s secrets were known to him. He had learnt to read almost imperceptible signs — the forms of icicles, the appearance of the small branches of trees, mists rising far away in the horizon, vague sounds in the air, distant reports, the flight of birds through the foggy atmosphere, a thousand circumstances which are so many words to those who can decipher them. Moreover, tempered by snow like a Damascus blade in the waters of Syria, he had a frame of iron, as General Kissoff had said, and, what was no less true, a heart of gold.

The only sentiment of love felt by Michael Strogoff was that which he entertained for his mother, the aged Marfa, who could never be induced to leave the house of the Strogoffs, at Omsk, on the banks of the Irtish, where the old huntsman and she had lived so long together. When her son left her, he went away with a full heart, but promising to come and see her whenever he could possibly do so; and this promise he had always religiously kept.

When Michael was twenty, it was decided that he should enter the personal service of the Emperor of Russia, in the corps of the couriers of the Czar. The hardy, intelligent, zealous, well-conducted young Siberian first distinguished himself especially, in a journey to the Caucasus, through the midst of a difficult country, ravaged by some restless successors of

Schamyl; then later, in an important mission to Petropolowski, in Kamtschatka, the extreme limit of Asiatic Russia. During these long journeys he displayed such marvelous coolness, prudence, and courage, as to gain him the approbation and protection of his chiefs, who rapidly advanced him in his profession.

The furloughs which were his due after these distant missions, he never failed to devote to his old mother. Having been much employed in the south of the empire, he had not seen old Marfa for three years — three ages! — the first time in his life he had been so long absent from her. Now, however, in a few days he would obtain his furlough, and he had accordingly already made preparations for departure for Omsk, when the events which have been related occurred. Michael Strogoff was therefore introduced into the Czar’s presence in complete ignorance of what the emperor expected from him.

The Czar fixed a penetrating look upon him without uttering a word, whilst Michael stood perfectly motionless.

The Czar, apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, motioned to the chief of police to seat himself, and dictated in a low voice a letter of not more than a few lines.

The letter penned, the Czar re-read it attentively, then signed it, preceding his name with the words “Byt po semou,” which, signifying “So be it,” constitutes the decisive formula of the Russian emperors.

The letter was then placed in an envelope, which was sealed with the imperial arms.

The Czar, rising, told Michael Strogoff to draw near.

Michael advanced a few steps, and then stood motionless, ready to answer.

The Czar again looked him full in the face and their eyes met. Then in an abrupt tone, “Thy name?” he asked.

“Michael Strogoff, sire.”

“Thy rank?”

“Captain in the corps of couriers of the Czar.”

“Thou dost know Siberia?”

“I am a Siberian.”

“A native of?”

“Omsk, sire.”

“Hast thou relations there?”

“Yes sire.”

“What relations?”

“My old mother.”

The Czar suspended his questions for a moment. Then, pointing to the letter which he held in his hand, “Here is a letter which I charge thee, Michael Strogoff, to deliver into the hands of the Grand Duke, and to no other but him.”

“I will deliver it, sire.”

“The Grand Duke is at Irkutsk.”

“I will go to Irkutsk.”

“Thou wilt have to traverse a rebellious country, invaded by Tartars, whose interest it will be to intercept this letter.”

“I will traverse it.”

“Above all, beware of the traitor, Ivan Ogareff, who will perhaps meet thee on the way.”

“I will beware of him.”

“Wilt thou pass through Omsk?”

“Sire, that is my route.”

“If thou dost see thy mother, there will be the risk of being recognized. Thou must not see her!”

Michael Strogoff hesitated a moment.

“I will not see her,” said he.

“Swear to me that nothing will make thee acknowledge who thou art, nor whither thou art going.”

“I swear it.”

“Michael Strogoff,” continued the Czar, giving the letter to the young courier, “take this letter; on it depends the safety of all Siberia, and perhaps the life of my brother the Grand Duke.”

“This letter shall be delivered to his Highness the Grand Duke.”

“Then thou wilt pass whatever happens?”

“I shall pass, or they shall kill me.”

“I want thee to live.”

“I shall live, and I shall pass,” answered Michael Strogoff.

The Czar appeared satisfied with Strogoff’s calm and simple answer.

“Go then, Michael Strogoff,” said he, “go for God, for Russia, for my brother, and for myself!”

The courier, having saluted his sovereign, immediately left the imperial cabinet, and, in a few minutes, the New Palace.

“You made a good choice there, General,” said the Czar.

“I think so, sire,” replied General Kissoff; “and your majesty may be sure that Michael Strogoff will do all that a man can do.”

“He is indeed a man,” said the Czar.

CHAPTER IV FROM MOSCOW TO NIJNI-NOVGOROD

THE distance between Moscow and Irkutsk, about to be traversed by Michael Strogoff, was three thousand four hundred miles. Before the telegraph wire extended from the Ural Mountains to the eastern frontier of Siberia, the dispatch service was performed by couriers, those who traveled the most rapidly taking eighteen days to get from Moscow to Irkutsk. But this was the exception, and the journey through Asiatic Russia usually occupied from four to five weeks, even though every available means of transport was placed at the disposal of the Czar’s messengers.

Michael Strogoff was a man who feared neither frost nor snow. He would have preferred traveling during the severe winter season, in order that he might perform the whole distance by sleighs. At that period of the year the difficulties which all other means of locomotion present are greatly diminished, the wide steppes being leveled by snow, while there are no rivers to cross, but simply sheets of glass, over which the sleigh glides rapidly and easily.

Perhaps certain natural phenomena are most to be feared at that time, such as long-continuing and dense fogs, excessive cold, fearfully heavy snow-storms, which sometimes envelop whole caravans and cause their destruction. Hungry wolves also roam over the plain in thousands. But it would have been better for Michael Strogoff to face these risks; for during the winter the Tartar invaders would have been stationed in the towns, any movement of their troops would have been impracticable, and he could consequently have more easily performed his journey. But it was not in his power to choose either weather or time. Whatever the circumstances, he must accept them and set out.

Such were the difficulties which Michael Strogoff boldly confronted and prepared to encounter.

In the first place, he must not travel as a courier of the Czar usually would. No one must even suspect what he really was. Spies swarm in a rebellious country; let him be recognized, and his mission would be in danger. Also, while supplying him with a large sum of money, which was sufficient for his journey, and would facilitate it in some measure, General Kissoff had not given him any document notifying that he was on the Emperor’s service, which is the Sesame par excellence. He contented himself with furnishing him with a “podorojna.”

This podorojna was made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff, merchant, living at Irkutsk. It authorized Nicholas Korpanoff to be accompanied by one or more persons, and, moreover, it was, by special notification, made available in the event of the Muscovite government forbidding natives of any other countries to leave Russia.

The podorojna is simply a permission to take post-horses; but Michael Strogoff was not to use it unless he was sure that by so doing he would not excite suspicion as to his mission, that is to say, whilst he was on European territory. The consequence was that in Siberia, whilst traversing the insurgent provinces, he would have no power over the relays, either in the choice of horses in preference to others, or in demanding conveyances for his personal use; neither was Michael Strogoff to forget that he was no longer a courier, but a plain merchant, Nicholas Korpanoff, traveling from Moscow to Irkutsk, and, as such exposed to all the impediments of an ordinary journey.

To pass unknown, more or less rapidly, but to pass somehow, such were the directions he had received.

Thirty years previously, the escort of a traveler of rank consisted of not less than two hundred mounted Cossacks, two hundred foot-soldiers, twenty-five Baskir horsemen, three hundred camels, four hundred horses, twenty-five wagons, two portable boats, and two pieces of cannon. All this was requisite for a journey in Siberia.

Michael Strogoff, however, had neither cannon, nor horsemen, nor foot-soldiers, nor beasts of burden. He would travel in a carriage or on horseback, when he could; on foot, when he could not.

There would be no difficulty in getting over the first thousand miles, the distance between Moscow and the Russian frontier. Railroads, post-carriages, steamboats, relays of horses, were at everyone’s disposal, and consequently at the disposal of the courier of the Czar.

Accordingly, on the morning of the 16th of July, having doffed his uniform, with a knapsack on his back, dressed in the simple Russian costume — tightly-fitting tunic, the traditional belt of the Moujik, wide trousers, gartered at the knees, and high boots — Michael Strogoff arrived at the station in time for the first train. He carried no arms, openly at least, but under his belt was hidden a revolver and in his pocket, one of those large knives, resembling both a cutlass and a yataghan, with which a Siberian hunter can so neatly disembowel a bear, without injuring its precious fur.

A crowd of travelers had collected at the Moscow station. The stations on the Russian railroads are much used as places for meeting, not only by those who are about to proceed by the train, but by friends who come to see them off. The station resembles, from the variety of characters assembled, a small news exchange.

The train in which Michael took his place was to set him down at Nijni-Novgorod. There terminated at that time, the iron road which, uniting Moscow and St. Petersburg, has since been continued to the Russian frontier. It was a journey of under three hundred miles, and the train would accomplish it in ten hours. Once arrived at Nijni-Novgorod, Strogoff would either take the land route or the steamer on the Volga, so as to reach the Ural Mountains as soon as possible.

Michael Strogoff ensconced himself in his corner, like a worthy citizen whose affairs go well with him, and who endeavors to kill time by sleep. Nevertheless, as he was not alone in his compartment, he slept with one eye open, and listened with both his ears.

In fact, rumor of the rising of the Kirghiz hordes, and of the Tartar invasion had transpired in some degree. The occupants of the carriage, whom chance had made his traveling companions, discussed the subject, though with that caution which has become habitual among Russians, who know that spies are ever on the watch for any treasonable expressions which may be uttered.

These travelers, as well as the large number of persons in the train, were merchants on their way to the celebrated fair of Nijni-Novgorod; — a very mixed assembly, composed of Jews, Turks, Cossacks, Russians, Georgians, Kalmucks, and others, but nearly all speaking the national tongue.

They discussed the pros and cons of the serious events which were taking place beyond the Ural, and those merchants seemed to fear lest the government should be led to take certain restrictive measures, especially in the provinces bordering on the frontier — measures from which trade would certainly suffer. They apparently thought only of the struggle from the single point of view of their threatened interests. The presence of a private soldier, clad in his uniform — and the importance of a uniform in Russia is great — would have certainly been enough to restrain the merchants’ tongues. But in the compartment occupied by Michael Strogoff, there was no one who seemed a military man, and the Czar’s courier was not the person to betray himself. He listened, then.

“They say that caravan teas are up,” remarked a Persian, known by his cap of Astrakhan fur, and his ample brown robe, worn threadbare by use.

“Oh, there’s no fear of teas falling,” answered an old Jew of sullen aspect. “Those in the market at Nijni-Novgorod will be easily cleared off by the West; but, unfortunately, it won’t be the same with Bokhara carpets.”

“What! are you expecting goods from Bokhara?” asked the Persian.

“No, but from Samarcand, and that is even more exposed. The idea of reckoning on the exports of a country in which the khans are in a state of revolt from Khiva to the Chinese frontier!”

“Well,” replied the Persian, “if the carpets do not arrive, the drafts will not arrive either, I suppose.”

“And the profits, Father Abraham!” exclaimed the little Jew, “do you reckon them as nothing?”

“You are right,” said another; “goods from Central Asia run a great risk in the market, and it will be the same with the tallow and shawls from the East.”

“Why, look out, little father,” said a Russian traveler, in a bantering tone; “you’ll grease your shawls terribly if you mix them up with your tallow.”

“That amuses you,” sharply answered the merchant, who had little relish for that sort of joke.

“Well, if you tear your hair, or if you throw ashes on your head,” replied the traveler, “will that change the course of events? No; no more than the course of the Exchange.”

“One can easily see that you are not a merchant,” observed the little Jew.

“Faith, no, worthy son of Abraham! I sell neither hops, nor eider-down, nor honey, nor wax, nor hemp-seed, nor salt meat, nor caviare, nor wood, nor wool, nor ribbons, nor, hemp, nor flax, nor morocco, nor furs.”

“But do you buy them?” asked the Persian, interrupting the traveler’s list.

“As little as I can, and only for my own private use,” answered the other, with a wink.

“He’s a wag,” said the Jew to the Persian.

“Or a spy,” replied the other, lowering his voice. “We had better take care, and not speak more than necessary. The police are not over-particular in these times, and you never can know with whom you are traveling.”

In another corner of the compartment they were speaking less of mercantile affairs, and more of the Tartar invasion and its annoying consequences.

“All the horses in Siberia will be requisitioned,” said a traveler, “and communication between the different provinces of Central Asia will become very difficult.”

“Is it true,” asked his neighbor, “that the Kirghiz of the middle horde have joined the Tartars?”

“So it is said,” answered the traveler, lowering his voice; “but who can flatter themselves that they know anything really of what is going on in this country?”

“I have heard speak of a concentration of troops on the frontier. The Don Cossacks have already gathered along the course of the Volga, and they are to be opposed to the rebel Kirghiz.”

“If the Kirghiz descend the Irtish, the route to Irkutsk will not be safe,” observed his neighbor. “Besides, yesterday I wanted to send a telegram to Krasnoiarsk, and it could not be forwarded. It’s to be feared that before long the Tartar columns will have isolated Eastern Siberia.”

“In short, little father,” continued the first speaker, “these merchants have good reason for being uneasy about their trade and transactions. After requisitioning the horses, they will take the boats, carriages, every means of transport, until presently no one will be allowed to take even one step in all the empire.”

“I’m much afraid that the Nijni-Novgorod fair won’t end as brilliantly as it has begun,” responded the other, shaking his head. “But the safety and integrity of the Russian territory before everything. Business is business.”

If in this compartment the subject of conversation varied but little — nor did it, indeed, in the other carriages of the train — in all it might have been observed that the talkers used much circumspection. When they did happen to venture out of the region of facts, they never went so far as to attempt to divine the intentions of the Muscovite government, or even to criticize them.

This was especially remarked by a traveler in a carriage at the front part of the train. This person — evidently a stranger — made good use of his eyes, and asked numberless questions, to which he received only evasive answers. Every minute leaning out of the window, which he would keep down, to the great disgust of his fellow-travelers, he lost nothing of the views to the right. He inquired the names of the most insignificant places, their position, what were their commerce, their manufactures, the number of their inhabitants, the average mortality, etc. and all this he wrote down in a note-book, already full.

This was the correspondent Alcide Jolivet, and the reason of his putting so many insignificant questions was, that amongst the many answers he received, he hoped to find some interesting fact “for his cousin.” But, naturally enough, he was taken for a spy, and not a word treating of the events of the day was uttered in his hearing.

Finding, therefore, that he could learn nothing of the Tartar invasion, he wrote in his book, “Travelers of great discretion. Very close as to political matters.”

Whilst Alcide Jolivet noted down his impressions thus minutely, his confrere, in the same train, traveling for the same object, was devoting himself to the same work of observation in another compartment. Neither of them had seen each other that day at the Moscow station, and they were each ignorant that the other had set out to visit the scene of the war. Harry Blount, speaking little, but listening much, had not inspired his companions with the suspicions which Alcide Jolivet had aroused. He was not taken for a spy, and therefore his neighbors, without constraint, gossiped in his presence, allowing themselves even to go farther than their natural caution would in most cases have allowed them. The correspondent of the Daily Telegraph had thus an opportunity of observing how much recent events preoccupied the merchants of Nijni-Novgorod, and to what a degree the commerce with Central Asia was threatened in its transit.

He therefore noted in his book this perfectly correct observation, “My fellow-travelers extremely anxious. Nothing is talked of but war, and they speak of it, with a freedom which is astonishing, as having broken out between the Volga and the Vistula.”

The readers of the Daily Telegraph would not fail to be as well informed as Alcide Jolivet’s “cousin.” But as Harry Blount, seated at the left of the train, only saw one part of the country, which was hilly, without giving himself the trouble of looking at the right side, which was composed of wide plains, he added, with British assurance, “Country mountainous between Moscow and Wladimir.”

It was evident that the Russian government purposed taking severe measures to guard against any serious eventualities even in the interior of the empire. The rebel lion had not crossed the Siberian frontier, but evil influences might be feared in the Volga provinces, so near to the country of the Kirghiz.

The police had as yet found no traces of Ivan Ogareff. It was not known whether the traitor, calling in the foreigner to avenge his personal rancor, had rejoined Feofar-Khan, or whether he was endeavoring to foment a revolt in the government of Nijni-Novgorod, which at this time of year contained a population of such diverse elements. Perhaps among the Persians, Armenians, or Kalmucks, who flocked to the great market, he had agents, instructed to provoke a rising in the interior. All this was possible, especially in such a country as Russia. In fact, this vast empire, 4,000,000 square miles in extent, does not possess the homogeneousness of the states of Western Europe. The Russian territory in Europe and Asia contains more than seventy millions of inhabitants. In it thirty different languages are spoken. The Sclavonian race predominates, no doubt, but there are besides Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Courlanders. Add to these, Finns, Laplanders, Esthonians, several other northern tribes with unpronounceable names, the Permiaks, the Germans, the Greeks, the Tartars, the Caucasian tribes, the Mongol, Kalmuck, Samoid, Kamtschatkan, and Aleutian hordes, and one may understand that the unity of so vast a state must be difficult to maintain, and that it could only be the work of time, aided by the wisdom of many successive rulers.

Be that as it may, Ivan Ogareff had hitherto managed to escape all search, and very probably he might have rejoined the Tartar army. But at every station where the train stopped, inspectors came forward who scrutinized the travelers and subjected them all to a minute examination, as by order of the superintendent of police, these officials were seeking Ivan Ogareff. The government, in fact, believed it to be certain that the traitor had not yet been able to quit European Russia. If there appeared cause to suspect any traveler, he was carried off to explain himself at the police station, and in the meantime the train went on its way, no person troubling himself about the unfortunate one left behind.

With the Russian police, which is very arbitrary, it is absolutely useless to argue. Military rank is conferred on its employees, and they act in military fashion. How can anyone, moreover, help obeying, unhesitatingly, orders which emanate from a monarch who has the right to employ this formula at the head of his ukase: “We, by the grace of God, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias of Moscow, Kiev, Wladimir, and Novgorod, Czar of Kasan and Astrakhan, Czar of Poland, Czar of Siberia, Czar of the Tauric Chersonese, Seignior of Pskov, Prince of Smolensk, Lithuania, Volkynia, Podolia, and Finland, Prince of Esthonia, Livonia, Courland, and of Semigallia, of Bialystok, Karelia, Sougria, Perm, Viatka, Bulgaria, and many other countries; Lord and Sovereign Prince of the territory of Nijni-Novgorod, Tchemigoff, Riazan, Polotsk, Rostov, Jaroslavl, Bielozersk, Oudoria, Obdoria, Kondinia, Vitepsk, and of Mstislaf, Governor of the Hyperborean Regions, Lord of the countries of Iveria, Kartalinia, Grouzinia, Kabardinia, and Armenia, Hereditary Lord and Suzerain of the Scherkess princes, of those of the mountains, and of others; heir of Norway, Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, Stormarn, Dittmarsen, and Oldenburg." A powerful lord, in truth, is he whose arms are an eagle with two heads, holding a scepter and a globe, surrounded by the escutcheons of Novgorod, Wladimir, Kiev, Kasan, Astrakhan, and of Siberia, and environed by the collar of the order of St. Andrew, surmounted by a royal crown!

As to Michael Strogoff, his papers were in order, and he was, consequently, free from all police supervision.

At the station of Wladimir the train stopped for several minutes, which appeared sufficient to enable the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph to take a twofold view, physical and moral, and to form a complete estimate of this ancient capital of Russia.

At the Wladimir station fresh travelers joined the train. Among others, a young girl entered the compartment occupied by Michael Strogoff. A vacant place was found opposite the courier. The young girl took it, after placing by her side a modest traveling-bag of red leather, which seemed to constitute all her luggage. Then seating herself with downcast eyes, not even glancing at the fellow-travelers whom chance had given her, she prepared for a journey which was still to last several hours.

Michael Strogoff could not help looking attentively at his newly-arrived fellow-traveler. As she was so placed as to travel with her back to the engine, he even offered her his seat, which he might prefer to her own, but she thanked him with a slight bend of her graceful neck.

The young girl appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen years of age. Her head, truly charming, was of the purest Sclavonic type — slightly severe, and likely in a few summers to unfold into beauty rather than mere prettiness. From beneath a sort of kerchief which she wore on her head escaped in profusion light golden hair. Her eyes were brown, soft, and expressive of much sweetness of temper. The nose was straight, and attached to her pale and somewhat thin cheeks by delicately mobile nostrils. The lips were finely cut, but it seemed as if they had long since forgotten how to smile.

The young traveler was tall and upright, as far as could be judged of her figure from the very simple and ample pelisse that covered her. Although she was still a very young girl in the literal sense of the term, the development of her high forehead and clearly-cut features gave the idea that she was the possessor of great moral energy — a point which did not escape Michael Strogoff. Evidently this young girl had already suffered in the past, and the future doubtless did not present itself to her in glowing colors; but she had surely known how to struggle still with the trials of life. Her energy was evidently both prompt and persistent, and her calmness unalterable, even under circumstances in which a man would be likely to give way or lose his self-command.

Such was the impression which she produced at first sight. Michael Strogoff, being himself of an energetic temperament, was naturally struck by the character of her physiognomy, and, while taking care not to cause her annoyance by a too persistent gaze, he observed his neighbor with no small interest. The costume of the young traveler was both extremely simple and appropriate. She was not rich — that could be easily seen; but not the slightest mark of negligence was to be discerned in her dress. All her luggage was contained in the leather bag which, for want of room, she held on her lap.

She wore a long, dark pelisse, gracefully adjusted at the neck by a blue tie. Under this pelisse, a short skirt, also dark, fell over a robe which reached the ankles. Half-boots of leather, thickly soled, as if chosen in anticipation of a long journey, covered her small feet.

Michael Strogoff fancied that he recognized, by certain details, the fashion of the costume of Livonia, and thought his neighbor a native of the Baltic provinces.

But whither was this young girl going, alone, at an age when the fostering care of a father, or the protection of a brother, is considered a matter of necessity? Had she now come, after an already long journey, from the provinces of Western Russia? Was she merely going to Nijni-Novgorod, or was the end of her travels beyond the eastern frontiers of the empire? Would some relation, some friend, await her arrival by the train? Or was it not more probable, on the contrary, that she would find herself as much isolated in the town as she was in this compartment? It was probable.

In fact, the effect of habits contracted in solitude was clearly manifested in the bearing of the young girl. The manner in which she entered the carriage and prepared herself for the journey, the slight disturbance she caused among those around her, the care she took not to incommode or give trouble to anyone, all showed that she was accustomed to be alone, and to depend on herself only.

Michael Strogoff observed her with interest, but, himself reserved, he sought no opportunity of accosting her. Once only, when her neighbor — the merchant who had jumbled together so imprudently in his remarks tallow and shawls — being asleep, and threatening her with his great head, which was swaying from one shoulder to the other, Michael Strogoff awoke him somewhat roughly, and made him understand that he must hold himself upright.

The merchant, rude enough by nature, grumbled some words against “people who interfere with what does not concern them,” but Michael Strogoff cast on him a glance so stern that the sleeper leant on the opposite side, and relieved the young traveler from his unpleasant vicinity.

The latter looked at the young man for an instant, and mute and modest thanks were in that look.

But a circumstance occurred which gave Strogoff a just idea of the character of the maiden. Twelve versts before arriving at Nijni-Novgorod, at a sharp curve of the iron way, the train experienced a very violent shock. Then, for a minute, it ran onto the slope of an embankment.

Travelers more or less shaken about, cries, confusion, general disorder in the carriages — such was the effect at first produced. It was to be feared that some serious accident had happened. Consequently, even before the train had stopped, the doors were opened, and the panic-stricken passengers thought only of getting out of the carriages.

Michael Strogoff thought instantly of the young girl; but, while the passengers in her compartment were precipitating themselves outside, screaming and struggling, she had remained quietly in her place, her face scarcely changed by a slight pallor.

She waited — Michael Strogoff waited also.

Both remained quiet.

“A determined nature!” thought Michael Strogoff.

However, all danger had quickly disappeared. A breakage of the coupling of the luggage-van had first caused the shock to, and then the stoppage of, the train, which in another instant would have been thrown from the top of the embankment into a bog. There was an hour’s delay. At last, the road being cleared, the train proceeded, and at half-past eight in the evening arrived at the station of Nijni-Novgorod.

Before anyone could get out of the carriages, the inspectors of police presented themselves at the doors and examined the passengers.

Michael Strogoff showed his podorojna, made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff. He had consequently no difficulty. As to the other travelers in the compartment, all bound for Nijni-Novgorod, their appearance, happily for them, was in nowise suspicious.

The young girl in her turn, exhibited, not a passport, since passports are no longer required in Russia, but a permit indorsed with a private seal, and which seemed to be of a special character. The inspector read the permit with attention. Then, having attentively examined the person whose description it contained:

“You are from Riga?” he said.

“Yes,” replied the young girl.

“You are going to Irkutsk?”

“Yes.”

“By what route?”

“By Perm.”

“Good!” replied the inspector. “Take care to have your permit vised, at the police station of Nijni-Novgorod.”

The young girl bent her head in token of assent.

Hearing these questions and replies, Michael Strogoff experienced a mingled sentiment both of surprise and pity. What! this young girl, alone, journeying to that far-off Siberia, and at a time when, to its ordinary dangers, were added all the perils of an invaded country and one in a state of insurrection! How would she reach it? What would become of her?

The inspection ended, the doors of the carriages were then opened, but, before Michael Strogoff could move towards her, the young Livonian, who had been the first to descend, had disappeared in the crowd which thronged the platforms of the railway station.

CHAPTER V THE TWO ANNOUNCEMENTS

NIJNI-NOVGOROD, Lower Novgorod, situate at the junction of the Volga and the Oka, is the chief town in the district of the same name. It was here that Michael Strogoff was obliged to leave the railway, which at the time did not go beyond that town. Thus, as he advanced, his traveling would become first less speedy and then less safe.

Nijni-Novgorod, the fixed population of which is only from thirty to thirty-five thousand inhabitants, contained at that time more than three hundred thousand; that is to say, the population was increased tenfold. This addition was in consequence of the celebrated fair, which was held within the walls for three weeks. Formerly Makariew had the benefit of this concourse of traders, but since 1817 the fair had been removed to Nijni-Novgorod.

Even at the late hour at which Michael Strogoff left the platform, there was still a large number of people in the two towns, separated by the stream of the Volga, which compose Nijni-Novgorod. The highest of these is built on a steep rock, and defended by a fort called in Russia “kreml.”

Michael Strogoff expected some trouble in finding a hotel, or even an inn, to suit him. As he had not to start immediately, for he was going to take a steamer, he was compelled to look out for some lodging; but, before doing so, he wished to know exactly the hour at which the steamboat would start. He went to the office of the company whose boats plied between Nijni-Novgorod and Perm. There, to his great annoyance, he found that no boat started for Perm till the following day at twelve o’clock. Seventeen hours to wait! It was very vexatious to a man so pressed for time. However, he never senselessly murmured. Besides, the fact was that no other conveyance could take him so quickly either to Perm or Kasan. It would be better, then, to wait for the steamer, which would enable him to regain lost time.

Here, then, was Michael Strogoff, strolling through the town and quietly looking out for some inn in which to pass the night. However, he troubled himself little on this score, and, but that hunger pressed him, he would probably have wandered on till morning in the streets of Nijni-Novgorod. He was looking for supper rather than a bed. But he found both at the sign of the City of Constantinople. There, the landlord offered him a fairly comfortable room, with little furniture, it is true, but not without an image of the Virgin, and a few saints framed in yellow gauze.

A goose filled with sour stuffing swimming in thick cream, barley bread, some curds, powdered sugar mixed with cinnamon, and a jug of kwass, the ordinary Russian beer, were placed before him, and sufficed to satisfy his hunger. He did justice to the meal, which was more than could be said of his neighbor at table, who, having, in his character of “old believer” of the sect of Raskalniks, made the vow of abstinence, rejected the potatoes in front of him, and carefully refrained from putting sugar in his tea.

His supper finished, Michael Strogoff, instead of going up to his bedroom, again strolled out into the town. But, although the long twilight yet lingered, the crowd was already dispersing, the streets were gradually becoming empty, and at length everyone retired to his dwelling.

Why did not Michael Strogoff go quietly to bed, as would have seemed more reasonable after a long railway journey? Was he thinking of the young Livonian girl who had been his traveling companion? Having nothing better to do, he WAS thinking of her. Did he fear that, lost in this busy city, she might be exposed to insult? He feared so, and with good reason. Did he hope to meet her, and, if need were, to afford her protection? No. To meet would be difficult. As to protection — what right had he —

“Alone,” he said to himself, “alone, in the midst of these wandering tribes! And yet the present dangers are nothing compared to those she must undergo. Siberia! Irkutsk! I am about to dare all risks for Russia, for the Czar, while she is about to do so — For whom? For what? She is authorized to cross the frontier! The country beyond is in revolt! The steppes are full of Tartar bands!”

Michael Strogoff stopped for an instant, and reflected.

“Without doubt,” thought he, “she must have determined on undertaking her journey before the invasion. Perhaps she is even now ignorant of what is happening. But no, that cannot be; the merchants discussed before her the disturbances in Siberia — and she did not seem surprised. She did not even ask an explanation. She must have known it then, and knowing it, is still resolute. Poor girl! Her motive for the journey must be urgent indeed! But though she may be brave — and she certainly is so — her strength must fail her, and, to say nothing of dangers and obstacles, she will be unable to endure the fatigue of such a journey. Never can she reach Irkutsk!”

Indulging in such reflections, Michael Strogoff wandered on as chance led him; being well acquainted with the town, he knew that he could easily retrace his steps.

Having strolled on for about an hour, he seated himself on a bench against the wall of a large wooden cottage, which stood, with many others, on a vast open space. He had scarcely been there five minutes when a hand was laid heavily on his shoulder.

“What are you doing here?” roughly demanded a tall and powerful man, who had approached unperceived.

“I am resting,” replied Michael Strogoff.

“Do you mean to stay all night on the bench?”

“Yes, if I feel inclined to do so,” answered Michael Strogoff, in a tone somewhat too sharp for the simple merchant he wished to personate.

“Come forward, then, so I can see you,” said the man.

Michael Strogoff, remembering that, above all, prudence was requisite, instinctively drew back. “It is not necessary,” he replied, and calmly stepped back ten paces.

The man seemed, as Michael observed him well, to have the look of a Bohemian, such as are met at fairs, and with whom contact, either physical or moral, is unpleasant. Then, as he looked more attentively through the dusk, he perceived, near the cottage, a large caravan, the usual traveling dwelling of the Zingaris or gypsies, who swarm in Russia wherever a few copecks can be obtained.

As the gypsy took two or three steps forward, and was about to interrogate Michael Strogoff more closely, the door of the cottage opened. He could just see a woman, who spoke quickly in a language which Michael Strogoff knew to be a mixture of Mongol and Siberian.

“Another spy! Let him alone, and come to supper. The papluka is waiting for you.”

Michael Strogoff could not help smiling at the epithet bestowed on him, dreading spies as he did above all else.

In the same dialect, although his accent was very different, the Bohemian replied in words which signify, “You are right, Sangarre! Besides, we start to-morrow.”

“To-morrow?” repeated the woman in surprise.

“Yes, Sangarre,” replied the Bohemian; “to-morrow, and the Father himself sends us — where we are going!”

Thereupon the man and woman entered the cottage, and carefully closed the door.

“Good!” said Michael Strogoff, to himself; “if these gipsies do not wish to be understood when they speak before me, they had better use some other language.”

From his Siberian origin, and because he had passed his childhood in the Steppes, Michael Strogoff, it has been said, understood almost all the languages in usage from Tartary to the Sea of Ice. As to the exact signification of the words he had heard, he did not trouble his head. For why should it interest him?

It was already late when he thought of returning to his inn to take some repose. He followed, as he did so, the course of the Volga, whose waters were almost hidden under the countless number of boats floating on its bosom.

An hour after, Michael Strogoff was sleeping soundly on one of those Russian beds which always seem so hard to strangers, and on the morrow, the 17th of July, he awoke at break of day.

He had still five hours to pass in Nijni-Novgorod; it seemed to him an age. How was he to spend the morning unless in wandering, as he had done the evening before, through the streets? By the time he had finished his breakfast, strapped up his bag, had his podorojna inspected at the police office, he would have nothing to do but start. But he was not a man to lie in bed after the sun had risen; so he rose, dressed himself, placed the letter with the imperial arms on it carefully at the bottom of its usual pocket within the lining of his coat, over which he fastened his belt; he then closed his bag and threw it over his shoulder. This done, he had no wish to return to the City of Constantinople, and intending to breakfast on the bank of the Volga near the wharf, he settled his bill and left the inn. By way of precaution, Michael Strogoff went first to the office of the steam-packet company, and there made sure that the Caucasus would start at the appointed hour. As he did so, the thought for the first time struck him that, since the young Livonian girl was going to Perm, it was very possible that her intention was also to embark in the Caucasus, in which case he should accompany her.

The town above with its kremlin, whose circumference measures two versts, and which resembles that of Moscow, was altogether abandoned. Even the governor did not reside there. But if the town above was like a city of the dead, the town below, at all events, was alive.

Michael Strogoff, having crossed the Volga on a bridge of boats, guarded by mounted Cossacks, reached the square where the evening before he had fallen in with the gipsy camp. This was somewhat outside the town, where the fair of Nijni-Novgorod was held. In a vast plain rose the temporary palace of the governor-general, where by imperial orders that great functionary resided during the whole of the fair, which, thanks to the people who composed it, required an ever-watchful surveillance.

This plain was now covered with booths symmetrically arranged in such a manner as to leave avenues broad enough to allow the crowd to pass without a crush.

Each group of these booths, of all sizes and shapes, formed a separate quarter particularly dedicated to some special branch of commerce. There was the iron quarter, the furriers' quarter, the woolen quarter, the quarter of the wood merchants, the weavers' quarter, the dried fish quarter, etc. Some booths were even built of fancy materials, some of bricks of tea, others of masses of salt meat — that is to say, of samples of the goods which the owners thus announced were there to the purchasers — a singular, and somewhat American, mode of advertisement.

In the avenues and long alleys there was already a large assemblage of people — the sun, which had risen at four o'clock, being well above the horizon — an extraordinary mixture of Europeans and Asiatics, talking, wrangling, haranguing, and bargaining. Everything which can be bought or sold seemed to be heaped up in this square. Furs, precious stones, silks, Cashmere shawls, Turkey carpets, weapons from the Caucasus, gauzes from Smyrna and Ispahan. Tiflis armor, caravan teas. European bronzes, Swiss clocks, velvets and silks from Lyons, English cottons, harness, fruits, vegetables, minerals from the Ural, malachite, lapis-lazuli, spices, perfumes, medicinal herbs, wood, tar, rope, horn, pumpkins, water-melons, etc — all the products of India, China, Persia, from the shores of the Caspian and the Black Sea, from America and Europe, were united at this corner of the globe.

It is scarcely possible truly to portray the moving mass of human beings surging here and there, the excitement, the confusion, the hubbub; demonstrative as were the natives and the inferior classes, they were completely outdone by their visitors. There were merchants from Central Asia, who had occupied a year in escorting their merchandise across its vast plains, and who would not again see their shops and counting-houses for another year to come. In short, of such importance is this fair of Nijni-Novgorod, that the sum total of its transactions amounts yearly to nearly a hundred million dollars.

On one of the open spaces between the quarters of this temporary city were numbers of mountebanks of every description; gypsies from the mountains, telling fortunes to the credulous fools who are ever to be found in such assemblies; Zingaris or Tsiganes — a name which the Russians give to the gypsies who are the descendants of the ancient Copts — singing their wildest melodies and dancing their most original dances; comedians of foreign theaters, acting Shakespeare, adapted to the taste of spectators who crowded to witness them. In the long avenues the bear showmen accompanied their four-footed dancers, menageries resounded with the hoarse cries of animals under the influence of the stinging whip or red-hot irons of the tamer; and, besides all these numberless performers, in the middle of the central square, surrounded by a circle four deep of enthusiastic amateurs, was a band of “mariners of the Volga,” sitting on the ground, as on the deck of their vessel, imitating the action of rowing, guided by the stick of the master of the orchestra, the veritable helmsman of this imaginary vessel! A whimsical and pleasing custom!

Suddenly, according to a time-honored observance in the fair of Nijni-Novgorod, above the heads of the vast concourse a flock of birds was allowed to escape from the cages in which they had been brought to the spot. In return for a few copecks charitably offered by some good people, the bird-fanciers opened the prison doors of their captives, who flew out in hundreds, uttering their joyous notes.

It should be mentioned that England and France, at all events, were this year represented at the great fair of Nijni-Novgorod by two of the most distinguished products of modern civilization, Messrs. Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet. Jolivet, an optimist by nature, found everything agreeable, and as by chance both lodging and food were to his taste, he jotted down in his book some memoranda particularly favorable to the town of Nijni-Novgorod. Blount, on the contrary, having in vain hunted for a supper, had been obliged to find a resting-place in the open air. He therefore looked at it all from another point of view, and was preparing an article of the most withering character against a town in which the landlords of the inns refused to receive travelers who only begged leave to be flayed, “morally and physically.”

Michael Strogoff, one hand in his pocket, the other holding his cherry-stemmed pipe, appeared the most indifferent and least impatient of men; yet, from a certain contraction of his eyebrows every now and then, a careful observer would have seen that he was burning to be off.

For two hours he kept walking about the streets, only to find himself invariably at the fair again. As he passed among the groups of buyers and sellers he discovered that those who came from countries on the confines of Asia manifested great uneasiness. Their trade was visibly suffering. Another symptom also was marked. In Russia military uniforms appear on every occasion. Soldiers are wont to mix freely with the crowd, the police agents being almost invariably aided by a number of Cossacks, who, lance on shoulder, keep order in the crowd of three hundred thousand strangers.

But on this occasion the soldiers, Cossacks and the rest, did not put in an appearance at the great market. Doubtless, a sudden order to move having been foreseen, they were restricted to their barracks.

Moreover, while no soldiers were to be seen, it was not so with their officers. Since the evening before, aides-decamp, leaving the governor’s palace, galloped in every direction. An unusual movement was going forward which a serious state of affairs could alone account for. There were innumerable couriers on the roads both to Wladimir and to the Ural Mountains. The exchange of telegraphic dispatches with Moscow was incessant.

Michael Strogoff found himself in the central square when the report spread that the head of police had been summoned by a courier to the palace of the governor-general. An important dispatch from Moscow, it was said, was the cause of it.

“The fair is to be closed,” said one.

“The regiment of Nijni-Novgorod has received the route,” declared another.

“They say that the Tartars menace Tomsk!”

“Here is the head of police!” was shouted on every side. A loud clapping of hands was suddenly raised, which subsided by degrees, and finally was succeeded by absolute silence. The head of police arrived in the middle of the central square, and it was seen by all that he held in his hand a dispatch.

Then, in a loud voice, he read the following announcements: “By order of the Governor of Nijni-Novgorod.

“1st. All Russian subjects are forbidden to quit the province upon any pretext whatsoever.

“2nd. All strangers of Asiatic origin are commanded to leave the province within twenty-four hours.”

CHAPTER VI BROTHER AND SISTER

HOWEVER disastrous these measures might be to private interests, they were, under the circumstances, perfectly justifiable.

“All Russian subjects are forbidden to leave the province;” if Ivan Ogareff was still in the province, this would at any rate prevent him, unless with the greatest difficulty, from rejoining Feofar-Khan, and becoming a very formidable lieutenant to the Tartar chief.

“All foreigners of Asiatic origin are ordered to leave the province in four-and-twenty hours;” this would send off in a body all the traders from Central Asia, as well as the bands of Bohemians, gipsies, etc. having more or less sympathy with the Tartars. So many heads, so many spies — undoubtedly affairs required their expulsion.

It is easy to understand the effect produced by these two thunder-claps bursting over a town like Nijni-Novgorod, so densely crowded with visitors, and with a commerce so greatly surpassing that of all other places in Russia. The natives whom business called beyond the Siberian frontier could not leave the province for a time at least. The tenor of the first article of the order was express; it admitted of no exception. All private interests must yield to the public weal. As to the second article of the proclamation, the order of expulsion which it contained admitted of no evasion either. It only concerned foreigners of Asiatic origin, but these could do nothing but pack up their merchandise and go back the way they came. As to the mountebanks, of which there were a considerable number, they had nearly a thousand versts to go before they could reach the nearest frontier. For them it was simply misery.

At first there rose against this unusual measure a murmur of protestation, a cry of despair, but this was quickly suppressed by the presence of the Cossacks and agents of police. Immediately, what might be called the exodus from the immense plain began. The awnings in front of the stalls were folded up; the theaters were taken to pieces; the fires were put out; the acrobats' ropes were lowered; the old broken-winded horses of the traveling vans came back from their sheds. Agents and soldiers with whip or stick stimulated the tardy ones, and made nothing of pulling down the tents even before the poor Bohemians had left them.

Under these energetic measures the square of Nijni-Novgorod would, it was evident, be entirely evacuated before the evening, and to the tumult of the great fair would succeed the silence of the desert.

It must again be repeated — for it was a necessary aggravation of these severe measures — that to all those nomads chiefly concerned in the order of expulsion even the steppes of Siberia were forbidden, and they would be obliged to hasten to the south of the Caspian Sea, either to Persia, Turkey, or the plains of Turkestan. The post of the Ural, and the mountains which form, as it were, a prolongation of the river along the Russian frontier, they were not allowed to pass. They were therefore under the necessity of traveling six hundred miles before they could tread a free soil.

Just as the reading of the proclamation by the head of the police came to an end, an idea darted instinctively into the mind of Michael Strogoff. "What a singular coincidence," thought he, "between this proclamation expelling all foreigners of Asiatic origin, and the words exchanged last evening between those two gipsies of the Zingari race. 'The Father himself sends us where we wish to go,' that old man said. But 'the Father' is the emperor! He is never called anything else among the people. How could those gipsies have foreseen the measure taken against them? how could they have known it beforehand, and where do they wish to go? Those are suspicious people, and it seems to me that to them the government proclamation must be more useful than injurious."

But these reflections were completely dispelled by another which drove every other thought out of Michael's mind. He forgot the Zingaris, their suspicious words, the strange coincidence which resulted from the proclamation. The remembrance of the young Livonian girl suddenly rushed into his mind. "Poor child!" he thought to himself. "She cannot now cross the frontier."

In truth the young girl was from Riga; she was Livonian, consequently Russian, and now could not leave Russian territory! The permit which had been given her before the new measures had been promulgated was no longer available. All the routes to Siberia had just been pitilessly closed to her, and, whatever the motive taking her to Irkutsk, she was now forbidden to go there.

This thought greatly occupied Michael Strogoff. He said to himself, vaguely at first, that, without neglecting anything of what was due to his important mission, it would perhaps be possible for him to be of some use to this brave girl; and this idea pleased him. Knowing how serious were the dangers which he, an energetic and vigorous man, would have personally to encounter, he could not conceal from himself how infinitely greater they would prove to a young unprotected girl. As she was going to Irkutsk, she would be obliged to follow the same road as himself, she would have to pass through the bands of invaders, as he was about to attempt doing himself. If, moreover, she had at her disposal only the money necessary for a journey taken under ordinary circumstances, how could she manage to accomplish it under conditions which made it not only perilous but expensive?

“Well,” said he, “if she takes the route to Perm, it is nearly impossible but that I shall fall in with her. Then, I will watch over her without her suspecting it; and as she appears to me as anxious as myself to reach Irkutsk, she will cause me no delay.”

But one thought leads to another. Michael Strogoff had till now thought only of doing a kind action; but now another idea flashed into his brain; the question presented itself under quite a new aspect.

“The fact is,” said he to himself, “that I have much more need of her than she can have of me. Her presence will be useful in drawing off suspicion from me. A man traveling alone across the steppe, may be easily guessed to be a courier of the Czar. If, on the contrary, this young girl accompanies me, I shall appear, in the eyes of all, the Nicholas Korpanoff of my podorojna. Therefore, she must accompany me. Therefore, I must find her again at any cost. It is not probable that since yesterday evening she has been able to get a carriage and leave Nijni-Novgorod. I must look for her. And may God guide me!”

Michael left the great square of Nijni-Novgorod, where the tumult produced by the carrying out of the prescribed measures had now reached its height. Recriminations from the banished strangers, shouts from the agents and Cossacks who were using them so brutally, together made an indescribable uproar. The girl for whom he searched could not be there. It was now nine o’clock in the morning. The steamboat did not start till twelve. Michael Strogoff had therefore nearly two hours to employ in searching for her whom he wished to make his traveling companion.

He crossed the Volga again and hunted through the quarters on the other side, where the crowd was much less considerable. He entered the churches, the natural refuge for all who weep, for all who suffer. Nowhere did he meet with the young Livonian.

“And yet,” he repeated, “she could not have left Nijni-Novgorod yet. We’ll have another look.” He wandered about thus for two hours. He went on without stopping, feeling no fatigue, obeying a potent instinct which allowed no room for thought. All was in vain.

It then occurred to him that perhaps the girl had not heard of the order — though this was improbable enough, for such a thunder-clap could not have burst without being heard by all. Evidently interested in knowing the smallest news from Siberia, how could she be ignorant of the measures taken by the governor, measures which concerned her so directly?

But, if she was ignorant of it, she would come in an hour to the quay, and there some merciless agent would refuse her a passage! At any cost, he must see her beforehand, and enable her to avoid such a repulse.

But all his endeavors were in vain, and he at length almost despaired of finding her again. It was eleven o’clock, and Michael thought of presenting his podorojna at the office of the head of police. The proclamation evidently did not concern him, since the emergency had been foreseen for him, but he wished to make sure that nothing would hinder his departure from the town.

Michael then returned to the other side of the Volga, to the quarter in which was the office of the head of police. An immense crowd was collected there; for though all foreigners were ordered to quit the province, they had notwithstanding to go through certain forms before they could depart.

Without this precaution, some Russian more or less implicated in the Tartar movement would have been able, in a disguise, to pass the frontier — just those whom the order wished to prevent going. The strangers were sent away, but still had to gain permission to go.

Mountebanks, gypsies, Tsiganes, Zingaris, mingled with merchants from Persia, Turkey, India, Turkestan, China, filled the court and offices of the police station.

Everyone was in a hurry, for the means of transport would be much sought after among this crowd of banished people, and those who did not set about it soon ran a great risk of not being able to leave the town in the prescribed time, which would expose them to some brutal treatment from the governor’s agents.

Owing to the strength of his elbows Michael was able to cross the court. But to get into the office and up to the clerk’s little window was a much more difficult business. However, a word into an inspector’s ear and a few judiciously given roubles were powerful enough to gain him a passage. The man, after taking him into the waiting-room, went to call an upper clerk. Michael Strogoff would not be long in making everything right with the police and being free in his movements.

Whilst waiting, he looked about him, and what did he see? There, fallen, rather than seated, on a bench, was a girl, prey to a silent despair, although her face could scarcely be seen, the profile alone being visible against the wall. Michael Strogoff could not be mistaken. He instantly recognized the young Livonian.

Not knowing the governor’s orders, she had come to the police office to get her pass signed. They had refused to sign it. No doubt she was authorized to go to Irkutsk, but the order was peremptory — it annulled all previous authorizations, and the routes to Siberia were closed to her. Michael, delighted at having found her again, approached the girl.

She looked up for a moment and her face brightened on recognizing her traveling companion. She instinctively rose and, like a drowning man who clutches at a spar, she was about to ask his help.

At that moment the agent touched Michael on the shoulder, “The head of police will see you,” he said.

“Good,” returned Michael. And without saying a word to her for whom he had been searching all day, without reassuring her by even a gesture, which might compromise either her or himself, he followed the man.

The young Livonian, seeing the only being to whom she could look for help disappear, fell back again on her bench.

Three minutes had not passed before Michael Strogoff reappeared, accompanied by the agent. In his hand he held his podorojna, which threw open the roads to Siberia for him. He again approached the young Livonian, and holding out his hand: “Sister,” said he.

She understood. She rose as if some sudden inspiration prevented her from hesitating a moment.

“Sister,” repeated Michael Strogoff, “we are authorized to continue our journey to Irkutsk. Will you come with me?”

“I will follow you, brother,” replied the girl, putting her hand into that of Michael Strogoff. And together they left the police station.

CHAPTER VII GOING DOWN THE VOLGA

A LITTLE before midday, the steamboat's bell drew to the wharf on the Volga an unusually large concourse of people, for not only were those about to embark who had intended to go, but the many who were compelled to go contrary to their wishes. The boilers of the Caucasus were under full pressure; a slight smoke issued from its funnel, whilst the end of the escape-pipe and the lids of the valves were crowned with white vapor. It is needless to say that the police kept a close watch over the departure of the Caucasus, and showed themselves pitiless to those travelers who did not satisfactorily answer their questions.

Numerous Cossacks came and went on the quay, ready to assist the agents, but they had not to interfere, as no one ventured to offer the slightest resistance to their orders. Exactly at the hour the last clang of the bell sounded, the powerful wheels of the steamboat began to beat the water, and the Caucasus passed rapidly between the two towns of which Nijni-Novgorod is composed.

Michael Strogoff and the young Livonian had taken a passage on board the Caucasus. Their embarkation was made without any difficulty. As is known, the podorojna, drawn up in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff, authorized this merchant to be accompanied on his journey to Siberia. They appeared, therefore, to be a brother and sister traveling under the protection of the imperial police. Both, seated together at the stern, gazed at the receding town, so disturbed by the governor's order. Michael had as yet said nothing to the girl, he had not even questioned her. He waited until she should speak to him, when that was necessary. She had been anxious to leave that town, in which, but for the providential intervention of this unexpected protector, she would have remained imprisoned. She said nothing, but her looks spoke her thanks.

The Volga, the Rha of the ancients, the largest river in all Europe, is almost three thousand miles in length. Its waters, rather unwholesome in its upper part, are improved at Nijni-Novgorod by those of the Oka, a rapid affluent, issuing from the central provinces of Russia. The system of Russian canals and rivers has been justly compared to a gigantic tree whose branches spread over every part of the empire. The Volga forms the trunk of this tree, and it has for roots seventy mouths opening into the Caspian Sea. It is navigable as far as Rjef, a town in the government of Tver, that is, along the greater part of its course.

The steamboats plying between Perm and Nijni-Novgorod rapidly perform the two hundred and fifty miles which separate this town from the town of Kasan. It is true that these boats have only to descend the Volga, which adds nearly two miles of current per hour to their own speed; but on arriving at the confluence of the Kama, a little below Kasan, they are obliged to quit the Volga for the smaller river, up which they ascend to Perm. Powerful as were her machines, the Caucasus could not thus, after entering the Kama, make against the current more than ten miles an hour. Including an hour’s stoppage at Kasan, the voyage from Nijni-Novgorod to Perm would take from between sixty to sixty-two hours.

The steamer was very well arranged, and the passengers, according to their condition or resources, occupied three distinct classes on board. Michael Strogoff had taken care to engage two first-class cabins, so that his young companion might retire into hers whenever she liked.

The Caucasus was loaded with passengers of every description. A number of Asiatic traders had thought it best to leave Nijni-Novgorod immediately.

In that part of the steamer reserved for the first-class might be seen Armenians in long robes and a sort of miter on their heads; Jews, known by their conical caps; rich Chinese in their traditional costume, a very wide blue, violet, or black robe; Turks, wearing the national turban; Hindoos, with square caps, and a simple string for a girdle, some of whom, hold in their hands all the traffic of Central Asia; and, lastly, Tartars, wearing boots, ornamented with many-colored braid, and the breast a mass of embroidery. All these merchants had been obliged to pile up their numerous bales and chests in the hold and on the deck; and the transport of their baggage would cost them dear, for, according to the regulations, each person had only a right to twenty pounds' weight.

In the bows of the Caucasus were more numerous groups of passengers, not only foreigners, but also Russians, who were not forbidden by the order to go back to their towns in the province. There were mujiks with caps on their heads, and wearing checked shirts under their wide pelisses; peasants of the Volga, with blue trousers stuffed into their boots, rose-colored cotton shirts, drawn in by a cord, felt caps; a few women, habited in flowery-patterned cotton dresses, gay-colored aprons, and bright handkerchiefs on their heads. These were principally third-class passengers, who were, happily, not troubled by the prospect of a long return voyage. The Caucasus passed numerous boats being towed up the stream, carrying all sorts of merchandise to Nijni-Novgorod. Then passed rafts of wood interminably long, and barges loaded to the gunwale, and nearly sinking under water. A bootless voyage they were making, since the fair had been abruptly broken up at its outset.

The waves caused by the steamer splashed on the banks, covered with flocks of wild duck, who flew away uttering deafening cries. A little farther, on the dry fields, bordered with willows, and aspens, were scattered a few cows, sheep, and herds of pigs. Fields, sown with thin buckwheat and rye, stretched away to a background of half-cultivated hills, offering no remarkable prospect. The pencil of an artist in quest of the picturesque would have found nothing to reproduce in this monotonous landscape.

The Caucasus had been steaming on for almost two hours, when the young Livonian, addressing herself to Michael, said, “Are you going to Irkutsk, brother?”

“Yes, sister,” answered the young man. “We are going the same way. Consequently, where I go, you shall go.”

“To-morrow, brother, you shall know why I left the shores of the Baltic to go beyond the Ural Mountains.”

“I ask you nothing, sister.”

“You shall know all,” replied the girl, with a faint smile. “A sister should hide nothing from her brother. But I cannot to-day. Fatigue and sorrow have broken me.”

“Will you go and rest in your cabin?” asked Michael Strogoff.

“Yes — yes; and to-morrow — ”

“Come then — ”

He hesitated to finish his sentence, as if he had wished to end it by the name of his companion, of which he was still ignorant.

“Nadia,” said she, holding out her hand.

“Come, Nadia,” answered Michael, “and make what use you like of your brother Nicholas Korpanoff.” And he led the girl to the cabin engaged for her off the saloon.

Michael Strogoff returned on deck, and eager for any news which might bear on his journey, he mingled in the groups of passengers, though without taking any part in the conversation. Should he by any chance be questioned, and obliged to reply, he would announce himself as the merchant Nicholas Korpanoff, going back to the frontier, for he did not wish it to be suspected that a special permission authorized him to travel to Siberia.

The foreigners in the steamer could evidently speak of nothing but the occurrences of the day, of the order and its consequences. These poor people, scarcely recovered from the fatigue of a journey across Central Asia, found themselves obliged to return, and if they did not give loud vent to their anger and despair, it was because they dared not. Fear, mingled with respect, restrained them. It was possible that inspectors of police, charged with watching the passengers, had secretly embarked on board the Caucasus, and it was just as well to keep silence; expulsion, after all, was a good deal preferable to imprisonment in a fortress. Therefore the men were either silent, or spoke with so much caution that it was scarcely possible to get any useful information.

Michael Strogoff thus could learn nothing here; but if mouths were often shut at his approach — for they did not know him — his ears were soon struck by the sound of one voice, which cared little whether it was heard or not.

The man with the hearty voice spoke Russian, but with a French accent; and another speaker answered him more reservedly. “What,” said the first, “are you on board this boat, too, my dear fellow; you whom I met at the imperial fete in Moscow, and just caught a glimpse of at Nijni-Novgorod?”

“Yes, it’s I,” answered the second drily.

“Really, I didn’t expect to be so closely followed.”

“I am not following you sir; I am preceding you.”

“Precede! precede! Let us march abreast, keeping step, like two soldiers on parade, and for the time, at least, let us agree, if you will, that one shall not pass the other.”

“On the contrary, I shall pass you.”

“We shall see that, when we are at the seat of war; but till then, why, let us be traveling companions. Later, we shall have both time and occasion to be rivals.”

“Enemies.”

“Enemies, if you like. There is a precision in your words, my dear fellow, particularly agreeable to me. One may always know what one has to look for, with you.”

“What is the harm?”

“No harm at all. So, in my turn, I will ask your permission to state our respective situations.”

“State away.”

“You are going to Perm — like me?”

“Like you.”

“And probably you will go from Perm to Ekaterenburg, since that is the best and safest route by which to cross the Ural Mountains?”

“Probably.”

“Once past the frontier, we shall be in Siberia, that is to say in the midst of the invasion.”

“We shall be there.”

“Well! then, and only then, will be the time to say, Each for himself, and God for — ”

“For me.”

“For you, all by yourself! Very well! But since we have a week of neutral days before us, and since it is very certain that news will not shower down upon us on the way, let us be friends until we become rivals again.”

“Enemies.”

“Yes; that’s right, enemies. But till then, let us act together, and not try and ruin each other. All the same, I promise you to keep to myself all that I can see — ”

“And I, all that I can hear.”

“Is that agreed?”

“It is agreed.”

“Your hand?”

“Here it is.” And the hand of the first speaker, that is to say, five wide-open fingers, vigorously shook the two fingers coolly extended by the other.

“By the bye,” said the first, “I was able this morning to telegraph the very words of the order to my cousin at seventeen minutes past ten.”

“And I sent it to the Daily Telegraph at thirteen minutes past ten.”

“Bravo, Mr. Blount!”

“Very good, M. Jolivet.”

“I will try and match that!”

“It will be difficult.”

“I can try, however.”

So saying, the French correspondent familiarly saluted the Englishman, who bowed stiffly. The governor’s proclamation did not concern these two news-hunters, as they were neither Russians nor foreigners of Asiatic origin. However, being urged by the same instinct, they had left Nijni-Novgorod together. It was natural that they should take the same means of transport, and that they should follow the same route to the Siberian steppes. Traveling companions, whether enemies or friends, they had a week to pass together before “the hunt would be open.” And then success to the most expert! Alcide Jolivet had made the first advances, and Harry Blount had accepted them though he had done so coldly.

That very day at dinner the Frenchman open as ever and even too loquacious, the Englishman still silent and grave, were seen hobnobbing at the same table, drinking genuine Cliquot, at six roubles the bottle, made from the fresh sap of the birch-trees of the country. On hearing them chatting away together, Michael Strogoff said to himself: “Those are inquisitive and indiscreet fellows whom I shall probably meet again on the way. It will be prudent for me to keep them at a distance.”

The young Livonian did not come to dinner. She was asleep in her cabin, and Michael did not like to awaken her. It was evening before she reappeared on the deck of the Caucasus. The long twilight imparted a coolness to the atmosphere eagerly enjoyed by the passengers after the stifling heat of the day. As the evening advanced, the greater number never even thought of going into the saloon. Stretched on the benches, they inhaled with delight the slight breeze caused by the speed of the steamer. At this time of year, and under this latitude, the sky scarcely darkened between sunset and dawn, and left the steersman light enough to guide his steamer among the numerous vessels going up or down the Volga.

Between eleven and two, however, the moon being new, it was almost dark. Nearly all the passengers were then asleep on the deck, and the silence was disturbed only by the noise of the paddles striking the water at regular intervals. Anxiety kept Michael Strogoff awake. He walked up and down, but always in the stern of the steamer. Once, however, he happened to pass the engine-room. He then found himself in the part reserved for second and third-class passengers.

There, everyone was lying asleep, not only on the benches, but also on the bales, packages, and even the deck itself. Some care was necessary not to tread on the sleepers, who were lying about everywhere. They were chiefly mujiks, accustomed to hard couches, and quite satisfied with the planks of the deck. But no doubt they would, all the same, have soundly abused the clumsy fellow who roused them with an accidental kick.

Michael Strogoff took care, therefore, not to disturb anyone. By going thus to the end of the boat, he had no other idea but that of striving against sleep by a rather longer walk. He reached the forward deck, and was already climbing the forecastle ladder, when he heard someone speaking near him. He stopped. The voices appeared to come from a group of passengers enveloped in cloaks and wraps. It was impossible to recognize them in the dark, though it sometimes happened that, when the steamer's chimney sent forth a plume of ruddy flames, the sparks seemed to fall amongst the group as though thousands of spangles had been suddenly illuminated.

Michael was about to step up the ladder, when a few words reached his ear, uttered in that strange tongue which he had heard during the night at the fair. Instinctively he stopped to listen. Protected by the shadow of the forecastle, he could not be perceived himself. As to seeing the passengers who were talking, that was impossible. He must confine himself to listening.

The first words exchanged were of no importance — to him at least — but they allowed him to recognize the voices of the man and woman whom he had heard at Nijni-Novgorod. This, of course, made him redouble his attention. It was, indeed, not at all impossible that these same Tsiganes, now banished, should be on board the Caucasus.

And it was well for him that he listened, for he distinctly heard this question and answer made in the Tartar idiom: "It is said that a courier has set out from Moscow for Irkutsk."

“It is so said, Sangarre; but either this courier will arrive too late, or he will not arrive at all.”

Michael Strogoff started involuntarily at this reply, which concerned him so directly. He tried to see if the man and woman who had just spoken were really those whom he suspected, but he could not succeed.

In a few moments Michael Strogoff had regained the stern of the vessel without having been perceived, and, taking a seat by himself, he buried his face in his hands. It might have been supposed that he was asleep.

He was not asleep, however, and did not even think of sleeping. He was reflecting, not without a lively apprehension: “Who is it knows of my departure, and who can have any interest in knowing it?”

CHAPTER VIII GOING UP THE KAMA

THE next day, the 18th of July, at twenty minutes to seven in the morning, the Caucasus reached the Kasan quay, seven versts from the town.

Kasan is situated at the confluence of the Volga and Kasanka. It is an important chief town of the government, and a Greek archbishopric, as well as the seat of a university. The varied population preserves an Asiatic character. Although the town was so far from the landing-place, a large crowd was collected on the quay. They had come for news. The governor of the province had published an order identical with that of Nijni-Novgorod. Police officers and a few Cossacks kept order among the crowd, and cleared the way both for the passengers who were disembarking and also for those who were embarking on board the Caucasus, minutely examining both classes of travelers. The one were the Asiatics who were being expelled; the other, mujiks stopping at Kasan.

Michael Strogoff unconcernedly watched the bustle which occurs at all quays on the arrival of a steam vessel. The Caucasus would stay for an hour to renew her fuel. Michael did not even think of landing. He was unwilling to leave the young Livonian girl alone on board, as she had not yet reappeared on deck.

The two journalists had risen at dawn, as all good huntsmen should do. They went on shore and mingled with the crowd, each keeping to his own peculiar mode of proceeding; Harry Blount, sketching different types, or noting some observation; Alcide Jolivet contenting himself with asking questions, confiding in his memory, which never failed him.

There was a report along all the frontier that the insurrection and invasion had reached considerable proportions. Communication between Siberia and the empire was already extremely difficult. All this Michael Strogoff heard from the new arrivals. This information could not but cause him great uneasiness, and increase his wish of being beyond the Ural Mountains, so as to judge for himself of the truth of these rumors, and enable him to guard against any possible contingency. He was thinking of seeking more direct intelligence from some native of Kasan, when his attention was suddenly diverted.

Among the passengers who were leaving the Caucasus, Michael recognized the troop of Tsiganes who, the day before, had appeared in the Nijni-Novgorod fair. There, on the deck of the steamboat were the old Bohemian and the woman. With them, and no doubt under their direction, landed about twenty dancers and singers, from fifteen to twenty years of age, wrapped in old cloaks, which covered their spangled dresses. These dresses, just then glancing in the first rays of the sun, reminded Michael of the curious appearance which he had observed during the night. It must have been the glitter of those spangles in the bright flames issuing from the steamboat's funnel which had attracted his attention.

"Evidently," said Michael to himself, "this troop of Tsiganes, after remaining below all day, crouched under the forecastle during the night. Were these gipsies trying to show themselves as little as possible? Such is not according to the usual custom of their race."

Michael Strogoff no longer doubted that the expressions he had heard, had proceeded from this tawny group, and had been exchanged between the old gypsy and the woman to whom he gave the Mongolian name of Sangarre. Michael involuntarily moved towards the gangway, as the Bohemian troop was leaving the steamboat.

The old Bohemian was there, in a humble attitude, little conformable with the effrontery natural to his race. One would have said that he was endeavoring rather to avoid attention than to attract it. His battered hat, browned by the suns of every clime, was pulled forward over his wrinkled face. His arched back was bent under an old cloak, wrapped closely round him, notwithstanding the heat. It would have been difficult, in this miserable dress, to judge of either his size or face. Near him was the Tsigane, Sangarre, a woman about thirty years old. She was tall and well made, with olive complexion, magnificent eyes, and golden hair.

Many of the young dancers were remarkably pretty, all possessing the clear-cut features of their race. These Tsiganes are generally very attractive, and more than one of the great Russian nobles, who try to vie with the English in eccentricity, has not hesitated to choose his wife from among these gypsy girls. One of them was humming a song of strange rhythm, which might be thus rendered:

“Glitters brightly the gold

In my raven locks streaming

Rich coral around

My graceful neck gleaming;

Like a bird of the air,

Through the wide world I roam.”

The laughing girl continued her song, but Michael Strogoff ceased to listen. It struck him just then that the Tsigane, Sangarre, was regarding him with a peculiar gaze, as if to fix his features indelibly in her memory.

It was but for a few moments, when Sangarre herself followed the old man and his troop, who had already left the vessel. “That’s a bold gypsy,” said Michael to himself. “Could she have recognized me as the man whom she saw at Nijni-Novgorod? These confounded Tsiganes have the eyes of a cat! They can see in the dark; and that woman there might well know — ”

Michael Strogoff was on the point of following Sangarre and the gypsy band, but he stopped. “No,” thought he, “no unguarded proceedings. If I were to stop that old fortune teller and his companions my incognito would run a risk of being discovered. Besides, now they have landed, before they can pass the frontier I shall be far beyond it. They may take the route from Kasan to Ishim, but that affords no resources to travelers. Besides a tarantass, drawn by good Siberian horses, will always go faster than a gypsy cart! Come, friend Korpanoff, be easy.”

By this time the man and Sangarre had disappeared.

Kasan is justly called the “Gate of Asia” and considered as the center of Siberian and Bokharian commerce; for two roads begin here and lead across the Ural Mountains. Michael Strogoff had very judiciously chosen the one by Perm and Ekaterenburg. It is the great stage road, well supplied with relays kept at the expense of the government, and is prolonged from Ishim to Irkutsk.

It is true that a second route — the one of which Michael had just spoken — avoiding the slight detour by Perm, also connects Kasan with Ishim. It is perhaps shorter than the other, but this advantage is much diminished by the absence of post-houses, the bad roads, and lack of villages. Michael Strogoff was right in the choice he had made, and if, as appeared probable, the gipsies should follow the second route from Kasan to Ishim, he had every chance of arriving before them.

An hour afterwards the bell rang on board the Caucasus, calling the new passengers, and recalling the former ones. It was now seven o'clock in the morning. The requisite fuel had been received on board. The whole vessel began to vibrate from the effects of the steam. She was ready to start. Passengers going from Kasan to Perm were crowding on the deck.

Michael noticed that of the two reporters Blount alone had rejoined the steamer. Was Alcide Jolivet about to miss his passage?

But just as the ropes were being cast off, Jolivet appeared, tearing along. The steamer was already sheering off, the gangway had been drawn onto the quay, but Alcide Jolivet would not stick at such a little thing as that, so, with a bound like a harlequin, he alighted on the deck of the Caucasus almost in his rival's arms.

“I thought the Caucasus was going without you,” said the latter.

“Bah!” answered Jolivet, “I should soon have caught you up again, by chartering a boat at my cousin's expense, or by traveling post at twenty copecks a verst, and on horseback. What could I do? It was so long a way from the quay to the telegraph office.”

“Have you been to the telegraph office?” asked Harry Blount, biting his lips.

“That's exactly where I have been!” answered Jolivet, with his most amiable smile.

“And is it still working to Kolyvan?”

“That I don’t know, but I can assure you, for instance, that it is working from Kasan to Paris.”

“You sent a dispatch to your cousin?”

“With enthusiasm.”

“You had learnt then — ?”

“Look here, little father, as the Russians say,” replied Alcide Jolivet, “I’m a good fellow, and I don’t wish to keep anything from you. The Tartars, and Feofar-Khan at their head, have passed Semipolatinsk, and are descending the Irtish. Do what you like with that!”

What! such important news, and Harry Blount had not known it; and his rival, who had probably learned it from some inhabitant of Kasan, had already transmitted it to Paris. The English paper was distanced! Harry Blount, crossing his hands behind him, walked off and seated himself in the stern without uttering a word.

About ten o’clock in the morning, the young Livonian, leaving her cabin, appeared on deck. Michael Strogoff went forward and took her hand. “Look, sister!” said he, leading her to the bows of the Caucasus.

The view was indeed well worth seeing. The Caucasus had reached the confluence of the Volga and the Kama. There she would leave the former river, after having descended it for nearly three hundred miles, to ascend the latter for a full three hundred.

The Kama was here very wide, and its wooded banks lovely. A few white sails enlivened the sparkling water. The horizon was closed by a line of hills covered with aspens, alders, and sometimes large oaks.

But these beauties of nature could not distract the thoughts of the young Livonian even for an instant. She had left her hand in that of her companion, and turning to him, “At what distance are we from Moscow?” she asked.

“Nine hundred versts,” answered Michael.

“Nine hundred, out of seven thousand!” murmured the girl.

The bell now announced the breakfast hour. Nadia followed Michael Strogoff to the restaurant. She ate little, and as a poor girl whose means are small would do. Michael thought it best to content himself with the fare which satisfied his companion; and in less than twenty minutes he and Nadia returned on deck. There they seated themselves in the stern, and without preamble, Nadia, lowering her voice to be heard by him alone, began:

“Brother, I am the daughter of an exile. My name is Nadia Fedor. My mother died at Riga scarcely a month ago, and I am going to Irkutsk to rejoin my father and share his exile.”

“I, too, am going to Irkutsk,” answered Michael, “and I shall thank Heaven if it enables me to give Nadia Fedor safe and sound into her father’s hands.”

“Thank you, brother,” replied Nadia.

Michael Strogoff then added that he had obtained a special podorojna for Siberia, and that the Russian authorities could in no way hinder his progress.

Nadia asked nothing more. She saw in this fortunate meeting with Michael a means only of accelerating her journey to her father.

“I had,” said she, “a permit which authorized me to go to Irkutsk, but the new order annulled that; and but for you, brother, I should have been unable to leave the town, in which, without doubt, I should have perished.”

“And dared you, alone, Nadia,” said Michael, “attempt to cross the steppes of Siberia?”

“The Tartar invasion was not known when I left Riga. It was only at Moscow that I learnt the news.”

“And despite it, you continued your journey?”

“It was my duty.”

The words showed the character of the brave girl.

She then spoke of her father, Wassili Fedor. He was a much-esteemed physician at Riga. But his connection with some secret society having been asserted, he received orders to start for Irkutsk. The police who brought the order conducted him without delay beyond the frontier.

Wassili Fedor had but time to embrace his sick wife and his daughter, so soon to be left alone, when, shedding bitter tears, he was led away. A year and a half after her husband’s departure, Madame Fedor died in the arms of her daughter, who was thus left alone and almost penniless. Nadia Fedor then asked, and easily obtained from the Russian government, an authorization to join her father at Irkutsk. She wrote and told him she was starting. She had barely enough money for this long journey, and yet she did not hesitate to undertake it. She would do what she could. God would do the rest.

CHAPTER IX DAY AND NIGHT IN A TARANTASS

THE next day, the 19th of July, the Caucasus reached Perm, the last place at which she touched on the Kama.

The government of which Perm is the capital is one of the largest in the Russian Empire, and, extending over the Ural Mountains, encroaches on Siberian territory. Marble quarries, mines of salt, platina, gold, and coal are worked here on a large scale. Although Perm, by its situation, has become an important town, it is by no means attractive, being extremely dirty, and without resources. This want of comfort is of no consequence to those going to Siberia, for they come from the more civilized districts, and are supplied with all necessaries.

At Perm travelers from Siberia resell their vehicles, more or less damaged by the long journey across the plains. There, too, those passing from Europe to Asia purchase carriages, or sleighs in the winter season.

Michael Strogoff had already sketched out his programme. A vehicle carrying the mail usually runs across the Ural Mountains, but this, of course, was discontinued. Even if it had not been so, he would not have taken it, as he wished to travel as fast as possible, without depending on anyone. He wisely preferred to buy a carriage, and journey by stages, stimulating the zeal of the postillions by well-applied “na vodkou,” or tips.

Unfortunately, in consequence of the measures taken against foreigners of Asiatic origin, a large number of travelers had already left Perm, and therefore conveyances were extremely rare. Michael was obliged to content himself with what had been rejected by others. As to horses, as long as the Czar’s courier was not in Siberia, he could exhibit his podorojna, and the postmasters would give him the preference. But, once out of Europe, he had to depend alone on the power of his roubles.

But to what sort of a vehicle should he harness his horses? To a telga or to a tarantass? The telga is nothing but an open four-wheeled cart, made entirely of wood, the pieces fastened together by means of strong rope. Nothing could be more primitive, nothing could be less comfortable; but, on the other hand, should any accident happen on the way, nothing could be more easily repaired. There is no want of firs on the Russian frontier, and axle-trees grow naturally in forests. The post extraordinary, known by the name of “perck-ladnoi,” is carried by the telga, as any road is good enough for it. It must be confessed that sometimes the ropes which fasten the concern together break, and whilst the hinder part remains stuck in some bog, the fore-part arrives at the post-house on two wheels; but this result is considered quite satisfactory.

Michael Strogoff would have been obliged to employ a telga, if he had not been lucky enough to discover a tarantass. It is to be hoped that the invention of Russian coach-builders will devise some improvement in this last-named vehicle. Springs are wanting in it as well as in the telga; in the absence of iron, wood is not spared; but its four wheels, with eight or nine feet between them, assure a certain equilibrium over the jolting rough roads. A splash-board protects the travelers from the mud, and a strong leathern hood, which may be pulled quite over the occupiers, shelters them from the great heat and violent storms of the summer. The tarantass is as solid and as easy to repair as the telga, and is, moreover, less addicted to leaving its hinder part in the middle of the road.

It was not without careful search that Michael managed to discover this tarantass, and there was probably not a second to be found in all Perm. He haggled long about the price, for form’s sake, to act up to his part as Nicholas Korpanoff, a plain merchant of Irkutsk.

Nadia had followed her companion in his search after a suitable vehicle. Although the object of each was different, both were equally anxious to arrive at their goal. One would have said the same will animated them both.

“Sister,” said Michael, “I wish I could have found a more comfortable conveyance for you.”

“Do you say that to me, brother, when I would have gone on foot, if need were, to rejoin my father?”

“I do not doubt your courage, Nadia, but there are physical fatigues a woman may be unable to endure.”

“I shall endure them, whatever they be,” replied the girl. “If you ever hear a complaint from me you may leave me in the road, and continue your journey alone.”

Half an hour later, the podorojna being presented by Michael, three post-horses were harnessed to the tarantass. These animals, covered with long hair, were very like long-legged bears. They were small but spirited, being of Siberian breed. The way in which the iemschik harnessed them was thus: one, the largest, was secured between two long shafts, on whose farther end was a hoop carrying tassels and bells; the two others were simply fastened by ropes to the steps of the tarantass. This was the complete harness, with mere strings for reins.

Neither Michael Strogoff nor the young Livonian girl had any baggage. The rapidity with which one wished to make the journey, and the more than modest resources of the other, prevented them from embarrassing themselves with packages. It was a fortunate thing, under the circumstances, for the tarantass could not have carried both baggage and travelers. It was only made for two persons, without counting the iemschik, who kept his equilibrium on his narrow seat in a marvelous manner.

The iemschik is changed at every relay. The man who drove the tarantass during the first stage was, like his horses, a Siberian, and no less shaggy than they; long hair, cut square on the forehead, hat with a turned-up brim, red belt, coat with crossed facings and buttons stamped with the imperial cipher. The iemschik, on coming up with his team, threw an inquisitive glance at the passengers of the tarantass. No luggage! — and had there been, where in the world could he have stowed it? Rather shabby in appearance too. He looked contemptuous.

“Crows,” said he, without caring whether he was overheard or not; “crows, at six copecks a verst!”

“No, eagles!” said Michael, who understood the iemschik’s slang perfectly; “eagles, do you hear, at nine copecks a verst, and a tip besides.”

He was answered by a merry crack of the whip.

In the language of the Russian postillions the “crow” is the stingy or poor traveler, who at the post-houses only pays two or three copecks a verst for the horses. The “eagle” is the traveler who does not mind expense, to say nothing of liberal tips. Therefore the crow could not claim to fly as rapidly as the imperial bird.

Nadia and Michael immediately took their places in the tarantass. A small store of provisions was put in the box, in case at any time they were delayed in reaching the post-houses, which are very comfortably provided under direction of the State. The hood was pulled up, as it was insupport-ably hot, and at twelve o’clock the tarantass left Perm in a cloud of dust.

The way in which the iemschik kept up the pace of his team would have certainly astonished travelers who, being neither Russians nor Siberians, were not accustomed to this sort of thing. The leader, rather larger than the others, kept to a steady long trot, perfectly regular, whether up or down hill. The two other horses seemed to know no other pace than the gallop, though they performed many an eccentric curvette as they went along. The iemschik, however, never touched them, only urging them on by startling cracks of his whip. But what epithets he lavished on them, including the names of all the saints in the calendar, when they behaved like docile and conscientious animals! The string which served as reins would have had no influence on the spirited beasts, but the words “na pravo,” to the right, “na levo,” to the left, pronounced in a guttural tone, were more effectual than either bridle or snaffle.

And what amiable expressions! “Go on, my doves!” the iemschik would say. “Go on, pretty swallows! Fly, my little pigeons! Hold up, my cousin on the left! Gee up, my little father on the right!”

But when the pace slackened, what insulting expressions, instantly understood by the sensitive animals! “Go on, you wretched snail! Confound you, you slug! I’ll roast you alive, you tortoise, you!”

Whether or not it was from this way of driving, which requires the iemschiks to possess strong throats more than muscular arms, the tarantass flew along at a rate of from twelve to fourteen miles an hour. Michael Strogoff was accustomed both to the sort of vehicle and the mode of traveling. Neither jerks nor jolts incommoded him. He knew that a Russian driver never even tries to avoid either stones, ruts, bogs, fallen trees, or trenches, which may happen to be in the road. He was used to all that. His companion ran a risk of being hurt by the violent jolts of the tarantass, but she would not complain.

For a little while Nadia did not speak. Then possessed with the one thought, that of reaching her journey’s end, “I have calculated that there are three hundred versts between Perm and Ekaterenburg, brother,” said she. “Am I right?”

“You are quite right, Nadia,” answered Michael; “and when we have reached Ekaterenburg, we shall be at the foot of the Ural Mountains on the opposite side.”

“How long will it take to get across the mountains?”

“Forty-eight hours, for we shall travel day and night. I say day and night, Nadia,” added he, “for I cannot stop even for a moment; I go on without rest to Irkutsk.”

“I shall not delay you, brother; no, not even for an hour, and we will travel day and night.”

“Well then, Nadia, if the Tartar invasion has only left the road open, we shall arrive in twenty days.”

“You have made this journey before?” asked Nadia.

“Many times.”

“During winter we should have gone more rapidly and surely, should we not?”

“Yes, especially with more rapidity, but you would have suffered much from the frost and snow.”

“What matter! Winter is the friend of Russia.”

“Yes, Nadia, but what a constitution anyone must have to endure such friendship! I have often seen the temperature in the Siberian steppes fall to more than forty degrees below freezing point! I have felt, notwithstanding my reindeer coat, my heart growing chill, my limbs stiffening, my feet freezing in triple woolen socks; I have seen my sleigh horses covered with a coating of ice, their breath congealed at their nostrils. I have seen the brandy in my flask change into hard stone, on which not even my knife could make an impression. But my sleigh flew like the wind. Not an obstacle on the plain, white and level farther than the eye could reach! No rivers to stop one! Hard ice everywhere, the route open, the road sure! But at the price of what suffering, Nadia, those alone could say, who have never returned, but whose bodies have been covered up by the snow storm.”

“However, you have returned, brother,” said Nadia.

“Yes, but I am a Siberian, and, when quite a child, I used to follow my father to the chase, and so became inured to these hardships. But when you said to me, Nadia, that winter would not have stopped you, that you would have gone alone, ready to struggle against the frightful Siberian climate, I seemed to see you lost in the snow and falling, never to rise again.”

“How many times have you crossed the steppe in winter?” asked the young Livonian.

“Three times, Nadia, when I was going to Omsk.”

“And what were you going to do at Omsk?”

“See my mother, who was expecting me.”

“And I am going to Irkutsk, where my father expects me. I am taking him my mother’s last words. That is as much as to tell you, brother, that nothing would have prevented me from setting out.”

“You are a brave girl, Nadia,” replied Michael. “God Himself would have led you.”

All day the tarantass was driven rapidly by the iemschiks, who succeeded each other at every stage. The eagles of the mountain would not have found their name dishonored by these “eagles” of the highway. The high price paid for each horse, and the tips dealt out so freely, recommended the travelers in a special way. Perhaps the postmasters thought it singular that, after the publication of the order, a young man and his sister, evidently both Russians, could travel freely across Siberia, which was closed to everyone else, but their papers were all en regle and they had the right to pass.

However, Michael Strogoff and Nadia were not the only travelers on their way from Perm to Ekaterenburg. At the first stages, the courier of the Czar had learnt that a carriage preceded them, but, as there was no want of horses, he did not trouble himself about that.

During the day, halts were made for food alone. At the post-houses could be found lodging and provision. Besides, if there was not an inn, the house of the Russian peasant would have been no less hospitable. In the villages, which are almost all alike, with their white-walled, green-roofed chapels, the traveler might knock at any door, and it would be opened to him. The moujik would come out, smiling and extending his hand to his guest. He would offer him bread and salt, the burning charcoal would be put into the "samovar," and he would be made quite at home. The family would turn out themselves rather than that he should not have room. The stranger is the relation of all. He is "one sent by God."

On arriving that evening Michael instinctively asked the postmaster how many hours ago the carriage which preceded them had passed that stage.

"Two hours ago, little father," replied the postmaster.

"Is it a berlin?"

"No, a telga."

"How many travelers?"

"Two."

"And they are going fast?"

"Eagles!"

"Let them put the horses to as soon as possible."

Michael and Nadia, resolved not to stop even for an hour, traveled all night. The weather continued fine, though the atmosphere was heavy and becoming charged with electricity. It was to be hoped that a storm would not burst whilst they were among the mountains, for there it would be terrible. Being accustomed to read atmospheric signs, Michael Strogoff knew that a struggle of the elements was approaching.

The night passed without incident. Notwithstanding the jolting of the tarantass, Nadia was able to sleep for some hours. The hood was partly raised so as to give as much air as there was in the stifling atmosphere.

Michael kept awake all night, mistrusting the iemschiks, who are apt to sleep at their posts. Not an hour was lost at the relays, not an hour on the road.

The next day, the 20th of July, at about eight o’clock in the morning, they caught the first glimpse of the Ural Mountains in the east. This important chain which separates Russia from Siberia was still at a great distance, and they could not hope to reach it until the end of the day. The passage of the mountains must necessarily be performed during the next night. The sky was cloudy all day, and the temperature was therefore more bearable, but the weather was very threatening.

It would perhaps have been more prudent not to have ascended the mountains during the night, and Michael would not have done so, had he been permitted to wait; but when, at the last stage, the iemschik drew his attention to a peal of thunder reverberating among the rocks, he merely said:

“Is a telga still before us?”

“Yes.”

“How long is it in advance?”

“Nearly an hour.”

“Forward, and a triple tip if we are at Ekaterenburg to-morrow morning.”

CHAPTER X A STORM IN THE URAL MOUNTAINS

THE Ural Mountains extend in a length of over two thousand miles between Europe and Asia. Whether they are called the Urals, which is the Tartar, or the Poyas, which is the Russian name, they are correctly so termed; for these names signify “belt” in both languages. Rising on the shores of the Arctic Sea, they reach the borders of the Caspian. This was the barrier to be crossed by Michael Strogoff before he could enter Siberian Russia. The mountains could be crossed in one night, if no accident happened. Unfortunately, thunder muttering in the distance announced that a storm was at hand. The electric tension was such that it could not be dispersed without a tremendous explosion, which in the peculiar state of the atmosphere would be very terrible.

Michael took care that his young companion should be as well protected as possible. The hood, which might have been easily blown away, was fastened more securely with ropes, crossed above and at the back. The traces were doubled, and, as an additional precaution, the nave-boxes were stuffed with straw, as much to increase the strength of the wheels as to lessen the jolting, unavoidable on a dark night. Lastly, the fore and hinder parts, connected simply by the axles to the body of the tarantass, were joined one to the other by a crossbar, fixed by means of pins and screws.

Nadia resumed her place in the cart, and Michael took his seat beside her. Before the lowered hood hung two leathern curtains, which would in some degree protect the travelers against the wind and rain. Two great lanterns, suspended from the iemschik’s seat, threw a pale glimmer scarcely sufficient to light the way, but serving as warning lights to prevent any other carriage from running into them.

It was well that all these precautions were taken, in expectation of a rough night. The road led them up towards dense masses of clouds, and should the clouds not soon resolve into rain, the fog would be such that the tarantass would be unable to advance without danger of falling over some precipice.

The Ural chain does not attain any very great height, the highest summit not being more than five thousand feet. Eternal snow is there unknown, and what is piled up by the Siberian winter is soon melted by the summer sun. Shrubs and trees grow to a considerable height. The iron and copper mines, as well as those of precious stones, draw a considerable number of workmen to that region. Also, those villages termed “gavody” are there met with pretty frequently, and the road through the great passes is easily practicable for post-carriages.

But what is easy enough in fine weather and broad daylight, offers difficulties and perils when the elements are engaged in fierce warfare, and the traveler is in the midst of it. Michael Strogoff knew from former experience what a storm in the mountains was, and perhaps this would be as terrible as the snowstorms which burst forth with such vehemence in the winter.

Rain was not yet falling, so Michael raised the leathern curtains which protected the interior of the tarantass and looked out, watching the sides of the road, peopled with fantastic shadows, caused by the wavering light of the lanterns. Nadia, motionless, her arms folded, gazed forth also, though without leaning forward, whilst her companion, his body half out of the carriage, examined both sky and earth.

The calmness of the atmosphere was very threatening, the air being perfectly still. It was just as if Nature were half stifled, and could no longer breathe; her lungs, that is to say those gloomy, dense clouds, not being able to perform their functions. The silence would have been complete but for the grindings of the wheels of the tarantass over the road, the creaking of the axles, the snorting of the horses, and the clattering of their iron hoofs among the pebbles, sparks flying out on every side.

The road was perfectly deserted. The tarantass encountered neither pedestrians nor horsemen, nor a vehicle of any description, in the narrow defiles of the Ural, on this threatening night. Not even the fire of a charcoal-burner was visible in the woods, not an encampment of miners near the mines, not a hut among the brushwood.

Under these peculiar circumstances it might have been allowable to postpone the journey till the morning. Michael Strogoff, however, had not hesitated, he had no right to stop, but then — and it began to cause him some anxiety — what possible reason could those travelers in the telga ahead have for being so imprudent?

Michael remained thus on the look-out for some time. About eleven o’clock lightning began to blaze continuously in the sky. The shadows of huge pines appeared and disappeared in the rapid light. Sometimes when the tarantass neared the side of the road, deep gulfs, lit up by the flashes, could be seen yawning beneath them. From time to time, on their vehicle giving a worse lurch than usual, they knew that they were crossing a bridge of roughly-hewn planks thrown over some chasm, thunder appearing actually to be rumbling below them. Besides this, a booming sound filled the air, which increased as they mounted higher. With these different noises rose the shouts of the iemschik, sometimes scolding, sometimes coaxing his poor beasts, who were suffering more from the oppression of the air than the roughness of the roads. Even the bells on the shafts could no longer rouse them, and they stumbled every instant.

“At what time shall we reach the top of the ridge?” asked Michael of the iemschik.

“At one o’clock in the morning if we ever get there at all,” replied he, with a shake of his head.

“Why, my friend, this will not be your first storm in the mountains, will it?”

“No, and pray God it may not be my last!”

“Are you afraid?”

“No, I’m not afraid, but I repeat that I think you were wrong in starting.”

“I should have been still more wrong had I stayed.”

“Hold up, my pigeons!” cried the iemschik; it was his business to obey, not to question.

Just then a distant noise was heard, shrill whistling through the atmosphere, so calm a minute before. By the light of a dazzling flash, almost immediately followed by a tremendous clap of thunder, Michael could see huge pines on a high peak, bending before the blast. The wind was unchained, but as yet it was the upper air alone which was disturbed. Successive crashes showed that many of the trees had been unable to resist the burst of the hurricane. An avalanche of shattered trunks swept across the road and dashed over the precipice on the left, two hundred feet in front of the tarantass.

The horses stopped short.

“Get up, my pretty doves!” cried the iemschik, adding the cracking of his whip to the rumbling of the thunder.

Michael took Nadia’s hand. “Are you asleep, sister?”

“No, brother.”

“Be ready for anything; here comes the storm!”

“I am ready.”

Michael Strogoff had only just time to draw the leathern curtains, when the storm was upon them.

The iemschik leapt from his seat and seized the horses’ heads, for terrible danger threatened the whole party.

The tarantass was at a standstill at a turning of the road, down which swept the hurricane; it was absolutely necessary to hold the animals’ heads to the wind, for if the carriage was taken broadside it must infallibly capsize and be dashed over the precipice. The frightened horses reared, and their driver could not manage to quiet them. His friendly expressions had been succeeded by the most insulting epithets. Nothing was of any use. The unfortunate animals, blinded by the lightning, terrified by the incessant peals of thunder, threatened every instant to break their traces and flee. The iemschik had no longer any control over his team.

At that moment Michael Strogoff threw himself from the tarantass and rushed to his assistance. Endowed with more than common strength, he managed, though not without difficulty, to master the horses.

The storm now raged with redoubled fury. A perfect avalanche of stones and trunks of trees began to roll down the slope above them.

“We cannot stop here,” said Michael.

“We cannot stop anywhere,” returned the iemschik, all his energies apparently overcome by terror. “The storm will soon send us to the bottom of the mountain, and that by the shortest way.”

“Take you that horse, coward,” returned Michael, “I’ll look after this one.”

A fresh burst of the storm interrupted him. The driver and he were obliged to crouch upon the ground to avoid being blown down. The carriage, notwithstanding their efforts and those of the horses, was gradually blown back, and had it not been stopped by the trunk of a tree, it would have gone over the edge of the precipice.

“Do not be afraid, Nadia!” cried Michael Strogoff.

“I’m not afraid,” replied the young Livonian, her voice not betraying the slightest emotion.

The rumbling of the thunder ceased for an instant, the terrible blast had swept past into the gorge below.

“Will you go back?” said the iemschik.

“No, we must go on! Once past this turning, we shall have the shelter of the slope.”

“But the horses won’t move!”

“Do as I do, and drag them on.”

“The storm will come back!”

“Do you mean to obey?”

“Do you order it?”

“The Father orders it!” answered Michael, for the first time invoking the all-powerful name of the Emperor.

“Forward, my swallows!” cried the iemschik, seizing one horse, while Michael did the same to the other.

Thus urged, the horses began to struggle onward. They could no longer rear, and the middle horse not being hampered by the others, could keep in the center of the road. It was with the greatest difficulty that either man or beasts could stand against the wind, and for every three steps they took in advance, they lost one, and even two, by being forced backwards. They slipped, they fell, they got up again. The vehicle ran a great risk of being smashed. If the hood had not been securely fastened, it would have been blown away long before. Michael Strogoff and the iemschik took more than two hours in getting up this bit of road, only half a verst in length, so directly exposed was it to the lashing of the storm. The danger was not only from the wind which battered against the travelers, but from the avalanche of stones and broken trunks which were hurtling through the air.

Suddenly, during a flash of lightning, one of these masses was seen crashing and rolling down the mountain towards the tarantass. The iemschik uttered a cry.

Michael Strogoff in vain brought his whip down on the team, they refused to move.

A few feet farther on, and the mass would pass behind them! Michael saw the tarantass struck, his companion crushed; he saw there was no time to drag her from the vehicle.

Then, possessed in this hour of peril with superhuman strength, he threw himself behind it, and planting his feet on the ground, by main force placed it out of danger.

The enormous mass as it passed grazed his chest, taking away his breath as though it had been a cannon-ball, then crushing to powder the flints on the road, it bounded into the abyss below.

“Oh, brother!” cried Nadia, who had seen it all by the light of the flashes.

“Nadia!” replied Michael, “fear nothing!”

“It is not on my own account that I fear!”

“God is with us, sister!”

“With me truly, brother, since He has sent thee in my way!” murmured the young girl.

The impetus the tarantass had received was not to be lost, and the tired horses once more moved forward. Dragged, so to speak, by Michael and the iemschik, they toiled on towards a narrow pass, lying north and south, where they would be protected from the direct sweep of the tempest. At one end a huge rock jutted out, round the summit of which whirled an eddy. Behind the shelter of the rock there was a comparative calm; yet once within the circumference of the cyclone, neither man nor beast could resist its power.

Indeed, some firs which towered above this protection were in a trice shorn of their tops, as though a gigantic scythe had swept across them. The storm was now at its height. The lightning filled the defile, and the thunderclaps had become one continued peal. The ground, struck by the concussion, trembled as though the whole Ural chain was shaken to its foundations.

Happily, the tarantass could be so placed that the storm might strike it obliquely. But the counter-currents, directed towards it by the slope, could not be so well avoided, and so violent were they that every instant it seemed as though it would be dashed to pieces.

Nadia was obliged to leave her seat, and Michael, by the light of one of the lanterns, discovered an excavation bearing the marks of a miner’s pick, where the young girl could rest in safety until they could once more start.

Just then — it was one o’clock in the morning — the rain began to fall in torrents, and this in addition to the wind and lightning, made the storm truly frightful. To continue the journey at present was utterly impossible. Besides, having reached this pass, they had only to descend the slopes of the Ural Mountains, and to descend now, with the road torn up by a thousand mountain torrents, in these eddies of wind and rain, was utter madness.

“To wait is indeed serious,” said Michael, “but it must certainly be done, to avoid still longer detentions. The very violence of the storm makes me hope that it will not last long. About three o’clock the day will begin to break, and the descent, which we cannot risk in the dark, we shall be able, if not with ease, at least without such danger, to attempt after sunrise.”

“Let us wait, brother,” replied Nadia; “but if you delay, let it not be to spare me fatigue or danger.”

“Nadia, I know that you are ready to brave everything, but, in exposing both of us, I risk more than my life, more than yours, I am not fulfilling my task, that duty which before everything else I must accomplish.”

“A duty!” murmured Nadia.

Just then a bright flash lit up the sky; a loud clap followed. The air was filled with sulphurous suffocating vapor, and a clump of huge pines, struck by the electric fluid, scarcely twenty feet from the tarantass, flared up like a gigantic torch.

The iemschik was struck to the ground by a counter-shock, but, regaining his feet, found himself happily unhurt.

Just as the last growlings of the thunder were lost in the recesses of the mountain, Michael felt Nadia’s hand pressing his, and he heard her whisper these words in his ear: “Cries, brother! Listen!”

CHAPTER XI TRAVELERS IN DISTRESS

DURING the momentary lull which followed, shouts could be distinctly heard from farther on, at no great distance from the tarantass. It was an earnest appeal, evidently from some traveler in distress.

Michael listened attentively. The iemschik also listened, but shook his head, as though it was impossible to help.

“They are travelers calling for aid,” cried Nadia.

“They can expect nothing,” replied the iemschik.

“Why not?” cried Michael. “Ought not we do for them what they would for us under similar circumstances?”

“Surely you will not risk the carriage and horses!”

“I will go on foot,” replied Michael, interrupting the iemschik.

“I will go, too, brother,” said the young girl.

“No, remain here, Nadia. The iemschik will stay with you. I do not wish to leave him alone.”

“I will stay,” replied Nadia.

“Whatever happens, do not leave this spot.”

“You will find me where I now am.”

Michael pressed her hand, and, turning the corner of the slope, disappeared in the darkness.

“Your brother is wrong,” said the iemschik.

“He is right,” replied Nadia simply.

Meanwhile Strogoff strode rapidly on. If he was in a great hurry to aid the travelers, he was also very anxious to know who it was that had not been hindered from starting by the storm; for he had no doubt that the cries came from the telga, which had so long preceded him.

The rain had stopped, but the storm was raging with redoubled fury. The shouts, borne on the air, became more distinct. Nothing was to be seen of the pass in which Nadia remained. The road wound along, and the squalls, checked by the corners, formed eddies highly dangerous, to pass which, without being taken off his legs, Michael had to use his utmost strength.

He soon perceived that the travelers whose shouts he had heard were at no great distance. Even then, on account of the darkness, Michael could not see them, yet he heard distinctly their words.

This is what he heard, and what caused him some surprise: “Are you coming back, blockhead?”

“You shall have a taste of the knout at the next stage.”

“Do you hear, you devil’s postillion! Hullo! Below!”

“This is how a carriage takes you in this country!”

“Yes, this is what you call a telga!”

“Oh, that abominable driver! He goes on and does not appear to have discovered that he has left us behind!”

“To deceive me, too! Me, an honorable Englishman! I will make a complaint at the chancellor’s office and have the fellow hanged.”

This was said in a very angry tone, but was suddenly interrupted by a burst of laughter from his companion, who exclaimed, “Well! this is a good joke, I must say.”

“You venture to laugh!” said the Briton angrily.

“Certainly, my dear confrere, and that most heartily. ‘Pon my word I never saw anything to come up to it.”

Just then a crashing clap of thunder re-echoed through the defile, and then died away among the distant peaks. When the sound of the last growl had ceased, the merry voice went on: “Yes, it undoubtedly is a good joke. This machine certainly never came from France.”

“Nor from England,” replied the other.

On the road, by the light of the flashes, Michael saw, twenty yards from him, two travelers, seated side by side in a most peculiar vehicle, the wheels of which were deeply imbedded in the ruts formed in the road.

He approached them, the one grinning from ear to ear, and the other gloomily contemplating his situation, and recognized them as the two reporters who had been his companions on board the Caucasus.

“Good-morning to you, sir,” cried the Frenchman. “Delighted to see you here. Let me introduce you to my intimate enemy, Mr. Blount.”

The English reporter bowed, and was about to introduce in his turn his companion, Alcide Jolivet, in accordance with the rules of society, when

Michael interrupted him.

“Perfectly unnecessary, sir; we already know each other, for we traveled together on the Volga.”

“Ah, yes! exactly so! Mr. — ”

“Nicholas Korpanoff, merchant, of Irkutsk. But may I know what has happened which, though a misfortune to your companion, amuses you so much?”

“Certainly, Mr. Korpanoff,” replied Alcide. “Fancy! our driver has gone off with the front part of this confounded carriage, and left us quietly seated in the back part! So here we are in the worse half of a telga; no driver, no horses. Is it not a joke?”

“No joke at all,” said the Englishman.

“Indeed it is, my dear fellow. You do not know how to look at the bright side of things.”

“How, pray, are we to go on?” asked Blount.

“That is the easiest thing in the world,” replied Alcide. “Go and harness yourself to what remains of our cart; I will take the reins, and call you my little pigeon, like a true iemschik, and you will trot off like a real post-horse.”

“Mr. Jolivet,” replied the Englishman, “this joking is going too far, it passes all limits and — ”

“Now do be quiet, my dear sir. When you are done up, I will take your place; and call me a broken-winded snail and faint-hearted tortoise if I don’t take you over the ground at a rattling pace.”

Alcide said all this with such perfect good-humor that Michael could not help smiling. “Gentlemen,” said he, “here is a better plan. We have now reached the highest ridge of the Ural chain, and thus have merely to descend the slopes of the mountain. My carriage is close by, only two hundred yards behind. I will lend you one of my horses, harness it to the remains of the telga, and to-mor-how, if no accident befalls us, we will arrive together at Ekaterenburg.”

“That, Mr. Korpanoff,” said Alcide, “is indeed a generous proposal.”

“Indeed, sir,” replied Michael, “I would willingly offer you places in my tarantass, but it will only hold two, and my sister and I already fill it.”

“Really, sir,” answered Alcide, “with your horse and our demi-telga we will go to the world’s end.”

“Sir,” said Harry Blount, “we most willingly accept your kind offer. And, as to that iemschik — ”

“Oh! I assure you that you are not the first travelers who have met with a similar misfortune,” replied Michael.

“But why should not our driver come back? He knows perfectly well that he has left us behind, wretch that he is!”

“He! He never suspected such a thing.”

“What! the fellow not know that he was leaving the better half of his telga behind?”

“Not a bit, and in all good faith is driving the fore part into Ekaterenburg.”

“Did I not tell you that it was a good joke, confrere?” cried Alcide.

“Then, gentlemen, if you will follow me,” said Michael, “we will return to my carriage, and — ”

“But the telga,” observed the Englishman.

“There is not the slightest fear that it will fly away, my dear Blount!” exclaimed Alcide; “it has taken such good root in the ground, that if it were left here until next spring it would begin to bud.”

“Come then, gentlemen,” said Michael Strogoff, “and we will bring up the tarantass.”

The Frenchman and the Englishman, descending from their seats, no longer the hinder one, since the front had taken its departure, followed Michael.

Walking along, Alcide Jolivet chattered away as usual, with his invariable good-humor. “Faith, Mr. Korpanoff,” said he, “you have indeed got us out of a bad scrape.”

“I have only done, sir,” replied Michael, “what anyone would have done in my place.”

“Well, sir, you have done us a good turn, and if you are going farther we may possibly meet again, and — ”

Alcide Jolivet did not put any direct question to Michael as to where he was going, but the latter, not wishing it to be suspected that he had anything to conceal, at once replied, “I am bound for Omsk, gentlemen.”

“Mr. Blount and I,” replied Alcide, “go where danger is certainly to be found, and without doubt news also.”

“To the invaded provinces?” asked Michael with some earnestness.

“Exactly so, Mr. Korpanoff; and we may possibly meet there.”

“Indeed, sir,” replied Michael, “I have little love for cannon-balls or lance points, and am by nature too great a lover of peace to venture where fighting is going on.”

“I am sorry, sir, extremely sorry; we must only regret that we shall separate so soon! But on leaving Ekaterenburg it may be our fortunate fate to travel together, if only for a few days?”

“Do you go on to Omsk?” asked Michael, after a moment’s reflection.

“We know nothing as yet,” replied Alcide; “but we shall certainly go as far as Ishim, and once there, our movements must depend on circumstances.”

“Well then, gentlemen,” said Michael, “we will be fellow-travelers as far as Ishim.”

Michael would certainly have preferred to travel alone, but he could not, without appearing at least singular, seek to separate himself from the two reporters, who were taking the same road that he was. Besides, since Alcide and his companion intended to make some stay at Ishim, he thought it rather convenient than otherwise to make that part of the journey in their company.

Then in an indifferent tone he asked, “Do you know, with any certainty, where this Tartar invasion is?”

“Indeed, sir,” replied Alcide, “we only know what they said at Perm. Feofar-Khan’s Tartars have invaded the whole province of Semipolatinsk, and for some days, by forced marches, have been descending the Irtish. You must hurry if you wish to get to Omsk before them.”

“Indeed I must,” replied Michael.

“It is reported also that Colonel Ogareff has succeeded in passing the frontier in disguise, and that he will not be slow in joining the Tartar chief in the revolted country.”

“But how do they know it?” asked Michael, whom this news, more or less true, so directly concerned.

“Oh! as these things are always known,” replied Alcide; “it is in the air.”

“Then have you really reason to think that Colonel Ogareff is in Siberia?”

“I myself have heard it said that he was to take the road from Kasan to Ekaterenburg.”

“Ah! you know that, Mr. Jolivet?” said Harry Blount, roused from his silence.

“I knew it,” replied Alcide.

“And do you know that he went disguised as a gypsy!” asked Blount.

“As a gypsy!” exclaimed Michael, almost involuntarily, and he suddenly remembered the look of the old Bohemian at Nijni-Novgorod, his voyage on board the Caucasus, and his disembarking at Kasan.

“Just well enough to make a few remarks on the subject in a letter to my cousin,” replied Alcide, smiling.

“You lost no time at Kasan,” dryly observed the Englishman.

“No, my dear fellow! and while the Caucasus was laying in her supply of fuel, I was employed in obtaining a store of information.”

Michael no longer listened to the repartee which Harry Blount and Alcide exchanged. He was thinking of the gypsy troupe, of the old Tsigane, whose face he had not been able to see, and of the strange woman who accompanied him, and then of the peculiar glance which she had cast at him. Suddenly, close by he heard a pistol-shot.

“Ah! forward, sirs!” cried he.

“Hullo!” said Alcide to himself, “this quiet merchant who always avoids bullets is in a great hurry to go where they are flying about just now!”

Quickly followed by Harry Blount, who was not a man to be behind in danger, he dashed after Michael. In another instant the three were opposite the projecting rock which protected the tarantass at the turning of the road.

The clump of pines struck by the lightning was still burning. There was no one to be seen. However, Michael was not mistaken. Suddenly a dreadful growling was heard, and then another report.

“A bear;” cried Michael, who could not mistake the growling. “Nadia; Nadia!” And drawing his cutlass from his belt, Michael bounded round the buttress behind which the young girl had promised to wait.

The pines, completely enveloped in flames, threw a wild glare on the scene. As Michael reached the tarantass, a huge animal retreated towards him.

It was a monstrous bear. The tempest had driven it from the woods, and it had come to seek refuge in this cave, doubtless its habitual retreat, which Nadia then occupied.

Two of the horses, terrified at the presence of the enormous creature, breaking their traces, had escaped, and the iemschik, thinking only of his beasts, leaving Nadia face to face with the bear, had gone in pursuit of them.

But the brave girl had not lost her presence of mind. The animal, which had not at first seen her, was attacking the remaining horse. Nadia, leaving the shelter in which she had been crouching, had run to the carriage, taken one of Michael’s revolvers, and, advancing resolutely towards the bear, had fired close to it.

The animal, slightly wounded in the shoulder, turned on the girl, who rushed for protection behind the tarantass, but then, seeing that the horse was attempting to break its traces, and knowing that if it did so, and the others were not recovered, their journey could not be continued, with the most perfect coolness she again approached the bear, and, as it raised its paws to strike her down, gave it the contents of the second barrel.

This was the report which Michael had just heard. In an instant he was on the spot. Another bound and he was between the bear and the girl. His arm made one movement upwards, and the enormous beast, ripped up by that terrible knife, fell to the ground a lifeless mass. He had executed in splendid style the famous blow of the Siberian hunters, who endeavor not to damage the precious fur of the bear, which fetches a high price.

“You are not wounded, sister?” said Michael, springing to the side of the young girl.

“No, brother,” replied Nadia.

At that moment the two journalists came up. Alcide seized the horse’s head, and, in an instant, his strong wrist mastered it. His companion and he had seen Michael’s rapid stroke. “Bravo!” cried Alcide; “for a simple merchant, Mr. Korpanoff, you handle the hunter’s knife in a most masterly fashion.”

“Most masterly, indeed,” added Blount.

“In Siberia,” replied Michael, “we are obliged to do a little of everything.”

Alcide regarded him attentively. Seen in the bright glare, his knife dripping with blood, his tall figure, his foot firm on the huge carcass, he was indeed worth looking at.

“A formidable fellow,” said Alcide to himself. Then advancing respectfully, he saluted the young girl.

Nadia bowed slightly.

Alcide turned towards his companion. “The sister worthy of the brother!” said he. “Now, were I a bear, I should not meddle with two so brave and so charming.”

Harry Blount, perfectly upright, stood, hat in hand, at some distance. His companion’s easy manners only increased his usual stiffness.

At that moment the iemschik, who had succeeded in recapturing his two horses, reappeared. He cast a regretful glance at the magnificent animal lying on the ground, loth to leave it to the birds of prey, and then proceeded once more to harness his team.

Michael acquainted him with the travelers’ situation, and his intention of loaning one of the horses.

“As you please,” replied the iemschik. “Only, you know, two carriages instead of one.”

“All right, my friend,” said Alcide, who understood the insinuation, “we will pay double.”

“Then gee up, my turtle-doves!” cried the iemschik.

Nadia again took her place in the tarantass. Michael and his companions followed on foot. It was three o’clock. The storm still swept with terrific violence across the defile. When the first streaks of daybreak appeared the tarantass had reached the telga, which was still conscientiously imbedded as far as the center of the wheel. Such being the case, it can be easily understood how a sudden jerk would separate the front from the hinder part. One of the horses was now harnessed by means of cords to the remains of the telga, the reporters took their place on the singular equipage, and the two carriages started off. They had now only to descend the Ural slopes, in doing which there was not the slightest difficulty.

Six hours afterwards the two vehicles, the tarantass preceding the telga, arrived at Ekaterenburg, nothing worthy of note having happened in the descent.

The first person the reporters perceived at the door of the post-house was their iemschik, who appeared to be waiting for them. This worthy Russian had a fine open countenance, and he smilingly approached the travelers, and, holding out his hand, in a quiet tone he demanded the usual “pour-boire.”

This very cool request roused Blount’s ire to its highest pitch, and had not the iemschik prudently retreated, a straight-out blow of the fist, in true British boxing style, would have paid his claim of “na vodkou.”

Alcide Jolivet, at this burst of anger, laughed as he had never laughed before.

“But the poor devil is quite right!” he cried. “He is perfectly right, my dear fellow. It is not his fault if we did not know how to follow him!”

Then drawing several copecks from his pocket, “Here my friend,” said he, handing them to the iemschik; “take them. If you have not earned them, that is not your fault.”

This redoubled Mr. Blount’s irritation. He even began to speak of a lawsuit against the owner of the telga.

“A lawsuit in Russia, my dear fellow!” cried Alcide. “Things must indeed change should it ever be brought to a conclusion! Did you never hear the story of the wet-nurse who claimed payment of twelve months’ nursing of some poor little infant?”

“I never heard it,” replied Harry Blount.

“Then you do not know what that suckling had become by the time judgment was given in favor of the nurse?”

“What was he, pray?”

“Colonel of the Imperial Guard!”

At this reply all burst into a laugh.

Alcide, enchanted with his own joke, drew out his notebook, and in it wrote the following memorandum, destined to figure in a forthcoming French and Russian dictionary: “Telga, a Russian carriage with four wheels, that is when it starts; with two wheels, when it arrives at its destination.”

CHAPTER XII PROVOCATION

EKATERENBURG, geographically, is an Asiatic city; for it is situated beyond the Ural Mountains, on the farthest eastern slopes of the chain. Nevertheless, it belongs to the government of Perm; and, consequently, is included in one of the great divisions of European Russia. It is as though a morsel of Siberia lay in Russian jaws.

Neither Michael nor his companions were likely to experience the slightest difficulty in obtaining means of continuing their journey in so large a town as Ekaterenburg. It was founded in 1723, and has since become a place of considerable size, for in it is the chief mint of the empire. There also are the headquarters of the officials employed in the management of the mines. Thus the town is the center of an important district, abounding in manufactories principally for the working and refining of gold and platina.

Just now the population of Ekaterenburg had greatly increased; many Russians and Siberians, menaced by the Tartar invasion, having collected there. Thus, though it had been so troublesome a matter to find horses and vehicles when going to Ekaterenburg, there was no difficulty in leaving it; for under present circumstances few travelers cared to venture on the Siberian roads.

So it happened that Blount and Alcide had not the slightest trouble in replacing, by a sound telga, the famous demi-carriage which had managed to take them to Ekaterenburg. As to Michael, he retained his tarantass, which was not much the worse for its journey across the Urals; and he had only to harness three good horses to it to take him swiftly over the road to Irkutsk.

As far as Tioumen, and even up to Novo-Zaimskoe, this road has slight inclines, which gentle undulations are the first signs of the slopes of the Ural Mountains. But after Novo-Zaimskoe begins the immense steppe.

At Ichim, as we have said, the reporters intended to stop, that is at about four hundred and twenty miles from Ekaterenburg. There they intended to be guided by circumstances as to their route across the invaded country, either together or separately, according as their news-hunting instinct set them on one track or another.

This road from Ekaterenburg to Ichim — which passes through Irkutsk — was the only one which Michael could take. But, as he did not run after news, and wished, on the contrary, to avoid the country devastated by the invaders, he determined to stop nowhere.

“I am very happy to make part of my journey in your company,” said he to his new companions, “but I must tell you that I am most anxious to reach Omsk; for my sister and I are going to rejoin our mother. Who can say whether we shall arrive before the Tartars reach the town! I must therefore stop at the post-houses only long enough to change horses, and must travel day and night.”

“That is exactly what we intend doing,” replied Blount.

“Good,” replied Michael; “but do not lose an instant. Buy or hire a carriage whose — ”

“Whose hind wheels,” added Alcide, “are warranted to arrive at the same time as its front wheels.”

Half an hour afterwards the energetic Frenchman had found a tarantass in which he and his companion at once seated themselves. Michael and Nadia once more entered their own carriage, and at twelve o'clock the two vehicles left the town of Ekaterenburg together.

Nadia was at last in Siberia, on that long road which led to Irkutsk. What must then have been the thoughts of the young girl? Three strong swift horses were taking her across that land of exile where her parent was condemned to live, for how long she knew not, and so far from his native land. But she scarcely noticed those long steppes over which the tarantass was rolling, and which at one time she had despaired of ever seeing, for her eyes were gazing at the horizon, beyond which she knew her banished father was. She saw nothing of the country across which she was traveling at the rate of fifteen versts an hour; nothing of these regions of Western Siberia, so different from those of the east. Here, indeed, were few cultivated fields; the soil was poor, at least at the surface, but in its bowels lay hid quantities of iron, copper, platina, and gold. How can hands be found to cultivate the land, when it pays better to burrow beneath the earth? The pickaxe is everywhere at work; the spade nowhere.

However, Nadia's thoughts sometimes left the provinces of Lake Baikal, and returned to her present situation. Her father's image faded away, and was replaced by that of her generous companion as he first appeared on the Vladimir railroad. She recalled his attentions during that journey, his arrival at the police-station, the hearty simplicity with which he had called her sister, his kindness to her in the descent of the Volga, and then all that he did for her on that terrible night of the storm in the Urals, when he saved her life at the peril of his own.

Thus Nadia thought of Michael. She thanked God for having given her such a gallant protector, a friend so generous and wise. She knew that she was safe with him, under his protection. No brother could have done more than he. All obstacles seemed cleared away; the performance of her journey was but a matter of time.

Michael remained buried in thought. He also thanked God for having brought about this meeting with Nadia, which at the same time enabled him to do a good action, and afforded him additional means for concealing his true character. He delighted in the young girl's calm intrepidity. Was she not indeed his sister? His feeling towards his beautiful and brave companion was rather respect than affection. He felt that hers was one of those pure and rare hearts which are held by all in high esteem.

However, Michael's dangers were now beginning, since he had reached Siberian ground. If the reporters were not mistaken, if Ivan Ogareff had really passed the frontier, all his actions must be made with extreme caution. Things were now altered; Tartar spies swarmed in the Siberian provinces. His incognito once discovered, his character as courier of the Czar known, there was an end of his journey, and probably of his life. Michael felt now more than ever the weight of his responsibility.

While such were the thoughts of those occupying the first carriage, what was happening in the second? Nothing out of the way. Alcide spoke in sentences; Blount replied by monosyllables. Each looked at everything in his own light, and made notes of such incidents as occurred on the journey — few and but slightly varied — while they crossed the provinces of Western Siberia.

At each relay the reporters descended from their carriage and found themselves with Michael. Except when meals were to be taken at the post-houses, Nadia did not leave the tarantass. When obliged to breakfast or dine, she sat at table, but was always very reserved, and seldom joined in conversation.

Alcide, without going beyond the limits of strict propriety, showed that he was greatly struck by the young girl. He admired the silent energy which she showed in bearing all the fatigues of so difficult a journey.

The forced stoppages were anything but agreeable to Michael; so he hastened the departure at each relay, roused the innkeepers, urged on the iemschiks, and expedited the harnessing of the tarantass. Then the hurried meal over — always much too hurried to agree with Blount, who was a methodical eater — they started, and were driven as eagles, for they paid like princes.

It need scarcely be said that Blount did not trouble himself about the girl at table. That gentleman was not in the habit of doing two things at once. She was also one of the few subjects of conversation which he did not care to discuss with his companion.

Alcide having asked him, on one occasion, how old he thought the girl, “What girl?” he replied, quite seriously.

“Why, Nicholas Korpanoff’s sister.”

“Is she his sister?”

“No; his grandmother!” replied Alcide, angry at his indifference. “What age should you consider her?”

“Had I been present at her birth I might have known.”

Very few of the Siberian peasants were to be seen in the fields. These peasants are remarkable for their pale, grave faces, which a celebrated traveler has compared to those of the Castilians, without the haughtiness of the latter. Here and there some villages already deserted indicated the approach of the Tartar hordes. The inhabitants, having driven off their flocks of sheep, their camels, and their horses, were taking refuge in the plains of the north. Some tribes of the wandering Kirghiz, who remained faithful, had transported their tents beyond the Irtych, to escape the depredations of the invaders.

Happily, post traveling was as yet uninterrupted; and telegraphic communication could still be effected between places connected with the wire. At each relay horses were to be had on the usual conditions. At each telegraphic station the clerks transmitted messages delivered to them, delaying for State dispatches alone.

Thus far, then, Michael’s journey had been accomplished satisfactorily. The courier of the Czar had in no way been impeded; and, if he could only get on to Krasnoiarsk, which seemed the farthest point attained by Feofar-Khan’s Tartars, he knew that he could arrive at Irkutsk, before them. The day after the two carriages had left Ekaterenburg they reached the small town of Toulouguisk at seven o’clock in the morning, having covered two hundred and twenty versts, no event worthy of mention having occurred. The same evening, the 22d of July, they arrived at Tioumen.

Tioumen, whose population is usually ten thousand inhabitants, then contained double that number. This, the first industrial town established by the Russians in Siberia, in which may be seen a fine metal-refining factory and a bell foundry, had never before presented such an animated appearance. The correspondents immediately went off after news. That brought by Siberian fugitives from the seat of war was far from reassuring. They said, amongst other things, that Feofar-Khan’s army was rapidly approaching the valley of the Ichim, and they confirmed the report that the Tartar chief was soon to be joined by Colonel Ogareff, if he had not been so already. Hence the conclusion was that operations would be pushed in Eastern Siberia with the greatest activity. However, the loyal Cossacks of the government of Tobolsk were advancing by forced marches towards Tomsk, in the hope of cutting off the Tartar columns.

At midnight the town of Novo-Saimsk was reached; and the travelers now left behind them the country broken by tree-covered hills, the last remains of the Urals.

Here began the regular Siberian steppe which extends to the neighborhood of Krasnoiarsk. It is a boundless plain, a vast grassy desert; earth and sky here form a circle as distinct as that traced by a sweep of the compasses. The steppe presents nothing to attract notice but the long line of the telegraph posts, their wires vibrating in the breeze like the strings of a harp. The road could be distinguished from the rest of the plain only by the clouds of fine dust which rose under the wheels of the tarantass. Had it not been for this white riband, which stretched away as far as the eye could reach, the travelers might have thought themselves in a desert.

Michael and his companions again pressed rapidly forward. The horses, urged on by the iemschik, seemed to fly over the ground, for there was not the slightest obstacle to impede them. The tarantass was going straight for Ichim, where the two correspondents intended to stop, if nothing happened to make them alter their plans.

A hundred and twenty miles separated Novo-Saimsk from the town of Ichim, and before eight o’clock the next evening the distance could and should be accomplished if no time was lost. In the opinion of the iemschiks, should the travelers not be great lords or high functionaries, they were worthy of being so, if it was only for their generosity in the matter of “na vodkou.”

On the afternoon of the next day, the 23rd of July, the two carriages were not more than thirty versts from Ichim. Suddenly Michael caught sight of a carriage — scarcely visible among the clouds of dust — preceding them along the road. As his horses were evidently less fatigued than those of the other traveler, he would not be long in overtaking it. This was neither a tarantass nor a telga, but a post-berlin, which looked as if it had made a long journey. The postillion was thrashing his horses with all his might, and only kept them at a gallop by dint of abuse and blows. The berlin had certainly not passed through Novo-Saimsk, and could only have struck the Irkutsk road by some less frequented route across the steppe.

Our travelers’ first thought, on seeing this berlin, was to get in front of it, and arrive first at the relay, so as to make sure of fresh horses. They said a word to their iemschiks, who soon brought them up with the berlin.

Michael Strogoff came up first. As he passed, a head was thrust out of the window of the berlin.

He had not time to see what it was like, but as he dashed by he distinctly heard this word, uttered in an imperious tone: “Stop!”

But they did not stop; on the contrary, the berlin was soon distanced by the two tarantasses.

It now became a regular race; for the horses of the berlin — no doubt excited by the sight and pace of the others — recovered their strength and kept up for some minutes. The three carriages were hidden in a cloud of dust. From this cloud issued the cracking of whips mingled with excited shouts and exclamations of anger.

Nevertheless, the advantage remained with Michael and his companions, which might be very important to them if the relay was poorly provided with horses. Two carriages were perhaps more than the postmaster could provide for, at least in a short space of time.

Half an hour after the berlin was left far behind, looking only a speck on the horizon of the steppe.

It was eight o’clock in the evening when the two carriages reached Ichim. The news was worse and worse with regard to the invasion. The town itself was menaced by the Tartar vanguard; and two days before the authorities had been obliged to retreat to Tobolsk. There was not an officer nor a soldier left in Ichim.

On arriving at the relay, Michael Strogoff immediately asked for horses. He had been fortunate in distancing the berlin. Only three horses were fit to be harnessed. The others had just come in worn out from a long stage.

As the two correspondents intended to stop at Ichim, they had not to trouble themselves to find transport, and had their carriage put away. In ten minutes Michael was told that his tarantass was ready to start.

“Good,” said he.

Then turning to the two reporters: “Well, gentlemen, the time is come for us to separate.”

“What, Mr. Korpanoff,” said Alcide Jolivet, “shall you not stop even for an hour at Ichim?”

“No, sir; and I also wish to leave the post-house before the arrival of the berlin which we distanced.”

“Are you afraid that the traveler will dispute the horses with you?”

“I particularly wish to avoid any difficulty.”

“Then, Mr. Korpanoff,” said Jolivet, “it only remains for us to thank you once more for the service you rendered us, and the pleasure we have had in traveling with you.”

“It is possible that we shall meet you again in a few days at Omsk,” added Blount.

“It is possible,” answered Michael, “since I am going straight there.”

“Well, I wish you a safe journey, Mr. Korpanoff,” said Alcide, “and Heaven preserve you from telgas.”

The two reporters held out their hands to Michael with the intention of cordially shaking his, when the sound of a carriage was heard outside. Almost immediately the door was flung open and a man appeared.

It was the traveler of the berlin, a military-looking man, apparently about forty years of age, tall, robust in figure, broad-shouldered, with a strongly-set head, and thick mus-taches meeting red whiskers. He wore a plain uniform. A cavalry saber hung at his side, and in his hand he held a short-handled whip.

“Horses,” he demanded, with the air of a man accustomed to command.

“I have no more disposable horses,” answered the postmaster, bowing.

“I must have some this moment.”

“It is impossible.”

“What are those horses which have just been harnessed to the tarantass I saw at the door?”

“They belong to this traveler,” answered the postmaster, pointing to Michael Strogoff.

“Take them out!” said the traveler in a tone which admitted of no reply.

Michael then advanced.

“These horses are engaged by me,” he said.

“What does that matter? I must have them. Come, be quick; I have no time to lose.”

“I have no time to lose either,” replied Michael, restraining himself with difficulty.

Nadia was near him, calm also, but secretly uneasy at a scene which it would have been better to avoid.

“Enough!” said the traveler. Then, going up to the postmaster, “Let the horses be put into my berlin,” he exclaimed with a threatening gesture.

The postmaster, much embarrassed, did not know whom to obey, and looked at Michael, who evidently had the right to resist the unjust demands of the traveler.

Michael hesitated an instant. He did not wish to make use of his podorojna, which would have drawn attention to him, and he was most unwilling also, by giving up his horses, to delay his journey, and yet he must not engage in a struggle which might compromise his mission.

The two reporters looked at him ready to support him should he appeal to them.

“My horses will remain in my carriage,” said Michael, but without raising his tone more than would be suitable for a plain Irkutsk merchant.

The traveler advanced towards Michael and laid his hand heavily on his shoulder. “Is it so?” he said roughly. “You will not give up your horses to me?”

“No,” answered Michael.

“Very well, they shall belong to whichever of us is able to start. Defend yourself; I shall not spare you!”

So saying, the traveler drew his saber from its sheath, and Nadia threw herself before Michael.

Blount and Alcide Jolivet advanced towards him.

“I shall not fight,” said Michael quietly, folding his arms across his chest.

“You will not fight?”

“No.”

“Not even after this?” exclaimed the traveler. And before anyone could prevent him, he struck Michael’s shoulder with the handle of the whip. At this insult Michael turned deadly pale. His hands moved convulsively as if he would have knocked the brute down. But by a tremendous effort he mastered himself. A duel! it was more than a delay; it was perhaps the failure of his mission. It would be better to lose some hours. Yes; but to swallow this affront!

“Will you fight now, coward?” repeated the traveler, adding coarseness to brutality.

“No,” answered Michael, without moving, but looking the other straight in the face.

“The horses this moment,” said the man, and left the room.

The postmaster followed him, after shrugging his shoulders and bestowing on Michael a glance of anything but approbation.

The effect produced on the reporters by this incident was not to Michael’s advantage. Their discomfiture was visible. How could this strong young man allow himself to be struck like that and not demand satisfaction for such an insult? They contented themselves with bowing to him and retired, Jolivet remarking to Harry Blount

“I could not have believed that of a man who is so skillful in finishing up Ural Mountain bears. Is it the case that a man can be courageous at one time and a coward at another? It is quite incomprehensible.”

A moment afterwards the noise of wheels and whip showed that the berlin, drawn by the tarantass' horses, was driving rapidly away from the post-house.

Nadia, unmoved, and Michael, still quivering, remained alone in the room. The courier of the Czar, his arms crossed over his chest was seated motionless as a statue. A color, which could not have been the blush of shame, had replaced the paleness on his countenance.

Nadia did not doubt that powerful reasons alone could have allowed him to suffer so great a humiliation from such a man. Going up to him as he had come to her in the police-station at Nijni-Novgorod:

"Your hand, brother," said she.

And at the same time her hand, with an almost maternal gesture, wiped away a tear which sprang to her companion's eye.

CHAPTER XIII DUTY BEFORE EVERYTHING

NADIA, with the clear perception of a right-minded woman, guessed that some secret motive directed all Michael Strogoff’s actions; that he, for a reason unknown to her, did not belong to himself; and that in this instance especially he had heroically sacrificed to duty even his resentment at the gross injury he had received.

Nadia, therefore, asked no explanation from Michael. Had not the hand which she had extended to him already replied to all that he might have been able to tell her?

Michael remained silent all the evening. The postmaster not being able to supply them with fresh horses until the next morning, a whole night must be passed at the house. Nadia could profit by it to take some rest, and a room was therefore prepared for her.

The young girl would no doubt have preferred not to leave her companion, but she felt that he would rather be alone, and she made ready to go to her room.

Just as she was about to retire she could not refrain from going up to Michael to say good-night.

“Brother,” she whispered. But he checked her with a gesture. The girl sighed and left the room.

Michael Strogoff did not lie down. He could not have slept even for an hour. The place on which he had been struck by the brutal traveler felt like a burn.

“For my country and the Father,” he muttered as he ended his evening prayer.

He especially felt a great wish to know who was the man who had struck him, whence he came, and where he was going. As to his face, the features of it were so deeply engraven on his memory that he had no fear of ever forgetting them.

Michael Strogoff at last asked for the postmaster. The latter, a Siberian of the old type, came directly, and looking rather contemptuously at the young man, waited to be questioned.

“You belong to the country?” asked Michael.

“Yes.”

“Do you know that man who took my horses?”

“No.”

“Had you never seen him before?”

“Never.”

“Who do you think he was?”

“A man who knows how to make himself obeyed.”

Michael fixed his piercing gaze upon the Siberian, but the other did not quail before it.

“Do you dare to judge me?” exclaimed Michael.

“Yes,” answered the Siberian, “there are some things even a plain merchant cannot receive without returning.”

“Blows?”

“Blows, young man. I am of an age and strength to tell you so.”

Michael went up to the postmaster and laid his two powerful hands on his shoulders.

Then in a peculiarly calm tone, “Be off, my friend,” said he: “be off! I could kill you.”

The postmaster understood. “I like him better for that,” he muttered and retired without another word.

At eight o’clock the next morning, the 24th of July, three strong horses were harnessed to the tarantass. Michael Strogoff and Nadia took their places, and Ichim, with its disagreeable remembrances, was soon left far behind.

At the different relays at which they stopped during the day Strogoff ascertained that the berlin still preceded them on the road to Irkutsk, and that the traveler, as hurried as they were, never lost a minute in pursuing his way across the steppe.

At four o’clock in the evening they reached Abatskaia, fifty miles farther on, where the Ichim, one of the principal affluents of the Irtych, had to be crossed. This passage was rather more difficult than that of the Tobol. Indeed the current of the Ichim was very rapid just at that place. During the Siberian winter, the rivers being all frozen to a thickness of several feet, they are easily practicable, and the traveler even crosses them without being aware of the fact, for their beds have disappeared under the snowy sheet spread uniformly over the steppe; but in summer the difficulties of crossing are sometimes great.

In fact, two hours were taken up in making the passage of the Ichim, which much exasperated Michael, especially as the boatmen gave them alarming news of the Tartar invasion. Some of Feofar-Khan’s scouts had already appeared on both banks of the lower Ichim, in the southern parts of the government of Tobolsk. Omsk was threatened. They spoke of an engagement which had taken place between the Siberian and Tartar troops on the frontier of the great Kirghese horde — an engagement not to the advantage of the Russians, who were weak in numbers. The troops had retreated thence, and in consequence there had been a general emigration of all the peasants of the province. The boatmen spoke of horrible atrocities committed by the invaders — pillage, theft, incendiarism, murder. Such was the system of Tartar warfare.

The people all fled before Feofar-Khan. Michael Strogoff’s great fear was lest, in the depopulation of the towns, he should be unable to obtain the means of transport. He was therefore extremely anxious to reach Omsk. Perhaps there they would get the start of the Tartar scouts, who were coming down the valley of the Irtych, and would find the road open to Irkutsk.

Just at the place where the tarantass crossed the river ended what is called, in military language, the “Ichim chain” — a chain of towers, or little wooden forts, extending from the southern frontier of Siberia for a distance of nearly four hundred versts. Formerly these forts were occupied by detachments of Cossacks, and they protected the country against the Kirghese, as well as against the Tartars. But since the Muscovite Government had believed these hordes reduced to absolute submission, they had been abandoned, and now could not be used; just at the time when they were needed. Many of these forts had been reduced to ashes; and the boatmen even pointed out the smoke to Michael, rising in the southern horizon, and showing the approach of the Tartar advance-guard.

As soon as the ferryboat landed the tarantass on the right bank of the Ichim, the journey across the steppe was resumed with all speed. Michael Strogoff remained very silent. He was, however, always attentive to Nadia, helping her to bear the fatigue of this long journey without break or rest; but the girl never complained. She longed to give wings to the horses. Something told her that her companion was even more anxious than herself to reach Irkutsk; and how many versts were still between!

It also occurred to her that if Omsk was entered by the Tartars, Michael's mother, who lived there, would be in danger, and that this was sufficient to explain her son's impatience to get to her.

Nadia at last spoke to him of old Marfa, and of how unprotected she would be in the midst of all these events.

"Have you received any news of your mother since the beginning of the invasion?" she asked.

"None, Nadia. The last letter my mother wrote to me contained good news. Marfa is a brave and energetic Siberian woman. Notwithstanding her age, she has preserved all her moral strength. She knows how to suffer."

"I shall see her, brother," said Nadia quickly. "Since you give me the name of sister, I am Marfa's daughter."

And as Michael did not answer she added:

“Perhaps your mother has been able to leave Omsk?”

“It is possible, Nadia,” replied Michael; “and I hope she may have reached Tobolsk. Marfa hates the Tartars. She knows the steppe, and would have no fear in just taking her staff and going down the banks of the Irtych. There is not a spot in all the province unknown to her. Many times has she traveled all over the country with my father; and many times I myself, when a mere child, have accompanied them across the Siberian desert. Yes, Nadia, I trust that my mother has left Omsk.”

“And when shall you see her?”

“I shall see her — on my return.”

“If, however, your mother is still at Omsk, you will be able to spare an hour to go to her?”

“I shall not go and see her.”

“You will not see her?”

“No, Nadia,” said Michael, his chest heaving as he felt he could not go on replying to the girl’s questions.

“You say no! Why, brother, if your mother is still at Omsk, for what reason could you refuse to see her?”

“For what reason, Nadia? You ask me for what reason,” exclaimed Michael, in so changed a voice that the young girl started. “For the same reason as that which made me patient even to cowardice with the villain who — ” He could not finish his sentence.

"Calm yourself, brother," said Nadia in a gentle voice. "I only know one thing, or rather I do not know it, I feel it. It is that all your conduct is now directed by the sentiment of a duty more sacred — if there can be one — than that which unites the son to the mother."

Nadia was silent, and from that moment avoided every subject which in any way touched on Michael's peculiar situation. He had a secret motive which she must respect. She respected it.

The next day, July 25th, at three o'clock in the morning, the tarantass arrived at Tioukalmsk, having accomplished a distance of eighty miles since it had crossed the Ichim. They rapidly changed horses. Here, however, for the first time, the iemschik made difficulties about starting, declaring that detachments of Tartars were roving across the steppe, and that travelers, horses, and carriages would be a fine prize for them.

Only by dint of a large bribe could Michael get over the unwillingness of the iemschik, for in this instance, as in many others, he did not wish to show his podorojna. The last ukase, having been transmitted by telegraph, was known in the Siberian provinces; and a Russian specially exempted from obeying these words would certainly have drawn public attention to himself — a thing above all to be avoided by the Czar's courier. As to the iemschik's hesitation, either the rascal traded on the traveler's impatience or he really had good reason to fear.

However, at last the tarantass started, and made such good way that by three in the afternoon it had reached Koulatsinskoe, fifty miles farther on. An hour after this it was on the banks of the Irtych. Omsk was now only fourteen miles distant.

The Irtych is a large river, and one of the principal of those which flow towards the north of Asia. Rising in the Altai Mountains, it flows from the southeast to the northwest and empties itself into the Obi, after a course of four thousand miles.

At this time of year, when all the rivers of the Siberian basin are much swollen, the waters of the Irtych were very high. In consequence the current was changed to a regular torrent, rendering the passage difficult enough. A swimmer could not have crossed, however powerful; and even in a ferryboat there would be some danger.

But Michael and Nadia, determined to brave all perils whatever they might be, did not dream of shrinking from this one. Michael proposed to his young companion that he should cross first, embarking in the ferryboat with the tarantass and horses, as he feared that the weight of this load would render it less safe. After landing the carriage he would return and fetch Nadia.

The girl refused. It would be the delay of an hour, and she would not, for her safety alone, be the cause of it.

The embarkation was made not without difficulty, for the banks were partly flooded and the boat could not get in near enough. However, after half an hour's exertion, the boatmen got the tarantass and the three horses on board. The passengers embarked also, and they shoved off.

For a few minutes all went well. A little way up the river the current was broken by a long point projecting from the bank, and forming an eddy easily crossed by the boat. The two boatmen propelled their barge with long poles, which they handled cleverly; but as they gained the middle of the stream it grew deeper and deeper, until at last they could only just reach the bottom. The ends of the poles were only a foot above the water, which rendered their use difficult. Michael and Nadia, seated in the stern of the boat, and always in dread of a delay, watched the boatmen with some uneasiness.

“Look out!” cried one of them to his comrade.

The shout was occasioned by the new direction the boat was rapidly taking. It had got into the direct current and was being swept down the river. By diligent use of the poles, putting the ends in a series of notches cut below the gunwale, the boatmen managed to keep the craft against the stream, and slowly urged it in a slanting direction towards the right bank.

They calculated on reaching it some five or six versts below the landing place; but, after all, that would not matter so long as men and beasts could disembark without accident. The two stout boatmen, stimulated moreover by the promise of double fare, did not doubt of succeeding in this difficult passage of the Irtych.

But they reckoned without an accident which they were powerless to prevent, and neither their zeal nor their skill-fulness could, under the circumstances, have done more.

The boat was in the middle of the current, at nearly equal distances from either shore, and being carried down at the rate of two versts an hour, when Michael, springing to his feet, bent his gaze up the river.

Several boats, aided by oars as well as by the current, were coming swiftly down upon them.

Michael’s brow contracted, and a cry escaped him.

“What is the matter?” asked the girl.

But before Michael had time to reply one of the boatmen exclaimed in an accent of terror:

“The Tartars! the Tartars!”

There were indeed boats full of soldiers, and in a few minutes they must reach the ferryboat, it being too heavily laden to escape from them.

The terrified boatmen uttered exclamations of despair and dropped their poles.

“Courage, my friends!” cried Michael; “courage! Fifty roubles for you if we reach the right bank before the boats overtake us.”

Incited by these words, the boatmen again worked manfully but it soon become evident that they could not escape the Tartars.

It was scarcely probable that they would pass without attacking them. On the contrary, there was everything to be feared from robbers such as these.

“Do not be afraid, Nadia,” said Michael; “but be ready for anything.”

“I am ready,” replied Nadia.

“Even to leap into the water when I tell you?”

“Whenever you tell me.”

“Have confidence in me, Nadia.”

“I have, indeed!”

The Tartar boats were now only a hundred feet distant. They carried a detachment of Bokharian soldiers, on their way to reconnoiter around Omsk.

The ferryboat was still two lengths from the shore. The boatmen redoubled their efforts. Michael himself seized a pole and wielded it with superhuman strength. If he could land the tarantass and horses, and dash off with them, there was some chance of escaping the Tartars, who were not mounted.

But all their efforts were in vain. “Saryn na kitchou!” shouted the soldiers from the first boat.

Michael recognized the Tartar war-cry, which is usually answered by lying flat on the ground. As neither he nor the boatmen obeyed a volley was let fly, and two of the horses were mortally wounded.

At the next moment a violent blow was felt. The boats had run into the ferryboat.

“Come, Nadia!” cried Michael, ready to jump overboard.

The girl was about to follow him, when a blow from a lance struck him, and he was thrown into the water. The current swept him away, his hand raised for an instant above the waves, and then he disappeared.

Nadia uttered a cry, but before she had time to throw herself after him she was seized and dragged into one of the boats. The boatmen were killed, the ferryboat left to drift away, and the Tartars continued to descend the Irtych.

CHAPTER XIV MOTHER AND SON

OMSK is the official capital of Western Siberia. It is not the most important city of the government of that name, for Tomsk has more inhabitants and is larger. But it is at Omsk that the Governor-General of this the first half of Asiatic Russia resides. Omsk, properly so called, is composed of two distinct towns: one which is exclusively inhabited by the authorities and officials; the other more especially devoted to the Siberian merchants, although, indeed, the trade of the town is of small importance.

This city has about 12,000 to 13,000 inhabitants. It is defended by walls, but these are merely of earth, and could afford only insufficient protection. The Tartars, who were well aware of this fact, consequently tried at this period to carry it by main force, and in this they succeeded, after an investment of a few days.

The garrison of Omsk, reduced to two thousand men, resisted valiantly. But driven back, little by little, from the mercantile portion of the place, they were compelled to take refuge in the upper town.

It was there that the Governor-General, his officers, and soldiers had entrenched themselves. They had made the upper quarter of Omsk a kind of citadel, and hitherto they held out well in this species of improvised “kreml,” but without much hope of the promised succor. The Tartar troops, who were descending the Irtych, received every day fresh reinforcements, and, what was more serious, they were led by an officer, a traitor to his country, but a man of much note, and of an audacity equal to any emergency. This man was Colonel Ivan Ogareff.

Ivan Ogareff, terrible as any of the most savage Tartar chieftains, was an educated soldier. Possessing on his mother’s side some Mongolian blood, he delighted in deceptive strategy and ambuscades, stopping short of nothing when he desired to fathom some secret or to set some trap. Deceitful by nature, he willingly had recourse to the vilest trickery; lying when occasion demanded, excelling in the adoption of all disguises and in every species of deception. Further, he was cruel, and had even acted as an executioner. Feofar-Khan possessed in him a lieutenant well capable of seconding his designs in this savage war.

When Michael Strogoff arrived on the banks of the Irtych, Ivan Ogareff was already master of Omsk, and was pressing the siege of the upper quarter of the town all the more eagerly because he must hasten to Tomsk, where the main body of the Tartar army was concentrated.

Tomsk, in fact, had been taken by Feofar-Khan some days previously, and it was thence that the invaders, masters of Central Siberia, were to march upon Irkutsk.

Irkutsk was the real object of Ivan Ogareff. The plan of the traitor was to reach the Grand Duke under a false name, to gain his confidence, and to deliver into Tartar hands the town and the Grand Duke himself. With such a town, and such a hostage, all Asiatic Siberia must necessarily fall into the hands of the invaders. Now it was known that the Czar was acquainted with this conspiracy, and that it was for the purpose of baffling it that a courier had been intrusted with the important warning. Hence, therefore, the very stringent instructions which had been given to the young courier to pass incognito through the invaded district.

This mission he had so far faithfully performed, but now could he carry it to a successful completion?

The blow which had struck Michael Strogoff was not mortal. By swimming in a manner by which he had effectually concealed himself, he had reached the right bank, where he fell exhausted among the bushes.

When he recovered his senses, he found himself in the cabin of a mujik, who had picked him up and cared for him. For how long a time had he been the guest of this brave Siberian? He could not guess. But when he opened his eyes he saw the handsome bearded face bending over him, and regarding him with pitying eyes. “Do not speak, little father,” said the mujik, “Do not speak! Thou art still too weak. I will tell thee where thou art and everything that has passed.”

And the mujik related to Michael Strogoff the different incidents of the struggle which he had witnessed — the attack upon the ferry by the Tartar boats, the pillage of the tarantass, and the massacre of the boatmen.

But Michael Strogoff listened no longer, and slipping his hand under his garment he felt the imperial letter still secured in his breast. He breathed a sigh of relief.

But that was not all. “A young girl accompanied me,” said he.

“They have not killed her,” replied the mujik, anticipating the anxiety which he read in the eyes of his guest. “They have carried her off in their boat, and have continued the descent of Irtych. It is only one prisoner more to join the many they are taking to Tomsk!”

Michael Strogoff was unable to reply. He pressed his hand upon his heart to restrain its beating. But, notwithstanding these many trials, the sentiment of duty mastered his whole soul. “Where am I?” asked he.

“Upon the right bank of the Irtych, only five versts from Omsk,” replied the mujik.

“What wound can I have received which could have thus prostrated me? It was not a gunshot wound?”

“No; a lance-thrust in the head, now healing,” replied the mujik. “After a few days’ rest, little father, thou wilt be able to proceed. Thou didst fall into the river; but the Tartars neither touched nor searched thee; and thy purse is still in thy pocket.”

Michael Strogoff gripped the mujik’s hand. Then, recovering himself with a sudden effort, “Friend,” said he, “how long have I been in thy hut?”

“Three days.”

“Three days lost!”

“Three days hast thou lain unconscious.”

“Hast thou a horse to sell me?”

“Thou wishest to go?”

“At once.”

“I have neither horse nor carriage, little father. Where the Tartar has passed there remains nothing!”

“Well, I will go on foot to Omsk to find a horse.”

“A few more hours of rest, and thou wilt be in a better condition to pursue thy journey.”

“Not an hour!”

“Come now,” replied the mujik, recognizing the fact that it was useless to struggle against the will of his guest, “I will guide thee myself. Besides,” he added, “the Russians are still in great force at Omsk, and thou couldst, perhaps, pass unperceived.”

“Friend,” replied Michael Strogoff, “Heaven reward thee for all thou hast done for me!”

“Only fools expect reward on earth,” replied the mujik.

Michael Strogoff went out of the hut. When he tried to walk he was seized with such faintness that, without the assistance of the mujik, he would have fallen; but the fresh air quickly revived him. He then felt the wound in his head, the violence of which his fur cap had lessened. With the energy which he possessed, he was not a man to succumb under such a trifle. Before his eyes lay a single goal — far-distant Irkutsk. He must reach it! But he must pass through Omsk without stopping there.

“God protect my mother and Nadia!” he murmured. “I have no longer the right to think of them!”

Michael Strogoff and the mujik soon arrived in the mercantile quarter of the lower town. The surrounding earthwork had been destroyed in many places, and there were the breaches through which the marauders who followed the armies of Feofar-Khan had penetrated. Within Omsk, in its streets and squares, the Tartar soldiers swarmed like ants; but it was easy to see that a hand of iron imposed upon them a discipline to which they were little accustomed. They walked nowhere alone, but in armed groups, to defend themselves against surprise.

In the chief square, transformed into a camp, guarded by many sentries, 2,000 Tartars bivouacked. The horses, picketed but still saddled, were ready to start at the first order. Omsk could only be a temporary halting-place for this Tartar cavalry, which preferred the rich plains of Eastern Siberia, where the towns were more wealthy, and, consequently, pillage more profitable.

Above the mercantile town rose the upper quarter, which Ivan Ogareff, notwithstanding several assaults vigorously made but bravely repelled, had not yet been able to reduce. Upon its embattled walls floated the national colors of Russia.

It was not without a legitimate pride that Michael Strogoff and his guide, vowing fidelity, saluted them.

Michael Strogoff was perfectly acquainted with the town of Omsk, and he took care to avoid those streets which were much frequented. This was not from any fear of being recognized. In the town his old mother only could have called him by name, but he had sworn not to see her, and he did not. Besides — and he wished it with his whole heart — she might have fled into some quiet portion of the steppe.

The mujik very fortunately knew a postmaster who, if well paid, would not refuse at his request either to let or to sell a carriage or horses. There remained the difficulty of leaving the town, but the breaches in the fortifications would, of course, facilitate his departure.

The mujik was accordingly conducting his guest straight to the posting-house, when, in a narrow street, Michael Strogoff, coming to a sudden stop sprang behind a jutting wall.

“What is the matter?” asked the astonished mujik.

“Silence!” replied Michael, with his finger on his lips. At this moment a detachment debouched from the principal square into the street which Michael Strogoff and his companion had just been following.

At the head of the detachment, composed of twenty horsemen, was an officer dressed in a very simple uniform. Although he glanced rapidly from one side to the other he could not have seen Michael Strogoff, owing to his precipitous retreat.

The detachment went at full trot into the narrow street. Neither the officer nor his escort concerned themselves about the inhabitants. Several unlucky ones had scarcely time to make way for their passage. There were a few half-stifled cries, to which thrusts of the lance gave an instant reply, and the street was immediately cleared.

When the escort had disappeared, “Who is that officer?” asked Michael Strogoff. And while putting the question his face was pale as that of a corpse.

“It is Ivan Ogareff,” replied the Siberian, in a deep voice which breathed hatred.

“He!” cried Michael Strogoff, from whom the word escaped with a fury he could not conquer. He had just recognized in this officer the traveler who had struck him at the posting-house of Ichim. And, although he had only caught a glimpse of him, it burst upon his mind, at the same time, that this traveler was the old Zingari whose words he had overheard in the market place of Nijni-Novgorod.

Michael Strogoff was not mistaken. The two men were one and the same. It was under the garb of a Zingari, mingling with the band of Sangarre, that

Ivan Ogareff had been able to leave the town of Nijni-Novgorod, where he had gone to seek his confidants. Sangarre and her Zingari, well paid spies, were absolutely devoted to him. It was he who, during the night, on the fair-ground had uttered that singular sentence, which Michael Strogoff could not understand; it was he who was voyaging on board the Caucasus, with the whole of the Bohemian band; it was he who, by this other route, from Kasan to Ichim, across the Urals, had reached Omsk, where now he held supreme authority.

Ivan Ogareff had been barely three days at Omsk, and had it not been for their fatal meeting at Ichim, and for the event which had detained him three days on the banks of the Irtych, Michael Strogoff would have evidently beaten him on the way to Irkutsk.

And who knows how many misfortunes would have been avoided in the future! In any case — and now more than ever — Michael Strogoff must avoid Ivan Ogareff, and contrive not to be seen. When the moment of encountering him face to face should arrive, he knew how to meet it, even should the traitor be master of the whole of Siberia.

The mujik and Michael resumed their way and arrived at the posting-house. To leave Omsk by one of the breaches would not be difficult after nightfall. As for purchasing a carriage to replace the tarantass, that was impossible. There were none to be let or sold. But what want had Michael Strogoff now for a carriage? Was he not alone, alas? A horse would suffice him; and, very fortunately, a horse could be had. It was an animal of strength and mettle, and Michael Strogoff, accomplished horseman as he was, could make good use of it.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon. Michael Strogoff, compelled to wait till nightfall, in order to pass the fortifications, but not desiring to show himself, remained in the posting-house, and there partook of food.

There was a great crowd in the public room. They were talking of the expected arrival of a corps of Muscovite troops, not at Omsk, but at Tomsk — a corps intended to recapture that town from the Tartars of Feofar-Khan.

Michael Strogoff lent an attentive ear, but took no part in the conversation. Suddenly a cry made him tremble, a cry which penetrated to the depths of his soul, and these two words rushed into his ear: “My son!”

His mother, the old woman Marfa, was before him! Trembling, she smiled upon him. She stretched forth her arms to him. Michael Strogoff arose. He was about to throw himself —

The thought of duty, the serious danger for his mother and himself in this unfortunate meeting, suddenly stopped him, and such was his command over himself that not a muscle of his face moved. There were twenty people in the public room. Among them were, perhaps, spies, and was it not known in the town that the son of Marfa Strogoff belonged to the corps of the couriers of the Czar?

Michael Strogoff did not move.

“Michael!” cried his mother.

“Who are you, my good lady?” Michael Strogoff stammered, unable to speak in his usual firm tone.

“Who am I, thou askest! Dost thou no longer know thy mother?”

“You are mistaken,” coldly replied Michael Strogoff. “A resemblance deceives you.”

The old Marfa went up to him, and, looking straight into his eyes, said, “Thou art not the son of Peter and Marfa Strogoff?”

Michael Strogoff would have given his life to have locked his mother in his arms; but if he yielded it was all over with him, with her, with his mission, with his oath! Completely master of himself, he closed his eyes, in order not to see the inexpressible anguish which agitated the revered countenance of his mother. He drew back his hands, in order not to touch those trembling hands which sought him. “I do not know in truth what it is you say, my good woman,” he replied, stepping back.

“Michael!” again cried his aged mother.

“My name is not Michael. I never was your son! I am Nicholas Korpanoff, a merchant at Irkutsk.”

And suddenly he left the public room, whilst for the last time the words re-echoed, “My son! my son!”

Michael Strogoff, by a desperate effort, had gone. He did not see his old mother, who had fallen back almost inanimate upon a bench. But when the postmaster hastened to assist her, the aged woman raised herself. Suddenly a thought occurred to her. She denied by her son! It was not possible. As for being herself deceived, and taking another for him, equally impossible. It was certainly her son whom she had just seen; and if he had not recognized her it was because he would not, it was because he ought not, it was because he had some cogent reasons for acting thus! And then, her mother’s feelings arising within her, she had only one thought — ”Can I, unwittingly, have ruined him?”

“I am mad,” she said to her interrogators. “My eyes have deceived me! This young man is not my child. He had not his voice. Let us think no more of it; if we do I shall end by finding him everywhere.”

Less than ten minutes afterwards a Tartar officer appeared in the posting-house. “Marfa Strogoff?” he asked.

“It is I,” replied the old woman, in a tone so calm, and with a face so tranquil, that those who had witnessed the meeting with her son would not have known her.

“Come,” said the officer.

Marfa Strogoff, with firm step, followed the Tartar. Some moments afterwards she found herself in the chief square in the presence of Ivan Ogareff, to whom all the details of this scene had been immediately reported.

Ogareff, suspecting the truth, interrogated the old Siberian woman. “Thy name?” he asked in a rough voice.

“Marfa Strogoff.”

“Thou hast a son?”

“Yes.”

“He is a courier of the Czar?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he?”

“At Moscow.”

“Thou hast no news of him?”

“No news.”

“Since how long?”

“Since two months.”

“Who, then, was that young man whom thou didst call thy son a few moments ago at the posting-house?”

“A young Siberian whom I took for him,” replied Marfa Strogoff. “This is the tenth man in whom I have thought I recognized my son since the town has been so full of strangers. I think I see him everywhere.”

“So this young man was not Michael Strogoff?”

“It was not Michael Strogoff.”

“Dost thou know, old woman, that I can torture thee until thou avowest the truth?”

“I have spoken the truth, and torture will not cause me to alter my words in any way.”

“This Siberian was not Michael Strogoff?” asked a second time Ivan Ogareff.

“No, it was not he,” replied a second time Marfa Strogoff. “Do you think that for anything in the world I would deny a son whom God has given me?”

Ivan Ogareff regarded with an evil eye the old woman who braved him to the face. He did not doubt but that she had recognized her son in this young Siberian. Now if this son had first renounced his mother, and if his mother renounced him in her turn, it could occur only from the most weighty motive. Ogareff had therefore no doubt that the pretended Nicholas Korpanoff was Michael Strogoff, courier of the Czar, seeking concealment under a false name, and charged with some mission which it would have been important for him to know. He therefore at once gave orders for his pursuit. Then “Let this woman be conducted to Tomsk,” he said.

While the soldiers brutally dragged her off, he added between his teeth, “When the moment arrives I shall know how to make her speak, this old sorceress!”

CHAPTER XV THE MARSHES OF THE BARABA

IT was fortunate that Michael Strogoff had left the posting-house so promptly. The orders of Ivan Ogareff had been immediately transmitted to all the approaches of the city, and a full description of Michael sent to all the various commandants, in order to prevent his departure from Omsk. But he had already passed through one of the breaches in the wall; his horse was galloping over the steppe, and the chances of escape were in his favor.

It was on the 29th of July, at eight o’clock in the evening, that Michael Strogoff had left Omsk. This town is situated about halfway between Moscow and Irkutsk, where it was necessary that he should arrive within ten days if he wished to get ahead of the Tartar columns. It was evident that the unlucky chance which had brought him into the presence of his mother had betrayed his incognito. Ivan Ogareff was no longer ignorant of the fact that a courier of the Czar had just passed Omsk, taking the direction of Irkutsk. The dispatches which this courier bore must have been of immense importance. Michael Strogoff knew, therefore, that every effort would be made to capture him.

But what he did not know, and could not know, was that Marfa Strogoff was in the hands of Ivan Ogareff, and that she was about to atone, perhaps with her life, for that natural exhibition of her feelings which she had been unable to restrain when she suddenly found herself in the presence of her son. And it was fortunate that he was ignorant of it. Could he have withstood this fresh trial?

Michael Strogoff urged on his horse, imbuing him with all his own feverish impatience, requiring of him one thing only, namely, to bear him rapidly to the next posting-house, where he could be exchanged for a quicker conveyance.

At midnight he had cleared fifty miles, and halted at the station of Koulikovo. But there, as he had feared, he found neither horses nor carriages. Several Tartar detachments had passed along the highway of the steppe. Everything had been stolen or requisitioned both in the villages and in the posting-houses. It was with difficulty that Michael Strogoff was even able to obtain some refreshment for his horse and himself.

It was of great importance, therefore, to spare his horse, for he could not tell when or how he might be able to replace it. Desiring, however, to put the greatest possible distance between himself and the horsemen who had no doubt been dispatched in pursuit, he resolved to push on. After one hour’s rest he resumed his course across the steppe.

Hitherto the weather had been propitious for his journey. The temperature was endurable. The nights at this time of the year are very short, and as they are lighted by the moon, the route over the steppe is practicable. Michael Strogoff, moreover, was a man certain of his road and devoid of doubt or hesitation, and in spite of the melancholy thoughts which possessed him he had preserved his clearness of mind, and made for his destined point as though it were visible upon the horizon. When he did halt for a moment at some turn in the road it was to breathe his horse. Now he would dismount to ease his steed for a moment, and again he would place his ear to the ground to listen for the sound of galloping horses upon the steppe. Nothing arousing his suspicions, he resumed his way.

On the 30th of July, at nine o’clock in the morning, Michael Strogoff passed through the station of Touroumoff and entered the swampy district of the Baraba.

There, for a distance of three hundred versts, the natural obstacles would be extremely great. He knew this, but he also knew that he would certainly surmount them.

These vast marshes of the Baraba, form the reservoir to all the rain-water which finds no outlet either towards the Obi or towards the Irtych. The soil of this vast depression is entirely argillaceous, and therefore impermeable, so that the waters remain there and make of it a region very difficult to cross during the hot season. There, however, lies the way to Irkutsk, and it is in the midst of ponds, pools, lakes, and swamps, from which the sun draws poisonous exhalations, that the road winds, and entails upon the traveler the greatest fatigue and danger.

Michael Strogoff spurred his horse into the midst of a grassy prairie, differing greatly from the close-cropped sod of the steppe, where feed the immense Siberian herds. The grass here was five or six feet in height, and had made room for swamp-plants, to which the dampness of the place, assisted by the heat of summer, had given giant proportions. These were principally canes and rushes, which formed a tangled network, an impenetrable undergrowth, sprinkled everywhere with a thousand flowers remarkable for the brightness of their color.

Michael Strogoff, galloping amongst this undergrowth of cane, was no longer visible from the swamps which bordered the road. The tall grass rose above him, and his track was indicated only by the flight of innumerable aquatic birds, which rose from the side of the road and dispersed into the air in screaming flocks.

The way, however, was clearly traceable. Now it would lie straight between the dense thicket of marsh-plants; again it would follow the winding shores of vast pools, some of which, several versts in length and breadth, deserve the name of lakes. In other localities the stagnant waters through which the road lay had been avoided, not by bridges, but by tottering platforms ballasted with thick layers of clay, whose joists shook like a too weak plank thrown across an abyss. Some of these platforms extended over three hundred feet, and travelers by tarantass, when crossing them have experienced a nausea like sea-sickness.

Michael Strogoff, whether the soil beneath his feet was solid or whether it sank under him, galloped on without halt, leaping the space between the rotten joists; but however fast they traveled the horse and the horseman were unable to escape from the sting of the two-winged insects which infest this marshy country.

Travelers who are obliged to cross the Baraba during the summer take care to provide themselves with masks of horse-hair, to which is attached a coat of mail of very fine wire, which covers their shoulders. Notwithstanding these precautions, there are few who come out of these marshes without having their faces, necks, and hands covered with red spots. The atmosphere there seems to bristle with fine needles, and one would almost say that a knight’s armor would not protect him against the darts of these dipterals. It is a dreary region, which man dearly disputes with tipulae, gnats, mosquitos, horse-flies, and millions of microscopic insects which are not visible to the naked eye; but, although they are not seen, they make themselves felt by their intolerable stinging, to which the most callous Siberian hunters have never been able to inure themselves.

Michael Strogoff’s horse, stung by these venomous insects, sprang forward as if the rowels of a thousand spurs had pierced his flanks. Mad with rage, he tore along over verst after verst with the speed of an express train, lashing his sides with his tail, seeking by the rapidity of his pace an alleviation of his torture.

It required as good a horseman as Michael Strogoff not to be thrown by the plungings of his horse, and the sudden stops and bounds which he made to escape from the stings of his persecutors. Having become insensible, so to speak, to physical suffering, possessed only with the one desire to arrive at his destination at whatever cost, he saw during this mad race only one thing — that the road flew rapidly behind him.

Who would have thought that this district of the Baraba, so unhealthy during the summer, could have afforded an asylum for human beings? Yet it did so. Several Siberian hamlets appeared from time to time among the giant canes. Men, women, children, and old men, clad in the skins of beasts, their faces covered with hardened blisters of skin, pastured their poor herds of sheep. In order to preserve the animals from the attack of the insects, they drove them to the leeward of fires of green wood, which were kept burning night and day, and the pungent smoke of which floated over the vast swamp.

When Michael Strogoff perceived that his horse, tired out, was on the point of succumbing, he halted at one of these wretched hamlets, and there, forgetting his own fatigue, he himself rubbed the wounds of the poor animal with hot grease according to the Siberian custom; then he gave him a good feed; and it was only after he had well groomed and provided for him that he thought of himself, and recruited his strength by a hasty meal of bread and meat and a glass of kwass. One hour afterwards, or at the most two, he resumed with all speed the interminable road to Irkutsk.

On the 30th of July, at four o’clock in the afternoon, Michael Strogoff, insensible of every fatigue, arrived at Elamsk. There it became necessary to give a night’s rest to his horse. The brave animal could no longer have continued the journey. At Elamsk, as indeed elsewhere, there existed no means of transport, — for the same reasons as at the previous villages, neither carriages nor horses were to be had.

Michael Strogoff resigned himself therefore to pass the night at Elamsk, to give his horse twelve hours’ rest. He recalled the instructions which had been given to him at Moscow — to cross Siberia incognito, to arrive at Irkutsk, but not to sacrifice success to the rapidity of the journey; and consequently it was necessary that he should husband the sole means of transport which remained to him.

On the morrow, Michael Strogoff left Elamsk at the moment when the first Tartar scouts were signaled ten versts behind upon the road to the Baraba, and he plunged again into the swampy region. The road was level, which made it easy, but very tortuous, and therefore long. It was impossible, moreover, to leave it, and to strike a straight line across that impassable network of pools and bogs.

On the next day, the 1st of August, eighty miles farther, Michael Strogoff arrived at midday at the town of Spaskoe, and at two o’clock he halted at Pokrowskoe. His horse, jaded since his departure from Elamsk, could not have taken a single step more.

There Michael Strogoff was again compelled to lose, for necessary rest, the end of that day and the entire night; but starting again on the following morning, and still traversing the semi-inundated soil, on the 2nd of August, at four o’clock in the afternoon, after a stage of fifty miles he reached Kamsk.

The country had changed. This little village of Kamsk lies, like an island, habitable and healthy, in the midst of the uninhabitable district. It is situated in the very center of the Baraba. The emigration caused by the Tartar invasion had not yet depopulated this little town of Kamsk. Its inhabitants probably fancied themselves safe in the center of the Baraba, whence at least they thought they would have time to flee if they were directly menaced.

Michael Strogoff, although exceedingly anxious for news, could ascertain nothing at this place. It would have been rather to him that the Governor would have addressed himself had he known who the pretended merchant of Irkutsk really was. Kamsk, in fact, by its very situation seemed to be outside the Siberian world and the grave events which troubled it.

Besides, Michael Strogoff showed himself little, if at all. To be unperceived was not now enough for him: he would have wished to be invisible. The experience of the past made him more and more circumspect in the present and the future. Therefore he secluded himself, and not caring to traverse the streets of the village, he would not even leave the inn at which he had halted.

As for his horse, he did not even think of exchanging him for another animal. He had become accustomed to this brave creature. He knew to what extent he could rely upon him. In buying him at Omsk he had been lucky, and in taking him to the postmaster the generous mujik had rendered him a great service. Besides, if Michael Strogoff had already become attached to his horse, the horse himself seemed to become inured, by degrees, to the fatigue of such a journey, and provided that he got several hours of repose daily, his rider might hope that he would carry him beyond the invaded provinces.

So, during the evening and night of the 2nd of August, Michael Strogoff remained confined to his inn, at the entrance of the town; which was little frequented and out of the way of the importunate and curious.

Exhausted with fatigue, he went to bed after having seen that his horse lacked nothing; but his sleep was broken. What he had seen since his departure from Moscow showed him the importance of his mission. The rising was an extremely serious one, and the treachery of Ogareff made it still more formidable. And when his eyes fell upon the letter bearing upon it the authority of the imperial seal — the letter which, no doubt, contained the remedy for so many evils, the safety of all this war-ravaged country — Michael Strogoff felt within himself a fierce desire to dash on across the steppe, to accomplish the distance which separated him from Irkutsk as the crow would fly it, to be an eagle that he might overtop all obstacles, to be a hurricane that he might sweep through the air at a hundred versts an hour, and to be at last face to face with the Grand Duke, and to exclaim: “Your highness, from his Majesty the Czar!”

On the next morning at six o’clock, Michael Strogoff started off again. Thanks to his extreme prudence this part of the journey was signalized by no incident whatever. At Oubinsk he gave his horse a whole night’s rest, for he wished on the next day to accomplish the hundred versts which lie between Oubinsk and Ikoulskoe without halting. He started therefore at dawn; but unfortunately the Baraba proved more detestable than ever.

In fact, between Oubinsk and Kamakore the very heavy rains of some previous weeks were retained by this shallow depression as in a water-tight bowl. There was, for a long distance, no break in the succession of swamps, pools, and lakes. One of these lakes — large enough to warrant its geographical nomenclature — Tchang, Chinese in name, had to be coasted for more than twenty versts, and this with the greatest difficulty. Hence certain delays occurred, which all the impatience of Michael Strogoff could not avoid. He had been well advised in not taking a carriage at Kamsk, for his horse passed places which would have been impracticable for a conveyance on wheels.

In the evening, at nine o’clock, Michael Strogoff arrived at Ikoulskoe, and halted there over night. In this remote village of the Baraba news of the war was utterly wanting. From its situation, this part of the province, lying in the fork formed by the two Tartar columns which had bifurcated, one upon Omsk and the other upon Tomsk, had hitherto escaped the horrors of the invasion.

But the natural obstacles were now about to disappear, for, if he experienced no delay, Michael Strogoff should on the morrow be free of the Baraba and arrive at Kolyvan. There he would be within eighty miles of Tomsk. He would then be guided by circumstances, and very probably he would decide to go around Tomsk, which, if the news were true, was occupied by Feofar-Khan.

But if the small towns of Ikoulskoe and Karguinsk, which he passed on the next day, were comparatively quiet, owing to their position in the Baraba, was it not to be dreaded that, upon the right banks of the Obi, Michael Strogoff would have much more to fear from man? It was probable. However, should it become necessary, he would not hesitate to abandon the beaten path to Irkutsk. To journey then across the steppe he would, no doubt, run the risk of finding himself without supplies. There would be, in fact, no longer a well-marked road. Still, there must be no hesitation.

Finally, towards half past three in the afternoon, Michael Strogoff left the last depressions of the Baraba, and the dry and hard soil of Siberia rang out once more beneath his horse’s hoofs.

He had left Moscow on the 15th of July. Therefore on this day, the 5th of August, including more than seventy hours lost on the banks of the Irtych, twenty days had gone by since his departure.

One thousand miles still separated him from Irkutsk.

CHAPTER XVI A FINAL EFFORT

MICHAEL’S fear of meeting the Tartars in the plains beyond the Baraba was by no means ungrounded. The fields, trodden down by horses’ hoofs, afforded but too clear evidence that their hordes had passed that way; the same, indeed, might be said of these barbarians as of the Turks: “Where the Turk goes, no grass grows.”

Michael saw at once that in traversing this country the greatest caution was necessary. Wreaths of smoke curling upwards on the horizon showed that huts and hamlets were still burning. Had these been fired by the advance guard, or had the Emir’s army already advanced beyond the boundaries of the province? Was Feofar-Khan himself in the government of Yeniseisk? Michael could settle on no line of action until these questions were answered. Was the country so deserted that he could not discover a single Siberian to enlighten him?

Michael rode on for two versts without meeting a human being. He looked carefully for some house which had not been deserted. Every one was tenantless.

One hut, however, which he could just see between the trees, was still smoking. As he approached he perceived, at some yards from the ruins of the building, an old man surrounded by weeping children. A woman still young, evidently his daughter and the mother of the poor children, kneeling on the ground, was gazing on the scene of desolation. She had at her breast a baby but a few months old; shortly she would have not even that nourishment to give it. Ruin and desolation were all around!

Michael approached the old man.

“Will you answer me a few questions?” he asked.

“Speak,” replied the old man.

“Have the Tartars passed this way?”

“Yes, for my house is in flames.”

“Was it an army or a detachment?”

“An army, for, as far as eye can reach, our fields are laid waste.”

“Commanded by the Emir?”

“By the Emir; for the Obi’s waters are red.”

“Has Feofar-Khan entered Tomsk?”

“He has.”

“Do you know if his men have entered Kolyvan?”

“No; for Kolyvan does not yet burn.”

“Thanks, friend. Can I aid you and yours?”

“No.”

“Good-by.”

“Farewell.”

And Michael, having presented five and twenty roubles to the unfortunate woman, who had not even strength to thank him, put spurs to his horse once more.

One thing he knew; he must not pass through Tomsk. To go to Kolyvan, which the Tartars had not yet reached, was possible. Yes, that is what he must do; there he must prepare himself for another long stage. There was nothing for it but, having crossed the Obi, to take the Irkutsk road and avoid Tomsk.

This new route decided on, Michael must not delay an instant. Nor did he, but, putting his horse into a steady gallop, he took the road towards the left bank of the Obi, which was still forty versts distant. Would there be a ferry boat there, or should he, finding that the Tartars had destroyed all the boats, be obliged to swim across?

As to his horse, it was by this time pretty well worn out, and Michael intended to make it perform this stage only, and then to exchange it for a fresh one at Kolyvan. Kolyvan would be like a fresh starting point, for on leaving that town his journey would take a new form. So long as he traversed a devastated country the difficulties must be very great; but if, having avoided Tomsk, he could resume the road to Irkutsk across the province of Yeniseisk, which was not yet laid waste, he would finish his journey in a few days.

Night came on, bringing with it refreshing coolness after the heat of the day. At midnight the steppe was profoundly dark. The sound of the horses’s hoofs alone was heard on the road, except when, every now and then, its master spoke a few encouraging words. In such darkness as this great care was necessary lest he should leave the road, bordered by pools and streams, tributaries of the Obi. Michael therefore advanced as quickly as was consistent with safety. He trusted no less to the excellence of his eyes, which penetrated the gloom, than to the well-proved sagacity of his horse.

Just as Michael dismounted to discover the exact direction of the road, he heard a confused murmuring sound from the west. It was like the noise of horses' hoofs at some distance on the parched ground. Michael listened attentively, putting his ear to the ground.

“It is a detachment of cavalry coming by the road from Omsk,” he said to himself. “They are marching very quickly, for the noise is increasing. Are they Russians or Tartars?”

Michael again listened. “Yes,” said he, “they are at a sharp trot. My horse cannot outstrip them. If they are Russians I will join them; if Tartars I must avoid them. But how? Where can I hide in this steppe?”

He gave a look around, and, through the darkness, discovered a confused mass at a hundred paces before him on the left of the road. “There is a copse!” he exclaimed. “To take refuge there is to run the risk of being caught, if they are in search of me; but I have no choice.”

In a few moments Michael, dragging his horse by the bridle, reached a little larch wood, through which the road lay. Beyond this it was destitute of trees, and wound among bogs and pools, separated by dwarfed bushes, whins, and heather. The ground on either side was quite impracticable, and the detachment must necessarily pass through the wood. They were pursuing the high road to Irkutsk. Plunging in about forty feet, he was stopped by a stream running under the brushwood. But the shadow was so deep that Michael ran no risk of being seen, unless the wood should be carefully searched. He therefore led his horse to the stream and fastened him to a tree, returning to the edge of the road to listen and ascertain with what sort of people he had to do.

Michael had scarcely taken up his position behind a group of larches when a confused light appeared, above which glared brighter lights waving about in the shadow.

“Torches!” said he to himself. And he drew quickly back, gliding like a savage into the thickest underwood.

As they approached the wood the horses’ pace was slackened. The horsemen were probably lighting up the road with the intention of examining every turn.

Michael feared this, and instinctively drew near to the bank of the stream, ready to plunge in if necessary.

Arrived at the top of the wood, the detachment halted. The horsemen dismounted. There were about fifty. A dozen of them carried torches, lighting up the road.

By watching their preparations Michael found to his joy that the detachment were not thinking of visiting the copse, but only bivouacking near, to rest their horses and allow the men to take some refreshment. The horses were soon unsaddled, and began to graze on the thick grass which carpeted the ground. The men meantime stretched themselves by the side of the road, and partook of the provisions they produced from their knapsacks.

Michael’s self-possession had never deserted him, and creeping amongst the high grass he endeavored not only to examine the new-comers, but to hear what they said. It was a detachment from Omsk, composed of Usbeck horsemen, a race of the Mongolian type. These men, well built, above the medium height, rough, and wild-featured, wore on their heads the “talpak,” or black sheep-skin cap, and on their feet yellow high-heeled boots with turned-up toes, like the shoes of the Middle Ages. Their tunics were close-fitting, and confined at the waist by a leathern belt braided with red. They were armed defensively with a shield, and offensively with a curved sword, and a flintlock musket slung at the saddle-bow. From their shoulders hung gay-colored cloaks.

The horses, which were feeding at liberty at the edge of the wood, were, like their masters, of the Usbeck race. These animals are rather smaller than the Turcomanian horses, but are possessed of remarkable strength, and know no other pace than the gallop.

This detachment was commanded by a “pendja-baschi”; that is to say, a commander of fifty men, having under him a “deh-baschi,” or simple commander of ten men. These two officers wore helmets and half coats-of-mail; little trumpets fastened to their saddle-bows were the distinctive signs of their rank.

The pendja-baschi had been obliged to let his men rest, fatigued with a long stage. He and the second officer, smoking “beng,” the leaf which forms the base of the “has-chisch,” strolled up and down the wood, so that Michael Strogoff without being seen, could catch and understand their conversation, which was spoken in the Tartar language.

Michael’s attention was singularly excited by their very first words. It was of him they were speaking.

“This courier cannot be much in advance of us,” said the pendja-baschi; “and, on the other hand, it is absolutely impossible that he can have followed any other route than that of the Baraba.”

“Who knows if he has left Omsk?” replied the deh-baschi. “Perhaps he is still hidden in the town.”

“That is to be wished, certainly. Colonel Ogareff would have no fear then that the dispatches he bears should ever reach their destination.”

“They say that he is a native, a Siberian,” resumed the deh-baschi. “If so, he must be well acquainted with the country, and it is possible that he has left the Irkutsk road, depending on rejoining it later.”

“But then we should be in advance of him,” answered the pendja-baschi; “for we left Omsk within an hour after his departure, and have since followed the shortest road with all the speed of our horses. He has either remained in Omsk, or we shall arrive at Tomsk before him, so as to cut him off; in either case he will not reach Irkutsk.”

“A rugged woman, that old Siberian, who is evidently his mother,” said the deh-baschi.

At this remark Michael’s heart beat violently.

“Yes,” answered the pendja-baschi. “She stuck to it well that the pretended merchant was not her son, but it was too late. Colonel Ogareff was not to be taken in; and, as he said, he will know how to make the old witch speak when the time comes.”

These words were so many dagger-thrusts for Michael. He was known to be a courier of the Czar! A detachment of horsemen on his track could not fail to cut him off. And, worst of all, his mother was in the hands of the Tartars, and the cruel Ogareff had undertaken to make her speak when he wished!

Michael well knew that the brave Siberian would sacrifice her life for him. He had fancied that he could not hate Ivan Ogareff more, yet a fresh tide of hate now rose in his heart. The wretch who had betrayed his country now threatened to torture his mother.

The conversation between the two officers continued, and Michael understood that an engagement was imminent in the neighborhood of Kolyvan, between the Muscovite troops coming from the north and the Tartars. A small Russian force of two thousand men, reported to have reached the lower course of the Obi, were advancing by forced marches towards Tomsk. If such was the case, this force, which would soon find itself engaged with the main body of Feofar-Khan's army, would be inevitably overwhelmed, and the Irkutsk road would be in the entire possession of the invaders.

As to himself, Michael learnt, by some words from the pendja-baschi, that a price was set on his head, and that orders had been given to take him, dead or alive.

It was necessary, therefore, to get the start of the Usbeck horsemen on the Irkutsk road, and put the Obi between himself and them. But to do that, he must escape before the camp was broken up.

His determination taken, Michael prepared to execute it.

Indeed, the halt would not be prolonged, and the pendja-baschi did not intend to give his men more than an hour's rest, although their horses could not have been changed for fresh ones since Omsk, and must be as much fatigued as that of Michael Strogoff.

There was not a moment to lose. It was within an hour of morning. It was needful to profit by the darkness to leave the little wood and dash along the road; but although night favored it the success of such a flight appeared to be almost impossible.

Not wishing to do anything at random, Michael took time for reflection, carefully weighing the chances so as to take the best. From the situation of the place the result was this — that he could not escape through the back of the wood, the stream which bordered it being not only deep, but very wide and muddy. Beneath this thick water was a slimy bog, on which the foot could not rest. There was only one way open, the high-road. To endeavor to reach it by creeping round the edge of the wood, without attracting attention, and then to gallop at headlong speed, required all the remaining strength and energy of his noble steed. Too probably it would fall dead on reaching the banks of the Obi, when, either by boat or by swimming, he must cross this important river. This was what Michael had before him.

His energy and courage increased in sight of danger.

His life, his mission, his country, perhaps the safety of his mother, were at stake. He could not hesitate.

There was not a moment to be lost. Already there was a slight movement among the men of the detachment. A few horsemen were strolling up and down the road in front of the wood. The rest were still lying at the foot of the trees, but their horses were gradually penetrating towards the center of the wood.

Michael had at first thought of seizing one of these horses, but he recollected that, of course, they would be as fatigued as his own. It was better to trust to his own brave steed, which had already rendered him such important service. The good animal, hidden behind a thicket, had escaped the sight of the Usbecks. They, besides, had not penetrated so far into the wood.

Michael crawled up to his horse through the grass, and found him lying down. He patted and spoke gently to him, and managed to raise him without noise. Fortunately, the torches were entirely consumed, and now went out, the darkness being still profound under shelter of the larches. After replacing the bit, Michael looked to his girths and stirrups, and began to lead his horse quietly away. The intelligent animal followed his master without even making the least neigh.

A few Usbeck horses raised their heads, and began to wander towards the edge of the wood. Michael held his revolver in his hand, ready to blow out the brains of the first Tartar who should approach him. But happily the alarm was not given, and he was able to gain the angle made by the wood where it joined the road.

To avoid being seen, Michael's intention was not to mount until after turning a corner some two hundred feet from the wood. Unfortunately, just at the moment that he was issuing from the wood, an Usbeck's horse, scenting him, neighed and began to trot along the road. His master ran to catch him, and seeing a shadowy form moving in the dim light, "Look out!" he shouted.

At the cry, all the men of the bivouac jumped up, and ran to seize their horses. Michael leaped on his steed, and galloped away. The two officers of the detachment urged on their men to follow.

Michael heard a report, and felt a ball pass through his tunic. Without turning his head, without replying, he spurred on, and, clearing the brushwood with a tremendous bound, he galloped at full speed toward the Obi.

The Usbecks’ horses being unsaddled gave him a small start, but in less than two minutes he heard the tramp of several horses gradually gaining on him.

Day was now beginning to break, and objects at some distance were becoming visible. Michael turned his head, and perceived a horseman rapidly approaching him. It was the deh-baschi. Being better mounted, this officer had distanced his detachment.

Without drawing rein, Michael extended his revolver, and took a moment’s aim. The Usbeck officer, hit in the breast, rolled on the ground.

But the other horsemen followed him closely, and without waiting to assist the deh-baschi, exciting each other by their shouts, digging their spurs into their horses’ sides, they gradually diminished the distance between themselves and Michael.

For half an hour only was the latter able to keep out of range of the Tartars, but he well knew that his horse was becoming weaker, and dreaded every instant that he would stumble never to rise again.

It was now light, although the sun had not yet risen above the horizon. Two versts distant could be seen a pale line bordered by a few trees.

This was the Obi, which flows from the southwest to the northeast, the surface almost level with the ground, its bed being but the steppe itself.

Several times shots were fired at Michael, but without hitting him, and several times too he discharged his revolver on those of the soldiers who pressed him too closely. Each time an Usbeck rolled on the ground, midst cries of rage from his companions. But this pursuit could only terminate to Michael's disadvantage. His horse was almost exhausted. He managed to reach the bank of the river. The Usbeck detachment was now not more than fifty paces behind him.

The Obi was deserted — not a boat of any description which could take him over the water!

"Courage, my brave horse!" cried Michael. "Come! A last effort!" And he plunged into the river, which here was half a verst in width.

It would have been difficult to stand against the current — indeed, Michael's horse could get no footing. He must therefore swim across the river, although it was rapid as a torrent. Even to attempt it showed Michael's marvelous courage. The soldiers reached the bank, but hesitated to plunge in.

The pendja-baschi seized his musket and took aim at Michael, whom he could see in the middle of the stream. The shot was fired, and Michael's horse, struck in the side, was borne away by the current.

His master, speedily disentangling himself from his stirrups, struck out boldly for the shore. In the midst of a hailstorm of balls he managed to reach the opposite side, and disappeared in the rushes.

CHAPTER XVII THE RIVALS

MICHAEL was in comparative safety, though his situation was still terrible. Now that the faithful animal who had so bravely borne him had met his death in the waters of the river, how was he to continue his journey?

He was on foot, without provisions, in a country devastated by the invasion, overrun by the Emir’s scouts, and still at a considerable distance from the place he was striving to reach. “By Heaven, I will get there!” he exclaimed, in reply to all the reasons for faltering. “God will protect our sacred Russia.”

Michael was out of reach of the Usbeck horsemen. They had not dared to pursue him through the river.

Once more on solid ground Michael stopped to consider what he should do next. He wished to avoid Tomsk, now occupied by the Tartar troops. Nevertheless, he must reach some town, or at least a post-house, where he could procure a horse. A horse once found, he would throw himself out of the beaten track, and not again take to the Irkutsk road until in the neighborhood of Krasnoiarsk. From that place, if he were quick, he hoped to find the way still open, and he intended to go through the Lake Baikal provinces in a southeasterly direction.

Michael began by going eastward. By following the course of the Obi two versts further, he reached a picturesque little town lying on a small hill. A few churches, with Byzantine cupolas colored green and gold, stood up against the gray sky. This is Kolyvan, where the officers and people employed at Kamsk and other towns take refuge during the summer from the unhealthy climate of the Baraba. According to the latest news obtained by the Czar’s courier, Kolyvan could not be yet in the hands of the invaders.

The Tartar troops, divided into two columns, had marched to the left on Omsk, to the right on Tomsk, neglecting the intermediate country.

Michael Strogoff's plan was simply this — to reach Kolyvan before the arrival of the Usbeck horsemen, who would ascend the other bank of the Obi to the ferry. There he would procure clothes and a horse, and resume the road to Irkutsk across the southern steppe.

It was now three o'clock in the morning. The neighborhood of Kolyvan was very still, and appeared to have been totally abandoned. The country population had evidently fled to the northwards, to the province of Yeniseisk, dreading the invasion, which they could not resist.

Michael was walking at a rapid pace towards Kolyvan when distant firing struck his ear. He stopped, and clearly distinguished the dull roar of artillery, and above it a crisp rattle which could not be mistaken.

"It is cannon and musketry!" said he. "The little Russian body is engaged with the Tartar army! Pray Heaven that I may arrive at Kolyvan before them!"

The firing became gradually louder, and soon to the left of Kolyvan a mist collected — not smoke, but those great white clouds produced by discharges of artillery.

The Usbeck horsemen stopped on the left of the Obi, to await the result of the battle. From them Michael had nothing to fear as he hastened towards the town.

In the meanwhile the firing increased, and became sensibly nearer. It was no longer a confused roar, but distinct reports. At the same time the smoke partially cleared, and it became evident that the combatants were rapidly moving southwards. It appeared that Kolyvan was to be attacked on the north side. But were the Russians defending it or the Tartars? It being impossible to decide this, Michael became greatly perplexed.

He was not more than half a verst from Kolyvan when he observed flames shooting up among the houses of the town, and the steeple of a church fell in the midst of clouds of smoke and fire. Was the struggle, then, in Kolyvan? Michael was compelled to think so. It was evident that Russians and Tartars were fighting in the streets of the town. Was this a time to seek refuge there? Would he not run a risk of being taken prisoner? Should he succeed in escaping from Kolyvan, as he had escaped from Omsk? He hesitated and stopped a moment. Would it not be better to try, even on foot, to reach some small town, and there procure a horse at any price? This was the only thing to be done; and Michael, leaving the Obi, went forward to the right of Kolyvan.

The firing had now increased in violence. Flames soon sprang up on the left of the town. Fire was devouring one entire quarter of Kolyvan.

Michael was running across the steppe endeavoring to gain the covert of some trees when a detachment of Tartar cavalry appeared on the right. He dared not continue in that direction. The horsemen advanced rapidly, and it would have been difficult to escape them.

Suddenly, in a thick clump of trees, he saw an isolated house, which it would be possible to reach before he was perceived. Michael had no choice but to run there, hide himself and ask or take something to recruit his strength, for he was exhausted with hunger and fatigue.

He accordingly ran on towards this house, still about half a verst distant. As he approached, he could see that it was a telegraph office. Two wires left it in westerly and easterly directions, and a third went towards Kolyvan.

It was to be supposed that under the circumstances this station was abandoned; but even if it was, Michael could take refuge there, and wait till nightfall, if necessary, to again set out across the steppe covered with Tartar scouts.

He ran up to the door and pushed it open.

A single person was in the room whence the telegraphic messages were dispatched. This was a clerk, calm, phlegmatic, indifferent to all that was passing outside. Faithful to his post, he waited behind his little wicket until the public claimed his services.

Michael ran up to him, and in a voice broken by fatigue, “What do you know?” he asked.

“Nothing,” answered the clerk, smiling.

“Are the Russians and Tartars engaged?”

“They say so.”

“But who are the victors?”

“I don’t know.”

Such calmness, such indifference, in the midst of these terrible events, was scarcely credible.

“And is not the wire cut?” said Michael.

“It is cut between Kolyvan and Krasnoiarsk, but it is still working between Kolyvan and the Russian frontier.”

“For the government?”

“For the government, when it thinks proper. For the public, when they pay. Ten copecks a word, whenever you like, sir!”

Michael was about to reply to this strange clerk that he had no message to send, that he only implored a little bread and water, when the door of the house was again thrown open.

Thinking that it was invaded by Tartars, Michael made ready to leap out of the window, when two men only entered the room who had nothing of the Tartar soldier about them. One of them held a dispatch, written in pencil, in his hand, and, passing the other, he hurried up to the wicket of the imperturbable clerk.

In these two men Michael recognized with astonishment, which everyone will understand, two personages of whom he was not thinking at all, and whom he had never expected to see again. They were the two reporters, Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, no longer traveling companions, but rivals, enemies, now that they were working on the field of battle.

They had left Ichim only a few hours after the departure of Michael Strogoff, and they had arrived at Kolyvan before him, by following the same road, in consequence of his losing three days on the banks of the Irtych. And now, after being both present at the engagement between the Russians and Tartars before the town, they had left just as the struggle broke out in the streets, and ran to the telegraph office, so as to send off their rival dispatches to Europe, and forestall each other in their report of events.

Michael stood aside in the shadow, and without being seen himself he could see and hear all that was going on. He would now hear interesting news, and would find out whether or not he could enter Kolyvan.

Blount, having distanced his companion, took possession of the wicket, whilst Alcide Jolivet, contrary to his usual habit, stamped with impatience.

“Ten copecks a word,” said the clerk.

Blount deposited a pile of roubles on the shelf, whilst his rival looked on with a sort of stupefaction.

“Good,” said the clerk. And with the greatest coolness in the world he began to telegraph the following dispatch: “Daily Telegraph, London.

“From Kolyvan, Government of Omsk, Siberia, 6th August.

“Engagement between Russian and Tartar troops.”

The reading was in a distinct voice, so that Michael heard all that the English correspondent was sending to his paper.

“Russians repulsed with great loss. Tartars entered Kolyvan to-day.” These words ended the dispatch.

“My turn now,” cried Alcide Jolivet, anxious to send off his dispatch, addressed to his cousin.

But that was not Blount’s idea, who did not intend to give up the wicket, but have it in his power to send off the news just as the events occurred. He would therefore not make way for his companion.

“But you have finished!” exclaimed Jolivet.

“I have not finished,” returned Harry Blount quietly.

And he proceeded to write some sentences, which he handed in to the clerk, who read out in his calm voice: “John Gilpin was a citizen of credit and renown; a train-band captain eke was he of famous London town.”

Harry Blount was telegraphing some verses learned in his childhood, in order to employ the time, and not give up his place to his rival. It would perhaps cost his paper some thousands of roubles, but it would be the first informed. France could wait.

Jolivet’s fury may be imagined, though under any other circumstances he would have thought it fair warfare. He even endeavored to force the clerk to take his dispatch in preference to that of his rival.

“It is that gentleman’s right,” answered the clerk coolly, pointing to Blount, and smiling in the most amiable manner. And he continued faithfully to transmit to the Daily Telegraph the well-known verses of Cowper.

Whilst he was working Blount walked to the window and, his field glass to his eyes, watched all that was going on in the neighborhood of Kolyvan, so as to complete his information. In a few minutes he resumed his place at the wicket, and added to his telegram: “Two churches are in flames. The fire appears to gain on the right. ‘John Gilpin’s spouse said to her dear, Though wedded we have been these twice ten tedious years, yet we no holiday have seen.’”

Alcide Jolivet would have liked to strangle the honorable correspondent of the Daily Telegraph.

He again interrupted the clerk, who, quite unmoved, merely replied: “It is his right, sir, it is his right — at ten copecks a word.”

And he telegraphed the following news, just brought him by Blount: “Russian fugitives are escaping from the town. ‘Away went Gilpin — who but he? His fame soon spread around: He carries weight! he rides a race! ‘Tis for a thousand pound!’” And Blount turned round with a quizzical look at his rival.

Alcide Jolivet fumed.

In the meanwhile Harry Blount had returned to the window, but this time his attention was diverted by the interest of the scene before him. Therefore, when the clerk had finished telegraphing the last lines dictated by Blount, Alcide Jolivet noiselessly took his place at the wicket, and, just as his rival had done, after quietly depositing a respectable pile of roubles on the shelf, he delivered his dispatch, which the clerk read aloud: “Madeleine Jolivet, 10, Faubourg Montmartre, Paris.

“From Kolyvan, Government of Omsk, Siberia, 6th August.

“Fugitives are escaping from the town. Russians defeated. Fiercely pursued by the Tartar cavalry.”

And as Harry Blount returned he heard Jolivet completing his telegram by singing in a mocking tone:

“II est un petit homme, Tout habille de gris, Dans Paris!”

Imitating his rival, Alcide Jolivet had used a merry refrain of Beranger.

“Hallo!” said Harry Blount.

“Just so,” answered Jolivet.

In the meantime the situation at Kolyvan was alarming in the extreme. The battle was raging nearer, and the firing was incessant.

At that moment the telegraph office shook to its foundations. A shell had made a hole in the wall, and a cloud of dust filled the office.

Alcide was just finishing writing his lines; but to stop, dart on the shell, seize it in both hands, throw it out of the window, and return to the wicket, was only the affair of a moment.

Five seconds later the shell burst outside. Continuing with the greatest possible coolness, Alcide wrote: “A six-inch shell has just blown up the wall of the telegraph office. Expecting a few more of the same size.”

Michael Strogoff had no doubt that the Russians were driven out of Kolyvan. His last resource was to set out across the southern steppe.

Just then renewed firing broke out close to the telegraph house, and a perfect shower of bullets smashed all the glass in the windows. Harry Blount fell to the ground wounded in the shoulder.

Jolivet even at such a moment, was about to add this postscript to his dispatch: “Harry Blount, correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, has fallen at my side struck by — ” when the imperturbable clerk said calmly: “Sir, the wire has broken.” And, leaving his wicket, he quietly took his hat, brushed it round with his sleeve, and, still smiling, disappeared through a little door which Michael had not before perceived.

The house was surrounded by Tartar soldiers, and neither Michael nor the reporters could effect their retreat.

Alcide Jolivet, his useless dispatch in his hand, had run to Blount, stretched on the ground, and had bravely lifted him on his shoulders, with the intention of flying with him. He was too late!

Both were prisoners; and, at the same time, Michael, taken unawares as he was about to leap from the window, fell into the hands of the Tartars!

END OF BOOK I

BOOK II

CHAPTER I A TARTAR CAMP

AT a day’s march from Kolyvan, several versts beyond the town of Diachinks, stretches a wide plain, planted here and there with great trees, principally pines and cedars. This part of the steppe is usually occupied during the warm season by Siberian shepherds, and their numerous flocks. But now it might have been searched in vain for one of its nomad inhabitants. Not that the plain was deserted. It presented a most animated appearance.

There stood the Tartar tents; there Feofar-Khan, the terrible Emir of Bokhara, was encamped; and there on the following day, the 7th of August, were brought the prisoners taken at Kolyvan after the annihilation of the Russian force, which had vainly attempted to oppose the progress of the invaders. Of the two thousand men who had engaged with the two columns of the enemy, the bases of which rested on Tomsk and Omsk, only a few hundred remained. Thus events were going badly, and the imperial government appeared to have lost its power beyond the frontiers of the Ural — for a time at least, for the Russians could not fail eventually to defeat the savage hordes of the invaders. But in the meantime the invasion had reached the center of Siberia, and it was spreading through the revolted country both to the eastern, and the western provinces. If the troops of the Amoor and the province of Takutsk did not arrive in time to occupy it, Irkutsk, the capital of Asiatic Russia, being insufficiently garrisoned, would fall into the hands of the Tartars, and the Grand Duke, brother of the Emperor, would be sacrificed to the vengeance of Ivan Ogareff.

What had become of Michael Strogoff? Had he broken down under the weight of so many trials? Did he consider himself conquered by the series of disasters which, since the adventure of Ichim, had increased in magnitude? Did he think his cause lost? that his mission had failed? that his orders could no longer be obeyed?

Michael was one of those men who never give in while life exists. He was yet alive; he still had the imperial letter safe; his disguise had been undiscovered. He was included amongst the numerous prisoners whom the Tartars were dragging with them like cattle; but by approaching Tomsk he was at the same time drawing nearer to Irkutsk. Besides, he was still in front of Ivan Ogareff.

“I will get there!” he repeated to himself.

Since the affair of Kolyvan all the powers of his mind were concentrated on one object — to become free! How should he escape from the Emir’s soldiers?

Feofar’s camp presented a magnificent spectacle.

Numberless tents, of skin, felt, or silk, glistened in the rays of the sun. The lofty plumes which surmounted their conical tops waved amidst banners, flags, and pennons of every color. The richest of these tents belonged to the Seides and Khodjas, who are the principal personages of the khanat. A special pavilion, ornamented with a horse’s tail issuing from a sheaf of red and white sticks artistically interlaced, indicated the high rank of these Tartar chiefs. Then in the distance rose several thousand of the Turcoman tents, called “karaoy,” which had been carried on the backs of camels.

The camp contained at least a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers, as many foot as horse soldiers, collected under the name of Alamanes. Amongst them, and as the principal types of Turkestan, would have been directly remarked the Tadjiks, from their regular features, white skin, tall forms, and black eyes and hair; they formed the bulk of the Tartar army, and of them the khanats of Khokhand and Koundouge had furnished a contingent nearly equal to that of Bokhara. With the Tadjiks were mingled specimens of different races who either reside in Turkestan or whose native countries border on it. There were Usbecks, red-bearded, small in stature, similar to those who had pursued Michael. Here were Kirghiz, with flat faces like the Kalmucks, dressed in coats of mail: some carried the lance, bows, and arrows of Asiatic manufacture; some the saber, a matchlock gun, and the “tschakane,” a little short-handled ax, the wounds from which invariably prove fatal. There were Mongols — of middle height, with black hair plaited into pigtails, which hung down their back; round faces, swarthy complexions, lively deep-set eyes, scanty beards — dressed in blue nankeen trimmed with black plush, sword-belts of leather with silver buckles, coats gayly braided, and silk caps edged with fur and three ribbons fluttering behind. Brown-skinned Afghans, too, might have been seen. Arabs, having the primitive type of the beautiful Semitic races; and Turcomans, with eyes which looked as if they had lost the pupil, — all enrolled under the Emir’s flag, the flag of incendiaries and devastators.

Among these free soldiers were a certain number of slave soldiers, principally Persians, commanded by officers of the same nation, and they were certainly not the least esteemed of Feofar-Khan’s army.

If to this list are added the Jews, who acted as servants, their robes confined with a cord, and wearing on their heads instead of the turban, which is forbidden them, little caps of dark cloth; if with these groups are mingled some hundreds of “kalenders,” a sort of religious mendicants, clothed in rags, covered by a leopard skin, some idea may be formed of the enormous agglomerations of different tribes included under the general denomination of the Tartar army.

Nothing could be more romantic than this picture, in delineating which the most skillful artist would have exhausted all the colors of his palette.

Feofar’s tent overlooked the others. Draped in large folds of a brilliant silk looped with golden cords and tassels, surmounted by tall plumes which waved in the wind like fans, it occupied the center of a wide clearing, sheltered by a grove of magnificent birch and pine trees. Before this tent, on a japanned table inlaid with precious stones, was placed the sacred book of the Koran, its pages being of thin gold-leaf delicately engraved. Above floated the Tartar flag, quartered with the Emir’s arms.

In a semicircle round the clearing stood the tents of the great functionaries of Bokhara. There resided the chief of the stables, who has the right to follow the Emir on horseback even into the court of his palace; the grand falconer; the “housch-begui,” bearer of the royal seal; the “toptschi-baschi,” grand master of the artillery; the “khodja,” chief of the council, who receives the prince’s kiss, and may present himself before him with his girdle untied; the “scheikh-oul-islam,” chief of the Ulemas, representing the priests; the “cazi-askev,” who, in the Emir’s absence settles all disputes raised among the soldiers; and lastly, the chief of the astrologers, whose great business is to consult the stars every time the Khan thinks of changing his quarters.

When the prisoners were brought into the camp, the Emir was in his tent. He did not show himself. This was fortunate, no doubt. A sign, a word from him might have been the signal for some bloody execution. But he intrenched himself in that isolation which constitutes in part the majesty of Eastern kings. He who does not show himself is admired, and, above all, feared.

As to the prisoners, they were to be penned up in some enclosure, where, ill-treated, poorly fed, and exposed to all the inclemencies of the weather, they would await Feofar’s pleasure.

The most docile and patient of them all was undoubtedly Michael Strogoff. He allowed himself to be led, for they were leading him where he wished to go, and under conditions of safety which free he could not have found on the road from Kolyvan to Tomsk. To escape before reaching that town was to risk again falling into the hands of the scouts, who were scouring the steppe. The most eastern line occupied by the Tartar columns was not situated beyond the eighty-fifth meridian, which passes through Tomsk. This meridian once passed, Michael considered that he should be beyond the hostile zones, that he could traverse Genisci without danger, and gain Krasnoiarsk before Feofar-Khan had invaded the province.

“Once at Tomsk,” he repeated to himself, to repress some feelings of impatience which he could not entirely master, “in a few minutes I should be beyond the outposts; and twelve hours gained on Feofar, twelve hours on Ogareff, that surely would be enough to give me a start of them to Irkutsk.”

The thing that Michael dreaded more than everything else was the presence of Ivan Ogareff in the Tartar camp. Besides the danger of being recognized, he felt, by a sort of instinct, that this was the traitor whom it was especially necessary to precede. He understood, too, that the union of Ogareff’s troops with those of Feofar would complete the invading army, and that the junction once effected, the army would march en masse on the capital of Eastern Siberia. All his apprehensions came from this quarter, and he dreaded every instant to hear some flourish of trumpets, announcing the arrival of the lieutenant of the Emir.

To this was added the thought of his mother, of Nadia, — the one a prisoner at Omsk; the other dragged on board the Irtych boats, and no doubt a captive, as Marfa Strogoff was. He could do nothing for them. Should he ever see them again? At this question, to which he dared not reply, his heart sank very low.

At the same time with Michael Strogoff and so many other prisoners Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet had also been taken to the Tartar camp. Their former traveling companion, captured like them at the telegraph office, knew that they were penned up with him in the enclosure, guarded by numerous sentinels, but he did not wish to accost them. It mattered little to him, at this time especially, what they might think of him since the affair at Ichim. Besides, he desired to be alone, that he might act alone, if necessary. He therefore held himself aloof from his former acquaintances.

From the moment that Harry Blount had fallen by his side, Jolivet had not ceased his attentions to him. During the journey from Kolyvan to the camp — that is to say, for several hours — Blount, by leaning on his companion’s arm, had been enabled to follow the rest of the prisoners. He tried to make known that he was a British subject; but it had no effect on the barbarians, who only replied by prods with a lance or sword. The correspondent of the Daily Telegraph was, therefore, obliged to submit to the common lot, resolving to protest later, and obtain satisfaction for such treatment. But the journey was not the less disagreeable to him, for his wound caused him much pain, and without Alcide Jolivet’s assistance he might never have reached the camp.

Jolivet, whose practical philosophy never abandoned him, had physically and morally strengthened his companion by every means in his power. His first care, when they found themselves definitely established in the enclosure, was to examine Blount’s wound. Having managed carefully to draw off his coat, he found that the shoulder had been only grazed by the shot.

“This is nothing,” he said. “A mere scratch! After two or three dressings you will be all to rights.”

“But these dressings?” asked Blount.

“I will make them for you myself.”

“Then you are something of a doctor?”

“All Frenchmen are something of doctors.”

And on this affirmation Alcide, tearing his handkerchief, made lint of one piece, bandages of the other, took some water from a well dug in the middle of the enclosure, bathed the wound, and skillfully placed the wet rag on Harry Blount’s shoulder.

“I treat you with water,” he said. “This liquid is the most efficacious sedative known for the treatment of wounds, and is the most employed now. Doctors have taken six thousand years to discover that! Yes, six thousand years in round numbers!”

“I thank you, M. Jolivet,” answered Harry, stretching himself on a bed of dry leaves, which his companion had arranged for him in the shade of a birch tree.

“Bah! it’s nothing! You would do as much for me.”

“I am not quite so sure,” said Blount candidly.

“Nonsense, stupid! All English are generous.”

“Doubtless; but the French?”

“Well, the French — they are brutes, if you like! But what redeems them is that they are French. Say nothing more about that, or rather, say nothing more at all. Rest is absolutely necessary for you.”

But Harry Blount had no wish to be silent. If the wound, in prudence, required rest, the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph was not a man to indulge himself.

“M. Jolivet,” he asked, “do you think that our last dispatches have been able to pass the Russian frontier?”

“Why not?” answered Alcide. “By this time you may be sure that my beloved cousin knows all about the affair at Kolyvan.”

“How many copies does your cousin work off of her dispatches?” asked Blount, for the first time putting his question direct to his companion.

“Well,” answered Alcide, laughing, “my cousin is a very discreet person, who does not like to be talked about, and who would be in despair if she troubled the sleep of which you are in need.”

“I don’t wish to sleep,” replied the Englishman. “What will your cousin think of the affairs of Russia?”

“That they seem for the time in a bad way. But, bah! the Muscovite government is powerful; it cannot be really uneasy at an invasion of barbarians.”

“Too much ambition has lost the greatest empires,” answered Blount, who was not exempt from a certain English jealousy with regard to Russian pretensions in Central Asia.

“Oh, do not let us talk politics,” cried Jolivet. “It is forbidden by the faculty. Nothing can be worse for wounds in the shoulder — unless it was to put you to sleep.”

“Let us, then, talk of what we ought to do,” replied Blount. “M. Jolivet, I have no intention at all of remaining a prisoner to these Tartars for an indefinite time.”

“Nor I, either, by Jove!”

“We will escape on the first opportunity?”

“Yes, if there is no other way of regaining our liberty.”

“Do you know of any other?” asked Blount, looking at his companion.

“Certainly. We are not belligerents; we are neutral, and we will claim our freedom.”

“From that brute of a Feofar-Khan?”

“No; he would not understand,” answered Jolivet; “but from his lieutenant, Ivan Ogareff.”

“He is a villain.”

“No doubt; but the villain is a Russian. He knows that it does not do to trifle with the rights of men, and he has no interest to retain us; on the contrary. But to ask a favor of that gentleman does not quite suit my taste.”

“But that gentleman is not in the camp, or at least I have not seen him here,” observed Blount.

“He will come. He will not fail to do that. He must join the Emir. Siberia is cut in two now, and very certainly Feofar’s army is only waiting for him to advance on Irkutsk.”

“And once free, what shall we do?”

“Once free, we will continue our campaign, and follow the Tartars, until the time comes when we can make our way into the Russian camp. We must not give up the game. No, indeed; we have only just begun. You, friend, have already had the honor of being wounded in the service of the Daily Telegraph, whilst I — I have as yet suffered nothing in my cousin’s service. Well, well! Good,” murmured Alcide Jolivet; “there he is asleep. A few hours’ sleep and a few cold water compresses are all that are required to set an Englishman on his legs again. These fellows are made of cast iron.”

And whilst Harry Blount rested, Alcide watched near him, after having drawn out his note book, which he loaded with notes, determined besides to share them with his companion, for the greater satisfaction of the readers of the Daily Telegraph. Events had united them one with the other. They were no longer jealous of each other. So, then, the thing that Michael Strogoff dreaded above everything was the most lively desire of the two correspondents. Ivan Ogareff’s arrival would evidently be of use to them. Blount and Jolivet’s interest was, therefore, contrary to that of Michael. The latter well understood the situation, and it was one reason, added to many others, which prevented him from approaching his former traveling companions. He therefore managed so as not to be seen by them.

Four days passed thus without the state of things being in anywise altered. The prisoners heard no talk of the breaking up of the Tartar camp. They were strictly guarded. It would have been impossible for them to pass the cordon of foot and horse soldiers, which watched them night and day. As to the food which was given them it was barely sufficient. Twice in the twenty-four hours they were thrown a piece of the intestines of goats grilled on the coals, or a few bits of that cheese called “kroute,” made of sour ewe’s milk, and which, soaked in mare’s milk, forms the Kirghiz dish, commonly called “koumyss.” And this was all. It may be added that the weather had become detestable. There were considerable atmospheric commotions, bringing squalls mingled with rain. The unfortunate prisoners, destitute of shelter, had to bear all the inclemencies of the weather, nor was there the slightest alleviation to their misery. Several wounded women and children died, and the prisoners were themselves compelled to dig graves for the bodies of those whom their jailers would not even take the trouble to bury.

During this trying period Alcide Jolivet and Michael Strogoff worked hard, each in the portions of the enclosure in which they found themselves. Healthy and vigorous, they suffered less than so many others, and could better endure the hardships to which they were exposed. By their advice, and the assistance they rendered, they were of the greatest possible use to their suffering and despairing fellow-captives.

Was this state of things to last? Would Feofar-Khan, satisfied with his first success, wait some time before marching on Irkutsk? Such, it was to be feared, would be the case. But it was not so. The event so much wished for by Jolivet and Blount, so much dreaded by Michael, occurred on the morning of the 12th of August.

On that day the trumpets sounded, the drums beat, the cannon roared. A huge cloud of dust swept along the road from Kolyvan. Ivan Ogareff, followed by several thousand men, made his entry into the Tartar camp.

CHAPTER II CORRESPONDENTS IN TROUBLE

IVAN OGAREFF was bringing up the main body of the army of the Emir. The cavalry and infantry now under him had formed part of the column which had taken Omsk. Ogareff, not having been able to reduce the high town, in which, it must be remembered, the governor and garrison had sought refuge, had decided to pass on, not wishing to delay operations which ought to lead to the conquest of Eastern Siberia. He therefore left a garrison in Omsk, and, reinforcing himself en route with the conquerors of Kolyvan, joined Feofar's army.

Ivan Ogareff's soldiers halted at the outposts of the camp. They received no orders to bivouac. Their chief's plan, doubtless, was not to halt there, but to press on and reach Tomsk in the shortest possible time, it being an important town, naturally intended to become the center of future operations.

Besides his soldiers, Ogareff was bringing a convoy of Russian and Siberian prisoners, captured either at Omsk or Kolyvan. These unhappy creatures were not led to the enclosure — already too crowded — but were forced to remain at the outposts without shelter, almost without nourishment. What fate was Feofar-Khan reserving for these unfortunates? Would he imprison them in Tomsk, or would some bloody execution, familiar to the Tartar chiefs, remove them when they were found too inconvenient? This was the secret of the capricious Emir.

This army had not come from Omsk and Kolyvan without bringing in its train the usual crowd of beggars, freebooters, pedlars, and gypsies, which compose the rear-guard of an army on the march.

All these people lived on the country traversed, and left little of anything behind them. There was, therefore, a necessity for pushing forward, if only to secure provisions for the troops. The whole region between Ichim and the Obi, now completely devastated, no longer offered any resources. The Tartars left a desert behind them.

Conspicuous among the gypsies who had hastened from the western provinces was the Tsigane troop, which had accompanied Michael Strogoff as far as Perm. Sangarre was there. This fierce spy, the tool of Ivan Ogareff, had not deserted her master. Ogareff had traveled rapidly to Ichim, whilst Sangarre and her band had proceeded to Omsk by the southern part of the province.

It may be easily understood how useful this woman was to Ogareff. With her gypsy-band she could penetrate anywhere. Ivan Ogareff was kept acquainted with all that was going on in the very heart of the invaded provinces. There were a hundred eyes, a hundred ears, open in his service. Besides, he paid liberally for this espionage, from which he derived so much advantage.

Once Sangarre, being implicated in a very serious affair, had been saved by the Russian officer. She never forgot what she owed him, and had devoted herself to his service body and soul.

When Ivan Ogareff entered on the path of treason, he saw at once how he might turn this woman to account. Whatever order he might give her, Sangarre would execute it. An inexplicable instinct, more powerful still than that of gratitude, had urged her to make herself the slave of the traitor to whom she had been attached since the very beginning of his exile in Siberia.

Confidante and accomplice, Sangarre, without country, without family, had been delighted to put her vagabond life to the service of the invaders thrown by Ogareff on Siberia. To the wonderful cunning natural to her race she added a wild energy, which knew neither forgiveness nor pity. She was a savage worthy to share the wigwam of an Apache or the hut of an Andaman.

Since her arrival at Omsk, where she had rejoined him with her Tsiganes, Sangarre had not again left Ogareff. The circumstance that Michael and Marfa Strogoff had met was known to her. She knew and shared Ogareff's fears concerning the journey of a courier of the Czar. Having Marfa Strogoff in her power, she would have been the woman to torture her with all the refinement of a Redskin in order to wrest her secret from her. But the hour had not yet come in which Ogareff wished the old Siberian to speak. Sangarre had to wait, and she waited, without losing sight of her whom she was watching, observing her slightest gestures, her slightest words, endeavoring to catch the word "son" escaping from her lips, but as yet always baffled by Marfa's taciturnity.

At the first flourish of the trumpets several officers of high rank, followed by a brilliant escort of Usbeck horsemen, moved to the front of the camp to receive Ivan Ogareff. Arrived in his presence, they paid him the greatest respect, and invited him to accompany them to Feofar-Khan's tent.

Imperturbable as usual, Ogareff replied coldly to the deference paid to him. He was plainly dressed; but, from a sort of impudent bravado, he still wore the uniform of a Russian officer.

As he was about to enter the camp, Sangarre, passing among the officers approached and remained motionless before him. "Nothing?" asked Ogareff.

“Nothing.”

“Have patience.”

“Is the time approaching when you will force the old woman to speak?”

“It is approaching, Sangarre.”

“When will the old woman speak?”

“When we reach Tomsk.”

“And we shall be there — ”

“In three days.”

A strange gleam shot from Sangarre’s great black eyes, and she retired with a calm step. Ogareff pressed his spurs into his horse’s flanks, and, followed by his staff of Tartar officers, rode towards the Emir’s tent.

Feofar-Khan was expecting his lieutenant. The council, composed of the bearer of the royal seal, the khodja, and some high officers, had taken their places in the tent. Ivan Ogareff dismounted and entered.

Feofar-Khan was a man of forty, tall, rather pale, of a fierce countenance, and evil eyes. A curly black beard flowed over his chest. With his war costume, coat of mail of gold and silver, cross-belt and scabbard glistening with precious stones, boots with golden spurs, helmet ornamented with an aigrette of brilliant diamonds, Feofar presented an aspect rather strange than imposing for a Tartar Sardana-palus, an undisputed sovereign, who directs at his pleasure the life and fortune of his subjects.

When Ivan Ogareff appeared, the great dignitaries remained seated on their gold-embroidered cushions; but Feofar rose from a rich divan which occupied the back part of the tent, the ground being hidden under the thick velvet-pile of a Bokharian carpet.

The Emir approached Ogareff and gave him a kiss, the meaning of which he could not mistake. This kiss made the lieutenant chief of the council, and placed him temporarily above the khodja.

Then Feofar spoke. “I have no need to question you,” said he; “speak, Ivan. You will find here ears very ready to listen to you.”

“Takhsir,” answered Ogareff, “this is what I have to make known to you.” He spoke in the Tartar language, giving to his phrases the emphatic turn which distinguishes the languages of the Orientals. “Takhsir, this is not the time for unnecessary words. What I have done at the head of your troops, you know. The lines of the Ichim and the Irtych are now in our power; and the Turcoman horsemen can bathe their horses in the now Tartar waters. The Kirghiz hordes rose at the voice of Feofar-Khan. You can now push your troops towards the east, and where the sun rises, or towards the west, where he sets.”

“And if I march with the sun?” asked the Emir, without his countenance betraying any of his thoughts.

“To march with the sun,” answered Ogareff, “is to throw yourself towards Europe; it is to conquer rapidly the Siberian provinces of Tobolsk as far as the Ural Mountains.”

“And if I go to meet this luminary of the heavens?”

"It is to subdue to the Tartar dominion, with Irkutsk, the richest countries of Central Asia."

"But the armies of the Sultan of St. Petersburg?" said Feofar-Khan, designating the Emperor of Russia by this strange title.

"You have nothing to fear from them," replied Ivan Ogareff. "The invasion has been sudden; and before the Russian army can succor them, Irkutsk or Tobolsk will have fallen into your power. The Czar's troops have been overwhelmed at Kolyvan, as they will be everywhere where yours meet them."

"And what advice does your devotion to the Tartar cause suggest?" asked the Emir, after a few moments' silence.

"My advice," answered Ivan Ogareff quickly, "is to march to meet the sun. It is to give the grass of the eastern steppes to the Turcoman horses to consume. It is to take Irkutsk, the capital of the eastern provinces, and with it a hostage, the possession of whom is worth a whole country. In the place of the Czar, the Grand Duke his brother must fall into your hands."

This was the great result aimed at by Ivan Ogareff. To listen to him, one would have taken him for one of the cruel descendants of Stephan Razine, the celebrated pirate who ravaged Southern Russia in the eighteenth century. To seize the Grand Duke, murder him pitilessly, would fully satisfy his hatred. Besides, with the capture of Irkutsk, all Eastern Siberia would pass to the Tartars.

"It shall be thus, Ivan," replied Feofar.

"What are your orders, Takhsir?"

“To-day our headquarters shall be removed to Tomsk.”

Ogareff bowed, and, followed by the housch-begui, he retired to execute the Emir’s orders.

As he was about to mount his horse, to return to the outposts, a tumult broke out at some distance, in the part of the camp reserved for the prisoners. Shouts were heard, and two or three shots fired. Perhaps it was an attempt at revolt or escape, which must be summarily suppressed.

Ivan Ogareff and the housch-begui walked forward and almost immediately two men, whom the soldiers had not been able to keep back appeared before them.

The housch-begui, without more information, made a sign which was an order for death, and the heads of the two prisoners would have rolled on the ground had not Ogareff uttered a few words which arrested the sword already raised aloft. The Russian had perceived that these prisoners were strangers, and he ordered them to be brought to him.

They were Harry Blount and Alcide jolivet.

On Ogareff’s arrival in the camp, they had demanded to be conducted to his presence. The soldiers had refused. In consequence, a struggle, an attempt at flight, shots fired which happily missed the two correspondents, but their execution would not have been long delayed, if it had not been for the intervention of the Emir’s lieutenant.

The latter observed the prisoners for some moments, they being absolutely unknown to him. They had been present at that scene in the post-house at Ichim, in which Michael Strogoff had been struck by Ogareff; but the brutal traveler had paid no attention to the persons then collected in the common room.

Blount and Jolivet, on the contrary, recognized him at once, and the latter said in a low voice, “Hullo! It seems that Colonel Ogareff and the rude personage of Ichim are one!” Then he added in his companion’s ear, “Explain our affair, Blount. You will do me a service. This Russian colonel in the midst of a Tartar camp disgusts me; and although, thanks to him, my head is still on my shoulders, my eyes would exhibit my feelings were I to attempt to look him in the face.”

So saying, Alcide Jolivet assumed a look of complete and haughty indifference.

Whether or not Ivan Ogareff perceived that the prisoner’s attitude was insulting towards him, he did not let it appear. “Who are you, gentlemen?” he asked in Russian, in a cold tone, but free from its usual rudeness.

“Two correspondents of English and French newspapers,” replied Blount laconically.

“You have, doubtless, papers which will establish your identity?”

“Here are letters which accredit us in Russia, from the English and French chancellor’s office.”

Ivan Ogareff took the letters which Blount held out, and read them attentively. “You ask,” said he, “authorization to follow our military operations in Siberia?”

“We ask to be free, that is all,” answered the English correspondent dryly.

“You are so, gentlemen,” answered Ogareff; “I am curious to read your articles in the Daily Telegraph.”

“Sir,” replied Blount, with the most imperturbable coolness, “it is sixpence a number, including postage.” And thereupon he returned to his companion, who appeared to approve completely of his replies.

Ivan Ogareff, without frowning, mounted his horse, and going to the head of his escort, soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

“Well, Jolivet, what do you think of Colonel Ivan Ogareff, general-in-chief of the Tartar troops?” asked Blount.

“I think, my dear friend,” replied Alcide, smiling, “that the housch-begui made a very graceful gesture when he gave the order for our heads to be cut off.”

Whatever was the motive which led Ogareff to act thus in regard to the two correspondents, they were free and could rove at their pleasure over the scene of war. Their intention was not to leave it. The sort of antipathy which formerly they had entertained for each other had given place to a sincere friendship. Circumstances having brought them together, they no longer thought of separating. The petty questions of rivalry were forever extinguished. Harry Blount could never forget what he owed his companion, who, on the other hand, never tried to remind him of it. This friendship too assisted the reporting operations, and was thus to the advantage of their readers.

“And now,” asked Blount, “what shall we do with our liberty?”

“Take advantage of it, of course,” replied Alcide, “and go quietly to Tomsk to see what is going on there.”

“Until the time — very near, I hope — when we may rejoin some Russian regiment?”

“As you say, my dear Blount, it won’t do to Tartarise ourselves too much. The best side is that of the most civilized army, and it is evident that the people of Central Asia will have everything to lose and absolutely nothing to gain from this invasion, while the Russians will soon repulse them. It is only a matter of time.”

The arrival of Ivan Ogareff, which had given Jolivet and Blount their liberty, was to Michael Strogoff, on the contrary, a serious danger. Should chance bring the Czar’s courier into Ogareff’s presence, the latter could not fail to recognize in him the traveler whom he had so brutally treated at the Ichim post-house, and although Michael had not replied to the insult as he would have done under any other circumstances, attention would be drawn to him, and at once the accomplishment of his plans would be rendered more difficult.

This was the unpleasant side of the business. A favorable result of his arrival, however, was the order which was given to raise the camp that very day, and remove the headquarters to Tomsk. This was the accomplishment of Michael’s most fervent desire. His intention, as has been said, was to reach Tomsk concealed amongst the other prisoners; that is to say, without any risk of falling into the hands of the scouts who swarmed about the approaches to this important town. However, in consequence of the arrival of Ivan Ogareff, he questioned whether it would not be better to give up his first plan and attempt to escape during the journey.

Michael would, no doubt, have kept to the latter plan had he not learnt that Feofar-Khan and Ogareff had already set out for the town with some thousands of horsemen. “I will wait, then,” said he to himself; “at least, unless some exceptional opportunity for escape occurs. The adverse chances are numerous on this side of Tomsk, while beyond I shall in a few hours have passed the most advanced Tartar posts to the east. Still three days of patience, and may God aid me!”

It was indeed a journey of three days which the prisoners, under the guard of a numerous detachment of Tartars, were to make across the steppe. A hundred and fifty versts lay between the camp and the town — an easy march for the Emir’s soldiers, who wanted for nothing, but a wretched journey for these people, enfeebled by privations. More than one corpse would show the road they had traversed.

It was two o’clock in the afternoon, on the 12th of August, under a hot sun and cloudless sky, that the toptschi-baschi gave the order to start.

Alcide and Blount, having bought horses, had already taken the road to Tomsk, where events were to reunite the principal personages of this story.

Amongst the prisoners brought by Ivan Ogareff to the Tartar camp was an old woman, whose taciturnity seemed to keep her apart from all those who shared her fate. Not a murmur issued from her lips. She was like a statue of grief. This woman was more strictly guarded than anyone else, and, without her appearing to notice, was constantly watched by the Tsigane Sangarre. Notwithstanding her age she was compelled to follow the convoy of prisoners on foot, without any alleviation of her suffering.

However, a kind Providence had placed near her a courageous, kind-hearted being to comfort and assist her. Amongst her companions in misfortune a young girl, remarkable for beauty and taciturnity, seemed to have given herself the task of watching over her. No words had been exchanged between the two captives, but the girl was always at the old woman's side when help was useful. At first the mute assistance of the stranger was accepted with some mistrust. Gradually, however, the young girl's clear glance, her reserve, and the mysterious sympathy which draws together those who are in misfortune, thawed Marfa Strogoff's coldness.

Nadia — for it was she — was thus able, without knowing it, to render to the mother those attentions which she had herself received from the son. Her instinctive kindness had doubly inspired her. In devoting herself to her service, Nadia secured to her youth and beauty the protection afforded by the age of the old prisoner.

On the crowd of unhappy people, embittered by sufferings, this silent pair — one seeming to be the grandmother, the other the grand-daughter — imposed a sort of respect.

After being carried off by the Tartar scouts on the Irtych, Nadia had been taken to Omsk. Kept prisoner in the town, she shared the fate of all those captured by Ivan Ogareff, and consequently that of Marfa Strogoff.

If Nadia had been less energetic, she would have succumbed to this double blow. The interruption to her journey, the death of Michael, made her both desperate and excited. Divided, perhaps forever, from her father, after so many happy efforts had brought her near him, and, to crown her grief, separated from the intrepid companion whom God seemed to have placed in her way to lead her. The image of Michael Strogoff, struck before her eyes with a lance and disappearing beneath the waters of the Irtych, never left her thoughts.

Could such a man have died thus? For whom was God reserving His miracles if this good man, whom a noble object was urging onwards, had been allowed to perish so miserably? Then anger would prevail over grief. The scene of the affront so strangely borne by her companion at the Ichim relay returned to her memory. Her blood boiled at the recollection.

“Who will avenge him who can no longer avenge himself?” she said.

And in her heart, she cried, “May it be I!” If before his death Michael had confided his secret to her, woman, aye girl though she was, she might have been able to carry to a successful conclusion the interrupted task of that brother whom God had so soon taken from her.

Absorbed in these thoughts, it can be understood how Nadia could remain insensible to the miseries even of her captivity. Thus chance had united her to Marfa Strogoff without her having the least suspicion of who she was. How could she imagine that this old woman, a prisoner like herself, was the mother of him, whom she only knew as the merchant Nicholas Korpanoff? And on the other hand, how could Marfa guess that a bond of gratitude connected this young stranger with her son?

The thing that first struck Nadia in Marfa Strogoff was the similarity in the way in which each bore her hard fate. This stoicism of the old woman under the daily hardships, this contempt of bodily suffering, could only be caused by a moral grief equal to her own. So Nadia thought; and she was not mistaken. It was an instinctive sympathy for that part of her misery which Marfa did not show which first drew Nadia towards her. This way of bearing her sorrow went to the proud heart of the young girl. She did not offer her services; she gave them. Marfa had neither to refuse nor accept them. In the difficult parts of the journey, the girl was there to support her. When the provisions were given out, the old woman would not have moved, but Nadia shared her small portion with her; and thus this painful journey was performed. Thanks to her companion, Marfa was able to follow the soldiers who guarded the prisoners without being fastened to a saddle-bow, as were many other unfortunate wretches, and thus dragged along this road of sorrow.

“May God reward you, my daughter, for what you have done for my old age!” said Marfa Strogoff once, and for some time these were the only words exchanged between the two unfortunate beings.

During these few days, which to them appeared like centuries, it would seem that the old woman and the girl would have been led to speak of their situation. But Marfa Strogoff, from a caution which may be easily understood, never spoke about herself except with the greatest brevity. She never made the smallest allusion to her son, nor to the unfortunate meeting.

Nadia also, if not completely silent, spoke little. However, one day her heart overflowed, and she told all the events which had occurred from her departure from Wladimir to the death of Nicholas Korpanoff.

All that her young companion told intensely interested the old Siberian. “Nicholas Korpanoff!” said she. “Tell me again about this Nicholas. I know only one man, one alone, in whom such conduct would not have astonished me. Nicholas Korpanoff! Was that really his name? Are you sure of it, my daughter?”

“Why should he have deceived me in this,” replied Nadia, “when he deceived me in no other way?”

Moved, however, by a kind of presentiment, Marfa Strogoff put questions upon questions to Nadia.

“You told me he was fearless, my daughter. You have proved that he has been so?” asked she.

“Yes, fearless indeed!” replied Nadia.

“It was just what my son would have done,” said Marfa to herself.

Then she resumed, “Did you not say that nothing stopped him, nor astonished him; that he was so gentle in his strength that you had a sister as well as a brother in him, and he watched over you like a mother?”

“Yes, yes,” said Nadia. “Brother, sister, mother — he has been all to me!”

“And defended you like a lion?”

“A lion indeed!” replied Nadia. “A lion, a hero!”

“My son, my son!” thought the old Siberian. “But you said, however, that he bore a terrible insult at that post-house in Ichim?”

“He did bear it,” answered Nadia, looking down.

“He bore it!” murmured Marfa, shuddering.

“Mother, mother,” cried Nadia, “do not blame him! He had a secret. A secret of which God alone is as yet the judge!”

“And,” said Marfa, raising her head and looking at Nadia as though she would read the depths of her heart, “in that hour of humiliation did you not despise this Nicholas Korpanoff?”

“I admired without understanding him,” replied the girl. “I never felt him more worthy of respect.”

The old woman was silent for a minute.

“Was he tall?” she asked.

“Very tall.”

“And very handsome? Come, speak, my daughter.”

“He was very handsome,” replied Nadia, blushing.

“It was my son! I tell you it was my son!” exclaimed the old woman, embracing Nadia.

“Your son!” said Nadia amazed, “your son!”

“Come,” said Marfa; “let us get to the bottom of this, my child. Your companion, your friend, your protector had a mother. Did he never speak to you of his mother?”

“Of his mother?” said Nadia. “He spoke to me of his mother as I spoke to him of my father — often, always. He adored her.”

“Nadia, Nadia, you have just told me about my own son,” said the old woman.

And she added impetuously, “Was he not going to see this mother, whom you say he loved, in Omsk?”

“No,” answered Nadia, “no, he was not.”

“Not!” cried Marfa. “You dare to tell me not!”

“I say so: but it remains to me to tell you that from motives which outweighed everything else, motives which I do not know, I understand that Nicholas Korpanoff had to traverse the country completely in secret. To him it was a question of life and death, and still more, a question of duty and honor.”

“Duty, indeed, imperious duty,” said the old Siberian, “of those who sacrifice everything, even the joy of giving a kiss, perhaps the last, to his old mother. All that you do not know, Nadia — all that I did not know myself — I now know. You have made me understand everything. But the light which you have thrown on the mysteries of my heart, I cannot return on yours. Since my son has not told you his secret, I must keep it. Forgive me, Nadia; I can never repay what you have done for me.”

“Mother, I ask you nothing,” replied Nadia.

All was thus explained to the old Siberian, all, even the conduct of her son with regard to herself in the inn at Omsk. There was no doubt that the young girl’s companion was Michael Strogoff, and that a secret mission in the invaded country obliged him to conceal his quality of the Czar’s courier.

“Ah, my brave boy!” thought Marfa. “No, I will not betray you, and tortures shall not wrest from me the avowal that it was you whom I saw at Omsk.”

Marfa could with a word have paid Nadia for all her devotion to her. She could have told her that her companion, Nicholas Korpanoff, or rather Michael Strogoff, had not perished in the waters of the Irtych, since it was some days after that incident that she had met him, that she had spoken to him.

But she restrained herself, she was silent, and contented herself with saying, “Hope, my child! Misfortune will not overwhelm you. You will see your father again; I feel it; and perhaps he who gave you the name of sister is not dead. God cannot have allowed your brave companion to perish. Hope, my child, hope! Do as I do. The mourning which I wear is not yet for my son.”

CHAPTER III BLOW FOR BLOW

SUCH were now the relative situations of Marfa Strogoff and Nadia. All was understood by the old Siberian, and though the young girl was ignorant that her much-regretted companion still lived, she at least knew his relationship to her whom she had made her mother; and she thanked God for having given her the joy of taking the place of the son whom the prisoner had lost.

But what neither of them could know was that Michael, having been captured at Kolyvan, was in the same convoy and was on his way to Tomsk with them.

The prisoners brought by Ivan Ogareff had been added to those already kept by the Emir in the Tartar camp. These unfortunate people, consisting of Russians, Siberians, soldiers and civilians, numbered some thousands, and formed a column which extended over several versts. Some among them being considered dangerous were handcuffed and fastened to a long chain. There were, too, women and children, many of the latter suspended to the pommels of the saddles, while the former were dragged mercilessly along the road on foot, or driven forward as if they were animals. The horsemen compelled them to maintain a certain order, and there were no laggards with the exception of those who fell never to rise again.

In consequence of this arrangement, Michael Strogoff, marching in the first ranks of those who had left the Tartar camp — that is to say, among the Kolyvan prisoners — was unable to mingle with the prisoners who had arrived after him from Omsk. He had therefore no suspicion that his mother and Nadia were present in the convoy, nor did they suppose that he was among those in front. This journey from the camp to Tomsk, performed under the lashes and spear-points of the soldiers, proved fatal to many, and terrible to all. The prisoners traveled across the steppe, over a road made still more dusty by the passage of the Emir and his vanguard. Orders had been given to march rapidly. The short halts were rare. The hundred miles under a burning sky seemed interminable, though they were performed as rapidly as possible.

The country, which extends from the right of the Obi to the base of the spur detached from the Sayanok Mountains, is very sterile. Only a few stunted and burnt-up shrubs here and there break the monotony of the immense plain. There was no cultivation, for there was no water; and it was water that the prisoners, parched by their painful march, most needed. To find a stream they must have diverged fifty versts eastward, to the very foot of the mountains.

There flows the Tom, a little affluent of the Obi, which passes near Tomsk before losing itself in one of the great northern arteries. There water would have been abundant, the steppe less arid, the heat less severe. But the strictest orders had been given to the commanders of the convoy to reach Tomsk by the shortest way, for the Emir was much afraid of being taken in the flank and cut off by some Russian column descending from the northern provinces.

It is useless to dwell upon the sufferings of the unhappy prisoners. Many hundreds fell on the steppe, where their bodies would lie until winter, when the wolves would devour the remnants of their bones.

As Nadia helped the old Siberian, so in the same way did Michael render to his more feeble companions in misfortune such services as his situation allowed. He encouraged some, supported others, going to and fro, until a prick from a soldier’s lance obliged him to resume the place which had been assigned him in the ranks.

Why did he not endeavor to escape?

The reason was that he had now quite determined not to venture until the steppe was safe for him. He was resolved in his idea of going as far as Tomsk “at the Emir’s expense,” and indeed he was right. As he observed the numerous detachments which scoured the plain on the convoy’s flanks, now to the south, now to the north, it was evident that before he could have gone two versts he must have been recaptured. The Tartar horsemen swarmed — it actually appeared as if they sprang from the earth — like insects which a thunderstorm brings to the surface of the ground. Flight under these conditions would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible. The soldiers of the escort displayed excessive vigilance, for they would have paid for the slightest carelessness with their heads.

At nightfall of the 15th of August, the convoy reached the little village of Zabediero, thirty versts from Tomsk.

The prisoners’ first movement would have been to rush into the river, but they were not allowed to leave the ranks until the halt had been organized. Although the current of the Tom was just now like a torrent, it might have favored the flight of some bold or desperate man, and the strictest measures of vigilance were taken. Boats, requisitioned at Zabediero, were brought up to the Tom and formed a line of obstacles impossible to pass. As to the encampment on the outskirts of the village, it was guarded by a cordon of sentinels.

Michael Strogoff, who now naturally thought of escape, saw, after carefully surveying the situation, that under these conditions it was perfectly impossible; so, not wishing to compromise himself, he waited.

The prisoners were to encamp for the whole night on the banks of the Tom, for the Emir had put off the entrance of his troops into Tomsk. It had been decided that a military fete should mark the inauguration of the Tartar headquarters in this important city. Feofar-Khan already occupied the fortress, but the bulk of his army bivouacked under its walls, waiting until the time came for them to make a solemn entry.

Ivan Ogareff left the Emir at Tomsk, where both had arrived the evening before, and returned to the camp at Zabediero. From here he was to start the next day with the rear-guard of the Tartar army. A house had been arranged for him in which to pass the night. At sunrise horse and foot soldiers were to proceed to Tomsk, where the Emir wished to receive them with the pomp usual to Asiatic sovereigns. As soon as the halt was organized, the prisoners, worn out with their three days' journey, and suffering from burning thirst, could drink and take a little rest. The sun had already set, when Nadia, supporting Marfa Strogoff, reached the banks of the Tom. They had not till then been able to get through those who crowded the banks, but at last they came to drink in their turn.

The old woman bent over the clear stream, and Nadia, plunging in her hand, carried it to Marfa's lips. Then she refreshed herself. They found new life in these welcome waters. Suddenly Nadia started up; an involuntary cry escaped her.

Michael Strogoff was there, a few steps from her. It was he. The dying rays of the sun fell upon him.

At Nadia's cry Michael started. But he had sufficient command over himself not to utter a word by which he might have been compromised.

And yet, when he saw Nadia, he also recognized his mother.

Feeling he could not long keep master of himself at this unexpected meeting, he covered his eyes with his hands and walked quickly away.

Nadia’s impulse was to run after him, but the old Siberian murmured in her ear, “Stay, my daughter!”

“It is he!” replied Nadia, choking with emotion. “He lives, mother! It is he!”

“It is my son,” answered Marfa, “it is Michael Strogoff, and you see that I do not make a step towards him! Imitate me, my daughter.”

Michael had just experienced the most violent emotion which a man can feel. His mother and Nadia were there!

The two prisoners who were always together in his heart, God had brought them together in this common misfortune. Did Nadia know who he was? Yes, for he had seen Marfa’s gesture, holding her back as she was about to rush towards him. Marfa, then, had understood all, and kept his secret.

During that night, Michael was twenty times on the point of looking for and joining his mother; but he knew that he must resist the longing he felt to take her in his arms, and once more press the hand of his young companion. The least imprudence might be fatal. He had besides sworn not to see his mother. Once at Tomsk, since he could not escape this very night, he would set off without having even embraced the two beings in whom all the happiness of his life was centered, and whom he should leave exposed to so many perils.

Michael hoped that this fresh meeting at the Zabediero camp would have no disastrous consequences either to his mother or to himself. But he did not know that part of this scene, although it passed so rapidly, had been observed by Sangarre, Ogareff's spy.

The Tsigane was there, a few paces off, on the bank, as usual, watching the old Siberian woman. She had not caught sight of Michael, for he disappeared before she had time to look around; but the mother's gesture as she kept back Nadia had not escaped her, and the look in Marfa's eyes told her all.

It was now beyond doubt that Marfa Strogoff's son, the Czar's courier, was at this moment in Zabediero, among Ivan Ogareff's prisoners. Sangarre did not know him, but she knew that he was there. She did not then attempt to discover him, for it would have been impossible in the dark and the immense crowd.

As for again watching Nadia and Marfa Strogoff, that was equally useless. It was evident that the two women would keep on their guard, and it would be impossible to overhear anything of a nature to compromise the courier of the Czar. The Tsigane's first thought was to tell Ivan Ogareff. She therefore immediately left the encampment. A quarter of an hour after, she reached Zabediero, and was shown into the house occupied by the Emir's lieutenant. Ogareff received the Tsigane directly.

"What have you to tell me, Sangarre?" he asked.

"Marfa Strogoff's son is in the encampment."

"A prisoner?"

“A prisoner.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Ogareff, “I shall know — ”

“You will know nothing, Ivan,” replied Tsigane; “for you do not even know him by sight.”

“But you know him; you have seen him, Sangarre?”

“I have not seen him; but his mother betrayed herself by a gesture, which told me everything.”

“Are you not mistaken?”

“I am not mistaken.”

“You know the importance which I attach to the apprehension of this courier,” said Ivan Ogareff. “If the letter which he has brought from Moscow reaches Irkutsk, if it is given to the Grand Duke, the Grand Duke will be on his guard, and I shall not be able to get at him. I must have that letter at any price. Now you come to tell me that the bearer of this letter is in my power. I repeat, Sangarre, are you not mistaken?”

Ogareff spoke with great animation. His emotion showed the extreme importance he attached to the possession of this letter. Sangarre was not at all put out by the urgency with which Ogareff repeated his question. “I am not mistaken, Ivan,” she said.

“But, Sangarre, there are thousands of prisoners; and you say that you do not know Michael Strogoff.”

“No,” answered the Tsigane, with a look of savage joy, “I do not know him; but his mother knows him. Ivan, we must make his mother speak.”

“To-morrow she shall speak!” cried Ogareff. So saying, he extended his hand to the Tsigane, who kissed it; for there is nothing servile in this act of respect, it being usual among the Northern races.

Sangarre returned to the camp. She found out Nadia and Marfa Strogoff, and passed the night in watching them. Although worn out with fatigue, the old woman and the girl did not sleep. Their great anxiety kept them awake. Michael was living, but a prisoner. Did Ogareff know him, or would he not soon find him out? Nadia was occupied by the one thought that he whom she had thought dead still lived. But Marfa saw further into the future: and, although she did not care what became of herself, she had every reason to fear for her son.

Sangarre, under cover of the night, had crept near the two women, and remained there several hours listening. She heard nothing. From an instinctive feeling of prudence not a word was exchanged between Nadia and Marfa Strogoff. The next day, the 16th of August, about ten in the morning, trumpet-calls resounded throughout the encampment. The Tartar soldiers were almost immediately under arms.

Ivan Ogareff arrived, surrounded by a large staff of Tartar officers. His face was more clouded than usual, and his knitted brow gave signs of latent wrath which was waiting for an occasion to break forth.

Michael Strogoff, hidden in a group of prisoners, saw this man pass. He had a presentiment that some catastrophe was imminent: for Ivan Ogareff knew now that Marfa was the mother of Michael Strogoff.

Ogareff dismounted, and his escort cleared a large circle round him. Just then Sangarre approached him, and said, “I have no news.”

Ivan Ogareff’s only reply was to give an order to one of his officers. Then the ranks of prisoners were brutally hurried up by the soldiers. The unfortunate people, driven on with whips, or pushed on with lances, arranged themselves round the camp. A strong guard of soldiers drawn up behind, rendered escape impossible.

Silence then ensued, and, on a sign from Ivan Ogareff, Sangarre advanced towards the group, in the midst of which stood Marfa.

The old Siberian saw her, and knew what was going to happen. A scornful smile passed over her face. Then leaning towards Nadia, she said in a low tone, “You know me no longer, my daughter. Whatever may happen, and however hard this trial may be, not a word, not a sign. It concerns him, and not me.”

At that moment Sangarre, having regarded her for an instant, put her hand on her shoulder.

“What do you want with me?” said Marfa.

“Come!” replied Sangarre, and pushing the old Siberian before her, she took her to Ivan Ogareff, in the middle of the cleared ground. Michael cast down his eyes that their angry flashings might not appear.

Marfa, standing before Ivan Ogareff, drew herself up, crossed her arms on her breast, and waited.

“You are Marfa Strogoff?” asked Ogareff.

“Yes,” replied the old Siberian calmly.

“Do you retract what you said to me when, three days ago, I interrogated you at Omsk?”

“No!”

“Then you do not know that your son, Michael Strogoff, courier of the Czar, has passed through Omsk?”

“I do not know it.”

“And the man in whom you thought you recognized your son, was not he your son?”

“He was not my son.”

“And since then you have not seen him amongst the prisoners?”

“No.”

“If he were pointed out, would you recognize him?”

“No.”

On this reply, which showed such determined resolution, a murmur was heard amongst the crowd.

Ogareff could not restrain a threatening gesture.

“Listen,” said he to Marfa, “your son is here, and you shall immediately point him out to me.”

“No.”

"All these men, taken at Omsk and Kolyvan, will defile before you; and if you do not show me Michael Strogoff, you shall receive as many blows of the knout as men shall have passed before you."

Ivan Ogareff saw that, whatever might be his threats, whatever might be the tortures to which he submitted her, the indomitable Siberian would not speak. To discover the courier of the Czar, he counted, then, not on her, but on Michael himself. He did not believe it possible that, when mother and son were in each other's presence, some involuntary movement would not betray him. Of course, had he wished to seize the imperial letter, he would simply have given orders to search all the prisoners; but Michael might have destroyed the letter, having learnt its contents; and if he were not recognized, if he were to reach Irkutsk, all Ivan Ogareff's plans would be baffled. It was thus not only the letter which the traitor must have, but the bearer himself.

Nadia had heard all, and she now knew who was Michael Strogoff, and why he had wished to cross, without being recognized, the invaded provinces of Siberia.

On an order from Ivan Ogareff the prisoners defiled, one by one, past Marfa, who remained immovable as a statue, and whose face expressed only perfect indifference.

Her son was among the last. When in his turn he passed before his mother, Nadia shut her eyes that she might not see him. Michael was to all appearance unmoved, but the palm of his hand bled under his nails, which were pressed into them.

Ivan Ogareff was baffled by mother and son.

Sangarre, close to him, said one word, “The knout!”

“Yes,” cried Ogareff, who could no longer restrain himself; “the knout for this wretched old woman — the knout to the death!”

A Tartar soldier bearing this terrible instrument of torture approached Marfa. The knout is composed of a certain number of leathern thongs, at the end of which are attached pieces of twisted iron wire. It is reckoned that a sentence to one hundred and twenty blows of this whip is equivalent to a sentence of death.

Marfa knew it, but she knew also that no torture would make her speak. She was sacrificing her life.

Marfa, seized by two soldiers, was forced on her knees on the ground. Her dress torn off left her back bare. A saber was placed before her breast, at a few inches’ distance only. Directly she bent beneath her suffering, her breast would be pierced by the sharp steel.

The Tartar drew himself up. He waited. “Begin!” said Ogareff. The whip whistled in the air.

But before it fell a powerful hand stopped the Tartar’s arm. Michael was there. He had leapt forward at this horrible scene. If at the relay at Ichim he had restrained himself when Ogareff’s whip had struck him, here before his mother, who was about to be struck, he could not do so. Ivan Ogareff had succeeded.

“Michael Strogoff!” cried he. Then advancing, “Ah, the man of Ichim?”

“Himself!” said Michael. And raising the knout he struck Ogareff a sharp blow across the face. “Blow for blow!” said he.

“Well repaid!” cried a voice concealed by the tumult.

Twenty soldiers threw themselves on Michael, and in another instant he would have been slain.

But Ogareff, who on being struck had uttered a cry of rage and pain, stopped them. “This man is reserved for the Emir’s judgment,” said he. “Search him!”

The letter with the imperial arms was found in Michael’s bosom; he had not had time to destroy it; it was handed to Ogareff.

The voice which had pronounced the words, “Well repaid!” was that of no other than Alcide Jolivet. “Par-dieu!” said he to Blount, “they are rough, these people. Acknowledge that we owe our traveling companion a good turn. Korpanoff or Strogoff is worthy of it. Oh, that was fine retaliation for the little affair at Ichim.”

“Yes, retaliation truly,” replied Blount; “but Strogoff is a dead man. I suspect that, for his own interest at all events, it would have been better had he not possessed quite so lively a recollection of the event.”

“And let his mother perish under the knout?”

“Do you think that either she or his sister will be a bit better off from this outbreak of his?”

“I do not know or think anything except that I should have done much the same in his position,” replied Alcide. “What a scar the Colonel has received! Bah! one must boil over sometimes. We should have had water in our veins instead of blood had it been incumbent on us to be always and everywhere unmoved to wrath."

"A neat little incident for our journals," observed Blount, "if only Ivan Ogareff would let us know the contents of that letter."

Ivan Ogareff, when he had stanched the blood which was trickling down his face, had broken the seal. He read and re-read the letter deliberately, as if he was determined to discover everything it contained.

Then having ordered that Michael, carefully bound and guarded, should be carried on to Tomsk with the other prisoners, he took command of the troops at Zabediero, and, amid the deafening noise of drums and trumpets, he marched towards the town where the Emir awaited him.

CHAPTER IV THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

TOMSK, founded in 1604, nearly in the heart of the Siberian provinces, is one of the most important towns in Asiatic Russia. Tobolsk, situated above the sixtieth parallel; Irkutsk, built beyond the hundredth meridian — have seen Tomsk increase at their expense.

And yet Tomsk, as has been said, is not the capital of this important province. It is at Omsk that the Governor-General of the province and the official world reside. But Tomsk is the most considerable town of that territory. The country being rich, the town is so likewise, for it is in the center of fruitful mines. In the luxury of its houses, its arrangements, and its equipages, it might rival the greatest European capitals. It is a city of millionaires, enriched by the spade and pickax, and though it has not the honor of being the residence of the Czar's representative, it can boast of including in the first rank of its notables the chief of the merchants of the town, the principal grantees of the imperial government's mines.

But the millionaires were fled now, and except for the crouching poor, the town stood empty to the hordes of Feofar-Khan. At four o'clock the Emir made his entry into the square, greeted by a flourish of trumpets, the rolling sound of the big drums, salvoes of artillery and musketry.

Feofar mounted his favorite horse, which carried on its head an aigrette of diamonds. The Emir still wore his uniform. He was accompanied by a numerous staff, and beside him walked the Khans of Khokhand and Koundouge and the grand dignitaries of the Khanats.

At the same moment appeared on the terrace the chief of Feofar's wives, the queen, if this title may be given to the sultana of the states of Bokhara. But, queen or slave, this woman of Persian origin was wonderfully beautiful.

Contrary to the Mahometan custom, and no doubt by some caprice of the Emir, she had her face uncovered. Her hair, divided into four plaits, fell over her dazzling white shoulders, scarcely concealed by a veil of silk worked in gold, which fell from the back of a cap studded with gems of the highest value. Under her blue-silk petticoat, fell the “zirdjameh” of silken gauze, and above the sash lay the “pirahn.” But from the head to the little feet, such was the profusion of jewels — gold beads strung on silver threads, chaplets of turquoises, “firouzehs” from the celebrated mines of Elbourz, necklaces of cornelians, agates, emeralds, opals, and sapphires — that her dress seemed to be literally made of precious stones. The thousands of diamonds which sparkled on her neck, arms, hands, at her waist, and at her feet might have been valued at almost countless millions of roubles.

The Emir and the Khans dismounted, as did the dignitaries who escorted them. All entered a magnificent tent erected on the center of the first terrace. Before the tent, as usual, the Koran was laid.

Feofar’s lieutenant did not make them wait, and before five o’clock the trumpets announced his arrival. Ivan Ogareff — the Scarred Cheek, as he was already nick-named — wearing the uniform of a Tartar officer, dismounted before the Emir’s tent. He was accompanied by a party of soldiers from the camp at Zabediero, who ranged up at the sides of the square, in the middle of which a place for the sports was reserved. A large scar could be distinctly seen cut obliquely across the traitor’s face.

Ogareff presented his principal officers to the Emir, who, without departing from the coldness which composed the main part of his dignity, received them in a way which satisfied them that they stood well in the good graces of their chief.

At least so thought Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, the two inseparables, now associated together in the chase after news. After leaving Zabediero, they had proceeded rapidly to Tomsk. The plan they had agreed upon was to leave the Tartars as soon as possible, and to join a Russian regiment, and, if they could, to go with them to Irkutsk. All that they had seen of the invasion, its burnings, its pillages, its murders, had perfectly sickened them, and they longed to be among the ranks of the Siberian army. Jolivet had told his companion that he could not leave Tomsk without making a sketch of the triumphal entry of the Tartar troops, if it was only to satisfy his cousin's curiosity; but the same evening they both intended to take the road to Irkutsk, and being well mounted hoped to distance the Emir's scouts.

Alcide and Blount mingled therefore in the crowd, so as to lose no detail of a festival which ought to supply them with a hundred good lines for an article. They admired the magnificence of Feofar-Khan, his wives, his officers, his guards, and all the Eastern pomp, of which the ceremonies of Europe can give not the least idea. But they turned away with disgust when Ivan Ogareff presented himself before the Emir, and waited with some impatience for the amusements to begin.

"You see, my dear Blount," said Alcide, "we have come too soon, like honest citizens who like to get their money's worth. All this is before the curtain rises, it would have been better to arrive only for the ballet."

"What ballet?" asked Blount.

"The compulsory ballet, to be sure. But see, the curtain is going to rise." Alcide Jolivet spoke as if he had been at the Opera, and taking his glass from its case, he prepared, with the air of a connoisseur, "to examine the first act of Feofar's company."

A painful ceremony was to precede the sports. In fact, the triumph of the vanquisher could not be complete without the public humiliation of the vanquished. This was why several hundreds of prisoners were brought under the soldiers’ whips. They were destined to march past Feofar-Khan and his allies before being crammed with their companions into the prisons in the town.

In the first ranks of these prisoners figured Michael Strogoff. As Ogareff had ordered, he was specially guarded by a file of soldiers. His mother and Nadia were there also.

The old Siberian, although energetic enough when her own safety was in question, was frightfully pale. She expected some terrible scene. It was not without reason that her son had been brought before the Emir. She therefore trembled for him. Ivan Ogareff was not a man to forgive having been struck in public by the knout, and his vengeance would be merciless. Some frightful punishment familiar to the barbarians of Central Asia would, no doubt, be inflicted on Michael Ogareff had protected him against the soldiers because he well knew what would happen by reserving him for the justice of the Emir.

The mother and son had not been able to speak together since the terrible scene in the camp at Zabediero. They had been pitilessly kept apart — a bitter aggravation of their misery, for it would have been some consolation to have been together during these days of captivity. Marfa longed to ask her son’s pardon for the harm she had unintentionally done him, for she reproached herself with not having commanded her maternal feelings. If she had restrained herself in that post-house at Omsk, when she found herself face to face with him, Michael would have passed unrecognized, and all these misfortunes would have been avoided.

Michael, on his side, thought that if his mother was there, if Ogareff had brought her with him, it was to make her suffer with the sight of his own punishment, or perhaps some frightful death was reserved for her also.

As to Nadia, she only asked herself how she could save them both, how come to the aid of son and mother. As yet she could only wonder, but she felt instinctively that she must above everything avoid drawing attention upon herself, that she must conceal herself, make herself insignificant. Perhaps she might at least gnaw through the meshes which imprisoned the lion. At any rate if any opportunity was given her she would seize upon it, and sacrifice herself, if need be, for the son of Marfa Strogoff.

In the meantime the greater part of the prisoners were passing before the Emir, and as they passed each was obliged to prostrate himself, with his forehead in the dust, in token of servitude. Slavery begins by humiliation. When the unfortunate people were too slow in bending, the rough guards threw them violently to the ground.

Alcide Jolivet and his companion could not witness such a sight without feeling indignant.

“It is cowardly — let us go,” said Alcide.

“No,” answered Blount; “we must see it all.”

“See it all! — ah!” cried Alcide, suddenly, grasping his companion’s arm.

“What is the matter with you?” asked the latter.

“Look, Blount; it is she!”

“What she?”

“The sister of our traveling companion — alone, and a prisoner! We must save her.”

“Calm yourself,” replied Blount coolly. “Any interference on our part in behalf of the young girl would be worse than useless.”

Alcide Jolivet, who had been about to rush forward, stopped, and Nadia — who had not perceived them, her features being half hidden by her hair — passed in her turn before the Emir without attracting his attention.

However, after Nadia came Marfa Strogoff; and as she did not throw herself quickly in the dust, the guards brutally pushed her. She fell.

Her son struggled so violently that the soldiers who were guarding him could scarcely hold him back. But the old woman rose, and they were about to drag her on, when Ogareff interposed, saying, “Let that woman stay!”

As to Nadia, she happily regained the crowd of prisoners. Ivan Ogareff had taken no notice of her.

Michael was then led before the Emir, and there he remained standing, without casting down his eyes.

“Your forehead to the ground!” cried Ogareff.

“No!” answered Michael.

Two soldiers endeavored to make him bend, but they were themselves laid on the ground by a buffet from the young man’s fist.

Ogareff approached Michael. “You shall die!” he said.

“I can die,” answered Michael fiercely; “but your traitor’s face, Ivan, will not the less carry forever the infamous brand of the knout.”

At this reply Ivan Ogareff became perfectly livid.

“Who is this prisoner?” asked the Emir, in a tone of voice terrible from its very calmness.

“A Russian spy,” answered Ogareff. In asserting that Michael was a spy he knew that the sentence pronounced against him would be terrible.

The Emir made a sign at which all the crowd bent low their heads. Then he pointed with his hand to the Koran, which was brought him. He opened the sacred book and placed his finger on one of its pages.

It was chance, or rather, according to the ideas of these Orientals, God Himself who was about to decide the fate of Michael Strogoff. The people of Central Asia give the name of “fal” to this practice. After having interpreted the sense of the verse touched by the judge’s finger, they apply the sentence whatever it may be.

The Emir had let his finger rest on the page of the Koran. The chief of the Ulemas then approached, and read in a loud voice a verse which ended with these words, “And he will no more see the things of this earth.”

“Russian spy!” exclaimed Feofar-Kahn in a voice trembling with fury, “you have come to see what is going on in the Tartar camp. Then look while you may.”

CHAPTER V “LOOK WHILE YOU MAY!”

MICHAEL was held before the Emir’s throne, at the foot of the terrace, his hands bound behind his back. His mother overcome at last by mental and physical torture, had sunk to the ground, daring neither to look nor listen.

“Look while you may,” exclaimed Feofar-Kahn, stretching his arm towards Michael in a threatening manner. Doubtless Ivan Ogareff, being well acquainted with Tartar customs, had taken in the full meaning of these words, for his lips curled for an instant in a cruel smile; he then took his place by Feofar-Khan.

A trumpet call was heard. This was the signal for the amusements to begin. “Here comes the ballet,” said Alcide to Blount; “but, contrary to our customs, these barbarians give it before the drama.”

Michael had been commanded to look at everything. He looked. A troop of dancers poured into the open space before the Emir’s tent. Different Tartar instruments, the “doutare,” a long-handled guitar, the “kobize,” a kind of violoncello, the “tschibyzga,” a long reed flute; wind instruments, tom-toms, tambourines, united with the deep voices of the singers, formed a strange harmony. Added to this were the strains of an aerial orchestra, composed of a dozen kites, which, fastened by strings to their centers, resounded in the breeze like AEolian harps.

Then the dancers began. The performers were all of Persian origin; they were no longer slaves, but exercised their profession at liberty. Formerly they figured officially in the ceremonies at the court of Teheran, but since the accession of the reigning family, banished or treated with contempt, they had been compelled to seek their fortune elsewhere. They wore the national costume, and were adorned with a profusion of jewels. Little triangles of gold, studded with jewels, glittered in their ears. Circles of silver, marked with black, surrounded their necks and legs.

These performers gracefully executed various dances, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. Their faces were uncovered, but from time to time they threw a light veil over their heads, and a gauze cloud passed over their bright eyes as smoke over a starry sky. Some of these Persians wore leathern belts embroidered with pearls, from which hung little triangular bags. From these bags, embroidered with golden filigree, they drew long narrow bands of scarlet silk, on which were braided verses of the Koran. These bands, which they held between them, formed a belt under which the other dancers darted; and, as they passed each verse, following the precept it contained, they either prostrated themselves on the earth or lightly bounded upwards, as though to take a place among the houris of Mohammed’s heaven.

But what was remarkable, and what struck Alcide, was that the Persians appeared rather indolent than fiery. Their passion had deserted them, and, by the kind of dances as well as by their execution, they recalled rather the calm and self-possessed nauch girls of India than the impassioned dancers of Egypt.

When this was over, a stern voice was heard saying:

“Look while you may!”

The man who repeated the Emir’s words — a tall spare Tartar — was he who carried out the sentences of Feofar-Khan against offenders. He had taken his place behind Michael, holding in his hand a broad curved saber, one of those Damascene blades which are forged by the celebrated armorers of Karschi or Hissar.

Behind him guards were carrying a tripod supporting a chafing-dish filled with live coals. No smoke arose from this, but a light vapor surrounded it, due to the incineration of a certain aromatic and resinous substance which he had thrown on the surface.

The Persians were succeeded by another party of dancers, whom Michael recognized. The journalists also appeared to recognize them, for Blount said to his companion, “These are the Tsiganes of Nijni-Novgorod.”

“No doubt of it,” cried Alcide. “Their eyes, I imagine, bring more money to these spies than their legs.”

In putting them down as agents in the Emir’s service, Alcide Jolivet was, by all accounts, not mistaken.

In the first rank of the Tsiganes, Sangarre appeared, superb in her strange and picturesque costume, which set off still further her remarkable beauty.

Sangarre did not dance, but she stood as a statue in the midst of the performers, whose style of dancing was a combination of that of all those countries through which their race had passed — Turkey, Bohemia, Egypt, Italy, and Spain. They were enlivened by the sound of cymbals, which clashed on their arms, and by the hollow sounds of the “daires” — a sort of tambourine played with the fingers.

Sangarre, holding one of those daires, which she played between her hands, encouraged this troupe of veritable corybantes. A young Tsigane, of about fifteen years of age, then advanced. He held in his hand a “doutare,” strings of which he made to vibrate by a simple movement of the nails. He sung. During the singing of each couplet, of very peculiar rhythm, a dancer took her position by him and remained there immovable, listening to him, but each time that the burden came from the lips of the young singer, she resumed her dance, dinning in his ears with her daire, and deafening him with the clashing of her cymbals. Then, after the last chorus, the remainder surrounded the Tsigane in the windings of their dance.

At that moment a shower of gold fell from the hands of the Emir and his train, and from the hands of his officers of all ranks; to the noise which the pieces made as they struck the cymbals of the dancers, being added the last murmurs of the doutares and tambourines.

“Lavish as robbers,” said Alcide in the ear of his companion. And in fact it was the result of plunder which was falling; for, with the Tartar tomans and sequins, rained also Russian ducats and roubles.

Then silence followed for an instant, and the voice of the executioner, who laid his hand on Michael’s shoulder, once more pronounced the words, which this repetition rendered more and more sinister:

“Look while you may”

But this time Alcide observed that the executioner no longer held the saber bare in his hand.

Meanwhile the sun had sunk behind the horizon. A semi-obscurity began to envelop the plain. The mass of cedars and pines became blacker and blacker, and the waters of the Tom, totally obscured in the distance, mingled with the approaching shadows.

But at that instant several hundreds of slaves, bearing lighted torches, entered the square. Led by Sangarre, Tsiganes and Persians reappeared before the Emir’s throne, and showed off, by the contrast, their dances of styles so different. The instruments of the Tartar orchestra sounded forth in harmony still more savage, accompanied by the guttural cries of the singers. The kites, which had fallen to the ground, once more winged their way into the sky, each bearing a parti-colored lantern, and under a fresher breeze their harps vibrated with intenser sound in the midst of the aerial illumination.

Then a squadron of Tartars, in their brilliant uniforms, mingled in the dances, whose wild fury was increasing rapidly, and then began a performance which produced a very strange effect. Soldiers came on the ground, armed with bare sabers and long pistols, and, as they executed dances, they made the air re-echo with the sudden detonations of their firearms, which immediately set going the rumbling of the tambourines, and grumblings of the daires, and the gnashing of doutares.

Their arms, covered with a colored powder of some metallic ingredient, after the Chinese fashion, threw long jets — red, green, and blue — so that the groups of dancers seemed to be in the midst of fireworks. In some respects, this performance recalled the military dance of the ancients, in the midst of naked swords; but this Tartar dance was rendered yet more fantastic by the colored fire, which wound, serpent-like, above the dancers, whose dresses seemed to be embroidered with fiery hems. It was like a kaleidoscope of sparks, whose infinite combinations varied at each movement of the dancers.

Though it may be thought that a Parisian reporter would be perfectly hardened to any scenic effect, which our modern ideas have carried so far, yet Alcide Jolivet could not restrain a slight movement of the head, which at home, between the Boulevard Montmartre and La Madeleine would have said — ”Very fair, very fair.”

Then, suddenly, at a signal, all the lights of the fantasia were extinguished, the dances ceased, and the performers disappeared. The ceremony was over, and the torches alone lighted up the plateau, which a few instants before had been so brilliantly illuminated.

On a sign from the Emir, Michael was led into the middle of the square.

“Blount,” said Alcide to his companion, “are you going to see the end of all this?”

“No, that I am not,” replied Blount.

“The readers of the Daily Telegraph are, I hope, not very eager for the details of an execution a la mode Tartare?”

“No more than your cousin!”

“Poor fellow!” added Alcide, as he watched Michael. “That valiant soldier should have fallen on the field of battle!”

“Can we do nothing to save him?” said Blount.

“Nothing!”

The reporters recalled Michael’s generous conduct towards them; they knew now through what trials he must have passed, ever obedient to his duty; and in the midst of these Tartars, to whom pity is unknown, they could do nothing for him. Having little desire to be present at the torture reserved for the unfortunate man, they returned to the town. An hour later, they were on the road to Irkutsk, for it was among the Russians that they intended to follow what Alcide called, by anticipation, “the campaign of revenge.”

Meantime, Michael was standing ready, his eyes returning the Emir’s haughty glance, while his countenance assumed an expression of intense scorn whenever he cast his looks on Ivan Ogareff. He was prepared to die, yet not a single sign of weakness escaped him.

The spectators, waiting around the square, as well as Feofar-Khan’s body-guard, to whom this execution was only one of the attractions, were eagerly expecting it. Then, their curiosity satisfied, they would rush off to enjoy the pleasures of intoxication.

The Emir made a sign. Michael was thrust forward by his guards to the foot of the terrace, and Feofar said to him, “You came to see our goings out and comings in, Russian spy. You have seen for the last time. In an instant your eyes will be forever shut to the day.”

Michael’s fate was to be not death, but blindness; loss of sight, more terrible perhaps than loss of life. The unhappy man was condemned to be blinded.

However, on hearing the Emir’s sentence Michael’s heart did not grow faint. He remained unmoved, his eyes wide open, as though he wished to concentrate his whole life into one last look. To entreat pity from these savage men would be useless, besides, it would be unworthy of him. He did not even think of it. His thoughts were condensed on his mission, which had apparently so completely failed; on his mother, on Nadia, whom he should never more see! But he let no sign appear of the emotion he felt. Then, a feeling of vengeance to be accomplished came over him. “Ivan,” said he, in a stern voice, “Ivan the Traitor, the last menace of my eyes shall be for you!”

Ivan Ogareff shrugged his shoulders.

But Michael was not to be looking at Ivan when his eyes were put out. Marfa Strogoff stood before him.

“My mother!” cried he. “Yes! yes! my last glance shall be for you, and not for this wretch! Stay there, before me! Now I see once more your well-beloved face! Now shall my eyes close as they rest upon it..!”

The old woman, without uttering a word, advanced.

“Take that woman away!” said Ivan.

Two soldiers were about to seize her, but she stepped back and remained standing a few paces from Michael.

The executioner appeared. This time, he held his saber bare in his hand, and this saber he had just drawn from the chafing-dish, where he had brought it to a white heat. Michael was going to be blinded in the Tartar fashion, with a hot blade passed before his eyes!

Michael did not attempt to resist. Nothing existed before his eyes but his mother, whom his eyes seemed to devour. All his life was in that last look.

Marfa Strogoff, her eyes open wide, her arms extended towards where he stood, was gazing at him. The incandescent blade passed before Michael’s eyes.

A despairing cry was heard. His aged mother fell senseless to the ground. Michael Strogoff was blind.

His orders executed, the Emir retired with his train. There remained in the square only Ivan Ogareff and the torch bearers. Did the wretch intend to insult his victim yet further, and yet to give him a parting blow?

Ivan Ogareff slowly approached Michael, who, feeling him coming, drew himself up. Ivan drew from his pocket the Imperial letter, he opened it, and with supreme irony he held it up before the sightless eyes of the Czar’s courier, saying, “Read, now, Michael Strogoff, read, and go and repeat at Irkutsk what you have read. The true Courier of the Czar is Ivan Ogareff.”

This said, the traitor thrust the letter into his breast. Then, without looking round he left the square, followed by the torch-bearers.

Michael was left alone, at a few paces from his mother, lying lifeless, perhaps dead. He heard in the distance cries and songs, the varied noises of a wild debauch. Tomsk, illuminated, glittered and gleamed.

Michael listened. The square was silent and deserted. He went, groping his way, towards the place where his mother had fallen. He found her with his hand, he bent over her, he put his face close to hers, he listened for the beating of her heart. Then he murmured a few words.

Did Marfa still live, and did she hear her son’s words? Whether she did so or not, she made not the slightest movement. Michael kissed her forehead and her white locks. He then raised himself, and, groping with his foot, trying to stretch out his hand to guide himself, he walked by degrees to the edge of the square.

Suddenly Nadia appeared. She walked straight to her companion. A knife in her hand cut the cords which bound Michael’s arms. The blind man knew not who had freed him, for Nadia had not spoken a word.

But this done: “Brother!” said she.

“Nadia!” murmured Michael, “Nadia!”

“Come, brother,” replied Nadia, “use my eyes whilst yours sleep. I will lead you to Irkutsk.”

CHAPTER VI A FRIEND ON THE HIGHWAY

HALF an hour afterwards, Michael and Nadia had left Tomsk.

Many others of the prisoners were that night able to escape from the Tartars, for officers and soldiers, all more or less intoxicated, had unconsciously relaxed the vigilant guard which they had hitherto maintained. Nadia, after having been carried off with the other prisoners, had been able to escape and return to the square, at the moment when Michael was led before the Emir. There, mingling with the crowd, she had witnessed the terrible scene. Not a cry escaped her when the scorching blade passed before her companion’s eyes. She kept, by her strength of will, mute and motionless. A providential inspiration bade her restrain herself and retain her liberty that she might lead Marfa’s son to that goal which he had sworn to reach. Her heart for an instant ceased to beat when the aged Siberian woman fell senseless to the ground, but one thought restored her to her former energy. “I will be the blind man’s dog,” said she.

On Ogareff’s departure, Nadia had concealed herself in the shade. She had waited till the crowd left the square. Michael, abandoned as a wretched being from whom nothing was to be feared, was alone. She saw him draw himself towards his mother, bend over her, kiss her forehead, then rise and grope his way in flight.

A few instants later, she and he, hand in hand, had descended the steep slope, when, after having followed the high banks of the Tom to the furthest extremity of the town, they happily found a breach in the inclosure.

The road to Irkutsk was the only one which penetrated towards the east. It could not be mistaken. It was possible that on the morrow, after some hours of carousal, the scouts of the Emir, once more scattering over the steppes, might cut off all communication. It was of the greatest importance therefore to get in advance of them. How could Nadia bear the fatigues of that night, from the 16th to the 17th of August? How could she have found strength for so long a stage? How could her feet, bleeding under that forced march, have carried her thither? It is almost incomprehensible. But it is none the less true that on the next morning, twelve hours after their departure from Tomsk, Michael and she reached the town of Semilowskoe, after a journey of thirty-five miles.

Michael had not uttered a single word. It was not Nadia who held his hand, it was he who held that of his companion during the whole of that night; but, thanks to that trembling little hand which guided him, he had walked at his ordinary pace.

Semilowskoe was almost entirely abandoned. The inhabitants had fled. Not more than two or three houses were still occupied. All that the town contained, useful or precious, had been carried off in wagons. However, Nadia was obliged to make a halt of a few hours. They both required food and rest.

The young girl led her companion to the extremity of the town. There they found an empty house, the door wide open. An old rickety wooden bench stood in the middle of the room, near the high stove which is to be found in all Siberian houses. They silently seated themselves.

Nadia gazed in her companion’s face as she had never before gazed. There was more than gratitude, more than pity, in that look. Could Michael have seen her, he would have read in that sweet desolate gaze a world of devotion and tenderness.

The eyelids of the blind man, made red by the heated blade, fell half over his eyes. The pupils seemed to be singularly enlarged. The rich blue of the iris was darker than formerly. The eyelashes and eyebrows were partly burnt, but in appearance, at least, the old penetrating look appeared to have undergone no change. If he could no longer see, if his blindness was complete, it was because the sensibility of the retina and optic nerve was radically destroyed by the fierce heat of the steel.

Then Michael stretched out his hands.

“Are you there, Nadia?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied the young girl; “I am close to you, and I will not go away from you, Michael.”

At his name, pronounced by Nadia for the first time, a thrill passed through Michael’s frame. He perceived that his companion knew all, who he was.

“Nadia,” replied he, “we must separate!”

“We separate? How so, Michael?”

“I must not be an obstacle to your journey! Your father is waiting for you at Irkutsk! You must rejoin your father!”

“My father would curse me, Michael, were I to abandon you now, after all you have done for me!”

“Nadia, Nadia,” replied Michael, “you should think only of your father!”

“Michael,” replied Nadia, “you have more need of me than my father. Do you mean to give up going to Irkutsk?”

“Never!” cried Michael, in a tone which plainly showed that none of his energy was gone.

“But you have not the letter!”

“That letter of which Ivan Ogareff robbed me! Well! I shall manage without it, Nadia! They have treated me as a spy! I will act as a spy! I will go and repeat at Irkutsk all I have seen, all I have heard; I swear it by Heaven above! The traitor shall meet me one day face to face! But I must arrive at Irkutsk before him.”

“And yet you speak of our separating, Michael?”

“Nadia, they have taken everything from me!”

“I have some roubles still, and my eyes! I can see for you, Michael; and I will lead you thither, where you could not go alone!”

“And how shall we go?”

“On foot.”

“And how shall we live?”

“By begging.”

“Let us start, Nadia.”

“Come, Michael.”

The two young people no longer kept the names “brother” and “sister.” In their common misfortune, they felt still closer united. They left the house after an hour’s repose. Nadia had procured in the town some morsels of “tchornekhleb,” a sort of barley bread, and a little mead, called “meod” in Russia. This had cost her nothing, for she had already begun her plan of begging. The bread and mead had in some degree appeased Michael’s hunger and thirst. Nadia gave him the lion’s share of this scanty meal. He ate the pieces of bread his companion gave him, drank from the gourd she held to his lips.

“Are you eating, Nadia?” he asked several times.

“Yes, Michael,” invariably replied the young girl, who contented herself with what her companion left.

Michael and Nadia quitted Semilowskoe, and once more set out on the laborious road to Irkutsk. The girl bore up in a marvelous way against fatigue. Had Michael seen her, perhaps he would not have had the courage to go on. But Nadia never complained, and Michael, hearing no sigh, walked at a speed he was unable to repress. And why? Did he still expect to keep before the Tartars? He was on foot, without money; he was blind, and if Nadia, his only guide, were to be separated from him, he could only lie down by the side of the road and there perish miserably. But if, on the other hand, by energetic perseverance he could reach Krasnoiarsk, all was perhaps not lost, since the governor, to whom he would make himself known, would not hesitate to give him the means of reaching Irkutsk.

Michael walked on, speaking little, absorbed in his own thoughts. He held Nadia’s hand. The two were in incessant communication. It seemed to them that they had no need of words to exchange their thoughts. From time to time Michael said, “Speak to me, Nadia.”

“Why should I, Michael? We are thinking together!” the young girl would reply, and contrived that her voice should not betray her extreme fatigue.

But sometimes, as if her heart had ceased to beat for an instant, her limbs tottered, her steps flagged, her arms fell to her sides, she dropped behind. Michael then stopped, he fixed his eyes on the poor girl, as though he would try to pierce the gloom which surrounded him; his breast heaved; then, supporting his companion more than before, he started on afresh.

However, amidst these continual miseries, a fortunate circumstance on that day occurred which it appeared likely would considerably ease their fatigue. They had been walking from Semilowskoe for two hours when Michael stopped.

“Is there no one on the road?”

“Not a single soul,” replied Nadia.

“Do you not hear some noise behind us? If they are Tartars we must hide. Keep a good look-out!”

“Wait, Michael!” replied Nadia, going back a few steps to where the road turned to the right.

Michael Strogoff waited alone for a minute, listening attentively.

Nadia returned almost immediately and said, “It is a cart. A young man is leading it.”

“Is he alone?”

“Alone.”

Michael hesitated an instant. Should he hide? or should he, on the contrary, try to find a place in the vehicle, if not for himself, at least for her? For himself, he would be quite content to lay one hand on the cart, to push it if necessary, for his legs showed no sign of failing him; but he felt sure that Nadia, compelled to walk ever since they crossed the Obi, that is, for eight days, must be almost exhausted. He waited.

The cart was soon at the corner of the road. It was a very dilapidated vehicle, known in the country as a kibitka, just capable of holding three persons. Usually the kibitka is drawn by three horses, but this had but one, a beast with long hair and a very long tail. It was of the Mongol breed, known for strength and courage.

A young man was leading it, with a dog beside him. Nadia saw at once that the young man was Russian; his face was phlegmatic, but pleasant, and at once inspired confidence. He did not appear to be in the slightest hurry; he was not walking fast that he might spare his horse, and, to look at him, it would not have been believed that he was following a road which might at any instant be swarming with Tartars.

Nadia, holding Michael by the hand, made way for the vehicle. The kibitka stopped, and the driver smilingly looked at the young girl.

“And where are you going to in this fashion?” he asked, opening wide his great honest eyes.

At the sound of his voice, Michael said to himself that he had heard it before. And it was satisfactory to him to recognize the man for his brow at once cleared.

“Well, where are you going?” repeated the young man, addressing himself more directly to Michael.

"We are going to Irkutsk," he replied.

"Oh! little father, you do not know that there are still versts and versts between you and Irkutsk?"

"I know it."

"And you are going on foot?"

"On foot."

"You, well! but the young lady?"

"She is my sister," said Michael, who judged it prudent to give again this name to Nadia.

"Yes, your sister, little father! But, believe me, she will never be able to get to Irkutsk!"

"Friend," returned Michael, approaching him, "the Tartars have robbed us of everything, and I have not a copeck to offer you; but if you will take my sister with you, I will follow your cart on foot; I will run when necessary, I will not delay you an hour!"

"Brother," exclaimed Nadia, "I will not! I will not! Sir, my brother is blind!"

"Blind!" repeated the young man, much moved.

"The Tartars have burnt out his eyes!" replied Nadia, extending her hands, as if imploring pity.

“Burnt out his eyes! Oh! poor little father! I am going to Krasnoiarsk. Well, why should not you and your sister mount in the kibitka? By sitting a little close, it will hold us all three. Besides, my dog will not refuse to go on foot; only I don’t go fast, I spare my horse.”

“Friend, what is your name?” asked Michael.

“My name is Nicholas Pigassof.”

“It is a name that I will never forget,” said Michael.

“Well, jump up, little blind father. Your sister will be beside you, in the bottom of the cart; I sit in front to drive. There is plenty of good birch bark and straw in the bottom; it’s like a nest. Serko, make room!”

The dog jumped down without more telling. He was an animal of the Siberian race, gray hair, of medium size, with an honest big head, just made to pat, and he, moreover, appeared to be much attached to his master.

In a moment more, Michael and Nadia were seated in the kibitka. Michael held out his hands as if to feel for those of Pigassof. “You wish to shake my hands!” said Nicholas. “There they are, little father! shake them as long as it will give you any pleasure.”

The kibitka moved on; the horse, which Nicholas never touched with the whip, ambled along. Though Michael did not gain any in speed, at least some fatigue was spared to Nadia.

Such was the exhaustion of the young girl, that, rocked by the monotonous movement of the kibitka, she soon fell into a sleep, its soundness proving her complete prostration. Michael and Nicholas laid her on the straw as comfortably as possible. The compassionate young man was greatly moved, and if a tear did not escape from Michael’s eyes, it was because the red-hot iron had dried up the last!

“She is very pretty,” said Nicholas.

“Yes,” replied Michael.

“They try to be strong, little father, they are brave, but they are weak after all, these dear little things! Have you come from far.”

“Very far.”

“Poor young people! It must have hurt you very much when they burnt your eyes!”

“Very much,” answered Michael, turning towards Nicholas as if he could see him.

“Did you not weep?”

“Yes.”

“I should have wept too. To think that one could never again see those one loves. But they can see you, however; that’s perhaps some consolation!”

“Yes, perhaps. Tell me, my friend,” continued Michael, “have you never seen me anywhere before?”

“You, little father? No, never.”

“The sound of your voice is not unknown to me.”

“Why!” returned Nicholas, smiling, “he knows the sound of my voice! Perhaps you ask me that to find out where I come from. I come from Kolyvan.”

“From Kolyvan?” repeated Michael. “Then it was there I met you; you were in the telegraph office?”

“That may be,” replied Nicholas. “I was stationed there. I was the clerk in charge of the messages.”

“And you stayed at your post up to the last moment?”

“Why, it’s at that moment one ought to be there!”

“It was the day when an Englishman and a Frenchman were disputing, roubles in hand, for the place at your wicket, and the Englishman telegraphed some poetry.”

“That is possible, but I do not remember it.”

“What! you do not remember it?”

“I never read the dispatches I send. My duty being to forget them, the shortest way is not to know them.”

This reply showed Nicholas Pigassof’s character. In the meanwhile the kibitka pursued its way, at a pace which Michael longed to render more rapid. But Nicholas and his horse were accustomed to a pace which neither of them would like to alter. The horse went for two hours and rested one — so on, day and night. During the halts the horse grazed, the travelers ate in company with the faithful Serko. The kibitka was provisioned for at least twenty persons, and Nicholas generously placed his supplies at the disposal of his two guests, whom he believed to be brother and sister.

After a day's rest, Nadia recovered some strength. Nicholas took the best possible care of her. The journey was being made under tolerable circumstances, slowly certainly, but surely. It sometimes happened that during the night, Nicholas, although driving, fell asleep, and snored with a clearness which showed the calmness of his conscience. Perhaps then, by looking close, Michael's hand might have been seen feeling for the reins, and giving the horse a more rapid pace, to the great astonishment of Serko, who, however, said nothing. The trot was exchanged for the amble as soon as Nicholas awoke, but the kibitka had not the less gained some versts.

Thus they passed the river Ichirnsk, the villages of Ichisnokoe, Berikylokoe, Kuskoe, the river Marunsk, the village of the same name, Bogostowskoe, and, lastly, the Ichoula, a little stream which divides Western from Eastern Siberia. The road now lay sometimes across wide moors, which extended as far as the eye could reach, sometimes through thick forests of firs, of which they thought they should never get to the end. Everywhere was a desert; the villages were almost entirely abandoned. The peasants had fled beyond the Yenisei, hoping that this wide river would perhaps stop the Tartars.

On the 22d of August, the kibitka entered the town of Atchinsk, two hundred and fifty miles from Tomsk. Eighty miles still lay between them and Krasnoiarsk.

No incident had marked the journey. For the six days during which they had been together, Nicholas, Michael, and Nadia had remained the same, the one in his unchange-able calm, the other two, uneasy, and thinking of the time when their companion would leave them.

Michael saw the country through which they traveled with the eyes of Nicholas and the young girl. In turns, they each described to him the scenes they passed. He knew whether he was in a forest or on a plain, whether a hut was on the steppe, or whether any Siberian was in sight. Nicholas was never silent, he loved to talk, and, from his peculiar way of viewing things, his friends were amused by his conversation. One day, Michael asked him what sort of weather it was.

“Fine enough, little father,” he answered, “but soon we shall feel the first winter frosts. Perhaps the Tartars will go into winter quarters during the bad season.”

Michael Strogoff shook his head with a doubtful air.

“You do not think so, little father?” resumed Nicholas. “You think that they will march on to Irkutsk?”

“I fear so,” replied Michael.

“Yes... you are right; they have with them a bad man, who will not let them loiter on the way. You have heard speak of Ivan Ogareff?”

“Yes.”

“You know that it is not right to betray one’s country!”

“No... it is not right...” answered Michael, who wished to remain unmoved.

“Little father,” continued Nicholas, “it seems to me that you are not half indignant enough when Ivan Ogareff is spoken of. Your Russian heart ought to leap when his name is uttered.”

“Believe me, my friend, I hate him more than you can ever hate him,” said Michael.

“It is not possible,” replied Nicholas; “no, it is not possible! When I think of Ivan Ogareff, of the harm which he is doing to our sacred Russia, I get into such a rage that if I could get hold of him — ”

“If you could get hold of him, friend?”

“I think I should kill him.”

“And I, I am sure of it,” returned Michael quietly.

CHAPTER VII THE PASSAGE OF THE YENISEI

AT nightfall, on the 25th of August, the kibitka came in sight of Krasnoiarsk. The journey from Tomsk had taken eight days. If it had not been accomplished as rapidly as it might, it was because Nicholas had slept little. Consequently, it was impossible to increase his horse's pace, though in other hands, the journey would not have taken sixty hours.

Happily, there was no longer any fear of Tartars. Not a scout had appeared on the road over which the kibitka had just traveled. This was strange enough, and evidently some serious cause had prevented the Emir's troops from marching without delay upon Irkutsk. Something had occurred. A new Russian corps, hastily raised in the government of Yeniseisk, had marched to Tomsk to endeavor to retake the town. But, being too weak to withstand the Emir's troops, now concentrated there, they had been forced to effect a retreat. Feofar-Khan, including his own soldiers, and those of the Khanats of Khokhand and Koun-douze, had now under his command two hundred and fifty thousand men, to which the Russian government could not as yet oppose a sufficient force. The invasion could not, therefore, be immediately stopped, and the whole Tartar army might at once march upon Irkutsk. The battle of Tomsk was on the 22nd of August, though this Michael did not know, but it explained why the vanguard of the Emir's army had not appeared at Krasnoiarsk by the 25th.

However, though Michael Strogoff could not know the events which had occurred since his departure, he at least knew that he was several days in advance of the Tartars, and that he need not despair of reaching before them the town of Irkutsk, still six hundred miles distant.

Besides, at Krasnoiarsk, of which the population is about twelve thousand souls, he depended upon obtaining some means of transport. Since Nicholas Pigassof was to stop in that town, it would be necessary to replace him by a guide, and to change the kibitka for another more rapid vehicle. Michael, after having addressed himself to the governor of the town, and established his identity and quality as Courier of the Czar — which would be easy — doubted not that he would be enabled to get to Irkutsk in the shortest possible time. He would thank the good Nicholas Pigassof, and set out immediately with Nadia, for he did not wish to leave her until he had placed her in her father’s arms. Though Nicholas had resolved to stop at Krasnoiarsk, it was only as he said, “on condition of finding employment there.” In fact, this model clerk, after having stayed to the last minute at his post in Kolyvan, was endeavoring to place himself again at the disposal of the government. “Why should I receive a salary which I have not earned?” he would say.

In the event of his services not being required at Krasnoiarsk, which it was expected would be still in telegraphic communication with Irkutsk, he proposed to go to Oudinsk, or even to the capital of Siberia itself. In the latter case, he would continue to travel with the brother and sister; and where would they find a surer guide, or a more devoted friend?

The kibitka was now only half a verst from Krasnoiarsk. The numerous wooden crosses which are erected at the approaches to the town, could be seen to the right and left of the road. It was seven in the evening; the outline of the churches and of the houses built on the high bank of the Yenisei were clearly defined against the evening sky, and the waters of the river reflected them in the twilight.

“Where are we, sister?” asked Michael.

"Half a verst from the first houses," replied Nadia.

"Can the town be asleep?" observed Michael. "Not a sound strikes my ear."

"And I cannot see the slightest light, nor even smoke mounting into the air," added Nadia.

"What a queer town!" said Nicholas. "They make no noise in it, and go to bed uncommonly early!"

A presentiment of impending misfortune passed across Michael's heart. He had not said to Nadia that he had placed all his hopes on Krasnoiarsk, where he expected to find the means of safely finishing his journey. He much feared that his anticipations would again be disappointed.

But Nadia had guessed his thoughts, although she could not understand why her companion should be so anxious to reach Irkutsk, now that the Imperial letter was gone. She one day said something of the sort to him. "I have sworn to go to Irkutsk," he replied.

But to accomplish his mission, it was necessary that at Krasnoiarsk he should find some more rapid mode of locomotion. "Well, friend," said he to Nicholas, "why are we not going on?"

"Because I am afraid of waking up the inhabitants of the town with the noise of my carriage!" And with a light fleck of the whip, Nicholas put his horse in motion.

Ten minutes after they entered the High Street. Krasnoiarsk was deserted; there was no longer an Athenian in this "Northern Athens," as Madame de Bourboulon has called it. Not one of their dashing equipages swept through the wide, clean streets. Not a pedestrian enlivened the footpaths raised at the bases of the magnificent wooden houses, of monumental aspect! Not a Siberian belle, dressed in the last French fashion, promenaded the beautiful park, cleared in a forest of birch trees, which stretches away to the banks of the Yenisei! The great bell of the cathedral was dumb; the chimes of the churches were silent. Here was complete desolation. There was no longer a living being in this town, lately so lively!

The last telegram sent from the Czar’s cabinet, before the rupture of the wire, had ordered the governor, the garrison, the inhabitants, whoever they might be, to leave Krasnoiarsk, to carry with them any articles of value, or which might be of use to the Tartars, and to take refuge at Irkutsk. The same injunction was given to all the villages of the province. It was the intention of the Muscovite government to lay the country desert before the invaders. No one thought for an instant of disputing these orders. They were executed, and this was the reason why not a single human being remained in Krasnoiarsk.

Michael Strogoff, Nadia, and Nicholas passed silently through the streets of the town. They felt half-stupefied. They themselves made the only sound to be heard in this dead city. Michael allowed nothing of what he felt to appear, but he inwardly raged against the bad luck which pursued him, his hopes being again disappointed.

“Alack, alack!” cried Nicholas, “I shall never get any employment in this desert!”

“Friend,” said Nadia, “you must go on with us.”

“I must indeed!” replied Nicholas. “The wire is no doubt still working between Oudinsk and Irkutsk, and there — Shall we start, little father?”

“Let us wait till to-morrow,” answered Michael.

“You are right,” said Nicholas. “We have the Yenisei to cross, and need light to see our way there!”

“To see!” murmured Nadia, thinking of her blind companion.

Nicholas heard her, and turning to Michael, “Forgive me, little father,” said he. “Alas! night and day, it is true, are all the same to you!”

“Do not reproach yourself, friend,” replied Michael, pressing his hand over his eyes. “With you for a guide I can still act. Take a few hours’ repose. Nadia must rest too. To-morrow we will recommence our journey!”

Michael and his friends had not to search long for a place of rest. The first house, the door of which they pushed open, was empty, as well as all the others. Nothing could be found within but a few heaps of leaves. For want of better fodder the horse had to content himself with this scanty nourishment. The provisions of the kibitka were not yet exhausted, so each had a share. Then, after having knelt before a small picture of the Panaghia, hung on the wall, and still lighted up by a flickering lamp, Nicholas and the young girl slept, whilst Michael, over whom sleep had no influence, watched.

Before daybreak the next morning, the 26th of August, the horse was drawing the kibitka through the forests of birch trees towards the banks of the Yenisei. Michael was in much anxiety. How was he to cross the river, if, as was probable, all boats had been destroyed to retard the Tartars’ march? He knew the Yenisei, its width was considerable, its currents strong. Ordinarily by means of boats specially built for the conveyance of travelers, carriages, and horses, the passage of the Yenisei takes about three hours, and then it is with extreme difficulty that the boats reach the opposite bank. Now, in the absence of any ferry, how was the kibitka to get from one bank to the other?

Day was breaking when the kibitka reached the left bank, where one of the wide alleys of the park ended. They were about a hundred feet above the Yenisei, and could therefore survey the whole of its wide course.

“Do you see a boat?” asked Michael, casting his eyes eagerly about from one side to the other, mechanically, no doubt, as if he could really see.

“It is scarcely light yet, brother,” replied Nadia. “The fog is still thick, and we cannot see the water.”

“But I hear it roaring,” said Michael.

Indeed, from the fog issued a dull roaring sound. The waters being high rushed down with tumultuous violence. All three waited until the misty curtain should rise. The sun would not be long in dispersing the vapors.

“Well?” asked Michael.

“The fog is beginning to roll away, brother,” replied Nadia, “and it will soon be clear.”

“Then you do not see the surface of the water yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Have patience, little father,” said Nicholas. “All this will soon disappear. Look! here comes the breeze! It is driving away the fog. The trees on the opposite hills are already appearing. It is sweeping, flying away. The kindly rays of the sun have condensed all that mass of mist. Ah! how beautiful it is, my poor fellow, and how unfortunate that you cannot see such a lovely sight!"

"Do you see a boat?" asked Michael.

"I see nothing of the sort," answered Nicholas.

"Look well, friend, on this and the opposite bank, as far as your eye can reach. A raft, even a canoe?"

Nicholas and Nadia, grasping the bushes on the edge of the cliff, bent over the water. The view they thus obtained was extensive. At this place the Yenisei is not less than a mile in width, and forms two arms, of unequal size, through which the waters flow swiftly. Between these arms lie several islands, covered with alders, willows, and poplars, looking like verdant ships, anchored in the river. Beyond rise the high hills of the Eastern shore, crowned with forests, whose tops were then empurpled with light. The Yenisei stretched on either side as far as the eye could reach. The beautiful panorama lay before them for a distance of fifty versts.

But not a boat was to be seen. All had been taken away or destroyed, according to order. Unless the Tartars should bring with them materials for building a bridge of boats, their march towards Irkutsk would certainly be stopped for some time by this barrier, the Yenisei.

"I remember," said Michael, "that higher up, on the outskirts of Krasnoiarsk, there is a little quay. There the boats touch. Friend, let us go up the river, and see if some boat has not been forgotten on the bank."

Nadia seized Michael’s hand and started off at a rapid pace in the direction indicated. If only a boat or a barge large enough to hold the kibitka could be found, or even one that would carry just themselves, Michael would not hesitate to attempt the passage! Twenty minutes after, all three had reached the little quay, with houses on each side quite down to the water’s edge. It was like a village standing beyond the town of Krasnoiarsk.

But not a boat was on the shore, not a barge at the little wharf, nothing even of which a raft could be made large enough to carry three people. Michael questioned Nicholas, who made the discouraging reply that the crossing appeared to him absolutely impracticable.

“We shall cross!” answered Michael.

The search was continued. They examined the houses on the shore, abandoned like all the rest of Krasnoiarsk. They had merely to push open the doors and enter. The cottages were evidently those of poor people, and quite empty. Nicholas visited one, Nadia entered another, and even Michael went here and there and felt about, hoping to light upon some article that might be useful.

Nicholas and the girl had each fruitlessly rummaged these cottages and were about to give up the search, when they heard themselves called. Both ran to the bank and saw Michael standing on the threshold of a door.

“Come!” he exclaimed. Nicholas and Nadia went towards him and followed him into the cottage.

“What are these?” asked Michael, touching several objects piled up in a corner.

“They are leathern bottles,” answered Nicholas.

“Are they full?”

“Yes, full of koumyss. We have found them very opportunely to renew our provisions!”

“Koumyss” is a drink made of mare’s or camel’s milk, and is very sustaining, and even intoxicating; so that Nicholas and his companions could not but congratulate themselves on the discovery.

“Save one,” said Michael, “but empty the others.”

“Directly, little father.”

“These will help us to cross the Yenisei.”

“And the raft?”

“Will be the kibitka itself, which is light enough to float. Besides, we will sustain it, as well as the horse, with these bottles.”

“Well thought of, little father,” exclaimed Nicholas, “and by God’s help we will get safely over... though perhaps not in a straight line, for the current is very rapid!”

“What does that matter?” replied Michael. “Let us get across first, and we shall soon find out the road to Irkutsk on the other side of the river.”

“To work, then,” said Nicholas, beginning to empty the bottles.

One full of koumyss was reserved, and the rest, with the air carefully fastened in, were used to form a floating apparatus. Two bottles were fastened to the horse's sides to support it in the water. Two others were attached to the shafts to keep them on a level with the body of the machine, thus transformed into a raft. This work was soon finished.

"You will not be afraid, Nadia?" asked Michael.

"No, brother," answered the girl.

"And you, friend?"

"I?" cried Nicholas. "I am now going to have one of my dreams realized — that of sailing in a cart."

At the spot where they were now standing, the bank sloped, and was suitable for the launching of the kibitka. The horse drew it into the water, and they were soon both floating. As to Serko, he was swimming bravely.

The three passengers, seated in the vehicle, had with due precaution taken off their shoes and stockings; but, thanks to the bottles, the water did not even come over their ankles. Michael held the reins, and, according to Nicholas's directions, guided the animal obliquely, but cautiously, so as not to exhaust him by struggling against the current. So long as the kibitka went with the current all was easy, and in a few minutes it had passed the quays of Krasnoiarsk. It drifted northwards, and it was soon evident that it would only reach the opposite bank far below the town. But that mattered little. The crossing would have been made without great difficulty, even on this imperfect apparatus, had the current been regular; but, unfortunately, there were whirlpools in numbers, and soon the kibitka, notwithstanding all Michael's efforts, was irresistibly drawn into one of these.

There the danger was great. The kibitka no longer drifted, but spun rapidly round, inclining towards the center of the eddy, like a rider in a circus. The horse could scarcely keep his head above water, and ran a great risk of being suffocated. Serko had been obliged to take refuge in the carriage.

Michael knew what was happening. He felt himself drawn round in a gradually narrowing line, from which they could not get free. How he longed to see, to be better able to avoid this peril, but that was no longer possible. Nadia was silent, her hands clinging to the sides of the cart, which was inclining more and more towards the center of depression.

And Nicholas, did he not understand the gravity of the situation? Was it with him phlegm or contempt of danger, courage or indifference? Was his life valueless in his eyes, and, according to the Eastern expression, “an hotel for five days,” which, whether one is willing or not, must be left the sixth? At any rate, the smile on his rosy face never faded for an instant.

The kibitka was thus in the whirlpool, and the horse was nearly exhausted, when, all at once, Michael, throwing off such of his garments as might impede him, jumped into the water; then, seizing with a strong hand the bridle of the terrified horse, he gave him such an impulse that he managed to struggle out of the circle, and getting again into the current, the kibitka drifted along anew.

“Hurrah!” exclaimed Nicholas.

Two hours after leaving the wharf, the kibitka had crossed the widest arm of the river, and had landed on an island more than six versts below the starting point.

There the horse drew the cart onto the bank, and an hour’s rest was given to the courageous animal; then the island having been crossed under the shade of its magnificent birches, the kibitka found itself on the shore of the smaller arm of the Yenisei.

This passage was much easier; no whirlpools broke the course of the river in this second bed; but the current was so rapid that the kibitka only reached the opposite side five versts below. They had drifted eleven versts in all.

These great Siberian rivers across which no bridges have as yet been thrown, are serious obstacles to the facility of communication. All had been more or less unfortunate to Michael Strogoff. On the Irtych, the boat which carried him and Nadia had been attacked by Tartars. On the Obi, after his horse had been struck by a bullet, he had only by a miracle escaped from the horsemen who were pursuing him. In fact, this passage of the Yenisei had been performed the least disastrously.

“That would not have been so amusing,” exclaimed Nicholas, rubbing his hands, as they disembarked on the right bank of the river, “if it had not been so difficult.”

“That which has only been difficult to us, friend,” answered Michael Strogoff, “will, perhaps, be impossible to the Tartars.”

CHAPTER VIII A HARE CROSSES THE ROAD

MICHAEL STROGOFF might at last hope that the road to Irkutsk was clear. He had distanced the Tartars, now detained at Tomsk, and when the Emir’s soldiers should arrive at Krasnoiarsk they would find only a deserted town. There being no communication between the two banks of the Yenisei, a delay of some days would be caused until a bridge of boats could be established, and to accomplish this would be a difficult undertaking. For the first time since the encounter with Ivan Ogareff at Omsk, the courier of the Czar felt less uneasy, and began to hope that no fresh obstacle would delay his progress.

The road was good, for that part of it which extends between Krasnoiarsk and Irkutsk is considered the best in the whole journey; fewer jolts for travelers, large trees to shade them from the heat of the sun, sometimes forests of pines or cedars covering an extent of a hundred versts. It was no longer the wide steppe with limitless horizon; but the rich country was empty. Everywhere they came upon deserted villages. The Siberian peasantry had vanished. It was a desert, but a desert by order of the Czar.

The weather was fine, but the air, which cooled during the night, took some time to get warm again. Indeed it was now near September, and in this high region the days were sensibly shortening. Autumn here lasts but a very little while, although this part of Siberian territory is not situated above the fifty-fifth parallel, that of Edinburgh and Copenhagen. However, winter succeeds summer almost unexpectedly. These winters of Asiatic Russia may be said to be precocious, considering that during them the thermometer falls until the mercury is frozen nearly 42 degrees below zero, and that 20 degrees below zero is considered an unsupportable temperature.

The weather favored our travelers. It was neither stormy nor rainy. The health of Nadia and Michael was good, and since leaving Tomsk they had gradually recovered from their past fatigues.

As to Nicholas Pigassof, he had never been better in his life. To him this journey was a trip, an agreeable excursion in which he employed his enforced holiday.

“Decidedly,” said he, “this is pleasanter than sitting twelve hours a day, perched on a stool, working the manip-ulator!”

Michael had managed to get Nicholas to make his horse quicken his pace. To obtain this result, he had confided to Nicholas that Nadia and he were on their way to join their father, exiled at Irkutsk, and that they were very anxious to get there. Certainly, it would not do to overwork the horse, for very probably they would not be able to exchange him for another; but by giving him frequent rests — every ten miles, for instance — forty miles in twenty-four hours could easily be accomplished. Besides, the animal was strong, and of a race calculated to endure great fatigue. He was in no want of rich pasturage along the road, the grass being thick and abundant. Therefore, it was possible to demand an increase of work from him.

Nicholas gave in to all these reasons. He was much moved at the situation of these two young people, going to share their father’s exile. Nothing had ever appeared so touching to him. With what a smile he said to Nadia: “Divine goodness! what joy will Mr. Korpanoff feel, when his eyes behold you, when his arms open to receive you! If I go to Irkutsk — and that appears very probable now — will you permit me to be present at that interview! You will, will you not?” Then, striking his forehead: “But, I forgot, what grief too when he sees that his poor son is blind! Ah! everything is mingled in this world!”

However, the result of all this was the kibitka went faster, and, according to Michael’s calculations, now made almost eight miles an hour.

After crossing the little river Biriousa, the kibitka reached Biriousensk on the morning of the 4th of September. There, very fortunately, for Nicholas saw that his provisions were becoming exhausted, he found in an oven a dozen “pogatchas,” a kind of cake prepared with sheep’s fat and a large supply of plain boiled rice. This increase was very opportune, for something would soon have been needed to replace the koumyss with which the kibitka had been stored at Krasnoiarsk.

After a halt, the journey was continued in the afternoon. The distance to Irkutsk was not now much over three hundred miles. There was not a sign of the Tartar vanguard. Michael Strogoff had some grounds for hoping that his journey would not be again delayed, and that in eight days, or at most ten, he would be in the presence of the Grand Duke.

On leaving Biriousinsk, a hare ran across the road, in front of the kibitka. “Ah!” exclaimed Nicholas.

“What is the matter, friend?” asked Michael quickly, like a blind man whom the least sound arouses.

“Did you not see?” said Nicholas, whose bright face had become suddenly clouded. Then he added, “Ah! no! you could not see, and it’s lucky for you, little father!”

“But I saw nothing,” said Nadia.

“So much the better! So much the better! But I — I saw!”

“What was it then?” asked Michael.

“A hare crossing our road!” answered Nicholas.

In Russia, when a hare crosses the path, the popular belief is that it is the sign of approaching evil. Nicholas, superstitious like the greater number of Russians, stopped the kibitka.

Michael understood his companion’s hesitation, without sharing his credulity, and endeavored to reassure him, “There is nothing to fear, friend,” said he.

“Nothing for you, nor for her, I know, little father,” answered Nicholas, “but for me!”

“It is my fate,” he continued. And he put his horse in motion again. However, in spite of these forebodings the day passed without any accident.

At twelve o’clock the next day, the 6th of September, the kibitka halted in the village of Alsalevok, which was as deserted as the surrounding country. There, on a doorstep, Nadia found two of those strong-bladed knives used by Siberian hunters. She gave one to Michael, who concealed it among his clothes, and kept the other herself.

Nicholas had not recovered his usual spirits. The ill-omen had affected him more than could have been believed, and he who formerly was never half an hour without speaking, now fell into long reveries from which Nadia found it difficult to arouse him. The kibitka rolled swiftly along the road. Yes, swiftly! Nicholas no longer thought of being so careful of his horse, and was as anxious to arrive at his journey’s end as Michael himself. Notwithstanding his fatalism, and though resigned, he would not believe himself in safety until within the walls of Irkutsk. Many Russians would have thought as he did, and more than one would have turned his horse and gone back again, after a hare had crossed his path.

Some observations made by him, the justice of which was proved by Nadia transmitting them to Michael, made them fear that their trials were not yet over. Though the land from Krasnoiarsk had been respected in its natural productions, its forests now bore trace of fire and steel; and it was evident that some large body of men had passed that way.

Twenty miles before Nijni-Oudinsk, the indications of recent devastation could not be mistaken, and it was impossible to attribute them to others than the Tartars. It was not only that the fields were trampled by horse's feet, and that trees were cut down. The few houses scattered along the road were not only empty, some had been partly demolished, others half burnt down. The marks of bullets could be seen on their walls.

Michael's anxiety may be imagined. He could no longer doubt that a party of Tartars had recently passed that way, and yet it was impossible that they could be the Emir's soldiers, for they could not have passed without being seen. But then, who were these new invaders, and by what out-of-the-way path across the steppe had they been able to join the highroad to Irkutsk? With what new enemies was the Czar's courier now to meet?

He did not communicate his apprehensions either to Nicholas or Nadia, not wishing to make them uneasy. Besides, he had resolved to continue his way, as long as no insurmountable obstacle stopped him. Later, he would see what it was best to do. During the ensuing day, the recent passage of a large body of foot and horse became more and more apparent. Smoke was seen above the horizon. The kibitka advanced cautiously. Several houses in deserted villages still burned, and could not have been set on fire more than four and twenty hours before.

At last, during the day, on the 8th of September, the kibitka stopped suddenly. The horse refused to advance. Serko barked furiously.

“What is the matter?” asked Michael.

“A corpse!” replied Nicholas, who had leapt out of the kibitka. The body was that of a moujik, horribly mutilated, and already cold. Nicholas crossed himself. Then, aided by Michael, he carried the body to the side of the road. He would have liked to give it decent burial, that the wild beasts of the steppe might not feast on the miserable remains, but Michael could not allow him the time.

“Come, friend, come!” he exclaimed, “we must not delay, even for an hour!” And the kibitka was driven on.

Besides, if Nicholas had wished to render the last duties to all the dead bodies they were now to meet with on the Siberian highroad, he would have had enough to do! As they approached Nijni-Oudinsk, they were found by twenties, stretched on the ground.

It was, however, necessary to follow this road until it was manifestly impossible to do so longer without falling into the hands of the invaders. The road they were following could not be abandoned, and yet the signs of devastation and ruin increased at every village they passed through. The blood of the victims was not yet dry. As to gaining information about what had occurred, that was impossible. There was not a living being left to tell the tale.

About four o’clock in the afternoon of this day, Nicholas caught sight of the tall steeples of the churches of Nijni-Oudinsk. Thick vapors, which could not have been clouds, were floating around them.

Nicholas and Nadia looked, and communicated the result of their observations to Michael. They must make up their minds what to do. If the town was abandoned, they could pass through without risk, but if, by some inexplicable maneuver, the Tartars occupied it, they must at every cost avoid the place.

“Advance cautiously,” said Michael Strogoff, “but advance!”

A verst was soon traversed.

“Those are not clouds, that is smoke!” exclaimed Nadia. “Brother, they are burning the town!”

It was, indeed, only too plain. Flashes of light appeared in the midst of the vapor. It became thicker and thicker as it mounted upwards. But were they Tartars who had done this? They might be Russians, obeying the orders of the Grand Duke. Had the government of the Czar determined that from Krasnoiarsk, from the Yenisei, not a town, not a village should offer a refuge to the Emir’s soldiers? What was Michael to do?

He was undecided. However, having weighed the pros and cons, he thought that whatever might be the difficulties of a journey across the steppe without a beaten path, he ought not to risk capture a second time by the Tartars. He was just proposing to Nicholas to leave the road, when a shot was heard on their right. A ball whistled, and the horse of the kibitka fell dead, shot through the head.

A dozen horsemen dashed forward, and the kibitka was surrounded. Before they knew where they were, Michael, Nadia, and Nicholas were prisoners, and were being dragged rapidly towards Nijni-Oudinsk.

Michael, in this second attack, had lost none of his presence of mind. Being unable to see his enemies, he had not thought of defending himself. Even had he possessed the use of his eyes, he would not have attempted it. The consequences would have been his death and that of his companions. But, though he could not see, he could listen and understand what was said.

From their language he found that these soldiers were Tartars, and from their words, that they preceded the invading army.

In short, what Michael learnt from the talk at the present moment, as well as from the scraps of conversation he overheard later, was this. These men were not under the direct orders of the Emir, who was now detained beyond the Yenisei. They made part of a third column chiefly composed of Tartars from the khanats of Khokland and Koondooz, with which Feofar's army was to affect a junction in the neighborhood of Irkutsk.

By Ogareff's advice, in order to assure the success of the invasion in the Eastern provinces, this column had skirted the base of the Altai Mountains. Pillaging and ravaging, it had reached the upper course of the Yenisei. There, guessing what had been done at Krasnoiarsk by order of the Czar, and to facilitate the passage of the river to the Emir's troops, this column had launched a flotilla of boats, which would enable Feofar to cross and resume the road to Irkutsk. Having done this, it had descended the valley of the Yenisei and struck the road on a level with Alsalevsk. From this little town began the frightful course of ruin which forms the chief part of Tartar warfare. Nijni-Oudinsk had shared the common fate, and the Tartars, to the number of fifty thousand, had now quitted it to take up a position before Irkutsk. Before long, they would be reinforced by the Emir's troops.

Such was the state of affairs at this date, most serious for this isolated part of Eastern Siberia, and for the comparatively few defenders of its capital.

It can be imagined with what thoughts Michael's mind was now occupied! Who could have been astonished had he, in his present situation, lost all hope and all courage? Nothing of the sort, however; his lips muttered no other words than these: "I will get there!"

Half an hour after the attack of the Tartar horsemen, Michael Strogoff, Nadia, and Nicholas entered Nijni-Oudinsk. The faithful dog followed them, though at a distance. They could not stay in the town, as it was in flames, and about to be left by the last of the marauders. The prisoners were therefore thrown on horses and hurried away; Nicholas resigned as usual, Nadia, her faith in Michael unshaken, and Michael himself, apparently indifferent, but ready to seize any opportunity of escaping.

The Tartars were not long in perceiving that one of their prisoners was blind, and their natural barbarity led them to make game of their unfortunate victim. They were traveling fast. Michael's horse, having no one to guide him, often started aside, and so made confusion among the ranks. This drew on his rider such abuse and brutality as wrung Nadia's heart, and filled Nicholas with indignation. But what could they do? They could not speak the Tartar language, and their assistance was mercilessly refused. Soon it occurred to these men, in a refinement of cruelty, to exchange the horse Michael was riding for one which was blind. The motive of the change was explained by a remark which Michael overheard, "Perhaps that Russian can see, after all!"

Michael was placed on this horse, and the reins ironically put into his hand. Then, by dint of lashing, throwing stones, and shouting, the animal was urged into a gallop. The horse, not being guided by his rider, blind as himself, sometimes ran into a tree, sometimes went quite off the road — in consequence, collisions and falls, which might have been extremely dangerous.

Michael did not complain. Not a murmur escaped him. When his horse fell, he waited until it got up. It was, indeed, soon assisted up, and the cruel fun continued. At sight of this wicked treatment, Nicholas could not contain himself; he endeavored to go to his friend’s aid. He was prevented, and treated brutally.

This game would have been prolonged, to the Tartars’ great amusement, had not a serious accident put an end to it. On the 10th of September the blind horse ran away, and made straight for a pit, some thirty or forty feet deep, at the side of the road.

Nicholas tried to go after him. He was held back. The horse, having no guide, fell with his rider to the bottom. Nicholas and Nadia uttered a piercing cry! They believed that their unfortunate companion had been killed.

However, when they went to his assistance, it was found that Michael, having been able to throw himself out of the saddle, was unhurt, but the miserable horse had two legs broken, and was quite useless. He was left there to die without being put out of his suffering, and Michael, fastened to a Tartar’s saddle, was obliged to follow the detachment on foot.

Even now, not a protest, not a complaint! He marched with a rapid step, scarcely drawn by the cord which tied him. He was still “the Man of Iron,” of whom General Kissoff had spoken to the Czar!

The next day, the 11th of September, the detachment passed through the village of Chibarlinskoe. Here an incident occurred which had serious consequences. It was nightfall. The Tartar horsemen, having halted, were more or less intoxicated. They were about to start. Nadia, who till then, by a miracle, had been respectfully treated by the soldiers, was insulted by one of them.

Michael could not see the insult, nor the insulter, but Nicholas saw for him. Then, quietly, without thinking, without perhaps knowing what he was doing, Nicholas walked straight up to the man, and, before the latter could make the least movement to stop him, had seized a pistol from his holster and discharged it full at his breast.

The officer in command of the detachment hastened up on hearing the report. The soldiers would have cut the unfortunate Nicholas to pieces, but at a sign from their officer, he was bound instead, placed across a horse, and the detachment galloped off.

The rope which fastened Michael, gnawed through by him, broke by the sudden start of the horse, and the half-tipsy rider galloped on without perceiving that his prisoner had escaped.

Michael and Nadia found themselves alone on the road.

CHAPTER IX IN THE STEPPE

MICHAEL STROGOFF and Nadia were once more as free as they had been in the journey from Perm to the banks of the Irtych. But how the conditions under which they traveled were altered! Then, a comfortable tarantass, fresh horses, well-kept post-horses assured the rapidity of their journey. Now they were on foot; it was utterly impossible to procure any other means of locomotion, they were without resources, not knowing how to obtain even food, and they had still nearly three hundred miles to go! Moreover, Michael could now only see with Nadia's eyes.

As to the friend whom chance had given them, they had just lost him, and fearful might be his fate. Michael had thrown himself down under the brushwood at the side of the road. Nadia stood beside him, waiting for the word from him to continue the march.

It was ten o'clock. The sun had more than three hours before disappeared below the horizon. There was not a house in sight. The last of the Tartars was lost in the distance. Michael and Nadia were quite alone.

"What will they do with our friend?" exclaimed the girl. "Poor Nicholas! Our meeting will have been fatal to him!" Michael made no response.

"Michael," continued Nadia, "do you not know that he defended you when you were the Tartars' sport; that he risked his life for me?"

Michael was still silent. Motionless, his face buried in his hands; of what was he thinking? Perhaps, although he did not answer, he heard Nadia speak.

Yes! he heard her, for when the young girl added, “Where shall I lead you, Michael?”

“To Irkutsk!” he replied.

“By the highroad?”

“Yes, Nadia.”

Michael was still the same man who had sworn, whatever happened, to accomplish his object. To follow the highroad, was certainly to go the shortest way. If the vanguard of Feofar-Khan’s troops appeared, it would then be time to strike across the country.

Nadia took Michael’s hand, and they started.

The next morning, the 13th of September, twenty versts further, they made a short halt in the village of Joulounov-skoe. It was burnt and deserted. All night Nadia had tried to see if the body of Nicholas had not been left on the road, but it was in vain that she looked among the ruins, and searched among the dead. Was he reserved for some cruel torture at Irkutsk?

Nadia, exhausted with hunger, was fortunate enough to find in one of the houses a quantity of dried meat and “soukharis,” pieces of bread, which, dried by evaporation, preserve their nutritive qualities for an indefinite time.

Michael and the girl loaded themselves with as much as they could carry. They had thus a supply of food for several days, and as to water, there would be no want of that in a district rendered fertile by the numerous little affluents of the Angara.

They continued their journey. Michael walked with a firm step, and only slackened his pace for his companion’s sake. Nadia, not wishing to retard him, obliged herself to walk. Happily, he could not see to what a miserable state fatigue had reduced her.

However, Michael guessed it. “You are quite done up, poor child,” he said sometimes.

“No,” she would reply.

“When you can no longer walk, I will carry you.”

“Yes, Michael.”

During this day they came to the little river Oka, but it was fordable, and they had no difficulty in crossing. The sky was cloudy and the temperature moderate. There was some fear that the rain might come on, which would much have increased their misery. A few showers fell, but they did not last.

They went on as before, hand in hand, speaking little, Nadia looking about on every side; twice a day they halted. Six hours of the night were given to sleep. In a few huts Nadia again found a little mutton; but, contrary to Michael’s hopes, there was not a single beast of burden in the country; horses, camels — all had been either killed or carried off. They must still continue to plod on across this weary steppe on foot.

The third Tartar column, on its way to Irkutsk, had left plain traces: here a dead horse, there an abandoned cart. The bodies of unfortunate Siberians lay along the road, principally at the entrances to villages. Nadia, overcoming her repugnance, looked at all these corpses!

The chief danger lay, not before, but behind. The advance guard of the Emir's army, commanded by Ivan Ogareff, might at any moment appear. The boats sent down the lower Yenisei must by this time have reached Krasnoiarsk and been made use of. The road was therefore open to the invaders. No Russian force could be opposed to them between Krasnoiarsk and Lake Baikal, Michael therefore expected before long the appearance of the Tartar scouts.

At each halt, Nadia climbed some hill and looked anxiously to the Westward, but as yet no cloud of dust had signaled the approach of a troop of horse.

Then the march was resumed; and when Michael felt that he was dragging poor Nadia forward too rapidly, he went at a slower pace. They spoke little, and only of Nicholas. The young girl recalled all that this companion of a few days had done for them.

In answering, Michael tried to give Nadia some hope of which he did not feel a spark himself, for he well knew that the unfortunate fellow would not escape death.

One day Michael said to the girl, "You never speak to me of my mother, Nadia."

His mother! Nadia had never wished to do so. Why renew his grief? Was not the old Siberian dead? Had not her son given the last kiss to her corpse stretched on the plain of Tomsk?

"Speak to me of her, Nadia," said Michael. "Speak — you will please me."

And then Nadia did what she had not done before. She told all that had passed between Marfa and herself since their meeting at Omsk, where they had seen each other for the first time. She said how an inexplicable instinct had led her towards the old prisoner without knowing who she was, and what encouragement she had received in return. At that time Michael Strogoff had been to her but Nicholas Korpanoff.

“Whom I ought always to have been,” replied Michael, his brow darkening.

Then later he added, “I have broken my oath, Nadia. I had sworn not to see my mother!”

“But you did not try to see her, Michael,” replied Nadia. “Chance alone brought you into her presence.”

“I had sworn, whatever might happen, not to betray myself.”

“Michael, Michael! at sight of the lash raised upon Marfa, could you refrain? No! No oath could prevent a son from succoring his mother!”

“I have broken my oath, Nadia,” returned Michael. “May God and the Father pardon me!”

“Michael,” resumed the girl, “I have a question to ask you. Do not answer it if you think you ought not. Nothing from you would vex me!”

“Speak, Nadia.”

“Why, now that the Czar’s letter has been taken from you, are you so anxious to reach Irkutsk?”

Michael tightly pressed his companion’s hand, but he did not answer.

“Did you know the contents of that letter before you left Moscow?”

“No, I did not know.”

“Must I think, Michael, that the wish alone to place me in my father’s hands draws you toward Irkutsk?”

“No, Nadia,” replied Michael, gravely. “I should deceive you if I allowed you to believe that it was so. I go where duty orders me to go. As to taking you to Irkutsk, is it not you, Nadia, who are now taking me there? Do I not see with your eyes; and is it not your hand that guides me? Have you not repaid a hundred-fold the help which I was able to give you at first? I do not know if fate will cease to go against us; but the day on which you thank me for having placed you in your father’s hands, I in my turn will thank you for having led me to Irkutsk.”

“Poor Michael!” answered Nadia, with emotion. “Do not speak so. That does not answer me. Michael, why, now, are you in such haste to reach Irkutsk?”

“Because I must be there before Ivan Ogareff,” exclaimed Michael.

“Even now?”

“Even now, and I will be there, too!”

In uttering these words, Michael did not speak solely through hatred to the traitor. Nadia understood that her companion had not told, or could not tell, her all.

On the 15th of September, three days later, the two reached the village of Kouitounskoe. The young girl suffered dreadfully. Her aching feet could scarcely support her; but she fought, she struggled, against her weariness, and her only thought was this: “Since he cannot see me, I will go on till I drop.”

There were no obstacles on this part of the journey, no danger either since the departure of the Tartars, only much fatigue. For three days it continued thus. It was plain that the third invading column was advancing rapidly in the East; that could be seen by the ruins which they left after them — the cold cinders and the already decomposing corpses.

There was nothing to be seen in the West; the Emir’s advance-guard had not yet appeared. Michael began to consider the various reasons which might have caused this delay. Was a sufficient force of Russians directly menacing Tomsk or Krasnoiarsk? Did the third column, isolated from the others, run a risk of being cut off? If this was the case, it would be easy for the Grand Duke to defend Irkutsk, and any time gained against an invasion was a step towards repulsing it. Michael sometimes let his thoughts run on these hopes, but he soon saw their improbability, and felt that the preservation of the Grand Duke depended alone on him.

Nadia dragged herself along. Whatever might be her moral energy, her physical strength would soon fail her. Michael knew it only too well. If he had not been blind, Nadia would have said to him, “Go, Michael, leave me in some hut! Reach Irkutsk! Accomplish your mission! See my father! Tell him where I am! Tell him that I wait for him, and you both will know where to find me! Start! I am not afraid! I will hide myself from the Tartars! I will take care of myself for him, for you! Go, Michael! I can go no farther!”

Many times Nadia was obliged to stop. Michael then took her in his strong arms and, having no longer to think of her fatigue, walked more rapidly and with his indefatigable step.

On the 18th of September, at ten in the evening, Kimilteiskoe was at last entered. From the top of a hill, Nadia saw in the horizon a long light line. It was the Dinka River. A few lightning flashes were reflected in the water; summer lightning, without thunder. Nadia led her companion through the ruined village. The cinders were quite cold. The last of the Tartars had passed through at least five or six days before.

Beyond the village, Nadia sank down on a stone bench. “Shall we make a halt?” asked Michael.

“It is night, Michael,” answered Nadia. “Do you not want to rest a few hours?”

“I would rather have crossed the Dinka,” replied Michael, “I should like to put that between us and the Emir’s advance-guard. But you can scarcely drag yourself along, my poor Nadia!”

“Come, Michael,” returned Nadia, seizing her companion’s hand and drawing him forward.

Two or three versts further the Dinka flowed across the Irkutsk road. The young girl wished to attempt this last effort asked by her companion. She found her way by the light from the flashes. They were then crossing a boundless desert, in the midst of which was lost the little river. Not a tree nor a hillock broke the flatness. Not a breath disturbed the atmosphere, whose calmness would allow the slightest sound to travel an immense distance.

Suddenly, Michael and Nadia stopped, as if their feet had been fast to the ground. The barking of a dog came across the steppe. “Do you hear?” said Nadia.

Then a mournful cry succeeded it — a despairing cry, like the last appeal of a human being about to die.

“Nicholas! Nicholas!” cried the girl, with a foreboding of evil. Michael, who was listening, shook his head.

“Come, Michael, come,” said Nadia. And she who just now was dragging herself with difficulty along, suddenly recovered strength, under violent excitement.

“We have left the road,” said Michael, feeling that he was treading no longer on powdery soil but on short grass.

“Yes, we must!” returned Nadia. “It was there, on the right, from which the cry came!”

In a few minutes they were not more than half a verst from the river. A second bark was heard, but, although more feeble, it was certainly nearer. Nadia stopped.

“Yes!” said Michael. “It is Serko barking!... He has followed his master!”

“Nicholas!” called the girl. Her cry was unanswered.

Michael listened. Nadia gazed over the plain illumined now and again with electric light, but she saw nothing. And yet a voice was again raised, this time murmuring in a plaintive tone, “Michael!”

Then a dog, all bloody, bounded up to Nadia.

It was Serko! Nicholas could not be far off! He alone could have murmured the name of Michael! Where was he? Nadia had no strength to call again.

Michael, crawling on the ground, felt about with his hands.

Suddenly Serko uttered a fresh bark and darted towards a gigantic bird which had swooped down. It was a vulture. When Serko ran towards it, it rose, but returning struck at the dog. The latter leapt up at it. A blow from the formidable beak alighted on his head, and this time Serko fell back lifeless on the ground.

At the same moment a cry of horror escaped Nadia. “There... there!” she exclaimed.

A head issued from the ground! She had stumbled against it in the darkness.

Nadia fell on her knees beside it. Nicholas buried up to his neck, according to the atrocious Tartar custom, had been left in the steppe to die of thirst, and perhaps by the teeth of wolves or the beaks of birds of prey!

Frightful torture for the victim imprisoned in the ground — the earth pressed down so that he cannot move, his arms bound to his body like those of a corpse in its coffin! The miserable wretch, living in the mold of clay from which he is powerless to break out, can only long for the death which is so slow in coming!

There the Tartars had buried their prisoner three days before! For three days, Nicholas waited for the help which now came too late! The vultures had caught sight of the head on a level with the ground, and for some hours the dog had been defending his master against these ferocious birds!

Michael dug at the ground with his knife to release his friend! The eyes of Nicholas, which till then had been closed, opened.

He recognized Michael and Nadia. “Farewell, my friends!” he murmured. “I am glad to have seen you again! Pray for me!”

Michael continued to dig, though the ground, having been tightly rammed down, was as hard as stone, and he managed at last to get out the body of the unhappy man. He listened if his heart was still beating... It was still!

He wished to bury him, that he might not be left exposed; and the hole into which Nicholas had been placed when living, was enlarged, so that he might be laid in it — dead! The faithful Serko was laid by his master.

At that moment, a noise was heard on the road, about half a verst distant. Michael Strogoff listened. It was evidently a detachment of horse advancing towards the Dinka. “Nadia, Nadia!” he said in a low voice.

Nadia, who was kneeling in prayer, arose. “Look, look!” said he.

“The Tartars!” she whispered.

It was indeed the Emir’s advance-guard, passing rapidly along the road to Irkutsk.

“They shall not prevent me from burying him!” said Michael. And he continued his work.

Soon, the body of Nicholas, the hands crossed on the breast, was laid in the grave. Michael and Nadia, kneeling, prayed a last time for the poor fellow, inoffensive and good, who had paid for his devotion towards them with his life.

“And now,” said Michael, as he threw in the earth, “the wolves of the steppe will not devour him.”

Then he shook his fist at the troop of horsemen who were passing. “Forward, Nadia!” he said.

Michael could not follow the road, now occupied by the Tartars. He must cross the steppe and turn to Irkutsk. He had not now to trouble himself about crossing the Dinka. Nadia could not move, but she could see for him. He took her in his arms and went on towards the southwest of the province.

A hundred and forty miles still remained to be traversed. How was the distance to be performed? Should they not succumb to such fatigue? On what were they to live on the way? By what superhuman energy were they to pass the slopes of the Sayansk Mountains? Neither he nor Nadia could answer this!

And yet, twelve days after, on the 2d of October, at six o’clock in the evening, a wide sheet of water lay at Michael Strogoff’s feet. It was Lake Baikal.

CHAPTER X BAIKAL AND ANGARA

LAKE BAIKAL is situated seventeen hundred feet above the level of the sea. Its length is about six hundred miles, its breadth seventy. Its depth is not known. Madame de Bourboulon states that, according to the boatmen, it likes to be spoken of as “Madam Sea.” If it is called “Sir Lake,” it immediately lashes itself into fury. However, it is reported and believed by the Siberians that a Russian is never drowned in it.

This immense basin of fresh water, fed by more than three hundred rivers, is surrounded by magnificent volcanic mountains. It has no other outlet than the Angara, which after passing Irkutsk throws itself into the Yenisei, a little above the town of Yeniseisk. As to the mountains which encase it, they form a branch of the Toungouzes, and are derived from the vast system of the Altai.

In this territory, subject to peculiar climatical conditions, the autumn appears to be absorbed in the precocious winter. It was now the beginning of October. The sun set at five o’clock in the evening, and during the long nights the temperature fell to zero. The first snows, which would last till summer, already whitened the summits of the neighboring hills. During the Siberian winter this inland sea is frozen over to a thickness of several feet, and is crossed by the sleighs of caravans.

Either because there are people who are so wanting in politeness as to call it “Sir Lake,” or for some more meteorological reason, Lake Baikal is subject to violent tempests. Its waves, short like those of all inland seas, are much feared by the rafts, prahms, and steamboats, which furrow it during the summer.

It was the southwest point of the lake which Michael had now reached, carrying Nadia, whose whole life, so to speak, was concentrated in her eyes. But what could these two expect, in this wild region, if it was not to die of exhaustion and famine? And yet, what remained of the long journey of four thousand miles for the Czar’s courier to reach his end? Nothing but forty miles on the shore of the lake up to the mouth of the Angara, and sixty miles from the mouth of the Angara to Irkutsk; in all, a hundred miles, or three days’ journey for a strong man, even on foot.

Could Michael Strogoff still be that man?

Heaven, no doubt, did not wish to put him to this trial. The fatality which had hitherto pursued his steps seemed for a time to spare him. This end of the Baikal, this part of the steppe, which he believed to be a desert, which it usually is, was not so now. About fifty people were collected at the angle formed by the end of the lake.

Nadia immediately caught sight of this group, when Michael, carrying her in his arms, issued from the mountain pass. The girl feared for a moment that it was a Tartar detachment, sent to beat the shores of the Baikal, in which case flight would have been impossible to them both. But Nadia was soon reassured.

“Russians!” she exclaimed. And with this last effort, her eyes closed and her head fell on Michael’s breast.

But they had been seen, and some of these Russians, running to them, led the blind man and the girl to a little point at which was moored a raft.

The raft was just going to start. These Russians were fugitives of different conditions, whom the same interest had united at Lake Baikal. Driven back by the Tartar scouts, they hoped to obtain a refuge at Irkutsk, but not being able to get there by land, the invaders having occupied both banks of the Angara, they hoped to reach it by descending the river which flows through the town.

Their plan made Michael's heart leap; a last chance was before him, but he had strength to conceal this, wishing to keep his incognito more strictly than ever.

The fugitives' plan was very simple. A current in the lake runs along by the upper bank to the mouth of the Angara; this current they hoped to utilize, and with its assistance to reach the outlet of Lake Baikal. From this point to Irkutsk, the rapid waters of the river would bear them along at a rate of eight miles an hour. In a day and a half they might hope to be in sight of the town.

No kind of boat was to be found; they had been obliged to make one; a raft, or rather a float of wood, similar to those which usually are drifted down Siberian rivers, was constructed. A forest of firs, growing on the bank, had supplied the necessary materials; the trunks, fastened together with osiers, made a platform on which a hundred people could have easily found room.

On board this raft Michael and Nadia were taken. The girl had returned to herself; some food was given to her as well as to her companion. Then, lying on a bed of leaves, she soon fell into a deep sleep.

To those who questioned him, Michael Strogoff said nothing of what had taken place at Tomsk. He gave himself out as an inhabitant of Krasnoiarsk, who had not been able to get to Irkutsk before the Emir's troops arrived on the left bank of the Dinka, and he added that, very probably, the bulk of the Tartar forces had taken up a position before the Siberian capital.

There was not a moment to be lost; besides, the cold was becoming more and more severe. During the night the temperature fell below zero; ice was already forming on the surface of the Baikal. Although the raft managed to pass easily over the lake, it might not be so easy between the banks of the Angara, should pieces of ice be found to block up its course.

At eight in the evening the moorings were cast off, and the raft drifted in the current along the shore. It was steered by means of long poles, under the management of several muscular moujiks. An old Baikal boatman took command of the raft. He was a man of sixty-five, browned by the sun, and lake breezes. A thick white beard flowed over his chest; a fur cap covered his head; his aspect was grave and austere. His large great-coat, fastened in at the waist, reached down to his heels. This taciturn old fellow was seated in the stern, and issued his commands by gestures. Besides, the chief work consisted in keeping the raft in the current, which ran along the shore, without drifting out into the open.

It has been already said that Russians of all conditions had found a place on the raft. Indeed, to the poor moujiks, the women, old men, and children, were joined two or three pilgrims, surprised on their journey by the invasion; a few monks, and a priest. The pilgrims carried a staff, a gourd hung at the belt, and they chanted psalms in a plaintive voice: one came from the Ukraine, another from the Yellow sea, and a third from the Finland provinces. This last, who was an aged man, carried at his waist a little padlocked collecting-box, as if it had been hung at a church door. Of all that he collected during his long and fatiguing pilgrimage, nothing was for himself; he did not even possess the key of the box, which would only be opened on his return.

The monks came from the North of the Empire. Three months before they had left the town of Archangel. They had visited the sacred islands near the coast of Carelia, the convent of Solovetsk, the convent of Troitsa, those of Saint Antony and Saint Theodosia, at Kiev, that of Kazan, as well as the church of the Old Believers, and they were now on their way to Irkutsk, wearing the robe, the cowl, and the clothes of serge.

As to the papa, or priest, he was a plain village pastor, one of the six hundred thousand popular pastors which the Russian Empire contains. He was clothed as miserably as the moujiks, not being above them in social position; in fact, laboring like a peasant on his plot of ground; baptis-ing, marrying, burying. He had been able to protect his wife and children from the brutality of the Tartars by sending them away into the Northern provinces. He himself had stayed in his parish up to the last moment; then he was obliged to fly, and, the Irkutsk road being stopped, had come to Lake Baikal.

These priests, grouped in the forward part of the raft, prayed at regular intervals, raising their voices in the silent night, and at the end of each sentence of their prayer, the “Slava Bogu,” Glory to God! issued from their lips.

No incident took place during the night. Nadia remained in a sort of stupor, and Michael watched beside her; sleep only overtook him at long intervals, and even then his brain did not rest. At break of day, the raft, delayed by a strong breeze, which counteracted the course of the current, was still forty versts from the mouth of the Angara. It seemed probable that the fugitives could not reach it before three or four o’clock in the evening. This did not trouble them; on the contrary, for they would then descend the river during the night, and the darkness would also favor their entrance into Irkutsk.

The only anxiety exhibited at times by the old boatman was concerning the formation of ice on the surface of the water. The night had been excessively cold; pieces of ice could be seen drifting towards the West. Nothing was to be dreaded from these, since they could not drift into the Angara, having already passed the mouth; but pieces from the Eastern end of the lake might be drawn by the current between the banks of the river; this would cause difficulty, possibly delay, and perhaps even an insurmountable obstacle which would stop the raft.

Michael therefore took immense interest in ascertaining what was the state of the lake, and whether any large number of ice blocks appeared. Nadia being now awake, he questioned her often, and she gave him an account of all that was going on.

Whilst the blocks were thus drifting, curious phenomena were taking place on the surface of the Baikal. Magnificent jets, from springs of boiling water, shot up from some of those artesian wells which Nature has bored in the very bed of the lake. These jets rose to a great height and spread out in vapor, which was illuminated by the solar rays, and almost immediately condensed by the cold. This curious sight would have assuredly amazed a tourist traveling in peaceful times on this Siberian sea.

At four in the evening, the mouth of the Angara was signaled by the old boatman, between the high granite rocks of the shore. On the right bank could be seen the little port of Livenitchnaia, its church, and its few houses built on the bank. But the serious thing was that the ice blocks from the East were already drifting between the banks of the Angara, and consequently were descending towards Irkutsk. However, their number was not yet great enough to obstruct the course of the raft, nor the cold great enough to increase their number.

The raft arrived at the little port and there stopped. The old boatman wished to put into harbor for an hour, in order to make some repairs. The trunks threatened to separate, and it was important to fasten them more securely together to resist the rapid current of the Angara.

The old boatman did not expect to receive any fresh fugitives at Livenitchnaia, and yet, the moment the raft touched, two passengers, issuing from a deserted house, ran as fast as they could towards the beach.

Nadia seated on the raft, was abstractedly gazing at the shore. A cry was about to escape her. She seized Michael's hand, who at that moment raised his head.

"What is the matter, Nadia?" he asked.

"Our two traveling companions, Michael."

"The Frenchman and the Englishman whom we met in the defiles of the Ural?"

"Yes."

Michael started, for the strict incognito which he wished to keep ran a risk of being betrayed. Indeed, it was no longer as Nicholas Korpanoff that Jolivet and Blount would now see him, but as the true Michael Strogoff, Courier of the Czar. The two correspondents had already met him twice since their separation at the Ichim post-house — the first time at the Zabediero camp, when he laid open Ivan Ogareff's face with the knout; the second time at Tomsk, when he was condemned by the Emir. They therefore knew who he was and what depended on him.

Michael Strogoff rapidly made up his mind. “Nadia,” said he, “when they step on board, ask them to come to me!”

It was, in fact, Blount and Jolivet, whom the course of events had brought to the port of Livenitchnaia, as it had brought Michael Strogoff. As we know, after having been present at the entry of the Tartars into Tomsk, they had departed before the savage execution which terminated the fete. They had therefore never suspected that their former traveling companion had not been put to death, but blinded by order of the Emir.

Having procured horses they had left Tomsk the same evening, with the fixed determination of henceforward dating their letters from the Russian camp of Eastern Siberia. They proceeded by forced marches towards Irkutsk. They hoped to distance Feofar-Khan, and would certainly have done so, had it not been for the unexpected apparition of the third column, come from the South, up the valley of the Yenisei. They had been cut off, as had been Michael, before being able even to reach the Dinka, and had been obliged to go back to Lake Baikal.

They had been in the place for three days in much perplexity, when the raft arrived. The fugitives’ plan was explained to them. There was certainly a chance that they might be able to pass under cover of the night, and penetrate into Irkutsk. They resolved to make the attempt.

Alcide directly communicated with the old boatman, and asked a passage for himself and his companion, offering to pay anything he demanded, whatever it might be.

“No one pays here,” replied the old man gravely; “every one risks his life, that is all!”

The two correspondents came on board, and Nadia saw them take their places in the forepart of the raft. Harry Blount was still the reserved Englishman, who had scarcely addressed a word to her during the whole passage over the Ural Mountains. Alcide Jolivet seemed to be rather more grave than usual, and it may be acknowledged that his gravity was justified by the circumstances.

Jolivet had, as has been said, taken his seat on the raft, when he felt a hand laid on his arm. Turning, he recognized Nadia, the sister of the man who was no longer Nicholas Korpanoff, but Michael Strogoff, Courier of the Czar. He was about to make an exclamation of surprise when he saw the young girl lay her finger on her lips.

“Come,” said Nadia. And with a careless air, Alcide rose and followed her, making a sign to Blount to accompany him.

But if the surprise of the correspondents had been great at meeting Nadia on the raft it was boundless when they perceived Michael Strogoff, whom they had believed to be no longer living.

Michael had not moved at their approach. Jolivet turned towards the girl. “He does not see you, gentlemen,” said Nadia. “The Tartars have burnt out his eyes! My poor brother is blind!”

A feeling of lively compassion exhibited itself on the faces of Blount and his companion. In a moment they were seated beside Michael, pressing his hand and waiting until he spoke to them.

“Gentlemen,” said Michael, in a low voice, “you ought not to know who I am, nor what I am come to do in Siberia. I ask you to keep my secret. Will you promise me to do so?”

“On my honor,” answered Jolivet.

“On my word as a gentleman,” added Blount.

“Good, gentlemen.”

“Can we be of any use to you?” asked Harry Blount. “Could we not help you to accomplish your task?”

“I prefer to act alone,” replied Michael.

“But those blackguards have destroyed your sight,” said Alcide.

“I have Nadia, and her eyes are enough for me!”

In half an hour the raft left the little port of Livenitchnaia, and entered the river. It was five in the evening and getting dusk. The night promised to be dark and very cold also, for the temperature was already below zero.

Alcide and Blount, though they had promised to keep Michael’s secret, did not leave him. They talked in a low voice, and the blind man, adding what they told him to what he already knew, was able to form an exact idea of the state of things. It was certain that the Tartars had actually invested Irkutsk, and that the three columns had effected a junction. There was no doubt that the Emir and Ivan Ogareff were before the capital.

But why did the Czar’s courier exhibit such haste to get there, now that the Imperial letter could no longer be given by him to the Grand Duke, and when he did not even know the contents of it? Alcide Jolivet and Blount could not understand it any more than Nadia had done.

No one spoke of the past, except when Jolivet thought it his duty to say to Michael, “We owe you some apology for not shaking hands with you when we separated at Ichim.”

“No, you had reason to think me a coward!”

“At any rate,” added the Frenchman, “you knouted the face of that villain finely, and he will carry the mark of it for a long time!”

“No, not a long time!” replied Michael quietly.

Half an hour after leaving Livenitchnaia, Blount and his companion were acquainted with the cruel trials through which Michael and his companion had successively passed. They could not but heartily admire his energy, which was only equaled by the young girl’s devotion. Their opinion of Michael was exactly what the Czar had expressed at Moscow: “Indeed, this is a Man!”

The raft swiftly threaded its way among the blocks of ice which were carried along in the current of the Angara. A moving panorama was displayed on both sides of the river, and, by an optical illusion, it appeared as if it was the raft which was motionless before a succession of picturesque scenes. Here were high granite cliffs, there wild gorges, down which rushed a torrent; sometimes appeared a clearing with a still smoking village, then thick pine forests blazing. But though the Tartars had left their traces on all sides, they themselves were not to be seen as yet, for they were more especially massed at the approaches to Irkutsk.

All this time the pilgrims were repeating their prayers aloud, and the old boatman, shoving away the blocks of ice which pressed too near them, imperturbably steered the raft in the middle of the rapid current of the Angara.

CHAPTER XI BETWEEN TWO BANKS

BY eight in the evening, the country, as the state of the sky had foretold, was enveloped in complete darkness. The moon being new had not yet risen. From the middle of the river the banks were invisible. The cliffs were confounded with the heavy, low-hanging clouds. At intervals a puff of wind came from the east, but it soon died away in the narrow valley of the Angara.

The darkness could not fail to favor in a considerable degree the plans of the fugitives. Indeed, although the Tartar outposts must have been drawn up on both banks, the raft had a good chance of passing unperceived. It was not likely either that the besiegers would have barred the river above Irkutsk, since they knew that the Russians could not expect any help from the south of the province. Besides this, before long Nature would herself establish a barrier, by cementing with frost the blocks of ice accumulated between the two banks.

Perfect silence now reigned on board the raft. The voices of the pilgrims were no longer heard. They still prayed, but their prayer was but a murmur, which could not reach as far as either bank. The fugitives lay flat on the platform, so that the raft was scarcely above the level of the water. The old boatman crouched down forward among his men, solely occupied in keeping off the ice blocks, a maneuver which was performed without noise.

The drifting of the ice was a favorable circumstance so long as it did not offer an insurmountable obstacle to the passage of the raft. If that object had been alone on the water, it would have run a risk of being seen, even in the darkness, but, as it was, it was confounded with these moving masses, of all shapes and sizes, and the tumult caused by the crashing of the blocks against each other concealed likewise any suspicious noises.

There was a sharp frost. The fugitives suffered cruelly, having no other shelter than a few branches of birch. They cowered down together, endeavoring to keep each other warm, the temperature being now ten degrees below freezing point. The wind, though slight, having passed over the snow-clad mountains of the east, pierced them through and through.

Michael and Nadia, lying in the afterpart of the raft, bore this increase of suffering without complaint. Jolivet and Blount, placed near them, stood these first assaults of the Siberian winter as well as they could. No one now spoke, even in a low voice. Their situation entirely absorbed them. At any moment an incident might occur, which they could not escape unscathed.

For a man who hoped soon to accomplish his mission, Michael was singularly calm. Even in the gravest conjunctures, his energy had never abandoned him. He already saw the moment when he would be at last allowed to think of his mother, of Nadia, of himself! He now only dreaded one final unhappy chance; this was, that the raft might be completely barred by ice before reaching Irkutsk. He thought but of this, determined beforehand, if necessary, to attempt some bold stroke.

Restored by a few hours’ rest, Nadia had regained the physical energy which misery had sometimes overcome, although without ever having shaken her moral energy. She thought, too, that if Michael had to make any fresh effort to attain his end, she must be there to guide him. But in proportion as she drew nearer to Irkutsk, the image of her father rose more and more clearly before her mind. She saw him in the invested town, far from those he loved, but, as she never doubted, struggling against the invaders with all the spirit of his patriotism. In a few hours, if Heaven favored them, she would be in his arms, giving him her mother’s last words, and nothing should ever separate them again. If the term of Wassili Fedor’s exile should never come to an end, his daughter would remain exiled with him. Then, by a natural transition, she came back to him who would have enabled her to see her father once more, to that generous companion, that “brother,” who, the Tartars driven back, would retake the road to Moscow, whom she would perhaps never meet again!

As to Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount, they had one and the same thought, which was, that the situation was extremely dramatic, and that, well worked up, it would furnish a most deeply interesting article. The Englishman thought of the readers of the Daily Telegraph, and the Frenchman of those of his Cousin Madeleine. At heart, both were not without feeling some emotion.

“Well, so much the better!” thought Alcide Jolivet, “to move others, one must be moved one’s self! I believe there is some celebrated verse on the subject, but hang me if I can recollect it!” And with his well-practiced eyes he endeavored to pierce the gloom of the river.

Every now and then a burst of light dispelling the darkness for a time, exhibited the banks under some fantastic aspect — either a forest on fire, or a still burning village. The Angara was occasionally illuminated from one bank to the other. The blocks of ice formed so many mirrors, which, reflecting the flames on every point and in every color, were whirled along by the caprice of the current. The raft passed unperceived in the midst of these floating masses.

The danger was not at these points.

But a peril of another nature menaced the fugitives. One that they could not foresee, and, above all, one that they could not avoid. Chance discovered it to Alcide Jolivet in this way: — Lying at the right side of the raft, he let his hand hang over into the water. Suddenly he was surprised by the impression made on it by the current. It seemed to be of a slimy consistency, as if it had been made of mineral oil. Alcide, aiding his touch by his sense of smell, could not be mistaken. It was really a layer of liquid naphtha, floating on the surface of the river!

Was the raft really floating on this substance, which is in the highest degree combustible? Where had this naphtha come from? Was it a natural phenomenon taking place on the surface of the Angara, or was it to serve as an engine of destruction, put in motion by the Tartars? Did they intend to carry conflagration into Irkutsk?

Such were the questions which Alcide asked himself, but he thought it best to make this incident known only to Harry Blount, and they both agreed in not alarming their companions by revealing to them this new danger.

It is known that the soil of Central Asia is like a sponge impregnated with liquid hydrogen. At the port of Bakou, on the Persian frontier, on the Caspian Sea, in Asia Minor, in China, on the Yuen-Kiang, in the Burman Empire, springs of mineral oil rise in thousands to the surface of the ground. It is an “oil country,” similar to the one which bears this name in North America.

During certain religious festivals, principally at the port of Bakou, the natives, who are fire-worshipers, throw liquid naphtha on the surface of the sea, which buoys it up, its density being inferior to that of water. Then at nightfall, when a layer of mineral oil is thus spread over the Caspian, they light it, and exhibit the matchless spectacle of an ocean of fire undulating and breaking into waves under the breeze.

But what is only a sign of rejoicing at Bakou, might prove a fearful disaster on the waters of the Angara. Whether it was set on fire by malevolence or imprudence, in the twinkling of an eye a conflagration might spread beyond Irkutsk. On board the raft no imprudence was to be feared; but everything was to be dreaded from the conflagrations on both banks of the Angara, for should a lighted straw or even a spark blow into the water, it would inevitably set the whole current of naphtha in a blaze.

The apprehensions of Jolivet and Blount may be better understood than described. Would it not be prudent, in face of this new danger, to land on one of the banks and wait there? “At any rate,” said Alcide, “whatever the danger may be, I know some one who will not land!”

He alluded to Michael Strogoff.

In the meantime, on glided the raft among the masses of ice which were gradually getting closer and closer together. Up till then, no Tartar detachment had been seen, which showed that the raft was not abreast of the outposts. At about ten o’clock, however, Harry Blount caught sight of a number of black objects moving on the ice blocks. Springing from one to the other, they rapidly approached.

“Tartars!” he thought. And creeping up to the old boatman, he pointed out to him the suspicious objects.

The old man looked attentively. “They are only wolves!” said he. “I like them better than Tartars. But we must defend ourselves, and without noise!”

The fugitives would indeed have to defend themselves against these ferocious beasts, whom hunger and cold had sent roaming through the province. They had smelt out the raft, and would soon attack it. The fugitives must struggle without using firearms, for they could not now be far from the Tartar posts. The women and children were collected in the middle of the raft, and the men, some armed with poles, others with their knives, stood prepared to repulse their assailants. They did not make a sound, but the howls of the wolves filled the air.

Michael did not wish to remain inactive. He lay down at the side attacked by the savage pack. He drew his knife, and every time that a wolf passed within his reach, his hand found out the way to plunge his weapon into its throat. Neither were Jolivet and Blount idle, but fought bravely with the brutes. Their companions gallantly seconded them. The battle was carried on in silence, although many of the fugitives received severe bites.

The struggle did not appear as if it would soon terminate. The pack was being continually reinforced from the right bank of the Angara. “This will never be finished!” said Alcide, brandishing his dagger, red with blood.

In fact, half an hour after the commencement of the attack, the wolves were still coming in hundreds across the ice. The exhausted fugitives were getting weaker. The fight was going against them. At that moment, a group of ten huge wolves, raging with hunger, their eyes glowing in the darkness like red coals, sprang onto the raft. Jolivet and his companion threw themselves into the midst of the fierce beasts, and Michael was finding his way towards them, when a sudden change took place.

In a few moments the wolves had deserted not only the raft, but also the ice on the river. All the black bodies dispersed, and it was soon certain that they had in all haste regained the shore. Wolves, like other beasts of prey, require darkness for their proceedings, and at that moment a bright light illuminated the entire river.

It was the blaze of an immense fire. The whole of the small town of Poshkavsk was burning. The Tartars were indeed there, finishing their work. From this point, they occupied both banks beyond Irkutsk. The fugitives had by this time reached the dangerous part of their voyage, and they were still twenty miles from the capital.

It was now half past eleven. The raft continued to glide on amongst the ice, with which it was quite mingled, but gleams of light sometimes fell upon it. The fugitives stretched on the platform did not permit themselves to make a movement by which they might be betrayed.

The conflagration was going on with frightful rapidity. The houses, built of fir-wood, blazed like torches — a hundred and fifty flaming at once. With the crackling of the fire was mingled the yells of the Tartars. The old boatman, getting a foothold on a near piece of ice, managed to shove the raft towards the right bank, by doing which a distance of from three to four hundred feet divided it from the flames of Poshkavsk.

Nevertheless, the fugitives, lighted every now and then by the glare, would have been undoubtedly perceived had not the incendiaries been too much occupied in their work of destruction.

It may be imagined what were the apprehensions of Jolivet and Blount, when they thought of the combustible liquid on which the raft floated. Sparks flew in millions from the houses, which resembled so many glowing furnaces. They rose among the volumes of smoke to a height of five or six hundred feet. On the right bank, the trees and cliffs exposed to the fire looked as if they likewise were burning. A spark falling on the surface of the Angara would be sufficient to spread the flames along the current, and to carry disaster from one bank to the other. The result of this would be in a short time the destruction of the raft and of all those which it carried.

But, happily, the breeze did not blow from that side. It came from the east, and drove the flames towards the left. It was just possible that the fugitives would escape this danger. The blazing town was at last passed. Little by little the glare grew dimmer, the crackling became fainter, and the flames at last disappeared behind the high cliffs which arose at an abrupt turn of the river.

By this time it was nearly midnight. The deep gloom again threw its protecting shadows over the raft. The Tartars were there, going to and fro near the river. They could not be seen, but they could be heard. The fires of the outposts burned brightly.

In the meantime it had become necessary to steer more carefully among the blocks of ice. The old boatman stood up, and the moujiks resumed their poles. They had plenty of work, the management of the raft becoming more and more difficult as the river was further obstructed.

Michael had crept forward; Jolivet followed; both listened to what the old boatman and his men were saying.

“Look out on the right!”

“There are blocks drifting on to us on the left!”

“Fend! fend off with your boat-hook!”

“Before an hour is past we shall be stopped!”

“If it is God’s will!” answered the old man. “Against His will there is nothing to be done.”

“You hear them,” said Alcide.

“Yes,” replied Michael, “but God is with us!”

The situation became more and more serious. Should the raft be stopped, not only would the fugitives not reach Irkutsk, but they would be obliged to leave their floating platform, for it would be very soon smashed to pieces in the ice. The osier ropes would break, the fir trunks torn asunder would drift under the hard crust, and the unhappy people would have no refuge but the ice blocks themselves. Then, when day came, they would be seen by the Tartars, and massacred without mercy!

Michael returned to the spot where Nadia was waiting for him. He approached the girl, took her hand, and put to her the invariable question: “Nadia, are you ready?” to which she replied as usual, “I am ready!”

For a few versts more the raft continued to drift amongst the floating ice. Should the river narrow, it would soon form an impassable barrier. Already they seemed to drift slower. Every moment they encountered severe shocks or were compelled to make detours; now, to avoid running foul of a block, there to enter a channel, of which it was necessary to take advantage. At length the stoppages became still more alarming. There were only a few more hours of night. Could the fugitives not reach Irkutsk by five o’clock in the morning, they must lose all hope of ever getting there at all.

At half-past one, notwithstanding all efforts, the raft came up against a thick barrier and stuck fast. The ice, which was drifting down behind it, pressed it still closer, and kept it motionless, as though it had been stranded.

At this spot the Angara narrowed, it being half its usual breadth. This was the cause of the accumulation of ice, which became gradually soldered together, under the double influence of the increased pressure and of the cold. Five hundred feet beyond, the river widened again, and the blocks, gradually detaching themselves from the floe, continued to drift towards Irkutsk. It was probable that had the banks not narrowed, the barrier would not have formed. But the misfortune was irreparable, and the fugitives must give up all hope of attaining their object.

Had they possessed the tools usually employed by whalers to cut channels through the ice-fields — had they been able to get through to where the river widened — they might have been saved. But they had nothing which could make the least incision in the ice, hard as granite in the excessive frost. What were they to do?

At that moment several shots on the right bank startled the unhappy fugitives. A shower of balls fell on the raft. The devoted passengers had been seen. Immediately afterwards shots were heard fired from the left bank. The fugitives, taken between two fires, became the mark of the Tartar sharpshooters. Several were wounded, although in the darkness it was only by chance that they were hit.

“Come, Nadia,” whispered Michael in the girl’s ear.

Without making a single remark, “ready for anything,” Nadia took Michael’s hand.

“We must cross the barrier,” he said in a low tone. “Guide me, but let no one see us leave the raft.”

Nadia obeyed. Michael and she glided rapidly over the floe in the obscurity, only broken now and again by the flashes from the muskets. Nadia crept along in front of Michael. The shot fell around them like a tempest of hail, and pattered on the ice. Their hands were soon covered with blood from the sharp and rugged ice over which they clambered, but still on they went.

In ten minutes, the other side of the barrier was reached. There the waters of the Angara again flowed freely. Several pieces of ice, detached gradually from the floe, were swept along in the current down towards the town. Nadia guessed what Michael wished to attempt. One of the blocks was only held on by a narrow strip.

“Come,” said Nadia. And the two crouched on the piece of ice, which their weight detached from the floe.

It began to drift. The river widened, the way was open. Michael and Nadia heard the shots, the cries of distress, the yells of the Tartars. Then, little by little, the sounds of agony and of ferocious joy grew faint in the distance.

“Our poor companions!” murmured Nadia.

For half an hour the current hurried along the block of ice which bore Michael and Nadia. They feared every moment that it would give way beneath them. Swept along in the middle of the current, it was unnecessary to give it an oblique direction until they drew near the quays of Irkutsk. Michael, his teeth tight set, his ear on the strain, did not utter a word. Never had he been so near his object. He felt that he was about to attain it!

Towards two in the morning a double row of lights glittered on the dark horizon in which were confounded the two banks of the Angara. On the right hand were the lights of Irkutsk; on the left, the fires of the Tartar camp.

Michael Strogoff was not more than half a verst from the town. “At last!” he murmured.

But suddenly Nadia uttered a cry.

At the cry Michael stood up on the ice, which was wavering. His hand was extended up the Angara. His face, on which a bluish light cast a peculiar hue, became almost fearful to look at, and then, as if his eyes had been opened to the bright blaze spreading across the river, “Ah!” he exclaimed, “then Heaven itself is against us!”

CHAPTER XII IRKUTSK

IRKUTSK, the capital of Eastern Siberia, is a populous town, containing, in ordinary times, thirty thousand inhabitants. On the right side of the Angara rises a hill, on which are built numerous churches, a lofty cathedral, and dwellings disposed in picturesque disorder.

Seen at a distance, from the top of the mountain which rises at about twenty versts off along the Siberian highroad, this town, with its cupolas, its bell-towers, its steeples slender as minarets, its domes like pot-bellied Chinese jars, presents something of an oriental aspect. But this similarity vanishes as the traveler enters.

The town, half Byzantine, half Chinese, becomes European as soon as he sees its macadamized roads, bordered with pavements, traversed by canals, planted with gigantic birches, its houses of brick and wood, some of which have several stories, the numerous equipages which drive along, not only tarantasses but broughams and coaches; lastly, its numerous inhabitants far advanced in civilization, to whom the latest Paris fashions are not unknown.

Being the refuge for all the Siberians of the province, Irkutsk was at this time very full. Stores of every kind had been collected in abundance. Irkutsk is the emporium of the innumerable kinds of merchandise which are exchanged between China, Central Asia, and Europe. The authorities had therefore no fear with regard to admitting the peasants of the valley of the Angara, and leaving a desert between the invaders and the town.

Irkutsk is the residence of the governor-general of Eastern Siberia. Below him acts a civil governor, in whose hands is the administration of the province; a head of police, who has much to do in a town where exiles abound; and, lastly, a mayor, chief of the merchants, and a person of some importance, from his immense fortune and the influence which he exercises over the people.

The garrison of Irkutsk was at that time composed of an infantry regiment of Cossacks, consisting of two thousand men, and a body of police wearing helmets and blue uniforms laced with silver. Besides, as has been said, in consequence of the events which had occurred, the brother of the Czar had been shut up in the town since the beginning of the invasion.

A journey of political importance had taken the Grand Duke to these distant provinces of Central Asia. After passing through the principal Siberian cities, the Grand Duke, who traveled en militaire rather than en prince, without any parade, accompanied by his officers, and escorted by a regiment of Cossacks, arrived in the Trans-Baikalcine provinces. Nikolaevsk, the last Russian town situated on the shore of the Sea of Okhotsk, had been honored by a visit from him. Arrived on the confines of the immense Muscovite Empire, the Grand Duke was returning towards Irkutsk, from which place he intended to retake the road to Moscow, when, sudden as a thunder clap, came the news of the invasion.

He hastened to the capital, but only reached it just before communication with Russia had been interrupted. There was time to receive only a few telegrams from St. Petersburg and Moscow, and with difficulty to answer them before the wire was cut. Irkutsk was isolated from the rest of the world.

The Grand Duke had now only to prepare for resistance, and this he did with that determination and coolness of which, under other circumstances, he had given incontestable proofs. The news of the taking of Ichim, Omsk, and Tomsk, successively reached Irkutsk. It was necessary at any price to save the capital of Siberia. Reinforcements could not be expected for some time. The few troops scattered about in the provinces of Siberia could not arrive in sufficiently large numbers to arrest the progress of the Tartar columns. Since therefore it was impossible for Irkutsk to escape attack, the most important thing to be done was to put the town in a state to sustain a siege of some duration.

The preparations were begun on the day Tomsk fell into the hands of the Tartars. At the same time with this last news, the Grand Duke heard that the Emir of Bokhara and the allied Khans were directing the invasion in person, but what he did not know was, that the lieutenant of these barbarous chiefs was Ivan Ogareff, a Russian officer whom he had himself reduced to the ranks, but with whose person he was not acquainted.

First of all, as we have seen, the inhabitants of the province of Irkutsk were compelled to abandon the towns and villages. Those who did not take refuge in the capital had to retire beyond Lake Baikal, a district to which the invasion would probably not extend its ravages. The harvests of corn and fodder were collected and stored up in the town, and Irkutsk, the last bulwark of the Muscovite power in the Far East, was put in a condition to resist the enemy for a lengthened period.

Irkutsk, founded in 1611, is situated at the confluence of the Irkut and the Angara, on the right bank of the latter river. Two wooden draw-bridges, built on piles, connected the town with its suburbs on the left bank. On this side, defence was easy. The suburbs were abandoned, the bridges destroyed. The Angara being here very wide, it would not be possible to pass it under the fire of the besieged.

But the river might be crossed both above and below the town, and consequently, Irkutsk ran a risk of being attacked on its east side, on which there was no wall to protect it.

The whole population were immediately set to work on the fortifications. They labored day and night. The Grand Duke observed with satisfaction the zeal exhibited by the people in the work, whom ere long he would find equally courageous in the defense. Soldiers, merchants, exiles, peasants, all devoted themselves to the common safety. A week before the Tartars appeared on the Angara, earth-works had been raised. A fosse, flooded by the waters of the Angara, was dug between the scarp and counterscarp. The town could not now be taken by a coup de main. It must be invested and besieged.

The third Tartar column — the one which came up the valley of the Yenisei on the 24th of September — appeared in sight of Irkutsk. It immediately occupied the deserted suburbs, every building in which had been destroyed so as not to impede the fire of the Grand Duke’s guns, unfortunately but few in number and of small caliber. The Tartar troops as they arrived organized a camp on the bank of the Angara, whilst waiting the arrival of the two other columns, commanded by the Emir and his allies.

The junction of these different bodies was effected on the 25th of September, in the Angara camp, and the whole of the invading army, except the garrisons left in the principal conquered towns, was concentrated under the command of Feofar-Khan.

The passage of the Angara in front of Irkutsk having been regarded by Ogareff as impracticable, a strong body of troops crossed, several versts up the river, by means of bridges formed with boats. The Grand Duke did not attempt to oppose the enemy in their passage. He could only impede, not prevent it, having no field-artillery at his disposal, and he therefore remained in Irkutsk.

The Tartars now occupied the right bank of the river; then, advancing towards the town, they burnt, in passing, the summer-house of the governor-general, and at last having entirely invested Irkutsk, took up their positions for the siege.

Ivan Ogareff, who was a clever engineer, was perfectly competent to direct a regular siege; but he did not possess the materials for operating rapidly. He was disappointed too in the chief object of all his efforts — the surprise of Irkutsk. Things had not turned out as he hoped. First, the march of the Tartar army was delayed by the battle of Tomsk; and secondly, the preparations for the defense were made far more rapidly than he had supposed possible; these two things had balked his plans. He was now under the necessity of instituting a regular siege of the town.

However, by his suggestion, the Emir twice attempted the capture of the place, at the cost of a large sacrifice of men. He threw soldiers on the earth-works which presented any weak point; but these two assaults were repulsed with the greatest courage. The Grand Duke and his officers did not spare themselves on this occasion. They appeared in person; they led the civil population to the ramparts. Citizens and peasants both did their duty.

At the second attack, the Tartars managed to force one of the gates. A fight took place at the head of Bolchaia Street, two versts long, on the banks of the Angara. But the Cossacks, the police, the citizens, united in so fierce a resistance that the Tartars were driven out.

Ivan Ogareff then thought of obtaining by stratagem what he could not gain by force. We have said that his plan was to penetrate into the town, make his way to the Grand Duke, gain his confidence, and, when the time came, give up the gates to the besiegers; and, that done, wreak his vengeance on the brother of the Czar. The Tsigane Sangarre, who had accompanied him to the Angara, urged him to put this plan in execution.

Indeed, it was necessary to act without delay. The Russian troops from the government of Yakutsk were advancing towards Irkutsk. They had concentrated along the upper course of the Lena. In six days they would arrive. Therefore, before six days had passed, Irkutsk must be betrayed. Ogareff hesitated no longer.

One evening, the 2d of October, a council of war was held in the grand saloon of the palace of the governor-general. This palace, standing at the end of Bolchaia Street, overlooked the river. From its windows could be seen the camp of the Tartars, and had the invaders possessed guns of wider range, they would have rendered the palace uninhabitable.

The Grand Duke, General Voranzoff, the governor of the town, and the chief of the merchants, with several officers, had collected to determine upon various proposals.

“Gentlemen,” said the Grand Duke, “you know our situation exactly. I have the firm hope that we shall be able to hold out until the arrival of the Yakutsk troops. We shall then be able to drive off these barbarian hordes, and it will not be my fault if they do not pay dearly for this invasion of the Muscovite territory.”

“Your Highness knows that all the population of Irkutsk may be relied on,” said General Voranzoff.

“Yes, general,” replied the Grand Duke, “and I do justice to their patriotism. Thanks to God, they have not yet been subjected to the horrors of epidemic and famine, and I have reason to hope that they will escape them; but I cannot admire their courage on the ramparts enough. You hear my words, Sir Merchant, and I beg you to repeat such to them."

"I thank your Highness in the name of the town," answered the merchant chief. "May I ask you what is the most distant date when we may expect the relieving army?"

"Six days at most, sir," replied the Grand Duke. "A brave and clever messenger managed this morning to get into the town, and he told me that fifty thousand Russians under General Kisselef, are advancing by forced marches. Two days ago, they were on the banks of the Lena, at Kirensk, and now, neither frost nor snow will keep them back. Fifty thousand good men, taking the Tartars on the flank, will soon set us free."

"I will add," said the chief of the merchants, "that we shall be ready to execute your orders, any day that your Highness may command a sortie."

"Good, sir," replied the Grand Duke. "Wait till the heads of the relieving columns appear on the heights, and we will speedily crush these invaders."

Then turning to General Voranzoff, "To-morrow," said he, "we will visit the works on the right bank. Ice is drifting down the Angara, which will not be long in freezing, and in that case the Tartars might perhaps cross."

"Will your Highness allow me to make an observation?" said the chief of the merchants.

"Do so, sir."

"I have more than once seen the temperature fall to thirty and forty degrees below zero, and the Angara has still carried down drifting ice without entirely freezing. This is no doubt owing to the swiftness of its current. If therefore the Tartars have no other means of crossing the river, I can assure your Highness that they will not enter Irkutsk in that way."

The governor-general confirmed this assertion.

"It is a fortunate circumstance," responded the Grand Duke. "Nevertheless, we must hold ourselves ready for any emergency."

He then, turning towards the head of the police, asked, "Have you nothing to say to me, sir?"

"I have your Highness," answered the head of police, "a petition which is addressed to you through me."

"Addressed by whom?"

"By the Siberian exiles, whom, as your Highness knows, are in the town to the number of five hundred."

The political exiles, distributed over the province, had been collected in Irkutsk, from the beginning of the invasion. They had obeyed the order to rally in the town, and leave the villages where they exercised their different professions, some doctors, some professors, either at the Gymnasium, or at the Japanese School, or at the School of Navigation. The Grand Duke, trusting like the Czar in their patriotism, had armed them, and they had thoroughly proved their bravery.

"What do the exiles ask?" said the Grand Duke.

"They ask the consent of your Highness," answered the head of police, "to their forming a special corps and being placed in the front of the first sortie."

“Yes,” replied the Grand Duke with an emotion which he did not seek to hide, “these exiles are Russians, and it is their right to fight for their country!”

“I believe I may assure your Highness,” said the governor-general, “you will have no better soldiers.”

“But they must have a chief,” said the Grand Duke, “who will he be?”

“They wish to recommend to your Highness,” said the head of police, “one of their number, who has distinguished himself on several occasions.”

“Is he a Russian?”

“Yes, a Russian from the Baltic provinces.”

“His name?”

“Is Wassili Fedor.”

This exile was Nadia’s father. Wassili Fedor, as we have already said, followed his profession of a medical man in Irkutsk. He was clever and charitable, and also possessed the greatest courage and most sincere patriotism. All the time which he did not devote to the sick he employed in organizing the defense. It was he who had united his companions in exile in the common cause. The exiles, till then mingled with the population, had behaved in such a way as to draw on themselves the attention of the Grand Duke. In several sorties, they had paid with their blood their debt to holy Russia — holy as they believe, and adored by her children! Wassili Fedor had behaved heroically; his name had been mentioned several times, but he never asked either thanks or favors, and when the exiles of Irkutsk thought of forming themselves into a special corps, he was ignorant of their intention of choosing him for their captain.

When the head of police mentioned this name, the Grand Duke answered that it was not unknown to him.

“Indeed,” remarked General Voranzoff, “Wassili Fedor is a man of worth and courage. His influence over his companions has always been very great.”

“How long has he been at Irkutsk?” asked the Duke.

“For two years.”

“And his conduct?”

“His conduct,” answered the head of police, “is that of a man obedient to the special laws which govern him.”

“General,” said the Grand Duke, “General, be good enough to present him to me immediately.”

The orders of the Grand Duke were obeyed, and before half an hour had passed, Fedor was introduced into his presence. He was a man over forty, tall, of a stern and sad countenance. One felt that his whole life was summed up in a single word — strife — he had striven and suffered. His features bore a marked resemblance to those of his daughter, Nadia Fedor.

This Tartar invasion had severely wounded him in his tenderest affections, and ruined the hope of the father, exiled eight thousand versts from his native town. A letter had apprised him of the death of his wife, and at the same time of the departure of his daughter, who had obtained from the government an authorization to join him at Irkutsk. Nadia must have left Riga on the 10th of July. The invasion had begun on the 15th of July; if at that time Nadia had passed the frontier, what could have become of her in the midst of the invaders? The anxiety of the unhappy father may be supposed when, from that time, he had no further news of his daughter.

Wassili Fedor entered the presence of the Grand Duke, bowed, and waited to be questioned.

“Wassili Fedor,” said the Grand Duke, “your companions in exile have asked to be allowed to form a select corps. They are not ignorant that in this corps they must make up their minds to be killed to the last man?”

“They are not ignorant of it,” replied Fedor.

“They wish to have you for their captain.”

“I, your Highness?”

“Do you consent to be placed at their head?”

“Yes, if it is for the good of Russia.”

“Captain Fedor,” said the Grand Duke, “you are no longer an exile.”

“Thanks, your Highness, but can I command those who are so still?”

“They are so no longer!” The brother of the Czar had granted a pardon to all Fedor’s companions in exile, now his companions in arms!

Wassili Fedor wrung, with emotion, the hand which the Grand Duke held out to him, and retired.

The latter, turned to his officers, “The Czar will not refuse to ratify that pardon,” said he, smiling; “we need heroes to defend the capital of Siberia, and I have just made some.”

This pardon, so generously accorded to the exiles of Irkutsk, was indeed an act of real justice and sound policy.

It was now night. Through the windows of the palace burned the fires of the Tartar camp, flickering beyond the Angara. Down the river drifted numerous blocks of ice, some of which stuck on the piles of the old bridges; others were swept along by the current with great rapidity. It was evident, as the merchant had observed, that it would be very difficult for the Angara to freeze all over. The defenders of Irkutsk had not to dread being attacked on that side. Ten o’clock had just struck. The Grand Duke was about to dismiss his officers and retire to his apartments, when a tumult was heard outside the palace.

Almost immediately the door was thrown open, an aide-de-camp appeared, and advanced rapidly towards the Grand Duke.

“Your Highness,” said he, “a courier from the Czar!”

CHAPTER XIII THE CZAR'S COURIER

ALL the members of the council simultaneously started forward. A courier from the Czar arrived in Irkutsk! Had these officers for a moment considered the improbability of this fact, they would certainly not have credited what they heard.

The Grand Duke advanced quickly to his aide-de-camp. “This courier!” he exclaimed.

A man entered. He appeared exhausted with fatigue. He wore the dress of a Siberian peasant, worn into tatters, and exhibiting several shot-holes. A Muscovite cap was on his head. His face was disfigured by a recently-healed scar. The man had evidently had a long and painful journey; his shoes being in a state which showed that he had been obliged to make part of it on foot.

“His Highness the Grand Duke?” he asked.

The Grand Duke went up to him. “You are a courier from the Czar?” he asked.

“Yes, your Highness.”

“You come?”

“From Moscow.”

“You left Moscow?”

“On the 15th of July.”

“Your name?”

“Michael Strogoff.”

It was Ivan Ogareff. He had taken the designation of the man whom he believed that he had rendered powerless. Neither the Grand Duke nor anyone knew him in Irkutsk, and he had not even to disguise his features. As he was in a position to prove his pretended identity, no one could have any reason for doubting him. He came, therefore, sustained by his iron will, to hasten by treason and assassination the great object of the invasion.

After Ogareff had replied, the Grand Duke signed to all his officers to withdraw. He and the false Michael Strogoff remained alone in the saloon.

The Grand Duke looked at Ivan Ogareff for some moments with extreme attention. Then he said, “On the 15th of July you were at Moscow?”

“Yes, your Highness; and on the night of the 14th I saw His Majesty the Czar at the New Palace.”

“Have you a letter from the Czar?”

“Here it is.”

And Ivan Ogareff handed to the Grand Duke the Imperial letter, crumpled to almost microscopic size.

“Was the letter given you in this state?”

“No, your Highness, but I was obliged to tear the envelope, the better to hide it from the Emir’s soldiers.”

“Were you taken prisoner by the Tartars?”

“Yes, your Highness, I was their prisoner for several days,” answered Ogareff. “That is the reason that, having left Moscow on the 15th of July, as the date of that letter shows, I only reached Irkutsk on the 2d of October, after traveling seventy-nine days.”

The Grand Duke took the letter. He unfolded it and recognized the Czar’s signature, preceded by the decisive formula, written by his brother’s hand. There was no possible doubt of the authenticity of this letter, nor of the identity of the courier. Though Ogareff’s countenance had at first inspired the Grand Duke with some distrust, he let nothing of it appear, and it soon vanished.

The Grand Duke remained for a few minutes without speaking. He read the letter slowly, so as to take in its meaning fully. “Michael Strogoff, do you know the contents of this letter?” he asked.

“Yes, your Highness. I might have been obliged to destroy it, to prevent its falling into the hands of the Tartars, and should such have been the case, I wished to be able to bring the contents of it to your Highness.”

“You know that this letter enjoins us all to die, rather than give up the town?”

“I know it.”

“You know also that it informs me of the movements of the troops which have combined to stop the invasion?”

“Yes, your Highness, but the movements have failed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that Ichim, Omsk, Tomsk, to speak only of the more important towns of the two Siberias, have been successively occupied by the soldiers of Feofar-Khan.”

“But there has been fighting? Have not our Cossacks met the Tartars?”

“Several times, your Highness.”

“And they were repulsed?”

“They were not in sufficient force to oppose the enemy.”

“Where did the encounters take place?”

“At Kolyvan, at Tomsk.” Until now, Ogareff had only spoken the truth, but, in the hope of troubling the defenders of Irkutsk by exaggerating the defeats, he added, “And a third time before Krasnoiarsk.”

“And what of this last engagement?” asked the Grand Duke, through whose compressed lips the words could scarcely pass.

“It was more than an engagement, your Highness,” answered Ogareff; “it was a battle.”

“A battle?”

“Twenty thousand Russians, from the frontier provinces and the government of Tobolsk, engaged with a hundred and fifty thousand Tartars, and, notwithstanding their courage, were overwhelmed.”

“You lie!” exclaimed the Grand Duke, endeavoring in vain to curb his passion.

“I speak the truth, your Highness,” replied Ivan Ogareff coldly. “I was present at the battle of Krasnoiarsk, and it was there I was made prisoner!”

The Grand Duke grew calmer, and by a significant gesture he gave Ogareff to understand that he did not doubt his veracity. “What day did this battle of Krasnoiarsk take place?” he asked.

“On the 2d of September.”

“And now all the Tartar troops are concentrated here?”

“All.”

“And you estimate them?”

“At about four hundred thousand men.”

Another exaggeration of Ogareff’s in the estimate of the Tartar army, with the same object as before.

“And I must not expect any help from the West provinces?” asked the Grand Duke.

“None, your Highness, at any rate before the end of the winter.”

“Well, hear this, Michael Strogoff. Though I must expect no help either from the East or from the West, even were these barbarians six hundred thousand strong, I will never give up Irkutsk!”

Ogareff’s evil eye slightly contracted. The traitor thought to himself that the brother of the Czar did not reckon the result of treason.

The Grand Duke, who was of a nervous temperament, had great difficulty in keeping calm whilst hearing this disastrous news. He walked to and fro in the room, under the gaze of Ogareff, who eyed him as a victim reserved for vengeance. He stopped at the windows, he looked forth at the fires in the Tartar camp, he listened to the noise of the ice-blocks drifting down the Angara.

A quarter of an hour passed without his putting any more questions. Then taking up the letter, he re-read a passage and said, “You know that in this letter I am warned of a traitor, of whom I must beware?”

“Yes, your Highness.”

“He will try to enter Irkutsk in disguise; gain my confidence, and betray the town to the Tartars.”

“I know all that, your Highness, and I know also that Ivan Ogareff has sworn to revenge himself personally on the Czar’s brother.”

“Why?”

“It is said that the officer in question was condemned by the Grand Duke to a humiliating degradation.”

“Yes, I remember. But it is a proof that the villain, who could afterwards serve against his country and head an invasion of barbarians, deserved it.”

“His Majesty the Czar,” said Ogareff, “was particularly anxious that you should be warned of the criminal projects of Ivan Ogareff against your person.”

“Yes; of that the letter informs me.”

“And His Majesty himself spoke to me of it, telling me I was above all things to beware of the traitor.”

“Did you meet with him?”

“Yes, your Highness, after the battle of Krasnoiarsk. If he had only guessed that I was the bearer of a letter addressed to your Highness, in which his plans were revealed, I should not have got off so easily.”

“No; you would have been lost!” replied the Grand Duke. “And how did you manage to escape?”

“By throwing myself into the Irtych.”

“And how did you enter Irkutsk?”

“Under cover of a sortie, which was made this evening to repulse a Tartar detachment. I mingled with the defenders of the town, made myself known, and was immediately conducted before your Highness.”

“Good, Michael Strogoff,” answered the Grand Duke. “You have shown courage and zeal in your difficult mission. I will not forget you. Have you any favor to ask?”

“None; unless it is to be allowed to fight at the side of your Highness,” replied Ogareff.

“So be it, Strogoff. I attach you from to-day to my person, and you shall be lodged in the palace.”

“And if according to his intention, Ivan Ogareff should present himself to your Highness under a false name?”

“We will unmask him, thanks to you, who know him, and I will make him die under the knout. Go!”

Ogareff gave a military salute, not forgetting that he was a captain of the couriers of the Czar, and retired.

Ogareff had so far played his unworthy part with success. The Grand Duke’s entire confidence had been accorded him. He could now betray it whenever it suited him. He would inhabit the very palace. He would be in the secret of all the operations for the defense of the town. He thus held the situation in his hand, as it were. No one in Irkutsk knew him, no one could snatch off his mask. He resolved therefore to set to work without delay.

Indeed, time pressed. The town must be captured before the arrival of the Russians from the North and East, and that was only a question of a few days. The Tartars once masters of Irkutsk, it would not be easy to take it again from them. At any rate, even if they were obliged to abandon it later, they would not do so before they had utterly destroyed it, and before the head of the Grand Duke had rolled at the feet of Feofar-Khan.

Ivan Ogareff, having every facility for seeing, observing, and acting, occupied himself the next day with visiting the ramparts. He was everywhere received with cordial congratulations from officers, soldiers, and citizens. To them this courier from the Czar was a link which connected them with the empire.

Ogareff recounted, with an assurance which never failed, numerous fictitious events of his journey. Then, with the cunning for which he was noted, without dwelling too much on it at first, he spoke of the gravity of the situation, exaggerating the success of the Tartars and the numbers of the barbarian forces, as he had when speaking to the Grand Duke. According to him, the expected succors would be insufficient, if ever they arrived at all, and it was to be feared that a battle fought under the walls of Irkutsk would be as fatal as the battles of Kolyvan, Tomsk, and Krasnoiarsk.

Ogareff was not too free in these insinuations. He wished to allow them to sink gradually into the minds of the defenders of Irkutsk. He pretended only to answer with reluctance when much pressed with questions. He always added that they must fight to the last man, and blow up the town rather than yield!

These false statements would have done more harm had it been possible; but the garrison and the population of Irkutsk were too patriotic to let themselves be moved. Of all the soldiers and citizens shut up in this town, isolated at the extremity of the Asiatic world, not one dreamed of even speaking of a capitulation. The contempt of the Russians for these barbarians was boundless.

No one suspected the odious part played by Ivan Ogareff; no one guessed that the pretended courier of the Czar was a traitor. It occurred very naturally that on his arrival in Irkutsk, a frequent intercourse was established between Ogareff and one of the bravest defenders of the town, Wassili Fedor. We know what anxiety this unhappy father suffered. If his daughter, Nadia Fedor, had left Russia on the date fixed by the last letter he had received from Riga, what had become of her? Was she still trying to cross the invaded provinces, or had she long since been taken prisoner? The only alleviation to Wassili Fedor’s anxiety was when he could obtain an opportunity of engaging in battle with the Tartars — opportunities which came too seldom for his taste. The very evening the pretended courier arrived, Wassili Fedor went to the governor-general’s palace and, acquainting Ogareff with the circumstances under which his daughter must have left European Russia, told him all his uneasiness about her. Ogareff did not know Nadia, although he had met her at Ichim on the day she was there with Michael Strogoff; but then, he had not paid more attention to her than to the two reporters, who at the same time were in the post-house; he therefore could give Wassili Fedor no news of his daughter.

“But at what time,” asked Ogareff, “must your daughter have left the Russian territory?”

“About the same time that you did,” replied Fedor.

“I left Moscow on the 15th of July.”

“Nadia must also have quitted Moscow at that time. Her letter told me so expressly.”

“She was in Moscow on the 15th of July?”

“Yes, certainly, by that date.”

“Then it was impossible for her — But no, I am mistaken — I was confusing dates. Unfortunately, it is too probable that your daughter must have passed the frontier, and you can only have one hope, that she stopped on learning the news of the Tartar invasion!”

The father’s head fell! He knew Nadia, and he knew too well that nothing would have prevented her from setting out. Ivan Ogareff had just committed gratuitously an act of real cruelty. With a word he might have reassured Fedor. Although Nadia had passed the frontier under circumstances with which we are acquainted, Fedor, by comparing the date on which his daughter would have been at Nijni-Novgorod, and the date of the proclamation which forbade anyone to leave it, would no doubt have concluded thus: that Nadia had not been exposed to the dangers of the invasion, and that she was still, in spite of herself, in the European territory of the Empire.

Ogareff obedient to his nature, a man who was never touched by the sufferings of others, might have said that word. He did not say it. Fedor retired with his heart broken. In that interview his last hope was crushed.

During the two following days, the 3rd and 4th of October, the Grand Duke often spoke to the pretended Michael Strogoff, and made him repeat all that he had heard in the Imperial Cabinet of the New Palace. Ogareff, prepared for all these questions, replied without the least hesitation. He intentionally did not conceal that the Czar’s government had been utterly surprised by the invasion, that the insurrection had been prepared in the greatest possible secrecy, that the Tartars were already masters of the line of the Obi when the news reached Moscow, and lastly, that none of the necessary preparations were completed in the Russian provinces for sending into Siberia the troops requisite for repulsing the invaders.

Ivan Ogareff, being entirely free in his movements, began to study Irkutsk, the state of its fortifications, their weak points, so as to profit subsequently by his observations, in the event of being prevented from consummating his act of treason. He examined particularly the Bolchaia Gate, the one he wished to deliver up.

Twice in the evening he came upon the glacis of this gate. He walked up and down, without fear of being discovered by the besiegers, whose nearest posts were at least a mile from the ramparts. He fancied that he was recognized by no one, till he caught sight of a shadow gliding along outside the earthworks. Sangarre had come at the risk of her life for the purpose of putting herself in communication with Ivan Ogareff.

For two days the besieged had enjoyed a tranquillity to which the Tartars had not accustomed them since the commencement of the investment. This was by Ogareff's orders. Feofar-Khan's lieutenant wished that all attempts to take the town by force should be suspended. He hoped the watchfulness of the besieged would relax. At any rate, several thousand Tartars were kept in readiness at the outposts, to attack the gate, deserted, as Ogareff anticipated that it would be, by its defenders, whenever he should summon the besiegers to the assault.

This he could not now delay in doing. All must be over by the time that the Russian troops should come in sight of Irkutsk. Ogareff's arrangements were made, and on this evening a note fell from the top of the earthworks into Sangarre's hands.

On the next day, that is to say during the hours of darkness from the 5th to the 6th of October, at two o'clock in the morning, Ivan Ogareff had resolved to deliver up Irkutsk.

CHAPTER XIV THE NIGHT OF THE FIFTH OF OCTOBER

IVAN OGAREFF’S plan had been contrived with the greatest care, and except for some unforeseen accident he believed that it must succeed. It was of importance that the Bolchaia Gate should be unguarded or only feebly held when he gave it up. The attention of the besieged was therefore to be drawn to another part of the town. A diversion was agreed upon with the Emir.

This diversion was to be effected both up and down the river, on the Irkutsk bank. The attack on these two points was to be conducted in earnest, and at the same time a feigned attempt at crossing the Angara from the left bank was to be made. The Bolchaia Gate, would be probably deserted, so much the more because on this side the Tartar outposts having drawn back, would appear to have broken up.

It was the 5th of October. In four and twenty hours, the capital of Eastern Siberia would be in the hands of the Emir, and the Grand Duke in the power of Ivan Ogareff.

During the day, an unusual stir was going on in the Angara camp. From the windows of the palace important preparations on the opposite shore could be distinctly seen. Numerous Tartar detachments were converging towards the camp, and from hour to hour reinforced the Emir’s troops. These movements, intended to deceive the besieged, were conducted in the most open manner possible before their eyes.

Ogareff had warned the Grand Duke that an attack was to be feared. He knew, he said, that an assault was to be made, both above and below the town, and he counselled the Duke to reinforce the two directly threatened points. Accordingly, after a council of war had been held in the palace, orders were issued to concentrate the defense on the bank of the Angara and at the two ends of the town, where the earthworks protected the river.

This was exactly what Ogareff wished. He did not expect that the Bolchaia Gate would be left entirely without defenders, but that there would only be a small number. Besides, Ogareff meant to give such importance to the diversion, that the Grand Duke would be obliged to oppose it with all his available forces. The traitor planned also to produce so frightful a catastrophe that terror must inevitably overwhelm the hearts of the besieged.

All day the garrison and population of Irkutsk were on the alert. The measures to repel an attack on the points hitherto unassailed had been taken. The Grand Duke and General Voranzoff visited the posts, strengthened by their orders. Wassili Fedor’s corps occupied the North of the town, but with orders to throw themselves where the danger was greatest. The right bank of the Angara had been protected with the few guns possessed by the defenders. With these measures, taken in time, thanks to the advice so opportunely given by Ivan Ogareff, there was good reason to hope that the expected attack would be repulsed. In that case the Tartars, momentarily discouraged, would no doubt not make another attempt against the town for several days. Now the troops expected by the Grand Duke might arrive at any hour. The safety or the loss of Irkutsk hung only by a thread.

On this day, the sun which had risen at twenty minutes to six, set at forty minutes past five, having traced its diurnal arc for eleven hours above the horizon. The twilight would struggle with the night for another two hours. Then it would be intensely dark, for the sky was cloudy, and there would be no moon. This gloom would favor the plans of Ivan Ogareff.

For a few days already a sharp frost had given warning of the approaching rigor of the Siberian winter, and this evening it was especially severe. The Russians posted by the bank of the Angara, obliged to conceal their position, lighted no fires. They suffered cruelly from the low temperature. A few feet below them, the ice in large masses drifted down the current. All day these masses had been seen passing rapidly between the two banks.

This had been considered by the Grand Duke and his officers as fortunate. Should the channel of the Angara continue to be thus obstructed, the passage must be impracticable. The Tartars could use neither rafts nor boats. As to their crossing the river on the ice, that was not possible. The newly-frozen plain could not bear the weight of an assaulting column.

This circumstance, as it appeared favorable to the defenders of Irkutsk, Ogareff might have regretted. He did not do so, however. The traitor knew well that the Tartars would not try to pass the Angara, and that, on its side at least, their attempt was only a feint.

About ten in the evening, the state of the river sensibly improved, to the great surprise of the besieged and still more to their disadvantage. The passage till then impracticable, became all at once possible. The bed of the Angara was clear. The blocks of ice, which had for some days drifted past in large numbers, disappeared down the current, and five or six only now occupied the space between the banks. The Russian officers reported this change in the river to the Grand Duke. They suggested that it was probably caused by the circumstance that in some narrower part of the Angara, the blocks had accumulated so as to form a barrier.

We know this was the case. The passage of the Angara was thus open to the besiegers. There was great reason for the Russians to be on their guard.

Up to midnight nothing had occurred. On the Eastern side, beyond the Bolchaia Gate, all was quiet. Not a glimmer was seen in the dense forest, which appeared confounded on the horizon with the masses of clouds hanging low down in the sky. Lights flitting to and fro in the Angara camp, showed that a considerable movement was taking place. From a verst above and below the point where the scarp met the river’s bank, came a dull murmur, proving that the Tartars were on foot, expecting some signal. An hour passed. Nothing new.

The bell of the Irkutsk cathedral was about to strike two o’clock in the morning, and not a movement amongst the besiegers had yet shown that they were about to commence the assault. The Grand Duke and his officers began to suspect that they had been mistaken. Had it really been the Tartars’ plan to surprise the town? The preceding nights had not been nearly so quiet — musketry rattling from the outposts, shells whistling through the air; and this time, nothing. The officers waited, ready to give their orders, according to circumstances.

We have said that Ogareff occupied a room in the palace. It was a large chamber on the ground floor, its windows opening on a side terrace. By taking a few steps along this terrace, a view of the river could be obtained.

Profound darkness reigned in the room. Ogareff stood by a window, awaiting the hour to act. The signal, of course, could come from him, alone. This signal once given, when the greater part of the defenders of Irkutsk would be summoned to the points openly attacked, his plan was to leave the palace and hurry to the Bolchaia Gate. If it was unguarded, he would open it; or at least he would direct the overwhelming mass of its assailants against the few defenders.

He now crouched in the shadow, like a wild beast ready to spring on its prey. A few minutes before two o’clock, the Grand Duke desired that Michael Strogoff — which was the only name they could give to Ivan Ogareff — should be brought to him. An aide-de-camp came to the room, the door of which was closed. He called.

Ogareff, motionless near the window, and invisible in the shade did not answer. The Grand Duke was therefore informed that the Czar’s courier was not at that moment in the palace.

Two o’clock struck. Now was the time to cause the diversion agreed upon with the Tartars, waiting for the assault. Ivan Ogareff opened the window and stationed himself at the North angle of the side terrace.

Below him flowed the roaring waters of the Angara. Ogareff took a match from his pocket, struck it and lighted a small bunch of tow, impregnated with priming powder, which he threw into the river.

It was by the orders of Ivan Ogareff that the torrents of mineral oil had been thrown on the surface of the Angara! There are numerous naphtha springs above Irkutsk, on the right bank, between the suburb of Poshkavsk and the town. Ogareff had resolved to employ this terrible means to carry fire into Irkutsk. He therefore took possession of the immense reservoirs which contained the combustible liquid. It was only necessary to demolish a piece of wall in order to allow it to flow out in a vast stream.

This had been done that night, a few hours previously, and this was the reason that the raft which carried the true Courier of the Czar, Nadia, and the fugitives, floated on a current of mineral oil. Through the breaches in these reservoirs of enormous dimensions rushed the naphtha in torrents, and, following the inclination of the ground, it spread over the surface of the river, where its density allowed it to float. This was the way Ivan Ogareff carried on warfare! Allied with Tartars, he acted like a Tartar, and against his own countrymen!

The tow had been thrown on the waters of the Angara. In an instant, with electrical rapidity, as if the current had been of alcohol, the whole river was in a blaze above and below the town. Columns of blue flames ran between the two banks. Volumes of vapor curled up above. The few pieces of ice which still drifted were seized by the burning liquid, and melted like wax on the top of a furnace, the evaporated water escaping in shrill hisses.

At the same moment, firing broke out on the North and South of the town. The enemy's batteries discharged their guns at random. Several thousand Tartars rushed to the assault of the earth-works. The houses on the bank, built of wood, took fire in every direction. A bright light dissipated the darkness of the night.

"At last!" said Ivan Ogareff.

He had good reason for congratulating himself. The diversion which he had planned was terrible. The defenders of Irkutsk found themselves between the attack of the Tartars and the fearful effects of fire. The bells rang, and all the able-bodied of the population ran, some towards the points attacked, and others towards the houses in the grasp of the flames, which it seemed too probable would ere long envelop the whole town.

The Gate of Bolchaia was nearly free. Only a very small guard had been left there. And by the traitor's suggestion, and in order that the event might be explained apart from him, as if by political hate, this small guard had been chosen from the little band of exiles.

Ogareff re-entered his room, now brilliantly lighted by the flames from the Angara; then he made ready to go out. But scarcely had he opened the door, when a woman rushed into the room, her clothes drenched, her hair in disorder.

“Sangarre!” exclaimed Ogareff, in the first moment of surprise, and not supposing that it could be any other woman than the gypsy.

It was not Sangarre; it was Nadia!

At the moment when, floating on the ice, the girl had uttered a cry on seeing the fire spreading along the current, Michael had seized her in his arms, and plunged with her into the river itself to seek a refuge in its depths from the flames. The block which bore them was not thirty fathoms from the first quay of Irkutsk.

Swimming beneath the water, Michael managed to get a footing with Nadia on the quay. Michael Strogoff had reached his journey’s end! He was in Irkutsk!

“To the governor’s palace!” said he to Nadia.

In less than ten minutes, they arrived at the entrance to the palace. Long tongues of flame from the Angara licked its walls, but were powerless to set it on fire. Beyond the houses on the bank were in a blaze.

The palace being open to all, Michael and Nadia entered without difficulty. In the confusion, no one remarked them, although their garments were dripping. A crowd of officers coming for orders, and of soldiers running to execute them, filled the great hall on the ground floor. There, in a sudden eddy of the confused multitude, Michael and the young girl were separated from each other.

Nadia ran distracted through the passages, calling her companion, and asking to be taken to the Grand Duke. A door into a room flooded with light opened before her. She entered, and found herself suddenly face to face with the man whom she had met at Ichim, whom she had seen at Tomsk; face to face with the one whose villainous hand would an instant later betray the town!

“Ivan Ogareff!” she cried.

On hearing his name pronounced, the wretch started. His real name known, all his plans would be balked. There was but one thing to be done: to kill the person who had just uttered it. Ogareff darted at Nadia; but the girl, a knife in her hand, retreated against the wall, determined to defend herself.

“Ivan Ogareff!” again cried Nadia, knowing well that so detested a name would soon bring her help.

“Ah! Be silent!” hissed out the traitor between his clenched teeth.

“Ivan Ogareff!” exclaimed a third time the brave young girl, in a voice to which hate had added ten-fold strength.

Mad with fury, Ogareff, drawing a dagger from his belt, again rushed at Nadia and compelled her to retreat into a corner of the room. Her last hope appeared gone, when the villain, suddenly lifted by an irresistible force, was dashed to the ground.

“Michael!” cried Nadia.

It was Michael Strogoff. Michael had heard Nadia's call. Guided by her voice, he had just in time reached Ivan Ogareff's room, and entered by the open door.

"Fear nothing, Nadia," said he, placing himself between her and Ogareff.

"Ah!" cried the girl, "take care, brother! The traitor is armed! He can see!"

Ogareff rose, and, thinking he had an immeasurable advantage over the blind man leaped upon him. But with one hand, the blind man grasped the arm of his enemy, seized his weapon, and hurled him again to the ground.

Pale with rage and shame, Ogareff remembered that he wore a sword. He drew it and returned a second time to the charge. A blind man! Ogareff had only to deal with a blind man! He was more than a match for him!

Nadia, terrified at the danger which threatened her companion ran to the door calling for help!

"Close the door, Nadia!" said Michael. "Call no one, and leave me alone! The Czar's courier has nothing to fear to-day from this villain! Let him come on, if he dares! I am ready for him."

In the mean time, Ogareff, gathering himself together like a tiger about to spring, uttered not a word. The noise of his footsteps, his very breathing, he endeavored to conceal from the ear of the blind man. His object was to strike before his opponent was aware of his approach, to strike him with a deadly blow.

Nadia, terrified and at the same time confident, watched this terrible scene with involuntary admiration. Michael's calm bearing seemed to have inspired her. Michael's sole weapon was his Siberian knife. He did not see his adversary armed with a sword, it is true; but Heaven's support seemed to be afforded him. How, almost without stirring, did he always face the point of the sword?

Ivan Ogareff watched his strange adversary with visible anxiety. His superhuman calm had an effect upon him. In vain, appealing to his reason, did he tell himself that in so unequal a combat all the advantages were on his side. The immobility of the blind man froze him. He had settled on the place where he would strike his victim. He had fixed upon it! What, then, hindered him from putting an end to his blind antagonist?

At last, with a spring he drove his sword full at Michael's breast. An imperceptible movement of the blind man's knife turned aside the blow. Michael had not been touched, and coolly he awaited a second attack.

Cold drops stood on Ogareff's brow. He drew back a step, then again leaped forward. But as had the first, this second attempt failed. The knife had simply parried the blow from the traitor's useless sword.

Mad with rage and terror before this living statue, he gazed into the wide-open eyes of the blind man. Those eyes which seemed to pierce to the bottom of his soul, and yet which did not, could not, see — exercised a sort of dreadful fascination over him.

All at once, Ogareff uttered a cry. A sudden light flashed across his brain. "He sees!" he exclaimed, "he sees!" And like a wild beast trying to retreat into its den, step by step, terrified, he drew back to the end of the room.

Then the statue became animated, the blind man walked straight up to Ivan Ogareff, and placing himself right before him, "Yes, I see!" said he. "I see the mark of the knout which I gave you, traitor and coward! I see the place where I am about to strike you! Defend your life! It is a duel I deign to offer you! My knife against your sword!”

“He sees!” said Nadia. “Gracious Heaven, is it possible!”

Ogareff felt that he was lost. But mustering all his courage, he sprang forward on his impassible adversary. The two blades crossed, but at a touch from Michael’s knife, wielded in the hand of the Siberian hunter, the sword flew in splinters, and the wretch, stabbed to the heart, fell lifeless on the ground.

At the same moment, the door was thrown open. The Grand Duke, accompanied by some of his officers, appeared on the threshold. The Grand Duke advanced. In the body lying on the ground, he recognized the man whom he believed to be the Czar’s courier.

Then, in a threatening voice, “Who killed that man?” he asked.

“I,” replied Michael.

One of the officers put a pistol to his temple, ready to fire.

“Your name?” asked the Grand Duke, before giving the order for his brains to be blown out.

“Your Highness,” answered Michael, “ask me rather the name of the man who lies at your feet!”

“That man, I know him! He is a servant of my brother! He is the Czar’s courier!”

“That man, your Highness, is not a courier of the Czar! He is Ivan Ogareff!”

“Ivan Ogareff!” exclaimed the Grand Duke.

“Yes, Ivan the Traitor!”

“But who are you, then?”

“Michael Strogoff!”

CHAPTER XV CONCLUSION

MICHAEL STROGOFF was not, had never been, blind. A purely human phenomenon, at the same time moral and physical, had neutralized the action of the incandescent blade which Feofar's executioner had passed before his eyes.

It may be remembered, that at the moment of the execution, Marfa Strogoff was present, stretching out her hands towards her son. Michael gazed at her as a son would gaze at his mother, when it is for the last time. The tears, which his pride in vain endeavored to subdue, welling up from his heart, gathered under his eyelids, and volatiliz-ing on the cornea, had saved his sight. The vapor formed by his tears interposing between the glowing saber and his eyeballs, had been sufficient to annihilate the action of the heat. A similar effect is produced, when a workman smelter, after dipping his hand in vapor, can with impunity hold it over a stream of melted iron.

Michael had immediately understood the danger in which he would be placed should he make known his secret to anyone. He at once saw, on the other hand, that he might make use of his supposed blindness for the accomplishment of his designs. Because it was believed that he was blind, he would be allowed to go free. He must therefore be blind, blind to all, even to Nadia, blind everywhere, and not a gesture at any moment must let the truth be suspected. His resolution was taken. He must risk his life even to afford to all he might meet the proof of his want of sight. We know how perfectly he acted the part he had determined on.

His mother alone knew the truth, and he had whispered it to her in Tomsk itself, when bending over her in the dark he covered her with kisses.

When Ogareff had in his cruel irony held the Imperial letter before the eyes which he believed were destroyed, Michael had been able to read, and had read the letter which disclosed the odious plans of the traitor. This was the reason of the wonderful resolution he exhibited during the second part of his journey. This was the reason of his unalterable longing to reach Irkutsk, so as to perform his mission by word of mouth. He knew that the town would be betrayed! He knew that the life of the Grand Duke was threatened! The safety of the Czar’s brother and of Siberia was in his hands.

This story was told in a few words to the Grand Duke, and Michael repeated also — and with what emotion! — the part Nadia had taken in these events.

“Who is this girl?” asked the Grand Duke.

“The daughter of the exile, Wassili Fedor,” replied Michael.

“The daughter of Captain Fedor,” said the Grand Duke, “has ceased to be the daughter of an exile. There are no longer exiles in Irkutsk.”

Nadia, less strong in joy than she had been in grief, fell on her knees before the Grand Duke, who raised her with one hand, while he extended the other to Michael.

An hour after, Nadia was in her father’s arms. Michael Strogoff, Nadia, and Wassili Fedor were united. This was the height of happiness to them all.

The Tartars had been repulsed in their double attack on the town. Wassili Fedor, with his little band, had driven back the first assailants who presented themselves at the Bolchaia Gate, expecting to find it open and which, by an instinctive feeling, often arising from sound judgment, he had determined to remain at and defend.

At the same time as the Tartars were driven back the besieged had mastered the fire. The liquid naphtha having rapidly burnt to the surface of the water, the flames did not go beyond the houses on the shore, and left the other quarters of the town uninjured. Before daybreak the troops of Feofar-Khan had retreated into their camp, leaving a large number of dead on and below the ramparts.

Among the dead was the gypsy Sangarre, who had vainly endeavored to join Ivan Ogareff.

For two days the besiegers attempted no fresh assault. They were discouraged by the death of Ogareff. This man was the mainspring of the invasion, and he alone, by his plots long since contrived, had had sufficient influence over the khans and their hordes to bring them to the conquest of Asiatic Russia.

However, the defenders of Irkutsk kept on their guard, and the investment still continued; but on the 7th of October, at daybreak, cannon boomed out from the heights around Irkutsk. It was the succoring army under the command of General Kisselef, and it was thus that he made known his welcome arrival to the Grand Duke.

The Tartars did not wait to be attacked. Not daring to run the risk of a battle under the walls of Irkutsk, they immediately broke up the Angara camp. Irkutsk was at last relieved.

With the first Russian soldiers, two of Michael’s friends entered the city. They were the inseparable Blount and Jolivet. On gaining the right bank of the Angara by means of the icy barrier, they had escaped, as had the other fugitives, before the flames had reached their raft. This had been noted by Alcide Jolivet in his book in this way: “Ran a narrow chance of being finished up like a lemon in a bowl of punch!”

Their joy was great on finding Nadia and Michael safe and sound; above all, when they learnt that their brave companion was not blind. Harry Blount inscribed this observation: “Red-hot iron is insufficient in some cases to destroy the sensibility of the optic nerve.”

Then the two correspondents, settled for a time in Irkutsk, busied themselves in putting the notes and impressions of their journey in order. Thence were sent to London and Paris two interesting articles relative to the Tartar invasion, and which — a rare thing — did not contradict each other even on the least important points.

The remainder of the campaign was unfortunate to the Emir and his allies. This invasion, futile as all which attack the Russian Colossus must be, was very fatal to them. They soon found themselves cut off by the Czar’s troops, who retook in succession all the conquered towns. Besides this, the winter was terrible, and, decimated by the cold, only a small part of these hordes returned to the steppes of Tartary.

The Irkutsk road, by way of the Ural Mountains, was now open. The Grand Duke was anxious to return to Moscow, but he delayed his journey to be present at a touching ceremony, which took place a few days after the entry of the Russian troops.

Michael Strogoff sought Nadia, and in her father’s presence said to her, “Nadia, my sister still, when you left Riga to come to Irkutsk, did you leave it with any other regret than that for your mother?”

“No,” replied Nadia, “none of any sort whatever.”

“Then, nothing of your heart remains there?”

“Nothing, brother.”

“Then, Nadia,” said Michael, “I think that God, in allowing us to meet, and to go through so many severe trials together, must have meant us to be united forever.”

“Ah!” said Nadia, falling into Michael’s arms. Then turning towards Wassili Fedor, “My father,” said she, blushing.

“Nadia,” said Captain Fedor, “it will be my joy to call you both my children!”

The marriage ceremony took place in Irkutsk cathedral.

Jolivet and Blount very naturally assisted at this marriage, of which they wished to give an account to their readers.

“And doesn’t it make you wish to imitate them?” asked Alcide of his friend.

“Pooh!” said Blount. “Now if I had a cousin like you — ”

“My cousin isn’t to be married!” answered Alcide, laughing.

“So much the better,” returned Blount, “for they speak of difficulties arising between London and Pekin. Have you no wish to go and see what is going on there?”

“By Jove, my dear Blount!” exclaimed Alcide Jolivet, “I was just going to make the same proposal to you.”

And that was how the two inseparables set off for China.

A few days after the ceremony, Michael and Nadia Strogoff, accompanied by Wassili Fedor, took the route to Europe. The road so full of suffering when going, was a road of joy in returning. They traveled swiftly, in one of those sleighs which glide like an express train across the frozen steppes of Siberia.

However, when they reached the banks of the Dinka, just before Birskoe, they stopped for a while. Michael found the place where he had buried poor Nicholas. A cross was erected there, and Nadia prayed a last time on the grave of the humble and heroic friend, whom neither of them would ever forget.

At Omsk, old Marfa awaited them in the little house of the Strogoffs. She clasped passionately in her arms the girl whom in her heart she had already a hundred times called “daughter.” The brave old Siberian, on that day, had the right to recognize her son and say she was proud of him.

After a few days passed at Omsk, Michael and Nadia entered Europe, and, Wassili Fedor settling down in St. Petersburg, neither his son nor his daughter had any occasion to leave him, except to go and see their old mother.

The young courier was received by the Czar, who attached him specially to his own person, and gave him the Cross of St. George. In the course of time, Michael Strogoff reached a high station in the Empire. But it is not the history of his success, but the history of his trials, which deserves to be related.

OFF ON A COMET

Translated by Charles F. Horne,

First published under the French title *Hector Servadac* in 1877, this novel tells the story of John Herschel, who observes Comet Halley from his observatory in Cape Town in 1835. The narrative begins with a comet that touches the Earth in its flight and collects a few small chunks of it.

Verne at the time of publication

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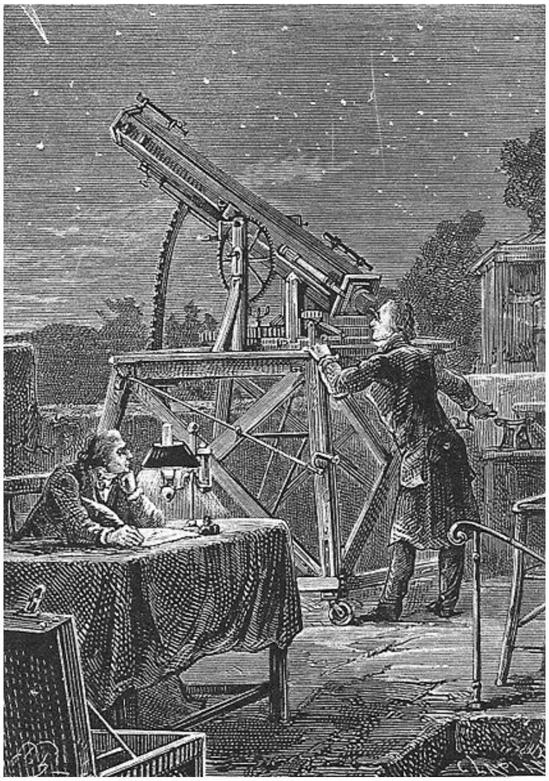

An original illustration

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I. A CHALLENGE

“Nothing, sir, can induce me to surrender my claim.”

“I am sorry, count, but in such a matter your views cannot modify mine.”

“But allow me to point out that my seniority unquestionably gives me a prior right.”

“Mere seniority, I assert, in an affair of this kind, cannot possibly entitle you to any prior claim whatever.”

“Then, captain, no alternative is left but for me to compel you to yield at the sword’s point.”

“As you please, count; but neither sword nor pistol can force me to forego my pretensions. Here is my card.”

“And mine.”

This rapid altercation was thus brought to an end by the formal interchange of the names of the disputants. On one of the cards was inscribed:

Captain Hector Servadac,

Staff Officer, Mostaganem.

On the other was the title:

Count Wassili Timascheff,

On board the Schooner “Dobryna.”

It did not take long to arrange that seconds should be appointed, who would meet in Mostaganem at two o’clock that day; and the captain and the count were on the point of parting from each other, with a salute of punctilious courtesy, when Timascheff, as if struck by a sudden thought, said abruptly: “Perhaps it would be better, captain, not to allow the real cause of this to transpire?”

“Far better,” replied Servadac; “it is undesirable in every way for any names to be mentioned.”

“In that case, however,” continued the count, “it will be necessary to assign an ostensible pretext of some kind. Shall we allege a musical dispute? a contention in which I feel bound to defend Wagner, while you are the zealous champion of Rossini?”

“I am quite content,” answered Servadac, with a smile; and with another low bow they parted.

The scene, as here depicted, took place upon the extremity of a little cape on the Algerian coast, between Mostaganem and Tenes, about two miles from the mouth of the Shelif. The headland rose more than sixty feet above the sea-level, and the azure waters of the Mediterranean, as they softly kissed the strand, were tinged with the reddish hue of the ferriferous rocks that formed its base. It was the 31st of December. The noontide sun, which usually illuminated the various projections of the coast with a dazzling brightness, was hidden by a dense mass of cloud, and the fog, which for some unaccountable cause, had hung for the last two months over nearly every region in the world, causing serious interruption to traffic between continent and continent, spread its dreary veil across land and sea.

After taking leave of the staff-officer, Count Wassili Timascheff wended his way down to a small creek, and took his seat in the stern of a light four-oar that had been awaiting his return; this was immediately pushed off from shore, and was soon alongside a pleasure-yacht, that was lying to, not many cable lengths away.

At a sign from Servadac, an orderly, who had been standing at a respectful distance, led forward a magnificent Arabian horse; the captain vaulted into the saddle, and followed by his attendant, well mounted as himself, started off towards Mostaganem. It was half-past twelve when the two riders crossed the bridge that had been recently erected over the Shelif, and a quarter of an hour later their steeds, flecked with foam, dashed through the Mascara Gate, which was one of five entrances opened in the embattled wall that encircled the town.

At that date, Mostaganem contained about fifteen thousand inhabitants, three thousand of whom were French. Besides being one of the principal district towns of the province of Oran, it was also a military station. Mostaganem rejoiced in a well-sheltered harbor, which enabled her to utilize all the rich products of the Mina and the Lower Shelif. It was the existence of so good a harbor amidst the exposed cliffs of this coast that had induced the owner of the *Dobryna* to winter in these parts, and for two months the Russian standard had been seen floating from her yard, whilst on her mast-head was hoisted the pennant of the French Yacht Club, with the distinctive letters M. C. W. T. the initials of Count Timascheff.

Having entered the town, Captain Servadac made his way towards Matmore, the military quarter, and was not long in finding two friends on whom he might rely — a major of the 2nd Fusileers, and a captain of the 8th Artillery. The two officers listened gravely enough to Servadac's request that they would act as his seconds in an affair of honor, but could not resist a smile on hearing that the dispute between him and the count had originated in a musical discussion. Surely, they suggested, the matter might be easily arranged; a few slight concessions on either side, and all might be amicably adjusted. But no representations on their part were of any avail. Hector Servadac was inflexible.

"No concession is possible," he replied, resolutely. "Rossini has been deeply injured, and I cannot suffer the injury to be unavenged. Wagner is a fool. I shall keep my word. I am quite firm."

"Be it so, then," replied one of the officers; "and after all, you know, a sword-cut need not be a very serious affair."

"Certainly not," rejoined Servadac; "and especially in my case, when I have not the slightest intention of being wounded at all."

Incredulous as they naturally were as to the assigned cause of the quarrel, Servadac's friends had no alternative but to accept his explanation, and without farther parley they started for the staff office, where, at two o'clock precisely, they were to meet the seconds of Count Timascheff. Two hours later they had returned. All the preliminaries had been arranged; the count, who like many Russians abroad was an aide-de-camp of the Czar, had of course proposed swords as the most appropriate weapons, and the duel was to take place on the following morning, the first of January, at nine o'clock, upon the cliff at a spot about a mile and a half from the mouth of the Shelif. With the assurance that they would not fail to keep their appointment with military punctuality, the two officers cordially wrung their friend's hand and retired to the Zulma Cafe for a game at piquet. Captain Servadac at once retraced his steps and left the town.

For the last fortnight Servadac had not been occupying his proper lodgings in the military quarters; having been appointed to make a local levy, he had been living in a gourbi, or native hut, on the Mostaganem coast, between four and five miles from the Shelif. His orderly was his sole companion, and by any other man than the captain the enforced exile would have been esteemed little short of a severe penance.

On his way to the gourbi, his mental occupation was a very laborious effort to put together what he was pleased to call a rondo, upon a model of versification all but obsolete. This rondo, it is unnecessary to conceal, was to be an ode addressed to a young widow by whom he had been captivated, and whom he was anxious to marry, and the tenor of his muse was intended to prove that when once a man has found an object in all respects worthy of his affections, he should love her "in all simplicity." Whether the aphorism were universally true was not very material to the gallant captain, whose sole ambition at present was to construct a roundelay of which this should be the prevailing sentiment. He indulged the fancy that he might succeed in producing a composition which would have a fine effect here in Algeria, where poetry in that form was all but unknown.

"I know well enough," he said repeatedly to himself, "what I want to say. I want to tell her that I love her sincerely, and wish to marry her; but, confound it! the words won't rhyme. Plague on it! Does nothing rhyme with 'simplicity'? Ah! I have it now:

'Lovers should, whoe'er they be,

Love in all simplicity.'

But what next? how am I to go on? I say, Ben Zoof,” he called aloud to his orderly, who was trotting silently close in his rear, “did you ever compose any poetry?”

“No, captain,” answered the man promptly: “I have never made any verses, but I have seen them made fast enough at a booth during the fete of Montmartre.”

“Can you remember them?”

“Remember them! to be sure I can. This is the way they began:

‘Come in! come in! you’ll not repent

The entrance money you have spent;

The wondrous mirror in this place

Reveals your future sweetheart’s face.’”

“Bosh!” cried Servadac in disgust; “your verses are detestable trash.”

“As good as any others, captain, squeaked through a reed pipe.”

“Hold your tongue, man,” said Servadac peremptorily; “I have made another couplet.

‘Lovers should, whoe’er they be,

Love in all simplicity;

Lover, loving honestly,

Offer I myself to thee.'"

Beyond this, however, the captain's poetical genius was impotent to carry him; his farther efforts were unavailing, and when at six o'clock he reached the gourbi, the four lines still remained the limit of his composition.

CHAPTER II. CAPTAIN SERVADAC AND HIS ORDERLY

At the time of which I write, there might be seen in the registers of the Minister of War the following entry:

SERVADAC (*Hector*), born at St. Trelody in the district of Lesparre, department of the Gironde, July 19th, 18 — .

Property: 1200 francs in rentes.

Length of service: Fourteen years, three months, and five days.

Service: Two years at school at St. Cyr; two years at L'Ecole d'Application; two years in the 8th Regiment of the Line; two years in the 3rd Light Cavalry; seven years in Algeria.

Campaigns: Soudan and Japan.

Rank: Captain on the staff at Mostaganem.

Decorations: Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, March 13th, 18 — .

Hector Servadac was thirty years of age, an orphan without lineage and almost without means. Thirsting for glory rather than for gold, slightly scatter-brained, but warm-hearted, generous, and brave, he was eminently formed to be the protege of the god of battles.

For the first year and a half of his existence he had been the foster-child of the sturdy wife of a vine-dresser of Medoc — a lineal descendant of the heroes of ancient prowess; in a word, he was one of those individuals whom nature seems to have predestined for remarkable things, and around whose cradle have hovered the fairy godmothers of adventure and good luck.

In appearance Hector Servadac was quite the type of an officer; he was rather more than five feet six inches high, slim and graceful, with dark curling hair and mustaches, well-formed hands and feet, and a clear blue eye. He seemed born to please without being conscious of the power he possessed. It must be owned, and no one was more ready to confess it than himself, that his literary attainments were by no means of a high order. “We don’t spin tops” is a favorite saying amongst artillery officers, indicating that they do not shirk their duty by frivolous pursuits; but it must be confessed that Servadac, being naturally idle, was very much given to “spinning tops.” His good abilities, however, and his ready intelligence had carried him successfully through the curriculum of his early career. He was a good draughtsman, an excellent rider — having thoroughly mastered the successor to the famous “Uncle Tom” at the riding-school of St. Cyr — and in the records of his military service his name had several times been included in the order of the day.

The following episode may suffice, in a certain degree, to illustrate his character. Once, in action, he was leading a detachment of infantry through an intrenchment. They came to a place where the side-work of the trench had been so riddled by shell that a portion of it had actually fallen in, leaving an aperture quite unsheltered from the grape-shot that was pouring in thick and fast. The men hesitated. In an instant Servadac mounted the side-work, laid himself down in the gap, and thus filling up the breach by his own body, shouted, “March on!”

And through a storm of shot, not one of which touched the prostrate officer, the troop passed in safety.

Since leaving the military college, Servadac, with the exception of his two campaigns in the Soudan and Japan, had been always stationed in Algeria. He had now a staff appointment at Mostaganem, and had lately been entrusted with some topographical work on the coast between Tenes and the Shelif. It was a matter of little consequence to him that the gourbi, in which of necessity he was quartered, was uncomfortable and ill-contrived; he loved the open air, and the independence of his life suited him well. Sometimes he would wander on foot upon the sandy shore, and sometimes he would enjoy a ride along the summit of the cliff; altogether being in no hurry at all to bring his task to an end. His occupation, moreover, was not so engrossing but that he could find leisure for taking a short railway journey once or twice a week; so that he was ever and again putting in an appearance at the general's receptions at Oran, and at the fetes given by the governor at Algiers.

It was on one of these occasions that he had first met Madame de L — — , the lady to whom he was desirous of dedicating the rondo, the first four lines of which had just seen the light. She was a colonel's widow, young and handsome, very reserved, not to say haughty in her manner, and either indifferent or impervious to the admiration which she inspired. Captain Servadac had not yet ventured to declare his attachment; of rivals he was well aware he had not a few, and amongst these not the least formidable was the Russian Count Timascheff. And although the young widow was all unconscious of the share she had in the matter, it was she, and she alone, who was the cause of the challenge just given and accepted by her two ardent admirers.

During his residence in the gourbi, Hector Servadac's sole companion was his orderly, Ben Zoof. Ben Zoof was devoted, body and soul, to his superior officer. His own personal ambition was so entirely absorbed in his master's welfare, that it is certain no offer of promotion — even had it been that of aide-de-camp to the Governor-General of Algiers — would have induced him to quit that master's service. His name might seem to imply that he was a native of Algeria; but such was by no means the case. His true name was Laurent; he was a native of Montmartre in Paris, and how or why he had obtained his patronymic was one of those anomalies which the most sagacious of etymologists would find it hard to explain.

Born on the hill of Montmartre, between the Solferino tower and the mill of La Galette, Ben Zoof had ever possessed the most unreserved admiration for his birthplace; and to his eyes the heights and district of Montmartre represented an epitome of all the wonders of the world. In all his travels, and these had been not a few, he had never beheld scenery which could compete with that of his native home. No cathedral — not even Burgos itself — could vie with the church at Montmartre. Its race-course could well hold its own against that at Pentelique; its reservoir would throw the Mediterranean into the shade; its forests had flourished long before the invasion of the Celts; and its very mill produced no ordinary flour, but provided material for cakes of world-wide renown. To crown all, Montmartre boasted a mountain — a veritable mountain; envious tongues indeed might pronounce it little more than a hill; but Ben Zoof would have allowed himself to be hewn in pieces rather than admit that it was anything less than fifteen thousand feet in height.

Ben Zoof's most ambitious desire was to induce the captain to go with him and end his days in his much-loved home, and so incessantly were Servadac's ears besieged with descriptions of the unparalleled beauties and advantages of this eighteenth arrondissement of Paris, that he could scarcely hear the name of Montmartre without a conscious thrill of aversion. Ben Zoof, however, did not despair of ultimately converting the captain, and meanwhile had resolved never to leave him. When a private in the 8th Cavalry, he had been on the point of quitting the army at twenty-eight years of age, but unexpectedly he had been appointed orderly to Captain Servadac. Side by side they fought in two campaigns. Servadac had saved Ben Zoof's life in Japan; Ben Zoof had rendered his master a like service in the Soudan. The bond of union thus effected could never be severed; and although Ben Zoof's achievements had fairly earned him the right of retirement, he firmly declined all honors or any pension that might part him from his superior officer. Two stout arms, an iron constitution, a powerful frame, and an indomitable courage were all loyally devoted to his master's service, and fairly entitled him to his *soi-disant* designation of "The Rampart of Montmartre." Unlike his master, he made no pretension to any gift of poetic power, but his inexhaustible memory made him a living encyclopaedia; and for his stock of anecdotes and trooper's tales he was matchless.

Thoroughly appreciating his servant's good qualities, Captain Servadac endured with imperturbable good humor those idiosyncrasies, which in a less faithful follower would have been intolerable, and from time to time he would drop a word of sympathy that served to deepen his subordinate's devotion.

On one occasion, when Ben Zoof had mounted his hobby-horse, and was indulging in high-flown praises about his beloved eighteenth arrondissement, the captain had remarked gravely, "Do you know, Ben Zoof, that Montmartre only requires a matter of some thirteen thousand feet to make it as high as Mont Blanc?"

Ben Zoof's eyes glistened with delight; and from that moment Hector Servadac and Montmartre held equal places in his affection.

CHAPTER III. INTERRUPTED EFFUSIONS

Composed of mud and loose stones, and covered with a thatch of turf and straw, known to the natives by the name of “driss,” the gourbi, though a grade better than the tents of the nomad Arabs, was yet far inferior to any habitation built of brick or stone. It adjoined an old stone hostelry, previously occupied by a detachment of engineers, and which now afforded shelter for Ben Zoof and the two horses. It still contained a considerable number of tools, such as mattocks, shovels, and pick-axes.

Uncomfortable as was their temporary abode, Servadac and his attendant made no complaints; neither of them was dainty in the matter either of board or lodging. After dinner, leaving his orderly to stow away the remains of the repast in what he was pleased to term the “cupboard of his stomach.” Captain Servadac turned out into the open air to smoke his pipe upon the edge of the cliff. The shades of night were drawing on. An hour previously, veiled in heavy clouds, the sun had sunk below the horizon that bounded the plain beyond the Shelif.

The sky presented a most singular appearance. Towards the north, although the darkness rendered it impossible to see beyond a quarter of a mile, the upper strata of the atmosphere were suffused with a rosy glare. No well-defined fringe of light, nor arch of luminous rays, betokened a display of aurora borealis, even had such a phenomenon been possible in these latitudes; and the most experienced meteorologist would have been puzzled to explain the cause of this striking illumination on this 31st of December, the last evening of the passing year.

But Captain Servadac was no meteorologist, and it is to be doubted whether, since leaving school, he had ever opened his “Course of

Cosmography.” Besides, he had other thoughts to occupy his mind. The prospects of the morrow offered serious matter for consideration. The captain was actuated by no personal animosity against the count; though rivals, the two men regarded each other with sincere respect; they had simply reached a crisis in which one of them was *de trop;* which of them, fate must decide.

At eight o’clock, Captain Servadac re-entered the gourbi, the single apartment of which contained his bed, a small writing-table, and some trunks that served instead of cupboards. The orderly performed his culinary operations in the adjoining building, which he also used as a bed-room, and where, extended on what he called his “good oak mattress,” he would sleep soundly as a dormouse for twelve hours at a stretch. Ben Zoof had not yet received his orders to retire, and ensconcing himself in a corner of the gourbi, he endeavored to doze — a task which the unusual agitation of his master rendered somewhat difficult. Captain Servadac was evidently in no hurry to betake himself to rest, but seating himself at his table, with a pair of compasses and a sheet of tracing-paper, he began to draw, with red and blue crayons, a variety of colored lines, which could hardly be supposed to have much connection with a topographical survey. In truth, his character of staff-officer was now entirely absorbed in that of Gascon poet. Whether he imagined that the compasses would bestow upon his verses the measure of a mathematical accuracy, or whether he fancied that the parti-colored lines would lend variety to his rhythm, it is impossible to determine; be that as it may, he was devoting all his energies to the compilation of his rondo, and supremely difficult he found the task.

“Hang it!” he ejaculated, “whatever induced me to choose this meter? It is as hard to find rhymes as to rally fugitive in a battle. But, by all the powers!

it shan't be said that a French officer cannot cope with a piece of poetry. One battalion has fought — now for the rest!"

Perseverance had its reward. Presently two lines, one red, the other blue, appeared upon the paper, and the captain murmured:

> "Words, mere words, cannot avail,
>
> Telling true heart's tender tale."

"What on earth ails my master?" muttered Ben Zoof; "for the last hour he has been as fidgety as a bird returning after its winter migration."

Servadac suddenly started from his seat, and as he paced the room with all the frenzy of poetic inspiration, read out:

> "Empty words cannot convey
>
> All a lover's heart would say."

"Well, to be sure, he is at his everlasting verses again!" said Ben Zoof to himself, as he roused himself in his corner. "Impossible to sleep in such a noise;" and he gave vent to a loud groan.

"How now, Ben Zoof?" said the captain sharply. "What ails you?"

"Nothing, sir, only the nightmare."

"Curse the fellow, he has quite interrupted me!" ejaculated the captain. "Ben Zoof!" he called aloud.

"Here, sir!" was the prompt reply; and in an instant the orderly was upon his feet, standing in a military attitude, one hand to his forehead, the other closely pressed to his trouser-seam.

“Stay where you are! don’t move an inch!” shouted Servadac; “I have just thought of the end of my rondo.” And in a voice of inspiration, accompanying his words with dramatic gestures, Servadac began to declaim:

> “Listen, lady, to my vows —
>
> O, consent to be my spouse;
>
> Constant ever I will be,
>
> Constant...”

No closing lines were uttered. All at once, with unutterable violence, the captain and his orderly were dashed, face downwards, to the ground.

CHAPTER IV. A CONVULSION OF NATURE

Whence came it that at that very moment the horizon underwent so strange and sudden a modification, that the eye of the most practiced mariner could not distinguish between sea and sky?

Whence came it that the billows raged and rose to a height hitherto unregistered in the records of science?

Whence came it that the elements united in one deafening crash; that the earth groaned as though the whole framework of the globe were ruptured; that the waters roared from their innermost depths; that the air shrieked with all the fury of a cyclone?

Whence came it that a radiance, intenser than the effulgence of the Northern Lights, overspread the firmament, and momentarily dimmed the splendor of the brightest stars?

Whence came it that the Mediterranean, one instant emptied of its waters, was the next flooded with a foaming surge?

Whence came it that in the space of a few seconds the moon’s disc reached a magnitude as though it were but a tenth part of its ordinary distance from the earth?

Whence came it that a new blazing spheroid, hitherto unknown to astronomy, now appeared suddenly in the firmament, though it were but to lose itself immediately behind masses of accumulated cloud?

What phenomenon was this that had produced a cataclysm so tremendous in effect upon earth, sky, and sea?

Was it possible that a single human being could have survived the convulsion? and if so, could he explain its mystery?

CHAPTER V. A MYSTERIOUS SEA

Violent as the commotion had been, that portion of the Algerian coast which is bounded on the north by the Mediterranean, and on the west by the right bank of the Shelif, appeared to have suffered little change. It is true that indentations were perceptible in the fertile plain, and the surface of the sea was ruffled with an agitation that was quite unusual; but the rugged outline of the cliff was the same as heretofore, and the aspect of the entire scene appeared unaltered. The stone hostelry, with the exception of some deep clefts in its walls, had sustained little injury; but the gourbi, like a house of cards destroyed by an infant's breath, had completely subsided, and its two inmates lay motionless, buried under the sunken thatch.

It was two hours after the catastrophe that Captain Servadac regained consciousness; he had some trouble to collect his thoughts, and the first sounds that escaped his lips were the concluding words of the rondo which had been so ruthlessly interrupted;

“Constant ever I will be,

Constant...”

His next thought was to wonder what had happened; and in order to find an answer, he pushed aside the broken thatch, so that his head appeared above the *debris*. “The gourbi leveled to the ground!” he exclaimed, “surely a waterspout has passed along the coast.”

He felt all over his body to perceive what injuries he had sustained, but not a sprain nor a scratch could he discover. “Where are you, Ben Zoof?” he shouted.

“Here, sir!” and with military promptitude a second head protruded from the rubbish.

“Have you any notion what has happened, Ben Zoof?”

“I’ve a notion, captain, that it’s all up with us.”

“Nonsense, Ben Zoof; it is nothing but a waterspout!”

“Very good, sir,” was the philosophical reply, immediately followed by the query, “Any bones broken, sir?”

“None whatever,” said the captain.

Both men were soon on their feet, and began to make a vigorous clearance of the ruins, beneath which they found that their arms, cooking utensils, and other property, had sustained little injury.

“By-the-by, what o’clock is it?” asked the captain.

“It must be eight o’clock, at least,” said Ben Zoof, looking at the sun, which was a considerable height above the horizon. “It is almost time for us to start.”

“To start! what for?”

“To keep your appointment with Count Timascheff.”

“By Jove! I had forgotten all about it!” exclaimed Servadac. Then looking at his watch, he cried, “What are you thinking of, Ben Zoof? It is scarcely two o’clock.”

“Two in the morning, or two in the afternoon?” asked Ben Zoof, again regarding the sun.

Servadac raised his watch to his ear. “It is going,” said he; “but, by all the wines of Medoc, I am puzzled. Don’t you see the sun is in the west? It must be near setting.”

“Setting, captain! Why, it is rising finely, like a conscript at the sound of the reveille. It is considerably higher since we have been talking.”

Incredible as it might appear, the fact was undeniable that the sun was rising over the Shelif from that quarter of the horizon behind which it usually sank for the latter portion of its daily round. They were utterly bewildered. Some mysterious phenomenon must not only have altered the position of the sun in the sidereal system, but must even have brought about an important modification of the earth’s rotation on her axis.

Captain Servadac consoled himself with the prospect of reading an explanation of the mystery in next week’s newspapers, and turned his attention to what was to him of more immediate importance. “Come, let us be off,” said he to his orderly; “though heaven and earth be topsy-turvy, I must be at my post this morning.”

“To do Count Timascheff the honor of running him through the body,” added Ben Zoof.

If Servadac and his orderly had been less preoccupied, they would have noticed that a variety of other physical changes besides the apparent alteration in the movement of the sun had been evolved during the atmospheric disturbances of that New Year’s night. As they descended the steep footpath leading from the cliff towards the Shelif, they were unconscious that their respiration became forced and rapid, like that of a mountaineer when he has reached an altitude where the air has become less charged with oxygen. They were also unconscious that their voices were thin and feeble; either they must themselves have become rather deaf, or it was evident that the air had become less capable of transmitting sound.

The weather, which on the previous evening had been very foggy, had entirely changed. The sky had assumed a singular tint, and was soon covered with lowering clouds that completely hid the sun. There were, indeed, all the signs of a coming storm, but the vapor, on account of the insufficient condensation, failed to fall.

The sea appeared quite deserted, a most unusual circumstance along this coast, and not a sail nor a trail of smoke broke the gray monotony of water and sky. The limits of the horizon, too, had become much circumscribed. On land, as well as on sea, the remote distance had completely disappeared, and it seemed as though the globe had assumed a more decided convexity.

At the pace at which they were walking, it was very evident that the captain and his attendant would not take long to accomplish the three miles that lay between the gourbi and the place of rendezvous. They did not exchange a word, but each was conscious of an unusual buoyancy, which appeared to lift up their bodies and give as it were, wings to their feet. If Ben Zoof had expressed his sensations in words, he would have said that he felt “up to anything,” and he had even forgotten to taste so much as a crust of bread, a lapse of memory of which the worthy soldier was rarely guilty.

As these thoughts were crossing his mind, a harsh bark was heard to the left of the footpath, and a jackal was seen emerging from a large grove of lentisks. Regarding the two wayfarers with manifest uneasiness, the beast took up its position at the foot of a rock, more than thirty feet in height. It belonged to an African species distinguished by a black spotted skin, and a black line down the front of the legs. At night-time, when they scour the country in herds, the creatures are somewhat formidable, but singly they are no more dangerous than a dog. Though by no means afraid of them, Ben Zoof had a particular aversion to jackals, perhaps because they had no place among the fauna of his beloved Montmartre. He accordingly began to make threatening gestures, when, to the unmitigated astonishment of himself and the captain, the animal darted forward, and in one single bound gained the summit of the rock.

“Good Heavens!” cried Ben Zoof, “that leap must have been thirty feet at least.”

“True enough,” replied the captain; “I never saw such a jump.”

Meantime the jackal had seated itself upon its haunches, and was staring at the two men with an air of impudent defiance. This was too much for Ben Zoof’s forbearance, and stooping down he caught up a huge stone, when to his surprise, he found that it was no heavier than a piece of petrified sponge. “Confound the brute!” he exclaimed, “I might as well throw a piece of bread at him. What accounts for its being as light as this?”

Nothing daunted, however, he hurled the stone into the air. It missed its aim; but the jackal, deeming it on the whole prudent to decamp, disappeared across the trees and hedges with a series of bounds, which could only be likened to those that might be made by an india-rubber kangaroo. Ben Zoof was sure that his own powers of propelling must equal those of a howitzer, for his stone, after a lengthened flight through the air, fell to the ground full five hundred paces the other side of the rock.

The orderly was now some yards ahead of his master, and had reached a ditch full of water, and about ten feet wide. With the intention of clearing it, he made a spring, when a loud cry burst from Servadac. “Ben Zoof, you idiot! What are you about? You will break your back!”

And well might he be alarmed, for Ben Zoof had sprung to a height of forty feet into the air. Fearful of the consequences that would attend the descent of his servant to *terra firma*, Servadac bounded forwards, to be on the other side of the ditch in time to break his fall. But the muscular effort that he made carried him in his turn to an altitude of thirty feet; in his ascent he passed Ben Zoof, who had already commenced his downward course; and then, obedient to the laws of gravitation, he descended with increasing rapidity, and alighted upon the earth without experiencing a shock greater than if he had merely made a bound of four or five feet high.

Ben Zoof burst into a roar of laughter. “Bravo!” he said, “we should make a good pair of clowns.”

But the captain was inclined to take a more serious view of the matter. For a few seconds he stood lost in thought, then said solemnly, “Ben Zoof, I must be dreaming. Pinch me hard; I must be either asleep or mad.”

“It is very certain that something has happened to us,” said Ben Zoof. “I have occasionally dreamed that I was a swallow flying over the Montmartre, but I never experienced anything of this kind before; it must be peculiar to the coast of Algeria.”

Servadac was stupefied; he felt instinctively that he was not dreaming, and yet was powerless to solve the mystery. He was not, however, the man to puzzle himself for long over any insoluble problem. “Come what may,” he presently exclaimed, “we will make up our minds for the future to be surprised at nothing.”

“Right, captain,” replied Ben Zoof; “and, first of all, let us settle our little score with Count Timascheff.”

Beyond the ditch lay a small piece of meadow land, about an acre in extent. A soft and delicious herbage carpeted the soil, whilst trees formed a charming framework to the whole. No spot could have been chosen more suitable for the meeting between the two adversaries.

Servadac cast a hasty glance round. No one was in sight. “We are the first on the field,” he said.

“Not so sure of that, sir,” said Ben Zoof.

“What do you mean?” asked Servadac, looking at his watch, which he had set as nearly as possible by the sun before leaving the gourbi; “it is not nine o’clock yet.”

“Look up there, sir. I am much mistaken if that is not the sun;” and as Ben Zoof spoke, he pointed directly overhead to where a faint white disc was dimly visible through the haze of clouds.

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Servadac. “How can the sun be in the zenith, in the month of January, in lat. 39 degrees N.?”

“Can’t say, sir. I only know the sun is there; and at the rate he has been traveling, I would lay my cap to a dish of couscous that in less than three hours he will have set.”

Hector Servadac, mute and motionless, stood with folded arms. Presently he roused himself, and began to look about again. “What means all this?” he murmured. “Laws of gravity disturbed! Points of the compass reversed! The length of day reduced one half! Surely this will indefinitely postpone my meeting with the count. Something has happened; Ben Zoof and I cannot both be mad!”

The orderly, meantime, surveyed his master with the greatest equanimity; no phenomenon, however extraordinary, would have drawn from him a single exclamation of surprise. “Do you see anyone, Ben Zoof?” asked the captain, at last.

“No one, sir; the count has evidently been and gone.” “But supposing that to be the case,” persisted the captain, “my seconds would have waited, and not seeing me, would have come on towards the gourbi. I can only conclude that they have been unable to get here; and as for Count Timascheff — ”

Without finishing his sentence. Captain Servadac, thinking it just probable that the count, as on the previous evening, might come by water, walked to the ridge of rock that overhung the shore, in order to ascertain if the *Dobryna* were anywhere in sight. But the sea was deserted, and for the first time the captain noticed that, although the wind was calm, the waters were unusually agitated, and seethed and foamed as though they were boiling. It was very certain that the yacht would have found a difficulty in holding her own in such a swell. Another thing that now struck Servadac was the extraordinary contraction of the horizon. Under ordinary circumstances, his elevated position would have allowed him a radius of vision at least five and twenty miles in length; but the terrestrial sphere seemed, in the course of the last few hours, to have become considerably reduced in volume, and he could now see for a distance of only six miles in every direction.

Meantime, with the agility of a monkey, Ben Zoof had clambered to the top of a eucalyptus, and from his lofty perch was surveying the country to the south, as well as towards both Tenes and Mostaganem. On descending, be informed the captain that the plain was deserted.

“We will make our way to the river, and get over into Mostaganem,” said the captain.

The Shelif was not more than a mile and a half from the meadow, but no time was to be lost if the two men were to reach the town before nightfall. Though still hidden by heavy clouds, the sun was evidently declining fast; and what was equally inexplicable, it was not following the oblique curve that in these latitudes and at this time of year might be expected, but was sinking perpendicularly on to the horizon.

As he went along, Captain Servadac pondered deeply. Perchance some unheard-of phenomenon had modified the rotary motion of the globe; or perhaps the Algerian coast had been transported beyond the equator into the southern hemisphere. Yet the earth, with the exception of the alteration in its convexity, in this part of Africa at least, seemed to have undergone no change of any very great importance. As far as the eye could reach, the shore was, as it had ever been, a succession of cliffs, beach, and arid rocks, tinged with a red ferruginous hue. To the south — if south, in this inverted order of things, it might still be called — the face of the country also appeared unaltered, and some leagues away, the peaks of the Merdeyah mountains still retained their accustomed outline.

Presently a rift in the clouds gave passage to an oblique ray of light that clearly proved that the sun was setting in the east.

“Well, I am curious to know what they think of all this at Mostaganem,” said the captain. “I wonder, too, what the Minister of War will say when he receives a telegram informing him that his African colony has become, not morally, but physically disorganized; that the cardinal points are at variance with ordinary rules, and that the sun in the month of January is shining down vertically upon our heads.”

Ben Zoof, whose ideas of discipline were extremely rigid, at once suggested that the colony should be put under the surveillance of the police, that the cardinal points should be placed under restraint, and that the sun should be shot for breach of discipline.

Meantime, they were both advancing with the utmost speed. The decompression of the atmosphere made the specific gravity of their bodies extraordinarily light, and they ran like hares and leaped like chamois. Leaving the devious windings of the footpath, they went as a crow would fly across the country. Hedges, trees, and streams were cleared at a bound, and under these conditions Ben Zoof felt that he could have overstepped Montmartre at a single stride. The earth seemed as elastic as the springboard of an acrobat; they scarcely touched it with their feet, and their only fear was lest the height to which they were propelled would consume the time which they were saving by their short cut across the fields.

It was not long before their wild career brought them to the right bank of the Shelif. Here they were compelled to stop, for not only had the bridge completely disappeared, but the river itself no longer existed. Of the left bank there was not the slightest trace, and the right bank, which on the previous evening had bounded the yellow stream, as it murmured peacefully along the fertile plain, had now become the shore of a tumultuous ocean, its azure waters extending westwards far as the eye could reach, and annihilating the tract of country which had hitherto formed the district of Mostaganem. The shore coincided exactly with what had been the right bank of the Shelif, and in a slightly curved line ran north and south, whilst the adjacent groves and meadows all retained their previous positions. But the river-bank had become the shore of an unknown sea.

Eager to throw some light upon the mystery, Servadac hurriedly made his way through the oleander bushes that overhung the shore, took up some water in the hollow of his hand, and carried it to his lips. “Salt as brine!” he exclaimed, as soon as he had tasted it. “The sea has undoubtedly swallowed up all the western part of Algeria.”

“It will not last long, sir,” said Ben Zoof. “It is, probably, only a severe flood.”

The captain shook his head. “Worse than that, I fear, Ben Zoof,” he replied with emotion. “It is a catastrophe that may have very serious consequences. What can have become of all my friends and fellow-officers?”

Ben Zoof was silent. Rarely had he seen his master so much agitated; and though himself inclined to receive these phenomena with philosophic indifference, his notions of military duty caused his countenance to reflect the captain’s expression of amazement.

But there was little time for Servadac to examine the changes which a few hours had wrought. The sun had already reached the eastern horizon, and just as though it were crossing the ecliptic under the tropics, it sank like a cannon ball into the sea. Without any warning, day gave place to night, and earth, sea, and sky were immediately wrapped in profound obscurity.

CHAPTER VI. THE CAPTAIN MAKES AN EXPLORATION

Hector Servadac was not the man to remain long unnerved by any untoward event. It was part of his character to discover the why and the wherefore of everything that came under his observation, and he would have faced a cannon ball the more unflinchingly from understanding the dynamic force by which it was propelled. Such being his temperament, it may well be imagined that he was anxious not to remain long in ignorance of the cause of the phenomena which had been so startling in their consequences.

“We must inquire into this to-morrow,” he exclaimed, as darkness fell suddenly upon him. Then, after a pause, he added: “That is to say, if there is to be a to-morrow; for if I were to be put to the torture, I could not tell what has become of the sun.”

“May I ask, sir, what we are to do now?” put in Ben Zoof.

“Stay where we are for the present; and when daylight appears — if it ever does appear — we will explore the coast to the west and south, and return to the gourbi. If we can find out nothing else, we must at least discover where we are.”

“Meanwhile, sir, may we go to sleep?”

“Certainly, if you like, and if you can.”

Nothing loath to avail himself of his master’s permission, Ben Zoof crouched down in an angle of the shore, threw his arms over his eyes, and very soon slept the sleep of the ignorant, which is often sounder than the sleep of the just. Overwhelmed by the questions that crowded upon his brain, Captain Servadac could only wander up and down the shore. Again and again he asked himself what the catastrophe could portend. Had the towns of Algiers, Oran, and Mostaganem escaped the inundation? Could he bring himself to believe that all the inhabitants, his friends, and comrades had perished; or was it not more probable that the Mediterranean had merely invaded the region of the mouth of the Shelif? But this supposition did not in the least explain the other physical disturbances. Another hypothesis that presented itself to his mind was that the African coast might have been suddenly transported to the equatorial zone. But although this might get over the difficulty of the altered altitude of the sun and the absence of twilight, yet it would neither account for the sun setting in the east, nor for the length of the day being reduced to six hours.

“We must wait till to-morrow,” he repeated; adding, for he had become distrustful of the future, “that is to say, if to-morrow ever comes.”

Although not very learned in astronomy, Servadac was acquainted with the position of the principal constellations. It was therefore a considerable disappointment to him that, in consequence of the heavy clouds, not a star was visible in the firmament. To have ascertained that the pole-star had become displaced would have been an undeniable proof that the earth was revolving on a new axis; but not a rift appeared in the lowering clouds, which seemed to threaten torrents of rain.

It happened that the moon was new on that very day; naturally, therefore, it would have set at the same time as the sun. What, then, was the captain’s bewilderment when, after he had been walking for about an hour and a half, he noticed on the western horizon a strong glare that penetrated even the masses of the clouds.

“The moon in the west!” he cried aloud; but suddenly bethinking himself, he added: “But no, that cannot be the moon; unless she had shifted very much nearer the earth, she could never give a light as intense as this.”

As he spoke the screen of vapor was illuminated to such a degree that the whole country was as it were bathed in twilight. “What can this be?” soliloquized the captain. “It cannot be the sun, for the sun set in the east only an hour and a half ago. Would that those clouds would disclose what enormous luminary lies behind them! What a fool I was not to have learnt more astronomy! Perhaps, after all, I am racking my brain over something that is quite in the ordinary course of nature.”

But, reason as he might, the mysteries of the heavens still remained impenetrable. For about an hour some luminous body, its disc evidently of gigantic dimensions, shed its rays upon the upper strata of the clouds; then, marvelous to relate, instead of obeying the ordinary laws of celestial mechanism, and descending upon the opposite horizon, it seemed to retreat farther off, grew dimmer, and vanished.

The darkness that returned to the face of the earth was not more profound than the gloom which fell upon the captain’s soul. Everything was incomprehensible. The simplest mechanical rules seemed falsified; the planets had defied the laws of gravitation; the motions of the celestial spheres were erroneous as those of a watch with a defective mainspring, and there was reason to fear that the sun would never again shed his radiance upon the earth.

But these last fears were groundless. In three hours’ time, without any intervening twilight, the morning sun made its appearance in the west, and day once more had dawned. On consulting his watch, Servadac found that night had lasted precisely six hours. Ben Zoof, who was unaccustomed to so brief a period of repose, was still slumbering soundly.

“Come, wake up!” said Servadac, shaking him by the shoulder; “it is time to start.”

“Time to start?” exclaimed Ben Zoof, rubbing his eyes. “I feel as if I had only just gone to sleep.”

“You have slept all night, at any rate,” replied the captain; “it has only been for six hours, but you must make it enough.”

“Enough it shall be, sir,” was the submissive rejoinder.

“And now,” continued Servadac, “we will take the shortest way back to the gourbi, and see what our horses think about it all.”

“They will think that they ought to be groomed,” said the orderly.

“Very good; you may groom them and saddle them as quickly as you like. I want to know what has become of the rest of Algeria: if we cannot get round by the south to Mostaganem, we must go eastwards to Tenes.” And forthwith they started. Beginning to feel hungry, they had no hesitation in gathering figs, dates, and oranges from the plantations that formed a continuous rich and luxuriant orchard along their path. The district was quite deserted, and they had no reason to fear any legal penalty.

In an hour and a half they reached the gourbi. Everything was just as they had left it, and it was evident that no one had visited the place during their absence. All was desolate as the shore they had quitted.

The preparations for the expedition were brief and simple. Ben Zoof saddled the horses and filled his pouch with biscuits and game; water, he felt certain, could be obtained in abundance from the numerous affluents of the Shelif, which, although they had now become tributaries of the Mediterranean, still meandered through the plain. Captain Servadac mounted his horse Zephyr, and Ben Zoof simultaneously got astride his mare Galette, named after the mill of Montmartre. They galloped off in the direction of the Shelif, and were not long in discovering that the diminution in the pressure of the atmosphere had precisely the same effect upon their horses as it had had upon themselves. Their muscular strength seemed five times as great as hitherto; their hoofs scarcely touched the ground, and they seemed transformed from ordinary quadrupeds into veritable hippogriffs. Happily, Servadac and his orderly were fearless riders; they made no attempt to curb their steeds, but even urged them to still greater exertions. Twenty minutes sufficed to carry them over the four or five miles that intervened between the gourbi and the mouth of the Shelif; then, slackening their speed, they proceeded at a more leisurely pace to the southeast, along what had once been the right bank of the river, but which, although it still retained its former characteristics, was now the boundary of a sea, which extending farther than the limits of the horizon, must have swallowed up at least a large portion of the province of Oran. Captain Servadac knew the country well; he had at one time been engaged upon a trigonometrical survey of the district, and consequently had an accurate knowledge of its topography. His idea now was to draw up a report of his investigations: to whom that report should be delivered was a problem he had yet to solve.

During the four hours of daylight that still remained, the travelers rode about twenty-one miles from the river mouth. To their vast surprise, they did not meet a single human being. At nightfall they again encamped in a slight bend of the shore, at a point which on the previous evening had faced the mouth of the Mina, one of the left-hand affluents of the Shelif, but now absorbed into the newly revealed ocean. Ben Zoof made the sleeping accommodation as comfortable as the circumstances would allow; the horses were clogged and turned out to feed upon the rich pasture that clothed the shore, and the night passed without special incident.

At sunrise on the following morning, the 2nd of January, or what, according to the ordinary calendar, would have been the night of the 1st, the captain and his orderly remounted their horses, and during the six-hours’ day accomplished a distance of forty-two miles. The right bank of the river still continued to be the margin of the land, and only in one spot had its integrity been impaired. This was about twelve miles from the Mina, and on the site of the annex or suburb of Surkelmittoo. Here a large portion of the bank had been swept away, and the hamlet, with its eight hundred inhabitants, had no doubt been swallowed up by the encroaching waters. It seemed, therefore, more than probable that a similar fate had overtaken the larger towns beyond the Shelif.

In the evening the explorers encamped, as previously, in a nook of the shore which here abruptly terminated their new domain, not far from where they might have expected to find the important village of Memounturroy; but of this, too, there was now no trace. “I had quite reckoned upon a supper and a bed at Orleansville to-night,” said Servadac, as, full of despondency, he surveyed the waste of water.

“Quite impossible,” replied Ben Zoof, “except you had gone by a boat. But cheer up, sir, cheer up; we will soon devise some means for getting across to Mostaganem.”

“If, as I hope,” rejoined the captain, “we are on a peninsula, we are more likely to get to Tenes; there we shall hear the news.”

“Far more likely to carry the news ourselves,” answered Ben Zoof, as he threw himself down for his night’s rest.

Six hours later, only waiting for sunrise, Captain Servadac set himself in movement again to renew his investigations. At this spot the shore, that hitherto had been running in a southeasterly direction, turned abruptly to the north, being no longer formed by the natural bank of the Shelif, but consisting of an absolutely new coast-line. No land was in sight. Nothing could be seen of Orleansville, which ought to have been about six miles to the southwest; and Ben Zoof, who had mounted the highest point of view attainable, could distinguish sea, and nothing but sea, to the farthest horizon.

Quitting their encampment and riding on, the bewildered explorers kept close to the new shore. This, since it had ceased to be formed by the original river bank, had considerably altered its aspect. Frequent landslips occurred, and in many places deep chasms rifted the ground; great gaps furrowed the fields, and trees, half uprooted, overhung the water, remarkable by the fantastic distortions of their gnarled trunks, looking as though they had been chopped by a hatchet.

The sinuosities of the coast line, alternately gully and headland, had the effect of making a devious progress for the travelers, and at sunset, although they had accomplished more than twenty miles, they had only just arrived at the foot of the Merdeyah Mountains, which, before the cataclysm, had formed the extremity of the chain of the Little Atlas. The ridge, however, had been violently ruptured, and now rose perpendicularly from the water.

On the following morning Servadac and Ben Zoof traversed one of the mountain gorges; and next, in order to make a more thorough acquaintance with the limits and condition of the section of Algerian territory of which they seemed to be left as the sole occupants, they dismounted, and proceeded on foot to the summit of one of the highest peaks. From this elevation they ascertained that from the base of the Merdeyah to the Mediterranean, a distance of about eighteen miles, a new coast line had come into existence; no land was visible in any direction; no isthmus existed to form a connecting link with the territory of Tenes, which had entirely disappeared. The result was that Captain Servadac was driven to the irresistible conclusion that the tract of land which he had been surveying was not, as he had at first imagined, a peninsula; it was actually an island.

Strictly speaking, this island was quadrilateral, but the sides were so irregular that it was much more nearly a triangle, the comparison of the sides exhibiting these proportions: The section of the right bank of the Shelif, seventy-two miles; the southern boundary from the Shelif to the chain of the Little Atlas, twenty-one miles; from the Little Atlas to the Mediterranean, eighteen miles; and sixty miles of the shore of the Mediterranean itself, making in all an entire circumference of about 171 miles.

“What does it all mean?” exclaimed the captain, every hour growing more and more bewildered.

“The will of Providence, and we must submit,” replied Ben Zoof, calm and undisturbed. With this reflection, the two men silently descended the mountain and remounted their horses. Before evening they had reached the Mediterranean. On their road they failed to discern a vestige of the little town of Montenotte; like Tenes, of which not so much as a ruined cottage was visible on the horizon, it seemed to be annihilated.

On the following day, the 6th of January, the two men made a forced march along the coast of the Mediterranean, which they found less altered than the captain had at first supposed; but four villages had entirely disappeared, and the headlands, unable to resist the shock of the convulsion, had been detached from the mainland.

The circuit of the island had been now completed, and the explorers, after a period of sixty hours, found themselves once more beside the ruins of their gourbi. Five days, or what, according to the established order of things, would have been two days and a half, had been occupied in tracing the boundaries of their new domain; and they had ascertained beyond a doubt that they were the sole human inhabitants left upon the island.

“Well, sir, here you are, Governor General of Algeria!” exclaimed Ben Zoof, as they reached the gourbi.

“With not a soul to govern,” gloomily rejoined the captain.

“How so? Do you not reckon me?”

“Pshaw! Ben Zoof, what are you?”

“What am I? Why, I am the population.”

The captain deigned no reply, but, muttering some expressions of regret for the fruitless trouble he had taken about his rondo, betook himself to rest.

CHAPTER VII. BEN ZOOF WATCHES IN VAIN

In a few minutes the governor general and his population were asleep. The gourbi being in ruins, they were obliged to put up with the best accommodation they could find in the adjacent erection. It must be owned that the captain’s slumbers were by no means sound; he was agitated by the consciousness that he had hitherto been unable to account for his strange experiences by any reasonable theory. Though far from being advanced in the knowledge of natural philosophy, he had been instructed, to a certain degree, in its elementary principles; and, by an effort of memory, he managed to recall some general laws which he had almost forgotten. He could understand that an altered inclination of the earth’s axis with regard to the ecliptic would introduce a change of position in the cardinal points, and bring about a displacement of the sea; but the hypothesis entirely failed to account, either for the shortening of the days, or for the diminution in the pressure of the atmosphere. He felt that his judgment was utterly baffled; his only remaining hope was that the chain of marvels was not yet complete, and that something farther might throw some light upon the mystery.

Ben Zoof’s first care on the following morning was to provide a good breakfast. To use his own phrase, he was as hungry as the whole population of three million Algerians, of whom he was the representative, and he must have enough to eat. The catastrophe which had overwhelmed the country had left a dozen eggs uninjured, and upon these, with a good dish of his famous couscous, he hoped that he and his master might have a sufficiently substantial meal. The stove was ready for use, the copper skillet was as bright as hands could make it, and the beads of condensed steam upon the surface of a large stone al-caraza gave evidence that it was supplied with water. Ben Zoof at once lighted a fire, singing all the time, according to his wont, a snatch of an old military refrain.

Ever on the lookout for fresh phenomena, Captain Servadac watched the preparations with a curious eye. It struck him that perhaps the air, in its strangely modified condition, would fail to supply sufficient oxygen, and that the stove, in consequence, might not fulfill its function. But no; the fire was lighted just as usual, and fanned into vigor by Ben Zoof applying his mouth in lieu of bellows, and a bright flame started up from the midst of the twigs and coal. The skillet was duly set upon the stove, and Ben Zoof was prepared to wait awhile for the water to boil. Taking up the eggs, he was surprised to notice that they hardly weighed more than they would if they had been mere shells; but he was still more surprised when he saw that before the water had been two minutes over the fire it was at full boil.

“By jingo!” he exclaimed, “a precious hot fire!”

Servadac reflected. “It cannot be that the fire is hotter,” he said, “the peculiarity must be in the water.” And taking down a centigrade thermometer, which hung upon the wall, he plunged it into the skillet. Instead of 100 degrees, the instrument registered only 66 degrees.

“Take my advice, Ben Zoof,” he said; “leave your eggs in the saucepan a good quarter of an hour.”

“Boil them hard! That will never do,” objected the orderly.

“You will not find them hard, my good fellow. Trust me, we shall be able to dip our sippets into the yolks easily enough.”

The captain was quite right in his conjecture, that this new phenomenon was caused by a diminution in the pressure of the atmosphere. Water boiling at a temperature of 66 degrees was itself an evidence that the column of air above the earth's surface had become reduced by one-third of its altitude. The identical phenomenon would have occurred at the summit of a mountain 35,000 feet high; and had Servadac been in possession of a barometer, he would have immediately discovered the fact that only now for the first time, as the result of experiment, revealed itself to him — a fact, moreover, which accounted for the compression of the blood-vessels which both he and Ben Zoof had experienced, as well as for the attenuation of their voices and their accelerated breathing. "And yet," he argued with himself, "if our encampment has been projected to so great an elevation, how is it that the sea remains at its proper level?"

Once again Hector Servadac, though capable of tracing consequences, felt himself totally at a loss to comprehend their cause; hence his agitation and bewilderment!

After their prolonged immersion in the boiling water, the eggs were found to be only just sufficiently cooked; the couscous was very much in the same condition; and Ben Zoof came to the conclusion that in future he must be careful to commence his culinary operations an hour earlier. He was rejoiced at last to help his master, who, in spite of his perplexed preoccupation, seemed to have a very fair appetite for breakfast.

"Well, captain?" said Ben Zoof presently, such being his ordinary way of opening conversation.

"Well, Ben Zoof?" was the captain's invariable response to his servant's formula.

“What are we to do now, sir?”

“We can only for the present wait patiently where we are. We are encamped upon an island, and therefore we can only be rescued by sea.”

“But do you suppose that any of our friends are still alive?” asked Ben Zoof.

“Oh, I think we must indulge the hope that this catastrophe has not extended far. We must trust that it has limited its mischief to some small portion of the Algerian coast, and that our friends are all alive and well. No doubt the governor general will be anxious to investigate the full extent of the damage, and will send a vessel from Algiers to explore. It is not likely that we shall be forgotten. What, then, you have to do, Ben Zoof, is to keep a sharp lookout, and to be ready, in case a vessel should appear, to make signals at once.”

“But if no vessel should appear!” sighed the orderly.

“Then we must build a boat, and go in search of those who do not come in search of us.”

“Very good. But what sort of a sailor are you?”

“Everyone can be a sailor when he must,” said Servadac calmly.

Ben Zoof said no more. For several succeeding days he scanned the horizon unintermittently with his telescope. His watching was in vain. No ship appeared upon the desert sea. “By the name of a Kabyle!” he broke out impatiently, “his Excellency is grossly negligent!”

Although the days and nights had become reduced from twenty-four hours to twelve, Captain Servadac would not accept the new condition of things, but resolved to adhere to the computations of the old calendar. Notwithstanding, therefore, that the sun had risen and set twelve times since the commencement of the new year, he persisted in calling the following day the 6th of January. His watch enabled him to keep an accurate account of the passing hours.

In the course of his life, Ben Zoof had read a few books. After pondering one day, he said: “It seems to me, captain, that you have turned into Robinson Crusoe, and that I am your man Friday. I hope I have not become a negro.”

“No,” replied the captain. “Your complexion isn’t the fairest in the world, but you are not black yet.”

“Well, I had much sooner be a white Friday than a black one,” rejoined Ben Zoof.

Still no ship appeared; and Captain Servadac, after the example of all previous Crusoes, began to consider it advisable to investigate the resources of his domain. The new territory of which he had become the monarch he named Gourbi Island. It had a superficial area of about nine hundred square miles. Bullocks, cows, goats, and sheep existed in considerable numbers; and as there seemed already to be an abundance of game, it was hardly likely that a future supply would fail them. The condition of the cereals was such as to promise a fine ingathering of wheat, maize, and rice; so that for the governor and his population, with their two horses, not only was there ample provision, but even if other human inhabitants besides themselves should yet be discovered, there was not the remotest prospect of any of them perishing by starvation.

From the 6th to the 13th of January the rain came down in torrents; and, what was quite an unusual occurrence at this season of the year, several heavy storms broke over the island. In spite, however, of the continual downfall, the heavens still remained veiled in cloud. Servadac, moreover, did not fail to observe that for the season the temperature was unusually high; and, as a matter still more surprising, that it kept steadily increasing, as though the earth were gradually and continuously approximating to the sun. In proportion to the rise of temperature, the light also assumed greater intensity; and if it had not been for the screen of vapor interposed between the sky and the island, the irradiation which would have illumined all terrestrial objects would have been vivid beyond all precedent.

But neither sun, moon, nor star ever appeared; and Servadac's irritation and annoyance at being unable to identify any one point of the firmament may be more readily imagined than described. On one occasion Ben Zoof endeavored to mitigate his master's impatience by exhorting him to assume the resignation, even if he did not feel the indifference, which he himself experienced; but his advice was received with so angry a rebuff that he retired in all haste, abashed, to résumé his watchman's duty, which he performed with exemplary perseverance. Day and night, with the shortest possible intervals of rest, despite wind, rain, and storm, he mounted guard upon the cliff — but all in vain. Not a speck appeared upon the desolate horizon. To say the truth, no vessel could have stood against the weather. The hurricane raged with tremendous fury, and the waves rose to a height that seemed to defy calculation. Never, even in the second era of creation, when, under the influence of internal heat, the waters rose in vapor to descend in deluge back upon the world, could meteorological phenomena have been developed with more impressive intensity.

But by the night of the 13th the tempest appeared to have spent its fury; the wind dropped; the rain ceased as if by a spell; and Servadac, who for the last six days had confined himself to the shelter of his roof, hastened to join Ben Zoof at his post upon the cliff. Now, he thought, there might be a chance of solving his perplexity; perhaps now the huge disc, of which he had had an imperfect glimpse on the night of the 31st of December, might again reveal itself; at any rate, he hoped for an opportunity of observing the constellations in a clear firmament above.

The night was magnificent. Not a cloud dimmed the luster of the stars, which spangled the heavens in surpassing brilliancy, and several nebulae which hitherto no astronomer had been able to discern without the aid of a telescope were clearly visible to the naked eye.

By a natural impulse, Servadac's first thought was to observe the position of the pole-star. It was in sight, but so near to the horizon as to suggest the utter impossibility of its being any longer the central pivot of the sidereal system; it occupied a position through which it was out of the question that the axis of the earth indefinitely prolonged could ever pass. In his impression he was more thoroughly confirmed when, an hour later, he noticed that the star had approached still nearer the horizon, as though it had belonged to one of the zodiacal constellations.

The pole-star being manifestly thus displaced, it remained to be discovered whether any other of the celestial bodies had become a fixed center around which the constellations made their apparent daily revolutions. To the solution of this problem Servadac applied himself with the most thoughtful diligence. After patient observation, he satisfied himself that the required conditions were answered by a certain star that was stationary not far from the horizon. This was Vega, in the constellation Lyra, a star which, according to the precession of the equinoxes, will take the place of our pole-star 12,000 years hence. The most daring imagination could not suppose that a period of 12,000 years had been crowded into the space of a fortnight; and therefore the captain came, as to an easier conclusion, to the opinion that the earth's axis had been suddenly and immensely shifted; and from the fact that the axis, if produced, would pass through a point so little removed above the horizon, he deduced the inference that the Mediterranean must have been transported to the equator.

Lost in bewildering maze of thought, he gazed long and intently upon the heavens. His eyes wandered from where the tail of the Great Bear, now a zodiacal constellation, was scarcely visible above the waters, to where the stars of the southern hemisphere were just breaking on his view. A cry from Ben Zoof recalled him to himself.

"The moon!" shouted the orderly, as though overjoyed at once again beholding what the poet has called:

> "The kind companion of terrestrial night;"

and he pointed to a disc that was rising at a spot precisely opposite the place where they would have expected to see the sun. "The moon!" again he cried.

But Captain Servadac could not altogether enter into his servant's enthusiasm. If this were actually the moon, her distance from the earth must have been increased by some millions of miles. He was rather disposed to suspect that it was not the earth's satellite at all, but some planet with its apparent magnitude greatly enlarged by its approximation to the earth. Taking up the powerful field-glass which he was accustomed to use in his surveying operations, he proceeded to investigate more carefully the luminous orb. But he failed to trace any of the lineaments, supposed to resemble a human face, that mark the lunar surface; he failed to decipher any indications of hill and plain; nor could he make out the aureole of light which emanates from what astronomers have designated Mount Tycho. “It is not the moon,” he said slowly.

“Not the moon?” cried Ben Zoof. “Why not?”

“It is not the moon,” again affirmed the captain.

“Why not?” repeated Ben Zoof, unwilling to renounce his first impression.

“Because there is a small satellite in attendance.” And the captain drew his servant’s attention to a bright speck, apparently about the size of one of Jupiter’s satellites seen through a moderate telescope, that was clearly visible just within the focus of his glass.

Here, then, was a fresh mystery. The orbit of this planet was assuredly interior to the orbit of the earth, because it accompanied the sun in its apparent motion; yet it was neither Mercury nor Venus, because neither one nor the other of these has any satellite at all.

The captain stamped and stamped again with mingled vexation, agitation, and bewilderment. “Confound it!” he cried, “if this is neither Venus nor Mercury, it must be the moon; but if it is the moon, whence, in the name of all the gods, has she picked up another moon for herself?”

The captain was in dire perplexity.

CHAPTER VIII. VENUS IN PERILOUS PROXIMITY

The light of the returning sun soon extinguished the glory of the stars, and rendered it necessary for the captain to postpone his observations. He had sought in vain for further trace of the huge disc that had so excited his wonder on the 1st, and it seemed most probable that, in its irregular orbit, it had been carried beyond the range of vision.

The weather was still superb. The wind, after veering to the west, had sunk to a perfect calm. Pursuing its inverted course, the sun rose and set with undeviating regularity; and the days and nights were still divided into periods of precisely six hours each — a sure proof that the sun remained close to the new equator which manifestly passed through Gourbi Island.

Meanwhile the temperature was steadily increasing. The captain kept his thermometer close at hand where he could repeatedly consult it, and on the 15th he found that it registered 50 degrees centigrade in the shade.

No attempt had been made to rebuild the gourbi, but the captain and Ben Zoof managed to make up quarters sufficiently comfortable in the principal apartment of the adjoining structure, where the stone walls, that at first afforded a refuge from the torrents of rain, now formed an equally acceptable shelter from the burning sun. The heat was becoming insufferable, surpassing the heat of Senegal and other equatorial regions; not a cloud ever tempered the intensity of the solar rays; and unless some modification ensued, it seemed inevitable that all vegetation should become scorched and burnt off from the face of the island.

In spite, however, of the profuse perspirations from which he suffered, Ben Zoof, constant to his principles, expressed no surprise at the unwonted heat.

No remonstrances from his master could induce him to abandon his watch from the cliff. To withstand the vertical beams of that noontide sun would seem to require a skin of brass and a brain of adamant; but yet, hour after hour, he would remain conscientiously scanning the surface of the Mediterranean, which, calm and deserted, lay outstretched before him. On one occasion, Servadac, in reference to his orderly's indomitable perseverance, happened to remark that he thought he must have been born in the heart of equatorial Africa; to which Ben Zoof replied, with the utmost dignity, that he was born at Montmartre, which was all the same. The worthy fellow was unwilling to own that, even in the matter of heat, the tropics could in any way surpass his own much-loved home.

This unprecedented temperature very soon began to take effect upon the products of the soil. The sap rose rapidly in the trees, so that in the course of a few days buds, leaves, flowers, and fruit had come to full maturity. It was the same with the cereals; wheat and maize sprouted and ripened as if by magic, and for a while a rank and luxuriant pasturage clothed the meadows. Summer and autumn seemed blended into one. If Captain Servadac had been more deeply versed in astronomy, he would perhaps have been able to bring to bear his knowledge that if the axis of the earth, as everything seemed to indicate, now formed a right angle with the plane of the ecliptic, her various seasons, like those of the planet Jupiter, would become limited to certain zones, in which they would remain invariable. But even if he had understood the *rationale* of the change, the convulsion that had brought it about would have been as much a mystery as ever.

The precocity of vegetation caused some embarrassment. The time for the corn and fruit harvest had fallen simultaneously with that of the haymaking; and as the extreme heat precluded any prolonged exertions, it was evident "the population" of the island would find it difficult to provide the necessary amount of labor. Not that the prospect gave them much concern: the provisions of the gourbi were still far from exhausted, and now that the roughness of the weather had so happily subsided, they had every encouragement to hope that a ship of some sort would soon appear. Not only was that part of the Mediterranean systematically frequented by the government steamers that watched the coast, but vessels of all nations were constantly cruising off the shore.

In spite, however, of all their sanguine speculations, no ship appeared. Ben Zoof admitted the necessity of extemporizing a kind of parasol for himself, otherwise he must literally have been roasted to death upon the exposed summit of the cliff.

Meanwhile, Servadac was doing his utmost — it must be acknowledged, with indifferent success — to recall the lessons of his school-days. He would plunge into the wildest speculations in his endeavors to unravel the difficulties of the new situation, and struggled into a kind of conviction that if there had been a change of manner in the earth’s rotation on her axis, there would be a corresponding change in her revolution round the sun, which would involve the consequence of the length of the year being either diminished or increased.

Independently of the increased and increasing heat, there was another very conclusive demonstration that the earth had thus suddenly approximated towards the sun. The diameter of the solar disc was now exactly twice what it ordinarily looks to the naked eye; in fact, it was precisely such as it would appear to an observer on the surface of the planet Venus. The most obvious inference would therefore be that the earth’s distance from the sun had been diminished from 91,000,000 to 66,000,000 miles. If the just equilibrium of the earth had thus been destroyed, and should this diminution of distance still continue, would there not be reason to fear that the terrestrial world would be carried onwards to actual contact with the sun, which must result in its total annihilation?

The continuance of the splendid weather afforded Servadac every facility for observing the heavens. Night after night, constellations in their beauty lay stretched before his eyes — an alphabet which, to his mortification, not to say his rage, he was unable to decipher. In the apparent dimensions of the fixed stars, in their distance, in their relative position with regard to each other, he could observe no change. Although it is established that our sun is approaching the constellation of Hercules at the rate of more than 126,000,000 miles a year, and although Arcturus is traveling through space at the rate of fifty-four miles a second — three times faster than the earth goes round the sun, — yet such is the remoteness of those stars that no appreciable change is evident to the senses. The fixed stars taught him nothing.

Far otherwise was it with the planets. The orbits of Venus and Mercury are within the orbit of the earth, Venus rotating at an average distance of 66,130,000 miles from the sun, and Mercury at that of 35,393,000. After pondering long, and as profoundly as he could, upon these figures, Captain Servadac came to the conclusion that, as the earth was now receiving about double the amount of light and heat that it had been receiving before the catastrophe, it was receiving about the same as the planet Venus; he was driven, therefore, to the estimate of the measure in which the earth must have approximated to the sun, a deduction in which he was confirmed when the opportunity came for him to observe Venus herself in the splendid proportions that she now assumed.

That magnificent planet which — as Phosphorus or Lucifer, Hesperus or Vesper, the evening star, the morning star, or the shepherd’s star — has never failed to attract the rapturous admiration of the most indifferent observers, here revealed herself with unprecedented glory, exhibiting all the phases of a lustrous moon in miniature. Various indentations in the outline of its crescent showed that the solar beams were refracted into regions of its surface where the sun had already set, and proved, beyond a doubt, that the planet had an atmosphere of her own; and certain luminous points projecting from the crescent as plainly marked the existence of mountains. As the result of Servadac’s computations, he formed the opinion that Venus could hardly be at a greater distance than 6,000,000 miles from the earth.

“And a very safe distance, too,” said Ben Zoof, when his master told him the conclusion at which he had arrived.

“All very well for two armies, but for a couple of planets not quite so safe, perhaps, as you may imagine. It is my impression that it is more than likely we may run foul of Venus,” said the captain.

“Plenty of air and water there, sir?” inquired the orderly.

“Yes; as far as I can tell, plenty,” replied Servadac.

“Then why shouldn’t we go and visit Venus?”

Servadac did his best to explain that as the two planets were of about equal volume, and were traveling with great velocity in opposite directions, any collision between them must be attended with the most disastrous consequences to one or both of them. But Ben Zoof failed to see that, even at the worst, the catastrophe could be much more serious than the collision of two railway trains.

The captain became exasperated. “You idiot!” he angrily exclaimed; “cannot you understand that the planets are traveling a thousand times faster than the fastest express, and that if they meet, either one or the other must be destroyed? What would become of your darling Montmartre then?”

The captain had touched a tender chord. For a moment Ben Zoof stood with clenched teeth and contracted muscles; then, in a voice of real concern, he inquired whether anything could be done to avert the calamity.

“Nothing whatever; so you may go about your own business,” was the captain’s brusque rejoinder.

All discomfited and bewildered, Ben Zoof retired without a word.

During the ensuing days the distance between the two planets continued to decrease, and it became more and more obvious that the earth, on her new orbit, was about to cross the orbit of Venus. Throughout this time the earth had been making a perceptible approach towards Mercury, and that planet — which is rarely visible to the naked eye, and then only at what are termed the periods of its greatest eastern and western elongations — now appeared in all its splendor. It amply justified the epithet of “sparkling” which the ancients were accustomed to confer upon it, and could scarcely fail to awaken a new interest. The periodic recurrence of its phases; its reflection of the sun’s rays, shedding upon it a light and a heat seven times greater than that received by the earth; its glacial and its torrid zones, which, on account of the great inclination of the axis, are scarcely separable; its equatorial bands; its mountains eleven miles high; — were all subjects of observation worthy of the most studious regard.

But no danger was to be apprehended from Mercury; with Venus only did collision appear imminent. By the 18th of January the distance between that planet and the earth had become reduced to between two and three millions of miles, and the intensity of its light cast heavy shadows from all terrestrial objects. It might be observed to turn upon its own axis in twenty-three hours twenty-one minutes — an evidence, from the unaltered duration of its days, that the planet had not shared in the disturbance. On its disc the clouds formed from its atmospheric vapor were plainly perceptible, as also were the seven spots, which, according to Bianchini, are a chain of seas. It was now visible in broad daylight. Buonaparte, when under the Directory, once had his attention called to Venus at noon, and immediately hailed it joyfully, recognizing it as his own peculiar star in the ascendant. Captain Servadac, it may well be imagined, did not experience the same gratifying emotion.

On the 20th, the distance between the two bodies had again sensibly diminished. The captain had ceased to be surprised that no vessel had been sent to rescue himself and his companion from their strange imprisonment; the governor general and the minister of war were doubtless far differently occupied, and their interests far otherwise engrossed. What sensational articles, he thought, must now be teeming to the newspapers! What crowds must be flocking to the churches! The end of the world approaching! the great climax close at hand! Two days more, and the earth, shivered into a myriad atoms, would be lost in boundless space!

These dire forebodings, however, were not destined to be realized. Gradually the distance between the two planets began to increase; the planes of their orbits did not coincide, and accordingly the dreaded catastrophe did not ensue. By the 25th, Venus was sufficiently remote to preclude any further fear of collision. Ben Zoof gave a sigh of relief when the captain communicated the glad intelligence.

Their proximity to Venus had been close enough to demonstrate that beyond a doubt that planet has no moon or satellite such as Cassini, Short, Montaigne of Limoges, Montbarron, and some other astronomers have imagined to exist. “Had there been such a satellite,” said Servadac, “we might have captured it in passing. But what can be the meaning,” he added seriously, “of all this displacement of the heavenly bodies?”

“What is that great building at Paris, captain, with a top like a cap?” asked Ben Zoof.

“Do you mean the Observatory?”

“Yes, the Observatory. Are there not people living in the Observatory who could explain all this?”

“Very likely; but what of that?”

“Let us be philosophers, and wait patiently until we can hear their explanation.”

Servadac smiled. “Do you know what it is to be a philosopher, Ben Zoof?” he asked.

“I am a soldier, sir,” was the servant’s prompt rejoinder, “and I have learnt to know that ‘what can’t be cured must be endured.”

The captain made no reply, but for a time, at least, he desisted from puzzling himself over matters which he felt he was utterly incompetent to explain. But an event soon afterwards occurred which awakened his keenest interest.

About nine o’clock on the morning of the 27th, Ben Zoof walked deliberately into his master’s apartment, and, in reply to a question as to what he wanted, announced with the utmost composure that a ship was in sight.

“A ship!” exclaimed Servadac, starting to his feet. “A ship! Ben Zoof, you donkey! you speak as unconcernedly as though you were telling me that my dinner was ready.”

“Are we not philosophers, captain?” said the orderly.

But the captain was out of hearing.

CHAPTER IX. INQUIRIES UNSATISFIED

Fast as his legs could carry him, Servadac had made his way to the top of the cliff. It was quite true that a vessel was in sight, hardly more than six miles from the shore; but owing to the increase in the earth’s convexity, and the consequent limitation of the range of vision, the rigging of the topmasts alone was visible above the water. This was enough, however, to indicate that the ship was a schooner — an impression that was confirmed when, two hours later, she came entirely in sight.

“The *Dobryna*!” exclaimed Servadac, keeping his eye unmoved at his telescope.

“Impossible, sir!” rejoined Ben Zoof; “there are no signs of smoke.”

“The *Dobryna*!” repeated the captain, positively. “She is under sail; but she is Count Timascheff’s yacht.”

He was right. If the count were on board, a strange fatality was bringing him to the presence of his rival. But no longer now could Servadac regard him in the light of an adversary; circumstances had changed, and all animosity was absorbed in the eagerness with which he hailed the prospect of obtaining some information about the recent startling and inexplicable events. During the twenty-seven days that she had been absent, the *Dobryna*, he conjectured, would have explored the Mediterranean, would very probably have visited Spain, France, or Italy, and accordingly would convey to Gourbi Island some intelligence from one or other of those countries. He reckoned, therefore, not only upon ascertaining the extent of the late catastrophe, but upon learning its cause. Count Timascheff was, no doubt, magnanimously coming to the rescue of himself and his orderly.

The wind being adverse, the *Dobryna* did not make very rapid progress; but as the weather, in spite of a few clouds, remained calm, and the sea was quite smooth, she was enabled to hold a steady course. It seemed unaccountable that she should not use her engine, as whoever was on board, would be naturally impatient to reconnoiter the new island, which must just have come within their view. The probability that suggested itself was that the schooner's fuel was exhausted.

Servadac took it for granted that the *Dobryna* was endeavoring to put in. It occurred to him, however, that the count, on discovering an island where he had expected to find the mainland of Africa, would not unlikely be at a loss for a place of anchorage. The yacht was evidently making her way in the direction of the former mouth of the Shelif, and the captain was struck with the idea that he would do well to investigate whether there was any suitable mooring towards which he might signal her. Zephyr and Galette were soon saddled, and in twenty minutes had carried their riders to the western extremity of the island, where they both dismounted and began to explore the coast.

They were not long in ascertaining that on the farther side of the point there was a small well-sheltered creek of sufficient depth to accommodate a vessel of moderate tonnage. A narrow channel formed a passage through the ridge of rocks that protected it from the open sea, and which, even in the roughest weather, would ensure the calmness of its waters.

Whilst examining the rocky shore, the captain observed, to his great surprise, long and well-defined rows of seaweed, which undoubtedly betokened that there had been a very considerable ebb and flow of the waters — a thing unknown in the Mediterranean, where there is scarcely any perceptible tide. What, however, seemed most remarkable, was the manifest evidence that ever since the highest flood (which was caused, in all probability, by the proximity of the body of which the huge disc had been so conspicuous on the night of the 31st of December) the phenomenon had been gradually lessening, and in fact was now reduced to the normal limits which had characterized it before the convulsion.

Without doing more than note the circumstance, Servadac turned his entire attention to the *Dobryna*, which, now little more than a mile from shore, could not fail to see and understand his signals. Slightly changing her course, she first struck her mainsail, and, in order to facilitate the movements of her helmsman, soon carried nothing but her two topsails, brigantine and jib. After rounding the peak, she steered direct for the channel to which Servadac by his gestures was pointing her, and was not long in entering the creek. As soon as the anchor, imbedded in the sandy bottom, had made good its hold, a boat was lowered. In a few minutes more Count Timascheff had landed on the island. Captain Servadac hastened towards him.

“First of all, count,” he exclaimed impetuously, “before we speak one other word, tell me what has happened.”

The count, whose imperturbable composure presented a singular contrast to the French officer’s enthusiastic vivacity, made a stiff bow, and in his Russian accent replied: “First of all, permit me to express my surprise at seeing you here. I left you on a continent, and here I have the honor of finding you on an island.”

“I assure you, count, I have never left the place.”

“I am quite aware of it. Captain Servadac, and I now beg to offer you my sincere apologies for failing to keep my appointment with you.”

“Never mind, now,” interposed the captain; “we will talk of that by-and-by. First, tell me what has happened.”

“The very question I was about to put to you, Captain Servadac.”

“Do you mean to say you know nothing of the cause, and can tell me nothing of the extent, of the catastrophe which has transformed this part of Africa into an island?”

“Nothing more than you know yourself.”

“But surely, Count Timascheff, you can inform me whether upon the northern shore of the Mediterranean — ”

“Are you certain that this is the Mediterranean?” asked the count significantly, and added, “I have discovered no sign of land.”

The captain stared in silent bewilderment. For some moments he seemed perfectly stupefied; then, recovering himself, he began to overwhelm the count with a torrent of questions. Had he noticed, ever since the 1st of January, that the sun had risen in the west? Had he noticed that the days had been only six hours long, and that the weight of the atmosphere was so much diminished? Had he observed that the moon had quite disappeared, and that the earth had been in imminent hazard of running foul of the planet Venus? Was he aware, in short, that the entire motions of the terrestrial sphere had undergone a complete modification? To all these inquiries, the count responded in the affirmative. He was acquainted with everything that had transpired; but, to Servadac’s increasing astonishment, he could throw no light upon the cause of any of the phenomena.

"On the night of the 31st of December," he said, "I was proceeding by sea to our appointed place of meeting, when my yacht was suddenly caught on the crest of an enormous wave, and carried to a height which it is beyond my power to estimate. Some mysterious force seemed to have brought about a convulsion of the elements. Our engine was damaged, nay disabled, and we drifted entirely at the mercy of the terrible hurricane that raged during the succeeding days. That the *Dobryna* escaped at all is little less than a miracle, and I can only attribute her safety to the fact that she occupied the center of the vast cyclone, and consequently did not experience much change of position."

He paused, and added: "Your island is the first land we have seen."

"Then let us put out to sea at once and ascertain the extent of the disaster," cried the captain, eagerly. "You will take me on board, count, will you not?"

"My yacht is at your service, sir, even should you require to make a tour round the world."

"A tour round the Mediterranean will suffice for the present, I think," said the captain, smiling.

The count shook his head.

"I am not sure," said he, "but what the tour of the Mediterranean will prove to be the tour of the world."

Servadac made no reply, but for a time remained silent and absorbed in thought.

After the silence was broken, they consulted as to what course was best to pursue; and the plan they proposed was, in the first place, to discover how much of the African coast still remained, and to carry on the tidings of their own experiences to Algiers; or, in the event of the southern shore having actually disappeared, they would make their way northwards and put themselves in communication with the population on the river banks of Europe.

Before starting, it was indispensable that the engine of the *Dobryna* should be repaired: to sail under canvas only would in contrary winds and rough seas be both tedious and difficult. The stock of coal on board was adequate for two months' consumption; but as it would at the expiration of that time be exhausted, it was obviously the part of prudence to employ it in reaching a port where fuel could be replenished.

The damage sustained by the engine proved to be not very serious; and in three days after her arrival the *Dobryna* was again ready to put to sea.

Servadac employed the interval in making the count acquainted with all he knew about his small domain. They made an entire circuit of the island, and both agreed that it must be beyond the limits of that circumscribed territory that they must seek an explanation of what had so strangely transpired.

It was on the last day of January that the repairs of the schooner were completed. A slight diminution in the excessively high temperature which had prevailed for the last few weeks, was the only apparent change in the general order of things; but whether this was to be attributed to any alteration in the earth's orbit was a question which would still require several days to decide. The weather remained fine, and although a few clouds had accumulated, and might have caused a trifling fall of the barometer, they were not sufficiently threatening to delay the departure of the *Dobryna*.

Doubts now arose, and some discussion followed, whether or not it was desirable for Ben Zoof to accompany his master. There were various reasons why he should be left behind, not the least important being that the schooner had no accommodation for horses, and the orderly would have found it hard to part with Zephyr, and much more with his own favorite Galette; besides, it was advisable that there should be some one left to receive any strangers that might possibly arrive, as well as to keep an eye upon the herds of cattle which, in the dubious prospect before them, might prove to be the sole resource of the survivors of the catastrophe. Altogether, taking into consideration that the brave fellow would incur no personal risk by remaining upon the island, the captain was induced with much reluctance to forego the attendance of his servant, hoping very shortly to return and to restore him to his country, when he had ascertained the reason of the mysteries in which they were enveloped.

On the 31st, then, Ben Zoof was “invested with governor’s powers,” and took an affecting leave of his master, begging him, if chance should carry him near Montmartre, to ascertain whether the beloved “mountain” had been left unmoved.

Farewells over, the *Dobryna* was carefully steered through the creek, and was soon upon the open sea.

CHAPTER X. A SEARCH FOR ALGERIA

The *Dobryna*, a strong craft of 200 tons burden, had been built in the famous shipbuilding yards in the Isle of Wight. Her sea going qualities were excellent, and would have amply sufficed for a circumnavigation of the globe. Count Timascheff was himself no sailor, but had the greatest confidence in leaving the command of his yacht in the hands of Lieutenant Procope, a man of about thirty years of age, and an excellent seaman. Born on the count’s estates, the son of a serf who had been emancipated long before the famous edict of the Emperor Alexander, Procope was sincerely attached, by a tie of gratitude as well as of duty and affection, to his patron’s service. After an apprenticeship on a merchant ship he had entered the imperial navy, and had already reached the rank of lieutenant when the count appointed him to the charge of his own private yacht, in which he was accustomed to spend by far the greater part of his time, throughout the winter generally cruising in the Mediterranean, whilst in the summer he visited more northern waters.

The ship could not have been in better hands. The lieutenant was well informed in many matters outside the pale of his profession, and his attainments were alike creditable to himself and to the liberal friend who had given him his education. He had an excellent crew, consisting of Tiglew the engineer, four sailors named Niegoch, Tolstoy, Etkef, and Panofka, and Mochel the cook. These men, without exception, were all sons of the count’s tenants, and so tenaciously, even out at sea, did they cling to their old traditions, that it mattered little to them what physical disorganization ensued, so long as they felt they were sharing the experiences of their lord and master. The late astounding events, however, had rendered Procope manifestly uneasy, and not the less so from his consciousness that the count secretly partook of his own anxiety.

Steam up and canvas spread, the schooner started eastwards. With a favorable wind she would certainly have made eleven knots an hour had not the high waves somewhat impeded her progress. Although only a moderate breeze was blowing, the sea was rough, a circumstance to be accounted for only by the diminution in the force of the earth's attraction rendering the liquid particles so buoyant, that by the mere effect of oscillation they were carried to a height that was quite unprecedented. M. Arago has fixed twenty-five or twenty-six feet as the maximum elevation ever attained by the highest waves, and his astonishment would have been very great to see them rising fifty or even sixty feet. Nor did these waves in the usual way partially unfurl themselves and rebound against the sides of the vessel; they might rather be described as long undulations carrying the schooner (its weight diminished from the same cause as that of the water) alternately to such heights and depths, that if Captain Servadac had been subject to seasickness he must have found himself in sorry plight. As the pitching, however, was the result of a long uniform swell, the yacht did not labor much harder than she would against the ordinary short strong waves of the Mediterranean; the main inconvenience that was experienced was the diminution in her proper rate of speed.

For a few miles she followed the line hitherto presumably occupied by the coast of Algeria; but no land appeared to the south. The changed positions of the planets rendered them of no avail for purposes of nautical observation, nor could Lieutenant Procope calculate his latitude and longitude by the altitude of the sun, as his reckonings would be useless when applied to charts that had been constructed for the old order of things; but nevertheless, by means of the log, which gave him the rate of progress, and by the compass which indicated the direction in which they were sailing, he was able to form an estimate of his position that was sufficiently free from error for his immediate need.

Happily the recent phenomena had no effect upon the compass; the magnetic needle, which in these regions had pointed about 22 degrees from the north pole, had never deviated in the least — a proof that, although east and west had apparently changed places, north and south continued to retain their normal position as cardinal points. The log and the compass, therefore, were able to be called upon to do the work of the sextant, which had become utterly useless.

On the first morning of the cruise Lieutenant Procope, who, like most Russians, spoke French fluently, was explaining these peculiarities to Captain Servadac; the count was present, and the conversation perpetually recurred, as naturally it would, to the phenomena which remained so inexplicable to them all.

“It is very evident,” said the lieutenant, “that ever since the 1st of January the earth has been moving in a new orbit, and from some unknown cause has drawn nearer to the sun.”

“No doubt about that,” said Servadac; “and I suppose that, having crossed the orbit of Venus, we have a good chance of running into the orbit of Mercury.”

“And finish up by a collision with the sun!” added the count.

“There is no fear of that, sir. The earth has undoubtedly entered upon a new orbit, but she is not incurring any probable risk of being precipitated onto the sun.”

“Can you satisfy us of that?” asked the count.

“I can, sir. I can give you a proof which I think you will own is conclusive. If, as you suppose, the earth is being drawn on so as to be precipitated against the sun, the great center of attraction of our system, it could only be because the centrifugal and centripetal forces that cause the planets to rotate in their several orbits had been entirely suspended: in that case, indeed, the earth would rush onwards towards the sun, and in sixty-four days and a half the catastrophe you dread would inevitably happen.”

“And what demonstration do you offer,” asked Servadac eagerly, “that it will not happen?”

“Simply this, captain: that since the earth entered her new orbit half the sixty-four days has already elapsed, and yet it is only just recently that she has crossed the orbit of Venus, hardly one-third of the distance to be traversed to reach the sun.”

The lieutenant paused to allow time for reflection, and added: “Moreover, I have every reason to believe that we are not so near the sun as we have been. The temperature has been gradually diminishing; the heat upon Gourbi Island is not greater now than we might ordinarily expect to find in Algeria. At the same time, we have the problem still unsolved that the Mediterranean has evidently been transported to the equatorial zone.”

Both the count and the captain expressed themselves reassured by his representations, and observed that they must now do all in their power to discover what had become of the vast continent of Africa, of which, they were hitherto failing so completely to find a vestige.

Twenty-four hours after leaving the island, the *Dobryna* had passed over the sites where Tenes, Cherchil, Koleah, and Sidi-Feruch once had been, but of these towns not one appeared within range of the telescope. Ocean reigned supreme. Lieutenant Procope was absolutely certain that he had not mistaken his direction; the compass showed that the wind had never shifted from the west, and this, with the rate of speed as estimated by the log, combined to assure him that at this date, the 2d of February, the schooner was in lat. 36 degrees 49 min N. and long. 3 degrees 25 min E. the very spot which ought to have been occupied by the Algerian capital. But Algiers, like all the other coast-towns, had apparently been absorbed into the bowels of the earth.

Captain Servadac, with clenched teeth and knitted brow, stood sternly, almost fiercely, regarding the boundless waste of water. His pulse beat fast as he recalled the friends and comrades with whom he had spent the last few years in that vanished city. All the images of his past life floated upon his memory; his thoughts sped away to his native France, only to return again to wonder whether the depths of ocean would reveal any traces of the Algerian metropolis.

“Is it not impossible,” he murmured aloud, “that any city should disappear so completely? Would not the loftiest eminences of the city at least be visible? Surely some portion of the Casbah must still rise above the waves? The imperial fort, too, was built upon an elevation of 750 feet; it is incredible that it should be so totally submerged. Unless some vestiges of these are found, I shall begin to suspect that the whole of Africa has been swallowed in some vast abyss.”

Another circumstance was most remarkable. Not a material object of any kind was to be noticed floating on the surface of the water; not one branch of a tree had been seen drifting by, nor one spar belonging to one of the numerous vessels that a month previously had been moored in the magnificent bay which stretched twelve miles across from Cape Matafuz to Point Pexade. Perhaps the depths might disclose what the surface failed to reveal, and Count Timascheff, anxious that Servadac should have every facility afforded him for solving his doubts, called for the sounding-line. Forthwith, the lead was greased and lowered. To the surprise of all, and especially of Lieutenant Procope, the line indicated a bottom at a nearly uniform depth of from four to five fathoms; and although the sounding was persevered with continuously for more than two hours over a considerable area, the differences of level were insignificant, not corresponding in any degree to what would be expected over the site of a city that had been terraced like the seats of an amphitheater. Astounding as it seemed, what alternative was left but to suppose that the Algerian capital had been completely leveled by the flood?

The sea-bottom was composed of neither rock, mud, sand, nor shells; the sounding-lead brought up nothing but a kind of metallic dust, which glittered with a strange iridescence, and the nature of which it was impossible to determine, as it was totally unlike what had ever been known to be raised from the bed of the Mediterranean.

“You must see, lieutenant, I should think, that we are not so near the coast of Algeria as you imagined.”

The lieutenant shook his head. After pondering awhile, he said: “If we were farther away I should expect to find a depth of two or three hundred fathoms instead of five fathoms. Five fathoms! I confess I am puzzled.”

For the next thirty-six hours, until the 4th of February, the sea was examined and explored with the most unflagging perseverance. Its depth remained invariable, still four, or at most five, fathoms; and although its bottom was assiduously dredged, it was only to prove it barren of marine production of any type.

The yacht made its way to lat. 36 degrees, and by reference to the charts it was tolerably certain that she was cruising over the site of the Sahel, the ridge that had separated the rich plain of the Mitidja from the sea, and of which the highest peak, Mount Boujereah, had reached an altitude of 1,200 feet; but even this peak, which might have been expected to emerge like an islet above the surface of the sea, was nowhere to be traced. Nothing was to be done but to put about, and return in disappointment towards the north.

Thus the *Dobryna* regained the waters of the Mediterranean without discovering a trace of the missing province of Algeria.

CHAPTER XI. AN ISLAND TOMB

No longer, then, could there be any doubt as to the annihilation of a considerable portion of the colony. Not merely had there been a submersion of the land, but the impression was more and more confirmed that the very bowels of the earth must have yawned and closed again upon a large territory. Of the rocky substratum of the province it became more evident than ever that not a trace remained, and a new soil of unknown formation had certainly taken the place of the old sandy sea-bottom. As it altogether transcended the powers of those on board to elucidate the origin of this catastrophe, it was felt to be incumbent on them at least to ascertain its extent.

After a long and somewhat wavering discussion, it was at length decided that the schooner should take advantage of the favorable wind and weather, and proceed at first towards the east, thus following the outline of what had formerly represented the coast of Africa, until that coast had been lost in boundless sea.

Not a vestige of it all remained; from Cape Matafuz to Tunis it had all gone, as though it had never been. The maritime town of Dellis, built like Algiers, amphitheater-wise, had totally disappeared; the highest points were quite invisible; not a trace on the horizon was left of the Jurjura chain, the topmost point of which was known to have an altitude of more than 7,000 feet.

Unsparing of her fuel, the *Dobryna* made her way at full steam towards Cape Blanc. Neither Cape Negro nor Cape Serrat was to be seen. The town of Bizerta, once charming in its oriental beauty, had vanished utterly; its marabouts, or temple-tombs, shaded by magnificent palms that fringed the gulf, which by reason of its narrow mouth had the semblance of a lake, all had disappeared, giving place to a vast waste of sea, the transparent waves of which, as still demonstrated by the sounding-line, had ever the same uniform and arid bottom.

In the course of the day the schooner rounded the point where, five weeks previously, Cape Blanc had been so conspicuous an object, and she was now stemming the waters of what once had been the Bay of Tunis. But bay there was none, and the town from which it had derived its name, with the Arsenal, the Goletta, and the two peaks of Bou-Kournein, had all vanished from the view. Cape Bon, too, the most northern promontory of Africa and the point of the continent nearest to the island of Sicily, had been included in the general devastation.

Before the occurrence of the recent prodigy, the bottom of the Mediterranean just at this point had formed a sudden ridge across the Straits of Libya. The sides of the ridge had shelved to so great an extent that, while the depth of water on the summit had been little more than eleven fathoms, that on either hand of the elevation was little short of a hundred fathoms. A formation such as this plainly indicated that at some remote epoch Cape Bon had been connected with Cape Furina, the extremity of Sicily, in the same manner as Ceuta has doubtless been connected with Gibraltar.

Lieutenant Procope was too well acquainted with the Mediterranean to be unaware of this peculiarity, and would not lose the opportunity of ascertaining whether the submarine ridge still existed, or whether the sea-bottom between Sicily and Africa had undergone any modification.

Both Timascheff and Servadac were much interested in watching the operations. At a sign from the lieutenant, a sailor who was stationed at the foot of the fore-shrouds dropped the sounding-lead into the water, and in reply to Procope’s inquiries, reported — ”Five fathoms and a flat bottom.”

The next aim was to determine the amount of depression on either side of the ridge, and for this purpose the *Dobryna* was shifted for a distance of half a mile both to the right and left, and the soundings taken at each station. “Five fathoms and a flat bottom,” was the unvaried announcement after each operation. Not only, therefore, was it evident that the submerged chain between Cape Bon and Cape Furina no longer existed, but it was equally clear that the convulsion had caused a general leveling of the sea-bottom, and that the soil, degenerated, as it has been said, into a metallic dust of unrecognized composition, bore no trace of the sponges, sea-anemones, star-fish, sea-nettles, hydrophytes, and shells with which the submarine rocks of the Mediterranean had hitherto been prodigally clothed.

The *Dobryna* now put about and resumed her explorations in a southerly direction. It remained, however, as remarkable as ever how completely throughout the voyage the sea continued to be deserted; all expectations of hailing a vessel bearing news from Europe were entirely falsified, so that more and more each member of the crew began to be conscious of his isolation, and to believe that the schooner, like a second Noah’s ark, carried the sole survivors of a calamity that had overwhelmed the earth.

On the 9th of February the *Dobryna* passed over the site of the city of Dido, the ancient Byrsa — a Carthage, however, which was now more completely destroyed than ever Punic Carthage had been destroyed by Scipio Africanus or Roman Carthage by Hassan the Saracen.

In the evening, as the sun was sinking below the eastern horizon, Captain Servadac was lounging moodily against the taffrail. From the heaven above, where stars kept peeping fitfully from behind the moving clouds, his eye wandered mechanically to the waters below, where the long waves were rising and falling with the evening breeze.

All at once, his attention was arrested by a luminous speck straight ahead on the southern horizon. At first, imagining that he was the victim of some spectral illusion, he observed it with silent attention; but when, after some minutes, he became convinced that what he saw was actually a distant light, he appealed to one of the sailors, by whom his impression was fully corroborated. The intelligence was immediately imparted to Count Timascheff and the lieutenant.

“Is it land, do you suppose?” inquired Servadac, eagerly.

“I should be more inclined to think it is a light on board some ship,” replied the count.

“Whatever it is, in another hour we shall know all about it,” said Servadac.

“No, captain,” interposed Lieutenant Procope; “we shall know nothing until to-morrow.”

“What! not bear down upon it at once?” asked the count in surprise.

“No, sir; I should much rather lay to and wait till daylight. If we are really near land, I should be afraid to approach it in the dark.”

The count expressed his approval of the lieutenant’s caution, and thereupon all sail was shortened so as to keep the *Dobryna* from making any considerable progress all through the hours of night. Few as those hours were, they seemed to those on board as if their end would never come. Fearful lest the faint glimmer should at any moment cease to be visible, Hector Servadac did not quit his post upon the deck; but the light continued unchanged. It shone with about the same degree of luster as a star of the second magnitude, and from the fact of its remaining stationary, Procope became more and more convinced that it was on land and did not belong to a passing vessel.

At sunrise every telescope was pointed with keenest interest towards the center of attraction. The light, of course, had ceased to be visible, but in the direction where it had been seen, and at a distance of about ten miles, there was the distinct outline of a solitary island of very small extent; rather, as the count observed, it had the appearance of being the projecting summit of a mountain all but submerged. Whatever it was, it was agreed that its true character must be ascertained, not only to gratify their own curiosity, but for the benefit of all future navigators. The schooner accordingly was steered directly towards it, and in less than an hour had cast anchor within a few cables' lengths of the shore.

The little island proved to be nothing more than an arid rock rising abruptly about forty feet above the water. It had no outlying reefs, a circumstance that seemed to suggest the probability that in the recent convulsion it had sunk gradually, until it had reached its present position of equilibrium.

Without removing his eye from his telescope, Servadac exclaimed: “There is a habitation on the place; I can see an erection of some kind quite distinctly. Who can tell whether we shall not come across a human being?”

Lieutenant Procope looked doubtful. The island had all the appearance of being deserted, nor did a cannon-shot fired from the schooner have the effect of bringing any resident to the shore. Nevertheless, it was undeniable that there was a stone building situated on the top of the rock, and that this building had much the character of an Arabian mosque.

The boat was lowered and manned by the four sailors; Servadac, Timascheff and Procope were quickly rowed ashore, and lost no time in commencing their ascent of the steep acclivity. Upon reaching the summit, they found their progress arrested by a kind of wall, or rampart of singular construction, its materials consisting mainly of vases, fragments of columns, carved bas-reliefs, statues, and portions of broken stelae, all piled promiscuously together without any pretense to artistic arrangement. They made their way into the enclosure, and finding an open door, they passed through and soon came to a second door, also open, which admitted them to the interior of the mosque, consisting of a single chamber, the walls of which were ornamented in the Arabian style by sculptures of indifferent execution. In the center was a tomb of the very simplest kind, and above the tomb was suspended a large silver lamp with a capacious reservoir of oil, in which floated a long lighted wick, the flame of which was evidently the light that had attracted Servadac's attention on the previous night.

"Must there not have been a custodian of the shrine?" they mutually asked; but if such there had ever been, he must, they concluded, either have fled or have perished on that eventful night. Not a soul was there in charge, and the sole living occupants were a flock of wild cormorants which, startled at the entrance of the intruders, rose on wing, and took a rapid flight towards the south.

An old French prayer-book was lying on the corner of the tomb; the volume was open, and the page exposed to view was that which contained the office for the celebration of the 25th of August. A sudden revelation dashed across Servadac's mind. The solemn isolation of the island tomb, the open breviary, the ritual of the ancient anniversary, all combined to apprise him of the sanctity of the spot upon which he stood.

“The tomb of St. Louis!” he exclaimed, and his companions involuntarily followed his example, and made a reverential obeisance to the venerated monument.

It was, in truth, the very spot on which tradition asserts that the canonized monarch came to die, a spot to which for six centuries and more his countrymen had paid the homage of a pious regard. The lamp that had been kindled at the memorial shrine of a saint was now in all probability the only beacon that threw a light across the waters of the Mediterranean, and even this ere long must itself expire.

There was nothing more to explore. The three together quitted the mosque, and descended the rock to the shore, whence their boat re-conveyed them to the schooner, which was soon again on her southward voyage; and it was not long before the tomb of St. Louis, the only spot that had survived the mysterious shock, was lost to view.

CHAPTER XII. AT THE MERCY OF THE WINDS

As the affrighted cormorants had winged their flight towards the south, there sprang up a sanguine hope on board the schooner that land might be discovered in that direction. Thither, accordingly, it was determined to proceed, and in a few hours after quitting the island of the tomb, the *Dobryna* was traversing the shallow waters that now covered the peninsula of Dakhul, which had separated the Bay of Tunis from the Gulf of Hammamet. For two days she continued an undeviating course, and after a futile search for the coast of Tunis, reached the latitude of 34 degrees.

Here, on the 11th of February, there suddenly arose the cry of “Land!” and in the extreme horizon, right ahead, where land had never been before, it was true enough that a shore was distinctly to be seen. What could it be? It could not be the coast of Tripoli; for not only would that low-lying shore be quite invisible at such a distance, but it was certain, moreover, that it lay two degrees at least still further south. It was soon observed that this newly discovered land was of very irregular elevation, that it extended due east and west across the horizon, thus dividing the gulf into two separate sections and completely concealing the island of Jerba, which must lie behind. Its position was duly traced on the *Dobryna*’s chart.

“How strange,” exclaimed Hector Servadac, “that after sailing all this time over sea where we expected to find land, we have at last come upon land where we thought to find sea!”

“Strange, indeed,” replied Lieutenant Procope; “and what appears to me almost as remarkable is that we have never once caught sight either of one of the Maltese tartans or one of the Levantine xebecs that traffic so regularly on the Mediterranean.”

“Eastwards or westwards,” asked the count — ”which shall be our course? All farther progress to the south is checked.”

“Westwards, by all means,” replied Servadac quickly. “I am longing to know whether anything of Algeria is left beyond the Shelif; besides, as we pass Gourbi Island we might take Ben Zoof on board, and then make away for Gibraltar, where we should be sure to learn something, at least, of European news.”

With his usual air of stately courtesy, Count Timascheff begged the captain to consider the yacht at his own disposal, and desired him to give the lieutenant instructions accordingly.

Lieutenant Procope, however, hesitated, and after revolving matters for a few moments in his mind, pointed out that as the wind was blowing directly from the west, and seemed likely to increase, if they went to the west in the teeth of the weather, the schooner would be reduced to the use of her engine only, and would have much difficulty in making any headway; on the other hand, by taking an eastward course, not only would they have the advantage of the wind, but, under steam and canvas, might hope in a few days to be off the coast of Egypt, and from Alexandria or some other port they would have the same opportunity of getting tidings from Europe as they would at Gibraltar.

Intensely anxious as he was to revisit the province of Oran, and eager, too, to satisfy himself of the welfare of his faithful Ben Zoof, Servadac could not but own the reasonableness of the lieutenant’s objections, and yielded to the proposal that the eastward course should be adopted. The wind gave signs only too threatening of the breeze rising to a gale; but, fortunately, the waves did not culminate in breakers, but rather in a long swell which ran in the same direction as the vessel.

During the last fortnight the high temperature had been gradually diminishing, until it now reached an average of 20 degrees Cent. (or 68 degrees Fahr.), and sometimes descended as low as 15 degrees. That this diminution was to be attributed to the change in the earth's orbit was a question that admitted of little doubt. After approaching so near to the sun as to cross the orbit of Venus, the earth must now have receded so far from the sun that its normal distance of ninety-one millions of miles was greatly increased, and the probability was great that it was approximating to the orbit of Mars, that planet which in its physical constitution most nearly resembles our own. Nor was this supposition suggested merely by the lowering of the temperature; it was strongly corroborated by the reduction of the apparent diameter of the sun's disc to the precise dimensions which it would assume to an observer actually stationed on the surface of Mars. The necessary inference that seemed to follow from these phenomena was that the earth had been projected into a new orbit, which had the form of a very elongated ellipse.

Very slight, however, in comparison was the regard which these astronomical wonders attracted on board the *Dobryna*. All interest there was too much absorbed in terrestrial matters, and in ascertaining what changes had taken place in the configuration of the earth itself, to permit much attention to be paid to its erratic movements through space.

The schooner kept bravely on her way, but well out to sea, at a distance of two miles from land. There was good need of this precaution, for so precipitous was the shore that a vessel driven upon it must inevitably have gone to pieces; it did not offer a single harbor of refuge, but, smooth and perpendicular as the walls of a fortress, it rose to a height of two hundred, and occasionally of three hundred feet. The waves dashed violently against its base. Upon the general substratum rested a massive conglomerate, the crystallizations of which rose like a forest of gigantic pyramids and obelisks.

But what struck the explorers more than anything was the appearance of singular newness that pervaded the whole of the region. It all seemed so recent in its formation that the atmosphere had had no opportunity of producing its wonted effect in softening the hardness of its lines, in rounding the sharpness of its angles, or in modifying the color of its surface; its outline was clearly marked against the sky, and its substance, smooth and polished as though fresh from a founder’s mold, glittered with the metallic brilliancy that is characteristic of pyrites. It seemed impossible to come to any other conclusion but that the land before them, continent or island, had been upheaved by subterranean forces above the surface of the sea, and that it was mainly composed of the same metallic element as had characterized the dust so frequently uplifted from the bottom.

The extreme nakedness of the entire tract was likewise very extraordinary. Elsewhere, in various quarters of the globe, there may be sterile rocks, but there are none so adamant as to be altogether unfurrowed by the filaments engendered in the moist residuum of the condensed vapor; elsewhere there may be barren steeps, but none so rigid as not to afford some hold to vegetation, however low and elementary may be its type; but here all was bare, and blank, and desolate — not a symptom of vitality was visible.

Such being the condition of the adjacent land, it could hardly be a matter of surprise that all the sea-birds, the albatross, the gull, the sea-mew, sought continual refuge on the schooner; day and night they perched fearlessly upon the yards, the report of a gun failing to dislodge them, and when food of any sort was thrown upon the deck, they would dart down and fight with eager voracity for the prize. Their extreme avidity was recognized as a proof that any land where they could obtain a sustenance must be far remote.

Onwards thus for several days the *Dobryna* followed the contour of the inhospitable coast, of which the features would occasionally change, sometimes for two or three miles assuming the form of a simple arris, sharply defined as though cut by a chisel, when suddenly the prismatic lamellae soaring in rugged confusion would again recur; but all along there was the same absence of beach or tract of sand to mark its base, neither were there any of those shoals of rock that are ordinarily found in shallow water. At rare intervals there were some narrow fissures, but not a creek available for a ship to enter to replenish its supply of water; and the wide roadsteads were unprotected and exposed to well-nigh every point of the compass.

But after sailing two hundred and forty miles, the progress of the *Dobryna* was suddenly arrested. Lieutenant Procope, who had sedulously inserted the outline of the newly revealed shore upon the maps, announced that it had ceased to run east and west, and had taken a turn due north, thus forming a barrier to their continuing their previous direction. It was, of course, impossible to conjecture how far this barrier extended; it coincided pretty nearly with the fourteenth meridian of east longitude; and if it reached, as probably it did, beyond Sicily to Italy, it was certain that the vast basin of the Mediterranean, which had washed the shores alike of Europe, Asia, and Africa, must have been reduced to about half its original area.

It was resolved to proceed upon the same plan as heretofore, following the boundary of the land at a safe distance. Accordingly, the head of the *Dobryna* was pointed north, making straight, as it was presumed, for the south of Europe. A hundred miles, or somewhat over, in that direction, and it was to be anticipated she would come in sight of Malta, if only that ancient island, the heritage in succession of Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Sicilians, Romans, Vandals, Greeks, Arabians, and the knights of Rhodes, should still be undestroyed.

But Malta, too, was gone; and when, upon the 14th, the sounding-line was dropped upon its site, it was only with the same result so oftentimes obtained before.

“The devastation is not limited to Africa,” observed the count.

“Assuredly not,” assented the lieutenant; adding, “and I confess I am almost in despair whether we shall ever ascertain its limits. To what quarter of Europe, if Europe still exists, do you propose that I should now direct your course?”

“To Sicily, Italy, France!” ejaculated Servadac, eagerly, — ”anywhere where we can learn the truth of what has befallen us.”

“How if we are the sole survivors?” said the count, gravely.

Hector Servadac was silent; his own secret presentiment so thoroughly coincided with the doubts expressed by the count, that he refrained from saying another word.

The coast, without deviation, still tended towards the north. No alternative, therefore, remained than to take a westerly course and to attempt to reach the northern shores of the Mediterranean. On the 16th the *Dobryna* essayed to start upon her altered way, but it seemed as if the elements had conspired to obstruct her progress. A furious tempest arose; the wind beat dead in the direction of the coast, and the danger incurred by a vessel of a tonnage so light was necessarily very great.

Lieutenant Procope was extremely uneasy. He took in all sail, struck his topmasts, and resolved to rely entirely on his engine. But the peril seemed only to increase. Enormous waves caught the schooner and carried her up to their crests, whence again she was plunged deep into the abysses that they left. The screw failed to keep its hold upon the water, but continually revolved with useless speed in the vacant air; and thus, although the steam was forced on to the extremest limit consistent with safety, the vessel held her way with the utmost difficulty, and recoiled before the hurricane.

Still, not a single resort for refuge did the inaccessible shore present. Again and again the lieutenant asked himself what would become of him and his comrades, even if they should survive the peril of shipwreck, and gain a footing upon the cliff. What resources could they expect to find upon that scene of desolation? What hope could they entertain that any portion of the old continent still existed beyond that dreary barrier?

It was a trying time, but throughout it all the crew behaved with the greatest courage and composure; confident in the skill of their commander, and in the stability of their ship, they performed their duties with steadiness and unquestioning obedience.

But neither skill, nor courage, nor obedience could avail; all was in vain. Despite the strain put upon her engine, the schooner, bare of canvas (for not even the smallest stay-sail could have withstood the violence of the storm), was drifting with terrific speed towards the menacing precipices, which were only a. few short miles to leeward. Fully alive to the hopelessness of their situation, the crew were all on deck.

“All over with us, sir!” said Procope to the count. “I have done everything that man could do; but our case is desperate. Nothing short of a miracle can save us now. Within an hour we must go to pieces upon yonder rocks.”

“Let us, then, commend ourselves to the providence of Him to Whom nothing is impossible,” replied the count, in a calm, clear voice that could be distinctly heard by all; and as he spoke, he reverently uncovered, an example in which he was followed by all the rest.

The destruction of the vessel seeming thus inevitable, Lieutenant Procope took the best measures he could to insure a few days’ supply of food for any who might escape ashore. He ordered several cases of provisions and kegs of water to be brought on deck, and saw that they were securely lashed to some empty barrels, to make them float after the ship had gone down.

Less and less grew the distance from the shore, but no creek, no inlet, could be discerned in the towering wall of cliff, which seemed about to topple over and involve them in annihilation. Except a change of wind or, as Procope observed, a supernatural rifting of the rock, nothing could bring deliverance now. But the wind did not veer, and in a few minutes more the schooner was hardly three cables’ distance from the fatal land. All were aware that their last moment had arrived. Servadac and the count grasped each other’s hands for a long farewell; and, tossed by the tremendous waves, the schooner was on the very point of being hurled upon the cliff, when a ringing shout was heard. “Quick, boys, quick! Hoist the jib, and right the tiller!”

Sudden and startling as the unexpected orders were, they were executed as if by magic.

The lieutenant, who had shouted from the bow, rushed astern and took the helm, and before anyone had time to speculate upon the object of his maneuvers, he shouted again, “Look out! sharp! watch the sheets!”

An involuntary cry broke forth from all on board. But it was no cry of terror. Right ahead was a narrow opening in the solid rock; it was hardly forty feet wide. Whether it was a passage or no, it mattered little; it was at least a refuge; and, driven by wind and wave, the *Dobryna*, under the dexterous guidance of the lieutenant, dashed in between its perpendicular walls.

Had she not immured herself in a perpetual prison?

CHAPTER XIII. A ROYAL SALUTE

“Then I take your bishop, major,” said Colonel Murphy, as he made a move that he had taken since the previous evening to consider.

“I was afraid you would,” replied Major Oliphant, looking intently at the chess-board.

Such was the way in which a long silence was broken on the morning of the 17th of February by the old calendar.

Another day elapsed before another move was made. It was a protracted game; it had, in fact, already lasted some months — the players being so deliberate, and so fearful of taking a step without the most mature consideration, that even now they were only making the twentieth move.

Both of them, moreover, were rigid disciples of the renowned Philidor, who pronounces that to play the pawns well is “the soul of chess”; and, accordingly, not one pawn had been sacrificed without a most vigorous defense.

The men who were thus beguiling their leisure were two officers in the British army — Colonel Heneage Finch Murphy and Major Sir John Temple Oliphant. Remarkably similar in personal appearance, they were hardly less so in personal character. Both of them were about forty years of age; both of them were tall and fair, with bushy whiskers and mustaches; both of them were phlegmatic in temperament, and both much addicted to the wearing of their uniforms. They were proud of their nationality, and exhibited a manifest dislike, verging upon contempt, of everything foreign. Probably they would have felt no surprise if they had been told that Anglo-Saxons were fashioned out of some specific clay, the properties of which surpassed the investigation of chemical analysis. Without any intentional disparagement they might, in a certain way, be compared to two scarecrows which, though perfectly harmless in themselves, inspire some measure of respect, and are excellently adapted to protect the territory intrusted to their guardianship.

English-like, the two officers had made themselves thoroughly at home in the station abroad in which it had been their lot to be quartered. The faculty of colonization seems to be indigenous to the native character; once let an Englishman plant his national standard on the surface of the moon, and it would not be long before a colony was established round it.

The officers had a servant, named Kirke, and a company of ten soldiers of the line. This party of thirteen men were apparently the sole survivors of an overwhelming catastrophe, which on the 1st of January had transformed an enormous rock, garrisoned with well-nigh two thousand troops, into an insignificant island far out to sea. But although the transformation had been so marvelous, it cannot be said that either Colonel Murphy or Major Oliphant had made much demonstration of astonishment.

“This is all very peculiar, Sir John,” observed the colonel.

“Yes, colonel; very peculiar,” replied the major.

“England will be sure to send for us,” said one officer.

“No doubt she will,” answered the other.

Accordingly, they came to the mutual resolution that they would “stick to their post.”

To say the truth, it would have been a difficult matter for the gallant officers to do otherwise; they had but one small boat; therefore, it was well that they made a virtue of necessity, and resigned themselves to patient expectation of the British ship which, in due time, would bring relief.

They had no fear of starvation. Their island was mined with subterranean stores, more than ample for thirteen men — nay, for thirteen Englishmen — for the next five years at least. Preserved meat, ale, brandy — all were in abundance; consequently, as the men expressed it, they were in this respect “all right.”

Of course, the physical changes that had taken place had attracted the notice both of officers and men. But the reversed position of east and west, the diminution of the force of gravity, the altered rotation of the earth, and her projection upon a new orbit, were all things that gave them little concern and no uneasiness; and when the colonel and the major had replaced the pieces on the board which had been disturbed by the convulsion, any surprise they might have felt at the chess-men losing some portion of their weight was quite forgotten in the satisfaction of seeing them retain their equilibrium.

One phenomenon, however, did not fail to make its due impression upon the men; this was the diminution in the length of day and night. Three days after the catastrophe, Corporal Pim, on behalf of himself and his comrades, solicited a formal interview with the officers. The request having been granted, Pim, with the nine soldiers, all punctiliously wearing the regimental tunic of scarlet and trousers of invisible green, presented themselves at the door of the colonel’s room, where he and his brother-officer were continuing their game. Raising his hand respectfully to his cap, which he wore poised jauntily over his right ear, and scarcely held on by the strap below his under lip, the corporal waited permission to speak.

After a lingering survey of the chess-board, the colonel slowly lifted his eyes, and said with official dignity, “Well, men, what is it?”

“First of all, sir,” replied the corporal, “we want to speak to you about our pay, and then we wish to have a word with the major about our rations.”

“Say on, then,” said Colonel Murphy. “What is it about your pay?”

“Just this, sir; as the days are only half as long as they were, we should like to know whether our pay is to be diminished in proportion.”

The colonel was taken somewhat aback, and did not reply immediately, though by some significant nods towards the major, he indicated that he thought the question very reasonable. After a few moments’ reflection, he replied, “It must, I think, be allowed that your pay was calculated from sunrise to sunrise; there was no specification of what the interval should be. Your pay will continue as before. England can afford it.”

A buzz of approval burst involuntarily from all the men, but military discipline and the respect due to their officers kept them in check from any boisterous demonstration of their satisfaction.

“And now, corporal, what is your business with me?” asked Major Oliphant.

“We want to know whether, as the days are only six hours long, we are to have but two meals instead of four?”

The officers looked at each other, and by their glances agreed that the corporal was a man of sound common sense.

“Eccentricities of nature,” said the major, “cannot interfere with military regulations. It is true that there will be but an interval of an hour and a half between them, but the rule stands good — four meals a day. England is too rich to grudge her soldiers any of her soldiers’ due. Yes; four meals a day.”

“Hurrah!” shouted the soldiers, unable this time to keep their delight within the bounds of military decorum; and, turning to the right-about, they marched away, leaving the officers to renew the all-absorbing game.

However confident everyone upon the island might profess to be that succor would be sent them from their native land — for Britain never abandons any of her sons — it could not be disguised that that succor was somewhat tardy in making its appearance. Many and various were the conjectures to account for the delay. Perhaps England was engrossed with domestic matters, or perhaps she was absorbed in diplomatic difficulties; or perchance, more likely than all, Northern Europe had received no tidings of the convulsion that had shattered the south. The whole party throve remarkably well upon the liberal provisions of the commissariat department, and if the officers failed to show the same tendency to *embonpoint* which was fast becoming characteristic of the men, it was only because they deemed it due to their rank to curtail any indulgences which might compromise the fit of their uniform.

On the whole, time passed indifferently well. An Englishman rarely suffers from *ennui*, and then only in his own country, when required to conform to what he calls “the humbug of society”; and the two officers, with their similar tastes, ideas, and dispositions, got on together admirably. It is not to be questioned that they were deeply affected by a sense of regret for their lost comrades, and astounded beyond measure at finding themselves the sole survivors of a garrison of 1,895 men, but with true British pluck and self-control, they had done nothing more than draw up a report that 1,882 names were missing from the muster-roll.

The island itself, the sole surviving fragment of an enormous pile of rock that had reared itself some 1,600 feet above the sea, was not, strictly speaking, the only land that was visible; for about twelve miles to the south there was another island, apparently the very counterpart of what was now occupied by the Englishmen. It was only natural that this should awaken some interest even in the most imperturbable minds, and there was no doubt that the two officers, during one of the rare intervals when they were not absorbed in their game, had decided that it would be desirable at least to ascertain whether the island was deserted, or whether it might not be occupied by some others, like themselves, survivors from the general catastrophe. Certain it is that one morning, when the weather was bright and calm, they had embarked alone in the little boat, and been absent for seven or eight hours. Not even to Corporal Pim did they communicate the object of their excursion, nor say one syllable as to its result, and it could only be inferred from their manner that they were quite satisfied with what they had seen; and very shortly afterwards Major Oliphant was observed to draw up a lengthy document, which was no sooner finished than it was formally signed and sealed with the seal of the 33rd Regiment. It was directed:

To the First Lord of the Admiralty,

London,

and kept in readiness for transmission by the first ship that should hail in sight. But time elapsed, and here was the 18th of February without an opportunity having been afforded for any communication with the British Government.

At breakfast that morning, the colonel observed to the major that he was under the most decided impression that the 18th of February was a royal anniversary; and he went on to say that, although he had received no definite instructions on the subject, he did not think that the peculiar circumstances under which they found themselves should prevent them from giving the day its due military honors.

The major quite concurred; and it was mutually agreed that the occasion must be honored by a bumper of port, and by a royal salute. Corporal Pim must be sent for. The corporal soon made his appearance, smacking his lips, having, by a ready intuition, found a pretext for a double morning ration of spirits.

“The 18th of February, you know, Pim,” said the colonel; “we must have a salute of twenty-one guns.”

“Very good,” replied Pim, a man of few words.

“And take care that your fellows don’t get their arms and legs blown off,” added the officer.

“Very good, sir,” said the corporal; and he made his salute and withdrew.

Of all the bombs, howitzers, and various species of artillery with which the fortress had been crowded, one solitary piece remained. This was a cumbrous muzzle-loader of 9-inch caliber, and, in default of the smaller ordnance generally employed for the purpose, had to be brought into requisition for the royal salute.

A sufficient number of charges having been provided, the corporal brought his men to the reduct, whence the gun’s mouth projected over a sloping embrasure. The two officers, in cocked hats and full staff uniform, attended to take charge of the proceedings. The gun was maneuvered in strict accordance with the rules of “The Artilleryman’s Manual,” and the firing commenced.

Not unmindful of the warning he had received, the corporal was most careful between each discharge to see that every vestige of fire was extinguished, so as to prevent an untimely explosion while the men were reloading; and accidents, such as so frequently mar public rejoicings, were all happily avoided.

Much to the chagrin of both Colonel Murphy and Major Oliphant, the effect of the salute fell altogether short of their anticipations. The weight of the atmosphere was so reduced that there was comparatively little resistance to the explosive force of the gases, liberated at the cannon’s mouth, and there was consequently none of the reverberation, like rolling thunder, that ordinarily follows the discharge of heavy artillery.

Twenty times had the gun been fired, and it was on the point of being loaded for the last time, when the colonel laid his hand upon the arm of the man who had the ramrod. “Stop!” he said; “we will have a ball this time. Let us put the range of the piece to the test.”

“A good idea!” replied the major. “Corporal, you hear the orders.”

In quick time an artillery-wagon was on the spot, and the men lifted out a full-sized shot, weighing 200 lbs. which, under ordinary circumstances, the cannon would carry about four miles. It was proposed, by means of telescopes, to note the place where the ball first touched the water, and thus to obtain an approximation sufficiently accurate as to the true range.

Having been duly charged with powder and ball, the gun was raised to an angle of something under 45 degrees, so as to allow proper development to the curve that the projectile would make, and, at a signal from the major, the light was applied to the priming.

“Heavens!” “By all that’s good!” exclaimed both officers in one breath, as, standing open-mouthed, they hardly knew whether they were to believe the evidence of their own senses. “Is it possible?”

The diminution of the force of attraction at the earth’s surface was so considerable that the ball had sped beyond the horizon.

“Incredible!” ejaculated the colonel.

“Incredible!” echoed the major.

“Six miles at least!” observed the one.

“Ay, more than that!” replied the other.

Awhile, they gazed at the sea and at each other in mute amazement. But in the midst of their perplexity, what sound was that which startled them? Was it mere fancy? Was it the reverberation of the cannon still booming in their ears? Or was it not truly the report of another and a distant gun in answer to their own? Attentively and eagerly they listened. Twice, thrice did the sound repeat itself. It was quite distinct. There could be no mistake.

“I told you so,” cried the colonel, triumphantly. “I knew our country would not forsake us; it is an English ship, no doubt.”

In half an hour two masts were visible above the horizon. “See! Was I not right? Our country was sure to send to our relief. Here is the ship.”

“Yes,” replied the major; “she responded to our gun.”

“It is to be hoped,” muttered the corporal, “that our ball has done her no damage.”

Before long the hull was full in sight. A long trail of smoke betokened her to be a steamer; and very soon, by the aid of the glass, it could be ascertained that she was a schooner-yacht, and making straight for the island. A flag at her mast-head fluttered in the breeze, and towards this the two officers, with the keenest attention, respectively adjusted their focus.

Simultaneously the two telescopes were lowered. The colonel and the major stared at each other in blank astonishment. “Russian!” they gasped.

And true it was that the flag that floated at the head of yonder mast was the blue cross of Russia.

CHAPTER XIV. SENSITIVE NATIONALITY

When the schooner had approached the island, the Englishmen were able to make out the name “*Dobryna*” painted on the aft-board. A sinuous irregularity of the coast had formed a kind of cove, which, though hardly spacious enough for a few fishing-smacks, would afford the yacht a temporary anchorage, so long as the wind did not blow violently from either west or south. Into this cove the *Dobryna* was duly signaled, and as soon as she was safely moored, she lowered her four-oar, and Count Timascheff and Captain Servadac made their way at once to land.

Colonel Heneage Finch Murphy and Major Sir John Temple Oliphant stood, grave and prim, formally awaiting the arrival of their visitors. Captain Servadac, with the uncontrolled vivacity natural to a Frenchman, was the first to speak.

“A joyful sight, gentlemen!” he exclaimed. “It will give us unbounded pleasure to shake hands again with some of our fellow-creatures. You, no doubt, have escaped the same disaster as ourselves.”

But the English officers, neither by word nor gesture, made the slightest acknowledgment of this familiar greeting.

“What news can you give us of France, England, or Russia?” continued Servadac, perfectly unconscious of the stolid rigidity with which his advances were received. “We are anxious to hear anything you can tell us. Have you had communications with Europe? Have you — ”

“To whom have we the honor of speaking?” at last interposed Colonel Murphy, in the coldest and most measured tone, and drawing himself up to his full height.

“Ah! how stupid! I forgot,” said Servadac, with the slightest possible shrug of the shoulders; “we have not been introduced.”

Then, with a wave of his hand towards his companion, who meanwhile had exhibited a reserve hardly less than that of the British officers, he said:

“Allow me to introduce you to Count Wassili Timascheff.”

“Major Sir John Temple Oliphant,” replied the colonel.

The Russian and the Englishman mutually exchanged the stiffest of bows.

“I have the pleasure of introducing Captain Servadac,” said the count in his turn.

“And this is Colonel Heneage Finch Murphy,” was the major’s grave rejoinder.

More bows were interchanged and the ceremony brought to its due conclusion. It need hardly be said that the conversation had been carried on in French, a language which is generally known both by Russians and Englishmen — a circumstance that is probably in some measure to be accounted for by the refusal of Frenchmen to learn either Russian or English.

The formal preliminaries of etiquette being thus complete, there was no longer any obstacle to a freer intercourse. The colonel, signing to his guests to follow, led the way to the apartment occupied jointly by himself and the major, which, although only a kind of casemate hollowed in the rock, nevertheless wore a general air of comfort. Major Oliphant accompanied them, and all four having taken their seats, the conversation was commenced.

Irritated and disgusted at all the cold formalities, Hector Servadac resolved to leave all the talking to the count; and he, quite aware that the Englishmen would adhere to the fiction that they could be supposed to know nothing that had transpired previous to the introduction felt himself obliged to recapitulate matters from the very beginning.

“You must be aware, gentlemen,” began the count, “that a most singular catastrophe occurred on the 1st of January last. Its cause, its limits we have utterly failed to discover, but from the appearance of the island on which we find you here, you have evidently experienced its devastating consequences.”

The Englishmen, in silence, bowed assent.

“Captain Servadac, who accompanies me,” continued the count, “has been most severely tried by the disaster. Engaged as he was in an important mission as a staff-officer in Algeria — ”

“A French colony, I believe,” interposed Major Oliphant, half shutting his eyes with an expression of supreme indifference.

Servadac was on the point of making some cutting retort, but Count Timascheff, without allowing the interruption to be noticed, calmly continued his narrative:

“It was near the mouth of the Shelif that a portion of Africa, on that eventful night, was transformed into an island which alone survived; the rest of the vast continent disappeared as completely as if it had never been.”

The announcement seemed by no means startling to the phlegmatic colonel.

“Indeed!” was all he said.

“And where were you?” asked Major Oliphant.

“I was out at sea, cruising in my yacht; hard by; and I look upon it as a miracle, and nothing less, that I and my crew escaped with our lives.”

“I congratulate you on your luck,” replied the major.

The count resumed: “It was about a month after the great disruption that I was sailing — my engine having sustained some damage in the shock — along the Algerian coast, and had the pleasure of meeting with my previous acquaintance, Captain Servadac, who was resident upon the island with his orderly, Ben Zoof.”

“Ben who?” inquired the major.

“Zoof! Ben Zoof!” ejaculated Servadac, who could scarcely shout loud enough to relieve his pent-up feelings.

Ignoring this ebullition of the captain’s spleen, the count went on to say: “Captain Servadac was naturally most anxious to get what news he could. Accordingly, he left his servant on the island in charge of his horses, and came on board the *Dobryna* with me. We were quite at a loss to know where we should steer, but decided to direct our course to what previously had been the east, in order that we might, if possible, discover the colony of Algeria; but of Algeria not a trace remained.”

The colonel curled his lip, insinuating only too plainly that to him it was by no means surprising that a French colony should be wanting in the element of stability. Servadac observed the supercilious look, and half rose to his feet, but, smothering his resentment, took his seat again without speaking.

“The devastation, gentlemen,” said the count, who persistently refused to recognize the Frenchman’s irritation, “everywhere was terrible and complete. Not only was Algeria lost, but there was no trace of Tunis, except one solitary rock, which was crowned by an ancient tomb of one of the kings of France — ”

“Louis the Ninth, I presume,” observed the colonel.

“Saint Louis,” blurted out Servadac, savagely.

Colonel Murphy slightly smiled.

Proof against all interruption, Count Timascheff, as if he had not heard it, went on without pausing. He related how the schooner had pushed her way onwards to the south, and had reached the Gulf of Cabes; and how she had ascertained for certain that the Sahara Sea had no longer an existence.

The smile of disdain again crossed the colonel’s face; he could not conceal his opinion that such a destiny for the work of a Frenchman could be no matter of surprise.

“Our next discovery,” continued the count, “was that a new coast had been upheaved right along in front of the coast of Tripoli, the geological formation of which was altogether strange, and which extended to the north as far as the proper place of Malta.”

“And Malta,” cried Servadac, unable to control himself any longer; “Malta — town, forts, soldiers, governor, and all — has vanished just like Algeria.”

For a moment a cloud rested upon the colonel's brow, only to give place to an expression of decided incredulity.

"The statement seems highly incredible," he said.

"Incredible?" repeated Servadac. "Why is it that you doubt my word?"

The captain's rising wrath did not prevent the colonel from replying coolly, "Because Malta belongs to England."

"I can't help that," answered Servadac, sharply; "it has gone just as utterly as if it had belonged to China."

Colonel Murphy turned deliberately away from Servadac, and appealed to the count: "Do you not think you may have made some error, count, in reckoning the bearings of your yacht?"

"No, colonel, I am quite certain of my reckonings; and not only can I testify that Malta has disappeared, but I can affirm that a large section of the Mediterranean has been closed in by a new continent. After the most anxious investigation, we could discover only one narrow opening in all the coast, and it is by following that little channel that we have made our way hither. England, I fear, has suffered grievously by the late catastrophe. Not only has Malta been entirely lost, but of the Ionian Islands that were under England's protection, there seems to be but little left."

"Ay, you may depend upon it," said Servadac, breaking in upon the conversation petulantly, "your grand resident lord high commissioner has not much to congratulate himself about in the condition of Corfu."

The Englishmen were mystified.

“Corfu, did you say?” asked Major Oliphant.

“Yes, Corfu; I said Corfu,” replied Servadac, with a sort of malicious triumph.

The officers were speechless with astonishment.

The silence of bewilderment was broken at length by Count Timascheff making inquiry whether nothing had been heard from England, either by telegraph or by any passing ship.

“No,” said the colonel; “not a ship has passed; and the cable is broken.”

“But do not the Italian telegraphs assist you?” continued the count.

“Italian! I do not comprehend you. You must mean the Spanish, surely.”

“How?” demanded Timascheff.

“Confound it!” cried the impatient Servadac. “What matters whether it be Spanish or Italian? Tell us, have you had no communication at all from Europe? — no news of any sort from London?”

“Hitherto, none whatever,” replied the colonel; adding with a stately emphasis, “but we shall be sure to have tidings from England before long.”

“Whether England is still in existence or not, I suppose,” said Servadac, in a tone of irony.

The Englishmen started simultaneously to their feet.

“England in existence?” the colonel cried. “England! Ten times more probable that France — ”

“France!” shouted Servadac in a passion. “France is not an island that can be submerged; France is an integral portion of a solid continent. France, at least, is safe.”

A scene appeared inevitable, and Count Timascheff’s efforts to conciliate the excited parties were of small avail.

“You are at home here,” said Servadac, with as much calmness as he could command; “it will be advisable, I think, for this discussion to be carried on in the open air.” And hurriedly he left the room. Followed immediately by the others, he led the way to a level piece of ground, which he considered he might fairly claim as neutral territory.

“Now, gentlemen,” he began haughtily, “permit me to represent that, in spite of any loss France may have sustained in the fate of Algeria, France is ready to answer any provocation that affects her honor. Here I am the representative of my country, and here, on neutral ground — ”

“Neutral ground?” objected Colonel Murphy; “I beg your pardon. This, Captain Servadac, is English territory. Do you not see the English flag?” and, as he spoke, he pointed with national pride to the British standard floating over the top of the island.

“Pshaw!” cried Servadac, with a contemptuous sneer; “that flag, you know, has been hoisted but a few short weeks.”

“That flag has floated where it is for ages,” asserted the colonel.

“An imposture!” shouted Servadac, as he stamped with rage.

Recovering his composure in a degree, he continued: “Can you suppose that I am not aware that this island on which we find you is what remains of the

Ionian representative republic, over which you English exercise the right of protection, but have no claim of government?”

The colonel and the major looked at each other in amazement.

Although Count Timascheff secretly sympathized with Servadac, he had carefully refrained from taking part in the dispute; but he was on the point of interfering, when the colonel, in a greatly subdued tone, begged to be allowed to speak.

“I begin to apprehend,” he said, “that you must be la-boring under some strange mistake. There is no room for questioning that the territory here is England’s — England’s by right of conquest; ceded to England by the Treaty of Utrecht. Three times, indeed — in 1727, 1779, and 1792 — France and Spain have disputed our title, but always to no purpose. You are, I assure you, at the present moment, as much on English soil as if you were in London, in the middle of Trafalgar Square.”

It was now the turn of the captain and the count to look surprised. “Are we not, then, in Corfu?” they asked.

“You are at Gibraltar,” replied the colonel.

Gibraltar! The word fell like a thunderclap upon their ears. Gibraltar! the western extremity of the Mediterranean! Why, had they not been sailing persistently to the east? Could they be wrong in imagining that they had reached the Ionian Islands? What new mystery was this?

Count Timascheff was about to proceed with a more rigorous investigation, when the attention of all was arrested by a loud outcry. Turning round, they saw that the crew of the *Dobryna* was in hot dispute with the English soldiers. A general altercation had arisen from a disagreement between the sailor Panofka and Corporal Pim. It had transpired that the cannon-ball fired in experiment from the island had not only damaged one of the spars of the schooner, but had broken Panofka's pipe, and, moreover, had just grazed his nose, which, for a Russian's, was unusually long. The discussion over this mishap led to mutual recriminations, till the sailors had almost come to blows with the garrison.

Servadac was just in the mood to take Panofka's part, which drew from Major Oliphant the remark that England could not be held responsible for any accidental injury done by her cannon, and if the Russian's long nose came in the way of the ball, the Russian must submit to the mischance.

This was too much for Count Timascheff, and having poured out a torrent of angry invective against the English officers, he ordered his crew to embark immediately.

“We shall meet again,” said Servadac, as they pushed off from shore.

“Whenever you please,” was the cool reply.

The geographical mystery haunted the minds of both the count and the captain, and they felt they could never rest till they had ascertained what had become of their respective countries. They were glad to be on board again, that they might résumé their voyage of investigation, and in two hours were out of sight of the sole remaining fragment of Gibraltar.

CHAPTER XV. AN ENIGMA FROM THE SEA

Lieutenant Procope had been left on board in charge of the *Dobryna*, and on resuming the voyage it was a task of some difficulty to make him understand the fact that had just come to light. Some hours were spent in discussion and in attempting to penetrate the mysteries of the situation.

There were certain things of which they were perfectly certain. They could be under no misapprehension as to the distance they had positively sailed from Gourbi Island towards the east before their further progress was arrested by the unknown shore; as nearly as possible that was fifteen degrees; the length of the narrow strait by which they had made their way across that land to regain the open sea was about three miles and a half; thence onward to the island, which they had been assured, on evidence that they could not disbelieve, to be upon the site of Gibraltar, was four degrees; while from Gibraltar to Gourbi Island was seven degrees or but little more. What was it altogether? Was it not less than thirty degrees? In that latitude, the degree of longitude represents eight and forty miles. What, then, did it all amount to? Indubitably, to less than 1,400 miles. So brief a voyage would bring the *Dobryna* once again to her starting-point, or, in other words, would enable her to complete the circumnavigation of the globe. How changed the condition of things! Previously, to sail from Malta to Gibraltar by an eastward course would have involved the passage of the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Pacific, the Atlantic; but what had happened now? Why, Gibraltar had been reached as if it had been just at Corfu, and some three hundred and thirty degrees of the earth’s circuit had vanished utterly.

After allowing for a certain margin of miscalculation, the main fact remained undeniable; and the necessary inference that Lieutenant Procope drew from the round of the earth being completed in 1,400 miles, was that the earth’s diameter had been reduced by about fifteen sixteenths of its length.

“If that be so,” observed the count, “it accounts for some of the strange phenomena we witness. If our world has become so insignificant a spheroid, not only has its gravity diminished, but its rotary speed has been accelerated; and this affords an adequate explanation of our days and nights being thus curtailed. But how about the new orbit in which we are moving?”

He paused and pondered, and then looked at Procope as though awaiting from him some further elucidation of the difficulty. The lieutenant hesitated. When, in a few moments, he began to speak, Servadac smiled intelligently, anticipating the answer he was about to hear.

“My conjecture is,” said Procope, “that a fragment of considerable magnitude has been detached from the earth; that it has carried with it an envelope of the earth’s atmosphere, and that it is now traveling through the solar system in an orbit that does not correspond at all with the proper orbit of the earth.”

The hypothesis was plausible; but what a multitude of bewildering speculations it entailed! If, in truth, a certain mass had been broken off from the terrestrial sphere, whither would it wend its way? What would be the measure of the eccentricity of its path? What would be its period round the sun? Might it not, like a comet, be carried away into the vast infinity of space? or, on the other hand, might it not be attracted to the great central source of light and heat, and be absorbed in it? Did its orbit correspond with the orbit of the ecliptic? and was there no chance of its ever uniting again with the globe, from which it had been torn off by so sudden and violent a disruption?

A thoughtful silence fell upon them all, which Servadac was the first to break. “Lieutenant,” he said, “your explanation is ingenious, and accounts for many appearances; but it seems to me that in one point it fails.”

“How so?” replied Procope. “To my mind the theory meets all objections.”

“I think not,” Servadac answered. “In one point, at least, it appears to me to break down completely.”

“What is that?” asked the lieutenant.

“Stop a moment,” said the captain. “Let us see that we understand each other right. Unless I mistake you, your hypothesis is that a fragment of the earth, comprising the Mediterranean and its shores from Gibraltar to Malta, has been developed into a new asteroid, which is started on an independent orbit in the solar regions. Is not that your meaning?”

“Precisely so,” the lieutenant acquiesced.

“Well, then,” continued Servadac, “it seems to me to be at fault in this respect: it fails, and fails completely, to account for the geological character of the land that we have found now encompassing this sea. Why, if the new land is a fragment of the old — why does it not retain its old formation? What has become of the granite and the calcareous deposits? How is it that these should all be changed into a mineral concrete with which we have no acquaintance?”

No doubt, it was a serious objection; for, however likely it might be that a mass of the earth on being detached would be eccentric in its movements, there was no probable reason to be alleged why the material of its substance should undergo so complete a change. There was nothing to account for the fertile shores, rich in vegetation, being transformed into rocks arid and barren beyond precedent.

The lieutenant felt the difficulty, and owned himself unprepared to give at once an adequate solution; nevertheless, he declined to renounce his theory. He asserted that the arguments in favor of it carried conviction to his mind, and that he entertained no doubt but that, in the course of time, all apparently antagonistic circumstances would be explained so as to become consistent with the view he took. He was careful, however, to make it understood that with respect to the original cause of the disruption he had no theory to offer; and although he knew what expansion might be the result of subterranean forces, he did not venture to say that he considered it sufficient to produce so tremendous an effect. The origin of the catastrophe was a problem still to be solved.

“Ah! well,” said Servadac, “I don’t know that it matters much where our new little planet comes from, or what it is made of, if only it carries France along with it.”

“And Russia,” added the count.

“And Russia, of course,” said Servadac, with a polite bow.

There was, however, not much room for this sanguine expectation, for if a new asteroid had thus been brought into existence, it must be a sphere of extremely limited dimensions, and there could be little chance that it embraced more than the merest fraction of either France or Russia. As to England, the total cessation of all telegraphic communication between her shores and Gibraltar was a virtual proof that England was beyond its compass.

And what was the true measurement of the new little world? At Gourbi Island the days and nights were of equal length, and this seemed to indicate that it was situated on the equator; hence the distance by which the two poles stood apart would be half what had been reckoned would be the distance completed by the *Dobryna* in her circuit. That distance had been already estimated to be something under 1,400 miles, so that the Arctic Pole of their recently fashioned world must be about 350 miles to the north, and the Antarctic about 350 miles to the south of the island. Compare these calculations with the map, and it is at once apparent that the northernmost limit barely touched the coast of Provence, while the southernmost reached to about lat. 20 degrees N. and fell in the heart of the desert. The practical test of these conclusions would be made by future investigation, but meanwhile the fact appeared very much to strengthen the presumption that, if Lieutenant Procope had not arrived at the whole truth, he had made a considerable advance towards it.

The weather, ever since the storm that had driven the *Dobryna* into the creek, had been magnificent. The wind continued favorable, and now under both steam and canvas, she made a rapid progress towards the north, a direction in which she was free to go in consequence of the total disappearance of the Spanish coast, from Gibraltar right away to Alicante. Malaga, Almeria, Cape Gata, Carthagena. Cape Palos — all were gone. The sea was rolling over the southern extent of the peninsula, so that the yacht advanced to the latitude of Seville before it sighted any land at all, and then, not shores such as the shores of Andalusia, but a bluff and precipitous cliff, in its geological features resembling exactly the stern and barren rock that she had coasted beyond the site of Malta. Here the sea made a decided indentation on the coast; it ran up in an acute-angled triangle till its apex coincided with the very spot upon which Madrid had stood. But as hitherto the sea had encroached upon the land, the land in its turn now encroached upon the sea; for a frowning headland stood out far into the basin of the Mediterranean, and formed a promontory stretching out beyond the proper places of the Balearic Isles. Curiosity was all alive. There was the intensest interest awakened to determine whether no vestige could be traced of Majorca, Minorca, or any of the group, and it was during a deviation from the direct course for the purpose of a more thorough scrutiny, that one of the sailors raised a thrill of general excitement by shouting, “A bottle in the sea!”

Here, then, at length was a communication from the outer world. Surely now they would find a document which would throw some light upon all the mysteries that had happened? Had not the day now dawned that should set their speculations all at rest?

It was the morning of the 21st of February. The count, the captain, the lieutenant, everybody hurried to the forecastle; the schooner was dexterously put about, and all was eager impatience until the supposed bottle was hauled on deck.

It was not, however, a bottle; it proved to be a round leather telescope-case, about a foot long, and the first thing to do before investigating its contents was to make a careful examination of its exterior. The lid was fastened on by wax, and so securely that it would take a long immersion before any water could penetrate; there was no maker’s name to be deciphered; but impressed very plainly with a seal on the wax were the two initials “P. R.”

When the scrutiny of the outside was finished, the wax was removed and the cover opened, and the lieutenant drew out a slip of ruled paper, evidently torn from a common note-book. The paper had an inscription written in four lines, which were remarkable for the profusion of notes of admiration and interrogation with which they were interspersed:

> “Gallia???
>
> *Ab sole*, au 15 fev. 59,000,000 l!
>
> Chemin parcouru de janv. a fev. 82,000,000 l!!
>
> *Va bene! All right!!* Parfait!!!”

There was a general sigh of disappointment. They turned the paper over and over, and handed it from one to another. “What does it all mean?” exclaimed the count.

“Something mysterious here!” said Servadac. “But yet,” he continued, after a pause, “one thing is tolerably certain: on the 15th, six days ago, someone was alive to write it.”

“Yes; I presume there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the date,” assented the count.

To this strange conglomeration of French, English, Italian, and Latin, there was no signature attached; nor was there anything to give a clue as to the locality in which it had been committed to the waves. A telescope-case would probably be the property of some one on board a ship; and the figures obviously referred to the astronomical wonders that had been experienced.

To these general observations Captain Servadac objected that he thought it unlikely that any one on board a ship would use a telescope-case for this purpose, but would be sure to use a bottle as being more secure; and, accordingly, he should rather be inclined to believe that the message had been set afloat by some *savant* left alone, perchance, upon some isolated coast.

“But, however interesting it might be,” observed the count, “to know the author of the lines, to us it is of far greater moment to ascertain their meaning.”

And taking up the paper again, he said, “Perhaps we might analyze it word by word, and from its detached parts gather some clue to its sense as a whole.”

“What can be the meaning of all that cluster of interrogations after Gallia?” asked Servadac.

Lieutenant Procope, who had hitherto not spoken, now broke his silence by saying, “I beg, gentlemen, to submit my opinion that this document goes very far to confirm my hypothesis that a fragment of the earth has been precipitated into space.”

Captain Servadac hesitated, and then replied, “Even if it does, I do not see how it accounts in the least for the geological character of the new asteroid.”

“But will you allow me for one minute to take my supposition for granted?” said Procope. “If a new little planet has been formed, as I imagine, by disintegration from the old, I should conjecture that Gallia is the name assigned to it by the writer of this paper. The very notes of interrogation are significant that he was in doubt what he should write.”

“You would presume that he was a Frenchman?” asked the count.

“I should think so,” replied the lieutenant.

“Not much doubt about that,” said Servadac; “it is all in French, except a few scattered words of English, Latin, and Italian, inserted to attract attention. He could not tell into whose hands the message would fall first.”

“Well, then,” said Count Timascheff, “we seem to have found a name for the new world we occupy.”

“But what I was going especially to observe,” continued the lieutenant, “is that the distance, 59,000,000 leagues, represents precisely the distance we ourselves were from the sun on the 15th. It was on that day we crossed the orbit of Mars.”

“Yes, true,” assented the others.

“And the next line,” said the lieutenant, after reading it aloud, “apparently registers the distance traversed by Gallia, the new little planet, in her own orbit. Her speed, of course, we know by Kepler’s laws, would vary according to her distance from the sun, and if she were — as I conjecture from the temperature at that date — on the 15th of January at her perihelion, she would be traveling twice as fast as the earth, which moves at the rate of between 50,000 and 60,000 miles an hour.”

“You think, then,” said Servadac, with a smile, “you have determined the perihelion of our orbit; but how about the aphelion? Can you form a judgment as to what distance we are likely to be carried?”

“You are asking too much,” remonstrated the count.

“I confess,” said the lieutenant, “that just at present I am not able to clear away the uncertainty of the future; but I feel confident that by careful observation at various points we shall arrive at conclusions which not only will determine our path, but perhaps may clear up the mystery about our geological structure.”

“Allow me to ask,” said Count Timascheff, “whether such a new asteroid would not be subject to ordinary mechanical laws, and whether, once started, it would not have an orbit that must be immutable?”

“Decidedly it would, so long as it was undisturbed by the attraction of some considerable body; but we must recollect that, compared to the great planets, Gallia must be almost infinitesimally small, and so might be attracted by a force that is irresistible.”

“Altogether, then,” said Servadac, “we seem to have settled it to our entire satisfaction that we must be the population of a young little world called Gallia. Perhaps some day we may have the honor of being registered among the minor planets.”

“No chance of that,” quickly rejoined Lieutenant Procope. “Those minor planets all are known to rotate in a narrow zone between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter; in their perihelia they cannot approximate the sun as we have done; we shall not be classed with them.”

“Our lack of instruments,” said the count, “is much to be deplored; it baffles our investigations in every way.”

“Ah, never mind! Keep up your courage, count!” said Servadac, cheerily.

And Lieutenant Procope renewed his assurances that he entertained good hopes that every perplexity would soon be solved.

“I suppose,” remarked the count, “that we cannot attribute much importance to the last line: *‘Va bene! All right!!* Parfait!!!”

The captain answered, “At least, it shows that whoever wrote it had no murmuring or complaint to make, but was quite content with the new order of things.”

CHAPTER XVI. THE RESIDUUM OF A CONTINENT

Almost unconsciously, the voyagers in the *Dobryna* fell into the habit of using Gallia as the name of the new world in which they became aware they must be making an extraordinary excursion through the realms of space. Nothing, however, was allowed to divert them from their ostensible object of making a survey of the coast of the Mediterranean, and accordingly they persevered in following that singular boundary which had revealed itself to their extreme astonishment.

Having rounded the great promontory that had barred her farther progress to the north, the schooner skirted its upper edge. A few more leagues and they ought to be abreast of the shores of France. Yes, of France.

But who shall describe the feelings of Hector Servadac when, instead of the charming outline of his native land, he beheld nothing but a solid boundary of savage rock? Who shall paint the look of consternation with which he gazed upon the stony rampart — rising perpendicularly for a thousand feet — that had replaced the shores of the smiling south? Who shall reveal the burning anxiety with which he throbbed to see beyond that cruel wall?

But there seemed no hope. Onwards and onwards the yacht made her way, and still no sign of France. It might have been supposed that Servadac’s previous experiences would have prepared him for the discovery that the catastrophe which had overwhelmed other sites had brought destruction to his own country as well. But he had failed to realize how it might extend to France; and when now he was obliged with his own eyes to witness the waves of ocean rolling over what once had been the lovely shores of Provence, he was well-nigh frantic with desperation.

“Am I to believe that Gourbi Island, that little shred of Algeria, constitutes all that is left of our glorious France? No, no; it cannot be. Not yet have we reached the pole of our new world. There is — there must be — something more behind that frowning rock. Oh, that for a moment we could scale its towering height and look beyond! By Heaven, I adjure you, let us disembark, and mount the summit and explore! France lies beyond.”

Disembarkation, however, was an utter impossibility. There was no semblance of a creek in which the *Dobryna* could find an anchorage. There was no outlying ridge on which a footing could be gained. The precipice was perpendicular as a wall, its topmost height crowned with the same conglomerate of crystallized lamellae that had all along been so pronounced a feature.

With her steam at high pressure, the yacht made rapid progress towards the east. The weather remained perfectly fine, the temperature became gradually cooler, so that there was little prospect of vapors accumulating in the atmosphere; and nothing more than a few cirri, almost transparent, veiled here and there the clear azure of the sky. Throughout the day the pale rays of the sun, apparently lessened in its magnitude, cast only faint and somewhat uncertain shadows; but at night the stars shone with surpassing brilliancy. Of the planets, some, it was observed, seemed to be fading away in remote distance. This was the case with Mars, Venus, and that unknown orb which was moving in the orbit of the minor planets; but Jupiter, on the other hand, had assumed splendid proportions; Saturn was superb in its luster, and Uranus, which hitherto had been imperceptible without a telescope was pointed out by Lieutenant Procope, plainly visible to the naked eye. The inference was irresistible that Gallia was receding from the sun, and traveling far away across the planetary regions.

On the 24th of February, after following the sinuous course of what before the date of the convulsion had been the coast line of the department of Var, and after a fruitless search for Hyeres, the peninsula of St. Tropez, the Lerius Islands, and the gulfs of Cannes and Jouar, the *Dobryna* arrived upon the site of the Cape of Antibes.

Here, quite unexpectedly, the explorers made the discovery that the massive wall of cliff had been rent from the top to the bottom by a narrow rift, like the dry bed of a mountain torrent, and at the base of the opening, level with the sea, was a little strand upon which there was just space enough for their boat to be hauled up.

“Joy! joy!” shouted Servadac, half beside himself with ecstasy; “we can land at last!”

Count Timascheff and the lieutenant were scarcely less impatient than the captain, and little needed his urgent and repeated solicitations: “Come on! Quick! Come on! no time to lose!”

It was half-past seven in the morning, when they set their foot upon this untried land. The bit of strand was only a few square yards in area, quite a narrow strip. Upon it might have been recognized some fragments of that agglutination of yellow limestone which is characteristic of the coast of Provence. But the whole party was far too eager to wait and examine these remnants of the ancient shore; they hurried on to scale the heights.

The narrow ravine was not only perfectly dry, but manifestly had never been the bed of any mountain torrent. The rocks that rested at the bottom — just as those which formed its sides — were of the same lamellous formation as the entire coast, and had not hitherto been subject to the disaggregation which the lapse of time never fails to work. A skilled geologist would probably have been able to assign them their proper scientific classification, but neither Servadac, Timascheff, nor the lieutenant could pretend to any acquaintance with their specific character.

Although, however, the bottom of the chasm had never as yet been the channel of a stream, indications were not wanting that at some future time it would be the natural outlet of accumulated waters; for already, in many places, thin layers of snow were glittering upon the surface of the fractured rocks, and the higher the elevation that was gained, the more these layers were found to increase in area and in depth.

“Here is a trace of fresh water, the first that Gallia has exhibited,” said the count to his companions, as they toiled up the precipitous path.

“And probably,” replied the lieutenant, “as we ascend we shall find not only snow but ice. We must suppose this Gallia of ours to be a sphere, and if it is so, we must now be very close to her Arctic regions; it is true that her axis is not so much inclined as to prolong day and night as at the poles of the earth, but the rays of the sun must reach us here only very obliquely, and the cold, in all likelihood, will be intense.”

“So cold, do you think,” asked Servadac, “that animal life must be extinct?”

“I do not say that, captain,” answered the lieutenant; “for, however far our little world may be removed from the sun, I do not see why its temperature should fall below what prevails in those outlying regions beyond our system where sky and air are not.” “And what temperature may that be?” inquired the captain with a shudder.

“Fourier estimates that even in those vast unfathomable tracts, the temperature never descends lower than 60 degrees,” said Procope.

“Sixty! Sixty degrees below zero!” cried the count. “Why, there’s not a Russian could endure it!”

“I beg your pardon, count. It is placed on record that the English *have* survived it, or something quite approximate, upon their Arctic expeditions. When Captain Parry was on Melville Island, he knew the thermometer to fall to 56 degrees,” said Procope.

As the explorers advanced, they seemed glad to pause from time to time, that they might recover their breath; for the air, becoming more and more rarefied, made respiration somewhat difficult and the ascent fatiguing. Before they had reached an altitude of 600 feet they noticed a sensible diminution of the temperature; but neither cold nor fatigue deterred them, and they were resolved to persevere. Fortunately, the deep striae or furrows in the surface of the rocks that made the bottom of the ravine in some degree facilitated their progress, but it was not until they had been toiling up for two hours more that they succeeded in reaching the summit of the cliff.

Eagerly and anxiously did they look around. To the south there was nothing but the sea they had traversed; to the north, nothing but one drear, inhospitable stretch.

Servadac could not suppress a cry of dismay. Where was his beloved France? Had he gained this arduous height only to behold the rocks carpeted with ice and snow, and reaching interminably to the far-off horizon? His heart sank within him.

The whole region appeared to consist of nothing but the same strange, uniform mineral conglomerate, crystallized into regular hexagonal prisms. But whatever was its geological character, it was only too evident that it had entirely replaced the former soil, so that not a vestige of the old continent of Europe could be discerned. The lovely scenery of Provence, with the grace of its rich and undulating landscape; its gardens of citrons and oranges rising tier upon tier from the deep red soil — all, all had vanished. Of the vegetable kingdom, there was not a single representative; the most meager of Arctic plants, the most insignificant of lichens, could obtain no hold upon that stony waste. Nor did the animal world assert the feeblest sway. The mineral kingdom reigned supreme.

Captain Servadac's deep dejection was in strange contrast to his general hilarity. Silent and tearful, he stood upon an ice-bound rock, straining his eyes across the boundless vista of the mysterious territory. "It cannot be!" he exclaimed. "We must somehow have mistaken our bearings. True, we have encountered this barrier; but France is there beyond! Yes, France is *there!* Come, count, come! By all that's pitiful, I entreat you, come and explore the farthest verge of the ice-bound track!"

He pushed onwards along the rugged surface of the rock, but had not proceeded far before he came to a sudden pause. His foot had come in contact with something hard beneath the snow, and, stooping down, he picked up a little block of stony substance, which the first glance revealed to be of a geological character altogether alien to the universal rocks around. It proved to be a fragment of dis-colored marble, on which several letters were inscribed, of which the only part at all decipherable was the syllable "Vil."

"Vil — Villa!" he cried out, in his excitement dropping the marble, which was broken into atoms by the fall.

What else could this fragment be but the sole surviving remnant of some sumptuous mansion that once had stood on this unrivaled site? Was it not the residue of some edifice that had crowned the luxuriant headland of Antibes, overlooking Nice, and commanding the gorgeous panorama that embraced the Maritime Alps and reached beyond Monaco and Mentone to the Italian height of Bordighera? And did it not give in its sad and too convincing testimony that Antibes itself had been involved in the great destruction? Servadac gazed upon the shattered marble, pensive and disheartened.

Count Timascheff laid his hand kindly on the captain’s shoulder, and said, “My friend, do you not remember the motto of the old Hope family?”

He shook his head mournfully.

“*Orbe fracto, spes illoesa*,” continued the count — ”Though the world be shattered, hope is unimpaired.”

Servadac smiled faintly, and replied that he felt rather compelled to take up the despairing cry of Dante, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.”

“Nay, not so,” answered the count; “for the present at least, let our maxim be *Nil desperandum!*”

CHAPTER XVII. A SECOND ENIGMA

Upon re-embarking, the bewildered explorers began to discuss the question whether it would not now be desirable to make their way back to Gourbi Island, which was apparently the only spot in their new world from which they could hope to derive their future sustenance. Captain Servadac tried to console himself with the reflection that Gourbi Island was, after all, a fragment of a French colony, and as such almost like a bit of his dear France; and the plan of returning thither was on the point of being adopted, when Lieutenant Procope remarked that they ought to remember that they had not hitherto made an entire circuit of the new shores of the sea on which they were sailing.

“We have,” he said, “neither investigated the northern shore from the site of Cape Antibes to the strait that brought us to Gibraltar, nor have we followed the southern shore that stretches from the strait to the Gulf of Cabes. It is the old coast, and not the new, that we have been tracing; as yet, we cannot say positively that there is no outlet to the south; as yet, we cannot assert that no oasis of the African desert has escaped the catastrophe. Perhaps, even here in the north, we may find that Italy and Sicily and the larger islands of the Mediterranean may still maintain their existence.”

“I entirely concur with you,” said Count Timascheff. “I quite think we ought to make our survey of the confines of this new basin as complete as possible before we withdraw.”

Servadac, although he acknowledged the justness of these observations, could not help pleading that the explorations might be deferred until after a visit had been paid to Gourbi Island.

“Depend upon it, captain, you are mistaken,” replied the lieutenant; “the right thing to do is to use the *Dobryna* while she is available.”

“Available! What do you mean?” asked the count, somewhat taken by surprise.

“I mean,” said Procope, “that the farther this Gallia of ours recedes from the sun, the lower the temperature will fall. It is likely enough, I think, that before long the sea will be frozen over, and navigation will be impossible. Already you have learned something of the difficulties of traversing a field of ice, and I am sure, therefore, you will acquiesce in my wish to continue our explorations while the water is still open.”

“No doubt you are right, lieutenant,” said the count. “We will continue our search while we can for some remaining fragment of Europe. Who shall tell whether we may not meet with some more survivors from the catastrophe, to whom it might be in our power to afford assistance, before we go into our winter quarters?”

Generous and altogether unselfish as this sentiment really was, it was obviously to the general interest that they should become acquainted, and if possible establish friendly relations, with any human inhabitant who might be sharing their own strange destiny in being rolled away upon a new planet into the infinitude of space. All difference of race, all distinction of nationality, must be merged into the one thought that, few as they were, they were the sole surviving representatives of a world which it seemed exceedingly improbable that they would ever see again; and common sense dictated that they were bound to direct all their energies to insure that their asteroid should at least have a united and sympathizing population.

It was on the 25th of February that the yacht left the little creek in which she had taken refuge, and setting off at full steam eastwards, she continued her way along the northern shore. A brisk breeze tended to increase the keenness of the temperature, the thermometer being, on an average, about two degrees below zero. Salt water freezes only at a lower temperature than fresh; the course of the *Dobryna* was therefore unimpeded by ice, but it could not be concealed that there was the greatest necessity to maintain the utmost possible speed.

The nights continued lovely; the chilled condition of the atmosphere prevented the formation of clouds; the constellations gleamed forth with unsullied luster; and, much as Lieutenant Procope, from nautical considerations, might regret the absence of the moon, he could not do otherwise than own that the magnificent nights of Gallia were such as must awaken the enthusiasm of an astronomer. And, as if to compensate for the loss of the moonlight, the heavens were illuminated by a superb shower of falling stars, far exceeding, both in number and in brilliancy, the phenomena which are commonly distinguished as the August and November meteors; in fact, Gallia was passing through that meteoric ring which is known to lie exterior to the earth’s orbit, but almost concentric with it. The rocky coast, its metallic surface reflecting the glow of the dazzling luminaries, appeared literally stippled with light, whilst the sea, as though spattered with burning hailstones, shone with a phosphorescence that was perfectly splendid. So great, however, was the speed at which Gallia was receding from the sun, that this meteoric storm lasted scarcely more than four and twenty hours.

Next day the direct progress of the *Dobryna* was arrested by a long projection of land, which obliged her to turn southwards, until she reached what formerly would have been the southern extremity of Corsica. Of this, however, there was now no trace; the Strait of Bonifacio had been replaced by a vast expanse of water, which had at first all the appearance of being utterly desert; but on the following morning the explorers unexpectedly sighted a little island, which, unless it should prove, as was only too likely, to be of recent origin they concluded, from its situation, must be a portion of the northernmost territory of Sardinia.

The *Dobryna* approached the land as nearly as was prudent, the boat was lowered, and in a few minutes the count and Servadac had landed upon the islet, which was a mere plot of meadow land, not much more than two acres in extent, dotted here and there with a few myrtle-bushes and lentisks, interspersed with some ancient olives. Having ascertained, as they imagined, that the spot was devoid of living creature, they were on the point of returning to their boat, when their attention was arrested by a faint bleating, and immediately afterwards a solitary she-goat came bounding towards the shore. The creature had dark, almost black hair, and small curved horns, and was a specimen of that domestic breed which, with considerable justice, has gained for itself the title of “the poor man’s cow.” So far from being alarmed at the presence of strangers, the goat ran nimbly towards them, and then, by its movements and plaintive cries, seemed to be enticing them to follow it.

“Come,” said Servadac; “let us see where it will lead us; it is more than probable it is not alone.”

The count agreed; and the animal, as if comprehending what was said, trotted on gently for about a hundred paces, and stopped in front of a kind of cave or burrow that was half concealed by a grove of lentisks. Here a little girl, seven or eight years of age, with rich brown hair and lustrous dark eyes, beautiful as one of Murillo’s angels, was peeping shyly through the branches. Apparently discovering nothing in the aspect of the strangers to excite her apprehensions, the child suddenly gained confidence, darted forwards with outstretched hands, and in a voice, soft and melodious as the language which she spoke, said in Italian:

“I like you; you will not hurt me, will you?”

“Hurt you, my child?” answered Servadac. “No, indeed; we will be your friends; we will take care of you.”

And after a few moments’ scrutiny of the pretty maiden, he added:

“Tell us your name, little one.”

“Nina!” was the child’s reply.

“Well, then, Nina, can you tell us where we are?”

“At Madalena, I think,” said the little girl; “at least, I know I was there when that dreadful shock came and altered everything.”

The count knew that Madalena was close to Caprera, to the north of Sardinia, which had entirely disappeared in the disaster. By dint of a series of questions, he gained from the child a very intelligent account of her experiences. She told him that she had no parents, and had been employed in taking care of a flock of goats belonging to one of the landowners, when one day, all of a sudden, everything around her, except this little piece of land, had been swallowed up, and that she and Marzy, her pet goat, had been left quite alone. She went on to say that at first she had been very frightened; but when she found that the earth did not shake any more, she had thanked the great God, and had soon made herself very happy living with Marzy. She had enough food, she said, and had been waiting for a boat to fetch her, and now a boat had come and she was quite ready to go away; only they must let her goat go with her: they would both like so much to get back to the old farm.

“Here, at least, is one nice little inhabitant of Gallia,” said Captain Servadac, as he caressed the child and conducted her to the boat.

Half an hour later, both Nina and Marzy were safely quartered on board the yacht. It is needless to say that they received the heartiest of welcomes. The Russian sailors, ever superstitious, seemed almost to regard the coming of the child as the appearance of an angel; and, incredible as it may seem, more than one of them wondered whether she had wings, and amongst themselves they commonly referred to her as “the little Madonna.”

Soon out of sight of Madalena, the *Dobryna* for some hours held a southeasterly course along the shore, which here was fifty leagues in advance of the former coast-line of Italy, demonstrating that a new continent must have been formed, substituted as it were for the old peninsula, of which not a vestige could be identified. At a latitude corresponding with the latitude of Rome, the sea took the form of a deep gulf, extending back far beyond the site of the Eternal City; the coast making a wide sweep round to the former position of Calabria, and jutting far beyond the outline of “the boot,” which Italy resembles. But the beacon of Messina was not to be discerned; no trace, indeed, survived of any portion of Sicily; the very peak of Etna, 11,000 feet as it had reared itself above the level of the sea, had vanished utterly.

Another sixty leagues to the south, and the *Dobryna* sighted the entrance of the strait which had afforded her so providential a refuge from the tempest, and had conducted her to the fragmentary relic of Gibraltar. Hence to the Gulf of Cabes had been already explored, and as it was universally allowed that it was unnecessary to renew the search in that direction, the lieutenant started off in a transverse course, towards a point hitherto uninvestigated. That point was reached on the 3rd of March, and thence the coast was continuously followed, as it led through what had been Tunis, across the province of Constantine, away to the oasis of Ziban; where, taking a sharp turn, it first reached a latitude of 32 degrees, and then returned again, thus forming a sort of irregular gulf, enclosed by the same unvarying border of mineral concrete. This colossal boundary then stretched away for nearly 150 leagues over the Sahara desert, and, extending to the south of Gourbi Island, occupied what, if Morocco had still existed, would have been its natural frontier.

Adapting her course to these deviations of the coastline, the *Dobryna* was steering northwards, and had barely reached the limit of the bay, when the attention of all on board was arrested by the phenomenon of a volcano, at least 3,000 feet high, its crater crowned with smoke, which occasionally was streaked by tongues of flame.

“A burning mountain!” they exclaimed.

“Gallia, then, has some internal heat,” said Servadac.

“And why not, captain?” rejoined the lieutenant. “If our asteroid has carried with it a portion of the old earth’s atmosphere, why should it not likewise retain something of its central fire?”

“Ah, well!” said the captain, shrugging his shoulders, “I dare say there is caloric enough in our little world to supply the wants of its population.”

Count Timascheff interrupted the silence that followed this conversation by saying, “And now, gentlemen, as our course has brought us on our way once more towards Gibraltar, what do you say to our renewing our acquaintance with the Englishmen? They will be interested in the result of our voyage.”

“For my part,” said Servadac, “I have no desire that way. They know where to find Gourbi Island; they can betake themselves thither just when they please. They have plenty of provisions. If the water freezes, 120 leagues is no very great distance. The reception they gave us was not so cordial that we need put ourselves out of the way to repeat our visit.”

“What you say is too true,” replied the count. “I hope we shall show them better manners when they condescend to visit us.”

“Ay,” said Servadac, “we must remember that we are all one people now; no longer Russian, French, or English. Nationality is extinct.”

“I am sadly afraid, however,” continued the count, “that an Englishman will be an Englishman ever.”

“Yes,” said the captain, “that is always their failing.”

And thus all further thought of making their way again to the little garrison of Gibraltar was abandoned.

But even if their spirit of courtesy had disposed them to renew their acquaintance with the British officers, there were two circumstances that just then would have rendered such a proposal very unadvisable. In the first place, Lieutenant Procope was convinced that it could not be much longer now before the sea would be entirely frozen; and, besides this, the consumption of their coal, through the speed they had maintained, had been so great that there was only too much reason to fear that fuel would fail them. Anyhow, the strictest economy was necessary, and it was accordingly resolved that the voyage should not be much prolonged. Beyond the volcanic peak, moreover, the waters seemed to expand into a boundless ocean, and it might be a thing full of risk to be frozen up while the yacht was so inadequately provisioned. Taking all these things into account, it was agreed that further investigations should be deferred to a more favorable season, and that, without delay, the *Dobryna* should return to Gourbi Island.

This decision was especially welcome to Hector Servadac, who, throughout the whole of the last five weeks, had been agitated by much anxious thought on account of the faithful servant he had left behind.

The transit from the volcano to the island was not long, and was marked by only one noticeable incident. This was the finding of a second mysterious document, in character precisely similar to what they had found before. The writer of it was evidently engaged upon a calculation, probably continued from day to day, as to the motions of the planet Gallia upon its orbit, and committing the results of his reckonings to the waves as the channel of communication.

Instead of being enclosed in a telescope-case, it was this time secured in a preserved-meat tin, hermetically sealed, and stamped with the same initials on the wax that fastened it. The greatest care was used in opening it, and it was found to contain the following message:

“Gallia Ab sole, au 1 mars, dist. 78,000,000 l! Chemin parcouru de fev. a mars: 59,000,000 1! *Va bene! All right! Nil desperandum!*

“Enchante!”

“Another enigma!” exclaimed Servadac; “and still no intelligible signature, and no address. No clearing up of the mystery!”

“I have no doubt, in my own mind,” said the count, “that it is one of a series. It seems to me probable that they are being sent broadcast upon the sea.”

“I wonder where the hare-brained *savant* that writes them can be living?” observed Servadac.

“Very likely he may have met with the fate of AEsop’s abstracted astronomer, who found himself at the bottom of a well.”

“Ay; but where *is* that well?” demanded the captain.

This was a question which the count was incapable of settling; and they could only speculate afresh as to whether the author of the riddles was dwelling upon some solitary island, or, like themselves, was navigating the waters of the new Mediterranean. But they could detect nothing to guide them to a definite decision.

After thoughtfully regarding the document for some time. Lieutenant Procope proceeded to observe that he believed the paper might be considered as genuine, and accordingly, taking its statements as reliable, he deduced two important conclusions: first, that whereas, in the month of January, the distance traveled by the planet (hypothetically called Gallia) had been recorded as 82,000,000 leagues, the distance traveled in February was only 59,000,000 leagues — a difference of 23,000,000 leagues in one month; secondly, that the distance of the planet from the sun, which on the 15th of February had been 59,000,000 leagues, was on the 1st of March 78,000,000 leagues — an increase of 19,000,000 leagues in a fortnight.

Thus, in proportion as Gallia receded from the sun, so did the rate of speed diminish by which she traveled along her orbit; facts to be observed in perfect conformity with the known laws of celestial mechanism.

“And your inference?” asked the count.

“My inference,” replied the lieutenant, “is a confirmation of my surmise that we are following an orbit decidedly elliptical, although we have not yet the material to determine its eccentricity.”

“As the writer adheres to the appellation of Gallia, do you not think,” asked the count, “that we might call these new waters the Gallian Sea?”

“There can be no reason to the contrary, count,” replied the lieutenant; “and as such I will insert it upon my new chart.”

“Our friend,” said Servadac, “seems to be more and more gratified with the condition of things; not only has he adopted our motto, ‘*Nil desperandum!*’ but see how enthusiastically he has wound up with his ‘*Enchante!*’”

The conversation dropped.

A few hours later the man on watch announced that Gourbi Island was in sight.

CHAPTER XVIII. AN UNEXPECTED POPULATION

The *Dobryna* was now back again at the island. Her cruise had lasted from the 31st of January to the 5th of March, a period of thirty-five days (for it was leap year), corresponding to seventy days as accomplished by the new little world.

Many a time during his absence Hector Servadac had wondered how his present vicissitudes would end, and he had felt some misgivings as to whether he should ever again set foot upon the island, and see his faithful orderly, so that it was not without emotion that he had approached the coast of the sole remaining fragment of Algerian soil. But his apprehensions were groundless; Gourbi Island was just as he had left it, with nothing unusual in its aspect, except that a very peculiar cloud was hovering over it, at an altitude of little more than a hundred feet. As the yacht approached the shore, this cloud appeared to rise and fall as if acted upon by some invisible agency, and the captain, after watching it carefully, perceived that it was not an accumulation of vapors at all, but a dense mass of birds packed as closely together as a swarm of herrings, and uttering deafening and discordant cries, amidst which from time to time the noise of the report of a gun could be plainly distinguished.

The *Dobryna* signalized her arrival by firing her cannon, and dropped anchor in the little port of the Shelif. Almost within a minute Ben Zoof was seen running, gun in hand, towards the shore; he cleared the last ridge of rocks at a single bound, and then suddenly halted. For a few seconds he stood motionless, his eyes fixed, as if obeying the instructions of a drill sergeant, on a point some fifteen yards distant, his whole attitude indicating submission and respect; but the sight of the captain, who was landing, was too much for his equanimity, and darting forward, he seized his master’s hand and covered it with kisses. Instead, however, of uttering any expressions of welcome or rejoicing at the captain’s return, Ben Zoof broke out into the most vehement ejaculations.

“Thieves, captain! beastly thieves! Bedouins! pirates! devils!”

“Why, Ben Zoof, what’s the matter?” said Servadac soothingly.

“They are thieves! downright, desperate thieves! those infernal birds! That’s what’s the matter. It is a good thing you have come. Here have I for a whole month been spending my powder and shot upon them, and the more I kill them, the worse they get; and yet, if I were to leave them alone, we should not have a grain of corn upon the island.”

It was soon evident that the orderly had only too much cause for alarm. The crops had ripened rapidly during the excessive heat of January, when the orbit of Gallia was being traversed at its perihelion, and were now exposed to the depredations of many thousands of birds; and although a goodly number of stacks attested the industry of Ben Zoof during the time of the *Dobryna*’s voyage, it was only too apparent that the portion of the harvest that remained ungathered was liable to the most imminent risk of being utterly devoured. It was, perhaps, only natural that this clustered mass of birds, as representing the whole of the feathered tribe upon the surface of Gallia, should resort to Gourbi Island, of which the meadows seemed to be the only spot from which they could get sustenance at all; but as this sustenance would be obtained at the expense, and probably to the serious detriment, of the human population, it was absolutely necessary that every possible resistance should be made to the devastation that was threatened.

Once satisfied that Servadac and his friends would cooperate with him in the raid upon “the thieves,” Ben Zoof became calm and content, and began to make various inquiries. “And what has become,” he said, “of all our old comrades in Africa?”

“As far as I can tell you,” answered the captain, “they are all in Africa still; only Africa isn’t by any means where we expected to find it.”

“And France? Montmartre?” continued Ben Zoof eagerly. Here was the cry of the poor fellow’s heart.

As briefly as he could, Servadac endeavored to explain the true condition of things; he tried to communicate the fact that Paris, France, Europe, nay, the whole world was more than eighty millions of leagues away from Gourbi Island; as gently and cautiously as he could he expressed his fear that they might never see Europe, France, Paris, Montmartre again.

“No, no, sir!” protested Ben Zoof emphatically; “that is all nonsense. It is altogether out of the question to suppose that we are not to see Montmartre again.” And the orderly shook his head resolutely, with the air of a man determined, in spite of argument, to adhere to his own opinion.

“Very good, my brave fellow,” replied Servadac, “hope on, hope while you may. The message has come to us over the sea, ‘Never despair’; but one thing, nevertheless, is certain; we must forthwith commence arrangements for making this island our permanent home.”

Captain Servadac now led the way to the gourbi, which, by his servant’s exertions, had been entirely rebuilt; and here he did the honors of his modest establishment to his two guests, the count and the lieutenant, and gave a welcome, too, to little Nina, who had accompanied them on shore, and between whom and Ben Zoof the most friendly relations had already been established.

The adjacent building continued in good preservation, and Captain Servadac's satisfaction was very great in finding the two horses, Zephyr and Galette, comfortably housed there and in good condition.

After the enjoyment of some refreshment, the party proceeded to a general consultation as to what steps must be taken for their future welfare. The most pressing matter that came before them was the consideration of the means to be adopted to enable the inhabitants of Gallia to survive the terrible cold, which, in their ignorance of the true eccentricity of their orbit, might, for aught they knew, last for an almost indefinite period. Fuel was far from abundant; of coal there was none; trees and shrubs were few in number, and to cut them down in prospect of the cold seemed a very questionable policy; but there was no doubt some expedient must be devised to prevent disaster, and that without delay.

The victualing of the little colony offered no immediate difficulty. Water was abundant, and the cisterns could hardly fail to be replenished by the numerous streams that meandered along the plains; moreover, the Gallian Sea would ere long be frozen over, and the melted ice (water in its congealed state being divested of every particle of salt) would afford a supply of drink that could not be exhausted. The crops that were now ready for the harvest, and the flocks and herds scattered over the island, would form an ample reserve. There was little doubt that throughout the winter the soil would remain unproductive, and no fresh fodder for domestic animals could then be obtained; it would therefore be necessary, if the exact duration of Gallia's year should ever be calculated, to proportion the number of animals to be reserved to the real length of the winter.

The next thing requisite was to arrive at a true estimate of the number of the population. Without including the thirteen Englishmen at Gibraltar, about whom he was not particularly disposed to give himself much concern at present, Servadac put down the names of the eight Russians, the two Frenchman, and the little Italian girl, eleven in all, as the entire list of the inhabitants of Gourbi Island.

“Oh, pardon me,” interposed Ben Zoof, “you are mistaking the state of the case altogether. You will be surprised to learn that the total of people on the island is double that. It is twenty-two.”

“Twenty-two!” exclaimed the captain; “twenty-two people on this island? What do you mean?”

“The opportunity has not occurred,” answered Ben Zoof, “for me to tell you before, but I have had company.”

“Explain yourself, Ben Zoof,” said Servadac. “What company have you had?”

“You could not suppose,” replied the orderly, “that my own unassisted hands could have accomplished all that harvest work that you see has been done.”

“I confess,” said Lieutenant Procope, “we do not seem to have noticed that.”

“Well, then,” said Ben Zoof, “if you will be good enough to come with me for about a mile, I shall be able to show you my companions. But we must take our guns.”

“Why take our guns?” asked Servadac. “I hope we are not going to fight.”

“No, not with men,” said Ben Zoof; “but it does not answer to throw a chance away for giving battle to those thieves of birds.”

Leaving little Nina and her goat in the gourbi, Servadac, Count Timascheff, and the lieutenant, greatly mystified, took up their guns and followed the orderly. All along their way they made unsparing slaughter of the birds that hovered over and around them. Nearly every species of the feathered tribe seemed to have its representative in that living cloud. There were wild ducks in thousands; snipe, larks, rooks, and swallows; a countless variety of sea-birds — widgeons, gulls, and seamews; beside a quantity of game — quails, partridges, and woodcocks. The sportsmen did their best; every shot told; and the depredators fell by dozens on either hand.

Instead of following the northern shore of the island, Ben Zoof cut obliquely across the plain. Making their progress with the unwonted rapidity which was attributable to their specific lightness, Servadac and his companions soon found themselves near a grove of sycamores and eucalyptus massed in picturesque confusion at the base of a little hill. Here they halted.

“Ah! the vagabonds! the rascals! the thieves!” suddenly exclaimed Ben Zoof, stamping his foot with rage.

“How now? Are your friends the birds at their pranks again?” asked the captain.

“No, I don’t mean the birds: I mean those lazy beggars that are shirking their work. Look here; look there!” And as Ben Zoof spoke, he pointed to some scythes, and sickles, and other implements of husbandry that had been left upon the ground.

“What is it you mean?” asked Servadac, getting somewhat impatient.

“Hush, hush! listen!” was all Ben Zoof’s reply; and he raised his finger as if in warning.

Listening attentively, Servadac and his associates could distinctly recognize a human voice, accompanied by the notes of a guitar and by the measured click of castanets.

“Spaniards!” said Servadac.

“No mistake about that, sir,” replied Ben Zoof; “a Spaniard would rattle his castanets at the cannon’s mouth.”

“But what is the meaning of it all?” asked the captain, more puzzled than before.

“Hark!” said Ben Zoof; “it is the old man’s turn.”

And then a voice, at once gruff and harsh, was heard vociferating, “My money! my money! when will you pay me my money? Pay me what you owe me, you miserable majos.”

Meanwhile the song continued:

“Tu sandunga y cigarro,

Y una cana de Jerez,

Mi jamelgo y un trabuco,

Que mas gloria puede haver?”

Servadac's knowledge of Gascon enabled him partially to comprehend the rollicking tenor of the Spanish patriotic air, but his attention was again arrested by the voice of the old man growling savagely, "Pay me you shall; yes, by the God of Abraham, you shall pay me."

"A Jew!" exclaimed Servadac.

"Ay, sir, a German Jew," said Ben Zoof.

The party was on the point of entering the thicket, when a singular spectacle made them pause. A group of Spaniards had just begun dancing their national fandango, and the extraordinary lightness which had become the physical property of every object in the new planet made the dancers bound to a height of thirty feet or more into the air, considerably above the tops of the trees. What followed was irresistibly comic. Four sturdy majos had dragged along with them an old man incapable of resistance, and compelled him, *nolens volens*, to join in the dance; and as they all kept appearing and disappearing above the bank of foliage, their grotesque attitudes, combined with the pitiable countenance of their helpless victim, could not do otherwise than recall most forcibly the story of Sancho Panza tossed in a blanket by the merry drapers of Segovia.

Servadac, the count, Procope, and Ben Zoof now proceeded to make their way through the thicket until they came to a little glade, where two men were stretched idly on the grass, one of them playing the guitar, and the other a pair of castanets; both were exploding with laughter, as they urged the performers to greater and yet greater exertions in the dance. At the sight of strangers they paused in their music, and simultaneously the dancers, with their victim, alighted gently on the sward.

Breathless and half exhausted as was the Jew, he rushed with an effort towards Servadac, and exclaimed in French, marked by a strong Teutonic accent, “Oh, my lord governor, help me, help! These rascals defraud me of my rights; they rob me; but, in the name of the God of Israel, I ask you to see justice done!”

The captain glanced inquiringly towards Ben Zoof, and the orderly, by a significant nod, made his master understand that he was to play the part that was implied by the title. He took the cue, and promptly ordered the Jew to hold his tongue at once. The man bowed his head in servile submission, and folded his hands upon his breast.

Servadac surveyed him leisurely. He was a man of about fifty, but from his appearance might well have been taken for at least ten years older. Small and skinny, with eyes bright and cunning, a hooked nose, a short yellow beard, unkempt hair, huge feet, and long bony hands, he presented all the typical characteristics of the German Jew, the heartless, wily usurer, the hardened miser and skinflint. As iron is attracted by the magnet, so was this Shylock attracted by the sight of gold, nor would he have hesitated to draw the life-blood of his creditors, if by such means he could secure his claims.

His name was Isaac Hakkabut, and he was a native of Cologne. Nearly the whole of his time, however, he informed Captain Servadac, had been spent upon the sea, his real business being that of a merchant trading at all the ports of the Mediterranean. A tartan, a small vessel of two hundred tons burden, conveyed his entire stock of merchandise, and, to say the truth, was a sort of floating emporium, conveying nearly every possible article of commerce, from a lucifer match to the radiant fabrics of Frankfort and Epinal. Without wife or children, and having no settled home, Isaac Hakkabut lived almost entirely on board the *Hansa*, as he had named his tartan; and engaging a mate, with a crew of three men, as being adequate to work so light a craft, he cruised along the coasts of Algeria, Tunis, Egypt, Turkey, and Greece, visiting, moreover, most of the harbors of the Levant. Careful to be always well supplied with the products in most general demand — coffee, sugar, rice, tobacco, cotton stuffs, and gunpowder — and being at all times ready to barter, and prepared to deal in secondhand wares, he had contrived to amass considerable wealth.

On the eventful night of the 1st of January the *Hansa* had been at Ceuta, the point on the coast of Morocco exactly opposite Gibraltar. The mate and three sailors had all gone on shore, and, in common with many of their fellow-creatures, had entirely disappeared; but the most projecting rock of Ceuta had been undisturbed by the general catastrophe, and half a score of Spaniards, who had happened to be upon it, had escaped with their lives. They were all Andalusian majos, agricultural laborers, and naturally as careless and apathetic as men of their class usually are, but they could not help being very considerably embarrassed when they discovered that they were left in solitude upon a detached and isolated rock. They took what mutual counsel they could, but became only more and more perplexed. One of them was named Negrete, and he, as having traveled somewhat more than the rest, was tacitly recognized as a sort of leader; but although he was by far the most enlightened of them all, he was quite incapable of forming the least conception of the nature of what had occurred. The one thing upon which they could not fail to be conscious was that they had no prospect of obtaining provisions, and consequently their first business was to devise a scheme for getting away from their present abode. The *Hansa* was lying off shore. The Spaniards would not have had the slightest hesitation in summarily taking possession of her, but their utter ignorance of seamanship made them reluctantly come to the conclusion that the more prudent policy was to make terms with the owner.

And now came a singular part of the story. Negrete and his companions had meanwhile received a visit from two English officers from Gibraltar. What passed between them the Jew did not know; he only knew that, immediately after the conclusion of the interview, Negrete came to him and ordered him to set sail at once for the nearest point of Morocco. The Jew, afraid to disobey, but with his eye ever upon the main chance, stipulated that at the end of their voyage the Spaniards should pay for their passage — terms to which, as they would to any other, they did not demur, knowing that they had not the slightest intention of giving him a single real.

The *Hansa* had weighed anchor on the 3rd of February. The wind blew from the west, and consequently the working of the tartan was easy enough. The unpracticed sailors had only to hoist their sails and, though they were quite unconscious of the fact, the breeze carried them to the only spot upon the little world they occupied which could afford them a refuge.

Thus it fell out that one morning Ben Zoof, from his lookout on Gourbi Island, saw a ship, not the *Dobryna*, appear upon the horizon, and make quietly down towards what had formerly been the right bank of the Shelif.

Such was Ben Zoof's version of what had occurred, as he had gathered it from the new-comers. He wound up his recital by remarking that the cargo of the *Hansa* would be of immense service to them; he expected, indeed, that Isaac Hakkabut would be difficult to manage, but considered there could be no harm in appropriating the goods for the common welfare, since there could be no opportunity now for selling them.

Ben Zoof added, “And as to the difficulties between the Jew and his passengers, I told him that the governor general was absent on a tour of inspection, and that he would see everything equitably settled.”

Smiling at his orderly’s tactics, Servadac turned to Hakkabut, and told him that he would take care that his claims should be duly investigated and all proper demands should be paid. The man appeared satisfied, and, for the time at least, desisted from his complaints and importunities.

When the Jew had retired, Count Timascheff asked, “But how in the world can you ever make those fellows pay anything?”

“They have lots of money,” said Ben Zoof.

“Not likely,” replied the count; “when did you ever know Spaniards like them to have lots of money?”

“But I have seen it myself,” said Ben Zoof; “and it is English money.”

“English money!” echoed Servadac; and his mind again reverted to the excursion made by the colonel and the major from Gibraltar, about which they had been so reticent. “We must inquire more about this,” he said.

Then, addressing Count Timascheff, he added, “Altogether, I think the countries of Europe are fairly represented by the population of Gallia.”

“True, captain,” answered the count; “we have only a fragment of a world, but it contains natives of France, Russia, Italy, Spain, and England. Even Germany may be said to have a representative in the person of this miserable Jew.”

“And even in him,” said Servadac, “perhaps we shall not find so indifferent a representative as we at present imagine.”

CHAPTER XIX. GALLIA'S GOVERNOR GENERAL

The Spaniards who had arrived on board the *Hansa* consisted of nine men and a lad of twelve years of age, named Pablo. They all received Captain Servadac, whom Ben Zoof introduced as the governor general, with due respect, and returned quickly to their separate tasks. The captain and his friends, followed at some distance by the eager Jew, soon left the glade and directed their steps towards the coast where the *Hansa* was moored.

As they went they discussed their situation. As far as they had ascertained, except Gourbi Island, the sole surviving fragments of the Old World were four small islands: the bit of Gibraltar occupied by the Englishmen; Ceuta, which had just been left by the Spaniards; Madalena, where they had picked up the little Italian girl; and the site of the tomb of Saint Louis on the coast of Tunis. Around these there was stretched out the full extent of the Gallian Sea, which apparently comprised about one-half of the Mediterranean, the whole being encompassed by a barrier like a framework of precipitous cliffs, of an origin and a substance alike unknown.

Of all these spots only two were known to be inhabited: Gibraltar, where the thirteen Englishmen were amply provisioned for some years to come, and their own Gourbi Island. Here there was a population of twenty-two, who would all have to subsist upon the natural products of the soil. It was indeed not to be forgotten that, perchance, upon some remote and undiscovered isle there might be the solitary writer of the mysterious papers which they had found, and if so, that would raise the census of their new asteroid to an aggregate of thirty-six.

Even upon the supposition that at some future date the whole population should be compelled to unite and find a residence upon Gourbi Island, there did not appear any reason to question but that eight hundred acres of rich soil, under good management, would yield them all an ample sustenance. The only critical matter was how long the cold season would last; every hope depended upon the land again becoming productive; at present, it seemed impossible to determine, even if Gallia's orbit were really elliptic, when she would reach her aphelion, and it was consequently necessary that the Gallians for the time being should reckon on nothing beyond their actual and present resources.

These resources were, first, the provisions of the *Dobryna*, consisting of preserved meat, sugar, wine, brandy, and other stores sufficient for about two months; secondly, the valuable cargo of the *Hansa*, which, sooner or later, the owner, whether he would or not, must be compelled to surrender for the common benefit; and lastly, the produce of the island, animal and vegetable, which with proper economy might be made to last for a considerable period.

In the course of the conversation, Count Timascheff took an opportunity of saying that, as Captain Servadac had already been presented to the Spaniards as governor of the island, he thought it advisable that he should really assume that position.

“Every body of men,” he observed, “must have a head, and you, as a Frenchman, should, I think, take the command of this fragment of a French colony. My men, I can answer for it, are quite prepared to recognize you as their superior officer.”

“Most unhesitatingly,” replied Servadac, “I accept the post with all its responsibilities. We understand each other so well that I feel sure we shall try and work together for the common good; and even if it be our fate never again to behold our fellow creatures, I have no misgivings but that we shall be able to cope with whatever difficulties may be before us."

As he spoke, he held out his hand. The count took it, at the same time making a slight bow. It was the first time since their meeting that the two men had shaken hands; on the other hand, not a single word about their former rivalry had ever escaped their lips; perhaps that was all forgotten now.

The silence of a few moments was broken by Servadac saying, "Do you not think we ought to explain our situation to the Spaniards?"

"No, no, your Excellency," burst in Ben Zoof, emphatically; "the fellows are chicken-hearted enough already; only tell them what has happened, and in sheer despondency they will not do another stroke of work."

"Besides," said Lieutenant Procope, who took very much the same view as the orderly, "they are so miserably ignorant they would be sure to misunderstand you."

"Understand or misunderstand," replied Servadac, "I do not think it matters. They would not care. They are all fatalists. Only give them a guitar and their castanets, and they will soon forget all care and anxiety. For my own part, I must adhere to my belief that it will be advisable to tell them everything. Have you any opinion to offer, count?"

"My own opinion, captain, coincides entirely with yours. I have followed the plan of explaining all I could to my men on board the *Dobryna*, and no inconvenience has arisen."

“Well, then, so let it be,” said the captain; adding, “It is not likely that these Spaniards are so ignorant as not to have noticed the change in the length of the days; neither can they be unaware of the physical changes that have transpired. They shall certainly be told that we are being carried away into unknown regions of space, and that this island is nearly all that remains of the Old World.”

“Ha! ha!” laughed Ben Zoof, aloud; “it will be fine sport to watch the old Jew’s face, when he is made to comprehend that he is flying away millions and millions of leagues from all his debtors.”

Isaac Hakkabut was about fifty yards behind, and was consequently unable to overhear the conversation. He went shambling along, half whimpering and not unfrequently invoking the God of Israel; but every now and then a cunning light gleamed from his eyes, and his lips became compressed with a grim significance.

None of the recent phenomena had escaped his notice, and more than once he had attempted to entice Ben Zoof into conversation upon the subject; but the orderly made no secret of his antipathy to him, and generally replied to his advances either by satire or by banter. He told him that he had everything to gain under the new system of nights and days, for, instead of living the Jew’s ordinary life of a century, he would reach to the age of two centuries; and he congratulated him upon the circumstance of things having become so light, because it would prevent him feeling the burden of his years. At another time he would declare that, to an old usurer like him, it could not matter in the least what had become of the moon, as he could not possibly have advanced any money upon her. And when Isaac, undaunted by his jeers, persevered in besetting him with questions, he tried to silence him by saying, “Only wait till the governor general comes; he is a shrewd fellow, and will tell you all about it.”

“But will he protect my property?” poor Isaac would ask tremulously.

“To be sure he will! He would confiscate it all rather than that you should be robbed of it.”

With this Job’s comfort the Jew had been obliged to content himself as best he could, and to await the promised arrival of the governor.

When Servadac and his companions reached the shore, they found that the *Hansa* had anchored in an exposed bay, protected but barely by a few projecting rocks, and in such a position that a gale rising from the west would inevitably drive her on to the land, where she must be dashed in pieces. It would be the height of folly to leave her in her present moorings; without loss of time she must be brought round to the mouth of the Shelif, in immediate proximity to the Russian yacht.

The consciousness that his tartan was the subject of discussion made the Jew give way to such vehement ejaculations of anxiety, that Servadac turned round and peremptorily ordered him to desist from his clamor. Leaving the old man under the surveillance of the count and Ben Zoof, the captain and the lieutenant stepped into a small boat and were soon alongside the floating emporium.

A very short inspection sufficed to make them aware that both the tartan and her cargo were in a perfect state of preservation. In the hold were sugar-loaves by hundreds, chests of tea, bags of coffee, hogsheads of tobacco, pipes of wine, casks of brandy, barrels of dried herrings, bales of cotton, clothing of every kind, shoes of all sizes, caps of various shape, tools, household utensils, china and earthenware, reams of paper, bottles of ink, boxes of lucifer matches, blocks of salt, bags of pepper and spices, a stock of huge Dutch cheeses, and a collection of almanacs and miscellaneous literature. At a rough guess the value could not be much under pounds 5,000 sterling. A new cargo had been taken in only a few days before the catastrophe, and it had been Isaac Hakkabut's intention to cruise from Ceuta to Tripoli, calling wherever he had reason to believe there was likely to be a market for any of his commodities.

"A fine haul, lieutenant," said the captain.

"Yes, indeed," said the lieutenant; "but what if the owner refuses to part with it?"

"No fear; no fear," replied the captain. "As soon as ever the old rascal finds that there are no more Arabs or Algerians for him to fleece, he will be ready enough to transact a little business with us. We will pay him by bills of acceptance on some of his old friends in the Old World."

"But why should he want any payment?" inquired the lieutenant. "Under the circumstances, he must know that you have a right to make a requisition of his goods."

"No, no," quickly rejoined Servadac; "we will not do that. Just because the fellow is a German we shall not be justified in treating him in German fashion. We will transact our business in a business way. Only let him once realize that he is on a new globe, with no prospect of getting back to the old one, and he will be ready enough to come to terms with us."

"Perhaps you are right," replied the lieutenant; "I hope you are. But anyhow, it will not do to leave the tartan here; not only would she be in danger in the event of a storm, but it is very questionable whether she could resist the pressure of the ice, if the water were to freeze."

"Quite true, Procope; and accordingly I give you the commission to see that your crew bring her round to the Shelif as soon as may be."

"To-morrow morning it shall be done," answered the lieutenant, promptly.

Upon returning to the shore, it was arranged that the whole of the little colony should forthwith assemble at the gourbi. The Spaniards were summoned and Isaac, although he could only with reluctance take his wistful gaze from his tartan, obeyed the governor's orders to follow.

An hour later and the entire population of twenty-two had met in the chamber adjoining the gourbi. Young Pablo made his first acquaintance with little Nina, and the child seemed highly delighted to find a companion so nearly of her own age. Leaving the children to entertain each other, Captain Servadac began his address.

Before entering upon further explanation, he said that he counted upon the cordial co-operation of them all for the common welfare.

Negrete interrupted him by declaring that no promises or pledges could be given until he and his countrymen knew how soon they could be sent back to Spain.

"To Spain, do you say?" asked Servadac.

"To Spain!" echoed Isaac Hakkabut, with a hideous yell. "Do they expect to go back to Spain till they have paid their debts? Your Excellency, they owe me twenty reals apiece for their passage here; they owe me two hundred reals. Are they to be allowed...?"

“Silence, Mordecai, you fool!” shouted Ben Zoof, who was accustomed to call the Jew by any Hebrew name that came uppermost to his memory. “Silence!”

Servadac was disposed to appease the old man’s anxiety by promising to see that justice was ultimately done; but, in a fever of frantic excitement, he went on to implore that he might have the loan of a few sailors to carry his ship to Algiers.

“I will pay you honestly; I will pay you *well*,” he cried; but his ingrained propensity for making a good bargain prompted him to add, “provided you do not overcharge me.”

Ben Zoof was about again to interpose some angry exclamation; but Servadac checked him, and continued in Spanish: “Listen to me, my friends. Something very strange has happened. A most wonderful event has cut us off from Spain, from France, from Italy, from every country of Europe. In fact, we have left the Old World entirely. Of the whole earth, nothing remains except this island on which you are now taking refuge. The old globe is far, far away. Our present abode is but an insignificant fragment that is left. I dare not tell you that there is any chance of your ever again seeing your country or your homes.”

He paused. The Spaniards evidently had no conception of his meaning.

Negrete begged him to tell them all again. He repeated all that he had said, and by introducing some illustrations from familiar things, he succeeded to a certain extent in conveying some faint idea of the convulsion that had happened. The event was precisely what he had foretold. The communication was received by all alike with the most supreme indifference.

Hakkabut did not say a word. He had listened with manifest attention, his lips twitching now and then as if suppressing a smile. Servadac turned to him, and asked whether he was still disposed to put out to sea and make for Algiers.

The Jew gave a broad grin, which, however, he was careful to conceal from the Spaniards. “Your Excellency jests,” he said in French; and turning to Count Timascheff, he added in Russian: “The governor has made up a wonderful tale.”

The count turned his back in disgust, while the Jew sidled up to little Nina and muttered in Italian. “A lot of lies, pretty one; a lot of lies!”

“Confound the knave!” exclaimed Ben Zoof; “he gabbles every tongue under the sun!”

“Yes,” said Servadac; “but whether he speaks French, Russian, Spanish, German, or Italian, he is neither more nor less than a Jew.”

CHAPTER XX. A LIGHT ON THE HORIZON

On the following day, without giving himself any further concern about the Jew’s incredulity, the captain gave orders for the *Hansa* to be shifted round to the harbor of the Shelif. Hakkabut raised no objection, not only because he was aware that the move insured the immediate safety of his tartan, but because he was secretly entertaining the hope that he might entice away two or three of the *Dobryna’s* crew and make his escape to Algiers or some other port.

Operations now commenced for preparing proper winter quarters. Spaniards and Russians alike joined heartily in the work, the diminution of atmospheric pressure and of the force of attraction contributing such an increase to their muscular force as materially facilitated all their labors.

The first business was to accommodate the building adjacent to the gourbi to the wants of the little colony. Here for the present the Spaniards were lodged, the Russians retaining their berths upon the yacht, while the Jew was permitted to pass his nights upon the *Hansa*. This arrangement, however, could be only temporary. The time could not be far distant when ships’ sides and ordinary walls would fail to give an adequate protection from the severity of the cold that must be expected; the stock of fuel was too limited to keep up a permanent supply of heat in their present quarters, and consequently they must be driven to seek some other refuge, the internal temperature of which would at least be bearable.

The plan that seemed to commend itself most to their consideration was, that they should dig out for themselves some subterraneous pits similar to “silos,” such as are used as receptacles for grain. They presumed that when the surface of Gallia should be covered by a thick layer of ice, which is a bad conductor of heat, a sufficient amount of warmth for animal vitality might still be retained in excavations of this kind. After a long consultation they failed to devise any better expedient, and were forced to resign themselves to this species of troglodyte existence.

In one respect they congratulated themselves that they should be better off than many of the whalers in the polar seas, for as it is impossible to get below the surface of a frozen ocean, these adventurers have to seek refuge in huts of wood and snow erected on their ships, which at best can give but slight protection from extreme cold; but here, with a solid subsoil, the Gallians might hope to dig down a hundred feet or so and secure for themselves a shelter that would enable them to brave the hardest severity of climate.

The order, then, was at once given. The work was commenced. A stock of shovels, mattocks, and pick-axes was brought from the gourbi, and with Ben Zoof as overseer, both Spanish majos and Russian sailors set to work with a will.

It was not long, however, before a discovery, more unexpected than agreeable, suddenly arrested their labors. The spot chosen for the excavation was a little to the right of the gourbi, on a slight elevation of the soil. For the first day everything went on prosperously enough; but at a depth of eight feet below the surface, the navvies came in contact with a hard surface, upon which all their tools failed to make the slightest impression. Servadac and the count were at once apprised of the fact, and had little difficulty in recognizing the substance that had revealed itself as the very same which composed the shores as well as the subsoil of the Gallian sea. It evidently formed the universal substructure of the new asteroid. Means for hollowing it failed them utterly. Harder and more resisting than granite, it could not be blasted by ordinary powder; dynamite alone could suffice to rend it.

The disappointment was very great. Unless some means of protection were speedily devised, death seemed to be staring them in the face. Were the figures in the mysterious documents correct? If so, Gallia must now be a hundred millions of leagues from the sun, nearly three times the distance of the earth at the remotest section of her orbit. The intensity of the solar light and heat, too, was very seriously diminishing, although Gourbi Island (being on the equator of an orb which had its axes always perpendicular to the plane in which it revolved) enjoyed a position that gave it a permanent summer. But no advantage of this kind could compensate for the remoteness of the sun. The temperature fell steadily; already, to the discomfiture of the little Italian girl, nurtured in sunshine, ice was beginning to form in the crevices of the rocks, and manifestly the time was impending when the sea itself would freeze.

Some shelter must be found before the temperature should fall to 60 degrees below zero. Otherwise death was inevitable. Hitherto, for the last few days, the thermometer had been registering an average of about 6 degrees below zero, and it had become matter of experience that the stove, although replenished with all the wood that was available, was altogether inadequate to effect any sensible mitigation of the severity of the cold. Nor could any amount of fuel be enough. It was certain that ere long the very mercury and spirit in the thermometers would be congealed. Some other resort must assuredly be soon found, or they must perish. That was clear.

The idea of betaking themselves to the *Dobryna* and *Hansa* could not for a moment be seriously entertained; not only did the structure of the vessels make them utterly insufficient to give substantial shelter, but they were totally unfitted to be trusted as to their stability when exposed to the enormous pressure of the accumulated ice.

Neither Servadac, nor the count, nor Lieutenant Procope were men to be easily disheartened, but it could not be concealed that they felt themselves in circumstances by which they were equally harassed and perplexed. The sole expedient that their united counsel could suggest was to obtain a refuge below ground, and *that* was denied them by the strange and impenetrable substratum of the soil; yet hour by hour the sun's disc was lessening in its dimensions, and although at midday some faint radiance and glow were to be distinguished, during the night the painfulness of the cold was becoming almost intolerable.

Mounted upon Zephyr and Galette, the captain and the count scoured the island in search of some available retreat. Scarcely a yard of ground was left unexplored, the horses clearing every obstacle as if they were, like Pegasus, furnished with wings. But all in vain. Soundings were made again and again, but invariably with the same result; the rock, hard as adamant, never failed to reveal itself within a few feet of the surface of the ground.

The excavation of any silo being thus manifestly hopeless, there seemed nothing to be done except to try and render the buildings alongside the gourbi impervious to frost. To contribute to the supply of fuel, orders were given to collect every scrap of wood, dry or green, that the island produced; and this involved the necessity of felling the numerous trees that were scattered over the plain. But toil as they might at the accumulation of firewood, Captain Servadac and his companions could not resist the conviction that the consumption of a very short period would exhaust the total stock. And what would happen then?

Studious if possible to conceal his real misgivings, and anxious that the rest of the party should be affected as little as might be by his own uneasiness, Servadac would wander alone about the island, racking his brain for an idea that would point the way out of the serious difficulty. But still all in vain.

One day he suddenly came upon Ben Zoof, and asked him whether he had no plan to propose. The orderly shook his head, but after a few moments' pondering, said: “Ah! master, if only we were at Montmartre, we would get shelter in the charming stone-quarries.”

“Idiot!” replied the captain, angrily, “if we were at Montmartre, you don't suppose that we should need to live in stone-quarries?”

But the means of preservation which human ingenuity had failed to secure were at hand from the felicitous provision of Nature herself. It was on the 10th of March that the captain and Lieutenant Procope started off once more to investigate the northwest corner of the island; on their way their conversation naturally was engrossed by the subject of the dire necessities which only too manifestly were awaiting them. A discussion more than usually animated arose between them, for the two men were not altogether of the same mind as to the measures that ought to be adopted in order to open the fairest chance of avoiding a fatal climax to their exposure; the captain persisted that an entirely new abode must be sought, while the lieutenant was equally bent upon devising a method of some sort by which their present quarters might be rendered sufficiently warm. All at once, in the very heat of his argument, Procope paused; he passed his hand across his eyes, as if to dispel a mist, and stood, with a fixed gaze centered on a point towards the south. “What is that?” he said, with a kind of hesitation. “No, I am not mistaken,” he added; “it is a light on the horizon.”

“A light!” exclaimed Servadac; “show me where.”

"Look there!" answered the lieutenant, and he kept pointing steadily in its direction, until Servadac also distinctly saw the bright speck in the distance.

It increased in clearness in the gathering shades of evening. "Can it be a ship?" asked the captain.

"If so, it must be in flames; otherwise we should not be able to see it so far off," replied Procope.

"It does not move," said Servadac; "and unless I am greatly deceived, I can hear a kind of reverberation in the air."

For some seconds the two men stood straining eyes and ears in rapt attention. Suddenly an idea struck Servadac's mind. "The volcano!" he cried; "may it not be the volcano that we saw, whilst we were on board the *Dobryna?*"

The lieutenant agreed that it was very probable.

"Heaven be praised!" ejaculated the captain, and he went on in the tones of a keen excitement: "Nature has provided us with our winter quarters; the stream of burning lava that is flowing there is the gift of a bounteous Providence; it will provide us all the warmth we need. No time to lose! To-morrow, my dear Procope, to-morrow we will explore it all; no doubt the life, the heat we want is reserved for us in the heart and bowels of our own Gallia!"

Whilst the captain was indulging in his expressions of enthusiasm, Procope was endeavoring to collect his thoughts. Distinctly he remembered the long promontory which had barred the *Dobryna's* progress while coasting the southern confines of the sea, and which had obliged her to ascend northwards as far as the former latitude of Oran; he remembered also that at the extremity of the promontory there was a rocky headland crowned with smoke; and now he was convinced that he was right in identifying the position, and in believing that the smoke had given place to an eruption of flame.

When Servadac gave him a chance of speaking, he said, “The more I consider it, captain, the more I am satisfied that your conjecture is correct. Beyond a doubt, what we see is the volcano, and to-morrow we will not fail to visit it.”

On returning to the gourbi, they communicated their discovery to Count Timascheff only, deeming any further publication of it to be premature. The count at once placed his yacht at their disposal, and expressed his intention of accompanying them.

“The yacht, I think,” said Procope, “had better remain where she is; the weather is beautifully calm, and the steam-launch will answer our purpose better; at any rate, it will convey us much closer to shore than the schooner.”

The count replied that the lieutenant was by all means to use his own discretion, and they all retired for the night.

Like many other modern pleasure-yachts, the *Dobryna*, in addition to her four-oar, was fitted with a fast-going little steam-launch, its screw being propelled, on the Oriolle system, by means of a boiler, small but very effective. Early next morning, this handy little craft was sufficiently freighted with coal (of which there was still about ten tons on board the *Dobryna*), and manned by nobody except the captain, the count, and the lieutenant, left the harbor of the Shelif, much to the bewilderment of Ben

Zoof, who had not yet been admitted into the secret. The orderly, however, consoled himself with the reflection that he had been temporarily invested with the full powers of governor general, an office of which he was not a little proud.

The eighteen miles between the island and the headland were made in something less than three hours. The volcanic eruption was manifestly very considerable, the entire summit of the promontory being enveloped in flames. To produce so large a combustion either the oxygen of Gallia’s atmosphere had been brought into contact with the explosive gases contained beneath her soil, or perhaps, still more probable, the volcano, like those in the moon, was fed by an internal supply of oxygen of her own.

It took more than half an hour to settle on a suitable landing-place. At length, a small semi-circular creek was discovered among the rocks, which appeared advantageous, because, if circumstances should so require, it would form a safe anchorage for both the *Dobryna* and the *Hansa*.

The launch securely moored, the passengers landed on the side of the promontory opposite to that on which a torrent of burning lava was descending to the sea. With much satisfaction they experienced, as they approached the mountain, a sensible difference in the temperature, and their spirits could not do otherwise than rise at the prospect of having their hopes confirmed, that a deliverance from the threatened calamity had so opportunely been found. On they went, up the steep acclivity, scrambling over its rugged projections, scaling the irregularities of its gigantic strata, bounding from point to point with the agility of chamois, but never alighting on anything except on the accumulation of the same hexagonal prisms with which they had now become so familiar.

Their exertions were happily rewarded. Behind a huge pyramidal rock they found a hole in the mountain-side, like the mouth of a great tunnel. Climbing up to this orifice, which was more than sixty feet above the level of the sea, they ascertained that it opened into a long dark gallery. They entered and groped their way cautiously along the sides. A continuous rumbling, that increased as they advanced, made them aware that they must be approaching the central funnel of the volcano; their only fear was lest some insuperable wall of rock should suddenly bar their further progress.

Servadac was some distance ahead.

“Come on!” he cried cheerily, his voice ringing through the darkness, “come on! Our fire is lighted! no stint of fuel! Nature provides that! Let us make haste and warm ourselves!”

Inspired by his confidence, the count and the lieutenant advanced bravely along the unseen and winding path. The temperature was now at least fifteen degrees above zero, and the walls of the gallery were beginning to feel quite warm to the touch, an indication, not to be overlooked, that the substance of which the rock was composed was metallic in its nature, and capable of conducting heat.

“Follow me!” shouted Servadac again; “we shall soon find a regular stove!”

Onwards they made their way, until at last a sharp turn brought them into a sudden flood of light. The tunnel had opened into a vast cavern, and the gloom was exchanged for an illumination that was perfectly dazzling. Although the temperature was high, it was not in any way intolerable.

One glance was sufficient to satisfy the explorers that the grateful light and heat of this huge excavation were to be attributed to a torrent of lava that was rolling downwards to the sea, completely subtending the aperture of the cave. Not inaptly might the scene be compared to the celebrated Grotto of the Winds at the rear of the central fall of Niagara, only with the exception that here, instead of a curtain of rushing water, it was a curtain of roaring flame that hung before the cavern’s mouth.

“Heaven be praised!” cried Servadac, with glad emotion; “here is all that we hoped for, and more besides!”

CHAPTER XXI. WINTER QUARTERS

The habitation that had now revealed itself, well lighted and thoroughly warm, was indeed marvelous. Not only would it afford ample accommodation for Hector Servadac and “his subjects,” as Ben Zoof delighted to call them, but it would provide shelter for the two horses, and for a considerable number of domestic animals.

This enormous cavern was neither more or less than the common junction of nearly twenty tunnels (similar to that which had been traversed by the explorers), forming ramifications in the solid rock, and the pores, as it were, by which the internal heat exuded from the heart of the mountain. Here, as long as the volcano retained its activity, every living creature on the new asteroid might brave the most rigorous of climates; and as Count Timascheff justly remarked, since it was the only burning mountain they had sighted, it was most probably the sole outlet for Gallia’s subterranean fires, and consequently the eruption might continue unchanged for ages to come.

But not a day, not an hour, was to be lost now. The steam-launch returned to Gourbi Island, and preparations were forthwith taken in hand for conveying man and beast, corn and fodder, across to the volcanic headland. Loud and hearty were the acclamations of the little colony, especially of the Spaniards, and great was the relief of Nina, when Servadac announced to them the discovery of their future domicile; and with requickened energies they labored hard at packing, anxious to reach their genial winter quarters without delay.

For three successive days the *Dobryna*, laden to her very gunwale, made a transit to and fro. Ben Zoof was left upon the island to superintend the stowage of the freight, whilst Servadac found abundant occupation in overlooking its disposal within the recesses of the mountain. First of all, the large store of corn and fodder, the produce of the recent harvest, was landed and deposited in one of the vaults; then, on the 15th, about fifty head of live cattle — bullocks, cows, sheep, and pigs — were conveyed to their rocky stalls. These were saved for the sake of preserving the several breeds, the bulk of the island cattle being slaughtered, as the extreme severity of the climate insured all meat remaining fresh for almost an indefinite period. The winter which they were expecting would probably be of unprecedented length; it was quite likely that it would exceed the six months' duration by which many arctic explorers have been tried; but the population of Gallia had no anxiety in the matter of provisions — their stock was far more than adequate; while as for drink, as long as they were satisfied with pure water, a frozen sea would afford them an inexhaustible reservoir.

The need for haste in forwarding their preparations became more and more manifest; the sea threatened to be un-navigable very soon, as ice was already forming which the noonday sun was unable to melt. And if haste were necessary, so also were care, ingenuity, and forethought. It was indispensable that the space at their command should be properly utilized, and yet that the several portions of the store should all be readily accessible.

On further investigation an unexpected number of galleries was discovered, so that, in fact, the interior of the mountain was like a vast bee-hive perforated with innumerable cells; and in compliment to the little Italian it was unanimously voted by the colony that their new home should be called "Nina's Hive."

The first care of Captain Servadac was to ascertain how he could make the best possible use of the heat which nature had provided for them so opportunely and with so lavish a hand. By opening fresh vents in the solid rock (which by the action of the heat was here capable of fissure) the stream of burning lava was diverted into several new channels, where it could be available for daily use; and thus Mochel, the *Dobryna's* cook, was furnished with an admirable kitchen, provided with a permanent stove, where he was duly installed with all his culinary apparatus.

“What a saving of expense it would be,” exclaimed Ben Zoof, “if every household could be furnished with its own private volcano!”

The large cavern at the general junction of the galleries was fitted up as a drawing-room, and arranged with all the best furniture both of the gourbi and of the cabin of the *Dobryna*. Hither was also brought the schooner’s library, containing a good variety of French and Russian books; lamps were suspended over the different tables; and the walls of the apartment were tapestried with the sails and adorned with the flags belonging to the yacht. The curtain of fire extending over the opening of the cavern provided it, as already stated, with light and heat.

The torrent of lava fell into a small rock-bound basin that had no apparent communication with the sea, and was evidently the aperture of a deep abyss, of which the waters, heated by the descent of the eruptive matter, would no doubt retain their liquid condition long after the Gallian Sea had become a sheet of ice.

A small excavation to the left of the common hall was allotted for the special use of Servadac and the count; another on the right was appropriated to the lieutenant and Ben Zoof; whilst a third recess, immediately at the back, made a convenient little chamber for Nina. The Spaniards and the Russian sailors took up their sleeping-quarters in the adjacent galleries, and found the temperature quite comfortable.

Such were the internal arrangements of Nina’s Hive, the refuge where the little colony were full of hope that they would be able to brave the rigors of the stern winter-time that lay before them — a winter-time during which Gallia might possibly be projected even to the orbit of Jupiter, where the temperature would not exceed one twenty-fifth of the normal winter temperature of the earth.

The only discontented spirit was Isaac Hakkabut. Throughout all the preparations which roused even the Spaniards to activity, the Jew, still incredulous and deaf to every representation of the true state of things, insisted upon remaining in the creek at Gourbi Island; nothing could induce him to leave his tartan, where, like a miser, he would keep guard over his precious cargo, ever grumbling and growling, but with his weather-eye open in the hope of catching sight of some passing sail. It must be owned that the whole party were far from sorry to be relieved of his presence; his uncomely figure and repulsive countenance was a perpetual bugbear. He had given out in plain terms that he did not intend to part with any of his property, except for current money, and Servadac, equally resolute, had strictly forbidden any purchases to be made, hoping to wear out the rascal’s obstinacy.

Hakkabut persistently refused to credit the real situation; he could not absolutely deny that some portions of the terrestrial globe had undergone a certain degree of modification, but nothing could bring him to believe that he was not, sooner or later, to résumé his old line of business in the Mediterranean. With his wonted distrust of all with whom he came in contact, he regarded every argument that was urged upon him only as evidence of a plot that had been devised to deprive him of his goods. Repudiating, as he did utterly, the hypothesis that a fragment had become detached from the earth, he scanned the horizon for hours together with an old telescope, the case of which had been patched up till it looked like a rusty stove-pipe, hoping to descry the passing trader with which he might effect some bartering upon advantageous terms.

At first he professed to regard the proposed removal into winter-quarters as an attempt to impose upon his credulity; but the frequent voyages made by the *Dobryna* to the south, and the repeated consignments of corn and cattle, soon served to make him aware that Captain Servadac and his companions were really contemplating a departure from Gourbi Island.

The movement set him thinking. What, he began to ask himself — what if all that was told him was true? What if this sea was no longer the Mediterranean? What if he should never again behold his German fatherland? What if his marts for business were gone for ever? A vague idea of ruin began to take possession of his mind: he must yield to necessity; he must do the best he could. As the result of his cogitations, he occasionally left his tartan and made a visit to the shore. At length he endeavored to mingle with the busy group, who were hurrying on their preparations; but his advances were only met by jeers and scorn, and, ridiculed by all the rest, he was fain to turn his attention to Ben Zoof, to whom he offered a few pinches of tobacco.

“No, old Zebulon,” said Ben Zoof, steadily refusing the gift, “it is against orders to take anything from you. Keep your cargo to yourself; eat and drink it all if you can; we are not to touch it.”

Finding the subordinates incorruptible, Isaac determined to go to the fountain-head. He addressed himself to Servadac, and begged him to tell him the whole truth, piteously adding that surely it was unworthy of a French officer to deceive a poor old man like himself.

“Tell you the truth, man!” cried Servadac. “Confound it, I have told you the truth twenty times. Once for all, I tell you now, you have left yourself barely time enough to make your escape to yonder mountain.”

“God and Mahomet have mercy on me!” muttered the Jew, whose creed frequently assumed a very ambiguous character.

“I will tell you what,” continued the captain — ”you shall have a few men to work the *Hansa* across, if you like.”

“But I want to go to Algiers,” whimpered Hakkabut.

“How often am I to tell you that Algiers is no longer in existence? Only say yes or no — are you coming with us into winter-quarters?”

“God of Israel! what is to become of all my property?”

“But, mind you,” continued the captain, not heeding the interruption, “if you do not choose voluntarily to come with us, I shall have the *Hansa*, by my orders, removed to a place of safety. I am not going to let your cursed obstinacy incur the risk of losing your cargo altogether.”

“Merciful Heaven! I shall be ruined!” moaned Isaac, in despair.

“You are going the right way to ruin yourself, and it would serve you right to leave you to your own devices. But be off! I have no more to say.”

And, turning contemptuously on his heel, Servadac left the old man vociferating bitterly, and with uplifted hands protesting vehemently against the rapacity of the Gentiles.

By the 20th all preliminary arrangements were complete, and everything ready for a final departure from the island. The thermometer stood on an average at 8 degrees below zero, and the water in the cistern was completely frozen. It was determined, therefore, for the colony to embark on the following day, and take up their residence in Nina’s Hive.

A final consultation was held about the *Hansa*. Lieutenant Procope pronounced his decided conviction that it would be impossible for the tartan to resist the pressure of the ice in the harbor of the Shelif, and that there would be far more safety in the proximity of the volcano. It was agreed on all hands that the vessel must be shifted; and accordingly orders were given, four Russian sailors were sent on board, and only a few minutes elapsed after the *Dobryna* had weighed anchor, before the great lateen sail of the tartan was unfurled, and the “shop-ship,” as Ben Zoof delighted to call it, was also on her way to the southward.

Long and loud were the lamentations of the Jew. He kept exclaiming that he had given no orders, that he was being moved against his will, that he had asked for no assistance, and needed none; but it required no very keen discrimination to observe that all along there was a lurking gleam of satisfaction in his little gray eyes, and when, a few hours later, he found himself securely anchored, and his property in a place of safety, he quite chuckled with glee.

“God of Israel!” he said in an undertone, “they have made no charge; the idiots have piloted me here for nothing.”

For nothing! His whole nature exulted in the consciousness that he was enjoying a service that had been rendered gratuitously.

Destitute of human inhabitants, Gourbi Island was now left to the tenancy of such birds and beasts as had escaped the recent promiscuous slaughter. Birds, indeed, that had migrated in search of warmer shores, had returned, proving that this fragment of the French colony was the only shred of land that could yield them any sustenance; but their life must necessarily be short. It was utterly impossible that they could survive the cold that would soon ensue.

The colony took possession of their new abode with but few formalities. Everyone, however, approved of all the internal arrangements of Nina’s Hive, and were profuse in their expressions of satisfaction at finding themselves located in such comfortable quarters. The only malcontent was Hakkabut; he had no share in the general enthusiasm, refused even to enter or inspect any of the galleries, and insisted on remaining on board his tartan.

“He is afraid,” said Ben Zoof, “that he will have to pay for his lodgings. But wait a bit; we shall see how he stands the cold out there; the frost, no doubt, will drive the old fox out of his hole.”

Towards evening the pots were set boiling, and a bountiful supper, to which all were invited, was spread in the central hall. The stores of the *Dobryna* contained some excellent wine, some of which was broached to do honor to the occasion. The health of the governor general was drunk, as well as the toast “Success to his council,” to which Ben Zoof was called upon to return thanks. The entertainment passed off merrily. The Spaniards were in the best of spirits; one of them played the guitar, another the castanets, and the rest joined in a ringing chorus. Ben Zoof contributed the famous Zouave refrain, well known throughout the French army, but rarely performed in finer style than by this *virtuoso:*

“Misti goth dar dar tire lyre!

Flic! floc! flac! lirette, lira!

Far la rira,

Tour tala rire,

Tour la Ribaud,

Ricandeau,

Sans repos, repit, repit, repos, ris pot, ripette!

Si vous attrapez mon refrain,

Fameux vous etes.”

The concert was succeeded by a ball, unquestionably the first that had ever taken place in Gallia. The Russian sailors exhibited some of their national dances, which gained considerable applause, even although they followed upon the marvelous fandangos of the Spaniards. Ben Zoof, in his turn, danced a *pas seul* (often performed in the Elysee Montmartre) with an elegance and vigor that earned many compliments from Negrete.

It was nine o’clock before the festivities came to an end, and by that time the company, heated by the high temperature of the hall, and by their own exertions, felt the want of a little fresh air. Accordingly the greater portion of the party, escorted by Ben Zoof, made their way into one of the adjacent galleries that led to the shore. Servadac, with the count and lieutenant, did not follow immediately; but shortly afterwards they proceeded to join them, when on their way they were startled by loud cries from those in advance.

Their first impression was that they were cries of distress, and they were greatly relieved to find that they were shouts of delight, which the dryness and purity of the atmosphere caused to re-echo like a volley of musketry.

Reaching the mouth of the gallery, they found the entire group pointing with eager interest to the sky.

“Well, Ben Zoof,” asked the captain, “what’s the matter now?”

“Oh, your Excellency,” ejaculated the orderly, “look there! look there! The moon! the moon’s come back!”

And, sure enough, what was apparently the moon was rising above the mists of evening.

CHAPTER XXII. A FROZEN OCEAN

The moon! She had disappeared for weeks; was she now returning? Had she been faithless to the earth? and had she now approached to be a satellite of the new-born world?

“Impossible!” said Lieutenant Procope; “the earth is millions and millions of leagues away, and it is not probable that the moon has ceased to revolve about her.”

“Why not?” remonstrated Servadac. “It would not be more strange than the other phenomena which we have lately witnessed. Why should not the moon have fallen within the limits of Gallia’s attraction, and become her satellite?”

“Upon that supposition,” put in the count, “I should think that it would be altogether unlikely that three months would elapse without our seeing her.”

“Quite incredible!” continued Procope. “And there is another thing which totally disproves the captain’s hypothesis; the magnitude of Gallia is far too insignificant for her power of attraction to carry off the moon.”

“But,” persisted Servadac, “why should not the same convulsion that tore us away from the earth have torn away the moon as well? After wandering about as she would for a while in the solar regions, I do not see why she should not have attached herself to us.”

The lieutenant repeated his conviction that it was not likely.

“But why not?” again asked Servadac impetuously.

“Because, I tell you, the mass of Gallia is so inferior to that of the moon, that Gallia would become the moon’s satellite; the moon could not possibly become hers.”

“Assuming, however,” continued Servadac, “such to be the case — ”

“I am afraid,” said the lieutenant, interrupting him, “that I cannot assume anything of the sort even for a moment.”

Servadac smiled good-humoredly.

“I confess you seem to have the best of the argument, and if Gallia had become a satellite of the moon, it would not have taken three months to catch sight of her. I suppose you are right.”

While this discussion had been going on, the satellite, or whatever it might be, had been rising steadily above the horizon, and had reached a position favorable for observation. Telescopes were brought, and it was very soon ascertained, beyond a question, that the new luminary was not the well-known Phoebe of terrestrial nights; it had no feature in common with the moon. Although it was apparently much nearer to Gallia than the moon to the earth, its superficies was hardly one-tenth as large, and so feebly did it reflect the light of the remote sun, that it scarcely emitted radiance enough to extinguish the dim luster of stars of the eighth magnitude. Like the sun, it had risen in the west, and was now at its full. To mistake its identity with the moon was absolutely impossible; not even Servadac could discover a trace of the seas, chasms, craters, and mountains which have been so minutely delineated in lunar charts, and it could not be denied that any transient hope that had been excited as to their once again being about to enjoy the peaceful smiles of “the queen of night” must all be resigned.

Count Timascheff finally suggested, though somewhat doubtfully, the question of the probability that Gallia, in her course across the zone of the minor planets, had carried off one of them; but whether it was one of the 169 asteroids already included in the astronomical catalogues, or one previously unknown, he did not presume to determine. The idea to a certain extent was plausible, inasmuch as it has been ascertained that several of the telescopic planets are of such small dimensions that a good walker might make a circuit of them in four and twenty hours; consequently Gallia, being of superior volume, might be supposed capable of exercising a power of attraction upon any of these miniature microcosms.

The first night in Nina's Hive passed without special incident; and next morning a regular scheme of life was definitely laid down. "My lord governor," as Ben Zoof until he was peremptorily forbidden delighted to call Servadac, had a wholesome dread of idleness and its consequences, and insisted upon each member of the party undertaking some special duty to fulfill. There was plenty to do. The domestic animals required a great deal of attention; a supply of food had to be secured and preserved; fishing had to be carried on while the condition of the sea would allow it; and in several places the galleries had to be further excavated to render them more available for use. Occupation, then, need never be wanting, and the daily round of labor could go on in orderly routine.

A perfect concord ruled the little colony. The Russians and Spaniards amalgamated well, and both did their best to pick up various scraps of French, which was considered the official language of the place. Servadac himself undertook the tuition of Pablo and Nina, Ben Zoof being their companion in play-hours, when he entertained them with enchanting stories in the best Parisian French, about "a lovely city at the foot of a mountain," where he always promised one day to take them.

The end of March came, but the cold was not intense to such a degree as to confine any of the party to the interior of their resort; several excursions were made along the shore, and for a radius of three or four miles the adjacent district was carefully explored. Investigation, however, always ended in the same result; turn their course in whatever direction they would, they found that the country retained everywhere its desert character, rocky, barren, and without a trace of vegetation. Here and there a slight layer of snow, or a thin coating of ice arising from atmospheric condensation indicated the existence of superficial moisture, but it would require a period indefinitely long, exceeding human reckoning, before that moisture could collect into a stream and roll downwards over the stony strata to the sea. It seemed at present out of their power to determine whether the land upon which they were so happily settled was an island or a continent, and till the cold was abated they feared to undertake any lengthened expedition to ascertain the actual extent of the strange concrete of metallic crystallization.

By ascending one day to the summit of the volcano, Captain Servadac and the count succeeded in getting a general idea of the aspect of the country. The mountain itself was an enormous block rising symmetrically to a height of nearly 3,000 feet above the level of the sea, in the form of a truncated cone, of which the topmost section was crowned by a wreath of smoke issuing continuously from the mouth of a narrow crater.

Under the old condition of terrestrial things, the ascent of this steep acclivity would have been attended with much fatigue, but as the effect of the altered condition of the law of gravity, the travelers performed perpetual prodigies in the way of agility, and in little over an hour reached the edge of the crater, without more sense of exertion than if they had traversed a couple of miles on level ground. Gallia had its drawbacks, but it had some compensating advantages.

Telescopes in hand, the explorers from the summit scanned the surrounding view. Their anticipations had already realized what they saw. Just as they expected, on the north, east, and west lay the Gallian Sea, smooth and motionless as a sheet of glass, the cold having, as it were, congealed the atmosphere so that there was not a breath of wind. Towards the south there seemed no limit to the land, and the volcano formed the apex of a triangle, of which the base was beyond the reach of vision. Viewed even from this height, whence distance would do much to soften the general asperity, the surface nevertheless seemed to be bristling with its myriads of hexagonal lamellae, and to present difficulties which, to an ordinary pedestrian, would be insurmountable.

“Oh for some wings, or else a balloon!” cried Servadac, as he gazed around him; and then, looking down to the rock upon which they were standing, he added, “We seem to have been transplanted to a soil strange enough in its chemical character to bewilder the *savants* at a museum.”

“And do you observe, captain,” asked the count, “how the convexity of our little world curtails our view? See, how circumscribed is the horizon!”

Servadac replied that he had noticed the same circumstance from the top of the cliffs of Gourbi Island.

“Yes,” said the count; “it becomes more and more obvious that ours is a very tiny world, and that Gourbi Island is the sole productive spot upon its surface. We have had a short summer, and who knows whether we are not entering upon a winter that may last for years, perhaps for centuries?”

“But we must not mind, count,” said Servadac, smiling. “We have agreed, you know, that, come what may, we are to be philosophers.”

“Ay, true, my friend,” rejoined the count; “we must be philosophers and something more; we must be grateful to the good Protector who has hitherto befriended us, and we must trust His mercy to the end.”

For a few moments they both stood in silence, and contemplated land and sea; then, having given a last glance over the dreary panorama, they prepared to wend their way down the mountain. Before, however, they commenced their descent, they resolved to make a closer examination of the crater. They were particularly struck by what seemed to them almost the mysterious calmness with which the eruption was effected. There was none of the wild disorder and deafening tumult that usually accompany the discharge of volcanic matter, but the heated lava, rising with a uniform gentleness, quietly overran the limits of the crater, like the flow of water from the bosom of a peaceful lake. Instead of a boiler exposed to the action of an angry fire, the crater rather resembled a brimming basin, of which the contents were noiselessly escaping. Nor were there any igneous stones or red-hot cinders mingled with the smoke that crowned the summit; a circumstance that quite accorded with the absence of the pumice-stones, obsidians, and other minerals of volcanic origin with which the base of a burning mountain is generally strewn.

Captain Servadac was of opinion that this peculiarity augured favorably for the continuance of the eruption. Extreme violence in physical, as well as in moral nature, is never of long duration. The most terrible storms, like the most violent fits of passion, are not lasting; but here the calm flow of the liquid fire appeared to be supplied from a source that was inexhaustible, in the same way as the waters of Niagara, gliding on steadily to their final plunge, would defy all effort to arrest their course.

Before the evening of this day closed in, a most important change was effected in the condition of the Gallian Sea by the intervention of human agency. Notwithstanding the increasing cold, the sea, unruffled as it was by a breath of wind, still retained its liquid state. It is an established fact that water, under this condition of absolute stillness, will remain uncongealed at a temperature several degrees below zero, whilst experiment, at the same time, shows that a very slight shock will often be sufficient to convert it into solid ice. It had occurred to Servadac that if some communication could be opened with Gourbi Island, there would be a fine scope for hunting expeditions. Having this ultimate object in view, he assembled his little colony upon a projecting rock at the extremity of the promontory, and having called Nina and Pablo out to him in front, he said: “Now, Nina, do you think you could throw something into the sea?”

“I think I could,” replied the child, “but I am sure that Pablo would throw it a great deal further than I can.”

“Never mind, you shall try first.”

Putting a fragment of ice into Nina’s hand, he addressed himself to Pablo:

“Look out, Pablo; you shall see what a nice little fairy Nina is! Throw, Nina, throw, as hard as you can.”

Nina balanced the piece of ice two or three times in her hand, and threw it forward with all her strength.

A sudden thrill seemed to vibrate across the motionless waters to the distant horizon, and the Gallian Sea had become a solid sheet of ice!

CHAPTER XXIII. A CARRIER-PIGEON

When, three hours after sunset, on the 23d of March, the Gallian moon rose upon the western horizon, it was observed that she had entered upon her last quarter. She had taken only four days to pass from syzygy to quadrature, and it was consequently evident that she would be visible for little more than a week at a time, and that her lunation would be accomplished within sixteen days. The lunar months, like the solar days, had been diminished by one-half. Three days later the moon was in conjunction with the sun, and was consequently lost to view; Ben Zoof, as the first observer of the satellite, was extremely interested in its movements, and wondered whether it would ever reappear.

On the 26th, under an atmosphere perfectly clear and dry, the thermometer fell to 12 degrees F. below zero. Of the present distance of Gallia from the sun, and the number of leagues she had traversed since the receipt of the last mysterious document, there were no means of judging; the extent of diminution in the apparent disc of the sun did not afford sufficient basis even for an approximate calculation; and Captain Servadac was perpetually regretting that they could receive no further tidings from the anonymous correspondent, whom he persisted in regarding as a fellow-countryman.

The solidity of the ice was perfect; the utter stillness of the air at the time when the final congelation of the waters had taken place had resulted in the formation of a surface that for smoothness would rival a skating-rink; without a crack or flaw it extended far beyond the range of vision.

The contrast to the ordinary aspect of polar seas was very remarkable. There, the ice-fields are an agglomeration of hummocks and icebergs, massed in wild confusion, often towering higher than the masts of the largest whalers, and from the instability of their foundations liable to an instantaneous loss of equilibrium; a breath of wind, a slight modification of the temperature, not unfrequently serving to bring about a series of changes outrivaling the most elaborate transformation scenes of a pantomime. Here, on the contrary, the vast white plain was level as the desert of Sahara or the Russian steppes; the waters of the Gallian Sea were imprisoned beneath the solid sheet, which became continually stouter in the increasing cold.

Accustomed to the uneven crystallizations of their own frozen seas, the Russians could not be otherwise than delighted with the polished surface that afforded them such excellent opportunity for enjoying their favorite pastime of skating. A supply of skates, found hidden away amongst the *Dobryna's* stores, was speedily brought into use. The Russians undertook the instruction of the Spaniards, and at the end of a few days, during which the temperature was only endurable through the absence of wind, there was not a Gallian who could not skate tolerably well, while many of them could describe figures involving the most complicated curves. Nina and Pablo earned loud applause by their rapid proficiency; Captain Servadac, an adept in athletics, almost outvied his instructor, the count; and Ben Zoof, who had upon some rare occasions skated upon the Lake of Montmartre (in his eyes, of course, a sea), performed prodigies in the art.

This exercise was not only healthful in itself, but it was acknowledged that, in case of necessity, it might become a very useful means of locomotion. As Captain Servadac remarked, it was almost a substitute for railways, and as if to illustrate this proposition, Lieutenant Procope, perhaps the greatest expert in the party, accomplished the twenty miles to Gourbi Island and back in considerably less than four hours.

The temperature, meanwhile, continued to decrease, and the average reading of the thermometer was about 16 degrees F. below zero; the light also diminished in proportion, and all objects appeared to be enveloped in a half-defined shadow, as though the sun were undergoing a perpetual eclipse. It was not surprising that the effect of this continuously overhanging gloom should be to induce a frequent depression of spirits amongst the majority of the little population, exiles as they were from their mother earth, and not unlikely, as it seemed, to be swept far away into the regions of another planetary sphere. Probably Count Timascheff, Captain Servadac, and Lieutenant Procope were the only members of the community who could bring any scientific judgment to bear upon the uncertainty that was before them, but a general sense of the strangeness of their situation could not fail at times to weigh heavily upon the minds of all. Under these circumstances it was very necessary to counteract the tendency to despond by continual diversion; and the recreation of skating thus opportunely provided, seemed just the thing to arouse the flagging spirits, and to restore a wholesome excitement.

With dogged obstinacy, Isaac Hakkabut refused to take any share either in the labors or the amusements of the colony. In spite of the cold, he had not been seen since the day of his arrival from Gourbi Island. Captain Servadac had strictly forbidden any communication with him; and the smoke that rose from the cabin chimney of the *Hansa* was the sole indication of the proprietor being still on board. There was nothing to prevent him, if he chose, from partaking gratuitously of the volcanic light and heat which were being enjoyed by all besides; but rather than abandon his close and personal oversight of his precious cargo, he preferred to sacrifice his own slender stock of fuel.

Both the schooner and the tartan had been carefully moored in the way that seemed to promise best for withstanding the rigor of the winter. After seeing the vessels made secure in the frozen creek. Lieutenant Procope, following the example of many Arctic explorers, had the precaution to have the ice beveled away from the keels, so that there should be no risk of the ships' sides being crushed by the increasing pressure; he hoped that they would follow any rise in the level of the ice-field, and when the thaw should come, that they would easily regain their proper water-line.

On his last visit to Gourbi Island, the lieutenant had ascertained that north, east, and west, far as the eye could reach, the Gallian Sea had become one uniform sheet of ice. One spot alone refused to freeze; this was the pool immediately below the central cavern, the receptacle for the stream of burning lava. It was entirely enclosed by rocks, and if ever a few icicles were formed there by the action of the cold, they were very soon melted by the fiery shower. Hissing and spluttering as the hot lava came in contact with it, the water was in a continual state of ebullition, and the fish that abounded in its depths defied the angler's craft; they were, as Ben Zoof remarked, "too much boiled to bite."

At the beginning of April the weather changed. The sky became overcast, but there was no rise in the temperature. Unlike the polar winters of the earth, which ordinarily are affected by atmospheric influence, and liable to slight intermissions of their severity at various shiftings of the wind, Gallia's winter was caused by her immense distance from the source of all light and heat, and the cold was consequently destined to go on steadily increasing until it reached the limit ascertained by Fourier to be the normal temperature of the realms of space.

With the over-clouding of the heavens there arose a violent tempest; but although the wind raged with an almost inconceivable fury, it was unaccompanied by either snow or rain. Its effect upon the burning curtain that covered the aperture of the central hall was very remarkable. So far from there being any likelihood of the fire being extinguished by the vehemence of the current of air, the hurricane seemed rather to act as a ventilator, which fanned the flame into greater activity, and the utmost care was necessary to avoid being burnt by the fragments of lava that were drifted into the interior of the grotto. More than once the curtain itself was rifted entirely asunder, but only to close up again immediately after allowing a momentary draught of cold air to penetrate the hall in a way that was refreshing and rather advantageous than otherwise.

On the 4th of April, after an absence of about four days, the new satellite, to Ben Zoof's great satisfaction, made its reappearance in a crescent form, a circumstance that seemed to justify the anticipation that henceforward it would continue to make a periodic revolution every fortnight.

The crust of ice and snow was far too stout for the beaks of the strongest birds to penetrate, and accordingly large swarms had left the island, and, following the human population, had taken refuge on the volcanic promontory; not that there the barren shore had anything in the way of nourishment to offer them, but their instinct impelled them to haunt now the very habitations which formerly they would have shunned. Scraps of food were thrown to them from the galleries; these were speedily devoured, but were altogether inadequate in quantity to meet the demand. At length, emboldened by hunger, several hundred birds ventured through the tunnel, and took up their quarters actually in Nina's Hive. Congregating in the large hall, the half-famished creatures did not hesitate to snatch bread, meat, or food of any description from the hands of the residents as they sat at table, and soon became such an intolerable nuisance that it formed one of the daily diversions to hunt them down; but although they were vigorously attacked by stones and sticks, and even occasionally by shot, it was with some difficulty that their number could be sensibly reduced.

By a systematic course of warfare the bulk of the birds were all expelled, with the exception of about a hundred, which began to build in the crevices of the rocks. These were left in quiet possession of their quarters, as not only was it deemed advisable to perpetuate the various breeds, but it was found that these birds acted as a kind of police, never failing either to chase away or to kill any others of their species who infringed upon what they appeared to regard as their own special privilege in intruding within the limits of their domain.

On the 15th loud cries were suddenly heard issuing from the mouth of the principal gallery.

“Help, help! I shall be killed!”

Pablo in a moment recognized the voice as Nina’s. Outrunning even Ben Zoof he hurried to the assistance of his little playmate, and discovered that she was being attacked by half a dozen great sea-gulls, and only after receiving some severe blows from their beaks could he succeed by means of a stout cudgel in driving them away.

“Tell me, Nina, what is this?” he asked as soon as the tumult had subsided.

The child pointed to a bird which she was caressing tenderly in her bosom.

“A pigeon!” exclaimed Ben Zoof, who had reached the scene of commotion, adding:

“A carrier-pigeon! And by all the saints of Montmartre, there is a little bag attached to its neck!”

He took the bird, and rushing into the hall placed it in Servadac’s hands.

“Another message, no doubt,” cried the captain, “from our unknown friend. Let us hope that this time he has given us his name and address.”

All crowded round, eager to hear the news. In the struggle with the gulls the bag had been partially torn open, but still contained the following dispatch:

“Gallia!

Chemin parcouru du 1er Mars au 1er Avril: 39,000,000 l!

Distance du soleil: 110,000,000 l!

Capte Nerina en passant.

Vivres vont manquer et...”

The rest of the document had been so damaged by the beaks of the gulls that it was illegible. Servadac was wild with vexation. He felt more and more convinced that the writer was a Frenchman, and that the last line indicated that he was in distress from scarcity of food. The very thought of a fellow-countryman in peril of starvation drove him well-nigh to distraction, and it was in vain that search was made everywhere near the scene of conflict in hopes of finding the missing scrap that might bear a signature or address.

Suddenly little Nina, who had again taken possession of the pigeon, and was hugging it to her breast, said:

“Look here, Ben Zoof!”

And as she spoke she pointed to the left wing of the bird. The wing bore the faint impress of a postage-stamp, and the one word: “FORMENTERA.”

CHAPTER XXIV. A SLEDGE-RIDE

Formentera was at once recognized by Servadac and the count as the name of one of the smallest of the Balearic Islands. It was more than probable that the unknown writer had thence sent out the mysterious documents, and from the message just come to hand by the carrier-pigeon, it appeared all but certain that at the beginning of April, a fortnight back, he had still been there. In one important particular the present communication differed from those that had preceded it: it was written entirely in French, and exhibited none of the ecstatic exclamations in other languages that had been remarkable in the two former papers. The concluding line, with its intimation of failing provisions, amounted almost to an appeal for help. Captain Servadac briefly drew attention to these points, and concluded by saying, “My friends, we must, without delay, hasten to the assistance of this unfortunate man.”

“For my part,” said the count, “I am quite ready to accompany you; it is not unlikely that he is not alone in his distress.”

Lieutenant Procope expressed much surprise. “We must have passed close to Formentera,” he said, “when we explored the site of the Balearic Isles; this fragment must be very small; it must be smaller than the remaining splinter of Gibraltar or Ceuta; otherwise, surely it would never have escaped our observation.”

“However small it may be,” replied Servadac, “we must find it. How far off do you suppose it is?”

“It must be a hundred and twenty leagues away,” said the lieutenant, thoughtfully; “and I do not quite understand how you would propose to get there.”

“Why, on skates of course; no difficulty in that, I should imagine,” answered Servadac, and he appealed to the count for confirmation of his opinion.

The count assented, but Procope looked doubtful.

“Your enterprise is generous,” he said, “and I should be most unwilling to throw any unnecessary obstacle in the way of its execution; but, pardon me, if I submit to you a few considerations which to my mind are very important. First of all, the thermometer is already down to 22 degrees below zero, and the keen wind from the south is making the temperature absolutely unendurable; in the second place, supposing you travel at the rate of twenty leagues a day, you would be exposed for at least six consecutive days; and thirdly, your expedition will be of small avail unless you convey provisions not only for yourselves, but for those whom you hope to relieve.”

“We can carry our own provisions on our backs in knapsacks,” interposed Servadac, quickly, unwilling to recognize any difficulty in the way.

“Granted that you can,” answered the lieutenant, quietly; “but where, on this level ice-field, will you find shelter in your periods of rest? You must perish with cold; you will not have the chance of digging out ice-huts like the Esquimaux.”

“As to rest,” said Servadac, “we shall take none; we shall keep on our way continuously; by traveling day and night without intermission, we shall not be more than three days in reaching Formentera.”

“Believe me,” persisted the lieutenant, calmly, “your enthusiasm is carrying you too far; the feat you propose is impossible; but even conceding the possibility of your success in reaching your destination, what service do you imagine that you, half-starved and half-frozen yourself, could render to those who are already perishing by want and exposure? you would only bring them away to die."

The obvious and dispassionate reasoning of the lieutenant could not fail to impress the minds of those who listened to him; the impracticability of the journey became more and more apparent; unprotected on that drear expanse, any traveler must assuredly succumb to the snow-drifts that were continually being whirled across it. But Hector Servadac, animated by the generous desire of rescuing a suffering fellow-creature, could scarcely be brought within the bounds of common sense. Against his better judgment he was still bent upon the expedition, and Ben Zoof declared himself ready to accompany his master in the event of Count Timascheff hesitating to encounter the peril which the undertaking involved. But the count entirely repudiated all idea of shrinking from what, quite as much as the captain, he regarded as a sacred duty, and turning to Lieutenant Procope, told him that unless some better plan could be devised, he was prepared to start off at once and make the attempt to skate across to Formentera. The lieutenant, who was lost in thought, made no immediate reply.

"I wish we had a sledge," said Ben Zoof.

"I dare say that a sledge of some sort could be contrived," said the count; "but then we should have no dogs or reindeers to draw it."

"Why not rough-shoe the two horses?"

"They would never be able to endure the cold," objected the count.

“Never mind,” said Servadac, “let us get our sledge and put them to the test. Something must be done!”

“I think,” said Lieutenant Procope, breaking his thoughtful silence, “that I can tell you of a sledge already provided for your hand, and I can suggest a motive power surer and swifter than horses.”

“What do you mean?” was the eager inquiry.

“I mean the *Dobryna*’s yawl,” answered the lieutenant; “and I have no doubt that the wind would carry her rapidly along the ice.”

The idea seemed admirable. Lieutenant Procope was well aware to what marvelous perfection the Americans had brought their sail-sledges, and had heard how in the vast prairies of the United States they had been known to outvie the speed of an express train, occasionally attaining a rate of more than a hundred miles an hour. The wind was still blowing hard from the south, and assuming that the yawl could be propelled with a velocity of about fifteen or at least twelve leagues an hour, he reckoned that it was quite possible to reach Formentera within twelve hours, that is to say, in a single day between the intervals of sunrise and sunrise.

The yawl was about twelve feet long, and capable of holding five or six people. The addition of a couple of iron runners would be all that was requisite to convert it into an excellent sledge, which, if a sail were hoisted, might be deemed certain to make a rapid progress over the smooth surface of the ice. For the protection of the passengers it was proposed to erect a kind of wooden roof lined with strong cloth; beneath this could be packed a supply of provisions, some warm furs, some cordials, and a portable stove to be heated by spirits of wine.

For the outward journey the wind was as favorable as could be desired; but it was to be apprehended that, unless the direction of the wind should change, the return would be a matter of some difficulty; a system of tacking might be carried out to a certain degree, but it was not likely that the yawl would answer her helm in any way corresponding to what would occur in the open sea. Captain Servadac, however, would not listen to any representation of probable difficulties; the future, he said, must provide for itself.

The engineer and several of the sailors set vigorously to work, and before the close of the day the yawl was furnished with a pair of stout iron runners, curved upwards in front, and fitted with a metal scull designed to assist in maintaining the directness of her course; the roof was put on, and beneath it were stored the provisions, the wraps, and the cooking utensils.

A strong desire was expressed by Lieutenant Procope that he should be allowed to accompany Captain Servadac instead of Count Timascheff. It was unadvisable for all three of them to go, as, in case of there being several persons to be rescued, the space at their command would be quite inadequate. The lieutenant urged that he was the most experienced seaman, and as such was best qualified to take command of the sledge and the management of the sails; and as it was not to be expected that Servadac would resign his intention of going in person to relieve his fellow-countryman, Procope submitted his own wishes to the count. The count was himself very anxious to have his share in the philanthropic enterprise, and demurred considerably to the proposal; he yielded, however, after a time, to Servadac's representations that in the event of the expedition proving disastrous, the little colony would need his services alike as governor and protector, and overcoming his reluctance to be left out of the perilous adventure, was prevailed upon to remain behind for the general good of the community at Nina’s Hive.

At sunrise on the following morning, the 16th of April, Captain Servadac and the lieutenant took their places in the yawl. The thermometer was more than 20 degrees below zero, and it was with deep emotion that their companions beheld them thus embarking upon the vast white plain. Ben Zoof’s heart was too full for words; Count Timascheff could not forbear pressing his two brave friends to his bosom; the Spaniards and the Russian sailors crowded round for a farewell shake of the hand, and little Nina, her great eyes flooded with tears, held up her face for a parting kiss. The sad scene was not permitted to be long. The sail was quickly hoisted, and the sledge, just as if it had expanded a huge white wing, was in a little while carried far away beyond the horizon.

Light and unimpeded, the yawl scudded on with incredible speed. Two sails, a brigantine and a jib, were arranged to catch the wind to the greatest advantage, and the travelers estimated that their progress would be little under the rate of twelve leagues an hour. The motion of their novel vehicle was singularly gentle, the oscillation being less than that of an ordinary railway-carriage, while the diminished force of gravity contributed to the swiftness. Except that the clouds of ice-dust raised by the metal runners were an evidence that they had not actually left the level surface of the ice, the captain and lieutenant might again and again have imagined that they were being conveyed through the air in a balloon.

Lieutenant Procope, with his head all muffled up for fear of frost-bite, took an occasional peep through an aperture that had been intentionally left in the roof, and by the help of a compass, maintained a proper and straight course for Formentera. Nothing could be more dejected than the aspect of that frozen sea; not a single living creature relieved the solitude; both the travelers, Procope from a scientific point of view, Servadac from an aesthetic, were alike impressed by the solemnity of the scene, and where the lengthened shadow of the sail cast upon the ice by the oblique rays of the setting sun had disappeared, and day had given place to night, the two men, drawn together as by an involuntary impulse, mutually held each other’s hands in silence.

There had been a new moon on the previous evening; but, in the absence of moonlight, the constellations shone with remarkable brilliancy. The new pole-star close upon the horizon was resplendent, and even had Lieutenant Procope been destitute of a compass, he would have had no difficulty in holding his course by the guidance of that alone. However great was the distance that separated Gallia from the sun, it was after all manifestly insignificant in comparison with the remoteness of the nearest of the fixed stars.

Observing that Servadac was completely absorbed in his own thoughts, Lieutenant Procope had leisure to contemplate some of the present perplexing problems, and to ponder over the true astronomical position. The last of the three mysterious documents had represented that Gallia, in conformity with Kepler’s second law, had traveled along her orbit during the month of March twenty millions of leagues less than she had done in the previous month; yet, in the same time, her distance from the sun had nevertheless been increased by thirty-two millions of leagues. She was now, therefore, in the center of the zone of telescopic planets that revolve between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, and had captured for herself a satellite which, according to the document, was Nerina, one of the asteroids most recently identified. If thus, then, it was within the power of the unknown writer to estimate with such apparent certainty Gallia’s exact position, was it not likely that his mathematical calculations would enable him to arrive at some definite conclusion as to the date at which she would begin again to approach the sun? Nay, was it not to be expected that he had already estimated, with sufficient approximation to truth, what was to be the true length of the Gallian year?

So intently had they each separately been following their own train of thought, that daylight reappeared almost before the travelers were aware of it. On consulting their instruments, they found that they must have traveled close upon a hundred leagues since they started, and they resolved to slacken their speed. The sails were accordingly taken in a little, and in spite of the intensity of the cold, the explorers ventured out of their shelter, in order that they might reconnoiter the plain, which was apparently as boundless as ever. It was completely desert; not so much as a single point of rock relieved the bare uniformity of its surface.

“Are we not considerably to the west of Formentera?” asked Servadac, after examining the chart.

“Most likely,” replied Procope. “I have taken the same course as I should have done at sea, and I have kept some distance to windward of the island; we can bear straight down upon it whenever we like.”

“Bear down then, now; and as quickly as you can.”

The yawl was at once put with her head to the northeast and Captain Servadac, in defiance of the icy blast, remained standing at the bow, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

All at once his eye brightened.

“Look! look!” he exclaimed, pointing to a faint outline that broke the monotony of the circle that divided the plain from the sky.

In an instant the lieutenant had seized his telescope.

“I see what you mean,” said he; “it is a pylone that has been used for some geodesic survey.”

The next moment the sail was filled, and the yawl was bearing down upon the object with inconceivable swiftness, both Captain Servadac and the lieutenant too excited to utter a word. Mile after mile the distance rapidly grew less, and as they drew nearer the pylone they could see that it was erected on a low mass of rocks that was the sole interruption to the dull level of the field of ice. No wreath of smoke rose above the little island; it was manifestly impossible, they conceived, that any human being could there have survived the cold; the sad presentiment forced itself upon their minds that it was a mere cairn to which they had been hurrying.

Ten minutes later, and they were so near the rock that the lieutenant took in his sail, convinced that the impetus already attained would be sufficient to carry him to the land. Servadac’s heart bounded as he caught sight of a fragment of blue canvas fluttering in the wind from the top of the pylone: it was all that now remained of the French national standard. At the foot of the pylone stood a miserable shed, its shutters tightly closed. No other habitation was to be seen; the entire island was less than a quarter of a mile in circumference; and the conclusion was irresistible that it was the sole surviving remnant of Formentera, once a member of the Balearic Archipelago.

To leap on shore, to clamber over the slippery stones, and to reach the cabin was but the work of a few moments. The worm-eaten door was bolted on the inside. Servadac began to knock with all his might. No answer. Neither shouting nor knocking could draw forth a reply.

“Let us force it open, Procope!” he said.

The two men put their shoulders to the door, which soon yielded to their vigorous efforts, and they found themselves inside the shed, and in almost total darkness. By opening a shutter they admitted what daylight they could. At first sight the wretched place seemed to be deserted; the little grate contained the ashes of a fire long since extinguished; all looked black and desolate. Another instant’s investigation, however, revealed a bed in the extreme corner, and extended on the bed a human form.

“Dead!” sighed Servadac; “dead of cold and hunger!”

Lieutenant Procope bent down and anxiously contemplated the body.

“No; he is alive!” he said, and drawing a small flask from his pocket he poured a few drops of brandy between the lips of the senseless man.

There was a faint sigh, followed by a feeble voice, which uttered the one word, “Gallia?”

“Yes, yes! Gallia!” echoed Servadac, eagerly.

“My comet, my comet!” said the voice, so low as to be almost inaudible, and the unfortunate man relapsed again into unconsciousness.

“Where have I seen this man?” thought Servadac to himself; “his face is strangely familiar to me.”

But it was no time for deliberation. Not a moment was to be lost in getting the unconscious astronomer away from his desolate quarters. He was soon conveyed to the yawl; his books, his scanty wardrobe, his papers, his instruments, and the blackboard which had served for his calculations, were quickly collected; the wind, by a fortuitous Providence, had shifted into a favorable quarter; they set their sail with all speed, and ere long were on their journey back from Formentera.

Thirty-six hours later, the brave travelers were greeted by the acclamations of their fellow-colonists, who had been most anxiously awaiting their reappearance, and the still senseless *savant*, who had neither opened his eyes nor spoken a word throughout the journey, was safely deposited in the warmth and security of the great hall of Nina’s Hive.

END OF FIRST BOOK

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I. THE ASTRONOMER

By the return of the expedition, conveying its contribution from Formentera, the known population of Gallia was raised to a total of thirty-six.

On learning the details of his friends’ discoveries, Count Timascheff did not hesitate in believing that the exhausted individual who was lying before him was the author alike of the two unsigned documents picked up at sea, and of the third statement so recently brought to hand by the carrier-pigeon. Manifestly, he had arrived at some knowledge of Gallia’s movements: he had estimated her distance from the sun; he had calculated the diminution of her tangential speed; but there was nothing to show that he had arrived at the conclusions which were of the most paramount interest to them all. Had he ascertained the true character of her orbit? had he established any data from which it would be possible to reckon what time must elapse before she would again approach the earth?

The only intelligible words which the astronomer had uttered had been, “My comet!”

To what could the exclamation refer? Was it to be conjectured that a fragment of the earth had been chipped off by the collision of a comet? and if so, was it implied that the name of the comet itself was Gallia, and were they mistaken in supposing that such was the name given by the *savant* to the little world that had been so suddenly launched into space? Again and again they discussed these questions; but no satisfactory answer could be found. The only man who was able to throw any light upon the subject was lying amongst them in an unconscious and half-dying condition.

Apart from motives of humanity, motives of self-interest made it a matter of the deepest concern to restore animation to that senseless form. Ben Zoof, after making the encouraging remark that *savants* have as many lives as a cat, proceeded, with Negrete's assistance, to give the body such a vigorous rubbing as would have threatened serious injury to any ordinary mortal, whilst they administered cordials and restoratives from the *Dobryna's* medical stores powerful enough, one might think, to rouse the very dead.

Meanwhile the captain was racking his brain in his exertions to recall what were the circumstances of his previous acquaintance with the Frenchman upon whose features he was gazing; he only grew more and more convinced that he had once been familiar with them. Perhaps it was not altogether surprising that he had almost forgotten him; he had never seen him since the days of his youth, that time of life which, with a certain show of justice, has been termed the age of ingratitude; for, in point of fact, the astronomer was none other than Professor Palmyrin Rosette, Servadac's old science-master at the Lycee Charlemagne.

After completing his year of elementary studies, Hector Servadac had entered the school at Saint Cyr, and from that time he and his former tutor had never met, so that naturally they would well-nigh pass from each other's recollection. One thing, however, on the other hand, might conduce to a mutual and permanent impression on their memories; during the year at the Lycee, young Servadac, never of a very studious turn of mind, had contrived, as the ringleader of a set of like caliber as himself, to lead the poor professor a life of perpetual torment. On the discovery of each delinquency he would fume and rage in a manner that was a source of unbounded delight to his audience.

Two years after Servadac left the Lycee, Professor Rosette had thrown up all educational employment in order that he might devote himself entirely to the study of astronomy. He endeavored to obtain a post at the Observatory, but his ungenial character was so well known in scientific circles that he failed in his application; however, having some small private means, he determined on his own account to carry on his researches without any official salary. He had really considerable genius for the science that he had adopted; besides discovering three of the latest of the telescopic planets, he had worked out the elements of the three hundred and twenty-fifth comet in the catalogue; but his chief delight was to criticize the publications of other astronomers, and he was never better pleased than when he detected a flaw in their reckonings.

When Ben Zoof and Negrete had extricated their patient from the envelope of furs in which he had been wrapped by Servadac and the lieutenant, they found themselves face to face with a shrivelled little man, about five feet two inches high, with a round bald head, smooth and shiny as an ostrich’s egg, no beard unless the unshorn growth of a week could be so described, and a long hooked nose that supported a huge pair of spectacles such as with many near-sighted people seems to have become a part of their individuality. His nervous system was remarkably developed, and his body might not inaptly be compared to one of the Rhumkorff’s bobbins of which the thread, several hundred yards in length, is permeated throughout by electric fluid. But whatever he was, his life, if possible, must be preserved. When he had been partially divested of his clothing, his heart was found to be still beating, though very feebly. Asserting that while there was life there was hope, Ben Zoof recommenced his friction with more vigor than ever.

When the rubbing had been continued without a moment’s intermission for the best part of half an hour, the astronomer heaved a faint sigh, which ere long was followed by another and another. He half opened his eyes, closed them again, then opened them completely, but without exhibiting any consciousness whatever of his situation. A few words seemed to escape his lips, but they were quite unintelligible. Presently he raised his right hand to his forehead as though instinctively feeling for something that was missing; then, all of a sudden, his features became contracted, his face flushed with apparent irritation, and he exclaimed fretfully, “My spectacles! — where are my spectacles?”

In order to facilitate his operations, Ben Zoof had removed the spectacles in spite of the tenacity with which they seemed to adhere to the temples of his patient; but he now rapidly brought them back and readjusted them as best he could to what seemed to be their natural position on the aquiline nose. The professor heaved a long sigh of relief, and once more closed his eyes.

Before long the astronomer roused himself a little more, and glanced inquiringly about him, but soon relapsed into his comatose condition. When next he opened his eyes, Captain Servadac happened to be bending down closely over him, examining his features with curious scrutiny. The old man darted an angry look at him through the spectacles, and said sharply, “Servadac, five hundred lines to-morrow!”

It was an echo of days of old. The words were few, but they were enough to recall the identity which Servadac was trying to make out.

“Is it possible?” he exclaimed. “Here is my old tutor, Mr. Rosette, in very flesh and blood.”

“Can’t say much for the flesh,” muttered Ben Zoof.

The old man had again fallen back into a torpid slumber. Ben Zoof continued, “His sleep is getting more composed. Let him alone; he will come round yet. Haven’t I heard of men more dried up than he is, being brought all the way from Egypt in cases covered with pictures?”

“You idiot! — those were mummies; they had been dead for ages.”

Ben Zoof did not answer a word. He went on preparing a warm bed, into which he managed to remove his patient, who soon fell into a calm and natural sleep.

Too impatient to await the awakening of the astronomer and to hear what representations he had to make, Servadac, the count, and the lieutenant, constituting themselves what might be designated “the Academy of Sciences” of the colony, spent the whole of the remainder of the day in starting and discussing the wildest conjectures about their situation. The hypothesis, to which they had now accustomed themselves for so long, that a new asteroid had been formed by a fracture of the earth’s surface, seemed to fall to the ground when they found that Professor Palmyrin Rosette had associated the name of Gallia, not with their present home, but with what he called “my comet”; and that theory being abandoned, they were driven to make the most improbable speculations to replace it.

Alluding to Rosette, Servadac took care to inform his companions that, although the professor was always eccentric, and at times very irascible, yet he was really exceedingly good-hearted; his bark was worse than his bite; and if suffered to take their course without observation, his outbreaks of ill-temper seldom lasted long.

“We will certainly do our best to get on with him,” said the count. “He is no doubt the author of the papers, and we must hope that he will be able to give us some valuable information.”

“Beyond a question the documents have originated with him,” assented the lieutenant. “Gallia was the word written at the top of every one of them, and Gallia was the first word uttered by him in our hearing.”

The astronomer slept on. Meanwhile, the three together had no hesitation in examining his papers, and scrutinizing the figures on his extemporized blackboard. The handwriting corresponded with that of the papers already received; the blackboard was covered with algebraical symbols traced in chalk, which they were careful not to obliterate; and the papers, which consisted for the most part of detached scraps, presented a perfect wilderness of geometrical figures, conic sections of every variety being repeated in countless profusion.

Lieutenant Procope pointed out that these curves evidently had reference to the orbits of comets, which are variously parabolic, hyperbolic, or elliptic. If either of the first two, the comet, after once appearing within the range of terrestrial vision, would vanish forever in the outlying regions of space; if the last, it would be sure, sooner or later, after some periodic interval, to return.

From the *prima facie* appearance of his papers, then, it seemed probable that the astronomer, during his sojourn at Formentera, had been devoting himself to the study of cometary orbits; and as calculations of this kind are ordinarily based upon the assumption that the orbit is a parabola, it was not unlikely that he had been endeavoring to trace the path of some particular comet.

“I wonder whether these calculations were made before or after the 1st of January; it makes all the difference,” said Lieutenant Procope.

“We must bide our time and hear,” replied the count.

Servadac paced restlessly up and down. “I would give a month of my life,” he cried, impetuously, “for every hour that the old fellow goes sleeping on.”

“You might be making a bad bargain,” said Procope, smiling. “Perhaps after all the comet has had nothing to do with the convulsion that we have experienced.”

“Nonsense!” exclaimed the captain; “I know better than that, and so do you. Is it not as clear as daylight that the earth and this comet have been in collision, and the result has been that our little world has been split off and sent flying far into space?”

Count Timascheff and the lieutenant looked at each other in silence. “I do not deny your theory,” said Procope after a while. “If it be correct, I suppose we must conclude that the enormous disc we observed on the night of the catastrophe was the comet itself; and the velocity with which it was traveling must have been so great that it was hardly arrested at all by the attraction of the earth.”

“Plausible enough,” answered Count Timascheff; “and it is to this comet that our scientific friend here has given the name of Gallia.”

It still remained a puzzle to them all why the astronomer should apparently be interested in the comet so much more than in the new little world in which their strange lot was cast.

“Can you explain this?” asked the count.

“There is no accounting for the freaks of philosophers, you know,” said Servadac; “and have I not told you that this philosopher in particular is one of the most eccentric beings in creation?”

“Besides,” added the lieutenant, “it is exceedingly likely that his observations had been going on for some considerable period before the convulsion happened.”

Thus, the general conclusion arrived at by the Gallian Academy of Science was this: That on the night of the 31st of December, a comet, crossing the ecliptic, had come into collision with the earth, and that the violence of the shock had separated a huge fragment from the globe, which fragment from that date had been traversing the remote inter-planetary regions. Palmyrin Rosette would doubtless confirm their solution of the phenomenon.

CHAPTER II. A REVELATION

To the general population of the colony the arrival of the stranger was a matter of small interest. The Spaniards were naturally too indolent to be affected in any way by an incident that concerned themselves so remotely; while the Russians felt themselves simply reliant on their master, and as long as they were with him were careless as to where or how they spent their days. Everything went on with them in an accustomed routine; and they lay down night after night, and awoke to their avocations morning after morning, just as if nothing extraordinary had occurred.

All night long Ben Zoof would not leave the professor's bedside. He had constituted himself sick nurse, and considered his reputation at stake if he failed to set his patient on his feet again. He watched every movement, listened to every breath, and never failed to administer the strongest cordials upon the slightest pretext. Even in his sleep Rosette's irritable nature revealed itself. Ever and again, sometimes in a tone of uneasiness, and sometimes with the expression of positive anger, the name of Gallia escaped his lips, as though he were dreaming that his claim to the discovery of the comet was being contested or denied; but although his attendant was on the alert to gather all he could, he was able to catch nothing in the incoherent sentences that served to throw any real light upon the problem that they were all eager to solve.

When the sun reappeared on the western horizon the professor was still sound asleep; and Ben Zoof, who was especially anxious that the repose which promised to be so beneficial should not be disturbed, felt considerable annoyance at hearing a loud knocking, evidently of some blunt heavy instrument against a door that had been placed at the entrance of the gallery, more for the purpose of retaining internal warmth than for guarding against intrusion from without.

“Confound it!” said Ben Zoof. “I must put a stop to this;” and he made his way towards the door.

“Who’s there?” he cried, in no very amiable tone.

“I.” replied the quavering voice.

“Who are you?”

“Isaac Hakkabut. Let me in; do, please, let me in.”

“Oh, it is you, old Ashtaroth, is it? What do you want? Can’t you get anybody to buy your stuffs?”

“Nobody will pay me a proper price.”

“Well, old Shimei, you won’t find a customer here. You had better be off.”

“No; but do, please — do, please, let me in,” supplicated the Jew. “I want to speak to his Excellency, the governor.”

“The governor is in bed, and asleep.”

“I can wait until he awakes.”

“Then wait where you are.”

And with this inhospitable rejoinder the orderly was about to return to his place at the side of his patient, when Servadac, who had been roused by the sound of voices, called out, “What’s the matter, Ben Zoof?”

“Oh, nothing, sir; only that hound of a Hakkabut says he wants to speak to you.”

“Let him in, then.”

Ben Zoof hesitated.

“Let him in, I say,” repeated the captain, peremptorily.

However reluctantly, Ben Zoof obeyed. The door was unfastened, and Isaac Hakkabut, enveloped in an old overcoat, shuffled into the gallery. In a few moments Servadac approached, and the Jew began to overwhelm him with the most obsequious epithets. Without vouchsafing any reply, the captain beckoned to the old man to follow him, and leading the way to the central hall, stopped, and turning so as to look him steadily in the face, said, “Now is your opportunity. Tell me what you want.”

“Oh, my lord, my lord,” whined Isaac, “you must have some news to tell me.”

“News? What do you mean?”

“From my little tartan yonder, I saw the yawl go out from the rock here on a journey, and I saw it come back, and it brought a stranger; and I thought — I thought — I thought — ”

“Well, you thought — what did you think?”

“Why, that perhaps the stranger had come from the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and that I might ask him — ”

He paused again, and gave a glance at the captain.

“Ask him what? Speak out, man?”

“Ask him if he brings any tidings of Europe,” Hakkabut blurted out at last.

Servadac shrugged his shoulders in contempt and turned away. Here was a man who had been resident three months in Gallia, a living witness of all the abnormal phenomena that had occurred, and yet refusing to believe that his hope of making good bargains with European traders was at an end. Surely nothing, thought the captain, will convince the old rascal now; and he moved off in disgust. The orderly, however, who had listened with much amusement, was by no means disinclined for the conversation to be continued. “Are you satisfied, old Ezekiel?” he asked.

“Isn’t it so? Am I not right? Didn’t a stranger arrive here last night?” inquired the Jew.

“Yes, quite true.”

“Where from?”

“From the Balearic Isles.”

“The Balearic Isles?” echoed Isaac.

“Yes.”

“Fine quarters for trade! Hardly twenty leagues from Spain! He must have brought news from Europe!”

“Well, old Manasseh, what if he has?”

“I should like to see him.”

“Can’t be.”

The Jew sidled close up to Ben Zoof, and laying his hand on his arm, said in a low and insinuating tone, “I am poor, you know; but I would give you a few reals if you would let me talk to this stranger.”

But as if he thought he was making too liberal an offer, he added, “Only it must be at once.”

“He is too tired; he is worn out; he is fast asleep,” answered Ben Zoof.

“But I would pay you to wake him.”

The captain had overheard the tenor of the conversation, and interposed sternly, “Hakkabut! if you make the least attempt to disturb our visitor, I shall have you turned outside that door immediately.”

“No offense, my lord, I hope,” stammered out the Jew. “I only meant — ”

“Silence!” shouted Servadac. The old man hung his head, abashed.

“I will tell you what,” said Servadac after a brief interval; “I will give you leave to hear what this stranger has to tell as soon as he is able to tell us anything; at present we have not heard a word from his lips.”

The Jew looked perplexed.

“Yes,” said Servadac; “when we hear his story, you shall hear it too.”

“And I hope it will be to your liking, old Ezekiel!” added Ben Zoof in a voice of irony.

They had none of them long to wait, for within a few minutes Rosette’s peevish voice was heard calling, “Joseph! Joseph!”

The professor did not open his eyes, and appeared to be slumbering on, but very shortly afterwards called out again, “Joseph! Confound the fellow! where is he?” It was evident that he was half dreaming about a former servant now far away on the ancient globe. “Where’s my blackboard, Joseph?”

“Quite safe, sir,” answered Ben Zoof, quickly.

Rosette unclosed his eyes and fixed them full upon the orderly’s face. “Are you Joseph?” he asked.

“At your service, sir,” replied Ben Zoof with imperturbable gravity.

“Then get me my coffee, and be quick about it.”

Ben Zoof left to go into the kitchen, and Servadac approached the professor in order to assist him in rising to a sitting posture.

“Do you recognize your quondam pupil, professor?” he asked.

“Ah, yes, yes; you are Servadac,” replied Rosette. “It is twelve years or more since I saw you; I hope you have improved.”

“Quite a reformed character, sir, I assure you,” said Servadac, smiling.

“Well, that’s as it should be; that’s right,” said the astronomer with fussy importance. “But let me have my coffee,” he added impatiently; “I cannot collect my thoughts without my coffee.”

Fortunately, Ben Zoof appeared with a great cup, hot and strong. After draining it with much apparent relish, the professor got out of bed, walked into the common hall, round which he glanced with a pre-occupied air, and proceeded to seat himself in an armchair, the most comfortable which the cabin of the *Dobryna* had supplied. Then, in a voice full of satisfaction, and that involuntarily recalled the exclamations of delight that had wound up the two first of the mysterious documents that had been received, he burst out, "Well, gentlemen, what do you think of Gallia?"

There was no time for anyone to make a reply before Isaac Hakkabut had darted forward.

"By the God — "

"Who is that?" asked the startled professor; and he frowned, and made a gesture of repugnance.

Regardless of the efforts that were made to silence him, the Jew continued, "By the God of Abraham, I beseech you, give me some tidings of Europe!"

"Europe?" shouted the professor, springing from his seat as if he were electrified; "what does the man want with Europe?"

"I want to get there!" screeched the Jew; and in spite of every exertion to get him away, he clung most tenaciously to the professor's chair, and again and again implored for news of Europe.

Rosette made no immediate reply. After a moment or two's reflection, he turned to Servadac and asked him whether it was not the middle of April.

"It is the twentieth," answered the captain.

“Then to-day,” said the astronomer, speaking with the greatest deliberation — ”to-day we are just three millions of leagues away from Europe.”

The Jew was utterly crestfallen.

“You seem here,” continued the professor, “to be very ignorant of the state of things.”

“How far we are ignorant,” rejoined Servadac, “I cannot tell. But I will tell you all that we do know, and all that we have surmised.” And as briefly as he could, he related all that had happened since the memorable night of the thirty-first of December; how they had experienced the shock; how the *Dobryna* had made her voyage; how they had discovered nothing except the fragments of the old continent at Tunis, Sardinia, Gibraltar, and now at Formentera; how at intervals the three anonymous documents had been received; and, finally, how the settlement at Gourbi Island had been abandoned for their present quarters at Nina’s Hive.

The astronomer had hardly patience to hear him to the end. “And what do you say is your surmise as to your present position?” he asked.

“Our supposition,” the captain replied, “is this. We imagine that we are on a considerable fragment of the terrestrial globe that has been detached by collision with a planet to which you appear to have given the name of Gallia.”

“Better than that!” cried Rosette, starting to his feet with excitement.

“How? Why? What do you mean?” cried the voices of the listeners.

“You are correct to a certain degree,” continued the professor. “It is quite true that at 47’ 35.6” after two o’clock on the morning of the first of

January there was a collision; my comet grazed the earth; and the bits of the earth which you have named were carried clean away.”

They were all fairly bewildered.

“Where, then,” cried Servadac eagerly, “where are we?”

“You are on my comet, on Gallia itself!”

And the professor gazed around him with a perfect air of triumph.

CHAPTER III. THE PROFESSOR’S EXPERIENCES

“Yes, my comet!” repeated the professor, and from time to time he knitted his brows, and looked around him with a defiant air, as though he could not get rid of the impression that someone was laying an unwarranted claim to its proprietorship, or that the individuals before him were intruders upon his own proper domain.

But for a considerable while, Servadac, the count, and the lieutenant remained silent and sunk in thought. Here then, at last, was the unriddling of the enigma they had been so long endeavoring to solve; both the hypotheses they had formed in succession had now to give way before the announcement of the real truth. The first supposition, that the rotatory axis of the earth had been subject to some accidental modification, and the conjecture that replaced it, namely, that a certain portion of the terrestrial sphere had been splintered off and carried into space, had both now to yield to the representation that the earth had been grazed by an unknown comet, which had caught up some scattered fragments from its surface, and was bearing them far away into sidereal regions. Unfolded lay the past and the present before them; but this only served to awaken a keener interest about the future. Could the professor throw any light upon that? they longed to inquire, but did not yet venture to ask him.

Meanwhile Rosette assumed a pompous professional air, and appeared to be waiting for the entire party to be ceremoniously introduced to him. Nothing unwilling to humor the vanity of the eccentric little man, Servadac proceeded to go through the expected formalities.

“Allow me to present to you my excellent friend, the Count Timascheff,” he said.

“You are very welcome,” said Rosette, bowing to the count with a smile of condescension.

“Although I am not precisely a voluntary resident on your comet, Mr. Professor, I beg to acknowledge your courteous reception,” gravely responded Timascheff.

Servadac could not quite conceal his amusement at the count’s irony, but continued, “This is Lieutenant Procope, the officer in command of the *Dobryna*.”

The professor bowed again in frigid dignity.

“His yacht has conveyed us right round Gallia,” added the captain.

“Round Gallia?” eagerly exclaimed the professor.

“Yes, entirely round it,” answered Servadac, and without allowing time for reply, proceeded, “And this is my orderly, Ben Zoof.”

“Aide-de-camp to his Excellency the Governor of Gallia,” interposed Ben Zoof himself, anxious to maintain his master’s honor as well as his own.

Rosette scarcely bent his head.

The rest of the population of the Hive were all presented in succession: the Russian sailors, the Spaniards, young Pablo, and little Nina, on whom the professor, evidently no lover of children, glared fiercely through his formidable spectacles. Isaac Hakkabut, after his introduction, begged to be allowed to ask one question.

“How soon may we hope to get back?” he inquired.

“Get back!” rejoined Rosette, sharply; “who talks of getting back? We have hardly started yet.”

Seeing that the professor was inclined to get angry, Captain Servadac adroitly gave a new turn to the conversation by asking him whether he would gratify them by relating his own recent experiences. The astronomer seemed pleased with the proposal, and at once commenced a verbose and somewhat circumlocutory address, of which the following summary presents the main features.

The French Government, being desirous of verifying the measurement already made of the arc of the meridian of Paris, appointed a scientific commission for that purpose. From that commission the name of Palmyrin Rosette was omitted, apparently for no other reason than his personal unpopularity. Furious at the slight, the professor resolved to set to work independently on his own account, and declaring that there were inaccuracies in the previous geodesic operations, he determined to re-examine the results of the last triangulation which had united Formentera to the Spanish coast by a triangle, one of the sides of which measured over a hundred miles, the very operation which had already been so successfully accomplished by Arago and Biot.

Accordingly, leaving Paris for the Balearic Isles, he placed his observatory on the highest point of Formentera, and accompanied as he was only by his servant, Joseph, led the life of a recluse. He secured the services of a former assistant, and dispatched him to a high peak on the coast of Spain, where he had to superintend a reverberator, which, with the aid of a glass, could be seen from Formentera. A few books and instruments, and two months' victuals, was all the baggage he took with him, except an excellent astronomical telescope, which was, indeed, almost part and parcel of himself, and with which he assiduously scanned the heavens, in the sanguine anticipation of making some discovery which would immortalize his name.

The task he had undertaken demanded the utmost patience. Night after night, in order to fix the apex of his triangle, he had to linger on the watch for the assistant's signal-light, but he did not forget that his predecessors, Arago and Biot, had had to wait sixty-one days for a similar purpose. What retarded the work was the dense fog which, it has been already mentioned, at that time enveloped not only that part of Europe, but almost the entire world.

Never failing to turn to the best advantage the few intervals when the mist lifted a little, the astronomer would at the same time cast an inquiring glance at the firmament, as he was greatly interested in the revision of the chart of the heavens, in the region contiguous to the constellation Gemini.

To the naked eye this constellation consists of only six stars, but through a telescope ten inches in diameter, as many as six thousand are visible. Rosette, however, did not possess a reflector of this magnitude, and was obliged to content himself with the good but comparatively small instrument he had.

On one of these occasions, whilst carefully gauging the recesses of Gemini, he espied a bright speck which was unregistered in the chart, and which at first he took for a small star that had escaped being entered in the catalogue. But the observation of a few separate nights soon made it manifest that the star was rapidly changing its position with regard to the adjacent stars, and the astronomer’s heart began to leap at the thought that the renown of the discovery of a new planet would be associated with his name.

Redoubling his attention, he soon satisfied himself that what he saw was not a planet; the rapidity of its displacement rather forced him to the conjecture that it must be a comet, and this opinion was soon strengthened by the appearance of a coma, and subsequently confirmed, as the body approached the sun, by the development of a tail.

A comet! The discovery was fatal to all further progress in the triangulation. However conscientiously the assistant on the Spanish coast might look to the kindling of the beacon, Rosette had no glances to spare for that direction; he had no eyes except for the one object of his notice, no thoughts apart from that one quarter of the firmament.

A comet! No time must be lost in calculating its elements.

Now, in order to calculate the elements of a comet, it is always deemed the safest mode of procedure to assume the orbit to be a parabola. Ordinarily, comets are conspicuous at their perihelia, as being their shortest distances from the sun, which is the focus of their orbit, and inasmuch as a parabola is but an ellipse with its axis indefinitely produced, for some short portion of its pathway the orbit may be indifferently considered either one or the other; but in this particular case the professor was right in adopting the supposition of its being parabolic.

Just as in a circle, it is necessary to know three points to determine the circumference; so in ascertaining the elements of a comet, three different positions must be observed before what astronomers call its “ephemeris” can be established.

But Professor Rosette did not content himself with three positions; taking advantage of every rift in the fog he made ten, twenty, thirty observations both in right ascension and in declination, and succeeded in working out with the most minute accuracy the five elements of the comet which was evidently advancing with astounding rapidity towards the earth.

These elements were:

1. The inclination of the plane of the cometary orbit to the plane of the ecliptic, an angle which is generally considerable, but in this case the planes were proved to coincide.

2. The position of the ascending node, or the point where the comet crossed the terrestrial orbit.

These two elements being obtained, the position in space of the comet’s orbit was determined.

3. The direction of the axis major of the orbit, which was found by calculating the longitude of the comet’s perihelion.

4. The perihelion distance from the sun, which settled the precise form of the parabola.

5. The motion of the comet, as being retrograde, or, unlike the planets, from east to west.

Rosette thus found himself able to calculate the date at which the comet would reach its perihelion, and, overjoyed at his discovery, without thinking of calling it Palmyra or Rosette, after his own name, he resolved that it should be known as Gallia.

His next business was to draw up a formal report. Not only did he at once recognize that a collision with the earth was possible, but he soon foresaw that it was inevitable, and that it must happen on the night of the 31st of December; moreover, as the bodies were moving in opposite directions, the shock could hardly fail to be violent.

To say that he was elated at the prospect was far below the truth; his delight amounted almost to delirium. Anyone else would have hurried from the solitude of Formentera in sheer fright; but, without communicating a word of his startling discovery, he remained resolutely at his post. From occasional newspapers which he had received, he had learnt that fogs, dense as ever, continued to envelop both hemispheres, so that he was assured that the existence of the comet was utterly unknown elsewhere; and the ignorance of the world as to the peril that threatened it averted the panic that would have followed the publication of the facts, and left the philosopher of Formentera in sole possession of the great secret. He clung to his post with the greater persistency, because his calculations had led him to the conclusion that the comet would strike the earth somewhere to the south of Algeria, and as it had a solid nucleus, he felt sure that, as he expressed it, the effect would be "unique," and he was anxious to be in the vicinity.

The shock came, and with it the results already recorded. Palmyrin Rosette was suddenly separated from his servant Joseph, and when, after a long period of unconsciousness, he came to himself, he found that he was the solitary occupant of the only fragment that survived of the Balearic Archipelago.

Such was the substance of the narrative which the professor gave with sundry repetitions and digressions; while he was giving it, he frequently paused and frowned as if irritated in a way that seemed by no means justified by the patient and good-humored demeanor of his audience.

“But now, gentlemen,” added the professor, “I must tell you something more. Important changes have resulted from the collision; the cardinal points have been displaced; gravity has been diminished: not that I ever supposed for a minute, as you did, that I was still upon the earth. No! the earth, attended by her moon, continued to rotate along her proper orbit. But we, gentlemen, have nothing to complain of; our destiny might have been far worse; we might all have been crushed to death, or the comet might have remained in adhesion to the earth; and in neither of these cases should we have had the satisfaction of making this marvelous excursion through untraversed solar regions. No, gentlemen, I repeat it, we have nothing to regret.”

And as the professor spoke, he seemed to kindle with the emotion of such supreme contentment that no one had the heart to gainsay his assertion. Ben Zoof alone ventured an unlucky remark to the effect that if the comet had happened to strike against Montmartre, instead of a bit of Africa, it would have met with some resistance.

“Pshaw!” said Rosette, disdainfully. “A mole-hill like Montmartre would have been ground to powder in a moment.”

“Mole-hill!” exclaimed Ben Zoof, stung to the quick. “I can tell you it would have caught up your bit of a comet and worn it like a feather in a cap.”

The professor looked angry, and Servadac having imposed silence upon his orderly, explained the worthy soldier’s sensitiveness on all that concerned Montmartre. Always obedient to his master, Ben Zoof held his tongue; but he felt that he could never forgive the slight that had been cast upon his beloved home.

It was now all-important to learn whether the astronomer had been able to continue his observations, and whether he had learned sufficient of Gallia’s path through space to make him competent to determine, at least approximately, the period of its revolution round the sun. With as much tact and caution as he could, Lieutenant Procope endeavored to intimate the general desire for some information on this point.

“Before the shock, sir,” answered the professor, “I had conclusively demonstrated the path of the comet; but, in consequence of the modifications which that shock has entailed upon my comet’s orbit, I have been compelled entirely to recommence my calculations.”

The lieutenant looked disappointed.

“Although the orbit of the earth was unaltered,” continued the professor, “the result of the collision was the projection of the comet into a new orbit altogether.”

“And may I ask,” said Procope, deferentially, “whether you have got the elements of the fresh orbit?”

“Yes.”

“Then perhaps you know — ”

“I know this, sir, that at 47 minutes 35.6 seconds after two o’clock on the morning of the 1st of January last, Gallia, in passing its ascending node, came in contact with the earth; that on the 10th of January it crossed the orbit of Venus; that it reached its perihelion on the 15th; that it re-crossed the orbit of Venus; that on the 1st of February it passed its descending node; on the 13th crossed the orbit of Mars; entered the zone of the telescopic planets on the 10th of March, and, attracting Nerina, carried it off as a satellite.”

Servadac interposed:

“We are already acquainted with well-nigh all these extraordinary facts; many of them, moreover, we have learned from documents which we have picked up, and which, although unsigned, we cannot entertain a doubt have originated with you.”

Professor Rosette drew himself up proudly and said: “Of course, they originated with me. I sent them off by hundreds. From whom else could they come?”

“From no one but yourself, certainly,” rejoined the count, with grave politeness.

Hitherto the conversation had thrown no light upon the future movements of Gallia, and Rosette was disposed apparently to evade, or at least to postpone, the subject. When, therefore, Lieutenant Procope was about to press his inquiries in a more categorical form, Servadac, thinking it advisable not prematurely to press the little *savant* too far, interrupted him by asking the professor how he accounted for the earth having suffered so little from such a formidable concussion.

“I account for it in this way,” answered Rosette: “the earth was traveling at the rate of 28,000 leagues an hour, and Gallia at the rate of 57,000 leagues an hour, therefore the result was the same as though a train rushing along at a speed of about 86,000 leagues an hour had suddenly encountered some obstacle. The nucleus of the comet, being excessively hard, has done exactly what a ball would do fired with that velocity close to a pane of glass. It has crossed the earth without cracking it.”

“It is possible you may be right,” said Servadac, thoughtfully.

“Right! of course I am right!” replied the snappish professor. Soon, however, recovering his equanimity, he continued: “It is fortunate that the earth was only touched obliquely; if the comet had impinged perpendicularly, it must have plowed its way deep below the surface, and the disasters it might have caused are beyond reckoning. Perhaps,” he added, with a smile, “even Montmartre might not have survived the calamity.”

“Sir!” shouted Ben Zoof, quite unable to bear the unprovoked attack.

“Quiet, Ben Zoof!” said Servadac sternly.

Fortunately for the sake of peace, Isaac Hakkabut, who at length was beginning to realize something of the true condition of things, came forward at this moment, and in a voice trembling with eagerness, implored the professor to tell him when they would all be back again upon the earth.

“Are you in a great hurry?” asked the professor coolly.

The Jew was about to speak again, when Captain Servadac interposed: “Allow me to say that, in somewhat more scientific terms, I was about to ask you the same question. Did I not understand you to say that, as the consequence of the collision, the character of the comet’s orbit has been changed?”

“You did, sir.”

“Did you imply that the orbit has ceased to be a parabola?”

“Just so.”

“Is it then an hyperbola? and are we to be carried on far and away into remote distance, and never, never to return?”

“I did not say an hyperbola.”

“And is it not?”

“It is not.”

“Then it must be an ellipse?”

“Yes.”

“And does its plane coincide with the plane of the earth?”

“Yes.”

“Then it must be a periodic comet?”

“It is.”

Servadac involuntarily raised a ringing shout of joy that echoed again along the gallery.

“Yes,” continued the professor, “Gallia is a periodic comet, and allowing for the perturbations to which it is liable from the attraction of Mars and Jupiter and Saturn, it will return to the earth again in two years precisely.”

“You mean that in two years after the first shock, Gallia will meet the earth at the same point as they met before?” said Lieutenant Procope.

“I am afraid so,” said Rosette.

“Why afraid?”

“Because we are doing exceedingly well as we are.” The professor stamped his foot upon the ground, by way of emphasis, and added, “If I had my will, Gallia should never return to the earth again!”

CHAPTER IV. A REVISED CALENDAR

All previous hypotheses, then, were now forgotten in the presence of the one great fact that Gallia was a comet and gravitating through remote solar regions. Captain Servadac became aware that the huge disc that had been looming through the clouds after the shock was the form of the retreating earth, to the proximity of which the one high tide they had experienced was also to be attributed.

As to the fulfillment of the professor's prediction of an ultimate return to the terrestrial sphere, that was a point on which it must be owned that the captain, after the first flush of his excitement was over, was not without many misgivings.

The next day or two were spent in providing for the accommodation of the new comer. Fortunately his desires were very moderate; he seemed to live among the stars, and as long as he was well provided with coffee, he cared little for luxuries, and paid little or no regard to the ingenuity with which all the internal arrangements of Nina's Hive had been devised. Anxious to show all proper respect to his former tutor, Servadac proposed to leave the most comfortable apartment of the place at his disposal; but the professor resolutely declined to occupy it, saying that what he required was a small chamber, no matter how small, provided that it was elevated and secluded, which he could use as an observatory and where he might prosecute his studies without disturbance. A general search was instituted, and before long they were lucky enough to find, about a hundred feet above the central grotto, a small recess or reduct hollowed, as it were, in the mountain side, which would exactly answer their purpose. It contained room enough for a bed, a table, an arm-chair, a chest of drawers, and, what was of still more consequence, for the indispensable telescope. One small stream of lava, an off-shoot of the great torrent, sufficed to warm the apartment enough.

In these retired quarters the astronomer took up his abode. It was on all hands acknowledged to be advisable to let him go on entirely in his own way. His meals were taken to him at stated intervals; he slept but little; carried on his calculations by day, his observations by night, and very rarely made his appearance amongst the rest of the little community.

The cold now became very intense, the thermometer registering 30 degrees F. below zero. The mercury, however, never exhibited any of those fluctuations that are ever and again to be observed in variable climates, but continued slowly and steadily to fall, and in all probability would continue to do so until it reached the normal temperature of the regions of outlying space.

This steady sinking of the mercury was accompanied by a complete stillness of the atmosphere; the very air seemed to be congealed; no particle of it stirred; from zenith to horizon there was never a cloud; neither were there any of the damp mists or dry fogs which so often extend over the polar regions of the earth; the sky was always clear; the sun shone by day and the stars by night without causing any perceptible difference in the temperature.

These peculiar conditions rendered the cold endurable even in the open air. The cause of so many of the diseases that prove fatal to Arctic explorers resides in the cutting winds, unwholesome fogs, or terrible snow drifts, which, by drying up, relaxing, or otherwise affecting the lungs, make them incapable of fulfilling their proper functions. But during periods of calm weather, when the air has been absolutely still, many polar navigators, well-clothed and properly fed, have been known to withstand a temperature when the thermometer has fallen to 60 degrees below zero. It was the experience of Parry upon Melville Island, of Kane beyond latitude 81 degrees north, and of Hall and the crew of the *Polaris*, that, however intense the cold, in the absence of the wind they could always brave its rigor.

Notwithstanding, then, the extreme lowness of the temperature, the little population found that they were able to move about in the open air with perfect immunity. The governor general made it his special care to see that his people were all well fed and warmly clad. Food was both wholesome and abundant, and besides the furs brought from the *Dobryna's* stores, fresh skins could very easily be procured and made up into wearing apparel. A daily course of out-door exercise was enforced upon everyone; not even Pablo and Nina were exempted from the general rule; the two children, muffled up in furs, looking like little Esquimeaux, skated along together, Pablo ever at his companion's side, ready to give her a helping hand whenever she was weary with her exertions.

After his interview with the newly arrived astronomer, Isaac Hakkabut slunk back again to his tartan. A change had come over his ideas; he could no longer resist the conviction that he was indeed millions and millions of miles away from the earth, where he had carried on so varied and remunerative a traffic. It might be imagined that this realization of his true position would have led him to a better mind, and that, in some degree at least, he would have been induced to regard the few fellow-creatures with whom his lot had been so strangely cast, otherwise than as mere instruments to be turned to his own personal and pecuniary advantage; but no — the desire of gain was too thoroughly ingrained into his hard nature ever to be eradicated, and secure in his knowledge that he was under the protection of a French officer, who, except under the most urgent necessity, would not permit him to be molested in retaining his property, he determined to wait for some emergency to arise which should enable him to use his present situation for his own profit.

On the one hand, the Jew took it into account that although the chances of returning to the earth might be remote, yet from what he had heard from the professor he could not believe that they were improbable; on the other, he knew that a considerable sum of money, in English and Russian coinage, was in the possession of various members of the little colony, and this, although valueless now, would be worth as much as ever if the proper condition of things should be restored; accordingly, he set his heart on getting all the monetary wealth of Gallia into his possession, and to do this he must sell his goods. But he would not sell them yet; there might come a time when for many articles the supply would not be equal to the demand; that would be the time for him; by waiting he reckoned he should be able to transact some lucrative business.

Such in his solitude were old Isaac's cogitations, whilst the universal population of Nina's Hive were congratulating themselves upon being rid of his odious presence.

As already stated in the message brought by the carrier pigeon, the distance traveled by Gallia in April was 39,000,000 leagues, and at the end of the month she was 110,000,000 leagues from the sun. A diagram representing the elliptical orbit of the planet, accompanied by an ephemeris made out in minute detail, had been drawn out by the professor. The curve was divided into twenty-four sections of unequal length, representing respectively the distance described in the twenty-four months of the Gallian year, the twelve former divisions, according to Kepler's law, gradually diminishing in length as they approached the point denoting the aphelion and increasing as they neared the perihelion.

It was on the 12th of May that Rosette exhibited this result of his labors to Servadac, the count, and the lieutenant, who visited his apartment and naturally examined the drawing with the keenest interest. Gallia's path, extending beyond the orbit of Jupiter, lay clearly defined before their eyes, the progress along the orbit and the solar distances being inserted for each month separately. Nothing could look plainer, and if the professor's calculations were correct (a point upon which they dared not, if they would, express the semblance of a doubt), Gallia would accomplish her revolution in precisely two years, and would meet the earth, which would in the same period of time have completed two annual revolutions, in the very same spot as before. What would be the consequences of a second collision they scarcely ventured to think.

Without lifting his eye from the diagram, which he was still carefully scrutinizing, Servadac said, "I see that during the month of May, Gallia will only travel 30,400,000 leagues, and that this will leave her about 140,000,000 leagues distant from the sun."

"Just so," replied the professor.

"Then we have already passed the zone of the telescopic planets, have we not?" asked the count.

"Can you not use your eyes?" said the professor, testily. "If you will look you will see the zone marked clearly enough upon the map."

Without noticing the interruption, Servadac continued his own remarks, "The comet then, I see, is to reach its aphelion on the 15th of January, exactly a twelvemonth after passing its perihelion.”

“A twelvemonth! Not a Gallian twelvemonth?” exclaimed Rosette.

Servadac looked bewildered. Lieutenant Procope could not suppress a smile.

“What are you laughing at?” demanded the professor, turning round upon him angrily.

“Nothing, sir; only it amuses me to see how you want to revise the terrestrial calendar.”

“I want to be logical, that’s all.”

“By all manner of means, my dear professor, let us be logical.”

“Well, then, listen to me,” resumed the professor, stiffly. “I presume you are taking it for granted that the Gallian year — by which I mean the time in which Gallia makes one revolution round the sun — is equal in length to two terrestrial years.”

They signified their assent.

“And that year, like every other year, ought to be divided into twelve months.”

“Yes, certainly, if you wish it,” said the captain, acquiescing.

“If I wish it!” exclaimed Rosette. “Nothing of the sort! Of course a year must have twelve months!”

“Of course,” said the captain.

"And how many days will make a month?" asked the professor.

"I suppose sixty or sixty-two, as the case may be. The days now are only half as long as they used to be," answered the captain.

"Servadac, don't be thoughtless!" cried Rosette, with all the petulant impatience of the old pedagogue. "If the days are only half as long as they were, sixty of them cannot make up a twelfth part of Gallia's year — cannot be a month."

"I suppose not," replied the confused captain.

"Do you not see, then," continued the astronomer, "that if a Gallian month is twice as long as a terrestrial month, and a Gallian day is only half as long as a terrestrial day, there must be a hundred and twenty days in every month?"

"No doubt you are right, professor," said Count Timascheff; "but do you not think that the use of a new calendar such as this would practically be very troublesome?"

"Not at all! not at all! I do not intend to use any other," was the professor's bluff reply.

After pondering for a few moments, the captain spoke again. "According, then, to this new calendar, it isn't the middle of May at all; it must now be some time in March."

"Yes," said the professor, "to-day is the 26th of March. It is the 266th day of the Gallian year. It corresponds with the 133d day of the terrestrial year. You are quite correct, it is the 26th of March."

“Strange!” muttered Servadac.

“And a month, a terrestrial month, thirty old days, sixty new days hence, it will be the 86th of March.”

“Ha, ha!” roared the captain; “this is logic with a vengeance!”

The old professor had an undefined consciousness that his former pupil was laughing at him; and as it was growing late, he made an excuse that he had no more leisure. The visitors accordingly quitted the observatory.

It must be owned that the revised calendar was left to the professor’s sole use, and the colony was fairly puzzled whenever he referred to such unheard-of dates as the 47th of April or the 118th of May.

According to the old calendar, June had now arrived; [illustration omitted] [page intentionally blank] and by the professor’s tables Gallia during the month would have advanced 27,500,000 leagues farther along its orbit, and would have attained a distance of 155,000,000 leagues from the sun. The thermometer continued to fall; the atmosphere remained clear as heretofore. The population performed their daily avocations with systematic routine; and almost the only thing that broke the monotony of existence was an occasional visit from the blustering, nervous, little professor, when some sudden fancy induced him to throw aside his astronomical studies for a time, and pay a visit to the common hall. His arrival there was generally hailed as the precursor of a little season of excitement. Somehow or other the conversation would eventually work its way round to the topic of a future collision between the comet and the earth; and in the same degree as this was a matter of sanguine anticipation to Captain Servadac and his friends, it was a matter of aversion to the astronomical enthusiast, who had no desire to quit his present quarters in a sphere which, being of his own discovery, he could hardly have cared for more if it had been of his own creation. The interview would often terminate in a scene of considerable animation.

On the 27th of June (old calendar) the professor burst like a cannon-ball into the central hall, where they were all assembled, and without a word of salutation or of preface, accosted the lieutenant in the way in which in earlier days he had been accustomed to speak to an idle school-boy, “Now, lieutenant! no evasions! no shufflings! Tell me, have you or have you not circumnavigated Gallia?”

The lieutenant drew himself up stiffly. “Evasions! shufflings! I am not accustomed, sir — ” he began in a tone evidencing no little resentment; but catching a hint from the count he subdued his voice, and simply said, “We have.”

“And may I ask,” continued the professor, quite unaware of his previous discourtesy, “whether, when you made your voyage, you took any account of distances?”

“As approximately as I could,” replied the lieutenant; “I did what I could by log and compass. I was unable to take the altitude of sun or star.”

“At what result did you arrive? What is the measurement of our equator?”

“I estimate the total circumference of the equator to be about 1,400 miles.”

“Ah!” said the professor, more than half speaking to himself, “a circumference of 1,400 miles would give a diameter of about 450 miles. That would be approximately about one-sixteenth of the diameter of the earth.”

Raising his voice, he continued, “Gentlemen, in order to complete my account of my comet Gallia, I require to know its area, its mass, its volume, its density, its specific gravity.”

“Since we know the diameter,” remarked the lieutenant, “there can be no difficulty in finding its surface and its volume.”

“And did I say there was any difficulty?” asked the professor, fiercely. “I have been able to reckon that ever since I was born.”

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” cried Ben Zoof, delighted at any opportunity of paying off his old grudge.

The professor looked at him, but did not vouchsafe a word. Addressing the captain, he said, “Now, Servadac, take your paper and a pen, and find me the surface of Gallia.”

With more submission than when he was a school-boy, the captain sat down and endeavored to recall the proper formula.

“The surface of a sphere? Multiply circumference by diameter.”

“Right!” cried Rosette; “but it ought to be done by this time.”

“Circumference, 1,400; diameter, 450; area of surface, 630,000,” read the captain.

“True,” replied Rosette, “630,000 square miles; just 292 times less than that of the earth.”

“Pretty little comet! nice little comet!” muttered Ben Zoof.

The astronomer bit his lip, snorted, and cast at him a withering look, but did not take any further notice.

“Now, Captain Servadac,” said the professor, “take your pen again, and find me the volume of Gallia.”

The captain hesitated.

“Quick, quick!” cried the professor, impatiently; “surely you have not forgotten how to find the volume of a sphere!”

“A moment’s breathing time, please.”

“Breathing time, indeed! A mathematician should not want breathing time! Come, multiply the surface by the third of the radius. Don’t you recollect?”

Captain Servadac applied himself to his task while the by-standers waited, with some difficulty suppressing their inclination to laugh. There was a short silence, at the end of which Servadac announced that the volume of the comet was 47,880,000 cubic miles.

“Just about 5,000 times less than the earth,” observed the lieutenant.

“Nice little comet! pretty little comet!” said Ben Zoof.

The professor scowled at him, and was manifestly annoyed at having the insignificant dimensions of his comet pointed out in so disparaging a manner. Lieutenant Procope further remarked that from the earth he supposed it to be about as conspicuous as a star of the seventh magnitude, and would require a good telescope to see it.

“Ha, ha!” laughed the orderly, aloud; “charming little comet! so pretty; and so modest!”

“You rascal!” roared the professor, and clenched his hand in passion, as if about to strike him. Ben Zoof laughed the more, and was on the point of repeating his satirical comments, when a stern order from the captain made him hold his tongue. The truth was that the professor was just as sensitive about his comet as the orderly was about Montmartre, and if the contention between the two had been allowed to go on unchecked, it is impossible to say what serious quarrel might not have arisen.

When Professor Rosette’s equanimity had been restored, he said, “Thus, then, gentlemen, the diameter, the surface, the volume of my comet are settled; but there is more to be done. I shall not be satisfied until, by actual measurement, I have determined its mass, its density, and the force of gravity at its surface.”

“A laborious problem,” remarked Count Timascheff.

“Laborious or not, it has to be accomplished. I am resolved to find out what my comet weighs.”

“Would it not be of some assistance, if we knew of what substance it is composed?” asked the lieutenant.

“That is of no moment at all,” replied the professor; “the problem is independent of it.”

“Then we await your orders,” was the captain’s reply.

“You must understand, however,” said Rosette, “that there are various preliminary calculations to be made; you will have to wait till they are finished.”

“As long as you please,” said the count.

“No hurry at all,” observed the captain, who was not in the least impatient to continue his mathematical exercises.

“Then, gentlemen,” said the astronomer, “with your leave we will for this purpose make an appointment a few weeks hence. What do you say to the 62d of April?”

Without noticing the general smile which the novel date provoked, the astronomer left the hall, and retired to his observatory.

CHAPTER V. WANTED: A STEELYARD

Under the still diminishing influence of the sun’s attraction, but without let or hindrance, Gallia continued its interplanetary course, accompanied by Nerina, its captured satellite, which performed its fortnightly revolutions with unvarying regularity.

Meanwhile, the question beyond all others important was ever recurring to the minds of Servadac and his two companions: were the astronomer’s calculations correct, and was there a sound foundation for his prediction that the comet would again touch the earth? But whatever might be their doubts or anxieties, they were fain to keep all their misgivings to themselves; the professor was of a temper far too cross-grained for them to venture to ask him to revise or re-examine the results of his observations.

The rest of the community by no means shared in their uneasiness. Negrete and his fellow-countrymen yielded to their destiny with philosophical indifference. Happier and better provided for than they had ever been in their lives, it did not give them a passing thought, far less cause any serious concern, whether they were still circling round the sun, or whether they were being carried right away within the limits of another system. Utterly careless of the future, the majos, light-hearted as ever, carolled out their favorite songs, just as if they had never quitted the shores of their native land.

Happiest of all were Pablo and Nina. Racing through the galleries of the Hive, clambering over the rocks upon the shore, one day skating far away across the frozen ocean, the next fishing in the lake that was kept liquid by the heat of the lava-torrent, the two children led a life of perpetual enjoyment. Nor was their recreation allowed to interfere with their studies.

Captain Servadac, who in common with the count really liked them both, conceived that the responsibilities of a parent in some degree had devolved upon him, and took great care in superintending their daily lessons, which he succeeded in making hardly less pleasant than their sports.

Indulged and loved by all, it was little wonder that young Pablo had no longing for the scorching plains of Andalusia, or that little Nina had lost all wish to return with her pet goat to the barren rocks of Sardinia. They had now a home in which they had nothing to desire.

“Have you no father nor mother?” asked Pablo, one day.

“No,” she answered.

“No more have I,” said the boy, “I used to run along by the side of the diligences when I was in Spain.”

“I used to look after goats at Madalena,” said Nina; “but it is much nicer here — I am so happy here. I have you for a brother, and everybody is so kind. I am afraid they will spoil us, Pablo,” she added, smiling.

“Oh, no, Nina; you are too good to be spoiled, and when I am with you, you make me good too,” said Pablo, gravely.

July had now arrived. During the month Gallia’s advance along its orbit would be reduced to 22,000,000 leagues, the distance from the sun at the end being 172,000,000 leagues, about four and a half times as great as the average distance of the earth from the sun. It was traveling now at about the same speed as the earth, which traverses the ecliptic at a rate of 21,000,000 leagues a month, or 28,800 leagues an hour.

In due time the 62d April, according to the revised Gallian calendar, dawned; and in punctual fulfillment of the professor’s appointment, a note was delivered to Servadac to say that he was ready, and hoped that day to commence operations for calculating the mass and density of his comet, as well as the force of gravity at its surface.

A point of far greater interest to Captain Servadac and his friends would have been to ascertain the nature of the substance of which the comet was composed, but they felt pledged to render the professor any aid they could in the researches upon which he had set his heart. Without delay, therefore, they assembled in the central hall, where they were soon joined by Rosette, who seemed to be in fairly good temper.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “I propose to-day to endeavor to complete our observations of the elements of my comet. Three matters of investigation are before us. First, the measure of gravity at its surface; this attractive force we know, by the increase of our own muscular force, must of course be considerably less than that at the surface of the earth. Secondly, its mass, that is, the quality of its matter. And thirdly, its density or quantity of matter in a unit of its volume. We will proceed, gentlemen, if you please, to weigh Gallia.”

Ben Zoof, who had just entered the hall, caught the professor’s last sentence, and without saying a word, went out again and was absent for some minutes. When he returned, he said, “If you want to weigh this comet of yours, I suppose you want a pair of scales; but I have been to look, and I cannot find a pair anywhere. And what’s more,” he added mischievously, “you won’t get them anywhere.”

A frown came over the professor’s countenance. Servadac saw it, and gave his orderly a sign that he should desist entirely from his bantering.

“I require, gentlemen,” resumed Rosette, “first of all to know by how much the weight of a kilogramme here differs from its weight upon the earth; the attraction, as we have said, being less, the weight will proportionately be less also.”

“Then an ordinary pair of scales, being under the influence of attraction, I suppose, would not answer your purpose,” submitted the lieutenant.

“And the very kilogramme weight you used would have become lighter,” put in the count, deferentially.

“Pray, gentlemen, do not interrupt me,” said the professor, authoritatively, as if *ex cathedra*. “I need no instruction on these points.”

Procope and Timascheff demurely bowed their heads.

The professor resumed. “Upon a steelyard, or spring-balance, dependent upon mere tension or flexibility, the attraction will have no influence. If I suspend a weight equivalent to the weight of a kilogramme, the index will register the proper weight on the surface of Gallia. Thus I shall arrive at the difference I want: the difference between the earth’s attraction and the comet’s. Will you, therefore, have the goodness to provide me at once with a steelyard and a tested kilogramme?”

The audience looked at one another, and then at Ben Zoof, who was thoroughly acquainted with all their resources. “We have neither one nor the other,” said the orderly.

The professor stamped with vexation.

“I believe old Hakkabut has a steelyard on board his tartan,” said Ben Zoof, presently.

“Then why didn’t you say so before, you idiot?” roared the excitable little man.

Anxious to pacify him, Servadac assured him that every exertion should be made to procure the instrument, and directed Ben Zoof to go to the Jew and borrow it.

“No, stop a moment,” he said, as Ben Zoof was moving away on his, errand; “perhaps I had better go with you myself; the old Jew may make a difficulty about lending us any of his property.”

“Why should we not all go?” asked the count; “we should see what kind of a life the misanthrope leads on board the *Hansa*.”

The proposal met with general approbation. Before they started, Professor Rosette requested that one of the men might be ordered to cut him a cubic decimeter out of the solid substance of Gallia. “My engineer is the man for that,” said the count; “he will do it well for you if you will give him the precise measurement.”

“What! you don’t mean,” exclaimed the professor, again going off into a passion, “that you haven’t a proper measure of length?”

Ben Zoof was sent off to ransack the stores for the article in question, but no measure was forthcoming. “Most likely we shall find one on the tartan,” said the orderly.

“Then let us lose no time in trying,” answered the professor, as he hustled with hasty strides into the gallery.

The rest of the party followed, and were soon in the open air upon the rocks that overhung the shore. They descended to the level of the frozen water and made their way towards the little creek where the *Dobryna* and the *Hansa* lay firmly imprisoned in their icy bonds.

The temperature was low beyond previous experience; but well muffled up in fur, they all endured it without much actual suffering. Their breath issued in vapor, which was at once congealed into little crystals upon their whiskers, beards, eyebrows, and eyelashes, until their faces, covered with countless snow-white prickles, were truly ludicrous. The little professor, most comical of all, resembled nothing so much as the cub of an Arctic bear.

It was eight o'clock in the morning. The sun was rapidly approaching the zenith; but its disc, from the extreme remoteness, was proportionately dwarfed; its beams being all but destitute of their proper warmth and radiance. The volcano to its very summit and the surrounding rocks were still covered with the unsullied mantle of snow that had fallen while the atmosphere was still to some extent charged with vapor; but on the north side the snow had given place to the cascade of fiery lava, which, making its way down the sloping rocks as far as the vaulted opening of the central cavern, fell thence perpendicularly into the sea. Above the cavern, 130 feet up the mountain, was a dark hole, above which the stream of lava made a bifurcation in its course. From this hole projected the case of an astronomer's telescope; it was the opening of Palmyrin Rosette's observatory.

Sea and land seemed blended into one dreary whiteness, to which the pale blue sky offered scarcely any contrast. The shore was indented with the marks of many footsteps left by the colonists either on their way to collect ice for drinking purposes, or as the result of their skating expeditions; the edges of the skates had cut out a labyrinth of curves complicated as the figures traced by aquatic insects upon the surface of a pool.

Across the quarter of a mile of level ground that lay between the mountain and the creek, a series of footprints, frozen hard into the snow, marked the course taken by Isaac Hakkabut on his last return from Nina's Hive.

On approaching the creek, Lieutenant Procope drew his companions' attention to the elevation of the *Dobryna's* and *Hansa's* waterline, both vessels being now some fifteen feet above the level of the sea.

"What a strange phenomenon!" exclaimed the captain.

"It makes me very uneasy," rejoined the lieutenant; "in shallow places like this, as the crust of ice thickens, it forces everything upwards with irresistible force."

"But surely this process of congelation must have a limit!" said the count.

"But who can say what that limit will be? Remember that we have not yet reached our maximum of cold," replied Procope.

"Indeed, I hope not!" exclaimed the professor; "where would be the use of our traveling 200,000,000 leagues from the sun, if we are only to experience the same temperature as we should find at the poles of the earth?"

"Fortunately for us, however, professor," said the lieutenant, with a smile, "the temperature of the remotest space never descends beyond 70 degrees below zero."

"And as long as there is no wind," added Servadac, "we may pass comfortably through the winter, without a single attack of catarrh."

Lieutenant Procope proceeded to impart to the count his anxiety about the situation of his yacht. He pointed out that by the constant superposition of new deposits of ice, the vessel would be elevated to a great height, and consequently in the event of a thaw, it must be exposed to a calamity similar to those which in polar seas cause destruction to so many whalers.

There was no time now for concerting measures offhand to prevent the disaster, for the other members of the party had already reached the spot where the *Hansa* lay bound in her icy trammels. A flight of steps, recently hewn by Hakkabut himself, gave access for the present to the gangway, but it was evident that some different contrivance would have to be resorted to when the tartan should be elevated perhaps to a hundred feet.

A thin curl of blue smoke issued from the copper funnel that projected above the mass of snow which had accumulated upon the deck of the *Hansa*. The owner was sparing of his fuel, and it was only the non-conducting layer of ice enveloping the tartan that rendered the internal temperature endurable.

"Hi! old Nebuchadnezzar, where are you?" shouted Ben Zoof, at the full strength of his lungs.

At the sound of his voice, the cabin door opened, and the Jew's head and shoulders protruded onto the deck.

CHAPTER VI. MONEY AT A PREMIUM

“Who’s there? I have nothing here for anyone. Go away!” Such was the inhospitable greeting with which Isaac Hakkabut received his visitors.

“Hakkabut! do you take us for thieves?” asked Servadac, in tones of stern displeasure.

“Oh, your Excellency, my lord, I did not know that it was you,” whined the Jew, but without emerging any farther from his cabin.

“Now, old Hakkabut, come out of your shell! Come and show the governor proper respect, when he gives you the honor of his company,” cried Ben Zoof, who by this time had clambered onto the deck.

After considerable hesitation, but still keeping his hold upon the cabin-door, the Jew made up his mind to step outside. “What do you want?” he inquired, timorously.

“I want a word with you,” said Servadac, “but I do not want to stand talking out here in the cold.”

Followed by the rest of the party, he proceeded to mount the steps. The Jew trembled from head to foot. “But I cannot let you into my cabin. I am a poor man; I have nothing to give you,” he moaned piteously.

“Here he is!” laughed Ben Zoof, contemptuously; “he is beginning his chapter of lamentations over again. But standing out here will never do. Out of the way, old Hakkabut, I say! out of the way!” and, without more ado, he thrust the astonished Jew on one side and opened the door of the cabin.

Servadac, however, declined to enter until he had taken the pains to explain to the owner of the tartan that he had no intention of laying violent hands upon his property, and that if the time should ever come that his cargo was in requisition for the common use, he should receive a proper price for his goods, the same as he would in Europe.

“Europe, indeed!” muttered the Jew maliciously between his teeth. “European prices will not do for me. I must have Gallian prices — and of my own fixing, too!”

So large a portion of the vessel had been appropriated to the cargo that the space reserved for the cabin was of most meager dimensions. In one corner of the compartment stood a small iron stove, in which smoldered a bare handful of coals; in another was a trestle-board which served as a bed; two or three stools and a rickety deal table, together with a few cooking utensils, completed a stock of furniture which was worthy of its proprietor.

On entering the cabin, Ben Zoof’s first proceeding was to throw on the fire a liberal supply of coals, utterly regardless of the groans of poor Isaac, who would almost as soon have parted with his own bones as submit to such reckless expenditure of his fuel. The perishing temperature of the cabin, however, was sufficient justification for the orderly’s conduct, and by a little skillful manipulation he soon succeeded in getting up a tolerable fire.

The visitors having taken what seats they could, Hakkabut closed the door, and, like a prisoner awaiting his sentence, stood with folded hands, expecting the captain to speak.

“Listen,” said Servadac; “we have come to ask a favor.”

Imagining that at least half his property was to be confiscated, the Jew began to break out into his usual formula about being a poor man and having nothing to spare; but Servadac, without heeding his complainings, went on: “We are not going to ruin you, you know.”

Hakkabut looked keenly into the captain’s face.

“We have only come to know whether you can lend us a steelyard.”

So far from showing any symptom of relief, the old miser exclaimed, with a stare of astonishment, as if he had been asked for some thousand francs: “A steelyard?”

“Yes!” echoed the professor, impatiently; “a steelyard.”

“Have you not one?” asked Servadac.

“To be sure he has!” said Ben Zoof.

Old Isaac stammered and stuttered, but at last confessed that perhaps there might be one amongst the stores.

“Then, surely, you will not object to lend it to us?” said the captain.

“Only for one day,” added the professor.

The Jew stammered again, and began to object. “It is a very delicate instrument, your Excellency. The cold, you know, the cold may do injury to the spring; and perhaps you are going to use it to weigh something very heavy.”

“Why, old Ephraim, do you suppose we are going to weigh a mountain with it?” said Ben Zoof.

“Better than that!” cried out the professor, triumphantly; “we are going to weigh Gallia with it; my comet.”

“Merciful Heaven!” shrieked Isaac, feigning consternation at the bare suggestion.

Servadac knew well enough that the Jew was holding out only for a good bargain, and assured him that the steelyard was required for no other purpose than to weigh a kilogramme, which (considering how much lighter everything had become) could not possibly put the slightest strain upon the instrument.

The Jew still spluttered, and moaned, and hesitated.

“Well, then,” said Servadac, “if you do not like to lend us your steelyard, do you object to sell it to us?”

Isaac fairly shrieked aloud. “God of Israel!” he ejaculated, “sell my steelyard? Would you deprive me of one of the most indispensable of my means of livelihood? How should I weigh my merchandise without my steelyard — my solitary steelyard, so delicate and so correct?”

The orderly wondered how his master could refrain from strangling the old miser upon the spot; but Servadac, rather amused than otherwise, determined to try another form of persuasion. “Come, Hakkabut, I see that you are not disposed either to lend or to sell your steelyard. What do you say to letting us hire it?”

The Jew’s eyes twinkled with a satisfaction that he was unable to conceal. “But what security would you give? The instrument is very valuable;” and he looked more cunning than ever.

“What is it worth? If it is worth twenty francs, I will leave a deposit of a hundred. Will that satisfy you?”

He shook his head doubtfully. “It is very little; indeed, it is too little, your Excellency. Consider, it is the only steelyard in all this new world of ours; it is worth more, much more. If I take your deposit it must be in gold — all gold. But how much do you agree to give me for the hire — the hire, one day?”

“You shall have twenty francs,” said Servadac.

“Oh, it is dirt cheap; but never mind, for one day, you shall have it. Deposit in gold money a hundred francs, and twenty francs for the hire.” The old man folded his hands in meek resignation.

“The fellow knows how to make a good bargain,” said Servadac, as Isaac, after casting a distrustful look around, went out of the cabin.

“Detestable old wretch!” replied the count, full of disgust.

Hardly a minute elapsed before the Jew was back again, carrying his precious steelyard with ostentatious care. It was of an ordinary kind. A spring balance, fitted with a hook, held the article to be weighed; a pointer, revolving on a disc, indicated the weight of the article. Professor Rosette was manifestly right in asserting that such a machine would register results quite independently of any change in the force of attraction. On the earth it would have registered a kilogramme as a kilogramme; here it recorded a different value altogether, as the result of the altered force of gravity.

Gold coinage to the worth of one hundred and twenty francs was handed over to the Jew, who clutched at the money with unmistakable eagerness.

The steelyard was committed to the keeping of Ben Zoof, and the visitors prepared to quit the *Hansa*.

All at once it occurred to the professor that the steelyard would be absolutely useless to him, unless he had the means for ascertaining the precise measurement of the unit of the soil of Gallia which he proposed to weigh. “Something more you must lend me,” he said, addressing the Jew. “I must have a measure, and I must have a kilogramme.”

“I have neither of them,” answered Isaac. “I have neither. I am sorry; I am very sorry.” And this time the old Jew spoke the truth. He would have been really glad to do another stroke or two of business upon terms as advantageous as the transaction he had just concluded.

Palmyrin Rosette scratched his head in perplexity, glaring round upon his companions as if they were personally responsible for his annoyance. He muttered something about finding a way out of his difficulty, and hastily mounted the cabin-ladder. The rest followed, but they had hardly reached the deck when the chink of money was heard in the room below. Hakkabut was locking away the gold in one of the drawers.

Back again, down the ladder, scrambled the little professor, and before the Jew was aware of his presence he had seized him by the tail of his slouchy overcoat. “Some of your money! I must have money!” he said.

“Money!” gasped Hakkabut; “I have no money.” He was pale with fright, and hardly knew what he was saying.

“Falsehood!” roared Rosette. “Do you think I cannot see?” And peering down into the drawer which the Jew was vainly trying to close, he cried, “Heaps of money! French money! Five-franc pieces! the very thing I want! I must have them!”

The captain and his friends, who had returned to the cabin looked on with mingled amusement and bewilderment.

“They are mine!” shrieked Hakkabut.

“I will have them!” shouted the professor.

“You shall kill me first!” bellowed the Jew.

“No, but I must!” persisted the professor again.

It was manifestly time for Servadac to interfere. “My dear professor,” he said, smiling, “allow me to settle this little matter for you.”

“Ah! your Excellency,” moaned the agitated Jew, “protect me! I am but a poor man — ”

“None of that, Hakkabut. Hold your tongue.” And, turning to Rosette, the captain said, “If, sir, I understand right, you require some silver five-franc pieces for your operation?”

“Forty,” said Rosette, surlily.

“Two hundred francs!” whined Hakkabut.

“Silence!” cried the captain.

“I must have more than that,” the professor continued. “I want ten two-franc pieces, and twenty half-francs.”

“Let me see,” said Servadac, “how much is that in all? Two hundred and thirty francs, is it not?”

“I dare say it is,” answered the professor.

“Count, may I ask you,” continued Servadac, “to be security to the Jew for this loan to the professor?”

“Loan!” cried the Jew, “do you mean only a loan?”

“Silence!” again shouted the captain.

Count Timascheff, expressing his regret that his purse contained only paper money, begged to place it at Captain Servadac’s disposal.

“No paper, no paper!” exclaimed Isaac. “Paper has no currency in Gallia.”

“About as much as silver,” coolly retorted the count.

“I am a poor man,” began the Jew.

“Now, Hakkabut, stop these miserable lamentations of yours, once for all. Hand us over two hundred and thirty francs in silver money, or we will proceed to help ourselves.”

Isaac began to yell with all his might: “Thieves! thieves!”

In a moment Ben Zoof’s hand was clasped tightly over his mouth. “Stop that howling, Belshazzar!”

“Let him alone, Ben Zoof. He will soon come to his senses,” said Servadac, quietly.

When the old Jew had again recovered himself, the captain addressed him. “Now, tell us, what interest do you expect?”

Nothing could overcome the Jew’s anxiety to make another good bargain. He began: “Money is scarce, very scarce, you know — ”

“No more of this!” shouted Servadac. “What interest, I say, what interest do you ask?”

Faltering and undecided still, the Jew went on. “Very scarce, you know. Ten francs a day, I think, would not be unreasonable, considering — ”

The count had no patience to allow him to finish what he was about to say. He flung down notes to the value of several rubles. With a greediness that could not be concealed, Hakkabut grasped them all. Paper, indeed, they were; but the cunning Israelite knew that they would in any case be security far beyond the value of his cash. He was making some eighteen hundred per cent. interest, and accordingly chuckled within himself at his unexpected stroke of business.

The professor pocketed his French coins with a satisfaction far more demonstrative. “Gentlemen,” he said, “with these franc pieces I obtain the means of determining accurately both a meter and a kilogramme.”

CHAPTER VII. GALLIA WEIGHED

A quarter of an hour later, the visitors to the *Hansa* had reassembled in the common hall of Nina’s Hive.

“Now, gentlemen, we can proceed,” said the professor. “May I request that this table may be cleared?”

Ben Zoof removed the various articles that were lying on the table, and the coins which had just been borrowed from the Jew were placed upon it in three piles, according to their value.

The professor commenced. “Since none of you gentlemen, at the time of the shock, took the precaution to save either a meter measure or a kilogramme weight from the earth, and since both these articles are necessary for the calculation on which we are engaged, I have been obliged to devise means of my own to replace them.”

This exordium delivered, he paused and seemed to watch its effect upon his audience, who, however, were too well acquainted with the professor’s temper to make any attempt to exonerate themselves from the rebuke of carelessness, and submitted silently to the implied reproach.

“I have taken pains,” he continued, “to satisfy myself that these coins are in proper condition for my purpose. I find them unworn and unchipped; indeed, they are almost new. They have been hoarded instead of circulated; accordingly, they are fit to be utilized for my purpose of obtaining the precise length of a terrestrial meter.”

Ben Zoof looked on in perplexity, regarding the lecturer with much the same curiosity as he would have watched the performances of a traveling mountebank at a fair in Montmartre; but Servadac and his two friends had already divined the professor's meaning. They knew that French coinage is all decimal, the franc being the standard of which the other coins, whether gold, silver, or copper, are multiples or measures; they knew, too, that the caliber or diameter of each piece of money is rigorously determined by law, and that the diameters of the silver coins representing five francs, two francs, and fifty centimes measure thirty-seven, twenty-seven, and eighteen millimeters respectively; and they accordingly guessed that Professor Rosette had conceived the plan of placing such a number of these coins in juxtaposition that the length of their united diameters should measure exactly the thousand millimeters that make up the terrestrial meter.

The measurement thus obtained was by means of a pair of compasses divided accurately into ten equal portions, or decimeters, each of course 3.93 inches long. A lath was then cut of this exact length and given to the engineer of the *Dobryna*, who was directed to cut out of the solid rock the cubic decimeter required by the professor.

The next business was to obtain the precise weight of a kilogramme. This was by no means a difficult matter. Not only the diameters, but also the weights, of the French coins are rigidly determined by law, and as the silver five-franc pieces always weigh exactly twenty-five grammes, the united weight of forty of these coins is known to amount to one kilogramme.

“Oh!” cried Ben Zoof; “to be able to do all this I see you must be rich as well as learned.”

With a good-natured laugh at the orderly's remark, the meeting adjourned for a few hours. By the appointed time the engineer had finished his task, and with all due care had prepared a cubic decimeter of the material of the comet.

“Now, gentlemen,” said Professor Rosette, “we are in a position to complete our calculation; we can now arrive at Gallia’s attraction, density, and mass.”

Everyone gave him his complete attention.

“Before I proceed,” he resumed, “I must recall to your minds Newton’s general law, ‘that the attraction of two bodies is directly proportional to the product of their masses, and inversely proportional to the square of their distances.’”

“Yes,” said Servadac; “we remember that.”

“Well, then,” continued the professor, “keep it in mind for a few minutes now. Look here! In this bag are forty five-franc pieces — altogether they weigh exactly a kilogramme; by which I mean that if we were on the earth, and I were to hang the bag on the hook of the steelyard, the indicator on the dial would register one kilogramme. This is clear enough, I suppose?”

As he spoke the professor designedly kept his eyes fixed upon Ben Zoof. He was avowedly following the example of Arago, who was accustomed always in lecturing to watch the countenance of the least intelligent of his audience, and when he felt that he had made his meaning clear to him, he concluded that he must have succeeded with all the rest. In this case, however, it was technical ignorance, rather than any lack of intelligence, that justified the selection of the orderly for this special attention.

Satisfied with his scrutiny of Ben Zoof’s face, the professor went on. “And now, gentlemen, we have to see what these coins weigh here upon Gallia.”

He suspended the money bag to the hook; the needle oscillated, and stopped. “Read it off!” he said.

The weight registered was one hundred and thirty-three grammes.

“There, gentlemen, one hundred and thirty-three grammes! Less than one-seventh of a kilogramme! You see, consequently, that the force of gravity here on Gallia is not one-seventh of what it is upon the earth!”

“Interesting!” cried Servadac, “most interesting! But let us go on and compute the mass.”

“No, captain, the density first,” said Rosette.

“Certainly,” said the lieutenant; “for, as we already know the volume, we can determine the mass as soon as we have ascertained the density.”

The professor took up the cube of rock. “You know what this is,” he went on to say. “You know, gentlemen, that this block is a cube hewn from the substance of which everywhere, all throughout your voyage of circumnavigation, you found Gallia to be composed — a substance to which your geological attainments did not suffice to assign a name.”

“Our curiosity will be gratified,” said Servadac, “if you will enlighten our ignorance.”

But Rosette did not take the slightest notice of the interruption.

“A substance it is which no doubt constitutes the sole material of the comet, extending from its surface to its innermost depths. The probability is that it would be so; your experience confirms that probability: you have found no trace of any other substance. Of this rock here is a solid decimeter; let us get at its weight, and we shall have the key which will unlock the problem of the whole weight of Gallia. We have demonstrated that the force of attraction here is only one-seventh of what it is upon the earth, and shall consequently have to multiply the apparent weight of our cube by seven, in order to ascertain its proper weight. Do you understand me, goggle-eyes?"

This was addressed to Ben Zoof, who was staring hard at him. "No!" said Ben Zoof.

"I thought not; it is of no use waiting for your puzzle-brains to make it out. I must talk to those who can understand."

The professor took the cube, and, on attaching it to the hook of the steelyard, found that its apparent weight was one kilogramme and four hundred and thirty grammes.

"Here it is, gentlemen; one kilogramme, four hundred and thirty grammes. Multiply that by seven; the product is, as nearly as possible, ten kilogrammes. What, therefore, is our conclusion? Why, that the density of Gallia is just about double the density of the earth, which we know is only five kilogrammes to a cubic decimeter. Had it not been for this greater density, the attraction of Gallia would only have been one-fifteenth instead of one-seventh of the terrestrial attraction."

The professor could not refrain from exhibiting his gratification that, however inferior in volume, in density, at least, his comet had the advantage over the earth.

Nothing further now remained than to apply the investigations thus finished to the determining of the mass or weight. This was a matter of little labor.

“Let me see,” said the captain; “what is the force of gravity upon the various planets?”

“You can’t mean, Servadac, that you have forgotten that? But you always were a disappointing pupil.”

The captain could not help himself: he was forced to confess that his memory had failed him.

“Well, then,” said the professor, “I must remind you. Taking the attraction on the earth as 1, that on Mercury is 1.15, on Venus it is.92, on Mars.5, and on Jupiter 2.45; on the moon the attraction is.16, whilst on the surface of the sun a terrestrial kilogramme would weigh 28 kilogrammes.”

“Therefore, if a man upon the surface of the sun were to fall down, he would have considerable difficulty in getting up again. A cannon ball, too, would only fly a few yards,” said Lieutenant Procope.

“A jolly battle-field for cowards!” exclaimed Ben Zoof.

“Not so jolly, Ben Zoof, as you fancy,” said his master; “the cowards would be too heavy to run away.”

Ben Zoof ventured the remark that, as the smallness of Gallia secured to its inhabitants such an increase of strength and agility, he was almost sorry that it had not been a little smaller still.

“Though it could not anyhow have been very much smaller,” he added, looking slyly at the professor.

“Idiot!” exclaimed Rosette. “Your head is too light already; a puff of wind would blow it away.”

“I must take care of my head, then, and hold it on,” replied the irrepressible orderly.

Unable to get the last word, the professor was about to retire, when Servadac detained him.

“Permit me to ask you one more question,” he said. “Can you tell me what is the nature of the soil of Gallia?”

“Yes, I can answer that. And in this matter I do not think your impertinent orderly will venture to put Montmartre into the comparison. This soil is of a substance not unknown upon the earth.” And speaking very slowly, the professor said: “It contains 70 per cent. of tellurium, and 30 per cent. of gold.”

Servadac uttered an exclamation of surprise.

“And the sum of the specific gravities of these two substances is 10, precisely the number that represents Gallia’s density.”

“A comet of gold!” ejaculated the captain.

“Yes; a realization of what the illustrious Maupertuis has already deemed probable,” replied the astronomer.

“If Gallia, then, should ever become attached to the earth, might it not bring about an important revolution in all monetary affairs?” inquired the count.

“No doubt about it!” said Rosette, with manifest satisfaction. “It would supply the world with about 246,000 trillions of francs.”

“It would make gold about as cheap as dirt, I suppose,” said Servadac.

The last observation, however, was entirely lost upon the professor, who had left the hall with an air almost majestic, and was already on his way to the observatory.

“And what, I wonder, is the use of all these big figures?” said Ben Zoof to his master, when next day they were alone together.

“That’s just the charm of them, my good fellow,” was the captain’s cool reply, “that they are of no use whatever.”

CHAPTER VIII. JUPITER SOMEWHAT CLOSE

Except as to the time the comet would take to revolve round the sun, it must be confessed that all the professor’s calculations had comparatively little interest for anyone but himself, and he was consequently left very much to pursue his studies in solitude.

The following day was the 1st of August, or, according to Rosette, the 63rd of April. In the course of this month Gallia would travel 16,500,000 leagues, attaining at the end a distance of 197,000,000 leagues from the sun. This would leave 81,000,000 leagues more to be traversed before reaching the aphelion of the 15th of January, after which it would begin once more to approach the sun.

But meanwhile, a marvelous world, never before so close within the range of human vision, was revealing itself. No wonder that Palmyrin Rosette cared so little to quit his observatory; for throughout those calm, clear Gallian nights, when the book of the firmament lay open before him, he could revel in a spectacle which no previous astronomer had ever been permitted to enjoy.

The glorious orb that was becoming so conspicuous an object was none other than the planet Jupiter, the largest of all the bodies existing within the influence of solar attraction. During the seven months that had elapsed since its collision with the earth, the comet had been continuously approaching the planet, until the distance between them was scarcely more than 61,000,000 leagues, and this would go on diminishing until the 15th of October.

Under these circumstances, was it perfectly certain that no danger could accrue? Was not Gallia, when its pathway led it into such close proximity to this enormous planet, running a risk of being attracted within its influence? Might not that influence be altogether disastrous? The professor, it is true, in his estimate of the duration of his comet's revolution, had represented that he had made all proper allowances for any perturbations that would be caused either by Jupiter, by Saturn, or by Mars; but what if there were any errors in his calculations? what if there should be any elements of disturbance on which he had not reckoned?

Speculations of this kind became more and more frequent, and Lieutenant Procope pointed out that the danger incurred might be of a fourfold character: first, that the comet, being irresistibly attracted, might be drawn on to the very surface of the planet, and there annihilated; secondly, that as the result of being brought under that attraction, it might be transformed into a satellite, or even a sub-satellite, of that mighty world; thirdly, that it might be diverted into a new orbit, which would never be coincident with the ecliptic; or, lastly, its course might be so retarded that it would only reach the ecliptic too late to permit any junction with the earth. The occurrence of any one of these contingencies would be fatal to their hopes of reunion with the globe, from which they had been so strangely severed.

To Rosette, who, without family ties which he had never found leisure or inclination to contract, had no shadow of desire to return to the earth, it would be only the first of these probabilities that could give him any concern. Total annihilation might not accord with his views, but he would be quite content for Gallia to miss its mark with regard to the earth, indifferent whether it revolved as a new satellite around Jupiter, or whether it wended its course through the untraversed regions of the milky way. The rest of the community, however, by no means sympathized with the professor’s sentiments, and the following month was a period of considerable doubt and anxiety.

On the 1st of September the distance between Gallia and Jupiter was precisely the same as the mean distance between the earth and the sun; on the 16th, the distance was further reduced to 26,000,000 leagues. The planet began to assume enormous dimensions, and it almost seemed as if the comet had already been deflected from its elliptical orbit, and was rushing on in a straight line towards the overwhelming luminary.

The more they contemplated the character of this gigantic planet, the more they became impressed with the likelihood of a serious perturbation in their own course. The diameter of Jupiter is 85,390 miles, nearly eleven times as great as that of the earth; his volume is 1,387 times, and his mass 300 times greater; and although the mean density is only about a quarter of that of the earth, and only a third of that of water (whence it has been supposed that the superficies of Jupiter is liquid), yet his other proportions were large enough to warrant the apprehension that important disturbances might result from his proximity.

“I forget my astronomy, lieutenant,” said Servadac. “Tell me all you can about this formidable neighbor.”

The lieutenant having refreshed his memory by reference to Flammarion’s *Recits de l’Infini*, of which he had a Russian translation, and some other books, proceeded to recapitulate that Jupiter accomplishes his revolution round the sun in 4,332 days 14 hours and 2 minutes; that he travels at the rate of 467 miles a minute along an orbit measuring 2,976 millions of miles; and that his rotation on his axis occupies only 9 hours and 55 minutes.

“His days, then, are shorter than ours?” interrupted the captain.

“Considerably,” answered the lieutenant, who went on to describe how the displacement of a point at the equator of Jupiter was twenty-seven times as rapid as on the earth, causing the polar compression to be about 2,378 miles; how the axis, being nearly perpendicular, caused the days and nights to be nearly of the same length, and the seasons to be invariable; and how the amount of light and heat received by the planet is only a twenty-fifth part of that received by the earth, the average distance from the sun being 475,693,000 miles.

“And how about these satellites? Sometimes, I suppose, Jupiter has the benefit of four moons all shining at once?” asked Servadac.

Of the satellites, Lieutenant Procope went on to say that one is rather smaller than our own moon; that another moves round its primary at an interval about equal to the moon’s distance from ourselves; but that they all revolve in considerably less time: the first takes only l day 18 hours 27 minutes; the second takes 3 days 13 hours 14 minutes; the third, 7 days 3 hours 42 minutes; whilst the largest of all takes but 16 days 16 hours 32 minutes. The most remote revolves round the planet at a distance of 1,192,820 miles.

“They have been enlisted into the service of science,” said Procope. “It is by their movements that the velocity of light has been calculated; and they have been made available for the determination of terrestrial longitudes.”

“It must be a wonderful sight,” said the captain.

“Yes,” answered Procope. “I often think Jupiter is like a prodigious clock with four hands.”

“I only hope that we are not destined to make a fifth hand,” answered Servadac.

Such was the style of the conversation that was day by day reiterated during the whole month of suspense. Whatever topic might be started, it seemed soon to settle down upon the huge orb that was looming upon them with such threatening aspect.

“The more remote that these planets are from the sun,” said Procope, “the more venerable and advanced in formation are they found to be. Neptune, situated 2,746,271,000 miles from the sun, issued from the solar nebulosity, thousands of millions of centuries back. Uranus, revolving 1,753,851,000 miles from the center of the planetary system, is of an age amounting to many hundred millions of centuries. Jupiter, the colossal planet, gravitating at a distance of 475,693,000 miles, may be reckoned as 70,000,000 centuries old. Mars has existed for 1,000,000,000 years at a distance of 139,212,000 miles. The earth, 91,430,000 miles from the sun, quitted his burning bosom 100,000,000 years ago. Venus, revolving now 66,131,000 miles away, may be assigned the age of 50,000,000 years at least; and Mercury, nearest of all, and youngest of all, has been revolving at a distance of 35,393,000 miles for the space of 10,000,000 years — the same time as the moon has been evolved from the earth.”

Servadac listened attentively. He was at a loss what to say; and the only reply he made to the recital of this novel theory was to the effect that, if it were true, he would prefer being captured by Mercury than by Jupiter, for Mercury, being so much the younger, would probably prove the less imperative and self-willed master.

It was on the 1st of September that the comet had crossed the orbit of Jupiter, and on the 1st of October the two bodies were calculated to be at their minimum separation. No direct shock, however, could be apprehended; the demonstration was sufficiently complete that the orbit of Gallia did not coincide with that of the planet, the orbit of Jupiter being inclined at an angle of 1 degrees 19 mins to the orbit of the earth, with which that of Gallia was, no doubt, coincident.

As the month of September verged towards its close, Jupiter began to wear an aspect that must have excited the admiration of the most ignorant or the most indifferent observer. Its salient points were illumined with novel and radiant tints, and the solar rays, reflected from its disc, glowed with a mingled softness and intensity upon Gallia, so that Nerina had to pale her beauty.

Who could wonder that Rosette, enthusiast as he was, should be irremovable from his observatory? Who could expect otherwise than that, with the prospect before him of viewing the giant among planets, ten times nearer than any mortal eye had ever done, he should have begrudged every moment that distracted his attention?

Meanwhile, as Jupiter grew large, the sun grew small.

From its increased remoteness the diameter of the sun’s disc was diminished to 5 degrees 46 mins.

And what an increased interest began to be associated with the satellites! They were visible to the naked eye! Was it not a new record in the annals of science?

Although it is acknowledged that they are not ordinarily visible on earth without the aid of a somewhat powerful telescope, it has been asserted that a favored few, endued with extraordinary powers of vision, have been able to identify them with an unassisted eye; but here, at least, in Nina’s Hive were many rivals, for everyone could so far distinguish them one from the other as to describe them by their colors. The first was of a dull white shade; the second was blue; the third was white and brilliant; the fourth was orange, at times approaching to a red. It was further observed that Jupiter itself was almost void of scintillation.

Rosette, in his absorbing interest for the glowing glories of the planet, seemed to be beguiled into comparative forgetfulness of the charms of his comet; but no astronomical enthusiasm of the professor could quite allay the general apprehension that some serious collision might be impending.

Time passed on. There was nothing to justify apprehension. The question was continually being asked, “What does the professor really think?”

“Our friend the professor,” said Servadac, “is not likely to tell us very much; but we may feel pretty certain of one thing: he wouldn’t keep us long in the dark, if he thought we were not going back to the earth again. The greatest satisfaction he could have would be to inform us that we had parted from the earth for ever.”

“I trust from my very soul,” said the count, “that his prognostications are correct.”

“The more I see of him, and the more I listen to him,” replied Servadac, “the more I become convinced that his calculations are based on a solid foundation, and will prove correct to the minutest particular.”

Ben Zoof here interrupted the conversation. “I have something on my mind,” he said.

“Something on your mind? Out with it!” said the captain.

“That telescope!” said the orderly; “it strikes me that that telescope which the old professor keeps pointed up at yonder big sun is bringing it down straight upon us.”

The captain laughed heartily.

“Laugh, captain, if you like; but I feel disposed to break the old telescope into atoms.”

“Ben Zoof,” said Servadac, his laughter exchanged for a look of stern displeasure, “touch that telescope, and you shall swing for it!”

The orderly looked astonished.

“I am governor here,” said Servadac.

Ben Zoof knew what his master meant, and to him his master’s wish was law.

The interval between the comet and Jupiter was, by the 1st of October, reduced to 43,000,000 miles. The belts all parallel to Jupiter’s equator were very distinct in their markings. Those immediately north and south of the equator were of a dusky hue; those toward the poles were alternately dark and light; the intervening spaces of the planet’s superficies, between edge and edge, being intensely bright. The belts themselves were occasionally broken by spots, which the records of astronomy describe as varying both in form and in extent.

The physiology of belts and spots alike was beyond the astronomer’s power to ascertain; and even if he should be destined once again to take his place in an astronomical congress on the earth, he would be just as incapable as ever of determining whether or no they owed their existence to the external accumulation of vapor, or to some internal agency. It would not be Professor Rosette's lot to enlighten his brother *savants* to any great degree as to the mysteries that are associated with this, which must ever rank as one of the most magnificent amongst the heavenly orbs.

As the comet approached the critical point of its career it cannot be denied that there was an unacknowledged consciousness of alarm. Mutually reserved, though ever courteous, the count and the captain were secretly drawn together by the prospect of a common danger; and as their return to the earth appeared to them to become more and more dubious, they abandoned their views of narrow isolation, and tried to embrace the wider philosophy that acknowledges the credibility of a habitable universe.

But no philosophy could be proof against the common instincts of their humanity; their hearts, their hopes, were set upon their natural home; no speculation, no science, no experience, could induce them to give up their fond and sanguine anticipation that once again they were to come in contact with the earth.

“Only let us escape Jupiter,” said Lieutenant Procope, repeatedly, “and we are free from anxiety.”

“But would not Saturn lie ahead?” asked Servadac and the count in one breath.

“No!” said Procope; “the orbit of Saturn is remote, and does not come athwart our path. Jupiter is our sole hindrance. Of Jupiter we must say, as William Tell said, ‘Once through the ominous pass and all is well.’”

The 15th of October came, the date of the nearest approximation of the comet to the planet. They were only 31,000,000 miles apart. What would now transpire? Would Gallia be diverted from its proper way? or would it hold the course that the astronomer had predicted?

Early next morning the captain ventured to take the count and the lieutenant up to the observatory. The professor was in the worst of tempers.

That was enough. It was enough, without a word, to indicate the course which events had taken. The comet was pursuing an unaltered way.

The astronomer, correct in his prognostications, ought to have been the most proud and contented of philosophers; his pride and contentment were both overshadowed by the certainty that the career of his comet was destined to be so transient, and that it must inevitably once again come into collision with the earth.

CHAPTER IX MARKET PRICES IN GALLIA

“All right!” said Servadac, convinced by the professor’s ill humor that the danger was past; “no doubt we are in for a two years’ excursion, but fifteen months more will take us back to the earth!”

“And we shall see Montmartre again!” exclaimed Ben Zoof, in excited tones that betrayed his delight in the anticipation.

To use a nautical expression, they had safely “rounded the point,” and they had to be congratulated on their successful navigation; for if, under the influence of Jupiter’s attraction, the comet had been retarded for a single hour, in that hour the earth would have already traveled 2,300,000 miles from the point where contact would ensue, and many centuries would elapse before such a coincidence would possibly again occur.

On the 1st of November Gallia and Jupiter were 40,000,000 miles apart. It was little more than ten weeks to the 15th of January, when the comet would begin to re-approach the sun. Though light and heat were now reduced to a twenty-fifth part of their terrestrial intensity, so that a perpetual twilight seemed to have settled over Gallia, yet the population felt cheered even by the little that was left, and buoyed up by the hope that they should ultimately regain their proper position with regard to the great luminary, of which the temperature has been estimated as not less than 5,000,000 degrees.

Of the anxiety endured during the last two months Isaac Hakkabut had known nothing. Since the day he had done his lucky stroke of business he had never left the tartan; and after Ben Zoof, on the following day, had returned the steelyard and the borrowed cash, receiving back the paper roubles deposited, all communication between the Jew and Nina’s Hive had ceased. In the course of the few minutes' conversation which Ben Zoof had held with him, he had mentioned that he knew that the whole soil of Gallia was made of gold; but the old man, guessing that the orderly was only laughing at him as usual, paid no attention to the remark, and only meditated upon the means he could devise to get every bit of the money in the new world into his own possession. No one grieved over the life of solitude which Hakkabut persisted in leading. Ben Zoof giggled heartily, as he repeatedly observed "it was astonishing how they reconciled themselves to his absence."

The time came, however, when various circumstances prompted him to think he must renew his intercourse with the inhabitants of the Hive. Some of his goods were beginning to spoil, and he felt the necessity of turning them into money, if he would not be a loser; he hoped, moreover, that the scarcity of his commodities would secure very high prices.

It happened, just about this same time, that Ben Zoof had been calling his master's attention to the fact that some of their most necessary provisions would soon be running short, and that their stock of coffee, sugar, and tobacco would want replenishing. Servadac's mind, of course, turned to the cargo on board the *Hansa*, and he resolved, according to his promise, to apply to the Jew and become a purchaser. Mutual interest and necessity thus conspired to draw Hakkabut and the captain together.

Often and often had Isaac gloated in his solitude over the prospect of first selling a portion of his merchandise for all the gold and silver in the colony. His recent usurious transaction had whetted his appetite. He would next part with some more of his cargo for all the paper money they could give him; but still he should have goods left, and they would want these. Yes, they should have these, too, for promissory notes. Notes would hold good when they got back again to the earth; bills from his Excellency the governor would be good bills; anyhow there would be the sheriff. By the God of Israel! he would get good prices, and he would get fine interest!

Although he did not know it, he was proposing to follow the practice of the Gauls of old, who advanced money on bills for payment in a future life. Hakkabut's "future life," however, was not many months in advance of the present.

Still Hakkabut hesitated to make the first advance, and it was accordingly with much satisfaction that he hailed Captain Servadac's appearance on board the *Hansa*.

"Hakkabut," said the captain, plunging without further preface into business, "we want some coffee, some tobacco, and other things. I have come to-day to order them, to settle the price, and to-morrow Ben Zoof shall fetch the goods away."

"Merciful, heavens!" the Jew began to whine; but Servadac cut him short.

"None of that miserable howling! Business! I am come to buy your goods. I shall pay for them."

"Ah yes, your Excellency," whispered the Jew, his voice trembling like a street beggar. "Don't impose on me. I am poor; I am nearly ruined already."

"Cease your wretched whining!" cried Servadac. "I have told you once, I shall pay for all I buy."

"Ready money?" asked Hakkabut.

“Yes, ready money. What makes you ask?” said the captain, curious to hear what the Jew would say.

“Well, you see — you see, your Excellency,” stammered out the Jew, “to give credit to one wouldn’t do, unless I gave credit to another. You are solvent — I mean honorable, and his lordship the count is honorable; but maybe — maybe — ”

“Well?” said Servadac, waiting, but inclined to kick the old rascal out of his sight.

“I shouldn’t like to give credit,” he repeated.

“I have not asked you for credit. I have told you, you shall have ready money.”

“Very good, your Excellency. But how will you pay me?”

“Pay you? Why, we shall pay you in gold and silver and copper, while our money lasts, and when that is gone we shall pay you in bank notes.”

“Oh, no paper, no paper!” groaned out the Jew, relapsing into his accustomed whine.

“Nonsense, man!” cried Servadac.

“No paper!” reiterated Hakkabut.

“Why not? Surely you can trust the banks of England, France, and Russia.”

“Ah no! I must have gold. Nothing so safe as gold.”

“Well then,” said the captain, not wanting to lose his temper, “you shall have it your own way; we have plenty of gold for the present. We will leave the bank notes for by and by.” The Jew’s countenance brightened, and Servadac, repeating that he should come again the next day, was about to quit the vessel.

“One moment, your Excellency,” said Hakkabut, sidling up with a hypocritical smile; “I suppose I am to fix my own prices.”

“You will, of course, charge ordinary prices — proper market prices; European prices, I mean.”

“Merciful heavens!” shrieked the old man, “you rob me of my rights; you defraud me of my privilege. The monopoly of the market belongs to me. It is the custom; it is my right; it is my privilege to fix my own prices.”

Servadac made him understand that he had no intention of swerving from his decision.

“Merciful heavens!” again howled the Jew, “it is sheer ruin. The time of monopoly is the time for profit; it is the time for speculation.”

“The very thing, Hakkabut, that I am anxious to prevent. Just stop now, and think a minute. You seem to forget *my* rights; you are forgetting that, if I please, I can confiscate all your cargo for the common use. You ought to think yourself lucky in getting any price at all. Be contented with European prices; you will get no more. I am not going to waste my breath on you. I will come again to-morrow;” and, without allowing Hakkabut time to renew his lamentations, Servadac went away.

All the rest of the day the Jew was muttering bitter curses against the thieves of Gentiles in general, and the governor of Gallia in particular, who were robbing him of his just profits, by binding him down to a maximum price for his goods, just as if it were a time of revolution in the state. But he would be even with them yet; he would have it all out of them: he would make European prices pay, after all. He had a plan — he knew how; and he chuckled to himself, and grinned maliciously.

True to his word, the captain next morning arrived at the tartan. He was accompanied by Ben Zoof and two Russian sailors. “Good-morning, old Eleazar; we have come to do our little bit of friendly business with you, you know,” was Ben Zoof’s greeting.

“What do you want to-day?” asked the Jew.

“To-day we want coffee, and we want sugar, and we want tobacco. We must have ten kilogrammes of each. Take care they are all good; all first rate. I am commissariat officer, and I am responsible.”

“I thought you were the governor’s aide-de-camp,” said Hakkabut.

“So I am, on state occasions; but to-day, I tell you. I am superintendent of the commissariat department. Now, look sharp!”

Hakkabut hereupon descended into the hold of the tartan, and soon returned, carrying ten packets of tobacco, each weighing one kilogramme, and securely fastened by strips of paper, labeled with the French government stamp.

“Ten kilogrammes of tobacco at twelve francs a kilogramme: a hundred and twenty francs,” said the Jew.

Ben Zoof was on the point of laying down the money, when Servadac stopped him.

“Let us just see whether the weight is correct.”

Hakkabut pointed out that the weight was duly registered on every packet, and that the packets had never been unfastened. The captain, however, had his own special object in view, and would not be diverted. The Jew fetched his steelyard, and a packet of the tobacco was suspended to it.

“Merciful heavens!” screamed Isaac.

The index registered only 133 grammes!

“You see, Hakkabut, I was right. I was perfectly justified in having your goods put to the test,” said Servadac, quite seriously.

“But — but, your Excellency — ” stammered out the bewildered man.

“You will, of course, make up the deficiency,” the captain continued, not noticing the interruption.

“Oh, my lord, let me say — ” began Isaac again.

“Come, come, old Caiaphas, do you hear? You are to make up the deficiency,” exclaimed Ben Zoof.

“Ah, yes, yes; but — ”

The unfortunate Israelite tried hard to speak, but his agitation prevented him. He understood well enough the cause of the phenomenon, but he was overpowered by the conviction that the “cursed Gentiles” wanted to cheat him. He deeply regretted that he had not a pair of common scales on board.

“Come, I say, old Jedediah, you are a long while making up what’s short,” said Ben Zoof, while the Jew was still stammering on.

As soon as he recovered his power of articulation, Isaac began to pour out a medley of lamentations and petitions for mercy. The captain was inexorable. “Very sorry, you know, Hakkabut. It is not my fault that the packet is short weight; but I cannot pay for a kilogramme except I have a kilogramme.”

Hakkabut pleaded for some consideration.

“A bargain is a bargain,” said Servadac. “You must complete your contract.”

And, moaning and groaning, the miserable man was driven to make up the full weight as registered by his own steelyard. He had to repeat the process with the sugar and coffee: for every kilogramme he had to weigh seven. Ben Zoof and the Russians jeered him most unmercifully.

“I say, old Mordecai, wouldn’t you rather give your goods away, than sell them at this rate? I would.”

“I say, old Pilate, a monopoly isn’t always a good thing, is it?”

“I say, old Sepharvaim, what a flourishing trade you’re driving!”

Meanwhile seventy kilogrammes of each of the articles required were weighed, and the Jew for each seventy had to take the price of ten.

All along Captain Servadac had been acting only in jest. Aware that old Isaac was an utter hypocrite, he had no compunction in turning a business transaction with him into an occasion for a bit of fun. But the joke at an end, he took care that the Jew was properly paid all his legitimate due.

CHAPTER X. FAR INTO SPACE

A month passed away. Gallia continued its course, bearing its little population onwards, so far removed from the ordinary influence of human passions that it might almost be said that its sole ostensible vice was represented by the greed and avarice of the miserable Jew.

After all, they were but making a voyage — a strange, yet a transient, excursion through solar regions hitherto untraversed; but if the professor’s calculations were correct — and why should they be doubted? — their little vessel was destined, after a two years’ absence, once more to return “to port.” The landing, indeed, might be a matter of difficulty; but with the good prospect before them of once again standing on terrestrial shores, they had nothing to do at present except to make themselves as comfortable as they could in their present quarters.

Thus confident in their anticipations, neither the captain, the count, nor the lieutenant felt under any serious obligation to make any extensive provisions for the future; they saw no necessity for expending the strength of the people, during the short summer that would intervene upon the long severity of winter, in the cultivation or the preservation of their agricultural resources. Nevertheless, they often found themselves talking over the measures they would have been driven to adopt, if they had found themselves permanently attached to their present home.

Even after the turning-point in their career, they knew that at least nine months would have to elapse before the sea would be open to navigation; but at the very first arrival of summer they would be bound to arrange for the *Dobryna* and the *Hansa* to retransport themselves and all their animals to the shores of Gourbi Island, where they would have to commence their agricultural labors to secure the crops that must form their winter store. During four months or thereabouts, they would lead the lives of farmers and of sportsmen; but no sooner would their haymaking and their corn harvest have been accomplished, than they would be compelled again, like a swarm of bees, to retire to their semi-troglodyte existence in the cells of Nina's Hive.

Now and then the captain and his friends found themselves speculating whether, in the event of their having to spend another winter upon Gallia, some means could not be devised by which the dreariness of a second residence in the recesses of the volcano might be escaped. Would not another exploring expedition possibly result in the discovery of a vein of coal or other combustible matter, which could be turned to account in warming some erection which they might hope to put up? A prolonged existence in their underground quarters was felt to be monotonous and depressing, and although it might be all very well for a man like Professor Rosette, absorbed in astronomical studies, it was ill suited to the temperaments of any of themselves for any longer period than was absolutely indispensable.

One contingency there was, almost too terrible to be taken into account. Was it not to be expected that the time might come when the internal fires of Gallia would lose their activity, and the stream of lava would consequently cease to flow? Why should Gallia be exempt from the destiny that seemed to await every other heavenly body? Why should it not roll onwards, like the moon, a dark cold mass in space?

In the event of such a cessation of the volcanic eruption, whilst the comet was still at so great a distance from the sun, they would indeed be at a loss to find a substitute for what alone had served to render life endurable at a temperature of 60 degrees below zero. Happily, however, there was at present no symptom of the subsidence of the lava's stream; the volcano continued its regular and unchanging discharge, and Servadac, ever sanguine, declared that it was useless to give themselves any anxiety upon the matter.

On the 15th of December, Gallia was 276,000,000 leagues from the sun, and, as it was approximately to the extremity of its axis major, would travel only some 11,000,000 or 12,000,000 leagues during the month. Another world was now becoming a conspicuous object in the heavens, and Palmyrin Rosette, after rejoicing in an approach nearer to Jupiter than any other mortal man had ever attained, was now to be privileged to enjoy a similar opportunity of contemplating the planet Saturn. Not that the circumstances were altogether so favorable. Scarcely 31,000,000 miles had separated Gallia from Jupiter; the minimum distance of Saturn would not be less than 415,000,000 miles; but even this distance, although too great to affect the comet's progress more than had been duly reckoned on, was considerably shorter than what had ever separated Saturn from the earth.

To get any information about the planet from Rosette appeared quite impossible. Although equally by night and by day he never seemed to quit his telescope, he did not evince the slightest inclination to impart the result of his observations. It was only from the few astronomical works that happened to be included in the *Dobryna's* library that any details could be gathered, but these were sufficient to give a large amount of interesting information.

Ben Zoof, when he was made aware that the earth would be invisible to the naked eye from the surface of Saturn, declared that he then, for his part, did not care to learn any more about such a planet; to him it was indispensable that the earth should remain in sight, and it was his great consolation that hitherto his native sphere had never vanished from his gaze.

At this date Saturn was revolving at a distance of 420,000,000 miles from Gallia, and consequently 874,440,000 miles from the sun, receiving only a hundredth part of the light and heat which that luminary bestows upon the earth. On consulting their books of reference, the colonists found that Saturn completes his revolution round the sun in a period of 29 years and 167 days, traveling at the rate of more than 21,000 miles an hour along an orbit measuring 5,490 millions of miles in length. His circumference is about 220,000 miles; his superficies, 144,000 millions of square miles; his volume, 143,846 millions of cubic miles. Saturn is 735 times larger than the earth, consequently he is smaller than Jupiter; in mass he is only 90 times greater than the earth, which gives him a density less than that of water. He revolves on his axis in 10 hours 29 minutes, causing his own year to consist of 86,630 days; and his seasons, on account of the great inclination of his axis to the plane of his orbit, are each of the length of seven terrestrial years.

Although the light received from the sun is comparatively feeble, the nights upon Saturn must be splendid. Eight satellites — Mimas, Enceladus, Tethys, Dione, Rhea, Titan, Hyperion, and Japetus — accompany the planet; Mimas, the nearest to its primary, rotating on its axis in 221/2 hours, and revolving at a distance of only 120,800 miles, whilst Japetus, the most remote, occupies 79 days in its rotation, and revolves at a distance of 2,314,000 miles.

Another most important contribution to the magnificence of the nights upon Saturn is the triple ring with which, as a brilliant setting, the planet is encompassed. To an observer at the equator, this ring, which has been estimated by Sir William Herschel as scarcely 100 miles in thickness, must have the appearance of a narrow band of light passing through the zenith 12,000 miles above his head. As the observer, however, increases his latitude either north or south, the band will gradually widen out into three detached and concentric rings, of which the innermost, dark though transparent, is 9,625 miles in breadth; the intermediate one, which is brighter than the planet itself, being 17,605 miles broad; and the outer, of a dusky hue, being 8,660 miles broad.

Such, they read, is the general outline of this strange appendage, which revolves in its own plane in 10 hours 32 minutes. Of what matter it is composed, and how it resists disintegration, is still an unsettled question; but it might almost seem that the Designer of the universe, in permitting its existence, had been willing to impart to His intelligent creatures the manner in which celestial bodies are evolved, and that this remarkable ring-system is a remnant of the nebula from which Saturn was himself developed, and which, from some unknown cause, has become solidified. If at any time it should disperse, it would either fall into fragments upon the surface of Saturn, or the fragments, mutually coalescing, would form additional satellites to circle round the planet in its path.

To any observer stationed on the planet, between the extremes of lat. 45 degrees on either side of the equator, these wonderful rings would present various strange phenomena. Sometimes they would appear as an illuminated arch, with the shadow of Saturn passing over it like the hour-hand over a dial; at other times they would be like a semi-aureole of light. Very often, too, for periods of several years, daily eclipses of the sun must occur through the interposition of this triple ring.

Truly, with the constant rising and setting of the satellites, some with bright discs at their full, others like silver crescents, in quadrature, as well as by the encircling rings, the aspect of the heavens from the surface of Saturn must be as impressive as it is gorgeous.

Unable, indeed, the Gallians were to realize all the marvels of this strange world. After all, they were practically a thousand times further off than the great astronomers have been able to approach by means of their giant telescopes. But they did not complain; their little comet, they knew, was far safer where it was; far better out of the reach of an attraction which, by affecting their path, might have annihilated their best hopes.

The distances of several of the brightest of the fixed stars have been estimated. Amongst others, Vega in the constellation Lyra is 100 millions of millions of miles away; Sirius in Canis Major, 123 millions of millions; the Pole-star, 282 millions of millions; and Capella, 340 millions of millions of miles, a figure represented by no less than fifteen digits.

The hard numerical statement of these enormous figures, however, fails altogether in any adequate way to convey a due impression of the magnitude of these distances. Astronomers, in their ingenuity, have endeavored to use some other basis, and have found “the velocity of light” to be convenient for their purpose. They have made their representations something in this way:

“Suppose,” they say, “an observer endowed with an infinite length of vision: suppose him stationed on the surface of Capella; looking thence towards the earth, he would be a spectator of events that had happened seventy years previously; transport him to a star ten times distant, and he will be reviewing the terrestrial sphere of 720 years back; carry him away further still, to a star so remote that it requires something less than nineteen centuries for light to reach it, and he would be a witness of the birth and death of Christ; convey him further again, and he shall be looking upon the dread desolation of the Deluge; take him away further yet (for space is infinite), and he shall be a spectator of the Creation of the spheres. History is thus stereotyped in space; nothing once accomplished can ever be effaced."

Who can altogether be astonished that Palmyrin Rosette, with his burning thirst for astronomical research, should have been conscious of a longing for yet wider travel through the sidereal universe? With his comet now under the influence of one star, now of another, what various systems might he not have explored! what undreamed-of marvels might not have revealed themselves before his gaze! The stars, fixed and immovable in name, are all of them in motion, and Gallia might have followed them in their un-tracked way.

But Gallia had a narrow destiny. She was not to be allowed to wander away into the range of attraction of another center; nor to mingle with the star clusters, some of which have been entirely, others partially resolved; nor was she to lose herself amongst the 5,000 nebulae which have resisted hitherto the grasp of the most powerful reflectors. No; Gallia was neither to pass beyond the limits of the solar system, nor to travel out of sight of the terrestrial sphere. Her orbit was circumscribed to little over 1,500 millions of miles; and, in comparison with the infinite space beyond, this was a mere nothing.

CHAPTER XI. A FETE DAY

The temperature continued to decrease; the mercurial thermometer, which freezes at 42 degrees below zero, was no longer of service, and the spirit thermometer of the *Dobryna* had been brought into use. This now registered 53 degrees below freezing-point.

In the creek, where the two vessels had been moored for the winter, the elevation of the ice, in anticipation of which Lieutenant Procope had taken the precautionary measure of beveling, was going on slowly but irresistibly, and the tartan was upheaved fifty feet above the level of the Gallian Sea, while the schooner, as being lighter, had been raised to a still greater altitude.

So irresistible was this gradual process of elevation, so utterly defying all human power to arrest, that the lieutenant began to feel very anxious as to the safety of his yacht. With the exception of the engine and the masts, everything had been cleared out and conveyed to shore, but in the event of a thaw it appeared that nothing short of a miracle could prevent the hull from being dashed to pieces, and then all means of leaving the promontory would be gone. The *Hansa*, of course, would share a similar fate; in fact, it had already heeled over to such an extent as to render it quite dangerous for its obstinate owner, who, at the peril of his life, resolved that he would stay where he could watch over his all-precious cargo, though continually invoking curses on the ill-fate of which he deemed himself the victim.

There was, however, a stronger will than Isaac Hakkabut’s. Although no one of all the community cared at all for the safety of the Jew, they cared very much for the security of his cargo, and when Servadac found that nothing would induce the old man to abandon his present quarters voluntarily, he very soon adopted measures of coercion that were far more effectual than any representations of personal danger.

“Stop where you like, Hakkabut,” said the captain to him; “but understand that I consider it my duty to make sure that your cargo is taken care of. I am going to have it carried across to land, at once.”

Neither groans, nor tears, nor protestations on the part of the Jew, were of the slightest avail. Forthwith, on the 20th of December, the removal of the goods commenced.

Both Spaniards and Russians were all occupied for several days in the work of unloading the tartan. Well muffled up as they were in furs, they were able to endure the cold with impunity, making it their special care to avoid actual contact with any article made of metal, which, in the low state of the temperature, would inevitably have taken all the skin off their hands, as much as if it had been red-hot. The task, however, was brought to an end without accident of any kind; and when the stores of the *Hansa* were safely deposited in the galleries of the Hive, Lieutenant Procope avowed that he really felt that his mind had been unburdened from a great anxiety.

Captain Servadac gave old Isaac full permission to take up his residence amongst the rest of the community, promised him the entire control over his own property, and altogether showed him so much consideration that, but for his unbounded respect for his master, Ben Zoof would have liked to reprimand him for his courtesy to a man whom he so cordially despised.

Although Hakkabut clamored most vehemently about his goods being carried off “against his will,” in his heart he was more than satisfied to see his property transferred to a place of safety, and delighted, moreover, to know that the transport had been effected without a farthing of expense to himself. As soon, then, as he found the tartan empty, he was only too glad to accept the offer that had been made him, and very soon made his way over to the quarters in the gallery where his merchandise had been stored. Here he lived day and night. He supplied himself with what little food he required from his own stock of provisions, a small spirit-lamp sufficing to perform all the operations of his meager cookery. Consequently all intercourse between himself and the rest of the inhabitants was entirely confined to business transactions, when occasion required that some purchase should be made from his stock of commodities. Meanwhile, all the silver and gold of the colony was gradually finding its way to a double-locked drawer, of which the Jew most carefully guarded the key.

The 1st of January was drawing near, the anniversary of the shock which had resulted in the severance of thirty-six human beings from the society of their fellow-men. Hitherto, not one of them was missing. The unvarying calmness of the climate, notwithstanding the cold, had tended to maintain them in good health, and there seemed no reason to doubt that, when Gallia returned to the earth, the total of its little population would still be complete.

The 1st of January, it is true, was not properly “New Year’s Day” in Gallia, but Captain Servadac, nevertheless, was very anxious to have it observed as a holiday.

“I do not think,” he said to Count Timascheff and Lieutenant Procope, “that we ought to allow our people to lose their interest in the world to which we are all hoping to return; and how can we cement the bond that ought to unite us, better than by celebrating, in common with our fellow-creatures upon earth, a day that awakens afresh the kindliest sentiments of all? Besides,” he added, smiling, “I expect that Gallia, although invisible just at present to the naked eye, is being closely watched by the telescopes of our terrestrial friends, and I have no doubt that the newspapers and scientific journals of both hemispheres are full of accounts detailing the movements of the new comet.”

“True,” asserted the count. “I can quite imagine that we are occasioning no small excitement in all the chief observatories.”

“Ay, more than that,” said the lieutenant; “our Gallia is certain to be far more than a mere object of scientific interest or curiosity. Why should we doubt that the elements of a comet which has once come into collision with the earth have by this time been accurately calculated? What our friend the professor has done here, has been done likewise on the earth, where, beyond a question, all manner of expedients are being discussed as to the best way of mitigating the violence of a concussion that must occur.”

The lieutenant’s conjectures were so reasonable that they commanded assent. Gallia could scarcely be otherwise than an object of terror to the inhabitants of the earth, who could by no means be certain that a second collision would be comparatively so harmless as the first. Even to the Gallians themselves, much as they looked forward to the event, the prospect was not unmixed with alarm, and they would rejoice in the invention of any device by which it was likely the impetus of the shock might be deadened.

Christmas arrived, and was marked by appropriate religious observance by everyone in the community, with the exception of the Jew, who made a point of secluding himself more obstinately than ever in the gloomy recesses of his retreat.

To Ben Zoof the last week of the year was full of bustle. The arrangements for the New Year *fete* were entrusted to him, and he was anxious, in spite of the resources of Gallia being so limited, to make the program for the great day as attractive as possible.

It was a matter of debate that night whether the professor should be invited to join the party; it was scarcely likely that he would care to come, but, on the whole, it was felt to be advisable to ask him. At first Captain Servadac thought of going in person with the invitation; but, remembering Rosette's dislike to visitors, he altered his mind, and sent young Pablo up to the observatory with a formal note, requesting the pleasure of Professor Rosette's company at the New Year's *fete*.

Pablo was soon back, bringing no answer except that the professor had told him that "to-day was the 125th of June, and that to-morrow would be the 1st of July."

Consequently, Servadac and the count took it for granted that Palmyrin Rosette declined their invitation.

An hour after sunrise on New Year's Day, Frenchmen, Russians, Spaniards, and little Nina, as the representative of Italy, sat down to a feast such as never before had been seen in Gallia. Ben Zoof and the Russian cook had quite surpassed themselves. The wines, part of the *Dobryna's* stores, were of excellent quality. Those of the vintages of France and Spain were drunk in toasting their respective countries, and even Russia was honored in a similar way by means of a few bottles of kummel. The company was more than contented — it was as jovial as Ben Zoof could desire; and the ringing cheers that followed the great toast of the day — "A happy return to our Mother Earth," must fairly have startled the professor in the silence of his observatory.

The *dejeuner* over, there still remained three hours of daylight. The sun was approaching the zenith, but so dim and enfeebled were his rays that they were very unlike what had produced the wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy which they had just been enjoying, and it was necessary for all, before starting upon an excursion that would last over nightfall, to envelop themselves in the thickest of clothing.

Full of spirits, the party left the Hive, and chattering and singing as they went, made their way down to the frozen shore, where they fastened on their skates. Once upon the ice, everyone followed his own fancy, and some singly, some in groups, scattered themselves in all directions. Captain Servadac, the count, and the lieutenant were generally seen together. Negrete and the Spaniards, now masters of their novel exercise, wandered fleetly and gracefully hither and thither, occasionally being out of sight completely. The Russian sailors, following a northern custom, skated in file, maintaining their rank by means of a long pole passed under their right arms, and in this way they described a trackway of singular regularity. The two children, blithe as birds, flitted about, now singly, now arm-in-arm, now joining the captain's party, now making a short peregrination by themselves, but always full of life and spirit. As for Ben Zoof, he was here, there, and everywhere, his imperturbable good temper ensuring him a smile of welcome whenever he appeared.

Thus coursing rapidly over the icy plain, the whole party had soon exceeded the line that made the horizon from the shore. First, the rocks of the coast were lost to view; then the white crests of the cliffs were no longer to be seen; and at last, the summit of the volcano, with its corona of vapor, was entirely out of sight. Occasionally the skaters were obliged to stop to recover their breath, but, fearful of frost-bite, they almost instantly resumed their exercise, and proceeded nearly as far as Gourbi Island before they thought about retracing their course.

But night was coming on, and the sun was already sinking in the east with the rapidity to which the residents on Gallia were by this time well accustomed. The sunset upon this contracted horizon was very remarkable. There was not a cloud nor a vapor to catch the tints of the declining beams; the surface of the ice did not, as a liquid sea would, reflect the last green ray of light; but the radiant orb, enlarged by the effect of refraction, its circumference sharply defined against the sky, sank abruptly, as though a trap had been opened in the ice for its reception.

Before the daylight ended. Captain Servadac had cautioned the party to collect themselves betimes into one group. “Unless you are sure of your whereabouts before dark,” he said, “you will not find it after. We have come out like a party of skirmishers; let us go back in full force.”

The night would be dark; their moon was in conjunction, and would not be seen; the stars would only give something of that “pale radiance” which the poet Corneille has described.

Immediately after sunset the torches were lighted, and the long series of flames, fanned by the rapid motion of their bearers, had much the appearance of an enormous fiery banner. An hour later, and the volcano appeared like a dim shadow on the horizon, the light from the crater shedding a lurid glare upon the surrounding gloom. In time the glow of the burning lava, reflected in the icy mirror, fell upon the troop of skaters, and cast their lengthened shadows grotesquely on the surface of the frozen sea.

Later still, half an hour or more afterwards, the torches were all but dying out. The shore was close at hand. All at once, Ben Zoof uttered a startled cry, and pointed with bewildered excitement towards the mountain. Involuntarily, one and all, they plowed their heels into the ice and came to a halt. Exclamations of surprise and horror burst from every lip. The volcano was extinguished! The stream of burning lava had suddenly ceased to flow!

Speechless with amazement, they stood still for some moments. There was not one of them that did not realize, more or less, how critical was their position. The sole source of the heat that had enabled them to brave the rigor of the cold had failed them! death, in the cruellest of all shapes, seemed staring them in the face — death from cold! Meanwhile, the last torch had flickered out.

It was quite dark.

“Forward!” cried Servadac, firmly.

At the word of command they advanced to the shore; clambered with no little difficulty up the slippery rocks; gained the mouth of the gallery; groped their way into the common hall.

How dreary! how chill it seemed!

The fiery cataract no longer spread its glowing covering over the mouth of the grotto. Lieutenant Procope leaned through the aperture. The pool, hitherto kept fluid by its proximity to the lava, was already encrusted with a layer of ice.

Such was the end of the New Year’s Day so happily begun.

CHAPTER XII. THE BOWELS OF THE COMET

The whole night was spent in speculating, with gloomy forebodings, upon the chances of the future. The temperature of the hall, now entirely exposed to the outer air, was rapidly falling, and would quickly become unendurable. Far too intense was the cold to allow anyone to remain at the opening, and the moisture on the walls soon resolved itself into icicles. But the mountain was like the body of a dying man, that retains awhile a certain amount of heat at the heart after the extremities have become cold and dead. In the more interior galleries there was still a certain degree of warmth, and hither Servadac and his companions were glad enough to retreat.

Here they found the professor, who, startled by the sudden cold, had been fain to make a precipitate retreat from his observatory. Now would have been the opportunity to demand of the enthusiast whether he would like to prolong his residence indefinitely upon his little comet. It is very likely that he would have declared himself ready to put up with any amount of discomfort to be able to gratify his love of investigation; but all were far too disheartened and distressed to care to banter him upon the subject on which he was so sensitive.

Next morning, Servadac thus addressed his people. “My friends, except from cold, we have nothing to fear. Our provisions are ample — more than enough for the remaining period of our sojourn in this lone world of ours; our preserved meat is already cooked; we shall be able to dispense with all fuel for cooking purposes. All that we require is warmth — warmth for ourselves; let us secure that, and all may be well. Now, I do not entertain a doubt but that the warmth we require is resident in the bowels of this mountain on which we are living; to the depth of those bowels we must penetrate; there we shall obtain the warmth which is indispensable to our very existence.”

His tone, quite as much as his words, restored confidence to many of his people, who were already yielding to a feeling of despair. The count and the lieutenant fervently, but silently, grasped his hand.

“Nina,” said the captain, “you will not be afraid to go down to the lower depths of the mountain, will you?”

“Not if Pablo goes,” replied the child.

“Oh yes, of course, Pablo will go. You are not afraid to go, are you, Pablo?” he said, addressing the boy.

“Anywhere with you, your Excellency,” was the boy’s prompt reply.

And certain it was that no time must be lost in penetrating below the heart of the volcano; already the most protected of the many ramifications of Nina’s Hive were being pervaded by a cold that was insufferable. It was an acknowledged impossibility to get access to the crater by the exterior declivities of the mountain-side; they were far too steep and too slippery to afford a foothold. It must of necessity be entered from the interior.

Lieutenant Procope accordingly undertook the task of exploring all the galleries, and was soon able to report that he had discovered one which he had every reason to believe abutted upon the central funnel. His reason for coming to this conclusion was that the caloric emitted by the rising vapors of the hot lava seemed to be oozing, as it were, out of the tellurium, which had been demonstrated already to be a conductor of heat. Only succeed in piercing through this rock for seven or eight yards, and the lieutenant did not doubt that his way would be opened into the old lava-course, by following which he hoped descent would be easy.

Under the lieutenant’s direction the Russian sailors were immediately set to work. Their former experience had convinced them that spades and pick-axes were of no avail, and their sole resource was to proceed by blasting with gunpowder. However skillfully the operation might be carried on, it must necessarily occupy several days, and during that time the sufferings from cold must be very severe.

“If we fail in our object, and cannot get to the depths of the mountain, our little colony is doomed,” said Count Timascheff.

“That speech is not like yourself,” answered Servadac, smiling. “What has become of the faith which has hitherto carried you so bravely through all our difficulties?”

The count shook his head, as if in despair, and said, sadly, “The Hand that has hitherto been outstretched to help seems now to be withdrawn.”

“But only to test our powers of endurance,” rejoined the captain, earnestly. “Courage, my friend, courage! Something tells me that this cessation of the eruption is only partial; the internal fire is not all extinct. All is not over yet. It is too soon to give up; never despair!”

Lieutenant Procope quite concurred with the captain. Many causes, he knew, besides the interruption of the influence of the oxygen upon the mineral substances in Gallia’s interior, might account for the stoppage of the lava-flow in this one particular spot, and he considered it more than probable that a fresh outlet had been opened in some other part of the surface, and that the eruptive matter had been diverted into the new channel. But at present his business was to prosecute his labors so that a retreat might be immediately effected from their now untenable position.

Restless and agitated, Professor Rosette, if he took any interest in these discussions, certainly took no share in them. He had brought his telescope down from the observatory into the common hall, and there at frequent intervals, by night and by day, he would endeavor to continue his observations; but the intense cold perpetually compelled him to desist, or he would literally have been frozen to death. No sooner, however, did he find himself obliged to retreat from his study of the heavens, than he would begin overwhelming everybody about him with bitter complaints, pouring out his regrets that he had ever quitted his quarters at Formentera.

On the 4th of January, by persevering industry, the process of boring was completed, and the lieutenant could hear that fragments of the blasted rock, as the sailors cleared them away with their spades, were rolling into the funnel of the crater. He noticed, too, that they did not fall perpendicularly, but seemed to slide along, from which he inferred that the sides of the crater were sloping; he had therefore reason to hope that a descent would be found practicable.

Larger and larger grew the orifice; at length it would admit a man’s body, and Ben Zoof, carrying a torch, pushed himself through it, followed by the lieutenant and Servadac. Procope’s conjecture proved correct. On entering the crater, they found that the sides slanted at the angle of about 4 degrees; moreover, the eruption had evidently been of recent origin, dating probably only from the shock which had invested Gallia with a proportion of the atmosphere of the earth, and beneath the coating of ashes with which they were covered, there were various irregularities in the rock, not yet worn away by the action of the lava, and these afforded a tolerably safe footing.

“Rather a bad staircase!” said Ben Zoof, as they began to make their way down.

In about half an hour, proceeding in a southerly direction, they had descended nearly five hundred feet. From time to time they came upon large excavations that at first sight had all the appearance of galleries, but by waving his torch, Ben Zoof could always see their extreme limits, and it was evident that the lower strata of the mountain did not present the same system of ramification that rendered the Hive above so commodious a residence.

It was not a time to be fastidious; they must be satisfied with such accommodation as they could get, provided it was warm. Captain Servadac was only too glad to find that his hopes about the temperature were to a certain extent realized. The lower they went, the greater was the diminution in the cold, a diminution that was far more rapid than that which is experienced in making the descent of terrestrial mines. In this case it was a volcano, not a colliery, that was the object of exploration, and thankful enough they were to find that it had not become extinct. Although the lava, from some unknown cause, had ceased to rise in the crater, yet plainly it existed somewhere in an incandescent state, and was still transmitting considerable heat to inferior strata.

Lieutenant Procope had brought in his hand a mercurial thermometer, and Servadac carried an aneroid barometer, by means of which he could estimate the depth of their descent below the level of the Gallian Sea. When they were six hundred feet below the orifice the mercury registered a temperature of 6 degrees below zero.

“Six degrees!” said Servadac; “that will not suit us. At this low temperature we could not survive the winter. We must try deeper down. I only hope the ventilation will hold out.”

There was, however, nothing to fear on the score of ventilation. The great current of air that rushed into the aperture penetrated everywhere, and made respiration perfectly easy.

The descent was continued for about another three hundred feet, which brought the explorers to a total depth of nine hundred feet from their old quarters. Here the thermometer registered 12 degrees above zero — a temperature which, if only it were permanent, was all they wanted. There was no advantage in proceeding any further along the lava-course; they could already hear the dull rumblings that indicated that they were at no great distance from the central focus.

“Quite near enough for me!” exclaimed Ben Zoof. “Those who are chilly are welcome to go as much lower as they like. For my part, I shall be quite warm enough here.”

After throwing the gleams of torch-light in all directions, the explorers seated themselves on a jutting rock, and began to debate whether it was practicable for the colony to make an abode in these lower depths of the mountain. The prospect, it must be owned, was not inviting. The crater, it is true, widened out into a cavern sufficiently large, but here its accommodation ended. Above and below were a few ledges in the rock that would serve as receptacles for provisions; but, with the exception of a small recess that must be reserved for Nina, it was clear that henceforth they must all renounce the idea of having separate apartments. The single cave must be their dining-room, drawing-room, and dormitory, all in one. From living the life of rabbits in a warren, they were reduced to the existence of moles, with the difference that they could not, like them, forget their troubles in a long winter’s sleep.

The cavern, however, was quite capable of being lighted by means of lamps and lanterns. Among the stores were several barrels of oil and a considerable quantity of spirits of wine, which might be burned when required for cooking purposes. Moreover, it would be unnecessary for them to confine themselves entirely to the seclusion of their gloomy residence; well wrapped up, there would be nothing to prevent them making occasional excursions both to the Hive and to the sea-shore. A supply of fresh water would be constantly required; ice for this purpose must be perpetually carried in from the coast, and it would be necessary to arrange that everyone in turn should perform this office, as it would be no sinecure to clamber up the sides of the crater for 900 feet, and descend the same distance with a heavy burden.

But the emergency was great, and it was accordingly soon decided that the little colony should forthwith take up its quarters in the cave. After all, they said, they should hardly be much worse off than thousands who annually winter in Arctic regions. On board the whaling-vessels, and in the establishments of the Hudson’s Bay Company, such luxuries as separate cabins or sleeping-chambers are never thought of; one large apartment, well heated and ventilated, with as few corners as possible, is considered far more healthy; and on board ship the entire hold, and in forts a single floor, is appropriated to this purpose. The recollection of this fact served to reconcile them, in a great degree, to the change to which they felt it requisite to submit.

Having remounted the ascent, they made the result of their exploration known to the mass of the community, who received the tidings with a sense of relief, and cordially accepted the scheme of the migration.

The first step was to clear the cavern of its accumulation of ashes, and then the labor of removal commenced in earnest. Never was a task undertaken with greater zest. The fear of being to a certainty frozen to death if they remained where they were, was a stimulus that made everyone put forth all his energies. Beds, furniture, cooking utensils — first the stores of the *Dobryna*, then the cargo of the tartan — all were carried down with the greatest alacrity, and the diminished weight combined with the downhill route to make the labor proceed with incredible briskness.

Although Professor Rosette yielded to the pressure of circumstances, and allowed himself to be conducted to the lower regions, nothing would induce him to allow his telescope to be carried underground; and as it was undeniable that it would certainly be of no service deep down in the bowels of the mountain, it was allowed to remain undisturbed upon its tripod in the great hall of Nina’s Hive.

As for Isaac Hakkabut, his outcry was beyond description lamentable. Never, in the whole universe, had a merchant met with such reverses; never had such a pitiable series of losses befallen an unfortunate man. Regardless of the ridicule which his abject wretchedness excited, he howled on still, and kept up an unending wail; but meanwhile he kept a keen eye upon every article of his property, and amidst universal laughter insisted on having every item registered in an inventory as it was transferred to its appointed place of safety. Servadac considerately allowed the whole of the cargo to be deposited in a hollow apart by itself, over which the Jew was permitted to keep a watch as vigilant as he pleased.

By the 10th the removal was accomplished. Rescued, at all events, from the exposure to a perilous temperature of 60 degrees below zero, the community was installed in its new home. The large cave was lighted by the

Dobryna's lamps, while several lanterns, suspended at intervals along the acclivity that led to their deserted quarters above, gave a weird picturesqueness to the scene, that might vie with any of the graphic descriptions of the "Arabian Nights' Entertainments."

"How do you like this, Nina?" said Ben Zoof.

"*Va bene!*" replied the child. "We are only living in the cellars instead of upon the ground floor."

"We will try and make ourselves comfortable," said the orderly.

"Oh yes, we will be happy here," rejoined the child; "it is nice and warm."

Although they were as careful as they could to conceal their misgivings from the rest, Servadac and his two friends could not regard their present situation without distrust. When alone, they would frequently ask each other what would become of them all, if the volcanic heat should really be subsiding, or if some unexpected perturbation should retard the course of the comet, and compel them to an indefinitely prolonged residence in their grim abode. It was scarcely likely that the comet could supply the fuel of which ere long they would be in urgent need. Who could expect to find coal in the bowels of Gallia, — coal, which is the residuum of ancient forests mineralized by the lapse of ages? Would not the lava-cinders exhumed from the extinct volcano be their last poor resource?

"Keep up your spirits, my friends," said Servadac; "we have plenty of time before us at present. Let us hope that as fresh difficulties arise, fresh ways of escape will open. Never despair!"

“True,” said the count; “it is an old saying that ‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’ Besides, I should think it very unlikely that the internal heat will fail us now before the summer.”

The lieutenant declared that he entertained the same hope. As the reason of his opinion he alleged that the combustion of the eruptive matter was most probably of quite recent origin, because the comet before its collision with the earth had possessed no atmosphere, and that consequently no oxygen could have penetrated to its interior.

“Most likely you are right,” replied the count; “and so far from dreading a failure of the internal heat, I am not quite sure that we may not be exposed to a more terrible calamity still?”

“What?” asked Servadac.

“The calamity of the eruption breaking out suddenly again, and taking us by surprise.”

“Heavens!” cried the captain, “we will not think of that.”

“The outbreak may happen again,” said the lieutenant, calmly; “but it will be our fault, our own lack of vigilance, if we are taken by surprise.” And so the conversation dropped.

The 15th of January dawned; and the comet was 220,000,000 leagues from the sun.

Gallia had reached its aphelion.

CHAPTER XIII. DREARY MONTHS

Henceforth, then, with a velocity ever increasing, Gallia would re-approach the sun.

Except the thirteen Englishmen who had been left at Gibraltar, every living creature had taken refuge in the dark abyss of the volcano’s crater.

And with those Englishmen, how had it fared?

“Far better than with ourselves,” was the sentiment that would have been universally accepted in Nina’s Hive. And there was every reason to conjecture that so it was. The party at Gibraltar, they all agreed, would not, like themselves, have been compelled to have recourse to a stream of lava for their supply of heat; they, no doubt, had had abundance of fuel as well as food; and in their solid casemate, with its substantial walls, they would find ample shelter from the rigor of the cold. The time would have been passed at least in comfort, and perhaps in contentment; and Colonel Murphy and Major Oliphant would have had leisure more than sufficient for solving the most abstruse problems of the chess-board. All of them, too, would be happy in the confidence that when the time should come, England would have full meed of praise to award to the gallant soldiers who had adhered so well and so manfully to their post.

It did, indeed, more than once occur to the minds both of Servadac and his friends that, if their condition should become one of extreme emergency, they might, as a last resource, betake themselves to Gibraltar, and there seek a refuge; but their former reception had not been of the kindest, and they were little disposed to renew an acquaintanceship that was marked by so little cordiality. Not in the least that they would expect to meet with any inhospitable rebuff. Far from that; they knew well enough that Englishmen, whatever their faults, would be the last to abandon their fellow-creatures in the hour of distress. Nevertheless, except the necessity became far more urgent than it had hitherto proved, they resolved to endeavor to remain in their present quarters. Up till this time no casualties had diminished their original number, but to undertake so long a journey across that unsheltered expanse of ice could scarcely fail to result in the loss of some of their party.

However great was the desire to find a retreat for every living thing in the deep hollow of the crater, it was found necessary to slaughter almost all the domestic animals before the removal of the community from Nina's Hive. To have stabled them all in the cavern below would have been quite impossible, whilst to have left them in the upper galleries would only have been to abandon them to a cruel death; and since meat could be preserved for an indefinite time in the original store-places, now colder than ever, the expedient of killing the animals seemed to recommend itself as equally prudent and humane.

Naturally the captain and Ben Zoof were most anxious that their favorite horses should be saved, and accordingly, by dint of the greatest care, all difficulties in the way were overcome, and Zephyr and Galette were conducted down the crater, where they were installed in a large hole and provided with forage, which was still abundant.

Birds, subsisting only on scraps thrown out to them did not cease to follow the population in its migration, and so numerous did they become that multitudes of them had repeatedly to be destroyed.

The general re-arrangement of the new residence was no easy business, and occupied so much time that the end of January arrived before they could be said to be fairly settled. And then began a life of dreary monotony. Then seemed to creep over everyone a kind of moral torpor as well as physical lassitude, which Servadac, the count, and the lieutenant did their best not only to combat in themselves, but to counteract in the general community. They provided a variety of intellectual pursuits; they instituted debates in which everybody was encouraged to take part; they read aloud, and explained extracts from the elementary manuals of science, or from the books of adventurous travel which their library supplied; and Russians and Spaniards, day after day, might be seen gathered round the large table, giving their best attention to instruction which should send them back to Mother Earth less ignorant than they had left her.

Selfish and morose, Hakkabut could never be induced to be present at these social gatherings. He was far too much occupied in his own appropriated corner, either in conning his accounts, or in counting his money. Altogether, with what he had before, he now possessed the round sum of 150,000 francs, half of which was in sterling gold; but nothing could give him any satisfaction while he knew that the days were passing, and that he was denied the opportunity of putting out his capital in advantageous investments, or securing a proper interest.

Neither did Palmyrin Rosette find leisure to take any share in the mutual intercourse. His occupation was far too absorbing for him to suffer it to be interrupted, and to him, living as he did perpetually in a world of figures, the winter days seemed neither long nor wearisome. Having ascertained every possible particular about his comet, he was now devoting himself with equal ardor to the analysis of all the properties of the satellite Nerina, to which he appeared to assert the same claim of proprietorship.

In order to investigate Nerina it was indispensable that he should make several actual observations at various points of the orbit; and for this purpose he repeatedly made his way up to the grotto above, where, in spite of the extreme severity of the cold, he would persevere in the use of his telescope till he was all but paralyzed. But what he felt more than anything was the want of some retired apartment, where he could pursue his studies without hindrance or intrusion.

It was about the beginning of February, when the professor brought his complaint to Captain Servadac, and begged him to assign him a chamber, no matter how small, in which he should be free to carry on his task in silence and without molestation. So readily did Servadac promise to do everything in his power to provide him with the accommodation for which he asked, that the professor was put into such a manifest good temper that the captain ventured to speak upon the matter that was ever uppermost in his mind.

“I do not mean,” he began timidly, “to cast the least imputation of inaccuracy upon any of your calculations, but would you allow me, my dear professor, to suggest that you should revise your estimate of the duration of Gallia’s period of revolution. It is so important, you know, so all important; the difference of one half minute, you know, would so certainly mar the expectation of reunion with the earth — ”

And seeing a cloud gathering on Rosette’s face, he added:

“I am sure Lieutenant Procope would be only too happy to render you any assistance in the revision.”

“Sir,” said the professor, bridling up, “I want no assistant; my calculations want no revision. I never make an error. I have made my reckoning as far as Gallia is concerned. I am now making a like estimate of the elements of Nerina.”

Conscious how impolitic it would be to press this matter further, the captain casually remarked that he should have supposed that all the elements of Nerina had been calculated long since by astronomers on the earth. It was about as unlucky a speech as he could possibly have made. The professor glared at him fiercely.

“Astounding, sir!” he exclaimed. “Yes! Nerina was a planet then; everything that appertained to the planet was determined; but Nerina is a moon now. And do you not think, sir, that we have a right to know as much about our moon as those *terrestrials*” — and he curled his lip as he spoke with a contemptuous emphasis — ”know of theirs?”

“I beg pardon,” said the corrected captain.

“Well then, never mind,” replied the professor, quickly appeased; “only will you have the goodness to get me a proper place for study?”

“I will, as I promised, do all I can,” answered Servadac.

“Very good,” said the professor. “No immediate hurry; an hour hence will do.”

But in spite of this condescension on the part of the man of science, some hours had to elapse before any place of retreat could be discovered likely to suit his requirements; but at length a little nook was found in the side of the cavern just large enough to hold an armchair and a table, and in this the astronomer was soon ensconced to his entire satisfaction.

Buried thus, nearly 900 feet below ground, the Gallians ought to have had unbounded mental energy to furnish an adequate reaction to the depressing monotony of their existence; but many days would often elapse without any one of them ascending to the surface of the soil, and had it not been for the necessity of obtaining fresh water, it seemed almost probable that there would never have been an effort made to leave the cavern at all.

A few excursions, it is true, were made in the downward direction. The three leaders, with Ben Zoof, made their way to the lower depths of the crater, not with the design of making any further examination as to the nature of the rock — for although it might be true enough that it contained thirty per cent. of gold, it was as valueless to them as granite — but with the intention of ascertaining whether the subterranean fire still retained its activity. Satisfied upon this point, they came to the conclusion that the eruption which had so suddenly ceased in one spot had certainly broken out in another.

February, March, April, May, passed wearily by; but day succeeded to day with such gloomy sameness that it was little wonder that no notice was taken of the lapse of time. The people seemed rather to vegetate than to live, and their want of vigor became at times almost alarming. The readings around the long table ceased to be attractive, and the debates, sustained by few, became utterly wanting in animation. The Spaniards could hardly be roused to quit their beds, and seemed to have scarcely energy enough to eat. The Russians, constitutionally of more enduring temperament, did not give way to the same extent, but the long and drear confinement was beginning to tell upon them all. Servadac, the count, and the lieutenant all knew well enough that it was the want of air and exercise that was the cause of much of this mental depression; but what could they do? The most serious remonstrances on their part were entirely in vain. In fact, they themselves occasionally fell a prey to the same lassitude both of body and mind. Long fits of drowsiness, combined with an utter aversion to food, would come over them. It almost seemed as if their entire nature had become degenerate, and that, like tortoises, they could sleep and fast till the return of summer.

Strange to say, little Nina bore her hardships more bravely than any of them. Flitting about, coaxing one to eat, another to drink, rousing Pablo as often as he seemed yielding to the common languor, the child became the life of the party. Her merry prattle enlivened the gloom of the grim cavern like the sweet notes of a bird; her gay Italian songs broke the monotony of the depressing silence; and almost unconscious as the half-dormant population of Gallia were of her influence, they still would have missed her bright presence sorely. The months still glided on; how, it seemed impossible for the inhabitants of the living tomb to say. There was a dead level of dullness.

At the beginning of June the general torpor appeared slightly to relax its hold upon its victims. This partial revival was probably due to the somewhat increased influence of the sun, still far, far away. During the first half of the Gallian year, Lieutenant Procope had taken careful note of Rosette’s monthly announcements of the comet’s progress, and he was able now, without reference to the professor, to calculate the rate of advance on its way back towards the sun. He found that Gallia had re-crossed the orbit of Jupiter, but was still at the enormous distance of 197,000,000 leagues from the sun, and he reckoned that in about four months it would have entered the zone of the telescopic planets.

Gradually, but uninterruptedly, life and spirits continued to revive, and by the end of the month Servadac and his little colony had regained most of their ordinary physical and mental energies. Ben Zoof, in particular, roused himself with redoubled vigor, like a giant refreshed from his slumbers. The visits, consequently, to the long-neglected galleries of Nina’s Hive became more and more frequent.

One day an excursion was made to the shore. It was still bitterly cold, but the atmosphere had lost nothing of its former stillness, and not a cloud was visible from horizon to zenith. The old footmarks were all as distinct as on the day in which they had been imprinted, and the only portion of the shore where any change was apparent was in the little creek. Here the elevation of the ice had gone on increasing, until the schooner and the tartan had been uplifted to a height of 150 feet, not only rendering them quite inaccessible, but exposing them to all but certain destruction in the event of a thaw.

Isaac Hakkabut, immovable from the personal oversight of his property in the cavern, had not accompanied the party, and consequently was in blissful ignorance of the fate that threatened his vessel. “A good thing the old fellow wasn’t there to see,” observed Ben Zoof; “he would have screamed like a peacock. What a misfortune it is,” he added, speaking to himself, “to have a peacock’s voice, without its plumage!”

During the months of July and August, Gallia advanced 164,000,000 leagues along her orbit. At night the cold was still intense, but in the daytime the sun, here full upon the equator, caused an appreciable difference of 20 degrees in the temperature. Like birds, the population spent whole days exposed to its grateful warmth, rarely returning till nightfall to the shade of their gloomy home.

This spring-time, if such it may be called, had a most enlivening influence upon all. Hope and courage revived as day by day the sun’s disc expanded in the heavens, and every evening the earth assumed a greater magnitude amongst the fixed stars. It was distant yet, but the goal was cheeringly in view.

“I can’t believe that yonder little speck of light contains my mountain of Montmartre,” said Ben Zoof, one night, after he had been gazing long and steadily at the far-off world.

“You will, I hope, some day find out that it does,” answered his master.

“I hope so,” said the orderly, without moving his eye from the distant sphere. After meditating a while, he spoke again. “I suppose Professor Rosette couldn’t make his comet go straight back, could he?”

“Hush!” cried Servadac.

Ben Zoof understood the correction.

“No,” continued the captain; “it is not for man to disturb the order of the universe. That belongs to a Higher Power than ours!”

CHAPTER XIV. THE PROFESSOR PERPLEXED

Another month passed away, and it was now September, but it was still impossible to leave the warmth of the subterranean retreat for the more airy and commodious quarters of the Hive, where “the bees” would certainly have been frozen to death in their cells. It was altogether quite as much a matter of congratulation as of regret that the volcano showed no symptoms of resuming its activity; for although a return of the eruption might have rendered their former resort again habitable, any sudden outbreak would have been disastrous to them where they were, the crater being the sole outlet by which the burning lava could escape.

“A wretched time we have had for the last seven months,” said the orderly one day to his master; “but what a comfort little Nina has been to us all!”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Servadac; “she is a charming little creature. I hardly know how we should have got on without her.”

“What is to become of her when we arrive back at the earth?”

“Not much fear, Ben Zoof, but that she will be well taken care of. Perhaps you and I had better adopt her.”

“Ay, yes,” assented the orderly. “You can be her father, and I can be her mother.”

Servadac laughed. “Then you and I shall be man and wife.”

“We have been as good as that for a long time,” observed Ben Zoof, gravely.

By the beginning of October, the temperature had so far moderated that it could scarcely be said to be intolerable. The comet's distance was scarcely three times as great from the sun as the earth from the sun, so that the thermometer rarely sunk beyond 35 degrees below zero. The whole party began to make almost daily visits to the Hive, and frequently proceeded to the shore, where they resumed their skating exercise, rejoicing in their recovered freedom like prisoners liberated from a dungeon. Whilst the rest were enjoying their recreation, Servadac and the count would hold long conversations with Lieutenant Procope about their present position and future prospects, discussing all manner of speculations as to the results of the anticipated collision with the earth, and wondering whether any measures could be devised for mitigating the violence of a shock which might be terrible in its consequences, even if it did not entail a total annihilation of themselves.

There was no visitor to the Hive more regular than Rosette. He had already directed his telescope to be moved back to his former observatory, where, as much as the cold would permit him, he persisted in making his all-absorbing studies of the heavens.

The result of these studies no one ventured to inquire; but it became generally noticed that something was very seriously disturbing the professor's equanimity. Not only would he be seen toiling more frequently up the arduous way that lay between his nook below and his telescope above, but he would be heard muttering in an angry tone that indicated considerable agitation.

One day, as he was hurrying down to his study, he met Ben Zoof, who, secretly entertaining a feeling of delight at the professor's manifest discomfiture, made some casual remark about things not being very straight. The way in which his advance was received the good orderly never divulged, but henceforward he maintained the firm conviction that there was something very much amiss up in the sky.

To Servadac and his friends this continual disquietude and ill-humor on the part of the professor occasioned no little anxiety. From what, they asked, could his dissatisfaction arise? They could only conjecture that he had discovered some flaw in his reckonings; and if this were so, might there not be reason to apprehend that their anticipations of coming into contact with the earth, at the settled time, might all be falsified?

Day followed day, and still there was no cessation of the professor’s discomposure. He was the most miserable of mortals. If really his calculations and his observations were at variance, this, in a man of his irritable temperament, would account for his perpetual perturbation. But he entered into no explanation; he only climbed up to his telescope, looking haggard and distressed, and when compelled by the frost to retire, he would make his way back to his study more furious than ever. At times he was heard giving vent to his vexation. “Confound it! what does it mean? what is she doing? All behind! Is Newton a fool? Is the law of universal gravitation the law of universal nonsense?” And the little man would seize his head in both his hands, and tear away at the scanty locks which he could ill afford to lose.

Enough was overheard to confirm the suspicion that there was some irreconcilable discrepancy between the results of his computation and what he had actually observed; and yet, if he had been called upon to say, he would have sooner insisted that there was derangement in the laws of celestial mechanism, than have owned there was the least probability of error in any of his own calculations. Assuredly, if the poor professor had had any flesh to lose he would have withered away to a shadow.

But this state of things was before long to come to an end. On the 12th, Ben Zoof, who was hanging about outside the great hall of the cavern, heard the professor inside utter a loud cry. Hurrying in to ascertain the cause, he found Rosette in a state of perfect frenzy, in which ecstasy and rage seemed to be struggling for the predominance.

“Eureka! Eureka!” yelled the excited astronomer.

“What, in the name of peace, do you mean?” bawled Ben Zoof, in open-mouthed amazement.

“Eureka!” again shrieked the little man.

“How? What? Where?” roared the bewildered orderly.

“Eureka! I say,” repeated Rosette; “and if you don’t understand me, you may go to the devil!”

Without availing himself of this polite invitation, Ben Zoof betook himself to his master. “Something has happened to the professor,” he said; “he is rushing about like a madman, screeching and yelling ‘Eureka!’”

“Eureka?” exclaimed Servadac. “That means he has made a discovery;” and, full of anxiety, he hurried off to meet the professor.

But, however great was his desire to ascertain what this discovery implied, his curiosity was not yet destined to be gratified. The professor kept muttering in incoherent phrases: “Rascal! he shall pay for it yet. I will be even with him! Cheat! Thrown me out!” But he did not vouchsafe any reply to Servadac’s inquiries, and withdrew to his study.

From that day Rosette, for some reason at present incomprehensible, quite altered his behavior to Isaac Hakkabut, a man for whom he had always hitherto evinced the greatest repugnance and contempt. All at once he began to show a remarkable interest in the Jew and his affairs, paying several visits to the dark little storehouse, making inquiries as to the state of business and expressing some solicitude about the state of the exchequer.

The wily Jew was taken somewhat by surprise, but came to an immediate conclusion that the professor was contemplating borrowing some money; he was consequently very cautious in all his replies.

It was not Hakkabut’s habit ever to advance a loan except at an extravagant rate of interest, or without demanding far more than an adequate security. Count Timascheff, a Russian nobleman, was evidently rich; to him perhaps, for a proper consideration, a loan might be made: Captain Servadac was a Gascon, and Gascons are proverbially poor; it would never do to lend any money to him; but here was a professor, a mere man of science, with circumscribed means; did *he* expect to borrow? Certainly Isaac would as soon think of flying, as of lending money to him. Such were the thoughts that made him receive all Rosette’s approaches with a careful reservation.

It was not long, however, before Hakkabut was to be called upon to apply his money to a purpose for which he had not reckoned. In his eagerness to effect sales, he had parted with all the alimentary articles in his cargo without having the precautionary prudence to reserve enough for his own consumption. Amongst other things that failed him was his stock of coffee, and as coffee was a beverage without which he deemed it impossible to exist, he found himself in considerable perplexity.

He pondered the matter over for a long time, and ultimately persuaded himself that, after all, the stores were the common property of all, and that he had as much right to a share as anyone else. Accordingly, he made his way to Ben Zoof, and, in the most amiable tone he could assume, begged as a favor that he would let him have a pound of coffee.

The orderly shook his head dubiously.

“A pound of coffee, old Nathan? I can’t say.”

“Why not? You have some?” said Isaac.

“Oh yes! plenty — a hundred kilogrammes.”

“Then let me have one pound. I shall be grateful.”

“Hang your gratitude!”

“Only one pound! You would not refuse anybody else.”

“That’s just the very point, old Samuel; if you were anybody else, I should know very well what to do. I must refer the matter to his Excellency.”

“Oh, his Excellency will do me justice.”

“Perhaps you will find his justice rather too much for you.” And with this consoling remark, the orderly went to seek his master.

Rosette meanwhile had been listening to the conversation, and secretly rejoicing that an opportunity for which he had been watching had arrived. “What’s the matter, Master Isaac? Have you parted with all your coffee?” he asked, in a sympathizing voice, when Ben Zoof was gone.

“Ah! yes, indeed,” groaned Hakkabut, “and now I require some for my own use. In my little black hole I cannot live without my coffee.”

“Of course you cannot,” agreed the professor.

“And don’t you think the governor ought to let me have it?”

“No doubt.”

“Oh, I must have coffee,” said the Jew again.

“Certainly,” the professor assented. “Coffee is nutritious; it warms the blood. How much do you want?”

“A pound. A pound will last me for a long time.”

“And who will weigh it for you?” asked Rosette, scarcely able to conceal the eagerness that prompted the question.

“Why, they will weigh it with my steelyard, of course. There is no other balance here.” And as the Jew spoke, the professor fancied he could detect the faintest of sighs.

“Good, Master Isaac; all the better for you! You will get your seven pounds instead of one!”

“Yes; well, seven, or thereabouts — thereabouts,” stammered the Jew with considerable hesitation.

Rosette scanned his countenance narrowly, and was about to probe him with further questions, when Ben Zoof returned. “And what does his Excellency say?” inquired Hakkabut.

“Why, Nehemiah, he says he shan’t give you any.”

“Merciful heavens!” began the Jew.

“He says he doesn’t mind selling you a little.”

“But, by the holy city, why does he make me pay for what anybody else could have for nothing?”

“As I told you before, you are not anybody else; so, come along. You can afford to buy what you want. We should like to see the color of your money.”

“Merciful heavens!” the old man whined once more.

“Now, none of that! Yes or no? If you are going to buy, say so at once; if not, I shall shut up shop.”

Hakkabut knew well enough that the orderly was not a man to be trifled with, and said, in a tremulous voice, “Yes, I will buy.”

The professor, who had been looking on with much interest, betrayed manifest symptoms of satisfaction.

“How much do you want? What will you charge for it?” asked Isaac, mournfully, putting his hand into his pocket and chinking his money.

“Oh, we will deal gently with you. We will not make any profit. You shall have it for the same price that we paid for it. Ten francs a pound, you know.”

The Jew hesitated.

“Come now, what is the use of your hesitating? Your gold will have no value when you go back to the world.”

“What do you mean?” asked Hakkabut, startled.

“You will find out some day,” answered Ben Zoof, significantly.

Hakkabut drew out a small piece of gold from his pocket, took it close under the lamp, rolled it over in his hand, and pressed it to his lips. “Shall you weigh me the coffee with my steelyard?” he asked, in a quavering voice that confirmed the professor’s suspicions.

“There is nothing else to weigh it with; you know that well enough, old Shechem,” said Ben Zoof. The steelyard was then produced; a tray was suspended to the hook, and upon this coffee was thrown until the needle registered the weight of one pound. Of course, it took seven pounds of coffee to do this.

“There you are! There’s your coffee, man!” Ben Zoof said.

“Are you sure?” inquired Hakkabut, peering down close to the dial. “Are you quite sure that the needle touches the point?”

“Yes; look and see.”

“Give it a little push, please.”

“Why?”

“Because — because — ”

“Well, because of what?” cried the orderly, impatiently.

“Because I think, perhaps — I am not quite sure — perhaps the steelyard is not quite correct.”

The words were not uttered before the professor, fierce as a tiger, had rushed at the Jew, had seized him by the throat, and was shaking him till he was black in the face.

“Help! help!” screamed Hakkabut. “I shall be strangled.”

“Rascal! consummate rascal! thief! villain!” the professor reiterated, and continued to shake the Jew furiously.

Ben Zoof looked on and laughed, making no attempt to interfere; he had no sympathy with either of the two.

The sound of the scuffling, however, drew the attention of Servadac, who, followed by his companions, hastened to the scene. The combatants were soon parted. “What is the meaning of all this?” demanded the captain.

As soon as the professor had recovered his breath, exhausted by his exertions, he said, “The old reprobate, the rascal has cheated us! His steelyard is wrong! He is a thief!”

Captain Servadac looked sternly at Hakkabut.

“How is this, Hakkabut? Is this a fact?”

“No, no — yes — no, your Excellency, only — ”

“He is a cheat, a thief!” roared the excited astronomer. “His weights deceive!”

“Stop, stop!” interposed Servadac; “let us hear. Tell me, Hakkabut — ”

“The steelyard lies! It cheats! it lies!” roared the irrepressible Rosette.

“Tell me, Hakkabut, I say,” repeated Servadac.

The Jew only kept on stammering, “Yes — no — I don’t know.”

But heedless of any interruption, the professor continued, “False weights! That confounded steelyard! It gave a false result! The mass was wrong! The observations contradicted the calculations; they were wrong! She was out of place! Yes, out of place entirely.”

“What!” cried Servadac and Procope in a breath, “out of place?”

“Yes, completely,” said the professor.

“Gallia out of place?” repeated Servadac, agitated with alarm.

“I did not say Gallia,” replied Rosette, stamping his foot impetuously; “I said Nerina.”

“Oh, Nerina,” answered Servadac. “But what of Gallia?” he inquired, still nervously.

“Gallia, of course, is on her way to the earth. I told you so. But that Jew is a rascal!”

CHAPTER XV. A JOURNEY AND A DISAPPOINTMENT

It was as the professor had said. From the day that Isaac Hakkabut had entered upon his mercantile career, his dealings had all been carried on by a system of false weight. That deceitful steelyard had been the mainspring of his fortune. But when it had become his lot to be the purchaser instead of the vendor, his spirit had groaned within him at being compelled to reap the fruits of his own dishonesty. No one who had studied his character could be much surprised at the confession that was extorted from him, that for every supposed kilogramme that he had ever sold the true weight was only 750 grammes, or just five and twenty per cent. less than it ought to have been.

The professor, however, had ascertained all that he wanted to know. By estimating his comet at a third as much again as its proper weight, he had found that his calculations were always at variance with the observed situation of the satellite, which was immediately influenced by the mass of its primary.

But now, besides enjoying the satisfaction of having punished old Hakkabut, Rosette was able to recommence his calculations with reference to the elements of Nerina upon a correct basis, a task to which he devoted himself with redoubled energy.

It will be easily imagined that Isaac Hakkabut, thus caught in his own trap, was jeered most unmercifully by those whom he had attempted to make his dupes. Ben Zoof, in particular, was never wearied of telling him how on his return to the world he would be prosecuted for using false weights, and would certainly become acquainted with the inside of a prison. Thus badgered, he secluded himself more than ever in his dismal hole, never venturing, except when absolutely obliged, to face the other members of the community.

On the 7th of October the comet re-entered the zone of the telescopic planets, one of which had been captured as a satellite, and the origin of the whole of which is most probably correctly attributed to the disintegration of some large planet that formerly revolved between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. By the beginning of the following month half of this zone had been traversed, and only two months remained before the collision with the earth was to be expected. The temperature was now rarely below 12 degrees below zero, but that was far too cold to permit the slightest symptoms of a thaw. The surface of the sea remained as frozen as ever, and the two vessels, high up on their icy pedestals, remained unaltered in their critical position.

It was about this time that the question began to be mooted whether it would not be right to reopen some communication with the Englishmen at Gibraltar. Not that any doubt was entertained as to their having been able successfully to cope with the rigors of the winter; but Captain Servadac, in a way that did honor to his generosity, represented that, however uncourteous might have been their former behavior, it was at least due to them that they should be informed of the true condition of things, which they had had no opportunity of learning; and, moreover, that they should be invited to co-operate with the population of Nina’s Hive, in the event of any measures being suggested by which the shock of the approaching collision could be mitigated.

The count and the lieutenant both heartily concurred in Servadac’s sentiments of humanity and prudence, and all agreed that if the intercourse were to be opened at all, no time could be so suitable as the present, while the surface of the sea presented a smooth and solid footing. After a thaw should set in, neither the yacht nor the tartan could be reckoned on for service, and it would be inexpedient to make use of the steam launch, for which only a few tons of coal had been reserved, just sufficient to convey them to Gourbi Island when the occasion should arise; whilst as to the yawl, which, transformed into a sledge, had performed so successful a trip to Formentera, the absence of wind would make that quite unavailable. It was true that with the return of summer temperature, there would be certain to be a derangement in the atmosphere of Gallia, which would result in wind, but for the present the air was altogether too still for the yawl to have any prospects of making its way to Gibraltar.

The only question remaining was as to the possibility of going on foot. The distance was somewhere about 240 miles. Captain Servadac declared himself quite equal to the undertaking. To skate sixty or seventy miles a day would be nothing, he said, to a practical skater like himself. The whole journey there and back might be performed in eight days. Provided with a compass, a sufficient supply of cold meat, and a spirit lamp, by which he might boil his coffee, he was perfectly sure he should, without the least difficulty, accomplish an enterprise that chimed in so exactly with his adventurous spirit.

Equally urgent were both the count and the lieutenant to be allowed to accompany him; nay, they even offered to go instead; but Servadac, expressing himself as most grateful for their consideration, declined their offer, and avowed his resolution of taking no other companion than his own orderly.

Highly delighted at his master’s decision, Ben Zoof expressed his satisfaction at the prospect of “stretching his legs a bit,” declaring that nothing could induce him to permit the captain to go alone. There was no delay. The departure was fixed for the following morning, the 2nd of November.

Although it is not to be questioned that a genuine desire of doing an act of kindness to his fellow-creatures was a leading motive of Servadac’s proposed visit to Gibraltar, it must be owned that another idea, confided to nobody, least of all to Count Timascheff, had been conceived in the brain of the worthy Gascon. Ben Zoof had an inkling that his master was “up to some other little game,” when, just before starting, he asked him privately whether there was a French tricolor among the stores. “I believe so,” said the orderly.

“Then don’t say a word to anyone, but fasten it up tight in your knapsack.”

Ben Zoof found the flag, and folded it up as he was directed. Before proceeding to explain this somewhat enigmatical conduct of Servadac, it is necessary to refer to a certain physiological fact, coincident but unconnected with celestial phenomena, originating entirely in the frailty of human nature. The nearer that Gallia approached the earth, the more a sort of reserve began to spring up between the captain and Count Timascheff. Though they could not be said to be conscious of it, the remembrance of their former rivalry, so completely buried in oblivion for the last year and ten months, was insensibly recovering its hold upon their minds, and the question was all but coming to the surface as to what would happen if, on their return to earth, the handsome Madame de L — — should still be free. From companions in peril, would they not again be avowed rivals? Conceal it as they would, a coolness was undeniably stealing over an intimacy which, though it could never be called affectionate, had been uniformly friendly and courteous.

Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that Hector Servadac should not have confided to the count a project which, wild as it was, could scarcely have failed to widen the unacknowledged breach that was opening in their friendship.

The project was the annexation of Ceuta to the French dominion. The Englishmen, rightly enough, had continued to occupy the fragment of Gibraltar, and their claim was indisputable. But the island of Ceuta, which before the shock had commanded the opposite side of the strait, and had been occupied by Spaniards, had since been abandoned, and was therefore free to the first occupant who should lay claim to it. To plant the tricolor upon it, in the name of France, was now the cherished wish of Servadac's heart.

"Who knows," he said to himself, "whether Ceuta, on its return to earth, may not occupy a grand and commanding situation? What a proud thing it would be to have secured its possession to France!"

Next morning, as soon as they had taken their brief farewell of their friends, and were fairly out of sight of the shore, Servadac imparted his design to Ben Zoof, who entered into the project with the greatest zest, and expressed himself delighted, not only at the prospect of adding to the dominions of his beloved country, but of stealing a march upon England.

Both travelers were warmly clad, the orderly's knapsack containing all the necessary provisions. The journey was accomplished without special incident; halts were made at regular intervals, for the purpose of taking food and rest. The temperature by night as well as by day was quite endurable, and on the fourth afternoon after starting, thanks to the straight course which their compass enabled them to maintain, the adventurers found themselves within a few miles of Ceuta.

As soon as Ben Zoof caught sight of the rock on the western horizon, he was all excitement. Just as if he were in a regiment going into action, he talked wildly about “columns” and “squares” and “charges.” The captain, although less demonstrative, was hardly less eager to reach the rock. They both pushed forward with all possible speed till they were within a mile and a half of the shore, when Ben Zoof, who had a very keen vision, stopped suddenly, and said that he was sure he could see something moving on the top of the island.

“Never mind, let us hasten on,” said Servadac. A few minutes carried them over another mile, when Ben Zoof stopped again.

“What is it, Ben Zoof?” asked the captain.

“It looks to me like a man on a rock, waving his arms in the air,” said the orderly.

“Plague on it!” muttered Servadac; “I hope we are not too late.” Again they went on; but soon Ben Zoof stopped for the third time.

“It is a semaphore, sir; I see it quite distinctly.” And he was not mistaken; it had been a telegraph in motion that had caught his eye.

“Plague on it!” repeated the captain.

“Too late, sir, do you think?” said Ben Zoof.

“Yes, Ben Zoof; if that’s a telegraph — and there is no doubt of it — somebody has been before us and erected it; and, moreover, if it is moving, there must be somebody working it now.”

He was keenly disappointed. Looking towards the north, he could distinguish Gibraltar faintly visible in the extreme distance, and upon the summit of the rock both Ben Zoof and himself fancied they could make out another semaphore, giving signals, no doubt, in response to the one here.

“Yes, it is only too clear; they have already occupied it, and established their communications,” said Servadac.

“And what are we to do, then?” asked Ben Zoof.

“We must pocket our chagrin, and put as good a face on the matter as we can,” replied the captain.

“But perhaps there are only four or five Englishmen to protect the place,” said Ben Zoof, as if meditating an assault.

“No, no, Ben Zoof,” answered Servadac; “we must do nothing rash. We have had our warning, and, unless our representations can induce them to yield their position, we must resign our hope.”

Thus discomfited, they had reached the foot of the rock, when all at once, like a “Jack-in-the-box,” a sentinel started up before them with the challenge:

“Who goes there?”

“Friends. Vive la France!” cried the captain.

“Hurrah for England!” replied the soldier.

By this time four other men had made their appearance from the upper part of the rock.

“What do you want?” asked one of them, whom Servadac remembered to have seen before at Gibraltar.

“Can I speak to your commanding officer?” Servadac inquired.

“Which?” said the man. “The officer in command of Ceuta?”

“Yes, if there is one.”

“I will acquaint him with your arrival,” answered the Englishman, and disappeared.

In a few minutes the commanding officer, attired in full uniform, was seen descending to the shore. It was Major Oliphant himself.

Servadac could no longer entertain a doubt that the Englishmen had forestalled him in the occupation of Ceuta. Provisions and fuel had evidently been conveyed thither in the boat from Gibraltar before the sea had frozen, and a solid casemate, hollowed in the rock, had afforded Major Oliphant and his contingent ample protection from the rigor of the winter. The ascending smoke that rose above the rock was sufficient evidence that good fires were still kept up; the soldiers appeared to have thriven well on what, no doubt, had been a generous diet, and the major himself, although he would scarcely have been willing to allow it, was slightly stouter than before.

Being only about twelve miles distant from Gibraltar, the little garrison at Ceuta had felt itself by no means isolated in its position; but by frequent excursions across the frozen strait, and by the constant use of the telegraph, had kept up their communication with their fellow-countrymen on the other island. Colonel Murphy and the major had not even been forced to forego the pleasures of the chessboard. The game that had been interrupted by Captain Servadac's former visit was not yet concluded; but, like the two American clubs that played their celebrated game in 1846 between Washington and Baltimore, the two gallant officers made use of the semaphore to communicate their well-digested moves.

The major stood waiting for his visitor to speak.

"Major Oliphant, I believe?" said Servadac, with a courteous bow.

"Yes, sir, Major Oliphant, officer in command of the garrison at Ceuta," was the Englishman's reply. "And to whom," he added, "may I have the honor of speaking?"

"To Captain Servadac, the governor general of Gallia."

"Indeed!" said the major, with a supercilious look.

"Allow me to express my surprise," resumed the captain, "at seeing you installed as commanding officer upon what I have always understood to be Spanish soil. May I demand your claim to your position?"

"My claim is that of first occupant."

"But do you not think that the party of Spaniards now resident with me may at some future time assert a prior right to the proprietorship?"

"I think not, Captain Servadac."

"But why not?" persisted the captain.

"Because these very Spaniards have, by formal contract, made over Ceuta, in its integrity, to the British government."

Servadac uttered an exclamation of surprise.

“And as the price of that important cession,” continued Major Oliphant, “they have received a fair equivalent in British gold.”

“Ah!” cried Ben Zoof, “that accounts for that fellow Negrete and his people having such a lot of money.”

Servadac was silent. It had become clear to his mind what had been the object of that secret visit to Ceuta which he had heard of as being made by the two English officers. The arguments that he had intended to use had completely fallen through; all that he had now to do was carefully to prevent any suspicion of his disappointed project.

“May I be allowed to ask, Captain Servadac, to what I am indebted for the honor of this visit?” asked Major Oliphant presently.

“I have come, Major Oliphant, in the hope of doing you and your companions a service,” replied Servadac, rousing himself from his reverie.

“Ah, indeed!” replied the major, as though he felt himself quite independent of all services from exterior sources.

“I thought, major, that it was not unlikely you were in ignorance of the fact that both Ceuta and Gibraltar have been traversing the solar regions on the surface of a comet.”

The major smiled incredulously; but Servadac, nothing daunted, went on to detail the results of the collision between the comet and the earth, adding that, as there was the almost immediate prospect of another concussion, it had occurred to him that it might be advisable for the whole population of Gallia to unite in taking precautionary measures for the common welfare.

“In fact, Major Oliphant,” he said in conclusion, “I am here to inquire whether you and your friends would be disposed to join us in our present quarters.”

“I am obliged to you, Captain Servadac,” answered the major stiffly; “but we have not the slightest intention of abandoning our post. We have received no government orders to that effect; indeed, we have received no orders at all. Our own dispatch to the First Lord of the Admiralty still awaits the mail.”

“But allow me to repeat,” insisted Servadac, “that we are no longer on the earth, although we expect to come in contact with it again in about eight weeks.”

“I have no doubt,” the major answered, “that England will make every effort to reclaim us.”

Servadac felt perplexed. It was quite evident that Major Oliphant had not been convinced of the truth of one syllable of what he had been saying.

“Then I am to understand that you are determined to retain your two garrisons here and at Gibraltar?” asked Servadac, with one last effort at persuasion.

“Certainly; these two posts command the entrance of the Mediterranean.”

“But supposing there is no longer any Mediterranean?” retorted the captain, growing impatient.

“Oh, England will always take care of that,” was Major Oliphant’s cool reply. “But excuse me,” he added presently; “I see that Colonel Murphy has just telegraphed his next move. Allow me to wish you good-afternoon.”

And without further parley, followed by his soldiers, he retired into the casemate, leaving Captain Servadac gnawing his mustache with mingled rage and mortification.

“A fine piece of business we have made of this!” said Ben Zoof, when he found himself alone with his master.

“We will make our way back at once,” replied Captain Servadac.

“Yes, the sooner the better, with our tails between our legs,” rejoined the orderly, who this time felt no inclination to start off to the march of the Algerian zephyrs. And so the French tricolor returned as it had set out — in Ben Zoof’s knapsack.

On the eighth evening after starting, the travelers again set foot on the volcanic promontory just in time to witness a great commotion.

Palmyrin Rosette was in a furious rage. He had completed all his calculations about Nerina, but that perfidious satellite had totally disappeared. The astronomer was frantic at the loss of his moon. Captured probably by some larger body, it was revolving in its proper zone of the minor planets.

CHAPTER XVI. A BOLD PROPOSITION

On his return Servadac communicated to the count the result of his expedition, and, though perfectly silent on the subject of his personal project, did not conceal the fact that the Spaniards, without the smallest right, had sold Ceuta to the English.

Having refused to quit their post, the Englishmen had virtually excluded themselves from any further consideration; they had had their warning, and must now take the consequences of their own incredulity.

Although it had proved that not a single creature either at Gourbi Island, Gibraltar, Ceuta, Madalena, or Formentera had received any injury whatever at the time of the first concussion, there was nothing in the least to make it certain that a like immunity from harm would attend the second. The previous escape was doubtless owing to some slight, though unaccountable, modification in the rate of motion; but whether the inhabitants of the earth had fared so fortunately, was a question that had still to be determined.

The day following Servadac's return, he and the count and Lieutenant Procope met by agreement in the cave, formally to discuss what would be the most advisable method of proceeding under their present prospects. Ben Zoof was, as a matter of course, allowed to be present, and Professor Rosette had been asked to attend; but he declined on the plea of taking no interest in the matter. Indeed, the disappearance of his moon had utterly disconcerted him, and the probability that he should soon lose his comet also, plunged him into an excess of grief which he preferred to bear in solitude.

Although the barrier of cool reserve was secretly increasing between the captain and the count, they scrupulously concealed any outward token of their inner feelings, and without any personal bias applied their best energies to the discussion of the question which was of such mutual, nay, of such universal interest.

Servadac was the first to speak. “In fifty-one days, if Professor Rosette has made no error in his calculations, there is to be a recurrence of collision between this comet and the earth. The inquiry that we have now to make is whether we are prepared for the coming shock. I ask myself, and I ask you, whether it is in our power, by any means, to avert the evil consequences that are only too likely to follow?”

Count Timascheff, in a voice that seemed to thrill with solemnity, said: “In such events we are at the disposal of an over-ruling Providence; human precautions cannot sway the Divine will.”

“But with the most profound reverence for the will of Providence,” replied the captain, “I beg to submit that it is our duty to devise whatever means we can to escape the threatening mischief. Heaven helps them that help themselves.”

“And what means have you to suggest, may I ask?” said the count, with a faint accent of satire.

Servadac was forced to acknowledge that nothing tangible had hitherto presented itself to his mind.

“I don’t want to intrude,” observed Ben Zoof, “but I don’t understand why such learned gentlemen as you cannot make the comet go where you want it to go.”

“You are mistaken, Ben Zoof, about our learning,” said the captain; “even Professor Rosette, with all his learning, has not a shadow of power to prevent the comet and the earth from knocking against each other.”

“Then I cannot see what is the use of all this learning,” the orderly replied.

“One great use of learning,” said Count Timascheff with a smile, “is to make us know our own ignorance.”

While this conversation had been going on, Lieutenant Procope had been sitting in thoughtful silence. Looking up, he now said, “Incident to this expected shock, there may be a variety of dangers. If, gentlemen, you will allow me, I will enumerate them; and we shall, perhaps, by taking them *seriatim*, be in a better position to judge whether we can successfully grapple with them, or in any way mitigate their consequences.”

There was a general attitude of attention. It was surprising how calmly they proceeded to discuss the circumstances that looked so threatening and ominous.

“First of all,” resumed the lieutenant, “we will specify the different ways in which the shock may happen.”

“And the prime fact to be remembered,” interposed Servadac, “is that the combined velocity of the two bodies will be about 21,000 miles an hour.”

“Express speed, and no mistake!” muttered Ben Zoof.

“Just so,” assented Procope. “Now, the two bodies may impinge either directly or obliquely. If the impact is sufficiently oblique, Gallia may do precisely what she did before: she may graze the earth; she may, or she may not, carry off a portion of the earth’s atmosphere and substance, and so she may float away again into space; but her orbit would undoubtedly be deranged, and if we survive the shock, we shall have small chance of ever returning to the world of our fellow-creatures.”

“Professor Rosette, I suppose,” Ben Zoof remarked, “would pretty soon find out all about that.”

“But we will leave this hypothesis,” said the lieutenant; “our own experience has sufficiently shown us its advantages and its disadvantages. We will proceed to consider the infinitely more serious alternative of direct impact; of a shock that would hurl the comet straight on to the earth, to which it would become attached.”

“A great wart upon her face!” said Ben Zoof, laughing.

The captain held up his finger to his orderly, making him understand that he should hold his tongue.

“It is, I presume, to be taken for granted,” continued Lieutenant Procope, “that the mass of the earth is comparatively so large that, in the event of a direct collision, her own motion would not be sensibly retarded, and that she would carry the comet along with her, as part of herself.”

“Very little question of that, I should think,” said Servadac.

“Well, then,” the lieutenant went on, “what part of this comet of ours will be the part to come into collision with the earth? It may be the equator, where we are; it may be at the exactly opposite point, at our antipodes; or it may be at either pole. In any case, it seems hard to foresee whence there is to come the faintest chance of deliverance.”

“Is the case so desperate?” asked Servadac.

“I will tell you why it seems so. If the side of the comet on which we are resident impinges on the earth, it stands to reason that we must be crushed to atoms by the violence of the concussion.”

“Regular mincemeat!” said Ben Zoof, whom no admonitions could quite reduce to silence.

“And if,” said the lieutenant, after a moment’s pause, and the slightest possible frown at the interruption — ”and if the collision should occur at our antipodes, the sudden check to the velocity of the comet would be quite equivalent to a shock *in situ*; and, another thing, we should run the risk of being suffocated, for all our comet’s atmosphere would be assimilated with the terrestrial atmosphere, and we, supposing we were not dashed to atoms, should be left as it were upon the summit of an enormous mountain (for such to all intents and purposes Gallia would be), 450 miles above the level of the surface of the globe, without a particle of air to breathe.”

“But would not our chances of escape be considerably better,” asked Count Timascheff, “in the event of either of the comet’s poles being the point of contact?”

“Taking the combined velocity into account,” answered the lieutenant, “I confess that I fear the violence of the shock will be too great to permit our destruction to be averted.”

A general silence ensued, which was broken by the lieutenant himself. “Even if none of these contingencies occur in the way we have contemplated, I am driven to the suspicion that we shall be burnt alive.”

“Burnt alive!” they all exclaimed in a chorus of horror.

“Yes. If the deductions of modern science be true, the speed of the comet, when suddenly checked, will be transmuted into heat, and that heat will be so intense that the temperature of the comet will be raised to some millions of degrees.”

No one having anything definite to allege in reply to Lieutenant Procope’s forebodings, they all relapsed into silence. Presently Ben Zoof asked whether it was not possible for the comet to fall into the middle of the Atlantic.

Procope shook his head. “Even so, we should only be adding the fate of drowning to the list of our other perils.”

“Then, as I understand,” said Captain Servadac, “in whatever way or in whatever place the concussion occurs, we must be either crushed, suffocated, roasted, or drowned. Is that your conclusion, lieutenant?”

“I confess I see no other alternative,” answered Procope, calmly.

“But isn’t there another thing to be done?” said Ben Zoof.

“What do you mean?” his master asked.

“Why, to get off the comet before the shock comes.”

“How could you get off Gallia?”

“That I can’t say,” replied the orderly.

“I am not sure that that could not be accomplished,” said the lieutenant.

All eyes in a moment were riveted upon him, as, with his head resting on his hands, he was manifestly cogitating a new idea. “Yes, I think it could be accomplished,” he repeated. “The project may appear extravagant, but I do not know why it should be impossible. Ben Zoof has hit the right nail on the head; we must try and leave Gallia before the shock.”

“Leave Gallia! How?” said Count Timascheff.

The lieutenant did not at once reply. He continued pondering for a time, and at last said, slowly and distinctly, “By making a balloon!”

Servadac’s heart sank.

“A balloon!” he exclaimed. “Out of the question! Balloons are exploded things. You hardly find them in novels. Balloon, indeed!”

“Listen to me,” replied Procope. “Perhaps I can convince you that my idea is not so chimerical as you imagine.” And, knitting his brow, he proceeded to establish the feasibility of his plan. “If we can ascertain the precise moment when the shock is to happen, and can succeed in launching ourselves a sufficient time beforehand into Gallia’s atmosphere, I believe it will transpire that this atmosphere will amalgamate with that of the earth, and that a balloon whirled along by the combined velocity would glide into the mingled atmosphere and remain suspended in mid-air until the shock of the collision is overpast.”

Count Timascheff reflected for a minute, and said, “I think, lieutenant, I understand your project. The scheme seems tenable; and I shall be ready to co-operate with you, to the best of my power, in putting it into execution.”

“Only, remember,” continued Procope, “there are many chances to one against our success. One instant’s obstruction and stoppage in our passage, and our balloon is burnt to ashes. Still, reluctant as I am to acknowledge it, I confess that I feel our sole hope of safety rests in our getting free from this comet.”

“If the chances were ten thousand to one against us,” said Servadac, “I think the attempt ought to be made.”

“But have we hydrogen enough to inflate a balloon?” asked the count.

“Hot air will be all that we shall require,” the lieutenant answered; “we are only contemplating about an hour’s journey.”

“Ah, a fire-balloon! A montgolfier!” cried Servadac. “But what are you going to do for a casing?”

“I have thought of that. We must cut it out of the sails of the *Dobryna*; they are both light and strong,” rejoined the lieutenant. Count Timascheff complimented the lieutenant upon his ingenuity, and Ben Zoof could not resist bringing the meeting to a conclusion by a ringing cheer.

Truly daring was the plan of which Lieutenant Procope had thus become the originator; but the very existence of them all was at stake, and the design must be executed resolutely. For the success of the enterprise it was absolutely necessary to know, almost to a minute, the precise time at which the collision would occur, and Captain Servadac undertook the task, by gentle means or by stern, of extracting the secret from the professor.

To Lieutenant Procope himself was entrusted the superintendence of the construction of the montgolfier, and the work was begun at once. It was to be large enough to carry the whole of the twenty-three residents in the volcano, and, in order to provide the means of floating aloft long enough to give time for selecting a proper place for descent, the lieutenant was anxious to make it carry enough hay or straw to maintain combustion for a while, and keep up the necessary supply of heated air.

The sails of the *Dobryna*, which had all been carefully stowed away in the Hive, were of a texture unusually close, and quite capable of being made airtight by means of a varnish, the ingredients of which were rummaged out of the promiscuous stores of the tartan. The lieutenant himself traced out the pattern and cut out the strips, and all hands were employed in seaming them together. It was hardly the work for little fingers, but Nina persisted in accomplishing her own share of it. The Russians were quite at home at occupation of this sort, and having initiated the Spaniards into its mysteries, the task of joining together the casing was soon complete. Isaac Hakkabut and the professor were the only two members of the community who took no part in this somewhat tedious proceeding.

A month passed away, but Servadac found no opportunity of getting at the information he had pledged himself to gain. On the sole occasion when he had ventured to broach the subject with the astronomer, he had received for answer that as there was no hurry to get back to the earth, there need be no concern about any dangers of transit.

Indeed, as time passed on, the professor seemed to become more and more inaccessible. A pleasant temperature enabled him to live entirely in his observatory, from which intruders were rigidly shut out. But Servadac bided his time. He grew more and more impressed with the importance of finding out the exact moment at which the impact would take place, but was content to wait for a promising opportunity to put any fresh questions on the subject to the too reticent astronomer.

Meanwhile, the earth's disc was daily increasing in magnitude; the comet traveled 50,000,000 leagues during the month, at the close of which it was not more than 78,000,000 leagues from the sun.

A thaw had now fairly set in. The breaking up of the frozen ocean was a magnificent spectacle, and “the great voice of the sea,” as the whalers graphically describe it, was heard in all its solemnity. Little streams of water began to trickle down the declivities of the mountain and along the shelving shore, only to be transformed, as the melting of the snow continued, into torrents or cascades. Light vapors gathered on the horizon, and clouds were formed and carried rapidly along by breezes to which the Gallian atmosphere had long been unaccustomed. All these were doubtless but the prelude to atmospheric disturbances of a more startling character; but as indications of returning spring, they were greeted with a welcome which no apprehensions for the future could prevent being glad and hearty.

A double disaster was the inevitable consequence of the thaw. Both the schooner and the tartan were entirely destroyed. The basement of the icy pedestal on which the ships had been upheaved was gradually undermined, like the icebergs of the Arctic Ocean, by warm currents of water, and on the night of the 12th the huge block collapsed *en masse*, so that on the following morning nothing remained of the *Dobryna* and the *Hansa* except the fragments scattered on the shore.

Although certainly expected, the catastrophe could not fail to cause a sense of general depression. Well-nigh one of their last ties to Mother Earth had been broken; the ships were gone, and they had only a balloon to replace them!

To describe Isaac Hakkabut’s rage at the destruction of the tartan would be impossible. His oaths were simply dreadful; his imprecations on the accursed race were full of wrath. He swore that Servadac and his people were responsible for his loss; he vowed that they should be sued and made to pay him damages; he asserted that he had been brought from Gourbi Island only to be plundered; in fact, he became so intolerably abusive, that Servadac threatened to put him into irons unless he conducted himself properly; whereupon the Jew, finding that the captain was in earnest, and would not hesitate to carry the threat into effect, was fain to hold his tongue, and slunk back into his dim hole.

By the 14th the balloon was finished, and, carefully sewn and well varnished as it had been, it was really a very substantial structure. It was covered with a network that had been made from the light rigging of the yacht, and the car, composed of wicker-work that had formed partitions in the hold of the *Hansa*, was quite commodious enough to hold the twenty-three passengers it was intended to convey. No thought had been bestowed upon comfort or convenience, as the ascent was to last for so short a time, merely long enough for making the transit from atmosphere to atmosphere.

The necessity was becoming more and more urgent to get at the true hour of the approaching contact, but the professor seemed to grow more obstinate than ever in his resolution to keep his secret.

On the 15th the comet crossed the orbit of Mars, at the safe distance of 56,000,000 leagues; but during that night the community thought that their last hour had taken them unawares. The volcano rocked and trembled with the convulsions of internal disturbance, and Servadac and his companions, convinced that the mountain was doomed to some sudden disruption, rushed into the open air.

The first object that caught their attention as they emerged upon the open rocks was the unfortunate professor, who was scrambling down the mountain-side, piteously displaying a fragment of his shattered telescope.

It was no time for condolence.

A new marvel arrested every eye. A fresh satellite, in the gloom of night, was shining conspicuously before them.

That satellite was a part of Gallia itself!

By the expansive action of the inner heat, Gallia, like Gambart’s comet, had been severed in twain; an enormous fragment had been detached and launched into space!

The fragment included Ceuta and Gibraltar, with the two English garrisons!

CHAPTER XVII. THE VENTURE MADE

What would be the consequences of this sudden and complete disruption, Servadac and his people hardly dared to think.

The first change that came under their observation was the rapidity of the sun’s appearances and disappearances, forcing them to the conviction that although the comet still rotated on its axis from east to west, yet the period of its rotation had been diminished by about one-half. Only six hours instead of twelve elapsed between sunrise and sunrise; three hours after rising in the west the sun was sinking again in the east.

“We are coming to something!” exclaimed Servadac. “We have got a year of something like 2,880 days.”

“I shouldn’t think it would be an easy matter to find saints enough for such a calendar as that!” said Ben Zoof.

Servadac laughed, and remarked that they should have the professor talking about the 238th of June, and the 325th of December.

It soon became evident that the detached portion was not revolving round the comet, but was gradually retreating into space. Whether it had carried with it any portion of atmosphere, whether it possessed any other condition for supporting life, and whether it was likely ever again to approach to the earth, were all questions that there were no means of determining. For themselves the all-important problem was — what effect would the rending asunder of the comet have upon its rate of progress? and as they were already conscious of a further increase of muscular power, and a fresh diminution of specific gravity, Servadac and his associates could not but wonder whether the alteration in the mass of the comet would not result in its missing the expected coincidence with the earth altogether.

Although he professed himself incompetent to pronounce a decided opinion, Lieutenant Procope manifestly inclined to the belief that no alteration would ensue in the rate of Gallia’s velocity; but Rosette, no doubt, could answer the question directly, and the time had now arrived in which he must be compelled to divulge the precise moment of collision.

But the professor was in the worst of tempers. Generally taciturn and morose, he was more than usually uncivil whenever any one ventured to speak to him. The loss of his telescope had doubtless a great deal to do with his ill-humor; but the captain drew the most favorable conclusions from Rosette’s continued irritation. Had the comet been in any way projected from its course, so as to be likely to fail in coming into contact with the earth, the professor would have been quite unable to conceal his satisfaction. But they required to know more than the general truth, and felt that they had no time to lose in getting at the exact details.

The opportunity that was wanted soon came.

On the 18th, Rosette was overheard in furious altercation with Ben Zoof. The orderly had been taunting the astronomer with the mutilation of his little comet. A fine thing, he said, to split in two like a child’s toy. It had cracked like a dry nut; and mightn’t one as well live upon an exploding bomb? — with much more to the same effect. The professor, by way of retaliation, had commenced sneering at the “prodigious” mountain of Montmartre, and the dispute was beginning to look serious when Servadac entered.

Thinking he could turn the wrangling to some good account, so as to arrive at the information he was so anxiously seeking, the captain pretended to espouse the views of his orderly; he consequently brought upon himself the full force of the professor’s wrath.

Rosette’s language became more and more violent, till Servadac, feigning to be provoked beyond endurance, cried:

“You forget, sir, that you are addressing the Governor-General of Gallia.”

“Governor-General! humbug!” roared Rosette. “Gallia is my comet!”

“I deny it,” said Servadac. “Gallia has lost its chance of getting back to the earth. Gallia has nothing to do with you. Gallia is mine; and you must submit to the government which I please to ordain.”

“And who told you that Gallia is not going back to the earth?” asked the professor, with a look of withering scorn.

“Why, isn’t her mass diminished? Isn’t she split in half? Isn’t her velocity all altered?” demanded the captain.

“And pray who told you this?” again said the professor, with a sneer.

“Everybody. Everybody knows it, of course,” replied Servadac.

“Everybody is very clever. And you always were a very clever scholar too. We remember that of old, don’t we?”

“Sir!”

“You nearly mastered the first elements of science, didn’t you?”

“Sir!”

“A credit to your class!”

“Hold your tongue, sir!” bellowed the captain again, as if his anger was uncontrollable.

“Not I,” said the professor.

“Hold your tongue!” repeated Servadac.

“Just because the mass is altered you think the velocity is altered?”

“Hold your tongue!” cried the captain, louder than ever.

“What has mass to do with the orbit? Of how many comets do you know the mass, and yet you know their movements? Ignorance!” shouted Rosette.

“Insolence!” retorted Servadac.

Ben Zoof, really thinking that his master was angry, made a threatening movement towards the professor.

“Touch me if you dare!” screamed Rosette, drawing himself up to the fullest height his diminutive figure would allow. “You shall answer for your conduct before a court of justice!”

“Where? On Gallia?” asked the captain.

“No; on the earth.”

“The earth! Pshaw! You know we shall never get there; our velocity is changed.”

“On the earth,” repeated the professor, with decision.

“Trash!” cried Ben Zoof. “The earth will be too far off!”

“Not too far off for us to come across her orbit at 42 minutes and 35.6 seconds past two o’clock on the morning of this coming 1st of January.”

“Thanks, my dear professor — many thanks. You have given me all the information I required;” and, with a low bow and a gracious smile, the captain withdrew. The orderly made an equally polite bow, and followed his master. The professor, completely nonplussed, was left alone.

Thirteen days, then — twenty-six of the original Gallian days, fifty-two of the present — was all the time for preparation that now remained. Every preliminary arrangement was hurried on with the greatest earnestness.

There was a general eagerness to be quit of Gallia. Indifferent to the dangers that must necessarily attend a balloon ascent under such unparalleled circumstances, and heedless of Lieutenant Procope’s warning that the slightest check in their progress would result in instantaneous combustion, they all seemed to conclude that it must be the simplest thing possible to glide from one atmosphere to another, so that they were quite sanguine as to the successful issue of their enterprise. Captain Servadac made a point of showing himself quite enthusiastic in his anticipations, and to Ben Zoof the going up in a balloon was the supreme height of his ambition. The count and the lieutenant, of colder and less demonstrative temperament, alike seemed to realize the possible perils of the undertaking, but even they were determined to put a bold face upon every difficulty.

The sea had now become navigable, and three voyages were made to Gourbi Island in the steam launch, consuming the last of their little reserve of coal.

The first voyage had been made by Servadac with several of the sailors. They found the gourbi and the adjacent building quite uninjured by the severity of the winter; numbers of little rivulets intersected the pasture-land; new plants were springing up under the influence of the equatorial sun, and the luxuriant foliage was tenanted by the birds which had flown back from the volcano. Summer had almost abruptly succeeded to winter, and the days, though only three hours long, were intensely hot.

Another of the voyages to the island had been to collect the dry grass and straw which was necessary for inflating the balloon. Had the balloon been less cumbersome it would have been conveyed to the island, whence the start would have been effected; but as it was, it was more convenient to bring the combustible material to the balloon.

The last of the coal having been consumed, the fragments of the shipwrecked vessels had to be used day by day for fuel. Hakkabut began making a great hubbub when he found that they were burning some of the spars of the *Hansa*; but he was effectually silenced by Ben Zoof, who told him that if he made any more fuss, he should be compelled to pay 50,000 francs for a balloon-ticket, or else he should be left behind.

By Christmas Day everything was in readiness for immediate departure. The festival was observed with a solemnity still more marked than the anniversary of the preceding year. Every one looked forward to spending New Year’s Day in another sphere altogether, and Ben Zoof had already promised Pablo and Nina all sorts of New Year’s gifts.

It may seem strange, but the nearer the critical moment approached, the less Hector Servadac and Count Timascheff had to say to each other on the subject. Their mutual reserve became more apparent; the experiences of the last two years were fading from their minds like a dream; and the fair image that had been the cause of their original rivalry was ever rising, as a vision, between them.

The captain’s thoughts began to turn to his unfinished rondo; in his leisure moments, rhymes suitable and unsuitable, possible and impossible, were perpetually jingling in his imagination. He labored under the conviction that he had a work of genius to complete. A poet he had left the earth, and a poet he must return.

Count Timascheff’s desire to return to the world was quite equaled by Lieutenant Procope’s. The Russian sailors’ only thought was to follow their master, wherever he went. The Spaniards, though they would have been unconcerned to know that they were to remain upon Gallia, were nevertheless looking forward with some degree of pleasure to revisiting the plains of Andalusia; and Nina and Pablo were only too delighted at the prospect of accompanying their kind protectors on any fresh excursion whatever.

The only malcontent was Palmyrin Rosette. Day and night he persevered in his astronomical pursuits, declared his intention of never abandoning his comet, and swore positively that nothing should induce him to set foot in the car of the balloon.

The misfortune that had befallen his telescope was a never-ending theme of complaint; and just now, when Gallia was entering the narrow zone of shooting-stars, and new discoveries might have been within his reach, his loss made him more inconsolable than ever. In sheer desperation, he endeavored to increase the intensity of his vision by applying to his eyes some belladonna which he found in the *Dobryna’s* medicine chest; with heroic fortitude he endured the tortures of the experiment, and gazed up into the sky until he was nearly blind. But all in vain; not a single fresh discovery rewarded his sufferings.

No one was quite exempt from the feverish excitement which prevailed during the last days of December. Lieutenant Procope superintended his final arrangements. The two low masts of the schooner had been erected firmly on the shore, and formed supports for the montgolfier, which had been duly covered with the netting, and was ready at any moment to be inflated. The car was close at hand. Some inflated skins had been attached to its sides, so that the balloon might float for a time, in the event of its descending in the sea at a short distance from the shore. If unfortunately, it should come down in mid-ocean, nothing but the happy chance of some passing vessel could save them all from the certain fate of being drowned.

The 31st came. Twenty-four hours hence and the balloon, with its large living freight, would be high in the air. The atmosphere was less buoyant than that of the earth, but no difficulty in ascending was to be apprehended.

Gallia was now within 96,000,000 miles of the sun, consequently not much more than 4,000,000 miles from the earth; and this interval was being diminished at the rate of nearly 208,000 miles an hour, the speed of the earth being about 70,000 miles, that of the comet being little less than 138,000 miles an hour.

It was determined to make the start at two o’clock, three-quarters of an hour, or, to speak correctly 42 minutes 35.6 seconds, before the time predicted by the professor as the instant of collision. The modified rotation of the comet caused it to be daylight at the time.

An hour previously the balloon was inflated with perfect success, and the car was securely attached to the network. It only awaited the stowage of the passengers.

Isaac Hakkabut was the first to take his place in the car. But scarcely had he done so, when Servadac noticed that his waist was encompassed by an enormous girdle that bulged out to a very extraordinary extent. “What’s all this, Hakkabut?” he asked.

“It’s only my little bit of money, your Excellency; my modest little fortune — a mere bagatelle,” said the Jew.

“And what may your little fortune weigh?” inquired the captain.

“Only about sixty-six pounds!” said Isaac.

“Sixty-six pounds!” cried Servadac. “We haven’t reckoned for this.”

“Merciful heavens!” began the Jew.

“Sixty-six pounds!” repeated Servadac. “We can hardly carry ourselves; we can’t have any dead weight here. Pitch it out, man, pitch it out!”

“God of Israel!” whined Hakkabut.

“Out with it, I say!” cried Servadac.

“What, all my money, which I have saved so long, and toiled for so hard?”

“It can’t be helped,” said the captain, unmoved.

“Oh, your Excellency!” cried the Jew.

“Now, old Nicodemus, listen to me,” interposed Ben Zoof; “you just get rid of that pouch of yours, or we will get rid of you. Take your choice. Quick, or out you go!”

The avaricious old man was found to value his life above his money; he made a lamentable outcry about it, but he unfastened his girdle at last, and put it out of the car.

Very different was the case with Palmyrin Rosette. He avowed over and over again his intention of never quitting the nucleus of his comet. Why should he trust himself to a balloon, that would blaze up like a piece of paper? Why should he leave the comet? Why should he not go once again upon its surface into the far-off realms of space?

His volubility was brought to a sudden check by Servadac’s bidding two of the sailors, without more ado, to take him in their arms and put him quietly down at the bottom of the car.

To the great regret of their owners, the two horses and Nina’s pet goat were obliged to be left behind. The only creature for which there was found a place was the carrier-pigeon that had brought the professor’s message to the Hive. Servadac thought it might probably be of service in carrying some communication to the earth.

When every one, except the captain and his orderly, had taken their places, Servadac said, “Get in, Ben Zoof.”

“After you, sir,” said Ben Zoof, respectfully.

“No, no!” insisted Servadac; “the captain must be the last to leave the ship!”

A moment’s hesitation and the orderly clambered over the side of the car. Servadac followed. The cords were cut. The balloon rose with stately calmness into the air.

CHAPTER XVIII. SUSPENSE

When the balloon had reached an elevation of about 2,500 yards, Lieutenant Procope determined to maintain it at that level. A wire-work stove, suspended below the casing, and filled with lighted hay, served to keep the air in the interior at a proper temperature.

Beneath their feet was extended the basin of the Gallian Sea. An inconsiderable speck to the north marked the site of Gourbi Island. Ceuta and Gibraltar, which might have been expected in the west, had utterly disappeared. On the south rose the volcano, the extremity of the promontory that jutted out from the continent that formed the framework of the sea; whilst in every direction the strange soil, with its commixture of tellurium and gold, gleamed under the sun’s rays with a perpetual iridescence.

Apparently rising with them in their ascent, the horizon was well-defined. The sky above them was perfectly clear; but away in the northwest, in opposition to the sun, floated a new sphere, so small that it could not be an asteroid, but like a dim meteor. It was the fragment that the internal convulsion had rent from the surface of the comet, and which was now many thousands of leagues away, pursuing the new orbit into which it had been projected. During the hours of daylight it was far from distinct, but after nightfall it would assume a definite luster.

The object, however, of supreme interest was the great expanse of the terrestrial disc, which was rapidly drawing down obliquely towards them. It totally eclipsed an enormous portion of the firmament above, and approaching with an ever-increasing velocity, was now within half its average distance from the moon. So close was it, that the two poles could not be embraced in one focus. Irregular patches of greater or less brilliancy alternated on its surface, the brighter betokening the continents, the more somber indicating the oceans that absorbed the solar rays. Above, there were broad white bands, darkened on the side averted from the sun, exhibiting a slow but unintermittent movement; these were the vapors that pervaded the terrestrial atmosphere.

But as the aeronauts were being hurried on at a speed of 70 miles a second, this vague aspect of the earth soon developed itself into definite outlines. Mountains and plains were no longer confused, the distinction between sea and shore was more plainly identified, and instead of being, as it were, depicted on a map, the surface of the earth appeared as though modelled in relief.

Twenty-seven minutes past two, and Gallia is only 72,000 miles from the terrestrial sphere; quicker and quicker is the velocity; ten minutes later, and they are only 36,000 miles apart!

The whole configuration of the earth is clear.

“Europe! Russia! France!” shout Procope, the count, and Servadac, almost in a breath.

And they are not mistaken. The eastern hemisphere lies before them in the full blaze of light, and there is no possibility of error in distinguishing continent from continent.

The surprise only kindled their emotion to yet keener intensity, and it would be hard to describe the excitement with which they gazed at the panorama that was before them. The crisis of peril was close at hand, but imagination overleaped all consideration of danger; and everything was absorbed in the one idea that they were again within reach of that circle of humanity from which they had supposed themselves severed forever.

And, truly, if they could have paused to study it, that panorama of the states of Europe which was outstretched before their eyes, was conspicuous for the fantastic resemblances with which Nature on the one hand, and international relations on the other, have associated them. There was England, marching like some stately dame towards the east, trailing her ample skirts and coroneted with the cluster of her little islets; Sweden and Norway, with their bristling spine of mountains, seemed like a splendid lion eager to spring down from the bosom of the ice-bound north; Russia, a gigantic polar bear, stood with its head towards Asia, its left paw resting upon Turkey, its right upon Mount Caucasus; Austria resembled a huge cat curled up and sleeping a watchful sleep; Spain, with Portugal as a pennant, like an unfurled banner, floated from the extremity of the continent; Turkey, like an insolent cock, appeared to clutch the shores of Asia with the one claw, and the land of Greece with the other; Italy, as it were a foot and leg encased in a tight-fitting boot, was juggling deftly with the islands of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica; Prussia, a formidable hatchet imbedded in the heart of Germany, its edge just grazing the frontiers of France; whilst France itself suggested a vigorous torso with Paris at its breast.

All at once Ben Zoof breaks the silence: “Montmartre! I see Montmartre!” And, smile at the absurdity as others might, nothing could induce the worthy orderly to surrender his belief that he could actually make out the features of his beloved home.

The only individual whose soul seemed unstirred by the approaching earth was Palmyrin Rosette. Leaning over the side of the car, he kept his eyes fixed upon the abandoned comet, now floating about a mile and a half below him, bright in the general irradiation which was flooding the surrounding space.

Chronometer in hand, Lieutenant Procope stood marking the minutes and seconds as they fled; and the stillness which had once again fallen upon them all was only broken by his order to replenish the stove, that the montgolfier might retain its necessary level. Servadac and the count continued to gaze upon the earth with an eagerness that almost amounted to awe. The balloon was slightly in the rear of Gallia, a circumstance that augured somewhat favorably, because it might be presumed that if the comet preceded the balloon in its contact with the earth, there would be a break in the suddenness of transfer from one atmosphere to the other.

The next question of anxiety was, where would the balloon alight? If upon *terra firma*, would it be in a place where adequate resources for safety would be at hand? If upon the ocean, would any passing vessel be within hail to rescue them from their critical position? Truly, as the count observed to his comrades, none but a Divine Pilot could steer them now.

“Forty-two minutes past!” said the lieutenant, and his voice seemed to thrill through the silence of expectation.

There were not 20,000 miles between the comet and the earth!

The calculated time of impact was 2 hours 47 minutes 35.6 seconds. Five minutes more and collision must ensue!

But was it so? Just at this moment, Lieutenant Procope observed that the comet deviated sensibly in an oblique course. Was it possible that after all collision would not occur?

The deviation, however, was not great; it did not justify any anticipation that Gallia would merely graze the earth, as it had done before; it left it certain that the two bodies would inevitably impinge.

“No doubt,” said Ben Zoof, “this time we shall stick together.”

Another thought occurred. Was it not only too likely that, in the fusion of the two atmospheres, the balloon itself, in which they were being conveyed, would be rent into ribbons, and every one of its passengers hurled into destruction, so that not a Gallian should survive to tell the tale of their strange peregrinations?

Moments were precious; but Hector Servadac resolved that he would adopt a device to secure that at least some record of their excursion in solar distances should survive themselves.

Tearing a leaf from his note-book, he wrote down the name of the comet, the list of the fragments of the earth it had carried off, the names of his companions, and the date of the comet’s aphelion; and having subscribed it with his signature, turned to Nina and told her he must have the carrier-pigeon which was nestling in her bosom.

The child’s eyes filled with tears; she did not say a word, but imprinting a kiss upon its soft plumage, she surrendered it at once, and the message was hurriedly fastened to its neck. The bird wheeled round and round in a few circles that widened in their diameter, and quickly sunk to an altitude in the comet’s atmosphere much inferior to the balloon.

Some minutes more were thus consumed and the interval of distance was reduced to less than 8,000 miles.

The velocity became inconceivably great, but the increased rate of motion was in no way perceptible; there was nothing to disturb the equilibrium of the car in which they were making their aerial adventure.

“Forty-six minutes!” announced the lieutenant.

The glowing expanse of the earth’s disc seemed like a vast funnel, yawning to receive the comet and its atmosphere, balloon and all, into its open mouth.

“Forty-seven!” cried Procope.

There was half a minute yet. A thrill ran through every vein. A vibration quivered through the atmosphere. The montgolfier, elongated to its utmost stretch, was manifestly being sucked into a vortex. Every passenger in the quivering car involuntarily clung spasmodically to its sides, and as the two atmospheres amalgamated, clouds accumulated in heavy masses, involving all around in dense obscurity, while flashes of lurid flame threw a weird glimmer on the scene.

In a mystery every one found himself upon the earth again. They could not explain it, but here they were once more upon terrestrial soil; in a swoon they had left the earth, and in a similar swoon they had come back!

Of the balloon not a vestige remained, and contrary to previous computation, the comet had merely grazed the earth, and was traversing the regions of space, again far away!

CHAPTER XIX. BACK AGAIN

“In Algeria, captain?”

“Yes, Ben Zoof, in Algeria; and not far from Mostaganem.” Such were the first words which, after their return to consciousness, were exchanged between Servadac and his orderly.

They had resided so long in the province that they could not for a moment be mistaken as to their whereabouts, and although they were incapable of clearing up the mysteries that shrouded the miracle, yet they were convinced at the first glance that they had been returned to the earth at the very identical spot where they had quitted it.

In fact, they were scarcely more than a mile from Mostaganem, and in the course of an hour, when they had all recovered from the bewilderment occasioned by the shock, they started off in a body and made their way to the town. It was a matter of extreme surprise to find no symptom of the least excitement anywhere as they went along. The population was perfectly calm; every one was pursuing his ordinary avocation; the cattle were browsing quietly upon the pastures that were moist with the dew of an ordinary January morning. It was about eight o’clock; the sun was rising in the east; nothing could be noticed to indicate that any abnormal incident had either transpired or been expected by the inhabitants. As to a collision with a comet, there was not the faintest trace of any such phenomenon crossing men’s minds, and awakening, as it surely would, a panic little short of the certified approach of the millennium.

“Nobody expects us,” said Servadac; “that is very certain.”

“No, indeed,” answered Ben Zoof, with a sigh; he was manifestly disappointed that his return to Mostaganem was not welcomed with a triumphal reception.

They reached the Mascara gate. The first persons that Servadac recognized were the two friends that he had invited to be his seconds in the duel two years ago, the colonel of the 2nd Fusiliers and the captain of the 8th Artillery. In return to his somewhat hesitating salutation, the colonel greeted him heartily, “Ah! Servadac, old fellow! is it you?”

“I, myself,” said the captain.

“Where on earth have you been to all this time? In the name of peace, what have you been doing with yourself?”

“You would never believe me, colonel,” answered Servadac, “if I were to tell you; so on that point I had better hold my tongue.”

“Hang your mysteries!” said the colonel; “tell me, where have you been?”

“No, my friend, excuse me,” replied Servadac; “but shake hands with me in earnest, that I may be sure I am not dreaming.” Hector Servadac had made up his mind, and no amount of persuasion could induce him to divulge his incredible experiences.

Anxious to turn the subject, Servadac took the earliest opportunity of asking, “And what about Madame de L — — ?”

“Madame de L — — -!” exclaimed the colonel, taking the words out of his mouth; “the lady is married long ago; you did not suppose that she was going to wait for you. ‘Out of sight, out of mind,’ you know.”

“True,” replied Servadac; and turning to the count he said, “Do you hear that? We shall not have to fight our duel after all.”

“Most happy to be excused,” rejoined the count. The rivals took each other by the hand, and were united henceforth in the bonds of a sincere and confiding friendship.

“An immense relief,” said Servadac to himself, “that I have no occasion to finish that confounded rondo!”

It was agreed between the captain and the count that it would be desirable in every way to maintain the most rigid silence upon the subject of the inexplicable phenomena which had come within their experience. It was to them both a subject of the greatest perplexity to find that the shores of the Mediterranean had undergone no change, but they coincided in the opinion that it was prudent to keep their bewilderment entirely to themselves. Nothing induced them to break their reserve.

The very next day the small community was broken up.

The *Dobryna’s* crew, with the count and the lieutenant, started for Russia, and the Spaniards, provided, by the count’s liberality, with a competency that ensured them from want, were despatched to their native shores. The leave taking was accompanied by genuine tokens of regard and goodwill.

For Isaac Hakkabut alone there was no feeling of regret. Doubly ruined by the loss of his tartan, and by the abandonment of his fortune, he disappeared entirely from the scene. It is needless to say that no one troubled himself to institute a search after him, and, as Ben Zoof sententiously remarked, “Perhaps old Jehoram is making money in America by exhibiting himself as the latest arrival from a comet!”

But however great was the reserve which Captain Servadac might make on his part, nothing could induce Professor Rosette to conceal his experiences. In spite of the denial which astronomer after astronomer gave to the appearance of such a comet as Gallia at all, and of its being refused admission to the catalogue, he published a voluminous treatise, not only detailing his own adventures, but setting forth, with the most elaborate precision, all the elements which settled its period and its orbit. Discussions arose in scientific circles; an overwhelming majority decided against the representations of the professor; an unimportant minority declared themselves in his favor, and a pamphlet obtained some degree of notice, ridiculing the whole debate under the title of “The History of an Hypothesis.” In reply to this impertinent criticism of his labors, Rosette issued a rejoinder full with the most vehement expressions of indignation, and reiterating his asseveration that a fragment of Gibraltar was still traversing the regions of space, carrying thirteen Englishmen upon its surface, and concluding by saying that it was the great disappointment of his life that he had not been taken with them.

Pablo and little Nina were adopted, the one by Servadac, the other by the count, and under the supervision of their guardians, were well educated and cared for. Some years later, Colonel, no longer Captain, Servadac, his hair slightly streaked with grey, had the pleasure of seeing the handsome young Spaniard united in marriage to the Italian, now grown into a charming girl, upon whom the count bestowed an ample dowry; the young people’s happiness in no way marred by the fact that they had not been destined, as once seemed likely, to be the Adam and Eve of a new world.

The career of the comet was ever a mystery which neither Servadac nor his orderly could eliminate from the regions of doubt. Anyhow, they were firmer and more confiding friends than ever.

One day, in the environs of Montmartre, where they were secure from eavesdroppers, Ben Zoof incidentally referred to the experiences in the depths of Nina’s Hive; but stopped short and said, “However, those things never happened, sir, did they?”

His master could only reply, “Confound it, Ben Zoof! What is a man to believe?”

THE UNDERGROUND CITY

Translated by W.H.G. Kingston

Also known as *The Black Indies*, this novel was first published in 1877. It concerns the fortunes of the mining community of Aberfoyle near Stirling, Scotland. Receiving a letter from an old colleague, mining engineer James Starr sets off for the old Aberfoyle mine, thought to have been mined out ten years earlier. Starr finds mine overman Simon Ford and his family living in a cottage deep inside the mine; he is astonished to find that Ford has made a discovery of the presence of a large vein of coal. Accompanying Simon Ford are his wife, Madge, and adult son, Harry.

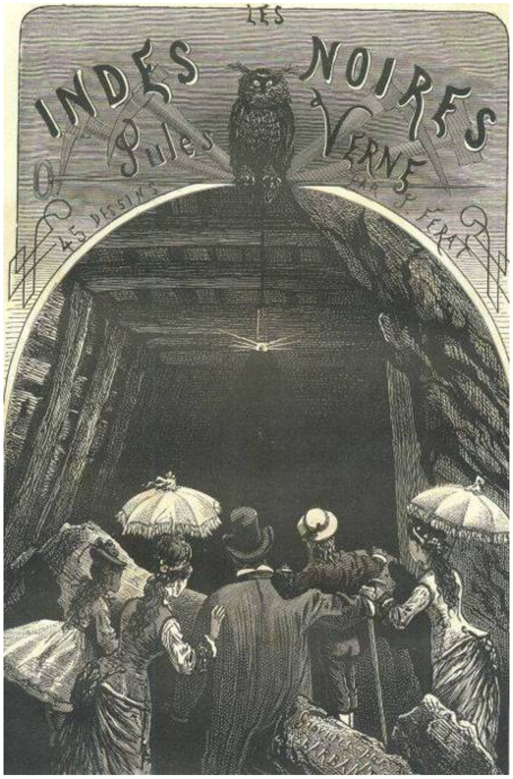
LES
INDES NOIRES
Jules Verne
45 DESSINS PAR J. FERAT

The original French frontispiece

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CHAPTER I. CONTRADICTORY LETTERS

To Mr. F. R. Starr, Engineer, 30 Canongate, Edinburgh.

IF Mr. James Starr will come to-morrow to the Aberfoyle coal-mines, Dochart pit, Yarrow shaft, a communication of an interesting nature will be made to him.

“Mr. James Starr will be awaited for, the whole day, at the Callander station, by Harry Ford, son of the old overman Simon Ford.”

“He is requested to keep this invitation secret.”

Such was the letter which James Starr received by the first post, on the 3rd December, 18 — , the letter bearing the Aberfoyle postmark, county of Stirling, Scotland.

The engineer’s curiosity was excited to the highest pitch. It never occurred to him to doubt whether this letter might not be a hoax. For many years he had known Simon Ford, one of the former foremen of the Aberfoyle mines, of which he, James Starr, had for twenty years, been the manager, or, as he would be termed in English coal-mines, the viewer. James Starr was a strongly-constituted man, on whom his fifty-five years weighed no more heavily than if they had been forty. He belonged to an old Edinburgh family, and was one of its most distinguished members. His labors did credit to the body of engineers who are gradually devouring the carboniferous subsoil of the United Kingdom, as much at Cardiff and Newcastle, as in the southern counties of Scotland. However, it was more particularly in the depths of the mysterious mines of Aberfoyle, which border on the Alloa mines and occupy part of the county of Stirling, that the name of Starr had acquired the greatest renown. There, the greater part of his existence had been passed. Besides this, James Starr belonged to the Scottish Antiquarian Society, of which he had been made president. He was also included amongst the most active members of the Royal Institution; and the Edinburgh Review frequently published clever articles signed by him. He was in fact one of those practical men to whom is due the prosperity of England. He held a high rank in the old capital of Scotland, which not only from a physical but also from a moral point of view, well deserves the name of the Northern Athens.

We know that the English have given to their vast extent of coal-mines a very significant name. They very justly call them the “Black Indies,” and these Indies have contributed perhaps even more than the Eastern Indies to swell the surprising wealth of the United Kingdom.

At this period, the limit of time assigned by professional men for the exhaustion of coal-mines was far distant and there was no dread of scarcity. There were still extensive mines to be worked in the two Americas. The manu-factories, appropriated to so many different uses, locomotives, steamers, gas works, &c. were not likely to fail for want of the mineral fuel; but the consumption had so increased during the last few years, that certain beds had been exhausted even to their smallest veins. Now deserted, these mines perforated the ground with their useless shafts and forsaken galleries. This was exactly the case with the pits of Aberfoyle.

Ten years before, the last butty had raised the last ton of coal from this colliery. The underground working stock, traction engines, trucks which run on rails along the galleries, subterranean tramways, frames to support the shaft, pipes — in short, all that constituted the machinery of a mine had been brought up from its depths. The exhausted mine was like the body of a huge fantastically-shaped mastodon, from which all the organs of life have been taken, and only the skeleton remains.

Nothing was left but long wooden ladders, down the Yarrow shaft — the only one which now gave access to the lower galleries of the Dochart pit. Above ground, the sheds, formerly sheltering the outside works, still marked the spot where the shaft of that pit had been sunk, it being now abandoned, as were the other pits, of which the whole constituted the mines of Aberfoyle.

It was a sad day, when for the last time the workmen quitted the mine, in which they had lived for so many years. The engineer, James Starr, had collected the hundreds of workmen which composed the active and courageous population of the mine. Overmen, brakemen, putters, wastemen, barrowmen, masons, smiths, carpenters, outside and inside laborers, women, children, and old men, all were collected in the great yard of the Dochart pit, formerly heaped with coal from the mine.

Many of these families had existed for generations in the mine of old Aberfoyle; they were now driven to seek the means of subsistence elsewhere, and they waited sadly to bid farewell to the engineer.

James Starr stood upright, at the door of the vast shed in which he had for so many years superintended the powerful machines of the shaft. Simon Ford, the foreman of the Dochart pit, then fifty-five years of age, and other managers and overseers, surrounded him. James Starr took off his hat. The miners, cap in hand, kept a profound silence. This farewell scene was of a touching character, not wanting in grandeur.

“My friends,” said the engineer, “the time has come for us to separate. The Aberfoyle mines, which for so many years have united us in a common work, are now exhausted. All our researches have not led to the discovery of a new vein, and the last block of coal has just been extracted from the Dochart pit.” And in confirmation of his words, James Starr pointed to a lump of coal which had been kept at the bottom of a basket.

“This piece of coal, my friends,” resumed James Starr, “is like the last drop of blood which has flowed through the veins of the mine! We shall keep it, as the first fragment of coal is kept, which was extracted a hundred and fifty years ago from the bearings of Aberfoyle. Between these two pieces, how many generations of workmen have succeeded each other in our pits! Now, it is over! The last words which your engineer will address to you are a farewell. You have lived in this mine, which your hands have emptied. The work has been hard, but not without profit for you. Our great family must disperse, and it is not probable that the future will ever again unite the scattered members. But do not forget that we have lived together for a long time, and that it will be the duty of the miners of Aberfoyle to help each other. Your old masters will not forget you either. When men have worked together, they must never be stranger to each other again. We shall keep our eye on you, and wherever you go, our recommendations shall follow you. Farewell then, my friends, and may Heaven be with you!”

So saying, James Starr wrung the horny hand of the oldest miner, whose eyes were dim with tears. Then the overmen of the different pits came forward to shake hands with him, whilst the miners waved their caps, shouting, “Farewell, James Starr, our master and our friend!”

This farewell would leave a lasting remembrance in all these honest hearts. Slowly and sadly the population quitted the yard. The black soil of the roads leading to the Dochart pit resounded for the last time to the tread of miners’ feet, and silence succeeded to the bustling life which had till then filled the Aberfoyle mines.

One man alone remained by James Starr. This was the overman, Simon Ford. Near him stood a boy, about fifteen years of age, who for some years already had been employed down below.

James Starr and Simon Ford knew and esteemed each other well. “Good-by, Simon,” said the engineer.

“Good-by, Mr. Starr,” replied the overman, “let me add, till we meet again!”

“Yes, till we meet again. Ford!” answered James Starr. “You know that I shall be always glad to see you, and talk over old times.”

“I know that, Mr. Starr.”

“My house in Edinburgh is always open to you.”

“It’s a long way off, is Edinburgh!” answered the man shaking his head. “Ay, a long way from the Dochart pit.”

“A long way, Simon? Where do you mean to live?”

“Even here, Mr. Starr! We’re not going to leave the mine, our good old nurse, just because her milk is dried up! My wife, my boy, and myself, we mean to remain faithful to her!”

“Good-by then, Simon,” replied the engineer, whose voice, in spite of himself, betrayed some emotion.

“No, I tell you, it’s TILL WE MEET AGAIN, Mr. Starr, and not Just ‘good-by,’” returned the foreman. “Mark my words, Aberfoyle will see you again!”

The engineer did not try to dispel the man’s illusion. He patted Harry’s head, again wrung the father’s hand, and left the mine.

All this had taken place ten years ago; but, notwithstanding the wish which the overman had expressed to see him again, during that time Starr had heard nothing of him. It was after ten years of separation that he got this letter from Simon Ford, requesting him to take without delay the road to the old Aberfoyle colliery.

A communication of an interesting nature, what could it be? Dochart pit. Yarrow shaft! What recollections of the past these names brought back to him! Yes, that was a fine time, that of work, of struggle, — the best part of the engineer’s life. Starr re-read his letter. He pondered over it in all its bearings. He much regretted that just a line more had not been added by Ford. He wished he had not been quite so laconic.

Was it possible that the old foreman had discovered some new vein? No! Starr remembered with what minute care the mines had been explored before the definite cessation of the works. He had himself proceeded to the lowest soundings without finding the least trace in the soil, burrowed in every direction. They had even attempted to find coal under strata which are usually below it, such as the Devonian red sandstone, but without result. James Starr had therefore abandoned the mine with the absolute conviction that it did not contain another bit of coal.

“No,” he repeated, “no! How is it possible that anything which could have escaped my researches, should be revealed to those of Simon Ford. However, the old overman must well know that such a discovery would be the one thing in the world to interest me, and this invitation, which I must keep secret, to repair to the Dochart pit!” James Starr always came back to that.

On the other hand, the engineer knew Ford to be a clever miner, peculiarly endowed with the instinct of his trade. He had not seen him since the time when the Aberfoyle colliery was abandoned, and did not know either what he was doing or where he was living, with his wife and his son. All that he now knew was, that a rendezvous had been appointed him at the Yarrow shaft, and that Harry, Simon Ford’s son, was to wait for him during the whole of the next day at the Callander station.

“I shall go, I shall go!” said Starr, his excitement increasing as the time drew near.

Our worthy engineer belonged to that class of men whose brain is always on the boil, like a kettle on a hot fire. In some of these brain kettles the ideas bubble over, in others they just simmer quietly. Now on this day, James Starr’s ideas were boiling fast.

But suddenly an unexpected incident occurred. This was the drop of cold water, which in a moment was to condense all the vapors of the brain. About six in the evening, by the third post, Starr’s servant brought him a second letter. This letter was enclosed in a coarse envelope, and evidently directed by a hand unaccustomed to the use of a pen. James Starr tore it open. It contained only a scrap of paper, yellowed by time, and apparently torn out of an old copy book.

On this paper was written a single sentence, thus worded:

“It is useless for the engineer James Starr to trouble himself, Simon Ford’s letter being now without object.”

No signature.

CHAPTER II. ON THE ROAD

THE course of James Starr’s ideas was abruptly stopped, when he got this second letter contradicting the first.

“What does this mean?” said he to himself. He took up the torn envelope, and examined it. Like the other, it bore the Aberfoyle postmark. It had therefore come from the same part of the county of Stirling. The old miner had evidently not written it. But, no less evidently, the author of this second letter knew the overman’s secret, since it expressly contradicted the invitation to the engineer to go to the Yarrow shaft.

Was it really true that the first communication was now without object? Did someone wish to prevent James Starr from troubling himself either uselessly or otherwise? Might there not be rather a malevolent intention to thwart Ford’s plans?

This was the conclusion at which James Starr arrived, after mature reflection. The contradiction which existed between the two letters only wrought in him a more keen desire to visit the Dochart pit. And besides, if after all it was a hoax, it was well worth while to prove it. Starr also thought it wiser to give more credence to the first letter than to the second; that is to say, to the request of such a man as Simon Ford, rather than to the warning of his anonymous contradictor.

“Indeed,” said he, “the fact of anyone endeavoring to influence my resolution, shows that Ford’s communication must be of great importance. To-morrow, at the appointed time, I shall be at the rendezvous.”

In the evening, Starr made his preparations for departure. As it might happen that his absence would be prolonged for some days, he wrote to Sir

W. Elphiston, President of the Royal Institution, that he should be unable to be present at the next meeting of the Society. He also wrote to excuse himself from two or three engagements which he had made for the week. Then, having ordered his servant to pack a traveling bag, he went to bed, more excited than the affair perhaps warranted.

The next day, at five o’clock, James Starr jumped out of bed, dressed himself warmly, for a cold rain was falling, and left his house in the Canongate, to go to Granton Pier to catch the steamer, which in three hours would take him up the Forth as far as Stirling.

For the first time in his life, perhaps, in passing along the Canongate, he did NOT TURN TO LOOK AT HOLYROOD, the palace of the former sovereigns of Scotland. He did not notice the sentinels who stood before its gateways, dressed in the uniform of their Highland regiment, tartan kilt, plaid and sporran complete. His whole thought was to reach Callander where Harry Ford was supposedly awaiting him.

The better to understand this narrative, it will be as well to hear a few words on the origin of coal. During the geological epoch, when the terrestrial spheroid was still in course of formation, a thick atmosphere surrounded it, saturated with watery vapors, and copiously impregnated with carbonic acid. The vapors gradually condensed in diluvial rains, which fell as if they had leapt from the necks of thousands of millions of seltzer water bottles. This liquid, loaded with carbonic acid, rushed in torrents over a deep soft soil, subject to sudden or slow alterations of form, and maintained in its semi-fluid state as much by the heat of the sun as by the fires of the interior mass. The internal heat had not as yet been collected in the center of the globe. The terrestrial crust, thin and incompletely hardened, allowed it to spread through its pores. This caused a peculiar form of vegetation, such as is probably produced on the surface of the inferior planets, Venus or Mercury, which revolve nearer than our earth around the radiant sun of our system.

The soil of the continents was covered with immense forests. Carbonic acid, so suitable for the development of the vegetable kingdom, abounded. The feet of these trees were drowned in a sort of immense lagoon, kept continually full by currents of fresh and salt waters. They eagerly assimilated to themselves the carbon which they, little by little, extracted from the atmosphere, as yet unfit for the function of life, and it may be said that they were destined to store it, in the form of coal, in the very bowels of the earth.

It was the earthquake period, caused by internal convulsions, which suddenly modified the unsettled features of the terrestrial surface. Here, an intumescence which was to become a mountain, there, an abyss which was to be filled with an ocean or a sea. There, whole forests sunk through the earth's crust, below the unfixed strata, either until they found a resting-place, such as the primitive bed of granitic rock, or, settling together in a heap, they formed a solid mass.

As the waters were contained in no bed, and were spread over every part of the globe, they rushed where they liked, tearing from the scarcely-formed rocks material with which to compose schists, sandstones, and limestones. This the roving waves bore over the submerged and now peaty forests, and deposited above them the elements of rocks which were to superpose the coal strata. In course of time, periods of which include millions of years, these earths hardened in layers, and enclosed under a thick carapace of pudding-stone, schist, compact or friable sandstone, gravel and stones, the whole of the massive forests.

And what went on in this gigantic crucible, where all this vegetable matter had accumulated, sunk to various depths? A regular chemical operation, a sort of distillation. All the carbon contained in these vegetables had agglomerated, and little by little coal was forming under the double influence of enormous pressure and the high temperature maintained by the internal fires, at this time so close to it.

Thus there was one kingdom substituted for another in this slow but irresistible reaction. The vegetable was transformed into a mineral. Plants which had lived the vegetative life in all the vigor of first creation became petrified. Some of the substances enclosed in this vast herbal left their impression on the other more rapidly mineralized products, which pressed them as an hydraulic press of incalculable power would have done.

Thus also shells, zoophytes, star-fish, polypi, spirifores, even fish and lizards brought by the water, left on the yet soft coal their exact likeness, “admirably taken off.”

Pressure seems to have played a considerable part in the formation of carboniferous strata. In fact, it is to its degree of power that are due the different sorts of coal, of which industry makes use. Thus in the lowest layers of the coal ground appears the anthracite, which, being almost destitute of volatile matter, contains the greatest quantity of carbon. In the higher beds are found, on the contrary, lignite and fossil wood, substances in which the quantity of carbon is infinitely less. Between these two beds, according to the degree of pressure to which they have been subjected, are found veins of graphite and rich or poor coal. It may be asserted that it is for want of sufficient pressure that beds of peaty bog have not been completely changed into coal. So then, the origin of coal mines, in whatever part of the globe they have been discovered, is this: the absorption through the terrestrial crust of the great forests of the geological period; then, the mineralization of the vegetables obtained in the course of time, under the influence of pressure and heat, and under the action of carbonic acid.

Now, at the time when the events related in this story took place, some of the most important mines of the Scottish coal beds had been exhausted by too rapid working. In the region which extends between Edinburgh and Glasgow, for a distance of ten or twelve miles, lay the Aberfoyle colliery, of which the engineer, James Starr, had so long directed the works. For ten years these mines had been abandoned. No new seams had been discovered, although the soundings had been carried to a depth of fifteen hundred or even of two thousand feet, and when James Starr had retired, it was with the full conviction that even the smallest vein had been completely exhausted.

Under these circumstances, it was plain that the discovery of a new seam of coal would be an important event. Could Simon Ford's communication relate to a fact of this nature? This question James Starr could not cease asking himself. Was he called to make conquest of another corner of these rich treasure fields? Fain would he hope it was so.

The second letter had for an instant checked his speculations on this subject, but now he thought of that letter no longer. Besides, the son of the old overman was there, waiting at the appointed rendezvous. The anonymous letter was therefore worth nothing.

The moment the engineer set foot on the platform at the end of his journey, the young man advanced towards him.

“Are you Harry Ford?” asked the engineer quickly.

“Yes, Mr. Starr.”

“I should not have known you, my lad. Of course in ten years you have become a man!”

“I knew you directly, sir,” replied the young miner, cap in hand. “You have not changed. You look just as you did when you bade us good-by in the Dochart pit. I haven’t forgotten that day.”

“Put on your cap, Harry,” said the engineer. “It’s pouring, and politeness needn’t make you catch cold.”

“Shall we take shelter anywhere, Mr. Starr?” asked young Ford.

“No, Harry. The weather is settled. It will rain all day, and I am in a hurry. Let us go on.”

“I am at your orders,” replied Harry.

“Tell me, Harry, is your father well?”

“Very well, Mr. Starr.”

“And your mother?”

“She is well, too.”

“Was it your father who wrote telling me to come to the Yarrow shaft?”

“No, it was I.”

“Then did Simon Ford send me a second letter to contradict the first?” asked the engineer quickly.

“No, Mr. Starr,” answered the young miner.

“Very well,” said Starr, without speaking of the anonymous letter. Then, continuing, “And can you tell me what you father wants with me?”

“Mr. Starr, my father wishes to tell you himself.”

“But you know what it is?”

“I do, sir.”

“Well, Harry, I will not ask you more. But let us get on, for I’m anxious to see Simon Ford. By-the-bye, where does he live?”

“In the mine.”

“What! In the Dochart pit?”

“Yes, Mr. Starr,” replied Harry.

“Really! has your family never left the old mine since the cessation of the works?”

“Not a day, Mr. Starr. You know my father. It is there he was born, it is there he means to die!”

“I can understand that, Harry. I can understand that! His native mine! He did not like to abandon it! And are you happy there?”

“Yes, Mr. Starr,” replied the young miner, “for we love one another, and we have but few wants.”

“Well, Harry,” said the engineer, “lead the way.”

And walking rapidly through the streets of Callander, in a few minutes they had left the town behind them.

CHAPTER III. THE DOCHART PIT

HARRY FORD was a fine, strapping fellow of five and twenty. His grave looks, his habitually passive expression, had from childhood been noticed among his comrades in the mine. His regular features, his deep blue eyes, his curly hair, rather chestnut than fair, the natural grace of his person, altogether made him a fine specimen of a lowlander. Accustomed from his earliest days to the work of the mine, he was strong and hardy, as well as brave and good. Guided by his father, and impelled by his own inclinations, he had early begun his education, and at an age when most lads are little more than apprentices, he had managed to make himself of some importance, a leader, in fact, among his fellows, and few are very ignorant in a country which does all it can to remove ignorance. Though, during the first years of his youth, the pick was never out of Harry's hand, nevertheless the young miner was not long in acquiring sufficient knowledge to raise him into the upper class of the miners, and he would certainly have succeeded his father as overman of the Dochart pit, if the colliery had not been abandoned.

James Starr was still a good walker, yet he could not easily have kept up with his guide, if the latter had not slackened his pace. The young man, carrying the engineer's bag, followed the left bank of the river for about a mile. Leaving its winding course, they took a road under tall, dripping trees. Wide fields lay on either side, around isolated farms. In one field a herd of hornless cows were quietly grazing; in another sheep with silky wool, like those in a child's toy sheep fold.

The Yarrow shaft was situated four miles from Callander. Whilst walking, James Starr could not but be struck with the change in the country. He had not seen it since the day when the last ton of Aberfoyle coal had been emptied into railway trucks to be sent to Glasgow. Agricultural life had now taken the place of the more stirring, active, industrial life. The contrast was all the greater because, during winter, field work is at a standstill. But formerly, at whatever season, the mining population, above and below ground, filled the scene with animation. Great wagons of coal used to be passing night and day. The rails, with their rotten sleepers, now disused, were then constantly ground by the weight of wagons. Now stony roads took the place of the old mining tramways. James Starr felt as if he was traversing a desert.

The engineer gazed about him with a saddened eye. He stopped now and then to take breath. He listened. The air was no longer filled with distant whistlings and the panting of engines. None of those black vapors which the manufacturer loves to see, hung in the horizon, mingling with the clouds. No tall cylindrical or prismatic chimney vomited out smoke, after being fed from the mine itself; no blast-pipe was puffing out its white vapor. The ground, formerly black with coal dust, had a bright look, to which James Starr's eyes were not accustomed.

When the engineer stood still, Harry Ford stopped also. The young miner waited in silence. He felt what was passing in his companion's mind, and he shared his feelings; he, a child of the mine, whose whole life had been passed in its depths.

“Yes, Harry, it is all changed,” said Starr. “But at the rate we worked, of course the treasures of coal would have been exhausted some day. Do you regret that time?”

“I do regret it, Mr. Starr,” answered Harry. “The work was hard, but it was interesting, as are all struggles.”

"No doubt, my lad. A continuous struggle against the dangers of landslips, fires, inundations, explosions of firedamp, like claps of thunder. One had to guard against all those perils! You say well! It was a struggle, and consequently an exciting life."

"The miners of Alva have been more favored than the miners of Aberfoyle, Mr. Starr!"

"Ay, Harry, so they have," replied the engineer.

"Indeed," cried the young man, "it's a pity that all the globe was not made of coal; then there would have been enough to last millions of years!"

"No doubt there would, Harry; it must be acknowledged, however, that nature has shown more forethought by forming our sphere principally of sandstone, limestone, and granite, which fire cannot consume."

"Do you mean to say, Mr. Starr, that mankind would have ended by burning their own globe?"

"Yes! The whole of it, my lad," answered the engineer. "The earth would have passed to the last bit into the furnaces of engines, machines, steamers, gas factories; certainly, that would have been the end of our world one fine day!"

"There is no fear of that now, Mr. Starr. But yet, the mines will be exhausted, no doubt, and more rapidly than the statistics make out!"

"That will happen, Harry; and in my opinion England is very wrong in exchanging her fuel for the gold of other nations! I know well," added the engineer, "that neither hydraulics nor electricity has yet shown all they can do, and that some day these two forces will be more completely utilized.

But no matter! Coal is of a very practical use, and lends itself easily to the various wants of industry. Unfortunately man cannot produce it at will. Though our external forests grow incessantly under the influence of heat and water, our subterranean forests will not be reproduced, and if they were, the globe would never be in the state necessary to make them into coal."

James Starr and his guide, whilst talking, had continued their walk at a rapid pace. An hour after leaving Callander they reached the Dochart pit.

The most indifferent person would have been touched at the appearance this deserted spot presented. It was like the skeleton of something that had formerly lived. A few wretched trees bordered a plain where the ground was hidden under the black dust of the mineral fuel, but no cinders nor even fragments of coal were to be seen. All had been carried away and consumed long ago.

They walked into the shed which covered the opening of the Yarrow shaft, whence ladders still gave access to the lower galleries of the pit. The engineer bent over the opening. Formerly from this place could be heard the powerful whistle of the air inhaled by the ventilators. It was now a silent abyss. It was like being at the mouth of some extinct volcano.

When the mine was being worked, ingenious machines were used in certain shafts of the Aberfoyle colliery, which in this respect was very well off; frames furnished with automatic lifts, working in wooden slides, oscillating ladders, called "man-engines," which, by a simple movement, permitted the miners to descend without danger.

But all these appliances had been carried away, after the cessation of the works. In the Yarrow shaft there remained only a long succession of ladders, separated at every fifty feet by narrow landings. Thirty of these ladders placed thus end to end led the visitor down into the lower gallery, a depth of fifteen hundred feet. This was the only way of communication which existed between the bottom of the Dochart pit and the open air. As to air, that came in by the Yarrow shaft, from whence galleries communicated with another shaft whose orifice opened at a higher level; the warm air naturally escaped by this species of inverted siphon.

“I will follow you, my lad,” said the engineer, signing to the young man to precede him.

“As you please, Mr. Starr.”

“Have you your lamp?”

“Yes, and I only wish it was still the safety lamp, which we formerly had to use!”

“Sure enough,” returned James Starr, “there is no fear of fire-damp explosions now!”

Harry was provided with a simple oil lamp, the wick of which he lighted. In the mine, now empty of coal, escapes of light carburetted hydrogen could not occur. As no explosion need be feared, there was no necessity for interposing between the flame and the surrounding air that metallic screen which prevents the gas from catching fire. The Davy lamp was of no use here. But if the danger did not exist, it was because the cause of it had disappeared, and with this cause, the combustible in which formerly consisted the riches of the Dochart pit.

Harry descended the first steps of the upper ladder. Starr followed. They soon found themselves in a profound obscurity, which was only relieved by the glimmer of the lamp. The young man held it above his head, the better to light his companion. A dozen ladders were descended by the engineer and his guide, with the measured step habitual to the miner. They were all still in good condition.

James Starr examined, as well as the insufficient light would permit, the sides of the dark shaft, which were covered by a partly rotten lining of wood.

Arrived at the fifteenth landing, that is to say, half way down, they halted for a few minutes.

“Decidedly, I have not your legs, my lad,” said the engineer, panting.

“You are very stout, Mr. Starr,” replied Harry, “and it’s something too, you see, to live all one’s life in the mine.”

“Right, Harry. Formerly, when I was twenty, I could have gone down all at a breath. Come, forward!”

But just as the two were about to leave the platform, a voice, as yet far distant, was heard in the depths of the shaft. It came up like a sonorous billow, swelling as it advanced, and becoming more and more distinct.

“Halloo! who comes here?” asked the engineer, stopping Harry.

“I cannot say,” answered the young miner.

“Is it not your father?”

“My father, Mr. Starr? no.”

“Some neighbor, then?”

“We have no neighbors in the bottom of the pit,” replied Harry. “We are alone, quite alone.”

“Well, we must let this intruder pass,” said James Starr. “Those who are descending must yield the path to those who are ascending.”

They waited. The voice broke out again with a magnificent burst, as if it had been carried through a vast speaking trumpet; and soon a few words of a Scotch song came clearly to the ears of the young miner.

“The Hundred Pipers!” cried Harry. “Well, I shall be much surprised if that comes from the lungs of any man but Jack Ryan.”

“And who is this Jack Ryan?” asked James Starr.

“An old mining comrade,” replied Harry. Then leaning from the platform, “Halloo! Jack!” he shouted.

“Is that you, Harry?” was the reply. “Wait a bit, I’m coming.” And the song broke forth again.

In a few minutes, a tall fellow of five and twenty, with a merry face, smiling eyes, a laughing mouth, and sandy hair, appeared at the bottom of the luminous cone which was thrown from his lantern, and set foot on the landing of the fifteenth ladder. His first act was to vigorously wring the hand which Harry extended to him.

“Delighted to meet you!” he exclaimed. “If I had only known you were to be above ground to-day, I would have spared myself going down the Yarrow shaft!”

“This is Mr. James Starr,” said Harry, turning his lamp towards the engineer, who was in the shadow.

“Mr. Starr!” cried Jack Ryan. “Ah, sir, I could not see. Since I left the mine, my eyes have not been accustomed to see in the dark, as they used to do.”

“Ah, I remember a laddie who was always singing. That was ten years ago. It was you, no doubt?”

“Ay, Mr. Starr, but in changing my trade, I haven’t changed my disposition. It’s far better to laugh and sing than to cry and whine!”

“You’re right there, Jack Ryan. And what do you do now, as you have left the mine?”

“I am working on the Melrose farm, forty miles from here. Ah, it’s not like our Aberfoyle mines! The pick comes better to my hand than the spade or hoe. And then, in the old pit, there were vaulted roofs, to merrily echo one’s songs, while up above ground! — But you are going to see old Simon, Mr. Starr?”

“Yes, Jack,” answered the engineer.

“Don’t let me keep you then.”

“Tell me, Jack,” said Harry, “what was taking you to our cottage to-day?”

“I wanted to see you, man,” replied Jack, “and ask you to come to the Irvine games. You know I am the piper of the place. There will be dancing and singing.”

“Thank you, Jack, but it’s impossible.”

“Impossible?”

“Yes; Mr. Starr’s visit will last some time, and I must take him back to Callander.”

“Well, Harry, it won’t be for a week yet. By that time Mr. Starr’s visit will be over, I should think, and there will be nothing to keep you at the cottage.”

“Indeed, Harry,” said James Starr, “you must profit by your friend Jack’s invitation.”

“Well, I accept it, Jack,” said Harry. “In a week we will meet at Irvine.”

“In a week, that’s settled,” returned Ryan. “Good-by, Harry! Your servant, Mr. Starr. I am very glad to have seen you again! I can give news of you to all my friends. No one has forgotten you, sir.”

“And I have forgotten no one,” said Starr.

“Thanks for all, sir,” replied Jack.

“Good-by, Jack,” said Harry, shaking his hand. And Jack Ryan, singing as he went, soon disappeared in the heights of the shaft, dimly lighted by his lamp.

A quarter of an hour afterwards James Starr and Harry descended the last ladder, and set foot on the lowest floor of the pit.

From the bottom of the Yarrow shaft radiated numerous empty galleries. They ran through the wall of schist and sandstone, some shored up with great, roughly-hewn beams, others lined with a thick casing of wood. In every direction embankments supplied the place of the excavated veins. Artificial pillars were made of stone from neighboring quarries, and now they supported the ground, that is to say, the double layer of tertiary and quaternary soil, which formerly rested on the seam itself. Darkness now filled the galleries, formerly lighted either by the miner’s lamp or by the electric light, the use of which had been introduced in the mines.

“Will you not rest a while, Mr. Starr?” asked the young man.

“No, my lad,” replied the engineer, “for I am anxious to be at your father’s cottage.”

“Follow me then, Mr. Starr. I will guide you, and yet I daresay you could find your way perfectly well through this dark labyrinth.”

“Yes, indeed! I have the whole plan of the old pit still in my head.”

Harry, followed by the engineer, and holding his lamp high the better to light their way, walked along a high gallery, like the nave of a cathedral. Their feet still struck against the wooden sleepers which used to support the rails.

They had not gone more than fifty paces, when a huge stone fell at the feet of James Starr. “Take care, Mr. Starr!” cried Harry, seizing the engineer by the arm.

“A stone, Harry! Ah! these old vaultings are no longer quite secure, of course, and — ”

“Mr. Starr,” said Harry Ford, “it seems to me that stone was thrown, thrown as by the hand of man!”

“Thrown!” exclaimed James Starr. “What do you mean, lad?”

“Nothing, nothing, Mr. Starr,” replied Harry evasively, his anxious gaze endeavoring to pierce the darkness. “Let us go on. Take my arm, sir, and don’t be afraid of making a false step.”

“Here I am, Harry.” And they both advanced, whilst Harry looked on every side, throwing the light of his lamp into all the corners of the gallery.

“Shall we soon be there?” asked the engineer.

“In ten minutes at most.”

“Good.”

“But,” muttered Harry, “that was a most singular thing. It is the first time such an accident has happened to me.

“That stone falling just at the moment we were passing.”

“Harry, it was a mere chance.”

“Chance,” replied the young man, shaking his head. “Yes, chance.” He stopped and listened.

“What is the matter, Harry?” asked the engineer.

“I thought I heard someone walking behind us,” replied the young miner, listening more attentively. Then he added, “No, I must have been mistaken. Lean harder on my arm, Mr. Starr. Use me like a staff.”

“A good solid staff, Harry,” answered James Starr. “I could not wish for a better than a fine fellow like you.”

They continued in silence along the dark nave. Harry was evidently preoccupied, and frequently turned, trying to catch, either some distant noise, or remote glimmer of light.

But behind and before, all was silence and darkness.

CHAPTER IV. THE FORD FAMILY

TEN minutes afterwards, James Starr and Harry issued from the principal gallery. They were now standing in a glade, if we may use this word to designate a vast and dark excavation. The place, however, was not entirely deprived of daylight. A few rays straggled in through the opening of a deserted shaft. It was by means of this pipe that ventilation was established in the Dochart pit. Owing to its lesser density, the warm air was drawn towards the Yarrow shaft. Both air and light, therefore, penetrated in some measure into the glade.

Here Simon Ford had lived with his family ten years, in a subterranean dwelling, hollowed out in the schistous mass, where formerly stood the powerful engines which worked the mechanical traction of the Dochart pit.

Such was the habitation, “his cottage,” as he called it, in which resided the old overman. As he had some means saved during a long life of toil, Ford could have afforded to live in the light of day, among trees, or in any town of the kingdom he chose, but he and his wife and son preferred remaining in the mine, where they were happy together, having the same opinions, ideas, and tastes. Yes, they were quite fond of their cottage, buried fifteen hundred feet below Scottish soil. Among other advantages, there was no fear that tax gatherers, or rent collectors would ever come to trouble its inhabitants.

At this period, Simon Ford, the former overman of the Dochart pit, bore the weight of sixty-five years well. Tall, robust, well-built, he would have been regarded as one of the most conspicuous men in the district which supplies so many fine fellows to the Highland regiments.

Simon Ford was descended from an old mining family, and his ancestors had worked the very first carboniferous seams opened in Scotland. Without discussing whether or not the Greeks and Romans made use of coal, whether the Chinese worked coal mines before the Christian era, whether the French word for coal (HOUILLE) is really derived from the farrier Houillos, who lived in Belgium in the twelfth century, we may affirm that the beds in Great Britain were the first ever regularly worked. So early as the eleventh century, William the Conqueror divided the produce of the Newcastle bed among his companions-in-arms. At the end of the thirteenth century, a license for the mining of “sea coal” was granted by Henry III. Lastly, towards the end of the same century, mention is made of the Scotch and Welsh beds.

It was about this time that Simon Ford’s ancestors penetrated into the bowels of Caledonian earth, and lived there ever after, from father to son. They were but plain miners. They labored like convicts at the work of extracting the precious combustible. It is even believed that the coal miners, like the salt-makers of that period, were actual slaves.

However that might have been, Simon Ford was proud of belonging to this ancient family of Scotch miners. He had worked diligently in the same place where his ancestors had wielded the pick, the crowbar, and the mattock. At thirty he was overman of the Dochart pit, the most important in the Aberfoyle colliery. He was devoted to his trade. During long years he zealously performed his duty. His only grief had been to perceive the bed becoming impoverished, and to see the hour approaching when the seam would be exhausted.

It was then he devoted himself to the search for new veins in all the Aberfoyle pits, which communicated underground one with another. He had had the good luck to discover several during the last period of the working. His miner’s instinct assisted him marvelously, and the engineer, James

Starr, appreciated him highly. It might be said that he divined the course of seams in the depths of the coal mine as a hydroscope reveals springs in the bowels of the earth. He was par excellence the type of a miner whose whole existence is indissolubly connected with that of his mine. He had lived there from his birth, and now that the works were abandoned he wished to live there still. His son Harry foraged for the subterranean housekeeping; as for himself, during those ten years he had not been ten times above ground.

“Go up there! What is the good?” he would say, and refused to leave his black domain. The place was remarkably healthy, subject to an equable temperature; the old overman endured neither the heat of summer nor the cold of winter. His family enjoyed good health; what more could he desire?

But at heart he felt depressed. He missed the former animation, movement, and life in the well-worked pit. He was, however, supported by one fixed idea. “No, no! the mine is not exhausted!” he repeated.

And that man would have given serious offense who could have ventured to express before Simon Ford any doubt that old Aberfoyle would one day revive! He had never given up the hope of discovering some new bed which would restore the mine to its past splendor. Yes, he would willingly, had it been necessary, have resumed the miner’s pick, and with his still stout arms vigorously attacked the rock. He went through the dark galleries, sometimes alone, sometimes with his son, examining, searching for signs of coal, only to return each day, wearied, but not in despair, to the cottage.

Madge, Simon’s faithful companion, his “gude-wife,” to use the Scotch term, was a tall, strong, comely woman. Madge had no wish to leave the Dochart pit any more than had her husband. She shared all his hopes and regrets. She encouraged him, she urged him on, and talked to him in a way which cheered the heart of the old overman. “Aberfoyle is only asleep,” she would say. “You are right about that, Simon. This is but a rest, it is not death!”

Madge, as well as the others, was perfectly satisfied to live independent of the outer world, and was the center of the happiness enjoyed by the little family in their dark cottage.

The engineer was eagerly expected. Simon Ford was standing at his door, and as soon as Harry’s lamp announced the arrival of his former viewer he advanced to meet him.

“Welcome, Mr. Starr!” he exclaimed, his voice echoing under the roof of schist. “Welcome to the old overman’s cottage! Though it is buried fifteen hundred feet under the earth, our house is not the less hospitable.”

“And how are you, good Simon?” asked James Starr, grasping the hand which his host held out to him.

“Very well, Mr. Starr. How could I be otherwise here, sheltered from the inclemencies of the weather? Your ladies who go to Newhaven or Portobello in the summer time would do much better to pass a few months in the coal mine of Aberfoyle! They would run no risk here of catching a heavy cold, as they do in the damp streets of the old capital.”

“I’m not the man to contradict you, Simon,” answered James Starr, glad to find the old man just as he used to be. “Indeed, I wonder why I do not change my home in the Canongate for a cottage near you.”

“And why not, Mr. Starr? I know one of your old miners who would be truly pleased to have only a partition wall between you and him.”

“And how is Madge?” asked the engineer.

“The goodwife is in better health than I am, if that’s possible,” replied Ford, “and it will be a pleasure to her to see you at her table. I think she will surpass herself to do you honor.”

“We shall see that, Simon, we shall see that!” said the engineer, to whom the announcement of a good breakfast could not be indifferent, after his long walk.

“Are you hungry, Mr. Starr?”

“Ravenously hungry. My journey has given me an appetite. I came through horrible weather.”

“Ah, it is raining up there,” responded Simon Ford.

“Yes, Simon, and the waters of the Forth are as rough as the sea.”

“Well, Mr. Starr, here it never rains. But I needn’t describe to you all the advantages, which you know as well as myself. Here we are at the cottage. That is the chief thing, and I again say you are welcome, sir.”

Simon Ford, followed by Harry, ushered their guest into the dwelling. James Starr found himself in a large room lighted by numerous lamps, one hanging from the colored beams of the roof.

“The soup is ready, wife,” said Ford, “and it mustn’t be kept waiting any more than Mr. Starr. He is as hungry as a miner, and he shall see that our boy doesn’t let us want for anything in the cottage! By-the-bye, Harry,” added the old overman, turning to his son, “Jack Ryan came here to see you.”

“I know, father. We met him in the Yarrow shaft.”

“He’s an honest and a merry fellow,” said Ford; “but he seems to be quite happy above ground. He hasn’t the true miner’s blood in his veins. Sit down, Mr. Starr, and have a good dinner, for we may not sup till late.”

As the engineer and his hosts were taking their places:

“One moment, Simon,” said James Starr. “Do you want me to eat with a good appetite?”

“It will be doing us all possible honor, Mr. Starr,” answered Ford.

“Well, in order to eat heartily, I must not be at all anxious. Now I have two questions to put to you.”

“Go on, sir.”

“Your letter told me of a communication which was to be of an interesting nature.”

“It is very interesting indeed.”

“To you?”

“To you and to me, Mr. Starr. But I do not want to tell it you until after dinner, and on the very spot itself. Without that you would not believe me.”

“Simon,” resumed the engineer, “look me straight in the face. An interesting communication? Yes. Good! I will not ask more,” he added, as if he had read the reply in the old overman’s eyes.

“And the second question?” asked the latter.

“Do you know, Simon, who the person is who can have written this?” answered the engineer, handing him the anonymous letter.

Ford took the letter and read it attentively. Then giving it to his son, “Do you know the writing?” he asked.

“No, father,” replied Harry.

“And had this letter the Aberfoyle postmark?” inquired Simon Ford.

“Yes, like yours,” replied James Starr.

“What do you think of that, Harry?” said his father, his brow darkening.

“I think, father,” returned Harry, “that someone has had some interest in trying to prevent Mr. Starr from coming to the place where you invited him.”

“But who,” exclaimed the old miner, “who could have possibly guessed enough of my secret?” And Simon fell into a reverie, from which he was aroused by his wife.

“Let us begin, Mr. Starr,” she said. “The soup is already getting cold. Don’t think any more of that letter just now.”

On the old woman’s invitation, each drew in his chair, James Starr opposite to Madge — to do him honor — the father and son opposite to each other. It was a good Scotch dinner. First they ate “hotchpotch,” soup with the meat swimming in capital broth. As old Simon said, his wife knew no rival in the art of preparing hotchpotch. It was the same with the “cockyleeky,” a cock stewed with leeks, which merited high praise. The whole was washed down with excellent ale, obtained from the best brewery in Edinburgh.

But the principal dish consisted of a “haggis,” the national pudding, made of meat and barley meal. This remarkable dish, which inspired the poet Burns with one of his best odes, shared the fate of all the good things in this world — it passed away like a dream.

Madge received the sincere compliments of her guest. The dinner ended with cheese and oatcake, accompanied by a few small glasses of “usquebaugh,” capital whisky, five and twenty years old — just Harry’s age. The repast lasted a good hour. James Starr and Simon Ford had not only eaten much, but talked much too, chiefly of their past life in the old Aberfoyle mine.

Harry had been rather silent. Twice he had left the table, and even the house. He evidently felt uneasy since the incident of the stone, and wished to examine the environs of the cottage. The anonymous letter had not contributed to reassure him.

Whilst he was absent, the engineer observed to Ford and his wife, “That’s a fine lad you have there, my friends.”

“Yes, Mr. Starr, he is a good and affectionate son,” replied the old overman earnestly.

“Is he happy with you in the cottage?”

“He would not wish to leave us.”

“Don’t you think of finding him a wife, some day?”

“A wife for Harry,” exclaimed Ford. “And who would it be? A girl from up yonder, who would love merry-makings and dancing, who would prefer her clan to our mine! Harry wouldn’t do it!”

“Simon,” said Madge, “you would not forbid that Harry should take a wife.”

“I would forbid nothing,” returned the old miner, “but there’s no hurry about that. Who knows but we may find one for him — ”

Harry re-entered at that moment, and Simon Ford was silent.

When Madge rose from the table, all followed her example, and seated themselves at the door of the cottage. “Well, Simon,” said the engineer, “I am ready to hear you.”

“Mr. Starr,” responded Ford, “I do not need your ears, but your legs. Are you quite rested?”

“Quite rested and quite refreshed, Simon. I am ready to go with you wherever you like.”

“Harry,” said Simon Ford, turning to his son, “light our safety lamps.”

“Are you going to take safety lamps!” exclaimed James Starr, in amazement, knowing that there was no fear of explosions of fire-damp in a pit quite empty of coal.

“Yes, Mr. Starr, it will be prudent.”

“My good Simon, won’t you propose next to put me in a miner’s dress?”

“Not just yet, sir, not just yet!” returned the old overman, his deep-set eyes gleaming strangely.

Harry soon reappeared, carrying three safety lamps. He handed one of these to the engineer, the other to his father, and kept the third hanging from his left hand, whilst his right was armed with a long stick.

“Forward!” said Simon Ford, taking up a strong pick, which was leaning against the wall of the cottage.

“Forward!” echoed the engineer. “Good-by, Madge.”

“GOD speed you!” responded the good woman.

“A good supper, wife, do you hear?” exclaimed Ford. “We shall be hungry when we come back, and will do it justice!”

CHAPTER V. SOME STRANGE PHENOMENA

MANY superstitious beliefs exist both in the Highlands and Lowlands of Scotland. Of course the mining population must furnish its contingent of legends and fables to this mythological repertory. If the fields are peopled with imaginary beings, either good or bad, with much more reason must the dark mines be haunted to their lowest depths. Who shakes the seam during tempestuous nights? who puts the miners on the track of an as yet unworked vein? who lights the fire-damp, and presides over the terrible explosions? who but some spirit of the mine? This, at least, was the opinion commonly spread among the superstitious Scotch.

In the first rank of the believers in the supernatural in the Dochart pit figured Jack Ryan, Harry's friend. He was the great partisan of all these superstitions. All these wild stories were turned by him into songs, which earned him great applause in the winter evenings.

But Jack Ryan was not alone in his belief. His comrades affirmed, no less strongly, that the Aberfoyle pits were haunted, and that certain strange beings were seen there frequently, just as in the Highlands. To hear them talk, it would have been more extraordinary if nothing of the kind appeared. Could there indeed be a better place than a dark and deep coal mine for the freaks of fairies, elves, goblins, and other actors in the fantastical dramas? The scenery was all ready, why should not the supernatural personages come there to play their parts?

So reasoned Jack Ryan and his comrades in the Aberfoyle mines. We have said that the different pits communicated with each other by means of long subterranean galleries. Thus there existed beneath the county of Stirling a vast tract, full of burrows, tunnels, bored with caves, and perforated with shafts, a subterranean labyrinth, which might be compared to an enormous ant-hill.

Miners, though belonging to different pits, often met, when going to or returning from their work. Consequently there was a constant opportunity of exchanging talk, and circulating the stories which had their origin in the mine, from one pit to another. These accounts were transmitted with marvelous rapidity, passing from mouth to mouth, and gaining in wonder as they went.

Two men, however, better educated and with more practical minds than the rest, had always resisted this temptation. They in no degree believed in the intervention of spirits, elves, or goblins. These two were Simon Ford and his son. And they proved it by continuing to inhabit the dismal crypt, after the desertion of the Dochart pit. Perhaps good Madge, like every Highland woman, had some leaning towards the supernatural. But she had to repeat all these stories to herself, and so she did, most conscientiously, so as not to let the old traditions be lost.

Even had Simon and Harry Ford been as credulous as their companions, they would not have abandoned the mine to the imps and fairies. For ten years, without missing a single day, obstinate and immovable in their convictions, the father and son took their picks, their sticks, and their lamps. They went about searching, sounding the rock with a sharp blow, listening if it would return a favor-able sound. So long as the soundings had not been pushed to the granite of the primary formation, the Fords were agreed that the search, unsuccessful to-day, might succeed to-morrow, and that it ought to be resumed. They spent their whole life in endeavoring to bring Aberfoyle back to its former prosperity. If the father died before the hour of success, the son was to go on with the task alone.

It was during these excursions that Harry was more particularly struck by certain phenomena, which he vainly sought to explain. Several times, while walking along some narrow cross-alley, he seemed to hear sounds similar to those which would be produced by violent blows of a pickax against the wall.

Harry hastened to seek the cause of this mysterious work. The tunnel was empty. The light from the young miner's lamp, thrown on the wall, revealed no trace of any recent work with pick or crowbar. Harry would then ask himself if it was not the effect of some acoustic illusion, or some strange and fantastic echo. At other times, on suddenly throwing a bright light into a suspicious-looking cleft in the rock, he thought he saw a shadow. He rushed forward. Nothing, and there was no opening to permit a human being to evade his pursuit!

Twice in one month, Harry, whilst visiting the west end of the pit, distinctly heard distant reports, as if some miner had exploded a charge of dynamite. The second time, after many careful researches, he found that a pillar had just been blown up.

By the light of his lamp, Harry carefully examined the place attacked by the explosion. It had not been made in a simple embankment of stones, but in a mass of schist, which had penetrated to this depth in the coal stratum. Had the object of the explosion been to discover a new vein? Or had someone wished simply to destroy this portion of the mine? Thus he questioned, and when he made known this occurrence to his father, neither could the old overman nor he himself answer the question in a satisfactory way.

"It is very queer," Harry often repeated. "The presence of an unknown being in the mine seems impossible, and yet there can be no doubt about it. Does someone besides ourselves wish to find out if a seam yet exists? Or, rather, has he attempted to destroy what remains of the Aberfoyle mines? But for what reason? I will find that out, if it should cost me my life!”

A fortnight before the day on which Harry Ford guided the engineer through the labyrinth of the Dochart pit, he had been on the point of attaining the object of his search. He was going over the southwest end of the mine, with a large lantern in his hand. All at once, it seemed to him that a light was suddenly extinguished, some hundred feet before him, at the end of a narrow passage cut obliquely through the rock. He darted forward.

His search was in vain. As Harry would not admit a supernatural explanation for a physical occurrence, he concluded that certainly some strange being prowled about in the pit. But whatever he could do, searching with the greatest care, scrutinizing every crevice in the gallery, he found nothing for his trouble.

If Jack Ryan and the other superstitious fellows in the mine had seen these lights, they would, without fail, have called them supernatural, but Harry did not dream of doing so, nor did his father. And when they talked over these phenomena, evidently due to a physical cause, “My lad,” the old man would say, “we must wait. It will all be explained some day.”

However, it must be observed that, hitherto, neither Harry nor his father had ever been exposed to any act of violence. If the stone which had fallen at the feet of James Starr had been thrown by the hand of some ill-disposed person, it was the first criminal act of that description.

James Starr was of opinion that the stone had become detached from the roof of the gallery; but Harry would not admit of such a simple explanation. According to him, the stone had not fallen, it had been thrown; for otherwise, without rebounding, it could never have described a trajectory as it did.

Harry saw in it a direct attempt against himself and his father, or even against the engineer.

CHAPTER VI. SIMON FORD’S EXPERIMENT

THE old clock in the cottage struck one as James Starr and his two companions went out. A dim light penetrated through the ventilating shaft into the glade. Harry’s lamp was not necessary here, but it would very soon be of use, for the old overman was about to conduct the engineer to the very end of the Dochart pit.

After following the principal gallery for a distance of two miles, the three explorers — for, as will be seen, this was a regular exploration — arrived at the entrance of a narrow tunnel. It was like a nave, the roof of which rested on woodwork, covered with white moss. It followed very nearly the line traced by the course of the river Forth, fifteen hundred feet above.

“So we are going to the end of the last vein?” said James Starr.

“Ay! You know the mine well still.”

“Well, Simon,” returned the engineer, “it will be difficult to go further than that, if I don’t mistake.”

“Yes, indeed, Mr. Starr. That was where our picks tore out the last bit of coal in the seam. I remember it as if it were yesterday. I myself gave that last blow, and it re-echoed in my heart more dismally than on the rock. Only sandstone and schist were round us after that, and when the truck rolled towards the shaft, I followed, with my heart as full as though it were a funeral. It seemed to me that the soul of the mine was going with it.”

The gravity with which the old man uttered these words impressed the engineer, who was not far from sharing his sentiments. They were those of the sailor who leaves his disabled vessel — of the proprietor who sees the house of his ancestors pulled down. He pressed Ford’s hand; but now the latter seized that of the engineer, and, wringing it:

“That day we were all of us mistaken,” he exclaimed. “No! The old mine was not dead. It was not a corpse that the miners abandoned; and I dare to assert, Mr. Starr, that its heart beats still.”

“Speak, Ford! Have you discovered a new vein?” cried the engineer, unable to contain himself. “I know you have! Your letter could mean nothing else.”

“Mr. Starr,” said Simon Ford, “I did not wish to tell any man but yourself.”

“And you did quite right, Ford. But tell me how, by what signs, are you sure?”

“Listen, sir!” resumed Simon. “It is not a seam that I have found.”

“What is it, then?”

“Only positive proof that such a seam exists.”

“And the proof?”

“Could fire-damp issue from the bowels of the earth if coal was not there to produce it?”

“No, certainly not!” replied the engineer. “No coal, no fire-damp. No effects without a cause.”

“Just as no smoke without fire.”

“And have you recognized the presence of light carburetted hydrogen?”

“An old miner could not be deceived,” answered Ford. “I have met with our old enemy, the fire-damp!”

“But suppose it was another gas,” said Starr. “Firedamp is almost without smell, and colorless. It only really betrays its presence by an explosion.”

“Mr. Starr,” said Simon Ford, “will you let me tell you what I have done? Harry had once or twice observed something remarkable in his excursions to the west end of the mine. Fire, which suddenly went out, sometimes appeared along the face of the rock or on the embankment of the further galleries. How those flames were lighted, I could not and cannot say. But they were evidently owing to the presence of fire-damp, and to me fire-damp means a vein of coal.”

“Did not these fires cause any explosion?” asked the engineer quickly.

“Yes, little partial explosions,” replied Ford, “such as I used to cause myself when I wished to ascertain the presence of fire-damp. Do you remember how formerly it was the custom to try to prevent explosions before our good genius, Humphry Davy, invented his safety-lamp?”

“Yes,” replied James Starr. “You mean what the ‘monk,’ as the men called him, used to do. But I have never seen him in the exercise of his duty.”

“Indeed, Mr. Starr, you are too young, in spite of your five-and-fifty years, to have seen that. But I, ten years older, often saw the last ‘monk’ working in the mine. He was called so because he wore a long robe like a monk. His proper name was the ‘fireman.’ At that time there was no other means of destroying the bad gas but by dispersing it in little explosions, before its buoyancy had collected it in too great quantities in the heights of the galleries. The monk, as we called him, with his face masked, his head muffled up, all his body tightly wrapped in a thick felt cloak, crawled along the ground. He could breathe down there, when the air was pure; and with his right hand he waved above his head a blazing torch. When the firedamp had accumulated in the air, so as to form a detonating mixture, the explosion occurred without being fatal, and, by often renewing this operation, catastrophes were prevented. Sometimes the ‘monk’ was injured or killed in his work, then another took his place. This was done in all mines until the Davy lamp was universally adopted. But I knew the plan, and by its means I discovered the presence of firedamp and consequently that of a new seam of coal in the Dochart pit.”

All that the old overman had related of the so-called “monk” or “fireman” was perfectly true. The air in the galleries of mines was formerly always purified in the way described.

Fire-damp, marsh-gas, or carburetted hydrogen, is colorless, almost scentless; it burns with a blue flame, and makes respiration impossible. The miner could not live in a place filled with this injurious gas, any more than one could live in a gasometer full of common gas. Moreover, fire-damp, as well as the latter, a mixture of inflammable gases, forms a detonating mixture as soon as the air unites with it in a proportion of eight, and perhaps even five to the hundred. When this mixture is lighted by any cause, there is an explosion, almost always followed by a frightful catastrophe.

As they walked on, Simon Ford told the engineer all that he had done to attain his object; how he was sure that the escape of fire-damp took place at the very end of the farthest gallery in its western part, because he had provoked small and partial explosions, or rather little flames, enough to show the nature of the gas, which escaped in a small jet, but with a continuous flow.

An hour after leaving the cottage, James Starr and his two companions had gone a distance of four miles. The engineer, urged by anxiety and hope, walked on without noticing the length of the way. He pondered over all that the old miner had told him, and mentally weighed all the arguments which the latter had given in support of his belief. He agreed with him in thinking that the continued emission of carburetted hydrogen certainly showed the existence of a new coal-seam. If it had been merely a sort of pocket, full of gas, as it is sometimes found amongst the rock, it would soon have been empty, and the phenomenon have ceased. But far from that. According to Simon Ford, the fire-damp escaped incessantly, and from that fact the existence of an important vein might be considered certain. Consequently, the riches of the Dochart pit were not entirely exhausted. The chief question now was, whether this was merely a vein which would yield comparatively little, or a bed occupying a large extent.

Harry, who preceded his father and the engineer, stopped.

“Here we are!” exclaimed the old miner. “At last, thank Heaven! you are here, Mr. Starr, and we shall soon know.” The old overman’s voice trembled slightly.

“Be calm, my man!” said the engineer. “I am as excited as you are, but we must not lose time.”

The gallery at this end of the pit widened into a sort of dark cave. No shaft had been pierced in this part, and the gallery, bored into the bowels of the earth, had no direct communication with the surface of the earth.

James Starr, with intense interest, examined the place in which they were standing. On the walls of the cavern the marks of the pick could still be seen, and even holes in which the rock had been blasted, near the termination of the working. The schist was excessively hard, and it had not been necessary to bank up the end of the tunnel where the works had come to an end. There the vein had failed, between the schist and the tertiary sandstone. From this very place had been extracted the last piece of coal from the Dochart pit.

“We must attack the dyke,” said Ford, raising his pick; “for at the other side of the break, at more or less depth, we shall assuredly find the vein, the existence of which I assert.”

“And was it on the surface of these rocks that you found out the fire-damp?” asked James Starr.

“Just there, sir,” returned Ford, “and I was able to light it only by bringing my lamp near to the cracks in the rock. Harry has done it as well as I.”

“At what height?” asked Starr.

“Ten feet from the ground,” replied Harry.

James Starr had seated himself on a rock. After critically inhaling the air of the cavern, he gazed at the two miners, almost as if doubting their words, decided as they were. In fact, carburetted hydrogen is not completely scentless, and the engineer, whose sense of smell was very keen, was astonished that it had not revealed the presence of the explosive gas. At any rate, if the gas had mingled at all with the surrounding air, it could only be in a very small stream. There was no danger of an explosion, and they might without fear open the safety lamp to try the experiment, just as the old miner had done before.

What troubled James Starr was, not lest too much gas mingled with the air, but lest there should be little or none.

“Could they have been mistaken?” he murmured. “No: these men know what they are about. And yet — ”

He waited, not without some anxiety, until Simon Ford’s phenomenon should have taken place. But just then it seemed that Harry, like himself, had remarked the absence of the characteristic odor of fire-damp; for he exclaimed in an altered voice, “Father, I should say the gas was no longer escaping through the cracks!”

“No longer!” cried the old miner — and, pressing his lips tight together, he snuffed the air several times.

Then, all at once, with a sudden movement, “Hand me your lamp, Harry,” he said.

Ford took the lamp with a trembling hand. He drew off the wire gauze case which surrounded the wick, and the flame burned in the open air.

As they had expected, there was no explosion, but, what was more serious, there was not even the slight crackling which indicates the presence of a small quantity of firedamp. Simon took the stick which Harry was holding, fixed his lamp to the end of it, and raised it high above his head, up to where the gas, by reason of its buoyancy, would naturally accumulate. The flame of the lamp, burning straight and clear, revealed no trace of the carburetted hydrogen.

“Close to the wall,” said the engineer.

“Yes,” responded Ford, carrying the lamp to that part of the wall at which he and his son had, the evening before, proved the escape of gas.

The old miner’s arm trembled whilst he tried to hoist the lamp up. “Take my place, Harry,” said he.

Harry took the stick, and successively presented the lamp to the different fissures in the rock; but he shook his head, for of that slight crackling peculiar to escaping fire-damp he heard nothing. There was no flame. Evidently not a particle of gas was escaping through the rock.

“Nothing!” cried Ford, clenching his fist with a gesture rather of anger than disappointment.

A cry escaped Harry.

“What’s the matter?” asked Starr quickly.

“Someone has stopped up the cracks in the schist!”

“Is that true?” exclaimed the old miner.

“Look, father!” Harry was not mistaken. The obstruction of the fissures was clearly visible by the light of the lamp. It had been recently done with lime, leaving on the rock a long whitish mark, badly concealed with coal dust.

“It’s he!” exclaimed Harry. “It can only be he!”

“He?” repeated James Starr in amazement.

“Yes!” returned the young man, “that mysterious being who haunts our domain, for whom I have watched a hundred times without being able to get at him — the author, we may now be certain, of that letter which was intended to hinder you from coming to see my father, Mr. Starr, and who finally threw that stone at us in the gallery of the Yarrow shaft! Ah! there’s no doubt about it; there is a man’s hand in all that!”

Harry spoke with such energy that conviction came instantly and fully to the engineer’s mind. As to the old overman, he was already convinced. Besides, there they were in the presence of an undeniable fact — the stopping-up of cracks through which gas had escaped freely the night before.

“Take your pick, Harry,” cried Ford; “mount on my shoulders, my lad! I am still strong enough to bear you!” The young man understood in an instant. His father propped himself up against the rock. Harry got upon his shoulders, so that with his pick he could reach the line of the fissure. Then with quick sharp blows he attacked it. Almost directly afterwards a slight sound was heard, like champagne escaping from a bottle — a sound commonly expressed by the word “puff.”

Harry again seized his lamp, and held it to the opening. There was a slight report; and a little red flame, rather blue at its outline, flickered over the rock like a Will-o’-the-Wisp.

Harry leaped to the ground, and the old overman, unable to contain his joy, grasped the engineer’s hands, exclaiming, “Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah! Mr. Starr. The fire-damp burns! the vein is there!”

CHAPTER VII. NEW ABERFOYLE

THE old overman’s experiment had succeeded. Firedamp, it is well known, is only generated in coal seams; therefore the existence of a vein of precious combustible could no longer be doubted. As to its size and quality, that must be determined later.

“Yes,” thought James Starr, “behind that wall lies a carboniferous bed, undiscovered by our soundings. It is vexatious that all the apparatus of the mine, deserted for ten years, must be set up anew. Never mind. We have found the vein which was thought to be exhausted, and this time it shall be worked to the end!”

“Well, Mr. Starr,” asked Ford, “what do you think of our discovery? Was I wrong to trouble you? Are you sorry to have paid this visit to the Dochart pit?”

“No, no, my old friend!” answered Starr. “We have not lost our time; but we shall be losing it now, if we do not return immediately to the cottage. To-morrow we will come back here. We will blast this wall with dynamite. We will lay open the new vein, and after a series of soundings, if the seam appears to be large, I will form a new Aberfoyle Company, to the great satisfaction of the old shareholders. Before three months have passed, the first corves full of coal will have been taken from the new vein.”

“Well said, sir!” cried Simon Ford. “The old mine will grow young again, like a widow who remarries! The bustle of the old days will soon begin with the blows of the pick, and mattock, blasts of powder, rumbling of wagons, neighing of horses, creaking of machines! I shall see it all again! I hope, Mr. Starr, that you will not think me too old to resume my duties of overman?”

“No, Simon, no indeed! You wear better than I do, my old friend!”

“And, sir, you shall be our viewer again. May the new working last for many years, and pray Heaven I shall have the consolation of dying without seeing the end of it!”

The old miner was overflowing with joy. James Starr fully entered into it; but he let Ford rave for them both. Harry alone remained thoughtful. To his memory recurred the succession of singular, inexplicable circumstances attending the discovery of the new bed. It made him uneasy about the future.

An hour afterwards, James Starr and his two companions were back in the cottage. The engineer supped with good appetite, listening with satisfaction to all the plans unfolded by the old overman; and had it not been for his excitement about the next day’s work, he would never have slept better than in the perfect stillness of the cottage.

The following day, after a substantial breakfast, James Starr, Simon Ford, Harry, and even Madge herself, took the road already traversed the day before. All looked like regular miners. They carried different tools, and some dynamite with which to blast the rock. Harry, besides a large lantern, took a safety lamp, which would burn for twelve hours. It was more than was necessary for the journey there and back, including the time for the working — supposing a working was possible.

“To work! to work!” shouted Ford, when the party reached the further end of the passage; and he grasped a heavy crowbar and brandished it.

“Stop one instant,” said Starr. “Let us see if any change has taken place, and if the fire-damp still escapes through the crevices.”

“You are right, Mr. Starr,” said Harry. “Whoever stopped it up yesterday may have done it again to-day!”

Madge, seated on a rock, carefully observed the excavation, and the wall which was to be blasted.

It was found that everything was just as they left it. The crevices had undergone no alteration; the carburetted hydrogen still filtered through, though in a small stream, which was no doubt because it had had a free passage since the day before. As the quantity was so small, it could not have formed an explosive mixture with the air inside. James Starr and his companions could therefore proceed in security. Besides, the air grew purer by rising to the heights of the Dochart pit; and the fire-damp, spreading through the atmosphere, would not be strong enough to make any explosion.

“To work, then!” repeated Ford; and soon the rock flew in splinters under his skillful blows. The break was chiefly composed of pudding-stone, interspersed with sandstone and schist, such as is most often met with between the coal veins. James Starr picked up some of the pieces, and examined them carefully, hoping to discover some trace of coal.

Starr having chosen the place where the holes were to be drilled, they were rapidly bored by Harry. Some cartridges of dynamite were put into them. As soon as the long, tarred safety match was laid, it was lighted on a level with the ground. James Starr and his companions then went off to some distance.

“Oh! Mr. Starr,” said Simon Ford, a prey to agitation, which he did not attempt to conceal, “never, no, never has my old heart beaten so quick before! I am longing to get at the vein!”

“Patience, Simon!” responded the engineer. “You don’t mean to say that you think you are going to find a passage all ready open behind that dyke?”

“Excuse me, sir,” answered the old overman; “but of course I think so! If there was good luck in the way Harry and I discovered this place, why shouldn’t the good luck go on?”

As he spoke, came the explosion. A sound as of thunder rolled through the labyrinth of subterranean galleries. Starr, Madge, Harry, and Simon Ford hastened towards the spot.

“Mr. Starr! Mr. Starr!” shouted the overman. “Look! the door is broken open!”

Ford’s comparison was justified by the appearance of an excavation, the depth of which could not be calculated. Harry was about to spring through the opening; but the engineer, though excessively surprised to find this cavity, held him back. “Allow time for the air in there to get pure,” said he.

“Yes! beware of the foul air!” said Simon.

A quarter of an hour was passed in anxious waiting. The lantern was then fastened to the end of a stick, and introduced into the cave, where it continued to burn with unaltered brilliancy. “Now then, Harry, go,” said Starr, “and we will follow you.”

The opening made by the dynamite was sufficiently large to allow a man to pass through. Harry, lamp in hand, entered unhesitatingly, and disappeared in the darkness. His father, mother, and James Starr waited in silence. A minute — which seemed to them much longer — passed. Harry did not reappear, did not call. Gazing into the opening, James Starr could not even see the light of his lamp, which ought to have illuminated the dark cavern.

Had the ground suddenly given way under Harry’s feet? Had the young miner fallen into some crevice? Could his voice no longer reach his companions?

The old overman, dead to their remonstrances, was about to enter the opening, when a light appeared, dim at first, but gradually growing brighter, and Harry’s voice was heard shouting, “Come, Mr. Starr! come, father! The road to New Aberfoyle is open!”

If, by some superhuman power, engineers could have raised in a block, a thousand feet thick, all that portion of the terrestrial crust which supports the lakes, rivers, gulfs, and territories of the counties of Stirling, Dumbarton, and Renfrew, they would have found, under that enormous lid, an immense excavation, to which but one other in the world can be compared — the celebrated Mammoth caves of Kentucky. This excavation was composed of several hundred divisions of all sizes and shapes. It might be called a hive with numberless ranges of cells, capriciously arranged, but a hive on a vast scale, and which, instead of bees, might have lodged all the ichthyosauri, megatheriums, and pterodactyles of the geological epoch.

A labyrinth of galleries, some higher than the most lofty cathedrals, others like cloisters, narrow and winding — these following a horizontal line, those on an incline or running obliquely in all directions — connected the caverns and allowed free communication between them.

The pillars sustaining the vaulted roofs, whose curves allowed of every style, the massive walls between the passages, the naves themselves in this layer of secondary formation, were composed of sandstone and schistous rocks. But tightly packed between these useless strata ran valuable veins of coal, as if the black blood of this strange mine had circulated through their tangled network. These fields extended forty miles north and south, and stretched even under the Caledonian Canal. The importance of this bed could not be calculated until after soundings, but it would certainly surpass those of Cardiff and Newcastle.

We may add that the working of this mine would be singularly facilitated by the fantastic dispositions of the secondary earths; for by an unaccountable retreat of the mineral matter at the geological epoch, when the mass was solidifying, nature had already multiplied the galleries and tunnels of New Aberfoyle.

Yes, nature alone! It might at first have been supposed that some works abandoned for centuries had been discovered afresh. Nothing of the sort. No one would have deserted such riches. Human termites had never gnawed away this part of the Scottish subsoil; nature herself had done it all. But, we repeat, it could be compared to nothing but the celebrated Mammoth caves, which, in an extent of more than twenty miles, contain two hundred and twenty-six avenues, eleven lakes, seven rivers, eight cataracts, thirty-two unfathomable wells, and fifty-seven domes, some of which are more than four hundred and fifty feet in height. Like these caves, New Aberfoyle was not the work of men, but the work of the Creator.

Such was this new domain, of matchless wealth, the discovery of which belonged entirely to the old overman. Ten years' sojourn in the deserted mine, an uncommon pertinacity in research, perfect faith, sustained by a marvelous mining instinct — all these qualities together led him to succeed where so many others had failed. Why had the soundings made under the direction of James Starr during the last years of the working stopped just at that limit, on the very frontier of the new mine? That was all chance, which takes great part in researches of this kind.

However that might be, there was, under the Scottish subsoil, what might be called a subterranean county, which, to be habitable, needed only the rays of the sun, or, for want of that, the light of a special planet.

Water had collected in various hollows, forming vast ponds, or rather lakes larger than Loch Katrine, lying just above them. Of course the waters of these lakes had no movement of currents or tides; no old castle was reflected there; no birch or oak trees waved on their banks. And yet these deep lakes, whose mirror-like surface was never ruffled by a breeze, would not be without charm by the light of some electric star, and, connected by a string of canals, would well complete the geography of this strange domain.

Although unfit for any vegetable production, the place could be inhabited by a whole population. And who knows but that in this steady temperature, in the depths of the mines of Aberfoyle, as well as in those of Newcastle, Alloa, or Cardiff — when their contents shall have been exhausted — who knows but that the poorer classes of Great Britain will some day find a refuge?

CHAPTER VIII. EXPLORING

AT Harry’s call, James Starr, Madge, and Simon Ford entered through the narrow orifice which put the Dochart pit in communication with the new mine. They found themselves at the beginning of a tolerably wide gallery. One might well believe that it had been pierced by the hand of man, that the pick and mattock had emptied it in the working of a new vein. The explorers question whether, by a strange chance, they had not been transported into some ancient mine, of the existence of which even the oldest miners in the county had ever known.

No! It was merely that the geological layers had left this passage when the secondary earths were in course of formation. Perhaps some torrent had formerly dashed through it; but now it was as dry as if it had been cut some thousand feet lower, through granite rocks. At the same time, the air circulated freely, which showed that certain natural vents placed it in communication with the exterior atmosphere.

This observation, made by the engineer, was correct, and it was evident that the ventilation of the new mine would be easily managed. As to the fire-damp which had lately filtered through the schist, it seemed to have been contained in a pocket now empty, and it was certain that the atmosphere of the gallery was quite free from it. However, Harry prudently carried only the safety lamp, which would insure light for twelve hours.

James Starr and his companions now felt perfectly happy. All their wishes were satisfied. There was nothing but coal around them. A sort of emotion kept them silent; even Simon Ford restrained himself. His joy overflowed, not in long phrases, but in short ejaculations.

It was perhaps imprudent to venture so far into the crypt. Pooh! they never thought of how they were to get back.

The gallery was practicable, not very winding. They met with no noxious exhalations, nor did any chasm bar the path. There was no reason for stopping for a whole hour; James Starr, Madge, Harry, and Simon Ford walked on, though there was nothing to show them what was the exact direction of this unknown tunnel.

And they would no doubt have gone farther still, if they had not suddenly come to the end of the wide road which they had followed since their entrance into the mine.

The gallery ended in an enormous cavern, neither the height nor depth of which could be calculated. At what altitude arched the roof of this excavation — at what distance was its opposite wall — the darkness totally concealed; but by the light of the lamp the explorers could discover that its dome covered a vast extent of still water — pond or lake — whose picturesque rocky banks were lost in obscurity.

“Halt!” exclaimed Ford, stopping suddenly. “Another step, and perhaps we shall fall into some fathomless pit.”

“Let us rest awhile, then, my friends,” returned the engineer. “Besides, we ought to be thinking of returning to the cottage.”

“Our lamp will give light for another ten hours, sir,” said Harry.

“Well, let us make a halt,” replied Starr; “I confess my legs have need of a rest. And you, Madge, don’t you feel tired after so long a walk?”

“Not over much, Mr. Starr,” replied the sturdy Scotchwoman; “we have been accustomed to explore the old Aberfoyle mine for whole days together.”

“Tired? nonsense!” interrupted Simon Ford; “Madge could go ten times as far, if necessary. But once more, Mr. Starr, wasn’t my communication worth your trouble in coming to hear it? Just dare to say no, Mr. Starr, dare to say no!”

“Well, my old friend, I haven’t felt so happy for a long while!” replied the engineer; “the small part of this marvelous mine that we have explored seems to show that its extent is very considerable, at least in length.”

“In width and in depth, too, Mr. Starr!” returned Simon Ford.

“That we shall know later.”

“And I can answer for it! Trust to the instinct of an old miner! It has never deceived me!”

“I wish to believe you, Simon,” replied the engineer, smiling. “As far as I can judge from this short exploration, we possess the elements of a working which will last for centuries!”

“Centuries!” exclaimed Simon Ford; “I believe you, sir! A thousand years and more will pass before the last bit of coal is taken out of our new mine!”

“Heaven grant it!” returned Starr. “As to the quality of the coal which crops out of these walls?”

“Superb! Mr. Starr, superb!” answered Ford; “just look at it yourself!”

And so saying, with his pick he struck off a fragment of the black rock.

“Look! look!” he repeated, holding it close to his lamp; “the surface of this piece of coal is shining! We have here fat coal, rich in bituminous matter; and see how it comes in pieces, almost without dust! Ah, Mr. Starr! twenty years ago this seam would have entered into a strong competition with Swansea and Cardiff! Well, stokers will quarrel for it still, and if it costs little to extract it from the mine, it will not sell at a less price outside.”

“Indeed,” said Madge, who had taken the fragment of coal and was examining it with the air of a connoisseur; “that’s good quality of coal. Carry it home, Simon, carry it back to the cottage! I want this first piece of coal to burn under our kettle.”

“Well said, wife!” answered the old overman, “and you shall see that I am not mistaken.”

“Mr. Starr,” asked Harry, “have you any idea of the probable direction of this long passage which we have been following since our entrance into the new mine?”

“No, my lad,” replied the engineer; “with a compass I could perhaps find out its general bearing; but without a compass I am here like a sailor in open sea, in the midst of fogs, when there is no sun by which to calculate his position.”

“No doubt, Mr. Starr,” replied Ford; “but pray don’t compare our position with that of the sailor, who has everywhere and always an abyss under his feet! We are on firm ground here, and need never be afraid of foundering.”

“I won’t tease you, then, old Simon,” answered James Starr. “Far be it from me even in jest to depreciate the New Aberfoyle mine by an unjust comparison! I only meant to say one thing, and that is that we don’t know where we are.”

“We are in the subsoil of the county of Stirling, Mr. Starr,” replied Simon Ford; “and that I assert as if — ”

“Listen!” said Harry, interrupting the old man. All listened, as the young miner was doing. His ears, which were very sharp, had caught a dull sound, like a distant murmur. His companions were not long in hearing it themselves. It was above their heads, a sort of rolling sound, in which though it was so feeble, the successive CRESCENDO and DIMINUENDO could be distinctly heard.

All four stood for some minutes, their ears on the stretch, without uttering a word. All at once Simon Ford exclaimed, “Well, I declare! Are trucks already running on the rails of New Aberfoyle?”

“Father,” replied Harry, “it sounds to me just like the noise made by waves rolling on the sea shore.”

“We can’t be under the sea though!” cried the old overman.

“No,” said the engineer, “but it is not impossible that we should be under Loch Katrine.”

“The roof cannot have much thickness just here, if the noise of the water is perceptible.”

“Very little indeed,” answered James Starr, “and that is the reason this cavern is so huge.”

“You must be right, Mr. Starr,” said Harry.

“Besides, the weather is so bad outside,” resumed Starr, “that the waters of the loch must be as rough as those of the Firth of Forth.”

“Well! what does it matter after all?” returned Simon Ford; “the seam won’t be any the worse because it is under a loch. It would not be the first time that coal has been looked for under the very bed of the ocean! When we have to work under the bottom of the Caledonian Canal, where will be the harm?”

“Well said, Simon,” cried the engineer, who could not restrain a smile at the overman’s enthusiasm; “let us cut our trenches under the waters of the sea! Let us bore the bed of the Atlantic like a strainer; let us with our picks join our brethren of the United States through the subsoil of the ocean! let us dig into the center of the globe if necessary, to tear out the last scrap of coal.”

“Are you joking, Mr. Starr?” asked Ford, with a pleased but slightly suspicious look.

“I joking, old man? no! but you are so enthusiastic that you carry me away into the regions of impossibility! Come, let us return to the reality, which is sufficiently beautiful; leave our picks here, where we may find them another day, and let’s take the road back to the cottage.”

Nothing more could be done for the time. Later, the engineer, accompanied by a brigade of miners, supplied with lamps and all necessary tools, would resume the exploration of New Aberfoyle. It was now time to return to the Dochart pit. The road was easy, the gallery running nearly straight through the rock up to the orifice opened by the dynamite, so there was no fear of their losing themselves.

But as James Starr was proceeding towards the gallery Simon Ford stopped him.

“Mr. Starr,” said he, “you see this immense cavern, this subterranean lake, whose waters bathe this strand at our feet? Well! it is to this place I mean to change my dwelling, here I will build a new cottage, and if some brave fellows will follow my example, before a year is over there will be one town more inside old England.”

James Starr, smiling approval of Ford’s plans, pressed his hand, and all three, preceding Madge, re-entered the gallery, on their way back to the Dochart pit. For the first mile no incident occurred. Harry walked first, holding his lamp above his head. He carefully followed the principal gallery, without ever turning aside into the narrow tunnels which radiated to the right and left. It seemed as if the returning was to be accomplished as easily as the going, when an unexpected accident occurred which rendered the situation of the explorers very serious.

Just at a moment when Harry was raising his lamp there came a rush of air, as if caused by the flapping of invisible wings. The lamp escaped from his hands, fell on the rocky ground, and was broken to pieces.

James Starr and his companions were suddenly plunged in absolute darkness. All the oil of the lamp was spilt, and it was of no further use. “Well, Harry,” cried his father, “do you want us all to break our necks on the way back to the cottage?”

Harry did not answer. He wondered if he ought to suspect the hand of a mysterious being in this last accident? Could there possibly exist in these depths an enemy whose unaccountable antagonism would one day create serious difficulties? Had someone an interest in defending the new coal field against any attempt at working it? In truth that seemed absurd, yet the facts spoke for themselves, and they accumulated in such a way as to change simple presumptions into certainties.

In the meantime the explorers' situation was bad enough. They had now, in the midst of black darkness, to follow the passage leading to the Dochart pit for nearly five miles. There they would still have an hour's walk before reaching the cottage.

"Come along," said Simon Ford. "We have no time to lose. We must grope our way along, like blind men. There's no fear of losing our way. The tunnels which open off our road are only just like those in a molehill, and by following the chief gallery we shall of course reach the opening we got in at. After that, it is the old mine. We know that, and it won't be the first time that Harry and I have found ourselves there in the dark. Besides, there we shall find the lamps that we left. Forward then! Harry, go first. Mr. Starr, follow him. Madge, you go next, and I will bring up the rear. Above everything, don't let us get separated."

All complied with the old overman's instructions. As he said, by groping carefully, they could not mistake the way. It was only necessary to make the hands take the place of the eyes, and to trust to their instinct, which had with Simon Ford and his son become a second nature.

James Starr and his companions walked on in the order agreed. They did not speak, but it was not for want of thinking. It became evident that they had an adversary. But what was he, and how were they to defend themselves against these mysteriously-prepared attacks? These disquieting ideas crowded into their brains. However, this was not the moment to get discouraged.

Harry, his arms extended, advanced with a firm step, touching first one and then the other side of the passage.

If a cleft or side opening presented itself, he felt with his hand that it was not the main way; either the cleft was too shallow, or the opening too narrow, and he thus kept in the right road.

In darkness through which the eye could not in the slightest degree pierce, this difficult return lasted two hours. By reckoning the time since they started, taking into consideration that the walking had not been rapid, Starr calculated that he and his companions were near the opening. In fact, almost immediately, Harry stopped.

“Have we got to the end of the gallery?” asked Simon Ford.

“Yes,” answered the young miner.

“Well! have you not found the hole which connects New Aberfoyle with the Dochart pit?”

“No,” replied Harry, whose impatient hands met with nothing but a solid wall.

The old overman stepped forward, and himself felt the schistous rock. A cry escaped him.

Either the explorers had strayed from the right path on their return, or the narrow orifice, broken in the rock by the dynamite, had been recently stopped up. James Starr and his companions were prisoners in New Aberfoyle.

CHAPTER IX. THE FIRE-MAIDENS

A WEEK after the events just related had taken place, James Starr's friends had become very anxious. The engineer had disappeared, and no reason could be brought forward to explain his absence. They learnt, by questioning his servant, that he had embarked at Granton Pier. But from that time there were no traces of James Starr. Simon Ford's letter had requested secrecy, and he had said nothing of his departure for the Aberfoyle mines.

Therefore in Edinburgh nothing was talked of but the unaccountable absence of the engineer. Sir W. Elphiston, the President of the Royal Institution, communicated to his colleagues a letter which James Starr had sent him, excusing himself from being present at the next meeting of the society. Two or three others produced similar letters. But though these documents proved that Starr had left Edinburgh — which was known before — they threw no light on what had become of him. Now, on the part of such a man, this prolonged absence, so contrary to his usual habits, naturally first caused surprise, and then anxiety.

A notice was inserted in the principal newspapers of the United Kingdom relative to the engineer James Starr, giving a description of him and the date on which he left Edinburgh; nothing more could be done but to wait. The time passed in great anxiety. The scientific world of England was inclined to believe that one of its most distinguished members had positively disappeared. At the same time, when so many people were thinking about James Starr, Harry Ford was the subject of no less anxiety. Only, instead of occupying public attention, the son of the old overman was the cause of trouble alone to the generally cheerful mind of Jack Ryan.

It may be remembered that, in their encounter in the Yarrow shaft, Jack Ryan had invited Harry to come a week afterwards to the festivities at Irvine. Harry had accepted and promised expressly to be there. Jack Ryan knew, having had it proved by many circumstances, that his friend was a man of his word. With him, a thing promised was a thing done. Now, at the Irvine merry-making, nothing was wanting; neither song, nor dance, nor fun of any sort — nothing but Harry Ford.

The notice relative to James Starr, published in the papers, had not yet been seen by Ryan. The honest fellow was therefore only worried by Harry's absence, telling himself that something serious could alone have prevented him from keeping his promise. So, the day after the Irvine games, Jack Ryan intended to take the railway from Glasgow and go to the Dochart pit; and this he would have done had he not been detained by an accident which nearly cost him his life. Something which occurred on the night of the 12th of December was of a nature to support the opinions of all partisans of the supernatural, and there were many at Melrose Farm.

Irvine, a little seaport of Renfrew, containing nearly seven thousand inhabitants, lies in a sharp bend made by the Scottish coast, near the mouth of the Firth of Clyde. The most ancient and the most famed ruins on this part of the coast were those of this castle of Robert Stuart, which bore the name of Dundonald Castle.

At this period Dundonald Castle, a refuge for all the stray goblins of the country, was completely deserted. It stood on the top of a high rock, two miles from the town, and was seldom visited. Sometimes a few strangers took it into their heads to explore these old historical remains, but then they always went alone. The inhabitants of Irvine would not have taken them there at any price. Indeed, several legends were based on the story of certain “fire-maidens,” who haunted the old castle.

The most superstitious declared they had seen these fantastic creatures with their own eyes. Jack Ryan was naturally one of them. It was a fact that from time to time long flames appeared, sometimes on a broken piece of wall, sometimes on the summit of the tower which was the highest point of Dundonald Castle.

Did these flames really assume a human shape, as was asserted? Did they merit the name of fire-maidens, given them by the people of the coast? It was evidently just an optical delusion, aided by a good deal of credulity, and science could easily have explained the phenomenon.

However that might be, these fire-maidens had the reputation of frequenting the ruins of the old castle and there performing wild strathspeys, especially on dark nights. Jack Ryan, bold fellow though he was, would never have dared to accompany those dances with the music of his bagpipes.

“Old Nick is enough for them!” said he. “He doesn’t need me to complete his infernal orchestra.”

We may well believe that these strange apparitions frequently furnished a text for the evening stories. Jack Ryan was ending the evening with one of these. His auditors, transported into the phantom world, were worked up into a state of mind which would believe anything.

All at once shouts were heard outside. Jack Ryan stopped short in the middle of his story, and all rushed out of the barn. The night was pitchy dark. Squalls of wind and rain swept along the beach. Two or three fishermen, their backs against a rock, the better to resist the wind, were shouting at the top of their voices.

Jack Ryan and his companions ran up to them. The shouts were, however, not for the inhabitants of the farm, but to warn men who, without being aware of it, were going to destruction. A dark, confused mass appeared some way out at sea. It was a vessel whose position could be seen by her lights, for she carried a white one on her foremast, a green on the starboard side, and a red on the outside. She was evidently running straight on the rocks.

“A ship in distress?” said Ryan.

“Ay,” answered one of the fishermen, “and now they want to tack, but it’s too late!”

“Do they want to run ashore?” said another.

“It seems so,” responded one of the fishermen, “unless he has been misled by some — ”

The man was interrupted by a yell from Jack. Could the crew have heard it? At any rate, it was too late for them to beat back from the line of breakers which gleamed white in the darkness.

But it was not, as might be supposed, a last effort of Ryan’s to warn the doomed ship. He now had his back to the sea. His companions turned also, and gazed at a spot situated about half a mile inland. It was Dundonald Castle. A long flame twisted and bent under the gale, on the summit of the old tower.

“The Fire-Maiden!” cried the superstitious men in terror.

Clearly, it needed a good strong imagination to find any human likeness in that flame. Waving in the wind like a luminous flag, it seemed sometimes to fly round the tower, as if it was just going out, and a moment after it was seen again dancing on its blue point.

“The Fire-Maiden! the Fire-Maiden!” cried the terrified fishermen and peasants.

All was then explained. The ship, having lost her reckoning in the fog, had taken this flame on the top of Dundonald Castle for the Irvine light. She thought herself at the entrance of the Firth, ten miles to the north, when she was really running on a shore which offered no refuge.

What could be done to save her, if there was still time? It was too late. A frightful crash was heard above the tumult of the elements. The vessel had struck. The white line of surf was broken for an instant; she heeled over on her side and lay among the rocks.

At the same time, by a strange coincidence, the long flame disappeared, as if it had been swept away by a violent gust. Earth, sea, and sky were plunged in complete darkness.

“The Fire-Maiden!” shouted Ryan, for the last time, as the apparition, which he and his companions believed supernatural, disappeared. But then the courage of these superstitious Scotchmen, which had failed before a fancied danger, returned in face of a real one, which they were ready to brave in order to save their fellow-creatures. The tempest did not deter them. As heroic as they had before been credulous, fastening ropes round their waists, they rushed into the waves to the aid of those on the wreck.

Happily, they succeeded in their endeavors, although some — and bold Jack Ryan was among the number — were severely wounded on the rocks. But the captain of the vessel and the eight sailors who composed his crew were hauled up, safe and sound, on the beach.

The ship was the Norwegian brig MOTALA, laden with timber, and bound for Glasgow. Of the MOTALA herself nothing remained but a few spars, washed up by the waves, and dashed among the rocks on the beach.

Jack Ryan and three of his companions, wounded like himself, were carried into a room of Melrose Farm, where every care was lavished on them. Ryan was the most hurt, for when with the rope round his waist he had rushed into the sea, the waves had almost immediately dashed him back against the rocks. He was brought, indeed, very nearly lifeless on to the beach.

The brave fellow was therefore confined to bed for several days, to his great disgust. However, as soon as he was given permission to sing as much as he liked, he bore his trouble patiently, and the farm echoed all day with his jovial voice. But from this adventure he imbibed a more lively sentiment of fear with regard to brownies and other goblins who amuse themselves by plaguing mankind, and he made them responsible for the catastrophe of the Motala. It would have been vain to try and convince him that the Fire-Maidens did not exist, and that the flame, so suddenly appearing among the ruins, was but a natural phenomenon. No reasoning could make him believe it. His companions were, if possible, more obstinate than he in their credulity. According to them, one of the Fire-Maidens had maliciously attracted the MOTALA to the coast. As to wishing to punish her, as well try to bring the tempest to justice! The magistrates might order what arrests they pleased, but a flame cannot be imprisoned, an impalpable being can’t be handcuffed. It must be acknowledged that the researches which were ultimately made gave ground, at least in appearance, to this superstitious way of explaining the facts.

The inquiry was made with great care. Officials came to Dundonald Castle, and they proceeded to conduct a most vigorous search. The magistrate wished first to ascertain if the ground bore any footprints, which could be attributed to other than goblins' feet. It was impossible to find the least trace, whether old or new. Moreover, the earth, still damp from the rain of the day before, would have preserved the least vestige.

The result of all this was, that the magistrates only got for their trouble a new legend added to so many others — a legend which would be perpetuated by the remembrance of the catastrophe of the MOTALA, and indisputably confirm the truth of the apparition of the Fire-Maidens.

A hearty fellow like Jack Ryan, with so strong a constitution, could not be long confined to his bed. A few sprains and bruises were not quite enough to keep him on his back longer than he liked. He had not time to be ill.

Jack, therefore, soon got well. As soon as he was on his legs again, before resuming his work on the farm, he wished to go and visit his friend Harry, and learn why he had not come to the Irvine merry-making. He could not understand his absence, for Harry was not a man who would willingly promise and not perform. It was unlikely, too, that the son of the old overman had not heard of the wreck of the MOTALA, as it was in all the papers. He must know the part Jack had taken in it, and what had happened to him, and it was unlike Harry not to hasten to the farm and see how his old chum was going on.

As Harry had not come, there must have been something to prevent him. Jack Ryan would as soon deny the existence of the Fire-Maidens as believe in Harry’s indifference.

Two days after the catastrophe Jack left the farm merily, feeling nothing of his wounds. Singing in the fullness of his heart, he awoke the echoes of the cliff, as he walked to the station of the railway, which VIA Glasgow would take him to Stirling and Callander.

As he was waiting for his train, his attention was attracted by a bill posted up on the walls, containing the following notice:

“On the 4th of December, the engineer, James Starr, of Edinburgh, embarked from Granton Pier, on board the Prince of Wales. He disembarked the same day at Stirling. From that time nothing further has been heard of him.

“Any information concerning him is requested to be sent to the President of the Royal Institution, Edinburgh.”

Jack Ryan, stopping before one of these advertisements, read it twice over, with extreme surprise.

“Mr. Starr!” he exclaimed. “Why, on the 4th of December I met him with Harry on the ladder of the Dochart pit! That was ten days ago! And he has not been seen from that time! That explains why my chum didn’t come to Irvine.”

And without taking time to inform the President of the Royal Institution by letter, what he knew relative to James Starr, Jack jumped into the train, determining to go first of all to the Yarrow shaft. There he would descend to the depths of the pit, if necessary, to find Harry, and with him was sure to be the engineer James Starr.

“They haven’t turned up again,” said he to himself. “Why? Has anything prevented them? Could any work of importance keep them still at the bottom of the mine? I must find out!” and Ryan, hastening his steps, arrived in less than an hour at the Yarrow shaft.

Externally nothing was changed. The same silence around. Not a living creature was moving in that desert region. Jack entered the ruined shed which covered the opening of the shaft. He gazed down into the dark abyss — nothing was to be seen. He listened — nothing was to be heard.

“And my lamp!” he exclaimed; “suppose it isn’t in its place!” The lamp which Ryan used when he visited the pit was usually deposited in a corner, near the landing of the topmost ladder. It had disappeared.

“Here is a nuisance!” said Jack, beginning to feel rather uneasy. Then, without hesitating, superstitious though he was, “I will go,” said he, “though it’s as dark down there as in the lowest depths of the infernal regions!”

And he began to descend the long flight of ladders, which led down the gloomy shaft. Jack Ryan had not forgotten his old mining habits, and he was well acquainted with the Dochart pit, or he would scarcely have dared to venture thus. He went very carefully, however. His foot tried each round, as some of them were worm-eaten. A false step would entail a deadly fall, through this space of fifteen hundred feet. He counted each landing as he passed it, knowing that he could not reach the bottom of the shaft until he had left the thirtieth. Once there, he would have no trouble, so he thought, in finding the cottage, built, as we have said, at the extremity of the principal passage.

Jack Ryan went on thus until he got to the twenty-sixth landing, and consequently had two hundred feet between him and the bottom.

Here he put down his leg to feel for the first rung of the twenty-seventh ladder. But his foot swinging in space found nothing to rest on. He knelt down and felt about with his hand for the top of the ladder. It was in vain.

“Old Nick himself must have been down this way!” said Jack, not without a slight feeling of terror.

He stood considering for some time, with folded arms, and longing to be able to pierce the impenetrable darkness. Then it occurred to him that if he could not get down, neither could the inhabitants of the mine get up. There was now no communication between the depths of the pit and the upper regions. If the removal of the lower ladders of the Yarrow shaft had been effected since his last visit to the cottage, what had become of Simon Ford, his wife, his son, and the engineer?

The prolonged absence of James Starr proved that he had not left the pit since the day Ryan met with him in the shaft. How had the cottage been provisioned since then? The food of these unfortunate people, imprisoned fifteen hundred feet below the surface of the ground, must have been exhausted by this time.

All this passed through Jack’s mind, as he saw that by himself he could do nothing to get to the cottage. He had no doubt but that communication had been interrupted with a malevolent intention. At any rate, the authorities must be informed, and that as soon as possible. Jack Ryan bent forward from the landing.

“Harry! Harry!” he shouted with his powerful voice.

Harry’s name echoed and re-echoed among the rocks, and finally died away in the depths of the shaft.

Ryan rapidly ascended the upper ladders and returned to the light of day. Without losing a moment he reached the Callander station, just caught the express to Edinburgh, and by three o’clock was before the Lord Provost.

There his declaration was received. His account was given so clearly that it could not be doubted. Sir William Elphiston, President of the Royal Institution, and not only colleague, but a personal friend of Starr’s, was also informed, and asked to direct the search which was to be made without delay in the mine. Several men were placed at his disposal, supplied with lamps, picks, long rope ladders, not forgetting provisions and cordials. Then guided by Jack Ryan, the party set out for the Aberfoyle mines.

The same evening the expedition arrived at the opening of the Yarrow shaft, and descended to the twenty-seventh landing, at which Jack Ryan had been stopped a few hours previously. The lamps, fastened to long ropes, were lowered down the shaft, and it was thus ascertained that the four last ladders were wanting.

As soon as the lamps had been brought up, the men fixed to the landing a rope ladder, which unrolled itself down the shaft, and all descended one after the other. Jack Ryan’s descent was the most difficult, for he went first down the swinging ladders, and fastened them for the others.

The space at the bottom of the shaft was completely deserted; but Sir William was much surprised at hearing Jack Ryan exclaim, “Here are bits of the ladders, and some of them half burnt!”

“Burnt?” repeated Sir William. “Indeed, here sure enough are cinders which have evidently been cold a long time!”

“Do you think, sir,” asked Ryan, “that Mr. Starr could have had any reason for burning the ladders, and thus breaking of communication with the world?”

“Certainly not,” answered Sir William Elphiston, who had become very thoughtful. “Come, my lad, lead us to the cottage. There we shall ascertain the truth.”

Jack Ryan shook his head, as if not at all convinced. Then, taking a lamp from the hands of one of the men, he proceeded with a rapid step along the principal passage of the Dochart pit. The others all followed him.

In a quarter of an hour the party arrived at the excavation in which stood Simon Ford’s cottage. There was no light in the window. Ryan darted to the door, and threw it open. The house was empty.

They examined all the rooms in the somber habitation. No trace of violence was to be found. All was in order, as if old Madge had been still there. There was even an ample supply of provisions, enough to last the Ford family for several days.

The absence of the tenants of the cottage was quite unaccountable. But was it not possible to find out the exact time they had quitted it? Yes, for in this region, where there was no difference of day or night, Madge was accustomed to mark with a cross each day in her almanac.

The almanac was pinned up on the wall, and there the last cross had been made at the 6th of December; that is to say, a day after the arrival of James

Starr, to which Ryan could positively swear. It was clear that on the 6th of December, ten days ago, Simon Ford, his wife, son, and guest, had quitted the cottage. Could a fresh exploration of the mine, undertaken by the engineer, account for such a long absence? Certainly not.

It was intensely dark all round. The lamps held by the men gave light only just where they were standing. Suddenly Jack Ryan uttered a cry. “Look there, there!”

His finger was pointing to a tolerably bright light, which was moving about in the distance. “After that light, my men!” exclaimed Sir William.

“It’s a goblin light!” said Ryan. “So what’s the use? We shall never catch it.”

The president and his men, little given to superstition, darted off in the direction of the moving light. Jack Ryan, bravely following their example, quickly overtook the head-most of the party.

It was a long and fatiguing chase. The lantern seemed to be carried by a being of small size, but singular agility.

Every now and then it disappeared behind some pillar, then was seen again at the end of a cross gallery. A sharp turn would place it out of sight, and it seemed to have completely disappeared, when all at once there would be the light as bright as ever. However, they gained very little on it, and Ryan’s belief that they could never catch it seemed far from groundless.

After an hour of this vain pursuit Sir William Elphiston and his companions had gone a long way in the southwest direction of the pit, and began to think they really had to do with an impalpable being. Just then it seemed as if the distance between the goblin and those who were pursuing it was becoming less. Could it be fatigued, or did this invisible being wish to entice Sir William and his companions to the place where the inhabitants of the cottage had perhaps themselves been enticed. It was hard to say.

The men, seeing that the distance lessened, redoubled their efforts. The light which had before burnt at a distance of more than two hundred feet before them was now seen at less than fifty. The space continued to diminish. The bearer of the lamp became partially visible. Sometimes, when it turned its head, the indistinct profile of a human face could be made out, and unless a sprite could assume bodily shape, Jack Ryan was obliged to confess that here was no supernatural being. Then, springing forward, —

“Courage, comrades!” he exclaimed; “it is getting tired! We shall soon catch it up now, and if it can talk as well as it can run we shall hear a fine story.”

But the pursuit had suddenly become more difficult. They were in unknown regions of the mine; narrow passages crossed each other like the windings of a labyrinth. The bearer of the lamp might escape them as easily as possible, by just extinguishing the light and retreating into some dark refuge.

“And indeed,” thought Sir William, “if it wishes to avoid us, why does it not do so?”

Hitherto there had evidently been no intention to avoid them, but just as the thought crossed Sir William’s mind the light suddenly disappeared, and the party, continuing the pursuit, found themselves before an extremely narrow natural opening in the schistous rocks.

To trim their lamps, spring forward, and dart through the opening, was for Sir William and his party but the work of an instant. But before they had gone a hundred paces along this new gallery, much wider and loftier than the former, they all stopped short. There, near the wall, lay four bodies, stretched on the ground — four corpses, perhaps!

“James Starr!” exclaimed Sir William Elphiston.

“Harry! Harry!” cried Ryan, throwing himself down beside his friend.

It was indeed the engineer, Madge, Simon, and Harry Ford who were lying there motionless. But one of the bodies moved slightly, and Madge’s voice was heard faintly murmuring, “See to the others! help them first!”

Sir William, Jack, and their companions endeavored to reanimate the engineer and his friends by getting them to swallow a few drops of brandy. They very soon succeeded. The unfortunate people, shut up in that dark cavern for ten days, were dying of starvation. They must have perished had they not on three occasions found a loaf of bread and a jug of water set near them. No doubt the charitable being to whom they owed their lives was unable to do more for them.

Sir William wondered whether this might not have been the work of the strange sprite who had allured them to the very spot where James Starr and his companions lay.

However that might be, the engineer, Madge, Simon, and Harry Ford were saved. They were assisted to the cottage, passing through the narrow opening which the bearer of the strange light had apparently wished to point out to Sir William. This was a natural opening. The passage which James

Starr and his companions had made for themselves with dynamite had been completely blocked up with rocks laid one upon another.

So, then, whilst they had been exploring the vast cavern, the way back had been purposely closed against them by a hostile hand.

CHAPTER X. COAL TOWN

THREE years after the events which have just been related, the guide-books recommended as a “great attraction,” to the numerous tourists who roam over the county of Stirling, a visit of a few hours to the mines of New Aberfoyle.

No mine in any country, either in the Old or New World, could present a more curious aspect.

To begin with, the visitor was transported without danger or fatigue to a level with the workings, at fifteen hundred feet below the surface of the ground. Seven miles to the southwest of Callander opened a slanting tunnel, adorned with a castellated entrance, turrets and battlements. This lofty tunnel gently sloped straight to the stupendous crypt, hollowed out so strangely in the bowels of the earth.

A double line of railway, the wagons being moved by hydraulic power, plied from hour to hour to and from the village thus buried in the subsoil of the county, and which bore the rather ambitious title of Coal Town.

Arrived in Coal Town, the visitor found himself in a place where electricity played a principal part as an agent of heat and light. Although the ventilation shafts were numerous, they were not sufficient to admit much daylight into New Aberfoyle, yet it had abundance of light. This was shed from numbers of electric discs; some suspended from the vaulted roofs, others hanging on the natural pillars — all, whether suns or stars in size, were fed by continuous currents produced from electro-magnetic machines. When the hour of rest arrived, an artificial night was easily produced all over the mine by disconnecting the wires.

Below the dome lay a lake of an extent to be compared to the Dead Sea of the Mammoth caves — a deep lake whose transparent waters swarmed with eyeless fish, and to which the engineer gave the name of Loch Malcolm.

There, in this immense natural excavation, Simon Ford built his new cottage, which he would not have exchanged for the finest house in Prince’s Street, Edinburgh. This dwelling was situated on the shores of the loch, and its five windows looked out on the dark waters, which extended further than the eye could see. Two months later a second habitation was erected in the neighborhood of Simon Ford’s cottage: this was for James Starr. The engineer had given himself body and soul to New Aberfoyle, and nothing but the most imperative necessity ever caused him to leave the pit. There, then, he lived in the midst of his mining world.

On the discovery of the new field, all the old colliers had hastened to leave the plow and harrow, and resume the pick and mattock. Attracted by the certainty that work would never fail, allured by the high wages which the prosperity of the mine enabled the company to offer for labor, they deserted the open air for an underground life, and took up their abode in the mines.

The miners’ houses, built of brick, soon grew up in a picturesque fashion; some on the banks of Loch Malcolm, others under the arches which seemed made to resist the weight that pressed upon them, like the piers of a bridge. So was founded Coal Town, situated under the eastern point of Loch Katrine, to the north of the county of Stirling. It was a regular settlement on the banks of Loch Malcolm. A chapel, dedicated to St. Giles, overlooked it from the top of a huge rock, whose foot was laved by the waters of the subterranean sea.

When this underground town was lighted up by the bright rays thrown from the discs, hung from the pillars and arches, its aspect was so strange, so fantastic, that it justified the praise of the guide-books, and visitors flocked to see it.

It is needless to say that the inhabitants of Coal Town were proud of their place. They rarely left their laboring village — in that imitating Simon Ford, who never wished to go out again. The old overman maintained that it always rained “up there,” and, considering the climate of the United Kingdom, it must be acknowledged that he was not far wrong. All the families in New Aberfoyle prospered well, having in three years obtained a certain competency which they could never have hoped to attain on the surface of the county. Dozens of babies, who were born at the time when the works were resumed, had never yet breathed the outer air.

This made Jack Ryan remark, “It’s eighteen months since they were weaned, and they have not yet seen daylight!”

It may be mentioned here, that one of the first to run at the engineer’s call was Jack Ryan. The merry fellow had thought it his duty to return to his old trade. But though Melrose farm had lost singer and piper it must not be thought that Jack Ryan sung no more. On the contrary, the sonorous echoes of New Aberfoyle exerted their strong lungs to answer him.

Jack Ryan took up his abode in Simon Ford’s new cottage. They offered him a room, which he accepted without ceremony, in his frank and hearty way. Old Madge loved him for his fine character and good nature. She in some degree shared his ideas on the subject of the fantastic beings who were supposed to haunt the mine, and the two, when alone, told each other stories wild enough to make one shudder — stories well worthy of enriching the hyperborean mythology.

Jack thus became the life of the cottage. He was, besides being a jovial companion, a good workman. Six months after the works had begun, he was made head of a gang of hewers.

“That was a good work done, Mr. Ford,” said he, a few days after his appointment. “You discovered a new field, and though you narrowly escaped paying for the discovery with your life — well, it was not too dearly bought.”

“No, Jack, it was a good bargain we made that time!” answered the old overman. “But neither Mr. Starr nor I have forgotten that to you we owe our lives.”

“Not at all,” returned Jack. “You owe them to your son Harry, when he had the good sense to accept my invitation to Irvine.”

“And not to go, isn’t that it?” interrupted Harry, grasping his comrade’s hand. “No, Jack, it is to you, scarcely healed of your wounds — to you, who did not delay a day, no, nor an hour, that we owe our being found still alive in the mine!”

“Rubbish, no!” broke in the obstinate fellow. “I won’t have that said, when it’s no such thing. I hurried to find out what had become of you, Harry, that’s all. But to give everyone his due, I will add that without that unapproachable goblin — ”

“Ah, there we are!” cried Ford. “A goblin!”

“A goblin, a brownie, a fairy’s child,” repeated Jack Ryan, “a cousin of the Fire-Maidens, an Urisk, whatever you like! It’s not the less certain that without it we should never have found our way into the gallery, from which you could not get out."

"No doubt, Jack," answered Harry. "It remains to be seen whether this being was as supernatural as you choose to believe."

"Supernatural!" exclaimed Ryan. "But it was as supernatural as a Will-o'-the-Wisp, who may be seen skipping along with his lantern in his hand; you may try to catch him, but he escapes like a fairy, and vanishes like a shadow! Don't be uneasy, Harry, we shall see it again some day or other!"

"Well, Jack," said Simon Ford, "Will-o'-the-Wisp or not, we shall try to find it, and you must help us."

"You'll get into a scrap if you don't take care, Mr. Ford!" responded Jack Ryan.

"We'll see about that, Jack!"

We may easily imagine how soon this domain of New Aberfoyle became familiar to all the members of the Ford family, but more particularly to Harry. He learnt to know all its most secret ins and outs. He could even say what point of the surface corresponded with what point of the mine. He knew that above this seam lay the Firth of Clyde, that there extended Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine. Those columns supported a spur of the Grampian mountains. This vault served as a basement to Dumbarton. Above this large pond passed the Balloch railway. Here ended the Scottish coast. There began the sea, the tumult of which could be distinctly heard during the equinoctial gales. Harry would have been a first-rate guide to these natural catacombs, and all that Alpine guides do on their snowy peaks in daylight he could have done in the dark mine by the wonderful power of instinct.

He loved New Aberfoyle. Many times, with his lamp stuck in his hat, did he penetrate its furthest depths. He explored its ponds in a skillfully-managed canoe. He even went shooting, for numerous birds had been introduced into the crypt — pintails, snipes, ducks, who fed on the fish which swarmed in the deep waters. Harry’s eyes seemed made for the dark, just as a sailor’s are made for distances. But all this while Harry felt irresistibly animated by the hope of finding the mysterious being whose intervention, strictly speaking, had saved himself and his friends. Would he succeed? He certainly would, if presentiments were to be trusted; but certainly not, if he judged by the success which had as yet attended his researches.

The attacks directed against the family of the old overman, before the discovery of New Aberfoyle, had not been renewed.

CHAPTER XI. HANGING BY A THREAD

ALTHOUGH in this way the Ford family led a happy and contented life, yet it was easy to see that Harry, naturally of a grave disposition, became more and more quiet and reserved. Even Jack Ryan, with all his good humor and usually infectious merriment, failed to rouse him to gayety of manner.

One Sunday — it was in the month of June — the two friends were walking together on the shores of Loch Malcolm. Coal Town rested from labor. In the world above, stormy weather prevailed. Violent rains fell, and dull sultry vapors brooded over the earth; the atmosphere was most oppressive.

Down in Coal Town there was perfect calm; no wind, no rain. A soft and pleasant temperature existed instead of the strife of the elements which raged without. What wonder then, that excursionists from Stirling came in considerable numbers to enjoy the calm fresh air in the recesses of the mine?

The electric discs shed a brilliancy of light which the British sun, oftener obscured by fogs than it ought to be, might well envy. Jack Ryan kept talking of these visitors, who passed them in noisy crowds, but Harry paid very little attention to what he said.

“I say, do look, Harry!” cried Jack. “See what numbers of people come to visit us! Cheer up, old fellow! Do the honors of the place a little better. If you look so glum, you’ll make all these outside folks think you envy their life above-ground.”

“Never mind me, Jack,” answered Harry. “You are jolly enough for two, I’m sure; that’s enough.”

“I’ll be hanged if I don’t feel your melancholy creeping over me though!” exclaimed Jack. “I declare my eyes are getting quite dull, my lips are drawn together, my laugh sticks in my throat; I’m forgetting all my songs. Come, man, what’s the matter with you?”

“You know well enough, Jack.”

“What? the old story?”

“Yes, the same thoughts haunt me.”

“Ah, poor fellow!” said Jack, shrugging his shoulders. “If you would only do like me, and set all the queer things down to the account of the goblins of the mine, you would be easier in your mind.”

“But, Jack, you know very well that these goblins exist only in your imagination, and that, since the works here have been reopened, not a single one has been seen.”

“That’s true, Harry; but if no spirits have been seen, neither has anyone else to whom you could attribute the extraordinary doings we want to account for.”

“I shall discover them.”

“Ah, Harry! Harry! it’s not so easy to catch the spirits of New Aberfoyle!”

“I shall find out the spirits as you call them,” said Harry, in a tone of firm conviction.

“Do you expect to be able to punish them?”

“Both punish and reward. Remember, if one hand shut us up in that passage, another hand delivered us! I shall not soon forget that.”

“But, Harry, how can we be sure that these two hands do not belong to the same body?”

“What can put such a notion in your head, Jack?” asked Harry.

“Well, I don’t know. Creatures that live in these holes, Harry, don’t you see? they can’t be made like us, eh?”

“But they ARE just like us, Jack.”

“Oh, no! don’t say that, Harry! Perhaps some madman managed to get in for a time.”

“A madman! No madman would have formed such connected plans, or done such continued mischief as befell us after the breaking of the ladders.”

“Well, but anyhow he has done no harm for the last three years, either to you, Harry, or any of your people.”

“No matter, Jack,” replied Harry; “I am persuaded that this malignant being, whoever he is, has by no means given up his evil intentions. I can hardly say on what I found my convictions. But at any rate, for the sake of the new works, I must and will know who he is and whence he comes.”

“For the sake of the new works did you say?” asked Jack, considerably surprised.

“I said so, Jack,” returned Harry. “I may be mistaken, but, to me, all that has happened proves the existence of an interest in this mine in strong opposition to ours. Many a time have I considered the matter; I feel almost sure of it. Just consider the whole series of inexplicable circumstances, so singularly linked together. To begin with, the anonymous letter, contradictory to that of my father, at once proves that some man had become aware of our projects, and wished to prevent their accomplishment. Mr. Starr comes to see us at the Dochart pit. No sooner does he enter it with me than an immense stone is cast upon us, and communication is interrupted by the breaking of the ladders in the Yarrow shaft. We commence exploring. An experiment, by which the existence of a new vein would be proved, is rendered impossible by stoppage of fissures. Notwithstanding this, the examination is carried out, the vein discovered. We return as we came, a prodigious gust of air meets us, our lamp is broken, utter darkness surrounds us. Nevertheless, we make our way along the gloomy passage until, on reaching the entrance, we find it blocked up. There we were — imprisoned. Now, Jack, don’t you see in all these things a malicious intention? Ah, yes, believe me, some being hitherto invisible, but not supernatural, as you will persist in thinking, was concealed in the mine. For some reason, known only to himself, he strove to keep us out of it. WAS there, did I say? I feel an inward conviction that he IS there still, and probably prepares some terrible disaster for us. Even at the risk of my life, Jack, I am resolved to discover him.”

Harry spoke with an earnestness which strongly impressed his companion. “Well, Harry,” said he, “if I am forced to agree with you in certain points, won’t you admit that some kind fairy or brownie, by bringing bread and water to you, was the means of — ”

“Jack, my friend,” interrupted Harry, “it is my belief that the friendly person, whom you will persist in calling a spirit, exists in the mine as certainly as the criminal we speak of, and I mean to seek them both in the most distant recesses of the mine.”

“But,” inquired Jack, “have you any possible clew to guide your search?”

“Perhaps I have. Listen to me! Five miles west of New Aberfoyle, under the solid rock which supports Ben Lomond, there exists a natural shaft which descends perpendicularly into the vein beneath. A week ago I went to ascertain the depth of this shaft. While sounding it, and bending over the opening as my plumb-line went down, it seemed to me that the air within was agitated, as though beaten by huge wings.”

“Some bird must have got lost among the lower galleries,” replied Jack.

“But that is not all, Jack. This very morning I went back to the place, and, listening attentively, I thought I could detect a sound like a sort of groaning.”

“Groaning!” cried Jack, “that must be nonsense; it was a current of air — unless indeed some ghost — ”

“I shall know to-morrow what it was,” said Harry.

“To-morrow?” answered Jack, looking at his friend.

“Yes; to-morrow I am going down into that abyss.”

“Harry! that will be a tempting of Providence.”

“No, Jack, Providence will aid me in the attempt. Tomorrow, you and some of our comrades will go with me to that shaft. I will fasten myself to a long rope, by which you can let me down, and draw me up at a given signal. I may depend upon you, Jack?”

“Well, Harry,” said Jack, shaking his head, “I will do as you wish me; but I tell you all the same, you are very wrong.”

“Nothing venture nothing win,” said Harry, in a tone of decision. “To-morrow morning, then, at six o’clock. Be silent, and farewell!”

It must be admitted that Jack Ryan’s fears were far from groundless. Harry would expose himself to very great danger, supposing the enemy he sought for lay concealed at the bottom of the pit into which he was going to descend. It did not seem likely that such was the case, however.

“Why in the world,” repeated Jack Ryan, “should he take all this trouble to account for a set of facts so very easily and simply explained by the supernatural intervention of the spirits of the mine?”

But, notwithstanding his objections to the scheme, Jack Ryan and three miners of his gang arrived next morning with Harry at the mouth of the opening of the suspicious shaft. Harry had not mentioned his intentions either to James Starr or to the old overman. Jack had been discreet enough to say nothing.

Harry had provided himself with a rope about 200 feet long. It was not particularly thick, but very strong — sufficiently so to sustain his weight. His friends were to let him down into the gulf, and his pulling the cord was to be the signal to withdraw him.

The opening into this shaft or well was twelve feet wide. A beam was thrown across like a bridge, so that the cord passing over it should hang down the center of the opening, and save Harry from striking against the sides in his descent.

He was ready.

“Are you still determined to explore this abyss?” whispered Jack Ryan.

“Yes, I am, Jack.”

The cord was fastened round Harry’s thighs and under his arms, to keep him from rocking. Thus supported, he was free to use both his hands. A safety-lamp hung at his belt, also a large, strong knife in a leather sheath.

Harry advanced to the middle of the beam, around which the cord was passed. Then his friends began to let him down, and he slowly sank into the pit. As the rope caused him to swing gently round and round, the light of his lamp fell in turns on all points of the side walls, so that he was able to examine them carefully. These walls consisted of pit coal, and so smooth that it would be impossible to ascend them.

Harry calculated that he was going down at the rate of about a foot per second, so that he had time to look about him, and be ready for any event.

During two minutes — that is to say, to the depth of about 120 feet, the descent continued without any incident.

No lateral gallery opened from the side walls of the pit, which was gradually narrowing into the shape of a funnel. But Harry began to feel a fresher air rising from beneath, whence he concluded that the bottom of the pit communicated with a gallery of some description in the lowest part of the mine.

The cord continued to unwind. Darkness and silence were complete. If any living being whatever had sought refuge in the deep and mysterious abyss, he had either left it, or, if there, by no movement did he in the slightest way betray his presence.

Harry, becoming more suspicious the lower he got, now drew his knife and held it in his right hand. At a depth of 180 feet, his feet touched the lower point and the cord slackened and unwound no further.

Harry breathed more freely for a moment. One of the fears he entertained had been that, during his descent, the cord might be cut above him, but he had seen no projection from the walls behind which anyone could have been concealed.

The bottom of the abyss was quite dry. Harry, taking the lamp from his belt, walked round the place, and perceived he had been right in his conjectures.

An extremely narrow passage led aside out of the pit. He had to stoop to look into it, and only by creeping could it be followed; but as he wanted to see in which direction it led, and whether another abyss opened from it, he lay down on the ground and began to enter it on hands and knees.

An obstacle speedily arrested his progress. He fancied he could perceive by touching it, that a human body lay across the passage. A sudden thrill of horror and surprise made him hastily draw back, but he again advanced and felt more carefully.

His senses had not deceived him; a body did indeed lie there; and he soon ascertained that, although icy cold at the extremities, there was some vital heat remaining. In less time than it takes to tell it, Harry had drawn the body from the recess to the bottom of the shaft, and, seizing his lamp, he cast its lights on what he had found, exclaiming immediately, “Why, it is a child!”

The child still breathed, but so very feebly that Harry expected it to cease every instant. Not a moment was to be lost; he must carry this poor little creature out of the pit, and take it home to his mother as quickly as he could. He eagerly fastened the cord round his waist, stuck on his lamp, clasped the child to his breast with his left arm, and, keeping his right hand free to hold the knife, he gave the signal agreed on, to have the rope pulled up.

It tightened at once; he began the ascent. Harry looked around him with redoubled care, for more than his own life was now in danger.

For a few minutes all went well, no accident seemed to threaten him, when suddenly he heard the sound of a great rush of air from beneath; and, looking down, he could dimly perceive through the gloom a broad mass arising until it passed him, striking him as it went by.

It was an enormous bird — of what sort he could not see; it flew upwards on mighty wings, then paused, hovered, and dashed fiercely down upon Harry, who could only wield his knife in one hand. He defended himself and the child as well as he could, but the ferocious bird seemed to aim all its blows at him alone. Afraid of cutting the cord, he could not strike it as he wished, and the struggle was prolonged, while Harry shouted with all his might in hopes of making his comrades hear.

He soon knew they did, for they pulled the rope up faster; a distance of about eighty feet remained to be got over. The bird ceased its direct attack, but increased the horror and danger of his situation by rushing at the cord, clinging to it just out of his reach, and endeavoring, by pecking furiously, to cut it.

Harry felt overcome with terrible dread. One strand of the rope gave way, and it made them sink a little.

A shriek of despair escaped his lips.

A second strand was divided, and the double burden now hung suspended by only half the cord.

Harry dropped his knife, and by a superhuman effort succeeded, at the moment the rope was giving way, in catching hold of it with his right hand above the cut made by the beak of the bird. But, powerfully as he held it in his iron grasp, he could feel it gradually slipping through his fingers.

He might have caught it, and held on with both hands by sacrificing the life of the child he supported in his left arm. The idea crossed him, but was banished in an instant, although he believed himself quite unable to hold out until drawn to the surface. For a second he closed his eyes, believing they were about to plunge back into the abyss.

He looked up once more; the huge bird had disappeared; his hand was at the very extremity of the broken rope — when, just as his convulsive grasp was failing, he was seized by the men, and with the child was placed on the level ground.

The fearful strain of anxiety removed, a reaction took place, and Harry fell fainting into the arms of his friends.

CHAPTER XII. NELL ADOPTED

A COUPLE of hours later, Harry still unconscious, and the child in a very feeble state, were brought to the cottage by Jack Ryan and his companions. The old overman listened to the account of their adventures, while Madge attended with the utmost care to the wants of her son, and of the poor creature whom he had rescued from the pit.

Harry imagined her a mere child, but she was a maiden of the age of fifteen or sixteen years.

She gazed at them with vague and wondering eyes; and the thin face, drawn by suffering, the pallid complexion, which light could never have tinged, and the fragile, slender figure, gave her an appearance at once singular and attractive. Jack Ryan declared that she seemed to him to be an uncommonly interesting kind of ghost.

It must have been due to the strange and peculiar circumstances under which her life hitherto had been led, that she scarcely seemed to belong to the human race. Her countenance was of a very uncommon cast, and her eyes, hardly able to bear the lamp-light in the cottage, glanced around in a confused and puzzled way, as if all were new to them.

As this singular being reclined on Madge's bed and awoke to consciousness, as from a long sleep, the old Scotchwoman began to question her a little.

"What do they call you, my dear?" said she.

"Nell," replied the girl.

"Do you feel anything the matter with you, Nell?"

“I am hungry. I have eaten nothing since — since — ”

Nell uttered these few words like one unused to speak much. They were in the Gaelic language, which was often spoken by Simon and his family. Madge immediately brought her some food; she was evidently famished. It was impossible to say how long she might have been in that pit.

“How many days had you been down there, dearie?” inquired Madge.

Nell made no answer; she seemed not to understand the question.

“How many days, do you think?”

“Days?” repeated Nell, as though the word had no meaning for her, and she shook her head to signify entire want of comprehension.

Madge took her hand, and stroked it caressingly. “How old are you, my lassie?” she asked, smiling kindly at her.

Nell shook her head again.

“Yes, yes,” continued Madge, “how many years old?”

“Years?” replied Nell. She seemed to understand that word no better than days! Simon, Harry, Jack, and the rest, looked on with an air of mingled compassion, wonder, and sympathy. The state of this poor thing, clothed in a miserable garment of coarse woolen stuff, seemed to impress them painfully.

Harry, more than all the rest, seemed attracted by the very peculiarity of this poor stranger. He drew near, took Nell’s hand from his mother, and looked directly at her, while something like a smile curved her lip. “Nell,” he said, “Nell, away down there — in the mine — were you all alone?”

“Alone! alone!” cried the girl, raising herself hastily. Her features expressed terror; her eyes, which had appeared to soften as Harry looked at her, became quite wild again. “Alone!” repeated she, “alone!” — and she fell back on the bed, as though deprived of all strength.

“The poor bairn is too weak to speak to us,” said Madge, when she had adjusted the pillows. “After a good rest, and a little more food, she will be stronger. Come away, Simon and Harry, and all the rest of you, and let her go to sleep.” So Nell was left alone, and in a very few minutes slept profoundly.

This event caused a great sensation, not only in the coal mines, but in Stirlingshire, and ultimately throughout the kingdom. The strangeness of the story was exaggerated; the affair could not have made more commotion had they found the girl enclosed in the solid rock, like one of those antediluvian creatures who have occasionally been released by a stroke of the pickax from their stony prison. Nell became a fashionable wonder without knowing it. Superstitious folks made her story a new subject for legendary marvels, and were inclined to think, as Jack Ryan told Harry, that Nell was the spirit of the mines.

“Be it so, Jack,” said the young man; “but at any rate she is the good spirit. It can have been none but she who brought us bread and water when we were shut up down there; and as to the bad spirit, who must still be in the mine, we’ll catch him some day.”

Of course James Starr had been at once informed of all this, and came, as soon as the young girl had sufficiently recovered her strength, to see her, and endeavor to question her carefully.

She appeared ignorant of nearly everything relating to life, and, although evidently intelligent, was wanting in many elementary ideas, such as time, for instance. She had never been used to its division, and the words signifying hours, days, months, and years were unknown to her.

Her eyes, accustomed to the night, were pained by the glare of the electric discs; but in the dark her sight was wonderfully keen, the pupil dilated in a remarkable manner, and she could see where to others there appeared profound obscurity. It was certain that her brain had never received any impression of the outer world, that her eyes had never looked beyond the mine, and that these somber depths had been all the world to her.

The poor girl probably knew not that there were a sun and stars, towns and counties, a mighty universe composed of myriads of worlds. But until she comprehended the significance of words at present conveying no precise meaning to her, it was impossible to ascertain what she knew.

As to whether or not Nell had lived alone in the recesses of New Aberfoyle, James Starr was obliged to remain uncertain; indeed, any allusion to the subject excited evident alarm in the mind of this strange girl. Either Nell could not or would not reply to questions, but that some secret existed in connection with the place, which she could have explained, was manifest.

“Should you like to stay with us? Should you like to go back to where we found you?” asked James Starr.

“Oh, yes!” exclaimed the maiden, in answer to his first question; but a cry of terror was all she seemed able to say to the second.

James Starr, as well as Simon and Harry Ford, could not help feeling a certain amount of uneasiness with regard to this persistent silence. They found it impossible to forget all that had appeared so inexplicable at the time they made the discovery of the coal mine; and although that was three years ago, and nothing new had happened, they always expected some fresh attack on the part of the invisible enemy.

They resolved to explore the mysterious well, and did so, well armed and in considerable numbers. But nothing suspicious was to be seen; the shaft communicated with lower stages of the crypt, hollowed out in the carboniferous bed.

Many a time did James Starr, Simon, and Harry talk over these things. If one or more malevolent beings were concealed in the coal-pit, and there concocted mischief, Nell surely could have warned them of it, yet she said nothing. The slightest allusion to her past life brought on such fits of violent emotion, that it was judged best to avoid the subject for the present. Her secret would certainly escape her by-and-by.

By the time Nell had been a fortnight in the cottage, she had become a most intelligent and zealous assistant to old Madge. It was clear that she instinctively felt she should remain in the dwelling where she had been so charitably received, and perhaps never dreamt of quitting it. This family was all in all to her, and to the good folks themselves Nell had seemed an adopted child from the moment when she first came beneath their roof. Nell was in truth a charming creature; her new mode of existence added to her beauty, for these were no doubt the first happy days of her life, and her heart was full of gratitude towards those to whom she owed them. Madge felt towards her as a mother would; the old woman doted upon her; in short, she was beloved by everybody. Jack Ryan only regretted one thing, which was that he had not saved her himself. Friend Jack often came to the cottage. He sang, and Nell, who had never heard singing before, admired it greatly; but anyone might see that she preferred to Jack's songs the graver conversation of Harry, from whom by degrees she learnt truths concerning the outer world, of which hitherto she had known nothing.

It must be said that, since Nell had appeared in her own person, Jack Ryan had been obliged to admit that his belief in hobgoblins was in a measure weakened. A couple of months later his credulity experienced a further shock. About that time Harry unexpectedly made a discovery which, in part at least, accounted for the apparition of the fire-maidens among the ruins of Dundonald Castle at Irvine.

During several days he had been engaged in exploring the remote galleries of the prodigious excavation towards the south. At last he scrambled with difficulty up a narrow passage which branched off through the upper rock. To his great astonishment, he suddenly found himself in the open air. The passage, after ascending obliquely to the surface of the ground, led out directly among the ruins of Dundonald Castle.

There was, therefore, a communication between New Aberfoyle and the hills crowned by this ancient castle. The upper entrance to this gallery, being completely concealed by stones and brushwood, was invisible from without; at the time of their search, therefore, the magistrates had been able to discover nothing.

A few days afterwards, James Starr, guided by Harry, came himself to inspect this curious natural opening into the coal mine. “Well,” said he, “here is enough to convince the most superstitious among us. Farewell to all their brownies, goblins, and fire-maidens now!”

“I hardly think, Mr. Starr, we ought to congratulate ourselves,” replied Harry. “Whatever it is we have instead of these things, it can’t be better, and may be worse than they are.”

“That’s true, Harry,” said the engineer; “but what’s to be done? It is plain that, whatever the beings are who hide in the mine, they reach the surface of the earth by this passage. No doubt it was the light of torches waved by them during that dark and stormy night which attracted the MOTALA towards the rocky coast, and like the wreckers of former days, they would have plundered the unfortunate vessel, had it not been for Jack Ryan and his friends. Anyhow, so far it is evident, and here is the mouth of the den. As to its occupants, the question is — Are they here still?”

“I say yes; because Nell trembles when we mention them — yes, because Nell will not, or dare not, speak about them,” answered Harry in a tone of decision.

Harry was surely in the right. Had these mysterious denizens of the pit abandoned it, or ceased to visit the spot, what reason could the girl have had for keeping silence?

James Starr could not rest till he had penetrated this mystery. He foresaw that the whole future of the new excavations must depend upon it. Renewed and strict precautions were therefore taken. The authorities were informed of the discovery of the entrance. Watchers were placed among the ruins of the castle. Harry himself lay hid for several nights in the thickets of brushwood which clothed the hill-side.

Nothing was discovered — no human being emerged from the opening. So most people came to the conclusion that the villains had been finally dislodged from the mine, and that, as to Nell, they must suppose her to be dead at the bottom of the shaft where they had left her.

While it remained unworked, the mine had been a safe enough place of refuge, secure from all search or pursuit. But now, circumstances being altered, it became difficult to conceal this lurking-place, and it might reasonably be hoped they were gone, and that nothing for the future was to be dreaded from them.

James Starr, however, could not feel sure about it; neither could Harry be satisfied on the subject, often repeating, “Nell has clearly been mixed up with all this secret business. If she had nothing more to fear, why should she keep silence? It cannot be doubted that she is happy with us. She likes us all — she adores my mother. Her absolute silence as to her former life, when by speaking out she might benefit us, proves to me that some awful secret, which she dares not reveal, weighs on her mind. It may also be that she believes it better for us, as well as for herself, that she should remain mute in a way otherwise so unaccountable.”

In consequence of these opinions, it was agreed by common consent to avoid all allusion to the maiden’s former mode of life. One day, however, Harry was led to make known to Nell what James Starr, his father, mother, and himself believed they owed to her interference.

It was a fete-day. The miners made holiday on the surface of the county of Stirling as well as in its subterraneous domains. Parties of holiday-makers were moving about in all directions. Songs resounded in many places beneath the sonorous vaults of New Aberfoyle. Harry and Nell left the cottage, and slowly walked along the left bank of Loch Malcolm.

Then the electric brilliance darted less vividly, and the rays were interrupted with fantastic effect by the sharp angles of the picturesque rocks which supported the dome. This imperfect light suited Nell, to whose eyes a glare was very unpleasant.

“Nell,” said Harry, “your eyes are not fit for daylight yet, and could not bear the brightness of the sun.”

“Indeed they could not,” replied the girl; “if the sun is such as you describe it to me, Harry.”

“I cannot by any words, Nell, give you an idea either of his splendor or of the beauty of that universe which your eyes have never beheld. But tell me, is it really possible that, since the day when you were born in the depths of the coal mine, you never once have been up to the surface of the earth?”

“Never once, Harry,” said she; “I do not believe that, even as an infant, my father or mother ever carried me thither. I am sure I should have retained some impression of the open air if they had.”

“I believe you would,” answered Harry. “Long ago, Nell, many children used to live altogether in the mine; communication was then difficult, and I have met with more than one young person, quite as ignorant as you are of things above-ground. But now the railway through our great tunnel takes us in a few minutes to the upper regions of our country. I long, Nell, to hear you say, ‘Come, Harry, my eyes can bear daylight, and I want to see the sun! I want to look upon the works of the Almighty.’”

“I shall soon say so, Harry, I hope,” replied the girl; “I shall soon go with you to the world above; and yet — ”

“What are you going to say, Nell?” hastily cried Harry; “can you possibly regret having quitted that gloomy abyss in which you spent your early years, and whence we drew you half dead?”

“No, Harry,” answered Nell; “I was only thinking that darkness is beautiful as well as light. If you but knew what eyes accustomed to its depth can see! Shades flit by, which one longs to follow; circles mingle and intertwine, and one could gaze on them forever; black hollows, full of indefinite gleams of radiance, lie deep at the bottom of the mine. And then the voice-like sounds! Ah, Harry! one must have lived down there to understand what I feel, what I can never express.”

“And were you not afraid, Nell, all alone there?”

“It was just when I was alone that I was not afraid.”

Nell’s voice altered slightly as she said these words; however, Harry thought he might press the subject a little further, so he said, “But one might be easily lost in these great galleries, Nell. Were you not afraid of losing your way?”

“Oh, no, Harry; for a long time I had known every turn of the new mine.”

“Did you never leave it?”

“Yes, now and then,” answered the girl with a little hesitation; “sometimes I have been as far as the old mine of Aberfoyle.”

“So you knew our old cottage?”

“The cottage! oh, yes; but the people who lived there I only saw at a great distance.”

“They were my father and mother,” said Harry; “and I was there too; we have always lived there — we never would give up the old dwelling.”

“Perhaps it would have been better for you if you had,” murmured the maiden.

“Why so, Nell? Was it not just because we were obstinately resolved to remain that we ended by discovering the new vein of coal? And did not that discovery lead to the happy result of providing work for a large population, and restoring them to ease and comfort? and did it not enable us to find you, Nell, to save your life, and give you the love of all our hearts?”

“Ah, yes, for me indeed it is well, whatever may happen,” replied Nell earnestly; “for others — who can tell?”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing — nothing. But it used to be very dangerous at that time to go into the new cutting — yes, very dangerous indeed, Harry! Once some rash people made their way into these chasms. They got a long, long way; they were lost!”

“They were lost?” said Harry, looking at her.

“Yes, lost!” repeated Nell in a trembling voice. “They could not find their way out.”

“And there,” cried Harry, “they were imprisoned during eight long days! They were at the point of death, Nell; and, but for a kind and charitable being — an angel perhaps — sent by God to help them, who secretly brought them a little food; but for a mysterious guide, who afterwards led to them their deliverers, they never would have escaped from that living tomb!”

“And how do you know about that?” demanded the girl.

“Because those men were James Starr, my father, and myself, Nell!”

Nell looked up hastily, seized the young man’s hand, and gazed so fixedly into his eyes that his feelings were stirred to their depths. “You were there?” at last she uttered.

“I was indeed,” said Harry, after a pause, “and she to whom we owe our lives can have been none other than yourself, Nell!”

Nell hid her face in her hands without speaking. Harry had never seen her so much affected.

“Those who saved your life, Nell,” added he in a voice tremulous with emotion, “already owed theirs to you; do you think they will ever forget it?”

CHAPTER XIII. ON THE REVOLVING LADDER

THE mining operations at New Aberfoyle continued to be carried on very successfully. As a matter of course, the engineer, James Starr, as well as Simon Ford, the discoverers of this rich carboniferous region, shared largely in the profits.

In time Harry became a partner. But he never thought of quitting the cottage. He took his father’s place as overman, and diligently superintended the works of this colony of miners. Jack Ryan was proud and delighted at the good fortune which had befallen his comrade. He himself was getting on very well also.

They frequently met, either at the cottage or at the works in the pit. Jack did not fail to remark the sentiments entertained by Harry towards Nell. Harry would not confess to them; but Jack only laughed at him when he shook his head and tried to deny any special interest in her.

It must be noted that Jack Ryan had the greatest possible wish to be of the party when Nell should pay her first visit to the upper surface of the county of Stirling. He wished to see her wonder and admiration on first beholding the yet unknown face of Nature. He very much hoped that Harry would take him with them when the excursion was made. As yet, however, the latter had made no proposal of the kind to him, which caused him to feel a little uneasy as to his intentions.

One morning Jack Ryan was descending through a shaft which led from the surface to the lower regions of the pit. He did so by means of one of those ladders which, continually revolving by machinery, enabled persons to ascend and descend without fatigue. This apparatus had lowered him about a hundred and fifty feet, when at a narrow landing-place he perceived Harry, who was coming up to his labors for the day.

“Well met, my friend!” cried Jack, recognizing his comrade by the light of the electric lamps.

“Ah, Jack!” replied Harry, “I am glad to see you. I’ve got something to propose.”

“I can listen to nothing till you tell me how Nell is,” interrupted Jack Ryan.

“Nell is all right, Jack — so much so, in fact, that I hope in a month or six weeks — ”

“To marry her, Harry?”

“Jack, you don’t know what you are talking about!”

“Ah, that’s very likely; but I know quite well what I shall do.”

“What will you do?”

“Marry her myself, if you don’t; so look sharp,” laughed Jack. “By Saint Mungo! I think an immense deal of bonny Nell! A fine young creature like that, who has been brought up in the mine, is just the very wife for a miner. She is an orphan — so am I; and if you don’t care much for her, and if she will have me — ”

Harry looked gravely at Jack, and let him talk on without trying to stop him. “Don’t you begin to feel jealous, Harry?” asked Jack in a more serious tone.

“Not at all,” answered Harry quietly.

“But if you don’t marry Nell yourself, you surely can’t expect her to remain a spinster?”

“I expect nothing,” said Harry.

A movement of the ladder machinery now gave the two friends the opportunity — one to go up, the other down the shaft. However, they remained where they were.

“Harry,” quoth Jack, “do you think I spoke in earnest just now about Nell?”

“No, that I don’t, Jack.”

“Well, but now I will!”

“You? speak in earnest?”

“My good fellow, I can tell you I am quite capable of giving a friend a bit of advice.”

“Let’s hear, then, Jack!”

“Well, look here! You love Nell as heartily as she deserves. Old Simon, your father, and old Madge, your mother, both love her as if she were their daughter. Why don’t you make her so in reality? Why don’t you marry her?”

“Come, Jack,” said Harry, “you are running on as if you knew how Nell felt on the subject.”

“Everybody knows that,” replied Jack, “and therefore it is impossible to make you jealous of any of us. But here goes the ladder again — I’m off!”

“Stop a minute, Jack!” cried Harry, detaining his companion, who was stepping onto the moving staircase.

“I say! you seem to mean me to take up my quarters here altogether!”

“Do be serious and listen, Jack! I want to speak in earnest myself now.”

“Well, I’ll listen till the ladder moves again, not a minute longer.”

“Jack,” resumed Harry, “I need not pretend that I do not love Nell; I wish above all things to make her my wife.”

“That’s all right!”

“But for the present I have scruples of conscience as to asking her to make me a promise which would be irrevocable.”

“What can you mean, Harry?”

“I mean just this — that, it being certain Nell has never been outside this coal mine in the very depths of which she was born, it stands to reason that she knows nothing, and can comprehend nothing of what exists beyond it. Her eyes — yes, and perhaps also her heart — have everything yet to learn. Who can tell what her thoughts will be, when perfectly new impressions shall be made upon her mind? As yet she knows nothing of the world, and to me it would seem like deceiving her, if I led her to decide in ignorance, upon choosing to remain all her life in the coal mine. Do you understand me, Jack?”

“Hem! — yes — pretty well. What I understand best is that you are going to make me miss another turn of the ladder.”

“Jack,” replied Harry gravely, “if this machinery were to stop altogether, if this landing-place were to fall beneath our feet, you must and shall hear what I have to say.”

“Well done, Harry! that’s how I like to be spoken to! Let’s settle, then, that, before you marry Nell, she shall go to school in Auld Reekie.”

“No indeed, Jack; I am perfectly able myself to educate the person who is to be my wife.”

“Sure that will be a great deal better, Harry!”

“But, first of all,” resumed Harry, “I wish that Nell should gain a real knowledge of the upper world. To illustrate my meaning, Jack, suppose you were in love with a blind girl, and someone said to you, ‘In a month’s time her sight will be restored,’ would you not wait till after she was cured, to marry her?”

“Faith, to be sure I would!” exclaimed Jack.

“Well, Jack, Nell is at present blind; and before she marries me, I wish her to see what I am, and what the life really is to which she would bind herself. In short, she must have daylight let in upon the subject!”

“Well said, Harry! Very well said indeed!” cried Jack. “Now I see what you are driving at. And when may we expect the operation to come off?”

“In a month, Jack,” replied Harry. “Nell is getting used to the light of our reflectors. That is some preparation. In a month she will, I hope, have seen the earth and its wonders — the sky and its splendors. She will perceive that the limits of the universe are boundless.”

But while Harry was thus giving the rein to his imagination, Jack Ryan, quitting the platform, had leaped on the step of the moving machinery.

“Hullo, Jack! Where are you?”

“Far beneath you,” laughed the merry fellow. “While you soar to the heights, I plunge into the depths.”

“Fare ye well. Jack!” returned Harry, himself laying hold of the rising ladder; “mind you say nothing about what I have been telling you.”

“Not a word,” shouted Jack, “but I make one condition.”

“What is that?”

“That I may be one of the party when Nell’s first excursion to the face of the earth comes off!”

“So you shall, Jack, I promise you!”

A fresh throb of the machinery placed a yet more considerable distance between the friends. Their voices sounded faintly to each other. Harry, however, could still hear Jack shouting:

“I say! do you know what Nell will like better than either sun, moon, or stars, after she’s seen the whole of them?”

“No, Jack!”

“Why, you yourself, old fellow! still you! always you!” And Jack’s voice died away in a prolonged “Hurrah!”

Harry, after this, applied himself diligently, during all his spare time, to the work of Nell’s education. He taught her to read and to write, and such rapid progress did she make, it might have been said that she learnt by instinct. Never did keen intelligence more quickly triumph over utter ignorance. It was the wonder of all beholders.

Simon and Madge became every day more and more attached to their adopted child, whose former history continued to puzzle them a good deal. They plainly saw the nature of Harry’s feelings towards her, and were far from displeased thereat. They recollected that Simon had said to the engineer on his first visit to the old cottage, “How can our son ever think of marrying? Where could a wife possibly be found suitable for a lad whose whole life must be passed in the depths of a coal mine?”

Well! now it seemed as if the most desirable companion in the world had been led to him by Providence. Was not this like a blessing direct from Heaven? So the old man made up his mind that, if the wedding did take place, the miners of New Aberfoyle should have a merry-making at Coal Town, which they would never during their lives forget. Simon Ford little knew what he was saying!

It must be remarked that another person wished for this union of Harry and Nell as much as Simon did — and that was James Starr, the engineer. Of course he was really interested in the happiness of the two young people. But another motive, connected with wider interests, influenced him to desire it.

It has been said that James Starr continued to entertain a certain amount of apprehension, although for the present nothing appeared to justify it. Yet that which had been might again be. This mystery about the new cutting — Nell was evidently the only person acquainted with it. Now, if fresh dangers were in store for the miners of Aberfoyle, how were they possibly to be guarded against, without so much as knowing the cause of them?

“Nell has persisted in keeping silence,” said James Starr very often, “but what she has concealed from others, she will not long hide from her husband. Any danger would be danger to Harry as well as to the rest of us. Therefore, a marriage which brings happiness to the lovers, and safety to their friends, will be a good marriage, if ever there is such a thing here below.”

Thus, not illogically, reasoned James Starr. He communicated his ideas to old Simon, who decidedly appreciated them. Nothing, then, appeared to stand in the way of the match. What, in fact, was there to prevent it? They loved each other; the parents desired nothing better for their son. Harry’s comrades envied his good fortune, but freely acknowledged that he deserved it. The maiden depended on no one else, and had but to give the consent of her own heart.

Why, then, if there were none to place obstacles in the way of this union — why, as night came on, and, the labors of the day being over, the electric lights in the mine were extinguished, and all the inhabitants of Coal Town at rest within their dwellings — why did a mysterious form always emerge from the gloomier recesses of New Aberfoyle, and silently glide through the darkness?

What instinct guided this phantom with ease through passages so narrow as to appear to be impracticable?

Why should the strange being, with eyes flashing through the deepest darkness, come cautiously creeping along the shores of Lake Malcolm? Why so directly make his way towards Simon’s cottage, yet so carefully as hitherto to avoid notice? Why, bending towards the windows, did he strive to catch, by listening, some fragment of the conversation within the closed shutters?

And, on catching a few words, why did he shake his fist with a menacing gesture towards the calm abode, while from between his set teeth issued these words in muttered fury, “She and he? Never! never!”

CHAPTER XIV. A SUNRISE

A MONTH after this, on the evening of the 20th of August, Simon Ford and Madge took leave, with all manner of good wishes, of four tourists, who were setting forth from the cottage.

James Starr, Harry, and Jack Ryan were about to lead Nell's steps over yet untrodden paths, and to show her the glories of nature by a light to which she was as yet a stranger. The excursion was to last for two days. James Starr, as well as Harry, considered that during these eight and forty hours spent above ground, the maiden would be able to see everything of which she must have remained ignorant in the gloomy pit; all the varied aspects of the globe, towns, plains, mountains, rivers, lakes, gulfs, and seas would pass, panorama-like, before her eyes.

In that part of Scotland lying between Edinburgh and Glasgow, nature would seem to have collected and set forth specimens of every one of these terrestrial beauties. As to the heavens, they would be spread abroad as over the whole earth, with their changeful clouds, serene or veiled moon, their radiant sun, and clustering stars. The expedition had been planned so as to combine a view of all these things.

Simon and Madge would have been glad to go with Nell; but they never left their cottage willingly, and could not make up their minds to quit their subterranean home for a single day.

James Starr went as an observer and philosopher, curious to note, from a psychological point of view, the novel impressions made upon Nell; perhaps also with some hope of detecting a clue to the mysterious events connected with her childhood. Harry, with a little trepidation, asked himself whether it was not possible that this rapid initiation into the things of the exterior world would change the maiden he had known and loved hitherto into quite a different girl. As for Jack Ryan, he was as joyous as a lark rising in the first beams of the sun. He only trusted that his gayety would prove contagious, and enliven his traveling companions, thus rewarding them for letting him join them. Nell was pensive and silent.

James Starr had decided, very sensibly, to set off in the evening. It would be very much better for the girl to pass gradually from the darkness of night to the full light of day; and that would in this way be managed, since between midnight and noon she would experience the successive phases of shade and sunshine, to which her sight had to get accustomed.

Just as they left the cottage, Nell took Harry's hand saying, "Harry, is it really necessary for me to leave the mine at all, even for these few days?"

"Yes, it is, Nell," replied the young man. "It is needful for both of us."

"But, Harry," resumed Nell, "ever since you found me, I have been as happy as I can possibly be. You have been teaching me. Why is that not enough? What am I going up there for?"

Harry looked at her in silence. Nell was giving utterance to nearly his own thoughts.

"My child," said James Starr, "I can well understand the hesitation you feel; but it will be good for you to go with us. Those who love you are taking you, and they will bring you back again. Afterwards you will be free, if you wish it, to continue your life in the coal mine, like old Simon, and Madge, and Harry. But at least you ought to be able to compare what you give up with what you choose, then decide freely. Come!"

“Come, dear Nell!” cried Harry.

“Harry, I am willing to follow you,” replied the maiden. At nine o’clock the last train through the tunnel started to convey Nell and her companions to the surface of the earth. Twenty minutes later they alighted on the platform where the branch line to New Aberfoyle joins the railway from Dumbarton to Stirling.

The night was already dark. From the horizon to the zenith, light vapory clouds hurried through the upper air, driven by a refreshing northwesterly breeze. The day had been lovely; the night promised to be so likewise.

On reaching Stirling, Nell and her friends, quitting the train, left the station immediately. Just before them, between high trees, they could see a road which led to the banks of the river Forth.

The first physical impression on the girl was the purity of the air inhaled eagerly by her lungs.

“Breathe it freely, Nell,” said James Starr; “it is fragrant with all the scents of the open country.”

“What is all that smoke passing over our heads?” inquired Nell.

“Those are clouds,” answered Harry, “blown along by the westerly wind.”

“Ah!” said Nell, “how I should like to feel myself carried along in that silent whirl! And what are those shining sparks which glance here and there between rents in the clouds?”

“Those are the stars I have told you about, Nell. So many suns they are, so many centers of worlds like our own, most likely.”

The constellations became more clearly visible as the wind cleared the clouds from the deep blue of the firmament. Nell gazed upon the myriad stars which sparkled overhead. “But how is it,” she said at length, “that if these are suns, my eyes can endure their brightness?”

“My child,” replied James Starr, “they are indeed suns, but suns at an enormous distance. The nearest of these millions of stars, whose rays can reach us, is Vega, that star in Lyra which you observe near the zenith, and that is fifty thousand millions of leagues distant. Its brightness, therefore, cannot affect your vision. But our own sun, which will rise to-morrow, is only distant thirty-eight millions of leagues, and no human eye can gaze fixedly upon that, for it is brighter than the blaze of any furnace. But come, Nell, come!”

They pursued their way, James Starr leading the maiden, Harry walking by her side, while Jack Ryan roamed about like a young dog, impatient of the slow pace of his masters. The road was lonely. Nell kept looking at the great trees, whose branches, waving in the wind, made them seem to her like giants gesticulating wildly. The sound of the breeze in the tree-tops, the deep silence during a lull, the distant line of the horizon, which could be discerned when the road passed over open levels — all these things filled her with new sensations, and left lasting impressions on her mind.

After some time she ceased to ask questions, and her companions respected her silence, not wishing to influence by any words of theirs the girl’s highly sensitive imagination, but preferring to allow ideas to arise spontaneously in her soul.

At about half past eleven o’clock, they gained the banks of the river Forth. There a boat, chartered by James Starr, awaited them. In a few hours it would convey them all to Granton. Nell looked at the clear water which flowed up to her feet, as the waves broke gently on the beach, reflecting the starlight. “Is this a lake?” said she.

“No,” replied Harry, “it is a great river flowing towards the sea, and soon opening so widely as to resemble a gulf. Taste a little of the water in the hollow of your hand, Nell, and you will perceive that it is not sweet like the waters of Lake Malcolm.”

The maiden bent towards the stream, and, raising a little water to her lips, “This is quite salt,” said she.

“Yes, the tide is full; the sea water flows up the river as far as this,” answered Harry.

“Oh, Harry! Harry!” exclaimed the maiden, “what can that red glow on the horizon be? Is it a forest on fire?”

“No, it is the rising moon, Nell.”

“To be sure, that’s the moon,” cried Jack Ryan, “a fine big silver plate, which the spirits of air hand round and round the sky to collect the stars in, like money.”

“Why, Jack,” said the engineer, laughing, “I had no idea you could strike out such bold comparisons!”

“Well, but, Mr. Starr, it is a just comparison. Don’t you see the stars disappear as the moon passes on? so I suppose they drop into it.”

“What you mean to say, Jack, is that the superior brilliancy of the moon eclipses that of stars of the sixth magnitude, therefore they vanish as she approaches.”

“How beautiful all this is!” repeated Nell again and again, with her whole soul in her eyes. “But I thought the moon was round?”

“So she is, when ‘full,’” said James Starr; “that means when she is just opposite to the sun. But to-night the moon is in the last quarter, shorn of her just proportions, and friend Jack’s grand silver plate looks more like a barber’s basin.”

“Oh, Mr. Starr, what a base comparison!” he exclaimed, “I was just going to begin a sonnet to the moon, but your barber’s basin has destroyed all chance of an inspiration.”

Gradually the moon ascended the heavens. Before her light the lingering clouds fled away, while stars still sparkled in the west, beyond the influence of her radiance. Nell gazed in silence on the glorious spectacle. The soft silvery light was pleasant to her eyes, and her little trembling hand expressed to Harry, who clasped it, how deeply she was affected by the scene.

“Let us embark now,” said James Starr. “We have to get to the top of Arthur’s Seat before sunrise.”

The boat was moored to a post on the bank. A boatman awaited them. Nell and her friends took their seats; the sail was spread; it quickly filled before the northwesterly breeze, and they sped on their way.

What a new sensation was this for the maiden! She had been rowed on the waters of Lake Malcolm; but the oar, handled ever so lightly by Harry, always betrayed effort on the part of the oarsman. Now, for the first time, Nell felt herself borne along with a gliding movement, like that of a balloon through the air. The water was smooth as a lake, and Nell reclined in the stern of the boat, enjoying its gentle rocking. Occasionally the effect of the moonlight on the waters was as though the boat sailed across a glittering silver field. Little wavelets rippled along the banks. It was enchanting.

At length Nell was overcome with drowsiness, her eyelids drooped, her head sank on Harry’s shoulder — she slept. Harry, sorry that she should miss any of the beauties of this magnificent night, would have aroused her.

“Let her sleep!” said the engineer. “She will better enjoy the novelties of the day after a couple of hours’ rest.”

At two o’clock in the morning the boat reached Granton pier. Nell awoke. “Have I been asleep?” inquired she.

“No, my child,” said James Starr. “You have been dreaming that you slept, that’s all.”

The night continued clear. The moon, riding in mid-heaven, diffused her rays on all sides. In the little port of Granton lay two or three fishing boats; they rocked gently on the waters of the Firth. The wind fell as the dawn approached. The atmosphere, clear of mists, promised one of those fine autumn days so delicious on the sea coast.

A soft, transparent film of vapor lay along the horizon; the first sunbeam would dissipate it; to the maiden it exhibited that aspect of the sea which seems to blend it with the sky. Her view was now enlarged, without producing the impression of the boundless infinity of ocean.

Harry taking Nell’s hand, they followed James Starr and Jack Ryan as they traversed the deserted streets. To Nell, this suburb of the capital appeared only a collection of gloomy dark houses, just like Coal Town, only that the roof was higher, and gleamed with small lights.

She stepped lightly forward, and easily kept pace with Harry. “Are you not tired, Nell?” asked he, after half an hour’s walking.

“No! my feet seem scarcely to touch the earth,” returned she. “This sky above us seems so high up, I feel as if I could take wing and fly!”

“I say! keep hold of her!” cried Jack Ryan. “Our little Nell is too good to lose. I feel just as you describe though, myself, when I have not left the pit for a long time.”

“It is when we no longer experience the oppressive effect of the vaulted rocky roof above Coal Town,” said James Starr, “that the spacious firmament appears to us like a profound abyss into which we have, as it were, a desire to plunge. Is that what you feel, Nell?”

“Yes, Mr. Starr, it is exactly like that,” said Nell. “It makes me feel giddy.”

“Ah! you will soon get over that, Nell,” said Harry. “You will get used to the outer world, and most likely forget all about our dark coal pit.”

“No, Harry, never!” said Nell, and she put her hand over her eyes, as though she would recall the remembrance of everything she had lately quitted.

Between the silent dwellings of the city, the party passed along Leith Walk, and went round the Calton Hill, where stood, in the light of the gray dawn, the buildings of the Observatory and Nelson’s Monument. By Regent’s

Bridge and the North Bridge they at last reached the lower extremity of the Canongate. The town still lay wrapt in slumber.

Nell pointed to a large building in the center of an open space, asking, “What great confused mass is that?”

“That confused mass, Nell, is the palace of the ancient kings of Scotland; that is Holyrood, where many a sad scene has been enacted! The historian can here invoke many a royal shade; from those of the early Scottish kings to that of the unhappy Mary Stuart, and the French king, Charles X. When day breaks, however, Nell, this palace will not look so very gloomy. Holyrood, with its four embattled towers, is not unlike some handsome country house. But let us pursue our way. There, just above the ancient Abbey of Holyrood, are the superb cliffs called Salisbury Crags. Arthur’s Seat rises above them, and that is where we are going. From the summit of Arthur’s Seat, Nell, your eyes shall behold the sun appear above the horizon seaward.”

They entered the King’s Park, then, gradually ascending they passed across the Queen’s Drive, a splendid carriageway encircling the hill, which we owe to a few lines in one of Sir Walter Scott’s romances.

Arthur’s Seat is in truth only a hill, seven hundred and fifty feet high, which stands alone amid surrounding heights. In less than half an hour, by an easy winding path, James Starr and his party reached the crest of the crouching lion, which, seen from the west, Arthur’s Seat so much resembles. There, all four seated themselves; and James Starr, ever ready with quotations from the great Scottish novelist, simply said, “Listen to what is written by Sir Walter Scott in the eighth chapter of the Heart of Mid-Lothian. ‘If I were to choose a spot from which the rising or setting sun could be seen to the greatest possible advantage, it would be from this neighborhood.’ Now watch, Nell! the sun will soon appear, and for the first time you will contemplate its splendor.”

The maiden turned her eyes eastward. Harry, keeping close beside her, observed her with anxious interest. Would the first beams of day overpower her feelings? All remained quiet, even Jack Ryan. A faint streak of pale rose tinted the light vapors of the horizon. It was the first ray of light attacking the laggards of the night. Beneath the hill lay the silent city, massed confusedly in the twilight of dawn. Here and there lights twinkled among the houses of the old town. Westward rose many hill-tops, soon to be illuminated by tips of fire.

Now the distant horizon of the sea became more plainly visible. The scale of colors fell into the order of the solar. Every instant they increased in intensity, rose color became red, red became fiery, daylight dawned. Nell now glanced towards the city, of which the outlines became more distinct. Lofty monuments, slender steeples emerged from the gloom; a kind of ashy light was spread abroad. At length one solitary ray struck on the maiden’s sight. It was that ray of green which, morning or evening, is reflected upwards from the sea when the horizon is clear.

An instant afterwards, Nell turned, and pointing towards a bright prominent point in the New Town, “Fire!” cried she.

“No, Nell, that is no fire,” said Harry. “The sun has touched with gold the top of Sir Walter Scott’s monument” — and, indeed, the extreme point of the monument blazed like the light of a pharos.

It was day — the sun arose — his disc seemed to glitter as though he indeed emerged from the waters of the sea. Appearing at first very large from the effects of refraction, he contracted as he rose and assumed the perfectly circular form. Soon no eye could endure the dazzling splendor; it was as though the mouth of a furnace was opened through the sky.

Nell closed her eyes, but her eyelids could not exclude the glare, and she pressed her fingers over them. Harry advised her to turn in the opposite direction. “Oh, no,” said she, “my eyes must get used to look at what yours can bear to see!”

Even through her hands Nell perceived a rosy light, which became more white as the sun rose above the horizon. As her sight became accustomed to it, her eyelids were raised, and at length her eyes drank in the light of day.

The good child knelt down, exclaiming, “Oh Lord God! how beautiful is Thy creation!” Then she rose and looked around. At her feet extended the panorama of Edinburgh — the clear, distinct lines of streets in the New Town, and the irregular mass of houses, with their confused network of streets and lanes, which constitutes Auld Reekie, properly so called. Two heights commanded the entire city; Edinburgh Castle, crowning its huge basaltic rock, and the Calton Hill, bearing on its rounded summit, among other monuments, ruins built to represent those of the Parthenon at Athens.

Fine roadways led in all directions from the capital. To the north, the coast of the noble Firth of Forth was indented by a deep bay, in which could be seen the seaport town of Leith, between which and this Modern Athens of the north ran a street, straight as that leading to the Piraeus.

Beyond the wide Firth could be seen the soft outlines of the county of Fife, while beneath the spectator stretched the yellow sands of Portobello and Newhaven.

Nell could not speak. Her lips murmured a word or two indistinctly; she trembled, became giddy, her strength failed her; overcome by the purity of the air and the sublimity of the scene, she sank fainting into Harry’s arms, who, watching her closely, was ready to support her.

The youthful maiden, hitherto entombed in the massive depths of the earth, had now obtained an idea of the universe — of the works both of God and of man. She had looked upon town and country, and beyond these, into the immensity of the sea, the infinity of the heavens.

CHAPTER XV. LOCH LOMOND AND LOCH KATRINE

HARRY bore Nell carefully down the steeps of Arthur’s Seat, and, accompanied by James Starr and Jack Ryan, they reached Lambert’s Hotel. There a good breakfast restored their strength, and they began to make further plans for an excursion to the Highland lakes.

Nell was now refreshed, and able to look boldly forth into the sunshine, while her lungs with ease inhaled the free and healthful air. Her eyes learned gladly to know the harmonious varieties of color as they rested on the green trees, the azure skies, and all the endless shades of lovely flowers and plants.

The railway train, which they entered at the Waverley Station, conveyed Nell and her friends to Glasgow. There, from the new bridge across the Clyde, they watched the curious sea-like movement of the river. After a night’s rest at Comrie’s Royal Hotel, they betook themselves to the terminus of the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway, from whence a train would rapidly carry them, by way of Dumbarton and Balloch, to the southern extremity of Loch Lomond.

“Now for the land of Rob Roy and Fergus MacIvor! — the scenery immortalized by the poetical descriptions of Walter Scott,” exclaimed James Starr. “You don’t know this country, Jack?”

“Only by its songs, Mr. Starr,” replied Jack; “and judging by those, it must be grand.”

“So it is, so it is!” cried the engineer, “and our dear Nell shall see it to the best advantage.”

A steamboat, the SINCLAIR by name, awaited tourists about to make the excursion to the lakes. Nell and her companions went on board. The day had begun in brilliant sunshine, free from the British fogs which so often veil the skies.

The passengers were determined to lose none of the beauties of nature to be displayed during the thirty miles’ voyage. Nell, seated between James Starr and Harry, drank in with every faculty the magnificent poetry with which lovely Scottish scenery is fraught. Numerous small isles and islets soon appeared, as though thickly sown on the bosom of the lake. The SINCLAIR steamed her way among them, while between them glimpses could be had of quiet valleys, or wild rocky gorges on the mainland.

“Nell,” said James Starr, “every island here has its legend, perhaps its song, as well as the mountains which overshadow the lake. One may, without much exaggeration, say that the history of this country is written in gigantic characters of mountains and islands.”

Nell listened, but these fighting stories made her sad. Why all that bloodshed on plains which to her seemed enormous, and where surely there must have been room for everybody?

The shores of the lake form a little harbor at Luss. Nell could for a moment catch sight of the old tower of its ancient castle. Then, the SINCLAIR turning northward, the tourists gazed upon Ben Lomond, towering nearly 3,000 feet above the level of the lake.

“Oh, what a noble mountain!” cried Nell; “what a view there must be from the top!”

“Yes, Nell,” answered James Starr; “see how haughtily its peak rises from amidst the thicket of oaks, birches, and heather, which clothe the lower portion of the mountain! From thence one may see two-thirds of old Caledonia. This eastern side of the lake was the special abode of the clan McGregor. At no great distance, the struggles of the Jacobites and Hanoverians repeatedly dyed with blood these lonely glens. Over these scenes shines the pale moon, called in old ballads ‘Macfarlane’s lantern.’ Among these rocks still echo the immortal names of Rob Roy and McGregor Campbell.”

As the SINCLAIR advanced along the base of the mountain, the country became more and more abrupt in character. Trees were only scattered here and there; among them were the willows, slender wands of which were formerly used for hanging persons of low degree.

“To economize hemp,” remarked James Starr.

The lake narrowed very much as it stretched northwards.

The steamer passed a few more islets, Inveruglas, Eilad-whow, where stand some ruins of a stronghold of the clan MacFarlane. At length the head of the loch was reached, and the SINCLAIR stopped at Inversnaid.

Leaving Loch Arklet on the left, a steep ascent led to the Inn of Stronachlacar, on the banks of Loch Katrine.

There, at the end of a light pier, floated a small steamboat, named, as a matter of course, the Rob Roy. The travelers immediately went on board; it was about to start. Loch Katrine is only ten miles in length; its width never exceeds two miles. The hills nearest it are full of a character peculiar to themselves.

“Here we are on this famous lake,” said James Starr. “It has been compared to an eel on account of its length and windings: and justly so. They say that it never freezes. I know nothing about that, but what we want to think of is, that here are the scenes of the adventures in the Lady of the Lake. I believe, if friend Jack looked about him carefully, he might see, still gliding over the surface of the water, the shade of the slender form of sweet Ellen Douglas.”

“To be sure, Mr. Starr,” replied Jack; “why should I not? I may just as well see that pretty girl on the waters of Loch Katrine, as those ugly ghosts on Loch Malcolm in the coal pit.”

It was by this time three o’clock in the afternoon. The less hilly shores of Loch Katrine westward extended like a picture framed between Ben An and Ben Venue. At the distance of half a mile was the entrance to the narrow bay, where was the landing-place for our tourists, who meant to return to Stirling by Callander.

Nell appeared completely worn out by the continued excitement of the day. A faint ejaculation was all she was able to utter in token of admiration as new objects of wonder or beauty met her gaze. She required some hours of rest, were it but to impress lastingly the recollection of all she had seen.

Her hand rested in Harry’s, and, looking earnestly at her, he said, “Nell, dear Nell, we shall soon be home again in the gloomy region of the coal mine. Shall you not pine for what you have seen during these few hours spent in the glorious light of day?”

“No, Harry,” replied the girl; “I shall like to think about it, but I am glad to go back with you to our dear old home.”

“Nell!” said Harry, vainly attempting to steady his voice, “are you willing to be bound to me by the most sacred tie? Could you marry me, Nell?”

“Yes, Harry, I could, if you are sure that I am able to make you happy,” answered the maiden, raising her innocent eyes to his.

Scarcely had she pronounced these words when an unaccountable phenomenon took place. The Rob Roy, still half a mile from land, experienced a violent shock. She suddenly grounded. No efforts of the engine could move her.

The cause of this accident was simply that Loch Katrine was all at once emptied, as though an enormous fissure had opened in its bed. In a few seconds it had the appearance of a sea beach at low water. Nearly the whole of its contents had vanished into the bosom of the earth.

“My friends!” exclaimed James Starr, as the cause of this marvel became suddenly clear to him, “God help New Aberfoyle!”

CHAPTER XVI. A FINAL THREAT

ON that day, in the colliery of New Aberfoyle, work was going on in the usual regular way. In the distance could be heard the crash of great charges of dynamite, by which the carboniferous rocks were blasted. Here masses of coal were loosened by pick-ax and crowbar; there the perforating machines, with their harsh grating, bored through the masses of sandstone and schist.

Hollow, cavernous noises resounded on all sides. Draughts of air rushed along the ventilating galleries, and the wooden swing-doors slammed beneath their violent gusts. In the lower tunnels, trains of trucks kept passing along at the rate of fifteen miles an hour, while at their approach electric bells warned the workmen to cower down in the refuge places. Lifts went incessantly up and down, worked by powerful engines on the surface of the soil. Coal Town was throughout brilliantly lighted by the electric lamps at full power.

Mining operations were being carried on with the greatest activity; coal was being piled incessantly into the trucks, which went in hundreds to empty themselves into the corves at the bottom of the shaft. While parties of miners who had labored during the night were taking needful rest, the others worked without wasting an hour.

Old Simon Ford and Madge, having finished their dinner, were resting at the door of their cottage. Simon smoked a good pipe of tobacco, and from time to time the old couple spoke of Nell, of their boy, of Mr. Starr, and wondered how they liked their trip to the surface of the earth. Where would they be now? What would they be doing? How could they stay so long away from the mine without feeling homesick?

Just then a terrific roaring noise was heard. It was like the sound of a mighty cataract rushing down into the mine. The old people rose hastily. They perceived at once that the waters of Loch Malcolm were rising. A great wave, unfurling like a billow, swept up the bank and broke against the walls of the cottage. Simon caught his wife in his arms, and carried her to the upper part of their dwelling.

At the same moment, cries arose from all parts of Coal Town, which was threatened by a sudden inundation. The inhabitants fled for safety to the top of the schist rocks bordering the lake; terror spread in all directions; whole families in frantic haste rushed towards the tunnel in order to reach the upper regions of the pit.

It was feared that the sea had burst into the colliery, for its galleries and passages penetrated as far as the Caledonian Canal. In that case the entire excavation, vast as it was, would be completely flooded. Not a single inhabitant of New Aberfoyle would escape death.

But when the foremost fugitives reached the entrance to the tunnel, they encountered Simon Ford, who had quitted his cottage. “Stop, my friends, stop!” shouted the old man; “if our town is to be overwhelmed, the floods will rush faster than you can; no one can possibly escape. But see! the waters are rising no further! it appears to me the danger is over.”

“And our comrades at the far end of the works — what about them?” cried some of the miners.

“There is nothing to fear for them,” replied Simon; “they are working on a higher level than the bed of the loch.”

It was soon evident that the old man was in the right. The sudden influx of water had rushed to the very lowest bed of the vast mine, and its only ultimate effect was to raise the level of Loch Malcolm a few feet. Coal Town was uninjured, and it was reasonable to hope that no one had perished in the flood of water which had descended to the depths of the mine never yet penetrated by the workmen.

Simon and his men could not decide whether this inundation was owing to the overflow of a subterranean sheet of water penetrating fissures in the solid rock, or to some underground torrent breaking through its worn bed, and precipitating itself to the lowest level of the mine. But that very same evening they knew what to think about it, for the local papers published an account of the marvelous phenomenon which Loch Katrine had exhibited.

The surprising news was soon after confirmed by the four travelers, who, returning with all possible speed to the cottage, learned with extreme satisfaction that no serious damage was done in New Aberfoyle.

The bed of Loch Katrine had fairly given way. The waters had suddenly broken through by an enormous fissure into the mine beneath. Of Sir Walter Scott's favorite loch there was not left enough to wet the pretty foot of the Lady of the Lake; all that remained was a pond of a few acres at the further extremity.

This singular event made a profound sensation in the country. It was a thing unheard of that a lake should in the space of a few minutes empty itself, and disappear into the bowels of the earth. There was nothing for it but to erase Loch Katrine from the map of Scotland until (by public subscription) it could be refilled, care being of course taken, in the first place, to stop the rent up tight. This catastrophe would have been the death of Sir Walter Scott, had he still been in the world.

The accident was explicable when it was ascertained that, between the bed of the lake and the vast cavity beneath, the geological strata had become reduced to a thin layer, incapable of longer sustaining the weight of water.

Now, although to most people this event seemed plainly due to natural causes, yet to James Starr and his friends, Simon and Harry Ford, the question constantly recurred, was it not rather to be attributed to malevolence? Uneasy suspicions continually harassed their minds. Was their evil genius about to renew his persecution of those who ventured to work this rich mine?

At the cottage, some days later, James Starr thus discussed the matter with the old man and his son: “Well, Simon,” said he, “to my thinking we must class this circumstance with the others for which we still seek elucidation, although it is no doubt possible to explain it by natural causes.”

“I am quite of your mind, Mr. James,” replied Simon, “but take my advice, and say nothing about it; let us make all researches ourselves.”

“Oh, I know the result of such research beforehand!” cried the engineer.

“And what will it be, then?”

“We shall find proofs of malevolence, but not the malefactor.”

“But he exists! he is there! Where can he lie concealed? Is it possible to conceive that the most depraved human being could, single-handed, carry out an idea so infernal as that of bursting through the bed of a lake? I believe I shall end by thinking, like Jack Ryan, that the evil demon of the mine revenges himself on us for having invaded his domain.”

Nell was allowed to hear as little as possible of these discussions. Indeed, she showed no desire to enter into them, although it was very evident that she shared in the anxieties of her adopted parents. The melancholy in her countenance bore witness to much mental agitation.

It was at length resolved that James Starr, together with Simon and Harry, should return to the scene of the disaster, and endeavor to satisfy themselves as to the cause of it. They mentioned their project to no one. To those unacquainted with the group of facts on which it was based, the opinion of Starr and his friends could not fail to appear wholly inadmissible.

A few days later, the three friends proceeded in a small boat to examine the natural pillars on which had rested the solid earth forming the basin of Loch Katrine. They discovered that they had been right in suspecting that the massive columns had been undermined by blasting. The blackened traces of explosion were to be seen, the waters having subsided below the level of these mysterious operations Thus the fall of a portion of the vast vaulted dome was proved to have been premeditated by man, and by man's hand had it been effected.

“It is impossible to doubt it,” said James Starr; “and who can say what might not have happened had the sea, instead of a little loch, been let in upon us?”

“You may well say that,” cried the old overman, with a feeling of pride in his beloved mine; “for nothing less than a sea would have drowned our Aberfoyle. But, once more, what possible interest could any human being have in the destruction of our works?”

“It is quite incomprehensible,” replied James Starr. “This case is something perfectly unlike that of a band of common criminals, who, concealing themselves in dens and caves, go forth to rob and pillage the surrounding country. The evil deeds of such men would certainly, in the course of three years have betrayed their existence and lurking-places. Neither can it be, as I sometimes used to think, that smugglers or coiners carried on their illegal practices in some distant and unknown corner of these prodigious caverns, and were consequently anxious to drive us out of them. But no one coins false money or obtains contraband goods only to conceal them!

“Yet it is clear that an implacable enemy has sworn the ruin of New Aberfoyle, and that some interest urges him to seek in every possible way to wreak his hatred upon us. He appears to be too weak to act openly, and lays his schemes in secret; but displays such intelligence as to render him a most formidable foe.

“My friends, he must understand better than we do the secrets of our domain, since he has all this time eluded our vigilance. He must be a man experienced in mining, skilled beyond the most skillful — that’s certain, Simon! We have proof enough of that.

“Let me see! Have you never had a personal enemy, to whom your suspicions might point? Think well! There is such a thing as hatred which time never softens. Go back to recollections of your earliest days. What befalls us appears the work of a stern and patient will, and to explain it demands every effort of thought and memory.”

Simon did not answer immediately — his mind evidently engaged in a close and candid survey of his past life. Presently, raising his head, “No,” said he; “no! Heaven be my witness, neither Madge nor I have ever injured anybody. We cannot believe that we have a single enemy in the world.”

“Ah! if Nell would only speak!” cried the engineer.

“Mr. Starr — and you, father,” said Harry, “I do beg of you to keep silence on this matter, and not to question my poor Nell. I know she is very anxious and uneasy; and I feel positive that some great secret painfully oppresses her heart. Either she knows nothing it would be of any use for us to hear, or she considers it her duty to be silent. It is impossible to doubt her affection for us — for all of us. If at a future time she informs me of what she has hitherto concealed from us, you shall know about it immediately.”

“So be it, then, Harry,” answered the engineer; “and yet I must say Nell’s silence, if she knows anything, is to me perfectly inexplicable.”

Harry would have continued her defense; but the engineer stopped him, saying, “All right, Harry; we promise to say no more about it to your future wife.”

“With my father’s consent she shall be my wife without further delay.”

“My boy,” said old Simon, “your marriage shall take place this very day month. Mr. Starr, will you undertake the part of Nell’s father?”

“You may reckon upon me for that, Simon,” answered the engineer.

They then returned to the cottage, but said not a word of the result of their examinations in the mine, so that to the rest of its inhabitants, the bursting in of the vaulted roof of the caverns continued to be regarded as a mere accident. There was but a loch the less in Scotland.

Nell gradually resumed her customary duties, and Harry made good use of her little visit to the upper air, in the instructions he gave her. She enjoyed the recollections of life above ground, yet without regretting it. The somber region she had loved as a child, and in which her wedded life would be spent, was as dear to her as ever.

The approaching marriage created great excitement in New Aberfoyle. Good wishes poured in on all sides, and foremost among them were Jack Ryan's. He was detected busily practicing his best songs in preparation for the great day, which was to be celebrated by the whole population of Coal Town.

During the month preceding the wedding-day, there were more accidents occurring in New Aberfoyle than had ever been known in the place. One would have thought the approaching union of Harry and Nell actually provoked one catastrophe after another. These misfortunes happened chiefly at the further and lowest extremity of the works, and the cause of them was always in some way mysterious.

Thus, for instance, the wood-work of a distant gallery was discovered to be in flames, which were extinguished by Harry and his companions at the risk of their lives, by employing engines filled with water and carbonic acid, always kept ready in case of necessity. The lamp used by the incendiary was found; but no clew whatever as to who he could be.

Another time an inundation took place in consequence of the stanchions of a water-tank giving way; and Mr. Starr ascertained beyond a doubt that these supports had first of all been partially sawn through. Harry, who had been overseeing the works near the place at the time, was buried in the falling rubbish, and narrowly escaped death.

A few days afterwards, on the steam tramway, a train of trucks, which Harry was passing along, met with an obstacle on the rails, and was overturned. It was then discovered that a beam had been laid across the line.

In short, events of this description became so numerous that the miners were seized with a kind of panic, and it required all the influence of their chiefs to keep them on the works.

“You would think that there was a whole band of these ruffians,” Simon kept saying, “and we can’t lay hands on a single one of them.”

Search was made in all directions. The county police were on the alert night and day, yet discovered nothing. The evil intentions seeming specially designed to injure Harry. Starr forbade him to venture alone beyond the ordinary limits of the works.

They were equally careful of Nell, although, at Harry’s entreaty, these malicious attempts to do harm were concealed from her, because they might remind her painfully of former times. Simon and Madge watched over her by day and by night with a sort of stern solicitude. The poor child yielded to their wishes, without a remark or a complaint. Did she perceive that they acted with a view to her interest? Probably she did. And on her part, she seemed to watch over others, and was never easy unless all whom she loved were together in the cottage.

When Harry came home in the evening, she could not restrain expressions of child-like joy, very unlike her usual manner, which was rather reserved than demonstrative. As soon as day broke, she was astir before anyone else, and her constant uneasiness lasted all day until the hour of return home from work.

Harry became very anxious that their marriage should take place. He thought that, when the irrevocable step was taken, malevolence would be disarmed, and that Nell would never feel safe until she was his wife. James Starr, Simon, and Madge, were all of the same opinion, and everyone counted the intervening days, for everyone suffered from the most uncomfortable forebodings.

It was perfectly evident that nothing relating to Nell was indifferent to this hidden foe, whom it was impossible to meet or to avoid. Therefore it seemed quite possible that the solemn act of her marriage with Harry might be the occasion of some new and dreadful outbreak of his hatred.

One morning, a week before the day appointed for the ceremony, Nell, rising early, went out of the cottage before anyone else. No sooner had she crossed the threshold than a cry of indescribable anguish escaped her lips.

Her voice was heard throughout the dwelling; in a moment, Madge, Harry, and Simon were at her side. Nell was pale as death, her countenance agitated, her features expressing the utmost horror. Unable to speak, her eyes were riveted on the door of the cottage, which she had just opened.

With rigid fingers she pointed to the following words traced upon it during the night: “Simon Ford, you have robbed me of the last vein in our old pit. Harry, your son, has robbed me of Nell. Woe betide you! Woe betide you all! Woe betide New Aberfoyle! — SILFAX.”

“Silfax!” exclaimed Simon and Madge together.

“Who is this man?” demanded Harry, looking alternately at his father and at the maiden.

“Silfax!” repeated Nell in tones of despair, “Silfax!” — and, murmuring this name, her whole frame shuddering with fear and agitation, she was borne away to her chamber by old Madge.

James Starr, hastening to the spot, read the threatening sentences again and again.

“The hand which traced these lines,” said he at length, “is the same which wrote me the letter contradicting yours, Simon. The man calls himself Silfax. I see by your troubled manner that you know him. Who is this Silfax?”

CHAPTER XVII. THE “MONK”

THIS name revealed everything to the old overman. It was that of the last “monk” of the Dochart pit.

In former days, before the invention of the safety-lamp, Simon had known this fierce man, whose business it was to go daily, at the risk of his life, to produce partial explosions of fire-damp in the passages. He used to see this strange solitary being, prowling about the mine, always accompanied by a monstrous owl, which he called Harfang, who assisted him in his perilous occupation, by soaring with a lighted match to places Silfax was unable to reach.

One day this old man disappeared, and at the same time also, a little orphan girl born in the mine, who had no relation but himself, her great-grandfather. It was perfectly evident now that this child was Nell. During the fifteen years, up to the time when she was saved by Harry, they must have lived in some secret abyss of the mine.

The old overman, full of mingled compassion and anger, made known to the engineer and Harry all that the name of Silfax had revealed to him. It explained the whole mystery. Silfax was the mysterious being so long vainly sought for in the depths of New Aberfoyle.

“So you knew him, Simon?” demanded Mr. Starr.

“Yes, that I did,” replied the overman. “The Harfang man, we used to call him. Why, he was old then! He must be fifteen or twenty years older than I am. A wild, savage sort of fellow, who held aloof from everyone and was known to fear nothing — neither fire nor water. It was his own fancy to follow the trade of ‘monk,’ which few would have liked. The constant danger of the business had unsettled his brain. He was prodigiously strong, and he knew the mine as no one else — at any rate, as well as I did. He lived on a small allowance. In faith, I believed him dead years ago.”

“But,” resumed James Starr, “what does he mean by those words, ‘You have robbed me of the last vein of our old mine’?”

“Ah! there it is,” replied Simon; “for a long time it had been a fancy of his — I told you his mind was deranged — that he had a right to the mine of Aberfoyle; so he became more and more savage in temper the deeper the Dochart pit — his pit! — was worked out. It just seemed as if it was his own body that suffered from every blow of the pickax. You must remember that, Madge?”

“Ay, that I do, Simon,” replied she.

“I can recollect all this,” resumed Simon, “since I have seen the name of Silfax on the door. But I tell you, I thought the man was dead, and never imagined that the spiteful being we have so long sought for could be the old fireman of the Dochart pit.”

“Well, now, then,” said Starr, “it is all quite plain. Chance made known to Silfax the new vein of coal. With the egotism of madness, he believed himself the owner of a treasure he must conceal and defend. Living in the mine, and wandering about day and night, he perceived that you had discovered the secret, and had written in all haste to beg me to come. Hence the letter contradicting yours; hence, after my arrival, all the accidents that occurred, such as the block of stone thrown at Harry, the broken ladder at the Yarrow shaft, the obstruction of the openings into the wall of the new cutting; hence, in short, our imprisonment, and then our deliverance, brought about by the kind assistance of Nell, who acted of course without the knowledge of this man Silfax, and contrary to his intentions.”

“You describe everything exactly as it must have happened, Mr. Starr,” returned old Simon. “The old ‘Monk’ is mad enough now, at any rate!”

“All the better,” quoth Madge.

“I don’t know that,” said Starr, shaking his head; “it is a terrible sort of madness this.”

“Ah! now I understand that the very thought of him must have terrified poor little Nell, and also I see that she could not bear to denounce her grandfather. What a miserable time she must have had of it with the old man!”

“Miserable with a vengeance,” replied Simon, “between that savage and his owl, as savage as himself. Depend upon it, that bird isn’t dead. That was what put our lamp out, and also so nearly cut the rope by which Harry and Nell were suspended.”

“And then, you see,” said Madge, “this news of the marriage of our son with his granddaughter added to his rancor and ill-will.”

“To be sure,” said Simon. “To think that his Nell should marry one of the robbers of his own coal mine would just drive him wild altogether.”

“He will have to make up his mind to it, however,” cried Harry. “Mad as he is, we shall manage to convince him that Nell is better off with us here than ever she was in the caverns of the pit. I am sure, Mr. Starr, if we could only catch him, we should be able to make him listen to reason.”

“My poor Harry! there is no reasoning with a madman,” replied the engineer. “Of course it is better to know your enemy than not; but you must not fancy all is right because we have found out who he is. We must be on our guard, my friends; and to begin with, Harry, you positively must question Nell. She will perceive that her silence is no longer reasonable. Even for her grandfather’s own interest, she ought to speak now. For his own sake, as well as for ours, these insane plots must be put a stop to.”

“I feel sure, Mr. Starr,” answered Harry, “that Nell will of herself propose to tell you what she knows. You see it was from a sense of duty that she has been silent hitherto. My mother was very right to take her to her room just now. She much needed time to recover her spirits; but now I will go for her.”

“You need not do so, Harry,” said the maiden in a clear and firm voice, as she entered at that moment the room in which they were. Nell was very pale; traces of tears were in her eyes; but her whole manner showed that she had nerved herself to act as her loyal heart dictated as her duty.

“Nell!” cried Harry, springing towards her.

The girl arrested her lover by a gesture, and continued, “Your father and mother, and you, Harry, must now know all. And you too, Mr. Starr, must remain ignorant of nothing that concerns the child you have received, and whom Harry — unfortunately for him, alas! — drew from the abyss.”

“Oh, Nell! what are you saying?” cried Harry.

“Allow her to speak,” said James Starr in a decided tone.

“I am the granddaughter of old Silfax,” resumed Nell. “I never knew a mother till the day I came here,” added she, looking at Madge.

“Blessed be that day, my daughter!” said the old woman.

“I knew no father till I saw Simon Ford,” continued Nell; “nor friend till the day when Harry’s hand touched mine. Alone with my grandfather I have lived during fifteen years in the remote and most solitary depths of the mine. I say WITH my grandfather, but I can scarcely use the expression, for I seldom saw him. When he disappeared from Old Aberfoyle, he concealed himself in caverns known only to himself. In his way he was kind to me, dreadful as he was; he fed me with whatever he could procure from outside the mine; but I can dimly recollect that in my earliest years I was the nursling of a goat, the death of which was a bitter grief to me. My grandfather, seeing my distress, brought me another animal — a dog he said it was. But, unluckily, this dog was lively, and barked. Grandfather did not like anything cheerful. He had a horror of noise, and had taught me to be silent; the dog he could not teach to be quiet, so the poor animal very soon disappeared. My grandfather’s companion was a ferocious bird, Harfang, of which, at first, I had a perfect horror; but this creature, in spite of my dislike to it, took such a strong affection for me, that I could not help returning it. It even obeyed me better than its master, which used to make me quite uneasy, for my grandfather was jealous. Harfang and I did not dare to let him see us much together; we both knew it would be dangerous. But I am talking too much about myself: the great thing is about you.”

“No, my child,” said James Starr, “tell us everything that comes to your mind.”

“My grandfather,” continued Nell, “always regarded your abode in the mine with a very evil eye — not that there was any lack of space. His chosen refuge was far — very far from you. But he could not bear to feel that you were there. If I asked any questions about the people up above us, his face grew dark, he gave no answer, and continued quite silent for a long time afterwards. But when he perceived that, not content with the old domain, you seemed to think of encroaching upon his, then indeed his anger burst forth. He swore that, were you to succeed in reaching the new mine, you should assuredly perish. Notwithstanding his great age, his strength is astonishing, and his threats used to make me tremble."

"Go on, Nell, my child," said Simon to the girl, who paused as though to collect her thoughts.

"On the occasion of your first attempt," resumed Nell, "as soon as my grandfather saw that you were fairly inside the gallery leading to New Aberfoyle, he stopped up the opening, and turned it into a prison for you. I only knew you as shadows dimly seen in the gloom of the pit, but I could not endure the idea that you would die of hunger in these horrid places; and so, at the risk of being detected, I succeeded in obtaining bread and water for you during some days. I should have liked to help you to escape, but it was so difficult to avoid the vigilance of my grandfather. You were about to die. Then arrived Jack Ryan and the others. By the providence of God I met with them, and instantly guided them to where you were. When my grandfather discovered what I had done, his rage against me was terrible. I expected death at his hands. After that my life became insupportable to me. My grandfather completely lost his senses. He proclaimed himself King of Darkness and Flame; and when he heard your tools at work on coal-beds which he considered entirely his own, he became furious and beat me cruelly. I would have fled from him, but it was impossible, so narrowly did he watch me. At last, in a fit of ungovernable fury, he threw me down into the abyss where you found me, and disappeared, vainly calling on Harfang, which faithfully stayed by me, to follow him. I know not how long I remained there, but I felt I was at the point of death when you, my Harry, came and saved me. But now you all see that the grandchild of old Silfax can never be the wife of Harry Ford, because it would be certain death to you all!"

"Nell!" cried Harry.

"No," continued the maiden, "my resolution is taken. By one means only can your ruin be averted; I must return to my grandfather. He threatens to destroy the whole of New Aberfoyle. His is a soul incapable of mercy or forgiveness, and no mortal can say to what horrid deed the spirit of revenge will lead him. My duty is clear; I should be the most despicable creature on earth did I hesitate to perform it. Farewell! I thank you all heartily. You only have taught me what happiness is. Whatever may befall, believe that my whole heart remains with you."

At these words, Simon, Madge, and Harry started up in an agony of grief, exclaiming in tones of despair, "What, Nell! is it possible you would leave us?"

James Starr put them all aside with an air of authority, and, going straight up to Nell, he took both her hands in his, saying quietly, "Very right, my child; you have said exactly what you ought to say; and now listen to what we have to say in reply. We shall not let you go away; if necessary, we shall keep you by force. Do you think we could be so base as to accept of your generous proposal? These threats of Silfax are formidable — no doubt about it! But, after all, a man is but a man, and we can take precautions. You will tell us, will you not, even for his own sake, all you can about his habits and his lurking-places? All we want to do is to put it out of his power to do harm, and perhaps bring him to reason."

“You want to do what is quite impossible,” said Nell. “My grandfather is everywhere and nowhere. I have never seen his retreats. I have never seen him sleep. If he meant to conceal himself, he used to leave me alone, and vanish. When I took my resolution, Mr. Starr, I was aware of everything you could say against it. Believe me, there is but one way to render Silfax powerless, and that will be by my return to him. Invisible himself, he sees everything that goes on. Just think whether it is likely he could discover your very thoughts and intentions, from that time when the letter was written to Mr. Starr, up to now that my marriage with Harry has been arranged, if he did not possess the extraordinary faculty of knowing everything. As far as I am able to judge, my grandfather, in his very insanity, is a man of most powerful mind. He formerly used to talk to me on very lofty subjects. He taught me the existence of God, and never deceived me but on one point, which was — that he made me believe that all men were base and perfidious, because he wished to inspire me with his own hatred of all the human race. When Harry brought me to the cottage, you thought I was simply ignorant of mankind, but, far beyond that, I was in mortal fear of you all. Ah, forgive me! I assure you, for many days I believed myself in the power of wicked wretches, and I longed to escape. You, Madge, first led me to perceive the truth, not by anything you said, but by the sight of your daily life, for I saw that your husband and son loved and respected you! Then all these good and happy workmen, who so revere and trust Mr. Starr, I used to think they were slaves; and when, for the first time, I saw the whole population of Aberfoyle come to church and kneel down to pray to God, and praise Him for His infinite goodness, I said to myself, ‘My grandfather has deceived me.’ But now, enlightened by all you have taught me, I am inclined to think he himself is deceived. I mean to return to the secret passages I formerly frequented with him. He is certain to be on the watch. I will call to him; he will hear me, and who knows but that, by returning to him, I may be able to bring him to the knowledge of the truth?”

The maiden spoke without interruption, for all felt that it was good for her to open her whole heart to her friends.

But when, exhausted by emotion, and with eyes full of tears, she ceased speaking, Harry turned to old Madge and said, “Mother, what should you think of the man who could forsake the noble girl whose words you have been listening to?”

“I should think he was a base coward,” said Madge, “and, were he my son, I should renounce and curse him.”

“Nell, do you hear what our mother says?” resumed Harry. “Wherever you go I will follow you. If you persist in leaving us, we will go away together.”

“Harry! Harry!” cried Nell.

Overcome by her feelings, the girl’s lips blanched, and she sank into the arms of Madge, who begged she might be left alone with her.

CHAPTER XVIII. NELL’S WEDDING

IT was agreed that the inhabitants of the cottage must keep more on their guard than ever. The threats of old Silfax were too serious to be disregarded. It was only too possible that he possessed some terrible means by which the whole of Aberfoyle might be annihilated.

Armed sentinels were posted at the various entrances to the mine, with orders to keep strict watch day and night. Any stranger entering the mine was brought before James Starr, that he might give an account of himself. There being no fear of treason among the inhabitants of Coal Town, the threatened danger to the subterranean colony was made known to them. Nell was informed of all the precautions taken, and became more tranquil, although she was not free from uneasiness. Harry’s determination to follow her wherever she went compelled her to promise not to escape from her friends.

During the week preceding the wedding, no accident whatever occurred in Aberfoyle. The system of watching was carefully maintained, but the miners began to recover from the panic, which had seriously interrupted the work of excavation. James Starr continued to look out for Silfax. The old man having vindictively declared that Nell should never marry Simon’s son, it was natural to suppose that he would not hesitate to commit any violent deed which would hinder their union.

The examination of the mine was carried on minutely. Every passage and gallery was searched, up to those higher ranges which opened out among the ruins of Dundonald Castle. It was rightly supposed that through this old building Silfax passed out to obtain what was needful for the support of his miserable existence (which he must have done, either by purchasing or thieving).

As to the “fire-maidens,” James Starr began to think that appearance must have been produced by some jet of fire-damp gas which, issuing from that part of the pit, could be lighted by Silfax. He was not far wrong; but all search for proof of this was fruitless, and the continued strain of anxiety in this perpetual effort to detect a malignant and invisible being rendered the engineer — outwardly calm — an unhappy man.

As the wedding-day approached, his dread of some catastrophe increased, and he could not but speak of it to the old overman, whose uneasiness soon more than equaled his own. At length the day came. Silfax had given no token of existence.

By daybreak the entire population of Coal Town was astir. Work was suspended; overseers and workmen alike desired to do honor to Simon Ford and his son. They all felt they owed a large debt of gratitude to these bold and persevering men, by whose means the mine had been restored to its former prosperity. The ceremony was to take place at eleven o’clock, in St. Giles’s chapel, which stood on the shores of Loch Malcolm.

At the appointed time, Harry left the cottage, supporting his mother on his arm, while Simon led the bride. Following them came Starr, the engineer, composed in manner, but in reality nerved to expect the worst, and Jack Ryan, stepping superb in full Highland piper’s costume. Then came the other mining engineers, the principal people of Coal Town, the friends and comrades of the old overman — every member of this great family of miners forming the population of New Aberfoyle.

In the outer world, the day was one of the hottest of the month of August, peculiarly oppressive in northern countries. The sultry air penetrated the depths of the coal mine, and elevated the temperature. The air which entered through the ventilating shafts, and the great tunnel of Loch Malcolm, was charged with electricity, and the barometer, it was afterwards remarked, had fallen in a remarkable manner. There was, indeed, every indication that a storm might burst forth beneath the rocky vault which formed the roof of the enormous crypt of the very mine itself.

But the inhabitants were not at that moment troubling themselves about the chances of atmospheric disturbance above ground. Everybody, as a matter of course, had put on his best clothes for the occasion. Madge was dressed in the fashion of days gone by, wearing the “toy” and the “rokelay,” or Tartan plaid, of matrons of the olden time, old Simon wore a coat of which Bailie Nicol Jarvie himself would have approved.

Nell had resolved to show nothing of her mental agitation; she forbade her heart to beat, or her inward terrors to betray themselves, and the brave girl appeared before all with a calm and collected aspect. She had declined every ornament of dress, and the very simplicity of her attire added to the charming elegance of her appearance. Her hair was bound with the “snood,” the usual head-dress of Scottish maidens.

All proceeded towards St. Giles’s chapel, which had been handsomely decorated for the occasion.

The electric discs of light which illuminated Coal Town blazed like so many suns. A luminous atmosphere pervaded New Aberfoyle. In the chapel, electric lamps shed a glow over the stained-glass windows, which shone like fiery kaleidoscopes. At the porch of the chapel the minister awaited the arrival of the wedding party.

It approached, after having passed in stately procession along the shore of Loch Malcolm. Then the tones of the organ were heard, and, preceded by the minister, the group advanced into the chapel. The Divine blessing was first invoked on all present. Then Harry and Nell remained alone before the minister, who, holding the sacred book in his hand, proceeded to say, "Harry, will you take Nell to be your wife, and will you promise to love her always?"

"I promise," answered the young man in a firm and steady voice.

"And you, Nell," continued the minister, "will you take Harry to be your husband, and — "

Before he could finish the sentence, a prodigious noise resounded from without. One of the enormous rocks, on which was formed the terrace overhanging the banks of Loch Malcolm, had suddenly given way and opened without explosion, disclosing a profound abyss, into which the waters were now wildly plunging.

In another instant, among the shattered rocks and rushing waves appeared a canoe, which a vigorous arm propelled along the surface of the lake. In the canoe was seen the figure of an old man standing upright. He was clothed in a dark mantle, his hair was dishevelled, a long white beard fell over his breast, and in his hand he bore a lighted Davy safety lamp, the flame being protected by the metallic gauze of the apparatus.

In a loud voice this old man shouted, "The fire-damp is upon you! Woe — woe betide ye all!"

At the same moment the slight smell peculiar to carburetted hydrogen was perceptibly diffused through the atmosphere. And, in truth, the fall of the rock had made a passage of escape for an enormous quantity of explosive gas, accumulated in vast cavities, the openings to which had hitherto been blocked up.

Jets and streams of the fire-damp now rose upward in the vaulted dome; and well did that fierce old man know that the consequence of what he had done would be to render explosive the whole atmosphere of the mine.

James Starr and several others, having hastily quitted the chapel, and perceived the imminence of the danger, now rushed back, crying out in accents of the utmost alarm, “Fly from the mine! Fly instantly from the mine!”

“Now for the fire-damp! Here comes the fire-damp!” yelled the old man, urging his canoe further along the lake.

Harry with his bride, his father and his mother, left the chapel in haste and in terror.

“Fly! fly for your lives!” repeated James Starr. Alas! it was too late to fly! Old Silfax stood there, prepared to fulfill his last dreadful threat — prepared to stop the marriage of Nell and Harry by overwhelming the entire population of the place beneath the ruins of the coal mine.

As he stood ready to accomplish this act of vengeance, his enormous owl, whose white plumage was marked with black spots, was seen hovering directly above his head.

At that moment a man flung himself into the waters of the lake, and swam vigorously towards the canoe.

It was Jack Ryan, fully determined to reach the madman before he could do the dreadful deed of destruction.

Silfax saw him coming. Instantly he smashed the glass of his lamp, and, snatching out the burning wick, waved it in the air.

Silence like death fell upon the astounded multitude. James Starr, in the calmness of despair, marvelled that the inevitable explosion was even for a moment delayed.

Silfax, gazing upwards with wild and contracted features, appeared to become aware that the gas, lighter than the lower atmosphere, was accumulating far up under the dome; and at a sign from him the owl, seizing in its claw the lighted match, soared upwards to the vaulted roof, towards which the madman pointed with outstretched arm.

Another second and New Aberfoyle would be no more.

Suddenly Nell sprang from Harry’s arms, and, with a bright look of inspiration, she ran to the very brink of the waters of the lake. “Harfang! Harfang!” cried she in a clear voice; “here! come to me!”

The faithful bird, surprised, appeared to hesitate in its flight. Presently, recognizing Nell’s voice, it dropped the burning match into the water, and, describing a wide circle, flew downwards, alighting at the maiden’s feet.

Then a terrible cry echoed through the vaulted roofs. It was the last sound uttered by old Silfax.

Just as Jack Ryan laid his hand on the edge of the canoe, the old man, foiled in his purpose of revenge, cast himself headlong into the waters of the lake.

“Save him! oh, save him!” shrieked Nell in a voice of agony. Immediately Harry plunged into the water, and, swimming towards Jack Ryan, he dived repeatedly.

But his efforts were useless. The waters of Loch Malcolm yielded not their prey: they closed forever over Silfax.

CHAPTER XIX. THE LEGEND OF OLD SILFAX

Six months after these events, the marriage, so strangely interrupted, was finally celebrated in St. Giles's chapel, and the young couple, who still wore mourning garments, returned to the cottage. James Starr and Simon Ford, henceforth free from the anxieties which had so long distressed them, joyously presided over the entertainment which followed the ceremony, and prolonged it to the following day.

On this memorable occasion, Jack Ryan, in his favorite character of piper, and in all the glory of full dress, blew up his chanter, and astonished the company by the unheard of achievement of playing, singing, and dancing all at once.

It is needless to say that Harry and Nell were happy. These loving hearts, after the trials they had gone through found in their union the happiness they deserved.

As to Simon Ford, the ex-overman of New Aberfoyle, he began to talk of celebrating his golden wedding, after fifty years of marriage with good old Madge, who liked the idea immensely herself.

"And after that, why not golden wedding number two?"

"You would like a couple of fifties, would you, Mr. Simon?" said Jack Ryan.

"All right, my boy," replied the overman quietly, "I see nothing against it in this fine climate of ours, and living far from the luxury and intemperance of the outer world."

Will the dwellers in Coal Town ever be called to witness this second ceremony? Time will show. Certainly the strange bird of old Silfax seemed destined to attain a wonderful longevity. The Harfang continued to haunt the gloomy recesses of the cave. After the old man’s death, Nell had attempted to keep the owl, but in a very few days he flew away. He evidently disliked human society as much as his master had done, and, besides that, he appeared to have a particular spite against Harry. The jealous bird seemed to remember and hate him for having carried off Nell from the deep abyss, notwithstanding all he could do to prevent him. Still, at long intervals, Nell would see the creature hovering above Loch Malcolm.

Could he possibly be watching for his friend of yore? Did he strive to pierce, with keen eye, the depths which had engulfed his master?

The history of the Harfang became legendary, and furnished Jack Ryan with many a tale and song. Thanks to him, the story of old Silfax and his bird will long be preserved, and handed down to future generations of the Scottish peasantry.

DICK SAND: A CAPTAIN AT FIFTEEN

Trasnlated by Ellen Elizabeth Frewer

This novel was first published in 1878 and deals with the controversial theme of the African slave trade, amongst other issues. It tells the story of Dick Sand, a fifteen year old boy serving on the schooner “Pilgrim” as a sailor. The crew are whale hunters that voyage every year down to New Zealand.

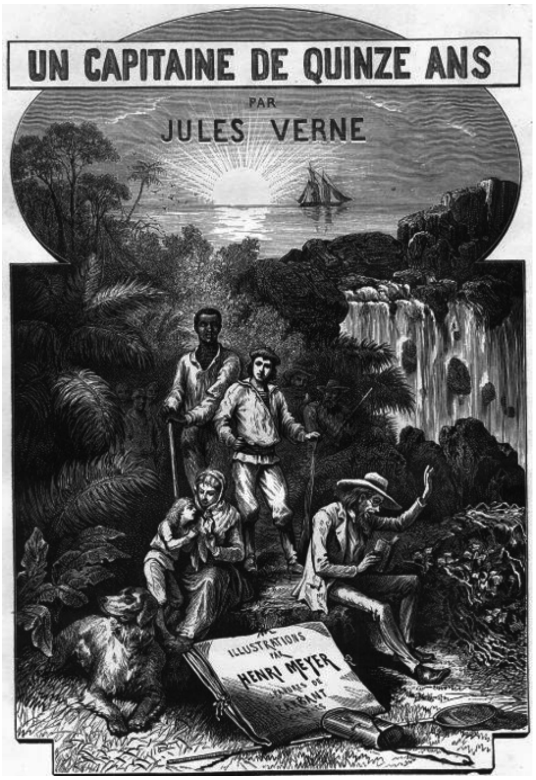
UN CAPITAINE DE QUINZE ANS
PAR
JULES VERNE
ILLUSTRATIONS
PAR
HENRI MEYER

The frontispiece in the first French edition

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PART I

CHAPTER I.

THE “PILGRIM.”

On the 2nd of February, 1873, the “Pilgrim,” a tight little craft of 400 tons burden, lay in lat. 43° 57’, S. and long. 165° 19’, W. She was a schooner, the property of James W. Weldon, a wealthy Californian ship-owner who had fitted her out at San Francisco, expressly for the whale-fisheries in the southern seas.

James Weldon was accustomed every season to send his whalers both to the Arctic regions beyond Behring Straits, and to the Antarctic Ocean below Tasmania and Cape Horn; and the “Pilgrim,” although one of the smallest, was one of the best-going vessels of its class; her sailing-powers were splendid, and her rigging was so adroitly adapted that with a very small crew she might venture without risk within sight of the impenetrable ice-fields of the southern hemisphere: under skilful guidance she could dauntlessly thread her way amongst the drifting ice-bergs that, lessened though they were by perpetual shocks and undermined by warm currents, made their way northwards as far as the parallel of New Zealand or the Cape of Good Hope, to a latitude corresponding to which in the northern hemisphere they are never seen, having already melted away in the depths of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

For several years the command of the “Pilgrim” had been entrusted to Captain Hull, an experienced seaman, and one of the most dexterous harpooners in Weldon’s service. The crew consisted of five sailors and an apprentice. This number, of course, was quite insufficient for the process of whale-fishing, which requires a large contingent both for manning the whale-boats and for cutting up the whales after they are captured; but

Weldon, following the example of other owners, found it more economical to embark at San Francisco only just enough men to work the ship to New Zealand, where, from the promiscuous gathering of seamen of well-nigh every nationality, and of needy emigrants, the captain had no difficulty in engaging as many whalemen as he wanted for the season. This method of hiring men who could be at once discharged when their services were no longer required had proved altogether to be the most profitable and convenient.

The “Pilgrim” had now just completed her annual voyage to the Antarctic circle. It was not, however, with her proper quota of oil-barrels full to the brim, nor yet with an ample cargo of cut and uncut whalebone, that she was thus far on her way back. The time, indeed, for a good haul was past; the repeated and vigourous attacks upon the cetaceans had made them very scarce; the whale known as “the Right whale,” the “Nord-kapper” of the northern fisheries, the “Sulpher-boltone” of the southern, was hardly ever to be seen; and latterly the whalers had had no alternative but to direct their efforts against the Finback or Jubarte, a gigantic mammal, encounter with which is always attended with considerable danger.

So scanty this year had been the supply of whales that Captain Hull had resolved next year to push his way into far more southern latitudes; even, if necessary, to advance to the regions known as Clarie and Adélie Lands, of which the discovery, though claimed by the American navigator Wilkes, belongs by right to the illustrious Frenchman Dumont d’Urville, the commander of the “Astrolabe” and the “Zélee.”

The season had been exceptionally unfortunate for the “Pilgrim.” At the beginning of January, almost in the height of the southern summer, long before the ordinary time for the whalers’ return, Captain Hull had been obliged to abandon his fishing-quarters. His hired contingent, all men of more than doubtful character, had given signs of such insubordination as threatened to end in mutiny; and he had become aware that he must part company with them on the earliest possible opportunity. Accordingly, without delay, the bow of the “Pilgrim” was directed to the northwest, towards New Zealand, which was sighted on the 15th of January, and on reaching Waitemata, the port of Auckland, in the Hauraki Gulf, on the east coast of North Island, the whole of the gang was peremptorily discharged.

The ship’s crew were more than dissatisfied. They were angry. Never before had they returned with so meagre a haul. They ought to have had at least two hundred barrels more. The captain himself experienced all the mortification of an ardent sportsman who for the first time in his life brings home a half-empty bag; and there was a general spirit of animosity against the rascals whose rebellion had so entirely marred the success of the expedition.

Captain Hull did everything in his power to repair the disappointment; he made every effort to engage a fresh gang; but it was too late; every available seaman had long since been carried off to the fisheries. Finding therefore that all hope of making good the deficiency in his cargo must be resigned, he was on the point of leaving Auckland, alone with his crew, when he was met by a request with which he felt himself bound to comply.

It had chanced that James Weldon, on one of those journeys which were necessitated by the nature of his business, had brought with him his wife, his son Jack, a child of five years of age, and a relation of the family who was generally known by the name of Cousin Benedict. Weldon had of course intended that his family should accompany him on his return home to San Francisco; but little Jack was taken so seriously ill, that his father, whose affairs demanded his immediate return, was obliged to leave him behind at Auckland with his wife and Cousin Benedict.

Three months had passed away, little Jack was convalescent, and Mrs. Weldon, weary of her long separation from her husband, was anxious to get home as soon as possible. Her readiest way of reaching San Francisco was to cross to Australia, and thence to take a passage in one of the vessels of the “Golden Age” Company, which run between Melbourne and the Isthmus of Panama: on arriving in Panama she would have to wait the departure of the next American steamer of the line which maintains a regular communication between the Isthmus and California. This route, however, involved many stoppages and changes, such as are always disagreeable and inconvenient for women and children, and Mrs. Weldon was hesitating whether she should encounter the journey, when she heard that her husband’s vessel, the “Pilgrim,” had arrived at Auckland. Hastening to Captain Hull, she begged him to take her with her little boy, Cousin Benedict, and Nan, an old negress who had been her attendant from her childhood, on board the “Pilgrim,” and to convey them to San Francisco direct.

“Was it not over hazardous,” asked the captain, “to venture upon a voyage of between 5000 and 6000 miles in so small a sailing-vessel?”

But Mrs. Weldon urged her request, and Captain Hull, confident in the sea-going qualities of his craft, and anticipating at this season nothing but fair weather on either side of the equator, gave his consent.

In order to provide as far as possible for the comfort of the lady during a voyage that must occupy from forty to fifty days, the captain placed his own cabin at her entire disposal.

Everything promised well for a prosperous voyage. The only hindrance that could be foreseen arose from the circumstance that the “Pilgrim” would have to put in at Valparaiso for the purpose of unlading; but that business once accomplished, she would continue her way along the American coast with the assistance of the land breezes, which ordinarily make the proximity of those shores such agreeable quarters for sailing.

Mrs. Weldon herself had accompanied her husband in so many voyages, that she was quite inured to all the makeshifts of a seafaring life, and was conscious of no misgiving in embarking upon a vessel of such small tonnage. She was a brave, high-spirited woman of about thirty years of age, in the enjoyment of excellent health, and for her the sea had no terrors. Aware that Captain Hull was an experienced man, in whom her husband had the utmost confidence, and knowing that his ship was a substantial craft, registered as one of the best of the American whalers, so far from entertaining any mistrust as to her safety, she only rejoiced in the opportuneness of the chance which seemed to offer her a direct and unbroken route to her destination.

Cousin Benedict, as a matter of course, was to accompany her. He was about fifty; but in spite of his mature age it would have been considered the height of imprudence to allow him to travel anywhere alone. Spare, lanky, with a bony frame, with an enormous cranium, and a profusion of hair, he was one of those amiable, inoffensive *savants* who, having once taken to gold spectacles, appear to have arrived at a settled standard of age, and, however long they live afterwards, seem never to be older than they have ever been.

Claiming a sort of kindredship with all the world, he was universally known, far beyond the pale of his own connexions, by the name of “Cousin

Benedict.” In the ordinary concerns of life nothing would ever have rendered him capable of shifting for himself; of his meals he would never think until they were placed before him; he had the appearance of being utterly insensible to heat or cold; he vegetated rather than lived, and might not inaptly be compared to a tree which, though healthy enough at its core, produces scant foliage and no fruit. His long arms and legs were in the way of himself and everybody else; yet no one could possibly treat him with unkindness. As M. Prudhomme would say, “if only he had been endowed with capability,” he would have rendered a service to any one in the world; but helplessness was his dominant characteristic; helplessness was ingrained into his very nature; yet this very helplessness made him an object of kind consideration rather than of contempt, and Mrs. Weldon looked upon him as a kind of elder brother to her little Jack.

It must not be supposed, however, that Cousin Benedict was either idle or unoccupied. On the contrary, his whole time was devoted to one absorbing passion for natural history. Not that he had any large claim to be regarded properly as a natural historian; he had made no excursions over the whole four districts of zoology, botany, mineralogy, and geology, into which the realms of natural history are commonly divided; indeed, he had no pretensions at all to be either a botanist, a mineralogist, or a geologist; his studies only sufficed to make him a zoologist, and that in a very limited sense. No Cuvier was he; he did not aspire to decompose animal life by analysis, and to recompose it by synthesis; his enthusiasm had not made him at all deeply versed in vertebrata, mollusca, or radiata; in fact, the vertebrata — animals, birds, reptiles, fishes — had had no place in his researches; the mollusca — from the cephalopoda to the bryozia — had had no attractions for him; nor had he consumed the midnight oil in investigating the radiata, the echmodermata, acalephæ, polypi, entozoa, or infusoria.

No; Cousin Benedict’s interest began and ended with the articulata; and it must be owned at once that his studies were very far from embracing all the range of the six classes into which “articulata” are subdivided; viz, the insecta, the mynapoda, the arachnida, the crustacea, the cinhopoda, and the anelides; and he was utterly unable in scientific language to distinguish a worm from a leech, an earwig from a sea-acorn, a spider from a scorpion, a shrimp from a frog-hopper, or a galley-worm from a centipede.

To confess the plain truth, Cousin Benedict was an amateur entomologist, and nothing more.

Entomology, it may be asserted, is a wide science; it embraces the whole division of the articulata; but our friend was an entomologist only in the limited sense of the popular acceptation of the word; that is to say, he was an observer and collector of insects, meaning by “insects” those articulata which have bodies consisting of a number of concentric movable rings, forming three distinct segments, each with a pair of legs, and which are scientifically designated as hexapods.

To this extent was Cousin Benedict an entomologist; and when it is remembered that the class of insecta of which he had grown up to be the enthusiastic student comprises no less than ten [Footnote: These ten orders are (1) the orthoptera, *e.g.* grasshoppers and crickets; (2) the neuroptera, *e.g.* dragon-flies; (3) the hymenoptera, *e.g.* bees, wasps, and ants; (4) the lepidoptera, *e.g.* butterflies and moths; (5) the hemiptera, *e.g.* cicadas and fleas; (6) the coleoptera, *e.g.* cockchafers and glow-worms; (7) the diptera, *e.g.* gnats and flies; (8) the rhipiptera, *e.g.* the stylops; (9) the parasites, *e.g.* the acarus; and (10) the thysanura, *e.g.* the lepisma and podura.] orders, and that of these ten the coleoptera and diptera alone include 30,000 and 60,000 species respectively, it must be confessed that he had an ample field for his most persevering exertions.

Every available hour did he spend in the pursuit of his favourite science: hexapods ruled his thoughts by day and his dreams by night. The number of pins that he carried thick on the collar and sleeves of his coat, down the front of his waistcoat, and on the crown of his hat, defied computation; they were kept in readiness for the capture of specimens that might come in his way, and on his return from a ramble in the country he might be seen literally encased with a covering of insects, transfixed adroitly by scientific rule.

This ruling passion of his had been the inducement that had urged him to accompany Mr. and Mrs. Weldon to New Zealand. It had appeared to him that it was likely to be a promising district, and now having been successful in adding some rare specimens to his collection, he was anxious to get back again to San Francisco, and to assign them their proper places in his extensive cabinet.

Besides, it never occurred to Mrs. Weldon to start without him. To leave him to shift for himself would be sheer cruelty. As a matter of course whenever Mrs. Weldon went on board the “Pilgrim,” Cousin Benedict would go too.

Not that in any emergency assistance of any kind could be expected from him; on the contrary, in the case of difficulty he would be an additional burden; but there was every reason to expect a fair passage and no cause of misgiving of any kind, so the propriety of leaving the amiable entomologist behind was never suggested.

Anxious that she should be no impediment in the way of the due departure of the “Pilgrim” from Waitemata, Mrs. Weldon made her preparations with the utmost haste, discharged the servants which she had temporarily engaged at Auckland, and accompanied by little Jack and the old negress, and followed mechanically by Cousin Benedict, embarked on the 22nd of January on board the schooner.

The amateur, however, kept his eye very scrupulously upon his own special box. Amongst his collection of insects were some very remarkable examples of new staphylins, a species of carnivorous coleoptera with eyes placed above their head; it was a kind supposed to be peculiar to New Caledonia. Another rarity which had been brought under his notice was a venomous spider, known among the Maoris as a “katipo;” its bite was asserted to be very often fatal. As a spider, however, belongs to the order of the arachnida, and is not properly an “insect,” Benedict declined to take any interest in it. Enough for him that he had secured a novelty in his own section of research; the “Staphylin Neo-Zelandus” was not only the gem of his collection, but its pecuniary value baffled ordinary estimate; he insured his box at a fabulous sum, deeming it to be worth far more than all the cargo of oil and whalebone in the “Pilgrim’s” hold.

Captain Hull advanced to meet Mrs. Weldon and her party as they stepped on deck.

“It must be understood, Mrs. Weldon,” he said, courteously raising his hat, “that you take this passage entirely on your own responsibility.”

“Certainly, Captain Hull,” she answered; “but why do you ask?”

“Simply because I have received no orders from Mr. Weldon,” replied the captain.

“But my wish exonerates you,” said Mrs. Weldon.

“Besides,” added Captain Hull, “I am unable to provide you with the accommodation and the comfort that you would have upon a passenger steamer.”

“You know well enough, captain,” remonstrated the lady “that my husband would not hesitate for a moment to trust his wife and child on board the ‘Pilgrim.’”

“Trust, madam! No! no more than I should myself. I repeat that the ‘Pilgrim’ cannot afford you the comfort to which you are accustomed.”

Mrs. Weldon smiled.

“Oh, I am not one of your grumbling travellers. I shall have no complaints to make either of small cramped cabins, or of rough and meagre food.”

She took her son by the hand, and passing on, begged that they might start forthwith.

Orders accordingly were given; sails were trimmed; and after taking the shortest course across the gulf, the “Pilgrim” turned her head towards America.

Three days later strong easterly breezes compelled the schooner to tack to larboard in order to get to windward. The consequence was that by the 2nd of February the captain found himself in such a latitude that he might almost be suspected of intending to round Cape Horn rather than of having a design to coast the western shores of the New Continent.

Still, the sea did not become rough. There was a slight delay, but, on the whole, navigation was perfectly easy.

CHAPTER II.

THE APPRENTICE.

There was no poop upon the “Pilgrim’s” deck, so that Mrs. Weldon had no alternative than to acquiesce in the captain’s proposal that she should occupy his own modest cabin.

Accordingly, here she was installed with Jack and old Nan; and here she took all her meals, in company with the captain and Cousin Benedict.

For Cousin Benedict tolerably comfortable sleeping accommodation had been contrived close at hand, while Captain Hull himself retired to the crew’s quarter, occupying the cabin which properly belonged to the chief mate, but as already indicated, the services of a second officer were quite dispensed with.

All the crew were civil and attentive to the wife of their employer, a master to whom they were faithfully attached. They were all natives of the coast of California, brave and experienced seamen, and united by tastes and habits in a common bond of sympathy. Few as they were in number, their work was never shirked, not simply from the sense of duty, but because they were directly interested in the profits of their undertaking; the success of their labours always told to their own advantage. The present expedition was the fourth that they had taken together; and, as it turned out to be the first in which they had failed to meet with success, it may be imagined that they were full of resentment against the mutinous whalemen who had been the cause of so serious a diminution of their ordinary gains.

The only one on board who was not an American was a man who had been temporarily engaged as cook. His name was Negoro; he was a Portuguese by birth, but spoke English with perfect fluency. The previous cook had deserted the ship at Auckland, and when Negoro, who was out of employment, applied for the place, Captain Hull, only too glad to avoid detention, engaged him at once without inquiry into his antecedents. There was not the slightest fault to be found with the way in which the cook performed his duties, but there was something in his manner, or perhaps, rather in the expression of his countenance, which excited the Captain’s misgivings, and made him regret that he had not taken more pains to investigate the character of one with whom he was now brought into such close contact

Negoro looked about forty years of age. Although he had the appearance of being slightly built, he was muscular; he was of middle height, and seemed to have a robust constitution; his hair was dark, his complexion somewhat swarthy. His manner was taciturn, and although, from occasional remarks that he dropped, it was evident that he had received some education, he was very reserved on the subjects both of his family and of his past life. No one knew where he had come from, and he admitted no one to his confidence as to where he was going, except that he made no secret of his intention to land at Valparaiso. His freedom from sea-sickness demonstrated that this could hardly be his first voyage, but on the other hand his complete ignorance of seamen’s phraseology made it certain that he had never been accustomed to his present occupation. He kept himself aloof as much as possible from the rest of the crew, during the day rarely leaving the great cast-iron stove, which was out of proportion to the measurement of the cramped little kitchen; and at night, as soon as the fire was extinguished, took the earliest opportunity of retiring to his berth and going to sleep.

It has been already stated that the crew of the “Pilgrim” consisted of five seamen and an apprentice. This apprentice was Dick Sands.

Dick was fifteen years old; he was a foundling, his unknown parents having abandoned him at his birth, and he had been brought up in a public charitable institution. He had been called Dick, after the benevolent passer-by who had discovered him when he was but an infant a few hours old, and he had received the surname of Sands as a memorial of the spot where he had been exposed, Sandy Hook, a point at the mouth of the Hudson, where it forms an entrance to the harbour of New York.

As Dick was so young it was most likely he would yet grow a little taller, but it did not seem probable that he would ever exceed middle height, he looked too stoutly and strongly built to grow much. His complexion was dark, but his beaming blue eyes attested, with scarcely room for doubt, his Anglo-Saxon origin, and his countenance betokened energy and intelligence. The profession that he had adopted seemed to have equipped him betimes for fighting the battle of life.

Misquoted often as Virgil’s are the words

> “Audaces fortuna juvat!”
>
> but the true reading is
>
> “Audentes fortuna juvat!”

and, slight as the difference may seem, it is very significant. It is upon the confident rather than the rash, the daring rather than the bold, that Fortune sheds her smiles; the bold man often acts without thinking, whilst the daring always thinks before he acts.

And Dick Sands was truly courageous; he was one of the daring. At fifteen years old, an age at which few boys have laid aside the frivolities of childhood, he had acquired the stability of a man, and the most casual observer could scarcely fail to be attracted by his bright, yet thoughtful countenance. At an early period of his life he had realized all the difficulties of his position, and had made a resolution, from which nothing tempted him to flinch, that he would carve out for himself an honourable and independent career. Lithe and agile in his movements, he was an adept in every kind of athletic exercise; and so marvellous was his success in everything he undertook, that he might almost be supposed to be one of those gifted mortals who have two right hands and two left feet.

Until he was four years old the little orphan had found a home in one of those institutions in America where forsaken children are sure of an asylum, and he was subsequently sent to an industrial school supported by charitable aid, where he learnt reading, writing, and arithmetic. From the days of infancy he had never deviated from the expression of his wish to be a sailor, and accordingly, as soon as he was eight, he was placed as cabin-boy on board one of the ships that navigate the Southern Seas. The officers all took a peculiar interest in him, and he received, in consequence, a thoroughly good grounding in the duties and discipline of a seaman's life. There was no room to doubt that he must ultimately rise to eminence in his profession, for when a child from the very first has been trained in the knowledge that he must gain his bread by the sweat of his brow, it is comparatively rare that he lacks the will to do so.

Whilst he was still acting as cabin-boy on one of those trading-vessels, Dick attracted the notice of Captain Hull, who took a fancy to the lad and introduced him to his employer. Mr. Weldon at once took a lively interest in

Dick’s welfare, and had his education continued in San Francisco, taking care that he was instructed in the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, to which his own family belonged.

Throughout his studies Dick Sands’ favourite subjects were always those which had a reference to his future profession; he mastered the details of the geography of the world; he applied himself diligently to such branches of mathematics as were necessary for the science of navigation; whilst for recreation in his hours of leisure, he would greedily devour every book of adventure in travel that came in his way. Nor did he omit duly to combine the practical with the theoretical; and when he was bound apprentice on board the “Pilgrim,” a vessel not only belonging to his benefactor, but under the command of his kind friend Captain Hull, he congratulated himself most heartily, and felt that the experience he should gain in the southern whale-fisheries could hardly fail to be of service to him in after-life. A first-rate sailor ought to be a first-rate fisherman too.

It was a matter of the greatest pleasure to Dick Sands when he heard to his surprise that Mrs. Weldon was about to become a passenger on board the “Pilgrim.” His devotion to the family of his benefactor was large and genuine. For several years Mrs. Weldon had acted towards him little short of a mother’s part, and for Jack, although he never forgot the difference in their position, he entertained well-nigh a brother’s affection. His friends had the satisfaction of being assured that they had sown the seeds of kindness on a generous soil, for there was no room to doubt that the heart of the orphan boy was overflowing with sincere gratitude. Should the occasion arise, ought he not, he asked, to be ready to sacrifice everything in behalf of those to whom he was indebted not only for his start in life, but for the knowledge of all that was right and holy?

Confiding in the good principles of her protégé, Mrs. Weldon had no hesitation in entrusting her little son to his especial charge. During the frequent periods of leisure, when the sea was fair, and the sails required no shifting, the apprentice was never weary of amusing Jack by making him familiar with the practice of a sailor's craft; he made him scramble up the shrouds, perch upon the yards, and slip down the back-stays; and the mother had no alarm; her assurance of Dick Sands' ability and watchfulness to protect her boy was so complete that she could only rejoice in an occupation for him that seemed more than anything to restore the colour he had lost in his recent illness.

Time passed on without incident; and had it not been for the constant prevalence of an adverse wind, neither passengers nor crew could have found the least cause of complaint. The pertinacity, however, with which the wind kept to the east could not do otherwise than make Captain Hull somewhat concerned; it absolutely prevented him from getting his ship into her proper course, and he could not altogether suppress his misgiving that the calms near the

Tropic of Capricorn, and the equatorial current driving him on westwards, would entail a delay that might be serious.

It was principally on Mrs. Weldon's account that the Captain began to feel uneasiness, and he made up his mind that if he could hail a vessel proceeding to America he should advise his passengers to embark on her; unfortunately, however, he felt that they were still in a latitude far too much to the south to make it likely that they should sight a steamer going to Panama; and at that date, communication between Australia and the New World was much less frequent than it has since become.

Still, nothing occurred to interrupt the general monotony of the voyage until the 2nd of February, the date at which our narrative commences.

It was about nine o’clock in the morning of that day that Dick and little Jack had perched themselves together on the top-mast-yards. The weather was very clear, and they could see the horizon right round except the section behind them, hidden by the brigantine-sail on the main-mast. Below them, the bowsprit seemed to lie along the water with its stay-sails attached like three unequal wings; from the lads’ feet to the deck was the smooth surface of the fore-mast; and above their heads nothing but the small top-sail and the top-mast. The schooner was running on the larboard tack as close to the wind as possible.

Dick Sand was pointing out to Jack how well the ship was ballasted, and was trying to explain how it was impossible for her to capsize, however much she heeled to starboard, when suddenly the little fellow cried out, —

“I can see something in the water!”

“Where? what?” exclaimed Dick, clambering to his feet upon the yard.

“There!” said the child, directing attention to the portion of the sea-surface that was visible between the stay-sails.

Dick fixed his gaze intently for a moment, and then shouted out lustily, —

“Look out in front, to starboard! There is something afloat. To windward, look out!”

CHAPTER III.

A RESCUE.

At the sound of Dick's voice all the crew, in a moment, were upon the alert. The men who were not on watch rushed to the deck, and Captain Hull hurried from his cabin to the bows. Mrs. Weldon, Nan, and even Cousin Benedict leaned over the starboard taffrails, eager to get a glimpse of what had thus suddenly attracted the attention of the young apprentice. With his usual indifference, Negoro did not leave his cabin, and was the only person on board who did not share the general excitement.

Speculations were soon rife as to what could be the nature of the floating object which could be discerned about three miles ahead. Suggestions of various character were freely made. One of the sailors declared that it looked to him only like an abandoned raft, but Mrs. Weldon observed quickly that if it were a raft it might be carrying some unfortunate shipwrecked men who must be rescued if possible. Cousin Benedict asserted that it was nothing more nor less than a huge sea-monster; but the captain soon arrived at the conviction that it was the hull of a vessel that had heeled over on to its side, an opinion with which Dick thoroughly coincided, and went so far as to say that he believed he could make out the copper keel glittering in the sun.

“Luff, Bolton, luff!” shouted Captain Hull to the helmsman; “we will at any rate lose no time in getting alongside.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” answered the helmsman, and the “Pilgrim” in an instant was steered according to orders.

In spite, however, of the convictions of the captain and Dick, Cousin Benedict would not be moved from his opinion that the object of their curiosity was some huge cetacean.

“It is certainly dead, then,” remarked Mrs. Weldon; “it is perfectly motionless.”

“Oh, that’s because it is asleep,” said Benedict, who, although he would have willingly given up all the whales in the ocean for one rare specimen of an insect, yet could not surrender his own belief.

“Easy, Bolton, easy!” shouted the captain when they were getting nearer the floating mass; “don’t let us be running foul of the thing; no good could come from knocking a hole in our side; keep out from it a good cable’s length.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied the helmsman, in his usual cheery way; and by an easy turn of the helm the “Pilgrim’s” course was slightly modified so as to avoid all fear of collision.

The excitement of the sailors by this time had become more intense. Ever since the distance had been less than a mile all doubt had vanished, and it was certain that what was attracting their attention was the hull of a capsized ship. They knew well enough the established rule that a third of all salvage is the right of the finders, and they were filled with the hope that the hull they were nearing might contain an undamaged cargo, and be “a good haul,” to compensate them for their ill-success in the last season.

A quarter of an hour later and the “Pilgrim” was within half a mile of the deserted vessel, facing her starboard side. Water-logged to her bulwarks, she had heeled over so completely that it would have been next to impossible to stand upon her deck. Of her masts nothing was to be seen; a few ends of cordage were all that remained of her shrouds, and the try-sail chains were hanging all broken. On the starboard flank was an enormous hole.

“Something or other has run foul of her,” said Dick.

“No doubt of that,” replied the captain; “the only wonder is that she did not sink immediately.”

“Oh, how I hope the poor crew have been saved!” exclaimed Mrs Weldon.

“Most probably,” replied the captain, “they would all have taken to the boats. It is as likely as not that the ship which did the mischief would continue its course quite unconcerned”

“Surely, you cannot mean,” cried Mrs Weldon, “that any one could be capable of such inhumanity?”

“Only too probable,” answered Captain Hull, “unfortunately, such instances are very far from rare”

He scanned the drifting ship carefully and continued, —

“No, I cannot see any sign of boats here, I should guess that the crew have made an attempt to get to land, at such a distance as this, however, from America or from the islands of the Pacific I should be afraid that it must be hopeless.”

“Is it not possible,” asked Mrs Weldon, “that some poor creature may still survive on board, who can tell what has happened?”

"Hardly likely, madam; otherwise there would have been some sort of a signal in sight. But it is a matter about which we will make sure."

The captain waved his hand a little in the direction in which he wished to go, and said quietly, —

"Luff, Bolton, luff a bit!"

The "Pilgrim" by this time was not much more than three cables' lengths from the ship, there was still no token of her being otherwise than utterly deserted, when Dick Sands suddenly exclaimed, —

"Hark! if I am not much mistaken, that is a dog barking!"

Every one listened attentively; it was no fancy on Dick's part, sure enough a stifled barking could be heard, as if some unfortunate dog had been imprisoned beneath the hatchways; but as the deck was not yet visible, it was impossible at present to determine the precise truth.

Mrs Weldon pleaded, —

"If it is only a dog, captain, let it be saved."

"Oh, yes, yes, mamma, the dog must be saved!" cried

little Jack; "I will go and get a bit of sugar ready for it."

"A bit of sugar, my child, will not be much for a starved dog."

"Then it shall have my soup, and I will do without," said the boy, and he kept shouting, "Good dog! good dog!" until he persuaded himself that he heard the animal responding to his call.

The vessels were now scarcely three hundred feet apart; the barking was more and more distinct, and presently a great dog was seen clinging to the starboard netting. It barked more desperately than ever.

“Howick,” said Captain Hull, calling to the boatswain, “heave to, and lower the small boat.”

The sails were soon trimmed so as to bring the schooner to a standstill within half a cable’s length of the disabled craft, the boat was lowered, and the captain and Dick, with a couple of sailors, went on board. The dog kept up a continual yelping; it made the most vigourous efforts to retain its hold upon the netting, but perpetually slipped backwards and fell off again upon the inclining deck. It was soon manifest, however, that all the noise the creature was making was not directed exclusively towards those who were coming to its rescue, and Mrs. Weldon could not divest herself of the impression that there must be some survivors still on board. All at once the animal changed its gestures. Instead of the crouching attitude and supplicating whine with which it seemed to be imploring the compassion of those who were nearing it, it suddenly appeared to become bursting with violence and furious with rage.

“What ails the brute?” exclaimed Captain Hull.

But already the boat was on the farther side of the wrecked ship, and the captain was not in a position to see that Negoro the cook had just come on to the schooner’s deck, or that it was obvious that it was against him that the dog had broken out in such obstreperous fury. Negoro had approached without being noticed by any one; he made his way to the forecastle, whence, without a word or look of surprise, he gazed a moment at the dog, knitted his brow, and, silent and unobserved as he had come, retired to his kitchen.

As the boat had rounded the stern of the drifting hull, it had been observed that the one word “Waldeck” was painted on the aft-board, but that there was no intimation of the port to which the ship belonged. To Captain Hull’s experienced eye, however, certain details of construction gave a decided confirmation to the probability suggested by her name that she was of American build.

Of what had once been a fine brig of 500 tons burden this hopeless wreck was now all that remained. The large hole near the bows indicated the place where the disastrous shock had occurred, but as, in the heeling over, this aperture had been carried some five or six feet above the water, the vessel had escaped the immediate foundering which must otherwise have ensued; but still it wanted only the rising of a heavy swell to submerge the ship at any time in a few minutes.

It did not take many more strokes to bring the boat close to the larboard bulwark, which was half out of the water, and Captain Hull obtained a view of the whole length of the deck. It was clear from end to end. Both masts had been snapped off within two feet of their sockets, and had been swept away with shrouds, stays, and rigging. Not a single spar was to be seen floating anywhere within sight of the wreck, a circumstance from which it was to be inferred that several days at least had elapsed since the catastrophe.

Meantime the dog, sliding down from the taffrail, got to the centre hatchway, which was open. Here it continued to bark, alternately directing its eyes above deck and below.

“Look at that dog!” said Dick; “I begin to think there must be somebody on board.”

“If so,” answered the captain, “he must have died of hunger; the water of course has flooded the store-room.”

“No,” said Dick; “that dog wouldn’t look like that if there were nobody there alive.”

Taking the boat as close as was prudent to the wreck, the captain and Dick called and whistled repeatedly to the dog, which after a while let itself slip into the sea, and began to swim slowly and with manifest weakness towards the boat. As soon as it was lifted in, the animal, instead of devouring the piece of bread that was offered him, made its way to a bucket containing a few drops of fresh water, and began eagerly to lap them up.

“The poor wretch is dying of thirst!” said Dick.

It soon appeared that the dog was very far from being engrossed with its own interests. The boat was being pushed back a few yards in order to allow the captain to ascertain the most convenient place to get alongside the “Waldeck,” when the creature seized Dick by the jacket, and set up a howl that was almost human in its piteousness. It was evidently in a state of alarm that the boat was not going to return to the wreck. The dog’s meaning could not be misunderstood. The boat was accordingly brought against the larboard side of the vessel, and while the two sailors lashed her securely to the “Waldeck’s” cat-head, Captain Hull and Dick, with the dog persistently accompanying them, clambered, after some difficulty, to the open hatchway between the stumps of the masts, and made their way into the hold. It was half full of water, but perfectly destitute of cargo, its sole contents being the ballast sand which had slipped to larboard, and now served to keep the vessel on her side.

One glance was sufficient to convince the captain that there was no salvage to be effected.

“There is nothing here; nobody here,” he said.

“So I see,” said the apprentice, who had made his way to the extreme fore-part of the hold.

“Then we have only to go up again,” remarked the captain.

They ascended the ladder, but no sooner did they reappear upon the deck than the dog, barking irrepressibly, began trying manifestly to drag them towards the stern.

Yielding to what might be called the importunities of the dog, they followed him to the poop, and there, by the dim glimmer admitted by the sky-light, Captain Hull made out the forms of five bodies, motionless and apparently lifeless, stretched upon the floor.

One after another, Dick hastily examined them all, and emphatically declared it to be his opinion, that not one or them had actually ceased to breathe; whereupon the captain did not lose a minute in summoning the two sailors to his aid, and although it was far from an easy task, he succeeded in getting the five unconscious men, who were all negroes, conveyed safely to the boat.

The dog followed, apparently satisfied.

With all possible speed the boat made its way back again to the “Pilgrim,” a girt-line was lowered from the mainyard, and the unfortunate men were raised to the deck.

“Poor things!” said Mrs. Weldon, as she looked compassionately on the motionless forms.

“But they are not dead,” cried Dick eagerly; “they are not dead; we shall save them all yet!”

“What’s the matter with them?” asked Cousin Benedict, looking at them with utter bewilderment.

“We shall hear all about them soon, I dare say,” said the captain, smiling; “but first we will give them a few drops of rum in some water.”

Cousin Benedict smiled in return.

“Negoro!” shouted the captain.

At the sound of the name, the dog, who had hitherto been quite passive, growled fiercely, showed his teeth, and exhibited every sign of rage.

The cook did not answer.

“Negoro!” again the captain shouted, and the dog became yet more angry.

At this second summons Negoro slowly left his kitchen, but no sooner had he shown his face upon the deck than the animal made a rush at him, and would unquestionably have seized him by the throat if the man had not knocked him back with a poker which he had brought with him in his hand.

The infuriated beast was secured by the sailors, and prevented from inflicting any serious injury.

“Do you know this dog?” asked the captain.

“Know him? Not I! I have never set eyes on the brute in my life.”

“Strange!” muttered Dick to himself; “there is some mystery here. We shall see.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE SURVIVORS OF THE “WALDECK.”

In spite of the watchfulness of the French and English cruisers, there is no doubt that the slave-trade is still extensively carried on in all parts of equatorial Africa, and that year after year vessels loaded with slaves leave the coasts of Angola and Mozambique to transport their living freight to many quarters even of the civilized world.

Of this Captain Hull was well aware, and although he was now in a latitude which was comparatively little traversed by such slavers, he could not help almost involuntarily conjecturing that the negroes they had just found must be part of a slave-cargo which was on its way to some colony of the Pacific; if this were so, he would at least have the satisfaction of announcing to them that they had regained their freedom from the moment that they came on board the “Pilgrim.”

Whilst these thoughts were passing through his mind, Mrs. Weldon, assisted by Nan and the ever active Dick Sands, was doing everything in her power to restore consciousness to the poor sufferers. The judicious administration of fresh water and a limited quantity of food soon had the effect of making them revive; and when they were restored to their senses it was found that the eldest of them, a man of about sixty years of age, who immediately regained his powers of speech, was able to reply in good English to all the questions that were put to him. In answer to Captain Hull’s inquiry whether they were not slaves, the old negro proudly stated that he and his companions were all free American citizens, belonging to the state of Pennsylvania.

“Then, let me assure you, my friend,” said the captain, “you have by no means compromised your liberty in having been brought on board the American schooner ‘Pilgrim.’”

Not merely, as it seemed, on account of his age and experience, but rather because of a certain superiority and greater energy of character, this old man was tacitly recognized as the spokesman of his party; he freely communicated all the information that Captain Hull required to hear, and by degrees he related all the details of his adventures.

He said that his name was Tom, and that when he was only six years of age he had been sold as a slave, and brought from his home in Africa to the United States; but by the act of emancipation he had long since recovered his freedom. His companions, who were all much younger than himself, their ages ranging from twenty-five to thirty, were all free-born, their parents having been emancipated before their birth, so that no white man had ever exercised upon them the rights of ownership. One of them was his own son; his name was Bat (an abbreviation of Bartholomew); and there were three others, named Austin, Actæon, and Hercules. All four of them were specimens of that stalwart race that commands so high a price in the African market, and in spite of the emaciation induced by their recent sufferings, their muscular, well-knit frames betokened a strong and healthy constitution. Their manner bore the impress of that solid education which is given in the North American schools, and their speech had lost all trace of the “nigger-tongue,” a dialect without articles or inflexions, which since the anti-slavery war has almost died out in the United States.

Three years ago, old Tom stated, the five men had been engaged by an Englishman who had large property in South Australia, to work upon his estates near Melbourne. Here they had realized a considerable profit, and upon the completion of their engagement they determined to return with their savings to America. Accordingly, on the 5th of January, after paying their passage in the ordinary way, they embarked at Melbourne on board the "Waldeck." Everything went on well for seventeen days, until, on the night of the 22nd, which was very dark, they were run into by a great steamer. They were all asleep in their berths, but, roused by the shock of the collision, which was extremely severe, they hurriedly made their way on to the deck. The scene was terrible; both masts were gone, and the brig, although the water had not absolutely flooded her hold so as to make her sink, had completely heeled over on her side. Captain and crew had entirely disappeared, some probably having been dashed into the sea, others perhaps having saved themselves by clinging to the rigging of the ship which had fouled them, and which could be distinguished through the darkness rapidly receding in the distance. For a while they were paralyzed, but they soon awoke to the conviction that they were left alone upon a half-capsized and disabled hull, twelve hundred miles from the nearest land. Mrs. Weldon was loud in her expression of indignation that any captain should have the barbarity to abandon an unfortunate vessel with which his own carelessness had brought him into collision. It would be bad enough, she said for a driver on a public road, when it might be presumed that help would be forthcoming, to pass on unconcerned after causing an accident to another vehicle; but how much more shameful to desert the injured on the open sea, where the victims of his incompetence could have no chance of obtaining succour! Captain Hull could only repeat what he had said before, that incredibly atrocious as it might seem, such inhumanity was far from rare.

On resuming his story, Tom said that he and his companions soon found that they had no means left for getting away from the capsized brig; both the boats had been crushed in the collision, so that they had no alternative except to await the appearance of a passing vessel, whilst the wreck was drifting hopelessly along under the action of the currents. This accounted for the fact of their being found so far south of their proper course.

For the next ten days the negroes had subsisted upon a few scraps of food that they found in the stern cabin; but as the store room was entirely under water, they were quite unable to obtain a drop of anything to drink, and the freshwater tanks that had been lashed to the deck had been stove in at the time of the catastrophe. Tortured with thirst, the poor men had suffered agonies, and having on the previous night entirely lost consciousness, they must soon have died if the “Pilgrim’s” timely arrival had not effected their rescue.

All the outlines of Tom’s narrative were fully confirmed by the other negroes; Captain Hull could see no reason to doubt it; indeed, the facts seemed to speak for themselves.

One other survivor of the wreck, if he had been gifted with the power of speech, would doubtless have corroborated the testimony. This was the dog who seemed to have such an unaccountable dislike to Negoro.

Dingo, as the dog was named, belonged to the fine breed of mastiffs peculiar to New Holland. It was not, however, from Australia, but from the coast of West Africa, near the mouth of the Congo, that the animal had come. He had been picked up there, two years previously, by the captain of the “Waldeck,” who had found him wandering about and more than half starved. The initials S. V. engraved upon his collar were the only tokens that the dog had a past history of his own. After he had been taken on board the “Waldeck,” he remained quite unsociable, apparently ever pining for some lost master, whom he had failed to find in the desert land where he had been met with.

Larger than the dogs of the Pyrenees, Dingo was a magnificent example of his kind. Standing on his hind legs, with his head thrown back, he was as tall as a man. His agility and strength would have made him a sure match for a panther, and he would not have flinched at facing a bear. His fine shaggy coat was a dark tawny colour, shading off somewhat lighter round the muzzle, and his long bushy tail was as strong as a lion's. If he were made angry, no doubt he might become a most formidable foe, so that it was no wonder that Negoro did not feel altogether gratified at his reception.

But Dingo, though unsociable, was not savage. Old Tom said that, on board the "Waldeck," he had noticed that the animal seemed to have a particular dislike to negroes; not that he actually attempted to do them any harm, only he uniformly avoided them, giving an impression that he must have been systematically ill-treated by the natives of that part of Africa in which he had been found. During the ten days that had elapsed since the collision, Dingo had kept resolutely aloof from Tom and his companions; they could not tell what he had been feeding on; they only knew that, like themselves, he had suffered an excruciating thirst.

Such had been the experience of the survivors of the "Waldeck." Their situation had been most critical. Even if they survived the pangs of want of food, the slightest gale or the most inconsiderable swell might at any moment have sunk the water-logged ship, and had it not been that calms and contrary winds had contributed to the opportune arrival of the "Pilgrim," an inevitable fate was before them; their corpses must lie at the bottom of the sea.

Captain Hull's act of humanity, however, would not be complete unless he succeeded in restoring the shipwrecked men to their homes. This he promised to do. After completing the unlading at Valparaiso, the "Pilgrim" would make direct for California, where, as Mrs. Weldon assured them, they would be most hospitably received by her husband, and provided with the necessary means for returning to Pennsylvania.

The five men, who, as the consequence of the shipwreck, had lost all the savings of their last three years of toil, were profoundly grateful to their kind-hearted benefactors; nor, poor negroes as they were, did they utterly resign the hope that at some future time they might have it in their power to repay the debt which they owed their deliverers.

CHAPTER V.

DINGO’S SAGACITY.

Meantime the “Pilgrim” pursued her course, keeping as much as possible to the east, and before evening closed in the hull of the “Waldeck” was out of sight.

Captain Hull still continued to feel uneasy about the constant prevalence of calms; not that for himself he cared much about the delay of a week or two in a voyage from New Zealand to Valparaiso, but he was disappointed at the prolonged inconvenience it caused to his lady passenger. Mrs. Weldon, however, submitted to the detention very philosophically, and did not utter a word of complaint.

The captain’s next care was to improvise sleeping accommodation for Tom and his four associates. No room for them could possibly be found in the crew’s quarters, so that their berths had to be arranged under the forecastle; and as long as the weather continued fine, there was no reason why the negroes, accustomed as they were to a somewhat rough life, should not find themselves sufficiently comfortable.

After this incident of the discovery of the wreck, life on board the “Pilgrim” relapsed into its ordinary routine. With the wind invariably in the same direction, the sails required very little shifting; but whenever it happened, as occasionally it would, that there was any tacking to be done, the good-natured negroes were ever ready to lend a helping hand; and the rigging would creak again under the weight of Hercules, a great strapping fellow, six feet high, who seemed almost to require ropes of extra strength made for his special use.

Hercules became at once a great favourite with little Jack; and when the giant lifted him like a doll in his stalwart arms, the child fairly shrieked with delight.

“Higher! higher! very high!” Jack would say sometimes.

“There you are, then, Master Jack,” Hercules would reply as he raised him aloft.

“Am I heavy?” asked the child,

“As heavy as a feather.”

“Then lift me higher still,” cried Jack; “as high as ever you can reach.”

And Hercules, with the child’s two feet supported on his huge palm, would walk about the deck with him like an acrobat, Jack all the time endeavouring, with vain efforts, to make him “feel his weight.”

Besides Dick Sands and Hercules, Jack admitted a third friend to his companionship. This was Dingo. The dog, unsociable as he had been on board the “Waldeck,” seemed to have found society more congenial to his tastes, and being one of those animals that are fond of children, he allowed Jack to do with him almost anything he pleased. The child, however, never thought of hurting the dog in any way, and it was doubtful which of the two had the greater enjoyment of their mutual sport. Jack found a live dog infinitely more entertaining than his old toy upon its four wheels, and his great delight was to mount upon Dingo’s back, when the animal would gallop off with him like a race-horse with his jockey. It must be owned that one result of this intimacy was a serious diminution of the supply of sugar in the store-room. Dingo was the delight of all the crew excepting Negoro, who cautiously avoided coming in contact with an animal who showed such unmistakable symptoms of hostility.

The new companions that Jack had thus found did not in the least make him forget his old friend Dick Sands, who devoted all his leisure time to him as assiduously as ever. Mrs. Weldon regarded their intimacy with the greatest satisfaction, and one day made a remark to that effect in the presence of Captain Hull.

“You are right, madam,” said the captain cordially; “Dick is a capital fellow, and will be sure to be a first-rate sailor. He has an instinct which is little short of a genius; it supplies all deficiencies of theory. Considering how short an experience and how little instruction he has had, it is quite wonderful how much he knows about a ship.”

“Certainly for his age,” assented Mrs. Weldon, “he is singularly advanced. I can safely say that I have never had a fault to find with him. I believe that it is my husband’s intention, after this voyage, to let him have systematic training in navigation, so that he may be able ultimately to become a captain.”

“I have no misgivings, madam,” replied the captain; “there is every reason to expect that he will be an honour to the service”

“Poor orphan!” said the lady; “he has been trained in a hard school.”

“Its lessons have not been lost upon him,” rejoined Captain Hull; “they have taught him the prime lesson that he has his own way to make in the world.”

The eyes of the two speakers turned as it were unwittingly in the direction where Dick Sands happened to be standing. He was at the helm.

“Look at him now!” said the captain; “see how steadily he keeps his eye upon the fore; nothing distracts him from his duty; he is as much to be depended on as the most experienced helmsman. It was a capital thing for him that he began his training as a cabin-boy. Nothing like it. Begin at the beginning. It is the best of training for the merchant service.”

“But surely,” interposed Mrs. Weldon, “you would not deny that in the navy there have been many good officers who have never had the training of which you are speaking?”

“True, madam; but yet even some of the best of them have begun at the lowest step of the ladder. For instance, Lord Nelson.”

Just at this instant Cousin Benedict emerged from the stern-cabin, and completely absorbed, according to his wont, in his own pursuit, began to wander up and down the deck, peering into the interstices of the network, rummaging under the seats, and drawing his long fingers along the cracks in the floor where the tar had crumbled away.

“Well, Benedict, how are you getting on?” asked Mrs Weldon.

“I? Oh, well enough, thank you,” he replied dreamily; “but I wish we were on shore.”

“What were you looking for under that bench?” said Captain Hull.

“Insects, of course,” answered Benedict; “I am always looking for insects.”

“But don’t you know, Benedict,” said Mrs. Weldon, “that Captain Hull is far too particular to allow any vermin on the deck of his vessel?”

Captain Hull smiled and said, —

“Mrs Weldon is very complimentary; but I am really inclined to hope that your investigations in the cabins of the ‘Pilgrim’ will not be attended with much success.”

Cousin Benedict shrugged his shoulders in a manner that indicated that he was aware that the cabins could furnish nothing attractive in the way of insects.

“However,” continued the captain, “I dare say down in the hold you could find some cockroaches; but cockroaches, I presume, would be of little or no interest to you.”

“No interest?” cried Benedict, at once warmed into enthusiasm; “why, are they not the very orthoptera that roused the imprecations of Virgil and Horace? Are they not closely allied to the *Periplaneta orientalis* and the American Kakerlac, which inhabit — ”

“I should rather say infest,” interrupted the captain.

“Easy enough to see, sir,” replied Benedict, stopping short with amazement, “that you are not an entomologist!”

“I fear I must plead guilty to your accusation,” said the captain good-humouredly.

“You must not expect every one to be such an enthusiast in your favourite study as yourself.” Mrs. Weldon interposed; “but are you not satisfied with the result of your explorations in New Zealand?”

“Yes, yes,” answered Benedict, with a sort of hesitating reluctance; “I must not say I was dissatisfied; I was really very delighted to secure that new staphylin which hitherto had never been seen elsewhere than in New California; but still, you know, an entomologist is always craving for fresh additions to his collection.”

While he was speaking, Dingo, leaving little Jack, who was romping with him, came and jumped on Benedict, and began to fawn on him.

“Get away, you brute!” he exclaimed, thrusting the dog aside.

“Poor Dingo! good dog!” cried Jack, running up and taking the animal’s huge head between his tiny hands.

“Your interest in cockroaches, Mr. Benedict,” observed the captain, “does not seem to extend to dogs.”

“It isn’t that I dislike dogs at all,” answered Benedict; “but this creature has disappointed me.”

“How do you mean? You could hardly want to catalogue him with the diptera or hymenoptera?” asked Mrs Weldon laughingly.

“Oh, not at all,” replied Benedict, with the most unmoved gravity. “But I understood that he had been found on the West Coast of Africa, and I hoped that perhaps he might have brought over some African hemiptera in his coat; but I have searched his coat well, over and over again, without finding a single specimen. The dog has disappointed me,” he repeated mournfully.

"I can only hope," said the captain, "that if you had found anything, you were going to kill it instantly."

Benedict looked with mute astonishment into the captain's face. In a moment or two afterwards, he said, —

"I suppose, sir, you acknowledge that Sir John Franklin was an eminent member of your profession?"

"Certainly; why?"

"Because Sir John would never take away the life of the most insignificant insect; it is related of him that when he had once been incessantly tormented all day by a mosquito, at last he found it on the back of his hand and blew it off, saying, 'Fly away, little creature, the world is large enough for both you and me!'"

"That little anecdote of yours, Mr. Benedict," said the captain, smiling, "is a good deal older than Sir John Franklin. It is told, in nearly the same words, about Uncle Toby, in Sterne's 'Tristram Shandy'; only there it was not a mosquito, it was a common fly."

"And was Uncle Toby an entomologist?" asked Benedict; "did he ever really live?"

"No," said the captain, "he was only a character in a novel."

Cousin Benedict gave a look of utter contempt, and Captain Hull and Mrs Weldon could not resist laughing.

Such is only one instance of the way in which Cousin Benedict invariably brought it about that all conversation with him ultimately turned upon his favourite pursuit, and all along, throughout the monotonous hours of smooth sailing, while the “Pilgrim” was making her little headway to the east, he showed his own devotion to his pet science, by seeking to enlist new disciples. First of all, he tried his powers of persuasion upon Dick Sands, but soon finding that the young apprentice had no taste for entomological mysteries, he gave him up and turned his attention to the negroes. Nor was he much more successful with them; one after another, Tom, Bat, Actæon, and Austin had all withdrawn themselves from his instructions, and the class at last was reduced to the single person of Hercules; but in him the enthusiastic naturalist thought he had discovered a latent talent which could distinguish between a parasite and a thysanura.

Hercules accordingly submitted to pass a considerable portion of his leisure in the observation of every variety of coleoptera; he was encouraged to study the extensive collection of stag-beetles, tiger-beetles and lady-birds; and although at times the enthusiast trembled to see some of his most delicate and fragile specimens in the huge grasp of his pupil, he soon learned that the man’s gentle docility was a sufficient guarantee against his clumsiness.

While the science of entomology was thus occupying its two votaries, Mrs. Weldon was giving her own best attention to the education of Master Jack. Reading and writing she undertook to teach herself, while she entrusted the instruction in arithmetic to the care of Dick Sands. Under the conviction that a child of five years will make a much more rapid progress if something like amusement be combined with his lessons, Mrs. Weldon would not teach her boy to spell by the use of an ordinary school primer, but used a set of cubes, on the sides of which the various letters were painted in red. After first making a word and showing it to Jack, she set him to put it together without her help, and it was astonishing how quickly the child advanced, and how many hours he would spend in this way, both in the cabin and on deck. There were more than fifty cubes, which, besides the alphabet, included all the digits; so that they were of service for Dick Sands' lessons as well as for her own. She was more than satisfied with her device.

On the morning of the 9th an incident occurred which could not fail to be observed as somewhat remarkable. Jack was half lying, half sitting on the deck, amusing himself with his letters, and had just finished putting together a word with which he intended to puzzle old Tom, who, with his hand sheltering his eyes, was pretending not to see the difficulty which was being labouriously prepared to bewilder him; all at once, Dingo, who had been gambolling round the child, made a sudden pause, lifted his right paw, and wagged his tail convulsively. Then darting down upon a capital S, he seized it in his mouth, and carried it some paces away.

“Oh, Dingo, Dingo! you mustn't eat my letters!” shouted the child.

But the dog had already dropped the block of wood, and coming back again, picked up another, which he laid quietly by the side of the first. This time it was a capital V. Jack uttered an exclamation of astonishment which brought to his side not only his mother, but the captain and Dick, who were both on deck. In answer to their inquiry as to what had occurred, Jack cried out in the greatest excitement that Dingo knew how to read. At any rate he was sure that he knew his letters.

Dick Sands smiled and stooped to take back the letters. Dingo snarled and showed his teeth, but the apprentice was not frightened; he carried his point, and replaced the two blocks among the rest. Dingo in an instant pounced upon them again, and having drawn them to his side, laid a paw upon each of them, as if to signify his intention of retaining them in his possession. Of the other letters of the alphabet he took no notice at all.

“It is very strange,” said Mrs. Weldon; “he has picked out S V again.”

“S V!” repeated the captain thoughtfully; “are not those the letters that form the initials on his collar?”

And turning to the old negro, he continued, —

“Tom didn’t you say that this dog did not always belong to the captain of the ‘Waldeck’?”

“To the best of my belief,” replied Tom, “the captain had only had him about two years. I often heard him tell how he found him at the mouth of the Congo.”

“Do you suppose that he never knew where the animal came from, or to whom he had previously belonged?” asked Captain Hull.

“Never,” answered Tom, shaking his head; “a lost dog is worse to identify than a lost child; you see, he can’t make himself understood any way.”

The captain made no answer, but stood musing; Mrs. Weldon interrupted him.

“These letters, captain, seem to be recalling something to your recollection.

“I can hardly go so far as to say that, Mrs. Weldon,” he replied; “but I cannot help associating them with the fate of a brave explorer.”

“Whom do you mean? said the lady.

“In 1871, just two years ago,” the captain continued, “a French traveller, under the auspices of the Geographical Society of Paris, set out for the purpose of crossing Africa from west to east. His starting-point was the mouth of the Congo, and his exit was designed to be as near as possible to Cape Deldago, at the mouth of the River Rovouma, of which he was to ascertain the true course. The name of this man was Samuel Vernon, and I confess it strikes me as somewhat a strange coincidence that the letters engraved on Dingo’s collar should be Vernon’s initials.”

“Is nothing known about this traveller?” asked Mrs. Weldon.

“Nothing was ever heard of him after his first departure. It appears quite certain that he failed to reach the east coast, and it can only be conjectured either that he died upon his way, or that he was made prisoner by the natives; and if so, and this dog ever belonged to him, the animal might have made his way back to the sea-coast, where, just about the time that would be likely, the captain of the ‘Waldeck’ picked him up.”

“But you have no reason to suppose, Captain Hull, that Vernon ever owned a dog of this description?”

“I own I never heard of it,” said the captain; “but still the impression fixes itself on my mind that the dog must have been his; how he came to know one letter from another, it is not for me to pretend to say. Look at him now, madam! he seems not only to be reading the letters for himself, but to be inviting us to come and read them with him.”

Whilst Mrs. Weldon was watching the dog with much amusement, Dick Sands, who had listened to the previous conversation, took the opportunity of asking the captain whether the traveller Vernon had started on his expedition quite alone.

“That is really more than I can tell you, my boy,” answered Captain Hull; “but I should almost take it for granted that he would have a considerable retinue of natives.”

The captain spoke without being aware that Negoro had meanwhile quietly stolen on deck. At first his presence was quite unnoticed, and no one observed the peculiar glance with which he looked at the two letters over which Dingo still persisted in keeping guard. The dog, however, no sooner caught sight of the cook than he began to bristle with rage, whereupon Negoro, with a threatening gesture which seemed half involuntary, withdrew immediately to his accustomed quarters.

The incident did not escape the captain’s observation.

“No doubt,” he said, “there is some mystery here;” and he was pondering the matter over in his mind when Dick Sands spoke.

“Don’t you think it very singular, sir, that this dog should have such a knowledge of the alphabet?”

Jack here put in his word.

“My mamma has told me about a dog whose name was Munito, who could read as well as a schoolmaster, and could play dominoes.”

Mrs. Weldon smiled.

“I am afraid, my child, that that dog was not quite so learned as you imagine. I don’t suppose he knew one letter from another; but his master, who was a clever American, having found out that the animal had a very keen sense of hearing, taught him some curious tricks.”

“What sort of tricks?” asked Dick, who was almost as much interested as little Jack.

“When he had to perform in public,” continued Mrs. Weldon, “a lot of letters like yours, Jack, were spread out upon a table, and Munito would put together any word that the company should propose, either aloud or in a whisper, to his master. The creature would walk about until he stopped at the very letter which was wanted. The secret of it all was that the dog’s owner gave him a signal when he was to stop by rattling a little tooth-pick in his pocket, making a slight noise that only the dog’s ears were acute enough to perceive.”

Dick was highly amused, and said, —

“But that was a dog who could do nothing wonderful without his master.”

“Just so,” answered Mrs. Weldon; “and it surprises me

very much to see Dingo picking out these letters without a master to direct him.”

“The more one thinks of it, the more strange it is,” said Captain Hull; “but, after all, Dingo’s sagacity is not greater than that of the dog which rang the convent bell in order to get at the dish that was reserved for passing beggars; nor than that of the dog who had to turn a spit every other day, and never could be induced to work when it was not his proper day. Dingo evidently has no acquaintance with any other letters except the two S V; and some circumstance which we can never guess has made him familiar with them.”

“What a pity he cannot talk!” exclaimed the apprentice; “we should know why it is that he always shows his teeth at Negoro.”

“And tremendous teeth they are!” observed the captain, as Dingo at that moment opened his mouth, and made a display of his formidable fangs.

CHAPTER VI.

A WHALE IN SIGHT.

It was only what might be expected that the dog's singular exhibition of sagacity should repeatedly form a subject of conversation between Mrs. Weldon, the captain, and Dick. The young apprentice in particular began to entertain a lurking feeling of distrust towards Negoro, although it must be owned that the man's conduct in general afforded no tangible grounds for suspicion.

Nor as it only among the stern passengers that Dingo's remarkable feat was discussed; amongst the crew in the bow the dog not only soon gained the reputation of being able to read, but was almost credited with being able to write too, as well as any sailor among them; indeed the chief wonder was that he did not speak.

"Perhaps he can," suggested Bolton, the helmsman, "and likely enough some fine day we shall have him coming to ask about our bearings, and to inquire which way the wind lies."

"Ah! why not?" assented another sailor; "parrots talk, and magpies talk; why shouldn't a dog? For my part, I should guess it must be easier to speak with a mouth than with a beak."

"Of course it is," said Howick, the boatswain; "only a quadruped has never yet been known to do it."

Perhaps, however, the worthy fellow would have been amazed to hear that a certain Danish *savant* once possesed a dog that could actually pronounce quite distinctly nearly twenty different words, demonstrating that the construction of the glottis, the aperture at the top of the windpipe, was adapted for the emission of regular sounds: of course the animal attached no meaning to the words it uttered any more than a parrot or a jay can comprehend their own chatterings.

Thus, unconsciously, Dingo had become the hero of the hour. On several separate occasions Captain Hull repeated the experiment of spreading out the blocks before him, but invariably with the same result; the dog never failed, without the slightest hesitation, to pick out the two letters, leaving all the rest of the alphabet quite unnoticed.

Cousin Benedict alone, somewhat ostentatiously, professed to take no interest in the circumstance.

“You cannot suppose,” he said to Captain Hull, after various repetitions of the trick, “that dogs are to be reckoned the only animals endowed with intelligence Rats, you know, will always leave a sinking ship, and beavers invariably raise their dams before the approach of a flood. Did not the horses of Nicomedes, Scanderberg and Oppian die of grief for the loss of their masters? Have there not been instances of donkeys with wonderful memories? Birds, too, have been trained to do the most remarkable things; they have been taught to write word after word at their master’s dictation; there are cockatoos who can count the people in a room as accurately as a mathematician; and haven’t you heard of the old Cardinal’s parrot that he would not part with for a hundred gold crowns because it could repeat the Apostles’ creed from beginning to end without a blunder? And insects,” he continued, warming into enthusiasm, “how marvellously they vindicate the axiom —

‘In minimis maximus Deus!’

Are not the structures of ants the very models for the architects of a city? Has the diving-bell of the aquatic argyroneta ever been surpassed by the invention of the most skilful student of mechanical art? And cannot fleas go through a drill and fire a gun as well as the most accomplished artilleryman? This Dingo is nothing out of the way. I suppose he belongs to some unclassed species of mastiff. Perhaps one day or other he may come to be identified as the 'canis alphabeticus' of New Zealand."

The worthy entomologist delivered this and various similar harangues; but Dingo, nevertheless, retained his high place in the general estimation, and by the occupants of the forecastle was regarded as little short of a phenomenon. The feeling, otherwise universal, was not in any degree shared by Negoro, and it is not improbable that the man would have been tempted to some foul play with the dog if the open sympathies of the crew had not kept him in check. More than ever he studiously avoided coming in contact in any way with the animal, and Dick Sands in his own mind was quite convinced that since the incident of the letters, the cook's hatred of the dog had become still more intense.

After continual alternations with long and wearisome calms the north-east wind perceptibly moderated, and on the both, Captain Hull really began to hope that such a change would ensue as to allow the schooner to run straight before the wind. Nineteen days had elapsed since the "Pilgrim" had left Auckland, a period not so long but that with a favourable breeze it might be made up at last. Some days however were yet to elapse before the wind veered round to the anticipated quarter.

It has been already stated that this portion of the Pacific is almost always deserted. It is out of the line of the American and Australian steam-packets, and except a whaler had been brought into it by some such exceptional circumstances as the “Pilgrim,” it was quite unusual to see one in this latitude.

But, however void of traffic was the surface of the sea, to none but an unintelligent mind could it appear monotonous or barren of interest. The poetry of the ocean breathes forth in its minute and almost imperceptible changes. A marine plant, a tuft of seaweed lightly furrowing the water, a drifting spar with its unknown history, may afford unlimited scope — for the imagination; every little drop passing, in its process of evaporation, backwards and forwards from sea to sky, might perchance reveal its own special secret; and happy are those minds which are capable of a due appreciation of the mysteries of air and ocean.

Above the surface as well as below, the restless flood is ever teaming with animal life; and the passengers on board the “Pilgrim” derived no little amusement from watching great flocks of birds migrating northwards to escape the rigour of the polar winter, and ever and again descending in rapid flight to secure some tiny fish. Occasionally Dick Sands would take a pistol, and now and then a rifle, and, thanks to Mr. Weldon’s former instructions, would bring down various specimens of the feathered tribe.

Sometimes white petrels would congregate in considerable numbers near the schooner; and sometimes petrels of another species, with brown borders on their wings, would come in sight; now there would be flocks of damiers skimming the water; and now groups of penguins, whose clumsy gait appears so ludicrous on shore; but, as Captain Hull pointed out, when their stumpy wings were employed as fins, they were a match for the most rapid of fish, so that sailors have often mistaken them for bonitos.

High over head, huge albatrosses, their outspread wings measuring ten feet from tip to tip, would soar aloft, thence to swoop down towards the deep, into which they plunged their beaks in search of food. Such incidents and scenes as these were infinite in their variety, and it was accordingly only for minds that were obtuse to the charms of nature that the voyage could be monotonous.

On the day the wind shifted, Mrs. Weldon was walking up and down on the “Pilgrim’s” stern, when her attention was attracted by what seemed to her a strange phenomenon. All of a sudden, far as the eye could reach, the sea had assumed a reddish hue, as if it were tinged with blood.

Both Dick and Jack were standing close behind her, and she cried, —

“Look, Dick, look! the sea is all red. Is it a sea-weed that is making the water so strange a colour?

“No,” answered Dick, “it is not a weed; it is what the sailors call whales’ food; it is formed, I believe, of innumerable myriads of minute crustacea.”

“Crustacea they may be,” replied Mrs. Weldon, “but they must be so small that they are mere insects. Cousin Benedict no doubt will like to see them.”

She called aloud, —

“Benedict! Benedict! come here! we have a sight here to interest you.”

The amateur naturalist slowly emerged from his cabin followed by Captain Hull.

“Ah! yes, I see!” said the captain; “whales’ food; just the opportunity for you, Mr. Benedict; a chance not to be thrown away for studying one of the most curious of the crustacea.”

“Nonsense!” ejaculated Benedict contemptuously; “utter nonsense!”

“Why? what do you mean, Mr. Benedict?” retorted the captain; “surely you, as an entomologist, must know that I am right in my conviction that these crustacea belong to one of the six classes of the articulata.”

The disdain of Cousin Benedict was expressed by a repeated sneer.

“Are you not aware, sir, that my researches as an entomologist are confined entirely to the hexapoda?”

Captain Hull, unable to repress a smile, only answered good-humouredly, —

“I see, sir, your tastes do not lie in the same direction as those of the whale.”

And turning to Mrs. Weldon, he continued, —

“To whalemen, madam, this is a sight that speaks for itself. It is a token that we ought to lose no time in getting out our lines and looking to the state of our harpoons. There is game not far away.”

Jack gave vent to his astonishment.

“Do you mean that great creatures like whales feed on such tiny things as these?”

“Yes, my boy,” said the captain; “and I daresay they are as nice to them as semolina and ground rice are to you.

When a whale gets into the middle of them he has nothing to do but to open his jaws, and, in a minute, hundreds of thousands of these minute creatures are inside the fringe or whalebone around his palate, and he is sure of a good mouthful."

"So you see, Jack," said Dick, "the whale gets his shrimps without the trouble of shelling them."

"And when he has just closed his snappers is the very time to give him a good taste of the harpoon," added Captain Hull.

The words had hardly escaped the captain's lips when a shout from one of the sailors announced, —

"A whale to larboard!"

"There's the whale!" repeated the captain. All his professional instincts were aroused in an instant, and he hurried to the bow, followed in eager curiosity by all the stern passengers.

Even Cousin Benedict loitered up in the rear, constrained, in spite of himself, to take a share in the general interest.

There was no doubt about the matter. Four miles or so to windward an unusual commotion in the water betokened to experienced eyes the presence of a whale; but the distance was too great to permit a reasonable conjecture to be formed as to which species of those mammifers the creature belonged.

Three distinct species are familiarly known. First there is the Right whale, which is ordinarily sought for in the northern fisheries. The average length of this cetacean is sixty feet, though it has been known to attain the length of eighty feet. It has no dorsal fin, and beneath its skin is a thick layer of blubber. One of these monsters alone will yield as much as a hundred barrels of oil.

Then there is the Hump-back, a typical representative of the species “balænoptera,” a definition which may at first sight appear to possess an interest for an entomologist, but which really refers to two white dorsal fins, each half as wide as the body, resembling a pair of wings, and in their formation similar to those of the flying-fish. It must be owned, however, that a flying whale would decidedly be a *rara avis*.

Lastly, there is the Jubarte, commonly known as the Finback. It is provided with a dorsal fin, and in length not unfrequently is a match for the gigantic Right whale.

While it was impossible to decide to which of the three species the whale in the distance really belonged, the general impression inclined to the belief that it was a jubarte.

With longing eyes Captain Hull and his crew gazed at the object of general attraction. Just as irresistibly as it is said a clockmaker is drawn on to examine the mechanism of every clock which chance may throw in his way, so is a whaleman ever anxious to plunge his harpoon into any whale that he can get within his reach. The larger the game the more keen the excitement; and no elephant-hunter’s eagerness ever surpasses the zest of the whale-fisher when once started in pursuit of the prey.

To the crew the sight of the whale was the opening of an unexpected opportunity, and no wonder they were fired with the burning hope that even now they might do something to supply the deficiency of their meagre haul throughout the season.

Far away as the creature still was, the captain's practised eye soon enabled him to detect various indications that satisfied him as to its true species. Amongst other things that arrested his attention, he observed a column of water and vapour ejected from the nostrils. "It isn't a right whale," he said; "if so, its spout would be smaller and it would rise higher in the air. And I do not think it is a hump-back. I cannot hear the hump-back's roar. Dick, tell me, what do you think about it?"

With a critical eye Dick Sands looked long and steadily at the spout.

"It blows out water, sir," said the apprentice, "water, as well as vapour. I should think it is a finback. But it must be a rare large one."

"Seventy feet, at least!" rejoined the captain, flushing with his enthusiasm.

"What a big fellow!" said Jack, catching the excitement of his elders.

"Ah, Jack, my boy," chuckled the captain, "the whale little thinks who are watching him enjoy his breakfast!"

"Yes," said the boatswain; "a dozen such gentlemen as that would freight a craft twice the size of ours; but this one, if only we can get him, will go a good way towards filling our empty barrels."

"Rather rough work, you know," said Dick, "to attack a finback!"

"You are right, Dick," answered the captain; "the boat has yet to be built which is strong enough to resist the flap of a jubarte's tail."

"But the profit is worth the risk, captain, isn't it?"

“You are right again, Dick,” replied Captain Hull, and as he spoke, he clambered on to the bowsprit in order that he might get a better view of the whale.

The crew were as eager as their captain. Mounted on the fore-shrouds, they scanned the movements of their coveted prey in the distance, freely descanting upon the profit to be made out of a good finback and declaring that it would be a thousand pities if this chance of filling the casks below should be permitted to be lost.

Captain Hull was perplexed. He bit his nails and knitted his brow.

“Mamma!” cried little Jack, “I should so much like to see a whale close, — quite close, you know.”

“And so you shall, my boy,” replied the captain, who was standing by, and had come to the resolve that if his men would back him, he would make an attempt to capture the prize.

He turned to his crew, —

“My men! what do you think? shall we make the venture? Remember, we are all alone; we have no whalemen to help us; we must rely upon ourselves; I have thrown a harpoon before now; I can throw a harpoon again; what do you say?”

The crew responded with a ringing cheer, —

“Ay, ay, sir! Ay, ay!”

CHAPTER VII.

PREPARATIONS FOR AN ATTACK.

Great was the excitement that now prevailed, and the question of an attempt to capture the sea-monster became the ruling theme of conversation. Mrs. Weldon expressed considerable doubt as to the prudence of venturing upon so great a risk with such a limited number of hands, but when Captain Hull assured her that he had more than once successfully attacked a whale with a single boat, and that for his part he had no fear of failure, she made no further remonstrance, and appeared quite satisfied.

Having formed his resolve, the captain lost no time in setting about his preliminary arrangements. He could not really conceal from his own mind that the pursuit of a finback was always a matter of some peril, and he was anxious, accordingly, to make every possible provision which forethought could devise against all emergencies.

Besides her long-boat, which was kept between the two masts, the “Pilgrim” had three whale-boats, two of them slung to the starboard and larboard davits, and the third at the stern, outside the taffrail. During the fishing season, when the crew was reinforced by a hired complement of New Zealand whalemen, all three of these boats would be brought at once into requisition, but at present the whole crew of the “Pilgrim” was barely sufficient to man one of the three boats. Tom and his friends were ready to volunteer their assistance, but any offers of service from them were necessarily declined; the manipulation of a whale-boat can only be entrusted to those who are experienced in the work, as a false turn of the tiller or a premature stroke of the oar may in a moment compromise the safety of the whole party. Thus compelled to take all his trained sailors with him on his venturous expedition, the captain had no alternative than to leave his apprentice in charge of the schooner during his absence. Dick’s choice would have been very much in favour of taking a share in the whale-hunt, but he had the good sense to know that the developed strength of a man would be of far greater service in the boat, and accordingly without a murmur he resigned himself to remain behind.

Of the five sailors who were to man the boat, there were four to take the oars, whilst Howick the boatswain was to manage the oar at the stern, which on these occasions generally replaces an ordinary rudder as being quicker in action in the event of any of the side oars being disabled. The post of harpooner was of course assigned to Captain Hull, to whose lot it would consequently fall first to hurl his weapon at the whale, then to manage the unwinding of the line to which the harpoon was attached, and finally to kill the creature by lance-wounds when it should emerge again from below the sea.

A method sometimes employed for commencing an attack is to place a sort of small cannon on the bows or deck of the boat and to discharge from it either a harpoon or some explosive bullets, which make frightful lacerations on the body of the victim; but the “Pilgrim” was not provided with apparatus of this description; not only are all the contrivances of this kind very costly and difficult to manage, but the fishermen generally are averse to innovations, and prefer the old-fashioned harpoons. It was with these alone that Captain Hull was now about to encounter the finback that was lying some four miles distant from his ship.

The weather promised as favourably as could be for the enterprise. The sea was calm, and the wind moreover was still moderating, so that there was no likelihood of the schooner drifting away during the captain’s absence.

When the starboard whale-boat had been lowered, and the four sailors had entered it, Howick passed a couple of harpoons down to them, and some lances which had been carefully sharpened; to these were added five coils of stout and supple rope, each 600 feet long, for a whale when struck often dives so deeply that even these lengths of line knotted together are found to be insufficient. After these implements of attack had been properly stowed in the bows, the crew had only to await the pleasure of their captain.

The “Pilgrim,” before the sailors left her, had been made to heave to, and the yards were braced so as to secure her remaining as stationary as possible. As the time drew near for the captain to quit her, he gave a searching look all round to satisfy himself that everything was in order; he saw that the halyards were properly tightened, and the sails trimmed as they should be, and then calling the young apprentice to his side, he said, —

“Now, Dick, I am going to leave you for a few hours: while I am away, I hope that it will not be necessary for you to make any movement whatever. However, you must be on the watch. It is not very likely, but it is possible that this finback may carry us out to some distance. If so, you will have to follow; and in that case, I am sure you may rely upon Tom and his friends for assistance.”

One and all, the negroes assured the captain of their willingness to obey Dick’s instructions, the sturdy Hercules rolling up his capacious shirt-sleeves as if to show that he was ready for immediate action.

The captain went on, —

“The weather is beautifully fine, Dick, and I see no prospect of the wind freshening; but come what may, I have one direction to give you which I strictly enforce. You must not leave the ship. If I want you to follow us, I will hoist a flag on the boat-hook.”

“You may trust me, sir,” answered Dick; “and I will keep a good look-out.”

“All right, my lad; keep a cool head and a good heart. You are second captain now, you know. I never heard of any one of your age being placed in such a post; be a credit to your position!”

Dick blushed, and the bright flush that rose to his cheeks spoke more than words.

“The lad may be trusted,” murmured the captain to himself; “he is as modest as he is courageous. Yes; he may be trusted.”

It cannot be denied that the captain was not wholly without compunction at the step he was taking; he was aware of the danger to which he was exposing himself, but he beguiled himself with the persuasion that it was only for a few hours; and his fisherman’s instinct was very keen. It was not only for himself; the desire upon the part of the crew was almost irresistibly strong that every opportunity ought to be employed for making the cargo of the schooner equal to her owner’s expectations. And so he finally prepared to start.

“I wish you all success!” said Mrs. Weldon.

“Many thanks!” he replied.

Little Jack put in his word, —

“And you will try and catch the whale without hurting him much?”

“All right, young gentleman,” answered the captain; “he shall hardly feel the tip of our fingers!”

“Sometimes,” said Cousin Benedict, as if he had been pondering the expedition in relation to his pet science, “sometimes there are strange insects clinging to the backs of these great mammifers; do you think you are likely to procure me any specimens?”

“You shall soon have the opportunity of investigating for yourself,” was the captain’s reply.

“And you, Tom; we shall be looking to you for help in cutting up our prize, when we get it alongside,” continued he.

“We shall be quite ready, sir,” said the negro.

“One thing more, Dick,” added the captain; “you may as well be getting up the empty barrels out of the hold; they will be all ready.”

“It shall be done, sir,” answered Dick promptly.

If everything went well it was the intention that the whale after it had been killed should be towed to the side of the schooner, where it would be firmly lashed. Then the sailors with their feet in spiked shoes would get upon its back and proceed to cut the blubber, from head to tail, in long strips, which would first be divided into lumps about a foot and a half square, the lumps being subsequently chopped into smaller portions capable of being stored away in casks. The ordinary rule would be for a ship, as soon as the flaying was complete, to make its way to land where the blubber could be at once boiled down, an operation by which it is reduced by about a third of its weight, and by which it yields all its oil, the only portion of it which is of any value. Under present circumstances, however, Captain Hull would not think of melting down the blubber until his arrival at Valparaiso, and as he was sanguine that the wind would soon set in a favourable direction, he calculated that he should reach that port in less than three weeks, a period during which his cargo would not be deteriorated.

The latest movement with regard to the "Pilgrim" had been to bring her somewhat nearer the spot where the spouts of vapour indicated the presence of the coveted prize. The creature continued to swim about in the reddened waters, opening and shutting its huge jaws like an automaton, and absorbing at every mouthful whole myriads of animalcula. No one entertained a fear that it would try to make an escape; it was the unanimous verdict that it was "a fighting whale," and one that would resist all attacks to the very end.

As Captain Hull descended the rope-ladder and took his place in the front of the boat, Mrs. Weldon and all on board renewed their good wishes.

Dingo stood with his fore paws upon the taffrail, and appeared as much as any to be bidding the adventurous party farewell.

When the boat pushed off, those who were left on board the "Pilgrim" made their way slowly to the bows, from which the most extensive view was to be gained.

The captain's voice came from the retreating boat, —

"A sharp look-out, Dick; a sharp look-out; one eye on us, one on the ship!"

"Ay, ay, sir," replied the apprentice.

By his gestures the captain showed that he was under some emotion; he called out again, but the boat had made such headway that it was too far off for any words to be heard.

Dingo broke out into a piteous howl.

The dog was still standing erect, his eye upon the boat in the distance. To the sailors, ever superstitious, the howling was not reassuring. Even Mrs. Weldon was startled.

“Why, Dingo, Dingo,” she exclaimed, “this isn’t the way to encourage your friends. Come here, sir; you must behave better than that!”

Sinking down on all fours the animal walked slowly up to Mrs. Weldon, and began to lick her hand.

“Ah!” muttered old Tom, shaking his head solemnly, “he doesn’t wag his tail at all. A bad omen.”

All at once the dog gave a savage growl.

As she turned her head, Mrs Weldon caught sight of Negoro making his way to the forecastle, probably actuated by the general spirit of curiosity to follow the maneuvers of the whale-boat. He stopped and seized a handspike as soon as he saw the ferocious attitude of the dog.

The lady was quite unable to pacify the animal, which seemed about to fly upon the throat of the cook, but Dick Sands called out loudly, —

“Down, Dingo, down!”

The dog obeyed; but it seemed to be with extreme reluctance that he returned to Dick’s side; he continued to growl, as if still remembering his rage. Negoro had turned very pale, and having put down the handspike, made his way cautiously back to his own quarters.

“Hercules,” said Dick, “I must get you to keep your eye upon that man.”

“Yes, I will,” he answered, significantly clenching his fists.

Dick took his station at the helm, whence he kept an earnest watch upon the whale-boat, which under the vigourous plying of the seamen’s oars had become little more than a speck upon the water.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CATASTROPHE.

Experienced whaleman as he was, Captain Hull knew the difficulty of the task he had undertaken, he was alive to the importance of making his approach to the whale from the leeward, so that there should be no sound to apprize the creature of the proximity of the boat. He had perfect confidence in his boatswain, and felt sure that he would take the proper course to insure a favourable result to the enterprise.

“We mustn’t show ourselves too soon, Howick,” he said.

“Certainly not,” replied Howick, “I am going to skirt the edge of the discoloured water, and I shall take good care to get well to leeward.”

“All right,” the captain answered, and turning to the crew said, “now, my lads, as quietly as you can.”

Muffling the sound of their oars by placing straw in the rowlocks, and avoiding the least unnecessary noise, the men skilfully propelled the boat along the outline of the water tinged by the crustacea, so that while the starboard oars still dipped in the green and limpid sea, the larboard were in the deep-dyed waves, and seemed as though they were dripping with blood.

“Wine on this side, water on that,” said one of the sailors jocosely.

“But neither of them fit to drink,” rejoined the captain sharply, “so just hold your tongue!”

Under Howick’s guidance the boat now glided stealthily

on to the greasy surface of the reddened waters, where she appeared to float as on a pool of oil. The whale seemed utterly unconscious of the attack that was threatening it, and allowed the boat to come nearer without exhibiting any sign of alarm.

The wide circuit which the captain had thought it advisable to take had the effect of considerably increasing the distance between his boat and the "Pilgrim," whilst the strange rapidity with which objects at sea become diminished in apparent magnitude, as if viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, made the ship look farther away than she actually was.

Another half-hour elapsed, and at the end of it the captain found himself so exactly to leeward that the huge body of the whale was precisely intermediate between his boat and the "Pilgrim." A closer approach must now be made; every precaution must be used; but the time had come to get sufficiently near for the harpoon to be discharged.

"Slowly, my men," said the captain, in a low voice; "slowly and softly!"

Howick muttered something that implied that the whale had ceased blowing so hard, and that it was aware of their approach; the captain, upon this, enjoined the most perfect silence, but urged his crew onwards, until, in five or six minutes, they were within a cable's length of the finback. Erect at the stern the boatswain stood, and manoeuvred to get the boat as close as possible to the whale's left flank, while he made it an object of special care to keep beyond the reach of its formidable tail, one stroke of which could involve them all in instantaneous disaster.

The manipulation of the boat thus left to the boatswain, the captain made ready for the arduous effort that was before him. At the extreme bow, harpoon in hand, with his legs somewhat astride so as to insure his equilibrium, he stood prepared to plunge his weapon into the mass that rose above the surface of the sea. By his side, coiled in a pail, and with one end firmly attached to the harpoon, was the first of the five lines which if the whale should dive to a considerable depth, would have to be joined end to end, one after another .

“Are you ready, my lads?” said he, hardly above a whisper.

“Ay, ay, sir,” replied Howick, speaking as gently as his master, and giving a firmer grip to the rudder-oar that he held in his hands.

“Then, alongside at once,” was the captain’s order, which was promptly obeyed, so that in a few minutes the boat was only about ten feet from the body of the whale. The animal did not move. Was it asleep? In that case there was hope that the very first stroke might be fatal. But it was hardly likely. Captain Hull felt only too sure that there was some different cause to be assigned for its remaining so still and stationary; and the rapid glances of the boatswain showed that he entertained the same suspicion. But it was no time for speculation; the moment for action had arrived, and no attempt was made on either hand to exchange ideas upon the subject.

Captain Hull seized his weapon tightly by the shaft, and having poised it several times in the air, in order to make more sure of his aim, he gathered all his strength and hurled it against the side of the finback.

“Backwater!” he shouted.

The sailors pushed back with all their might, and the boat in an instant was beyond the range of the creature’s tail.

And now the immoveableness of the animal was at once accounted for.

“See; there’s a youngster!” exclaimed Howick.

And he was not mistaken. Startled by the blow of the harpoon the monster had heeled over on to its side, and the movement revealed a young whale which the mother had been disturbed in the act of suckling. It was a discovery which made Captain Hull aware that the capture of the whale would be attended with double difficulty; he knew; that she would defend “her little one” (if such a term can be applied to a creature that was at least twenty feet long) with the most determined fury; yet having made what he considered a successful commencement of the attack, he would not be daunted, nor deterred from his endeavour to secure so fine a prize.

The whale did not, as sometimes happens, make a precipitate dash upon the boat, a proceeding which necessitates the instant cutting of the harpoon-line, and an immediate retreat, but it took the far more usual course of diving downwards almost perpendicularly. It was followed by its calf; very soon, however, after rising once again to the surface with a sudden bound, it began swimming along under water with great rapidity.

Before its first plunge Captain Hull and Howick had sufficient opportunity to observe that it was an unusually large balaenoptera, measuring at least eighty feet from head to tail, its colour being of a yellowish-brown, dappled with numerous spots of a darker shade.

The pursuit, or what may be more aptly termed “the towing,” of the whale had now fairly commenced. The sailors had shipped their oars, and the whale-boat darted like an arrow along the surface of the waves. In spite of the oscillation, which was very violent, Howick succeeded in maintaining equilibrium, and did not need the repeated injunctions with which the agitated captain urged his boatswain to be upon his guard.

But fast as the boat flew along, she could not keep pace with the whale, and so rapidly did the line run out that except proper care had been taken to keep the bucket in which it was coiled filled with water, the friction against the edge of the boat would inevitably have caused it to take fire. The whale gave no indication of moderating its speed, so that the first line was soon exhausted, and the second had to be attached to its end, only to be run out with like rapidity. In a few minutes more it was necessary to join on the third line; it was evident that the whale had not been hit in a vital part, and so far from rising to the surface, the oblique direction of the rope indicated that the creature was seeking yet greater depths.

“Confound it!” exclaimed the captain; “it seems as if the brute is going to run out all our line.”

“Yes; and see what a distance the animal is dragging us away from the ‘Pilgrim,’” answered Howick.

“Sooner or later, however,” said Captain Hull, “the thing must come to the surface; she is not a fish, you know.”

“She is saving her breath for the sake of her speed,” said one of the sailors with a grin.

But grin as he might, both he and his companions began to look serious when the fourth line had to be added to the third, and more serious still when the fifth was added to the fourth. The captain even began to mutter imprecations upon the refractory brute that was putting their patience to so severe a test.

The last line was nearly all uncoiled, and the general consternation was growing very great, when there was observed to be a slight slackening in the tension.

“Thank Heaven!” cried the captain; “the beast has tired herself out at last.”

Casting his eye towards the “Pilgrim,” he saw at a glance that she could not be less than five miles to leeward. It was a long distance, but when, according to his arrangement, he had hoisted the flag on the boat-hook which was to be the signal for the ship to approach, he had the satisfaction of seeing that Dick Sands and the negroes at once began bracing the yards to get as near as possible to the wind. The breeze, however, blew only in short, unsteady puffs, and it was only too evident that the “Pilgrim” would have considerable difficulty in working her way to the whale-boat, even if she succeeded at last.

Meantime, just as had been expected, the whale had risen to the surface of the water, the harpoon still fixed firmly in her side. She remained motionless, apparently waiting for her calf, which she had far out-distanced in her mad career. Captain Hull ordered his men to pull towards her as rapidly as they could, and on getting close up, two of the sailors, following the captain’s example, shipped their oars and took up the long lances with which the whale was now to be attacked. Howick held himself in readiness to sheer off quickly in the event of the finback making a turn towards the boat.

“Now, my lads!” shouted the captain. “Look out! take a good aim! no false shots! Are you ready, Howick?”

“Quite ready, captain,” answered the boatswain, adding, “but it perplexes me altogether to see the brute so quiet all of a sudden.”

“It looks suspicious,” said the captain; “but never mind; go on! straight ahead!”

Captain Hull was becoming more excited every moment.

During the time the boat was approaching, the whale had only turned round a little in the water without changing its position. It was evidently still looking for its calf, which was not to be seen by its side. All of a sudden it gave a jerk with its tail which carried it some few yards away.

The men were all excited. Was the beast going to escape again? Was the fatiguing pursuit all to come over a second time? Must not the chase be abandoned? Would not the prize have to be given up?

But no: the whale was not starting on another flight; it had merely turned so as to face the boat, and now rapidly beating the water with its enormous fins, it commenced a frantic dash forwards.

“Look out, Howick, she’s coming!” shouted Captain Hull.

The skilful boatswain was all on the alert; the boat swerved, as if by instinct, so as to avoid the blow, and as the whale passed furiously by, she received three tremendous thrusts from the lances of the captain and the two men, who all endeavoured to strike at some vital part. There was a sudden pause. The whale spouted up two gigantic columns of blood and water, lashed its tail, and, with bounds and plunges that were terrible to behold, renewed its angry attack upon the boat.

None but the most determined of whalemen could fail to lose their head under such an assault. Calm and collected, however, the crew remained. Once again did Howick adroitly sheer aside, and once again did the three lances do their deadly work upon the huge carcase as it rolled impetuously past; but this time, so great was the wave that was caused by the infuriated animal, that the boat was well-nigh full of water, and in imminent danger of being capsized.

“Bale away, men!” cried the captain.

Putting down their oars, the other sailors set to work baling with all their might. Captain Hull cut the harpoon-line, now no longer required, because the whale, maddened with pain and grief for the loss of its offspring, would certainly make no further attempt to escape, but would fight desperately to the very end.

The finback was obviously bent on a third onslaught upon the boat, which, being in spite of all the men’s exertions still more than half full of water, no longer answered readily to the rudder-oar.

No one thought of flight. The swiftest boat could be overtaken in a very few bounds. There was no alternative but to face the encounter. It was not long in coming. Their previous good fortune failed them. The whale in passing caught the boat with such a violent blow from its dorsal fin, that the men lost their footing and the lances missed their mark.

“Where’s Howick?” screamed the captain in alarm.

“Here I am, captain; all right!” replied the boatswain, who had scrambled to his feet only to find that the oar with which he had been steering was snapped in half.

“The rudder’s smashed,” he said.

“Take another, Howick; quick!” cried the captain.

But scarcely had he time to replace the broken oar, when a bubbling was heard a few yards away from the boat, and the young whale made its appearance on the surface of the sea. Catching sight of it instantly, the mother made a fresh dash in its direction, the maternal instincts were aroused, and the contest must become more deadly than ever.

Captain Hull looked towards the “Pilgrim,” and waved his signal frantically above his head. It was, however, with

no hope of succour; he was only too well aware that no human efforts could effectually hasten the arrival of the ship. Dick Sands indeed had at once obeyed the first summons: already the wind was filling the sails, but in default of steam power her progress at best could not be otherwise than slow. Not only did Dick feel convinced that it would be a useless waste of time to lower a boat and come off with the negroes to the rescue, but he remembered the strict orders he had received on no account to quit the ship. Captain Hull, however, could perceive that the apprentice had had the aft-boat lowered, and was towing it along, so that it should be in readiness for a refuge as soon as they should get within reach.

But the whale, close at hand, demanded attention that could ill be spared for the yet distant ship. Covering her young one with her body, she was manifestly designing another charge full upon the boat.

“On your guard, Howick! sheer off!” bellowed the captain.

But the order was useless. The fresh oar that the boatswain had taken to replace the broken one was considerably shorter, and consequently it failed in lever-power. There was, in fact, no helm for the boat to answer. The sailors saw the failure, and convinced that all was lost uttered one long, despairing cry that might have been heard on board the “Pilgrim.” Another moment, and from beneath there came a tremendous blow from the monster’s tail that sent the boat flying in the air. In fragments it fell back again into a sea that was lashed into fury by the angry flapping of the finback’s fins.

Was it not possible for the unfortunate men, bleeding and wounded as they were, still to save themselves by clinging to some floating spar? Captain Hull is indeed seen endeavouring to hoist the boatswain on to a drifting plank. But all in vain. There is no hope. The whale, writhing in the convulsions of death, returns yet once again to the attack; the waters around the struggling sailors seethe and foam. A brief turmoil follows as if there were the bursting of some vast waterspout.

In a quarter of an hour afterwards, Dick Sands, with the negroes, reaches the scene of the catastrophe. All is still and desolate. Every living object has vanished. Nothing is visible except a few fragments of the whale-boat floating on the blood-stained water.

CHAPTER IX.

DICK’S PROMOTION.

The first feeling experienced by those on board the “Pilgrim,” after witnessing the terrible disaster was one of grief and horror at the fearful death that had befallen the victims. Captain Hull and his men had been swept away before their very eyes, and they had been powerless to assist. Not one was saved; the schooner had reached the spot too late to offer the least resistance to the attacks of the formidable sea-monster.

When Dick and the negroes returned to the ship after their hopeless search, with only the corroboration of their sad foreboding that captain and crew had disappeared for ever, Mrs. Weldon sank upon her knees; little Jack knelt beside her crying bitterly; and Dick, old Nan, and all the negroes stood reverently around her whilst with great devoutness the lady offered up the prayer of commendation for the souls of the departing. All sympathized heartily with her supplications, nor was there any diminution of their fervour when she proceeded to implore that the survivors might have strength and courage for their own hour of need.

The situation was indeed very grave. Here was the “Pilgrim” in the middle of the Pacific, hundreds of miles away from the nearest land, without captain, without crew, at the mercy of the wind and waves. It was a strange fatality that had brought the whale across their path; it was a fatality stranger still that had induced her captain, a man of no ordinary prudence, to risk even his life for the sake of making good a deficient cargo. It was an event almost unknown in the annals of whale-fishing that not a single man in the whale-boat should escape alive; nevertheless, it was all too true; and now, of all those left on board, Dick Sands, the apprentice-boy of fifteen years of age, was the sole individual who had the slightest knowledge of the management of a ship; the negroes, brave and willing as they were, were perfectly ignorant of seamen’s duties; and, to crown all, here was a lady with her child on board, for whose safety the commander of the vessel would be held responsible.

Such were the facts which presented themselves to the mind of Dick as, with folded arms, he stood gazing gloomily at the spot where Captain Hull, his esteemed benefactor, had sunk to rise no more. The lad raised his eyes sadly; he scanned the horizon with the vain hope that he might perchance descry some passing vessel to which he could confide Mrs. Weldon and her son; for himself, his mind was made up; he had already resolved that nothing should induce him to quit the “Pilgrim” until he had exhausted every energy in trying to carry her into port.

The ocean was all deserted. Since the disappearance of the whale nothing had broken the monotonous surface either of sea or sky. The apprentice, short as his experience was, knew enough to be aware that he was far out of the common track alike of merchantmen or whalers; he would not buoy himself up with false expectations; he would look his situation full and fairly in the face; he would do his best, and trust hopefully in guidance from the Power above.

Thus absorbed in his meditations he did not observe that he was not alone. Negoro, who had gone below immediately after the catastrophe, had again come back upon deck. What this mysterious character had felt upon witnessing the awful calamity it would be impossible to say. Although with his eye he had keenly taken in every detail of the melancholy spectacle, every muscle of, his face had remained unmoved; not a gesture, not a word betrayed the least emotion. Even if he had heard, he had taken no part, nor evinced the faintest interest in Mrs. Weldon’s outpouring of prayer.

He had made his way to the stern, where Dick Sands was pondering over the responsibilities of his own position, and stood looking towards the apprentice without interrupting his reverie.

Catching sight of him, Dick roused himself in an instant, and said, —

“You want to speak to me?”

“I must speak either to the captain or the boatswain,” answered the man.

“Negoro,” said Dick sharply, “you know as well as I do, that they are both drowned.”

“Then where am I to get my orders from?” asked the fellow insolently.

“From me,” promptly rejoined the apprentice.

“From you! from a boy of fifteen?”

“Yes, from me,” repeated Dick, in a firm and resolute voice, looking at the man until he recoiled under his gaze. “From *me*”

Mrs. Weldon had heard what passed.

“I wish every one on board to understand,” she interposed, “that Dick Sands is captain now. Orders must be taken from him, and they must be obeyed.”

Negoro frowned, bit his lip, sneered, and having muttered something that was unintelligible, made his way back to his cabin.

Meantime, the schooner under the freshening breeze had been carried beyond the shoal of the crustaceans. Dick cast his eye first at the sails, then along the deck, and seemed to become more and more alive to the weight of the obligation that had fallen upon him; but his heart did not fail him; he was conscious that the hopes of the passengers centred in himself, and he was determined to let them see that he would do his best not to disappoint them.

Although he was satisfied of his capability, with the help of the negroes, to manipulate the sails, he was conscious of a defect of the scientific knowledge which was requisite for properly controlling the ship's course. He felt the want of a few more years' experience. If only he had had longer practice he would, he thought, have been as able as Captain Hull himself, to use the sextant, to take the altitude of the stars, to read the time from his chronometer; sun, moon, and planets, should have been his guides; from the firmament, as from a dial-plate, he would have gathered the teachings of his true position; but all this was beyond him as yet; his knowledge went no further than the use of the log and compass, and by these alone he must be content to make his reckonings. But he kept up his courage, and did not permit himself for one moment to despair of ultimate success.

Mrs. Weldon needed little penetration to recognize the thoughts which were passing in the mind of the resolute youth.

“I see you have come to your decision, Dick,” she said. “The command of the ship is in your hands; no fear but that you will do your duty; and Tom, and the rest of them, no doubt, will render you every assistance in their power.”

“Yes, Mrs. Weldon,” rejoined Dick brightly; “and before long I shall hope to make them good seamen. If only the weather lasts fair, everything will go on well enough; and if the weather turns out bad, we must not despond; we will get safe ashore."

He paused a moment and added reverently, —

"God helping us."

Mrs. Weldon proceeded to inquire whether he had any means of ascertaining the "Pilgrim's" present position. He replied that the ship's chart would at once settle that. Captain Hull had kept the reckoning accurately right up to the preceding day.

"And what do you propose to do next?" she asked. "Of course you understand that in our present circumstances we are not in the least bound to go to Valparaiso if there is a nearer port which we could reach."

"Certainly not," replied Dick; "and therefore it is my intention to sail due east, as by following that course we are sure to come upon some part of the American coast."

"Do your best, Dick, to let us get ashore somewhere."

"Never fear, madam," he answered; "as we get nearer land we shall be almost sure to fall in with a cruiser which will put us into the right track. If the wind does but remain in the north-west, and allow us to carry plenty of sail, we shall get on famously."

He spoke with the cheery confidence of a good sailor who knows the good ship beneath his feet. He had moved off a few steps to go and take the helm, when Mrs. Weldon, calling him back, reminded him that he had not yet ascertained the true position of the schooner. Dick confessed that it ought to be done at once, and going to the captain’s cabin brought out the chart upon which the ill-fated commander had marked the bearings the evening before. According to this dead-reckoning they were in lat. 43° 35’, S. and long. 164° 13’, W.; and as the schooner had made next to no progress during the last twenty-four eventful hours, the entry might fairly be accepted as representing approximately their present position.

To the lady’s inexperienced eye, as she bent over the outspread chart, it seemed that the land, as represented by the brown patch which depicted the continent of South America extending like a barrier between two oceans from Cape Horn to Columbia, was, after all, not so very far distant; the wide space of the Pacific was not so broad but that it would be quickly traversed.

“Oh, we shall soon be on shore!” she said.

But Dick knew better. He had acquaintance enough with the scale upon which the chart was constructed to be aware that the “Pilgrim” herself would have been a speck like a microscopic infusoria on the vast surface of that sea, and that hundreds and hundreds of weary miles separated her from the coast.

No time was to be lost. Contrary winds had ceased to blow; a fresh north-westerly breeze had sprung up, and the *cirri*, or curl-cloud: overhead indicated that for some time at least the direction of the wind would be unchanged.

Dick appealed to the negroes, and tried to make them appreciate the difficulty of the task that had fallen to his lot. Tom answered, in behalf of himself and all the rest, that they were not only willing, but anxious, to do all they could to assist him, saying that if their knowledge was small, yet their arms were strong, and added that they should certainly be obedient to every order he gave.

“My friends,” said Dick, addressing them in reply; “I shall make it a point of myself taking the helm as much as possible. But you know I must have my proper rest sometimes. No one can live without sleep. Now, Tom, I intend you to stand by me for the remainder of the day. I will try and make you understand how to steer by the aid of the compass. It is not difficult. You will soon learn. I shall have to leave you when I go to my hammock for an hour or two.”

“Is there nothing,” said little Jack, “that I can learn to do?”

“Oh yes, Jack; you shall keep the wind in order,” answered Dick, smiling.

“That I will!” cried the child, clapping his hands, while the mother drew him to her side.

“And now, my men,” was Dick’s first order to his crew, we must brace in the yards to sail fair. I will show you how.”

“All right, Captain Sands; we are at your service,” said old Tom gravely.

CHAPTER X.

THE NEW CREW.

Dick Sands, captain of the “Pilgrim,” would not lose a moment in getting his ship under sail. His prime object was to land his passengers safely at Valparaiso or some other American port, and to accomplish his purpose it was in the first place necessary that he should ascertain the schooner’s rate of speed and the direction that she was taking. This information was to be obtained readily enough by means of the log and compass, and the result of each day’s observations would be entered regularly on the chart.

The log on board was a patent log, with a dial-plate and screw, by means of which the distance that is travelled can be measured accurately for any definite time; it was an instrument so simple that the negroes were very soon taught its use. The slight error in the reckoning caused by the action of the currents could only be rectified by astronomical observations, which, as already has been stated, were beyond Dick’s attainments to make.

The idea more than once crossed Dick’s mind whether he would not take the “Pilgrim” back again to New Zealand; the distance was considerably less than it was to America, and had the wind remained in the quarter whence it had been blowing so long, it is more than likely he would have determined to retrace his course. But as the wind had now veered to the north-west, and there was every probability that it was settled for a time, he came to the conclusion that he had better take advantage of it and persevere in making his way towards the east. Accordingly he lost no time in putting his ship before the wind.

On a schooner the fore-mast usually carries four square sails; on the lower mast a fore-sail; on the top-mast a top-sail; on the top-gallant a top-gallant-sail and a royal. The main-mast carries only a main-sail and a top-sail. Between the masts upon the fore-stays can be hoisted a triple tier of triangular sails; while the bowsprit with its jib-boom will carry the three jibs.

The jibs, the main-sail, the main-top-sail and the staysails are all managed with comparative ease, because they can be hoisted from the deck without the necessity of ascending the mast to let fly the robbins, by which they are fastened to the yards. With the sails on the fore-mast it is altogether a more difficult business. In order either to unfurl them, to take them in, or to reef them, it is necessary for a man to clamber up by the shrouds, either to the fore-top, or to the top-gallant cross-trees, and thence mounting by loose ropes, extended below the yards, to hold on by one hand whilst he does his work with the other. The operation requires alike the head and arm of an experienced mariner; and when a fresh breeze has been blowing, it is a casualty far from uncommon that a sailor, confused by the flapping of the canvas and the pitching of the vessel, should be blown overboard in the act. For the unpractised negroes the danger would necessarily be very great. However, the wind at present was very moderate, and the ship ploughed her way over the waves without any violent oscillations.

At the time when Dick Sands, in obedience to the signal he received from Captain Hull, proceeded to make his way to the scene of the disaster, the “Pilgrim,” as she lay to, was carrying only her jibs, main-sail, fore-sail, and fore-top-sail. In order, therefore, to put her as near as possible to the wind, it had been merely necessary to counter-brace the fore-sail yard, a manoeuvre in which the negroes had rendered all the assistance that was necessary. It was requisite now to do something more. To enable him to get straight before the wind Dick wanted to increase his sail, and was desirous of hoisting the top-gallant, the royal, the main-top-sail, and the stay-sails.

He was himself standing at the wheel.

“Now, my men,” he shouted to the negroes; “I want your help. Do exactly as I tell you. Bear away, Tom!”

Tom looked puzzled.

“Bear away! unfasten that rope, I mean. And, Bat, come along; do the same as Tom.”

The men did what they were bidden.

“That’s right!” continued Dick, and calling to Hercules, said, —

“Now, Hercules; a good strong pull!”

To give such a direction to Hercules was somewhat imprudent; the rigging creaked again under his giant strength.

“Gently, gently, my good fellow!” said Dick, laughing; “you will have the mast down.”

“I declare I hardly touched the rope,” answered Hercules.

“Well, next time, you must only pretend to touch it,” said Dick; and, continuing his orders, shouted, “Now slacken! let fly! make fast! now brace in the yards! all right! that’s capital!”

The yards were loosened, the foresails turned slowly round, and, catching the breeze, gave a slight impetus to the ship. Dick’s next orders were for the jib-sheets to be set free, and then he called the men to the stern.

“Now,” said he; “we must look to the main-mast; but take care, Hercules, not to have it down.”

“I will be as careful as possible, Mr. Dick,” submissively replied Hercules, as though he were afraid to commit himself to any rash promise.

The manoeuvre was simple enough. The main-sheet was gradually slackened, the great sail took the wind and added its powerful action to that of the fore-sails. The main-top-sail was next brought to bear; it was only clewed up, so that there was nothing to do except to pull the halyards, haul it aboard the tack, and unfurl it. But in pulling at the halyards the muscular energy of Hercules, which was supplemented by that of Actæon, not to forget little Jack, who had volunteered his assistance, proved to be overpowering, and the rope snapped in two. All three of them, of course, fell flat upon the deck; but fortunately neither of them was hurt, and Jack laughed heartily at his tumble as an excellent joke.

“Up with you!” cried Captain Dick; “there’s no harm done; splice the rope, and haul away more gently next time.”

It took but a few minutes to execute the order, and the “Pilgrim” was soon sailing away rapidly with her head to the east.

“Well done, my friends!” said Dick, who had not left his post at the helm; “you will be first-rate sailors before the end of the voyage.”

“We shall do our best, I promise you, Captain Sands,” replied Tom, making it a point to give the young commander his proper title.

Mrs. Weldon also congratulated the new crew upon the success of their first attempt.

“I believe it was Master Jack who broke that rope,” said Hercules, with a sly twinkle in his eye; “he is very strong, I can tell you.”

Jack looked as though he thoroughly appreciated the compliment, and evidenced his satisfaction by giving his huge friend a hearty shake of the hand.

There were still several sails that were not yet set. Running well before the wind as the “Pilgrim” was, Dick nevertheless felt that the gallant, royal, and stay-sails, if brought into service, would materially assist her progress, and he determined not to dispense with their help. The stay-sails could be hoisted from below, but to bring the gallant and royal into play demanded more experience than any of his crew had had. Knowing that he could not entrust the task to them, and yet resolved not to be baulked of his wish to set them, he undertook the task himself. He first put Tom to the helm, showing him how to keep the schooner’s head in the right direction, and having placed the other four at the royal and top-gallant halyards, proceeded to mount the foremast.

To clamber up the foreshrouds and the top-shrouds on to the cross-trees was mere child’s play to the active apprentice. In a few minutes he had unfurled the top-gallant-sail, mounted to the royal-yard, unfurled the royal, again reached the cross-trees, and having caught hold of one of the starboard backstays, had descended to the deck; there he gave the necessary directions, and the two sails were made fast, and both yards braced.

Nor did this content him. The stay-sails were set between the masts, and thus the “Pilgrim” was running along, crowded to the full, with all her canvas. The only additional sails which Dick could possibly have employed would have been some studding-sails to larboard, but as the setting of these was a matter of some difficulty, and they were not always readily struck in the case of a sudden squall, he contented himself without them.

Again he took his place at the helm. The breeze was manifestly freshening, and the “Pilgrim,” almost imperceptibly heeling to starboard, glided rapidly along the surface of the water, leaving behind her a wake, smooth and clean, that bore plain witness to the true adjustment of her water-line.

“This is good progress, Mrs. Weldon,” he said; “may Heaven grant the wind and weather may continue thus favourable!”

The lady, in silence, shook the boy’s hand; and then, worn-out with the excitement of the past hours, went to her cabin, where she lay down and fell into a troubled doze.

The new crew remained on watch. They were stationed on the forecastle, in readiness to make any alteration which the sails might require, but the wind was so steady and unshifting that no need arose for their services.

And Cousin Benedict? all this time, where was he? and what had he been doing?

He was sitting in his cabin; he had a magnifying-glass in his hand and was studying an articulata of the order orthoptera, an insect of the Blattidae family; its characteristics are a roundish body, rather long wings, flat elytra, and a head hidden by the prothorax. He had been on deck at the time of the calamity; the ill-fated captain with the crew had been drowned before his very eyes; but he said nothing; not that he was unmoved; to think that he was not struck with horror would be to libel his kind and pitying nature. His sympathy was aroused, especially for his cousin; he pressed her hand warmly as if he would assure her of his truest commiseration; but he said nothing; he hurried off towards his cabin; and who shall deny that it was to devise some wonderfully energetic measures that he would take in consequence of this melancholy event?

Passing the kitchen, however, he caught sight of Negoro in the act of crushing a blatta, an American species of cockroach. He broke out into a storm of invective, and in tones of indignation demanded the surrender of the insect, which Negoro made with cool contempt. In a moment Captain Hull and his partners in death were all forgotten; the enthusiast had secured a prize with which he hastened to his own little compartment, where he was soon absorbed in proving to his own satisfaction, in opposition to the opinion of other entomologists, that the blattae of the phoraspous species, which are remarkable for their colours, differ in their habits from blattae of the ordinary sort.

For the remainder of the day perfect order reigned on board the “Pilgrim.” Though they were unable to shake off the sickening feeling of horror roused by the frightful disaster, and felt that they had sustained a startling shock, all the passengers seemed mechanically to fall into their usual routine. Dick Sands, though avowedly at the wheel, seemed to be everywhere, with an eye for every thing, and his amateur crew obeyed him readily, and with the promptness of a willing activity.

Negoro made no further overt attempt to question the young captain’s authority, but remained shut up in his kitchen. Dick made no secret of his determination to place the cook in close confinement if he exhibited any future sign of insubordination. Hercules was ready to carry him off bodily to the hold, and old Nan was equally ready to take his place in the cooking department. Probably Negoro was aware of all this; at any rate he did not seem disposed to give any further cause of offence at present.

As the day advanced the wind continued to freshen; but no shifting of the sails seemed necessary. The “Pilgrim” was running well. There was no need to diminish her spread of canvas. Masts as solid and rigging as strong as hers could stand a far heavier breeze.

As a general rule, it is deemed prudent in case of a squall to shorten sail at night, and especially to take in gallants and royal; but the weather prospects now were all so promising and satisfactory that Dick persuaded himself he was under no necessity to take this precaution; he rather felt himself bound to take the strongest measures he could to expedite his reaching less unfrequented waters. He made up his mind, however, not to leave the deck at all that night.

The young captain made every effort to get an approximate reckoning of the schooner’s progress. He heaved the log every half-hour and duly registered the result of each successive examination. There were two compasses on board; one in the binnacle, close under the eye of the helmsman, the other, an inverted compass, being attached to the rafters of the captain’s cabin, so that without leaving his berth he could see whether the man in charge of the wheel was holding a proper course.

Every vessel that is duly furnished for a lengthened voyage has always not only two compasses but two chronometers, one to correct the other. The “Pilgrim” was not deficient in this respect, and Dick Sands made a strong point of admonishing his crew that they should take especial care of the compasses, which under their present circumstances were of such supreme importance.

A misfortune, however, was in store for them. On the night of the 12th, while Dick was on watch, the compass in the cabin became detached from its fastening and fell on the floor. The accident was not discovered until the following morning. Whether the metal ferule that had attached the instrument to the rafters had become rusty, or whether it had been worn away by additional friction it seemed impossible to settle. All that could be said was that the compass was broken beyond repair. Dick was extremely grieved at the loss; but he did not consider that any one was to be blamed for the mishap, and could only resolve for the future to take extra care of the compass in the binnacle.

With the exception of this *contretemps*, everything appeared to go on satisfactorily on board. Mrs. Weldon, reassured by Dick's confidence, had regained much of her wonted calmness, and was besides ever supported by a sincere religious spirit. She and Dick had many a long conversation together. The ingenuous lad was always ready to take the kind and intelligent lady into his counsel, and day by day would point out to her on the chart the registers he made as the result of his dead reckoning; he would then try and satisfy her that under the prevailing wind there could be no doubt they must arrive at the coast of South America: moreover, he said that, unless he was much mistaken, they should sight the land at no great distance from Valparaiso.

Mrs. Weldon had, in truth, no reason to question the correctness of Dick's representations; she owned that provided the wind remained in the same favourable quarter, there was every prospect of their reaching land in safety; nevertheless at times she could not resist the misgiving that would arise when she contemplated what might be the result of a change of wind or a breaking of the weather.

With the light-heartedness that belonged to his age, Jack soon fell back into his accustomed pursuits, and was to be seen merrily running over the deck or romping with Dingo. At times, it is true, he missed the companionship of Dick; but his mother made him comprehend that now that Dick, was captain, his time was too much occupied to allow him; any leisure for play, and the child quite understood that he must not interrupt his old friend in his new duties.

The negroes performed their work with intelligence, and seemed to make rapid progress in the art of seamanship. Tom had been unanimously appointed boatswain, and took one watch with Bat and Austin, the alternate watch being discharged by Dick himself with Hercules and Actæon. One of them steered so that the other two were free to watch at the bows. As a general rule Dick Sands managed to remain at the wheel all night; five or six hours' sleep in the daytime sufficed for him, and during the time when he was lying down he entrusted the wheel to Tom or Bat, who under his instructions had become very fair helmsmen. Although in these unfrequented waters there was little chance of running foul of any other vessel, Dick invariably took the precaution of lighting his signals, carrying a green light to starboard and a red light to port. His exertions, however, were a great strain upon him, and sometimes during the night his fatigue would induce a heavy drowsiness, and he steered, as it were, by instinct more than by attention.

On the night of the 13th, he was so utterly worn-out that he was obliged to ask Tom to relieve him at the helm whilst he went down for a few hours' rest. Actæon and Hercules remained on watch on the forecastle.

The night was very dark; the sky was covered with heavy clouds that had formed in the chill evening air, and the sails on the top-masts were lost in the obscurity. At the stern, the lamps on either side of the binnacle cast a faint reflection on the metal mountings of the wheel, leaving the deck generally in complete darkness.

Towards three o’clock in the morning Tom was getting so heavy with sleepiness that he was almost unconscious. His eye, long fixed steadily on the compass, lost its power of vision, and he fell into a doze from which it would require more than a slight disturbance to arouse him.

Meantime a light shadow glided stealthily along the deck. Creeping gradually up to the binnacle, Negoro put down something heavy that he had brought in his hand. He stole a keen and rapid glance at the dial of the compass, and made his way back, unseen and unheard as he had come.

Almost immediately afterwards, Tom awakened from his slumber. His eye fell instinctively on the compass, and he saw in a moment that the ship was out of her proper course. By a turn of the helm he brought her head to what he supposed to be the east. But he was mistaken. During his brief interval of unconsciousness a piece of iron had been deposited beneath the magnetic needle, which by this means had been diverted thirty degrees to the right, and, instead of pointing due north, inclined far towards north-east.

Consequently it came to pass that the “Pilgrim,” supposed by her young commander to be making good headway due east, was in reality, under the brisk north-west breeze, speeding along towards the south-east.

CHAPTER XI.

ROUGH WEATHER.

During the ensuing week nothing particular occurred on board. The breeze still freshened, and the “Pilgrim” made on the average 160 miles every twenty-four hours. The speed was as great as could be expected from a craft of her size.

Dick grew more and more sanguine in his anticipations that it could not be long before the schooner would cross the track of the mail-packets plying between the eastern and western hemispheres. He had made up his mind to hail the first passing vessel, and either to transfer his passengers, or what perhaps would be better still, to borrow a few sailors, and, it might be, an officer to work the “Pilgrim” to shore. He could not help, however, a growing sense of astonishment, when day after day passed, and yet there was no ship to be signalled. He kept the most vigourous look-out, but all to no purpose. Three voyages before had he made to the whale-fisheries, and his experience made him sure that he ought now to be sighting some English or American vessel on its way between the Equator and Cape Horn.

Very different, however, was the true position of the “Pilgrim” from what Dick supposed; not only had the ship been carried far out of her direct course by currents, the force of which there were no means of estimating, but from the moment when the compass had been tampered with by Negoro, the steering itself had put the vessel all astray.

Unconscious of both these elements of disturbance, Dick Sands was convinced that they were proceeding steadily eastwards, and was perpetually encouraging Mrs. Weldon and himself by the assurance that they must very soon arrive within view of the American coast; again and again asserting that his sole concern was for his passengers, and that for his own safety he had no anxiety.

“But think, Dick,” said the lady, “what a position you would have been in, if you had not had your passengers. You would have been alone with that terrible Negoro; you would have been rather alarmed then.”

“I should have taken good care to put it out of Negoro’s power to do me any mischief, and then I should have worked the ship by myself,” answered the lad stoutly.

His very pluck gave Mrs. Weldon renewed confidence. She was a woman with wonderful powers of endurance, and it was only when she thought of her little son that she had any feeling of despair; yet even this she endeavoured to conceal, and Dick’s undaunted courage helped her.

Although the youth of the apprentice did not allow him to pretend to any advanced scientific knowledge, he had the proverbial “weather-eye” of the sailor. He was not only very keen in noticing any change in the aspect of the sky, but he had learnt from Captain Hull, who was a clever meteorologist, to draw correct conclusions from the indications of the barometer; the captain, indeed, having taken the trouble to make him learn by heart the general rules which are laid down in Vorepierre’s *Dictionnaire Illustré*.

There are seven of these rules: —

1. If after a long period of fine weather the barometer falls suddenly and continuously, although the mercury may be descending for two or three days before there is an apparent change in the atmosphere, there will ultimately be rain; and the longer has been the time between the first

depression and the commencement of the rain, the longer the rain may be expected to last.

2. *Vice versâ,* if after a long period of wet weather the barometer begins to rise slowly and steadily, fine weather will ensue; and the longer the time between the first rising of the mercury and the commencement of the fine weather, the longer the fine weather may be expected to last.

3. If immediately after the fall or rise of the mercury a change of weather ensues, the change will be of no long continuance.

4. A gradual rise for two or three days during rain forecasts fine weather; but if there be a fall immediately on the arrival of the fine weather, it will not be for long. This rule holds also conversely.

5. In spring and autumn a sudden fall indicates rain; in the summer, if very hot, it foretells a storm. In the winter, after a period of steady frost, a fall prognosticates a change of wind with rain and hail; whilst a rise announces the approach of snow.

6. Rapid oscillations of the mercury either way are not to be interpreted as indicating either wet or dry weather of any duration; continuance of either fair or foul weather is forecast only by a prolonged and steady rise or fall beforehand.

7. At the end of autumn, after a period of wind and rain, a rise may be expected to be followed by north wind and frost.

Not merely had Dick got these rules by rote, but he had tested them by his own observations, and had become singularly trustworthy in his forecasts of the weather. He made a point of consulting the barometer several times every day, and although to all appearances the sky indicated that the fine weather was settled, it did not escape his observation that on the 20th the mercury showed a tendency to fall. Dick knew that rain, if it came, would be accompanied by wind; an opinion in which he was very soon confirmed by the breeze freshening, till the air was displaced at the rate of nearly sixty feet a second, or more

[Footnote 1: This and several of the other rules are concisely concentrated in the couplet —

Long foretold, long last; Short notice, soon past.]

than forty miles an hour; and he recognized the necessity of at once shortening sail. He had already used the precaution to take in the royal, the main-top-sail, and the flying jib, but he now at once resolved likewise to take in the top-gallant, and to have a couple of reefs in the foretop-sail.

To an inexperienced crew, the last operation was far from easy; but there was no symptom of shrinking from it. Followed by Bat and Austin, Dick mounted the rigging of the foremast, and with little trouble got to the top-gallant. Had the weather been less unpromising he would have been inclined to leave the two yards as they were, but anticipating the ultimate necessity of being obliged to lower the mast, he unrigged them, and let them down to the deck; he knew well enough that in the event of the gale rising as he expected, the lowering of the mast as well as the shortening of sail would contribute to diminish the strain and stress upon the vessel.

It was the work of two hours to get this preliminary operation over. There still remained the task of taking in the reefs in the top-sail.

The “Pilgrim” in one respect differed from most modern vessels. She did not carry a double foretop, which would very much have diminished the difficulty attending the reefing. It was consequently necessary to proceed as before; to mount the rigging, by main force to haul in the flapping canvas, and to make the fastening secure. But critical and dangerous as the task was, it was successfully accomplished, and the three young men, having descended safely to the deck, had the satisfaction of seeing the schooner run easily before the wind, which had further increased till it was blowing a stiff gale.

For three days the gale continued brisk and hard, yet without any variation in its direction. But all along the barometer was falling; the mercury sank to 28° without symptom of recovery. The sky was becoming overcast; clouds, thick and lowering, obscured the sun, and it was difficult to make out where it rose or where it set. Dick did his best to keep up his courage, but he could not disguise from himself that there was cause for uneasiness. He took no more rest than was absolutely necessary, and what repose he allowed himself he always took on deck; he maintained a calm exterior, but he was really tortured with anxiety.

Although the violence of the wind seemed to lull awhile, Dick did not suffer himself to be betrayed into any false security; he knew only too well what to expect, and after a brief interval of comparative quiet, the gale returned and the waves began to run very high.

About four o’clock one afternoon, Negoro (a most unusual thing for him) emerged from his kitchen, and skulked to the fore. Dingo was fast asleep, and did not make his ordinary growl by way of greeting to his enemy. For half an hour Negoro stood motionless, apparently surveying the horizon.

The heavy waves rolled past; they were higher than the condition of the wind warranted; their magnitude witnessed to a storm passing in the west, and there was every reason to suspect that the “Pilgrim” might be caught by its violence.

Negoro looked long at the water; he then raised his eyes and scanned the sky. Above and below he might have read threatening signs. The upper stratum of cloud was travelling far more rapidly than that beneath, an indication that ere long the masses of vapour would descend, and, coming in contact with the inferior current, would change the gale into a tempest, which probably would increase to a hurricane.

It might be from ignorance or it might be from indifference, but there was no indication of alarm on the face of Negoro; on the other hand there might be seen a sort of smile curling on his lip. After thus gazing above him and around him, he clambered on to the bowsprit, and made his way by degrees to the very gammonings; again he rested and looked about him as if to explore the horizon; after a while he clambered back on deck, and soon stealthily retreated to his own quarters.

No doubt there was much to cause concern in the general aspect of the weather; but there was one point on which they never failed to congratulate each other; — that the direction of the wind had never changed, and consequently must be carrying them in the desired course. Unless a storm should overtake them, they could continue their present navigation without peril, and with every prospect of finding a port upon the shore where they might put in. Such were their mutual and acknowledged hopes; but Dick secretly felt the misgiving lest, without a pilot, he might in his ignorance fail to find a harbour of refuge. Nevertheless, he would not suffer himself to meet trouble half-way, and kept up his spirits under the conviction that if difficulties came he should be strengthened to grapple with them or make his escape.

Time passed on, and the 9th of March arrived without material change in the condition of the atmosphere. The sky remained heavily burdened, and the wind, which occasionally had abated for a few hours, had always returned with at least its former violence. The occasional rising of the mercury never encouraged Dick to anticipate a permanent improvement in the weather, and he discerned only too plainly that brighter times at present were not to be looked for.

A startling alarm had more than once been caused by the sudden breaking of storms in which thunderbolts had seemed to fall within a few cables' lengths of the schooner. On these occasions the torrents of rain had been so heavy that the ship had appeared to be in the very midst of a whirlpool of vapour, and it was impossible to see a yard ahead.

The “Pilgrim” pitched and rolled frightfully. Fortunately Mrs. Weldon could bear the motion without much personal inconvenience, and consequently was able to devote her attention to her little boy, who was a miserable sufferer. Cousin Benedict was as undisturbed as the cockroaches he was investigating; he hardly noticed the increasing madness of either wind or wave, but went on with his studies as calmly as if he were in his own comfortable museum at San Francisco. Moreover, it was fortunate that the negroes did not suffer to any great degree from sea-sickness, and consequently were able to assist their captain in his arduous task, Dick was far too experienced a sailor himself to be inconvenienced by any oscillations of the vessel, however violent.

The “Pilgrim” still made good headway, and Dick, although he was aware that ultimately it would probably be necessary again to shorten sail, was anxious to postpone making any alteration before he was absolutely obliged. Surely, he reasoned with himself, the land could not now be far away; he had calculated his speed; he had kept a diligent reckoning on the chart; surely, the shore must be almost in sight. He would not trust his crew to keep watch; he was aware how easily their inexperienced eyes would be misled, and how they might mistake a distant cloud-bank for the land they coveted to see; he kept watch for himself; his own gaze was ever fixed upon the horizon; and in the eagerness of his expectation he would repeatedly mount to the cross-trees to get a wider range of vision.

But land was not to be seen.

Next day as Dick was standing at the bow, alternately considering the canvas which his ship carried and the aspect presented by the sky, Mrs. Weldon approached him without his noticing her. She caught some muttered expressions of bewilderment that fell from his lips, and asked him whether he could see anything.

He lowered the telescope which he had been holding in his hand, and answered, —

“No, Mrs. Weldon, I cannot see anything; and it is this Hiat perplexes me so sorely. I cannot understand why we have not already come in sight of land. It is nearly a month since we lost our poor dear captain. There has been no delay in our progress; no stoppage in our rate of speed. I cannot make it out.”

“How far were we from land when we lost the captain?”

“I am sure I am not far out in saying that we were scarcely more than 4500 miles from the shores of America.”

“And at what rate have we been sailing?”

“Not much less than nine score knots a day.”

“How long, then, do you reckon, Dick, we ought to be in arriving at the coast?”

“Under six-and-twenty days,” replied Dick.

He paused before he spoke again, then added, —

“But what mystifies me even more than our failing to sight the land is this: we have not come across a single vessel; and yet vessels without number are always traversing these seas.”

“But do you not think,” inquired Mrs. Weldon, “that you have made some error in your reckoning? Is your speed really what you have supposed?”

“Impossible, madam,” replied Dick, with an air of dignity, “impossible that I should have fallen into error. The log has been consulted, without fail, every half-hour. I am about to have it lowered now, and I will undertake to show you that we are at this present moment making ten miles an hour, which would give considerably over 200 miles a day.”

He then called out to Tom, —

“Tom, lower the log!”

The old man was quite accustomed to the duty. The log was fastened to the line and thrown overboard. It ran out regularly for about five-and-twenty fathoms, when all at once the line slackened in Tom’s hand.

“It is broken!” cried Tom; “the cord is broken!”

“Broken?” exclaimed Dick: “good heavens! we have lost the log!”

It was too true. The log was gone.

Tom drew in the rope. Dick took it up and examined it. It had not broken at its point of union with the log; it had given way in the middle, at a place where the strands in some unaccountable way had worn strangely thin.

Dick’s agony of mind, in spite of his effort to be calm, was intensely great. A suspicion of foul play involuntarily occurred to him. He knew that the rope had been of first-rate make; he knew that it had been quite sound when used before; but he could prove nothing; he could only mourn over the loss which committed him to the sole remaining compass as his only guide.

That compass, too, although he knew it not, was misleading him entirely!

Mrs. Weldon sighed as she witnessed the grief which the loss manifestly caused poor Dick, but in purest sympathy she said nothing, and retired thoughtfully to her cabin.

It was no longer possible to reckon the rate of progress, but there was no doubt that the “Pilgrim” continued to maintain at least her previous speed.

Before another four-and-twenty hours had passed the barometer had fallen still lower, and the wind was threatening to rise to a velocity of sixty miles. Resolved to be on the safe side, Dick determined not only to strike the top-gallant and the main-top-mast, but to take in all the lower sails. Indeed, he began to be aware that no time was to be lost. The operation would not be done in a moment, and the storm was approaching. Dick made Tom take the helm; he ascended the shrouds with Bat, Austin, and Actæon, making Hercules stay on deck to slacken the halyards as required.

By dint of arduous exertion, and at no little risk of being thrown overboard by the rolling of the ship, they succeeded in lowering the two masts; the fore-top-sail was then reefed, and the fore-sail entirely struck, so that the only canvas that the schooner carried was the reefed fore-top and the one stay. These, however, made her run with a terrific speed.

Early on the morning of the 12th, Dick noted with alarm that the barometer had not ceased to fall, and now registered only 27.9°. The tempest had continued to increase, till it was unsafe for the ship to carry any canvas at all. The order was given for the top-sail to be taken in, but it was too late; a violent gust carried the sail completely away, and Austin, who had made his way to the fore-top-yard, was struck by the flying sheet; and although he was not seriously hurt, he was obliged at once to return to deck.

Dick Sands became more uneasy than ever; he was tortured by apprehensions of reefs outlying the shore, to which he imagined he must now be close; but he could discern no rocks to justify his fears, and returned to take his place at the helm.

The next moment Negoro appeared on deck; he pointed mysteriously to the far-off horizon, as though he discerned some object, as a mountain, there; and looking round with a malevolent smile, immediately left the deck, and went back to his cabin.

CHAPTER XII.

HOPE REVIVED.

The wind had now increased to a hurricane; it had veered to the south-west, and had attained a velocity little short of ninety miles an hour. On land, the most substantial of erections could with difficulty have withstood its violence, and a vessel anchored in a roadstead must have been torn from its moorings and cast ashore. The memorable storm that had devastated the Island of Guadaloupe on the 25th of July, 1825, when heavy cannon were lifted from their carriages, could scarcely have been more furious, and it was only her mobility before the blast and the solidity of her structure that gave the “Pilgrim” a hope of surviving the tempest.

A few minutes after the topsail had been lost, the small jib was carried away. Dick Sands contemplated the possibility of throwing out a storm-jib, made of extra strong canvas, as a means of bringing the ship a little more under his control, but abandoned the idea as useless. It was, therefore, under bare poles that the “Pilgrim” was driven along; but in spite of the lack of canvas, the hull, masts, and rigging, gave sufficient purchase to the wind, and the progress of the schooner was prodigiously rapid; sometimes, indeed, she seemed to be literally lifted from the water, and scudded on, scarcely skimming its surface. The rolling was fearful. Enormous waves followed in quick succession, and as they travelled faster than the ship, there was the perpetual risk of one of them catching her astern. Without sail, there were no means of escaping that peril by increase of speed; the adroit management of the helm was the only chance of avoiding the hazardous shocks, and even this repeatedly failed.

To prevent his being washed overboard Dick lashed himself to his place at the wheel by a rope round his waist, and made Tom and Bat keep close at hand, ready to give him assistance, in case of emergency. Hercules and Actæon, clinging to the bitt, kept watch at the bow. Mrs. Weldon and her party, at Dick's special request, remained inside the stern cabin, although the lady, for her own part, would much rather have stayed on deck; she had, however, yielded to the representation that she would thus be exposing herself to unnecessary danger.

The hatchways were hermetically closed, and it was to be hoped that they would withstand the heavy sea that was dashing over them; only let one of them give way to the pressure, and the vessel must inevitably fill and founder. It was a matter of congratulation that the stowage had been done very carefully, so that notwithstanding all the lurchings of the ship, the cargo did not shift in the least.

The heroic young commander had still further curtailed his periods of rest, and it was only at the urgent entreaty of Mrs. Weldon, who feared that he would exhaust himself by his vigilance, that he was induced to lie down for a few hours' sleep on the night of the 13th.

After Tom and Bat had been left alone at the wheel they were, somewhat to their surprise, joined by Negoro, who very rarely came aft. He seemed inclined to enter into conversation, but found little encouragement to talk on the part either of Tom or his son. All at once a violent roll of the ship threw him off his feet, and he would have gone overboard if he had not been saved by falling against the binnacle.

Old Tom was in a frantic state of alarm lest the compass should be broken. He uttered a cry of consternation so loud that it roused Dick from the light slumber into which he had fallen in the cabin, and he rushed to the deck. By the time he had reached the stern, Negoro had not only regained his feet, but had managed successfully to conceal

the bit of iron which he had again extracted from beneath the binnacle where he had himself laid it. Now that the wind had shifted to the south-west, it suited his machinations that the magnetic needle should indicate its true direction.

“How now?” asked Dick eagerly; “what is the meaning of all this noise?”

Tom explained how the cook had fallen against the binnacle, and how he had been terrified lest the compass should be injured. Dick’s heart sank at the thought of losing his sole remaining compass, and his anxiety betrayed itself in his countenance as he knelt down to examine its condition; but he breathed freely as he ascertained that the instrument had sustained no damage; by the dim light he saw the needle resting on its two concentric circles, and felt his fears at once relieved; of course, he was quite unconscious of the fact that the removal of the bit of iron had made the magnet change its pointing. The incident, however, excited his misgiving; although he felt that Negoro could not be held responsible for an accidental fall, the very presence of the man in such a place at such a time perplexed him.

“And what brings you here, this hour of the night?” he asked.

“That’s not your business,” retorted Negoro insolently.

“It is my business,” replied Dick resolutely; “and I mean to have an answer; what brought you here?”

Negoro answered sullenly that he knew of no rule to prevent his going where he liked and when he liked.

“No rule!” cried Dick; “then I make the rule now. From this time forward, I make the rule that you shall never come astern. Do you understand?”

Roused from his accustomed doggedness, the man seemed to make a threatening movement. Quick as lightning, Dick Sands drew a revolver from his pocket.

“Negoro, one act, one word of insubordination, and I blow out your brains!”

Negoro had no time to reply; before he could speak he was bowed down towards the deck by an irresistible weight. Hercules had grasped him by the shoulder.

“Shall I put him overboard, captain? he will make a meal for the fishes; they are not very particular what they eat,” said the negro, with a grin of contempt.

“Not yet,” quietly answered Dick.

The giant removed his hand, and Negoro stood upright again, and began to retreat to his own quarters, muttering, however, as he passed Hercules, —

“You cursed nigger! You shall pay for this!”

The discovery was now made that the wind apparently had taken a sudden shift of no less than forty-five degrees; but what occasioned Dick the greatest perplexity was that there was nothing in the condition of the sea to correspond with the alteration in the current of the air; instead of being directly astern, wind and waves were now beating on the larboard. Progress in this way must necessarily be full of danger, and Dick was obliged to bring his ship up at least four points before he got her straight before the tempest.

The young captain felt that he must be more than ever on the alert; he could not shake off the suspicion that Negoro had been concerned in the loss of the first compass, and had some further designs upon the second. Still he was utterly at a loss to imagine what possible motive the man could have for so criminal an act of malevolence, as there was no plausible reason to be assigned why he should not be as anxious as all the rest to reach the coast of America. The suspicion continued, however, to haunt him, and when he mentioned it to Mrs. Weldon he found that a similar feeling of distrust had agitated her, although she, like himself, was altogether unable to allege a likely motive why the cook should contemplate so strange an act of mischief. It was determined that a strict surveillance should be kept upon all the fellow's movements.

Negoro, however, manifested no inclination to disobey the captain's peremptory order; he kept strictly to his own part of the ship; but as Dingo was now regularly quartered on the stern, there was a tolerably sure guarantee that the cook would not be found wandering much in that direction.

A week passed, and still the tempest showed no signs of abating; the barometer continued to fall, and not once did a period of calmer weather afford an opportunity of carrying sail. The "Pilgrim" still made her way northeast. Her speed could not be less than two hundred miles in twenty-four hours. But no land appeared. Vast as was the range of the American continent, extending for 120 degrees between the Atlantic and the Pacific, it was nowhere to be discerned. Was he dreaming? was he mad? Dick would perpetually ask himself: had he been sailing in a wrong direction? had he failed to steer aright?

But no: he was convinced there was no error in his steering. Although he could not actually see it for the mist, he knew that day after day the sun rose before him, and that it set behind him. Yet he was constrained in bewilderment to ask, what had become of those shores of America upon which, when they came in sight, there was only too great a fear the ship should be dashed? what had become of them? where were they? whither had this incessant hurricane driven them? why did not the expected coast appear?

To all these bewildering inquiries Dick could find no answer except to imagine that his compass had misled him. Yet he was powerless to put his own misgivings to the test; he deplored more than ever the destruction of the duplicate instrument which would have checked his registers. He studied his chart; but all in vain; the position in which he found himself as the result of Negoro's treachery, seemed to baffle him the more, the more he tried to solve the mystery.

The days were passing on in this chronic state of anxiety, when one morning about eight o'clock, Hercules, who was on watch at the fore, suddenly shouted, —

"Land!"

Dick Sands had little reliance upon the negro's inexperienced eye, but hurried forward to the bow.

"Where's the land?" he cried; his voice being scarcely audible above the howling of the tempest.

“There! look there!” said Hercules, nodding his head and pointing over the larboard side, to the north-east.

Dick could see nothing.

Mrs. Weldon had heard the shout. Unable to restrain her interest, she had left her cabin and was at Dick’s side. He uttered an expression of surprise at seeing her, but could not hear anything she said, as her voice was unable to rise above the roaring of the elements; she stood, her whole being as it were concentrated in the power of vision, and scanned the horizon in the direction indicated by Hercules. But all to no purpose.

Suddenly, however, after a while, Dick raised his hand.

“Yes!” he said; “yes; sure enough, yonder is land.”

He clung with excitement to the netting; and Mrs Weldon, supported by Hercules, strained her eyes yet more vehemently to get a glimpse of a shore which she had begun to despair of ever reaching.

Beyond a doubt an elevated peak was there. It must be about ten miles to leeward. A break in the clouds soon left it more distinct. Some promontory it must be upon the American coast. Without sails, of course, the “Pilgrim” had no chance of bearing down direct upon it; but at least there was every reason to believe that she would soon reach some other portion of the shore; perhaps before noon, certainly in a few hours, they must be close to land.

The pitching of the ship made it impossible for Mrs. Weldon to keep safe footing on the deck; accordingly, at a sign from Dick, Hercules led her back again to her cabin.

Dick did not remain long at the bow, but went thoughtfully back to the wheel.

He had, indeed, a tremendous responsibility before him. Here was the land, the land for which they had longed so eagerly; and now that their anticipations were on the point of being realized, what was there, with a hurricane driving them on towards it, to prevent that land being their destruction? What measures could he take to prevent the schooner being dashed to pieces against it?

At the very moment when the promontory was just abreast of them, Negoro appeared on deck; he nodded to the peak familiarly, as he might have saluted a familiar friend, and retired as stealthily as he had come.

Two hours later, and the promontory was lying to the larboard wake. Dick Sands had never relaxed his watchfulness, but he had failed to discover any further indications of a coast-line. His perplexity could only increase; the horizon was clear; the Andes ought to be distinct; they would be conspicuous twenty miles or more away. Dick took up his telescope again and again; he scrutinized the eastern horizon with minutest care; but there was nothing to be seen; and as the afternoon waned away the last glimpse had been taken of the promontory that had awakened their expectation; it had vanished utterly from their gaze; no indication of shore could be seen from the “Pilgrim’s” deck.

Dick Sands uttered a sigh of mingled amazement and relief. He went into Mrs. Weldon’s cabin, where she was standing with her party.

“It was only an island!” he said; “only an island!”

“How? why? what island? what do you mean?” cried Mrs. Weldon incredulously; “what island can it be?”

“The chart perhaps will tell us,” replied Dick; and hurrying off to his own cabin, he immediately returned with the chart in his hands.

After studying it attentively for a few minutes, he said, —

“There, Mrs. Weldon; the land we have just passed, I should suppose must be that little speck in the midst of the Pacific. It must be Easter Island. At least, there seems to be no other land which possibly it could be.”

“And do you say,” inquired Mrs. Weldon, “that we have left it quite behind us?”

“Yes, entirely; almost to windward.”

Mrs. Weldon commenced a searching scrutiny of the map that was outspread before her.

“How far is this,” she said, after bending a considerable time over the chart; “how far is this from the coast of America?”

“Thirty-five degrees,” answered Dick; “somewhere about 2500 miles.”

“What ever do you mean?” rejoined the lady astonished; “if the ‘Pilgrim’ is still 2500 miles from shore, she has positively made no progress at all. Impossible!”

In thoughtful perplexity, Dick passed his hand across his brow. He did not know what to say. After an interval of silence, he said, —

“I have no account to give for the strange delay. It is inexplicable to myself, except upon that one hypothesis, which I cannot resist, that the readings of the compass, somehow or other, have been wrong.”

He relapsed into silence. Then, brightening up, he added, —

“But, thank God! at least we have now the satisfaction of knowing where we really are; we are no longer lost upon the wide Pacific; if only this hurricane will cease, long as the distance seems, we are on our proper course to the shores of America.”

The tone of confidence with which the youthful captain spoke had the effect of inspiring new hope into all who heard him; their spirits rose, and to their sanguine mood it seemed as if they were approaching to the end of all their troubles, and had hardly more to do than to await the turning of a tide to bring them into a glad proximity to port.

Easter Island, of which the true name is Vai-Hoo, was discovered by David in 1686 and visited by Cook and Lapérouse. It lies in lat. 27° S. and long. 112 E.; consequently, it was evident that during the raging of the hurricane the schooner had been driven northwards no less than fifteen degrees. Far away, however, as she was from shore, the wind could hardly fail within ten days to carry her within sight of land; and then, if the storm had worn itself out, (as probably it would,) the “Pilgrim” would again hoist sail, and make her way into some port with safety. Anyhow, the discovery of his true position restored a spirit of confidence to Dick Sands, and he anticipated the time when he should no longer be drifting helplessly before the storm.

To say the truth, the “Pilgrim” had suffered very little from the prolonged fury of the weather. The damage she had sustained was limited to the loss of the topsail and the small jib, which could be easily replaced. The caulking of the seams remained thoroughly sound, and no drop of water had found its way into the hold. The pumps, too, were perfectly free. Dick Sands did not fear for the stability of his ship; his only anxiety was lest the weather should not moderate in time. Only let the wind subside, and the schooner once more would be under his control; but he never forgot that the ordering of the winds and waves were in the hands of the Great Disposer of all.

CHAPTER XIII.

LAND AT LAST.

It was not long before Dick's sanguine expectations were partially realized, for on the very next day, which was the 27th, the barometer began to rise, not rapidly, but steadily, indicating that its elevation would probably continue. The sea remained exceedingly rough, but the violence of the wind, which had veered slightly towards the west, had perceptibly diminished. The tempest had passed its greatest fury, and was beginning to wear itself out.

Not a sail, however, could yet be hoisted; the smallest show of canvas would have been carried away in an instant; nevertheless Dick hoped that before another twenty-four hours were over, the "Pilgrim" might be able to carry a storm-jib.

In the course of the night the wind moderated still more and the pitching of the ship had so far diminished that the passengers began to reappear on deck. Mrs. Weldon was the first to leave her enforced imprisonment. She was anxious to speak to Dick, whom she might have expected to find looking pale and wan after his almost superhuman exertions and loss of sleep. But she was mistaken; however much the lad might suffer from the strain in after-years, at present he exhibited no symptoms of failing energy.

"Well, Captain Dick, how are you?" she said, as she advanced towards him holding out her hand.

Dick smiled.

“You call me captain, Mrs. Weldon,” he answered, “but you do not seem disposed to submit implicitly to

captain’s orders. Did I not direct you to keep to your cabin?”

“You did,” replied the lady; “but observing how much the storm had abated, I could not resist the temptation to disobey you.”

“Yes, madam, the weather is far more promising; the barometer has not fallen since yesterday morning, and I really trust the worst is over now.”

“Thank Heaven!” she replied, and after a few moments’ silence, she added.—

“But now, Dick, you must really take some rest; you may perhaps not know how much you require it; but it is absolutely necessary.”

“Rest!” the boy repeated; “rest! I want no rest. I have only done my duty, and it will be time enough for me to concern myself about my own rest, when I have seen my passengers in a place of safety.”

“You have acquitted yourself like a man,” said Mrs. Weldon; “and you may be assured that my husband, like myself, will never forget the services you have rendered me. I shall urge upon him the request which I am sure he will not refuse, that you shall have your studies completed, so that you may be made a captain for the firm.”

Tears of gratitude rose to Dick’s eyes. He deprecated the praise that was lavished upon him, but rejoiced in the prospect that seemed opening upon his future. Mrs. Weldon assured him that he was dear as a son to her, and pressed a gentle kiss upon his forehead. The lad felt that he was animated, if need be, to yet greater hardships in behalf of his benefactors, and resolved to prove himself even more worthy of their confidence.

By the 29th, the wind had so far moderated that Dick thought he might increase the “Pilgrim’s” speed by hoisting the foresail and topsail.

“Now, my men, I have some work for you to-day,” he said to the negroes when he came on deck at daybreak.

“All right, captain,” answered Hercules, “we are growing rusty for want of something to do.”

“Why didn’t you blow with your big mouth?” said little Jack; “you could have beaten the wind all to nothing.”

Dick laughed, and said, “Not a bad idea, Jack; if ever we get becalmed, we must get Hercules to blow into the sails.”

“I shall be most happy,” retorted the giant, and he inflated his huge checks till he was the very impersonation of Boreas himself.

“But now to work!” cried Dick; “we have lost our topsail, and we must contrive to hoist another. Not an easy matter, I can tell you.”

“I dare say we shall manage it,” replied Actæon.

“We must do our best,” said Tom.

“Can’t I help?” inquired Jack.

“Of course you can,” answered Dick; “run along to the wheel, and assist Bat.”

Jack strutted off, proud enough of his commission.

Under Dick’s directions, the negroes commenced their somewhat difficult task. The new topsail, rolled up, had first of all to be hoisted, and then to be made fast to the yard; but so adroitly did the crew carry out their orders, that in less than an hour the sail was properly set and flying with a couple of reefs. The foresail and second jib, which had been taken down before the tempest, were hoisted again, and before ten o’clock the “Pilgrim” was running along under the three sails which Dick considered were as much as it was prudent to carry. Even at her present speed, the schooner, he reckoned, would be within sight of the American shore in about ten days. It was an immense relief to him to find that she was no longer at the mercy of the waves, and when he saw the sails properly set he returned in good spirits to his post at the helm, not forgetting to thank the temporary helmsman for his services, nor omitting his acknowledgment to Master Jack, who received the compliment with becoming gravity.

Although the clouds continued to travel all the next day with great rapidity they were very much broken, and alternately the “Pilgrim” was bathed in sunlight and enveloped in vapours, which rolled on towards the east. As the weather cleared, the hatchways were opened in order to ventilate the ship, and the outer air was allowed again to penetrate not only the hold, but the cabin and crew’s quarters The wet sails were hung out to dry, the deck was washed down, for Dick Sands was anxious not to bring his ship into port without having “finished her toilet,” and he found that his crew could very well spare a few hours daily to get her into proper trim.

Notwithstanding the loss of the log, Dick had sufficient experience to be able to make an approximate estimate of the schooner’s progress, and after having pointed out to Mrs. Weldon what he imagined was the “Pilgrim’s” true position, he told her that it was his firm impression that land would be sighted in little more than a week.

“And upon what part of South America do you reckon we are likely to find ourselves?” she asked.

“That is more than I dare venture to promise,” replied Dick; “but I should think somewhere hereabouts.”

He was pointing on the chart to the long shore-line of Chili and Peru.

They both examined the outspread chart with still closer attention.

“Here, you see,” resumed Dick, “here is the island we have just left; we left it in the west; the wind has not shifted; we must expect to come in sight of land, pretty nearly due east of it. The coast has plenty of harbours. From any one of them you will be able easily to get to San Francisco. You know, I dare say, that the Pacific Navigation Company’s steamers touch at all the principal ports. From any of them you will be sure to get direct passage to California.”

“But do you mean,” asked Mrs. Weldon, “that you are not going yourself to take the schooner to San Francisco?”

“Not direct,” replied the young captain; “I want to see you safe on shore and satisfactorily on your homeward way. When that is done, I shall hope to get competent officers to take the ship to Valparaiso, where she will discharge her cargo, as Captain Hull intended; and afterwards I shall work our way back to San Francisco.”

“Ah, well; we will see all about that in due time.” Mrs. Weldon said, smiling; and, after a short pause, added, “At one time, Dick, you seemed to have rather a dread of the shore.”

“Quite true,” answered Dick; “but now I am in hopes we may fall in with some passing vessel; we want to have a confirmation as to our true position. I cannot tell you how surprised I am that we have not come across a single vessel. But when we near the land we shall be able to get a pilot.”

“But what will happen if we fail to get a pilot?” was Mrs. Weldon’s inquiry. She was anxious to learn how far the lad was prepared to meet any emergency.

With unhesitating promptness Dick replied, —

“Why, then, unless the weather takes the control of the ship out of my hands, I must patiently follow the coast until I come to a harbour of refuge. But if the wind should freshen, I should have to adopt other measures.”

“What then, Dick, what then?” persisted Mrs. Weldon.

The boy’s brow knitted itself together in resolution, and he said deliberately, —

“I should run the ship aground.”

Mrs. Weldon started.

“However,” Dick continued, “there is no reason to apprehend this. The weather has mended and is likely to mend. And why should we fear about finding a pilot? Let us hope all will be well.”

Mrs. Weldon at least had satisfied herself on one point. She had ascertained that although Dick did not anticipate disaster, yet he was prepared in the case of emergency to resort to measures from which any but the most experienced seaman would shrink.

But although Dick's equanimity had been successful in allaying any misgivings on Mrs. Weldon's part, it must be owned that the condition of the atmosphere caused him very serious uneasiness.

The wind remained uncomfortably high, and the barometer gave very ominous indications that it would ere long freshen still more. Dick dreaded that the time was about to return in which once again he must reduce his vessel to a state of bare poles; but so intense was his aversion to having his ship so wrested as it were from his own management, that he determined to carry the topsail till it was all but carried away by the force of the blast. Concerned, moreover, for the safety of his masts, the loss of which he acknowledged must be fatal, he had the shrouds well overhauled and the backstays considerably tightened.

More than once another contingency occurred to his mind, and gave him some anxiety. He could not overlook the possibility of the wind changing all round. What should he do in such a case? He would of course endeavour by all means to get the schooner on by incessant tacking; but was there not the certainty of a most hazardous delay? and worse than this, was there not a likelihood of the "Pilgrim" being once again driven far out to sea?

Happily these forebodings were not realized. The wind, after chopping about for several days, at one time blowing from the north, and at another from the south, finally settled down into a stiffish gale from the west, which did nothing worse than severely strain the masts.

In this weary but hopeful endurance time passed on. The 5th of April had arrived. It was more than two months since the “Pilgrim” had quitted New Zealand; it was true that during the first three weeks of her voyage she had been impeded by protracted calms and contrary winds; but since that time her speed had been rapid, the very tempests had driven her forwards with unwonted velocity; she had never failed to have her bow towards the land, and yet land seemed as remote as ever; the coast line was retreating as they approached it. What could be the solution of the mystery?

From the cross-trees one or other of the negroes was kept incessantly on the watch. Dick Sands himself, telescope in hand, would repeatedly ascend in the hope of beholding some lofty peak of the Andes emerging from the mists that hung over the horizon. But all in vain.

False alarms were given more than once. Sometimes Tom, sometimes Hercules, or one of the others would be sure that a distant speck they had descried was assuredly a mountain ridge; but the vapours were continually gathering in such fantastic forms that their unexperienced eyes were soon deceived, and they seldom had to wait long before their fond delusion was all dispelled.

At last, the expected longing was fulfilled. At eight o’clock one morning the mists seemed broken up with unusual rapidity, and the horizon was singularly clear. Dick had hardly gone aloft when his voice rung out, —

“Land! Land ahead!”

As if summoned by a spell, every one was on deck in an instant: Mrs. Weldon, sanguine of a speedy end to the general anxiety; little Jack, gratified at a new object of curiosity; Cousin Benedict, already scenting a new field for entomological investigation; old Nan; and the negroes, eager to set foot upon American soil; all, with the exception of Negoro, all were on deck; but the cook did not stir from his solitude, or betray any sympathy with the general excitement.

Whatever hesitation there might be at first soon passed away; one after another soon distinguished the shore they were approaching, and in half an hour there was no room for the most sceptical to doubt that Dick was right. There was land not far ahead.

A few miles to the east there was a long low-lying coast; the chain of the Andes ought to be visible; but it was obscured, of course, by the intervening clouds.

The “Pilgrim” bore down rapidly towards the land, and in a short time its configuration could be plainly made out. Towards the north-east the coast terminated in a headland of moderate height sheltering a kind of roadstead; on the south-east it stretched out in a long and narrow tongue. The Andes were still wanting to the scene; they must be somewhere in the background; but at present, strange to say, there was only a succession of low cliffs with some trees standing out against the sky. No human habitation, no harbour, not even an indication of a river-mouth, could anywhere be seen.

The wind remained brisk, and the schooner was driving directly towards the land, with sails shortened as seemed desirable; but Dick realized to himself the fact that he was utterly incapable of altering her course. With eager eyes he scrutinized his situation. Straight ahead was a reef over which the waves were curling, and around which the surf must be tremendous. It could hardly be more than a mile away. The wind seemed brisker than before.

After gazing awhile, Dick seemed to have come to a sudden resolution. He went quickly aft and took the helm. He had seen a little cove, and had made up his mind that he would try and make his way into it. He did not speak a word; he knew the difficulty of the task he had undertaken; he was aware from the white foam, that there was shallow water on either hand; but he kept the secret of the peril to himself, and sought no counsel in coming to his fixed resolve.

Dingo had been trotting up and down the deck. All at once he bounded to the fore, and broke out into a piteous howl. It roused Dick from his anxious cogitations. Was it possible that the animal recognized the coast? It almost seemed as if it brought back some painful associations.

The howling of the dog had manifestly attracted Negoro's attention; the man emerged from his cabin, and, regardless of the dog, stood close to the netting; but although he gazed at the surf, it did not seem to occasion him any alarm. Mrs. Weldon, who was watching him, fancied she saw a flush rise to his face, which involuntarily suggested the thought to her mind that Negoro had seen the place before.

Either she had no time or no wish to express what had struck her, for she did not mention it to Dick, who, at that moment, left the helm, and came and stood beside her.

Dick looked as if he were taking a lingering farewell of the cove past which they were being carried beyond his power to help.

In a few moments he turned round to Mrs. Weldon, and said quietly, —

“Mrs. Weldon, I am disappointed. I hoped to get the schooner into yonder cove; but there is no chance now; if nothing is done, in half an hour she will be upon that reef. I have but one alternative left. I must run her aground. It will be utter destruction to the ship, but there is no choice. Your safety is the first and paramount consideration.”

“Do you mean that there is no other course to be taken, Dick?”

“None whatever,” said Dick decidedly.

“It must be as you will,” she said.

Forthwith ensued the agitating preparations for stranding. Mrs. Weldon, Jack, Cousin Benedict, and Nan were provided with life belts, while Dick and the negroes made themselves ready for being dashed into the waves. Every precaution that the emergency admitted was duly taken. Mrs. Weldon was entrusted to the special charge of Hercules; Dick made himself responsible for doing all he could for little Jack; Cousin Benedict, who was tolerably calm, was handed over to Bat and Austin; while Actæon promised to look after Nan. Negoro’s nonchalance implied that he was quite capable of shifting for himself.

Dick had the forethought also to order about a dozen barrels of their cargo to be brought in front, so that when the “Pilgrim” struck, the oil escaping and floating on the waves would temporarily lull their fury, and make smoother water for the passage of the ship.

After satisfying himself that there was no other measure to be taken to ameliorate the peril, Dick Sands returned to the helm. The schooner was all but upon the reef, and only a few cables’ length from the shore; her starboard quarter indeed was already bathed in the seething foam, and any instant the keel might be expected to grate upon the under-lying rock. Presently a change of colour in the water was observed; it revealed a passage between the rocks. Dick gave the wheel a turn; he saw the chance of getting aground nearer to the shore than he had dared to hope, and he made the most of it. He steered the schooner right into the narrow channel; the sea was furious, and dashed vehemently upon the crags on either hand.

“Now, my lads!” he cried to his crew, “now’s your time; out with your oil! let it run!”

Ready for the order, the negroes poured out the oil, and the raging waters were stilled as if by magic. A few moments more and perchance they would rage more vehemently than ever. But for the instant they were lulled.

The “Pilgrim,” meanwhile, had glided onwards, and made dead for the adjacent shore. There was a sudden shock. Caught by an enormous wave the schooner had been hurled aground; her masts had fallen, fortunately without injury to any one on board. But the vessel had parted amidships, and was foundering; the water was rushing irresistibly into the hold.

The shore, however, was not half a cable’s length away; there was a low, dark ridge of rocks that was united to the beach; it afforded ample means of rescue, and in less than ten minutes the “Pilgrim’s” captain, crew, and passengers were all landed, with their lives, at the foot of the overhanging cliff.

CHAPTER XIV.

ASHORE.

Thus, after a voyage of seventy-four days, the “Pilgrim” had stranded. Mrs. Weldon and her fellow-voyagers joined in thanksgiving to the kind Providence that had brought them ashore, not upon one of the solitary islands of Polynesia, but upon a solid continent, from almost any part of which there would be no difficulty in getting home.

The ship was totally lost. She was lying in the surf a hopeless wreck, and few must be the hours that would elapse before she would be broken up in scattered fragments; it was impossible to save her. Notwithstanding that Dick Sands bewailed the loss of a valuable ship and her cargo to the owner, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he had been instrumental in saving what was far more precious, the lives of the owner’s wife and son.

It was impossible to do more than hazard a conjecture as to the part of the South American coast on which the “Pilgrim” had been cast. Dick imagined that it must be somewhere on the coast of Peru; after sighting Easter Island, he knew that the united action of the equatorial current and the brisk wind must have had the effect of driving the schooner far northward, and he formed his conclusion accordingly. Be the true position, however, what it might, it was all important that it should be accurately ascertained as soon as possible. If it were really in Peru, he would not be long in finding his way to one of the numerous ports and villages that lie along the coast.

But the shore here was quite a desert. A narrow strip of beach, strewn with boulders, was enclosed by a cliff of no great height, in which, at irregular intervals, deep funnels appeared as chasms in the rock. Here and there a gentle slope led to the top.

About a quarter of a mile to the north was the mouth of a little river which had not been visible from the sea. Its banks were overhung by a number of “rhizophora,” a species of mangrove entirely distinct from that indigenous to India. It was soon ascertained that the summit of the cliff was clothed by a dense forest, extending far away in undulations of verdure to the mountains in the background. Had Cousin Benedict been a botanist, he could not have failed to find a new and interesting field for his researches; there were lofty baobabs (to which an extraordinary longevity has often been erroneously ascribed), with bark resembling Egyptian syenite; there were white pines, tamarinds, pepper-plants of peculiar species, and numerous other plants unfamiliar to the eye of a native of the North; but, strange to say, there was not a single specimen of the extensive family of palms, of which more than a thousand varieties are scattered in profusion in so many quarters of the globe.

Above the shore hovered a large number of screeching birds, mostly of the swallow tribe, their black plumage shot with steelly blue, and shading off to a light brown at the top of the head. Now and then a few partridges of a greyish colour rose on wing, their necks entirely bare of feathers: the fearless manner in which the various birds all allowed themselves to be approached made Mrs. Weldon and Dick both wonder if the shores upon which they had been thrown were not so deserted that the sound of fire-arms was not known.

On the edge of the reefs some pelicans (of the species known as *pelicanus minor*) were busily filling their pouches with tiny fish, and some gulls coming in from the open sea began to circle round the wreck: with these exceptions not a living creature appeared in sight. Benedict, no doubt, could have discovered many entomological novelties amongst the foliage, but these could give no more information than the birds as to the name of their habitat. Neither north, nor south, nor towards the forest, was there trace of rising smoke, or any footprint or other sign to indicate the presence of a human being.

Dick's surprise was very great. He knew that the proximity of a native would have made Dingo bark aloud; but the dog gave no warning; he was running backwards and forwards, his tail lowered and his nose close to the ground; now and again he uttered a deep growl.

"Look at Dingo!" said Mrs. Weldon; "how strange he is! he seems to be trying to discover a lost scent."

After watching the dog for a time, she spoke again: —

"Look, too, at Negoro! he and the dog seem to be on the same purpose!"

"As to Negoro," said Dick, "I cannot concern myself with him now; he must do as he pleases; I have no further control over him; his service expires with the loss of the ship."

Negoro was in fact walking to and fro, surveying the shore with the air of a man who was trying to recall some past experience to his recollection. His dogged taciturnity was too well known for any one to think of questioning him; every one was accustomed to let him go his own way, and when Dick noticed that he had gone towards the little river, and had disappeared behind the cliff, he thought no more about him. Dingo likewise had quite forgotten his enemy, and desisted from his growling.

The first necessity for the shipwrecked party was to find a temporary shelter where they might take some refreshment. There was no lack of provisions;

independently of the resources of the land, the ebbing tide had left upon the rocks the great bulk of the “Pilgrim’s” stores, and the negroes had already collected several kegs of biscuit, and a number of cases of preserved meat, besides a variety of other supplies. All that they rescued they carefully piled up above high-water mark. As nothing appeared to be injured by the sea-water, the victualling of the party all seemed to be satisfactorily secure for the interval which must elapse (and they all believed it would not be long,)

before they reached one of the villages which they presumed were close at hand. Dick, moreover, took the precaution of sending Hercules to get a small supply of fresh water from the river hard by, and the good-natured fellow returned carrying a whole barrel-full on his shoulder.

Plenty of fuel was lying about, and whenever they wanted to light a fire they were sure of having an abundance of dead wood and the roots of the old mangroves. Old Tom, an inveterate smoker, always carried a tinder box in his pocket; this had been too tightly fastened to be affected by the moisture, and could always produce a spark upon occasion.

Still they must have a shelter. Without some rest it was impossible to start upon a tour of exploration; accordingly, all interests were directed towards ascertaining where the necessary repose could be obtained.

The honour of discovering where the desired retreat could be found fell to the lot of little Jack. Trotting about at the foot of the cliff, he came upon one of those grottoes which are constantly being found hollowed out in the rock by the vehement action of the waves in times of tempest.

“Here, look here!” cried the child; “here’s a place!”

“Well done, Jack!” answered his mother; “your lucky discovery is just what we wanted. If we were going to stay here any time we should have to do the same as the Swiss Family Robinson, and name the spot after you!”

It was hardly more than twelve or fourteen feet square, and yet the grotto seemed to Jack to be a gigantic cavern. But narrow as its limits were, it was capacious enough to receive the entire party. It was a great satisfaction to Mrs. Weldon to observe that it was perfectly dry, and as the moon was just about her first quarter there was no likelihood of a tide rising to the foot of the cliff. At any rate, it was resolved that they might take up their quarters there for a few hours.

Shortly after one o’clock the whole party were seated upon a carpet of seaweed round a repast consisting of preserved meat, biscuit, and water flavoured with a few drops of rum, of which Bat had saved a quart bottle from the wreck. Even Negoro had returned and joined the group; probably he had not cared to venture alone along the bank of the stream into the forest. He sat listening, as it seemed indifferently, to the various plans for the future that were being discussed, and did not open his mouth either by way of remonstrance or suggestion.

Dingo was not forgotten, and had his share of food duly given him outside the grotto, where he was keeping guard.

When the meal was ended, Mrs. Weldon, passing her arms round Jack, who was lounging half asleep with excitement and fatigue at her side, was the first to speak.

“My dear Dick,” she said, “in the name of us all, let me thank you for the services you have rendered us in our tedious time of difficulty. As you have been our captain at sea, let me beg you to be our guide upon land. We shall have perfect confidence in your judgment, and await your instructions as to what our next proceedings shall be."

All eyes were turned upon Dick. Even Negoro appeared to be roused to curiosity, as if eager to know what he had to say.

Dick did not speak for some moments. He was manifestly pondering what step he should advise. After a while he said, —

"My own impression, Mrs. Weldon, is that we have been cast ashore upon one of the least-frequented parts of the coast of Peru, and that we are near the borders of the Pampas. In that case I should conclude that we are at a considerable distance from any village. Now, I should recommend that we stay here altogether for the coming night. To-morrow morning, two of us can start off on an exploring expedition. I entertain but little doubt that natives will be met with within ten or a dozen miles."

Mrs. Weldon looked doubtful. Plainly she thought unfavourably of the project of separating the party. She reflected for a considerable time, and then asked, —

"And who is to undertake the task of exploring?"

Prompt was Dick's answer: —

"Tom and I."

"And leave us here?" suggested the lady.

"Yes; to take care of you, there will be Hercules, Bat, Actæon and Austin. Negoro, too, I presume, means to remain here," said Dick, glancing towards the cook.

“Perhaps,” replied Negoro, sparing as ever of his words.

“We shall take Dingo,” added Dick; “likely enough he may be useful.”

At the sound of his name the dog had entered the grotto. A short bark seemed to testify his approval of Dick’s proposal.

Mrs. Weldon was silent. She looked sad and thoughtful. It was hard to reconcile herself to the division of the party. She was aware that the separation would not be for long, but she could not suppress a certain feeling of nervousness. Was it not possible that some natives, attracted by the wreck, would assault them in hopes of plunder?

Every argument he could think of, Dick brought forward to reassure the lady. He told her that the Indians were perfectly harmless, and entirely different to the savage tribes of Africa and Polynesia; there was no reason to apprehend any mischief, even if they should chance to encounter them, which was itself extremely unlikely. No doubt the separation would have its inconveniences, but they would be insignificant compared with the difficulty of traversing the country *en masse*. Tom and he would have far greater freedom if they went alone, and could make their investigations much more thoroughly. Finally he promised that if within two days they failed to discover human habitation, they would return to the grotto forthwith.

“I confess, however,” he added, “that I have little expectation of being able to ascertain our true position, until I have penetrated some distance into the country.”

There was nothing in Dick’s representations but what commanded Mrs. Weldon’s assent as reasonable. It was simply her own nervousness, she acknowledged, that made her hesitate; but it was only with extreme reluctance that she finally yielded to the proposition.

“And what, Mr. Benedict, is your opinion of my proposal?” said Dick, turning to the entomologist.

“I?” answered Cousin Benedict, looking somewhat bewildered, “Oh, I am agreeable to anything. I dare say I shall find some specimens. I think I will go and look at once.”

“Take my advice, and don’t go far away,” replied Dick.

“All right; I shall take care of myself.”

“And don’t be bringing back a lot of mosquitoes,” said old Tom mischievously.

With his box under his arm, the naturalist left the grotto.

Negoro followed almost immediately. He did not take the same direction as Benedict up the cliff, but for the second time bent his steps towards the river, and proceeded along its bank till he was out of sight.

It was not long before Jack’s exertions told upon him, and he fell into a sound sleep. Mrs. Weldon having gently laid him on Nan’s lap, wandered out and made her way to the water’s edge. She was soon joined by Dick and the negroes, who wanted to see whether it was possible to get to the “Pilgrim,” and secure any articles that might be serviceable for future use. The reef on which the schooner had stranded was now quite dry, and the carcase of the vessel which had been partially covered at high water was lying in the midst of *debris* of the most promiscuous character. The wide difference between high and low-water mark caused Dick Sands no little surprise. He knew that the tides on the shores of the Pacific were very inconsiderable; in his own mind, however, he came to the conclusion that the phenomenon was to be explained by the unusually high wind that had been blowing on the coast.

Not without emotion could Mrs. Weldon, or indeed any of them, behold the unfortunate ship upon which they had spent so many eventful days, lying dismasted on her side. But there was little time for sentiment. If they wished to visit the hull before it finally went to pieces there must be no delay.

Hoisting themselves by some loose rigging that was hanging from the deck, Dick and several of the negroes contrived to make their way into the interior of the hull. Dick left his men to gather together all they could in the way of food and drink from the store-room, and himself went straight to the stern cabin, into which the water had not penetrated. Here he found four excellent Purday’s Remington rifles and a hundred cartridges; with these he determined to arm his party, in case they should be attacked by Indians. He also chose six of the strongest of the cutlasses that are used for slicing up dead whales; and did not forget the little toy gun which was Jack’s special property. Unexpectedly he found a pocket-compass, which he was only too glad to appropriate. What a boon it would have been had he discovered it earlier! The ship’s charts in the fore-cabin were too much injured by water to be of any further service. Nearly everything was either lost or spoiled, but the misfortune was not felt very acutely because there was ample provision for a few days, and it seemed useless to burden themselves with more than was necessary. Dick hardly needed Mrs. Weldon’s advice to secure all the money that might be on board, but after the most diligent search he failed to discover more than five hundred dollars. This was a subject of perplexity. Mrs. Weldon herself had

had a considerably larger sum than this, and Captain Hull was known always to keep a good reserve in hand. There was but one way to solve the mystery. Some one had been beforehand to the wreck. It could not be any of the negroes, as not one of them had for a moment left the grotto. Suspicion naturally fell upon Negoro, who had been out alone upon the shore. Morose and cold-blooded as the man was, Dick hardly knew why he should suspect him of the crime of theft; nevertheless, he determined to cross-examine him, and, if need be, to have him searched, as soon as he came back.

The day wore onwards to its close. The sun was approaching the vernal equinox, and sank almost perpendicularly on to the horizon. Twilight was very short, and the rapidity with which darkness came on confirmed Dick in his belief that they had got ashore at some spot lying between the tropic of Capricorn and the equator.

They all assembled in the grotto again for the purpose of getting some sleep.

“Another rough night coming on!” said Tom, pointing to the heavy clouds that hung over the horizon.

“No doubt, Tom!” answered Dick, “and I think we may congratulate ourselves on being safe out of our poor ship.”

As the night could not be otherwise than very dark, it was arranged that the negroes should take their turns in keeping guard at the entrance of the grotto. Dingo also would be upon the alert.

Benedict had not yet returned. Hercules shouted his name with the full strength of his capacious lungs, and shortly afterwards the entomologist was seen making his way down the face of the cliff at the imminent risk of breaking his neck. He was in a great rage. He had not found a single insect worth having, scorpions, scolopendra, and other myriapoda were in the forest in abundance; but not one of these of course could be allowed a place in his collection.

“Have I come six thousand miles for this?” he cried: “have I endured storm and shipwreck only to be cast where not a hexapod is to be seen? The country is detestable! I shall not stay in it another hour!”

Ever gentle to his eccentricities, Mrs. Weldon soothed him as she would a child, she told him that he had better take some rest now, and most likely he would have better luck to-morrow.

Cousin Benedict had hardly been pacified when Tom remarked that Negoro too had not returned.

“Never mind!” said Bat, “his room is as good as his company.”

“I cannot say that I altogether think so. The man is no favourite of mine, but I like him better under my own eye,” said Mrs. Weldon.

“Perhaps he has his own reasons for keeping away,” said Dick, and taking Mrs. Weldon aside, he communicated to her his suspicions of the fellow’s dishonesty.

He found that she coincided with him in her view of

Negoro’s conduct; but she did not agree with him in his proposal to have him searched at once. If he returned, she should be convinced that he had deposited the money in some secret spot; and as there would be no proof of his guilt, it would be better to leave him, at least for a time, uninterrogated.

Dick was convinced by her representations, and promised to act upon her advice.

Before they resigned themselves to sleep, they had repeatedly summoned Negoro back, but he either could not or would not hear. Mrs. Weldon and Dick scarcely knew what to think; unless he had lost his way; it was unaccountable why he should be wandering about alone on a dark night in a strange country.

Presently Dingo was heard barking furiously. He had left the opening of the grotto, and was evidently down at the water's edge. Imagining that Negoro must be coming, Dick sent three of the negroes in the direction of the river to meet him; but when they reached the bank not a soul could be seen, and as Dingo was quiet again, they made their way back to the grotto.

Excepting the man left on watch, they now all lay down, hoping to get some repose. Mrs. Weldon, however, could not sleep. The land for which she had sighed so ardently had been reached, but it had failed to give either the security or the comfort which she had anticipated!

CHAPTER XV.

A STRANGER.

At daybreak, next morning, Austin, who happened to be on guard, heard Dingo bark, and noticed that he started up and ran towards the river. Arousing the inmates of the grotto, he announced to them that some one was coming.

“It isn’t Negoro,” said Tom; “Dingo would bark louder than that if Negoro were to be seen.”

“Who, then, can it be?” asked Mrs. Weldon, with an inquiring glance towards Dick.

“We must wait and see, madam,” replied Dick quietly.

Bidding Bat, Austin, and Hercules follow his example, Dick Sands took up a cutlass and a rifle, into the breach of which he slipped a cartridge. Thus armed, the four young men made their way towards the river bank. Tom and Actæon were left with Mrs. Weldon at the entrance of the grotto.

The sun was just rising. Its rays, intercepted by the lofty range of mountains in the east, did not fall directly on the cliff; but the sea to its western horizon was sparkling in the sunbeams as the party marched along the shore. Dingo was motionless as a setter, but did not cease barking. It soon proved not to be his old enemy who was disturbing him. A man, who was not Negoro, appeared round the angle of the cliff, and advancing cautiously along the bank of the stream, seemed by his gestures to be endeavouring to pacify the dog, with which an encounter would certainly have been by no means desirable.

“That’s not Negoro!” said Hercules.

“No loss for any of us,” muttered Bat.

“You are right,” replied Dick; “perhaps he is a native; let us hope he may be able to tell us our whereabouts, and save us the trouble of exploring.”

With their rifles on their shoulders, they advanced steadily towards the new arrival. The stranger, on becoming aware of their approach, manifested great surprise; he was apparently puzzled as to how they had reached the shore, for the “Pilgrim” had been entirely broken up during the night, and the spars that were floating about had probably been too few and too scattered to attract his attention. His first attitude seemed to betray something of fear; and raising to his shoulder a gun that had been slung to his belt, he began to retrace his steps; but conciliatory gestures on the part of Dick quickly reassured him, and after a moment’s hesitation, he continued to advance.

He was a man of about forty years of age, strongly built, with a keen, bright eye, grizzly hair and beard, and a complexion tanned as with constant exposure to the forest air. He wore a broad-brimmed hat, a kind of leather jerkin, or tunic, and long boots reaching nearly to his knees. To his high heels was fastened a pair of wide-rowelled spurs, which clanked as he moved.

Dick Sands in an instant saw that he was not looking upon one of the roving Indians of the pampas, but upon one of those adventurers, often of very doubtful character, who are not unfrequently to be met with in the remotest quarters of the earth. Clearly this was neither an Indian nor a Spaniard. His erect, not to say rigid deportment, and the reddish hue with which his hair and beard were streaked, betokened him to be of Anglo-Saxon origin, a conjecture which was at once confirmed when upon Dick’s wishing him “good morning,” he replied in unmistakable English, with hardly a trace of foreign accent, —

“Good morning, my young friend.”

He stepped forward, and having shaken hands with Dick, nodded to all his companions.

“Are you English?” he asked.

“No; we are Americans,” replied Dick.

“North or South?” inquired the man.

“North,” Dick answered.

The information seemed to afford the stranger no little satisfaction, and he again wrung Dick’s hand with all the enthusiasm of a fellow-countryman.

“And may I ask what brings you here?” he continued.

Before, however, Dick had time to reply, the stranger had courteously raised his hat, and, looking round, Dick saw that his bow was intended for Mrs. Weldon, who had just reached the river-bank. She proceeded to tell him the particulars of how they had been shipwrecked, and how the vessel had gone to pieces on the reefs.

A look of pity crossed the man’s face as he listened, and he cast his eye, as it might be involuntarily, upon the sea, in order to discern some vestige of the stranded ship.

“Ah! there is nothing to be seen of our poor schooner!” said Dick mournfully; “the last of her was broken up in the storm last night.”

“And now,” interposed Mrs. Weldon, “can you tell us where we are?”

“Where?” exclaimed the man, with every indication of surprise at her question; “why, on the coast of South America, of course!”

“But on what part? are we near Peru?” Dick inquired eagerly.

“No, my lad, no; you are more to the south; you are on the coast of Bolivia; close to the borders of Chili.”

“A good distance, I suppose, from Lima?” asked Dick.

“From Lima? yes, a long way; Lima is far to the north.”

“And what is the name of that promontory?” Dick said, pointing to the adjacent headland.

“That, I confess, is more than I am able to tell you,” replied the stranger; “for although I have travelled a great deal in the interior of the country, I have never before visited this part of the coast.”

Dick pondered in thoughtful silence over the information he had thus received. He had no reason to doubt its accuracy; according to his own reckoning he would have expected to come ashore somewhere between the latitudes of 27° and 30°; and by this stranger’s showing he had made the latitude 25°; the discrepancy was not very great; it was not more than might be accounted for by the action of the currents, which he knew he had been unable to estimate; moreover, the deserted character of the whole shore inclined him to believe more easily that he was in Lower Bolivia.

Whilst this conversation was going on, Mrs. Weldon, whose suspicions had been excited by Negoro’s disappearance, had been scrutinizing the stranger with the utmost attention; but she could detect nothing either in his manner or in his words to give her any cause to doubt his good faith.

“Pardon me,” she said presently; “but you do not seem to me to be a native of Peru?”

“No; like yourself, I am an American, Mrs. — — ;” he paused, as if waiting to be told her name.

The lady smiled, and gave her name; he thanked her, and continued, —

“My name is Harris. I was born in South Carolina; but it is now twenty years since I left my home for the pampas of Bolivia; imagine, therefore, how much pleasure it gives me to come across some countrymen of my own.”

“Do you live in this part of the province, Mr. Harris?” Mrs. Weldon asked.

“No, indeed; far away; I live down to the south, close to the borders of Chili. At present I am taking a journey north-eastwards to Atacama.”

“Atacama!” exclaimed Dick; “are we anywhere near the desert of Atacama?”

“Yes, my young friend,” rejoined Harris, “you are just on the edge of it. It extends far beyond those mountains which you see on the horizon, and is one of the most curious and least explored parts of the continent.”

“And are you travelling through it alone?” Mrs. Weldon inquired.

“Yes, quite alone; and it is not the first time I have performed the journey. One of my brothers owns a large farm, the hacienda of San Felice, about 200 miles from here, and I have occasion now and then to pay him business visits.”

After a moment’s hesitation, as if he were weighing a sudden thought, he continued, —

“I am on my way there now, and if you will accompany me I can promise you a hearty welcome, and my brother will be most happy to do his best to provide you with means of conveyance to San Francisco.”

Mrs. Weldon had hardly begun to express her thanks for the proposal when he said abruptly, —

“Are these negroes your slaves?”

“Slaves! sir,” replied Mrs. Weldon, drawing herself up proudly; “we have no slaves in the United States. The south has now long followed the example of the north. Slavery is abolished.”

“I beg your pardon, madam. I had forgotten that the war of 1862 had solved that question. But seeing these fellows with you, I thought perhaps they might be in your service,” he added, with a slight tone of irony.

“We are very proud to be of any service to Mrs. Weldon,” Tom interposed with dignity, “but we are no man’s property. It is true I was sold for a slave when I was six years old; but I have long since had my freedom; and so has my son. Bat here, and all his friends, were born of free parents.”

“Ah! well then, I have to congratulate you,” replied Harris, in a manner that jarred very sensibly upon Mrs. Weldon’s feelings; but she said nothing.

Harris added, —

“I can assure you that you are as safe here in Bolivia as you would be in New England.”

He had not finished speaking, when Jack, followed by Nan, came out of the grotto. The child was rubbing his eyes, having only just awakened from his night’s sleep. Catching sight of his mother, he darted towards her.

“What a charming little boy!” exclaimed Harris.

“He is my little son,” said Mrs. Weldon, kissing the child by way of morning greeting.

“Ah, madam, I am sure you must have suffered doubly on his account. Will the little man let me kiss him too?”

But there was something in the stranger’s appearance that did not take Jack’s fancy, and he shrank back timidly to his mother’s side.

“You must excuse him, sir; he is very shy.”

“Never mind,” said Harris; “we shall be better acquainted by-and-by. When we get to my brother’s, he shall have a nice little pony to ride.”

But not even this tempting offer seemed to have any effect in coaxing Jack into a more genial mood. He kept fast hold of his mother’s hand, and she, somewhat vexed at his behaviour, and anxious that no offence should be given to a man who appeared so friendly in his intentions, hastened to turn the conversation to another topic.

Meantime Dick Sands had been considering Harris’s proposal. Upon the whole, the plan of making their way to the hacienda of San Felice seemed to commend itself to his judgment; but he could not conceal from himself that a journey of 200 miles across plains and forests, without any means of transport, would be extremely fatiguing. On expressing his doubts on this point, he was met with the reply, —

“Oh, that can be managed well enough, young man; just round the corner of the cliff there I have a horse, which is quite at the disposal of the lady and her son; and by easy stages of ten miles or so a day, it will do the rest of us no harm to travel on foot. Besides,” he added, “when I spoke of the journey being 200 miles, I was thinking of following, as I usually do, the course of the river; but by taking a short cut across the forest, we may reduce the distance by nearly eighty miles.”

Mrs. Weldon was about to say how grateful she was, but Harris anticipated her.

“Not a word, madam, I beg you. You cannot thank me better than by accepting my offer. I confess I have never crossed this forest, but I am so much accustomed to the pampas that I have little fear of losing my way. The only difficulty is in the matter of provisions, as I have only supplied myself with enough to carry me on to San Felice.”

“As to provisions,” replied Mrs. Weldon, “we have enough and to spare; and we shall be more than willing to share everything with you.”

“That is well,” answered Harris; “then there can be no reason why we should not start at once.”

He was turning away with the intention of fetching his horse, when Dick Sands detained him. True to his seaman’s instincts, the young sailor felt that he should be much more at his ease on the sea-shore than traversing the heart of an unknown forest.

“Pardon me, Mr. Harris,” he began, “but instead of taking so long a journey across the desert of Atacama, would it not be far better for us to follow the coast either northwards or southwards, until we reach the nearest seaport?”

A frown passed over Harris’s countenance.

“I know very little about the coast,” he answered; “but I know enough to assure you that there is no town to the north within 300 or 400 miles.”

“Then why should we not go south?” persisted Dick.

“You would then have to travel to Chili, which is almost as far; and, under your circumstances, I should not advise you to skirt the pampas of the Argentine Republic. For my own part, I could not accompany you.”

“But do not the vessels which ply between Chili and Peru come within sight of this coast?” interposed Mrs. Weldon.

“No, madam; they keep out so far to sea that there would not be the faintest chance of your hailing one.”

“You seem to have another question to ask Mr. Harris,” Mrs. Weldon continued, addressing Dick, who still looked rather doubtful.

Dick replied that he was about to inquire at what port he would be likely to find a ship to convey their party to San Francisco.

“That I really cannot tell you, my young friend,” rejoined Harris; “I can only repeat my promise that we will furnish you with the means of conveyance from San Felice to Atacama, where no doubt you will obtain all the information you require.”

“I hope you will not think that Dick is insensible to your kindness, Mr. Harris,” said Mrs. Weldon, apologetically.

“On the contrary,” promptly observed Dick; “I fully appreciate it; I only wish we had been cast ashore upon a spot where we should have had no need to intrude upon his generosity.”

“I assure you, madam, it gives me unbounded pleasure to serve you in any way,” said Harris; “it is, as I have told you, not often that I come in contact with any of my own countrymen.”

“Then we accept your offer as frankly as it is made,” replied the lady, adding; “but I cannot consent to deprive you of your horse. I am a very good walker.”

“So am I,” said Harris, with a bow, “and consequently I intend you and your little son to ride. I am used to long tramps through the pampas. Besides, it is not at all unlikely that we shall come across some of the workpeople belonging to the hacienda; if so, they will be able to give us a mount.”

Convinced that it would only be thwarting Mrs. Weldon’s wishes to throw any further impediment in the way, Dick Sands suppressed his desire to raise fresh obstacles, and simply asked how soon they ought to start.

“This very day, at once,” said Harris quickly.

“So soon?” asked Dick.

“Yes. The rainy season begins in April, and the sooner we are at San Felice the better. The way through the forest is the safest as well as the shortest, for we shall be less likely to meet any of the nomad Indians, who are notorious robbers.”

Without making any direct reply, Dick proceeded to instruct the negroes to choose such of the provisions as were most easy of transport, and to make them up into packages, that every one might carry a due share. Hercules with his usual good nature professed himself willing to carry the entire load; a proposal, however, to which Dick would not listen for a moment.

“You are a fine fellow, Hercules” said Harris, scrutinizing the giant with the eye of a connoisseur; “you would be worth something in the African market.”

“Those who want me now must catch me first,” retorted Hercules, with a grin.

The services of all hands were enlisted, and in a comparatively short time sufficient food was packed up to supply the party for about ten days’ march.

“You must allow us to show you what hospitality is in our power,” said Mrs. Weldon, addressing her new acquaintance; “our breakfast will be ready in a quarter of an hour, and we shall be happy if you will join us.”

“It will give me much pleasure,” answered Harris, gaily; “I will employ the interval in fetching my horse, who has breakfasted already.”

“I will accompany you,” said Dick.

“By all means, my young friend; come with me, and I will show you the lower part of the river.”

While they were gone, Hercules was sent in search of Cousin Benedict, who was wandering on the top of the cliff in quest of some wonderful insect, which, of course, was not to be found. Without asking his permission, Hercules unceremoniously brought him back to Mrs. Weldon, who explained how they were about to start upon a ten days’ march into the interior of the country. The entomologist was quite satisfied with the arrangement, and declared himself ready for a march across the entire continent, as long as he was free to be adding to his collection on the way.

Thus assured of her cousin’s acquiescence in her plans; Mrs. Weldon proceeded to prepare such a substantial meal as she hoped would invigorate them all for the approaching journey.

Harris and Dick Sands, meantime, had turned the corner of the cliff, and walked about 300 paces along the shore until they came to a tree to which a horse was tethered. The creature neighed as it recognized its master. It was a strong-built animal, of a kind that Dick had not seen before, although its long neck and crupper, short loins, flat shoulders and arched forehead indicated that it was of Arabian breed.

“Plenty of strength here,” Harris said, as after unfastening the horse, he took it by the bridle and began to lead it along the shore.

Dick made no reply; he was casting a hasty glance at the forest which enclosed them on either hand; it was an unattractive sight, but he observed nothing to give him any particular ground for uneasiness.

Turning round, he said abruptly, —

“Did you meet a Portuguese last night, named Negoro?”

“Negoro? who is Negoro?” asked Harris, in a tone of surprise.

“He was our ship’s cook; but he has disappeared.”

“Drowned, probably,” said Harris indifferently.

“No, he was not drowned; he was with us during the evening, but left afterwards; I thought perhaps you might have met him along the river-side, as you came that way.”

“No,” said Harris, “I saw no one; if your cook ventured alone into the forest, most likely he has lost his way; it is possible we may pick him up upon our road.”

When they arrived at the grotto, they found breakfast duly prepared. Like the supper of the previous evening it consisted mainly of corned beef and biscuit. Harris did ample justice to the repast.

“There is no fear of our starving as we go,” he observed to Mrs. Weldon; “but I can hardly say so much for the unfortunate Portuguese, your cook, of whom my young friend here has been speaking.”

“Ah! has Dick been telling you about Negoro?” Mrs. Weldon said.

Dick explained that he had been inquiring whether Mr. Harris had happened to meet him in the direction he had come.

“I saw nothing of him,” Harris repeated; “and as he has deserted you, you need not give yourselves any concern about him.” And apparently glad to turn the subject, he said, “Now, madam, I am at your service; shall we start at once?”

It was agreed that there was no cause for delay. Each one took up the package that had been assigned him. Mrs. Weldon, with Hercules’ help, mounted the horse, and Jack, with his miniature gun slung across his shoulder, was placed astride in front of her. Without a thought of acknowledging the kindness of the good-natured stranger in providing him so enjoyable a ride, the heedless little fellow declared himself quite capable of guiding the “gentleman’s horse,” and when to indulge him the bridle was put into his hand, he looked as proud as though he had been appointed leader of the whole caravan.

CHAPTER XVI.

THROUGH THE FOREST.

Although there was no obvious cause for apprehension, it cannot be denied that it was with a certain degree of foreboding that Dick Sands first entered that dense forest, through which for the next ten days they were all to wend their toilsome way.

Mrs. Weldon, on the contrary, was full of confidence and hope. A woman and a mother, she might have been expected to be conscious of anxiety at the peril to which she might be exposing herself and her child; and doubtless she would have been sensible of alarm if her mind had not been fully satisfied upon two points; first, that the portion of the pampas they were about to traverse was little infested either by natives or by dangerous beasts; and secondly, that she was under the protection of a guide so trustworthy as she believed Harris to be.

The entrance to the forest was hardly more than three hundred paces up the river. An order of march had been arranged which was to be observed as closely as possible throughout the journey. At the head of the troop were Harris and Dick Sands, one armed with his long gun, the other with his Remington; next came Bat and Austin, each carrying a gun and a cutlass, then Mrs. Weldon and Jack, on horseback, closely followed by Tom and old Nan, while Actæon with the fourth Remington, and Hercules with a huge hatchet in his waist-belt, brought up the rear. Dingo had no especial place in the procession, but wandered to and fro at his pleasure. Ever since he had been cast ashore Dick had noticed a remarkable change in the dog’s behaviour; the animal was in a constant state of agitation, always apparently on the search for some lost scent, and repeatedly giving vent to a low growl, which seemed to proceed from grief rather than from rage.

As for Cousin Benedict, his movements were permitted to be nearly as erratic as Dingo’s; nothing but a leading-string could possibly have kept him in the ranks. With his tin box under his arm, and his butterfly net in his hand, and his huge magnifying-glass suspended from his neck, he would be sometimes far ahead, sometimes a long way behind, and at the risk of being attacked by some venomous snake, would make frantic dashes into the tall grass whenever he espied some attractive orthoptera or other insect which he thought might be honoured by a place in his collection.

In one hour after starting Mrs. Weldon had called to him a dozen times without the slightest effect. At last she told him seriously that if he would not give up chasing the insects at a distance, she should be obliged to take possession of his tin box.

“Take away my box!” he cried, with as much horror as if she had threatened to tear out his vitals.

“Yes, your box and your net too!”

“My box and my net! but surely not my spectacles!” almost shrieked the excited entomologist.

“Yes, and your spectacles as well!” added Mrs. Weldon mercilessly; “I am glad you have reminded me of another means of reducing you to obedience!”

The triple penalty of which he was thus warned had the effect of keeping him from wandering away for the best part of the next hour, but he was soon once more missing from the ranks; he was manifestly incorrigible; the deprivation of box, net, and spectacles would, it was acknowledged, be utterly without avail to prevent him from rambling. Accordingly it was thought better to let him have his own way, especially as Hercules volunteered to keep his eye upon him, and to endeavour to guard the worthy naturalist as carefully as he would himself protect some precious specimen of a lepidoptera. Further anxiety on his account was thus put to rest.

In spite of Harris's confident assertion that they were little likely to be molested by any of the nomad Indians, the whole company rejoiced in feeling that they were well armed, and they resolved to keep in a compact body. The way across the forest could scarcely be called a path; it was, in fact, little more than the track of animals, and progress along it was necessarily very slow; indeed it seemed impossible, at the rate they started, to accomplish more than five or six miles in the course of twelve hours.

The weather was beautifully fine; the sun ascended nearly to the zenith, and its rays, descending almost perpendicularly, caused a degree of heat which, as Harris pointed out, would have been unendurable upon the open plain, but was here pleasantly tempered by the shelter of the foliage.

Most of the trees were quite strange to them. To an experienced eye they were such as were remarkable more for their character then for their size. Here, on one side, was the bauhinia, or mountain ebony; there, on the other, the molompi or pterocarpus, its trunk exuding large quantities of resin, and of which the strong light wood makes excellent oars or paddles; further on were fustics heavily charged with colouring matter, and guaiacums, twelve feet in diameter, surpassing the ordinary kind in magnitude, yet far inferior in quality.

Dick Sands kept perpetually asking Harris to tell him the names of all these trees and plants.

“Have you never been on the coast of South America before?” replied Harris, without giving the explicit information that was sought.

“Never,” said Dick; “never before. Nor do I recollect ever having seen any one who has.”

“But surely you have explored the coasts of Columbia or Patagonia,” Harris continued.

Dick avowed that he had never had the chance.

“But has Mrs. Weldon never visited these parts? Our countrymen, I know, are great travellers.”

“No,” answered Mrs. Weldon; “my husband’s business called him occasionally to New Zealand, but I have accompanied him nowhere else. With this part of Lower Bolivia we are totally unacquainted.”

“Then, madam, I can only assure you that you will see a most remarkable country, in every way a very striking contrast to the regions of Peru, Brazil, and the Argentine republic. Its animal and vegetable products would fill a naturalist with unbounded wonder. May I not declare it a lucky chance that has brought you here?”

“Do not say chance, Mr. Harris, if you please.”

“Well, then, madam; providence, if you prefer it,” said Harris, with the air of a man incapable of recognizing the distinction.

After finding that there was no one amongst them who was acquainted in any way with the country through which they were travelling, Harris seemed to exhibit an evident pleasure in pointing out and describing by name the various wonders of the forest. Had Cousin Benedict's attainments included a knowledge of botany he would have found himself in a fine field for researches, and might perchance have discovered novelties to which his own name could be appended in the catalogues of science. But he was no botanist; in fact, as a rule, he held all blossoms in aversion, on the ground that they entrapped insects into their corollæ, and poisoned them sometimes with venomous juices. New and rare insects, however, seemed hereabouts to be wanting.

Occasionally the soil became marshy, and they all had to wend their way over a perfect network of tiny rivulets that were affluents of the river from which they had started. Sometimes these rivulets were so wide that they could not be passed without a long search for some spot where they could be forded; their banks were all very damp, and in many places abounded with a kind of reed, which Harris called by its proper name of papyrus.

As soon as the marshy district had been passed, the forest resumed its original aspect, the footway becoming narrow as ever. Harris pointed out some very fine ebony-trees,

larger than the common sort, and yielding a wood darker and more durable than what is ordinarily seen in the market. There were also more mango-trees than might have been expected at this distance from the sea; a beautiful white lichen enveloped their trunks like a fur; but in spite of their luxuriant foliage and delicious fruit, Harris said that there was not a native who would venture to propagate the species, as the superstition of the country is that "whoever plants a mango, dies!"

At noon a halt was made for the purpose of rest and refreshment. During the afternoon they arrived at some gently rising ground, not the first slopes of hills, but an insulated plateau which appeared to unite mountains and plains. Notwithstanding that the trees were far less crowded and more inclined to grow in detached groups, the numbers of herbaceous plants with which the soil was covered rendered progress no less difficult than it was before. The general aspect of the scene was not unlike an East Indian jungle. Less luxuriant indeed than in the lower valley of the river, the vegetation was far more abundant than that of the temperate zones either of the Old or New continents. Indigo grew in great profusion, and, according to Harris's representation, was the most encroaching plant in the whole country; no sooner, he said, was a field left untilled, than it was overrun by this parasite, which sprang up with the rank growth of thistles or nettles.

One tree which might have been expected to be common in this part of the continent seemed entirely wanting. This was the caoutchouc. Of the various trees from which India-rubber is procured, such as the Ficus prinoides, the Castilioa elastica, the Cecropia peltata, the Callophora utilis, the Cameraria latifolia, and especially the Siphonia elastica, all of which abound in the provinces of South America, not a single specimen was to be seen. Dick had promised to show Jack an India-rubber-tree, and the child, who had conjured up visions of squeaking dolls, balls, and other toys growing upon its branches, was loud and constant in his expressions of disappointment.

“Never mind, my little man,” said Harris; “have patience, and you shall see hundreds of India-rubber-trees when you get to the hacienda.”

“And will they be nice and elastic?” asked Jack, whose ideas upon the subject were of the vaguest order.

“Oh, yes, they will stretch as long as you like,” Harris answered, laughing. “But here is something to amuse you,” he added, and as he spoke, he gathered a fruit that looked as tempting as a peach.

“You are quite sure that it is safe to give it him?” said Mrs. Weldon anxiously.

“To satisfy you, madam, I will eat one first myself.”

The example he set was soon followed by all the rest. The fruit was a mango; that which had been so opportunely discovered was of the sort that ripens in March or April; there is a later kind which ripens in September. With his mouth full of juice, Jack pronounced that it was very nice, but did not seem to be altogether diverted from his sense of disappointment at not coming to an India-rubber-tree. Evidently the little man thought himself rather injured.

“And Dick promised me some humming-birds too!” he murmured.

“Plenty of humming-birds for you, when you get to the farm; lots of them where my brother lives,” said Harris.

And to say the truth, there was nothing extravagant in the way the child’s anticipations had been raised, for in Bolivia humming-birds are found in great abundance. The Indians, who weave their plumage into all kinds of artistic designs, have bestowed the most poetical epithets upon these gems of the feathered race. They call them “rays of the sun,” and “tresses of the day-star;” at one time they will describe them as “king of flowers,” at another as “blossoms of heaven kissing blossoms of earth,” or as “the jewel that reflects the sunbeam.” In fact their imagination seems to have shaped a suitable distinction for almost every one of the 150 known species of this dazzling little beauty.

But however numerous humming-birds might be expected to be in the Bolivian forest, they proved scarce enough at present, and Jack had to content himself with Harris's representations that they did not like solitude, but would be found plentifully at San Felice, where they would be heard all day long humming like a spinning-wheel. Already Jack said he longed to be there, a wish that was so unanimously echoed by all the rest, that they resolved that no stoppage should be allowed beyond what was absolutely indispensable.

After a time the forest began to alter its aspect. The trees were even less crowded, opening now and then into wide glades. The soil, cropping up above its carpet of verdure, exhibited veins of rose granite and syenite, like plates of lapis lazuli; on some of the higher ground, the fleshy tubers of the sarsaparilla plant, growing in a hopeless entanglement, made progress a matter of still greater difficulty than in the narrow tracks of the dense forest.

At sunset the travellers found that they had accomplished about eight miles from their starting-point. They could not prognosticate what hardships might be in store for them on future days, but it was certain that the experiences of the first day had been neither eventful nor very fatiguing. It was now unanimously agreed that they should make a halt for the night, and as little was to be apprehended from the attacks either of man or beast, it was considered unnecessary to form anything like a regular encampment. One man on guard, to be relieved every few hours, was presumed to be sufficient. Admirable shelter was offered by an enormous mango, the spreading foliage of which formed a kind of natural verandah, sweeping the ground so thoroughly that any one who chose could find sleeping-quarters in its very branches.

Simultaneously with the halting of the party there was heard a deafening tumult in the upper boughs. The mango was the roosting place of a colony of grey parrots, a noisy, quarrelsome, and rapacious race, of whose true characteristics the specimens seen in confinement in Europe give no true conception. Their screeching and chattering were such a nuisance that Dick Sands wanted to fire a shot into the middle of them, but Harris seriously dissuaded him, urging that the report of firearms would only serve to reveal their own presence, whilst their greatest safety lay in perfect silence.

Supper was prepared. There was little need of cooking. The meal, as before, consisted of preserved meat and biscuit. Fresh water, which they flavoured with a few drops of rum, was obtained from an adjacent stream which trickled through the grass. By way of dessert they had an abundance of ripe mangoes, and the only drawback to their general enjoyment was the discordant outcry which the parrots kept up, as it were in protest against the invasion of what they held to be their own rightful domain.

It was nearly dark when supper was ended. The evening shade crept slowly upwards to the tops of the trees, which soon stood out in sharp relief against the lighter background of the sky, while the stars, one by one, began to peep. The wind dropped, and ceased to murmur through the foliage; to the general relief, the parrots desisted from their clatter; and as Nature hushed herself to rest, she seemed to be inviting all her children to follow her example.

“Had we not better light a good large fire?” asked Dick.

“By no means,” said Harris; “the nights are not cold, and under this wide-spreading mango the ground is not likely to be damp. Besides, as I have told you before, our best security consists in our taking care to attract no attention whatever from without.”

Mrs. Weldon interposed, —

“It may be true enough that we have nothing to dread from the Indians, but is it certain that there are no dangerous quadrupeds against which we are bound to be upon our guard?”

Harris answered, —

“I can positively assure you, madam, that there are no animals here but such as would be infinitely more afraid of you than you would be of them.”

“Are there any woods without wild beasts?” asked Jack.

“All woods are not alike, my boy,” replied Harris;

“this wood is a great park. As the Indians say, ‘Es como el Pariso;’ it is like Paradise.”

Jack persisted, —

“There must be snakes, and lions, and tigers.”

“Ask your mamma, my boy,” said Harris, “whether she ever heard of lions and tigers in America?”

Mrs. Weldon was endeavouring to put her little boy at his ease on this point, when Cousin Benedict interposed, saying that although there were no lions or tigers, there were plenty of jaguars and panthers in the New World.

"And won't they kill us?" demanded Jack eagerly, his apprehensions once more aroused.

"Kill you?" laughed Harris; "why, your friend Hercules here could strangle them, two at a time, one in each hand!"

"But, please, don't let the panthers come near me!" pleaded Jack, evidently alarmed.

"No, no, Master Jack, they shall not come near you. I will give them a good grip first," and the giant displayed his two rows of huge white teeth.

Dick Sands proposed that it should be the four younger negroes who should be assigned the task of keeping watch during the night, in attendance upon himself; but Actæon insisted so strongly upon the necessity of Dick's having his full share of rest, that the others were soon brought to the same conviction, and Dick was obliged to yield.

Jack valiantly announced his intention of taking one watch, but his sleepy eyelids made it only too plain that he did not know the extent of his own fatigue.

"I am sure there are wolves here," he said.

"Only such wolves as Dingo would swallow at a mouthful," said Harris.

"But I am sure there are wolves," he insisted, repeating the word "wolves" again and again, until he tumbled off to sleep against the side of old Nan. Mrs. Weldon gave her little son a silent kiss; it was her loving "good night."

Cousin Benedict was missing. Some little time before, he had slipped away in search of "cocuyos," or fire-flies, which he had heard were common in

South America.

Those singular insects emit a bright bluish light from two spots on the side of the thorax, and their colours are so brilliant that they are used as ornaments for ladies’ headdresses. Hoping to secure some specimens for his box, Benedict would have wandered to an unlimited distance; but Hercules, faithful to his undertaking, soon discovered him, and heedless of the naturalist’s protestations and vociferations, promptly escorted him back to the general rendezvous.

Hercules himself was the first to keep watch, but with this exception, the whole party, in another hour, were wrapped in peaceful slumber.

CHAPTER XVII

MISGIVINGS.

Most travellers who have passed a night in a South American forest have been roused from their slumbers by a *matinée musicale* more fantastic than melodious, performed by monkeys, as their ordinary greeting of the dawn. The yelling, chattering, screeching, howling, all unite to form a chorus almost unearthly in its hideousness.

Amongst the various specimens of the numerous family of the quadrumana ought to be recognized the little marikina; the sagouin, with its parti-coloured face; the grey mora, the skin of which is used by the Indians for covering their gun-locks; the sapajou, with its singular tuft over the forehead, and, most remarkable of all, the guariba (*Simia Beelzebul*) with its prehensile tail and diabolical countenance.

At the first streak of daylight the senior member, as choragus, will start the key-note in a sonorous barytone, the younger monkeys join in tenor and alto, and the concert begins. But this morning there was no concert at all. There was nothing of the wonted serenade to break the silence of the forest. The shrill notes resulting from the rapid vibration of the hyoid bones of the throat were not to be heard. Indians would have been disappointed and perplexed; they are very fond of the flesh of the guariba when smoked and dried, and they would certainly have missed the chant of the monkey "paternosters;" but Dick Sands and his companions were unfamiliar with any of these things, and accordingly the singular quietude was to them a matter of no surprise.

They all awoke much refreshed by their night's rest, which there had been nothing to disturb. Jack was by no means the latest in opening his eyes, and his first words were addressed to Hercules, asking him whether he had caught a wolf with his teeth. Hercules had to acknowledge that he had tasted nothing all night, and declared himself quite ready for breakfast. The whole party were unanimous in this respect, and after a brief morning prayer, breakfast was expeditiously served by old Nan. The meal was but a repetition of the last evening’s supper, but with their appetites sharpened by the fresh forest air, and anxious to fortify themselves for a good day’s march, they did not fail to do ample justice to their simple fare. Even Cousin Benedict, for once in his life at least, partook of his food as if it were not utterly a matter of indifference to him; but he grumbled very much at the restraint to which he considered himself subjected; he could not see the good of coming to such a country as this, if he were to be obliged to walk about with his hands in his pockets; and he protested that if Hercules did not leave him alone and permit him to catch fire-flies, there would be a bone to pick between them. Hercules did not look very much alarmed at the threat. Mrs. Weldon, however, took him aside, and telling him that she did not wish to deprive the enthusiast entirely of his favourite occupation, instructed him to allow her cousin as much liberty as possible, provided he did not lose sight of him.

The morning meal was over, and it was only seven o’clock when the travellers were once more on their way towards the east, preserving the same marching-order as on the day before.

The path was still through luxuriant forest. The vegetable kingdom reigned supreme. As the plateau was immediately adjacent to tropical latitudes, the sun’s rays during the summer months descended perpendicularly upon the virgin soil, and the vast amount of heat thus obtained combined with the abundant moisture retained in the subsoil, caused vegetation to assume a character which was truly magnificent.

Dick Sands could not overcome a certain sense of mystification. Here they were, as Harris told them, in the region of the pampas, a word which he knew in the Quichna dialect signifies “a plain;” but he had always read that these plains were characterized by a deficiency alike of water, of trees, and rocks; he had always understood that during the rainy season, thistles spring up in great abundance and grow until they form thickets that are well-nigh impenetrable; he had imagined that the few dwarf trees and prickly shrubs that exist during the summer only stamp the general scene with an aspect of yet more thorough bareness and desolation. But how different was everything to all this! The forest never ceased to stretch away interminably to the horizon. There were no tokens of the rough nakedness that he had expected. Dick seemed to be driven to the conclusion that Harris was right in describing this plateau of Atacama, which he had for his part most firmly believed to be a vast desert between the Andes and the Pacific, as a region that was quite exceptional in its natural features.

It was not in Dick’s character to keep his reflections to himself. In the course of the morning he expressed his extreme surprise at finding the pampas answer so little to his preconceived ideas.

“Have I not understood correctly,” he said, “that the pampas is similar to the North American savannahs, only less marshy?”

Harris replied that such was indeed a correct description of the pampas of Rio Colorado, and the Ilanos of Venezuela and the Orinoco.

“But,” he continued, “I own I am as much astonished as yourself at the character of this region; I have never crossed the plateau before, and I must confess it is altogether different to what you find beyond the Andes towards the Atlantic.”

“You don’t mean that we are going to cross the Andes?” said Dick, in sudden alarm.

Harris smiled.

“No, no, indeed. With our limited means of transport such an undertaking would have been rash in the extreme. We had better have kept to the coast for ever rather than incur such a risk. Our destination, San Felice, is on this side of the range, and in order to reach it, we shall not have to leave the plateau, of which the greatest elevation is but little over 1500 feet.”

“And you say,” Dick persisted, “that you have really no fear of losing your way in a forest such as this, a forest into which you have never set foot before?”

“No fear whatever,” Harris answered; “so accustomed am I to travelling of this kind, that I can steer my way by a thousand signs revealing themselves in the growth of the trees, and in the composition of the soil, which would never present themselves to your notice. I assure you that I anticipate no difficulties.”

This conversation was not heard by any of the rest of the party. Harris seemed to speak as frankly as he did fearlessly, and Dick felt that there might be, after all, no just grounds for any of his own misgivings.

Five days passed by, and the 12th of April arrived without any special incident. Nine miles had been the average distance accomplished in a day; regular periods of rest had been taken, and, except that Jack’s spirits had somewhat flagged, the fatigue did not seem to have interfered with the general good health of the travellers.

First disappointed of his India-rubber-tree, and then of his humming birds, Jack had inquired about the beautiful parrots which he had been led to expect he should see in this wonderful forest. Where were the bright green macaws? where were the gaudy aras with their bare white cheeks and pointed tails, which seem never to light upon the ground? and where, too, were all the brilliant parroquets, with their feathered faces, and indeed the whole variety of those forest chatterers of which the Indians affirm that they speak the language of nations long extinct?

It is true that there was no lack of the common grey parrots with crimson tails, but these were no novelty; Jack had seen plenty of them before, for owing to their reputation of being the most clever in mimickry of the Psittacidæ, they have been domesticated everywhere in both the Old and New worlds.

But Jack's dissatisfaction was nothing compared to Cousin Benedict's. In spite of being allowed to wander away from the rank, he had failed to discover a single insect which was worth the pursuit; not even a fire-fly danced at night; nature seemed to be mocking him, and his ill-humour increased accordingly.

In this way the journey was continued for four days longer, and on the 16th it was estimated that they must have travelled between eighty and ninety miles north-eastwards from the coast. Harris positively asserted that they could not be much more than twenty miles from San Felice, and that by pushing forwards they might expect in eight-and-forty hours to find themselves lodged in comfortable quarters.

But although they had thus succeeded in traversing this vast table-land, they had not seen one human inhabitant. Dick was more than ever perplexed, and it was a subject of bitter regret to him that they had not stranded upon some more frequented part of the shore, near some village or plantation where Mrs. Weldon might long since have found a suitable refuge.

Deserted, however, as the country apparently was by man, it had latterly shown itself much more abundantly tenanted by animals. Many a time a long, plaintive cry was heard, which Harris attributed to the tardigrades or sloths often found in wooded districts, and known by the name of “ais;” and in the middle of the dinner-halt on this day, a loud hissing suddenly broke upon the air which made Mrs. Weldon start to her feet in alarm.

“A serpent!” cried Dick, catching up his loaded gun.

The negroes, following Dick’s example, were in a moment on the alert.

“Don’t fire!” cried Harris.

There was indeed nothing improbable in the supposition that a “sucuru,” a species of boa, sometimes measuring forty feet in length, had just moved itself in the long grass at their side, but Harris affirmed that the “sucuru” never hisses, and declared that the noise had really come from animals of an entirely inoffensive character.

“What animals?” asked Dick, always eager for information, which it must be granted Harris seemed always equally anxious to give.

“Antelopes,” replied Harris; “but, hush! not a sound, or you will frighten them away.”

“Antelopes!” cried Dick; “I must see them; I must get close to them.”

“More easily said than done,” answered Harris, shaking his head; but Dick was not to be diverted from his purpose, and, gun in hand, crept into the grass. He had not advanced many yards before a herd of about a dozen gazelles, graceful in body, with short, pointed horns, dashed past him like a glowing cloud, and disappeared in the underwood without giving him time to take a shot.

“I told you beforehand what you would have to expect,” said Harris, as Dick, with a considerable sense of disappointment, returned to the party.

Impossible, however, as it had been fairly to scrutinize the antelopes, such was hardly the case with another herd of animals, the identification of which led to a somewhat singular discussion between Harris and the rest.

About four o’clock on the afternoon of the same day, the travellers were halting for a few moments near an opening in the forest, when three or four large animals emerged from a thicket about a hundred paces ahead, and scampered off at full speed. In spite of what Harris had urged, Dick put his gun to his shoulder, and was on the very point of firing, when Harris knocked the rifle quickly aside.

“They were giraffes!” shouted Dick.

The announcement awakened the curiosity of Jack, who quickly scrambled to his feet upon the saddle on which he was lounging.

“My dear Dick,” said Mrs. Weldon, “there are no giraffes in America!”

“Certainly not,” cried Harris; “they were not giraffes, they were ostriches which you saw!”

“Ostriches with four legs! that will never do! what do you say. Mrs. Weldon?”

Mrs. Weldon replied that she had certainly taken the animals for quadrupeds, and all the negroes were under the same impression.

Laughing heartily, Harris said it was far from an uncommon thing for an inexperienced eye to mistake a large ostrich for a small giraffe; the shape of both was so similar, that it often quite escaped observation as to whether the long necks terminated in a beak or a muzzle; besides, what need of discussion could there be when the fact was established that giraffes are unknown in the New World? The reasoning was plausible enough, and Mrs Weldon and the negroes were soon convinced. But Dick was far from satisfied.

“I did not know that there was an American ostrich!” he again objected.

“Oh, yes,” replied Harris promptly, “there is a species called the nandu, which is very well known here; we shall probably see some more of them.”

The statement was correct; the nandu is common in the plains of South America, and is distinguished from the African ostrich by having three toes, all furnished with claws. It is a fine bird, sometimes exceeding six feet in height; it has a short beak, and its wings are furnished with blue-grey plumes. Harris appeared well acquainted with the bird, and proceeded to give a very precise account of its habits. In concluding his remarks, he again pressed upon Dick his most urgent request that he should abstain from firing upon any animal whatever. It was of the utmost consequence.

Dick made no reply. He was silent and thoughtful. Grave doubts had arisen in his mind, and he could neither explain nor dispel them.

When the march was resumed on the following day, Harris asserted his conviction that another four-and-twenty hours would bring them to the hacienda.

“And there, madam,” he said, addressing Mrs. Weldon, “we can offer you every essential comfort, though you may not find the luxuries of your own home in San Francisco.”

Mrs. Weldon repeated her expression of gratitude for the proffered hospitality, owning that she should now be exceedingly glad to reach the farm, as she was anxious about her little son, who appeared to be threatened with the symptoms of incipient fever.

Harris could not deny that although the climate was usually very healthy, it nevertheless did occasionally produce a kind of intermittent fever during March and April.

“But nature has provided the proper remedy,” said Dick; and perceiving that Harris did not comprehend his meaning, he continued, “Are we not in the region of the quinquinas, the bark of which is notoriously the medicine with which attacks of fever are usually treated? for my part, I am amazed that we have not seen numbers of them already.”

“Ah! yes, yes; I know what you mean,” answered Harris, after a moment’s hesitation; “they are trees, however, not always easy to find; they rarely grow in groups, and in spite of their large leaves and fragrant red blossom, the Indians themselves often have a difficulty in recognizing them; the feature that distinguishes them most is their evergreen foliage”

At Mrs. Weldon’s request, Harris promised to point out the tree if he should see one, but added that when she reached the hacienda, she would be able to obtain some sulphate of quinine, which was much more efficacious than the unprepared bark.

[Footnote: This bark was formerly, reduced to powder, known as “Pulvis Jesuiticus,” because in the year 1649 the Jesuits in Rome imported a large quantity of it from their missionaries in South America.]

The day passed without further incident. No rain had fallen at present, though the warm mist that rose from the soil betokened an approaching change of weather; the rainy season was certainly not far distant, but to travellers who indulged the expectation of being in a few hours in a place of shelter, this was not a matter of great concern.

Evening came, and a halt was made for the night beneath a grove of lofty trees. If Harris had not miscalculated, they could hardly be more than about six miles from their destination; so confirmed, however, was Dick Sands in his strange suspicions, that nothing could induce him to relax any of the usual precautions, and he particularly insisted upon the negroes, turn by turn, keeping up the accustomed watch.

Worn out by fatigue, the little party were glad to lie down, but they had scarcely dropped off to sleep when they were aroused by a sharp cry.

“Who’s that? who’s there? what’s the matter?” exclaimed Dick, the first to rise to his feet.

“It is I,” answered Benedict’s voice; “I am bitten. Something has bitten me.”

“A snake!” exclaimed Mrs. Weldon in alarm.

“No, no, cousin, better than that! it was not a snake; I believe it was an orthoptera; I have it all right,” he shouted triumphantly.

“Then kill it quickly, sir; and let us go to sleep again in peace,” said Harris.

“Kill it! not for the world! I must have a light, and look at it!”

Dick Sands indulged him, for reasons of his own, in getting a light. The entomologist carefully opened his hand and displayed an insect somewhat smaller than a bee, of a dull colour, streaked with yellow on the under portion of the body. He looked radiant with delight.

“A diptera!” he exclaimed, half beside himself with joy, “a most famous diptera!”

“Is it venomous?” asked Mrs. Weldon.

“Not at all to men; it only hurts elephants and buffaloes.”

“But tell us its name! what is it?” cried Dick impetuously.

The naturalist began to speak in a slow, oracular tone.

“This insect is here a prodigy; it is an insect totally unknown in this country, — in America.”

“Tell us its name!” roared Dick.

“It is a tzetzy, sir, a true tzetzy.”

Dick’s heart sank like a stone. He was speechless. He did not, dared not, ask more. Only too well he knew where the tzetzy could alone be found. He did not close his eyes again that night.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

The morning of the 18th dawned, the day on which, according to Harris's prediction, the travellers were to be safely housed at San Felice. Mrs. Weldon was really much relieved at the prospect, for she was aware that her strength must prove inadequate to the strain of a more protracted journey. The condition of her little boy, who was alternately flushed with fever, and pale with exhaustion, had begun to cause her great anxiety, and unwilling to resign the care of the child even to Nan his faithful nurse, she insisted upon carrying him in her own arms. Twelve days and nights, passed in the open air, had done much to try her powers of endurance, and the charge of a sick child in addition would soon break down her strength entirely.

Dick Sands, Nan, and the negroes had all borne the march very fairly. Their stock of provisions, though of course considerably diminished, was still far from small. As for Harris, he had shown himself pre-eminently adapted for forest-life, and capable of bearing any amount of fatigue. Yet, strange to say, as he approached the end of the journey, his manner underwent a remarkable change; instead of conversing in his ordinary frank and easy way, he became silent and preoccupied, as if engrossed in his own thoughts. Perhaps he had an instinctive consciousness that "his young friend," as he was in the habit of addressing Dick, was entertaining hard suspicions about him.

The march was resumed. The trees once again ceased to be crowded in impenetrable masses, but stood in clusters at considerable distances apart. Now, Dick tried to argue with himself, they must be coming to the true pampas, or the man must be designedly misleading them; and yet what motive could he have?

Although during the earlier part of the day there occurred nothing that could be said absolutely to justify Dick’s increasing uneasiness, two circumstances transpired which did not escape his observation, and which, he felt, might be significant. The first of these was a sudden change in Dingo’s behaviour. The dog, throughout the march, had uniformly run along with his nose upon the ground, smelling the grass and shrubs, and occasionally uttering a sad low whine; but to-day he seemed all agitation; he scampered about with bristling coat, with his head erect, and ever and again burst into one of those furious fits of barking, with which he had formerly been accustomed to greet Negoro’s appearance upon the deck of the “Pilgrim.”

The idea that flitted across Dick’s mind was shared by Tom.

“Look, Mr. Dick, look at Dingo; he is at his old ways again,” said he; “it is just as if Negoro...”

“Hush!” said Dick to the old man, who continued in a lower voice, —

“It is just as if Negoro had followed us; do you think it is likely?”

“It might perhaps be to his advantage to follow us, if he doesn’t know the country; but if he does know the country, why then...”

Dick did not finish his sentence, but whistled to Dingo. The dog reluctantly obeyed the call.

As soon as the dog was at his side, Dick patted him, repeating, —

“Good dog! good Dingo! where’s Negoro?”

The sound of Negoro’s name had its usual effect; it seemed to irritate the animal exceedingly, and he barked furiously, and apparently wanted to dash into the thicket.

Harris had been an interested spectator of the scene, and now approached with a peculiar expression on his countenance, and inquired what they were saying to Dingo.

“Oh, nothing much,” replied Tom; “we were only asking him for news of a lost acquaintance.”

“Ah, I suppose you mean that Portuguese cook of yours.”

“Yes,” answered Tom; “we fancied from Dingo’s behaviour, that Negoro must be somewhere close at hand.”

“Why don’t you send and search the underwood? perhaps the poor wretch is in distress.”

“No need of that, Mr. Harris; Negoro, I have no doubt, is quite capable of taking care of himself.”

“Well, just as you please, my young friend,” said Harris, with an air of indifference.

Dick turned away; he continued his endeavours to pacify Dingo, and the conversation dropped.

The other thing that had arrested Dick’s attention was the behaviour of the horse. If they had been as near the hacienda as Harris described, would not the animal have pricked up its ears, sniffed the air, and with dilated nostril, exhibited some sign of satisfaction, as being upon familiar ground?

But nothing of the kind was to be observed; the horse plodded along as unconcernedly as if a stable were as far away as ever.

Even Mrs. Weldon was not so engrossed with her child, but what she was fain to express her wonder at the deserted aspect of the country. No trace of a farm-labourer was anywhere to be seen! She cast her eye at Harris, who was in his usual place in front, and observing how he was looking first to the left, and then to the right, with the air of a man who was uncertain of his path, she asked herself whether it was possible their guide might have lost his way. She dared not entertain the idea, and averted her eyes, that she might not be harassed by his movements.

After crossing an open plain about a mile in width, the travellers once again entered the forest, which resumed something of the same denseness that had characterized it farther to the west. In the course of the afternoon, they came to a spot which was marked very distinctly by the vestiges of some enormous animals, which must have passed quite recently. As Dick looked carefully about him, he observed that the branches were all torn off or broken to a considerable height, and that the foot-tracks in the trampled grass were much too large to be those either of jaguars or panthers. Even if it were possible that the prints on the ground had been made by ais or other taidigrades, this would fail to account in the least for the trees being broken to such a height. Elephants alone were capable of working such destruction in the underwood, but elephants were unknown in America. Dick was puzzled, but controlled himself so that he would not apply to Harris for any enlightenment; his intuition made him aware that a man who had once tried to make him believe that giraffes were ostriches, would not hesitate a second time to impose upon his credulity.

More than ever was Dick becoming convinced that Harris was a traitor, and he was secretly prompted to tax him with his treachery. Still he was obliged to own that he could not assign any motive for the man acting in such a manner with the survivors of the “Pilgrim,” and consequently hesitated before he actually condemned him for conduct so base and heartless. What could be done? he repeatedly asked himself. On board ship the boy captain might perchance have been able to devise some plan for the safety of those so strangely committed to his charge, but here on an unknown shore, he could only suffer from the burden of this responsibility the more, because he was so utterly powerless to act.

He made up his mind on one point. He determined not to alarm the poor anxious mother a moment before he was actually compelled. It was his carrying out this determination that explained why on subsequently arriving at a considerable stream, where he saw some huge heads, swollen muzzles, long tusks and unwieldy bodies rising from amidst the rank wet grass, he uttered no word and gave no gesture of surprise; but only too well he knew, at a glance, that he must be looking at a herd of hippopotamuses.

It was a weary march that day; a general feeling of depression spread involuntarily from one to another; hardly conscious to herself of her weariness, Mrs. Weldon was exhibiting manifest symptoms of lassitude; and it was only Dick’s moral energy and sense of duty that kept him from succumbing to the prevailing dejection.

About four o’clock, Tom noticed something lying in the grass, and stooping down he picked up a kind of knife; it was of peculiar shape, being very wide and flat in the blade, while its handle, which was of ivory, was ornamented with a good deal of clumsy carving. He carried it at once to Dick, who, when he had scrutinized it, held it up to Harris, with the remark, —

“There must be natives not far off.”

“Quite right, my young friend; the hacienda must be a very few miles away, — but yet, but yet...”

He hesitated.

“You don’t mean that you are not sure of your way,” said Dick sharply.”

“Not exactly that,” replied Harris; “yet in taking this short cut across the forest, I am inclined to think I am a mile or so out of the way. Perhaps I had better walk on a little way, and look about me.”

“No; you do not leave us here,” cried Dick firmly.

“Not against your will; but remember, I do not undertake to guide you in the dark.”

“We must spare you the necessity for that. I can answer for it that Mrs. Weldon will raise no objection to spending another night in the open air. We can start off to-morrow morning as early as we like, and if the distance be only what you represent, a few hours will easily accomplish it.”

“As you please,” answered Harris with cold civility.

Just then, Dingo again burst out into a vehement fit of barking, and it required no small amount of coaxing on Dick’s part to make him cease from his noise.

It was decided that the halt should be made at once. Mrs. Weldon, as it had been anticipated, urged nothing against it, being preoccupied by her immediate attentions to Jack, who was lying in her arms, suffering from a decided attack of fever. The shelter of a large thicket had just been selected by Dick as a suitable resting-place for the night, when Tom, who was assisting in the necessary preparations, suddenly gave a cry of horror.

“What is it, Tom?” asked Dick very calmly.

“Look! look at these trees! they are spattered with blood! and look here! here are hands, men’s hands, cut off and lying on the ground!”

“What?” cried Dick, and in an instant was at his side.

His presence of mind did not fail him; he whispered, —

“Hush! Tom! hush! not a word!”

But it was with a shudder that ran through his veins that he witnessed for himself the mutilated fragments of several human bodies, and saw, lying beside them, some broken forks, and some bits of iron chain.

The sight of the gory remains made Dingo bark ferociously, and Dick, who was most anxious that Mrs. Weldon’s attention should not be called to the discovery, had the greatest difficulty in driving him back; but fortunately the lady’s mind was so engrossed with her patient, that she did not observe the commotion. Harris stood aloof; there was no one to notice the change that passed over his countenance, but the expression was almost diabolical in its malignity.

Poor old Tom himself seemed perfectly spell-bound. With his hands clenched, his eyes dilated, and his breast heaving with emotion, he kept repeating without anything like coherence, the words, —

“Forks! chains! forks!... long ago... remember... too well... chains!”

“For Mrs. Weldon’s sake, Tom, hold your tongue!” Dick implored him.

Tom, however, was full with some remembrance of the past; he continued to repeat, —

“Long ago... forks... chains!” until Dick led him out of hearing.

A fresh halting-place was chosen a short distance further on, and supper was prepared. But the meal was left almost untasted; not so much that hunger had been overcome by fatigue, but because the indefinable feeling of uneasiness, that had taken possession of them all, had entirely destroyed all appetite.

Gradually the night became very dark. The sky was covered with heavy storm-clouds, and on the western horizon flashes of summer lightning now and then glimmered through the trees. The air was perfectly still; not a leaf stirred, and the atmosphere seemed so charged with electricity as to be incapable of transmitting sound of any kind.

Dick, himself, with Austin and Bat in attendance, remained on guard, all of them eagerly straining both eye and ear to catch any light or sound that might disturb the silence and obscurity. Old Tom, with his head sunk upon his breast, sat motionless, as in a trance; he was gloomily revolving the awakened memories of the past. Mrs. Weldon was engaged with her sick child. Scarcely one of the party was really asleep, except indeed it might be Cousin Benedict, whose reasoning faculties were not of an order to carry him forwards into any future contingencies.

Midnight was still an hour in advance, when the dull air seemed filled with a deep and prolonged roar, mingled with a peculiar kind of vibration.

Tom started to his feet. A fresh recollection of his early days had struck him.

“A lion! a lion!” he shouted.

In vain Dick tried to repress him; but he repeated, —

“A lion! a lion!”

Dick Sands seized his cutlass, and, unable any longer to control his wrath, he rushed to the spot where he had left Harris lying.

The man was gone, and his horse with him!

All the suspicions that had been so long pent up within Dick’s mind now shaped themselves into actual reality. A flood of light had broken in upon him. Now he was convinced, only too certainly, that it was not the coast of America at all upon which the schooner had been cast ashore! it was not Easter Island that had been sighted far away in the west! the compass had completely deceived him; he was satisfied now that the strong currents had carried them quite round Cape Horn, and that they had really entered the Atlantic. No wonder that quinquinas, caoutchouc, and other South American products, had failed to be seen. This was neither the Bolivian pampas nor the plateau of Atacama. They were giraffes, not ostriches, that had vanished down the glade; they were elephants that had trodden down the underwood; they were hippopotamuses that were lurking by the river; it was indeed the dreaded tzetsy that Cousin Benedict had so triumphantly discovered; and, last of all, it was a lion’s roar that had disturbed the silence of the forest. That chain, that knife, those forks, were unquestionably the instruments of slave-dealers; and what could those mutilated hands be, except the relics of their ill-fated victims?

Harris and Negoro must be in a conspiracy!

It was with terrible anguish that Dick gnashed his teeth and muttered, —

“Yes, it is too true; we are in Africa! in equatorial Africa! in the land of slavery! in the very haunt of slave-drivers!”

PART II

CHAPTER I.

THE DARK CONTINENT.

The “slave-trade” is an expression that ought never to have found its way into any human language. After being long practised at a large profit by such European nations as had possessions beyond the seas, this abominable traffic has now for many years been ostensibly forbidden; yet even in the enlightenment of this nineteenth century, it is still largely carried on, especially in Central Africa, inasmuch as there are several states, professedly Christian, whose signatures have never been affixed to the deed of abolition.

Incredible as it should seem, this barter of human beings still exists, and for the due comprehension of the second part of Dick Sands’ story it must be borne in mind, that for the purpose of supplying certain colonies with slaves, there continue to be prosecuted such barbarous “man-hunts” as threaten almost to lay waste an entire continent with blood, fire, and pillage.

The nefarious traffic as far as regards negroes does not appear to have arisen until the fifteenth century. The following are said to be the circumstances under which it had its origin. After being banished from Spain, the Mussulmans crossed the straits of Gibraltar and took refuge upon the shores of Africa, but the Portuguese who then occupied that portion of the coast persecuted the fugitives with the utmost severity, and having captured them in large numbers, sent them as prisoners into Portugal. They were thus the first nucleus of any African slaves that entered Western Europe since the commencement of the Christian era. The majority, however, of these Mussulmans were members of wealthy families, who were prepared to pay almost any amount of money for their release; but no ransom was exorbitant enough to tempt the Portuguese to surrender them; more precious than gold were the strong arms that should work the resources of their young and rising colonies. Thus baulked in their purpose of effecting a direct ransom of their captured relatives, the Mussulman families next submitted a proposition for exchanging them for a larger number of African negroes, whom it would be quite easy to procure. The Portuguese, to whom the proposal was in every way advantageous, eagerly accepted the offer; and in this way the slave-trade was originated in Europe.

By the end of the sixteenth century this odious traffic had become permanently established; in principle it contained nothing repugnant to the semi-barbarous thought and customs then existing; all the great states recognized it as the most effectual means of colonizing the islands of the New World, especially as slaves of negro blood, well acclimatized to tropical heat, were able to survive where white men must have perished by thousands. The transport of slaves to the American colonies was consequently regularly effected by vessels specially built for that purpose, and large dépôts for this branch of commerce were established at various points of the African coast. The “goods” cost comparatively little in production, and the profits were enormous.

Yet, after all, however indispensable it might be to complete the foundation of the trans-atlantic colonies, there was nothing to justify this shameful barter of human flesh and blood, and the voice of philanthropy began to be heard in protestation, calling upon all European governments, in the name of mercy and common humanity, to decree the abolition of the trade at once.

In 1751, the Quakers put themselves at the head of the abolitionist movement in North America, that very land where, a hundred years later, the war of secession burst forth, in which the question of slavery bore the most conspicuous part. Several of the Northern States, Virginia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania prohibited the trade, liberating the slaves, in spite of the cost, who had been imported into their territories.

The campaign, thus commenced, was not limited to a few provinces of the New World; on this side of the Atlantic, too, the partisans of slavery were subject to a vigourous attack. England and France led the van, and energetically beat up recruits to serve the righteous cause. “Let us lose our colonies rather than sacrifice our principles,” was the magnanimous watchword that resounded throughout Europe, and notwithstanding the vast political and commercial interests involved in the question, it did not go forth in vain. A living impulse had been communicated to the liberation-movement. In 1807, England formally prohibited the slave-trade in her colonies; France following her example in 1814. The two great nations then entered upon a treaty on the subject, which was confirmed by Napoleon during the Hundred Days.

Hitherto, however, the declaration was purely theoretical. Slave-ships continued to ply their illicit trade, discharging their living cargo at many a colonial port. It was evident that more resolute and practical measures must be taken to impress the enormity. Accordingly the United States in 1820, and Great Britain in 1824, declared the slave-trade to be an act of piracy and its perpetrators to be punishable with death. France soon gave in her adherence to the new treaty, but the Southern States of America, and the Spanish and Portuguese, not having signed the act of abolition, continued the importation of slaves at a great profit, and this in defiance of the recognized reciprocal right of visitation to verify the flags of suspected ships.

But although the slave-trade by these measures was in a considerable measure reduced, it continued to exist; new slaves were not allowed, but the old ones did not recover their liberty. England was now the first to set a noble example. On the 14th of May, 1833, an Act of Parliament, by a munificent vote of millions of pounds, emancipated all the negroes in the British Colonies, and in August, 1838, 670,000 slaves were declared free men. Ten years later, in 1848, the French Republic liberated the slaves in her colonies to the number of 260,000, and in 1859 the war which broke out between the Federals and Confederates in the United States finished the work of emancipation by extending it to the whole of North America.

Thus, three great powers have accomplished their task of humanity, and at the present time the slave-trade is carried on only for the advantage of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, or to supply the requirements of the Turkish or Arab populations of the East. Brazil, although she has not emancipated her former slaves, does not receive any new, and all negro children are pronounced free-born.

In contrast, however, to all this, it is not to be concealed that, in the interior of Africa, as the result of wars between chieftains waged for the sole object of making captives, entire tribes are often reduced to slavery, and are carried off in caravans in two opposite directions, some westwards to the Portuguese colony of Angola, others eastwards to Mozambique. Of these miserable creatures, of whom a very small proportion ever reach their destination, some are despatched to Cuba or Madagascar, others to the Arab or Turkish provinces of Asia, to Mecca or Muscat. The French and English cruisers have practically very little power to control the iniquitous proceedings, because the extent of coast to be watched is so large that a strict and adequate surveillance cannot be maintained. The extent of the odious export is very considerable; no less than 24,000 slaves annually reach the coast, a number that hardly represents a tenth part of those who are massacred or otherwise perish by a deplorable end. After the frightful butcheries, the fields lie devastated, the smouldering villages are void of inhabitants, the rivers reek with bleeding corpses, and wild beasts take undisputed possession of the soil. Livingstone, upon returning to a district, immediately after one of these ruthless raids, said that he could never have recognized it for the same that he had visited only a few months previously; and all other travellers, Grant, Speke, Burton, Cameron, Stanley, describe the wooded plateau of Central Africa as the principal theatre of the barbarous warfare between chief and chief. In the region of the great lakes, throughout the vast district which feeds the market of Zanzibar, in Bornu and Fezzan, further south on the banks of the Nyassa and Zambesi, further west in the districts of the Upper Zaire, just traversed by the intrepid Stanley, everywhere there is the recurrence of the same scenes of ruin, slaughter, and devastation. Ever and again the question seems to be forced upon the mind whether slavery is not to end in the entire annihilation of the negro race, so that, like the Australian tribes of South Holland, it will become extinct. Who can doubt that the day must dawn which will herald the closing of the markets in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, a day when civilized nations shall no longer tolerate the perpetration of this barbarous wrong?

It is hardly too much to say that another year ought to witness the emancipation of every slave in the possession of Christian states. It seems only too likely that for years to come the Mussulman nations will continue to depopulate the continent of Africa; to them is due the chief emigration of the natives, who, torn from their provinces, are sent to the eastern coast in numbers that exceed 40,000 annually. Long before the Egyptian expedition the natives of Sennaar were sold to the natives of Darfur and *vice versa*; and even Napoleon Buonaparte purchased a considerable number of negroes, whom he organized into regiments after the fashion of the mamelukes. Altogether it may be affirmed, that although four-fifths of the present century have passed away, slave-traffic in Africa has been increased rather than diminished.

The truth is that Islamism really nurtures the slave-trade. In Mussulman provinces, the black slave has taken the place of the white slave of former times; dealers of the most questionable character bear their part in the execrable business, bringing a supplementary population to races which, unregenerated by their own labour, would otherwise diminish and ultimately disappear.

As in the time of Buonaparte, these slaves often become soldiers; on the Upper Niger, for instance, they still form half the army of certain chieftains, under circumstances in which their lot is hardly, if at all, inferior to that of free men. Elsewhere, where the slave is not a soldier, he counts merely as current coin; and in Bornu and even in Egypt, we are told by William Lejean, an eye-witness, that officers and other functionaries have received their pay in this form.

Such, then, appears to be the present actual condition of the slave-trade; and it is stern justice that compels the additional statement that there are representatives of certain great European powers who still favour the unholy traffic with an indulgent connivance, and whilst cruisers are watching the coasts of the Atlantic and of the Indian Ocean, kidnapping goes on regularly in the interior, caravans pass along under the very eyes of certain officials, and massacres are perpetrated in which frequently ten negroes are sacrificed in the capture of a single slave.

It was the knowledge, more or less complete, of all this, that wrung from Dick Sands his bitter and heart-rending cry: —

“We are in Africa! in the very haunt of slave-drivers!”

Too true it was that he found himself and his companions in a land fraught with such frightful peril. He could only tremble when he wondered on what part of the fatal continent the “Pilgrim” had stranded. Evidently it was at some point of the west coast, and he had every reason to fear that it was on the shores of Angola, the rendezvous for all the caravans that journey in that portion of Africa.

His conjecture was correct; he really was in the very country that a few years later and with gigantic effort was to be traversed by Cameron in the south and Stanley in the north. Of the vast territory, with its three provinces, Congo, Angola, and Benguela, little was then known except the coast. It extends from the Zaire on the north to the Nourse on the south, and its chief towns are the ports of Benguela and of St. Paul de Loanda, the capital of the colony, which is a dependency of the kingdom of Portugal. The interior of the country had been almost entirely unexplored. Very few were the travellers who had cared to venture far inland, for an unhealthy climate, a hot, damp soil conducive to fever, a permanent warfare between the native tribes, some of which are cannibals, and the ill-feeling of the slave-dealers against any stranger who might endeavour to discover the secrets of their infamous craft, all combine to render the region one of the most hazardous in the whole of Equatorial Africa.

It was in 1816 that Tuckey ascended the Congo as far as the Yellala Falls, a distance not exceeding 203 miles; but the journey was too short to give an accurate idea of the interior of the country, and moreover cost the lives of nearly all the officers and scientific men connected with the expedition.

Thirty-seven years afterwards, Dr. Livingstone had advanced from the Cape of Good Hope to the Upper Zambesi; thence, with a fearlessness hitherto unrivalled, he crossed the Coango, an affluent of the Congo, and after having traversed the continent from the extreme south to the east he reached St. Paul de Loanda on the 31st of May, 1854, the first explorer of the unknown portions of the great Portuguese colony.

Eighteen years elapsed, and two other bold travellers crossed the entire continent from east to west, and after encountering unparalleled difficulties, emerged, the one to the south, the other to the north of Angola.

The first of these was Verney Lovett Cameron, a lieutenant in the British navy. In 1872, when serious doubts were entertained as to the safety of the expedition sent out under Stanley to the relief of Livingstone in the great lake district, Lieutenant Cameron volunteered to go out in search of the noble missionary explorer. His offer was accepted, and accompanied by Dr. Dillon, Lieutenant Cecil Murphy, and Robert Moffat, a nephew of Livingstone, he started from Zanzibar. Having passed through Ugogo, he met Livingstone's corpse, which was being borne to the eastern coast by his faithful followers. Unshaken in his resolve to make his way right across the continent, Cameron still pushed onwards to the west. He passed through Unyanyembe and Uganda, and reached Kawele, where he secured all Livingstone's papers. After exploring Lake Tanganyika he crossed the mountains of Bambarre, and finding himself unable to descend the course of the Lualaba, he traversed the provinces devastated and depopulated by war and the slave-trade, Kilemba, Urua, the sources of the Lomami, Ulanda, and Lovalé, and having crossed the Coanza, he sighted the Atlantic and reached the port of St. Philip de Benguela, after a journey that had occupied three years and five months. Cameron's two companions, Dr.

Dillon and Robert Moffat, both succumbed to the hardships of the expedition.

The intrepid Englishman was soon to be followed into the field by an American, Mr. Henry Moreland Stanley. It is universally known how the undaunted correspondent of the *New York Herald*, having been despatched in search of Livingstone, found the veteran missionary at Ujiji, on the borders of Lake Tanganyika, on the 31st of October, 1871. But what he had undertaken in the course of humanity Stanley longed to continue in the interests of science, his prime object being to make a thorough investigation of the Lualaba, of which, in his first expedition, he had only been able to get a partial and imperfect survey. Accordingly, whilst Cameron was still deep in the provinces of Central Africa, Stanley started from Bagamoyo in November, 1874. Twenty-one months later he quitted Ujiji, which had been decimated by small-pox, and in seventy-four days accomplished the passage of the lake and reached Nyangwe, a great slave-market previously visited both by Livingstone and Cameron. He was also present at some of the horrible razzias, perpetrated by the officers of the Sultan of Zanzibar in the districts of the Marunzu and Manyuema.

In order to be in a position to descend the Lualaba to its very mouth, Stanley engaged at Nyangwe 140 porters and nineteen boats. Difficulties arose from the very outset, and not only had he to contend with the cannibals of Ugusu, but, in order to avoid many unnavigable cataracts, he had to convey his boats many miles by land. Near the equator, just at the point where the Lualaba turns north-north-west, Stanley's little convoy was attacked by a fleet of boats, manned by several hundred natives, whom, however, he succeeded in putting to flight. Nothing daunted, the resolute American pushed on to lat. 20° N. and ascertained, beyond room for doubt, that the Lualaba was really the Upper Zaire or Congo, and that, by following its course, he should come directly to the sea.

Beset with many perils was the way. Stanley was in almost daily collision with the various tribes upon the river-banks; on the 3rd of June, 1877, he lost one of his companions, Frank Pocock, at the passage of the cataracts of Massassa, and on the 18th of July he was himself carried in his boat into the Mbelo Falls, and escaped by little short of a miracle.

On the 6th of August the daring adventurer arrived at the village of Ni Sanda, only four days from the sea; two days later he received a supply of provisions that had been sent by two Emboma merchants to Banza M’buko, the little coast-town where, after a journey of two years and nine months, fraught with every kind of hardship and privation, he completed his transit of the mighty continent. His toil told, at least temporarily, upon his years, but he had the grand satisfaction of knowing that he had traced the whole course of the Lualaba, and had ascertained, beyond reach of question, that as the Nile is the great artery of the north, and the Zambesi of the east, so Africa possesses in the west a third great river, which in a course of no less than 2900 miles, under the names of the Lualaba, Zaire, and Congo, unites the lake district with the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1873, however, the date at which the “Pilgrim” foundered upon the coast, very little was known of the province of Angola, except that it was the scene of the western slave-trade, of which the markets of Bihé, Cassanga, and Kazunde were the chief centres. This was the country in which Dick Sands now found himself, a hundred miles from shore, in charge of a lady exhausted with fatigue and anxiety, a half-dying child, and a band of negroes who would be a most tempting bait to the slave-driver.

His last illusion was completely dispelled. He had no longer the faintest hope that he was in America, that land where little was to be dreaded from either native, wild beast, or climate; he could no more cherish the fond impression that he might be in the pleasant region between the Cordilleras and the coast, where villages are numerous and missions afford hospitable shelter to every traveller. Far, far away were those provinces of Bolivia and Peru, to which (unless a criminal hand had interposed) the “Pilgrim” would certainly have sped her way. No: too truly this was the terrible province of Angola; and worse than all, not the district near the coast, under the surveillance of the Portuguese authorities, but the interior of the country, traversed only by slave caravans, driven under the lash of the havildars.

Limited, in one sense, was the knowledge that Dick Sands possessed of this land of horrors; but he had read the accounts that had been given by the missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by the Portuguese traders who frequented the route from St. Paul de Loanda, by San Salvador to the Zaire, as well as by Dr. Livingstone in his travels in 1853, and consequently he knew enough to awaken immediate and complete despair in any spirit less indomitable than his own.

Anyhow, his position was truly appalling.

CHAPTER II.

ACCOMPLICES.

On the day following that on which Dick Sands and his party had made their last halt in the forest, two men met by appointment at a spot about three miles distant.

The two men were Harris and Negoro, the one lately landed from New Zealand, the other pursuing his wonted occupation of slave-dealer in the province of Angola. They were seated at the foot of an enormous banyan-tree, on the banks of a rushing torrent that streamed between tall borders of papyrus.

After the conversation had turned awhile upon the events of the last few hours, Negoro said abruptly, —

“Couldn’t you manage to get that young fifteen-year-old any farther into the interior?”

“No, indeed; it was a hard matter enough to bring him thus far; for the last few days his suspicions have been wide awake.”

“But just another hundred miles, you know,” continued Negoro, “would have finished the business off well, and those black fellows would have been ours to a dead certainty.”

“Don’t I tell you, my dear fellow, that it was more than time for me to give them the slip?” replied Harris, shrugging his shoulders. “Only too well I knew that our young friend was longing to put a shot into my body, and that was a sugar-plum I might not be able to digest.”

The Portuguese gave a grunt of assent, and Harris went on, —

"For several days I succeeded well enough. I managed to palm off the country as the forest of Atacama, which you may recollect I once visited; but when the youngster began to ask for gutta-percha and humming-birds, and his mother wanted quinquina-trees, and when that old fool of a cousin was bent on finding cocuyos, I was rather nonplussed. One day I had to swear that giraffes were ostriches, but the young captain did not seem to swallow the dose at all easily. Then we saw traces of elephants and hippopotamuses, which of course are as often seen in America as an honest man in a Benguela penitentiary; then that old nigger Tom discovered a lot of forks and chains left by some runaway slaves at the foot of a tree; but when, last of all, a lion roared, — and the noise, you know, is rather louder than the mewing of a cat, — I thought it was time to take my horse and decamp."

Negoro repeated his expression of regret that the whole party had not been carried another hundred miles into the province.

"It really cannot be helped," rejoined the American; "I have done the best I could; and I think, mate," he added confidentially, "that you have done wisely in following the caravan at a good distance; that dog of theirs evidently owes you a grudge, and might prove an ugly customer."

"I shall put a bullet into that beast's head before long," growled Negoro.

"Take care you don't get one through your own first," laughed Harris; "that young Sands, I warn you, is a first-rate shot, and between ourselves, is rather a fine fellow of his kind."

“Fine fellow, indeed!” sneered Negoro; “whatever he is, he is a young upstart, and I have a long score to wipe off against him;” and, as he spoke, an expression of the utmost malignity passed over his countenance.

Harris smiled.

“Well, mate,” he said; “your travels have not improved your temper, I see. But come now, tell me what you have been doing all this time. When I found you just after the wreck, at the mouth of the Longa, you had only time to ask me to get this party, somehow or other, up into the country. But it is just upon two years since you left Cassange with that caravan of slaves for our old master Alvez. What have you been doing since? The last I heard of you was that you had run foul of an English cruiser, and that you were condemned to be hanged.”

“So I was very nearly,” muttered Negoro.

“Ah, well, that will come sooner or later,” rejoined the American with philosophic indifference; “men of our trade can’t expect to die quietly in our beds, you know. But were you caught by the English?”

“No, by the Portuguese.”

“Before you had got rid of your cargo?”

Negoro hesitated a moment before replying.

“No,” he said, presently, and added, “The Portuguese have changed their game: for a long time they carried on the trade themselves, but now they have got wonderfully particular; so I was caught, and condemned to end my days in the penitentiary at St. Paul de Loanda.”

"Confound it!" exclaimed Harris, "a hundred times better be hanged!"

"I'm not so sure of that," the Portuguese replied, "for when I had been at the galleys about a fortnight I managed to escape, and got into the hold of an English steamer bound for New Zealand. I wedged myself in between a cask of water and a case of preserved meat, and so managed to exist for a month. It was close quarters, I can tell you, but I preferred to travel incognito rather than run the risk of being handed over again to the authorities at Loanda."

"Well done!" exclaimed the American, "and so you had a free passage to the land of the Maoris. But you didn't come back in the same fashion?"

"No; I always had a hankering to be here again at my old trade; but for a year and a half..."

He stopped abruptly, and grasped Harris by the arm.

"Hush," he whispered, "didn't you hear a rustling in that clump of papyrus?"

In a moment Harris had caught up his loaded gun; and both men, starting to their feet, looked anxiously around them.

"It was nothing," said Harris presently; "the stream is swollen by the storm, that is all; your two years' travelling has made you forget the sounds of the forest, mate. Sit down again, and go on with your story. When I know the past, I shall be better able to talk about the future."

They reseated themselves, and Negoro went on, —

“For a whole year and a half I vegetated at Auckland. I left the hold of the steamer without a dollar in my pocket, and had to turn my hand to every trade imaginable in order to get a living.”

“Poor fellow! I daresay you even tried the trade of being an honest man,” put in the American.

“Just so,” said Negoro, “and in course of time the ‘Pilgrim,’ the vessel by which I came here, put in at Auckland. While she was waiting to take Mrs. Weldon and her party on board, I applied to the captain for a post, for I was once mate on board a slaver, and know something of seamanship. The ‘Pilgrim’s’ crew was complete, but fortunately the ship’s cook had just deserted; I offered to supply his place; in default of better my services were accepted, and in a few days we were out of sight of New Zealand.”

“I have heard something about the voyage from young Sands,” said Harris, “but even now I can’t understand how you reached here.”

“Neither does he,” said Negoro, with a malicious grin. “I will tell you now, and you may repeat the story to your young friend if you like.”

“Well, go on,” said Harris.

“When we started,” continued Negoro, “it was my intention to sail only as far as Chili: that would have brought me nearly half way to Angola; but three weeks after leaving Auckland, Captain Hull and all his crew were lost in chasing a whale, and I and the apprentice were the only seamen left on board.”

“Then why in the name of peace didn’t you take command of the ship?” exclaimed Harris.

“Because there were five strong niggers who didn’t trust me; so, on second thoughts, I determined to keep my old post as cook.”

“Then do you mean to say that it was mere accident that brought you to the coast of Africa?”

“Not a bit of it; the only accident, — and a very lucky one it was — was meeting you on the very spot where we stranded. But it was my doing that we got so far. Young Sands understood nothing more of navigation than the use of the log and compass. Well, one fine day, you understand, the log remained at the bottom of the sea, and one night the compass was tampered with, so that the ‘Pilgrim,’ scudding along before a tempest, was carried altogether out of her course. You may imagine the young captain was puzzled at the length of the voyage; it would have bewildered a more experienced head than his. Before he was aware of it, we had rounded Cape Horn; I recognized it through the mist. Then at once I put the compass to rights again, and the ‘Pilgrim ‘ was carried north-eastwards by a tremendous hurricane to the very place I wanted. The island Dick Sands took for Easter Island was really Tristan d’Acunha.”

“Good!” said Harris; “I think I understand now how our friends have been persuaded to take Angola for Bolivia. But they are undeceived now, you know,” he added.

“I know all about that,” replied the Portuguese.

“Then what do you intend to do?” said Harris.

“You will see,” answered Negoro significantly; “but first of all tell me something about our employer, old Alvez; how is he?”

“Oh, the old rascal is well enough, and will be delighted to see you again,” replied Harris.

“Is he at the market at Bihé?”

“No, he has been at his place at Kazonndé for a year or more.”

“And how does business go on?”

“Badly enough, on this coast,” said Harris; “plenty of slaves are waiting to be shipped to the Spanish colonies, but the difficulty is how to get them embarked. The Portuguese authorities on the one hand, and the English cruisers on the other, almost put a stop to exportation altogether; down to the south, near Mossamedes, is the only part where it can be attempted with any chance of success. To pass a caravan through Benguela or Loande is an utter impossibility; neither the governors nor the chefés

[Footnote 1: Subordinate Portuguese governors at secondary stations.] will listen to a word of reason. Old Alvez is therefore thinking of going in the other direction towards Nyangwe and Lake Tanganyika; he can there exchange his goods for slaves and ivory, and is sure to do a good business with Upper Egypt and the coast of Mozambique, which supplies Madagascar. But I tell you, Negoro,” he added gravely, “I believe the time is coming when the slave-trade will come to an end altogether. The English missionaries are advancing into the interior. That fellow Livingstone, confound him! has finished his tour of the lakes, and is now working his way towards Angola; then there is another man named Cameron who is talking about crossing the continent from east to west, and it is feared that Stanley the American will do the same. All this exploration, you know, is ruinous to our business, and it is to our interest that not one of these travellers should be allowed to return to tell tales of us in Europe.”

Harris spoke like a merchant embarrassed by a temporary commercial crisis. The atrocious scenes to which the slave-dealers are accustomed seems to render them impervious to all sense of justice or humanity, and they learn to regard their living merchandize with as small concern as though they were dealing with chests of tea or hogsheads of sugar.

But Harris was right when he asserted that civilization must follow the wake of the intrepid pioneers of African discovery. Livingstone first, and after him, Grant, Speke, Burton, Cameron, Stanley, are the heroes whose names will ever be linked with the first dawnings of a brighter age upon the dark wilds of Equatorial Africa.

Having ascertained that his accomplice had returned unscrupulous and daring as ever, and fully prepared to pursue his former calling as an agent of old Alvez the slave dealer, Harris inquired what he proposed doing with the survivors of the “Pilgrim” now that they were in his hands.

“Divide them into two lots,” answered Negoro, without a moment’s hesitation, “one for the market, the other...”

He did not finish his sentence, but the expression of his countenance was an index to the malignity of his purpose.

“Which shall you sell?” asked the American.

“The niggers, of course. The old one is not worth much, but the other four ought to fetch a good price at Kazonndé.”

“Yes, you are right,” said Harris; “American-born slaves, with plenty of work in them, are rare articles, and very different to the miserable wretches we get up the country. But you never told me,” he added, suddenly changing the subject, “whether you found any money on board the ‘Pilgrim’!”

“Oh, I rescued a few hundred dollars from the wreck, that was all,” said the Portuguese carelessly; “but I am expecting...” he stopped short.

“What are you expecting?” inquired Harris eagerly.

“Oh, nothing, nothing,” said Negoro, apparently annoyed that he had said so much, and immediately began talking of the means of securing the living prey which he had been taking so many pains to entrap. Harris informed him that on the Coanza, about ten miles distant, there was at the present time encamped a slave caravan, under the control of an Arab named Ibn Hamish; plenty of native soldiers were there on guard, and if Dick Sands and his people could only be induced to travel in that direction, their capture would be a matter of very little difficulty. He said that of course Dick Sands’ first thought would naturally be how to get back to the coast; it was not likely that he would venture a second time through the forest, but would in all probability try to make his way to the nearest river, and descend its course on a raft to the sea. The nearest river was undoubtedly the Coanza, so that he and Negoro might feel quite sure of meeting “their friends” upon its banks.

“If you really think so,” said Negoro, “there is not much time to be lost; whatever young Sands determines to do, he will do at once: he never lets the grass grow under his feet.”

“Let us start, then, this very moment, mate,” was Harris’s reply.

Both rose to their feet, when they were startled by the same rustling in the papyrus which had previously aroused Negoro’s fears. Presently a low growl was heard, and a large dog, showing his teeth, emerged from the bushes, evidently prepared for an attack.

“It’s Dingo!” exclaimed Harris.

“Confound the brute! he shall not escape me this time,” said Negoro.

He caught up Harris’s gun, and raising it to his shoulder, he fired just as the dog was in the act of springing at his throat. A long whine of pain followed the report, and Dingo disappeared again amongst the bushes that fringed the stream. Negoro was instantly upon his track, but could discover nothing beyond a few blood-stains upon the stalks of the papyrus, and a long crimson trail upon the pebbles on the bank.

“I think I have done for the beast now,” was Negoro’s remark as he returned from his fruitless search.

Harris, who had been a silent spectator of the whole scene, now asked coolly, —

“What makes that animal have such an inveterate dislike to you?”

“Oh, there is an old score to settle between us,” replied the Portuguese.

“What about?” inquired the American.

Negoro made no reply, and finding him evidently disinclined to be communicative on the subject, Harris did not press the matter any further.

A few moments later the two men were descending the stream, and making their way through the forest towards the Coanza.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE MARCH AGAIN.

“Africa! Africa!” was the terrible word that echoed and re-echoed in the mind of Dick Sands. As he pondered over the events of the preceding weeks he could now understand why, notwithstanding the rapid progress of the ship, the land seemed ever to be receding, and why the voyage had been prolonged to twice its anticipated length. It remained, however, a mystery inexplicable as before, how and when they had rounded Cape Horn and passed into another ocean. Suddenly the idea flashed upon him that the compass must have been tampered with; and he remembered the fall of the first compass; he recalled the night when he had been roused by Tom’s cry of alarm that Negoro had fallen against the binnacle. As he recollected these circumstances he became more and more convinced that it was Negoro who was the mainspring of all the mischief; that it was he who had contrived the loss of the “Pilgrim,” and compromised the safety of all on board.

What had been the career, what could be the motives of a man who was capable of such vile machinations?

But shrouded in mystery as were the events of the past, the present offered a prospect equally obscure.

Beyond the fact that he was in Africa and a hundred miles from the coast, Dick knew absolutely nothing. He could only conjecture that he was in the fatal province of Angola, and assured as he was that Harris had acted the traitor, he was led to the conclusion that he and Negoro had been playing into each other’s hands. The result of the collision, he feared, might be very disastrous to the survivors of the “Pilgrim.” Yet, in what manner would the odious stratagem be accomplished? Dick could well understand that the negroes would be sold for slaves; he could only too easily imagine that upon himself Negoro would wreak the vengeance he had so obviously been contemplating; but for Mrs. Weldon and the other helpless members of the party what fate could be in store?

The situation was terrible, but yet Dick did not flinch; he had been appointed captain, and captain he would remain; Mrs. Weldon and her little son had been committed to his charge, and he was resolved to carry out his trust faithfully to the end.

For several hours he remained wrapped in thought, pondering over the present and the future, weighing the evil chances against the good, only to be convinced that the evil much preponderated. At length he rose, firm, resolute, calm. The first glimmer of dawn was breaking upon the forest. All the rest of the party, except Tom, were fast asleep. Dick Sands crept softly up to the old negro, and whispered: —

"Tom, you know now where we are!"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Dick, only too well I know it. We are in Africa!"

The old man sighed mournfully.

"Tom," said Dick, in the same low voice, "you must keep this a secret; you must not say a word to let Mrs. Weldon or any of the others know "

The old man murmured his assent, and Dick continued: —

"It will be quite enough for them to learn that we have been betrayed by Harris, and that we must consequently practise extra care and watchfulness; they will merely think we are taking precautions against being surprised by nomad Indians. I trust to your good sense, Tom, to assist me in this."

"You may depend upon me, Mr. Dick; and I can promise you that we will all do our best to prove our courage, and to show our devotion to your service."

Thus assured of Tom's co-operation, Dick proceeded to deliberate upon his future line of action. He had every reason to believe that the treacherous American, startled by the traces of the slaves and the unexpected roaring of the lion, had taken flight before he had conducted his victims to the spot where they were to be attacked, and that consequently some hours might elapse before he would be joined by Negoro, who (to judge from Dingo's strange behaviour) had undoubtedly for the last few days been somewhere on their track.

Here was a delay that might be turned to good account, and no time was to be lost in taking advantage of it to commence their return journey to the coast. If, as Dick had every reason to suppose, he was in Angola, he hoped to find, either north or south, some Portuguese settlement whence he could obtain the means of transporting his party to their several homes.

But how was this return journey to be accomplished? It would be difficult, not to say imprudent, to retrace their footsteps through the forest; it would merely bring them to their starting-point, and would, moreover, afford an easy track for Negoro or his accomplices to follow. The safest and most secret means of reaching the coast would assuredly be by descending the course of some river. This would have to be effected by constructing a strong raft, from which the little party, well armed, might defend themselves alike from attacks either of the natives or of wild beasts, and which would likewise afford a comfortable means of transport for Mrs. Weldon and her little boy, who were now deprived of the use of Harris's horse. The negroes, it is true, would be only too pleased to carry the lady on a litter of branches, but this would be to occupy the services of two out of five, and under the circumstances it was manifestly advisable that all hands should be free to act on the defensive. Another great inducement towards the plan was that Dick Sands felt himself much more at home in travelling by water than by land, and was longing to be once again upon what to him was, as it were, his native element. He little dreamt that he was devising for himself the very plan that Harris, in his speculations, had laid down for him!

The most urgent matter was now to find such a stream as would suit their purpose. Dick had several reasons for feeling sure that one existed in the neighbourhood. He knew that the little river, which fell into the Atlantic near the spot where the “Pilgrim” stranded, could not extend very far either to the north or east, because the horizon was bounded in both directions by the chain of mountains which he had taken for the Cordilleras. If the stream did not rise in those hills it must incline to the south, so that in either case Dick was convinced he could not be long in discovering it or one of its affluents. Another sign, which he recognized as hopeful, was that during the last few miles of the march the soil had become moist and level, whilst here and there the appearance of tiny rivulets indicated that an aqueous network existed in the subsoil. On the previous day, too, the caravan had skirted a rushing torrent, of which the waters were tinged with oxide of iron from its sloping banks.

Dick’s scheme was to make his way back as far as this stream, which though not navigable itself would in all probability empty itself into some affluent of greater importance. The idea, which he imparted to Tom, met with the old negro’s entire approval.

As the day dawned the sleepers, one by one, awoke. Mrs. Weldon laid little Jack in Nan’s arms. The child was still dozing; the fever had abated, but he looked painfully white and exhausted after the attack.

“Dick,” said Mrs. Weldon, after looking round her, “where is Mr. Harris? I cannot see him.”

“Harris has left us,” answered Dick very quietly.

“Do you mean that he has gone on ahead?”

“No, madam, I mean that he has left us, and gone away entirely: he is in league with Negoro.”

“In league with Negoro!” cried Mrs. Weldon, “Ah, I have had a fancy lately that there has been something wrong: but why? what can be their motive?”

“Indeed I am unable to tell you,” replied Dick; “I only

of heavily-laden chariots, betokened the flight of a herd of buffaloes; but with these exceptions no animal of any magnitude appeared in view.

For about two miles Dick followed the course of the rivulet, in the hope that it would emerge into a more important stream, which would convey them without much difficulty or danger direct to the sea.

Towards noon about three miles had been accomplished, and a halt was made for rest. Neither Negoro nor Harris had been seen, nor had Dingo reappeared. The encampment for the midday refreshment was made under the shelter of a clump of bamboos, which effectually concealed them all. Few words were spoken during the meal. Mrs. Weldon could eat nothing; she had again taken her little boy into her arms, and seemed wholly absorbed in watching him. Again and again Dick begged her to take some nourishment, urging upon her the necessity of keeping up her strength.

“We shall not be long in finding a good current to carry us to the coast,” said the lad brightly.

Mrs. Weldon raised her eyes to his animated features. With so sanguine and resolute a leader, with such devoted servants as the five negroes in attendance, she felt that she ought not utterly to despair. Was she not, after all, on friendly soil? what great harm could Harris perpetrate against her or her belongings? She would hope still, hope for the best.

Rejoiced as he was to see something of its former brightness return to her countenance, Dick nevertheless had scarcely courage steadily to return her searching gaze. Had she known the whole truth, he knew that her heart must fail her utterly.

CHAPTER IV.

ROUGH TRAVELLING.

Just at this moment Jack woke up and put his arms round his mother’s neck. His eyes were brighter, and there was manifestly no return of fever.

“You are better, darling!” said Mrs. Weldon, pressing him tenderly to her.

“Yes, mamma, I am better; but I am very thirsty.”

Some cold water was soon procured, which the child drank eagerly, and then began to look about him. His first inquiry was for his old friends, Dick and Hercules, both of whom approached at his summons and greeted him affectionately.

“Where is the horse?” was the next question.

“Gone away, Master Jack; I am your horse now,” said Hercules.

“But you have no bridle for me to hold,” said Jack, looking rather disappointed.

“You may put a bit in my mouth if you like, master Jack,” replied Hercules, extending his jaws, “and then you may pull as hard as you please.”

“O, I shall not pull very hard,” said Jack; “but haven’t we nearly come to Mr. Harris’s farm?”

Mrs. Weldon assured the child that they should soon be where they wanted to be, and Dick, finding that the conversation was approaching dangerous ground, proposed that the journey should be now resumed. Mrs. Weldon assented; the encampment was forthwith broken up and the march continued as before.

In order not to lose sight of the watercourse, it was necessary to cut a way right through the underwood: progress was consequently very slow; and a little over a mile was all that was accomplished in about three hours. Footpaths had evidently once existed, but they had all become what the natives term “dead,” that is, they had become entirely overgrown with brushwood and brambles. The negroes worked away with a will; Hercules, in particular, who temporarily resigned his charge to Nan, wielded his axe with marvellous effect, all the time giving vent to stentorian groans and grunts, and succeeded in opening the woods before him as if they were being consumed by a devouring fire.

Fortunately this heavy labour was not of very long duration.

After about a mile, an opening of moderate width, converging towards the stream and following its bank, was discovered in the underwood. It was a passage formed by elephants, which apparently by hundreds must be in the habit of traversing this part of the forest. The spongy soil, soaked by the downpour of the rainy season, was everywhere indented with the enormous impressions of their feet.

But it soon became evident that elephants were not the only living creatures that had used this track. Human bones gnawed by beasts of prey, whole human skeletons, still wearing the iron fetters of slavery, everywhere strewed the ground. It was a scene only too common in Central Africa, where like cattle driven to the slaughter, poor miserable men are dragged in caravans for hundreds of weary miles, to perish on the road in countless numbers beneath the trader’s lash, to succumb to the mingled horrors of fatigue, privation, and disease, or, if provisions fail, to be butchered, without pity or remorse, by sword and gun.

That slave-caravans had passed that way was too obvious to permit a doubt. For at least a mile, at almost every step Dick came in contact with the scattered bones; while ever and again huge goat suckers, disturbed by the approach of the travellers, rose with flapping wings, and circled round their heads.

The youth’s heart sank with secret dismay lest Mrs. Weldon should divine the meaning of this ghastly scene, and appeal to him for explanation, but fortunately she had again insisted on carrying her little patient, and although the child was fast asleep, he absorbed her whole attention. Nan was by her side, almost equally engrossed. Old Tom alone was fully alive to the significance of his surroundings, and with downcast eyes he mournfully pursued his march. Full of amazement, the other negroes looked right and left upon what might appear to them as the upheaval of some vast cemetery, but they uttered no word of inquiry or surprise.

Meantime the bed of the stream had increased both in breadth and depth, and the rivulet had in a degree lost its character of a rushing torrent. This was a change which Dick Sands observed hopefully, interpreting it as an indication that it might itself become navigable, or would empty itself into some more important tributary of the Atlantic. His resolve was fixed: he would follow its course at all hazards. As soon, therefore, as he found that the elephant’s track was quitting the water’s edge, he made up his mind to abandon it, and had no hesitation in again resorting to the use of the axe. Once more, then, commenced the labour of cutting a way through the entanglement of bushes and creepers that were thick upon the soil. It was no longer forest through which they were wending their arduous path; trees were comparatively rare; only tall clumps of bamboos rose above the grass, so high, however, that even Hercules could not see above them, and the passage of the little troop could only have been discovered by the rustling in the stalks.

In the course of the afternoon, the soil became soft and marshy. It was evident that the travellers were crossing plains that in a long rainy season must be inundated. The ground was carpeted with luxuriant mosses and graceful ferns, and the continual appearance of brown hematite wherever there was a rise in the soil, betokened the existence of a rich vein of metal beneath.

Remembering what he had read in Dr. Livingstone’s account of these treacherous swamps, Dick bade his companions take their footing warily. He himself led the way. Tom expressed his surprise that the ground should be so soaked when there had been no rain for some time.

“I think we shall have a storm soon,” said Bat,

“All the more reason, then,” replied Dick, “why we should get away from these marshes as quickly as possible. Carry Jack again, Hercules; and you, Bat and Austin, keep close to Mrs. Weldon, so as to be able to assist her if she wants your help. But take care, take care, Mr. Benedict!” he cried out in sudden alarm; “what are you doing, sir?”

“I’m slipping in,” was poor Benedict’s helpless reply. He had trodden upon a kind of quagmire and, as though a trap had been opened beneath his feet, was fast disappearing into the slough. Assistance was immediately rendered, and the unfortunate naturalist was dragged out, covered with mud almost to his waist, but thoroughly satisfied because his precious box of specimens had suffered no injury. Actæon undertook for the future to keep close to his side, and endeavour to avoid a repetition of the mishap.

The accident could not be said to be altogether free from unpleasant consequences. Air-bubbles in great numbers had risen to the surface of the mire from which Benedict had been extricated, and as they burst they disseminated an odious stench that was well-nigh intolerable. The passage of these pestilential districts is not unfrequently very dangerous, and Livingstone, who on several occasions waded through them in mud that reached to his breast, compares them to great sponges composed of black porous earth, in which every footstep causes streams of moisture to ooze out.

For well nigh half a mile they had now to wend their cautious way across this spongy soil. Mrs. Weldon, ankle-deep in the soft mud, was at last compelled to come to a stand-still; and Hercules, Bat, and Austin, all resolved that she should be spared further discomfort, and insisted upon weaving some bamboos into a litter, upon which, after much reluctance to become such a burden, she was induced, with Jack beside her, to take her place.

After the delay thus caused, the procession again started on its perilous route. Dick Sands continued to walk at the head, in order to test the stability of the footing; Action followed, holding Cousin Benedict firmly by the arm; Tom took charge of old Nan, who without his support would certainly have fallen into the quagmire; and the three other negroes carried the litter in the rear. It was a matter of the greatest difficulty to find a path that was sufficiently firm; the method they adopted was to pick their way as much as possible on the long rank grass that on the margin of the swamps was tolerably tough; but in spite of the greatest precaution, there was not one of them who escaped occasionally sinking up to his knees in slush.

At about five o'clock they were relieved by finding themselves on ground of a more clayey character; it was still soft and porous below, but its surface was hard enough to give a secure foothold. There were watery pores that percolated the subsoil, and these gave evident witness to the proximity of a river-district.

The heat would have been intolerably oppressive if it had not been tempered by some heavy storm-clouds which obstructed the direct influence of the sun's rays. Lightning was observed to be playing faintly about the sky, and there was now and again the low growl of distant thunder. The indications of a gathering storm were too manifest to be disregarded, and Dick could not help being very uneasy. He had heard of the extreme violence of African storms, and knew that torrents of rain, hurricanes that no tree could resist, and thunderbolt after thunderbolt were the usual accompaniment of these tempests. And here in this lowland desert, which too surely would be completely inundated, there would not be a tree to which they could resort for shelter, while it would likewise be utterly vain to hope to obtain a refuge by excavation, as water would be found only two feet below the surface.

After scrutinizing the landscape, however, he noticed some low elevations on the north that seemed to form the boundary of the marshy plain. A few trees were scattered along their summits; if his party could get no other shelter here, he hoped they would be able to find themselves free from any danger caused by the rising flood.

"Push on, friends, push on!" he cried; "three miles more, and we shall be out of this treacherous lowland."

His words served to inspire a fresh confidence, and in spite of all the previous fatigue, every energy was brought into play with renewed vigour. Hercules, in particular, seemed ready to carry the whole party, if it had been in his power.

The storm was not long in beginning. The rising ground was still two miles away. Although the sun was above the horizon, the darkness was almost complete; the overhanging volumes of vapour sank lower and lower towards the earth, but happily the full force of the deluge which must ultimately come did not descend as yet. Lightning, red and blue, flashed on every side and appeared to cover the ground with a network of flame.

Ever and again the little knot of travellers were in peril of being struck by the thunderbolts which, on that treeless plain, had no other object of attraction. Poor little Jack, who had been awakened by the perpetual crashes, buried his face in terror in Hercules' breast, anxious, however, not to distress his mother by any outward exhibition of alarm. The good-natured negro endeavoured to pacify him by promises that the lightning should not touch him, and the child, ever confident in the protection of his huge friend, lost something of his nervousness.

But it could not be long before the clouds would burst and discharge the threatened down-pour.

“What are we to do, Tom?” asked Dick, drawing up close to the negro’s side.

“We must make a rush for it; push on with all the speed we can.”

“But where?” cried Dick.

“Straight on,” was the prompt reply; “if the rain catches us here on the plain we shall all be drowned.”

“But where are we to go?” repeated Dick, in despair; “if only there were a hut! But look, look there!”

A vivid flash of lightning had lit up the country, and Dick declared that he could see a camp which could hardly be more than a quarter of a mile ahead.

The negro looked doubtful.

“I saw it too,” he assented: “but if it be a camp at all it would be a camp of natives; and to fall into that would involve us in a worse fate than the rain.”

Another brilliant flash brought the camp once again into relief; it appeared to be made up of about a hundred conical tents, arranged very symmetrically, each of them being from twelve to fifteen feet in height. It had the appearance, from a distance, of being deserted; if it were really so, it would afford just the shelter that was needed; otherwise, at all hazards, it must be most carefully avoided.

“I will go in advance,” said Dick, after a moment’s reflection, “and reconnoitre it.”

“Let one of us, at least, go with you,” replied Tom.

“No, stay where you are; I shall be much less likely to be discovered if I go alone.”

Without another word, he darted off, and was soon lost in the sombre darkness that was only broken by the frequent lightning.

Large drops of rain were now beginning to fall.

Tom and Dick had been walking some little distance in advance of the rest of the party, who consequently had not overheard their conversation. A halt being made, Mrs. Weldon inquired what was the matter. Tom explained that a camp or village had been noticed a little way in front, and that the captain had gone forward to investigate it. Mrs. Weldon asked no further questions, but quietly waited the result. It was only a few minutes before Dick returned.

“You may come on,” he cried.

“Is the camp deserted?” asked Tom.

“It is not a camp at all; it is a lot of ant-hills!”

“Ant-hills!” echoed Benedict, suddenly aroused into a state of excitement.

“No doubt of it, Mr. Benedict.” replied Dick; “they are ant-hills twelve feet high at least: and I hope we shall be able to get into them.”

“Twelve feet!” the naturalist repeated; “they must be those of the termites, the white ants; there is no other insect that could make them. Wonderful architects are the termites.”

“Termites, or whatever they are, they will have to turn out for us,” said Dick.

“But they will eat us up!” objected Benedict.

“I can’t help that,” retorted Dick; “go we must, and go at once.”

“But stop a moment,” continued the provoking naturalist; “stop, and tell me: I can’t be wrong: I always thought that white ants could never be found elsewhere than in Africa.”

“Come along, sir, I say; come along, quick!” shouted Dick, terrified lest Mrs. Weldon should have overheard him.

They hurried on. A wind had risen; large spattering drops were now beginning to fall more heavily on the ground and in a few minutes it would be impossible to stand against the advancing tempest. The nearest of the accumulation of ant-hills was reached in time, and however dangerous their occupants might be, it was decided either to expel them, or to share their quarters. Each cone was formed of a kind of reddish clay, and had a single opening at its base. Hercules took his hatchet, and quickly enlarged the aperture till it would admit his own huge body. Not an ant made its appearance. Cousin Benedict expressed his extreme surprise. But the structure unquestionably was empty, and one after another the whole party made their way inside.

The rain by this time was descending in terrific torrents, strong enough to extinguish, one would think, the most violent explosions of the electric fluid. But the travellers were secure in their shelter, and had nothing to fear for the present; their tenement was of greater stability than a tent or a native hut. It was one of those marvellous structures erected by little insects, which to Cameron appeared even more wonderful than the upraising of the Egyptian pyramids by human hands. To use his own comparison, it might be likened to the construction of a Mount Everest, the loftiest of the Himalayan peaks, by the united labour of a nation.

CHAPTER V.

WHITE ANTS.

The storm had now burst in full fury, and fortunate it was that a refuge had been found. The rain did not fall in separate drops as in temperate zones, but descended like the waters of a cataract, in one solid and compact mass, in a way that could only suggest the outpour of some vast aerial basin containing the waters of an entire ocean. Contrary, too, to the storms of higher latitudes, of which the duration seems ordinarily to be in inverse ratio to their violence, these African tempests, whatever their magnitude, often last for whole days, furrowing the soil into deep ravines, changing plains to lakes and brooks to torrents, and causing rivers to overflow and cover vast districts with their inundations. It is hard to understand whence such volumes of vapour and electric fluid can accumulate. The earth, upon these occasions, might almost seem to be carried back to the remote period which has been called “the diluvian age.”

Happily, the walls of the ant-hill were very thick; no beaver-hut formed of pounded earth could be more perfectly water-tight, and a torrent might have passed over it without a particle of moisture making its way through its substance.

As soon as the party had taken possession of the tenement, a lantern was lighted, and they proceeded to examine the interior. The cone, which was about twelve feet high inside, was eleven feet wide at the base, gradually narrowing to a sugar-loaf top. The walls and partitions between the tiers of cells were nowhere less than a foot thick throughout.

These wonderful erections, the result of the combined labour of innumerable insects, are by no means uncommon in the heart of Africa.

Smeathman, a Dutch traveller of the last century, has recorded how he and four companions all at one time occupied the summit of one of them in Loundé. Livingstone noticed some made of red clay, of which the height varied from fifteen to twenty feet; and in Nyangwé, Cameron several times mistook one of these colonies for a native camp pitched upon the plain. He described some of these strange edifices as being flanked with small spires, giving them the appearance of a cathedral-dome.

The reddish clay of which the ant-hill was composed could leave no doubt upon the mind of a naturalist that it had been formed by the species known as “termes bellicosus;” had it been made of grey or black alluvial soil, it might have been attributed to the “termes mordax” or “termes atrox,” formidable names that must awaken anything but pleasure in the minds of all but enthusiast entomologists.

In the centre was an open space, surrounded by roomy compartments, ranged one upon another, like the berths of a ship’s cabin, and lined with the millions of cells that had been occupied by the ants. This central space was inadequate to hold the whole party that had now made their hurried resort to it, but as each of the compartments was sufficiently capacious to admit one person to occupy it in a sitting posture, Mrs. Weldon, Jack, Nan, and Cousin Benedict were exalted to the upper tier, Austin, Bat, and Actæon occupied the next story, whilst Tom and Hercules, and Dick Sands himself remained below.

Dick soon found that the soil beneath his feet was beginning to get damp, and insisted upon having some of the dry clay spread over it from the base of the cone.

“It is a long time,” he said, “since we have slept with a roof over our heads; and I am anxious to make our refuge as secure as possible. It may be that we shall have to

stay here for a whole day or more; on the first opportunity I shall go and explore; it may turn out that we are near the stream we are seeking; and perhaps we shall have to build a raft before we start again.”

Under his direction, therefore, Hercules took his hatchet, and proceeded to break down the lowest range of cells and to spread the dry, brittle clay of which they were composed a good foot thick over the damp floor, taking care not in any way to block up the aperture by which the fresh air penetrated into the interior.

It was indeed fortunate that the termites had abandoned their home; had it swarmed with its multitudes of voracious Neuroptera, the ant-hill would have been utterly untenable for human beings. Cousin Benedict’s curiosity was awakened, and he was intensely interested in the question of the evacuation, so that he proceeded at once to investigate, if he could, whether the emigration had been recent or otherwise. He took the lantern, and as the result of his scrutiny he soon discovered in a recess what he described as the termites’”storehouse,” or the place where the indefatigable insects keep their provisions. It was a large cavity, not far from the royal cell, which, together with the cells for the reception of the young larvae, had been destroyed by Hercules in the course of his flooring operations. Out of this receptacle Benedict drew a considerable quantity of gum and vegetable juices, all in a state so liquid as to demonstrate that they had been deposited there quite recently.

“They have only just gone,” he exclaimed, with an air of authority, as if he imagined that some one was about to challenge his assertion.

“We are not going to dispute your word, Mr. Benedict,” said Dick; “here we are; we have taken their place, and shall be quite content for them to keep out of the way, without caring when they went, or where they have gone.”

“But we must care,” retorted Benedict testily; “why they have gone concerns us a good deal; these juices make it evident, from the liquid state in which we find them, that the ants were here this morning, they have not only gone, but they have carried off their young larvae with them; they have been sagacious enough to take warning of some impending danger.”

“Perhaps they heard that we were coming,” said Hercules, laughing.

A look of withering scorn was the only answer that the entomologist deigned to give.

“Yes, I say,” repeated Hercules, “perhaps they heard that we were coming.”

“Pshaw!” said Benedict contemptuously; “do you imagine they would be afraid of you? they would reduce your carcase to a skeleton in no time, if they found it across their path.”

“No doubt, if I were dead,” replied Hercules, “they could pick my bones pretty clean; but while I had the use of my limbs I think I could crush them by thousands.”

“Thousands!” ejaculated Benedict, with increasing warmth; “you think you could demolish thousands; but what if they were hundreds of thousands, millions, hundreds of millions? Alive as much as dead, I tell you, they wouldn’t be long in consuming every morsel of you.”

During this brisk little discussion Dick Sands had been pondering over what Benedict had said. There was no doubt that the amateur naturalist was well acquainted with the habits of white ants, and if, as he affirmed, the insects had instinctively quitted their abode on account of some approaching danger, Dick asked himself whether it was safe or prudent for his party to remain. But the fury of the storm was still so great that all possibility of removing from the shelter seemed precluded for the present, and, without inquiring farther into the mystery, he merely said,

“Although the ants, Mr. Benedict, have left us their provisions, we must not forget that we have brought our own. We will have our supper now, and to-morrow, when the storm is over, we will see what is to be done.”

Fatigue had not taken away the appetite of the energetic travellers, and they gladly set about the preparation of their meal. The provisions, of which they had enough for another two days, had not been injured by the rain. For some minutes the crunching of hard biscuit was the only sound to be heard; Hercules, in particular, seemed to pound away with his huge jaws as with a pair of millstones.

Mrs. Weldon was the only one of the party who ate little; and that little was only taken at Dick’s earnest solicitation; he could not help noticing, with much concern, that although Jack seemed to be satisfactorily recovering, and, without sign of fever, was sleeping calmly enough on a bed made up of clothes spread out in one of the cells, yet his mother had lost much of her courage, and seemed preoccupied and depressed.

Cousin Benedict did due honour to the simple evening repast; not on account of its quantity or quality, but because it gave him an opportunity of holding forth upon the subject of termites. He was much vexed that he had been unable to discover a single specimen in the deserted anthill with which he might illustrate his lecture, but notwithstanding this deficiency he continued to talk, heedless whether any one was listening.

“They are wonderful insects,” he said; “they belong to the order of the Neuroptera, which have the antennae longer than the head; their mandibles are well-developed, and the inferior pair of wings is generally as large as the superior. There are five families of them; the Panorpide, the Myrmellonide, the Hemerobiide, the Termitine, and the Perlide. I need hardly say that what we are now occupying is a dwelling of the Termitine.”

At this point Dick became all attention; he was anxious to ascertain whether this discovery of white ants had aroused any suspicion in Benedict’s mind that they must be on African soil. The naturalist, now fairly mounted on a favourite hobby, went on with his discourse.

“I am sorry not to have a specimen to show you, but these Termitine have four joints in the tarsi, and strong horny mandibles. The family includes, as genera, the Mantispa, the Raphidia, and the Termes, the last commonly known as white ants, amongst which are ‘Termes fatalis, Termes lucifugans, Termes mordax,’ and several others more or less rare.”

“And which of them built this ant-hill?” inquired Dick.

“The bellicosi!” replied Benedict, pronouncing the name with as much pride as if he were eulogizing the Macedonians or some warlike nation of antiquity. “Bellicosi,” he continued, “are to be found of every size. There is as much difference between the largest and the smallest of them as there is between Hercules and a dwarf; the workers are about one-fifth of an inch long; the soldiers, or fighting-ants, are half an inch; whilst the males and females measure four fifths of an inch. There is another curious species, called ‘sirafoos,’ which are about half an inch long, and have pincers instead of mandibles, and heads larger than their bodies, like sharks. In fact, if sharks and sirafoos were placed in competition, I should be inclined to back the sharks.”

“And where are these sirafoos most generally to be found?” said Dick cautiously.

“In Africa, in the southern and central provinces. Africa may truly be termed the land of ants. Livingstone, in the notes brought home by Stanley, describes a battle which he was fortunate enough to witness between an army of black ants and an army of red. The black ants, or drivers, which are what the natives call sirafoos, got the best of it; and the red ants, or ‘tchoongoos,’ after a very resolute defence, were obliged to retire defeated, carrying their eggs and young ones with them. Livingstone avows that he never saw the warlike instinct so strongly developed as in these sirafoos; the stoutest man, the largest animal, a lion or an elephant, quails before the grip of their mandibles: no obstacle impedes their progress; no tree is too lofty for them to scale, and they contrive to cross wide streams by forming their own bodies into a kind of suspension bridge. Equally amazing are their numbers; Du Chaillu, another African traveller, relates how it took more than twelve hours for a column of ants to file pass him, without a moment’s pause in their march. These numbers, however cease to be so surprising when it is explained that their fecundity is such that a single female of the termites bellicosi has been estimated to produce as many as sixty thousand eggs a day. These Neuroptera furnish the natives with a favourite food, grilled ants being considered a great delicacy.”

“Have you ever tasted them?” asked Hercules, with a grin.

“Never,” answered the naturalist; “but I am in hopes I shall have a chance of doing so very soon.”

“Surely you don’t imagine yourself in Africa!” said Tom suddenly.

“Africa! no; why should I?” replied Benedict; “but, as I have already seen a tzetsy in America, I do not despair of having the satisfaction of discovering white ants there too. You do not know the sensation I shall make in Europe when I publish my folio volume and its illustrations.”

It was evident that no inkling of the truth had yet entered poor Benedict’s brain, and it seemed likely that it would require demonstration far more striking than any natural phenomena to undeceive the minds of such of the party as were not already in possession of the fatal secret.

Although it was nine o’clock, Cousin Benedict went on talking incessantly, regardless of the fact that one by one his audience were falling to sleep in their separate cells. Dick Sands did not sleep, but neither did he interrupt the entomologist by farther questions; Hercules kept up his attention longer than the rest, but at length he too succumbed to weariness, and his eyes and ears were closed to all external sights and sounds.

But endurance has limits, and at last Cousin Benedict, having worn himself out, clambered up to the topmost cell of the cone, which he had chosen for his dormitory, and fell into a peaceful slumber.

The lantern had been already extinguished. All was darkness and silence within, whilst the storm without still raged with a violence that gave no sign of abatement.

Dick Sands himself was the only one of the party who was not partaking in the repose that was so indispensable to them all; but he could not sleep; his every thought was absorbed in the responsibility that rested on him to rescue those under his charge from the dangers that threatened them. Again and again he recalled every incident that had occurred since the loss of Captain Hull and his crew; he remembered the occasion when he had stood with his pistol pointed at Negoro’s head; why, oh why, had his hand faltered then? why had he not at that moment hurled the miserable wretch overboard, and thus relieved himself and his partners in trouble from the catastrophe that had since befallen them? Peril was still staring them in the face, and his sole drop of consolation in the bitter cup of despondency was that Mrs. Weldon was still ignorant of their real situation.

At that moment, just in the fever of his agony, he felt a light breath upon his forehead; a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a gentle voice murmured in his ear, —

“My poor boy, I know everything. God will help us! His will be done!”

CHAPTER VI.

A DIVING-BELL.

This sudden revelation that Mrs. Weldon was acquainted with the true state of things left Dick speechless. Even had he been capable of replying, she gave him no opportunity, but immediately retired to the side of her son. The various incidents of the march had all gradually enlightened her, and perhaps the exclamation of Cousin Benedict on the preceding evening had crowned them all; anyhow the brave lady now knew the worst. Dick felt, however, that she did not despair; neither would he.

He lay and longed for the dawn, when he hoped to explore the situation better, and perchance to find the watercourse which he was convinced could not be far distant. Moreover, he was extremely anxious to be out of the reach of the natives whom, it was only too likely, Negoro and Harris might be putting on their track.

But as yet no glimmer of daylight penetrated the aperture of the cone, whilst the heavy rumblings, deadened as they were by the thickness of the walls, made it certain that the storm was still raging with undiminished fury. Attentively Dick listened, and he could distinctly hear the rain beating around the base of the ant-hill; the heavy drops splashed again as they fell, in a way altogether different to what they would upon solid ground, so that he felt sure that the adjacent land was by this time completely flooded. He was getting very drowsy when it suddenly occurred to him that it was not unlikely the aperture was getting blocked up with damp clay; in that case he knew that the breath of the inmates would quickly vitiate the internal atmosphere. He crept along the ground and had the satisfaction of finding that the clay embankment was still perfectly dry; the orifice was quite unobstructed, allowing not only a free passage to the air, but admitting the glare of the occasional flashes of lightning, which the descending volumes of water did not seem to stay.

Having thus far satisfied himself that all was well, and that there was no immediate danger, Dick thought that he might now resign himself to sleep as well as the rest: he took the precaution, however, of stretching himself upon the embankment within easy reach of the opening, and with his head supported against the wall, after a while dozed off.

How long his light slumber had lasted he could not say, when he was aroused by a sensation of cold. He started up, and to his horror discovered that the water had entered the ant-hill and was rising rapidly; it could not be long, he saw, before it reached the cells which were occupied by Hercules and Tom. He woke them at once, and told them what he had observed. The lantern was soon lighted, and they set to work to ascertain what progress the water was making It rose for about five feet, when it was found to remain stationary.

“What is the matter, Dick?” inquired Mrs. Weldon, disturbed by the movements of the men.

“Nothing very alarming,” answered Dick promptly; “only some water has found its way into the lower part of the place; it will not reach your upper cells; probably some river has overflowed its boundaries.”

“The very river, perhaps,” suggested Hercules assuringly, “that is to carry us to the coast.”

Mrs. Weldon made no reply.

Cousin Benedict was still sleeping as soundly as if he were himself a white ant; the negroes were peering down on to the sheet of water which reflected back the rays of the lantern, ready to carry out any orders given by Dick, who was quietly gauging the inundation, and removing the provisions and fire-arms out of its reach.

“Did the water get in at the opening, Mr. Dick?” asked Tom.

“Yes, Tom, and consequently we are coming to the end of our stock of fresh air,” was Dick’s reply.

“But why should we not make another opening above the water level?” Tom inquired.

“A thing to be thought about,” said Dick; “but we have to remember that if we have five feet of water here inside, there is probably a depth of six or seven outside. In rising here the flood has compressed the air, and made it an obstacle to further progress, but if we allow the air to escape, we may perhaps only be letting the water rise too high for our safety. We are just as if we were in a diving-bell.”

“Then what is to be done?” asked the old negro.

“No doubt,” replied Dick, “we must proceed very cautiously. An inconsiderate step will jeopardize our lives.” Dick Sands was quite correct in comparing the cone to an immersed diving-bell. In that mechanical contrivance, however, the air can always be renewed by means of pumps, so that it can be occupied without inconvenience beyond what is entailed by a somewhat confined atmosphere; but here the interior space had already been reduced by a third part through the encroachment of the water, and there was no method of communicating with the outer air except by opening a new aperture, an operation in which there was manifest danger.

Dick did not entertain the slightest apprehension that the ant-hill would be carried away bodily by the inundation; he knew that it would adhere to its base as firmly as a beaver-hut; what he really dreaded was that the storm would last so long that the flood would rise high above the plain, perhaps submerging the ant-hill entirely, so that ultimately all air would be expelled by the persistent pressure.

The more he pondered the more he felt himself driven to the conviction that the inundation would be wide and deep. It could not be, he felt sure, entirely owing to the downpour from the clouds that the rapid flood was rising; there must have been the sudden overflowing of some stream to cause such a deluge over the low-lying plain. It could not be proved that the ant hill was not already under water, so that escape might be no longer possible, even from its highest point.

With all Dick's courage, it was yet evident that he was very uneasy; he did not know what to do, and asked himself again and again whether patient waiting or decisive action would be his more prudent course.

It was now about three o'clock in the morning. All within the ant-hill were silent and motionless, listening to the incessant turmoil which told that the strife of the elements had not yet ceased.

Presently, old Tom pointed out that the height of the water was gradually increasing, but only by very slow ascent. Dick could only say that if the flood continued to rise, however slowly, it must inevitably drive out the air.

As if struck by a sudden thought, Bat called out, —

“Let me try and get outside. Perhaps I might dive and get through the opening.”

“I think I had better make that experiment myself,” answered Dick.

“That you never shall,” interposed Tom peremptorily; “you must let Bat go. It may not be possible to get back, and your presence is indispensable here. Think, sir, think of Mrs. Weldon, and Master Jack,” he added in a lower tone.

“Well, well,” Dick assented, “if it must be so, Bat shall go.”

And turning to Bat, he continued,

“Do not try to come back again; we will try, if we can, to follow you the same way; but if the top of the cone is still above water, knock hard on it with your hatchet, and we shall take it as a signal that we may break our way out. Do you understand?”

“All right!” he said, “all right, sir.”

And after wringing his father’s hand, he drew a long breath, and plunged into the water that filled the lower section of the ant-hill.

It was an exploit that required considerable agility; the diver would have to find the orifice, make his way through it, and, without loss of a moment, let himself rise to the surface outside. Full half a minute elapsed, and Dick was making sure that the negro had been successful in his effort, when his black head emerged from the water. There was a general exclamation of surprise.

“It is blocked up,” gasped Bat, as soon as he had recovered breath enough to speak.

“Blocked up?” cried Tom.

“Yes,” Bat affirmed; “I have felt all round the wall very carefully with my hand, and I am sure there is no hole left; I suppose the water has dissolved the clay.”

“If you cannot find a hole,” exclaimed Hercules, “I can very soon make one;” and he was just about to plunge his hatchet into the side of the ant-hill, when Dick prevented him.

“Stop, stop! you must not be in such a hurry!”

He reflected for a few moments, and went on, —

“We must be cautious; an impetuous step may be destruction; perhaps the water is over the top; if it is allowed to enter, then at once is an end of all.”

“But whatever we do,” urged Tom, “must be done at once; there is no time to lose.”

He was right; the water had risen till it was quite six feet deep; none but Mrs. Weldon, Jack, Nan, and Cousin Benedict, who were lodged in the upper cells, were fairly above its surface.

Dick now came to his determination. At about a foot above the water-level, that is, about seven feet from the ground, he resolved to bore a hole through the clay. If he should find himself in communication with the open air, he would have the proof he desired that the top of the cone was still uncovered; if, on the other hand, he should ascertain that he had pierced the wall below the surface of the external water, he would be prepared to plug up the hole instantaneously, and repeat the experiment higher up. It was true that the inundation might have risen even fifteen feet above the plain; in that case the worst had come, and there was no alternative but that they must all die of asphyxia.

Carefully considering the chances of his undertaking, Dick calmly and steadily set about his task. The best instrument that suggested itself for his purpose was the ramrod of a gun, which, having a sort of corkscrew at the end for extracting the wadding, would serve as an auger. The hole would be very small, but yet large enough for the requisite test. Hercules showed him all the light he could by holding up the lantern. There were several candles left, so that they were not in fear of being altogether in darkness.

The operation hardly took a minute; the ramrod passed through the clay without difficulty; a muffled sound was distinguished as of air-bubbles rushing through a column of water. As the air escaped, the water in the cone rose perceptibly. The hole had been pierced too low. A handful of clay was immediately forced into the orifice, which was thus effectually plugged; and Dick turned round quietly, and said, —

“We must try again.”

The water had again become stationary, but its last rise had diminished the amount of breathing space by more than eight inches. The supply of oxygen was beginning to fail, respiration was becoming difficult, and the flame of the candle burned red and dim.

About a foot higher than the first hole, Dick now set about boring a second. The experiment might again prove a failure, and the water rise yet higher in the cone; but the risk must be run.

Just as the auger was being inserted, a loud exclamation of delight was heard proceeding from Cousin Benedict’s cell. Dick paused, and Hercules turned the lantern towards the excited naturalist, who seemed beaming with satisfaction.

“Yes, yes; I see it all well enough,” he cried; “I know now why the termites left their home; they were wide-awake; they were more clever than we are; they knew that the storm was coming!”

Finding that this was all the worthy entomologist had

to communicate, Dick, without comment, turned back again to his operation. Again the gurgling noise! again the water’s upward rush! For the second time he had failed to effect an aperture to the outer air!

The situation was to the last degree alarming. The water had all but reached Mrs. Weldon, and she was obliged to take her boy into her arms. Every one felt nearly stifled. A loud singing was heard in the ears, and the lantern showed barely any light at all. A few minutes more and the air would be incapable of supporting life. One chance alone remained. They must bore another hole at the very summit of the cone. Not that they were unaware of the imminent danger of this measure, for if the ant-hill were really submerged the water from below would immediately expel the remaining air and death must be instantaneous. A few brief words from Dick explained the emergency of the crisis. Mrs. Weldon recognized the necessity, —

“Yes, Dick, do it; there is nothing else to be done.”

While she was speaking the light flickered out, and they were in total darkness.

Mounted on the shoulders of Hercules, who was crouching in one of the side-cells, his head only just above water, Dick proceeded to force the ramrod into the clay, which at the vertex of the ant-hill was considerably harder and thicker than elsewhere.

A strange mingling of hope and fear thrilled through Dick Sands as he applied his hand to make the opening which was to admit life and air, or the flood of death!

The silence of the general expectation was broken by the noise of a sharp hissing; the water rose for eight inches, but all at once it ceased to rise; it had found its level. No need this time to close the orifice; the top of the ant-hill was higher than the top of the flood; and for the present, at least, they could all rejoice that their lives were spared!

A general cheer, led by the stentorian voice of Hercules, involuntarily broke from the party; cutlasses were brought into action, and the clay crumbled away beneath the vigorous assault that was made upon it. The welcome air was admitted through the new-made aperture, bringing with it the first rays of the rising sun. The summit of the ant-hill once removed, it would be quite easy to clamber to the top, whence it was hoped they would soon get away to some high ground out of reach of the flood.

Dick was the first to mount the summit; but a cry of dismay burst from his lips!

A sound only too well known to travellers in Africa broke upon his ear; that sound was the whizzing of arrows.

Hardly a hundred yards away was a large encampment; whilst, in the water, quite close to the ant-hill where he stood, he saw some long boats full of natives. From one of these had come the volley of arrows which had greeted his appearance above the opening of the cone.

To tell his people what had happened was the work of a moment. He seized his gun, and made Hercules, Bat, and Actæon take theirs, and all fired simultaneously at the nearest boat. Several of the natives were seen to fall; but shouts of defiance were raised, and shots were fired in return.

Resistance was manifestly useless. What could they do against a hundred natives? they were assailed on every hand. In accordance with what seemed a preconcerted plan, they were carried off from the ant-hill with brutal violence, in two parties, without the chance of a farewell word or sign.

Dick Sands saw that Mrs. Weldon, Jack, and Cousin Benedict were placed on board one boat, and were conveyed towards the camp, whilst he himself, with the five negroes and old Nan, was forced into another, and taken in a different direction. Twenty natives formed a body-guard around them, and five boats followed in their rear.

Useless though it were, Dick and the negroes made one desperate attempt to maintain their freedom; they wounded several of their antagonists, and would doubtless have paid their lives as a penalty for their daring, if there had not been special orders given that they should be taken alive.

The passage of the flood was soon accomplished. The boat had barely touched the shore, when Hercules with a tremendous bound sprang on to the land. Instantly two natives rushed upon him. The giant clave their skulls with the butt end of his gun, and made off. Followed though he was by a storm of bullets, he escaped in safety, and disappeared beneath the cover of the woods.

Dick Sands and the others were guarded to the shore, and fettered like slaves.

CHAPTER VII.

A SLAVE CARAVAN.

The storm of the previous night, by swelling the tributaries of the Coanza, had caused the main river to overflow its banks. The inundation had entirely changed the aspect of the country, transforming the plain into a lake, where the peaks of a number of ant-hills were the sole objects that emerged above the watery expanse.

The Coanza, which is one of the principal rivers of Angola, falls into the Atlantic about a hundred miles from the spot at which the “Pilgrim” was stranded. The stream, which a few years later was crossed by Cameron on his way to Benguela, seems destined to become the chief highway of traffic between Angola and the interior; steamers already ply upon its lower waters, and probably ten years will not elapse before they perform regular service along its entire course.

Dick Sands had been quite right in searching northwards for the navigable stream he had been so anxious to find; the rivulet he had been following fell into the Coanza scarce a mile away, and had it not been for this unexpected attack he and his friends might reasonably have hoped to descend the river upon a raft, until they reached one of the Portuguese forts where steam vessels put in. But their fate was ordered otherwise.

The camp which Dick had descried from the ant-hill was pitched upon an eminence crowned by an enormous sycamore-fig, one of those giant trees occasionally found in Central Africa, of which the spreading foliage will shelter some five hundred men. Some of the non-fruit-bearing kind of banyan-trees formed the background of the landscape.

Beneath the shelter of the sycamore, the caravan which had been referred to in the conversation between Negoro and Harris had just made a halt. Torn from their villages by the agents of the slave-dealer Alvez, the large troop of natives was on its way to the market of Kazonndé, thence to be sent as occasion required either to the west coast, or to Nyangwé, in the great lake district, to be dispersed into Upper Egypt or Zanzibar.

Immediately on reaching the camp, the four negroes and old Nan were placed under precisely the same treatment as the rest of the captives. In spite of a desperate resistance, they were deprived of their weapons, and fastened two and two, one behind another, by means of a pole about six feet long, forked at each end, and attached to their necks by an iron bolt. Their arms were left free, that they might carry any burdens, and in order to prevent an attempt to escape a heavy chain was passed round their waists. It was thus in single file, unable to turn either right or left, they would have to march hundreds of miles, goaded along their toilsome road by the havildar’s whip. The lot of Hercules seemed preferable, exposed though undoubtedly he would be in his flight to hunger, and to the attacks of wild beasts, and to all the perils of that dreary country. But solitude, with its worst privations, was a thing to be envied in comparison to being in the hands of those pitiless drivers, who did not speak a word of the language of their victims, but communicated with them only by threatening gestures or by actual violence.

As a white man, Dick was not attached to any other captive. The drivers were probably afraid to subject him to the same treatment as the negroes, and he was left unfettered, but placed under the strict surveillance of a havildar. At first he felt considerable surprise at not seeing Harris or Negoro in the camp, as he could not entertain a doubt that it was at their instigation the attack had been made upon their retreat; but when he came to reflect that Mrs. Weldon, Jack, and Cousin Benedict had not been allowed to come with them, but had been carried off in some other direction, he began to think it probable that the two rascals had some scheme to carry out with regard to them elsewhere.

The caravan consisted of nearly eight hundred, including about five hundred slaves of both sexes, two hundred soldiers and freebooters, and a considerable number of havildars and drivers, over whom the agents acted as superior officers.

These agents are usually of Portuguese or Arab extraction; and the cruelties they inflict upon the miserable captives are almost beyond conception; they beat them continually, and if any unfortunate slave sinks from exhaustion, or in any way becomes unfit for the market, he is forthwith either stabbed or shot. As the result of this brutality it rarely happens that fifty per cent of the slaves reach their destination; some few may contrive to escape, and many are left as skeletons along the line of route.

Such of the agents as are Portuguese are (as it may well be imagined) of the very lowest dregs of society, outlaws, escaped criminals, and men of the most desperate character; of this stamp were the associates of Negoro and Harris, now in the employ of José Antonio Alvez, one of the most notorious of all the slave-dealers of Central Africa, and of whom Commander Cameron has given some curious information.

Most frequently the soldiers who escort the captives are natives hired by the dealers, but they do not possess the entire monopoly of the forays made for the purpose of securing slaves; the native negro kings make war upon each other with this express design, and sell their vanquished antagonists, men, women, and children, to the traders for calico, guns, gunpowder and red beads; or in times of famine, according to Livingstone, even for a few grains of maize.

The escort of old Alvez' caravan was an average specimen of these African soldiers. It was simply a horde of half-naked banditti, carrying old flint-locked muskets, the barrels of which were decorated with copper rings. The agents are very often put to their wits' end to know how to manage them; their orders are called in question, halts are continually demanded, and in order to avert desertion they are frequently obliged to yield to the obstreperous will of their undisciplined force.

Although the slaves, both male and female, are compelled to carry burdens whilst on their march, a certain number of porters, called *pagazis*, is specially engaged to carry the more valuable merchandize, and principally the ivory. Tusks occasionally weigh as much as 160 lbs. and require two men to carry them to the dépôts, whence they are sent to the markets of Khartoom, Natal, and Zanzibar. On their arrival the *pagazis* are paid by the dealers according to contract, which is generally either by about twenty yards of the cotton stuff known as *merikani*, or by a little powder, by a handful or two of cowries, by some beads, or if all these be scarce, they are paid by being allotted some of the slaves who are otherwise unsalable.

Among the five hundred slaves in the caravan, very few were at all advanced in years. The explanation of this circumstance was that whenever a raid is made, and a village is set on fire, every inhabitant above the age of forty is mercilessly massacred or hung upon the neighbouring trees; only the children and young adults of both sexes are reserved for the market, and as these constitute only a small proportion of the vanquished, some idea may be formed of the frightful depopulation which these vast districts of Equinoctial Africa are undergoing.

Nothing could be more pitiable than the condition of this miserable herd. All alike were destitute of clothing, having nothing on them but a few strips of the stuff known as *mbuza*, made from the bark of trees; many of the women were covered with bleeding wounds from the drivers' lashes, and had their feet lacerated by the constant friction of the road, but in addition to other burdens were compelled to carry their own emaciated children; young men, too, there were who had lost their voices from exhaustion, and who, to use Livingstone's expression, had been reduced to "ebony skeletons" by toiling under the yoke of the fork, which is far more galling than the galley-chain. It was a sight that might have moved the most stony-hearted, but yet there was no symptom of compassion on the part of those Arab and Portuguese drivers whom Cameron pronounces "worse than brutes." [Footnote: Cameron says, "In order to obtain the fifty women of whom Alvez is the owner, ten villages, containing altogether a population of not less than 1500, were totally destroyed. A few of the inhabitants contrived to escape, but the majority either perished in the flames, were slain in defending their families, or were killed by hunger or wild beasts in the jungle... The crimes which are perpetuated in Africa, by men who call themselves Christians, seem incredible to the inhabitants of civilized countries. It is impossible that the government at Lisbon can be aware of the atrocities committed by those who boast of being subject to her flag." *Tour du Monde*.

N.B. — Against these assertions of Cameron, loud protestations have been made in Portugal.]

The guard over the prisoners was so strict that Dick Sands felt it would be utterly useless for him to make any attempt to seek for Mrs. Weldon. She and her son had doubtless been carried off by Negoro, and his heart sank when he thought of the dangers to which too probably she would be exposed. Again and again he repeated his reproaches on himself that he had ever allowed either Negoro or Harris to escape his hands. Neither Mrs. Weldon nor Jack could expect the least assistance from Cousin Benedict; the good man was barely able to consult for himself. All three of them would, he conjectured, be conveyed to some remote district of Angola; the poor mother, like some miserable slave, would insist upon carrying her own sick son until her strength failed her, and, exhausted by her endurances, she sank down helpless on the way.

A prisoner, and powerless to help! the very thought was itself a torture to poor Dick. Even Dingo was gone! It would have been a satisfaction to have had the dog to send off upon the track of the lost ones. One only hope remained. Hercules still was free. All that human strength could attempt in Mrs. Weldon’s behalf, Hercules would not fail to try. Perhaps, too, under cover of the night, it was not altogether improbable that the stalwart negro would mingle with the crowd of negroes (amongst whom his dark skin would enable him to pass unnoticed), and make his way to Dick himself; then might not the two together elude the vigilance of the watch? might they not follow after and overtake Mrs. Weldon in the forest? would they not perchance be able either by stealth or by force to liberate her, and once free they would effect an escape to the river, and finally accomplish the undertaking in which they had been so lamentably frustrated. Such were the sanguine visions in which Dick permitted himself to indulge; his temperament overcame all tendency to despair, and kept him alive to the faintest chance of deliverance.

The next thing of importance was to ascertain the destination of the caravan. It was a matter of the most serious moment whether the convoy of slaves were going to be carried to one of the dépôts of Angola, or whether they were to be sent hundreds of miles into the interior to Nyangwe, in the heart of the great lake district that Livingstone was then exploring. To reach the latter spot would occupy some months, and to return thence to the coast, even if they should be fortunate enough to regain their liberty, would be a work of insuperable difficulty.

He was not long left in suspense. Although he could not understand the half-African, half-Arab dialect that was used by the leaders of the caravan, he noticed that the word Kazonndé occurred very frequently, and knowing it as the name of an important market in the province, he naturally concluded that it was there the slaves were to be disposed of; whether for the advantage of the king of the district, or of one of the rich traders, he had no means of telling. Unless his geographical knowledge was at fault, he was aware that Kazonndé must be about 400 miles from S. Paul de Loanda, and consequently that it could hardly be more than 250 miles from the part of the Coanza where they were now encamped. Under favourable circumstances it was a journey that could not be accomplished in less than twelve or fourteen days, but allowing for the retarded progress of a caravan already exhausted by a lengthened march, Dick was convinced that they could not reach the place for at least three weeks.

He was most anxious to communicate to his companions in adversity his impression that they were not to be carried into the heart of the country, and began to cogitate whether some plan could not be devised for exchanging a few words with them.

Forked together, as it has been said, two and two, the four negroes were at the right-hand extremity of the camp; Bat attached to his father, Austin to Actæon. A havildar, with twelve soldiers, formed their guard. Dick, at first, was about fifty yards away from the group, but being left free to move about, contrived gradually to diminish the distance between himself and them. Tom seemed to apprehend his intention, and whispered a word to his companions that they should be on the look-out. Without moving they were all on their guard in a moment. Dick, careful to conceal his design, strolled backward with a feigned indifference, and succeeded in getting so near that he might have called out and informed Tom that they were going to Kazonndé. But he was desirous of accomplishing more than this; he wanted to get an opportunity of having some conversation as to their future plans, and he ventured to approach still nearer. His heart beat high as he believed he was on the point of attaining his object, when all at once the havildar, becoming aware of his design, rushed upon him like a madman, summoned some soldiers, and with considerable violence sent him back to the front. Tom and the others were quickly removed to another part of the encampment.

Exasperated by the rough attack that was made upon him, Dick had seized the havildar’s gun and broken it, almost wrenching it from his hands, when several soldiers simultaneously assailed him, and would have struck him down and killed him upon the spot, had not one of the chiefs, an Arab of huge stature and ferocious countenance, interfered to stop them.

This Arab was the Ibn Hamish of whom Harris had spoken to Negoro. He said a few words which Dick could not understand, and the soldiers, with manifest reluctance, relaxed their hold and retired. It was evident that although Dick was not to be permitted to hold any communication with the rest of his party, orders had been given that his life was to be protected.

It was now nine o’clock, and the beating of drums and the blowing of coodoo [Footnote: Coodoo, a ruminant common in Africa.] horns gave the signal that the morning march was to be continued. Instantly chiefs, soldiers, porters, and slaves were upon their feet, and arranged themselves in their various groups with a havildar bearing a bright-coloured banner at their head.

The order was given; the start was made. A strange song was heard rising in the air. It was a song, not of the victors, but of the vanquished. The slaves were chanting an imprecation on their oppressors; and the burden of the chorus was that captured, tortured, slain — after death they would return and avenge their wrongs upon their murderers!

CHAPTER VIII.

NOTES BY THE WAY.

The storm of the preceding evening had now passed away, but the sky was still cloudy and the weather far from settled. It was the 19th of April, the time of the *masika,* or second period of the rainy season, so that for the next two or three weeks the nights might be expected to be wet.

On leaving the banks of the Coanza the caravan proceeded due east. Soldiers marched at the head and in the rear, as well as upon the flanks of the troop; any escape of the prisoners, therefore, even if they had not been loaded with their fetters, would have been utterly impossible. They were all driven along without any attempt at order, the havildars using their whips unsparingly upon them whenever they showed signs of flagging. Some poor mothers could be seen carrying two infants, one on each arm, whilst others led by the hand naked children, whose feet were sorely cut by the rough ground over which they had trod.

Ibn Hamish, the Arab who had interfered between Dick and the havildar, acted as commander to the caravan, and was here, there, and everywhere; not moved in the least by the sufferings of the captives, but obliged to be attentive to the importunities of the soldiers and porters, who were perpetually clamouring for extra rations, or demanding an immediate halt. Loud were the discussions that arose, and the uproar became positively deafening when the quarrelsome voices rose above the shrieks of the slaves, many of whom found themselves treading upon soil already stained by the blood of the ranks in front.

No chance again opened for Dick to get any communication with his friends, who had been sent to the van of the procession. Urged on by the whip they continued to march in single file, their heads in the heavy forks. If ever the havildar strolled a few yards away, Bat took the opportunity of murmuring a few words of encouragement to his poor old father, while he tried to pick out the easiest path for him, and to relax the pace to suit his enfeebled limbs. Large tears rolled down old Tom’s cheeks when he found that his son’s efforts only resulted in bringing down upon his back some sharp cuts of the havildar’s whip. Actæon and Austin, subject to hardly less brutality, followed a few steps behind, but all four could not help feeling envious at the luck of Hercules, who might have dangers to encounter, but at least had his liberty.

Immediately upon their capture, Tom had revealed to his companions the fact that they were in Africa, and informing them how they had been betrayed by Harris, made them understand that they had no mercy to expect.

Old Nan had been placed amongst a group of women in the central ranks. She was chained to a young mother with two children, the one at the breast, the other only three years old, and scarcely able to walk. Moved by compassion, Nan took the little one into her own arms, thus not only saving it from fatigue, but from the blows it would very likely have received for lagging behind. The mother shed tears of gratitude, but the weight was almost too much for Nan’s strength, and she felt as if she must break down under her self-imposed burden. She thought fondly of little Jack, and imagining him borne along in the arms of his weary mother, could not help asking herself whether she should ever see him or her kind mistress again.

Far in the rear, Dick could not see the head of the caravan except occasionally, when the ground was rather on the rise. The voices of the agents and drivers, harsh and excited as they were, scarcely roused him from his melancholy reflections. His thoughts were not of himself nor of his own sufferings; his whole attention was absorbed in looking for some traces of Mrs. Weldon’s progress; if she, too, was being taken to Kazonndé, her route must also lie this way. But he could discover no trace of her having been conducted by this line of march, and could only hope that she was being spared the cruelties which he was himself witnessing.

The forest extended for about twenty miles to the east of the Coanza, but whether it was that the trees had been destroyed by the ravages of insects, or broken down before they had made their growth by being trampled on by elephants, they were growing much less thickly than in the immediate vicinity of the river. There were numbers of cotton-trees, seven or eight feet high, from which are manufactured the black-and-white striped stuffs that are worn in the interior of the province; but, upon the whole, progress was not much impeded either by shrubs or underwood. Occasionally the caravan plunged into jungles of reeds like bamboos, their stalks an inch in diameter, so tall that only an elephant or giraffe could have reared above them, and through which none excepting such as had a very intimate knowledge of the country could possibly have made their way.

Starting every morning at daybreak they marched till noon, when an hour’s halt was made. Packets of manioc were then unfastened, and doled out in sparing quantities among the slaves; sometimes, when the soldiers had plundered some village, a little goat’s flesh or some sweet potatoes were added to the meal; but generally the fatigue, aggravated by inadequate rest, took away the appetite, and when meal-time arrived many of the slaves could hardly eat at all. During the first eight days’ march from the Coanza no less than twenty unfortunate wretches had fallen upon the road, and had been left behind, a prey to the lions, panthers, and leopards that prowled in the wake. As Dick heard their roars in the stillness of the night, he trembled as he thought of Hercules. Nevertheless, had the opportunity offered itself, he would not for a moment have hesitated in making his own escape to the wilderness.

The two hundred and fifty miles between the river and Kazonndé were accomplished in what the traders call marches of ten miles each, including the halts at night and midday. The journey cannot be better described than by a few rough notes that Dick Sands made upon his way.

April 25th. — Saw a village surrounded with bamboo palisading, eight or nine feet high. Fields round planted with maize, beans, and sorghum. Two negroes captured, fifteen killed, rest took to flight.

26th. — Crossed a torrent 150 yards wide. Bridge formed of trunks of trees and creepers. Piles nearly gave way; two women fastened to a fork; one of them, carrying a baby, fell into the water. Water quickly tinged with blood; crocodiles seen under bridge; risk of stepping into their very jaws.

28th. — Crossed a forest of bauhinias; great trees, the iron-wood of the Portuguese. Heavy rain; ground sodden; marching difficult. Caught sight of Nan in the middle of caravan; she was toiling along with a black child in her arms; the woman with her limping, and blood trickling from her shoulder.

29th. — Camp at night under a huge baobab, with white flowers and light green leaves. Lions and leopards roaring all night. A soldier fired at a panther. What has become of Hercules?

30th. — Rainy season said to be over till November. First touch of African winter. Dew very heavy. Plains all flooded. Easterly winds: difficulty of respiration; susceptibility to fever. No trace of Mrs. Weldon; cannot tell whether she is ahead. Fear Jack may have a return of fever.

May 5th. — Forced to march several stages across flooded plains, water up to the waist; many leeches sticking to the skin. Lotus and papyrus upon higher ground. Great heavy leaves, like cabbages, beneath the water, make many stumble as they walk. Saw large numbers of little fish, silurus-species; these are caught by the natives, and sold to the caravans.

7th. — Plain still inundated. Last night, no halting-place to be found. Marched on through the darkness. Great misery. Except for Mrs. Weldon, life not worth having; for her sake must hold out. Loud cries heard. Saw, by the lightning, soldiers breaking large boughs from the resinous trees that emerged from the water. The caravan had been attacked on the flank by a dozen or more crocodiles; women and children seized and carried off to what Livingstone calls their “pasture-lands,” the holes where they deposit their prey until it is decomposed. Myself grazed by the scales of one of them. A slave close beside me torn out of the fork, which was snapped in half. How the poor fellow’s cry of agony rings in my ear! This morning, twenty missing. Tom and the others, thank God! are still alive. They are on in front. Once Bat made a sharp turn, and Tom caught sight of me. Nothing to be seen of Nan; was she, poor creature, one of those that the crocodiles had got?

8th. — After twenty-four hours in the water we have crossed the plain. We have halted on a hill. The sun helps to dry us. Nothing to eat except a little manioc and a few handfuls of maize. Only muddy water to drink. Impossible for Mrs. Weldon to survive these hardships; I hope from my heart that she has been taken some other way. Small-pox has broken out in the caravan; those that have it are to be left behind.

9th. — Started at dawn. No stragglers allowed; sick and weary must be kept together by havildars' whip; the losses were considerable. Living skeletons all round. Rejoiced once more to catch sight of Nan. She was not carrying the child any longer; she was alone; the chain was round her waist, but she had the loose end thrown over her shoulder. I got close to her; suppose I am altered, as she did not know me. After I had called her by name several times she stared at me, and at last said, "Ah, Mr. Dick, is it you? you will not see me here much longer" Her cadaverous look pained my very soul, but I tried to speak hopefully. Poor Nan shook her head. "I shall never see my dear mistress again; no, nor master Jack; I

shall soon die. "Anxious to help her, I would gladly have carried the end of the chain which she had been obliged to bear because her fellow-prisoner was dead. A rough hand was soon upon my shoulder; a cruel lash had made Nan retreat to the general crowd, whilst, at the bidding of an Arab chief, I was hustled back to the very hindmost rank of the procession. I overheard the word Negoro, in a way that convinced me that it is under the direction of the Portuguese that I am subject to this hard indignity.

11th. — Last night encamped under some large trees on the skirts of a forest. Several escaped prisoners recaptured; their punishment barbarously cruel. Loud roaring of lions and hyenas heard at nightfall, also snorting of hippopotamuses; probably some lake or water-course not far off. Tired, but could not sleep; heard a rustling in the grass; felt sure that something was going to attack me; what could I do? I had no gun. For Mrs. Weldon's sake, must, if possible, preserve my life. The night was dark; no moon; two eyes gleamed upon me; I was about to utter a cry of alarm; fortunately, I suppressed it; the creature that had sprung to my feet was Dingo! The dog licked my hands all over, persisting in rubbing his neck against them, evidently to make me feel there; found a reed fastened to the well-known collar upon which the initials S.V. had so often awakened our curiosity; breaking open the reed, I took a note from inside; it was too dark for me to see to read it. I tried, by caressing Dingo, to detain him; but the dog appeared to know that his mission with me was at an end; he licked my hands affectionately, made a sudden bound, and disappeared in the long grass as mysteriously as he had come. The howling of the wild beasts increased. How I dreaded that the faithful creature would become their prey! No more sleep this night for me. It seemed that daylight would never dawn; at length it broke with the suddenness that marks a tropical morn. I was able cautiously to read my note; the handwriting, I knew at a glance, was that of Hercules; there were but a few lines in pencil: —

“Mrs. Weldon and Jack carried away in a kitanda.

Harris and Negoro both with them. Mr. Benedict too. Only a few marches ahead, but cannot be communicated with at present. Found Dingo wounded by a gun-shot. Dear Mr. Dick, do not despair; keep up your courage. I may help you yet.

“Your ever true and faithful

“HERCULES.”

As far as it went, this intelligence was satisfactory. A kitanda, I know, is a kind of litter made of dry grass, protected by a curtain, and carried on the shoulders of two men by a long bamboo. What a relief to know that Mrs. Weldon and Jack have been spared the miseries of this dreadful march! May I not indulge the hope of seeing them at Kazonndé?

12th. — The prisoners getting more and more weary and worn out. Blood-stains on the way still more conspicuous. Many poor wretches are a mass of wounds. One poor woman for two days has carried her dead child, from which she refuses to be parted.

l6th. — Small-pox raging; the road strewn with corpses. Still ten days before we reach Kazonndé. Just passed a tree from which slaves who had died from hunger were hanging by the neck.

18th. — Must not give in, but I am almost exhausted. Rains have ceased. We are to make what the dealers call *trikesa*, extra marches in the after-part of the day. Road very steep; runs through *nyassi*, tall grass of which the stalks scratch my face, and the seeds get under my tattered clothes and make my skin smart painfully. My boots fortunately are thick, and have not worn out. More slaves sick and abandoned to take their chance. Provisions running very short; soldiers and pagazis must be satisfied, otherwise they desert; consequently the slaves are all but starved. "They can eat each other," say the agents. A young slave, apparently in good health, dropped down dead. It made me think of Livingstone's description of how free-born men, reduced to slavery, will suddenly press their hand on their side, and die of a broken heart.

24th. — Twenty captives, incapable any longer of keeping pace with the rest, put to death by the havildars, the Arab chief offering no opposition. Poor old Nan one of the victims of this horrible butchery. My foot struck her corpse as I passed, but I was not permitted to give her a decent burial. Poor old Nan! the first of the survivors of the "Pilgrim" to go to her long rest! Poor old Nan!

Every night I watch for Dingo; but he never comes. Has Hercules nothing more to communicate? or has any mishap befallen him? If he is alive he will do what mortal strength can do to aid us.

CHAPTER IX.

KAZONNDÉ.

By the 26th of May, when the caravan reached Kazonndé the number of the slaves had diminished by more than half, so numerous had been the casualties along the road. But the dealers were quite prepared to make a market of their loss; the demand for slaves was very great, and the price must be raised accordingly.

Angola at that time was the scene of a large negro-traffic, and as the caravans principally wended their way towards the interior, the Portuguese authorities at Loanda and Benguela had practically no power to prevent it. The barracks on the shore were crowded to overflowing with prisoners, the few slave-ships that managed to elude the cruisers being quite inadequate to embark the whole number for the Spanish colonies to America.

Kazonndé, the point whence the caravans diverge to the various parts of the lake district, is situated three miles from the mouth of the Coanza, and is one of the most important *lakonis*, or markets of the province. The open marketplace where the slaves are exposed for sale is called the *chitoka*.

All the larger towns of Central Africa are divided into two distinct parts; one occupied by the Arab, Portuguese, or native merchants, and containing their slave-barracks; the other being the residence of the negro king, often a fierce drunken potentate, whose rule is a reign of terror, and who lives by subsidies allowed him by the traders.

The commercial quarter of Kazonndé now belonged to

José Antonio Alvez. It was his largest dépôt, although he had another at Bihé, and a third at Cassangé, where Cameron subsequently met him. It consisted of one long street, on each side of which were groups of flat-roofed houses called *tembés*, built of rough earth, and provided with square yards for cattle. The end of it opened into the *chitoka*, which was surrounded by the barracks. Above the houses some fine banyan-trees waved their branches, surmounted here and there by the crests of graceful palms. There was at least a score of birds of prey that hovered about the streets, and came down to perform the office of public scavengers. At no great distance flowed the Loohi, a river not yet explored, but which is supposed to be an affluent or sub-affluent of the Congo.

Adjoining the commercial quarter was the royal residence, nothing more nor less than a collection of dirty huts, extending over an area of nearly a square mile.

Some of these huts were unenclosed; others were surrounded by a palisade of reeds, or by a hedge of bushy figs.

In an enclosure within a papyrus fence were about thirty huts appropriated to the king’s slaves, another group for his wives, and in the middle, almost hidden by a plantation of manioc, a *tembé* larger and loftier than the rest, the abode of the monarch himself.

He had sorely declined from the dignity and importance of his predecessors, and his army, which by the early Portuguese traders had been estimated at 20,000, now numbered less than 4000 men; no longer could he afford, as in the good old time, to order a sacrifice of twenty-five or thirty slaves at one offering.

His name was Moené Loonga. Little over fifty, he was prematurely aged by drink and debauchery, and scarcely better than a maniac. His subjects, officers, and ministers, were all liable to be mutilated at his pleasure, and noses and ears, feet and hands, were cut off unsparingly whenever his caprice so willed it. His death would have been a cause of regret to no one, with the exception, perhaps, of Alvez, who was on very good terms with him. Alvez, moreover, feared that in the event of the present king's death, the succession of his chief wife, Queen Moena, might be disputed, and that his dominions would be invaded by a younger and more active neighbour, one of the kings of Ukusu, who had already seized upon some villages dependent on the government of Kazonndé, and who was in alliance with a rival trader named Tipo-Tipo, a man of pure Arab extraction, from whom Cameron afterwards received a visit at Nyangwé.

To all intents and purposes Alvez was the real sovereign of the district, having fostered the vices of the brutalized king till he had him completely in his power. He was a man considerably advanced in years; he was not (as his name might imply) a white man, but had merely assumed his Portuguese title for purposes of business; his true name was Kendélé, and he was a pure negro by birth, being a native of Dondo on the Coanza. He had commenced life as a slave-dealer's agent, and was now on his way towards becoming a first-class trader; that is to say, he was a consummate rascal under the guise of an honest man. He it was whom Cameron met at the end of 1874 at Kilemba, the capital of Urua, of which Kasongo is chief, and with whose caravan he travelled to Bihé, a distance of seven hundred miles.

It was midday when the caravan entered Kazonndé. The journey from the Coanza had lasted thirty-eight days, more than five weeks of misery as great as was within human power to endure. Amidst the noise of drums and coodoo-horns the slaves were conducted to the marketplace. The soldiers of the caravan discharged their guns into the air, and old Alvez' resident retinue responded with a similar salute. The bandits, than which the soldiers were nothing better, were delighted to meet again, and would celebrate their return by a season of riot and excess.

The slaves, reduced to a total of about two hundred and fifty, were many of them almost dead from exhaustion; the forks were removed from their necks, though the chains were still retained, and the whole of them were driven into barracks that were unfit even for cattle, to await (in company with 1200 to 1500 other captives already there) the great market which would be held two days hence.

The *pagazis*, after delivering their loads of ivory, would only stay to receive their payment of a few yards of calico or other stuff, and would then depart at once to join some other caravan.

On being relieved from the forks which they had carried for so many weary days, Tom and his companions heartily wrung each other's hands, but they could not venture to utter one word of mutual encouragement. The three younger men, more full of life and vigour, had resisted the effects of the fatigue, but poor old Tom was nearly exhausted, and had the march been protracted for a few more days he must have shared Nan's fate and been left behind, a prey to the wild beasts.

Upon their arrival all four were packed into a narrow cell, where some food was provided, and the door was immediately locked upon them.

The *chitoka* was now almost deserted, and Dick Sands was left there under the special charge of a havildar: he lost no opportunity of peering into every hut in the hope of catching a glimpse of Mrs. Weldon, who, if Hercules had not misinformed him, had come on hither just in front.

But he was very much perplexed. He could well understand that Mrs. Weldon, if still a prisoner, would be kept out of sight, but why Negoro and Harris did not appear to triumph over him in his humiliation was quite a mystery to him. It was likely enough that the presence of either one or the other of them would be the signal for himself to be exposed to fresh indignity, or even to torture, but Dick would have welcomed the sight of them at Kazonndé, were it only as an indication that Mrs. Weldon and Jack were there also.

It disappointed him, too, that Dingo did not come back. Ever since the dog had brought him the first note, he had kept an answer written ready to send to Hercules, imploring him to look after Mrs. Weldon, and to keep him informed of everything. He began to fear that the faithful creature must be dead, perhaps perished in some attempt to reach himself; it was, however, quite possible that Hercules had taken the dog in some other direction, hoping to gain somedépôt in the interior.

But so thoroughly had Dick persuaded himself that Mrs. Weldon had preceded him to Kazonndé that his disappointment became more and more keen when he failed to discover her. For a while he seemed to yield to despair, and sat down sorrowful and sick at heart.

Suddenly a chorus of voices and trumpets broke upon his ear; he was startled into taking a new interest in what was going on.

“Alvez! Alvez!” was the cry again and again repeated by the crowd.

Here, then, was the great man himself about to appear. Was it not likely that Harris or Negoro might be with him?

Dick stood erect and resolute, his eye vivid with expectation; he felt all eagerness to stand face to face with his betrayers; boy as he was, he was equal to cope with them both.

The *kitanda*, which came in sight at the end of the street, was nothing more than a kind of hammock covered by a faded and ragged curtain. An old negro stepped out of it. His attendants greeted him with noisy acclamations.

This, then, was the great trader, José Antonio Alvez.

Immediately following him was his friend Coïmbra, son of the chief Coïmbra of Bihé, and, according to Cameron, the greatest blackguard in the province. This sworn ally of Alvez, this organizer of his slave-raids, this commander, worthy of his own horde of bandits, was utterly loathsome in his appearance, his flesh was filthily dirty, his eyes were bloodshot, his skin yellow, and his long hair all dishevelled. He had no other attire than a tattered shirt, a tunic made of grass, and a battered straw hat, under which his countenance appeared like that of some old hag.

Alvez himself, whose clothes were like those of an old Turk the day after a carnival, was one degree more respectable in appearance than his satellite, not that his looks spoke much for the very highest class of African slave-dealers. To Dick’s great disappointment, neither Harris nor Negoro was among his retinue.

Both Alvez and Coïmbra shook hands with Ibn Hamish, the leader of the caravan, and congratulated him on the success of the expedition. Alvez made a grimace on being told that half the slaves had died on the way, but on the whole he seemed satisfied; he could meet the demand that at present existed, and would lose no time in bartering the new arrival for ivory or *hannas*, copper in the shape of a St. Andrew’s cross, the form in which the metal is exported in Central Africa.

After complimenting the havildars upon the way in which they had done their work, the trader gave orders that the porters should be paid and dismissed. The conversations were carried on in a mixture of Portuguese and native idioms, in which the African element abounded so largely that a native of Lisbon would have been at a loss to understand them. Dick, of course, could not comprehend what was said, and it was only when he saw a havildar go towards the cell in which Tom and the others were confined, that he realized that the talk was about himself and his party.

When the negroes were brought out, Dick came close up, being anxious to learn as much as he could of what was in contemplation. The old trader’s eyes seemed to brighten as he glanced upon the three strapping young men who, he knew, would soon be restored to their full strength by rest and proper food. They at least would get a good price; as for poor old Tom, he was manifestly so broken down by infirmity and age, that he would have no value in the market.

In a few words of broken English, which Alvez had picked up from some of his agents, he ironically gave them all a welcome.

“Glad to see you!” he said, with a diabolical grin.

Tom knew what he meant, and drew himself up proudly.

“We are free men!” he protested, “free citizens of the United States!”

“Yes, yes!” replied Alvez, grinning, “you are Americans; very glad to see you!”

“Very glad to see you!” echoed Coïmbra, and walking up to Austin he felt his chest and shoulders, and then proceeded to open his mouth in order to examine his teeth.

A blow from Austin’s powerful fist sent the satellite staggering backwards.

Some soldiers made a dash and seized the young negro, evidently ready to make him pay dearly for his temerity; but Alvez was by no means willing to have any injury done to his newly-acquired property, and called them off. He hardly attempted to conceal his amusement at Coïmbra’s discomfiture, although the blow had cost him one of his front teeth.

After he had recovered somewhat from the shock, Coïmbra stood scowling at Austin, as if mentally vowing vengeance on some future occasion.

Dick Sands was now himself brought forward in the custody of a havildar. It was clear that Alvez had been told all about him, for after scanning him for a moment, he stammered out in his broken English, —

“Ah! ah! the little Yankee!”

“Yes,” replied Dick; “I see you know who I am. What are you going to do with me and my friends?”

“Yankee! little Yankee!” repeated the trader, who either did not or would not comprehend the meaning of Dick’s question.

Dick turned to Coïmbra and made the same inquiry of him; in spite of his degraded features, now still farther disfigured by being swollen from the blow, it was easy to recognize that he was not of native origin. He refused to answer a word, and only stared again with the vicious glare of malevolence.

Meanwhile, Alvez had begun to talk to Ibn Hamish. Dick felt sure that they intended to separate him from the negroes, and accordingly took the opportunity of whispering a few words to them.

“My friends, I have heard from Hercules. Dingo

brought me a note from him, tied round his neck. He says Harris and Negoro have carried off Mrs. Weldon, Jack, and Mr. Benedict. He did not know where. Have patience, and we will find them yet.”

“And where’s Nan?” muttered Tom, in a low voice.

“Dead,” replied Dick, and was about to add more, when a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and a voice that he knew too well exclaimed, —

“Well, my young friend, how are you? I am glad to see you again.”

He turned round quickly. Harris stood before him.

“Where is Mrs. Weldon?” asked Dick impetuously.

“Ah, poor thing!” answered Harris, with an air of deep commiseration.

“What! is she dead?” Dick almost shrieked; “where is her child?”

“Poor little fellow!” said Harris, in the same mournful tone.

These insinuations, that those in whose welfare he was so deeply interested had succumbed to the hardships of the journey, awoke in Dick’s mind a sudden and irresistible desire for vengeance. Darting forwards he seized the cutlass that Harris wore in his belt, and plunged it into his heart.

With a yell and a curse, the American fell dead at his feet.

CHAPTER X.

MARKET-DAY.

So sudden was Dick’s action that it had been impossible to parry his blow. Several of the natives rushed on him, and in all likelihood would have struck him down upon the spot had not Negoro arrived at that very moment. At a sign from him the natives drew back, and proceeded to raise and carry away Harris’s corpse.

Alvez and Coïmbra were urgent in their demand that Dick should forthwith be punished by death, but Negoro whispered to them that they would assuredly be the gainers by delay, and they accordingly contented themselves with ordering the youth to be placed under strict supervision.

This was the first time that Dick had set eyes upon Negoro since he had left the coast; nevertheless, so heartbroken was he at the intelligence he had just received, that he did not deign to address a word to the man whom he knew to be the real author of all his misery. He cared not now what became of him.

Loaded with chains, he was placed in the dungeon where Alvez was accustomed to confine slaves who had been condemned to death for mutiny or violence. That he had no communication with the outer world gave him no concern; he had avenged the death of those for whose safety he had felt himself responsible, and could now calmly await the fate which he could not doubt was in store for him; he did not dare to suppose that he had been temporarily spared otherwise than that he might suffer the cruellest tortures that native ingenuity could devise. That the “Pilgrim’s” cook now held in his power the boy captain he so thoroughly hated was warrant enough that the sternest possible measure of vengeance would be exacted.

Two days later, the great market, the *lakoni*, commenced. Although many of the principal traders were there from the interior, it was by no means exclusively a slave-mart; a considerable proportion of the natives from the neighbouring provinces assembled to dispose of the various products of the country.

Quite early the great *chitoka* of Kazonndé was all alive with a bustling concourse of little under five thousand people, including the slaves of old Alvez, amongst whom were Tom and his three partners in adversity — an item by no means inconsiderable in the dealer's stock.

Accompanied by Coïmbra, Alvez himself was one of the first arrivals. He was going to sell his slaves in lots to be conveyed in caravans into the interior. The dealers for the most part consisted of half-breeds from Ujiji, the principal market on Lake Tanganyika, whilst some of a superior class were manifestly Arabs.

The natives that were assembled were of both sexes, and of every variety of age, the women in particular displaying an aptitude in making bargains that is shared by their sisters elsewhere of a lighter hue; and it may be said that no market of the most civilized region could be characterized by greater excitement or animation, for amongst the savages of Africa the customer makes his offer in equally noisy terms as the vendor.

The *lakoni* was always considered a kind of fète-day; consequently the natives of both sexes, though their clothing was scanty in extent, made a point of appearing in a most lavish display of ornaments. Their head-gear was most remarkable. The men had their hair arranged in every variety of eccentric device; some had it divided into four parts, rolled over cushions and fastened into a chignon, or mounted in front into a bunch of tails adorned with red feathers; others plastered it thickly with a mixture of red mud and oil similar to that used for greasing machinery, and formed it into cones or lumps, into which they inserted a medley of iron pins and ivory skewers; whilst the greatest dandies had a glass bead threaded upon every single hair, the whole being fastened together by a tattooing-knife driven through the glittering mass.

As a general rule, the women preferred dressing their hair in little tufts about the size of a cherry, arranging it into the shape of a cap, with corkscrew ringlets on each side of the face. Some wore it simply hanging down their backs, others in French fashion, with a fringe across the forehead; but every *coiffure*, without exception, was daubed and caked either with the mixture of mud and grease, or with a bright red extract of sandal-wood called *nkola*.

But it was not only on their heads that they made this extraordinary display of ornaments; the lobes of their ears were loaded till they reached their shoulders with a profusion of wooden pegs, open-work copper rings, grains of maize, or little gourds, which served the purpose of snuff-boxes; their necks, arms, wrists, legs, and ankles were a perfect mass of brass and copper rings, or sometimes were covered with a lot of bright buttons. Rows of red beads, called *sames-sames*, or *talakas*, seemed also very popular. As they had no pockets, they attached their knives, pipes and other articles to various parts of their body; so that altogether, in their holiday attire, the rich men of the district might not inappropriately be compared to walking shrines.

With their teeth they had all played the strangest of vagaries; the upper and lower incisors had generally been extracted, and the others had been filed to points or carved into hooks, like the fangs of a rattle-snake. Their fingernails were allowed to grow to such an immoderate length as to render the hands well-nigh useless, and their swarthy skins were tattooed with figures of trees, birds, crescents and discs, or, not unfrequently, with those zigzag lines which Livingstone thinks he recognizes as resembling those observed in ancient Egyptian drawings. The tattooing is effected by means of a blue substance inserted into incisions previously made in the skin. Every child is tattooed in precisely the same pattern as his father before him, and thus it may always be ascertained to what family he belongs. Instead of carrying his armorial bearings upon his plate or upon the panels of his carriage, the African magnate wears them emblazoned on his own bosom!

The garments that were usually worn were simply aprons of antelope-skins descending to the knees, but occasionally a short petticoat might be seen made of woven grass and dyed with bright colours. The ladies not unfrequently wore girdles of beads attached to green skirts embroidered with silk and ornamented with bits of glass or cowries, or sometimes the skirts were made of the grass cloth called *lambda*, which, in blue, yellow, or black, is so much valued by the people of Zanzibar.

Garments of these pretensions, however, always indicated that the wearers belonged to the upper classes; the lower orders, such as the smaller dealers, as well as the slaves, had hardly any clothes at all.

The women commonly acted as porters, and arrived at the market with huge baskets on their backs, which they secured by means of straps passed across the forehead. Having deposited their loads upon the chitoka, they turned out their goods, and then seated themselves inside the empty baskets.

As the result of the extreme fertility of the country all the articles offered for sale were of a first-rate quality. There were large stores of rice, which had been grown at a profit a hundred times as great as the cost, and maize which, producing three crops in eight months, yielded a profit as large again as the rice. There were also sesame, Urua pepper stronger than Cayenne, manioc, nutmegs, salt, and palm-oil. In the market, too, were hundreds of goats, pigs and sheep, evidently of a Tartar breed, with hair instead of wool; and there was a good supply of fish and poultry. Besides all these there was an attractive display of bright-coloured pottery, the designs of which were very symmetrical.

In shrill, squeaky voices, children were crying several varieties of native drinks; banana-wine, *pombé*, which, whatever it was, seemed to be in great demand; *malofoo*, a kind of beer compounded of bananas, and mead, a mixture of honey and water, fermented with malt.

But the most prominent feature in the whole market was the traffic in stuffs and ivory. The pieces could be counted by thousands of the unbleached *mcrikani* from Salem in Massachusetts, of the blue cotton, *kaniki*, thirty-four inches wide, and of the checked *sohari*, blue and black with its scarlet border. More expensive than these were lots of silk *diulis*, with red, green, or yellow grounds, which are sold in lengths of three yards, at prices varying from seven dollars to eighty, when they are interwoven with gold.

The ivory had come from well-nigh every part of Central Africa, and was destined for Khartoom, Zanzibar, and Natal, many of the merchants dealing in this commodity exclusively.

How vast a number of elephants must be slaughtered to supply this ivory may be imagined when it is remembered that over 200 tons, that is, 1,125,000 lbs. are exported annually to Europe. Of this, much the larger share goes to England, where the Sheffield cutlery consumes about 382,500 lbs. From the West Coast of Africa alone the produce is nearly 140 tons.

The average weight of a pair of tusks is 28 lbs. and the ordinary value of these in 1874 would be about 60*l*.; but here in Kazonndé were some weighing no less than 165 lbs. of that soft, translucent quality which retains its whiteness far better than the ivory from other sources.

As already mentioned, slaves are not unfrequently used as current money amongst the African traders, but the natives themselves usually pay for their goods with Venetian glass beads, of which the chalk-white are called *catchokolos*, the black *bubulus*, and the red *sikunderetches*. Strung in ten rows, or *khetés*, these beads are twisted twice round the neck, forming what is called a *foondo*, which is always reckoned of considerable value.

The usual measure by which they are sold is the *frasilah*, containing a weight of about 70 lbs. Livingstone, Cameron and Stanley always took care to be well provided with this kind of currency. In default of beads, the picé, a Zanzibar coin worth something more than a farthing, and *vioon-gooas,* shells peculiar to the East Coast, are recognized as a medium of exchange in the market. Amongst the cannibal tribes a certain value is attached to human teeth, and at the lakoni some natives might be seen wearing strings of teeth, the owners of which they had probably, at some previous time, devoured. This species of currency, however, was falling rapidly into disuse.

Towards the middle of the day the excitement of the market reached its highest pitch, and the uproar became perfectly deafening. The voices of the eager sellers mingled with those of indignant and overcharged customers; fights were numerous, and as there was an utter absence of any kind of police, no effort was made to restore peace or order amongst the unruly crowd.

It was just noon when Alvez gave orders that the slaves he wished to dispose of should be placed on view. Thereupon nearly two thousand unfortunates were brought forward, many of whom had been confined in the dealer’s barracks for several months. Most of the stock, however, had been so carefully attended to that they were in good condition, and it was only the last batch that looked as if they would be improved by another month’s rest; but as the demand upon the East Coast was now very large, Alvez hoped to get a good price for all, and determined to part with even the last arrivals for whatever sum he could obtain.

Amongst these latter, whom the havildars drove like a herd of cattle into the middle of the chitoka, were Tom and his three friends. They were closely chained, and rage and shame were depicted in their countenances.

Bat passed a quick and scrutinizing gaze around him, and said to the others, —

“I do not see Mr. Dick.”

Tom answered mournfully, —

“Mr. Dick will be killed, if he is not dead already. Our only hope is that we may now all be bought in one lot; it will be a consolation to us if we can be all together.”

Tears rose to Bat's eyes as he thought of how his poor old father was likely to be sold, and carried away to wear out his days as a common slave.

The sale now commenced. The agents of Alvez proceeded to divide the slaves, men, women and children, into lots, treating them in no respect better than beasts in a cattle-market. Tom and the others were paraded about from customer to customer, an agent accompanying them to proclaim the price demanded. Strong, intelligent-looking Americans, quite different to the miserable creatures brought from the banks of the Zambesi and Lualaba, they at once attracted the observation of the Arab and half-breed dealers. Just as though they were examining a horse, the buyers felt their limbs, turned them round and round, looked at their teeth, and finally tested their paces by throwing a stick to a distance and making them run to fetch it.

All the slaves were subjected to similar humiliations; and ail alike, except the very young children, seemed deeply sensible of their degradation. The cruelty exhibited towards them was very vile. Coïmbra, who was half drunk, treated them with the utmost brutality; not that they had any reason to expect any gentler dealings at the hands of the new masters who might purchase them for ivory or any other commodity. Children were torn away from their parents, husbands from their wives, brothers from sisters, and without even the indulgence of a parting word, were separated never to meet again.

The scenes that occur at such markets as this at Kazonndé are too heartrending to be described in detail.

It is one of the peculiar requirements of the slave-trade that the two sexes should have an entirely different destination. In fact, the dealers who purchase men never purchase women. The women, who are required to supply the Mussulman harems, are sent principally to Arab districts to be exchanged for ivory; whilst the men, who are to be put to hard labour, are despatched to the coast, East and West, whence they are exported to the Spanish colonies, or to the markets of Muscat or Madagascar.

To Tom and his friends the prospect of being transported to a slave colony was far better than that of being retained in some Central African province, where they could have no chance of regaining their liberty; and the moment, to them, was accordingly one of great suspense.

Altogether, things turned out for them better than they dared anticipate. They had at least the satisfaction of finding that as yet they were not to be separated. Alvez, of course, had taken good care to conceal the origin of this exceptional lot, and their own ignorance of the language thoroughly prevented them from communicating it; but the anxiety to secure so valuable a property rendered the competition for it very keen; the bidding rose higher and higher, until at length the four men were knocked down to a rich Arab dealer, who purposed in the course of a few days to take them to Lake Tanganyika, and thence to one of the deptôs of Zanzibar.

This journey, it is true, would be for 1500 miles across the most unhealthy parts of Central Africa, through districts harassed by internal wars; and it seemed improbable that Tom could survive the hardships he must meet; like poor old Nan, he would succumb to fatigue; but the brave fellows did not suffer themselves to fear the future, they were only too happy to be still together; and the chain that bound them one to another was felt to be easier and lighter to bear.

Their new master knew that it was for his own interest that his purchase should be well taken care of; he looked to make a substantial profit at Zanzibar, and sent them off at once to his own private barracks; consequently they saw no more of what transpired at Kazonndé.

CHAPTER XI.

A BOWL OF PUNCH.

The afternoon was passing away, and it was now past four o’clock, when the sound of drums, cymbals, and a variety of native instruments was heard at the end of the main thoroughfare. The market was still going on with the same animation as before; half a day’s screeching and fighting seemed neither to have wearied the voices nor broken the limbs of the demoniacal traffickers; there was a considerable number of slaves still to be disposed of, and the dealers were haggling over the remaining lots with an excitement of which a sudden panic on the London Stock Exchange could give a very inadequate conception.

But the discordant concert which suddenly broke upon the ear was the signal for business to be at once suspended. The crowd might cease its uproar, and recover its breath. The King of Kazonndé, Moené Loonga, was about to honour the *lakoni* with a visit.

Attended by a large retinue of wives, officers, soldiers, and slaves, the monarch was conveyed to the middle of the market-place in an old palanquin, from which he was obliged to have five or six people to help him to descend. Alvez and the other traders advanced to meet him with the most exaggerated gestures of reverence, all of which he received as his rightful homage.

He was a man of fifty years of age, but might easily have passed for eighty. He looked like an old, decrepit monkey. On his head was a kind of tiara, adorned with leopards’ claws dyed red, and tufts of greyish-white hair;

this was the usual crown of the sovereigns of Kazonndé. From his waist hung two skirts of coodoo-hide, stiff as blacksmiths’ aprons, and embroidered with pearls. The tattooings on his breast were so numerous that his pedigree, which they declared, might seem to reach back to time immemorial. His wrists and arms were encased in copper bracelets, thickly encrusted with beads; he wore a pair of top-boots, a present from Alvez some twenty years ago; in his left hand he carried a great stick surmounted by a silver knob; in his right a fly-flapper with a handle studded with pearls; over his head was carried an old umbrella with as many patches as a Harlequin’s coat, whilst from his neck hung Cousin Benedict’s magnifying-glass, and on his nose were the spectacles which had been stolen from Bat’s pocket.

Such was the appearance of the potentate beneath whose sway the country trembled for a hundred miles round.

By virtue of his sovereignty Moené Loonga claimed to be of celestial origin; and any subject who should have the audacity to raise a question on this point would have been despatched forthwith to another world. All his actions, his eating and drinking, were supposed to be performed by divine impulse. He certainly drank like no other mortal; his officers and ministers, confirmed tipplers as they were, appeared sober men in comparison with himself, and he seemed never to be doing anything but imbibing strong pombé, and over-proof spirit with which Alvez kept him liberally supplied.

In his harem Moené Loonga had wives of all ages from forty to fourteen, most of whom accompanied him on his visit to the *lakoni*. Moena, the chief wife, who was called the queen, was the eldest of them all, and, like the rest, was of royal blood. She was a vixenish-looking woman, very gaily attired; she wore a kind of bright tartan over a skirt of woven grass, embroidered with pearls; round her throat was a profusion of necklaces, and her hair was mounted up in tiers that toppled high above her head, making her resemble some hideous monster. The younger wives, all of them sisters or cousins of the king, were less elaborately dressed. They walked behind her, ready at the slightest sign to perform the most menial services. Did his Majesty wish to sit down, two of them would immediately stoop to the ground and form a seat with their bodies, whilst others would have to lie down and support his feet upon their backs: a throne and footstool of living ebony.

Amidst the staggering, half-tipsy crowd of ministers, officers, and magicians that composed Moené Loonga’s suite, there was hardly a man to be seen who had not lost either an eye, an ear, or hand, or nose. Death and mutilation were the only two punishments practised in Kazonndé, and the slightest offence involved the instant amputation of some member of the body. The loss of the ear was considered the severest penalty, as it prevented the possibility of wearing earrings!

The governors of districts, or *kilolos*, whether hereditary or appointed for four years, were distinguished by red waistcoats and zebra-skin caps; in their hands they brandished long rattans, coated at one extremity with a varnish of magic drugs.

The weapons carried by the soldiers consisted of wooden bows adorned with fringes and provided with a spare bowstring, knives filed into the shape of serpents’ tongues, long, broad lances, and shields of palm wood, ornamented with arabesques. In the matter of uniform, the royal army had no demands to make upon the royal treasury.

Amongst the attendants of the king there was a considerable number of sorcerers and musicians. The sorcerers, or *mganga*, were practically the physicians of the court, the savages having the most implicit faith in divinations and incantations of every kind, and employing fetishes, clay or wooden figures, representing sometimes ordinary human beings and sometimes fantastic animals. Like the rest of the retinue, these magicians were, for the most part, more or less mutilated, an indication that some of their prescriptions on behalf of the king had failed of success.

The musicians were of both sexes, some performing on

shrill rattles, some on huge drums, whilst others played on instruments called *marimbas*, a kind of dulcimer made of two rows of different-sized gourds fastened in a frame, and struck by sticks with india-rubber balls at the end. To any but native ears the music was perfectly deafening.

Several flags and banners were carried m the procession, and amongst these was mixed up a number of long pikes, upon which were stuck the skulls of the various chiefs that Moené Loonga had conquered in battle.

As the king as helped out of his palanquin, the acclamations rose higher and higher from every quarter of the market place The soldiers attached to the caravans fired off their old guns, though the reports were almost too feeble to be heard above the noisy vociferations of the crowd; and the havildars rubbed their black noses with cinnabar powder, which they carried in bags, and prostrated themselves. Alvez advanced and presented the king with some fresh tobacco, “the appeasing herb,” as it is called in the native dialect; and certainly Moené Loonga seemed to require some appeasing, as, for some unknown reason, he was in a thoroughly bad temper.

Coïmbra, Ibn Hamish and the dealers all came forward to pay their court to the monarch, the Arabs greeting him with the cry of *marhaba*, or welcome;

others clapped their hands and bowed to the very ground; while some even smeared themselves with mud, in token of their most servile subjection.

But Moené Loonga scarcely took notice of any of them; he went staggering along, rolling like a ship upon a stormy sea, and made his way past the crowds of slaves, each of whom, no less than their masters, trembled lest he should think fit to claim them for his own.

Negoro, who kept close at Alvez' side, did not fail to render his homage along with the rest. Alvez and the king were carrying on a conversation in the native language, if that could be called a conversation in which Moené Loonga merely jerked out a few monosyllables from his inflamed and swollen lips. He was asking Alvez to replenish his stock of brandy.

"We are proud to welcome your majesty at the market of Kazonndé," Alvez was saying.

"Get me brandy," was all the drunken king's reply.

"Will it please your majesty to take part in the business of the *lakoni*?" Alvez tried to ask.

"Drink!" blurted out the king impatiently.

Alvez continued, —

"My friend Negoro here is anxious to greet your majesty after his long absence."

"Drink!" roared the monarch again.

“Will the king take pombé or mead?” asked Alvez, at last obliged to take notice of the demand.

“Brandy! give me fire-water!” yelled the king, in a fury. “For every drop you shall have...”

“A drop of a white man’s blood!” suggested Negoro, glancing at Alvez.

“Yes, yes; kill a white man,” assented Moené Loonga, his ferocious instincts all aroused by the proposition.

“There is a white man here,” said Alvez, “who has killed my agent. He must be punished for his act.”

“Send him to King Masongo!” cried the king; “Masongo and the Assuas will cut him up and eat him alive.”

Only too true it is that cannibalism is still openly practised in certain provinces of Central Africa. Livingstone records that the Manyuemas not only eat men killed in war, but even buy slaves for that purpose; it is said to be the avowal of these Manyuemas that “human flesh is slightly salt, and requires no seasoning.” Cameron relates how in the dominions of Moené Booga dead bodies were soaked for a few days in running water as a preparation for their being devoured; and Stanley found traces of a widely-spread cannibalism amongst the inhabitants of Ukusu.

But however horrible might be the manner of death proposed by Moené Loonga, it did not at all suit Negoro’s purpose to let Dick Sands out of his clutches.

“The white man is here,” he said to the king; “it is here he has committed his offence, and here he should be punished.”

“If you will,” replied Moené Loonga; “only I must have fire-water; a drop of fire-water for every drop of the white man’s blood.”

“Yes, you shall have the fire-water,” assented Alvez, “and what is more, you shall have it all alight. We will give your majesty a bowl of blazing punch.”

The thought had struck Alvez, and he was himself delighted with the idea, that he would set the spirit in flames. Moené Loonga had complained that the “fire-water” did not justify its name as it ought, and Alvez hoped that perhaps, administered in this new form, it might revivify the deadened membranes of the palate of the king.

Moené Loonga did not conceal his satisfaction. Wives and courtiers alike were full of anticipation. They had all drunk brandy, but they had not drunk brandy alight. And not only was their thirst for alcohol to be satisfied; their thirst for blood was likewise to be indulged; and when it is remembered how, even amongst the civilized, drunkenness reduces a man below the level of a brute, it may be imagined to what barbarous cruelties Dick Sands was likely to be exposed. The idea of torturing a white man was not altogether repugnant to the coloured blood of either Alvez or Coïmbra, while with Negoro the spirit of vengeance had completely overpowered all feeling of compunction.

Night, without any intervening twilight, was soon drawing on, and the contemplated display could hardly fail to be effective. The programme for the evening consisted of two parts; first, the blazing punch-bowl; then the torture, culminating in an execution.

The destined victim was still closely confined in his dark and dreary dungeon; all the slaves, whether sold or not, had been driven back to the barracks, and the chitoka was cleared of every one except the slave-dealers, the havildars, and the soldiers, who hoped, by favour of the king, to have a share of the flaming punch.

Alvez did not long delay the proceedings. He ordered a huge caldron, capable of containing more than twenty gallons, to be placed in the centre of the market-place. Into this were emptied several casks of highly-rectified spirit, of a very inferior quality, to which was added a supply of cinnamon and other spices, no ingredient being omitted which was likely to give a pungency to suit the savage palate.

The whole royal retinue formed a circle round the king. Fascinated by the sight of the spirit, Moené Loonga came reeling up to the edge of the punch-bowl, and seemed ready to plunge himself head foremost into it. Alvez held him back, at the same time placing a lucifer in his hand.

“Set it alight!” cried the slave-dealer, grinning slily as he spoke.

The king applied the match to the surface of the spirit. The effect was instantaneous. High above the edge of the bowl the blue flame rose and curled. To give intensity to the process Alvez had added a sprinkling of salt to the mixture, and this caused the fire to cast upon the faces of all around that lurid glare which is generally associated with apparitions of ghosts and phantoms. Half intoxicated already, the negroes yelled and gesticulated; and joining hands, they performed a fiendish dance around their monarch. Alvez stood and stirred the spirit with an enormous metal ladle, attached to a pole, and as the flames rose yet higher and higher they seemed to throw a more and more unearthly glamour over the ape-like forms that circled in their wild career.

Moené Loonga, in his eagerness, soon seized the ladle from the slave-dealer’s hands, plunged it deep into the bowl, and bringing it up again full of the blazing punch, raised it to his lips.

A horrible shriek brought the dancers to a sudden standstill. By a kind of spontaneous combustion, the king had taken fire internally; though it was a fire that emitted little heat, it was none the less intense and consuming. In an instant one of the ministers in attendance ran to the king’s assistance, but he, almost as much alcoholized as his master, caught fire as well, and soon both monarch and minister lay writhing on the ground in unutterable agony. Not a soul was able to lend a helping hand. Alvez and Negoro were at a loss what to do; the courtiers dared not expose themselves to so terrible a fate; the women had all fled in alarm, and Coïmbra, awakened to the conviction of the inflammability of his own condition, had rapidly decamped.

To say the truth, it was impossible to do anything; water would have proved unavailing to quench the pale blue flame that hovered over the prostrate forms, every tissue of which was so thoroughly impregnated with spirit, that combustion, though outwardly extinguished, would continue its work internally.

In a few minutes life was extinct, but the bodies continued long afterwards to burn; until, upon the spot where they had fallen, a few light ashes, some fragments of the spinal column, some fingers and some toes, covered with a thin layer of stinking soot, were all that remained of the King of Kazonndé and his ill fated minister.

CHAPTER XII.

ROYAL OBSEQUIES.

On the following morning the town of Kazonndé presented an aspect of unwonted desolation. Awe-struck at the event of the previous evening, the natives had all shut themselves up in their huts. That a monarch who was to be assumed as of divine origin should perish with one of his ministers by so horrible a death was a thing wholly unparalleled in their experience. Some of the elder part of the community remembered having taken part in certain cannibal preparations, and were aware that the cremation of a human body is no easy matter, yet here was a case in which two men had been all but utterly consumed without any extraneous application. Here was a mystery that baffled all their comprehension.

Old Alvez had also retired to the seclusion of his own residence; having been warned by Negoro that he would probably be held responsible for the occurrence, he deemed it prudent to keep in retirement. Meanwhile Negoro industriously circulated the report that the king's death had been brought about by supernatural means reserved by the great Manitoo solely for his elect, and that it was sacred fire that had proceeded from his body. The superstitious natives readily received this version of the affair, and at once proceeded to honour Moené Loonga with funeral rites worthy of one thus conspicuously elevated to the rank of the gods. The ceremony (which entailed an expenditure of human blood incredible except that it is authenticated by Cameron and other African travellers) was just the opportunity that Negoro required for carrying out his designs against Dick, whom he intended to take a prominent part in it.

The natural successor to the king was the queen Moena. By inaugurating the funeral without delay and thus assuming the semblance of authority, she forestalled the king of Ukusu or any other rival who might venture to dispute her sovereignty; and moreover, by taking the reins of government into her hands she avoided the fate reserved for the other wives who, had they been allowed to live, might prove somewhat troublesome to the shrew. Accordingly, with the sound of coodoo horns and marimbas, she caused a proclamation to be made in the various quarters of the town, that the obsequies of the deceased monarch would be celebrated on the next evening with all due solemnity.

The announcement met with no opposition either from the officials about the court or from the public at large. Alvez and the traders generally were quite satisfied with Moena's assumption of the supremacy, knowing that by a few presents and a little flattery they could make her sufficiently considerate for their own interests.

Preparations began at once. At the end of the chief thoroughfare flowed a deep and rapid brook, an affluent of the Coango, in the dry bed of which the royal grave was to be formed. Natives were immediately set to work to construct a dam by means of which the water should be diverted, until the burial was over, into a temporary channel across the plain; the last act in the ceremonial being to undam the stream and allow it to resume its proper course.

Negoro had formed the resolution that Dick Sands should be one of the victims to be sacrificed upon the king's tomb. Thoroughly aware as he was that the indignation which had caused the death of Harris extended in at least an equal degree to himself, the cowardly rascal would not have ventured to approach Dick under similar circumstances at the risk of meeting a similar fate; but knowing him to be a prisoner bound hand and foot, from whom there could be nothing to fear, he resolved to go to him in his dungeon-*

Not only did he delight in torturing his victims, but he derived an especial gratification from witnessing the torture.

About the middle of the day, accordingly, he made his way to the cell where Dick was detained under the strict watch of a havildar. There, bound with fetters that penetrated his very flesh, lay the poor boy; for the last four and twenty hours he had not been allowed a morsel of food, and would gladly have faced the most painful death as a welcome relief to his miseries.

But at the sight of Negoro all his energy revived; instinctively he made an effort to burst his bonds, and to get a hold upon his persecutor; but the strength of a giant would have been utterly unavailing for such a design. Dick felt that the struggle he had to make was of another kind, and forcing himself to an apparent composure, he determined to look Negoro straight in the face, but to vouchsafe no reply to anything he might say.

“I felt bound,” Negoro began, “to come and pay my respects to my young captain, and to tell him how sorry I am that he has not the same authority here that he had on board the ‘Pilgrim.’”

Finding that Dick returned no answer, he continued, —

“You remember your old cook, captain: I have come to know what you would like to order for your breakfast.”

Here he paused to give a brutal kick at Dick’s foot, and went on, —

"I have also another question to ask you, captain; can you tell me how it was that you landed here in Angola instead of upon the coast of America?"

The way in which the question was put more than ever confirmed Dick's impression that the "Pilgrim's" course had been altered by Negoro, but he persevered in maintaining a contemptuous silence.

"It was a lucky thing for you, captain," resumed the vindictive Portuguese, "that you had a good seaman on board, otherwise the ship would have run aground on some reef in the tempest, instead of coming ashore here in a friendly port."

Whilst he was speaking, Negoro had gradually drawn nearer to the prisoner, until their faces were almost in contact. Exasperated by Dick's calmness, his countenance assumed an expression of the utmost ferocity, and at last he burst forth in a paroxysm of rage.

"It is my turn now! I am master now! I am captain here! You are in my power now! Your life is in my hands!"

"Take it, then," said Dick quietly; "death has no terrors for me, and your wickedness will soon be avenged."

"Avenged!" roared Negoro; "do you suppose there is a single soul to care about you? Avenged! who will concern himself with what befalls you? except Alvez and me, there is no one with a shadow of authority here; if you think you are going to get any help from old Tom or any of those niggers, let me tell you that they are every one of them sold and have been sent off to Zanzibar."

"Hercules is free," said Dick.

“Hercules!” sneered Negoro; “he has been food for lions and panthers long ago, I am only sorry that I did not get the chance of disposing of him myself.”

“And there is Dingo,” calmly persisted Dick; “sure as fate, he will find you out some day.”

“Dingo is dead!” retorted Negoro with malicious glee: “I shot the brute myself, and I should be glad if every survivor of the ‘Pilgrim’ had shared his fate.”

“But remember,” said Dick, “you have to follow them all yourself;” and he fixed a sharp gaze upon his persecutor’s eye.

The Portuguese villain was stung to the quick; he made a dash towards the youth, and would have strangled him upon the spot, but remembering that any such sudden action would be to liberate him from the torture he was determined he should undergo, he controlled his rage, and after giving strict orders to the havildar, who had been a passive spectator of the scene, to keep a careful watch upon his charge, he left the dungeon.

So far from depressing Dick’s spirits, the interview had altogether a contrary effect; his feelings had undergone a reaction, so that all his energies were restored. Possibly Negoro in his sudden assault had unintentionally loosened his fetters, for he certainly seemed to have greater play for his limbs, and fancied that by a slight effort he might succeed in disengaging his arms. Even that amount of freedom, however, he knew could be of no real avail to him; he was a closely-guarded prisoner, without hope of succour from without; and now he had no other wish than cheerfully to meet the death that should unite him to the friends who had gone before.

The hours passed on. The gleams of daylight that penetrated the thatched roof of the prison gradually faded into darkness; the few sounds on the chitoka, a great contrast to the hubbub of the day, became hushed into silence, and night fell upon the town of Kazonndé.

Dick Sands slept soundly for about a couple of hours, and woke up considerably refreshed. One of his arms, which was somewhat less swollen than the other, he was able to withdraw from its bonds; it was at any rate a relief to stretch it at his pleasure.

The havildar, grasping the neck of a brandy-bottle which he had just drained, had sunk into a heavy slumber, and Dick Sands was contemplating the possibility of getting posssession of his gaoler’s weapons when his attention was arrested by a scratching at the bottom of the door. By the help of his liberated arm he contrived to crawl noiselessly to the threshold, where the scratching increased in violence. For a moment he was in doubt whether the noise proceeded from the movements of a man or an animal. He gave a glance at the havildar, who was sound asleep, and placing his lips against the door murmured “Hercules!”

A low whining was the sole reply.

“It must be Dingo,” muttered Dick to himself; “Negoro may have told me a lie; perhaps, after all, the dog is not dead.”

As though in answer to his thoughts, a dog’s paw was pushed below the door. Dick seized it eagerly; he had no doubt it was Dingo’s; but if the dog brought a message, it was sure to be tied to his neck, and there seemed to be no means of getting at it, except the hole underneath could be made large enough to admit the animal’s head. Dick determined to try and scrape away the soil at the threshold, and commenced digging with his nails. But he had scarcely set himself to his task when loud barkings, other than Dingo’s, were heard in the distance. The faithful creature had been scented out by the native dogs, and instinct dictated an immediate flight. Alarm had evidently been taken, as several gun-shots were fired; the havildar half roused himself from his slumber, and Dick was fain to roll himself once more into his corner, there to await the dawn of the day which was intended to be his last.

Throughout that day, the grave-digging was carried on with unremitted activity. A large number of the natives, under the superintendence of the queen’s prime minister, were set to work, and according to the decree of Moena, who seemed resolved to continue the rigorous sway of her departed husband, were bound, under penalty of mutilation, to accomplish their task within the proscribed time.

As soon as the stream had been diverted into its temporary channel, there was hollowed out in the dry river bed a pit, fifty feet long, ten feet wide, and ten feet deep. This, towards the close of the day, was lined throughout with living women, selected from Moené Loonga’s slaves; in ordinary cases it would have been their fate to be buried alive beside their master; but in recognition of his miraculous death it was ordained that they should be drowned beside his remains. [Footnote: The horrible hecatombs that commemorate the death of any powerful chief in Central Africa defy all description. Cameron relates that more than a hundred victims were sacrificed at the obsequies of the father of the King of Kassongo.]

Generally, the royal corpse is arrayed in its richest vestments before being consigned to the tomb, but in this case, when the remains consisted only of a few charred bones, another plan was adopted. An image of the king, perhaps rather flattering to the original, was made of wicker-work; inside this were placed the fragments of bones and skin, and the effigy itself was then arrayed in the robes of state, which, as already mentioned, were not of a very costly description.

Cousin Benedict’s spectacles were not forgotten, but were firmly affixed to the countenance of the image. The masquerade had its ludicrous as well as its terrible side.

When the evening arrived, a long procession was seen wending its way to the place of interment; the uproar was perfectly deafening; shouts, yells, the boisterous incantations of the musicians, the clang of musical instruments, and the reports of many old muskets, mingled in wild confusion.

The ceremony was to take place by torch-light, and the whole population of Kazonndé, native and otherwise, was bound to be present. Alvez, Coïmbra, Negoro, the Arab dealers and their havildars all helped to swell the numbers, the queen having given express orders that no one who had been at the lakoni should leave the town, and it was not deemed prudent to disobey her commands.

The remains of the king were carried in a palanquin in the rear of the cortége, surrounded by the wives of the second class, some of whom were doomed to follow their master beyond the tomb. Queen Moena, in state array, marched behind the catafalque.

Night was well advanced when the entire procession reached the banks of the brook, but the resin-torches, waved on high by their bearers, shed a ruddy glare upon the teeming crowd. The grave, with its lining of living women, bound to its side by chains, was plainly visible; fifty slaves, some resigned and mute, others uttering loud and piteous cries, were there awaiting the moment when the rushing torrent should be opened upon them.

The wives who were destined to perish had been selected by the queen herself and were all in holiday-attire. One of the victims, who bore the title of second wife, was forced down upon her hands and knees in the grave, in order to form a resting-place for the effigy, as she had been accustomed to do for the living sovereign; the third wife had to sustain the image in an upright position, and the fourth lay down at its feet to make a footstool.

In front of the effigy, at the end of the grave, a huge stake, painted red, was planted firmly in the earth. Bound to this stake, his body half naked, exhibiting marks of the tortures which by Negoro’s orders he had already undergone, friendless and hopeless, was Dick Sands!

The time, however, for opening the flood-gate had not yet arrived. First of all, at a sign from the queen, the fourth wife, forming the royal footstool had her throat cut by an executioner, her blood streaming into the grave. This barbarous deed was the commencement of a most frightful butchery. One after another, fifty slaves fell beneath the slaughterous knife, until the river-bed was a very cataract of blood. For half an hour the shrieks of the victims mingled with the imprecations of their murderers, without evoking one single expression of horror or sympathy from the gazing crowd around.

At a second signal from the queen, the barrier, which retained the water above, was opened. By a refinement of cruelty the torrent was not admitted suddenly to the grave, but allowed to trickle gradually in.

The first to be drowned were the slaves that carpeted the bottom of the trench, their frightful struggles bearing witness to the slow death that was overpowering them. Dick was immersed to his knees, but he could be seen making what might seem one last frantic effort to burst his bonds.

Steadily rose the water; the stream resumed its proper course; the last head disappeared beneath its surface, and soon there remained nothing to indicate that in the depth below there was a tomb where a hundred victims had been sacrificed to the memory 0f the King of Kazonndé.

Painful as they are to describe, it is impossible to ignore the reality of such scenes.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN CAPTIVITY.

So far from Mrs. Weldon and Jack having succumbed to the hardships to which they had been exposed, they were both alive, and together with Cousin Benedict were now in Kazonndé. After the assault upon the ant-hill they had all three been conveyed beyond the encampment to a spot where a rude palanquin was in readiness for Mrs. Weldon and her son. The journey hence to Kazonndé was consequently accomplished without much difficulty; Cousin Benedict, who performed it on foot, was allowed to entomologize as much as he pleased upon the road, so that to him the distance was a matter of no concern. The party reached their destination a week sooner than Ibn Hamish’s caravan, and the prisoners were lodged in Alvez’ quarters.

Jack was much better. After leaving the marshy districts he had no return of fever, and as a certain amount of indulgence had been allowed them on their journey, both he and his mother, as far as their health was concerned, might be said to be in a satisfactory condition.

Of the rest of her former companions Mrs. Weldon could hear nothing. She had herself been a witness of the escape of Hercules, but of course knew nothing further of his fate; as for Dick Sands, she entertained a sanguine hope that his white skin would protect him from any severe treatment; but for Nan and the other poor negroes, here upon African soil, she feared the very worst.

Being entirely shut off from communication with the outer world, she was quite unaware of the arrival of the caravan; even if she had heard the noisy commotion of the market she would not have known what it meant, and she was in ignorance alike of the death of Harris, of the sale of Tom and his companions, of the dreadful end of the king, and of the royal obsequies in which poor Dick had been assigned so melancholy a share. During the journey from the Coanza to Kazonndé, Harris and Negoro had held no conversation with her, and since her arrival she had not been allowed to pass the inclosure of the establishment, so that, as far as she knew, she was quite alone, and being in Negoro's power, was in a position from which it seemed only too likely nothing but death could release her.

From Cousin Benedict, it is needless to repeat, she could expect no assistance; his own personal pursuits engrossed him, and he had no care nor leisure to bestow upon external circumstances. His first feeling, on being made to understand that he was not in America, was one of deep disappointment that the wonderful things he had seen were no discoveries at all; they were simply African insects common on African soil. This vexation, however, soon passed away, and he began to believe that "the land of the Pharaohs" might possess as much entomological wealth as "the land of the Incas."

"Ah," he would exclaim to Mrs. Weldon, heedless that she gave him little or no attention, "this is the country of the manticoræ, and wonderful coleoptera they are, with their long hairy legs, their sharp elytra and their big mandibles; the most remarkable of them all is the tuberous manticora. And isn't this, too, the land of the golden-tipped calosomi? and of the prickly-legged goliaths of Guinea and Gabon? Here, too, we ought to find the spotted anthidia, which lay their eggs in empty snail-shells; and the sacred atenchus, which the old Egyptians used to venerate as divine."

"Yes, yes;" he would say at another time, "this is the proper habitat of those death's-head sphinxes which are now so common everywhere; and this is the place for those ‘Idias Bigoti,’ so formidable to the natives of Senegal.

There must be wonderful discoveries to be made here if only those good people will let me.”

The “good people” referred to were Negoro and Harris, who had restored him much of the liberty of which Dick Sands had found it necessary to deprive him. With freedom to roam and in possession of his tin box, Benedict would have been amongst the most contented of men, had it not been for the loss of his spectacles and magnifying-glass, now buried with the King of Kazonndé. Reduced to the necessity of poking every insect almost into his eyes before he could discover its characteristics, he would have sacrificed much to recover or replace his glasses, but as such articles were not to be procured at any price, he contented himself with the permission to go where he pleased within the limits of the palisade. His keepers knew him well enough to be satisfied that he would make no attempt to escape, and as the enclosure was nearly a mile in circumference, containing many shrubs and trees and huts with thatched roofs, besides being intersected by a running stream, it afforded him a very fair scope for his researches, and who should say that he would not discover some novel specimen to which, in the records of entomological science, his own name might be assigned?

If thus the domain of Antonio Alvez was sufficient to satisfy Benedict, to little Jack it might well seem immense. But though allowed to ramble over the whole place as he liked, the child rarely cared to leave his mother; he would be continually inquiring about his father, whom he had now so long been expecting to see: he would ask why Nan and Hercules and Dingo had gone away and left him; and perpetually he would be expressing his wonder where Dick could be, and wishing he would come back again. Mrs. Weldon could only hide her tears and answer him by caresses.

Nothing, however, transpired to give the least intimation that any of the prisoners were to be treated otherwise than they had been upon the journey from the Coanza. Excepting such as were retained for old Alvez’ personal service, all the slaves had been sold, and the storehouses were now full of stuffs and ivory, the stuffs destined to be sent into the central provinces and the ivory to be exported. The establishment was thus no longer crowded as it had been, and Mrs. Weldon and Jack were lodged in a different hut to Cousin Benedict. All three, however, took their meals together and were allowed a sufficient diet of mutton or goats’-flesh, vegetables, manioc, sorghum and native fruits. With the traders’ servants they held no communication, but Halima, a young slave who had been told off to attend to Mrs. Weldon, evinced for her new mistress an attachment which, though rough, was evidently sincere.

Old Alvez, who occupied the principal house in thedépôt, was rarely seen; whilst the non-appearance of either Harris or Negoro caused Mrs. Weldon much surprise and perplexity. In the midst of all her troubles, too, she was haunted by the thought of the anxiety her husband must be suffering on her account. Unaware of her having embarked on board the “Pilgrim,” at first he would have wondered at steamer after steamer arriving at San Francisco without her. After a while the “Pilgrim” would have been registered amongst the number of missing ships; and it was certain the intelligence would be forwarded to him by his correspondents, that the vessel had sailed from Auckland with his wife and child on board. What was he to imagine? he might refuse to believe that they had perished at sea, but he would never dream of their having been carried to Africa, and would certainly institute a search in no other direction than on the coast of America, or amongst the isles of the Pacific. She had not the faintest hope of her whereabouts being discovered, and involuntarily her thoughts turned to the possibility of making an escape. She might well feel her heart sink within her at the bare idea; even if she should succeed in eluding the vigilance of the watch, there were two hundred miles of dense forest to be traversed before the coast could be reached; nevertheless, it revealed itself to her as her last chance, and failing all else, she resolved to hazard it.

But, first of all, she determined, if it were possible, to discover the ultimate design of Negoro. She was not kept long in suspense. On the 6th of June, just a week after the royal funeral, the Portuguese entered the depót, in which he had not set foot since his return, and made his way straight to the hut in which he knew he should find the prisoner. Benedict was out insect-hunting; Jack, under Halima’s charge, was being taken for a walk. Mrs. Weldon was alone.

Negoro pushed open the door, and said abruptly, —

“Mrs. Weldon, I have come to tell you, that Tom and his lot have been sold for the Ujiji market; Nan died on her way here; and Dick Sands is dead too.”

Mrs. Weldon uttered a cry of horror.

“Yes, Mrs. Weldon,” he continued; “he has got what he deserved; he shot Harris, and has been executed for the murder. And here you are alone! mark this! alone and in my power!”

What Negoro said was true; Tom, Bat, Actæon, and Austin had all been sent off that morning on their way to Ujiji.

Mrs. Weldon groaned bitterly.

Negoro went on.

“If I chose, I could still further avenge upon you the ill-treatment I got on board that ship; but it does not suit my purpose to kill you. You and that boy of yours, and that idiot of a fly-catcher, all have a certain value in the market. I mean to sell you.”

“You dare not!” said Mrs. Weldon firmly; “you know you are making an idle threat; who do you suppose would purchase people of white blood?”

“I know a customer who will give me the price I mean to ask,” replied Negoro with a brutal grin.

She bent down her head; only too well she knew that such things were possible in this horrid land.

“Tell me who he is!” she said; “tell the name of the man who...”

“James Weldon,” he answered slowly.

“My husband!” she cried; “what do you mean?”

“I mean what I say. I mean to make your husband buy you back at my price; and if he likes to pay for them, he shall have his son and his cousin too.”

“And when, and how, may I ask, do you propose to manage this?” replied Mrs. Weldon. forcing herself to be calm.

“Here, and soon too. I suppose Weldon will not mind coming to fetch you.”

“He would not hesitate to come; but how could he know we are here?”

“I will go to him. I have money that will take me to San Francisco.”

“What you stole from the ‘Pilgrim’?” said Mrs. Weldon.

“Just so,” replied Negoro; “and I have plenty more I suppose when Weldon hears that you are a prisoner in Central Africa, he will not think much of a hundred thousand dollars.”

“But how is he to know the truth of your statement?”

“I shall take him a letter from you. You shall represent me as your faithful servant, just escaped from the hands of savages.”

“A letter such as that I will never write; never,” said Mrs. Weldon decisively.

“What? what? you refuse?”

“I refuse.”

She had all the natural cravings of a woman and a wife, but so thoroughly was she aware of the treachery of the man she had to deal with, that she dreaded lest, as soon as he had touched the ransom, he would dispose of her husband altogether.

There was a short silence.

“You will write that letter,” said Negoro.

“Never!” repeated Mrs. Weldon.

“Remember your child!”

Mrs. Weldon’s heart beat violently, but she did not answer a word.

“I will give you a week to think over this,” hissed out Negoro.

Mrs. Weldon was still silent.

“A week! I will come again in a week; you will do as I wish, or it will be the worse for you.”

He gnashed his teeth, turned on his heel, and left the hut.

CHAPTER XIV.

A RAY OF HOPE.

Mrs. Weldon’s first feeling on being left alone was a sense of relief at having a week’s respite. She had no trust in Negoro’s honesty, but she knew well enough that their “marketable value” would secure them from any personal danger, and she had time to consider whether some compromise might be effected by which her husband might be spared the necessity of coming to Kazonndé. Upon the receipt of a letter from herself, he would not hesitate for a moment in undertaking the journey, but she entertained no little fear that after all perhaps her own departure might not be permitted; the slightest caprice on the part of Queen Moena would detain her as a captive, whilst as to Negoro, if once he should get the ransom he wanted, he would take no further pains in the matter.

Accordingly, she resolved to make the proposition that she should be conveyed to some point upon the coast, where the bargain could be concluded without Mr. Weldon’s coming up the country.

She had to weigh all the consequences that would follow any refusal on her part to fall in with Negoro’s demands. Of course, he would spend the interval in preparing for his start to America, and when he should come back and find her still hesitating, was it not likely that he would find scope for his revenge in suggesting that she must be separated from her child.

The very thought sent a pang through her heart, and she clasped her little boy tenderly to her side.

“What makes you so sad, mamma?” asked Jack.

“I was thinking of your father, my child,” she answered; “would you not like to see him?”

“Yes, yes; is he coming here?”

“No, my boy, he must not come here.”

“Then let us take Dick, and Tom, and Hercules, and go to him.”

Mrs. Weldon tried to conceal her tears.

“Have you heard from papa?”

“No.”

“Then why do you not write to him?”

“Write to him?” repeated his mother, “that is the very thing I was thinking about.”

The child little knew the agitation that was troubling her mind.

Meanwhile Mrs. Weldon had another inducement which she hardly ventured to own to herself for postponing her final decision. Was it absolutely impossible that her liberation should be effected by some different means altogether?

A few days previously she had overheard a conversation outside her hut, and over this she had found herself continually pondering.

Alvez and one of the Ujiji dealers, discussing the future prospects of their business, mutually agreed in denouncing the efforts that were being made for the suppression of the slave-traffic, not only by the cruisers on the coast, but by the intrusion of travellers and missionaries into the interior.

Alvez averred that all these troublesome visitors ought to be exterminated forthwith.

“But kill one, and another crops up,” replied the dealer.

“Yes, their exaggerated reports bring up a swarm of them,” said Alvez.

It seemed a subject of bitter complaint that the markets of Nyangwé, Zanzibar, and the lake-district had been invaded by Speke and Grant and others, and although they congratulated each other that the western provinces had not yet been much persecuted, they confessed that now that the travelling epidemic had begun to rage, there was no telling how soon a lot of European and American busy-bodies might be among them. Thedépôts at Cassange and Bihe had both been visited, and although Kazonndé had hitherto been left quiet, there were rumours enough that the continent was to be tramped over from east to west. [Footnote: This extraordinary feat was, it is universally known, subsequently accomplished by Cameron.]

“And it may be,” continued Alvez, “that that missionary fellow, Livingstone, is already on his way to us; if he comes there can be but one result; there must be freedom for all the slaves in Kazonndé.”

“Freedom for the slaves in Kazonndé!” These were the words which in connexion with Dr. Livingstone’s name had arrested Mrs. Weldon’s attention, and who can wonder that she pondered them over and over again, and ventured to associate them with her own prospects?

Here was a ray of hope!

The mere mention of Livingstone’s name in association with this story seems to demand a brief survey of his career.

Born on the 19th of March, 1813, David Livingstone was the second of six children of a tradesman in the village of Blantyre, in Lanarkshire. After two years’ training in medicine and theology, he was sent out by the London Missionary Society, and landed at the Cape of Good Hope in 1840, with the intention of joining Moffat in South Africa. After exploring the country of the Bechuanas, he returned to Kuruman, and, having married Moffat’s daughter, proceeded in 1843 to found a mission in the Mabotsa valley.

After four years he removed to Kolobeng in the Bechuana district, 225 miles north of Kuruman, whence, in 1849, starting off with his wife, three children, and two friends, Mr. Oswell and Mr. Murray, he discovered Lake Ngami, and returned by descending the course of the Zouga.

The opposition of the natives had prevented his proceeding beyond Lake Ngami at his first visit, and he made

a second with no better success. In a third attempt, however, he wended his way northwards with his family and Mr. Oswell along the Chobé, an affluent of the Zambesi, and after a difficult journey at length reached the district of the Makalolos, of whom the chief, named Sebituané, joined him at Linyanté. The Zambesi itself was discovered at the end of June, 1851, and the doctor returned to the Cape for the purpose of sending his family to England.

His next project was to cross the continent obliquely from south to west, but in this expedition he had resolved that he would risk no life but his own.

Accompanied, therefore, by only a few natives, he started in the following June, and skirting the Kalahari desert entered Litoubarouba on the last day of the year; here he found the Bechuana district much ravaged by the Boers, the original Dutch colonists, who had formed the population of the Cape before it came into the possession of the English. After a fortnight’s stay, he proceeded into the heart of the district of the Bamangonatos, and travelled continuously until the 23rd of May, when he arrived at Linyanté, and was received with much honour by Sekeletoo, who had recently become sovereign of the Makalolos. A severe attack of fever detained the traveller here for a period, but he made good use of the enforced rest by studying the manners of the country, and became for the first time sensible of its terrible sufferings in consequence of the slave-trade.

Descending the course of the Chobé to the Zambesi, he next entered Naniele, and after visiting Katonga and Libonta, advanced to the point of confluence of the Leeba with the Zambesi, where he determined upon ascending the former as far as the Portuguese possessions in the west; it was an undertaking, however, that required considerable preparation, so that it was necessary for him to return to Linyanté.

On the 11th of November he again started. He was accompanied by twenty-seven Makalolos, and ascended the Leeba till, in the territory of the Balonda, he reached a spot where it received the waters of its tributary the Makondo.

It was the first time a white man had ever penetrated so far.

Proceeding on their way, they arrived at the residence of Shinté, the most powerful of the chieftains of the Balonda, by whom they were well received, and having met with equal kindness from Kateema, a ruler on the other side of the Leeba, they encamped, on the 20th of February, 1853, on the banks of Lake Dilolo.

Here it was that the real difficulty commenced; the arduous travelling, the attacks of the natives, and their exorbitant demands, the conspiracies of his own attendants and their desertions, would soon have caused any one of less energy to abandon his enterprise; but David Livingstone was not a man to be daunted; resolutely he persevered, and on the 4th of April reached the banks of the Coango, the stream that forms the frontier of the Portuguese possessions, and joins the Zaire on the north.

Six days later he passed through Cassangé. Here it was that Alvez had seen him. On the 31st of May he arrived at St. Paul de Loanda, having traversed the continent in about two years.

It was not long, however, before he was off again. Following the banks of the Coanza, the river which was to bring such trying experiences to Dick Sands and his party, he reached the Lombé, and having met numbers of slave-caravans on his way, again passed through Cassange, crossed the Coango, and reached the Zambesi at Kewawa. By the 8th of the following June he was again at Lake Dilolo, and descending the river, he re-entered Linyanté. Here he stayed till the 3rd of November, when he commenced his second great journey, which was to carry him completely across Africa from west to east.

After visiting the famed Victoria Falls, the intrepid explorer quitted the Zambesi, and took a north-easterly route. The transit of the territory of the Batokas, a people brutalized by the inhalation of hemp; a visit to Semalemboni the powerful chief of the district; the passage of the Kafoni; a visit to king Mbourouma; an inspection of the ruins of Zumbo, an old Portuguese town; a meeting with the chief Mpendé, at that time at war with the Portuguese, these were the principal events of this journey, and on the 22nd of April, Livingstone left Teté, and having descended the river as far as its delta, reached Quilimané, just four years after his last departure from the Cape. On the 12th of July he embarked for the Mauritius, and on the 22nd of December, 1856, he landed in England after an absence of sixteen years.

Loaded with honours by the Geographical Societies of London and Paris, brilliantly entertained by all ranks, it would have been no matter of surprise if he had surrendered himself to a well-earned repose; but no thought of permanent rest occurred to him, and on the 1st of March, 1858, accompanied by his brother Charles, Captain Bedingfield, Dr. Kirk, Dr. Miller, Mr. Thornton, and Mr. Baines, he started again, with the intention of exploring the basin of the Zambesi, and arrived in due time at the coast of Mozambique.

The party ascended the great river by the Kongone mouth; they were on board a small steamer named the “Ma-Robert,” and reached Teté on the 8th of September.

During the following year they investigated the lower course of the Zambesi, and its left affluent the Shiré, and having visited Lake Shirwa, they explored the territory of the Manganjas, and discovered Lake Nyassa. In August, 1860, they returned to the Victoria Falls.

Early in the following year, Bishop Mackenzie and his missionary staff arrived at the mouth of the Zambesi.

In March an exploration of the Rovouma was made on board the “Pioneer,” the exploring party returning afterwards to Lake Nyassa, where they remained a considerable time. The 30th of January, 1862, was signalized by the arrival of Mrs. Livingstone, and by the addition of another steamer, the "Lady Nyassa;" but the happiness of reunion was very transient; it was but a short time before the enthusiastic Bishop Mackenzie succumbed to the unhealthiness of the climate, and on the 27th of April Mrs. Livingstone expired in her husband's arms.

A second investigation of the Rovouma soon followed and at the end of November the doctor returned to the Zambesi, and reascended the Shire. In the spring of 1803 he lost his companion Mr. Thornton, and as his brother and Dr. Kirk were both much debilitated, he insisted upon their return to Europe, while he himself returned for the third time to Lake Nyassa, and completed the hydrographical survey which already he had begun.

A few months later found him once more at the mouth of the Zambesi; thence he crossed over to Zanzibar, and after five years' absence arrived in London, where he published his work, "The exploration of the Zambesi and its affluents."

Still unwearied and insatiable in his longings, he was back again in Zanzibar at the commencement of 1866, ready to begin his fourth journey, this time attended only by a few sepoys and negroes. Witnessing on his way some horrible scenes which were perpetrated as the result of the prosecution of the slave-trade, he proceeded to Mokalaosé on the shores of Lake Nyassa, where nearly all his attendants deserted him, and returned to Zanzibar with the report that he was dead.

Dr. Livingstone meanwhile was not only alive, but undaunted in his determination to visit the country between the two lakes Nyassa and Tanganyika. With none to guide him except a few natives, he crossed the Loangona, and in the following April discovered Lake Liemmba. Here he lay for a whole month hovering between life and death, but rallying a little he pushed on to the north shore of Lake Moero. Taking up his quarters at Cazembé for six weeks, he made two separate explorations of the lake, and then started farther northwards, intending to reach Ujiji, an important town upon Lake Tanganyika; overtaken, however, by floods, and again abandoned by his servants, he was obliged to retrace his steps. Six weeks afterwards he had made his way southwards to the great lake Bangweolo, whence once more he started towards Tanganyika.

This last effort was most trying, and the doctor had grown so weak that he was obliged to be carried, but he reached Ujiji, where he was gratified by finding some supplies that had been thoughtfully forwarded to him by the Oriental Society at Calcutta.

His great aim now was to ascend the lake, and reach the sources of the Nile. On the 21st of September he was at Bambarré, in the country of the cannibal Manyuema, upon the Lualaba, the river afterwards ascertained by Stanley to be the Upper Zaire or Congo. At Mamobela the doctor was ill for twenty-four days, tended only by three followers who continued faithful; but in July he made a vigorous effort, and although he was reduced to a skeleton, made his way back to Ujiji.

During this long time no tidings of Livingstone reached Europe, and many were the misgivings lest the rumours of his death were only too true. He was himself, too, almost despairing as to receiving any help. But help was closer at hand than he thought. On the 3rd of November, only eleven days after his return to Ujiji, some gun shots were heard within half a mile of the lake. The doctor went out to ascertain whence they proceeded, and had not gone far before a white man stood before him.

“You are Dr. Livingstone, I presume,” said the stranger, raising his cap.

“Yes, sir, I am Dr. Livingstone, and am happy to see you,” answered the doctor, smiling kindly.

The two shook each other warmly by the hand.

The new arrival was Henry Stanley, the correspondent of the *New York Herald*, who had been sent out by Mr. Bennett, the editor, in search of the great African explorer. On receiving his orders in October, 1870, without a day’s unnecessary delay he had embarked at Bombay for Zanzibar, and, after a journey involving considerable peril, had arrived safely at Ujiji.

Very soon the two travellers found themselves on the best of terms, and set out together on an excursion to the north of Tanganyika. They proceeded as far as Cape Magala, and decided that the chief outlet of the lake must be an affluent of the Lualaba, a conclusion that was subsequently confirmed by Cameron.

Towards the end of the year Stanley began to prepare to return. Livingstone accompanied him as far as Kwihara, and on the 3rd of the following March they parted.

“You have done for me what few men would venture to do; I am truly grateful,” said Livingstone.

Stanley could scarcely repress his tears as he expressed his hope that the doctor might be spared to return to his friends safe and well.

“Good-bye!” said Stanley, choked with emotion.

“Good-bye!” answered the veteran feebly.

Thus they parted, and in July, 1872, Stanley landed at Marseilles.

Again David Livingstone resumed his researches in the interior.

After remaining five months at Kwihara he gathered together a retinue consisting of his faithful followers Suzi, Chumah, Amoda, and Jacob Wainwright, and fifty-six men sent to him by Stanley, and lost no time in proceeding towards the south of Tanganyika. In the course of the ensuing month the caravan encountered some frightful storms, but succeeded in reaching Moura. There had previously been an extreme drought, which was now followed by the rainy season, which entailed the loss of many of the beasts of burden, in consequence of the bites of the tzetsy.

On the 24th of January they were at Chitounkwé, and in April, after rounding the east of Lake Bangweolo, they made their way towards the village of Chitambo. At this point it was that Livingstone had parted company with certain slave-dealers, who had carried the information to old Alvez that the missionary traveller would very likely proceed by way of Loanda to Kazonndé.

But on the 13th of June, the very day before Negoro reckoned on obtaining from Mrs. Weldon the letter which should be the means of securing him a hundred thousand dollars, tidings were circulated in the district that on the 1st of May Dr. Livingstone had breathed his last.

The report proved perfectly true. On the 29th of April the caravan had reached the village of Chitambo, the doctor so unwell that he was carried on a litter. The following night he was in great pain, and after repeatedly murmuring in a low voice, “Oh dear, oh dear!” he fell into a kind of stupor.

A short time afterwards he called up Suzi, and having asked for some medicine, told his attendant that he should not require anything more.

“You can go now.”

About four o’clock next morning, when an anxious visit was made to his room, the doctor was found kneeling by the bed-side, his head in his hands, in the attitude of prayer. Suzi touched him, but his forehead was icy with the coldness of death. He had died in the night.

His body was carried by those who loved him, and in spite of many obstacles was brought to Zanzibar, whence, nine months after his death, it was conveyed to England. On the 12th of April, 1874, it was interred in Westminster Abbey, counted worthy to be deposited amongst those whom the country most delights to honour.

CHAPTER XV.

AN EXCITING CHASE.

To say the truth, it was the very vaguest of hopes to which Mrs. Weldon had been clinging, yet it was not without some thrill of disappointment that she heard from the lips of old Alvez himself that Dr. Livingstone had died at a little village on Lake Bangweolo. There had appeared to be a sort of a link binding her to the civilized world, but it was now abruptly snapped, and nothing remained for her but to make what terms she could with the base and heartless Negoro.

On the 14th, the day appointed for the interview, he made his appearance at the hut, firmly resolved to make no abatement in the terms that he had proposed, Mrs. Weldon, on her part, being equally determined not to yield to the demand.

“There is only one condition,” she avowed, “upon which I will acquiesce. My husband shall not be required to come up the country here.”

Negoro hesitated; at length he said that he would agree to her husband being taken by ship to Mossamedes, a small port in the south of Angola, much frequented by slavers, whither also, at a date hereafter to be fixed, Alvez should send herself with Jack and Benedict; the stipulation was confirmed that the ransom should be 100,000 dollars, and it was further made part of the contract that Negoro should be allowed to depart as an honest man.

Mrs. Weldon felt she had gained an important point in thus sparing her husband the necessity of a journey to Kazonndé, and had no apprehensions about herself on her way to Mossamedes, knowing that it was to the interest of Alvez and Negoro alike to attend carefully to her wants.

Upon the terms of the covenant being thus arranged, Mrs. Weldon wrote such a letter to her husband as she knew would bring him with all speed to Mossamedes, but she left it entirely to Negoro to represent himself in whatever light he chose. Once in possession of the document, Negoro lost no time in starting on his errand. The very next morning, taking with him about twenty negroes, he set off towards the north, alleging to Alvez as his motive for taking that direction, that he was not only going to embark somewhere at the mouth of the Congo, but that he was anxious to keep as far as possible from the prison-houses of the Portuguese, with which already he had been involuntarily only too familiar.

After his departure, Mrs. Weldon resolved to make the best of her period of imprisonment, aware that it could hardly be less than four months before he would return. She had no desire to go beyond the precincts assigned her, even had the privilege been allowed her; but warned by Negoro that Hercules was still free, and might at any time attempt a rescue, Alvez had no thought of permitting her any unnecessary liberty. Her life therefore soon resumed its previous monotony.

The daily routine went on within the enclosure pretty much as in other parts of the town, the women all being employed in various labours for the benefit of their husbands and masters. The rice was pounded with wooden pestles; the maize was peeled and winnowed, previously to extracting the granulous substance for the drink which they call *mtyellé*; the sorghum had to be gathered in, the season of its ripening being marked by festive observances; there was a fragrant oil to be expressed from a kind of olive named the *mpafoo*; the cotton had to be spun on spindles, which were hardly less than a foot and a half in length; there was the bark of trees to be woven into textures for wearing; the manioc had to be dug up, and the cassava procured from its roots; and besides all this, there was the preparation of the soil for its future plantings, the usual productions of the country being the *moritsané* beans, growing in pods fifteen inches long upon stems twenty feet high, the *arachides*, from which they procure a serviceable oil, the *chilobé* pea, the blossoms of which are used to give a flavour to the insipid sorghum, cucumbers, of which the seeds are roasted as chestnuts, as well as the common crops of coffee, sugar, onions, guavas, and sesame.

To the women's lot, too, falls the manipulation of all the fermented drinks, the *malafoo*, made from bananas, the *pombé,* and various other liquors. Nor should the care of all the domestic animals be forgotten; the cows that will not allow themselves to be milked unless they can see their calf, or a stuffed representative of it; the short-horned heifers that not unfrequently have a hump; the goats that, like slaves, form part of the currency of the country; the pigs, the sheep, and the poultry.

The men, meanwhile, smoke their hemp or tobacco, hunt buffaloes or elephants, or are hired by the dealers to join in the slave-raids; the harvest of slaves, in fact, being a thing of as regular and periodic recurrence as the ingathering of the maize.

In her daily strolls, Mrs. Weldon would occasionally pause to watch the women, but they only responded to her notice by a long stare or by a hideous grimace; a kind of natural instinct made them hate a white skin, and they had no spark of commiseration for the stranger who had been brought among them; Halima, however, was a marked exception, she grew more and more devoted to her mistress, and by degrees, the two became able to exchange many sentences in the native dialect.

Jack generally accompanied his mother. Naturally enough he longed to get outside the enclosure, but still he found considerable amusement in watching the birds that built in a huge baobab that grew within; there were maraboos making their nests with twigs; there were scarlet-throated *souimangas* with nests like weaver-birds; widow birds that helped themselves liberally to the thatch of the huts; *calaos* with their tuneful song; grey parrots, with bright red tails, called *roufs* by the Manyuema, who apply the same name to their reigning chiefs; and insect-eating *drongos*, like grey linnets with large red beaks. Hundreds of butterflies flitted about, especially in the neighbourhood of the brooks; but these were more to the taste of Cousin Benedict than of little Jack; over and over again the child expressed his regret that he could not see over the walls, and more than ever he seemed to miss his friend Dick, who had taught him to climb a mast, and who he was sure would have fine fun with him in the branches of the trees, which were growing sometimes to the height of a hundred feet.

So long as the supply of insects did not fail, Benedict would have been contented to stay on without a murmur in his present quarters. True, without his glasses he worked at a disadvantage; but he had had the good fortune to discover a minute bee that forms its cells in the holes of worm-eaten wood, and a “sphex” that practises the craft of the cuckoo, and deposits its eggs in an abode not prepared by itself. Mosquitos abounded in swarms, and the worthy naturalist was so covered by their stings as to be hardly recognizable; but when Mrs. Weldon remonstrated with him for exposing himself so unnecessarily, he merely scratched the irritated places on his skin, and said —

“It is their instinct, you know; it is their instinct.”

On the 17th of June an adventure happened to him which was attended with unexpected consequences. It was about eleven o’clock in the morning. The insufferable heat had driven all the residents within the dépôt indoors, and not a native was to be seen in the streets of Kazonndé. Mrs. Weldon was dozing; Jack was fast asleep. Benedict himself, sorely against his will, for he heard the hum of many an insect in the sunshine, had been driven to the seclusion of his cabin, and was falling into an involuntary siesta.

Suddenly a buzz was heard, an insect’s wing vibrating some fifteen thousand beats a second!

“A hexapod!” cried Benedict, sitting up.

Short-sighted though he was, his hearing was acute, and his perception made him thoroughly convinced that he was in proximity to some giant specimen of its kind. Without moving from his seat he did his utmost to ascertain what it was; he was determined not to flinch from the sharpest of stings if only he could get the chance of capturing it. Presently he made out a large black speck flitting about in the few rays of daylight that were allowed to penetrate the hut. With bated breath he waited in eager expectation. The insect, after long hovering above him, finally settled on his head. A smile of satisfaction played about his lips as he felt it crawling lightly through his hair. Equally fearful of missing or injuring it, he restrained his first impulse to grasp it in his hand.

“I will wait a minute,” he thought; “perhaps it may creep down my nose; by squinting a little perhaps I shall be able to see it.”

For some moments hope alternated with fear. There sat Benedict with what he persuaded himself was some new African hexapod perched upon his head, and agitated by doubts as to the direction in which it would move. Instead of travelling in the way he reckoned along his nose, might it not crawl behind his ears or down his neck, or, worse than all, resume its flight in the air?

Fortune seemed inclined to favour him. After threading the entanglement of the naturalist’s hair the insect was felt to be descending his forehead. With a fortitude not unworthy of the Spartan who suffered his breast to be gnawed by a fox, nor of the Roman hero who plunged his hand into the red-hot coals, Benedict endured the tickling of the six small feet, and made not a motion that might frighten the creature into taking wing. After making repeated circuits of his forehead, it passed just between his eyebrows; there was a moment of deep suspense lest it should once more go upwards; but it soon began to move again; neither to the right nor to the left did it turn, but kept straight on over the furrows made by the constant rubbing of the spectacles, right along the arch of the cartilage till it reached the extreme tip of the nose. Like a couple of movable lenses, Benedict’s two eyes steadily turned themselves inwards till they were directed to the proper point.

“Good!” he whispered to himself.

He was exulting at the discovery that what he had been waiting for so patiently was a rare specimen of the tribe of the Cicindelidæ, peculiar to the districts of Southern Africa.

“A tuberous manticora!” he exclaimed.

The insect began to move again, and as it crawled down to the entrance of the nostrils the tickling sensation became too much for endurance, and Benedict sneezed. He made a sudden clutch, but of course he only caught his own nose. His vexation was very great, but he did not lose his composure; he knew that the manticora rarely flies very high, and that more frequently than not it simply crawls. Accordingly he groped about a long time on his hands and knees, and at last he found it basking in a ray of sunshine within a foot of him. His resolution was soon taken. He would not run the risk of crushing it by trying to catch it, but would make his observations on it as it crawled; and so with his nose close to the ground, like a dog upon the scent, he followed it on all fours, admiring it and examining it as it moved. Regardless of the heat he not only left the doorway of his hut, but continued creeping along till he reached the enclosing palisade.

At the foot of the fence the manticora, according to the habits of its kind, began to seek a subterranean retreat, and coming to the opening of a mole-track entered it at once. Benedict quite thought he had now lost sight of his prize altogether, but his surprise was very great when he found that the aperture was at least two feet wide, and that it led into a gallery which would admit his whole body. His momentary feeling of astonishment, however, gave way to his eagerness to follow up the hexapod, and he continued burrowing like a ferret.

Without knowing it, he actually passed under the palisading, and was now beyond it; — the mole-track, in fact, was a communication that had been made between the interior and exterior of the enclosure. Benedict had obtained his freedom, but so far from caring in the least for his liberty he continued totally absorbed in the pursuit upon which he had started. He watched with unflagging vigilance, and it was only when the hexapod expanded its wings as if for flight that he prepared to imprison it in the hollow of his hand.

All at once, however, he was taken by surprise; a whizz and a whirr and the prize was gone!

Disappointed rather than despairing, Benedict raised himself up, and looked about him. Before long the old black speck was again flitting just above his head. There was every reason to hope that it would ultimately settle once more upon the ground, but on this side of the palisade there was a large forest a little way to the north, and if the manticora were to get into its mass of foliage all hope of keeping it in view would be lost, and there would be an end of the proud expectation of storing it in the tin box, to be preserved among the rest of the entomological wonders.

After a while the insect descended to the earth; it did not rest at all, nor crawl as it had done previously, but made its advance by a series of rapid hops. This made the chase for the near-sighted naturalist a matter of great difficulty; he put his face as close to the ground as possible, and kept starting off and stopping and starting off again with his arms extended like a swimming frog, continually making frantic clutches to find as continually that his grasp had been eluded.

After running till he was out of breath, and scratching his hands against the brushwood and the foliage till they bled, he had the mortification of feeling the insect dash past his ear with what might be a defiant buzz, and finding that it was out of sight for ever.

“Ungrateful hexapod!” he cried in dismay, “I intended to honour you with the best place in my collection.”

He knew not what to do, and could not reconcile himself to the loss; he reproached himself for not having secured the manticora at the first; he gazed at the forest till he persuaded himself he could see the coveted insect in the distance, and, seized with a frantic impulse, exclaimed, —

“I will have you yet!”

He did not even yet realize the fact that he had gained his liberty, but heedless of everything except his own burning disappointment, and at the risk of being attacked by natives or beset by wild beasts, he was just on the very point of dashing into the heart of the wood when suddenly a giant form confronted him, as suddenly a giant hand seized him by the nape of his neck, and, lifting him up, carried him off with apparently as little exertion as he could himself have carried off his hexapod!

For that day at least Cousin Benedict had lost his chance of being the happiest of entomologists.

CHAPTER XVI.

A MAGICIAN.

On finding that Cousin Benedict did not return to his quarters at the proper hour, Mrs. Weldon began to feel uneasy. She could not imagine what had become of him; his tin box with its contents were safe in his hut, and even if a chance of escape had been offered him, she knew that nothing would have induced him voluntarily to abandon his treasures. She enlisted the services of Halima, and spent the remainder of the day in searching for him, until at last she felt herself driven to the conviction that he must have been confined by the orders of Alvez himself; for what reason she could not divine, as Benedict had undoubtedly been included in the number of prisoners to be delivered to Mr. Weldon for the stipulated ransom.

But the rage of the trader when he heard of the escape of the captive was an ample proof that he had had no hand in his disappearance. A rigorous search was instituted in every direction, which resulted in the discovery of the mole-track. Here beyond a question was the passage through which the fly-catcher had found his way.

“Idiot! fool! rascal!” muttered Alvez, full of rage at the prospect of losing a portion of the redemption-money; “if ever I get hold of him, he shall pay dearly for this freak.”

The opening was at once blocked up, the woods were scoured all round for a considerable distance, but no trace of Benedict was to be found. Mrs. Weldon was bitterly grieved and much overcome, but she had no alternative except to resign herself as best she could to the loss of her unfortunate relation; there was a tinge of bitterness in her anxiety, for she could not help being irritated at the recklessness with which he had withdrawn himself from the reach of her protection.

Meanwhile the weather for the time of year underwent a very unusual change. Although the rainy season is ordinarily reckoned to terminate about the end of April, the sky had suddenly become overcast in the middle of June, rain had recommenced falling, and the downpour had been so heavy and continuous that all the ground was thoroughly sodden. To Mrs. Weldon personally this incessant rainfall brought no other inconvenience beyond depriving her of her daily exercise, but to the natives in general it was a very serious calamity.

The ripening crops in the low-lying districts were completely flooded, and the inhabitants feared that they would be reduced to the greatest extremities; all agricultural pursuits had come to a standstill, and neither the queen nor her ministers could devise any expedient to avert or mitigate the misfortune. They resolved at last to have recourse to the magicians, not those who are called in request to heal diseases or to procure good luck, but to the *mganga*, sorcerers of a superior order, who are credited with the faculty of invoking or dispelling rain.

But it was all to no purpose. It was in vain that the *mganga* monotoned their incantations, flourished their rattles, jingled their bells, and exhibited their amulets; it was equally without avail that they rolled up their balls of dirt and spat in the faces of all the courtiers: the pitiless rain continued to descend, and the malign influences that were ruling the clouds refused to be propitiated.

The prospect seemed to become more and more hopeless, when the report was brought to Moena that there was a most wonderful *mganga* resident in the north of Angola. He had never been seen in this part of the country, but fame declared him to be a magician of the very highest order. Application, without delay, should be made to him; he surely would be able to stay the rain.

Early in the morning of the 25th a great tinkling of bells announced the magician’s arrival at Kazonndé. The natives poured out to meet him on his way to the *chitoka*, their minds being already predisposed in his favour by a moderation of the downpour, and by sundry indications of a coming change of wind.

The ordinary practice of the professors of the magical art is to perambulate the villages in parties of three or four, accompanied by a considerable number of acolytes and assistants. In this case the *mganga* came entirely alone. He was a pure negro of most imposing stature, more than six feet high, and broad in proportion. All over his chest was a fantastic pattern traced in pipe-clay, the lower portion of his body being covered with a flowing skirt of woven grass, so long that it made a train. Round his neck hung a string of birds’ skulls, upon his head he wore a leathern helmet ornamented with pearls and plumes, and about his waist was a copper girdle, to which was attached bells that tinkled like the harness of a Spanish mule. The only instrument indicating his art was a basket he carried made of a calabash containing shells, amulets, little wooden idols and other fetishes, together with what was more important than all, a large number of those balls of dung, without which no African ceremony of divination could ever be complete.

One peculiarity was soon discovered by the crowd; the *mganga* was dumb, and could utter only one low, guttural sound, which was quite unintelligible; this was a circumstance, however, that seemed only to augment their faith in his powers.

With a stately strut that brought all his tinkling paraphernalia into full play, the magician proceeded to make the circuit of the market-place. The natives followed in a troop behind, endeavouring, like monkeys, to imitate his every movement. He turned into the main thoroughfare, and began to make his way direct to the royal residence, whence, as soon as the queen heard of his approach, she advanced to meet him. On seeing her, the *mganga* bowed to the very dust; then, rearing himself to his full height, he

pointed aloft, and by the significance of his animated gestures indicated that, although the fleeting clouds were now going to the west, they would soon return eastwards with a rotatory motion irresistibly strong.

All at once, to the surprise of the beholders, he stooped and took the hand of the mighty sovereign of Kazonndé.

The courtiers hurried forward to check the unprecedented breach of etiquette, but the foremost was driven back with so staggering a blow that the others deemed it prudent to retire.

The queen herself appeared not to take the least offence at the familiarity; she bestowed a hideous grimace, which was meant for a smile, upon her illustrious visitor, who, still keeping his hold upon her hand, started off walking at a rapid pace, the crowd following in the rear. He directed his steps towards the residence of Alvez, and finding the door closed, applied his strong shoulder to it with such effect, that it fell bodily to the ground, and the passive sovereign stood within the limits of the enclosure. The trader was about to summon his slaves and soldiers to repel the unceremonious invasion of his premises, but on beholding the queen all stepped back with respectful reverence.

Before Alvez had time to ask the sovereign to what cause he was indebted for the honour of her visit, the magician had cleared a wide space around him, and had once again commenced his performances. Brandishing his arms wildly he pointed to the clouds as though he were arresting them in their course; he inflated his huge cheeks and blew with all his strength, as if resolved to disperse the heavy masses, and then stretching himself to his full height, he appeared to clutch them in his giant grasp.

Deeply impressed, the superstitious Moena was half beside herself with excitement; she uttered loud cries and involuntarily began herself to imitate every one of the *mganga's* gestures. The entire crowd joined in, and very soon the low guttural note of the sorcerer was lost, totally drowned in the turmoil of howls, shrieks, and discordant songs.

To the chagrin, however, both of the queen and her subjects, there was not the slightest intimation that the clouds above were going to permit a rift by which the rays of the tropical sun could find a passage. On the contrary, the tokens of improvement in the weather, which had been observed in the early morning, had all disappeared, the atmosphere was darker than ever, and heavy storm-drops began to patter down.

A reaction was beginning to take place in the enthusiasm of the crowd. After all, then, it would seem that this famous *mganga* from whom so much had been expected, had no power above the rest. Disappointment every moment grew more keen, and soon there was a positive display of irritation. The natives pressed around him with closed fists and threatening gestures. A frown gathered on Moena's face, and her lips opened with muttered words clear enough to make the magician understand that his ears were in jeopardy. His position was evidently becoming critical.

An unexpected incident suddenly altered the aspect of affairs.

The *mganga* was quite tall enough to see over the heads of the crowd, and all at once pausing in the midst of his incantations, he pointed to a distant corner of the enclosure. All eyes were instantly turned in that direction. Mrs. Weldon and Jack had just come out of their hut, and catching sight of them, the *mganga* stood with his left hand pointing towards them and his right upstretched towards the heavens.

Intuitively the multitude comprehended his meaning. Here was the explanation of the mystery. It was this white woman with her child that had been the cause of all their misery, it was owing to them that the clouds had poured down this desolating rain. With yells of execration the whole mob made a dash towards the unfortunate lady who, pale with fright and rigid as a statue, stood clasping her boy to her side. The *mganga*, however, anticipated them. Having pushed his way through the infuriated throng, he seized the child and held him high in the air, as though about to hurl him to the ground, a peace-offering to the offended gods.

Mrs. Weldon gave a piercing shriek, and fell senseless to the earth.

Lifting her up, and making a sign to the queen that all would now be right, the *mganga* retreated carrying both mother and child through the crowd, who retreated before him and made an open passage.

Alvez now felt that it was time to interfere. Already one of his prisoners had eluded his vigilance, and was he now to see two more carried off before his eyes? was he to lose the whole of the expected ransom? no, rather would he see Kazonndé destroyed by a deluge, than resign his chance of securing so good a prize. Darting forwards he attempted to obstruct the magician’s progress; but public opinion was against him; at a sign from the queen, he was seized by the guards, and he was aware well enough of what would be the immediate consequence of resistance. He deemed it prudent to desist from his obstruction, but in his heart he bitterly cursed the stupid credulity of the natives for supposing that the blood of the white woman or the child could avail to put an end to the disasters they were suffering.

Making the natives understand that they were not to follow him, the magician carried off his burden as easily as a lion would carry a couple of kids. The lady was still unconscious, and Jack was all but paralyzed with fright. Once free of the enclosure the *mganga* crossed the town, entered the forest, and after a march of three miles, during which he did not slacken his pace for a moment, reached the bank of a river which was flowing towards the north.

Here in the cavity of a rock, concealed by drooping foliage, a canoe was moored, covered with a kind of thatched roof; on this the magician deposited his burden, and sending the light craft into mid-stream with a vigorous kick, exclaimed in a cheery voice, —

“Here they are, captain! both of them! Mrs. Weldon and Master Jack, both! We will be off now! I hope those idiots of Kazonndé will have plenty more rain yet! Off we go!”

CHAPTER XVII.

DRIFTING DOWN THE STREAM.

“Off we go!” It was the voice of Hercules addressing Dick Sands, who, frightfully debilitated by recent sufferings, was leaning against Cousin Benedict for support. Dingo was lying at his feet.

Mrs. Weldon gradually recovered her consciousness. Looking around her in amazement she caught sight of Dick.

“Dick, is it you?” she muttered feebly.

The lad with some difficulty arose, and took her hand in his, while Jack overwhelmed him with kisses.

“And who would have thought it was you, Hercules, that carried us away?” said the child; “I did not know you a bit; you were so dreadfully ugly.”

“I was a sort of a devil, you know, Master Jack,” Hercules answered; “and the devil is not particularly handsome;” and he began rubbing his chest vigorously to get rid of the white pattern with which he had adorned it.

Mrs. Weldon held out her hand to him with a grateful smile.

“Yes, Mrs. Weldon, he has saved you, and although he does not own it, he has saved me too,” said Dick.

“Saved!” repeated Hercules, “you must not talk about safety, for you are not saved yet.”

And pointing to Benedict, he continued, —

“That’s where your thanks are due; unless he had come and informed me all about you and where you were, I should have known nothing, and should have been powerless to aid you.”

It was now five days since he had fallen in with the entomologist as he was chasing the manticora, and unceremoniously had carried him off.

As the canoe drifted rapidly along the stream, Hercules briefly related his adventures since his escape from the encampment on the Coanza. He described how he had followed the kitanda which was conveying Mrs. Weldon; how in the course of his march he had found Dingo badly wounded; how he and the dog together had reached the neighbourhood of Kazonndé, and how he had contrived to send a note to Dick, intending to inform him of Mrs. Weldon’s destination. Then he went on to say that since his unexpected *rencontre* with Cousin Benedict he had watched very closely for a chance to get into the guardeddépôt, but until now had entirely failed. A celebrated *mganga* had been passing on his way through the forest, and he had resolved upon impersonating him as a means of gaining the admittance he wanted. His strength made the undertaking sufficiently easy; and having stripped the magician of his paraphernalia, and bound him securely to a tree, he painted his own body with a pattern like that which he observed on his victim’s chest, and having attired himself with the magical garments was quite equipped to impose upon the credulous natives. The result of his stratagem they had all that day witnessed.

He had hardly finished his account of himself when Mrs. Weldon, smiling at his success, turned to Dick.

“And how, all this time, my dear boy, has it fared with you?” she asked.

Dick said, —

“I remember very little to tell you. I recollect being fastened to a stake in the river-bed and the water rising and rising till it was above my head. My last thoughts were about yourself and Jack. Then everything became a blank, and I knew nothing more until I found myself amongst the papyrus on the river-bank, with Hercules tending me like a nurse.”

“You see I am the right sort of *mganga*” interposed Hercules; “I am a doctor as well as a conjurer.”

“But tell me, Hercules, how did you save him?”

“Oh, it was not a difficult matter by any means,” answered Hercules modestly; “it was dark, you know, so that at the proper moment it was quite possible to wade in amongst the poor wretches at the bottom of the trench, and to wrench the stake from its socket. Anybody could have done it. Cousin Benedict could have done it. Dingo, too, might have done it. Perhaps, after all, it was Dingo that did it.”

“No, no, Hercules, that won’t do,” cried Jack; “besides, look, Dingo is shaking his head; he is telling you he didn’t do it.”

“Dingo must not tell tales, Master Jack,” said Hercules, laughing.

But, nevertheless, although the brave fellow’s modesty prompted him to conceal it, it was clear that he had accomplished a daring feat, of which few would have ventured to incur the risk.

Inquiry was next made after Tom, Bat, Actæon, and Austin. His countenance fell, and large tears gathered in his eyes as Hercules told how he had seen them pass through the forest in a slave-caravan. They were gone; he feared they were gone for ever.

Mrs. Weldon tried to console him with the hope that they might still be spared to meet again some day; but he shook his head mournfully. She then communicated to Dick the terms of the compact that had been entered into for her own release, and observed that under the circumstances it might really have been more prudent for her to remain in Kazonndé.

“Then I have made a mistake; I have been an idiot, in bringing you away,” said Hercules, ever ready to depreciate his own actions.

“No,” said Dick; “you have made no mistake; you could not have done better; those rascals, ten chances to one, will only get Mr. Weldon into some trap. We must get to Mossamedes before Negoro arrives; once there, we shall find that the Portuguese authorities will lend us their protection, and when old Alvez arrives to claim his 100,000 dollars — ”

“He shall receive a good thrashing for his pains,” said Hercules, finishing Dick’s sentence, and chuckling heartily at the prospect.

It was agreed on all hands that it was most important that Negoro’s arrival at Mossamedes should be forestalled. The plan which Dick had so long contemplated of reaching the coast by descending some river seemed now in a fair way of being accomplished, and from the northerly direction in which they were proceeding it was quite probable that they would ultimately reach the Zaire, and in that case not actually arrive at S. Paul de Loanda; but that would be immaterial, as they would be sure of finding help anywhere in the colonies of Lower Guinea.

On finding himself on the river-bank, Dick’s first thought had been to embark upon one of the floating islands that are continually to be seen upon the surface of the African streams, but it happened that Hercules during one of his rambles found a native boat that had run adrift. It was just the discovery that suited their need. It was one of the long, narrow canoes, thirty feet in length by three or four in breadth, that with a large number of paddles can be driven with immense velocity, but by the aid of a single scull can be safely guided down the current of a stream.

Dick was somewhat afraid that, to elude observation, it would be necessary to proceed only by night, but as the loss of twelve hours out of the twenty-four would double the length of the voyage, he devised the plan of covering the canoe with a roof of long grass, supported by a horizontal pole from stem to stern, and this not only afforded a shelter from the sun, but so effectually concealed the craft, rudder-scull and all, that the very birds mistook it for one of the natural islets, and red-beaked gulls, black *arringhas* and grey and white kingfishers would frequently alight upon it in search of food.

Though comparatively free from fatigue, the voyage must necessarily be long, and by no means free from danger, and the daily supply of provisions was not easy to procure. If fishing failed, Dick had the one gun which Hercules had carried away with him from the ant-hill, and as he was by no means a bad shot, he hoped to find plenty of game, either along the banks or by firing through a loophole in the thatch.

The rate of the current, as far as he could tell, was about two miles an hour, enough to carry them about fifty miles a day; it was a speed, however, that made it necessary for them to keep a sharp look-out for any rocks or submerged trunks of trees, as well as to be on their guard against rapids and cataracts.

Dick’s strength and spirits all revived at the delight of having Mrs. Weldon and Jack restored to him, and he assumed his post at the bow of the canoe, directing Hercules how to use the scull at the stern. A litter of soft grass was made for Mrs. Weldon, who spent most of her time lying thoughtfully in the shade. Cousin Benedict was very taciturn; he had not recovered the loss of the manticora, and frowned ever and again at Hercules, as if he had not yet forgiven him for stopping him in the chase. Jack, who had been told that he must not be noisy, amused himself by playing with Dingo.

The first two days passed without any special incident. The stock of provisions was quite enough for that time, so that there was no need to disembark, and Dick merely lay to for a few hours in the night to take a little necessary repose.

The stream nowhere exceeded 150 feet in breadth. The floating islands moved at the same pace as the canoe, and except from some unforeseen circumstance, there could be no apprehension of a collision. The banks were destitute of human inhabitants, but were richly clothed with wild plants, of which the blossoms were of the most gorgeous colours; the asclepiae, the gladiolus, the clematis, lilies, aloes, umbelliferae, arborescent ferns and fragrant shrubs, combining on either hand to make a border of surpassing beauty. Here and there the forest extended to the very shore, and copal-trees, acacias with their stiff foliage, bauhinias clothed with lichen, fig-trees with their masses of pendant roots, and other trees of splendid growth rose to the height of a hundred feet, forming a shade which the rays of the sun utterly failed to penetrate.

Occasionally a wreath of creepers would form an arch from shore to shore, and on the 27th, to Jack’s great delight, a group of monkeys was seen crossing one of these natural bridges, holding on most carefully by their tails, lest the aerial pathway should snap beneath their weight. These monkeys, belonging to a smaller kind of chimpanzee, which are known in Central Africa by the name of *sokos*, were hideous creatures with low foreheads, bright yellow faces, and long, upright ears; they herd in troops of about ten, bark like dogs, and are much dreaded by the natives on account of their alleged propensity to carry off young children; there is no telling what predatory designs they might have formed against Master Jack if they had spied him out, but Dick's artifice effectually screened him from their observation.

Twenty miles further on the canoe came to a sudden standstill.

"What's the matter now, captain?" cried Hercules from the stern.

"We have drifted on to a grass barrier, and there is no hope for it, we shall have to cut our way through," answered Dick.

"All right, I dare say we shall manage it," promptly replied Hercules, leaving his rudder to come in front.

The obstruction was formed by the interlacing of masses of the tough, glossy grass known by the name of *tikatika*, which, when compressed, affords a surface so compact and resisting that travellers have been known by means of it to cross rivers dry-footed. Splendid specimens of lotus plants had taken root amongst the vegetation.

As it was nearly dark, Hercules could leave the boat without much fear of detection, and so effectually did he wield his hatchet that, in two hours after the stoppage, the barrier was hewn asunder, and the light craft resumed the channel.

It must be owned that it was with a sense of reluctance that Benedict felt the boat was again beginning to move forward; the whole voyage appeared to him to be perfectly uninteresting and unnecessary; not a single insect had he observed since he left Kazonndé, and his most ardent wish was that he could return there and regain possession of his invaluable tin box. But an unlooked for gratification was in store for him.

Hercules, who had been his pupil long enough to have an eye for the kind of creature Benedict was ever trying to secure, on coming back from his exertions on the grass-barrier, brought a horrible-looking animal, and submitted it to the sullen entomologist.

“Is this of any use to you?”

The amateur lifted it up carefully, and having almost poked it into his near-sighted eyes, uttered a cry of delight, —

“Bravo, Hercules! you are making amends for your past mischief; it is splendid! it is unique!”

“Is it really very curious?” said Mrs. Weldon.

“Yes, indeed,” answered the enraptured naturalist; “it is really unique; it belongs to neither of the ten orders; it can be classed neither with the coleoptera, neuroptera, nor to the hymenoptera: if it had eight legs I should know how to classify it; I should place it amongst the second section of the arachnida; but it is a hexapod, a genuine hexapod; a spider with six legs; a grand discovery; it must be entered on the catalogue as ‘Hexapodes Benedictus.’” Once again mounted on his hobby, the worthy enthusiast continued to discourse with an unwonted vivacity to his indulgent ii* not over attentive audience.

Meanwhile the canoe was steadily threading its way over the dark waters, the silence of the night broken only by the rattle of the scales of some crocodiles, or by the snorting of hippopotamuses in the neighbourhood. Once the travellers were startled by a loud noise, such as might

proceed from some ponderous machinery in motion: it was caused by a troop of a hundred or more elephants that, after feasting through the day on the roots of the forest, had come to quench their thirst at the river-side.

But no danger was to be apprehended; lighted by the pale moon that rose over the tall trees, the canoe throughout the night pursued in safety its solitary voyage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN ANXIOUS VOYAGE.

Thus the canoe drifted on for a week, the forests that for many miles had skirted the river ultimately giving place to extensive jungles that stretched far away to the horizon. Destitute, fortunately for the travellers, of human inhabitants, the district abounded in a large variety of animal life; zebras, elands, caamas, sported on the bank, disappearing at night-fall before howling leopards and roaring lions.

It was Dick’s general custom, as he lay to for a while in the afternoon, to go ashore in search of food, and as the manioc, maize, and sorghum that were to be found were of a wild growth and consequently not fit for consumption, he was obliged to run the risk of using his gun. On the 4th of July he succeeded by a single shot in killing *pokoo*, a kind of antelope about five feet long, with annulated horns, a tawny skin dappled with bright spots, and a white belly. The venison proved excellent, and was roasted over a fire procured by the primitive method, practised, it is said, even by gorillas, of rubbing two sticks together.

In spite of these halts, and the time taken for the night’s rest, the distance accomplished by the 8th could not be estimated at less than a hundred miles. The river, augmented by only a few insignificant tributaries, had not materially increased in volume; its direction, however, had slightly changed more to the north-west. It afforded a very fair supply of fish, which were caught by lines made of the long stems of creepers furnished with thorns instead of fish-hooks, a considerable proportion being the delicate *sandjtkas*, which when dried may be transported to any climate; besides these there were the black *usakas*, the wide-headed *monndés*, and occasionally the little *dagalas*, resembling Thames whitebait.

Next day, Dick met with an adventure that put all his courage and composure to the test. He had noticed the horns of a caama projecting above the brushwood, and went ashore alone with the intention of securing it. He succeeded in getting tolerably close to it and fired, but he was terribly startled when a formidable creature bounded along some thirty paces ahead, and took possession of the prey he had just wounded.

It was a majestic lion, at least five feet in height, of the kind called *káramoo*, in distinction to the maneless species known as the *Nyassi-lion*. Before Dick had time to reload, the huge brute had caught sight of him, and without relaxing its hold upon the writhing antelope beneath its claws, glared upon him fiercely. Dick's presence of mind did not forsake him; flight he knew was not to be thought of; his only chance he felt intuitively would be by keeping perfectly still; and aware that the beast would be unlikely to give up a struggling prey for another that was motionless, he stood face to face with his foe, not venturing to move an eyelid. In a few minutes the lion's patience seemed to be exhausted; with a grand stateliness, it picked up the caama as easily as a dog would lift a hare, turned round, and lashing the bushes with its tail, disappeared in the jungle.

It took Dick some little time to recover himself sufficiently to return to the canoe. On arriving, he said nothing of the peril to which he had been exposed, but heartily congratulated himself that they had means of transport without making their way through jungles and forests.

As they advanced, they repeatedly came across evidences that the country had not been always, as now it was, utterly devoid oi population; more than once, they observed traces which betokened the former existence of villages; either some ruined palisades or the *débris* of some thatched huts, or some solitary sacred tree within an enclosure would indicate that the death of a chief had, according to custom, made a native tribe migrate to new quarters.

If natives were still dwelling in the district, as was just probable, they must have been living underground, only emerging at night like beasts of prey, from which they were only a grade removed.

Dick Sands had every reason to feel convinced that cannibalism had been practised in the neighbourhood, Three times, as he was wandering in the forest, he had come upon piles of ashes and half-charred human bones, the remnants, no doubt, of a ghastly meal, and although he mentioned nothing of what he had seen to Mrs. Weldon, he made up his mind to go ashore as seldom as possible, and as often as he found it absolutely necessary to go, he gave Hercules strict directions to push off into mid-stream at the very first intimation of danger.

A new cause of anxiety arose on the following evening, and made it necessary for them to take the most guarded measures of precaution. The river-bed had widened out into a kind of lagoon, and on the right side of this, built upon piles in the water, not only was there a collection of about thirty huts, but the fires gleaming under the thatch, made it evident that they were all inhabited. Unfortunately the only channel of the stream flowed close under the huts, the river elsewhere being so obstructed with rocks that navigation of any kind was impossible. Nothing was more probable than that the natives would have set their nets all across the piles, and if so, the canoe would be sure to be obstructed, and an alarm must inevitably be raised. Every caution seemed to be unavailing, because the canoe must follow the stream; however, in the lowest of whispers Dick ordered

Hercules to keep clear as much as he could of the worm-eaten timber. The night was not very dark, which was equally an advantage and a disadvantage, as while it permitted those on board to steer as they wanted, it did not prevent them from being seen.

The situation became more and more critical. About a hundred feet ahead, the channel was very contracted; two natives, gesticulating violently, were seen squatting on the pilework; a few moments more and their voices could be heard; it was obvious that they had seen the floating mass; apprehending that it was going to destroy their nets, they yelled aloud and shouted for assistance; instantly five or six negroes scrambled down the piles, and perched themselves upon the cross-beams.

On board the canoe the profoundest silence was maintained. Dick only signalled his directions to Hercules, without uttering a word, while Jack performed his part by holding Dingo’s mouth tightly closed, to stop the low growlings which the faithful watch-dog seemed resolved to make; but fortunately every sound was overpowered by the rushing of the stream and the clamour of the negroes, as they hurriedly drew in their nets. If they should raise them in time, all might be well, but if, on the other hand, the canoe should get entangled, the consequences could hardly fail to be disastrous. The current in its narrow channel was so strong that Dick was powerless either to modify his course or to slacken it.

Half a minute more, and the canoe was right under the woodwork, but the efforts of the natives had already elevated the nets so that the anticipated danger was happily escaped; but it chanced that in making its way through the obstacle, a large piece of the grass-thatch got detached. One of the negroes raised a sudden shout of alarm, and it seemed only too probable that he had caught a sight of the travellers below and was informing his companions. This apprehension, too, was only momentary; the current had changed almost to a rapid, and carried the canoe along with such velocity that the lacustrine village was quickly out of sight.

“Steer to the left!” cried Dick, finding that the riverbed had again become clear.

A stiff pull at the tiller made the craft fly in that direction.

Dick went to the stern, and scanned the moonlit waters. All was perfectly still, no canoe was in pursuit; perhaps the natives had not one to use; but certain it was that

when daylight dawned no vestige of an inhabitant was to be seen. Nevertheless Dick thought it prudent for a while to steer close under the shelter of the left-hand shore.

By the end of the next four days the aspect of the country had undergone a remarkable change, the jungle having given place to a desert as dreary as the Kalahari itself. The river appeared interminable, and it became a matter of serious consideration how to get a sufficiency of food. Fish was scarce, or at least hard to catch, and the arid soil provided no means of sustenance for antelopes, so that nothing was to be gained from the chase. Carnivorous animals also had quite disappeared, and the silence of the night was broken, not by the roar of wild beasts, but by the croaking of frogs in a discordant chorus, which Cameron has compared to the clanking of hammers and the grating of files in a ship-builder’s yard.

Far away both to the east and west the outlines of hills could be faintly discerned, but the shores on either hand were perfectly flat and devoid of trees. Euphorbias, it is true, grew in considerable numbers, but as they were only of the oil-producing species, and not the kind from which cassava or manioc is procured, they were useless in an alimentary point of view.

Dick was becoming more and more perplexed, when Hercules happened to mention that the natives often eat young fern-fronds and the pith of the papyrus, and that before now he had himself been reduced to the necessity of subsisting on nothing better.

“We must try them,” said Dick.

Both ferns and papyrus abounded on the banks, and a meal was prepared, the sweet soft pith of the papyrus being found very palatable. Jack in particular appeared to enjoy it extremely, but it was not in any way a satisfying diet.

Thanks to Cousin Benedict, a fresh variety in the matter of food was found on the following day. Since the discovery of the “Hexapodes Benedictus” he had recovered his spirits, and, having fastened his prize safely inside his hat, he wandered about, as often as he had a chance, in his favourite pursuit of insect-hunting. As he was rummaging in the long grass, he put up a bird which flew but a very short distance. Benedict recognized it by its peculiar note, and, seeing Dick take his gun to aim at it, exclaimed, —

“Don’t fire, don’t fire! that bird will be worth nothing for food among five of us.”

“It will be dinner enough for Jack,” said Dick, who, finding that the bird did not seem in a hurry to make its escape, delayed his shot for a moment, without intending to be diverted from his purpose of securing it.

“You mustn’t fire,” insisted Benedict, “it is an indicator; it will show you where there are lots of honey.”

Aware that a few pounds of honey would really be of more value than a little bird, Dick lowered his gun, and in company with the entomologist set off to follow the indicator, which seemed, by alternately flying and stopping, to be inviting them to come on, and they had but a little way to go before they observed several swarms of bees buzzing around some old stems hidden amongst the euphorbias. Notwithstanding Benedict’s remonstrances against depriving the bees of the fruits of their industry, Dick instantly set to work, and without remorse suffocated them by burning dry grass underneath. Having secured a good amount of honey, he left the comb to the indicator as its share of the booty, and went back with his companion to the canoe.

The honey was acceptable, but it did not do much to alleviate the cravings of hunger.

Next day it happened that they had just stopped for their accustomed rest, when they observed that an enormous swarm of grasshoppers had settled at the mouth of a creek close by. Two or three deep they covered the soil, myriads and myriads of them adhering to every shrub.

“The natives eat those grasshoppers,” said Benedict, “and like them too.”

The remark produced an instant effect; all hands were busied in collecting them, and a large supply was quickly gathered: the canoe might have been filled ten times over.

Grilled over a slow fire, they were found to be very palatable eating, and, spite of his qualms of conscience, Benedict himself made a hearty meal.

But although the gnawings of absolute hunger were thus assuaged, all the travellers began to long most anxiously for the voyage to come to an end. The mode of transit indeed might be less exhausting to the bodily powers than a land march would have been, but the excessive heat by day, the damp mists at night, and the incessant attacks of mosquitoes, all combined to render the passage extremely trying. There was no telling how long it would last, and Dick was equally uncertain whether it might end in a few days, or be protracted for a month. The direction which the stream was taking was itself a subject of perplexity.

A fresh surprise was now in store.

As Jack, a few mornings afterwards, was standing at the bow peering through an aperture in the grass canopy above him, he suddenly turned round and cried, —

“The sea! the sea!”

Dick started forwards, and looked eagerly in the same direction.

A large expanse of water was visible in the horizon, but after having surveyed it for a moment or two, he said, —

“No, Jack, it is not the sea, it is a great river; it is running west, and I suppose this river runs into it. Perhaps it is the Zaire.”

“Let us hope it is,” said Mrs. Weldon earnestly.

Most cordially did Dick Sands re-echo her words, being well aware that at the mouth of that river were Portuguese villages, where a refuge might assuredly be found.

For several succeeding days the canoe, still concealed by its covering, floated on the silvery surface of this new-found stream. On either side the banks became less arid, and there seemed everything to encourage the few survivors of the “Pilgrim” to believe that they would soon see the last of the perils and toils of their journey.

They were too sanguine. Towards three o’clock on the morning of the 18th, Dick, who was at his usual post at the bow, fancied he heard a dull rumbling towards the west. Mrs. Weldon, Jack, and Benedict were all asleep. Calling Hercules to him, he asked him whether he could not hear a strange noise. The night was perfectly calm, and not a breath of air was stirring. The negro listened attentively, and suddenly, his eyes sparkling with delight, exclaimed, —

“Yes, captain, I hear the sea!”

Dick shook his head and answered, —

“It is not the sea, Hercules.”

“Not the sea!” cried the negro, “then what can it be?”

“We must wait till daybreak,” replied Dick, “and meanwhile we shall have to keep a sharp look-out.”

Hercules returned to his place, but only to continue listening with ever-increasing curiosity. The rumbling perceptibly increased till it became a continued roar.

With scarcely any intervening twilight night passed into day. Just in front, scarcely more than half a mile ahead, a great mist was hanging over the river; it was not an ordinary fog, and when the sun rose, the light of the dawn caused a brilliant rainbow to arch itself from shore to shore.

In a voice so loud that it awoke Mrs. Weldon, Dick gave his order to Hercules to steer for the bank: —

“Quick, quick, Hercules! ashore! ashore! there are cataracts close ahead!”

And so it was. Within little more than a quarter of a mile the bed of the river sank abruptly some hundred feet, and the foaming waters rushed down in a magnificent fall with irresistible velocity. A few minutes more and the canoe must have been swallowed in the deep abyss.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN ATTACK.

The canoe inclined to the west readily enough; the fall in the river-bed was so sudden that the current remained quite unaffected by the cataract at a distance of three hundred yards.

On the bank were woods so dense that sunlight could not penetrate the shade. Dick was conscious of a sad misgiving when he looked at the character of the territory through which they must necessarily pass. It did not seem practicable by any means to convey the canoe below the falls.

As they neared the shore, Dingo became intensely agitated. At first Dick suspected that a wild beast or a native might be lurking in the papyrus, but it soon became obvious that the dog was excited by grief rather than by rage.

“Dingo is crying,” said Jack; “poor Dingo!” and the child laid his arms over the creature’s neck.

The dog, however, was too impatient to be caressed; bounding away, he sprang into the water, swam across the twenty feet that intervened between the shore, and disappeared in the grass.

In a few moments the boat had glided on to a carpet of confervas and other aquatic plants, starting a few kingfishers and some snow-white herons. Hercules moored it to the stump of a tree, and the travellers went ashore.

There was no pathway through the forest, only the

trampled moss showed that the place had been recently visited either by animals or men.

Dick took his gun and Hercules his hatchet, and they set out to search for Dingo. They had not far to go before they saw him with his nose close to the ground, manifestly following a scent; the animal raised his head for a moment, as if beckoning them to follow, and kept on till he reached an old sycamore-stump. Having called out to the rest of the party to join them, Dick made his way farther into the wood till he got up to Dingo, who was whining piteously at the entrance of a dilapidated hut.

The rest were not long in following, and they all entered the hut together. The floor was strewn with bones whitened by exposure.

“Some one has died here,” said Mrs. Weldon.

“Perhaps,” added Dick, as if struck by a sudden thought, “it was Dingo’s old master. Look at him! he is pointing with his paw.”

The portion of the sycamore-trunk which formed the farther side of the hut had been stripped of its bark, and upon the smooth wood were two great letters in dingy red almost effaced by time, but yet plain enough to be distinguished.

“S. V.” cried Dick, as he looked where the dog’s paw rested; “the same initials that Dingo has upon his collar. There can be no mistake. S. V.”

A small copper box, green with verdigris, caught his eye, and he picked it up. It was open, but contained a scrap of discoloured paper. The writing upon this consisted of a few sentences, of which only detached words could be made out, but they revealed the sad truth only too plainly.

“Robbed by Negoro — murdered — Dingo — help — Negoro guide — l20 miles from coast — December 3rd, l871 — write no more.

“S. VERNON.”

Here was the clue to a melancholy story. Samuel Vernon, under the guidance of Negoro, and taking with him his dog Dingo, had set out on an exploration of a district of Central Africa; he had taken a considerable quantity of money to procure the necessary supplies on the way, and this had excited the cupidity of his guide, who seized the opportunity, whilst they were encamping on the banks of the Congo, to assassinate his employer, and get possession of his property. Negoro, however, had not escaped; he had fallen into the hands of the Portuguese, by whom he was recognized as an agent of the slave-dealer Alvez, and condemned to spend the rest of his days in prison. He contrived after a while to make his escape, and, as has been already mentioned, found his way to New Zealand, whence he had returned by securing an engagement on board the “Pilgrim.” Between the time when he was attacked by Negoro and the moment of his death, Vernon had managed to write the few brief lines of which the fragments still survived, and to deposit the document in the box from which the money had been stolen, and by a last effort had traced out his initials in blood upon the naked wood which formed the wall of the hut. For many days Dingo watched beside his master, and throughout that time his eyes were resting so perpetually upon the two crimson letters in front of him, that mere instinct seemed to fasten them indelibly on his memory. Quitting his watch one day, perhaps to pacify his hunger, the dog wandered to the coast, where he was picked up by the captain of the “Waldeck,” afterwards to be transferred to the very ship on which his owner’s murderer had been engaged as cook.

All throughout this time poor Vernon’s bones had been bleaching in the African forest, and the first resolution of Dick and Mrs. Weldon was to give the residue of his remains some semblance of a decent burial. They were just proceeding to their task when Dingo gave a furious growl, and dashed out of the hut; another moment, and a terrible shriek made it evident that he was in conflict with some dread antagonist.

Hercules was quickly in pursuit, and the whole party followed in time to witness the giant hurl himself upon a man with whom already Dingo was in mortal combat.

The dog was griping the man by the throat, the man was lifting his cutlass high above the head of the dog.

That man was Negoro. The rascal, on getting his letter at Kazonndé, instead of embarking at once for America, had left his native escort for a while, and returned to the scene of his crime to secure the treasure which he had left buried at a little distance in a spot that he had marked. At this very moment he was in the act of digging up the gold he had concealed; some glistening coins scattered here and there betrayed his purpose; but in the midst of his labours he had been startled by the dashing forward of a dog; another instant, and the dog had fixed itself upon his throat, whilst he, in an agony of desperation, had drawn his cutlass and plunged it deep into the creature’s side.

Hercules came up at the very climax of the death-struggle.

“You villain! you accursed villain! I have you now!” he cried, about to seize hold of his victim.

But vengeance was already accomplished. Negoro gave no sign of life; death had overtaken him on the very scene of his guilt. Dingo, too, had received a mortal wound; he dragged himself back to the hut, lay down beside the remains of his master, and expired.

The sad task of burying Vernon’s bones, and laying his faithful dog beside them having been accomplished, the whole party was obliged to turn their thoughts to their own safety. Although Negoro was dead, it as very likely that the natives that he had taken with him were at no great distance, and would come to search for him.

A hurried conference was held as to what steps had best be taken. The few words traceable on the paper made them aware that they were on the banks of the Congo, and that they were still 120 miles from the coast. The fall just ahead was probably the cataract of Memo, but whatever it was, no doubt it effectually barred their farther progress by water. There seemed no alternative but that they should make their way by one bank or the other a mile or two below the waterfall, and there construct a raft on which once again they could drift down the stream. The question that pressed for immediate settlement was which bank it should be. Here, on the left bank, would be the greater risk of encountering the negro escort of Negoro, while as to the farther shore they could not tell what obstacles it might present.

Altogether Mrs. Weldon advocated trying the other side, but Dick insisted upon crossing first by himself to ascertain whether an advance by that route were really practicable.

“The river is only about 100 yards wide,” he urged; “I can soon get across. I shall leave Hercules to look after you all.”

Mrs. Weldon demurred for a while, but Dick seemed resolute, and as he promised to take his gun and not to attempt to land if he saw the least symptom of danger, she at last consented, but with so much reluctance that even after he had entered the canoe she said, —

“I think, Dick, it would be really better for us all to go together.”

“No, Mrs. Weldon, indeed, no; I am sure it is best for me to go alone; I shall be back in an hour.”

“If it must be so, it must,” said the lady.

“Keep a sharp look-out, Hercules!” cried the youth cheerily, as he pushed off from the land.

The strength of the current was by no means violent, but quite enough to make the direction of Dick’s course somewhat oblique. The roar of the cataract reverberated in his ears, and the spray, wafted by the westerly wind, brushed lightly past his face, and he shuddered as he felt how near they must have been to destruction if he had relaxed his watch throughout the night.

It took him hardly a quarter of an hour to reach the opposite bank, and he was just preparing to land when there arose a tremendous shout from about a dozen natives, who, rushing forward, began to tear away the canopy of grass with which the canoe was covered.

Dick’s horror was great. It would have been greater still if he had known that they were cannibals. They were the natives settled at the lacustrine village higher up the river. When the piece of thatch had been knocked off in passing the piles a glimpse had been caught of the passengers below, and aware that the cataract ahead must ultimately bring them to a standstill, the eager barbarians had followed them persistently day by day for the last eight days.

Now they thought they had secured their prize, but loud was their yell of disappointment when on stripping off the thatch they found only one person, and that a mere boy, standing beneath it.

Dick stood as calmly as he could at the bow, and pointed his gun towards the savages, who were sufficiently acquainted with the nature of fire-arms to make them afraid to attack him.

Mrs. Weldon with the others, in their eagerness to watch Dick’s movements, had remained standing upon the shore of the river, and at this instant were caught sight of by one of the natives, who pointed them out to his companions. A sudden impulse seized the whole of them, and they sprang into the canoe; there seemed to be a practised hand amongst them, which caught hold of the rudder-oar, and the little craft was quickly on its way back.

Although he gave up all as now well-nigh lost, Dick neither moved nor spoke. He had one lingering hope yet left. Was it not possible even now that by sacrificing his own life he could save the lives of those that were entrusted to him?

When the canoe had come near enough to the shore for his voice to be heard, he shouted with all his might, —

“Fly, Mrs. Weldon; fly, all of you; fly for your lives!”

But neither Mrs. Weldon nor Hercules stirred; they seemed rooted to the ground.

“Fly, fly, fly!” he continued shouting.

But though he knew they must hear him, yet he saw them make no effort to escape. He understood their meaning; of what avail was flight when the savages would be upon their track in a few minutes after?

A sudden thought crossed his mind. He raised his gun and fired at the man who was steering; the bullet shattered the rudder-scull into fragments.

The cannibals uttered a yell of terror. Deprived of guidance, the canoe was at the mercy of the current, and, borne along with increasing speed, was soon within a hundred feet of the cataract.

The anxious watchers on the bank instantly discerned Dick’s purpose, and understood that in order to save them he had formed the resolution of precipitating himself with the savages into the seething waters

Nothing could avail to arrest the swift descent. Mrs Weldon in an agony of despair waved her hands in a last sad farewell, Jack and Benedict seemed paralyzed, whilst Hercules involuntarily extended his great strong arm that was powerless to aid.

Suddenly the natives, impelled by a last frantic effort to reach the shore, plunged into the water, but then movement capsized the boat.

Face to face with death, Dick lost nothing of his indomitable presence of mind. Might not that light canoe, floating bottom upwards, be made the means for yet another grasp at life? The danger that threatened him was twofold, there was the risk of suffocation as well as the peril of being drowned; could not the inverted canoe be used for a kind of float at once to keep his head above water and to serve as a screen from the rushing air? He had some faint recollection of how it had been proved possible under some such conditions to descend in safety the falls of Niagara.

Quick as lightning he seized hold of the cross-bench of the canoe, and with his head out of water beneath the upturned keel, he was dashed down the furious and well-nigh perpendicular fall.

The craft sank deep into the abyss, but rose quickly again to the surface. Here was Dick’s chance, he was a good swimmer, and his life depended now upon his strength of arm.

It was a hard struggle, but he succeeded. In a quarter of an hour he had landed on the left hand bank, where he

was greeted with the joyful congratulations of his friends, who had hurried to the foot of the fall to assure themselves of his fate.

The cannibals had all disappeared in the surging waters. Unprotected in their fall, they had doubtless ceased to breathe before reaching the lowest depths of the cataract where their lifeless bodies would soon be dashed to pieces against the sharp rocks that were scattered along the lower course of the stream.

CHAPTER XX.

A HAPPY REUNION.

Two days after Dick’s marvellous deliverance the party had the good fortune to fall in with a caravan of honest Portuguese ivory-traders on their way to Emboma, at the mouth of the Congo. They rendered the fugitives every assistance, and thus enabled them to reach the coast without further discomfort.

This meeting with the caravan was a most fortunate occurrence, as any project of launching a raft upon the Zaire would have been quite impracticable, the river between the Ntemo and Yellala Falls being a continuous series of cataracts. Stanley counted as many as sixty-two, and it was hereabouts that that brave traveller sustained the last of thirty-one conflicts with the natives, escaping almost by a miracle from the Mbelo cataract.

Before the middle of August the party arrived at Emboma, where they were hospitably received by M. Motta Viega and Mr. Harrison. A steamer was just on the point of starting for the Isthmus of Panama; in this they took their passage, and in due time set foot once more upon American soil.

Forthwith a message was despatched to Mr. Weldon, apprising him of the return of the wife and child over whose loss he had mourned so long On the 25th the railroad deposited the travellers at San Francisco, the only thing to mar their happiness being the recollection that Tom and his partners were not with them to share their joy.

Mr. Weldon had every reason to congratulate himself that Negoro had failed to reach him. No doubt he would have been ready to sacrifice the bulk of his fortune, and without a moment's hesitation would have set out for the coast of Africa, but who could question that he would there have been exposed to the vilest treachery? He felt that to Dick Sands and to Hercules he owed a debt of gratitude that it would be impossible to repay; Dick assumed more than ever the place of an adopted son, whilst the brave negro was regarded as a true and faithful friend.

Cousin Benedict, it must be owned, failed to share for long the general joy. After giving Mr. Weldon a hasty shake of the hand, he hurried off to his private room, and resumed his studies almost as if they had never been interrupted. He set himself vigorously to work with the design of producing an elaborate treatise upon the "Hexapodes Benedictus" hitherto unknown to entomological research. Here in his private chamber spectacles and magnifying-glass were ready for his use, and he was now able for the first time with the aid of proper appliances to examine the unique production of Central Africa.

A shriek of horror and disappointment escaped his lips. The Hexapodes Benedictus was not a hexapod at all. It was a common spider. Hercules, in catching it, had unfortunately broken off its two front legs, and Benedict, almost blind as he was, had failed to detect the accident. His chagrin was most pitiable, the wonderful discovery that was to have exalted his name high in the annals of science belonged simply to the common order of the arachnidæ The blow to his aspirations was very heavy; it brought on a fit of illness from which it took him some time to recover.

For the next three years Dick was entrusted with the education of little Jack during the intervals he could spare from the prosecution of his own studies, into which he threw himself with an energy quickened by a kind of remorse.

“If only I had known what a seaman ought to know when I was left to myself on board the ‘Pilgrim,’” he would continually say, “what misery and suffering we might have been spared!”

So diligently did he apply himself to the technical branches of his profession that at the age of eighteen he received a special certificate of honour, and was at once raised to the rank of a captain in Mr. Weldon’s firm.

Thus by his industry and good conduct did the poor foundling of Sandy Hook rise to a post of distinction. In spite of his youth, he commanded universal respect; his native modesty and straightforwardness never failed him, and for his own part, he seemed to be unconscious of those fine traits in his character which had impelled him to deeds that made him little short of a hero.

His leisure moments, however, were often troubled by one source of sadness; he could never forget the four negroes for whose misfortunes he held himself by his own inexperience to be in a way responsible. Mrs. Weldon thoroughly shared his regret, and would have made many sacrifices to discover what had become of them. This anxiety was at length relieved.

Owing to the large correspondence of Mr. Weldon in almost every quarter of the world, it was discovered that the whole of them had been sold in one lot, and that they were now in Madagascar. Without listening for a moment to Dick’s proposal to apply all his savings to effect their liberation, Mr. Weldon set his own agents to negotiate for their freedom, and on the 15th of November, 1877, Tom, Bat, Actæon, and Austin awaited their welcome at the merchant’s door. It is needless to say how warm were the greetings they received.

Out of all the survivors of the “Pilgrim” that had been cast upon the fatal coast of Africa, old Nan alone was wanting to complete the number. Considering what they had all undergone, and the perils to which they had been exposed, it seemed little short of a miracle that she and poor Dingo should be the only victims.

High was the festivity that night in the house of the Californian merchant, and the toast, proposed at Mrs. Weldon’s request, that was received with the loudest acclamation was

“DICK SANDS, THE BOY CAPTAIN!”

THE END.

THE BEGUM’S FORTUNE

Translated by Agnes Kinloch Kingston and W. H. G. Kingston

This 1879 novel tells the story of two men, who receive news that they are part-inheritors to a vast fortune from an immensely rich princess - the begum of the title. One of the inheritors is a gentle French physician, Dr. Sarrasin, who has long been concerned with the unsanitary conditions of the European cities. He decides to use his share of the inheritance to establish a utopian model city which would be constructed and maintained with public health as the primary concern of its government.

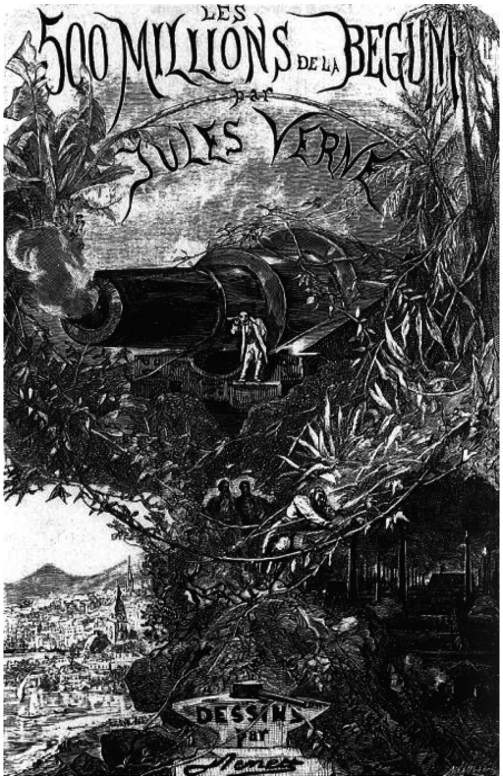
LES
500 MILLIONS DE LA BEGUM
par
JULES VERNE
DESSINS
par

An original title page

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CHAPTER 1

ENTER MR. SHARP

“Really these English newspapers are very well written,” the worthy doctor said to himself, as he leant back in a great leathern easy-chair.

All his life Dr. Sarrasin had been given to soliloquizing, one of the many results of his absence of mind.

He was a man of fifty, or thereabouts; his features were refined; clear lively eyes shone through his steel spectacles, and the expression of his countenance, although grave, was genial. He was one of those people: of whom one says at first sight, “That’s an honest man!”

Notwithstanding the early hour, and his rather casual attire, the doctor had already shaved and put on a white tie.

Scattered near him on the carpet and on a number of chairs, in the sitting-room of his Brighton hotel, lay copies of the Times, the Daily Telegraph, and the Daily News. It was not much later than ten o’clock, yet the doctor had been out for a walk in the town, visited an hospital, returned to his hotel, and read in the principal London journals the full report of a paper which he had read two evenings before at a meeting of the great International Hygienic Conference on the “Compte globules du sang,” or “blood-corpuscle computator,” an instrument which he had invented.

Before him stood a breakfast-tray covered with a snowy napkin, on which were placed a well served cutlet, a cup of hot fragrant tea, and a plate of that buttered toast which English cooks, thanks to English bakers, can make to perfection.

“Yes,” he repeated, “these journals are really admirably well written, there is no denying the fact. Here is the speech of the president, the reply by Doctor Cicogna of Naples, my own paper in full, all caught in the air so to speak, seized and photographed at once!

“Dr. Sarrasin of Douai rose and addressed the meeting. The honorable member spoke in French, and said, ‘My auditors will permit me to express myself in my own language, which I am sure they understand far better than I can speak theirs

“Five columns in small print!

“I cannot decide which reports it best, the Times or the Telegraph, each seems so exact and so detailed.”

Dr. Sarrasin had reached this point in his meditations, when one of the waiters of the establishment, a gentleman most correctly dressed in black, entered, and, presenting a card, inquired whether “Monsiou” was “at home” to a visitor.

This appellation of “Monsiou” is one which the English consider it necessary to bestow indiscriminately on every Frenchman — just as they would think it a breach of all the rules of civility should they fail to address an Italian as “Signor,” and a German as “Herr.” Perhaps on the whole the custom is a good one — it certainly has the advantage of at once specifying nationalities.

Considerably surprised to hear of a visitor in a country where he knew nobody, the doctor took the card, and read with increased perplexity the following address :

W. H. Sharp, Jnr.

Solicitor, 94 Southampton Row, London.

He knew that a “solicitor” meant what he should call an *“aooue,”* and signified a lawyer of the compound nature of attorney, procurator, and notary.

“What possible business can Mr. Sharp have with me?” thought the doctor. “Have I got into some scrape or other without knowing it? Are you sure this card is meant forme?” he asked.

“Oh yes, Monsiou.”

“Well, let the gentleman come in.”

A youngish man entered the room, and the doctor at once classed him in the great family of “death’s heads.” Thin dry lips, drawn back from long white teeth, hollow templebones, displayed beneath skin like parchment, the complexion of a mummy, and small grey eyes as sharp as needles, quite justified the title. The rest of the skeleton, from the heels to the occiput, was hidden from view beneath an ulster, of a large chequer pattern; his hand grasped a patent-leather bag.

This personage entered, bowing hastily, placed bag and hat on the ground, took a chair without waiting to be offered one, and opened his business by saying —

“William Henry Sharp, Junior, of the firm of Billows, Green, Sharp and Co. Have I the honour of speaking to Doctor Sarrasin?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Frangois Sarrasin?”

“That certainly is my name.”

“OfDouai?”

“I reside at Douai.”

“Your father’s name was Isidore Sarrasin?”

“It was so.”

“Then we can assume that he was Isidore Sarrasin.”

Mr. Sharp drew a note-book from his pocket, consulted it, and resumed —

“Isidore Sarrasin died at Paris in 1857, 6th Arrondissement, Rue Taranne, Number 54 — the Hotel des Ecoles, now demolished.”

“Perfectly correct,” said the doctor, more and more astonished. “But will you have the kindness to explain — ?”

“His mother’s name,” pursued the imperturbable Mr. Sharp, “was Julie Langevol, originally of Bar-le-Duc, daughter of Benedict Langevol, who lived in the alley Loriol, and died in 1812, as is shown by the municipal registers of the said town — these registers are a valuable institution, sir — highly valuable — hem — hem — and sister of Jean Jacques Langevol, drum-major in the 36th Light

“I assure you,” interrupted Doctor Sarrasin, taken aback at this intimate acquaintance with his genealogy, “that you are better informed on these points than I am myself. It is true that my grandmother’s family name was Langevol, and that is all I know about her.”

“About the year 1807 she left the town of Bar-le-Duc with your grandfather, Jean Sarrasin, whom she had married in 1799. They settled at Melun, where he worked as a tinsmith, and where, in 1811, Julie Langevol, Sarrasin’s wife, died, leaving only one child, Isidore Sar rasin, your father. From that time, up to the date of his death, discovered at Paris, the thread is lost.”

“I can supply it,” said the doctor, interested in spite of himself by this wonderful precision. “My grandfather settled in Paris for the sake of the education of his son, whom he destined to the medical profession. He died in 1832, at Palaiseau, near Versailles, where my father practiced as a physician, and where I was born in 1822.”

“You are my man,” resumed Mr. Sharp. “No brothers or sisters?”

“None. I was the only son; my mother died two years after my birth. Now, sir, will you tell me — ?” Mr. Sharp stood up.

“Rajah Bryah Jowahir Mothooranath,” he said, pronouncing the names with the respect shown by every Englishman to a title, “I am happy to have discovered you, and to be the first to congratulate you.”

“The man is crazy,” thought the doctor; “it is not at all unusual among these death’s heads.” The solicitor read this opinion in his eyes. “I am not mad in the slightest degree,” he said calmly. “You are at the present moment the sole known heir to the title of Rajah, which Jean Jacques Langevol — who became a naturalized British subject in 1819, succeeded to the property of his wife the Begum Gokool, and died in 1814, leaving only one son, an idiot, who died without issue in 1869 — was allowed to assume by the Governor-General of the province of Bengal.

“The value of the estate has risen during the last thirty years to about five million pounds sterling. It remained sequestered and under guardianship, almost the whole of the interest going to increase the capital, during the life of the imbecile son of Jean Jacques Langevol.

“In 1870 the value of the inheritance was given in round numbers as twenty-one million pounds sterling, or five hundred and twenty-five million francs. In fulfillment of an order of the law court of Agra, countersigned by that of Delhi, and confirmed by the Privy Council, the whole of the landed and personal property has been sold, and the sum realized has been placed in the Bank of England.

“The actual sum is five hundred and twenty-seven million francs, which you can withdraw by cheque as soon as you have established your identity in the Court of Chancery. And in the meantime I am authorized by Messrs. Trollop, Smith and Co. Bankers, to offer you advances up to any amount.”

Dr. Sarrasin sat petrified — for some minutes he could not utter a word; then, feeling that this fine story had no foundation in fact, he said quietly —

“After all, sir, where are the proofs of this, and how did you succeed in identifying me?”

“The proofs are here, sir,” replied Mr. Sharp, tapping on his shiny leather bag. “As to how I discovered you, that was quite simple: I have been searching for you for five years. It is the speciality of our firm to find heirs for the numerous fortunes which year by year are left in escheat in the British dominions.

“For five years the question of the inheritance of the Begum Gokool has exercised all our ingenuity and activity. We have made investigations in every direction and passed in review of hundreds of families of your name without finding that of Isidore Sarrasin. I was almost convinced that there was not another of the name in all France, when yesterday morning I read in the *Daily News* a report of the meeting of the Hygienic Conference, and observed that among the members was a Doctor Sarrasin, whom I had never heard of before.

“Referring at once to my notes, and to hundreds of papers on the subject of this estate, I ascertained with surprise that the town of Douai had entirely escaped out notice.

“With the conviction that I had got on the right scent, I took the train for Brighton, and when I saw you leaving the meeting all my doubts vanished. You are the living image of your great-uncle Langevol, of whom we possess a photograph taken from a portrait by the Indian painter Saranoni.”

Mr. Sharp took a photograph from his pocket-book and handed it to Dr. Sarrasin.

It represented a tall man with a magnificent beard, a crested turban, and a richly brocaded robe.

He was seated after the usual style of conventional portraits of generals in the army, appearing to be drawing up a plan of attack, while attentively watching the spectator.

In the background could be dimly discerned the smoke of battle and a charge of cavalry.

“A glance at these papers will inform you on this matter better than I can do,” continued Mr. Sharp; “I will leave them with you, and return in a couple of hours, if you will then permit me to take your orders.”

So saying, Mr. Sharp drew from the depths of his glazed bag seven or eight bundles of documents, some printed and some manuscript, placed them on the table, and backed out of the room, murmuring —

“I have the honour to wish the Rajah Bryah Jowahir Mothooranath a very good morning.”

Partly convinced, partly ridiculing the idea, the doctor took the papers and began to peruse them.

A rapid examination sufficed to show him the truth of Mr. Sharp’s statements, and to remove his doubts. Among the printed documents he read the following:

Evidence placed before the Right Honourable Lords of Her Majesty’s Privy Council on the 5th of January, 1870, touching the vacant succession of the Begum Gokool of Ragginahra, in Bengal. Points of the case.

The question concerns the rights of possession to certain landed estates, together with a variety of edifices, palaces, mercantile establishments, villages, personal properties, treasure, arms, etc. etc. forming the inheritance of the Begum Gokool of Ragginahra.

From evidence submitted to the civil tribunal of Agra, and to the Superior Court at Delhi, it appears that in 1819, the Begum Gokool, widow of Rajah Luckmissur, and possessed in her own right of considerable wealth, married a foreigner, of French origin, by name Jean Jacques Langevol.

This foreigner, after serving until 1815 in the French army as drum-major in the 36th Light Cavalry, embarked at Nantes, upon the disbandment of the army of the Loire, as supercargo of a merchant ship.

He reached Calcutta, passed into the interior, and speedily obtained the appointment of military instructor in the small native army which the Rajah Luckmissur was authorized to maintain. In this army he rose to be commander-in-chief, and shortly after the Rajah's death he obtained the hand of his widow.

In consideration of various important services rendered to the English residents at Agra by Jean Jacques Langevol, he was naturalized as a British subject, and the Governor-General of Bengal obtained for the husband of the Begum the title of Rajah of Bryah Jowahir

Mothooranath, which was the name of one of the most considerable of her estates.

The Begum died in 1839, leaving the whole of her wealth and property to Langevol, who survived her only two years.

Their only child was imbecile from his infancy, and was at once placed under guardians. The inheritance was carefully managed by trustees until his death, which occurred in 1869.

To this immense heritage there is no known heir. The courts of Agra and Delhi having ordered its sale by auction, on the application of the local government acting for the state, we have the honour to request from the Lords of the Privy Council a confirmation of their decision, etc. Here followed the signatures.

Copies of legal documents from Agra and Delhi, deeds of sale, an account of the efforts made in France to discover the next of kin to Langevol family, and a whole mass of imposing evidence of similar nature, left Dr. Sarrasin no room for doubt or hesitation.

Between him and the five hundred and twenty-seven millions of francs deposited in the strong rooms of the Bank of England there was but a step, to produce authentic certificates of certain births and deaths.

Such a stroke of fortune being enough to dazzle the imagination of the most sober-minded man, the good doctor could not contemplate it without some emotion. Yet this was of short duration, and he showed it only by striding for a few minutes up and down his apartment.

Quickly recovering his self-possession, he accused himself of weakness for yielding to this feverish agitation, threw himself into his chair, and remained for a time lost in profound reflection.

Then suddenly rising, he resumed his walk backwards and forwards, while his eyes shone with a pure light as though a noble and generous project burned within his breast. He seemed to welcome, to caress, to encourage, and finally to adopt, it.

A knock at the door. Mr. Sharp returned. “I ask your pardon a thousand times for my doubts as to the accuracy of your information,” said the doctor in a cordial tone. “You see me now perfectly convinced, and extremely obliged to you for the trouble you have taken.”

“Not at all-mere matter of business — in the way of my profession-nothing more,” replied Mr. Sharp. “May I venture to hope that the Rajah will remain our client?”

“That is understood. I place the whole affair in your hands. I only beg you to desist from giving me that absurd title.”

“Absurd! — a title worth twenty millions!” were the words Mr. Sharp would have uttered had he not known better; but he said, “Certainly, sir, if you wish it. As you please, sir. I am now going to return by train to London, where I shall await your orders.”

“May I keep these documents?” inquired the doctor.

“Most assuredly — we have kept copies.”

Dr. Sarrasin was left alone. He seated himself at his desk, took out a sheet of paper, and wrote as follows:

“Brighton, 28th October, 1871 “MYDEARCHILD,

“We have become possessed of an enormous fortune, a fortune absurdly colossal. Do not fancy that I have lost my senses, but read the printed papers enclosed in my letter. You will plainly see from these that I am proved to be the heir to a native title in India, and to a sum equivalent to many millions of francs at present deposited in the Bank of England.

“I can feel sure of the sentiments with which you, my dear Otto, will receive this news. You will perceive, as I do myself, the new duties which such wealth will impose upon us, and the danger we are in of being tempted to use it unwisely.

“It is only an hour since I was made aware of the fact, and already the overpowering sense of responsibility seems to lessen the pleasure it first gave me as I thought of you. This change may be fatal instead of fortunate to our destiny. In the modest position of pioneers of science we were content and happy in obscurity. Shall we continue to be so? I doubt it — unless — perhaps — (could I venture to mention an idea which has flashed across my brain?) unless this same fortune were to become in our hands a new and powerful engine of science, a mighty tool in the great work of civilization and progress! We will talk about this. Write to me — let me know very soon what impression this wonderful news makes on your mind — and let your mother hear of it from you. Sensible woman as she is, I am convinced she will receive it calmly. As to your sister, she is too young to have her head turned by anything of the sort. Besides that little head of hers is a very sober one, and even if she could comprehend all that this change in our position implies, I believe she would take it more quietly than any of us.

“Remember me cordially to Max; I associate him with all my schemes for the future.

“Your affectionate father,

“Francois Sarrasin.”

This letter, with the more important papers was addressed to Monsieur Octavius Sarrasin,

Student at the Upper School of Arts and Manufactures,

32 Rue du Roi de Sicile, Paris.

Then the doctor put on his overcoat, took his hat, and went to the Conference.

In a quarter of an hour the worthy man had forgotten all about his millions.

CHAPTER 2

FRIENDS

Dr. Sarrasin’s son Octavius was not exactly what one would call a dunce. He was neither a blockhead nor a genius, neither plain nor handsome, neither tall nor short, neither dark nor fair. His complexion was nut-brown, and he was altogether an average specimen of the middle class.

At school he had never taken a very high place, although he had occasionally won a prize. He had failed in his first examination for entering the College of Engineers, but a second attempt had admitted him, although with no great credit.

His character lacked decision — his mind was content with inaccuracies; he was one of those people who are satisfied to have a general idea of a subject, and who walk through life as though moonstruck. Such men float at the mercy of fate, like corks on the crests of the waves. They are driven to the equator or to the pole, according to whether the wind blows north or south. Chance alone decides their career.

Had Dr. Sarrasin altogether understood his son’s character, he might have hesitated to write such a letter; but the wisest man may be a blind father.

Fortunately for Octavius, during his school days he had come under the influence of an energetic nature, whose vigorous strength ruled him for his good, though somewhat tyrannically. He formed a close friendship with one of his companions, Max Bruckmann, a native of Alsace, a year younger than himself, but far his superior in physical, intellectual and moral vigour.

Max Bruckmann, left an orphan at the age of twelve, had inherited a small income, just sufficient to meet the expenses of his education. His life at college would have been dull indeed had he not passed the holidays at the home of Octavius, or Otto, as he called his friend.

The young Alsacian very soon felt himself one of Dr. Sarrasin’s family. Beneath his cold exterior lay a warm and sensitive nature, and he felt that he was bound for life to those who acted like a father and a mother to him.

He positively adored Dr. Sarrasin, his wife, and their pretty thoughtful little daughter; his heart expanded under the influence of their kindness, and he greatly wished to be useful to them by helping Jeannette, who loved her studies, to advance in them, and to cultivate her excellent abilities and firm, sensible mind, thoroughly, while he longed to lead Otto to become as good a man as his father. This latter task he well knew to be by no means so easy as the former, yet he was resolved to attain his double purpose.

Max Bruckmann was one of those trusty and gallant champions whom year by year Alsace sends forth to do battle on the great arena of life in Paris.

As a mere child he distinguished himself by the strength and flexibility of his muscles, as much as by the liveliness and intelligence of his mind. Inwardly full of life and courage, his outward frame exhibited strong muscular development rather than graceful proportions. At college he excelled in everything he attempted, whether in sports or in study. Reaping an annual harvest of prizes, he thought the year wasted if he failed to gain everything within his reach.

At twenty he was well-grown, robust, and in splendid condition; his movements were animated, and his well-shaped head showed unusual intelligence. When he entered college, in the same year as Octavius, he stood second, and he was resolved to be first when the time came to leave it.

Without his persistent energy to urge him forward, Octavius would never have entered the college at all. For a whole year Max had driven and goaded him to work, had simply made him succeed. He felt for this friend, with his weak and vacillating nature, a sentiment of kindly compassion such as a lion might be supposed to show for a little puppy. He liked to feel that he could nourish this parasitical plant from the superabundance of his own sap, and make it flourish and blossom beside him.

The war of 1870 broke out at the end of term. Max, full of patriotic grief at the fate which threatened Stras-burg and Alsace, hastened to enlist in the 31st Regiment of Light Infantry. Otto, as Max called him, and as we will for the future, at once followed his example.

Side by side the two friends, stationed in the outposts of Paris, went through the severe campaign of the siege.

At Champigny Max received a ball in his right arm, at Buzenval an epaulet on his left shoulder. Otto received neither wound nor decoration. This could not have been his fault, for he followed his friend everywhere, scarcely half a dozen yards in his rear. But those half-dozen yards made all the difference.

After the peace, the two friends resumed their studies, occupying modest apartments together near the college.

The recent misfortunes of France, her loss of Lorraine and Alsace, had matured the character of Max-he now felt and spoke like a man.

“It is the vocation of the youth of France,” said he, “to repair the errors of their fathers. Only by genuine hard work can this be done.”

Max rose every morning at five o’clock, and made Otto do the same. He kept him punctual at his classes, and never lost sight of him during the hours of recreation.

Their evenings were devoted to study, with occasional pauses for a pipe or a cup of coffee. At ten they retired to rest, their hearts content, their brains well filled.

A game at billiards now and then, a well-chosen play or concert, a ride to the forest of Verrieres, a country walk, and twice a week a lesson in fencing and boxing-these were their amusements.

From time to time Otto, casting curious eyes at the very questionable enjoyments of other students, would make feeble attempts at revolt, and talk of going to see Caesar Leroux, who was “studying law,” and passed most of his time at the beer-shop of St. Michel; but Max treated these fancies with such utter contempt and derision that they usually passed off quietly.

On the 29th of October, 1871, about seven o’clock in the evening, the two friends were seated, as was their wont side by side at the same table, with a shaded lamp between them.

Max was working out a problem in applied mathematics, regarding the stability of structures, and had thrown himself heart and soul into his subject.

Otto was devoting himself sedulously to something which he thought of much greater importance, the brewing of a pint of coffee. It was one of the few things in which he flattered himself he really excelled, perhaps because he had daily practice in it, thus escaping for a few minutes the troublesome business of squaring equations, which he considered that Max really did carry too far.

Drop by drop he let his boiling water pass through a thick layer of powdered mocha, and he ought to have been contented with such tranquil happiness; but he was annoyed at the devoted industry of Max, and felt an unconquerable desire to interrupt him.

“It would be a good idea to buy a percolator,” said he, suddenly. This ancient and solemn method of filtering is a disgrace to our modern civilization.”

“Then buy a percolator; it will perhaps keep you from wasting an hour every evening with your cooking,” replied Max, and he returned to his problem.

“The interior surface of a vault is an ellipsoid; let $A B C D$ be that principal ellipse which contains the two axes, $O A$ equal to a $O B$ equal to b, while the least axis $0\ 0'$ C” is vertical, and equal to c; then that which supports the elliptic vault — ” At this moment a rap sounded at the door. “A letter for Monsieur Octavius Sarrasin.” It may be imagined that this interruption was heartily welcomed by that young gentleman! “Ah! from my father-I see, it’s his handwriting. Come, this is something like a letter!” he exclaimed, as he weighed the packet of papers in his hand.

Max knew that the doctor was in England. He had been in Paris a week before on his way there, and had treated the two lads to a dinner fit for an emperor, at the Palais Royal; for although that once famous place was quite out of fashion, Dr. Sarrasin still regarded it as the centre of Parisian taste and refinement.

“Let me know what your father says about his Hygienic Conference,” said Max. “It was a good idea of his to attend that; French savants are inclined to be too exclusive.”

And Max returned to his problem.

“The exterior surface will be formed by another similar ellipsoid, having its centre at the point *O* on the vertical *O C*.

“Let FFFbe the foci of the three principal ellipses, then we find the auxiliary ellipse and hyperbola, of which the common axes are — ”

A shout from Otto made him look up.

“What is the matter?” he asked with some alarm, seeing his friend turn pale.

“Read this!” cried Otto, completely astonished by the news he had just received.

Max took the letter, read it all through, read it a second time, glanced over the documents enclosed, and said —

“This is strange!”

Then he filled his pipe, and lighted it methodically.

Otto watched him — all anxiety for his opinion.

“Do you think it can be true?” he exclaimed with a choking voice.

“True? — to be sure it is. Your father has too much common sense, his judgment is too good to let him ac- cept so well-authenticated a statement as this rashly. Besides, the proofs are there — it is in fact perfectly clear.”

The pipe was now thoroughly lighted.

Max resumed his work.

Otto sat with his arms hanging down, unable even to finish his coffee, far less to bring two ideas together.

He could not help speaking, just to convince himself that he was not

asleep.

“But, I say, Max, if this is true it is downright overwhelming! All these millions! why — it is an enormous fortune, mind you!”

Max looked up and nodded, “Yes, enormous is the word for it. Most likely there is not one such in France, a few in the United States, five or six in England — not above fifteen or twenty in the whole world.”

“And a title into the bargain!” resumed Otto. “A foreign title — what is it? let’s see — ’Rajah!’ Not that I ever cherished ambitions to have a title, but if it comes in one’s way, why it certainly sounds more imposing than plain San-asm.”

Max shot forth a puff of smoke, and uttered not a word. That puff of smoke distinctly said, “Pooh! Pooh!”

“Certainly,” continued Otto, “I should never have stuck a ‘de’ before my name, or assumed anything high-sounding as some people do; but to inherit a real genuine title, and to take my place among the great princes of India, without any possible chance of doubt or confusion!”

The pipe kept puffing, “Pooh! Pooh!”

“My dear fellow,” said Otto decidedly, “you may say what you like, but I can tell you there is ‘a good deal in blood’ as the English put it.”

He stopped short as he caught the mocking smile in Max’s eyes, and returned to the contemplation of his millions.

“Do you recollect, Max, how Bin6me, our old arithmetic master, used to impress upon us every year in his opening lesson, that five hundred million was a number beyond the grasp of one human mind unaided by the resource of written figures? You have to remember that a man who spent a franc every minute would take more than a thousand years to pay such a sum away. Well, it really is strange to think one has inherited five hundred million francs!”

“Five hundred million francs, is it?” cried Max with more interest than he had yet shown. “Shall I tell you the best thing you can do? Give it to France to pay off her ransom, she only requires ten times as much!”

“For mercy’s sake, don’t suggest such an idea to my father!” cried Otto, looking quite scared. “He really might adopt it. I can tell you that he’s already got some such notion in his head. Some investment he might certainly make, but at least let us have the interest!”

“Come, we shall have you turn out a financier after all!” said Max. “Something tells me, my poor Otto, that it would have been better for your father, with his upright, intelligent mind, if this great fortune had been more reasonable in size. I would rather see you with an income of five-and-twenty thousand to share with your good little sister than with this great mountain of gold!”

And Max went back to his work.

As for Otto, he could not settle to anything, and he fidgeted about the room till his friend began to get impatient and said —

“You had better go out and take a walk, Otto; it’s clear you are fit for nothing this evening!”

“You’re quite right! I really am not,” replied Otto, who joyfully caught at this excuse for leaving off work; seizing his hat, he clattered downstairs, and soon he was in the street.

Presently he stopped beneath a bright gaslight, and read his father’s letter again. He wanted to make sure he was not dreaming.

“Five hundred million francs!” he kept repeating. “That would be at least five-and-twenty millions a year. Why, if my father would only give me one million a year — say quarterly or half-yearly — as my allowance, how happy I should be! Money can do so much. I know 11 should make an excellent use of it. *I’m* not a fool — not a I bit of it! Didn’t I get into the upper school? And then j that title! I’m sure I could easily support the dignity of a title.”

As he walked along he looked into all the shops.

“I shall have a fine house, horses — one for Max of course. I’m getting rich myself and so must he. Just think! Five hundred millions! But somehow, now a I fortune comes, I feel as though I’d always expected it. j

Something whispered that I should not be poring over 1 books and plans all my life."

As Otto revolved these thoughts in his mind, he was passing along beneath the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli. Reaching the Champs Elysees, he turned up the Rue Royal, and reached the Boulevards.

The splendid shop-fronts, which he had formerly regarded with indifference as exhibiting things utterly out I of his reach, now attracted his lively attention, as he 1 reflected, with a thrill of delight, that at any moment he I could possess any of these treasures-or all of them.

"For me," said he to himself, "it is for me, that all this fine linen, all these exquisite soft cloths are manufactured; for me watchmakers construct timepieces and chronometers; for my pleasure the brilliant glories of theatre and opera shed their dazzling light, the violins scrape, the prima-donnas sing their enchanting strains. For me horse-dealers train thoroughbreds, and the Cafe Anglaise is lighted up. All Paris is mine! Everything is at my disposal! Travel! to be sure I shall travel. I shall go and visit my Indian possessions. As likely as not I shall buy a pagoda some day, priests and all, and the ivory idols into the bargain. I shall have elephants of my own! I shall have splendid guns and rifles and go tiger-shooting. And I must have a splendid boat. A boat indeed, what am I thinking about? a fine steam yacht, that's what I shall have — go where I choose, stop as often as I like. Talking of steam, I must give this news to my mother. Suppose I start for Douai? There is college to be considered. But then, what use is college to me now?

"But Max, I must let him know. I should send him a message; of course he will understand that in the present circumstances I'm in a hurry to see my mother and sister."

Otto entered an office, and sent a telegram to tell his friend that he had gone, and would return in a couple of days. Then, hailing a cab, he was driven to the terminus of the Northern Railway.

Settling himself in the corner of a carriage, he continued to follow out his dreaming fancies, until, at two o'clock in the morning, he arrived at Douai; he hurried to his father's house and rang the night bell so noisily, that not only the family but all the neighbours were aroused by the peal. Night-capped heads popped out at various windows.

"Somebody is very ill!-who can it be?" they wondered.

"The doctor is not at home!" the old servant screamed from her attic window.

"It's me! It's Otto! Come down and let me in, Fanchon!"

After a delay of ten minutes, Otto was admitted into the house. His mother and sister, hastily robed in dressing-gowns, came downstairs, all anxiety to learn what this visit meant.

When it was read aloud the doctor's letter explained the mystery.

At first Madame Sarrasin was completely dazzled. She embraced her son and daughter with tears of joy; she felt that the whole world was theirs, and that no misfortune could ever approach a family who owned hundreds of millions of francs.

Women, however, can adapt themselves to circumstances, and to sudden changes of fortune more readily than men.

When Madame Sarrasin had read her husband's letter again, she felt that this great sum was his, that he would take all the responsibility of deciding what she and her children were to do, and she speedily resumed her usual composure.

As for Jeannette, she was glad to see her mother and her brother so happy, but her childish imagination could picture no manner of life more delightful than the one she was leading in her quiet home, busy with her studies, and happy in the love of her parents.

She could not see why a few bundles of bank-notes should make any great change in her existence, and the prospect of it did not trouble her in the slightest degree.

At a very early age, Madame Sarrasin had married a man entirely absorbed in the studious occupation of an ardent scholar and philosopher: she loved her husband, and she respected his tastes, although she could not always comprehend them.

Incapable of sharing the pleasure which Dr. Sarrasin derived from study, she had sometimes felt herself lonely by the side of the enthusiastic man of science, and consequently she centred all her hopes and aspirations in her children. She pictured a brilliant and happy future for them.

Otto, she felt certain, was destined to do great things. From the time he took a place in the upper school she mentally regarded that modest and useful college for young engineers as the nursery of illustrious men. Her only trouble was that their limited means might possibly prove an obstacle, or at least a difficulty, in the way of her son's brilliant career, and might ultimately also affect her daughter's position in life. But now she understood the news conveyed in her husband’s letter, well enough to realize that these fears were needless, and her satisfaction was complete.

The mother and son spent most of the night in talking and making plans, while Jeannette, happy in the present and heedless of the future, was fast asleep in an armchair.

“You haven’t mentioned Max,” Madame Sarrasin said to her son. “Haven’t you shown him your father’s letter? What does *he* say about it?”

“Oh, you know what Max is!” answered Otto. “He is worse than a philosopher, he’s a stoic. I believe he’s afraid of the effect which so enormous a fortune will have upon us! I say upon us, but he isn’t afraid for my father himself, — he can rely upon his good sense and judgment, he says. But for you, mother, and for Jeannette, and more especially for me, he plainly said he should have preferred an income of a few thousands a year.”

“Perhaps Max is not far wrong,” replied Madame Sarrasin, looking at her son. ‘Tor some natures, the sudden ownership of great wealth is fraught with danger.”

Jeannette awoke, and heard her mother’s last words.

“Don’t you remember, mother,” said she, as, rubbing her eyes, she rose and turned towards her little bedroom, “Don’t you remember you told me one day that Max was always in the right. And I, for one, believe what our friend Max says.” And, kissing her mother, Jeannette withdrew.

CHAPTER 3

EFFECT OF AN ITEM OF NEWS

On entering the hall where the fourth meeting of the 1 Hygienic Conference was being held, Dr. Sarrasin realized that he was being received with unusual tokens of respect. The Right Honourable Lord Glandover, the president and chairman of the assembly, had not hitherto condescended to appear conscious of the French doctor’s existence.

This nobleman was an august personage, whose business it was to declare the Conference open or closed, and, using a list placed before him, to call upon the various speakers who were to address the meeting.

He habitually carried his right hand in the breast of his buttoned coat, not because it was injured and needed support, but only because it was the custom for English sculptors to represent statesmen in this inconvenient attitude.

His pale smooth face, marked with red blotches, and surmounted by a wig of light hair, brushed high on a forehead which clearly belonged to an empty pate, had an air of ludicrous stiffness and foolish gravity. Lord Glandover might have been made of wood or pasteboard, so stiff and unnatural were all his movements. His very eyes seemed to turn beneath their brows in intermittent jerks, like those of a doll or puppet.

The notice which Lord Glandover had hitherto bestowed on Dr. Sarrasin amounted to no more than a slight and patronizing bow; it seemed to say

— ”Good morning, my poor fellow; you are one of those who support your insignificant existence by making insignificant experiments with insignificant machines. How condescending I am to notice a being so far beneath me in the scale of creation! You may sit down, my poor fellow, within the shadow of my nobility."

But on the present occasion Lord Glandover smiled most graciously upon Dr. Sarrasin as he entered, and even carried his courtesy so far as to invite him by a sign to be seated at his right hand. The other members of the Conference all rose when he appeared on the platform.

Considerably astonished by so flattering a reception, Dr. Sarrasin took the chair he was offered, concluding that, on further consideration, his invention had been found of much greater importance than his scientific brethren had at first supposed. But this illusion vanished when Lord Glandover, leaning towards him with a spinal contortion of his body, whispered in his ear — "I understand that you are a man of very considerable property. They tell me you are worth twenty-one million pounds sterling."

This was said almost in a tone of reproach, as though his lordship felt aggrieved at having lightly treated the equivalent in flesh and blood of *so* vast a sum of money.

His look and tone seemed to say —

"Why wasn't I told about this? It really is most unfair to expose one to the awkwardness of making such mistakes!"

"Dr. Sarrasin, who could not in conscience have said he "was worth" a penny more than he had been at the last meeting, was wondering how the news could have become known so quickly, when Dr. Ovidius of Berlin, who sat next him, said with a false and faint smile —

“Why, Sarrasin, you are as great a man as any of the Rothschilds! — so the *Daily Telegraph* makes out. Let me congratulate you.”

He handed the doctor a copy of Thursday’s paper. Among the items of news was to be seen the following paragraph, the composition of which plainly revealed its authorship.

“a monster Heritage — The legitimate heir to the fortune of the late Begum Gokool has at length been discovered, thanks to the indefatigable researches of Messrs. Billows, Green and Sharp, solicitors, 94 Southampton Row, London.

“The fortunate possessor of twenty-one million pounds sterling, now deposited in the Bank of England, is a Frenchman, Dr. Sarrasin, whose able paper, communicated at the Brighton Scientific Conference, was reported in this journal three days ago.

“By dint of a course of strenuous efforts and amid difficulties and adventures forming in themselves a per-feet romance, Mr. Sharp had succeeded in proving indisputably that Dr. Sarrasin is the sole living descendant of Jean Jacques Langevol, the second husband of the Begum Gokool.

“This soldier of fortune was, it appears, a native of the town of Bar- le-Duc in France.

“A few formalities only require to be gone through to place Dr. Sarrasin in full possession of his fortune. A petition to that effect has been filed in Chancery.

“Very remarkable is the chain of circumstances by which the treasure accumulated by a long line of Indian Rajahs is laid at the feet of a French physician. The fickle goddess might have exhibited the indiscretion she so frequently displays in the disposal of her gifts; but on this occasion she has, we are glad to say, bestowed this prodigious fortune on one who will not fail to make a good use of his wealth.”

Oddly enough as many might think, Dr. Sarrasin was vexed to see his news made public. He not only foresaw the many annoyances it would entail upon him, he also felt humbled by the importance which people seemed to attach to the event. He, himself, personally, appeared to dwindle into insignificance before the imposing figures which denoted his wealth. He was inwardly conscious that his own personal merits — all that he had ever accomplished — were already, even in the eyes of those who knew him best, sunk in this ocean of gold and silver.

His friends no longer saw in him the enthusiastic experimentalist, the ingenious inventor, the acute philosopher; they saw only the great millionaire.

Had he been a humpbacked dwarf, an ignorant Hottentot, the lowest specimen of humanity, instead of one of its most intelligent representatives, his value would have been the same as Lord Glandover had expressed I it, he “was worth” henceforth just twenty-one million pounds, no more and no less.

This idea sickened him, and the crowd of members, staring with a searching if not a scientific curiosity to see how a millionaire looked, noticed with surprise that a shade of melancholy gathered on the countenance they were scrutinizing.

This, however, was only a passing weakness. The magnitude of the object to which he had resolved to dedicate his unexpected fortune rose suddenly before him, and his serenity was restored.

He waited until Dr. Stevenson, of Glasgow, had finished reading a paper on the education of young idiots, and then requested leave to make a communication.

It was instantly granted by Lord Glandover, although the name of Dr. Ovidius stood next on the list. By the marked tone of his voice, he indicated that he would have done so had the whole Conference objected, or j had all the learned men in Europe protested with one | accord against such a piece of favouritism.

“Gentlemen,” said Dr. Sarrasin, “it was my intention to wait for a few days before informing you of the singular chance which has befallen me, and of the happy con- j sequences which may accrue to science from this event But, the fact having become public, it would seem j mere affectation were I now to delay speaking of it, and placing it in its proper light.

“Yes, gentlemen, it is true that a large sum of money, ; a sum amounting to many millions, now deposited in the I Bank of England, appears to be legally my property.

“Need I tell you, that such being the case, I consider myself simply as a steward, entrusted with this wealth’ for the use and benefit of science?” (Immense sensation.) “This treasure belongs, not to me but to humanity — to progress!” (Great commotion — exclamations — applause. The whole assembly, electrified by this announcement, rise *en masse.)*

“Do not applaud me, gentlemen; I do not know one man of science worthy of the name who, in my place, would not do what it is my desire to do.

“It is possible that in this matter some may attribute motives of vanity and self-love to me, rather than of genuine devotedness.” (No! No!) “It matters little. Let us look to the results.

“I declare, then, definitively, and without reservation, that the twenty-one million pounds placed in my hands belongs not to me, but to science! Will you, gentlemen, undertake the management and distribution of it?

“I have not enough confidence in my own knowledge to undertake the sole disposal of such a sum. I appoint you as trustees; you yourselves shall decide on the best means of employing all this treasure.” (Tumultuous applause — great excitement — general enthusiasm.)

The whole assembly stood up; some members in the fever of their excitement, mounted on the table. Professor Turnbull, of Glasgow, appeared on the verge of apoplexy. Dr. Cicogna, of Naples, was ready to choke.

Lord Glandover alone maintained the serene and dignified composure befitting his rank. He was perfectly convinced that Dr. Sarrasin intended the whole thing as a pleasant jest, without the smallest intention of actually carrying out so extravagant a scheme.

When quiet was in some measure restored, the speaker continued —

“If I may be permitted to suggest something that would be easy to develop and bring to perfection, I would beg to propose the following plan.”

The assembly, recovering its composure, listened with reverential attention.

“Gentlemen, among the many causes of the sickness, misery and death which surrounds us, is one to which I think it reasonable to attach great importance; andj that is the deplorable sanitary conditions under which the greater part of mankind exists.

“Multitudes are massed together in towns, and in dwellings where they are often deprived of light and air, the two elements most necessary to life.

“These agglomerations of humanity become the hotbeds of fever and infection, and even those who escape death are tainted with disease; they are feeble and useless members of society, which thereby suffers great and \ serious loss, instead of deriving priceless advantage from their healthful and vigorous labour.

“Why, gentlemen, should we not, in an effort to remedy this sore evil, try the most powerful of all means of persuasion — that of example?

“Why should we not, by uniting the powers of our minds, produce the plan of a model city, based upon I strictly scientific principles?” (Cries of “Hear, Hear.”) I “Why should we not afterwards devote our capital to I the erection of such a city, and then present it to the I world as a practical illustration of what all cities ought 1 to be?” (Hear, Hear! and thunders of applause.)

The members, in transports of admiration, shook hands I and congratulated each other; then, surrounding Dr. Sarrasin, they seized upon his chair, raised him up, and I bore him triumphantly round the hall.

“Gentlemen,” continued the doctor, on being per-1 mitted to resume his place; “to this city, which every I one of us can already picture in imagination, and which I may shortly become a reality — to this city of health and I happiness we will call universal attention by descriptions, translated into all the languages of the earth; we will invite visitors from every nation; we will offer it as a home and refuge for honest families forced to emigrate from over-populated countries.

“Those unfortunate people, also, who are driven into exile by foreign conquest (can you wonder, gentlemen, that I think of them?) will find among us employment for their activity, and scope for their intelligence, while they will enrich our colony by their moral virtue and intellectual strength — possessions of far higher value than gold or precious stones.

“We will found great colleges where youth will be trained and educated in principles based on the truest wisdom, so as to develop and justly balance their moral, physical and intellectual faculties, thus preparing future generations of strong and virtuous men.”

No language can describe the tumult of enthusiasm which followed this communication. For at least a quarter of an hour the hall resounded with a storm of cheering and hurrahs.

Dr. Sarrasin sat down, and Lord Glandover, once more leaning towards him, murmured in his ear with a knowing wink —

“Not a bad investment that! what a revenue you would draw from the rents — eh? The thing would be sure to succeed, provided it were well started and backed up by influential names. Why, all our convalescents and valetudinarians would be for settling there at once! Be sure you put down my name for a good building lot, doctor!”

Poor Dr. Sarrasin was quite mortified by this determination to attribute his actions to a covetous motive, and was about to reply to his lordship, when he heard the vice-president move a vote of thanks to the author of the philanthropic proposal just submitted to the assembly.

“It would,” he said, “be to the eternal honour of the j Brighton Conference, that an idea so sublime had been originated there. It was an idea which nothing short of the most exalted benevolence and the rarest generosity could have conceived. And yet, now that the idea had, been suggested, it seemed almost a wonder that it had never before occurred to any one.

“Millions had been lavished on senseless wars, vast sums of money squandered in foolish speculations; how infinitely better they might have been spent in the furtherance of such a scheme as this!”

The speaker, in conclusion, proposed “That, in honour of its founder, the new city should receive the name I of Sarrasina.”

This motion would have been carried by acclamation, but Dr. Sarrasin interposed —

“No,” said he, “my name has nothing whatever to do I with this scheme. Neither let us bestow on the future I city a fancy name derived from Greek or Latin, such I as is often invented, and gives an air of affectation and peculiarity to whatever bears it. It will be the city of I welfare and comfort, let it be named after my country! I Let us call it Frankville!”

Everyone agreed to gratify Dr. Sarrasin by acceding to his choice, and the first step was thus taken towards I the founding of the city.

The meeting then proceeded to the discussion of other | points, and to this practical occupation, so unlike those to which it was usually devoted, we will leave it, while I we follow the wandering fortunes of the paragraph published in the *Daily Telegraph.*

Copied word for word by all the newspapers, the information contained in this little paragraph was soon blazed abroad over every county in England. In the *Hull Gazette* it figured at the top of the second page in a copy of that modest journal which, on the 1st of November, arrived at Rotterdam on board the three-masted collier *Queen Mary.*

The active scissors of the editor of the *Belgian Echo* pounced upon it at once; it was speedily translated into Flemish (the language of Cuyp and Potter), and on the wings of steam it reached the *Bremen Chronicle* on the 2nd of November. In that paper our bit of news next appeared, the same in substance, but clothed in a garb of German, the artful editor adding in parentheses “from our Brighton correspondent.”

The anecdote, now thoroughly Germanized, reached the office of the editor of the *Northern Gazette,* and that great man gave it a place in the second column of his third page.

On the evening of the 3rd of November, after passing through these various transformations, it made its entrance, between the fat hands of a stout serving man, into the study of Professor Schultz of the University of Jena.

High as this personage stood in the scale of humanity, he presented nothing remarkable to the eye of a stranger.

He was a man of five or six and forty, strongly built, his square shoulders denoting a robust constitution; his forehead was bald, the little hair remaining on his temples and behind his head suggesting the idea that they consisted of threads of tow. His eyes were blue, that vague blue which never betrays a thought. Professor Schultz had a large mouth, garnished with a double row of formidable teeth which would never drop their prey; resumed his labours, over them closed thin lips, whose principal employment was to keep note of the words which passed between them.

The general appearance of the professor was decidedly unpleasant to others, but he himself was evidently perfectly satisfied with it.

On hearing his servant enter, he raised his eyes to a] very pretty clock over the mantel-piece, which looked out of place among a number of trashy articles around it, and said in a brusque, rough voice:

“6:55! The post comes in at 6:30. You bring my letters too late by twenty-five minutes. The next time they are not on my table at 6:30 you quit my service.

“Will you please to dine now, sir?” asked the man as he withdrew.

“It is now 6:55, and I dine at seven. You have been] here for three weeks, and you know that. Recollect that I never change an hour, and never repeat an order.

The professor laid his newspaper on the table, and] went on writing a treatise which was to appear next day in *Physiological Records*, a periodical to which he con-j tributed. We may be permitted to state that this treatise) was entitled — *”Why are all Frenchmen affected by different degrees of hereditary degeneracy?*

As the professor pursued his task, his dinner, consist-j ing of a large dish of sausages and cabbage, flanked by a huge flagon of beer, was carefully placed on a round table near the fire.

He laid aside his pen in order to devour this repast, which he did with greater appearance of enjoyment’i than might have been expected from so grave an individual. Then he rang for coffee, lighted his pipe, and resume his labours.

It was after midnight when he signed his name on the last page, and retired at once to his bedroom to enjoy.a well-earned repose.

Not till he was in bed did he take his paper from its cover, and begin to read before going to sleep. Just as the professor was becoming drowsy, his eye was caught by a foreign name, that of “Langevol,” in the paragraph relating to the “Monster Heritage.” He tried to call to mind clearly the vague recollections to which this name gave rise. After a few minutes vainly devoted to efforts of memory, he threw away the journal, blew out his candle, and loud snores quickly gave notice that he slept.

By a physiological phenomenon, which he himself had studied and explained at great length, this name of Langevol followed Professor Schultz even in his dreams. The consequence was that on awaking next morning, he found himself mechanically repeating it.

All at once, just as he was going to look at his watch, a sudden light broke in upon him.

Snatching up the newspaper at the foot of his bed, he read again and again, with his hand pressed on his forehead, the paragraph which he had all but missed seeing the night before. The light was evidently spreading to his brain, for without waiting to put on his flowered dressing-gown he hurried to the fireplace, took a small miniature portrait from the wall by the mirror, and turning it round, passed his sleeve across the dusty pasteboard at the back.

The professor was right. Behind the picture he read the following German words, traced in faded ink:

“Therese Schultz, eine geborene Langevol,” which means, “Theresa Schultz, whose maiden name was Langevol.”

That evening the professor was in the express train on his way to

London.

CHAPTER 4

TWO CLAIMANTS

On the 6th November, at 7 a.m. Professor Schultz arH rived at the Charing Cross Station. At noon he presented himself at No. 94 Southampton Row, entering a large room divided by a wooden barrier, one side being for the clerks, the other for the public. In it there were six chairs, a table, numberless green tin boxes, and] a London Directory. Two young men, seated at the! table, were quietly eating the traditional luncheon of bread and cheese usual with their class.

“Messrs. Billows, Green and Sharp?” said the professor, in the tone of a man calling for his dinner.

“Mr. Sharp is in his private room — what name? On what business?”

“Professor Schultz, of Jena. On the Langevol business.”

This information was murmured into the speaking-tube by the young clerk, a reply which he did not I choose to repeat — being returned into his ear.

“Hang the Langevol business! Another fool come to I put in a claim !

Clerk’s answer: “This man seems respectable enough. Does not look exactly agreeable though.”

Another mysterious whisper conveyed the words: “And he comes from Germany?”

“So he says.”

With a sigh came the order:

“Send him upstairs.”

“Second storey, door facing you,” said the clerk aloud, pointing to an inner entrance.

The professor plunged into the passage, mounted the stairs, and found himself opposite a green baize door, on which the name of Mr. Sharp stood out in black letters on a brass plate.

That personage was seated at a large mahogany writing-table, in an ordinary-looking room, with a felt carpet, leather chairs, and many open boxes.

He half rose from his seat, and then, according to the polite fashion of business men, began to rummage among his papers for several minutes to show how busy he was. At last, turning to Professor Schultz who remained standing near him, he said:

“Have the goodness, sir, to tell me your business here in as few words as possible. My time is limited; I can give you but a very few minutes.”

The professor smiled slightly, evidently not at all put out by the way he was received.

“Perhaps,” he said, “when you know what brings me here, you will think it advisable to grant me a few min-’utes more.”

“Proceed, sir.”

“My business relates to the inheritance left by Jean Jacques Langevol, of Bar-le-Duc. I am the grandson of the elder sister, Theresa Lanegvol, who married in 1792 my grandfather, Martin Schultz, a surgeon in the army of Brunswick; he died in 1814.1 have in my possession three letters from my great-uncle, written to his sister, and many accounts of his return home after the battle of Jena, besides the legal documents which prove my birth.”

We need not follow Professor Schultz through the prolix explanations which he gave to Mr. Sharp. On this point he seemed, contrary to his nature, to be quite inexhaustible. His aim was to demonstrate to this Englishman, this Mr. Sharp, that by rights the German race] should, in all things, predominate over all others. His’ object in putting forward a claim to this inheritance was chiefly that it might be snatched from French hands, which could not fail to make an absurd use of it. What he hated in his rival was his nationality. Had he been a German he certainly should not have interfered, etc. etc.

But that a Frenchman — a would-be “savant” — should have this enormous wealth to spend upon French fancies, distressed him, and he considered it his duty to contest his right to it at all costs.

At first sight, the connection between these political opinions and the opulent inheritance in question was not very clear. But the experienced eye of the man of! business plainly detected the relation which patriotic’ I ambition for the advantage of the German nation generally bore to the private interests of Professor Schultz individually. He saw that this apparently double aim I had in reality but one motive.

There was no doubt about it. However humiliating it might be for a professor of the University of Jena to be connected with beings of an inferior race, it was evident that a French ancestress had had a share in the responsibility of giving to the world this matchless human being. But this relationship, being in a secondary degree to that of Doctor Sarrasin, would give only secondary rights to the said inheritance. The solicitor perceived, however, the possibility of lawfully sustaining them, and in this possibility he foresaw another which would be much to the advantage of Billows, Green, and Sharp, something which would change the Langevol affair, already productive, into a very good thing, indeed, a second case of the "Jarndyce *versus* Jarndyce" of Dickens. An extensive horizon of stamped paper, deeds, documents of all sorts, rose before the eyes of the man of law; and, what was even more enticing, he saw a compromise conducted by himself, Sharp, to the interest of both his clients, which would equally bring to himself honour and profit.

In the meanwhile he made known to Professor Schultz the claims of Doctor Sarrasin, gave him proofs in corroboration, and insinuated that if Billows, Green, and Sharp undertook to make something advantageous for the professor out of claims, "shadowy though they are, my dear sir, they would, I fear, not hold water in a lawsuit," which his relationship to the doctor gave him — he hoped that the remarkable sense of justice, possessed by all Germans, would admit that to Messrs. Billows, Green and Sharp, he, the professor, owed a large debt of gratitude.

The latter was practical enough to understand the drift of this argument, and soon put the mind of the business man at rest on this point, though without committing himself in any way. Mr. Sharp politely begged permission to inquire into the affair at his leisure, and showed him out with marked respect, nothing more having been said as to the very limited time of which he had previously been so sparing. Professor Schultz retired convinced that he had no adequate claim to put forward for the Begum's innerance, but persuaded none the less that a struggle between the Saxon and Latin races, besides always being | meritorious, would not fail, if set about properly, to turn to the advantage of the former.

The next important step was to get Dr. Sarrasin’s opinion on the subject. A telegram despatched immediately to Brighton had the effect of bringing that gentleman to Mr. Sharp’s office by five o’clock.

Dr. Sarrasin heard all that had occurred with a calm- [| ness which astonished the solicitor. He frankly declared | that he perfectly remembered a tradition in his family of I a great-aunt who had been brought up by a rich and I titled lady, who had emigrated with her, and who had 1 married in Germany. He knew neither the name nor the [exact degree of relationship of this great-aunt.

Mr. Sharp was busily looking over his notes, carefully numbered in portfolios, which he now exhibited with ij considerable complacency to the doctor.

There was — Mr. Sharp did not seek to hide it — matter I for a lawsuit, and lawsuits of this character may easily t be long drawn out. Indeed, it was not at all necessary ij to acknowledge to the adverse party that family tradi-j I tion which Doctor Sarrasin had in his honesty confided [just now to his solicitor. To be sure, there were those [letters from Jean Jacques Langevol to his sister, of which Professor Schultz had spoken, and which were a I point in his favour. A very small point indeed, destitute of any legal character, but still a point — no doubt other [proofs would be exhumed from the dust of municipal I archives. Perhaps even the adverse party, in default of I authentic documents, would even dare to manufacture I false ones. Everything must be foreseen. Who knew but that fresh investigations might assign to this Therese Langevol and her descendants, who had suddenly started up, superior claims to Dr. Sarrasin’s? In any case, there would be long disputes, tedious examinations — no end of them. There was good hope of success for both sides, and each could easily form a limited liability company to advance the cost of the proceedings and exhaust all the pleas of jurisdiction.

A celebrated suit of the same sort had been in the Court of Chancery for eighty-three consecutive years, and was only ended at last for want of funds — interest and capital, all had gone! What with inquiries, commissions, transfers, the proceedings would take an indefinite period! In ten years' time the question would probably be still undecided, and the twenty-one millions still sleeping quietly in the Bank.

Dr. Sarrasin listened to this long-winded oration, and wondered when it would come to an end. Without taking for gospel all that he heard, he felt a kind of chilly discouragement creeping over him, much as a voyager gazes from the ship's bows at the port to which he believes himself approaching, but sees it growing less and less distinct, and finally disappearing as his vessel drifts away from the land. He told himself that it was not impossible that this fortune now so near, and for which he had already found a use, would end by slipping from his grasp, and fade away.

"Then what is to be done?" he asked of the solicitor.

"What is to be done? — Hem! — " That was difficult to say, more difficult still to decide; but no doubt everything would be arranged in the end. He, Sharp, was certain of that. English law was excellent, a leetle slow perhaps, he could not help saying so — yes, decidedly slow, *pede claudo* — *heml* — hem!-but all the more sure.

Assuredly Doctor Sarrasin could not fail in the course of a few years to be in possession of this inheritance, always supposing — hem! — hem! —

his claims sufficient!

The doctor issued from the office in Southampton Row very much shaken in his confidence, and convinced that he must either plunge into an interminable lawsuit or give up his dream. The thoughts that his fine philanthropic scheme must come to nothing gave him keen pain.

In the meantime, Mr. Sharp sent for Professor Schultz, who had left his address. He told him that Dr. Sarrasin had never heard of Therese Langevol, that he denied the existence of a German branch of the family, and rejected any idea of a compromise. There was nothing that the professor could do, therefore, if he believed his right well established, but to go to law. From this, Mr. Sharp, who was perfectly disinterested of course, andl was a mere spectator in the matter, had no intention of dissuading him. What more could a solicitor wish than a lawsuit of perhaps thirty years, and not knowing to what it might lead them? He personally would be delighted. If he had not feared that Professor Schultz would think it suspicious on his part, he would have pushed his disinterestedness so far as to recommend to him one of his legal brethren, who would look after his interests. And, indeed, the choice would be important! The path of law had now become a regular highway! — swarming with adventurers and robbers! — he owned this shameful fact, though with a blush

“Supposing the French doctor were willing to arrangethe matter, how much would it cost?” asked the professor.

Being a wise man, words could not confuse him — being a practical man, he went straight to the point without wasting any precious time on the way. Mr. Sharp was rather disconcerted by this mode of action. He represented to Professor Schultz that business did not go on so quickly as all that; that no one could see the end, when as yet they were just at the beginning; that in order to bring Dr. Sarrasin to terms they must protract the business, so as not to allow him to see that he, Schultz, was at all eager to compromise matters.

“I beg, sir,” he concluded, “that you will leave it to me; put yourself in my hands, and I will be answerable for everything.”

“Very well,” replied Schultz, “but I should much like to know what I have to expect.”

However, he could not ascertain from Mr. Sharp the price at which the solicitor valued Saxon gratitude, and was therefore obliged to give him *carte blanche* in the matter.

When Dr. Sarrasin appeared next day in answer to Mr. Sharp’s summons, and quietly asked if he had any particular news for him, the solicitor, alarmed at his calmness, informed him that a detailed examination had convinced him that the better plan would be to nip the threatened danger in the bud, and propose to compromise with this new claimant. Dr. Sarrasin must agree with him that this was essentially disinterested advice, and advice which few solicitors in Mr. Sharp’s place would have given. But he felt quite a paternal interest in the affair, and his pride was concerned in bringing it to a speedy conclusion.

The doctor listened and thought all this sensible enough. During the last few days he had become so accustomed to the idea of immediately realizing his scientific dream that everything gave way to it. To wait ten years, or even one year, before he had it in his power, would have been a cruel trial to him. Without being taken in by Mr. Sharp’s fine speeches, although he was little familiar with legal and financial questions, he would have cheerfully given up his claims for a sum paid down in ready money sufficient to enable him to pass at once from theory to practice. He also, therefore, at once, gave *carte blanche* to Mr. Sharp and departed.

The solicitor had now got what he wanted. It was quite true that perhaps another might in his place have yielded to the temptation of beginning and prolonging a lawsuit which would bring in a considerable annuity to his business. But Mr. Sharp was not a man who cared for this kind of speculation.

He saw close to his hand a way by which he could reap an abundant harvest, and he resolved to seize it. The next day he wrote to the doctor that he believed Herr Schultz was not opposed to a compromise. In subsequent visits made by him to the doctor and professor, he told them alternately, that the adverse party would say nothing definite, and moreover, that a third candidate, attracted by the scent was being spoken about.

This little game went on for a week. In the morning I all was going well, but by the evening an unforeseen objection had suddenly arisen to upset everything. The honest doctor was incessantly troubled by doubts, fears, and changes of mind. Mr. Sharp could not bring himself to hook his fish, he so greatly feared that at the last he would struggle and snap the line. But so many precautions were, in this case, quite superfluous. From the very first day Dr. Sarrasin, who would have done anything to spare himself the trouble of a lawsuit, was ready for any arrangement. When at last Mr. Sharp thought that the psychological moment, to use the celebrated expression, had arrived, or in less exalted language, that his client was done to a turn, he suddenly unmasked his batteries, and proposed an immediate compromise.

A benevolent man then appeared — the banker, Stilb-rng-who proposed to split the difference, to give them ten millions each, and merely to have as commission the surplus million.

When Mr. Sharp made this proposal Dr. Sarrasin could have embraced him; he thought it a splendid idea. He was ready and eager to sign. He would have liked to put up in the market place of the proposed city golden statues to the banker Stilbing, to the solicitor Sharp, to the bank, and to all the lawyers in the United Kingdom.

The documents were drawn up, and everything was ready. Professor Schultz had surrendered — Mr. Sharp assuring him that, with a less easy-tempered adversary he would certainly have had all the costs to pay. So it was settled. The two heirs each received a cheque for a hundred thousand pounds, payable at sight, and a promise of a definite settlement after all the legal formalities had been gone through.

Thus was this wonderful affair settled, to the great glory of the Anglo-Saxon race!

We are assured that, that same evening, whilst dining at *the* Cobden Club with his friend Stilbing, Mr. Sharp drank a glass of champagne to the health of Dr. Sarrasin, another to Professor Schultz, and then, as he finished the bottle gave vent to this somewhat indiscreet exclamation —

“Hurrah! Rule Britannia! We’ve got the best of it this time!”

The truth is, that the banker Stilbing considered his friend rather stupid for not having made a great deal more out of the business, and in his heart the Professor had also thought so, from the moment in which he had felt himself obliged to agree to any arrangement offered him. What could not have been done with a man like Dr. Sarrasin, a Celt, careless, thoughtless, and very certainly a visionary!

The Professor had heard of his rival’s project of founding a French town, under such moral and physical conditions as would develop the qualities of the race and| form strong and brave generations.

He thought this enterprise absurd and to his mind it was sure to fail, as it opposed the law of progress, which decreed the uprooting of the Latin race, its subjection to the Saxon, and at last its disappearance from the surface of the globe. However, these results might be held in check if the doctor started to carry out his programme and even more so, if there were any prospect of its success. It was, therefore, the duty of every true| Saxon, in the interest of general order, to obey this [appointed law, and bring this insane enterprise to nothing — if he could. In the circumstances it was quite clear that he, Schultz, M.D*privat docent*

of chemistry in Jena University, known by his numerous works on the different human races — works in which it was proved that the German race was to absorb all others — it was . quite clear that he was especially designed by the great creative and destructive force of nature to annihilate the pigmies who were struggling against it. From the very beginning it had been ordained that Therese Langevol would marry Martin Schultz, and that one day, when the two nationalities met in the persons of the French doctor and the German professor, the latter would crush the former. Already he had in his possession half the doctor’s fortune — this was the weapon he was to wield. At present this project was but a secondary one to Professor Schultz; he merely added it to others still more vast which he had formed for the destruction of all nations who refused to blend themselves with the German people and be united with the Vaterland. However, wishing to explore Dr. Sarrasin’s plans, to the end — if so be that they had an end — he attended all the meetings of the Congress. As several members, with Doctor Sarrasin himself among them, were leaving the meeting, the professor was overheard to make this declaration: that he would found, at the same time as Frankville, a city strong enough to put an end to that absurd and abnormal ant-hill.

“I hope,” he added, “that the experiment we shall make will serve as an example to all the world!”

Although good Doctor Sarrasin was so full of love to all mankind, he had lived long enough to know that his fellow-creatures did not all deserve the name of philanthropists. He therefore made a note of this speech of his adversary, thinking like a sensible man that no threat ought to be neglected. Some time afterwards, writing to Max to ask him to help in his enterprise, he mentioned this incident and described Herr Schultz so accurately that the young Alsacian was certain the doctor had a formidable adversary in him. The doctor added —

“We shall need bold and energetic men, practical and well informed, not only to build but to defend us.” Max answered —

“Although I cannot help you in founding your city at once, you may depend on finding me when the right time comes. I shall not lose sight for a single day of this Professor Schultz whom you have described so well. My Alascian birth gives me the right to know about his affairs. Whether I am near you or far away, I am devoted to you. If by any unforeseen chance you should be some months, or even years, without hearing from me, do not be uneasy. Whether I am near you or far away, I shall have but one thought, to work for you, and consequently to serve France.”

CHAPTER 5

STAHLSTADT

We must take a leap through time and space. Five years have elapsed since the two heirs took possession of the Begum’s inheritance. The scene lies in the United States, to the south of Oregon, ten leagues from the shores oflthe Pacific. The district is mountainous, its northern limits as yet barely defined by the two neighbouring powers.

A merely superficial spectator might call it the American Switzerland, with its abrupt peaks rising above the clouds, its deep valleys dividing the heights, its aspect at once grand and wild.

But, unlike the European Switzerland, it is not given| up to the peaceful industries of the shepherd, the guide,) and the hotel-keeper. It has Alpine decorations only, just a crust of rocks, and earth and venerable pines spread over a mass of iron and coal.

Should the traveller through these solitudes stay on his way to listen awhile to the voice of nature, he would] not, as on the slopes of the Oberland, hear the gentle murmurs of insect life, or the herd-boy’s call, enhancing! the silence of the mountain. On his ear in this wild spot would fall the heavy sound of the steam hammer, and under his feet would echo the muffled explosions of powder.

He would feel as if the ground was as full of trapdoors as the stage of a theatre, and that at any moment even the huge rocks might sink and disappear into unknown depths.

Dreary roads, black with cinders and coke, wind round the sides of the mountains.

Heaps of variegated scoria, which the scanty herbage fails to cover, glance and glare like the eyes of a basilisk. Here and there yawns the shaft of a deserted mine, a dark gulf, the mouth grown over with briers. The air is heavy with smoke, and hangs like a pall over the ground. Not a bird nor an insect *is* to be found, and a butterfly has not been seen within the memory of man.

At the northern point, where the mountain-spurs slope into the plain, between two ranges of bleak hills lies what until 1871 was called the “red plain,” because of the colour of the soil, which is impregnated with oxide of iron, but what *is* now called Stahlfeld, or the field of steel.

Just imagine a plateau of seventeen or eighteen square miles, the soil sandy and strewn with pebbles, and altogether as arid and desolate as the ancient bed of some inland sea. Nature has done nothing towards giving the place life and movement, but man has brought a wonderful amount of energy and vigour to bear upon it.

In five years there sprang up on this bare and rocky plain eighteen villages, composed of small wooden houses, all alike, brought ready-built from Chicago, and containing a large population of rough workmen. In the midst of these villages, at the very foot of the Coal Butts, as the inexhaustible mountains of coal are called, rises a dark mass, huge, and strange, an agglomeration of regular-shaped buildings, pierced with sym-j metrical windows, covered with red roofs, and surmounted by a forest of cylindrical chimneys, which continually vomit forth clouds of dense smoke. Through the black curtain which veils the sky dart red lightninglike flames, while a distant roaring resembles that of thunder or the beating of the surf on a rocky shore.

This erection is Stahlstadt — Steel Town! The German city, and the personal property of Professor Schultz, the ex-chemistry professor of Jena, who has become, by means of the Begum’s millions, the greatest ironworker, and especially the greatest cannon-founder of the two] hemispheres.

He casts guns of all shapes and of all calibres, with smooth and rifled bores, for Russia, Turkey, Roumania, Japan, for Italy and for China, but particularly for Germany.

With the aid of his enormous capital, this large est tablishment, which is at the same time a veritable town,! started up as at the wave of a conjurer’s wand. Thirty! thousand workmen, Germans for the most part, crowded to it, and settled themselves in the suburbs. In a few! months its products, because of their overwhelming sul periority, acquired universal celebrity. Professor Schultz digs out iron and coal from his own mines which lie ready to his hand, and converts them into steel, and again into cannon, all on the spot.

What none of his competitors can do he achieves. In; France lingots of steel are turned out, eighty thousand pounds in weight. In England a hundred-ton gun has been cast. At Essen M. Krupp has contrived to cast blocks of steel of ten hundred thousand pounds! Herr Schultz does not stop at that — he knows no limits. Order a cannon of him, of whatever weight and power you like, he’ll turn you out that cannon, as bright as a new halfpenny, exactly at the time agreed on.

But he makes his customers pay for it! It is as if the two hundred and fifty millions of 1871 had only given him an appetite for more!

In gun-casting, as in everything else, the man who can do what others cannot do, is sure to be well off. Indeed, Schultz’s cannon not only attain an unprecedented size, put although they may deteriorate slightly in use, they never burst. Stahlstadt steel seems to have special properties. There are many stories current of mysterious chemical formulae; but one thing is certain, that no one has discovered the invaluable secret.

Another thing certain is that, in Stahlstadt, that secret is guarded with the most jealous care.

In this remote corner of North America, surrounded by deserts, isolated from the world by a rampart of mountains, five hundred miles from the nearest town or habitation of any sort, we may search in vain for the smallest vestige of that liberty which is the basic principle of the United States.

On arriving under the walls of Stahlstadt it is useless to try to enter one of the massive gateways which here and there break the line of moats and fortifications. The sternest of sentinels will repulse the traveller. He must go back to the suburbs. He cannot enter the City of Steel unless he possesses the magic formula, the password — or, at any rate, an order, duly stamped, signed, and countersigned.

One November morning a young workman arrived at Stahlstadt, who no doubt possessed such an order, for after leaving his well-worn portmanteau at an inn he] directed his steps to the gateway nearest the village.

He was a fine, strongly-built young fellow, dressed in a loose coat, woollen shirt with no collar, and trousers] of ribbed velveteen, tucked into big boots. He pulled his] wide felt hat over his eyes, as if to conceal the coal dust with which his skin was begrimed, and walked forward with elastic steps, whistling through his brown moustache.

Arrived at the gateway, the young man, showing a printed paper to the officer of the gate, was immediately admitted.

“Your order is addressed to the foreman, Seligmann, section K, road ix, workshop 743,” said the sentinel. “You must follow the roundway to your right till you come to the K boundary, and there show yourself to the porter. Do you know the rule? Expelled, if you enter! any section except your own,” he added as the new- comer went away.

The young workman followed along the roadway the direction indicated to him. On his right lay a moat above which marched numerous sentinels. On his left,! between the wide circular road and the mass of buildings, lay first a double line of railway, and then a seel ond wall, similar to the outer one, which entirely surrounded the Steel city.

It was of so great an extent, that the sections, en-1 closed by the fortified walls like the spokes of a wheel, were perfectly independent of each other, although surrounded by the same wall and moat.

The young workman soon reached the boundary K,] placed at the side of the road, before a lofty gateway] surmounted by the same letter sculptured in the stone and presented himself to the porter. This time, instead of having a soldier to deal with, he found himself before a pensioner, with a wooden leg and medals on his breast.

The pensioner examined the paper, stamped it again and said —

“All right, ninth road on the left.”

The young man entered this second entrenched line, and at last found himself in section K. The road which debouched from the gate was its axis, and rows of uniform buildings extended at right angles on either side.

The noise of machinery was almost deafening. Those grey buildings pierced with thousands of windows were like living monsters. But the newcomer was apparently accustomed to such scenes, for he bestowed not the slightest attention on the curious spectacle.

In five minutes he had found road ix, workshop 743, md-having entered a little office full of portfolios and registers, stood in the presence of the foreman Seligmann.

The man took the paper with all its stamps, ex-imined it, then looked the young workman up and down.

‘Hired as puddler, are you?” he asked; “you seem very young?”

“Age has nothing to do with it,” was the answer. “I shall soon be twenty-six, and I’ve been puddling for the last seven months. If you like I can show you certificates) the strength of which I was engaged at New York by the head overseer.”

The young man spoke German quite easily, but with

slight accent which seemed to arouse the foreman’s suspicions.

‘Are you an Alsacian?” he demanded.

‘No, I am Swiss — from Schaffhausen. Look, here are all my papers, quite correct,” he added, taking out a leather pocket-book and showing a passport, testimonial, and certificates.

“Very good. After all, you are hired, and it’s simply my business to show you your place,” returned Selig-mann, reassured by this display of official documents.

He then inscribed the name of Johann Schwartz in a register, copying it from the order, and gave the workman a blue card bearing his name and the number 57,938, adding-

“You must be at the K gate every morning at seven o’clock; show this card, which will already have passed you through the outer wall. Take a token with your number on it from the rack in the lodge and show it toj me when you come in. At seven in the evening, as you go out, drop the token into a box placed at the door of the workshop, and only opened at that time.”

“I know the system. Can I live in the town?” asked Schwartz.

“No; you must find a lodging outside, but you can get your meals at the canteen in the shed at a very] moderate price. Your wages are a dollar a day to begin with, but they will be raised quarterly. Expulsion is the only punishment. It is pronounced by me in the first place, and by the engineer on appeal, for any infraction of the rules. Will you begin to-day?”

“Why not?”

“It will be only a half-day,” observed the foreman, as he guided Schwartz to an inner gallery.

The two men walked along a wide passage, crossed aj yard and entered a vast hall, like the platform of an] immense terminus. Schwartz, as he glanced round, could not restrain a movement of professional admiration.

On each side of the long hall were two rows of enormous columns, as big as those in St. Peter’s, at Rome, their tops rising through the glass roof. These were the chimneys of the puddling furnaces, and there were fifty of them in a row.

At one end engines were continually bringing up wagonloads of iron to feed the furnaces; at the other, empty trucks appeared to receive and carry away the metal, now transformed into steel.

This metamorphosis is accomplished by means of the operation of “puddling,” at which gangs of half-naked Cyclops, armed with long iron rakes, were working with might and main.

The “pigs” of iron are thrown into a furnace brought to an intense heat. As soon as it melts, the metal is stirred about for a considerable time. When it acquires a certain consistency, the puddler, by means of his long hook, turns and rolls the molten mass about, and makes it into four blooms, or balls, which he then hands over to others.

The operation is continued in the midst of the hall. Opposite each furnace stands a shingling hammer, actuated by steam.

Protected by boots and armlets of iron, his head covered with a metallic veil, and wearing a thick leathern apron, the “shingler” with his long pincers takes up the red-hot ball, and places it under the hammer. Down on it comes the weight of the ponderous engine amidst showers of sparks pressing out a quantity of dross. When it cools it is taken back to the furnace, to be brought out again and hammered as before.

There was incessant movement in this monster forge. To a spectator it was terrifying: the cascades of molten metal, dull blows heard above the roaring, showers of brilliant sparks, the glare of the red-hot furnaces. In the fearful din and tumult, man appeared like a helpless infant.

Powerful fellows must these puddlers be! To stir and knead four hundredweight of metallic paste in that temperature, to see nothing for hours but the blinding glare of the furnace and molten iron, is trying work, and wears a man out in ten years.

Schwartz, as if to show the foreman what he could do, at once stripped off his coat and woollen shirt, exhibiting a well-knit frame, and arms on which the muscles stood out like cords, seized a hook which one of the] puddlers had just put down, and set to work.

Seeing that he was likely to do well, the foreman; soon left, and returned to his office.

The new-comer worked on until the dinner-hour. But he was either too energetic, or he had neglected to take} sufficient food that morning to support his strength inj this unusual toil, for he soon appeared tired and faint] Indeed so worn out did he seem that the chief of his! gang noticed it.

“You’re not fit for a puddler, my lad,” he said, “and you had best ask at once to be changed into another section, for they won’t do it later.”

Schwartz protested against this. It was but a passing faintness. He could puddle as well as any one!

The gang's-man made his report however, and Schwartz was immediately called up before the chief! engineer.

This personage examined his papers, shook his head,! and asked in an inquisitorial tone —

"Were you a puddler at Brooklyn?"

The young man looked down in confusion.

"I see, I have to confess it," he answered. "I was employed in casting, and it was hoping to increase my wages that I wanted to try my hand at puddling."

"You are all alike," returned the engineer, shrugging his shoulders. "At five-and-twenty you think you can do what few men of five-and-thirty are fit for. Well, then, are you good at casting?"

"I was two months in the first class."

"You had better have stayed in it! Here you will have to begin in the third. All the same, you may think yourself lucky in being allowed to change your section so easily!"

The engineer then wrote a few words on a pass, sent a telegram, and

said —

"Give up your counter, leave this division, and go straight to section O, chief engineer's office. He has been told."

The same formalities were gone through again that Schwartz had met with at the K gate. As in the morning, he was questioned, accepted, and sent to the foreman of the workshop, who introduced him into the casting-hall. But here the work was more silent, and more methodical.

“This is only a small gallery, for casting forty-two pounders,” observed the foreman; “first-class workmen alone are allowed to cast the big guns.”

The “small” gallery was not less than four hundred and fifty feet long and two hundred wide. Schwartz, as he glanced round, calculated that there must be at j least six hundred crucibles being heated, by four, eight, or twelve at a time in the side furnaces.

The moulds destined for the reception of the fused steel were placed down the middle of the gallery, at the bottom of a trench. On each side of the trench was a movable crane, which, running on a fine of rails, was constantly in use for moving enormous weights. As in the puddling hall, at one end was a railroad to convej the bars of steel, at the other one for taking away th| cannon as they came out of the mould.

Near each mould stood a man armed with an iron rod to test the state of fusion of the metal in the crucibles.

The processes which Schwartz had seen put in practice elsewhere were here brought to a remarkable state of perfection.

When a cast was to be made, a warning bell gave the signal to all the watchers of the crucibles. Then, two by two, workmen of equal height, bearing between them on their shoulders a horizontal bar of iron, came with measured step, and placed themselves before every furnace.

An officer, armed with a whistle, his chronometer id his hand, stood near the mould, conveniently placed for all the furnaces in action. On each side channels of refractory earth, covered with metal, converged in gentle slopes to a funnel-shaped reservoir, placed just above the mould. The officer whistled; immediately a crucible, taken from the fire with pincers, was slung on the iron bar supported by the two workmen. The whistle commenced a series of modulations, and the two men, keeping time to it, approached and emptied the contents their crucible into the corresponding channel. Then the tossed their empty receptacle still red-hot into a vat.

Without interruption, at regular intervals, so as to keep up a constant flow, gangs from the other furnace went through exactly the same operation.

It was all executed with such wonderful precision that just at the appointed time the last crucible was emptied and flung into the vat. The manoeuvre seemed rather the result of a blind mechanism than the cooperation of a hundred human wills.

Inflexible discipline, the force of habit, and the power of the measured musical strain, worked the miracle.

The sight appeared familiar to Schwartz, who was soon coupled with a man of his own height, tested in a small cast, and found a capital workman. Indeed at the end of the day the head of his gang promised him a speedy rise.

On leaving the section O at seven that evening, he went back to the inn to fetch his portmanteau. Then, following one of the exterior roads, he soon came to a group of houses, which he had noticed that morning as he passed, and easily found accommodation in the cottage of a good woman who “took in a lodger.”

After supper, our young workman did not, like too many of his class, stroll out to the nearest public-house. He shut himself in his room, took from his pocket a fragment of steel evidently picked up in the puddling shed and a little crucible-earth from the O section, and examined them carefully by the light of a smoky lamp. Then, taking from his portmanteau a thick manuscript look, half full of notes, formulae, and calculations, he wrote the following in good French, though, for precaution, in a cipher of which he alone knew the key:

“November 10th — Stahlstadt. There is nothing particular in the mode of puddling, unless, of course, it is le choice of two different temperatures, relatively low for the first heat and the re-heating, according to Chernoff s rules. As to the casting, it is done after Krupp’s process, but with a perfectly admirable uniformity of movement. This precision in manoeuvres is the great German strength. It results from the innate musical talent in the German race. The English could never attain to this perfection; they have no ear, and want discipline. The French may reach it easily, as they are thj most perfect dancers in the world. So far, there appeal! to be nothing mysterious in the remarkable success of this manufacture. The mineral specimens which I picked up on the mountain are similar to our best iron.

“The coal is certainly uncommonly fine, of an high metallurgic quality, but still there is nothing unusual about it.

“There is no doubt that in the Schultz manufacture special care is taken to purify the principal material from any foreign matter, that they may be employee: only in a perfectly pure state. The result may easily him imagined. To solve the remainder of the problem, I have only to determine the composition of the refractor earth which the crucibles and the channels are made of. This discovered, and our gangs of workmen properly drilled, I do not see why we should not do what they are doing here. All the same, as yet I have only seen two sections, and there are at least four-and-twenty, with-I out counting the central building, the plans and models' department, the secret cabinet! What dangerous scheme may not be maturing in that den? What may not ou friends have to fear, after the threat uttered by He Schultz when he took possession of his fortune?"

After these questions, Schwartz, who was tired enough with his day's work, undressed, laid himself down in a little bed, which was about as uncomfortable as a German bed could be — and that is saying a good deal- lighted his pipe and began to smoke and read a well-worn book. But his thoughts were apparently elsewhere. The odorous clouds issued from his lips as if they were: saying — "Pooh! Pooh! Pooh! Pooh!"

He soon put down his book, and remained lost in thought for a long time, as though he were absorbed in the solution of a difficult problem.

"Ah," he exclaimed at last, "though the devil himself should try to prevent me I will find out the secret of Professor Schultz, and, above all, what he is plotting against Frankville!"

Schwartz went to sleep, murmuring the name of Doctor Sarrasin; but in his dreams it was the name of Jeannette, sweet little Jeannette, that was on his lips. He had never forgotten the little girl, although Jeannette,

ice he last saw her, had grown into a young lady. This phenomenon is easily explained by the ordinary laws of the association of ideas. Thoughts of the doctor brought up that of his daughter — association by contiguity. Then, when Schwartz — or rather Max Bruckmann — awoke, still having Jeannette in his mind, he was not at all taken aback, but found in this fact a fresh proof of the excellence of the psychological principles of John Stuart Mill

CHAPTER 6

THE ALBRECHT PIT

Ms. Bauer, Max Bruckmann’s good landlady, was a Swiss by birth. She was the widow of a miner who had been killed four years before in one of those accidents which make a miner’s life so precarious. She was granted a small annual pension of thirty dollars, and, had more] over the wages of her boy Carl, brought regularly to her every Sunday. She could also increase her income slightly by letting a furnished room.

Although scarcely thirteen, Carl was employed in the coal mine as a trapper, it being his duty to open and shut one of the ventilator doors whenever it was necessary for the coal trucks to pass. His mother had her house on lease; and as it was too far from the Albrecht pit for him *to* come home every evening, he had obtained some night work at the bottom of the mine. It was not heavy, being merely to look after six horses,’ whilst the man who took charge of them during the day spent the night above ground.

Carl’s young life was almost entirely passed, therefore,; fifteen hundred feet below the surface of the earth. All day he kept watch by his door, all night he slept on a bed of straw near his horses. Only on Sunday mornings did he return to the light of day, to revel for a few short! hours in the universal blessing of the sun, the blue skyj and his mother’s smile.

As may be imagined, on coming up from the pit after! such a week he was hardly what would be called presentable. Indeed he was more like a young gnome, a] sweep, or a Negro, than anything else. Frau Bauer had] always a good supply of hot water and soap ready, an<n the first thing she did was to devote a good hour to! scrubbing him. She next dressed him *in* a

comfortable] suit of dark green cloth made from an old one of his father's and, kept all the week in the big deal cupboard,! and she then began to admire her boy, an occupation] of which she never tired, for she thought him the handsomest in the world.

When the layer of coal-dust was washed off, Carl was really as good-looking as most boys. His golden silky locks and his pleasant blue eyes well suited his fair complexion, but he was altogether too small for his age. His sunless life made him as white as a turnip and, had Dr. Sarrasin's *compte-globules* been applied to the blood of the young miner, it would probably have shown that he possessed a very insufficient quantity.

In character he was rather silent and quiet, with some of that pride which the feeling of constant danger, the habit of regular work, and the satisfaction of difficulties overcome, gives to all miners.

His greatest happiness was to sit near his mother at the square table in their little kitchen, and to arrange in a box a large number of frightful insects which he had brought from the bowels of the earth. The warm and equal atmosphere of the mines has its special fauna, little known by naturalist, just as the damp walls of the pits have their flora of curious mosses, mushrooms, and lichens.

The engineer, Maulesmiilhe, who was fond of entomology, had noticed this, and had promised a small reward for each new specimen that Carl brought him. This, which had at first led the boy to explore all the recesses of the mine, had gradually taught him to be a collector. He now sought for insects on his own account.

However, he did not limit his affections to spiders and wood-lice. He was on intimate terms with two bats and a big rat. If he was to be believed, these three animals were the most intelligent and amiable creatures in ie world; even more intellectual than the horses with their long silky manes and shining sides, which Carl always spoke of in terms of warm admiration.

Blair-Athol was his chief favourite, the eldest in the stable, a philosophical old horse, who had been for six] years fifteen hundred feet, below the level of the sea and during all that time had never seen the light of day. He was now nearly blind.

But how well he knew his way along the subterranean labyrinth, when to turn to the right and when to] the left, as he hauled his trucks, without ever missing a step! He always stopped at the right time before the trap, leaving just enough room to open it. In how friendly! a way did he neigh, morning and evening, at the exact minute when it was time for his fodder to be brought him. How good, how obedient, how gentle, he was!

“I declare, mother, he really gives me a kiss, by rubbing his cheek against mine, when I put my head near him,” said Carl. “And he’s wonderfully useful besides, mind you, for he’s just like a clock; without him we should never know whether it was night or day, morning or evening.”

So the boy chattered, and dame Bauer listened to him with delight. She, too, loved Blair-Athol as much as her son did, and never failed to send him a lump of sugar. She would have given anything to go and see the old servant her husband had known, and at the same time to visit the dismal place where poor Bauer’s body — black as ink, charred by the fire-damp — had been found after the explosion. But women are not admitted into the; mines, and she had to be satisfied with the vivid descriptions which her son gave her.

Ah! she knew that mine well — that great dark pit to which her husband went down, and from which he never returned. How many times she had waited near; the yawning mouth, eighteen feet in diameter, looking along the walling of freestone, gazing at the oaken frame-work to which the cages were drawn up by cables and pulleys of steel — visited the surface-workings, the engine-shed, the timekeeper’s hut, and the rest! How many times had she warmed herself at the glowing brazier where the miners dry their garments on emerging from the pit, and the impatient smokers light their pipes! How familiar she was with all the noise and activity of the place!

The receivers who unhooked the loaded cages — the sorters, washers, engine-men, stokers — she had watched them all at work over and over again.

What she could not see, and yet could always picture with the eyes of affection, was what happened when the cage sank down, carrying its cluster of workmen, formerly with her husband, and now with her only child among them.

She could hear their voices and laughter, growing fainter and fainter in the depths, and finally ceasing altogether. In her thoughts she followed that frail cage | as it was lowered — down, down the narrow chimney, fifteen, eighteen hundred feet — fourteen times the height of the Great Pyramid, till it arrived at the bottom, and the men hastened off to their work.

She imagined them all dispersing to different parts of the subterranean town, some to the right, some to the left — hewers, armed with strong pickaxes to attack the blocks of coal; shorers to bank up places whence the coal had been hollowed; carpenters, to put up woodwork; labourers, to repair the roads and lay the rails; masons, to cement the roofs.

A wide central gallery led from this shaft to another, a ventilator about a mile distant. At right angles from this spread secondary roads; and in parallel fines, smaller ones again. These roads were separated by walls and pillars of coal or rock. All was regular, square, solid, black!

And this labyrinth of roads was alive with half-naked miners, working, talking, laughing, by the light of their safety-lamps.

All this dame Bauer could see, as she sat alone, dreaming, beside her

fire.

Among the numerous galleries, the one she oftenest imagined to herself was where her boy Carl opened and shut his door.

When evening came, the day workmen went up, to be replaced by others; but her boy did not go with the rest to take his place in the cage. He went off to the stable, patted his beloved Blair-Athol, and gave him his supper of oats and fresh hay. Then he ate his own] little cold supper, which had been sent to him, played for a few minutes with his big pet rat, caught and stroked the two bats as they fluttered about him, and then was soon fast asleep on his heap of straw.

Well did the fond mother know all this, and much she loved to hear every incident of her boy’s daily life.

“Mother, what do you think Mr. Maulesmiilhe, the engineer, said to me yesterday? He said that if I gave the right answers to some questions in arithmetic which he would ask me one of these days, he would take me to I hold the land-chain when he surveys the mine with his compass. I’m told they’re going to pierce a new gallery,! to join the Weber shaft, and he will find it uncommonly difficult to bring it out in the right place!”

“Really!” cried dame Bauer with delight; “did Mr. I Maulesmiilhe say that!” And already she imagined her Carl holding the chain along the gallery, whilst the] engineer, note-book in hand, set down figures, and, his I eyes fixed on the compass, ordered the direction of the tunnelling.

“Unluckily,” continued Carl, “I have nobody to explain what I can’t understand in my arithmetic, and I’m so afraid I shall not get the answer right!”

At this point, Max, who was silently smoking by the fireside, a place which, as a lodger in the house, he had the privilege of occupying, joined in the conversation, and said to the boy —

“If you like to tell me what you find difficult, perhaps I can give you a helping hand.”

“You?” said dame Bauer with some incredulity.

“Certainly,” replied Mac. “Do you think I don’t learn anything at the evening class where I go regularly after supper? The master is very pleased with me, and says he will make me a monitor.”

This settled, Max brought from his room a clean paper copy-book, and seating himself by the lad, explained the difficult sum so very clearly that the astonished Carl managed it easily.

From that day dame Bauer showed more consideration for her lodger, and Max took a great liking to his little companion.

In the factory Max showed himself an exemplary workman, and he was not long in being promoted to the second, and then to the first class. Every morning he was at the O gate punctually at seven o’clock. Every evening, after his supper, he repaired to the class taught by the engineer, Trubner. Geometry, algebra, machine-drawing — he attacked them all with equal ardour; and his progress was so rapid that his master was much struck by it. Two months from his entry into the Schultz manufactory, the young workman was already noted as having one of the cleverest intellects, not only in the A section, but in all Stahlstadt. A report which his engineer sent up at the end of the quarter bore this formal mention:

“Schwartz (Johann) twenty-six, working caster of the first class. I wish to bring this man before the notice of j the Directors, as quite above the average, in three re-j spects, theoretical knowledge, practical skill, and remarkable genius for invention.”

But something more than this was required to draw! the attention of the chiefs to Max. It was not long in j coming; though unfortunately it was under the most tragic circumstances.

One Sunday morning, Max, much astonished at hearing i ten o’clock strike without his young friend Carl’s having appeared, went down to ask dame Bauer if she knew the j reason for this delay. He found her very uneasy; Carll ought to have been at home two hours and more. See-j ing her anxiety, Max offered to go and look after him,! and set off in the direction of the Albrecht shaft.

He met several miners on the way, and asked them| if they had seen the boy; then, on receiving a negative reply, and exchanging the *“Glilck auf!”* (success to you! | safe return!), which is the usual salutation of German j pitmen, Max continued his walk.

About eleven o’clock, he reached the head of the Al-1 brecht shaft. It was not noisy and livery, as on a weekday; there was only one young “milliner,” — as the miners | jokingly call the coal sorters — chatting with the watchman, whose duty kept him, even on this day, at the pit’s] mouth.

“Have you seen little Carl Bauer, number 41,902, come] up this morning?” asked Max of this functionary.

The man consulted his list, and shook his head.

“Is there any other outlet to the mine?”

“No, this is the only one; the new shaft to the north is not yet finished.”

“Then, is the boy below?”

“He must be, though it’s an odd thing too, for on Sundays, only the five watchmen should be left.”

“Can I go down to find out?”

“Not without permission.”

“There may have been an accident,” put in the milliner.

“Not possible on Sunday.”

“All the same,” said Max, “I must find out what has become of that

boy.”

“You must speak to the overseer of machinery — in his office, if he is still there.”

The overseer, dressed in his Sunday best, with a shirt collar as *stiS* as if it had been made out of tin, was fortunately still at his accounts. He was an intelligent and humane man, and at once entered into Max’s anxiety.

“We will go at once and see what he is doing.”

And ordering the man on duty to be ready to pay out the cable, he prepared to descend into the mine with the young workman.

“Haven’t you got the Galibert apparatus?” asked Max. “It may be

useful.”

“You’re right. One can never be sure what has happened at the bottom of

the pit.”

Saying this, the overseer took from a cupboard two zinc reservoirs, similar to the urns which the street cocoa-sellers in Paris carry on their backs. These were cylinders of compressed air, communicating with the lips by two india-rubber tubes, the horn mouthpiece being held between the teeth. They are filled with the aid of special bellows, so constructed to empty themselves completely. The nose being held in wooden pincers, a man thus supplied with a store of air, may penetrate into the most unbreathable atmosphere.

These preparations completed, the overseer and Max took their places in the cage, the cable was paid out, and the descent began.

Two small electric lamps shed some degree of light around, and the men conversed together as they were lowered into the depths of the earth.

“For a man not in the business you are a cool hand,” remarked the overseer. “I’ve seen people who couldn’t summon up enough courage to go down; or if they did, they crouched like rabbits at the bottom of the cage all the time.”

“Really,” answered Max, “it seems nothing to me; though it’s true I’ve been down a coal mine two or three times before.”

They were soon landed at the foot of the shaft. The watchman whom they found there had seen nothing of young Carl.

They first visited the stable; the horses were there alone, and appeared quite tired of their own company. At least such was the conclusion to be drawn from the neigh with which Blair-Athol greeted the approach of the three human figures. On a nail hung Carl’s knapsack, and in a corner, beside a curry-comb, lay his arithmetic book.

Max noticed at once that his lantern was not there, a fresh proof that the boy must be still in the mine.

“He may have been hurt by a fall of rock,” said the overseer, “but it’s scarcely probable. What can he have been doing in the galleries on a Sunday?”

“Oh! perhaps he went to hunt for some insects before going up,” said the watchman. “It’s quite a passion with him.”

The stable-boy, who arrived in the midst of this discussion, confirmed this idea. He had seen Carl start off at seven o’clock with his lantern.

A systematic search was immediately commenced. The other watchmen were called, and each one, with his lantern, was sent off in a different direction, pointed out to him on a large plan of the mine, so that every tunnel and gallery might be thoroughly examined.

In two hours the whole mine had been gone through, and the seven men met again at the foot of the shaft. There had not been the least appearance of a fall found anywhere, nor the least trace of Carl. The overseer, perhaps influenced by an increasing appetite, was inclined to the opinion that the boy had slipped out un-perceived, and would by now have reached his home. But Max, convinced of the contrary, insisted on renewed exertions.

“What is that?” he asked, pointing to a dotted region on the plan, resembling in the midst of the adjacent minuteness those *terrae incognitae* marked on the confines of the arctic continents.

“Those workings have been provisionally abandoned, because of the thinning-out of the bed,” replied the overseer.

“Are there some abandoned workings? We must look there!” exclaimed Max, with a decision to which the other men submitted.

They were not long in reaching the entrance to some galleries which, to judge by the slimy and mouldy walls, might have been deserted for many years.

They had proceeded for some time without coming upon anything suspicious, when Max stopped, and said —

“Don’t you feel stupefied, and suffering from a head-

“Why, yes, indeed we do!” answered his companions.

“So do I,” resumed Max; “for a moment I felt quite giddy. There is certainly choke damp about! Will you let me light a match?” he asked of the overseer.

“By all means, my lad, strike away.”

Max took his little box from his pocket, struck a match, and stooping, held it towards the ground, upon which it instantly went out.

“I was sure of it,” he remarked. “The gas being heavier than the air, lies close to the ground. You must not stay here — I mean those without the Galibert apparatus. If you like, sir, we can continue the search alone.”

This being agreed to, Max and the overseer each took between his teeth the mouthpiece of his air box, placed the clamp on his nostrils, and boldly penetrated into a succession of old galleries.

In a quarter of an hour they came out to renew the air in their reservoirs; this done, they started again.

On the third trial their efforts were crowned with success. The faint bluish light of an electric lamp was seen far off in the darkness. They hastened

to it.

At the foot of the damp wall, motionless and already cold, lay poor little Carl. His blue lips and sunken eyes told what had happened.

Evidently he had wished to pick up something from the ground: he had stooped, and been literally drowned in the choke damp.

Every effort to recall him to life was in vain. He must have been already dead four or five hours. By the next evening there was another little grave in the cemetery of Stahlstadt, and poor dame Bauer was bereaved of her child as well as of her husband.

CHAPTER 7

THE CENTRAL BLOCK

A report from Dr. Echternach, surgeon-in-chief to the section of the Albrecht pit, stated that the death of Carl Bauer, number 41,902, thirteen years of age, trapper in gallery 228, was caused by asphyxia, resulting from the absorption by the respiratory organs of a large proportion of carbon dioxide.

Another no less luminous report from the engineer Maulesmiilhe explained the necessity of including in the ventilating scheme zone B in the plan xiv, as a large amount of deleterious gas was filtering slowly from its galleries. Lastly, a note from the same functionary brought before the notice of the authorities the devotion of the overseer Rayer, and of the first-class workman, Johann Schwartz.

Ten hours later, on reaching the porter’s lodge, Max, - as he took his token, found on the hook a printed order, addressed to him:

“Schwartz will present himself at the Director-General’s office at ten o’clock to-day. Central block, Gate and Road A.”

“At last!” thought Max. “This.is the first step; the rest will comer’

While chatting with his comrades on his Sunday walks round Stahlstadt, he had acquired sufficient knowledge of the general organization of the city to know that authority to enter the central block was not to be had every day. All sorts of stories were current about this place. It was said that some indiscreet people, who had tried to get into the guarded enclosure by stratagem, had never been seen again. That before their admission, all workmen employed there had to go through a series of masonic ceremonies — that they were obliged to take the most solemn oaths not to reveal anything that went on there, and were mercilessly sentenced to death by a secret tribunal if they violated their oath. An under-ground railway put this sanctuary in communication with the outer part of the works. Night trains conveyed unknown visitors. Supreme councils were held there, and sometimes mysterious personages came to participate in the deliberations.

Without putting too much faith in these rumours, . Max knew that they were really the popular expression j of a well-known fact — the extreme difficulty which attended admission into the central division. Of all the workmen whom he knew — and he had friends in the iron-mines as well as *in* the coal-pits, among- the refiners as well as among the men employed in the blast furnaces, among the carpenters as well as the smiths-not one had ever entered the gate.

So it was with a feeling of intense curiosity as well as of secret pleasure that he presented himself there at the hour named. It was soon plain that the precautions Were of the strictest order.

Evidently Max was expected. Two men, dressed in grey uniforms with swords at their sides, and revolvers in their belts, were waiting in the porter’s lodge.

This lodge, like that of a cloistered convent, had two I gates, an outer and an inner one, which were never opened at the same time.

The pass examined and signed, Max saw, though without manifesting any surprise, a white handkerchief brought out; with this the two attendants in uniform carefully bandaged his eyes.

Then, taking him by the arms, they marched him off without saying a word.

After walking two or three thousand steps they mounted a staircase, a door was opened and shut, and Max was allowed to take off his bandage.

He found himself in a large plain room, furnished with some chairs, a blackboard, and a long desk, supplied with every implement necessary for line drawing. It was lighted by high windows, filled with ground glass.

Almost immediately two personages, who looked as if they belonged to a university, entered the room.

“You are brought before our notice as having somewhat distinguished yourself,” said one of them. “We are going to examine you to find out if there is any ground for admitting you into the model division. Are you prepared to answer our questions?”

Max modestly declared himself ready to be put to the test.

The two examiners then successively put questions to him in chemistry, geometry, and algebra. The young workman satisfied them in every case by the clearness and precision of his answers. The figures which he traced in chalk on the board were neat, decided, and elegant. His equations were set out most perfectly, in equal lines, like the ranks of a crack regiment. One of these demonstrations was so remarkable, and so new to the judges that they expressed their astonishment, and asked him where he had been taught.

“At .Schaffhaiisen, my native town, *hi* the elementary school.”

“Yon seem to’ be a good draughtsman?” “It was my strong point.”

“The education they give in Switzerland is decidedly very out of the ordinary,” one examiner remarked to the other. “We will give you two hours to execute this,” he resumed, handing to the candidate a drawing of a very complicated-looking steam-engine. “If you acquit yourself well you shall be admitted with the comment, ‘Perfectly satisfactory and very superior’. Left alone, Max set eagerly to work. When his judges re-entered at the expiration of the given time, they were so delighted with his diagram that they added to the promised comment, “We have not another draughtsman of equal talent.”

Our young workman was then again seized by the grey attendants, and with the same ceremonial, that is to say, the bandaged eyes, he was led to the office of the Director-General.

“You are offered admission to one of the studios in the model division,” said this personage. “Are you ready to submit to the rules and regulations?”

“I do not know what they are,” said Max; “but I presume they are acceptable.”

“They are these: First, you are compelled, as long as your engagement lasts, to reside in the same division. You cannot go out but by special and exceptional order. Second, you are subjected to military discipline; and you owe absolute obedience, under military penalties, to your superiors. As a setoff against this, you are like the non-commissioned officers of an army in the field, for you may, by regular stages, be raised to the highest grades. Third, you bind yourself by an oath never to reveal to any one what you see in the division to which you have access. Fourth, your correspondence is opened by your chiefs, all you send as well as all you receive; and it must be limited to

your own family."

"In short, I am in prison," thought Max.

Then he replied quietly-

"These rules seem perfectly just, and I am ready to submit to them."

"Good. Raise your hand. Take the oath. You are nominated draughtsman to the fourth studio. A lodging will be assigned to you, and for your meals you will find a first-rate canteen here. You haven't brought your property with you?"

"No, sir. As I didn't know what I was wanted for, I left my things in my

room."

"They will be brought to you, for you must not go out of the division

again."

"I did well," thought Max, "to write my notes in cipher! They would only have to look at them!"

Before the close of the day, Max was established in a pretty little room, in the fourth storey of a building overlooking a wide courtyard, and had framed some ideas about his new life.

He did not fancy that it would be as dismal as it seemed at first sight. His comrades, with whom he made acquaintance at the restaurant, were mostly quiet and gentle, like all industrious people. To brighten things up a little — for there was rather a lack of gaiety in their mechanical life — they had formed a band amongst themselves, and performed selections of very tolerable music every evening. A library, a reading room, during the rare hours of leisure, were valuable resources for the mind, from a scientific point of view. Special courses held by professors were obligatory for all the men employed, and they had besides to undergo frequent examinations and competitions. But fresh air and liberty were lacking in these narrow confines.

It was a regular college, only with extra strictness exercised on grown men. The surrounding atmosphere was bound to weigh on their spirits, subjected as they were to an iron discipline.

The winter passed away *in* these occupations, to which Max gave himself up heart and soul. Misapplication, the perfection of his drawings, his extraordinary progress *in* every subject he was taught, which was obvious to all his tutors and examiners, had made him, even *in* this short time and amongst all these diligent men, something of a celebrity. By general consent he was the most clever draughtsman of them all, the most ingenious, the most fruitful *in* resources. Did there arise any difficulty? they applied *to* him. Even the chiefs themselves resorted to his experience, with the respect which merit extorts even from the most marked jealousy. But if, on reaching the heart of the model division, the young man fancied that he would be any nearer getting at the innermost secrets, he was very much out in his reckoning.

His life at present was enclosed within an iron railing three hundred yards in diameter, surrounding the segment of the central block to which he was attached. Intellectually, his activity could and should extend to the highest branches of metallurgical industry. In practice, it was limited to drawing steam- engines. He constructed them of all dimensions and of all powers, for every kind of industry and use, for war-ships and for, printing-presses; but he never went beyond this highly-specialized task, this speciality. The division of

labour, pushed to its utmost limit, held him as in a-vise

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After four months passed in section A, Max knew no more of the layout of the works in the Steel City than he did on entering. At the most he had merely collected a little general information about the organization of the machinery of which — notwithstanding his merits — he formed but a very small portion. He knew that the centre of the spider's web, symbolical of Stahlstadt, was the Bull Tower, a kind of Cyclopean structure, overlooking all the neighbouring buildings.

He had learnt, too, through the rumours which circulated in the canteen, that the dwelling of Herr Schultz himself was at the base of this tower, and that the renowned secret room occupied its centre. It was added that this vaulted hall, protected against any danger of fire, and plated inside, as a battleship is plated outside, was closed by a system of steel doors with spring-gun locks, worthy of the most suspicious bank. The general opinion was that Professor Schultz was working at the completion of a terrible engine of war of unprecedented power, destined to assure universal dominion to Germany.

Max had revolved in his brain many most audacious plans of escalade and disguise, but had been compelled to admit that nothing of the sort was practicable. Those lines of sombre and massive walls, flooded with light during the night, and guarded by trusty sentinels, would always oppose an insuperable obstacle to every attempt. But even if he did partly overcome it what would he see? Details, always details, never the whole!

What matter! He had sworn not to yield, and he would not yield. If it took ten years, he would wait that time. But the hour was coming when that secret would be his own. It must! The happy city of Frankville was prospering, its beneficent institutions favouring each and all, and giving a new horizon of hope to a disheartened “people”. Max had no doubt that in the face of such a triumph of the Latin race, Schultz would be more than ever determined to make good his threats. Stahlstadt and its factories were a proof of that Thus many weeks passed away.

One day in March, Max had just for the hundredth time repeated his secret vow, when one of the grey-clad attendants told him that the Director-General wished to speak to him.

“I have received from Herr Schultz,” said this high functionary, “an order to send him our best draughtsman. You are the man. Make your arrangements to pass into the inner circle. You are promoted to the rank of lieutenant.”

Thus, at the very moment when he was almost despairing of success, his heroic toil at last procured him the entrance he so much desired!

Max was so filled with delight that it showed Itself in his face.

“I am happy to have such good news to announce *to* you,” continued the Director; “and I cannot refrain from urging you to continue in the path you have begun to tread so gallantly. A brilliant future is before you. Go, sir.”

So Max, after his long probation, caught the first glimpse of the end which he had sworn to reach!

To stuff all his clothes into his portmanteau, to follow the grey men, to pass through the last enclosure, of which the entrance *in* the A road might still have been forbidden to him, was the work of a few minutes.

He now stood at the foot of the inaccessible’ Bull Tower; until this moment he had *seen* only its lofty head reared among the clouds.-

The scene which lay before him was indeed unexpected. Imagine a man suddenly transported from a noisy, commonplace European workshop into the midst of a virgin forest in the torrid zone. Such was the surprise which awaited Max in the centre of Stahlstadt.

As a virgin forest gains in beauty from the descriptions of great writers, so was Professor Schultz’s park more beautiful than the most lovely of pleasure gardens. Slender palms, tufted bananas, curious cacti formed the shrubberies, creepers wound gracefully round eucalyptus trees, hung in green festoons, or fell in rich clusters. The most tender plants bloomed in abundance. Pineapples and guavas ripened beside oranges. Humming birds and birds of paradise displayed their brilliant plumage in the open air, for the temperature was as tropical as the vegetation.

Max instinctively looked around and above for glass and hot-air pipes

to account for this miracle; seeing nothing but the blue sky he stopped bewildered.

Then it flashed upon him that not far from the spot was a coal mine permanently on fire, and he guessed that Herr Schultz had ingeniously utilized this valuable subterranean heat, by means of metallic pipes, to maintain a constant hot-house atmosphere.

But this explanation did not prevent the young Alsacians eyes from being dazzled and charmed with the green lawns, while his nostrils inhaled with delight the delicious scents which filled the air. To a man who had passed six months without seeing even a blade of grass, it was truly refreshing. A gravelled path led him, by a gentle slope, to the foot of a handsome flight of marble steps, commanded by a majestic colonnade. Behind rose the huge and massive square building, which was as it were the pedestal of the Bull Tower.

Beneath the peristyle Max could see seven or eight servants in red livery, and a gorgeous porter in a cocked hat, and bearing a halberd. And he noticed rich bronze candelabra between the columns. As he ascended the steps a slight rumble told him that the underground railway lay beneath his feet.

Max gave his name, and was immediately admitted into a hall, a veritable museum of sculpture. Not having time to examine anything, he was conducted first through a saloon, adorned with black and gold, and then through one with red and gold ornaments, and finally he was left alone for five minutes in a yellow and gold saloon. At the end of that time a footman returned and showed him into a splendid green and gold study.

Herr Schultz in’ person, smoking a long clay pipe, with a tankard of beer at his side, had the effect, in the midst of all this luxury, of a spot of mud on a patent-leather boot.

Without rising, without even turning his head, the King of Steel merely said, in a cold tone —

“Are you the draughtsman?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I have *seen* your diagrams. They are very good. But do you understand nothing but steam-engines?”

“I have never been examined in anything else.”

“Do you know anything of the science of projectiles?”

“I have studied it in my spare time, and for my own pleasure.”

This reply interested Herr Schultz.

He deigned to turn and look at his employee.

“Well, will you undertake to design a cannon with me? We shall see what you can make of it! Ah! You will be scarcely able to take the place of that idiot of a Sohne, who got killed this morning whilst handling some dynamite! The fool might have blown us all up!”

It must be acknowledged that this revolting want of feeling was only what might have been expected from - the mouth of Hen Schuitz.

CHAPTER 8

THE DRAGON’S DEN

The reader who has followed the progress of our young Aisacian’s fortune will probably not be much surprised to find him, at the end of a few weeks, firmly established in Herr Schultz’s favour. The two had become inseparable. They worked together, they ate and walked together, and together they sat smoking over their foaming glasses of beer. The ex-professor of Iena had never before met with a coadjutor so entirely after his own heart, one who caught his meaning with half a word, ‘ and who could so- rapidly utilize his theoretical ideas.

Max not merely possessed transcendent merit in all branches of the profession, he was also the most charming companion, the most diligent worker, the most modestly fertile inventor.

Herr Schultz was delighted with him. Ten times a day he said to himself, “What a treasure! what a pearl this fellow is!”

The truth was that Max had, at the first glance, seen through the character of his formidable patron, and, perceiving that blind and insatiable vanity was its leading feature, he regulated his conduct by humouring the egotism which he despised.

In a dew days the young man had acquired such skill in the fingering necessary for this human keyboard, that he could play upon Schultz as easily as one plays on a piano.

His tactics merely consisted in exhibiting his own merits to advantage, but always in such a way as to leave an opening for his master to show superiority over him. For instance, when he finished a drawing he would leave

it perfect, with the exception of some slight fault, as easy to see as to correct, and this the ex-professor immediately and exultantly pounced upon.

Had he some theoretical idea, he developed it in the course of conversation in such a way that Herr Schultz might fancy that he himself had originated it. Sometimes he even went further, saying boldly —

“I have traced that plan of a battleship with the detachable ram which you asked f or.”

“Me?” returned Herr Schultz, who had never dreamt of such a thing.

“Why, yes! you don’t mean to say you have forgotten? A detachable ram, which will leave a spindle-shaped torpedo in the enemy’s side, to burst after three minutes!”

1 hadn’t the least recollection of it. That comes .of having a head like mine! it’s so full of inventive genius that I forget my own ideas,” And Herr Schultz conscientiously pocketed the credit of the new invention.

Perhaps, after all, he was only half duped by this artifice. In his innermost heart he probably felt that Max was stronger than he. But by one of those mysterious workings of the human brain, he was contented with the appearance of superiority as long as he could delude his subordinate.

“But the fellow must be an ass after all, in spite of his clevenest he would sometimes say to himself, with a silent laugh which showed all the thirty-two dominoes in his jaw.

His vanity, if it were-ever wounded, was soon consoled by the reflection that he alone in ail the world could carry out these inventions and ideas. They would have been of no value but for his gold. After all Max was only part of the mechanism which he, Schultz, had set going, and so on, and so forth.

Yet, though he was in such high favour, Max was never taken into the professor’s confidence, and after five months’ sojourn in the Bull Tower he knew little more than at first of its’ mysteries. His suspicions had become certainties, and that was all. He was now sure that Stahlstadt contained a secret, and that Herr Schultz had some aim far beyond that of mere profit. The nature of his occupation made it extremely probable that he had invented some completely new engine of warfare.

But the enigma had still to be solved. Max at last decided that he could never obtain the knowledge he. sought without bringing the affair to a head, and this he resolved to do.

It was after dinner on the evening of the 5th of September; exactly a

year since he had found the body of his little friend Carl in the Albrecht pit.

Outside, the long severe’ American winter had already covered the country with its white mantle; but in the park of Stahlstadt the temperature was as warm as during June, and the snow, melting before it touched the ground, fell in rain instead of flakes.

“Those sausages in sauerkraut were delicious, weren’t they?” remarked Herr Schultz, whose love of his favourite dish was unaffected by the Begum’s millions.

“Delicious!” returned Max, who had heroically partaken of this mess every evening, till at last he hated the very sight of it.

His feelings decided him at once to carry the project he meditated into

effect.

“I wonder,” resumed Herr Schultz, with a sigh, “how people can endure existence, when they have neither sausages, nor sauerkraut, nor beer.”

“Life must be one long misery to them,” replied Max. “It would really be a charity to unite all mankind with the Vaterland.”

“Well! well! that will come, that will come!” exclaimed the King of Steel. “Here we are already installed in the heart of America. Just let us take an island or two *in* the neighbourhood of Japan, and you will see in how few strides we shall get round the globe!”

The footman now brought in the pipes; Herr Schultz filled and lighted his. Max had purposely determined to make’use of this moment of supreme bliss, so he began, after a few minutes’ silence —

“I must say that I don’t quite believe in this conquest!”

“What conquest?” asked Herr Schultz, who had forgotten what was the topic of conversation.

“The conquest of the world by the Germans.”

The ex-professor thought he had not heard correctly.

“You don’t believe in the conquest of the world by the Germans?”

“No.”

“Oh, indeed, that’s a strange thing! I’d like to know the reasons for your doubt.”

“Simply because the French artillerymen will end by doing, better, and will far surpass you. The Swiss, my fellow-countrymen, who know them well, are firmly convinced that a Frenchman forewarned is worth two Germans. The lesson of 1870 will be repeated against those who gave it No one doubts this in my little country, sir, and if I may venture to say so, it is the opinion of the cleverest men in England.”

Max had uttered these words in a cool, dry, and decisive tone, which, if it were possible, doubled the effect of this downright blasphemy.

Herr Schultz glared wildly-his astonishment almost choked him. Then the blood rushed to his face with such violence that the young mari feared, for a moment, he had gone too far. However, seeing that rage had not stifled his victim, and that he would not die of the shock this time, he resumed —

“Yes, it is annoying to think of; but it’s the fact. Although our rivals- aren’t making any noise about it, yet they are working. Do you think they’ve learnt nothing since the war? Whilst we are stupidly trying to increase the weight of our cannon, you may be sure that they are preparing something new, and that we shall see what it is on the very first opportunity!”

“Something new, something new!” stammered Herr Schultz. “We are doing that too, sir!”

“Ah, yes, in a way. We are making in steel what our predecessors made in bronze, that’s all. We double the proportions and the range of our pieces.”

“Double!” exclaimed Herr Schultz, in a tone which signified, “Indeed! we do better than double!”

“In short,” resumed Max, “we are mere plagiarists See here, the truth is we lack any genius for inventing.

We discover nothing, and the French do — and will — you may be sure.”

Herr Schultz had become, outwardly at least, rather calmer, though his trembling lips, and the paleness which had succeeded the apoplectic crimson, betrayed the agitation of his mind.

Must he endure such a pitch of humiliation? To be the- far-famed Schultz, the absolute master of the greatest manufactory and cannon-foundry in the whole world, to have kings and parliaments at his feet, and then to be told by an insignificant Swiss draughtsman that he lacked inventiveness, that he was inferior to a French gunner! And all this when he had close to him, on the other side of a. plated wall, something which would confound the impudent rascal, a thousand times, shut him up completely and sweep away all his idiotic arguments? No, it was not to be endured!

Herr Schultz rose so abruptly that he broke his pipe. Then, casting at Max a glance full of irony, he hissed out from between his set teeth —

“Follow me, sir, I’m going to show you whether I, Herr Schultz, have any lack of inventiveness!”

Max had played high, but he had- won-thanks to the surprise his bold and unexpected language had produced, and the passion he had aroused.

Vanity being stronger than prudence with the ex-professor, Schultz was now eager to reveal his secret. He led the way with a hurried step into his study, closed the door carefully, and, walking straight up to the bookcase, he touched a panel. Immediately an opening, concealed by the rows of books, appeared in the wall. This was the entrance to a narrow passage, leading by a stone staircase to the very foot of the Bull Tower.

There an oaken door was opened by means of a little key which never left the possession of the master of the place. A second door appeared, fastened with a padlock, similar to those used for securing strong-boxes.

Herr Schultz threw open the heavy iron barrier, protected within by a complicated apparatus of explosive machinery, which Max, actuated by professional curiosity, would have much liked to examine; but his guide left him no time to do so.

The two men then found themselves before a third door, without any apparent lock or bolt, which yielded to a slight push, which had to be given, however, in a special way.

This third barrier passed, Herr Schultz and his companion climbed an iron staircase of two hundred steps, and arrived at the summit of the Bull Tower, overlooking all the city of Stahlstadt.

In the centre of a sort of casemate, pierced with numerous embrasures, stood a steel cannon.

“There!” exclaimed the professor, who had not uttered a word since they left the dining-room.

It was the most enormous piece of ordnance Max had ever beheld. A breach-loader of at least three hundred tons, its mouth measured nearly five feet in diameter. Mounted on a steel carriage, and running on rails of the same metal, it might have been manoeuvred by a child, so easy did a system of cogged wheels make all its movements. A spring, fixed at the back of the carriage, had the effect of annulling the recoil, or at least of producing a perfectly equal reaction, so that after each shot the gun returned to its original position.

“And what may be the perforating power of this piece?” asked Max, who could not restrain his admiration.

“At twenty thousand yards we can’ pierce a forty-inch plate as easily as if it were a slice of bread and butter!”

“And its range?”

“Its range?” cried Schultz, enthusiastically. “Ah! you said just now that our imitative genius had done nothing more than double the range of former guns! Well, with this fellow, I would undertake to send, with tolerable precision, a projectile to the distance of thirty miles!”

“Thirty miles!” cried Max. “Thirty miles! What new powder are you

using?”

“Oh! I can tell you everything now,” replied Herr Schultz in a peculiar tone. “There is no inconvenience in revealing my secrets to you. Large-grained powder has served its time. Gun-cotton is what I use; its expansive powder is four times that of ordinary powder, and I increase it fivefold by mixing with it eight-tenths of its weight of nitrate of potash.”

“But,” observed Max, “no piece, though made of the best steel, could stand that long. After four or five shots your cannon will be impaired, and soon become useless.”

“If it were only to fire one shot that one would be sufficient!”

“It would be an expensive one.”

“It would cost a million, for that is the net cost of the sy

“One shot worth a million!”

“What matter, so that it destroyed a thousand millions!”

“A thousand millions!” cried Max.

However, he restrained the mingled horror and admiration with which this fearful agent of destruction inspired him, and added —

“It is certainly a wonderful and astonishing piece ofartillery, but notwithstanding its merits, it bears out my theory, there are certainly improvements, but it is all limitation, no invention.”

“No invention!” responded Herr Schultz, shrugging his shoulders. “I repeat that I have no secrets from you now. Gome with me.”

The King of Steel and his companion then left the casemate and descended to a lower storey by means of an hydraulic lift. Here lay a large number of long objects, cylindrical in shape, which might, from a distance, have been taken for dismounted cannon.

“There are our shells,” said Herr Schultz.

This time Max was obliged to acknowledge that they resembled nothing he had ever seen before. They were enormous tubes, six feet in length and three in diameter, sheathed in lead in such a way as to fit into the rifling of the gun, closed behind by a steel plate, and with the point finished off by a steel tip, supplied with a percussion striker.

Nothing in their appearance indicated the special nature of these shells, though Max felt that they must contain some terrible element of destruction, surpassing all that had ever been made or thought of before.

“Can’t you guess?” asked Herr Schultz, seeing that his companion remained silent.

“Indeed, no, sir! Why should you want a shell so long and so heavy — in appearance at least?”

“Their appearance is deceitful,” answered Herr Schultz; “and there is no great difference in their weight from that of an ordinary shell of the same calibre. Come! I must tell you everything. A fusee shell of glass, encased in oak, charged with liquid carbon dioxide at seventy atmospheres of pressure. The fall brings about the explosion of the case and the return of the liquid to a gaseous state. An enormous volume of carbonic acid gas rushes into the air, and a cold of a hundred degrees below zero seizes upon the surrounding atmosphere. Every living thing within a radius of thirty yards from the centre of the explosion is at once frozen and suffocated. I say thirty yards at the lowest, but the action would really extend much farther, say to a hundred or a couple of hundred yards.

“Another capital thing about it is, that the gas, remaining a very long time near the ground, because it is heavier than air, will preserve the dangerous properties of the zone for many hours after the first explosion, so that any creature which may attempt to enter or pass through it must infallibly perish. The effect of that shot will be both instantaneous and lasting. Besides, with my plan, there will be no wounded, only dead!”

Herr Schultz displayed manifest pleasure *in* exhibiting the merits of his invention. His good humour had returned, he was flushed with pride, and his teeth gleamed.

“You are to imagine,” he resumed, “a sufficient number of my pieces of ordnance directed against a besieged town. Supposing one sufficient for the destruction of an area of two acres and a half, then, for a town of two thousand five hundred acres, we must have a hundred batteries, each consisting of ten suitable guns. Now, let us suppose all our guns in position, the weather calm and favourable, the general signal given by an electric wire. In a minute there would not be a single living being remaining in an area of two thousand five hundred acres! The town would be submerged in a regular ocean of carbonic acid gas! The idea occurred to me last year on reading the medical report of the accidental death of a little miner in the Albrecht pit. I had the first inspiration at Naples, when I visited the Dog Grotto.* *[The Grotto del Cano, in the neighbourhood of Naples, borrows its names from the curious property its atmosphere possesses of suffocating a dog, or any small four-legged animal, without doing any harm to a man standing upright-this is because of a layer of about two feet of carbonic acid gas, kept close to the ground by its specific weight.]* But that more recent event was needed to put the finishing touches to my idea. You comprehend the principle, don’t you? An artificial ocean of pure carbon dioxide! Now, the proportion of a fifth of this gas would be enough to make the air unbreathable.”

Max did not utter a word. He was in fact struck dumb. Herr Schultz felt his triumph so keenly that he did not wish to take advantage of it.

“There is only one detail which troubles me,” said he.

“And what can that be?” asked Max.

“That I have not succeeded in suppressing the sound of the explosion. It makes my gun too much like a common cannon. Just think of what it would be if I could fire it silently. On some calm and serene night, sudden death comes noiselessly upon a hundred thousand men at once!”

The enchanting prospect thus called up threw Herr Schultz into a brown study. From this reverie, which was only a deep immersion in a bath of self-love, he was aroused as Max observed —

“Very good, sir, very good! but a thousand guns of this description mean time and money.”

“Money? we are overflowing with it! Time? Time is ours!”

And indeed this German, the latest of his school, believed what he said.

“Well,” replied Max, “your shell loaded with carbon dioxide’ is not entirely new after all, for it is derived from those asphyxiating projectiles which have been known for many years; but that it may be eminently destructive, I do not deny. Only — ”

“Only?”

“It is light for its size, and if it is ever projected thirty miles — ”

“It is only made to go six,” answered Herr Schultz, smiling. “But,” he added, pointing to another shell, “here is one of steel. This fellow is full, and contains a hundred smaller guns, symmetrically arranged, fitted one into the other like the parts of a telescope. Having been fired as projectiles, they will become cannon to vomit forth in their turn tiny shells loaded with incendiary matter. It will be a whole battery hurled through space, to carry flame and death into a town by covering it with a shower of inextinguishable fire! This has enough weight to go the thirty miles that I mentioned. In a short time such a trial will be made of it that unbelievers may go if they like and handle the hundred thousand corpses which it will have stretched on the ground.”

Here the dominoes gleamed so intolerably in Herr Schultz’s mouth, that Max felt a strong desire to smash a dozen or so of them in, but he restrained himself. He had not yet heard everything.

Herr Schultz resumed —

“I have told you that a decisive experiment is shortly to be made.”

“How? Where?” cried Max.

“How? With one of these shells, which, thrown by my gun from the platform, will cross the Cascade Moun-tains. Where? There exists a city, separated from us by thirty miles at the most, upon whose inhabitants it will come like a thunder-clap, for even if they expected it they could not ward it off or escape its horrific events. This is now the 5th of September. Well, on the 13th, at a quarter before midnight, Frankville will disappear from off

American soil! The burning of Sodom will be rivalled. Professor Schultz, in his turn, will let loose the fires of Heaven!”

At this unexpected declaration Max felt the blood curdle in his veins. Fortunately Herr Schultz did not perceive agitation.

“Now you see,” he continued in an easy tone, “we act in just the opposite way from the founders of Frankville. We search for the secret of abridging the lives of men, whilst they seek to lengthen them. However, everything in nature has an object, and Dr. Sarrasin, by founding that isolated city, has, without suspecting it, placed within my reach, a most magnificent field of experiment”

Max could scarcely believe his ears. “But,” he said, and the involuntary tremor in his voice attracted the attention of the King of Steel for a moment, “the inhabitants of Frankville have done no harm to you, sir. So far as I know, you have not the slightest reason for picking a quarrel with them.”

“My dear fellow,” replied Herr Schultz, “in your brain, though well organized in other respects, there is a fund of Celtic ideas, which would do you

much injury were you to live long enough! Right-Good-Evil are purely relative, and quite conventional words. Nothing is positive but the grand laws of nature. The law of competition has the same force as that of gravitation. It is folly to resist, while to submit and follow in the way it pointsout is only wise and reasonable, and therefore I mean to destroy Doctor Sarrasin’s city. Thanks to my cannon, my fifty thousand Germans will easily make an end of the hundred thousand dreamers over there, who now constitute a group condemned to perish.”

Seeing that an attempt to argue with Herr Schultz would be useless, Max did not try to soften him.

The two then left the shell chamber, closed the secret doors, and returned to the dining-room.

In the coolest, most natural way, the professor again lifted his tankard to his lips, touched a bell, called for a pipe in the place of the one he had broken, and then addressing the footman — "Are Arminius and Sigimer there?" he asked. "Yes, sir."

"Tell them to remain within call."

When the servant had left the. room, the King of Steel turned to Max and looked him full in the face.

The latter's eyes did not quail before that look of almost metallic hardness.

"You really mean," said he, "to put your project into execution?"

"Really. I know the situation and the latitude and longitude of Frankville to the tenth of a second, and on the 13th of September, at a quarter before midnight, it will cease to be."

"Perhaps you ought to have kept this plan an absolute secret."

"My dear fellow," answered Herr Schultz, "decidedly your mind never would become logical. This makes me regret the less that you must die young." At these words Max started up. "Is it possible that you do not understand," added Herr Schultz, coldly, "that I never speak of my plans but before those who cannot repeat them?"

The bell rang. Arminius and Sigimer, two giants, appeared at the door. “You wished to know my secret,” said Herr Schultz, “you do know it. Nothing remains for you now but to die!” Max did not reply.

“You are too intelligent,” resumed Herr Schultz, “to suppose that I can let you live, now that you know all about my plans. That would be an act of unpardonable carelessness; that would be illogical. The greatness of my aim forbids me to compromise its success for the consideration of a relative value so trifling as the life of a man — even of such a man as you, my dear fellow, whose good cerebral organization I most particularly esteem. Now I truly regret that a slight impulse of self-love should have carried me away and placed me under the necessity of suppressing you. But you must understand that in the face of the interests to which I have devoted myself, there can be no question of sentiment. I may as well tell you now, that it was for having penetrated my secret that your predecessor met his death, and not by an explosion of dynamite! The rule *is* strict, it must be inflexible! I can alter nothing.”

Max looked at Herr Schultz. He understood by the sound of his voice, by the unrelenting obstinacy of that bald head that he was lost. He did not give himself the trouble of uttering a word of protest.

“When, and by what death shall I die?” he merely asked.

“Don’t be uneasy about that,” replied Herr Schultz, composedly. ^*Yon* will die; but suffering will be spared you. You will not wake up some morning. That is all.”

At a sign from the King of Steel, Max found himself led away, and shut into his room, the door of which was guarded by the two giants.

But when he found himself alone, he thought with a shudder of agony and rage of the doctor, his relations, compatriots, all those whom he loved.

“The death which awaits me is nothing,” he said to himself. “But how am I to avert the danger which threatens them?”

CHAPTER 9

« F.P.C.»

The situation was indeed serious. What could poor Max do, he whose hours were already numbered, and whose last night might have come with the setting sun?

He did not sleep for an instant — not from the dread of never awaking, as Herr Schultz had said, but because his heart was too full of thoughts of Frankville and of the impending catastrophe.

“What shall I attempt?” he thought to himself. “To destroy that gun? Blow up the tower it stands on? How could I manage it? Escape! Escape? when my room is guarded by a couple of giants? And then suppose I could get away from Stahlstadt before the 13th of September, how could I help them? To be sure, if I could not save our beloved city, I might at least save the inhabitants. I might fly to them shouting ‘Escape! escape without delay! You are in danger of perishing by fire and steel! Fly, all of you, for your lives!”“

Then Max’s thoughts passed into another channel.

“That villain Schultz!” he thought. “Even admitting that he has exaggerated the destructive effects of his shell, and that he cannot really set fire to the whole town, it is quite certain that with a single shot he can burn a considerable’ part! It’s a frightful machine he has invented, and notwithstanding the distance between the two-towns, it will easily send the projectile across! Its speed, too, must be twenty times superior to any hitherto obtained. Something like ten thousand yards, or nine miles a second! It’s actually a third of the speed of the earth in its orbit! Is it possible? Oh, if only that horrible gun would blow up at the first shot! But there is no hope of that, for-the metal it is made of will stand anything. How precisely the wretch knows the position of Frankville!

Without going out of his den, he can point his cannon with mathematical precision, and, as he said, the shell will undoubtedly fall in the very heart of the city! How can the unhappy inhabitants be warned?"

Max had not closed an eyelid when day dawned. He then rose from the bed, on which he had tossed in feverish restlessness. "Come," he said to himself, "it will be for another night. As this executioner means to spare me suffering, he no doubt will wait till sleep, getting the. better of my anxiety, has overpowered me. And then! What sort of death can he have in store for me? Does he mean to kill me with some decoction of prussic acid whilst I sleep? Will he introduce some of that carbon dioxide gas which he has at his disposal, into my room? Won t he prefer to use it in a liquid form, like that in his glass shells, when its sudden return to a gaseous state produces a hundred degrees of frost? And the next day instead of 'me/ instead of this strong, well-constituted body, so full of life, there will be nothing but a dried, frozen, shrivelled mummy! Oh, the savage! Well, well, if it must be so, let my heart be frozen and. my life wither away in that unbearable atmosphere, if only my friends, Doctor Sarrasin, his family, Jeannette-my little Jeannette-may be saved! But to achieve that I must escape. Well, escape I will!"

As he uttered these words, Max, though he believed himself locked into his room, instinctively laid his hand on the handle of the door.

To his great surprise it opened, and he went down as usual and out into the garden, where he was accustomed to walk.

“Ah,” he thought, “I am a prisoner in the Central Block, though not in my room. That’s something in my favour!”

However, no sooner-was Max outside, than he saw that though apparently free, in reality he could not make a step without being escorted by the two personages who answered to the historic, or rather pre-historic, names of Arminius and Sigimer.

He had often wondered, when he met them about the place, what could be the duty of those two huge men in grey cloaks, with their bull necks, herculean muscles, and dark red faces bristling with thick moustaches and bushy whiskers.

He now knew what that duty was. They were the executioners of Herr Schultz’s darkest deeds, who at the moment were acting as his bodyguards!

These two giants never let him out of their sight, lying at the door of his room and dogging his steps when he walked in the park. The formidable array of revolvers and daggers which each carried in his belt rendered hopeless any attempt to escape from them.

Moreover, they were as dumb as fish.

Max tried, in a diplomatic way, to get up a conversation with them, but he only received a ferocious glare in reply. Even the offer of a glass of beer, which he had some reason to suppose irresistible, was made in vain. After observing them for fifteen hours, he discovered that they had one weakness, only one — a pipe, which they took the liberty of smoking close at his heels. This single weakness Max determined to turn to account. How, he did not know, he could not even imagine, but he had vowed to escape, and nothing should be neglected that could in any way assist him.

Time was pressing. What was to be done?

At the least sign of rebellion or flight, Max was sure of receiving a couple of bullets in his head. Even supposing they missed, he was still in the centre of a triple fortified line, guarded by a triple row of sentinels.

According to his custom, the former pupil of the Central School correctly put the situation in the form of a mathematical problem.

“Given, a man guarded by two unscrupulous ruffians, individually stronger than himself, and armed to the teeth. The man must first escape the vigilance of these warders. This done, he must get out of a fortified place, all the entrances to which are strictly watched.”

Max pondered this double question a hundred times, but always came to the conclusion “Which is impossible,” However, the gravity of his situation seemed to sharpen all his faculties of invention. Whether chance alone gave the finishing touch or not would be difficult to say.

It happened that the next day, as Max was walking in the park, his eyes fell on a shrub whose appearance instantly attracted him.

It was a dull-looking herbaceous plant, its leaves alternately oval, pointed and double, with great red bell-shaped monopetalous flowers hanging by auxiliary stalks.

Max had merely studied botany as an amateur, but it immediately occurred to him that this shrub had the characteristics of one of the order Solanaceae.

Quite at a venture, he gathered a leaf and chewed it slightly as he pursued his walk. He was not mistaken. A feeling of heaviness in his limbs, accompanied by a sensation of nausea, soon convinced him that he had close at hand a natural laboratory of bella-donna which is the most active of all narcotics.

He strolled on until he reached a small artificial lake, which stretched away to the southern end of the park, and supplied a cascade, which, he noticed, was evidently copied from that in the Bois de Boulogne.

“Where does the water of that cascade go?” thought Max.

It first flowed into the bed of a little river, which, after describing various turns and bends, finally disappeared at the limits of the park.

There was evidently an outlet, and, to all appearances the river escaped by filling one of the subterranean channels which watered the plain beyond Stahl-stadt.

In this Max saw a gate of egress. It was certainly not a carriage-way, but it was an opening.

“And suppose the channel is barred by an iron grating!” objected the voice of prudence.

“Nothing venture, nothing have! Files weren’t made to gnaw away corks, and there are capital files in the laboratory!” so answered another ironical voice, one that prompted a daring resolve.

In two minutes Max’s determination was made. An idea — as it might be called — had darted into his mind, one that after all could not perhaps be carried out, but which he would attempt if death did not overtake him first.

He sauntered back towards the shrub with red flowers, and gathered two or three leaves in such a way that his guards could not fail to see him.

Then, returning to his room, he. quite openly dried these leaves before the fire, rubbed them between his hands to crush them, and mixed them with his tobacco.

During the six following days, Max, to his extreme surprise, woke up quite well every morning. Had Herr Schultz, whom he had not seen again and whom he never met in his walks — had he given up his plan of making away with him? No, this was not likely, any more than he would relinquish his scheme for destroying Doctor Sarrasin's city.

Max made use of this permission to live, and every day renewed his manoeuvre. He took care, of course, never to smoke the bella-donna himself, and so he kept two packets of tobacco, one for his personal use, the other for daily show. His object was simply to arouse the curiosity of Arminius and Sigimer. Confirmed smokers like these two ruffians, would soon be sure to notice the shrub from which he took the leaves, copy him, and see how they

liked the mixture.

This idea was correct, and the result proved equal to his anticipation.

On the sixth day, the eve of the fatal 13th of September, Max, as he glanced carelessly behind him, had the satisfaction of seeing his guards collect a small supply of the green leaves.

An hour later, he noticed that they were drying them at the fire, rubbing them in their great horny hands, and mixing them with their tobacco. They seemed already to be licking their lips in anticipation.

Was it Max's intention merely to stupefy Arminius and Sigimer? No, that was not enough. Even when he had eluded their vigilance he would still have to pass down that stream, even if it should prove to be miles in length. But he had arranged his plan. It was true that there were nine chances in ten that he would perish; but as he was already condemned to death, that did not matter much.

Evening came, and with it the supper hour, and afterwards a walk. The inseparable trio took the way into the park.

Without hesitating, without losing a minute, Max proceeded straight towards a building which stood alone, and which was no other than the workshop where all the models were made. He sat down on a bench outside, filled his pipe, and began to smoke.

Arminius and Sigimer, who had their pipes all ready, sat down on a neighbouring seat and soon were puffing away.

The effects of the narcotic were not long in becoming visible.

Before five minutes had passed, the two clumsy giants were yawning and stretching like bears in a cage. Their eyes grew dim, a dull sound boomed in their ears; their complexions changed from red to purple, their arms fell useless at their sides, their heads dropped on their breasts.

Their pipes slipped to the ground.

Then followed a loud snoring, which mingled with the twittering of the birds who lived all the year round in the perpetual summer of the Stahlstadt park.

Now was Max’s time. His impatience may be imagined, when *it* is remembered that during the next night, at a quarter before midnight, Frankville, which Herr Schultz had sentenced, would cease to exist.

He darted into the workshop. It was a large building, a perfect museum of models. Hydraulic machines, locomotives, stationary engines, portable engines, suction pumps, boring machines, ships, ship machinery, in fact, the masterpieces it contained would be too numerous to mention. It was a collection of wooden models of everything made in the Schultz manufactory since its foundation, and you may be sure that many cannon, torpedoes, and shells were amongst them.

The night was dark, and favourable to the young Alsacian’s daring project. Besides accomplishing his escape he hoped to destroy the Stahlstadt Model Museum.

How he longed to annihilate that huge Bull Tower, with its destructive cannon and all it contained! But it was useless to think of that.

Max’s first care was to seize a little steel saw, suitable for filing iron, which was hanging from a tool rack, and to slip it into his pocket. Then taking a match from his box, he struck it, set fire to a heap of drawings and flimsy fir- wood models and rushed’out.

Spreading among all these inflammable materials, the fire increased with great rapidity, and flames speedily burst forth from every part of the building. The alarm-bell rang, the electric wire carried the news to every quarter of Stahlstadt, peals sounded, and firemen and engines hastened from all directions.

At the same moment Herr Schultz, vhose presence was well calculated to encourage the workers, made his appearance.

In a very few minutes, the boilers were under pressure and the powerful pumps at work. But in spite of the deluges of water which fell on the walls and roofs, the lire gained force, and it was soon clear that all hope of mastering it must be given up. It was a grand and terrible spectacle.

Crouched in a corner, Max never lost sight of Herr Schultz, who cheered on his men as if assaulting town There was no necessity for him to give a further helping hand to the fire. The Museum, standing as it did alone in the park, would soon be entirely consumed.

Herr Schultz, seeing that the building itself could not possibly be saved, suddenly shouted out —

“Ten. thousand dollars to whoever will save model, number 3175, from the glass case in the centre!”

This was the model of Schultz’s famous cannon, and he valued it above

all other things in the Museum.

To reach it, however, a person would be compelled to make his way through a deluge of sparks and falling wood, and an unbreathabie atmosphere of dense black smoke. It was ten to one that he would escape with his life. So notwithstanding the magnificence of Herr Schultz’s offer, no one answered his appeal At last a man presented himself. It was Max.

“I will go,” said he.

“You!” exclaimed Herr Schultz.

“Yes, I!”

“It won’t save you from the sentence of death pronounced against you, so don’t imagine it!”

“I’m not suggesting that, simply to snatch your precious model from destruction.”

“Go on then,” answered Herr Schultz, “and I swear that if you succeed, the ten thousand dollars shall be faithfully made over to your heirs.”

“I will depend on you for that,” returned Max.

Several of the Galibert apparatus were brought to him; they were always at hand in case of fire, as they enabled men to venture into the densest smoke. Max had already made use of one when he tried to save from death dame Bauer’s boy, poor little Carl.

One of these was soon filled with air and placed on his back. He put the pincers on his nose, took the tube in his mouth and darted into the smoke.

“At last!” said he. “This compressed air will last for a quarter of an hour! Heaven grant that may be enough time!”

As may be imagined, Max had not the slightest intention of endeavouring to save Schultz’s model cannon. His life every moment in dire peril, he made his way across the smoke-filled hall, amidst a shower of blazing brands and charred beams. Mercifully none of them touched him, and just as the roof fell in with a fearful crash, he escaped at the opposite side of the building.

To fly towards the stream, to run along its banks till he reached the unknown opening and to plunge in, was the work of only a few seconds.

The rapid current swept him along in a depth of seven or eight feet. He had no need to guide himself, for the water bore him as straight as if he had held Ariadne’s clue.

He soon found that he had entered a narrow channel, a sort of pipe, completely filled by the overflow of the river.

“How long can this tunnel be?” thought Max. “Everything depends on that! If I do not get through it in a quarter of an hour, the air will fail and I am lost!”

He maintained his coolness and presence of mind. Ten minutes had passed, when he was suddenly driven up against some obstacle.

This was an iron grating on hinges that barred the way down the tunnel.

“This is what I feared!” thought Max simply. Without losing a moment, he took the saw from his pocket, and set to work on the bolt of the staple.

Five minutes labour did not loosen it, and the grating remained obstinately closed. Already Max breathed with difficulty. There came a buzzing in his ears, the blood mounted in his head, he felt he’ would soon lose consciousness.

He tried, however, to make, the most of the small quantity of air remaining by taking breath as seldom as possible. Though half sawn through, the bolt would not yield! At that moment the saw slipped from his hands. “Surely God himself cannot be against me!” was his thought.

And grasping the grating with both hands, he shook it with the despairing energy given by the instinct of self-preservation.

The grating opened. The bolt had given way, and the current carried the daring Alsacian onwards, nearly suffocated, yet still feebly struggling, as he inhaled the last vestiges of air in the reservoir!

The next day, when Herr Schultz’s men ventured into the ruins left by the fire, they searched in vain among all the debris and the still smouldering cinders for any trace of human remains. Clearly the brave workman must have perished.

His daring act did not astonish any of the friends who had known him in the various workshops. •

The precious model had not been saved, but the man who knew the secrets of the Steel King was dead.

“Heaven can witness that I wished to spare him any suffering,” Herr Schultz said to himself, in his usual serene fashion. “At any rate, as I don’t know his heirs, I have saved ten thousand dollars!”

Such was the only funeral oration which the philosophical professor pronounced over the supposed grave of our young Alsacian!

CHAPTER 10

AN ARTICLE FROM *UNSERE CENTURIE,* A GERMAN REVIEW

A month prior to these events a periodical entitled *Our Century-it* had a salmon-coloured wrapper-published the following article regarding Frankville. This article was particularly relished by the fastidious people of the German Empire, perhaps because it studied that city only from a purely material point of view:

“We have already given our readers an account of the extraordinary phenomenon which has been produced on the western coast of the United States* The great American republic, owing to the large proportion of emigrants included in its population, has for .long accustomed the world to’ a succession of surprises; but the last, and certainly the most singular, is that of a city named Frank-ville. Though the very idea of it did not exist five years ago, it is now flourishing, and in the highest degree of prosperity.

“This marvellous city has risen as if by enchantment on the balmy shores of the Pacific We will not inquire whether it is true (as we are assured) that the first plan and idea of this enterprise is due to a Frenchman, Doctor Sarrasin. The thing is possible, as this doctor may boast a distant relationship with our illustrious King of Steel. We may also say in passing, it is rumoured that a considerable inheritance, which should properly have come to Herr Schultz, has had something to do with the founding of Frankville. Wherever any good springs up in the world, we may be certain that it is from German seed; this is a truth we are proud of stating whenever an opportunity offers. But, however that may be, we now wish to give our readers some precise and authentic details on the subject of the spontaneous mushroom-like growth of a model city.

“It is useless to look for its name on the map. Even the great atlas in three hundred and seventy-eight folio volumes, by our eminent Tuchtigmann, in which every thicket and clump of trees in the old and new world are put in with such exactitude, even this noble monument to geographical science, designed for the use of snipers, does not bear the least trace of Frankville.

“The place where the new city now stands was five years ago a complete desert. The exact spot lies 43° 11’ 3” north latitude, and 124° 41’ 17” west longitude.

“It will be seen that this is on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, and at the foot of the secondary chain of the Rocky Mountains, called the Cascade Mountains, sixty miles to the north of White Cape, Oregon State, North America.

“This most advantageous site has been carefully sought and chosen from among a number of others. The prominent reasons for its adoption are the temperate climate of the northern hemisphere, which has always been at the head of terrestrial civilization; its position, in the middle of a federative republic, and in a newly-formed State, which has allowed it to secure its independence, with rights similar to those possessed by the principality of Monaco in Europe, on the condition that after a certain number of years it would enter the: Union. Its situation on the Ocean, which is becoming more and more the great highway of the globe; the varied fertile, and salubrious nature of the soil; the proximity of a chain of mountains, sheltering it from the north, south, and east winds, leaving to the fresh Pacific breeze the task of renovating the atmosphere of the city; the possession of a small river, whose fresh, sweet, clear water, oxygenated by repeated falls, and by the rapidity of its flow, arrives perfectly pure at the sea; lastly, a natural port, formed by a long curved promontory, which may easily be enlarged by breakwaters.

“A few secondary advantages may be mentioned, such as the proximity of fine marble and stone quarries, deposits of kaolin, and even traces of auriferous ore. In fact, this last detail was almost the cause of the site’s being given up, for the founders of the town feared that, the gold-fever might interfere with their plans. Fortunately, however, the nuggets were found to be small and far from numerous.

“The choice of a territory, although decided upon *after* serious and close study, took but a few days, and was not made the subject of a special expedition. Science is now so far advanced that, without leaving his study, a man may gather exact and particular information about the most distant

regions.

“This point decided, two representatives of the Organization Committee took the first boat from Liverpool, arrived in eleven days’ at New York, and in seven more at San Francisco, where they chartered a steamer, which in ten hours landed them on the proposed site.

“To come to terms with the legislature of Oregon, to obtain a grant of twelve miles of land on the shores of the sea on the flanks of the Cascade Mountains, to indemnify with a few millions of dollars the half-dozen planters who had some real or supposed rights on the ground, all this business did not take more than a month.

“By January, 1872, the territory was already, surveyed, measured, laid out, and an army of twenty thousand Chinese coolies, under the direction of five hundred overseers and European engineers, were hard at work. Placards posted up all over the State of California, an advertisement van permanently attached to the express train, which starts every morning from San Francisco to traverse the American continent, and a daily article in the twenty-three newspapers of that town, were sufficient to ensure the recruiting of the labourers. It was not even found necessary to resort to the expedient of publishing on a grand scale by means of gigantic letters sculptured on the peaks of the Rocky Mountains, that men were wanted. It must be said that the influx of Chinese coolies into western America had just at this time caused much perturbation in the labour market. Several States had, in the interest of their own population, actually expelled these unfortunate people *en masse*. The building of Frankville came just in time to save them from perishing. Their wages, fixed at a dollar a day, were not to be paid them until the works were finished, and their rations were distributed by the municipal administration. Thus all the disorder and shameful speculations, which so often attend any great displacement of population, were avoided. The wages were deposited every week, in the presence of delegates in the great Bank of San Francisco, and every coolie was warned that when he drew it out he was not to return. This precaution was absolutely necessary to get rid of a yellow population, which would otherwise have infallibly lowered the tone and standard of the new city. The founders having, besides, reserved the right of granting or refusing permission to live there, the application of this measure was comparatively easy.

“The first great enterprise was the establishment of a branch railway, connecting the territory of the new town with the trunk of the Pacific Railroad, and running to Sacramento. These works, and those of the harbour, were pushed on with extraordinary activity. In April, the first train, direct from New York, brought to the Frankville terminus the members of the Committee, who, until this time, had remained in Europe.

“In this interval, the general planning of the town, the details of habitations and public monuments had been halted.

“This was not from want of materials; from the very first, American industry had hastened to load the quays of Frankville with every imaginable requisite for building. It was merely the difficulty of choice. The founders at last decided that the freestone should be reserved for national edifices and general ornamentation, and that all houses should be built of brick. Not, it must be understood, of common roughly-moulded half-baked bricks, but of light, well-shaped ones, regular in size, weight, and texture, and pierced from end to end with a series of cylindrical and parallel holes. These bricks, when placed together, allowed the air to circulate freely throughout the walls of the building. [These plans as well as the general idea, are borrowed from Doctor Benjamin Ward Richardson, Member of the Royal Society of London], This arrangement had at the same time the valuable effect of deadening sounds, and giving complete independence to each apartment.

“The Committee did not wish to impose a stereotyped model on the builders. They were averse to a wearisome and insipid uniformity, and merely gave a certain number of fixed rules, to which the architects were bound to adhere.

“1st — Each house to stand alone in a plot of ground planted with trees, grass, and flowers, and to be inhabited by a single family,

“2nd — No house to be more than two stories high; air and light must not be monopolized by some, to the detriment of others.

“3rd — Every house must be set back ten yards from the road, and divided from it by a breast-high railing. The space between the building and the railing must be laid out as a garden.

“4th — The walls to be built of the patent tubular bricks, similar to the model. All ornamentation to be left to the. taste of the architect.

“5th — The roofs to be in terraces, slightly inclined from the four sides, covered with bitumen, surrounded by a balustrade high enough to render

accidents impossible, and proper channels made to carry away rainwater.

“6th — All the houses must be built on a vaulted foundation, open on each side, and thus forming under the ground-floor an aerated subsoil, as well as a hall. All water-pipes must be exposed, running up the central pillar, in such a way that it may be always easy to ascertain their condition, and in case of fire, to be able to obtain the necessary water immediately. The floor of this hall, rising about three inches above the level of the road, must be properly gravelled. A door and a special staircase will place it in direct communication with the kitchens and- other usual offices, so that all household transactions may go on without offending either the eyes or the nose.

“7th — The kitchens and other usual offices will, contrary to the usual custom, be ‘placed in the upper storey, and, in communication with the terrace. A lift, moved by mechanical power, which, like artificial light and water, will be supplied at reduced prices .to the inhabitants, will easily convey all loads to this level.

“8th — The plan of the rooms is left to individual taste. But two dangerous elements of illness, nests indeed of miasma and laboratories of poison, are to be -strictly excluded — carpets and painted papers. The floors, beautifully inlaid with valuable woods by clever workmen, would be quite wasted were they hidden under a woollen cloth of doubtful cleanliness. The walls, lined with polished bricks, present the brilliancy and variety of the inner apartments of Pompeii, with a luxury of colour, which painted paper, charged with its thousand subtle poisons, could never reach. They are washed as windows are washed, and scrubbed like ceilings and floors. Not even a germ of anything harmful can be harboured there.

“9th-Each bedroom is distinct from the dressing-room. It cannot be too much recommended that the former apartment, where a third of a man’s life is passed, should be the largest, the most airy, and at the same time the most simple. It must only be used for sleep; four chairs, an iron bedstead, supplied with two frequently-beaten mattresses, is the only necessary furniture. Eiderdown quilts and heavy coverlets, powerful allies of epidemics, are excluded as a matter of course. Good woollen coverings, light and warm, and easily washed, replace them well. Though curtains and draperies are not absolutely forbidden, it is recommended that, if used, they should be made of washable materials.

“10th-Each room may be warmed according to fancy by wood or coal; but to every chimney is a corresponding opening to the outer air. The smoke, instead of issuing through the roof, is led away by subterranean pipes to special furnaces, established, outside the town, at the back of the houses, at the rate of a furnace to every two hundred inhabitants. There it is deprived of the particles of carbon which it bears, and is discharged in a colourless state into the air, at a height of thirty-five yards. Such are the ten rules imposed on the building of each particular house.

“The general arrangements are no less carefully studied.

“The plan of the town is essentially simple and regular, the roads crossing at right angles, at equal distances, of a uniform width, planted with trees, and numbered.

“Some of the roads being wider, are then called boulevards or avenues, and leave space on one side for rails for tramways and metropolitan railways. Public gardens are numerous, and ornamented with fine copies of the masterpieces of sculpture, until the artists of Frankville shall have produced original pieces worthy to replace them.

“Every industry and trade is freely permitted.

“Any one wishing to have the right of living in Frankville must give good references, be qualified to follow a useful or liberal profession in industry, science, or the arts, and must undertake to keep the laws of the town. An idle life would not be tolerated there.

“There are already a large number of public edifices. The most important are the Cathedral, chapels, museums, libraries, schools and gymnasiums, fitted up with the luxury and hygienic skill worthy of a great city.

“It is needless to say that from the age of four years all children are obliged to follow physical and intellectual exercises, calculated to develop the brain and muscles. They are also accustomed to such strict cleanliness that they consider a spot on their simple clothes quite a disgrace.

“Individual and collective cleanliness is the great idea of the founders of Frankville. To clean, clean unceasingly, so as to destroy the miasmas constantly emanating from a large community, such is the principal work of the central government. For this purpose, all the contents of the drains are led out of the town, condensed, and daily transferred to the fields.

“Water flows everywhere in abundance.

“The streets are paved with, bituminized wood; and the stone footpaths are as spotless as a courtyard in Holland. The provision markets are subject to strict surveillance, and any merchants who dare to take liberties with the public health incur the severest penalties. The man who sells a bad egg, damaged meat, or a pint of adulterated milk, is simply treated as the poisoner he really is. This necessary and delicate office is confided | to experienced men, who are specially trained for it. Their jurisdiction extends to the very laundries, which are on a large scale and provided with steam engines, artificial dryers, and, above all, with disinfecting-rooms. No body-linen is sent back to its owners without being thoroughly bleached, and special care is taken never to mix the washing of two families. This simple precaution is of great value.

“Hospitals are few in number, for the system of home-nursing is general, and they are reserved for homeless strangers and exceptional cases. The idea of making the hospital larger than any, other building, and of putting seven or eight hundred patients under one roof, so as to produce a centre of infection, would not enter the heads of the founders of this model city. Far from this, it is in their own, as well as in the public interest, to isolate the sick as much as possible* This is the plan pursued in the houses, the hospitals being merely for ‘the temporary accommodation of the most pressing cases.

“Twenty or thirty patients . at most, each having a separate apartment, are put into these light barracks, which are built of fir-wood, and burnt regularly every year. They have, besides, the advantage of being easily carried from one part of the town to another as they are wanted, and, being all on one model, can be.multiplied to any extent.

“Another Ingenious institution is that of a body of experienced nurses, specially trained for the purpose, and always at the disposal of the public, These women, being carefully chosen, are most valuable and devoted aids to

the doctors, They bring into the bosom of families that practical knowledge, so necessary and yet so often absent; in the time of danger it Is their mission to prevent the spread of the disease as well as to tend the sick, “We should never end were we to attempt to enumerate all the hygienic perfections Inaugurated by the founders of this new town. On his arrival each citizen is presented with a small pamphlet, in which the most . important principles of a life regulated according to science, are set forth In clear and simple language,

“He is there told ‘that the perfect equilibrium of all the functions is one of the necessities for health, that work and rest are equally Indispensable, that fatigue Is as necessary for the brain as for “the muscles; that nine-tenths of the Illnesses are owing to contagion transmitted by air and food, He cannot surround his dwelling and his person with too many sanitary precautions. To avoid -the use of exciting poisons, to practice bodily exercises, to conscientiously perform *every* day some appointed duty, to drink pure water, to eat fresh meat and vegetables simply prepared, to sleep regularly seven or eight hours a night, such is the A B C of health,

“Beginning from the first principles laid down by the founders, we have been led on to speak of this singular city as already finished It is Indeed so; the first houses built, the others rose as If by magic, A man should have previously visited “the far west In order to realize the Wonderful change The site that was a desert in the month of January 1872, contained six thousand houses in 1873. In 1874, it possessed nine thousand, complete with all public edifices.

“Speculation has certainly had its part in this unheard-of success. The ground having cost nothing, the houses could be sold or let at very moderate prices. There being no taxes, the political independence of this isolated little territory, its novelty, and the pleasant climate, all contributed to induce emigration. At the present time Frankville contains nearly a hundred thousand inhabitants.

“But to us the most interesting part of it is that the result of the sanitary experiment is conclusive.

“Whilst the annual mortality in the most favoured towns of Europe or the New World has never been less than three per cent, in Frankville for these five years the average has been one and a half. Even this figure had been increased by a slight fever epidemic during the first summer. That of the last year was only one and a quarter. And a more important circumstance still, is that, with but a few exceptions, all the deaths actually registered were due to specific and hereditary affections. Accidental illnesses have been at once much rarer, and less dangerous, than in any other great centre. As to epidemics properly so called, nothing has been seen or heard of them.

“It will be interesting to follow the development of this attempt, and certainly intriguing to discover if the influence of this scientific regime may not in the course of a generation, or more likely still, after several generations, weaken hereditary and morbid predispositions.

“It is assuredly not too much to hope as one of the founders has written, ‘and if so what may not be the grandeur of the result! Everybody living for ninety or a hundred years, and then only dying of old age, as do the greater number of animals and plants.

“There is something enchanting in such a dream! Nevertheless, if we may be allowed to express our sincere opinion, we have but an indifferent belief in the actual success of this experiment. We see in it a fundamental and probably a fatal flaw, which is its being in the hands of a Committee in which the Latin element prevails, and from which the German element has been systematically excluded. That is a bad sign. Since the world began nothing durable has been made but by Germany, and without her nothing perfect can be effected. The founders of Frankville may clear the ground, and elucidate some special points; not, however, on this spot in America, but on the borders of Syria, shall we one day see the true model city arise.”

CHAPTER 11

AT DINNER WITH DOCTOR SARRASIN

On the 13th of September, although it wanted but a few hours to the time fixed on by Professor Schultz for the destruction of Frankville, neither the governor nor anyone among the inhabitants dreamed of the danger which threatened them.

Seven o’clock in the evening arrived.

Half buried in thick masses of oleander and tamarinds, the beautiful city lay at the foot of the Cascade Mountains, its marble quays gently caressed by the waves of the Pacific. The carefully watered roads, freshened by the breeze, presented a cheerful and animated spectacle. The trees which shaded them rustled softly. The velvet lawns were fresh and green. Brilliant beds of flowers exhaled their sweetness around the calm and smiling white houses. The air was warm and balmy, and the sky as blue as the sea which glittered at the end of the long avenues.

A stranger arriving in the town would have been at once struck with the healthful look of the inhabitants and the activity in the streets. The academies of painting, music, and sculpture, and the library, all in the same quarter, had just been closed. Excellent public courses were given there to small classes, so that each pupil might get the full advantage of the lesson. Among the crowds issuing from these places, and naturally causing some stoppage, not an exclamation of impatience, nor an angry look, was heard or seen. The general aspect was one of calmness and satisfaction.

Not in the centre of the town but on the shores of the Pacific had Doctor Sarrasin built his house. It had been among the first put up, and he had come immediately and settled himself there with his wife and daughter Jeannette.

Octavius, the extempore millionaire, had chosen to remain in Paris; but he had no longer Max for a mentor.

The two friends had almost lost sight of each other since they lived together in the Rue du Roi de Sicile.

When the doctor emigrated with his wife and daughter to the coast of Oregon, Otto was his own master. He soon neglected college, where his father had wished him to continue his studies, and was in consequence plucked in the final examination in which his friend Max came out first.

Till then, poor Otto, who was incapable of managing for himself, had had Max for a guide. When the young Alsacian left, his companion at once began to see life in Paris. He passed the greater part of his time on the box of a four-in-hand coach, driving perpetually between the Avenue Marigny, where he had rooms, and the various suburban race-courses.

Otto Sarrasin, who, three months before could scarcely manage to stick on a horse hired by the hour, had suddenly become deeply versed in the mysteries of hip-pology. His erudition was borrowed from an English groom who had entered his service, and who, because o£ the superiority of his special knowledge ruled him entirely.

Interviews with tailors, saddlers, and bootmakers occupied the mornings. His evenings were spent at the theatres and in the rooms of an ostentatious newly-formed club which he had just opened at the corner of Trouchet Street, and chosen by Otto because the people he met there paid to his money a homage which his personal merits had not hitherto received.

He thought the company highly distinguished. It was noticeable that the handsomely-framed list hanging in the waiting-room bore few except foreign names. Titles abounded, so that you might almost fancy yourself in the antechamber of an heraldic college. But on penetrating farther one might imagine oneself in a living ethnological exhibition. All the big noises and bilious complexions of the two hemispheres seemed to have assembled there.

Otto Sarrasin reigned paramount among these worthies. His words were quoted, his neckties copied, his opinions accepted as articles of faith. And intoxicated with this incense of flattery, he never realized that he was systematically losing money, gambling and at the races. Perhaps certain members of the club, in their Oriental capacity, thought that they had some claims on the Begum's heritage. At any rate, they were able to gradually draw it into their pockets by a slow but continual process.

In this new life the ties which bound Otto to Max Bruckmann were soon loosened. At last, the two friends exchanged letters only at long intervals. What could there be in common between the eager hard-working man, solely occupied with bringing his intellect to the highest point of culture and strength, and the idle youth, puffed up with his riches, his thoughts filled only with club and stable gossip?

We know how Max left Paris, first to keep a watch on Herr Schultz, who had just founded Stahlstadt, the rival to Frankville, and then actually to enter the services of the King of Steel.

For two years Otto led his useless and dissipated life. Then a weariness of these hollow and worthless pleasures seized him, and one fine day, after having wasted some millions of francs, he rejoined his father, thus escaping from moral and physical ruin. At the moment he was living in the doctor's house in Frankville.

His sister Jeannette was now a lovely girl of nineteen, to whose French grace her four years' stay in the new country had added all the good American qualities. Her mother said sometimes that before having her so completely to herself, she had never felt the charm of perfect intimacy with her.

As to Madame Sarrasin, since the return of her prodigal son, the child of her hopes, she was as completely happy as any one can be here below, for she associated herself with all the good her husband could and did do with his immense fortune. On the evening of which we have spoken, Doctor Sarrasin had invited to dinner two of his most intimate friends, Colonel Hendon, an old hero of the War of Secession, who had left an arm at Pittsburg, and an ear at Sevenoaks, but who could hold his own with any one at a game of chess; and Monsieur Lentz, Director-General of Instruction in the new city.

The conversation turned on the plans for the administration of the town, and the results already obtained in the various public services, institutions,

hospitals, and mutual-aid societies.

M. Lentz, following the doctor's programme, in which religious teaching was not forgotten, had founded several elementary schools, where it was the schoolmaster's duty to develop the mind of the child by submitting it to a sort of intellectual gymnastic exercise, devised so as to follow the natural bent of its faculties. The child was taught to love a science before being crammed with it, thus avoiding that knowledge which, says Montaigne, "floats on the surface of the brain," without penetrating the understanding, or rendering its possessor either wiser or better. Later, a well-prepared intellect can choose its path for itself and follow it profitably.

In this well-ordered education the principles of health took a foremost

place.

Man should have equal command both of his mind and body. If one fails him he suffers for it, and the mind especially, if unsupported by the body, would soon give way.

Frankville had now reached the highest degree of intellectual, as well as of temporal, prosperity. In its Congress were collected all the illustrious and learned men of the two worlds. Artists, painters, sculptors, musicians, crowded to this city attracted by its reputation.

All the young people of Frankville, who promised some day to enlighten this corner of America, studied under these masters. This new Athens-of French origin-was on the way to become the first of cities. A sound military, as well as a civil, education was given in the colleges. All the young men were taught the use of firearms, and the first principles of strategy and tactics.

When this became the subject of conversation, Colonel Hendon declared himself delighted with all his recruits.

“They are,” he said, “already accustomed to forced marches, fatigue, and all kinds of manly exercises. Our army is composed of citizens, and when the time comes to prove them, they will be found to be disciplined and trustworthy soldiers.”

Frankville was on the best terms with all the neighbouring States, for she had seized every occasion to cooperate with them; but ingratitude speaks so loudly when a people's own interests are in question that the doctor and his friends resolved not to lose sight of the maxim: "Heaven helps those who help themselves," and to rely on their own exertions.

Dinner was over, the dessert was on the table, and following the usual

custom the ladies had just retired.

Doctor Sarrasin, Otto, Colonel Hendon, and M. Lentz continued the conversation, and were discussing the higher questions of political economy, when a servant entered and handed the doctor his paper.

It was the *New York Herald.* This respectable journal had always shown itself extremely favourable, first to the foundation and then to the development of Frankville, and the leaders of the city were accustomed to look in its columns for the possible variations of public opinion regarding them in the United States. This agglomeration of happy, free, and independent people on their little neutral territory, was envied by not a few, and if Frankville had many friends in America to defend her, she had also enemies who delighted in attacking her. At any rate, the *New York Herald* was on their side, and constantly expressed itself in terms of admiration and esteem.

Without interrupting what he was saying, Doctor Sarrasin opened the paper, mechanically casting his eyes on the first paragraph. Suddenly he paused in consternation as he saw the following lines, which he read to himself and then aloud, to the great surprise and greater indignation of his friends:

“New York, September 8th — A violent attempt against the rights of men is shortly to take place. We learn from a certain source that formidable preparations are being made at Stahlstadt with the object of attacking and destroying Frankville, the city of French origin. We do not know if the United States can or ought to interfere in this struggle, which will, set the Latin and Saxon races by the ears; but, *in* common with all honest men, we denounce this odious abuse of strength. Frankville should not lose an hour in putting herself in a state of defence, etc.”

CHAPTER 12

THE COUNCIL

The hatred which the King of Steel bore to Doctor Sarcasm's work was no secret. Every one knew that his was a rival city. But nobody would have believed him capable of attacking a peaceful town, and endeavouring to destroy it at a blow. The article in the *New York Herald* was quite definite. The correspondent of that journal had realized Herr Schultz's designs, and, as they said, there was not an hour to spare!

The worthy doctor was confounded. Like all honest-hearted men, he refused as long as he could to believe in the evil designs of others. It seemed impossible to him that a human being could be so wicked as to wish to destroy, without sufficient reason and from simple malice, a city, which was in certain respects the common property of mankind.

"Just think that our average mortality will this year be only one and a quarter in every hundred!" he exclaimed, naively; "that there is not a boy of ten years old who does not know how to read; that not a murder or theft has been committed since Frankville was founded! And these barbarians want to destroy this successful experiment at its very beginning! No; I cannot believe that a chemist, a savant, were he a hundred times a German, could be capable of such an atrocity!"

They were compelled, however, to trust to the evidence of a paper, which thoroughly favoured their undertaking, and to act without delay. The first moment of dismay passed, and Doctor Sarrasin, regaining the command of his feelings, addressed his friends in the following words:

“Gentlemen, you are members of the Civic Council, and it is your duty as well as my own to take all necessary measures for the safety of the town.

What ought we to do first?”

“Is there no chance of arranging matters?” said M. Lentz. “Can’t we avoid war honourably?”

“That is impossible,” replied Otto. “Clearly Herr Schultz will have it at any price. His hate will not let him come to terms!”

“Very well!” exclaimed the doctor; “we shall be ready to receive him. Do you think, colonel, that anything can resist the cannons of Stahlstadt?”

“Any human force can be effectively countered by another human force,” replied Colonel Hendon, “but we needn’t think of defending ourselves by the same method and the same arms as Herr Schultz will use to attack us. To construct armaments able to resist his would take a long time, and I don’t even know if we should be able to make them, as we haven’t the specialized workshops. I can see only one chance of safety, to keep the enemy at a distance and make a blockade impossible.”

“I’ll go at once and convoke the Council,” said Doctor Sarrasin; and he led his guests into his study.

This was a simply-furnished room, three of its sides being covered with shells while in the fourth, below the pictures and ornaments, was a row of numbered openings, somewhat resembling ear-trumpets.

“Thanks to the telephone,” said he, “we can hold a council in Frankville, whilst every one remains at home.”

The doctor touched a bell, which at once put him into communication with the houses of all the members. In less than three minutes the word “present,” brought successively by each wire, announced that the Council was sitting.

The doctor placed himself before the mouthpiece, rang the bell, and

said —

“The meeting is open. My honourable friend, Colonel Hendon, will speak — he is to make a communication of the deepest importance.”

The colonel then placed himself before the telephone, and, after reading the article from the *New York Herald,* he proposed that immediate measures should be taken to resist the enemy’s advance.

He had scarcely concluded when Number Six put the question —

“Does the colonel believe defence possible, if his methods of

preventing the enemy from reaching us do not succeed?”

Colonel Hendon replied in the affirmative. The question and answer reached each of the invisible members of the Council instantaneously, together with the explanations which had proceeded them.

Number Seven asked how long he thought it would take for the people of Frankville to prepare.

The colonel could not say, but thought it advisable to act as though they were to be attacked in a fortnight.

Number Two: “Should we wait for the attack, or would you think it better to prevent it?”

“We must do all in our power to prevent it,” answered the colonel; “and if we are menaced by a fleet, we must blow up Herr Schultz’s ships with torpedoes.”

On this, Doctor Sarrasin offered to call into council the most distinguished chemists, as well as the most experienced artillery officers, and give them the task of examining the plans which Colonel Hendon had ready to submit to them.

Question from Number One —

“What is the sum necessary to begin the works of defence immediately?”

“We should have at our disposal from fifteen to twenty million dollars.”

“I propose that the Citizens’ Assembly be instantly convoked.”

President Sarrasin: “I will put it to the vote.” The bells of each telephone rang twice, announcing that the proposal was unanimously adopted.

It was half-past eight. The Council had only lasted eighteen minutes, and had not disturbed anyone.

The Popular Assembly was convoked by means as simple, and almost as expeditious. Doctor Sarrasin transmitted the vote of the Council to the Town Hall by telephone. An electric peal of bells was instantly put into operation at the summit of each of the columns which stood in every square of the city. These columns were surmounted by luminous dial-plates, on which the hands, actuated by electricity, pointed to half-past eight, the hour for the Assembly.

This clamorous call, continuing for a quarter of an hour, brought all the inhabitants out of their houses. Glancing up at the nearest dial, and realizing

that some national duty required their presence at the Town Hall, they hastened there as quickly as possible.

In less than forty-five minutes the Assembly was complete. Doctor Sarrasin was already in the place of honour, surrounded by the Council, whilst Colonel Hendon waited at the foot of the platform until he was given permission to speak.

Most of the citizens already knew the reason for the meeting. Indeed, the discussion of the Civic Council, automatically stereographed by the Town Hall telephone, had been immediately sent to the papers, printed in a special edition, and placarded all over the town.

The municipal hall was an immense building, roofed with glass and brilliantly lighted by gas.

The crowd which filled it was calm and orderly, every one standing. All the faces were cheerful. Perfect health, an active and regular life, and a quiet conscience, placed them above any unruly passion of alarm or anger.

At exactly half-past eight the president rang his bell, and silence fell on the assembly.

The colonel ascended the platform. There, in sober but forcible language;, without useless ornament or oratorical pretensions — the language of a man, who, knowing what he is talking about, expresses himself clearly —

Colonel Hendon described the inveterate hatred which Herr Schultz bore against Frankville, Doctor Sarrasin, and his work, and also the formidable preparations announced by the *New York Herald* which were intended to destroy their city and its inhabitants.

“It is for you to decide what is best to do,” he continued. “Some people, possessing neither courage nor patriotism, might perhaps prefer to give up the land, and to leave the aggressors to do what they wish with their new home. But I am certain beforehand that so pusillanimous a proposal would find no echo among my fellow-citizens. Men who can realize the greatness of the object aimed at by the founders of the model city, men who have accepted its laws, must certainly be men of courage and intelligence. Sincere representatives of progress as you are, you will do everything to save our incomparable town, this glorious monument raised by science to ameliorate the fallen conditions of man! Your duty, therefore, is to give your lives for the cause you represent,”

Thunders - of applause greeted this peroration and several speakers

supported Colonel Hendon’s motion.

Doctor Sarrasin urged the necessity for constituting a Committee of Defence, whose duty was to take immediate measures with all the secrecy indispensable in military operations, and the proposal was adopted.

A member of the Civic Council then suggested that five million dollars should be voted for the works. A show of hands ratified this.

At five-and-twenty minutes past ten the meeting was over, and the citizens of Frankville were about to leave the hall, when there occurred an unexpected incident. The empty platform was suddenly occupied by a stranger of a most strange appearance; he had appeared as if by magic. His face showed that he was labouring under frightful excitement; but his attitude was calm and resolute. His torn and muddy clothes, his bleeding forehead showed that something extraordinary had happened.

At sight of him everyone paused. With an imperative gesture the stranger commanded silence.

Who was he? Whence had he come? No one, not even Doctor Sarrasin, ventured to ask him.

“I have just escaped from Stahlstadt,” he said. “Herr Schultz had condemned me to death. God has allowed me to reach you in time to attempt to save you. I am not unknown to all of you. My venerated master, Doctor Sarrasin, can tell you, I hope, that in spite of my appearance, which makes me unrecognizable even to him, some confidence may be placed in Max Bruckmann!”

“Max!” the doctor and Otto exclaimed at once, starting towards him.

He stopped them by a sign.

Max had indeed been miraculously saved. After he had forced the grating open, just as he was almost suffocated, the current had swept him onwards, and two minutes later threw him on the bank, outside Stahlstadt indeed but almost lifeless.

For several hours the brave young fellow lay stretched motionless in the darkness, far from any help, in the lonely desert. When consciousness returned it was day-light. He thanked God that he had escaped from that horrible Stahlstadt, that he was no longer a prisoner. The next moment his thoughts were concentrated on Doctor Sarrasin, his friends, and fellow citizens.

“I must save them!” he repeated.

By a supreme effort he got to his feet. He was thirty miles from Frankville, and he had to traverse that thirty miles on foot, for there was no railway in that direction, not even a cart or a horse to be got, for everybody shunned the whole country round the terrible Steel City. He pressed on, however, without taking a moment’s rest, and at a quarter-past ten he arrived at the city.

The placards which covered the walls told him all. He found that the inhabitants had been warned of the threatened danger; but they were not aware of its frightful nature, or that it was immediate.

The catastrophe premeditated by Herr Schultz was to take place on this very evening, at a quarter to twelve. It was now a quarter-past ten.

Max had not a moment to lose: he sped through the town and at twenty-five minutes past ten, as the Assembly was about to break up, he ascended the platform.

“Not in a month, my friends,” he cried, “not even in a week, must you expect the danger! But in an hour this awful catastrophe, a rain of iron and fire, will burst upon your town! A weapon, worthy the invention of a fiend and able to carry thirty miles, is at this very moment pointed against us. I have seen it. Let the women and children seek shelter in the deepest and strongest cellars, or let them instantly leave the town, and take refuge in the mountains. All the men must prepare to fight the fire by every possible means. For a time fire will be your only enemy. Neither armies nor soldiers will march against you. The adversary who menaces you disdains all ordinary modes of attack. If the plans and calculations of a man, whose power for evil you know well, are realized — unless Herr Schultz is mistaken for the first time in his life — fire will suddenly break out in at least a hundred places all over Frankville. We shall soon have to face the flames at a hundred different points! Whatever happens, first the population must be saved; such of your houses and monuments which cannot be preserved, or even the whole town, time and money can restore!"

In Europe Max would have been thought mad. But in America it is unwise to refuse to believe in any miracle of science, however unexpected; so, by Doctor Sar-rasin's advice, the young engineer was listened to and believed in.

The crowd, awed as much by the accent and appearance of the speaker as by his words, obeyed without even dreaming of disputing his commands. The doctor answered for Max Bruckmann, and that was enough.

Orders were immediately given, and messengers were sent out in every direction.

As for the inhabitants, some withdrew to the cellars of their dwellings, resigned to suffer all the horrors of a bombardment, others hastened out into the country, on foot, horseback, or in carriages, and ascended the steeps of the Cascade Mountains. In the meantime the able-bodied men collected in the square, and in various other places which the doctor pointed out, everything that would serve to subdue fire, water, earth, and sand.

In the Hall the discussion continued.

Max was evidently beset by some idea which filled his brain to the exclusion of every other thought. He muttered to himself —

“At a quarter to twelve! Is it really possible for that villainous Schultz to destroy us with his execrable invention?”

Suddenly he drew out his pocket-book. He made a gesture requiring silence, and then, pencil in hand, rapidly put down a number of figures on one of its pages. As he did so his brow cleared, his face became radiant.

“Ah! my friends!” he exclaimed, “my friends! Either these figures are liars, or else everything we fear will vanish like a nightmare before the evidence of a problem in the science of projectiles, the solution of which I have sought in vain until this moment. Herr Schultz is mistaken! The threatened danger is nothing but a dream. For once his science is at fault! Nothing of what he foretold will come to pass. It is impossible! His formidable shell will fly over Frankville without touching it, and if there is anything to fear, this will be only in the future!”

What could Max mean? His friends did not understand!

The young Alsacian then explained the result of his calculations.

In his clear ringing voice he explained his demonstration in such a way as to make it clear, even to the most ignorant. It was light succeeding darkness,

calm following agony. Not only would the projectile leave untouched the doctor’s city, but it would touch nothing whatever. It was destined to lose itself in space!

Doctor Sarrasin acknowledged the accuracy of Max’s calculations, and then, pointing to the luminous dial in the hall-

“In three minutes,” he exclaimed, “we shall know whether Schultz or Max Bruckmann is right! Whatever happens, my friends, we need not regret any of the precautions we have taken, and we must still neglect nothing which can baffle the designs of our enemy. If his design fails for the present, as Max has just given us reason to hope, it won’t be the last. Schultz’s hate will never be stifled or checked.”

“Come!” exclaimed Max.

All followed him into the square. Three minutes passed in breathless suspense. The quarter before twelve tolled forth from the great clock!

Four seconds after, a dark mass was seen high above their heads; quick as thought it rushed onwards, and with a sinister hiss it soon disappeared far beyond the town.

“A pleasant journey to it!” shouted Max, with a burst of laughter. “If Herr Schultz’s shell keeps up that speed, it will never again fall upon terrestrial soil!”

In two minutes a roar was heard like distant thunder. This was the report of the cannon in the Bull Tower, the sound reaching Frankville a hundred and thirteen seconds after the projectile had passed at the rate of four hundred and fifty miles an hour.

CHAPTER 13

MAX BRUCKMANN, TO PROFESSOR SCHULTZ OF STAHLSTADT

“Frankyille? September 14th I consider it proper to inform the King of Steel, that -on the evening of the day before yesterday, preferring my own safety to that of the model in the blazing work-1 shop, I succeeded in passing beyond the frontier of his dominion.

‘While taking leave, I should fail in my bounden duty, unless I in turn revealed my secrets. Do not, however, be uneasy on that account, I shall not require you to pay for the knowledge with your life.

“My real name is not Schwartz, and I am not a Swiss. Alsace is my country, and I am called Max Bruckmann.

“I am a tolerable engineer, if one may take your word for it; but first and foremost, I am a Frenchman. You have shown yourself the implacable enemy of my coun- J try, my friends, and my family. You have entertained odious designs against everything I hold most dear. I have dared and done all, to discover those designs; I will dare and do all to frustrate them.

“I hasten to let you know that your first shot has failed to take effect.

“It has not hit the mark, for, thank heaven, it could not. Your gun is nevertheless wonderful, though the projectiles which it sends forth will never” do any harm to anyone! They will fall nowhere! I had a presentiment of this, and, to your great glory, it is now an established fact, that Herr Schultz has invented a wonderful cannon, but one which is entirely inoffensive.

"You will be delighted to hear that we saw your perfected shell, at 45 minutes and 4 seconds past 11, flying above our town. It was flying westwards

and circling in space, and this will continue to do until the end of time. A projectile with an initial speed of 10,000 yards per second can never fall! This motion, combined with the earth's attraction, destines it to circle forever around our globe.

"You ought to have known this.

"I hope and expect that the cannon in the Bull Tower *is* completely spoilt by this first trial; but two hundred thousand dollars is not too much to have paid for the pleasure of having endowed the planetary world with a new star, and the earth with a second satellite. * *(see note end)* "Max Bruckmann."

An express messenger was immediately sent from Frankville to Stahlstadt with this letter; and Max, must be forgiven for not having been able to resist the satisfaction of writing it to Herr Schultz.

Max was quite right when he said that the famous shell would never again fall on the surface of the earth, and also right when he predicted the cannon of the Bull Tower would be rendered useless by the enormous charge of gun-cotton.

The receipt of this letter greatly discomfited Herr Schultz, and was a terrible shock to his self-love. As he read it, he turned perfectly livid, and his head fell on his breast as if he had been struck with a club. He remained in this state of prostration for a quarter of an hour. When he revived his rage was frightful. Arminius and Sigimer alone witnessed its outbursts!

However, Herr Schultz was not a man to acknowledge himself beaten.

Henceforth the struggle between him and Max would continue to the death. He still had other shells charged with liquid carbon dioxide, which guns less powerful but more practical, could throw a short distance.

Calming himself with an effort, the King of Steel reentered his study, and continued his work.

It was clear that Frankville, now more than ever menaced with danger, must neglect nothing by which it could put itself into a perfect state of preparedness.

CHAPTER 14

CLEARING FOR ACTION

ALTHOUGH THE danger was no longer imminent, it was still serious. Max told Doctor Sarrasin and his friends all he knew about Herr Schultz's preparations, and described his engines of destruction. On the next day the | Council of Defence, in which he took a principal part, occupied itself with discussing a plan of resistance and preparing to put it into execution.

In all this Max was well seconded by Otto, whom he I found altered and much improved in character.

No one knew the details of the Council's decisions. Only their general purport was regularly communicated to the press. It was not difficult to trace in these the practical hand of Max.

"In preparing for defence," he told the townsfolk, "the great thing is to know the strength of the enemy, and to adapt the plan of resistance to that strength. No doubt Herr Schultz's cannon are formidable, but it is better to have to face these guns — of which we know the number, calibre, range and effect — than to have to deal with unknown weapons."

It was decided to prevent the blockade of the town, either by land or

sea.

How this could best be done was a question which the Council actively discussed, and when they announced that the problem was solved nobody doubted it. The citizens hastened *en masse* to put the plan into effect, and no tasks were neglected which could contribute to the work of defence. Men of all ages, and of every walk of life, became for the time being manual labourers, and everything went on rapidly and cheerfully. Provisions enough for two years were stored in the town. Coal and iron were also imported in bulk; the iron being essential for manufacturing weapons of all sorts and the coal equally necessary both for warmth and for fuel for the munition factories.

In addition to the heaps of iron and coal there could be seen all stored in the market places, gigantic heaps of sacks of flour, and quarters of smoked meat, stacks of cheeses, mountains of preserved and dried vegetables. Numbers of sheep and cattle were also herded in the beautiful gardens of the town.

When the calling-up order appeared for the mobilization of all men able to carry arms, the enthusiasm with which it was received testified to the excellent spirit of these soldier-citizens. Plainly dressed in woollen shirts, cloth trousers, and half-boots, strong leather caps, and armed with Werder rifles, they drilled every day in the avenues.

Gangs of coolies banked up the earth, dug trenches, raised the entrenchments and redoubts at every favourable point. The casting of guns had been commenced and was pushed on with activity, for the many smoke-consuming plants in the city were easily transformed into casting furnaces.

Max was tireless in all this. He was here, there and everywhere, in the thick of all the work. Did some theoretical or practical difficulty arise $ he could immediately solve it. If necessary, he turned up his sleeves and gave a practical demonstration. His authority was always accepted without a murmur, and his orders were punctually obeyed.

Otto likewise did his best. Although at first he had thought of ornamenting his uniform with gold lace, he soon gave up the idea, seeing that to set a good example to others he must be content to do the duty of a private soldier.

He, therefore, took his place in the battalion assigned to him, and conducted himself like a model soldier. To those who at first attempted to pity him, he replied —

“Everyone according to his merits. Perhaps I should not have been able to command, so the least I can do is to learn to obey!”

A report — which turned out to be false — gave a still more lively impulse to the works of defence. Herr Schultz, it was said, was negotiating with some maritime company to transport his cannon. From that time I on such hoaxes were the order of the day. Now it was that the Schultz fleet was off the coast of Frankville, and now that the Sacramento Railway had been cut by

Uhlans, who had apparently dropped from the clouds. But all these rumours, which were immediately con-, tradicted, had been invented by the correspondents of newspapers, hard up for matter to fill their despatches, with the object of sustaining the curiosity of their readers. The truth was that Stahlstadt did not give the least sign of life.

This perfect quietude, although it left Max ample time to complete his preparations, caused him much dis-, quiet in his rare moments of leisure.

“Is it possible that the ruffian has changed his tactics, and is preparing some new mode of attack?” he thought.

However, the plans for checking the advance of the .enemy’s ships, and preventing the blockade of the town, promised to answer well, and Max redoubled his exertions.

His sole pleasure and his only rest, after a hard day’s I work, was the short hour which he passed every evening in Madame Sarcasm’s drawing- room.

From the first, the doctor had stipulated that he should always come and dine at his house, unless he were prevented by another engagement; but, by some singular chance, no other invitation enticing enough to make Max give up this privilege had as yet presented itself.

The everlasting game of chess between the doctor and Colonel Hendon could not have been interesting enough to explain the punctuality with which he presented himself every day at the door of the mansion. We are therefore compelled to believe that there was another attraction for Max, and we might, perhaps, have suspected its nature — although, certainly he himself did not as yet suspect it — had we observed the interest which he took in the conversations between himself, Madame Sarrasin, and Mademoiselle Jeannette, when they were all three seated near the large table, at which the two ladies were busy providing necessities for future use in the ambulances.

“Will these steel bolts be better than the ones you showed us a drawing of?” asked Jeannette, who was interested in everything concerning the defence.

“There’s no doubt about that, mademoiselle/7 replied Max.

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear it! But what a lot of trouble and research you have to put into the smallest detail of your work! You told me that another 500 yards of trench were dug yesterday — that’s quite a lot, isn’t it?”

“No indeed — not nearly enough. At that rate we shan’t get the strong-point finished by the end of the month.”

“I should like to see it finished, and those horrible Schultz people coming! You men are so very lucky — you can work and make yourselves useful. Waiting can’t possibly be so trying for them as it is for useless people like us!”

“Useless!” exclaimed Max, roused out of his usual calm. “Useless! And who do you think these brave men — men who have left everything to become soldiers — who do you think they’re working for, if it isn’t to secure the safety and happiness of their mothers, their wives — and the ones whom they hope to make their wives? Where does their ardour come from if it isn’t from you, and how do you account for this readiness to sacrifice themselves if not — ??

Here Max got rather confused, and stopped. Mademoiselle Jeannette did not urge him, and good Madame Sarrasin herself was obliged to close the discussion by saying to the young man that no doubt a love of duty was sufficient to explain the zeal of most of them.

And when Max, at the call of inexorable duty, tore himself away from this pleasant talk, in order to finish a plan, or a calculation or an estimate, he took with him the invincible determination to save Frankville and its inhabitants.

I Little could he imagine what was about to happen, and yet it was only the inevitable result of a state of things so utterly unnatural as this concentration of all power in a single person which formed the fundamental principle in the City of Steel.

CHAPTER 15

THE SAN FRANCISCO EXCHANGE

The San Francisco Exchange, by which term is meant, as though algebraically, an immense industrial and commercial business, presents one of the strangest and most Animated scenes in the world.

The geographical position of the capital of California gives its Exchange, as a natural consequence, the cosmopolitan character which is one of its most remarkable features.

Beneath its handsome red granite porticoes the tall, fair Saxon jostles the slight, active, dark-haired Celt, The Negro meets the Finlander and the Hindoo.

The Polynesian gazes with astonishment at the Green-lander. The Chinaman, with oblique eyes and long plaited pigtail, endeavours to outdo, his historic enemy the Japanese in trade.

Every tongue, every dialect, every jargon, mingles there as in a modern

Babel.

On the 12th October this place of business opened in the usual way. At about eleven o’clock the principal brokers and men of business began to arrive, and accost one another gravely or gaily, according to their individual moods, shaking hands, and going together to the refreshment bar to fortify themselves by ‘liquoring up” for the operations of the day.

One after the other they went to open the little metal doors of the numbered letter-boxes, which received the correspondence of subscribers in the vestibule. Enormous packets of letters were drawn forth and eagerly examined.

Soon, as the market prices for the day were announced, the crowd

gradually increased. Groups more or less numerous were formed, and there arose from among them a murmur and hum of human voices.

Then commenced a shower of telegraphic messages from all quarters of the globe.

Scarcely a minute passed that the officials of the Exchange did not add a fresh strip of blue paper to the collection of telegrams placarded on the north wall, and this was read aloud in a stentorian voice, amid the now deafening buzz.

The commotion and hubbub kept on increasing.

Clerks rushed in and out; the telegraph office was besieged; messages were dispatched and answers received every instant.

All note-books were open, entries made, erased, or torn up.

At about one o’clock a contagious excitement seemed to take possession of the crowd. A mysterious sensation passed through these agitated groups of human beings like the trembling of an earthquake.

A piece of news, startling, unexpected, and incredible, had been brought by one of the partners in the Bank of the Far West, and it circulated with the speed of an electric flash.

Exclamations and comments were heard on all sides.

“Impossible! It’s a trick — a hoax,” said some. “Who’s going to believe anything so preposterous?”

“Well,” said others, “there may be something in it. No smoke without fire, you know.”

“But is a man in his position likely to fail?”

“People apparently in the very best positions fail.”

“But sir,” cried one, “the fixtures, tools and engines alone represent more than eighty million dollars!”

“Without reckoning the cast iron and steel, the raw material, and manufactured articles!” added another.

“To be sure! That’s just what I say, too! Schultz is good for ninety millions of dollars, and I’ll undertake to be answerable for that on his demand!”

“Well, but then how do you explain this suspension of payment?”

“Explain! I don’t explain it at all! I don’t believe it!”

“Don’t you? As if such things didn’t happen every day to houses of the most firm and established reputations !”

“Stahlstadt is not a house; it is a city.”

“Of course! It can’t possibly have broken up so completely. A company will certainly be formed to carry on the business.”

“But why on earth didn’t Schultz form such a company instead of declaring himself bankrupt?”

“Exactly, sir; and there’s the absurdity! So absurd that the statement won’t bear examination. It is neither more nor less than a pure fabrication, probably invented by Nash, who is desperately anxious for a rise in steel.”

“A fabrication? False intelligence? Nothing of the sort! Schultz has not only failed; he has absconded!”

“Come! Come!”

“Absconded, sir! The telegram announcing it has just this moment been posted up!”

A formidable wave of humanity rolled towards the frame in which the despatches were placarded.

The last strip of blue paper bore these words:

“New York, 12:40 — Central Bank. Manufactory of Stahlstadt. Stopped payment. Liabilities, as far as known: forty-seven million dollars. Schultz has disappeared.”

There was now no doubt about the truth of the astounding news; and conjectures and rumours were rife.

By two o’clock lists of failures consequent upon that of Schultz began to pour in.

The Mining Bank of New York lost most.

The firm of Westerly and Son at Chicago was implicated to the extent of seven million dollars.

The house of the Mitwaukees of Buffalo, five million.

The Industrial Bank of San Francisco, a million and a half.

The names of numbers of minor firms followed with proportionate

losses.

But, without waiting for this news, came the natural . rebound. r The money market, which was so dull in the morning, was now unsteady for two hours together. What falls! what rises! what fluctuations, what unrestrained speculation!

A rise in steel, and going up every minute; a rise in coal; a rise in the shares of all the foundries in the American Union; a rise in the products of every kind of iron \ industry; a rise in Frankville land.

Although on the declaration of war the latter had fallen to zero, and disappeared from the list of quotations, it had now suddenly risen to a hundred and eighty dollars an acre.

In the evening the newspaper shops were besieged.

But though the *Herald*, the *Tribune*, the *Alta*, the *Guardian*, the *Echo*, and the *Globe* printed in gigantic characters the meagre information they had been able to collect, this after all amounted to very little.

All that was known was that, on the 25th of September, a draft for eight millions of dollars, accepted by Herr Schultz, drawn by Jackson, Elder, and Co. of Buffalo, having been presented to Schring, Strauss, and Co. the King of Steel’s bankers, in New York, those gentlemen had stated that the balance to their client’s account was insufficient for such an enormous sum, and had telegraphed this to him, without receiving any answer.

On referring to their books, they perceived with consternation that for thirteen days no letters and no accounts had come from Stahlstadt.

From that moment drafts and cheques, drawn by Herr Schultz on their bank, came in daily, only to undergo the fate of being returned with the words "no funds."

For four days inquiries, telegrams, and furious questions rained from one side on the bank and then again on Stahlstadt.

At last a decisive reply was given.

"Herr Schultz disappeared on the 17th of September/" said the telegram. "No one can throw the least light on this mystery. He has left no orders, and the strong-boxes in every section are empty."

Since then it had been no longer possible to conceal the truth. Many of the principal creditors had taken fright and sent in their claims to the commercial court Ruin spread rapidly in all directions.

At twelve o'clock, on the 13th of October, the total amoust of failures was estimated at forty-seven millions of dollars. When everything became known it was likely to amount to sixty millions.

This was all that could be said, and all that the journals, with a few exceptions, could report. Of course they announced for the next day full and special particulars, "as yet unpublished." And, indeed, to do them justice, each, within an hour of the first announcement, had despatched a correspondent on the road to Stahlstadt.

By the evening of the 14th of October, Steel City was besieged by an army of reporters, all with open notebooks and pencils in hand. Like a wave, however, they broke against the outer wall, for the sentries were in their places, and any attempt to bribe or cajole them was utterly in vain.

The reporters, nevertheless, ascertained that the workmen as yet knew nothing, and that the routine of the sections had not been changed in any particular. The overseers had merely announced by superior order the day before, that no funds or instructions had been issued from the Central Block, and that in consequence the works would be suspended on the following Saturday, unless contrary orders were received. All this only complicated, instead of throwing any I light on, the situation.

That Herr Schultz had disappeared for nearly a month, of that there was no doubt. But what might be the cause J;and meaning of this disappearance no one knew. A vague impression still prevailed that the mysterious personage might at any moment re-appear and this seemed to lessen the general uneasiness.

For some days all the work had gone on as usual. I Every one had pursued his task within the limited hori-I zon of his section. The salaries were paid from the strong-jboxes every Saturday, and the main vault had met all I local necessities. But centralization had been brought to too high a pitch of perfection in Stahlstadt; the master I had reserved so absolutely to himself the superinten-j dence of everything, that his absence could not fail to | cause an early stoppage in the machinery. So, from the 117th of September, the day on which the King of Steel I had signed his orders for the last time, up to the 13th J of October, when the news of the suspension of pay-I ment had burst like a thunder-clap, millions of letters, I a large number containing considerable accounts, had I passed through the Stahlstadt Post Office, had been I deposited in the box of the Central Block, and no doubt I had reached Herr Schultz’s study. But he alone had I the right to open them, to mark them with a red pencil, | and to transmit them to the principal cashier.

Even the highest functionaries in the town never dreamt of doing anything out of their regular duties.

Invested with almost absolute power over their subordinates, they were each, in regard to Herr Schultz — as they still were in regard to his memory — like so many human tools, without authority, without ability to show initiative or any voice *in* anything. Each ensconced him-self within the narrow limits of his duty, waited, temporized, and watched the course of events.

The end came at last. This remarkable state of affairs was prolonged until the principal houses involved were suddenly seized with a panic, telegraphed, begged for an answer, entreated, protested, and finally commenced legal proceedings. This took some time. No one was will-ing to suspect prematurely that a prosperity so firmly believed in had been resting on an insecure basis. But the fact was now obvious: Herr Schultz had fled from his creditors.

This was all that the reporters could gather. The cele» brated Meiklejohn himself, famous for having extracted a political avowal from President Grant, the most taciturn man of his time; the indefatigable Blunderbuss, remarkable for being the first, although but a simple correspondent of *The World*, to announce to the Czar the news of the capitulation of Plevna — even these great men in the reporting line had not this time been more fortunate than their brethren. They were forced to con-fess to

themselves that *The Tribune* and *The World* could not as yet give the latest news of the bankrupt Schultz.

That Stahlstadt was indeed in a strange situation will be realized when it is remembered that it was an independent and isolated town, permitting no regular legal inquiry. Herr Schultz’s signature was, it is true, pro- tested at New York, and his creditors had every reason | to believe that the stock and the factory itself would indemnify them to some extent.

But to what court should they apply to obtain an execution or a sequestration? Stahlstadt lay in a territory of its own, where .everything belonged to Herr |;Schultz.

If only he had left a representative, an administrative council, or a substitute! But there was nothing of the sort. He himself was king, judge, general-in-chief, notary, lawyer, and the only commercial court in the city. In his person he had realized the ideal of centralization.

Therefore, now that he was absent, there was absolutely nobody in power, and the whole concern fell like [a house of cards.

In any other situation, the creditors would have been able to form a syndicate, substituting themselves for [Herr Schultz, to lay hands on the stock, and to take over [the direction of affairs. To all appearances only a little I money and authority was needed to set the machine to work.

But nothing of the sort was possible. The proper legal instrument to effect this substitution was wanting. There iwas a moral barrier round the City of Steel, and this was if possible more insurmountable than its walls. The unfortunate creditors could see the securities for their debts, but they were quite unable to touch them.

All they could do was to unite in a general body, and agree to address a request to the Congress to ask it to take their case in hand, espouse the interests of its nationals, pronounce the annexation of Stahlstadt to American territory, and thus bring this monstrous creation under the general laws of civilization. Several mem-bers of the Congress were personally interested in the business, the request was tempting to the American character, and there was reason to believe that it would be crowned with complete success.

Unfortunately the Congress was not then in session, so that a long delay

was to be feared before the matter could be submitted to it.

Until that time nothing could be done in Stahlstadt, and one by one the furnaces were extinguished.

The consternation among the population of ten thousand families who got their livings in the factory was profound. But what were they to do? Go on working in the hope of wages, which might be six months coming, or which might never come at all? No one was inclined to adopt this course. Besides, what work could they do? The source from which orders came like everything else, was dried up. All Herr Schultz’s clients waited for the legal solution. The heads of the sections, engineers, and overseers, could do Nothing for want of orders.

Numberless assemblies, meetings, and debates took place, though no plan could really be fixed on. The enforced stoppage soon brought with it a train of misery, despair and vice. As the workshops emptied, the public-houses filled. For each chimney which ceased to smoke in the factory, a tavern sprang up in one of the neighbouring villages.

The wisest and most prudent among the workmen; those who had foreseen hard times and had laid by for a rainy day, hastened to escape with bag and baggage; and happy rosy-cheeked children, wild with delight at the new world revealed to them, peeped through the curtains of the departing waggons, loaded with their fathers' tools and furniture, and with the precious bedding, dear to the heart of the housewife. These all were scattered east, south, and north, soon finding other factories, other anvils, other hearths.

But for one who could thus depart, there were ten whose poverty nailed them to the soil. There they remained, hollow-eyed and broken-hearted. Selling their poor garments to the flock of birds-of-prey in human shape whose instinct attracts them to scenes of great disasters, reduced in a few days to the last extremities, deprived of credit as well as of wages, of hope as well as of work, and seeing before them a future of misery as black and dismal as the fast approaching winter!

CHAPTER 16

TWO FRENCHMEN CAPTURE A TOWN

WHEN TIDINGS of the disappearance of Schultz reached Frankville, Max’s first words were —

“Suppose it’s merely a trick!”

He reflected, however, that the results to Stahlstadt had been so disastrous as to make such an hypothesis inadmissible.

Still, as hatred is an unreasoning passion, the exasperated rage of such a man as Herr Schultz might really render him capable of sacrificing everything to it. Whether or not this was the case, it was undeniably necessary to be on the *qui vive.*

Accordingly the Council of Defence immediately, at once issued a proclamation exhorting the inhabitants to be on their guard against false reports spread by the enemy with the object of lulling them into security.

Frankville judged it prudent to continue all the preparations for defence, taking no notice of what might after all prove to be a stratagem of its arch-enemy.

But soon the journals of San Francisco, Chicago, and New York published further details and news of the financial and commercial results of the Stahlstadt catastrophe, forming altogether a mass of evidence to prove that Schultz was indeed a bankrupt, and had indeed disappeared.

And so, one fine morning, the doctor’s model city realized that it was safe, just as a sleeper escapes from the oppression of a horrible dream by the simple act of awaking.

Yes! Frankville was clearly out of danger without having to strike a blow, and Max, now absolutely certain of this, announced the news amid public rejoicing.

A strain seemed suddenly removed. The public drew, as it were, a long sigh of relief, and assumed a holiday aspect.

Everybody shook hands, offered mutual congratulations, and invited each other to dinner. All the women came out in fresh toilettes, and the men said farewell to drill, manoeuvres, and hard work.

Every one went about looking pleased and beaming. Frankville was like a town peopled with convalescents. But among them all, the happiest was unquestionably Doctor Sarrasin.

The worthy man had felt himself responsible for the fate of those who had come so confidently to settle on his territory and to place themselves under his protection.

For the last month, the fear of having lured them to destruction, when he had only sought their happiness, |had never given him a moment’s rest. Now he was released from terrible anxiety, and he could breathe freely.

This common danger had united the citizens more Aclosely. All classes had been brought nearer to each other, and knew themselves to be brothers, animated with the same feelings, and affected by the same interests. A new sensation had sprung up in the hearts of all. Henceforward the inhabitants had a strong sense of patriotism for Frankville. They had feared, they had suffered for their town, and now they realized how much they loved it.

The material results of having placed it in a state of defence were also to the city’s advantge. Their strength iwas known. They felt more sure of themselves, and they would now be ready for whatever the future might bring.

The prospects of Doctor Sarrasin’s work had never Aappeared more brilliant; and (what was unusual) no ingratitude was shown towards Max. Although the safety |of the population had not been his work, public thanks were voted to the young engineer, as the organizer of the defence, the man to whose devotion the town would have owed its safety had the plans of Herr Schultz succeeded.

Max, however, did not regard his task as finished. The mystery surrounding Stahlstadt might, he still thought, conceal danger. He could not rest satisfied un-ftil he had thrown complete light into the very midst of the darkness which still enveloped the City of Steel.

He resolved, therefore, to return to Stahlstadt, and to stop at nothing until he had probed the last secret to its depths.

Doctor Sarrasin pointed out that the enterprise would be difficult, that it would bristle with dangers, that he knew not what mines might spring beneath his feet, and that, in fact, it would resemble a descent into the lower regions. Herr Schultz, such as he had been described to him, was not a man to disappear with impunity to others, or to bury himself alone beneath the ruins of all his hopes. They had every reason to fear the last desperate design of such a man. It would be like the terrible dying agony of a shark!

“My dear doctor, it is just because I think that all you imagine is possible that I believe it my duty to go to Stahlstadt,” answered Max. “The place is like to a shell from which I must snatch the fuse before it bursts, and I will even ask your permission to take Otto with me."

"Otto!" exclaimed the doctor.

"Yes! He's become a fine fellow, who may be relied on; and I assure you that this excursion will do him a great deal of good!"

"May God protect you both!" returned the old man, fervently grasping his hand.

The next morning a carriage drove through the deserted villages and deposited Max and Otto at the gate of Stahlstadt.

Both were well equipped, well armed, and completely determined not to come back until they had cleared up the mystery.

They walked side by side along the outer road which led round the fortifications, and the truth, which Max had till then persisted in doubting, now lay before them.

It was clear that the place was completely deserted. From the lonely road which he now trod with Otto he could formerly have seen within the town flaring gas, or the flash of a sentinel's bayonet, and many other signs of life. The windows of different sections would have I been illuminated and dazzling. Now all was gloomy I and silent. Death seemed to hover over the city, its tall : chimneys standing up like skeletons. The footfalls of I Max and his companion alone aroused the echoes of the place. The sensation of solitude and desolation was so strong that Otto could not help remarking —

“It is singular, but I have never felt a silence like this! We might fancy ourselves in a cemetery!”

It was seven o’clock when Max and Otto reached the I edge of the moat, opposite the principal gate of Stahl-stadt. Not a living creature appeared on the crest of the wall, and of the sentinels who formerly had stood at equal distances all round, like so many human posts, not one remained. The drawbridge was raised, leaving before the gate a gulf from five to six yards wide.

It took them more than an hour before they could succeed in securing the end of a stout rope, by throwing : it with all their might so as to catch on

one of the beams. After much trouble, Max managed it, and Otto, going first, drew himself up hand over hand to the top of the gate. Max passed their arms and ammunition up to him and then he himself followed the same way.

They next carried their rope to the other side of the wall, let down all their impedimenta, and finally slid down themselves.

The two young men were now on the circular way which Max remembered having followed the first day he entered Stahlstadt. Complete silence and solitude were all around. Before them rose, black and dumb, the imposing mass of buildings which glared with their thousand glass windows at the intruders, as if to say —

“Be off! You have no business to attempt to penetrate into our secrets!”

Max and Otto consulted.

“We will assail the O gate, as that is the one which I know best,” said

Max.

They bent their steps westward, and soon arrived before the monumental arch which bore on its front the letter O. The two massive oaken doors, full of great iron nails, were closed. Max approached, and struck them several times with a large stone he took from the road.

The echo alone resounded.

“Come! let’s get busy!” he cried to Otto.

They had now to recommence the troublesome work of throwing their rope over the door until it met with some obstacle on which it would catch firmly. This was difficult, but they succeeded at last, and Max and Otto surmounted the wall, and found themselves in section O.

“What a nuisance!” exclaimed Otto, looking round; “what’s the use of all, our trouble? We haven’t made much progress! No sooner have we got over one wall, than we find another before us!”

“Silence in the ranks!” returned Max. “Here we are in my old workshop. I’m not sorry to see it again, that we may get hold of some tools which we shall be sure to need, not forgetting a few packets of dynamite.”

As he spoke they entered the great casting-hall, to which the young Alsacian had been admitted on his arrival at the factory.

How dismal it looked, with its furnaces extinguished, its rails rusted, its dusty cranes extending their gaunt arms in the air like so many gallows. AH this struck a chill to the heart, and Max felt that it would be pleasant to have something to divert their minds.

“Here is a workshop which will interest you more,” he observed, leading the way to the canteen.

Otto followed obediently, and showed unmistakable signs of satisfaction as he caught sight of a whole regiment of bottles, red, yellow, and green, drawn up in order of battle on a wooden shelf. Several boxes of preserved meat and other good things were also there; more than enough to furnish them with a substantial breakfast, the want of which they had begun to feel: so, having spread the food on the counter, the two young men fell to.

Whilst eating Max considered what was the next thing to do. There was no point in even thinking of scaling the wall of the Central Block, as it was prodigiously high, isolated from all the other buildings, and was devoid of any projection on which to fasten a rope. To find the door — of which there was probably only one — it would be necessary to go through all the sections, anything but an easy task. Dynamite could be used, though that was dangerous, for it seemed impossible that Herr Schultz should have disappeared without constructing traps in his deserted territory, or establishing counter-mines to the mines which those who wished to take possession of Stahlstadt would not fail to lay. But no fear of this could deter Max.

Seeing that Otto was now refreshed and rested, Max went with him to the end of the road which formed the axis of the section, up to the foot of the huge freestone wall.

“What do you think of blowing it up here?” he asked, “Shall we drill the wall and explode some dynamite?”

“It will be hard work, but we are not afraid of that!” replied Otto, ready to attempt anything.

They first had to lay bare the foot of the wall, then to introduce a lever between two stones, loosen one, and finally, with a drill, to cut several little parallel trenches. By ten o'clock all was prepared; the dynamite was in its place and the fuse lighted.

Max knew that it would burn for five minutes, and as he had noticed that the canteen was underground, and was a stoutly-built stone-vaulted cellar, he took refuge there with Otto.

Suddenly every building, and even the cellar, were shaken as if by an earthquake. Then, almost immediately, a tremendous roar, resembling the sound of three or four batteries thundering at once, rent the air.

In two or three seconds a perfect avalanche of stones and debris showered down far and wide. Then began an uproar of breaking roofs, crashing beams, falling walls, mingled with the sound of a cascade of broken glass.

When the frightful din had ceased, Max and Otto ventured forth from their retreat.

Accustomed as he was to the terrific effects of an explosion, Max was completely astonished at the results of this one. Half of the section had been blown up, and the dismantled walls of all the neighbouring workshops resembled those of a bombarded town. On all sides the ground was strewed with heaps of rubbish, and pieces of.glass and plaster, whilst clouds of dust, in settling down, fell like snow on the ruins.

Otto and Max hastened to the inner wall

From fifteen to twenty feet of it had been thrown down, and on the other side of the breach the ex-draughtsman of the Central Block could see the well-known hall where he had passed so many monotonous hours.

As the place was no longer guarded, it was easy to enter.

Still the same silence everywhere.

Max passed in review the studios, where formerly his comrades had admired his diagrams. In one comer he discovered the very half-sketched drawing of a steam-engine on which he had been engaged when Herr Schultz summoned him to the park. In the reading-room lay the papers and the books he knew so well.

Everything bore the look of business suspended, of a sudden interruption to work.

The two friends had now reached the inner limits of the Central Block and stood before the wall, which as Max believed divided them from the park.

“Shall we make this fellow dance too?” asked Otto.

“Perhaps; but first we can look for a door, which a very small charge could send flying”

They proceeded, therefore, to skirt the wall around the park, from time to time making a detour to avoid a building jutting out like a spur, or to climb a fence. But they never lost sight of it, and they were soon rewarded for their trouble by coming to a low, narrow door.

In two minutes Otto had bored a gimlet hole through the oaken panels, and Max, putting his eye to the opening, saw with lively satisfaction that on the other side lay the tropical park, with its eternal verdure and summer temperature.

“One more door to blow up, and we shall be there!” he exclaimed to his companion.

“For a piece of wood like this a bomb would be too great an honour,” returned Otto.

And as he spoke he struck a heavy blow on the postern with his axe.

It had not begun to give way, however, when they heard a key turned, and two bolts slipped back.

The door half opened, though held inside by a thick chain.

“Wer da?” (Who goes there?) demanded a hoarse voice.

CHAPTER 17

PARLEY BEFORE THE CITADEL

The two young men were hardly prepared for such a question. It astonished them more than if they had been met by a rifle shot.

Max had had a great many guesses about this mysterious town, and die very last thing he had expected was that a living being would quietly ask the reason of his visit. His enterprise, legitimate enough under the supposition that Stahlstadt was completely deserted, assumed quite another aspect when the city was found to be inhabited.

That which in the one case was but a kind of archaeological inquiry in the other became an attack by force of arms, and bore the character of a burglary.

These reflections rushed in upon the mind of Max so forcibly that he stood as if struck dumb.

“Who goes there?” the voice repeated, impatiently.

There was certainly some reason for his impatience. For intruders to have reached this door by overcoming so many obstacles, scaling walls, and blowing up half the town, and then to have nothing to say on being simply asked, “Who goes there?” was somewhat astonishing.

In half a minute Max became aware of the awkwardness of his position, and he replied in German —

“Friend or enemy, whichever you like! I want to speak to Herr Schultz.”

Directly he uttered these words an exclamation was heard from the other side of the door —

“Ach!”

And through the opening Max could discern a red whisker, half a bristly moustache, and a dull eye, which he immediately recognized as belonging to Sigimer, one of the uncouth beings who had been ordered by Schultz to guard him.

“Johann Schwartz!” exclaimed the giant, with a sort of stupid joy, “Johann Schwartz!”

The unexpected return of his prisoner seemed to astonish him as much as his mysterious disappearance must have done.

“Can I speak to Herr Schultz?” repeated Max, finding that this exclamation was the only answer he received.

Sigimer shook his head.

“No order!” he said. “Can’t come in here without an order!”

“At least you can tell Herr Schultz that I am here, and want to see him.”

“Herr Schultz not here! Herr Schultz gone!” replied the giant, with a shade of sadness in his tone.

“But where is he? When will he be back?”

“Don’t know! Instructions remain as before! No one can enter without an order!”

These disjointed sentences were all that Max could get from Sigimer, who to any other questions maintained a dogged and obstinate silence.

Otto at last became impatient.

“Where’s the use of asking permission to enter?” said he. “It is much easier to take it!”

And he shoved against the door to try and force it open. It was held by the chain, however, and a more powerful arm than his soon shut it, and rapidly drew the bolts.

“There must be several men behind there!” cried Otto, rather humiliated at this result.

He applied his eye to the gimlet-hole, and uttered a cry of surprise.

“There’s a second giant!”

“Arminius, no doubt,” returned Max, in his turn putting his eye to the

hole.

“Yes! It is Arminius, Sigimer’s companion.”

As he spoke, another voice, apparently from the sky, caused Max to raise his head.

“Wer da?” it said.

This time it was Arminius who spoke, looking over the top of the wall, which he had reached by means of a ladder.

“Come, you know well enough who it is, Arminius!A returned Max. “Will you open, yes or no?”

These words had scarcely left his lips when the muzzle of a gun was pointed over the wall, and a bullet just grazed the brim of Otto’s hat.

“Very well, here’s an answer for that!” exclaimed Max; and, placing some dynamite under the door he blew it into fragments.

A breach thus being made, Otto and Max, their guns in their hands and their knives between their teeth, sprang into the park.

The ladder still leant against the now tottering wall, and at its foot were traces of blood, but neither Arminius nor Sigimer was there to bar the progress of the adventurers.

The gardens lay before them in all the richness of their vegetation.

Otto was delighted.

“What a magnificent place!” he said; “but look out! We had better proceed like skirmishers! These sour-krout-eaters are most likely watching for us — hiding behind the bushes!”

Max and Otto separated, and each taking one side of the walk which opened before them, they advanced cautiously from tree to tree, from mound to mound, after the most approved principles of strategy.

This was a wise precaution. They had not gone a hundred yards when a second shot was heard, and the bark of the tree which Max had just left flew in splinters.

"This is serious! Down on the ground!" exclaimed Otto.

And, adding example to precept, he crawled on hands and knees up to a thorny thicket bordering the square in the centre of which rose the Bull Tower.

Max, not following this advice quickly enough, narrowly escaped another bullet, and avoided a fourth only by darting behind the trunk of a palm-tree.

"Fortunately these fellows shoot no better than raw recruits!" Otto called out to his friend.

"Hush!" returned Max. "Don't you see the smoke hanging about that window on the ground-floor? The villains are in ambush there! But I mean to play them a trick now!"

In a trice, Max had cut a good-sized stick from the shrubbery, and on this he hung his coat, placing his hat on the top. Having thus improvised a very presentable dummy, he stuck it in the ground, so that the hat and sleeves alone were visible, then, gliding up to Otto, he whispered in his ear —

"Just keep them amused by firing at the window, first from your place and then from mine! I'm off to take them in the rear!"

And Max, leaving Otto to skirmish, crept cautiously away through the bushes.

A quarter of an hour passed, whilst about twenty shots were exchanged without result on either side, though Max's coat and hat were completely riddled with bullets. As to the window-blinds, Otto’s gun had sent them into shivers.

Suddenly the firing ceased, and Otto distinctly heard a stifled cry of —

“Help! help! I’ve got him!”

To leave his shelter, to fly through the shrubbery and spring in at the window, took Otto but a moment.

Struggling desperately on the floor, entwined like two serpents were Max and Sigimer. Surprised by the sudden attack of his adversary, who had forced an inner door, the giant had been unable to use his weapons. But his herculean strength rendered him a formidable enemy, and although thrown to the ground, he had not lost hope of gaining the upper hand. Max, on his side, displayed remarkable vigour and agility.

The fight would certainly have terminated in the death of one of the combatants had not Otto’s intervention made a less tragic end possible. The two together soon disarmed Sigimer, and bound him so that he could move neither hand nor foot.

“Where’s the other fellow?” asked Otto.

Max pointed to the further end of the room, where Arminius lay bleeding on a bench.

“Has he been shot?” he asked.

“Yes,” replied Otto. Together they examined the body.

“Quite dead!” said Max.

“Then the rascal might have died in a better cause!” exclaimed Otto.

“Here we are, masters of the place!” said Max. “So now to serious business. We’ll first explore the study of the great Herr Schultz!”

From the room, in which the last act of the siege had been performed, the two young men proceeded through the suite of apartments which led to the sanctum of the King of Steel.

Otto was lost in admiration at the sight of such splendour.

Max smiled as he looked round at him, and opened, one after the other, the doors of the magnificent rooms, till they reached the green-and-gold apartment.

He had expected to find something new, but nothing so strange as the spectacle which here lay before their eyes. It looked just as if the General Post- Office of New York or Paris had been robbed and its contents thrown pell-mell on the floor. On every side were heaps of letters and sealed packets, on the writing-table, on the I chairs, on the carpet. They waded knee-deep in a flood of papers. All the financial, industrial, and personal correspondence of Herr Schultz, brought to the letter-box in the park wall, and faithfully carried in by Arminius I and Sigimer, had accumulated here in their master’s I study.

How many questions, what expectations, what anxious suspense, what misery and tears were enclosed in those voiceless envelopes addressed to Herr Schultz! What millions of money, too, no doubt, in paper, cheques, bills, and money orders of all sorts!

Everything rested here motionless through the absence of the only hand which had a right to break these fragile but inviolable seals.

“Now,” said Max, “we’ve got to discover the secret door of the laboratory!”

He began by taking all the books out of the bookcase. This was useless; he could not find the masked passage he had traversed in company with Herr Schultz,

In vain he shook the panels one by one, and tapped them in succession, with an iron rod which he took from the mantel-piece. In vain he struck the wall in the hope of hearing it give forth a hollow sound. It was quite evident that Schultz, uneasy at no longer being the sole possessor of his secret, had done away with that door.

He must necessarily have opened another.

“But where?” asked Max. “It mmst be here somewhere, as Arminius and Sigimer have brought the letters to this room, which Herr Schultz no doubt continued to use after my departure. I know enough of his habits to be sure that, after bricking up the old passage, he would wish to have another close at hand, and hidden from inquisitive eyes! Can there be a trap-door under the carpet?”

The carpet itself showed no signs of being cut; but none the less it was unnailed and raised. The floor, examined bit by bit, showed nothing suspicious.

“How do you know the opening is in this room?” asked Otto.

“I am morally certain of it!” answered Max.

“Then only the ceiling remains to be explored,” returned Otto springing on to a chair.

His idea was to get up to the chandelier and sound the central rose with the butt of his gun.

However, no sooner had he grasped the gilded chandelier, than, to his extreme surprise, it sank under his hand. The ceiling opened and left to view a wide gap, from which a light, self-acting steel ladder slid down to reach the

CHAPTER 18

THE KERNEL OF THE NUT

THE TOP of the steel ladder was fixed close to the wall of a vast circular chamber, which had no communication with the exterior. It would have been in complete darkness but for a dazzling white light which streamed through the thick glass of a bull's-eye, fixed in the centre of the oak floor. For purity and brilliancy it might be compared to the moon when she is in her full beauty.

Perfect silence reigned within these mute and eyeless walls. The two young men fancied themselves *in* the ante-chamber of a tomb.

But before bending over the glass, Max hesitated for a moment. He had attained his object! The secret which he had come to Stahlstadt to learn, was about to be revealed to him!

This feeling, however, soon passed off. Together he and Otto knelt beside the disc and looked down into the chamber beneath.

A horrible and unexpected sight met their astonished gaze.

The glass disc, being convex on both sides, formed a lens, which immensely magnified everything visible through it.

Here was the secret laboratory of Herr Schultz. The intense glare which shone through the disc, as if from the lantern of a lighthouse, came from a double electric lamp, still burning in its airless globe and still incessantly fed by a powerful voltaic pile.

In the middle of the room, motionless as marble, and enormously magnified by the refraction of the lens was seated a human form.

Fragments and splinters of shells were strewn on the ground around this spectre.

There was no doubt about it; it was Herr Schultz himself, recognizable by his horrid grinning mouth and his gleaming teeth; but a gigantic Herr Schultz, suffocated and frozen by the action of a terrible cold produced by the explosion of one of his frightful munitions of war.

The King of Steel was seated at his table, holding an enormous pen like a lance in his hand as if he were writing. Had it not been for the stony glare of his dilated eyeballs, and his set mouth, he would still have seemed alive. Here this awful corpse had been for a month, hidden from all eyes, and now discovered like a mammoth concealed for ages in the glaciers of the Polar regions. Everything around him was frozen, the re-agents in their jars, the water in its receivers, and the mercury in its containers!

In spite of the horror of this spectacle, Max’s first thought was one of satisfaction that they had been fortunate enough to be able to observe the interior of the laboratory from the outside, for if he and Otto had entered they must infallibly have been struck dead.

Max soon guessed how the fearful accident had occurred, when he realized that the fragments scattered on the ground were small pieces of glass. He knew that the inner case of Herr Schultz’s asphyxiating projectiles contained liquid carbon dioxide, and that, to resist the enormous pressure, it was made of tempered glass, which has ten or twelve times the usual strength; the great fault of this newly-invented production, is that it often bursts, suddenly, by some mysterious action, without any apparent cause. This was evidently what had happened. Perhaps the interior pressure had helped to bring about the explosion of the shell deposited in the laboratory; whatever its cause the liberated chemical, on returning to a gaseous state, had brought about a fearful lowering of the surrounding atmosphere, as much as a hundred degrees below zero.

The effects had indeed been terrible. Death had surprised Herr Schultz in the attitude he was in at the time of the explosion, and in a moment he had been turned into ice.

One fact which Max particularly noticed, was that at the time of his death the King of Steel was engaged in writing.

What was inscribed on the sheet of paper lying beneath that lifeless hand? It would be interesting to know the last thought, and read the last words, of such a man.

The difficulty was to procure the paper. The idea of breaking the disc so as to descend into the laboratory could not be entertained for an instant. The gas would have rushed out immediately and suffocated every riving being. The risk of bringing a sudden death upon themselves could not be run merely for the sake of satisfying their curiosity. Max, therefore, seeing that the writing as well as everything else was so wonderfully magnified and brilliantly illuminated endeavoured to read it from a distance. Being well acquainted with the handwriting of Herr Schultz, with a little trouble he at last made out the following lines.

According to the usual custom of Herr Schultz, it was rather an order than an instruction.

“Order to B.K.R.Z. to advance the projected expedition against Frankville by a fortnight. As soon as this order is received execute the measures I have devised; this time they must be overwhelming and complete. Do not alter an iota of what I have decided upon. I wish that in a fortnight Frankville should become a city of the dead without a surviving inhabitant. I hope for a modern Pompeii, to be at once a terror and a wonder to the whole world. If my orders are properly executed, this result will be inevitable.

“You will send the bodies of Doctor Sarrasin and Max Bruckmann to me. I wish to have them.

“Schultz — ”

The signature was unfinished, the final z and the usual flourish being wanting.

Max and Otto gazed mute and motionless at this strange spectacle, feeling as if they were witnessing the invocation of some malignant spirit.

But it was time to leave the dismal scene, and the two friends, agitated by conflicting feelings, descended from the room above the laboratory.

There, in that dark tomb, for, when the electric current failed the lamp would be extinguished, the corpse of the King of Steel would remain alone, dried up like a mummified Pharaoh, whom twenty centuries had not reduced to dust!

An hour later, having unbound Sigimer, who seemed puzzled to know what to do with his freedom, Otto and Max quitted Stahlstadt, and took their way back to Frankville, which they entered the same evening.

Doctor Sarrasin was busy in his study when the return of the two young men was announced to him.

“Tell them to come in!” he exclaimed. “Come in quickly!”

“Well?” said he, as soon as the friends presented themselves before

him.

“Doctor,” replied Max, “the news we bring from Stahlstadt will put your mind at rest for a long time. Herr Schultz is no more! Herr Schultz is dead!” “Dead!” exclaimed Doctor Sarrasin. The good man remained thoughtful for a few moments, without uttering another word.

“My dear fellow,” he said at last, “can you understand that this news, which ought to make me rejoice, since it takes from us the dread of the thing I most execrate, war, and the most unjust, unreasonable war ever heard of! — can you understand how, against all reason, it makes my heart ache? Oh, why should a man of such powerful intelligence have made himself our enemy? Why did he not use his rare intellectual gifts for the benefit of his fellow creatures? How much wisdom has been lost which would have been so valuable had it been associated with us and used for a common object! All this at once struck me when you said: ‘Herr Schultz is dead;’ but now tell me all that you know of this unforeseen event.”

“Herr Schultz,” replied Max, “has met his death in the mysterious laboratory, which he had striven to render inaccessible to all others, with such diabolical ingenuity. Nobody but himself ever knew of its existence, and so nobody could enter it to rescue him. He has fallen a victim to that marvellous concentration of all his plans in his own hands on which he so mistakenly relied. By the will of Providence, his desire of making himself the key to all his projects has been turned to his own destruction!”

“It could not have been otherwise!” answered Doctor Sarrasin. “Herr Sehultz began with a completely false belief. For, indeed, isn’t the best government the one where the chief, when he dies can be most easily replaced, and which will go on working smoothly, just because all the machinery is open and visible?”

“You will see, doctor,” said Max, “how everything that has happened in Stahlstadt bears out what you said. We found Herr Sehultz seated before his desk, that central point from which came all those orders so implicitly obeyed by the Steel City, and which nobody ever dreamt of disputing. Death had left him every appearance of life, so that for a moment I thought the spectre would have spoken to us! But the inventor has fallen by his own invention! He was killed by one of the shells with which he hoped to destroy our town, just as he was signing his name to the order for our extermination! Listen!”

And Max read aloud the copy he had made of the horrible words written by Herr Sehultz.

Then he added —

“The greatest proof of the death of Herr Sehultz, even if we hadn’t seen him, is that everything around him has ceased to live. There is nothing breathing in Stahlstadt. As in the palace of the Sleeping Beauty, slumber has suspended all life, and arrested every movement. The effects of the master’s death has extended not only to his servants but also to machinery.”

“Yes,” returned Doctor Sarrasin; “here we see the justice of God! It is because he indulged in his hatred against us, and urged on,his attack with such boundless rancour, that Herr Sehultz has perished.”

“That is true,” answered Max; “but now, doctor, let us leave the past and think only of the present. Although the death of Herr Schultz gives us peace, it has ruined the wonderful business he created. Blinded by his success, and his hatred of France and you, he had supplied large numbers of cannon and weapons to any one who might be our enemy, without getting sufficient guarantees. In spite of this, and although to pay off all his debts would take a long time, I believe that a strong hand could set Stahlstadt on its legs again, and turn to a good purpose all that has been hitherto used for an evil one. Herr Sehultz has only one likely heir, doctor, and that is yourself. His work must not be allowed to fall entirely to the ground. The world is too fond of thinking that the only use it can make of a rival force is to destroy it completely. This is not really so, and I hope you will agree that, on the contrary, it is our duty to try to save from this immense wreck all that we can use to benefit humanity. Now I am ready to devote myself entirely to this task.”

“Max is right,” said Otto, grasping his friend’s hand, “and here am I quite ready to work under his orders, if my father will agree.”

“I certainly approve, my dear lads,” replied Doctor Sarrasin. Yes, Max, there will be no want of capital, and, thanks to you, I shall hope to have in the resuscitated Stahlstadt such an arsenal that from now on no- body in the world will ever dream of attacking us! And as we shall then be the strongest, we must at the same time endeavour to be also the most just, we must spread the benefits of peace and justice all around. Ah, Max! what fascinating dreams! And when I feel that, with you to help me, I can at least accomplish a part of this, I ask myself why-yes, why haven’t I two sons! Why aren’t you the brother of Otto! With we three working together, it seems as if nothing could be impossible!”

CHAPTER 19

A FAMILY AFFAIR

PERHAPS IN the course of this veracious narrative we have not said enough about the personal history of those who have played such prominent parts in it. We may now, therefore, be allowed to stop to give a few details about them.

It must be acknowledged that the good doctor was not so entirely taken up with the idea of collective humanity, as to merge the welfare of individuals in it. He had, therefore, been struck by the sudden pallor which overspread the countenance of Max as he uttered his last words. He sought to read the cause of this sudden emotion in the young man’s eyes. The silence of the older man seemed to question the engineer, as if he expected him to speak; but mastering himself with a strong effort, Max immediately resumed his composure. His complexion regained its natural tint, and his attitude was merely that of a man who expects an interesting conversation to continue.

Doctor Sarrasin, slightly provoked at a calmness so evidently assumed, approached his young friend, and with a familiar gesture,, laid his hand upon his wrist, just as he would on that of a patient, whose pulse he wished to feel quietly and unobtrusively.

Max naturally allowed this without seeming to notice the doctor’s intentions, and as he did not open his lips —

“My dear Max,” observed the old man, Ve will postpone our conversation about the future destiny of Stahl-stadt until some other time. For although we are vowed to the work of labouring to better the condition of mankind, we are not forbidden to occupy ourselves with the fate of those we love, of those who are nearest to us. Well, I think the time has come to tell you what

a young lady, whose name I will mention presently, replied not long ago to her father and mother, when for the twentieth time that year they had been asked for her in marriage.

“The proposals were, for the most part, such that even the most fastidious could have had no reason for refusing them, and yet this young woman always said •No!’”

At this point Max drew his hand away with a sudden movement from the doctors grasp, and the latter, as if he were satisfied on the subject of his patient’s health, and had not noticed that both his arm and his confidence had been withdrawn, quietly continued his story.

“Well, now said the mother, to the young lady of whom I speak, ‘just tell me the reason for these continued refusals. Education, fortune, position, good looks, all are there. Why this decided No! so resolute and prompt, to requests which you don’t even take the trouble to consider for a moment? You are not usually so very downright!’

“At this the girl made up her mind to speak clearly and frankly, and replied —

“‘I say no with as much sincerity as I would say yes, dear mother, if the yes really came from my heart. I agree that several of the matches you have proposed to me are perfectly unexceptionable; but, besides my belief that most of those addresses were paid more to what is considered the best — that is the richest — match in the town, than to me myself, and that that idea does not incline me to say yes, I will venture to tell you, since you wish it, that none of these proposals is the one I hope for, the one which I still expect, and which, unfortunately, I may have to wait a long time for, if it ever comes at all!’

“What, my dear,’ said the mother, in surprise, ‘you

“She did not end that sentence, for want of knowing how to finish it, and in perplexity turned to her husband, with looks which plainly begged for help and advice.

“However, as he did not intend to interfere in the discussion between the mother and daughter until a little more light had been thrown on the subject he put on an obtuse air, and did this so well that the poor girl, blushing with embarrassment, and perhaps with a little anger, suddenly determined to make a clean breast of it.

“‘I said, dear mother,’ she continued, ‘that the proposal I hoped for might be a very long time coming, and possibly never come at all. I add that this delay, although so indefinite, will neither hurt nor astonish me. I have the misfortune to be very rich; he, whose proposal I hope for, is very poor; therefore, he will not make it, and he is right. It is for him to wait — ’

“Why not for us to speak?’ said the mother, wishing perhaps to keep her daughter from uttering words she feared to hear.

“Then the husband interposed.

“‘My dear,’ he said, affectionately, taking his wife’s hands in his, It is not with impunity that a mother reverenced by her daughter as you are, can constantly in her presence sing the praises of a fine, handsome fellow, who, ever since she was born, has been almost one of the family, that she comments to every one on the strength of his character, that she glories in what her husband says when he in his turn has the opportunity to boast of his remarkable intelligence, or speaks feelingly of the thousand proofs of devotion he has received from him! If the girl who saw this young man singled out both by her father, and her mother, had not admired him herself, she would have failed in her duty!’

“‘Oh, father!’ cried the girl, throwing herself into her mother’s arms, to hide her confusion, ‘if you guessed, why did you make me speak!’

“‘Why?’ returned the father, ‘why, but to have the joy of hearing you, my darling, that I might be still more certain that I was not mistaken, to be able at last to tell you that both your mother and I approve your choice, that your heart has been given where we wished; and to spare a poor and proud man from making a proposal, at which he feels a reluctant delicacy, I will do it myself — yes, I will do it, because I have read his heart as I have read yours! Calm yourself, then! On the first favourable opportunity, I will ask Max, if, by

any possibility, he would care to become my son-in-law!’”

Taken unawares by this sudden peroration, Max had started to his feet as if moved by a spring. Otto silently grasped his hand, while Doctor Sarrasin held out his arms. The young Alsacian was pale as death. But does not happiness sometimes take this aspect when it enters without warning into a strong heart?

CHAPTER 20

CONCLUSION

FRANKVILLE, RELEASED from all anxiety, in peace with its neighbours, well governed, and thanks to the good behaviour of its inhabitants, happy, is highly prosperous. Its success is so justly deserved that it arouses no envy, and its strength enforces the respect even of the most warlike.

Under the iron rule of Herr Schultz, the City of Steel was a terrible munition factory, an organized source of destruction; but, thanks to Max Bruckmann, the liquidation of its debts was effected without loss to any one, and Stahlstadt became a centre of production unsurpassed by any other industry.

A year ago Max became the happy husband of Jeannette, and the birth of a child has recently added to their felicity.

As to Otto, he worked gallantly under his brother-in-law’s direction, and seconded all his efforts. His sister is hoping soon to see him married to a friend whose good sense will preserve her husband from any relapse.

The wishes of the doctor and his wife are thus fulfilled, and to put it in a few words, they are at the zenith of happiness and even of glory — if glory ever entered into the programme of their honest ambitions.

We may now be assured that the future belongs to the efforts of Doctor Sarrasin and Max Bruckmann, and that the example of Frankville and Stahlstadt, as model city and industrial town, will not be lost upon future generations.

TRIBULATIONS OF A CHINAMAN IN CHINA

Translated by Virginia Champlin

This novel was first published in 1879. The story concerns a rich Chinese man, Kin-Fo, who is bored with life, and after some business misfortune decides to die. The novel is a traditional adventure story, similar in style to *Around the World in Eighty Days*, but it also features controversial criticism of the British opium trade in China.

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CHAPTER 1

The First Watch Of The Night

"It must be admitted that life has some good in it," said one of the guests, leaning his elbow on the arm of his marble-backed chair, while he sat biting the root of a sugar water-lily.

"And some bad also," answered another, between fits of coughing, occasioned by having swallowed the prickly part of the delicate fin of a shark which had nearly choked him.

"Be philosophical," said an older man, who wore on his nose an enormous pair of wooden spectacles with large glasses. "To-day, one runs the risk of strangling, and tomorrow everything flows as smoothly as the sweet draughts of this nectar — such is life."

After saying these words, this easy-going epicure swallowed a glass of warm wine, the steam of which slowly escaped from a metal teapot.

"For my part," said a fourth guest, "life appears to be very acceptable when one does nothing, and has the means to afford to do nothing."

"That is a mistake," answered the fifth. "Happiness is to be found in study and work. To acquire the greatest amount of knowledge is the way to be happy."

"And to learn at last that one knows nothing."

"Is not that the commencement of wisdom?"

"What, then, is the end?"

“Wisdom has no end,” philosophically answered the man with the spectacles. “To have common sense should be supreme satisfaction.”

It was then that the first guest directly addressed the host, who occupied the upper end of the table — that is the worst place — as the laws of politeness exacted. Indifferent and inattentive the latter listened without saying anything during this discussion. “Come, let us hear what our host has to say? Does he find existence good or bad? Is he for or against it?”

The host carelessly cracked some melon seeds, and answered by disdainfully moving his lips like a man who takes no interest in anything. “Pooh!” said he.

This is the favorite word of indifferent people. It says everything, and means nothing. It is in every language, and has a place in every dictionary in the world. It is an articulated grimace.

The five guests who were entertained by this weary host pressed him with arguments, each in favor of his own proposition. They wanted his opinion. He tried to avoid answering, but replied by affirming that life had no good or bad in it. In his view, “It was an invention, insignificant enough, and having but little enjoyment in it.”

“Ah, now our friend speaks; but why should he thus speak, since the rustle of a rose has not even troubled his repose?”

“And he is young yet.”

“Young and rich.”

“Perhaps too rich.”

These remarks flew about like rockets from fireworks, without bringing a smile to the host's impassable physiognomy. He was satisfied to shrug his shoulders slightly, like a man who had never wished to turn over the leaves in the book of his life, and who had not even cut the first pages.

And yet this indifferent man was at least thirty-one years of age; he possessed a large fortune, enjoyed good health, was not without culture, his intelligence was above the average, and he had everything, which so many want, to make him one of the happiest men in the world. And why was he not happy?

"Why?"

The grave voice of the philosopher was now heard, speaking like the leader of a chorus. "Friend," he said, "if you are not happy here below it is because your happiness thus far has been only negative. It is with happiness as it is with health, to enjoy it one should sometimes be deprived of it. Now, have you never been ill? I mean to ask, rather, have you never been unfortunate? It is that which is wanting in your life. Who can appreciate happiness if misfortune has never, even for a moment, assailed him?"

And at this observation, full of wisdom, the philosopher, raising his glass full of the best champagne, said, "I wish that the sun of our host's life may be a little darkened, and that he may experience some sorrows." After which he emptied his glass.

The host made a nod of assent, and lapsed into his habitual apathy.

Where did this conversation take place? Was it in a European dining- room in Paris, London, Vienna, or St. Petersburg? Were these six guests assembled together in a restaurant in the Old or the New World? And who were they who, without having drunk to excess, were discussing these questions in the midst of a feast? They were not Frenchmen, you may rest assured, because they were not talking politics.

These six guests were seated in a medium-sized dining-room elegantly decorated. The last rays of the sun were streaming through the net-work of blue and orange window-glass, and past the open windows the breeze was full of the odor of natural flowers. A few lanterns mingled their variegated light with the dying light of day. Above the windows were sculptured and rich arabesques, representing celestial and terrestrial beauty, and animals and vegetables of a strange fauna and flora.

As to the servants, they were very prepossessing young girls, whose hair was mingled with lilies and chrysanthemums, and whose arms were coquettishly encircled with bracelets of gold. Smiling, they served or removed the dishes with one hand, while with the other each gracefully waved a large fan which restored the currents of the air.

The moment came at last when the young girls brought in, not, according to European fashion, finger-bowls containing perfumed water, but napkins saturated with warm water, which each of the guests passed over his face with extreme satisfaction.

It was only an interlude of the repast — an hour of luxurious rest, while the music filled up the moments, for soon a troupe of singers and musicians entered the room. The singers were young and pretty girls, of modest appearance and behavior; but what music and method was there — it was a mewing and harsh noise, without measure or tune, sometimes rising in sharp notes to the utmost limit of perception by the auditory nerves.

The six guests then left their seats, but only to pass from one table to another, which was done with great ceremony and compliments of all sorts. On this second table each found a small cup having a lid ornamented with a portrait of Bodhidharama, the celebrated Buddhist monk, standing on his legendary raft. Each of the guests received a pinch of tea, which he infused in the boiling water in his cup, without any sugar, and he drank it immediately.

And what tea! It was not to be feared that the house of Gibb, Gibb and Company, who supplied it, had adulterated it with a mixture of foreign leaves; or that it had already been subjected to a first infusion, and was only good to use in sweeping carpets; or that a dishonest preparer had colored it yellow with curcuma, or green with Prussian blue! It was imperial tea in all its purity, and its leaves were the first gathering in the month of March — those precious leaves which are like the flower itself, for the loss of the leaves causes the death of the plant. It was composed of those leaves which young children alone are allowed to gather, with carefully gloved hands.

The cups were still full, and the host, with his eyes fixed on vacancy and his elbow leaning on the table, expressed himself in these words: “My friends, listen to me without laughing; the die is cast. I am going to introduce into my life a new element, which may perhaps vary its monotony. Will it be for good or for evil? The future only can tell. This dinner to which I have invited you, is my farewell dinner to bachelor life. In fifteen days I shall be married, and — — ”

“And you will be the happiest of men,” cried the optimist. “See, all the signs are in your favor.”

Indeed, the lamps flickered, and cast a pale light around, the magpies chattered on the arabesques of the windows, and the little tea leaves floated perpendicularly in the cups. So many lucky omens could not fail.

They all congratulated their host, who received their compliments with the greatest coolness. But as he did not name the person destined to fill the part of the “new element to his happiness,” and whom he had chosen, no one was indiscreet enough to interrogate him on the subject.

Yet, the philosopher’s voice was not heard among the general concert of congratulations. With his arms crossed, his eyes partly closed, and an ironical smile on his lips, he seemed to approve those who paid the compliments no more than he did the one who was complimented.

The latter rose, placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder, and in a voice that seemed less calm than usual, asked, “Am I then too old to marry?”

“No!”

“Too young?”

“No; neither too young nor too old.”

“Do you think I am acting wrong?”

“Probably so.”

“But she, whom I have chosen, and whom you know, has everything that is necessary to make me happy.”

“I know it.”

“Well, then?”

“But it is you who have not everything necessary to make you happy. To be bored during single life is bad, but to be bored double is worse.”

“Am I, then, never to be happy?”

“No: not so long as you do not know what misfortune is.”

“Misfortune cannot reach me.”

“So much the worse; for then you are incurable.”

“Ah! These philosophers,” cried the youngest of the guests. “One should not listen to them. They are theoretical; they manufacture all kinds of theories which are impracticable. Get married, get married, my friend. I should do the same, had I not made a vow never to do anything. Get married; and, as the poets say, ‘May the two phoenixes always appear to you tenderly united.’ My friends, I drink to the success of our host.”

“And I,” answered the philosopher, “drink to the near interposition of some protecting divinity, who, in order to make him happy, will require him to pass through the trial of misfortune.”

At this singular toast, the guests arose, brought their fists together as they do at games before beginning the struggle; and having alternately lowered and raised them while bowing their heads, took leave of each other.

From the description of the dining-room where the entertainment was given, and the strange bill of fare which composed it, as well as from the dress and manner of the guests, and perhaps from the singularity of the theories which they advanced, the reader has guessed that we are speaking of the Chinese, not of those “Celestials” who look as if they had been taken from some Chinese screen, or had escaped from some piece of pottery, but of the modern inhabitants of the Celestial Empire, already Europeanized by their studies, their voyages, and their frequent communication with the civilization of the West.

Indeed, it was in the saloon of one of the flower boats on the River of Pearls, at Canton, that the rich Kin-Fo, accompanied by the inseparable Wang, the philosopher, had just given an entertainment to four of the best friends of his youth. Pao-Shen, a mandarin of the fourth class, and of the order of the blue button; Yin-Pang, a rich silk merchant in Apothecary street; Tim, the high liver; and Houal, the literary man.

And this entertainment took place on the 27th day of the 4th moon, during the first of those five periods which so poetically divide the hours of the Chinese night.

CHAPTER 2

Antecedents

If Kin-Fo gave his farewell dinner to his Canton friends, it was because he had passed a part of his youth in the capital of the Province of Kouang-Tong. Of the numerous companions a rich and generous young man is sure to have, the four invited guests on the flower boat were the only ones left him at this time. As to the others, they were dispersed by the accidents of life; he would have looked in vain to have brought them together.

Kin-Fo lived in Shang-Hai at this time, and for a change of air he was spending a few days in Canton. This evening he intended to take the steamer which stops at the principal points along the coast, and return quietly home to his yamen.

Why Wang accompanied Kin-Fo was because the philosopher could never leave his pupil, who did not want for lessons. To tell the truth he paid no attention to them, they were so many maxims and wise sentences lost. The “theory machine,” according to Tim, the high liver, was never weary of producing them.

Kin-Fo was a good type of the northern Chinamen who have never joined with the Tartars. You might not meet his equal in the southern provinces, where the high and low classes are more intimately blended with the Mandshurian race. Kin-Fo neither from his father nor his mother, whose ancestors kept secluded after the conquest, had a drop of Tartar blood in his veins. He was tall, well-built, fair rather than yellow, with straight eyebrows, and eyes following the horizontal, and but slightly raised toward the temple; he had a straight nose, and a face that was not flat. He would have been distinguished even among the finest specimens of Western people.

Indeed if Kin-Fo appeared like a Chinaman, it was because of his carefully shaven skull, his smooth, hairless brow and neck, and his magnificent queue, which started from the occiput and rolled down like a serpent of jet. Careful of his person, he wore a delicate mustache which made a half circle over his upper lip, and an imperial which was exactly like a rest seen in a piece of music. His nails were more than a centimeter long, a proof that he belonged to that category of lucky men who can live without work. Perhaps, too, his careless manner and his haughty bearing added somewhat to his distinguished appearance.

Besides, Kin-Fo was born at Pekin, an advantage of which the Chinese are very proud. To any one who would have asked him where he came from, he would have answered, “I come from above.”

It was at Pekin that his father, Tchoung-Heou, lived when he was born, and he was six years old when the former settled at Shang-Hai. This worthy Chinaman, who came from an excellent family in the northern part of the empire, possessed, like his countrymen, a remarkable capacity for business. During the first years of his career, he traded and sold everything that the rich and populous territory produced: Such as paper goods from Swatow; silks from Sou-Tcheou; sugar candy from Formosa; tea from Hankow and Foochow; iron from Honan; and red and yellow copper from the province of Yunanne. All were to him articles of trade and commerce. During the years following his capital was doubled, owing to the creation of a new commerce, which might be called “The Coolie trade of the New World.”

It is toward North America, and principally into the State of California, that the surplus population of China is directed, but this has been done in such great numbers that Congress has been obliged to take restrictive measures against the invasion, rather impolitely called “The yellow pest.”

Rich companies undertake the transportation of these inexpensive emigrants. Five had charge of the enlisting in the five provinces of the Celestial Empire, and a sixth had quarters at San Francisco. The first five shipped the merchandise, and the sixth received them. An additional agency, called the Ting-Tong, was stationed where they were reshipped.

This requires an explanation. The Chinese are very willing to expatriate themselves to seek their fortunes with the “Melicans,” as they call the population of the United States, but on one condition, that their bodies shall be faithfully brought back and buried in their native land. This is one of the principal conditions of the contract a sine qua non clause which is binding on these companies toward the emigrant, and nothing can avoid it. So that the Ting-Tong, otherwise called the “Agency of the Dead,” which draws its funds from private sources, is charged with freighting the “corpse-steamers,” which leave San Francisco fully loaded for Shang-Hai, Hong-Kong, or Tien-Tsin.

This new kind of business, and new source of profit, the able and enterprising Tchoung-Heou soon saw. At the time of his death, in the year 1866, he was a director in the Kouang-Than Company, in the province of that name, and sub-director of the treasury for the dead in San Francisco.

Kin-Fo having now no father or mother, was heir to a fortune valued at four millions of francs, which was invested in stock in the Central Bank of California, and he had the good sense to let it remain there. At the time he lost his father, the young heir, who was nineteen years old, would have been alone in the world, had it not been for Wang, the inseparable Wang, who filled the place of mentor and friend.

But who was this Wang? For seventeen years he had lived in the yamen at Shang-Hai, and he was the guest of the father before he became that of the son. But where did he come from? What were his antecedents? All these obscure questions Tchoung-Heou and Kin-Fo alone could answer; and if they had considered proper to do so, which was not probable, this is what they would have said:

Every one knows that China is the kingdom where insurrections last many years, and carry off hundreds of thousands of men. Now, in the seventeenth century, the celebrated dynasty of Ming, of Chinese origin, reigned in China three hundred years; when, in the year 1644, the chief, feeling unable to cope with the rebels who threatened the capital, asked aid of a Tartar king. The king hastened to his aid without being pressed to do so; he drove out the rebels, profited by the situation to overthrow him who had asked his aid, and he proclaimed his own son, Chun-Tche, emperor.

From this period, the Tartar authority was substituted for that of the Chinese, and the throne was occupied by Manchurian emperors. By degrees the two races, especially among the lower classes, came together; but among the rich families of the north the separation between the Chinese and the Tartars was maintained more strictly. The type still retains its characteristics, particularly in the center of the Western Provinces of the Empire. There are centered what are called “the irreconcilables,” who remain faithful to the fallen dynasty.

Kin-Fo’s father belonged to the latter class, and he did not belie the traditions of his family. A rising against the foreign power, even after a reign of three hundred years, would have found him ready to join it. His son, Kin-Fo, fully shared his political opinions.

In the year 1860, the Emperor S’Hiene-Fong declared war against England and France — a war ended by the treaty of Pekin, on the 25th of October of the same year. Before that date, a formidable uprising threatened the then reigning dynasty. The Tchang-Mao or the Tai-ping, the “long-haired rebels,” took possession of Nan-King in 1853, and Shang-Hai in 1855. S’Hiene-Fong being dead, his son had great difficulty in repulsing the Tai-ping. Without the Viceroy Li and Prince Kong, and especially the English colonel, Gordon, he perhaps would not have been able to save his throne.

The Tai-ping, the declared enemies of the Tartars, having strongly organized for rebellion, wished to replace the ancient dynasty of the Ming. They formed four distinct bands; the first under a black banner, appointed to kill; the second under a red banner, to set fire; the third under a yellow banner, to pillage and rob; and the fourth, under a white banner, were commissioned to provision the other three.

There were important military operations in Kiang-Sou and Sou-Tcheou, and Kia-Hing, about five leagues distant from Shang-Hai, fell into the power of the rebels, and were recovered, not without great difficulty, by the imperial troops. Shang-Hai was menaced, and even attacked, on the 18th of August, 1860, at the time that Generals Grant and Montauban, commanding the Anglo-French army, were cannonading the forts of Pei-Ho.

Now, at this time Tchoung-Heou, Kin-Fo’s father, was living near Shang-Hai, not far from the beautiful bridge which the Chinese engineers had thrown across the river at Sou-Tcheou. This rebellion of the Tai-ping he could not regard but with approval, since it was chiefly directed against the Tartar dynasty. On the evening of the 18th of August, after the rebels had been driven out of ShangHai, the door of Tchoung-Heou’s house suddenly opened.

A fugitive, who had escaped from his pursuers, threw himself at the feet of Tchoung-Heou. This unfortunate man had no weapon with which to defend himself, and if he was given up to the imperial soldiers he was lost.

Kin-Fo's father was not the man to betray a Tai-ping who sought refuge in his house, and he shut the door, and said, "I do not wish to know, and I never shall know, who you are, what you have done, or whence you come; you are my guest, and for that reason you are safe at my house."

The fugitive wished to speak to express his acknowledgments, but he was unable from weakness.

"Your name?" asked Tchoung-Heou.

"Wang." It was indeed Wang, who was saved by the generosity of Tchoung-Heou — a generosity which would have cost the latter his life, if he was suspected of having given hospitality to a rebel.

A few years afterward the uprising of the rebels was forever repressed. In the year 1864 the Tai-ping chief, who was besieged at Nan-King, poisoned himself, to avoid falling into the hands of the imperials. Wang, from that day forward, remained in the house of his benefactor. He never referred to the past, and no one questioned him. The atrocities committed by the rebels were said to be frightful, and under what banner Wang had served — the yellow, red, black, or white — it was better to remain in ignorance of, and to believe that he belonged to the provisioning column.

Wang was pleased with his lot, and he continued to be the guest of this hospitable house. After Tchoung-Heou's death, his son had no desire to be separated from him, so much accustomed had he become to the company of this amiable person.

Indeed, at the time of this story who would have ever recognized a former Tai-ping, a murderer, a robber, or an incendiary from choice, in this philosopher of fifty-five years, this moralist in spectacles.

With his long, modest robe, and the sash around his waist rising toward his chest from growing obesity, with his head-dress regulated according to the imperial decree, wearing a fur hat with the rim raised around the crown, from whence fell tassels of red cord, did he not look like a worthy professor of philosophy, and one of those learned men who write fluently in the eighty thousand characters of Chinese writing, and like a savant of superior dialect receiving the first prize in the examination of doctors, with the right to pass under the gate of Pekin reserved for the "Sons of Heaven?" Perhaps, after all, the rebel had improved by contact with the honest Tchoung-Heou, and he had gradually entered into the study of speculative philosophy.

On the evening when Kin-Fo and Wang, who never left each other, were together at Canton, after the farewell dinner, they both went along the wharves to seek the steamer to take them quickly to Shang-Hai. Kin-Fo walked on in silence, and in a pensive mood. Wang looked round to the right and to the left, philosophizing to the moon and to the stars; passed smilingly under the gate of "Eternal Purity," which he did not find too high for him, and under the gate of "Eternal Joy," whose gates seemed to open on his own existence, and finally saw the pagoda of the "Five Hundred Divinities" vanishing in the distance.

CHAPTER 3

Kin-Fo At Home

A yamen is a number of buildings, variously constructed, ranged according to a parallel line, which a second line of kiosks and pavilions cut across perpendicularly. Ordinarily, the yamen serves as a dwelling for mandarins of high rank, and belongs to the emperor; but it is not forbidden to wealthy Celestials to have one. It was in one of these sumptuous hotels that the wealthy Kin-Fo dwelt in Shang-Hai.

Wang and his pupil stopped at the principal gate opening on the vast inclosure, which surrounded the various constructions of the yamen and its garden and courtyards. If, instead of being the dwelling of a private person, it had been that of a mandarin magistrate, a large drum would have occupied the best place under the roof of the porch over the door, and where in the night as well as the day those of his deputies who might have to seek for justice would have knocked; but instead of this “drum” large porcelain jars ornamented the entrance to the yamen, which contained cold tea, and which were kept constantly filled by his servants.

These jars were for the benefit of passers-by, which did honor to the generosity of Kin-Fo. He was well and favorably regarded, as they say, by his neighbors in the east and the west.

On the arrival of the master, the servants of the house ran to the door to receive him. Valets-de-chambre, footmen, porters, chair-bearers, waiters, coachmen, and cooks, all who compose a Chinese household, formed into line under the orders of the steward. A dozen of coolies, engaged by the month for the coarse work, stood a little in the rear.

The steward welcomed the master to the house, who made a sign with his hand and passed rapidly on.

“Soun,” he merely said.

“Soun,” answered Wang, smiling. “If Soun were here, it would not be Soun.”

“Where is he?” asked Kin-Fo.

The steward had to confess that neither he, nor any one, knew where he was. Now Soun was no less a person than the first valet-de-chambre, specially attached to Kin-Fo’s person, and was one whom he could by no means dispense with.

Was Soun, then a model servant? No, he could not possibly have done his duty in a worse manner; he was absent-minded, awkward with his hands and tongue, a great eater, and a great coward; but he was a true Chinaman, faithful on the whole, and the only one possessed of the gift of moving his master. Did Kin-Fo find a necessity to get angry with Soun twenty times a day, yet if he only corrected him ten times, there was just so much less to rouse him from his habitual indolence, and put his bile in motion. It was evident that he was a hygienic servant.

Soun, like the most of Chinese servants, came of himself to be corrected when he deserved it. The blows of the rattan would be poured on his shoulders, but he hardly cared for that. What caused him to show more sensibility was the successive cuttings of his braided pigtail, which Kin-Fo made him undergo when he had committed any, grave fault.

Probably every one is aware how much the Chinaman values this singular appendage. The loss of his queue, or pigtail, is the first punishment applied to criminals. It is a dishonor for life, so that the unfortunate valet dreaded nothing so much as to be condemned to lose a piece of it. Four years before, when he entered Kin-Fo’s service, his braid was one of the finest in the Celestial Empire, and measured over four feet, now it only measured two, so that Soun in two years would be entirely bald.

Wang and Kin-Fo, followed respectfully by the servants of the house, crossed the garden, where the trees, mostly set in porcelain vases, and cut in a surprising style of art, assumed the form of fantastic animals. Then they walked around the large basin containing the fishes, in which the water was hidden from view under the pale red flowers of the most beautiful of the native water-lilies in the Empire of Flowers. All that Chinese fancy, with European comfort, might be found in this luxurious dwelling.

Kin-Fo was a man of progress, and his tastes proved it. He was not averse to the importation of every modern Western invention. He belonged to that category of the Sons of Heaven, still too rare, who are charmed by the physical and chemical sciences. He was not one of those barbarians who cut the first telegraph wires which the house of Reynolds wished to establish as far as Wousung, with the view of ascertaining more quickly the arrival of English and American mails; nor was he one of those backward mandarins who, in order not to let the submarine cable from Shang-Hai to Hong-Kong be attached at any point whatsoever of the territory, obliged the electricians to fasten it on a boat in the open river.

Material progress was introduced into his house. Indeed, the telephone gave communication between the different buildings in his yamen, and electric bells connected the rooms in his house. During the cold weather he was not ashamed to have a fire, and he was more sensible in this respect than his fellow-citizens, who freeze under four or five suits of clothes.

The pupil of the philosopher Wang had all that was necessary to make him happy in his material, as well as his moral life. He had Soun to rouse him from his daily apathy. Yet even Soun was not sufficient to give him happiness.

It is true that, at the present moment, Soun, who was never where he ought to be, did not show himself. He had some grave fault, no doubt, to reproach himself with — something which he had done wrong during his master's absence; and he feared for his shoulders, habituated as he was to the rattan. Perchance he even trembled for his pigtail.

"Soun!" said Kin-Fo, as he entered the hall into which the rooms opened to the right and to the left, and his voice indicated an ill-repressed impatience.

"Soun!" repeated Wang, whose good advice and reproaches were always thrown away upon the incorrigible valet.

"Let some one find Soun, and have him brought to me," said Kin-Fo, addressing the steward, who set every one to searching for the lost one.

Wang and Kin-Fo were now alone. "Wisdom," said the philosopher, "commands the traveler who returns to his fireside to take some repose."

"Let us be wise," simply answered Wang's pupil, and after shaking the philosopher's hand, he directed his steps toward his apartment, while Wang sought his own chamber.

Kin-Fo, when alone, stretched himself on one of those soft lounges of European manufacture which a Chinese upholsterer could never have made so comfortable. In this position he began to meditate. Was it about his marriage with the amiable and handsome woman he was to make his companion for life? Yes; but that is not surprising, because he was on the eve of visiting her. This charming person did not reside in Shang-Hai, but in Pekin; and Kin-Fo considered that it would be only proper to announce to her his return to Shang-Hai, and his intention of soon visiting the capital of the Celestial Empire; and even if he were to show a desire and some impatience to see her, he did not think it would be out of place, for he had a true affection for her. Wang had proved to him by indisputable rules of logic that he really loved her, and this new element introduced into his life might perhaps call forth the unknown — that is, happiness. Kin-Fo was dreaming with his eyes half closed, and he would have fallen asleep, if he had not felt a sort of tickling in his right hand. Instinctively his fingers came together and seized a knotty body of reasonable thickness which they were undoubtedly accustomed to handle. He was not mistaken; it was a rattan which had been slipped into his right hand, and he heard, in a resigned tone of voice, the following words: “When master wishes.”

Kin-Fo rose up, and by a very natural movement he brandished the correcting rattan. Soun stood before him presenting his shoulders in the posture of a patient, and supporting himself on the floor by one hand, he held a letter in the other.

“Well, here you are at last,” cried Kin-Fo.

“Yes, yes,” answered Soun; “I did not expect you until three o’clock; but I am ready when you wish.”

Kin-Fo threw the rattan on the carpet. Soun, although naturally very yellow, had now become very pale. “If you offer your back, without any other explanation, it proves that you deserve something more," said the master. "What is the matter?"

"This letter."

"Well, what of it? Speak!" cried Kin-Fo, at the same time taking the letter which Soun presented to him.

"I very stupidly forgot to give it to you before you left for Canton."

"A week behind time, you rogue."

"I did wrong, my master."

"Come here."

"I am like a poor crab," said Soun, "that has no claws, and cannot walk — yes! Yes!"

This last yes was one of despair. Kin-Fo seized Soun by his pigtail, and with one clip of the scissors cut off the extreme end.

It is believed that claws grow instantaneously on the unhappy crab; this one, having first snatched from the carpet the precious part of the queue which had been cut off, scampered hastily away.

From twenty-four inches Soun's pigtail had become reduced to twenty-three.

Kin-Fo had now resumed his usual calmness, and thrown himself on the lounge once more, and was examining, like a man whom nothing hurries, the letter which had arrived a week ago. He was only displeased with Soun on account of his negligence, not on account of the delay. What could there be in a letter that would interest him? It would be interesting if it could only cause him an emotion. An emotion for him! He looked at it vacantly. The envelope, made of heavy linen paper, showed on the address and the reverse side sundry postmarks of a chocolate and wine color, with the picture of a man underneath the figure "2" and "six cents," which indicated that it came from the United States of America.

"Good!" said Kin-Fo, shrugging his shoulders; "a letter from my correspondent in San Francisco," and he threw the letter in the corner of a divan.

Indeed, what could his correspondent have to tell him? That the title deeds which composed almost all his fortune slept quietly in the vaults of the Central Bank in California, or that his stock had risen from fifteen to twenty per cent, or that the dividends to be distributed would exceed those of the preceding year? A few millions of dollars, more or less, was not sufficient to move him.

A few minutes later Kin-Fo took up the letter and mechanically tore the envelope; but, instead of reading it, his eyes only sought for the signature. "It is, indeed, from my correspondent," he said; "he can have nothing to say but about business, and to-morrow I will attend to business."

A second time Kin-Fo was about to throw the letter aside, when his attention was called to a word underlined several times on the second page. It was the word "indebtedness," to which the San Francisco correspondent evidently wished to attract the attention of his client at Shang-Hai.

Kin-Fo took up the letter again, and read it from the beginning to the end, not without a certain feeling of curiosity, rather surprising on his part. For a moment his eyebrows contracted, but a disdainful smile settled on his lips when he finished reading it.

Kin-Fo rose, walked about twenty steps, and approached the acoustic tube which placed him in direct communication with Wang; he was about to carry the mouthpiece to his lips when he changed his mind, let the rubber fall, and returning, threw himself on a divan. “Pooh!” said he.

“And she,” he murmured — ”she is really more interested in all this than I am.”

He then approached a little table, on which stood a box of rare carving; but as he was about to open it, he stopped. “What was it, that her last letter said?” he murmured.

Instead of raising the box cover, he pressed a spring at one end, and immediately a sweet voice was heard: “My little elder brother, am I no longer to you like the flower ‘Mei-houa’ in the first moon, like the flower of the apricot in the second, and the flower of the peach-tree in the third? My dear precious jewel of a heart, a thousand, ten thousand greetings to you.” It was the voice of a young woman, whose tender words were repeated by phonograph.

“Poor little younger sister,” said Kin-Fo. Then opening the box, he took out from the apparatus the paper on which were the indented lines which had just reproduced the inflections of the absent voice, and replaced it with another.

Kin-Fo spoke in it for about a minute. By his voice, which was always calm and even, no one could recognize whether joy or sorrow influenced his thoughts. Kin-Fo spoke three or four sentences only. Having done this, the movement of the phonograph was suspended, he drew out the special paper on which the needle acting upon the membrane had traced oblique ridges, corresponding to the words spoken; then placing this paper in an envelope which he sealed, he wrote from right to left the following address:

“Madame Le-Ou, Cha-Coua Avenue, Pekin.”

An electric bell soon brought a domestic. Orders were given to him to take this letter immediately to the post-office.

An hour later Kin-Fo slept peacefully, pressing in his arms his — “tchou-fou-jen” a kind of pillow of plaited bamboo, which maintains a coolness, very much prized in warm latitudes.

CHAPTER 4

Unwelcome Tidings

“You have no letter for me yet?”

“No, madame.”

“How long the time appears to me, mother.”

Thus spoke the charming Le-ou for the tenth time that day, in the boudoir of her house in Cha-Coua Avenue, Pekin. The old mother who answered her, and to whom she gave this appellation, usually bestowed in China on servants of a respectable age, was the grumbling and disagreeable Miss Nan.

Le-ou had married, when she was eighteen years of age, a learned man who had contributed to the famous work called “Sse-Khou-Tsuane-Chou,” which was begun in the year 1773, and was to comprise 168,000 volumes, but up to the present time had only reached the 78,738th volume.

This learned man was twice her age, and died three years after this unequal union. The young widow was therefore left alone in the world when she was only twenty-one years old. Kin-Fo met her on a voyage which he made to Pekin about this time. Wang, who was acquainted with this charming person, drew Kin-Fo’s attention to her, who gradually allowed himself to fall into the idea of changing his condition in life by becoming the husband of the handsome young widow. Le-ou was not insensible to the proposition made to her, and it was in this way that the marriage was decided upon, which was to be celebrated as soon as Kin-Fo had made the necessary arrangements at Shang-Hai and Pekin.

It is not common in the Celestial Empire for widows to marry again, not that they do not wish it as much as the others of their sex in Western countries, but because the wish is not shared by the opposite sex. If Kin-Fo was an exception to the rule, it was because he was eccentric, we know.

Le-ou, if she married again, would no longer have the right to pass under the commemorative arches which the emperor has sometimes erected in honor of women who had been faithful to a deceased husband — such as the Widow Soung, who never would leave her husband’s tomb; of the Widow Koung-Kiang, who cut off an arm; and of the Widow Yen-Tchiang, who disfigured herself as a sign of conjugal grief. But Le-ou believed she could put her twenty years to better use. She would again assume that life of obedience which constitutes the whole role of a woman in the Chinese family; she would renounce speaking of outside matters, and conform to the precepts of the book “Li-nun” on domestic virtues, and the book “Nei-tso-pien,” on the duties of marriage, and she might again find that consideration which the wife enjoys among the upper classes. So Le-ou, who was intelligent and well educated, understanding what place she would hold in the life of the rich man, tired of the world, and feeling an affection for him, and a desire to prove to him that happiness still exists here below, was resigned to her new lot.

The first husband had left this young widow, at the time of his death, in easy but moderate circumstances. The house in Cha-Coua Avenue was a modest one. The insupportable Nan was the only servant; but Le-ou put up with her disagreeable manners, which is peculiar to the servants of the Empire of Flowers.

It was in her dressing-room that the young lady passed the most of her time, the furniture of which would have seemed very plain were it not for the rich presents sent her for the past two months from Shang-Hai. A few pictures hung on the walls, and, among others, a valuable one by, the old painter, Huan-Tse-Nen.

This young Le-ou was a charming woman even to European eyes. She was fair, and not yellow; she had sweet soft eyes, raised near the temples; black hair, ornamented with peach-blossoms, fastened by pins of green jade; small teeth; and eyebrows defined with a delicate line of India ink. She used no honey or Spanish-white on her cheeks, as the beauties in the Celestial Empire generally do. This young widow had nothing to do with these artificial ingredients. She seldom went out of her house at Cha-Coua, and for that reason disdained to use the mask, common among Chinese women when they go out.

As for her toilet, nothing could be more simple or elegant. A long robe, with a white embroidered galloon at the hem, and underneath this she wore a plaited skirt; at her waist a plastron, adorned with braid in gold filigree; pantaloons attached to the belt and fastened over hose of Nan-King silk; pretty slippers, ornamented with pearls, completed her attire. It wanted nothing more to make the young widow charming, unless we add that her hands were delicate, and that she preserved her nails, that were long and rosy, in little silver cases carved with exquisite art. Her feet? Well, her feet were small, not on account of any deformity in consequence of that barbarous custom among the Chinese which is happily being done away with, but because nature had made them so.

“It cannot be possible that a letter has not come to-day,” said Le-ou again; “go and see, mother.”

“I have been to see,” replied Miss Nan, very disrespectfully, and left the room, grumbling.

Le-ou tried to work to divert her mind, but she was thinking of Kin-Fo all the time, since she was embroidering for him a pair of cloth socks, whose manufacture is altogether confined to Chinese women, to whatever class they may belong. But her work soon fell from her hands. She rose, took two or three watermelon seeds from a box, and cracked them between her pretty white teeth. She then opened a book called “Nushun,” a code of instructions intended to be read by all good wives daily.

“As spring is the most favorable season for the farmer, so is the dawn the most propitious moment of the day.”

“Rise early, and do not yield to the wooing of sleep.”

“Take care of the mulberry-tree and the hemp.”

“Spin silk and cotton zealously.”

“A woman’s virtue is in being industrious and economical.”

“Your neighbor will sing your praises.”

This book was soon closed, for the fond Le-ou was not thinking of what she was reading.

“Where is he?” she asked herself. “He must have gone to Canton. Has he returned to Shang-Hai? When will he come to Pekin? Has the sea been propitious to him? May the Goddess Koanine aid him!”

She wished a reaction to the anxiety which had taken possession of her whole being. Her lute was there, her fingers ran over the chords, while her lips murmured the first words of the song, “Hands United,” but she could not continue. “His letters always came promptly,” she thought to herself; “and when I read them how they move my soul. Now instead of letters addressed only to my, eyes, I hear his voice itself.”

Le-ou glanced at a phonograph which stood on a small table, and which was exactly like the one that Kin-Fo used at Shang-Hai. They could thus hear each other speak, in spite of the distance which separated them. But to-day, as for several days, the phonograph was silent, and said nothing of the thoughts of the absent one.

At this moment the old mother entered. “There is your letter,” she said.

Nan went out after handing to Le-ou a letter post-marked Shang-Hai. A smile played on the lips of the young woman. Her eyes shone with a brilliant light. She tore open the envelope rapidly, without taking time to contemplate it, as was her custom.

It was not a letter which the envelope contained, but one of those oblique indented plates which, when adjusted in the phonograph, reproduce all the inflections of the human voice. “Ah! I like this even better,” Le-ou cried, joyously, “for I can hear him speak.”

The paper was placed on the roller of the phonograph, which a movement like clock-work turned, and Le-ou putting her ear to it, heard a voice she well knew say:

“Little Younger Sister — Ruin has carried away my riches, as the east wind blows away the yellow leaves of autumn. I do not wish to make another miserable by having her share my misery. Forget him on whom ten thousand misfortunes have fallen.”

“Yours in despair, Kin-Fo.”

What a blow for the young woman! A life more bitter than the bitter gentian awaited her now. Yes, the golden wind carried her last hopes with the fortune of him she loved. The love which Kin-Fo had for her, had it forever gone away? Did her lover only believe in the happiness which riches gives? Ah, poor Le-ou! She now resembled a kite, when the string to which it is attached is broken, slowly she sank to the ground.

CHAPTER 5

“The Centenary”

The following day the disdain for the things of this world did not leave Kin-Fo. With his usual pace, he left his home, crossed the river and directed his steps toward a handsome house standing between the Mission Church and the United States Consulate.

On the front of this house was a large copper plate, on which appeared this inscription:

The Centenary Life Insurance Company, Guaranteed Capital, $20,000,000. Principal Agent: William J. Bidulph.

Kin-Fo pushed open the door and found himself in an office divided into two compartments by a simple railing as high as his elbow. Several paper boxes, books with nickel clasps, an American safe with secret drawers, two or three tables, where the agent’s clerks were working, and a secretary desk, which the Honorable William J. Bidulph reserved for himself. This comprised the furniture of the office, which looked more like the office in a Broadway store than one on the shores of the Wousung.

William J. Bidulph was the principal agent in China of the fire and life insurance company, whose headquarters were in Chicago. It was called the “Centenary,” a good sign to draw customers.

The Centenary was renowned in the United States, and had branches in the five divisions of the world. It did an extensive business, which was boldly and liberally carried on, and was thus able to take every risk.

The Celestials were beginning to follow this modern current of ideas, which filled the coffers of companies of this kind. A great number of houses in the Central Empire were insured against fire, and the insurance risks in case of death, with their combinations, did not want Chinese signatures. The guarantee of the Centenary was already posted on doors in Shang-Hai, and, among other places, on the pillars of Kin-Fo's costly yamen. It was not, therefore, with the intention of insuring against fire that Wang's pupil went to visit the Honorable William J. Bidulph.

"Mr. Bidulph?" he asked, on entering. William J. Bidulph was there "in person," like a photographer always at the disposition of the public. He was correctly dressed in a black coat and white cravat, with a full beard, and a peculiar American manner.

"To whom have I the honor of speaking?" asked William J. Bidulph.

"To Mr. Kin-Fo, of Shang-Hai."

"Mr. Kin-Fo, one of the clients of the Centenary-policy No. 27,200?"

"The same."

"Shall I have the pleasure, sir, of being able to render you any service?"

"I would like to speak to you in private," answered Kin-Fo. The conversation between these two persons could be easily carried on, since William J. Bidulph spoke Chinese as well as Kin-Fo spoke English.

The rich client was then introduced, with the respect which was due him, into an inner office, hung with tapestry, and closed with double doors, where one might have plotted the overthrow of the dynasty of Tsing without fear of being heard by the most cunning tipaos in the Celestial Empire.

“Sir,” said Kin-Fo, as soon as he was seated in a rocking-chair before a fireplace heated with gas, “I desire to negotiate with your company for the insurance of my life.”

“Sir,” answered William J. Bidulph, “there is nothing more simple. Two signatures, yours and mine, at the foot of a policy, and the insurance is effected, after a few preliminary formalities. But, sir, permit me to ask this question: Of course you desire to die at an advanced age — a very natural desire always?”

“Why?” asked Kin-Fo. “Ordinarily, life insurance indicates a fear of approaching death.”

“Oh, sir,” answered William J. Bidulph, in the most serious way in the world, “that fear is never entertained by the patrons of the Centenary. Does not its name indicate this? To be insured with us, is to take a long lease of life. I beg your pardon, but it is seldom that our insured do not pass their hundredth year — very rare, very rare. In their interest we ought to deprive them of life. But we do a superb business. I assure you, sir, that to be insured in the Centenary is a sure way to become a centenarian.”

“Ah!” said Kin-Fo, quietly, looking at William J. Bidulph with his cold eye. The chief agent, as serious as a minister, had not the appearance of joking.

“However that may be,” replied Kin-Fo, “I wish to insure my life for $200,000.”

“We will say a policy for $200,000,” answered William J. Bidulph, as he wrote this figure on a memorandum. The magnitude of the amount did not even cause him to raise his eyebrows.

“Against what risks do you intend to take an insurance, my dear sir?”

“All.”

“The risks of travel by sea and land, and those of a residence outside of the limits of the Celestial Empire?”

“Yes.”

“The risks of military service?”

“Yes.”

“Then the premiums will be very high.”

“I will pay what is necessary.”

“It is agreed.”

“But,” added Kin-Fo, “there is another very important risk of which you do not speak.”

“What is it?”

“Suicide. I thought the policies of the Centenary allowed insurance against suicide.”

“Just so! Just so!” replied William J. Bidulph, rubbing his hands. “That is also a source of profit to us. You can rest assured that our clients are generally men who cling to life, and those who from excessive prudence insure against suicide never kill themselves.”

“For all that,” answered Kin-Fo, “for personal reasons I wish to insure against this risk also.”

“Just as you wish, but the premium will be very high.”

“I say, again, that I will pay whatever is necessary.”

“I understand. We will therefore say,” said William J. Bidulph, continuing to write on his memorandum, “risks of traveling by sea and land, and suicide.”

“And on those conditions, what will the premiums to be paid amount to?” asked Kin-Fo.

“My dear sir,” answered the principal agent, “our premiums are based on a mathematical precision which does honor to the Company. They are no longer, as formerly, on Duvillar’s tables. Are you acquainted with Duvillar?”

“I never knew him.”

“He was a remarkable statistician, but ancient, so ancient even that he is dead. At the time that he established his famous tables, which still serve as the scale for premiums in the most of the European companies which are behind the times, the average duration of life was less than it is at present, thanks to the general progress. We make a basis on a higher medium, and consequently more favorable to the insured, who pays less and lives longer.”

“What will be the amount of my premium?” asked Kin-Fo, desirous of stopping the wordy agent.

“Sir,” answered William J. Bidulph, “may I take the liberty of asking how old you are?”

“Thirty-one years.”

“Well, at thirty-one, if it were only for ordinary risks, you would have to pay other companies two eighty-three per cent. but in the Centenary it would only be two seventy, which would annually make $5,400 on a capital of $200,000.”

“And on the terms that I desire,” said Kin-Fo, “insuring against every risk, even suicide — suicide above everything?”

“Sir,” answered William J. Bidulph, in an amiable tone, after having consulted a printed table, “we cannot do this for you at less than twenty-five per cent.”

“Which will be?”

“Fifty thousand dollars.”

“And how do you wish the premium to be paid to you?”

“All at once, or in parts by the month, at the pleasure of the insured.”

“Which would be for the first two months?”

“Eight thousand three hundred and thirty-two dollars, which, if paid to-day, the 30th of April,” answered William J. Bidulph, “would cover you up to the 30th of June of the present year.”

“Sir,” answered Kin-Fo, “these conditions suit me-here is the premium for the first two months;” and he placed on the table a thick roll of bills which he drew from his pocket.

“Well, sir, very well,” answered William J. Bidulph; “but, before signing the policy, there is one formality to be gone through with.”

“What is it?”

“You must receive a visit from the physician of the Company.”

“What is the object of the visit?”

“In order to see if you are in sound health, and that you have no organic complaint of a nature to shorten life-if, in short, you can give us guarantees of a long life.”

“For what reason, since I insure even against duel and suicide?” observed Kin-Fo.

“Well, my dear sir,” replied William J. Bidulph, still smiling, “a malady, the germ of which you might have, and which would carry you off in a few months, would cost us, in all, $200,000.”

“My suicide would cost you that also, I suppose?” asked Kin-Fo.

“My dear sir,” answered the principal agent, taking Kin-Fo’s hand in his, “I have already had the pleasure of telling you that many of our clients insure against suicide, but they never commit suicide; besides, we are not prevented from watching over them — , but with the greatest discretion.”

“Ah!” Said Kin-Fo.

“I will also add,” said William J. Bidulph, “that all the clients of the Centenary insured against the risk of suicide are the ones who pay premiums the longest; but, between ourselves, why should the rich Mr. Kin-Fo contemplate suicide?”

“And why should the rich Mr. Kin-Fo get insured?”

“Oh,” answered William J. Bidulph, “to be certain of living to be very old as a client of the Centenary.” There was no use discussing with the principal agent of the celebrated Company — he was so positive in what he said.

“And now,” he added, “for whose benefit is this insurance of $200,000 to be made?”

“There will be two beneficiaries,” answered Kin-Fo, “one for $50,000 and the other for $150,000.”

“We will say for the $50,000?”

“Mr. Wang.”

“What! The philosopher Wang?”

“The same.”

“And for the $150,000?”

“Madame Le-ou, of Pekin.”

“Pekin,” added William J. Bidulph, finishing his entry of the names of the beneficiaries. Then he resumed:

“What is Madame Le-ou’s age?”

“Twenty-one,” answered Kin-Fo.

“Oh,” said the agent, “a young lady who will be quite old when she receives the amount of the policy.”

“Why so, please?”

“Because you will live to be more than a hundred years of age, my dear sir. And about the philosopher, Wang -what age is he?”

“He is fifty-five.”

“Well, this amiable man is sure of never receiving anything.”

“That is to be seen, sir,” said Kin-Fo, directing his steps toward the office door.

“Good-day,” answered the Honorable William J. Bidulph, bowing to the new client of the Centenary.

The following day the doctor of the Company made Kin-Fo the usual visit. His report was: “A body of iron, muscles of steel, and lungs like organ bellows.”

There was now nothing to prevent the Company from dealing with a man so solidly built. The policy was then signed. Neither Le-ou nor Wang, unless through unforeseen circumstances, would ever know what Kin-Fo had just done for them, until the day when the Centenary should be called to pay them the policy, the last generous act of the ex-millionaire.

CHAPTER 6

Preparing For Death

The $200,000 of the Centenary was in a very perilous condition, notwithstanding what the Honorable William J. Bidulph might think and say. Kin-Fo's scheme was not of that kind that on reflection one postpones indefinitely.

Completely ruined, Wang's pupil formally determined to end his existence, which, even in the time of his riches, brought him only sadness and weariness. The letter delivered by Soun, eight days after its arrival, had come from San Francisco. It gave notice of the suspension of payment of the Central Bank of California. Now Kin-Fo's fortune consisted almost entirely, as we know, of stock in this celebrated bank; and improbable as the news might appear, it was too true. The suspension of payment of the Central Bank of California was confirmed by the newspapers at Shang-Hai. The failure had been declared, and the fall in the stock had ruined Kin-Fo.

The sale of his house at Shang-Hai would not yield him a sufficient income. The $8,000 premium paid to the Centenary, and some boat stock of the Tien-Tsin Company, which, if sold that day would-hardly amount to anything worth while, now comprised his whole fortune.

A Western man, a Frenchman, or an Englishman, would have taken this new state of existence philosophically, and sought to have got up in the world again, by labor; but a Celestial believes that he has the right to think otherwise, and to act differently. It was voluntary death that Kin-Fo, like a true Chinaman, was going to, with that typical indifference characteristic of the yellow race.

The Chinaman has only a passive courage, but he possesses it in the highest degree. His indifference to death is truly extraordinary. When ill, he sees it approach with indifference. When condemned to death, and already in the hands of the executioner, he shows no signs of fear. The public executions, so frequent, the sight of horrible suffering, which are part of the penal laws in the Celestial Empire, have early made familiar to the Sons of Heaven the idea of abandoning without regret the things of this world; besides, it is not to be wondered at, since in all families this thought of death is a topic of conversation almost daily, which has its influence over the most ordinary acts of life. The worship of ancestors is found even among the poorest people. There is not a rich dwelling where there is not reserved a sort of domestic sanctuary, and there is not a miserable hut where may not be found some corner religiously kept apart for the relics of ancestors, in whose honor a day is celebrated in the second month. That is why one finds in the same shop, where children's cradles and wedding gifts are sold, a varied assortment of coffins, which form an article of Chinese commerce.

The furniture would be incomplete if a coffin were wanting in the mansion. The son considers it a duty to offer one to his father while living, and it is considered a great proof of tenderness. This coffin is placed in a special chamber. It is ornamented and taken care of; and when it has received the mortal remains, it is kept for many years with pious care. In short, respect for the dead is the basis of Chinese religion, and contributes to bind the family ties more closely.

Kin-Fo, therefore, more than any other person, owing to his temperament, looked with tranquility at the thought of putting an end to his days. He had insured the fate of the two beings in whom all his affection centered. What had he to regret now? Nothing. Suicide could not cause him any remorse. What is a crime in Western civilized countries, is nothing more than a lawful act, we might say, in the midst of that strange civilization of Eastern Asia.

Kin-Fo had made up his mind, and no influence could change him from putting it into execution, not even the influence of the philosopher Wang. Besides, the latter was in absolute ignorance of his pupil’s designs. Soun was no wiser, and only observed one thing since his master’s return; that was, that Kin-Fo showed himself more patient toward him, in not finding fault with his daily blunders.

Decidedly, Soun was arriving at the conclusion that he could not find a better master, and his precious pigtail wriggled on his back with security.

A Chinese proverb says:

“To be happy on earth, you must live at Canton, and die at Liao-Tcheou.”

It is at Canton that every luxury of life is found, and it is at Liao-Tcheou that the best coffins are manufactured.

Kin-Fo did not fail to leave an order with the best house, that his last bed of repose might arrive in time. To be properly laid out for his last sleep is the constant thought of every Celestial who knows how to live.

At the same time Kin-Fo bought a white cock, whose part is to embody departing spirits, and seize in their flight one of the seven elements of which a Chinese soul is composed.

We see that if the pupil of the philosopher Wang showed himself indifferent to the details of life, he was much less so to those of death. He had to arrange the program for his funeral, and on that very day a beautiful sheet of paper, called rice paper, received Kin-Fo’s last will.

After having bequeathed to the young widow his house at Shang-Hai, and to Wang a portrait of the Emperor Tai-ping, which the philosopher always regarded favorably. Kin-Fo wrote with a firm hand the order of march of the persons who were to assist at his obsequies.

In default of relations, of which he had none, he wished a party of friends, which he had, to appear at the head of the funeral procession, dressed in white, which is the mourning color of the Celestial Empire. Along the length of the streets as far as the tomb, which had been erected some time ago in the suburbs of Shang-Hai, were to extend a double row of servants charged with the burial. Then the hearse was to appear. It was an enormous palanquin, hung in violet silk, and embroidered with gold dragons, which fifty valets were to carry on their shoulders in the middle of a double row of bonzes. The priests, dressed in robes of gray, red, and yellow, reciting the last prayers, alternated with the thunder of gongs, the playing of flutes, and the noisy din of trumpets, six feet long, were to follow. At last the mourners' carriages, draped in white, were to close this sumptuous funeral procession, the expenses of which must exhaust the last resources of the opulent defunct. This program was really nothing very extraordinary: many funerals of this class pass through the streets of Canton, Shang-Hai, or Pekin, and the Celestials see nothing more than a natural homage given to the remains of him who is no more.

On the 20th of October a box, sent from Liao-Tcheou, arrived to the address of Kin-Fo, at his dwelling in ShangHai. It contained the coffin he had ordered, carefully packed. Neither Wang nor Soun, nor any of the servants in the yamen were surprised; for, we repeat, that there is not a Chinaman who is not anxious to possess in his lifetime the bed on which he is to sleep for eternity.

A letter had arrived that day from the desolate Le-ou-the young widow placed at the disposal of Kin-Fo the little that she possessed. Fortune was nothing to her; she could do without it. She loved him, and what did he want more? Could they not be happy in more modest circumstances? This letter, full of sincere affection, did not alter Kin-Fo's resolution. "My death alone can enrich her," he thought.

It only remained to decide in what way he should accomplish this last supreme act. Kin-Fo felt a sort of pleasure in planning the details, for he was in hopes that at the last moment an emotion, however fleeting as it might be, would make his heart beat.

Within the inclosure of the yamen rose four pretty kiosks, ornamented with all the fancy characteristic of Chinese decorations. They bore significant names, such as the "Pavilion of Happiness," which Kin-Fo never entered; the "Pavilion of Fortune," which he looked upon with disdain; the "Pavilion of Pleasure," the doors of which were now closed to him; the "Pavilion of Long Life," which he had resolved to destroy.

It was this last one that instinct led him to choose. He resolved to shut himself up in it at nightfall, and it was there, the following day, they were to find him happy in death. This point decided, how was he to die? Rip himself open like a Japanese? Strangle himself with a silk cord like a mandarin? Open his veins in a perfumed bath like an epicurean in ancient Rome? No. These proceedings had something brutal in them, and would be painful to his friends and servants. One or two grains of opium, mixed with some subtle poison, would be sufficient to make him pass from this world into the other without his being conscious of the change, carried in one of those dreams which converts slumber into eternal sleep.

The sun was beginning to sink below the horizon when Kin-Fo had only a few hours to live. He wished to take a last promenade and see the country once more around Shang-Hai, and the shores of the Houang-Pou, on which he had so often walked away his weariness. He left the yamen to return once more, and never leave it again.

The English territory, the little bridge over the creek, the French Concession, were crossed in an indolent manner, as he saw no necessity to hasten in this last hour. Passing along the wharf of the native port, he wound around the wall of Shang-Hai as far as the Roman Catholic Cathedral, whose cupola overlooks the southern suburbs. He then turned to the right, and quietly ascended the road which leads to the pagoda at Loung-Hao.

Kin-Fo was not a man who looked around him; so that two strangers dressed like Europeans, who had followed him when he left the yamen, did not even attract his attention. He did not see them, although they never lost sight of him. They walked at some distance behind him, walking when he walked, and stopping when he stopped. It was plain they were there to watch him. They were of medium height, and one would have said that they were like two pointer dogs with sharp eyes and fleet limbs.

Kin-Fo, after walking about a league around the country, retraced his steps. The two bloodhounds also retraced theirs.

Kin-Fo, on his return, saw two or three beggars, to whom he gave alms. Farther on several Chinese Christians, trained in their devotions by the French Sisters of Charity, crossed the road. Each was carrying a basket on her back, in which were contained some abandoned children. They have been appropriately called “the children’s rag-pickers.” And these unfortunate children, what are they but rags thrown in the gutter? Kin-Fo emptied his purse into the hands of these charitable sisters. They were surprised at this act on the part of a Celestial.

It was now evening, and Kin-Fo took the road by the wharf, to return to his home at Shang-Hai. The floating population were still astir, and singing and noise were heard everywhere. Kin-Fo listened; he was anxious to hear the last words that would fall on his ears.

A young Tankadere, guiding her boat through the somber waters of the Houang-Pou, sang thus:

“I deck my boat with a thousand flowers, Counting the hours; My prayers to the blue-god ever rise Homeward to turn my lover’s eyes; My soul impassion’d ever cries, Will he come to-morrow?”

“To-morrow!” thought Kin-Fo to himself; “Where shall I be to-morrow?”

“I know not what land of cold or drought His steps have sought; Roaming beyond old China’s wall Heedless what perils may befall; Ah! Could he hear my heart-sick call — He would come to-morrow.”

“To seek for wealth, O, why didst thou stay Far, far away? Why dost thou tarry! The months glide by, Waiteth the priest the bands to tie, Phoenix to phoenix ever nigh; Come, O come to-morrow!”

The voice died away in the distance. Kin-Fo thought to himself, “Yes, perhaps riches are not everything in this world; but life is not worth living.”

Half an hour afterward he entered his dwelling. The two strangers, who were following him up to that time, had to stop.

Kin-Fo quietly walked to the kiosk of “Long Life,” opened the door and closed it again, and was alone in a little room lighted by a lantern which shed a soft glow around. On a table, which was made of a single piece of jade, stood a box containing a few grains of opium, mixed with a deadly poison, which Kin-Fo always had on hand in case of need. He took up two of these grains, placed them in one of those red-clay pipes which opium-eaters use, and began to light it.

“Why, how is this,” said he, “not even an emotion at the moment when I am about to sleep never to rise again.”

He hesitated a moment. “No,” he cried, throwing the pipe away, which broke on the inlaid floor, “I must have some emotion, even if it be feeble. I must have it — and I will have it.”

And leaving the kiosk with a quicker step than ordinary, he walked toward Wang’s room.

CHAPTER 7

A Serious Contract Proposition

Wang had not yet gone to bed. He was lying on a divan; he was reading the last issue of the Pekin Gazette. When his eyebrows contracted, it was very certain that the paper paid some compliment to the reigning dynasty of Tsing.

Kin-Fo opened the door, entered the room, threw himself in an arm-chair, and said, “Wang, I have come to ask a favor of you.”

“Ten thousand are at your service,” answered the philosopher, letting fall the paper. “Speak — speak — my son, speak, without fear, and whatever it is, I will do it.”

“The service which I require,” said Kin-Fo, “is one of that kind that a friend can render but once; after that I will excuse you from the nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine others; but I must add that you are not to expect any thanks from me afterward.”

“The most able interpreter of inexplicable things could not understand you — what is it?”

“Wang,” said Kin-Fo, “I am ruined.”

“Ah! Ah!” said the philosopher, with the tone of a man who has heard good rather than bad news.

“The letter which I found here on our return from Canton,” said Kin-Fo, “has apprised me that the Central Bank of California has failed. Outside of this yamen and a few thousand dollars, which may enable me to live one or two months longer, I have nothing left."

"Then," said Wang, after looking at his pupil, "it is no longer the rich Kin-Fo to whom I am speaking."

"It is the poor Kin-Fo, whom poverty has never frightened."

"Well answered, my son," said the philosopher, rising.

"I have not, therefore, lost my time in inculcating to you those lessons of wisdom. Thus far you have only vegetated without passions or struggles. You will live now. Confucius has said, and the Talmud after him, 'That there are fewer misfortunes than one fears.' We shall now earn our daily rice. The 'Nun-Schum' teaches us that 'In life there are ups and downs.' The wheel of fortune is continually turning, and the spring wind is variable. Rich or poor, try to do your duty. Let us go."

And Wang, like a true philosopher, was about to quit the sumptuous habitation. Kin-Fo stopped him.

"I said," he resumed, "that poverty has never frightened me, but I will add that I have decided not to endure it."

"Ah!" said Wang, "what do you intend?"

"To die."

"Not to die," quietly answered the philosopher. "A man who has decided to end life says nothing to anybody."

“It would have been done already,” replied Kin-Fo, with a calm equal to that of the philosopher, “had I not wished that my death should cause me at least one first and last emotion. Now, at the moment I was about to swallow one of those grains of opium that you know about, my heart beat so slow that I threw the poison away, and I have come to find you.”

“Do you then wish, my friend, that we should die together?” asked Wang, smiling.

“No,” said Kin-Fo; “I wish you to live.”

“Why?”

“To kill me with your own hand.”

At this unexpected proposition Wang did not even shudder, but Kin-Fo, who looked at him steadily in the face, saw a light in his eyes. The old Tai-ping was awakened in him; eighteen years had passed over his head without stifling the sanguinary instincts of his youth. To the son of him who had protected him he would not object to putting him out of existence, if he desired it. Yes, he, Wang the philosopher, would do this.

But this light in his eyes died out very soon. Wang assumed the usual look of a worthy man, a little more serious perhaps, and settling down again, he said, “And is this the favor that you ask of me?”

“Yes,” replied Kin-Fo; “and the performance of this service will acquit you from all you owe to Tchoung-Heou and his son.”

“What do you want to do?” simply asked the philosopher.

“On the 25th of June, the 28th of the 6th moon, which will be my 31st birthday, I wish to have ceased to live. I must fall by your hand, not knowing where or how. In each of the eighty thousand minutes which will remain to me of life, during the fifty-five days yet remaining, I must be filled with the thought, the hope, and the fear that my life will suddenly end. I must have before me those eighty thousand emotions, so plain, that, when the seven elements of my soul separate, I can cry out, ‘At last I have lived!’”

Kin-Fo, contrary to his habit, had spoken with a certain animation, and it will be noticed that he had fixed on the sixth day before the expiration of his policy as the limit of his existence. This was acting like a prudent man, for in default of the payment of a new premium, a delay would cause his heirs to lose the insurance.

The philosopher listened gravely, casting a look at the portrait of the Tai-ping which he was to inherit, although he was not aware of it.

“You will not decline to fulfill the obligation you have promised, to give me the blow?” asked Kin-Fo.

Wang, with a gesture, indicated that he was ready. He had seen too many killed while fighting under the banners of the Tai-pings, but he added, “Do you thus renounce the chances that the True Master has given you to reach extreme old age?”

“I renounce them.”

“Without any regrets?”

“Without a regret,” answered Kin-Fo. “What! To be old, and resemble a piece of wood which can no longer be carved. If I do not desire to live rich, I should desire it less poor.”

“And the young widow at Pekin,” said Wang. “Do you forget the old proverb, ‘Flowers with flowers; the willow with the willow; the union of two hearts makes a hundred years of spring?’”

“Against three hundred years of autumn, summer, and winter,” replied Kin-Fo, shrugging his shoulders. “No; if Le-ou were poor, she would be miserable with me. On the contrary, my death will assure her a fortune.”

“Have you done that?”

“Yes; and you, Wang, have $50,000 placed on my head.”

“Ah!” simply replied the philosopher, “you answer every question.”

“Yes, to every one, even to an objection which you have not yet made.”

“What is it?”

“The danger which may follow, after my death, of your being suspected as my assassin.”

“Oh,” replied Wang; “it is only the blunderers and the cowards who allow themselves to be taken; besides, where would the merit be of rendering you this last service if I risked nothing?”

“None at all, Wang; but I prefer to give you security in that respect, and no one will ever dream of disturbing you.”

Saying this, Kin-Fo approached a table, took up a sheet of paper, and, in clear handwriting, wrote the following lines:

"I have voluntarily killed myself through disgust and weariness of life. Kin-Fo."

He gave the paper to Wang. The philosopher read it in a low voice at first, then aloud; and, after doing this, he carefully folded it and placed it in his memorandum-book. Another gleam came into his eyes.

"Is this all serious on your part?" said he, regarding his pupil fixedly.

"Yes, serious."

"It will be no less serious on my part, then."

"Then before the 25th of June, at the latest, I shall have ceased to live."

"I do not know whether you will have ceased to live in the way that you understand it," replied the philosopher, gravely; "but you can rest assured you will be dead."

"Thank you, and good-by, Wang."

"Farewell, Kin-Fo."

And Kin-Fo quietly left the chamber of the philosopher.

CHAPTER 8

Suspense

“Well, Craig-Fry?” said the Hon. William J. Bidulph, the following day, to the two agents whom he had commissioned to watch the movements of the new client of the Centenary.

“Well,” answered Craig, “we followed him yesterday during a long walk — — ”

“And,” added Fry, “he certainly has not the appearance of a man who contemplates suicide. When night came we saw him to his own door, but which, unfortunately, we could not enter.”

“And this morning?” asked William J. Bidulph.

“We learned,” answered Craig, “that he was as safe as the bridge of Palikao.”

The agents, Craig and Fry, were two pure-blooded Americans, cousins, in the employ of the Centenary, who might be taken for twins. They were so identified, that when one commenced a sentence, the other usually finished it. They had the same brain, the same thought, heart, stomach, and the same way of doing everything. It was four hands, arms, and legs united in one body. In a word, they were like the Siamese twins.

“Then,” asked William J. Bidulph, “you have not yet been able to penetrate into the house?”

“Not — ” said Craig

“Yet,” said Fry.

“It may be difficult,” replied the principal agent; “but it must be done; it is of importance that the Centenary not only earns the enormous premium, but it is of greater importance to save $200,000. Therefore, there are two months of watching, and perhaps more, if our new client renews his policy.”

“There is a servant — ” said Craig.

“Whom we might bribe — ” said Fry

“Ah,” said Bidulph, “stick to the servant — buy him. He must be sensible to the sound of taels; and taels you shall not want, even although you may have to exhaust the three thousand formalities of civility which Chinese etiquette requires. You will not regret the pains you have taken.”

“It shall be — ” said Craig.

“Done,” replied Fry. And those were the reasons why Craig and Fry wished to put themselves on a familiar footing with Soun. Now, Soun was not a man to resist taels, with the courteous offer of several glasses of American liquor.

Craig and Fry soon learned from Soun all that they wished to know for their interest, which amounted to this: Had Kin-Fo changed his style of living? No; except that he scolded his valet less, that the scissors were not used so often to cut off his pigtail, and that the rattan was used less on his shoulders. Had Kin-Fo any deadly weapon about him? No; for he did not belong to that respectable category of amateurs who use deadly weapons. What did he eat at his meals? Some simple dishes. Did he rise early? At five o’clock. Did he go to bed early? At ten o’clock, which was his custom since Soun had known him. Was he sad, preoccupied, or wearied with life? He was not a very cheerful man, indeed. Oh, no! Nevertheless, some days he enjoyed the things of this life. Yes — Soun found him less indifferent, like a man who is waiting — for what — ? He could not tell.

Finally, did his master possess any poisonous substance which he could use? He had none any longer, for that very morning they had thrown by his orders into the Houang-Pou a dozen of little globules which were poisonous.

In all this, there was nothing to alarm the principal agent of the Centenary. No. The rich Kin-Fo, whose circumstances no one except Wang was aware of, appeared to enjoy life. However this may be, Craig and Fry were to continue to make inquiries about everything their client did. Thus the two inseparables continued to question Soun, who took pleasure in conversing with such amiable men.

It would be going too far to say that the hero of this story clung to life more tenaciously since his resolution to get rid of it; but he did not want for emotions. He had placed Damocles’ sword over his head, and this sword was sure to fall on him some day. Was it to be to-day, or tomorrow? This morning, or this evening? On this point there was some doubt, and hence a movement of the heart, new to him. Besides, since the exchange of words between him and Wang, he saw less of him. Either the philosopher left the house oftener than he was accustomed, or he shut himself up in his room. Kin-Fo did not go in search of him; that was not his place, and he was ignorant of how Wang passed his time. Perhaps, in preparing some ambush for him. An old Tai-ping must have a great many ways of dispatching a man. From this Kin-Fo’s curiosity was aroused; a new element of interest was afforded him. However, the master and pupil met at the same table; but there was no allusion made to their future position of assassin and assassinated — they talked about other things. Wang was more serious than usual, often turned his eyes away, and seemed to be more preoccupied. The man who was so communicative had now become silent and sad. A great eater formerly, like every philosopher who has a good stomach, the most delicate dishes did not tempt him, and the wine no longer consoled him.

Kin-Fo tried to put him at his ease. He tasted of every dish, and it followed that he ate more than usual; hence a new sensation, and he relished his dinners, which agreed with him; it could not be that Wang intended to poison him. He afforded Wang every facility to accomplish his deed. Kin-Fo left his chamber door open, that the philosopher might enter and deal the fatal blow while he was awake or asleep; all that Kin-Fo expected was, that his hand might be swift, and the blow fatal. But his emotions were changing; and after the first few nights he was so accustomed to expect the fatal blow, that he slept soundly and awoke every morning fresh and bright. Things could not always remain thus.

The thought often occurred to Kin-Fo, that Wang would hesitate before killing him in the house where he had been so hospitably entertained. He resolved to put him more at his ease on that point, and we find him running about the country, seeking isolated roads, staying out late in the worst places in Shang-Hai, where robbery and murders were committed daily. He walked through the streets at all hours of the night, jostled by drunken men of all nations, but he was safe and sound. He did not see Craig and Fry, who followed him everywhere, ready to give him help in case of need. If matters went on in this way, Kin-Fo would get accustomed to this new mode of existence, and perhaps weariness would return.

One day chance aroused a new sensation in him. He passed the door of the philosopher’s room. Wang was trying the point of a dagger, and wetting it with some liquid in a blue glass bottle. As Kin-Fo glanced into the room the philosopher brandished the dagger around, in order to try it. Kin-Fo’s face changed at the sight of this, and the blood mounted to his eyes; he thought to himself, “this is the day in which he is to perform the deed.” He discreetly retired, without being seen or heard. Kin-Fo did not leave his room the rest of the day, nor did the philosopher make his appearance either. Kin-Fo went to bed as usual, and rose next morning as a healthy man does.

Ten days had now elapsed, but Wang had two months still to perform his promise. “I have given him more time than is necessary,” said Kin-Fo; and he feared that Wang had repented of his promise.

Kin-Fo observed, however, that the philosopher made more visits than usual to the ancestor’s room, where the coffin was stored, and he was delighted to hear from Soun than Wang had ordered him to brush and clean it, and keep it in readiness.

The 13th, 14th, and 15th of May passed. There was nothing new.

Did Wang intend to let the time pass, and only pay his debt when it was due, as is the custom with merchants? In that case there would be no emotion or surprise for Kin-Fo.

A significant occurrence came to the knowledge of Kin-Fo on the morning of the 16th of May, about six o’clock. He had, had a bad night, and, on waking, was still under the influence of a horrid dream. Prince Ien, the sovereign judge of the Chinese hell, had condemned him not to appear before him until the twelfth-hundreth moon should rise above the horizon of the Celestial Empire. A century still to live — a whole century!

Kin-Fo was therefore in bad humor, for he believed everything was conspiring against him, and when Soun came to assist him to dress, he accosted him angrily: “Go to the devil.”

“No,” answered Soun, “not before I have told you.”

“What?”

“That Mr. Wang — — ”

“Wang — ! What has Wang done?” said Kin-Fo, seizing Soun by his pigtail. “What has he done?”

“My master,” answered Soun, who wriggled like a worm, “he has ordered us to carry your coffin into the ‘Pavilion of Long Life,’ and — — ”

“Has he done that?” cried Kin-Fo, whose face lighted up. “Go, Soun — go, my friend! Stop; here are ten taels; and be careful to execute all Wang’s orders.”

Thereupon Soun was astonished, and repeated to himself:

“Decidedly, master is crazy; but at least he is generous.”

This time Kin-Fo did not doubt that the Tai-ping intended to give the fatal blow in the “Pavilion of Long Life,” where he himself had determined to die. The catastrophe was now approaching. How long the day appeared to Kin-Fo. Finally the sun disappeared, and the shadows of night surrounded the yamen.

Kin-Fo went to the pavilion in the hope of never leaving it alive. He extended himself on a soft divan, which seemed to be made for long repose, and he waited. Then the recollections of his useless life passed before his mind — his weariness, his disgust, all that riches could not conquer, and all that poverty might have increased.

One bright light illumined his life, which had no attraction during his opulence: it was the affection which he felt for the young widow. This sentiment moved his heart when it was about ceasing to beat. What! Make poor Le-ou as miserable as himself — never!

The fourth period, which precedes the dawn, passed, causing Kin-Fo, the liveliest emotions. He listened anxiously. He tried to hear the least noise, while his eyes looked into the darkness. More than once he thought he heard the door open, pushed by some prudent hand. He thought without doubt that Wang hoped to find him asleep, and would strike him in his sleep. Then a reaction took place in him; he feared and desired at the same time this visit of the Tai-ping. The dawn appeared, and the day was slowly approaching. Suddenly the door was opened; Kin-Fo arose, having lived in this last second more than he had done in his whole lifetime.

Soun was before him, with a letter in his hand. “In great haste,” Soun simply said.

Kin-Fo took the letter, which bore the San Francisco postmark. He opened the envelope, read it rapidly, and rushed out of the “Pavilion of Long Life.”

“Wang, Wang!” he cried. In an instant he flung open the door and was in the philosopher’s room.

Wang was not there. Wang had not slept in the house. The servants, on hearing Kin-Fo’s cries, ran to him; they searched the yamen, but it was evident that Wang had disappeared without leaving any traces.

CHAPTER 9

Inverted Circumstances

“Yes, Mr. Bidulph, a simple stock-jobbing operation, in the American style,” said Kin-Fo to the principal agent of the insurance company.

The Honorable William J. Bidulph laughed with the aid of a connoisseur, and observed: “It was indeed well played for everybody was taken in.”

“My own correspondent even,” remarked Kin-Fo; “for eight days afterward they paid with open doors; there was no failure, the news was false, but the deed was done, and the stock, which had depreciated eight per cent. was bought in by the Central Bank at the lowest rate; and when the director was asked the cause of the failure, he answered amiably, ‘One hundred and seventy-five per cent.’ This is what my correspondent writes me in the letter I received this morning, at the moment when I thought myself absolutely ruined.”

“Did you have any idea of taking your own life?” cried William J. Bidulph.

“No,” answered Kin-Fo; “but I thought I might be assassinated.”

“Assassinated?”

“By my written authority — an assassination agreed upon, and which would have cost you — — ”

“Two hundred thousand dollars,” answered Mr. Bidulph, “since all risks against death were taken. Ah, we should have regretted your loss, my dear sir.”

"On account of the amount?"

Mr. Bidulph took his client's hand and shook it cordially in the American style. "But I do not understand you," he added.

"You will understand," replied Kin-Fo; and he told him of the engagement entered into by him with a man in whom he had confidence, and who guaranteed every immunity. The grave feature was that the promise would be fulfilled; the pledge would be kept, without the shadow of a doubt.

"Is this man a friend?" asked the agent.

"He is," answered Kin-Fo; "and my death is worth $50,000 to him."

"Fifty thousand dollars!" cried Mr. Bidulph. "Then it is Mr. Wang?"

"The same."

"A philosopher! He would never kill you."

Kin-Fo was about to say, "This philosopher is an old Tai-ping. During the half of his life he has committed more murders than would ruin the Centenary if they had been insured there. For the last eighteen years his ferocious instincts have been restrained. Now the opportunity is offered him, and he believes me to be ruined and determined to die, and knowing that he will get a small fortune by my death, he will not hesitate."

Kin-Fo said nothing of this, however, for it would compromise Wang, whom, perhaps, William J. Bidulph would not have hesitated to denounce to the governor of the province as a former Tai-ping. That would have saved Kin-Fo, no doubt, but Wang would have been lost.

“Well,” said the agent, “there is a simple thing to do.”

“What is it?”

“You must tell Mr. Wang that the contract is broken, and get back the compromising letter.”

“That is easier said than done,” answered Kin-Fo.

“Wang has disappeared since yesterday, and no one knows his whereabouts.”

“Ah!” said the agent, rather perplexed. “And now, my dear sir, you no longer wish to die,” he said, looking at Kin-Fo.

“No,” he answered. “The stroke of the Central Bank in California has doubled my fortune, and I am going to get married. But I must find Wang first; the time agreed upon has not yet expired.”

“When does it expire?”

“On the 25th of June. And during the interval the Centenary runs great risk, and it should take measures in consequence.”

“And find the philosopher,” said the Honorable William J. Bidulph.

He promenaded up and down with his hands behind his back, then said, “Well, we will find this man, even if he is hidden in the bowels of the earth; and until then we shall prevent any attempt at assassination, as we have prevented you from committing suicide.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kin-Fo.

“This: that since the day the policy was signed, the 30th of April last, two of my detectives have followed you and watched your movements.”

“I have not observed them.”

“Ah, they are discreet men. I should like to introduce them to you, now there is no necessity to hide their movements unless from Mr. Wang.”

“Certainly,” answered Kin-Fo.

“Craig-Fry should be here since you are here,” and William J. Bidulph cried out, “Craig-Fry!”

Craig and Fry were indeed there behind the door of the private office. They had tracked Kin-Fo to the Centenary office, and were waiting for him.

Now, there were two courses, as the Honorable William J. Bidulph observed. The detectives must remain carefully shut up in Kin-Fo’s house at Shang-Hai, so that Wang could not enter without their knowledge, or else find Wang, who must be made to give up the letter, which must be considered null and void.

“The first plan is of no use,” said Kin-Fo. “Wang knows how to come to me without being seen, since my house is his; he must be found at any cost.”

“You are right, sir,” answered William J. Bidulph.

“The surest way is to find Wang — and he must be found.”

“Dead or — ” said Craig.

“Alive,” concluded Fry.

“No, living,” cried Kin-Fo. “I do not intend that Wang shall be in danger a moment through my fault.”

“Craig and Fry,” added William J. Bidulph, “you are responsible for our client for seventy-seven days longer, and until the 30th of next June he will be worth to us two hundred thousand dollars.”

Thereupon the client and the principal agent of the Centenary took leave of each other. Ten minutes later, Kin-Fo, escorted by his two body-guards, who were not to leave him again, entered the yamen.

When Soun saw Craig and Fry officially installed in the house, he felt some regret. There would be no more answers or taels; besides, his master began to abuse him again. Unfortunate Soun! What would he have said had he known what the future had in store for him?

The first care Kin-Fo took was to phonograph to Cha-Coua Avenue, Pekin, the change of fortune which made him richer than before. The young lady heard the voice again of him whom she believed to be lost to her forever. He would see his little younger sister again. The seventh moon would not pass before he would see her, never to leave her again; having refused to make her miserable, he did not wish to run the risk of making her a widow. Le-ou did not quite understand what this last phrase meant. She only knew one thing; that was, that her lover had returned, and that before two months he would be with her. On that day there was not a happier woman than the young widow in all the Celestial Empire.

A complete reaction had taken place in Kin-Fo’s ideas-now become a fourfold millionaire — from the operations of the Central Bank in California. He intended to live, and to live well. Twenty days of emotions had changed him. Neither the Mandarin Pao-Shen, nor the Merchant Yin-

Pang, nor Tim the high liver, nor Houal the literary man would have recognized in him the indifferent host who bade them good-by on one of the flower — ! Boats on the River of Pearls. Wang would not have believed his eyes were he there, but he had disappeared. He did not come back to the house at Shang-Hai.

Eight days later, on the 24th of May, no news was heard of the philosopher; vainly did Kin-Fo, Craig, and Fry search the districts, the shops, and the suburbs of Shang-Hai, and the most skillful detectives of the police searched in vain for him about the country. The philosopher could not be found.

Craig and Fry became more uneasy, and increased their precautions. Neither by day nor by night did they lose sight of their client; they eat at the same table with him, and slept in the same room. They tried to persuade him to wear a steel breast-plate in case he was struck with a dagger, and to eat only eggs in the shell to prevent him being poisoned. Kin-Fo sent them away. Why not shut him up for two months in the Centenary safe under the pretext that he was worth $200,000?

Then William J. Bidulph, always practical, proposed to his client to return him the premium and destroy the policy.

“I am sorry,” said Kin-Fo, “but the thing is done, and you must take the consequences.”

“Well, let it be so,” said the agent, who had to submit to what he could not avoid. “You are right. You will never be better guarded than by us.”

“Nor for better value,” replied Kin-Fo.

CHAPTER 10

Kin-Fo Becomes Celebrated

Still Wang could not be found.

This complication disturbed the calm of the agent of the Centenary. At first he had thought that Wang would not fulfill his promise, but now he began to believe that nothing was impossible in that strange country which they call the Celestial Empire. He was soon of the same opinion as Kin-Fo, that if they could not find Wang, the philosopher would keep his word. His disappearance even indicated a project of attacking his pupil when he least expected it, like a thunderbolt, and striking him to the heart. After placing the letter on the body of his victim, he would quietly present himself at the office of the Centenary to claim his insurance.

Wang must, therefore, be notified. The Honorable William J. Bidulph had to use some indirect means. In a few days notices were forwarded to the different Chinese newspapers, and telegrams were sent to the foreign journals in both worlds: “Mr. Wang, of Shang-Hai, is requested to consider the agreement made between Mr. Kin-Fo and himself, under date the 2nd of May last, as canceled; the said Mr. Kin-Fo having but one desire, and that is to die a centenarian.”

This strange advertisement was soon followed by another more practical: “Two thousand dollars to whoever will make known to William J. Bidulph, the principal agent of the Centenary at Shang-Hai, the present residence of Mr. Wang, of said city.”

That the philosopher was running around the world during the fifty-five days given him to fulfill his promise, there was no reason to suppose. It was more probable that he was concealed in the suburbs of Shang-Hai; but the Honorable William J. Bidulph did not believe he could use too many precautions.

Several days passed, and there was no change in the situation of affairs. The advertisements were reproduced in profusion, under the familiar American style: “Wang, Wang, Wang,” on one side, and “Kin-Fo, Kin-Fo, Kin-Fo,” on the other. This had the effect of creating general laughter.

As far as the remotest provinces of the Celestial Empire people cried out in jest, “Where is Wang?” “Who has seen Wang?” “Where does Wang live?” “What is Wang doing?”

“Wang! Wang! Wang!” cried the little Chinese children in the streets.

The advertisements were soon in the mouths of everybody, and Kin-Fo, who wished to become a centenarian, who sought for longevity, like the celebrated elephant whose twentieth lustrum was about being accomplished in the palace of the stables of Pekin, could not fail to be soon very much in the fashion.

Kin-Fo had to endure the inconveniences of this singular celebrity, and they went so far as to sing songs about him to the tune of “The Five Periods of the Centenarian.” If Kin-Fo was annoyed at the noise made over his name, William J. Bidulph, on the contrary, was rejoiced; but Wang was, none the less, not to be found.

Things went so far that Kin-Fo was unable to endure the situation. Did he go out — a train of children of every age and sex followed him in the streets, and along the wharves, and even as far as the suburbs. Did he go home — a rabble of the worst kind stood before the doors of the yamen.

Every morning he had to satisfy his people that he had not slept in his coffin in the “Pavilion of Long Life.” The papers published an ironical bulletin of his health with comments, as if he belonged to the reigning dynasty of the “Tsing,” which made him appear ridiculous.

It followed that one day, on the 21st of May, the annoyed Kin-Fo went to find the Honorable William J. Bidulph, to notify him that he intended to leave the place. He had, had enough of Shang-Hai, and the people of Shang-Hai. The agent thereupon remarked to him, very justly, “You may, be running greater risks.”

“I care little for that,” said Kin-Fo.

“But where are you going?”

“Straight before me.”

“But where will you stop?”

“Nowhere.”

“When will you come back?”

“Never.”

“And if I should get some news of Wang?”

“Let Wang go to the devil! Oh, the foolish idea I had of giving him that absurd letter!”

Kin-Fo still had a great desire to find the philosopher. That his life was in the hands of another annoyed him, but to have to wait another month in such a situation he was not resigned to. The lamb was becoming enraged.

“Well, go then,” said William J. Bidulph. “Craig and Fry will follow you, wherever you go.”

“As you like,” said Kin-Fo; “But I give you notice that they will have to run about.”

Kin-Fo returned home and prepared to depart. Soun was to accompany him, although he did not like moving about.

Fry and Craig, like true Americans, were always ready to go, even to the end of the world, and they asked but one question: “Where, sir — ” said Craig.

“Are you going?” added Fry.

“To Nan-King first, and then to the devil.”

The same smile appeared simultaneously on Craig and Fry’s lips; they were delighted. “To the devil!” nothing could please them better. They took leave of the Honorable William J. Bidulph, and dressed themselves in Chinese costume, in order to attract less attention during the journey through the Celestial Empire. An hour afterward, with their bags at their side, and their revolvers fastened around their waist, they returned to the yamen.

At nightfall Kin-Fo and his companions took passage on the steamboat which runs between Shang-Hai and Nan-King. In less than twelve hours they ascended by the Blue River as far as the old capital of Southern China. During the short passage, Craig and Fry took precious care of Kin-Fo, staring at all the passengers to see if they could recognize anybody, and particularly if they could see the philosopher, whom they knew very well. They felt assured that he was not on board. After taking this precaution, they paid particular attention to Kin-Fo; they felt every support on which he might lean; they drew him away from the boiler; they cautioned him not to expose himself to the night air; they scolded Soun for his neglect, as he was never near his master when he wanted him. They also slept at his cabin door, ready to assist him if, by an explosion or collision, the steamboat should sink.

But no accident occurred to prove Fry and Craig’s devotion. The steamboat rapidly descended the Wousung, touched at Yang-Tse-Kiang, coasted along the island of Tsong-Ming, ascended through the province of Kiang-Sou, and on the 22nd, in the morning, landed her passengers safe and sound on the quay of the old imperial city. Soun was indebted to the two body-guards that his pigtail had not grown shorter during the voyage.

It was not without a motive that Kin-Fo stopped first at Nan-King. He had an idea that he might find the philosopher there. Wang might be attracted by past recollections to this unfortunate city, which was the principal center of the rebellion of the Tachings. It was possible that the philosopher, feeling homesick, had taken refuge in those places so full of personal recollections, and from there, in a few hours, he could return to Shang-Hai, ready to deal the blow.

Such was Kin-Fo’s reason for stopping at Nan-King; should he meet Wang, all would be explained, and the absurd situation would be finished. If Wang was not there, he could continue his travels through the Celestial Empire until the time expired when he would have nothing to fear from his old teacher and friend.

“I am traveling under the assumed name of Ki-Nan,” said Kin-Fo to his companions, “and I do not wish my real name to be known, under any pretext whatever.”

“Ki — ” said Craig.

“Nan,” finished Fry.

“Ki-Nan,” repeated Soun.

One can understand that Kin-Fo escaping the annoyances of his fame at Shang-Hai, did not wish to meet them again on his journey.

The whole day was passed in visiting the different places and streets in Nan-King. Kin-Fo walked quickly, talked little, and looked at everything. No suspicious person appeared among the mass of people which they met on the canals or in the streets. They saw no one they knew around the yamen of the Catholic missionaries, nor in the neighborhood of the arsenal. Kin-Fo, followed by his two companions, left by the eastern gate, and ventured out into the deserted country. They saw a small temple, and behind it was a hill. Under its turf Rong-Ou, the bonze who had become an emperor, and five centuries before had fought against the foreign power.

Might not the philosopher have come here again to look at the tomb where rested the founder of the dynasty of Ming? But the temple was abandoned. The only guardians were the colossal figures on the marble.

On the door of the temple Kin-Fo saw, not without emotion, signs which some hand had engraved there. He approached, and read these three letters;

W. K. F.

Wang! Kin-Fo! There could be no doubt that the philosopher had recently passed there.

CHAPTER 11

Travel Under Difficulties

Who is this traveler who is seen running over the principal road and up the canals and rivers of the Celestial Empire? He is going on and on all the time, not knowing in the evening where he will be to-morrow. He crosses over cities without seeing them, he goes to hotels only to sleep a few hours, and he stops at restaurants only to take a hasty meal. He is prodigal with his money; he throws it about to hasten his progress.

It is not a merchant engaged in business; it is not a mandarin to whom the minister has given an important and pressing mission; it is not an artist in search of the beauties of nature; it is not a savant who is in search of ancient documents stored in the temples of old China; it is not a student going to the pagoda to get his university degrees; nor is it a priest of Buddha inspecting the altars; nor a pilgrim fulfilling a vow at one of the five holy mountains of the Celestial Empire. It is the pretended Ki-Nan, accompanied by Fry and Craig, followed by Soun. It is Kin-Fo, in that singular state of mind which leads him to search for the undiscoverable Wang.

The travelers had taken at Nan-King one of those rapid American steamboats, those floating hotels which sail on the Blue River. Sixty hours later, and they land at Ran-Keou. There, situated at the confluence of the Blue River and its important tributary, the Ran-Kiang, the wandering Kin-Fo stopped half a day.

If Craig and Fry had ever hoped that on this journey through China they could get any idea of its customs, or learn anything of its cities, they were soon undeceived. They had not even time to take notes, and their impressions were reduced to the names of cities and suburbs, and to the days of the month; but they were neither curious nor talkative, they hardly ever spoke; for what good would it do? What Craig thought, Fry thought also.

Kin-Fo was not the man to give up this style of traveling, which pleased him. He expected to go to the point where the Ran-Kiang would cease to be navigable, after that he would consider. Craig and Fry would have liked that kind of navigation the whole course of the journey, for it was easier to watch on board of a boat, and there was less danger.

As for Soun, this life on board of a steamboat was agreeable to him. He did not have to walk; he had nothing to do; and he left his master to the good offices of Craig and Fry. He slept in the corner after breakfast, dinner, and supper, and the cooking was good.

Whoever had followed Kin-Fo from province to province, from city to city, in this fantastic journey, would have had much to do. At one time he would travel in a carriage, but such a carriage — it was nothing more than a box, fastened by large iron nails to the axletree of two wheels, drawn by two mules, and a linen covering which allowed the rays of the sun and the rain to penetrate. At another time he might be seen extended in a mule-chair, like a sentry-box hung between two poles, and which pitched and tossed about like a ship at sea. Craig and Fry followed on two asses which rolled and pitched more than the chair, trotted along like two aids-de-camp.

As to Soun, on such occasions, when walking was necessarily rapid, he went on foot grumbling and complaining, and comforting himself, when the opportunity offered, with brandy. He also felt a peculiar rolling motion, but it was due to other causes than the roughness of the road over which he had to go.

It was on horseback, and poor horses they were, that Kin-Fo and his companions made their entry into Si-Gnan-Fou, the ancient capital of the Central Empire, the former residence of the emperors of the dynasty of Tang. But to reach this far-off province of Chen-Si, and to cross the plains, how much fatigue and danger they had to undergo.

As to the dangers, they were but too real in a country where the police have an extraordinary dread of being stabbed by robbers. Several times suspicious looking men stopped the travelers while they were crossing narrow places, but on seeing Craig and Fry with their revolvers in their belts, they were frightened away. Nevertheless, the agents of the Centenary sometimes experienced great fear for the living million of dollars they were escorting, if not for themselves. That Kin-Fo should fall by Wang’s poniard, or by a robber’s dagger, would make no difference; the result would be the same, and the Company’s money-chest would receive the blow.

Under those circumstances, Kin-Fo, who was armed, could defend himself. His life he valued more than ever now, and, as Craig and Fry remarked, “he would kill himself to preserve it.”

At Tong-Kouan Kin-Fo intended to rest some days. He was looking for a convenient hotel where he could find a good bed, and a good table, which would have been agreeable to Fry and Craig, and more so to Soun. But the latter had the imprudence to give the Custom-house authorities the real name of his master, which cost him a partial loss of his pigtail. This mistake made Kin-Fo leave the city at once in great anger. The name had produced its effect. People wished to see the celebrated Kin-Fo, this unique man, whose only desire was to become a centenarian.

The disgusted traveler, with his two guards and his valet, had only time to escape from the crowds of curious people who followed his footsteps. He ascended the shores of the Yellow River on foot, and he and his companions traveled until they were exhausted, when they stopped at a little town, where, his being unknown, secured him some hours of peace and quiet.

Soun was so absolutely discomfited, that he dared not say a word, and, with the ridiculous little rat-tail that yet remained to him, he was a comic sight. The boys ran after him, making fun of him and calling him names, and he, too, was in a hurry to arrive at some place where his master was unknown.

The little town had no horses, wagons, or chairs. There was no alternative but to remain there or go on. This did not inspire the philosopher Wang’s pupil with good humor, and he showed very little philosophy under the circumstances. He accused everybody, and had only himself to blame. How he regretted the time when he had nothing to do but live. “If to know happiness it is necessary to experience pain and torments,” as Wang said, “I know it now.”

While thus going about, he met worthy fellows without a penny in their pockets, who nevertheless were happy. He could not but see the varied forms of happiness which work, cheerfully performed, gives. Here were laborers bent over their plows, and there workmen who sang while handling their tools. Was it not to the want of this labor that Kin-Fo’s lack of happiness might be attributed? Ah! The lesson was complete; he believed so, at least.

Craig and Fry finished by discovering a vehicle, the only one, after searching through the village, but they were unable to use it. It was a wheelbarrow — Pascal’s wheelbarrow, and no doubt invented before the time of the invention of powder, the art of writing, the compass, and the kite.

In China, the wheel of this conveyance, which is large in diameter, is placed, not at the extreme end of the shafts, but in the center, and moves across the body of the wheelbarrow like the central wheel of some steamboats. The body is divided into two parts, in one of which the traveler can stretch himself out, and in the other his baggage is carried.

The motor of this vehicle can be only one man, who pushes it before him, and does not drag it after him. He is therefore placed behind the traveler, and does not obstruct his view, as the English cab-driver does. When the wind is favorable, the man adds to the natural force by setting a mast in front of the vehicle and raising a sail; so that when the breeze is strong, instead of pushing the wheelbarrow, it is the wheelbarrow which draws the man along — and sometimes faster than he wishes to go.

This vehicle was brought, with all its accessories, and Kin-Fo entered it. The wind was favorable, and the sail was hoisted. “Let us go, Soun,” said Kin-Fo.

Soun was preparing to stretch himself out in the baggage compartment of the wheelbarrow. “Into the shafts!” cried Kin-Fo, in a tone which admitted of no reply.

“But, master — ” said Soun, whose legs shook like a foundered horse.

“To the shafts!” repeated Kin-Fo, looking suspiciously at Soun’s pigtail. “To the shafts! And look out that you do not shake me.”

Soun passed the straps around his shoulders, and took hold of the shafts with both hands. Fry and Craig took their position, one on each side of the wheelbarrow, and the breeze assisting them, the little band went off at a brisk trot. We cannot attempt to describe Soun’s powerless rage.

It was in this equipage that Kin-Fo entered into the northern provinces of China; walking when he wanted to stretch his legs, and driven in a wheelbarrow when he wished to rest himself.

On the 19th of June he reached Tong-Tcheou. Wang had yet six days to complete his contract.

CHAPTER 12

Lament Of The Five Periods

"Gentlemen," said Kin-Fo to his two body-guards, when the wheelbarrow stopped at the entrance to the suburbs of Tong-Tcheou, "we have only forty miles to reach Pekin, and I intend to stay here until the time of the agreement will have expired between Wang and myself. In this city of four hundred thousand souls I can easily remain without being known, if Soun will only remember that he is in the service of Ki-Nan, a merchant of the province of Chen-Si."

Certainly, Soun would remember it; his blunder had cost him too much-was he not filling the place of a horse for eight days; "and he hoped that Kin-Fo — — "

"Ki — " said Craig.

"Nan!" added Fry.

"Would not take him from his ordinary duties; and now, in the present tired state which he was in, he had but one favor to ask of Kin-Fo — — "

"Ki — " again said Craig.

"Nan!" repeated Fry.

"That was, to be allowed to sleep for forty-eight hours, without any bridle or harness at all."

"For eight days, if you like," answered Kin-Fo, "for you cannot talk while you are asleep."

Kin-Fo and his companions occupied themselves in looking for a suitable hotel in Tong-Tcheou. That large city is only an immense suburb of Pekin. The road which joins it to the capital is bordered with villas, houses, tombs, and small pagodas. Kin-Fo was conducted to Tae-Ouang-Miao, the temple of the sovereign princes. It is a temple, transformed into a hotel where strangers can be comfortably lodged.

An hour afterward Kin-Fo and his two body-guards left their rooms, after taking breakfast with a good appetite, and they asked themselves what was to be done now? “It is necessary,” echoed Craig and Fry, “to read the Official Gazette, so that we may see if there is anything there concerning ourselves.”

“You are right,” answered Kin-Fo. “Perhaps we may learn something about Wang, too.”

All three left the hotel. The two acolytes walked on each side of Kin-Fo, looking at the passers-by, and allowing no one to approach him. They went by the side streets, in this way, until they reached the wharves, where they bought a copy of the Official Gazette, and read it eagerly. There was nothing in it but the promise of the two thousand dollars, or the thirteen hundred taels, to any one who would make known to William J. Bidulph the present residence of Mr. Wang, of Shang-Hai.

“So he has not turned up?” said Kin-Fo.

“He has not, therefore, read the advertisement about himself,” remarked Craig.

“He therefore intends to fulfill the contract,” added Fry.

“Without any doubt,” answered Kin-Fo. “If Wang dogs not know the change in the situation of my affairs, and that seems probable, he will feel the necessity of keeping his promise. Therefore, in one, two, or three days, I will be in greater danger than I am to-day; and in six days I will be in greater danger than ever.”

“But the time will pass.”

“Then I shall have no more to fear.”

“Well, sir,” answered Craig and Fry, “there are but three ways of getting rid of this danger for the next six days.”

“What is the first?” asked Kin-Fo.

“It is to shut yourself up in the room of your hotel,” said Craig, “and to wait until the time has expired.”

“And what is the second?”

“It is to have yourself arrested as a criminal,” answered Fry, “and placed in the prison of Tong-Tcheou.”

“And what is the third?”

“It is to pass yourself off for a dead man,” answered Fry and Craig, “and not to rise again until you are sure there is no danger.”

“You don’t know Wang,” cried Kin-Fo. “Wang would find means to get into this hotel, into my prison, and even into my tomb. If he has not already dealt the blow, it is because he has not wished to do so, and he prefers to let me have the pleasure of enjoying the anxiety of waiting. Who knows what his motive is? Anyway, I prefer to have my liberty."

"Wait then!" said Craig.

"It appears to me — — " added Fry.

"Gentlemen!" answered Kin-Fo, in a dry tone, "I will do as I please. After all, if I die before the 25th of this month, what is your company going to lose?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars," answered Fry and Craig. "Two hundred thousand dollars which they will have to pay to your heirs."

"And I lose all my fortune, without saying anything about my life. I am therefore more interested than you are in this matter."

"Certainly."

"Very true."

"Well, you may continue to watch over me as much as you please, but I will do as I am inclined."

There was nothing to reply to this. Craig and Fry were obliged to increase their precautions, and allow their client to act as he pleased.

Tong-Tcheou is one of the oldest cities in the Celestial Empire; it is the center of business activity; its suburbs are very lively from the ingress and egress of its inhabitants. Kin-Fo and his two companions were struck with this active movement when they arrived on the wharf, where the junks and other boats are anchored.

Craig and Fry, on thinking over the situation of affairs, arrived at the conclusion that there was more safety in the midst of a crowd. The death of their client could be only brought about by suicide; the letter which would be found upon his person would leave no doubt in that respect.

Wang would have no interest in striking him down, except on certain conditions, which did not offer themselves in the crowded streets or in the public places in a city. Consequently, Kin-Fo's guardians had no fear of an immediate attack. There only remained now, to find out whether the Tai-ping, by some means, had not been following them since their departure from Shang-Hai, and they used their eyes in staring at the people as they passed them by.

All of a sudden a name was heard spoken at which they pricked up their ears.

"Kin-Fo, Kin-Fo!" cried some little Chinese children, clapping their hands and jumping about in the midst of a crowd.

Was Kin-Fo known there, and had his name produced the accustomed effect? Our hero stopped. Craig and Fry held themselves in readiness, in case of an attack.

It was not for Kin-Fo that these cries were intended. No one appeared to know him. He did not stir, but curious to know why his name was called, he waited. A crowd of men, women, and children were gathered around a strolling singer, who appeared to be very popular with the people in the streets. The crowd clapped their hands and applauded him in advance.

When the singer had a sufficiently large audience he drew out a package of illustrated cards, beautifully colored, and then he cried, in a loud voice:

“The Five Periods Of The Centenarian.”

It was the famous lament which was going the rounds of the Celestial Empire.

Craig and Fry wished to draw away their client, but this time Kin-Fo insisted on remaining. No one knew him. He had never heard the lament which related his ways and doings; he wanted to hear it. The singer commenced thus:

“In the first period, when the moon shines on the roof of the house at Shang-Hai, Kin-Fo is young; he is only twenty years old; he looks like the willow whose first leaves show their little green tongue.”

“In the second period, when the moon shines on the east side of the rich yamen, Kin-Fo is forty years old, and his business has succeeded to his liking, and his neighbors sing his praises.”

The singer changed the expression of his face, and seemed to age at every verse. He was loaded with applause. He continued:

“In the third period the moon lights the open space. Kin-Fo is sixty years old. After the green leaves of summer, the yellow chrysanthemums of autumn come.”

“In the fourth period the moon has declined to the west. Kin-Fo is eighty years old. His body is twisted like a prawn in hot water. He is failing; he is sinking with the star of night.”

“In the fifth period the cocks salute the birth of dawn. Kin-Fo is a hundred years old. He dies; his greatest desire is accomplished, but Prince Ien refuses to receive him. The prince does not want aged people who go into second childhood in his court. Old Kin-Fo must wander through all eternity, without being able to rest.”

The crowd applauded, and the singer sold hundreds of his laments at three sapeques a copy.

And why should not Kin-Fo buy one? He drew some money from his pocket, and extending his arm, the money fell on the ground in the midst of the crowd. There was a man standing opposite who fixed his gaze on him.

“Ah!” said Kin-Fo. At the same time Fry and Craig came up to him, thinking that he was recognized, threatened, or perhaps struck.

“Wang!” cried Kin-Fo.

“Wang!” repeated Craig and Fry.

It was indeed Wang. He saw his old pupil; but instead of embracing him, repulsed him vigorously, and ran away as fast as he could.

Kin-Fo did not hesitate, but pursued Wang, escorted by Fry and Craig. They also recognized the philosopher, who evidently no more expected to see Kin-Fo than Kin-Fo expected to find him there. Why did Wang fly away? It was a mystery, but he did run as if all the police in the Celestial Empire were running after him. It was a mad pursuit.

“I am not ruined, Wang! Wang, I am not ruined!” cried Kin-Fo.

“Rich!” cried Fry.

“Rich!” repeated Craig.

But Wang was too far ahead to hear these words, which were meant to stop him. He ran along the wharf and the canal, and reached the suburbs. The three pursuers ran after him, but did not gain. Half a dozen Chinamen joined in the race, as well as two or three tipaos, who mistook him for a criminal. It was a curious sight, this crowd shouting and screaming, adding to their number as they went along.

The name Wang was sufficient. Wang was that enigmatical personage whose discovery would be worth a large reward. Everybody knew it; and while Kin-Fo ran after his eight hundred thousand dollars, Craig and Fry ran after their two hundred thousand, and the others ran after the two thousand, which was the amount of the reward offered for the discovery of Wang.

“Wang! Wang! I am richer than ever!” repeatedly cried Kin-Fo, as much as his speed would allow him.

“Not ruined?” cried Fry.

“Not ruined,” repeated Craig.

“Stop, stop!” cried the pursuers, who made the dust fly. Wang heard nothing. He was unwilling to allow the crowd to gain on him by turning his head.

The suburbs were passed, and Wang made for the road along the canal, where he had a free field. His speed increased, but his pursuers increased their efforts, and this mad chase was kept up for twenty minutes. No one knew what the result would be; but it was evident that the fugitive was weakening. The distance between his pursuers and himself was being shortened.

Wang, seeing this, ran behind some trees in front of a small pagoda on the right of the road.

“Ten thousand taels to whoever stops him!” cried Kin-Fo.

“Ten thousand — ” cried Craig.

“Taels,” concluded Fry.

“Yes, yes,” cried the crowd; and they crossed the road, and were winding around the pagoda. Wang appeared again, and taking a direct course along a canal to avoid his pursuers, found himself on a paved road. He was now exhausted, and often turned his head around.

The end was approaching, it was only a question of a short time — perhaps a few minutes at most.

Wang, Kin-Fo, and his companions had arrived at a place where the road crossed a river, over the celebrated bridge of Palikao. It was now no use attempting to stop Wang by words which he could not or would not hear. It was necessary to catch him, and, if necessary, to tie him. An explanation would follow.

Wang saw that he would be taken, and he seemed to wish to avoid meeting his old pupil face to face, and he would have risked his life rather than to see him. With one bound Wang jumped upon the railing of the bridge and threw himself into the Pei-ho.

Kin-Fo stopped and cried out, “Wang, Wang!”

Then, taking a leap, he also sprang into the river, shouting, “I will take him alive!”

“Craig,” said Fry.

“Fry,” said Craig.

“Two hundred thousand dollars in the water.” They both jumped on the railing and plunged into the water to aid the ruinous client of the Centenary. Some few of the pursuers followed in their excitement.

Kin-Fo, Fry, and Craig searched for Wang, but he could not be found. He must have been drawn down by the river, and drowned. Had he deliberately sought death or only been striving to escape? No one could tell.

CHAPTER 13

Pekin

The Pe-Tche-Li, the most western of the eighteen provinces of China, is divided into nine departments. The capital of one of these is Chun-Kin-Fo; that is, “the City of the First Order, Submissive to Heaven,” which city is Pekin. It comprises two distinct cities, which are divided by a large boulevard and a fortified wall. One of them, the Chinese City, is a rectangular parallelogram; and the other, the Tartar City, is almost a perfect square; the latter incloses two other cities named the “Yellow City” (Hoang-Tching), and the “Red City” (Tsen-Kin-Tching).

The Chinese city is divided, north and south, by an important artery called Grand Avenue. Transversely it is crossed by another artery, much longer, which cuts the first at a right angle, and runs from the Cha-Coua Gate at the east to the Couan-Tsu Gate at the west. It is called Cha-Coua Avenue, and it was about a hundred paces from its point of intersection with Grand Avenue that the future Madame Kin-Fo lived.

The reader may remember that, a few days after she received the letter announcing Kin-Fo’s ruin, she received a second contradicting the first, and saying that the seventh moon would not pass over before her little younger brother would be near her.

It is useless to ask whether Le-ou counted the days and hours after that date, the 17th of May; but Kin-Fo gave her no further news of himself during that wild journey, the object of which he would not make known to anybody under any pretext. Le-ou had written to Shang-Hai. Her letters remained unanswered. We can well conceive her anxiety when on the 19th of June no letter had been received by her.

Le-ou was a Buddhist. The bonzes often observed her coming to the temple of Koan-Ti-Miao, consecrated to the Goddess Koanine. There she made prayers for her friend, and burned perfumed sticks, and prostrated herself in the porch of the temple.

That day she thought she would implore the Goddess Koanine, for she had a presentiment that some great danger threatened him whom she expected with impatience. Le-ou therefore called the “old mother,” and told her to go and order a chair and carriers in the square in Grand Avenue. Nan shrugged her shoulders, and went to execute her message.

During this time the young widow was alone in her dressing-room, looking sadly at the phonograph, which no longer enabled her to hear the voice of her absent one. “Ah!” said she, “he must at least know that I do not cease to think of him, and I wish that my voice may repeat this to him when he returns.” Le-ou pushed the spring which puts the phonographic wheel in motion, and with a loud voice spoke the sweet phrases her heart inspired.

Nan entered suddenly, and interrupted this tender monologue. The chair-bearers were waiting for madame, “who might as well have stayed at home.”

Le-ou did not hear, but went out, leaving the old woman to scold as she liked. She installed herself in the chair, after giving orders to carry her to Koan-Ti-Miao.

The carriers had only to turn around Cha-Coua Avenue and ascend Grand Avenue as far as the Gate of Tien. But they did not advance without difficulties. Business was brisk at this hour, and there was considerable delay in that quarter of the city, which is one of the most populous in the capital. Here might be seen peddler's booths, open-air orators, fortune-tellers, photographers; and there a wedding procession, or perhaps a funeral — all helping to block up the way. In another place there might be seen a crowd before the yamen of a magistrate. On the Leou-Ping rock there was a criminal kneeling, who had received a beating. There was also a thief shut up in a wooden box, with his head looking backward, who was left to public charity. Others were seen wearing yokes like oxen.

Le-ou's chair went very slow, and the impediments became greater as she approached the outer boulevard. She arrived there, however, and stopped at the interior of the bastion, which defends the door near the Temple of the Goddess Koanine.

Le-ou descended from her chair, entered the temple, and, after kneeling, she prostrated herself before the statue of the goddess. She then directed her steps to a religious machine, which is called the "prayer mill." It is a sort of reel, with eight branches, on the ends of which were little streamers ornamented with sacred texts. A bonze stood gravely near the machine and awaited the worshiper, and especially the price for the devotions. Le-ou gave the servant of Buddha a few taels, which were to pay the expenses of religion, and then with her right hand she seized the handle of the reel and commenced to turn it slowly, after placing her left hand on her heart.

"Faster," said the bonze, with an encouraging gesture, and the young woman began to turn faster. This lasted for a quarter of an hour, after which the bonze assured her that her prayers would be granted. Le-ou again bowed down before the Goddess Koanine, left the temple, entered the chair, and was taken home.

As she reached Grand Avenue the carriers went faster; the stores were being closed, and business was being suspended; a long cortege filled a part of the avenue, and was noisily approaching.

It was the Emperor Koang-Sin, whose name means “Continuation of Glory,” who was returning to his good Tartar City, whose middle gate was about to open to him. At the head were two body-guards, followed by a platoon of soldiers; next came a group of officers of high rank, who held a yellow parasol with ruffles, and ornamented with a dragon, which is the emblem of the emperor, as the phoenix is that of the empress.

The palanquin next appeared, and was carried by sixteen men with red dresses covered with white rosettes, and closely fitting embroidered silk waistcoats. Princes, dignitaries on horses harnessed in yellow silk, as a sign of very high rank, escorted the imperial carriage. In the palanquin reclined the Son of Heaven, cousin of the Emperor Tong-Tche, and nephew of Prince Kong.

After the palanquin came relays of carriers and grooms. This cortege entered the gates of Tien, to the satisfaction of promenaders, merchants and others, who could now attend to their business.

Le-ou’s chair continued on its way to her house, where she arrived after being absent about two hours. But what a surprise the Goddess Koanine had in store for the young woman!

When the chair stopped, a carriage drawn by two mules, and covered with dust, drove up to the door, and Kin-Fo, followed by Craig, Fry, and Soun, descended from it.

“Is it you? Is it you?” cried Le-ou, who could not believe what she saw.

“Dear little younger sister!” answered Kin-Fo, “You certainly did not doubt that I would return?”

Le-ou could not answer. She took her friend’s hand, and drawing him into her dressing-room before the little phonograph, the discreet confidant of her troubles, she said, “I have not for a moment doubted your return;” and adjusting the wheel of the phonograph, she pressed the spring which set it in motion.

Kin-Fo then heard a sweet voice repeat what the loving Le-ou had been saying to him a few hours before his arrival.

“Come back, well-beloved little brother — come back to me! That our hearts may be no longer separated, as are the two stars of Orpheus and Lyra. I think only of your return.”

The phonograph was silent for a few moments, when it cried out, in a harsh voice: “Is it not sufficient to have a mistress, without having a master in the house? May Prince Ien strangle them both!”

This second voice was easy to recognize — it was Nan’s. The disagreeable old woman continued to speak after Le-ou left the room, while the machine was in a condition to receive impressions; but she did not know that her imprudent words were registered. Maid-servants and valets, beware of phonographs!

That very day Nan was dismissed, without even waiting for the last days of the seventh moon.

CHAPTER 14

Surprises

Every obstacle to Kin-Fo’s marriage with Le-ou was now removed. It was true that the time allowed for Wang to fulfill his pledge had not yet expired; but the unfortunate philosopher had fallen a victim as the result of his mysterious flight, and further danger was not to be feared from him. The 25th of June, the very day on which at one time Kin-Fo had wished to end his existence, was fixed for the wedding.

Le-ou had of course been informed of the various vicissitudes which her lover had experienced since he had sent her his refusal either to make her the participator of his poverty or to run the risk of leaving her a widow, and she was well aware of the altered circumstances that had led him once more to come and claim her as his bride. She could not restrain her tears when she heard of Wang’s death. She had known the philosopher and esteemed him, and he had moreover been her first confidant of her sentiments toward Kin-Fo. “Poor Wang,” she said, “we shall miss him at our wedding.”

“Yes, poor Wang,” repeated Kin-Fo; “but you must remember,” he added, “that he had sworn to kill me.”

Le-ou shook her pretty little head. “No, no,” she said, “he would never have done that. I believe he drowned himself in the Pei-Ho, for the very purpose of evading his promise.”

Kin-Fo could not but own that her hypothesis was probable. He, too, regretted the faithful companion of his youth; his memory would be long in fading from either of their hearts.

It is almost needless to say that after the catastrophe on the bridge of Palikao, Bidulph's sensational paragraphs in the newspapers were discontinued, and the name of Kin-Fo sank into oblivion almost as speedily as it had risen into notoriety. The services of Craig and Fry were no longer in such urgent requisition. It is true that they were bound to defend the interests of the Centenarian until the 30th, the date of the expiration of the policy, but there was now no demand for the same measure of unremitted vigilance. Fear of attack from Wang had passed away, and there was no probability that Kin-Fo would lay violent hands on himself; his desire now was to live as long as possible.

But Kin-Fo did not care to give them an abrupt dismissal. If their services had not been disinterested, they had at least been conscientious, and he therefore begged them to stay over his marriage festivities, an invitation which they were very pleased to accept.

"Marriage is a kind of suicide," was Fry's jesting remark to Craig.

"It is a surrender of one's life, at all events," was Craig's reply.

Old Nan was soon replaced in Le-ou's household by a domestic of more agreeable disposition. Loo-ta-loo, an aunt of Le-ou's, of mature age, had come to stay with her, and act a mother's part at the time of her marriage. She was the wife of a second-class mandarin of the fourth rank, with the blue button, formerly an Imperial reader, and member of the Academy of the Hanlin, apparently possessing every quality for performing her office in a manner worthy of the occasion.

It was Kin-Fo's intention to leave Pekin immediately after his marriage, as besides his objection to residing in the vicinity of the Imperial Court, he felt anxious to see his young wife properly installed as mistress of the sumptuous yamen at Shang-Hai. Meantime he took temporary apartments in the Tien-Foo-Tang, or temple of celestial happiness, a very comfortable hotel and restaurant near the Tien-Men rampart, between the Chinese and Tartar towns. Craig and Fry were lodged in the same quarters. Soun had returned to his duties, but although he was always grumbling, he took care first of all to assure himself that there was no phonograph at hand. The fate of old mother Nan was a warning to him to be cautious.

Kin-Fo had the pleasure of meeting two of his Canton friends in Pekin — the merchant Yin-Pang, and Hooal, the literate. They of course were invited to attend the approaching ceremony, as well as several of the dignitaries and merchants with whom Kin-Fo was acquainted in the capital.

Wang’s apathetic, indifferent pupil seemed at last to have become truly happy; two months’ trouble and botheration seemed at last to have made him appreciate his fortunate lot; the philosopher had been right, and it was a matter for regret that he was not present to witness the truth of the theory that he had advanced.

All the time that was at his disposal was spent by Kin-Fo with the young widow. She was never so happy as when he was by her side. She cared little for the presents which he lavished upon her from the richest stores in the city. Her thoughts were of him and him alone, and over and over again she would repeat to herself the wise maxims of the famous Pan-Hoei-Pan:

“If a woman has a husband after her own heart, she has him for all her life.”

“A woman should have an unbounded respect for the man whose name she bears.”

“A woman should be like a shadow and an echo in the house.”

“The husband is the wife’s heaven.”

Meantime the preparations for the wedding, which Kin-Fo wished to be very handsome, were advancing rapidly. Already the thirty pairs of embroidered slippers that are necessary for a Chinese lady’s trousseau had arrived at Le-ou’s house, and her boudoir was crammed with confectionery and dried fruits, all in confusion with rich silks, jewels of wrought gold and precious stones, cases for the nails, bodkins for the hair, and all the charming knickknacks that Pekin jewelers so cunningly devise.

In this strange country, a young girl when she marries never has a dowry. She is literally purchased either by the husband himself, or by his relations. Although she may have no brothers, she cannot inherit any portion of her paternal fortune, unless her father makes an express declaration in her favor. Such arrangements are always completed before the marriage, and are usually negotiated by agents called “Mei-jin.”

The young fiancee is next presented to her husband’s parents. The husband himself she never sees until the wedding-day, when she is carried in a closed chair to his house. The key of the chair is handed to the bridegroom, who opens the door, and if the lady within pleases his taste, he holds out his hand to her; if not, he slams the door, and the engagement is all at an end, the girl’s parents having the right to retain the purchase-money.

No preliminaries of this kind were necessary in Kin-Fo’s case; he and his future wife were both free agents, and had no one to consult besides themselves. There were, however, other formalities which might not be neglected. For three days before the wedding the inside of Le-ou’s house was kept brilliantly lighted throughout, and for three whole nights Loo-ta-loo, as the representative of the bride’s family, had to abstain from sleep, to indicate the grief felt at parting from the fiancee. Had Kin-Fo’s parents been living, his house would have been illuminated too, as a sign of mourning, for according to the Hao-Khieou-Chooen, “the marriage of a son ought to be regarded as an emblem of the death of the father.”

There were moreover various astrological calculations not to be overlooked. The horoscopes were taken with due form, and foretold a perfect compatibility of temper between the affianced couple. The season of the year and the age of the moon were alike favorable, and it seemed as though no marriage could possibly take place under more propitious auspices.

The appointed day arrived, and everything was ready for the great event. In China there is no formal contract made in the presence of a bonze or lama, nor even before a civil magistrate, and it was arranged that the bride should be conducted with great pomp to the hotel of Celestial Happiness at eight o’clock in the evening.

At seven o’clock Kin-Fo, attended by Craig and Fry, waited to receive his friends at the door of his apartment. The invitations dispensed to them had been inscribed in microscopic characters on red paper, and ran thus:

“Kin-Fo of Shang-Hai presents his humble respects to — — , and humbly begs him to assist at the humble ceremony of his marriage.”

The guests thus invited all arrived. They had come to do honor to the bridegroom, and to take part in the magnificent banquet prepared for the men, while the ladies would feast apart at a table specially reserved for them. Yin-Pang and Hooal the literate duly arrived among the rest.

As soon as they arrived, Kin-Fo conducted them to the reception-room, stopping twice on the way at doors which were opened by servants in gorgeous livery, and begging his guests to pass before him. His mode of addressing them was in the politest strain. He called them by their “noble names,” inquired after their “noble health,” and asked for information about their “noble families.” Not even the most scrupulous observer of etiquette could have found the slightest flaw in his manners or deportment.

Craig and Fry watched his demeanor with surprise and admiration. They watched him also for another reason. The same idea had occurred to them both: namely, that Wang might not have perished, as they imagined, in the river. Were there not yet several hours to expire? Perhaps, even now, he might mingle with the wedding-guests and strike the fatal blow. Improbable as this was, it was not impossible, and Craig and Fry carefully scrutinized every one who entered. But the face they sought did not appear.

The bride arrived. Kin-Fo stepped forward. The master of the ceremonies handed him a key, with which he unlocked the door of the palanquin. He held out his hand; Le-ou, trembling and beautiful, descended lightly, and passed through the assembled visitors, who saluted her respectfully by raising their hands to their breasts. As the bride entered the hotel a signal was given, and instantly a number of illuminated kites in the form of dragons, phoenixes, and other emblems of marriage, rose into the air; flying pigeons, with a little musical apparatus attached to their tails, filled the space overhead with harmonious sounds, while hundreds of sky-rockets shot up and descended in a golden shower.

Suddenly a distant noise was heard upon the ramparts. Mingled with the murmur of voices were heard the tones of a trumpet’s blast. The noise ceased, then began again. This time the sounds were nearer; it was evident they were approaching the very street where the bridal cortege had arrived. Kin-Fo paused and listened; his friends stood waiting to receive the bride.

Gradually the commotion reached the street; the trumpets were being blown more vigorously than ever.

“What can it be?” Kin-Fo exclaimed.

Le-ou turned pale; a presentiment of the cause of the uproar made her heart beat fast. All at once the mob rushed down the street. In the midst was a herald wearing the Imperial uniform, and escorted by a detachment of ti-paos. Silence fell upon the multitude, as he proclaimed in sonorous tones, “The Empress dowager is dead!”

“An interdiction! An interdiction!”

Kin-Fo uttered an exclamation of rage and disappointment. Only too well he knew what an interdiction meant. It meant that during the court-mourning, which commencing from that moment would last for a period to be fixed by law, no subject would be allowed to have his head shaved, no public festivities might be held, no theatrical representations might be given, no courts of justice might be open, and worst of all — no marriages might be celebrated!

Le-ou, though downcast, was not disconcerted. Taking Kin-Fo’s hand, she pressed it gently, and in a voice that strove to conceal her emotion, she said bravely, “We must wait a little longer!”

And so the palanquin departed, bearing the fair young bride back to her home in the Cha-Coua Avenue. The festivities were suspended; the tables cleared; the orchestra dismissed, and the guests, after condolences with the disconsolate bridegroom, took their departure.

Kin-Fo, with only Craig and Fry, was left in the deserted apartment of the hotel of Celestial Happiness, a name of bitter sarcasm to him now. An evil fate seemed still to be pursuing him. He dared not run the risk of infringing the Imperial edict, and the interdiction might be prolonged at the Emperor’s pleasure to an indefinite period. Here indeed was an occasion when he had need of all the precepts of philosophy instilled into him in his early days.

An hour later, a servant entered bearing a letter, which he said had just been delivered by a messenger. Kin-Fo exclaimed with surprise. He recognized the handwriting; it was Wang’s own.

“My Dear Friend, I am yet alive, but by the time you receive this I shall be dead. I die because I have not courage to perform my contract; but be content, I have provided for your wishes to be carried out. Lao-Shen, a Tai-ping, and a former comrade of my own, has your letter. He has hands and heart that will not flinch. He will do the deed. To him I have bequeathed the sum of money which would fall to me at your death.”

“Farewell, dear friend; my death will not long precede your own! Again farewell!”

“Yours ever, Wang.”

CHAPTER 15

Off Again

Here was a dilemna! It left Kin-Fo in a more critical position than ever. Wang’s courage, it was true, had failed him at the last, and nothing was to be apprehended from him. But had he not deputed his commission to an avowed Tai-ping who would murder him without the least scruple? And was not that Tai-ping in possession of a document that would protect him from punishment? Moreover, had he not 50,000 dollars to gain by the transaction?

Kin-Fo stamped his foot in vexation, and muttered, “Enough of this business! It must be settled somehow!”

Handing Wang’s letter to Craig and Fry, he asked them whether they had anything to suggest.

They inquired whether the paper he had given to Wang specified the 25th as being the limit provided for the execution of the contract.

“No; I left Wang to fill up the document with the date at his discretion. This rascal Lao-Shen is free to act just when he pleases; he has no stipulation about time to bind him.”

“But the policy,” said Craig and Fry, “expires on the 30th. He is sure to know enough to make him understand that he has nothing to gain if he delays the act an hour beyond that. No; he will finish his business before that day, or he will leave it alone.”

There was not much to be said in answer to this, but Kin-Fo paced up and down the room uneasily. “We must find this Lao-Shen; be he where he may, we must get at him. The letter I gave Wang must be redeemed; at all hazards, at any cost, it must be redeemed: even if I pay the 50,000 dollars for it, I must have it."

"Of course, if you can," assented Craig.

"If I can? I must, I will!" cried Kin-Fo, getting more and more excited; "Am I to suffer disappointment after disappointment?" And again he paced the room rapidly.

"I am off again!" he said, after a few minutes.

"At your service, sir," replied the men.

"I am off! You, gentlemen, do as you please; but I start at once."

"We attend you, of course," answered both Craig and Fry with one breath.

"As you like," Kin-Fo repeated.

"We should be failing entirely in our duty to our employers if we were to permit you to travel alone."

"Well, then," said Kin-Fo, "no time to lose."

It was not very likely that it would prove at all a difficult matter to discover Lao-Shen. He was a notorious character, and very few inquiries were enough to elicit the information that after the suppression of the rebellion in which he had taken an active part, he had retired beyond the Great Wall to the north, into the district around the gulf of Leao-Tong, an inlet of the gulf of Pe-Chi-Li. The government had not made terms with him in the same way as it had with many others of the insurgent leaders, but had winked at his retreating beyond the Imperial frontier, when he found himself at liberty to adopt the congenial profession of a highwayman. Altogether, he was a man whose qualifications for the office for which Wang had engaged him could not be disputed.

A little closer investigation soon brought it further to light that Lao-Shen had quite recently been seen in the neighborhood of Foo-Ning, a small port on the Gulf of Leao-Tong, and thither Kin-Fo made up his mind to hasten without delay. At least he would be on the track of the man he sought.

First of all, however, he must go to Le-ou and inform her of his decision. Her grief was pitiable. With tears streaming from her eyes, she besought him to keep far as possible out of the reach of a man hired to be his assassin. Let him leave China altogether. Madness to go near Lao-Shen; better go to the remotest corner of the earth.

As well as he could, Kin-Fo consoled her; he explained that there was no quarter of the world where he could endure to feel that his life was at the disposal of a mercenary rascal; it was his determination to follow the fellow up, and to find him out; he was going to put a stop to the bargain; he was going to get back that unlucky paper, and he should succeed; he would soon be back again in Pekin; he would be back before the day appointed for the Court mourning came to an end. And he finished by exclaiming, “How fortunate for us that our marriage has been delayed this little while! How dreadful for you, while my life hangs thus in the balance, to be my wife!”

“No, no, indeed,” answered Le-ou sadly; “if only I had been your wife, I could have claimed the right of going with you in every hour of danger.”

“Far better otherwise,” said Kin-Fo; “I had rather face a thousand perils, and die a thousand deaths, than bring you into jeopardy.”

Le-ou wept still more bitterly. A tear rose to the eye of Kin-Fo himself, and saying “farewell,” he tore himself from her embrace.

The same morning saw the party back again at Tong-Tcheou. Soun repined very sorrowfully at being again disturbed in the rest he was ever seeking; he thought himself the unluckiest of mortals. But there was no help for it.

What now should be the line of action? This was the next question to be decided. There was the choice of going by land or by water. To go by land would take them through a country which under the circumstances was especially perilous, although had they been going no farther than the Great Wall, they would have been tempted to run the risk. But the port of Foo-Ning, whither they were on their way, was far to the east, and if only a vessel could be found to convey them, they would really save time by going by sea. The passage ought only to take a few days. Kin-Fo set about inquiring, and had the satisfaction of learning that a ship on its way to Foo-Ning was at that very time lying at the mouth of the Pei-Ho, and which, if he took one of the fast river-boats down the stream, there was no doubt he would be able to catch. He would be sure to find accommodation for his party on board.

Craig and Fry begged for an hour’s grace; they obtained the permission, which was granted with some reluctance, and made use of the time in purchasing a great variety of apparatus for saving life in case of shipwreck; they bought old-fashioned life-belts, and unwilling to let their charge incur the slightest risk that precaution could anticipate, they bought the recently invented floating-costume of Captain Boyton.

Every preparation was hurried on, and it was still quite early in the afternoon of the 26th, when they all went on board the Pei-tang, one of the little river steamers that ply along the Pei-Ho. The river winds so much that the distance between Tong-Tcheou and the river-mouth is as nearly as possible double the length of a straight line drawn from point to point; its banks are artificial and the channel is consequently deep enough to accommodate vessels of considerable burden.

Craig and his colleague made a point throughout the passage of never stirring an inch from the place of duty. They felt a heavier responsibility now brought upon them by the change of circumstances. It was no longer from Wang, whom they knew well enough to recognize at a glance, that they had to defend their charge; it was from Lao-Shen, a desperate Tai-ping, a man they had never seen, who might be in disguise among the passengers, ready at any moment to perpetrate his murderous act. Could they be too vigilant? They scarcely allowed themselves time to eat; when should they be able to find time to sleep?

Soun was all in a flutter, but his disquietude arose from altogether a different cause; the prospect of a sea-voyage thoroughly upset him, and, although the water in the river was perfectly smooth, the nearer the steamboat approached the gulf, the more livid did his countenance become.

“Then you have never been on the sea?” asked Craig.

“Never,” he replied.

“You don’t seem to think you will like it,” added Fry.

“I don’t like it at all.”

“You must keep your head up,” said Craig.

“And your mouth shut,” continued Fry.

The poor fellow looked as if he had not the least objection to keep his mouth shut, but he cast one of those lugubrious glances at the widening waters which often betray beforehand the dread of seasickness. He made no reply, but found a place as near the middle of the boat as he could.

Before sunrise the little steamer had reached Ta-koo. Here were the ruins of the northern and southern forts that were taken in 1860 by the allied army of England and France, when General Collineau on the 24th of August made his grand attack, the gunboats forcing the entrance of the river. A narrow strip, now scarcely occupied at all, was conceded to the French, and there may still be seen the monument erected over the bodies of the officers and men who fell upon that occasion.

Unable to cross the bar of the river, the Pei-tang had to land her passengers at Ta-koo. It was a town of considerable importance, and would be found capable of a large development, if only the mandarins would permit a railway to be laid down.

The ship bound for Foo-Ning was to sail that day, so that no time would be lost. The vessel was named the Sam-Yep; and Kin-Fo, finding nothing to detain him on shore, hailed a sampan, and went on board at once.

CHAPTER 16

On Board The Sam-Yep

A week previously an American ship, chartered by one of the Chino-Californian companies, had cast anchor in the harbor of Ta-koo. She was freighted at the expense of the Ting-Tong agency that had its headquarters at the Laurel Hill Cemetery, San Francisco, where the bodies of the celestials who had died in the United States awaited their transit to their native land, where their religion ordains that they shall be interred. The vessel, which was bound for Canton, conveyed as many as two hundred and fifty coffins, seventy-five of which had been disembarked at Takoo, and transferred that morning to the vessel on which Kin-Fo and his party had taken passage, to be despatched to the northern provinces. The voyage, it is true, at that season of the year, would not last more than two or three days, and no other vessel was at present going in the direction of Leao-Tong; otherwise it was not exactly the one they would have been disposed to select.

The Sam-Yep was a sea-junk of about three hundred tons burden. Some junks of over one thousand tons draw only six feet of water, enabling them to cross the bars of rivers. Too wide for their length, their beam measuring a quarter of their keel, they sail badly unless close to the wind, but have the advantage of being able to put about, as it were on their own pivot, as easily as a top. Their enormous helms are pierced with holes, a system very much applauded in China, but the effect of which is open to controversy. Be that as it may, however, these ponderous junks no doubt do brave the sea around the mouths of rivers, and it has been recorded that one of them, chartered by a Canton firm and commanded by an American, conveyed a cargo of tea and porcelain to San Francisco, an instance which proves that it is not impossible for them to stand the open sea. It has also been asserted by competent judges that the Chinese make excellent seamen.

The Sam-Yep was of modern construction, her hull being somewhat after the European model. She was built entirely of bamboo sewn together and calked with tow and resin from Cambodga, and was so water-tight that it was considered unnecessary for her to carry a pump in her hold. She floated as light as a cork; her anchor was made of wood of a most durable character; her rigging was of palm-fiber, and remarkably flexible; and she had two masts, a mainmast and foremast, like a lugger. In every respect she seemed perfectly fitted for short cruises.

In looking at her, no one would have imagined that she had temporarily been converted into an enormous hearse, and that so melancholy a cargo had replaced the ordinary chests of tea, bales of silks, and packets of Chinese perfumery. She had laid aside none of her usual decorations; fore and aft waved pennants and streamers; on the prow was painted a great red eye, like that of some huge seamonster; from the masthead floated the Chinese flag; and two pieces of ordnance glittered brightly in the sunlight. The whole appearance of the vessel was fresh and festive. After all, was she not performing the pleasant duty of restoring to their native land the corpses of those who had expressed their wish to lie there? To Kin-Fo and Soun there was nothing repugnant in the idea of such a cargo. The two Americans doubtless would have preferred something different, but they had no alternative than to perform their office of following Kin-Fo.

A captain and a crew of six men were all that were required to work the junk. It has been said that the mariner’s compass was invented in China; whether that is true or not, the Chinese cruisers never use it; and Captain

Yin, the commander of the Sam-Yep, as he did not expect to go out of sight of land, was no exception to the general rule.

Captain Yin was a bright, loquacious little man, nearly always smiling, and a living illustration of the theory of perpetual motion. He was never still: eyes, arms, and hands seemed here, there, and everywhere, and moved as fast as his tongue. He rated and scolded his crew, but on the whole he was a capital seaman, had his vessel perfectly under his control, and was well acquainted with the coasts. The handsome sum that Kin-Fo had paid as passage-money had by no means a tendency to lower his spirits; a hundred and fifty taels for a trip of sixty hours was a windfall that did not often fall to his lot.

Kin-Fo and his guardians found quarters, such as they were, in the stern of the vessel. Soun was accommodated near the bow.

After a most careful scrutiny of both captain and crew, Craig and Fry came to the conclusion that there was nothing at all suspicious in the appearance of any of them. It was quite unlikely that they were in collusion with Lao-Shen, as it was the merest chance that had brought Kin-Fo upon the junk at all. Beyond the ordinary perils of a sea voyage, there was no special danger pending over their charge, and they felt justified in relaxing a little of their vigilance.

Kin-Fo felt the relief of being left more to himself. He retired to his cabin, and began to “philosophize,” as he expressed it. Here was he, a man who when he was exempt from care amid the luxuries of his yamen, never knew what happiness was. Trouble and anxiety had wrought a transformation in his mind, and now, when once he should gain possession of the fatal letter, he thought he should know true happiness at last. That the letter would be restored to him he had no doubt whatever. It was only a question of money with Lao-Shen; he would as soon receive 50,000 dollars from Kin-Fo during his lifetime as after his death; perhaps sooner, as it would save him the trouble of going to Shang-Hai and presenting himself at the Centenarian Office, a proceeding which, however great might be the clemency of the Government, could not be without a certain amount of risk to a former rebel. The difficulty was lest the Tai-ping should attack him unawares. He knew nothing of Lao-Shen’s movements, while Lao-Shen might be perfectly conversant with his, and the danger would become even more imminent when he landed in the very province where he resided. Nevertheless, Kin-Fo was hopeful, and went on to make brilliant plans for the future, in which of course the young widow at Pekin played no unimportant part.

Soun’s meditations, meantime, were of a very different nature. Lying prostrate in his cabin, he was paying his tribute to the malevolent deities of the Gulf of Pe-Chi-Li. He could scarcely collect his thoughts sufficiently to curse his master, or Wang, or the robber Lao-Shen. Ai ai ya! His heart was stupid, his brain was stupid, his ideas were stupid! He could think no more about his tea nor his rice. Ai ai ya! What a fool he had been to enter the service of a man who wanted to come to sea! He would give up his pigtail, he would shave his head, he would become a bonze, if only he could get back to dry land. A yellow dog — yes, a yellow dog — was devouring his liver and his stomach. Ai ai ya!

With a good south breeze, the Sam-Yep ran by the three or four miles of sandy shore that here lay from east to west. This part of the gulf was almost deserted; important shipping traffic did not extend beyond a radius of twenty miles from the estuary of the Pei-Ho, and a few merchant junks on short cruises, and about a dozen fishing-boats were all that could be seen near the shore, while out to sea the line of the horizon was quite unbroken.

Observing that all the fishing-boats, even those of only five or six tons' burden, carried one or two small cannon, Craig and Fry asked Captain Yin the reason, and were told that it was for protection against pirates.

"Pirates!" exclaimed Craig. "Surely there are no pirates in the Gulf of Pe-Chi-Li?"

"Why not in the Gulf of Pe-Chi-Li as much as in all the seas of China?" rejoined the captain. And he gave a merry laugh that displayed his two rows of fine white teeth.

"You don't seem to be much afraid of them," said Fry.

"Haven't I two guns to keep them at a distance?" said Yin.

"Are the guns loaded?" Craig inquired.

"Generally; not now."

"Why not now?" asked Fry.

"Because I have no powder on board," calmly responded the captain.

"Then what good will your guns do you?" the Americans exclaimed simultaneously.

The captain laughed again. "If my junk were loaded to the hatchways with opium or tea," he said, "then it would be worth defending; but with its present cargo — — "

He shrugged his shoulders with an expressive gesture.

“You gentlemen seem to have rather a dread of pirates,” he said presently, “and yet you have no property of any value on board.”

Craig and Fry informed him that they had special reasons for wishing to avoid an attack, and asked how the pirates could be aware beforehand of the nature of his freight. Captain Yin pointed to a white flag that was fluttering half-mast high above their heads.

“Pirates know what that means,” he said; “they will not take the trouble to rob a vessel laden with coffins.”

“But perhaps,” insisted Craig, “they may think the white flag is only a ruse, and will come on board to see for themselves.”

“Let them come, then,” said Yin jauntily; “they will soon have to go back the same way as they came.”

Craig and Fry said no more, but they could not altogether share the captain’s equanimity. A junk of three hundred tons burden, even though carrying nothing but ballast, would be no mean prize for freebooters. They could, however, do no more than quietly await the chapter of accidents, and hope for the best.

The captain, for his part, had neglected nothing that could insure a favorable voyage. Before setting sail he had sacrificed a cock to the presiding deities of the sea, and its feathers were still suspended from the foremast; a few drops of its blood had been sprinkled on the deck, and a small cup of wine thrown overboard had completed the propitiatory offering.

But whether it was that the cock had not been sufficiently plump, or the wine had not been of the choicest vintage, somehow or other the capricious deities seemed not to have been satisfied. In the course of the day, quite unexpectedly, for the weather was bright and clear, the junk was overtaken by a tremendous gale, an event which the keenest of mariners could not have foreseen. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and the Sam-Yep was preparing to double the promontory beyond which the coastline extended in a northeasterly direction; that done, she might run straight before the wind, and Captain Yin had every reason to think that in less than twenty-four hours she would be at Foo-Ning.

As the time for arriving drew near, Kin-Fo's impatience to gain possession of the letter increased considerably. With Soun the yearning to get on shore amounted almost to frenzy. Craig and Fry remembered that in three days more their responsibilities concerning the client of the Centenarian would be at an end; at midnight on the 30th of June his policy would expire, the premium had not been renewed, and all anxiety would cease.

Just as the Sam-Yep reached the entrance of the Gulf of Leao-Tong the wind veered suddenly to the northeast; it subsequently changed to the north, and two hours later was blowing from the northwest. If Captain Yin had, had a barometer on board, he would have noticed that the mercury had made a sudden fall, a rapid rarefaction of the air that betokened an approaching typhoon, the motion of which was lightening the atmospheric strata. Had he been acquainted with the observations of Paddington and Maury, forewarned, he would have endeavored to alter his tack and steer to the northeast, in the hope of getting beyond the attraction of the tempest.

But he did not understand the use of the barometer, and was ignorant of the law of cyclones. He had sacrificed a cock, and therefore was he not insured against every calamity? Nevertheless, superstitious Chinaman though he was, he proved an excellent seaman on the occasion, and his instinct seemed to serve him as well as the science of a European captain.

The typhoon was not of a large extent, consequently its velocity was very great, the rotatory motion being little less than sixty miles an hour. Fortunately it carried the Sam-Yep to the east, otherwise she would have been driven on to a coast where she must inevitably have perished. At eleven o’clock the tempest reached its height. Captain Yin was not laughing now, but he had lost none of his presence of mind. With his hand constantly on the helm, he skillfully steered the light vessel, which rose easily upon the waves, and in all his orders he was ably seconded by his crew.

Kin-Fo had left his cabin, and, clinging to the bulwarks, was contemplating the sea and sky. The clouds, torn to shreds by the hurricane, were hurrying in masses over the surface of the water, while the waves, all white in the blackness of the night, seemed to be sucked up by the typhoon far above their ordinary level. He was neither surprised nor alarmed. This storm was only one of the series of misfortunes that his ill-luck had prepared for him. In this summer season other people might have made a short passage of sixty hours under favorable circumstances; but such luck was not to be his.

Craig and Fry were much more uneasy, not for themselves, but for the interests of the Centenarian. Only let their lives be preserved until midnight on the 30th of June, and the conscientious agents cared not what became of themselves or their charge afterward.

As for Soun, to his mind the junk was in no greater danger now than she had been ever since he came on board. Stormy or calm, it was all alike to him. Ai ai ya! The passengers down in the hold had the best of it; they felt neither rolling nor pitching; he wished he were among them. Ai ai ya!

For the space of three hours the junk really was in a critical position. A false turn of the helm, and she would have been lost, for the sea would have dashed over her deck; and, although, like a pail, she could not capsize, there was every chance that she might fill and founder. Tossed as she was by the waves, it was impossible to keep her in any constant direction, nor could any estimate be made as to the course she was taking.

By some happy chance, however, she ultimately gained without serious damage the center of the great atmospheric disturbance that extended over an area of sixty miles. Here, like a placid lake in the midst of an angry ocean, was a tract of smooth water, two or three miles in area, where the wind was scarcely perceptible.

The junk, which had been driven thither under bare poles, was now in safety. Toward three o’clock in the morning the fury of the cyclone ceased almost as if by magic, and the angry waters round the little lake subsided into calmness. But when daylight dawned, no land was in sight. The Sam-Yep was the center of a barren waste of sea and sky.

CHAPTER 17

The Cargo

“Where are we, Captain Yin?” Kin-Fo asked after the danger was all over.

“I hardly know,” replied the captain, who had quite recovered his jovial looks.

“Are we in the Gulf of Pe-Chi-Li?”

“Not unlikely.”

“Or do you think we have been driven into the Gulf of Leao-Tong?”

“Very probably.”

“Where, then, are we going to land?”

“Just where the wind takes us.”

“When?”

“That’s more than I can tell you.”

Kin-Fo was beginning to lose his temper. “A true Chinaman always knows his whereabouts,” he said, quoting a Chinese proverb.

“Ah! That means on land, not at sea!” answered the captain, grinning from ear to ear.

“I don’t see anything to laugh at,” said Kin-Fo impatiently.

“Nor do I see anything to cry at,” retorted Yin.

It might be true that there was nothing really alarming in the situation, but it was quite obvious that the captain did not know where he was; without a compass he had no means of judging in what direction his ship had been driven by the tempest, during which the wind had been blowing from such different quarters, and while, with her sails furled and her helm useless, she had been the mere plaything of the hurricane.

But whether the junk had been carried into one gulf or the other, there could be no hesitation now about the necessity of putting her head to the west; ultimately, land must be sighted in that direction. Had it been in his power, the captain would forthwith have hoisted sail and followed the sun, which was once more shining, though only faintly; but there was not a breath of wind; the typhoon had been succeeded by a dead calm; not a ripple played upon the smooth undulations that just lifted up the vessel and allowed her to sink again without moving her a foot forward. A heavy vapor hung over the sea, and the general aspect was in striking contrast to the commotion of the previous night. It was one of those calms locally known as "white calms."

"And how long is this going to last?" said Kin-Fo.

"No telling," replied the captain with perfect composure; "at this season of the year calms sometimes continue for weeks."

"Weeks!" repeated Kin-Fo; "do you suppose I am to stay here for weeks?"

"No help for it, my dear sir, unless by good luck we can manage to get taken in tow."

"Confound the junk! What a fool I was to be caught coming on board!"

“Will you allow me to offer you two little bits of advice? Be like other folks, and don’t grumble at the weather which you can’t alter; and, secondly, do as I am going to do; go to bed and get some comfortable sleep.”

And with a philosophy that was worthy of Wang himself, the captain retired to his cabin, leaving only a few men on deck.

For the next quarter of an hour Kin-Fo paced backward and forward, drumming his fingers upon his folded arms; then, casting a glance at the desolate scene around, he made up his mind to go to his cabin, and left the deck without saying a word to Craig and Fry, who had been lounging meanwhile against the taffrail, not speaking a word to each other, but no doubt holding mutual intercourse by silent sympathy. They had heard all that passed between Kin-Fo and the captain, but to say the truth, they really were not concerned at the delay which was giving so much annoyance to the young man; if they were losing anything in time, they were gaining in security, for as long as Kin-Fo was on board the Sam-Yep, was he not free from any chance of being attacked by Lao-Shen? Moreover, the period of their engagement and consequently of their responsibility was close at hand; two days more and a whole band of Tai-pings might assail him, and it would not be their duty to risk a hair of their heads to protect him. Practical Yankees as they were, they were devoted to the client of the Centenarian so long as he represented the sum of 200,000 dollars; they would be utterly indifferent when that interest lapsed.

Under these circumstances there was nothing to prevent them from sitting down to their luncheon with a capital appetite. The food was excellent; they partook of the same dishes, consumed the same quantities of bread and the same number of slices of meat; they drank Bidulph’s health in the same number of glasses of wine, and afterward smoked precisely the same number of cigarettes. If not by birth, they were Siamese twins in taste and habit.

The day passed on without incident or accident; there was still the “woolly” sky; still the smooth sea; and nothing to disturb the general monotony.

Toward four o’clock in the afternoon, poor Soun made his appearance on deck. He reeled, he staggered as if he were drunk, though probably he had never in all his life been so abstemious before. His complexion was blue and green, verging to yellow; probably when he got on shore again it would be as usual, orange; when he was angry he would flush into crimson, and thus in a very short period his countenance would have exhibited all the colors of the rainbow.

Keeping his eyes half-closed, and not daring to look beyond the bulwarks, he stumbled up to Craig and Fry, and said, “Are we nearly there?”

“No,” they answered.

“Not nearly?”

“No.”

“Ai ai ya!” he moaned, and flung himself down at the foot of the mast, wriggling as if in convulsions, which made his miserable little queue shake like a puppy’s tail.

Earlier in the day Captain Yin had given orders, very prudently, for the hatchways to be opened that the sun might dry up the water that during the typhoon had been shipped into the hold. Craig and Fry had been promenading the deck, repeatedly pausing and looking down through the middle hatchway, until at last, prompted by curiosity, they agreed to go below.

Except just where the light was admitted from above, the hold was very dark; but after a short time the eye grew accustomed to the obscurity, and it was quite possible to distinguish the way in which the singular cargo had been stowed. The hold was not divided, as in most junks, into partitions, but was open from end to end, and the whole of it appropriated to this strange consignment, the crew having to find their berths forward. Piled up one upon another, and arrayed on both sides, were the seventy-five coffins bound for Foo-Ning, all fastened quite securely so as to prevent any oscillation that might imperil the ship, a passage being left along the middle, the end of which, remote from the hatchway, was sunk in gloom.

Craig and Fry walked silently and softly, as though they were treading the floor of a mausoleum. There was something of awe mingling with their curiosity. The coffins were of all sizes, a small proportion of them being costly and elaborate, the generality perfectly plain. Of the emigrants whom necessity drives across the Pacific, it is very few that make a fortune or realize a competency in the diggings of California, or in the mines of Nevada and Colorado; nearly all die as impoverished as they went out; but all, whatever their wealth or poverty, are without exception and with equal care brought back to their native land.

About ten of the coffins were made of valuable wood adorned with all the richness that Chinese fancy could devise; but the rest were merely four planks with ends, put together in the roughest manner and painted yellow; every one of them bore the name and address of its tenant, and as Craig and Fry passed along they kept on reading such names as Lien-Foo of Yun-Ping-Fu, Nan-Loon of Foo-Ning, and remarked that there seemed no confusion; every corpse could be conveyed to its destination to await in field, in orchard, or in plain, its ultimate interment in Chinese soil.

“Well packed!” whispered Craig.

“Well packed!” whispered Fry.

They spoke calmly as they would about a consignment of ordinary goods from San Francisco or New York.

Having proceeded to the farther end of the passage where it was most gloomy, they turned and looked along the avenue of that temporary cemetery toward the light; they were on the point of returning, when a slight sound attracted their attention. “A rat!” they said.

“I should think a rat would prefer a cargo of rice,” said Craig.

“Or of maize,” added Fry.

The noise continued. It was like a scratching with nails or claws. It was on the starboard side, and came from about the level of their heads; consequently from the upper tier of coffins.

The men hissed as they would to scare away a rat. Still the scratching went on. They listened with bated breath. Evidently the sound came from inside one of the coffins.

“Some Chinaman buried before he was dead,” said Craig.

“And just come to life again,” continued Fry.

They went close up to the coffin, and laid their hands upon it; it did not admit of a doubt that there was movement within. “This means mischief!”

they muttered.

The same idea had simultaneously occurred to them both, that a new danger was threatening the client in their charge.

Raising their hands, they could feel that the lid of the coffin was being gently lifted up. With the most perfect composure they waited to see what would follow next. They did not make a movement. It was too dark for them to distinguish anything plainly, but they were not mistaken in thinking they saw a coffin lid slowly opening on the larboard side.

A whisper was next heard. A whisper followed in reply.

“Is that you, Cono?”

“Is that you, Fa-Kien?”

“Is it to be to-night?”

“Yes, to-night.”

“Before the moon rises?”

“Yes, in the second watch.”

“Do the others know?”

“They have all been told.”

“I shall be glad to get out of this.”

“Ay, so shall we all.”

“Thirty-six hours in a coffin is no joke!”

“You are right.”

“But Lao-Shen ordered it.”

“Hush, hush! What’s that?”

The last exclamation was caused by Craig and Fry making an involuntary movement at the mention of Lao-Shen; but they did not speak nor move again.

There was a slight pause, after which the coffin-lids gently closed themselves again, and there was complete silence.

Stealthily on hands and knees, Craig and Fry made their way back through the hatchway on to the deck, and in a moment were locked in their own cabin, where they could converse without risk of being overheard.

“Dead men who talk — ” began Craig.

“Are not dead yet,” concluded Fry.

The mere mentioning of Lao-Shen’s name under these somewhat ghastly circumstances had been enough to reveal the whole truth. It was evident that the Tai-ping had employed some agents who had found their way on board, and it did not admit of much doubt that they had only succeeded by the connivance of the captain. The coffins had been disembarked from the American ships, and had, had to remain for a day or two to await the arrival of the Sam-Yep, and during that time a number of them had been broken open, the corpses removed, and their places supplied by the confederates of Lao-Shen. How it had transpired that Kin-Fo was among the passengers of the Sam-Yep was a mystery they could not explain; but they recollected that they had noticed suspicious characters on board from the time of embarkation, and acknowledged that it would be a thing discreditable to themselves if, after all, the office they represented should lose the two hundred thousand dollars at stake.

They were not the men to lose their presence of mind; they were facing a grave and unexpected emergency; there was not much time in which to form their plans; the deed was to be done before the second watch; there was not much scope for deliberation; there was only one conclusion to be arrived at — before the second watch Kin-Fo must be away from the junk.

How the escape was to be made was a question more easy to ask than to answer. The only boat belonging to the ship was a cumbrous craft that it would take the whole crew to lower to the water, and if the captain were an accomplice in the plot, the crew could not be enlisted to lend a helping hand. The project of using the boat had to be abandoned.

Seven o’clock, and the captain was still in his cabin. Was it not likely he was only waiting in solitude until the appointed time had passed, and the deed was done? The junk was floating adrift; there was no watch, why should there be? A sailor, all alone, was slumbering in the bows. If only the appliances were at hand, the opportunity for escape was complete. Had they been anxious to get away from a fire-ship, they scarcely could have been more excited. A thought struck them; there was not a moment to spare to discuss it; it must be put into execution now, at once.

Opening the door of Kin-Fo’s cabin, they touched him gently; he was fast asleep; they touched him again.

“What do you want with me?” he said.

They told him as concisely as they could all the facts; he did not seem at all alarmed; he pondered a moment, and asked, “Why not throw the rascals overboard?”

“That is quite out of the question,” they replied. “There are too many against us.”

“Then are we to do nothing?” said Kin-Fo.

“Do as we tell you,” answered Craig; “we have made our plans.”

“Let me hear,” said Kin-Fo, in some surprise.

“Take this dress; ask no questions; put it on, and be ready!”

The men opened a parcel they had brought with them. It contained four sets of the swimming apparatus just invented by Captain Boyton. They gave a set to Kin-Fo, saying, “We have more for ourselves, and one for Soun.”

“Go and fetch Soun,” he bade them.

And Soun was brought in, looking as if he were suffering from an attack of paralysis.

“You are to put this on,” said his master.

But Soun was incapable of helping himself, and while he kept on moaning, “Ai ai ya,” the others contrived to drag him into the waterproof attire.

Eight o’clock, and they were all equipped; they looked like four great seals just going to plunge into the frozen waters, although it must be owned that Soun was almost too flabby in his condition to be compared to so lithe a creature.

The junk continued to float in absolute stillness upon the unruffled sea; Craig and Fry opened one of the portholes of the cabin, and quietly dropped Soun down without more ado. Kin-Fo cautiously followed; Craig and Fry only stayed to make sure that they had provided themselves with all the necessary appurtenances, and plunged in after them.

So quiet were all their movements that no one on board was aware that four of the passengers had quitted the Sam-Yep.

CHAPTER 18

Afloat

Captain Boyton’s apparatus is a gutta-percha suit, consisting of leggings, tunic, and cap. But though impervious to water, the material would not be impervious to cold, were it not that the garments are made with an outer and an inner layer between which may be admitted a certain quantity of air. The air serves the double purpose of maintaining the apparatus upon the surface of the water and preventing the chill that would otherwise ensue from long exposure.

The joints of the separate pieces of the costume are perfectly water-tight. The leggings terminate beneath the feet with heavy soles, and are clasped at the waist with a metal belt, which is made wide enough to allow free movement, to the body. The jacket is fixed into the belt, and has a solid collar, to which in its turn is attached the cap, which is drawn tightly over the forehead, cheeks and chin by means of an elastic border, leaving only the eyes, mouth, and nose exposed.

Several gutta-percha tubes are attached to the jacket to admit the air, which can be regulated to any density, so that a traveler may float upright with the water up to his neck or only to his waist, or may lie horizontally upon its surface, all the time in perfect safety and with complete liberty of action.

The practical utility of the apparatus has already been proved in a way that does much credit to its inventor. To make it complete there are several other appurtenances: a waterproof bag that is slung over the shoulder, and contains various useful articles; a small pole which can be attached to the foot by a socket, and carries a small sail; and a light paddle, which may be used either as an oar or a rudder, as circumstances may require.

Thus equipped, Kin-Fo, Craig, Fry, and Soun floated off, and a very few strokes of their paddles carried them a considerable distance from the junk. The night was very dark, and even if Captain Yin or any of his men had been on deck, they would not have perceived the fugitives, and no one could have the slightest suspicion that they were escaping.

The second watch, the time mentioned by the pretended corpse, would be about the middle of the night, consequently Kin-Fo and his companions had several hours' grace during which they hoped to get a safe distance from the Sam-Yep. A very slight breeze was beginning to ruffle the surface of the water, but not enough to make them depend on any other means except their paddles for their progress.

In a very few minutes Kin-Fo, Craig, and Fry, grew accustomed to their strange equipment, and were able to maneuver so well, that they could, without a moment's hesitation, assume any attitude or make any movement they desired. Soun for a time had to be taken in tow, but he very quickly recovered his energies, and felt far more at his ease than he had been on board the junk. All sensation of seasickness had left him, and the relief of finding himself floating up to his waist in the sea, instead of being subject to the pitching, tossing, and heaving of a ship, was very great.

But although he was no longer ill, he was in considerable alarm. Nothing possessed him but that he should be devoured by sharks, and he was continually drawing up his legs, as though he felt them already being snapped at. His fears, it must be owned, were not altogether without foundation.

It was a strange vicissitude to which fortune had now called Kin-Fo and his companions. On and on they went, lying almost flat upon their backs to paddle, and rising to the perpendicular when they required a rest. An hour after leaving the junk the party found themselves about half a mile distant. They came to a standstill, resting on their paddles, and began to hold a whispered consultation.

“That rascal of a captain!” said Craig, in order to broach the subject that was of course uppermost in his mind.

“And that scoundrel Lao-Shen!” added Fry.

“Are you surprised?” said Kin-Fo; “I am never surprised at anything now.”

“I cannot understand how those fellows found out that you were going to take passage on board that junk,” replied Craig.

“Well, it doesn’t matter much now that we are safe,” said Kin-Fo composedly.

“Safe!” exclaimed Craig; “We are not safe as long as the Sam-Yep is in sight.”

“What is to be done, then?” inquired Kin-Fo.

“We must take some refreshment and go on again, so that we may be out of sight at daybreak.”

Admitting a little more air into his apparatus, Fry allowed himself to rise till the water was about level with his waist, and then opening his bag, took out a bottle and a glass. He filled the glass with brandy, and handed it to Kin-Fo, who, without requiring any pressing, drained it to the bottom. Craig and Fry helped themselves, and Soun was not forgotten.

“How are you now?” asked Craig, when Soun had emptied his glass.

“Much better, thank you,” said Soun; “but I should like something to eat.”

“We will have our breakfast at daybreak, and then you shall have some tea.”

Soun made a wry face.

“Cold?” he asked.

“No; hot,” said Craig.

Soun’s countenance brightened.

“But how will you manage that?” he inquired.

“I shall make a fire.”

“Then why wait till the morning?” urged Soun.

“Why, you stupid fellow, you don’t want Captain Yin and his accomplices to see our light, do you?”

“No, O no.”

“Then have patience, and wait till the proper time.”

The appearance of the party during this colloquy was irresistibly comical; the slight undulation of the water kept them bobbing up and down like so many corks, or like the hammers of a pianoforte when the keys are touched. Kin-Fo presently remarked that the wind was beginning to freshen.

“Let us set our sails, then,” said Craig and Fry.

But just as they were preparing to erect their little masts, Soun uttered a loud cry of terror.

“Be quiet, you fool!” angrily whispered his master, “do you want us to be discovered?”

“I thought,” muttered Soun, “I saw a monster — a shark — quite close to me; I thought I felt it, too.”

Craig carefully examined the surface of the water, and said that it was quite a mistake on Soun’s part; no shark was there at all.

Kin-Fo laid his hand on his servant’s shoulder.

“Understand, Soun, that you are not to be a coward,” he said. “You are not to cry out, mind, even if your leg is snapped off.”

“If you make any outcry,” added Fry, “we will cut a slit in your jacket, and send you to the bottom of the sea, where you may bellow to your heart’s content.”

Thus adjured, the unfortunate Soun, though by no means consoled, dared not utter another word. It seemed as though his troubles were never to have an end, and he began to think that the miseries of seasickness were scarcely worse than the tortures of terror.

Kin-Fo had been right when he said that the wind was freshening. Even if it were only one of the slight breezes that subside at’ sunrise, it must be utilized to increase the distance between them and the Sam-Yep. When Lao-Shen’s people discovered that Kin-Fo was no longer in his cabin, they would assuredly begin to look about for him, and if any of them were in sight, the ship’s boat would greatly facilitate their capture; consequently it was of the utmost importance to be far away before dawn.

The wind fortunately was blowing from the east. Whether they had been carried by the hurricane into the Gulf of Leao-Tong, the Gulf of Pe-Chi-Li, or even into the Yellow Sea, a westerly course must in any case take them toward the coast, where they had every chance of being picked up by some merchant vessel on its way to the mouth of the Pei-Ho, or by one of the fishing-boats plying day and night about the shore. If, on the contrary, the wind had come from the west, and the Sam-Yep had been driven south of Corea, Kin-Fo and his companions would have had no chance of rescue; they must either have been borne away on to the open sea, or floated ultimately on to the shores of Japan as lifeless corpses, which the dress they wore would not allow to sink.

It was now about ten o’clock. The moon would rise shortly before midnight, and there was no time to be lost. According to Craig and Fry’s directions, preparations were made for hoisting sail. The process was very simple. Each gutta-percha suit had a socket attached to the sole of the right foot, which was intended to hold the short pole that served for a mast. The party first of all stretched themselves on their backs, brought their foot within reach of their hands by bending the knee, and fixed the mast in its place, having previously attached the halyard of the little sail to its extremity. At a signal from Fry and Craig, each man simultaneously pulled at his halyard, and hoisted the upper corner of his triangular sail to the top of the mast. The halyards were then made fast to the metal waistbands, the sheets were held in the hand, and they all sailed off like a flotilla of “scaphanders,” an appellation to which they had more right than the submarine workmen to whom it is often improperly applied.

In the course of ten minutes they were able to steer with perfect ease and security; they kept equal pace with one another, and glided easily along the water like so many seagulls with their wings extended to the breeze. Their progress was greatly facilitated by the condition of the sea; not a wave disturbed the long quiet undulation of its surface, so that there was no splash or surf to inconvenience them.

Two or three times, Soun, forgetting Craig and Fry’s instructions, was foolish enough to turn his head, and in so doing swallowed several mouthfuls of salt water. Experience, however, soon taught him better. Still he could not overcome his dread of sharks. It was explained to him that he ran less risk in a horizontal than in a vertical position, since the formation of a shark’s jaw obliges it to turn over on to its back before seizing its prey, and consequently it is difficult for it to grasp a floating object; it was furthermore pointed out to him that these voracious brutes prefer inanimate bodies to those with any power of motion. Soun accordingly made up his mind not to keep still for a moment, and was all the happier for his efforts.

For about an hour the “scaphanders” sailed on. A shorter time would not have sufficed to carry them out of reach of the junk, a longer would have exhausted them; already their arms were getting weary with the strain put upon them by the tension of the sails.

Craig and Fry gave the signal for stopping. Instantly the sheets were loosened, and all, with the exception of Soun, who preferred remaining on the cautious side, resumed a perpendicular position.

“Five minutes’ rest, sir,” said Craig to Kin-Fo.

“And another glass of brandy,” said Fry.

Kin-Fo assented willingly to both propositions. A little stimulant was all they required at present; having dined shortly before leaving the junk, they could well afford to wait for food until the morning. Neither did they suffer at all from cold; the layer of air between their bodies and the water protected them from any chill, and their temperature had not abated a degree since they made their start.

Was the Sam-Yep still in sight? Fry carefully swept the eastern horizon with a night-glass that he drew from his bag, but no sign of her was visible against the dim background of the sky. The night was rather foggy; there were very few stars, and the planets looked almost like nebulae in the firmament. The waning moon, however, would not be long in rising, and would probably disperse the mist.

“The rascals are still asleep,” said Fry.

“They haven’t taken advantage of the breeze,” said Craig.

Kin-Fo, tightening his sheet, and spreading his sail to the wind, now professed himself ready to make another start, and accordingly they all resumed their course, the wind being not quite so strong as before.

As they were proceeding toward the west, they would be unable to observe the moon as she rose in the east; her light, however, would necessarily illuminate the opposite horizon, of which it was important for them to make a careful observation. If instead of a clearly defined circle between sea and sky, the line should be broken and refract the lunar rays, they might be certain that the shore was in sight; and as the coast was everywhere open and unbeaten by surf, a landing could be effected without danger in almost any part.

About twelve o’clock a faint light began to play upon the vapors overhead, a sign that the moon was rising above the water. Neither Kin-Fo nor his companions turned their heads. Again the breeze had freshened, and while it helped to disperse the fog, was carrying them along with considerable rapidity, so that quite a furrow of foam followed in their wake. The atmosphere became clearer and clearer; the constellations shone out more brightly, and the moon, changing from a coppery red to a silvery white, soon illumined the whole of the surrounding space.

All at once Craig uttered a loud oath.

“The junk!” he cried.

“Down with the sails!” exclaimed Fry.

In an instant the four sails were lowered, and the masts removed from their sockets. All the party resumed an upright position, and looked behind them. There, too truly, was the outline of the junk, with all sails spread, about a mile away.

Captain Yin, they did not doubt, had become aware of Kin-Fo’s escape, and had at once set out in pursuit. Unless the fugitives could contrive to avoid discovery on the bright surface of the water, in another quarter of an hour they would be in the hands of the captain and his accomplices.

“Heads down!” said Craig.

His order was understood. A little more air was ejected from the apparatus, and all four men sank until only their heads emerged from the waves. There they waited without a sound or a motion.

The junk was advancing rapidly, its upper sails casting great shadows on the sea. In five minutes' time it was within half a mile of them, and they could see the sailors moving to and fro, and the captain at the helm. All at once a great shout was heard; a crowd of men had rushed upon the deck, and were apparently attacking the crew. The uproar was terrible; yells of rage and execration alternated with shrieks of agony and despair. Then all was still; the clamor was hushed; nothing was heard but a constant splash, splash, at the side of the junk, indicating that bodies were being thrown overboard.

After all, then, Captain Yin and his crew had not been in league with Lao-Shen and his troop; the poor fellows, on the contrary, had themselves been the victims of the band of rascals who had smuggled themselves on board with no other design than that of gaining possession of the junk. The pirates had, had no idea that Kin-Fo was a fellow-passenger, and were he discovered now, it was certain that neither he nor any of his companions could expect to find mercy at their hands.

The Sam-Yep continued her course. She was close upon them now, but by the happiest chance she cast upon them the shadow of her sails. For an instant they dived beneath the waves. When they rose again, the junk had passed, and they were safe.

A corpse that was floating by they recognized as that of Captain Yin, with a poignard in his side. For a time the ample folds of his garments sustained him upon the surface of the water. Then he sank, never to rise again.

Thus by a foul massacre had perished the genial, lighthearted commander of the Sam-Yep.

Ten minutes later the junk had disappeared in the west, and Kin-Fo, Craig, Fry, and Soun were all alone in the waste of water.

CHAPTER 19

A Tiger-Shark

In the course of three hours day began to break, and before it was quite light the junk was out of sight. Though sailing in the same direction, the “scaphanders” had of course been unable to keep pace with her, and she was already nine or ten miles away.

All danger from that quarter was therefore at an end; nevertheless the situation was not altogether satisfactory. Far as the eye could reach there was no indication of land, nor was there a single vessel of any kind in sight; whether they were in the Gulf of Pe-Chi-Li or in the Yellow Sea was still uncertain.

The direction taken by the junk, however, demonstrated that sooner or later land would be found toward the west, and, as a slight breeze still ruffled the waters, it was advisable to continue sailing that way.

It was now necessary to satisfy the cravings of hunger, which, after a ten hours’ fast, were very keen.

“We will make a good breakfast,” said Craig and Fry.

Kin-Fo gladly assented. Soun smacked his lips with delight, and for a time quite forgot his fear of being devoured.

The waterproof bag was again in requisition. Fry produced some bread and some excellent preserved meat, and the meal, though not as elaborate in its menu as an ordinary Chinese repast, was nevertheless most heartily enjoyed.

The bag contained provisions enough for one more day, by which time Craig and Fry said they might all hope to be on shore. Kin-Fo asked them what ground they had for such a hope? They replied that their good luck seemed to be returning to them; they were free of the dangerous junk, and never since they had, had the honor of attending Kin-Fo had they been in so secure a position as now.

“All the Tai-pings in the world, sir, could not reach you here,” said Craig.

“And considering that you are equivalent to two hundred thousand dollars, you float excellently well,” said Fry.

Kin-Fo smiled.

“It is all owing to you, gentlemen,” he said, “that I am afloat at all. Had it not been for you, I should have had the fate of poor Captain Yin.”

“And so should I,” echoed Soun, gulping down a huge mouthful of bread.

“You will not be the losers for your attention,” Kin-Fo continued; “I shall never forget how much I owe you.”

“You owe us nothing,” said Craig; “we are the servants of the Centenarian.”

“And our great hope is,” said Fry, “that the Centenarian will never owe anything to you.”

Whatever might be their motive, Kin-Fo could not be otherwise than touched by their zealous devotion.

“We will talk about this again,” said he, “when Lao-Shen has restored that unfortunate letter.”

Craig and Fry smiled significantly, but made no reply.

Presently, in fun, Kin-Fo asked Soun to bring him some tea.

“All right,” said Fry, before Soun had time to reply to his master’s joke.

Again opening his bag, he produced a little appliance which may well be reckoned an indispensable accompaniment to the Boyton apparatus, and which serves the double purpose of a lamp and a stove. It consisted simply of a tube five or six inches in length, furnished with a tap-top and bottom, the whole being inserted into a sheet of cork, like the floating thermometers used in public baths.

After placing it upon the surface of the water, Fry turned on the taps, one with each hand, and in an instant a flame started from the extremity of the funnel, sufficiently large to diffuse a perceptible heat.

“There’s your stove,” said Fry.

Soun could not believe his eyes.

“Why, you made fire out of water!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, he made it of water and phosphuret of calcium,” said Craig.

The instrument, in fact, was constructed so as to utilize a singular property of phosphuret of calcium, which in contact with water produces phosphuretted hydrogen. The gas burns spontaneously, and cannot be extinguished by either wind or rain. It is consequently employed now for lighting all the improved life-buoys, which immediately they touch the water, eject a long flame, by means of which any one who has fallen overboard by night is at once able to see the means thrown out for his rescue.

While the hydrogen was burning, Craig held over it a little saucepan, containing some fresh water which he had drawn from a little keg, also carried in the bag. As soon as the water was boiling, he poured it into a teapot, in which a few pinches of tea had already been placed. The whole party then partook of the decoction, and even Kin-Fo and Soun, although it was not brewed in Chinese fashion, had no fault to find with it. It formed, in fact, a most acceptable addition to the breakfast. All that they required now was some knowledge of their whereabouts. At no distant day a sextant and chronometer will unquestionably be added to the Boyton apparatus, and then shipwrecked mariners will no longer be at a loss to ascertain their position upon the ocean.

Thus refreshed the little party once again set sail. For hours the wind blew steadily, and they rarely had to use their paddles as rudders. The gentle gliding movement in a horizontal position had a tendency to make them sleepy; but under the circumstances sleep must not be thought of, and in order to resist it, Craig and Fry smoked cigars, after the fashion of dandies in a swimming bath.

Several times the “scaphanders” were startled by the gambols of some marine animals that put Soun into a great state of alarm; these were nothing more, however, than harmless porpoises, probably astonished at the strange beings whom they now saw for the first time invading their native element. In great herds, they darted along with the speed of arrows, their huge slimy bodies glistening like emeralds beneath the water; now and then leaping up some five or six feet into the air, and turning a somersault that displayed the remarkable suppleness of their muscles. So great was their speed, far surpassing that of the fleetest ships, that Kin-Fo, in spite of the jerks and plunges, would fain have been taken in tow by one of them.

Toward noon the wind lulled into short puffs, and finally dropped altogether. The little sails fell idly against the masts; no longer was there any tension upon the sheets, nor any furrow of foam left behind in the wake.

“This is bad,” said Craig.

“Very unfortunate,” assented Fry.

They all came to a standstill. The masts were taken from the sockets, the sails struck, and each member of the party, having placed himself in an upright position, examined the horizon.

It was still deserted. Not a sail nor a trail of smoke was in sight. A scorching sun had absorbed all vapor and rarefied the air. The water would not have been cold for the travelers, even had they not been protected by their double covering of gutta-percha.

Sanguine as Craig and Fry might be as to the final issue of events, they could scarcely fail to be somewhat uneasy now. They had no means of judging how far they had sailed in the course of the last sixteen hours, and the nonappearance of any coast or passing vessel became more and more inexplicable. Still, neither they nor Kin-Fo were the men to despair as long as hope remained, and as they had provisions enough for another day, and the weather showed no symptoms of growing stormy, they determined to make good use of their paddles, and to push on. The signal for starting was given, and now on their backs, now on their faces, they persevered in their westerly course.

Progress was far from rapid. To arms unaccustomed to the work, the manipulation of the paddles was very fatiguing. Poor Soun was full of complaints; and he lagged so much behind the others that they frequently had to wait until he caught them up. His master scolded, abused, and threatened him, but all in vain; Soun knew that his pigtail was safe in his gutta-percha cap; still, the fear of being left behind sufficed to prevent him from falling very far into the rear.

Toward two o’clock some sea-gulls were observed, and although these birds are often seen far out at sea, their appearance could not but be taken as an indication that land was most probably within an accessible distance.

An hour later they all got entangled in a bed of seaweed, from which they had considerable trouble to extricate themselves; they floundered about like fish in a drag-net, and were obliged to use knives to set themselves free. The result was a delay of about half an hour, and an outlay of strength which could ill be spared.

At four o’clock, greatly exhausted, they made another halt. A fresh breeze had sprung up, but unfortunately it was from the south. As they could not trim their sails, they were afraid to use them at all, lest they should be carried northward and lose the headway they had made toward the west.

The halt was rather long, for, besides resting their weary limbs, they were glad to recruit themselves again with their provisions; but the dinner was not so festive a meal as the breakfast had been. Matters did not look quite so promising now; night was coming on; the wind was increasing from the south, and no one knew precisely what to do.

Kin-Fo leaned in gloomy silence upon his paddle, his brows knit, but more with vexation than alarm. Soun kept on grumbling and whining, and began to sneeze as though he were attacked with influenza. Craig and Fry felt that something was expected of them, but were puzzled how to act.

By a happy chance, a solution came to their bewilderment. About five o’clock, pointing suddenly toward the south, they both exclaimed,

“A sail!”

Sure enough, about three miles to windward, a vessel was bearing down toward them, and, if she held her present course, would probably pass within a short distance of the spot where they were. Not a moment was to be lost in making their way toward her. The opportunity for deliverance must not be allowed to slip. Instantly the paddles were brought into use, and nearer and nearer drew the vessel in the freshening breeze. It was only a fishing-smack, but it indicated that the land could not be very far distant, for the Chinese fishermen rarely venture far out to sea.

Encouraging the others to follow, Kin-Fo paddled with all his might, darting over the surface of the water like a skiff; and Soun, in his eagerness not to be left behind, worked away so hard that he fairly outstripped his master.

Half a mile more, and they would be within earshot of the boat, even if they had not already been observed. The fear was, that the fishermen, when they saw such strange creatures in the water, might take to flight. Nevertheless the attempt to reach them must be made.

The distance to be accomplished was growing inconsiderable, when Soun, who was still in advance, gave a startling cry of terror:

“A shark! A shark!”

And it was no false alarm. About twenty paces ahead could be seen the fins of a tiger-shark, a voracious creature peculiar to these waters, and truly worthy of its name.

“Out with your knives!” shouted Craig and Fry.

The weapons, such as they were, were quickly produced. Soun, meantime, deeming prudence the better part of valor, had beat a hasty retreat behind the rest. The shark was rapidly bearing down upon them, and for an instant his huge body, all streaked and spotted with green, rose above the waters. It was at least sixteen feet in length, a truly hideous monster!

Turning half over on to its back, it was preparing to make a snap at Kin-Fo, who, quite calm and collected, planted his paddle on its back, and, with a vigorous thrust, sent himself flying far out of the way. Craig and Fry drew close up, ready either for attack or defense.

The shark dived for a second, and returned to the charge, its huge mouth bristling with four rows of cruel teeth. Kin-Fo attempted to repeat his former maneuver, but this time the paddle came in contact with the creature’s jaw, and was snapped off short. Half lying on its side, the shark was just rushing once more upon its prey, when the water became blood-red. Craig and Fry, with the long blades of their American knives, had succeeded in penetrating the tough skin of the brute. The hideous jaw opened and closed again with a terrible snap. The shark seemed in agonies, and began to lash the water with its formidable tail, one stroke catching Fry on his side, and dashing him ten feet away. Craig uttered a cry of pain, as if he had received the blow himself. But Fry was not hurt; his gutta-percha covering had protected him from injury, and he returned to the attack with redoubled vigor.

The shark turned and turned again. Kin-Fo had contrived to lodge the end of his broken paddle in the socket of its eye, and, at the risk of being cut in two, managed to hold it firmly there, while Craig and Fry endeavored to pierce the creature’s heart. Their attempt was evidently successful, for almost directly the shark, with one last struggle, sank beneath the bloody waters.

“Hurrah! Hurrah!” shouted Craig and Fry, brandishing their knives in triumph.

“Thanks! Thanks!” was all Kin-Fo could say.

“No thanks to us,” said Craig; “two hundred thousand dollars was too good a mouthful for that brute!”

Fry cordially assented.

And where, meantime, was Soun? The coward, making off as fast as his paddle would carry him, had got within three cables’ length of the fishing-boat; but his precaution was almost the means of his coming to grief.

The fishermen, perceiving what they supposed to be a strange animal in the water, prepared to catch it as they would a seal or a dolphin, and a long rope with a hook attached was thrown overboard. The hook caught Soun by the waist-belt, and slipping upward, made a rent in his gutta-percha jacket the whole length of his back. Sustained now only by his inflated leggings, he rolled right over with his head in the water, and his heels in the air.

Kin-Fo, Craig, and Fry had by this time reached the spot, and were calling out to the fishermen in good Chinese. Great was the alarm of the men on finding themselves accosted by what they supposed to be “talking seals.”

Their first impulse was to set sail and make off, but Kin-Fo at last convinced them that he was a Chinaman like themselves, and he and the two Americans were taken on board.

Soun was then turned the right way up by means of a boat-hook, and one of the fishermen caught hold of his pigtail for the purpose of hauling him on to the boat. The pigtail came off bodily in the man’s hand, and down went Soun again into the water. The fishermen, by throwing a rope round his waist, succeeded, with considerable difficulty, in getting him into the boat.

Almost before he could get rid of the quantities of salt water that he had swallowed, Kin-Fo walked up to him, and said:

“Then that pigtail of yours was false, after all?”

“Ah, yes, sir,” replied Soun, “knowing your ways, I should never have ventured to enter your service with a real one.”

The tone in which he spoke was so irresistibly comical, that Kin-Fo burst into a fit of laughter, in which the others joined.

The fishermen were from Foo-Ning, and were now only about five miles from the very port to which Kin-Fo wanted to go.

Toward eight o’clock that evening, they were safely landed at Foo-Ning, and divesting themselves of their Boyton apparatus, once more resumed their ordinary appearance.

CHAPTER 20

Resignation Of Office

“Now for the Tai-ping!” were Kin-Fo’s first words on the following morning, after he and his fellow-adventurers had passed a night of well-earned repose. They were now upon Lao-Shen’s field of action; it was the 30th of June; matters were at a crisis. Would Kin-Fo come out conqueror in the strife? Would he have the chance of negotiating for the restoration of his letter, before Wang’s ruthless agent should deal the fatal stab into his bosom?

The Americans interchanged significant glances, and reechoed his words, “Now for the Tai-ping!”

The arrival of the party on the previous evening in their singular costume had caused a great commotion in the little port of Foo-Ning. The objects of public curiosity, they had been followed by a crowd to the door of the inn, where the money that Craig and Fry had taken the precaution to put in their bag, procured them clothes adapted for the present circumstances. Had they not been numerously surrounded, they could hardly have failed to notice one Celestial in particular, who never left their track. Their surprise would have been considerable had they known that he was at watch all night at the inn-door, and that in the morning he was still to be found on the same spot.

Consequently there were no suspicions in their mind, when the man accosted them as they left the inn, and offered his services as a guide. He was about thirty years of age, with nothing in his appearance to indicate that he was otherwise than honest. Craig and Fry, however, cautious to the last, inquired whither he wished to guide them.

“To the Great Wall, of course,” said he. “All visitors to Foo-Ning go to see the Great Wall, and as I know the country well, I thought you might accept my services to show you the way.”

Kin-Fo interposed to inquire whether the country was safe for traveling. The guide assured him that it was perfectly secure.

“Do you know anything of a certain Lao-Shen hereabouts?” inquired Kin-Fo.

“O yes, Lao-Shen the Tai-ping,” replied the guide, “but there is nothing to fear from him this side of the Wall; he will not venture to set foot on Imperial territory; he and his crew are only seen in the Mongolian Provinces.”

“Where was he seen last?” asked Kin-Fo.

“In the neighborhood of the Tchin-Tang-Ho, only a few lis from the Wall.”

“And how far is it from Foo-Ning to the Tchin-Tang-Ho?”

“About fifty lis.”

“Very well; I engage you to conduct me to Lao-Shen’s camp.”

The man started.

“You shall be well paid,” Kin-Fo added.

But the guide shook his head; he evidently did not care to pass the frontier.

“To the Great Wall,” he said, “no farther. It would be at the risk of my life to go beyond.”

Kin-Fo offered to pay him any sum that he pleased to demand, till at last he wrung from the man a reluctant consent to undertake the business.

Turning to the Americans, Kin-Fo told them that of course they were free to go or not, as they liked.

“Wherever you go,” said Craig.

“We go also,” said Fry.

The client of the Centenarian had not yet ceased to be of the value of 200,000 dollars.

The agents appeared to be perfectly well satisfied as to the trustworthiness of their guide, and to have no apprehension of the danger which was likely to threaten beyond the great barrier that the Chinese have erected to defend themselves from the incursions of the Mongolian hordes. Soun was not consulted as to whether he wished to accompany the party or not; go he must.

Five camels accordingly were purchased, together with the small quantity of harness necessary for their equipment. A stock of provisions and a supply of weapons were also procured, and the party started under the direction of their guide.

The preparations had consumed so much time, that it was one o’clock in the afternoon before they were fairly on their road. The guide, however, made sure of reaching the Great Wall by midnight, where they would make a temporary camp, and if Kin-Fo still persisted in his determination, they would cross the frontier on the morrow.

The country about Foo-Ning was undulated, and the road, upon which the yellow dust rose in clouds, wound through richly cultivated fields, a sign that the travelers had not yet quitted the productive territory of the Chinese Empire.

The camels marched with a slow, measured tread, each carrying its rider comfortably ensconced between its two great humps. Soun greatly approved of this mode of traveling, and thought that in this way he should not object to journey even to the world’s end. The heat, however, was very great, the hot air being refracted from the soil and producing strange mirages, like vast seas, which vanished almost as suddenly as they appeared, much to the satisfaction of Soun, to whom the prospect of another sea voyage opened visions of unmitigated horror.

No conversation was possible under the circumstances. The guide, who seemed to be of a taciturn nature, always took the foremost place, and although the dense masses of dust materially narrowed his range of vision, he never hesitated which way to follow, even at crossroads, where there was no sign-post. Craig and Fry, quite satisfied as to his honesty, were free to direct all their attention to Kin-Fo. Naturally, as the time grew shorter, their anxiety increased; now or never was the time to bring them face to face with the foe they dreaded.

Kin-Fo meanwhile was forgetting all the anxieties of the present and future in making a retrospect of the past. The unintermitted evil fortune of the last two months made him feel seriously depressed. From the day that his correspondent at San Francisco sent him the news of the loss of all his fortune, had he not passed through a period of ill-luck that was truly extraordinary? What a contrast between his existence of late, and the time when he possessed advantages which he had not the sense to appreciate!

Would misfortune terminate with his regaining possession of the letter? Should he at last have the tender care of the sweet Le-ou to compensate him for his troubles, and make him forget the difficulties by which he had been beset? His thoughts bewildered him, and Wang, the philosopher and friend of his youth, was no longer present to comfort and advise him.

His reverie was suddenly interrupted by his camel coming so sharply in contact with that of the guide, that he was nearly thrown to the ground.

“What are you stopping for?” he asked.

“It is eight o’clock, sir,” said the conductor, “and I propose that we halt and have our supper; we can continue our journey afterward.”

“But it will be dark, will it not?” objected Kin-Fo.

“There is no fear that I shall lose my way; the Great Wall is not more than twenty lis ahead, and we had better give our animals some rest.”

Kin-Fo assented to the proposal, and the whole party came to a halt. There was a small deserted hut by the side of the road, and a little stream where the camels might be watered. It was not dark, and Kin-Fo and his companions could see to spread their meal, which they afterward ate with an excellent appetite.

Conversation did not flow rapidly. Two or three times Kin-Fo tried to get some information about Lao-Shen, but the guide generally shook his head, evidently desiring to avoid the subject. He merely repeated that Lao-Shen himself never came on this side of the Great Wall, although he added that some of his band occasionally made their appearance.

“Buddha protect us from the Tai-ping,” he concluded.

While the guide was speaking, Craig and Fry were knitting their brows, looking at their watches, and holding a whispered consultation. “Why should we not wait here quietly until to-morrow morning?” they asked presently aloud.

“In this hut!” exclaimed the guide. “Far better to be in the open country; we shall run much less risk of being surprised.”

“It was arranged that we were to be at the Great Wall to-night,” said Kin-Fo, “and at the Great Wall I mean to be.”

His tone was such as to brook no contradiction, and the Americans could not do otherwise than submit. Soun, though half paralyzed with fear, dared not protest.

It was now nearly nine o’clock; the meal was over, and the guide gave the signal to start. Kin-Fo prepared to mount his camel; Craig and Fry followed him. “Are you quite determined, sir, to put yourself into Lao-Shen’s hands?”

“Quite determined,” said Kin-Fo; “I will have my letter at any price.”

“You are running a great risk,” they pleaded, “in going to the Tai-ping’s camp.”

“I have come too far to retreat now,” said Kin-Fo, with decision; “as I told you before, you may do as you please about following me.”

The guide meantime had lighted a small pocket lantern. The Americans drew near, and again looked at their watches. “It would be much more prudent to wait till to-morrow,” they again persisted.

“Nonsense!” said Kin-Fo. “Lao-Shen will be just as dangerous to-morrow or the day after as he is to-day. My decision is unalterable. Let us be off at once.”

The guide had overheard the latter part of the conversation. Once or twice previously, when Craig and Fry had been trying to dissuade Kin-Fo from proceeding, an expression of dissatisfaction had passed over his countenance, and now, when he found them persisting in their remonstrance, he could not restrain a gesture of annoyance.

The motion did not escape Kin-Fo, and he was still further surprised when the guide, as he was assisting him to mount his camel, whispered in his ear, “Beware of those two men.”

Kin-Fo was on the point of asking him to explain himself, but the man put his finger on his lips, gave the signal for starting, and the little caravan set off on its night journey across the country.

The guide’s mysterious speech had aroused an uneasy suspicion in Kin-Fo’s mind; and yet he could not believe that, after two-months’ devoted attention, his two protectors were about to play him false. Yet why had they tried to dissuade him from paying his visit to the Tai-ping’s camp? Was it not for that very purpose that they had left Pekin? Was it not to their interest that Kin-Fo should regain possession of the letter that compromised his life? Truly their conduct was inexplicable.

Kin-Fo kept to himself all the perplexity which was agitating his mind. He had taken up his position behind the guide; Craig and Fry followed him closely, and for a couple of hours the journey was continued in silence.

It was close upon midnight when the guide stopped and pointed to a long black line in the north that stood out clearly against the lighter background of the sky. Behind the line several hill-tops had already caught the moonlight, although the moon herself was still below the horizon.

“The Great Wall!” he said.

“Shall we get beyond it to-night?” inquired Kin-Fo.

“Certainly, if you wish it.”

“By all means, yes!”

“I must first go and examine the passage,” said the guide. “Wait here till I come back.” The camels were brought to a standstill, and the guide disappeared.

Craig and Fry stepped up to Kin-Fo. “Have you been satisfied with our services, sir, since we have been commissioned to attend you?” they inquired in a breath.

“Quite satisfied.”

“Then will you be kind enough to sign this paper as a testimonial to our good conduct during the time you have been under our charge?”

Kin-Fo looked with some surprise at the leaf torn from a notebook that Craig was holding out to him.

“It is a certificate which we hope to have the pleasure of exhibiting to our principal,” added Fry.

“Here is my back to serve you as a desk,” said Craig, suiting the action to the word, and stooping down.

“And here is a pen and ink with which to sign your name,” added Fry.

Kin-Fo smiled, and did as he was requested. “But what is the meaning of all this ceremony at this time of night?” he asked.

“Because in a very few minutes your interest in the Centenarian Assurance Office will have expired,” said Craig.

“And you may kill yourself, or allow yourself to be killed, just which you please,” said Fry.

Kin-Fo stared with astonishment; the Americans were talking in the blandest of tones; but he did not at all comprehend their meaning. Presently the moon began to rise above the eastern horizon.

“There’s the moon!” exclaimed Fry.

“To-day, the 30th of June, she rises at midnight” said Craig.

“Your policy has not been renewed,” said Fry.

“Therefore you are no longer the client of the Centenarian,” added Craig.

“Good-night, sir,” said Fry politely.

“Good-night,” echoed Craig, with equal courtesy.

And the two agents, turning their camels’ heads in the opposite direction, disappeared from view, leaving Kin-Fo in speechless amazement.

The sound of their camels’ hoofs had scarcely died away, when a troop of men, led on by the guide, seized upon Kin-Fo, helpless to defend himself, and captured Soun, who was rushing away in the hope of making his escape.

An instant afterward, both master and man were dragged into the low chamber of one of the deserted bastions of the Great Wall, the door of which was at once fastened behind them.

CHAPTER 21

Back To Shang-Hai

The Great Wall of China, constructed by the Emperor Tin-Chi-Hooang-Ti in the third century, is nearly 1,400 miles long and extends from its two jetties in the Gulf of Leao-Tong to the province of Kan-Sou, where it degenerates into very insignificant dimensions. It is an uninterrupted succession of double ramparts, defended by bastions fifty feet high and twenty wide; the lower part is of granite, the upper of bricks, and it boldly follows the outline of the mountain tops on the Russo-Chinese frontier. On the Chinese side the wall is now in a very bad condition, but on the side facing Manchuria it is still well preserved, and its battlements maintained in formidable array.

Neither army nor artillery defends this line of fortification; Russian, Tartar, Kirghis, as much as the Chinaman, is free to pass its barrier; and the wall, moreover, fails to protect the Empire from the visitation of the fine Mongolian dust which the north wind brings down sometimes as far as the capital.

After passing a miserable night on a heap of straw, Kin-Fo and Soun were next morning forced to take their way beneath the postern of these deserted bastions. They were escorted by a band of twelve men, who no doubt were in Lao-Shen’s service. The guide who had hitherto conducted them had disappeared; it became more and more plain that it had been design and not chance that had thrown him in their way; the rascal’s hesitation about venturing beyond the Great Wall was a mere ruse to avert suspicion; and he too beyond a question had been acting under the orders of the Tai-ping.

“Of course you are taking me to Lao-Shen’s camp?” Kin-Fo said to the leader of the escort.

“We shall be there in little more than an hour,” answered the man.

It was a confirmation to Kin-Fo’s conjecture, of which he did not stand in much need; yet it satisfied him. After all, was he not being conducted to the very place for which he had set out? And was he not in the way to get the chance of recovering the paper that kept his life in jeopardy? He maintained his composure perfectly, leaving all outward exhibition of alarm to poor Soun, whose teeth were chattering with the most abject fear.

Beyond the wall, the troop did not continue its journey along the great Mongol road, but diverged at once into a steep pathway to the right through the mountainous district of the province, the guard so carefully surrounding their prisoners that any attempt to escape, even had they been inclined to venture it, would have been out of the question.

Their advance was as rapid as the steepness of the road would allow, and in about an hour and a half, on turning the corner of a projecting eminence, they came in sight of a building in a half-ruined condition; it was an old bonze-house built upon the brow of a hill, and a curious monument of Buddhist architecture. It did not seem at all likely that any worshipers would now be found to frequent a temple in such a deserted part of the frontier; but it was a situation not badly suited for a highwayman, and if Lao-Shen had settled there, he had made a judicious selection for himself.

In reply to a question of Kin-Fo, the leader of the escort told him that it was Lao-Shen’s residence.

“Take me to him at once,” said Kin-Fo.

“We have brought you on purpose,” answered the man.

Having been deprived of their fire-arms, Kin-Fo and Soun were brought into a wide vestibule that had formed the atrium of the ancient temple. Here were about twenty fierce-looking men, all armed and attired in the picturesque costume of highwaymen. With the utmost calmness, Kin-Fo passed through the double row they formed on his entrance; Soun having to be pushed forcibly by his shoulders.

The farther end of the vestibule opened on to a staircase cut in the solid wall, and leading into the heart of the mountain to a crypt beneath the temple by windings so complicated that no one unaccustomed to the place could have found his way.

Lighted by torches carried by the escort, the prisoners were conducted down thirty steps, then for about a hundred yards along a narrow passage, until they found themselves in a large hall, which the additional glare of more torches still left very dim. Massive pillars carved with grotesque heads of the monsters of Chinese mythology supported the low arches of the roof, which sprang from their keystones with spreading moldings.

A low murmur that ran through the hall made Kin-Fo aware that it was not deserted; so far from that, its recesses were filled with men, as if the entire confraternity of Tai-pings had been summoned to some special ceremony.

At the extreme end of the crypt, on a wide stone platform, stood a man of enormous stature; he bore all the appearance of a president of some secret tribunal; three or four attendants stood close beside him, as if acting the part of his assessors, and at a sign from him they gave orders that the prisoners were to approach.

“Here is Lao-Shen,” said the leader, pointing to the gigantic figure on the platform.

Stepping forward with firm step, Kin-Fo in the most direct manner entered upon the business that was uppermost in his mind.

“I am Kin-Fo,” he began. “Wang has been your old comrade and confederate. I gave Wang a certain paper with a certain contract. Wang has transferred that paper to you. I come to tell you that, that contract is not valid now, and I demand the paper at your hands.”

The Tai-ping did not stir a muscle; had he been of bronze he could not have been more rigid.

“You can demand your own price,” continued Kin-Fo, and then waited for an answer.

But no answer came.

Kin-Fo went on:

“I am ready to give you a draft on any bank you choose. I am prepared to guarantee its payment to any messenger you send. Name the sum for which you surrender the contract.”

Still no answer.

Kin-Fo repeated his request more emphatically than before.

No answer.

“Five thousand taels, shall I offer?”

Still silence.

“Ten thousand?”

Lao-Shen and all around him were as mute as the statues.

Kin-Fo grew anxious and impatient.

“Do you not hear me?”

Lao-Shen bowed his head gravely.

“I will give you thirty thousand taels. I will give you all you would get from the Centenarian. I must have the paper. Name, only name the price.”

The Tai-ping stood mute as before.

Wild with excitement Kin-Fo clenched his hands and dashed forward to the platform.

“What price will you take?”

“Money will not buy that paper,” at last said the Tai-ping sternly; “you have offended Buddha by despising the life that Buddha gave you, and Buddha will be avenged. Death alone can convince you of the worth of the gift of life which you have esteemed so lightly.”

The voice with which this sentence of decision was uttered prohibited any reply; and even had Kin-Fo been anxious to say a word in his own defense, the opportunity was not afforded him. A signal was given, and he was forthwith seized, carried out, and thrust into a cage, the door of which was immediately locked. In spite of the most pitiable howlings, Soun was subjected to the same treatment.

“Ah, well!” said Kin-Fo to himself, when he was left to his solitude, “I suppose those who despise life deserve to die!”

Yet death was not so near as he imagined. Hours passed on and execution was delayed; he began to speculate what terrible torture the Tai-ping might have in store for him. After a while he was conscious that his cage was being moved, and he felt that it was being placed upon some vehicle. Evidently he was to be conveyed to a distance. For nearly eight hours there was the tramp of horses, and the clatter of weapons carried by an escort, and he was tumbled and jolted about most unmercifully. Then came a halt. Shortly afterward the cage was removed to another conveyance; it was not long before it began rolling and pitching; there was the noise, too, of a screw, and the ill-fated tenant was aware that he was on board a steamer.

“Are they going to throw me overboard?” he wondered; “well, it will be a mercy if they spare me any worse torture!”

Forty-eight hours elapsed. Twice a day a little food was introduced into the cage by a trap-door, but he never could see the hand that brought it, and never could get a reply to the question that he asked.

He had plenty of time to think now. He had been years and years and felt no emotion; surely he was not destined to die without emotion; he had, had enough and more than enough during the last few weeks; he must die now, but he had the intensest longing to die in the light of day; he shuddered at the prospect of being cast unawares into the deep sea; oh, that he could live, if it were only to see once more his beloved Le-ou! To see her no more; the thought was terrible!

The voyage came to an end; he was yet alive; but surely his last moments must have come; here was the crisis; every minute was a year — , a hundred years!

To his unbounded surprise, he felt his cage carried along and deposited upon terra firma; he heard a commotion outside, and in a few minutes the door was opened; he was seized, and a bandage fastened tightly over his eyes, and he was pushed violently along. Finding after a time that the steps of the men who were driving him along began to hesitate, he concluded that they had arrived at the scene of his execution, and shouted out — ,

“Hear my last petition. I have but one request; unbandage my eyes; let me see the daylight; let me die as a man that can face death!”

“Grant the criminal the boon he asks,” said a solemn voice, severely, in his ears; “let the bandage be untied.”

The bandage was removed.

Kin-Fo quivered with amazement. Was he dreaming? What was the meaning of all this?

Before him was a table sumptuously spread. Five guests were smiling, as if they were expecting his arrival. Two seats were still unoccupied.

“Friends, friends!” he cried in the bewilderment of his excitement; “tell me, am I mad?”

A few moments restored him to composure, and he looked around; there was no mistake; before his eyes were Wang and the four friends of his early youth, Yin-Pang, Hooal, Pao-Shen, and Tim, with whom just two months previously he had feasted in the cabin of the yacht on the Pearl River at Canton. Here he was in the dining-room of his own yamen at Shang-Hai.

“Speak, Wang, and tell me,” he cried, “what means all this? Is it you or your ghost?”

“It is Wang himself,” replied the philosopher smiling.

Kin-Fo looked puzzled. Wang then went on, “You have come home again after a rough lesson. You owe that lesson to me. It has been my doing that you have had so much to bear. But it has been for your good, and you must forgive me.”

More perplexed than ever, Kin-Fo looked at him, but said nothing.

“All,” proceeded Wang, “is soon explained. I undertook, at your solicitation, the task of putting you to death, just in order that the commission should not be given to other hands. I knew sooner than even you did, that the report about your ruin and the loss of your property was all false; and I knew, in consequence, that though you then wanted to die, you would very soon want to live. I have made my former comrade, Lao-Shen, my confidant. Lao-Shen is now one of the most faithful of the friends of the government; he has long since submitted to established rule; but in this affair he has cooperated with me; and your own experience of the last few days tells you how: he has brought you face to face with death, and thus has taught you the lesson I determined you should learn of the value of life. My heart bled for you at the trouble and the suffering you had to endure; it was a hard and bitter thing to me to abandon you to what you would have to undergo; but I knew there was no other, no easier way in which you could be made successful in the pursuit of happiness.”

Wang could say no more. Kin-Fo had caught him in his arms, and was pressing him to his heart.

“Poor Wang!” he said, “what pain you have suffered on my account! And besides, what risks you have run! I shall never forget that day at the Bridge of Palikao.”

The philosopher laughed, almost merrily.

“Yes; it was a cold bath for any one; but for a man of fifty-five, in a burning sweat after a long chase, it was rather a trial both for his years and for his philosophy. But never mind, no harm came of it. A man never moves so quickly as when he is doing good for others.”

“For others,” repeated Kin-Fo; “yes, I do not doubt it; the true secret of happiness is to be working for the good of others.”

The conversation, which was becoming grave, was interrupted by the introduction of Soun. The poor fellow was looking as miserable as might be expected after a sea-voyage of nearly two days; it would be difficult to describe exactly the hue of his complexion, but he expressed himself unboundedly glad to find himself in his master’s home again.

After releasing Wang from his embrace, Kin-Fo went round and affectionately shook hands with each one of the guests.

“What a fool I have been all my life!” he said.

“But you are going to be a perfect sage henceforth,” replied Wang.

“My first act of wisdom, then,” Kin-Fo began, “must be to set my affairs in order. I shall not be content until I have that little document again in my possession which has been the cause of all my tribulations. If Lao-Shen is in possession of it, he must give it up, in case it should fall into unscrupulous hands.”

There was a general smile.

“Our friend’s adventures,” said Wang, “have most undoubtedly wrought a change in his character; he is no longer the indifferent mortal he was.”

“But you do not tell me,” persisted Kin-Fo, “where that written contract is; nothing can satisfy me till I have seen it burnt, and its ashes scattered to the winds.”

“You seem in earnest,” said Wang.

“Most seriously,” replied Kin-Fo; but where is the paper? Has Lao-Shen given it back?

“Lao-Shen never had it.”

“Then you have it yourself; you will not refuse to restore it to me? I suppose you do not want to retain it as a guarantee against a repetition of my folly.”

“Certainly not,” said Wang; “but it is not in my possession; still more, it is not at my disposal.”

“What!” cried Kin-Fo; “you do not mean that you have been imprudent enough to intrust it to other hands?”

“I confess I have parted with it,”Wang replied.

“How? Why? When? To whom?” exclaimed Kin-Fo in his impatience.

“I gave it up — ” continued Wang calmly.

“To whom? Tell me,” interrupted Kin-Fo.

“You do not give me time to tell you; I gave it up to one who is willing to restore it to you?”

And almost before he had finished speaking, Le-ou stood in front of him, holding the paper in her delicate fingers. Concealed behind a curtain, she had heard all that passed, and delayed no longer to come forward.

“Le-ou!” cried Kin-Fo, and was hastening to clasp her to his bosom.

But she drew back, as if she were going to retreat as mysteriously as she had appeared.

“Patience, patience!” she said, “business before pleasure; does my brother know and acknowledge his own handwriting?”

“Too well,” he answered; “there is not the second fool in the world who ever would have written it.”

“Is that your real opinion?” she asked.

“My real opinion,” said Kin-Fo.

“Then you may burn the paper,” said Le-ou; “and therewith annihilate the man who wrote it.”

With the most beaming of smiles she handed him the paper which so long had been the torture of his life; he held it to a candle, not removing his eyes from it until it was consumed.

Then turning to his promised bride, he pressed her lovingly to his bosom.

“And now,” he said, “you will come and preside at our reunion here. I feel as if I can do justice to the feast.”

“And so do we,” rejoined the guests.

A few days later and the term of the court-mourning had expired. With even greater lavishness than before the ceremony was arranged, and the marriage took place immediately.

The affection of the loving couple was unalterable; prosperity awaited them throughout their future life; and only by a visit to the yamen in Shang-Hai could the measure of their mutual happiness be realized.

THE END

THE STEAM HOUSE

Anonymous translation, 1880

This 1880 novel recounts the travels of a group of British colonists in the Raj in a wheeled house pulled by a steam-powered mechanical elephant. The novel takes place in the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 against British rule, with the passions and traumas aroused still very much alive among Indians and British alike.

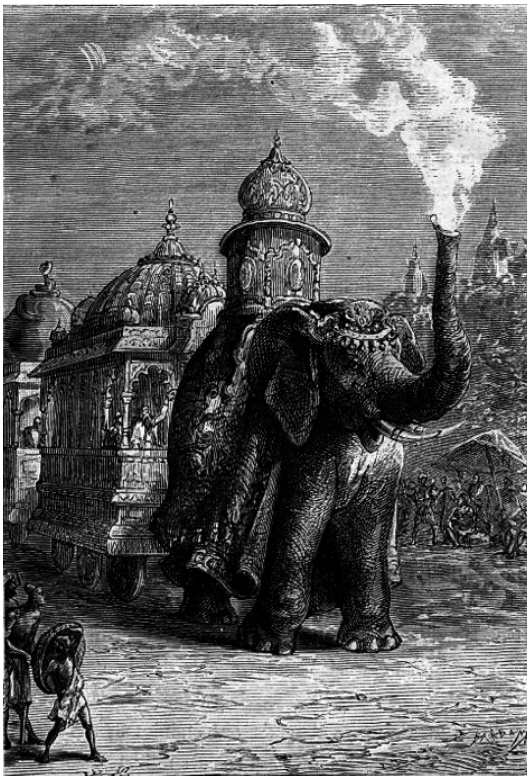

An original illustration

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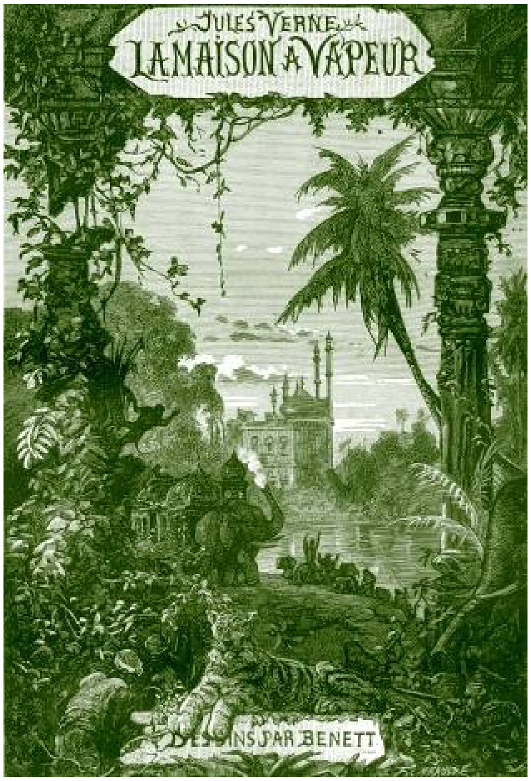
JULES VERNE
LA MAISON À VAPEUR
DESSINS PAR BENETT

The original frontispiece

BOOK ONE

THE DEMON OF CAWNPORE

CHAPTER I

“TWO THOUSAND POUNDS FOR A HEAD”

A REWARD of two thousand pounds will be paid to any one who will deliver up, dead or alive, one of the prime movers of the Sepoy revolt, at present known to be in the Bombay presidency, the Nabob Dandou Pant, commonly called...”

Such was the fragmentary notice read by the inhabitants of Aurangabad, on the evening of the 6th of March, 1867.

A copy of the placard had been recently affixed to the wall of a lonely and ruined bungalow on the banks of the Doudhma, and already the corner of the paper bearing the second name — a name execrated by some, secretly admired by others — was gone.

The name had been there, printed in large letters, but it was torn off by the hand of a solitary fakir who passed by that desolate spot. The name of the Governor of the Bombay presidency, countersigning that of the Viceroy of India, had also disappeared. What could have been the fakir’s motive in doing this?

By defacing the notice, did he hope that the rebel of 1857 would escape public prosecution, and the consequences of the steps taken to secure his arrest? Could he imagine that a notoriety so terrible as his would vanish with the fragments of this scrap of paper?

To suppose such a thing would have been madness. The notices were affixed in profusion to the walls of the houses, palaces, mosques, and hotels of Aurangabad. Besides which, a crier had gone through all the streets, reading in a loud voice the proclamation of the Viceroy. So that the inhabitants of the lowest quarters knew by this tine that a sum, amounting to a fortune, was promised to whomsoever would deliver up this Dandou Pant. The name, annihilated in one solitary instance, would, before twelve hours were over, be proclaimed throughout the province.

If, indeed, the report was correct that the Nabob had taken refuge in this part of Hindoostan, there could be no doubt that he would shortly fall into the hands of those strongly interested in his capture. Under what impulse, then, had the fakir defaced a placard of which thousands of copies had been circulated?

The impulse was doubtless one of anger, mingled perhaps with contempt; for he turned from the place with a scornful gesture, and entering the city was soon lost to view amid the swarming populace of its more crowded and disreputable quarter.

That portion of the Indian peninsula which lies between the Western Ghauts, and the Ghauts of the Bay of Bengal, is called the Deccan. It is the name commonly given to the southern part of India below the Ganges. The Deccan, of which the name in Sanscrit signifies “south,” contains a certain number of provinces in the presidencies of Bombay and Madras. Chief among these is the province of Aurangabad, the capital of which was, in former days, that of the entire Deccan.

In the seventeenth century the celebrated Mogul Emperor, Aurungzebe, established his court in the town of Aurangabad, known in the early history of India by the name of Kirkhi. It then contained one hundred thousand inhabitants. Now, in the hands of the English who rule it in the name of the

Nizam of Hyderabad, there are not more than fifty thousand. Vet it is one of the most healthful cities of the peninsula, having hitherto escaped the scourge of Asiatic cholera, as well as the visitations of the fever epidemics so much to be dreaded in India.

Aurangabad possesses magnificent remains of its ancient splendor. Many artistic and richly ornamental buildings bear witness to the power and grandeur of the most illustrious of the conquerors of India, the renowned Aurungzebe, who raised this empire, increased by the addition of Cabul and Assam, to a marvellous height of prosperity.

The palace of the Great Mogul stands on the right bank of the Doudhma. The mausoleum of the favorite Sultana of the Shah Jahan, the father of Aurungzebe, is also a remarkable edifice; so likewise is the elegant mosque built in imitation of the Tadje at Agra, which rears its four minarets round a graceful swelling cupola.

Among the mixed and varied population of Aurangabad, such a man as the fakir above mentioned easily concealed himself from observation. Whether his character was real or assumed, he was in no respect to be distinguished from others of his class. Men like him abound in India, and form, with the sayeds, a body of religious mendicants, who, traveling through the country on foot or on horseback, ask alms, which, if not bestowed willingly, they demand as a right. They also play the part of voluntary martyrs, and are held in great reverence by the lower orders of the Hindoo people.

This particular fakir was a man of good height, being more than five feet nine inches. His age could not have been more than forty, and his countenance reminded one of the handsome Mahratta type, especially in the brilliancy of his keen black eyes; but it was difficult to trace the fine features of the race, disfigured and pitted as they were by the marks of smallpox. He was in the prime of life, and his figure was robust and supple. A close observer would have seen that he had lost one finger of his left hand. His hair was dyed a red color, and he went barefoot, wearing only a turban, and a scanty shirt or tunic of striped woolen stuff girded round his waist.

On his breast were represented in bright colors the emblems of the two principles of preservation and destruction taught by Hindoo mythology: the lion's head of the fourth incarnation of Vishnu, the three eyes and the symbolic trident of the ferocious Siva.

There was great stir and commotion that evening in the streets of Aurangabad, especially in the lower quarters, where the populace swarmed outside the hovels in which they lived. Men, women, children; English soldiers, sepoys, beggars of all descriptions; peasants from the villages, met, talked, gesticulated, discussed the proclamation, and calculated the chances of winning the enormous reward offered by Government.

The excitement was as great as it could have been before the wheel of a lottery where the prize was 2,000/. In this case the fortunate ticket was the head of Dandou Pant,

and to obtain it a man must first have the good luck to fall in with the Nabob, and then the courage to seize him.

The fakir, apparently the only person unexcited by the hope of winning the prize, threaded his way among the eager groups, occasionally stopping and listening to what was said, as though he might hear something of use to him. He spoke to no one, but if his lips were silent his eyes and ears were on the alert.

“Two thousand pounds for finding the Nabob!” exclaimed one, raising his clenched hands to heaven.

“Not for finding him,” replied another, “but for catching him, which is a very different thing!”

“Well, to be sure, he is not a man to let himself be taken without a resolute struggle.”

“But surely it was said he died of fever in the jungles of Nepaul?”

“That story was quite untrue! The cunning fellow chose to pass for dead, that he might live in greater security!”

“The report was spread that he had been buried in the midst of his encampment on the frontier!”

“It was a false funeral, on purpose to deceive people.”

The fakir did not change a muscle of his countenance on hearing this latter assertion, which was made in a tone admitting of no doubt. But when one of the more excited of the group near which he was standing began to relate the following circumstantial details, his brows knit involuntarily as he listened.

“It is very certain,” said the speaker, “that in 1859 the Nabob took refuge with his brother, Balao Rao, and the ex-rajah of Gonda, Debi-Bux-Singh, in a camp at the foot of the mountains of Nepaul. There, finding themselves closely pressed by the British troops, they all three resolved to cross the Indo-Chinese frontier. Before doing so, they caused a report of their death to be circulated, in order to confirm which they went through the ceremony of actual funerals; but in fact only a finger from the left hand of each man had been really buried. These they cut off themselves when the rites were celebrated.”

“How do you know all this?” demanded one of the crowd of listeners.

“I myself was present,” answered the man. “The sol-

Biers of Dandou Pant had taken me prisoner. I only effected my escape six months afterward.”

While the Hindoo was speaking, the fakir never took his gaze off him. His eyes blazed like lightning. He kept his left hand under the ragged folds of his garment, and his lips quivered as they parted over his sharp-pointed teeth.

“So you have seen the Nabob?” inquired one of the audience.

“I have,” replied the former prisoner of Dandou Pant.

“And would know him for certain if accident were to bring you face to face with him?”

“Assuredly I would: I know him as well as I know myself.”

Then you have a good chance of gaining the 2,000!” returned his questioner, not without a touch of envy in his tone.

“Perhaps so,” replied the Hindoo, “if it be true that the Nabob has been so imprudent as to venture into the presidency of Bombay, which to me appears very unlikely.”

“What would be the reason of his venturing so far? What reason would induce him to dare so much?”

“No doubt he might hope to instigate a fresh rebellion, either among the sepoys or among the country populations of Central India.”

“Since Government asserts that he is known to be in the province,” said one of the speakers, who belonged to that class which takes for gospel everything stated by authority, “of course Government has reliable information on the subject.”

“Be it so!” responded the Hindoo; “only let it be the will of Brahma that Dandou Pant crosses my path, and my fortune is made!”

The fakir withdrew a few paces, but he did not lose sight of the ex-prisoner of the Nabob.

It was by this time dark night, but there was no diminution of the commotion in the streets of Aurangabad. Gossip about the Nabob circulated faster than ever. Here, people were saying that he had been seen in the town; there, that he was known to be at a great distance. A courier from the north was reported to have arrived, with news for the Governor, of his arrest. At nine o’clock the best informed asserted that he was already imprisoned in the town jail — in company with some Thugs who had been vegetating there for more than thirty years; that he was going to be hanged next day at sunrise without a trial, just like Tantia Topi, his celebrated comrade in revolt.

But by ten o’clock there was fresh news. The prisoner had escaped, and the hopes of those who coveted the reward revived. In reality all these reports were false. Those supposed to be the best informed knew no more than any one else. The Nabob’s head was safe. The prize was still to be won.

It was evident that the Indian who was acquainted with the person of Dandou Pant had a better chance of gaining the reward than any one else. Very few people, especially in the presidency of Bombay, had had occasion to meet with the savage leader of the great insurrection.

Farther to the north, or more in the center of the country — in Scinde, in Bundelkund, in Oude, near Agra, Delhi, Cawnpore, Lucknow, on the principal theater of the atrocities committed by his order — the population would have risen in a body, and delivered him over to British justice. The relatives of his victims — husbands, brothers, children, wives — still wept for those whom he had caused to be massacred by hundreds. Ten years had passed, but had not extinguished the righteous sentiments of horror and vengeance. It seemed, therefore, impossible that Dandou Pant should be so imprudent as to trust himself in districts where his name was held in execration.

If, then, he really had, as was supposed, recrossed the Indo-Chinese frontier — if some hidden motive, whether projects for new revolt or otherwise, had induced him to quit the secret asylum which had hitherto remained unknown even to the Anglo-Indian police — it was only in the provinces of the Deccan that he could expect an open course and a species of security. And we have seen that the Governor had, in point of fact, got wind of his appearance in the presidency, and instantly a price had been set on his head. Still it must be remarked that men of the upper ranks at Aurangabad — magistrates, military officers, and public functionaries — considerably doubted the truth of the information received by the Governor.

It had so often been reported that this man had been seen, and even captured! So much false intelligence had been circulated respecting him, that there began to be a kind of legendary belief in a gift of ubiquity possessed by him, to account for the skill with which he eluded the most able and active agents of the police. The population, however, made no doubt that the intelligence as to his appearance was reliable.

Among those now most convinced that the Nabob was to be found was, of course, his ex-prisoner. The poor wretch, allured by the hope of gain, and likewise animated by a spirit of personal revenge, began to set about the undertaking at once, and regarded his success as almost certain.

His plan was very simple. He proposed next day to offer his services to the Governor; then, after having learned exactly all that was known of Dandou Pant — that is to say, the particulars on which was founded the information referred to in the proclamation — he intended to make his way at once to the locality in which the Nabob was reported to have been seen.

About eleven o'clock at night the Indian began to think of retiring to take some repose. His only resting-place was a small boat moored by the banks of the Doudhma; and thither he directed his steps, his mind full of the various reports he had heard, as, with half-closed eyes and thoughtful brow, he revolved the project he had resolved to carry out.

Quite unknown to him the fakir dogged his steps; he followed noiselessly, and, keeping in the shadow, never for an instant lost sight of him. Toward the outskirts of this quarter of Aurangabad the streets became gradually deserted. The chief thoroughfare opened upon bare, unoccupied ground, one circuit of which skirted the stream of the Doudhma. The place was a kind of desert beyond the town, though within its walls a few passengers were hastily traversing it, evidently anxious to reach more frequented paths. The footsteps of the last died away in the distance, the Hindoo was now alone on the river's bank.

The fakir was at no great distance, but concealed by trees, or beneath the somber walls of ruined habitations, which were scattered here and there. His precautions were needful. When the moon rose and shed uncertain rays athwart the gloom, the Hindoo might have seen that he was watched,

and even very closely followed. As to hearing the sound of the fakir's tread, it was utterly impossible. Barefoot, he glided, rather than walked. Nothing revealed his presence on the banks of the Doudhma.

Five minutes passed. The Hindoo took his way mechanically toward his wretched boat, like a man accustomed to withdraw night after night to this desert place.

He was absorbed in the thought of the interview he meant to have next day with the Governor; while the hope of revenging himself on the Nabob — never remarkable for his tenderness toward his prisoners — united with a burning desire to obtain the reward, rendered him blind and deaf to everything around him; and though the fakir was gradually approaching him, he was totally unconscious of the danger in which his imprudent words had placed him.

Suddenly a man sprang upon him with a bound like that of a tiger! He seemed to grasp a lightning flash. It was the moonlight glancing on the blade of a Malay dagger!

The Hindoo, struck in the breast, fell heavily to the ground. The wound, inflicted by an unerring hand, was mortal; but a few inarticulate words escaped the unhappy man's lips, with a torrent of blood. The assassin stooped, raised his victim, and supported him while he turned his own face to the full light of the moon.

“Dost know me?” he asked.

“It is he!” murmured the Indian; and the dreaded name would have been his last choking utterance, but his head fell back, and he expired. In another instant the corpse had disappeared beneath the waters of the Doudhma.

The fakir waited until the noise of the plunge had passed away; then, turning swiftly, he traversed the open ground, and passing along the now deserted streets and lanes, approached one of the city gates.

This gate was closed for the night just as he reached it, and a military guard occupied the post, to prevent either ingress or egress. The fakir could not leave Aurangabad, as he had intended to do. “Vet depart this night I must, if ever I am to do it alive!” muttered he.

He turned away, and followed the inner line of fortifications for some little distance; then, ascending the slope. reached the upper part of the rampart. The crest towered fifty feet above the level of the fosse which lay between the scarp and counterscarp, and was devoid of any salient points or projections which could have afforded support. It seemed quite impossible that any man could descend without a rope, and the cord he wore as a girdle was but a few feet in length. He paused, glanced keenly round, and considered what was to be done.

Great trees rise within the walls of Aurangabad, which seems set, in a verdant frame of foliage. The branches of these being long and flexible, it might be possible to cling to one, and at great risk, drop over the wall. No sooner did this idea occur to the fakir, than, without a moment’s hesitation, he plunged among the boughs, and soon reappeared outside the wall, holding a long pliable branch, which he grasped midway, and which gradually bent .beneath his weight.

When the branch rested on the edge of the wall, the fakir began to let himself slowly downward, as though he held a knotted rope in his hands. By this means he descended a considerable distance; but when close to the extremity of the bough, at least thirty feet still intervened between him and the ground. There he hung, swinging in the air by his outstretched arms, while his feet sought some crevice or rough stone for support.

A flash! — another! The report of musketry!

The sentries had perceived the fugitive and fired upon him. He was not hit, but a ball struck the branch which supported him, and splintered it.

In a few seconds it gave way, and down went the fakir into the fosse. Such a fearful fall would have killed another man — he was uninjured. To spring to his feet, dart up the slope of the counterscarp amid a storm of bullets — not one of which touched him — and vanish in the darkness, was “mere play to the agile fugitive.

At a distance of two miles he passed the cantonments of the English troops, quartered outside Aurangabad.

A couple of hundred paces beyond that he stopped, turned round, and stretching his mutilated hand toward the city, fiercely uttered these words: “Woe betide those who fall now into the power of Dandou Pant! Englishmen have not seen the last of Nana Sahib!”

Nana Sahib! This name, the most formidable to which the revolt of 1857 had given a horrid notoriety, was there once more flung like a haughty challenge at the conquerors of India.

CHAPTER II

COLONEL MUNRO

“MAUCLER, my dear fellow, you tell us nothing about your journey!” said my friend Banks, the engineer, to me. “One would suppose you had never got beyond your native Paris! What do you think of India?”

“Think of India! “I replied. “I really must see it before I can answer that question!”

“Well, that is good!” returned Banks. “Why, you have just traversed the entire peninsula from Bombay to Calcutta, and unless you are downright blind — ”

“I am not blind, my dear Banks; but during that journey you speak of I was blinded.”

“Blinded?”

“Yes! quite blinded by smoke, steam, dust; and, above all, by the rapid motion. I don’t want to speak evil of railroads, Banks, since it is your business to make them; but let me ask whether you call it traveling to be jammed up in the compartment of a carriage, see no, farther than the glass of the windows on each side of you, tear along day and night, now over viaducts among the eagles and vultures, now through tunnels among moles and rats, stopping only at stations one exactly like another, seeing nothing of towns but the outside of their walls and the tops of their minarets, and all this amid an uproar of snorting engines, shrieking steam-whistles, grinding and grating of rails, varied by the mournful groans of the brake? Can you, I say, call this traveling so as to see a country?”

“Well done!” cried Captain Hood. “There, Banks! answer that if you can. What is your opinion, colonel? “The colonel, thus addressed, bent his head slightly, and merely said, “I am curious to know what reply Banks can make to our guest, Monsieur Maucler.”

“I reply without the slightest hesitation,” said the engineer, “that I quite agree with Maucler.”

“But then,” cried Captain Hood, “why do you construct these railroads at all?”

“To enable you to go from Calcutta to Bombay in sixty hours when you are in a hurry.”

“I am never in a hurry.”

“Ah, well then, you had better take to the great trunk road and walk!”

“That is exactly what I intend doing.”

“When?”

“When the colonel will agree to accompany me in a pretty little stroll of eight or nine hundred miles across the country!”

The colonel smiled, and without speaking again fell into one of the long reveries from which his most intimate friends, among whom were Captain Hood and Banks the engineer, found it difficult to rouse him.

I had arrived in India a month previously. Having journeyed by the Great Indian Peninsular Railway, which runs from Bombay to Calcutta, via Allahabad. I knew literally nothing of the country. But it was my purpose to travel through its northern districts beyond the Ganges, to visit its great cities, to examine and study the principal monuments of antiquity, and to devote to my explorations sufficient time to render them complete.

I had become acquainted with the engineer Banks in Paris. For some years we had been united by a friendship which only increased with greater intimacy. I had promised to visit him at Calcutta as soon as the completion of that part of the Scinde, Punjab, and Delhi Railroad, of which he was engineer, should set him at liberty.

The works being now at an end, Banks had some months' leave, and I had come to propose that he should take rest by roaming over India with me! As a matter of course he had accepted my proposal with enthusiasm, and in a few weeks, when the season would be favorable, we were to set off.

On my arrival at Calcutta in the month of March, 1867, Banks had introduced me to one of his gallant comrades, Captain Hood, and afterward to his friend Colonel Munro, at whose house we were spending the evening. The colonel, at this time a man of about forty-seven, occupied a house in the European quarter; it stood somewhat apart, and consequently beyond the noise and stir of the great metropolis of India, which consists in fact of two cities, one native, the other foreign and commercial.

The colonel's house was evidently that of a man in easy circumstances. There was a large staff of servants, such as is required in Anglo-Indian families: The furniture and every household arrangement was in the very best taste and style. In everything about the establishment might be traced the hand of an intelligent woman, whose thoughtful care must have originally planned the comforts and conveniences of the home, but at the same time one felt that this woman was there no longer.

The management of the household was conducted entirely by an old soldier of the colonel's regiment, who acted as his steward or major-domo. Sergeant McNeil was a Scotchman, who had been with him in many campaigns, not merely in his military capacity, but as an attached and devoted personal attendant.

He was a man of five-and-forty or thereabouts, of tall and vigorous frame, and manly, well-bearded countenance. Although he had retired from the service when his colonel did, he continued to wear the uniform; and this national costume, together with his martial bearing, bespoke him at once the Highlander and the soldier.

Both had left the army in 1860. But instead of returning to the hills and glens of their native land, both had remained in India, and lived at Calcutta in a species of retirement and solitude, which requires to be explained.

When my friend Banks was about to introduce me to Colonel Munro, he gave me one piece of advice. "Make no allusion to the sepoy revolt," he said: "and, above all, never mention the name of Nana Sahib."

Colonel Edward Munro belonged to an old Scottish family, whose members had made their mark in the history of former days.

He was descended from that Sir Hector Munro who in 1760 commanded the army in Bengal, when a serious insurrection had to be quelled. This he effected with a stern and pitiless energy. In one day twenty-eight rebels were blown from the cannon's mouth — a fearful sentence, many times afterward carried out during the mutiny of 1857.

At the period of that great revolt Colonel Munro was in command of the 93d Regiment of Highlanders, which he led during the campaign under Sir

James Outram — one of the heroes of that war — of whom Sir Charles Napier spoke as “The Chevalier Bayard of the Indian Army.” Colonel Munro was with him at Cawnpore; and also in the second campaign, he was at the siege of Lucknow, and continued with Sir James until the latter was appointed a Member of the Council of India at Calcutta.

In 1858 Colonel Munro was made a Knight Commander of the Star of India, and was created a baronet. His beloved wife never bore the title of Lady Munro, for she perished at Cawnpore on the 27th of June, 1857, in the atrocious of — perpetrated by the orders and before the eyes of Nana Sahib.

Lady Munro (her friends always called her so) had been perfectly adored by her husband. She was scarcely seven-and-twenty at the time of her terrible death. Mrs. Orr and Miss Jackson, after the taking of Lucknow, were miraculously saved and restored to their husband and father. But to Colonel Munro nothing remained of his wife. She had disappeared with the two hundred victims in the well of Cawnpore.

Sir Edward, now a desperate man, had but one object remaining in life; it was to quench a burning thirst for vengeance — for justice. The discovery of Nana Sahib, for whom, by order of Government, search was being made in all directions, was his one great desire, his sole aim.

It was in order to be free to prosecute this search that he had retired from the army. Sergeant McNeil got his discharge at the same time, and faithfully followed his master. The two men were animated by one hope, lived in one thought, had but one end in view; and eagerly starting in pursuit, followed up one track after another, only to fail as completely as the Anglo-Indian police had done. The Nana escaped all their efforts.

After three years spent in fruitless attempts, the colonel and Sergeant McNeil suspended their exertions for a time.

Just then the report of Nana. Sahib’s death was current in India, and this time it seemed to be so well attested as to admit of no reasonable doubt.

Sir Edward Munro and McNeil returned to Calcutta, and established themselves in the lonely bungalow which has been described. There the colonel lived in retirement, never left home, read nothing which could contain any reference to the sanguinary time of the mutiny, and seemed to live but for the cherished memory of his wife. Time in no way mitigated his grief.

I learned these particulars from my friend Banks, on our way to the house of mourning, as Sir Edward’s bungalow might be called. It was very evident why he had warned me against making any allusion to the sepoy revolt and its cruel chief.

It must be noted that a report of Nana’s reappearance in Bombay, which had for some days been circulating, had not reached him. Had it done so, he would have been on the move at once.

Banks and Captain Hood were tried friends of the colonel’s, and they were his only constant visitors.

The former, as I have said, had recently completed the works he had in charge, on the Great Indian Peninsular Railway. He was a man in the prime of life, and was now appointed to take an active part in constructing the Madras Railway, designed to connect the Arabian Sea with the Bay of Bengal, but which was not to be commenced for a year. He was just now on leave at Calcutta, occupied with many mechanical projects, for his mind was active and fertile, incessantly devising some novel invention. His spare time he devoted to the colonel, whose fast friend he had been for twenty years. Thus most of his evenings were spent in the veranda of the bungalow. There he usually met Captain Hood, who belonged to the first squadron of Carabineers, and had served in the campaign of 1857-58 first under Sir John Campbell in Oude and Rohilkund, and afterward in Central India, under Sir Hugh Rose, during the campaign which terminated in the taking of Gwalior.

Hood was not more than thirty; he had spent most of his life in India, and was a distinguished member of the Madras Club. His hair and beard were auburn, and he belonged to an English regiment; otherwise he was thoroughly "Indianized," and loved the country as if it had been his by birth. He thought India the only place worth living in. And there, certainly, all his tastes were gratified. A soldier by nature and temperament, opportunities for fighting were of constant recurrence. An enthusiastic sportsman, was he not in a land where nature had collected together all the wild animals in creation, all the furred and feathered game of either hemisphere? A determined mountaineer, the magnificent ranges of Thibet offered him the ascent of the loftiest summits on the globe.

An intrepid traveler, what debarred him from setting foot on the hitherto untrodden regions of the Himalayan frontier? Madly fond of horse-racing, the race-courses of India appeared to him fully as important as those of Newmarket or Epsom.

On this latter subject Banks and Hood were quite at variance. The engineer took very little interest in the turfy triumphs of "Gladiator "and Co.

One day, when Hood had been urging him to express some opinion on the point, Banks said that to his mind races could never be really exciting but on one condition.

“And what is that?” demanded Hood.

“It should be clearly understood,” returned Banks quite seriously, “that the jockey last at the winning-post is to be shot in his saddle.”

“Ah! not a bad idea!” exclaimed Hood, very simply. Nor would he have hesitated to run the chance himself.

Such were Sir Edward Munro’s two constant visitors, and without joining in their conversations he liked to listen to them. Their perpetual discussions and disputes on all sorts of subjects, often brought a smile to his lips.

One wish and desire these two brave fellows had in common. And that was to induce the colonel to join them in making a journey, and so to vary the melancholy tenor of his thoughts. Several times they had tried to persuade him to go to places frequented during the hot season by the rich dwellers in Calcutta.

The colonel was immovable.

He had heard of the journey which Banks and I proposed to take. This evening the subject was resumed. Captain Hood’s idea was a vast walking-tour in the north of India. He objected to railroads, as Banks did to horses. The middle course proposed was to travel either in carriages or in palanquins — easy enough on the great thoroughfares of Hindoostan.

“Don’t tell me about your bullock-wagons and your humped-zebu carriages!” cried Banks. “I believe if you had your way without us engineers, you would still go about in primitive vehicles such as were discarded in Europe five hundred years ago.”

"I'm sure they are far more comfortable than some of your contrivances, Banks. And think of those splendid white bullocks! why, they keep up a gallop admirably, and you find relays at every two leagues — "

"Yes; and they drag a machine on four wheels after them, in which one is tossed and pitched worse than in a boat at sea in a storm."

"Well, I can't say much for these conveyances, certainly," answered Hood. "But have we not capital carriages for two, three, or four horses, which in speed can rival some of your trains? For my part, give me a palanquin rather than a train."

"A palanquin, Hood! Call it a coffin — a bier — where you are laid out like a corpse!"

"That's all very well, but at least you are not rattled and shaken about. In a palanquin you may write, read, or sleep at your ease, without being roused up for your ticket at every station. A palanquin carried by four or six Bengalee gamals (bearers) will take you at the rate of four-and-half miles an hour, and ever so much safer, too, than your merciless express trains!"

"The best plan of all," said I, "would certainly be to carry one's house with one."

"Oh, you snail!" cried Banks.

"My friend," replied I, "a snail who could leave his shell, and return to it at pleasure, would not be badly off. To travel in one's own house, a rolling house, will probably be the climax of inventions in the matter of journeying!"

“Perhaps it will,” said Colonel Munro, who had not yet spoken. “If the scene could be changed without leaving home and all its associations, if the horizon, points of view, atmosphere, and climate could be varied while one’s daily life went on as usual — yes, perhaps — ”

“No more traveler’s bungalows,” said Hood, “where comfort is unknown, although for stopping there you require a leave from the local magistrate.”

“No more detestable inns, in which one is fleeced morally and physically!” said I.

“What a vision of delight!” cried Captain Hood. “Fancy stopping when you please, setting off when you feel inclined, going at a foot’s pace when disposed to linger, racing away at a gallop the instant the humor strikes you! Then to carry with you not only a bedroom, but drawing and dining and smoking rooms! and a kitchen! and a cook! That would be something like progress, indeed, Banks! and a hundred times better than railways. Contradict me if you dare!”

“Far from contradicting, I should entirely agree with you, if only you carried your notion of improvement far enough.”

“What? do you mean to say better still might be done?”

“Listen, and judge for yourself. You consider that a moving house would be superior to a carriage — to a saloon-carriage — even to a sleeping-car on a railroad. And supposing one traveled for pleasure only, and not on business, you are right; I suppose we are agreed as to that?”

“Yes,” said I, “we all think so; “and Colonel Munro made a sign of acquiescence.

“Well,’ continued Banks. “Now let us proceed. You give your orders to your coach-builder and architect combined, who turns you out a perfect realization of the idea, and there you have your rolling house, answering in every way to your requirements, replete with every convenience and comfort; not so high as to make one fear a somersault, not so broad as to suggest the possibility of sticking in a narrow road; well hung — in short, perfection. Let us suppose it has been built for our friend Colonel Munro; he invites us to share his hospitality, and proposes to visit the northern parts of India — like snails if you please, but snails who are not glued by the tail to their shells. All is prepared — nothing forgotten, not even the precious cook and kitchen so dear to our friend Hood. The day for starting comes! All right! Holloa! who is to draw your house, my good friend?”

“Draw it?” cried Hood; “why mules, asses, horses, bullocks!”

“In dozens?” said Banks.

“Ah! let’s see; elephants, of course — elephants! It would be something superb, majestic, to see a house drawn by a team of elephants, well-matched, and with splendid action.

Can you conceive a more lordly and magnificent style of progression? Would it not be glorious?”

“Well — yes — but — ”

“But! still another of your buts.’”

“And a very big but ‘ it is.”

“Bother you engineers! you are good for nothing but to discover difficulties.”

“And to surmount them when not insurmountable,” replied Banks quietly.

“Well then, surmount this one.”

“I will — and in this way. My dear Munro, Captain Hood offers us a large choice of motive power, but none which is incapable of fatigue, none which will not on occasion prove restive or obstinate, and above all, require to eat. It follows that the traveling house we speak of is quite impracticable unless it can be a steam house.”

“And run upon rails, of course! I thought so!” cried the captain, shrugging his shoulders.

“No, upon roads,” returned Banks; “drawn by a first-rate traction engine.”

“Bravo!” shouted Hood, “bravo! Provided the house need not follow your imperious lines of rails, I agree to the steam.”

“But,” said I to Banks, “an engine requires food as much as mules, asses, horses, bullocks, or elephants do, and for want of it will come to a standstill.”

“A steam horse,” replied he, “is equal in strength to several real horses, and the power may be indefinitely increased. The steam horse is subject neither to fatigue nor to sickness. In all latitudes, through all weathers, in sunshine, rain, or snow, he continues his unwearied course. He fears not the attack of wild beasts, the bite of serpents, nor the stings of venomous insects. Desiring neither rest nor sleep, he needs no whip, spur, or goad. The steam horse, provided only he is not required at last to be cooked for dinner, is superior to every draught animal which Providence has placed at the disposal of mankind. All he consumes is a little oil or grease, a little coal or wood; and you know, my friends, that forests are not scarce in our Indian Peninsula, and the wood belongs to everybody.”

“Well said!” exclaimed Captain Hood. “Hurrah for the steam horse! I can almost fancy I see the traveling house, invented by Banks the great engineer, traveling the highways and byways of India, penetrating jungles, plunging through forests, venturing even into the haunts of lions, tigers, bears, panthers, and leopards, while we, safe within its walls, are dealing destruction on all and sundry! Ah, Banks, it makes my mouth water! I wish I wasn’t going to be born for another fifty years!”

“Why not, my dear fellow?”

“Because fifty years hence your dream will come true; we shall have the steam house.”

“It is ready now,” said Banks simply. “Ready! Who has made one? Have you?”

“I have; and to tell you the truth, I rather expect it will even surpass your visionary hopes.”

“My dear Banks, let’s be off at once!” cried Hood, as if he had received an electric shock.

The engineer begged him to be calm, and turning to Sir Edward Munro, addressed him in an earnest tone.

“Edward,” said he, “if I place a steam house at your command — if a month hence, when the season will be suitable, I come and tell you that your rooms are prepared, and that you can occupy them and go wherever you like, while your friends Maucler, Hood, and I are ready and willing to accompany you on an excursion to the north of India — will you answer me, ‘ Let us start, Banks, let us start; and the God of the traveler be our speed ‘?”

“Yes, my friends,” replied Colonel Munro, after a few moments’ reflection. “Yes, I agree. I place at your disposal, Banks, the requisite funds. Keep your promise. Bring to us this ideal of a steam house, which is to surpass even Hood’s imagination, and we will travel over all India.”

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!” shouted Captain Hood. “Now for wild sports on the frontiers of Nepaul!”

At this moment Sergeant McNeil, attracted by the captain’s ringing cheers, appeared at the entrance to the veranda.

“McNeil,” said Colonel Munro, “we start in a month for the north of India. Will you go?”

“Certainly, colonel, if you do,” he replied.

CHAPTER III

THE SEPOY REVOLT

SOME account must now be given of the state of India at the period when the events of this story took place, and especially it will be necessary to relate the chief circumstances connected with the formidable revolt of the sepoys.

The Honorable East India Company, called sometimes by the nickname of “John Company,” was founded in 1600, in the reign of Elizabeth, in the midst of a population of two hundred millions, inhabiting the sacred land of Aryavarta.

Their first title was merely “The Governor and Company of Merchants of London trading to the East Indies,” and at their head was placed the Duke of Cumberland.

About this time the power of the Portuguese, which till then had been very great in the Indies, began to diminish. Of this the English immediately took advantage, and made their first attempt at a political and military administration in the presidency of Bengal, its capital, Calcutta, becoming the center of the new government.

A French Company was founded about the same period, under the patronage of Colbert, and the conflicting interests of the rival companies gave rise to endless contentions, in which, a century later, the names of Dupleix, Labourdonnais, and Count de Lally, are distinguished both in successes and reverses. The French were finally compelled to abandon the Carnatic, that portion of the peninsula which comprehends a part of its eastern coast.

Lord Clive’s brilliant successes having assured the English power in Bengal, Warren Hastings consolidated the empire Clive had founded, and from that time war and conquest went on, till England became master of that vast empire which has been described as “not less splendid and more durable than that of Alexander.”

The Company, however, till then all powerful, began to lose its authority, and in 1784 a bill was passed placing it under the control of Government. In 1813 it lost the monopoly of trading to India, and in 1833 the right of trading to China.

Since the establishment of a military force in India, the army had always been composed of two distinct contingents, European and native. The first consisted of British cavalry and infantry regiments, and European infantry in service of the Company; the second, of native regulars, commanded by English officers. There was also artillery, which belonged to the Company, and was European with the exception of a few batteries.

When Lord William Bentinck was made Governor of Madras, he introduced some reforms which highly offended the native troops. The sepoys were required to clip their mustaches, shave their chins, and were forbidden to wear their marks of caste. A new regulation turban was also ordered for them. Incited by the sons of Tippoo Sahib, this was made the excuse for an outbreak, in which the garrison at Vellore rose against and massacred their officers and about a hundred English soldiers, even the sick in the hospital being butchered.

The English troops quartered at Arcot fortunately arrived in time to stem that rebellion. This, however, showed that a slight cause would at any moment set the natives against their conquerors, and in 1857 imminent peril threatened this Eastern Empire.

The Mohammedans of both sects longed to set themselves free from the British yoke, but could not hope to do so while the Hindoo soldiery remained true to their salt. Unhappily the spark that was needed to inflame their passions was not long in being supplied. A suspicion had seized the Hindoo mind that their religion and caste were in danger; that the English had determined that all the natives should become Christians. They believed that the cartridges for their new Enfield rifles were purposely greased with pig’s fat, so that when they bit off the ends they would be defiled, lose caste, and be compelled to embrace the Christian religion.

Now, in a country where the population renounces even the use of soap, because the fat of either a sacred or unclean animal may enter into its composition, it was found very difficult to enforce the use of cartridges prepared with this substance, especially as they had to be touched with the lips. The Government yielded in some degree to the outcry which was made; but it was quite in vain to modify the drill with the rifles, or to assert that the fats in question took no part in the manufacture of the cartridges. Not a sepoy in the army could be reassured or persuaded to the contrary.

At this time Lord Canning was at the head of the administration as governor-general. Perhaps this statesman deluded himself as to the extent of the movement. For some years past the star of the United Kingdom had been growing visibly dimmer in the Hindoo sky. In 1842 the retreat from Cabul had diminished the prestige of the European conquerors. The attitude of the English army during the Crimean war had not in some instances been such as to sustain its military reputation. The sepoys, therefore, who were well acquainted with all that was happening on the shores of the Black Sea, thought the time had come when a revolt of the native troops would probably be successful. Their minds, already well prepared, were inflamed and excited by the bards, brahmins, and moulvis, who stirred them up by songs and exhortations.

At the beginning of the year 1857, while the contingent of the British army was reduced owing to exterior complications, Nana Sahib, otherwise called Dandou Pant, who had been residing near Cawnpore, had gone to Delhi, and twice to Lucknow, no doubt with the object of provoking the rising, prepared so long ago, for, in fact, very shortly after the departure of the Nana, the insurrection was declared.

On the 24th of February, at Berampore, the 34th regiment refused the cartridges. In the middle of the month of March an adjutant was massacred, and the regiment being disbanded after the punishment of the assassins, carried into the neighboring provinces most active elements of revolt.

On the 10th of May, at Meerut, a little to the north of Delhi, the 3 d, 11th, and 20th regiments mutinied, killed their colonels and several staff officers, gave up the town to pillage, and then fell back on Delhi. Here the rajah, a descendant of Timour, joined them. The arsenal fell into their power, and the officers of the 54th regiment were slaughtered. On the 11th of May, at Delhi, Major Fraser and his officers were pitilessly massacred by the mutineers of Meerut, in the very palace of the European commandant; and on the 16th of May forty-nine prisoners, men, women, and children, fell under the hatchets of the assassins. On the 20th of May, the 26th regiment, cantoned near Lahore,

killed the commandant of the fort and the European sergeant-major.

The impulse once given to these frightful butcheries, it was impossible to stop them. On the 28th of May, at Nourabad, many Anglo-Indian officers fell victims. The brigadier commandant, with his aide-de-camp, and many other officers, were murdered in the cantonments of Lucknow on the 30th of May. On the 31st of May, at Bareilly, in the Rohilkund, several officers were surprised and massacred, without having time to defend themselves. At Shahjahanpore, on the same date, were assassinated the collector and a number of officers by the sepoys of the 38th regiment; and the next day, beyond Barwar, many officers, women, and children, who were en route for the station of Sivapore, a mile from Aurungabad, fell victims.

In the first days of June, at Bhopal, were massacred a part of the European population; and at Jansi, under the inspiration of the terrible dispossessed Rani, all the women and children who took refuge in the fort were slaughtered with unexampled refinement of cruelty. At Allahabad, on the 6th of June, eight young ensigns fell by the sepoys' hands. On the 14th of June, two native regiments revolted at Gwalior, and assassinated their officers.

On the 27th of June, at Cawnpore, expired the first hecatomb of victims, of every age and sex, all shot or drowned — a prelude to the fearful drama which was to take place there a few weeks later. On the 1st of July, at Holkar, thirty-four Europeans — officers, women, and children — were massacred, and the town pillaged and burned; and on the same day, at Ugow, the colonel and adjutant of the 23d regiment were slain.

The second massacre at Cawnpore was on the 15th of July. On that day several hundred women and children — among them Lady Munro — were butchered with unequaled cruelty by the order of Nana himself, who called to his aid the Mussulman butchers from the slaughter-houses. This atrocious act, and how the bodies were afterward thrown down a well, is too well known to need further description.

On the 26th of September, in Lucknow, many were half cut to pieces, and then thrown still living into the flames. Besides these, in all the towns, and throughout the whole country, there were isolated murders, which altogether gave to this mutiny a horrible character of atrocity.

To these butcheries the English generals soon replied by reprisals — necessary, no doubt, since they did much to inspire terror of the British name among the insurgents — but which were truly frightful. At the beginning of the insurrection, at Lahore, Chief Justice Montgomery and Brigadier Corbett had managed to disarm, without bloodshed, the 8th, 16th, 26th, and 49th native regiments. At Moultan the 62d and 29th regiments were also forced to surrender their arms, without being able to attempt any serious resistance. The same thing was done at Peshawar to the 24th, 27th, and 51st regiments, who were disarmed by Brigadier S. Colton and Colonel Nicholson, just as the rebellion was about to burst. But the native officers of the 51st regiment having fled to the mountains, a price was set on their heads, and all were soon brought back by the hillmen. This was the beginning of the reprisals.

A column, commanded by Colonel Nicholson, attacked a native regiment, which was marching toward Delhi. The mutineers were soon defeated and dispersed, and one hundred and twenty prisoners brought to Peshawar. All were indiscriminately condemned to death; but one out of three only were really executed. Ten cannon were placed on the drilling-ground, a prisoner fastened to each of their mouths, and five times were the ten guns fired covering the plain with mutilated remains, in the midst of air tainted with the smell of burning flesh.

These men, as M. de Valbezen says in his book called “Nouvelles Etudes sur les Anglais et l’Inde,” nearly all died with that heroic indifference which Indians know so well how to preserve even in the very face of death. “No need to bind me, captain,” said a fine young sepoy, twenty years of age, to one of the officers present at the execution; and as he spoke he carelessly stroked the instrument of death. “No need to bind me; I have no wish to run away.” Such was the first and horrible execution, which was to be followed by so many others.

At the same time Brigadier Chamberlain published the following order to the native troops at Lahore, after the execution of two sepoys of the 55th regiment: “You have just seen two of your comrades bound to the cannon’s mouth and blown to pieces; this will be the punishment of all traitors. Your conscience will tell you what penalties they will undergo in the other world. These two soldiers have been shot rather than hung on the gallows, because I wished to spare them the pollution of the executioner’s touch, and prove thus that the Government, even at this crisis, wishes to avoid everything that would do the least injury to your prejudices of religion and caste.”

On the 30th of July, 1,237 prisoners fell successively before firing platoons, and fifty others only escaped to die of hunger and suffocation in the prisons in which they were shut up. On the 28th of August, of 870 sepoys who fled from Lahore, 659 were pitilessly massacred by the soldiers of the British army.

After the taking of Delhi, on the 23 d of September, three princes of the king’s family, the heir presumptive and his two cousins, surrendered unconditionally to Major Hodson, who brought them, with an escort of five men only, into the midst of a menacing crowd of 5,000 Hindoosone against 1,000. And yet, halfway through, Hodson stopped the cart which contained his prisoners, got into it, ordered them to lay bare their breasts, and then shot them all three with his revolver. “This bloody execution, by the hand of an English officer,” says M. de Valbezen, “excited the highest admiration throughout the Punjab.”

After the capture of Delhi, 3,000 prisoners perished by shot or on the gallows, and with them twenty-nine members of the royal family. The siege of Delhi, it is true, had cost the besiegers 2,151 Europeans, and 1,686 natives. At Allahabad horrible slaughter was made, not among the sepoys, but in the ranks of the humble population, whom the fanatics had almost unconsciously enticed to pillage. At Lucknow, on the 16th of November, 2,000 sepoys were shot at the Sikander Bagh, and a space of 120 square yards was strewed with their dead bodies.

At Cawnpore, after the massacre, Colonel Neil obliged the condemned men, before giving them over to the gallows, to lick and clean with their tongues, in proportion to their rank of caste, each spot of blood remaining in the house in which the victims had perished. To the Hindoos this was preceding death with dishonor.

During the expedition into Central India executions were continual, and under the fire of musketry “walls of human flesh fell and perished on the earth! “On the 9th of March, 1858, during the attack on the Yellow House, at the time of the second siege of Lucknow, after the decimation of the sepoys, it appears certain that one of these unfortunate men was roasted alive by the Sikhs, under the very eyes of the English officers! On the 11th, the moats of the Begum’s palace at Lucknow were filled with sepoys’ bodies; for the English could not restrain the rage that possessed them. In twelve days 3,000 natives were slain, either hung or shot, including among them 380 fugitives on the island of Hydasspes, who were escaping into Cashmere.

In short, without counting the sepoys who were killed under arms during this merciless repression — in which no prisoners were made — in the Punjab only not less than 628 natives were shot or bound to the cannon's mouth by order of the military authorities, 1,370 by order of the civil authority, 386 hung by order of both.

At the beginning of the year 1859 it was estimated that more than 120,000 native officers and soldiers had perished, and more than 200,000 civilian natives, who paid with their lives for their participation — often doubtful — in this insurrection. Terrible reprisals these! and perhaps, on that occasion, Mr. Gladstone had some reason on his side when he protested so energetically against them in Parliament.

It was important, for the better understanding of our story, that the death-list on both sides should be given as above, to make the reader comprehend the unsatiated hatred which still remained in the hearts of the conquered, thirsting for vengeance, as well as in those of the conquerors, who, ten years afterward, were still mourning the victims of Cawnpore and Lucknow.

As to the purely military facts of the campaign against the rebels, they comprised the following expeditions, which may be summarily mentioned.

To begin with, Sir John Lawrence lost his life in the first Punjab campaign. Then came the siege of Delhi (that central point of the insurrection), reenforced by thousands of fugitives, and in which Mohammed Shah Bahadour was proclaimed Emperor of Hindoostan. “Finish up Delhi!” was the impatient order of the governor-general in his last dispatch to the commander-in-chief; and the siege, begun on the night of the 13th of June, was ended on the 19th of September, after costing the lives of Generals Sir Harry Barnard and John Nicholson.

At the same time, after Nana Sahib had had himself declared Peishwar, and been crowned at the castle fort of Bhitoor, General Havelock effected his march on Cawnpore. He entered it the 17th of July, though too late to prevent the second massacre, or to seize the Nana, who managed to escape with 5,000 men and forty pieces of cannon.

Havelock then undertook a first campaign in the kingdom of Oude, and on the 28th of July he crossed the Ganges with 1,700 men and ten cannon only, and proceeded toward Lucknow.

Sir Colin Campbell and Major-General Sir James Outram now appeared on the scene. The siege of Lucknow lasted eighty-seven days, and during it Sir Henry Lawrence and General Havelock lost their lives. Then Sir Colin Campbell, after having been obliged to retire on Cawnpore, of which he took definite possession, prepared for a second campaign.

During this time other troops captured Mohir, a town of Central India, and made an expedition across the Mulwa, which established the British authority in that kingdom.

At the commencement of the year 1858 Campbell and Outram again marched on Lucknow, with four divisions of infantry, commanded by Major-Generals Sir James Outram and Sir Edward Lugard, and Brigadiers Walpole and Franks. Sir Hope Grant led the cavalry, while Wilson and Robert Napier had other commands, the army consisting of about 25,000 men, which were joined by the Maharajah of Nepaul with 12,000 Ghoorkas. But the rebel army numbered not less than 120,000 men, and the town of

Lucknow contained from 700,000 to 800,000 inhabitants. The first attack was made on the 6th of March.

On the 16th, after a series of combats the English got possession of that part of the town situated on the left bank of the Goomtee. Moos-a-bagh was cannonaded and captured by Sir James Outram and Sir Hope Grant on the 19th; and on the 21st, after a fierce struggle the English took final possession of the city.

In the month of April an expedition was made into Rohilkund, as a great number of the fugitive insurgents were there. Bareilly, the capital of that kingdom, was the first object of the English, who were not at the outset very fortunate, as they suffered a sort of defeat at Jugdespore. Here also Brigadier Adrian Hope was killed. But toward the end of the month Campbell arrived, retook Shahjahanpore, and on the 5th of May, attacking Bareilly, he seized it, without having been able to prevent the rebels evacuating it.

The Central India Field Force, under the command of Sir Hugh Rose, performed many gallant achievements. This general, in January, 1858, marched through the kingdom of Bhopal and relieved the town of Saugor on the 3 d of February, which had been closely besieged since July, 1857.

Ten days after he took the fort of Gurakota, forced the defiles of the Vindhya chain, crossed the Betwa, and arrived before Jhansi, defended by 11,000 rebels, under the command of the savage Amazon Ranee; invested this place on the 22d of March, in the midst of intense heat, detached 2,000 men from the besieging army to meet 20,000 men from Gwalior, led by the famous Tantia Topee, put this chief to the rout, and then assaulted the town on the 22d of April, forced the walls, and seized the citadel, from which the Ranee managed to escape. On the 23 d of May the British advanced on

Calpee, and occupied it. The Ranee and Tantia Topee having taken possession of Gwalior, Sir Hugh Rose advanced upon that place; an action took place at Morar on the 16th of June, and on the 19th another fierce contest, in which the rebels were completely put to the rout, and the Central India Field Force returned to Bombay in triumph.

The Ranee was killed in a hand-to-hand fight before Gwalior. This famous queen, who was devoted to the Nabob, and was his most faithful companion during the insurrection, fell by the hand of Sir Edward Munro. Nana Sahib, by the dead body of Lady Munro at Cawnpore, the colonel, by the dead body of the Ranee at Gwalior, represent the revolt and the suppression, and were thus made enemies whose hatred would find terrible vent if they ever met face to face!

The insurrection might now be considered to be quelled, except in a few places in the kingdom of Oude. Campbell resumed the campaign on the 2d of November, seized the last of the rebel places, and compelled several important chiefs to submit themselves. One of them, however, Beni Madho, was not taken. In December it was learned that he had taken refuge in a neighboring district of Nepaul. It was said that Nana Sahib, Balao Rao his brother, and the Begum of Oude, were with him. Later it was reported that they had sought refuge across the Raptee, on the boundaries of the kingdoms of Nepaul and Oude. Campbell pressed rapidly on, but they had crossed the frontier. In the beginning of February, 1859, an English brigade, one of the regiments being under command of Colonel Munro, pursued them into Nepaul. Beni Madho was killed, the Begum of Oude and her son were made prisoners, and obtained permission to reside in the capital of Nepaul. As to Nana Sahib and Balao Rao, though for long they were thought to be dead, yet such was not the case.

Thus the terrible insurrection was crushed. Tantia Topee, betrayed by his lieutenant Man-Singh, and condemned to death, was executed on the 15th of April at Sipree. This rebel, “this truly remarkable actor in the great drama of the Indian insurrection,” says M. de Valbezen, “one who gave proofs of a political genius full of resources and daring,” died courageously on the scaffold.

This sepoy mutiny, which might perhaps have lost India to the English if it had extended all over the peninsula, and especially if the rising had been national, caused the downfall of the Honorable East India Company. On the 1st of November, 1858, a proclamation, published in twenty languages, announced that Victoria, Queen of England, would wield the scepter of India — that country of which, some years later, she was to be crowned Empress.

The governor, now called Viceroy, a Secretary of State, and fifteen members, composed the supreme government. The governors of the presidencies of Madras and Bombay were henceforward to be nominated by the queen; the members of the Indian service and the commanders-in-chief to be chosen by the Secretary of State. Such were the principal arrangements of the new government.

As to the military force, the English army contained seventeen thousand more men than before the sepoy mutiny. The army in 1867 numbered 64,902 European officers and men, and 125,246 native. Such was the actual state of the peninsula from an administrative and military point of view; such the effective force which guarded a territory of 400,000 square miles.

“The English,” says M. Grandidier, “have been fortunate in finding in this large and magnificent country a gentle, industrious, and civilized people, who for long have been accustomed to a yoke. But they must be careful;

gentleness has its limits, and the yoke should not be allowed to bruise their necks, or they may one day rebel and cast it off.”

CHAPTER IV

DEEP IN THE CAVES OF ELLORA

it was but too true. The Mahratta prince, Dandou Pant, adopted son of Baji Rao, Peishwar of Poona, known as Nana Sahib, and perhaps at this period the sole survivor of the leaders in the great insurrection, had dared to leave his inaccessible retreats amid the mountains of Nepaul. Full of courage and audacity, accustomed to face danger, crafty and skilled in the art of baffling and eluding pursuit in every form, he had ventured forth into the provinces of the Deccan, animated by hatred intensified a hundredfold since the terrible reprisals taken after the rebellion.

Yes; Nana Sahib had sworn deadly hate to the possessors of India. Was he not the heir of Baji Rao? and when the Peishwar died in 1851, had not the Company refused to continue to pay to him his pension of eight Lacs of rupees? This had been one of the causes of an enmity from which resulted the greater excesses.

But what could Nana Sahib hope for now? The revolt had been completely quelled eight years before. The Honorable East India Company had gradually been superseded by the English Government, which now held the entire peninsula under an authority very much firmer and better established than that of the old mercantile associations.

Not a trace of the mutiny remained, for the ranks of the native regiments had been wholly reorganized. Could the Nana dream of success in an attempt to foment a national movement among the lowest classes of Hindoostan? We shall see.

He was aware that his presence in the province of Aurungabad had been observed; that the governor and viceroy were informed of it; that a price was set on his head. It was clear that precipitate flight was necessary, and that his place of refuge must be well concealed indeed if he hoped to baffle the search of the agents of Anglo-Indian police.

The Nana did not waste an hour of the night between the 6th and 7th of March. He perfectly knew the country, and resolved to gain Ellora, twenty-five miles from Aurungabad, and there join one of his accomplices.

The night was very dark. The pretended fakir, satisfied that no one was in pursuit, took his way toward the mausoleum, erected at some distance from the city, in honor of the Mohammedan Sha-Soufi, a saint whose relics have a high medicinal reputation. All within the mausoleum, priests and pilgrims, slept profoundly, and the Nana passed on without being subjected to inconvenient questioning.

Dark as it was, he soon discerned, four leagues farther northward, the block of granite on which is reared the impregnable fortress of Dowlatabad. Rising abruptly from the plain to the height of two hundred and forty feet, its vast outline could be traced against the sky. But Nana Sahib, with a glance of hatred, turned his gaze away from the place; for one of his ancestors, an emperor of the Deccan, had wished to establish his capital at the base of this stronghold. It would indeed have been an impregnable position, well suited to be the central point of an insurrectionary movement in this part of India.

Having traversed the plain, a region of more varied and broken ground succeeded; the undulations gave notice of mountains in the distance. But the Nana did not slacken his pace, although often making steep ascents. Twenty-five miles, the distance that is between Ellora and Aurungabad, had to be got over during the night; nothing therefore induced him to make a halt, although an open caravanserai lay near his path, and he passed a lonely and half-ruined bungalow among the hills, where he might have sought an hour’s repose.

When the sun rose he was beyond the village of Ranzah, which possesses the tomb of Aurungzebe, the most famous of Mogul emperors.

At length he had reached the celebrated group of excavations which take their name from the little neighboring village of Ellora.

The hill in which these caves, to the number of thirty, have been hollowed out, is crescent-shaped. The monuments consist of twenty-four Buddhist monasteries and some grottoes of less importance. The basaltic quarry has been extensively worked by the hand of man. But the native architects, who from the earliest ages extracted stones from it, had not for their main object the erection of the marvelous buildings here and there to be seen on the surface of the vast peninsula. No; they removed these stones in order to procure space within the living rock.

The arrival of Nana Sahib at Ellora was unobserved; he entered the caves and glided into one of several deep cracks or crevices which had opened in the basement, but were concealed behind the supporting elephants.

This opening admitted him into a gloomy passage or drain which ran beneath the temple, terminating in a sort of crypt or vaulted reservoir, now dry and empty.

Advancing a short way into the passage, the Nana uttered a peculiar whistle, to which a sound precisely similar immediately replied, and a light flashed through the darkness, proving that the answer was no mocking echo. Then an Indian appeared carrying a small lantern.

“Away with the light!” said the Nana.

“Dandou Pant!” said the Indian, extinguishing the lamp; “is it thou thyself?”

“My brother, it is I myself.”

“Art thou — ?.

“Let me eat first,” returned the Nana; “we will converse afterward. But let both eating and speaking be in darkness. Take my hand and guide me.”

The Indian took his hand and drew him into the crypt, and he assisted him to lie down on a heap of withered grass and leaves, where he himself had been sleeping when roused by the fakir’s signal.

The man, accustomed to move in the obscurity of this dismal retreat, soon produced food, consisting of bread, the flesh of fowls prepared in a way common in India, and a gourd containing half a pint of the strong spirit known as arrack, distilled from the sap of the cocoanut-tree.

The Nana ate and drank, but spoke never a word. He was faint and sinking through hunger and fatigue, and his whole vitality seemed concentrated in his eyes, which burned and flashed in the darkness like those of a tiger. The Indian remained motionless, waiting till the Nabob chose to speak.

This man was Balao Rao, the brother of Nana Sahib. Balao Rao, a year older than Dandou Pant, resembled him physically, and might easily be mistaken for him. Morally the likeness was still more complete. In detestation of the English, in craft to form plots, and in cruelty to execute them, they were as one soul, in two bodies. Throughout the rebellion these two brothers had kept together. After it was subdued, they shared together a refuge on the frontiers of Nepaul. And now, united by the single aim of resuming the struggle, they were both ready for action.

When the Nana had devoured the food set before him, he remained for some time leaning his head on his folded arms. Balao Rao kept silence, thinking he wished to sleep.

But Dandou Pant raised his head suddenly, and, grasping his brother's hand, said in a hollow voice, "I am denounced! There is a price set on my head! 2,000l. promised to the man who delivers up Nana Sahib!"

"Thy head is worth more than that, Dandou Pant!" cried Balao Rao; "2,000l. is hardly enough even for mine. They would be fortunate if they got the two for 20,000/."

"Yes," returned the Nana; "in three months, on the 23d of June, will be the anniversary of the battle of Plassy. Our prophets foretold that its hundredth anniversary, in 1857, should witness the downfall of British rule and the emancipation of the children of the sun. Nine years more than the hundred have now all but passed, and India still lies crushed and trodden beneath the invader's heel."

That effort which failed in 1857 may and ought to succeed ten years afterward," replied Balao Rao. "In 1827, '37, and '47, there were risings in India. The fever of revolt has broken out every ten years. Well — this year it will be cured by a bath of European blood!"

“Let but Brahma be our stay,” murmured the Nana, “and then — life for life! Woe to the leaders of our foe who yet survive! Lawrence is gone, Barnard, Hope, Napier, Hodson, Havelock — all are gone. But Campbell and Rose still live, and he whom, above all, I hate — that Colonel Munro, whose ancestor was the first to blow our men from the cannon’s mouth, the man who with his own hand slew my friend the Ranee of Jhansi. Let but that man fall into my power, and he shall see whether I have forgotten the horrors of Colonel Neil, the massacres of Secunderabad, the slaughter in the Begum’s palace, at Bareilly, Jhansi, Morar, the island of Hydaspes, and at Delhi. He shall discover that I have sworn his death, as he did mine.”

“Has he not left the army?” inquired Balao Rao.

“He would re-enter the service the moment any disturbances broke out,” replied Nana Sahib. “But even if our attempted rising were to fail, he should not escape, for I would stab him in his bungalow at Calcutta.”

“So let it be — and now?”

“Now the work must begin. This time it shall be a national movement. Let but the Hindoos of towns, villages, and country places rise simultaneously, and very soon the sepoys will make common cause with them. I have traversed the center and north of the Deccan; everywhere I have found minds ripe for revolt. We have leaders ready to act in every town and straggling village. The Brahmins will fanaticize the people. Religion this time will carry along with us the votaries of Siva and Vishnu. At the appointed time, at the given signal, millions of natives will rise, and the royal army will be annihilated!”

“And Dandou Pant?” exclaimed Balao Rao, seizing his brother’s hand.

“Dandou Pant,” continued the Nana, “will not only be the Peishwar crowned in the hill-fort of Bithour. He will be the sovereign of the whole sacred land of Hindoostan!”

Nana Sahib folded his arms, his abstracted look was that of a man whose mental eye is bent on the distant future, and he remained silent.

Balao Rao was careful not to rouse him. He loved to see the working of that fierce soul, burning as it were with a hidden fire, which he knew he could at any moment fan into a flame.

The Nana could not have had an accomplice more devoted to his person, a counselor more eager to urge him forward to attain his ends. He was to him, as has been said, a second self.

After a silence of some duration, the Nana raised his head — his thoughts had returned to the present.

“Where are our comrades?”

“In the caverns of Adjuntah, where they were appointed to wait for us.”

“And our horses?”

“I left them a gunshot from this place, on the road between Ellora and Boregami.”

“Is Kalagani with them?”

“He is, my brother. They are rested, refreshed, and perfectly ready for us.”

“Then let us start. We must be at Adjuntah before daybreak.”

“And after that what must be done? Has not this enforced flight disarranged our previous plans?”

“No,” replied Nana Sahib. “We must gain the heights of Sautpourra, where every defile is known to me, and where I can assuredly defy the pursuit of the English bloodhounds of police. There we shall be in the territory of the Bheels and Ghoonds, who are faithful to our cause. There, in the midst of that mountainous region of the Vindhyas, where the standard of revolt may at any moment be raised, I shall await the favorable juncture!”

“Forward!” exclaimed Balao Rao, starting up, “and let those who want heads come and take them!”

“Yes — let them come,” responded the Nana, grinding his teeth. “I am ready.”

Balao Rao instantly made his way along the narrow passage which led to this dismal cell beneath the temple. On reaching the secret opening behind the colossal elephant, he cautiously emerged, looked anxiously on all sides, amid the shadowy gloom, to ascertain that the coast was clear. Then advancing some twenty paces, and being satisfied that all was safe, he gave notice by a shrill whistle that the Nana might follow him.

Shortly afterward the two brothers had quitted this artificial valley, the length of which is half a league, and which, sometimes to a great height, and in several stories, is pierced by galleries, vaulted chambers, and excavations. The distance between Ellora and Adjuntah is fifty miles, but the Nana was no longer the fugitive of Aurungabad, traveling painfully on foot. Three horses awaited him, as his brother had said, under the care of his faithful servant Kalagani. They were concealed in a thick forest, about a mile from Ellora, and the three men were speedily mounted and galloping in the direction of Adjuntah. It was no strange thing to see a fakir on horseback. In point of fact, many of these impudent beggars demand alms from their seat in the saddle!

Although the time of the year was not that at which pilgrimages are usually made, yet the Nana avoided passing near the Mohammedan mausoleum frequented as a bungalow by pilgrims, travelers, and sightseers of all nations who often flock thither attracted by the wonders of Ellora, and pushed forward by a route as remote as possible from human habitations. He only halted occasionally to breathe the steeds and to partake of the simple provisions which Kalagani carried at his saddle-bow.

The ground was flat and level. In all directions stretched expanses of heath, crossed by massive ridges of dense jungle. But as they approached Adjuntah the country became more varied.

The superb grottoes or caves of Adjuntah, which rival those of Ellora, and perhaps in general beauty surpass them, occupy the lower end of a small valley about half a mile from the town. Nana Sahib could reach them without passing through it, and therefore felt himself secure, although so near a place where the governor’s proclamation was fixed to every building.

Fifteen hours after quitting Ellora he and his two companions plunged into a narrow defile which led them into the celebrated valley where twenty-seven temples, hewn in the rocky wall, looked down into the giddy depths beneath.

It was night, superb though moonless, for the heavens glittered with starry constellations, when the Nana, Balao Rao, and Kalagani approached their destination. Lofty trees and giant flowering plants stood out in strong relief against the sparkling sky. Not a breath stirred the air, not a leaf moved, not the faintest sound could be heard, save the dull murmur of a torrent which rolled in the depths of a ravine hundreds of feet below.

This murmur grew on the ear, however, and became a hoarse roar as the riders advanced to the cataract of Satkound, where the water, torn by sharp projections of quartz and basalt, plunges over a fall of fifty fathoms. As the travelers passed the chasm, a cloud of liquid dust whirled and eddied over it, which moonlight would have tinted with soft rainbow hues.

Here the defile made a sharp turn like an elbow, and the valley, in all its wealth of Buddhist architecture, lay before them.

On the walls of these temples — profusely adorned with columns, rose-tracery, arabesques, and galleries peopled by colossal forms of grotesque animals, hollowed out into cells formerly occupied by the priests, who were the guardians of these sacred abodes — the artist may admire the bright colors of frescoes which seem as though painted but yesterday; frescoes which represent royal ceremonies, religious processions, and battles, exhibiting every weapon employed long before the Christian era in the great and glorious empire of India.

To Nana Sahib all the secrets of these mysterious temples were well known. Already, more than once, he had, when closely pressed, sought refuge among them. The subterranean galleries connecting the temples, the narrow tunnels bored through solid walls of quartz, the winding passages crossing and recrossing in every direction, all the thousand ramifications of a labyrinth the clue to which might be sought in vain by the most patient, were familiar to him. Even with no torch to illumine their profound gloom, he was perfectly at home the’re.

Like a man sure of what he was about, the Nana made straight for one of the excavations less important than the rest. The entrance to it was filled up by a curtain of foliage and a mass of huge stones piled up in some ancient landslip, and thickly overgrown by shrubs and creepers.

The Nana gave notice of his presence at this concealed entrance simply by scraping his nail on a flat surface of stone.

Instantly the heads of two or three natives appeared among the branches; then ten, then twenty, showed themselves; and then soon, creeping and winding out like serpents from between the stones, came a party of forty well-armed men.

“Forward!” said Nana Sahib.

And seeking no explanation, ignorant of whither he led them, these faithful followers were ready to obey; and, if needful, lay down their lives for Dandou Pant. They were on foot, but could vie with the speed of any horse.

The little party made its way across the defile which skirted the abyss, keeping in a northerly direction, and rounding the shoulder of the hill. In an hour they reached the road to Kandeish, which finally leads to the passes of the Sautpourra mountains.

At daybreak they passed near the line of railway running from Bombay to Allahabad, above Nagpore.

On a sudden the Calcutta express dashed into sight, flinging masses of white vapor among the stately banyans, and startling with its shrieking whistle the wild inhabitants of the jungle.

The Nana drew bridle, and stretching his hand toward the flying train, exclaimed, in a strong, stern voice, “Speed on thy way, and tell the Viceroy of India that Nana Sahib lives! Tell him that this railroad, the accursed work of the invader’s hands, shall ere long be drenched in their blood.”

CHAPTER V

THE IRON GIANT

ON the morning of the 5th of May, the passengers along the high road from Calcutta to Chandernagore, whether men, women, or children, English or native, were completely astounded by a sight which met their eyes. And certainly the surprise they testified was extremely natural.

At sunrise a strange and most remarkable equipage had been seen to issue from the suburbs of the Indian capital, attended by a dense crowd of people drawn by curiosity to watch its departure.

First, and apparently drawing the caravan, came a gigantic elephant. The monstrous animal, twenty feet in height, and thirty in length, advanced deliberately, steadily, and with a certain mystery of movement which struck the gazer with a thrill of awe. His trunk, curved like a cornucopia, was uplifted high in the air. His gilded tusks, projecting from behind the massive jaws, resembled a pair of huge scythes. On his back was a highly ornamented howdah,

which looked like a tower surmounted, in Indian style, by a dome-shaped roof and furnished with lens-shaped glasses to serve for windows.

This elephant drew after him a train consisting of two enormous cars, or actual houses, moving bungalows in fact, each mounted on four wheels. The wheels, which, were prodigiously strong, were carved, or rather sculptured in every part. Their lowest portion only could be seen, as they moved inside a sort of case, like a paddle-box, which concealed the enormous locomotive apparatus. A flexible gangway connected the two carriages.

How could a single elephant, however strong, manage to drag these two enormous constructions, without any apparent effort? Yet this astonishing animal did so! His huge feet were raised and set down with mechanical regularity, and he changed his pace from a walk to a trot, without either the voice or a hand of a mahout being apparent.

The spectators were at first so astonished by all this, that they kept at a respectful distance; but when they ventured nearer, their surprise gave place to admiration. They could hear a roar, very similar to the cry uttered by these giants of the Indian forests. At intervals there issued from the trunk a jet of vapor. And yet, it was an elephant! The rugged greeny-black skin evidently covered the bony framework of one that must be called the king of the pachyderms. His eyes were lifelike; all his members were endowed with movement!

Ay! But if some inquisitive person had chanced to lay his hand on the animal, all would have been explained. It was but a marvelous deception, a gigantic imitation, having as nearly as possible every appearance of life. In fact, this elephant was really encased in steel, and an actual steamengine was concealed within its sides.

The train, or Steam House, to give it its most suitable name, was the traveling dwelling promised by the engineer. The first carriage, or rather house, was the habitation of Colonel Munro, Captain Hood, Banks, and myself. In the second lodged Sergeant McNeil and the servants of the expedition. Banks had kept his promise, Colonel Munro had kept his; and that was the reason why, on this May morning, we were setting out in this extraordinary vehicle,

with the intention of visiting the northern regions of the Indian peninsula.

But what was the good of this artificial elephant? Why have this fantastic apparatus, so unlike the usual practical inventions of the English? Till then, no one had ever thought of giving to a locomotive destined to travel either over macadam highways or iron rails, the shape and form of a quadruped.

I must say, the first time we were admitted to view the machine we were all lost in amazement. Questions about the why and wherefore fell thick and fast upon our friend Banks. We knew that this traction-engine had been constructed from his plans and under his directions. What, then, had given him the idea of hiding it within the iron sides of a mechanical elephant?

“My friends,” answered Banks seriously, “do you know the Rajah of Bhootan?”

“I know him,” replied Captain Hood, “or rather I did know him, for he died two months ago.”

“Well, before dying,” returned the engineer, “the Rajah of Bhootan not only lived, but lived differently to any one else. He loved pomp, and displayed it in every possible manner. He never denied himself anything — I mean anything that ever came into his head. His brain imagined the most impossible things, and had not his purse been inexhaustible, it would soon have been emptied in the process of gratifying all his desires. He was enormously rich, had coffers filled with lacs of rupees. Now one day an idea occurred to him, which took such possession of his mind as to keep him from sleeping — an idea which Solomon might have been proud of, and would certainly have realized, had he been acquainted with steam: this idea was to travel in a perfectly new fashion, and to have an equipage such as no one had before dreamed of. He knew me, and sent for me to his court, and himself drew the plan of his locomotive. If you imagine, my friends, that I burst into a laugh at the Rajah’s proposition, you are mistaken. I perfectly understood that this grandiose idea sprang naturally from the brain of a Hindoo sovereign, and I had but one desire on the subject — to realize it as soon as possible, and in a way to satisfy both my poetic client and myself. A hardworking engineer hasn't an opportunity every day to exercise his talents in this fantastic way, and add an animal of this description to the creations of the "Arabian Nights." In short, I saw it was possible to realize the Rajah's whim. All that has been done, that can be done, will be done in machinery. I set to work, and in this iron-plated case, in the shape of an elephant, I managed to inclose the boiler, the machinery, and the tender of a traction-engine, with all its accessories. The flexible trunk, which can be raised and lowered at will, is the chimney; the legs of my animal are connected with the wheels of the apparatus; I arranged his eyes so as to dart out two jets of electric light, and the artificial elephant was complete. But as it was not my own spontaneous creation, I met with numerous difficulties which delayed me. The gigantic plaything, as you may call it, cost me many a sleepless night; so many indeed, that my rajah, who was wild with impatience, and passed the best part of his time in my workshops, died before the finishing touches were given that would allow the elephant to set forth on his travels. The poor fellow had no time even to make one trial of his invention. His heirs, however, less fanciful than he, viewed the apparatus with the terror of superstition, and as the work of a madman. They were only eager to get rid of it at any price. I therefore bought it up on the colonel's account. Now you know all the why and wherefore of the matter, and how it is that in all the world we alone are the proprietors of a steam elephant, with the strength of eighty horses, not to mention eighty elephants!"

"Bravo, Banks! well done!" exclaimed Captain Hood. "A first-class engineer who is an artist, a poet in iron and steel into the bargain, is a rara avis among us!"

“The rajah being dead,” resumed Banks, “and his apparatus being in my possession, I had not the heart to destroy my elephant, and give the locomotive its ordinary form.”

“And you did well!” replied the captain. “Our elephant is superb, there’s no other word for it!” said the captain. “And what a fine effect we shall have, careering over the plains and through the jungles of Hindoostan! It is a regular rajah-like idea, isn’t it? and one of which we shall reap the advantage, sha’n’t we, colonel?”

Colonel Munro made a faint attempt at a smile, to show that he quite approved of the captain’s speech.

The journey was resolved upon then and there; and now this unique and wonderful steam elephant was reduced to drag the traveling residence of four Englishmen, instead of stalking along in state with one of the most opulent rajahs of the Indian peninsula.

I quote the following description of the mechanism of this road engine, on which Banks had brought to bear all the improvements of modern science, from notes made at the time.

“Between the four wheels are all the machinery of cylinders, pistons, feed-pump, etc. covered by the body of the boiler. This tubular boiler is in the fore part of the elephant’s body, and the tender, carrying fuel and water, in the hinder part. The boiler and tender, though both on the same truck, have a space between them, left for the use of the stoker. The engine-driver is stationed in the fireproof howdah on the animal’s back, in which we all could take refuge in case of any serious attack. He has there everything in his power, safety-valves, regulating brakes, etc. so that he can steer or back his engine at will. He has also thick lens-shaped glass fixed in the narrow embrasures, through which he can see the road both before and behind him.

“The boiler and tender are fixed on springs of the best steel, so as to lessen the jolting caused by the inequalities of the ground. The wheels, constructed with vast solidity, are grooved so as to bite the earth, and prevent them from ‘ skating.’

“The nominal strength of the engine is equal to that of eighty horses, but its power can be increased to equal that of one hundred and fifty, without any danger of an explosion. A case, hermetically sealed, incloses all the machinery, so as to protect it from the dust of the roads, which would soon put the mechanism out of order. The machine has a double cylinder after the Field system, and its great perfection consists in this, that the expenditure is small and the results great. Nothing could be better arranged in that way, for in the furnace any kind of fuel may be burned, either wood or coal. The engineer estimates the ordinary speed at fifteen miles an hour, but on a good road it can reach twenty-five. There is no danger of the wheels skating, not only from the grooves, but because of the perfect poise of the apparatus, which is all so well balanced that not even the severest jolting could disturb it. The atmospheric brakes, with which the engine is provided, could in a moment produce either a slackening of speed or a sudden halt.

“The facility with which the machine can ascend slopes is remarkable. Banks has succeeded most happily in this, taking into consideration the weight and power of propulsion of the machine. It can easily ascend a slope at an inclination of from four to five inches in the yard, which is considerable.”

There is a perfect network of magnificent roads made by the English all over India, which are excellently fitted for this mode of locomotion. The

Great Trunk Road, for instance, stretches uninterruptedly for one thousand and two hundred miles.

I must now describe the Steam House.

Banks had not only bought from the Nabob’s heirs the traction-engine, but the train which it had in tow. This had of course been constructed, according to the Oriental taste of the rajah, in the most gorgeous Hindoo fashion. I have already called it a traveling bungalow, and it merited the name, for the two cars composing it were simply a marvelous specimen of the architecture of the country.

Imagine two pagoda-shaped buildings without minarets, but with double-ridged roofs surmounted by a dome, the corbeling of the windows supported by sculptured pilasters, all the ornamentation in exquisitely carved and colored woods of rare kinds, a handsome veranda both back and front. You might suppose them a couple of pagodas torn from the sacred hill of Sonnaghur.

To complete the marvel of this prodigious locomotive I must add that it can float! In fact, the stomach, or that part of the elephant’s body which contains the machinery, as well as the lower portion of the buildings, form boats of light steel. When a river is met with, the elephant marches straight into it, the train follows, and as the animal’s feet can be moved by paddle-wheels, the Steam House moves gayly over the surface of the water. This is an indescribable advantage for such a vast country as India, where there are more rivers than bridges. This was the train ordered by the capricious Rajah of Bhootan. But though the carriages were like pagodas on the outside, Banks thought it best to furnish the interior to suit English tastes, with everything necessary for a long journey, and in this he was very successful.

The width of the two carriages was not less than eighteen feet; they therefore projected over the wheels, as the axles were not more than fifteen. Being well hung on splendid springs, any jolting would be as little felt as on a well- made railroad.

The first carriage was forty-five feet long. In front was an elegant veranda, in which a dozen people could sit comfortably. Two windows and a door led into the drawing- room, lighted besides by two side windows. This room, furnished with a table and book-case, and having luxurious divans all round it, was artistically decorated and hung with rich tapestry. A thick Turkey carpet covered the floor. “Tatties,” or blinds, hung before the windows, and were kept moistened with perfumed water, so that a delightful freshness was constantly diffused throughout all the apartments. A punkah was suspended from the ceiling and kept continually in motion, for it was necessary to provide against the heat, which at certain times of the year is something frightful.

Opposite the veranda door was another of valuable wood, opening into the dining-room, which was lighted not only by side windows, but by a ceiling of ground glass.

Eight guests might have been comfortably seated round the table in the center, so as we were but four we had ample room. It was furnished with sideboards and buffets loaded with all the wealth of silver, glass, and china, which is necessary to English comfort. Of course all these fragile articles were put in specially made racks, as is done on board ship, so that even on the roughest roads they would be perfectly safe.

A door led out into the passage, which ended in another veranda at the back. From this passage opened four rooms, each containing a bed, dressing-table, wardrobe and sofa, and fitted up like the cabins of the best transatlantic steamers. The first of these rooms on the left was occupied by Colonel Munro, the second on the right by Banks. Captain Hood was established next to the engineer, and I next to Sir Edward.

The second carriage was thirty-six feet in length, and also possessed a veranda which opened into a large kitchen, flanked on each side with a pantry, and supplied with everything that could be wanted. This kitchen communicated with a passage which, widening into a square in the middle, and lighted by a skylight, formed a dining-room for the servants. In the four angles were four cabins, occupied by Sergeant McNeil, the engine driver, the stoker, and Colonel Munro's orderly; while at the back were two other rooms for the cook and Captain Hood's man; besides a gun-room, box-room and ice-house, all opening into the back veranda.

It could not be denied that Banks had intelligently and comfortably arranged and furnished Steam House. There was an apparatus for heating it in winter with hot air from the engine, besides two small fireplaces in the drawing and dining rooms. We were therefore quite prepared to brave the rigors of the cold season, even on the slopes of the mountains of Thibet.

The following is the itinerary of the journey which was agreed on, subject to any modifications which unforeseen circumstances might suggest. We proposed leaving Calcutta, to follow the valley of the Ganges up to Allahabad, to cross the kingdom of Oude, so as to reach the first slopes of Thibet, to remain there for some months, sometimes in one place, sometimes in another, so as to give Captain Hood plenty of opportunity for hunting, and then to redescend to Bombay. We had thus 900 leagues, or 2,700 miles before us. But our house and servants traveled with us. Under these conditions, who would refuse even to make the tour of the world again and again?

CHAPTER VI

FIRST STAGES

Before dawn, on the morning of our start, I left the Spencer Hotel, one of the best in Calcutta, which I had made my residence ever since my arrival.

Our train awaited us at no great distance; we had only to enter and establish ourselves. Our luggage had of course been put “on board.” Nothing unnecessary was allowed; but Captain Hood had large ideas in the matter of firearms, and considered an arsenal of four Enfield rifles, four fowling-pieces, two duck-guns, and several other guns, pistols, and revolvers, quite indispensable for such a party as ours. This armory appeared to threaten the lives of wild beasts rather than simply to supply game for our table, but the Nimrod of our expedition was very decided in his views on the subject.

Captain Hood was in the highest spirits. The triumph of having succeeded in persuading Colonel Munro to forsake his solitary retreat; the pleasure of setting out on such a tour, with an equipage so entirely novel; the prospect of unusual occupation, plenty of exercise, and grand Himalayan excursions — all combined to excite him to the greatest degree, and he gave vent to his feelings in perpetual exclamations, while he urged us to bestir ourselves.

The clock struck the hour of departure. Steam was up, the engine ready for action. Our engine-driver stood at his post, his hand on the regulator. The whistle sounded.

“Off with you, Behemoth!” shouted Captain Hood, waving his cap. And this name, so well suited to our wonderful traction-engine, was ever after bestowed upon it.

Now for a word as to our attendants, who occupied the second house — No. 2, as we used to call it.

The engine-driver, Storr, was an Englishman, and had been employed on “The Great Southern “line until a few months previously. Banks knew him to be an efficient and clever workman, thoroughly up to his business, and therefore engaged him for Colonel Munro’s service. He was a man of forty years of age, and proved exceedingly useful to us.

The fireman’s name was Kalouth. He belonged to a tribe or class of Hindoos much sought after by railway companies, to be employed as stokers, because they endure with impunity the double heat of their tropical climate and that of the engine furnaces. They resemble, in this, the Arabs employed as firemen in the Red Sea steamers — good fellows who are content to be merely boiled where Europeans would be roasted in a few minutes.

Colonel Munro had a regimental servant named Goilmi, one of the tribe of Gourkas. He belonged to that regiment which, as an act of good discipline, had accepted the use of the Enfield rifles, the introduction of which into the service had been the reason, or at least the pretext, of the sepoy revolt. Small, active, supple, and of tried fidelity, Gofirni always wore the dark uniform of the rifle brigade, which was as dear to him as his own skin.

Sergeant McNeil and Ganni were attached heart and soul to Colonel Munro. They had fought under his command all through the Indian campaign; they had accompanied him in his fruitless search for Nana Sahib; they had followed him into retirement, and would never dream of leaving him.

Captain Hood had also a faithful follower — a frank, lively young Englishman, whose name was Fox, and who would not have changed places with any officer's servant under the sun. He perfectly adored Captain Hood, and was quite as keen a sportsman as his master. Having accompanied him on numberless tiger-hunts, Fox had proved his skill, and reckoned the tigers which had fallen to his gun at thirty-seven, only three less than his master could boast of.

Our staff of attendants was completed by a negro cook, whose dominion lay in the forepart of the second house. He was of French origin, and having boiled, fried, and fricasseed in every possible latitude, Monsieur Parazard-for that was his name — had no small opinion of the importance of his noble profession; he would have scorned to call it his trade.

He presided over his saucepans with the air of a high priest, and distributed his condiments with the accuracy of a chemist. Monsieur Parazard was vain, it is true, but so clever that we readily pardoned his vanity.

Our expedition, then, was made up of ten persons; namely, Sir Edward Munro, Banks, Hood, and myself, who were accommodated in one house; McNeil, Storr, Mouth, Gofimi, Fox, and Monsieur Parazard, in the other.

I must not forget the two dogs, Fan and Niger, whose sporting qualities were to be put to the proof by Hood, in many a stirring episode of the chase.

“Arrange the route exactly as you please, my friends,” said Colonel Munro. “Decide without reference to me. Whatever you do will be done well.”

“Still, my dear Munro,” replied Banks; “it would be satisfactory to have your opinion.”

“No, Banks,” returned the colonel; “I give myself up to you, and have no wish to visit one place rather than another. One single question, however, I will ask. After Benares, in what direction do you propose to travel?"

"Northward, most certainly!" exclaimed Hood impetuously. "Right across the kingdom of Oude, up to the lower ranges of the Himalayas!"

"Well then, my friends," began Colonel Munro, "perhaps when we get so far, I will propose — but it will be soon enough to speak of that when the time comes. Till then, go just where you choose."

I could not help feeling somewhat surprised by these words of Sir Edward Munro. What could he have in his mind? Had he only agreed to take this journey in the hope that chance might serve his purpose better than his own will and endeavor had done? Did it seem to him possible that, supposing Nana Sahib to be still alive, he might yet find trace of him in the extreme north of India? Was the hope of vengeance still strong within him?

I could not resist the conviction that our friend was influenced by this hidden motive, and that Sergeant McNeil shared his master's thoughts.

When we left Calcutta we were seated in the drawing-room of Steam House. The door and the windows of the veranda were open, and the measured beat of the punkah kept up an agreeable temperature. Storr drove the engine at a slow and steady rate of three miles an hour, for we travelers were just then in no haste, and desired to see at leisure the country we passed through.

For a long time we were followed by a number of Europeans who were astonished at our equipage, and by crowds of natives whose wonder and admiration was mingled with fear. We gradually distanced this attendant mob, but met people continually who lavished upon us admiring exclamations of Wallah! wallah! The huge elephant, vomiting clouds of steam, excited far more astonishment than the two superb cars which he drew after him.

At ten o’clock breakfast was served in the dining-room; and, seated at a table which was far less shaken than it would have been in a first-class railway carriage, we did ample justice to the culinary skill of Monsieur Parazard. We were traveling along the left bank of the Hoogly,

the most western of the numerous arms of the Ganges, which form together the labyrinthine network of the delta of the Sunderbunds, and is entirely an alluvial formation.

“What you see there, my dear Maucler,” said Banks, “is a conquest won by the sacred river Ganges from the not less sacred Bay of Bengal. It has been a mere affair of time. There is probably not an atom of that soil which has not been transported hither, by the mighty current, from the Himalayan heights. Little by little the stream has robbed the mountains in order to form this province, through which it has worked its bed — ”

“And changes incessantly!” broke in Captain Hood. “There never was such a whimsical, capricious, lunatic of a river as this same Ganges. People take the trouble to build a town on its banks, and behold, a few centuries later the town is in the midst of a plain, its harbors are dry, the river has changed its course! Thus Rajmahal, as well as Gaur, were both formerly situated on this faithless stream, and now there they are dying of thirst amidst the parched rice-fields of the plains.”

“Then may not some such fate be in store for Calcutta?” inquired I.

“Ah, who knows?”

“Come, come,” said Banks; “you forget the engineers! It would only require skillful embankments. We could easily put a strait-waistcoat on the Ganges, and restrain its vagaries.”

“It is well for you, Banks,” said I, “that no natives are within earshot when you speak so irreverently of their sacred stream! They would never forgive you.’

“Well, really,” returned Banks, they look on their river as a son of God, if not God himself, and in their eyes it can do nothing amiss.”

“Not even by maintaining, as it does, epidemics of the plague, fever, and cholera!” cried Captain Hood. “I must say, however, that the atmosphere it engenders agrees splendidly with the tigers and crocodiles which swarm in the Sunderbunds. Ah, the savages! Fox!” he added, turning to his servant, who was clearing away the breakfast things.

“Yes, captain.”

“Wasn’t it there you killed your thirty-seventh?”

“Yes, captain, two miles from Fort Canning. It was one evening — ”

“There, Fox! that will do,” interrupted the captain, as he tossed off a large glass of brandy and soda. “I know all about the thirty-seventh. The history of your thirty-eighth would interest me more.”

“My thirty-eighth is not killed yet, captain.”

“No, but you will bag him some day, Fox, as I shall my forty-first.”

It is to be noted, that in the conversations of Captain Hood and his man, the word “tiger “was never mentioned. It was quite unnecessary. The two hunters perfectly understood one another.

As we proceeded to the Hoogly, its banks, which above Calcutta are rather low, gradually contracted, much reducing the width of the river. For some hours we kept near the railroad, which from Burdwan passes on to Rajmahal, in the valley of the Ganges, which it then follows till beyond Benares.

The Calcutta train passed us at great speed, and the shouts of the passengers showed that while they admired us, they mocked our slower pace. We did not return their defiance. More rapidly they certainly did travel than ourselves, but in comfort there was simply no comparison.

During these two days the scenery was invariably flat, and therefore monotonous. Here and there waved a few slender cocoanut-trees, the last of which we should leave behind after passing Burdwan. These trees, which belong to the great family of palms, are partial to the coast, and love to breathe salt air. Thus they are not found beyond a somewhat narrow belt along the sea coast, and it is vain to seek them in Central India. The flora of the interior is, however, extremely interesting and varied.

On each side of our route, the country in this part resembles an immense chess-board marked out in squares of rice-fields, and stretching as far as we could see. Shades of green predominated, and the harvest promised to be abundant in this moist, warm soil, the prodigious fertility of which is well known.

On the evening of the second day, with punctuality which an express might have envied, the engine gave its last snort and stopped at the gates of

Burdwan. This city is the judicial headquarters of an English district; but properly speaking, the country belongs to a Maharajah, who pays taxes to Government amounting to not less than ten millions.

The town consists in a great part of low houses, standing in fine avenues of trees, such as cocoanuts and arequipas. These avenues being wide enough to admit our train, we proceeded to encamp in a charming spot, full of shade and freshness.

It seemed as though a large addition were suddenly made to the city, when our houses took up their position in it, and we would not have exchanged our residences for any in the splendid quarter where stands the magnificent palace of the sovereign of Burdwan.

It may well be supposed that our elephant produced all the terror and admiration which he usually excited among Bengalees. The people ran together from all sides, the men bare-headed, their hair cut short a la Titus, and wearing only loose cotton drawers, while the women were enveloped from head to foot in white.

“I begin to be afraid,” said Captain Hood, “that the Maharajah will want to buy our Behemoth, and that he will offer such a vast sum, we shall be forced to let his highness have him.”

“Never!” exclaimed Banks. “I will make another elephant for him if he likes, of power enough to draw his whole capital from one end of his dominion to the other. But we won’t part with Behemoth at any price, will we, Munro?”

“Most certainly we will not,” answered the colonel, in the tone of a man who was not to be tempted by millions.

And after all there was no question as to whether our colossal elephant was for sale or not. The Maharajah was not at Burdwan, and the only visit we received was from his kamdar, a sort of private secretary, who came to examine our equipage. Having done so, this personage offered us permission, which we very readily accepted, to examine the gardens of the palace.

We found them well worth a visit. They were beautifully laid out, filled with the finest specimens of tropical vegetation, and watered by sparkling rivulets flowing from miniature lakes. The park we also admired greatly: its verdant lawns were adorned by fanciful kiosks, and in superb menageries we found specimens of all the animals of the country, wild as well as domestic. Here were goats, stags, deer, elephants, tigers, lions, panthers, and bears, besides others too numerous to mention.

“Oh, captain!” cried Fox, “here are tigers in cages just like birds. Isn’t it a pity?”

“Indeed, Fox, and so it is,” replied the captain. “If the poor fellows had their choice, they certainly would far rather be prowling about in the jungle, even within reach of our rifle-balls!

“That’s just what I think, captain,” sighed honest Fox.

Next morning, the 10th of May, having laid in a fresh stock of provisions, we quitted Burdwan. Our Steam House passed the line of railroad by a level crossing, and traveled in the direction of Ramghur, a town situated about seventy leagues from Calcutta.

During this part of the journey Behemoth was kept going at a gentle trot, which pace proved the excellent structure of our well-hung carriages; the roads being good also favored our experiment.

To the great surprise of Captain Hood, we passed through many jungles without seeing any wild animals. It seemed not unlikely that they were terrified, and fled at the approach of a gigantic elephant, vomiting steam and smoke; but as it was to the northern regions, and not to Bengal provinces, that our hunter looked for the sport he loved so well, he did not as yet begin to complain.

On the 15th of May we were near Ramghur, about fifty leagues from Burdwan. The rate of speed at which we had traveled was not more than fifteen leagues in twelve hours. Three days afterward, on the 18th, we stopped at the little town of Chittra. No incidents marked these stages of our journey. The heat was intense; but what could be more agreeable than a siesta beneath the cool shelter of the verandas! The burning hours passed away in luxurious repose.

In the evenings Storr and ‘<Mouth cleaned the furnace and oiled and thoroughly examined the engine, operations which were always carefully superintended by Banks himself. While he was so employed, Captain Hood and I, accompanied by Fox, Goilmi, and the two dogs, used to take our guns, and explore the neighborhood of our camp. We fell in with nothing more important in the way of game than birds and a few small animals; and although the captain turned up his nose at such poor sport, he was always highly delighted next day, when Monsieur Parazard regaled us with a variety of new and savory dishes.

Banks, when he could, made our halting-places near some wood, and on the banks of a stream or brook, because it was always necessary to replenish the tender with what was wanted for the next day’s journey, and he attended personally to every detail.

Goinni and Fox were frequently employed as hewers of wood and drawers of water.

When the day’s work was done we lighted our cigars (excellent Manilla cheroots), and while we smoked we talked about this country with which Hood, as well as Banks, was so thoroughly well acquainted, The captain disdained cigars, and his vigorous lungs inhaled, through a pipe twenty feet long, the aromatic smoke of a hookah, carefully filled for him by the hand of Fox. It was our greatest wish that Colonel Munro should accompany us on our little shooting excursions round the camp. We invariably asked him to do so, but he as invariably declined, and remained with Sergeant McNeil, spending the time of our absence in pacing up and down a distance of not more than a hundred yards.

They spoke little, but so completely did they understand one another, that words were not needed for the interchange of thoughts.

Both were absorbed in tragic and indelible recollections. It was possible that, in approaching the theater of the bloody insurrection, these recollections would become more vivid.

Banks and Captain Hood shared with me the opinion that some fixed idea, which would be developed later, had induced Colonel Munro to join us in this expedition to the north of India.

In that case we might be on the verge of great events. Our steam Behemoth might be drawing us across these huge plains and mountains to the scene of a thrilling and unexpected drama.

CHAPTER VII

THE PILGRIMS OF THE PHALGOU RIVER

WHAT is now called Behar was in former days the empire of Magadha. In the time of the Buddhists it was sacred territory, and is still covered with temples and monasteries. But, for many centuries, the Brahmins have occupied the place of the priests of Buddha. They have taken possession of the viharas or temples, and, turning them to their own account, live on the produce of the worship they teach. The faithful flock thither from all parts, and in these sacred places the Brahmins compete with the holy waters of the Ganges, the pilgrimages to Benares, the ceremonies of Juggernaut; in fact, one may say the country belongs to them.

The soil is rich, there are immense rice-fields of emerald green, and vast plantations of poppies. There are numerous villages, buried in luxuriant verdure, and shaded by palms, mangoes, and date-trees, over which nature has thrown, like a net, a tangled web of creeping plants.

Steam House passed along roads which were embowered in foliage, and beneath the leafy arches the air was cool and fresh. We followed the chart of our route, and had no fear of losing our way.

The snorting and trumpeting of our elephant mingled with the deafening screams of the winged tribes and the discordant chatterings and scoldings of apes and monkeys, and the golden fruit of the bananas shone like stars through light clouds, as smoke and steam rolled in volumes among the trees. The delicate rice-birds rose in flocks as Behemoth passed along, their white plumage almost concealed as they flew through the spiral wreaths of steam.

But the heat! the moist air scarcely made its way through the tattier of our windows. The hot winds, charged with caloric as they passed over the surface of the great western plains, enveloped the land in their fiery embrace. One longs for the month of June, when this state of the atmosphere will be modified. Death threatens those who seek to brave the stroke of this flaming sun.

The fields are deserted. Even the ryots themselves, inured as they are to the burning heat, cannot continue their agricultural labors. The shady roadway alone is practicable, and even there we require the shelter of our traveling bungalow. Mouth the fireman must be made of pure carbon, or he would certainly dissolve before the grating of his furnace. But the brave Hindoo holds out nobly. It has become second nature with him, this existence on the platform of the locomotives which scour the railway lines of Central India!

During the daytime of May the 19th, the thermometer suspended on the wall of the dining-room registered 106° Fahrenheit. That evening we were unable to take our accustomed “constitutional “or hawakana. This word signifies literally “to eat air,” and means that, after the stifling heat of the tropical day, people go out to inhale the cool pure air of evening. On this occasion we felt that, on the contrary, the air would eat us!

“Monsieur Maucler,” said Sergeant McNeil to me, “this heat reminds me of one day in March, when Sir Hugh Rose, with just two pieces of artillery, tried to storm the walls at Lucknow. It was sixteen days since we had crossed the river Betwa, and during all that time our horses had not once been unsaddled. We were fighting between enormous walls of granite, and we might as well have been in a burning fiery furnace. The chitsis passed up and down our ranks, carrying water in their leathern bottles, which they poured on the men's heads as they stood to their guns, otherwise we should have dropped. Well do I remember how I felt! I was exhausted, my skull was ready to burst — I tottered. Colonel Munro saw me, and snatching the bottle from the hand of a chitsi, he emptied it over me — and it was the last water the carriers could procure... A man can't forget that sort of thing, sir! No, no! When I have shed the last drop of my blood for my colonel, I shall still be in his debt."

"Sergeant McNeil," said I, "does it not seem to you that since we left Calcutta, Colonel Munro has become more absent and melancholy than ever? I think that every day — "

"Yes, sir," replied McNeil, hastily interrupting me, "but that is quite natural. My colonel is approaching Lucknow — Cawnpore — where Nana Sahib murdered... Ah! it drives me mad to speak of it! Perhaps it would have been better if this journey had been planned in some different direction — if we had avoided the provinces ravaged by the insurrection! The recollection of these awful events is not yet softened by time."

"Why not even now change the route?" exclaimed I. "If you like, McNeil, I will speak about it to Mr. Banks and Captain Hood."

"It's too late now," replied the sergeant. "Besides, I have reason to think that my colonel wishes to revisit, perhaps for the last time, the theater of that horrible war; that he will once more go to the scene of Lady Munro's death."

"If you really think so, McNeil," said I, "it will be better to let things take their course, and not attempt to alter our plans. It is often felt to be a consolation to weep at the grave of those who are dear to us."

“Yes, at their grave!” cried McNeil. “But who can call the well of Cawnpore a grave? Could that fearful spot seem to anybody like a quiet grave in a Scotch churchyard, where, among flowers and under shady trees, they would stand on a spot, marked by a stone with one name, just one, upon it? Ah, sir, I fear the colonel’s grief will be something terrible! But I tell you again, it is too late to change the route. If we did, who knows but he might refuse to follow it? No, no; let things be, and may God direct us!”

It was evident, from the way in which McNeil spoke, that he well knew what was certain to influence his master’s plans, and I was by no means convinced that the opportunity of revisiting Cawnpore had not led the colonel to quit Calcutta. At all events, he now seemed attracted as by a magnet to the scene where that fatal tragedy had been enacted. To that force it would be necessary to yield.

I proceeded to ask the sergeant whether he himself had relinquished the idea of revenge — in other words, whether he believed Nana Sahib to be dead.

“No,” replied McNeil frankly. “Although I have no ground whatever for my belief, I feel persuaded that Nana Sahib will not die unpunished for his many crimes. No; I have heard nothing, I know nothing about him, but I am inwardly convinced it is so. Ah, sir! righteous vengeance is something to live for! Heaven grant that my presentiment is true, and then — some day — ”

The sergeant left his sentence unfinished, but his looks were sufficient. The servant and the master were of one mind.

When I reported this conversation to Banks and the captain, they were both of opinion that no change of route ought to be made. It had never been proposed to go to Cawnpore; and, once across the Ganges at Benares, we intended to push directly northwards, traversing the eastern portion of the kingdoms of Oude and Rohilkund. McNeil might after all be wrong in supposing that Sir Edward Munro would wish to revisit Cawnpore; but if he proposed to do so, we determined to offer no opposition.

As to Nana Sahib, if there had been any truth in the report of his reappearance in the Bombay presidency, we ought by this time to have heard something more of him. But, on the contrary, all the intelligence we could gain on our route led to the conclusion that the authorities had been in error.

If Colonel Munro really had any ulterior design in making this journey, it might have seemed more natural that he should have confided his intentions to Banks, who was his most intimate friend, rather than to Sergeant McNeil. But the latter was no doubt preferred, because he would urge his master to undertake what Banks would probably consider perilous and imprudent enterprises.

At noon, on the 19th of May, we left the small town of Chittra, 280 miles from Calcutta. Next day, at nightfall, we arrived, after a day of fearful heat, in the neighborhood of Gaya. The halt was made on the banks of a sacred river, the Phalgou, well known to pilgrims.

Our two houses were drawn up on a pretty bank, shaded by fine trees, within a couple of miles of the town. This place, being extremely curious and interesting, we intended to remain in it for thirty-six hours, that is to say for two nights and a day. Starting about four o’clock next morning, in order to avoid the midday heat, Banks, Captain Hood and I left Colonel Munro, and took our way to the town of Gaya.

It is stated that 150,000 devotees annually visit this center of Brahminical institutions; and we found every road to the place was swarming with men, women, old people, and children, who were advancing from all directions across the country, having braved the thousand fatigues of a long pilgrimage in order to fulfill their religious duties.

We could not have had a better guide than Banks, who knew the neighborhood well, having previously been on a survey in Behar, where a railroad was proposed, but not yet constructed.

Just before entering the place, which is appropriately called the Holy City, Banks stopped us near a sacred tree, round which pilgrims of every age and sex were bowed in the attitude of adoration. This tree was a peepul: the girth of the trunk was enormous; but although many of its branches were decayed and fallen, it was not more than two or three hundred years old. This fact was ascertained by M. Louis Rousselet, two years later, during his interesting journey across the India of the Rajahs.

The “Tree of Buddha,” as it is called, is the last of a generation of sacred peepuls, which have for ages overshadowed the spot, the first having been planted there five centuries before the Christian era; and probably the fanatics kneeling before it believe this to be the original tree consecrated there by Buddha. It stands upon a ruined terrace close to a temple built of brick, and evidently of great antiquity.

The appearance of three Europeans, in the midst of these swarming thousands of natives, was not regarded favorably. Nothing was said, but we could not reach the terrace, nor penetrate within the old temple: certainly it would have been difficult to do so under any circumstances, on account of the dense masses of pilgrims by whom the way was blocked up.

“I wish we could fall in with a Brahmin,” said Banks; “we might then inspect the temple, and feel we were doing the thing thoroughly.”

“What!” cried I, “would a priest be less strict than his followers?”

“My dear Maucler,” answered Banks, “the strictest rules will give way before the offer of a few rupees! The Brahmins must live.”

“I don’t see why they should,” bluntly said Captain Hood, who never professed toleration toward the Hindoos, nor held in respect, as his countrymen generally do, their manners, customs, prejudices, and objects of veneration. In his eyes India was nothing but a vast hunting-ground, and he felt a far deeper interest in the wild inhabitants of the jungles than in the native population either of town or country.

After remaining for some time at the foot of the sacred tree, Banks led us on toward the town of Gaya, the crowd of pilgrims increasing as we advanced. Very soon, through a vista of verdure, the picturesque edifices of Gaya appeared on the summit of a rock.

It is the temple of Vishnu which attracts travelers to this place. The construction is modern, as it was rebuilt by the Queen of Holcar only a few years ago. The great curiosity of this temple is the marks left by Vishnu when he condescended to visit earth on purpose to contend with the demon Maya. The struggle between a god and a fiend could not long remain doubtful.

Maya succumbed, and a block of stone, visible within the inclosure of Vishnu-Pad, bears witness, by the deep impress of his adversary’s footprints, that the demon had to deal with a formidable foe.

I said the block of stone was “visible “; I ought to have said “visible to Hindoo natives only.” No European is permitted to gaze upon these divine relics.

Perhaps a more robust faith than is to be found in Western minds may be necessary in order to distinguish these traces on the miraculous stone. Be that as it may, Banks’s offer of money failed this time. No priest would accept what would have been the price of a sacrilege; I dare not venture to suppose that the sum offered was unequal to the extent of the Brahminical conscience. Anyhow, we could not get into the temple.

Captain Flood was furious. He seemed disposed to deal summarily with the Brahmin who had turned us away.

Banks had to restrain him forcibly.

“Are you mad, Hood?” said he. “Don’t you know that the Hindoos regard their priests, the Brahmins, not merely as a race of illustrious descent, but also as beings of altogether superior and supernatural origin?”

When we reached that part of the river Phalgou which bathes the rock of Gaya, the prodigious assemblage of pilgrims lay before us in its full extent. There, in indescribable confusion, was a heaving, huddling, jostling crowd of men and women, old men and children, citizens and peasants, rich baboos and poor ryots, of every imaginable degree. Some came in palanquins, others in carriages drawn by large-humped oxen. Some lie beside their camels, whose snakelike heads are stretched out on the ground, while many travel on foot from all parts of India. Here tents are set up; there carts and wagons are unyoked, and numerous huts made of branches are prepared as temporary shelter for the crowd.

“What a mob “exclaimed Captain Hood.

“The water of the Phalgou will not be fit to drink this evening,” observed Banks.

“Why not?” inquired I.

“Because its waters are sacred, and this unsavory crowd will go and bathe in them, as they do in the Ganges.”

“Are we down stream?” cried Hood, pointing toward our encampment.

“No! don’t be uneasy, captain!” answered Banks, laughing; “we are up the river.”

“That’s all right! It would never do to water Behemoth at an impure fountain!”

We passed on through thousands of natives massed together in comparatively small space. The ear was struck by a discordant noise of chains and small bells. It was thus that mendicants appealed to public charity. Infinitely varied specimens of this vagrant brotherhood swarmed in all directions. Most of them displayed false wounds and deformities, but although the professed beggars only pretend to be sufferers, it is very different with the religious fanatics. In fact it would be difficult to carry enthusiasm further than they do.

Some of the fakirs, nearly naked, were covered with ashes; one had his arm fixed in a painful position by prolonged tension; another had kept his hand closed until it was pierced by the nails of his own fingers.

Some had measured the whole distance of their journey by the length of their bodies. For hundreds of miles they had continued incessantly to lie down, rise up, and lie down again, as though acting the part of a surveyor's chain.

Here some of the faithful, stupefied with bang (which is liquid opium mixed with a decoction of hemp), were suspended on branches of trees, by iron hooks plunged into their shoulders. Hanging thus, they whirled round and round until the flesh gave way, and they fell into the waters of the Phalgou.

Others, in honor of Siva, had pierced their arms, legs, or tongues through and through with little darts, and made serpents lick the blood which flowed from the wounds.

Such a spectacle could not be otherwise than repugnant to a European eye. I was passing on in haste, when Banks suddenly stopped me, saying, "The hour of prayer!"

At the same instant a Brahmin appeared in the midst of the crowd. He raised his right hand, and pointed toward the rising sun, hitherto concealed behind the rocks of Gaya.

The first ray darted by the glorious luminary was the signal. The all but naked crowd entered the sacred waters. There were simple immersions, as in the early form of baptism, but these soon changed into water parties of which it was not easy to perceive the religious character. Perhaps the initiated, who recited slocas or texts, which for a given sum the priests dictated to them, thought no more of the cleansing of their bodies than their souls. The truth being that after having taken a little water in the hollow of the hand, and sprinkled it toward the four cardinal points, they merely threw up a few drops into their faces, like bathers who amuse themselves on the beach as they enter the shallow waves. I ought to add besides, that they never forgot to pull out at least one hair for every sin they had Committed. A good many deserved to come forth bald from the waters of the Phalgou So vehement were the watery gambols of the faithful, as they plunged hither and thither, that the alligators in terror fled to the opposite bank. There they remained in a row, staring with their dull sea-green eyes at the noisy crowd which had invaded their domain, and making the air resound with the snapping of their formidable jaws. The pilgrims paid no more attention to them than if they had been harmless lizards.

It was time to leave these singular devotees, who were getting ready to enter Kailas, which is the paradise of Brahm; so we went up the river and returned to our encampment.

It might have been one o’clock the next morning when I was roused from uneasy slumber by a dull murmuring sound approaching along the banks of the Phalgou.

My first idea was, that the atmosphere being charged with electricity, a storm of wind was rising in the west, which would displace the strata of air, and perhaps make it more suitable for respiration. I was mistaken; the branches of the trees above us remained motionless; not a leaf stirred.

I put my head out at my window and listened. I plainly heard the distant murmur, but nothing was to be seen. The surface of the river was calm and placid, and the sound proceeded neither from the air nor from the water. Although puzzled, I could perceive no cause for alarm, and returning to bed, fatigue overcame my wakefulness, and I became drowsy. At intervals I was conscious of the inexplicable murmuring noise, but finally fell fast asleep.

In about two hours, just as the first rays of dawn broke through the darkness, I awoke with a start. Some one in the passage was calling the engineer. “Mr. Banks!”

“What is wanted?”

“Will you come here, sir?”

It was Storr the fireman who spoke to Banks. I rose immediately, and joined them in the front veranda. Colonel Munro was already there, and Captain Hood came soon after. “What’s the matter? “I heard Banks say.

“Just you look, sir,” replied Storr.

It was light enough for us to see the river banks and part of the road which stretched away before us; and to our great surprise these were encumbered by several hundred Hindoos, who were lying about in groups.

“Ah! those are some of the pilgrims we saw yesterday!” said Captain Hood.

“But what are they doing here?” said I.

“No doubt,” replied the captain, “they are waiting for sunrise, that they may perform their ablutions.”

“No such thing,” said Banks; “why should they leave Gaya to do that? I suspect they have come here because — ”

“Because Behemoth has produced his usual effect,” interrupted Captain Hood. “They heard that a huge great elephant — a colossus — bigger than the biggest they ever saw, was in the neighborhood, and of course they came to admire him.”

“If they keep to admiration, it will be all very well,” returned the engineer, shaking his head.

“What do you fear, Banks?” asked Colonel Munro.

“Well, I am afraid these fanatics may get in the way and impede our progress.”

“Be prudent, whatever you do! One cannot act too cautiously in dealing with such devotees.”

“Kalouth!” cried Banks, calling the stoker, “are the fires ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, light up.”

“Yes, light up by all means, Kalouth,” cried Captain Hood; “blaze away, Kalouth; and let Behemoth puff smoke and steam into the ugly faces of all this rabble!”

It was then half-past three in the morning. It would take half an hour to get up steam. The fires were instantly lighted. The wood cracked in the furnaces, and dense smoke issued from the gigantic trunk of the elephant, which was uplifted high among the boughs of the great trees.

Several parties of natives approached; then a general movement took place in the crowd. The people pressed closer round us. Those in the foremost rank threw up their arms in the air, stretched them toward the elephant, bowed down, knelt, cast themselves prostrate on the ground, and distinctly manifested the most profound adoration.

There we stood beneath the veranda, very anxious to know what this display of fanaticism would lead to. McNeil joined us, and looked on in silence. Banks took his place with Storr in the howdah, from which he could direct every movement of Behemoth.

By four o’clock steam was up. The noise made by the engine was, of course, taken by the Hindoos for the angry trumpeting of an elephant belonging to a supernatural race. Storr allowed the steam to escape by the valves, and it appeared to issue from the sides and through the skin of the gigantic quadruped.

“We are at high pressure.”

“Go ahead, Banks,” returned the colonel; “but be careful; don’t let us crush anybody.”

It was almost day. The road along the river bank was occupied by this great crowd of devotees, who seemed to have no idea of making way for us, so that to go forward and crush no one was anything but easy. The steam-whistle gave forth two or three short piercing shrieks, to which the pilgrims replied by frantic howls.

“Clear the way there!” shouted the engineer, telling the stoker at the same time to open the regulator. The steam bellowed as it rushed into the cylinders, the wheels made half a revolution, and a huge jet of white smoke issued from the trunk.

For an instant the crowd swerved aside. The regulator was then half open; the trumpeting and snorting of Behemoth increased in vehemence, and our train began to advance between the serried ranks of the natives, who seemed loath to give place to it.

“Look out, Banks! “I suddenly exclaimed.

I was leaning over the veranda rails, and I beheld a dozen of these fanatics cast themselves on the road, with the evident wish to be crushed beneath the wheels of the monstrous machine.

“Stand back there! Attention!” shouted Colonel Munro, signing to them to rise.

“Oh, the idiots “cried Captain Hood; “they take us for the car of Juggernaut! They want to get pounded beneath the feet of the sacred elephant!”

At a sign from Banks, the fireman shut off steam. The pilgrims, lying across the road, seemed desirous not to move. The fanatic crowd around them uttered loud cries, and appeared by their gestures to encourage them to persevere. The engine was at a standstill. Banks was excessively embarrassed.

All at once an idea struck him.

“Now we shall see!” he cried; and turning the tap of the clearance pipes under the boiler, strong jets of steam issued forth, and spread along the surface of the ground; while the air was filled by the shrill, harsh screams of the whistle.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” shouted Captain Hood. “Give it them, Banks! give it them well!”

The method proved successful. As the streams of vapor reached the fanatics, they sprang up with loud cries of pain. They were prepared and anxious to be run over, but not to be scalded.

The crowd drew back. The way was clear. Steam was put on in good earnest, and the wheels revolved steadily.

“Forward!” exclaimed Captain Hood, clapping his hands and laughing heartily.

And at a rapid rate Behemoth took his way along the road, vanishing in a cloud of vapor, like some mysterious visitant, from before the eyes of the wondering crowd.

CHAPTER VIII

A FEW HOURS AT BENARES

THE high road now lay open before our Steam House, a road which, via Sasseram, would lead us along the right bank of the Ganges, up to Benares.

A mile beyond the encampment our engine slackened its speed, and we proceeded at the more moderate pace of about seven miles and a half an hour. It Was Banks’s intention to camp that evening seventy-five miles from Gaya, and to pass the night quietly in the neighborhood of the little town of Sasseram.

In general, Indian roads avoid watercourses as much as possible, for they necessitate bridges, which are very expensive affairs to erect on that alluvial soil. In many places where it was found impossible to prevent a river or stream from barring the path, there is no means of transit except an ancient and clumsy ferry-boat, of no use for the conveyance of our train. Fortunately, however, we were independent.

We had that very day to cross an important river, the Sone. This stream is fed above Rhotas by its affluents, the Coput and the Coyle, and flows into the Ganges just between Arrah and Dinapore.

Nothing could be easier than our passage. The elephant took to the water quite naturally. It descended the gentle slope of the bank straight into the river, rested on the surface, and with its huge feet beating the water like a paddle-wheel, it quietly drew our floating train to the opposite bank.

Captain Hood could not contain his delight.

“A traveling house!” he would exclaim, “a house which is both a carriage and a steamboat. Now we only need wings to enable us to fly through the air, and thus to cleave space.”

“That will be done some day or other, Hood,” rejoined the engineer, quite seriously.

“I believe it, Banks,” answered the captain, no less seriously. “It will be done! But what can’t be done, is that our life should be given back to us a couple of hundred years hence to enable us to see all these marvels! Life is not all sunshine, but yet I would willingly consent to live ten centuries out of pure curiosity!”

That evening, twelve hours after leaving Gaya, we passed under the magnificent tubular railway bridge, eighty feet above the bed of the Sone, and encamped in the environs of Sasseram. We tverely wished to spend a night in this spot, to replenish our stock of wood and water, and start again at dawn of day.

This program we carried out, and next morning, before the burning midday heat began, we were far on our way.

The landscape was still much the same; that is, very rich and very cultivated. Such it appeared on approaching the marvelous valley of the Ganges. I will not stop to describe the numberless villages we passed lying in the midst of extensive rice-fields, nestling amid groves of palms, interspersed with mangoes and other trees of magnificent growth and foliage.

We never paused on our way; for even if the road was blocked by a cart drawn by slow-paced zebus, two or three shrieks from our whistle caused them to draw on one side, and we dashed past, to the great amazement of the ryots.

I was delighted and charmed at the sight of a great number of fields of roses. We were indeed not far distant from Ghazipore, the great center of production of the water, or rather essence, made from these flowers.

That evening, having traversed a tolerably level country between immense fields of poppies and tracts of rice marked out like a chess-board, we camped on the right bank of the Ganges, before the ancient Jerusalem of the Hindoos — the sacred city of Benares.

“Twenty-four hours’ halt here,” said Banks.

“At what distance from Calcutta are we now? “I asked the engineer.

“About three hundred and fifty miles,” he replied; “and you acknowledge, my friend, do you not, that we have felt nothing of the length of the way or the fatigue of the journey?”

The Ganges! Is not that a name which calls up the most poetic legends, and does it not seem as if all India were summed up in that word? Is there in the world a valley to be compared to this, extending over a space of fifteen hundred miles, and containing not less than a hundred million inhabitants? Is there a spot on the globe where more wonders have been heaped up since the appearance of the Asiatic races?

When we looked out the next morning, the 23 d of May, the rising sun was shining on the sheet of water spread out before our eyes. Several alligators of great size lay on the white sand, as if drinking in the early sunlight. Motionless, they were turned toward the radiant orb, as if they had been the most faithful votaries of Brahma. But the sight of several corpses floating by aroused them from their adoration.

It is said that these bodies float on the back when they are men, and on the chest when they are women, but from personal observation I can state that there is no truth in this statement. In a moment the monsters had darted on the prey, daily furnished to them on the waters of these rivers, and with it plunged into the depths.

The Calcutta Railway, before branching off at Allahabad ‘to run toward Delhi, keeps close to the right bank of the Ganges, although it does not follow the river in all its numerous windings. At the Mogul-Serai station, from which we were but a few miles distant, a small branch line turns off, which passes Benares by crossing the river, and, passing through the valley of the Goumtie, reaches Jaunpore at a distance of about thirty-five miles.

Benares lies on the left bank. But it was at Allahabad, and not here, that we were to cross the Ganges. Our Behemoth stood therefore in the encampment we had chosen on the evening of the 22d of May. Several boats were moored to the bank, ready to take us across to the sacred town, which I was very desirous of exploring carefully.

These cities had been so often visited by Colonel Munro that there was really nothing new to him to learn or see in this one. He had, however, at first thought of accompanying us that day; but on reflection decided to make an excursion along the banks of the river instead, with Sergeant McNeil as his companion; so the two quitted Steam House before we ourselves had started. Captain Hood had at one time been quartered at Benares, and he was anxious to go and see a few of his old friends there. Banks and I, therefore — the engineer having expressed a wish to be my guide — were the only members of our party whom a feeling of curiosity attracted to the city.

“Benares,” said Banks, is the most holy city of India. It is the Hindoo Mecca, and whoever has lived in it, if only for four-and-twenty hours, is assured of eternal happiness. One can imagine, then, what an enormous crowd of pilgrims such a belief would attract thither, and what a great population must reside in a city for which Brahma has reserved blessings of such importance.”

Benares is supposed to have existed for more than thirty centuries, and must therefore have been founded about the time when Troy disappeared. It always exercised a great influence — not political, but spiritual — over Hindoostan, and was the authorized center of the Buddhist religion until the ninth century. A religious revolution then occurred. Brahminism destroyed the ancient worship. Benares became the Brahmin capital, the center of attraction to the faithful, and it is said that 300,000 pilgrims visit it annually.

The Holy City still has its Rajah. Though he is a stipendiary of the British, and his salary is somewhat poor, he is still a prince, and inhabits a magnificent residence at Ramnagur, on the Ganges. He is a veritable descendant of the kings of Kaci, the ancient name of Benares, but has no real influence; though he would console himself for that if his pension had not been reduced to a lac of rupees, which is 100,000 rupees, or 10,000l. only enough for the pocketmoney of a Nabob in the old times.

Benares, like all towns in the valley of the Ganges, took part in the great insurrection of 1857. Its garrison was at this time composed of the 37th regiment of native infantry, a corps of irregular cavalry, and half a Sikh regiment. The English troops consisted merely of a half battery of artillery. This handful of men could not attempt to disarm the native soldiers. The authorities therefore waited with impatience for the arrival of Colonel Neil, who set out for Allahabad with the 10th regiment. Colonel Neil entered Benares with only two hundred and fifty men, and gave orders for a parade on the drill-ground.

When all were assembled, the sepoys were told to give up their arms. They refused. A fight then ensued between them and Colonel Neil’s infantry. The irregular cavalry almost immediately joined the mutineers, as did the Sikhs, who believed themselves betrayed.

The half battery, however, opened fire on them, and, notwithstanding that they fought with valor and desperation, all were put to the rout.

This fight took place outside the town. Inside there was an attempt at insurrection on the part of the Mussulmans, who hoisted the green flag, but this was soon quelled. From that time, and throughout the rest of the revolt, Benares was troubled no more, even at the time when the insurrection appeared triumphant in the province of the west.

These details Banks gave me as our boat glided slowly over the water of the Ganges.

“My dear fellow,” he remarked, “you are now going to pay your first visit to Benares. But although this city is so ancient, you must not expect to find in it any monument more than three hundred years old. Don’t be astonished at this. It is the consequence of those religious contests in which fire and sword have played such a lamentable part. But all the same, Benares is a very remarkable and curious town, and you will not regret an excursion to it.”

We now stopped our boat at a suitable distance to allow us to gaze across a bay as blue as that of Naples, at the picturesque amphitheater of terraced houses and palaces descending to the water’s edge, some of them projecting over the river, so that the waves constantly washed their base and appeared likely some day to undermine them. A pagoda of Chinese architecture, consecrated to Buddha — a perfect forest of towers, spires, and minarets — beautified the city, studded as it is with mosques and temples, the latter surmounted by the Lingam, one of the symbols of Siva, while the lofty Mohammedan mosque built by Aurungzebe crowned the marvelous panorama.

Instead of disembarking at one of the ghats, or flights of stone steps leading from the banks of the river up to the terraces, Banks directed the boatman to take us first past the quay.

Here I found the scene at Gaya reproduced, though with a different landscape. Instead of the green forests of the Phalgou, we had this holy city for a background. But the life part of the picture was much the same. Thousands of pilgrims covered the banks, the terraces, the stairs, and devoutly plunged into the stream, in rows of three or four deep. It must not be imagined that this bath was free. Sentries in red turbans, with sabers at their sides, stood on the lower steps of the ghats, and exacted tribute, in company with industrious Brahmins, who sold chaplets, amulets, charms, and other religious articles.

But besides the pilgrims who bathed on their own account, there were also traders whose only business was to draw this most sacred water, and transport it to the distant parts of the peninsula. As a security, each phial is marked with the seal of the Brahmins. But in spite of this, fraud is carried on to a great extent, as the exportation of this miraculous liquid is so considerable.

“Perhaps,” as Banks said to me, “all the water of the Ganges would not be sufficient to supply the wants of the faithful.”

I asked if these bathers did not often meet with accidents, for no one seemed to try to prevent such a thing. There were no swimmers to prevent imprudent people from venturing too far into the rapid current.

“Accidents are indeed frequent,” answered Banks; “but if the body of the devotee is lost, his soul is saved; therefore they do not concern themselves much about it.”

“And crocodiles? “I added.

“Crocodiles,” replied Banks, “usually keep their distance. All this noise terrifies them. These monsters are not to be feared so much as villains who dive under the water, seize women and children, and tear off their jewels. There is even a story about one of these wretches, who, by means of an artificial head, played the part of a crocodile for a long time, and made quite a little fortune by this profitable though dangerous trade. Finally, this impertinent intruder was devoured one day by a real alligator, and nothing was found of him but his head of tanned skin, floating on the surface of the water.

“There are also desperate fanatics who voluntarily seek death in the depths of the Ganges; and this they do with a curious species of refinement. Round their body they tie a chaplet of open but empty urns; gradually the water fills these vessels, and the devotee gently sinks down, amid the applause of the crowd.”

Our boat at last landed us at the Manmenka Ghat. Here were arranged in layers the funeral piles on which the corpses of all those who in their lifetime had had any care for their future existence, were burned. In this sacred spot, cremation is eagerly sought for by the faithful, and these funeral piles burn night and day. Rich baboos of distant territories cause themselves to be carried to Benares as soon as they are attacked by an illness which they feel will prove fatal. Benares is unquestionably the best starting point for a journey to the other world. If the deceased has only to reproach himself with venial faults, his soul is wafted on the smoke of the Manmenka straight to the regions of eternal bliss. If, on the contrary, he has been a great sinner, his soul must go and inhabit the body of a Brahmin yet to be born, for the purpose of being regenerated. It is to be hoped that his second life will be exemplary, or he will be exposed to a third trial before he is finally admitted to share the delights of Brahma's heaven.

The rest of the day we devoted to exploring the town, its principal monuments, and its bazaars, lined with dark shops after the Arab fashion. Here they sold principally fine muslin of beautiful texture, and kinkob, a rich silk material, brocaded with gold, which is one of the principal products of the Benares industry. The streets were clean, but so narrow as almost to prevent the sun's rays from penetrating to the pavement. But although it was shady, the heat was stifling. I pitied the bearers of our palanquin, who yet seemed to make no complaint themselves.

However, it being an opportunity for the poor wretches to earn a few rupees was sufficient to give them strength and spirit. But a certain Hindoo, or rather Bengalee, with a keen eye and cunning expression, had no such reason for following us, as he did, the whole day, and without much attempt at concealment. As we landed at the Manmenka Ghat, I had been speaking to Banks, and uttered aloud the name of Colonel Munro. The Bengalee, who was watching our boat put in, gave an evident start. I did not at the time pay much attention to this, but recalled the circumstance when I perceived the spy incessantly dogging our steps. He only left us to appear again, either before or behind, a few minutes later. Whether friend or foe I could not tell, but that he was a man to whom the name of Colonel Munro was not indifferent was perfectly evident.

Our palanquin soon stopped at the foot of a staircase of a hundred steps, leading from the quay to the mosque of Aurungzebe. Formerly the devotees only ascended these Santa Scala on their knees, after the manner of the faithful at Rome; but that was when a magnificent Hindoo temple dedicated to Vishnu was on the site now occupied by the mosque of the conqueror.

I should much have liked to survey Benares from the top of one of the minarets of this mosque, the construction of which is regarded as a perfect triumph of architecture. Although one hundred and thirty-two feet in height, they have scarcely the diameter of a manufactory chimney, and yet the cylindrical shaft contains a winding stair. No one is allowed to ascend, and there is a reason for this prohibition: the two minarets are already sensibly out of the perpendicular, and unless endowed with the vitality of the Tower of Pisa, they will end by coming down some day.

On leaving the mosque of Aurungzebe, I found the Bengalee waiting for us at the door. This time I looked fixedly at him, and he lowered his eyes. Before drawing Banks' attention to this incident, I wished to ascertain if this individual would persist in his suspicious behavior, and for the present I said nothing.

You may count pagodas and mosques by hundreds in this marvelous town of Benares. Also splendid palaces — the most beautiful of which is unquestionably that of the King of Nagpore. Few rajahs indeed neglect to secure a house in the Holy City, and always come to it at the time of the great religious festivals of Mela.

I could not attempt to visit all these buildings during the little time we had at our disposal. I contented myself, therefore, with making a visit to the temple of Bicheshwar, in which is set up the Lingam of Siva. This — a shapeless stone, looked upon as part of the body of this the most savage god of the Hindoo mythology — covers a well, the stagnant waters of which possess, they say, miraculous virtues. I saw also the Mankarnika, or sacred fountain, where devotees bathe, to the great profit of the Brahmins; then the Manmundir, an observatory built two hundred years ago by the Emperor Akbar.

I had heard of a palace of monkeys, which all tourists never failed to visit. A Parisian naturally imagined himself about to behold something like the celebrated monkey-house in the Jardin des Plantes. But there was nothing of the sort. I found that this palace was a temple, called the Dourga-Khound, situated a little beyond the outskirts. The monkeys were by no means shut up in cages. They roamed freely through the courts, leaping from wall to wall, climbing to the tops of enormous mango-trees, noisily disputing over the parched corn brought byTheir visitors, and to which they are very partial.

There, as everywhere else, the Brahmins, who keep the Dourga-Khound, levy a small contribution, which evidently makes this profession one of the most lucrative in India.

It is needless to say that we were rather done up by the heat, as toward evening we began to think of returning to Steam House. We had breakfasted and dined at Secrole, in one of the best hotels of that English town, and yet I must say that the cuisine made us regret that of Monsieur Parazard.

As we were stepping into our boat to return to the right bank of the Ganges, I again caught sight of the Bengalee a short distance from us. A skiff containing a Hindoo was waiting for him, into which he got. Did he mean to cross the river, and so follow us to our encampment? This looked suspicious.

“Banks,” said I in a low tone, pointing to the Bengalee, “that fellow is a spy, who has followed us every step of the way.”

“I have seen him,” returned Banks; “and I also noticed that it was the colonel’s name, uttered by you, which first put him on the alert.”

“Isn’t there any — ? “I said.

“No; leave him alone,” said Banks. “Better not to let him know that he is suspected — besides, he has gone now.”

In fact, the Bengalee’s canoe had already disappeared among the numerous vessels of all shapes and sizes covering the dark waters of the Ganges. Banks turned to our boatman. “Do you know that man?” he asked, in a tone of affected indifference.

“No; this is the first time I have seen him,” replied the native.

On reaching our encampment, we found Colonel Munro and Sergeant McNeil already there. Banks asked the sergeant if anything had happened during our absence. “Nothing,” was the reply.

“You haven’t seen any suspicious-looking person prowling about?”

‘ No, Mr. Banks. Have you any reason for suspecting — ?”

“We have been dogged during our excursion in Benares,” answered the engineer, “and I did not like the look of the fellow who followed us.”

“The spy was — ?”

“A Bengalee, who was put on the alert by the mention of Colonel Munro’s name.”

“What could the man want with us?”

“I don’t know, McNeil. We must keep a lookout.”

“We will!” returned the sergeant emphatically.

CHAPTER IX

ALLAHABAD

THE distance between Benares and Allahabad is about eighty miles, and the road lies on the right bank of the Ganges between the railway and the river. Storr had loaded the tender with a good supply of coal, so that the elephant would have no lack of nourishment for several days. Well cleaned — I had almost said well curry-combed — as bright as if he had just come out of the workshop, he impatiently waited the moment for starting. He didn’t exactly paw the ground, but the quivering of the wheels betrayed the tension of the steam which filled his lungs of steel. Our train started early in the morning of the 24th, at a rate of three to four miles an hour.

The night passed quietly, and we saw nothing of the Bengalee.

I may as well mention here, once for all, that each day’s program, of getting up, going to bed, breakfasts, luncheons, dinners, and siestas, was carried out with military exactitude. Our life in the Steam House went on as regularly as in the bungalow at Calcutta. The landscape was constantly changing under our eyes, without any perceptible movement of our house. We soon grew accustomed to our life, as do passengers on board an ocean steamer, though we had nothing monotonous, for, unlike the sea, our horizon was ever changing.

Toward eleven o’clock we caught sight, on the plain, of a curious mausoleum, erected in honor of two holy personages of Islam, “Cassim-Soliman,” father and son. Half an hour after this we passed the important fortress of Chunar, an impregnable rock crowned by picturesque ramparts, and rising perpendicularly one hundred and fifty feet above the river.

Of course we halted to pay this place a visit, as it is one of the most important fortresses in the valley of the Ganges.

It is a very economical place with regard to expenditure of powder and bullets, for when an assaulting column endeavors to scale the walls, it is immediately crushed by an avalanche of rocks and stones kept for the purpose.

At its foot lies the town which bears its name, the houses coquettishly peeping out from among the verdure.

In Benares, as we have seen, there exist many privileged places, which are considered by the Hindoos as the most sacred in the world. If one began to count, the number scattered over the peninsula would amount to hundreds. Chunar possesses one of these miraculous spots. Here you are shown a marble slab, to which some god or other comes regularly to take his daily siesta. It is true that he is invisible, so we did not stop see him.

About two o’clock next day we forded the little river Tonsa, at that time only containing a foot of water, and by the evening were encamped at the end of one of the suburbs of Allahabad.

On the next day Banks again wished to accompany me during the few hours I was able to spend in Allahabad. One might easily have spent three days in exploring the three towns of which it is composed, but it is less curious than Benares, although numbered among the holy cities.

There is really nothing to say about the Hindoo part of the town. It is simply a mass of low houses, separated by narrow streets, shaded by magnificent tamarind-trees.

Of the English town and cantonments, there is not much to be said either. The fine well-planted avenues, wealthy habitations, and wide squares, all look as if the town was destined to become a great capitaL

Allahabad is situated in a vast plain, bounded on the north and south by the double course of the Jumna and Ganges. It is called the "Plain of Almsgiving," because the Hindoo princes have at all times come here to perform works of charity. M. Rousselet, quoting a passage from the "Life of Hionen Thsang," says, "It is more meritorious to give away one piece of money in this place, than a hundred thousand elsewhere."

The fort of Allahahad is well worth a visit. It is constructed to the west of the great Almsgiving Plain, from which its high granite walls stand boldly out In the middle of the fort is a palace, now used as an arsenal, though formerly the favorite residence of the Sultan Akbar. In one of the corners is the Lat of Feroze Schachs, a superb monolith thirty-six feet in height, supporting a lion. Not far off is a little temple, which no Hindoo can visit, as they are refused admission into the fort, although it is one of the most sacred places in the world.

Banks told me that the fort of Allahabad also has its legend, which reminds one of the story relative to the reconstruction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. When the Sultan wished to build this fort, it seems that the stones turned very refractory. Directly a wall was built, it tumbled itself down again. The oracle was consulted. The oracle replied, as usual, that a voluntary victim must be offered to remove this spell.

A Hindoo offered himself as a holocaust; he was sacrificed, and the fort was soon finished. This man was called Brog, Ind that is the reason why the town is still designated by the double name of Brog-Allahabad.

Banks took us to the deservedly celebrated gardens of Khousroo. Here numerous Mohammedan mausoleums stand under the shade of beautiful tamarinds. One of them is the last resting-place of the sultan from whom these gardens take their name. On one of the white marble walls is printed the palm of an enormous hand. This was pointed out to us with a complacency which was lacking in the exhibition of the sacred impressions at Gaya. It And leaving the drawing-room, the engineer opened the door of the sergeant's cabin.

He was not there.

"Where is McNeil?" asked Banks of Gofni, who was getting ready to wait at table.

"He has left the camp," replied Gofimi.

"How long?"

"He went nearly an hour ago, by Colonel Munro's orders."

"You do not know where he has gone?"

"No, sahib, and I cannot tell why he went."

"Nothing fresh has happened here since we left?"

"Nothing, sahib."

Banks returned, and telling me of the sergeant's absence for a reason that no one knew, he repeated, "I do not know what it is, but very certainly there is something up. We must wait and see."

Every one now sat down to table. Ordinarily, Colonel Munro took part in the conversation during meals. He liked to hear us relate our adventures and excursions, and was interested in all we had been doing during the day.

I always took care to avoid speaking of anything that could in the slightest degree remind him of the mutiny. I think that he perceived this; but whether he appreciated it or not, it was sometimes difficult enough to maintain this reserve, especially when we talked of towns such as Benares and Allahabad.

During dinner, on the evening of which I speak, I feared being obliged to speak of Allahabad. I need not have been afraid, however. Colonel Munro questioned neither Banks nor myself about the occupation of our day. He remained mute during the whole of dinner, and as time went on his preoccupation visibly increased. He cast frequent glances along the road which led to the cantonments, and several times was evidently on the point of rising from table, the better to see in that direction. It was plain that he was impatiently awaiting the return of Sergeant McNeil.

Our meal was dull enough. Hood looked interrogatively at Banks, as if to ask him what was the matter, but Banks knew no more than he did.

When dinner at last came to an end, Colonel Munro, instead of as usual lying down to take a nap, stepped down from the veranda, went a few paces along the road, gave one long look down it; then, returning toward us, "Banks, Hood, and you, too, Maucler," he said, "will you accompany me as far as the nearest houses of the cantonments?"

We all immediately rose and followed the colonel, who walked slowly on without uttering a word. After proceeding thus for about a hundred paces, Sir Edward stopped before a post standing on the right hand side of the road, and having a notice stuck on it. “Read that,” he said.

It was the placard, already more than two months old, which put a price on the head of Nana Sahib, and gave notice of his presence in the presidency of Bombay.

Banks and Hood could scarcely conceal their disappointment. While still in Calcutta, and during the journey, they had so managed, up to the present time, that this notice had never come under the colonel’s eyes. But now a vexatious chance had baffled all their precautions.

“Banks!” said Sir Edward, seizing the engineer’s hand, “did you know of this notice? “Banks made no reply.

“You knew two months ago,” continued the colonel, “of this announcement that Nana Sahib was in the presidency of Bombay, and yet you said nothing to me.”

Banks remained silent, not knowing what to say.

“Well, yes, colonel,” exclaimed Captain Hood, “we did know of it, but what was the use of telling you? Who was to prove that the announcement is true, and what was the good of bringing to your mind those painful recollections which do you so much harm?”

“Banks,” cried Colonel Munro, his face, as it were, transformed, “have you forgotten that it is my right, that I of all men must do justice on that wretch? Know this! when I consented to leave Calcutta, I did so, because this journey would take me to the north of India, because I never even for a single day believed in the death of Nana Sahib, and because I will never relinquish my purpose of vengeance. In setting out with you, I had but one idea, one hope. For the attainment of my purpose, on the chances of the journey, and the aid of heaven, I had relied. I was right in so doing. Heaven directed me to this notice. It is in the south, and not in the north, that Nana Sahib must be sought for. Be it so; I shall go south."

We had not been mistaken in our fears. It was but too true. A fancy — nay more, a fixed idea — still governed the mind of Colonel Munro. He had just disclosed it to us.

"Munro," returned Banks, "if I said nothing to you about this, it was because I did not believe in Nana Sahib's being in the Bombay Presidency. It is probable that the authorities have been once more mistaken. In fact, that notice is dated the 6th of March, and since that time nothing has been heard to corroborate the statement of the appearance of the nabob."

At first Colonel Munro made no answer to the engineer's observation. He took another look along the road, then said, "My friends, I am about to hear the latest news. McNeil has gone to Allahabad with a letter for the governor. In a few minutes I shall know whether Nana Sahib did indeed reappear in one of the western provinces; whether he is there still, or whether he has again been lost sight of."

"And if he has been seen, if the fact is indisputable, what shall you do, Munro?" asked Banks, grasping the colonel's hand.

"I shall go," replied Sir Edward, "as is my duty, where justice leads me."

"That is positively decided, Munro?"

“Yes, Banks, positively. You must continue your travels without me, my friends — I shall take the train to Bombay this evening.”

“But not alone,” responded the engineer, turning toward us. “We will accompany you, Munro.”

“Yes, yes, colonel,” exclaimed Captain Hood. “We shall certainly not let you go without us. Instead of hunting wild beasts, we will hunt villains.”

Colonel Munro,” I added, “will you allow me to join the captain as one of your friends?”

“Yes, Maucler,” replied Banks; “this very evening we will leave Allahabad.”

“It is needless,” said a grave voice behind us.

We all turned, and beheld Sergeant McNeil standing with a newspaper in his hand. “Read, colonel,” said he. “This is what the governor desired me to show you.”

Sir Edward took the paper, and read as follows: “The Governor of the Bombay Presidency requests the public to take notice that the proclamation of the 6th of March, respecting the nabob, Dandou Pant, must now be considered as canceled. Nana Sahib was yesterday attacked in the defiles of the Sautpourra mountains, where he had taken refuge with his band, and was killed in the skirmish. The body has been identified by the inhabitants of Cawnpore and Lucknow. A finger is wanting on the left hand, and it is known that Nana Sahib had one amputated at the time when his mock obsequies were celebrated to make people believe in his death. The kingdom of India has now nothing further to dread from the machinations of the cruel nabob who has cost her so much blood.”

Colonel Munro read these lines in a hollow voice; then the paper fell from his hands.

We remained silent. Nana Sahib’s death, now indisputable, delivered us from all fear as to the future.

Colonel Munro said nothing for some minutes, but stood with his hand pressed over his eyes, as if to efface all frightful recollections. Then, “When should we leave Allahabad?” he asked.

“To-morrow, at daybreak,” replied the engineer.

“Banks,” resumed Sir Edward, “could we not stop for a few hours at Cawnpore?”

“You wish it?”

“Yes, Banks, I should like it — I must see Cawnpore once again — for the last time.”

“We shall be there in a couple of days,” replied the engineer, quietly.

“And after that?” said the colonel.

“After that,” answered Banks, “we shall continue our expedition to the north of India.”

“Yes, to the north! to the north!” said the colonel, in a tone which stirred me to the depths of my heart.

In truth, it was likely that Sir Edward Munro still entertained some doubt as to the real result of that last skirmish between Nana Sahib and the English. Yet what reason could he have for disbelieving such evidence as this? The future alone could explain.

CHAPTER X

VIA DOLOROSA

THE kingdom of Oude was formerly one of the most important, as it is still one of the richest, provinces in India. It had many sovereigns — some strong, some feeble. The weakness of one of them, named Wajid Ali Shah, brought about the annexation of his kingdom to the dominions of the Company, on the 6th of February, 1857.

This took place only a few months before the outbreak of this insurrection, and it was in Oude that the most frightful massacres were committed, and followed by the most terrible reprisals. The names of two cities remain in mournful celebrity ever since that time: Lucknow and Cawnpore.

Lucknow is the capital; Cawnpore one of the principal towns of the ancient kingdom. We reached the latter place on the morning of the 29th of May, having followed the right bank of the Ganges through a level plain covered with immense fields of indigo. For two days we had traveled at a speed of three leagues an hour, and were now nearly one thousand “kilometers “from Calcutta.

Cawnpore is a town of about 60,000 inhabitants. It occupies a strip of land about five miles in length, on the right bank of the Ganges. There is a military cantonment, in which are quartered 7,000 men. The traveler would vainly seek for anything worthy of his attention in this city, although it is of very ancient origin; anterior, they say, to the Christian era. No sentiment of curiosity, then, brought us to Cawnpore. The wishes of Sir Edward alone led us thither.

Early on the morning of the 30th May we quitted our encampment, and Banks, Captain Hood, and I, followed the colonel and Sergeant McNeil along that melancholy route on which the points of mournful interest were for the last time to be revisited.

I will here repeat the facts, as related to me by Banks, which it is necessary should be known. Cawnpore, which was garrisoned by reliable troops at the time of the annexation of the kingdom of Oude, contained at the outbreak of the mutiny no more than two hundred and fifty British soldiers to three regiments of native infantry (the 1st, 53d, and 56th), two regiments of cavalry, and a battery of Bengal artillery. There were in the place besides a considerable number of Europeans, workmen, clerks, merchants, etc. with 850 women and children of the 32d regiment, which garrisoned Lucknow.

Colonel Munro had been living at Cawnpore for several years. And it was there he met the lady who became his wife. Miss Hanlay was a charming young Englishwoman, high-spirited, intelligent, and noble-minded, worthy of the love of such a man as the colonel, who adored her. She and her mother resided in a bungalow near Cawnpore, and there, in 1855, she was married to Edward Munro.

Two years afterward, in 1857, when the first acts of rebellion occurred at Meerut, Colonel Munro had to rejoin his regiment at a day’s notice. He was therefore obliged to leave his wife with his mother-in-law at Cawnpore, but thinking that place unsafe, he charged them to make immediate preparations for departure to Calcutta. Alas, his fears were but too surely justified by what followed. The departure of Mrs. Hanlay and Lady Munro was delayed, and the consequences were fatal. The unfortunate ladies were unable to leave Cawnpore.

Sir Hugh Wheeler was then in command of the division — an upright, honorable soldier, who was but too soon to fall a victim to the crafty designs of Nana Sahib. The nabob at that time occupied his castle of Bithour, ten miles from Cawnpore, and affected to be on the best possible terms with the Europeans.

“You are aware, my dear Maucler,” continued Banks, “that the first outbreak of the insurrection took place at Meerut and Delhi. The news reached Cawnpore on the 4th of May. And on the same day the 1st regiment of sepoys exhibited symptoms of hostility. At this moment Nana Sahib came forward with an offer of his services to the Government. General Wheeler was so ill-advised as to place confidence in the good faith of this villain and knave, who immediately sent his own soldiers to occupy the Treasury Buildings.

“That same day an irregular regiment of sepoys, on its way to Cawnpore, mutinied and massacred its British officers at the very gates of the town. The danger then became evident in all its magnitude. General Wheeler gave orders that all Europeans should take refuge in the barracks,

where were quartered the women and children of the 32d regiment, then at Lucknow. These barracks were situated at the point nearest the road from Allahabad, by which alone succor could arrive.

“It was there that Lady Munro and her mother were shut up; and throughout this imprisonment she manifested the utmost sympathy for her companions in misfortune, tending them with her own hands, assisting them with money, encouraging them by words and example; in short, showing herself to be, as I have told you she was, a noble, heroic woman.

“The arsenal was soon after confided to a guard of the soldiers of Nana Sahib. Then the traitor displayed the standard of rebellion; and, on the 7th of June, the sepoys,

at their own desire, attacked the barracks, which was not defended by more than three hundred men who could be relied upon. They held out bravely, however, against the besiegers’ fire, beneath showers of projectiles; suffering sickness of all sorts, dying of hunger and thirst, for the supply of provisions was insufficient, and they had no water, because the wells dried up.

“This resistance lasted until the 27th of June. Nana Sahib then proposed a capitulation and General Wheeler committed the unpardonable mistake of signing it, notwithstanding the earnest entreaties of Lady Munro, who besought him to continue the contest.

“In consequence of this capitulation, about five hundred, persons — men, women, and children — Lady Munro and her mother being of the number, were embarked in boats, which were to descend the Ganges, and convey them to Allahabad. Scarcely were these unmoored, than the sepoys opened fire; bullets and grape-shot fell upon them like hail. Some of the boats sank, others were burned; one alone succeeded in passing several miles down the river. In this boat were Lady Munro and her mother, and for an instant they could believe themselves saved. But the soldiers of the Nana pursued, overtook, captured, and brought them back to the cantonments.

“There the prisoners were divided. All the men were put to death at once. The women and children were added to the number of those who had not been massacred on the 27th of June. These two hundred victims, for whom protracted agony was reserved, were shut up in a bungalow, the name of which, Bibi-Ghar, will ever be held in sorrowful remembrance.”

“How did these horrible details become known to you? “I inquired.

“They were related to me,” replied Banks, “by an old sergeant of the 32d. This man escaped by a miracle, and was sheltered by the Rajah of Raischwarah, a province of the kingdom of Oude, who received him as well as some other fugitives with the greatest humanity.”

“And Lady Munro and her mother? — what became of them?”

“My dear friend,” replied Banks, “we have no direct information of what happened, but it is only too easy to conjecture. In fact, the sepoys were masters of Cawnpore, and they were so until the 15th of July, during which period (nineteen days, which were like so many years! The unhappy victims were in hourly expectation of succor, which only came too late. General Havelock was marching from Calcutta to the relief of Cawnpore, and, after repeatedly defeating the mutineers, he entered it on the 17th of July.

“But two days previously, upon hearing that the British troops had crossed the river Pandou-Naddi, Nana Sahib resolved to signalize the last hours of his occupation of Cawnpore by frightful massacres. No fate seemed to him too severe for the invaders of India. Some prisoners, who had shared the captivity of the prisoners at Bibi-Ghar, were brought, and murdered before his eyes.

“The crowd of women and children remained, and among them Lady Munro and her mother. A platoon of the 6th regiment of sepoys received orders to fire upon them through the windows of Bibi-Ghar. The execution began, but not being carried out quickly enough to please the Nana, who was about to be compelled to beat a retreat, this sanguinary prince sent for

Mussulman butchers to assist the soldiery. It was the butchery of a slaughter-house.

“Next day, the children and women, dead or alive, were flung into a well; and when Havelock’s soldiers came up, this well, charged to the brim with corpses, was still reeking!

“Then began the reprisals. A certain number of mutineers, accomplices of Nana Sahib, had fallen into the hands of General Havelock. And the following day he issued that terrible Order of the Day, the terms of which I shall never forget:-

“‘ The well in which lie the mortal remains of the poor women and children massacred by order of the miscreant Nana Sahib, is to be filled up and carefully covered over in the form of a tomb. A detachment of European British soldiers, under an officer’s command, will fulfill the pious duty this evening. But the house and rooms in which the massacre took place are not to be cleansed by the fellow-countrymen of the victims. The officer is to understand that every drop of innocent blood is to be removed by the tongues of the mutineers condemned to die. After having heard the sentence of death, each man is to be conducted to the place of the massacre, and forced to cleanse a portion of the floors. Care must be taken to, render the task as repulsive as possible to the religious sentiments of the condemned men; and the lash, if necessary, must not be spared. This being accomplished, the sentence will be carried out on gallows erected near the house.’”

“This,” continued Banks, with deep emotion, “was the order for the day. It was executed in all particulars. But it could not restore the lost! And when, two days afterward, Colonel Munro arrived and sought for tidings or traces of Lady Munro and her mother, he found nothing — nothing!”

All this was related to me by Banks before reaching Cawnpore. And now it was toward the scene of these horrors that the colonel directed his steps. But first he revisited the bungalow where Lady Munro had lived in her youth, and where he had seen her for the last time.

It was situated a little outside the suburbs, not far from the line of military cantonments. Nothing of the house remained but ruins, blackened gables, fallen trees decaying on the ground; all was desolation, for the colonel had permitted nothing to be repaired. After the lapse of ten years the bungalow remained just as it had been left by the incendiaries.

We spent an hour in this desolate place. Sir Edward moved silently among ruins which awoke so many recollections, sometimes closing his eyes, as if in thought, he recalled the happy existence which nothing could ever restore to him. At length hastily, and as if doing violence to his feelings, he returned to us, and left the house.

We almost began to hope this visit would satisfy him. But no! Sir Edward Munro had resolved to drain to the dregs the bitterness of the sorrow which overwhelmed him in this fatal town. He wished to go to the barracks where his heroic wife had devoted herself so nobly to the care of those who endured there the horrors of a siege.

These barracks stood in the plain outside the town, and a church was being built on the spot. In order to reach it, we followed a macadamized road shaded by fine trees, and among the unfinished new buildings we could distinguish remains of the brick walls which had formed part of the works of defense raised by General Wheeler.

After Colonel Munro had long gazed motionless and in silence upon the ruins of the barracks, he turned to go toward Bibi-Ghar, but Banks, unable to restrain himself, seized his arm, as though to arrest his steps.

Sir Edward looked steadfastly in his face, and said in a terribly calm voice, “Let us proceed.”

“Munro! I beseech of you!”

“Then I will go alone.”

There was no resisting him. We went toward Bibi-Ghar, which is approached through gardens very well laid out, and planted with fine trees. The building is of octagonal form, and has a colonnade in Gothic style, which surrounds the place where was the well, now filled up and closed in by a casing of stone. This forms a kind of pedestal on which stands a white marble statue representing the Angel of Pity, one of the last works due to the chisel of the sculptor Marochetti.

It was Lord Canning, Governor-General of India during the fearful insurrection of 1857, who caused this monument to be erected. It was constructed from the design of Colonel Yule, of the engineers, who himself wished to have defrayed all the expenses. Here Sir Edward Munro could no longer restrain his tears. He fell on his knees beside the statue; while Sergeant McNeil, who was close beside him, wept in silence; and we, in the deepest pain, stood looking on, powerless to console this unfathomable grief.

At length Banks, aided by McNeil, succeeded in drawing our friend away from the spot, and I thought of the words traced with his bayonet by one of Havelock’s soldiers on the stone brink of the well: “Remember Cawnpore!”

CHAPTER XI

THE MONSOON

AT eleven o’clock we returned to the encampment, anxious to leave Cawnpore as quickly as possible; but our engine required some trifling repairs, and it was impossible to do so before the following morning.

Part of a day, then, was at my disposal. I considered that I could not employ it better than by visiting Lucknow, as Banks did not intend to pass through that place, where Colonel Munro would again have been brought in contact with reminiscences of the war. He was right. These vivid recollections were already far too poignant.

At midday, then, quitting Steam House, I took the little branch railway which unites Cawnpore to Lucknow. The distance is not more than twenty leagues, and in a couple of hours I found myself in this important capital of the kingdom of Oude, of which I wished merely to obtain a glance, or, as I might say, an impression. I soon perceived the truth of what I had heard respecting the great buildings of Lucknow, built during the reigns,of the Mohammedan emperors of the seventeenth century.

A Frenchman, named Martin, a native of Lyons, and a common soldier in the army of Lally-Tollendal, became, in 1730, a favorite with the king. He it was who designed, and in fact may be called the architect of, the so-called marvels of the capital of Oude.

The Kaiser Bagh, or official residence of the sovereigns, is a whimsical and fantastic medley of every style of architecture which could possibly emanate from the imagination of a corporal, and is a most superficial structure. The interior is nothing; all the labor has been lavished on the outside which is at once Hindoo, Chinese, Moorish, and — European. It is the same with regard to another smaller palace, called the Farid Bakch, which is likewise the work of Martin.

As to the Imambara, built in the midst of the fortress by Kaifiatoulla, the greatest architect of India in the seventeenth century, it is really superb, and, bristling with its hundreds of bell-towers, has a grand and imposing effect!

I could not leave Lucknow without seeing the Constantine Palace, which is another of the original performances of the French corporal, and bears his name. I also wished to visit the adjacent garden, called Secunder Bagh, where hundreds of sepoys were executed for having violated the tomb of the humble soldier of fortune before they abandoned the town.

Another French name besides that of Martin is honored at Lucknow. A non-commissioned officer, formerly of the Chasseurs d’Afrique, named Duprat, so distinguished himself by his bravery during the mutiny, that the rebels offered to make him their leader. Duprat nobly refused, notwithstanding the promises of wealth held out to tempt him, and the threats with which he was menaced when he stood firm. He remained faithful to the English. But the sepoys, who had failed to make him a traitor, directed against him their special vengeance, and he was slain in an encounter. “Infidel dog!” they had said on his refusal to join them, “we will have thee in spite of thyself! “And they had him; but only when he was dead!

The names of these two French soldiers were united in the reprisals; for the sepoys who had insulted the tomb of the one, and prepared the grave of the other, were ruthlessly put to death!

At length — having admired the magnificent parks which encircle this great city of 500,000 inhabitants as with a belt of verdure and flowers, and having ridden on elephant-back through the principal streets, and the fine boulevard of Hazrat Gaudj — I took the train, and returned to Cawnpore.

Next morning, the 31st of May, we resumed our route.

“Now then!” cried Captain Hood; “we are done at last with your Allahabads, your Cawnpores, Lucknows, and the rest, for which I care about as much as I do for a blank cartridge!”

“Yes, Hood, we have got through all that,” replied Banks; “and now for the north, toward which we are to travel almost in a direct line, to the base of the Himalayas.”

Bravo!” resumed the captain. “What I call real India is not the provinces, crammed with native towns and swarming with people, but the region where live in freedom my friends the elephants, lions, tigers, panthers, leopards, bears. bisons, and serpents. That is, in reality, the only habitable part of the whole peninsula! You will see that it is so, Maucler, and you will have no reason to regret the valley of the Ganges!”

“In your society I can regret nothing, my friend,” replied I.

“There are, however,” said Banks, “some very interesting towns in the northwest; such as Delhi, Agra, and Lahore. . .”

“Oh! my dear fellow! who ever heard of those miserable little places!” cried Hood.

“Miserable, indeed!” replied Banks. “Let me tell you, Hood, they are magnificent cities! And,” he continued, turning to me, “we must manage to let you see them, Maucler, without throwing out the captain’s plans for a sporting campaign.”

“All right, Banks,” said Hood; “but it is only from to-day that I consider our journey to have fairly commenced.”

Presently, in a loud voice, he shouted, “Fox!”

“Here, captain!” answered his servant.

“Fox! get all the guns, rifles, and revolvers in good order!”

“They are so, sir.”

“Prepare the cartridges.”

“They are prepared.”

“Is everything ready?”

“Quite ready, sir.”

“Make everything still more ready.”

“I will, sir.”

“It won’t be long before the thirty-eighth takes his place on your glorious list, Fox!”

“The thirty-eighth!” cried the man, with sudden light in his eye; “he won’t have to complain of the nice little ball I am keeping ready for him!”

“Get along with you, Fox!”

With a military salute Fox faced about, and re-entered the gun-room.

I will now give an outline of the plan for the second part of our journey — a plan which only unforeseen events were to induce us to alter.

By this route we were to ascend the course of the Ganges toward the northwest for a long way, and then, turning sharp to the north, continue our way between two rivers; one a tributary of the great river, the other of the Goinni. By this means a considerable number of streams would be avoided; and, passing by Biswah, we should rise in an oblique direction to the lower ranges of the mountains of Nepaul across the western part of Oude and Rohilkund This route had been ingeniously planned by Banks so as to surmount all difficulties. If coal were to fail in the north of Hindoostan, we were sure of having abundance of wood, and Behemoth would easily keep up any rate of speed we wished, on good roads through the grandest forests of the Indian Peninsula.

It was agreed that we might easily reach Biswah in six days, allowing for stoppages at convenient places, and time for the sportsmen of the party to exhibit their prowess. Besides Captain Hood, with Fox and Goilmi, could easily explore the vicinity of the roads, while Behemoth moved slowly along.

I was permitted to join them, although I was far from being an experienced hunter, and I occasionally did so.

I ought to mention that from the moment our journey took this new aspect, Colonel Munro became more sociable. Once fairly among the plains and forests beyond the valley of the Ganges, he appeared to resume the calm and even tenor of the life he used to lead at Calcutta, although it was impossible to suppose he could forget that we were gradually approaching the north of India, the region whither he was attracted as by an irresistible fatality. His conversation became more animated, both at meals and during the pleasant evening hours when we halted. As for McNeil, he seemed more gloomy than usual. Had the sight of BibiGhar revived his hatred and thirst for vengeance?

“Nana Sahib killed?” said he to me one day. “No, no, sir; they have not done that for us yet!”

The first day of our journey passed without any incident worth recording. Neither Captain Hood nor Fox had a chance of aiming at any sort of animal. It was quite distressing, and so extraordinary that we began to wonder whether the apparition of a steam elephant could be keeping the savage dwellers of the plains at a distance. We passed several jungles, known to be the resort of tigers and other carnivorous feline creatures. Not one showed himself, although the hunters kept away full two miles from us.

They were forced to devote their energies, with Niger and Fan, to shooting for Monsieur Parazard’s larder. Ho expected to be supplied regularly, and considered game for the table of paramount importance, most unreasonably despising the tigers and other beasts Fox talked to him about.

Disdainfully shrugging his shoulders, he would ask, “Are they good to eat?”

In the evening we fixed our camp beneath the shelter of a group of enormous banyans. The night was as tranquil as the day had been calm. No roars or howlings of wild animals broke the silence. The snorting of Behemoth himself was stilled.

When the camp-fires were extinguished, Banks, to please the captain, refrained from connecting the electric current by which the elephant’s eyes would have become two powerful lamps. But nothing came of it. It was the same the two following nights. Hood was getting desperate.

“What can have happened to my kingdom of Oude?” repeated the captain. “It has been translated! There are no more tigers here than in the lowlands of Scotland!”

“Perhaps there may have been battues here lately,” suggested Colonel Munro. “The animals may have emigrated en masse. But cheer up, my friend, and wait till we reach the foot of the mountains of Nepaul. You will find scope for your hunting instincts there!”

“It is devoutly to be hoped it may be so, colonel,” replied Hood, sadly shaking his head. “Otherwise we may as well recast our balls, and make small shot of them!”

The 3d of June was one of the hottest days which we had endured. There was not a breath of wind, and had not the road been shaded by huge trees, I think we must have been literally baked in our rooms. It seemed possible that, in heat like this, wild animals did not care to quit their dens even during the night.

Next morning, at sunrise, the horizon to the westward for the first time appeared somewhat misty. We then had presented to our eyes a magnificent spectacle — the phenomenon of the mirage, which is called in some parts of India seekote, or castles in the air; and in others, dessasur, or illusion.

What we saw was not a visionary sheet of water, with curious effects of refraction, but a complete chain of low hills, crowned by castles of the most fantastic form, resembling the rocky heights of some Rhenish valley with their ancient fastnesses of the Margraves. In a moment we seemed transported not only to that romantic part of Europe, but into the Middle Ages five or six centuries back. This phenomenon was surprisingly clear, and gave us a strange sensation of absolute reality. So much so, that the gigantic elephant-engine, with all its apparatus of modern machinery, advancing toward the habitations of men of Europe, in the eleventh century, struck us as far more out of place and unnatural than when traversing, beneath clouds of vapor, the country of Vishnu and Brahma.

“We thank you, fair Lady Nature!” cried Captain Hood; “instead of the minarets and cupolas, mosques and pagodas, we have been accustomed to, you are spreading before us charming old towns and castles of feudal times!”

“How poetical you are this morning, Hood!” returned Banks. “Pray have you been reading romantic ballads lately?”

“Laugh away, Banks; quiz me as much as you like, but just look there! See how objects in the foreground are growing in size! The bushes are turning into trees, the hills into mountains, the — f “Why the very cats will be tigers soon, won’t they, Hood?”

“Ah, Banks! how jolly that would be!... There!” continued the captain, “my Rhenish castles are melting away; the town is crumbling to ruins, and we return to realities, seeing only a landscape in the kingdom of Oude, which the very wild animals have deserted.”

The sun, rising above the eastern horizon, quickly dissipated the magical effects of refraction. The fortresses, like castles built of cards, sank down with the hills, which were suddenly transformed into plains.

“Well, now that the mirage has vanished, and with it Hood’s poetic vein, shall I tell you, my friends,” said Banks, what the phenomenon presages?”

“Say on, great engineer!” quoth the captain.

“Nothing less than a great change of weather,” replied Banks. “The early days of June are usually marked by climacteric changes. The turn of the monsoon will bring the periodical rainy season.”

“My dear Banks,” said I, “let it rain as it will, we are snug enough here. Under cover like this I should prefer a deluge to heat such as — ”

“All right, my dear friend, you shall be satisfied,” returned he; “I believe the rain is not far off, and we shall soon see the first clouds in the southwest.”

Banks was right. Toward evening the western horizon became obscured by vapors, showing that the monsoon, as frequently happens, would commence during the night. These mists, charged with electricity, came across the peninsula from the Indian Ocean, like so many vast leathern bottles out of the cellars of AEolus, filled full of storm, tempest, and hurricane.

Other signs, well known to Anglo-Indians, were observed during the day. Spiral columns of very fine dust whirled along the roads, in a manner quite unlike that which was raised by our heavy wheels. They resembled a number of those tufts of downy wool which can be set in motion by an electrical machine. The ground might, therefore, be compared to an immense receiver in which for several days electricity had been stored up. This dust was strangely tinted with yellow, and had a most curious effect, each atom seeming to shine from a little luminous center. At times we appeared to be traveling through flames, harmless flames, it is true, though neither in color nor vivacity resembling the ignis fatuus.

On this evening the encampment was arranged with greater care than usual, because, if the heat of the following day should prove equally overpowering, Banks proposed to prolong the halt, so as to pursue the journey during the night.

Colonel Munro was well pleased to think of spending some hours in this noble forest, so shady, so deeply calm. Everybody was satisfied with the arrangement; some because they really required rest, others because they longed once more to endeavor to fall in with some animal worth firing at. It is easy to guess who those persons were.

“Fox! Goiimi! it is only seven o’clock!” cried Captain Hood, as soon as we came to a halt; “let’s take a turn in the forest before it is quite dark. Will you come with us, Maucler?”

“My dear Hood,” said Banks, before I had time to answer, “you had better not leave the encampment. The weather looks threatening. Should the storm burst, you would find some trouble in getting back to us. To-morrow, if we remain here, you can go.”

“But to-morrow it will be daylight again,” replied Hood. “The dark hours are what I want for adventure!”

“I know that, Hood; but the night which is coming on is very unpromising. Still, if you are resolved to go, do not wander to any distance. In an hour it will be very dark, and you might have great difficulty in making your way back to camp.”

“Don’t be uneasy, Banks; it is hardly seven o’clock, and I will only ask the colonel for leave of absence till ten.”

“Go, if you wish it, my dear Hood,” said Sir Edward, “but pray attend to the advice Banks has given you.”

“All right, colonel.” And the captain, with his followers, Fox and Goilmi, all well equipped for the chase, left the encampment, and quickly disappeared behind the thick trees.

Fatigued by the heat of the day, I remained in camp.

Banks gave orders that the engine fires should not, as they usually were, be completely extinguished. He wished to retain the power of quickly getting up steam, in case of an emergency.

Storr and Kalouth betook themselves to their accustomed tasks, and attended to the supplies of wood and water; in doing so they found little difficulty, for a small stream flowed near our halting-place, and there was no lack of timber close at hand. M. Parazard diligently labored in his vocation, and, while putting aside the remains of one dinner, was busily planning the next.

As the evening continued pleasant, Sir Edward, Banks, McNeil, and I, went to rest by the borders of the rivulet, as the flow of its limpid waters refreshed the atmosphere, which even at this hour was suffocating.

The sinking sun shed a light which tinged with a color like dark-blue ink a mass of vapor which, through openings in the dense foliage, we could see accumulating in the zenith. These thick, heavily condensed clouds were stirred by no wind, but appeared to advance with a solemn motion of their own.

We remained chatting here till about eight o’clock. From time to time Banks rose to take a more extended view of the horizon, going toward the borders of the forest, which abruptly crossed the plain within a quarter of a mile of the camp. Each time on returning he looked uneasy, and only shook his head in reply to our questions.

At last we rose and accompanied him. Beneath the banyans it began to be dark already: I could see that an immense plain stretched westward up to a line of indistinct low hills, which were now almost enveloped in the clouds. The aspect of the heavens was terrible in its calm. Not a breath of air stirred the leaves of the highest trees. It was not the soft repose of slumbering nature, so often sung by poets, but the dull, heavy sleep of sickness. There was a restrained tension in the atmosphere, like condensed steam ready to explode.

And indeed the explosion was imminent. The storm-clouds were high, as is usually the case over plains, and presented wide curvilinear outlines, very strongly marked. They seemed to swell out, and, uniting together, diminished in number while they increased in size. Evidently, in a short time, there would be but one dense mass spread over the sky above us. Small detached clouds at a lower elevation hurried along, attracting, repelling, and crushing one against another, then, confusedly joining the general ine/ge, were lost to view.

About half-past eight a sharp flash of forked lightning rent the gloom asunder. Sixty-five seconds afterward, a peal of thunder broke, and the hollow rumbling attendant to that species of lightning lasted about fifteen seconds.

“Sixteen miles,” said Banks, looking at his watch. “That is almost the greatest distance at which thunder can be heard. But the storm, once unchained, will travel quickly; we must not wait for it. Let us go indoors, my friends.”

“And what about Captain Hood?” said Sergeant McNeil.

“The thunder has sounded the recall,” replied Banks. “It is to be hoped he will obey orders.”

CHAPTER XII

THREE-FOLD LIGHT

hindoostan shares with certain parts of Brazil — among others with Rio Janeiro — the proud distinction of being more frequently visited by storms than any other country on the face of the globe.

I consulted the barometer as soon as we reentered our apartments, and found that there had been a sudden fall of two inches in the mercurial column. This I pointed out to Colonel Munro.

“I am uneasy about Hood and his companions,” he said. “A storm is imminent; night is coming on, and the darkness rapidly increases. Sportsmen are certain always to go farther than they say they will, and even than they intend. How are they to find their way back to us?”

“Madman that he is!” cried Banks; “it was impossible to make him listen to reason. They never ought to have gone!”

“That is true enough, Banks; but gone they are,” replied Sir Edward; “all we can do now is to try and get them back.”

“Can we signal to them, anyhow? “I asked.

“To be sure we can. I will light the electric lamps at once. That is a happy thought of yours, Maucler.”

“Shall I go in search of Captain Hood, sir?” inquired McNeil.

“No, my old friend,” replied the colonel. “You would not find him, and would be lost yourself.”

Banks connected the electric current, and very soon Behemoth’s eyes, like two blazing beacons, shot glaring light athwart the gloom of the banyan forest. It seemed certain that it would be visible to our sportsmen at a considerable distance.

At this moment a hurricane of great violence burst forth, rending the tree-tops, and sounding among the columns of banyan as though rushing through sonorous organ-pipes. It was indeed a sudden outburst. Showers of leaves and dead branches strewed the ground and rattled upon the roofs of our carriages.

We closed every window; but the rain did not yet fall. “It is a species of typhoon,” remarked Banks.

“Storr!” cried Banks to the engine-driver, “are the embrasures of the turret well closed?”

“Yes, Mr. Banks: there is nothing to fear there.”

“Where is Kalouth?”

“He is stowing away the last of the fuel in the tender.”

“After this storm we shall only have to collect the wood. The wind is playing wood-cutter, and sparing us all the hard work,” said the engineer. “Keep up the pressure, Storr, and get under shelter.”

“Ay, ay, sir.”

“Are your tanks filled, Kalouth?”

“Yes, sahib; the water-supply is made up.”

"Well, come in, come in."

And the engine-driver and stoker hastened into the second carriage.

Flashes of lightning were now frequent, and thunder from the electric clouds kept up a sullen roar. The wind blew like scorching blasts from the mouth of a furnace. Occasionally we left the saloon, and went into the veranda. Gazing upward at the lofty summits of the stately banyans, the branches showed like fine black lace against the glowing background of the illumined sky. The incessant lightning was followed so rapidly by the peals of thunder, that the echoes had not time to die away; they were continually aroused by new and yet louder explosions. A deep, continuous roll was maintained, and only broken by those sharp detonations so well compared by Lucretius to the harsh screaming sound of paper when it is torn.

"I wonder the storm has not yet driven them in," said Colonel Munro.

"Perhaps Captain Hood has found some shelter in the forest," answered Sergeant McNeil. "He may be waiting in some cave or hollow tree, and will rejoin us in the morning. The camp will be here all right."

Banks shook his head somewhat doubtfully; he did not seem to share McNeil's opinion.

It was now about nine o'clock, and the rain began to fall with great force. It was mingled with enormous hailstones, and they pelted on the hollow roofs of Steam House with a noise like the roll of many drums. Even without the roar of the thunder, it was impossible to hear our own voices.

The air was full of the leaves of trees, whirling in all directions.

Banks did not attempt to speak, but pointed to the engine, directing our attention to the hailstones as they struck the metal sides of Behemoth. It was marvelous! Each stone struck fire in the contact, like flint and steel. It seemed as though showers of fiery metallic drops fell from the clouds, sending forth sparks as they struck the steel-plated engine. This proved how completely the atmosphere was saturated with electricity. Fulminating matter traversed it incessantly, till all space seemed to blaze with fire.

Banks signed to us to return to the saloon, and closed the veranda door. The darkness within the room contrasted strongly with the lightning which ‘flashed without. We had presently a proof that we were ourselves strongly charged with the electric fluid, when, to our infinite astonishment, we perceived our saliva to be luminous. This phenomenon, rarely observed, and very alarming when it is so, has been described as “spitting fire.”

The tumult of the heavens seemed every instant to increase, and the stoutest hearts beat thick and fast.

“And the others!” said Colonel Munro.

“Ah, yes, indeed — the others!” returned Banks.

We were horribly uneasy, yet could do nothing whatever to assist Captain Hood and his companions, who were of course in the utmost danger.

Even supposing they had found shelter, it could only be beneath trees, where accidents during storms are most imminent; and in the middle of a dense forest, how could they possibly maintain the distance of five or six yards from a vertical line, drawn from the extremity of the longest branches, which persons caught by storms in the neighborhood of trees are scientifically advised to do?

As these thoughts rushed through my mind, a peal of thunder, louder than any we had heard, burst directly over us. Steam House trembled throughout, and seemed to rise on its springs. I expected it to be overturned.

At the same time a strong odor filled the room — the penetrating smell of nitrous vapors.

“A thunderbolt has fallen!” said McNeil.

“Storr! Kalouth! Parazard!” shouted Banks.

The three men came running into our apartment, while the engineer stepped out on the balcony.

“There! — look there!” he cried. An enormous banyan had been struck ten paces off, on the left of the road.

We could see everything distinctly by the glare of incessant lightning. The immense trunk had fallen across the neighboring trees, its sturdy saplings no longer able to sustain it. The whole length of its bark had been peeled off, and one long strip was waving about and lashing the air, as the force of the gale made it twist and twine like a serpent. It was seen that the bark must have been stripped off from base to summit, under the influence of electricity which had violently rushed upward.

“A narrow escape for Steam House,” said the engineer. “We must remain here; we are safer than under those trees.”

As he spoke we heard cries. Could it be our friends returning?

“It is Parazard’s voice,” said Storr.

It was indeed the cook, who, from the hinder balcony, was loudly calling to us. We hastened to join him.

What a sight met our eyes! Within a hundred yards of us, behind, and to the right of, the camp, the banyan forest was on fire!

Already the loftier tree-tops were disappearing behind a curtain of flame.

The conflagration advanced fiercely and with incredible velocity toward Steam House. The danger was imminent. The heat and long continuous drought had combined to make trees, grass, and bushes so dry and combustible that it was probable the entire forest would be devoured by the furious element.

As we witnessed its rapid spread and advance, we were convinced that, should it reach the place of our encampment, our entire equipage would, in a very few minutes, be destroyed.

We stood silent before this fearful danger.

Then, folding his arms, the colonel said quietly, “Banks, you must get us out of this scrape.”

“Yes, I must, Munro,” replied the engineer; “and since we cannot possibly put out this fire, we must run away from it,”

“On foot?” exclaimed I.

“No; with our train all complete.”

“And Captain Hood, sir?” said McNeil.

“We can do nothing for them. If they are not here immediately, we shall start without them.”

“We must not abandon them,” said the colonel.

“My dear Munro, let me get the train out of reach of the fire, and then we can search for them.”

“Go on, then, Banks,” replied Colonel Munro, who saw that the engineer was in the right.

“Storr!” cried Banks, “to your engine at once! Kalouth! to your furnace — get the steam up! What pressure have we?’

“Two atmospheres,” answered the engine-driver.

“Within ten minutes we must have four! Look sharp, my lads!”

The men did not lose a moment. Torrents of black smoke gushed from the elephant’s trunk, meeting, and seeming to defy, the torrents of rain. Behemoth replied with whirling clouds of sparks to the vivid flashes which surrounded him; and draughts of air, whistling through the funnel, accelerated the combustion of the wood which Kalouth heaped and piled on his furnace.

Sir Edward Munro, Banks, and I remained on the veranda in rear of the carriages, watching the progress of the forest-fire. Huge trees tottered and fell across this vast hearth; the branches cracked and crackled like musketry; the burning creepers twisted in all directions, and led the flames from tree to tree, thus spreading the devastation right and left.

Within five minutes the conflagration had advanced fifty yards, and the flames, torn and disheveled by the gale, shot upward to such a height that the lightning flashes pierced them in all directions.

“We must be off in five minutes,” said Banks.

“At what a pace this fire goes! “I replied.

“We shall go faster!”

“If only Hood and his men were back!” said Sir Edward.

“The whistle! — sound the whistle!” cried Banks; “they may, perhaps, hear that.”

And darting into the turret, he made the air resound with shrill screams, which were heard above the rumbling thunder, and must have sounded to an immense distance. The situation can better be imagined than described. Necessity urged to immediate flight, while it seemed impossible to forsake our absent friends.

Banks returned to the hinder balcony. The edge of the fire was less than fifty yards from Steam House. The heat became insufferable; we could scarcely breathe the burning air. Flakes of fire fell on the carriages, which seemed protected in a measure by the floods and torrents of rain; but these, we well knew, could not check the direct attack of the flames.

The engine continued to send forth piercing shrieks. It was all in vain. There were no signs of either Hood, Fox, or Goiimi.

The engine-driver came to Banks, “Steam is up, sir!”

“Go on, then, Storr!” replied Banks, “but not too fast. Just quick enough to keep up beyond the reach of the fire.”

“Stop, Banks! wait a few minutes!” cried Colonel Munro, who could not bring himself to quit the spot.

“Three minutes, then, Munro,” returned Banks coolly. “But in three minutes the back of the train will begin to burn.”

Two minutes passed. It was impossible to stay in the veranda. The iron plating could not be touched, and began to burst open at the joints. It would be madness to stop another instant.

“Go on, Storr!”

“Hallo!” exclaimed the sergeant.

“There they are! God be praised!” said the colonel.

To the right of the road appeared Captain Hood and Fox, supporting Goiimi in their arms as they approached the carriage door.

Is he dead?”

“No; but struck by lightning, which smashed his gun, and has paralyzed his left leg.”

“We should never have got back to camp but for your steam whistle, Banks!” said Hood.

“Forward! forward!” shouted the engineer.

Hood and Fox sprang on board the train, and Gofimi, who had not lost consciousness, was placed in his cabin.

It was half-past ten — Banks and Storr went into the turret, and the equipage moved steadily forward, amid the blaze of a three-fold light, produced by the burning forest, the electric lamps, and the vivid lightning flashing from the skies.

Then Captain Hood in a few words related what had happened during his excursion. They had seen no traces of any wild animals. As the storm approached, darkness overtook them much more rapidly than they expected. They were three miles from camp when they heard the first thunder-clap, and endeavored to return, but quickly found they had lost their way among the banyan trunks, all exactly alike, and without a path in any direction whatever.

The tempest increased in violence; they were far beyond the limits of the light diffused by our electric lamp, and had nothing to guide them as to our whereabouts, while the rain and hail fell in torrents, quickly penetrating the shelter of the leafy screen above them.

Suddenly, with a glare of intensely brilliant lightning, a burst of thunder broke over them, and Goilmi fell prostrate at Captain Hood's feet; the butt-end of his gun alone remained in his hand, for it was instantaneously stripped of every bit of metal. They believed him to be killed, but found that the electric fluid had not struck him directly, although his leg was paralyzed by the shock. Poor Goitmi could not walk a step, and had to be carried. His companions would not listen to his entreaties that they would leave him, escape themselves, and, if possible, return afterward to fetch him. They raised him between them, and, as best they could, pursued their doubtful way through the dark forest.

Thus for two hours they wandered about, hesitating, stopping, resuming their march, without the slightest clue to the direction in which to find the camp.

At last, to their infinite joy, they heard the shriek of the steam whistle. It was the welcome voice of Behemoth.

A quarter of an hour afterward they arrived, as we were on the point of quitting the halting-place, and only just in time!

And now, though the train ran rapidly along the broad, smooth forest-road, the fire kept pace with it, and the danger was rendered the more threatening by a change of wind, such as frequently occurs during these violent meteoric storms. Instead of blowing in flank, it now changed to the rear, and by its vehemence materially increased the advance of the flames, which perceptibly gained on the travelers. A cloud of hot ashes whirled upward from the ground, as from the mouth of some crater; and into this rained downward burning branches and flakes of fire. The conflagration really resembled, more than anything else, the advance of a stream of lava, rushing across the country, and destroying everything in its course.

Banks instantly perceived this, and, even if he had not, he would have felt the scorching blast as it swept by.

Our speed was increased, although some danger attended the doing so over an unknown path. The machine, however, would not proceed as fast as the engineer could have wished, owing to the road being so cut up and flooded by rain.

About half-past eleven another awful clap of thunder burst directly over our heads. A cry escaped us. We feared that Banks and Storr had both been struck in their howdah, from which they were guiding the train.

This calamity, however, had not befallen us. Our elephant only had been struck, the tip of one of his long, hanging ears having attracted the electric current. No damage resulted to the machine fortunately, and Behemoth seemed to try to reply to the peals of thunder by renewed and vigorous trumpetings.

“Hurrah!” cried Captain Hood. “Hurrah! An elephant of flesh and blood would have been done for by this time. But this old fellow braves thunder and lightning, and sticks at nothing. Go it, Behemoth; hurrah!”

For another half hour the train was still ahead. Banks, fearing to run it against some obstacle, only proceeded at a rate sufficient to keep us out of reach of the fire.

From the veranda, in which Colonel Munro, Hood, and I had placed ourselves, we could see passing, great shadows, bounding through the blaze of the fire and lightning. We soon discovered them to be those of wild animals.

As a precautionary measure, Captain Hood kept his gun ready, for it was possible that some terrified beast might leap on our train, in search of a shelter or refuge.

One huge tiger did indeed make the attempt, but in his prodigious spring he was caught by the neck between two branches of a banyan-tree, which, bending under the storm, acted like great cords, and strangled the animal. “Poor beast!” said Fox.

“These creatures,” remarked Captain Hood, in an indignant manner, “are made to be killed by good, honest shot. You may well say poor beast.”

Poor Captain Hood was indeed out of luck. When he wanted tigers, he couldn’t find them; and now, when he was not looking for them, they passed within range, without his being able to get a shot at them, or were strangled before his eyes, like mice in a trap.

At one in the morning, our situation, dangerous as it had been before, became worse. The wind, which shifted about from one point of the compass to another, continually swept the fire across the road in front of us, so that now we were absolutely hemmed in.

The storm, however, had much diminished in violence, as is invariably the case when these pass above a forest, for there the trees gradually draw off and absorb the electric matter. But though the lightning and thunder were now less frequent, and though the rain fell with gentler force, yet the wind still roared with inconceivable fury.

At any cost it was absolutely necessary to hasten on, even at the risk of running into an obstacle, or of dashing over a precipice.

Banks directed our course with astonishing coolness, his eyes glued to the glass of the howdah, his hand ever on the regulator. Our way now led between two hedges of fire, and these we were forced to go through. On went Banks, resolutely and steadily, at the rate of five or six miles an hour.

I thought at last we should be obliged to stop, when before us lay a narrow passage, only fifty yards wide, with a roaring furnace on either side. Our wheels crunched over the glowing cinders, which strewed the soil, and a burning, stifling atmosphere enveloped us.

We were past!

At two in the morning a flash of lightning revealed to us the borders of the wood. Behind us lay a vast panorama of flames, which would spread on, and never stop until they had devoured the very last banyan of the immense forest.

At daybreak we halted at last; the storm had entirely ceased, and we arranged our camp. Our elephant, who was carefully examined, was found to have the tip of his right ear pierced by several holes running in diverse directions. If such a thing had happened to any other creature than an animal of steel, it would most certainly have at once sunk down, never again to rise, and our unfortunate train would then have been rapidly overwhelmed by the advancing flames.

At six that morning, after a very short rest, we again resumed our journey, and by twelve o’clock we were encamped in the neighborhood of Rewah.

CHAPTER XIII

CAPTAIN HOOD’S PROWESS

THE remainder of the day and the next night were quietly spent in camp. After all our fatigue and danger, this rest was well earned.

We had no longer before us the rich plains of the kingdom of Oude. Steam House had now to pass through Rohilkund, a fertile territory, though much cut up by nullahs, or ravines. Bareilly is the capital of this province, which is one hundred and fifty-five miles square, well watered by the numerous affluents or tributaries of the Cogra; here and there are many groups of magnificent mango-trees, as well as thick jungles, which latter are gradually disappearing as cultivation advances.

After the taking of Delhi, this was the center of the insurrection; Sir Colin Campbell conducted one of his campaigns here. Here, too, Brigadier Walpole’s column was not at the outset very fortunate, and here, also, fell a friend of Sir Edward Munro, the colonel of the 93 d Highlanders, who had so distinguished himself in the two assaults on Lucknow, during the affair of the 14th of April.

We could not have had a country better suited for the advance of our train than this. Beautiful level roads, easily crossed streams, running from the two more important arteries, descending from the north, all united to render this part of our journey pleasant. In a short time we should come to the first rising ground which connected the plain with the mountains of Nepaul.

We had, however, to think seriously of the rainy season.

The monsoon, which is prevalent from the northeast to the southwest during the first months of the year, is now reversed. The rainy season is more violent on the coast than in the interior of the peninsula, and also a little later; the reason being that the clouds are exhausted before reaching the center of India. Besides this, their direction is somewhat altered by the barrier of high mountains which form a sort of atmospheric eddy. On the coast of Malabar the monsoon begins in the month of May; in the central and northern provinces, it is felt some weeks later on, in June. We were now in June, and our journey was henceforward to be performed under new though well-foreseen circumstances.

I should have said before that honest Goilmi, who had been disarmed by the lightning in such an untoward manner, was nearly well again by the next day. The paralysis of his left leg was merely temporary. Soon not a trace of his accident remained, but it seemed to me he always bore rather a grudge against that storm.

On both the 6th and 7th of June, Captain Hood, aided by Fan and Niger, had better sport. He killed a couple of those antelopes called nylghaus. They are the blue oxen of the Hindoos, though it is certainly more correct to call them deer, since they have a greater resemblance to that animal.

These were not the wild beasts Captain Hood hoped for; but all the same, the nylghau, though not actually ferocious, is dangerous; for when slightly wounded, it turns on the hunter.

A shot from the captain, and a second from Fox, stopped short both of these superb creatures, killed, as it were, on the wing; and indeed Fox seemed to look on them as nothing higher than feathered game.

Monsieur Parazard, fortunately, was quite of another opinion, and the excellent haunch, cooked to a turn, which he served up to us that day at dinner, brought us all over to his side.

At daybreak on the 8th of June we left an encampment we had made near a little yillage in Rohilkund. We had arrived at it the evening before, after traversing the twenty-five miles which lay between it and Rewah. Our train could only go at a very moderate pace over the heavy ground caused by the rains. Besides this, the streams began to swell, and fording several delayed us some hours. After all we had not now so very far to go. We were sure of reaching the mountainous region before the end of June. There we intended to install Steam House for several of the summer months, as if in the midst of a sanitorium. We had nothing to make us uneasy in that respect.

On the 8th of June Captain Hood missed a fine opportunity for a shot. The road was bordered by a thick bamboo jungle, as is often the case near villages, which look as if built in a basket of flowers. This was not as yet the true jungle, for that, in the Hindoo sense, applies to the rugged, bare, and sterile plain, dotted with lines of gray bushes. We, on the contrary, were in a cultivated country, in the midst of a fertile territory, covered in most places with marshy rice-grounds.

Behemoth went quietly along, guided by Storr’s hand, and emitting graceful, feathery clouds of vapor, which curled away and dispersed among the bamboos at the roadside.

All at once, out leaped an animal with the most wonderful agility, and fastened on our elephant’s neck.

“A cheetah! a cheetah!” shouted the engine-driver.

At this cry, Captain Hood darted out to the balcony, and seized his gun, always ready and always at hand.

“A cheetah!” exclaimd he in his turn.

“Fire, then!” cried I.

“Time enough!” returned the captain, who contented himself with merely taking a good aim at the animal.

The cheetah is a species of leopard peculiar to India, not so large as the tiger, but almost as formidable, it is so active, supple, and strong.

Colonel Munro, Banks, and I stood out on the veranda, watching with interest for the captain to fire.

The leopard had evidently been deceived by the sight of our elephant. He had boldly sprung at him, expecting to bury his teeth and claws in living flesh, but instead of that, met with an iron skin, on which neither teeth nor claws could make any impression. Furious at his discomfiture, he clung to the long ears of the artificial animal, and was no doubt preparing to bound off again when he caught sight of us.

Captain Hood kept his gun pointed, after the manner of a hunter who is sure of his aim, but does not wish to fire until he is certain he can hit a vital part.

The cheetah drew itself up, roaring savagely. It no doubt knew of its danger, but did not attempt to escape. Perhaps it watched for an opportunity to spring on to the veranda.

Indeed, we soon saw it climbing up the elephant’s head, to the trunk or chimney, and almost to the opening out of which puffed jets of vapor.

“Now fire, Hood!” said I again.

“There’s time enough,” answered the captain. Then, without taking his eyes off the leopard, who still gazed at us, he addressed himself to me. “Did you ever kill a cheetah, Maucler?” he asked.

“Never.”

“Would you like to kill one?”

“Captain,” I replied, “I should not like to deprive you of this magnificent shot — !

“Pooh!” returned Hood, “it’s nothing of a shot. Take a gun and aim just below the beast’s shoulder! If you miss, I shall catch him as he springs.”

“Be it so, then.”

Fox, who had joined us, put a double-barreled gun into my hands. I took it, cocked it, aimed just below the leopard’s shoulder, and fired.

The animal, wounded, though but slightly, took an enormous bound, right over the driver’s howdah, and alighted on the first roof of Steam House.

Skilled sportsman as Captain Hood was, even he had not time to fire. “Here Fox, after me!” he shouted.

And the two, darting out of the veranda, hastened up into the howdah.

The leopard immediately sprang on to the second roof, clearing the foot-bridge at a bound.

The captain was on the point of firing, but another desperate leap carried the animal off the roof, and landed him at the side of the road, when he instantly disappeared in the jungle.

“Stop! stop!” cried Banks, to the engineer, who, applying the atmospheric brakes, brought the train to an instant standstill.

The captain and Fox leaped out and ran into the thicket, in hopes of finding the cheetah.

A few minutes passed. We listened somewhat impatiently. No shot was fired, and very soon the two hunters returned empty handed.

“Disappeared! Got clear off!” called out Captain Hood; “and not even a trace of blood on the grass!”

“It was my fault,” said I. “It would have been better if you had fired at the cheetah yourself. You wouldn’t have missed!”

“Nonsense,” returned Hood, “you hit him, I’m certain, though not in a good place.”

“The beast wasn’t fated to be my thirty-ninth, nor your forty-first, captain,” remarked Fox, much out of countenance.

“Rubbish,” said Hood, in a somewhat affected tone of indifference, “a cheetah isn’t a tiger! If it had been, my dear Maucler, I couldn’t have made up my mind to yield that shot to you!”

“Come to table, my friends,” said Colonel Munro. “Breakfast is ready, and will console you — ”

“I hope it may,” put in McNeil; “but it was all Fox’s fault!”

“My fault?” said the man, quite nonplussed by this unexpected observation.

“Certainly, Fox,” returned the sergeant. “The gun you handed to Mr. Maucler was only loaded with number six! “And McNeil held out the second cartridge which he had just withdrawn, to prove his words.

“Fox!” said Captain Hood.

“Yes, sir.”

“A couple of days under arrest!”

“Yes, captain.” And Fox retired into his cabin, resolved not to appear again for forty-eight hours. He was quite ashamed of himself, and wished to hide his disgraced head.

The next day Captain Hood, Goiimi, and I went off to beat about the plain at the side of the road, and thus to spend the half day’s halt which Banks allowed us. It rained all the morning, but about midday the sky cleared, and we hoped for a few hours of fine weather.

I must mention that it was not Hood, the hunter of wild beasts, who took me out this time, but the sportsman in search of game. In the interests of the table, he intended to stroll quietly about the rice-fields, accompanied by Fan and Niger.

Monsieur Parazard had hinted to the captain that his larder was empty, and that he expected his honor to take the necessary measures to fill it again. Captain Hood resigned himself, and we set out. For two hours our battue had no other result than to put up a few partridges, or scare away a few hares; but all at such a distance that, notwithstanding our good dogs, we had no chance of hitting them.

Captain Hood became utterly disgusted. In this vast plain, without jungles, or thickets, and dotted with villages and farms, he had no great hopes of meeting with any sort of wild beast, which would make amends for the loss of the leopard the preceding day. He had only come out now in the character of a purveyor, and thought of the reception Monsieur Parazard would give him if he returned with an empty bag. It was not our fault that even by four o'clock we had not had occasion to fire a single shot. A dry wind blew, and, as I said, all the game rose out of range.

"My dear fellow," said Hood, "this won't do at all. When we left Calcutta, I promised you such grand sport; and all this time, bad luck, fatality, I don't know what to call it, nor how to understand it, has prevented me from keeping my promise!"

"Come, captain," I replied, "you mustn't despair. Though I do regret it, it is more on your account than my own! We shall have better luck, no doubt, on the hills!"

"Yes," said Hood, "on the Himalayan slopes we shall set to work under more favorable conditions. You see, Maucler, I'd wager anything that our train, with all its apparatus, its steam and its roaring, and especially the gigantic elephant, terrifies the confounded brutes much more than a railway train would do, and that's the reason we don't see anything of them when traveling! When we halt, we must hope to be more lucky. That leopard was a fool! He must have been starving when he sprang on Behemoth, and he was worthy of being killed outright by a good shot! Hang that fellow Fox! I sha'n't forget that little job of his in a hurry! What time is it now?"

“Nearly five o’clock!”

“Five already, and we haven’t bagged a thing!”

“They won’t expect us back in camp till seven. Perhaps by that time — ”

“No; luck is against us!” exclaimed the captain; “and, look you, luck is the half of success!”

“Perseverance, too,” I answered. “Suppose we agree that we won’t go back empty-handed! Will that suit you?”

“Suit me? of course it will!”

“Agreed, then.”

“Look here, Maucler, I shall carry back a mouse or a squirrel, rather than be foresworn.”

Hood, Goini, and I were now in a frame of mind to attack anything. The chase was continued with a perseverance worthy of a better cause; but it seemed as if even the most inoffensive birds had become aware of our hostile intentions. We couldn’t get near a single one.

We roamed about thus among the rice-fields, beating first one side of the road and then the other, and turning back again, so as not to get too far from the camp. All was useless. Half past six, and we had not had to reload our guns. We might as well have had walking-sticks in our hands, the results would have been all the same.

I glanced at Captain Hood. He was marching along with his teeth set, while a deep frown on his brow betrayed his angry feelings. Between his compressed lips he muttered I don’t know what vain menaces against every living creature whether feathered or furred of which there was not a specimen on the plain. He probably would soon fire his gun at the first object which met his eye, a tree or rock, may be — rather a cynical way of getting rid of his anger. It was easy to see his weapon burned his fingers, as it were, from the way he shifted it about, now to his shoulder, then to his arm, now again carrying it in his hand.

Gofimi looked at him. “The captain will be in a passion if this goes on!” he said to me, shaking his head.

“Yes,” I replied, “I’d willingly give thirty shillings for the most modest little tame pigeon, if some charitable hand would let it go within range! It would appease him!”

But neither for thirty shillings, nor for double, or triple that amount, could we procure even the cheapest or the most common of fowl. The country seemed deserted, and we saw neither farm nor village. Indeed if it had been possible, I believe I should have sent Gotami to buy at any price some bird or other, if only a plucked chicken; anything to set our fretful captain free from his vow.

Night was coming on. In an hour’s time there would not be light enough for us to continue our fruitless expedition. Although we had agreed not to return to camp without something, yet we should be forced to do so, unless we meant to stay out all night. Not only did it threaten rain, but Colonel Munro and Banks would be seriously alarmed if we did not reappear.

Captain Hood, with straining eyeballs, glancing from right to left with birdlike quickness, walked ten paces ahead in an opposite direction to that of Steam House.

I was thinking of hastening my steps so as to rejoin him and beg him not to continue this struggle against ill-luck, when a whirr of wings was heard on my right. I looked toward the spot.

A dark mass was rising slowly above a thicket.

Instantly, without giving Captain Hood time to turn round, I leveled my gun, and fired both barrels successively. The unknown bird fell heavily.

Fan sprang forward, seized and brought it to the captain.

“At last!” exclaimed Hood. “If Monsieur Parazard isn’t contented with this, he must be shoved into his pot himself, head first.”

“But is it an edible bird? “I asked.

“Certainly, for want of anything better!” answered the captain.

“It was lucky nobody saw you, Mr. Maucler!” said “What have I done wrong?”

“Why, you have killed a peacock, and that is forbidden, for they are sacred birds all over India.”

“The fiend fly away with sacred birds and those who made them sacred, too!” exclaimed Captain Hood impatiently. “This one is killed at all events, and we shall eat him — devoutly if you like, but devour him somehow!”

Since the expedition of Alexander into this peninsula, the peacock has been a sacred animal in the Brahmins’ country. The Hindoos make it the emblem of the goddess Saravasti, who presides over births and marriages. To destroy this bird is forbidden under pain of punishment, which the English law has confirmed.

This one, which so rejoiced Captain Hood’s heart, was a magnificent specimen, with green metallic gleaming wings, edged with gold. His beautifully marked tail formed a superb fan of silky feathers.

“All right; forward!” said the captain.

“To-morrow, Monsieur Parazard will give us peacock for dinner, in spite of what all the Brahmins in India may think! Although, when cooked, this bird will indeed only look like a somewhat pretentious chicken, yet with its feathers artistically arranged, it will have a fine effect on our table!”

“Then you are satisfied, captain?”

“Satisfied — with you, yes, my dear fellow, but not pleased with myself at all! My bad luck isn’t over yet, and I must do away with it. Come along!”

Off we started to retrace our steps to the camp, now about three miles distant. Captain Hood and I walked close together along a winding path through thick bamboo jungles; Go-Cimi, carrying our game, bringing up the rear. The sun had not yet disappeared, but it was shrouded in great clouds, so that we had to find our way through semi-obscurity.

All at once a terrific roar burst from a thicket on our right. The sound was to me so awful that I stopped short, almost in spite of myself.

Captain Hood grasped my hand. “A tiger!” he said.

Then an oath escaped him. “Thunder and lightning!” he exclaimed, “there is only small shot in our guns!”

It was too true; neither Hood, Goinni, nor I, had any ball cartridges.

Besides, if we had, we should not have had time to reload. Ten seconds after uttering his first roar, the animal leaped from the covert with a single bound, and landed on the road twenty paces from us. It was a magnificent tiger, what the Hindoos would have called a man-eater, his annual victims might no doubt be counted by hundreds.

The situation was terrible. I gazed at the tiger, and must confess that my gun trembled in my hand. He measured from nine to ten feet in length, and was of a tawny color, striped with black and white.

He stared back at us, his catlike eyes blazing in the shadow. His tail feverishly lashed his sides. He crouched as if about to spring.

Hood had not lost his presence of mind. He took a careful aim at the animal, muttering in a tone which it is impossible to describe, “Number six! To fire at a tiger with number six! If I don’t hit him right in the eyes, we are — ”

The captain had not time to finish. The tiger advanced not by leaps, but slow steps.

Goitmi crouched behind us, and also took aim, though his gun, too, only contained small shot. As to mine, it was not even loaded. I prepared to do this now.

“Not a movement, not a sound!” muttered the captain. “The tiger will spring, and that will never do!”

We all three remained motionless. The tiger advanced slowly, his eyes glaring fixedly, and his great jaws held almost level with the ground. The brute was now only ten paces from the captain.

Hood stood firm, steady as a statue, concentrating his whole life in his gaze. The terrible struggle which was about to take place, and which might leave none of us alive, did not even make his heart beat more rapidly than usual. I thought the tiger was about to make his spring. He took five steps. I had need of all my self-control to keep from calling out, “Fire, Hood! now fire!”

No! The captain had said — and it was evidently his only chance — that he meant to blind the animal; and to do that he must be very close before he fired. The tiger came three paces nearer, and prepared to spring —

A loud report was heard, almost immediately followed by a second. The second explosion seemed to have taken place in the very body of the animal, which, after two or three starts and roars of pain, fell dead on the ground.

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Captain Hood, “my gun was loaded with ball after all, and what’s more, with an explosive ball! Ah, thanks, Fox, this time many thanks!”

“Is it possible? “I cried.

“Look for yourself.” And as he spoke the captain drew out the cartridge from the other barrel. There was the ball.

All was explained. Captain Hood possessed a double-barrelled rifle and a double-barrelled gun, both of the same caliber. Now, when Fox made the mistake of loading the rifle with small shot, he at the same time put explosive ball cartridges into the other. The day before, this mistake saved the life of the leopard, to-day it saved ours!

“Yes,” remarked Hood, “and never in my life have I been nearer death!”

Half an hour afterward, when we were safe back in camp, Hood called up Fox and told him what had happened.

“Captain,” returned the man, “that proves that instead of two days in confinement, I deserved four, because I made a mistake twice!”

“That is my opinion,” replied his master; “but since through your mistake I have bagged my forty-first, it is also my opinion that I should offer you this sovereign — ”

“And mine that I should take it,” answered Fox, pocketing the piece of gold.

Such were the incidents which marked Captain Hood’s encounter with his forty-first tiger.

In the evening of the 12th of June, our train came to a halt near a small village of no importance, and the next day we set out to begin the ninety miles which still lay between us and the mountains of Nepaul.

CHAPTER XIV

ONE AGAINST THREE

SOME days passed away, and we had at last commenced to ascend the first slopes of those northern regions of India, which, from rising ground to rising ground, from hill to hill, from mountain to mountain, at last attain to the highest altitude on the globe. Till then we had been rising, but so imperceptibly that Behemoth did not even appear to perceive it.

The weather was stormy and rainy, but the temperature was supportable. The roads were not yet bad, and heavy as the train was, it passed easily over them.

When too large a rut opened before us, Storr just touched the regulator, and a stronger press of the obedient fluid was enough to take us over the obstacle. The machine, as I said, had plenty of power, and a quarter of a turn given to the supply valves instantly added immensely to its strength.

As yet, we never had reason but to congratulate ourselves on this species of locomotion, as well as on the engine Banks had invented. Our rolling house was perfectly comfortable, and before our eyes we had always a fresh and ever-changing landscape.

The vast plain which extends from the valley of the Ganges into the territories of Oude and Rohilkund was ended. The north was framed in by the summits of the Himalayas, against which were swept the clouds driven by the southwest wind. It was impossible as yet to get a good view of the picturesque outline of this lofty chain; but on approaching the Thibetian frontier, the aspect of the country became more wild, and the jungle increased at the expense of cultivated ground.

On the 17th of June our camp was made near a serai-or traveler’s bungalow. The weather was rather brighter, and Behemoth, who had been worked hard for the last four days, required, if not rest, at any rate some attention. It was therefore agreed that the rest of the day and the following night should be passed in this spot.

The serai or caravanserai, the inn to be found on all the high roads, is a quadrangle of low buildings, surrounding an inner court, and usually surmounted by a tower at each corner, giving it quite an oriental appearance. The attendants in the serai consist of the bhisti, or water-carrier, the cook, who does well enough for travelers who can content themselves with eggs and chickens, and the khansama, or provider of provisions, with whom you must treat, and whose prices are low enough generally.

The keeper of the serai is simply an agent of the Honorable Company, to whom the greater number of these establishments belong, and they are inspected occasionally by the engineer-in-chief of the district.

A strange but strictly kept rule is in force in these bungalows: a traveler may occupy the serai for four-and-twenty hours, unquestioned, but in the event of his wishing to stay longer, he must get a permit from the inspector. Without this authorization the next corner, whether English or Hindoo, may turn him out.

It is needless to say that on our arrival at our halting-

place Behemoth produced the usual sensation, that is to say, he was very much stared at, and perhaps very much coveted. I must say, though, that the actual guests in the serai looked at him with somewhat of disdain, disdain too affected to be real.

These people, however, were not simple mortals, traveling on business or pleasure. Here was nothing less than the Prince Gourou Singh, in person, son of an independent rajah of Guzarate, and a rajah himself, traveling with great pomp in the north of the Indian peninsula.

This prince not only occupied the three or four rooms in the bungalow, but also all the neighborhood, which had been arranged so as to lodge the people of his suite.

I had never before seen a traveling rajah; so as soon as our camp had been settled at about a quarter of a mile from the serai, in a charming spot beside a stream and under magnificent trees, I went, in company with Captain Hood and Banks, to visit the encampment of Prince Gourou Singh. The son of a rajah who wishes to travel, cannot travel alone, that is evident! If there are any people in the world whom I have not the slightest inclination to envy, they are those who can't move hand or foot, without putting in motion at least a hundred people! Far better to be the simplest pedestrian, with knapsack on back, stick in hand, and gun on shoulder, than an Indian prince traveling with all the ceremonial which his rank requires.

“You can't call it a man going from one town to another,” said Banks to me; “it's a whole village altering its geographical relations!”

“I like Steam House far better,” I answered, “and I would not change with this rajah's son for anything!”

“Who knows,” said Captain Hood, “whether this prince may not prefer our rolling house to all his large and cumbersome equipage!”

“There will be only one answer to make to that,” cried Banks, “though I shall have no objection to build him a steam palace, provided he gives a good price! But while awaiting his summons, let us look around the camp, it is worth the trouble.”

The prince’s suite consisted of not less than five hundred persons. Under the great trees stood two hundred chariots, symmetrically arranged, like the tents of a vast camp. Some had zebras to draw them, others buffaloes, and besides these, there were three magnificent elephants, bearing on their backs richly ornamented palanquins, and twenty camels, from the country to the west of the Indus. Nothing was wanting in the caravan, neither musicians to charm the ears of his highness, nor dancing-girls to delight his eyes, nor jugglers to amuse his idle hours. Three hundred bearers and two hundred guards completed the company, the payment of whose wages would soon have exhausted any other purse than that of an independent Indian rajah.

Directly we appeared, the Hindoos started up and salaamed to us, bending down to the earth. A number also shouted, “Sahib! sahib!” and we answered with friendly gestures.

It occurred to me that perhaps Prince Gourou Singh might give in our honor one of those fetes of which rajahs are so lavish. The wide court of the bungalow was there all ready for any ceremony of this kind, and seemed to me admirably suited for the dances of the nautch-girls, the incantations of the charmers, or the tricks of the acrobats.

It would have delighted me, I acknowledge, to be present at such a spectacle in the middle of a serai, beneath the shade of magnificent trees, and with the natural get-up of the attendants. It would all have been worth far more than the boards of a narrow theater, with its scenery of painted canvas, and its imitation trees. I spoke my thoughts to my companions, who, while sharing my desire, did not think it would be realized.

“The Rajah of Guzarate,” said Banks, “is an independent man, who was with difficulty induced to submit, after the sepoy revolt, during which his conduct was at least suspicious. He does not at all like the English, and his son is not likely to make himself agreeable.”

“Well, well, we can do without his nautchs,” responded Captain Hood, shrugging his shoulders disdainfully.

Banks’s idea was probably correct, for we were not even admitted to the interior of the serai. Perhaps Prince Gourou Singh expected an official visit from the colonel; but as Sir Edward Munro had nothing to ask from this personage, he expected nothing, and did not trouble himself.

We now all returned to our own camp, where we did justice to the excellent dinner Monsieur Parazard served up. Preserved meats now formed the staple of our food. For several days the bad weather had prevented our hunting; but our cook was a clever man, and, under his knowing. hands, preserved vegetables and meat resumed all their natural flavor and freshness.

In spite of what Banks had said, a feeling of curiosity led me to wait all that evening for an invitation which never came. Captain Hood joked about my taste for ballets in the open air, and even assured me that it was “no end better “than the opera; but of this, unless the prince showed himself a little amiable, I should have no opportunity of judging. It was settled that our departure should take place at break of day the next morning, the 18th of June.

At five o’clock, Kalouth began to make up the fires. Our elephant, which had been detached from the rest of the train, stood about fifty paces off, and the engine-driver was busy taking in water. While this was going on, we strolled about beside the stream.

Forty minutes later the boiler was sufficiently under pressure, and Storr had begun to back, when a party of Hindoos approached. These were five or six richly dressed men, in white robes, silk tunics, and gold-embroidered turbans. A dozen guards armed with muskets and sabers accompanied them, one of the soldiers bearing a crown of green leaves, which showed the presence of some important person.

This important person was no other than Prince Gourou Singh himself, a man of some thirty-five years, with a very haughty expression, of a type common among the rajahs, in whose features are often found traces of the Mahratta character.

The prince did not deign to take notice of our presence. He walked forward a few paces and approached the gigantic elephant, which Storr's hand was now causing to move. Then after gazing at it, not without some feeling of curiosity, though that he did not wish to betray, "Who made that machine?" he demanded of Storr.

The engine-driver pointed to the engineer, who had joined us, and was standing a short distance off.

Prince Gourou Singh expressed himself very easily in English, and turning toward Banks, "Did you make — ?" he forced himself to say.

"I did," replied Banks.

"Did not some one tell me that it was a fancy of the late Rajah of Bhootan?"

Banks signed an affirmative.

“What is the good,” returned his highness, rudely shrugging his shoulders, “what is the good of being dragged about by a machine, when one has elephants of flesh and blood at one’s command?”

“Probably,” said Banks, “because this elephant is more powerful than all those of which the late rajah made use.”

“Oh!” said Gourou Singh contemptuously, “more powerful!”

“Infinitely more so!” returned Banks.

“Not one of yours,” put in Captain Hood, who much disliked these manners, “not one of yours would be capable of making that elephant stir an inch, if he did not wish it.”

“You say — ?” said the prince.

“My friend asserts,” replied the engineer, “and I also assert it, that this artificial animal could resist ten pair of horses, and that your three elephants harnessed together, could not make him move a foot!”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” replied the prince.

“Then you are quite wrong not to believe a word of it,” replied Captain Hood.

“And if your highness chooses to name a price,” added Banks, “I will engage to supply you with one that will have the strength of twenty of the best elephants in your stables!”

“It is easy to say so,” replied Gourou Singh dryly.

“And it is easy to do so,” returned Banks.

The prince began to get exasperated. It was plain to see that he could not stand contradiction.

“Can the experiment be made here?” he asked, after a moment’s thought.

“It can,” replied the engineer.

“I should like,” added Prince Gourou Singh, “to make this experiment the subject of a considerable wager, unless you draw back at the fear of losing it, as no doubt your elephant will draw back, when he has to struggle with mine.”

“Behemoth draw back?” exclaimed Captain Hood. “Who dares to say Behemoth will draw back?”

“I do,” returned Gourou Singh.

“And what sum will your highness wager?” asked the engineer, folding his arms.

“Four thousand rupees,” replied the prince, “if you have got four thousand rupees to lose.”

This would amount to nearly 400l. The stake was considerable, and I could see that Banks, confident as he was, did not much care to risk such a sum.

As for Captain Hood, he would have betted double that, if his modest pay would have allowed such a proceeding.

“You refuse?” at last said his highness, to whom 4,000 rupees merely represented the price of a passing fancy, “you are afraid to risk it?”

“Done!” exclaimed Colonel Munro, who had just approached, and now uttered this single word which was of much consequence to us.

“Will Colonel Munro wager 4,000 rupees?” inquired Prince Gourou Singh.

“Or even ten thousand,” answered Sir Edward, “if that would suit your highness better.”

“Be it so!” replied Gourou Singh.

This was becoming interesting. The engineer grasped the colonel’s hand, as if to thank him for saving him from the affront offered by the haughty rajah; but his brows knit for a moment, and I wondered whether he might not have presumed too much on the mechanical power of his apparatus.

Captain Hood had no such fears, he beamed all over, rubbed his hands, and advancing toward the elephant, “Attention, Behemoth,” he cried, “you have to work for the honor of old England, remember.”

All our party stood together, at the side of the road. About a hundred Hindoos left their own camp, and ran to be present at the forthcoming trial.

Banks left us and mounted into the howdah beside Storr, who by means of an artificial draught, was blowing up the furnaces so as to send a jet of vapor through Behemoth’s trunk.

While this was going on, at a sign from the prince, several of his servants went to the serai, and brought back the three elephants, freed from all their traveling harness. They were magnificent beasts, natives of Bengal, and much taller than their brethren of Southern India. The sight of these superb animals, in all their pride of strength, caused me a qualm of uneasiness. The mahouts, perched on their great necks, guided them by hand and voice.

As these elephants passed before his highness, the biggest of the three — a regular giant — stopped, bent his knees, raised his trunk, and saluted the prince like the well-trained courtier that he was. He with his two companions then approached Behemoth, whom they apparently regarded with astonishment, mingled with some fear.

Strong iron chains were fixed to the tender of our elephant. I confess my heart beat quick. Captain Hood gnawed his mustache and fidgeted about with anxiety. Colonel Munro was calm enough, far calmer indeed than Prince Gourou Singh.

“We are ready,” said the engineer. “When your highness pleases — ”

“It pleases me now,” returned the prince. Gourou Singh made a sign, the mahouts uttered a peculiar whistle, and the three elephants, planting their huge feet firmly on the ground, drew all together. The machine began to move.

A cry escaped me. Hood stamped.

“Put on the brakes!” said the engineer quietly, turning to the driver. And with a quick turn, followed by a rush of steam, the atmospheric brake was instantly brought to bear.

Behemoth stopped, immovable.

The mahouts excited the three elephants, who with straining muscles renewed their efforts. All was in vain. Our elephant appeared rooted to the ground.

Prince Gourou Singh bit his lip till the blood came.

Captain Hood clapped his hands.

“Forward!” cried Banks.

“Yes, forward,” repeated the captain, “forward!”

The regulator was opened wide, great puffs of vapor issued from the trunk, the wheels turned slowly round, and the three elephants, notwithstanding their struggles, were drawn backward, making deep ruts in the ground as they went.

“Go ahead! go ahead!” yelled Captain Hood.

And as Behemoth still moved forward, the enormous animals fell over on their sides, and were thus dragged.

some twenty feet, without apparently making any difference to our elephant.

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!” shouted the captain, who could not contain himself. “They might fasten the whole serai on to his highness’s elephants! It wouldn’t weigh more than a cherry to our Behemoth!”

Colonel Munro made a sign. Banks closed the regulator, and the machine stopped. Anything more piteous to behold than the prince’s three elephants now, could not be seen. There they lay, their trunks covered with mud, their great feet waving helplessly in the air, like gigantic beetles turned on their backs!

The prince, both irritated and ashamed, had by this time departed, without waiting for the end of the experiment.

The three elephants were now unharnessed. They rose, visibly humiliated by their defeat. As they repassed Behemoth, the largest, in spite of his driver, could not help bowing his knees and saluting with his trunk, just as he had done to Prince Gourou Singh.

In a quarter of an hour, a Hindoo, the kamdar, or secretary of his highness, appeared in our camp and handed to the colonel a bag containing the lost wager of ten thousand rupees.

Sir Edward took the bag, but tossed it scornfully back, saying, “For the people of his highness!”

Then turning on his heel, he walked quietly into Steam House. No better way could have been devised for putting down this arrogant prince who had so contemptuously provoked us.

Behemoth being now in his place, Banks gave the signal and we started off at full speed, in the midst of an enormous crowd of amazed and wondering Hindoos.

Shouts and cries saluted us, and soon a turn of the road hid Prince Gourou Singh’s camp and serai from our sight.

The next day, Steam House began to ascend an acclivity which connects the level country with the base of the Himalayan frontier. This was mere child’s play to our Behemoth, whose twenty-four horse power had enabled him successfully to cope with Prince Gourou Singh’s three elepharits. He pressed easily up the steep roads of this region, without its being found necessary to increase the regular pressure of steam.

It was indeed a strange sight, to see our colossal animal breasting the hill, giving vent to snorts and shrieks as he dragged our train up after him. Our heavy wheels crashed and ground along, not, it must be confessed, to the improvement of the roads; in which, already softened by torrents of rain, they made deep ruts. In spite of it all, Steam House gradually rose, the panorama widened, the plain subsided, and toward the south the horizon stretched at last farther than the eye could reach.

We were more sensible of the effect produced, when for some hours the road lay under the trees of a thick forest. Now and then a wide glade opened before us, like an immense window on the mountain ridge, when we would stop our train, for a minute or two if the landscape was misty,

or for half a day, if the view was clear. All four then leaning out of the back veranda would take our fill of gazing at the magnificent panorama extended before our eyes.

This ascent, interrupted by more or less prolonged halts — for the view as well as for night encampments — continued for no less than seven days, from the 19th to the 25th of June.

“With a little patience,” remarked Captain Hood, “our train will mount to the very highest summits of the Himalayas!”

“Don’t be too ambitious, captain,” responded the engineer.

“It could do it, Banks!”

“Yes, Hood, it could if the practicable road did not soon come to an end, and provided we carried fuel, for that we should no longer find among the glaciers, besides respirable air, which would be wanting up there. But there is no need for us to do more than just pass the habitable zone of the Himalayas. When Behemoth has attained a medium altitude, he will stop in some pleasant spot, on the border of an Alpine-like forest, in delicious air refreshed by the breezes from above. Our friend Munro will have transported his Calcutta bungalow on to the mountains of Nepaul, that is all, and there we can stay as long as .we like.”

On the 25th of June, we found the halting-place in which we were to camp for several months. For forty-eight hours the road had been becoming less and less practicable, being either half made or deeply cut up by the rain. It was a regular tug for Behemoth, but he managed it by devouring a little more fuel than usual. A few pieces of wood, added to Kalouth’s furnace, served to increase the steam pressure.

For this last forty-eight hours our train had been traveling through an almost deserted country. Settlements or villages were no longer to be met with. Only here and there a farm, or isolated dwelling, buried in the great pine-forests, with which the southern ridges bristled. Three or four times a solitary mountaineer greeted us with admiring exclamations. No doubt, on seeing the marvelous apparatus ascending the mountain, they imagined that Brahma had taken it into his head to transport an entire pagoda to some inaccessible and lofty height.

At last, on the 25th of June, Banks gave the word to “Halt!” and thus ended the first part of our journey into Northern India.

The train came to a standstill in the middle of a wide glade, near a torrent, the limpid waters of which would supply the wants of our camp for several months. Our outlook, too, extended for fifty or sixty miles over the plain.

Steam House was now 975 miles from its starting-place, 6,000 feet above the level of the sea, and resting at the foot of the Dhawalagiri, whose summit rises 27,000 feet into the air.

CHAPTER XV

THE PAL OF TANDIT

HAVING followed thus far the travels of Colonel Munro and his companions, from Calcutta to the Indo-Chinese frontier, and seen them safely encamped at the base of the mountains of Thibet, we will leave them for a time in their winter-quarters and devote a few pages to some other characters who have appeared in our story.

Our readers may remember the incident which marked the arrival of Steam House at Allahabad. From a newspaper of that town, dated the 25th of May, Colonel Munro learned the news of the death of Nana Sahib. Was this report so often spread before, and again so often contradicted, this time indeed true? After reading such minute details, could Sir Edward Munro still doubt, and was he not justified in renouncing all expectation of being able finally to do justice on the rebel of 1857?

We shall be enabled to judge of this, when we hear of all that occurred after the night of the 7th of March, during which Nana Sahib, accompanied by Balao Rao, his brother, and escorted by most faithful companions, the Hindoo Kalagani among the number, left the caves of Adjuntah.

Sixty hours later, the nabob reached the narrow defiles of the Sautpoora Mountains, after crossing the Taptee, which flows into the sea on the west coast, near Surat. He was then a hundred miles from Adjuntah, in a part of the province little frequented, and thus tolerably secure for a time. The place was well chosen.

Here Nana Sahib was near the country of the Ghoonds, an aboriginal tribe, only half subdued, whom he hoped to induce to revolt. Ghoondwana is a territory of two hundred square miles containing a population of more than three millions. M. Rousselet considers the inhabitants to be always ripe for rebellion. It is quite an important part of Hindoostan, and truth to say, is only nominally under English rule. The railway from Bombay to Allahabad traverses this district from southwest to northeast, and even has a branch into the center of the province of Nagpore; but the tribes remain as savage as ever, become refractory at any proposal of civilization, are very impatient of the European yoke, and in fact, as they can any moment retreat into their mountain fastnesses, are extremely difficult to keep in order, and this Nana Sahib well knew.

Here then he determined to seek shelter, so as to escape the search of the English police, and there to await a fit time to provoke an insurrectional movement.

If the nabob should succeed in his enterprise, if at his summons the Ghoonds should rise and follow where he led, the revolt would doubtless spread rapidly and widely.

To the north of Ghoondwana lies Bundelcund, which comprises the mountainous region, situated between the higher plateau of the Vindhyas and the important river the Jumna. In this country, covered with beautiful virgin forests, live a deceitful and cruel people, among whom all criminals, political or otherwise, seek and easily find a refuge. These provinces still remain barbarous, and here still live the descendants of those who fought under Tippoo Sahib against the invaders. Here, too, are the headquarters of the celebrated stranglers, the Thugs, so long the terror of India, fanatical assassins, who destroy innumerable victims, though without shedding blood; as well as bands of Pindarris, who perpetrate the most odious massacres, almost with impunity. In every part are swarms of the terrible

Dacoits, a sect of poisoners, who follow in the footsteps of the Thugs; and finally Nana Sahib himself had taken refuge here, after escaping the royal troops, now masters of Jansi. He having thus thrown them off the scent, intended soon to go and seek a more secure asylum in the inaccessible retreats of the Indo-Chinese frontier.

To the east of Ghoondwana is Kondistan or the country of the Konds. These people are the fierce votaries of Tado Pennor, the god of the earth, and Maunek Soro, the red god of battles. They are much given to those meriahs or human sacrifices, which the English have so long endeavored to abolish; and can only be compared to the savage natives of the most barbarous Polynesian islands. In 1840 and 1854, Major-General John Campbell with Captains Macpherson, Macvicar, and Fry, engaged in long and troublesome expeditions against these daring fanatics, who will do anything under a religious pretext, if an unscrupulous leader can be found.

To the west of Ghoondwana lies a state containing from 1,500,000 to 2,000,000 souls, occupied by the Bheels, formerly so powerful in Malwa and Rajpootana, now divided into clans, and spread all about the Vindhyas. They are almost always intoxicated with the spirit they obtain from the mikowah tree, but are brave, daring, hardy, and active, and constantly prepared to answer to the kisri their cry for war or pillage.

From this description it will be seen that Nana Sahib had chosen well. In this central region of the peninsula, he hoped this time, instead of a mere military insurrection, to provoke a national movement, in which Hindoos of every caste would take part.

But before taking any decided step, it was necessary to settle in the country, so as to obtain as much influence, and act as effectively as was possible under the circumstances.

This, of course, necessitated the discovery of a safe retreat, for a time at any rate, which he could be free to abandon, directly it was suspected.

This was Nana Sahib’s first care. The Hindoos who had followed him from Adjuntah, could go and come as they liked throughout the presidency. Balao Rao, who was not included in the governor’s notice, might also have enjoyed the same immunity, had it not been for his likeness to his brother. Since his flight to the frontiers of Nepaul, attention had not been drawn to his person, and there was every reason to believe him dead. But, taken for Nana Sahib, he would have been at once arrested, and this at any cost must be avoided.

A single asylum then was needed for these two brothers, one in thought and aim, and in the defiles of the Sautpoora Mountains, this would neither take long nor be difficult to find.

A suitable place was at last pointed out by one of the natives of the band, a Ghoond, who knew every inch of the valley, even to its innermost retreats.

On the right bank of a little tributary of the Nerbudda was a deserted pal, called the Pal of Tandit.

A pal is something less than a village and scarcely a hamlet, merely a collection of huts, or sometimes even a solitary habitation. The wanderers who inhabit it take up their abode there only for a time. After burning a few trees, the cinders of which improve the ground for a time, the Ghoond and his friends construct a dwelling. As the country is anything but safe, the house has all the appearance of a little fort. It is surrounded by palisades, and is capable of being defended against a surprise. Besides which, hidden in some thick clump of trees, or buried, so to speak, in a bower of cactus and brushwood, it is no easy matter to discover it at all.

Usually, the pal crowns some hillock with a narrow valley on one side, between two steep spurs of the mountains, in the midst of an impenetrable forest. It does not seem that any human creature could live there. There is no road to it, nor even the vestige of a path. To reach one, it is sometimes necessary to ascend the bed of a torrent, so that the water may wash away all traces of any one having passed that way. Besides this, a perfect avalanche of stones and rocks is kept ready at the top, arranged so that even a child's hand would be sufficient to push them over, and crush any one who attempted to reach the pal against the wish of the inhabitants.

Isolated as they are in their inaccessible eyries, the Ghoonds can yet communicate most rapidly from pal to pal. From the unequal ridges of the Sautpooras, signals are in a few minutes sent over sixty miles of country. A fire lighted on the summit of a pointed rock, a tree changed into a gigantic torch, a column of smoke on the top of a spur of the hills: the inhabitants all know what these signify. The enemy, that is to say, a detachment of English soldiers, or a squad of police, has penetrated into the valley, ascended the course of the Nerbudda, is searching the gorges, in quest of some criminal, to whom the district offers a willing refuge. The war-cry, so familiar to the ear of the mountaineers, becomes a cry of alarm. A stranger might mistake it for the call of night-birds, or the hissing of serpents.

The Ghoond does not so mistake it, however: it is a warning that he must fly, and so he does. The suspected pals are abandoned, or even burned. The nomads escape to other retreats, to be in their turn deserted if close pressed, so that when the agents of the authorities at last make their way to them, they find nothing but ruins.

It was to one of these places, the Pal of Tandit, that Nana Sahib and his friends came to take refuge. The faithful Ghoond, so devoted to the person of the nabob, brought them to it, and there, on the 12th of March, they stationed themselves.

The brothers’ first care, after taking possession of the Pal of Tandit, was diligently to reconnoiter the neighborhood. They observed in what directions they could see, and how far. They found out what were the nearest habitations, and who were their occupants. The position of this lonely peak, on which in the midst of a group of trees, was the Pal of Tandit, was minutely studied, until they finally came to the conclusion that it was utterly impossible to obtain access to it without following the bed of the Nazzur torrent, up which they had themselves ascended.

The security this Pal offered was undoubted, more especially as below it was a cave or tunnel, from which secret passages led out from the spur of the mountain, and afforded another way of escape when necessary.

It was not enough, however, for Balao Rao to know only what the Pal of Tandit was at the present time; he wished to know what it had been, and while the nabob was examining the interior he continued to interrogate the Ghoond.

“A few questions more,” he said. “For how long has this pal been deserted?”

“For more than a year,” replied the Ghoond.

“Who last inhabited it?”

“A wandering family, who only stayed there a few months.”

“Why did they leave it?”

“Because the soil did not supply them with sufficient nourishment on which to subsist.”

“And since their departure, no one to your knowledge has taken refuge there?”

“No one.”

“A soldier or emissary of the police has never set foot in this pal?”

“Never.”

“It has been visited by no stranger?”

“By none,” answered the Ghoond, “unless it was a woman.”

“A woman?” exclaimed Balao Rao.

“Yes, a woman, who has been wandering about in the valley of the Nerbudda for the last three years.”

“Who is she?”

“I have no idea who she is,” replied the man. “Where she comes from I cannot tell, and not a person in the valley knows more than I do about the matter. Whether she is a foreigner, or a native, no one has ever been able to find out.”

Balao Rao reflected for a moment, then resumed, “What does this woman do?” he asked.

“She goes to and fro,” replied the Ghoond, “and lives entirely on alms. Every one in the valley has a kind of superstitious veneration for her. I have several times myself received her in my own pal. She never speaks, and is generally supposed to be dumb, and I should not be surprised if she were. At night she may be seen straying about, holding a lighted torch in her hand. For this reason she is always known by the name of the ‘ Roving Flame.’”

“But,” said Balao Rao, “if this woman knows the Pal of Tandit, is she not likely to return to it while we are here, and so cause us some danger?”

“Not at all,” replied the Ghoond. “She is mad. Her senses have fled; her eyes gaze without seeing; her ears listen without hearing, her tongue cannot utter a word. It is as though she were blind, deaf, and dumb to all that goes on around her. She is quite mad, and madness is a living death!”

The Ghoond, in the language of the hillmen, thus traced the portrait of a strange creature, well known in the valley under the name of the “Roving Flame “of the Nerbudda. This was a woman whose pale, still beautiful, countenance, worn, though not with years, and quite devoid of expression, betrayed neither her origin nor age. The wild eyes looked as though they had closed to all intellectual life on some terrific scene, the horror of which still lingered in them.

The hillmen always received this poor inoffensive creature kindly. Like all savage people, the Ghoonds hold persons who have been deprived of reason in a sort of superstitious reverence. Roving Flame was hospitably welcomed wherever she appeared. No pal was closed to her. They fed her when she was hungry, gave her a bed when she was weary, without expecting a word of thanks from the poor speechless mouth.

For how long had this woman led this existence? Where had she come from? When did she first appear in Ghoondwana? Why did she rove about with a torch in her hand? Was it to light her path or to scare away wild beasts? It was impossible to find out. Sometimes she disappeared for whole months together. What became of her then? Did she leave the defiles of the Sautpooras for the gorges of the Vindhyas? Did she wander beyond the Nerbudda into Malwa or Bundelcund? No one knew. More than once, when her absence was prolonged, it was thought that her melancholy life had ended. But no! She always came back, still looking the same: for neither fatigue, nor illness, nor privation had any visible effect on her apparently frail body.

Balao Rao heard the native with extreme attention. He considered whether there might not be some danger in the circumstance that Roving Flame knew the Pal of Tandit, for, as she had already before sought refuge there, her instinct might lead her back to it. He therefore questioned the Ghoond as to whether he or his friends knew where the mad woman actually was at the present time.

“I cannot tell at all,” answered the Ghoond. “For more than six months no one has seen her in the valley. Possibly she may be dead; but even should she reappear and come to this pal, there is nothing to fear from her. She is but a moving statue. She will not see you, nor hear you, nor know in the least who you are! She will just enter, sit by your hearth for a day or even two, then light her torch, and begin again to wander from house to house. That is the way her life is spent. But since her absence this time has been so prolonged, most likely she will not return again. The mind died long ago, and now the body must be dead also!”

Balao Rao did not attach sufficient importance to this incident to think it worth mentioning to Nana Sahib.

The fugitives spent a month in the Pal of Tandit, and as yet Roving Flame had not returned to the Nerbudda valley.

CHAPTER XVI

ROVING FLAME

FOR a whole month, from the 12th of March to the 12th of April, Nana Sahib remained concealed in the pal. He wished to give the English authorities time either to make some mistake by thinking he was dead, and so give up the search, or to go on a false scent in quite another direction.

The two brothers did not go out in the daytime themselves, but their faithful followers went forth throughout the valley, visiting the villages and hamlets, announcing in ambiguous words the approaching apparition of a great moulti, half god, half man, and thus preparing their minds for a national rising.

When night fell, Nana Sahib and Balao Rao ventured to quit their retreat. Following the banks of the Nerbudda, they went from village to village, from pal to pal, awaiting the time when, with some security, they might attempt the domains of the rajahs under British rule. Nana Sahib knew, besides, that there were many semi-independent tribes,

who were impatient of the foreign yoke, and would rally round him at his summons. But in the first instance he must only deal with the savage populations of Ghoondwana.

These barbarous Bheels, nomad Konds, and Ghoonds, as little civilized as the natives of the Pacific isles, the Nana found all ready to rise and follow where he would. Although he prudently only made himself known to two or three powerful chiefs, that was sufficient to prove to him that his name alone would attract millions of natives from the central plateau of Hindoostan.

When the two brothers met again in their pal, they compared notes of all that they had seen, heard, and done. Their companions then joined them, bringing from all parts word that the spirit of revolt was blowing like a tempest through the Nerbudda valley. The Ghoonds only longed to be allowed to yell the “kisri,” or war-cry of the hillmen, and hurl themselves like a cataract on the military cantonments of the residency.

The time for that had not yet come.

It was in truth not enough that in the province lying between the Sautpooras and Vindhyas alone the spirit of revolt should be smouldering. That the fire might gradually gain on the country, it was necessary to carry the combustible elements into the neighboring states, which were more directly under English authority.

The whole of the vast kingdom of Scindia, as well as the states of Bhopal, Malwa, and Bundelcund were to be made to resemble a huge bonfire, ready and prepared for lighting. But Nana Sahib, wisely enough, did not intend to delegate to others the task of visiting his partisans in the insurrection of 1857; those natives who remained faithful to his cause, and never had believed in his death, were constantly expecting his reappearance.

A month after his arrival in the Pal of Tandit, the Nana began to consider he might act in safety. He thought that by this time the story of his having been seen in the province would be contradicted. Trusty spies kept him informed as to all that the governor of the Bombay Presidency had done to effect his capture. He knew that at first the authorities had instituted a most active search, but without result. The fisherman of Aurungabad, once the Nana’s prisoner, had fallen by his dagger, and no one had suspected that the fugitive fakir was the Nabob Dandoo Pant, on whose head a price had been set. In a week the reports grew fewer, the aspirants to the prize of 2,000/. lost hope, and the name of Nana Sahib began to be forgotten. Without much fear of being recognized, the nabob now began his insurrectionary campaign. Now in the costume of a parsee, and now in that of a humble ryot, one day alone, and another accompanied by his brother, he went long distances from the Pal of Tandit, northward, to the other side of the Nerbudda, and even beyond the Vindhyas.

If a spy had followed him in his wanderings he would, soon after the 12th of April, have found him at Indore.

There, Nana Sahib, while preserving the strictest incognito, put himself in communication with the extensive rural population employed in the culture of poppy fields. These were Rihillas, Mekranis, Valayalis, eager, courageous, and fanatical, chiefly sepoy deserters, concealed by the dress of native peasants.

Nana Sahib, on the 19th of April, passing through a magnificent valley in which dates and mango-trees grew in profusion, arrived at Suari.

Here rise numerous curious constructions, of very great antiquity. They are called “topes,” and resemble tumuli, crowned with hemispheric domes, the principal group being that of Saldhara, at the north of the valley. From these funeral monuments — these dwellings of the dead — the altars of which, dedicated to Buddhist rites, are shaded by stone parasols — issued, at the voice of Nana Sahib, hundreds of fugitives. Buried in these ruins to escape the retaliations of the English, one word was sufficient to make them understand what the nabob expected of them; when the hour came, a signal would be enough to excite them to throw themselves en masse on the invaders.

On the 24th of April the Nana reached Bhilsa, the chief town of an important district of Malwa, and in the ruins of that ancient place he collected men ripe for revolt, to whom he gave the news.

On the 27th he entered Rajghur, and on the 30th the old city of Saugor, not far from the spot where General Sir Hugh Rose fought a bloody battle with the insurgents, and with the hill of Maudanpoor, gained the key of the defiles of the Vindhyas.

There the nabob was joined by his brother and Kalagani, and the two then made themselves known to the chiefs of the principal tribes of which they were sure. In these councils the preliminaries of a general insurrection were discussed and agreed upon. While Nana Sahib and Balao Rao were pursuing their operations in these parts, their allies were no less busy on the northern side of the Vindhyas.

Before returning to the Nerbudda valley, the two brothers wished to visit Punnah. They ventured up the Keyne, under the shade of giant teaks and colossal bamboos. Here they enrolled many wild fellows from among the miserable people who work for the rajah in the valuable diamond-mines of the territory. “This rajah,” says M. Rousselet, “understanding the position which English protection gives to the princes of Bundelcund, prefers the role of a rich land-holder to that of an insignificant prince.” A rich landholder indeed! The region he possesses extends for twenty miles north of Punnah, and the working of his mines, the products of which are most esteemed in the markets of Benares and Allahabad, employs a large number of Hindoos. They are very hardly treated, condemned to the severest labor, and running a great chance of being decapitated as soon as their work is no longer required: so it is not to be wondered at that the Nana found many among them ready to fight for the independence of their country.

Leaving this place, the brothers came southward again, intending to return to the Pal of Tandit. However, before provoking the southern rising which should coincide with that of the north, they determined to stop at Bhopal.

This is an important Mussulman town, and the capital of Islamism in India. Its begum remained faithful to the English during the time of the rebellion.

Nana Sahib and Balao Rao, accompanied by a dozen Ghoonds, arrived at Bhopal on the 24th of May, the last day of the Moharum festival, instituted to celebrate the revival of the Mussulman army. Both had assumed the dress of joguis, religious mendicants armed with long daggers with rounded blades, which they dig into their bodies in a fanatical manner, though without doing any great harm. Being unrecognizable in this disguise, the two brothers followed the procession through the streets of the town, in the midst of numerous elephants, bearing on their back tadzias, or little temples, twenty feet high; they mingled with the Mussulmans, who were richly clothed in gold-embroidered tunics and muslin turbans; they joined with the musicians, soldiers, dancing-girls, young men disguised as women — a strange agglomeration which gave to the ceremony quite the look of a carnival. In this mob of natives were many of their friends, with whom the conspirators could easily manage to exchange a masonic sign, well known to the rebels of 1857.

When evening came, the crowd surged toward the lake which bathes the eastern suburb of the town.

There, in the midst of deafening cries, reports of firearms, popping of crackers, and by the light of innumerable torches, the fanatics seized the tadzias, and cast them into the waters of the lake. The Moharum festival was ended.

Just then Nana Sahib felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned and saw a Bengalee standing beside him.

The Nana recognized in this man one of his former followers. He gave him a questioning look.

The Bengalee thereupon murmured the following words, all of which were heard by the Nana without his betraying emotion by a single word or look.

“Colonel Munro has left Calcutta.”

“Where is he?”

“He was at Benares yesterday.”

“Where is he going?

“To the Nepaulese frontier.”

“With what object?”

“To stay there a?few months.”

“And then — ’”

“Return to Bombay.”

A whistle was heard. At the signal a native glided through the crowd and stood before them.

It was Kalagani.

“Go this instant,” said the nabob, “join Munro on his way to the north. Attach yourself to him. Render him some service, and risk your life if necessary. Never leave him until he is beyond the Vindhyas in the Nerbudda valley. Then — and then only — come and give me notice of his presence."

Kalagani signed an affirmative and disappeared. An order from the nabob was enough. In ten minutes he had left Bhopal.

At that moment Balao Rao approached his brother.

"It is time to set out," he said.

"Yes," replied the Nana; "and before daybreak we must be at the Pal of Tandit."

"Forward, then!"

Followed by their Ghoonds, the two men skirted the northern side of the lake until they reached an isolated farm, where horses awaited them and their escort. They were swift animals, fed upon spiced food, and capable of doing fifty miles in a single night. By eight o'clock they were galloping along the road from Bhopal to the Vindhyas.

The Nana prudently wished his return to the pal to pass unnoticed; so in order to reach their destination before daybreak, they pushed on at their utmost speed.

The brothers barely exchanged a word, but their minds were occupied with the same thoughts. During their excursion they had gathered more than hope — the absolute certainty that numberless followers would rally around them. The center of India was entirely in their hands. The military cantonments scattered over this vast territory could not resist the first assault of the insurgents. Their annihilation would leave the way open for the revolt, which, spreading from coast to coast, would call up a wall of determined natives, against which the English army would dash themselves in vain.

The Nana’s thoughts were divided between this and the fortunate chance, which would soon put Munro into his power. The colonel had at last quitted Calcutta, where he was so difficult to get at. Henceforth, none of his movements would be unknown to the nabob. Without his suspecting it, the hand of Kalagani would guide him into the wild country of the Vindhyas, and once there, none could protect him from the punishment Nana Sahib’s hate reserved for him.

Balao Rao knew nothing of what had passed between the Bengalee and his brother. It was not until they were approaching the pal, when stopping to breathe their horses for an instant, that Nana Sahib mentioned the subject.

“Munro has left Calcutta and is going to Bombay.”

“The road to Bombay,” exclaimed Balao Rao, “leads to the shores of the Indian Ocean.”

“The road to Bombay, this time,” returned the Nana, “will end in the Vindhyas.”

The horses set off again at a gallop through the thick forest which covered the borders of the Nerbudda valley.

It was five in the morning, and day was dawning, as Nana Sahib, Balao Rao, and their companions drew rein at the foot of the Nazzur torrent. The party here dismounted and left their horses in charge of a couple of

Ghoonds, with orders to take them to the nearest village. The rest then followed the brothers, who were already ascending the torrent.

All was still. The noise of day had not yet succeeded to the silence of night. Suddenly a shot was heard, followed by many others; then shouts arose. “Hurrah! hurrah! forward!”

An officer, with fifty British soldiers, appeared on the crest of the pal. “Fire! let none escape!” he exclaimed.

Another volley was fired straight at the group of Ghoonds which surrounded the Nana and his brother. Five or six natives fell, the others throwing themselves into the stream disappeared among the trees.

“Nana Sahib! Nana Sahib!” shouted the English, as they penetrated the narrow ravine.

All at once, one of those who had been mortally wounded, rose, his hand extended. “Death to the invaders!” he cried, in a hoarse voice, then fell back dead.

The officer approached the body. “Is this indeed Nana Sahib?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, it is,” answered two of his men, who had been at Cawnpore, and were well acquainted with the person of the nabob.

“After the others now,” called out the officer.

And he with all his detachment hastened off into the forest in pursuit.

Scarcely had they disappeared, when a dark figure glided out of the dim recesses of the pal. It was Roving Flame.

The evening before, the mad woman had been the unconscious guide of the officer and his men. She had entered the valley and was mechanically bending her step toward the Pal of Tandit, when she happened to pass a bivouac of these soldiers who were engaged in the search for the Nana. As the strange being glided by, the tongue which was supposed to be speechless, uttered a word, a name, that of the slaughterer of Cawnpore.

“Nana Sahib! Nana Sahib!” she repeated, as if some unaccountable presentiment had called up the image in her mind.

The officer heard and started. He instantly ordered up his men and followed in her steps, she appearing neither to see nor hear them. They reached the pal. Was this indeed the place in which the miscreant had hidden himself? The officer took the necessary measures for guarding the bed of the Nazzur and waited for day.

Directly Nana Sahib and his Ghoonds appeared on the scene, they were met with a volley, which laid many low, and among them, the chief of the Sepoy Mutiny.

Such was the account of the skirmish sent by telegraph to the Governor of the Bombay Presidency. The telegram soon spread all over the peninsula, the papers copied it, and thus Colonel Munro read it on the 26th of May in the Allahabad Gazette.

No one could any longer have doubts about the death of Nana Sahib. His identity had been proved, and as the paragraph stated, “India has now nothing further to dread from the machinations of the cruel nabob who has cost her so much blood!”

The madwoman left the pal and descended the bed of the Nazzur. Her hollow eyes were burning with a strange light, which was not there a short time before, and she still muttered at intervals the name of the Nana.

She reached the spot where the dead bodies lay, and stopped before the one recognized by the soldiers. The horrid scowl with which he died was fixed on his features. Having lived but for vengeance, his hate still survived.

The madwoman knelt down, laid her clasped hands on the body, from which the blood flowed and stained the folds of her dress, and looked long and fixedly at the face. Then she arose, and shaking her head, glided slowly away.

By the time she had gone a few yards, Roving Flame had relapsed into her wonted indifference, and her lips no longer uttered the cursed name of Nana Sahib.

BOOK TWO

TIGERS AND TRAITORS

CHAPTER I

OUR SANITARIUM

SPEAKING of the great American Andes, the mineralogist Haiiy uses a grand expression when he calls them “The incommensurable parts of Creation.”

These proud words may justly be applied to the Himalayan chain, whose heights no man can measure with any mathematical precision. They occurred to my mind when I first viewed this incomparable region, in the midst of which Colonel Munro, Captain Hood, Banks, and myself were to sojourn for several weeks.

“Not only are these mountains immeasurable,” said the engineer, “but their summit must be regarded as inaccessible; for human organs cannot work at such a height, where the air is not dense enough for breathing!”

This chain may be best described as a barrier of primitive granite, gneiss, and schist rocks, 1,560 miles in length, extending from the seventy-second meridian to the ninety-fifth, through two presidencies, Agra and Calcutta, and two kingdoms, Bhootan and Nepaul. It comprehends three distinct zones; the first 5,000 feet high, being more temperate than the lower plain, and yielding a harvest of corn in the winter, and rice in the summer; the second, increasing from 5,000 to 9,000 feet, on which the snow melts in the spring time, and the third, rising to 25,000, covered with ice and snow, which even in the hot season defies the solar rays.

At an elevation of 20,000 feet the mountains are pierced by eleven passes, which, incessantly threatened by avalanches, swept by torrents, and encumbered by glaciers, yet make it possible, though dangerous and difficult, to go from India to Thibet. Above this ridge, which is sometimes rounded and then again as flat as Table Mountain at the Cape of Good Hope, rise seven or eight peaks, some volcanic, commanding the sources of the Gogra, the Jumna, and the Ganges. The chief are Mounts Dookia and Kinchinjinga,

rising to 28,000 feet; Diodhoonga, 24,000; Dhawalagiri, 27,000; Chumalari, 28,000; and the highest in the world, Mount Everest, 29,000 feet. Such is this magnificent pile of mountains, which neither Alps, Pyrenees, nor Andes can excel in loftiness.

The first slopes are extensively and thickly wooded. Here may be found different representatives of the palm family, which, in a higher zone, give place to vast forests of oaks, cypress, and pines, to rich masses of bamboos and herbaceous plants.

Banks, who gave us this information, told us also that the snow-line is 6,000 feet lower on the Indian side of the chain than on the Thibetian; the reason being that the vapors brought by the south winds are arrested by the enormous barrier. On the other side, therefore, villages have been established at an altitude of 15,000 feet in the midst of fields of barley and beautiful meadows. If you believe the natives, one night is sufficient for a crop of grass to carpet these pastures!

In the middle zone, peacocks, partridges, pheasants, bustards, and quails, represent the winged tribe. Goats and sheep abound. In the highest zone we only find the wild boar, the chamois, the wild cat; and the eagle soars above the scanty vegetation, mere humble specimens of an arctic flora.

But there was nothing there to tempt Captain Hood. Was it likely that this Nimrod would have come into the Himalayan region merely to continue his trade of domestic provider? Fortunately for him, there was no chance that game worthy of his Enfield-rifle, and his explosive balls, would be scarce.

At the foot of the first slopes of the chain extends a zone, called by the natives the belt of Terrai. It is a long declivitous stretch of land, four or five miles wide, damp, warm, covered with vegetation and dense forests forming favorite resorts for wild beasts. This Eden of the hunter who loves the stirring features of the chase lay but 1,500 yards below us. It was therefore easy to enter into these preserves, which seemed as it were quite distinct grounds.

It was more than probable that Captain Hood would have greater pleasure in visiting the lower than the upper zones of the Himalayas, although, even after the explorations of that most ill-humored of travelers, Victor Jacquemont, many important geographical discoveries remain yet to be made.

“So this important chain is only very imperfectly known? “I remarked to Banks.

“Very imperfectly indeed,” answered the engineer. “The Himalayan chain may be likened to a little planet, stuck on to our globe, and keeping its own secrets.”

“They have been surveyed though,” said I, “they have been explored as much as is possible!”

“Oh, yes! There has been no lack of Himalayan travelers,” replied Banks. “Messrs. Gerard and Webb, the officers Kirkpatrick, Fraser, Hodgson, Herbert, Lloyd, Hooker, Cunningham, Strabing, Skinner, Johnson, Moorcroft, Thomson, Griffith, Vigne, FEW, the missionaries Huc and

Gabet, and more recently the brothers Schlagentweit, Colonel Waugh, Lieutenants Reuillier and Montgomery, have, by dint of great labor, made known in large measure their orological arrangements. Nevertheless, my friends, much remains to be learned.

“The exact heights of the principal peaks have given rise to numberless rectifications. Formerly, Dhawalagiri was the king of the whole chain; then after new measurements, he was forced to yield the throne to Kinchinjinga, who again has abdicated in favor of Mount Everest. At the present time, the latter surpasses all its rivals. However, the Chinese now say that the Kuen-Lun Mountains, to which it is true European measurements have not been applied, surpass Mount Everest in a slight degree, and that we must no longer look to the Himalayas as possessing the highest point of our globe.

“But in reality these measurements must not be considered mathematical until they have been barometrically obtained, and with every precaution that a direct determination will admit of. And how is this to be done without carrying a barometer to the very top of one of these inaccessible peaks? Of course no one has yet accomplished this.”

“It will be done,” answered Captain Hood, “just as some day voyages will be made to both the north and south pole!”

“Evidently!”

“Or an exploring party to the lowest depths of old Ocean.”

“Doubtless.”

“Or a journey to the center of the earth?”

“Bravo, Hood!”

“As everything will be done! “I added.

“Even an aerial voyage to each of the planets of the solar system!” rejoined Hood, whom nothing daunted.

“No, captain,” I replied. “Man, a mere inhabitant of the earth, cannot overstep its boundaries! But though he is confined to its crust, he may penetrate into all its secrets.”

“He can, he must!” cried Banks. “All that is within the limits of possibility may and shall be accomplished. Then when man has nothing more to discover in the globe which he inhabits — ”

“He will disappear with the spheroid which has no longer any mysteries concealed from him,” put in Captain Hood.

Not so!” returned Banks. “He will enjoy it as a master, and will derive far greater advantages from it. But friend Hood, now that we are in the Himalayan country, I wish to tell you of a curious discovery which you may make, among others, and which will certainly interest you.”

“What is it about, Banks?”

“In the account of his travels, the missionary Huc speaks of a singular tree which is called in Thibet ‘ the tree of ten thousand pictures.’ According to the Hindoo legend, Tong Kabac, the reformer of the Buddhist religion, was changed into a tree, some thousand years after the same adventure happened to Philemon, Baucis, and Daphne, those curious vegetable beings of the mythological flora. The hair of Tong Kabac became the foliage of this sacred tree, and on the leaves are — the missionary declares he saw it with his own eyes — Thibetian characters, distinctly to be traced in the veins."

"A tree producing printed leaves! "I exclaimed.

"And, moreover, on which you may read the purest and most moral sentences," continued the engineer.

"That would be well worth the trouble of proving," said I, laughing.

"Prove it, then, my friends," answered Banks. "If these trees exist in the southern part of Thibet, they surely are to be found in the upper zone, on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. During your excursions, then, you can be on the lookout for this — what shall I call it? — this maxim-tree."

"No, by Jove!" returned Captain Hood. "I came here to hunt, and have not the smallest intention of doing anything in the climbing line."

"Well, my dear fellow," resumed Banks, "a daring climber like you ought to make some ascent in all this great chain."

"Never!" exclaimed the captain.

"Why not?"

"I have renounced ascents!"

"Since when?"

"Since the day when, after having risked my life twenty times," answered Captain Hood, "I managed to reach the summit of Vrigel, in the kingdom of Bhootan. It was said that no human being had ever set foot on the top of that peak! There was glory to be gained! my honor was at stake! Well, after no end of narrow squeaks for it, I got to the top, and what did I see but these words cut on a rock: Durand, dentist, 14, Rue Caumartin, Paris! ‘ I climb no more!”

The honest captain! I must confess that, while telling us of his discomfiture, Hood looked so comical, that it was impossible to help joining him in a hearty laugh.

I have several times spoken of the “sanatariums “of the peninsula. These resorts in the mountains are much frequented during the summer by landowners, officers, and merchants, who are scorched by the glowing heat of the plains. In the first rank we must name Simla. It is like a little bit of Switzerland, with its torrents, its streams, its chalets, pleasantly situated under the shade of cedars and pines, 6,000 feet above the level of the sea.

After Simla, I must mention Darjeeling, with its pretty white houses, overlooked by Mount Kinchinjinga, 312 miles to the north of Calcutta, 6,900 feet above the level of the sea — a charming situation, in the most beautiful country in the world.

And now to these fresh and healthy stations, rendered indispensable by the burning climate of India, was added our Steam House. But it belonged to ourselves alone. It offered all the comforts of the most luxurious dwellings on the peninsula. Here, in this delicious climate, surrounded by all the necessaries and appliances of modern life, we dwelt in an atmosphere of quietness which we might have sought for in vain at Simla or Darjeeling, where there are swarms of Anglo-Indians.

The site for our sanitarium was judiciously chosen. The road, leaving the lower part of the mountain, diverged at this point both to the east and to the west, so as to connect several scattered villages. The nearest of these hamlets was five miles from Steam House. It was occupied by a hospitable race of mountaineers, who rear goats and sheep, and cultivate rich fields of wheat and barley.

One of the spurs supporting the great framework of the Himalayas formed a gently undulating plateau, nearly a mile in length, and half a mile in width. This was covered with a thick carpet of short, close, velvety grass, dotted all over with violets. Clusters of beautiful rhododendrons, as large as small oaks, and natural arbors of camellias, gave a gay and gardenlike aspect to the scene. Nature had had no need to call in the aid of workmen from Ispahan or Smyrna, to manufacture this vegetable carpet. Several million seeds, brought by the sweet South breezes to the fertile ground, a little rain, a little sunshine, and there lay the green, soft fabric!

In the background roared a torrent, whose course could be traced by its silvery gleam many hundred feet, as it descended the mountainside. It flowed down the right slope of the spur, and plunged, at no great distance from us, into a natural basin, overhung by splendid trees.

The overflow from this basin formed a stream, which, running across our plateau, ended in a noisy cascade, which dashed itself finally into a bottomless gulf.

From this description it may be seen how favorably Steam House was situated, both for comfort for the body and pleasure for the eye. Below us lay other and lesser crests, descending in gigantic steps to the plain. All this we could see from our high place of observation.

Number One of Steam House was placed so that the view to the south might be seen from the veranda as well as from the side windows of the drawing and dining rooms. Over us “a cedar spread his dark-green layers of shade,” contrasting with the eternal snow which glittered on the distant mountain peaks.

On the left, Number Two stood close to an enormous granite rock, gilded by the sun. This, our attendants’ house, was placed about twenty feet from the principal dwelling. From the end of one of its roofs curled upward a little stream of blue-gray smoke, showing the position of Monsieur Parazard’s culinary laboratory.

In the midst of the trees which lay between the two habitations might be seen a huge mastodon. It was Behemoth, standing under a great beech-tree, with his trunk upraised, as if browsing on the branches. He, too, was stationary now; resting, albeit he had no need of rest. However, there he stood, resolute defender of Steam House, like some enormous antediluvian animal, guarding the way.

Colossal as we had always thought our elephant, now that he stood before the everlasting hills, he, the handiwork of puny man, faded into insignificance. “Like a fly on the facade of a cathedral!” remarked Captain Hood contemptuously.

The comparison was good. Here, behind us, was a block of granite, from which a thousand elephants the size of ours might have been carved, and this block was but a simple step in the stair which leads up and up to the topmost crest crowned by the peak of Dhawalagiri.

At times, when the sky lowers, not only the highest summits, but the lower crests, disappear. This is caused by thick vapors sweeping across the middle zone, and veiling all the upper part. The landscape shrinks, and then, by an optical effect, it is as if the houses, the trees, the rocks, and Behemoth himself, resumed their natural size.

When certain moist winds blow, the clouds often roll below the plateau. The eye then rests on nothing but a sea of clouds, illumined here and there by the sun’s rays. All land both above and beneath vanishes, and we feel as if transported into some aerial region, beyond the earth.

Suddenly the wind changes. A northern breeze blows through the mountain gulleys, the fog is swept away, the cloudy sea disappears as if by magic, the grand rocks and peaks stand out again, and once more our view extends over a panorama of sixty miles.

CHAPTER II

MATHIAS VAN GUITT

AT daybreak on the 26th of June, the jovial tones of a well-known voice aroused me from my slumbers. Captain Hood and his man Fox were engaged in lively conversation in the dining-room, where I soon joined them.

At the same moment Banks made his appearance, upon which the captain greeted him with, “Well, Banks, here we are at last, arrived in safety. It’s a positive halt this time. Not a mere stoppage for an hour or two, but a stay of some months.”

“Very true, my dear Hood,” replied the engineer, “now you can arrange your hunting excursions as you please.

Behemoth’s whistle won’t hurry you back to camp.”

“Do you hear, Fox?”

“Ay, ay, captain,” answered the man.

“St. Hubert be my speed!” cried Hood. “I vow I won’t leave this sanitarium, as you call it, until the fiftieth is added to my list! The fiftieth, Fox! I have an idea that fellow will be particularly hard to get hold of.”

“He will be got, though,” put in Fox.

“What has put that idea into your head, captain? “I asked.

"Oh, Maucler, it is merely a presentiment — a sportsman's presentiment, nothing more."

"Well, then," said Banks, "from to-day, I suppose, you will commence the campaign?"

"From to-day," answered Captain Hood, "we shall begin by reconnoitering the ground, so as to explore the lower zone, by descending into the Terrai. Provided the tigers have not abandoned their residences."

"Can you imagine such a thing?"

"Remember! my bad luck!"

"Bad luck! — in the Himalayas!" returned the engineer. "Would that be possible?"

"Well, we shall see! You will accompany us, Maucler?" asked Captain Hood, turning to me.

"Yes, certainly."

"And you, Banks?"

"I also," replied the engineer; "and I fancy too that Munro will join you, like myself — as an amateur."

"Oh," returned Hood, "come as amateurs if you like, but you must be amateurs well armed. It would never do to walk about with nothing but sticks in your hands. The very wild beasts would hide themselves for shame."

“Agreed, then,” said the engineer.

“Now, Fox,” continued the captain, addressing his servant, “no mistakes this time, please. We are in the tiger country. Four Enfield rifles for the colonel, Mr. Banks, Monsieur Maucler, and myself; two guns loaded with explosive ball for yourself and Goftmi.”

“Don’t be afraid, captain,” replied Fox. “The game sha’n’t have any reason to complain, I warrant you.”

About eleven o’clock, therefore, Sir Edward Munro, Banks, Hood, Fox, Goilmi, and myself, all well armed, descended the road which slanted toward the plain, taking care to leave behind our two dogs, whose services were not required in an expedition of this sort.

Sergeant McNeil remained in camp with Storr, Kalouth, and the cook, to complete the arrangements. After his two months’ journey, Behemoth required to be examined both inside and out, cleaned, and put in order. This was, of course, a long, minute, and delicate operation, which would give his usual keepers, the driver and stoker, occupation for some time.

Soon after leaving our camp, a turn of the road quite hid Steam House, which disappeared from our sight, behind a thick curtain of trees. It no longer rained. A fresh wind blew from the northeast, driving the hurrying clouds before it. The sky was overcast, and the temperature consequently suitable for pedestrians, but we missed the pretty variations of light and shade which add such a charm to woodland scenery.

The six thousand feet down a direct road would have been but an affair of five-and-twenty or thirty minutes, but it was lengthened by the windings it took to avoid steep places. It took us not less than an hour and a half to reach the outskirts of the forest, but we all enjoyed the walk.

“Attention!” exclaimed Captain Hood. “We are now entering the domain of tigers, lions, panthers, leopards, and other interesting inhabitants of the Himalayan region. It is very exciting to destroy wild beasts, but it wouldn’t be quite so pleasant to be destroyed by them! Therefore, do not stray away from each other, and be prudent.”

Such advice from the lips of so bold a hunter was of considerable value, and we respected it accordingly. We all looked to the loading of our guns, and kept our eyes open. I may add that we not only had to be on our guard against wild beasts, but against serpents also, as the most dangerous of their species infest the Indian forests. Belongas, green serpents, whip snakes are frightfully venomous. The number of victims who succumb annually to the bite of these reptiles is five or six times greater than that of domestic animals or human beings who are killed by wild beasts.

In this region it was no more than the commonest prudence required, to look where you set your foot, or placed your hand, to keep your ears open for the slightest rustle in the grass or bushes, and your eyes, as much as possible, everywhere at once.

At half-past twelve we were well into the forest. The great trees formed wide alleys through which even Behemoth and his train might have passed with ease. Indeed, this part of the forest had been partially cleared by the hill-men, as we ascertained from the marks their carts had left in the soft clay ground. The principal alleys ran parallel with the mountain chain, along the greatest length of the Terrai, connecting the glades formed by the woodman’s ax, with more narrow paths which led off from them, and ended in impenetrable thickets.

We followed these avenues, more like surveyors than sportsmen, so as to ascertain their general direction. No roar or scream broke the silence of the woods; but great footprints, plainly recent, showed that wild beasts had not deserted the Terrai.

Suddenly, just as we were turning an angle formed by the hill, an exclamation from Captain Hood brought us all to a standstill.

Twenty paces from us was a construction most peculiar in its shape. It was not a house, for it had neither chimney nor windows. It was not a hunter’s lodge, for it had neither loopholes nor embrasures. It might rather have been taken for a native tomb, lost in the depths of the forest.

Imagine a sort of long cube, formed of trunks placed vertically side by side, fixed firmly in the ground, and connected with the upper part by a thick border of boughs. For a roof, other transverse trunks were strongly mortised into the walls. Evidently the builder of this edifice had determined to make it proof against anything. It was nearly six feet high, and twelve feet by five in length and width. There was no sign of any opening, unless one was hidden by a thick beam, of which the rounded top rose a little above the rest of the building. Above the roof were several long flexible tendrils, curiously arranged and tied together. At the extremity of a horizontal lever, which supported all this, hung a running knot, or rather noose, made of a thick twist of creepers.

“Hallo, what’s that? “I exclaimed.

“That,” answered Banks, after examining it well, “is simply a mouse-trap, and I leave you, my friends, to guess what sort of mice it is destined to catch.”

“A tiger-trap?” asked Hood.

“Yes,” replied Banks, “a tiger-trap. You see the door is closed by that beam, which was kept up by those tendrils, and which must have dropped when the inner weight was touched by some animal.”

“It is the first time,” said Hood, “that I ever saw a snare of that kind in an Indian forest. A mouse-trap, indeed! But it isn’t worthy of a sportsman.”

“Nor of a tiger,” added Fox.

“No doubt,” said Banks, “but when it is a question of destroying these ferocious animals, and not merely hunting them for pleasure, the best trap is the one which catches most. Now this appears to me most ingeniously arranged to attract and detain wild creatures, however sly and strong they may be.”

Allow me to remark, my friends,” said Colonel Munro, “that since the equilibrium of the weight which holds back the door of the trap has been disturbed, the probability is that some animal is taken in it.”

“We shall soon know that,” cried Captain Hood, “and if the mouse is not dead — °

The captain, giving force to his words, put his gun at full cock. All followed his example.

We had no doubt now that the erection before us was a trap, which, if it was not the work of a native, at any rate was a very practical engine of destruction, being extremely sensitive and uncommonly strong.

Our arrangements made, Captain Hood, Fox, and Goilmi approached and marched round the snare, examining it minutely.

Not the smallest chink, however, gave them the least glimpse into the interior.

They listened attentively. Not a sound betrayed the presence of any living creature. All was silent as the grave.

Hood and his companions came round again to the front. They ascertained that the beam slid up and down in two wide vertical grooves. It was only necessary, therefore, to raise this, and the entrance would be open.

“There’s not the slightest sound,” said Captain Hood, with his ear close against the door, “not even a breath. The mouse-trap is empty!”

“Never mind that, you must be careful,” and saying this, Colonel Munro seated himself on the trunk of a fallen tree to the left of the clearing. I placed myself beside him.

“Come, Gofimi,” said the captain.

Goilmi, with his supple, well-knit frame, active as a monkey, lithe as a leopard, a regular native acrobat, understood directly what was required of him. His natural adroitness designed him for the service the captain wished done. One spring, and he was on the roof, and grasping one of the rods. Then he crept along the lever till he reached the rope of creepers, and by his weight brought it down to the beam which closed the opening.

The loop was then passed over the head of the beam in a notch made for the purpose. All that now remained to be done was to move it by weighing down the other end of the lever.

The united strength of our little party was required for this, so Colonel Munro, Banks, Fox, and I proceeded to the back of the trap. Goinni remained on the roof to look after the lever, in case anything prevented it from working freely.

“I say, you fellows,” shouted Captain Hood, “if you want me, I will come; but if you can do without me, I would prefer to stop where I am, near the opening. If a tiger pops out, he shall be saluted with one shot, at any rate!”

“And will that count for your forty-second?” asked I.

“Why not?” answered Hood. “If I shoot him, he will have fallen in freedom.”

“Don’t count your chickens before they are hatched,” said the engineer.

“Especially when the chicken may turn out to be a tiger,” added the colonel.

“Now, my friends,” cried Banks, “all together.”

The beam was heavy, and did not run easily in the grooves; we managed, however, to move it just a foot from the ground, but then it stuck.

Captain Hood, with his gun at full cock, bent down, expecting to see some huge paw or nose poking out. Nothing was to be seen.

“Once more!” cried Banks. Goiimi now gave a jerk or two to the lever, and the beam again moved up. Gradually the opening became large enough to give passage even to an animal of great size. But no creature of any description appeared.

It was possible, after all, that owing to the noise made around the trap, the prisoner might have retreated into the farthest corner of his prison. He might perhaps be waiting for a favorable opportunity to spring out, overturn anything that opposed him, and disappear in the depths of the forest. It was very exciting.

At last I saw Captain Hood step forward, his finger on the trigger, and cast a keen glance into the interior of the snare. The beam was by this time completely raised, and the sunlight streamed freely into the building.

At that moment, a slight rustle was heard inside, then a great snore, or rather a tremendous yawn which had a very suspicious sound. Evidently an animal was in there, which had been fast asleep and was now awakening.

Captain Hood advanced still nearer, and pointed his gun at a dark object which he now saw moving in a corner.

Suddenly a cry of terror burst forth, followed immediately by these words, spoken in good English, “Don’t fire! For heaven’s sake, don’t fire!”

The man who uttered them ran out. Our astonishment was such that our hands left their grasp of the lever, and the beam fell again with a dull sound before the opening.

In the meantime, the personage who had so unexpectedly made his appearance, came up to Captain Hood, whose gun was aimed full at the stranger’s breast, and in a somewhat affected tone, accompanied by an emphatic gesture, “I beg you will lower your weapon, sir,” he said. “It is no tiger that you have to deal with.”

Captain Hood, after some hesitation, returned his rifle to a less threatening position.

“Whom have I the honor of addressing?” asked Banks, advancing in his turn.

“The naturalist Mathias van Guitt, purveyor of pachydermata, tardigrades, plantigrades, proboscidate animals, carnivora, and other mammalia for the house of Mr. Charles Rice of London, and Messrs. Hagenbeck of Hamburg.”

Then indicating us by a comprehensive wave of the arm” These gentlemen — ?”

“Are Colonel Munro and his traveling companions,” answered Banks.

“Taking a walk in the Himalayan forest,” resumed the purveyor. “A charming excursion indeed. I am happy to pay my respects to you, gentlemen.”

Who could this original be, whom we had met in such a strange way? He looked rather as if his wits had gone astray during his imprisonment in the tiger-trap. Was he mad, or was he in possession of his senses? Lastly, to what order of bimana did this individual belong?

We were about to ascertain all this, and we were destined eventually to learn to know well this singular person, who with perfect truth termed himself a naturalist. Mathias van Guitt, menagerie purveyor, was a spectacled man of about fifty. His smooth face, his twinkling eyes, his turned-up nose, the perpetual stir of his whole person, his exaggerated gestures, suited to each of the sentences which issued from his wide mouth, all combined to make him a perfect type of the old provincial comedian. Who has not, at some time or another, met one of these ancient actors, whose whole existence, limited by a horizon of foot-lamps and drop-scene, has been passed between the green-room and stage of a theater? Indefatigable talkers, worrying gesticulators, always striking some theatrical attitude or other, and the head, which is too empty at old age to have ever had much in it, carried high in air, and thrown a little back. There was certainly something of the old actor in Mathias van Guitt.

I have heard an amusing anecdote about a poor wretch of a singer, who prided himself on always suiting his actions to the words of his part. Thus, in the opera of “Masaniello,” when he sung, —

“If of a Neapolitan fisher...”

his right arm, extended toward the audience, would shake as if he held at the end of a line the fish which had just swallowed his hook. Then continuing, —

“Heaven wish’d to make a monarch,”

while one hand was raised toward the roof to indicate Heaven, the other, tracing a circle around his proudly-set head, denoted a royal crown.

“Rebelling against the decrees of destiny,”

his whole body seemed strongly to resist some unseen agency which almost threw him backward.

“He would say as he steer’d his bark...”

Then his two arms, quickly brought from left to right, and from right to left, as if moving the scull, showed his skill in guiding a boat.

Well, these gestures, customary with the singer in question, were very similar to those used by Mathias van Guitt. His language was always composed of the choicest terms, and he was sometimes rather annoying to his interlocutors if they could not keep beyond the radius of his gestures.

As we learned later, from his own mouth, Mathias van Guitt was formerly Professor of Natural History in the Rotterdam Museum, but did not succeed in his teaching. The worthy man was doubtless a subject for much laughter, and though pupils flocked to his chair, it was to amuse themselves, not to learn. In short, circumstances induced him to leave his wearisome, unsuccessful teaching of theoretical zoology and take to practical zoology in the East Indies. This sort of trade suited him better, and he became the agent of important firms in London and Hamburg, who provide both public and private menageries in the two worlds. A large order from Europe for wild beasts had now brought him into the Terrai. Indeed, his camp was not more than a couple of miles from the trap out of which we had just extricated him.

But how had the purveyor got into the snare? This Banks soon asked, and the reply was made in high-flown language, adorned with various gestures.

“It was yesterday. Already had the sun completed half his daily round, when the thought occurred to me that I would go and visit one of the tiger-traps erected in the forest. I therefore quitted my kraal, which I trust you will honor with a visit, gentlemen, and soon reached this clearing. My servants were attending to some urgent work, and I did not wish to disturb them. It was imprudent, I confess. When I arrived before this snare, I observed that the movable beam was raised. From this I drew the logical conclusion that no wild animal had allowed itself to be taken in it. However, wishing to ascertain if the bait was still in its place, and if the working of the weight was in good order, I, with a quick movement, insinuated my body through the narrow aperture.” Here the hand of Mathias van Guitt imitated the graceful undulations of a serpent as it glides through the long grass.

“When I reached the other side of the trap,” he continued, “I examined the quarter of a goat, the emanations from which were to attract guests to partake of it from this part of the forest. The bait was intact. I was about to withdraw, when an involuntary blow from my arm displaced the weight, the rope became loose, the beam fell, and I found myself taken in my own snare, without any possible means of escape.” Mathias van Guitt paused a moment to allow us to take in all the gravity of the situation.

“Yet, gentlemen,” he resumed, “I will not conceal from you, that I was first of all struck by the comic view of the matter. I was imprisoned, well! There was no jailer to open the door of my dungeon, granted! But I thought indeed, that my people, finding that I did not reappear at the kraal, would become uneasy at my prolonged absence and commence a search which sooner or later would end in my being discovered. It was but an affair of time.

‘ Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage; Minds innocent and quiet take That for an hermitage.’

I consoled myself with these thoughts, and the hours passed away without anything occurring to modify my situation. The shades of evening fell, and pangs of hunger made themselves felt. I imagined the best thing I could do would be to cheat time by sleeping. I resigned myself then philosophically, and was soon in the arms of Morpheus. Thet night was calm, and silence reigned throughout the forest. Nothing troubled my slumber, and perhaps I should even now be oblivious, if it had not been that I was awakened by an unusual noise. The door of the trap rose slowly, the blessed light of day streamed into my darksome retreat, the way of escape was open before me! What was my dismay, when I perceived the instrument of death aimed full at my heart! A moment more, and I should have been stretched lifeless on the ground! The hour of my deliverance would have been the last of my life! But the gallant captain soon recognized in me a creature of his own species. And I have still to thank you, gentlemen, for having restored to me my liberty."

Such was our new friend's account of himself. It must be acknowledged that we had some difficulty in keeping our gravity, so absurd were his tone and gestures.

"So, sir," said Banks, "your camp is established in this part of the Terrai?"

"Yes, sir," replied Mathias van Guitt. "As I had the pleasure of informing you, my kraal is not more than two miles from here, and if you will honor it with your presence, I shall be happy to receive you there."

"Certainly, Mr. van Guitt," answered Colonel Munro, "we will come and pay you a visit."

"We are hunters," added Captain Hood, "and the arrangements of a kraal will interest us."

"Hunters!" cried Mathias van Guitt, "hunters! "And his countenance betrayed that he held the sons of Nimrod in very moderate estimation. "You hunt wild beasts — for the sake of killing them doubtless?" he resumed, addressing the captain.

“Only to kill them,” replied Hood.

“And I only to catch them,” answered the purveyor, with evident pride.

“Well, Mr. van Guitt, we sha’n’t agree upon that point,” said Captain Hood.

The purveyor shook his head. The discovery of our hunting propensities was not, however, of importance enough to make him withdraw his invitation. “When you are ready to follow me, gentlemen,” said he, bowing gracefully.

As he spoke, voices were heard in the distance, and very soon half a dozen natives appeared at the other end of the glade. “Ah! here are my people,” said Vb n Guitt.

Then approaching us closer, and placing his finger on his lips, “Not a word of my adventure!” he whispered. “The attendants and servants of the kraal must not know that I have been caught in my own trap like some common animal! It would lessen the reputation for wisdom which I endeavor to preserve in their eyes.”

Our sign of acquiescence reassured the purveyor.

“Master,” said one of the natives, whose impassible and intelligent countenance attracted my attention; “master, we have been searching for you for more than an hour, without — ”

“I was with these gentlemen, who wish to accompany me to the kraal,” answered Van Guitt. “But before quitting the clearing, the trap must be put in order.”

While the natives were proceeding to obey their master's orders, Mathias van Guitt invited us to visit the interior of the trap. Captain Hood entered with alacrity, and I followed. The space was somewhat limited for the display of our host's gestures, but he nevertheless did the honors as though it were a drawing-room.

"I congratulate you," said Hood, after examining the apparatus. "It is exceedingly well contrived."

"I do not hesitate to say that it is, captain," replied Van Guitt. "This description of snare is infinitely preferable to the ditches set with stakes of hardened wood, or the flexible branches of trees bent together so as to form a running knot. In the first case, the animal is impaled on the sharp points; in the second, it is strangled. That, of course, matters little when the object is merely to kill and destroy. But I who now speak to you must procure the living creature intact, with not the slightest blemish."

"Certainly," said Captain Hood; "we do not proceed in the same way."

"Mine is perhaps the best," said the purveyor. "If you were to consult the animals themselves — "

"But I have no intention of consulting them," replied the captain.

Mathias van Guitt and Captain Hood would have some trouble in getting on together, most decidedly.

"Now when the animals are caught in the trap," I asked, "what do you do next?"

"A rolling cage is brought close to the trap," replied Van Guitt, "the prisoners run into it of their own accord, and then all I have to do is to convey them to the kraal, drawn at a slow and steady pace by my domestic buffaloes.”

Scarcely were these words uttered when cries arose outside. Captain Hood and I immediately hastened out of the building. What had happened?

A whip-snake, of the most venomous species, lay on the ground, cut in two pieces by a rod which one of the natives held in his hand, just as it was darting at the colonel. The man was the one I had at first remarked, and his rapid intervention had certainly saved Sir Edward from immediate death.

The cry we had heard was uttered by another of the servants, who now lay on the grass in the agonies of death. By a deplorable fatality, the head of the snake, as it was severed from the body, had bounded against the unfortunate man’s chest, its fangs had entered him, and penetrated by the subtle poison, in less than a minute he was dead, all help proving unavailing.

Rousing ourselves from the horror caused by this dreadful sight, we ran up to Colonel Munro. “You are not hurt?” exclaimed Banks, grasping his hand.

“No, Banks, no, make yourself easy,” answered Sir Edward.

Then advancing toward the native, to whom he owed his life. “I thank you, friend,” he said.

The native made a sign as if to say that no thanks were necessary, for that.

“What is your name?” asked the colonel.

“Kalagani,” answered the Hindoo.

CHAPTER III

THE KRAAL

THE death of this unfortunate man made a deep impression upon us, both from the fact itself and from the cause, though it was anything but an unusual occurrence. It was but one more added to the thousands who annually fall victims in India to the formidable reptiles.

It has been said — jestingly I presume — that formerly there were no snakes in Martinique, but that the English imported them when they were obliged to give up the island to France. The French had no occasion to retaliate in this manner when they yielded their conquest in India, for Nature had shown herself only too prodigal in that respect.

Under the influence of the venom, the body of the Hindoo began to exhibit signs of rapid decomposition. A speedy burial was necessary. His companions, therefore, set to work, and soon laid him in a grave deep enough to protect the body from wild beasts. When this sad ceremony was ended, Mathias van Guitt invited us to accompany him to his kraal, and we readily did so.

Half an hour’s walk brought us to the place, which deserved its name of kraal, though it is a word more especially used by the settlers of South Africa.

It was a wide inclosure, standing in a glade in the depths of the forest. Mathias van Guitt had arranged it with a perfect understanding of the requirements of his trade. A row of high palisades, having a gate wide enough to admit carts, surrounded it on the four sides. Inside was a long hut, made of trunks of trees and planks, which was the dwelling-place.

Six cages, divided into several compartments, and each mounted on four wheels, were drawn up in the left end of the inclosure. From the roars which issued from them, we concluded they were not untenanted.

To the left were penned a dozen buffaloes, which were fed on the mountain grass. These were the animals used to draw the traveling menagerie. Six men, who attended to these creatures and drove the carts, and ten others who were especially skillful in the chase, completed the staff of attendants in the kraal.

The carters were hired only for the duration of the campaign. Their services ended by driving the carts to the nearest railway station. There the cages were placed on trucks, and wheeled off, via Allahabad, to Bombay or Calcutta. The hunters, who were Hindoos, are called shikarries. They were employed to discover and follow up the traces of animals, dislodge them, and then assist in their capture.

Mathias van Guitt and his men had lived for some months in this kraal. They were there exposed, not only to the attacks of ferocious beasts, but also to the fevers with which the Terrai is infested. The damp nights, the pernicious evaporations from the ground, the moist heat hanging about under the thick-growing trees, through which the sun never penetrates, all combine to make this lower zone of the Himalayas a most unhealthy region. The purveyor and his men were, however, so well acclimatized, that the malaria affected them no more than it did the tigers or other inhabitants of the Terrai.

It would not have been wise for us to live in the kraal, nor did this enter into Captain Hood’s plan. Except for a night or two passed on the watch, we intended living in Steam House, which was too high up for any baleful vapors to reach us there.

Here were we, then, arrived at Van Guitt’s encampment. The door opened for us to enter. Mathias van Guitt appeared particularly flattered by our visit. “Now, gentlemen,” he said, “permit me to do the honors of my kraal. This establishment is replete with every necessary for the pursuit of my vocation. In reality, it is but a but on a large scale, which, in this country, hunters call a houddi.”

Saying this, our host opened the door of the dwelling which he and his people occupied together. Nothing could have been more simple. One room for the master, another for the carters, and another for the shikarries. A fourth, rather larger, serving for both kitchen and dining-room.

After visiting the habitation of “these bimana, belonging to the highest order of mammalia,” we were requested to look at the nearest of the quadrupeds’ dwellings. This was the most interesting part of the kraal. The cages were not like the comfortable dens of a zoological garden, but recalled rather the appearance of a traveling show. All that was required to complete them was a gaudily-painted canvas hung above a stage, and representing in startling colors a tamer, in pink tights and velvet jacket, striking an attitude in the midst of a bounding herd of wild beasts, who, with bloody jaws and claws outspread, were cowering under the lash of some heroic Van Amburgh.

A few paces farther on were the buffaloes. They occupied a portion of the kraal on the right, and their daily rations of fresh grass were brought to them there. It would have been impossible to allow these animals to stray in the neighboring pastures. As Mathias van Guitt elegantly remarked, “the freedom of pasture, allowable in the United Kingdom, is incompatible with the dangers presented by the Himalayan forests."

The menagerie, properly so called, comprised six cages on wheels. Each cage, with a barred front, was divided into three compartments. Doors, or rather partitions, moved from the top, made it easy for the animals in one compartment to be driven into another when necessary.

The cages at the present time contained seven tigers, two lions, three panthers, and a couple of leopards.

Van Guitt informed us that his stock would not be complete until he had captured two leopards, three tigers, and one lion more. Then he intended leaving this camp, proceeding to the nearest railway station, and thence traveling to Bombay.

The wild beasts were easily watched in their cages, and proved to be magnificent creatures, but particularly ferocious. They had been too recently caught to have yet become accustomed to a state of captivity. This was plain from their constant roars, their restless pacings up and down, and the blows they gave the bars, straining them in many places.

On seeing us, their rage was redoubled; but Van Guitt was not in the least disturbed.

"Poor beasts!" remarked Captain Hood.

"Poor beasts!" echoed Fox.

"Do you believe, then, that they are more to be pitied than those which you kill?" asked our host, somewhat sharply.

“Less to be pitied than blamed... for allowing themselves to be caught!” returned Hood.

If it is true that the wild beasts of a country such as Africa are sometimes compelled to undergo a long fast, because the animals upon which they feed are scarce, such could never be the case in the Terrai zone. Here abound bisons, buffaloes, zebras, boars, antelopes, to which the lions, tigers, and panthers are constantly giving chase. Besides goats and flocks of sheep, not to mention the poor ryots who are their shepherds, offer a certain and easy prey. They always find abundance in the Himalayan forests to satisfy their hunger. The purveyor fed his menagerie chiefly on the flesh of bison and zebras, and it was the shikarries’ duty to procure this meat.

It is a mistake to imagine that this species of hunting is without danger. Quite the contrary. The tiger himself has much to fear from the savage buffalo, who is a terrible animal when wounded. Many a hunter has, to his horror, found his antagonist rooting up, with its horns, the tree in which he has taken refuge.

It is said that the eye of a ruminant is a regular magnifying lens, increasing the size of an object threefold, and that man, in this gigantic aspect, awes him. It is also asserted that the upright position of a human being walking is of a nature to terrify ferocious animals, and, therefore, that it is far better to face them standing than lying or crouching down. I cannot tell how much truth there may be in these statements; but it is very certain that a man, even when drawn up to his full height, produces no effect whatever on the savage buffalo; and if his shot misses, he is almost certainly lost.

The buffalo of India has a short, square head, smooth horns, flattened at the base, a humped back — like its American congener — its legs, from the foot to the knee, being white, and its size, from the root of the tail to the end of its muzzle, measuring sometimes twelve feet. Although it is not particularly ferocious when feeding in herds on the plain, it yet is very formidable to any hunter who rashly attacks it.

The purveyor, who knew his business, was very sparing as to his captives' food. Once a day, at twelve o'clock, four or five pounds of meat were given them, and nothing more.

He even, though not from any religious motive, allowed them to fast from Saturday to Monday. They must have passed a dismal Sunday! Then, when forty-eight hours had elapsed, and their modest pittance appeared, the excitement and the roaring may be imagined, the cages actually swaying backward and forward with the movement of the springing, bounding creatures inside.

Yes, poor beasts! we may be tempted to say with Captain, Hood. But Mathias van Guitt did not act thus without a motive; and this enforced abstinence was good for the animals, and heightened their price in the European market.

It may easily be imagined that while Van Guitt was exhibiting his collection, more as a naturalist than a showman, his tongue was not allowed to stand still. On the contrary. He talked, he described, he related; and as wild beasts were the principal subjects of his redundant periods, it was all tolerably interesting to us.

“But, Mr. van Guitt,” said Banks, “can you tell me if the profits of the trade are in proportion to the risks that are run?”

“Sir,” answered the purveyor, “it was formerly extremely remunerative. However, for the last few years, I have been forced to perceive that ferocious animals have declined. You may judge of this by the current prices of the last quotation. Our principal market is the Zoological Garden in Antwerp. Volatiles, ophidians, specimens of the simian and saurian family, representatives of the carnivora of both hemispheres, such is the consuetudinal — ”

At this word Captain Hood bowed.

“ — produce of our adventurous battues in the forests of the peninsula. From one cause or another the public taste seems to have altered, and the sale price is sometimes less than what was expended on the capture! For instance, a male ostrich is now sold but for 441. and the female for 321. A black panther found a purchaser for only 601. a Java tigress for 961. and a family of lions — father, mother, uncle, and two healthy cubs — were sold in a lump for 280l.”

“They really went for nothing,” said Banks.

“As to proboscidate animals — ” resumed Van Guitt.

“Proboscidate?” said Captain Hood.

“We call by that scientific name those pachydermata which nature has furnished with a trunk.”

“Such as elephants!”

“Yes, elephants since the quaternary period. They were ‘ mastodons ‘ in the prehistoric times.”

“Thank you,” replied Hood.

“As to proboscidate animals,” resumed Van Guitt, “we must soon renounce even their capture, unless it is for the sake of their tusks; for the consumption of ivory has in no way diminished. But since the authors of dramatic pieces, at their wit’s end for some novelty, have conceived the idea of introducing these creatures on the stage, they are taken about from one town to another; so that the same elephant, parading the country with a strolling company, satisfies the curiosity of a whole province. From this cause, elephants are in less request than formerly.”

“But,” I asked, “do you only supply European menageries with these specimens of the Indian fauna?”

“You will pardon me,” replied Mathias van Guitt, “if on this subject, sir, I allow myself, without being too curious, to put to you a simple question?”

I bowed in token of acquiescence.

“You are French, sir,” said the purveyor. “That is plainly seen, not only by your accent, but by your type, which is an agreeable combination of the Gallo-Roman and the Celt. Now, as a Frenchman, you cannot have any propensity for distant journeys, and probably have not made the tour of the world? “Here Van Guitt’s hand described one of the great circles of the sphere.

“I have not yet had that pleasure,” I replied.

“I will ask you, then, sir,” continued our friend, “not if you have been to the Indies, as you are already here, but if you are thoroughly acquainted with the Indian peninsula?”

“Imperfectly as yet,” I answered. “However, I have already visited Bombay, Calcutta, Benares, Allahabad, and the valley of the Ganges. I have seen their monuments, I have admired — ”

“Ah! what is that, sir, what is all that?” interrupted Mathias van Guitt, turning away his head, and shaking his hand, in a manner to express supreme disdain.

Then launching out into an animated description, “Yes, what is all that, if you have not visited the menageries of those powerful rajahs, who maintain the worship of the superb animals, on which the sacred territory of India prides itself? Resume your tourist’s staff, sir. Go into Guicowar, and render homage to the King of Baroda. Inspect his menageries, which owe the greater number of their tenants, lions from Kattiwar, bears, panthers, cheetahs, lynx, and tigers, to me. Be present at the celebration of the marriage of his sixty thousand pigeons, which takes place every year, with great pomp! Admire his five hundred bulbuls, the nightingales of the peninsula, whose education is attended to as carefully as if they were heirs to the throne! Contemplate the elephants; one of them is the executioner, and his business it is to dash the head of the condemned man on the stone of punishment! Then transfer yourself to the establishments of the Rajah of Maissour, the richest of Asiatic sovereigns. Enter his palace, where you may count hundreds of rhinoceri, elephants, tigers, and every creature of high rank which belongs to the animal aristocracy of India! And when you have seen all this, sir, perhaps you need no longer be accused of ignorance of the marvels of this incomparable country!”

I could do no more than bow before these remarks. Van Guitt’s impassioned style of representing things admitted of no discussion.

Captain Hood, however, pressed him more directly about the particular fauna of this region of the Terrai.

“A little information, if you please,” he said, “about the wild beasts which I have come to this part of India to hunt. Although I am only a sportsman, and I repeat, I do not compete with you, Mr. van Guitt, yet if I could be of any use in capturing the tigers which you still want for your collection, I shall only be too pleased to do so. But, when your menagerie is completed, you must not take it ill if I, in my turn, shoot a few for my own personal amusement.”

Mathias van Guitt put himself into the attitude of a man who has resigned himself to submit to what he disapproves of, but does not know how to prevent. He admitted, however, that the Terrai contains a considerable number of troublesome animals, in no great request in the European markets, so that their sacrifice might be permitted.

“Kill the boars, I consent to that,” said he. “Although these swine of the order of pachydermata, are not carnivorous — ”

“Carnivorous?” said Captain Hood.

“I mean by that, that they are herbivorous; their ferocity is so great, that hunters who are rash enough to attack them run the greatest danger.”

“And wolves?”

“Wolves are numerous all over the peninsula, and are much to be dreaded when they advance in herds on some solitary farm. These animals slightly resemble the wolf of Poland, and I certainly have not much esteem either for jackals or wild dogs. I do not deny the ravages they commit, and as they have not the smallest marketable value, and are unworthy to figure among the higher classes of zoo-ocracy, I will abandon them also to you, Captain Hood."

"And bears? "I next asked.

"Bears are good, sir," answered the zoologist with a nod of approval. "Although those of India are not sought for quite as eagerly as others of the family Ursidw, they nevertheless possess a certain commercial value which recommends them to the benevolent attention of connoisseurs. Your taste might hesitate between the two species which we find in the valleys of Cashmere and the hills of Rajmahal. But, except perhaps in the hibernating period, these creatures are almost inoffensive, and, in short, would not tempt the cynegetic instincts of a true sportsman, such as I hold Captain Hood to be."

The captain smiled in a significant manner, showing well that with or without the permission of Mathias van Guitt, he meant only to refer to himself on these special questions.

"These animals," continued Van Guitt, "feed only on vegetables, and have nothing in common with the ferocious species, on which the peninsula so justly plumes itself."

"Do you include the leopard in your list of wild beasts?" asked Captain Hood.

"Most certainly, sir. This creature is active, bold, full of courage, and he can climb trees, so for that reason he is sometimes more formidable than the tiger."

“Oh!” ejaculated the captain.

“Sir,” answered Mathias van Guitt in a dignified tone, “when a hunter is no longer sure of finding a refuge in trees, he is very near being hunted in his turn!”

“And the panther?” asked Captain Hood, willing to cut short this discussion.

“The panther is superb,” answered Mathias van Guitt; “and you may observe, gentlemen, that I have some magnificent specimens. Astonishing animals, which by a singular contradiction, an antilogy, to use an uncommon word, may be trained for the chase. Yes, gentlemen, in Guicowar especially, the rajahs use panthers in this noble exercise. They are taken out in a palanquin, with their heads muffled like a falcon or a merlin! Indeed, they are regular four-footed hawks! No sooner do the hunters come in sight of a herd of antelopes, than the panther is unhooded, and flies upon the timid ruminants, whose feet, swift as they are, cannot carry them beyond the reach of those terrible claws! Yes, captain, yes! You will find panthers in the Terrai! You may perhaps find more than you care for, but I warn you charitably that they are by no means tame!”

“I should hope not,” was Captain Hood’s reply. “Nor the lions either,” added the zoologist, somewhat vexed at this answer.

“Ah! lions!” said Hood. “Let us speak a little about lions, please!”

“Well, sir,” resumed Mathias van Guitt, “I regard the so-called king of beasts as inferior to his congeners of ancient Libya. Here the males do not wear that mane which is the appendage of the African lion, and in my opinion, they are, therefore, but shorn Samsons! They have, besides, almost entirely disappeared from Central India to seek a refuge in the Kattiwar peninsula, the desert of Theil, and the Terrai forest. These degenerate felines, living solitary, like hermits, do not gain strength by frequenting the company of their fellows. Therefore, I do not give them the first place in the scale of quadrupeds. Indeed, gentlemen, you may escape from a lion — from a tiger, never I”

“Ah! tigers!” cried Captain Hood. “Yes, tigers!” echoed Fox.

“The tiger,” replied Van Guitt, growing animated, “to him belongs the crown. We speak of the royal tiger, not the royal lion, and that is but justice. India belongs entirely to him, and may be summed up in him. Was he not the first occupant of the soil? Was it not his right to look upon as invaders, not only the representatives of the Anglo-Saxon race, but also the polar race? Is he not indeed the true child of this sacred land of Aryvarta? These magnificent animals are spread over the whole surface of the peninsula, and they have not abandoned a single district of their ancestors, from Cape Comerin to the Himalayan barrier!”

And Mathias van Guitt’s arm, stretched out to denote the southern promontory, was now waved northward toward the mountain peaks.

“In the Sunderbunds,” he continued, “they are at home! There they reign as masters, and woe to all who attempt to dispute with them their territory! In the Neilgherry Hills they roam about in a body, like wild cats.

“‘Si parva licet componere magnis!’

You can understand from this why these superb felida are in such demand in all European markets, and are the pride of menageries! What is the great attraction in the public or private wild beast show? The tiger! When do you most fear for the life of the tamer? When he is in the tiger’s cage! For what animals do the rajahs pay their weight in gold to obtain them to ornament their royal gardens? The tiger! What creature is always at a premium in the wild animal market exchange of London, Antwerp, and Hamburg? The tiger! In what chase do British officers in India so distinguish themselves? In the tiger hunt! Do you know, gentlemen, what entertainment the independent sovereigns of India provide for their guests? A royal tiger in a cage is brought. The cage is placed in the midst of a wide plain. The rajah, his guests, his officers, his guards, are armed with lances, revolvers, and rifles, and are, for the most part, mounted on gallant solipeds — ”

“Solipeds?” said Captain Hood.

“Their horses, if you prefer the more vulgar word. Already the solipeds, terrified by the near neighborhood of the tiger, his scent, and the light which gleams from his eyes, rear, so that it requires all their riders’ skill to manage them. Suddenly the door of the cage is thrown open. The monster springs forth; with wild leaps he flies on the scattered groups; in his fury he immolates a hecatomb of victims. Although sometimes he contrives to break through the circle of fire and sword with which he is surrounded, more often he is overcome and falls, one against a hundred.

But, at least, his death is a glorious one, it is avenged beforehand.”

“Bravo, Mr. van Guitt,” cried Captain Hood, in his turn becoming quite excited. “Yes, that must be a fine sight. Truly the tiger is the king of beasts.”

“A royalty, too, which defies revolution,” added the zoologist.

“You have caught many, Mr. van Guitt,” said Hood, “I have killed many, and I hope not to leave the Terrai until the fiftieth has fallen by my shot.”

“Captain,” said the purveyor with a frown, “I have delivered up to you boars, wolves, bears, and buffaloes, will not those suffice to gratify your sporting mania?”

I saw that our friend Hood would burst forth with as much animation as Mathias van Guitt on this exciting question. Had the one captured more tigers than the other had killed? Was it better to catch or shoot them? This was the matter and theme of discussion! The captain and the zoologist commenced to exchange rapid sentences, both speaking at once, and apparently not in the least comprehending what the other said.

Banks interposed. “That tigers are the kings of creation is understood, gentlemen, but I must be permitted to add that they are very dangerous to their subjects. In 1862, if I am not mistaken, these excellent felidae devoured all the telegraph clerks in the Island of Sangor. We are also told of a tigress who, in three years, made no less than a hundred and eighteen victims, and another, who in the same space of time destroyed a hundred and twenty-seven persons. That is rather too much, even for a queen! Lastly, since the mutiny, in an interval of three years, twelve thousand five hundred and fifty-four individuals have perished by tigers’ teeth or claws.”

“But, sir,” replied Van Guitt, “you seem to forget that these animals are omophagm.”

“Omophagx?” said Captain Hood.

“Yes, eaters of raw flesh, and the natives say that when they have once tasted human flesh, they never care for any other!”

“Well, sir?” said Banks.

“Well, sir,” answered Mathias van Guitt, smiling, “they obey their nature!... They certainly must eat!’

CHAPTER IV

A QUEEN OF THE TERRAI

THIS remark of the zoologist ended our visit to the kraal, as it was time to return to Steam House.

I must say that Captain Hood and Mathias van Guitt did not part the best friends in the world. One wished to destroy the wild beasts of the Terrai, the other wished to catch them; yet there were plenty to satisfy both.

It was, however, agreed that intercourse between the kraal and the sanitarium should be frequent. Each was to give information to the other. Van Guitt's shikarries, who were well acquainted with this sort of expedition, and knew every turn of the forest, were to render a service to Captain Hood by showing him the tracks of animals. The zoologist most obligingly placed all his men, and especially Kalagani, at his disposal. This native, although but recently engaged at the kraal, showed himself very intelligent, and completely to be depended on.

In return, Captain Hood promised, as far as lay in his power, to aid in the capture of the animals which were yet wanting to complete the stock of Mathias van Guitt.

Before leaving the kraal, Sir Edward Munro, who probably did not purpose making many visits there, again thanked Kalagani, whose intervention had saved him. He told him that he should always be welcome at Steam House.

The native saluted coldly. Although he must have felt some sentiment of satisfaction at hearing the man whose life he had preserved speak thus, he allowed no trace of it to appear on his countenance.

We returned in time for dinner. As may be imagined, Mathias van Guitt was our chief subject of conversation. “By Jove! what an absurd fellow he is,” said the captain. “What with his gestures, his fine choice of words, and his grand expression, he is a caution! Only, if he fancies that wild beasts are mere subjects for exhibition, he is greatly mistaken!”

On the three following days, the 27th, 28th, and 29th of June, rain fell with such violence, that our hunters, to their great annoyance, could not dream of leaving Steam House. In such dreadful weather it would be impossible to find a track, and the carnivora, who are no fonder of water than are cats, would not willingly leave their dens. At last the weather showed signs of clearing, and Hood, Fox, Goinni, and I made preparations for descending to the kraal.

During the morning, some mountaineers came to pay us a visit. They had heard that a miraculous pagoda had been transported to the Himalayas, and a lively feeling of curiosity had brought them to Steam House.

They were fine types of the Thibetian frontier race. Full of warlike virtues, of tried loyalty, practising liberal hospitality, and far superior, both morally and physically, to the natives of the plains. The supposed pagoda astonished them; but Behemoth so impressed them as to draw from them marks of adoration. He was now at rest, what would not these good people have felt if they had seen him, vomiting forth flame and smoke, and ascending with a steady step the rough slopes of their mountains!

Colonel Munro gave a kind reception to these men, who usually frequented the territories of Nepaul, on the Indo-Chinese boundary. The conversation turned for a time on that part of the frontier where Nana Sahib had taken refuge, after the defeat of the sepoys.

These hillmen knew scarcely so much as we did ourselves on this matter. The rumors of the nabob’s death had reached them, and they cast no doubt upon it. As to those of his companions who had survived, perhaps they had sought a more secure refuge in the depths of Thibet; but to find them in that country would have been difficult. Indeed, if Colonel Munro, in coming to the north of the peninsula, had had any idea of throwing light on Nana Sahib’s history, this reply should have satisfied him. In listening to our visitors he remained thoughtful, and took no more part in the conversation.

Captain Hood put some questions to them, but on quite another point. He learned that wild beasts, more particularly tigers, had made frightful ravages in the lower zone of the Himalayas. Farms, and even whole villages, had been deserted by their inhabitants. Many flocks of goats and sheep had been already destroyed, besides numerous victims among the natives. Notwithstanding the considerable sum offered by the government — three hundred rupees for every tiger’s head — the number of these creatures did not appear to diminish, and people were asking themselves whether they would not soon be obliged to leave the country to them entirely.

The hillmen also added this information, that the tigers did not confine themselves entirely to the Terrai. Whenever the plain offered them tall grass, jungle, and trees among which they could crouch, there they might be met with in great numbers. “The evil beasts!” was their expression.

These honest people had very good cause not to profess the same opinions on the subject of tigers as the zoologist Mathias van Guitt and our friend Captain Hood.

The mountaineers retired, enchanted with the reception they had met with, and promising to repeat their visit to Steam House. After their departure our preparations were completed, and Captain Hood, our two companions, and I, all well armed ready for any encounter, descended to the Terrai.

On arriving at the trap from which we had so fortunately extracted Mathias van Guitt, that gentleman presented himself before our eyes, not without some ceremony.

Five or six of his people, Kalagani among the number, were occupied in getting a tiger, which had been caught during the night, from the snare into a traveling-cage. It was a magnificent animal indeed, and, as a matter of course, caused Captain Hood to feel corresponding envy!

“One less in the Terrai!” he murmured, between two sighs which found their echo in Fox’s manly breast.

“One more in the menagerie,” replied the zoologist. “Still two tigers, a lion, and two leopards, and I shall be in a position to honor my engagements before the end of the season. Will you come with me to the kraal, gentlemen?”

“Thank you,” said Captain Hood; “to-day, however, we are out on our own account.”

“Kalagani is at your disposal, Captain Hood,” replied the purveyor. “He is well acquainted with the forest, and may be useful to you.”

“We will gladly take him as a guide.”

“Farewell, gentlemen,” said Van Guitt; “I wish you good sport! But promise me not to massacre them all!”

“We will leave you a few,” returned Hood.

And Mathias van Guitt, saluting us with a superb bow,

followed his cage, and soon disappeared among the trees.

“Forward!” said Hood, “forward, my men. Hurrah for my forty-second!”

“And my thirty-eighth!” responded Fox. “And my first! “I added. But the quiet way in which I uttered the words, made the captain laugh. Evidently, I did not feel the sacred fire.

Hood turned to Kalagani. “So you know the forest well?” he asked.

“I have been over it twenty times, day and night, in every direction,” replied the man.

“Have you heard that a particular tiger has been lately noticed near the kraal?”

“Yes; but this tiger is a tigress. She has been seen two miles from here, in the upper part of the forest, and they have been trying to get hold of her for several days. Should you like — ”“

“That’s just what we want!” answered Captain Hood, without giving the native time to finish the sentence.

To follow Kalagani was the best thing we could do, so we did it. Wild beasts were apparently very plentiful in the Terrai, but here, as everywhere else, each required two bullocks a week for their own particular consumption! Just calculate what the cost of such a “keep “would be to the entire peninsula.

It must not be imagined that the numerous tigers visit inhabited country unless impelled by necessity. Till urged by hunger, they remain hidden in their lairs. Very many travelers have journeyed through these forests without even catching a glimpse of one. When a hunt is organized, the first thing to be done is to reconnoiter the places most frequented by the animal, and especially to find out the stream or spring to which he comes to slake his thirst.

Sometimes this is not sufficient, and he has to be attracted to the spot. This is done easily enough by putting a quarter of beef tied to a stake in some place surrounded by trees and rocks to shelter the hunters. This at least, is the way they proceed in the forest.

In the plains, it is another thing, and there the elephant becomes the most useful auxiliary to man in his dangerous sport. These animals have, however, to be trained to the work, though even then, they are sometimes seized with a panic which renders the position of the men perched on their backs dangerous in the extreme. It must also be said that sometimes the tiger does not hesitate to spring on the elephant. The struggle between the man and beast then takes place on the very back of the gigantic steed, and it is rarely indeed that it does not end in favor of the tiger.

In this way the grand hunts of the rajahs and great sportsmen of India are conducted, but it was by no means Captain Hood’s manner of proceeding. He was going to search for tigers on foot, and it was on foot that he was accustomed to fight them.

In the meantime, we were following Kalagani, who was walking on at a round pace. Reserved as all Hindoos are, he spoke little, and contented himself with replying briefly to the questions which we put to him.

After walking for an hour, we halted by a rapid stream, and on its banks were the still fresh tracks of animals. In a little glade was a stake, to which was fastened a quarter of beef. The bait had not been entirely untouched. It had been recently gnawed by the teeth of jackals, those thieves of the Indian fauna, always in quest of prey, but this was not intended for them. A dozen or so of these creatures fled at our approach, and left the place clear.

“Captain,” said Kalagani, “we must wait for the tigress here. You see that it is a good place for an ambush.”

It was, indeed, easy to post ourselves in trees or behind rocks, so as to have a cross-fire over the post in the center of the glade. This was immediately done. Goarni and I took our places in the same tree. Hood and Fox perched themselves in two magnificent oaks opposite each other. Kalagani hid behind a high rock, which he could climb if the danger became imminent.

The animal would be thus enclosed in a circle. All the chances were against it, although we were as yet reckoning on the unforeseen. We had now to wait.

We could still hear the hoarse bark of the dispersed jackals in the neighboring thickets, but they did not dare to return. Nearly an hour had thus passed, when the yelps suddenly ceased. Almost immediately two or three jackals bounded out of the wood, and darting across the glade, disappeared in the thicker part of the forest.

A sign from Kalagani, who was ready to climb his rock,

told us to be on our guard. We guessed that the precipitate flight of the jackals must have been caused by the approach of some savage animal —

the tigress no doubt — so that we were ready to see her at any moment appear on one side or other of the glade.

Our guns were all ready. Captain Hood and his man held their weapons pointed at the place from which the jackals had issued.

Very soon I saw a slight agitation among the upper branches of the thicket. The snapping of dry wood was also heard. Some animal was approaching, but slowly and warily. Though evidently seeing nothing of the hunters in wait among the branches, its instinct warned it that the place was not quite safe. Certainly, unless urged by hunger, and attracted by the smell of the beef, it would not have ventured farther.

At last we could see it through the branches, where it stopped, probably mistrustful. It was a huge tigress, powerful and active. She began to advance, crouching, and with an undulatory movement.

With one consent, we allowed her to approach the post. She smelt the ground, she drew herself up and arched her back, like a gigantic cat, prepared to spring.

Suddenly two sharp reports rang out.

“Forty-two “cried Captain Hood.

“Thirty-eight!” shouted Fox.

The captain and his man had fired at the same moment, and with such true aim, that the animal, shot through the heart, fell dead on the ground.

Kalagani ran up. We all quickly descended from our various trees. The tigress did not stir.

But to whom belonged the honor of having killed her? To the captain or to Fox? This was an important question, as may be imagined. The beast was examined. Two balls were found in the heart!

“Come,” said Hood, not without a slight touch of regret in his voice, “we’ve got half a tiger apiece.”

“So we have, captain; half a tiger apiece,” answered Fox, in the same tone.

And I verily believe neither of the two would, on any account have given up the share he reckoned to his own account.

Such was this wonderful shot, of which the clearest result was that the animal had fallen without a struggle, and consequently without danger to the assailants — a very rare occurrence. Fox and Goiuni remained on the field of battle, in order to despoil the animal of her magnificent skin, while Captain Hood and I returned to Steam House.

It is not my intention to note every incident of our expeditions into the Terrai forest, but only those which present some particular characteristic. I shall content myself with saying that, so far, Captain Hood and Fox found no reason to complain.

On the 10th of July, during a houddi hunt, a happy chance again favored them, without their running any real danger. The houddi, or hut, its walls pierced with loopholes, is built on the borders of a stream at which animals are accustomed to come and drink. Used to the sight of these erections, they are not alarmed, and carelessly expose themselves to be shot at. But, to be safe, it is necessary to mortally wound the creature at the first, or he becomes dangerous, and the but does not always protect the hunter from his infuriated spring.

This is exactly what occurred on the occasion of which I am about to speak. Mathias van Guitt accompanied us. Perhaps he hoped that some tiger, slightly wounded, might fall to his share, to take home to his kraal and be cured.

This time our sportsmen had three tigers to deal with. The first discharge was not sufficient to prevent them from springing on to the walls of the houddi. The two first, to the zoologist's great disgust, were each killed by a second ball, but the third leaped right in, his shoulder covered with blood, but not mortally wounded.

"We must have that fellow!" cried Van Guitt, who risked not a little in speaking thus. "We must take him alive!"

Scarcely had he uttered the words when, with a bound, the animal was upon him. He was overthrown in an instant, and it would have been all up with our friend had not Captain Hood sent a ball through the tiger's head, and thus saved the Dutchman, who sprang up, exclaiming, "Well, captain, you might just as well have waited — "

"Waited — what for?" answered Captain Hood; "until that brute had torn you to bits with his claws?"

"A wound with a claw needn't be mortal!"

"All right," returned Captain Hood quietly. "Another time I will wait!"

This tiger, however, instead of figuring in a menagerie, was fated only to be used as a hearthrug; but it brought up the list to forty-two for the captain, and thirty-eight for his man, without counting the half-tigress.

It must not be imagined that these grand hunts made us neglect smaller ones. Monsieur Parazard could not allow that. Antelopes, chamois, great bustards, of which there were numbers around Steam House, partridges and hares supplied our table with a great variety of game.

When we went into the Terrai, it was very rarely that Banks accompanied us. Although these expeditions began to interest me, he did not seem to care for them. The upper zones of the Himalayas evidently offered him greater attractions, and he took pleasure in these excursions, especially when Colonel Munro consented to join him.

But it was only once or twice that the engineer could persuade his friend to do so. We observed that since our installation in the sanitarium, Sir Edward Munro had again become anxious. He spoke less, he kept aloof from us, but held long conferences with Sergeant McNeil. Were these two men meditating some new project which they wished to keep concealed even from Banks?

On the 13 th of July Mathias van Guitt came to pay us a visit. Less favored than the captain, he had not added a single fresh tenant to his menagerie. Neither tigers, lions, nor leopards seemed disposed to be caught. The idea of going to exhibit themselves in the countries of the West apparently did not allure them. Consequently the zoologist was in a very bad humor, and did not seek to hide it. Kalagani and two shikarries accompanied him on this visit.

The situation of our house pleased him much. Colonel Munro begged him to remain and dine. He consented with pleasure to honor our table. While waiting for dinner, Van Guitt wished to go over Steam House, the comfort of which was a contrast to the modest arrangements of the kraal. Our dwellings drew forth many compliments from him, but I must confess that

Behemoth did not excite his admiration in the least. A naturalist, such as he was, could not but be indifferent to this masterpiece of mechanics. Remarkable as it was, how could he admire a mere imitation — a mechanical creation?

“Do not think badly of our elephant, Mr. van Guitt!” said Banks. “He is a powerful animal, who would make nothing of drawing all your menagerie cages and our cars as well.”

“I have my buffaloes,” answered the naturalist, “and I prefer their slow and steady pace.”

“Behemoth fears neither the claws nor teeth of tigers!” cried Hood.

“No doubt, gentlemen,” replied Mathias van Guitt, “but why should wild beasts attack him? They would not care for iron flesh!”

Though the zoologist did not conceal his indifference to our elephant, his men and Kalagani in particular were never tired of staring at it. Mingled with their admiration for the gigantic animal, there was evidently some superstitious respect. Icalagani appeared very much surprised when the engineer repeated that our iron elephant was more powerful than all the teams at the kraal put together. This was an opportunity for Captain Hood to describe, not without pride, our adventure with the three “proboscidate animals “belonging to Prince Gourou Singh. A slight incredulous smile curled the lip of the naturalist, but he said nothing.

On the 16th of July something occurred which made a regular quarrel between the zoologist and the captain. Hood shot a tiger just as it was about to enter one of the traps; and though this made his forty-third, it was not the eighth which the purveyor wished for.

However, after a lively interchange of epithets, harmony was once more restored, thanks to Colonel Munro’s intervention, and Captain Hood promised to respect any animal who “had intentions “of being caught in Van Guitt’s traps.

For the ensuing days the weather was detestable. We were obliged to stay indoors nolens volens. We were anxious that the rainy season should come to an end, and that could not now be long, for it had already lasted for more than three months. If the program of our journey was carried out as Banks had arranged, we had only six weeks to pass in our sanitarium.

On the 23 d of July some hillmen came to pay a second visit to Colonel Munro. Their village, called Souari, lay but five miles from our encampment on the upper limit of the Terrai. One of them told us, that for several weeks past, a tigress had been making frightful ravages on this part of the territory. The flocks were being carried off, and they even talked of abandoning Souari as uninhabitable.

There was no safety in it, either for man or beast. Snares and traps had been tried without any success on the ravenous beast, which already was spoken of as one of the most formidable ever known among even the oldest mountaineers.

It may be guessed that the story excited Captain Hood at once. He immediately offered to accompany the men back to their village, ready to put his hunting experience and his accurate aim at the service of these honest people, who, I imagine, counted not a little on such an offer.

“Shall you come, Maucler?” asked the captain, in the tone of a man who did not wish to influence a determination.

“Certainly,” I replied. “I should not like to miss such an interesting expedition.”

“I will join you, this time,” said the engineer.

“That’s capital, Banks.”

“Yes, Hood. I have a great wish to see you at work!”

“Am I not to go, captain?” asked Fox.

“Ah, you rascal!” laughed his master. “You won’t be sorry for an opportunity to make up your half-tigress! Yes, Fox, yes, you shall go!”

As we should probably be absent from Steam House for three or four days, Banks asked the colonel whether he would not like to go with us to the village of Souari. Sir Edward thanked him, but said he proposed to profit by our absence to visit the middle zone of the Himalayas above the belt of forest, with Goilmi and Sergeant McNeil. Banks did not urge the matter.

It was decided that we should set out directly for the kraal, in order to borrow from Mathias van Guitt a few of his shikarries, who might be useful to us. About midday we arrived there, and acquainted the naturalist with our intentions. He could not conceal his secret satisfaction in hearing of the exploits of this tigress, “well calculated,” said he, “to heighten the reputation of these felidm of the peninsula in the minds of connoisseurs.” He then placed at our disposal three of his men, besides Kalagani, always ready for any danger.

It was settled with Captain Hood that, if by any possibility the tigress should be taken living, it was to belong to Van Guitt’s menagerie. What an attraction if would be to have a placard hung in front of its cage, stating in eloquent terms the great deeds of “one of the Queens of the Terrai, who has devoured no less than a hundred and thirty-eight persons of both sexes!”

Our little band left the kraal about two o’clock in the afternoon. Before four o’clock, after ascending in an easterly direction, we arrived without adventure at Souari.

The panic here was at its height. That very morning a native had been surprised by the tigress near a stream and carried off into the forest.

We were received most hospitably in the house of a well-to-do-farmer, an Englishman. Our host had had more reason than any one else to complain of the savage beast, and would willingly pay several thousand rupees for its skin. “Several years ago, Captain Hood,” he said, “a tigress obliged the inhabitants of thirteen villages of the central provinces to take to flight, and in consequence a hundred and fifty miles were forced to lie fallow! Well, if that sort of thing takes place here the whole province will have to be deserted!”

“Have you employed every possible means to get rid of this tigress?” asked Banks.

“Yes, indeed, everything: traps, pitfalls, and even baits prepared with strychnine! Nothing has succeeded!”

“Well, my friend,” said Captain Hood, “I can’t promise for certain to give satisfaction, but I assure you we will do our very best.”

Thereupon a battue was organized for that same day. Our party and the shikarries were joined by about twenty mountaineers, who were well acquainted with the country. Although Banks was so little of a sportsman he accompanied our expedition with the most lively interest.

For three days we searched about all round the neighborhood, but with no result, except that a couple of tigers, which no one thought much of, fell by the captain’s gun. “Forty-five!” was all the remark he made.

At last the tigress signalized herself by a fresh misdeed. A buffalo, belonging to our host, disappeared from its pasture, and its remains were found about a quarter of a mile from the village. The assassination — premeditated murder, as a lawyer would say — had been accomplished before daybreak. The assassin could not be far off.

But was the principal author of this crime indeed the tigress so long sought in vain? The natives of Souari had no doubt of it. “I know it was my uncle, he did the mischief!” said one of the villagers to us.

“My uncle “is the natives’ usual name for the tiger, they believing that the soul of each of their ancestors is lodged for eternity in the body of some member of the cat tribe. On this occasion it would certainly have been more correct to say “My aunt!”

It was immediately decided that we should set out in quest of the animal without waiting for night, as the darkness would conceal it more effectually than ever. We knew it must be gorged, and would probably not leave its den for two or three days.

We took the field. Starting from the place where the buffalo had been seized, traces of blood showed the direction the tigress had taken. These marks led us toward a thicket, which had been beaten many times already, without discovering anything. It was resolved to surround this spot so as to form a circle through which the animal could not escape, at least without being seen.

The villagers dispersed themselves around, so as to gradually narrow the circle. Captain Hood, Kalagani, and I were on one side, Banks and Fox on the other, but in constant communication with the rest of the people. Each point of the ring was dangerous, since the tigress might try to break through anywhere.

There was no doubt that the animal was in this thicket, for the traces which entered one side did not reappear on the other. This did not prove though that it was its habitual retreat, for it had been searched before. It was early, only eight o’clock. When all arrangements were made, we began to advance noiselessly, contracting the investing circle. In half an hour we were at the limit of the first trees.

Nothing had occurred, nothing had announced the presence of any creature, and for my own part I began to question whether we were not wasting our time. Each could now only see the men next him, and yet it was important that we should advance with perfect unanimity.

It had been previously agreed that the man who first entered the wood should fire a shot. The signal was given by Captain Hood, who was always first in everything, and the border was crossed. I looked at my watch; it was thirty-five minutes past eight.

In a quarter of an hour the circle had so drawn in that our elbows touched, but we still had seen nothing.

Till now the silence had been unbroken, except by the snapping of dry branches under our feet. Suddenly a roar was heard.

“The beast is in there!” cried Captain Hood, pointing to the mouth of a cavern in a mass of rocks and trees. He was not mistaken. If it was not the usual haunt of the tigress, it was evidently her refuge now.

Hood, Banks, Fox, Kalagani, and several other men approached the narrow opening to which the bloody traces led.

“We shall have to go in there,” said the captain.

“A dangerous job!” remarked Banks. “It will be a serious matter for the first who enters!”

“I shall go in though,” returned Hood, looking carefully to his rifle.

“After me, captain!” put in Fox, who was already stooping to enter the cave.

“No, no, Fox!” cried Hood. “This is my affair!”

“Ah, captain!” said Fox, in most persuasive yet reproachful accents, “I am six behind you! “Just imagine their reckoning up their tigers at such a moment!

“Neither one nor the other shall enter!” exclaimed Banks. “No! I can’t allow it.”

“There is another way,” interrupted Kalagani.

“What is that?”

“To smoke her out,” replied the native. “She will be forced to appear then. It will be easier and less risky to kill her outside.”

“Kalagani is right,” said Banks. “Come, my men, dead wood, dry grass! Stop up the opening partly, so that the wind may drive the smoke and flame inside. The beast must either be roasted or run away!”

“It will run away,” said the native.

“So much the better!” remarked Captain Hood. ‘We shall be ready to give her a salute on her way.”

In a few minutes branches, grass, and dead wood, of which there was plenty lying near, were piled in a heap before the entrance to the den. Nothing had stirred inside. Nothing could be seen in the gloomy depths. Yet our ears could not have deceived us, the roar certainly came from that place.

A light was set to the heap, and soon the whole was in a blaze. From this bonfire issued a thick, choking smoke, blowing right into the interior. A second roar, more furious than the first, burst forth. The creature was being driven to extremities, and would make a rush.

We all waited anxiously, our faces toward the rocks, and partially sheltered by the trees, so as to avoid the first infuriated spring. The captain had chosen another position, which, to suit him, must, of course, be the most perilous. This was in a gap between the brushwood, the only one which offered a passage from the den. There Hood knelt on one knee, so as to steady his aim, his rifle at his shoulder, and looking as if carved in marble.

Three minutes had passed since the fire was first lighted, when a third roar, a stifled, suffocated roar, was heard. A huge monster dashed through the fire and smoke!

“Fire!” shouted Banks. Ten shots rang out, though we found afterward that not one had touched the animal.

Amid volumes of smoke, a second and yet longer bound carried the animal toward the thicket. Captain Hood, who waited with the greatest coolness, fired, hitting her below the shoulder.

Like a lightning flash the tigress was upon him, over he went, and in another moment her terrible claws would have torn open his head.

But Kalagani sprang forward, knife in hand. In an instant the brave fellow had seized the tigress by the throat.

The animal on this sudden attack shook off the native, and turned upon him.

Feeling himself free, the captain leaped up, and grasping the knife which had fallen from Kalagani’s hand, plunged it into the creature’s very heart. The tigress rolled over.

This exciting scene had taken place in less time than it takes to write it.

“Bag mahryaga! Bag mahryaga!” shouted the natives — meaning, “the tigress is dead!”

Yes, quite dead! But what a magnificent animal! Ten feet from muzzle to tail, tall in proportion, and its enormous paws armed with long claws, which looked as if they had been sharpened up on a grindstone!

While we were admiring the creature the natives, who had good reason for the grudge they bore against it, overwhelmed it with invectives.

Kalagani approached Captain Hood. “I thank you, sahib!” he said.

“What are you thanking me for?” cried Hood. “It’s I who owe you thanks, my brave fellow! If it hadn’t been for you, I should have been done for!”

“I should have been killed without your help!” replied the man coldly.

“What! By Jove — didn’t you rush forward, knife in hand, to stab the tigress just as she was going to tear my skull open?”

“You killed him though, sahib, and that makes your forty-sixth!”

“Hurrah! hurrah!” cried the natives. “Hurrah for Captain Hood!”

The captain had certainly every right to add this tigress to his list, but he gave Kalagani a grateful shake of the hand.

“Come to Steam House,” said Banks to the man. “Your shoulder has been torn, and is bleeding; but we will find something in our medicine-chest to heal the wound.

Kalagani acquiesced, and so, having taken leave of the inhabitants of Souari, who loaded us with thanks, we all proceeded in the direction of our sanitarium.

The shikarries now left us, to return to the kraal. Again they went back empty-handed, and if Mathias van Guitt had counted on this “Queen of the Terrai,” he must mourn for her; under the circumstances it was utterly impossible to take her alive.

We reached Steam House about midday. Here unexpected news awaited us. To our extreme disappointment Colonel Munro, Sergeant McNeil, and Goiimi had gone away.

A note addressed to Banks told us not to be uneasy at their absence; that Sir Edward was desirous of reconnoitering the Nepaulese frontier, so as to clear up certain suspicions relating to the companions of Nana Sahib, but that he would return before the time at which we had arranged to leave the Himalayas.

On hearing this note read, I fancied that an involuntary movement denoting vexation escaped Kalagani.

What could have occasioned this? I wondered.

CHAPTER V

A NIGHT ATTACK

THE colonel’s unexpected departure made us seriously uneasy. He was evidently still brooding over past events. But what could we do? Follow Sir Edward? We were ignorant of the direction he had taken, or even what point of the Nepaulese frontier he wished to reach.

On the other hand, we could not conceal from ourselves that as he had said nothing to Banks about this plan, it was because he dreaded his friend’s expostulations had wished to avoid hearing them. Banks much regretted having followed us on our expedition.

All we could do now was to resign ourselves and wait. Colonel Munro would certainly return before the end of August, that month being the last we were to pass here before proceeding southwest by the road to Bombay.

Kalagani, who was well doctored by Banks, only remained four-and-twenty hours in Steam House. His wound began to heal rapidly, and he left us, to return to his duties at the kraal.

The month of August was ushered in by violent rains — weather bad enough to give a frog a cold in its head, as Captain Hood remarked; but as there was less wet than in July, it was consequently more propitious for our excursions into the Terrai. Intercourse with the kraal was frequent. Mathias van Guitt continued dissatisfied. He, too, hoped to leave his camp in the beginning of September; but a lion, two tigers, and two leopards were still wanting, and he needed them to complete his troupe.

By way of retaliation, instead of the actors which he wished to engage on his employers' account, others came and presented themselves at his agency, for whom he had no occasion. Thus, on the 4th of August, a fine bear was caught in one of his traps. We happened to be in the kraal when the shikarries brought back a cage containing a prisoner of great size, with black fur, sharp claws, and long hairy ears, which is a specialty of the ursine family in India.

“Now what do I want with this useless tardigrade?” exclaimed the naturalist, shrugging his shoulders.

“Brother Ballon! Brother Ballon!” repeated the shikarries. Apparently though the natives are only nephews of tigers, they are the brothers of bears.

But Mathias van Guitt, notwithstanding this degree of relationship, received brother Ballon with a very evident show of ill-humor. It certainly did not please him to catch bears when he wanted tigers. What he to do with this inconvenient beast? It did not suit him to feed the animal without hopes of making anything by it. The Indian bear is little in request in the European market. It has not the mercantile value of the American grizzly, nor the Polar bear. Therefore Mathias van Guitt, being a good business man, did not care to possess a cumbersome brute, which he might find it very difficult to get rid of!

“Will you have him?” asked he of Captain Hood.

“What on earth do you expect me to do with him?” returned the captain.

“You can make him into beefsteaks,” replied the zoologist, “if I may make use of the catachresis!”

“Mr. van Guitt,” said Banks gravely, “the catachresis is allowable, when for lack of any other expression, it renders the thought properly.”

“That is quite my opinion,” replied the zoologist.

“Well, Hood,” said Banks, “will you or will you not take Mr. van Guitt’s bear?”

“Of course not,” replied the captain. “To eat bear steaks when once the bear is killed is all very well; but to kill a bear on purpose to make steaks of him isn’t an appetizing job!”

“Then you may give that plantigrade his liberty,” said Van Guitt, turning to his shikarries.

They obeyed. The cage was brought out of the kraal. One of the men opened the door. Brother Ballon, who seemed rather ashamed of the situation, did not require to be asked twice. He walked calmly out of the cage, shook his head, which might be interpreted as meaning thanks, and marched off uttering a grunt of satisfaction.

“That is a good deed you have performed,” said Banks. “It will bring you luck, Mr. van Guitt!”

Banks was right enough. On the 6th of August the zoologist was rewarded by procuring one of the animals he wished for. These were the circumstances of the capture: Mathias van Guitt, Captain Hood, and I, accompanied by Fox, Storr, and Icalagani, had been beating a thicket of cactus and lentisks since daybreak, when a half-stifled roar was heard.

With our guns ready cocked, and walking near together so as to guard against an isolated attack, we proceeded immediately to the suspected spot.

Fifty paces off the naturalist made us halt. He appeared to recognize the animal by the nature of the roar, and addressing himself more particularly to Captain Hood, “No useless firing, I beg,” he whispered.

Then advancing a few steps, while we, obeying his sign, remained behind, “A lion!” he cried.

There, indeed, at the end of a strong rope fastened to the forked branch of a tree, an animal was struggling. The fierce beast, hanging by one of its forepaws, which was tight in the slip-knot of the rope, gave terrible jerks without managing to free itself.

Captain Hood’s first impulse, in spite of Van Guitt’s request, was to make ready to fire.

“Do not fire, captain!” exclaimed the naturalist. “I conjure you not to fire!”

“But — ”

“No, no; I tell you! That lion is caught in one of my own snares, and he belongs to me!”

It was indeed a gallows-snare, at once simple and very ingenious. A very strong rope is fixed to the branch of a tree which is both tough and flexible. This branch is then bent down to the ground, so that the lower end of the cord, terminating in a running loop, hangs in a notch cut in a stake fixed firmly in the ground. On this stake is placed a bait in such a position that if any animal wishes to get at it, he must put either his head or one of his paws in the noose. But as soon as he does this, and moves the bait ever so slightly, the cord is disengaged from the stake, the branch flies up, the animal is raised, and at the same moment a heavy cylinder of wood, sliding along the rope, falls on the knot, fixing it tightly and rendering vain all the efforts of the suspended animal to get free.

This species of snare is frequently set in the Indian forests, and wild animals allow themselves to be caught in them far more frequently than one would be tempted to believe. It usually happens that the beast is seized by the neck, causing almost immediate strangulation, while at the same timq the skull is half fractured by the heavy wooden cylinder. But the lion which was now struggling before our eyes had only been caught by the paw. He was decidedly “all alive and kicking,” as Captain Hood remarked, and well worthy to figure among the zoologist’s guests.

Mathias van Guitt, in high delight, at once dispatched Kalagani to the kraal, with orders to bring a cage in charge of a driver. While he was gone we had ample leisure and opportunity to observe the captive, whose fury was redoubled by our presence.

The naturalist never took his eyes off him. He walked round and round the tree, taking good care, however, to keep out of reach of the claws which the poor lion struck out in every direction.

In half an hour’s time the cage appeared, drawn by two buffaloes. The suspended animal was cut down, not without some trouble, and we took the road to the kraal.

“Truly I was beginning to despair,” said Van Guitt. “Lions do not figure in great numbers among the nemoral beasts of India —

“Nemoral?” said Captain Hood.

“Yes, beasts which haunt forests, and I have reason to congratulate myself on capturing this animal, which will do honor to my menagerie.”

Dating from this day, Mathias van Guitt had no further reason to complain of ill-luck. On the 11th of August two leopards were taken together in that first trap from which we liberated the naturalist. These creatures were cheetahs, similar to the one which so audaciously attacked Behemoth on the plains of Rohilkund, and which we were not able to shoot. Two tigers only were now required to complete Van Guitt’s stock.

It was now the 15th of August. Colonel Munro had not yet reappeared, and we had not received any news of him. Banks was more uneasy than he cared to show. He interrogated Kalagani, who knew the Nepaul frontier, as to the danger Sir Edward might run by venturing into these independent territories.

The native assured him that not one of Nana Sahib’s partisans remained within the confines of Thibet. However, he seemed to regret that the colonel had not chosen him for a guide. His services would have been very useful in a country, with every path of which he was well acquainted. But there was no use now in thinking of joining him.

In the meanwhile, Captain Hood and Fox more especially continued their excursions in the Terrai. Aided by the shikarries, they contrived to kill three more tigers of medium size, not without great risk. Two of the animals went to the captain’s account, the third to his man.

“Forty-eight!” said Hood, who greatly longed to make up the round number of fifty before quitting the Himalayas.

“Thirty-nine!” said Fox, without counting a formidable panther which had fallen by his gun.

On the 20th of August the last but one of the tigers wanted by Van Guitt was found in one of the pits, which either by instinct or chance the creatures had till then escaped. As is usually the case, the animal was hurt in its fall, but the injury was not serious. A few days’ rest was sufficient to effect a cure, so that there would be nothing visible when delivery was made to Messrs. Hagenbeck, of Hamburg.

The use of this pit is regarded by connoisseurs as a barbarous method. When it is merely a question of destroying the animals, any way is good; but when it is necessary to take them alive, death is too often the consequence of their fall, especially when they are precipitated into a pit fifteen or twenty feet deep, destined for the capture of elephants. Out of ten there may be only one without some mortal injury. Therefore, even in Mysore, the naturalist told us, where the plan was at first so highly extolled, they are now beginning to give it up.

Mathias van Guitt being anxious to set out for Bombay, did all in his power to obtain his last tiger. It was not long before he had it in his possession, but at what a price! This incident deserves a detailed account, for the animal was dearly — too dearly — bought.

An expedition had been arranged by Captain Hood, for the evening of the 26th of August. Circumstances combined to render it a favorable opportunity — a cloudless sky, a calm, still night, and a waning moon. When the darkness is very profound, wild beasts do not care to quit their lairs, but a half light attracts them. Thus the meniscus — a word which Mathias van Guitt applied to the crescent moon — shed a few faint beams after midnight.

Captain Hood and I, Fox and Storr, who had taken a liking for the chase, formed the nucleus of this expedition, which was joined by the zoologist, Kalagani, and a few of the natives. Dinner ended, after taking leave of Banks, who had declined accompanying us, we left Steam House about seven in the evening, and at eight reached the kraal, without having met with any misadventure. Mathias van Guitt was just finishing his supper. He received us in his usual demonstrative style. A council of war was held, and a plan agreed upon.

It was thought advisable to lie in wait at the edge of a stream, falling down one of those ravines called nullahs, a couple of miles from the kraal, at a place which a pair of tigers visited every night. No bait had been placed at this spot, as the natives pronounced it useless. A battue recently made in that part of the Terrai proved that the need to quench their thirst was sufficient to attract the tigers to the bottom of that nullah. They also said that it would be easy for us to post ourselves advantageously there.

As we were not to leave the kraal before midnight, and it was then but eight o’clock, we had to wait with what patience we might until the hour for departure. “Gentlemen,” said Mathias van Guitt, “my habitation is entirely at your disposal. I invite you to do as I intend doing, lie down and endeavor to obtain some sleep. We shall have to rise more than early, and a few hours slumber will do much to fit us for our exertions.”

“Do you care to have a snooze, Maucler?” asked Captain Hood.

“No, thanks,” I answered, “and I would rather keep myself awake by walking about than be roused out of my first sleep.”

“Just as you please, gentlemen,” answered the zoologist. “As for myself, I already feel that spasmodic winking of the eyelid which is caused by the need of sleep. You see I have already the pendulum movement! “And Mathias van Guitt, raising his arms and throwing back his head and body, gave vent to several portentous yawns. Then making us a profound bow, he retired into his hut, and was doubtless soon fast asleep.

“Now what are we going to do?” asked I.

“Let us walk about, Maucler,” answered Captain Hood, “up and down in the kraal. It is a fine night, and I shall feel much more fit for a start than if I had three or four hours nap first. Besides, though sleep is called our best friend, it is a friend who often keeps us waiting!”

We were now strolling up and down in the inclosure, thinking or chatting as we chose. Storr, “whose best friend was not likely to keep him waiting,” was already asleep, lying at the foot of a tree. The shikarries and the rest were all crouched in their several corners, and no one in the place was awake but ourselves.

Keeping a watch would have been useless, as the kraal was entirely surrounded by a close and solid palisade. Kalagani himself made sure that the door was securely fastened; then, that duty performed, he wished us good night as he passed and joined his companions.

Our stroll took us first to the place occupied by the buffaloes. These magnificent ruminants, quiet and docile, were not even tethered. Accustomed to repose under the shade of gigantic maples, there they lay, their great horns entangled, their feet folded beneath them, and deep, sonorous breathing issuing from their enormous bodies. Even our approach did not arouse them. One only lifted his huge head for a moment, and looked sleepily at us, but soon put it down again.

“See to what a state tameness, or rather domestication, has reduced them,” I remarked.

“Yes,” replied Hood; “and yet buffaloes are terrible animals when in a savage state. But though they are so strong, they have not agility, and what can their horns do against the teeth and claws of lions and tigers? The advantage is decidedly on the side of the latter.”

Talking thus, we approached the cages. There, too, all was still. Tigers, lions, panthers, leopards, all were asleep in their various compartments. Mathias van Guitt wisely did not put them together until they were somewhat tamed by a few weeks of captivity. Otherwise, the brutes would most certainly have eaten each other up the very first day.

The three lions crouched motionless in a half circle like huge cats. Nothing of their heads could be seen, so buried were they in a thick muff of black fur, and they slept the sleep of the just.

Slumber was less profound in the tigers’ apartment. Their glowing eyes flamed through the dusk. Now and again a great paw would be stretched out, clawing at the iron bars. This was the sleep of fretful and impatient carnivora.

“They are having bad dreams, and I feel for them!” said the compassionate captain.

Some remorse, no doubt, troubled the three panthers, or at least some regret. At this hour, in their free life, they would have been roaming through the forest! They would have prowled around the pastures in quest of living flesh.

As to the four leopards, no nightmare disturbed their rest. They reposed peacefully. Two of these felines, a male and female, occupied the same room, being to all appearance as comfortable as if they were in their own den.

A single compartment was still empty — the one destined for the sixth and impracticable tiger, for whose capture Mathias van Guitt yet lingered in the Terrai.

Our promenade had lasted for nearly an hour. After once more making the tour of the kraal, we seated ourselves at the foot of an enormous mimosa. Absolute silence reigned over the entire forest. The wind, which whistled through the trees as night fell, had now died away. Not a leaf rustled.

Captain Hood and I, now seated near each other, no longer chatted. Not that we were becoming drowsy. It was rather that sort of absorption, more moral than physical, which is the effect produced by the perfect repose of nature. One thinks without forming the thought. One dreams as a man dreams without sleeping, when the wide open eyes gaze far away, seeing only some vision of the fancy.

One peculiarity surprised the captain, and unconsciously speaking in an undertone, as if fearing to break the silence, he said, “Maucler, this stillness astonishes me! Generally there are wild beasts roaring all night and making the forest a most noisy place. If not tigers or panthers, at any rate the jackals never rest. This kraal, full of living beings, ought to attract hundreds of them, and yet we hear nothing, not a snap of dry wood, or even a howl. If Mathias van Guitt was awake he would wonder as much as I do, no doubt, and would find some long break-jaw word by which to express his surprise!”

“Your observation is correct, my dear Hood,” I replied; “and I do not know to what cause to attribute the absence of these night prowlers. But we must take care, or we shall end by going to sleep ourselves!”

“No, no, fight against it!” returned the captain, stretching himself. “It will soon be time for us to start.”

And we continued to interchange sentences at somewhat long intervals. How long this lasted I cannot say, but suddenly a noise was heard which quickly aroused me from my drowsy state.

There was no doubt about it, the noise issued from the wild beasts’ cage. Lions, tigers, panthers, leopards, till now so peaceful, were uttering sullen growls of anger. Pacing up and down their narrow dens, they seemed to scent something afar off, and stopped every now and again to rear themselves up against the bars and sniff the air.

“What’s the matter with them?” asked I.

“I don’t know,” answered Hood, “but I fear they scent the approach of — ”

At that moment tremendous roars were heard outside the inclosure.

“Tigers!” exclaimed Hood, running toward Van Guitt’s hut. But such was the violence of the roaring that all the inhabitants of the kraal were already on foot, and the zoologist met him at the door.

“An attack!” he cried.

“I believe so,” replied the captain.

“Stop! I will see!”

And without taking time to finish his phrase, Mathias van Guitt, seizing a ladder, placed it against the palisade. In a moment he was at the top.

“Ten tigers and a dozen panthers!” he cried.

“That’s serious,” answered Captain Hood. “We intended hunting them, and now they have come hunting us!”

“Your guns — get your guns!” cried the zoologist. Obeying his orders, in half a minute we were ready to fire.

Attacks by a band of wild beasts are not rare in India. The inhabitants of districts infested by tigers, particularly the Sunderbunds, have often been besieged in their dwellings. This is a dreadful event, and too often the victory rests with the assailants.

In the meanwhile to the roars outside were joined howls and growls from the inside. The kraal was answering the forest. We could scarcely hear ourselves speak.

“To the palisades!” shouted Van Guitt, making us understand what he wanted more by his gestures than his voice. We all hastened forward.

At that moment, the buffaloes, a prey to the wildest terror, endeavored to force their way out from their inclosure, while the men vainly tried to keep them back.

Suddenly, the gate, having no doubt been insecurely fastened, was burst violently open, and a whole troop of wild beasts rushed in.

And yet Kalagani was supposed to have closed that gate carefully; he did so every evening!

“To the hut! to the but!” shouted Van Guitt, running toward his house, which alone offered a refuge.

But should we have time to reach it? Already two shikarries lay stretched on the earth. The others fled across the inclosure seeking a shelter. The zoologist, Storr, and six natives were already in the house, and closed the door just in time, as a couple of tigers were about to spring in.

Kalagani, Fox, and the rest had caught hold of trees, and hoisted themselves up among the branches. As for the captain and myself we had no time nor opportunity for joining Van Guitt.

“Maucler! Mat..cler!” shouted Hood, whose right arm had just received a wound.

With a blow of his tail a huge tiger had thrown me to the ground. Before he had time to turn upon me, I rose and hastened to Captain Hood’s assistance.

One refuge still remained to us; the empty compartment of the sixth cage. We sprung in, and in a moment we had closed the door, and were for a time safe from the brutes who threw themselves, growling savagely, against the iron bars.

Such was the fierceness of the furious beasts, joined to the anger of the tigers imprisoned in the neighboring compartments, that the cage, oscillating on its wheels, seemed on the point of being capsized.

The tigers, however, soon abandoned it to attack some more certain prey. What a scene it was I not a detail of it was lost to us, looking through the bars of our cage!

“The world is turned upside down!” cried Hood, who was almost mad with vexation.

“Those brutes to be out and we shut up!”

“Your wound? “I asked.

“That’s nothing!”

Five or six shots were at this moment heard. The firing was from the hut, around which two tigers and three panthers were raging. One of the animals was killed by an explosive ball from Storr’s rifle.

The others retreated and fell upon the herd of buffaloes, who were utterly defenceless against such adversaries. Fox, Kalagani, and the natives, who had dropped their weapons in their haste to climb the trees, could give no assistance.

However, Captain Hood, taking aim between the bars of our cage, fired. Although his right arm being almost paralyzed by his wound prevented him from taking his usual unerring aim, he was lucky enough to “pot his forty-ninth tiger.”

The buffaloes leaped from their inclosure and rushed bellowing through the kraal. They vainly endeavored to gore the tigers, who, however, easily kept out of reach of their horns. One of them, mounted by a panther, his claws tearing its neck, rushed out and away through the forest.

Five or six others, pursued closely by the beasts, also disappeared. A few of the tigers followed; but the buffaloes who had not been able to escape, lay slaughtered and torn on the ground.

Other shots were fired through the windows of the hut. But while Hood and I were doing our part, a new danger, menaced us. The animals shut up in the cages, excited by the rage of the struggle, the smell of blood, the roars of their brethren, rampaged about with indescribable violence..

Would they end by breaking their bars? This seemed really likely.

In fact, one of the tigers' cages was turned over. I thought for a moment that it would burst open and let them loose!

Fortunately nothing like this happened, and the prisoners could not even see what was passing outside, since it was the barred side of the cage which was downwards.

"Decidedly there are too many of them!" muttered the captain, as he reloaded.

At that moment, a tiger made a prodigious spring, and clung to the fork of a tree, on which two or three shikarries had sought refuge. One of the unfortunate men was seized and dragged down to the ground.

There a panther disputed with the tiger for the possession of the dead body, crunching the bones in the midst of a sea of blood.

"Fire now! Why don't you fire!" shouted the captain, as if Van Guitt and his companions could hear him.

As to us, we could do nothing more. Our cartridges were exhausted, and we could only remain powerless spectators of the scene. Even this did not last long, a tiger in the next compartment to ours who had been endeavoring to break out, managed by giving a violent shake to destroy the equilibrium of the cage. It oscillated for a moment, and then over it went.

Slightly bruised by the fall, we soon scrambled again to our knees. The sides bore the shock, but now we could no longer see what was going on outside. Though we could not see, we could at least hear! What a hideous din! What a horrid odor of blood! The fight seemed to have taken a still more violent character. What had happened? Had the prisoners in the other cages escaped? Where they attacking Van Guitt’s hut? Were the tigers and panthers springing into the trees and tearing down the natives?

“And we all the time shut up in this abominable box!”

exclaimed Captain Hood, wild with excitement and rage.

Nearly a quarter of an hour — which appeared whole hours to us — passed in this way. Then the uproar began to calm down. The roaring and howling diminished. The bounds of the tigers which occupied the compartments in one cage were less frequent. Had the massacre come to an end?

All at once, I heard the gate of the kraal slammed to with great noise; and Kalagani’s voice calling to us loudly, then Fox shouting, “Captain! captain!”

“This way!” cried Hood.

He was heard, and we soon felt the cage being lifted. A moment more and we were free.

“Fox! Storr!” called the captain, whose first thought was for his companions.

Here, sir!” answered both the men.

They were not even wounded. Mathias van Guitt and Kalagani were equally safe and sound. Two tigers and a panther lay lifeless on the ground. The others had left the kraal, and Kalagani had shut them out. We were all in safety. None of the beasts of the menagerie had effected an escape during the combat, and besides that the zoologist now counted one prisoner more. This was a young tiger imprisoned in the small traveling cage, which had upset over him, and under which he was caught as in a snare.

The stock of Mathias van Guitt was thus completed; but it had cost him dear! Five of his buffaloes were killed, and three of his natives, horribly mutilated, weltered in their blood on the grass of the inclosure!

CHAPTER VI

MATHIAS VAN GUITT'S FAREWELL

DURING the rest of the night no other incident occurred either in or outside the kraal. The gate was securely fastened this time. How was it that at the very time the wild beasts surrounded the palisade it should have been open? This was truly most unaccountable, for Kalagani had himself placed the strong bars which fastened it.

Captain Hood's wound gave him considerable pain, although it was but skin-deep. A little more though would have caused him to lose the use of his right arm.

For my part, I felt nothing of the violent blow which had thrown me to the ground. We resolved to return to Steam House as soon as day began to dawn.

As to Mathias van Guitt, except for regretting the loss of three of his people, he was not at all disheartened, although the being deprived of his buffaloes must put him to some inconvenience when the time for his departure came.

"It is but the chances of the trade," he said, "and I have for long had a presentiment that an adventure of this kind would befall me."

He then proceeded to arrange for the interment of the three natives, whose remains were laid in a corner of the kraal in a grave deep enough to prevent any wild animals disturbing them.

Soon, however, the dawn began to light up the dark avenues of the Terrai, and after many shakes of the hand, we took leave of Mathias van Guitt. To accompany us on our walk through the forest the zoologist put at our disposal Kalagani and two natives. His offer was accepted, and at six o’clock we left the kraal.

No untoward incident marked our return journey. Of tigers and panthers there was not a trace. The animals having been so severely repulsed had no doubt retreated to their dens, and this was not the time to go and rouse them up. As to the buffaloes which had escaped from the kraal, they had either been slain and devoured in the depths of the forest, or, if still alive, having fled to a great distance, it was not to be expected that their instinct would lead them back to the encampment. They must therefore be considered as positively lost to the naturalist.

At the border of the forest, Kalagani and the other men left us, and not long after Fan and Niger welcomed us back with joyful barks to Steam House.

I recounted our adventures to Banks, and it is needless to say that he congratulated us heartily on having got off so well! Too often in attacks of this nature not one of the assailed party escapes to tell the tale of the exploits of the assailants!

As to Captain Hood, he was obliged, whether he liked it or not, to keep his arm in a sling; but the engineer, who wa’s the doctor of the expedition, found his wound not serious, and declared that in a few days no trace of it would remain. At heart Captain Hood was much mortified at having received a wound without having returned it. And yet, he had added another tiger to the forty-eight already on his list.

On the afternoon of the 27th our attention was aroused by the joyful and excited barking of the dogs. We hastened out and saw Colonel Munro, McNeil, and Goiimi. Their return was a real relief to us. Had Sir Edward succeeded in his expedition? This we did not yet know. Hq was there, however, safe and sound, and that was the most important thing after all.

Banks immediately hurried up to him, grasped his hand, and gave him a questioning look.

“Nothing!” was all the reply he received, accompanied by a shake of the head.

This word signified not only that the search of the Nepaulese frontier had resulted in nothing, but that any conversation on this subject would be useless. It appeared to mean that there was nothing to speak about.

McNeil and GoCimi, whom Banks interrogated in the evening, were more explicit. They told him that Colonel Munro had indeed wished to survey that portion of Hindoostan in which Nana Sahib had taken refuge before his reappearance in the Bombay Presidency; to ascertain what had become of the nabob’s companions; to search for any traces which might remain of their passage over that part of the frontier; to endeavor to learn whether, instead of Nana Sahib, his brother, Balao Rao, was hiding in that country. Such had been Sir Edward’s object.

The result of this search was that there could no longer be any doubt that the rebels had left the country. There was not a vestige of that camp in which the false obsequies of Nana Sahib had been celebrated. No news was heard of Balao Rao. Of his companions, nothing that could urge them to set off on the track. The nabob killed in the defiles of the Sautpoora Mountains, his friends probably dispersed beyond the limits of the peninsula, the work of the avenger seemed already performed. To quit the Himalayas, continue southward, and thus finish our journey from Calcutta to Bombay, was all we had now to think of.

The departure was fixed for a week from that time, for the 3 d of September. That time was necessary to complete the healing of Captain Hood’s wound. Colonel Munro, too, who was plainly fatigued by his excursion through that rough country, was also glad of a few days’ rest.

During this time Banks began his preparations by getting our train in order, and in a state for the journey from the Himalayas to Bombay. To begin with it was agreed that the route should be a second time altered so as to avoid the great towns of the northwest, Mirat, Delhi, Agra, Gwalior, Jansi, and others, in which so many disasters of the mutiny of 1857 had taken place. With the last rebels of the insurrection had disappeared all that could arouse the recollections of Colonel Munro.

Our traveling dwelling would thus go straight through the provinces without stopping at the principal cities, but the country was well worth a visit, if only for its natural beauties. The immense kingdom of Scindia is unequalled in this respect. The most picturesque roads in the peninsula now lay before Behemoth.

The season of the monsoons had ended with the rainy season, which is not prolonged beyond the month of August. The first days of September promised a most agreeable temperature, which would render the second part of our journey far pleasanter than the first.

During the last week of our stay in the sanitarium, Fox and Goinni purveyed daily for the pantry. Accompanied by the two dogs they found swarms of partridges, pheasants, and bustards. These birds, preserved in the ice-house, were to supply us with game during the journey.

We paid two or three more visits to the kraal. There Mathias van Guitt was also preparing for his departure for Bombay, bearing his troubles with the philosophy which carried him calmly through all the miseries of existence both great and small.

The capture of the tenth tiger had completed his stock.

It was now only necessary to make up the number of his buffaloes. Not one of those which fled during the night attack had been recaptured. The chances were that all, dispersed in the forest, had met with violent deaths. The difficulty was how to make up the teams. In hopes of obtaining animals among the scattered farms and villages of the neighborhood, Van Guitt had sent Kalagani to inquire, and awaited his return with some impatience.

The last week of our abode at the sanitarium passed without incident. Captain Hood's wound gradually healed, and he seemed to hope for one more expedition before closing the campaign. But this idea Colonel Munro would not encourage.

Why risk himself needlessly while his arm was weak?

During the rest of our journey he would be very likely to meet with sport en route.

“Besides,” observed Banks, “you surely ought to be satisfied to find yourself alive and well, with a score of forty-nine tigers fallen to your gun. The balance is all in your favor.’

“Forty-nine — yes,” returned the captain with a sigh; “but I wanted fifty.”

He was evidently dissatisfied.

The 2d of September arrived, and we were on the eve of departure. In the morning Goiimi came in to announce a visit from the purveyor. Van Guitt, accompanied by Kalagani, came to Steam House; no doubt he wished to take formal leave at the last moment.

Colonel Munro received him cordially, and the Dutchman plunged into a course of speechifying more astonishing than ever. It struck me that his high-flown compliments concealed something which he hesitated to propose. Banks brought him to the point by inquiring whether he had succeeded in making up his buffalo teams.

“No, indeed, Mr. Banks,” he replied, “Kalagani has been unsuccessful. Although I gave him carte blanche as to price, he failed to procure a single pair of these useful animals. I am forced to admit myself wholly at a loss how to convey my menagerie to the nearest railway station. This loss of my buffaloes, by the sudden attack on the night between the 25th and 26th of August, embarrasses me exceedingly. My cages with their four-footed prisoners are heavy, and —

“Well, how are you going to manage?” demanded the engineer.

I can’t exactly say,” returned Mathias. “I plan — I contrive — I hesitate — but the fact is that on the 20th of September, that is to say eighteen days hence, I am bound to deliver the animals at Bombay.”

“In eighteen days!” echoed Banks. “Why you have not an hour to lose.”

“I know it, sir, and I have but one resource, just one.”

“What may that be?”

“It is to entreat the colonel to do me a very great favor.”

“Speak freely, Mr. van Guitt,” said Colonel Munro; “if I can oblige you, I will do so with pleasure.”

Mathias bowed, placed his right hand on his lips, swayed himself from side to side, and in every gesture betokened himself overwhelmed by unexpected kindness. He then explained that understanding our giant engine to be of immense power, he wished to know if it would be possible to attach his caravan of cages to our train, and so to drag them to Etawah, the nearest station on the line between Delhi and Allahabad.

The colonel turned to the engineer, saying, “Can we do what Mr. van Guitt requires?”

“I see no difficulty,” replied Banks. “Behemoth will never know that he draws a heavier weight.”

“It shall be done, Mr. van Guitt,” said Colonel Munro. “We will take your goods to Etawah. People ought to be neighborly and help one another even in the Himalayas.”

“I am aware of your goodness, colonel,” replied Van Guitt, “and indeed felt I might reckon on it.”

“You were right,” said Colonel Munro.

Everything being thus arranged, the Dutchman prepared to return to his kraal, in order to dismiss such of his attendants as were no longer required, retaining only four shikarries who were wanted to tend the animals.

“We meet to-morrow, then,” said Colonel Munro.

"To-morrow, gentlemen, I shall be ready, and waiting for you and your steam monster at my kraal." And the purveyor, delighted with the success of his visit, retired with all the airs of an actor leaving the stage.

Kalagani, after fixedly regarding Colonel Munro, whose journey to the frontiers of Nepaul appeared to interest him deeply, followed his master.

The last arrangements were completed. Everything was in traveling order, and of the Steam House sanitarium nothing remained. We were ready to descend to the plains, where our elephant was to leave us and fetch the Dutchman's caravan to join our train, which then was to start across Rohilkund.

At seven o'clock on the morning of the 3 d of September, Behemoth stood ready to resume the duties he had hitherto so well fulfilled. But a very unexpected occurrence now excited the surprise of every one.

After lighting the furnace to heat the boiler, Kalouth opened the different flues and the soot doors, in order to be sure that nothing impeded the draught of air, but started back when, with a strange sound of hissing, a score of what seemed like leathern thongs darted toward him from the tubes.

"Hallo, Kalouth! What's the matter?" said Banks.

"A swarm of serpents, sahib," cried the stoker.

In fact, what appeared like straps were snakes which had chosen to make themselves at home in the furnace chimneys, whence the heat now dislodged them. Some were scorched, and fell to the ground; had not Kalouth opened the valves, all would speedily have been roasted.

“What!” cried Captain Hood, running forward, “has Behemoth been cherishing a brood of serpents in his bosom?”

Yes, of the most dangerous and numerous description and a superb tiger-python now showed his pointed head from the tip of the elephant’s trunk, and began to unfold his coils, amid spiral volumes of smoke. The other serpents, which were so lucky as to escape with their lives, quickly vanished among the bushes.

But the python could not easily ascend the cast iron cylinder, and Captain Hood had time to get his rifle and send a bullet through its head.

Then Goorni mounted the elephant, and scrambling up the trunk, succeeded, with the help of Kalouth and Storr, in hoisting out the huge reptile. It was a most magnificent boa, in a vesture of gorgeous green and purple, adorned with regular rings, which seemed as though cut out of splendid tiger skin. It was as thick as a man’s arm, and measured quite five yards in length.

Truly it was a superb specimen, and would have made an advantageous addition to Van Guitt’s collection could it have been secured alive.

The excitement of this incident having subsided, Kalouth rearranged his furnace, the boiler soon began to do its part, and steam being fairly got up, we were ready to be off. One last glance over the marvelous panorama spread before us to the south, one last lingering look toward the indented outlines of the mighty mountain peaks which stood forth sharply against the northern sky, and then the shriek of the whistle gave notice of departure.

We descended the winding road without difficulty, the atmospheric brake acting admirably on the steep pitches, and in an hour we halted on the lower limit of the Terrai, at the edge of the plain. Here Behemoth, under charge of Banks and the fireman, left us, and at a dignified pace entered one of the broad roads through the forest.

A couple of hours later we heard the snorting and puffing of the steam giant, and he issued from the thicket of trees with the Dutchman’s caravan menagerie in tow.

Mathias van Guitt made his appearance, and renewed his thanks to the colonel. The wild beast cages, with a van in front for the purveyor and his men, were attached to our train, now composed of eight carriages.

Banks gave the signal, the regulation whistle sounded, and Behemoth, with stately motion, began to advance along the magnificent road leading to the south. The addition of Van Guitt and his wild beast vans made no difference to him.

“Well, Van Guitt, what do you think of it?” inquired Captain Hood.

“I think, captain,” replied Mathias, with some reason, “that this elephant would be much more wonderful if he were made of flesh and blood.”

We did not follow the route by which we had reached the foot of the Himalayas, but traveled southwest toward the little town of Philibit. We went at a moderate and easy pace, and met with no hindrance or discomfort.

The Dutchman daily took his seat at our table, when his splendid appetite never failed to do honor to the culinary talents of Monsieur Parazard. It speedily became necessary to call upon our sportsmen to do their duty, and Captain Hood resumed his labors for the larder. Food was required for our four-footed passengers, as well as for ourselves, and the shikarries took care to provide it. They were clever hunters; and led by Kalagani, himself a first-rate shot, kept up a supply of bison and antelope meat.

Kalagani maintained his peculiar and reserved manners, although very kindly treated by Colonel Munro, who was not a man to forget a good service done him. On the 10th of September our train skirted the town of hilibit without making a halt, but a considerable number of natives came to see us. Van Guitt's wild beast show attracted little attention in comparison with Behemoth, and without more than a passing glance at the splendid creatures within their cages, all hastened to admire the Steam Elephant.

We traversed the great plains of Northern India, passing, at a distance of some leagues, Bareilly, one of the chief cities of Rohilkund. Sometimes we were surrounded by forests filled with birds of brilliant plumage, sometimes by dense thickets of the thorny acacia two or three yards high, which is called by the English "Wait-a-bit."

There we met with many wild boars, whose flesh was of a remarkably fine flavor, from the fact of their feeding on the yellowish berry of these plants. These boars are extremely savage animals, and on several occasions they were killed by Captain Hood and Kalagani, under circumstances which displayed to advantage all the courage and skill possessed by our mighty hunters.

Between Philibit, and Etawah railway station our train had to cross the Upper Ganges, and shortly after an important tributary, the Kali-Nacli.

The menagerie vans were detached, and Steam House, assuming its nautical character, easily floated from one bank to the other. It was different with the Dutchman's vans. They had to be transported singly by a ferry boat, and though tedious, the passage was effected without much difficulty, as both he and his men knew exactly what to do.

At length without any adventure worthy of notice we reached the line of rail between Delhi and Allahabad. Here the two parts of our train were to separate, the first continuing to descend southward across the vast territories of Scind, in order to reach the Vindhyas and the presidency of Bombay. The second, was to be placed on railway trucks to travel to Bombay, and so by ship to Europe.

We encamped together for one night, and the respective starts were to be made at daybreak. Mathias van Guitt was about to dismiss such of his attendants as were no longer necessary to him, retaining the natives only until he should reach the ship.

Among the men now paid off was Kalagani, the hunter.

We had become attached to this native since he had rendered good service both to Colonel Munro and Captain Hood; and Banks, perceiving him to be at a loss for employment, asked if it would suit him to accompany us as far as Bombay.

After some moments consideration, Kalagani accepted the proposal, which seemed to please Colonel Munro very much. He was well acquainted with all this part of India, and attached to the staff of Steam House was likely to be extremely useful to us.

The next morning the camp was struck. Steam was up, and Storr only awaited final orders.

The ceremony of leave-taking was very simple on our part, highly theatrical on that of Van Guitt, who amplified his expressions of thanks, and specially distinguished himself in the final scene, when, as he disappeared from our sight he indicated by pantomimic gestures that never, either here below or in life hereafter, should our kindness fade from his memory.

CHAPTER VII

PASSAGE OF THE BETTWA

Our position on the 18th of September stood thus.

Distance from Calcutta... 812 miles.

From Sanitarium on the Himalayas 236

From Bombay... 1,000

With regard to distance, not half of our proposed journey had been accomplished, but reckoning the seven weeks spent on the Himalayan frontier above half the time allotted to it had elapsed. We left Calcutta on the 6th of March, and in two months we hoped to reach the western shores of Hindostan. Avoiding the great towns concerned in the revolt of 1857, we should travel nearly due south. There being excellent roads through Scind, we should meet no difficulties until we came to the mountains of Central India.

The presence of an experienced man like Kalagani would give additional security as well as facility to our progress, as he seemed so thoroughly well acquainted with this part of Hindostan. Banks called him the first day, while Colonel Munro was taking his siesta, and asked in what capacity he had so frequently traversed these provinces.

“I belonged,” replied the man, “to one of the numerous caravans of Brinjarees, who convey to the interior, on the backs of oxen, supplies of grain, either ordered by the government or private persons. In this capacity I have passed a score of times across the territories of North and Central India.”

“Do such caravans still cross this part of the peninsula?”

“Yes, sir, they do, and at this season of the year I should expect to meet Brinjarees on their way north.”

“Well, Kalagani, you are likely to be very useful to us. We wish to avoid the great cities, and to pass through the open country. You shall be our guide.”

“Certainly, sir,” answered the Hindoo, in the cold tone which was habitual to him, and to which I could never get quite reconciled. Then, he added, “Shall I state in a general way the direction we shall have to take?”

“Do so, Kalagani,” said Banks, spreading a large map on the table, and preparing to verify by observation the information about to be given him.

“It is very simple,” said the Indian. “A direct line takes us from the Delhi railroad to that of Bombay. The junction is at Allahabad. Between Etawah and the frontier of Bundelkund, there is but one important river to cross, the Jumna; between that and the Vindhyas Mountains there is another, the Bettwa. These two rivers may have overflowed their banks, but I think your train would be able to cross them even if it were so.”

“There would be no serious difficulty,” replied the engineer. “And having reached the Vindhyas — ?”

“We should turn slightly to the southeast, in order to reach a practicable pass. There will be no difficulty there either, for I know a spot where the ascents are easy. Wheel carriages prefer that way; it is the pass of Sirgour.”

“That ought to suit us,” returned Banks, “but I perceive that beyond the pass of Sirgour the country is very hilly. Could we not approach the Vindhyas by crossing Bhopal?”

“There are a great many towns in that direction,” answered Kalagani; “it would be difficult to avoid them. The sepoys distinguished themselves particularly there during the war of independence.”

I was struck by this expression, “the war of independence,” which Kalagani applied to the Mutiny. However.

I reflected that it was a native, not an Englishman, who used it. Besides, we had no reason to suppose that Kalagani had taken part in the revolt.

“Well,” resumed Banks, “leaving the cities of Bhopal to the west, are you certain that the pass of Sirgour will give us access to a practicable road?”

“To a road I have often traveled, sir, which, after making the circuit of Lake Puturia, will bring you near Jubbulpore, on the Bombay railway.”

“I see,” said Banks, who followed on the map all that the man said; “and after that — * ‘“

“After that the road turns to the southwest, and, more or less, runs alongside the line as far as Bombay.”

“Of course — so it does,” returned Banks. “I see no particular difficulty anywhere, and the route suits us. We shall not forget your services, Kalagani.”

Kalagani made his salaam, and was about to retire, when changing his mind, he again approached the engineer. “Have you any question to put to me?” said Banks. “I have, sir; may I be permitted to ask why you especially want to avoid the great towns of the Bundelkund?”

Banks looked at me. There seemed no reason for concealing the facts of the case from this man, and after a little consideration, Colonel Munro's position was explained to him.

He listened attentively to what the engineer related to him, and then he said in a tone denoting surprise, "Colonel Munro has nothing more to fear from Nana Sahib — at least not in these provinces."

"Neither in these provinces nor anywhere else," returned Banks. "Why do you say ' in these provinces? '"

"Because it was reported several months ago that the nabob had reappeared in the Bombay Presidency, but by no research could his retreat be discovered, and supposing him ever to have been there, it is probable that he has now again passed beyond the Indo-Chinese frontier."

This answer seemed to prove that Kalagani was ignorant of what had taken place in the Sautpourra Mountains, and that in the month of May, Nana Sahib had been slain by British soldiers at the Pal of Tandit.

"It seems that news takes a long time to reach the Himalayan forests!" exclaimed Banks.

Kalagani looked at him fixedly, like one not in the least comprehending his words.

"You do not seem to know that Nana Sahib is dead," continued the engineer.

"Nana Sahib dead!" cried the native.

“Certainly,” replied Banks, “government announced the fact that he had been killed, with all the details.”

“Killed?” said Kalagani, shaking his head, “where do they say Nana Sahib was killed?”

“At the Pal of TandIt, in the Sautpourra Mountains.”

“And when?”

“Nearly four months ago, on the 25th of last May.”

I noticed a peculiar look flit over Kalagani’s face as he folded his arms and remained silent.

“Have you any reason,” inquired I, “for discrediting the account of Nana Sahib’s death?”

“None, sir; I believe what you tell me.”

In another instant Banks and I were alone, and he exclaimed, “You see what these fellows are! They regard the chief of the rebel sepoys as something more than mortal. and because they have not seen him hanged, they never will believe he is dead.”

“Why,” replied I, “that is just like the old soldiers of the empire, who for twenty years after Napoleon’s death stoutly maintained that he was still alive.”

Since passing across the Upper Ganges fifteen days previous to this, a fertile country had opened before us, called the Doab, a district lying in the angle formed by the Ganges and the Jumna, which two rivers unite near Allahabad.

My impressions of the Doab are of alluvial plains cleared by the Brahmins twenty centuries before the Christian era, farming operations of the rudest description carried on by the peasantry, vast canal works due to English engineers, fields of the cotton plant, which especially thrives in this part of the country, the groans of the cotton mill machinery at work near every village, mingled with the songs of the men who are employed about it.

We went on our way very comfortably. Scenery and situations changed before our eyes, while we enjoyed in luxury the climax of the art of locomotion.

What mode of progression could be superior to this?

We reached the left bank of the Jumna. This important stream forms the boundary of Rajasthan, the country of the Rajahs, dividing it from Hindostan, or the country of the Hindoos.

We found that an early flood had already raised the waters of the Jumna. The current was rapid, but although this made our transit somewhat less easy, it did not hinder it at all. Banks took some few precautions, found a suitable landing-place, and within half an hour, Steam House was mounting the opposite bank of the river.

Railway trains require massive bridges to be built at great expense; one of these, of tubular construction, spans the Jumna at the fortress of Pelimghur near Delhi.

But our Behemoth drew his double cars over the surface of the current with as much ease as along the best macadamized high road.

Beyond the Jumna lay several of the towns which our engineer intended to pass by unvisited.

Among these was Gwalior, situated near the river Sawunrika, built on a basaltic rock, with its superb mosque of Musjid, its palace of Pal, its curious Gate of Elephants, its famous fortress, and the Vihura erected by Buddhists. The modern town of Lashkar, built at a little distance, forms a singular contrast to this ancient city, and competes in trade with it vigorously.

It was at Gwalior that the Ranee of Jansi, the devoted friend of Nana Sahib, defended herself heroically to the last. There, as we have already said, she fell by the hand of Colonel Munro during an engagement with two squadrons of the British troops, where he was in command of a battalion of his regiment, and from that moment dated the mortal hatred borne toward him by the Nabob, who sought till death to gratify it by revenge.

Yes! it certainly was desirable that Sir Edward Munro should not renew his recollections of the scenes which took place before the gates of Gwalior!

After Gwalior we passed Antri, and its vast plain broken by numerous peaks, like islands in an archipelago.

Then Duttiah, which has not been in existence for more than five centuries. It possesses a central fortress, elegant houses, temples of various forms, the deserted palace of Birsing-Deo, and the arsenal of Tope-Kana, the whole forming the capital of the province of Duttiah, which lies in the northern angle of Bundelkund, and is under British protection. Antri and Duttiah, as well as Gwalior, were seriously compromised by the insurrectional disturbances of 1857.

On the 22d of September, Jansi was passed at a considerable distance. This city is the most important military station in the Bundelkund, and the spirit of revolt is strong in the lower classes of its population. The town is comparatively modern, and has a great trade in Indian muslins, and blue cotton cloths. There are no ancient remains in this place, but it is interesting to visit its citadel, whose walls the English artillery and projectiles failed to destroy, also the Necropolis of the rajahs, which is remarkably picturesque.

This was the chief stronghold of the sepoy mutineers in Central India. There the intrepid Ranee instigated the first rising, which speedily spread throughout the Bundelkund.

There Sir Hugh Rose maintained an engagement which lasted no less than six days, during which time he lost fifteen per cent. of his force.

There, in spite of the obstinate resistance of a garrison of twelve thousand sepoys, and backed by an army of twenty thousand, Tantia Topi, Balao Rao (brother of the Nana), and last not least, the Ranee herself, were compelled to yield to the superiority of British arms.

It was there, at Jansi, that Colonel Munro had saved the life of his sergeant, McNeil, and given up to him his last drop of water. Yes! Jansi of all places must be avoided in a journey where the route was planned and marked out by Sir Edward's warmest friends!

After passing Jansi, we were detained for several hours by an encounter with travelers of whom Kalagani had previously spoken.

It was about eleven o’clock. Breakfast was over, and we were lounging under the veranda, or in the saloon, while Behemoth plodded steadily on at a moderate speed. The road was magnificent. Shaded by lofty trees it passed through fields of cotton and grain. The weather was fine, the sun very hot. All we could wish for was a metropolitan water-cart, to keep down the puffs of fine white dust which occasionally rose round our equipage.

But after a while the atmosphere appeared to become absolutely darkened with clouds of dust as dense as any ever blown up by the simoom of the Libyan Desert.

“I cannot imagine the cause of such a phenomenon,” said Banks, “for the wind blows quite a light breeze.”

“Probably Kalagani can explain it,” said Colonel Munro.

He was called, and entering the veranda, looked along the road, and at once said, “It is a long caravan going northward, and is most likely a party of the Brinjarees I spoke of to you, Mr. Banks.”

“Ah I and no doubt you will find some old friends among them.”

“Possibly, sahib; I lived a long time among those wandering tribes.”

“Perhaps you will want to leave us and join them again,” remarked Captain Hood.

“Not at all,” answered Kalagani.

Half an hour later, it was proved that his opinion was correct. A moving wall of oxen advanced, and our mighty elephant himself was brought to a standstill. There was nothing to regret in this enforced halt, however, for a most curious spectacle was presented to our observations.

A drove of four or five thousand oxen encumbered the road, and, as our guide had supposed, they belonged to a caravan of Brinjarees.

“These people,” said Banks, “are the Zingaris of Hindostan. They are a people rather than a tribe, and have no fixed abode, dwelling under tents in summer, in huts during the winter or rainy season. They are the porters and carriers of India, and I saw how they worked during the insurrection of 1857. By a sort of tacit agreement between the belligerents, their convoys were permitted to pass through the disturbed provinces. In fact, they kept up the supply of provisions to both armies. If these Brinjarees belong to one part of India more than to another, I should say it was Rajpootana, and perhaps more particularly the kingdom of Milwar. Pray examine them attentively, my dear Maucler, as they pass before you in defile.”

Our equipage was prudently drawn up on one side of the great highway. Nothing could have withstood this avalanche of horned cattle, even wild beasts hasten out of their way.

Following Banks’ advice, I set myself to observe closely the enormous procession as it passed by, and the first thing I noticed was that our Steam Elephant, so accustomed to create surprise and admiration, seemed scarcely to attract the attention of these people at all; they looked as if nothing ever could astonish them.

Both men and women of the race were extremely handsome; the former tall and strong, with fine features, curly hair, and a clear bronze complexion. They wore long tunics and turbans, and carried lances, bucklers, or round shields, and large swords slung across their shoulders. The latter, also very tall and well formed, were dressed in becoming bodices with full skirts, a loose mantle enveloping the whole form in graceful drapery. They wore jewels in their ears, and necklaces, bracelets, bangles, and anklets, made of gold, ivory, or shells. Thousands of oxen paced quietly along with these men,

women, old men, and children. They had neither harness nor halter, only bells or red tassels on their heads, and double packs thrown across their backs, which contained wheat and other grains.

A whole tribe journeyed in this manner, under the directions of an elected chief, called the naik, whose power is despotic while it lasts. He controls the movements of the caravan, fixes the hours for the start and the halt, and arranges the dispositions of the camp.

I was struck by the magnificent appearance of a large bull, who with superb and imperial step led the van. He was covered with a bright colored cloth, ornamented with bells and shell embroidery, and I asked Banks if he knew what was the special office of this splendid animal.

“Kalagani will of course be able to tell us,” answered he. “Where is the fellow?”

He was called, but did Tx t make his appearance, and search being made, it was found he had left Steam House.

“No doubt he has gone to renew acquaintance with some old comrade,” said Colonel Munro. “He will return before we resume our journey.”

This seemed very natural. There was nothing in the temporary absence of the man to occasion uneasiness, but somehow it haunted me uncomfortably.

“Well,” said Banks, “to the best of my belief this bull represents, or is an emblem of, their deity. Where he goes they follow; where he stops, there they encamp; but of course we are to suppose he is in reality under the secret control of the naik. Anyhow, he is to these wanderers an embodiment of their religion.”

The cortege seemed interminable, and for two hours there was no sign of an approaching end. Soon afterward, however, the rear guard came in sight, and at last I perceived Kalagani accompanied by a native who was not of the Brinjaree type. They were conversing together very coolly, and he was no doubt one who, as Kalagani had frequently done, had joined the caravan for a time only. Probably they were talking of the country which the caravan had just passed through, and across which lay the route by which our new guide had undertaken to lead us.

This man, who was the last of all the procession to pass us, paused for a moment before Steam House. He looked at the equipage with some interest, and I thought his eye rested particularly on Sir Edward Munro; but without uttering a word, he made a parting sign to Kalagani, rejoined the troop, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Kalagani then came up, and before any questions were asked, addressed himself to Colonel Munro, and simply saying, “One of my old comrades, who has been with the caravan for the last two months,” he resumed his place in our train, and we were speedily moving along a road now deeply marked by the footprints of thousands of men and oxen.

Next day, the 24th of September, we halted to pass the night a little to the east of Ourtcha on the left bank of the Bettwa, which is one of the chief tributaries of the Jumna.

There is nothing to see or say about Ourtcha. It is the old capital of Bundelkund, and was a flourishing town during the earlier part of the seventeenth century. But hard blows from the Mahrattas on one side, and the Mongols on the other, reduced it to a low condition, from which it has never recovered, so that, at the present time, one of the great cities of Central India is nothing more than a large village, miserably housing a few hundred peasants.

I said we encamped on the banks of the Bettwa, but the halt was made at some distance from the river, which, we learned, had considerably overflowed its banks. Night was coming on and it would be necessary next day to examine carefully the nature of the ground before attempting a passage. We therefore spent our evening in the usual way and retired to rest.

Except under very peculiar circumstances, we never kept watch by night. There seemed to be no occasion for it. Could anybody run away with our houses? No! Could they steal our elephant? Rather not! Nothing was more unlikely than an attack of thieves; but at all times our two dogs, Fan and Niger, were on the alert, and ready to give notice of approaching footsteps.

This very thing happened that night. Their violent barking aroused us about two in the morning. When I opened the door of my room, I found all my companions on foot. “Is anything the matter?” inquired Colonel Munro.

“The dogs seem to think so,” replied Banks. “I don’t believe they would bark like that for nothing.”

“I should not wonder if a panther had coughed in the jungle,” said Hood. “Let’s take our guns and make a search.”

McNeil, Kalagani, and Goinni were all out listening and trying to find out what was going on. We joined them.

“Well,” said the captain, “I suppose a few wild animals have passed on their way to the drinking-place?”

“Kalagani thinks this is something very different,” replied Sergeant McNeil.

“What then, Kalagani?”

“I don’t know yet, colonel,” said the Indian; “but certainly neither panthers, tigers, nor jackals. I fancy I can discern a confused mass among the trees — f “Let’s have at them at once!” exclaimed the captain, with eager hopes of his fiftieth tiger.

“Wait, Hood, wait,” said Banks; “caution is desirable in this case.”

“But we are in force, and well armed! I want to be at the bottom of this disturbance,” persisted the captain.

“All right then,” cried Banks. “Munro, you must remain in camp with McNeil and the other men, while Hood.

Maucler, Kalagani, and I go to reconnoiter.”

All this time the dogs continued to bark, but without any symptoms of the fury which they always displayed on the approach of wild beasts.

“Come along, Fox!” cried Captain Hood, beckoning to his servant.

Fan and Niger darted into the thicket. We followed them, and presently distinguished the sound of footsteps. It seemed as though the scouts of a large party were prowling round our camp. A few figures vanished silently among the bushes. The two dogs, barking loudly, ran backward and forward some paces in advance of us.

“Who goes there?” shouted Captain Hood.

No answer.

“These people either do not choose to speak or else understand no English,” said Banks.

“Well — give it them in Hindoostanee! Tell them we will fire if they don’t answer.”

In the dialect of Central India, Kalagani summoned the invisible rovers to advance and show themselves. Still no answer.

A rifle shot broke the silence. The impetuous captain could stand it no longer, and had taken aim apparently at a shadow flitting through the trees. The report was followed by a confused rushing sound, as if a multitude of people were dispersing right and left. Fan and Niger ran forward, and then returning to us quietly, showed no further uneasiness.

“Well, they beat a retreat double quick, these fellows, whoever they were,” exclaimed Hood.

“That is very certain,” returned Banks, “and now, whether they were robbers or rovers, all we have to do is to get back to Steam House. But we must set a watch till daybreak.”

In a very few minutes we had rejoined our party. McNeil, Goiami, and Fox arranged to take turns as sentries, and we once more retired to our cabins.

The night passed without disturbance; it was clear, that seeing we were on our guard, the visitors had decamped.

Next day, the 25th of September, while preparation was being made for a start, Colonel Munro, Hood, McNeil.

Kalagani, and I set out to explore the borders of the forest. We saw no trace whatever of the nocturnal adventurers, and on our return found Banks busily arranging for they passage of the river Bettwa, whose tawny waters were flowing far beyond their accustomed bed. The current was running at so rapid a rate, that Behemoth would have to make head against it to avoid being carried down stream.

The engineer, field-glass in hand, was endeavoring to determine our landing-place on the opposite bank. The Bettwa was at this point about a mile in width. Our train had as yet crossed no river so broad.

"What," said I, "becomes of travelers and traders when they are stopped by floods like this? These currents resemble rapids; ordinary ferry-boats could not resist them."

"Why! it is quite simple," replied Captain Hood, "they stay where they are."

"They can always cross if they have elephants," said Banks.

"You don't mean to say elephants can swim such distances?"

"Of course they can, and the thing is managed thus," answered the engineer. "All the baggage is placed on the back of these — "

"Proboscidians," suggested Hood, recollecting his friend the Dutchman's fine words.

“And the mahouts force them, at first reluctantly, to enter the stream. The animals hesitate, draw back, trumpet loudly; but finally make up their minds to face the difficulty, and beginning to swim, gallantly effect the passage. It must be admitted that some are occasionally swept away by the current and drowned, but that rarely happens if any experienced person is in charge.”

“Well,” said Hood, “Behemoth is thoroughly amphibious, and no doubt will make a fine passage.”

We all took our places; Kalouth by his furnace, Storr in the howdah, Banks acting as steersman. With gentle pace the elephant began his march. His great feet were covered, but the water was for about fifty feet too shallow to float him. Great caution was requisite, and the train moved slowly from terra firma.

All of a sudden we became aware that the sounds we had heard in the night were renewed and drawing near us.

About a hundred creatures, gesticulating and grimacing, issued from the woods.

“Monkeys, by Jove!” exclaimed Hood, with a burst of laughter, as a whole regiment of apes advanced in close order toward Steam House.

“What on earth do they want?” inquired McNeil.

“Of course they are going to attack us,” answered the belligerent captain.

“No, you have nothing to fear,” said Kalagani, who was watching them.

“Well, but what are they up to?” repeated McNeil.

“They only want to cross the river with us,” said the Indian.

And Kalagani was right. These were not insolent gibbons, with long hairy arms and importunate manners, nor were they members of the aristocratic family which inhabit the palace at Benares; but black monkeys, the largest in India, very active, and with white whiskers round their smooth faces, which make them look like old lawyers. In fantastic airs and attitudes they almost rivaled our friend Mathias van Guitt himself.

I then learned that these apes are sacred throughout India. One legend asserts that they are the descendants of Rama, who conquered the island of Ceylon. At Amber they occupy the Zenana palace, and do the honors to visitors. It is expressly forbidden to kill them, and several English officers have lost their lives through disregard of this law.

These monkeys are usually very gentle, and easily domesticated, but are dangerous if attacked, and when only slightly wounded, become, according to the statement of M. Louis Rousselet, quite as formidable as hyenas or panthers. But we had no intention of attacking them, and Captain Hood’s gun was not called into requisition. Could Kalagani be right in saying that these creatures, unable otherwise to cross the river, intended to avail themselves of our floating equipage?

We were speedily to see that it was so. When, after passing through the shallows, Behemoth reached the bed of the river, our train floated after him, and encountering a kind of eddy from a turn in the bank, remained at first almost stationary.

Just then the troop of monkeys approached, wading and dabbling in the shallow water. They made no demonstration of hostility; but suddenly the whole party, males, females, old and young, began to gambol and spring toward us, and, finally seizing each other by the hand, they fairly bounded up on our train, which actually seemed to be waiting for them.

In a few seconds there were a dozen on Behemoth’s back, thirty on the top of each carriage, and soon we had quite a hundred passengers, gay, familiar, even talkative (at least among themselves), no doubt congratulating one another on the fortunate chance by which they had secured their passage across the river.

Behemoth now fairly entered the current, and boldly facing it, proceeded on his way.

For an instant Banks looked anxiously at the apes, but they disposed themselves judiciously, so as to trim the flotilla. They sat or clung in all directions over the back of the elephant, on his neck, on his tusks, even on his upraised trunk, caring nothing for the jets of steam which it cast forth.

They clustered on the arched roofs of our carriages, some squatting down, some standing upright, some on all fours, others dangling by the tail from the veranda roofs. Stearn House maintained its equilibrium, and the excess of cargo proved to be quite immaterial.

Captain Hood was immensely amused, and his man Fox excessively astonished. He soon made friends with the free and easy creatures, who were grimacing on all sides of him, and began to do the honors of the house. He talked to them, shook hands, made his best bows, offered lumps of sugar, and would willingly have handed sweetmeats all round if Monsieur Parazard would have allowed it.

Behemoth worked his four feet strenuously; they beat the water, and acted like paddles.

Drifting downward in the current, he followed the direction which took us toward the landing-place. This we safely reached in about half an hour; and the moment our train touched the shore, the whole troop of monkeys sprang down, and with numberless absurd antics and capers, scampered off as hard as they could go.

“They might as well have said Thank’ee! ‘ “cried Fox, quite disgusted with the bad manners of his fellow passengers.

CHAPTER VIII

HOOD VERSUS BANKS

HAVING passed the Bettwa, we found ourselves already sixty-two miles from the station of Etawah, where we had left the Dutchman, Van Guitt.

Four days passed without incident — without even any sport for Captain Hood, wild animals being scarce in that part of Scind. “Upon my word,” he kept repeating in tones of great annoyance, “I begin to fear I shall arrive at Bombay without having bagged my fiftieth!”

Kalagani evidently knew this thinly-peopled region perfectly, and guided us across it most admirably. On the 29th of September our train began to ascend the northern slope of the Vindhyas, in order to reach the pass of Sirgour.

Hitherto we had met with no obstacle or difficulty, although this country is one of the worst in repute of all India, because it is a favorite retreat of criminals. Robbers haunt the highways, and it is here that the Dacoits carry on their double trade of thieves and poisoners. Great caution is desirable when traveling in this district.

Steam House was now about to penetrate the very worst part of the Bundelkund, namely, the mountainous region of the Vindhyas. We were within about sixty miles of Jubbulpore, the nearest station on the railway between Bombay and Allahabad; it was no great distance, but we could not expect to get over the ground as quickly as we had done on the plains of Scind. Steep ascents, bad roads, rocky ground, sharp turnings, and narrow defiles. All these must be looked for, and would reduce the rate of our speed. It would be necessary to reconnoiter carefully our line of march, as well as the halting-places, and during both day and night keep a very sharp lookout.

Kalagani was the first to urge these precautions. It was certainly wise to be prepared for every contingency; prudence is always a virtue.

Nevertheless, we had little to fear, being a numerous party, thoroughly armed, and, as it were, garrisoning two strong houses and a castle, which it was hardly likely marauders of any sort, Dacoits or even Thugs, supposing any still lurked in this wild part of the Bundelkund, would venture to assault.

The pass of Sirgour was attained with no great difficulty. In some places it was necessary to put on steam, when Behemoth instantly displayed power amply sufficient for the occasion.

Kalagani appeared so well acquainted with the winding passes among which we found ourselves, that we ceased to feel anxiety as to the route we were on. He never showed the smallest hesitation, but led the way confidently among deep gorges, lofty precipices, and dense forests of pines and other alpine trees, even where cross-roads would have puzzled many guides.

At times he stopped the train, and went forward to survey the road, but it was to ascertain its condition, which after the rainy season was often torn up by torrents, and retreat being difficult, it was awkward to come upon such chasms unawares.

The weather was perfect. The rains were over, and the burning sky was veiled by light mists, which tempered the solar rays, so that the heat we experienced was temperate, very endurable for travelers so well sheltered as we were. It was easy for our sportsmen to shoot what game we needed for the table without going any great distance from Steam House.

Captain Hood, however, and doubtless Fox also, regretted the absence of the wild beasts which abounded in the Terrai. But how could they hope to find lions, tigers, and panthers, where there was nothing for them to eat?

If, however, there was a lack of carnivora, we found occasion to make better acquaintance with Indian elephants — I mean wild elephants, of whom hitherto we had seen but rare examples.

It was about noon on the 30th of September that we perceived a pair of these superb animals in front of our train. On our approach, they left the road to let us pass, as though alarmed by the novel appearance of our equipage.

Even Captain Hood never thought of firing at the magnificent creatures unnecessarily. We all stood admiring them thus roaming at liberty their native wilds, where streams, torrents, and pastures afforded all they required.

“What a fine opportunity now for our friend Van Guitt to deliver a lecture on zoology!” cried the captain.

Everybody knows that India is, par excellence, the country for elephants; the species is rather smaller than the African elephant; it abounds in the various provinces of the peninsula, and is sought after also in Burmah, Siam, in the territories east of the Bay of Bengal.

They are usually captured by means of a keddah, which is an enclosure surrounded by palisades. Sometimes it is intended to secure a whole herd at once, and then the hunters assemble to the number of three or four hundred, under command of a jemidar, that is, a native sergeant, or headman, and drive them gradually toward the keddah.

This they are enticed to enter by the aid of tame elephants trained to the business; they are then separated, and have their hind legs shackled. The capture is then complete. But this method, besides being tedious, and troublesome, is generally unsuccessful with the large male elephants, who are bolder, and cunning enough to burst through the circle of beaters, thus escaping imprisonment in the keddah. The tame female elephants are appointed to follow these males for several days, the mahouts, wrapped in dark clothes, remain on their backs, and at last the unsuspecting elephants, when peacefully slumbering, are seized, chained, and led away captive before they recover from their first surprise.

In former times, as I have already had occasion to mention, elephants were taken in deep pits dug near their haunts, but by falling into these, which were about fifteen feet deep, the animals were often hurt or even killed, and the barbarous practice is now almost given up.

In Bengal and Nepaul, where the lasso is still in use, the chase becomes highly exciting and replete with adventure. Well-trained elephants are mounted by three men; one, the mahout, rides on the neck, and directs the animal’s movements; another behind, whose duty it is to spur and goad him, while the hunter is seated on his back, armed with a lasso, the noose ready prepared to fling. Thus equipped, the pursuit may last for hours, over plains and through forests, the hunters running great danger in the chase, but at length the huge quarry is lassoed, falls heavily, and is at the mercy of his captors.

By these different methods a vast number of elephants is annually caught in India. It is not a bad speculation. The price of a female elephant is sometimes 2801. of a male 8001. or even 2,000l. if he is of noble race.

But are the animals which cost such sums really so useful as to be worth it?

Yes, provided they are well fed. They must have six or seven hundred pounds’ weight of green fodder in every eighteen hours, that is about the amount allowed for average rations, and are then fit for active service; for the transport of troops and military stores, transport of artillery and wagons in mountainous countries, or through jungle impassable for horses; also in many great works of civil engineering, and other undertakings, where they are employed as beasts of burden.

These strong and docile giants are easily and quickly trained, seeming by instinct to be disposed to obedience; they are universally employed in Hindoostan, and as they do not multiply in captivity, it is necessary to keep up the supply for the country and for exportation, by continually hunting those which roam the forests. Notwithstanding this the herds of wild elephants appear in no way diminished. Numbers are still to be found in the different kingdoms of India.

Indeed, as far as we were concerned, far too many were at liberty, and this I shall presently show.

The two elephants in advance of us drew aside as I described, so as to allow our train to pass by them, immediately afterward resuming their march in the rear.

Presently several other elephants came in sight, and quickening their pace, overtook and joined the pair we had just passed. In a quarter of an hour as many as a dozen were behind us. They were evidently watching our equipage, and followed us at a distance of fifty yards. They did not try to overtake us, still less did they show any intention of leaving our company. They might easily have done so, for an elephant’s pace can be much more rapid than at first sight one would suppose, and among the rugged steeps of the Vindhyas, Behemoth could travel but slowly.

But their object evidently was to assemble in greater numbers. As they advanced they uttered peremptory calls, which appeared to be a summons to companions lingering behind, for cries, unmistakably in answer, sounded in the distance.

By one o’clock a troop of full thirty elephants followed us closely, and it was quite likely the number would increase.

Herds of these animals, consisting of thirty individuals, and forming a family party more or less nearly related, are frequently seen together; at times a formidable assemblage of at least a hundred are encountered with no great pleasure by travelers.

We all stood in the veranda behind our second carriage, and watched proceedings with some anxiety.

“The numbers continue to increase,” remarked Banks. “I suppose they mean to bring all the elephants in the district about us?”

“But,” said I, “they cannot call to each other at any great distance.”

“No,” replied the engineer; “but they have a very acute sense of smell, and we know it, because tame elephants detect the presence of wild ones three or four miles off.”

“Why it is like a migration — an exodus!” said Colonel Munro. “We ought to increase our speed, Banks.”

“Behemoth is doing his best, Munro. He has heavy work on this steep and rugged way.”

“What’s the use of hurrying?” cried Hood, always delighted with fresh adventure. “Let them come along with us, the jolly beasts! They form an escort just suited to us! The country, which seemed so desolate and deserted, is much more interesting now, and we go along with a retinue fit for a rajah!”

“We shall have to submit to their presence certainly,” said Banks. “I don’t see how we are to prevent it.”

“Why, what in the world are you afraid of?” asked the captain. “You know very well that a herd is always less dangerous than a solitary elephant. These are good, quiet beasts! Sheep, big sheep, with trunks — that’s all!”

“Hood’s enthusiasm is rising fast,” said Colonel Munro. “I am willing to believe that if these animals remain in the rear and keep their distance, we have nothing to fear; but if they take it into their heads to try to pass us on this narrow road, the consequences might be serious!”

“Besides,” I added, “what sort of reception will they give Behemoth, if they find themselves face to face with him?”

“Oh, nonsense! They will only salute him!” cried Hood. “They will make grand salaams to him as Prince Gourou Singh’s elephants did!”

“But those were tame elephants, sir, and well trained,” remarked Sergeant McNeil very sensibly.

"Well, those fellows behind there will become tame too. Their astonishment at meeting our giant will produce the deepest respect."

Our friend's admiration for the artificial elephant continued unabated; the chef-d'oeuvre of mechanism, created by the hand of an English engineer.

"Besides," he continued, "these animals are intelligent; they reason, compare, and judge. They can associate ideas like human beings."

"I question that," said Banks.

"Question that, do you?" cried the captain. "One would almost think you had never lived in India! Are not these excellent fellows put to all manner of domestic service? Have we any servant to equal them? Is not the elephant always ready to be useful? Don't you know, Maucler, what accounts of him are given by the best informed authors? According to them, the elephant is devoted to those he loves, carries their parcels, gathers flowers for them, goes out to shop in the bazaars, buys his own sugarcane, bananas, and mangoes, and pays for them himself, guards the house from wild beasts, and takes the children out walking more carefully than the best nurse in all England. He is kind, grateful, has a prodigious memory; and never forgets either a benefit or an injury. And then so tender-hearted! Why, an elephant won't hurt a fly, if he can help it! Look here! a friend of mine told me this himself. He saw a ladybird placed on a big stone, and the elephant was ordered to crush the little insect. Not a bit of it! The good beast would not put his foot on the creature; neither commands nor blows could drive him to the cruel deed! But directly he was told to lift it, he picked it up most tenderly with the delicate tip of his trunk, and let it fly away! Now then, Banks, I hope you will admit that the elephant is good and generous, superior to every other animal in creation, even to the ape and the dog. Are not the natives in the right when they attribute to him almost human intelligence?”

And the captain wound up his tirade by taking off his hat, and making a flourishing bow to the formidable army, which, with measured pace, came marching after us.

“Well spoken, Hood!” exclaimed Colonel Munro, with a smile. “Elephants have in you a very warm advocate.”

“Don’t you think I am in the right, colonel?”

“Hood may possibly be right,” said Banks; “but I am disposed to agree with the opinion of Sanderson, a great hunter, and the best authority in such matters.”

“Well; and what may this Sanderson say?” cried the captain in a tone of contempt.

“He maintains that the elephant possesses no unusual amount of intelligence, and that his most wonderful performances are simply the result of absolute obedience to orders given more or less secretly by their drivers.”

“Oh! indeed!” exclaimed Hood with some warmth.

“And he points to the fact,” continued Banks, “that the Hindoos have never chosen the elephant to symbolize wisdom; but in their sculptures, and sacred carvings have given in this respect the preference to the fox, the crow, and the ape.”

“Oh! oh! I protest!” cried the captain vehemently.

“Protest as much as you like, but listen to me. Sanderson adds that in the elephant the organ of obedience is phrenologically developed to an extraordinary degree — any one may see the protuberance of his skull. Besides he lets himself be taken in traps which are perfectly childish in their simplicity, such as holes covered over with sticks and branches, from which he never contrives to escape. He is easily decoyed into enclosures which no other wild animal would go near. And if he escapes from captivity he is retaken with a facility which is very little credit to his good sense. Even experience does not teach him prudence.”

“Poor beggars!” interposed Hood in a comic tone, “what a character this engineer is giving you, to be sure!”

“I will add as my final argument,” continued Banks, “that it is often extremely difficult to domesticate and train these creatures, especially while they are young, and when they belong to the weaker sex.”

“Why that only proves more than ever that they resemble human beings!” exclaimed Hood joyfully. “Isn’t it much easier to manage men than children and women?”

“My dear fellow, I do not see that either you or I, as bachelors, can be competent to decide such a question as that.”

“Ha! ha! well answered!”

“In short,” added Banks, “I do not think we ought to place too much reliance on the amiability of the elephant; if anything were to excite a troop of them to fury, it would be impossible to resist them, and as for those who are at this moment escorting us to the south, I heartily wish that they had urgent business in the opposite direction!”

“While you and Hood have been disputing about them, my dear Banks, their number has increased to an alarming extent,” remarked Colonel Munro.

CHAPTER IX

A HUNDRED AGAINST ONE

SIR EDWARD was not mistaken. A herd of from fifty to sixty elephants was now behind our train. They advanced in close ranks and were already so near to Steam House — within ten yards — that it was possible to survey them minutely.

At their head marched one of the largest in the herd, although its height, measured from the shoulder, was certainly not more than nine feet. As I remarked before, the Asiatic elephant is smaller than the African, which is frequently twelve feet high, and its tusks are in proportion. In the island of Ceylon a certain number of animals are found deprived of these appendages, but mucknas, which is the name given them, are rare on the mainland of India.

Behind the first elephant came several females, who in general are the leaders, while the males remain in the rear. Apparently on this occasion the usual order was changed, because of our presence on the line of march. The males in fact have nothing to do with the guidance of the herd. They have not the charge of their young ones; they cannot know when the babies ought to have a rest, nor can they tell what sort of camping-place is most fit for them. It is the females who, figuratively, “carry the tusks “of the household and direct the great migrations.

It was really difficult to answer the question of why they were now on the move, whether it was to seek more abundant pasture or to escape the sting of certain venomous insects, or a mere fancy to follow our strange equipage, the country was open enough, and according to their usual custom when they are not in wooded regions, these elephants journey by daylight. Before long we should see whether they would stop at nightfall, as we should ourselves be obliged to do.

“Hood,” said I, “see how our rearguard has increased! Do you still persist in thinking there is no danger?”

“Pooh!” said the captain. “Why should those animals want to do us any harm? They are not like tigers, are they, Fox?”

“Nor even panthers!” was the answer of the servant, who always chimed in with his master’s ideas.

But at this reply I perceived Kalagani shake his head disapprovingly. He evidently did not share in the perfect equanimity of the two hunters.

“You seem to be uneasy, Kalagani,” said Banks, looking at him.

“Cannot the speed of the train be increased?” was the man’s only reply.

“It will be rather difficult,” returned the engineer, “but we will try.”

So saying, Banks left the veranda, and ascended to the howdah in which Storr was standing. Almost immediately the snorts of Behemoth increased, as well as the speed of the train.

Very little, though, for the road was rough. But even if our rate had been redoubled, the state of things would have remained the same. The herd of elephants also advanced more rapidly, and the distance between them and Steam House did not diminish.

Several hours passed thus without any important alteration taking place. After dinner we resumed our places on the veranda of the second carriage.

The road now stretched away behind us for two miles or so in a straight line. Our view of it was no longer intercepted by sudden turnings.

To our extreme uneasiness we perceived that the number of elephants had increased within the last hour! We now counted at least a hundred.

The creatures marched in double or treble file, according to the width of the road, silently, at an even step, with their trunks in the air. It was like the advance of the tide flowing quietly in. All was calm now, to continue the metaphor, but if a tempest lashed into fury this moving mass, to what danger might we not be exposed?

In the meantime evening came on. There would be no moon, nor would the stars give any light, for a sort of fog or haze shrouded the heavens.

As Banks said, it would be impossible to follow such a difficult road in the dark. He resolved, therefore, to halt as soon as the valley widened, or we met with some gorge into which we could go, and allow the alarming-looking herd to pass us, and continue their migration to the south.

But would they do so? Might they not halt in or near our encampment? This was the great question.

With nightfall came a sort of agitation among the elephants which we had not observed during the day. A sort of roar, powerful but dull, escaped from their mighty lungs. To this uproar succeeded another peculiar noise.

“What does that mean?” asked the colonel.

“That is the sound they make,” replied Kalagani, “when they are in presence of an enemy.”

“And it is we, it can only be we whom they consider as such,” said Banks.

“I fear so,” replied the native.

The sound now resembled distant thunder. It recalled that which is produced in the side-scenes of a theater by the vibration of sheets of iron. Rubbing the extremity of their trunks on the ground, the elephants sent forth prolonged breaths with a deep and sullen roar.

It was now nine in the evening.

We had reached a sort of little plain, almost circular, and half a mile in width, from which debouched the road to the lake Puturia, near which Kalagani had proposed our halting. But this lake being still ten miles off, it was hopeless to think of reaching it that night.

Banks now gave the signal to stop. Behemoth became stationary, but he was not unharnessed. The fires were not even raked out. Storr received orders to keep up the pressure so that the train might move on again at a moment’s notice. We were thus ready for any emergency.

Colonel Munro retired to his room. Banks and Hood did not care to go to bed, and I preferred sitting up with them. All our servants were also afoot. But what could we possibly do, if the elephants took it into their heads to attack Steam House?

For the first hour a dull murmur continued around our encampment. The herd was evidently spreading over the little plain. Were they merely crossing it, and pursuing their way southward?

“That’s possible, after all,” said Banks.

“It is even more than probable,” added Captain Hood, whose optimism was never at fault.

Toward eleven o’clock the sounds began to diminish and at ten minutes past it had totally ceased.

It was a perfectly calm night, so that the slightest noise would have reached our ears. Nothing was to be heard but the panting of Behemoth, and nothing was to be seen but the sparks which flew occasionally from his trunk.

“Well!” remarked Hood, “wasn’t I right? Those fine fellows have taken their departure.”

“And a pleasant journey to them,” I rejoined.

“I am not at all sure they are gone,” said Banks, shaking his head. “But we must find out.”

Then calling to the engine-driver,” Storr,” he said, “the signal lamps.”

“Ay, ay, sir!”

In twenty seconds’ time the two electric lights blazed from Behemoth’s eyes, and by automatic mechanism were directed in turn to every point of the horizon.

There lay the elephants in a great circle round Steam House motionless, perhaps asleep. The brilliant light turned upon their dark bodies seemed to animate them with supernatural life. By a natural optical illusion the monsters assumed gigantic proportions, rivaling our Behemoth. Aroused by the glare they started as if touched by a fiery sting. Trunks were raised and tusks pointed as if the creatures were making ready for a rush at the train.

Roars issued from each vast throat. This sudden fury communicated itself to all, and round our encampment soon arose a deafening concert as if a hundred clarions at once were sounding a startling call.

“Out with the light!” called Banks.

The electric current was suddenly interrupted, and as suddenly the commotion ceased.

“They are there, you see, camped in a circle,” said the engineer; “and there they will still be at daybreak.”

“Hum!” observed Captain Hood, whose confidence appeared to be somewhat shaken.

What was to be done next? Kalagani was consulted. He did not attempt to conceal the anxiety he felt.

Could we leave the encampment under cover of the darkness? That was impossible. Besides, what use would it be? The herd of elephants would certainly follow us, and the difficulties of the road would be far greater than by day.

It was therefore agreed that the departure should not be attempted until dawn. We would then proceed with all possible prudence and celerity, but without startling or offending our formidable retinue.

“And suppose these animals persist in escorting us? “I asked.

“We will endeavor to reach some spot where Steam House can be put out of their reach,” answered Banks.

“Shall we find such a spot, before we get beyond the Vindhyas?” asked the captain.

“There is one,” said the Hindoo.

“What is it?” demanded Banks.

“Lake Puturia.”

“At what distance is it?”

“About nine miles.”

“But elephants swim,” replied Banks, “perhaps better than any other quadruped. They have been seen to keep themselves on the surface of the water for more than half a day! Now, is it not to be feared that they might follow us into Lake Puturia, and thus the situation of Steam House be made still more serious?”

“I cannot see any other way of escaping their attack!” said the native.

“Then we will try it!” said the engineer.

It was indeed the only thing to be done. The elephants might perhaps not venture to swim after us, and if they did, we might outstrip them.

We waited impatiently for day, which was not long in appearing. No hostile demonstration was made during the night, but at sunrise not an elephant had stirred, and Steam House was surrounded on all sides.

All at once a general move was made, as if the creatures were obeying a word of command. They shook their trunks, rubbed their tusks on the ground, made their toilet by squirting water all over their bodies, gathered several mouthfuls of the thick grass with which the ground was covered, and finally approached so near to Steam House that we could have touched them through the windows.

Banks, however, expressly forbade us to provoke them. It was important that no pretext should be given for a sudden attack.

In the meantime, several elephants pressed up close to Behemoth. They evidently wished to ascertain what the enormous animal, now standing so motionless, could be. Did they consider him as a relation? Did they suspect that he was endowed with marvelous power?

On the day before they had had no opportunity for seeing him at work, for their first ranks had always kept a certain distance from the rear of the train. But what would they do when they heard him snort and bellow, when his trunk ejected torrents of vapor, when they saw him raise and set down his great feet and begin to march, dragging the two great vans after him?

Colonel Munro, Captain Hood, Kalagani, and I took our places in the forepart of the train. Sergeant McNeil and his companions were at the back. Kalouth, at the furnaces, kept up the supply of fuel, so that the pressure of vapor had already reached five atmospheres. Banks was in the howdah with Storr, and kept his hand on the regulator.

The moment for departure came. At a sign from Banks, the driver touched the spring, and an ear-piercing whistle resounded through the air.

The elephants raised their heads, then drawing back a little, they left the way open for a few feet.

A jet of vapor started from the trunk, the wheels of the machine were put in motion, Behemoth and the train advanced together. None of my companions will contradict me when I assert that there was at first a lively movement of surprise among the foremost animals. A wider passage opened, and the road appeared free enough to allow the train to proceed at a pace equal to a horse’s trot.

But at the same moment all the “proboscidian herd,” to use an expression of the captain’s, moved too, both in front and rear. The first took the lead of the procession, the rest followed the train. All seemed quite determined not to abandon it.

At the same time, as the road was here wider, others walked at the sides, like horsemen accompanying a carriage. Male and female mingled, of all sizes, of all ages, adults of five-and-twenty years, and “grown men “of sixty, old fellows of more than a hundred, and little ones who had not yet left their mother’s side, but sucking with their lips and not with their trunks — as is sometimes supposed — got their breakfasts as they trotted along.

The entire troop kept a certain order, not hurrying, but regulating their pace to that of Behemoth.

“If they escort us like this to the lake,” said Colonel Munro, “I shall make no objection.”

“Yes,” replied Kalagani, “but what will happen when the road narrows?”

In this lay the danger.

No incident occurred during the three hours which were employed in traveling eight out of the ten miles to Lake Puturia. Two or three times only a few elephants stood across the road, as if it was their intention to bar it; but Behemoth pointed his tusks straight at them, sputtered out smoke in their faces, advancing all the time, so that they thought better of it, and started out of his way.

At ten o’clock two miles only lay between us and the lake. There — at least, so we hoped — we should be in comparative safety.

Of course, if no hostile demonstration was made before we reached the lake, Banks intended to leave Puturia on the west without stopping there, so as to quit the region of the Vindhyas the next day. From thence to the station of Jubbulpore was but a few hours’ journey.

I may here add that the country was not only very wild,

but absolutely a desert. Not a village, not a farm — the insufficiency of pasture accounting for this — not a caravan, or even a solitary traveler. Since our entry into this mountainous part of Bundelkund, we had not met a single human being.

About eleven o’clock the valley through which Steam House was passing, between two great spurs of the chain, began to narrow.

The danger of our situation, already fraught with so much to cause uneasiness, was now aggravated.

If the elephants had simply gone on in front or followed the train, the difficulty would not have occurred. But those marching alongside could not remain there. We should either crush them against the rocky sides of the road, or tumble them over the precipices which bordered it in some places.

Instinctively they tried to get either forward or back, the consequence being that it was no longer possible either to advance or retreat.

“This complicates matters,” remarked the colonel.

“Yes,” said Banks; “we are now under the necessity of breaking through the herd.”

“Well, break through, dash into them!” exclaimed Captain Hood. “By Jove! Behemoth’s iron tusks are worth much more than the ivory tusks of those idiotic brutes!”

The “proboscidians “were now only “idiotic brutes “in the eyes of our lively and changeable captain.

“No doubt,” said McNeil,”

“but we are one against a hundred.”

“Forward, whatever happens!” cried Banks, “or the herd will trample us under foot!”

Several puffs of steam now gave notice of more rapid movement on Behemoth’s part. His tusks ran into the elephant nearest him.

A cry of pain burst from the animal, which was answered by the furious clamor of the whole herd. A struggle, the issue of which we could not foresee, was imminent.

We had our weapons already in our hands, the rifles loaded with explosive ball and the revolvers charged. We were thus prepared to repel any aggression.

The first attack was made by a gigantic male, of ferocious aspect, who, planting his hind feet firmly on the ground, turned against Behemoth.

“A gunesh!” cried Kalagani.

“Pooh! he has only one tusk!” replied Hood, shrugging his shoulders disdainfully.

“He is the more terrible!” answered the native.

Kalagani had given to this elephant a name which hunters used to designate the males which have only one tusk. These are animals particularly reverenced by the natives, especially when it is the right tusk which is wanting. Such was the case with this one, and, as Kalagani said, it was, like all its species, uncommonly fierce.

This was soon proved.

The gunesh uttered a trumpet-note of defiance, turned back his trunk, which elephants never use for fighting, and rushed against Behemoth.

His tusk struck the iron side with such violence as to pierce through, but meeting with the thick armor of the inner plating, it broke against it.

The whole train felt the shock.

However, it continued to advance and drove back the gunesh, which boldly, but vainly, endeavored to resist it.

His call had been heard and understood.

The whole mass of animals stopped, presenting an insurmountable obstacle of living flesh.

At the same moment the hinder troops, continuing their march, pressed violently against the veranda. How could we resist such a crushing force?

Those which still remained at the side, raised their trunks, and twining them round the uprights of the carriages, shook them violently.

It would not do to stop, or it would soon be all up with the train, but we had to defend ourselves. No hesitation was possible. Guns and rifles were instantly aimed at our assailants.

“Don’t waste a single shot!” cried the captain. “Aim at the root of the trunk, or the hollow below the eye. Those are the vital parts!”

Captain Hood was obeyed. Several reports rang out, followed by yells of pain.

Three or four elephants, hit in a vital spot, had fallen behind us and at the side — a fortunate circumstance, since their corpses did not obstruct our road. Those in front drew to one side, and the train continued its advance.

“Reload and wait!” cried Hood.

If what he ordered us to wait for was the attack of the entire herd, there was no long delay. It was made with such violence that we almost gave ourselves up for lost.

A perfect chorus of hoarse and furious trumpeting suddenly burst forth. One might have supposed them to be an army of those fighting elephants, which, when possessed by the excitement called “must,” are treated by the natives so as to increase their rage.

Nothing can be more terrible, and the boldest elephantador, trained in Guicowar for the express purpose of fighting these formidable animals, would certainly have quailed before the assailants of Steam House.

“Forward!” cried Banks.

“Fire!” shouted Hood.

And with the snorts and shrieks of the engine were mingled the crack of our rifles. It was next to impossible to aim carefully, as the captain had advised, in such confusion. Every ball found a mark in the mass of flesh, but few hit a mortal part. The wounded animals, therefore, redoubled their fury, and to our shots they answered with blows of their tusks, which seriously damaged the walls.

To the reports of the guns, discharged both in front and rear of the train, and the bursting of the explosive balls in the bodies of the animals, was joined the hissing and whistling of the steam. Pressure rapidly increased.

Behemoth dashed into the bellowing crowd, dividing and repelling it. At the same time, his movable trunk, rising and falling like a formidable club, dealt repeated blows on the quivering bodies which he pierced with his tusks.

Thus we advanced along the narrow road.

Sometimes the wheels seemed about to stick fast, but on we struggled, till we were within a short distance of the lake.

“Hurrah!” shouted Captain Hood, like a soldier who is about to dash into the thick of the fight.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” we echoed.

All at once I caught sight of a huge trunk darting across the front veranda. In another minute Colonel Munro would be seized by this living lasso and be dashed under the monster’s feet. Just in time, however, Kalagani bounded forward and severed the trunk by a vigorous blow from a hatchet.

After this, while all were taking part in the common defence, the Hindoo never lost sight of Sir Edward. In his unfailing devotion and exposure of his own person to shield the colonel, he showed how sincere was his desire to protect him.

Behemoth’s power and strength of endurance were now put to the proof. How he worked his way, like a wedge, penetrating through the mass! And as at the same time the hindermost elephants butted at us with their heads the train advanced, not only without stopping, although with many a jolt and shock, but even faster than we could have hoped.

All at once a fresh noise arose amid the general din and clamor.

A party of elephants were crushing the second carriage against the rocks!

“Join us! join us!” shouted Banks to those of our friends who were defending the back of Steam House.

Already Fox, Goilmi, and the sergeant had darted into our house.

“Where is Parazard?” asked Captain Hood.

“He won’t leave his kitchen,” answered Fox.

“He must come! — haul him along!”

Doubtless our cook considered it a point of honor not to leave the post which had been confided to him. But to attempt to resist Gofirni’s powerful arms, when those arms had once grasped him, would have been of as much use as to endeavor to escape from the jaws of a crocodile.

Monsieur Parazard was soon deposited in the drawing-room.

“Are you all there?” cried Banks.

“Yes, sahib,” returned Goitmi.

“Cut through the connecting bar!”

“What, and leave half of our train behind!” cried Captain Hood.

“It must be done!” answered Banks.

The bar was cut through, the gangway hacked to pieces, and our second carriage was detached.

Not too soon! The carriage was crushed, heaved up, capsized, the elephants ending by pounding it beneath their feet. Nothing but a shapeless ruin was left, obstructing the road.

“Hum!” uttered Hood in a tone which would have made us laugh had the occasion allowed of it, “and those animals wouldn’t crush a ladybird!”

If the maddened elephants treated the first carriage as they had treated the last, we now knew the fate which awaited us.

“Pile up the fires, Kalouth!” called the engineer.

A few more yards — a last effort, and Lake Puturia might be reached.

Storr opened wide the regulator, thus showing Behemoth what was expected of him. He made a regular break through the rampart of elephants, and not contenting himself with merely thrusting them with his tusks, he squirted at them jets of burning steam, as he had done to the pilgrims of the Phalgou, scalding them with boiling water! It was magnificent!

The lake lay before us.

Ten minutes would put us in comparative safety.

The elephants no doubt knew this — which was a proof in favor of the intelligence Captain Hood had argued for. For the last time they bent all their efforts to capsize our train.

Still we used our firearms. The balls fell on the animals like hail. Only five or six elephants now barred our passage. Many fell, and the wheels ground over earth red with blood. These last remaining brutes had now to be got out of our way.

“Again! again!” shouted Banks to the driver.

At this Behemoth roared as if his inside was a workshop full of spinning-jennies. Steam rushed through the valves under the pressure of eight atmospheres. To increase this would have burst the boiler, which already vibrated. Happily this was needless.

Behemoth’s power was now irresistible. We could actually feel him bounding forward with the throbbing of the piston. The remains of the train followed him, jolting over the legs of the elephants which covered the ground, at the risk of being overset. If such an accident had happened, Steam House and its inhabitants would most certainly have come to an untimely end.

Mercifully this we were saved from; the edge of the lake was safely reached, into it dashed our brave Behemoth, and the train floated on the surface of its tranquil waters!

“Heaven be praised!” ejaculated the colonel.

Two or three elephants, blind with fury, rushed after us into the lake, attempting to pursue on its surface those whom they had vainly endeavored to annihilate on dry land. But Behemoth’s feet did their work well.

The train drew gradually from the shore, and a few well-directed shots soon freed us from the “marine monsters,” just as their trunks were getting closer than was pleasant to our back veranda.

“Well, captain,” remarked Banks, “what do you think of the gentleness of Indian elephants?”

“Pooh!” said Hood, “they aren’t worth being called wild beasts! Just suppose thirty tigers or so in the place of those hundred pachydermata, and I wager my commission that by this time not one of us would be alive to tell the tale!”

CHAPTER X

LAKE PUTURIA

LAKE PUTURIA, on which Steam House had found a temporary refuge, is situated twenty-five miles to the east of Dumoh. This town, the chief place in the English province to which it has given its name, is in a fair way of prosperity, and with its twelve hundred inhabitants reenforced by a small garrison, commands this dangerous portion of Bundelkund. Beyond its walls, however, especially toward the east, in the uncultivated region of the Vindhyas partly occupied by the lake, its influence can only slightly make itself felt.

But after all, what could happen to us worse than the adventure with the elephants from which we had come out safe and sound?

Our situation was still, however, somewhat critical, since the greater part of our stores had disappeared with “No. 2.” It was hopeless, even to think of patching up our ill-fated carriage. Turned over and crushed among the rocks, we knew that the mass of elephants must have passed over its remains, and that only shapeless debris could be left.

And yet, besides being the lodging of our attendants, that house contained not only the kitchen and pantry, but our store of provisions and ammunition. Of the latter we now had but a dozen cartridges; it was not probable, however, that we should wish to use firearms before our arrival at Jubbulpore. As to food, that was another question, and one more difficult to answer.

We had indeed nothing to eat of any description.

Even supposing that we reached the town, forty-three miles distant, by the next evening, we must resign ourselves to passing four-and-twenty hours without food.

There was no help for it!

Under these circumstances the most melancholy among us was naturally Monsieur Parazard. The loss of his pantry, the destruction of his apparatus, the scattering of his stores, had pierced him to the heart. He could not conceal his despair, and forgetful of the dangers through which we had been so miraculously preserved, regarded the disaster as an entirely personal misfortune. While we were all assembled in the saloon, discussing what was best to be done, Monsieur Parazard, with a most solemn face, appeared at the door, and begged to "make a communication of the utmost importance."

"Speak, Monsieur Parazard," replied Colonel Munro, signing to him to enter.

"Gentlemen," gravely said our dismal cook, "you cannot but know that all the stores contained in the second carriage of Steam House have been destroyed in the late catastrophe! Had a few provisions remained, I should have had some difficulty in preparing you even the most modest repast without a kitchen."

"We know it, Monsieur Parazard," answered the colonel. "It is to be regretted, but if we are compelled to fast, we must fast, and make the best of it."

"It is the more to be regretted indeed, gentlemen," resumed our cook, "when we are actually within sight of the herd of elephants which assailed us, of which more than one fell under your murderous fire — ”

“That’s a fine sentence, Monsieur Parazard,” interrupted Captain Hood. “With a few lessons you would soon learn to express yourself with as much elegance as our friend Mathias van Guitt.”

At this compliment Monsieur Parazard bowed, taking it all seriously, then with a sigh continued, —

“I say then, gentlemen, that a unique occasion for distinguishing myself in my business has offered itself. The flesh of the elephant, as may be supposed, is not all good, most of the parts being unquestionably hard and tough; but it appears that the Author of all Things has placed in the huge mass of flesh two choice morsels, worthy to be served at the table of the Viceroy of India. I mean the tongue of the animal, which is extraordinarily savory when it is prepared by a recipe which is exclusively my own, and also the feet of the pachyderm —

“Pachyderm — ? Very good, although proboscidian may be more elegant,” put in Hood, with an approving gesture.

“With the feet,” resumed Parazard, “may be made one of the best soups known in the culinary art, of which I am the representative in Steam House.”

“You make our mouths water, Monsieur Parazard,” answered Banks. “Unfortunately on one account, and fortunately on another, the elephants have not followed us into the lake, and I fear much that we must renounce, for some time at least, any idea of foot soup or a tongue ragout made from this savory but formidable animal.”

“Would it not be possible,” said the cook, “to return to land and procure —”

“Out of the question, Monsieur Parazard. However dainty and perfect your preparations would be, it would not do to run such a risk.”

“Well, gentlemen,” returned our cook, “pray accept my expression of the great regret I feel on the subject of this deplorable adventure.”

Your regrets are well expressed, Monsieur Parazard,” replied Colonel Munro, “and we give you credit for them. As to dinner and breakfast, don’t think about such a thing until we reach Jubbulpore.”

“I must then withdraw,” said Parazard, bowing without losing any of the gravity which was habitual to him.

We could have laughed heartily at our cook’s speeches and appearance had we not been so occupied with other matters.

In fact, another complication had arisen. Banks informed us that the thing most to be regretted was not the want of provisions, not the want of ammunition, but the lack of fuel. There was nothing wonderful in this, since for forty-eight hours it had not been possible to renew the supply of wood necessary for the feeding of the machine. The last of our store was thrown into the furnaces as we reached the lake. It would have been impossible to go on for another hour, so if we had not found a refuge then, the first carriage of Steam House would have shared the fate of the second.

“Now,” added Banks, “we have nothing more to burn, pressure is becoming lower, it has already fallen to two atmospheres, and there is no means of raisings it.”

“Is our situation really as serious as you seem to think, Banks?” asked the colonel.

“If we only wanted to get back to the shore from which we are now but a little distant, that would be practicable,” said Banks. “A quarter of an hour would do it. But to return to a spot where doubtless the elephants are still collected, would be highly imprudent. No, we must, on the contrary, cross this lake, and seek a landing place on its southern shore.”

“How wide may it be at this part?” asked Colonel Munro.

“Kalagani reckons it to be about seven or eight miles. Now, under present circumstances it would take several hours to cross, and as I say, in forty minutes the engine will cease working.”

“Well,” answered Sir Edward, “to begin with, we must pass the night quietly on the lake. We are safe here. Tomorrow we shall see what is to be done.”

This was decidedly the best thing to be done. We were all in great need of rest. At our last halting place in the middle of the circle of elephants, no one in Steam House had been able to sleep. But if that was a...” white night,” as we say in French, meaning sleepless night, this one was black, and much blacker than we liked.

In fact, toward seven o’clock, a slight mist began to rise over the surface of the lake. There had been a great deal of fog the preceding night in the higher regions of the atmosphere, but owing to the difference of locality and evaporation of the water, it was here low. After a hot day there was confusion between the higher and lower layers of the air, and the lake soon began to disappear in a fog, slight at first, but every moment increasing in density. This,

as Banks said, was a complication which we had to take into consideration.

As we had foreseen, about half-past seven, the panting of Behemoth grew fainter, the throbbing of the piston became weaker, his feet at last ceased to beat the water, and the mighty beast and our single house floated peacefully on the bosom of the lake. We no longer moved; there was no fuel, and no means of procuring any!

Under the circumstances, it was difficult to make out our situation exactly. During the short time the machine was working, we steered toward the southeastern shore, there to seek a landing place. Puturia being in form a long oval, it was possible that Steam House was not so very far from one or other of its banks.

It is needless to say that the trumpetings of the elephants, which we had heard for quite an hour after leaving the shore, had now died away in the distance.

While talking of the different eventualities which might occur in this new situation, Banks summoned Kalagani to share in our consultation. The native soon appeared, and was invited to give his opinion.

We were all assembled in the dining-room, which had a skylight but no side windows. The light from the lamps could not, therefore, be seen outside.

This was a wise precaution, it being just as well that the situation of Steam House should not be known by any prowlers who might happen to be on the shore.

In answering the questions put to him, Kalagani — at least, so it appeared to me — hesitated somewhat. We wished to know the position which the train now occupied, and that, I confess, was rather embarrassing to answer; perhaps a slight breeze from the northwest had had an effect upon Steam House, or perhaps a current was insensibly drifting us to the lower point of the lake.

“Look here, Kalagani,” said Banks, “do you know the exact extent of the Puturia?”

“Doubtless, sahib,” replied the man, “but in such a fog it is difficult — ”

“Can you make a rough guess at the distance which we now are from the nearest bank?”

“Yes,” answered the native, after some thought. “The distance cannot be more than a mile and a half.”

“To the east?” asked Banks.

“To the east.”

“So then, if we land there, we shall be nearer Jubbulpore than Dumoh?”

“Certainly.”

“At Jubbulpore then we must refit,” said Banks. “But now who knows when or how we can reach the shore? It may be a day or a couple of days before we can do so, and our provisions are exhausted!

“But,” said Kalagani, “could we not try, or at any rate one of us try, to land this very night?”

“How?”

“By swimming to shore.”

“A mile and a half in such a dense fog?” returned Banks. “A man would risk his life —

“That is no reason for not making the attempt,” replied Kalagani. I cannot tell why, but again it appeared to me that the man’s voice had not its accustomed frankness.

“Would you attempt this swim?” asked Colonel Munro, fixing his steady gaze on the countenance of the native.

“Yes, colonel, and I have every reason to believe I should succeed.”

“Well, my man,” resumed Banks, “in doing this you would render us a great service! Once on shore you will easily reach Jubbulpore, and from that place send us the help we need.”

“I am ready to start at once!” was Kalagani’s quiet response.

I expected Colonel Munro to thank our guide for having consented to perform such a perilous task; but after giving him another long and attentive look, he summoned Goinni. The servant appeared.

“Goilmi,” said his master, “are you not an excellent swimmer?”

“Yes, sahib.”

“A mile and a half on a night like this, through the calm waters of the lake, would not be too much for you?”

“Not one mile nor even two.”

“Well,” resumed the colonel, “here is Kalagani offering to swim across to the shore nearest to Jubbulpore. Now in the water, as well as on the land, in this part of Bundelkund, two bold and intelligent men being able to assist each other, have a better chance of succeeding. Will you accompany Kalagani?”

“Directly, sahib,” answered Gofimi.

“I do not need any one,” said Kalagani, “but if Colonel Munro insists, I willingly accept Goilmi as a companion.”

“Go then, my men,” said Banks, “and be as prudent as you are brave!”

This settled, Colonel Munro called Gofimi aside, and gave him a few brief directions. Five minutes after, the two natives, each with a parcel of clothes on his head, slipped over the side into the water. The fog being now very dense, a few strokes carried them out of sight.

I asked Colonel Munro why he had been so anxious to send a companion with Kalagani.

“My friends,” returned Sir Edward, “that man’s replies, although till now I have never suspected his fidelity, did not appear frank to me!”

“The same thing struck me,” said I.

“I cannot say I noticed anything of the kind,” observed the engineer.

“Listen, Banks,” resumed the colonel. “In offering to swim ashore, Kalagani had some ulterior motive.”

“What?”

“I do not know, but though he wished to land, it was not to bring us help from Jubbulpore.”

“Hullo!” exclaimed Hood.

Banks knit his brows as he looked at the colonel. Then” Munro,” he said, “till now that native has been most devoted to us all, and more particularly to you! And now you imagine that Kalagani would betray us! What possible reason can you have for thinking such a thing?”

“While Kalagani was speaking,” answered Sir Edward, “I noticed that his skin darkened, and when a copper-colored complexion becomes darker, it means that the man is lying! Scores of times, I have, by knowing this, been able to convict of falsehood both Hindoos and Bengalees, and have never been mistaken. I repeat, then, that Kalagani, notwithstanding all the presumptions in his favor, has not told the truth.”

This observation of the colonel’s, which I have often since seen verified, was quite correct. When they lie, the natives of India turn a shade darker, just as white people turn red.

This symptom had not escaped the colonel’s penetration, and he had therefore acted upon it.

“But what could Kalagani’s plans be,” questioned Banks, “and why should he betray us?”

“That remains to be seen,” answered Colonel Munro, “we shall know later, perhaps too late.”

“Too late, colonel!” cried the captain. “Why what do you expect? We aren’t going quite to destruction, I should hope!”

“At any rate, Munro,” said the engineer, “you did very right in sending Goinni as well. That fellow would serve us till his last breath. Active, intelligent. as he is, if he suspects any danger, he will know — ’

“So much the more,” observed the colonel, “that he has been warned beforehand, and mistrusts his companion.”

“Good,” said Banks. “Now we can wait for day. The mist will doubtless disperse as the sun rises, and then we shall better know where we are.”

The fog was dense, but nothing denoted the approach of bad weather. This was fortunate, for though our train could float, it was not built for a sea voyage!

Our attendants took up their abode for the night in the dining-room, we ourselves lying down on the sofas in the saloon, talking little, but listening to every sound from the outside.

About two in the morning, a perfect concert of wild beasts suddenly broke the stillness.

This showed the direction of the southwest shore, but it was evidently at some distance, from the sounds, and Banks guessed it to be a good mile from us. A band of wild animals had doubtless come to drink at the extreme point of the lake.

Very soon we became sure that, urged by a slight breeze, our train was drifting in a slow but steady manner toward the shore. In fact, by degrees the sounds not only came more distinctly to our ears, but we could already distinguish the deep roar of the tiger from the hoarse howl of the panther.

“By Jove! “Hood could not refrain from saying, “what a splendid opportunity for potting my fiftieth!’

“Another time for that, captain,” observed Banks. “When day breaks, I prefer to think that when we touch the shore that band of wild beasts will have left the place free for us!”

“Would it be at all dangerous,” I asked, “to light the electric lamps?”

“I do not think so,” replied Banks. “That part of the shore is probably only occupied by those animals who have come to drink. There can be no danger in trying to get a look at them.”

By Banks’s orders the brilliant light was thrown in a southwesterly direction. But powerless to pierce the thick mist, it only illuminated a short space before Steam House, and the shore remained totally invisible.

However, the sounds becoming more and more clear showed that the train had not ceased to drift. The wild beasts were evidently very numerous, though there was nothing astonishing in this, since Lake Puturia is the natural watering place for all the animals in that part of Bundelkund.

“I only hope Goiimi and Kalagani won’t fall into the clutches of those brutes,” observed Captain Hood.

“It is not tigers that I dread for Gofimi,” responded the colonel.

Colonel Munro’s suspicions had evidently increased, and for my part I began to share them. Yet the good offices of Kalagani since our arrival in the Himalayan regions, his unquestionably useful services, his devotion on both occasions that he had risked his life for Sir Edward and Captain Hood, all told in his favor. But when the mind once allows a doubt to gain an entrance, the value of deeds performed grow less, their character changes, we forget the past and dread the future.

And yet what motive could the man possibly have for betraying us? Had he any reason for personal hatred against the inhabitants of Steam House? Assuredly not. Why then should he lead them into an ambush? It was most inexplicable. All felt quite bewildered on the subject and longed impatiently for the denouement.

About four o’clock the roaring of the wild beasts abruptly ceased. What struck us as curious in this was that they did not grow gradually distant and drop off, one after another, as each took a last bumper and roared a farewell to his fellows. No, this was instantaneous. It was just as if some chance disturbed them in their carouse and caused their flight. Evidently they returned to their dens and lairs, not like beasts going quietly homeward, but like beasts running away.

Silence succeeded. The cause was not apparent to us now, but nevertheless it increased our anxiety.

As a precautionary measure, Banks ordered the lamps to be extinguished. If the animals had fled on the approach of a band of those highway rovers who frequent Bundelkund and the Vindhyas, it was most necessary carefully to conceal the situation of Steam House.

The stillness was not even broken by the ripple of the water, for the breeze had fallen. Whether or not the train was continuing to drift in a current, it was impossible to know, but with the day we hoped the fog would disperse.

I looked at my watch; it was five o’clock. Without the mist there should have been light enough to allow us to see some miles round. But the veil was not lifted; we were compelled to wait.

Colonel Munro, McNeil, and I in front; Fox, Kalouth, and Monsieur Parazard at the back; Banks and Storr in the howdah; and Captain Hood perched on the neck of the gigantic animal near the trunk, like a sailor on the topmast of a ship, all watched and waited for the first shout of “Land!”

Toward six o’clock a breeze sprang up which gradually freshened. The first rays of the sun pierced the fog; it cleared, and the horizon lay before us.

“Land!” shouted Captain Hood.

There to the southeast was the shore. It formed at the extremity of the lake a sort of narrow creek with a well-wooded background. The mist rose and left exposed to view the distant mountains. The train was now floating not more than two hundred yards from the other end of the creek, and it was still drifting on under the influence of the northwest breeze.

Nothing was to be seen on the shore. Not an animal nor a human being. It seemed a perfect desert. We could not even perceive a cottage or farm under the trees. A? landing might surely be effected here without danger.

The wind sent us slowly onward. We neared the shore. At last we touched! A better place for landing could not have been chosen, for here the bank was low, sandy, and shelving. But now it was impossible to move another inch. Without steam we could not advance a step on the road which the compass told us must be the way to Jubbulpore.

Without losing a moment, therefore, we all followed Hood, who was, of course, the first to leap on to the beach.

“Fuel, fuel!” cried Banks. “In an hour we shall be under pressure, and then forward!”

This was easy work. The ground all around was strewn with dead wood, fortunately dry enough to be used at once. We had only to fill the furnaces and load the tender.

All hands were soon hard at it. Kalouth alone remaining on the engine to receive and stow away what we collected. This was amply sufficient to take us to Jubbulpore, and at that place we could take in a supply of coal. As to food, the want of which speedily made itself felt, why, the hunters belonging to the expedition were not forbidden to shoot any game they might come across! Monsieur Parazard could borrow Kalouth’s fire, and we must satisfy our hunger as well as we could.

In an hour’s time the steam had reached a sufficient pressure, Behemoth began to move, ascended the slope, and set foot on the road.

“Now for Jubbulpore!” cried Banks.

But before Storr had time to give even a half turn to the regulator, furious shouts burst from the neighboring forest. A band of at least one hundred and fifty natives rushed out, and made directly at Steam House. In a moment the howdah, the carriage, both front and rear were invaded.

Before we knew where we were, we found ourselves seized, dragged fifty paces from our train, and held so firmly that it was impossible to free ourselves.

Judge of our wrath and fury when we were compelled to behold the scene of destruction and pillage which ensued. The natives, hatchet in hand, fell to the work of devastation and ruin. Of the interior furniture soon nothing was left! Then fire finished what the ax began, and in a few minutes all that could burn in our second carriage was in flames!

“The blackguards! the scoundrels!” yelled Captain Hood, struggling in the grasp of several natives.

All abuse was in vain, for the robbers could not even understand what was said. As to escaping from those who held us, it was not to be thought of.

The flames died down, leaving only the bare skeleton of our traveling house, which had journeyed half over the peninsula.

The natives next applied themselves to Behemoth, eager to destroy him also! But here they were impotent. Neither ax nor fire could make the smallest impression on the thick iron skin of the creature, nor on the engine which he bore within. In spite of all their efforts, he remained unhurt, to the triumph of Captain Hood, who uttered shouts of mingled joy and rage.

At this moment a man came forward. Evidently the chief of the band. The men immediately drew up in order before him. Another man accompanied him. All was explained, for in him we recognized our guide, Kalagani.

Of Goiimi there was not a trace. The faithful servant had disappeared, and the traitor only remained. No doubt the devotion of the brave man had cost him his life, and we should never see him again!

Kalagani advanced straight to Colonel Munro, and quite coolly, without the faintest sign of shame, pointed him out. “This one!” said he.

Instantly Colonel Munro was seized, and dragged away soon disappearing in the midst of the band, who at once set off in a southerly direction, without allowing us to give him one grasp of the hand, or exchange a last farewell!

Hood, Banks, and the rest of us struggled in vain to free ourselves, and fly to our friend’s assistance. Fifty rough hands threw us to the ground. Another movement and we would have been strangled.

“Don’t resist! It’s useless!” said Banks.

The engineer was right. We could do absolutely nothing to save the colonel. It was better to reserve all our energies for another attempt.

When a quarter of an hour had elapsed, the natives who detained us suddenly let go their hold, and darted off in the track of the first band. To follow them would have caused a catastrophe of no advantage to Sir Edward, and yet we would have done anything to be with him once more.

“Not another step,” said Banks.

We obeyed.

It was very evident that Colonel Munro, and he alone, was the object of this attack of the natives led by Kalagani.

What were the intentions of the traitor? He surely was not acting on his own account. Who then could he be obeying? The name of Nana Sahib came with ominous meaning into my mind!

Here ends the manuscript written by Maucler. The young Frenchman did not witness the events which occurred after this, and hastened the denouement of the drama, but on their becoming known later, they were put together in a narrative form, thus completing the account of this journey across Northern India.

CHAPTER XI

FACE TO FACE

THE murderous “Thugs,” from whom India appears now to be delivered, have left worthy successors behind them.

These are the “Dacoits,” who are really only Thugs, with a difference. These assassins have not the same object in view, and they carry it out in another way, but the result is identical: it is premeditated murder — assassination.

The Thugs devoted their victims to the ferocious Kali, goddess of Death, and effected murder by strangulation. The Dacoits practise poisoining for the purpose of robbery. They are more commonplace criminals than the fanatical Thugs, but quite as formidable.

Certain territories of the peninsula are infested with bands of Dacoits, recruited ever and anon by such evildoers as manage to slip through the fingers of Anglo-Indian justice. Day and night they haunt the highways of the wilder and more uncultivated regions, the Bundelkund, in particular, affording them favorable localities for their deeds of violence and pillage. At times the bandits unite in numbers to attack a lonely and defenceless village.

The wretched population has no safety but in flight; torture awaits all who remain in the hands of the Dacoits.

Their cruelties, according to M. Louis Rousselet, surpass all that imagination can conceive.

Colonel Munro had fallen into the power of a band of Dacoits, conducted by Kalagani. Rudely torn from his companions, he found himself hurried along the road to Jubbulpore, before he had time to collect his thoughts.

The conduct of Kalagani, from the day he joined our party, had been that of a traitor. He was the emissary of Nana Sahib: the instrument chosen by him to procure his revenge.

It will be recollected that on the 24th of May, at Bhopal, during the festivals of the Moharum, which the Nabob had audaciously attended, he had become aware of Sir Edward Munro’s departure on a journey to the northern provinces of India. Kalagani, one of the followers most absolutely devoted to his cause and to his person, had then instantly quitted Bhopal. His orders were to throw himself on the track of the colonel; to find and to follow him, and at all hazards to obtain confidential employment about the person of the enemy of Nana Sahib.

Without an hour’s delay, Kalagani had pushed northward. He overtook the Steam House train at Cawnpore, and from that moment never lost sight of it, but failed to find opportunity to do more. Therefore, when Colonel Munro and his party were installed in the sanitarium on the Himalayas, he determined to enter the service of Mathias van Guitt.

Kalagani foresaw that almost daily intercourse would infallibly take place between the kraal and the sanitarium. He was right, and immediately succeeded, not only in attracting the notice of Colonel Munro, but in securing a claim upon his gratitude.

The most difficult part of his mission was thus accomplished. We know the sequel. The Indian often came to Steam House; he became acquainted with our future plans, he heard what route Banks proposed to take when the journey was resumed. Thenceforth one single idea and design possessed him, that of securing the office of guide to the expedition.

For the attainment of his purpose, Kalagani left no stone unturned. He risked his own life, and that of others, under what circumstances the reader will not have forgotten, but they demand explanation.

He wished to disarm suspicion by accompanying the expedition at first starting without leaving the service of Van Guitt, hoping that something might afterward lead to the very post being offered to him which it was his sole object to obtain.

But the union of the two parties could not be effected, while the Dutchman had his full complement of draught oxen, or rather buffaloes. Deprived of them: he would be obliged to seek the aid of Behemoth. That the buffaloes might leave the inclosure and wander away during the night.

Kalagani, at the risk of such disaster as actually occurred, withdrew the bolts, and left the gate open. Tigers, panthers, and what not, rushed into the kraal, the buffaloes were killed or dispersed, several natives lost their lives — what matter? the plan had succeeded, and Mathias van Guitt was forced to entreat Colonel Munro to help his menagerie along the road to Bombay.

He did not do this without an attempt to make up his teams, but this was naturally a matter of great difficulty in the desert regions of the Himalaya, and the business being intrusted to Kalagani, had not the slightest chance of success. The result was, that Mathias van Guitt, with his whole menagerie and personal goods, traveled in tow of Behemoth to Etawah Station. There, availing himself of the railway, Kalagani and the other shikarries became of no further use to him, and were consequently dismissed.

Banks, observing the embarrassment evinced by Kalagani, and well aware of his intelligence, and perfect acquaintance with this part of India, concluded that he would render important service as a guide, offered him the situation. It was accepted, and from that moment Kalagani held the fate of the expedition in his hands.

Who could suspect treason in a man always ready to venture his life?

Once only was Kalagani on the point of betraying himself. It was when Banks spoke of the death of Nana Sahib. An incredulous gesture escaped him; he shook his head like one who knows better than to believe what is stated. To us, however, it seemed only natural that he, in common with his race, should regard that fiendish man with superstitious veneration, and believe he bore a charmed life.

Kalagani may have had our news confirmed, when — certainly not by accident — he met an old comrade in the caravan of the Brinjarees. Whatever he may then have heard, he in no way changed his tactics; but led us on through the defiles of the Vindhyas, and finally, after the various adventures which have been related, to the banks of Lake Puturia, amid whose waters we were forced to take refuge.

Then, under pretext that he would seek help at Jubbulpore, the traitor proposed to leave us. Colonel Munro ordered Goilmi to accompany him. The two men plunged into the lake, and within the hour reached its southwestern bank.

They proceeded together through the darkness of the night, one full of suspicion, the other ignorant that he was suspected. Gocni, therefore, as faithful to his colonel as McNeil could be, had the advantage.

During three hours they journeyed side by side along the road which leads across the southern slopes of the Vindhyas to the station of Jubbulpore. The fog became less dense, and Gotimi closely surveyed his companion. A strong knife hung at his girdle. Gocni, rapid in all he did, was prepared to spring on his campanion and disarm him on the slightest suspicious movement.

Unfortunately the faithful fellow had no time to act as he intended. The night was pitchy dark, even a moving figure could not be discerned a few paces distant. Thus it happened that at a turning in the path, a voice suddenly called, “Kalagani!”

“Here am I, Nassim,” replied the Hindoo.

At the same instant a strange, shrill cry sounded to the left of the way. This sound was the kisri of the fierce tribes of the Gondwana, well known to Goihni. He was taken by surprise and attempted nothing. The cry was a summons to a whole band, and even had he struck down Kalagani, of what use would that have been? Escape! — ’ he must escape — he must fly at once, and strive to rejoin his friends so as to warn them of their danger. Once more by the lake, he would endeavor to swim back to them, and prevent any attempt to reach the shore.

Without an instant’s hesitation he moved aside, and, while Kalagani joined Nassim, who had spoken, sprang into the jungle and disappeared.

Presently Kalagani turned back with his accomplice, intending to rid himself of the companion thrust upon him by Colonel Munro — but Gofimi was gone!

Nassim was the chief of a band of Dacoits devoted to the cause of Nana Sahib. When he heard of Goilmi and that he had fled, he dispersed his men on all sides in pursuit. It was important to secure at any price so brave an adherent of Sir Edward Munro. But search was useless. Gofimi made good his escape!

What, after all, had these Dacoits to fear from him? He was thrown on his own resources in a wild and unknown country, already three hours' march from Lake Puturia; make what speed he might, he could not reach it before they did!

Kalagani took his measures. He conferred for a few moments with the chief of the Dacoits, who appeared to await his orders, and the whole band was speedily in hasty march toward the lake.

Now, by what means had this troop been summoned from the gorges of the Vindhyas? How were they made aware of the approach of Colonel Munro to the neighborhood of Puturia? By Nassim himself, who was none other than the Indian who followed the caravan of Brinjarees!

In fact, everything that happened was the result of a well-laid plan, in which Colonel Munro and his companions merely acted the parts prepared for them. And thus, at the moment when the train touched the southern border of the lake, the Dacoits were ready to attack it, under command of Nassim and Kalagani.

It was their object to seize Colonel Munro alone. His companions, abandoned to their fate in this wild region, their last house destroyed, were powerless. He only therefore was made prisoner, and hurried away, so that by seven o'clock in the morning Lake Puturia lay six miles behind them.

Sir Edward at once concluded that his enemies, having secured him in this desolate place, would never let him leave the Vindhya region alive. Yet the brave man maintained his calm and dignified aspect. He walked with the utmost coolness in the midst of his savage captors, ready for anything that might occur, and by no sign or look showing that he perceived Kalagani. Flight was, of course, impossible, for although unbound, he was so closely surrounded, that no gap in the crowd was available. Besides, instant recapture must have ensued.

All the circumstances of the case passed in review before the colonel’s mind. Was it credible that this seizure was brought about by Nana Sahib? Impossible! Was not that terrible man dead? Yet it might be that to some devoted follower — perhaps to Balao Rao — he had bequeathed the fulfillment of his long-cherished revenge. Thus only could Sir Edward account for his misfortune.

Then he thought of poor Goumi. He was not apparently a prisoner of these Dacoits. Could he have escaped from them? It was possible. Had he not rather been slain at once? That was much more likely. But supposing him to be safe and at liberty, might his assistance be reckoned upon? It was hard to say.

If he had pressed forward to demand help at Jubbulpore, he would arrive too late.

If, on the other hand, he had gone to rejoin Banks and the rest at the lake, what could be done, destitute as they were of all stores and supplies? They might endeavor to reach Jubbulpore, but long ere they could do so, the unhappy captive would be dragged into the inaccessible retreats of the robbers among the mountains!

The case appeared hopeless, as Colonel Munro carefully and deliberately examined its bearings. He would not despair, neither would he indulge in groundless visions of deliverance.

The Dacoits marched with extreme rapidity. Nassim and Kalagani seemed anxious to reach, before sunset, an appointed rendezvous, where their prisoner’s fate would probably be decided. Colonel Munro was equally anxious to advance and end his suspense.

Once only, for half an hour at midday, Kalagani called a halt. The Dacoits carried provisions, which were eaten by the margin of a little brook. A morsel of bread and dried meat was given to the colonel, who ate it readily, not wishing to refuse what was necessary to sustain his powers at this dreadful crisis.

By this time they had traveled nearly sixteen miles. When Kalagani gave orders to resume the march, they still proceeded in the direction of Jubbulpore.

It was not until five o’clock in the afternoon that the Dacoits abandoned the highway, and turned off to the left. Then indeed did Sir Edward Munro feel that he was beyond human help. God alone could save him now.

In a short time Kalagani and his followers were passing through a narrow defile at the extreme limit of the valley of the Nerbudda, and approaching the wildest and most savage part of Bundelkund.

The place is two hundred and sixteen miles from the Pal of Tandit, at the east end of the Sautpoora Mountains, which may be called the western point of the Vindhyas, on one of the spurs of which stood the ancient fortress of

Ripore, now long abandoned, because when the defiles were occupied by the enemy, even in small numbers, it was impossible to obtain supplies.

This fort occupied a commanding position, which formed a kind of natural redan, five hundred feet in height, and overhanging a wide gorge amid adjacent precipices. The only access to it was by a narrow winding path, cut in the solid rock, and extremely difficult even for foot soldiers.

Dismantled walls, ruined bastions, crowned the summit; a stone parapet guarded the esplanade from the abyss beneath, and part remained of the building which had served as barracks for the little garrison of Ripore.

One alone was left of all the guns which had formerly defended the fort. This was an enormous cannon, pointed from the front of the esplanade. Too heavy for removal, too much impaired to be of any value, it had been left there a prey to devouring rust. This piece of artillery, in size and length, was a match for the famous bronze cannon of Bhilsa, which was cast in the time of Jehanghir, and is an enormous gun, six yards in length, with a caliber of forty-four. It might also bear comparison with the equally celebrated cannon of Bidjapoor, whose detonation, according to the natives, was enough to overthrow every building in the city.

Such was the hill-fort of Ripore, to which Kalagani led his prisoner.

It was late when they reached it, after a fatiguing march of more than five-and-twenty miles. In whose presence was Colonel Munro about to find himself? He was soon to know.

At the farther end of the esplanade, a group of natives could be seen within the ruined barracks. They left it, and advanced, while along the opposite parapet the Dacoits ranged themselves in a half circle, of which Colonel Munro occupied the center.

He stood, with folded arms, awaiting his fate. Kalagani, quitting his place in the ranks, advanced a few paces to meet the party.

A native, simply dressed, walked in front. Before him Kalagani bent respectfully, and kissed his extended hand, receiving a sign of approbation for good service rendered.

His leader then approached the prisoner; deliberately, but with flaming eyes, and in every feature showing symptoms of rage — intense, although restrained.

He was like a wild beast drawing near his prey. Colonel Munro let him come; he drew not back an inch, but regarded the man as fixedly as he was himself regarded. When but five paces apart, —

"'Tis only Balao Rao," said the colonel, in a tone of profound contempt.

"Look again!" returned the Hindoo.

"Nana Sahib!" cried Colonel Munro; and now indeed he started back. "Nana Sahib alive!"

It was indeed the nabob himself, the notorious leader of the sepoy revolt, the deadly enemy of Sir Edward Munro.

Who then fell at the Pal of Tandit?

His brother, Balao Rao.

The extraordinary resemblance of these two men, both marked with smallpox, both having lost the same finger of the same hand, had deceived the soldiers of Lucknow and Cawnpore; they had not hesitated to express absolute certainty that that man was the nabob, who in fact was his brother. The mistake was inevitable, and thus Government was informed of the death of Nana Sahib, while he yet lived, and Balao Rao was no more.

He failed not to take advantage of this new aspect of affairs, by which almost absolute security was afforded him. No such indefatigable search would be made for his brother as for himself, because neither had he taken a leading part in the Cawnpore massacres, nor had he the pernicious influence possessed by the Nana over his countrymen.

Nana Sahib therefore resolved to maintain the idea of his death, and renounce for the present his insurrectionary schemes, devoting himself wholly to private revenge.

Never had circumstances in this respect so favored him. Colonel Munro had left Calcutta on a long journey, by which he meant to reach Bombay.

Believing it possible to decoy him across the Bundelkund into the lonely region of the Vindhyas, Nana Sahib had previously put that mission into the hands of the crafty Kalagani.

After the affair at the Pal of Tandit, he himself of course quitted what was no longer a safe retreat, and plunging into the Nerbudda valleys, concealed himself among the deep gorges of the Vindhyas.

There, with a band of followers devoted to his person, he established himself in the deserted fort of Ripore, where he was soon reenforced by a party of Dacoits, worthy allies of such a chief, and month after month he waited.

Four months he waited, until, having done his part, Kalagani should inform him of the near approach of his enemy.

One fear possessed Nana Sahib. It was lest news of his death should reach the ears of Kalagani; for if he had reason to believe it, would he not abandon his treacherous design?

In order to prevent any such mistake, Nassim had been dispatched to meet the Steam House train on the road from Scind, communicate with Kalagani, and acquaint him with the exact state of the case.

Immediately after doing so in the crowded caravan of the Brinjarees, Nassim hastened back to the Fort of Ripore, and gave him the latest intelligence of the progress of his victim. Kalagani was bringing him by short journeys toward the Vindhyas, and he was to be taken prisoner on the banks of Lake Puturia.

All had succeeded to a wish. This time revenge was certain.

And now! Now Colonel Munro stood before Nana Sahib, disarmed, alone, at his mercy.

After the first few words, these two men continued to gaze in silence one upon another. On a sudden the image of Lady Munro rose so vividly before his eyes, that the blood rushed from her husband’s heart to his head. He sprang at the murderer of the prisoners of Cawnpore! Nana Sahib merely stepped back two paces, while several men flung themselves upon the colonel, whom they overpowered, though not without difficulty.

Sir Edward Munro resumed his self-possession, which, no doubt, the nabob perceived, for by a sign he made his men retire.

Once more the foes stood face to face.

At length the Nana spoke.

“Munro,” he said, “by your people a hundred and twenty prisoners were blown from the cannon’s mouth at Peshawur; since then more than twelve hundred sepoys have perished by that frightful death. Your people ruthlessly massacred the fugitives of Lahore; after the siege of Delhi they slaughtered three princes and twenty-nine members of the royal family; at Lucknow they slew six thousand of our race, and three thousand after the campaign of the Punjaub. In all, by cannon, musketry, by the gallows and the sword, a hundred and twenty thousand sepoys and two hundred thousand natives have paid with their lives for the rising in defence of national independence.”

“Death! death!” cried the Dacoits and all the followers of Nana Sahib.

He silenced them by a gesture, and waited for Colonel Munro to speak. The colonel gave no answer.

“As for thee, Munro,” resumed the nabob, “my faithful friend the Ranee of Jansi was slain by thy hand. She is not yet avenged.” Still no reply.

“Four months ago,” said Nana Sahib, “my brother Balao Rao fell under English balls aimed at me, and my brother is not yet avenged.”

“Death! death!”

This time these words were uttered more furiously, and the whole band made a movement as though to fall upon the prisoner.

“Silence!” exclaimed the Nana. “Await the hour of justice!”

All drew back.

“Munro,” once more continued the nabob, “an ancestor of yours, one Hector Munro, first invented the punishment, of which fearful use was made during the war of 1857. He gave the first order to tie the living bodies of our people, our parents, our brothers to the cannon’s mouth — ”

These words excited a fresh outburst of rage among his followers; once more he calmed them, and said, —

“Munro, as they perished so shalt thou perish! Behold this gun!” and turning round, he pointed to the enormous cannon which occupied the center of the esplanade.

“It is already loaded. You are about to be bound to its mouth; and to-morrow morning, when the sun rises, that cannon’s roar shall announce throughout the depths of the Vindhyas that the vengeance of Nana Sahib is at last complete!”

Colonel Munro fixed his eyes on the nabob with a composure which proved that death, even such a death, had no terrors for him.

“It is well,” he said. “You do as I should have done had you fallen into my hands.” And walking up to the gun, he placed himself before it; his hands were tied behind his back, and by strong cords he was bound across its deadly mouth.

There, for more than an hour, he was subjected to the base insults of all these savage men.

The brave colonel remained unmoved before their outrages, as before death itself.

Night fell. Nana Sahib, Kalagani, and Nassim withdrew into the old barracks. Their men, at length weary of tormenting the captive, followed their leaders.

Sir Edward Munro was alone in the presence of Death, and of his God.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE CANNON'S MOUTH

THE silence was not long unbroken.

An ample supply of provisions and abundance of arrack quickly excited the Dacoits, who ate and drank immoderately, to noisy and vociferous clamor.

By degrees, however, the uproar subsided. Sleep overtook the ruffians, who were wearied by days spent on the watch, before capturing their prisoner.

Was it possible he would be left thus alone until the hour of execution? Even though secured by triple cords round breast and arms, incapable of the least movement, would not Nana Sahib place a guard over his victim?

While such thoughts passed through the colonel's mind a Dacoit left the barracks, and came across the esplanade.

This man was appointed to keep watch over the prisoner throughout the night.

He approached the gun, and after ascertaining that Colonel Munro's position remained unaltered, he tried the cords with no gentle hand, muttering," Ten pounds of gunpowder! The old gun has not spoken for a long time. To-morrow she will say something worth hearing."

This remark brought a haughty smile to the lips of the gallant colonel. The most fearful death had no terrors for him.

The native then went round the cannon caressing it with his hand, and resting his finger for an instant on the touch-hole. There he stood, leaning on the breach of the gun, apparently losing all recollection of the prisoner, who remained like a culprit beneath the gibbet, waiting till the fatal bolt be withdrawn.

Somewhat affected by the powerful spirit he had been drinking, and utterly indifferent to the awful position of the unhappy prisoner, the Hindoo indistinctly hummed the air of an old Hindostanee song, breaking off and resuming the tune as a man does when, under the influence of liquor, his thoughts gradually escape control.

Presently he stood erect. Again passing his hand all over the gun, he came round it and stopped in front of the colonel, gazing stupidly as he muttered incoherent words. He touched the cords and seemed about to draw them tighter, then nodding his head as if reassured, sauntered up to the parapet about a dozen paces off.

For ten minutes he remained there, resting his arms on the top, sometimes glancing round, and then again gazing far down into the abyss at the foot of the fortress.

It was plain he was making a last effort against the drowsiness which threatened to overcome him. But at last he yielded, let himself drop to the ground and there lay stretched, the shadow of the parapet completely hiding him.

The night was intensely dark. Heavy clouds hung low and motionless. The atmosphere was still and oppressive.

No sound from the valley reached this height, perfect silence reigned around.

For the honor of brave Colonel Munro we must describe how he spent this terrible night. Not for a moment did he allow his thoughts to dwell on that last moment of his life, now fast approaching when with rude force his body would be blown to pieces and the atoms scattered far and wide. After all it would be instantaneous, and such a death had no terrors for a nature on which no moral or physical danger ever had effect. A few hours were still his, they belonged to this life which for the greater part had been spent so happily. His whole existence passed before him with wonderful exactitude. The image of Lady Munro arose. Once more he saw, he heard that dear one whom still he mourned as in the first days of his bereavement, no longer with tears but with an ever-aching heart! In his thoughts he returned to the beginning of his acquaintance with her, then a fair young girl living in the doomed town of Cawnpore, in the house where first he admired, knew, and loved her! He lived over again those few years of happiness, suddenly terminated by that most frightful catastrophe. He could recall every word, look, glance of hers, with such distinctness that the reality itself could hardly have been more real! Midnight passed without his being aware of it. The present was forgotten by him. Nothing could disturb him in his blissful recollections of his adored wife. In three hours he had gone over every day of the three years they had spent together. Yes! he was far away in imagination from the plateau and fortress of Ripore, far away from the mouth of that cannon, which the first rays of the sun were to fire!

But now came that horrible siege of Cawnpore, the imprisonment of Lady Munro and her mother in the BibiGhar, the frightful massacre, and lastly the well, the tomb of two hundred victims on which four months ago he had wept for the last time.

And now that demon, Nana Sahib, was here, only a few yards from him, behind the walls of the ruined barrack. The leader of the massacres, the murderer of Lady Munro and of so many other unhappy beings! It was into this assassin’s hands he had fallen, he who had hoped to do justice on the assassin who had hitherto escaped.

These thoughts roused Sir Edward. With an impulse of blind anger he made one desperate effort to free himself. The cords stretched, but the tightened knots cut into his flesh. He uttered a cry, not of pain, but of impotent rage. At the sound the native raised his head. His senses returned, he remembered that he was guarding the prisoner.

He got up and staggered to the colonel, laid his hand on his shoulder to make sure his prisoner was still there, and in a drowsy tone muttered,-”To-morrow, at sunrise — Boom!” Then he returned to the parapet as if for support, but no sooner did he touch it than he again lay down and was soon sound asleep.

After that one vain effort, calm fell upon Colonel Munro. The course of his thoughts was changed, though not directed to the fate which awaited him. By a natural association of ideas his mind reverted to his friends, his companions. He wondered whether they also had fallen into the hands of the Dacoits who swarm all over the Vindhyas, whether a fate similar to his own might not be reserved for them: the very idea sent a pang through his heart. But then he told himself that such a thing could not be. If the nabob had wished their death, would he not have united them together in the same punishment, to double his agony by the sight of his friends? No! it was on him, and on him alone — this he strove to believe — that Nana Sahib wished to wreak his hatred!

Then if Banks, Captain Hood, and Maucler were free what were they doing? Had they taken the road to Jubbulpore, mounted on Behemoth? The Dacoits had not been able to destroy him, and he could carry them quickly.

Once there, they could soon get help. But what would be the use of it then? How could they find out where the colonel was? No one knew of the fortress of Ripore, the retreat of Nana Sahib. And besides, why should the name of the nabob come into their minds? Did they not believe that Nana Sahib was dead, that he fell in the attack on the Pal of Tandit? No, they could do nothing for the prisoner!

Neither from Gofimi could help be expected. Kalagani had had every reason for getting rid of this faithful servant; and since Golimi was not there, it was because his death had preceded that of his master!

It was useless to count on even one chance of deliverance.. Colonel Munro was not the sort of man who would delude himself with vain hopes. He saw his position in its true light, and he returned to his thoughts of the past, and all its happy days and hours.

How long a time was spent thus he would have found it difficult to determine. The night was still dark. No faint streak of light as yet appeared on the mountain peaks to herald the approach of dawn.

It must have been about four in the morning, when the attention of Colonel Munro was arrested by a most singular phenomenon. While living that past inner existence, he had no eyes for anything near him; scenes of other days were before him.

Exterior objects, indistinctly seen in the gloom, had no attraction for him, when suddenly his eyes became conscious of something which caused the vision called up by his imagination totally to vanish. In fact, the colonel was no longer alone on the esplanade of Ripore. A wavering light had all at once appeared toward the end of the path, near the postern of the fortress. It went to and fro, now dim, now bright, one moment almost extinguished, the next resuming its brilliancy, as if held in an insecure hand.

In the prisoner’s position, every incident had its importance. He watched the light intently. Observing that a smoky vapor rose from it, he concluded it was not inclosed in a lantern.

“One of my companions,” thought the colonel. “Gani, perhaps! But no! He would not be there with a light to betray his presence. Who can it be?”

The flame slowly advanced. It glided along the wall of the old barrack, so close, indeed, that Sir Edward feared it would be perceived by the natives sleeping within. -

No notice was taken. The light passed unobserved. Every now and then, when the hand that bore it waved it wildly aloft, it blazed up afresh, and burned more brightly. By the time it reached the parapet, and moved along the crest, like St. Elmo’s Fire in a stormy night, the colonel had begun to distinguish a phantom — no distinct outline, but a vague shadow flitting onward. The being, whoever it was, was clothed in a long garment, covering both arms and head.

The prisoner did not move. He scarcely dared to breathe. He feared to terrify this apparition, or see the flame disappear in the darkness. He kept as motionless as the weighty piece of metal which held him, as it were, in its enormous jaws.

In the meantime the phantom continued to glide along the parapet. Suppose it stumbled over the body of the sleeping Hindoo! No, that was not likely; for the man lay to the left of the cannon, while the apparition advanced from the right, stopping sometimes, but ever gradually drawing nearer.

It at last came so close that Colonel Munro could see it distinctly. What he saw was a being of medium height, entirely covered by a long mantle. One hand alone was visible, bearing a lighted torch.

“It is some madman,” thought the colonel, “who is so accustomed to visit the Dacoits’ encampment, that they take no notice of him! Why hasn’t he a dagger in his hand instead of a torch? Perhaps I should be able — ”

It was not a madman, and yet Sir Edward had nearly guessed aright.

This was the madwoman of the Nerbudda valley, the unconscious creature who for the last four months had strayed about the Vindhyas, always respected and hospitably received by the superstitious Ghoonds. Neither Nana Sahib nor any of his companions knew of the part “Roving Flame “had taken in the attack on the Pal of Tandit. Many a time had they met her in this mountainous district of Bundelkund, but her presence had never caused them any anxiety. Often had her incessant wanderings led her to the fortress of Ripore, and no one ever dreamed of driving her away. It was only by chance that her nocturnal peregrinations had brought her there that night.

Colonel Munro knew nothing about this madwoman. He had never heard of Roving Flame; and yet as this unknown being approached, and was about to touch and perhaps speak to him, his heart beat with unaccountable violence.

Little by little the madwoman drew near the cannon. Her torch burned dimly; she did not appear to see the prisoner, although she was face to face with him, and her eyes were visible through openings like holes in the hood of a “penitent.”

Sir Edward did not stir. Neither by word nor by gesture did he seek to attract the attention of this strange being.

At last she turned and flitted round the huge gun, the light she carried casting little wandering shadows over its surface.

Did the poor, bewildered brain know the use of this gun, standing there like a monster; that a man was bound to its mouth, and that, at the first morning beam of light, it would vomit forth a fearful burst of thunder and lightning?

Far from it. Roving Flame was there as she might be anywhere, quite unconscious. She wandered about to-night as she had done many a time before on the esplanade. Then she would probably leave the spot, glide down the winding path to the valley, and thence stray wherever her fancy took her.

As Colonel Munro could freely turn his head, he followed all her movements. He saw her pass round the gun and direct her steps in the direction of the postern.

Suddenly Roving Flame stopped only a few paces from the sleeping native, and turned. Some invisible power seemed to draw her forward, some unaccountable instinct brought her back to the colonel, and again she stood motionless before him.

Sir Edward’s heart beat vehemently, as though it would burst from his bosom.

Roving Flame moved yet nearer. She raised her torch to a level with the prisoner’s face, as though the better to see him. Nothing of her own face was visible except her eyes, and they were brilliant with a feverish fire.

Colonel Munro gazed intently, as if fascinated.

The left hand of this strange being gradually drew back the folds of its garment until her face was exposed to view, and at the same time she shook the torch until it blazed afresh, and threw a bright light around.

A half-stifled cry broke from the prisoner, —

“Laura! Laura!”

He thought he must be going mad himself.

He closed his eyes for a moment. Then again he looked at her. It was Lady Munro! It was his wife who stood before him!

“Laura! — you! — is it you?” he stammered.

Lady Munro answered not a word. She did not recognize him. She did not even appear to hear him.

“Laura! Mad! — yes, mad! but living!”

Sir Edward could not have been deceived by a mere resemblance. The image of his wife was too deeply graven on his heart. Sadly changed, but still beautiful, was Lady Munro, and even after nine years of a separation which her husband had deemed eternal, he knew her to be his wife.

This poor lady, after doing all in her power to defend her mother, slain before her eyes, had herself fallen wounded, but not mortally; she was one of the last thrown into the well of Cawnpore on the heap of victims already filling it. When night fell, the instinct of self-preservation caused her to struggle to the margin of the well — instinct alone, for reason had fled at the horror of these awful scenes. After all she had suffered from the commencement of the siege, in the prison of the Bibi-Ghar, and at the massacre, finally seeing her mother slain had driven away her senses. She was mad, quite mad, but living, just as Munro had said. Crazed, she had dragged herself out of the well, and had wandered away and left the town, as did Nana Sahib and his followers after the bloody execution. Mad, she had escaped in the darkness through the country; avoiding town and inhabited districts, received by the poor ryots, and respected by them as a being deprived of reason, the poor creature had roamed onward until she reached the Sautpoora Mountains, and then the Vindhyas. Dead to every one for nine years, crazed by the horrors she had witnessed, she wandered incessantly, unable ever to rest!

And this was she!

Colonel Munro called again. No answer.

Oh, what would he not have given for power to fold her in his arms, carry her, fly with her, and commence a new life at her side! With the care and the great love he would lavish on her, reason could surely be won back! But what vain fancies were these? Was he not powerless, bound to this mass of metal, his limbs cut and numb with the tightly drawn cords, utterly unable to stir, in spite of all his wild longing to tear her away from that accursed spot!

What torture, what agony was that! Far beyond even what Nana Sahib’s cruel imagination could have conceived. Ah, if that demon had been there, if he had known that Lady Munro was in his power, what horrible joy he would have felt. With what refinement of cruelty he could have increased the sufferings of his prisoner.

“Laura! Laura!” repeated Sir Edward, raising his voice even at the risk of arousing his guard, sleeping but a few steps distant, or the Dacoits in the old barrack, or Nana Sahib himself.

Neither comprehending him nor seeing who he was, Lady Munro kept her wild eyes fixed on the colonel’s face. She understood nothing of the frightful torture inflicted on him, at thus finding his wife again, only when he himself had but an hour to live. She shook her head slightly, as though she had no wish to reply.

A few minutes passed like this; then her hand sunk down, her mantle fell again over her face, and she drew back a step or two. She was leaving him!

“Laura!” cried once more the agonized husband, as though he were bidding her a last farewell.

But no, it was evidently not yet her intention to leave the esplanade. The situation, already so dreadful, was now to be aggravated in a terrible degree.

Lady Munro stopped. The cannon had attracted her attention. Perhaps it awoke in her darkened mind some shadowy recollection of the siege of Cawnpore. At any rate, she slowly returned. The hand which held the torch cast the light over every part of the gun. The smallest spark falling on the touch-hole would take instant effect!

Must he then die by that hand, the one in all the world most dear to him?

The thought was too awful to be endured. Far better were it to perish before the eyes of the Nana and his men.

He must shout and arouse his executioners! Suddenly from the interior of the cannon he felt a hand grasp his. Yes, it was true; a friendly hand was busy at the cords. Then he became aware that a sharp blade was carefully cutting between the knots and his wrists. By some miracle a liberator was near him, in the very heart of the instrument of death!

One by one the cords were severed.

In a second it was done, he took a step forward! He was free!

All his self-command was required to restrain himself. The least sound would be certain ruin.

From the mouth of the piece issued a hand. Munro grasped it; with his assistance a man struggled forth, and fell at his feet.

It was Goilmi!

After his escape from Kalagani, this faithful servant had followed the road to Jubbulpore, instead of returning to the lake toward which Nassim’s band was proceeding. On reaching the path to Ripore, he had been obliged to conceal himself a second time on meeting a party of natives. From his hiding-place he overheard them speaking of Colonel Munro, who was to be brought by the Dacoits, headed by Kalagani, to the fortress, where Nana Sahib had determined his death should take place.

Unhesitatingly, Goiimi crept cautiously up the winding path, and reached the then deserted esplanade. There the heroic idea occurred to him that he would creep into the huge gun, hoping to save his master if it were possible, and if not, to die with him!

“Day is breaking!” whispered Goilmi. “We must fly.”

“And Lady Munro?” murmured the colonel, pointing to the motionless figure, now standing with her hand resting on the breech of the gun.

“In our arms, master!” answered Goilmi, asking no explanation.

It was too late!

As the colonel and Goilmi approached to seize her, the poor lady to escape them leaned across the gun. A spark fell from her torch, and a terrific roar, echoing from cliff to cliff of the Vindhyas, filled the valley as with a burst of thunder.

CHAPTER XIII.

BEHEMOTH!

AT this tremendous report, Lady Munro fell fainting into the arms of her husband. Without losing a moment the colonel darted across the esplanade, Goiimi, after giving his quietus to the astounded guard, following.

Scarcely had they passed through the postern before the esplanade was covered with the suddenly awakened men. A moment’s hesitation ensued, which was favorable to the fugitives.

Nana Sahib rarely passed the night in the fortress; and the evening before, after binding Colonel Munro to the cannon’s mouth, he had gone to meet some chiefs whom he did not dare to visit in open day. But this was the hour at which he usually returned, and he would not be long in appearing.

Kalagani, Nassim, Hindoos, and Dacoits, more than a hundred men in all, would instantly have set off in pursuit of the prisoner. One thing alone delayed them. They were perfectly ignorant of what had occurred; and the dead body of the native who had been entrusted with the charge of the colonel completely mystified them.

Their natural thought was that in all probability, by some strange mischance, the gun had gone off before the hour fixed, and that now the body of the prisoner was blown to pieces.

The fury of Kalagani and the others vented itself in a storm of oaths and abuse. Had Nana Sahib and the rest been after all deprived of the pleasure of witnessing the last moments of Colonel Munro? The nabob was at no great distance. He must have heard the report, and be even now returning in all haste to the fortress. What reply could they make when he required at their hands the prisoner whom he had left in their charge? This hesitation and delay, slight as it was, gave the fugitives time to get some little distance before being perceived.

Sir Edward and Goiimi, full of hope after their miraculous deliverance, rapidly descended the winding path, the strong arms of the colonel scarcely feeling their burden. His faithful servant kept close at his side, ready to defend or assist him.

Five minutes after leaving the postern, they were half way between the plateau and the valley. But day was breaking, and already a glimmering light penetrated to the bottom of the narrow gorge.

A yell burst from the heights above them.

As he leaned over the parapet, Kalagani had caught sight of two fugitives. One of them must be the prisoner of the Nana.

“Munro! There is Munro!” shouted Kalagani, mad with rage.

And with a bound he was through the postern, and in hot pursuit, followed by all his band.

“We are seen,” said the colonel, increasing his speed.

“I will stop the first!” said Goiimi. “They will kill me, but it may give you time to reach the high road.”

“They shall either kill us both, or we will escape together!” responded Munro.

The part of the way now reached was less rough, and they could therefore proceed faster. Forty feet farther and they would be in the Ripore road leading to the highway.

But though flight would be easier, so also would be the pursuit. To seek concealment was useless. Both would have been discovered immediately. The only chance of ultimate escape was to reach the open country.

Colonel Munro’s resolve was taken. He would not again fall alive into the hands of Nana Sahib. Rather than leave her, who had just been restored to him, in the power of the nabob, he would plunge Goiimi’s dagger into her heart, and then himself die by the same weapon.

“Courage, master!” said Goiimi, ready, if need were, to shield the colonel with his own body. “In five minutes we shall be on the Jubbulpore road!”

“God grant that we may find help there!” murmured the colonel.

The shouts of the natives were becoming more and more distinct.

On hurried the fugitives; they were at the road; they turned the corner. To their horror there, close to them, were two men, rapidly advancing from the opposite direction.

It was now light enough to distinguish faces clearly, and two names, uttered like a cry of hatred, burst forth at the same moment.

“Munro!”

“Nana Sahib!”

On hearing the report of the cannon, the nabob had hastened with all speed toward the fortress. He could not understand why his orders should have been executed before the hour he had named.

A Hindoo accompanied him; but before this man had time to make even a sign, he fell at Gofimi’s feet, stabbed with the same knife which had severed the colonel’s bonds.

“Help! here!” cried the Nana to the men who were dashing down the path.

“Yes, here!” returned Goilmi; and like a lightning flash he was upon the nabob.

His intention was — if he failed in killing him at the first blow — at least to struggle with him, so as to give Colonel Munro time to reach the high road; but the knife was struck from his grasp, and fell to the ground.

Furious at being disarmed, Gofimi seized his adversary round the body, and lifting him in his powerful arms, actually carried him off, determining to spring with him over the nearest precipice into the abyss beneath.

In the meanwhile, Kalagani and his companions were rapidly approaching; in another minute they would be upon them, and then what hope of escape could there be?

“Another effort!” repeated Gofimi. “I can keep them at bay for a few minutes by using their nabob as a shield! Fly, master, fly without me!”

The pursuers were close behind. In a half-strangled voice the nabob called on Kalagani. Suddenly, not twenty paces from them, other cries rose.

“Munro! Munro!”

There on the Ripore road was Banks, with him Captain Hood, Maucler, Sergeant McNeil, Fox, Parazard, and a little way behind them, on the high road, vomiting forth torrents of steam, Behemoth, in charge of Storr and Kalouth.

After the destruction of the last car composing Steam House, the engineer and his companions had no alternative but to use as a vehicle the elephant, which the Dacoits had been unable to destroy. Perched on Behemoth, they soon left Lake Puturia, and advanced along the Jubbulpore road. But just as they were passing the turning which led to the fortress, the tremendous report bursting over their heads caused them to halt.

Some presentiment, instinct, call it what you will, made them spring to the ground, and hurry at full speed up the steep road. What they hoped or expected they could not have told.

A sudden turn brought them all at once in full view of the colonel, whose first cry was, —

“Save Lady Munro!”

“And keep fast hold of the true Nana Sahib!” gasped Goilmi, who with a last furious effort had thrown the half suffocated man to the ground.

Captain Hood, McNeil, and Fox quickly seized and made him prisoner, and without asking any other explanation the whole party hastened back to Behemoth.

By order of the colonel, who wished to give him up to English justice, Nana Sahib was bound to the elephant’s neck. Lady Munro was placed in the howdah, her husband by her side; she was gradually recovering from her faint, and he anxiously watched for the least gleam of reason.

All were soon on the elephant’s back.

“At full speed!” cried Banks.

It was time. Already the foremost natives were but a hundred yards distant. All would be well if Behemoth could only reach before them the advanced post of the military cantonment of Jubbulpore, commanding the last defile of the Vindhyas.

The engine was abundantly supplied with water and fuel, everything necessary to maintain pressure, and keep up the utmost speed. But the road being full of sudden turns and angles, careful steering was necessary, it was not safe to rush blindly on.

The natives gained visibly, and their shouts redoubled.

“We shall have to defend ourselves,” said McNeil.

“And we will defend ourselves!” returned Captain Hood, with determination.

A dozen cartridges were all they had! Not a single shot must miss, for their pursuers were armed, and everything depended on their being kept at a distance.

Hood and Fox, rifle in hand, posted themselves in the rear, at the back of the howdah. Goiimi was forward, but still able to take good aim; McNeil was stationed near Nana Sahib, revolver in one hand, and dagger in the other, ready to stab him if the Hindoos seemed likely to overpower them.

Kalouth and Parazard supplied the furnaces. Banks and Storr drove the engine.

Already the pursuit had lasted ten minutes. Two hundred paces at most divided the parties. Though the natives went faster, the elephant could of course keep up his speed longer. The only tactics it was possible to employ were to keep the enemy from getting ahead.

At that moment a dozen shots rang out from the pursuers. The balls whistled harmlessly over Behemoth, except one which struck the end of his trunk.

“Don’t fire yet! We mustn’t fire till we are certain of hitting!” cried Captain Hood. “Save your fire! they are too far off yet!”

Banks, now seeing a straight line of road before him, opened wide the regulator; and Behemoth, dashing forward, left the enemy several hundred yards behind.

“Hurrah! hurrah for old Behemoth!” shouted the captain, wild with excitement. “Ha, ha! those scoundrels can’t catch him!”

But at the end of this straight bit of road lay a steep and winding pass or defile, the last on this south side of the Vindhyas, which must necessarily delay the progress of Banks and his companions. Kalagani and his party, knowing this, redoubled their efforts.

On went Behemoth, and now he was in the narrow road with a precipitous cliff on their side.

Speed was slackened, and Banks had to steer with the greatest care. Of course the natives soon regained all the ground they had lost. Though they had no hope of saving Nana Sahib, who was at the mercy of a dagger-thrust, at least they could avenge his death!

Another discharge was fired, but without touching any one on Behemoth's back.

"This is getting serious!" said the captain, leveling his gun. "Attention!"

He and Gocimi fired simultaneously. Two of the foremost natives were struck full in the chest and fell.

"Two less!" said Goilmi, reloading his weapon.

"Two out of a hundred!" returned Hood. "That is not nearly enough! We must make them pay more dearly than that!"

And three more natives fell dead.

It was impossible to go fast along this winding defile; and besides, as it narrowed, the way became steeper. However, another half mile and the last slope of the Vindhyas would be crossed, and Behemoth would find himself not a hundred yards from an outpost almost in sight of Jubbulpore.

These natives were not the sort of men to be terrified at the fire directed against them. They counted their lives as nothing when the duty of saving or avenging Nana Sahib was in question. Ten — twenty of them might fall; but eighty would still remain to rush on Behemoth, the moving citadel, and attack with murderous intent the little party it contained.

Kalagani was well aware of the fact that Captain Hood and his friends had but a few cartridges left, and that consequently their guns would soon be but useless weapons in their hands. Half of their ammunition was indeed already gone.

However, four more shots were fired, and four more Hindoos fell. Hood and Fox had now but a bullet a piece.

At that moment Kalagani, who had till now been very cautious, sprang forward nearer than was prudent.

“Ha! that’s you, is it? I’ll have you now!” remarked the captain, taking aim with the greatest coolness.

The shot struck the traitor in the very middle of the forehead. His hands clutched wildly at the air; he made one bound, and fell dead on the spot!

Suddenly the end of the pass appeared before them. Behemoth made one last effort. Once more Fox’s rifle rang out, and one more native sank to the ground! The natives perceiving immediately that the firing had ceased, pressed forward to the assault.

“Jump off!” cried Banks.

Under the circumstances it was indeed best to abandon Behemoth, and hasten on foot to the outpost.

Colonel Munro, his wife in his arms, stepped down.

Hood, Maucler, the sergeant, and the rest speedily leaped off. Banks alone remained in the howdah!

“And that villain!” cried Captain Hood, pointing to Nana Sahib, who was still bound to the elephant’s neck.

“Leave him to me, captain!” returned Banks, in a significant tone. Then, giving a last turn to the regulator, he also descended.

All hurried as fast as they could along the road, daggers in their hands, prepared to sell their lives dearly.

Behemoth, left to himself, continued to move, but having no one to guide him, soon ran against the cliff and there abruptly stopped, entirely barring the road.

On came the natives; with a rush they were upon him, eager to liberate the Nana. Suddenly a tremendous roar, like a most frightful crash of thunder, rent the air.

Before leaving the howdah, Banks had heavily charged the valves of the engine. The vapor reached extreme tension, and when Behemoth ran against the cliff, finding no way of escape through the cylinders, it burst the boiler, the fragments flying far and wide.

“Poor Behemoth!” cried Captain Hood. “He has died to save us!”

CHAPTER XIV

CAPTAIN HOOD’S FIFTIETH TIGER

COLONEL MUNRO and his party had now nothing further to fear either from the nabob and the natives who followed his fortunes, or from the Dacoits who had so long troubled this part of Bundelkund.

At the sound of the explosion, soldiers issued from the guard-house in imposing numbers. Finding themselves without a leader, the Dacoits no sooner perceived this reenforcement than they instantly took to flight.

Colonel Munro made himself known. In half an hour’s time they reached the station, where they were supplied with all they needed, and especially food, of which they were in great want.

Lady Munro was lodged in a comfortable hotel, until it was possible for her to be removed to Bombay. There Sir Edward trusted that his tender care would at last restore life to the soul of her whose body was at present the only living part, and who would be still dead to him unless her reason returned!

None of his friends despaired of the final recovery of Lady Munro. All confidently awaited it as the only thing which could entirely alter the colonel’s existence.

It was settled that the next day they should start for Bombay by the first train. This time they would be carried away by a common locomotive, instead of the indefatigable Behemoth, who now, alas! lay in shapeless ruins.

But neither his ardent admirer, Captain Hood, nor Banks, his ingenious inventor, nor indeed any of the members of the expedition could ever forget the “faithful animal,” to whom they all agreed in ascribing real life. Long did the noise of the explosion which annihilated him ring in their ears.

Before leaving Jubbulpore, Banks, Hood, Maucler, Fox, and Goilmi naturally wished to pay a visit to the scene of the catastrophe.

There was nothing to be feared from the band of Dacoits, yet as a precautionary measure, when the engineer and his companions reached the outpost, a detachment of soldiers joined them, and proceeded with them to the entrance of the defile.

On the ground lay five or six mutilated corpses, the bodies of those who had rushed on Behemoth for the purpose of freeing Nana Sahib.

Of the remainder of the band there was not a trace. Instead of returning to the ruined fortress, the last faithful followers of the Nana had dispersed through the Nerbudda Valley.

Poor Behemoth had been utterly destroyed by the bursting of his boiler. One of his huge feet was found at a great distance. A part of his trunk blown against the cliff, stuck fast, and now projected like a gigantic arm. To a great distance the ground was strewn with fragments of iron, screws, bolts, pins, remains of pipes, valves, and cylinders. At the moment of the explosion the tension of the force of steam must indeed have been terrific, perhaps exceeding twenty atmospheres.

And now, of that artificial elephant of which the dwellers in Steam House had been so proud, that colossal animal which had provoked the superstitious admiration of the natives, the mechanical masterpiece of

Banks the engineer, the realized dream of the whimsical Rajah of Bhootan, what remained? Only a valueless and unrecognizable skeleton!

“Poor beast!” sighed Captain Hood as he gazed on the body of his beloved Behemoth.

“We can make another — another which shall be even still more powerful!” said Banks.

“No doubt,” returned the captain, heaving another deep sigh, “but it won’t be him!”

While pursuing their investigations, the engineer and his companions anxiously looked for the remains of Nana Sahib. Even if his face were not recognizable, the finding of a hand which had lost a finger would be sufficient to prove his identity. It would be satisfactory to have this unquestionable proof of the death of the man who could no longer be mistaken for his brother, Balao Rao.

But none of the bloody remains which strewed the ground appeared to belong to him who once was Nana Sahib. Had his followers carried away every trace and vestige of him? That was more than probable.

The result of this was, that there being no certain proof of the death of Nana Sahib, a legend sprang up among the population of Central India. To them their unseen nabob was still living; they regarded him as an immortal being.

Banks and his friends were, however, positive that Nana Sahib could not have survived the explosion.

They returned to the town, though not until Captain Hood had picked up a piece of one of Behemoth’s tusks, which he ever afterward treasured as a remembrance.

The next day, the 4th of October, all left Jubbulpore by train. Four-and-twenty hours later, they crossed the Western Ghauts, the Andes of Hindostan, which stretch their immense length through dense forests of banyans, sycamores, teaks, mingled with palms, cocoa-trees, arecas, pepper-trees, sandalwood, and bamboos. In a few hours more, the railway deposited them on the island of Bombay, which with the islands of Salsette, Elephanta, and others, forms a magnificent roadstead and port, at the southeastern extremity of which stands the capital of the presidency.

Colonel Munro did not wish to remain in this great town, swarming with Arabs, Persians, Banyans, Abyssinians, Parsees or Guebres, Scindes, Europeans of every nationality, and also Hindoos.

The physicians whom he consulted on the state of Lady Munro, recommended him to take her to a villa in the neighborhood, where perfect quiet, combined with their great attention and the incessant care of her husband, could not fail to produce a salutary effect.

A month passed. Not one of the colonel’s companions, not one of his servants, thought of leaving him; they wished to be near him on the not far-distant day which they hoped would witness the cure of the poor lady.

This joy came at last. Little by little Lady Munro’s senses returned. The mind resumed its natural balance. Of her who had been Roving Flame there remained not a trace, she herself had no recollection of that sad time.

“Laura, Laura!” exclaimed the colonel, as Lady Munro at last fully recognizing him, was clasped in his arms.

A week after this, the inhabitants of Steam House were united once more in the bungalow at Calcutta. Another life was beginning in the beautiful dwelling very different to that which had formerly been passed within its walls. Banks was entreated to pass his leisure time there, Hood to return whenever he could get leave. As to McNeil and Goilmi, they belonged to the house, and could never be separated from Colonel Munro. About this time Maucler was obliged to leave Calcutta to return to Europe. He took leave at the same time as Hood, whom the devoted Fox was to follow to the military cantonments of Madras.

“Good-by, captain,” said Colonel Munro; “I am glad to think that you have nothing to regret in your journey across Northern India, except not having shot your fiftieth tiger!”

“But I did shoot him, colonel.”

“What! the fiftieth? When was that?”

“Why,” returned the captain, with a flourish, “forty-nine tigers, and Kalagani. Does not that make fifty?”

THE END.

EIGHT HUNDRED LEAGUES ON THE AMAZON

Translated by W. J. Gordon

This novel was first published in 1881. It tells the story of Joam Garral, a ranch owner, living near the Peruvian-Brazilian border on the Amazon River, who is forced to travel down-stream when his past catches up with him.

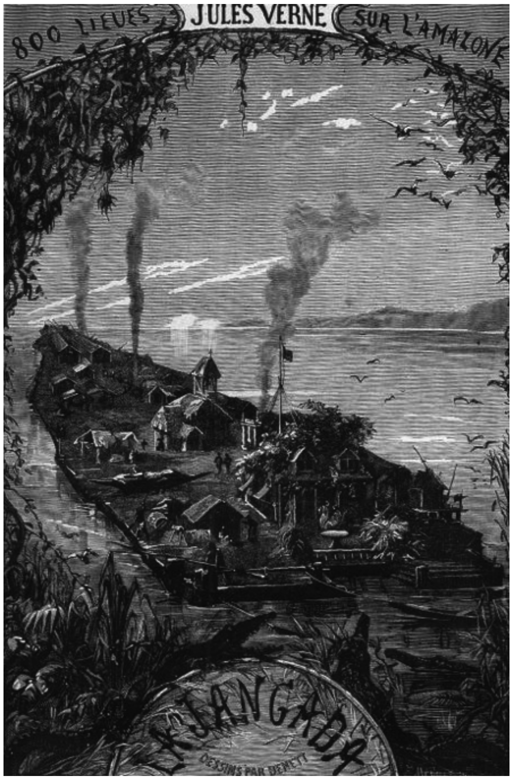
800 LIEUES
JULES VERNE
SUR L'AMAZONE
LA JANGADA
DESSINS PAR BENETT

The original frontispiece

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PART I. THE GIANT RAFT

CHAPTER I. A CAPTAIN OF THE WOODS

“P h y j s l y d d q f d z x g a s g z z q q e h x g k f n d r x u j u g I o c y t d x v k s b x h h u y p o h d v y r y m h u h p u y d k j o x p h e t o z l s l e t n p m v f f o v p d p a j x h y y n o j y g g a y m e q y n f u q l n m v l y f g s u z m q I z t l b q q y u g s q e u b v n r c r e d g r u z b l r m x y u h q h p z d r r g c r o h e p q x u f I v v r p l p h o n t h v d d q f h q s n t z h h h n f e p m q k y u u e x k t o g z g k y u u m f v I j d q d p z j q s y k r p l x h x q r y m v k l o h h h o t o z v d k s p p s u v j h d.”

THE MAN who held in his hand the document of which this strange assemblage of letters formed the concluding paragraph remained for some moments lost in thought.

It contained about a hundred of these lines, with the letters at even distances, and undivided into words. It seemed to have been written many years before, and time had already laid his tawny finger on the sheet of good stout paper which was covered with the hieroglyphics.

On what principle had these letters been arranged? He who held the paper was alone able to tell. With such cipher language it is as with the locks of some of our iron safes — in either case the protection is the same. The combinations which they lead to can be counted by millions, and no calculator’s life would suffice to express them. Some particular “word” has to be known before the lock of the safe will act, and some “cipher” is necessary before that cryptogram can be read.

He who had just reperused the document was but a simple “captain of the woods.” Under the name of *“Capitaes do Mato”* are known in Brazil those individuals who are engaged in the recapture of fugitive slaves. The institution dates from 1722. At that period anti-slavery ideas had entered the minds of a few philanthropists, and more than a century had to elapse before the mass of the people grasped and applied them. That freedom was a right, that the very first of the natural rights of man was to be free and to belong only to himself, would seem to be self-evident, and yet thousands of years had to pass before the glorious thought was generally accepted, and the nations of the earth had the courage to proclaim it.

In 1852, the year in which our story opens, there were still slaves in Brazil, and as a natural consequence, captains of the woods to pursue them. For certain reasons of political economy the hour of general emancipation had been delayed, but the black had at this date the right to ransom himself, the children which were born to him were born free. The day was not far distant when the magnificent country, into which could be put three-quarters of the continent of Europe, would no longer count a single slave among its ten millions of inhabitants.

The occupation of the captains of the woods was doomed, and at the period we speak of the advantages obtainable from the capture of fugitives were rapidly diminishing. While, however, the calling continued sufficiently profitable, the captains of the woods formed a peculiar class of adventurers, principally composed of freedmen and deserters — of not very enviable reputation. The slave hunters in fact belonged to the dregs of society, and we shall not be far wrong in assuming that the man with the cryptogram was a fitting comrade for his fellow *"capitaes do mato."* Torres — for that was his name — unlike the majority of his companions, was neither half-breed, Indian, nor negro. He was a white of Brazilian origin, and had received a better education than befitted his present condition. One of those unclassed men who are found so frequently in the distant countries of the

New World, at a time when the Brazilian law still excluded mulattoes and others of mixed blood from certain employments, it was evident that if such exclusion had affected him, it had done so on account of his worthless character, and not because of his birth.

Torres at the present moment was not, however, in Brazil. He had just passed the frontier, and was wandering in the forests of Peru, from which issue the waters of the Upper Amazon.

He was a man of about thirty years of age, on whom the fatigues of a precarious existence seemed, thanks to an exceptional temperament and an iron constitution, to have had no effect. Of middle height, broad shoulders, regular features, and decided gait, his face was tanned with the scorching air of the tropics. He had a thick black beard, and eyes lost under contracting eyebrows, giving that swift but hard glance so characteristic of insolent natures. Clothed as backwoodsmen are generally clothed, not over elaborately, his garments bore witness to long and roughish wear. On his head, stuck jauntily on one side, was a leather hat with a large brim. Trousers he had of coarse wool, which were tucked into the tops of the thick, heavy boots which formed the most substantial part of his attire, and over all, and hiding all, was a faded yellowish poncho.

But if Torres was a captain of the woods it was evident that he was not now employed in that capacity, his means of attack and defense being obviously insufficient for any one engaged in the pursuit of the blacks. No firearms — neither gun nor revolver. In his belt only one of those weapons, more sword than hunting-knife, called a *“manchetta,”* and in addition he had an *“enchada,”* which is a sort of hoe, specially employed in the pursuit of the tatous and agoutis which abound in the forests of the Upper Amazon, where there is generally little to fear from wild beasts.

On the 4th of May, 1852, it happened, then, that our adventurer was deeply absorbed in the reading of the document on which his eyes were fixed, and, accustomed as he was to live in the forests of South America, he was perfectly indifferent to their splendors. Nothing could distract his attention; neither the constant cry of the howling monkeys, which St. Hillaire has graphically compared to the ax of the woodman as he strikes the branches of the trees, nor the sharp jingle of the rings of the rattlesnake (not an aggressive reptile, it is true, but one of the most venomous); neither the bawling voice of the horned toad, the most hideous of its kind, nor even the solemn and sonorous croak of the bellowing frog, which, though it cannot equal the bull in size, can surpass him in noise.

Torres heard nothing of all these sounds, which form, as it were, the complex voice of the forests of the New World. Reclining at the foot of a magnificent tree, he did not even admire the lofty boughs of that *“pao ferro,”* or iron wood, with its somber bark, hard as the metal which it replaces in the weapon and utensil of the Indian savage. No. Lost in thought, the captain of the woods turned the curious paper again and again between his fingers. With the cipher, of which he had the secret, he assigned to each letter its true value. He read, he verified the sense of those lines, unintelligible to all but him, and then he smiled — and a most unpleasant smile it was.

Then he murmured some phrases in an undertone which none in the solitude of the Peruvian forests could hear, and which no one, had he been anywhere else, would have heard.

“Yes,” said he, at length, “here are a hundred lines very neatly written, which, for some one that I know, have an importance that is undoubted. That somebody is rich. It is a question of life or death for him, and looked at in every way it will cost him something.” And, scrutinizing the paper with greedy eyes, “At a conto (1) only for each word of this last sentence it will amount to a considerable sum, and it is this sentence which fixes the price. It sums up the entire document. It gives their true names to true personages; but before trying to understand it I ought to begin by counting the number of words it contains, and even when this is done its true meaning may be missed.”

In saying this Torres began to count mentally.

“There are fifty-eight words, and that makes fifty-eight contos. With nothing but that one could live in Brazil, in America, wherever one wished, and even live without doing anything! And what would it be, then, if all the words of this document were paid for at the same price? It would be necessary to count by hundreds of contos. Ah! there is quite a fortune here for me to realize if I am not the greatest of duffers!”

It seemed as though the hands of Torres felt the enormous sum, and were already closing over the rolls of gold. Suddenly his thoughts took another turn.

“At length,” he cried, “I see land; and I do not regret the voyage which has led me from the coast of the Atlantic to the Upper Amazon. But this man may quit America and go beyond the seas, and then how can I touch him? But no! he is there, and if I climb to the top of this tree I can see the roof under which he lives with his family!” Then seizing the paper and shaking it with terrible meaning: “Before to-morrow I will be in his presence; before to-morrow he will know that his honor and his life are contained in these lines. And when he wishes to see the cipher which permits him to read them, he — well, he will pay for it. He will pay, if I wish it, with all his fortune, as he ought to pay with all his blood! Ah! My worthy comrade, who gave me this cipher, who told me where I could find his old colleague, and the name under which he has been hiding himself for so many years, hardly suspects that he has made my fortune!”

For the last time Torres glanced over the yellow paper, and then, after carefully folding it, put it away into a little copper box which he used for a purse. This box was about as big as a cigar case, and if what was in it was all Torres possessed he would nowhere have been considered a wealthy man. He had a few of all the coins of the neighboring States — ten double-condors in gold of the United States of Colombia, worth about a hundred francs; Brazilian reis, worth about as much; golden sols of Peru, worth, say, double; some Chilian escudos, worth fifty francs or more, and some smaller coins; but the lot would not amount to more than five hundred francs, and Torres would have been somewhat embarrassed had he been asked how or where he had got them. One thing was certain, that for some months, after having suddenly abandoned the trade of the slave hunter, which he carried on in the province of Para, Torres had ascended the basin of the Amazon, crossed the Brazilian frontier, and come into Peruvian territory. To such a man the necessaries of life were but few; expenses he had none — nothing for his lodging, nothing for his clothes. The forest provided his food, which in the backwoods cost him naught. A few reis were enough for his tobacco, which he bought at the mission stations or in the villages, and for a trifle more he filled his flask with liquor. With little he could go far.

When he had pushed the paper into the metal box, of which the lid shut tightly with a snap, Torres, instead of putting it into the pocket of his under-vest, thought to be extra careful, and placed it near him in a hollow of a root of the tree beneath which he was sitting. This proceeding, as it turned out, might have cost him dear.

It was very warm; the air was oppressive. If the church of the nearest village had possessed a clock, the clock would have struck two, and, coming with the wind, Torres would have heard it, for it was not more than a couple of miles off. But he cared not as to time. Accustomed to regulate his proceedings by the height of the sun, calculated with more or less accuracy, he could scarcely be supposed to conduct himself with military precision. He breakfasted or dined when he pleased or when he could; he slept when and where sleep overtook him. If his table was not always spread, his bed was always ready at the foot of some tree in the open forest. And in other respects Torres was not difficult to please. He had traveled during most of the morning, and having already eaten a little, he began to feel the want of a snooze. Two or three hours' rest would, he thought, put him in a state to continue his road, and so he laid himself down on the grass as comfortably as he could, and waited for sleep beneath the ironwood-tree.

Torres was not one of those people who drop off to sleep without certain preliminaries. HE was in the habit of drinking a drop or two of strong liquor, and of then smoking a pipe; the spirits, he said, overexcited the brain, and the tobacco smoke agreeably mingled with the general haziness of his reverie.

Torres commenced, then, by applying to his lips a flask which he carried at his side; it contained the liquor generally known under the name of *"chica"* in Peru, and more particularly under that of *"caysuma"* in the Upper Amazon, to which fermented distillation of the root of the sweet manioc the captain had added a good dose of *"tafia"* or native rum.

When Torres had drunk a little of this mixture he shook the flask, and discovered, not without regret, that it was nearly empty.

"Must get some more," he said very quietly.

Then taking out a short wooden pipe, he filled it with the coarse and bitter tobacco of Brazil, of which the leaves belong to that old *“petun”* introduced into France by Nicot, to whom we owe the popularization of the most productive and widespread of the solanaceae.

This native tobacco had little in common with the fine qualities of our present manufacturers; but Torres was not more difficult to please in this matter than in others, and so, having filled his pipe, he struck a match and applied the flame to a piece of that stick substance which is the secretion of certain of the hymenoptera, and is known as “ants’ amadou.” With the amadou he lighted up, and after about a dozen whiffs his eyes closed, his pipe escaped from his fingers, and he fell asleep.

(1) One thousand reis are equal to three francs, and a conto

of reis is worth three thousand francs.

CHAPTER II. ROBBER AND ROBBED

TORRES SLEPT for about half an hour, and then there was a noise among the trees — a sound of light footsteps, as though some visitor was walking with naked feet, and taking all the precaution he could lest he should be heard. To have put himself on guard against any suspicious approach would have been the first care of our adventurer had his eyes been open at the time. But he had not then awoke, and what advanced was able to arrive in his presence, at ten paces from the tree, without being perceived.

It was not a man at all, it was a “guariba.”

Of all the prehensile-tailed monkeys which haunt the forests of the Upper Amazon — graceful sahuis, horned sapajous, gray-coated monos, sagouins which seem to wear a mask on their grimacing faces — the guariba is without doubt the most eccentric. Of sociable disposition, and not very savage, differing therein very greatly from the mucura, who is as ferocious as he is foul, he delights in company, and generally travels in troops. It was he whose presence had been signaled from afar by the monotonous concert of voices, so like the psalm-singing of some church choir. But if nature has not made him vicious, it is none the less necessary to attack him with caution, and under any circumstances a sleeping traveler ought not to leave himself exposed, lest a guariba should surprise him when he is not in a position to defend himself.

This monkey, which is also known in Brazil as the “barbado,” was of large size. The suppleness and stoutness of his limbs proclaimed him a powerful creature, as fit to fight on the ground as to leap from branch to branch at the tops of the giants of the forest.

He advanced then cautiously, and with short steps. He glanced to the right and to the left, and rapidly swung his tail. To these representatives of the monkey tribe nature has not been content to give four hands — she has shown herself more generous, and added a fifth, for the extremity of their caudal appendage possesses a perfect power of prehension.

The guariba noiselessly approached, brandishing a study cudgel, which, wielded by his muscular arm, would have proved a formidable weapon. For some minutes he had seen the man at the foot of the tree, but the sleeper did not move, and this doubtless induced him to come and look at him a little nearer. He came forward then, not without hesitation, and stopped at last about three paces off.

On his bearded face was pictured a grin, which showed his sharp-edged teeth, white as ivory, and the cudgel began to move about in a way that was not very reassuring for the captain of the woods.

Unmistakably the sight of Torres did not inspire the guariba with friendly thoughts. Had he then particular reasons for wishing evil to this defenseless specimen of the human race which chance had delivered over to him? Perhaps! We know how certain animals retain the memory of the bad treatment they have received, and it is possible that against backwoodsmen in general he bore some special grudge.

In fact Indians especially make more fuss about the monkey than any other kind of game, and, no matter to what species it belongs, follow its chase with the ardor of Nimrods, not only for the pleasure of hunting it, but for the pleasure of eating it.

Whatever it was, the guariba did not seen disinclined to change characters this time, and if he did not quite forget that nature had made him but a simple herbivore, and longed to devour the captain of the woods, he seemed at least to have made up his mind to get rid of one of his natural enemies.

After looking at him for some minutes the guariba began to move round the tree. He stepped slowly, holding his breath, and getting nearer and nearer. His attitude was threatening, his countenance ferocious. Nothing could have seemed easier to him than to have crushed this motionless man at a single blow, and assuredly at that moment the life of Torres hung by a thread.

In truth, the guariba stopped a second time close up to the tree, placed himself at the side, so as to command the head of the sleeper, and lifted his stick to give the blow.

But if Torres had been imprudent in putting near him in the crevice of the root the little case which contained his document and his fortune, it was this imprudence which saved his life.

A sunbeam shooting between the branches just glinted on the case, the polished metal of which lighted up like a looking-glass. The monkey, with the frivolity peculiar to his species, instantly had his attention distracted. His ideas, if such an animal could have ideas, took another direction. He stopped, caught hold of the case, jumped back a pace or two, and, raising it to the level of his eyes, looked at it not without surprise as he moved it about and used it like a mirror. He was if anything still more astonished when he heard the rattle of the gold pieces it contained. The music enchanted him. It was like a rattle in the hands of a child. He carried it to his mouth, and his teeth grated against the metal, but made no impression on it.

Doubtless the guariba thought he had found some fruit of a new kind, a sort of huge almost brilliant all over, and with a kernel playing freely in its shell.

But if he soon discovered his mistake he did not consider it a reason for throwing the case away; on the contrary, he grasped it more tightly in his left hand, and dropped the cudgel, which broke off a dry twig in its fall.

At this noise Torres woke, and with the quickness of those who are always on the watch, with whom there is no transition from the sleeping to the waking state, was immediately on his legs.

In an instant Torres had recognized with whom he had to deal.

“A guariba!” he cried.

And his hand seizing his manchetta, he put himself into a posture of defense.

The monkey, alarmed, jumped back at once, and not so brave before a waking man as a sleeping one, performed a rapid caper, and glided under the trees.

“It was time!” said Torres; “the rogue would have settled me without any ceremony!”

Of a sudden, between the hands of the monkey, who had stopped at about twenty paces, and was watching him with violent grimaces, as if he would like to snap his fingers at him, he caught sight of his precious case.

“The beggar!” he said. “If he has not killed me, he has done what is almost as bad. He has robbed me!”

The thought that the case held his money was not however, what then concerned him. But that which made him jump was the recollection that it contained the precious document, the loss of which was irreparable, as it carried with it that of all his hopes.

“Botheration!” said he.

And at the moment, cost what it might to recapture his case, Torres threw himself in pursuit of the guariba.

He knew that to reach such an active animal was not easy. On the ground he could get away too fast, in the branches he could get away too far. A well-aimed gunshot could alone stop him as he ran or climbed, but Torres possessed no firearm. His sword-knife and hoe were useless unless he could get near enough to hit him.

It soon became evident that the monkey could not be reached unless by surprise. Hence Torres found it necessary to employ cunning in dealing with the mischievous animal. To stop, to hide himself behind some tree trunk, to disappear under a bush, might induce the guariba to pull up and retrace his steps, and there was nothing else for Torres to try. This was what he did, and the pursuit commenced under these conditions; but when the captain of the woods disappeared, the monkey patiently waited until he came into sight again, and at this game Torres fatigued himself without result.

“Confound the guariba!” he shouted at length. “There will be no end to this, and he will lead me back to the Brazilian frontier. If only he would let go of my case! But no! The jingling of the money amuses him. Oh, you thief! If I could only get hold of you!”

And Torres recommenced the pursuit, and the monkey scuttled off with renewed vigor.

An hour passed in this way without any result. Torres showed a persistency which was quite natural. How without this document could he get his money?

And then anger seized him. He swore, he stamped, he threatened the guariba. That annoying animal only responded by a chuckling which was enough to put him beside himself.

And then Torres gave himself up to the chase. He ran at top speed, entangling himself in the high undergrowth, among those thick brambles and interlacing creepers, across which the guariba passed like a steeplechaser. Big roots hidden beneath the grass lay often in the way. He stumbled over them and again started in pursuit. At length, to his astonishment, he found himself shouting:

“Come here! come here! you robber!” as if he could make him understand him.

His strength gave out, breath failed him, and he was obliged to stop. “Confound it!” said he, “when I am after runaway slaves across the jungle they never give me such trouble as this! But I will have you, you wretched monkey! I will go, yes, I will go as far as my legs will carry me, and we shall see!”

The guariba had remained motionless when he saw that the adventurer had ceased to pursue him. He rested also, for he had nearly reached that degree of exhaustion which had forbidden all movement on the part of Torres.

He remained like this during ten minutes, nibbling away at two or three roots, which he picked off the ground, and from time to time he rattled the case at his ear.

Torres, driven to distraction, picked up the stones within his reach, and threw them at him, but did no harm at such a distance.

But he hesitated to make a fresh start. On one hand, to keep on in chase of the monkey with so little chance of reaching him was madness. On the other, to accept as definite this accidental interruption to all his plans, to be not only conquered, but cheated and hoaxed by a dumb animal, was maddening. And in the meantime Torres had begun to think that when the night came the robber would disappear without trouble, and he, the robbed one, would find a difficulty in retracing his way through the dense forest. In fact, the pursuit had taken him many miles from the bank of the river, and he would even now find it difficult to return to it.

Torres hesitated; he tried to resume his thoughts with coolness, and finally, after giving vent to a last imprecation, he was about to abandon all idea of regaining possession of his case, when once more, in spite of himself, there flashed across him the thought of his document, the remembrance of all that scaffolding on which his future hopes depended, on which he had counted so much; and he resolved to make another effort.

Then he got up.

The guariba got up too.

He made several steps in advance.

The monkey made as many in the rear, but this time, instead of plunging more deeply into the forest, he stopped at the foot of an enormous ficus — the tree of which the different kinds are so numerous all over the Upper Amazon basin.

To seize the trunk with his four hands, to climb with the agility of a clown who is acting the monkey, to hook on with his prehensile tail to the first branches, which stretched away horizontally at forty feet from the ground, and to hoist himself to the top of the tree, to the point where the higher branches just bent beneath its weight, was only sport to the active guariba, and the work of but a few seconds.

Up there, installed at his ease, he resumed his interrupted repast, and gathered the fruits which were within his reach. Torres, like him, was much in want of something to eat and drink, but it was impossible! His pouch was flat, his flask was empty.

However, instead of retracing his steps he directed them toward the tree, although the position taken up by the monkey was still more unfavorable for him. He could not dream for one instant of climbing the ficus, which the thief would have quickly abandoned for another.

And all the time the miserable case rattled at his ear.

Then in his fury, in his folly, Torres apostrophized the guariba. It would be impossible for us to tell the series of invectives in which he indulged. Not only did he call him a half-breed, which is the greatest of insults in the mouth of a Brazilian of white descent, but *“curiboca”* — that is to say, half-breed negro and Indian, and of all the insults that one man can hurl at another in this equatorial latitude *“curiboca”* is the cruelest.

But the monkey, who was only a humble quadruman, was simply amused at what would have revolted a representative of humanity.

Then Torres began to throw stones at him again, and bits of roots and everything he could get hold of that would do for a missile. Had he the hope to seriously hurt the monkey? No! he no longer knew what he was about. To tell the truth, anger at his powerlessness had deprived him of his wits. Perhaps he hoped that in one of the movements which the guariba would make in passing from branch to branch the case might escape him, perhaps he thought that if he continued to worry the monkey he might throw it at his head. But no! the monkey did not part with the case, and, holding it with one hand, he had still three left with which to move.

Torres, in despair, was just about to abandon the chase for good, and to return toward the Amazon, when he heard the sound of voices. Yes! the sound of human voices.

Those were speaking at about twenty paces to the right of him.

The first care of Torres was to hide himself in a dense thicket. Like a prudent man, he did not wish to show himself without at least knowing with whom he might have to deal. Panting, puzzled, his ears on the stretch, he waited, when suddenly the sharp report of a gun rang through the woods.

A cry followed, and the monkey, mortally wounded, fell heavily on the ground, still holding Torres' case.

"By Jove!" he muttered, "that bullet came at the right time!"

And then, without fearing to be seen, he came out of the thicket, and two young gentlemen appeared from under the trees.

They were Brazilians clothed as hunters, with leather boots, light palm-leaf hats, waistcoats, or rather tunics, buckled in at the waist, and more convenient than the national poncho. By their features and their complexion they were at once recognizable as of Portuguese descent.

Each of them was armed with one of those long guns of Spanish make which slightly remind us of the arms of the Arabs, guns of long range and considerable precision, which the dwellers in the forest of the upper Amazon handle with success.

What had just happened was a proof of this. At an angular distance of more than eighty paces the quadruman had been shot full in the head.

The two young men carried in addition, in their belts, a sort of dagger-knife, which is known in Brazil as a *“foca,”* and which hunters do not hesitate to use when attacking the ounce and other wild animals which, if not very formidable, are pretty numerous in these forests.

Torres had obviously little to fear from this meeting, and so he went on running toward the monkey’s corpse.

But the young men, who were taking the same direction, had less ground to cover, and coming forward a few paces, found themselves face to face with Torres.

The latter had recovered his presence of mind.

“Many thanks, gentlemen,” said he gayly, as he raised the brim of his hat; “in killing this wretched animal you have just done me a great service!”

The hunters looked at him inquiringly, not knowing what value to attach to his thanks.

Torres explained matters in a few words.

“You thought you had killed a monkey,” said he, “but as it happens you have killed a thief!”

“If we have been of use to you,” said the youngest of the two, “it was by accident, but we are none the less pleased to find that we have done some good.”

And taking several steps to the rear, he bent over the guariba, and, not without an effort, withdrew the case from his stiffened hand.

“Doubtless that, sir, is what belongs to you?”

“The very thing,” said Torres briskly, catching hold of the case and failing to repress a huge sigh of relief.

“Whom ought I to thank, gentlemen,” said he, “for the service you have rendered me?”

“My friend, Manoel, assistant surgeon, Brazilian army,” replied the young man.

“If it was I who shot the monkey, Benito,” said Manoel, “it was you that pointed him out to me.”

“In that case, sirs,” replied Torres, “I am under an obligation to you both, as well to you, Mr. Manoel, as to you, Mr. — — ”

“Benito Garral,” replied Manoel.

The captain of the woods required great command over himself to avoid giving a jump when he heard this name, and more especially when the young man obligingly continued:

“My father, Joam Garral, has his farm about three miles from here. If you would like, Mr. — — ”

“Torres,” replied the adventurer.

“If you would like to accompany us there, Mr. Torres, you will be hospitably received.”

“I do not know that I can,” said Torres, who, surprised by this unexpected meeting, hesitated to make a start. “I fear in truth that I am not able to accept your offer. The occurrence I have just related to you has caused me to lose time. It is necessary for me to return at once to the Amazon — as I purpose descending thence to Para.”

“Very well, Mr. Torres,” replied Benito, “it is not unlikely that we shall see you again in our travels, for before a month has passed my father and all his family will have taken the same road as you.”

“Ah!” said Torres sharply, “your father is thinking of recrossing the Brazilian frontier?”

“Yes, for a voyage of some months,” replied Benito. “At least we hope to make him decide so. Don’t we, Manoel?”

Manoel nodded affirmatively.

“Well, gentlemen,” replied Torres, “it is very probable that we shall meet again on the road. But I cannot, much to my regret, accept your offer now. I thank you, nevertheless, and I consider myself as twice your debtor.”

And having said so, Torres saluted the young men, who in turn saluted him, and set out on their way to the farm.

As for Torres he looked after them as they got further and further away, and when he had lost sight of them —

“Ah! he is about to recross the frontier!” said he, with a deep voice. “Let him recross it! and he will be still more at my mercy! Pleasant journey to you, Joam Garral!”

And having uttered these words the captain of the woods, making for the south so as to regain the left bank of the river by the shortest road, disappeared into the dense forest.

CHAPTER III. THE GARRAL FAMILY

THE VILLAGE of Iquitos is situated on the left bank of the Amazon, near the seventy-fourth meridian, on that portion of the great river which still bears the name of the Marânon, and of which the bed separates Peru from the republic of Ecuador. It is about fifty-five leagues to the west of the Brazilian frontier.

Iquitos, like every other collection of huts, hamlet, or village met with in the basin of the Upper Amazon, was founded by the missionaries. Up to the seventeenth year of the century the Iquito Indians, who then formed the entire population, were settled in the interior of the province at some distance from the river. But one day the springs in their territory all dried up under the influence of a volcanic eruption, and they were obliged to come and take up their abode on the left of the Marânon. The race soon altered through the alliances which were entered into with the riverine Indians, Ticunas, or Omaguas, mixed descent with a few Spaniards, and to-day Iquitos has a population of two or three families of half-breeds.

The village is most picturesquely grouped on a kind of esplanade, and runs along at about sixty feet from the river. It consists of some forty miserable huts, whose thatched roofs only just render them worthy of the name of cottages. A stairway made of crossed trunks of trees leads up to the village, which lies hidden from the traveler’s eyes until the steps have been ascended. Once at the top he finds himself before an inclosure admitting of slight defense, and consisting of many different shrubs and arborescent plants, attached to each other by festoons of lianas, which here and there have made their way abgove the summits of the graceful palms and banana-trees.

At the time we speak of the Indians of Iquitos went about in almost a state of nudity. The Spaniards and half-breeds alone were clothed, and much as they scorned their indigenous fellow-citizens, wore only a simple shirt, light cotton trousers, and a straw hat. All lived cheerlessly enough in the village, mixing little together, and if they did meet occasionally, it was only at such times as the bell of the mission called them to the dilapidated cottage which served them for a church.

But if existence in the village of Iquitos, as in most of the hamlets of the Upper Amazon, was almost in a rudimentary stage, it was only necessary to journey a league further down the river to find on the same bank a wealthy settlement, with all the elements of comfortable life.

This was the farm of Joam Garral, toward which our two young friends returned after their meeting with the captain of the woods.

There, on a bend of the stream, at the junction of the River Nanay, which is here about five hundred feet across, there had been established for many years this farm, homestead, or, to use the expression of the country, *“fazenda,”* then in the height of its prosperity. The Nanay with its left bank bounded it to the north for about a mile, and for nearly the same distance to the east it ran along the bank of the larger river. To the west some small rivulets, tributaries of the Nanay, and some lagoons of small extent, separated it from the savannah and the fields devoted to the pasturage of the cattle.

It was here that Joam Garral, in 1826, twenty-six years before the date when our story opens, was received by the proprietor of the fazenda.

This Portuguese, whose name was Magalhaës, followed the trade of timber-felling, and his settlement, then recently formed, extended for about half a mile along the bank of the river.

There, hospitable as he was, like all the Portuguese of the old race, Magalhaës lived with his daughter Yaquita, who after the death of her mother had taken charge of his household. Magalhaës was an excellent worker, inured to fatigue, but lacking education. If he understood the management of the few slaves whom he owned, and the dozen Indians whom he hired, he showed himself much less apt in the various external requirements of his trade. In truth, the establishment at Iquitos was not prospering, and the affairs of the Portuguese were getting somewhat embarrassed.

It was under these circumstances that Joam Garral, then twenty-two years old, found himself one day in the presence of Magalhaës. He had arrived in the country at the limit both of his strength and his resources. Magalhaës had found him half-dead with hunger and fatigue in the neighboring forest. The Portuguese had an excellent heart; he did not ask the unknown where he came from, but what he wanted. The noble, high-spirited look which Joam Garral bore in spite of his exhaustion had touched him. He received him, restored him, and, for several days to begin with, offered him a hospitality which lasted for his life.

Under such conditions it was that Joam Garral was introduced to the farm at Iquitos.

Brazilian by birth, Joam Garral was without family or fortune. Trouble, he said, had obliged him to quit his country and abandon all thoughts of return. He asked his host to excuse his entering on his past misfortunes — misfortunes as serious as they were unmerited. What he sought, and what he wished, was a new life, a life of labor. He had started on his travels with some slight thought of entering a fazenda in the interior. He was educated, intelligent. He had in all his bearing that inexpressible something which tells you that the man is genuine and of frank and upright character. Magalhaës, quite taken with him, asked him to remain at the farm, where he would, in a measure, supply that which was wanting in the worthy farmer.

Joam Garral accepted the offer without hesitation. His intention had been to join a *“seringal,”* or caoutchouc concern, in which in those days a good workman could earn from five to six piastres a day, and could hope to become a master if he had any luck; but Magalhaës very truly observed that if the pay was good, work was only found in the seringals at harvest time — that is to say, during only a few months of the year — and this would not constitute the permanent position that a young man ought to wish for.

The Portuguese was right. Joam Garral saw it, and entered resolutely into the service of the fazenda, deciding to devote to it all his powers.

Magalhaës had no cause to regret his generous action. His business recovered. His wood trade, which extended by means of the Amazon up to Para, was soon considerably extended under the impulse of Joam Garral. The fazenda began to grow in proportion, and to spread out along the bank of the river up to its junction with the Nanay. A delightful residence was made of the house; it was raised a story, surrounded by a veranda, and half hidden under beautiful trees — mimosas, fig-sycamores, bauhinias, and paullinias, whose trunks were invisible beneath a network of scarlet-flowered bromelias and passion-flowers.

At a distance, behind huge bushes and a dense mass of arborescent plants, were concealed the buildings in which the staff of the fazenda were accommodated — the servants’ offices, the cabins of the blacks, and the huts of the Indians. From the bank of the river, bordered with reeds and aquatic plants, the tree-encircled house was alone visible.

A vast meadow, laboriously cleared along the lagoons, offered excellent pasturage. Cattle abounded — a new source of profit in these fertile countries, where a herd doubles in four years, and where ten per cent. interest is earned by nothing more than the skins and the hides of the animals killed for the consumption of those who raise them! A few *“sitios,”* or manioc and coffee plantations, were started in parts of the woods which were cleared. Fields of sugar-canes soon required the construction of a mill to crush the sacchariferous stalks destined to be used hereafter in the manufacture of molasses, tafia, and rum. In short, ten years after the arrival of Joam Garral at the farm at Iquitos the fazenda had become one of the richest establishments on the Upper Amazon. Thanks to the good management exercised by the young clerk over the works at home and the business abroad, its prosperity daily increased.

The Portuguese did not wait so long to acknowledge what he owed to Joam Garral. In order to recompense him in proportion to his merits he had from the first given him an interest in the profits of his business, and four years after his arrival he had made him a partner on the same footing as himself, and with equal shares.

But there was more that he had in store for him. Yaquita, his daughter, had, in this silent young man, so gentle to others, so stern to himself, recognized the sterling qualities which her father had done. She was in love with him, but though on his side Joam had not remained insensible to the merits and the beauty of this excellent girl, he was too proud and reserved to dream of asking her to marry him.

A serious incident hastened the solution.

Magalhaës was one day superintending a clearance and was mortally wounded by the fall of a tree. Carried home helpless to the farm, and feeling himself lost, he raised up Yaquita, who was weeping by his side, took her hand, and put it into that of Joam Garral, making him swear to take her for his wife.

“You have made my fortune,” he said, “and I shall not die in peace unless by this union I know that the fortune of my daughter is assured.”

“I can continue her devoted servant, her brother, her protector, without being her husband,” Joam Garral had at first replied. “I owe you all, Magalhaës. I will never forget it, but the price you would pay for my endeavors is out of all proportion to what they are worth.”

The old man insisted. Death would not allow him to wait; he demanded the promise, and it was made to him.

Yaquita was then twenty-two years old, Joam was twenty-six. They loved each other and they were married some hours before the death of Magalhaës, who had just strength left to bless their union.

It was under these circumstances that in 1830 Joam Garral became the new fazender of Iquitos, to the immense satisfaction of all those who composed the staff of the farm.

The prosperity of the settlement could not do otherwise than grow when these two minds were thus united.

A year after her marriage Yaquita presented her husband with a son, and, two years after, a daughter. Benito and Minha, the grandchildren of the old

Portuguese, became worthy of their grandfather, children worthy of Joam and Yaquita.

The daughter grew to be one of the most charming of girls. She never left the fazenda. Brought up in pure and healthy surroundings, in the midst of the beauteous nature of the tropics, the education given to her by her mother, and the instruction received by her from her father, were ample. What more could she have learned in a convent at Manaos or Belem? Where would she have found better examples of the domestic virtues? Would her mind and feelings have been more delicately formed away from her home? If it was ordained that she was not to succeed her mother in the management of the fazenda, she was equal to any other position to which she might be called.

With Benito it was another thing. His father very wisely wished him to receive as solid and complete an education as could then be obtained in the large towns of Brazil. There was nothing which the rich fazender refused his son. Benito was possessed of a cheerful disposition, an active mind, a lively intelligence, and qualities of heart equal to those of his head. At the age of twelve he was sent into Para, to Belem, and there, under the direction of excellent professors, he acquired the elements of an education which could not but eventually make him a distinguished man. Nothing in literature, in the sciences, in the arts, was a stranger to him. He studied as if the fortune of his father would not allow him to remain idle. He was not among such as imagine that riches exempt men from work — he was one of those noble characters, resolute and just, who believe that nothing should diminish our natural obligation in this respect if we wish to be worthy of the name of men.

During the first years of his residence at Belem, Benito had made the acquaintance of Manoel Valdez. This young man, the son of a merchant in Para, was pursuing his studies in the same institution as Benito. The conformity of their characters and their tastes proved no barrier to their uniting in the closest of friendships, and they became inseparable companions.

Manoel, born in 1832, was one year older than Benito. He had only a mother, and she lived on the modest fortune which her husband had left her. When Manoel's preliminary studies were finished, he had taken up the subject of medicine. He had a passionate taste for that noble profession, and his intention was to enter the army, toward which he felt himself attracted.

At the time that we saw him with his friend Benito, Manoel Valdez had already obtained his first step, and he had come away on leave for some months to the fazenda, where he was accustomed to pass his holidays. Well-built, and of distinguished bearing, with a certain native pride which became him well, the young man was treated by Joam and Yaquita as another son. But if this quality of son made him the brother of Benito, the title was scarcely appreciated by him when Minha was concerned, for he soon became attached to the young girl by a bond more intimate than could exist between brother and sister.

In the year 1852 — of which four months had already passed before the commencement of this history — Joam Garral attained the age of forty-eight years. In that sultry climate, which wears men away so quickly, he had known how, by sobriety, self-denial, suitable living, and constant work, to remain untouched where others had prematurely succumbed. His hair, which he wore short, and his beard, which was full, had already grown gray, and gave him the look of a Puritan. The proverbial honesty of the Brazilian merchants and fazenders showed itself in his features, of which straightforwardness was the leading characteristic. His calm temperament seemed to indicate an interior fire, kept well under control. The fearlessness of his look denoted a deep-rooted strength, to which, when danger threatened, he could never appeal in vain.

But, notwithstanding one could not help remarking about this quiet man of vigorous health, with whom all things had succeeded in life, a depth of sadness which even the tenderness of Yaquita had not been able to subdue.

Respected by all, placed in all the conditions that would seem necessary to happiness, why was not this just man more cheerful and less reserved? Why did he seem to be happy for others and not for himself? Was this disposition attributable to some secret grief? Herein was a constant source of anxiety to his wife.

Yaquita was now forty-four. In that tropical country where women are already old at thirty she had learned the secret of resisting the climate’s destructive influences, and her features, a little sharpened but still beautiful, retained the haughty outline of the Portuguese type, in which nobility of face unites so naturally with dignity of mind.

Benito and Minha responded with an affection unbounded and unceasing for the love which their parents bore them.

Benito was now aged twenty-one, and quick, brave, and sympathetic, contrasted outwardly with his friend Manoel, who was more serious and reflective. It was a great treat for Benito, after quite a year passed at Belem, so far from the fazenda, to return with his young friend to his home to see once more his father, his mother, his sister, and to find himself, enthusiastic hunter as he was, in the midst of these superb forests of the Upper Amazon, some of whose secrets remained after so many centuries still unsolved by man.

Minha was twenty years old. A lovely girl, brunette, and with large blue eyes, eyes which seemed to open into her very soul; of middle height, good figure, and winning grace, in every way the very image of Yaquita. A little more serious than her brother, affable, good-natured, and charitable, she was beloved by all. On this subject you could fearlessly interrogate the humblest servants of the fazenda. It was unnecessary to ask her brother's friend, Manoel Valdez, what he thought of her. He was too much interested in the question to have replied without a certain amount of partiality.

This sketch of the Garral family would not be complete, and would lack some of its features, were we not to mention the numerous staff of the fazenda.

In the first place, then, it behooves us to name an old negress, of some sixty years, called Cybele, free through the will of her master, a slave through her affection for him and his, and who had been the nurse of Yaquita. She was one of the family. She thee-ed and thou-ed both daughter and mother. The whole of this good creature's life was passed in these fields, in the middle of these forests, on that bank of the river which bounded the horizon of the farm. Coming as a child to Iquitos in the slave-trading times, she had never quitted the village; she was married there, and early a widow, had lost her only son, and remained in the service of Magalhaës. Of the Amazon she knew no more than what flowed before her eyes.

With her, and more specially attached to the service of Minha, was a pretty, laughing mulatto, of the same age as her mistress, to whom she was completely devoted. She was called Lina. One of those gentle creatures, a little spoiled, perhaps, to whom a good deal of familiarity is allowed, but who in return adore their mistresses. Quick, restless, coaxing, and lazy, she could do what she pleased in the house.

As for servants they were of two kinds — Indians, of whom there were about a hundred, employed always for the works of the fazenda, and blacks to about double the number, who were not yet free, but whose children were not born slaves. Joam Garral had herein preceded the Brazilian government. In this country, moreover, the negroes coming from Benguela, the Congo, or the Gold Coast were always treated with kindness, and it was not at the fazenda of Iquitos that one would look for those sad examples of cruelty which were so frequent on foreign plantations.

CHAPTER IV. HESITATION

MANOEL WAS in love with the sister of his friend Benito, and she was in love with him. Each was sensible of the other’s worth, and each was worthy of the other.

When he was no longer able to mistake the state of his feelings toward Minha, Manoel had opened his heart to Benito.

“Manoel, my friend,” had immediately answered the enthusiastic young fellow, “you could not do better than wish to marry my sister. Leave it to me! I will commence by speaking to the mother, and I think I can promise that you will not have to wait long for her consent.”

Half an hour afterward he had done so.

Benito had nothing to tell his mother which she did not know; Yaquita had already divined the young people’s secret.

Before ten minutes had elapsed Benito was in the presence of Minha. They had but to agree; there was no need for much eloquence. At the first words the head of the gentle girl was laid on her brother’s shoulder, and the confession, “I am so happy!” was whispered from her heart.

The answer almost came before the question; that was obvious. Benito did not ask for more.

There could be little doubt as to Joam Garral’s consent. But if Yaquita and her children did not at once speak to him about the marriage, it was because they wished at the same time to touch on a question which might be more difficult to solve. That question was, Where should the wedding take place?

Where should it be celebrated? In the humble cottage which served for the village church? Why not? Joam and Yaquita had there received the nuptial benediction of the Padre Passanha, who was then the curate of Iquitos parish. At that time, as now, there was no distinction in Brazil between the civil and religious acts, and the registers of the mission were sufficient testimony to a ceremony which no officer of the civil power was intrusted to attend to.

Joam Garral would probably wish the marriage to take place at Iquitos, with grand ceremonies and the attendance of the whole staff of the fazenda, but if such was to be his idea he would have to withstand a vigorous attack concerning it.

“Manoel,” Minha said to her betrothed, “if I was consulted in the matter we should not be married here, but at Para. Madame Valdez is an invalid; she cannot visit Iquitos, and I should not like to become her daughter without knowing and being known by her. My mother agrees with me in thinking so. We should like to persuade my father to take us to Belem. Do you not think so?”

To this proposition Manoel had replied by pressing Minha’s hand. He also had a great wish for his mother to be present at his marriage. Benito had approved the scheme without hesitation, and it was only necessary to persuade Joam Garral. And hence on this day the young men had gone out hunting in the woods, so as to leave Yaquita alone with her husband.

In the afternoon these two were in the large room of the house. Joam Garral, who had just come in, was half-reclining on a couch of plaited bamboos, when Yaquita, a little anxious, came and seated herself beside him.

To tell Joam of the feelings which Manoel entertained toward his daughter was not what troubled her. The happiness of Minha could not but be assured by the marriage, and Joam would be glad to welcome to his arms the new son whose sterling qualities he recognized and appreciated. But to persuade her husband to leave the fazenda Yaquita felt to be a very serious matter.

In fact, since Joam Garral, then a young man, had arrived in the country, he had never left it for a day. Though the sight of the Amazon, with its waters gently flowing to the east, invited him to follow its course; though Joam every year sent rafts of wood to Manaos, to Belem, and the seacoast of Para; though he had seen each year Benito leave after his holidays to return to his studies, yet the thought seemed never to have occurred to him to go with him.

The products of the farm, of the forest, and of the fields, the fazender sold on the spot. He had no wish, either with thought or look, to go beyond the horizon which bounded his Eden.

From this it followed that for twenty-five years Joam Garral had never crossed the Brazilian frontier, his wife and daughter had never set foot on Brazilian soil. The longing to see something of that beautiful country of which Benito was often talking was not wanting, nevertheless. Two or three times Yaquita had sounded her husband in the matter. But she had noticed that the thought of leaving the fazenda, if only for a few weeks, brought an increase of sadness to his face. His eyes would close, and in a tone of mild reproach he would answer:

“Why leave our home? Are we not comfortable here?”

And Yaquita, in the presence of the man whose active kindness and unchangeable tenderness rendered her so happy, had not the courage to persist.

This time, however, there was a serious reason to make it worth while. The marriage of Minha afforded an excellent opportunity, it being so natural for them to accompany her to Belem, where she was going to live with her husband. She would there see and learn to love the mother of Manoel Valdez. How could Joam Garral hesitate in the face of so praiseworthy a desire? Why, on the other hand, did he not participate in this desire to become acquainted with her who was to be the second mother of his child?

Yaquita took her husband's hand, and with that gentle voice which had been to him all the music of his life:

"Joam," she said, "I am going to talk to you about something which we ardently wish, and which will make you as happy as we are."

"What is it about, Yaquita?" asked Joam.

"Manoel loves your daughter, he is loved by her, and in this union they will find the happiness — — "

At the first words of Yaquita Joam Garral had risen, without being able to control a sudden start. His eyes were immediately cast down, and he seemed to designedly avoid the look of his wife.

"What is the matter with you?" asked she.

"Minha? To get married!" murmured Joam.

"My dear," said Yaquita, feeling somewhat hurt, "have you any objection to make to the marriage? Have you not for some time noticed the feelings which Manoel has entertained toward our daughter?"

“Yes; and a year since — — ”

And Joam sat down without finishing his thoughts. By an effort of his will he had again become master of himself. The unaccountable impression which had been made upon him disappeared. Gradually his eyes returned to meet those of Yaquita, and he remained thoughtfully looking at her.

Yaquita took his hand.

“Joam,” she said, “have I been deceived? Had you no idea that this marriage would one day take place, and that it would give her every chance of happiness?”

“Yes,” answered Joam. “All! Certainly. But, Yaquita, this wedding — this wedding that we are both thinking of — when is it coming off? Shortly?”

“It will come off when you choose, Joam.”

“And it will take place here — at Iquitos?”

This question obliged Yaquita to enter on the other matter which she had at heart. She did not do so, however, without some hesitation, which was quite intelligible.

“Joam,” said she, after a moment’s silence, “listen to me. Regarding this wedding, I have got a proposal which I hope you will approve of. Two or three times during the last twenty years I have asked you to take me and my daughter to the provinces of the Lower Amazon, and to Para, where we have never been. The cares of the fazenda, the works which have required your presence, have not allowed you to grant our request. To absent yourself even for a few days would then have injured your business. But now everything has been successful beyond your dreams, and if the hour of repose has not yet come for you, you can at least for a few weeks get away from your work.”

Joam Garral did not answer, but Yaquita felt his hand tremble in hers, as though under the shock of some sorrowful recollection. At the same time a half-smile came to her husband’s lips — a mute invitation for her to finish what she had begun.

“Joam,” she continued, “here is an occasion which we shall never see again in this life. Minha is going to be married away from us, and is going to leave us! It is the first sorrow which our daughter has caused us, and my heart quails when I think of the separation which is so near! But I should be content if I could accompany her to Belem! Does it not seem right to you, even in other respects that we should know her husband’s mother, who is to replace me, and to whom we are about to entrust her? Added to this, Minha does not wish to grieve Madame Valdez by getting married at a distance from her. When we were married, Joam, if your mother had been alive, would you not have liked her to be present at your wedding?”

At these words of Yaquita Joam made a movement which he could not repress.

“My dear,” continued Yaquita, “with Minha, with our two sons, Benito and Manoel, with you, how I should like to see Brazil, and to journey down this splendid river, even to the provinces on the seacoast through which it runs! It seems to me that the separation would be so much less cruel! As we came back we should revisit our daughter in her house with her second mother. I would not think of her as gone I knew not where. I would fancy myself much less a stranger to the doings of her life.”

This time Joam had fixed his eyes on his wife and looked at her for some time without saying anything.

What ailed him? Why this hesitation to grant a request which was so just in itself — to say “Yes,” when it would give such pleasure to all who belonged to him? His business affairs could not afford a sufficient reason. A few weeks of absence would not compromise matters to such a degree. His manager would be able to take his place without any hitch in the fazenda. And yet all this time he hesitated.

Yaquita had taken both her husband’s hands in hers, and pressed them tenderly.

“Joam,” she said, “it is not a mere whim that I am asking you to grant. No! For a long time I have thought over the proposition I have just made to you; and if you consent, it will be the realization of my most cherished desire. Our children know why I am now talking to you. Minha, Benito, Manoel, all ask this favor, that we should accompany them. We would all rather have the wedding at Belem than at Iquitos. It will be better for your daughter, for her establishment, for the position which she will take at Belem, that she should arrive with her people, and appear less of a stranger in the town in which she will spend most of her life.”

Joam Garral leaned on his elbows. For a moment he hid his face in his hands, like a man who had to collect his thoughts before he made answer. There was evidently some hesitation which he was anxious to overcome, even some trouble which his wife felt but could not explain. A secret battle was being fought under that thoughtful brow. Yaquita got anxious, and almost reproached herself for raising the question. Anyhow, she was resigned to what Joam should decide. If the expedition would cost too much, she would silence her wishes; she would never more speak of leaving the fazenda, and never ask the reason for the inexplicable refusal.

Some minutes passed. Joam Garral rose. He went to the door, and did not return. Then he seemed to give a last look on that glorious nature, on that corner of the world where for twenty years of his life he had met with all his happiness.

Then with slow steps he returned to his wife. His face bore a new expression, that of a man who had taken a last decision, and with whom irresolution had ceased.

“You are right,” he said, in a firm voice. “The journey is necessary. When shall we start?”

“Ah! Joam! my Joam!” cried Yaquita, in her joy. “Thank you for me! Thank you for them!”

And tears of affection came to her eyes as her husband clasped her to his heart.

At this moment happy voices were heard outside at the door of the house.

Manoel and Benito appeared an instant after at the threshold, almost at the same moment as Minha entered the room.

“Children! your father consents!” cried Yaquita. “We are going to Belem!”

With a grave face, and without speaking a word, Joam Garral received the congratulations of his son and the kisses of his daughter.

“And what date, father,” asked Benito, “have you fixed for the wedding?”

“Date?” answered Joam. “Date? We shall see. We will fix it at Belem.”

“I am so happy! I am so happy!” repeated Minha, as she had done on the day when she had first known of Manoel’s request. “We shall now see the Amazon in all its glory throughout its course through the provinces of Brazil! Thanks, father!”

And the young enthusiast, whose imagination was already stirred, continued to her brother and to Manoel:

“Let us be off to the library! Let us get hold of every book and every map that we can find which will tell us anything about this magnificent river system! Don’t let us travel like blind folks! I want to see everything and know everything about this king of the rivers of the earth!”

CHAPTER V. THE AMAZON

“THE LARGEST river in the whole world!” said Benito to Manoel Valdez, on the morrow.

They were sitting on the bank which formed the southern boundary of the fazenda, and looking at the liquid molecules passing slowly by, which, coming from the enormous range of the Andes, were on their road to lose themselves in the Atlantic Ocean eight hundred leagues away.

“And the river which carries to the sea the largest volume of water,” replied Manoel.

“A volume so considerable,” added Benito, “that it freshens the sea water for an immense distance from its mouth, and the force of whose current is felt by ships at eight leagues from the coast.”

“A river whose course is developed over more than thirty degrees of latitude.”

“And in a basin which from south to north does not comprise less than twenty-five degrees.”

“A basin!” exclaimed Benito. “Can you call it a basin, the vast plain through which it runs, the savannah which on all sides stretches out of sight, without a hill to give a gradient, without a mountain to bound the horizon?”

“And along its whole extent,” continued Manoel, “like the thousand tentacles of some gigantic polyp, two hundred tributaries, flowing from north or south, themselves fed by smaller affluents without number, by the side of which the large rivers of Europe are but petty streamlets.”

“And in its course five hundred and sixty islands, without counting islets, drifting or stationary, forming a kind of archipelago, and yielding of themselves the wealth of a kingdom!”

“And along its flanks canals, lagoons, and lakes, such as cannot be met with even in Switzerland, Lombardy, Scotland, or Canada.”

“A river which, fed by its myriad tributaries, discharges into the Atlantic over two hundred and fifty millions of cubic meters of water every hour.”

“A river whose course serves as the boundary of two republics, and sweeps majestically across the largest empire of South America, as if it were, in very truth, the Pacific Ocean itself flowing out along its own canal into the Atlantic.”

“And what a mouth! An arm of the sea in which one island, Marajo, has a circumference of more than five hundred leagues!”

“And whose waters the ocean does not pond back without raising in a strife which is phenomenal, a tide-race, or *‘pororoca,’* to which the ebbs, the bores, and the eddies of other rivers are but tiny ripples fanned up by the breeze.”

“A river which three names are scarcely enough to distinguish, and which ships of heavy tonnage, without any change in their cargoes, can ascend for more than three thousand miles from its mouth.”

“A river which, by itself, its affluents, and subsidiary streams, opens a navigable commercial route across the whole of the south of the continent, passing from the Magdalena to the Ortequazza, from the Ortequazza to the Caqueta, from the Caqueta to the Putumayo, from the Putumayo to the

Amazon! Four thousand miles of waterway, which only require a few canals to make the network of navigation complete!"

"In short, the biggest and most admirable river system which we have in the world."

The two young men were speaking in a kind of frenzy of their incomparable river. They were themselves children of this great Amazon, whose affluents, well worthy of itself, from the highways which penetrate Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, New Grenada, Venezuela, and the four Guianas — English, French, Dutch and Brazilian.

What nations, what races, has it seen whose origin is lost in the far-distant past! It is one of the largest rivers of the globe. Its true source still baffles our explorers. Numbers of States still claim the honor of giving it birth. The Amazon was not likely to escape the inevitable fate, and Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia have for years disputed as to the honor of its glorious paternity.

To-day, however, there seems to be little doubt but that the Amazon rises in Peru, in the district of Huaraco, in the department of Tarma, and that it starts from the Lake of Lauricocha, which is situated between the eleventh and twelfth degree of south latitude.

Those who make the river rise in Bolivia, and descend form the mountains of Titicaca, have to prove that the true Amazon is the Ucayali, which is formed by the junction of the Paro and the Apurimac — an assertion which is now generally rejected.

At its departure from Lake Lauricocha the youthful river starts toward the northeast for a distance of five hundred and sixty miles, and does not strike to the west until it has received an important tributary — the Panta. It is called the Marañon in its journey through Colombia and Peru up to the Brazilian frontier — or, rather, the Maranhao, for Marañon is only the French rendering of the Portuguese name.

From the frontier of Brazil to Manaos, where the superb Rio Negro joins it, it takes the name of the Solimaës, or Solimoens, from the name of the Indian tribe Solimao, of which survivors are still found in the neighboring provinces. And, finally, from Manaos to the sea it is the Amasenas, or river of the Amazons, a name given it by the old Spaniards, the descendants of the adventurous Orellana, whose vague but enthusiastic stories went to show that there existed a tribe of female warriors on the Rio Nhamunda, one of the middle-sized affluents of the great river.

From its commencement the Amazon is recognizable as destined to become a magnificent stream. There are neither rapids nor obstacles of any sort until it reaches a defile where its course is slightly narrowed between two picturesque and unequal precipices. No falls are met with until this point is reached, where it curves to the eastward, and passes through the intermediary chain of the Andes. Hereabouts are a few waterfalls, were it not for which the river would be navigable from its mouth to its source. As it is, however, according the Humboldt, the Amazon is free for five-sixths of its length.

And from its first starting there is no lack of tributaries, which are themselves fed by subsidiary streams. There is the Chinchipa, coming from the northeast, on its left. On its right it is joined by the Chachapoyas, coming from the northeast. On the left we have the Marona and the Pastuca; and the Guallaga comes in from the right near the mission station of Laguna. On the left there comes the Chambyra and the Tigré, flowing from the northeast; and on the right the Huallaga, which joins the main stream twenty-eight hundred miles from the Atlantic, and can be ascended by steamboats for over two hundred miles into the very heart of Peru. To the right, again, near the mission of San Joachim d’Omaguas, just where the upper basin terminates, and after flowing majestically across the pampas of Sacramento, it receives the magnificent Ucayali, the great artery which, fed by numerous affluents, descends from Lake Chucuito, in the northeast of Arica.

Such are the principal branches above the village of Iquitos. Down the stream the tributaries become so considerable that the beds of most European rivers would fail to contain them. But the mouths of these auxiliary waters Joam Garral and his people will pass as they journey down the Amazon.

To the beauties of this unrivaled river, which waters the finest country in the world, and keeps along its whole course at a few degrees to the south of the equator, there is to be added another quality, possessed by neither the Nile, the Mississippi, nor the Livingstone — or, in other words, the old Congo-Zaira-Lualaba — and that is (although some ill-informed travelers have stated to the contrary) that the Amazon crosses a most healthy part of South America. Its basin is constantly swept by westerly winds. It is not a narrow valley surrounded by high mountains which border its banks, but a huge plain, measuring three hundred and fifty leagues from north to south, scarcely varied with a few knolls, whose whole extent the atmospheric currents can traverse unchecked.

Professor Agassiz very properly protested against the pretended unhealthiness o the climate of a country which is destined to become one of the most active of the world’s producers. According to him, “a soft and gentle breeze is constantly observable, and produces an evaporation, thanks to which the temperature is kept down, and the sun does not give out heat unchecked. The constancy of this refreshing breeze renders the climate of the river Amazon agreeable, and even delightful."

The Abbé Durand has likewise testified that if the temperature does not drop below 25 degrees Centigrade, it never rises above 33 degrees, and this gives for the year a mean temperature of from 28 degrees to 29 degrees, with a range of only 8 degrees.

After such statements we are safe in affirming that the basin of the Amazon has none of the burning heats of countries like Asia and Africa, which are crossed by the same parallels.

The vast plain which serves for its valley is accessible over its whole extent to the generous breezes which come from off the Atlantic.

And the provinces to which the river has given its name have acknowledged right to call themselves the healthiest of a country which is one of the finest on the earth.

And how can we say that the hydrographical system of the Amazon is not known?

In the sixteenth century Orellana, the lieutenant of one of the brothers Pizarro, descended the Rio Negro, arrived on the main river in 1540, ventured without a guide across the unknown district, and, after eighteen months of a navigation of which is record is most marvelous, reached the mouth.

In 1636 and 1637 the Portuguese Pedro Texeira ascended the Amazon to Napo, with a fleet of forty-seven pirogues.

In 1743 La Condamine, after having measured an arc of the meridian at the equator, left his companions Bouguer and Godin des Odonais, embarked on the Chinchipe, descended it to its junction with the Marañon, reached the mouth at Napo on the 31st of July, just in time to observe an emersion of the first satellite of Jupiter — which allowed this “Humboldt of the eighteenth century” to accurately determine the latitude and longitude of the spot — visited the villages on both banks, and on the 6th of September arrived in front of the fort of Para. This immense journey had important results — not only was the course of the Amazon made out in scientific fashion, but it seemed almost certain that it communicated with the Orinoco.

Fifty-five years later Humboldt and Bonpland completed the valuable work of La Condamine, and drew up the map of the Manañon as far as Napo.

Since this period the Amazon itself and all its principal tributaries have been frequently visited.

In 1827 Lister-Maw, in 1834 and 1835 Smyth, in 1844 the French lieutenant in command of the “Boulonnaise,” the Brazilian Valdez in 1840, the French “Paul Marcoy” from 1848 to 1860, the whimsical painter Biard in 1859, Professor Agassiz in 1865 and 1866, in 1967 the Brazilian engineer Franz Keller-Linzenger, and lastly, in 1879 Doctor Crevaux, have explored the course of the river, ascended many of its tributaries, and ascertained the navigability of its principal affluents.

But what has won the greatest honor for the Brazilian government is that on the 31st of July, 1857, after numerous frontier disputes between France and Brazil, about the Guiana boundary, the course of the Amazon was declared to be free and open to all flags; and, to make practice harmonize with theory, Brazil entered into negotiations with the neighboring powers for the exploration of every river-road in the basin of the Amazon.

To-day lines of well-found steamboats, which correspond direct with Liverpool, are plying on the river from its mouth up to Manaos; others ascend to Iquitos; others by way of the Tapajoz, the Madeira, the Rio Negro, or the Purus, make their way into the center of Peru and Bolivia.

One can easily imagine the progress which commerce will one day make in this immense and wealthy area, which is without a rival in the world.

But to this medal of the future there is a reverse. No progress can be accomplished without detriment to the indigenous races.

In face, on the Upper Amazon many Indian tribes have already disappeared, among others the Curicicurus and the Sorimaos. On the Putumayo, if a few Yuris are still met with, the Yahuas have abandoned the district to take refuge among some of the distant tributaries, and the Maoos have quitted its banks to wander in their diminished numbers among the forests of Japura.

The Tunantins is almost depopulated, and there are only a few families of wandering Indians at the mouth of the Jurua. The Teffé is almost deserted, and near the sources of the Japur there remained but the fragments of the great nation of the Umaüa. The Coari is forsaken. There are but few Muras Indians on the banks of the Purus. Of the ancient Manaos one can count but a wandering party or two. On the banks of the Rio Negro there are only a few half-breeds, Portuguese and natives, where a few years ago twenty-four different nations had their homes.

Such is the law of progress. The Indians will disappear. Before the Anglo-Saxon race Australians and Tasmanians have vanished. Before the conquerors of the Far West the North American Indians have been wiped out. One day perhaps the Arabs will be annihilated by the colonization of the French.

But we must return to 1852. The means of communication, so numerous now, did not then exist, and the journey of Joam Garral would require not less than four months, owing to the conditions under which it was made.

Hence this observation of Benito, while the two friends were watching the river as it gently flowed at their feet:

“Manoel, my friend, if there is very little interval between our arrival at Belem and the moment of our separation, the time will appear to you to be very short.”

“Yes, Benito,” said Manoel, “and very long as well, for Minha cannot by my wife until the end of the voyage.”

CHAPTER VI. A FOREST ON THE GROUND

THE GARRAL family were in high glee. The magnificent journey on the Amazon was to be undertaken under conditions as agreeable as possible. Not only were the fazender and his family to start on a voyage for several months, but, as we shall see, he was to be accompanied by a part of the staff of the farm.

In beholding every one happy around him, Joam forgot the anxieties which appeared to trouble his life. From the day his decision was taken he had been another man, and when he busied himself about the preparations for the expedition he regained his former activity. His people rejoiced exceedingly at seeing him again at work. His moral self reacted against his physical self, and Joam again became the active, energetic man of his earlier years, and moved about once more as though he had spent his life in the open air, under the invigorating influences of forests, fields, and running waters.

Moreover, the few weeks that were to precede his departure had been well employed.

At this period, as we have just remarked, the course of the Amazon was not yet furrowed by the numberless steam vessels, which companies were only then thinking of putting into the river. The service was worked by individuals on their own account alone, and often the boats were only employed in the business of the riverside establishments.

These boats were either *“ubas,”* canoes made from the trunk of a tree, hollowed out by fire, and finished with the ax, pointed and light in front, and heavy and broad in the stern, able to carry from one to a dozen paddlers, and of three or four tons burden: *“egariteas,”* constructed on a larger scale, of broader design, and leaving on each side a gangway for the rowers: or *“jangada,”* rafts of no particular shape, propelled by a triangular sail, and surmounted by a cabin of mud and straw, which served the Indian and his family for a floating home.

These three kinds of craft formed the lesser flotilla of the Amazon, and were only suited for a moderate traffic of passengers or merchandise.

Larger vessels, however, existed, either *“vigilingas,”* ranging from eight up to ten tons, with three masts rigged with red sails, and which in calm weather were rowed by four long paddles not at all easy to work against the stream; or *“cobertas,”* of twenty tons burden, a kind of junk with a poop behind and a cabin down below, with two masts and square sails of unequal size, and propelled, when the wind fell, by six long sweeps which Indians worked from a forecastle.

But neither of these vessels satisfied Joam Garral. From the moment that he had resolved to descend the Amazon he had thought of making the most of the voyage by carrying a huge convoy of goods into Para. From this point of view there was no necessity to descend the river in a hurry. And the determination to which he had come pleased every one, excepting, perhaps, Manoel, who would for very good reasons have preferred some rapid steamboat.

But though the means of transport devised by Joam were primitive in the extreme, he was going to take with him a numerous following and abandon himself to the stream under exceptional conditions of comfort and security.

It would be, in truth, as if a part of the fazenda of Iquitos had been cut away from the bank and carried down the Amazon with all that composed the family of the fazender — masters and servants, in their dwellings, their cottages, and their huts.

The settlement of Iquitos included a part of those magnificent forests which, in the central districts of South America, are practically inexhaustible.

Joam Garral thoroughly understood the management of these woods, which were rich in the most precious and diverse species adapted for joinery, cabinet work, ship building, and carpentry, and from them he annually drew considerable profits.

The river was there in front of him, and could it not be as safely and economically used as a railway if one existed? So every year Joam Garral felled some hundreds of trees from his stock and formed immense rafts of floating wood, of joists, beams, and slightly squared trunks, which were taken to Para in charge of capable pilots who were thoroughly acquainted with the depths of the river and the direction of its currents.

This year Joam Garral decided to do as he had done in preceding years. Only, when the raft was made up, he was going to leave to Benito all the detail of the trading part of the business. But there was no time to lose. The beginning of June was the best season to start, for the waters, increased by the floods of the upper basin, would gradually and gradually subside until the month of October.

The first steps had thus to be taken without delay, for the raft was to be of unusual proportions. It would be necessary to fell a half-mile square of the forest which was situated at the junction of the Nanay and the Amazon — that is to say, the whole river side of the fazenda, to form the enormous mass, for such were the *jangadas*, or river rafts, which attained the dimensions of a small island.

It was in this *jangada*, safer than any other vessel of the country, larger than a hundred *egariteas* or *vigilingas* coupled together, that Joam Garral proposed to embark with his family, his servants, and his merchandise.

“Excellent idea!” had cried Minha, clapping her hands, when she learned her father’s scheme.

“Yes,” said Yaquita, “and in that way we shall reach Belem without danger or fatigue.”

“And during the stoppages we can have some hunting in the forests which line the banks,” added Benito.

“Won’t it take rather long?” observed Manoel; “could we not hit upon some quicker way of descending the Amazon?”

It would take some time, obviously, but the interested observation of the young doctor received no attention from any one.

Joam Garral then called in an Indian who was the principal manager of the fazenda.

“In a month,” he said to him, “the jangada must be built and ready to launch.”

“We’ll set to work this very day, sir.”

It was a heavy task. There were about a hundred Indians and blacks, and during the first fortnight in May they did wonders. Some people unaccustomed to these great tree massacres would perhaps have groaned to see giants many hundred years old fall in a few hours beneath the axes of the woodmen; but there was such a quantity on the banks of the river, up stream and down stream, even to the most distant points of the horizon, that the felling of this half-mile of forest would scarcely leave an appreciable void.

The superintendent of the men, after receiving the instructions of Joam Garral, had first cleared the ground of the creepers, brushwood, weeds, and arborescent plants which obstructed it. Before taking to the saw and the ax they had armed themselves with a felling-sword, that indispensable tool of every one who desires to penetrate the Amazonian forests, a large blade slightly curved, wide and flat, and two or three feet long, and strongly handled, which the natives wield with consummate address. In a few hours, with the help of the felling-sword, they had cleared the ground, cut down the underwood, and opened large gaps into the densest portions of the wood.

In this way the work progressed. The ground was cleared in front of the woodmen. The old trunks were divested of their clothing of creepers, cacti, ferns, mosses, and bromelias. They were stripped naked to the bark, until such time as the bark itself was stripped from off them.

Then the whole of the workers, before whom fled an innumerable crowd of monkeys who were hardly their superiors in agility, slung themselves into the upper branches, sawing off the heavier boughs and cutting down the topmost limbs, which had to be cleared away on the spot. Very soon there remained only a doomed forest, with long bare stems, bereft of their crowns, through which the sun luxuriantly rayed on to the humid soil which perhaps its shots had never before caressed.

There was not a single tree which could not be used for some work of skill, either in carpentry or cabinet-work. There, shooting up like columns of ivory ringed with brown, were wax-palms one hundred and twenty feet high, and four feet thick at their base; white chestnuts, which yield the three-cornered nuts; *“murichis,”* unexcelled for building purposes; *“barrigudos,”* measuring a couple of yards at the swelling, which is found at a few feet above the earth, trees with shining russet bark dotted with gray tubercles, each pointed stem of which supports a horizontal parasol; and *“bombax”* of superb stature, with its straight and smooth white stem. Among these magnificent specimens of the Amazonian flora there fell many *“quatibos”* whose rosy canopies towered above the neighboring trees, whose fruits are like little cups with rows of chestnuts ranged within, and whose wood of clear violet is specially in demand for ship-building. And besides there was the ironwood; and more particularly the *“ibiriratea,”* nearly black in its skin, and so close grained that of it the Indians make their battle-axes; *“jacarandas,”* more precious than mahogany; *“cæsalpinas,”* only now found in the depths of the old forests which have escaped the woodman’s ax; *“sapucaias,”* one hundred and fifty feet high, buttressed by natural arches, which, starting from three yards from their base, rejoin the tree some thirty feet up the stem, twining themselves round the trunk like the filatures of a twisted column, whose head expands in a bouquet of vegetable fireworks made up of the yellow, purple, and snowy white of the parasitic plants.

Three weeks after the work was begun not one was standing of all the trees which had covered the angle of the Amazon and the Nanay. The clearance was complete. Joam Garral had not even had to bestir himself in the demolition of a forest which it would take twenty or thirty years to replace. Not a stick of young or old wood was left to mark the boundary of a future clearing, not even an angle to mark the limit of the denudation. It was indeed a clean sweep; the trees were cut to the level of the earth, to wait the day when their roots would be got out, over which the coming spring would still spread its verdant cloak.

This square space, washed on its sides by the waters of the river and its tributary, was destined to be cleared, plowed, planted, and sown, and the following year fields of manioc, coffee-shrubs, sugar-canes, arrowroot, maize, and peanuts would occupy the ground so recently covered by the trees.

The last week of the month had not arrived when the trunks, classified according to their varieties and specific gravity, were symmetrically arranged on the bank of the Amazon, at the spot where the immense jangada was to be guilt — which, with the different habitations for the accommodation of the crew, would become a veritable floating village — to wait the time when the waters of the river, swollen by the floods, would raise it and carry it for hundreds of leagues to the Atlantic coast.

The whole time the work was going on Joam Garral had been engaged in superintending it. From the clearing to the bank of the fazenda he had formed a large mound on which the portions of the raft were disposed, and to this matter he had attended entirely himself.

Yaquita was occupied with Cybele with the preparations for the departure, though the old negress could not be made to understand why they wanted to go or what they hoped to see.

“But you will see things that you never saw before,” Yaquita kept saying to her.

“Will they be better than what I see now?” was Cybele’s invariable reply.

Minha and her favorite for their part took care of what more particularly concerned them. They were not preparing for a simple voyage; for them it was a permanent departure, and there were a thousand details to look after for settling in the other country in which the young mulatto was to live with the mistress to whom she was so devotedly attached. Minha was a trifle sorrowful, but the joyous Lina was quite unaffected at leaving Iquitos. Minha Valdez would be the same to her as Minha Garral, and to check her spirits she would have to be separated from her mistress, and that was never thought of.

Benito had actively assisted his father in the work, which was on the point of completion. He commenced his apprenticeship to the trade of a fazender, which would probably one day become his own, as he was about to do that of a merchant on their descent of the river.

As for Manoel, he divided his time between the house, where Yaquita and her daughter were as busy as possible, and the clearing, to which Benito fetched him rather oftener than he thought convenient, and on the whole the division was very unequal, as may well be imagined.

CHAPTER VII. FOLLOWING A LIANA

IT WAS a Sunday, the 26th of May, and the young people had made up their minds to take a holiday. The weather was splendid, the heat being tempered by the refreshing breezes which blew from off the Cordilleras, and everything invited them out for an excursion into the country.

Benito and Manoel had offered to accompany Minha through the thick woods which bordered the right bank of the Amazon opposite the fazenda.

It was, in a manner, a farewell visit to the charming environs of Iquitos. The young men went equipped for the chase, but as sportsmen who had no intention of going far from their companions in pursuit of any game. Manoel could be trusted for that, and the girls — for Lina could not leave her mistress — went prepared for a walk, an excursion of two or three leagues being not too long to frighten them.

Neither Joam Garral nor Yaquita had time to go with them. For one reason the plan of the jangada was not yet complete, and it was necessary that its construction should not be interrupted for a day, and another was that Yaquita and Cybele, well seconded as they were by the domestics of the fazenda, had not an hour to lose.

Minha had accepted the offer with much pleasure, and so, after breakfast on the day we speak of, at about eleven o’clock, the two young men and the two girls met on the bank at the angle where the two streams joined. One of the blacks went with them. They all embarked in one of the ubas used in the service of the farm, and after having passed between the islands of Iquitos and Parianta, they reached the right bank of the Amazon.

They landed at a clump of superb tree-ferns, which were crowned, at a height of some thirty feet with a sort of halo made of the dainty branches of green velvet and the delicate lacework of the drooping fronds.

“Well, Manoel,” said Minha, “it is for me to do the honors of the forest; you are only a stranger in these regions of the Upper Amazon. We are at home here, and you must allow me to do my duty, as mistress of the house.”

“Dearest Minha,” replied the young man, “you will be none the less mistress of your house in our town of Belem than at the fazenda of Iquitos, and there as here — — ”

“Now, then,” interrupted Benito, “you did not come here to exchange loving speeches, I imagine. Just forget for a few hours that you are engaged.”

“Not for an hour — not for an instant!” said Manoel.

“Perhaps you will if Minha orders you?”

“Minha will not order me.”

“Who knows?” said Lina, laughing.

“Lina is right,” answered Minha, who held out her hand to Manoel. “Try to forget! Forget! my brother requires it. All is broken off! As long as this walk lasts we are not engaged: I am no more than the sister of Benito! You are only my friend!”

“To be sure,” said Benito.

“Bravo! bravo! there are only strangers here,” said the young mulatto, clapping her hands.

“Strangers who see each other for the first time,” added the girl; “who meet, bow to — — ”

“Mademoiselle!” said Manoel, turning to Minha.

“To whom have I the honor to speak, sir?” said she in the most serious manner possible.

“To Manoel Valdez, who will be glad if your brother will introduce me.”

“Oh, away with your nonsense!” cried Benito. “Stupid idea that I had! Be engaged, my friends — be it as much as you like! Be it always!”

“Always!” said Minha, from whom the word escaped so naturally that Lina’s peals of laughter redoubled.

A grateful glance from Manoel repaid Minha for the imprudence of her tongue.

“Come along,” said Benito, so as to get his sister out of her embarrassment; “if we walk on we shall not talk so much.”

“One moment, brother,” she said. “You have seen how ready I am to obey you. You wished to oblige Manoel and me to forget each other, so as not to spoil your walk. Very well; and now I am going to ask a sacrifice from you so that you shall not spoil mine. Whether it pleases you or not, Benito, you must promise me to forget — — ”

“Forget what?”

“That you are a sportsman!”

“What! you forbid me to — — ”

“I forbid you to fire at any of these charming birds — any of the parrots, caciques, or curucus which are flying about so happily among the trees! And the same interdiction with regard to the smaller game with which we shall have to do to-day. If any ounce, jaguar, or such thing comes too near, well — — ”

“But — — ” said Benito.

“If not, I will take Manoel’s arm, and we shall save or lose ourselves, and you will be obliged to run after us.”

“Would you not like me to refuse, eh?” asked Benito, looking at Manoel.

“I think I should!” replied the young man.

“Well then — no!” said Benito; “I do not refuse; I will obey and annoy you. Come on!”

And so the four, followed by the black, struck under the splendid trees, whose thick foliage prevented the sun’s rays from every reaching the soil.

There is nothing more magnificent than this part of the right bank of the Amazon. There, in such picturesque confusion, so many different trees shoot up that it is possible to count more than a hundred different species in a square mile. A forester could easily see that no woodman had been there with his hatchet or ax, for the effects of a clearing are visible for many centuries afterward. If the new trees are even a hundred years old, the general aspect still differs from what it was originally, for the lianas and other parasitic plants alter, and signs remain which no native can misunderstand.

The happy group moved then into the tall herbage, across the thickets and under the bushes, chatting and laughing. In front, when the brambles were too thick, the negro, felling-sword in hand, cleared the way, and put thousands of birds to flight.

Minha was right to intercede for the little winged world which flew about in the higher foliage, for the finest representations of tropical ornithology were there to be seen — green parrots and clamorous parakeets, which seemed to be the natural fruit of these gigantic trees; humming-birds in all their varieties, light-blue and ruby red; *"tisauras"* with long scissors-like tails, looking like detached flowers which the wind blew from branch to branch; blackbirds, with orange plumage bound with brown; golden-edged beccaficos; and *"sabias,"* black as crows; all united in a deafening concert of shrieks and whistles. The long beak of the toucan stood out against the golden clusters of the *"quiriris,"* and the treepeckers or woodpeckers of Brazil wagged their little heads, speckled all over with their purple spots. It was truly a scene of enchantment.

But all were silent and went into hiding when above the tops of the trees there grated like a rusty weathercock the *"alma de gato"* or "soul of the cat," a kind of light fawn-colored sparrow-hawk. If he proudly hooted, displaying in the air the long white plumes of his tail, he in his turn meekly took to flight when in the loftier heights there appeared the *"gaviao,"* the large white-headed eagle, the terror of the whole winged population of these woods.

Minha made Manoel admire the natural wonders which could not be found in their simplicity in the more civilized provinces of the east. He listened to her more with his eyes than his ears, for the cries and the songs of these thousands of birds were every now and then so penetrating that he was not able to hear what she said. The noisy laughter of Lina was alone sufficiently shrill to ring out with its joyous note above every kind of clucking, chirping, hooting, whistling, and cooing.

At the end of an hour they had scarcely gone a mile. As they left the river the trees assumed another aspect, and the animal life was no longer met with near the ground, but at from sixty to eighty feet above, where troops of monkeys chased each other along the higher branches. Here and there a few cones of the solar rays shot down into the underwood. In fact, in these tropical forests light does not seem to be necessary for their existence. The air is enough for the vegetable growth, whether it be large or small, tree or plant, and all the heat required for the development of their sap is derived not from the surrounding atmosphere, but from the bosom of the soil itself, where it is stored up as in an enormous stove.

And on the bromelias, grass plantains, orchids, cacti, and in short all the parasites which formed a little forest beneath the large one, many marvelous insects were they tempted to pluck as though they had been genuine blossoms — nestors with blue wings like shimmering watered silk, leilu butterflies reflexed with gold and striped with fringes of green, agrippina moths, ten inches long, with leaves for wings, maribunda bees, like living emeralds set in sockets of gold, and legions of lampyrons or pyrophorus coleopters, valagumas with breastplates of bronze, and green elytræ, with yellow light pouring from their eyes, who, when the night comes, illuminate the forest with their many-colored scintillations.

“What wonders!” repeated the enthusiastic girl.

“You are at home, Minha, or at least you say so,” said Benito, “and that is the way you talk of your riches!”

“Sneer away, little brother!” replied Minha; “such beautiful things are only lent to us; is it not so, Manoel? They come from the hand of the Almighty and belong to the world!”

“Let Benito laugh on, Minha,” said Manoel. “He hides it very well, but he is a poet himself when his time comes, and he admires as much as we do all these beauties of nature. Only when his gun is on his arm, good-by to poetry!”

“Then be a poet now,” replied the girl.

“I am a poet,” said Benito. “O! Nature-enchanting, etc.”

We may confess, however, that in forbidding him to use his gun Minha had imposed on him a genuine privation. There was no lack of game in the woods, and several magnificent opportunities he had declined with regret.

In some of the less wooded parts, in places where the breaks were tolerably spacious, they saw several pairs of ostriches, of the species known as *“naudus,”* from four to five feet high, accompanied by their inseparable *“seriemas,”* a sort of turkey, infinitely better from an edible point of view than the huge birds they escort.

“See what that wretched promise costs me,” sighed Benito, as, at a gesture from his sister, he replaced under his arm the gun which had instinctively gone up to his shoulder.

“We ought to respect the seriemas,” said Manoel, “for they are great destroyers of the snakes.”

“Just as we ought to respect the snakes,” replied Benito, “because they eat the noxious insects, and just as we ought the insects because they live on smaller insects more offensive still. At that rate we ought to respect everything.”

But the instinct of the young sportsman was about to be put to a still more rigorous trial. The woods became of a sudden full of game. Swift stags and graceful roebucks scampered off beneath the bushes, and a well-aimed bullet would assuredly have stopped them. Here and there turkeys showed themselves with their milk and coffee-colored plumage; and peccaries, a sort of wild pig highly appreciated by lovers of venison, and agouties, which are the hares and rabbits of Central America; and tatous belonging to the order of edentates, with their scaly shells of patterns of mosaic.

And truly Benito showed more than virtue, and even genuine heroism, when he came across some tapirs, called “antas” in Brazil, diminutives of the elephant, already nearly undiscoverable on the banks of the Upper Amazon and its tributaries, pachyderms so dear to the hunters for their rarity, so appreciated by the gourmands for their meat, superior far to beef, and above all for the protuberance on the nape of the neck, which is a morsel fit for a king.

His gun almost burned his fingers, but faithful to his promise he kept it quiet.

But yet — and he cautioned his sister about this — the gun would go off in spite of him, and probably register a master-stroke in sporting annals, if within range there should come a *“tamandoa assa,”* a kind of large and very curious ant-eater.

Happily the big ant-eater did not show himself, neither did any panthers, leopards, jaguars, guepars, or cougars, called indifferently ounces in South America, and to whom it is not advisable to get too near.

“After all,” said Benito, who stopped for an instant, “to walk is very well, but to walk without an object — — ”

“Without an object!” replied his sister; “but our object is to see, to admire, to visit for the last time these forests of Central America, which we shall not find again in Para, and to bid them a fast farewell.”

“Ah! an idea!”

It was Lina who spoke.

“An idea of Lina’s can be no other than a silly one,” said Benito, shaking his head.

“It is unkind, brother,” said Minha, “to make fun of Lina when she has been thinking how to give our walk the object which you have just regretted it lacks.”

“Besides, Mr. Benito, I am sure my idea will please you,” replied the mulatto.

“Well, what is it?” asked Minha.

“You see that liana?”

And Lina pointed to a liana of the *“cipos”* kind, twisted round a gigantic sensitive mimosa, whose leaves, light as feathers, shut up at the least disturbance.

“Well?” said Benito.

“I proposed,” replied Minha, “that we try to follow that liana to its very end.”

“It is an idea, and it is an object!” observed Benito, “to follow this liana, no matter what may be the obstacles, thickets, underwood, rocks, brooks, torrents, to let nothing stop us, not even — — ”

“Certainly, you are right, brother!” said Minha; “Lina is a trifle absurd.”

“Come on, then!” replied her brother; “you say that Lina is absurd so as to say that Benito is absurd to approve of it!”

“Well, both of you are absurd, if that will amuse you,” returned Minha. “Let us follow the liana!”

“You are not afraid?” said Manoel.

“Still objections!” shouted Benito.

“Ah, Manoel! you would not speak like that if you were already on your way and Minha was waiting for you at the end.”

“I am silent,” replied Manoel; “I have no more to say. I obey. Let us follow the liana!”

And off they went as happy as children home for their holidays.

This vegetable might take them far if they determined to follow it to its extremity, like the thread of Ariadne, as far almost as that which the heiress of Minos used to lead her from the labyrinth, and perhaps entangle them more deeply.

It was in fact a creeper of the salses family, one of the cipos known under the name of the red *“japicanga,”* whose length sometimes measures several miles. But, after all, they could leave it when they liked.

The cipo passed from one tree to another without breaking its continuity, sometimes twisting round the trunks, sometimes garlanding the branches, here jumping form a dragon-tree to a rosewood, then from a gigantic chestnut, the *“Bertholletia excelsa,”* to some of the wine palms, *“baccabas,”* whose branches have been appropriately compared by Agassiz to long sticks of coral flecked with green. Here round *“tucumas,”* or ficuses, capriciously twisted like centenarian olive-trees, and of which Brazil had fifty-four varieties; here round the kinds of euphorbias, which produce caoutchouc, *“gualtes,”* noble palm-trees, with slender, graceful, and glossy stems; and cacao-trees, which shoot up of their own accord on the banks of the Amazon and its tributaries, having different melastomas, some with red flowers and others ornamented with panicles of whitish berries.

But the halts! the shouts of cheating! when the happy company thought they had lost their guiding thread! For it was necessary to go back and disentangle it from the knot of parasitic plants.

“There it is!” said Lina, “I see it!”

“You are wrong,” replied Minha; “that is not it, that is a liana of another kind.”

“No, Lina is right!” said Benito.

“No, Lina is wrong!” Manoel would naturally return.

Hence highly serious, long-continued discussions, in which no one would give in.

Then the black on one side and Benito on the other would rush at the trees and clamber up to the branches encircled by the cipo so as to arrive at the true direction.

Now nothing was assuredly less easy in that jumble of knots, among which twisted the liana in the middle of bromelias, *“karatas,”* armed with their sharp prickles, orchids with rosy flowers and violet lips the size of gloves, and oncidiums more tangled than a skein of worsted between a kitten’s paws.

And then when the liana ran down again to the ground the difficulty of picking it out under the mass of lycopods, large-leaved heliconias, rosy-tasseled calliandras, rhipsalas encircling it like the thread on an electric reel, between the knots of the large white ipomas, under the fleshy stems of the vanilla, and in the midst of the shoots and branchlets of the grenadilla and the vine.

And when the cipo was found again what shouts of joy, and how they resumed the walk for an instant interrupted!

For an hour the young people had already been advancing, and nothing had happened to warn them that they were approaching the end.

They shook the liana with vigor, but it would not give, and the birds flew away in hundreds, and the monkeys fled from tree to tree, so as to point out the way.

If a thicket barred the road the felling-sword cut a deep gap, and the group passed in. If it was a high rock, carpeted with verdure, over which the liana twisted like a serpent, they climbed it and passed on.

A large break now appeared. There, in the more open air, which is as necessary to it as the light of the sun, the tree of the tropics, *par excellence,* which, according to Humboldt, “accompanies man in the infancy of his civilization,” the great provider of the inhabitant of the torrid zones, a banana-tree, was standing alone. The long festoon of the liana curled round its higher branches, moving away to the other side of the clearing, and disappeared again into the forest.

“Shall we stop soon?” asked Manoel.

“No; a thousand times no!” cried Benito, “not without having reached the end of it!”

“Perhaps,” observed Minha, “it will soon be time to think of returning.”

“Oh, dearest mistress, let us go on again!” replied Lina.

“On forever!” added Benito.

And they plunged more deeply into the forest, which, becoming clearer, allowed them to advance more easily.

Besides, the cipo bore away to the north, and toward the river. It became less inconvenient to follow, seeing that they approached the right bank, and it would be easy to get back afterward.

A quarter of an hour later they all stopped at the foot of a ravine in front of a small tributary of the Amazon. But a bridge of lianas, made of *“bejucos,”* twined together by their interlacing branches, crossed the stream. The cipo, dividing into two strings, served for a handrail, and passed from one bank to the other.

Benito, all the time in front, had already stepped on the swinging floor of this vegetable bridge.

Manoel wished to keep his sister back.

“Stay — stay, Minha!” he said, “Benito may go further if he likes, but let us remain here.”

“No! Come on, come on, dear mistress!” said Lina. “Don’t be afraid, the liana is getting thinner; we shall get the better of it, and find out its end!”

And, without hesitation, the young mulatto boldly ventured toward Benito.

“What children they are!” replied Minha. “Come along, Manoel, we must follow.”

And they all cleared the bridge, which swayed above the ravine like a swing, and plunged again beneath the mighty trees.

But they had not proceeded for ten minutes along the interminable cipo, in the direction of the river, when they stopped, and this time not without cause.

“Have we got to the end of the liana?” asked Minha.

“No,” replied Benito; “but we had better advance with care. Look!” and Benito pointed to the cipo which, lost in the branches of a high ficus, was agitated by violent shakings.

“What causes that?” asked Manoel.

“Perhaps some animal that we had better approach with a little circumspection!”

And Benito, cocking his gun, motioned them to let him go on a bit, and stepped about ten paces to the front.

Manoel, the two girls, and the black remained motionless where they were.

Suddenly Benito raised a shout, and they saw him rush toward a tree; they all ran as well.

Sight the most unforeseen, and little adapted to gratify the eyes!

A man, hanging by the neck, struggled at the end of the liana, which, supple as a cord, had formed into a slipknot, and the shakings came from the jerks into which he still agitated it in the last convulsions of his agony!

Benito threw himself on the unfortunate fellow, and with a cut of his hunting-knife severed the cipo.

The man slipped on to the ground. Manoel leaned over him, to try and recall him to life, if it was not too late.

“Poor man!” murmured Minha.

“Mr. Manoel! Mr. Manoel!” cried Lina. “He breathes again! His heart beats; you must save him.”

“True,” said Manoel, “but I think it was about time that we came up.”

He was about thirty years old, a white, clothed badly enough, much emaciated, and he seemed to have suffered a good deal.

At his feet were an empty flask, thrown on the ground, and a cup and ball in palm wood, of which the ball, made of the head of a tortoise, was tied on with a fiber.

“To hang himself! to hang himself!” repeated Lina, “and young still! What could have driven him to do such a thing?”

But the attempts of Manoel had not been long in bringing the luckless wight to life again, and he opened his eyes and gave an “ahem!” so vigorous and unexpected that Lina, frightened, replied to his cry with another.

“Who are you, my friend?” Benito asked him.

“An ex-hanger-on, as far as I see.”

“But your name?”

“Wait a minute and I will recall myself,” said he, passing his hand over his forehead. “I am known as Fragoso, at your service; and I am still able to curl and cut your hair, to shave you, and to make you comfortable according to all the rules of my art. I am a barber, so to speak more truly, the most desperate of Figaros.”

“And what made you think of — — ”

“What would you have, my gallant sir?” replied Fragoso, with a smile; “a moment of despair, which I would have duly regretted had the regrets been in another world! But eight hundred leagues of country to traverse, and not a coin in my pouch, was not very comforting! I had lost courage obviously.”

To conclude, Fragoso had a good and pleasing figure, and as he recovered it was evident that he was of a lively disposition. He was one of those wandering barbers who travel on the banks of the Upper Amazon, going from village to village, and putting the resources of their art at the service of negroes, negresses, Indians and Indian women, who appreciate them very much.

But poor Fragoso, abandoned and miserable, having eaten nothing for forty hours, astray in the forest, had for an instant lost his head, and we know the rest.

“My friend,” said Benito to him, “you will go back with us to the fazenda of Iquitos?”

“With pleasure,” replied Fragoso; “you cut me down and I belong to you. I must somehow be dependent.”

“Well, dear mistress, don’t you think we did well to continue our walk?” asked Lina.

“That I do,” returned the girl.

“Never mind,” said Benito; “I never thought that we should finish by finding a man at the end of the cipo.”

“And, above all, a barber in difficulties, and on the road to hang himself!” replied Fragoso.

The poor fellow, who was now wide awake, was told about what had passed. He warmly thanked Lina for the good idea she had had of following the liana, and they all started on the road to the fazenda, where Fragoso was received in a way that gave him neither wish nor want to try his wretched task again.

CHAPTER VIII. THE JANGADA

THE HALF-MILE square of forest was cleared. With the carpenters remained the task of arranging in the form of a raft the many venerable trees which were lying on the strand.

And an easy task it was. Under the direction of Joam Garral the Indians displayed their incomparable ingenuity. In everything connected with house-building or ship-building these natives are, it must be admitted, astonishing workmen. They have only an ax and a saw, and they work on woods so hard that the edge of their tools gets absolutely jagged; yet they square up trunks, shape beams out of enormous stems, and get out of them joists and planking without the aid of any machinery whatever, and, endowed with prodigious natural ability, do all these things easily with their skilled and patient hands.

The trees had not been launched into the Amazon to begin with; Joam Garral was accustomed to proceed in a different way. The whole mass of trunks was symmetrically arranged on a flat part of the bank, which he had already leveled up at the junction of the Nanay with the great river.

There it was that the jangada was to be built; thence it was that the Amazon was to float it when the time came for it to start for its destination.

And here an explanatory note is necessary in regard to the geography of this immense body of water, and more especially as relating to a singular phenomenon which the riverside inhabitants describe from personal observation.

The two rivers which are, perhaps, more extensive than the great artery of Brazil, the Nile and the Missouri-Mississippi, flow one from south to north across the African continent, the other from north to south through North America. They cross districts of many different latitudes, and consequently of many different climates.

The Amazon, on the contrary, is entirely comprised — at least it is from the point where it turns to the east, on the frontiers of Ecuador and Peru — between the second and fourth parallels of south latitude. Hence this immense river system is under the same climatic conditions during the whole of its course.

In these parts there are two distinct seasons during which rain falls. In the north of Brazil the rainy season is in September; in the south it occurs in March. Consequently the right-hand tributaries and the left-hand tributaries bring down their floods at half-yearly intervals, and hence the level of the Amazon, after reaching its maximum in June, gradually falls until October.

This Joam Garral knew by experience, and he intended to profit by the phenomenon to launch the jangada, after having built it in comfort on the river bank. In fact, between the mean and the higher level the height of the Amazon could vary as much as forty feet, and between the mean and the lower level as much as thirty feet. A difference of seventy feet like this gave the fazender all he required.

The building was commenced without delay. Along the huge bank the trunks were got into place according to their sizes and floating power, which of course had to be taken into account, as among these thick and heavy woods there were many whose specific gravity was but little below that of water.

The first layer was entirely composed of trunks laid side by side. A little interval had to be left between them, and they were bound together by transverse beams, which assured the solidity of the whole. *“Piaçaba”* ropes strapped them together as firmly as any chain cables could have done. This material, which consists of the ramicles of a certain palm-tree growing very abundantly on the river banks, is in universal use in the district. Piaçaba floats, resists immersion, and is cheaply made — very good reasons for causing it to be valuable, and making it even an article of commerce with the Old World.

Above this double row of trunks and beams were disposed the joists and planks which formed the floor of the jangada, and rose about thirty inches above the load water-line. The bulk was enormous, as we must confess when it is considered that the raft measured a thousand feet long and sixty broad, and thus had a superificies of sixty thousand square feet. They were, in fact, about to commit a whole forest to the Amazon.

The work of building was conducted under the immediate direction of Joam Garral. But when that part was finished the question of arrangement was submitted to the discussion of all, including even the gallant Fragoso.

Just a word as to what he was doing in his new situation at the fazenda.

The barber had never been so happy as since the day when he had been received by the hospitable family. Joam Garral had offered to take him to Para, on the road to which he was when the liana, according to his account, had seized him by the neck and brought him up with a round turn. Fragoso had accepted the offer, thanked him from the bottom of his heart, and ever since had sought to make himself useful in a thousand ways. He was a very intelligent fellow — what one might call a “double right-hander” — that is to say, he could do everything, and could do everything well. As merry as Lina, always singing, and always ready with some good-natured joke, he was not long in being liked by all.

But it was with the young mulatto that he claimed to have contracted the heaviest obligation.

“A famous idea that of yours, Miss Lina,” he was constantly saying, “to play at ‘following the liana!’ It is a capital game even if you do not always find a poor chap of a barber at the end!”

“Quite a chance, Mr. Fragoso,” would laughingly reply Lina; “I assure you, you owe me nothing!”

“What! nothing! I owe you my life, and I want it prolonged for a hundred years, and that my recollection of the fact may endure even longer! You see, it is not my trade to be hanged! If I tried my hand at it, it was through necessity. But, on consideration, I would rather die of hunger, and before quite going off I should try a little pasturage with the brutes! As for this liana, it is a lien between us, and so you will see!”

The conversation generally took a joking turn, but at the bottom Fragoso was very grateful to the mulatto for having taken the initiative in his rescue, and Lina was not insensible to the attentions of the brave fellow, who was as straightforward, frank, and good-looking as she was. Their friendship gave rise to many a pleasant, “Ah, ah!” on the part of Benito, old Cybele, and others.

To return to the Jangada. After some discussion it was decided, as the voyage was to be of some months’ duration, to make it as complete and comfortable as possible. The Garral family, comprising the father, mother, daughter, Benito, Manoel, and the servants, Cybele and Lina, were to live in a separate house. In addition to these, there were to go forty Indians, forty blacks, Fragoso, and the pilot who was to take charge of the navigation of the raft.

Though the crew was large, it was not more than sufficient for the service on board. To work the jangada along the windings of the river and between the hundreds of islands and islets which lay in its course required fully as many as were taken, for if the current furnished the motive power, it had nothing to do with the steering, and the hundred and sixty arms were no more than were necessary to work the long boathooks by which the giant raft was to be kept in mid-stream.

In the first place, then, in the hinder part of the jangada they built the master's house. It was arranged to contain several bedrooms and a large dining-hall. One of the rooms was destined for Joam and his wife, another for Lina and Cybele near those of their mistresses, and a third room for Benito and Manoel. Minha had a room away from the others, which was not by any means the least comfortably designed.

This, the principal house, was carefully made of weather-boarding, saturated with boiling resin, and thus rendered water-tight throughout. It was capitally lighted with windows on all sides. In front, the entrance-door gave immediate access to the common room. A light veranda, resting on slender bamboos, protected the exterior from the direct action of the solar rays. The whole was painted a light-ocher color, which reflected the heat instead of absorbing it, and kept down the temperature of the interior.

But when the heavy work, so to speak, had been completed, Minha intervened with:

“Father, now your care has inclosed and covered us, you must allow us to arrange our dwelling to please ourselves. The outside belongs to you, the inside to us. Mother and I would like it to be as though our house at the fazenda went with us on the journey, so as to make you fancy that we had never left Iquitos!"

"Do just as you like, Minha," replied Joam Garral, smiling in the sad way he often did.

"That will be nice!"

"I leave everything to your good taste."

"And that will do us honor, father. It ought to, for the sake of the splendid country we are going through — which is yours, by the way, and into which you are to enter after so many years' absence."

"Yes, Minha; yes," replied Joam. "It is rather as if we were returning from exile — voluntary exile! Do your best; I approve beforehand of what you do."

On Minha and Lina, to whom were added of their own free will Manoel on the one side and Fragoso on the other, devolved the care of decorating the inside of the house. With some imagination and a little artistic feeling the result was highly satisfactory.

The best furniture of the fazenda naturally found its place within, as after arriving in Para they could easily return it by one of the *igariteos*. Tables, bamboo easy-chairs, cane sofas, carved wood shelves, everything that constituted the charming furniture of the tropics, was disposed with taste about the floating home. No one is likely to imagine that the walls remained bare. The boards were hidden beneath hangings of most agreeable variety. These hangings were made of valuable bark, that of the *"tuturis,"* which is raised up in large folds like the brocades and damasks and softest and richest materials of our modern looms. On the floors of the rooms were jaguar skins, with wonderful spots, and thick monkey furs of exquisite fleeciness. Light curtains of the russet silk, produced by the *“sumauma,”* hung from the windows. The beds, enveloped in mosquito curtains, had their pillows, mattresses, and bolsters filled with that fresh and elastic substance which in the Upper Amazon is yielded by the bombax.

Throughout on the shelves and side-tables were little odds and ends, brought from Rio Janeiro or Belem, those most precious to Minha being such as had come from Manoel. What could be more pleasing in her eyes than the knickknacks given by a loving hand which spoke to her without saying anything?

In a few days the interior was completed, and it looked just like the interior of the fazenda. A stationary house under a lovely clump of trees on the borders of some beautiful river! Until it descended between the banks of the larger stream it would not be out of keeping with the picturesque landscape which stretched away on each side of it.

We may add that the exterior of the house was no less charming than the interior.

In fact, on the outside the young fellows had given free scope to their taste and imagination.

From the basement to the roof it was literally covered with foliage. A confused mass of orchids, bromelias, and climbing plants, all in flower, rooted in boxes of excellent soil hidden beneath masses of verdure. The trunk of some ficus or mimosa was never covered by a more startlingly tropical attire. What whimsical climbers — ruby red and golden yellow, with variegated clusters and tangled twigs — turned over the brackets, under the ridges, on the rafters of the roof, and across the lintels of the doors! They had brought them wholesale from the woods in the neighborhood of the fazenda. A huge liana bound all the parasites together; several times it made the round of the house, clinging on to every angle, encircling every projection, forking, uniting, it everywhere threw out its irregular branchlets, and allowed not a bit of the house to be seen beneath its enormous clusters of bloom.

As a delicate piece of attention, the author of which can be easily recognized, the end of the cipo spread out before the very window of the young mulatto, as though a long arm was forever holding a bouquet of fresh flowers across the blind.

To sum up, it was as charming as could be; and as Yaquita, her daughter, and Lina were content, we need say no more about it.

“It would not take much to make us plant trees on the jangada,” said Benito.

“Oh, trees!” ejaculated Minha.

“Why not?” replied Manoel. “Transported on to this solid platform, with some good soil, I am sure they would do well, and we would have no change of climate to fear for them, as the Amazon flows all the time along the same parallel.”

“Besides,” said Benito, “every day islets of verdure, torn from the banks, go drifting down the river. Do they not pass along with their trees, bushes, thickets, rocks, and fields, to lose themselves in the Atlantic eight hundred leagues away? Why, then, should we not transform our raft into a floating garden?”

“Would you like a forest, miss?” said Fragoso, who stopped at nothing.

“Yes, a forest!” cried the young mulatto; “a forest with its birds and its monkeys — — ”

“Its snakes, its jaguars!” continued Benito.

“Its Indians, its nomadic tribes,” added Manoel, “and even its cannibals!”

“But where are you going to, Fragoso?” said Minha, seeing the active barber making a rush at the bank.

“To look after the forest!” replied Fragoso.

“Useless, my friend,” answered the smiling Minha. “Manoel has given me a nosegay and I am quite content. It is true,” she added, pointing to the house hidden beneath the flowers, “that he has hidden our house in his betrothal bouquet!”

CHAPTER IX. THE EVENING OF THE FIFTH OF JUNE

WHILE THE master’s house was being constructed, Joam Garral was also busied in the arrangement of the out-buildings, comprising the kitchen, and offices in which provisions of all kinds were intended to be stored.

In the first place, there was an important stock of the roots of that little tree, some six or ten feet in height, which yields the manioc, and which form the principal food of the inhabitants of these inter-tropical countries. The root, very much like a long black radish, grows in clumps like potatoes. If it is not poisonous in Africa, it is certain that in South America it contains a more noxious juice, which it is necessary to previously get rid of by pressure. When this result is obtained, the root is reduced to flour, and is then used in many ways, even in the form of tapioca, according to the fancy of the natives.

On board the jangada there was a huge pile of this useful product destined for general consumption.

As for preserved meats, not forgetting a whole flock of sheep, kept in a special stable built in the front, they consisted principally of a quantity of the *“presunto”* hams of the district, which are of first-class quality; but the guns of the young fellows and of some of the Indians were reckoned on for additional supplies, excellent hunters as they were, to whom there was likely to be no lack of game on the islands and in the forests bordering on the stream. The river was expected to furnish its daily quota; prawns, which ought rather to be called crawfish; *“tambagus,”* the finest fish in the district, of a flavor superior to that of salmon, to which it is often compared; *“pirarucus”* with red scales, as large as sturgeons, which when salted are used in great quantities throughout Brazil; *“candirus,”* awkward to capture, but good to eat; *“piranhas,”* or devil-fish, striped with red bands, and thirty inches long; turtles large and small, which are counted by millions, and form so large a part of the food of the natives; some of every one of these things it was hoped would figure in turn on the tables of the master and his men.

And so each day shooting and fishing were to be regularly indulged in.

For beverages they had a good store of the best that country produced; *“caysuma”* or *“machachera,”* from the Upper and Lower Amazon, an agreeable liquor of slightly acidulated taste, which is distilled from the boiled root of the sweet manioc; *“beiju,”* from Brazil, a sort of national brandy, the *“chica”* of Peru; the *“mazato”* of the Ucayali, extracted from the boiled fruits of the banana-tree, pressed and fermented; *“guarana,”* a kind of paste made from the double almond of the *“paulliniasorbilis,”* a genuine tablet of chocolate so far as its color goes, which is reduced to a fine powder, and with the addition of water yields an excellent drink.

And this was not all. There is in these countries a species of dark violet wine, which is got from the juice of the palm, and the aromatic flavor of this *“assais”* is greatly appreciated by the Brazilans, and of it there were on board a respectable number of frasques (each holding a little more than half a gallon), which would probably be emptied before they arrived at Para.

The special cellar of the jangada did honor to Benito, who had been appointed its commander-in-chief. Several hundred bottles of sherry, port, and letubal recalled names dear to the earlier conquerors of South America. In addition, the young butler had stored away certain demijohns, holding half a dozen gallons each, of excellent *“tafia,”* a sugared brandy a trifle more pronounced in taste than the national *beiju*.

As far as tobacco was concerned, there was none of that coarse kind which usually contents the natives of the Amazonian basin. It all came direct from Villa Bella da Imperatriz — or, in other words, fro the district in which is grown the best tobacco in Central America.

The principal habitation, with its annexes — kitchen, offices, and cellars — was placed in the rear — or, let us say, stern of the craft — and formed a part reserved for the Garral family and their personal servants.

In the center the huts for the Indians and the blacks had been erected. The staff were thus placed under the same conditions as at the fazenda of Iquitos, and would always be able to work under the direction of the pilot.

To house the crew a good many huts were required, and these gave to the jangada the appearance of a small village got adrift, and, to tell the truth, it was a better built and better peopled village than many of those on the Upper Amazon.

For the Indians Joam Garral had designed regular cabins — huts without walls, with only light poles supporting the roof of foliage. The air circulated freely throughout these open constructions and swung the hammock suspended in the interior, and the natives, among whom were three or four complete families, with women and children, were lodged as if they were on shore.

The blacks here found their customary sheds. They differed from the cabins by being closed in on their four faces, of which only one gave access to the interior. The Indians, accustomed to live in the open air, free and untrammeled, were not able to accustom themselves to the imprisonment of the *ajoupas*, which agreed better with the life of the blacks.

In the bow regular warehouses had arisen, containing the goods which Joam Garral was carrying to Belem at the same time as the products of his forests.

There, in vast storerooms, under the direction of Benito, the rich cargo had been placed with as much order as if it had been carefully stowed away in a ship's hold.

In the first place, seven thousand arrobas of caoutchouc, each of about thirty pounds, composed the most precious part of the cargo, for every pound of it was worth from three to four francs. The jangada also took fifty hundredweight of sarsaparilla, a smilax which forms an important branch of foreign trade throughout the Amazon districts, and is getting rarer and rarer along the banks of the river, so that the natives are very careful to spare the stems when they gather them. Tonquin bans, known in Brazil under the name of *"cumarus,"* and used in the manufacture of certain essential oils; sassafras, from which is extracted a precious balsam for wounds; bales of dyeing plants, cases of several gums, and a quantity of precious woods, completed a well-adapted cargo for lucrative and easy sale in the provinces of Para.

Some may feel astonished that the number of Indians and negroes embarked were only sufficient to work the raft, and that a larger number were not taken in case of an attack by the riverside Indians.

Such would have been useless. The natives of Central America are not to be feared in the least, and the times are quite changed since it was necessary to provide against their aggressions. The Indians along the river belong to peaceable tribes, and the fiercest of them have retired before the advancing civilization, and drawn further and further away from the river and its tributaries. Negro deserters, escaped from the penal colonies of Brazil, England, Holland, or France, are alone to be feared. But there are only a small number of these fugitives, they only move in isolated groups across the savannahs or the woods, and the jangada was, in a measure, secured from any attack on the parts of the backwoodsmen.

On the other hand, there were a number of settlements on the river — towns, villages, and missions. The immense stream no longer traverses a desert, but a basin which is being colonized day by day. Danger was not taken into consideration. There were no precautions against attacks.

To conclude our description of the jangada, we have only to speak of one or two erections of different kinds which gave it a very picturesque aspect.

In the bow was the cabin of the pilot — we say in the bow, and not at the stern, where the helmsman is generally found. In navigating under such circumstances a rudder is of no use. Long oars have no effect on a raft of such dimensions, even when worked with a hundred sturdy arms. It was from the sides, by means of long boathooks or props thrust against the bed of the stream, that the jangada was kept in the current, and had its direction altered when going astray. By this means they could range alongside either bank, if they wished for any reason to come to a halt. Three or four ubas, and two pirogues, with the necessary rigging, were carried on board, and afforded easy communications with the banks. The pilot had to look after the channels of the river, the deviations of the current, the eddies which it was necessary to avoid, the creeks or bays which afforded favorable anchorage, and to do this he had to be in the bow.

If the pilot was the material director of this immense machine — for can we not justly call it so? — another personage was its spiritual director; this was Padre Passanha, who had charge of the mission at Iquitos.

A religious family, like that of Joam Garral's, had availed themselves enthusiastically of this occasion of taking him with them.

Padre Passanha, then aged seventy, was a man of great worth, full of evangelical fervor, charitable and good, and in countries where the representatives of religion are not always examples of the virtues, he stood out as the accomplished type of those great missionaries who have done so much for civilization in the interior of the most savage regions of the world.

For fifty years Padre Passanha had lived at Iquitos, in the mission of which he was the chief. He was loved by all, and worthily so. The Garral family held him in great esteem; it was he who had married the daughter of Farmer Magalhaës to the clerk who had been received at the fazenda. He had known the children from birth; he had baptized them, educated them, and hoped to give each of them the nuptial blessing.

The age of the padre did not allow of his exercising his important ministry any longer. The horn of retreat for him had sounded; he was about to be replaced at Iquitos by a younger missionary, and he was preparing to return to Para, to end his days in one of those convents which are reserved for the old servants of God.

What better occasion could offer than that of descending the river with the family which was as his own? They had proposed it to him, and he had accepted, and when arrived at Belem he was to marry the young couple, Minha and Manoel.

But if Padre Passanha during the course of the voyage was to take his meals with the family, Joam Garral desired to build for him a dwelling apart, and heaven knows what care Yaquita and her daughter took to make him comfortable! Assuredly the good old priest had never been so lodged in his modest parsonage!

The parsonage was not enough for Padre Passanha; he ought to have a chapel.

The chapel then was built in the center of the jangada, and a little bell surmounted it.

It was small enough, undoubtedly, and it could not hold the whole of the crew, but it was richly decorated, and if Joam Garral found his own house on the raft, Padre Passanha had no cause to regret the poverty-stricken church of Iquitos.

Such was the wonderful structure which was going down the Amazon. It was then on the bank waiting till the flood came to carry it away. From the observation and calculation of the rising it would seem as though there was not much longer to wait.

All was ready to date, the 5th of June.

The pilot arrived the evening before. He was a man about fifty, well up in his profession, but rather fond of drink. Such as he was, Joam Garral in large matters at different times had employed him to take his rafts to Belem, and he had never had cause to repent it.

It is as well to add that Araujo — that was his name — never saw better than when he had imbibed a few glasses of tafia; and he never did any work at all without a certain demijohn of that liquor, to which he paid frequent court.

The rise of the flood had clearly manifested itself for several days. From minute to minute the level of the river rose, and during the twenty-four hours which preceded the maximum the waters covered the bank on which the raft rested, but did not lift the raft.

As soon as the movement was assured, and there could be no error as to the height to which the flood would rise, all those interested in the undertaking were seized with no little excitement. For if through some inexplicable cause the waters of the Amazon did not rise sufficiently to flood the jangada, it would all have to be built over again. But as the fall of the river would be very rapid it would take long months before similar conditions recurred.

On the 5th of June, toward the evening, the future passengers of the jangada were collected on a plateau which was about a hundred feet above the bank, and waited for the hour with an anxiety quite intelligible.

There were Yaquita, her daughter, Manoel Valdez, Padre Passanha, Benito, Lina, Fragoso, Cybele, and some of the servants, Indian or negro, of the fazenda.

Fragoso could not keep himself still; he went and he came, he ran down the bank and ran up the plateau, he noted the points of the river gauge, and shouted “Hurrah!” as the water crept up.

“It will swim, it will swim!” he shouted. “The raft which is to take us to Belem! It will float if all the cataracts of the sky have to open to flood the Amazon!”

Joam Garral was on the raft with the pilot and some of the crew. It was for him to take all the necessary measures at the critical moment. The jangada was moored to the bank with solid cables, so that it could not be carried away by the current when it floated off.

Quite a tribe from one hundred and fifty to two hundred Indians, without counting the population of the village, had come to assist at the interesting spectacle.

They were all keenly on the watch, and silence reigned over the impressionable crowd.

Toward five o’clock in the evening the water had reached a level higher than that of the night before — by more than a foot — and the bank had already entirely disappeared beneath the liquid covering.

A certain groaning arose among the planks of the enormous structure, but there was still wanting a few inches before it was quite lifted and detached from the ground.

For an hour the groanings increased. The joists grated on all sides. A struggle was going on in which little by little the trunks were being dragged from their sandy bed.

Toward half-past six cries of joy arose. The jangada floated at last, and the current took it toward the middle of the river, but, in obedience to the cables, it quietly took up its position near the bank at the moment that Padre Passanha gave it his blessing, as if it were a vessel launched into the sea whose destinies are in the hands of the Most High!

CHAPTER X. FROM IQUITOS TO PEVAS

ON THE 6th of June, the very next day, Joam Garral and his people bade good-by to the superintendent and the Indians and negroes who were to stay behind at the fazenda. At six o'clock in the morning the jangada received all its passengers, or rather inhabitants, and each of them took possession of his cabin, or perhaps we had better say his house.

The moment of departure had come. Araujo, the pilot, got into his place at the bow, and the crew, armed with their long poles, went to their proper quarters.

Joam Garral, assisted by Benito and Manoel, superintended the unmooring.

At the command of the pilot the ropes were eased off, and the poles applied to the bank so as to give the jangada a start. The current was not long in seizing it, and coasting the left bank, the islands of Iquitos and Parianta were passed on the right.

The voyage had commenced — where would it finish? In Para, at Belem, eight hundred leagues from this little Peruvian village, if nothing happened to modify the route. How would it finish? That was the secret of the future.

The weather was magnificent. A pleasant *"pampero"* tempered the ardor of the sun — one of those winds which in June or July come from off the Cordilleras, many hundred leagues away, after having swept across the huge plain of the Sacramento. Had the raft been provided with masts and sails she would have felt the effects of the breeze, and her speed would have been greater; but owing to the sinuosities of the river and its abrupt changes, which they were bound to follow, they had had to renounce such assistance.

In a flat district like that through which the Amazon flows, which is almost a boundless plain, the gradient of the river bed is scarcely perceptible. It has been calculated that between Tabatinga on the Brazilian frontier, and the source of this huge body of water, the difference of level does not exceed a decimeter in each league. There is no other river in the world whose inclination is so slight.

It follows from this that the average speed of the current cannot be estimated at more than two leagues in twenty-four hours, and sometimes, while the droughts are on, it is even less. However, during the period of the floods it has been known to increase to between thirty and forty kilometers.

Happily, it was under these latter conditions that the jangada was to proceed; but, cumbrous in its movements, it could not keep up to the speed of the current which ran past it. There are also to be taken into account the stoppages occasioned by the bends in the river, the numerous islands which had to be rounded, the shoals which had to be avoided, and the hours of halting, which were necessarily lost when the night was too dark to advance securely, so that we cannot allow more than twenty-five kilometers for each twenty-four hours.

In addition, the surface of the water is far from being completely clear. Trees still green, vegetable remains, islets of plants constantly torn from the banks, formed quite a flotilla of fragments carried on by the currents, and were so many obstacles to speedy navigation.

The mouth of the Nanay was soon passed, and lost to sight behind a point on the left bank, which, with its carpet of russet grasses tinted by the sun, formed a ruddy relief to the green forests on the horizon.

The jangada took the center of the stream between the numerous picturesque islands, of which there are a dozen between Iquitos and Pucalppa.

Araujo, who did not forget to clear his vision and his memory by an occasional application to his demijohn, maneuvered very ably when passing through this archipelago. At his word of command fifty poles from each side of the raft were raised in the air, and struck the water with an automatic movement very curious to behold.

While this was going on, Yaquita, aided by Lina and Cybele, was getting everything in order, and the Indian cooks were preparing the breakfast.

As for the two young fellows and Minha, they were walking up and down in company with Padre Passanha, and from time to time the lady stopped and watered the plants which were placed about the base of the dwelling-house.

“Well, padre,” said Benito, “do you know a more agreeable way of traveling?”

“No, my dear boy,” replied the padre; “it is truly traveling with all one’s belongings.”

“And without any fatigue,” added Manoel; “we might do hundreds of thousands of miles in this way.”

“And,” said Minha, “you do not repent having taken passage with us? Does it not seem to you as if we were afloat on an island drifted quietly away from the bed of the river with its prairies and its trees? Only — — ”

“Only?” repeated the padre.

“Only we have made the island with our own hands; it belongs to us, and I prefer it to all the islands of the Amazon. I have a right to be proud of it.”

“Yes, my daughter; and I absolve you from your pride. Besides, I am not allowed to scold you in the presence of Manoel!”

“But, on the other hand,” replied she, gayly, “you should teach Manoel to scold me when I deserve it. He is a great deal too indulgent to my little self.”

“Well, then, dear Minha,” said Manoel, “I shall profit by that permission to remind you — — ”

“Of what?”

“That you were very busy in the library at the fazenda, and that you promised to make me very learned about everything connected with the Upper Amazon. We know very little about it in Para, and here we have been passing several islands and you have not even told me their names!”

“What is the good of that?” said she.

“Yes; what is the good of it?” repeated Benito. “What can be the use of remembering the hundreds of names in the ‘Tupi’ dialect with which these islands are dressed out? It is enough to know them. The Americans are much more practical with their Mississippi islands; they number them — — ”

“As they number the avenues and streets of their towns,” replied Manoel. “Frankly, I don’t care much for that numerical system; it conveys nothing to the imagination — Sixty-fourth Island or Sixty-fifth Island, any more than Sixth Street or Third Avenue. Don’t you agree with me, Minha?”

“Yes, Manoel; though I am of somewhat the same way of thinking as my brother. But even if we do not know their names, the islands of our great river are truly splendid! See how they rest under the shadows of those gigantic palm-trees with their drooping leaves! And the girdle of reeds which encircles them through which a pirogue can with difficulty make its way! And the mangrove trees, whose fantastic roots buttress them to the bank like the claws of some gigantic crab! Yes, the islands are beautiful, but, beautiful as they are, they cannot equal the one we have made our own!”

“My little Minha is enthusiastic to-day,” said the padre.

“Ah, padre! I am so happy to see everybody happy around me!”

At this moment the voice of Yaquita was heard calling Minha into the house.

The young girl smilingly ran off.

“You will have an amiable companion,” said the padre. “All the joy of the house goes away with you, my friend.”

“Brave little sister!” said Benito, “we shall miss her greatly, and the padre is right. However, if you do not marry her, Manoel — there is still time — she will stay with us.”

“She will stay with you, Benito,” replied Manoel. “Believe me, I have a presentiment that we shall all be reunited!”

The first day passed capitally; breakfast, dinner, siesta, walks, all took place as if Joam Garral and his people were still in the comfortable fazenda of Iquitos.

During these twenty-four hours the mouths of the rivers Bacali, Chochio, Pucalppa, on the left of the stream, and those of the rivers Itinicari, Maniti, Moyoc, Tucuya, and the islands of this name on the right, were passed without accident. The night, lighted by the moon, allowed them to save a halt, and the giant raft glided peacefully on along the surface of the Amazon.

On the morrow, the 7th of June, the jangada breasted the banks of the village of Pucalppa, named also New Oran. Old Oran, situated fifteen leagues down stream on the same left bank of the river, is almost abandoned for the new settlement, whose population consists of Indians belonging to the Mayoruna and Orejone tribes. Nothing can be more picturesque than this village with its ruddy-colored banks, its unfinished church, its cottages, whose chimneys are hidden amid the palms, and its two or three ubas half-stranded on the shore.

During the whole of the 7th of June the jangada continued to follow the left bank of the river, passing several unknown tributaries of no importance. For a moment there was a chance of her grounding on the easterly shore of the island of Sinicure; but the pilot, well served by the crew, warded off the danger and remained in the flow of the stream.

In the evening they arrived alongside a narrow island, called Napo Island, from the name of the river which here comes in from the north-northwest, and mingles its waters with those of the Amazon through a mouth about eight hundred yards across, after having watered the territories of the Coto and Orejone Indians.

It was on the morning of the 7th of June that the jangada was abreast the little island of Mango, which causes the Napo to split into two streams before falling into the Amazon.

Several years later a French traveler, Paul Marcoy, went out to examine the color of the waters of this tributary, which has been graphically compared to the cloudy greenish opal of absinthe. At the same time he corrected some of the measurements of La Condamine. But then the mouth of the Napo was sensibly increased by the floods and it was with a good deal of rapidity that its current, coming from the eastern slopes of Cotopaxi, hurried fiercely to mingle itself with the tawny waters of the Amazon.

A few Indians had wandered to the mouth of this river. They were robust in build, of tall stature, with shaggy hair, and had their noses pierced with a rod of palm, and the lobes of their ears lengthened to their shoulders by the weight of heavy rings of precious wood. Some women were with them. None of them showed any intention of coming on board. It is asserted that these natives are cannibals; but if that is true — and it is said of many of the riverine tribes — there must have been more evidence for the cannibalism than we get to-day.

Some hours later the village of Bella Vista, situated on a somewhat lower bank, appeared, with its cluster of magnificent trees, towering above a few huts roofed with straw, over which there drooped the large leaves of some medium-sized banana-trees, like the waters overflowing from a tazza.

Then the pilot, so as to follow a better current, which turned off from the bank, directed the raft toward the right side of the river, which he had not yet approached. The maneuver was not accomplished without certain difficulties, which were successfully overcome after a good many resorts to the demijohn.

This allowed them to notice in passing some of those numerous lagoons with black waters, which are distributed along the course of the Amazon, and which often have no communication with the river. One of these, bearing the name of the Lagoon of Oran, is of fair size, and receives the water by a large strait. In the middle of the stream are scattered several islands and two or three islets curiously grouped; and on the opposite bank Benito recognized the site of the ancient Oran, of which they could only see a few uncertain traces.

During two days the jangada traveled sometimes under the left bank, sometimes under the right, according to the condition of the current, without giving the least sign of grounding.

The passengers had already become used to this new life. Joam Garral, leaving to his son everything that referred to the commercial side of the expedition, kept himself principally to his room, thinking and writing. What he was writing about he told to nobody, not even Yaquita, and it seemed to have already assumed the importance of a veritable essay.

Benito, all observation, chatted with the pilot and acted as manager. Yaquita, her daughter, and Manoel, nearly always formed a group apart, discussing their future projects just as they had walked and done in the park of the fazenda. The life was, in fact, the same. Not quite, perhaps, to Benito, who had not yet found occasion to participate in the pleasures of the chase. If, however, the forests of Iquitos failed him with their wild beasts, agoutis, peccaries, and cabiais, the birds flew in flocks from the banks of the river and fearlessly perched on the jangada. When they were of such quality as to figure fairly on the table, Benito shot them; and, in the interest of all, his sister raised no objection; but if he came across any gray or yellow herons, or red or white ibises, which haunt the sides, he spared them through love for Minha. One single species of grebe, which is uneatable, found no grace in the eyes of the young merchant; this was the *“caiarara,”* as quick to dive as to swim or fly; a bird with a disagreeable cry, but whose down bears a high price in the different markets of the Amazonian basin.

At length, after having passed the village of Omaguas and the mouth of the Ambiacu, the jangada arrived at Pevas on the evening of the 11th of June, and was moored to the bank.

As it was to remain here for some hours before nightfall, Benito disembarked, taking with him the ever-ready Fragoso, and the two sportsmen started off to beat the thickets in the environs of the little place. An agouti and a cabiai, not to mention a dozen partridges, enriched the larder after this fortunate excursion. At Pevas, where there is a population of two hundred and sixty inhabitants, Benito would perhaps have done some trade with the lay brothers of the mission, who are at the same time wholesale merchants, but these had just sent away some bales of sarsaparilla and arrobas of caoutchouc toward the Lower Amazon, and their stores were empty.

The jangada departed at daybreak, and passed the little archipelago of the Iatio and Cochiquinas islands, after having left the village of the latter name on the right. Several mouths of smaller unnamed affluents showed themselves on the right of the river through the spaces between the islands.

Many natives, with shaved heads, tattooed cheeks and foreheads, carrying plates of metal in the lobes of their ears, noses, and lower lips, appeared for an instant on the shore. They were armed with arrows and blow tubes, but made no use of them, and did not even attempt to communicate with the jangada.

CHAPTER XI. FROM PEVAS TO THE FRONTIER

DURING THE FEW days which followed nothing occurred worthy of note. The nights were so fine that the long raft went on its way with the stream without even a halt. The two picturesque banks of the river seemed to change like the panoramas of the theaters which unroll from one wing to another. By a kind of optical illusion it appeared as though the raft was motionless between two moving pathways.

Benito had no shooting on the banks, for no halt was made, but game was very advantageously replaced by the results of the fishing.

A great variety of excellent fish were taken — *"pacos," "surubis," "gamitanas,"* of exquisite flavor, and several of those large rays called *"duridaris,"* with rose-colored stomachs and black backs armed with highly poisonous darts. There were also collected by thousands those *"candirus,"* a kind of small silurus, of which many are microscopic, and which so frequently make a pincushion of the calves of the bather when he imprudently ventures into their haunts.

The rich waters of the Amazon were also frequented by many other aquatic animals, which escorted the jangada through its waves for whole hours together.

There were the gigantic *"pria-rucus,"* ten and twelve feet long, cuirassed with large scales with scarlet borders, whose flesh was not much appreciated by the natives. Neither did they care to capture many of the graceful dolphins which played about in hundreds, striking with their tails the planks of the raft, gamboling at the bow and stern, and making the water alive with colored reflections and spurts of spray, which the refracted light converted into so many rainbows.

On the 16th of June the jangada, after fortunately clearing several shallows in approaching the banks, arrived near the large island of San Pablo, and the following evening she stopped at the village of Moromoros, which is situated on the left side of the Amazon. Twenty-four hours afterward, passing the mouths of the Atacoari or Cocha — or rather the *“furo,”* or canal, which communicates with the lake of Cabello-Cocha on the right bank — she put in at the rising ground of the mission of Cocha. This was the country of the Marahua Indians, whose long floating hair, and mouths opening in the middle of a kind of fan made of the spines of palm-trees, six inches long, give them a cat-like look — their endeavor being, according to Paul Marcoy, to resemble the tiger, whose boldness, strength, and cunning they admire above everything. Several women came with these Marahuas, smoking cigars, but holding the lighted ends in their teeth. All of them, like the king of the Amazonian forests, go about almost naked.

The mission of Cocha was then in charge of a Franciscan monk, who was anxious to visit Padre Passanha.

Joam Garral received him with a warm welcome, and offered him a seat at the dinner-table.

On that day was given a dinner which did honor to the Indian cook. The traditional soup of fragrant herbs; cake, so often made to replace bread in Brazil, composed of the flour of the manioc thoroughly impregnated with the gravy of meat and tomato jelly; poultry with rice, swimming in a sharp sauce made of vinegar and *“malagueta;”* a dish of spiced herbs, and cold cake sprinkled with cinnamon, formed enough to tempt a poor monk reduced to the ordinary meager fare of his parish. They tried all they could to detain him, and Yaquita and her daughter did their utmost in persuasion. But the Franciscan had to visit on that evening an Indian who was lying ill at Cocha, and he heartily thanked the hospitable family and departed, not without taking a few presents, which would be well received by the neophytes of the mission.

For two days Araujo was very busy. The bed of the river gradually enlarged, but the islands became more numerous, and the current, embarrassed by these obstacles, increased in strength. Great care was necessary in passing between the islands of Cabello-Cocha, Tarapote, and Cacao. Many stoppages had to be made, and occasionally they were obliged to pole off the jangada, which now and then threatened to run aground. Every one assisted in the work, and it was under these difficult circumstances that, on the evening of the 20th of June, they found themselves at Nuestra-Senora-di-Loreto.

Loreto is the last Peruvian town situated on the left bank of the river before arriving at the Brazilian frontier. It is only a little village, composed of about twenty houses, grouped on a slightly undulating bank, formed of ocherous earth and clay.

It was in 1770 that this mission was founded by the Jesuit missionaries. The Ticuma Indians, who inhabit the territories on the north of the river, are natives with ruddy skins, bushy hair, and striped designs on their faces, making them look like the lacquer on a Chinese table. Both men and women are simply clothed, with cotton bands bound round their thighs and stomachs. They are now not more than two hundred in number, and on the banks of the Atacoari are found the last traces of a nation which was formerly so powerful under its famous chiefs.

At Loreto there also live a few Peruvian soldiers and two or three Portuguese merchants, trading in cotton stuffs, salt fish, and sarsaparilla.

Benito went ashore, to buy, if possible, a few bales of this smilax, which is always so much in demand in the markets of the Amazon. Joam Garral, occupied all the time in the work which gave him not a moment's rest, did not stir. Yaquita, her daughter, and Manoel also remained on board. The mosquitoes of Loreto have a deserved reputation for driving away such visitors as do not care to leave much of their blood with the redoubtable diptera.

Manoel had a few appropriate words to say about these insects, and they were not of a nature to encourage an inclination to brave their stings.

“They say that all the new species which infest the banks of the Amazon collect at the village of Loreto. I believe it, but do not wish to confirm it. There, Minha, you can take your choice between the gray mosquito, the hairy mosquito, the white-clawed mosquito, the dwarf mosquito, the trumpeter, the little fifer, the urtiquis, the harlequin, the big black, and the red of the woods; or rather they make take their choice of you for a little repast, and you will come back hardly recognizable! I fancy these bloodthirsty diptera guard the Brazilian frontier considerably better than the poverty-stricken soldiers we see on the bank.”

“But if everything is of use in nature,” asked Minha, “what is the use of mosquitoes?”

“They minister to the happiness of entomologists,” replied Manoel; “and I should be much embarrassed to find a better explanation.”

What Manoel had said of the Loreto mosquitoes was only too true. When Benito had finished his business and returned on board, his face and hands were tattooed with thousands of red points, without counting some chigoes, which, in spite of the leather of his boots, had introduced themselves beneath his toes.

“Let us set off this very instant,” said Benito, “or these wretched insects will invade us, and the jangada will become uninhabitable!”

“And we shall take them into Para,” said Manoel, “where there are already quite enough for its own needs.”

And so, in order not to pass even the night near the banks, the jangada pushed off into the stream.

On leaving Loreto the Amazon turns slightly toward the southwest, between the islands of Arava, Cuyari, and Urucutea. The jangada then glided along the black waters of the Cajaru, as they mingled with the white stream of the Amazon. After having passed this tributary on the left, it peacefully arrived during the evening of the 23d of June alongside the large island of Jahuma.

The setting of the sun on a clear horizon, free from all haze, announced one of those beautiful tropical nights which are unknown in the temperate zones. A light breeze freshened the air; the moon arose in the constellated depths of the sky, and for several hours took the place of the twilight which is absent from these latitudes. But even during this period the stars shone with unequaled purity. The immense plain seemed to stretch into the infinite like a sea, and at the extremity of the axis, which measures more than two hundred thousand millions of leagues, there appeared on the north the single diamond of the pole star, on the south the four brilliants of the Southern Cross.

The trees on the left bank and on the island of Jahuma stood up in sharp black outline. There were recognizable in the undecided *silhouettes* the trunks, or rather columns, of *“copahus,”* which spread out in umbrellas, groups of *“sandis,”* from which is extracted the thick and sugared milk, intoxicating as wine itself, and *“vignaticos”* eighty feet high, whose summits shake at the passage of the lightest currents of air. “What a magnificent sermon are these forests of the Amazon!” has been justly said. Yes; and we might add, “What a magnificent hymn there is in the nights of the tropics!”

The birds were giving forth their last evening notes — *”bentivis,”* who hang their nests on the bank-side reeds; *“niambus,”* a kind of partridge, whose song is composed of four notes, in perfect accord; *“kamichis,”* with their plaintive melody; kingfishers, whose call responds like a signal to the last cry of their congeners; *“canindes,”* with their sonorous trumpets; and red macaws, who fold their wings in the foliage of the *“jaquetibas,”* when night comes on to dim their glowing colors.

On the jangada every one was at his post, in the attitude of repose. The pilot alone, standing in the bow, showed his tall stature, scarcely defined in the earlier shadows. The watch, with his long pole on his shoulder, reminded one of an encampment of Tartar horsemen. The Brazilian flag hung from the top of the staff in the bow, and the breeze was scarcely strong enough to lift the bunting.

At eight o’clock the three first tinklings of the Angelus escaped from the bell of the little chapel. The three tinklings of the second and third verses sounded in their turn, and the salutation was completed in the series of more rapid strokes of the little bell.

However, the family after this July day remained sitting under the veranda to breathe the fresh air from the open.

It had been so each evening, and while Joam Garral, always silent, was contented to listen, the young people gayly chatted away till bedtime.

“Ah! our splendid river! our magnificent Amazon!” exclaimed the young girl, whose enthusiasm for the immense stream never failed.

“Unequaled river, in very truth,” said Manoel; “and I do not understand all its sublime beauties. We are going down it, however, like Orellana and La Condamine did so many centuries ago, and I am not at all surprised at their marvelous descriptions.”

“A little fabulous,” replied Benito.

“Now, brother,” said Minha seriously, “say no evil of our Amazon.”

“To remind you that it has its legends, my sister, is to say no ill of it.”

“Yes, that is true; and it has some marvelous ones,” replied Minha.

“What legends?” asked Manoel. “I dare avow that they have not yet found their way into Para — or rather that, for my part, I am not acquainted with them.”

“What, then do you learn in the Belem colleges?” laughingly asked Minha.

“I begin to perceive that they teach us nothing,” replied Manoel.

“What, sir!” replied Minha, with a pleasant seriousness, “you do not know, among other fables, that an enormous reptile called the *‘minhocao,’* sometimes visits the Amazon, and that the waters of the river rise or fall according as this serpent plunges in or quits them, so gigantic is he?”

“But have you ever seen this phenomenal minhocao?”

“Alas, no!” replied Lina.

“What a pity!” Fragoso thought it proper to add.

“And the ‘Mae d’Aqua,’” continued the girl — ”that proud and redoubtable woman whose look fascinates and drags beneath the waters of the river the imprudent ones who gaze a her.”

“Oh, as for the ‘Mae d’Aqua,’ she exists!” cried the naïve Lina; “they say that she still walks on the banks, but disappears like a water sprite as soon as you approach her.”

“Very well, Lina,” said Benito; “the first time you see her just let me know.”

“So that she may seize you and take you to the bottom of the river? Never, Mr. Benito!”

“She believes it!” shouted Minha.

“There are people who believe in the trunk of Manaos,” said Fragoso, always ready to intervene on behalf of Lina.

“The ‘trunk of Manaos’?” asked Manoel. “What about the trunk of Manaos?”

“Mr. Manoel,” answered Fragoso, with comic gravity, “it appears that there is — or rather formerly was — a trunk of *‘turuma,’* which every year at the same time descended the Rio Negro, stopping several days at Manaos, and going on into Para, halting at every port, where the natives ornamented it with little flags. Arrived at Belem, it came to a halt, turned back on its road, remounted the Amazon to the Rio Negro, and returned to the forest from which it had mysteriously started. One day somebody tried to drag it ashore, but the river rose in anger, and the attempt had to be given up. And on another occasion the captain of a ship harpooned it and tried to tow it along. This time again the river, in anger, broke off the ropes, and the trunk mysteriously escaped."

"What became of it?" asked the mulatto.

"It appears that on its last voyage, Miss Lina," replied Fragoso, "it mistook the way, and instead of going up the Negro it continued in the Amazon, and it has never been seen again."

"Oh, if we could only meet it!" said Lina.

"If we meet it," answered Benito, "we will put you on it! It will take you back to the mysterious forest, and you will likewise pass into the state of a legendary mind!"

"And why not?" asked the mulatto.

"So much for your legends," said Manoel; "and I think your river is worthy of them. But it has also its histories, which are worth something more. I know one, and if I were not afraid of grieving you — for it is a very sad one — I would relate it."

"Oh! tell it, by all means, Mr. Manoel," exclaimed Lina; "I like stories which make you cry!"

"What, do you cry, Lina?" said Benito.

“Yes, Mr. Benito; but I cry when laughing.”

“Oh, well! let us save it, Manoel!”

“It is the history of a Frenchwoman whose sorrows rendered these banks memorable in the eighteenth century.”

“We are listening,” said Minha.

“Here goes, then,” said Manoel. “In 1741, at the time of the expedition of the two Frenchmen, Bouguer and La Condamine, who were sent to measure a terrestrial degree on the equator, they were accompanied by a very distinguished astronomer, Godin des Odonais. Godin des Odonais set out then, but he did not set out alone, for the New World; he took with him his young wife, his children, his father-in-law, and his brother-in-law. The travelers arrived at Quito in good health. There commenced a series of misfortunes for Madame Odonais; in a few months she lost some of her children. When Godin des Odonais had completed his work, toward the end of the year 1759, he left Quito and started for Cayenne. Once arrived in this town he wanted his family to come to him, but war had been declared, and he was obliged to ask the Portuguese government for permission for a free passage for Madame Odonais and her people. What do you think? Many years passed before the permission could be given. In 1765 Godin des Odonais, maddened by the delay, resolved to ascend the Amazon in search of his wife at Quito; but at the moment of his departure a sudden illness stopped him, and he could not carry out his intention. However, his application had not been useless, and Madame des Odonais learned at last that the king of Portugal had given the necessary permission, and prepared to embark and descend the river to her husband. At the same time an escort was ordered to be ready in the missions of the Upper Amazon. Madame des

Odonais was a woman of great courage, as you will see presently; she never hesitated, and notwithstanding the dangers of such a voyage across the continent, she started.”

“It was her duty to her husband, Manoel,” said Yaquita, “and I would have done the same.”

“Madame des Odonais,” continued Manoel, “came to Rio Bamba, at the south of Quito, bringing her brother-in-law, her children, and a French doctor. Their endeavor was to reach the missions on the Brazilian frontier, where they hoped to find a ship and the escort. The voyage at first was favorable; it was made down the tributaries of the Amazon in a canoe. The difficulties, however, gradually increased with the dangers and fatigues of a country decimated by the smallpox. Of several guides who offered their services, the most part disappeared after a few days; one of them, the last who remained faithful to the travelers, was drowned in the Bobonasa, in endeavoring to help the French doctor. At length the canoe, damaged by rocks and floating trees, became useless. It was therefore necessary to get on shore, and there at the edge of the impenetrable forest they built a few huts of foliage. The doctor offered to go on in front with a negro who had never wished to leave Madame des Odonais. The two went off; they waited for them several days, but in vain. They never returned.

“In the meantime the victuals were getting exhausted. The forsaken ones in vain endeavored to descend the Bobonasa on a raft. They had to again take to the forest, and make their way on foot through the almost impenetrable undergrowth. The fatigues were too much for the poor folks! They died off one by one in spite of the cares of the noble Frenchwoman. At the end of a few days children, relations, and servants, were all dead!”

“What an unfortunate woman!” said Lina.

“Madame des Odonais alone remained,” continued Manoel. “There she was, at a thousand leagues from the ocean which she was trying to reach! It was no longer a mother who continued her journey toward the river — the mother had lost her shildren; she had buried them with her own hands! It was a wife who wished to see her husband once again! She traveled night and day, and at length regained the Bobonasa. She was there received by some kind-hearted Indians, who took her to the missions, where the escort was waiting. But she arrived alone, and behind her the stages of the route were marked with graves! Madame des Odonais reached Loreto, where we were a few days back. From this Peruvian village she descended the Amazon, as we are doing at this moment, and at length she rejoined her husband after a separation of nineteen years.”

“Poor lady!” said Minha.

“Above all, poor mother!” answered Yaquita.

At this moment Araujo, the pilot, came aft and said:

“Joam Garral, we are off the Ronde Island. We are passing the frontier!”

“The frontier!” replied Joam.

And rising, he went to the side of the jangada, and looked long and earnestly at the Ronde Island, with the waves breaking up against it. Then his hand sought his forehead, as if to rid himself of some remembrance.

“The frontier!” murmured he, bowing his head by an involuntary movement.

But an instant after his head was raised, and his expression was that of a man resolved to do his duty to the last.

CHAPTER XII. FRAGOSO AT WORK

“BRAZA” (burning embers) is a word found in the Spanish language as far back as the twelfth century. It has been used to make the word “brazil,” as descriptive of certain woods which yield a reddish dye. From this has come the name “Brazil,” given to that vast district of South America which is crossed by the equator, and in which these products are so frequently met with. In very early days these woods were the object of considerable trade. Although correctly called *“ibirapitunga,”* from the place of production, the name of *“brazil”* stuck to them, and it has become that of the country, which seems like an immense heap of embers lighted by the rays of the tropical sun.

Brazil was from the first occupied by the Portuguese. About the commencement of the sixteenth century, Alvarez Cabral, the pilot, took possession of it, and although France and Holland partially established themselves there, it has remained Portuguese, and possesses all the qualities which distinguish that gallant little nation. It is to-day the largest state of South America, and has at its head the intelligent artist-king Dom Pedro.

“What is your privilege in the tribe?” asked Montaigne of an Indian whom he met at Havre.

“The privilege of marching first to battle!” innocently answered the Indian.

War, we know, was for a long time the surest and most rapid vehicle of civilization. The Brazilians did what this Indian did: they fought, they defended their conquests, they enlarged them, and we see them marching in the first rank of the civilizing advance.

It was in 1824, sixteen years after the foundation of the Portugo-Brazilian Empire, that Brazil proclaimed its independence by the voice of Don Juan, whom the French armies had chased from Portugal.

It remained only to define the frontier between the new empire and that of its neighbor, Peru. This was no easy matter.

If Brazil wished to extend to the Rio Napo in the west, Peru attempted to reach eight degrees further, as far as the Lake of Ega.

But in the meantime Brazil had to interfere to hinder the kidnaping of the Indians from the Amazon, a practice which was engaged in much to the profit of the Hispano-Brazilian missions. There was no better method of checking this trade than that of fortifying the Island of the Ronde, a little above Tabatinga, and there establishing a post.

This afforded the solution, and from that time the frontier of the two countries passed through the middle of this island.

Above, the river is Peruvian, and is called the Marañon, as has been said. Below, it is Brazilian, and takes the name of the Amazon.

It was on the evening of the 25th of June that the jangada stopped before Tabatinga, the first Brazilian town situated on the left bank, at the entrance of the river of which it bears the name, and belonging to the parish of St. Paul, established on the right a little further down stream.

Joam Garral had decided to pass thirty-six hours here, so as to give a little rest to the crew. They would not start, therefore, until the morning of the 27th.

On this occasion Yaquita and her children, less likely, perhaps, than at Iquitos to be fed upon by the native mosquitoes, had announced their intention of going on ashore and visiting the town.

The population of Tabatinga is estimated at four hundred, nearly all Indians, comprising, no doubt, many of those wandering families who are never settled at particular spots on the banks of the Amazon or its smaller tributaries.

The post at the island of the Ronde has been abandoned for some years, and transferred to Tabatinga. It can thus be called a garrison town, but the garrison is only composed of nine soldiers, nearly all Indians, and a sergeant, who is the actual commandant of the place.

A bank about thirty feet high, in which are cut the steps of a not very solid staircase, forms here the curtain of the esplanade which carries the pigmy fort. The house of the commandant consists of a couple of huts placed in a square, and the soldiers occupy an oblong building a hundred feet away, at the foot of a large tree.

The collection of cabins exactly resembles all the villages and hamlets which are scattered along the banks of the river, although in them a flagstaff carrying the Brazilian colors does not rise above a sentry-box, forever destitute of its sentinel, nor are four small mortars present to cannonade on an emergency any vessel which does not come in when ordered.

As for the village properly so called, it is situated below, at the base of the plateau. A road, which is but a ravine shaded by ficuses and miritis, leads to it in a few minutes. There, on a half-cracked hill of clay, stand a dozen houses, covered with the leaves of the *“boiassu”* palm placed round a central space.

All this is not very curious, but the environs of Tabatinga are charming, particularly at the mouth of the Javary, which is of sufficient extent to contain the Archipelago of the Aramasa Islands. Hereabouts are grouped many fine trees, and among them a large number of the palms, whose supple fibers are used in the fabrication of hammocks and fishing-nets, and are the cause of some trade. To conclude, the place is one of the most picturesque on the Upper Amazon.

Tabatinga is destined to become before long a station of some importance, and will no doubt rapidly develop, for there will stop the Brazilian steamers which ascend the river, and the Peruvian steamers which descend it. There they will tranship passengers and cargoes. It does not require much for an English or American village to become in a few years the center of considerable commerce.

The river is very beautiful along this part of its course. The influence of ordinary tides is not perceptible at Tabatinga, which is more than six hundred leagues from the Atlantic. But it is not so with the *“pororoca,”* that species of eddy which for three days in the height of the syzygies raises the waters of the Amazon, and turns them back at the rate of seventeen kilometers per hour. They say that the effects of this bore are felt up to the Brazilian frontier.

On the morrow, the 26th of June, the Garral family prepared to go off and visit the village. Though Joam, Benito, and Manoel had already set foot in a Brazilian town, it was otherwise with Yaquita and her daughter; for them it was, so to speak, a taking possession. It is conceivable, therefore, that Yaquita and Minha should attach some importance to the event.

If, on his part, Fragoso, in his capacity of wandering barber, had already run through the different provinces of South America, Lina, like her young mistress, had never been on Brazilian soil.

But before leaving the jangada Fragoso had sought Joam Garral, and had the following conversation with him.

“Mr. Garral,” said he, “from the day when you received me at the fazenda of Iquitos, lodged, clothed, fed — in a word, took me in so hospitably — I have owed you — — ”

“You owe me absolutely nothing, my friend,” answered Joam, “so do not insist — — ”

“Oh, do not be alarmed!” exclaimed Fragoso, “I am not going to pay it off! Let me add, that you took me on board the jangada and gave me the means of descending the river. But here we are, on the soil of Brazil, which, according to all probability, I ought never to have seen again. Without that liana — — ”

“It is to Lina, and to Lina alone, that you should tender your thanks,” said Joam.

“I know,” said Fragoso, “and I will never forget what I owe here, any more than what I owe you.”

“They tell me, Fragoso,” continued Joam, “that you are going to say good-by, and intend to remain at Tabatinga.”

“By no means, Mr. Garral, since you have allowed me to accompany you to Belem, where I hope at the least to be able to resume my old trade.”

“Well, if that is your intention — what were you going to ask me?”

“I was going to ask if you saw any inconvenience in my working at my profession on our route. There is no necessity for my hand to rust; and, besides, a few handfuls of reis would not be so bad at the bottom of my pocket, more particularly if I had earned them. You know, Mr. Garral, that a barber who is also a hairdresser — and I hardly like to say a doctor, out of respect to Mr. Manoel — always finds customers in these Upper Amazon villages.”

“Particularly among the Brazilians,” answered Joam. “As for the natives — — ”

“I beg pardon,” replied Fragoso, “particularly among the natives. Ah! although there is no beard to trim — for nature has been very stingy toward them in that way — there are always some heads of hair to be dressed in the latest fashion. They are very fond of it, these savages, both the men and the women! I shall not be installed ten minutes in the square at Tabatinga, with my cup and ball in hand — the cup and ball I have brought on board, and which I can manage with pretty pleasantly — before a circle of braves and squaws will have formed around me. They will struggle for my favors. I could remain here for a month, and the whole tribe of the Ticunas would come to me to have their hair looked after! They won’t hesitate to make the acquaintance of ‘curling tongs’ — that is what they will call me — if I revisit the walls of Tabatinga! I have already had two tries here, and my scissors and comb have done marvels! It does not do to return too often on the same track. The Indian ladies don’t have their hair curled every day, like the beauties of our Brazilian cities. No; when it is done, it is done for year, and during the twelvemonth they will take every care not to endanger the edifice which I have raised — with what talent I dare not say. Now it is nearly a year since I was at Tabatinga; I go to find my monuments in ruin! And if it is not objectionable to you, Mr. Garral, I would render myself again worthy of the reputation which I have acquired in these parts, the question of reis, and not that of conceit, being, you understand, the principal."

"Go on, then, friend," replied Joam Garral laughingly; "but be quick! we can only remain a day at Tabatinga, and we shall start to-morrow at dawn."

"I will not lose a minute," answered Fragoso — "just time to take the tools of my profession, and I am off."

"Off you go, Fragoso," said Joam, "and may the reis rain into your pocket!"

"Yes, and that is a proper sort of rain, and there can never be too much of it for your obedient servant."

And so saying Fragoso rapidly moved away.

A moment afterward the family, with the exception of Joam, went ashore. The jangada was able to approach near enough to the bank for the landing to take place without much trouble. A staircase, in a miserable state, cut in the cliff, allowed the visitors to arrive on the crest of the plateau.

Yaquita and her party were received by the commandant of the fort, a poor fellow who, however, knew the laws of hospitality, and offered them some breakfast in his cottage. Here and there passed and repassed several soldiers on guard, while on the threshold of the barrack appeared a few children, with their mothers of Ticuna blood, affording very poor specimens of the mixed race.

In place of accepting the breakfast of the sergeant, Yaquita invited the commandant and his wife to come and have theirs on board the jangada.

The commandant did not wait for a second invitation, and an appointment was made for eleven o'clock. In the meantime Yaquita, her daughter, and the young mulatto, accompanied by Manoel, went for a walk in the neighborhood, leaving Benito to settle with the commandant about the tolls — he being chief of the custom-house as well as of the military establishment.

That done, Benito, as was his wont, strolled off with his gun into the adjoining woods. On this occasion Manoel had declined to accompany him. Fragoso had left the jangada, but instead of mounting to the fort he had made for the village, crossing the ravine which led off from the right on the level of the bank. He reckoned more on the native custom of Tabatinga than on that of the garrison. Doubtless the soldiers' wives would not have wished better than to have been put under his hands, but the husbands scarcely cared to part with a few reis for the sake of gratifying the whims of their coquettish partners.

Among the natives it was quite the reverse. Husbands and wives, the jolly barber knew them well, and he knew they would give him a better reception.

Behold, then, Fragoso on the road, coming up the shady lane beneath the ficuses, and arriving in the central square of Tabatinga!

As soon as he set foot in the place the famous barber was signaled, recognized, surrounded. Fragoso had no big box, nor drum, nor cornet to attract the attention of his clients — not even a carriage of shining copper, with resplendent lamps and ornamented glass panels, nor a huge parasol, no anything whatever to impress the public, as they generally have at fairs. No; but Fragoso had his cup and ball, and how that cup and ball were manipulated between his fingers! With what address did he receive the turtle's head, which did for the ball, on the pointed end of the stick! With what grace did he make the ball describe some learned curve of which mathematicians have not yet calculated the value — even those who have determined the wondrous curve of "the dog who follows his master!"

Every native was there — men, women, the old and the young, in their nearly primitive costume, looking on with all their eyes, listening with all their ears. The smiling entertainer, half in Portuguese, half in Ticunian, favored them with his customary oration in a tone of the most rollicking good humor. What he said was what is said by all the charlatans who place their services at the public disposal, whether they be Spanish Figaros or French perruqiers. At the bottom the same self-possession, the same knowledge of human weakness, the same description of threadbare witticisms, the same amusing dexterity, and, on the part of the natives, the same wide-mouth astonishment, the same curiosity, the same credulity as the simple folk of the civilized world.

It followed, then, that ten minutes later the public were completely won, and crowded round Fragoso, who was installed in a *"loja"* of the place, a sort of serving-bar to the inn.

The *loja* belonged to a Brazilian settled at Tabatinga. There, for a few vatems, which are the sols of the country, and worth about twenty reis, or half a dozen centimes each, the natives could get drinks of the crudest, and particularly assai, a liquor half-sold, half-liquid, made of the fruit of the palm-tree, and drunk from a *"coui"* or half-calabash in general use in this district of the Amazon.

And then men and women, with equal eagerness, took their places on the barber’s stool. The scissors of Fragoso had little to do, for it was not a question of cutting these wealthy heads of hair, nearly all remarkable for their softness and their quality, but the use to which he could put his comb and the tongs, which were kept warming in the corner in a brasier.

And then the encouragements of the artist to the crowd!

“Look here! look here!” said he; “how will that do, my friends — if you don’t sleep on the top of it! There you are, for a twelvemonth! and these are the latest novelties from Belem and Rio de Janeiro! The queen’s maids of honor are not more cleverly decked out; and observe, I am not stingy with the pomade!”

No, he was not stingy with it. True, it was only a little grease, with which he had mixed some of the juices of a few flowers, but he plastered it on like cement!

And as to the names of the capillary edifices — for the monuments reared by the hands of Fragoso were of every order of architecture — buckles, rings, clubs, tresses, crimpings, rolls, corkscrews, curls, everything found there a place. Nothing false; no towers, no chignons, no shams! These head were not enfeebled by cuttings nor thinned by fallings-off, but were forests in all their native virginity! Fragoso, however, was not above adding a few natural flowers, two or three long fish-bones, and some fine bone or copper ornaments, which were brought him by the dandies of the district. Assuredly, the exquisites of the Directory would have envied the arrangement of these high-art coiffures, three and four stories high, and the great Leonard himself would have bowed before his transatlantic rival.

And then the vatems, the handfuls of reis — the only coins for which the natives of the Amazon exchange their goods — which rained into the pocket of Fragoso, and which he collected with evident satisfaction. But assuredly night would come before he could satisfy the demands of the customers, who were so constantly renewed. It was not only the population of Tabatinga which crowded to the door of the loja. The news of the arrival of Fragoso was not slow to get abroad; natives came to him from all sides: Ticunas from the left bank of the river, Mayorunas from the right bank, as well as those who live on the Cajuru and those who come from the villages of the Javary.

A long array of anxious ones formed itself in the square. The happy ones coming from the hands of Fragoso went proudly from one house to another, showed themselves off without daring to shake themselves, like the big children that they were.

It thus happened that when noon came the much-occupied barber had not had time to return on board, but had had to content himself with a little assai, some manioc flour, and turtle eggs, which he rapidly devoured between two applications of the curling-tongs.

But it was a great harvest for the innkeeper, as all the operations could not be conducted without a large absorption of liquors drawn from the cellars of the inn. In fact, it was an event for the town of Tabatinga, this visit of the celebrated Fragoso, barber in ordinary and extraordinary to the tribes of the Upper Amazon!

CHAPTER XIII. TORRES

AT FIVE O’CLOCK in the evening Fragoso was still there, and was asking himself if he would have to pass the night on the spot to satisfy the expectant crowd, when a stranger arrived in the square, and seeing all this native gathering, advanced toward the inn.

For some minutes the stranger eyed Fragoso attentively with some circumspection. The examination was obviously satisfactory, for he entered the loja.

He was a man about thirty-five years of age. He was dressed in a somewhat elegant traveling costume, which added much to his personal appearance. But his strong black beard, which the scissors had not touched for some time, and his hair, a trifle long, imperiously required the good offices of a barber.

“Good-day, friend, good-day!” said he, lightly striking Fragoso on the shoulder.

Fragoso turned round when he heard the words pronounced in pure Brazilian, and not in the mixed idiom of the natives.

“A compatriot?” he asked, without stopping the twisting of the refractory mouth of a Mayouma head.

“Yes,” answered the stranger. “A compatriot who has need of your services.”

“To be sure! In a minute,” said Fragoso. “Wait till I have finished with this lady!”

And this was done in a couple of strokes with the curling-tongs.

Although he was the last comer, and had no right to the vacant place, he sat down on the stool without causing any expostulation on the part of the natives who lost a turn.

Fragoso put down the irons for the scissors, and, after the manner of his brethren, said:

“What can I do for you, sir?”

“Cut my beard and my hair,” answered the stranger.

“All right!” said Fragoso, inserting his comb into the mass of hair.

And then the scissors to do their work.

“And you come from far?” asked Fragoso, who could not work without a good deal to say.

“I have come from the neighborhood of Iquitos.”

“So have I!” exclaimed Fragoso. “I have come down the Amazon from Iquitos to Tabatinga. May I ask your name?”

“No objection at all,” replied the stranger. “My name is Torres.”

When the hair was cut in the latest style Fragoso began to thin his beard, but at this moment, as he was looking straight into his face, he stopped, then began again, and then:

“Eh! Mr. Torres,” said he; “I seem to know you. We must have seen each other somewhere?”

“I do not think so,” quickly answered Torres.

“I am always wrong!” replied Fragoso, and he hurried on to finish his task.

A moment after Torres continued the conversation which this question of Fragoso had interrupted, with:

“How did you come from Iquitos?”

“From Iquitos to Tabatinga?”

“Yes.”

“On board a raft, on which I was given a passage by a worthy fazender who is going down the Amazon with his family.”

“A friend indeed!” replied Torres. “That is a chance, and if your fazender would take me — — ”

“Do you intend, then, to go down the river?”

“Precisely.”

“Into Para?”

“No, only to Manaos, where I have business.”

“Well, my host is very kind, and I think he would cheerfully oblige you.”

“Do you think so?”

“I might almost say I am sure.”

“And what is the name of this fazender?” asked Torres carelessly.

“Joam Garral,” answered Fragoso.

And at the same time he muttered to himself:

“I certainly have seen this fellow somewhere!”

Torres was not the man to allow a conversation to drop which was likely to interest him, and for very good reasons.

“And so you think Joam Garral would give me a passage?”

“I do not doubt it,” replied Fragoso. “What he would do for a poor chap like me he would not refuse to do for a compatriot like you.”

“Is he alone on board the jangada?”

“No,” replied Fragoso. “I was going to tell you that he is traveling with all his family — and jolly people they are, I assure you. He is accompanied by a crew of Indians and negroes, who form part of the staff at the fazenda.”

“Is he rich?”

“Oh, certainly!” answered Fragoso — ”very rich. Even the timber which forms the jangada, and the cargo it carries, constitute a fortune!”

“The Joam Garral and his whole family have just passed the Brazilian frontier?”

“Yes,” said Fragoso; “his wife, his son, his daughter, and Miss Minha’s betrothed.”

“Ah! he has a daughter?” said Torres.

“A charming girl!”

“Going to get married?”

“Yes, to a brave young fellow,” replied Fragoso — ”an army surgeon in garrison at Belem, and the wedding is to take place as soon as we get to the end of the voyage.”

“Good!” said the smiling Torres; “it is what you might call a betrothal journey.”

“A voyage of betrothal, of pleasure, and of business!” said Fragoso. “Madame Yaquita and her daughter have never set foot on Brazilian ground; and as for Joam Garral, it is the first time he has crossed the frontier since he went to the farm of old Magalhaës.”

“I suppose,” asked Torres, “that there are some servants with the family?”

“Of course,” replied Fragoso — ”old Cybele, on the farm for the last fifty years, and a pretty mulatto, Miss Lina, who is more of a companion than a servant to her mistress. Ah, what an amiable disposition! What a heart, and what eyes! And the ideas she has about everything, particularly about lianas — ” Fragoso, started on this subject, would not have been able to stop himself, and Lina would have been the object of a good many enthusiastic declarations, had Torres not quitted the chair for another customer.

“What do I owe you?” asked he of the barber.

“Nothing,” answered Fragoso. “Between compatriots, when they meet on the frontier, there can be no question of that sort.”

“But,” replied Torres, “I want to — — ”

“Very well, we will settle that later on, on board the jangada.”

“But I do not know that, and I do not like to ask Joam Garral to allow me — — ”

“Do not hesitate!” exclaimed Fragoso; “I will speak to him if you would like it better, and he will be very happy to be of use to you under the circumstances.”

And at that instant Manoel and Benito, coming into the town after dinner, appeared at the door of the loja, wishing to see Fragoso at work.

Torres turned toward them and suddenly said: “There are two gentlemen I know — or rather I remember.”

“You remember them!” asked Fragoso, surprised.

“Yes, undoubtedly! A month ago, in the forest of Iquitos, they got me out of a considerable difficulty.”

“But they are Benito Garral and Manoel Valdez.”

“I know. They told me their names, but I never expected to see them here.”

Torres advanced toward the two young men, who looked at him without recognizing him.

“You do not remember me, gentlemen?” he asked.

“Wait a little,” answered Benito; “Mr. Torres, if I remember aright; it was you who, in the forest of Iquitos, got into difficulties with a guariba?”

“Quite true, gentlemen,” replied Torres. “For six weeks I have been traveling down the Amazon, and I have just crossed the frontier at the same time as you have.”

“Very pleased to see you again,” said Benito; “but you have not forgotten that you promised to come to the fazenda to my father?”

“I have not forgotten it,” answered Torres.

“And you would have done better to have accepted my offer; it would have allowed you to have waited for our departure, rested from you fatigues, and descended with us to the frontier; so many days of walking saved.”

“To be sure!” answered Torres.

“Our compatriot is not going to stop at the frontier,” said Fragoso, “he is going on to Manaos.”

“Well, then,” replied Benito, “if you will come on board the jangada you will be well received, and I am sure my father will give you a passage.”

“Willingly,” said Torres; “and you will allow me to thank you in advance.”

Manoel took no part in the conversation; he let Benito make the offer of his services, and attentively watched Torres, whose face he scarcely remembered. There was an entire want of frankness in the eyes, whose look changed unceasingly, as if he was afraid to fix them anywhere. But Manoel kept this impression to himself, not wishing to injure a compatriot whom they were about to oblige.

“Gentlemen,” said Torres, “if you like, I am ready to follow you to the landing-place.”

“Come, then,” answered Benito.

A quarter of an hour afterward Torres was on board the jangada. Benito introduced him to Joam Garral, acquainting him with the circumstances under which they had previously met him, and asked him to give him a passage down to Manaos.

“I am happy, sir, to be able to oblige you,” replied Joam.

“Thank you,” said Torres, who at the moment of putting forth his hand kept it back in spite of himself.

“We shall be off at daybreak to-morrow,” added Joam Garral, “so you had better get your things on board.”

“Oh, that will not take me long!” answered Torres; “there is only myself and nothing else!”

“Make yourself at home,” said Joam Garral.

That evening Torres took possession of a cabin near to that of the barber. It was not till eight o’clock that the latter returned to the raft, and gave the young mulatto an account of his exploits, and repeated, with no little vanity, that the renown of the illustrious Fragoso was increasing in the basin of the Upper Amazon.

CHAPTER XIV. STILL DESCENDING

AT DAYBREAK on the morrow, the 27th of June, the cables were cast off, and the raft continued its journey down the river.

An extra passenger was on board. Whence came this Torres? No one exactly knew. Where was he going to? “To Manaos,” he said. Torres was careful to let no suspicion of his past life escape him, nor of the profession that he had followed till within the last two months, and no one would have thought that the jangada had given refuge to an old captain of the woods. Joam Garral did not wish to mar the service he was rendering by questions of too pressing a nature.

In taking him on board the fazender had obeyed a sentiment of humanity. In the midst of these vast Amazonian deserts, more especially at the time when the steamers had not begun to furrow the waters, it was very difficult to find means of safe and rapid transit. Boats did not ply regularly, and in most cases the traveler was obliged to walk across the forests. This is what Torres had done, and what he would continue to have done, and it was for him unexpected good luck to have got a passage on the raft.

From the moment that Benito had explained under what conditions he had met Torres the introduction was complete, and he was able to consider himself as a passenger on an Atlantic steamer, who is free to take part in the general life if he cares, or free to keep himself a little apart if of an unsociable disposition.

It was noticed, at least during the first few days, that Torres did not try to become intimate with the Garral family. He maintained a good deal of reserve, answering if addressed, but never provoking a reply.

If he appeared more open with any one, it was with Fragoso. Did he not owe to this gay companion the idea of taking passage on board the raft? Many times he asked him about the position of the Garrals at Iquitos, the sentiments of the daughter for Manoel Valdez, and always discreetly. Generally, when he was not walking alone in the bow of the jangada, he kept to his cabin.

He breakfasted and dined with Joam Garral and his family, but he took little part in their conversation, and retired when the repast was finished.

During the morning the raft passed by the picturesque group of islands situated in the vast estuary of the Javary. This important affluent of the Amazon comes from the southwest, and from source to mouth has not a single island, nor a single rapid, to check its course. The mouth is about three thousand feet in width, and the river comes in some miles above the site formerly occupied by the town of the same name, whose possession was disputed for so long by Spaniards and Portuguese.

Up to the morning of the 30th of June there had been nothing particular to distinguish the voyage. Occasionally they met a few vessels gliding along by the banks attached one to another in such a way that a single Indian could manage the whole — *"navigar de bubina,"* as this kind of navigation is called by the people of the country, that is to say, "confidence navigation."

They had passed the island of Araria, the Archipelago of the Calderon islands, the island of Capiatu, and many others whose names have not yet come to the knowledge of geographers.

On the 30th of June the pilot signaled on the right the little village of Jurupari-Tapera, where they halted for two or three hours.

Manoel and Benito had gone shooting in the neighborhood, and brought back some feathered game, which was well received in the larder. At the same time they had got an animal of whom a naturalist would have made more than did the cook.

It was a creature of a dark color, something like a large Newfoundland dog.

“A great ant-eater!” exclaimed Benito, as he threw it on the deck of the jangada.

“And a magnificent specimen which would not disgrace the collection of a museum!” added Manoel.

“Did you take much trouble to catch the curious animal?” asked Minha.

“Yes, little sister,” replied Benito, “and you were not there to ask for mercy! These dogs die hard, and no less than three bullets were necessary to bring this fellow down.”

The ant-eater looked superb, with his long tail and grizzly hair; with his pointed snout, which is plunged into the ant-hills whose insects form its principal food; and his long, thin paws, armed with sharp nails, five inches long, and which can shut up like the fingers of one’s hand. But what a hand was this hand of the ant-eater! When it has got hold of anything you have to cut it off to make it let go! It is of this hand that the traveler, Emile Carrey, has so justly observed: “The tiger himself would perish in its grasp.”

On the 2d of July, in the morning, the jangada arrived at the foot of San Pablo d’Olivença, after having floated through the midst of numerous islands which in all seasons are clad with verdure and shaded with magnificent trees, and the chief of which bear the names of Jurupari, Rita, Maracanatena, and Cururu Sapo. Many times they passed by the mouths of iguarapes, or little affluents, with black waters.

The coloration of these waters is a very curious phenomenon. It is peculiar to a certain number of these tributaries of the Amazon, which differ greatly in importance.

Manoel remarked how thick the cloudiness was, for it could be clearly seen on the surface of the whitish waters of the river.

“They have tried to explain this coloring in many ways,” said he, “but I do not think the most learned have yet arrived at a satisfactory explanation.”

“The waters are really black with a magnificent reflection of gold,” replied Minha, showing a light, reddish-brown cloth, which was floating level with the jangada.

“Yes,” said Manoel, “and Humboldt has already observed the curious reflection that you have; but on looking at it attentively you will see that it is rather the color of sepia which pervades the whole.”

“Good!” exclaimed Benito. “Another phenomenon on which the *savants* are not agreed.”

“Perhaps,” said Fragoso, “they might ask the opinions of the caymans, dolphins, and manatees, for they certainly prefer the black waters to the others to enjoy themselves in.”

“They are particularly attractive to those animals,” replied Manoel, “but why it is rather embarrassing to say. For instance, is the coloration due to the hydrocarbons which the waters hold in solution, or is it because they flow through districts of peat, coal, and anthracite; or should we not rather attribute it to the enormous quantity of minute plants which they bear along? There is nothing certain in the matter. Under any circumstances, they are excellent to drink, of a freshness quite enviable for the climate, and without after-taste, and perfectly harmless. Take a little of the water, Minha, and drink it; you will find it all right.”

The water is in truth limpid and fresh, and would advantageously replace many of the table-waters used in Europe. They drew several frasques for kitchen use.

It has been said that in the morning of the 2d of July the jangada had arrived at San Pablo d’Olivença, where they turn out in thousands those long strings of beads which are made from the scales of the *“coco de piassaba.”* This trade is here extensively followed. It may, perhaps, seem singular that the ancient lords of the country, Tupinambas and Tupiniquis, should find their principal occupation in making objects for the Catholic religion. But, after all, why not? These Indians are no longer the Indians of days gone by. Instead of being clothed in the national fashion, with a frontlet of macaw feathers, bow, and blow-tube, have they not adopted the American costume of white cotton trousers, and a cotton poncho woven by their wives, who have become thorough adepts in its manufacture?

San Pablo d’Olivença, a town of some importance, has not less than two thousand inhabitants, derived from all the neighboring tribes. At present the capital of the Upper Amazon, it began as a simple Mission, founded by the Portuguese Carmelites about 1692, and afterward acquired by the Jesuit missionaries.

From the beginning it has been the country of the Omaguas, whose name means “flat-heads,” and is derived from the barbarous custom of the native mothers of squeezing the heads of their newborn children between two plates, so as to give them an oblong skull, which was then the fashion. Like everything else, that has changed; heads have re-taken their natural form, and there is not the slightest trace of the ancient deformity in the skulls of the chaplet-makers.

Every one, with the exception of Joam Garral, went ashore. Torres also remained on board, and showed no desire to visit San Pablo d’Olivença, which he did not, however, seem to be acquainted with.

Assuredly if the adventurer was taciturn he was not inquisitive.

Benito had no difficulty in doing a little bartering, and adding slightly to the cargo of the jangada. He and the family received an excellent reception from the principal authorities of the town, the commandant of the place, and the chief of the custom-house, whose functions did not in the least prevent them from engaging in trade. They even intrusted the young merchant with a few products of the country for him to dispose of on their account at Manaos and Belem.

The town is composed of some sixty houses, arranged on the plain which hereabouts crowns the river-bank. Some of the huts are covered with tiles — a very rare thing in these countries; but, on the other hand, the humble church, dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul, has only a roof of straw, rather more appropriate for a stable of Bethlehem than for an edifice consecrated to religion in one of the most Catholic countries of the world.

The commandant, his lieutenant, and the head of the police accepted an invitation to dine with the family, and they were received by Joam Garral with the respect due to their rank.

During dinner Torres showed himself more talkative than usual. He spoke about some of his excursions into the interior of Brazil like a man who knew the country. But in speaking of these travels Torres did not neglect to ask the commandant if he knew Manaos, if his colleague would be there at this time, and if the judge, the first magistrate of the province, was accustomed to absent himself at this period of the hot season. It seemed that in putting this series of questions Torres looked at Joam Garral. It was marked enough for even Benito to notice it, not without surprise, and he observed that his father gave particular attention to the questions so curiously propounded by Torres.

The commandant of San Pablo d’Olivença assured the adventurer that the authorities were not now absent from Manaos, and he even asked Joam Garral to convey to them his compliments. In all probability the raft would arrive before the town in seven weeks, or a little later, say about the 20th or the 25th of August.

The guests of the fazender took leave of the Garral family toward the evening, and the following morning, that of the 3d of July, the jangada recommenced its descent of the river.

At noon they passed on the left the mouth of the Yacurupa. This tributary, properly speaking, is a true canal, for it discharges its waters into the Içа, which is itself an affluent of the Amazon.

A peculiar phenomenon, for the river displaces itself to feed its own tributaries!

Toward three o’clock in the afternoon the giant raft passed the mouth of the Jandiatuba, which brings its magnificent black waters from the southwest, and discharges them into the main artery by a mouth of four hundred meters in extent, after having watered the territories of the Culino Indians.

A number of islands were breasted — Pimaicaira, Caturia, Chico, Motachina; some inhabited, others deserted, but all covered with superb vegetation, which forms an unbroken garland of green from one end of the Amazon to the other.

CHAPTER XV. THE CONTINUED DESCENT

ON THE EVENING of the 5th of July, the atmosphere had been oppressive since the morning and threatened approaching storms. Large bats of ruddy color skimmed with their huge wings the current of the Amazon. Among them could be distinguished the *“perros voladors,”* somber brown above and light-colored beneath, for which Minha, and particularly the young mulatto, felt an instinctive aversion.

These were, in fact, the horrible vampires which suck the blood of the cattle, and even attack man if he is imprudent enough to sleep out in the fields.

“Oh, the dreadful creatures!” cried Lina, hiding her eyes; “they fill me with horror!”

“And they are really formidable,” added Minha; “are they not, Manoel?”

“To be sure — very formidable,” answered he. “These vampires have a particular instinct which leads them to bleed you in the places where the blood most easily comes, and principally behind the ear. During the operation the continue to move their wings, and cause an agreeable freshness which renders the sleep of the sleeper more profound. They tell of people, unconsciously submitted to this hemorrhage for many hours, who have never awoke!”

“Talk no more of things like that, Manoel,” said Yaquita, “or neither Minha nor Lina will dare sleep to-night.”

“Never fear!” replied Manoel; “if necessary we will watch over them as they sleep.”

“Silence!” said Benito.

“What is the matter?” asked Manoel.

“Do you not hear a very curious noise on that side?” continued Benito, pointing to the right bank.

“Certainly,” answered Yaquita.

“What causes the noise?” asked Minha. “One would think it was shingle rolling on the beach of the islands.”

“Good! I know what it is,” answered Benito. “Tomorrow, at daybreak, there will be a rare treat for those who like fresh turtle eggs and little turtles!”

He was not deceived; the noise was produced by innumerable chelonians of all sizes, who were attracted to the islands to lay their eggs.

It is in the sand of the beach that these amphibians choose the most convenient places to deposit their eggs. The operation commences with sunset and finishes with the dawn.

At this moment the chief turtle had left the bed of the river to reconnoiter for a favorable spot; the others, collected in thousands, were soon after occupied in digging with their hind paddles a trench six hundred feet long, a dozen wide, and six deep. After laying their eggs they cover them with a bed of sand, which they beat down with their carapaces as if they were rammers.

This egg-laying operation is a grand affair for the riverine Indians of the Amazon and its tributaries. They watch for the arrival of the chelonians, and proceed to the extraction of the eggs to the sound of the drum; and the harvest is divided into three parts — one to the watchers, another to the Indians, a third to the state, represented by the captains of the shore, who, in their capacity of police, have to superintend the collection of the dues. To certain beaches which the decrease of the waters has left uncovered, and which have the privilege of attracting the greater number of turtles, there has been given the name of "royal beaches." When the harvest is gathered it is a holiday for the Indians, who give themselves up to games, dancing, and drinking; and it is also a holiday for the alligators of the river, who hold high revelry on the remains of the amphibians.

Turtles, or turtle eggs, are an object of very considerable trade throughout the Amazonian basin. It is these chelonians whom they "turn" — that is to say, put on their backs — when they come from laying their eggs, and whom they preserve alive, keeping them in palisaded pools like fish-pools, or attaching them to a stake by a cord just long enough to allow them to go and come on the land or under the water. In this way they always have the meat of these animals fresh.

They proceed differently with the little turtles which are just hatched. There is no need to pack them or tie them up. Their shell is still soft, their flesh extremely tender, and after they have cooked them they eat them just like oysters. In this form large quantities are consumed.

However, this is not the most general use to which the chelonian eggs are put in the provinces of Amazones and Para. The manufacture of *"manteigna de tartaruga,"* or turtle butter, which will bear comparison with the best products of Normandy or Brittany, does not take less every year that from two hundred and fifty to three hundred millions of eggs. But the turtles are innumerable all along the river, and they deposit their eggs on the sands of the beach in incalculable quantities. However, on account of the destruction caused not only by the natives, but by the water-fowl from the side, the urubus in the air, and the alligators in the river, their number has been so diminished that for every little turtle a Brazilian pataque, or about a franc, has to be paid.

On the morrow, at daybreak, Benito, Fragoso, and a few Indians took a pirogue and landed on the beach of one of the large islands which they had passed during the night. It was not necessary for the jangada to halt. They knew they could catch her up.

On the shore they saw the little hillocks which indicated the places where, that very night, each packet of eggs had been deposited in the trench in groups of from one hundred and sixty to one hundred and ninety. These there was no wish to get out. But an earlier laying had taken place two months before, the eggs had hatched under the action of the heat stored in the sand, and already several thousands of little turtles were running about the beach.

The hunters were therefore in luck. The pirogue was filled with these interesting amphibians, and they arrived just in time for breakfast. The booty was divided between the passengers and crew of the jangada, and if any lasted till the evening it did not last any longer.

In the morning of the 7th of July they were before San Jose de Matura, a town situated near a small river filled up with long grass, and on the borders of which a legend says that Indians with tails once existed.

In the morning of the 8th of July they caught sight of the village of San Antonio, two or three little houses lost in the trees at the mouth of the Iça, or Putumayo, which is about nine hundred meters wide.

The Putumayo is one of the most important affluents of the Amazon. Here in the sixteenth century missions were founded by the Spaniards, which were afterward destroyed by the Portuguese, and not a trace of them now remains.

Representatives of different tribes of Indians are found in the neighborhood, which are easily recognizable by the differences in their tattoo marks.

The Iça is a body of water coming from the east of the Pasto Mountains to the northeast of Quito, through the finest forests of wild cacao-trees. Navigable for a distance of a hundred and forty leagues for steamers of not greater draught than six feet, it may one day become one of the chief waterways in the west of America.

The bad weather was at last met with. It did not show itself in continual rains, but in frequent storms. These could not hinder the progress of the raft, which offered little resistance to the wind. Its great length rendered it almost insensible to the swell of the Amazon, but during the torrential showers the Garral family had to keep indoors. They had to occupy profitably these hours of leisure. They chatted together, communicated their observations, and their tongues were seldom idle.

It was under these circumstances that little by little Torres had begun to take a more active part in the conversation. The details of his many voyages throughout the whole north of Brazil afforded him numerous subjects to talk about. The man had certainly seen a great deal, but his observations were those of a skeptic, and he often shocked the straightforward people who were listening to him. It should be said that he showed himself much impressed toward Minha. But these attentions, although they were displeasing to Manoel, were not sufficiently marked for him to interfere. On the other hand, Minha felt for him an instinctive repulsion which she was at no pains to conceal.

On the 5th of July the mouth of the Tunantins appeared on the left bank, forming an estuary of some four hundred feet across, in which it pours its blackish waters, coming from the west-northwest, after having watered the territories of the Cacena Indians. At this spot the Amazon appears under a truly grandiose aspect, but its course is more than ever encumbered with islands and islets. It required all the address of the pilot to steer through the archipelago, going from one bank to another, avoiding the shallows, shirking the eddies, and maintaining the advance.

They might have taken the Ahuaty Parana, a sort of natural canal, which goes off a little below the mouth of the Tunantins, and re-enters the principal stream a hundred an twenty miles further on by the Rio Japura; but if the larger portion of this measures a hundred and fifty feet across, the narrowest is only sixty feet, and the raft would there have met with a difficulty.

On the 13th of July, after having touched at the island of Capuro, passed the mouth of the Jutahy, which, coming from the east-southeast, brings in its black waters by a mouth five hundred feet wide, and admired the legions of monkeys, sulphur-white in color, with cinnabar-red faces, who are insatiable lovers of the nuts produced by the palm-trees from which the river derives its name, the travelers arrived on the 18th of July before the little village of Fonteboa.

At this place the jangada halted for twelve hours, so as to give a rest to the crew.

Fonteboa, like most of the mission villages of the Amazon, has not escaped the capricious fate which, during a lengthened period, moves them about from one place to the other. Probably the hamlet has now finished with its nomadic existence, and has definitely become stationary. So much the better; for it is a charming place, with its thirty houses covered with foliage, and its church dedicated to Notre Dame de Guadaloupe, the Black Virgin of Mexico. Fonteboa has one thousand inhabitants, drawn from the Indians on both banks, who rear numerous cattle in the fields in the neighborhood. These occupations do not end here, for they are intrepid hunters, or, if they prefer it, intrepid fishers for the manatee.

On the morning of their arrival the young fellows assisted at a very interesting expedition of this nature. Two of these herbivorous cetaceans had just been signaled in the black waters of the Cayaratu, which comes in at Fonteboa. Six brown points were seen moving along the surface, and these were the two pointed snouts and four pinions of the lamantins.

Inexperienced fishermen would at first have taken these moving points for floating wreckage, but the natives of Fonteboa were not to be so deceived. Besides, very soon loud blowings indicated that the spouting animals were vigorously ejecting the air which had become useless for their breathing purposes.

Two ubas, each carrying three fishermen, set off from the bank and approached the manatees, who soon took flight. The black points at first traced a long furrow on the top of the water, and then disappeared for a time.

The fishermen continued their cautious advance. One of them, armed with a very primitive harpoon — a long nail at the end of a stick — kept himself in the bow of the boat, while the other two noiselessly paddled on. They waited till the necessity of breathing would bring the manatees up again. In ten minutes or thereabouts the animals would certainly appear in a circle more or less confined.

In fact, this time had scarcely elapsed before the black points emerged at a little distance, and two jets of air mingled with vapor were noiselessly shot forth.

The ubas approached, the harpoons were thrown at the same instant; one missed its mark, but the other struck one of the cetaceans near his tail.

It was only necessary to stun the animal, who rarely defends himself when touched by the iron of the harpoon. In a few pulls the cord brought him alongside the uba, and he was towed to the beach at the foot of the village.

It was not a manatee of any size, for it only measured about three feet long. These poor cetaceans have been so hunted that they have become very rare in the Amazon and its affluents, and so little time is left them to grow that the giants of the species do not now exceed seven feet. What are these, after manatees twelve and fifteen feet long, which still abound in the rivers and lakes of Africa?

But it would be difficult to hinder their destruction. The flesh of the manatee is excellent, superior even to that of pork, and the oil furnished by its lard, which is three inches thick, is a product of great value. When the meat is smoke-dried it keeps for a long time, and is capital food. If to this is added that the animal is easily caught, it is not to be wondered at that the species is on its way to complete destruction.

On the 19th of July, at sunrise, the jangada left Fonteboa, and entered between the two completely deserted banks of the river, and breasted some islands shaded with the grand forests of cacao-trees. The sky was heavily charged with electric cumuli, warning them of renewed storms.

The Rio Jurua, coming from the southwest, soon joins the river on the left. A vessel can go up it into Peru without encountering insurmountable obstacles among its white waters, which are fed by a great number of petty affluents.

“It is perhaps in these parts,” said Manoel, “that we ought to look for those female warriors who so much astonished Orellana. But we ought to say that, like their predecessors, they do nor form separate tribes; they are simply the wives who accompany their husbands to the fight, and who, among the Juruas, have a great reputation for bravery.”

The jangada continued to descend; but what a labyrinth the Amazon now appeared! The Rio Japura, whose mouth was forty-eight miles on ahead, and which is one of its largest tributaries, runs almost parallel with the river.

Between them were canals, iguarapes, lagoons, temporary lakes, an inextricable network which renders the hydrography of this country so difficult.

But if Araujo had no map to guide him, his experience served him more surely, and it was wonderful to see him unraveling the chaos, without ever turning aside from the main river.

In fact, he did so well that on the 25th of July, in the afternoon, after having passed before the village of Parani-Tapera, the raft was anchored at the entrance of the Lake of Ego, or Teffe, which it was useless to enter, for they would not have been able to get out of it again into the Amazon.

But the town of Ega is of some importance; it was worthy of a halt to visit it. It was arranged, therefore, that the jangada should remain on this spot till the 27th of July, and that on the morrow the large pirogue should take the whole family to Ega. This would give a rest, which was deservedly due to the hard-working crew of the raft.

The night passed at the moorings near a slightly rising shore, and nothing disturbed the quiet. A little sheet-lightning was observable on the horizon, but it came from a distant storm which did not reach the entrance to the lake.

CHAPTER XVI. EGA

AT SIX o’clock in the morning of the 20th of July, Yaquita, Minha, Lina, and the two young men prepared to leave the jangada.

Joam Garral, who had shown no intention of putting his foot on shore, had decided this time, at the request of the ladies of his family, to leave his absorbing daily work and accompany them on their excursion. Torres had evinced no desire to visit Ega, to the great satisfaction of Manoel, who had taken a great dislike to the man and only waited for an opportunity to declare it.

As to Fragoso, he could not have the same reason for going to Ega as had taken him to Tabatinga, which is a place of little importance compared to this.

Ega is a chief town with fifteen hundred inhabitants, and in it reside all those authorities which compose the administration of a considerable city — considerable for the country; that is to say, the military commandant, the chief of the police, the judges, the schoolmaster, and troops under the command of officers of all ranks.

With so many functionaries living in a town, with their wives and children, it is easy to see that hair-dressers would be in demand. Such was the case, and Fragoso would not have paid his expenses.

Doubtless, however, the jolly fellow, who could do no business in Ega, had thought to be of the party if Lina went with her mistress, but, just as they were leaving the raft, he resolved to remain, at the request of Lina herself.

“Mr. Fragoso!” she said to him, after taking him aside.

“Miss Lina?” answered Fragoso.

“I do not think that your friend Torres intends to go with us to Ega.”

“Certainly not, he is going to stay on board, Miss Lina, but you wold oblige me by not calling him my friend!”

“But you undertook to ask a passage for him before he had shown any intention of doing so.”

“Yes, and on that occasion, if you would like to know what I think, I made a fool of myself!”

“Quite so! and if you would like to know what I think, I do not like the man at all, Mr. Fragoso.”

“Neither do I, Miss Lina, and I have all the time an idea that I have seen him somewhere before. But the remembrance is too vague; the impression, however, is far from being a pleasant one!”

“Where and when could you have met him? Cannot you call it to mind? It might be useful to know who he is and what he has been.”

“No — I try all I can. How long was it ago? In what country? Under what circumstances? And I cannot hit upon it.”

“Mr. Fragoso!”

“Miss Lina!”

“Stay on board and keep watch on Torres during our absence!”

“What? Not go with you to Ega, and remain a whole day without seeing you?”

“I ask you to do so!”

“Is it an order?”

“It is an entreaty!”

“I will remain!”

“Mr. Fragoso!”

“Miss Lina!”

“I thank you!”

“Thank me, then, with a good shake of the hand,” replied Fragoso; “that is worth something.”

Lina held out her hand, and Fragoso kept it for a few moments while he looked into her face. And that is the reason why he did not take his place in the pirogue, and became, without appearing to be, the guard upon Torres.

Did the latter notice the feelings of aversion with which he was regarded? Perhaps, but doubtless he had his reasons for taking no account of them.

A distance of four leagues separated the mooring-place from the town of Ega. Eight leagues, there and back, in a pirogue containing six persons, besides two negroes as rowers, would take some hours, not to mention the fatigue caused by the high temperature, though the sky was veiled with clouds.

Fortunately a lovely breeze blew from the northwest, and if it held would be favorable for crossing Lake Teffe. They could go to Ega and return rapidly without having to tack.

So the lateen sail was hoisted on the mast of the pirogue. Benito took the tiller, and off they went, after a last gesture from Lina to Fragoso to keep his eyes open.

The southern shore of the lake had to be followed to get to Ega.

After two hours the pirogue arrived at the port of this ancient mission founded by the Carmelites, which became a town in 1759, and which General Gama placed forever under Brazilian rule.

The passengers landed on a flat beach, on which were to be found not only boats from the interior, but a few of those little schooners which are used in the coasting-trade on the Atlantic seaboard.

When the two girls entered Ega they were at first much astonished.

“What a large town!” said Minha.

“What houses! what people!” replied Lina, whose eyes seemed to have expanded so that she might see better.

“Rather!” said Benito laughingly. “More than fifteen hundred inhabitants! Two hundred houses at the very least! Some of them with a first floor! And two or three streets! Genuine streets!”

“My dear Manoel!” said Minha, “do protect us against my brother! He is making fun of us, and only because he had already been in the finest towns in Amazones and Para!”

“Quite so, and he is also poking fun at his mother,” added Yaquita, “for I confess I never saw anything equal to this!”

“Then, mother and sister, you must take great care that you do not fall into a trance when you get to Manaos, and vanish altogether when you reach Belem!”

“Never fear,” answered Manoel; “the ladies will have been gently prepared for these grand wonders by visiting the principal cities of the Upper Amazon!”

“Now, Manoel,” said Minha, “you are talking just like my brother! Are you making fun of us, too?”

“No, Minha, I assure you.”

“Laugh on, gentlemen,” said Lina, “and let us look around, my dear mistress, for it is very fine!”

Very fine! A collection of houses, built of mud, whitewashed, and principally covered with thatch or palm-leaves; a few built of stone or wood, with verandas, doors, and shutters painted a bright green, standing in the middle of a small orchard of orange-trees in flower. But there were two or three public buildings, a barrack, and a church dedicated to St. Theresa, which was a cathedral by the side of the modest chapel at Iquitos. On looking toward the lake a beautiful panorama unfolded itself, bordered by a frame of cocoanut-trees and assais, which ended at the edge of the liquid level, and showed beyond the picturesque village of Noqueira, with its few small houses lost in the mass of the old olive-trees on the beach.

But for the two girls there was another cause of wonderment, quite feminine wonderment too, in the fashions of the fair Egans, not the primitive costume of the natives, converted Omaas or Muas, but the dress of true Brazilian ladies. The wives and daughters of the principal functionaries and merchants o the town pretentiously showed off their Parisian toilettes, a little out of date perhaps, for Ega is five hundred leagues away from Para, and this is itself many thousands of miles from Paris.

“Just look at those fine ladies in their fine clothes!”

“Lina will go mad!” exclaimed Benito.

“If those dresses were worn properly,” said Minha, “they might not be so ridiculous!”

“My dear Minha,” said Manoel, “with your simple gown and straw hat, you are better dressed than any one of these Brazilians, with their headgear and flying petticoats, which are foreign to their country and their race.”

“If it pleases you to think so,” answered Minha, “I do not envy any of them.”

But they had come to see. They walked through the streets, which contained more stalls than shops; they strolled about the market-place, the rendezvous of the fashionable, who were nearly stifled in their European clothes; they even breakfasted at an hotel — it was scarcely an inn — whose cookery caused them to deeply regret the excellent service on the raft.

After dinner, at which only turtle flesh, served up in different forms, appeared, the Garral family went for the last time to admire the borders of the lake as the setting sun gilded it with its rays; then they rejoined their pirogue, somewhat disillusioned perhaps as to the magnificence of a town which one hour would give time enough to visit, and a little tired with walking about its stifling streets which were not nearly so pleasant as the shady pathways of Iquitos. The inquisitive Lina's enthusiasm alone had not been damped.

They all took their places in the pirogue. The wind remained in the northwest, and had freshened with the evening. The sail was hoisted. They took the same course as in the morning, across the lake fed by the black waters of the Rio Teffe, which, according to the Indians, is navigable toward the southwest for forty days' journey. At eight o'clock the priogue regained the mooring-place and hailed the jangada.

As soon as Lina could get Fragoso aside —

"Have you seen anything suspicious?" she inquired.

"Nothing, Miss Lina," he replied; "Torres has scarcely left his cabin, where he has been reading and writing."

"He did not get into the house or the dining-room, as I feared?"

"No, all the time he was not in his cabin he was in the bow of the raft."

"And what was he doing?"

"Holding an old piece of paper in his hand, consulting it with great attention, and muttering a lot of incomprehensible words."

"All that is not so unimportant as you think, Mr. Fragoso. These readings and writings and old papers have their interest! He is neither a professor nor a lawyer, this reader and writer!"

“You are right!”

“Still watch him, Mr. Fragoso!”

“I will watch him always, Miss Lina,” replied Fragoso.

On the morrow, the 27th of July, at daybreak, Benito gave the pilot the signal to start.

Away between the islands, in the Bay of Arenapo, the mouth of the Japura, six thousand six hundred feet wide, was seen for an instant. This large tributary comes into the Amazon through eight mouths, as if it were pouring into some gulf or ocean. But its waters come from afar, and it is the mountains of the republic of Ecuador which start them on a course that there are no falls to break until two hundred and ten leagues from its junction with the main stream.

All this day was spent in descending to the island of Yapura, after which the river, less interfered with, makes navigation much easier. The current is not so rapid and the islets are easily avoided, so that there were no touchings or groundings.

The next day the jangada coasted along by vast beaches formed by undulating high domes, which served as the barriers of immense pasture grounds, in which the whole of the cattle in Europe could be raised and fed. These sand banks are considered to be the richest turtle grounds in the basin of the Upper Amazon.

On the evening of the 29th of July they were securely moored off the island of Catua, so as to pass the night, which promised to be dark.

On this island, as soon as the sun rose above the horizon, there appeared a party of Muras Indians, the remains of that ancient and powerful tribe, which formerly occupied more than a hundred leagues of the river bank between the Teffe and the Madeira.

These Indians went and came, watching the raft, which remained stationary. There were about a hundred of them armed with blow-tubes formed of a reed peculiar to these parts, and which is strengthened outside by the stem of a dwarf palm from which the pith has been extracted.

Joam Garral quitted for an instant the work which took up all his time, to warn his people to keep a good guard and not to provoke these Indians.

In truth the sides were not well matched. The Muras are remarkably clever at sending through their blow-tubes arrows which cause incurable wounds, even at a range of three hundred paces.

These arrows, made of the leaf of the *“coucourite”* palm, are feathered with cotton, and nine or ten inches long, with a point like a needle, and poisoned with *“curare.”*

Curare, or *“wourah,”* the liquor “which kills in a whisper,” as the Indians say, is prepared from the sap of one of the euphorbiaceæ and the juice of a bulbous strychnos, not to mention the paste of venomous ants and poisonous serpent fangs which they mix with it.

“It is indeed a terrible poison,” said Manoel. “It attacks at once those nerves by which the movements are subordinated to the will. But the heart is not touched, and it does not cease to beat until the extinction of the vital functions, and besides no antidote is known to the poison, which commences by numbness of the limbs.”

Very fortunately, these Muras made no hostile demonstrations, although they entertain a profound hatred toward the whites. They have, in truth, no longer the courage of their ancestors.

At nightfall a five-holed flute was heard behind the trees in the island, playing several airs in a minor key. Another flute answered. This interchange of musical phrases lasted for two or three minutes, and the Muras disappeared.

Fragoso, in an exuberant moment, had tried to reply by a song in his own fashion, but Lina had clapped her hand on his mouth, and prevented his showing off his insignificant singing talents, which he was so willingly lavish of.

On the 2d of August, at three o’clock in the afternoon, the raft arrived twenty leagues away from there at Lake Apoara, which is fed by the black waters of the river of the same name, and two days afterward, about five o’clock, it stopped at the entrance into Lake Coary.

This lake is one of the largest which communicates with the Amazon, and it serves as a reservoir for different rivers. Five or six affluents run into it, and there are stored and mixed up, and emerge by a narrow channel into the main stream.

After catching a glimpse of the hamlet of Tahua-Miri, mounted on its piles as on stilts, as a protection against inundation from the floods, which often sweep up over these low sand banks, the raft was moored for the night.

The stoppage was made in sight of the village of Coary, a dozen houses, considerably dilapidated, built in the midst of a thick mass of orange and calabash trees.

Nothing can be more changeable than the aspect of this village, for according to the rise or fall of the water the lake stretches away on all sides of it, or is reduced to a narrow canal, scarcely deep enough to communicate with the Amazon.

On the following morning, that of the 5th of August, they started at dawn, passing the canal of Yucura, belonging to the tangled system of lakes and furos of the Rio Zapura, and on the morning of the 6th of August they reached the entrance to Lake Miana.

No fresh incident occurred in the life on board, which proceeded with almost methodical regularity.

Fragoso, urged on by Lina, did not cease to watch Torres.

Many times he tried to get him to talk about his past life, but the adventurer eluded all conversation on the subject, and ended by maintaining a strict reserve toward the barber.

After catching a glimpse of the hamlet of Tahua-Miri, mounted on its piles as on stilts, as a protection against inundation from the floods, which often sweep up and over these low sand banks, the raft was moored for the night.

His intercourse with the Garral family remained the same. If he spoke little to Joam, he addressed himself more willingly to Yaquita and her daughter, and appeared not to notice the evident coolness with which he was received. They all agreed that when the raft arrived at Manaos, Torres should leave it, and that they would never speak of him again. Yaquita followed the advice of Padre Passanha, who counseled patience, but the good priest had not such an easy task in Manoel, who was quite disposed to put on shore the intruder who had been so unfortunately taken on to the raft.

The only thing that happened on this evening was the following:

A pirogue, going down the river, came alongside the jangada, after being hailed by Joam Garral.

“Are you going to Manaos?” asked he of the Indian who commanded and was steering her.

“Yes,” replied he.

“When will you get there?”

“In eight days.”

“Then you will arrive before we shall. Will you deliver a letter for me?”

“With pleasure.”

“Take this letter, then, my friend, and deliver it at Manaos.”

The Indian took the letter which Joam gave him, and a handful of reis was the price of the commission he had undertaken.

No members of the family, then gone into the house, knew anything of this. Torres was the only witness. He heard a few words exchanged between Joam and the Indian, and from the cloud which passed over his face it was easy to see that the sending of this letter considerably surprised him.

CHAPTER XVII. AN ATTACK

HOWEVER, if Manoel, to avoid giving rise to a violent scene on board, said nothing on the subject of Torres, he resolved to have an explanation with Benito.

“Benito,” he began, after taking him to the bow of the jangada, “I have something to say to you.”

Benito, generally so good-humored, stopped as he looked at Manoel, and a cloud came over his countenance.

“I know why,” he said; “it is about Torres.”

“Yes, Benito.”

“And I also wish to speak to you.”

“You have then noticed his attention to Minha?” said Manoel, turning pale.

“Ah! It is not a feeling of jealousy, though, that exasperates you against such a man?” said Benito quickly.

“No!” replied Manoel. “Decidedly not! Heaven forbid I should do such an injury to the girl who is to become my wife. No, Benito! She holds the adventurer in horror! I am not thinking anything of that sort; but it distresses me to see this adventurer constantly obtruding himself by his presence and conversation on your mother and sister, and seeking to introduce himself into that intimacy with your family which is already mine.”

“Manoel,” gravely answered Benito, “I share your aversion for this dubious individual, and had I consulted my feelings I would already have driven Torres off the raft! But I dare not!”

“You dare not?” said Manoel, seizing the hand of his friend. “You dare not?”

“Listen to me, Manoel,” continued Benito. “You have observed Torres well, have you not? You have remarked his attentions to my sister! Nothing can be truer! But while you have been noticing that, have you not seen that this annoying man never keeps his eyes off my father, no matter if he is near to him or far from him, and that he seems to have some spiteful secret intention in watching him with such unaccountable persistency?”

“What are you talking about, Benito? Have you any reason to think that Torres bears some grudge against Joam Garral?”

“No! I think nothing!” replied Benito; “it is only a presentiment! But look well at Torres, study his face with care, and you will see what an evil grin he has whenever my father comes into his sight.”

“Well, then,” exclaimed Manoel, “if it is so, Benito, the more reason for clearing him out!”

“More reason — or less reason,” replied Benito. “Manoel, I fear — what? I know not — but to force my father to get rid of Torres would perhaps be imprudent! I repeat it, I am afraid, though no positive fact enables me to explain my fear to myself!”

And Benito seemed to shudder with anger as he said these words.

“Then,” said Manoel, “you think we had better wait?”

“Yes; wait, before doing anything, but above all things let us be on our guard!”

“After all,” answered Manoel, “in twenty days we shall be at Manaos. There Torres must stop. There he will leave us, and we shall be relieved of his presence for good! Till then we must keep our eyes on him!”

“You understand me, Manoel?” asked Benito.

“I understand you, my friend, my brother!” replied Manoel, “although I do not share, and cannot share, your fears! What connection can possibly exist between your father and this adventurer? Evidently your father has never seen him!”

“I do not say that my father knows Torres,” said Benito; “but assuredly it seems to me that Torres knows my father. What was the fellow doing in the neighborhood of the fazenda when we met him in the forest of Iquitos? Why did he then refuse the hospitality which we offered, so as to afterward manage to force himself on us as our traveling companion? We arrive at Tabatinga, and there he is as if he was waiting for us! The probability is that these meetings were in pursuance of a preconceived plan. When I see the shifty, dogged look of Torres, all this crowds on my mind. I do not know! I am losing myself in things that defy explanation! Oh! why did I ever think of offering to take him on board this raft?”

“Be calm, Benito, I pray you!”

“Manoel!” continued Benito, who seemed to be powerless to contain himself, “think you that if it only concerned me — this man who inspires us all with such aversion and disgust — I should not hesitate to throw him overboard! But when it concerns my father, I fear lest in giving way to my impressions I may be injuring my object! Something tells me that with this scheming fellow there may be danger in doing anything until he has given us the right — the right and the duty — to do it. In short, on the jangada, he is in our power, and if we both keep good watch over my father, we can spoil his game, no matter how sure it may be, and force him to unmask and betray himself! Then wait a little longer!"

The arrival of Torres in the bow of the raft broke off the conversation. Torres looked slyly at the two young men, but said not a word.

Benito was not deceived when he said that the adventurer's eyes were never off Joam Garral as long as he fancied he was unobserved.

No! he was not deceived when he said that Torres' face grew evil when he looked at his father!

By what mysterious bond could these two men — one nobleness itself, that was self-evident — be connected with each other?

Such being the state of affairs it was certainly difficult for Torres, constantly watched as he was by the two young men, by Fragoso and Lina, to make a single movement without having instantly to repress it. Perhaps he understood the position. If he did, he did not show it, for his manner changed not in the least.

Satisfied with their mutual explanation, Manoel and Benito promised to keep him in sight without doing anything to awaken his suspicions.

During the following days the jangada passed on the right the mouths of the rivers Camara, Aru, and Yuripari, whose waters instead of flowing into the Amazon run off to the south to feed the Rio des Purus, and return by it into the main river. At five o'clock on the evening of the 10th of August they put into the island of Cocos.

They there passed a *"seringal."* This name is applied to a caoutchouc plantation, the caoutchouc being extracted from the *"seringueira"* tree, whose scientific name is *siphonia elastica.*

It is said that, by negligence or bad management, the number of these trees is decreasing in the basin of the Amazon, but the forests of seringueira trees are still very considerable on the banks of the Madeira, Purus, and other tributaries.

There were here some twenty Indians collecting and working the caoutchouc, an operation which principally takes place during the months of May, June, and July.

After having ascertained that the trees, well prepared by the river floods which have bathed their stems to a height of about four feet, are in good condition for the harvest, the Indians are set to work.

Incisions are made into the alburnum of the seringueiras; below the wound small pots are attached, which twenty-four hours suffice to fill with a milky sap. It can also be collected by means of a hollow bamboo, and a receptacle placed on the ground at the foot of the tree.

The sap being obtained, the Indians, to prevent the separation of its peculiar resins, fumigate it over a fire of the nuts of the assai palm. By spreading out the sap on a wooden scoop, and shaking it in the smoke, its coagulation is almost immediately obtained; it assumes a grayish-yellow tinge and solidifies. The layers formed in succession are detached from the scoop, exposed to the sun, hardened, and assume the brownish color with which we are familiar. The manufacture is then complete.

Benito, finding a capital opportunity, bought from the Indians all the caoutchouc stored in their cabins, which, by the way, are mostly built on piles. The price he gave them was sufficiently remunerative, and they were highly satisfied.

Four days later, on the 14th of August, the jangada passed the mouths of the Purus.

This is another of the large affluents of the Amazon, and seems to possess a navigable course, even for large ships, of over five hundred leagues. It rises in the southwest, and measures nearly five thousand feet across at its junction with the main river. After winding beneath the shade of ficuses, tahuaris, nipa palms, and cecropias, it enters the Amazon by five mouths.

Hereabouts Araujo the pilot managed with great ease. The course of the river was but slightly obstructed with islands, and besides, from one bank to another its width is about two leagues.

The current, too, took along the jangada more steadily, and on the 18th of August it stopped at the village of Pasquero to pass the night.

The sun was already low on the horizon, and with the rapidity peculiar to these low latitudes, was about to set vertically, like an enormous meteor.

Joam Garral and his wife, Lina, and old Cybele, were in front of the house.

Torres, after having for an instant turned toward Joam as if he would speak to him, and prevented perhaps by the arrival of Padre Passanha, who had come to bid the family good-night, had gone back to his cabin.

The Indians and the negroes were at their quarters along the sides. Araujo, seated at the bow, was watching the current which extended straight away in front of him.

Manoel and Benito, with their eyes open, but chatting and smoking with apparent indifference, walked about the central part of the craft awaiting the hour of repose.

All at once Manoel stopped Benito with his hand and said:

“What a queer smell! Am I wrong? Do you not notice it?”

“One would say that it was the odor of burning musk!” replied Benito. “There ought to be some alligators asleep on the neighboring beach!”

“Well, nature has done wisely in allowing them so to betray themselves.”

“Yes,” said Benito, “it is fortunate, for they are sufficiently formidable creatures!”

Often at the close of the day these saurians love to stretch themselves on the shore, and install themselves comfortably there to pass the night. Crouched at the opening of a hole, into which they have crept back, they sleep with the mouth open, the upper jaw perpendicularly erect, so as to lie in wait for their prey. To these amphibians it is but sport to launch themselves in its pursuit, either by swimming through the waters propelled by their tails or running along the bank with a speed no man can equal.

It is on these huge beaches that the caymans are born, live, and die, not without affording extraordinary examples of longevity. Not only can the old ones, the centenarians, be recognized by the greenish moss which carpets their carcass and is scattered over their protuberances, but by their natural ferocity, which increases with age. As Benito said, they are formidable creatures, and it is fortunate that their attacks can be guarded against.

Suddenly cries were heard in the bow.

“Caymans! caymans!”

Manoel and Benito came forward and looked.

Three large saurians, from fifteen to twenty feet long, had managed to clamber on to the platform of the raft.

“Bring the guns! Bring the guns!” shouted Benito, making signs to the Indians and the blacks to get behind.

“Into the house!” said Manoel; “make haste!”

And in truth, as they could not attack them at once, the best thing they could do was to get into shelter without delay.

It was done in an instant. The Garral family took refuge in the house, where the two young men joined them. The Indians and the negroes ran into their huts and cabins. As they were shutting the door:

“And Minha?” said Manoel.

“She is not there!” replied Lina, who had just run to her mistress’ room.

“Good heavens! where is she?” exclaimed her mother, and they all shouted at once:

“Himha! Minha!”

No reply.

“There she is, on the bow of the jangada!” said Benito.

“Minha!” shouted Manoel.

The two young men, and Fragoso and Joam Garral, thinking no more of danger, rushed out of the house, guns in hand.

Scarcely were they outside when two of the alligators made a half turn and ran toward them.

A dose of buckshot to the head, close to the eye, from Benito, stopped one of the monsters, who, mortally wounded, writhed in frightful convulsions and fell on his side.

But the second still lived, and came on, and there was no way of avoiding him.

The huge alligator tore up to Joam Garral, and after knocking him over with a sweep of his tail, ran at him with open jaws.

At this moment Torres rushed from the cabin, hatchet in hand, and struck such a terrific blow that its edge sunk into the jaw of the cayman and left him defenseless.

Blinded by the blood, the animal flew to the side, and, designedly or not, fell over and was lost in the stream.

“Minha! Minha!” shouted Manoel in distraction, when he got to the bow of the jangada.

Suddenly she came into view. She had taken refuge in the cabin of Araujo, and the cabin had just been upset by a powerful blow from the third alligator. Minha was flying aft, pursued by the monster, who was not six feet away from her.

Minha fell.

A second shot from Benito failed to stop the cayman. He only struck the animal’s carapace, and the scales flew to splinters but the ball did not penetrate.

Manoel threw himself at the girl to raise her, or to snatch her from death! A side blow from the animal’s tail knocked him down too.

Minha fainted, and the mouth of the alligator opened to crush her!

And then Fragoso jumped in to the animal, and thrust in a knife to the very bottom of his throat, at the risk of having his arm snapped off by the two jaws, had they quickly closed.

Fragoso pulled out his arm in time, but he could not avoid the chock of the cayman, and was hurled back into the river, whose waters reddened all around.

“Fragoso! Fragoso!” shrieked Lina, kneeling on the edge of the raft.

A second afterward Fragoso reappeared on the surface of the Amazon — safe and sound.

But, at the peril of his life he had saved the young girl, who soon came to. And as all hands were held out to him — Manoel’s, Yaquita’s, Minha’s, and Lina's, and he did not know what to say, he ended by squeezing the hands of the young mulatto.

However, though Fragoso had saved Minha, it was assuredly to the intervention of Torres that Joam Garral owed his safety.

It was not, therefore, the fazender's life that the adventurer wanted. In the face of this fact, so much had to be admitted.

Manoel said this to Benito in an undertone.

"That is true!" replied Benito, embarrassed. "You are right, and in a sense it is one cruel care the less! Nevertheless, Manoel, my suspicions still exist! It is not always a man's worst enemy who wishes him dead!"

Joam Garral walked up to Torres.

"Thank you, Torres!" he said, holding out his hand. The adventurer took a step or two backward without replying.

"Torres," continued Joam, "I am sorry that we are arriving at the end of our voyage, and that in a few days we must part! I owe you — — "

"Joam Garral!" answered Torres, "you owe me nothing! Your life is precious to me above all things! But if you will allow me — I have been thinking — in place of stopping at Manaos, I will go on to Belem. Will you take me there?"

Joam Garral replied by an affirmative nod.

In hearing this demand Benito in an unguarded moment was about to intervene, but Manoel stopped him, and the young man checked himself, though not without a violent effort.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE ARRIVAL DINNER

IN THE MORNING, after a night which was scarcely sufficient to calm so much excitement, they unmoored from the cayman beach and departed. Before five days, if nothing interfered with their voyage, the raft would reach the port of Manaos.

Minha had quite recovered from her fright, and her eyes and smiles thanked all those who had risked their lives for her.

As for Lina, it seemed as though she was more grateful to the brave Fragoso than if it was herself that he had saved.

“I will pay you back, sooner or later, Mr. Fragoso,” said she, smiling.

“And how, Miss Lina?”

“Oh! You know very well!”

“Then if I know it, let it be soon and not late!” replied the good-natured fellow.

And from this day it began to be whispered about that the charming Lina was engaged to Fragoso, that their marriage would take place at the same time as that of Minha and Manoel, and that the young couple would remain at Belem with the others.

“Capital! capital!” repeated Fragoso unceasingly; “but I never thought Para was such a long way off!”

As for Manoel and Benito, they had had a long conversation about what had passed. There could be no question about obtaining from Joam Garral the dismissal of his rescuer.

“Your life is precious to me above all things!” Torres had said.

This reply, hyperbolical and enigmatical at the time, Benito had heard and remembered.

In the meantime the young men could do nothing. More than ever they were reduced to waiting — to waiting not for four or five days, but for seven or eight weeks — that is to say, for whatever time it would take for the raft to get to Belem.

“There is in all this some mystery that I cannot understand,” said Benito.

“Yes, but we are assured on one point,” answered Manoel. “It is certain that Torres does not want your father’s life. For the rest, we must still watch!”

It seemed that from this day Torres desired to keep himself more reserved. He did not seek to intrude on the family, and was even less assiduous toward Minha. There seemed a relief in the situation of which all, save perhaps Joam Garral, felt the gravity.

On the evening of the same day they left on the right the island of Baroso, formed by a furo of that name, and Lake Manaori, which is fed by a confused series of petty tributaries.

The night passed without incident, though Joam Garral had advised them to watch with great care.

On the morrow, the 20th of August, the pilot, who kept near the right bank on account of the uncertain eddies on the left, entered between the bank and the islands.

Beyond this bank the country was dotted with large and small lakes, much as those of Calderon, Huarandeina, and other black-watered lagoons. This water system marks the approach of the Rio Negro, the most remarkable of all the tributaries of the Amazon. In reality the main river still bore the name of the Solimoens, and it is only after the junction of the Rio Negro that it takes the name which has made it celebrated among the rivers of the globe.

During this day the raft had to be worked under curious conditions.

The arm followed by the pilot, between Calderon Island and the shore, was very narrow, although it appeared sufficiently large. This was owing to a great portion of the island being slightly above the mean level, but still covered by the high flood waters. On each side were massed forests of giant trees, whose summits towered some fifty feet above the ground, and joining one bank to the other formed an immense cradle.

On the left nothing could be more picturesque than this flooded forest, which seemed to have been planted in the middle of a lake. The stems of the trees arose from the clear, still water, in which every interlacement of their boughs was reflected with unequaled purity. They were arranged on an immense sheet of glass, like the trees in miniature on some table *epergne,* and their reflection could not be more perfect. The difference between the image and the reality could scarcely be described. Duplicates of grandeur, terminated above and below by a vast parasol of green, they seemed to form two hemispheres, inside which the jangada appeared to follow one of the great circles.

It had been necessary to bring the raft under these boughs, against which flowed the gentle current of the stream. It was impossible to go back. Hence the task of navigating with extreme care, so as to avoid the collisions on either side.

In this all Araujo’s ability was shown, and he was admirably seconded by his crew. The trees of the forest furnished the resting-places for the long poles which kept the jangada in its course. The least blow to the jangada would have endangered the complete demolition of the woodwork, and caused the loss, if not of the crew, of the greater part of the cargo.

“It is truly very beautiful,” said Minha, “and it would be very pleasant for us always to travel in this way, on this quiet water, shaded from the rays of the sun.”

“At the same time pleasant and dangerous, dear Minha,” said Manoel. “In a pirogue there is doubtless nothing to fear in sailing here, but on a huge raft of wood better have a free course and a clear stream.”

“We shall be quite through the forest in a couple of hours,” said the pilot.

“Look well at it, then!” said Lina. “All these beautiful things pass so quickly! Ah! dear mistress! do you see the troops of monkeys disporting in the higher branches, and the birds admiring themselves in the pellucid water!”

“And the flowers half-opened on the surface,” replied Minha, “and which the current dandles like the breeze!”

“And the long lianas, which so oddly stretch from one tree to another!” added the young mulatto.

“And no Fragoso at the end of them!” said Lina’s betrothed. “That was rather a nice flower you gathered in the forest of Iquitos!”

“Just behold the flower — the only one in the world,” said Lina quizzingly; “and, mistress! just look at the splendid plants!”

And Lina pointed to the nymphæas with their colossal leaves, whose flowers bear buds as large as cocoanuts. Then, just where the banks plunged beneath the waters, there were clumps of *“mucumus,”* reeds with large leaves, whose elastic stems bend to give passage to the pirogues and close again behind them. There was there what would tempt any sportsman, for a whole world of aquatic birds fluttered between the higher clusters, which shook with the stream.

Ibises half-lollingly posed on some old trunk, and gray herons motionless on one leg, solemn flamingoes who from a distance looked like red umbrellas scattered in the foliage, and phenicopters of every color, enlivened the temporary morass.

And along the top of the water glided long and swiftly-swimming snakes, among them the formidable gymnotus, whose electric discharges successively repeated paralyze the most robust of men or animals, and end by dealing death. Precautions had to be taken against the *“sucurijus”* serpents, which, coiled round the trunk of some tree, unroll themselves, hang down, seize their prey, and draw it into their rings, which are powerful enough to crush a bullock. Have there not been met with in these Amazonian forests reptiles from thirty to thirty-five feet long? and even, according to M. Carrey, do not some exist whose length reaches forty-seven feet, and whose girth is that of a hogshead?

Had one of these sucurijus, indeed, got on to the raft he would have proved as formidable as an alligator.

Very fortunately the travelers had to contend with neither gymnotus nor sucuriju, and the passage across the submerged forest, which lasted about two hours, was effected without accident.

Three days passed. They neared Manaos. Twenty-four hours more and the raft would be off the mouth of the Rio Negro, before the capital of the province of Amazones.

In fact, on the 23d of August, at five o’clock in the evening, they stopped at the southern point of Muras Island, on the right bank of the stream. They only had to cross obliquely for a few miles to arrive at the port, but the pilot Araujo very properly would not risk it on that day, as night was coming on. The three miles which remained would take three hours to travel, and to keep to the course of the river it was necessary, above all things, to have a clear outlook.

This evening the dinner, which promised to be the last of this first part of the voyage, was not served without a certain amount of ceremony. Half the journey on the Amazon had been accomplished, and the task was worthy of a jovial repast. It was fitting to drink to the health of Amazones a few glasses of that generous liquor which comes from the coasts of Oporto and Setubal. Besides, this was, in a way, the betrothal dinner of Fragoso and the charming Lina — that of Manoel and Minha had taken place at the fazenda of Iquitos several weeks before. After the young master and mistress, it was the turn of the faithful couple who were attached to them by so many bonds of gratitude.

So Lina, who was to remain in the service of Minha, and Fragoso, who was about to enter into that of Manoel Valdez, sat at the common table, and even had the places of honor reserved for them.

Torres, naturally, was present at the dinner, which was worthy of the larder and kitchen of the jangada.

The adventurer, seated opposite to Joam Garral, who was always taciturn, listened to all that was said, but took no part in the conversation. Benito quietly and attentively watched him. The eyes of Torres, with a peculiar expression, constantly sought his father. One would have called them the eyes of some wild beast trying to fascinate his prey before he sprang on it.

Manoel talked mostly with Minha. Between whiles his eyes wandered to Torres, but he acted his part more successfully than Benito in a situation which, if it did not finish at Manaos, would certainly end at Belem.

The dinner was jolly enough. Lina kept it going with her good humor, Fragoso with his witty repartees.

The Padre Passanha looked gayly round on the little world he cherished, and on the two young couples which his hands would shortly bless in the waters of Para.

“Eat, padre,” said Benito, who joined in the general conversation; “do honor to this betrothal dinner. You will want some strength to celebrate both marriages at once!”

“Well, my dear boy,” replied Passanha, “seek out some lovely and gentle girl who wishes you well, and you will see that I can marry you at the same time!”

“Well answered, padre!” exclaimed Manoel. “Let us drink to the coming marriage of Benito.”

“We must look out for some nice young lady at Belem,” said Minha. “He should do what everybody else does.”

“To the wedding of Mr. Benito!” said Fragoso, “who ought to wish all the world to marry him!”

“They are right, sir,” said Yaquita. “I also drink to your marriage, and may you be as happy as Minha and Manoel, and as I and your father have been!”

“As you always will be, it is to be hoped,” said Torres, drinking a glass of port without having pledged anybody. “All here have their happiness in their own hands.”

It was difficult to say, but this wish, coming from the adventurer, left an unpleasant impression.

Manoel felt this, and wishing to destroy its effect, “Look here, padre,” said he, “while we are on this subject, are there not any more couples to betroth on the raft?”

“I do not know,” answered Padre Passanha, “unless Torres — you are not married, I believe?”

“No; I am, and always shall be, a bachelor.”

Benito and Manoel thought that while thus speaking Torres looked toward Minha.

“And what should prevent you marrying?” replied Padre Passanha; “at Belem you could find a wife whose age would suit yours, and it would be possible perhaps for you to settle in that town. That would be better than this wandering life, of which, up to the present, you have not made so very much.”

“You are right, padre,” answered Torres; “I do not say no. Besides the example is contagious. Seeing all these young couples gives me rather a longing for marriage. But I am quite a stranger in Belem, and, for certain reasons, that would make my settlement more difficult.”

“Where do you come from, then?” asked Fragoso, who always had the idea that he had already met Torres somewhere.

“From the province of Minas Geraes.”

“And you were born — — ”

“In the capital of the diamond district, Tijuco.”

Those who had seen Joam Garral at this moment would have been surprised at the fixity of his look which met that of Torres.

CHAPTER XIX. ANCIENT HISTORY

BUT THE CONVERSATION was continued by Fragoso, who immediately rejoined:

“What! you come from Tijuco, from the very capital of the diamond district?”

“Yes,” said Torres. “Do you hail from that province?”

“No! I come from the Atlantic seaboard in the north of Brazil,” replied Fragoso.

“You do not know this diamond country, Mr. Manoel?” asked Torres.

A negative shake of the head from the young man was the only reply.

“And you, Mr. Benito,” continued Torres, addressing the younger Garral, whom he evidently wished to join in the conversation; “you have never had curiosity enough to visit the diamond arraval?”

“Never,” dryly replied Benito.

“Ah! I should like to see that country,” said Fragoso, who unconsciously played Torres’ game. “It seems to me I should finish by picking up a diamond worth something considerable.”

“And what would you do with this diamond worth something considerable, Fragoso?” queried Lina.

“Sell it!”

“Then you would get rich all of a sudden!”

“Very rich!”

“Well, if you had been rich three months ago you would never have had the idea of — that liana!”

“And if I had not had that,” exclaimed Fragoso, “I should not have found a charming little wife who — well, assuredly, all is for the best!”

“You see, Fragoso,” said Minha, “when you marry Lina, diamond takes the place of diamond, and you do not lose by the change!”

“To be sure, Miss Minha,” gallantly replied Fragoso; “rather I gain!”

There could be no doubt that Torres did not want the subject to drop, for he went on with:

“It is a fact that at Tijuco sudden fortunes are realized enough to turn any man’s head! Have you heard tell of the famous diamond of Abaete, which was valued at more than two million contos of reis? Well, this stone, which weighed an ounce, came from the Brazilian mines! And they were three convicts — yes! three men sentenced to transportation for life — who found it by chance in the River Abaete, at ninety leagues from Terro de Frio.”

“At a stroke their fortune was made?” asked Fragoso.

“No,” replied Torres; “the diamond was handed over to the governor-general of the mines. The value of the stone was recognized, and King John VI. of Portugal, had it cut, and wore it on his neck on great occasions. As for the convicts, they got their pardon, but that was all, and the cleverest could not get much of an income out of that!”

“You, doubtless?” said Benito very dryly.

“Yes — I? Why not?” answered Torres. “Have you ever been to the diamond district?” added he, this time addressing Joam Garral.

“Never!” said Joam, looking straight at him.

“That is a pity!” replied he. “You should go there one day. It is a very curious place, I assure you. The diamond valley is an isolated spot in the vast empire of Brazil, something like a park of a dozen leagues in circumference, which in the nature of its soil, its vegetation, and its sandy rocks surrounded by a circle of high mountains, differs considerably from the neighboring provinces. But, as I have told you, it is one of the richest places in the world, for from 1807 to 1817 the annual return was about eighteen thousand carats. Ah! there have been some rare finds there, not only for the climbers who seek the precious stone up to the very tops of the mountains, but also for the smugglers who fraudulently export it. But the work in the mines is not so pleasant, and the two thousand negroes employed in that work by the government are obliged even to divert the watercourses to get at the diamantiferous sand. Formerly it was easier work.”

“In short,” said Fragoso, “the good time has gone!”

“But what is still easy is to get the diamonds in scoundrel-fashion — that is, by theft; and — stop! in 1826, when I was about eight years old, a terrible drama happened at Tijuco, which showed that criminal would recoil from nothing if they could gain a fortune by one bold stroke. But perhaps you are not interested?”

“On the contrary, Torres; go on,” replied Joam Garral, in a singularly calm voice.

“So be it,” answered Torres. “Well, the story is about stealing diamonds, and a handful of those pretty stones is worth a million, sometimes two!”

And Torres, whose face expressed the vilest sentiments of cupidity, almost unconsciously made a gesture of opening and shutting his hand.

“This is what happened,” he continued. “At Tijuco it is customary to send off in one delivery the diamonds collected during the year. They are divided into two lots, according to their size, after being sorted in a dozen sieves with holes of different dimensions. These lots are put into sacks and forwarded to Rio de Janeiro; but as they are worth many millions you may imagine they are heavily escorted. A workman chosen by the superintendent, four cavalrymen from the district regiment, and ten men on foot, complete the convoy. They first make for Villa Rica, where the commandant puts his seal on the sacks, and then the convoy continues its journey to Rio de Janeiro. I should add that, for the sake of precaution, the start is always kept secret. Well, in 1826, a young fellow named Dacosta, who was about twenty-two or twenty-three years of age, and who for some years had been employed at Tijuco in the offices of the governor-general, devised the following scheme. He leagued himself with a band of smugglers, and informed them of the date of the departure of the convoy. The scoundrels took their measures accordingly. They were numerous and well armed. Close to Villa Rica, during the night of the 22d of January, the gang suddenly attacked the diamond escort, who defended themselves bravely, but were all massacred, with the exception of one man, who, seriously wounded, managed to escape and bring the news of the horrible deed. The workman was not spared any more than the soldiers. He fell beneath he blows of the thieves, and was doubtless dragged away and thrown over some precipice, for his body was never found."

"And this Dacosta?" asked Joam Garral.

"Well, his crime did not do him much good, for suspicion soon pointed toward him. He was accused of having got up the affair. In vain he protested that he was innocent. Thanks to the situation he held, he was in a position to know the date on which the convoy's departure was to take place. He alone could have informed the smugglers. He was charged, arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. Such a sentence required his execution in twenty-four hours."

"Was the fellow executed?" asked Fragoso.

"No," replied Torres; "they shut him up in the prison at Villa Rica, and during the night, a few hours only before his execution, whether alone or helped by others, he managed to escape."

"Has this young man been heard of since?" asked Joam Garral.

"Never," replied Torres. "He probably left Brazil, and now, in some distant land, lives a cheerful life with the proceeds of the robbery which he is sure to have realized."

"Perhaps, on the other hand, he died miserably!" answered Joam Garral.

"And, perhaps," added Padre Passanha, "Heaven caused him to feel remorse for his crime."

Here they all rose from the table, and, having finished their dinner, went out to breathe the evening air. The sun was low on the horizon, but an hour had still to elapse before nightfall.

“These stories are not very lively,” said Fragoso, “and our betrothal dinner was best at the beginning.”

“But it was your fault, Fragoso,” answered Lina.

“How my fault?”

“It was you who went on talking about the district and the diamonds, when you should not have done so.”

“Well, that’s true,” replied Fragoso; “but I had no idea we were going to wind up in that fashion.”

“You are the first to blame!”

“And the first to be punished, Miss Lina; for I did not hear you laugh all through the dessert.”

The whole family strolled toward the bow of the jangada. Manoel and Benito walked one behind the other without speaking. Yaquita and her daughter silently followed, and all felt an unaccountable impression of sadness, as if they had a presentiment of some coming calamity.

Torres stepped up to Joam Garral, who, with bowed head, seemed to be lost in thought, and putting his hand on his shoulder, said, “Joam Garral, may I have a few minutes’ conversation with you?”

Joam looked at Torres.

“Here?” he asked.

“No; in private.”

“Come, then.”

They went toward the house, entered it, and the door was shut on them.

It would be difficult to depict what every one felt when Joam Garral and Torres disappeared. What could there be in common between the adventurer and the honest fazender of Iquitos? The menace of some frightful misfortune seemed to hang over the whole family, and they scarcely dared speak to each other.

“Manoel!” said Benito, seizing his friend’s arm, “whatever happens, this man must leave us tomorrow at Manaos.”

“Yes! it is imperative!” answered Manoel.

“And if through him some misfortune happens to my father — I shall kill him!”

CHAPTER XX. BETWEEN THE TWO MEN

FOR A MOMENT, alone in the room, where none could see or hear them, Joam Garral and Torres looked at each other without uttering a word. Did the adventurer hesitate to speak? Did he suspect that Joam Garral would only reply to his demands by a scornful silence?

Yes! Probably so. So Torres did not question him. At the outset of the conversation he took the affirmative, and assumed the part of an accuser.

“Joam,” he said, “your name is not Garral. Your name is Dacosta!”

At the guilty name which Torres thus gave him, Joam Garral could not repress a slight shudder.

“You are Joam Dacosta,” continued Torres, “who, twenty-five years ago, were a clerk in the governor-general’s office at Tijuco, and you are the man who was sentenced to death in this affair of the robbery and murder!”

No response from Joam Garral, whose strange tranquillity surprised the adventurer. Had he made a mistake in accusing his host? No! For Joam Garral made no start at the terrible accusations. Doubtless he wanted to know to what Torres was coming.

“Joam Dacosta, I repeat! It was you whom they sought for this diamond affair, whom they convicted of crime and sentenced to death, and it was you who escaped from the prison at Villa Rica a few hours before you should have been executed! Do you not answer?”

Rather a long silence followed this direct question which Torres asked. Joam Garral, still calm, took a seat. His elbow rested on a small table, and he looked fixedly at his accuser without bending his head.

“Will you reply?” repeated Torres.

“What reply do you want from me?” said Joam quietly.

“A reply,” slowly answered Torres, “that will keep me from finding out the chief of the police at Manaos, and saying to him, ‘A man is there whose identity can easily be established, who can be recognized even after twenty-five years’ absence, and this man was the instigator of the diamond robbery at Tijuco. He was the accomplice of the murderers of the soldiers of the escort; he is the man who escaped from execution; he is Joam Garral, whose true name is Joam Dacosta.’”

“And so, Torres,” said Joam Garral, “I shall have nothing to fear from you if I give the answer you require?”

“Nothing, for neither you nor I will have any interest in talking about the matter.”

“Neither you nor I?” asked Joam Garral. “It is not with money, then, that your silence is to be bought?”

“No! No matter how much you offered me!”

“What do you want, then?”

“Joam Garral,” replied Torres, “here is my proposal. Do not be in a hurry to reply by a formal refusal. Remember that you are in my power.”

“What is this proposal?” asked Joam.

Torres hesitated for a moment.

The attitude of this guilty man, whose life he held in his hands, was enough to astonish him. He had expected a stormy discussion and prayers and tears. He had before him a man convicted of the most heinous of crimes, and the man never flinched.

At length, crossing his arms, he said:

“You have a daughter! — I like her — and I want to marry her!”

Apparently Joam Garral expected anything from such a man, and was as quiet as before.

“And so,” he said, “the worthy Torres is anxious to enter the family of a murderer and a thief?”

“I am the sole judge of what it suits me to do,” said Torres. “I wish to be the son-in-law of Joam Garral, and I will.”

“You ignore, then, that my daughter is going to marry Manoel Valdez?”

“You will break it off with Manoel Valdez!”

“And if my daughter declines?”

“If you tell her all, I have no doubt she would consent,” was the impudent answer.

“All?”

“All, if necessary. Between her own feelings and the honor of her family and the life of her father she would not hesitate.”

“You are a consummate scoundrel, Torres,” quietly said Joam, whose coolness never forsook him.

“A scoundrel and a murderer were made to understand each other.”

At these words Joam Garral rose, advanced to the adventurer, and looking him straight in the face, “Torres,” he said, “if you wish to become one of the family of Joam Dacosta, you ought to know that Joam Dacosta was innocent of the crime for which he was condemned.”

“Really!”

“And I add,” replied Joam, “that you hold the proof of his innocence, and are keeping it back to proclaim it on the day when you marry his daughter.”

“Fair play, Joam Garral,” answered Torres, lowering his voice, “and when you have heard me out, you will see if you dare refuse me your daughter!”

“I am listening, Torres.”

“Well,” said the adventurer, half keeping back his words, as if he was sorry to let them escape from his lips, “I know you are innocent! I know it, for I know the true culprit, and I am in a position to prove your innocence.”

“And the unhappy man who committed the crime?”

“Is dead.”

“Dead!” exclaimed Joam Garral; and the word made him turn pale, in spite of himself, as if it had deprived him of all power of reinstatement.

“Dead,” repeated Torres; “but this man, whom I knew a long time after his crime, and without knowing that he was a convict, had written out at length, in his own hand, the story of this affair of the diamonds, even to the smallest details. Feeling his end approaching, he was seized with remorse. He knew where Joam Dacosta had taken refuge, and under what name the innocent man had again begun a new life. He knew that he was rich, in the bosom of a happy family, but he knew also that there was no happiness for him. And this happiness he desired to add to the reputation to which he was entitled. But death came — he intrusted to me, his companion, to do what he could no longer do. He gave me the proofs of Dacosta's innocence for me to transmit them to him, and he died."

"The man's name?" exclaimed Joam Garral, in a tone he could not control.

"You will know it when I am one of your family."

"And the writing?"

Joam Garral was ready to throw himself on Torres, to search him, to snatch from him the proofs of his innocence.

"The writing is in a safe place," replied Torres, "and you will not have it until your daughter has become my wife. Now will you still refuse me?"

"Yes," replied Joam, "but in return for that paper the half of my fortune is yours."

"The half of your fortune?" exclaimed Torres; "agreed, on condition that Minha brings it to me at her marriage."

"And it is thus that you respect the wishes of a dying man, of a criminal tortured by remorse, and who has charge you to repair as much as he could the evil which he had done?"

"It is thus."

"Once more, Torres," said Joam Garral, "you are a consummate scoundrel."

"Be it so."

"And as I am not a criminal we were not made to understand one another."

"And your refuse?"

"I refuse."

"It will be your ruin, then, Joam Garral. Everything accuses you in the proceedings that have already taken place. You are condemned to death, and you know, in sentences for crimes of that nature, the government is forbidden the right of commuting the penalty. Denounced, you are taken; taken, you are executed. And I will denounce you."

Master as he was of himself, Joam could stand it no longer. He was about to rush on Torres.

A gesture from the rascal cooled his anger.

"Take care," said Torres, "your wife knows not that she is the wife of Joam Dacosta, your children do not know they are the children of Joam Dacosta, and you are not going to give them the information."

Joam Garral stopped himself. He regained his usual command over himself, and his features recovered their habitual calm.

"This discussion has lasted long enough," said he, moving toward the door, "and I know what there is left for me to do."

“Take care, Joam Garral!” said Torres, for the last time, for he could scarcely believe that his ignoble attempt at extortion had collapsed.

Joam Garral made him no answer. He threw back the door which opened under the veranda, made a sign to Torres to follow him, and they advanced toward the center of the jangada, where the family were assembled.

Benito, Manoel, and all of them, under a feeling of deep anxiety, had risen. They could see that the bearing of Torres was still menacing, and that the fire of anger still shone in his eyes.

In extraordinary contrast, Joam Garral was master of himself, and almost smiling.

Both of them stopped before Yaquita and her people. Not one dared to say a word to them.

It was Torres who, in a hollow voice, and with his customary impudence, broke the painful silence.

“For the last time, Joam Garral,” he said, “I ask you for a last reply!”

“And here is my reply.”

And addressing his wife:

“Yaquita,” he said, “peculiar circumstances oblige me to alter what we have formerly decided as to the marriage of Minha and Manoel.”

“At last!” exclaimed Torres.

Joam Garral, without answering him, shot at the adventurer a glance of the deepest scorn.

But at the words Manoel had felt his heart beat as if it would break. The girl arose, ashy pale, as if she would seek shelter by the side of her mother. Yaquita opened her arms to protect, to defend her.

“Father,” said Benito, who had placed himself between Joam Garral and Torres, “what were you going to say?”

“I was going to say,” answered Joam Garral, raising his voice, “that to wait for our arrival in Para for the wedding of Minha and Manoel is to wait too long. The marriage will take place here, not later than to-morrow, on the jangada, with the aid of Padre Passanha, if, after a conversation I am about to have with Manoel, he agrees with me to defer it no longer.”

“Ah, father, father!” exclaimed the young man.

“Wait a little before you call me so, Manoel,” replied Joam, in a tone of unspeakable suffering.

Here Torres, with crossed arms, gave the whole family a look of inconceivable insolence.

“So that is you last word?” said he, extending his hand toward Joam Garral.

“No, that is not my last word.”

“What is it, then?”

“This, Torres. I am master here. You will be off, if you please, and even if you do not please, and leave the jangada at this very instant!”

“Yes, this instant!” exclaimed Benito, “or I will throw you overboard.”

Torres shrugged his shoulders.

“No threats,” he said; “they are of no use. It suits me also to land, and without delay. But you will remember me, Joam Garral. We shall not be long before we meet.”

“If it only depends on me,” answered Joam Garral, “we shall soon meet, and rather sooner, perhaps, than you will like. To-morrow I shall be with Judge Ribeiro, the first magistrate of the province, whom I have advised of my arrival at Manaos. If you dare, meet me there!”

“At Judge Ribeiro’s?” said Torres, evidently disconcerted.

“At Judge Ribeiro’s,” answered Joam Garral.

And then, showing the pirogue to Torres, with a gesture of supreme contempt Joam Garral ordered four of his people to land him without delay on the nearest point of the island.

The scoundrel at last disappeared.

The family, who were still appalled, respected the silence of its chief; but Fragoso, comprehending scarce half the gravity of the situation, and carried away by his customary vivacity, came up to Joam Garral.

“If the wedding of Miss Minha and Mr. Manoel is to take place to-morrow on the raft — — ”

“Yours shall take place at the same time,” kindly answered Joam Garral.

And making a sign to Manoel, he retired to his room with him.

The interview between Joam and Manoel had lasted for half an hour, and it seemed a century to the family, when the door of the room was reopened.

Manoel came out alone; his face glowed with generous resolution.

Going up to Yaquita, he said, “My mother!” to Minha he said, “My wife!” and to Benito he said, “My brother!” and, turning toward Lina and Fragoso, he said to all, “To-morrow!”

He knew all that had passed between Joam Garral and Torres. He knew that, counting on the protection of Judge Ribeiro, by means of a correspondence which he had had with him for a year past without speaking of it to his people, Joam Garral had at last succeeded in clearing himself and convincing him of his innocence. He knew that Joam Garral had boldly undertaken the voyage with the sole object of canceling the hateful proceedings of which he had been the victim, so as not to leave on his daughter and son-in-law the weight of the terrible situation which he had had to endure so long himself.

Yes, Manoel knew all this, and, further, he knew that Joam Garral — or rather Joam Dacosta — was innocent, and his misfortunes made him even dearer and more devoted to him. What he did not know was that the material proof of the innocence of the fazender existed, and that this proof was in the hands of Torres. Joam Garral wished to reserve for the judge himself the use of this proof, which, if the adventurer had spoken truly, would demonstrate his innocence.

Manoel confined himself, then, to announcing that he was going to Padre Passanha to ask him to get things ready for the two weddings.

Next day, the 24th of August, scarcely an hour before the ceremony was to take place, a large pirogue came off from the left bank of the river and hailed the jangada. A dozen paddlers had swiftly brought it from Manaos, and with a few men it carried the chief of the police, who made himself known and came on board.

At the moment Joam Garral and his family, attired for the ceremony, were coming out of the house.

“Joam Garral?” asked the chief of the police.

“I am here,” replied Joam.

“Joam Garral,” continued the chief of the police, “you have also been Joam Dacosta; both names have been borne by the same man — I arrest you!”

At these words Yaquita and Minha, struck with stupor, stopped without any power to move.

“My father a murderer?” exclaimed Benito, rushing toward Joam Garral.

By a gesture his father silenced him.

“I will only ask you one question,” said Joam with firm voice, addressing the chief of police. “Has the warrant in virtue of which you arrest me been issued against me by the justice at Manaos — by Judge Ribeiro?”

“No,” answered the chief of the police, “it was given to me, with an order for its immediate execution, by his substitute. Judge Ribeiro was struck with apoplexy yesterday evening, and died during the night at two o’clock, without having recovered his consciousness.”

“Dead!” exclaimed Joam Garral, crushed for a moment by the news — ”dead! dead!”

But soon raising his head, he said to his wife and children, “Judge Ribeiro alone knew that I was innocent, my dear ones. The death of the judge may be fatal to me, but that is no reason for me to despair.”

And, turning toward Manoel, “Heaven help us!” he said to him; “we shall see if truth will come down to the earth from Above.”

The chief of the police made a sign to his men, who advanced to secure Joam Garral.

“But speak, father!” shouted Benito, mad with despair; “say one word, and we shall contest even by force this horrible mistake of which you are the victim!”

“There is no mistake here, my son,” replied Joam Garral; “Joam Dacosta and Joam Garral are one. I am in truth Joam Dacosta! I am the honest man whom a legal error unjustly doomed to death twenty-five years ago in the place of the true culprit! That I am quite innocent I swear before Heaven, once for all, on your heads, my children, and on the head of your mother!”

“All communication between you and yours is now forbidden,” said the chief of the police. “You are my prisoner, Joam Garral, and I will rigorously execute my warrant.”

Joam restrained by a gesture his dismayed children and servants.

“Let the justice of man be done while we wait for the justice of God!”

And with his head unbent, he stepped into the pirogue.

It seemed, indeed, as though of all present Joam Garral was the only one whom this fearful thunderbolt, which had fallen so unexpectedly on his head, had failed to overwhelm.

PART II. THE CRYPTOGRAM

CHAPTER I. MANAOS

THE TOWN of Manaos is in 3° 8’ 4” south latitude, and 67° 27’ west longitude, reckoning from the Paris meridian. It is some four hundred and twenty leagues from Belem, and about ten miles from the *embouchure* of the Rio Negro.

Manaos is not built on the Amazon. It is on the left bank of the Rio Negro, the most important and remarkable of all the tributaries of the great artery of Brazil, that the capital of the province, with its picturesque group of private houses and public buildings, towers above the surrounding plain.

The Rio Negro, which was discovered by the Spaniard Favella in 1645, rises in the very heart of the province of Popayan, on the flanks of the mountains which separate Brazil from New Grenada, and it communicates with the Orinoco by two of its affluents, the Pimichin and the Cassiquary.

After a noble course of some seventeen hundred miles it mingles its cloudy waters with those of the Amazon through a mouth eleven hundred feet wide, but such is its vigorous influx that many a mile has to be completed before those waters lose their distinctive character. Hereabouts the ends of both its banks trend off and form a huge bay fifteen leagues across, extending to the islands of Anavilhanas; and in one of its indentations the port of Manaos is situated. Vessels of all kinds are there collected in great numbers, some moored in the stream awaiting a favorable wind, others under repair up the numerous *iguarapes*, or canals, which so capriciously intersect the town, and give it its slightly Dutch appearance.

With the introduction of steam vessels, which is now rapidly taking place, the trade of Manaos is destined to increase enormously. Woods used in building and furniture work, cocoa, caoutchouc, coffee, sarsaparilla, sugar-canes, indigo, muscado nuts, salt fish, turtle butter, and other commodities, are brought here from all parts, down the innumerable streams into the Rio Negro from the west and north, into the Madeira from the west and south, and then into the Amazon, and by it away eastward to the coast of the Atlantic.

Manaos was formerly called Moura, or Barra de Rio Negro. From 1757 to 1804 it was only part of the captaincy which bears the name of the great river at whose mouth it is placed; but since 1826 it has been the capital of the large province of Amazones, borrowing its latest name from an Indian tribe which formerly existed in these parts of equatorial America.

Careless travelers have frequently confounded it with the famous Manoa, a city of romance, built, it was reported, near the legendary lake of Parima — which would seem to be merely the Upper Branco, a tributary of the Rio Negro. Here was the Empire of El Dorado, whose monarch, if we are to believe the fables of the district, was every morning covered with powder of gold, there being so much of the precious metal abounding in this privileged locality that it was swept up with the very dust of the streets. This assertion, however, when put to the test, was disproved, and with extreme regret, for the auriferous deposits which had deceived the greedy scrutiny of the gold-seekers turned out to be only worthless flakes of mica!

In short, Manaos has none of the fabulous splendors of the mythical capital of El Dorado. It is an ordinary town of about five thousand inhabitants, and of these at least three thousand are in government employ. This fact is to be attributed to the number of its public buildings, which consist of the legislative chamber, the government house, the treasury, the post-office, and the custom-house, and, in addition, a college founded in 1848, and a hospital erected in 1851. When with these is also mentioned a cemetery on the south side of a hill, on which, in 1669, a fortress, which has since been demolished, was thrown up against the pirates of the Amazon, some idea can be gained as to the importance of the official establishments of the city. Of religious buildings it would be difficult to find more than two, the small Church of the Conception and the Chapel of Notre Dame des Remedes, built on a knoll which overlooks the town. These are very few for a town of Spanish origin, though to them should perhaps be added the Carmelite Convent, burned down in 1850, of which only the ruins remain. The population of Manaos does not exceed the number above given, and after reckoning the public officials and soldiers, is principally made of up Portuguese and Indian merchants belonging to the different tribes of the Rio Negro.

Three principal thoroughfares of considerable irregularity run through the town, and they bear names highly characteristic of the tone of thought prevalent in these parts — God-the-Father Street, God-the-Son Street, and God-the-Holy Ghost Street!

In the west of the town is a magnificent avenue of centenarian orange trees which were carefully respected by the architects who out of the old city made the new. Round these principal thoroughfares is interwoven a perfect network of unpaved alleys, intersected every now and then by four canals, which are occasionally crossed by wooden bridges. In a few places these iguarapes flow with their brownish waters through large vacant spaces covered with straggling weeds and flowers of startling hues, and here and there are natural squares shaded by magnificent trees, with an occasional white-barked sumaumeira shooting up, and spreading out its large dome-like parasol above its gnarled branches.

The private houses have to be sought for among some hundreds of dwellings, of very rudimentary type, some roofed with tiles, others with interlaced branches of the palm-tree, and with prominent miradors, and projecting shops for the most part tenanted by Portuguese traders.

And what manner of people are they who stroll on to the fashionable promenade from the public buildings and private residences? Men of good appearance, with black cloth coats, chimney-pot hats, patent-leather boots, highly-colored gloves, and diamond pins in their necktie bows; and women in loud, imposing toilets, with flounced dressed and headgear of the latest style; and Indians, also on the road to Europeanization in a way which bids fair to destroy every bit of local color in this central portion of the district of the Amazon!

Such is Manaos, which, for the benefit of the reader, it was necessary to sketch. Here the voyage of the giant raft, so tragically interrupted, had just come to a pause in the midst of its long journey, and here will be unfolded the further vicissitudes of the mysterious history of the fazender of Iquitos.

CHAPTER II. THE FIRST MOMENTS

SCARCELY HAD the pirogue which bore off Joam Garral, or rather Joam Dacosta — for it is more convenient that he should resume his real name — disappeared, than Benito stepped up to Manoel.

“What is it you know?” he asked.

“I know that your father is innocent! Yes, innocent!” replied Manoel, “and that he was sentenced to death twenty-three years ago for a crime which he never committed!”

“He has told you all about it, Manoel?”

“All about it,” replied the young man. “The noble fazender did not wish that any part of his past life should be hidden from him who, when he marries his daughter, is to be his second son.”

“And the proof of his innocence my father can one day produce?”

“That proof, Benito, lies wholly in the twenty-three years of an honorable and honored life, lies entirely in the bearing of Joam Dacosta, who comes forward to say to justice, ‘Here am I! I do not care for this false existence any more. I do not care to hide under a name which is not my true one! You have condemned an innocent man! Confess your errors and set matters right.’”

“And when my father spoke like that, you did not hesitate for a moment to believe him?”

“Not for an instant,” replied Manoel.

The hands of the two young fellows closed in a long and cordial grasp.

Then Benito went up to Padre Passanha.

“Padre,” he said, “take my mother and sister away to their rooms. Do not leave them all day. No one here doubts my father’s innocence — not one, you know that! To-morrow my mother and I will seek out the chief of the police. They will not refuse us permission to visit the prison. No! that would be too cruel. We will see my father again, and decide what steps shall be taken to procure his vindication.”

Yaquita was almost helpless, but the brave woman, though nearly crushed by this sudden blow, arose. With Yaquita Dacosta it was as with Yaquita Garral. She had not a doubt as to the innocence of her husband. The idea even never occurred to her that Joam Dacosta had been to blame in marrying her under a name which was not his own. She only thought of the life of happiness she had led with the noble man who had been injured so unjustly. Yes! On the morrow she would go to the gate of the prison, and never leave it until it was opened!

Padre Passanha took her and her daughter, who could not restrain her tears, and the three entered the house.

The two young fellows found themselves alone.

“And now,” said Benito, “I ought to know all that my father has told you.”

“I have nothing to hide from you.”

“Why did Torres come on board the jangada?”

“To see to Joam Dacosta the secret of his past life.”

“And so, when we first met Torres in the forest of Iquitos, his plan had already been formed to enter into communication with my father?”

“There cannot be a doubt of it,” replied Manoel. “The scoundrel was on his way to the fazenda with the idea of consummating a vile scheme of extortion which he had been preparing for a long time.”

“And when he learned from us that my father and his whole family were about to pass the frontier, he suddenly changed his line of conduct?”

“Yes. Because Joam Dacosta once in Brazilian territory became more at his mercy than while within the frontiers of Peru. That is why we found Torres at Tabatinga, where he was waiting in expectation of our arrival.”

“And it was I who offered him a passage on the raft!” exclaimed Benito, with a gesture of despair.

“Brother,” said Manoel, “you need not reproach yourself. Torres would have joined us sooner or later. He was not the man to abandon such a trail. Had we lost him at Tabatinga, we should have found him at Manaos.”

“Yes, Manoel, you are right. But we are not concerned with the past now. We must think of the present. An end to useless recriminations! Let us see!” And while speaking, Benito, passing his hand across his forehead, endeavored to grasp the details of the strange affair.

“How,” he asked, “did Torres ascertain that my father had been sentenced twenty-three years back for this abominable crime at Tijuco?”

“I do not know,” answered Manoel, “and everything leads me to think that your father did not know that.”

“But Torres knew that Garral was the name under which Joam Dacosta was living?”

“Evidently.”

“And he knew that it was in Peru, at Iquitos, that for so many years my father had taken refuge?”

“He knew it,” said Manoel, “but how he came to know it I do not understand.”

“One more question,” continued Benito. “What was the proposition that Torres made to my father during the short interview which preceded his expulsion?”

“He threatened to denounce Joam Garral as being Joam Dacosta, if he declined to purchase his silence.”

“And at what price?”

“At the price of his daughter’s hand!” answered Manoel unhesitatingly, but pale with anger.

“The scoundrel dared to do that!” exclaimed Benito.

“To this infamous request, Benito, you saw the reply that your father gave.”

“Yes, Manoel, yes! The indignant reply of an honest man. He kicked Torres off the raft. But it is not enough to have kicked him out. No! That will not do for me. It was on Torres’ information that they came here and arrested my father; is not that so?”

“Yes, on his denunciation.”

“Very well,” continued Benito, shaking his fist toward the left bank of the river, “I must find out Torres. I must know how he became master of the secret. He must tell me if he knows the real author of this crime. He shall speak out. And if he does not speak out, I know what I shall have to do.”

“What you will have to do is for me to do as well!” added Manoel, more coolly, but not less resolutely.

“No! Manoel, no, to me alone!”

“We are brothers, Benito,” replied Manoel. “The right of demanding an explanation belongs to us both.”

Benito made no reply. Evidently on that subject his decision was irrevocable.

At this moment the pilot Araujo, who had been observing the state of the river, came up to them.

“Have you decided,” he asked, “if the raft is to remain at her moorings at the Isle of Muras, or to go on to the port of Manaos?”

The question had to be decided before nightfall, and the sooner it was settled the better.

In fact, the news of the arrest of Joam Dacosta ought already to have spread through the town. That it was of a nature to excite the interest of the population of Manaos could scarcely be doubted. But would it provoke more than curiosity against the condemned man, who was the principal author of the crime of Tijuco, which had formerly created such a sensation? Ought they not to fear that some popular movement might be directed against the prisoner? In the face of this hypothesis was it not better to leave the jangada moored near the Isle of Muras on the right bank of the river at a few miles from Manaos?

The pros and cons of the question were well weighed.

“No!” at length exclaimed Benito; “to remain here would look as though we were abandoning my father and doubting his innocence — as though we were afraid to make common cause with him. We must go to Manaos, and without delay.”

“You are right,” replied Manoel. “Let us go.”

Araujo, with an approving nod, began his preparations for leaving the island. The maneuver necessitated a good deal of care. They had to work the raft slantingly across the current of the Amazon, here doubled in force by that of the Rio Negro, and to make for the *embouchure* of the tributary about a dozen miles down on the left bank.

The ropes were cast off from the island. The jangada, again started on the river, began to drift off diagonally. Araujo, cleverly profiting by the bendings of the current, which were due to the projections of the banks, and assisted by the long poles of his crew, succeeded in working the immense raft in the desired direction.

In two hours the jangada was on the other side of the Amazon, a little above the mouth of the Rio Negro, and fairly in the current which was to take it to the lower bank of the vast bay which opened on the left side of the stream.

At five o’clock in the evening it was strongly moored alongside this bank, not in the port of Manaos itself, which it could not enter without stemming a rather powerful current, but a short mile below it.

The raft was then in the black waters of the Rio Negro, near rather a high bluff covered with cecropias with buds of reddish-brown, and palisaded with stiff-stalked reeds called *“froxas,”* of which the Indians make some of their weapons.

A few citizens were strolling about the bank. A feeling of curiosity had doubtless attracted them to the anchorage of the raft. The news of the arrest of Joam Dacosta had soon spread about, but the curiosity of the Manaens did not outrun their discretion, and they were very quiet.

Benito’s intention had been to land that evening, but Manoel dissuaded him.

“Wait till to-morrow,” he said; “night is approaching, and there is no necessity for us to leave the raft.”

“So be it! To-morrow!” answered Benito.

And here Yaquita, followed by her daughter and Padre Passanha, came out of the house. Minha was still weeping, but her mother’s face was tearless, and she had that look of calm resolution which showed that the wife was now ready for all things, either to do her duty or to insist on her rights.

Yaquita slowly advanced toward Manoel.

“Manoel,” she said, “listen to what I have to say, for my conscience commands me to speak as I am about to do.”

“I am listening,” replied Manoel.

Yaquita, looking him straight in the face, continued: “Yesterday, after the interview you had with Joam Dacosta, my husband, you came to me and called me — mother! You took Minha’s hand, and called her — your wife! You then knew everything, and the past life of Joam Dacosta had been disclosed to you.”

“Yes,” answered Manoel, “and heaven forbid I should have had any hesitation in doing so!”

“Perhaps so,” replied Yaquita; “but then Joam Dacosta had not been arrested. The position is not now the same. However innocent he may be, my husband is in the hands of justice; his past life has been publicly proclaimed. Minha is a convict’s daughter.”

“Minha Dacosta or Minha Garral, what matters it to me?” exclaimed Manoel, who could keep silent no longer.

“Manoel!” murmured Minha.

And she would certainly have fallen had not Lina’s arm supported her.

“Mother, if you do not wish to kill her,” said Manoel, “call me your son!”

“My son! my child!”

It was all Yaquita could say, and the tears, which she restrained with difficulty, filled her eyes.

And then they all re-entered the house. But during the long night not an hour’s sleep fell to the lot of the unfortunate family who were being so cruelly tried.

CHAPTER III. RETROSPECTIVE

JOAM DACOSTA had relied entirely on Judge Albeiro, and his death was most unfortunate.

Before he was judge at Manaos, and chief magistrate in the province, Ribeiro had known the young clerk at the time he was being prosecuted for the murder in the diamond arrayal. He was then an advocate at Villa Rica, and he it was who defended the prisoner at the trial. He took the cause to heart and made it his own, and from an examination of the papers and detailed information, and not from the simple fact of his position in the matter, he came to the conclusion that his client was wrongfully accused, and that he had taken not the slightest part in the murder of the escort or the theft of the diamonds — in a word, that Joam Dacosta was innocent.

But, notwithstanding this conviction, notwithstanding his talent and zeal, Ribeiro was unable to persuade the jury to take the same view of the matter. How could he remove so strong a presumption? If it was not Joam Dacosta, who had every facility for informing the scoundrels of the convoy’s departure, who was it? The official who accompanied the escort had perished with the greater part of the soldiers, and suspicion could not point against him. Everything agreed in distinguishing Dacosta as the true and only author of the crime.

Ribeiro defended him with great warmth and with all his powers, but he could not succeed in saving him. The verdict of the jury was affirmative on all the questions. Joam Dacosta, convicted of aggravated and premeditated murder, did not even obtain the benefit of extenuating circumstances, and heard himself condemned to death.

There was no hope left for the accused. No commutation of the sentence was possible, for the crime was committed in the diamond arrayal. The condemned man was lost. But during the night which preceded his execution, and when the gallows was already erected, Joam Dacosta managed to escape from the prison at Villa Rica. We know the rest.

Twenty years later Ribeiro the advocate became the chief justice of Manaos. In the depths of his retreat the fazender of Iquitos heard of the change, and in it saw a favorable opportunity for bringing forward the revision of the former proceedings against him with some chance of success. He knew that the old convictions of the advocate would be still unshaken in the mind of the judge. He therefore resolved to try and rehabilitate himself. Had it not been for Ribeiro's nomination to the chief justiceship in the province of Amazones, he might perhaps have hesitated, for he had no new material proof of his innocence to bring forward. Although the honest man suffered acutely, he might still have remained hidden in exile at Iquitos, and still have asked for time to smother the remembrances of the horrible occurrence, but something was urging him to act in the matter without delay.

In fact, before Yaquita had spoken to him, Joam Dacosta had noticed that Manoel was in love with his daughter.

The union of the young army doctor and his daughter was in every respect a suitable one. It was evident to Joam that some day or other he would be asked for her hand in marriage, and he did not wish to be obliged to refuse.

But then the thought that his daughter would have to marry under a name which did not belong to her, that Manoel Valdez, thinking he was entering the family of Garral, would enter that of Dacosta, the head of which was under sentence of death, was intolerable to him. No! The wedding should not take place unless under proper conditions! Never!

Let us recall what had happened up to this time. Four years after the young clerk, who eventually became the partner of Magalhaës, had arrived at Iquitos, the old Portuguese had been taken back to the farm mortally injured. A few days only were left for him to live. He was alarmed at the thought that his daughter would be left alone and unprotected; but knowing that Joam and Yaquita were in love with each other, he desired their union without delay.

Joam at first refused. He offered to remain the protector or the servant of Yaquita without becoming her husband. The wish of the dying Magalhaës was so urgent that resistance became impossible. Yaquita put her hand into the hand of Joam, and Joam did not withdraw it.

Yes! It was a serious matter! Joam Dacosta ought to have confessed all, or to have fled forever from the house in which he had been so hospitably received, from the establishment of which he had built up the prosperity! Yes! To confess everything rather than to give to the daughter of his benefactor a name which was not his, instead of the name of a felon condemned to death for murder, innocent though he might be!

But the case was pressing, the old fazender was on the point of death, his hands were stretched out toward the young people! Joam was silent, the marriage took place, and the remainder of his life was devoted to the happiness of the girl he had made his wife.

“The day when I confess everything,” Joam repeated, “Yaquita will pardon everything! She will not doubt me for an instant! But if I ought not to have deceived her, I certainly will not deceive the honest fellow who wishes to enter our family by marrying Mina! No! I would rather give myself up and have done with this life!”

Many times had Joam thought of telling his wife about his past life. Yes! the avowal was on his lips whenever she asked him to take her into Brazil, and with her and her daughter descend the beautiful Amazon river. He knew sufficient of Yaquita to be sure that her affection for him would not thereby be diminished in the least. But courage failed him!

And this is easily intelligible in the face of the happiness of the family, which increased on every side. This happiness was his work, and it might be destroyed forever by his return.

Such had been his life for those long years; such had been the continuous source of his sufferings, of which he had kept the secret so well; such had been the existence of this man, who had no action to be ashamed of, and whom a great injustice compelled to hide away from himself!

But at length the day arrived when there could no longer remain a doubt as to the affection which Manoel bore to Minha, when he could see that a year would not go by before he was asked to give his consent to her marriage, and after a short delay he no longer hesitated to proceed in the matter.

A letter from him, addressed to Judge Ribeiro, acquainted the chief justice with the secret of the existence of Joam Dacosta, with the name under which he was concealed, with the place where he lived with his family, and at the same time with his formal intention of delivering himself up to justice, and taking steps to procure the revision of the proceedings, which would either result in his rehabilitation or in the execution of the iniquitous judgment delivered at Villa Rica.

What were the feelings which agitated the heart of the worthy magistrate? We can easily divine them. It was no longer to the advocate that the accused applied; it was to the chief justice of the province that the convict appealed. Joam Dacosta gave himself over to him entirely, and did not even ask him to keep the secret.

Judge Ribeiro was at first troubled about this unexpected revelation, but he soon recovered himself, and scrupulously considered the duties which the position imposed on him. It was his place to pursue criminals, and here was one who delivered himself into his hands. This criminal, it was true, he had defended; he had never doubted but that he had been unjustly condemned; his joy had been extreme when he saw him escape by flight from the last penalty; he had even instigated and facilitated his flight! But what the advocate had done in the past could the magistrate do in the present?

“Well, yes!” had the judge said, “my conscience tells me not to abandon this just man. The step he is taking is a fresh proof of his innocence, a moral proof, even if he brings me others, which may be the most convincing of all! No! I will not abandon him!”

From this day forward a secret correspondence took place between the magistrate and Joam Dacosta. Ribeiro at the outset cautioned his client against compromising himself by any imprudence. He had again to work up the matter, again to read over the papers, again to look through the inquiries. He had to find out if any new facts had come to light in the diamond province referring to so serious a case. Had any of the accomplices of the crime, of the smugglers who had attacked the convoy, been arrested since the attempt? Had any confessions or half-confessions been brought forward? Joam Dacosta had done nothing but protest his innocence from the very first. But that was not enough, and Judge Ribeiro was desirous of finding in the case itself the clue to the real culprit.

Joam Dacosta had accordingly been prudent. He had promised to be so. But in all his trials it was an immense consolation for him to find his old advocate, though now a chief justice, so firmly convinced that he was not guilty. Yes! Joam Dacosta, in spite of his condemnation, was a victim, a martyr, an honest man to whom society owed a signal reparation! And when the magistrate knew the past career of the fazender of Iquitos since his sentence, the position of his family, all that life of devotion, of work, employed unceasingly for the happiness of those belonging to him, he was not only more convinced but more affected, and determined to do all that he could to procure the rehabilitation of the felon of Tijuco.

For six months a correspondence had passed between these two men.

One day, the case being pressing, Joam Dacosta wrote to Judge Ribeiro:

“In two months I will be with you, in the power of the chief justice of the province!”

“Come, then,” replied Ribeiro.

The jangada was then ready to go down the river. Joam Dacosta embarked on it with all his people. During the voyage, to the great astonishment of his wife and son, he landed but rarely, as we know. More often he remained shut up on his room, writing, working, not at his trading accounts, but, without saying anything about it, at a kind of memoir, which he called “The History of My Life,” and which was meant to be used in the revision of the legal proceedings.

Eight days before his new arrest, made on account of information given by Torres, which forestalled and perhaps would ruin his prospects, he intrusted to an Indian on the Amazon a letter, in which he warned Judge Ribeiro of his approaching arrival.

The letter was sent and delivered as addressed, and the magistrate only waited for Joam Dacosta to commence on the serious undertaking which he hoped to bring to a successful issue.

During the night before the arrival of the raft at Manaos Judge Ribeiro was seized with an attack of apoplexy. But the denunciation of Torres, whose scheme of extortion had collapsed in face of the noble anger of his victim, had produced its effect. Joam Dacosta was arrested in the bosom of his family, and his old advocate was no longer in this world to defend him!

Yes, the blow was terrible indeed. His lot was cast, whatever his fate might be; there was no going back for him! And Joam Dacosta rose from beneath the blow which had so unexpectedly struck him. It was not only his own honor which was in question, but the honor of all who belonged to him.

CHAPTER IV. MORAL PROOFS

THE WARRANT against Joam Dacosta, alias Joam Garral, had been issued by the assistant of Judge Ribeiro, who filled the position of the magistrate in the province of Amazones, until the nomination of the successor of the late justice.

This assistant bore the name of Vicente Jarriquez. He was a surly little fellow, whom forty years' practice in criminal procedure had not rendered particularly friendly toward those who came before him. He had had so many cases of this sort, and tried and sentenced so many rascals, that a prisoner's innocence seemed to him *à priori* inadmissable. To be sure, he did not come to a decision unconscientiously; but his conscience was strongly fortified and was not easily affected by the circumstances of the examination or the arguments for the defense. Like a good many judges, he thought but little of the indulgence of the jury, and when a prisoner was brought before him, after having passed through the sieve of inquest, inquiry, and examination, there was every presumption in his eyes that the man was quite ten times guilty.

Jarriquez, however, was not a bad man. Nervous, fidgety, talkative, keen, crafty, he had a curious look about him, with his big head on his little body; his ruffled hair, which would not have disgraced the judge's wig of the past; his piercing gimlet-like eyes, with their expression of surprising acuteness; his prominent nose, with which he would assuredly have gesticulated had it been movable; his ears wide open, so as to better catch all that was said, even when it was out of range of ordinary auditory apparatus; his fingers unceasingly tapping the table in front of him, like those of a pianist practicing on the mute; and his body so long and his legs so short, and his feet perpetually crossing and recrossing, as he sat in state in his magistrate’s chair.

In private life, Jarriquez, who was a confirmed old bachelor, never left his law-books but for the table which he did not despise; for chess, of which he was a past master; and above all things for Chinese puzzles, enigmas, charades, rebuses, anagrams, riddles, and such things, with which, like more than one European justice — thorough sphinxes by taste as well as by profession — he principally passed his leisure.

It will be seen that he was an original, and it will be seen also how much Joam Dacosta had lost by the death of Judge Ribeiro, inasmuch as his case would come before this not very agreeable judge.

Moreover, the task of Jarriquez was in a way very simple. He had either to inquire nor to rule; he had not even to regulate a discussion nor to obtain a verdict, neither to apply the articles of the penal code nor to pronounce a sentence. Unfortunately for the fazender, such formalities were no longer necessary; Joam Dacosta had been arrested, convicted, and sentenced twenty-three years ago for the crime at Tijuco; no limitation had yet affected his sentence. No demand in commutation of the penalty could be introduced, and no appeal for mercy could be received. It was only necessary then to establish his identity, and as soon as the order arrived from Rio Janeiro justice would have to take its course.

But in the nature of things Joam Dacosta would protest his innocence; he would say he had been unjustly condemned. The magistrate’s duty, notwithstanding the opinions he held, would be to listen to him. The question would be, what proofs could the convict offer to make good his assertions? And if he was not able to produce them when he appeared before his first judges, was he able to do so now?

Herein consisted all the interest of the examination. There would have to be admitted the fact of a defaulter, prosperous and safe in a foreign country, leaving his refuge of his own free will to face the justice which his past life should have taught him to dread, and herein would be one of those rare and curious cases which ought to interest even a magistrate hardened with all the surroundings of forensic strife. Was it impudent folly on the part of the doomed man of Tijuco, who was tired of his life, or was it the impulse of a conscience which would at all risks have wrong set right? The problem was a strange one, it must be acknowledged.

On the morrow of Joam Dacosta's arrest, Judge Jarriquez made his way to the prison in God-the-Son Street, where the convict had been placed. The prison was an old missionary convent, situated on the bank of one of the principal iguarapes of the town. To the voluntary prisoners of former times there had succeeded in this building, which was but little adapted for the purpose, the compulsory prisoners of to-day. The room occupied by Joam Dacosta was nothing like one of those sad little cells which form part of our modern penitentiary system: but an old monk's room, with a barred window without shutters, opening on to an uncultivated space, a bench in one corner, and a kind of pallet in the other. It was from this apartment that Joam Dacosta, on this 25th of August, about eleven o'clock in the morning, was taken and brought into the judge's room, which was the old common hall of the convent.

Judge Jarriquez was there in front of his desk, perched on his high chair, his back turned toward the window, so that his face was in shadow while that of the accused remained in full daylight. His clerk, with the indifference which characterizes these legal folks, had taken his seat at the end of the table, his pen behind his ear, ready to record the questions and answers.

Joam Dacosta was introduced into the room, and at a sign from the judge the guards who had brought him withdrew.

Judge Jarriquez looked at the accused for some time. The latter, leaning slightly forward and maintaining a becoming attitude, neither careless nor humble, waited with dignity for the questions to which he was expected to reply.

“Your name?” said Judge Jarriquez.

“Joam Dacosta.”

“Your age?”

“Fifty-two.”

“Where do you live?”

“In Peru, at the village of Iquitos.”

“Under what name?”

“Under that of Garral, which is that of my mother.”

“And why do you bear that name?”

“Because for twenty-three years I wished to hide myself from the pursuit of Brazilian justice.”

The answers were so exact, and seemed to show that Joam Dacosta had made up his mind to confess everything concerning his past and present life, that Judge Jarriquez, little accustomed to such a course, cocked up his nose more than was usual to him.

“And why,” he continued, “should Brazilian justice pursue you?”

“Because I was sentenced to death in 1826 in the diamond affair at Tijuco.”

“You confess then that you are Joam Dacosta?”

“I am Joam Dacosta.”

All this was said with great calmness, and as simply as possible. The little eyes of Judge Jarriquez, hidden by their lids, seemed to say:

“Never came across anything like this before.”

He had put the invariable question which had hitherto brought the invariable reply from culprits of every category protesting their innocence. The fingers of the judge began to beat a gentle tattoo on the table.

“Joam Dacosta,” he asked, “what were you doing at Iquitos?”

“I was a fazender, and engaged in managing a farming establishment of considerable size.”

“It was prospering?”

“Greatly prospering.”

“How long ago did you leave your fazenda?”

“About nine weeks.”

“Why?”

“As to that, sir,” answered Dacosta, “I invented a pretext, but in reality I had a motive.”

“What was the pretext?”

“The responsibility of taking into Para a large raft, and a cargo of different products of the Amazon.”

“Ah! and what was the real motive of your departure?”

And in asking this question Jarriquez said to himself:

“Now we shall get into denials and falsehoods.”

“The real motive,” replied Joam Dacosta, in a firm voice, “was the resolution I had taken to give myself up to the justice of my country.”

“You give yourself up!” exclaimed the judge, rising from his stool. “You give yourself up of your own free will?”

“Of my own free will.”

“And why?”

“Because I had had enough of this lying life, this obligation to live under a false name, of this impossibility to be able to restore to my wife and children that which belongs to them; in short, sir, because — — ”

“Because?”

“I was innocent!”

“That is what I was waiting for,” said Judge Jarriquez.

And while his fingers tattooed a slightly more audible march, he made a sign with his head to Dacosta, which signified as clearly as possible, “Go on! Tell me your history. I know it, but I do not wish to interrupt you in telling it in your own way.”

Joam Dacosta, who did not disregard the magistrate’s far from encouraging attitude, could not but see this, and he told the history of his whole life. He spoke quietly without departing from the calm he had imposed upon himself, without omitting any circumstances which had preceded or succeeded his condemnation. In the same tone he insisted on the honored and honorable life he had led since his escape, on his duties as head of his family, as husband and father, which he had so worthily fulfilled. He laid stress only on one circumstance — that which had brought him to Manaos to urge on the revision of the proceedings against him, to procure his rehabilitation — and that he was compelled to do.

Judge Jarriquez, who was naturally prepossessed against all criminals, did not interrupt him. He contented himself with opening and shutting his eyes like a man who heard the story told for the hundredth time; and when Joam Dacosta laid on the table the memoir which he had drawn up, he made no movement to take it.

“You have finished?” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“And you persist in asserting that you only left Iquitos to procure the revision of the judgment against you.”

“I had no other intention.”

"What is there to prove that? Who can prove that, without the denunciation which had brought about your arrest, you would have given yourself up?"

"This memoir, in the first place."

"That memoir was in your possession, and there is nothing to show that had you not been arrested, you would have put it to the use you say you intended."

"At the least, sir, there was one thing that was not in my possession, and of the authenticity of which there can be no doubt."

"What?"

"The letter I wrote to your predecessor, Judge Ribeiro, the letter which gave him notice of my early arrival."

"Ah! you wrote?"

"Yes. And the letter which ought to have arrived at its destination should have been handed over to you."

"Really!" answered Judge Jarriquez, in a slightly incredulous tone. "You wrote to Judge Ribeiro."

"Before he was a judge in this province," answered Joam Dacosta, "he was an advocate at Villa Rica. He it was who defended me in the trial at Tijuco. He never doubted of the justice of my cause. He did all he could to save me. Twenty years later, when he had become chief justice at Manaos, I let him know who I was, where I was, and what I wished to attempt. His opinion about me had not changed, and it was at his advice I left the fazenda, and came in person to proceed with my rehabilitation. But death had unfortunately struck him, and maybe I shall be lost, sir, if in Judge Jarriquez I do not find another Judge Ribeiro."

The magistrate, appealed to so directly, was about to start up in defiance of all the traditions of the judicial bench, but he managed to restrain himself, and was contented with muttering:

"Very strong, indeed; very strong!"

Judge Jarriquez was evidently hard of heart, and proof against all surprise.

At this moment a guard entered the room, and handed a sealed packet to the magistrate.

He broke the seal and drew a letter from the envelope. He opened it and read it, not without a certain contraction of his eyebrows, and then said:

"I have no reason for hiding from you, Joam Dacosta, that this is the letter you have been speaking about, addressed by you to Judge Ribeiro and sent on to me. I have, therefore, no reason to doubt what you have said on the subject."

"Not only on that subject," answered Dacosta, "but on the subject of all the circumstances of my life which I have brought to your knowledge, and which are none of them open to question."

"Eh! Joam Dacosta," quickly replied Judge Jarriquez. "You protest your innocence; but all prisoners do as much! After all, you only offer moral presumptions. Have you any material proof?"

"Perhaps I have," answered Joam Dacosta.

At these words, Judge Jarriquez left his chair. This was too much for him, and he had to take two or three circuits of the room to recover himself.

CHAPTER V. MATERIAL PROOFS

WHEN THE MAGISTRATE had again taken his place, like a man who considered he was perfectly master of himself, he leaned back in his chair, and with his head raised and his eyes looking straight in front, as though not even noticing the accused, remarked, in a tone of the most perfect indifference:

“Go on.”

Joam Dacosta reflected for a minute as if hesitating to resume the order of his thoughts, and then answered as follows:

“Up to the present, sir, I have only given you moral presumptions of my innocence grounded on the dignity, propriety, and honesty of the whole of my life. I should have thought that such proofs were those most worthy of being brought forward in matters of justice.”

Judge Jarriquez could not restrain a movement of his shoulders, showing that such was not his opinion.

“Since they are not enough, I proceed with the material proofs which I shall perhaps be able to produce,” continued Dacosta; “I say perhaps, for I do not yet know what credit to attach to them. And, sir, I have never spoken of these things to my wife or children, not wishing to raise a hope which might be destroyed.”

“To the point,” answered Jarriquez.

“I have every reason to believe, sir, that my arrest on the eve of the arrival of the raft at Manaos is due to information given to the chief of the police!”

“You are not mistaken, Joam Dacosta, but I ought to tell you that the information is anonymous.”

“It matters little, for I know that it could only come from a scoundrel called Torres.”

“And what right have you to speak in such a way of this — informer?”

“A scoundrel! Yes, sir!” replied Joam quickly. “This man, whom I received with hospitality, only came to me to propose that I should purchase his silence to offer me an odious bargain that I shall never regret having refused, whatever may be the consequences of his denunciation!”

“Always this method!” thought Judge Jarriquez; “accusing others to clear himself.”

But he none the less listened with extreme attention to Joam’s recital of his relations with the adventurer up to the moment when Torres let him know that he knew and could reveal the name of the true author of the crime of Tijuco.

“And what is the name of the guilty man?” asked Jarriquez, shaken in his indifference.

“I do not know,” answered Joam Dacosta. “Torres was too cautious to let it out.”

“And the culprit is living?”

“He is dead.”

The fingers of Judge Jarriquez tattooed more quickly, and he could not avoid exclaiming, “The man who can furnish the proof of a prisoner’s innocence is always dead.”

“If the real culprit is dead, sir,” replied Dacosta, “Torres at least is living, and the proof, written throughout in the handwriting of the author of the crime, he has assured me is in his hands! He offered to sell it to me!”

“Eh! Joam Dacosta!” answered Judge Jarriquez, “that would not have been dear at the cost of the whole of your fortune!”

“If Torres had only asked my fortune, I would have given it to him and not one of my people would have demurred! Yes, you are right, sir; a man cannot pay too dearly for the redemption of his honor! But this scoundrel, knowing that I was at his mercy, required more than my fortune!”

“How so?”

“My daughter’s hand was to be the cost of the bargain! I refused; he denounced me, and that is why I am now before you!”

“And if Torres had not informed against you,” asked Judge Jarriquez — ”if Torres had not met with you on your voyage, what would you have done on learning on your arrival of the death of Judge Ribeiro? Would you then have delivered yourself into the hands of justice?”

“Without the slightest hesitation,” replied Joam, in a firm voice; “for, I repeat it, I had no other object in leaving Iquitos to come to Manaos.”

This was said in such a tone of truthfulness that Judge Jarriquez experienced a kind of feeling making its way to that corner of the heart where convictions are formed, but he did not yet give in.

He could hardly help being astonished. A judge engaged merely in this examination, he knew nothing of what is known by those who have followed this history, and who cannot doubt but that Torres held in his hands the material proof of Joam Dacosta's innocence. They know that the document existed; that it contained this evidence; and perhaps they may be led to think that Judge Jarriquez was pitilessly incredulous. But they should remember that Judge Jarriquez was not in their position; that he was accustomed to the invariable protestations of the culprits who came before him. The document which Joam Dacosta appealed to was not produced; he did not really know if it actually existed; and to conclude, he had before him a man whose guilt had for him the certainty of a settled thing.

However, he wished, perhaps through curiosity, to drive Joam Dacosta behind his last entrenchments.

"And so," he said, "all your hope now rests on the declaration which has been made to you by Torres."

"Yes, sir, if my whole life does not plead for me."

"Where do you think Torres really is?"

"I think in Manaos."

"And you hope that he will speak — that he will consent to good-naturedly hand over to you the document for which you have declined to pay the price he asked?"

"I hope so, sir," replied Joam Dacosta; "the situation now is not the same for Torres; he has denounced me, and consequently he cannot retain any hope of resuming his bargaining under the previous conditions. But this document might still be worth a fortune if, supposing I am acquitted or executed, it should ever escape him. Hence his interest is to sell me the document, which can thus not injure him in any way, and I think he will act according to his interest."

The reasoning of Joam Dacosta was unanswerable, and Judge Jarriquez felt it to be so. He made the only possible objection.

"The interest of Torres is doubtless to sell you the document — if the document exists."

"If it does not exist," answered Joam Dacosta, in a penetrating voice, "in trusting to the justice of men, I must put my trust only in God!"

At these words Judge Jarriquez rose, and, in not quite such an indifferent tone, said, "Joam Dacosta, in examining you here, in allowing you to relate the particulars of your past life and to protest your innocence, I have gone further than my instructions allow me. An information has already been laid in this affair, and you have appeared before the jury at Villa Rica, whose verdict was given unanimously, and without even the addition of extenuating circumstances. You have been found guilty of the instigation of, and complicity in, the murder of the soldiers and the robbery of the diamonds at Tijuco, the capital sentence was pronounced on you, and it was only by flight that you escaped execution. But that you came here to deliver yourself over, or not, to the hands of justice twenty-three years afterward, you would never have been retaken. For the last time, you admit that you are Joam Dacosta, the condemned man of the diamond arrayal?"

"I am Joam Dacosta."

"You are ready to sign this declaration?"

"I am ready."

And with a hand without a tremble Joam Dacosta put his name to the foot of the declaration and the report which Judge Jarriquez had made his clerk draw up.

"The report, addressed to the minister of justice, is to be sent off to Rio Janeiro," said the magistrate. "Many days will elapse before we receive orders to carry out your sentence. If then, as you say, Torres possesses the proof of your innocence, do all you can yourself — do all you can through your friends — do everything, so that that proof can be produced in time. Once the order arrives no delay will be possible, and justice must take its course."

Joam Dacosta bowed slightly.

"Shall I be allowed in the meantime to see my wife and children?" he asked.

"After to-day, if you wish," answered Judge Jarriquez; "you are no longer in close confinement, and they can be brought to you as soon as they apply."

The magistrate then rang the bell. The guards entered the room, and took away Joam Dacosta.

Judge Jarriquez watched him as he went out, and shook his head and muttered:

"Well, well! This is a much stranger affair than I ever thought it would be!"

CHAPTER VI. THE LAST BLOW

WHILE JOAM DACOSTA was undergoing this examination, Yaquita, from an inquiry made by Manoel, ascertained that she and her children would be permitted to see the prisoner that very day about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Yaquita had not left her room since the evening before. Minha and Lina kept near her, waiting for the time when she would be admitted to see her husband.

Yaquita Garral or Yaquita Dacosta, he would still find her the devoted wife and brave companion he had ever known her to be.

About eleven o'clock in the morning Benito joined Manoel and Fragoso, who were talking in the bow of the jangada.

"Manoel," said he, "I have a favor to ask you."

"What is it?"

"And you too, Fragoso."

"I am at your service, Mr. Benito," answered the barber.

"What is the matter?" asked Manoel, looking at his friend, whose expression was that of a man who had come to some unalterable resolution.

"You never doubt my father's innocence? Is that so?" said Benito.

"Ah!" exclaimed Fragoso. "Rather I think it was I who committed the crime."

“Well, we must now commence on the project I thought of yesterday.”

“To find out Torres?” asked Manoel.

“Yes, and know from him how he found out my father’s retreat. There is something inexplicable about it. Did he know it before? I cannot understand it, for my father never left Iquitos for more than twenty years, and this scoundrel is hardly thirty! But the day will not close before I know it; or, woe to Torres!”

Benito’s resolution admitted of no discussion; and besides, neither Manoel nor Fragoso had the slightest thought of dissuading him.

“I will ask, then,” continued Benito, “for both of you to accompany me. We shall start in a minute or two. It will not do to wait till Torres has left Manaos. He has no longer got his silence to sell, and the idea might occur to him. Let us be off!”

And so all three of them landed on the bank of the Rio Negro and started for the town.

Manaos was not so considerable that it could not be searched in a few hours. They had made up their minds to go from house to house, if necessary, to look for Torres, but their better plan seemed to be to apply in the first instance to the keepers of the taverns and lojas where the adventurer was most likely to put up. There could hardly be a doubt that the ex-captain of the woods would not have given his name; he might have personal reasons for avoiding all communication with the police. Nevertheless, unless he had left Manaos, it was almost impossible for him to escape the young fellows’ search. In any case, there would be no use in applying to the police, for it was very probable — in fact, we know that it actually was so — that the information given to them had been anonymous.

For an hour Benito, Manoel, and Fragoso walked along the principal streets of the town, inquiring of the tradesmen in their shops, the tavern-keepers in their cabarets, and even the bystanders, without any one being able to recognize the individual whose description they so accurately gave.

Had Torres left Manaos? Would they have to give up all hope of coming across him?

In vain Manoel tried to calm Benito, whose head seemed on fire. Cost what it might, he must get at Torres!

Chance at last favored them, and it was Fragoso who put them on the right track.

In a tavern in Holy Ghost Street, from the description which the people received of the adventurer, they replied that the individual in question had put up at the loja the evening before.

“Did he sleep here?” asked Fragoso.

“Yes,” answered the tavern-keeper.

“Is he here now?”

“No. He has gone out.”

“But has he settled his bill, as a man would who has gone for good?”

“By no means; he left his room about an hour ago, and he will doubtless come back to supper.”

“Do you know what road he took when he went out?”

“We saw him turning toward the Amazon, going through the lower town, and you will probably meet him on that side.”

Fragoso did not want any more. A few seconds afterward he rejoined the young fellows, and said:

“I am on the track.”

“He is there!” exclaimed Benito.

“No; he has just gone out, and they have seen him walking across to the bank of the Amazon.”

“Come on!” replied Benito.

They had to go back toward the river, and the shortest way was for them to take the left bank of the Rio Negro, down to its mouth.

Benito and his companions soon left the last houses of the town behind, and followed the bank, making a slight detour so as not to be observed from the jangada.

The plain was at this time deserted. Far away the view extended across the flat, where cultivated fields had replaced the former forests.

Benito did not speak; he could not utter a word. Manoel and Fragoso respected his silence. And so the three of them went along and looked about on all sides as they traversed the space between the bank of the Rio Negro and that of the Amazon. Three-quarters of an hour after leaving Manaos, and still they had seen nothing!

Once or twice Indians working in the fields were met with. Manoel questioned them, and one of them at length told him that a man, such as he described, had just passed in the direction of the angle formed by the two rivers at their confluence.

Without waiting for more, Benito, by an irresistible movement, strode to the front, and his two companions had to hurry on to avoid being left behind.

The left bank of the Amazon was then about a quarter of a mile off. A sort of cliff appeared ahead, hiding a part of the horizon, and bounding the view a few hundred paces in advance.

Benito, hurrying on, soon disappeared behind one of the sandy knolls.

“Quicker! quicker!” said Manoel to Fragoso. “We must not leave him alone for an instant.”

And they were dashing along when a shout struck on their ears.

Had Benito caught sight of Torres? What had he seen? Had Benito and Torres already met?

Manoel and Fragoso, fifty paces further on, after swiftly running round one of the spurs of the bank, saw two men standing face to face to each other.

They were Torres and Benito.

In an instant Manoel and Fragoso had hurried up to them. It might have been supposed that in Benito’s state of excitement he would be unable to restrain himself when he found himself once again in the presence of the adventurer. It was not so.

As soon as the young man saw himself face to face with Torres, and was certain that he could not escape, a complete change took place in his manner, his coolness returned, and he became once more master of himself.

The two men looked at one another for a few moments without a word.

Torres first broke silence, and, in the impudent tone habitual to him, remarked:

“Ah! How goes it, Mr. Benito Garral?”

“No, Benito Dacosta!” answered the young man.

“Quite so,” continued Torres. “Mr. Benito Dacosta, accompanied by Mr. Manoel Valdez and my friend Fragoso!”

At the irritating qualification thus accorded him by the adventurer, Fragoso, who was by no means loath to do him some damage, was about to rush to the attack, when Benito, quite unmoved, held him back.

“What is the matter with you, my lad?” exclaimed Torres, retreating for a few steps. “I think I had better put myself on guard.”

And as he spoke he drew from beneath his poncho his manchetta, the weapon, adapted at will for offense or defense, which a Brazilian is never without. And then, slightly stooping, and planted firmly on his feet, he waited for what was to follow.

“I have come to look for you, Torres,” said Benito, who had not stirred in the least at this threatening attitude.

“To look for me?” answered the adventurer. “It is not very difficult to find me. And why have you come to look for me?”

“To know from your own lips what you appear to know of the past life of my father.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I want to know how you recognized him, why you were prowling about our fazenda in the forest of Iquitos, and why you were waiting for us at Tabatinga.”

“Well! it seems to me nothing could be clearer!” answered Torres, with a grin. “I was waiting to get a passage on the jangada, and I went on board with the intention of making him a very simple proposition — which possibly he was wrong in rejecting.”

At these words Manoel could stand it no longer. With pale face and eye of fire he strode up to Torres.

Benito, wishing to exhaust every means of conciliation, thrust himself between them.

“Calm yourself, Manoel!” he said. “I am calm — even I.”

And then continuing:

“Quite so, Torres; I know the reason of your coming on board the raft. Possessed of a secret which was doubtless given to you, you wanted to make it a means of extortion. But that is not what I want to know at present.”

"What is it, then?"

"I want to know how you recognized Joam Dacosta in the fazenda of Iquitos?"

"How I recognized him?" replied Torres. "That is my business, and I see no reason why I should tell you. The important fact is, that I was not mistaken when I denounced in him the real author of the crime of Tijuco!"

"You say that to me?" exclaimed Benito, who began to lose his self-possession.

"I will tell you nothing," returned Torres; "Joam Dacosta declined my propositions! He refused to admit me into his family! Well! now that his secret is known, now that he is a prisoner, it is I who refuse to enter his family, the family of a thief, of a murderer, of a condemned felon, for whom the gallows now waits!"

"Scoundrel!" exclaimed Benito, who drew his manchetta from his belt and put himself in position.

Manoel and Fragoso, by a similar movement, quickly drew their weapons.

"Three against one!" said Torres.

"No! one against one!" answered Benito.

"Really! I should have thought an assassination would have better suited an assassin's son!"

"Torres!" exclaimed Benito, "defend yourself, or I will kill you like a mad dog!"

“Mad! so be it!” answered Torres. “But I bite, Benito Dacosta, and beware of the wounds!”

And then again grasping his manchetta, he put himself on guard and ready to attack his enemy.

Benito had stepped back a few paces.

“Torres,” he said, regaining all his coolness, which for a moment he had lost; “you were the guest of my father, you threatened him, you betrayed him, you denounced him, you accused an innocent man, and with God’s help I am going to kill you!”

Torres replied with the most insolent smile imaginable. Perhaps at the moment the scoundrel had an idea of stopping any struggle between Benito and him, and he could have done so. In fact he had seen that Joam Dacosta had said nothing about the document which formed the material proof of his innocence.

Had he revealed to Benito that he, Torres, possessed this proof, Benito would have been that instant disarmed. But his desire to wait till the very last moment, so as to get the very best price for the document he possessed, the recollection of the young man’s insulting words, and the hate which he bore to all that belonged to him, made him forget his own interest.

In addition to being thoroughly accustomed to the manchetta, which he often had had occasion to use, the adventurer was strong, active, and artful, so that against an adversary who was scarcely twenty, who could have neither his strength nor his dexterity, the chances were greatly in his favor.

Manoel by a last effort wished to insist on fighting him instead of Benito.

“No, Manoel,” was the cool reply, “it is for me alone to avenge my father, and as everything here ought to be in order, you shall be my second.”

“Benito!”

“As for you, Fragoso, you will not refuse if I ask you to act as second for that man?”

“So be it,” answered Fragoso, “though it is not an office of honor. Without the least ceremony,” he added, “I would have killed him like a wild beast.”

The place where the duel was about to take place was a level bank about fifty paces long, on the top of a cliff rising perpendicularly some fifty feet above the Amazon. The river slowly flowed at the foot, and bathed the clumps of reeds which bristled round its base.

There was, therefore, none too much room, and the combatant who was the first to give way would quickly be driven over into the abyss.

The signal was given by Manoel, and Torres and Benito stepped forward.

Benito had complete command over himself. The defender of a sacred cause, his coolness was unruffled, much more so than that of Torres, whose conscience insensible and hardened as it was, was bound at the moment to trouble him.

The two met, and the first blow came from Benito. Torres parried it. They then jumped back, but almost at the same instant they rushed together, and with their left hands seized each other by the shoulder — never to leave go again.

Torres, who was the strongest, struck a side blow with his manchetta which Benito could not quite parry. His left side was touched, and his poncho was reddened with his blood. But he quickly replied, and slightly wounded Torres in the hand.

Several blows were then interchanged, but nothing decisive was done. The ever silent gaze of Benito pierced the eyes of Torres like a sword blade thrust to his very heart. Visibly the scoundrel began to quail. He recoiled little by little, pressed back by his implacable foe, who was more determined on taking the life of his father's denouncer than in defending his own. To strike was all that Benito longed for; to parry was all that the other now attempted to do.

Soon Torres saw himself thrust to the very edge of the bank, at a spot where, slightly scooped away, it overhung the river. He perceived the danger; he tried to retake the offensive and regain the lost ground. His agitation increased, his looks grew livid. At length he was obliged to stoop beneath the arm which threatened him.

"Die, then!" exclaimed Benito.

The blow was struck full on its chest, but the point of the manchetta was stopped by a hard substance hidden beneath the poncho of the adventurer.

Benito renewed his attack, and Torres, whose return thrust did not touch his adversary, felt himself lost. He was again obliged to retreat. Then he would have shouted — shouted that the life of Joam Dacosta depended on his own! He had not time!

A second thrust of the manchetta pierced his heart. He fell backward, and the ground suddenly failing him, he was precipitated down the cliff. As a last effort his hands convulsively clutched at a clump of reeds, but they could not stop him, and he disappeared beneath the waters of the river.

Benito was supported on Manoel’s shoulder; Fragoso grasped his hands. He would not even give his companions time to dress his wound, which was very slight.

“To the jangada!” he said, “to the jangada!”

Manoel and Fragoso with deep emotion followed him without speaking a word.

A quarter of an hour afterward the three reached the bank to which the raft was moored. Benito and Manoel rushed into the room where were Yaquita and Minha, and told them all that had passed.

“My son!” “My brother!”

The words were uttered at the same moment.

“To the prison!” said Benito.

“Yes! Come! come!” replied Yaquita.

Benito, followed by Manoel, hurried along his mother, and half an hour later they arrived before the prison.

Owing to the order previously given by Judge Jarriquez they were immediately admitted, and conducted to the chamber occupied by the prisoner.

The door opened. Joam Dacosta saw his wife, his son, and Manoel enter the room.

“Ah! Joam, my Joam!” exclaimed Yaquita.

“Yaquita! my wife! my children!” replied the prisoner, who opened his arms and pressed them to his heart.

“My Joam, innocent!”

“Innocent and avenged!” said Benito.

“Avenged? What do you mean?”

“Torres is dead, father; killed by my hand!”

“Dead! — Torres! — Dead!” gasped Joam Dacosta. “My son! You have ruined me!”

CHAPTER VII. RESOLUTIONS

A FEW HOURS later the whole family had returned to the raft, and were assembled in the large room. All were there, except the prisoner, on whom the last blow had just fallen. Benito was quite overwhelmed, and accused himself of having destroyed his father, and had it not been for the entreaties of Yaquita, of his sister, of Padre Passanha, and of Manoel, the distracted youth would in the first moments of despair have probably made away with himself. But he was never allowed to get out of sight; he was never left alone. And besides, how could he have acted otherwise? Ah! why had not Joam Dacosta told him all before he left the jangada? Why had he refrained from speaking, except before a judge, of this material proof of his innocence? Why, in his interview with Manoel after the expulsion of Torres, had he been silent about the document which the adventurer pretended to hold in his hands? But, after all, what faith ought he to place in what Torres had said? Could he be certain that such a document was in the rascal’s possession?

Whatever might be the reason, the family now knew everything, and that from the lips of Joam Dacosta himself. They knew that Torres had declared that the proof of the innocence of the convict of Tijuco actually existed; that the document had been written by the very hand of the author of the attack; that the criminal, seized by remorse at the moment of his death, had intrusted it to his companion, Torres; and that he, instead of fulfilling the wishes of the dying man, had made the handing over of the document an excuse for extortion. But they knew also that Torres had just been killed, and that his body was engulfed in the waters of the Amazon, and that he died without even mentioning the name of the guilty man.

Unless he was saved by a miracle, Joam Dacosta might now be considered as irrevocably lost. The death of Judge Ribeiro on the one hand, the death of Torres on the other, were blows from which he could not recover! It should here be said that public opinion at Manaos, unreasoning as it always is, was all against he prisoner. The unexpected arrest of Joam Dacosta had revived the memory of the terrible crime of Tijuco, which had lain forgotten for twenty-three years. The trial of the young clerk at the mines of the diamond arrayal, his capital sentence, his escape a few hours before his intended execution — all were remembered, analyzed, and commented on. An article which had just appeared in the *O Diario d'o Grand Para,* the most widely circulated journal in these parts, after giving a history of the circumstances of the crime, showed itself decidedly hostile to the prisoner. Why should these people believe in Joam Dacosta's innocence, when they were ignorant of all that his friends knew — of what they alone knew?

And so the people of Manaos became excited. A mob of Indians and negroes hurried, in their blind folly, to surround the prison and roar forth tumultuous shouts of death. In this part of the two Americas, where executions under Lynch law are of frequent occurrence, the mob soon surrenders itself to its cruel instincts, and it was feared that on this occasion it would do justice with its own hands.

What a night it was for the passengers from the fazenda! Masters and servants had been affected by the blow! Were not the servants of the fazenda members of one family? Every one of them would watch over the safety of Yaquita and her people! On the bank of the Rio Negro there was a constant coming and going of the natives, evidently excited by the arrest of Joam Dacosta, and who could say to what excesses these half-barbarous men might be led?

The time, however, passed without any demonstration against the jangada.

On the morrow, the 26th of August, as soon as the sun rose, Manoel and Fragoso, who had never left Benito for an instant during this terrible night, attempted to distract his attention from his despair. After taking him aside they made him understand that there was no time to be lost — that they must make up their minds to act.

“Benito,” said Manoel, “pull yourself together! Be a man again! Be a son again!”

“My father!” exclaimed Benito. “I have killed him!”

“No!” replied Manoel. “With heaven’s help it is possible that all may not be lost!”

“Listen to us, Mr. Benito,” said Fragoso.

The young man, passing his hand over his eyes, made a violent effort to collect himself.

“Benito,” continued Manoel, “Torres never gave a hint to put us on the track of his past life. We therefore cannot tell who was the author of the crime of Tijuco, or under what conditions it was committed. To try in that direction is to lose our time.”

“And time presses!” added Fragoso.

“Besides,” said Manoel, “suppose we do find out who this companion of Torres was, he is dead, and he could not testify in any way to the innocence of Joam Dacosta. But it is none the less certain that the proof of this innocence exists, and there is not room to doubt the existence of a document which Torres was anxious to make the subject of a bargain. He told us so himself. The document is a complete avowal written in the handwriting of the culprit, which relates the attack in its smallest details, and which clears our father! Yes! a hundred times, yes! The document exists!”

“But Torres does not exist!” groaned Benito, “and the document has perished with him!”

“Wait, and don’t despair yet!” answered Manoel. “You remember under what circumstances we made the acquaintance of Torres? It was in the depths of the forest of Iquitos. He was in pursuit of a monkey which had stolen a metal case, which it so strangely kept, and the chase had lasted a couple of hours when the monkey fell to our guns. Now, do you think that it was for the few pieces of gold contained in the case that Torres was in such a fury to recover it? and do you not remember the extraordinary satisfaction which he displayed when we gave him back the case which we had taken out of the monkey’s paw?”

“Yes! yes!” answered Benito. “This case which I held — which I gave back to him! Perhaps it contained — — ”

“It is more than probable! It is certain!” replied Manoel.

“And I beg to add,” said Fragoso, “for now the fact recurs to my memory, that during the time you were at Ega I remained on board, at Lina’s advice, to keep an eye on Torres, and I saw him — yes, I saw him — reading, and again reading, an old faded paper, and muttering words which I could not understand.”

“That was the document!” exclaimed Benito, who snatched at the hope — the only one that was left. “But this document; had he not put it in some place of security?”

“No,” answered Manoel — ”no; it was too precious for Torres to dream of parting with it. He was bound to carry it always about with him, and doubtless in that very case.”

“Wait! wait, Manoel!” exclaimed Benito; “I remember — yes, I remember. During the struggle, at the first blow I struck Torres in his chest, my manchetta was stopped by some hard substance under his poncho, like a plate of metal — — ”

“That was the case!” said Fragoso.

“Yes,” replied Manoel; “doubt is impossible! That was the case; it was in his breast-pocket.”

“But the corpse of Torres?”

“We will recover it!”

“But the paper! The water will have stained it, perhaps destroyed it, or rendered it undecipherable!”

“Why,” answered Manoel, “if the metal case which held it was water-tight?”

“Manoel,” replied Benito, who seized on the last hope, “you are right! The corpse of Torres must be recovered! We will ransack the whole of this part of the river, if necessary, but we will recover it!”

The pilot Araujo was then summoned and informed of what they were going to do.

“Good!” replied he; “I know all the eddies and currents where the Rio Negro and the Amazon join, and we shall succeed in recovering the body. Let us take two pirogues, two ubas, a dozen of our Indians, and make a start.”

Padre Passanha was then coming out of Yaquita’s room.

Benito went to him, and in a few words told him what they were going to do to get possession of the document. “Say nothing to my mother or my sister,” he added; “if this last hope fails it will kill them!”

“Go, my lad, go,” replied Passanha, “and may God help you in your search.”

Five minutes afterward the four boats started from the raft. After descending the Rio Negro they arrived near the bank of the Amazon, at the very place where Torres, mortally wounded, had disappeared beneath the waters of the stream.

CHAPTER VIII. THE FIRST SEARCH

THE SEARCH had to commence at once, and that for two weighty reasons.

The first of these was — and this was a question of life or death — that this proof of Joam Dacosta’s innocence must be produced before the arrival of the order from Rio Janeiro. Once the identity of the prisoner was established, it was impossible that such an order could be other than the order for his execution.

The second was that the body of Torres should be got out of the water as quickly as possible so as to regain undamaged the metal case and the paper it ought to contain.

At this juncture Araujo displayed not only zeal and intelligence, but also a perfect knowledge of the state of the river at its confluence with the Rio Negro.

“If Torres,” he said to the young men, “had been from the first carried away by the current, we should have to drag the river throughout a large area, for we shall have a good many days to wait for his body to reappear on the surface through the effects of decomposition.”

“We cannot do that,” replied Manoel. “This very day we ought to succeed.”

“If, on the contrary,” continued the pilot, “the corpse has got stuck among the reeds and vegetation at the foot of the bank, we shall not be an hour before we find it.”

“To work, then!” answered Benito.

There was but one way of working. The boats approached the bank, and the Indians, furnished with long poles, began to sound every part of the river at the base of the bluff which had served for the scene of combat.

The place had been easily recognized. A track of blood stained the declivity in its chalky part, and ran perpendicularly down it into the water; and there many a clot scattered on the reeds indicated the very spot where the corpse had disappeared.

About fifty feet down stream a point jutted out from the riverside and kept back the waters in a kind of eddy, as in a large basin. There was no current whatever near the shore, and the reeds shot up out of the river unbent. Every hope then existed that Torres' body had not been carried away by the main stream. Where the bed of the river showed sufficient slope, it was perhaps possible for the corpse to have rolled several feet along the ridge, and even there no effect of the current could be traced.

The ubas and the pirogues, dividing the work among them, limited the field of their researches to the extreme edge of the eddy, and from the circumference to the center the crews' long poles left not a single point unexplored. But no amount of sounding discovered the body of the adventurer, neither among the clumps of reeds nor on the bottom of the river, whose slope was then carefully examined.

Two hours after the work had begun they had been led to think that the body, having probably struck against the declivity, had fallen off obliquely and rolled beyond the limits of this eddy, where the action of the current commenced to be felt.

"But that is no reason why we should despair," said Manoel, "still less why we should give up our search."

“Will it be necessary,” exclaimed Benito, “to search the river throughout its breadth and its length?”

“Throughout its breadth, perhaps,” answered Araujo, “throughout its length, no — fortunately.”

“And why?” asked Manoel.

“Because the Amazon, about a mile away from its junction with the Rio Negro, makes a sudden bend, and at the same time its bed rises, so that there is a kind of natural barrier, well known to sailors as the Bar of Frias, which things floating near the surface are alone able to clear. In short, the currents are ponded back, and they cannot possibly have any effect over this depression.”

This was fortunate, it must be admitted. But was Araujo mistaken? The old pilot of the Amazon could be relied on. For the thirty years that he had followed his profession the crossing of the Bar of Frias, where the current was increased in force by its decrease in depth, had often given him trouble. The narrowness of the channel and the elevation of the bed made the passage exceedingly difficult, and many a raft had there come to grief.

And so Araujo was right in declaring that if the corpse of Torres was still retained by its weight on the sandy bed of the river, it could not have been dragged over the bar. It is true that later on, when, on account of the expansion of the gases, it would again rise to the surface, the current would bear it away, and it would then be irrevocably lost down the stream, a long way beyond the obstruction. But this purely physical effect would not take place for several days.

They could not have applied to a man who was more skillful or more conversant with the locality than Araujo, and when he affirmed that the body could not have been borne out of the narrow channel for more than a mile or so, they were sure to recover it if they thoroughly sounded that portion of the river.

Not an island, not an islet, checked the course of the Amazon in these parts. Hence, when the foot of the two banks had been visited up to the bar, it was in the bed itself, about five hundred feet in width, that more careful investigations had to be commenced.

The way the work was conducted was this. The boats taking the right and left of the Amazon lay alongside the banks. The reeds and vegetation were tried with the poles. Of the smallest ledges in the banks in which a body could rest, not one escaped the scrutiny of Araujo and his Indians.

But all this labor produced no result, and half the day had elapsed without the body being brought to the surface of the stream.

An hour’s rest was given to the Indians. During this time they partook of some refreshment, and then they returned to their task.

Four of the boats, in charge of the pilot, Benito, Fragoso, and Manoel, divided the river between the Rio Negro and the Bar of Frias into four portions. They set to work to explore its very bed. In certain places the poles proved insufficient to thoroughly search among the deeps, and hence a few dredges — or rather harrows, made of stones and old iron, bound round with a solid bar — were taken on board, and when the boats had pushed off these rakes were thrown in and the river bottom stirred up in every direction.

It was in this difficult task that Benito and his companions were employed till the evening. The ubas and pirogues, worked by the oars, traversed the whole surface of the river up to the bar of Frias.

There had been moments of excitement during this spell of work, when the harrows, catching in something at the bottom, offered some slight resistance. They were then hauled up, but in place of the body so eagerly searched for, there would appear only heavy stones or tufts of herbage which they had dragged from their sandy bed. No one, however, had an idea of giving up the enterprise. They none of them thought of themselves in this work of salvation. Benito, Manoel, Araujo had not even to stir up the Indians or to encourage them. The gallant fellows knew that they were working for the fazender of Iquitos — for the man whom they loved, for the chief of the excellent family who treated their servants so well.

Yes; and so they would have passed the night in dragging the river. Of every minute lost all knew the value.

A little before the sun disappeared, Araujo, finding it useless to continue his operations in the gloom, gave the signal for the boats to join company and return together to the confluence of the Rio Negro and regain the jangada.

The work so carefully and intelligently conducted was not, however, at an end.

Manoel and Fragoso, as they came back, dared not mention their ill success before Benito. They feared that the disappointment would only force him to some act of despair.

But neither courage nor coolness deserted the young fellow; he was determined to follow to the end this supreme effort to save the honor and the life of his father, and he it was who addressed his companions, and said: “To-morrow we will try again, and under better conditions if possible.”

“Yes,” answered Manoel; “you are right, Benito. We can do better. We cannot pretend to have entirely explored the river along the whole of the banks and over the whole of its bed.”

“No; we cannot have done that,” replied Araujo; “and I maintain what I said — that the body of Torres is there, and that it is there because it has not been carried away, because it could not be drawn over the Bar of Frias, and because it will take many days before it rises to the surface and floats down the stream. Yes, it is there, and not a demijohn of tafia will pass my lips until I find it!”

This affirmation from the pilot was worth a good deal, and was of a hope-inspiring nature.

However, Benito, who did not care so much for words as he did for things, thought proper to reply, “Yes, Araujo; the body of Torres is in the river, and we shall find it if — — ”

“If?” said the pilot.

“If it has not become the prey of the alligators!”

Manoel and Fragoso waited anxiously for Araujo’s reply.

The pilot was silent for a few moments; they felt that he was reflecting before he spoke. “Mr. Benito,” he said at length, “I am not in the habit of speaking lightly. I had the same idea as you; but listen. During the ten hours we have been at work have you seen a single cayman in the river?”

“Not one,” said Fragoso.

“If you have not seen one,” continued the pilot, “it was because there were none to see, for these animals have nothing to keep them in the white waters when, a quarter of a mile off, there are large stretches of the black waters, which they so greatly prefer. When the raft was attacked by some of these creatures it was in a part where there was no place for them to flee to. Here it is quite different. Go to the Rio Negro, and there you will see caymans by the score. Had Torres’ body fallen into that tributary there might be no chance of recovering it. But it was in the Amazon that it was lost, and in the Amazon it will be found.”

Benito, relieved from his fears, took the pilot’s hand and shook it, and contented himself with the reply, “To-morrow, my friends!”

Ten minutes later they were all on board the jangada. During the day Yaquit had passed some hours with her husband. But before she started, and when she saw neither the pilot, nor Manoel, nor Benito, nor the boats, she had guessed the search on which they had gone, but she said nothing to Joam Dacosta, as she hoped that in the morning she would be able to inform him of their success.

But when Benito set foot on the raft she perceived that their search had been fruitless. However, she advanced toward him. “Nothing?” she asked.

“Nothing,” replied Benito. “But the morrow is left to us.”

The members of the family retired to their rooms, and nothing more was said as to what had passed.

Manoel tried to make Benito lie down, so as to take a few hours’ rest.

“What is the good of that?” asked Benito. “Do you think I could sleep?”

CHAPTER IX. THE SECOND ATTEMPT

ON THE MORROW, the 27th of August, Benito took Manoel apart, before the sun had risen, and said to him: “Our yesterday’s search was vain. If we begin again under the same conditions we may be just as unlucky.”

“We must do so, however,” replied Manoel.

“Yes,” continued Benito; “but suppose we do not find the body, can you tell me how long it will be before it rises to the surface?”

“If Torres,” answered Manoel, “had fallen into the water living, and not mortally wounded, it would take five or six days; but as he only disappeared after being so wounded, perhaps two or three days would be enough to bring him up again.”

This answer of Manoel, which was quite correct, requires some explanation. Every human body which falls into the water will float if equilibrium is established between its density and that of its liquid bed. This is well known to be the fact, even when a person does not know how to swim. Under such circumstances, if you are entirely submerged, and only keep your mouth and nose away from the water, you are sure to float. But this is not generally done. The first movement of a drowning man is to try and hold as much as he can of himself above the water; he holds up his head and lifts up his arms, and these parts of his body, being no longer supported by the liquid, do not lose that amount of weight which they would do if completely immersed. Hence an excess of weight, and eventually entire submersion, for the water makes its way to the lungs through the mouth, takes the place of the air which fills them, and the body sinks to the bottom.

On the other hand, when the man who falls into the water is already dead the conditions are different, and more favorable for his floating, for then the movements of which we have spoken are checked, and the liquid does not make its way to the lungs so copiously, as there is no attempt to respire, and he is consequently more likely to promptly reappear. Manoel then was right in drawing the distinction between the man who falls into the water living and the man who falls into it dead. In the one case the return to the surface takes much longer than in the other.

The reappearance of the body after an immersion more or less prolonged is always determined by the decomposition, which causes the gases to form. These bring about the expansion of the cellular tissues, the volume augments and the weight decreases, and then, weighing less than the water it displaces, the body attains the proper conditions for floating.

“And thus,” continued Manoel, “supposing the conditions continue favorable, and Torres did not live after he fell into the water, if the decomposition is not modified by circumstances which we cannot foresee, he will not reappear before three days.”

“We have not got three days,” answered Benito. “We cannot wait, you know; we must try again, and in some new way.”

“What can you do?” answered Manoel.

“Plunge down myself beneath the waters,” replied Benito, “and search with my eyes — with my hands.”

“Plunge in a hundred times — a thousand times!” exclaimed Manoel. “So be it. I think, like you, that we ought to go straight at what we want, and not struggle on with poles and drags like a blind man who only works by touch.

I also think that we cannot wait three days. But to jump in, come up again, and go down again will give only a short period for the exploration. No; it will never do, and we shall only risk a second failure.”

“Have you no other plan to propose, Manoel?” asked Benito, looking earnestly at his friend.

“Well, listen. There is what would seem to be a Providential circumstance that may be of use to us.”

“What is that?”

“Yesterday, as we hurried through Manaos, I noticed that they were repairing one of the quays on the bank of the Rio Negro. The submarine works were being carried on with the aid of a diving-dress. Let us borrow, or hire, or buy, at any price, this apparatus, and then we may resume our researches under more favorable conditions.”

“Tell Araujo, Fragoso, and our men, and let us be off,” was the instant reply of Benito.

The pilot and the barber were informed of the decision with regard to Manoel’s project. Both were ordered to go with the four boats and the Indians to the basin of Frias, and there to wait for the two young men.

Manoel and Benito started off without losing a moment, and reached the quay at Manaos. There they offered the contractor such a price that he put the apparatus at their service for the whole day.

“Will you not have one of my men,” he asked, “to help you?”

“Give us your foreman and one of his mates to work the air-pump,” replied Manoel.

“But who is going to wear the diving-dress?”

“I am,” answered Benito.

“You!” exclaimed Manoel.

“I intend to do so.”

It was useless to resist.

An hour afterward the raft and all the instruments necessary for the enterprise had drifted down to the bank where the boats were waiting.

The diving-dress is well known. By its means men can descend beneath the waters and remain there a certain time without the action of the lungs being in any way injured. The diver is clothed in a waterproof suit of India rubber, and his feet are attached to leaden shoes, which allow him to retain his upright position beneath the surface. At the collar of the dress, and about the height of the neck, there is fitted a collar of copper, on which is screwed a metal globe with a glass front. In this globe the diver places his head, which he can move about at his ease. To the globe are attached two pipes; one used for carrying off the air ejected from the lungs, and which is unfit for respiration, and the other in communication with a pump worked on the raft, and bringing in the fresh air. When the diver is at work the raft remains immovable above him; when the diver moves about on the bottom of the river the raft follows his movements, or he follows those of the raft, according to his convenience.

These diving-dresses are now much improved, and are less dangerous than formerly. The man beneath the liquid mass can easily bear the additional pressure, and if anything was to be feared below the waters it was rather some cayman who might there be met with. But, as had been observed by Araujo, not one of these amphibians had been seen, and they are well known to prefer the black waters of the tributaries of the Amazon. Besides, in case of danger, the diver has always his check-string fastened to the raft, and at the least warning can be quickly hauled to the surface.

Benito, invariably very cool once his resolution was taken, commenced to put his idea into execution, and got into the diving dress. His head disappeared in the metal globe, his hand grasped a sort of iron spear with which to stir up the vegetation and detritus accumulated in the river bed, and on his giving the signal he was lowered into the stream.

The men on the raft immediately commenced to work the air-pump, while four Indians from the jangada, under the orders of Araujo, gently propelled it with their long poles in the desired direction.

The two pirogues, commanded one by Fragoso, the other by Manoel, escorted the raft, and held themselves ready to start in any direction, should Benito find the corpse of Torres and again bring it to the surface of the Amazon.

CHAPTER X. A CANNON SHOT

BENITO THEN HAD disappeared beneath the vast sheet which still covered the corpse of the adventurer. Ah! If he had had the power to divert the waters of the river, to turn them into vapor, or to drain them off — if he could have made the Frias basin dry down stream, from the bar up to the influx of the Rio Negro, the case hidden in Torres' clothes would already have been in his hand! His father's innocence would have been recognized! Joam Dacosta, restored to liberty, would have again started on the descent of the river, and what terrible trials would have been avoided!

Benito had reached the bottom. His heavy shoes made the gravel on the bed crunch beneath him. He was in some ten or fifteen feet of water, at the base of the cliff, which was here very steep, and at the very spot where Torres had disappeared.

Near him was a tangled mass of reeds and twigs and aquatic plants, all laced together, which assuredly during the researches of the previous day no pole could have penetrated. It was consequently possible that the body was entangled among the submarine shrubs, and still in the place where it had originally fallen.

Hereabouts, thanks to the eddy produced by the prolongation of one of the spurs running out into the stream, the current was absolutely *nil*. Benito guided his movements by those of the raft, which the long poles of the Indians kept just over his head.

The light penetrated deep through the clear waters, and the magnificent sun, shining in a cloudless sky, shot its rays down into them unchecked. Under ordinary conditions, at a depth of some twenty feet in water, the view becomes exceedingly blurred, but here the waters seemed to be impregnated with a luminous fluid, and Benito was able to descend still lower without the darkness concealing the river bed.

The young man slowly made his way along the bank. With his iron-shod spear he probed the plants and rubbish accumulated along its foot. Flocks of fish, if we can use such an expression, escaped on all sides from the dense thickets like flocks of birds. It seemed as though the thousand pieces of a broken mirror glimmered through the waters. At the same time scores of crustaceans scampered over the sand, like huge ants hurrying from their hills.

Notwithstanding that Benito did not leave a single point of the river unexplored, he never caught sight of the object of his search. He noticed, however, that the slope of the river bed was very abrupt, and he concluded that Torres had rolled beyond the eddy toward the center of the stream. If so, he would probably still recover the body, for the current could hardly touch it at the depth, which was already great, and seemed sensibly to increase. Benito then resolved to pursue his investigations on the side where he had begun to probe the vegetation. This was why he continued to advance in that direction, and the raft had to follow him during a quarter of an hour, as had been previously arranged.

The quarter of an hour had elapsed, and Benito had found nothing. He felt the need of ascending to the surface, so as to once more experience those physiological conditions in which he could recoup his strength. In certain spots, where the depth of the river necessitated it, he had had to descend about thirty feet. He had thus to support a pressure almost equal to an atmosphere, with the result of the physical fatigue and mental agitation which attack those who are not used to this kind of work. Benito then pulled the communication cord, and the men on the raft commenced to haul him in, but they worked slowly, taking a minute to draw him up two or three feet so as not to produce in his internal organs the dreadful effects of decompression.

As soon as the young man had set foot on the raft the metallic sphere of the diving-dress was raised, and he took a long breath and sat down to rest.

The pirogues immediately rowed alongside. Manoel, Fragoso, and Araujo came close to him, waiting for him to speak.

“Well?” asked Manoel.

“Still nothing! Nothing!”

“Have you not seen a trace?”

“Not one!”

“Shall I go down now?”

“No, Manoel,” answered Benito; “I have begun; I know where to go. Let me do it!”

Benito then explained to the pilot that his intention was to visit the lower part of the bank up to the Bar of Frias, for there the slope had perhaps stopped the corpse, if, floating between the two streams, it had in the least degree been affected by the current. But first he wanted to skirt the bank and carefully explore a sort of hole formed in the slope of the bed, to the bottom of which the poles had evidently not been able to penetrate. Araujo approved of this plan, and made the necessary preparations.

Manoel gave Benito a little advice. “As you want to pursue your search on that side,” he said, “the raft will have to go over there obliquely; but mind what you are doing, Benito. That is much deeper than where you have been yet; it may be fifty or sixty feet, and you will have to support a pressure of quite two atmospheres. Only venture with extreme caution, or you may lose your presence of mind, or no longer know where you are or what to do. If your head feels as if in a vice, and your ears tingle, do not hesitate to give us the signal, and we will at once haul you up. You can then begin again if you like, as you will have got accustomed to move about in the deeper parts of the river.”

Benito promised to attend to these hints, of which he recognized the importance. He was particularly struck with the fact that his presence of mind might abandon him at the very moment he wanted it most.

Benito shook hands with Manoel; the sphere of the diving-dress was again screwed to his neck, the pump began to work, and the diver once more disappeared beneath the stream.

The raft was then taken about forty feet along the left bank, but as it moved toward the center of the river the current increased in strength, the ubas were moored, and the rowers kept it from drifting, so as only to allow it to advance with extreme slowness.

Benito descended very gently, and again found himself on the firm sand. When his heels touched the ground it could be seen, by the length of the haulage cord, that he was at a depth of some sixty-five or seventy feet. He was therefore in a considerable hole, excavated far below the ordinary level.

The liquid medium was more obscure, but the limpidity of these transparent waters still allowed the light to penetrate sufficiently for Benito to distinguish the objects scattered on the bed of the river, and to approach them with some safety. Besides, the sand, sprinkled with mica flakes, seemed to form a sort of reflector, and the very grains could be counted glittering like luminous dust.

Benito moved on, examining and sounding the smallest cavities with his spear. He continued to advance very slowly; the communication cord was paid out, and as the pipes which served for the inlet and outlet of the air were never tightened, the pump was worked under the proper conditions.

Benito turned off so as to reach the middle of the bed of the Amazon, where there was the greatest depression. Sometimes profound obscurity thickened around him, and then he could see nothing, so feeble was the light; but this was a purely passing phenomenon, and due to the raft, which, floating above his head, intercepted the solar rays and made the night replace the day. An instant afterward the huge shadow would be dissipated, and the reflection of the sands appear again in full force.

All the time Benito was going deeper. He felt the increase of the pressure with which his body was wrapped by the liquid mass. His respiration became less easy; the retractibility of his organs no longer worked with as much ease as in the midst of an atmosphere more conveniently adapted for them. And so he found himself under the action of physiological effects to which he was unaccustomed. The rumbling grew louder in his ears, but as his thought was always lucid, as he felt that the action of his brain was quite clear — even a little more so than usual — he delayed giving the signal for return, and continued to go down deeper still.

Suddenly, in the subdued light which surrounded him, his attention was attracted by a confused mass. It seemed to take the form of a corpse, entangled beneath a clump of aquatic plants. Intense excitement seized him.

He stepped toward the mass; with his spear he felt it. It was the carcass of a huge cayman, already reduced to a skeleton, and which the current of the Rio Negro had swept into the bed of the Amazon. Benito recoiled, and, in spite of the assertions of the pilot, the thought recurred to him that some living cayman might even then be met with in the deeps near the Bar of Frias!

But he repelled the idea, and continued his progress, so as to reach the bottom of the depression.

And now he had arrived at a depth of from eighty to a hundred feet, and consequently was experiencing a pressure of three atmospheres. If, then, this cavity was also drawn blank, he would have to suspend his researches.

Experience has shown that the extreme limit for such submarine explorations lies between a hundred and twenty and a hundred and thirty feet, and that below this there is great danger, the human organism not only being hindered from performing his functions under such a pressure, but the apparatus failing to keep up a sufficient supply of air with the desirable regularity.

But Benito was resolved to go as far as his mental powers and physical energies would let him. By some strange presentiment he was drawn toward this abyss; it seemed to him as though the corpse was very likely to have rolled to the bottom of the hole, and that Torres, if he had any heavy things about him, such as a belt containing either money or arms, would have sunk to the very lowest point. Of a sudden, in a deep hollow, he saw a body through the gloom! Yes! A corpse, still clothed, stretched out like a man asleep, with his arms folded under his head!

Was that Torres? In the obscurity, then very dense, he found it difficult to see; but it was a human body that lay there, less than ten paces off, and perfectly motionless!

A sharp pang shot through Benito. His heart, for an instant, ceased to beat. He thought he was going to lose consciousness. By a supreme effort he recovered himself. He stepped toward the corpse.

Suddenly a shock as violent as unexpected made his whole frame vibrate! A long whip seemed to twine round his body, and in spite of the thick diving-dress he felt himself lashed again and again.

“A gymnotus!” he said.

It was the only word that passed his lips.

In fact, it was a *“puraque,”* the name given by the Brazilians to the gymnotus, or electric snake, which had just attacked him.

It is well known that the gymnotus is a kind of eel, with a blackish, slimy skin, furnished along the back and tail with an apparatus composed of plates joined by vertical lamellæ, and acted on by nerves of considerable power. This apparatus is endowed with singular electrical properties, and is apt to produce very formidable results. Some of these gymnotuses are about the length of a common snake, others are about ten feet long, while others, which, however, are rare, even reach fifteen or twenty feet, and are from eight to ten inches in diameter.

Gymnotuses are plentiful enough both in the Amazon and its tributaries; and it was one of these living coils, about ten feet long, which, after uncurving itself like a bow, again attacked the diver.

Benito knew what he had to fear from this formidable animal. His clothes were powerless to protect him. The discharges of the gymnotus, at first somewhat weak, become more and more violent, and there would come a time when, exhausted by the shocks, he would be rendered powerless.

Benito, unable to resist the blows, half-dropped upon the sand. His limbs were becoming paralyzed little by little under the electric influences of the gymnotus, which lightly touched his body as it wrapped him in its folds. His arms even he could not lift, and soon his spear escaped him, and his hand had not strength enough left to pull the cord and give the signal.

Benito felt that he was lost. Neither Manoel nor his companions could suspect the horrible combat which was going on beneath them between the formidable puraque and the unhappy diver, who only fought to suffer, without any power of defending himself.

And that at the moment when a body — the body of Torres without a doubt! — had just met his view.

By a supreme instinct of self-preservation Benito uttered a cry. His voice was lost in the metallic sphere from which not a sound could escape!

And now the puraque redoubled its attacks; it gave forth shock after shock, which made Benito writhe on the sand like the sections of a divided worm, and his muscles were wrenched again and again beneath the living lash.

Benito thought that all was over; his eyes grew dim, his limbs began to stiffen.

But before he quite lost his power of sight and reason he became the witness of a phenomenon, unexpected, inexplicable, and marvelous in the extreme.

A deadened roar resounded through the liquid depths. It was like a thunder-clap, the reverberations of which rolled along the river bed, then violently agitated by the electrical discharges of the gymnotus. Benito felt himself bathed as it were in the dreadful booming which found an echo in the very deepest of the river depths.

And then a last cry escaped him, for fearful was the vision which appeared before his eyes!

The corpse of the drowned man which had been stretched on the sand arose! The undulations of the water lifted up the arms, and they swayed about as if with some peculiar animation. Convulsive throbs made the movement of the corpse still more alarming.

It was indeed the body of Torres. One of the suns rays shot down to it through the liquid mass, and Benito recognized the bloated, ashy features of the scoundrel who fell by his own hand, and whose last breath had left him beneath the waters.

And while Benito could not make a single movement with his paralyzed limbs, while his heavy shoes kept him down as if he had been nailed to the sand, the corpse straightened itself up, the head swayed to and fro, and disentangling itself from the hole in which it had been kept by a mass of aquatic weeds, it slowly ascended to the surface of the Amazon.

CHAPTER XI. THE CONTENTS OF THE CASE

WHAT WAS it that had happened? A purely physical phenomenon, of which the following is the explanation.

The gunboat Santa Ana, bound for Manaos, had come up the river and passed the bar at Frias. Just before she reached the *embouchure* of the Rio Negro she hoisted her colors and saluted the Brazilian flag. At the report vibrations were produced along the surface of the stream, and these vibrations making their way down to the bottom of the river, had been sufficient to raise the corpse of Torres, already lightened by the commencement of its decomposition and the distension of its cellular system. The body of the drowned man had in the ordinary course risen to the surface of the water.

This well-known phenomenon explains the reappearance of the corpse, but it must be admitted that the arrival of the Santa Ana was a fortunate coincidence.

By a shout from Manoel, repeated by all his companions, one of the pirogues was immediately steered for the body, while the diver was at the same time hauled up to the raft.

Great was Manoel’s emotion when Benito, drawn on to the platform, was laid there in a state of complete inertia, not a single exterior movement betraying that he still lived.

Was not this a second corpse which the waters of the Amazon had given up?

As quickly as possible the diving-dress was taken off him.

Benito had entirely lost consciousness beneath the violent shocks of the gymnotus.

Manoel, distracted, called to him, breathed into him, and endeavored to recover the heart’s pulsation.

“It beats! It beats!” he exclaimed.

Yes! Benito’s heart did still beat, and in a few minutes Manoel’s efforts restored him to life.

“The body! the Body!”

Such were the first words, the only ones which escaped from Benito’s lips.

“There it is!” answered Fragoso, pointing to a pirogue then coming up to the raft with the corpse.

“But what has been the matter, Benito?” asked Manoel. “Has it been the want of air?”

“No!” said Benito; “a puraque attacked me! But the noise? the detonation?”

“A cannon shot!” replied Manoel. “It was the cannon shot which brought the corpse to the surface.”

At this moment the pirogue came up to the raft with the body of Torres, which had been taken on board by the Indians. His sojourn in the water had not disfigured him very much. He was easily recognizable, and there was no doubt as to his identity.

Fragoso, kneeling down in the pirogue, had already begun to undo the clothes of the drowned man, which came away in fragments.

At the moment Torres' right arm, which was now left bare, attracted his attention. On it there appeared the distinct scar of an old wound produced by a blow from a knife.

"That scar!" exclaimed Fragoso. "But — that is good! I remember now — — "

"What?" demanded Manoel.

"A quarrel! Yes! a quarrel I witnessed in the province of Madeira three years ago. How could I have forgotten it! This Torres was then a captain of the woods. Ah! I know now where I had seen him, the scoundrel!"

"That does not matter to us now!" cried Benito. "The case! the case! Has he still got that?" and Benito was about to tear away the last coverings of the corpse to get at it.

Manoel stopped him.

"One moment, Benito," he said; and then, turning to the men on the raft who did not belong to the jangada, and whose evidence could not be suspected at any future time:

"Just take note, my friends," he said, "of what we are doing here, so that you can relate before the magistrate what has passed."

The men came up to the pirogue.

Fragoso undid the belt which encircled the body of Torres underneath the torn poncho, and feeling his breast-pocket, exclaimed:

"The case!"

A cry of joy escaped from Benito. He stretched forward to seize the case, to make sure than it contained — —

“No!” again interrupted Manoel, whose coolness did not forsake him. “It is necessary that not the slightest possible doubt should exist in the mind of the magistrate! It is better that disinterested witnesses should affirm that this case was really found on the corpse of Torres!”

“You are right,” replied Benito.

“My friend,” said Manoel to the foreman of the raft, “just feel in the pocket of the waistcoat.”

The foreman obeyed. He drew forth a metal case, with the cover screwed on, and which seemed to have suffered in no way from its sojourn in the water.

“The paper! Is the paper still inside?” exclaimed Benito, who could not contain himself.

“It is for the magistrate to open this case!” answered Manoel. “To him alone belongs the duty of verifying that the document was found within it.”

“Yes, yes. Again you are right, Manoel,” said Benito. “To Manaos, my friends — to Manaos!”

Benito, Manoel, Fragoso, and the foreman who held the case, immediately jumped into one of the pirogues, and were starting off, when Fragoso said:

“And the corpse?”

The pirogue stopped.

In fact, the Indians had already thrown back the body into the water, and it was drifting away down the river.

“Torres was only a scoundrel,” said Benito. “If I had to fight him, it was God that struck him, and his body ought not to go unburied!”

And so orders were given to the second pirogue to recover the corpse, and take it to the bank to await its burial.

But at the same moment a flock of birds of prey, which skimmed along the surface of the stream, pounced on the floating body. They were urubus, a kind of small vulture, with naked necks and long claws, and black as crows. In South America they are known as gallinazos, and their voracity is unparalleled. The body, torn open by their beaks, gave forth the gases which inflated it, its density increased, it sank down little by little, and for the last time what remained of Torres disappeared beneath the waters of the Amazon.

Ten minutes afterward the pirogue arrived at Manaos. Benito and his companions jumped ashore, and hurried through the streets of the town. In a few minutes they had reached the dwelling of Judge Jarriuez, and informed him, through one of his servants, that they wished to see him immediately.

The judge ordered them to be shown into his study.

There Manoel recounted all that had passed, from the moment when Torres had been killed until the moment when the case had been found on his corpse, and taken from his breast-pocket by the foreman.

Although this recital was of a nature to corroborate all that Joam Dacosta had said on the subject of Torres, and of the bargain which he had endeavored to make, Judge Jarriquez could not restrain a smile of incredulity.

“There is the case, sir,” said Manoel. “For not a single instant has it been in our hands, and the man who gives it to you is he who took it from the body of Torres.”

The magistrate took the case and examined it with care, turning it over and over as though it were made of some precious material. Then he shook it, and a few coins inside sounded with a metallic ring. Did not, then, the case contain the document which had been so much sought after — the document written in the very hand of the true author of the crime of Tijuco, and which Torres had wished to sell at such an ignoble price to Joam Dacosta? Was this material proof of the convict’s innocence irrevocably lost?

We can easily imagine the violent agitation which had seized upon the spectators of this scene. Benito could scarcely utter a word, he felt his heart ready to burst. “Open it, sir! open the case!” he at last exclaimed, in a broken voice.

Judge Jarriquez began to unscrew the lid; then, when the cover was removed, he turned up the case, and from it a few pieces of gold dropped out and rolled on the table.

“But the paper! the paper!” again gasped Benito, who clutched hold of the table to save himself from falling.

The magistrate put his fingers into the case and drew out, not without difficulty, a faded paper, folded with care, and which the water did not seem to have even touched.

“The document! that is the document!” shouted Fragoso; “that is the very paper I saw in the hands of Torres!”

Judge Jarriquez unfolded the paper and cast his eyes over it, and then he turned it over so as to examine it on the back and the front, which were both covered with writing. “A document it really is!” said he; “there is no doubt of that. It is indeed a document!”

“Yes,” replied Benito; “and that is the document which proves my father’s innocence!”

“I do not know that,” replied Judge Jarriquez; “and I am much afraid it will be very difficult to know it.”

“Why?” exclaimed Benito, who became pale as death.

“Because this document is a cryptogram, and — — ”

“Well?”

“We have not got the key!”

CHAPTER XII. THE DOCUMENT

THIS WAS a contingency which neither Joam Dacosta nor his people could have anticipated. In fact, as those who have not forgotten the first scene in this story are aware, the document was written in a disguised form in one of the numerous systems used in cryptography.

But in which of them?

To discover this would require all the ingenuity of which the human brain was capable.

Before dismissing Benito and his companions, Judge Jarriquez had an exact copy made of the document, and, keeping the original, handed it over to them after due comparison, so that they could communicate with the prisoner.

Then, making an appointment for the morrow, they retired, and not wishing to lose an instant in seeing Joam Dacosta, they hastened on to the prison, and there, in a short interview, informed him of all that had passed.

Joam Dacosta took the document and carefully examined it. Shaking his head, he handed it back to his son. “Perhaps,” he said, “there is therein written the proof I shall never be able to produce. But if that proof escapes me, if the whole tenor of my life does not plead for me, I have nothing more to expect from the justice of men, and my fate is in the hands of God!”

And all felt it to be so. If the document remained indecipherable, the position of the convict was a desperate one.

“We shall find it, father!” exclaimed Benito. “There never was a document of this sort yet which could stand examination. Have confidence — yes, confidence! Heaven has, so to speak, miraculously given us the paper which vindicates you, and, after guiding our hands to recover it, it will not refuse to direct our brains to unravel it.”

Joam Dacosta shook hands with Benito and Manoel, and then the three young men, much agitated, retired to the jangada, where Yaquita was awaiting them.

Yaquita was soon informed of what had happened since the evening — the reappearance of the body of Torres, the discovery of the document, and the strange form under which the real culprit, the companion of the adventurer, had thought proper to write his confession — doubtless, so that it should not compromise him if it fell into strange hands.

Naturally, Lina was informed of this unexpected complication, and of the discovery made by Fragoso that Torres was an old captain of the woods belonging to the gang who were employed about the mouths of the Madeira.

“But under what circumstances did you meet him?” asked the young mulatto.

“It was during one of my runs across the province of Amazones,” replied Fragoso, “when I was going from village to village, working at my trade.”

“And the scar?”

“What happened was this: One day I arrived at the mission of Aranas at the moment that Torres, whom I had never before seen, had picked a quarrel with one of his comrades — and a bad lot they are! — and this quarrel ended with a stab from a knife, which entered the arm of the captain of the woods. There was no doctor there, and so I took charge of the wound, and that is how I made his acquaintance.”

“What does it matter after all,” replied the young girl, “that we know what Torres had been? He was not the author of the crime, and it does not help us in the least.”

“No, it does not,” answered Fragoso; “for we shall end by reading the document, and then the innocence of Joam Dacosta will be palpable to the eyes of all.”

This was likewise the hope of Yaquita, of Benito, of Manoel, and of Minha, and, shut up in the house, they passed long hours in endeavoring to decipher the writing.

But if it was their hope — and there is no need to insist on that point — it was none the less that of Judge Jarriquez.

After having drawn up his report at the end of his examination establishing the identity of Joam Dacosta, the magistrate had sent it off to headquarters, and therewith he thought he had finished with the affair so far as he was concerned. It could not well be otherwise.

On the discovery of the document, Jarriquez suddenly found himself face to face with the study of which he was a master. He, the seeker after numerical combinations, the solver of amusing problems, the answerer of charades, rebuses, logogryphs, and such things, was at last in his true element.

At the thought that the document might perhaps contain the justification of Joam Dacosta, he felt all the instinct of the analyst aroused. Here, before his very eyes, was a cryptogram! And so from that moment he thought of nothing but how to discover its meaning, and it is scarcely necessary to say that he made up his mind to work at it continuously, even if he forgot to eat or to drink.

After the departure of the young people, Judge Jarriquez installed himself in his study. His door, barred against every one, assured him of several hours of perfect solitude. His spectacles were on his nose, his snuff-box on the table. He took a good pinch so as to develop the finesse and sagacity of his mind. He picked up the document and became absorbed in meditation, which soon became materialized in the shape of a monologue. The worthy justice was one of those unreserved men who think more easily aloud than to himself. “Let us proceed with method,” he said. “No method, no logic; no logic, no success.”

Then, taking the document, he ran through it from beginning to end, without understanding it in the least.

The document contained a hundred lines, which were divided into half a dozen paragraphs.

“Hum!” said the judge, after a little reflection; “to try every paragraph, one after the other, would be to lose precious time, and be of no use. I had better select one of these paragraphs, and take the one which is likely to prove the most interesting. Which of them would do this better than the last, where the recital of the whole affair is probably summed up? Proper names might put me on the track, among others that of Joam Dacosta; and if he had anything to do with this document, his name will evidently not be absent from its concluding paragraph.”

The magistrate’s reasoning was logical, and he was decidedly right in bringing all his resources to bear in the first place on the gist of the cryptogram as contained in its last paragraph.

Here is the paragraph, for it is necessary to again bring it before the eyes of the reader so as to show how an analyst set to work to discover its meaning.

“P h y j s l y d d q f d z x g a s g z z q q e h x g k f n d r x u j u g I o c y t d x v k s b x h h u y p o h d v y r y m h u h p u y d k j o x p h e t o z l s l e t n p m v f f o v p d p a j x h y y n o j y g g a y m e q y n f u q l n m v l y f g s u z m q I z t l b q q y u g s q e u b v n r c r e d g r u z b l r m x y u h q h p z d r r g c r o h e p q x u f I v v r p l p h o n t h v d d q f h q s n t z h h h n f e p m q k y u u e x k t o g z g k y u u m f v I j d q d p z j q s y k r p l x h x q r y m v k l o h h h o t o z v d k s p p s u v j h d.”

At the outset, Judge Jarrizuez noticed that the lines of the document were not divided either into words or phrases, and that there was a complete absence of punctuation. This fact could but render the reading of the document more difficult.

“Let us see, however,” he said, “if there is not some assemblage of letters which appears to form a word — I mean a pronounceable word, whose number of consonants is in proportion to its vowels. And at the beginning I see the word *phy;* further on the word *gas*. Halloo! *ujugi*. Does that mean the African town on the banks of Tanganyika? What has that got to do with all this? Further on here is the word *ypo*. Is it Greek, then? Close by here is *rym* and *puy*, and *jox*, and *phetoz*, and *jyggay*, and *mv*, and *qruz*. And before that we have got *red* and *let*. That is good! those are two English words. Then *ohe — syk;* then *rym* once more, and then the word *oto.”*

Judge Jarriquez let the paper drop, and thought for a few minutes.

“All the words I see in this thing seem queer!” he said. “In fact, there is nothing to give a clue to their origin. Some look like Greek, some like Dutch; some have an English twist, and some look like nothing at all! To say nothing of these series of consonants which are not wanted in any human pronunciation. Most assuredly it will not be very easy to find the key to this cryptogram.”

The magistrate’s fingers commenced to beat a tattoo on his desk — a kind of reveille to arouse his dormant faculties.

“Let us see,” he said, “how many letters there are in the paragraph.”

He counted them, pen in hand.

“Two hundred and seventy-six!” he said. “Well, now let us try what proportion these different letters bear to each other.”

This occupied him for some time. The judge took up the document, and, with his pen in his hand, he noted each letter in alphabetical order.

In a quarter of an hour he had obtained the following table:

a = 3 times

b = 4 —

c = 3 —

d = 16 —

e = 9 —

f = 10 —

$g = 13$ —

$h = 23$ —

$i = 4$ —

$j = 8$ —

$k = 9$ —

$l = 9$ —

$m = 9$ —

$n = 9$ —

$o = 12$ —

$p = 16$ —

$q = 16$ —

$r = 12$ —

$s = 10$ —

$t = 8$ —

$u = 17$ —

$v = 13$ —

$x = 12$ —

y = 19 —

z = 12 —

— — — — — — — —

Total... 276 times.

“Ah, ah!” he exclaimed. “One thing strikes me at once, and that is that in this paragraph all the letters of the alphabet are not used. That is very strange. If we take up a book and open it by chance it will be very seldom that we shall hit upon two hundred and seventy-six letters without all the signs of the alphabet figuring among them. After all, it may be chance,” and then he passed to a different train of thought. “One important point is to see if the vowels and consonants are in their normal proportion.”

And so he seized his pen, counted up the vowels, and obtained the following result:

a = 3 times

e = 9 —

i = 4 —

o = 12 —

u = 17 —

y = 19 —

— — — — — — — —

Total... 276 times.

"And thus there are in this paragraph, after we have done our subtraction, sixty-four vowels and two hundred and twelve consonants. Good! that is the normal proportion. That is about a fifth, as in the alphabet, where there are six vowels among twenty-six letters. It is possible, therefore, that the document is written in the language of our country, and that only the signification of each letter is changed. If it has been modified in regular order, and a *b* is always represented by an *l,* and *o* by a *v,* a *g* by a *k,* an *u* by an *r,* etc. I will give up my judgeship if I do not read it. What can I do better than follow the method of that great analytical genius, Edgar Allan Poe?"

Judge Jarriquez herein alluded to a story by the great American romancer, which is a masterpiece. Who has not read the "Gold Bug?" In this novel a cryptogram, composed of ciphers, letters, algebraic signs, asterisks, full-stops, and commas, is submitted to a truly mathematical analysis, and is deciphered under extraordinary conditions, which the admirers of that strange genius can never forget. On the reading of the American document depended only a treasure, while on that of this one depended a man's life. Its solution was consequently all the more interesting.

The magistrate, who had often read and re-read his "Gold Bug," was perfectly acquainted with the steps in the analysis so minutely described by Edgar Poe, and he resolved to proceed in the same way on this occasion. In doing so he was certain, as he had said, that if the value or signification of each letter remained constant, he would, sooner or later, arrive at the solution of the document.

"What did Edgar Poe do?" he repeated. "First of all he began by finding out the sign — here there are only letters, let us say the letter — which was reproduced the oftenest. I see that that is *h,* for it is met with twenty-three times. This enormous proportion shows, to begin with, that *h* does not stand for *h*, but, on the contrary, that it represents the letter which recurs most frequently in our language, for I suppose the document is written in Portuguese. In English or French it would certainly be *e*, in Italian it would be *i* or *a*, in Portuguese it will be *a* or *o*. Now let us say that it signifies *a* or *o*.”

After this was done, the judge found out the letter which recurred most frequently after *h*, and so on, and he formed the following table:

h = 23 times

y = 19 —

u = 17 —

d p q = 16 —

g v = 13 —

o r x z = 12 —

f s = 10 —

e k l m n = 9 —

j t = 8 —

b i = 8 —

a c = 8 —

“Now the letter *a* only occurs thrice!” exclaimed the judge, “and it ought to occur the oftenest. Ah! that clearly proves that the meaning had been changed. And now, after *a* or *o*, what are the letters which figure oftenest in our language? Let us see,” and Judge Jarriquez, with truly remarkable sagacity, which denoted a very observant mind, started on this new quest. In this he was only imitating the American romancer, who, great analyst as he was, had, by simple induction, been able to construct an alphabet corresponding to the signs of the cryptogram and by means of it to eventually read the pirate’s parchment note with ease.

The magistrate set to work in the same way, and we may affirm that he was no whit inferior to his illustrious master. Thanks to his previous work at logogryphs and squares, rectangular arrangements and other enigmas, which depend only on an arbitrary disposition of the letters, he was already pretty strong in such mental pastimes. On this occasion he sought to establish the order in which the letters were reproduced — vowels first, consonants afterward.

Three hours had elapsed since he began. He had before his eyes an alphabet which, if his procedure were right, would give him the right meaning of the letters in the document. He had only to successively apply the letters of his alphabet to those of his paragraph. But before making this application some slight emotion seized upon the judge. He fully experienced the intellectual gratification — much greater than, perhaps, would be thought — of the man who, after hours of obstinate endeavor, saw the impatiently sought-for sense of the logogryph coming into view.

“Now let us try,” he said; “and I shall be very much surprised if I have not got the solution of the enigma!”

Judge Jarriquez took off his spectacles and wiped the glasses; then he put them back again and bent over the table. His special alphabet was in one hand, the cryptogram in the other. He commenced to write under the first line of the paragraph the true letters, which, according to him, ought to correspond exactly with each of the cryptographic letters. As with the first line so did he with the second, and the third, and the fourth, until he reached the end of the paragraph.

Oddity as he was, he did not stop to see as he wrote if the assemblage of letters made intelligible words. No; during the first stage his mind refused all verification of that sort. What he desired was to give himself the ecstasy of reading it all straight off at once.

And now he had done.

“Let us read!” he exclaimed.

And he read. Good heavens! what cacophony! The lines he had formed with the letters of his alphabet had no more sense in them that those of the document! It was another series of letters, and that was all. They formed no word; they had no value. In short, they were just as hieroglyphic.

“Confound the thing!” exclaimed Judge Jarriquez.

CHAPTER XIII. IS IT A MATTER OF FIGURES?

IT WAS SEVEN o’clock in the evening. Judge Jarriquez had all the time been absorbed in working at the puzzle — and was no further advanced — and had forgotten the time of repast and the time of repose, when there came a knock at his study door.

It was time. An hour later, and all the cerebral substance of the vexed magistrate would certainly have evaporated under the intense heat into which he had worked his head.

At the order to enter — which was given in an impatient tone — the door opened and Manoel presented himself.

The young doctor had left his friends on board the jangada at work on the indecipherable document, and had come to see Judge Jarriquez. He was anxious to know if he had been fortunate in his researches. He had come to ask if he had at length discovered the system on which the cryptogram had been written.

The magistrate was not sorry to see Manoel come in. He was in that state of excitement that solitude was exasperating to him. He wanted some one to speak to, some one as anxious to penetrate the mystery as he was. Manoel was just the man.

“Sir,” said Manoel as he entered, “one question! Have you succeeded better than we have?”

“Sit down first,” exclaimed Judge Jarriquez, who got up and began to pace the room. “Sit down. If we are both of us standing, you will walk one way and I shall walk the other, and the room will be too narrow to hold us."

Manoel sat down and repeated his question.

"No! I have not had any success!" replied the magistrate; "I do not think I am any better off. I have got nothing to tell you; but I have found out a certainty."

"What is that, sir?"

"That the document is not based on conventional signs, but on what is known in cryptology as a cipher, that is to say, on a number."

"Well, sir," answered Manoel, "cannot a document of that kind always be read?"

"Yes," said Jarriquez, "if a letter is invariably represented by the same letter; if an *a*, for example, is always a *p*, and a *p* is always an *x;* if not, it cannot."

"And in this document?"

"In this document the value of the letter changes with the arbitrarily selected cipher which necessitates it. So a *b* will in one place be represented by a *k* will later on become a *z,* later on an *u* or an *n* or an *f,* or any other letter."

"And then?"

"And then, I am sorry to say, the cryptogram is indecipherable."

"Indecipherable!" exclaimed Manoel. "No, sir; we shall end by finding the key of the document on which the man's life depends."

Manoel had risen, a prey to the excitement he could not control; the reply he had received was too hopeless, and he refused to accept it for good.

At a gesture from the judge, however, he sat down again, and in a calmer voice asked:

“And in the first place, sir, what makes you think that the basis of this document is a number, or, as you call it, a cipher?”

“Listen to me, young man,” replied the judge, “and you will be forced to give in to the evidence.”

The magistrate took the document and put it before the eyes of Manoel and showed him what he had done.

“I began,” he said, “by treating this document in the proper way, that is to say, logically, leaving nothing to chance. I applied to it an alphabet based on the proportion the letters bear to one another which is usual in our language, and I sought to obtain the meaning by following the precepts of our immortal analyst, Edgar Poe. Well, what succeeded with him collapsed with me.”

“Collapsed!” exclaimed Manoel.

“Yes, my dear young man, and I at once saw that success sought in that fashion was impossible. In truth, a stronger man than I might have been deceived.”

“But I should like to understand,” said Manoel, “and I do not — — ”

“Take the document,” continued Judge Jarriquez; “first look at the disposition of the letters, and read it through.”

Manoel obeyed.

“Do you not see that the combination of several of the letters is very strange?” asked the magistrate.

“I do not see anything,” said Manoel, after having for perhaps the hundredth time read through the document.

“Well! study the last paragraph! There you understand the sense of the whole is bound to be summed up. Do you see anything abnormal?”

“Nothing.”

“There is, however, one thing which absolutely proves that the language is subject to the laws of number.”

“And that is?”

“That is that you see three *h’s* coming together in two different places.”

What Jarriquez said was correct, and it was of a nature to attract attention. The two hundred and fourth, two hundred and fifth, and two hundred and sixth letters of the paragraph, and the two hundred and fifty-eight, two hundred and fifty-ninth, and two hundred and sixtieth letters of the paragraph were consecutive *h’s*. At first this peculiarity had not struck the magistrate.

“And that proves?” asked Manoel, without divining the deduction that could be drawn from the combination.

“That simply proves that the basis of the document is a number. It shows *à priori* that each letter is modified in virtue of the ciphers of the number and according to the place which it occupies."

"And why?"

"Because in no language will you find words with three consecutive repetitions of the letter *h.*"

Manoel was struck with the argument; he thought about it, and, in short, had no reply to make.

"And had I made the observation sooner," continued the magistrate, "I might have spared myself a good deal of trouble and a headache which extends from my occiput to my sinciput."

"But, sir," asked Manoel, who felt the little hope vanishing on which he had hitherto rested, "what do you mean by a cipher?"

"Tell me a number."

"Any number you like."

"Give me an example and you will understand the explanation better."

Judge Jarriquez sat down at the table, took up a sheet of paper and a pencil, and said:

"Now, Mr. Manoel, let us choose a sentence by chance, the first that comes; for instance:

Judge Jarriquez has an ingenious mind.

I write this phrase so as to space the letters different and I get:

Judgejarriquezhasaningeniousmind.

“That done,” said the magistrate, to whom the phrase seemed to contain a proposition beyond dispute, looking Manoel straight in the face, “suppose I take a number by chance, so as to give a cryptographic form to this natural succession of words; suppose now this word is composed of three ciphers, and let these ciphers be 2, 3, and 4. Now on the line below I put the number 234, and repeat it as many times as are necessary to get to the end of the phrase, and so that every cipher comes underneath a letter. This is what we get:

J u d g e j a r r I q u e z h a s a n I n g e n I o u s m I n d 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 3 4 And now, Mr. Manoel, replacing each letter by the letter in advance of it in alphabetical order according to the value of the cipher, we get:

$j + 2 = l$ $u + 3 = x$ $d + 4 = h$ $g + 2 = i$ $e + 3 = h$ $j + 4 = n$ $a + 2 = c$ $r + 3 = u$ $r + 4 = v$ $i + 2 = k$ $q + 3 = t$ $u + 4 = y$ $e + 2 = g$ $a + 3 = c$ $h + 4 = t$ $a + 2 = c$ $s + 3 = v$ $a + 4 = e$ $n + 2 = p$ $i + 3 = l$ $n + 4 = r$ $g + 2 = i$ $e + 3 = h$ $n + 4 = r$ $i + 2 = k$ $o + 3 = r$ $u + 4 = y$ $s + 2 = u$ and so on.

“If, on account of the value of the ciphers which compose the number I come to the end of the alphabet without having enough complementary letters to deduct, I begin again at the beginning. That is what happens at the end of my name when the *z* is replaced by the 3. As after *z* the alphabet has no more letters, I commence to count from *a,* and so get the *c*. That done, when I get to the end of this cryptographic system, made up of the 234 — which was arbitrarily selected, do not forget! — the phrase which you recognize above is replaced by

lxhihncuvktygclveplrihrkryupmpg.

“And now, young man, just look at it, and do you not think it is very much like what is in the document? Well, what is the consequence? Why, that the signification of the letters depends on a cipher which chance puts beneath them, and the cryptographic letter which answers to a true one is not always the same. So in this phrase the first *j* is represented by an *l,* the second by an *n;* the first *e* by an *h,* the second b a *g,* the third by an *h;* the first *d* is represented by an *h,* the last by a *g;* the first *u* by an *x,* the last by a *y;* the first and second *a’s* by a *c,* the last by an *e;* and in my own name one *r* is represented by a *u,* the other by a *v.* and so on. Now do you see that if you do not know the cipher 234 you will never be able to read the lines, and consequently if we do not know the number of the document it remains undecipherable.”

On hearing the magistrate reason with such careful logic, Manoel was at first overwhelmed, but, raising his head, he exclaimed:

“No, sir, I will not renounce the hope of finding the number!”

“We might have done so,” answered Judge Jarriquez, “if the lines of the document had been divided into words.”

“And why?”

“For this reason, young man. I think we can assume that in the last paragraph all that is written in these earlier paragraphs is summed up. Now I am convinced that in it will be found the name of Joam Dacosta. Well, if the lines had been divided into words, in trying the words one after the other — I mean the words composed of seven letters, as the name of Dacosta is — it would not have been impossible to evolve the number which is the key of the document.”

“Will you explain to me how you ought to proceed to do that, sir?” asked Manoel, who probably caught a glimpse of one more hope.

“Nothing can be more simple,” answered the judge. “Let us take, for example, one of the words in the sentence we have just written — my name, if you like. It is represented in the cryptogram by this queer succession of letters, *ncuvktygc*. Well, arranging these letters in a column, one under the other, and then placing against them the letters of my name and deducting one from the other the numbers of their places in alphabetical order, I see the following result:

Between *n* and *j* we have 4 letters — *c* —
a — 2 — — *u* — *r* — 3 —
— *v* — *r* — 4 — — *k* —
i — 2 — — *t* — *q* — 3 —
— *y* — *u* — 4 — — *g* —
e — 2 — — *c* — *z* — 3 —

“Now what is the column of ciphers made up of that we have got by this simple operation? Look here! 423 423 423, that is to say, of repetitions of the numbers 423, or 234, or 342.”

“Yes, that is it!” answered Manoel.

“You understand, then, by this means, that in calculating the true letter from the false, instead of the false from the true, I have been able to discover the number with ease; and the number I was in search of is really the 234 which I took as the key of my cryptogram.”

“Well, sir!” exclaimed Manoel, “if that is so, the name of Dacosta is in the last paragraph; and taking successively each letter of those lines for the first of the seven letters which compose his name, we ought to get — — ”

“That would be impossible,” interrupted the judge, “except on one condition.”

“What is that?”

“That the first cipher of the number should happen to be the first letter of the word Dacosta, and I think you will agree with me that that is not probable.”

“Quite so!” sighed Manoel, who, with this improbability, saw the last chance vanish.

“And so we must trust to chance alone,” continued Jarriquez, who shook his head, “and chance does not often do much in things of this sort.”

“But still,” said Manoel, “chance might give us this number.”

“This number,” exclaimed the magistrate — ”this number? But how many ciphers is it composed of? Of two, or three, or four, or nine, or ten? Is it made of different ciphers only or of ciphers in different order many times repeated? Do you not know, young man, that with the ordinary ten ciphers, using all at a time, but without any repetition, you can make three million two hundred and sixty-eight thousand and eight hundred different numbers, and that if you use the same cipher more than once in the number, these millions of combinations will be enormously increased! And do you not know that if we employ every one of the five hundred and twenty-five thousand and six hundred minutes of which the year is composed to try at each of these numbers, it would take you six years, and that you would want three centuries if each operation took you an hour? No! You ask the impossible!"

"Impossible, sir?" answered Manoel. "An innocent man has been branded as guilty, and Joam Dacosta is to lose his life and his honor while you hold in your hands the material proof of his innocence! That is what is impossible!"

"Ah! young man!" exclaimed Jarriquez, "who told you, after all, that Torres did not tell a lie? Who told you that he really did have in his hands a document written by the author of the crime? that this paper was the document, and that this document refers to Joam Dacosta?"

"Who told me so?" repeated Manoel, and his face was hidden in his hands.

In fact, nothing could prove for certain that the document had anything to do with the affair in the diamond province. There was, in fact, nothing to show that it was not utterly devoid of meaning, and that it had been imagined by Torres himself, who was as capable of selling a false thing as a true one!

"It does not matter, Manoel," continued the judge, rising; "it does not matter! Whatever it may be to which the document refers, I have not yet given up discovering the cipher. After all, it is worth more than a logogryph or a rebus!"

At these words Manoel rose, shook hands with the magistrate, and returned to the jangada, feeling more hopeless when he went back than when he set out.

CHAPTER XIV. CHANCE!

A COMPLETE change took place in public opinion on the subject of Joam Dacosta. To anger succeeded pity. The population no longer thronged to the prison of Manaos to roar out cries of death to the prisoner. On the contrary, the most forward of them in accusing him of being the principal author of the crime of Tijuco now averred that he was not guilty, and demanded his immediate restoration to liberty. Thus it always is with the mob — from one extreme they run to the other. But the change was intelligible.

The events which had happened during the last few days — the struggle between Benito and Torres; the search for the corpse, which had reappeared under such extraordinary circumstances; the finding of the “indecipherable” document, if we can so call it; the information it concealed, the assurance that it contained, or rather the wish that it contained, the material proof of the guiltlessness of Joam Dacosta; and the hope that it was written by the real culprit — all these things had contributed to work the change in public opinion. What the people had desired and impatiently demanded forty-eight hours before, they now feared, and that was the arrival of the instructions due from Rio de Janeiro.

These, however, were not likely to be delayed.

Joam Dacosta had been arrested on the 24th of August, and examined next day. The judge’s report was sent off on the 26th. It was now the 28th. In three or four days more the minister would have come to a decision regarding the convict, and it was only too certain that justice would take its course.

There was no doubt that such would be the case. On the other hand, that the assurance of Dacosta’s innocence would appear from the document, was not doubted by anybody, neither by his family nor by the fickle population of Manaos, who excitedly followed the phases of this dramatic affair.

But, on the other hand, in the eyes of disinterested or indifferent persons who were not affected by the event, what value could be assigned to this document? and how could they even declare that it referred to the crime in the diamond arrayal? It existed, that was undeniable; it had been found on the corpse of Torres, nothing could be more certain. It could even be seen, by comparing it with the letter in which Torres gave the information about Joam Dacosta, that the document was not in the handwriting of the adventurer. But, as had been suggested by Judge Jarriquez, why should not the scoundrel have invented it for the sake of his bargain? And this was less unlikely to be the case, considering that Torres had declined to part with it until after his marriage with Dacosta's daughter — that is to say, when it would have been impossible to undo an accomplished fact.

All these views were held by some people in some form, and we can quite understand what interest the affair created. In any case, the situation of Joam Dacosta was most hazardous. If the document were not deciphered, it would be just the same as if it did not exist; and if the secret of the cryptogram were not miraculously divined or revealed before the end of the three days, the supreme sentence would inevitably be suffered by the doomed man of Tijuco. And this miracle a man attempted to perform! The man was Jarriquez, and he now really set to work more in the interest of Joam Dacosta than for the satisfaction of his analytical faculties. A complete change had also taken place in his opinion. Was not this man, who had voluntarily abandoned his retreat at Iquitos, who had come at the risk of his life to demand his rehabilitation at the hands of Brazilian justice, a moral enigma worth all the others put together? And so the judge had resolved never to leave the document until he had discovered the cipher. He set to work at it in a fury. He ate no more; he slept no more! All his time was passed in inventing combinations of numbers, in forging a key to force this lock!

This idea had taken possession of Judge Jarriquez's brain at the end of the first day. Suppressed frenzy consumed him, and kept him in a perpetual heat. His whole house trembled; his servants, black or white, dared not come near him. Fortunately he was a bachelor; had there been a Madame Jarriquez she would have had a very uncomfortable time of it. Never had a problem so taken possession of this oddity, and he had thoroughly made up his mind to get at the solution, even if his head exploded like an overheated boiler under the tension of its vapor.

It was perfectly clear to the mind of the worthy magistrate that the key to the document was a number, composed of two or more ciphers, but what this number was all investigation seemed powerless to discover.

This was the enterprise on which Jarriquez, in quite a fury, was engaged, and during this 28th of August he brought all his faculties to bear on it, and worked away almost superhumanly.

To arrive at the number by chance, he said, was to lose himself in millions of combinations, which would absorb the life of a first-rate calculator. But if he could in no respect reckon on chance, was it impossible to proceed by reasoning? Decidedly not! And so it was "to reason till he became unreasoning" that Judge Jarriquez gave himself up after vainly seeking repose in a few hours of sleep. He who ventured in upon him at this moment, after braving the formal defenses which protected his solitude, would have found him, as on the day before, in his study, before his desk, with the document under his eyes, the thousands of letters of which seemed all jumbled together and flying about his head.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “why did not the scoundrel who wrote this separate the words in this paragraph? We might — we will try — but no! However, if there is anything here about the murder and the robbery, two or three words there must be in it — ’arrayal,’ ‘diamond,’ ‘Tijuco,’ ‘Dacosta,’ and others; and in putting down their cryptological equivalents the number could be arrived at. But there is nothing — not a single break! — not one word by itself! One word of two hundred and seventy-six letters! I hope the wretch may be blessed two hundred and seventy-six times for complicating his system in this way! He ought to be hanged two hundred and seventy-six times!”

And a violent thump with his fist on the document emphasized this charitable wish.

“But,” continued the magistrate, “if I cannot find one of the words in the body of the document, I might at least try my hand at the beginning and end of each paragraph. There may be a chance there that I ought not to miss.”

And impressed with this idea Judge Jarriquez successively tried if the letters which commenced or finished the different paragraphs could be made to correspond with those which formed the most important word, which was sure to be found somewhre, that of *Dacosta*.

He could do nothing of the kind.

In fact, to take only the last paragraph with which he began, the formula was:

P = D   h = a   y = c
f = o   s = s   l = t
y = a

Now, at the very first letter Jarriquez was stopped in his calculations, for the difference in alphabetical position between the *d* and the *p* gave him not one cipher, but two, namely, 12, and in this kind of cryptograph only one letter can take the place of another.

It was the same for the seven last letters of the paragraph, *p s u v j h d,* of which the series also commences with a *p,* and which in no case could stand for the *d* in *Dacosta,* because these letters were in like manner twelve spaces apart.

So it was not his name that figured here.

The same observation applies to the words *arrayal* and *Tijuco,* which were successively tried, but whose construction did not correspond with the cryptographic series.

After he had got so far, Judge Jarriquez, with his head nearly splitting, arose and paced his office, went for fresh air to the window, and gave utterance to a growl, at the noise of which a flock of hummingbirds, murmuring among the foliage of a mimosa tree, betook themselves to flight. Then he returned to the document.

He picked it up and turned it over and over.

“The humbug! the rascal!” he hissed; “it will end by driving me mad! But steady! Be calm! Don’t let our spirits go down! This is not the time!”

And then, having refreshed himself by giving his head a thorough sluicing with cold water:

“Let us try another way,” he said, “and as I cannot hit upon the number from the arrangement of the letters, let us see what number the author of the document would have chosen in confessing that he was the author of the crime at Tijuco.”

This was another method for the magistrate to enter upon, and maybe he was right, for there was a certain amount of logic about it.

“And first let us try a date! Why should not the culprit have taken the date of the year in which Dacosta, the innocent man he allowed to be sentenced in his own place, was born? Was he likely to forget a number which was so important to him? Then Joam Dacosta was born in 1804. Let us see what 1804 will give us as a cryptographical number.”

And Judge Jarriquez wrote the first letters of the paragraph, and putting over them the number 1804 repeated thrice, he obtained

1804   1804   1804

phyj   slyd   dqfd

Then in counting up the spaces in alphabetical order, he obtained

s.yf   rdy.   cif.

And this was meaningless! And he wanted three letters which he had to replace by points, because the ciphers, 8, 4, and 4, which command the three letters, *h, d,* and *d,* do not give corresponding letters in ascending the series.

“That is not it again!” exclaimed Jarriquez. “Let us try another number.”

And he asked himself, if instead of this first date the author of the document had not rather selected the date of the year in which the crime was committed.

This was in 1826.

And so proceeding as above, he obtained.

1826   1826   1826

phyj   slyd   dqfd

and that gave

o.vd   rdv.   cid.

the same meaningless series, the same absence of sense, as many letters wanting as in the former instance, and for the same reason.

“Bother the number!” exclaimed the magistrate. “We must give it up again. Let us have another one! Perhaps the rascal chose the number of contos representing the amount of the booty!”

Now the value of the stolen diamonds was estimated at eight hundred and thirty-four contos, or about 2,500,000 francs, and so the formula became

834   834   834   834

phy   jsl   ydd   qfd

and this gave a result as little gratifying as the others — —

het   bph   pa.   ic.

“Confound the document and him who imagined it!” shouted Jarriquez, throwing down the paper, which was wafted to the other side of the room. “It would try the patience of a saint!”

But the short burst of anger passed away, and the magistrate, who had no idea of being beaten, picked up the paper. What he had done with the first letters of the different paragraphs he did with the last — and to no purpose. Then he tried everything his excited imagination could suggest.

He tried in succession the numbers which represented Dacosta’s age, which would have been known to the author of the crime, the date of his arrest, the date of the sentence at the Villa Rica assizes, the date fixed for the execution, etc. etc. even the number of victims at the affray at Tijuco!

Nothing! All the time nothing!

Judge Jarriquez had worked himself into such a state of exasperation that there really was some fear that his mental faculties would lose their balance. He jumped about, and twisted about, and wrestled about as if he really had got hold of his enemy’s body. Then suddenly he cried, “Now for chance! Heaven help me now, logic is powerless!”

His hand seized a bell-pull hanging near his table. The bell rang furiously, and the magistrate strode up to the door, which he opened. “Bobo!” he shouted.

A moment or two elapsed.

Bobo was a freed negro, who was the privileged servant of Jarriquez. He did not appear; it was evident that Bobo was afraid to come into his master’s room.

Another ring at the bell; another call to Bobo, who, for his own safety, pretended to be deaf on this occasion. And now a third ring at the bell, which unhitched the crank and broke the cord.

This time Bobo came up. “What is it, sir?” asked Bobo, prudently waiting on the threshold.

“Advance, without uttering a single word!” replied the judge, whose flaming eyes made the negro quake again.

Bobo advanced.

“Bobo,” said Jarriquez, “attend to what I say, and answer immediately; do not even take time to think, or I — — ”

Bobo, with fixed eyes and open mouth, brought his feet together like a soldier and stood at attention.

“Are you ready?” asked his master.

“I am.”

“Now, then, tell me, without a moment’s thought — you understand — the first number than comes into your head.”

“76223,” answered Bobo, all in a breath. Bobo thought he would please his master by giving him a pretty large one!

Judge Jarriquez had run to the table, and, pencil in hand, had made out a formula with the number given by Bobo, and which Bobo had in this way only given him at a venture.

It is obvious that it was most unlikely that a number such as 76223 was the key of the document, and it produced no other result than to bring to the lips of Jarriquez such a vigorous ejaculation that Bobo disappeared like a shot!

CHAPTER XV. THE LAST EFFORTS

THE MAGISTRATE, however, was not the only one who passed his time unprofitably. Benito, Manoel, and Minha tried all they could together to extract the secret from the document on which depended their father's life and honor. On his part, Fragoso, aided by Lina, could not remain quiet, but all their ingenuity had failed, and the number still escaped them.

"Why don't you find it, Fragoso?" asked the young mulatto.

"I will find it," answered Fragoso.

And he did not find it!

Here we should say that Fragoso had an idea of a project of which he had not even spoken to Lina, but which had taken full possession of his mind. This was to go in search of the gang to which the ex-captain of the woods had belonged, and to find out who was the probable author of this cipher document, which was supposed to be the confession of the culprit of Tijuco. The part of the Amazon where these people were employed, the very place where Fragoso had met Torres a few years before, was not very far from Manaos. He would only have to descend the river for about fifty miles, to the mouth of the Madeira, a tributary coming in on the right, and there he was almost sure to meet the head of these *"capitaes do mato,"* to which Torres belonged. In two days, or three days at the outside, Fragoso could get into communication with the old comrades of the adventurer.

"Yes! I could do that," he repeated to himself; "but what would be the good of it, supposing I succeeded? If we are sure that one of Torres' companions has recently died, would that prove him to be the author of this crime? Would that show that he gave Torres a document in which he announced himself the author of this crime, and exonerated Joam Dacosta? Would that give us the key of the document? No! Two men only knew the cipher — the culprit and Torres! And these two men are no more!”

So reasoned Fragoso. It was evident that his enterprise would do no good. But the thought of it was too much for him. An irresistible influence impelled him to set out, although he was not even sure of finding the band on the Madeira. In fact, it might be engaged in some other part of the province, and to come up with it might require more time than Fragoso had at his disposal! And what would be the result?

It is none the less true, however, that on the 29th of August, before sunrise, Fragoso, without saying anything to anybody, secretly left the jangada, arrived at Manaos, and embarked in one of the egariteas which daily descend the Amazon.

And great was the astonishment when he was not seen on board, and did not appear during the day. No one, not even Lina, could explain the absence of so devoted a servant at such a crisis.

Some of them even asked, and not without reason, if the poor fellow, rendered desperate at having, when he met him on the frontier, personally contributed to bringing Torres on board the raft, had not made away with himself.

But if Fragoso could so reproach himself, how about Benito? In the first place at Iquitos he had invited Torres to visit the fazenda; in the second place he had brought him on board the jangada, to become a passenger on it; and in the third place, in killing him, he had annihilated the only witness whose evidence could save the condemned man.

And so Benito considered himself responsible for everything — the arrest of his father, and the terrible events of which it had been the consequence.

In fact, had Torres been alive, Benito could not tell but that, in some way or another, from pity or for reward, he would have finished by handing over the document. Would not Torres, whom nothing could compromise, have been persuaded to speak, had money been brought to bear upon him? Would not the long-sought-for proof have been furnished to the judge? Yes, undoubtedly! And the only man who could have furnished this evidence had been killed through Benito!

Such was what the wretched man continually repeated to his mother, to Manoel, and to himself. Such were the cruel responsibilities which his conscience laid to his charge.

Between her husband, with whom she passed all the time that was allowed her, and her son, a prey to despair which made her tremble for his reason, the brave Yaquita lost none of her moral energy. In her they found the valiant daughter of Magalhaës, the worthy wife of the fazender of Iquitos.

The attitude of Joam Dacosta was well adapted to sustain her in this ordeal. That gallant man, that rigid Puritan, that austere worker, whose whole life had been a battle, had not yet shown a moment of weakness.

The most terrible blow which had struck him without prostrating him had been the death of Judge Ribeiro, in whose mind his innocence did not admit of a doubt. Was it not with the help of his old defender that he had hoped to strive for his rehabilitation? The intervention of Torres he had regarded throughout as being quite secondary for him. And of this document he had no knowledge when he left Iquitos to hand himself over to the justice of his country. He only took with him moral proofs. When a material proof was unexpectedly produced in the course of the affair, before or after his arrest, he was certainly not the man to despise it. But if, on account of regrettable circumstances, the proof disappeared, he would find himself once more in the same position as when he passed the Brazilian frontier — the position of a man who came to say, “Here is my past life; here is my present; here is an entirely honest existence of work and devotion which I bring you. You passed on me at first an erroneous judgment. After twenty-three years of exile I have come to give myself up! Here I am; judge me again!”

The death of Torres, the impossibility of reading the document found on him, had thus not produced on Joam Dacosta the impression which it had on his children, his friends, his household, and all who were interested in him.

“I have faith in my innocence,” he repeated to Yaquita, “as I have faith in God. If my life is still useful to my people, and a miracle is necessary to save me, that miracle will be performed; if not, I shall die! God alone is my judge!”

The excitement increased in Manaos as the time ran on; the affair was discussed with unexampled acerbity. In the midst of this enthralment of public opinion, which evoked so much of the mysterious, the document was the principal object of conversation.

At the end of this fourth day not a single person doubted but that it contained the vindication of the doomed man. Every one had been given an opportunity of deciphering its incomprehensible contents, for the “Diario d’o Grand Para” had reproduced it in facsimile. Autograph copies were spread about in great numbers at the suggestion of Manoel, who neglect nothing that might lead to the penetration of the mystery — not even chance, that “nickname of Providence,” as some one has called it.

In addition, a reward of one hundred contos (or three hundred thousand francs) was promised to any one who could discover the cipher so fruitlessly sought after — and read the document. This was quite a fortune, and so people of all classes forgot to eat, drink, or sleep to attack this unintelligible cryptogram.

Up to the present, however, all had been useless, and probably the most ingenious analysts in the world would have spent their time in vain. It had been advertised that any solution should be sent, without delay, to Judge Jarriquez, to his house in God-the-Son Street; but the evening of the 29th of August came and none had arrived, nor was any likely to arrive.

Of all those who took up the study of the puzzle, Judge Jarriquez was one of the most to be pitied. By a natural association of ideas, he also joined in the general opinion that the document referred to the affair at Tijuco, and that it had been written by the hand of the guilty man, and exonerated Joam Dacosta. And so he put even more ardor into his search for the key. It was not only the art for art’s sake which guided him, it was a sentiment of justice, of pity toward a man suffering under an unjust condemnation. If it is the fact that a certain quantity of phosphorus is expended in the work of the brain, it would be difficult to say how many milligrammes the judge had parted with to excite the network of his “sensorium,” and after all, to find out nothing, absolutely nothing.

But Jarriquez had no idea of abandoning the inquiry. If he could only now trust to chance, he would work on for that chance. He tried to evoke it by all means possible and impossible. He had given himself over to fury and anger, and, what was worse, to impotent anger!

During the latter part of this day he had been trying different numbers — numbers selected arbitrarily — and how many of them can scarcely be imagined. Had he had the time, he would not have shrunk from plunging into the millions of combinations of which the ten symbols of numeration are capable. He would have given his whole life to it at the risk of going mad before the year was out. Mad! was he not that already? He had had the idea that the document might be read through the paper, and so he turned it round and exposed it to the light, and tried it in that way.

Nothing! The numbers already thought of, and which he tried in this new way, gave no result. Perhaps the document read backward, and the last letter was really the first, for the author would have done this had he wished to make the reading more difficult.

Nothing! The new combination only furnished a series of letters just as enigmatic.

At eight o’clock in the evening Jarriquez, with his face in his hands, knocked up, worn out mentally and physically, had neither strength to move, to speak, to think, or to associate one idea with another.

Suddenly a noise was heard outside. Almost immediately, notwithstanding his formal orders, the door of his study was thrown open. Benito and Manoel were before him, Benito looking dreadfully pale, and Manoel supporting him, for the unfortunate young man had hardly strength to support himself.

The magistrate quickly arose.

“What is it, gentlemen? What do you want?” he asked.

“The cipher! the cipher!” exclaimed Benito, mad with grief — ”the cipher of the document.”

“Do you know it, then?” shouted the judge.

“No, sir,” said Manoel. “But you?”

“Nothing! nothing!”

“Nothing?” gasped Benito, and in a paroxysm of despair he took a knife from his belt and would have plunged it into his breast had not the judge and Manoel jumped forward and managed to disarm him.

“Benito,” said Jarriquez, in a voice which he tried to keep calm, “if you father cannot escape the expiation of a crime which is not his, you could do something better than kill yourself.”

“What?” said Benito.

“Try and save his life!”

“How?”

“That is for you to discover,” answered the magistrate, “and not for me to say.”

CHAPTER XVI. PREPARATIONS

ON THE FOLLOWING day, the 30th of August, Benito and Manoel talked matters over together. They had understood the thought to which the judge had not dared to give utterance in their presence, and were engaged in devising some means by which the condemned man could escape the penalty of the law.

Nothing else was left for them to do. It was only too certain that for the authorities at Rio Janeiro the undeciphered document would have no value whatever, that it would be a dead letter, that the first verdict which declared Joam Dacosta the perpetrator of the crime at Tijuco would not be set aside, and that, as in such cases no commutation of the sentence was possible, the order for his execution would inevitably be received.

Once more, then, Joam Dacosta would have to escape by flight from an unjust imprisonment.

It was at the outset agreed between the two young men that the secret should be carefully kept, and that neither Yaquita nor Minha should be informed of preparations, which would probably only give rise to hopes destined never to be realized. Who could tell if, owing to some unforeseen circumstance, the attempt at escape would not prove a miserable failure?

The presence of Fragoso on such an occasion would have been most valuable. Discreet and devoted, his services would have been most welcome to the two young fellows; but Fragoso had not reappeared. Lina, when asked, could only say that she knew not what had become of him, nor why he had left the raft without telling her anything about it.

And assuredly, had Fragoso foreseen that things would have turned out as they were doing, he would never have left the Dacosta family on an expedition which appeared to promise no serious result. Far better for him to have assisted in the escape of the doomed man than to have hurried off in search of the former comrades of Torres!

But Fragoso was away, and his assistance had to be dispensed with.

At daybreak Benito and Manoel left the raft and proceeded to Manaos. They soon reached the town, and passed through its narrow streets, which at that early hour were quite deserted. In a few minutes they arrived in front of the prison. The waste ground, amid which the old convent which served for a house of detention was built, was traversed by them in all directions, for they had come to study it with the utmost care.

Fifty-five feet from the ground, in an angle of the building, they recognized the window of the cell in which Joam Dacosta was confined. The window was secured with iron bars in a miserable state of repair, which it would be easy to tear down or cut through if they could only get near enough. The badly jointed stones in the wall, which were crumbled away every here and there, offered many a ledge for the feet to rest on, if only a rope could be fixed to climb up by. One of the bars had slipped out of its socket, and formed a hook over which it might be possible to throw a rope. That done, one or two of the bars could be removed, so as to permit a man to get through. Benito and Manoel would then have to make their way into the prisoner’s room, and without much difficulty the escape could be managed by means of the rope fastened to the projecting iron. During the night, if the sky were very cloudy, none of these operations would be noticed before the day dawned. Joam Dacosta could get safely away.

Manoel and Benito spent an hour about the spot, taking care not to attract attention, but examining the locality with great exactness, particularly as regarded the position of the window, the arrangement of the iron bars, and the place from which it would be best to throw the line.

“That is agreed,” said Manoel at length. “And now, ought Joam Dacosta to be told about this?”

“No, Manoel. Neither to him, any more than to my mother, ought we to impart the secret of an attempt in which there is such a risk of failure.”

“We shall succeed, Benito!” continued Manoel. “However, we must prepare for everything; and in case the chief of the prison should discover us at the moment of escape — — ”

“We shall have money enough to purchase his silence,” answered Benito.

“Good!” replied Manoel. “But once your father is out of prison he cannot remain hidden in the town or on the jangada. Where is he to find refuge?”

This was the second question to solve: and a very difficult one it was.

A hundred paces away from the prison, however, the waste land was crossed by one of those canals which flow through the town into the Rio Negro. This canal afforded an easy way of gaining the river if a pirogue were in waiting for the fugitive. From the foot of the wall to the canal side was hardly a hundred yards.

Benito and Manoel decided that about eight o’clock in the evening one of the pirogues, with two strong rowers, under the command of the pilot Araujo, should start from the jangada. They could ascend the Rio Negro, enter the canal, and, crossing the waste land, remain concealed throughout the night under the tall vegetation on the banks.

But once on board, where was Joam Dacosta to seek refuge? To return to Iquitos was to follow a road full of difficulties and peril, and a long one in any case, should the fugitive either travel across the country or by the river. Neither by horse not pirogue could he be got out of danger quickly enough, and the fazenda was no longer a safe retreat. He would not return to it as the fazender, Joam Garral, but as the convict, Joam Dacosta, continually in fear of his extradition. He could never dream of resuming his former life.

To get away by the Rio Negro into the north of the province, or even beyond the Brazilian territory, would require more time than he could spare, and his first care must be to escape from immediate pursuit.

To start again down the Amazon? But stations, village, and towns abounded on both sides of the river. The description of the fugitive would be sent to all the police, and he would run the risk of being arrested long before he reached the Atlantic. And supposing he reached the coast, where and how was he to hide and wait for a passage to put the sea between himself and his pursuers?

On consideration of these various plans, Benito and Manoel agreed that neither of them was practicable. One, however, did offer some chance of safety, and that was to embark in the pirogue, follow the canal into the Rio Negro, descend this tributary under the guidance of the pilot, reach the confluence of the rivers, and run down the Amazon along its right bank for some sixty miles during the nights, resting during the daylight, and so gaining the *embouchure* of the Madeira.

This tributary, which, fed by a hundred affluents, descends from the watershed of the Cordilleras, is a regular waterway opening into the very heart of Bolivia. A pirogue could pass up it and leave no trace of its passage, and a refuge could be found in some town or village beyond the Brazilian frontier. There Joam Dacosta would be comparatively safe, and there for several months he could wait for an opportunity of reaching the Pacific coast and taking passage in some vessel leaving one of its ports; and if the ship were bound for one of the States of North America he would be free. Once there, he could sell the fazenda, leave his country forever, and seek beyond the sea, in the Old World, a final retreat in which to end an existence so cruelly and unjustly disturbed. Anywhere he might go, his family — not excepting Manoel, who was bound to him by so many ties — would assuredly follow without the slightest hesitation.

“Let us go,” said Benito; “we must have all ready before night, and we have no time to lose.”

The young men returned on board by way of the canal bank, which led along the Rio Negro. They satisfied themselves that the passage of the pirogue would be quite possible, and that no obstacles such as locks or boats under repair were there to stop it. They then descended the left bank of the tributary, avoiding the slowly-filling streets of the town, and reached the jangada.

Benito’s first care was to see his mother. He felt sufficiently master of himself to dissemble the anxiety which consumed him. He wished to assure her that all hope was not lost, that the mystery of the document would be cleared up, that in any case public opinion was in favor of Joam, and that, in face of the agitation which was being made in his favor, justice would grant all the necessary time for the production of the material proof his innocence. “Yes, mother,” he added, “before to-morrow we shall be free from anxiety.”

“May heaven grant it so!” replied Yaquita, and she looked at him so keenly that Benito could hardly meet her glance.

On his part, and as if by pre-arrangement, Manoel had tried to reassure Minha by telling her that Judge Jarriquez was convinced of the innocence of Joam, and would try to save him by every means in his power.

“I only wish he would, Manoel,” answered she, endeavoring in vain to restrain her tears.

And Manoel left her, for the tears were also welling up in his eyes and witnessing against the words of hope to which he had just given utterance.

And now the time had arrived for them to make their daily visit to the prisoner, and Yaquita and her daughter set off to Manaos.

For an hour the young men were in consultation with Araujo. They acquainted him with their plan in all its details, and they discussed not only the projected escape, but the measures which were necessary for the safety of the fugitive.

Araujo approved of everything; he undertook during the approaching night to take the pirogue up the canal without attracting any notice, and he knew its course thoroughly as far as the spot where he was to await the arrival of Joam Dacosta. To get back to the mouth of the Rio Negro was easy enough, and the pirogue would be able to pass unnoticed among the numerous craft continually descending the river.

Araujo had no objection to offer to the idea of following the Amazon down to its confluence with the Madeira. The course of the Madeira was familiar to him for quite two hundred miles up, and in the midst of these thinly-peopled provinces, even if pursuit took place in their direction, all attempts at capture could be easily frustrated; they could reach the interior of Bolivia, and if Joam decided to leave his country he could procure a passage with less danger on the coast of the Pacific than on that of the Atlantic.

Araujo’s approval was most welcome to the young fellows; they had great faith in the practical good sense of the pilot, and not without reason. His zeal was undoubted, and he would assuredly have risked both life and liberty to save the fazender of Iquitos.

With the utmost secrecy Araujo at once set about his preparations. A considerable sum in gold was handed over to him by Benito to meet all eventualities during the voyage on the Madeira. In getting the pirogue ready, he announced his intention of going in search of Fragoso, whose fate excited a good deal of anxiety among his companions. He stowed away in the boat provisions for many days, and did not forget the ropes and tools which would be required by the young men when they reached the canal at the appointed time and place.

These preparations evoked no curiosity on the part of the crew of the jangada, and even the two stalwart negroes were not let into the secret. They, however, could be absolutely depended on. Whenever they learned what the work of safety was in which they were engaged — when Joam Dacosta, once more free, was confided to their charge — Araujo knew well that they would dare anything, even to the risk of their own lives, to save the life of their master.

By the afternoon all was ready, and they had only the night to wait for. But before making a start Manoel wished to call on Judge Jarriquez for the last time. The magistrate might perhaps have found out something new about the document. Benito preferred to remain on the raft and wait for the return of his mother and sister.

Manoel then presented himself at the abode of Judge Jarriquez, and was immediately admitted.

The magistrate, in the study which he never quitted, was still the victim of the same excitement. The document crumpled by his impatient fingers, was still there before his eyes on the table.

"Sir," said Manoel, whose voice trembled as he asked the question, "have you received anything from Rio de Janeiro."

"No," answered the judge; "the order has not yet come to hand, but it may at any moment."

"And the document?"

"Nothing yet!" exclaimed he. "Everything my imagination can suggest I have tried, and no result."

"None?"

"Nevertheless, I distinctly see one word in the document — only one!"

"What is that — what is the word?"

"'Fly'!"

Manoel said nothing, but he pressed the hand which Jarriquez held out to him, and returned to the jangada to wait for the moment of action.

CHAPTER XVII. THE LAST NIGHT

THE VISIT of Yaquita and her daughter had been like all such visits during the few hours which each day the husband and wife spent together. In the presence of the two beings whom Joam so dearly loved his heart nearly failed him. But the husband — the father — retained his self-command. It was he who comforted the two poor women and inspired them with a little of the hope of which so little now remained to him. They had come with the intention of cheering the prisoner. Alas! far more than he they themselves were in want of cheering! But when they found him still bearing himself unflinchingly in the midst of his terrible trial, they recovered a little of their hope.

Once more had Joam spoken encouraging words to them. His indomitable energy was due not only to the feeling of his innocence, but to his faith in that God, a portion of whose justice yet dwells in the hearts of men. No! Joam Dacosta would never lose his life for the crime of Tijuco!

Hardly ever did he mention the document. Whether it were apocryphal or no, whether it were in the handwriting of Torres or in that of the real perpetrator of the crime, whether it contained or did not contain the longed-for vindication, it was on no such doubtful hypothesis that Joam Dacosta presumed to trust. No; he reckoned on a better argument in his favor, and it was to his long life of toil and honor that he relegated the task of pleading for him.

This evening, then, his wife and daughter, strengthened by the manly words, which thrilled them to the core of their hearts, had left him more confident than they had ever been since his arrest. For the last time the prisoner had embraced them, and with redoubled tenderness. It seemed as though the *dénouement* was nigh.

Joam Dacosta, after they had left, remained for some time perfectly motionless. His arms rested on a small table and supported his head. Of what was he thinking? Had he at last been convinced that human justice, after failing the first time, would at length pronounce his acquittal?

Yes, he still hoped. With the report of Judge Jarriquez establishing his identity, he knew that his memoir, which he had penned with so much sincerity, would have been sent to Rio de Janeiro, and was now in the hands of the chief justice. This memoir, as we know, was the history of his life from his entry into the offices of the diamond arrayal until the very moment when the jangada stopped before Manaos. Joam Dacosta was pondering over his whole career. He again lived his past life from the moment when, as an orphan, he had set foot in Tijuco. There his zeal had raised him high in the offices of the governor-general, into which he had been admitted when still very young. The future smiled on him; he would have filled some important position. Then this sudden catastrophe; the robbery of the diamond convoy, the massacre of the escort, the suspicion directed against him as the only official who could have divulged the secret of the expedition, his arrest, his appearance before the jury, his conviction in spite of all the efforts of his advocate, the last hours spent in the condemned cell at Villa Rica, his escape under conditions which betokened almost superhuman courage, his flight through the northern provinces, his arrival on the Peruvian frontier, and the reception which the starving fugitive had met with from the hospitable fazender Magalhaës.

The prisoner once more passed in review these events, which had so cruelly marred his life. And then, lost in his thoughts and recollections, he sat, regardless of a peculiar noise on the outer wall of the convent, of the jerkings of a rope hitched on to a bar of his window, and of grating steel as it cut through iron, which ought at once to have attracted the attention of a less absorbed man.

Joam Dacosta continued to live the years of his youth after his arrival in Peru. He again saw the fazender, the clerk, the partner of the old Portuguese, toiling hard for the prosperity of the establishment at Iquitos. Ah! why at the outset had he not told all to his benefactor? He would never have doubted him. It was the only error with which he could reproach himself. Why had he not confessed to him whence he had come, and who he was — above all, at the moment when Magalhaës had place in his hand the hand of the daughter who would never have believed that he was the author of so frightful a crime.

And now the noise outside became loud enough to attract the prisoner's attention. For an instant Joam raised his head; his eyes sought the window, but with a vacant look, as though he were unconscious, and the next instant his head again sank into his hands. Again he was in thought back at Iquitos.

There the old fazender was dying; before his end he longed for the future of his daughter to be assured, for his partner to be the sole master of the settlement which had grown so prosperous under his management. Should Dacosta have spoken then? Perhaps; but he dared not do it. He again lived the happy days he had spent with Yaquita, and again thought of the birth of his children, again felt the happiness which had its only trouble in the remembrances of Tijuco and the remorse that he had not confessed his terrible secret.

The chain of events was reproduced in Joam's mind with a clearness and completeness quite remarkable.

And now he was thinking of the day when his daughter's marriage with Manoel had been decided. Could he allow that union to take place under a false name without acquainting the lad with the mystery of his life? No! And so at the advice of Judge Ribeiro he resolved to come and claim the revision of his sentence, to demand the rehabilitation which was his due! He was starting with his people, and then came the intervention of Torres, the detestable bargain proposed by the scoundrel, the indignant refusal of the father to hand over his daughter to save his honor and his life, and then the denunciation and the arrest!

Suddenly the window flew open with a violent push from without.

Joam started up; the souvenire of the past vanished like a shadow.

Benito leaped into the room; he was in the presence of his father, and the next moment Manoel, tearing down the remaining bars, appeared before him.

Joam Dacosta would have uttered a cry of surprise. Benito left him no time to do so.

"Father," he said, "the window grating is down. A rope leads to the ground. A pirogue is waiting for you on the canal not a hundred yards off. Araujo is there ready to take you far away from Manaos, on the other bank of the Amazon where your track will never be discovered. Father, you must escape this very moment! It was the judge's own suggestion!"

"It must be done!" added Manoel.

"Fly! I! — Fly a second time! Escape again?"

And with crossed arms, and head erect, Joam Dacosta stepped forward.

“Never!” he said, in a voice so firm that Benito and Manoel stood bewildered.

The young men had never thought of a difficulty like this. They had never reckoned on the hindrances to escape coming from the prisoner himself.

Benito advanced to his father, and looking him straight in the face, and taking both his hands in his, not to force him, but to try and convince him, said:

“Never, did you say, father?”

“Never!”

“Father,” said Manoel — ”for I also have the right to call you father — listen to us! If we tell you that you ought to fly without losing an instant, it is because if you remain you will be guilty toward others, toward yourself!”

“To remain,” continued Benito, “is to remain to die! The order for execution may come at any moment! If you imagine that the justice of men will nullify a wrong decision, if you think it will rehabilitate you whom it condemned twenty years since, you are mistaken! There is hope no longer! You must escape! Come!”

By an irresistible impulse Benito seized his father and drew him toward the window.

Joam Dacosta struggled from his son’s grasp and recoiled a second time.

“To fly,” he answered, in the tone of a man whose resolution was unalterable, “is to dishonor myself, and you with me! It would be a confession of my guilt! Of my own free will I surrendered myself to my country’s judges, and I will await their decision, whatever that decision may be!”

“But the presumptions on which you trusted are insufficient,” replied Manoel, “and the material proof of your innocence is still wanting! If we tell you that you ought to fly, it is because Judge Jarriquez himself told us so. You have now only this one chance left to escape from death!”

“I will die, then,” said Joam, in a calm voice. “I will die protesting against the decision which condemned me! The first time, a few hours before the execution — I fled! Yes! I was then young. I had all my life before me in which to struggle against man’s injustice! But to save myself now, to begin again the miserable existence of a felon hiding under a false name, whose every effort is required to avoid the pursuit of the police, again to live the life of anxiety which I have led for twenty-three years, and oblige you to share it with me; to wait each day for a denunciation which sooner or later must come, to wait for the claim for extradition which would follow me to a foreign country! Am I to live for that? No! Never!”

“Father,” interrupted Benito, whose mind threatened to give way before such obstinacy, “you shall fly! I will have it so!” And he caught hold of Joam Dacosta, and tried by force to drag him toward the window.

“No! no!”

“You wish to drive me mad?”

“My son,” exclaimed Joam Dacosta, “listen to me! Once already I escaped from the prison at Villa Rica, and people believed I fled from well-merited punishment. Yes, they had reason to think so. Well, for the honor of the name which you bear I shall not do so again.”

Benito had fallen on his knees before his father. He held up his hands to him; he begged him:

“But this order, father,” he repeated, “this order which is due to-day — even now — it will contain your sentence of death.”

“The order may come, but my determination will not change. No, my son! Joam Dacosta, guilty, might fly! Joam Dacosta, innocent, will not fly!”

The scene which followed these words was heart-rending. Benito struggled with his father. Manoel, distracted, kept near the window ready to carry off the prisoner — when the door of the room opened.

On the threshold appeared the chief of the police, accompanied by the head warder of the prison and a few soldiers. The chief of the police understood at a glance that an attempt at escape was being made; but he also understood from the prisoner’s attitude that he it was who had no wish to go! He said nothing. The sincerest pity was depicted on his face. Doubtless he also, like Judge Jarriquez, would have liked Dacosta to have escaped.

It was too late!

The chief of the police, who held a paper in his hand, advanced toward the prisoner.

“Before all of you,” said Joam Dacosta, “let me tell you, sir, that it only rested with me to get away, and that I would not do so.”

The chief of the police bowed his head, and then, in a voice which he vainly tried to control:

“Joam Dacosta,” he said, “the order has this moment arrived from the chief justice at Rio Janeiro.”

“Father!” exclaimed Manoel and Benito.

“This order,” asked Joam Dacosta, who had crossed his arms, “this order requires the execution of my sentence?”

“Yes!”

“And that will take place?”

“To-morrow.”

Benito threw himself on his father. Again would he have dragged him from his cell, but the soldiers came and drew away the prisoner from his grasp.

At a sign from the chief of the police Benito and Manoel were taken away. An end had to be put to this painful scene, which had already lasted too long.

“Sir,” said the doomed man, “before to-morrow, before the hour of my execution, may I pass a few moments with Padre Passanha, whom I ask you to tell?”

“It will be forbidden.”

“May I see my family, and embrace for a last time my wife and children?”

“You shall see them.”

“Thank you, sir,” answered Joam; “and now keep guard over that window; it will not do for them to take me out of here against my will.”

And then the chief of the police, after a respectful bow, retired with the warder and the soldiers.

The doomed man, who had now but a few hours to live, was left alone.

CHAPTER XVIII. FRAGOSO

AND SO the order had come, and, as Judge Jarriquez had foreseen, it was an order requiring the immediate execution of the sentence pronounced on Joam Dacosta. No proof had been produced; justice must take its course.

It was the very day — the 31st of August, at nine o’clock in the morning of which the condemned man was to perish on the gallows.

The death penalty in Brazil is generally commuted except in the case of negroes, but this time it was to be suffered by a white man.

Such are the penal arrangements relative to crimes in the diamond arrayal, for which, in the public interest, the law allows no appear to mercy.

Nothing could now save Joam Dacosta. It was not only life, but honor that he was about to lose.

But on the 31st of August a man was approaching Manaos with all the speed his horse was capable of, and such had been the pace at which he had come that half a mile from the town the gallant creature fell, incapable of carrying him any further.

The rider did not even stop to raise his steed. Evidently he had asked and obtained from it all that was possible, and, despite the state of exhaustion in which he found himself, he rushed off in the direction of the city.

The man came from the eastern provinces, and had followed the left bank of the river. All his means had gone in the purchase of this horse, which, swifter far than any pirogue on the Amazon, had brought him to Manaos.

It was Fragoso!

Had, then, the brave fellow succeeded in the enterprise of which he had spoken to nobody? Had he found the party to which Torres belonged? Had he discovered some secret which would yet save Joam Dacosta?

He hardly knew. But in any case he was in great haste to acquaint Judge Jarriquez with what he had ascertained during his short excursion.

And this is what had happened.

Fragoso had made no mistake when he recognized Torres as one of the captains of the party which was employed in the river provinces of the Madeira.

He set out, and on reaching the mouth of that tributary he learned that the chief of these *capitaes da mato* was then in the neighborhood.

Without losing a minute, Fragoso started on the search, and, not without difficulty, succeeded in meeting him.

To Fragoso’s questions the chief of the party had no hesitation in replying; he had no interest in keeping silence with regard to the few simple matters on which he was interrogated. In fact, three questions only of importance were asked him by Fragoso, and these were:

“Did not a captain of the woods named Torres belong to your party a few months ago?”

“Yes.”

“At that time had he not one intimate friend among his companions who has recently died?”

“Just so!”

“And the name of that friend was?”

“Ortega.”

This was all that Fragoso had learned. Was this information of a kind to modify Dacosta’s position? It was hardly likely.

Fragoso saw this, and pressed the chief of the band to tell him what he knew of this Ortega, of the place where he came from, and of his antecedents generally. Such information would have been of great importance if Ortega, as Torres had declared, was the true author of the crime of Tijuco. But unfortunately the chief could give him no information whatever in the matter.

What was certain was that Ortega had been a member of the band for many years, that an intimate friendship existed between him and Torres, that they were always seen together, and that Torres had watched at his bedside when he died.

This was all the chief of the band knew, and he could tell no more. Fragoso, then, had to be contented with these insignificant details, and departed immediately.

But if the devoted fellow had not brought back the proof that Ortega was the author of the crime of Tijuco, he had gained one thing, and that was the knowledge that Torres had told the truth when he affirmed that one of his comrades in the band had died, and that he had been present during his last moments.

The hypothesis that Ortega had given him the document in question had now become admissible. Nothing was more probable than that this document had reference to the crime of which Ortega was really the author, and that it contained the confession of the culprit, accompanied by circumstances which permitted of no doubt as to its truth.

And so, if the document could be read, if the key had been found, if the cipher on which the system hung were known, no doubt of its truth could be entertained.

But this cipher Fragoso did not know. A few more presumptions, a half-certainty that the adventurer had invented nothing, certain circumstances tending to prove that the secret of the matter was contained in the document — and that was all that the gallant fellow brought back from his visit to the chief of the gang of which Torres had been a member.

Nevertheless, little as it was, he was in all haste to relate it to Judge Jarriquez. He knew that he had not an hour to lose, and that was why on this very morning, at about eight o’clock, he arrived, exhausted with fatigue, within half a mile of Manaos. The distance between there and the town he traversed in a few minutes. A kind of irresistible presentiment urged him on, and he had almost come to believe that Joam Dacosta’s safety rested in his hands.

Suddenly Fragoso stopped as if his feet had become rooted in the ground. He had reached the entrance to a small square, on which opened one of the town gates.

There, in the midst of a dense crowd, arose the gallows, towering up some twenty feet, and from it there hung the rope!

Fragoso felt his consciousness abandon him. He fell; his eyes involuntarily closed. He did not wish to look, and these words escaped his lips: “Too late! too late!” But by a superhuman effort he raised himself up. No; it was *not* too late, the corpse of Joam Dacosta was *not* hanging at the end of the rope!

“Judge Jarriquez! Judge Jarriquez!” shouted Fragoso, and panting and bewildered he rushed toward the city gate, dashed up the principal street of Manaos, and fell half-dead on the threshold of the judge’s house. The door was shut. Fragoso had still strength enough left to knock at it.

One of the magistrate’s servants came to open it; his master would see no one.

In spite of this denial, Fragoso pushed back the man who guarded the entrance, and with a bound threw himself into the judge’s study.

“I come from the province where Torres pursued his calling as captain of the woods!” he gasped. “Mr. Judge, Torres told the truth. Stop — stop the execution?”

“You found the gang?”

“Yes.”

“And you have brought me the cipher of the document?”

Fragoso did not reply.

“Come, leave me alone! leave me alone!” shouted Jarriquez, and, a prey to an outburst of rage, he grasped the document to tear it to atoms.

Fragoso seized his hands and stopped him. “The truth is there!” he said.

“I know,” answered Jarriquez; “but it is a truth which will never see the light!”

“It will appear — it must! it must!”

“Once more, have you the cipher?”

“No,” replied Fragoso; “but, I repeat, Torres has not lied. One of his companions, with whom he was very intimate, died a few months ago, and there can be no doubt but that this man gave him the document he came to sell to Joam Dacosta.”

“No,” answered Jarriquez — ”no, there is no doubt about it — as far as we are concerned; but that is not enough for those who dispose of the doomed man’s life. Leave me!”

Fragoso, repulsed, would not quit the spot. Again he threw himself at the judge’s feet. “Joam Dacosta is innocent!” he cried; “you will not leave him to die? It was not he who committed the crime of Tijuco; it was the comrade of Torres, the author of that document! It was Ortega!”

As he uttered the name the judge bounded backward. A kind of calm swiftly succeeded to the tempest which raged within him. He dropped the document from his clenched hand, smoothed it out on the table, sat down, and, passing his hand over his eyes — ”That name?” he said — ”Ortega? Let us see,” and then he proceeded with the new name brought back by Fragoso as he had done with the other names so vainly tried by himself.

After placing it above the first six letters of the paragraph he obtained the following formula:

Ortega

Phyjsl

“Nothing!” he said. “That give us — nothing!”

And in fact the *h* placed under the *r* could not be expressed by a cipher, for, in alphabetical order, this letter occupies an earlier position to that of the *r.*

The *p,* the *y,* the *j,* arranged beneath the letters *o, t, e,* disclosed the cipher 1, 4, 5, but as for the *s* and the *l* at the end of the word, the interval which separated them from the *g* and the *a* was a dozen letters, and hence impossible to express by a single cipher, so that they corresponded to neither *g* nor *a*.

And here appalling shouts arose in the streets; they were the cries of despair.

Fragoso jumped to one of the windows, and opened it before the judge could hinder him.

The people filled the road. The hour had come at which the doomed man was to start from the prison, and the crowd was flowing back to the spot where the gallows had been erected.

Judge Jarriquez, quite frightful to look upon, devoured the lines of the document with a fixed stare.

“The last letters!” he muttered. “Let us try once more the last letters!”

It was the last hope.

And then, with a hand whose agitation nearly prevented him from writing at all, he placed the name of Ortega over the six last letters of the paragraph, as he had done over the first.

An exclamation immediately escaped him. He saw, at first glance, that the six last letters were inferior in alphabetical order to those which composed Ortega’s name, and that consequently they might yield the number.

And when he reduced the formula, reckoning each later letter from the earlier letter of the word, he obtained.

O r t e g a

4 3 2 5 1 3

S u v j h d

The number thus disclosed was 432513.

But was this number that which had been used in the document? Was it not as erroneous as those he had previously tried?

At this moment the shouts below redoubled — shouts of pity which betrayed the sympathy of the excited crowd. A few minutes more were all that the doomed man had to live!

Fragoso, maddened with grief, darted from the room! He wished to see, for the last time, his benefactor who was on the road to death! He longed to throw himself before the mournful procession and stop it, shouting, “Do not kill this just man! do not kill him!”

But already Judge Jarriquez had placed the given number above the first letters of the paragraph, repeating them as often as was necessary, as follows:

4 3 2 5 1 3 4 3 2 5 1 3 4 3 2 5 1 3 4 3 2 5 1 3

P h y j s l y d d q f d z x g a s g z z q q e h

And then, reckoning the true letters according to their alphabetical order, he read:

“Le véritable auteur du vol de — — ”

A yell of delight escaped him! This number, 432513, was the number sought for so long! The name of Ortega had enabled him to discover it! At length he held the key of the document, which would incontestably prove the innocence of Joam Dacosta, and without reading any more he flew from his study into the street, shouting:

“Halt! Halt!”

To cleave the crowd, which opened as he ran, to dash to the prison, whence the convict was coming at the last moment, with his wife and children clinging to him with the violence of despair, was but the work of a minute for Judge Jarriquez.

Stopping before Joam Dacosta, he could not speak for a second, and then these words escaped his lips:

“Innocent! Innocent!”

CHAPTER XIX. THE CRIME OF TIJUCO

ON THE ARRIVAL of the judge the mournful procession halted. A roaring echo had repeated after him and again repeated the cry which escaped from every mouth:

“Innocent! Innocent!”

Then complete silence fell on all. The people did not want to lose one syllable of what was about to be proclaimed.

Judge Jarriquez sat down on a stone seat, and then, while Minha, Benito, Manoel, and Fragoso stood round him, while Joam Dacosta clasped Yaquita to his heart, he first unraveled the last paragraph of the document by means of the number, and as the words appeared by the institution of the true letters for the cryptological ones, he divided and punctuated them, and then read it out in a loud voice. And this is what he read in the midst of profound silence:

Le véritable auteur du vol des diamants et de 43 251343251 343251 34 325 134 32513432 51 34 *Ph yjslyddf dzxgas gz zqq ehx gkfndrxu ju gi l’assassinat des soldats qui escortaient le convoi,* 32513432513 432 5134325 134 32513432513 43 251343 *ocytdxvksbx bhu ypohdvy rym huhpuydkjox ph etozsl commis dans la nuit du vingt-deux janvier mil* 251343 2513 43 2513 43 251343251 3432513 432 *etnpmv ffov pd pajx hy ynojyggay meqynfu q1n huit-cent vingt-six, n’est donc pas Joam Dacosta,* 5134 3251 3425 134 3251 3432 513 4325 1343251 *mvly fgsu zmqiz tlb qgyu gsqe uvb nrcc edgruzb injustement condamné à mort, c’est moi, les misérable* 34325134325 13432513 4 3251 3432 513 43 251343251 *l4msyuhqpz drrgcroh e pqxu fivv rpl ph onthvddqf employé de l’administration du district diamantin,* 3432513 43 251343251343251 34

32513432 513432513 *hqsntzh hh nfepmqkyuuexkto gz gkyuumfv ijdqdpzjq out, moi seul, qui signe de mon vrai nom, Ortega.* 432 513 4325 134 32513 43 251 3432 513 432513 *syk rpl xhxq rym vkloh hh oto zvdk spp suvjhd.*

“The real author of the robbery of the diamonds and of the murder of the soldiers who escorted the convoy, committed during the night of the twenty-second of January, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-six, was thus not Joam Dacosta, unjustly condemned to death; it was I, the wretched servant of the Administration of the diamond district; yes, I alone, who sign this with my true name, Ortega.”

The reading of this had hardly finished when the air was rent with prolonged hurrahs.

What could be more conclusive than this last paragraph, which summarized the whole of the document, and proclaimed so absolutely the innocence of the fazender of Iquitos, and which snatched from the gallows this victim of a frightful judicial mistake!

Joam Dacosta, surrounded by his wife, his children, and his friends, was unable to shake the hands which were held out to him. Such was the strength of his character that a reaction occurred, tears of joy escaped from his eyes, and at the same instant his heart was lifted up to that Providence which had come to save him so miraculously at the moment he was about to offer the last expiation to that God who would not permit the accomplishment of that greatest of crimes, the death of an innocent man!

Yes! There could be no doubt as to the vindication of Joam Dacosta. The true author of the crime of Tijuco confessed of his own free will, and described the circumstances under which it had been perpetrated!

By means of the number Judge Jarriquez interpreted the whole of the cryptogram.

And this was what Ortega confessed.

He had been the colleague of Joam Dacosta, employed, like him, at Tijuco, in the offices of the governor of the diamond arrayal. He had been the official appointed to accompany the convoy to Rio de Janeiro, and, far from recoiling at the horrible idea of enriching himself by means of murder and robbery, he had informed the smugglers of the very day the convoy was to leave Tijuco.

During the attack of the scoundrels, who awaited the convoy just beyond Villa Rica, he pretended to defend himself with the soldiers of the escort, and then, falling among the dead, he was carried away by his accomplices. Hence it was that the solitary soldier who survived the massacre had reported that Ortega had perished in the struggle.

But the robbery did not profit the guilty man in the long run, for, a little time afterward, he was robbed by those whom he had helped to commit the crime.

Penniless, and unable to enter Tijuco again, Ortega fled away to the provinces in the north of Brazil, to those districts of the Upper Amazon where the *capitaes da mato* are to be found. He had to live somehow, and so he joined this not very honorable company; they neither asked him who he was nor whence he came, and so Ortega became a captain of the woods, and for many years he followed the trade of a chaser of men.

During this time Torres, the adventurer, himself in absolute want, became his companion. Ortega and he became most intimate. But, as he had told

Torres, remorse began gradually to trouble the scoundrel’s life. The remembrance of his crime became horrible to him. He knew that another had been condemned in his place! He knew subsequently that the innocent man had escaped from the last penalty, but that he would never be free from the shadow of the capital sentence! And then, during an expedition of his party for several months beyond the Peruvian frontier, chance caused Ortega to visit the neighborhood of Iquitos, and there in Joam Garral, who did not recognize him, he recognized Joam Dacosta.

Henceforth he resolved to make all the reparation he could for the injustice of which his old comrade had been the victim. He committed to the document all the facts relative to the crime of Tijuco, writing it first in French, which had been his mother’s native tongue, and then putting it into the mysterious form we know, his intention being to transmit it to the fazender of Iquitos, with the cipher by which it could be read.

Death prevented his completing his work of reparation. Mortally wounded in a scuffle with some negroes on the Madeira, Ortega felt he was doomed. His comrade Torres was then with him. He thought he could intrust to his friend the secret which had so grievously darkened his life. He gave him the document, and made him swear to convey it to Joam Dacosta, whose name and address he gave him, and with his last breath he whispered the number 432513, without which the document would remain undecipherable.

Ortega dead, we know how the unworthy Torres acquitted himself of his mission, how he resolved to turn to his own profit the secret of which he was the possessor, and how he tried to make it the subject of an odious bargain.

Torres died without accomplishing his work, and carried his secret with him. But the name of Ortega, brought back by Fragoso, and which was the signature of the document, had afforded the means of unraveling the cryptogram, thanks to the sagacity of Judge Jarriquez. Yes, the material proof sought after for so long was the incontestable witness of the innocence of Joam Dacosta, returned to life, restored to honor.

The cheers redoubled when the worthy magistrate, in a loud voice, and for the edification of all, read from the document this terrible history.

And from that moment Judge Jarriquez, who possessed this indubitable proof, arranged with the chief of the police, and declined to allow Joam Dacosta, while waiting new instructions from Rio Janeiro, to stay in any prison but his own house.

There could be no difficulty about this, and in the center of the crowd of the entire population of Manaos, Joam Dacosta, accompanied by all his family, beheld himself conducted like a conquerer to the magistrate’s residence.

And in that minute the honest fazender of Iquitos was well repaid for all that he had suffered during the long years of exile, and if he was happy for his family’s sake more than for his own, he was none the less proud for his country’s sake that this supreme injustice had not been consummated!

And in all this what had become of Fragoso?

Well, the good-hearted fellow was covered with caresses! Benito, Manoel, and Minha had overwhelmed him, and Lina had by no means spared him. He did not know what to do, he defended himself as best he could. He did not deserve anything like it. Chance alone had done it. Were any thanks due to him for having recognized Torres as a captain of the woods? No, certainly not. As to his idea of hurrying off in search of the band to which

Torres had belonged, he did not think it had been worth much, and as to the name of Ortega, he did not even know its value.

Gallant Fragoso! Whether he wished it or no, he had none the less saved Joam Dacosta!

And herein what a strange succession of different events all tending to the same end. The deliverance of Fragoso at the time when he was dying of exhaustion in the forest of Iquitos; the hospitable reception he had met with at the fazenda, the meeting with Torres on the Brazilian frontier, his embarkation on the jangada; and lastly, the fact that Fragoso had seen him somewhere before.

“Well, yes!” Fragoso ended by exclaiming; “but it is not to me that all this happiness is due, it is due to Lina!”

“To me?” replied the young mulatto.

“No doubt of it. Without the liana, without the idea of the liana, could I ever have been the cause of so much happiness?”

So that Fragoso and Lina were praised and petted by all the family, and by all the new friends whom so many trials had procured them at Manaos, need hardly be insisted on.

But had not Judge Jarriquez also had his share in this rehabilitation of an innocent man? If, in spite of all the shrewdness of his analytical talents, he had not been able to read the document, which was absolutely undecipherable to any one who had not got the key, had he not at any rate discovered the system on which the cryptogram was composed? Without him what could have been done with only the name of Ortega to reconstitute the number which the author of the crime and Torres, both of whom were dead, alone knew?

And so he also received abundant thanks.

Needless to say that the same day there was sent to Rio de Janeiro a detailed report of the whole affair, and with it the original document and the cipher to enable it to be read. New instructions from the minister of justice had to be waited for, though there could be no doubt that they would order the immediate discharge of the prisoner. A few days would thus have to be passed at Manaos, and then Joam Dacosta and his people, free from all constraint, and released from all apprehension, would take leave of their host to go on board once more and continue their descent of the Amazon to Para, where the voyage was intended to terminate with the double marriage of Minha and Manoel and Lina and Fragoso.

Four days afterward, on the fourth of September, the order of discharge arrived. The document had been recognized as authentic. The handwriting was really that of Ortega, who had been formerly employed in the diamond district, and there could be no doubt that the confession of his crime, with the minutest details that were given, had been entirely written with his own hand.

The innocence of the convict of Villa Rica was at length admitted. The rehabilitation of Joam Dacosta was at last officially proclaimed.

That very day Judge Jarriquez dined with the family on board the giant raft, and when evening came he shook hands with them all. Touching were the adieus, but an engagement was made for them to see him again on their return at Manaos, and later on the fazenda of Iquitos.

On the morning of the morrow, the fifth of September, the signal for departure was given. Joam Dacosta and Yaquita, with their daughter and sons, were on the deck of the enormous raft. The jangada had its moorings slackened off and began to move with the current, and when it disappeared round the bend of the Rio Negro, the hurrahs of the whole population of Manaos, who were assembled on the bank, again and again re-echoed across the stream.

CHAPTER XX. THE LOWER AMAZON

LITTLE REMAINS to tell of the second part of the voyage down the mighty river. It was but a series of days of joy. Joam Dacosta returned to a new life, which shed its happiness on all who belonged to him.

The giant raft glided along with greater rapidity on the waters now swollen by the floods. On the left they passed the small village of Don Jose de Maturi, and on the right the mouth of that Madeira which owes its name to the floating masses of vegetable remains and trunks denuded of their foliage which it bears from the depths of Bolivia. They passed the archipelago of Caniny, whose islets are veritable boxes of palms, and before the village of Serpa, which, successively transported from one back to the other, has definitely settled on the left of the river, with its little houses, whose thresholds stand on the yellow carpet of the beach.

The village of Silves, built on the left of the Amazon, and the town of Villa Bella, which is the principal guarana market in the whole province, were soon left behind by the giant raft. And so was the village of Faro and its celebrated river of the Nhamundas, on which, in 1539, Orellana asserted he was attacked by female warriors, who have never been seen again since, and thus gave us the legend which justifies the immortal name of the river of the Amazons.

Here it is that the province of Rio Negro terminates. The jurisdiction of Para then commences; and on the 22d of September the family, marveling much at a valley which has no equal in the world, entered that portion of the Brazilian empire which has no boundary to the east except the Atlantic.

“How magnificent!” remarked Minha, over and over again.

“How long!” murmured Manoel.

“How beautiful!” repeated Lina.

“When shall we get there?” murmured Fragoso.

And this was what might have been expected of these folks from the different points of view, though time passed pleasantly enough with them all the same. Benito, who was neither patient nor impatient, had recovered all his former good humor.

Soon the jangada glided between interminable plantations of cocoa-trees with their somber green flanked by the yellow thatch or ruddy tiles of the roofs of the huts of the settlers on both banks from Obidos up to the town of Monto Alegre.

Then there opened out the mouth of the Rio Trombetas, bathing with its black waters the houses of Obidos, situated at about one hundred and eighty miles from Belem, quite a small town, and even a *“citade”* with large streets bordered with handsome habitations, and a great center for cocoa produce. Then they saw another tributary, the Tapajos, with its greenish-gray waters descending from the south-west; and then Santarem, a wealthy town of not less than five thousand inhabitants, Indians for the most part, whose nearest houses were built on the vast beach of white sand.

After its departure from Manaos the jangada did not stop anywhere as it passed down the much less encumbered course of the Amazon. Day and night it moved along under the vigilant care of its trusty pilot; no more stoppages either for the gratification of the passengers or for business purposes. Unceasingly it progressed, and the end rapidly grew nearer.

On leaving Alemquer, situated on the left bank, a new horizon appeared in view. In place of the curtain of forests which had shut them in up to then, our friends beheld a foreground of hills, whose undulations could be easily descried, and beyond them the faint summits of veritable mountains vandyked across the distant depth of sky. Neither Yaquita, nor her daughter, nor Lina, nor old Cybele, had ever seen anything like this.

But in this jurisdiction of Para, Manoel was at home, and he could tell them the names of the double chain which gradually narrowed the valley of the huge river.

“To the right,” said he, “that is the Sierra de Paracuarta, which curves in a half-circle to the south! To the left, that is the Sierra de Curuva, of which we have already passed the first outposts.”

“Then they close in?” asked Fragoso.

“They close in!” replied Manoel.

And the two young men seemed to understand each other, for the same slight but significant nodding of the head accompanied the question and reply.

At last, notwithstanding the tide, which since leaving Obidos had begun to be felt, and which somewhat checked the progress of the raft, the town of Monto Alegre was passed, then that of Pravnha de Onteiro, then the mouth of the Xingu, frequented by Yurumas Indians, whose principal industry consists in preparing their enemies’ heads for natural history cabinets.

To what a superb size the Amazon had now developed as already this monarch of rivers gave signs of opening out like a sea! Plants from eight to ten feet high clustered along the beach, and bordered it with a forest of reeds. Porto de Mos, Boa Vista, and Gurupa, whose prosperity is on the decline, were soon among the places left in the rear.

Then the river divided into two important branches, which flowed off toward the Atlantic, one going away northeastward, the other eastward, and between them appeared the beginning of the large island of Marajo. This island is quite a province in itself. It measures no less than a hundred and eighty leagues in circumference. Cut up by marshes and rivers, all savannah to the east, all forest to the west, it offers most excellent advantages for the raising of cattle, which can here be seen in their thousands. This immense barricade of Marajo is the natural obstacle which has compelled the Amazon to divide before precipitating its torrents of water into the sea. Following the upper branch, the jangada, after passing the islands of Caviana and Mexiana, would have found an *embouchure* of some fifty leagues across, but it would also have met with the bar of the prororoca, that terrible eddy which, for the three days preceding the new or full moon, takes but two minutes instead of six hours to raise the river from twelve to fifteen feet above ordinary high-water mark.

This is by far the most formidable of tide-races. Most fortunately the lower branch, known as the Canal of Breves, which is the natural area of the Para, is not subject to the visitations of this terrible phenomenon, and its tides are of a more regular description. Araujo, the pilot, was quite aware of this. He steered, therefore, into the midst of magnificent forests, here and there gliding past island covered with muritis palms; and the weather was so favorable that they did not experience any of the storms which so frequently rage along this Breves Canal.

A few days afterward the jangada passed the village of the same name, which, although built on the ground flooded for many months in the year, has become, since 1845, an important town of a hundred houses. Throughout these districts, which are frequented by Tapuyas, the Indians of the Lower Amazon become more and more commingled with the white population, and promise to be completely absorbed by them.

And still the jangada continued its journey down the river. Here, at the risk of entanglement, it grazed the branches of the mangliers, whose roots stretched down into the waters like the claws of gigantic crustaceans; then the smooth trunks of the paletuviers, with their pale-green foliage, served as the resting-places for the long poles of the crew as they kept the raft in the strength of the current.

Then came the Tocantins, whose waters, due to the different rivers of the province of Goyaz, mingle with those of the Amazon by an *embouchure* of great size, then the Moju, then the town of Santa Ana.

Majestically the panorama of both banks moved along without a pause, as though some ingenious mechanism necessitated its unrolling in the opposite direction to that of the stream.

Already numerous vessels descending the river, ubas, egariteas, vigilandas, pirogues of all builds, and small coasters from the lower districts of the Amazon and the Atlantic seaboard, formed a procession with the giant raft, and seemed like sloops beside some might man-of-war.

At length there appeared on the left Santa Maria de Belem do Para — the “town” as they call it in that country — with its picturesque lines of white houses at many different levels, its convents nestled among the palm-trees, the steeples of its cathedral and of Nostra Senora de Merced, and the flotilla of its brigantines, brigs, and barks, which form its commercial communications with the old world.

The hearts of the passengers of the giant raft beat high. At length they were coming to the end of the voyage which they had thought they would never reach. While the arrest of Joam detained them at Manaos, halfway on their journey, could they ever have hoped to see the capital of the province of Para?

It was in the course of this day, the 15th of October — four months and a half after leaving the fazenda of Iquitos — that, as they rounded a sharp bend in the river, Belem came into sight.

The arrival of the jangada had been signaled for some days. The whole town knew the story of Joam Dacosta. They came forth to welcome him, and to him and his people accorded a most sympathetic reception.

Hundreds of craft of all sorts conveyed them to the fazender, and soon the jangada was invaded by all those who wished to welcome the return of their compatriot after his long exile. Thousands of sight-seers — or more correctly speaking, thousands of friends crowded on to the floating village as soon as it came to its moorings, and it was vast and solid enough to support the entire population. Among those who hurried on board one of the first pirogues had brought Madame Valdez. Manoel’s mother was at last able to clasp to her arms the daughter whom her son had chosen. If the good lady had not been able to come to Iquitos, was it not as though a portion of the fazenda, with her new family, had come down the Amazon to her?

Before evening the pilot Araujo had securely moored the raft at the entrance of a creek behind the arsenal. That was to be its last resting-place, its last halt, after its voyage of eight hundred leagues on the great Brazilian artery.

There the huts of the Indians, the cottage of the negroes, the store-rooms which held the valuable cargo, would be gradually demolished; there the principal dwelling, nestled beneath its verdant tapestry of flowers and foliage, and the little chapel whose humble bell was then replying to the sounding clangor from the steeples of Belem, would each in its turn disappear.

But, ere this was done, a ceremony had to take place on the jangada — the marriage of Manoel and Minha, the marriage of Lina and Fragoso. To Father Passanha fell the duty of celebrating the double union which promised so happily. In that little chapel the two couples were to receive the nuptial benediction from his hands.

If it happened to be so small as to be only capable of holding the members of Dacosta’s family, was not the giant raft large enough to receive all those who wished to assist at the ceremony? and if not, and the crowd became so great, did not the ledges of the river banks afford sufficient room for as many others of the sympathizing crowd as were desirous of welcoming him whom so signal a reparation had made the hero of the day?

It was on the morrow, the 16th of October, that with great pomp the marriages were celebrated.

It was a magnificent day, and from about ten o’clock in the morning the raft began to receive its crowd of guests. On the bank could be seen almost the entire population of Belem in holiday costume. On the river, vessels of all sorts crammed with visitors gathered round the enormous mass of timber, and the waters of the Amazon literally disappeared even up to the left bank beneath the vast flotilla.

When the chapel bell rang out its opening note it seemed like a signal of joy to ear and eye. In an instant the churches of Belem replied to the bell of the jangada. The vessels in the port decked themselves with flags up to their mastheads, and the Brazilian colors were saluted by the many other national flags. Discharges of musketry reverberated on all sides, and it was only with difficulty that their joyous detonations could cope with the loud hurrahs from the assembled thousands.

The Dacosta family came forth from their house and moved through the crowd toward the little chapel. Joam was received with absolutely frantic applause. He gave his arm to Madame Valdez; Yaquita was escorted by the governor of Belem, who, accompanied by the friends of the young army surgeon, had expressed a wish to honor the ceremony with his presence. Manoel walked by the side of Minha, who looked most fascinating in her bride’s costume, and then came Fragoso, holding the hand of Lina, who seemed quite radiant with joy. Then followed Benito, then old Cybele and the servants of the worthy family between the double ranks of the crew of the jangada.

Padre Passanha awaited the two couples at the entrance of the chapel. The ceremony was very simple, and the same bands which had formerly blessed Joam and Yaquita were again stretched forth to give the nuptial benediction to their child.

So much happiness was not likely to be interrupted by the sorrow of long separation. In fact, Manoel Valdez almost immediately sent in his resignation, so as to join the family at Iquitos, where he is still following the profession of a country doctor.

Naturally the Fragosos did not hesitate to go back with those who were to them friends rather than masters.

Madame Valdez had no desire to separate so happy a group, but she insisted on one thing, and that was that they should often come and see her at Belem. Nothing could be easier. Was not the mighty river a bond of communication between Belem and Iquitos? In a few days the first mail steamer was to begin a regular and rapid service, and it would then only take a week to ascend the Amazon, on which it had taken the giant raft so many months to drift. The important commercial negotiations, ably managed by Benito, were carried through under the best of conditions, and soon of what had formed this jangada — that is to say, the huge raft of timber constructed from an entire forest at Iquitos — there remained not a trace.

A month afterward the fazender, his wife, his son, Manoel and Minha Valdez, Lina and Fragoso, departed by one of the Amazon steamers for the immense establishment at Iquitos of which Benito was to take the management.

Joam Dacosta re-entered his home with his head erect, and it was indeed a family of happy hearts which he brought back with him from beyond the Brazilian frontier. As for Fragoso, twenty times a day was he heard to repeat, "What! without the liana?" and he wound up by bestowing the name on the young mulatto who, by her affection for the gallant fellow, fully justified its appropriateness. "If it were not for the one letter," he said, "would not Lina and Liana be the same?"

THE GREEN RAY

Translated by M. de Hauteville

Published in 1882, this novel is named after the optical phenomena that occur shortly after sunset or before sunrise, when a green spot is visible above the sun. The novel's protagonists are trying to observe the green ray in Scotland. After numerous unsuccessful tries caused by clouds or distant boat sails hiding the sun, the phenomenon is eventually visible, but the heroes, finding love in each other's eyes, don't pay attention to the horizon.

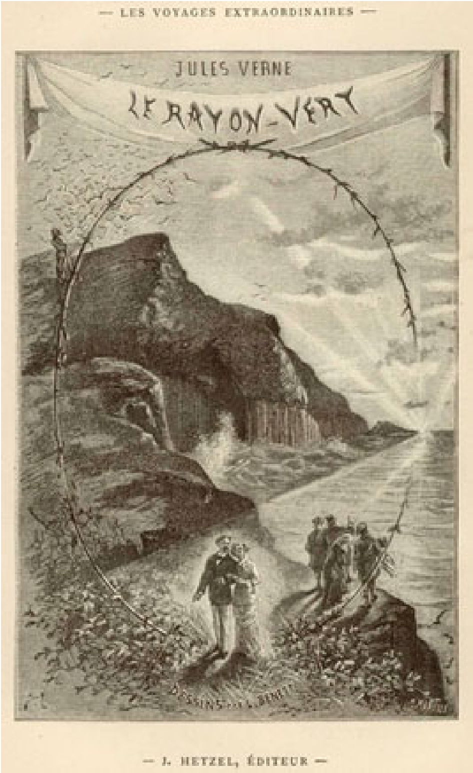
— LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES —
JULES VERNE
LE RAYON-VERT
DESSINS DE L. BENETT
— J. HETZEL, ÉDITEUR —

An original illustration

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FOR HELENA’S SAKE.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TEMPEST IN A CAVERN.

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CHAPTER I.

THE BROTHERS SAM AND SIB.

“Betty!”

“Bess!”

“Betsey!”

One after another these names re-echoed through the hall of Helensburgh; it was the way the brothers Sam and Sib had of summoning their housekeeper.

But just now these diminutives had no more power of bringing forth the worthy dame than if her masters had bestowed on her her rightful title.

It was Partridge the factor, who, with his hat in his hand, made his appearance at the hall-door.

Addressing the two goodnatured-looking gentlemen seated in the embrasure of a bow-window in the front of the house, he said, —

“You were calling Dame Bess, masters, but she is not in the house.”

“Where is she, then, Partridge?”

“She has gone out with Miss Campbell for a walk in the park.”

Then, at a sign from his masters. Partridge gravely retired.

These gentlemen were the brothers Sam and Sib — christened Samuel and Sebastian — Miss Campbell’s uncles, Scotchmen of the old school, and of an ancient Highland clan; they reckoned a hundred and twelve years between them, with only fifteen months' difference in age, Sam the elder, and Sib the younger.

To give a slight sketch of these paragons of honour, benevolence, and unselfishness, it need but be said that their whole lives had been consecrated to their niece. Her mother, their only sister, was left a widow a year after her marriage, and survived her husband a very short time. Sam and Sib were thus left sole guardians of the little orphan, who very soon became the one object of their thoughts and mutual affection.

For her sake they remained celibates, being of that number of estimable persons whose earthly career is one long course of self-denial. And does it not say much for them when the elder brother constituted himself father, and the younger one mother to the child, so that it came quite naturally to Helena to address them with, —

“Good morning, Papa Sam. How are you, Mamma Sib?”

And to whom can they better be compared, though not business-men, than to those two charitable merchants, so generous, united, and affectionate, the brothers Cheeryble, of London, the most worthy characters that ever emanated from the imagination of Dickens? It seems impossible to find a more exact likeness, and should the author be accused of borrowing their type from that *chef-d'œuvre* “Nicholas Nickleby,” no one can for a moment regret such an appropriation.

Sam and Sib Melville were united by their sister's marriage to the ancient family of Campbell.

They had been to the same college and sat in the same class, thus their ideas of things in general were much alike, and they expressed them in almost identical terms; the one could always finish the other’s sentence with similar expressions and gestures. In short, these two beings might have been one, save for some slight difference in their physical constitutions; Sam was a little taller than Sib, and Sib a little stouter than Sam. They might easily have exchanged their grey hair without altering the character of their honest faces, stamped with the nobility of the descendants of the clan Melville.

Need it be added that in the cut of their clothes and the choice of the cloth their tastes were alike, except that — how can this slight difference be accounted for? — except that Sam seemed to prefer dark blue and Sib dark maroon.

In truth, who would not have been glad to know these two worthy gentlemen? Accustomed to tread the same path through life, most probably they would not be far apart when the final halt should come. These last pillars of the house of Melville were solid, and might for a long while yet support the old edifice of their race, which dated back as far as the fourteenth century — from the time of Robert Bruce and Wallace, that heroic period during which Scotland disputed her right of independence with England.

But because Sam and Sib Melville had no longer occasion to fight for the welfare of their country, because their lives were passed in the ease and affluence which fortune had bestowed upon them, they are not to be reproached with it, nor must it be thought that they had degenerated, for their benevolence alone carried out the generous traditions of their ancestors.

Now each of them enjoying good health, and without a single irregularity in their lives to reproach themselves with, were destined to become aged without growing old either in body or mind.

Perhaps they had one failing — who can boast of being perfect? This was a habit of embellishing their conversation with quotations borrowed from the celebrated master of Abbotsford, and more especially from the epic poems of Ossian, which they doted upon. But who could blame them for it in this land of Walter Scott and Fingal?

To put a finishing-stroke to the sketch, it must be remarked that they were great snuff-takers. Now every one knows that the sign of a tobacconist's shop all over the United Kingdom is more often than not a valiant Scotchman with a snuff-box in his hand, parading himself in his national costume. Very well, then, the brothers Melville might advantageously have figured as these signs, posted up over the shop windows. They took as much snuff, if not more than any one living north or south of the Tweed. But now for a characteristic detail, they had but one snuff-box between them — and an enormous one it was! This portable piece of furniture was continually being passed from one brother's pocket to the other's; it was a kind of link between them. As a matter of course, they both felt a desire to inhale the excellent narcotic powder at the same moment, were it ten times an hour. When one drew the snuff-box from the depths of his pocket, they were both ready for a good pinch; and if they sneezed, they did not forget the customary "God bless you!"

In short, these brothers were mere children in all that concerned the realities of life; knowing little enough of the practical things of this world, and of business affairs, either commercial or financial, absolutely nothing, nor did they make any pretence to such knowledge; in politics they were perhaps Jacobites at heart, still retaining some of the old prejudice against the reigning house of Hanover, dreaming perhaps of the last of the Stuarts, as a

Frenchman might of the last of the Valois; in matters of sentiment they were still less learned.

The brothers had but one object in life, and that was to divine their niece’s thoughts and wishes, to direct them aright, if necessary, and to develop them; finally, to marry her to an excellent young man of their choice, who could not do otherwise than make her happy.

So they thought — or rather to hear them speak, one might have supposed that they had found the very man on whom must devolve this agreeable duty.

“So Helena has gone out, Sib?”

“Yes, but it is just five o’clock, and it will not be long before she is home.”

“And when she comes in — ”

“I think, Sam, it would be as well to have a serious talk with her.”

“In a few weeks the child will be eighteen.”

“The same age as Diana Vernon, Sam, Is she not just as charming as that adorable heroine of ‘Rob Roy’?”

“Yes, with her attractive ways — ”

“Her bright intellect — ”

“The originality of her ideas — ”

“She reminds one more of Diana Vernon than of Flora MacIvor, the grand and stately heroine of ‘Waverley’!”

The brothers, proud of their national author, mentioned the names of several other heroines from the “Antiquary,” “Guy Mannering,” “The Fair Maid of Perth,” &c. but all to their thinking must yield the palm to Miss Campbell.

“It is a young rose-tree which has bloomed rather early, brother Sib, and which needs but — ”

“A support. Now, I am tired of saying that the best support must be — ”

“Must be a husband, decidedly; for he, like the prop, takes root in the same soil — ”

“And naturally grows with the rose-tree which he protects.”

Between them the brothers had borrowed this metaphor from the “Complete Gardener.” Undoubtedly they were satisfied with it, for it brought a contented smile on each honest face. Sib opened the mutual snuff-box; daintily put in his fingers and then passed it to his brother, who, after taking a large pinch, deposited it in his pocket.

“So we are quite agreed, Sam.”

“As usual, Sib.”

“Even to the choice of the gardener?”

“How could any one be found more sympathetic, or likely to suit Helena, than this young *savant* who on several occasions has evinced sentiments so honourable — ”

“And so sincere on his part — ”

“It would be; difficult indeed, He is well educated, a graduate of the universities of Oxford and Edinburgh — ”

“A physicist like Tyndall — ”

“A chemist like Faraday — ”

“Thoroughly conversant in every subject — ”

“And no matter what question you put to him, never at a loss for an answer — ”

“Descended from ah excellent Fifeshire family, and, besides, heir to an ample fortune — ”

“Without taking into account his very agreeable personal appearance, at least to my thinking, even with his aluminium spectacles!”

Had the spectacles been of steel, nickel, or even of gold, the brothers would never have regarded them as a latent defect. ‘Tis true these optical appendages suit young *savants* and give an air of discretion highly appropriate.

But was this graduate of the above-mentioned universities, this physicist and chemist, agreeable to Miss Campbell? If Miss Campbell were indeed like Diana Vernon, Diana Vernon, one knows, had no feelings beyond a very reserved friendship for her learned cousin Rashleigh, and never married him to the end of the story.

Good! but that need not make the brothers uneasy, and they brought all the experience of two old bachelors to bear upon the subject.

“They have met already once or twice, Sib, and our young friend did not seem insensible to Helena’s beauty.”

“I should think not, indeed! If the divine Ossian had to celebrate her virtues, beauty, and grace, he would have called her Moina, that is to say, beloved of all — ”

“Unless he had named her Fiona, Sib, the incomparable beauty of the Gaelic epoch!”

“Did he not picture our Helena when he wrote: —

“‘She left the hall of her secret sigh! She came in all her beauty, like the moon from the cloud of the east — ’”

“‘Loveliness was around her as light. Her steps were the music of songs.’”

Happily, the brothers here ended their quotations, and fell from the somewhat misty regions of the poets into the realms of reality.

“Surely,” said the one, “if Helena pleases our young *savant*, he cannot fail to please — ”

“And if, on her part, Sam, she has not given as much attention as is due to the great qualities with which he is so liberally endowed by nature — ”

“It is simply because we haye not yet told her it is time to think of getting married.”

“But when once we have turned her thoughts that way, whilst admitting that she may have some objection, if not to the husband, at least to matrimony — ”

“She will not be long in giving her consent, Sam — ”

“Like the excellent Benedick, who, after resisting for a long while — ”

“Ended, at the conclusion of ‘Much Ado about Nothing,’ by marrying Beatrice.”

This was how Miss Campbell’s uncles arranged affairs, and the *dénouement* of their plan seemed to them as simple as that of Shakspere’s comedy.

They rose with one accord, smiled knowingly at each other, and gleefully rubbed their hands. This marriage was a settled affair! What difficulty could arise? The young man had as good as asked their consent, the young girl would give her reply, as to which they need not trouble themselves for a moment. Everything was most desirable, and only the day remained to be fixed.

Indeed it should be a fine ceremony; it should take place at Glasgow, certainly not in the cathedral of St. Mungo, the only church in Scotland, except that of St. Magnus, that had been respected at the time of the Reformation. No! it was too large, and consequently too gloomy for a wedding which, according to the brothers’ ideas, should be a brilliant display of youth, a beam of love! They would rather choose St. Andrew’s, or St. Enoch’s, or even St. George’s, in the best part of the city.

The brothers went on developing their plans rather in the form of a monologue than a dialogue, for it was always the same train of ideas, expressed in the same way. As they talked they had before them a view of the beautiful trees in the park, where Miss Campbell was now walking, and the grassy slopes through which wound a bright stream, while overhead the sky was shrouded with a slight mist, which seems peculiar to the Highlands of Scotland. They did not look at each other, there was no need for it; but from time to time they grasped each other’s hands, as though to keep up a communication of thought by means of some magnetic current.

Yes! it should be magnificent! They would do the thing handsomely. The poor of West George Street, if there were any — — and where are they not to be found? — should not be forgotten on this joyful occasion. If by chance Miss Campbell should wish that it might take place very quietly, and insisted on her uncles listening to her, they would know how to be firm with her for the first time in their lives; they would not yield on this point, nor any other. The guests at the bridal feast should quaff wine to their hearts’ content, but with all due ceremony; and Sam’s hand was held out simultaneously with Sib’s, as though they were already exchanging the famous Scotch toast.

At this moment the hall-door was opened, and a young girl, with cheeks glowing with health after her rapid walk, appeared. In her hand she held a newspaper, and going up to the brothers, she honoured them with two kisses each.

“Good-morning Uncle Sam,” said she.

“Good-morning, dear child.”

“And how is Uncle Sib?”

“Wonderfully well, thank you, my dear.”

“Helena,” said Sam, “we have a little arrangement to make with you.”

“An arrangement! what arrangement? What have you two uncles been plotting together?” asked Miss Campbell, as she looked roguishly from one to the other.

“You know that young gentleman, Mr. Aristobulus Ursiclos?”

“Yes, I know him,”

“Do you like him?”

“Why should I not like him, uncle?”

“Well, after mature consideration, brother and I think of proposing him to you as a husband.”

“I marry? I!” exclaimed Miss Campbell, and her pretty lips parted with the most musical laughter that had ever resounded through the great hall.

“Do you not want to be married?” asked her Uncle Sam.

“Why should I?”

“Never?” inquired Sib.

“Never!” replied Miss Campbell, assuming a serious air, which her smiling lips quite contradicted. “Never, uncles — at least, not till I have seen — ”

“Seen what?” cried the brothers.

“Until I have seen the Green Ray.”

CHAPTER II.

HELENA CAMPBELL.

The house occupied by the uncles and their niece was situated three miles from the little hamlet of Helensburgh, on the banks of Gare Loch, one of the most picturesque lakes which capriciously indent the right bank of the Clyde.

During the winter they lived in Glasgow, at an old mansion in West George Street, in the most aristocratic part of the new town, not far from Blythswood Square. There they stayed for six months in the year, unless some whim of Helena’s, to which they yielded without a murmur, took them off for a visit to Italy, Spain, or France. In the course of these travels they saw everything from their niece’s point of view, going where she liked, stopping where it pleased her to stop, and admiring nothing but what she admired. Then, when Miss Campbell closed the book in which she jotted down her impressions of the journey, they quietly returned to Scotland, and very willingly resumed their comfortable quarters in West George Street.

About the third week in May the brothers generally experienced a great desire to be back in the country, and this happened just as Helena showed the same inclination to leave the noise of Glasgow, and fly from the hubbub of business, which sometimes inundated even the neighbourhood of Blythswood Square, to breathe a purer atmosphere than that of the commercial city.

Thus the whole household, masters and servants, set out for the country house about twenty miles distant.

The village of Helensburgh is a pretty little place, and has become a much frequented bathing-resort by those who are at leisure to vary excursions up the Clyde with tours to Loch Katrine and Loch Lomond.

The brothers had chosen the best place possible for their house, about a mile from the shores of Gare Loch, surrounded by magnificent trees, near a stream, and standing on undulating ground which had all the appearance of a private park. Cool, shady retreats, grassy slopes; clumps of trees, flower-beds, pastures kept especially for sheep, silvery lakes adorned with swans, those graceful birds of whom Wordsworth writes, —

“The swan floats double — swan and shadow.”

Finally, everything that nature could unite to gladden the eyes without betraying the handiwork of man. Such was the summer residence of this wealthy family.

It may be added that from one part of the park, lying above Gare Loch, the view is charming. Beyond the narrow gulf on the right the eye rests on the peninsula of Roseneath, on which stands a pretty Italian villa, belonging to the Duke of Argyll; to the left lies the little hamlet of Helensburgh, with its undulating line of houses along the coast, and here and there the spire of a church; its elegant pier running out into the waters of the lake for the service of steamers, and its background of hills enlivened with picturesque villas. Facing you on the left bank of the Clyde, Port Glasgow, the ruins of Newark Castle, Greenock and its forest of masts, decorated with many-coloured flags, form a very varied panorama, from which it is difficult to turn away.

From the top of the principal tower of the house, the view was more beautiful still, with a glimpse of two horizons.

The square tower, with pepper-boxes standing out airily from three angles of its summit, ornamented with battlements, and its parapet girt with stone lace-work, rose still higher at its fourth angle in an octagonal turret, with an inevitable flag-staff. This keep of modern construction thus overlooked the whole of the building proper with its irregular roofing, its windows capriciously placed here and there, and its numerous gables and chimneys.

Now it was on this highest platform of the turret, beneath the national colours floating in the breeze, that Miss Campbell loved to sit and dream for whole hours together. She had made it a cosy little place of refuge, where she could read, write, or sleep at any time, sheltered from the sun, wind, and rain. Here she was most often to be found; and if not here, she was wandering through the park, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied by Dame Bess, unless she were riding her favourite little horse over the neighbouring country, followed by the faithful Partridge, who had to urge on his steed in order to keep up with his young mistress.

Among the numerous domestics, we must single out these two honest servants, who, from their childhood, had been attached to the Campbell family.

Elizabeth, the “Luckie,” as they call a housekeeper in the Highlands, could count as many years as she had keys on her bunch, and they were no less than forty-seven. She was a thorough manager: serious, orderly, skilful, superintending the whole household. Perhaps she imagined that she had reared the two brothers, although they were older than herself, but most certainly she had bestowed maternal care on Miss Campbell.

Next to this valuable stewardess figured Partridge, a servant entirely devoted to his masters, always faithful to the time-honoured customs of his clan, and invariably dressed in Highland costume.

With an Elizabeth to manage the household and a Partridge to look after it, what more could be wanted to ensure domestic felicity?

It has doubtless been remarked that when Partridge answered the brothers' call he had spoken of their niece as Miss Campbell.

Had the Scotchman given her her baptismal name, and called her Miss Helena, he would have committed an infraction of Highland etiquette; never indeed is the eldest or the only daughter of good family called by her Christian name. If Miss Campbell had been the daughter of a peer, she would have been called Lady Helena. Now this branch of the Campbells to which she belonged was only collateral and but distantly connected with the direct branch of the Campbells whose origin goes back to the Crusades. For many centuries branches from the old tree had been separated from the direct line of the glorious ancestor now represented by the clans of Argyll and Breadalbane; but however distant the connexion might be, Helena, on her father's side, had some of the blood of this illustrious family in her veins.

Still, though she was but Miss Campbell, she was a true Scotchwoman, one of those noble daughters of Thulé, with blue eyes and fair hair, whose portrait, engraved by Finden or Edwards, and placed among the Minnas, Brendas, Amy Robsarts, Flora Maclvors, Diana Vernons, would have held its own in those "keepsakes" in which the English used to gather the feminine beauty of this great novelist.

Miss Campbell was indeed very charming, with her pretty face, blue eyes, blue as her native lakes, her elegant figure, and somewhat haughty demeanour, her dreamy expression, except when a gleam of humour animated her features, her whole person, in fact, so graceful and *distingué*.

Helena was good as well as beautiful. Heiress to her uncles' wealth, she was not vain of riches, but by her charity endeavoured to verify the old Gaelic proverb, "May the hand which opens freely be always full!"

Attached above everything to her country, her clan, and her family, she was a true Scotchwoman, heart and soul, and would have given the preference to the most consummate Sawney over the most imposing of John Bulls. Her patriotic being thrilled like the strings of a harp when the voice of a mountaineer, singing some Highland pibroch, reached her across the country.

De Maistre has said, "There are in me two beings: myself and another."

The "myself" of Miss Campbell was a serious, reflecting being, looking upon life from the point of view of its duties rather than its rights.

The "other" was a romantic being, somewhat prone to superstition, fond of the marvellous tales which spring up so naturally in the land of Fingal; following the example of the Lindamiras, those adorable heroines of chivalrous romance, she would visit the neighbouring glens to listen to the "bagpipes of Strathearne," as the Highlanders call the wind when it whistles through the lonely alleys.

The brothers loved Miss Campbell's two personalities equally well, but it must be confessed that if the first charmed them by her good sense, the second occasionally embarrassed them with her unexpected remarks, her capricious flights of imagination, and her sudden excursions into dream-land.

Had she not just now given them a most singular answer?

“I marry?” had said the one being. “Marry Mr. Ursiclos? We shall see about that; we will talk about it another time.”

“Never! until I have seen the Green Ray!” the other had replied.

The brothers looked at each other, without being able to understand, whilst Miss Campbell installed herself in a large Gothic armchair in the recess of the window.

“What does she mean by the Green Ray?” asked Sam.

“And why does she want to see this ray?” said Sib.

Why? We are about to hear.

CHAPTER III.

THE ARTICLE IN THE “MORNING POST.”

Lovers of physical curiosities might have read in that day’s *Morning Post*:—

“Have you sometimes observed the sun set over the sea? Have you watched it till the upper rim of its disk, skimming the surface of the water, is just about to disappear? Very likely you have; but did you notice the phenomenon which occurs at the very instant the heavenly body sends forth its last ray, which, if the sky be cloudless, is of unparalleled purity? No, perhaps not. Well, the first time you have the opportunity, and it happens but rarely, of making this observation, it will not be, as one might think, a crimson ray which falls upon the retina of the eye, it will be ‘green,’ but a most wonderful green, a green which no artist could ever obtain on his palette, a green which neither the varied tints of vegetation nor the shades of the most limpid sea could ever produce the like! If there be green in Paradise, it cannot but be of this shade, which most surely is the true green of Hope!”

So ran the article in the *Morning Post*, the newspaper which Miss Campbell held in her hand when she entered the hall. This paragraph had simply bewitched her, and with great excitement she read to her uncles these few hurried lines, which sang the praises of the Green Ray in a somewhat lyric form.

But what Miss Campbell did not tell them was that this Green Ray tallied with an ancient legend, which till now she had never been able to understand. It was one among the numerous inexplicable legends of the Highlands, which avers that this ray has the virtue of making him who has seen it impossible to be deceived in matters of sentiment; at its apparition all deceit and falsehood are done away, and he who has been fortunate enough once to behold it is enabled to see closely into his own heart and read the thoughts of others.

A young Scotchwoman of the Highlands must be pardoned for a romantic credulity which this article in the *Morning Post* had just revived.

Sam and Sib looked at each other with blank astonishment, as Miss Campbell read. They had lived till now without seeing the Green Ray, and imagined it was quite possible to exist without ever doing so. However, it seemed that this was not Helena's opinion, who intended to make the most important action of her life subordinate to the observation of this unique phenomenon.

"Ah! and is that what is meant by the Green Ray?" said her uncle Sam, gently nodding his head.

"Yes," replied Miss Campbell.

"And do you really want to see it?" said Sib.

"I will see it with your permission, uncles, and as soon as possible, with all due deference to you."

"And then when you have seen it — ?"

"When I have seen it, we can talk of Mr. Aristobulus Ursiclos."

The brothers exchanged a knowing glance.

"Then let us go and see this Green Ray," said one.

“Without losing a moment!” added the other.

Miss Campbell stopped them just as they were about to open the hall window.

“We must wait till the sun sets,” said she.

“This evening then — ” said Sam,

“Should the sun set on a clear horizon,” added Miss Campbell.

“Very well, after dinner we will all three go to Roseneath Point — ” said Sib.

“Or else we might simply go on to the tower,” added Sam.

“We can only see the coast of the Clyde from Roseneath Point, or from the tower,” replied Miss Campbell; “and, remember, we must see the sun set on the sea-line, so take my advice, uncles, and let me see that horizon as quickly as possible.”

Miss Campbell spoke so seriously, and smiled at them so prettily, that the brothers could not refuse a proposition made in such terms.

“Perhaps there is no immediate hurry — ?” Sam, however, thought fit to observe.

And Sib came to his assistance, adding, —

“We have plenty of time — ”

Miss Campbell shook her head prettily.

“There is not plenty of time,” she replied, “and this, on the contrary, is most urgent.”

“On account of Mr. Aristobulus Ursiclos — ” said Sam.

“Whose happiness, it seems, depends upon your seeing the Green Ray, and — ” continued Sib.

“No, simply because we are already in the month of August, and it will not be long before our Scotch skies are hidden by fogs! We must take advantage of the fine evenings still left us! When shall we go?”

It was very certain Miss Campbell was determined to see the Green Ray that year, and there was no time to be lost. What they had to do was to go at once to some place on the Scotch coast facing the west, to settle down there as comfortably as possible, to see the sun set every evening and to watch for its last ray, without a day’s delay. Perhaps then by some happy chance Miss Campbell would have her whim gratified, should the sky favour the observation, which is a rare occurrence — as the *Morning Post* justly remarked.

And this well-informed journal was quite right.

First of all they must choose some place on the western coast, where the phenomenon would be likely to be visible. Now to find that, they would be obliged to go beyond the Frith of Clyde.

In fact, the whole expanse of the Frith is full of obstacles, which limit the range of view. These are the Kyles of Bute, the peninsulas of Knapdale and Kintyre, the isles of Arran, Jura, Islay, and a number of rocky islets, which form a kind of archipelago all along the western coast of Argyleshire. It would be impossible to get a glimpse here of the sea-horizon, where one might observe the sunset.

So that if they did not wish to leave Scotland, they must go further north or further south to an open coast, and that before autumn set in.

It mattered very little to Miss Campbell where they went, were it to the coast of Ireland, France, Norway, Spain, or Portugal; she would go to any place wherever the last ray of the setting sun could be seen, and whether it were convenient to the brothers or not, they would be obliged to follow her.

Both uncles were eager to offer their opinions after having exchanged a shrewd glance.

“Well, dear Helena,” said Sam, “nothing can be easier than to satisfy you; let us go to Oban.”

“It is very certain no place could be better than Oban,” added Sib.

“Oban, let it be,” replied Miss Campbell; “but is there a clear sea-horizon at Oban?”

“If there is one anywhere!” said Sam.

“More likely two than one,” exclaimed Sib.

“Well, then, let us go!”

“In three days’ time,” said one uncle.

“In two,” said the other, who thought it wise to make this prudent concession.

“No, to-morrow,” insisted Miss Campbell, rising from her seat just as the dinner-bell rang.

“To-morrow. Yes. It shall be to-morrow!” assented Sam.

“We only wish we were there now!” put in Sib.

Pages 38-39 missing from scans. Following paragraphs are translated by the contributor.

They spoke the truth, but wherefore this haste? Precisely because Aristobulus Ursiclos happened to be staying at Oban, and without being aware of this fact, Miss Campbell would be brought in contact with this young man, chosen from among the scholars, and, of what the Melville brothers had little doubt, among the most tedious.

That is how, thought the two scheming characters, Miss Campbell, after becoming fatigued observing the sunsets in vain, would give up the fantasy and finally place her hand in the hand of her fiancee. Moreover, had Helena suspected it, she would still have left. The presence of Aristobulus Ursiclos was not to obstruct her.

“Betty!”

“Bess!”

“Betsey!”

The series of names resounded again in the hall, but this time Dame Bess appeared and accepted the order to be ready, the following day, for an immediate departure.

It was indeed necessary to hasten. The barometer, which was above thirty and three-tenth inches (769 mm), promised some duration of good weather. By leaving the next morning, one could hope to arrive in Oban at a good hour, to observe the setting of the sun.

Naturally, during this day, Dame Bess and Partridge were occupied preparing for departure. The housekeeper’s forty-seven keys clicked in the pocket of her skirt, like the bells of a Spanish mule. What cupboards and drawers had to be opened, and especially closed! Perhaps the Helensburgh cottage would remain empty for a long time? Didn’t one have to take into account the whims of Miss Campbell? And if it pleased this charming person to run after her Green Ray? And if this Green Ray put on some coquettery to be hidden? And if the horizons of Oban did not offer all the clarity necessary for this kind of observation? And if it were necessary to seek another astronomical post on the southermost coast of Scotland, England, or Ireland, or even of the continent! They would leave the following day, it was agreed, but when would they return to the cottage? In a month, in six, in a year, in ten years?

“And why this idea to see the Green Ray?” asked Dame Bess, which Partridge helped to sound better.

“I do not know,” replied Partridge, “but it must have its importance, and our young mistress does not do anything without reason, as you know, mavourneen.”

Mavourneen is an expression which is used readily in Scotland, — -something like *ma chère* in France, and it did not displease the excellent housekeeper to be called this name by the honest Scotch.

“Partridge,” she replied, “I believe like you that this fantasy of Miss Campbell, which one hardly suspected, could hide some secret thought as well.”

“Which is?”

“Eh! who knows? if not a refusal, at least an end to her uncles’ projects.”

“In truth,” said Partridge, I do not know why the Melvilles are so much enticed by this Mr. Ursiclos! Is that the husband for our lady?

“It is certain, Partridge,” replied Dame Bess, “that if he does not entirely satisfy her, she will never marry him. She will say something pretty to her uncles, and give them a kiss, and they will be quite surprised that they ever thought of this suitor for a moment. For my own part, I think very little of him.”

End of missing pages and translation by contributor.

“No more than I do, honey.”

“Look here. Partridge, Miss Campbell’s heart is like this drawer, safely locked, and she only has the key, which she must give up before it can be opened.”

“Unless they take it from her!” added Partridge, with an approving smile.

“They will never take it from her, unless she likes,” replied Bess; “and may the wind carry my cap to the top of St. Mungo’s steeple, if ever our young mistress marries this Mr. Ursiclos!”

“A Southron!” cried Partridge, “who, though he was born in Scotland, has always lived the other side of the Tweed!”

Dame Bess shook her head. These two Highlanders understood each other well. They would hardly allow that the Lowlands were part of old Caledonia. Decidedly they were not in favour of this projected marriage; they hoped Miss Campbell would do better. It might be very suitable; but that did not seem enough to please them.

“After all, Partridge,” continued Dame Bess, “the customs of the old clans were the best, and it’s my belief that marriages were happier then than they are now-a-days.”

“You never said a truer word in your life, my dear,” gravely replied Partridge; “they thought more of the heart, and not so much of the purse in those days. Money, of course, is all very well, but affection is better!”

“Yes, Partridge, and they were careful above everything to know each other well before they married! Do you remember what used to take place at St. Olla’s fair at Kirkwall? All the time it lasted, from the beginning of August, the young people coupled off; and these couples were called “brother and sister of the first of August.” Brother and sister! Now wasn’t that a good way of preparing them for becoming husband and wife? And, upon my word, this is the very day the fair used to open! God grant the old custom may be revived.”

“And so say I!” replied Partridge. “If the masters had only met with some nice young ladies in that way, they would never have escaped matrimony, and Miss Campbell would now have two aunts to look after her.”

“I quite agree with you, Partridge” said Dame Bess; “but if you could couple off Miss Campbell with Mr. Ursiclos to-day, I’ll warrant that in a week’s time you would not find them together.”

Without dwelling upon the inconveniences which might arise from this familiarity, authorized by the ancient customs of Kirkwall, which have now died out, it must be acknowledged that Dame Bess was perhaps right in her statements. However, Miss Campbell and Arsitobulus Ursiclos were not brother and sister of the first of August, and if their marriage ever took place, they would have no chance of knowing each other as they might have done, had they gone through the test of St. Olla’s fair!

Be this as it may, fairs are now held for business and not for match-making. So we must leave Dame Bess and Partridge to their regrets, who lost not a moment while they talked.

The departure was decided on, and the place of resort chosen. The brothers and Miss Campbell would figure the next day under the heading of “Departures and Arrivals” in the fashionable papers, as having left for Oban. But which route were they to take? This matter had now to be arranged.

There are two different ways of going to this little town, which is some distance north-west of Glasgow.

The first is by road. One goes to Bowling, then past Dumbarton, and, skirting Loch Leven, touches at Balloch, the extreme end of Loch Lomond; crossing this most beautiful of the Scotch lakes, with its thirty isles lying between those historic shores, teeming with memories of MacGregor, MacFarlane, Rob Roy, and Robert Bruce, Dalmally is reached; from thence, following a road which winds round, and very often half way up the mountain side, overhanging torrents and fords, across the first range of the Grampian Hills, through undulating glens of heather, diversified with firs, oaks, larches, and birches, the wondering tourist at last finds himself at Oban, where the coast is as picturesque as any along the shores of the Atlantic.

It is a charming excursion which every traveller in Scotland has made, or ought to make; but as for sea-horizon, along this route, there is none; so when the uncles proposed going this way to Miss Campbell, they met with very little success.

The second route is both by river and sea. To descend the Clyde as far as the gulf to which it gives its name, and sail between the islands and islets which make that curious archipelago look like ah enormous skeleton hand spread over part of the ocean, then to reascend the right of this hand as far as Oban, was the one which tempted Miss Campbell most, for whom the beautiful country round Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine had no longer any charms. Besides, through the spaces between the islands, in the distance, there must be glimpses of the sea-horizon. Now, when the sun was setting during the last hour of the journey, if the horizon were not hidden by fog, might it not be possible to see this Green Ray, which lasted scarcely the fiftieth part of a minute?

“You understand, uncles,” said Miss Campbell, “it is for but one moment! So if I see what I want, the journey is at end, and we need not go on to Oban.”

This was precisely what the brothers had not bargained for; they had made up their minds to stay some time at Oban, the reason of which we know, and they had no intention of disarranging their plans through a too speedy apparition of the phenomenon.

Nevertheless, as Miss Campbell invariably had her own way, and as she wished to go by the sea route, that way was chosen in preference to the other.

“I wish the Green Ray at Jericho!” said Sam, when Helena had left the room.

“And all who conceived the idea with it,” added Sib.

CHAPTER IV.

DOWN THE CLYDE.

Very early the following day, the 2nd of August, Miss Campbell, accompanied by her uncles, and attended by Partridge and Dame Bess, took the train from Helensburgh. They were obliged to go to Glasgow to take the steamer, as it did not call anywhere along this part of the coast on its way to Oban.

At seven o’clock they reached Glasgow, where a carriage was waiting to take them to Broomielaw Bridge.

There the steamer *Columbia* lay, waiting for her passengers; a dense smoke pouring from her two funnels, and mingling with the thick fog hanging over the Clyde; but those mists were soon dispersed as the sun forced its way through the leaden-coloured clouds, and gave every promise of a fine day.

When their luggage had been put on board, Miss Campbell and her companions immediately embarked.

At this moment the bell summoning all tardy passengers rang out for the third and last time; the engines began to work, the paddle-wheels lashed the yellow water into foam, a shrill whistle sounded, the moorings were loosened, and the *Columbia* sped rapidly away with the tide.

Tourists in the United Kingdom have no cause for complaint, the companies everywhere place magnificent boats at their disposal. There is hardly a piece of water so inconsiderable, a lake so small, or a gulf so unimportant, ut what is every day ploughed by fine steam-packets. It is not to be wondered at that the Clyde should be one of the most favoured in this respect. Thus, the whole length of Broomielaw Street, alongside the wharfs of the steamboat quay were numbers of packets, with their paddle-boxes painted the brightest colours, from gold to vermilion, with steam up, ready to set off in all directions.

The *Columbia* was no exception to this rule; she was a fast boat, with long tapering bows, and provided with very powerful engines. In the saloons there was every possible comfort; the upper-deck, sheltered by awnings, under which were placed benches and luxurious seats, formed a delightful terrace, from whence the passengers could obtain a good view and plenty of fresh air.

There was no lack of tourists; tbey came from all parts, as many from Scotland as England. August is, *par excellence*, the month for excursions, and those up the Clyde and to the Hebrides are especial favourites. There were entire families, lively maidens, and children already used to the wonders of travelling; always, a plentiful number of clergymen, with high silk hats, long black overcoats, and stand-up collars, with white ties showing above their high waistcoats; then several farmers in Scotch caps, by their somewhat grave demeanour reminding one of the old “Bonnet-lairds” of sixty years ago; and, finally, half-a-dozen foreigners, Germans who lose none of their stolidity even out of Germany, and Frenchmen who still retain their genial amiability even out of France.

If Miss Campbell had been like the greater part of her fellow-countrymen, who religiously kept to the corners they had taken when first coming on board, and never moved from them the whole of the trip, she would have seen no more of the banks of the Clyde than actually passed before her eyes without turning her head. But she preferred to walk up and down from stem to stern of the steamer, looking at the towns, hamlets, and villages thickly scattered along its banks. Thus it was that the two brothers, who followed her, replying to, approving her observations, and confirming her remarks, were not allowed to take a moment's rest between Glasgow and Oban; as for that matter, however, they never dreamt of complaining, it was part of their duties of guardianship, which they followed instinctively, exchanging, meanwhile, pinches of snuff which kept them in good humour.

Dame Bess and Partridge, sitting forward, were chatting pleasantly of bygone times, of customs now extinct, and of the old disorganized clans. Ah! those good old times, where were they now? In those days the clear horizon of the Clyde was not hidden by dense volumes of smoke from factory chimneys; its banks did not resound with the dull noise of hammering, and its calm waters were never lashed into foam by some hundreds of steamers.

"That time will return, and perhaps sooner than we think for!" said Dame Bess, with an air of conviction.

"I hope so," gravely replied Partridge, "and with it we shall see the old customs of our ancestors!"

Meanwhile, the banks of the Clyde were passing rapidly from stem to stern of the *Columbia* like a moving panorama. To the right was seen the village of Partick, on the mouth of the Kelvin, and the immense docks, destined for the construction of iron ships, facing those of Govan, situated on the opposite shore. What noises of hammering, and what volumes of smoke and steam distressed the ears and eyes of Partridge and his companion!

But gradually all this busy din and smoky fog grew less and less. In the place of timber-yards, covered wharfs, tall factory chimneys, gigantic iron scaffoldings, which looked like the cages of a menagerie, now appeared coquettish houses, cottages buried among the trees, and villas of Anglo-Saxon design, scattered over the green hills. Between one town and another there was an uninterrupted succession of houses and country seats. After passing the royal borough of Renfrew, situated on the left bank of the river, were seen the wooded hills of Kilpatrick rising above the village of that name, which no Irishman can pass without betraying himself; for there was born St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland.

From a river the Clyde had now become an arm of the sea. Dame Bess and Partridge hailed the ruins of Douglas Castle, which recalls some old memories of Scottish history; but they averted their eyes when they passed the monument raised in honour of Harry Bell, the inventor of the first steamboat whose wheels had disturbed these peaceful waters.

A few miles further on, the tourists, Murray in hand, beheld the Castle of Dumbarton, standing on a basaltic rock which rises to the height of 500 feet, and the highest point of which still bears the name of Wallace’s seat.

At this moment a gentleman standing on the footbridge, without being asked, but also without objection from any one, thought it his duty to give a little historical lecture for the benefit of his fellow-travellers. In half an hour’s time, no one on board the *Columbia,* unless indeed he were deaf, need be ignorant of the fact that very probably the Romans had fortified Dumbarton; that this historical rock was transformed into a royal fortress at the beginning of the thirteenth century; that by the Act of Union it was privileged as one of the four places in Scotland to remain undismantled; that from this port in 1548, Mary Stuart, whose marriage with Francis II. was about to make her “Queen of a day,” left for France; finally, that Napoleon was to have been confined there in 1815, before Castlereagh had resolved to imprison him in St. Helena.

“Very instructive indeed,” said Sam.

“Instructive and interesting,” replied Sib; “this gentleman deserves our thanks.”

In fact, the two brothers had not lost a single word of the lecture, and accordingly thanked the self-improvised professor.

Miss Campbell, absorbed in her own thoughts, had heard nothing of this historical lesson. It had no power, just now, at least, to interest her. She did not even look at the ruins of Cardross Castle, where Robert Bruce died. A sea-horizon was what she vainly sought; but there was no chance of getting one till the *Columbia* had passed this succession of banks, promontories, and hill-sides, which bound the Frith of Clyde. Besides, the steamer was then passing the town of Helensburgh, Port Glasgow, the ruins of Newark Castle, and the peninsula of Roseneath, which she could see any day from her own home. And she began to wonder whether the steamer was going up the stream, winding through the park.

And, as they went farther on, why should she trouble herself to wonder at the hundreds of vessels crowding the docks of Greenock at the mouth of the river? What mattered it to her that the immortal Watt was born in this town? Why, three miles beyond this, need she look at the villages of Gourock on the left, and Dunoon on the right; at the indenting and winding fiords which encroach upon the shore of Argyle, and make it like a Norwegian coast?

No, Miss Campbell was watching impatiently for the ruined tower of Leven. Did she expect to see some hobgoblin there? Not in the least, she simply wished to be the first to signal Cloch light-house at the entrance of the Frith of Clyde.

At last, round a bend of the shore, the light-house appeared like a gigantic lamp.

“Cloch, Uncle Sam,” said she. “There is Cloch!”

“Yes, there is Cloch,” said he, re-echoing her words.

“There is the sea, Uncle Sib!”

“The sea, it is indeed,” replied Sib.

“How beautiful it is!” repeated the two uncles, as though they beheld it now for the first time!

There was no mistake about it. At the entrance to the Frith could be seen a distinct sea-horizon.

However, it was but midday, and it would be some hours before the sun sank beneath the waves — some hours yet of impatient waiting for Miss Campbell! Besides, this was a south-western horizon, over which the sun only set in winter, so it was of no use to look for the phenomenon in that direction; it must be more towards the north-west, since it wanted now but six weeks to the autumnal equinox.

But no matter, it was the sea which now lay before Helena’s eyes. Through the straits of the isles of Cumbrae, beyond the island of Bute, softly outlined against the sky, beyond the crests of Ailsa Craig and the hills of Arran, a clear line between sea and sky was distinctly visible.

Miss Campbell was watching it intently, absorbed in thought. As she stood motionless on the foot-bridge, she seemed to be measuring the length of the arc, to the point where the radiant orb must dip beneath the waters of the Archipelago of the Hebrides.

A voice roused the young dreamer from her reverie.

“It is quite time,” Sib was saying.

“Time for what, uncle?”

“Time for luncheon,” said Sam.

“Let us go, then,” replied Helena.

CHAPTER V.

CHANGE OF STEAMERS.

After partaking of an excellent luncheon, served in the saloon of the *Columbia*, Miss Campbell and her uncles again went on deck.

Helena could not repress an exclamation of disappointment when she once more resumed her post of observation.

“My horizon has gone!” said she.

It must be confessed her horizon was no longer visible; it had disappeared for some minutes, and the steamer, heading northwards, was at this moment entering the long straits of the Kyles of Bute.

“This is too bad, Uncle Sam,” said Miss Campbell, with a little reproachful grimace.

“But, my dear child — ”

“I shall not forget it, Uncle Sib!”

The brothers knew not what to say; however, it was certainly not their fault if the *Columbia*, after changing her course, was then making towards the north-west.

In fact, there are two different ways of going by sea from Glasgow to Oban.

The one — that which the *Columbia* had not taken — is the longest. After calling at Kothsay, the chief town of the island of Bute, overlouked by its ancient castle and sheltered on its western side from gales by a high ridge of hills, the steamer can continue to descend the Frith of Clyde, then coast along the eastern shore of the island, pass in sight of the greater and lesser Cumbrae, and make for the southern point of Arran, which belongs almost entirely to the Duke of Hamilton, from the base of its rocks to the summit of the Goatfell, 2866 feet above the level of the sea.

The man at the helm turns the wheel, the compass is set due west, the island of Arran is doubled, the steamer turns the peninsula of Kintyre, and, ascending the western coast, enters the Gigha Pass, then through the Sound, between the islands of Islay and Jura, she arrives at the wide entrance of the Frith of Lorn, which narrows, until it is quite closed, a little above Oban.

Her uncles, as well as Miss Campbell, had cause to regret this change of route, for in coasting along the shores of Islay. they would have seen the ancient home of the MacDonalds, who, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, were conquered and driven out by the Campbells; the scene of this historical fact, which touched them so closely, would have set their hearts beating in unison.

This route would just have suited Miss Campbell, for from Arran to the Mull of Kintyre the sea has a southern aspect; then from the Mull of Kintyre to the farther point of Islay it is a western sea, that is to say, that immense plain of water bounded only by the coast of America.

But this route is long, sometimes troublesome, if not dangerous, and among the passengers might be some who would be alarmed at the thought of venturing on a passage often rendered dangerous by gales off the shores of the Hebrides.

Thus engineers — among others Lesseps — thought of converting the peninsula of Kintyre into an island, and, thanks to their endeavours, the

Crinan Canal has been cut through its northern end; the journey is thus shortened by a considerable distance, and the passage takes but three or four hours.

This was the route which the Columbia was taking in her passage from Glasgow to Oban, between lochs and straits with no other view than that of sea-shore, mountains, and forests. Of all the passengers, Miss Campbell, undoubtedly, was the only one who really regretted the other route; but she was obliged to resign herself; besides, would not the sea-horizon be visible again when they were out of the Crinan Canal a few hours later, and even before sunset?

Just as the tourists, who had lingered in the saloon, again came on deck, the *Columbia* was at the entrance of Loch Riddan, off the little island of Elbangrieg, the last fortress where the heroic Duke of Argyll took refuge before he was crushed in his struggle for the political and religious freedom of Scotland. Then the steamer veered south, descended the straits of Bute, through a lovely panorama of wooded or barren isles, outlined against a background of light mist. At last, after having doubled Cape Ardlamont, she resumed her northerly course, across Loch Fyne, leaving to the left the village of East Tarbert, on the coast of Kintyre, rounded the Capeof Ardrishaig, and reached the village of Lochgilphead at the entrance of the Crinan Canal.

At this place the *Columbia* was obliged to be left, as she was too large for the navigation of the canal, through which only boats of light draught can pass,

A small steamer, called the *Linnet*, was waiting for the passengers of the *Columbia*, and the transhipment was effected in a few minutes. All took their places comfortably on the upper-deck of the steamer; then the *Linnet* sped rapidly between the banks of the canal, whilst a bagpiper in national costume gave the company the benefit of his monotonous and melancholy music.

It is a charming passage through this canal, sometimes running between high banks, sometimes skirting heather-clad hills; here passing through the open country, there hemmed in between the straight walls of the reaches. There is some little delay in the locks. Whilst the canal men are opening the gates for the boats to pass through, young girls come and politely offer the passengers new milk, speaking with that Gaelic idiom very often incomprehensible to Englishmen.

Six hours later — there had been a delay of two hours at a lock which was in bad working order — the hamlets and farms of this somewhat dreary district, and the extensive marshes of the Add, which stretch along the right side of the canal, had been passed. The Linnet stopped a few minutes later at Ballenach, and a second change of steamers took place.

The passengers of the *Columbia* now become passengers of the *Glengary*, leaving the Bay of Crinan, doubled the point on which rose the ancient feudal castle of Duntroon.

Since they had rounded the Isle of Bute, the sea-horizon had not been again visible.

Miss Campbell’s impatience can be easily imagined. Upon these waters, bounded in every direction by land, she might as well have been in the middle of Scotland, in the lake district, and in the country of Rob Roy, for on all sides were picturesque isles, with their verdant banks, and plantations of firs and larches.

At last the *Glengary* passed the northern point of Jura, and the sea-line was visible between this point and the Isle of Scarba.

“There it is, my dear Helena,” said her Uncle Sam, pointing towards the west.

“It was not our fault,” added Sib, “if these tiresome islands, confound them! hid it from you for a time.”

“You are quite forgiven, uncles,” replied Miss Campbell; “but don’t let it happen again.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE GULF OF CORYVRECHAN.

It was then six o’clock in the evening, and it wanted two or three hours till sunset. Most certainly the *Glengary* would reach Oban before the sun sank beneath the waters of the Atlantic, and Miss Campbell had some grounds for thinking that her wishes would be fulfilled that same evening. In fact, the cloudless sky seemed made expressly for the observation of the phenomenon, and the sea-horizon must be visible between the isles of Oronsay, Colonsay, and Mull, during the latter part of the passage.

But a very unexpected accident was about to delay the steamer’s progress.

Miss Campbell, buried in her one absorbing thought, stood motionless at her post, never for a moment losing sight of the line between the two islands, and as she was undoubtedly the only person on board so intently watching that part of the horizon, she was the first to notice how rough the sea appeared to be between Jura and Scarba. At the same time she could faintly hear the far-off roar of billows, and yet there was scarcely a ripple on the placid surface of the sea through which the steamer was cutting her way.

“What is the cause of the sea being so rough out there?” asked Miss Campbell of her uncles.

They could not tell her, knowing no more than she did what was happening three miles off in the narrow pass.

Then addressing the captain, who was standing on the foot-bridge, she asked him the same question.

“It is a simple phenomenon caused by the tide,” replied he; “and the noise you hear comes from the Gulf of Coryvrechan.”

“But the weather is splendid,” observed Miss Campbell; “and there is hardly a breath of wind to be felt.”

“It does not depend in the least upon the weather,” replied the captain. “It is the result of the high tide, which, coming out of the Sound of Jura, finds no outlet except between the islands of Jura and Scarba. Hence it happens that the water rushes through with terrific force, and it would be dangerous for any small craft to venture there.”

The Gulf of Coryvrechan, justly dreaded in these parts, is regarded as one of the most curious places in the western archipelago. A legend affirms that it owes its name to a Scandinavian prince who perished there in Celtic times. It is indeed a very dangerous pass, and many are the boats which have been drawn into the eddy and lost: for its bad reputation it may be compared with the treacherous whirlpool of Maelström on the coast of Norway.

Meanwhile, as Miss Campbell kept her eyes fixed on the seething mass of waters, her attention was particularly attracted to a point of the strait, where could be seen what might have been a rock, had it not moved up and down with the heaving billows.

“Look there! look there! captain,” exclaimed Helena. “If it is not a rock, what can it be?”

“It is most likely,” replied he, “a waif drawn into the currents, or rather —”

And looking through his glass, —

“A boat!” he exclaimed.

“A boat!” repeated Miss Campbell.

“Yes! — if I am not very much mistaken — a boat in peril on the Coryvrechan!”

At these words the passengers crowded on to the bridge, and looked in the direction of the gulf. There could no longer be any doubt that a boat had been drawn into the pass, and, carried along by the high tide on the whirling eddies, was now rushing on to certain destruction.

All eyes were fixed on the point of the gulf, about four or five miles distant from the *Glengary*.

“Most likely it is only a boat adrift,” observed one of the passengers.

“Not so, for I can see a man in it,” replied another.

“A man — two men!” cried Partridge, who was standing beside Miss Campbell.

There were certainly two men there, who had evidently lost all control over their craft. The slight breeze off the land was not enough to fill their sail, and draw them out of the eddies, and oars were powerless in such a sea, to prevent their being carried into the Coryvrechan.

“Captain!” cried Miss Campbell, “we cannot leave those poor creatures to perish. They will be lost if they are left to themselves. We must go to their help. We must.”

All on board thought the same, and eagerly awaited the captain’s answer.

“The *Glengary* could not venture into the Coryvrechan; but perhaps we may be able to get within reach of the boat,” he replied.

And turning towards the passengers, he seemed to wait for their approbation.

Miss Campbell went up to him.

“We must, captain, we must,” she exclaimed in a tone of entreaty. “My fellow-passengers, I am sure, wish it as much as I do! It is a matter of life or death for two of our fellow-creatures, whom you may perhaps be able to save. Oh, captain, I beseech you!”

“Yes — yes,” cried several of the passengers, moved by this young girl’s generous intervention.

The captain again looked through his glass, carefully observed the direction of the currents, then calling to the man at the wheel, —

“Hard a starboard!” said he.

The *Glengary* gradually veered round to the west. The engineer received the order to put on steam, and the isle of Jura was soon left some distance behind.

Nobody spoke on board, and all eyes were anxiously fixed upon the boat, which gradually became more visible.

It was only a small fishing-smack, the mast of which had been lowered, in order to give her more chance of resisting the violence of the waves.

One of the two men in the boat was lying full length in the stern, the other, rowing with all his might, made strenuous efforts to extricate her from the whirling tide. If he should not succeed, they were lost.

In half an hour's time the *Glengary* had reached the verge of the Coryvrechan, and began to pitch violently; but not one on board uttered a protest, although the rolling of the vessel might well have alarmed simple tourists.

At this part of the strait the sea was perfectly white, and nothing could be seen but a vast sheet of foam, upheaved in great masses by the fury of the waters.

The boat was but half a mile off, the man at the oars was making a last effort to extricate her from the eddies. He well understood that the *Glengary* was coming to his assistance, but he also saw that she could not venture much nearer, and that he must do his utmost to reach her. His companion, lying motionless in the stern, seemed to be deprived of all power of giving assistance.

Miss Campbell, filled with the keenest emotion, never took her eyes off this boat, which she had been the first to observe, and towards which, thanks to her earnest entreaties, the *Glengary* was now making her way.

Meanwhile, the situation grew more critical, and it was to be feared the steamer would not arrive in time. In order to avoid serious danger she was obliged to reduce her speed considerably, and, as it was, the water shipped over the bows, threatened to inundate the engine-room, and put out the fires — a contingency to be dreaded in this turbulent sea.

The captain, leaning upon the hand-rail of the bridge, was carefully watching that they were not driven out of their course, and skilfully manœuvred so that they should not be caught amidships by the heavy seas.

The boat, however, could not free herself from the eddies. At times she was completely hidden behind some gigantic breaker, and then caught in the swirl of the gulf, was spun round and round like an arrow, or rather like a stone flung from a sling.

“Faster! Faster!” cried Miss Campbell, unable to repress her feelings.

But at the sight of the great foam-crested billows some of the passengers already uttered cries of alarm; and the captain, aware of the risk he was incurring, hesitated about going any nearer the Coryvrechan.

The distance between the boat and the *Glengary* was scarcely half a cable’s length, and the unhappy men, on the verge of destruction, could be distinctly recognized.

They were an old sailor and a young man, the former lying helpless at the stern, and the latter rowing with all his might.

At this moment a heavy sea struck the steamer, and rendered her situation critical.

The captain dare not venture any farther in the pass, and it was as much as he could do to prevent his ship from being drawn into the surging currents.

All at once the fishing-smack, after tossing for a moment on the crest of a great wave, disappeared.

There was a cry of horror on board!

Had the boat been swamped? No. Again she rose on the back of another wave, and one last desperate effort with the oars brought her alongside the steamer.

“Bravo! bravo!” cried the sailors at the bows, and they held in readiness a coil of ropes, watching for the moment to throw them.

Suddenly the captain gave the order to put on steam, the *Glengary*’s speed increased, and she ventured boldly between the two islands, whilst the boat again drew some fathoms nearer.

At this moment the ropes were thrown out, and seized by the man in the boat. The engines of the *Glengary* were reversed, in order to extricate her from this dangerous position, and she steamed back with the boat in tow.

Leaving his oars, the young man raised his companion in his arms, and, with the help of the sailors, hoisted him on board. The aged seaman had been disabled by a heavy sea whilst the boat was being drawn into the pass, and thus was totally incapable of helping his companion, who was left to depend entirely on his own efforts.

When at last the young man sprang on to the deck of the *Glengary* he appeared to have lost none of his cool self-possession, his face was calm, and his whole bearing showed him capable of moral as well as physical courage.

His first care was to look after his companion, the owner of the smack, who was soon brought round by a stiff glass of grog.

“Mr. Oliver!” said he.

“Ah! my old friend,” replied the young man, “and what think you of this sea?”

“It is nothing! I have seen many the like of this, and it is going down already!”

“Yes, thank Heaven; but my imprudence nearly cost us our lives! But here we are safe and sound.”

“And by your efforts, Mr. Oliver.”

“No, by the help of God!”

And the young man, warmly grasping the seaman’s hands, made no attempt to conceal his emotion, which visibly affected all the passengers.

Then turning to the skipper, just as he was coming off the bridge —

“Captain,” said he, “I don’t know how to thank you enough for the service you have rendered us.”

“I only did my duty, sir,” replied the captain, “and, to tell the truth, you owe more thanks to my passengers than to me.”

The young man warmly shook the captain’s hand, and then turning to the passengers, he lifted his hat, and bowed gracefully to them.

Had not the *Glengary* arrived so opportunely, he and his companion would certainly have been lost.

During this exchange of civilities Miss Campbell had thought fit to retire. She did not wish attention to be drawn to the part she had played in this dramatic rescue. All of a sudden, as she stood on the bridge, her thoughts reverted to the object of her journey, and looking towards the western horizon, she exclaimed, —

“And what of the sunset, and the Green Ray?”

“No more sun for to-day!” said her Uncle Sam.

“No more chance of seeing the Green Ray!” added Sib.

It was too late, the sun had already disappeared below the wonderfully clear horizon, and had shot forth its Green Ray into space, whilst Miss Campbell’s thoughts were occupied with other matters. Thus an opportunity, which might perhaps be long in recurring, was lost!

“It is a pity,” she murmured; however, with little regret in her tone, as she considered all that had just happened.

Meanwhile the *Glengary* made her way out of the Coryvrechan Pass, and again resumed her northerly course. Giving his companion a last hearty grasp of the hand, the old seaman, now quite recovered, got back into his boat, and sailed for Jura.

As to the young man, whose leathern portmanteau had been put on board, he made one more tourist *en route* for Oban.

Leaving the islands of Shuna and Luing, where are the rich slate quarries belonging to the Marquis of Breadalbane, the steamer coasted along the isle of Seil, and a little later entering the Frith of Lorn, she steamed between the volcanic island of Kerera and the mainland. Then, as the shades of twilight deepened into night, she came to her moorings in the harbour of Oban.

CHAPTER VII.

ARISTOBULUS URSICLOS.

Even had there been as great a number of visitors on the beach of Oban as are to be found at Brighton, Ramsgate, or Margate, Aristobulus Ursiclos could not have failed to attract attention.

Without any pretence to be placed at the head of her rivals, Oban is a bathing-place much frequented by visitors from all parts of the United Kingdom. Its situation on the straits of Mull, sheltered from the western winds by the island of Kerera, attracts a great many people. Some come for the bathing, others make it a central point for excursions to Glasgow, Inverness, and the Hebrides. Here it must be added that Oban is not in the least, as many watering-places are, a kind of convalescent home. Most of the people who come to pass the hot summer months here are in good health, and one does not run the risk of playing whist with one dying, and two sick people.

Oban has only been built about fifty years, and has quite a modern air in the arrangement of its houses and streets; nevertheless, the church, a kind of Norman edifice with an elegant steeple, the old ivy-clad castle of Dunolly, standing on a rock at the north end, the panorama of white houses and pretty villas which rise on the background of hills, lastly, the peaceful waters of the bay, where graceful pleasure-boats lie at anchor, make a charming picture.

This year, and during this month of August, there was no lack of visitors at Oban. In the visitor’s book of one of the best hotels, among others more or less illustrious, the name of Aristobulus Ursiclos, of Dumfries, had figured for two or three weeks past.

He was a “person” of the age of twenty-eight, who had never been young, and probably would never be old; he gave one the impression of having been born at the age which he now appeared to be. His figure was neither good nor bad, his face very insignificant, with hair too fair for a man; he was short-sighted, and wore spectacles, and his small nose did not seem to belong to his face; of the 130,000 hairs which every human head ought to have, according to the latest statistics, he possessed about 60,000. He wore a beard round his cheeks and chin, which gave him rather the appearance of a monkey; had he been a monkey, he would have been a fine specimen, perhaps the missing link in the Darwinian theory.

Aristobulus was wealthy, but wealthier still in ideas, and yet the young *savant,* a graduate of the universities of Oxford and Edinburgh, was only clever enough to weary others with his universal knowledge; he knew more of the sciences of physic, chemistry, astronomy, and mathematics than of literature. He was very pretentious, but in reality it wanted but little to make him a perfect idiot. His chief mania, or his monomania if you like it better, was to give at random an explanation of the most natural things; in short, he was a pedant of a very disagreeable kind. One did not laugh at him because his remarks were laughable, but because he made himself so ridiculous. No one could have less claim to the motto of English Freemasons: *Audi, vide,* tace*; he never listened, never saw anything, and was* never silent. In a word, to borrow a comparison not inappropriate in this country of Walter Scott, Aristobulus Ursiclos, with his positive opinions, reminded one infinitely more of the Baillie Nicol Jarvie than his poetical cousin Rob Roy MacGregor.

And what daughter of the Highlands, without excepting Miss Campbell, would not have preferred Rob Roy to Nicol Jarvie?

Such was Aristobulus Ursiclos. How could the brothers have taken such a fancy to this pedant, and even have gone so far as to wish to be connected with him by marriage? How had he been able to make himself so agreeable to these worthy old gentlemen? Perhaps because he was the first who had made any overtures for the hand of their niece. With a kind of ingenuous delight the brothers had undoubtedly said to each other, —

“Here is a young man of good family, with a large fortune, which he has inherited from his parents and relatives, and, moreover, extraordinarily learned! He will be an excellent match for our dear Helena! This marriage can be easily brought about, and everything is most desirable.”

Thereupon they had offered each other snuff, and then had shut the box with a little click, which seemed to say, —

“That matter is settled.”

The brothers thought they had been very clever, thanks to this whim of the Green Ray, in bringing Miss Campbell to Oban. There, without any suspicion of an arranged plan, she would be able to resume her acquaintance with Aristobulus, which his absence had temporarily interrupted.

The hall of Helensburgh had been exchanged for the finest apartments in the Caledonian Hotel. If their stay at Oban should be prolonged it might be pleasanter to take some villa on the heights overlooking the town; but, meanwhile, with the assistance of Dame Bess and Partridge, all were comfortably settled in Master MacFyne’s establishment.

At nine o’clock next morning the brothers Melville left the hotel, and went in search of Aristobulus, while Miss Campbell, still asleep in her room on the first floor, was little dreaming of their errand.

Our two friends went down to the beach, and knowing that their niece's *soupirant* was staying in one of the hotels on the north side of the bay, they walked in that direction.

It must be admitted that they were guided by a presentiment, for, ten minutes after they had started, Aristobulus, who was taking his usual morning walk in pursuit of science, on the beach, met them, and exchanged a formal greeting.

"Mr. Ursiclos!" exclaimed the brothers.

"You here, gentlemen?" replied Aristobulus, in a supercilious tone that betrayed no surprise. "You here, gentlemen, at Oban?"

"Since last night," said Sam.

"And we are happy to see you, Mr. Ursiclos, looking so well," added Sib.

"Oh, very well indeed, gentlemen. Of course you have heard of the despatch which has just arrived?"

"The despatch?" said Sam. "Has Gladstone already — "

"It has nothing to do with Gladstone," replied Mr. Ursiclos, somewhat disdainfully; "it is a meteorological report."

"Ah, indeed!" replied the two brothers.

"Yes; it is announced that the depression at Swinemunde has moved towards the north, and has sensibly fallen. Its centre is at present near Stockholm, where the barometer, declining an inch, that is twenty-five millimetres," — to make use of the decimal system in vogue with *savants* — "stands at twenty-eight inches and six-tenths, or 726 millimétres. Though the pressure varies little in England and Scotland, it fell a tenth yesterday at Valentia, and two-tenths at Stornoway."

"And from this depression — ?" asked Sam.

"We must conclude — ?" added Sib.

"That this fine weather will not last," replied Aristobulus Ursiclos; "and that the sky will soon be charged with rain-clouds, brought up by the south-westerly winds from the Atlantic."

The brothers thanked the young *savant* for having acquainted them with this interesting prognostic, and concluded from it that they would have to wait some time for the Green Ray, for which they were not in the least sorry, as it would serve to prolong their stay at Oban.

"And you have come — ?" asked Aristobulus, after having picked up a flint, which he examined with the greatest attention.

The two brothers took care not to interrupt him in this study, but when the flint had been added to the collection already in the young *savant's* pocket, —

"We have come with the very natural intention of spending a short time here," began Sib.

"And we must add," said Sam, "that Miss Campbell, who accompanies us, has — "

“Ah! Miss Campbell,” interrupted Aristobulus. — ”I believe that flint belongs to the Gaelic epoch, there are marks on it — really I shall be charmed to see Miss Campbell again! — marks of meteoric origin. This remarkably mild climate will do her a great deal of good.”

“At present she is wonderfully well,” observed Sam; “and has no need of the trip for her health.”

“No matter,” continued Aristobulus, “the air is excellent here; zero twenty-one of oxygen, and zero seventy-nine of azote, with a little moisture in hygienic quantity; as for carbonic acid, there is scarcely a vestige. I analyze it every morning.”

The brothers flattered themselves that it was a polite attention intended for their niece.

“But,” asked Aristobulus, “if you did not come to Oban on account of your health, may I ask why you left Helensburgh?”

“We have no need to conceal the reason from you, considering the position in which we stand,” replied Sib.

“Am I to believe that this change,” interrupted the young *savant*, “is owing to a very natural desire to give me an opportunity of seeing Miss Campbell under circumstances where we shall have better opportunity of knowing and esteeming each other?”

“Assuredly,” replied Sam; “we thought that in this way the end might be attained more easily.”

“I approve of your plan, gentlemen,” said Aristobulus. “Here, Miss Campbell and I are on neutral ground; we shall be able, occasionally, to talk of the fluctuations of the sea, the direction of the winds, the height of the waves, the variation of the tides, and other physical phenomena, which must be of the highest interest to her!”

After exchanging a smile of satisfaction, the brothers bowed their approbation, and added that, on their return to Helensburgh, they hoped to receive their amiable guest under a more definite title.

Aristobulus replied that he had great pleasure in accepting their invitation, and still more so as the Government were just now about to make some important drainage works on the Clyde, between Helensburgh and Greenock — works to be carried on under novel conditions, by means of electric engines; thus, while he was staying at the hall, he would be able to make observations of the work, and calculate its probable utility.

The brothers could not but acknowledge how favourable this coincidence was to their plans; when the young *savant* was not otherwise engaged, he would be able to amuse himself, following the different phases of this interesting work.

“But,” asked Aristobulus, “of course you doubtless thought of some pretext for coming here, for Miss Campbell will hardly expect to see me at Oban?”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Sib, “and our niece herself furnished this pretext.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the young *savant*; “and what is it?”

“It is a question of seeing some physical phenomenon, under conditions which cannot be obtained at Helensburgh.”

“Indeed, gentlemen,” said Aristobulus, adjusting his spectacles; “this, already, proves that there is a sympathetic affinity between Miss Campbell and myself! May I know what the phenomenon is which cannot be observed at Helensburgh?”

“Nothing more or less than the Green Ray,” replied Sam.

“The Green Ray?” exclaimed Aristobulus, with some surprise. “I have never heard of it! Dare I ask what this Green Ray may be?”

The brothers explained as well as they could the nature of the phenomenon which had lately been drawn to the attention of the readers of the *Morning Post*.

“Pooh!” said Aristobulus, “it is a mere curiosity, of very little interest, which may be included in the somewhat childish domain of amusing physics.”

“Miss Campbell is but a young girl,” replied Sib, “and she seems to attach an exaggerated importance to this phenomenon — ”

“For she declares she will never marry until she has seen it,” added Sam.

“Ah! well, gentlemen,” replied Aristobulus, “we will show her the Green Ray!”

Then all three, taking the lane through the fields alongside the shore, returned to the hotel.

Aristobulus did not lose this opportunity of observing to the brothers how women’s minds were easily pleased with trifles, and he enlarged upon this subject, by dwelling at length upon all that must be done to raise the level of their neglected education, not that he thought their brain, which is less provided with cerebral matter than a man’s, and very different in the arrangement of its cells, could ever attain to the intelligence of lofty ispeculations! But without going as far as that, perhaps it might be elevated by a special course of training; although ever since there had been women in the world, never had one of them distinguished herself by any of those discoveries which rendered illustrious Aristotle, Euclid, Harvey, Hahnemann, Pascal, Newton, Laplace, Arago, Humphrey Davy, Edison, and others.

Then he launched into an explanation of different physical phenomena, and discoursed of *omni re scibili* without any further mention of Miss Campbell.

The brothers listened to him attentively — all the more so perhaps as they were unable to get in a word during this monologue, which Aristobulus emphasized with imperious and pedantic hums and has!

When they were within a few paces of the hotel they stopped for a minute, to take leave of each other.

A young lady was standing at one of the hotel windows, and, with a disconcerted air, seemed to be looking in every direction for something.

All at once Miss Campbell — for she it was — caught sight of her uncles; the window was immediately closed and a few minutes later the young girl came to them on the beach, looking very grave and reproachful.

The brothers exchanged a glance. What was the matter with Helena? Was it the presence of Aristobulus which seemed to annoy her?

Meanwhile, the young *savant* had advanced, and was bowing stiffly to Miss Campbell.

“Mr. Ursiclos — ” said the one brother, ceremoniously introducing him.

“Who, by the greatest chance, happens to be at Oban — ” added Sib.

“Ah! Mr. Ursiclos?”

And Miss Campbell scarcely took the trouble to bow.

Then turning to her uncles, who felt very much embarrassed, and hardly knew which way to look, —

“Uncles?” she said sternly.

“Yes, dear Helena,” replied they both, somewhat uneasily.

“Are we really at Oban?”

“At Oban? certainly.”

“On the western coast?”

“Exactly.”

“Very well, then we shall not be here in an hour’s time!”

“In an hour?”

“Did I not ask you to bring me where I could get a sea-horizon?”

“Of course you did, dear child.”

“Will you have the kindness to show me where it is?”

The brothers looked round and round in dismay.

Before them, neither to the south-west nor the north-east was there a single interval between the islands, where a line between the sea and sky was at all visible; Seil, Kerera, and Kismore formed a continuous barrier the whole distance, and they were obliged to confess that the horizon desired and promised was not to be found at Oban.

The brothers had not given it a thought, and as they walked along the beach, they made use of characteristic expressions inferring disappointment and ill-humour.

“Pooh!” said the one.

“Pshaw!” muttered the other.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CLOUD ON THE HORIZON.

An explanation had become necessary; but as Aristobulus would have been none the wiser for it, Miss Campbell bowed stiffly to him, and went back to the hotel.

Aristobulus returned the young lady’s bow just as frigidly; he was evidently annoyed at being made subservient to a ray, of whatever colour it might be, and he took his way home along the shore muttering to himself.

The brothers felt very ill-at-ease, and when they were back in their private sitting-room, they waited for Miss Campbell’s explanation.

This was simple enough; they had come to Oban on purpose to get a sea-horizon, and there was not one to be seen, or so little that it was not worth mention.

The two uncles could but honestly argue that they did not know Oban! Who would ever have thought that they would not have the open sea here, since it was such a frequented bathing-place. It was perhaps the only point on the coast where, thanks to these tiresome islands, the sea-line was not visible!

“Ah! well,” said Miss Campbell, in a tone which she tried to make as stem as possible, “we must find out some other place than Oban, even if we have to sacrifice the advantage of Mr. Ursiclos’s company.”

The brothers looked down, and made no reply to this direct hint.

“We are going to pack up and leave here this very day,” said Helena.

“So be it!” replied both uncles, who now could only make amends for their folly by passive submission to her wishes.

And immediately Dame Bess was summoned.

The housekeeper came up, followed by Partridge; both were at once informed of the change, and knowing that their young mistress’s word was law, they did not dream of asking the reason of this hurried departure.

But they had reckoned without their host, Mr. MacFyne, the proprietor of the hotel.

They little knew the customs of these excellent institutions, even in hospitable Scotland, if they thought that they, a party of three gentry and two servants, would be allowed to depart without some effort being made to detain them, and this was what now happened.

When he had been informed of the reason of their departure, Mr. MacFyne declared that everything might be arranged to the general satisfaction, without saying anything of his own particular pleasure in being able to keep his distinguished guests.

What would please Miss Campbell, and consequently what did the gentlemen desire? A sea-view with a clear horizon? Nothing could be easier, since they only wanted to see this horizon at sunset. They could not see it from the shore of Oban? Very well! From Mull only a small part of the Atlantic towards the south-west could be seen. But a little way down the coast was the island of Seil, connected with the mainland by a bridge; there there was nothing to interrupt their view of the western sea.

Now it was only a four or five miles' drive to the island, and when the weather was favourable, a carriage and pair of good horses would easily take Miss Campbell and her friends there in an hour or so.

In confirmation of this statement the glib hotel-keeper pointed out to them a large map hanging in the hall, so that Miss Campbell might not think he was trying to impose on her; and, indeed, facing the island of Seil was a large space comprising a third of that horizon over which the sun sets during the weeks preceding and following the equinox.

The matter was thus arranged to the extreme satisfaction of Mr. MacFyne, and to the perfect accommodation of the brothers. Miss Campbell generously granted them her pardon, and made no more disagreeable allusions to the presence of Aristobulus Ursiclos.

"But," said Sam, "it really is strange that it should be precisely at Oban that one cannot get a sea-horizon."

"Nature is so whimsical!" replied his brother.

Aristobulus was doubtless very glad to hear that Miss Campbell was not going elsewhere to make her meteorological observations; but he was so much absorbed in one of his abstruse problems, that he quite forgot to express his satisfaction.

The whimsical young lady did not seem to notice this delinquency, for whilst she was still utterly indifferent to him, her greeting was not quite so frigid when next they met.

Meanwhile, the state of the atmosphere had slightly improved; but though the weather remained fine, at sunrise and sunset the sky was generally flecked with clouds, so that it would only have been waste of time to go to Seil; they must exercise a little more patience.

During these long days Miss Campbell, leaving her uncles with the suitor of their choice, would wander along the sea-shore, sometimes accompanied by Dame Bess, but more often alone. She was glad to get away from the crowd of idle people one generally meets at bathing-places, whole families whose only occupation seems to be to sit on the beach and watch the tide come in and go out, whilst small boys and girls dig and roll about on the sands with a truly British freedom of attitude; grave phlegmatic gentlemen in their somewhat rudimentary bathing costumes, whose principal object in life seems to be to plunge up and down for ten minutes or so in the salt water; men and women of the highest respectability sitting motionless and stiff on the green benches, listlessly turning over the leaves of a book; tourists with telescopes slung over their shoulders; others with broad-brimmed hats, high gaiters, and umbrellas under their arms, who had arrived yesterday, and would leave again to-morrow; then in the midst of this crowd, sellers of all descriptions hawking their goods, electricians who for a few pence sell the fluid to any one who likes to pay for the fancy; itinerant piano-organists; photographers, in any number, printing off impromptu groups by the dozen; merchants in black overcoats; costermongers in broad-brimmed hats, pushing before them their little trucks, on which are displayed for sale the finest fruits in the world; negro minstrels with blackened faces, in various disguises, acting popular plays and singing comic songs, surrounded with a circle of children who gravely join in the choruses.

This sort of life at the sea-side had no charm for Miss Campbell; she preferred to get away as far as possible from the crowd, who seem as much strangers to each other as though they had come from the four quarters of the globe.

So, when her uncles, uneasy at her absence, wanted to find her, they had to search at the farther end of the beach, among the rocks overlooking the bay.

There Miss Campbell might be found, like Minna of “The Pirate,” leaning against a rock, her head resting on one hand, and with the other listlessly picking the seaweed growing here and there; her absent glance wandering from a “stack” whose rocky summit rose perpendicularly, to some obscure cavern, one of those “helyers,” as they call them in Scotland, echoing with the roaring of the sea.

In the distance might be seen rows of cormorants, sitting motionless like sacred birds, which she liked to watch when disturbed from their tranquillity they flew off, skimming the crests of the waves with their wings.

Of whom was the young girl thinking? Aristobulus Ursiclos undoubtedly would have had the conceit, and her uncles the simplicity to imagine that she was thinking of him, wherein they would have been much mistaken.

In her musings Miss Campbell’s thoughts would wander back to the scene in the Corjrvrechan. Again she saw the boat in peril, and the *Glengary* venturing to its assistance through the straits; again she experienced that keen emotion which had thrilled her when the boat with its two occupants had disappeared behind the breakers! Then there came the rescue, the rope thrown at the opportune moment, the graceful young man appearing on deck, calm and smiling, less moved than herself, and bowing with a dignified air to the passengers.

To an imaginative young girl here was matter for romance, but it seemed that the romance would be concluded in this first chapter; the book had been abruptly closed in Miss Campbell’s hands, and at what page might she ever open it again, since her “hero,” like some Woden of the Gaelic epoch, had never reappeared.

But had she ever looked out for him among the heedless crowds on the sea-shore? Perhaps. Had she met him? No; he would never have recognized her. Why should he have noticed her on board the *Glengary*? Why should he have come to her? How could he have guessed that it was to her he owed his safety? And yet it was she before any one else who had noticed the boat in danger; she who had been the first to entreat the captain to go to his rescue! And, in fact, it was owing to him that she had perhaps that evening lost the sight of the Green Ray; it was to be feared so at least.

During the three days following the arrival of the Melville family at Oban, the sky would have driven any astronomer to despair. It was covered with a kind of haze, more deceiving than clouds would have been; the most powerful glass or telescope, or even the reflector at Cambridge or Parsonstown, would have been incapable of piercing it. The sun alone was sufficiently powerful to penetrate it with its rays; but at sunset the sea-horizon was embanked with light mists, which were dyed with the most brilliant hues, so that it would have been impossible for the Green Ray to reach the eyes of an observer.

Carried away by a somewhat fanciful imagination, Miss Campbell, in her reverie, confused the hero of the Gulf of Coryvrechan and the Green Ray. Certain it was that neither one nor the other appeared, and if mists obscured one, incognito concealed the other.

The brothers Melville were ill-advised when they besought their niece to have patience. Miss Campbell did not trouble herself to make them responsible for these atmospheric disturbances. Thus they only had recourse to the excellent barometer which they had taken care to bring with them from Helensburgh, and which steadily refused to rise. In truth, they would have given their snuff-box to obtain a cloudless sunset!

As for the *savant* Ursiclos, one day, in speaking of these mists, he had the ill address to pronounce their formation quite natural, and this led to a short physical lecture, which he made in Miss Campbeirs presence. He spoke of clouds in general, of their downward motion which brought them to the horizon with a falling temperature, of mists reduced to a vesiculous state, of their scientific classing into nimbus, stratus, cumulus, cirrus! Needless to say he was not thanked for his display of wisdom. And this was so marked that the brothers did not know what attitude to assume during the inopportune discourse.

Yes, Miss Campbell pointedly “cut” the young *savant*; first of all she pretended to look in quite an opposite direction, so as not to hear him; then she kept her eyes persistently on Dunolly Castle, and appeared quite oblivious of his presence. Finally, she studiously examined her dainty sand-shoes, the most marked form of undisguised indifference, and the greatest proof of contempt the young Scotchwoman could have shown, and which was intended as much for the speaker as for his lecture.

Aristobulus, who was so entirely absorbed in his own self-importance and never spoke but for his own gratification, either did not or did not appear to, notice this treatment.

Thus passed the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th of August; but during that last day, to the brothers’ great delight, the barometer rose some degrees above change.

The following day dawned fair and cloudless. At ten o’clock the sun was shining brilliantly, and the sky was of a pure, limpid azure.

Miss Campbell could not let this opportunity escape. A carriage belonging to the hotel, always kept at her disposal, was ordered; now, if ever, was the time to make use of it; so at five o'clock in the afternoon, she and her uncles took their places in this carriage and four, driven by a skilful "whip," Partridge sitting in the rumble, and thus they started off on the road to Clachan.

Aristobulus Ursiclos, to his great reret — if not to Miss Campbell's — being deeply engaged in some important scientific pursuit, was unable to make one of the party.

The drive was charming from every point of view; the carriage took the road along the sea-shore, the whole length of the strait which separates the isle of Kerera from the mainland. This island, of volcanic origin, is most picturesque; but it had one drawback in Miss Campbell's eyes, namely, that it obstructed her view of the sea-horizon; however, as this would only last for about four miles and a half, she condescended to admire its harmonious outline, clearly defined against the sky, with the ruins of the Danish castle crowning its southern heights.

"That was formerly the abode of the MacDouglasses of Lorn — " remarked Sam.

"And has a peculiar interest to our family," added Sib; "since it was destroyed by the Campbells, who laid it in ruins, after having remorselessly massacred all its inhabitants!"

This fact seemed to win the particular approbation of Partridge, who quietly rubbed his hands in honour of the clan.

When they had passed the island of Kerera, the carriage took a narrow and slightly hilly road to the village of Clachan; from there they crossed the artificial isthmus, which, under the form of a bridge, spans the strait and unites the island of Seil with the mainland. Half an hour later, leaving the carriage at the foot of a ravine, the excursionists climbed the steep slopes of a hill, and seated themselves on the edge of the rocks overlooking the sea.

This time nothing could possibly obstruct the view of the western horizon; neither the isle of Easdale, nor that of Inish lying near Seil. Between the point of Ardalanish on the isle of Mull, one of the largest of the Hebrides to the north-east, and the island of Colonsay to the south-west, was a wide expanse of ocean, which would ere long be flooded with the crimson hues of sunset

Miss Campbell, filled with her one absorbing thought, stood a little in front of the others; a few birds of prey eagles and hawks, alone enlivened the stillness of the scene, hovering over their nests among the rocks.

Astronomically, at this time of year, and in these latitudes, the sun should set at ten minutes to eight o'clock, exactly in the direction of the point of Ardalanish. But a few weeks later it would be impossible to see it, as it would then set behind the island of Colonsay.

This evening, then, was well chosen, in point of time and place, for the observation of the phenomenon.

At this moment the sun was casting its rays obliquely on the cloudless horizon, and their eyes were scarcely able to bear the dazzling glare of its fiery disk, which the water reflected in a long train of light. Nevertheless, neither Miss Campbell nor her uncles would have consented to close their eyes — no! not even for a second.

But before the surface of the sun had touched the horizon, Miss Campbell uttered a cry of dismay!

A small cloud, slight as an arrow, and long as the flag of a man-of-war, had just appeared, and, floating across the solar disk, divided it into two unequal parts, and appeared to be sinking with it to the level of the sea.

It seemed as though the slightest breath of air would have been sufficient to drive it away! But no such breeze was forthcoming! And when the sun was reduced to a small arc, this light mist entirely circumscribed it. The Green Ray, lost in this little cloud, was hidden from the eyes of the intent observers.

CHAPTER IX.

DAME BESS’S TALK.

The drive back was made in silence; Miss Campbell spoke not a word, and her uncles dared not interrupt her reverie. And yet it was not their fault if the unlucky cloud had appeared just in time to obscure the sun’s last ray. After all, there was no need to despair; the fine weather must last for another six weeks, and if during the autumn they were not able to get one fine evening with a cloudless horizon, fortune was indeed against them.

However, it had been a splendid evening lost, and the barometer did not seem able to promise such another — for some time at least. Indeed, during the night the capricious index of the aneroid fell slightly back towards change; but though it was still fine weather for other people, it did not satisfy Miss Campbell.

The following day, the 8th of August, the sun was veiled in light mists, and the midday breeze was not strong enough to dissipate them. Towards evening the sky was resplendent with brilliant hues; every shade of colour, from chrome-yellow to a sombre ultramarine, dyed the western horizon. Through the veil of fleecy cloud the sunset tinted the background of the coast with every phantom ray, save that which Miss Campbell desired so much to see.

And the two following days were the same, so that the carriage remained unused in the coach-house of the hotel, for what was the use ot going to make an observation, which the state of the weather rendered impossible? The heights of Seil could be no more favoured than the shores of Oban, and it was better not to incur another disappointment.

Without being more vexed than could be expected, Miss Campbell contented herself by going in the evening to her room, pouting at this unobliging sun; and as she rested after her long walks, she would indulge in day-dreams. Of what? Of that legend attached to the Green Ray? Must she indeed see it in order to look clearly into her own heart? Into her own? perhaps not; but into that of others!

One day, accompanied by Dame Bess, Helena had carried her discomfiture to Dunolly Castle. From this place, at the foot of an old wall overgrown with ivy, nothing could be more lovely than the panorama formed by the Bay of Oban, the rugged aspect of Kerera, the isles dotted here and there in the western sea, and the great island of Mull, upon whose rocky western coast the storms of the Atlantic first vent their fury.

And from here Miss Campbell would gaze upon the magnificent scene spread out before her eyes; but did she see it? Did not some memory persistently distract her attention? In any case it certainly was not the image of Aristobulus Ursiclos. In truth, the young pedant would hardly have been gratified could he have heard the opinions of himself which Dame Bess so frankly expressed that afternoon.

“I don’t like him! No, I do not like him! He only thinks of himself! What sort of a figure would he cut at Helensburgh? He belongs to the clan of ‘Mac-Egotists,’ or I am very much mistaken. How could my masters have ever thought of making him their nephew! Partridge dislikes him as much as I do, and Partridge is no fool! Now, come, miss, do you like him?”

“Of whom are you speaking?” asked the young girl, who had heard nothing of Dame Bess’s previous speech.

“Of one whom you could never think of — were it only for the honour of the clan!”

“And who, then, is it that I may not think of?”

“Why, to be sure, this Mr. Aristobulus, who had much better go and seek his fortune the other side of the Tweed, as if a Campbell ever need run after an Ursiclos!”

Dame Bess was not in the habit of mincing her words, but her feelings must have been highly wrought for her to oppose her masters’ wishes, even for the sake of her young mistress. Besides, she felt sure that Helena was more than indifferent to this suitor. But she could hardly have guessed that this indifference was increased by a warmer feeling which her young mistress now experienced for another. Perhaps Dame Bess had a suspicion of the fact, when Miss Campbell asked her whether she had ever seen at Oban the young man whom the *Glengary* had so fortunately been able to rescue.

“No, miss,” replied Dame Bess, “he must have left immediately; but Partridge thought he saw him — ”

“When was that?”

“Yesterday, on the road to Dalmally. He was returning with a knapsack upon his back, like a travelling artist. Ah! that young man was very imprudent! His having allowed himself to be drawn into the Gulf of Coryvrechan speaks ill for his future. He will not always find a boat ready to come to his assistance, and one fine day he will come to grief.”

“Do you think so, Bess? If he had been imprudent, he at least showed himself to be courageous, and in the midst of his peril his self-possession never appeared to leave him for a moment.”

“That’s very likely, miss,” continued Dame Bess; “but surely the young man did not know that it was to you that he owed his rescue, or the day after our arrival at Oban he would at least have come and thanked you.”

“Thanked me?” repeated Miss Campbell. “And why? I only did for him what I would have done for any one else, and what any one else would surely have done in my place!”

“Would you recognize him again?” asked Dame Bess, looking at the young girl.

“Yes,” frankly replied Miss Campbell; “and I confess that his whole bearing, the calm courage which he exhibited when he stepped on deck, as though he had not just escaped death, and the affectionate words which he spoke to his old companion, made a great impression upon me.”

“Upon my word,” replied the worthy woman, “I could scarcely say what he is like; but at any rate, he is very different from this Mr. Ursiclos.”

Miss Campbell smiled, without saying anything; she rose from her seat and stood for a moment, casting a last look at the distant heights of Mull; then, followed by Dame Bess, she took the road back to Oban.

That evening the sun set in a kind of luminous haze, like spangled tulle, and its last ray was absorbed in the evening mists. On her return to the hotel, Miss Campbell did little justice to the dinner which her uncles had ordered for her, and after a short walk along the beach, she retired to her room.

CHAPTER X.

A CROQUET PARTY.

It must be confessed that the brothers were beginning to find the time hang rather heavily on their hands. Things were not going on at all as they would have liked. The visible *ennui* of their niece; the fancy which she had taken for being so much alone; the little encouragement she gave Mr. Ursiclos, about which, perhaps, that gentleman troubled himself less than they did: all these little incidents contributed to make their stay at Oban anything but agreeable. They could think of no device to break this monotony; in vain they watched the slightest atmospheric changes, and were obliged to console themselves with the hope that when once Miss Campbell's whim had been gratified she would doubtless be more tractable — at least to them.

It had happened that for the last two mornings Helena, more absent than ever, had forgotten to give them their usual morning kiss, which always put them in a good humour for the rest of the day.

Meanwhile, the barometer, insensible to the uncles' recriminations, showed not the slightest inclination to predict any immediate change for the better in the weather, and though they tapped it at least ten times a day, the mercury refused to rise one iota. Oh, these barometers!

AH at once an idea suddenly occurred to the brothers. On the afternoon of the 11th of August they thought of proposing to their niece a game of croquet to divert her thoughts, if possible, and though Aristobulus must be one of the party, Helena could not refuse to gratify their wishes in giving them this little pleasure.

It must be remarked that the brothers prided themselves on being first-rate players of this game, which, as one knows, is but the old game of “mall,” revived and adapted to the requirements of young ladies.

Now there were at Oban several plots of ground laid out especially for croquet.

If at most sea-side places people are content with very indifferent accommodation, it proves less the requirements of the players than their want of enthusiasm in this time-honoured pastime. Here the plots were not gravel but well kept lawns, watered every evening with watering-engines, and rolled every morning till they were smooth as velvet. Small squares of stone sunk in the ground were made for the hoops, and a narrow trench, a few inches deep, divided the different grounds.

How often the brothers had enviously watched the young people’s manœuvres on these well-kept grounds! They were highly pleased when Miss Campbell agreed to their proposal, for they hoped in this way to rouse her from her apathy, and at the same time be at liberty to enjoy their favourite pastime in the midst of a crowd of spectators, for there would be plenty of lookers-on here, as well as at Helensburgh. The vain creatures!

Aristobulus, duly informed, had for once consented to postpone his scientific researches, and at the appointed time reached the place of contest. He pretended to be as much up in theory as in the practice of croquet, and to play as a *savant*, geometrician, physicist, or mathematician; in a word, by the rule of A+B.

Miss Campbell was obliged to take the young pedant as partner, which did not altogether please her; but how could it have been otherwise? How could she have been cruel enough to separate her uncles and place them in opposition to each other, they who were so united in thought, heart, and mind, and who never played, except together — no, she certainly could not do that!

“Miss Campbell,” began Aristobulus, first thing, “I am most happy to be your partner, and if you will allow me, I will explain to you the determinative cause of the strokes.”

“Mr. Ursiclos,” replied Helena, interrupting him, “we must let my uncles win.”

“Win?”

“Yes. Without seeming to do so.”

“But, Miss Campbell — ”

“It will make them so vexed to lose.”

“But — allow me,” persisted Aristobulus. “I understand this game geometrically, and am justly proud of the fact! I have calculated the combination of lines, the geometrical value of the curves, and I think I have some pretensions — ”

“I have no other pretension,” interrupted Miss Campbell, “than that of making myself agreeable to my opponents; besides, I warn you, they are first-rate players, and I don’t think after all that your science will beat their skill.”

“We shall see by-and-by!” muttered Aristobulus, whom no consideration whatever could have persuaded to allow himself to be voluntarily beaten — not even to please Miss Campbell.

Meanwhile, the box, containing the hoops, mallets, and balls, had been brought and placed on the ground.

The nine hoops were adjusted in the little square flags, and posts driven in at either end of the ground.

“Now let us draw lots!” said Sam.

The marks were placed in a hat, and each player drew one out hap-hazard.

Fate decreed the following colours for the order of the players: a blue mallet and ball to Sam, a red one to Ursiclos, a yellow one to Sib, and a green to Miss Campbell.

“In anticipation of the ray of the same colour,” said she, “this is a good omen.”

It was Sam’s turn first, and he started the game after taking a good pinch of snuff with his partner.

It was a sight worth looking at, to see him, with his body not too straight, nor too bent, his head a little on one side, so as to be sure of striking his ball on the right spot, his hands placed one above the other on the mallet, the left above, and the right beneath, the knees slightly bent to counterbalance the force of the blow, the left foot placed alongside the ball, and the right a little behind. A perfect type of the accomplished gentleman croquet-player.

Then raising his mallet, and with it gently describing a semicircle, Sam struck the ball placed eighteen inches from the post, and did not require to make use of the privilege of a second start allowed for the first stroke; the ball, skilfully played, had passed through the first and second hoops, and only just missed the third by coming in contact with the side.

This was a very good beginning, and a murmur of applause ran through the spectators, who were standing looking on from the other side of the boundary-mark.

Aristobulus, in his turn, was less fortunate, through awkwardness, or ill-luck; he was obliged to commence three times before he could send his ball through the first hoop, and then it missed the second.

“It is very probable,” he observed to Miss Campbell, “that the calibre of this ball is not quite exact, and in that case the centre of gravity, placed eccentrically, throws it out of its course — ”

“Your turn next, Uncle Sib,” said Miss Campbell, without listening to a word of this scientific explanation.

Sib was worthy of his brother, his ball passed through the first two hoops, and stopped close to Aristobulus’s ball, which he made use of to get through the third, after he had roqueted it. Then he again roqueted the young *savant*, who looked, as much as to say, “only wait a bit!”

Finally, after bringing the two balls close together, he placed his foot on his own, and with a vigorous stroke sent his adversary’s ball flying far beyond the boundary.

Aristobulus was obliged to go after his ball; but he did so in a most composed manner, with the air of a philosopher, and then awaited his turn in the attitude of a general, who meditates a decisive blow.

Miss Campbell took her green ball, and skilfully sent it through the first two hoops.

Thus the game went on, while the brothers had decidedly the advantage, and did great havoc among their opponents’ balls! They made little signs, and understood each other at a glance, without needing to speak, and finally they were a long way ahead, to the great satisfaction of their niece, but to the infinite disgust of Aristobulus.

Miss Campbell, seeing that she was sufficiently distanced by her uncles, now began to play more seriously, and showed much more skill than her partner, who, however, did not spare her his scientific advice.

“The angle of reflection,” said he, “is equal to the angle of incidence, and that ought to show you the direction the ball will take after being struck; thus you must take advantage of — ”

“Why don’t you take advantage of it yourself, Mr. Ursiclos?” replied Miss Campbell. “Here, I am three hoops in front of you!”

In fact, Aristobulus remained sadly behind; ten times he had attempted to pass the centre hoop, without succeeding; he then began to complain of its position, and after taking it out and replacing it, he tried his fate once more.

But again fortune was unfavourable. Each time his ball would strike against the sides of the hoop, instead of going through.

Miss Campbell indeed might well have complained of her partner. She played very well, and deserved the compliments which her uncles did not spare. Nothing could have been more charming than to see her thoroughly enjoying the game, so well adapted for the display of feminine graces, her right foot half raised, in order to hold her ball when she was croqueting another, her arms coquettishly rounded as she lifted her mallet, the animation of her pretty face, and the graceful sway of her figure, made a most fascinating picture! and yet Aristobulus saw nothing of it.

It must be owned that the position of the game enraged the young *savant*; in fact, the brothers were now so far ahead that it would have been difficult to overtake them; and yet the chances in croquet are so unexpected that the game is never lost until it is won.

Such was the unequal position of affairs, when a ludicrous incident occurred.

Aristobulus at last found an opportunity to croquet Uncle Sam’s ball, which had just repassed the central hoop, before which he himself was obstinately detained.

With evident spite, although he endeavoured to appear calm to the eyes of the spectators, he now determined to make a master-stroke, and retaliate on his opponent, by sending him beyond the boundary-line. Placing his ball close to Uncle Sam’s he took pains to see that it touched, smoothing the grass down with the greatest care, then placing his left foot upon it, and lifting his mallet as high as possible, to give full force to the blow, he brought it sharply down.

A cry escaped him! A howl of pain! The mallet had struck not the ball, but the foot of the unlucky player, and there he was hopping on one leg, and uttering groans, very natural no doubt, but a trifle ludicrous.

The brothers ran up to him. Fortunately, as the leather of the boot had deadened the force of the blow, the contusion was not serious. But Aristobulus thought proper thus to account for his misadventure, —

“The radius, represented by the mallet,” said he, with a learned air, though unable to repress a grimace, “described a circle concentric to that which should have just touched the surface of the ground, because that radius was a little too short. Hence this blow — ”

“Well, sir, shall we give up the game?” asked Miss Campbell.

“Give up the game!” exclaimed Aristobulus. “Confess ourselves beaten? Never! Judging from the formula of the calculation of probabilities, it will yet be found that — ”

“Just so, let us continue,” abruptly replied Miss Campbell.

But all the formulas of the calculation of probabilities would have given but little chance to the opponents of the two brothers. Already Sam was a “rover,” that is to say, his ball having gone through all the hoops, he had struck the post, and had now but to help his partner by croqueting and roqueting any ball that he pleased.

In fact, a few more strokes definitely decided the game, and the brothers triumphed, but modestly as became conquerors. As to Aristobulus, notwithstanding his pretensions, he had not even succeeded in getting through the central hoop.

No doubt Miss Campbell wanted to appear more annoyed than she really was, and giving her ball a vigorous blow, she sent it flying, without heed as to its direction.

The ball shot right out of their plot towards the sea, rebounded on a pebble, and as Aristobulus would have said, its weight, multiplied by the square of its assistant velocity, carried it right out of the grounds.

Unlucky stroke!

A young artist was there sitting before his easel, making a sketch of the sea; the ball struck full on his canvas, smeared its green colour, with all the tints on the pallet, which it grazed in passing, and overturned the easel.

The artist turned round, and calmly remarked, —

“It is usual to give notice before beginning a bombardment. It appears we are not in safety here!”

Miss Campbell, having a presentiment of this accident before it occurred, ran towards the boundary-line.

“Oh! sir,” said she, addressing the artist, “please excuse my awkwardness!”

The young man rose and smilingly bowed to the beautiful girl, who blushed deeply as she made her apologies.

It was the hero of the Gulf of Coryvrechan!

CHAPTER XI.

OLIVER SINCLAIR.

Oliver Sinclair was a “bonnie lad,” to make use of a Scotch expression, in speaking of a gallant, sprightly youth. The last scion of a good Edinburgh family, this young Athenian of the Athens of the north was the son of an old councillor in this capital. Early left an orphan, he had been brought up by an uncle, one of the four baillies of the municipal administration, had made good use of his time at the University, and at the age of twenty, being possessor of a small independent fortune, and wishing to see something of the world, he visited the principal states of Europe, India, and America; the celebrated *Edinburgh Review* now and again published notes of his travels. Being an accomplished artist, he might have sold his pictures at a high price, had he liked. He was also a poet, when the whim took him, and who is not, at an age when all existence smiles upon one? — warm-hearted, and of an artistic nature, he was made to please, and this he did without effort or affectation on his part.

It would have been an easy matter for him to have found a wife in Edinburgh, where an accomplished, amiable, well-bred young man, with a handsome person, could not fail to find more than one heiress to his liking.

And yet Oliver Sinclair, at the age of twenty-six, did not appear to have felt any inclination to change his state. Was it that the path of life seemed too narrow for two to walk together? Not so; but likely enough he thought himself better able, as a single man, to indulge his tastes for art and travel.

Nevertheless, Oliver Sinclair might well have inspired any fair daughter of Scotland with more than ordinary liking. His elegant figure, his frank countenance, his manly yet gentle bearing and cheerful manners, made him altogether a fascinating character; but being no coxcomb, this fact had never occurred to him, or else he had never felt inclined to matrimony. Moreover, if he were calculated to inspire admiration among the ladies of Edinburgh, he was none the less liked by his friends at the University, and was one of those who, according to the old saying, never turned his back on friend or foe.

And yet, to-day, it must be admitted that he was turning his back upon Miss Campbell, who, it is true, was neither friend nor foe. In that position he had been unable to see the ball, which the young girl had so vigorously discharged; hence the disastrous effect on his canvas, and the overthrow of all his apparatus.

At the first glance, Miss Campbell had recognized her hero of the Coryvrechan; but the hero did not in the least recognize the young passenger of the *Glengary*. It was scarcely likely that during the journey from Scarba to Oban, he had even seen Miss Campbell on board. Most certainly had he known the part she had personally taken in his rescue, were it only out of politeness, he would have thanked her; but he was as yet unaware of that fact, and probably would always remain so.

Indeed, that very day, Miss Campbell forbade, yes, positively forbade, her uncles as well as Dame Bess and Partridge, to make any allusion, before this young man, to what had taken place on board the *Glengary* before the rescue.

Meanwhile, after the accident, the brothers had rejoined their niece, more vexed if possible than she, and they began to offer the young artist their personal apologies, when he interrupted them, saying, —

"Gentlemen, I beg you — it is really not worth mentioning!"

“But sir,” persisted Sib, “we are deeply grieved.”

“And if the disaster is irreparable, as we fear it is — ” added Sam.

“It is a mere trifle,” replied the young man, smiling. “A daub, nothing more, to which this avenging ball did fit justice!”

Oliver Sinclair said this with so much good-humour that the brothers would willingly have shaken hands with him without further ceremony; at any rate they thought it only polite to introduce themselves.

“Mr. Samuel Melville,” said one.

“Mr. Sebastian Melville,” said the other.

“And their niece, Miss Campbell,” added Helena, who considered it no breach of etiquette to introduce herself.

This was an invitation to the young man to state his name.

“Miss Campbell, and gentlemen,” said he, as seriously as possible, “I may tell you that I call myself ‘post,’ after one of your croquet-sticks, since I have been a mark for your ball; but my name is really Oliver Sinclair.”

“Mr. Sinclair,” replied Miss Campbell, who hardly knew how to take this answer, “please accept my apologies.”

“And ours too,” added the brothers.

“I assure you, Miss Campbell,” replied Oliver Sinclair, “it is not worth mentioning. I was trying to get an effect of the foam on the waves, and it is probable that your ball, like the sponge of — I forget what painter of antiquity, thrown across his picture, will have produced the effect which my brush was trying in vain to render.”

This was said so amiably that Miss Campbell and her uncles could hardly help smiling.

But as to the canvas which Oliver Sinclair picked up, it was quite spoilt, and the work must be begun afresh.

We may as well observe that Aristobulus did not trouble himself to add his apologies.

The game over, the young *savant*, highly annoyed at being unable to make his practical ability accord with his theoretical knowledge, had returned to his hotel.

They would probably not see him for two or three days, as he was going to Luing Island, one of the smallest of the Hebrides, situated to the south of the isle of Seil, and the rich slate quarries of which he wanted to study from a geological point of view.

Thus their conversation was carried on without any interruption in the way of explanatory remarks, which he would have been sure to make, on the tension of trajectories or other questions relative to the accident.

Oliver Sinclair soon found that he was not altogether unknown to the visitors of the Caledonian Hotel, and he then learnt that they were acquainted with the incidents of the passage.

“What!” exclaimed he, “were you really on board the *Glengary*, which fished me up so luckily?”

“Yes, Mr. Sinclair.”

“And you frightened us nicely,” added Sib, “when, by the greatest chance, we saw your boat among the breakers of the Coryvrechan.”

“A most providential chance,” added Sam; “and probably had it not been for the interposition of — ”

Here Miss Campbell made her uncle understand by a sign that she did not intend to pose as a deliverer, nor would she accept that *rôle* at any price.

“But, Mr. Sinclair,” continued Sam, “how could the old seaman, who was with you, have been imprudent enough to venture so near the gulf — ”

“The danger of which he must well have known, since he belonged to this part of the country?” added Sib.

“You must not blame him, gentlemen,” replied Oliver Sinclair; “it was entirely my imprudence, mine alone, and at one time I thought I should have to reproach myself with being the cause of the honest fellow’s death! But there were such wondrous colours on the surface of the eddies where the sea looked like an immense piece of guipure lace thrown over blue silk, that, without giving another thought as to probable danger, I set out in search of some new shade of colour in the midst of these waters, impregnated with light, and so I went on, and on! The old fisherman, knowing the danger, remonstrated with me, and wanted to turn back towards Jura, but I scarcely listened to him; and at last our boat was caught by the tide, and irresistibly drawn towards the gulf. We made every effort to clear ourselves. A heavy sea disabled my companion, and left him powerless to help me, and certainly, had it not been for the timely arrival of the *Glengary*, the skill of her captain, and humanity of the passengers, the fisherman and I would soon have passed into the legendary state, and would be included in the obituary of the Coryvrechan!”

Miss Campbell listened without saying a word, and now and then raised her beautiful eyes on the speaker, who did not embarrass her by returning her glance. She could not help smiling when he spoke of his chase, or rather of his fishing for marine tints. Was she not also engaged in a search somewhat less perilous, at the same time, the search for a celestial tint, the pursuit of the Green Ray?

The brothers could not refrain from mentioning the motive which had brought them to Oban, which was in fact the observation of the physical phenomenon, the nature of which they did their best to explain to the young artist.

“The Green Ray!” exclaimed Oliver Sinclair.

“Have you already seen it?” quickly asked the young girl. “Have you already seen it?”

“No, Miss Campbell, I never even knew that such a ray was to be seen. No, in truth, but now I am all anxiety to see it, and the sun shall not set again without having me for witness! By St. Dunstan, I will not draw another stroke till I have seen the colour of its last ray!”

It was difficult to know whether Oliver Sinclair spoke in jest or earnest, or if he were merely giving vent to artistic enthusiasm. At the same time Miss Campbell had a kind of presentiment that the young man was not joking.

“Mr. Sinclair,” she resumed, “the Green Ray is not my particular property! it shines for every one, and loses nothing of its value because more than one see it at the same time! If you like, we might try and see it together."

"Most willingly. Miss Campbell."

"But you will have to be very patient."

"We will be perfect models — "

"And not be afraid of hurting your eyesight," said Sam.

"The Green Ray is well worth that risk," replied Sinclair; "and I promise you I will not leave Oban till I have seen it."

"We have already been once to the island of Seil to observe this ray," said Miss Campbell, "but a little cloud hid the horizon just as the sun was setting."

"How unfortunate."

"Unfortunate indeed, Mr. Sinclair, for since that evening the sky has never been clear enough for us."

"We shall have more fine evenings yet, Miss Campbell. The summer is not over, and before the bad weather comes on, believe me, the sun will have the charity to show us his Green Ray."

"To tell the truth, Mr. Sinclair," continued Miss Campbell, "we should certainly have seen it on the evening of the 2nd of August, just on the horizon of the Coryvrechan Straits, had not our attention been distracted by a certain rescue."

"Indeed, Miss Campbell," replied Sinclair; "alas! that I should have been unfortunate enough to divert your attention at such a moment! My imprudence cost you the sight of the Green Ray! Then it is I who must humbly apologize to you, and assure you of my regret for my inopportune interference. It shall not happen again.”

And thus they talked of one thing and another on their way back to the Caledonian Hotel, where Oliver Sinclair happened to have taken rooms the previous evening on his return from an excursion to the environs of Dalmally. The young gentleman, whose frank and lively manner by no means displeased the brothers — far from it — was then led to speak of Edinburgh and of his uncle, the Baillie Patrick Oldimer, whom it happened that the brothers had known for many years, distance alone having suspended the acquaintance between the two families.

Thus they felt perfectly at home with each other, and Oliver Sinclair was invited to renew friendship with the Melvilles. As he had no reason for leaving Oban, he declared himself more ready than ever to remain and join in the search for the famous ray.

It happened after this that Miss Campbell and her uncles frequently met him on the beach; they made observations on the weather together, and ten times a day looked at the barometer, which showed some feeble signs of rising; in fact, on the morning of the 14th of August the amiable instrument was more propitious than ever.

With what delight Oliver Sinclair, that day, brought the news to Miss Campbell. A sky pure as the eye of a Madonna, an azure vault, which shaded off from deep indigo to ultramarine, with not the slightest haze to be seen anywhere, gave prospect of a splendid evening, and a sunset which would have entranced any astronomer!

“If we do not see our ray at sunset,” said Oliver Sinclair, “it will be because we are blind.”

“Uncles,” replied Miss Campbell, “you quite understand we are to go this evening?”

It was then agreed that they should set out before dinner for the island of Seil, which accordingly they did about five o’clock.

The carriage took them along the picturesque road to Glachan; Miss Campbell radiant with delight, Oliver Sinclair in high spirits, and the brothers partaking of the general good-humour. One would have thought that they were taking the sun with them in their carriage, and that the four horses drawing them were the hippogriffs of Apollo’s chariot!

Having reached the island of Seil, the enthusiastic observers found an horizon without the slightest obstacle to mar its purity. They went and seated themselves at the extreme end of a narrow headland which separated two creeks along the coast and jutted a mile into the sea.

“At last we are going to catch this capricious ray which is so chary about letting itself be seen!” said Sinclair.

“I believe so — ” replied Sam.

“I am certain of it — ” added Sib.

“And for my part, I hope so,” said Miss Campbell, looking at the clear sea and cloudless sky.

In fact, everything seemed to predict that at sunset the phenomenon would show itself in all its splendour.

Already the sinking sun was but a few degrees above the horizon; its crimson disk tinged the western sky with ruddy light, and cast a long train of dazzling brightness over the peaceful waters.

Silently waiting for the apparition, and as though entranced by the close of this glorious day, they watched the sun as it slowly sank like a ball of fire. All at once an involuntary cry escaped Miss Campbell, and it was followed by an anxious exclamation, which neither the brothers nor Oliver Sinclair could repress.

A sailing-boat doubled the island of Easdale, lying at the foot of Seil, and slowly made towards the west, its sail spread like a screen, extended above the horizon. Would it hide the sun just as its orb dipped beneath the waves?

It was a matter of seconds. There was no time to turn back or run in either direction, in order to see the point of contact; the narrowness of the headland would not allow a sufficient angle to permit them to get any other view of the sun.

Miss Campbell, in despair at this *contretemps*, ran to-and-fro on the rocks; Sinclair made frantic gestures to the occupants of the boat, and shouted to them to take in their sail.

But all in vain! They neither saw nor heard him. A light breeze, aided by the tide, was carrying the boat steadily towards the west.

Just as the upper rim of the sun’s disk was about to disappear, the boat passed in front of it and quite hid it behind its opaque sail.

Vain expectation! This time the Green Ray had been launched from a cloudless horizon, but had been intercepted by the sail before it could reach the promontory, from which so many eyes were anxiously watching.

Miss Campbell, Oliver Sinclair, and the brothers, intensely disappointed, and more irritated perhaps than this mischance warranted, stood as if petrified, forgetting even to move away, as they anathematized the boat and her occupants.

Meanwhile, this unlucky boat had come into a small bay in the island of Seil, at the very foot of the promontory, and at this moment a passenger landed from it, leaving on board two sailors who had brought him from Luing Island; then he walked along the beach and climbed the rocks, in order to reach the summit of the point.

Evidently the intruder must have recognized the group of observers standing on the plateau, for he bowed to them familiarly.

“Mr. Ursiclos!” exclaimed Miss Campbell.

“He! can it be he?” cried her two uncles.

“And who may this gentleman be?” said Oliver Sinclair to himself.

It was indeed Aristobulus in person, who was returning after a scientific tour of some days from the island of Luing.

How he was received by those, whose dearest wish he had just succeeded in frustrating, need not be told here.

The brothers, forgetting all etiquette, never even thought of introducing him to Oliver Sinclair. In presence of Helena’s discomfiture, they paid little attention to the suitor of their choice.

Miss Campbell, with her little hands clenched, her arms crossed on her breast, and her eyes sparkling with indignation, looked at him without saying a word. Then at last these words escaped her, —

“Mr. Ursiclos, you should have known better than to have played us such a trick!”

CHAPTER XII.

NEW PLANS.

The return to Oban was hardly as pleasant as the drive to Seil had been; they had set out confident of success, and were going back defeated.

If Miss Campbell’s disappointment could possibly have been increased, it was owing to the fact of its being caused by Aristobulus Ursiclos. She had some reason to blame this great culprit and vent her wrath on his head, and she made good use of the privilege. Her uncles would have been very ill-advised had they tried to defend him. No! it was perfectly evident that this clumsy fellow, of whom they were little thinking, had taken the boat and sailed right in front of the sunset on purpose, and such a wrong could never be forgiven.

Needless to say that after this rating, Aristobulus, who tried to excuse himself by ridiculing the idea of the Green Ray, returned by boat to Oban, and it was well he did, for probably he would not have been offered a seat in the carriage, nor one on the box even.

Thus twice the sun had set under conditions quite favourable to the observation of the phenomenon, and twice Miss Campbell had exposed her eyesight to the dazzling glare, all in vain! First of all the rescue of Oliver Sinclair, and then Aristobulus’s boat had caused her to miss opportunities which might be long in recurring! It is true the circumstances were not the same in both cases, and Miss Campbell made excuses for the one as much as she blamed the other, so who could have accused her of partiality?

The following day Oliver Sinclair was sauntering dreamily along the sea-shore.

“Who was this Mr. Ursiclos? A relation of Miss Campbell’s, or simply a friend? At any rate, he was evidently on very familiar terms with the family from the way in which the young lady scolded him for his awkwardness. But what could it matter to Oliver Sinclair? If he wished to know, he had but to ask either of the two brothers.” This was precisely what the young man did not care to do.

However, he had plenty of opportunities of doing so, scarcely a day passed without meeting the brothers — who could flatter himself that he had ever seen the one without the other? — and sometimes their niece with them, walking along the shore. They talked of all kinds of things, but especially of the weather, which in the open air is not always a mere excuse for something to say. Would they ever get another perfect evening, to enable them to try their fortune at the island of Seil once more? They had their doubts about it; indeed, since those two fine days, the 2nd and 14th of August, the sky had been very uncertain; there were nothing but storm-clouds, hazy horizons, and twilight mists, enough to drive to despair any student of astronomy anxious to make a survey of some particular corner of the celestial globe!

Why not confess that Oliver Sinclair was now bewitched with the Green Ray quite as much as Miss Campbell? He had entered into the spirit of the search with the beautiful young girl, with her he had studied the realms of space, and he followed up the fancy with no less eagerness, not to say impatience, than did his young companion. Ah! he was not an Aristobulus Ursiclos with his head in the clouds of lofty science, treating with contempt this simple optical phenomenon! They both understood each other, and both were anxious to be of that rare number of privileged beings to whom the Green Ray might reveal itself.

“We will see it. Miss Campbell; we will see it,” repeated Oliver Sinclair, “even if I have to go and light it up myself! In fact, it was my fault that you missed seeing it the first time, and I am as much to blame as that Mr. Ursiclos — a relation of yours, I believe?”

“No. My betrothed, it would seem,” replied Miss Campbell, walking on somewhat hurriedly to her uncles, who were a little way in front of them.

Her betrothed! It was singular the effect this reply, especially the tone in which it was made, had on Oliver Sinclair. After all why should this young pedant not be her fiancé? At any rate, under those circumstances, his presence at Oban might be accounted for. Because he had been clumsy enough to come between Miss Campbell and the sun, it did not follow — What did not follow? Oliver Sinclair would perhaps have been at a loss to say.

Besides, two days later, Aristobulus Ursiclos again turned up; Oliver often saw him in company with the brothers, who would not altogether treat him coldly, and he seemed to be on the best of terms with them. The young artist and the *savant* had met on one or two occasions, and the brothers at last remembered to introduce them to each other.

“Mr. Aristobulus Ursiclos, of Dumfries.”

“Mr. Oliver Sinclair, of Edinburgh!”

The young men bowed stiffly to each other, evidently there was not much sympathy between these two characters. The one examined the sky as though he would bring down the stars, the other as if to forecast the weather; the artist made no attempt to figure on the pedestal of art, the *savant* made for himself a pedestal of science, on which he might strike attitudes.

As to Miss Campbell, she treated Aristobulus with the greatest coolness. If he were present, she quite ignored him; if he happened to pass her, she turned her head the other way; in a word, as has been before remarked, she most distinctly cut him, and her uncles had some trouble to smooth matters over. However this may be, it was their opinion that all would turn out well, especially if this whimsical ray would but allow itself to be seen.

Meanwhile, Aristobulus eyed Oliver Sinclair over his spectacles, a frequent habit with short-sighted people, who want to look without seeming to do so; and what he saw — the young man’s assiduous attention to Miss Campbell, and the amiable manner in which she always received him — was not altogether calculated to please him, but highly confident in his own powers of attraction, he maintained a very proper reserve.

Meantime, this changeable weather was enough to try any one’s patience to the utmost. In the hope of seeing a clear horizon at sunset, were it but for a few moments, they made two or three excursions to the island of Seil, in which Aristobulus could not find time to join. But all in vain! the 23rd of August arrived without any sight of the phenomenon.

This fancy had become a fixed and besetting idea, which left no room for anything else; they dreamt of it night and day, till one might have feared it would engender some new kind of monomania. Under this one intense thought, colours all seemed to be transformed into one shade: the blue sky became green, the roads were green, the sea-shore was green, the rocks were green, water and wine seemed green as absinthe; even the brothers imagined they were dressed in green, and felt like two big paroquets, taking green snuff out of a green snuff-box. In fact, it was a case of green fever!

They were all seized with a kind of daltonism, and oculists might have had wherewithal to make interesting notes in their ophthalmological reviews. This state of things could not last long.

Fortunately Oliver Sinclair hit upon an idea.

“Miss Campbell,” said he one day, “and you, gentlemen, it seems to me that, considering everything, Oban is not the best place possible for our observation of the phenomenon in question.”

“And whose fault is that?” replied Miss Campbell, looking at the two culprits, who held down their heads.

“Here, there is no sea-horizon!” continued the young artist, “so that we are obliged to go as far as Seil to get one, at the risk too of not arriving there at the right moment.

“This is very evident,” said Miss Campbell; “in fact, I don’t know why my uncles ever thought of choosing this horrible place for our experiment.”

“My dear Helena!” exclaimed her Uncle Sam, scarcely knowing what to say, “we thought — ”

“Yes, we thought — the same thing — ” added Uncle Sib, coming to his brother’s assistance.

“That the sun would most certainly set every evening upon the horizon at Oban — ”

“Since Oban is situated on the sea-coast!”

“And you thought wrong, uncles,” replied Miss Campbell; “very wrong, indeed, as it never sets there.”

“Just so,” resumed Sam, “it is those tiresome islands which obstruct our view.”

“You really don’t intend to have them blown up?” asked Miss Campbell.

“It should have been done long ago, had it been possible,” replied Sib, in a decided tone.

“Nevertheless, we cannot go and take up our abode on the island of Seil,” observed Sam.

“And why not?”

“If you absolutely wish it, dear Helena — ”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Let us go, then!” said the brothers, with an air of resignation. And these two submissive beings declared themselves ready to leave Oban at once.

Here Oliver Sinclair interposed.

“Miss Campbell,” said he, “unless you have set your heart upon it, I think you might do better than take up your quarters at Seil.”

“Let us hear your opinion, Mr. Sinclair; and if your advice is good, my uncles will not refuse to follow it.”

The brothers nodded assent with an automatical movement so identical that never perhaps had they looked so much alike.

“The island of Seil,” continued Oliver Sinclair, “is most certainly not adapted for a lengthened stay, not even for a few days. If you have to exercise your patience, Miss Campbell, it will but be for your ultimate benefit. Besides, I have noticed at Seil that the view of the sea is somewhat limited by the configuration of the coast. If, by chance, we had to wait longer than we thought for, and our stay were prolonged for some weeks, it might happen that the sun, which is now retrograding towards the west, would at last set behind Colonsay, or Oransay, or even Islay, and our observation would again be baffled, for want of a sufficiently large expanse of sea.”

“Truly,” replied Miss Campbell, “this would be the last blow to our ill-fortune — ”

“And which we can perhaps avoid by looking for a place beyond this archipelago, bounded only by the wide Atlantic.”

“And do you know of such a place, Mr. Sinclair?” eagerly asked Miss Campbell.

The brothers anxiously awaited the young man’s answer. What would he reply? Where on earth would their niece’s caprice finally land them? Upon what farmost extremity of the globe would they have to settle themselves in order to satisfy her whim?

Oliver Sinclair’s reply at once reassured them.

“Miss Campbell,” said he, “not far from here, there is an island which seems to me to be just the place. It is situated beyond the heights of Mull, which shut in the western horizon of Oban, and is one of the smallest of the

Hebrides, standing out farthest into the Atlantic; it is the charming island of Iona.”

“Iona!” cried Miss Campbell, “Iona, uncles, oh! why are we not there now?”

“We will be there to-morrow,” replied Sib.

“To-morrow, before sunset,” added Sam.

“Let us be off, then,” said Miss Campbell, “and if we do not find at Iona a wide expanse of sea, you must understand, uncles, we will search for some other point on the coast, from John o’ Groat’s to the Land’s End, and if that does not do — ”

“It is very simple,” said Oliver Sinclair, “we will go round the world!”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GLORIES OF THE SEA.

If any one showed signs of vexation at the decision arrived at, it was Mr. MacFyne, the hotel-keeper; had it been possible, he would have had every island lying in front of Oban blown up. The worthy man had to console himself, when his visitors were gone, by regretting that he had ever taken in such a party of monomaniacs.

At eight o'clock in the morning Miss Campbell, her uncles, Dame Bess, and Partridge, embarked on the "swift steamer *Pioneer*," as said the prospectus, which made the trip round Mull, calling at Iona and Staffa, and returning to Oban the same evening.

Oliver Sinclair had gone down before them to the quay, and was awaiting his friends on the foot-bridge, between the paddle-boards of the steamer.

Aristobulus Ursiclos was not to be thought of for this trip, and yet the brothers were obliged to acquaint him with their sudden departure; it was only common politeness, and they were the most polite of men.

Aristobulus received the communication very coolly, and merely thanked them without saying a word as to his own plans.

Thus the brothers had gone off, contenting themselves with the thought that, though their protégé was extremely reserved, and their niece somewhat averse to him, yet all would be changed one fine autumn evening after a beautiful sunset, which Iona could not fail to give them.

All the passengers being on board, the moorings were cast after the third shrill whistle had sounded, and the *Pioneer* steamed out of the bay, taking a southerly course for the straits of Kerera.

There were a good many tourists on board, attracted by this charming excursion round Mull, which takes place once or twice a week, but Miss Campbell and her companions were to leave them at the first landing-place.

They were all impatience to reach Iona, this new field for their observation. The weather was splendid, the sea calm as a lake, and there was every promise of a fine passage. If that same evening did not bring them the realization of their wishes, well! they would wait patiently, after having settled down on the island. There, at least, the curtain was always raised and the scenery ready, so that nothing but bad weather could come in the way.

They would reach their destination before midday. The Pioneer passed through the straits of Kerera, doubled the southern point of the island, steamed across the wide mouth of the Frith of Lorn, left behind Colonsay and its ancient abbey, built in the fourteenth century by the celebrated Lords of the Isles, and ranged along the southern coast of Mull, lying in the open sea, like an immense crab with one claw slightly curved towards the south-west. At one moment Ben More, clad with heather, lifted its rugged head three thousand two hundred feet above the range of distant hills, its rounded summit overlooking those pasture-lands, sharply divided by the imposing mass of Ardalanish point.

Then the picturesque island of Iona stood out against the north-west, almost at the end of the southern point of Mull, and beyond lay the vast Atlantic.

“Are you fond of the sea, Mr. Sinclair?” asked Miss Campbell of her young companion, who sat near her on the deck, gazing at the lovely prospect.

"Am I fond of it, Miss Campbell?" replied he. "Yes, and I am not one of those miserable individuals who find the sight of it monotonous! To me, nothing is more varied than its appearance, but one must see it under its different aspects. The sea takes so many shades of colour, marvellously blended, that it is perhaps more difficult for an artist to produce an effect at the same time uniform and varied, than to paint a face, however changeable the expression may be."

"Yes," said Helena, "it changes incessantly with the slightest breath of wind, and alters every hour of the day, according to the light with which it is impregnated."

"Look at it now, Miss Campbell; it is perfectly calm! Does it not look like a lovely face asleep, in its unalterable serenity? It has not a wrinkle, it is young, it is beautiful! or, if you prefer it, it is an immense mirror, which reflects the sky, and in which God Himself is visible!"

"A mirror often dimmed by the breath of tempests!" added Miss Campbell.

"And," continued Oliver Sinclair, "it is that which makes the great variety, in the aspect of the ocean! Let but a little wind arise, the face will change, will grow wrinkled, and hoary with feathery spray; it will look old in a moment, but it will still be grand with its fitful phosphorescence, and its foam-flecked waves."

"Do you think, Mr. Sinclair," asked Miss Campbell, "that any artist, however clever he may be, could reproduce all the beauties of the sea on canvas?"

"No, indeed, Miss Campbell, and how could he? The sea has really no colour of its own; it is but an immense reflection of the sky; if it is blue, it is not a blue that one can paint; if it is green, there is no green that will match it! It should rather be depicted in a tempest, when it is dark, gloomy and livid, when it seems as though sky and sea were blended! Ah! Miss Campbell, the more I see of it, the more I find the ocean sublime! Ocean! that word says everything! It is immensity! Unfathomable depths below it are regions beside which ours are deserts! as Darwin says. What, compared to it, are the vastest continents? Mere islands surrounded by its waters! it covers four-fifths of the globe! By incessant circulation, it is nourished by the vapours which it emits. Yes, the ocean is infinite, an infinity one cannot see, but feel, infinite as the space it reflects in its waters, as says one of the poets."

"I like to hear you speak with such enthusiasm' Mr. Sinclair," said Miss Campbell, "and I quite share your feelings! Yes, I love the sea as much as you do."

"And you will not be afraid of braving its perils?" asked Oliver.

"No, indeed, I shall not be afraid! Can one be afraid of what one admires?"

"Would you like to be a daring explorer?"

"Perhaps so, Mr. Sinclair," replied Helena. "At any rate, of all the accounts of travels I have read, I prefer those relating to the discovery of distant seas. How often I have travelled over them with the great navigators! How often I have wandered into the great unknown, in imagination only, it is true, but I know nothing more enviable than the position of those heroes who have accomplished such grand discoveries."

"Yes, Miss Campbell, in the history of all ages, what is there more worthy of admiration? Only to think of crossing the Atlantic for the first time with

Columbus, the Pacific with Magellan, the polar seas with Parry, Franklin, and many others! I can never see a ship, man-of-war, trading-vessel, or even a simple fishing-smack, set out on any journey without my whole heart going with it. I think I was made for a sailor, and I regret, every day of my life, that it has not been my vocation."

"At any rate, you have been a great deal on the sea, have you not?" asked Miss Campbell.

"As much as I could," replied Oliver Sinclair. "I have been up the Mediterranean from the Straits of Gibraltar to the ports of the Levant, across the Atlantic to North America, and on the northern seas of Europe, and I know all the waters round England and Scotland — "

"And how magnificent they are, Mr. Sinclair!"

"Yes, indeed, I know of nothing to compare with these shores! We have here another archipelago; perhaps the sky is not so intensely blue as in the east, but the rugged rocks and hazy horizons make it much more romantic. The Grecian Archipelago gave birth to a whole company of gods and goddesses. That may be! but you may have remarked that they were very matter-of-fact divinities, very practical, and, moreover, endowed with corporeal life, doing business and reckoning up their accounts like any ordinary mortal. In my idea, Olympus appears like a great reception-room for rather common-place divinities. This is not the case with our Hebrides; they are the abode of supernatural beings! The ethereal Scandinavian deities are not in the least corporeal, but invisible beings, such as Odin, Ossian, Fingal, and the host of poetical phantoms, from the pages of the Sagas. How enchanting are these imaginary forms, which our memories can invoke, in the midst of Arctic gloom, or across the snows of northern regions! Here is an Olympus far more divine than its Grecian namesake;

there is nothing earthly about it, and if one had to search the wide world for a place worthy of such guests, it would be found in our Hebrides. Yes, Miss Campbell, this is where I should come to worship our divinities, and, like a true son of Caledonia, I would not change our archipelago with its two hundred isles, its grey skies, its tumultuous seas, influenced by the Gulf-stream, for all the archipelagos in the east."

"And it is all our own, being true Highlanders!" said Miss Campbell, carried away by her companion's enthusiastic words. "Ah! Mr. Sinclair, I am like you, passionately fond of our archipelago! it is magnificent, especially when lashed by the fury of tempests."

"It is indeed sublime," replied Oliver Sinclair. "There is nothing on the way to obstruct the violence of the gales which vent their force here after travelling three thousand miles! The American coast faces Scotland, and though great storms may rise there, it is the western coast of Europe which gets the first benefit of their fury! But what can they do against our Hebrides, which are not like that man of whom Livingstone speaks, who had no fear of lions, but was afraid of the sea? These isles, with their solid granite bases, can laugh to scorn the violence of wind and sea."

"The sea! A chemical combination of hydrogen and oxygen with two and a half per cent. of chloride of sodium! Indeed, nothing can be more sublime than the violent agitations of chloride of sodium!"

Miss Campbell and Oliver turned round on hearing these words, which were evidently meant for them, and intended as a reply to their enthusiastic eulogies.

Aristobulus Ursiclos was standing close behind them. The troublesome fellow could not resist the desire to leave Oban at the same time as Miss

Campbell, knowing that Oliver Sinclair was accompanying her to Iona. Having come on board before them, he had remained in the saloon till just as they were within sight of the island.

The workings of chloride of sodium indeed! what a blow to their romantic visions!

CHAPTER XIV.

LIFE AT IONA.

Meanwhile Iona — its ancient name being Isle of the Waves — rearing its cathedral hill about four hundred feet above the level of the sea, gradually grew more distinct as the steamer rapidly approached it.

About midday, the *Pioneer* came alongside a little jetty, made of roughly hewn rock, green with the constant wash of water. The passengers disembarked, some to return to Oban an hour later by the Straits of Mull, others — our friends being of that number — with the intention of remaining on the island.

Iona has no harbour properly speaking; a stone quay protects one of its creeks against the open sea, and that is all. Here, in fine weather, a few pleasure-boats, or fishing-smacks, lie at anchor.

Leaving the tourists to the mercy of a programme which obliged them to see the island in an hour. Miss Campbell and her companions went in search of suitable lodgings.

It was not to be expected, that they would find any of the comforts of an ordinary seaside place at Iona; in fact the island is not more than three miles long, and one mile broad, and can scarcely count five hundred inhabitants. The Duke of Argyll, to whom it belongs, only draws from it a revenue of a few hundred pounds. There is no town, hamlet, nor even village here; nothing but a few scattered houses, for the most part mere ruins, picturesque if you like, but very primitive, almost all windowless, lighted only by the doorways, with a hole in the roof for a chimney, the walls made of mud and pebbles, and a few huts of reeds and briars bound together with great withies of seaweed.

Who would believe that Iona was the cradle of the religion of the Druids, from the earliest ages of Scandinavian history? Who would have imagined that it was here St. Columba — the patron saint of Ireland, whose name it also bears — in the sixth century founded the first monastery in all Scotland for the preaching of Christianity, and that here the monks of Cluny lived up to the time of the Reformation! Where will one now find the great buildings which were, in a way, the seminaries of the bishops and great abbots of the United Kingdom? Where, amidst all the *débris*, shall one look for the library, rich in archives of the past, in manuscripts of Roman history, and in which the learned of the day came to study? No; at the present time, there is nothing but ruins, here where the civilization which so greatly changed all the northern states of Europe had its birth. Of the St. Columba of olden times, there now remains nothing but the island of Iona, with a few ignorant peasants, who can, with difficulty, get a crop of barley, wheat, and potatoes off its sandy soil, and a few fishermen who live on the fish-abounding waters of the Hebrides!

“Miss Campbell,” said Aristobulus, in a contemptuous tone, “on first impressions, do you think this comes up to Oban?”

“It is much better,” replied Miss Campbell, although no doubt she thought that there would be one inhabitant too many on the island.

Meanwhile, in lack of better accommodation, the brothers had discovered a very passable kind of inn, where tourists generally stayed who were not content with the short time the steamer allowed them for visiting the Druidical and Christian ruins. They were thus able to take up their abode at the Duncan Arms the same day, whilst Oliver Sinclair and Aristobulus Ursiclos found lodgings in different fishermen's huts.

But such was Miss Campbell's frame of mind that she was as comfortable in her room, with its window looking towards the west, as on the terrace of the high tower at Helensburgh, certainly more so than in the drawing-room of the Caledonian Hotel. From here the horizon lay before her eyes, without a single islet to break its circular line, and, with a little stretch of imagination, she might have been able to see, three thousand miles distant, the American coast on the other side of the Atlantic. Truly the sun had here a fine expanse in which to set in all its splendour.

The every-day living was simply and easily arranged; the meals were partaken of together in the one long room. Dame Bess and Partridge sitting at the same table according to the old custom.

Perhaps Aristobulus showed some surprise at this, but Oliver Sinclair had nothing to say against it; he had taken a great liking to these two servants, who warmly returned the feeling.

Here our friends led the old Scotch life in all its simplicity. After walks on the island, after conversation on bygone times, in which Aristobulus Ursiclos always chimed in most inopportunely with his modern remarks, they all met at the midday dinner and eight o'clock supper. Then as for the sunset, Miss Campbell never failed to watch it were the weather fine or cloudy! Who could tell? There might be some rift in the clouds, a cleft or tiny gap through which the last ray could be seen.

And what meals they had! The most Scotch of Walter Scott's guests at a dinner at Fergus MacIvor's or a supper at the Antiquary Oldbuck's, would have found nothing to complain of in the dishes served according to the old-fashioned customs. Dame Bess and Partridge, carried a century back, felt as happy as if they had lived in the time of their ancestors. The brothers were evidently pleased to see culinary preparations such as they could remember of old in the Melville family.

And this is something like the conversation during meal-time, in the long room, transformed into a dining-room.

“Take a few of these oatmeal cakes, they are very different from the sweet things they sell at Glasgow!”

“Do have some sowens; the mountaineers of the Highlands still eat this old-fashioned dish!”

“Some more ‘haggis,’ which our great poet Burns worthily celebrated in his verses, as the first, best, and most national of Scotch dishes.”

“A little of this ‘cockyleeky.’ If the cock is a little tough, the leeks it is dressed with are excellent.”

“And another helping of this hotch-potch, which beats any soup we get at Helensburgh!”

Ah! They fed well at the Duncan Arms, stocked with provision every two days by steamers going round the Hebrides! and they drank well also!

It was a sight worth seeing to look at the brothers talking together over their huge mugs, which held at least two quarts, and in which foamed the “usquebaugh,” the national beverage, *par excellence*, or “hummok,” better still, which was brewed especially for them! And the whisky made from barley which seemed to go on fermenting after it had been drunk! And if there was no strong beer, were they not content with the simple “mum” distilled from wheat, were it but the “twopenny” which can always be improved by a little gin! With such drinks they scarcely missed their port and sherry.

And if Aristobulus Ursiclos, accustomed to his modern comforts, was never tired of complaining, no one troubled to listen to him.

If he found the time pass very slowly on the island, it went quickly enough for the others, and Miss Campbell made no more protest against the mists which clouded the horizon every evening.

Certainly Iona was not a very large place, but does any one, who is fond of walking, want such extensive grounds? Cannot the whole of a royal park be contained in the end of a garden? They took long walks, and here and there Oliver Sinclair made sketches, Miss Campbell would watch him painting, and thus the time went on.

The 26th, 27th, 28th, and 29th, of August, followed each other without one moment of *ennui*. This wild life was in keeping with the wild island, against whose great desolate rocks the sea broke with a continuous roar.

Miss Campbell delighted to have got away from the inquisitive, noisy world one meets at sea-side towns, walked out as she would have done in the park at Helensburgh, with her “rokelay” wrapped around her like a mantilla, and her hair tied up with the ribbon or “snood” so becoming to young Scotch girls. Oliver Sinclair was never tired of admiring her grace, her charming person, and fascinating ways. They often wandered along together, talking, looking around, and searching among the sea-wrack left by the last tide, till they had reached the farther end of the island. Whole flocks of divers would fly up before them, scared by their approach, herons in search of small fish thrown up by the tide, and solan geese, with their white-tipped wings and yellow heads, which especially represent the class of palmiped's found in the Hebrides.

Then, as evening came on, after the sunset which was invariably veiled in mist, nothing pleased Miss Campbell and her friends, more than to wander down to the solitary shore, and spend the evening there! The stars shone out, and with them came memories of the poems of Ossian. In the stillness of the twilight, Miss Campbell and Oliver Sinclair heard the brothers reciting alternate lines from their favourite poet, the unfortunate son of Fingal.

"Star of descending night! fair is thy light in the west! thou liftest thy unshorn head from thy cloud: thy steps are stately on thy hill. What dost thou behold in the plain?

The stormy winds are laid. The murmur of the torrent comes from afar. Roaring waves climb the distant rock. The flies of evening are on their feeble wings; the hum of their course is on the field.

What dost thou behold, fair light? But thou dost smile and depart. The waves come with joy around thee; they bathe thy lovely hair. Farewell, thou silent beam! Let the light of Ossian's soul arise!"

Then silence followed, and they all went back to the little room at the inn.

Meanwhile, however short-sighted the brothers might be, they could well see that Oliver Sinclair gained exactly as Aristobulus lost in Miss Campbell's estimation. The two young men avoided each other as much as possible, the uncles did their utmost, and not without some difficulty preserved harmony among the little family.

Yes, they would have been glad to see Ursiclos and Sinclair seeking, instead of avoiding each other’s society, and maintaining as they did a contemptuous silence in each other’s presence.

Did they think that all men regarded each other as brothers, and as such brothers as they themselves were?

At last they managed so cleverly that on the 30th of August, it was agreed that they should all go together to visit the ruins of the Cathedral and monastery, and the cemetery, situated to the north-east and south of the cathedral hill.

This excursion, which tourists make in less than two hours, had not yet been taken by the new-comers on the island. It was a sad want of deference towards the legendary shades of those hermit monks who dwelt in the huts along the coast, a want of respect towards the illustrious dead of the royal houses from Fergus II. to Macbeth.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RUINS OF IONA.

That same day, Miss Campbell, her uncles, and the two young men, set out on their excursion directly after breakfast. It was fine autumn weather, and every now and then bright sunbeams darted through rifts in the clouds. In these intermittent gleams of sunshine, the ruins crowning that part of the island, the rocks picturesquely grouped along the coast, the houses scattered upon the undulating slopes of Iona, and the sea rippling under a light breeze, seemed to lose their somewhat sombre aspect, and grew bright in the cheering light.

It was not a visitors’ day; the steamer had brought over about fifty of them the day before, and would doubtless bring as many on the morrow, but at present Iona belonged entirely to its new inhabitants, and the ruins were quite deserted when our excursionists reached them.

They had a very lively walk. The brothers’ good-humour seemed to infect the rest of the party, and they chatted away as they followed each other along the little shingly paths between the low walls of bare rock.

All went on pleasantly till they reached MacLean’s Calvary. This fine red, granite monument, fourteen feet high, which overlooks the high road to Main Street, is the only one left of the three hundred and sixty crosses with which the island was covered at the time of the Reformation, about the middle of the sixteenth century.

Oliver Sinclair was anxious to make a sketch of this monument, which is a fine work, and stands out well in the midst of a bare, desolate plain.

Miss Campbell and her uncles stood round the young artist, about fifty feet from the Calvary, where they could get a full view of it, and Oliver Sinclair, sitting on a corner of a low wall, began to draw the outline of the ground on which the cross stood.

They had only been there a few moments, when it seemed to them all that a human form was trying to climb the steps of the Calvary.

“Well!” exclaimed Sinclair, “what can that intruder want there? If he were but dressed like a monk, he would not be in the way, and I could depict him prostrate at the foot of the old cross!”

“It is only some inquisitive body who is just in your way, Mr. Sinclair,” replied Miss Campbell.

“Stay, is it not Mr. Ursiclos, who has got ahead of us?” said Sam.

“‘Tis he, to be sure!” added Sib.

It was indeed Aristobulus, mounted on the base of the monument, which he was vigorously attacking with his hammer.

Incensed at the mineralogist’s want of respect, Miss Campbell immediately ran towards him.

“What are you doing there, sir?” she asked.

“You can see. Miss Campbell,” replied Aristobulus; “I am trying to chip off a piece of the granite.”

“But what is the use of such folly? I thought that the time of iconoclasts had long since passed.”

“I am by no means an iconoclast,” replied Aristobulus, “but a geologist, and as such I am anxious to know the nature of this stone.”

A violent blow with the hammer finished the work of defacement, and a piece of the stone basement rolled on the ground.

Aristobulus picked it up, and increasing the power of his spectacles by a large magnifying-glass, which he drew from its case, he put it close to the end of his nose.

“It is just as I expected,” said he. “This is a red granite of a very close, hard grain, which must have been brought from the Island of Nuns, and is, in every respect, similar to that used by the architects of the cathedral in the twelfth century.”

And Aristobulus could not resist this capital opportunity of launching into an archæological discourse, to which the brothers, who had now come up, thought it their duty to listen.

Without further ceremony, Miss Campbell went back to Oliver Sinclair, and when the sketch was finished, they all met again in the enclosure of the cathedral.

This edifice is a complex structure, composed of two churches joined together, the walls of which, thick as curtains, and the pillars solid as rock, have braved the rought tests of this northern climate for thirteen hundred years.

For some minutes the visitors walked about in the first church, which, from the shape of its vaults and arches, is of Roman architecture; then they went into the second, which is purely Gothic of the twelfth century, and forms the nave and transepts of the first. They wandered through these ruins from one epoch to another, peering down at the great square flags, through the cracks of which the grass had forced its way. Here and there were tombstones and effigies standing in corners, with their sculptured figures, seeming to ask alms of the passer-by.

The gloomy silence of the whole place seemed redolent with the romance of the past.

Miss Campbell, her uncles, and Oliver Sinclair, not noticing that their too learned companion had remained behind, then went under the dark archway of the square tower, an archway which formerly stood at the entrance of the first church, and, later on, at the point of intersection of the two edifices.

A few minutes later, measured footsteps were heard on the sonorous pavement; one might have imagined that one of the stone statues, animated by the breath of some spirit, was pacing slowly to and fro, like the Commander in Don Juan’s drawing-room.

It was Aristobulus, who, with measured strides, was reckoning the dimensions of the cathedral.

“A hundred and sixty feet from east to west,” he was saying, making a note of this in his pocket-book, as he entered the second church.

“Ah! it is you, Mr. Ursiclos,” said Miss Campbell, sarcastically; “after the mineralogist comes the geometrician.”

“And only seventy feet across the transepts,” continued Aristobulus.

“And how many inches?” asked Oliver Sinclair.

Aristobulus looked at Oliver as though he did not know whether he ought to feel insulted or not, but the uncles came to the rescue, and carried off Miss Campbell and the two young men to see the monastery.

There is nothing left of this building but insignificant ruins, although it survived its defacement at the time of the Reformation. After that time it was even used by a community of canoriesses of the order of St. Augustine, who were allowed to take refuge there by the state. There are now nothing but the dreary ruins of a convent, devastated by tempests, with neither anarch nor a pillar standing to resist the inclemency of the climate.

After exploring the ruins of the monastery, formerly so flourishing, the visitors were able to admire the chapel, which was in a much better state of preservation, and the dimensions of which Aristobulus hardly thought necessary to take. In this chapel, which is less ancient, or more solidly built, than the refectories or cloisters of the convent, only the roof is wanting; the chancel, which is almost intact, is a piece of architecture much admired by antiquaries.

In the western transept is the tomb of the last abbess of the community; on its black marble slab is a woman's face, sculptured between two angels, and above it a Madonna holding the child Jesus in her arms.

"This is just like the Virgin at Père la Chaise and the Madonna of St. Sextus, the only Virgins of Raphael's who have not their eyelids lowered; this one looks right at you, and the eyes seem to smile!"

This remark was very appropriately made by Miss Campbell, but it brought an ironical sneer on Aristobulus' lips,

"Where have you ever learnt, Miss Campbell, that eyes can smile?"

Perhaps Miss Campbell would have liked to have answered him, that, at any rate, her eyes would never have that expression when looking at him, but she contented herself by saying nothing.

“It is a very common error,” continued Aristobulus, as though he were speaking *ex cathedra*, “to talk of the eyes smiling. These organs of sight are, in fact, devoid of all expression, as oculists teach us: for example, place a mask on a face, look at the eyes through this mask, and I defy you to know whether the face is sad, smiling, or angry.”

“Ah! indeed?” exclaimed Sam, who seemed to be interested in this little lecture.

“I was not aware of that,” added Sib.

“Nevertheless it is a fact,” continued Aristobulus, “and if I had a mask —”

But the wonderful young man did not happen to have a mask, so the experiment could not be made to prove his assertion.

Moreover, Miss Campbell and Oliver Sinclair had already left the cloister, and were going towards the cemetery.

This place bears the name of the “Shrine of Oban,” in memory of the companion of St. Columba, who erected the chapel, the ruins of which stand in the midst of this field of the dead.

This is a curious piece of ground, covered with tombstones, where lie forty-eight Scotch kings, eight viceroys of the Hebrides, four viceroys of Ireland, and a king of France, whose name is entirely lost, like that of some chieftain of prehistoric times. Surrounded with its long iron railing, and paved with flags, it might be a kind of burying-ground of Kamac, whose stones are tombs, and not druidical rocks. Between them, on the grassy sward, lay the granite effigy of Duncan, King of Scotland, rendered illustrious by the tragedy of Macbeth. Of these stones some are simply ornamented with geometrical designs, others, sculptured in bas-relief, represent some fierce Celtic kings, lying there with the rigidity of corpses.

What memories hover over this necropolis of lona! What scope for the imagination to wander into the past, in this St. Denis of the Hebrides!

And how can one forget those lines of Ossian, which seem to have been inspired on this very spot?

“Son of the distant land! Thou dwellest in the field of fame! O, let thy song arise, at times, in praise of those who fell. Let their thin ghosts rejoice around thee.”

Miss Campbell and her companions were able to gaze in silence, without being bored by a guide positively asserting very uncertain historical facts, for the benefit of tourists. They seemed to see again those descendants of the Lord of the Isles, Angus Og, the companion of Robert Bruce, and brother-at-arms of that hero, who fought for the independence of his country.

“I should like to come back here at night-fall,” said Miss Campbell, “it seems to me that would be the best time to recall these memories; I should see them bringing up the corpse of the unfortunate Duncan; I should hear the conversation of the men as they laid him in the ground, consecrated to his ancestors. Now really, Mr. Sinclair, don’t you think it would be the most propitious time to invoke the goblins who guard the royal cemetery?”

“Yes, Miss Campbell, and I don’t think they could refuse to appear if you called them.”

“How now, Miss Campbell, do you believe in hobgoblins?” exclaimed Aristobulus.

“Yes, sir, I believe in them, like the true Scotch woman I am,” replied Miss Campbell.

“But, of course; you well know that they are quite imaginary, that nothing of the kind exists!”

“And suppose I do believe in them!” replied Miss Campbell. “I like to believe in domestic brownies who do the house-work; in sorcerers who perform their spells by certain incantations; in the Valkyrias, those fatal virgins of Scandinavian mythology, who carry off the fallen warriors from the battle-field; in those household fairies sung of by our poet Burns in his immortal verses, which no true Highlander can ever forget: —

“‘Upon that night, when fairies light

On Cassilis Downans dance,

Or owre the lays, in splendid blaze,

On sprightly coursers prance.

Or for Colean the route is ta’en,

Beneath the moon’s pale beams;

There up the cove to strave and rove

Amang the rocks and streams

To sport that night.'"

"Ah! Miss Campbell," continued the perverse fellow, "do you think that poets have any faith in those dreams of their imagination?"

"Most certainly, sir!" replied Oliver Sinclair, "or else their poetry would sound as unreal as any work which is not based on profound conviction."

"And you as well, sir?" said Aristobulus, "I knew you were an artist, but I did not think you were a poet."

"It is all the same thing," said Miss Campbell; "art embraces many forms."

"But no — no! — it is not possible!… You cannot believe in all the mythology of the ancient bards, whose disordered brains invoked imaginary divinities!"

"Oh! Mr. Ursiclos!" exclaimed Sam, touched in a tender point, "please do not treat our ancestors, who have sung of old Scotland, with such disrespect."

"And just listen to them for a moment!" said Sam, quoting from his favourite poem.

"Pleasant are the words of song, lovely the tales of other times! They are like the calm dew of the morning on the hill…"

"When the sun is faint on its side, and the lake is settled and blue in the vale."

added his brother.

The brothers would no doubt have indulged indefinitely in the poems of Ossian, had not Aristobulus abruptly cut them short, saying, —

“Gentlemen, have you ever seen a single one of these sprites, of whom you talk so enthusiastically? No. And are they to be seen? No, again.”

“That is just where you are mistaken, sir, and I pity you for never having seen one,” said Miss Campbell, who would not yield a hair of her hobgoblin to her opponent. “They can be seen in any of the Scotch highlands, gliding through lonely glens, rising out of the depths of ravines, fluttering over the surface of lakes, sporting in peaceful waters, and enjoying themselves in the midst of winter storms. And stop; why should not this Green Ray, which I persist in following, be the scarf of some Valkyria with its fringe trailing in the water on the horizon?”

“Oh! dear no!” exclaimed Aristobulus. “Not at all! And I will tell you what your Green Ray really is.”

“Please don’t tell me, sir,” cried Miss Campbell. “I do not wish to know.”

“But I must,” persisted Aristobulus, quite excited by this discussion.

“I forbid you — ”

“I must tell you all the same. Miss Campbell. If this last ray from the sun, just as it dips below the horizon is green, it is most likely because, just as it passes the thin line of water, it becomes impregnated with the colour — ”

“That’s enough, Mr. Ursiclos — !”

“Unless this green is the natural result of the crimson of the sun’s disk, which suddenly disappears, but leaves the impression on the retina of the eye, for in optics green is the complemental colour of crimson."

"Ah! sir, your physical arguments — "

"My arguments, Miss Campbell, agree with the nature of things," replied Aristobulus, "and, indeed, I am thinking of publishing some notes on this subject."

"Let us go, uncles," said Miss Campbell, thoroughly annoyed. "Mr. Ursiclos will spoil my Green Ray with his explanation!"

"Sir," interposed Oliver Sinclair, "your notes on the Green Ray could'not fail to be most curious, but allow me to propose another subject to you, perhaps more interesting still."

"And what may that be?" asked Aristobulus, in a pompous tone.

"You must doubtless know, that savants have treated scientifically this important question, *the influence of* fishes' tails on the undulation of the sea!"

"I beg your pardon, sir!"

"Well, sir, here is another, which I especially commend to your learned meditation, and that is: *The influence* of wind instruments on the formation of tempests!"

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO GUN-SHOTS.

For the next two or three days they saw nothing of Aristobulus. Had he left Iona by the steamer after seeing that it was only loss of time to run after Miss Campbell? No one could say; at any rate it was just as well that he kept out of the way, for the young girl was no longer indifferent to him, she absolutely hated him. To have stripped her ray of its poetry, to have materialized her dream, to have changed the scarf of a Valkyria into a horrid, optical phenomenon! Perhaps she might have forgiven him anything but this.

The brothers were not even allowed to go and make inquiries as to what had become of Ursiclos.

Besides, what good would that have been? What could they have said to him, and what could they still hope for? Could they henceforth ever expect a union between these two beings, so entirely opposed to each other, and separated by the gulf which there is between vulgar prose and sublime poetry, the one with his mania for reducing everything to scientific formulas, the other living only in the ideal, which ignores causes and is content with impressions.

Meanwhile, Partridge, at Dame Bess’s instigation, had learnt that the “young old savant,” as he called him, had not yet effected his departure, and that he was still staying at the fisherman’s hut, where he took his meals in solitude.

At any rate, Aristobulus did not trouble them with his company. The truth is that when he did not confine himself to his room, intent, no doubt, on some lofty scientific speculation, he went off, with his gun over his shoulder, to the farther shores of the coast, and there gave vent to his ill-humour by a great slaughter of black mergansers, or sea-gulls. Did he still retain some hope then? Did he flatter himself that when once Miss Campbell's whim had been gratified, she would return to her senses? Possibly he did, considering the vanity of the man.

But one day a very awkward accident happened to him, which might, indeed, have proved fatal, had it not been for the generous and timely assistance of his rival.

It occurred on the afternoon of the 2nd of September, when Aristobulus had gone to inspect the rocks at the southern point of the island. One of these granitic masses especially attracted his attention, so much so, that he determined to climb to the summit, which, however, was a most imprudent undertaking as the rock, was smooth and slippery, and there was scarcely an inch of foot-hold.

But Aristobulus was not to be daunted; he began to climb the steep side, helping himself up by clinging to tufts of vegetation growing here and there, and with great difficulty he managed to reach the top.

When once there, he gave himself up to his favourite pursuit of mineralogy, but when he wanted to descend, it was quite another matter. After having looked carefully for the easiest side to let himself slide down, he was about to commence the descent, when his foot slipped, and he went over the side without being able to stop himself. He would certainly have been pitched into the surf below, had not his fall been broken by a projecting shrub.

Aristobulus now found himself in a ludicrous, not to say dangerous position; he could not get up again, and at the same time it was impossible for him to descend.

An hour passed thus, and no one knows what would have happened, had not Oliver Sinclair, with his artist’s knapsack on his shoulder, been passing that way at the time, and heard his cries. At sight of Aristobulus suspended thirty feet in the air, and swinging to and fro like a sign-board in front of a tavern, he could hardly help laughing, but, as one may be sure, he did not hesitate a moment in going to his assistance.

This was not done without great difficulty; Oliver was obliged to get to the top of the rock, to hoist the hanging man up again, and then help him to descend on the other side.

“Mr. Sinclair,” said Aristobulus, as soon as he felt himself in safety. “I miscalculated the angle of inclination of this side of the rock; hence it was I slipped and was suspended.”

“Mr. Ursiclos,” replied Oliver, “I am most happy that chance allowed me to be of service to you!”

“Let me thank you nevertheless.”

“Do not mention it, sir; you would have certainly done as much for me.”

“Undoubtedly.”

Oliver Sinclair did not think of mentioning this incident, which was of no consequence to him. As to Aristobulus, he never spoke of it again, but as he highly valued his important person, he took it kindly of his rival, for having helped him out of this awkward predicament.

And now as to the famous ray; it must be admitted that it was singularly loath to show itself, and yet there was no time to be lost, for autumn would soon shroud the sky with her veil of mists, there would be no more soft, clear evenings, which, in these northern latitudes, are few and far between. No more such distinctly defined horizons as might have been traced by a geometrician's compass, or an artist's pencil. Would they be obliged to give up the phenomenon, which they had gone from place to place to see? Must they put off the observation till the following year, or obstinately persist in following it under other skies?

In truth, this was as much a cause of annoyance to Oliver Sinclair as Miss Campbell; they were both incensed at seeing the horizon daily obscured in sea mists. Such was the case during the first four days of this foggy month of September.

Every evening Miss Campbell, her uncles, and Oliver Sinclair sat on some rock, with the waves softly lapping beneath them, and conscientiously watched the sun set in brilliant banks of clouds, far more beautiful, no doubt, than if the sky had been perfectly clear.

An artist would have gone into raptures at the splendour and majesty of the spectacle, unfolded every evening, at the dazzling mass of colours shading off from one cloud to another, from deep violet at the zenith, to vivid crimson at the horizon, at the glittering cascade of molten gold, showered on the aerial rocks, but in this case the rocks were clouds, and these clouds, drifting across the sun's disk, absorbed its last rays, and completely hid them from the eyes of the anxious observers. Then they would all turn away disappointed like the spectators of a fairy scene at a theatre, the last effect of which has been spoilt by a blunder of the scene-shifter, and, taking the longest route, they would return to the Duncan Arms.

“Wait till to-morrow,” Miss Campbell would say.

“Yes, to-morrow,” repeated the uncles, “we have a kind of presentiment that to-morrow — ”

And each evening the brothers had a kind of presentiment which invariably ended in disappointment.

However, the 5th of September dawned fair and cloudless, the haze vanished away in the early sunbeams.

The barometer, which for some days had been rising, went up still higher, and remained at settled fine weather. It was not hot enough now for the sky to be misty as in the burning heat of summer; the atmosphere was as dry at the level of the sea, as on the top of a mountain, some thousand feet high.

To say with what anxiety the changes in this day were watched would be impossible, or with what beating hearts they observed the least cloud in the sky, or even with what feverish care they followed the sun on its daily course.

Fortunately, the breeze, which was light, but continuous, was off the land; in passing over the eastern mountains, and sweeping the surface of great prairies, it could not be charged with those molecules of moisture, thrown off by any large expanse of water.

But how long this day was in passing! Miss Campbell could not keep still in one place; braving the scorching sun, she paced feverishly to and fro, whilst Oliver Sinclair climbed the heights of the island in order to get a more extensive view of the horizon. The two uncles emptied a whole snuff-box and a half, and Partridge, as though he were on duty, stood in the attitude of a sentinel keeping watch on the sky.

It had been arranged that day that they should dine at five o’clock, in order to be in good time at the place of observation; the sun would not set till forty-nine minutes past six o’clock, so they would have plenty of time to watch its course down to the horizon.

“I believe we shall catch him this time!” said Sam, rubbing his hands.

“I think so too,” replied Sib, going through the same performance.

However, about three o’clock, there was an alarm; a great fleecy cloud had risen in the east, and was being carried towards the sea by the breeze.

It was Helena who saw it first, and she could not repress an exclamation of disappointment.

“It is but one cloud, and we have nothing to fear,” said one of her uncles; “it will soon dissolve.”

“Or it may travel quicker than the sun,” said Oliver Sinclair, “and disappear below the horizon before he does.”

“But is not this cloud the forerunner of a bank of mist?” asked Miss Campbell.

“I must go and see.”

And Oliver Sinclair immediately ran off to the monastery ruins, where he could get a better view of the eastern sky over the hills of Mull, the outlines of which were as clearly defined as a jagged black line traced on perfectly white paper.

There was not another shred of cloud in the sky, and not a particle of mist hovered round Ben More, which rose clear and distinct about three thousand feet above the level of the sea.

Oliver Sinclair returned half an hour later with reassuring words. This cloud was but a foundling lost in space; it would not even find enough to feed upon in this dry atmosphere, and so must perish of inanition on its way.

Meanwhile the fleecy cloud was making towards the zenith, and to the vexation of all, followed the sun's course, and was wafted nearer and nearer to it by the breeze. In sailing through the sky, its shape had been changed by an aerial current; from the form of a dog's head, which it had at first, it had taken that of a fish in the shape of a gigantic skate; then it turned into a ball, dark in the centre, but brilliant round the edges, and so reached the sun's disk.

A cry escaped Miss Campbell, who was standing eagerly watching its course.

The radiant orb, hidden behind this screen of mist, cast not a single ray over Iona, and the island lay in deep shadow.

But soon the shadow passed away, and the sun reappeared in all its glory; the cloud went on down to the horizon, but did not reach it, and half an hour later, it had vanished as though through a hole in the sky.

"At last it has gone," exclainied the young girl, "and I only hope it may not be followed by another!"

“No, reassure yourself. Miss Campbell,” replied Oliver; “as this cloud disappeared so quickly, and in such a manner, it is a proof that it met with no other vapours in the atmosphere, so that the whole sky, from east to west, must be perfectly clear.”

At six o’clock, the observers took up their position in the most open place they could find.

It was at the southern end of the island, on the highest point of the cathedral hill. From this position, all the highest part of Mull lying to the east could be seen. To the north the island of Staffa looked like an enormous calabash, stranded in the waters of the Hebrides, and, beyond, Ulva and Gometra stood out from the long coast-line of Mull; towards the west lay the immense plain of the sea.

The sun was sinking rapidly; the line of the horizon might have been traced with Indian ink. All the windows in Iona were ablaze, as though they had caught the reflection of golden flames of fire.

Miss Campbell and her friends stood silent and awe-struck before the sublime spectacle, and watched with half-closed eye-lids the sun’s disk, which seemed to change and swell, till it looked like an immense crimson fire-balloon on the surface of the water. There was not a sign of mist visible.

“I think we shall catch him this time,” repeated Sam.

“I think so too,” said Sib.

“Silence, uncles!” exclaimed Helena.

And they were silent and held their breath, as though they were afraid it might condense, and form a light vapour to obscure the sun.

The lower edge of the sun’s disk had touched the horizon, and grew larger and larger as though it were being filled out with some luminous fluid. They all seemed to drink in its last rays, like Tel Arago in the deserts of Palma on the coast of Spain, watching the signal-shot, from the island of Ivica, which would allow him to close the last triangle of his meridian line!

At last a tiny edge of the sun’s upper rim was all that remained; in less than fifteen seconds the last ray would be shot into space, and would give the eyes so anxiously awaiting it that impression of heavenly green —

Suddenly two gun-shots echoed among the rocks below the hill; a thick line of smoke followed, and then a whole cloud of sea-birds flew out, sea-gulls, wagels, and petrels, startled by the untimely reports.

The cloud of birds flew straight up, then forming a screen between the horizon and the island, it passed just in front of the sinking orb, at the very moment when its last line of light shot upwards from the surface of the water.

At that same moment, they saw the inevitable Aristobulus, gun in hand, standing on a point of the cliff, watching the flight of birds.

“We have had quite enough of this!” exclaimed Sib.

“A great deal too much,” cried Sam.

“I should have done well to have left him hanging from the rock,” said Oliver to himself; “at any rate he would have been there still.”

Helena with compressed lips and fixed gaze said not a word.

Once again she had missed seeing the Green Ray, and all through Aristobulus Ursiclos.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON BOARD THE “CLORINDA.”

The next day, at six o’clock in the morning, the *Clorinda*, a charming yawl of from forty-five to fifty tons burden, left the little harbour of Iona, and, under a light north-easterly breeze, tacking to starboard, gained the open sea.

The *Clorinda* carried on board Miss Campbell, her uncles, Oliver Sinclair, Dame Bess and Partridge; it is hardly necessary to say that the unlucky Aristobulus was not with them.

This arrangement had been made, and immediately put in execution, after the adventure of the previous evening.

On leaving the cathedral hill to return to the inn, Miss Campbell had said very abruptly, —

“Uncles, since Mr. Ursiclos intends to remain at Iona we will let him have the island to himself. Once at Oban and again here, it has been entirely his fault that we have not been able to make our observation; we will not stay a day longer where this tiresome man can annoy us with his clumsy pranks!”

To this proposal so frankly made, the brothers had nothing to object; besides, they also shared the general discontent, and anathematized Aristobulus Ursiclos. Decidedly the situation of the suitor of their choice was for ever compromised. Nothing could bring him again into Miss Campbell’s good graces, so, from now and henceforth, they were obliged to relinquish a plan which could never be realized.

“After all,” as Sam observed aside to his brother, “promises imprudently made are not iron manacles!”

Which, in other words, means that one can never be bound by a rash oath, and Sib had given his complete approbation to this Scotch axiom.

Just as they were saying “good night” in the long room of the Duncan Arms, Miss Campbell said, —

“We shall start to-morrow; I will not stay here a day longer!”

“That is understood, my dear Helena,” said her uncle Sam; “but where shall we go?”

“Any place where we shall be certain of not meeting that Mr. Ursiclos! So no one must know that we are going to leave Iona nor where we are going.”

“Just so, my dear child,” replied Sib; “but how shall we get away, and where shall we go?”

“What!” exclaimed Miss Campbell, “is there no means of leaving this island at dawn? Is there not one inhabited or even uninhabited place along the Scotch coast, where we might make our observation in peace?”

Her uncles certainly could not have answered these two questions, asked in a tone which admitted of no misunderstanding or prevarication.

Fortunately Oliver Sinclair was at hand.

“Miss Campbell,” said he, “this is how everything can be arranged: there is an island or rather an islet near here which will be quite suitable for the observation, and at the same time we shall not risk being interfered with by any one.”

“Which is it?”

“It is Staffa, which you can see two miles to the north of this island.”

“Is there any place to lodge at, and any possibility of getting there?” asked Miss Campbell.

“Yes,” replied Oliver, “and very easily. I have seen a yacht lying in the harbour, which can be hired at any time, to go to the English Channel, the North Sea, or the Irish Channel. What is there to prevent us from chartering this yacht, and stocking it with provisions for a fortnight, since Staffa can offer nothing in that way, and starting to-morrow at break of day?”

“Mr. Sinclair,” replied Miss Campbell, “if we can secretly leave this island to-morrow, you may be sure I shall owe you a great debt of gratitude!”

“To-morrow before midday, provided we get a good breeze in the morning, we shall be at Staffa,” replied Oliver, “and except for visitors who stop for scarcely an hour twice a week, we shall have the island to ourselves.”

As usual the brothers at once summoned Dame Bess, who immediately appeared.

“We are going to leave here to-morrow!” said Sam.

“To-morrow at daybreak!” added Sib.

And thereupon, without further parley, Dame Bess and Partridge at once set to work to make their preparations for departure.

Meanwhile Oliver had gone down to the harbour, and was there making arrangements with John Olduck.

John Olduck was the skipper of the *Clorinda*, a true seaman, with his gold-laced cap and brass buttons on his blue suit. Directly the terms were arranged, he with his six men, at once set to work to get everything in sailing order; his crew were composed of some of those picked men who, by trade, are fishermen in the winter, and take service on board yachts in the summer; they make the best sailors in the world.

At six o'clock in the morning the new passengers went on board the *Clorinda*.

They had carried off all the provisions they could get, including fresh and preserved meat; besides the steward would always be able to take in a fresh stock from the steamers which run regularly between Oban and Staffa.

Thus, at daybreak. Miss Campbell had taken possession of a charming little boudoir at the stern of the yacht; her uncles had the comfortable berth in the "main cabin" beyond the saloon. Oliver Sinclair had a cabin near the companion-steps leading to the saloon, and Dame Bess and Partridge disposed of themselves, the one on the left, the other on the right of the captain's cabin. Towards the bows was the kitchen, and beyond that again the crew's quarters, provided with six hammocks. Nothing was wanting in this charming yawl, built by Ratsey of Cowes; with a fair sea and stiff breeze, she would have taken an honourable place in "The Royal Thames Yacht Club Regatta."

Every one was delighted when the *Clorinda* at last left her moorings, and got under sail. She dipped gracefully to the breeze, without her white deck of Canadian pine being soiled by a particle of spray from the waves through which her slender bows were cutting.

The distance between Iona and Staffa is very short; with a favourable wind it can easily be done in twenty-five minutes by a yacht making her eight miles an hour. But just now the wind was dead ahead, though but a light breeze; besides this the tide was going down, so that they were obliged to tack several times before they could reach Staffa.

This mattered very little to Miss Campbell; the *Clorinda* had started, and that was the main thing.

An hour later Iona was lost to view in the morning haze, and with it the detested image of that *bête-noir* whose very name Helena would have liked to forget, as she frankly confessed to her uncles.

“Have I not some reason for it, Uncle Sam?”

“Every reason, my dear Helena.”

“And does Uncle Sib also approve?”

“Entirely.”

“Then,” added she, kissing them both, “you must confess it was a very foolish idea of yours to think of marrying me to such a man!”

And they both agreed that it was.

Altogether this was a charming trip, its only fault being that it was too short. And yet what was there to hinder them from prolonging it, and why not let the yawl carry them over the open Atlantic in search of the Green

Ray? But no; it had been agreed that they should go to Staffa, and the skipper had made his arrangements to reach that celebrated isle directly the tide was favourable.

About eight o’clock, an early breakfast, composed of tea and sandwiches, was served in the saloon. The guests, in high good-humour, took their places at the table, without one regret for the good things of the Duncan Arms. Ungrateful creatures!

When Miss Campbell again came on deck, the yacht had tacked and changed her bearings. She was now making towards the fine lighthouse, built upon the rock of Skerryvore, which rises a hundred and fifty feet above the level of the sea. The breeze, having freshened, the *Clorinda*, with her great white sails spread, was struggling against the ebb-tide, but made very little progress towards Staffa.

Miss Campbell was reclining in the stern upon one of the thick canvas cushions used on board pleasure-boats. She thoroughly enjoyed the rapid motion of the yacht, so different from the jolting of a railway journey; it was like the speed of a skater, carried along on the surface of a frozen lake. Nothing could have been more graceful than the *Clorinda* as she lightly dipped her head in the sparkling waves, sometimes seeming to float in the air like an immense bird upheld by its powerful wings.

This sea, covered to the north and south by the Hebrides, and sheltered by the coast on the east, is like an inland basin or lake.

The yacht made an oblique run for Staffa, a great, solitary rock lying off Mull, only a hundred feet above the level of the sea. One might almost imagine that it moved, showing sometimes its basaltic cliffs to the west, and sometimes the rugged pile of rocks on its eastern coast. By an optical illusion it seemed to turn upon its base, at the caprice of the angles under which the *Clorinda* approached or turned from it

Meanwhile, owing to the tide and wind, the yacht made little progress; when she veered towards the west, beyond the extreme point of Mull, she met with a heavy sea against which she gallantly held her own, then, tacking, she found herself gently rocked in quiet waters.

Towards eleven o'clock the *Clorinda* had gone far enough north to enable her to run straight for Staffa; sail was taken in, and the captain made ready for mooring.

There is no harbour at Staffa, but it is easily approached under any wind on its eastern side, among the rocks capriciously scattered by some convulsion of a geological period. At the same time, in very bad weather, the place is not approachable by craft above a certain tonnage.

The *Clorinda* was able to go alongside these black basaltic rocks. She veered round skilfully, leaving on one side the rock of Bouchaillie with its prismatic sides left bare by the low tide, and on the other, that causeway running along the coast to the left. This is the best anchorage in the island, and the place where the boats which bring tourists to the island call for them again, after their excursion over the hills of Staffa.

The *Clorinda* penetrated a little creek almost to the entrance of Clam-shell Cave, where her sails were taken in and the anchor dropped.

A moment later, Miss Campbell and her companions disembarked, and ascended the steps cut in the rock to the left of the grotto. A wooden staircase with a handrail led up the cliff, and this they took to reach the upper plateau.

At last they were at Staffa, and as much out of the civilized world as if a storm had cast them on a desert island in the Pacific.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STAFFA.

Although Staffa is but a mere islet, nature has, at least, made it one of the most curious of the Hebrides. This great oval rock, one mile long and half a mile wide, is furrowed with magnificent caves of basaltic origin, and is the rendezvous of geologists as well as of tourists. However, neither Miss Campbell nor her uncles had yet been to Staffa, and Oliver Sinclair alone knew its marvels. He was well fitted, therefore, to do the honours of the island, where they had come to spend a few days.

This rock is entirely the result of the crystallization of an enormous basaltic mass, which became congealed here at a very early period of the world’s formation, la fact, according to the observations of Helmholtz — formed on the experiments of Bischof on the congealing of basalt, which can only be melted at a temperature of two thousand degrees — it must have taken no less than three hundred and fifty millions of years, to complete its entire congealment. It must, therefore, have been at a fabulously remote epoch that the solidification of the world, after passing from a gaseous to a liquid state, began to be produced.

Had Aristobulus Ursiclos been there, he would have had matter for some fine dissertation on the phenomena of geological history. But he was far away; Miss Campbell thought no more of him, and as her Uncle Sam remarked to his brother, “Let sleeping dogs lie!”

“First of all,” said Oliver Sinclair, “we must take possession of our new domain.”

“Without forgetting the motive which brought us here,” added Miss Campbell, smiling.

“Without forgetting it! I should think not indeed!” exclaimed Sinclair. “Let us go at once and look for a good place of observation, and see what kind of western horizon our island gives us.”

“Yes, let us go,” replied Miss Campbell, “but it is rather misty to-day, and I do not think that the sunset is likely to be favourable for us.”

“We will wait, Miss Campbell, we will wait, if needs be, until the end of autumn.”

“Yes, we will wait,” repeated the brothers, “until Helena orders us away.”

“There is no hurry, uncles,” replied the young girl, who had been in high spirits since they had left Iona; “there is no hurry; the situation of this island is charming. A villa built in the middle of that beautiful green slope would not be at all a bad place to live in, even when the storms, which America sends us so liberally, break over Staffa.”

“Hum!” exclaimed Uncle Sib, “They must be terrible on this extreme verge of the ocean!”

“They are indeed,” replied Sinclair. “Staffa is exposed to every wind that blows, and affords no shelter except on its eastern coast, where our *Clorinda* is now lying at anchor; and on this part of the Atlantic the bad weather lasts nearly nine months out of the twelve.”

“That is why we cannot see a single tree,” said Sam; “all vegetation on this plateau must perish directly it rises a few feet above the ground.”

“Well, and is it not quite worth while to be able to live for two or three months on this island?” exclaimed Miss Campbell. “You must buy Staffa, uncles, if it is to be sold.”

And, as though they could refuse their niece nothing, the brothers had already put their hands into their pockets, as if about to settle the bargain.

“To whom does Staffa belong?” asked Sib.

“To the McDonalds,” replied Sinclair. “It only brings them in twelve pounds a year, but I do not think they would give it up at any price.”

“That is a pity!” said Miss Campbell, who naturally very enthusiastic, as we know, was still more so under her present circumstances.

Thus talking, the new arrivals made their inspection of the island, walking over its verdant slopes. It was not a day for visitors to come by steamer from Oban, so Miss Campbell and her friends had no fear of being disturbed by tourists; they had the desert island to themselves. A few highland ponies and black cows were grazing on the meagre pasture-land of the plateau, through which thin streaks of lava could be seen; but no shepherd was anywhere visible, and if they were tended, it was from afar — perhaps from Iona, or even Mull, fifteen miles off.

Neither was there a house to be seen; only the ruins of a hut destroyed by the terrific storms which rage from September to March, In truth, twelve pounds is a handsome revenue for a few acres of meadow-land, the grass of which is as bare as a piece of velvet worn to the thread. The exploration of the island was soon made, and they had now only to scan the horizon.

It was very evident that there was nothing to be expected from the sunset; that evening the sky, which had been so clear the day before, was how shrouded in mist, as might be expected in the changeable autumn weather. About six o'clock a bank of cloud tinged with red, hovering over the western horizon, foretold another change; the brothers were even obliged to confess that the barometer on board the *Clorinda* was going down to changeable, with a tendency to sink lower still. After the sun had sunk behind a waving line of billows, they all returned to the yacht, and passed the night quietly in the little cove by Clam-shell Cave.

The following day, the 7th of September, they agreed to make a closer inspection of the island. After having explored the heights, they must go and see the caves, and make up for lost time, since, all through Aristobulus, they had been so long detained in their search for the phenomenon. Besides this, there was no cause to regret their excursions to the caves, which have justly made this island so celebrated.

This day was given up to the exploration of the Clam-shell Cave, in front of which the yacht lay at anchor. Oliver Sinclair had given the steward instructions to have luncheon served here, where the guests might imagine themselves shut up in a ship's hold. Indeed, the prisms, from forty to fifty feet long; which form the sides of the vault, look very much like the timbers inside a vessel.

This cave, about thirty feet high, fifteen wide, and a hundred feet deep, is very easily approached; opening almost directly east, it is protected from the violence of breakers which, in heavy gales, dash over the other caverns in the island, but at the same time it is the least interesting. Nevertheless, the arrangement of its basaltic curves, which look rather like a work of art than nature, is very wonderful.

Miss Campbell was very much charmed with her visit; Oliver Sinclair made her admire the beauties of Clam-shell, with doubtless less scientific pomposity than Aristobulus would have done, but certainly with more artistic feeling.

“I should like to take away some souvenir of our visit to Clam-shell,” said Miss Campbell.

“Nothing can be easier,” replied Oliver; and in a few moments he had made a sketch of the cave, taken from the rock which projects at the end of the great basaltic causeway. The mouth of the cave, which had the appearance of an enormous mammiferous creature, reduced to a skeleton, the wooden staircase leading to the top of the island, the clear, peaceful water at its entrance, beneath which the enormous basaltic substructure could be seen, were all skilfully portrayed on a leaf of a sketch-book, under which the artist wrote, —

“*From Oliver Sinclair to Miss Campbell*.

“Staffa, 7th of September, 1881.”

After luncheon, the skipper had the largest of his shore-boats made ready, then his passengers took their seats in it, and were rowed alongside the picturesque coast, till they came to Boat Cave, so called because it is entirely filled by the sea, and cannot be entered on dry ground.

This cave is situated on the south-west side of the island, and when the sea is rough, it is dangerous to enter it; but to-day, although the sky was threatening, the wind had not yet freshened, and its exploration was perfectly safe.

Just as their boat reached the mouth of the cave, the steamer laden with tourists from Oban cast anchor in sight of the island. Fortunately, her passengers would not stay more than two hours, and during that time would not interfere at all with Miss Campbell and her friends. They could remain unperceived in the cave, during the regular routine of the excursion, which consisted of a visit to the cave of Fingal and a walk on the slopes of the island, so that there was no occasion for them to come in contact with the noisy excursionists, for which they were not sorry, and with a very good reason. For, after the sudden departure of his companions, might not Aristobulus, in order to return to Oban, have taken this steamer which had just called at Iona? At any rate, it was an encounter to be avoided.

Whether or not the above-mentioned gentleman was among the tourists, it was certain that no one remained behind after the steamer had left. When Miss Campbell and her companions at last came out of this long kind of tunnel which seems to have been burrowed in a basaltic mine, they found the island as peaceful as ever.

There are several celebrated caverns in many parts of the globe, but more particularly in volcanic regions, which are distinguished by being either of Neptunian or Plutonian origin.

Some of these cavities have been hollowed out by the water which gradually bites into and wears away even granitic rocks until it has transformed them into immense excavations; such are the caves of Crozen in Brittany, those of Bonifacio in Corsica, of Morghatten in Norway, of St. Michael in Gibraltar, of Scratchell on the coast of the Isle of Wight, and of Tourane in the marble cliffs on the coast of Cochin China.

Others, of quite different formation, are caused by the giving way in the sides of the granite or basalt, produced by the congealing of igneous rock, and the appearance of which is far more weird and rugged than that of caves of Neptunian creation.

In the first case. Nature, true to her principles, has economized force; in the second, she has economized time. The celebrated cave of Fingal belongs to the class of excavations of a geological epoch, and it was to the exploration of this marvellous cavern that the following day was to be devoted.

CHAPTER XIX.

FINGAL’S CAVE.

Had the skipper of the Clorinda been in any port of the United Kingdom within the last twenty-four hours, he would have been made acquainted with a meteorological bulletin, not very reassuring to vessels about to cross the Atlantic.

In fact, a heavy gale had been announced by telegram from New York. After having crossed the ocean from west to north-east, it threatened to break with terrific force over the coasts of Ireland and Scotland, before it spent itself on the shores of Norway.

But in default of this intelligence, the yacht’s barometer indicated great atmospheric disturbances, of which a prudent seaman could not but take note.

On the morning of the 8th of September, John Olduck, feeling somewhat uneasy, went to the farthest extremity of the western side of the island, in order to gauge the state of sky and sea.

Clouds, or rather streaks of mist, were already chasing each other swiftly across the sky; the breeze was freshening, and before long would blow a gale. The sea was flecked with foam in the distance, and the waves were breaking with a roar over the basaltic rocks which bristle round the foot of the island.

John Olduck did not feel at all reassured by his observations. Although the *Clorinda* was comparatively sheltered in Clam-shell Cove, it was hardly safe anchorage even for a boat of her small dimensions. The rising tide becoming engulfed between the islets and the eastern causeway might produce a formidable surf, which would make the position of the yacht rather perilous. Something must therefore be done, and that before the channel became impracticable.

When he returned on board, he found his passengers there, and acquainted them with his fears and the necessity of their leaving the island at once. By delaying a few hours, they would run the risk of meeting a heavy sea in the straits between Staffa and Mull. Now his proposal was that they should take shelter behind that island, in the little harbour of Auchnacraig, where the *Clorinda* would have nothing to fear from the gale.

“Leave Staffa!” cried Miss Campbell, “and lose such a magnificent horizon!”

“I believe it will be very dangerous to remain in our present anchorage,” replied the skipper.

“If it is really necessary, my dear Helena!” said her Uncle Sam.

“Yes, if it is really necessary!” repeated his brother.

Seeing what disappointment this hurried departure would cause Miss Campbell, Sinclair hastened to say, —

“How long do you think this storm will last, captain?”

“Two or three days at most, at this time of the year,” replied the skipper.

“And do you think it absolutely necessary for us to leave?”

“Necessary and urgent.”

“What are your plans?”

“To get under sail this very morning, and with this breeze we may be at Auchnacraig before evening, and we can return to Staffa as soon as the weather clears.”

“Why not return to Iona, which we could reach in an hour?” asked Sam.

“No, — no, not to Iona!” exclaimed Miss Campbell, before whom rose the spectre of Aristobulus.

“We should not be much safer in the harbour at Iona than here,” observed the skipper.

“Very well,” said Oliver Sinclair, “you can go, captain, you can go at once to Auchnacraig, and leave us here at Staffa.”

“At Staffa!” exclaimed John Olduck, “where there is not even a house to shelter you!”

“Will not Clam-shell Cave do for a few days?” continued Sinclair. “What is there wanting there? Nothing. We have plenty of provisions on board, bedding and change of clothes, which can be brought on land, and, moreover, a very good cook who will be only too pleased to stay with us!”

“Yes! Yes!” cried Miss Campbell, clapping her hands, “you can go, captain, you can take your yacht to Auchnacraig, and leave us on Staffa. We shall be like people cast on a desert isle, and we will make believe to be shipwrecked; we shall watch for the return of the *Clorinda* with all the emotions, transports, and anguish of the Swiss Family Robinson, when they saw a vessel passing their island! What brought us here? A romantic idea, was it not, Mr. Sinclair? and what could be more romantic than this place, uncles? And, besides, I should regret it all my life, if I missed the sublime spectacle of a storm, on this poetical island, with the northern sea lashed into fury, and the elements raging all around us! Do go, captain, and we will stay here till you return."

"But — " timidly ejaculated the brothers almost simultaneously.

"I believe you made some remark, uncles," interrupted Miss Campbell, "but I think I know the way to bring you round to my opinion," and thereupon she gave them each a kiss.

"There is one for you, Uncle Sam, and one for you, Uncle Sib. I wager now that youhave nothing more to say against my plan."

After this they did not dream of making the slightest objection. So long as it pleased their niece to remain at Staffa, why not remain there, and how was it they had not thought at once of this simple and natural plan which would settle all difficulties?

But it was Oliver Sinclair's idea, and Miss Campbell thanked him most cordially for it.

Matters being thus arranged, the sailors brought on shore everything necessary for their stay on the island. Clam-shell Cave was quickly transformed into a temporary dwelling, under the name of Melville House.

They would be as comfortable here, and even more so, than at the inn at Iona. The steward undertook to find a suitable place for his culinary operations, at the entrance of the cave, in a recess, evidently intended for this purpose.

Then Miss Campbell and her companions left the *Clorinda* in one of the small boats belonging to the yacht, which John Olduck placed at their disposal, as it might be useful to them in going from one rock to another.

An hour later, the *Clorinda*, with reefed sails, and storm-jib set, made for the north of the Mull, in order to reach Auchnacraig, by the straits between that island and the mainland. Her passengers watched her out of sight from the heights of Staffa, and half an hour later she had disappeared behind the isle of Gometra, bending to the breeze like a sea-gull skimming the surface of the waves with its wings.

But altogether the weather was threatening, the sky was not altogether overcast, and the sun shone through great rifts in the swiftly flying clouds. They might walk over the island, and, on returning, skirt the shore at the foot of the basaltic cliffs. So they proposed at once to visit Fingal's Cave, under the escort of Oliver Sinclair.

Tourists coming from Iona in the Oban steamer usually visit this cave in boats, but it is possible to penetrate to its farthest end by landing on the rocks to the right, where there is a practicable quay.

This was the way that Oliver Sinclair resolved to make the exploration, without using the boat.

Leaving Clam-shell Cave, they took the causeway running along the eastern shore of the island which is formed by sunken rocks, and is as dry and solid a pavement as though constructed by an engineer. This walk, which took but a few minutes, was made as they chatted and admired the islets, gently washed by the surf, and the bases of which could be seen through the clear, green water. One cannot imagine a more beautiful pathway to this cave, which is worthy to have been the palace of some hero of the “Thousand and One Nights.”

Arriving at the south-east angle of the island, Oliver Sinclair made his companions climb some natural steps in the rock, which would have lost nothing by comparison with the staircase of a mansion.

At the corner of the landing-place rise the exterior columns, grouped against the sides of the cave, like those of the small temple of Vesta at Rome, but in juxtaposition, so as to hide the main building.

Supported on these columns is the enormous mass of rock which forms this corner of the island. The oblique cleavage of these rocks, which seem to be arranged according to the geometrical design of stones in an arch, contrasts strangely with the vertical order of the columns which support them.

The sea, already influenced by the approaching storm, rose and fell against the foot of the steps, and through its clear, trembling depths could be seen the dark masses of rock basement.

Having reached the upper landing-stage, Oliver Sinclair turned to the left, and showed Miss Campbell a kind of narrow quay, or rather a natural foot-path, which led along the side of the rock, right into the depths of the cave. An iron hand-rail, imbedded in the rock, ran between the wall and the abrupt edge of the quay.

“Ah!” said Miss Campbell, “I think this hand-rail rather detracts from the romance of ‘Fingal’s palace.’”

“Yes,” replied Oliver, “it is an intervention of man in the work of nature.”

“If it is useful, we may as well make use of it,” said Sam.

“And I intend to do so,” added his brother.

Just as they were about to enter the cave, the visitors halted by their guide’s advice.

Before them opened a spacious, lofty cave, filled with a dim, mysterious light. The space between the two sides of the cave, at the level of the sea measures about thirty-four feet; to the right and left the basaltic columns, wedged one against the other, like those in certain cathedrals of the latest Gothic period, hide the main supporting walls. From the top of these columns spring the sides of an enormous pointed arch, which, at its key-stone, rises fifty feet above the average water mark.

Miss Campbell and her companions were obliged at last to tear themselves away from the contemplation of this wondrous spectacle, and follow the ledge of rock which formed the pathway leading into the cave.

There, ranged in perfect order, were hundreds of prismatic columns of unequal height, as if produced by some gigantic process of crystallization, their cleanly-cut sides standing out as sharply as though they had been chiselled by a sculptor. The exterior angles of the one adapted themselves geometrically to the interior angles of the other; some had three sides, some four, and even up to seven or eight, which gave a variety to the general uniformity of the style, and proves the artistic order of nature.

The light, coming from without, played upon these diamond-shaped angles, and, falling upon the water inside the cave, which reflected like a mirror, impregnated the submarine stones and sea-weeds with every tint of green, red, yellow, and orange, and then shone upon the basaltic rocks, which formed the ceiling of this incomparable cavern, till they sparkled with effulgent brilliancy.

Within reigned a sonorous silence — if we may be allowed to couple these words — that silence peculiar to profound caverns which the visitors did not dream of breaking. Melancholy strains of harmony alone filled the cavern, and gradually died away as the wind rose and fell.

One could almost imagine one heard these prisms resounding in the strong gusts of wind, like the keys of an enormous harmonica. And is it not to this curious effect that it owes its name of An-Na-Vine, "the harmonious grotto," as this cavern is called in the Celtic language?

"And what name could suit it better?" said Oliver Sinclair, "since Fingal was the father of Ossian, whose genius united poetry and music."

"Undoubtedly," interposed Sam, "for as Ossian has said,

"'When now shall I hear the bard? when rejoice at the fame of my fathers? The harp is not strung on Morven. The voice of music ascends not on Cona!'"

"Yes," added his brother Sib;

"'Dead, with the mighty, is the bard! Fame is in the desert no more.'"

The extreme depth of the cavern is estimated at about one hundred and fifty feet. At the end of the cave appears a kind of organ case, composed of a certain number of columns, smaller than those at the entrance, but equally perfect in their moulding, before which our visitors again stopped for a moment.

From this point the prospect looking out on to the open sky was wonderfully beautiful. Through the water, impregnated with light, could be seen the submarine base of the cavern formed of the shafts of columns, fitting one into the other like the squares of a mosiac. On the sides of the rocks was a wonderful play of light and shade, which was quite lost when a cloud passed across the entrance of the cave, like a gauze curtain hung before the stage of a theatre. All again grew bright and resplendent, with every prismatic colour, when a gleam of sunshine, reflected from the crystal depths, shot up in lines of light to the very summit of the cavern.

Outside, the sea was breaking over the projecting strata of the gigantic arch, which stood out against this background of sea and sky like a frame-work of ebony, and beyond, the horizon appeared in all its splendour, with Iona lying two miles off in the distance, the ruins of its cathedral clearly defined in the white sunlight.

All stood in ecstasy before this fairy-like scene, quite unable to express their intense admiration.

“What an enchanted palace!” exclaimed Miss Campbell at last, “and what a prosaic mind must he have who would refuse to believe that it was created for sylphs and mermaids! For whom do the strings of this great Æolian harp vibrate? Is it not that supernatural music which Waverley heard in his dreams?”

“You are right, Miss Campbell,” replied Oliver Sinclair, “and, undoubtedly, when Walter Scott was seeking his imagery in the poetical past of the Highlands, he thought of the palace of Fingal.”

“I should like to invoke the spirit of Ossian here,” continued the enthusiastic young girl. “Why should not the invisible bard reappear at my call, after slumbering for fifteen centuries? I like to think that when he was chanting the glorious deeds of his time, the blind poet took refuge more than once in this cave, which still bears his father's name! No doubt the echoes have often repeated his epic and lyric inspirations in the purest Gaelic accent. Do you not think, Mr. Sinclair, that the aged Ossian might have sat in this very place, and that the music of his harp may have mingled with the harsh accents of the voice of Selma?"

"How can one disbelieve what you seem to be so thoroughly convinced of, Miss Campbell?" replied Oliver.

"Shall I call him?" asked Helena softly.

And once or twice her clear, fresh voice rose above the soughing of the wind in the cavern, repeating the name of the ancient bard.

But, however much Helena might have wished it, and though she called three times, no shade of Ossian appeared in the paternal palace.

Meanwhile, the sun had become veiled in a thick mist, the cave was gradually filling with dark shadows, outside the sea had risen considerably, and great waves were already breaking with a roar against the foot of the rocks.

The visitors retook their way along the narrow path, already wet with the spray from the waves, and as they turned a sharp corner of the inland, they met the full force of the wind, but were soon on the sheltered causeway. The weather had changed considerably for the worse during the last two hours; a stiff gale was blowing off the sea, and threatened soon to turn to a hurricane.

However, Miss Campbell and her companions were able to reach Clamshell Cave easily, under shelter of the basaltic cliffs.

The following day the barometer had fallen very low. The wind raged furiously, and heavy, leaden-coloured clouds lowered in the sky; there was no rain as yet, but not a gleam of sunshine was to be seen for a moment.

Miss Campbell did not seem so vexed at this change in the weather as might have been expected; this life on a desert island, with the prospect of a tempest, delighted her enthusiastic nature. Like one of Walter Scott's heroines, she loved to wander, absorbed in thought, among the rocks of Staffa; more often than not she went alone, and they left her undisturbed in her solitude.

Several times she returned to Fingal's Cave, attracted by the strange romance of the place. There she spent whole hours lost in day-dreams, paying little heed to the cautions they gave her not to venture there imprudently.

The following day, the 9th of September, the tempest broke with unparalleled fury along the Scotch coast; it was a terrific hurricane, and nothing could have withstood its force on the plateau of Staffa.

About six o'clock in the evening, when dinner was awaiting them in Clamshell Cave, the brothers and Oliver Sinclair began to feel extremely anxious. Helena had been out since three o'clock, without saying where she was going, and had not yet returned.

They waited patiently, but with increasing anxiety, till seven o'clock, and still there was no sign of Helena. Several times Oliver Sinclair had gone up on to the plateau of the island. No one was to be seen. The storm was then raging with terrific fury, and the breakers dashed madly over the south-west side of the island.

“Alas! unhappy girl!” suddenly cried Oliver; “if she is in Fingal’s Cave, we must find her at once, or she is lost!”

CHAPTER XX.

FOR HELENA’S SAKE.

A few moments later, Oliver Sinclair, having rapidly crossed the causeway, reached the entrance of the cave, near the steps cut in the rock.

The brothers and Partridge followed him closely, but Dame Bess remained in Clam-shell Cave, waiting with inexpressible anxiety, and getting everything ready to receive Helena on her return.

The sea had already risen high enough to cover the ledge of rock forming the foot-path; it was dashing over the hand-rail, and made it quite out of the question to enter the cave this way.

As it was impossible to enter by this path, it was equally impossible for any one to get out of the cavern, and if Miss Campbell were there, she must be quite a prisoner! But how could they ascertain this, and how could they reach her?

“Helena! Helena!”

Could she possibly hear this name through the ceaseless crashing of breakers? A wild uproar of wind and waves filled the cavern, and it was of little use to look or call.

“Perhaps Helena is not there,” said Sam, who would willingly have clung to this hope.

“But where else can she be then?” replied his brother.

“Yes! where else can she be?” cried Sinclair. “Have I not searched for her in vain, in every nook and corner of the island? Would she not have returned before this if she could have done so? She is there! — there!”

And then they remembered the rash wish, which the imprudent young girl had often expressed, to see a storm in Fingal’s Cave. Had she then forgotten that the sea, in a storm, would rise higher and higher, till it made the cave a prison from which it would be impossible to escape?

What could they now do in order to rescue her?

The hurricane was venting its full force on this corner of the island, and sometimes the waves rose above the archway of the cave, where they broke with a deafening roar, and then fell back in sheets of foam, like the cataracts of Niagara, but the body of water rushed with overwhelming force, right into the cave, like a torrent suddenly overleaping its barrier, so that the farther end of the cavern received its full force.

In what niche could Miss Campbell have found a refuge which would not have been assailed by such terrific breakers? The arch of the cave was directly exposed to their force, and in their rise and fall they must have swept the foot-path with irresistible fury.

But still they refused to believe that the rash young girl was there! How could she have withstood the force of such a sea? Would not her torn and mutilated body have been carried out by the retreating waters? Would not the currents have swept her past the rocky causeway, right up to Clam-shell Cave?

“Helena! Helena!”

This name was persistently shouted through the hubbub of wind and wave, but there was no answer.

“No! no! she cannot be in the cave!” replied the brothers in despair.

“She is there!” persisted Oliver Sinclair.

And he pointed to a piece of ribbon which a retreating wave had cast on the steps of the rock.

He rushed to seize it.

It was the snood which Miss Campbell wore on her hair. Was it possible to doubt now?

But then, if this ribbon had been torn from her, must not the same blow have crushed her against the rock?

“I will know!” cried Oliver Sinclair.

And taking advantage of a receding wave, which left the foot-way almost clear, he seized the hand-rail, but a heavy sea immediately dashed him on to the landing-place.

Had not Partridge, at the risk of his life, rushed forward and caught him, Sinclair would have rolled down the steps and been carried off by the sea without a chance of being rescued.

The young man struggled to his feet. His determination to enter the cave was not in the least shaken.

“Miss Campbell must be there!” he repeated; “and she is alive, since her body has hot been swept past us, like this strip of ribbon! It is quite possible that she may have found refuge in some recess. But her strength will soon give way, and she cannot hold out until the tide goes down. We must manage to reach her somehow!"

"I will go," said Partridge.

"No; leave it to me," replied Sinclair.

He was about to attempt the last means of saving Helena, and yet it was one chance in a hundred whether it would succeed.

"Wait here for us, gentlemen," said he to the brothers, "and we will be back in five minutes. Come on, Partridge."

The two brothers stood in a corner, sheltered by the cliff, out of reach of the waves whilst Oliver Sinclair and Partridge hurried back to Clam-shell Cave.

It was then half-past eight. Five minutes later the young man and Partridge reappeared, dragging along the causeway the boat which the skipper had left them.

Could Oliver be thinking of attempting to enter the cave by sea, since it was impossible to do so by land?

Yes, he was about to make that venture; he was risking his life, and he knew it, but that did not make him hesitate for a moment.

The boat was brought to the foot of the staircase, where it was sheltered from the surf behind a projecting rock.

"I am going with you," said the old servant.

“No, Partridge,” replied Oliver, “we must not laden this light boat uselessly, and if Miss Campbell is yet alive, I shall be able to manage by myself.”

“Oliver,” cried the brothers, with tears in their eyes; “Oliver, save our child!”

The young man pressed their hands, then, springing into the boat, he seized the oars and skilfully pushed out into the eddying sea; then, waiting an instant for the reflux of an enormous wave, he was carried right in front of the cave. Here the boat was nearly upset; but, with a dextrous movement of the oars, Oliver succeeded in keeping her straight. Had she ben aught amidships, she would inevitably have been capsized.

At first the waves carried the frail boat almost above the entrance of the cavern, and one would have thought the nutshell would have been dashed to pieces against the rock, but the receeding wave drew it swiftly back with irresistable force.

Three times the light craft was thus tossed to and fro, first precipitated towards the cave, then carried back again, without being able to effect a passage through the waters which barred the entrance, but Oliver retained his self-possession, and held his own with the oars.

At last the boat was balanced for a moment on the crest of an enormous breaker, which rose almost as high as the plateau of the island, then fell with tremendous rapidity right at the foot of the cave, and Sinclair was hurled down its liquid back as though he were shooting a rapid.

A cry of horror escaped the spectators of this scene, for it appeared that the boat must inevitably be dashed against the rocks to the left of the entrance.

But the intrepid young man, with a stroke of the oars, righted her. The mouth of the cavern was then free, and, with the rapidity of an arrow, he was carried forward on the huge mass of water and disappeared inside the cavern.

A second later, the liquid sheets broke in an avalanche of foam against the island.

Would the boat be dashed to pieces against the rocks at the end of the cavern, and would there be two victims now instead of one?

Such was not the case. Oliver Sinclair had been hurled swiftly past the uneven roof of the cavern, but, by lying flat in the boat, he had escaped being struck by the projections of rock. In the space of a second he had reached the further end of the cavern, his only fear being that he might be carried out again by the retreating waters, before he could seize hold of some ledge of rock.

The boat was dashed against the columns at the end of the cave, and was broken in two, but fortunately Sinclair had time to lay hold of a projecting rock, which he clutched with the tenacity of a drowning man, and by this means hoisted himself out of reach of the sea.

A moment later, the broken boat was carried out by the retreating wave, and at sight of the wreck, the brothers and Partridge could not but conclude that the gallant young man had perished.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TEMPEST IN A CAVERN.

Oliver Sinclair was safe and sound, and, for the moment, out of danger. The darkness of the cavern was so great that he could see nothing of the interior. Only a dim twilight penetrated between the intervals of the waves, when the entrance was left partially clear.

Nevertheless, Sinclair endeavoured his utmost to see where Miss Campbell could have found a refuge. But in vain.

“Miss Campbell! Miss Campbell!” he shouted.

No words can depict his feelings when he heard a voice answering him, —

“Mr. Sinclair! Mr. Sinclair!”

Miss Campbell was alive!

But where could she be out of reach of the billows?

Crawling along the footpath, Sinclair went all round the end of the cavern.

Pages 284-285 missing from scans. Following paragraphs are translated by the contributor.

In the wall on the left, a shriking of basalt had created an anfractuosity, hollowed out as a nich. There, the pillars had been separated. The tiny room, broad at it opening, narrowed so as to leave place for only one person. The legend gave to this hole the name “armchair of Fingal.”

It was in the tiny room that Miss Campbell, surprised by the invasion of the sea, had taken refuge.

Some hours earlier, with the tide descending, entry to the cave was easily practicable, and there the imprudent one had come to make her daily visit. There, deep in her daydreams, she did not suspect the danger threatened by the rising tide, and she had not observed anything that occurred outside. When she wanted to leave, what was her fear, when she could no longer find an exit through this invasion of water!

Miss Campbell did not lose her head, however, and she sought to place herself in the shelter. After two or three vain attempts to reach the outside, she could, after trying twenty times, reach this armchair of Fingal.

It is there that Oliver Sinclair found her huddled up, out of the range of the heavy swells.

“Ah! Miss Campbell!” he exclaimed, “how you were imprudent enough to expose you thus, at the beginning of the tempest! We believed you were lost!”

“And you came to save me, Mr. Oliver,” answered Miss Campbell, more touched by the courage of the young man than the dangers which could still happen.

“I came to take you from a bad place, Miss Campbell, and I will succeed with the aid of God!”

“You are not afraid?”

“I am not afraid… No!… Since you are there, I do not fear anything any more… And, moreover, can I have another feeling of admiration in front of such a spectacle!… Look!”

Miss Campbell had moved herself back into the tiny room. Oliver Sinclair, upright in front of it, sought to shelter it as best he could, when the furiously rising swell threatened to reach it.

The two kept silent. Oliver Sinclair did not need words to comprehend! What good is words to express all that Miss Campbell felt?

However, the young man viewed with an inexpressible anguish, not for himself, but for Miss Campbell, the increasing threats from outside. To hear the howls of the wind, the crashes of the sea, did he understand that the storm was breaking with an increasing fury? Did he see the level of the water rising with the tide, which was still to increase for several hours?

Where would the rise of the sea stop, to which the broad swell was giving an abnormal height? One could not envisage, but, what was only too visible, is that slowly the cave was filling up. If the darkness was not complete, it was that the crests of the waves were impregnated with light from outside, and, besides this, large sheets of phosphorus cast a kind of electric glare on the diamond-shaped prisms of the basaltic columns, and reflected a vague, livid light.

End of missing pages and translation by contributor.

During those rapid gleams, Oliver Sinclair turned towards Miss Campbell, and looked at her with emotions not altogether evoked by the danger around them.

She was gazing in rapture at this sublime spectacle of a tempest in a cavern!

At that moment a wave, higher than the rest, dashed right up to the recess of Fingal's armchair, and Sinclair feared that they would both be swept from their place of refuge.

He held the young girl in his arms, as though she were a prey which the sea would have snatched from him.

"Oliver! Oliver!" cried Miss Campbell, losing her self-possession in a moment of terror.

"Don't be alarmed, Helena!" replied Sinclair. "I will protect you, Helena! — I — "

He said he would protect her! But how? How could he shelter her from the violence of the waves if their fury increased, if the water rose still higher, and made their present place of refuge untenable? What other place was there to afford a shelter from this terrific crashing and leaping of water? All these contingencies passed before him in their terrible reality.

Self-possession was all-important, and Sinclair resolutely determined to maintain his composure.

And well he might, all the more so, as the young girl's physical, if not moral, strength must give way before long. Exhausted by the wearying struggles, reaction would soon set in. Sinclair already felt that she was growing gradually weaker. He endeavoured to reassure her, although he had himself given up all hope.

"Helena — my dear Helena!" he murmured, "on my return to Oban — I learnt — that it was, thanks to you — that I was saved from the Gulf of Coryvrechan!"

“Oliver — you knew it?” replied Miss Campbell, in a stifled voice.

“Yes — and I will show my gratitude to-day! — I will bring you safely out of Fingal’s Cave.”

How dare Sinclair speak of safety, when the sea was dashing right up to the niche? He could only partially shelter his companion from its fury, and once or twice was himself almost swept off — only resisting the force of the water with an almost superhuman effort, feeling Helena’s arms tightly clasped round him, and knowing that she, too, must have been carried off with him.

It must have been about half-past nine in the evening when the tide was at its highest, and the billows were surging into the cavern with the impetuosity of an avalanche; they broke with a deafening roar against the sides of the rock, and such was their fury, that every now and then pieces of the basalt became detached and fell, making dark circles in the phosphorescent sheets of foam. Would the colunms themselves gradually crumble away before the indescribable fury of this onslaught? Might not even the roof of the vault fall in?

Sinclair could not quiet these harrowing thoughts; he felt an irresistible torpor creeping over him, which he tried in vain to shake off, and which was occasioned by the want of air, at times; for, although it came in abundantly with the waves, they seemed to draw it all out again as they swept back from the cavern. Helena’s strength was exhausted, and she became unconscious.

“Oliver! — Oliver!” she murmured, as she swooned away in his arms.

Oliver was crouching with the young girl in the farthest comer of the recess; he felt her cold, inanimate form, and endeavoured to chafe her with the little strength left him. Already the water was up to his waist, and if he, too, lost consciousness, it would be all over with them both!

The gallant young man held out for several hours longer. He supported Miss Campbell in his arms, and shielded her as best he could from the shock of the waves — and this in total darkness — for there was not even a gleam of phosphorescent light visible now, and in the midst of the continuous thundering and roaring of the tempest. It was no longer the voice of Selma which resounded in the palace of Fingal! It was the frightful barking of the dogs of Kamtschatka, which, says Michalet, “roam about in bands of thousands during the long nights, howling furiously at the roaring of the North Sea!”

At last the tide began to go down. Sinclair noticed that with the lowering of the water the waves grew less furious. The darkness in the cavern was so intense, that outside it seemed comparatively light, and in this obscurity the entrance to the cavern, no longer obstructed by the surging of the billows, could be dimly seen. Ere long the mists of night alone besieged the armchair of Fingal, the waves ceased to curl round them with treacherous fury. Hope once again revived in Sinclair’s breast.

By calculating the time which had elapsed since high tide, he knew that it must be past midnight. Two hours more, and the footway would be clear of the foaming breakers, and would then be practicable. For this event he waited, peering eagerly through the darkness, and at last he was rewarded.

The moment to leave the cave had come.

Miss Campbell, meanwhile, had not recovered consciousness. Sinclair took her inanimate form in his arms; then carefully descending from their place of refuge, he groped along the narrow ledge of rock, the iron hand-rail of which had been twisted and torn away by the heavy seas.

As the waves now and again swept towards him, he stood still for a moment, or drew back a step.

At last, just as he had reached the entrance of the cavern, a great wave broke right over them — he thought that they must have been crushed against the rock, or hurled into the foaming abyss below.

By a supreme effort, he managed to retain his footing, and, taking advantage of the retreating wave, he rushed out of the cave.

In a moment he had reached the angle of the cliffs, where the brothers, Partridge, and Dame Bess, who had now joined them, had remained all the night.

They were saved!

But this paroxysm of moral and physical energy, to which Oliver Sinclair had worked himself up, suddenly abandoned him, and after giving Miss Campbell into Dame Bess's arms, he fell exhausted at the foot of the rocks. Had it not been for his courageous devotion, Helena would never have come out of Fingal's cave alive.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE GREEN RAY.

A few minutes later, under the influence of the fresh air in Clam-shell Cave, Miss Campbell recovered consciousness, and seemed to awake as if from a dream in which Oliver Sinclair had taken the prominent part. Of the dangers to which her imprudence had exposed her, she thought but little.

She could not speak yet, but, at sight of Oliver Sinclair, tears of gratitude filled her eyes, and she held out her hand to her rescuer.

Her uncles, too deeply moved to speak, warmly grasped the young man’s hands. Dame Bess and Partridge would have liked to have hugged him.

Then, overcome by fatigue and after changing their saturated garments, they each sought the repose which all so much needed, and this eventful night ended peacefully.

But the impressions of the scene enacted in the legendary cave of Fingal could never be effaced from the memories of those who had been the chief actors in it.

The next day, while Miss Canipbell was still lying upon her couch in Clam-shell Cave, her uncles were walking arm-in-arm along the neighbouring causeway. They did not speak; what need of words to express the thoughts uppermost in both minds? Of what could they be thinking, but that Oliver Sinclair had risked his life in order to save the imprudent young girl? And what must they own but that their first plans might now be realized? In this dumb-show of conversation, carried on by nods and gesticulations, many things were said of which the brothers foresaw the speedy fulfilment. To them Oliver was no longer merely Oliver, but no less than Amin, the most perfect hero of the Gaelic times.

For his part, Sinclair was a prey to very natural excitement. A feeling of delicacy made him wish to be alone; he felt embarrassed in the company of the brothers, as though his very presence might seem to exact the reward of his devotion.

So, after leaving Clam-shell Cave, he wandered off alone over the heights of Staffa.

His thoughts were all of Miss Campbell, and he was quite oblivious of the dangers which he had incurred and voluntarily shared with her. All he cared to remember of this horrible night, were the hours spent by the side of Helena, in the dark cavern, when he held her in his arms to protect her from the raging of the waters. Again through the gleams of phosphorescent light he saw the beautiful face of the young girl, pale, rather with fatigue than fright, rising above the fury of the tempest, like the spirit of the storms! Again he heard her voice, trembling with emotion, as she replied, “What, you knew it?” when he had said, “I know what part you took when I was in danger of perishing inthe Gulf of Coryvrechan!” Again he imagined himself in the scanty shelter afforded by the niche fit only to hold a stone statue, where two young, loving creatures had suffered and struggled for their very lives during many long hours. There it was no longer Oliver Sinclair and Miss Campbell; they had called each other Oliver and Helena, as though, when instant death threatened them, they would have entered upon a new life together!

These vivid thoughts crowded through the young man’s brain as he wandered over the island. However much he would like to have returned to Miss Campbell, an irresistible feeling held him back, perhaps in her presence he would be unable to repress the words which were burning on his lips, and he was determined to be silent.

As happens sometimes after a great storm, the weather was splendid; the sky, swept by the fury of the gale, appeared of a transparent and incomparable ultramarine, and not a shred of mist veiled the horizon, though the sun had passed the zenith.

Lost in a whirl of overwhelming thoughts, Sinclair strolled leisurely along, basking in the warm, refulgent light, and inhaling the life-giving sea-breeze, when suddenly a thought struck him — a thought, quite driven from his memory by those now haunting his brain, came back to him as he found himself before an expanse of clear horizon.

“The Green Ray!” he exclaimed, “if ever sky was likely to favour our observation we have it here! Not a cloud! not a sign of haze! and it is scarcely probable that there will be any after the terrific gales of yesterday, which must have swept them all away to the east. Miss Campbell little thinks what a glorious sunset is awaiting her this evening! I must — I must go and let her know — without a moment’s delay!”

Delighted at having such a plausible excuse for returning to Helena, Sinclair started back to Clam-shell Cave.

A few minutes later he found himself before Miss Campbell and her uncles, who were looking affectionately at her whilst Dame Bess held her hand.

“Miss Campbell,” said he, “you are better, I am glad to see. Do you feel quite strong again?”

“Yes, Mr. Sinclair,” replied Miss Campbell, starting at sight of the young man.

“I think it would do you good,” resumed Sinclair, “to come and get a breath of fresh air on the heights. The sunshine is splendid after the storm, and it will put new life into you.”

“Mr. Sinclair is right,” said Sam.

“Quite right,” added Sib.

“And then,” continued Oliver Sinclair, “I must tell you that in less than a few hours, unless I am very much mistaken, your dearest wish will be gratified.”

“My dearest wish?” murmured Helena, as though speaking to herself.

“Yes; the sky is remarkably clear, and it is very probable that the sun will set on a cloudless horizon.”

“Can it be possible?” cried Sam.

“Can it be possible?” repeated his brother.

“And I have good reason to believe,” added Sinclair, “that this very evening we shall be able to see the Green Ray.”

“The Green Ray!” repeated Miss Campbell.

And she seemed to be puzzling her confused brain as to what this ray could be.

“Ah, to be sure!” added she, “we came here to see the Green Ray!”

“Come along! Come along!” said her uncle Sam, delighted at this opportunity of drawing the young girl out of the lethargy into which she had fallen. “Let us go to the other side of the island.”

“And we shall have a better appetite for dinner on our return,” gaily added Sib.

It was then five o’clock in the afternoon.

Led by Oliver Sinclair, the whole party, including Dame Bess and Partridge, at once left the cave, and mounting the flight of wooden steps which led up the face of the cliff, they reached the plateau of the island.

The brothers could not repress their delight at the magnificence of the sky, through which the sun was slowly travelling down to the west. Perhaps they exaggerated a little, but never, no never had they been so enthusiaistic with regard to the phenomenon. It almost seemed that it was especially for their benefit, and not for that of their niece, that they had made so many changes and submitted to so much discomfort, since they had left Helensburgh.

In truth, the sunset that evening promised to be splendid, and the most prosaic of individuals must have admired the glorious panorama of sea and sky stretching before his eyes.

Helena felt instilled with new life as she inhaled the fresh breezes; her beautiful, clear eyes sparkled with health as she gazed on the rippling waters of the Atlantic stretching far and wide, and her pale cheeks were faintly tinged with pink. How lovely she looked! And how charming her whole appearance! Oliver Sinclair walked a little way behind, and regarded her in silence; he who had often accompanied her in her long walks without the slightest embarrassment, now scarcely dared look at her for the wild throbbing of his heart!

As for the brothers, they were positively as radiant as the sun which they begged to have the goodness to set in a cloudless horizon, and to favour them with a sight of its green ray, whilst, between them, they repeated alternate verses of one of Ossian’s poems.

“‘O thou that rollest above, round as the shield of my fathers! Whence are thy beams, O Sun! thy everlasting light?’”

“‘Thou comest forth in thy awful beauty; the stars hide themselves in the sky; the moon, cold and pale, sinks in the western wave; but thou thyself movest alone.’”

“‘Who can be a companion of thy course? The oaks of the mountains fall; the mountains themselves decay with years; the ocean shrinks and grows again.’”

“‘The moon herself is lost in heaven; but thou art for ever the same, rejoicing in the brightness of thy course.’”

“‘When the world is dark with tempests, when thunder rolls and lightning flies, thou lookest in thy beauty from the clouds, and laughest at the storm.’”

Talking in this enthusiastic strain, they reached the farther end of the heights overlooking the sea. Here they sat down on the rocks, before a perfectly clear horizon.

And this time there was no Aristobulus to bring a sailing-boat in the way, or to raise a flight of sea-birds between Staffa and the setting sun!

As evening came on, the breeze fell, and the waves broke with a gentle plash at the foot of the rocks, the sea was as calm and smooth as a mirror, ruffled only now and then by the lightest breath of wind.

Everything was wonderfully favourable for the observation of the phenomenon.

But behold, half an hour later, Partridge pointing towards the south cried, —

“A sail!”

A sail! Would it once again pass in front of the sun’s disk just as it was sinking below the sea? This would indeed have been more than mere ill-luck!

The boat was coming out of the narrow strait between Iona and Mull, and was carried along by the tide rather than the wind, for there was not sufficient breeze to fill her sails.

“It is the *Clorinda*,” said Sinclair; “and as she will make for the other side of Staffa, she will not interfere at all with our view.”

It was indeed the Cloritida, which, after doubling the southern point of Mull, was making for her moorings in Clam-shell Cove.

All eyes were again turned towards the west. The sun seemed to sink with greater rapidity as it approached the sea; it threw a long trail of dazzling light over the trembling surface of the water; its disk soon changed from a shade of old gold, to fiery red, and, through their half-closed eyes, seemed to glitter with all the varying shades of a kaleidoscope. Faint, waving lines streaked the quivering trail of light cast on the surface of the water, like a spangled mass of glittering gems.

Not the faintest sign of cloud, haze, or mist was visible along the whole of the horizon, which was as clearly defined as a black line traced on white paper.

Motionless, and with intense excitement, they watched the fiery globe as it sank nearer and nearer the horizon, and, for an instant, hung suspended over the abyss. Then, through the refraction of the rays, its disk seemed to change till it looked like an Etruscan vase, with bulging sides, standing on the water. There was no longer any doubt as to the appearance of the phenomenon. Nothing could now interfere with this glorious sunset! Nothing could prevent its last ray from being seen!

The sun was just half way below the horizon, and its powerful rays were shot across the sky like golden arrows; in the distance the cliffs of Mull and the summit of Ben More were bathed in brilliant, purple light.

At last only a faint rim of gold skimmed the surface of the sea.

“The Green Ray! the Green Ray!” cried in one breath the brothers, Dame Bess and Partridge, whose eyes for one second had revelled in the incomparable tint of liquid jade.

Oliver and Helena alone had missed the phenomenon which had at last appeared after so many fruitless observations.

Just as the sun was shooting its last ray into space their eyes met, and all else was forgotten in that glance!

But Helena had caught the black ray, shining from the young man’s eyes, and Oliver the blue ray beaming from hers!

The sun had gone down, and neither Oliver nor Helena had seen the Green Ray.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONCLUSION.

The following day, the 12th of September, the Clorinda, with the whole party on board, set sail with a calm sea and favourable breeze, making for the south-west of the Hebrides, and soon Staffa, Iona, and the point of Mull disappeared behind the high cliffs of that island.

After a pleasant trip, the passengers of the yacht were landed in the little harbour of Oban; then by rail from Oban to Dunolly, and from Dunolly to Glasgow, across the most picturesque country in the Highlands, they returned to Helensburgh.

Three weeks later, a marriage was celebrated with great ceremony at St. George's, Glasgow, but it must be confessed it was not that of Aristobulus Ursiclos with Miss Campbell, and although the bridegroom happened to be Oliver Sinclair, the uncles appeared no less satisfied than their niece.

That this union, contracted under such peculiar circumstances, was a particularly happy one, it is needless to say. Helensburgh, Glasgow, nay even the whole world could scarcely hold all the happiness which had nevertheless been contained in Fingal's Cave.

Although Oliver Sinclair had not seen the much-sought-after phenomenon, he was determined to have a souvenir of the last evening spent on Staffa. So one day he exhibited a remarkably fine sunset, in which a particular effect of a green ray of extreme intensity, as though it had been painted with liquid emerald, was very much admired.

This picture aroused at the same time admiration and discussion, some said it was a natural effect marvellously reproduced, others maintained that it was purely imaginative and that nature could never produce such an effect, to the great indignation of both brothers, who had seen this ray, and declared that the young artist was quite correct.

“And it is even better,” said Sam, “to see the Green Ray in a painting — ”

“Than in nature,” added Sib, “for looking at so many sunsets, one after the other, does the eyesight no good.”

And the brothers were right.

Two months after this, the newly-married couple and their uncles were walking in the park on the banks of the Clyde, when they unexpectedly came upon Aristobulus Ursiclos.

The young savant, who was taking great interest in the work of dragging the river, was going towards the station of Helensburgh when he saw his old Oban companions.

To say that Aristobulus had suffered by Miss Campbell’s desertion of him, would be to entirely misunderstand his character. He felt not the slightest embarrassment before Mistress Sinclair.

They bowed to each other, and Aristobulus politely congratulated the newly-married pair.

Seeing this friendly feeling, the brothers could not conceal the happiness which this marriage had given them.

“Such happiness,” said Sam, “that sometimes when I am alone I find myself smiling.”

“And I weeping,” said Sib.

“Well, gentlemen,” remarked Aristobulus, “it must be allowed that this is the first time you have ever disagreed; one of you smiles, and the other weeps.”

“It is exactly the same thing,” interposed Sinclair.

“Exactly,” repeated his young wife, taking each uncle by the hand.

“How can that be?” replied Aristobulus, in his usual tone of superiority, “No! no! not at all! What is a smile? A voluntary and particular movement of the muscles of the face, whilst tears — ”

“And tears?” asked Mistress Sinclair.

“Are simply a humour which lubricates the eye-ball, a composition of chloride of sodium, phosphate of chalk, and chlorate of soda!”

“Speaking chemically, sir, you are right,” said Oliver Sinclair, “but chemically only.”

“I don’t understand the distinction,” sharply retorted Aristobulus.

And bowing with the rigidity of a geometrician, he resumed his way to the station, with measured steps.

“Mr. Ursiclos would explain sentiment on the same principle as he accounted for the Green Ray,” observed Mistress Sinclair.

“But after all, my dear Helena,” said Oliver, “we never saw that ray, much as we wished to.”

“We have seen something better still!” quietly replied his young wife. “We have seen the happiness which the legend attached to the observation of that phenomenon! And since we have found it, my dear Oliver, let us be contented, and leave to those who have never yet known it, the search for the Green Ray!”

THE END.

THE SCHOOL FOR ROBINSONS

Anonymous translation, 1883

Also known as *Godfrey Morgan: A Californian Mystery*, this adventure novel was first published in 1882. It tells the story of young adventurer Godfrey Morgan and his deportment instructor, Professor T. Artelett, who embark on a round-the-world ocean voyage. Their ship is wrecked and they are cast away on a remote island, where they rescue and befriend an African slave, Carefinotu.

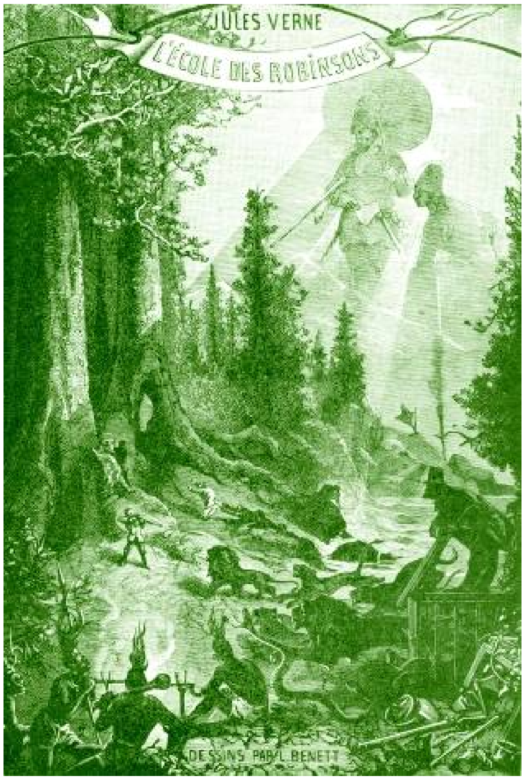
JULES VERNE
L'ÉCOLE DES ROBINSONS
DESSINS PAR L. BENETT

An original frontispiece of the novel

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CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE READER HAS THE OPPORTUNITY OF BUYING AN ISLAND IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN.

“An island to sell, for cash, to the highest bidder!” said Dean Felporg, the auctioneer, standing behind his rostrum in the room where the conditions of the singular sale were being noisily discussed.

“Island for sale! island for sale!” repeated in shrill tones again and again Gingrass, the crier, who was threading his way in and out of the excited crowd closely packed inside the largest saloon in the auction mart at No. 10, Sacramento Street.

The crowd consisted not only of a goodly number of Americans from the States of Utah, Oregon, and California, but also of a few Frenchmen, who form quite a sixth of the population.

Mexicans were there enveloped in their sarapes; Chinamen in their large-sleeved tunics, pointed shoes, and conical hats; one or two Kanucks from the coast; and even a sprinkling of Black Feet, Grosventres, or Flatheads, from the banks of the Trinity river.

The scene is in San Francisco, the capital of California, but not at the period when the placer-mining fever was raging — from 1849 to 1852. San Francisco was no longer what it had been then, a caravanserai, a terminus, an *inn*, where for a night there slept the busy men who were hastening to the gold-fields west of the Sierra Nevada. At the end of some twenty years the old unknown Yerba-Buena had given place to a town unique of its kind, peopled by 100,000 inhabitants, built under the shelter of a couple of hills, away from the shore, but stretching off to the farthest heights in the background — a city in short which has dethroned Lima, Santiago, Valparaiso, and every other rival, and which the Americans have made the queen of the Pacific, the “glory of the western coast!”

It was the 15th of May, and the weather was still cold. In California, subject as it is to the direct action of the polar currents, the first weeks of this month are somewhat similar to the last weeks of March in Central Europe. But the cold was hardly noticeable in the thick of the auction crowd. The bell with its incessant clangour had brought together an enormous throng, and quite a summer temperature caused the drops of perspiration to glisten on the foreheads of the spectators which the cold outside would have soon solidified.

Do not imagine that all these folks had come to the auction-room with the intention of buying. I might say that all of them had but come to see. Who was going to be mad enough, even if he were rich enough, to purchase an isle of the Pacific, which the government had in some eccentric moment decided to sell? Would the reserve price ever be reached? Could anybody be found to work up the bidding? If not, it would scarcely be the fault of the public crier, who tried his best to tempt buyers by his shoutings and gestures, and the flowery metaphors of his harangue. People laughed at him, but they did not seem much influenced by him.

“An island! an isle to sell!” repeated Gingrass.

“But not to buy!” answered an Irishman, whose pocket did not hold enough to pay for a single pebble.

“An island which at the valuation will not fetch six dollars an acre!” said the auctioneer.

“And which won’t pay an eighth per cent!” replied a big farmer, who was well acquainted with agricultural speculations.

“An isle which measures quite sixty-four miles round and has an area of two hundred and twenty-five thousand acres!”

“Is it solid on its foundation?” asked a Mexican, an old customer at the liquor-bars, whose personal solidity seemed rather doubtful at the moment.

“An isle with forests still virgin!” repeated the crier, “with prairies, hills, watercourses — ”

“Warranted?” asked a Frenchman, who seemed rather inclined to nibble.

“Yes! warranted!” added Felporg, much too old at his trade to be moved by the chaff of the public.

“For two years?”

“To the end of the world!”

“Beyond that?”

“A freehold island!” repeated the crier, “an island without a single noxious animal, no wild beasts, no reptiles! — ”

“No birds?” added a wag.

“No insects?” inquired another.

“An island for the highest bidder!” said Dean Felporg, beginning again. “Come, gentlemen, come! Have a little courage in your pockets! Who wants an island in perfect state of repair, never been used, an island in the Pacific, that ocean of oceans? The valuation is a mere nothing! It is put at eleven hundred thousand dollars, is there any one will bid? Who speaks first? You, sir? — you, over there nodding your head like a porcelain mandarin? Here is an island! a really good island! Who says an island?”

“Pass it round!” said a voice as if they were dealing with a picture or a vase.

And the room shouted with laughter, but not a half-dollar was bid.

However, if the lot could not be passed round, the map of the island was at the public disposal. The whereabouts of the portion of the globe under consideration could be accurately ascertained. There was neither surprise nor disappointment to be feared in that respect. Situation, orientation, outline, altitudes, levels, hydrography, climatology, lines of communication, all these were easily to be verified in advance. People were not buying a pig in a poke, and most undoubtedly there could be no mistake as to the nature of the goods on sale. Moreover, the innumerable journals of the United States, especially those of California, with their dailies, bi-weeklies, weeklies, bi-monthlies, monthlies, their reviews, magazines, bulletins, &c. had been for several months directing constant attention to the island whose sale by auction had been authorized by Act of Congress.

The island was Spencer Island, which lies in the west-south-west of the Bay of San Francisco, about 460 miles from the Californian coast, in 32° 15’ north latitude, and 145° 18’ west longitude, reckoning from Greenwich. It would be impossible to imagine a more isolated position, quite out of the way of all maritime or commercial traffic, although Spencer Island was relatively, not very far off, and situated practically in American waters. But thereabouts the regular currents diverging to the north and south have formed a kind of lake of calms, which is sometimes known as the "Whirlpool of Fleurieu."

It is in the centre of this enormous eddy, which has hardly an appreciable movement, that Spencer Island is situated. And so it is sighted by very few ships. The main routes of the Pacific, which join the new to the old continent, and lead away to China or Japan, run in a more southerly direction. Sailing-vessels would meet with endless calms in the Whirlpool of Fleurieu; and steamers, which always take the shortest road, would gain no advantage by crossing it. Hence ships of neither class know anything of Spencer Island, which rises above the waters like the isolated summit of one of the submarine mountains of the Pacific. Truly, for a man wishing to flee from the noise of the world, seeking quiet in solitude, what could be better than this island, lost within a few hundred miles of the coast? For a voluntary Robinson Crusoe, it would be the very ideal of its kind! Only of course he must pay for it.

And now, why did the United States desire to part with the island? Was it for some whim? No! A great nation cannot act on caprice in any matter, however simple. The truth was this: situated as it was, Spencer Island had for a long time been known as a station perfectly useless. There could be no practical result from settling there. In a military point of view it was of no importance, for it only commanded an absolutely deserted portion of the Pacific. In a commercial point of view there was a similar want of importance, for the products would not pay the freight either inwards or outwards. For a criminal colony it was too far from the coast. And to occupy it in any way, would be a very expensive undertaking. So it had remained deserted from time immemorial, and Congress, composed of "eminently practical" men, had resolved to put it up for sale — on one condition only, and that was, that its purchaser should be a free American citizen. There was no intention of giving away the island for nothing, and so the reserve price had been fixed at $1,100,000. This amount for a financial society dealing with such matters was a mere bagatelle, if the transaction could offer any advantages; but as we need hardly repeat, it offered none, and competent men attached no more value to this detached portion of the United States, than to one of the islands lost beneath the glaciers of the Pole.

In one sense, however, the amount was considerable. A man must be rich to pay for this hobby, for in any case it would not return him a halfpenny per cent. He would even have to be immensely rich for the transaction was to be a “cash” one, and even in the United States it is as yet rare to find citizens with $1,100,000 in their pockets, who would care to throw them into the water without hope of return.

And Congress had decided not to sell the island under the price. Eleven hundred thousand dollars, not a cent less, or Spencer Island would remain the property of the Union.

It was hardly likely that any one would be mad enough to buy it on the terms.

Besides, it was expressly reserved that the proprietor, if one offered, should not become king of Spencer Island, but president of a republic. He would gain no right to have subjects, but only fellow-citizens, who could elect him for a fixed time, and would be free from re-electing him indefinitely. Under any circumstances he was forbidden to play at monarchy. The Union could never tolerate the foundation of a kingdom, no matter how small, in American waters.

This reservation was enough to keep off many an ambitious millionaire, many an aged nabob, who might like to compete with the kings of the Sandwich, the Marquesas, and the other archipelagoes of the Pacific.

In short, for one reason or other, nobody presented himself. Time was getting on, the crier was out of breath in his efforts to secure a buyer, the auctioneer orated without obtaining a single specimen of those nods which his estimable fraternity are so quick to discover; and the reserve price was not even mentioned.

However, if the hammer was not wearied with oscillating above the rostrum, the crowd was not wearied with waiting around it. The joking continued to increase, and the chaff never ceased for a moment. One individual offered two dollars for the island, costs included. Another said that a man ought to be paid that for taking it.

And all the time the crier was heard with, —

“An island to sell! an island for sale!”

And there was no one to buy it.

“Will you guarantee that there are flats there?” said Stumpy, the grocer of Merchant Street, alluding to the deposits so famous in alluvial gold-mining.

“No,” answered the auctioneer, “but it is not impossible that there are, and the State abandons all its rights over the gold lands.”

“Haven’t you got a volcano?” asked Oakhurst, the bar-keeper of Montgomery Street.

“No volcanoes,” replied Dean Felporg, “if there were, we could not sell at this price!”

An immense shout of laughter followed.

“An island to sell! an island for sale!” yelled Gingrass, whose lungs tired themselves out to no purpose.

“Only a dollar! only a half-dollar! only a cent above the reserve!” said the auctioneer for the last time, “and I will knock it down! Once! Twice!”

Perfect silence.

“If nobody bids we must put the lot back! Once! Twice!

“Twelve hundred thousand dollars!”

The four words rang through the room like four shots from a revolver.

The crowd, suddenly speechless, turned towards the bold man who had dared to bid.

It was William W. Kolderup, of San Francisco.

CHAPTER II.

HOW WILLIAM W. KOLDERUP, OF SAN FRANCISCO, WAS AT LOGGERHEADS WITH J. R. TASKINAR, OF STOCKTON.

A man extraordinarily rich, who counted dollars by the million as other men do by the thousand; such was William W. Kolderup.

People said he was richer than the Duke of Westminster, whose income is some $4,000,000 a year, and who can spend his $10,000 a day, or seven dollars every minute; richer than Senator Jones, of Nevada, who has $35,000,000 in the funds; richer than Mr. Mackay himself, whose annual $13,750,000 give him $1560 per hour, or half-a-dollar to spend every second of his life.

I do not mention such minor millionaires as the Rothschilds, the Vanderbilts, the Dukes of Northumberland, or the Stewarts, nor the directors of the powerful bank of California, and other opulent personages of the old and new worlds whom William W. Kolderup would have been able to comfortably pension. He could, without inconvenience, have given away a million just as you and I might give away a shilling.

It was in developing the early placer-mining enterprises in California that our worthy speculator had laid the solid foundations of his incalculable fortune. He was the principal associate of Captain Sutter, the Swiss, in the localities, where, in 1848, the first traces were discovered. Since then, luck and shrewdness combined had helped him on, and he had interested himself in all the great enterprises of both worlds. He threw himself boldly into commercial and industrial speculations. His inexhaustible funds were the life of hundreds of factories, his ships were on every sea. His wealth increased not in arithmetical but in geometrical progression. People spoke of him as one of those few “milliardaires” who never know how much they are worth. In reality he knew almost to a dollar, but he never boasted of it.

At this very moment when we introduce him to our readers with all the consideration such a many-sided man merits, William W. Kolderup had 2000 branch offices scattered over the globe, 80,000 employés in America, Europe, and Australia, 300,000 correspondents, a fleet of 500 ships which continually ploughed the ocean for his profit, and he was spending not less than a million a year in bill-stamps and postages. In short, he was the honour and glory of opulent Frisco — the nickname familiarly given by the Americans to the Californian capital.

A bid from William W. Kolderup could not but be a serious one. And when the crowd in the auction room had recognized who it was that by $100,000 had capped the reserve price of Spencer Island, there was an irresistible sensation, the chaffing ceased instantly, jokes gave place to interjections of admiration, and cheers resounded through the saloon. Then a deep silence succeeded to the hubbub, eyes grew bigger, and ears opened wider. For our part had we been there we would have had to hold our breath that we might lose nothing of the exciting scene which would follow should any one dare to bid against William W. Kolderup.

But was it probable? Was it even possible?

No! And at the outset it was only necessary to look at William W. Kolderup to feel convinced that he could never yield on a question where his financial gallantry was at stake.

He was a big, powerful man, with huge head, large shoulders, well-built limbs, firmly knit, and tough as iron. His quiet but resolute look was not willingly cast downwards, his grey hair, brushed up in front, was as abundant as if he were still young. The straight lines of his nose formed a geometrically-drawn right-angled triangle. No moustache; his beard cut in Yankee fashion bedecked his chin, and the two upper points met at the opening of the lips and ran up to the temples in pepper-and-salt whiskers; teeth of snowy whiteness were symmetrically placed on the borders of a clean-cut mouth. The head of one of those true kings of men who rise in the tempest and face the storm. No hurricane could bend that head, so solid was the neck which supported it. In these battles of the bidders each of its nods meant an additional hundred thousand dollars.

There was no one to dispute with him.

“Twelve hundred thousand dollars — twelve hundred thousand!” said the auctioneer, with that peculiar accent which men of his vocation find most effective.

“Going at twelve hundred thousand dollars!” repeated Gingrass the crier.

“You could safely bid more than that,” said Oakhurst, the bar-keeper; “William Kolderup will never give in.”

“He knows no one will chance it,” answered the grocer from Merchant Street.

Repeated cries of “Hush!” told the two worthy tradesmen to be quiet. All wished to hear. All hearts palpitated. Dare any one raise his voice in answer to the voice of William W. Kolderup? He, magnificent to look upon, never moved. There he remained as calm as if the matter had no interest for him.

But — and this those near to him noticed — his eyes were like revolvers loaded with dollars, ready to fire.

“Nobody speaks?” asked Dean Felporg.

Nobody spoke.

“Once! Twice!”

“Once! Twice!” repeated Gingrass, quite accustomed to this little dialogue with his chief.

“Going!”

“Going!”

“For twelve — hundred — thousand — dollars — Spencer — Island — com — plete!”

“For twelve — hundred — thousand — dollars!”

“That is so? No mistake?”

“No withdrawal?”

“For twelve hundred thousand dollars, Spencer Island!”

The waistcoats rose and fell convulsively. Could it be possible that at the last second a higher bid would come? Felporg with his right hand stretched on the table was shaking his ivory hammer — one rap, two raps, and the deed would be done.

The public could not have been more absorbed in the face of a summary application of the law of Justice Lynch!

The hammer slowly fell, almost touched the table, rose again, hovered an instant like a sword which pauses ere the drawer cleaves the victim in twain; then it flashed swiftly downwards.

But before the sharp rap could be given, a voice was heard giving utterance to these four words, —

"Thirteen — hundred — thousand — dollars!"

There was a preliminary "Ah!" of general stupefaction, then a second "Ah!" of not less general satisfaction. Another bidder had presented himself! There was going to be a fight after all!

But who was the reckless individual who had dared to come to dollar strokes with William W. Kolderup of San Francisco?

It was J. R. Taskinar, of Stockton.

J. R. Taskinar was rich, but he was more than proportionately fat. He weighed 490 lbs. If he had only run second in the last fat-man show at Chicago, it was because he had not been allowed time to finish his dinner, and had lost about a dozen pounds.

This colossus, who had had to have special chairs made for his portly person to rest upon, lived at Stockton, on the San Joachim. Stockton is one of the most important cities in California, one of the depôt centres for the mines of the south, the rival of Sacramento the centre for the mines of the north. There the ships embark the largest quantity of Californian corn.

Not only had the development of the mines and speculations in wheat furnished J. R. Taskinar with the occasion of gaining an enormous fortune, but petroleum, like another Pactolus, had run through his treasury. Besides, he was a great gambler, a lucky gambler, and he had found “poker” most prodigal of its favours to him.

But if he was a Crœsus, he was also a rascal; and no one would have addressed him as “honourable,” although the title in those parts is so much in vogue. After all, he was a good war-horse, and perhaps more was put on his back than was justly his due. One thing was certain, and that was that on many an occasion he had not hesitated to use his “Derringer” — the Californian revolver.

Now J. R. Taskinar particularly detested William W. Kolderup. He envied him for his wealth, his position, and his reputation. He despised him as a fat man despises a lean one. It was not the first time that the merchant of Stockton had endeavoured to do the merchant of San Francisco out of some business or other, good or bad, simply owing to a feeling of rivalry. William W. Kolderup thoroughly knew his man, and on all occasions treated him with scorn enough to drive him to distraction.

The last success which J. R. Taskinar could not forgive his opponent was that gained in the struggle over the state elections. Notwithstanding his efforts, his threats, and his libels, not to mention the millions of dollars squandered by his electoral courtiers, it was William W. Kolderup who sat in his seat in the Legislative Council of Sacramento.

J. R. Taskinar had learnt — how, I cannot tell — that it was the intention of William W. Kolderup to acquire possession of Spencer Island. This island seemed doubtless as useless to him as it did to his rival. No matter. Here was another chance for fighting, and perhaps for conquering. J. R. Taskinar would not allow it to escape him.

And that is why J. R. Taskinar had come to the auction room among the curious crowd who could not be aware of his designs, why at all points he had prepared his batteries, why before opening fire, he had waited till his opponent had covered the reserve, and why when William W. Kolderup had made his bid of —

“Twelve hundred thousand dollars!”

J. R. Taskinar at the moment when William W. Kolderup thought he had definitely secured the island, woke up with the words shouted in stentorian tones, —

“Thirteen hundred thousand dollars!”

Everybody as we have seen turned to look at him.

“Fat Taskinar!”

The name passed from mouth to mouth. Yes. Fat Taskinar! He was known well enough! His corpulence had been the theme of many an article in the journals of the Union.

I am not quite sure which mathematician it was who had demonstrated by transcendental calculations, that so great was his mass that it actually influenced that of our satellite and in an appreciable manner disturbed the elements of the lunar orbit.

But it was not J. R. Taskinar’s physical composition which interested the spectators in the room. It was something far different which excited them; it was that he had entered into direct public rivalry with William W. Kolderup. It was a fight of heroes, dollar versus dollar, which had opened, and I do not know which of the two coffers would turn out to be best lined. Enormously rich were both these mortal enemies! After the first sensation, which was rapidly suppressed, renewed silence fell on the assembly. You could have heard a spider weaving his web.

It was the voice of Dean Felporg which broke the spell.

“For thirteen hundred thousand dollars, Spencer Island!” declaimed he, drawing himself up so as to better command the circle of bidders.

William W. Kolderup had turned towards J. R. Taskinar. The bystanders moved back, so as to allow the adversaries to behold each other. The man of Stockton and the man of San Francisco were face to face, mutually staring, at their ease. Truth compels me to state that they made the most of the opportunity. Never would one of them consent to lower his eyes before those of his rival.

“Fourteen hundred thousand dollars,” said William W. Kolderup.

“Fifteen hundred thousand!” retorted J. R. Taskinar.

“Sixteen hundred thousand!”

“Seventeen hundred thousand!”

Have you ever heard the story of the two mechanics of Glasgow, who tried which should raise the other highest up the factory chimney at the risk of a catastrophe? The only difference was that here the chimney was of ingots of gold.

Each time after the capping bid of J. R. Taskinar, William W. Kolderup took a few moments to reflect before he bid again. On the contrary Taskinar burst out like a bomb, and did not seem to require a second to think.

“Seventeen hundred thousand dollars!” repeated the auctioneer. “Now, gentlemen, that is a mere nothing! It is giving it away!”

And one can well believe that, carried away by the jargon of his profession, he was about to add, —

“The frame alone is worth more than that!” When —

“Seventeen hundred thousand dollars!” howled Gingrass, the crier.

“Eighteen hundred thousand!” replied William W. Kolderup.

“Nineteen hundred thousand!” retorted J. R. Taskinar.

“Two millions!” quoth William W. Kolderup, and so quickly that this time he evidently had not taken the trouble to think. His face was a little pale when these last words escaped his lips, but his whole attitude was that of a man who did not intend to give in.

J. R. Taskinar was simply on fire. His enormous face was like one of those gigantic railway bull’s-eyes which, screened by the red, signal the stoppage of the train. But it was highly probable that his rival would disregard the block, and decline to shut off steam.

This J. R. Taskinar felt. The blood mounted to his brows, and seemed apoplectically congested there. He wriggled his fat fingers, covered with diamonds of great price, along the huge gold chain attached to his chronometer. He glared at his adversary, and then shutting his eyes so as to open them with a more spiteful expression a moment afterwards.

“Two million, four hundred thousand dollars!” he remarked, hoping by this tremendous leap to completely rout his rival.

“Two million, seven hundred thousand!” replied William W. Kolderup in a peculiarly calm voice.

“Two million, nine hundred thousand!”

“Three millions!”

Yes! William W. Kolderup, of San Francisco, said three millions of dollars!

Applause rang through the room, hushed, however, at the voice of the auctioneer, who repeated the bid, and whose oscillating hammer threatened to fall in spite of himself by the involuntary movement of his muscles. It seemed as though Dean Felporg, surfeited with the surprises of public auction sales, would be unable to contain himself any longer.

All glances were turned on J. R. Taskinar. That voluminous personage was sensible of this, but still more was he sensible of the weight of these three millions of dollars, which seemed to crush him. He would have spoken, doubtless to bid higher — but he could not. He would have liked to nod his head — he could do so no more.

After a long pause, however, his voice was heard; feeble it is true, but sufficiently audible.

“Three millions, five hundred thousand!”

“Four millions,” was the answer of William W. Kolderup.

It was the last blow of the bludgeon. J. R. Taskinar succumbed. The hammer gave a hard rap on the marble table and —

Spencer Island fell for four millions of dollars to William W. Kolderup, of San Francisco.

“I will be avenged!” muttered J. R. Taskinar, and throwing a glance of hatred at his conqueror, he returned to the Occidental Hotel.

But “hip, hip, hurrah,” three times thrice, smote the ears of William W. Kolderup, then cheers followed him to Montgomery Street, and such was the delirious enthusiasm of the Americans that they even forgot to favour him with the customary bars of “Yankee Doodle.”

CHAPTER III.

THE CONVERSATION OF PHINA HOLLANEY AND GODFREY MORGAN, WITH A PIANO ACCOMPANIMENT.

William W. Kolderup had returned to his mansion in Montgomery Street. This thoroughfare is the Regent Street, the Broadway, the Boulevard des Italiens of San Francisco. Throughout its length, the great artery which crosses the city parallel with its quays is astir with life and movement; trams there are innumerable; carriages with horses, carriages with mules; men bent on business, hurrying to and fro over its stone pavements, past shops thronged with customers; men bent on pleasure, crowding the doors of the "bars," where at all hours are dispensed the Californian's drinks.

There is no need for us to describe the mansion of a Frisco nabob. With so many millions, there was proportionate luxury. More comfort than taste. Less of the artistic than the practical. One cannot have everything.

So the reader must be contented to know that there was a magnificent reception-room, and in this reception-room a piano, whose chords were permeating the mansion's warm atmosphere when the opulent Kolderup walked in.

"Good!" he said. "She and he are there! A word to my cashier, and then we can have a little chat."

And he stepped towards his office to arrange the little matter of Spencer Island, and then dismiss it from his mind. He had only to realize a few certificates in his portfolio and the acquisition was settled for. Half-a-dozen lines to his broker — no more. Then William W. Kolderup devoted himself to another “combination” which was much more to his taste.

Yes! she and he were in the drawing-room — she, in front of the piano; he, half reclining on the sofa, listening vaguely to the pearly arpeggios which escaped from the fingers of the charmer.

“Are you listening?” she said.

“Of course.”

“Yes! but do you understand it?”

“Do I understand it, Phina! Never have you played those ‘Auld Robin Gray’ variations more superbly.”

“But it is not ‘Auld Robin Gray,’ Godfrey: it is ‘Happy Moments.’”

“Oh! ah! yes! I remember!” answered Godfrey, in a tone of indifference which it was difficult to mistake. The lady raised her two hands, held them suspended for an instant above the keys as if they were about to grasp another chord, and then with a half-turn on her music-stool she remained for a moment looking at the too tranquil Godfrey, whose eyes did their best to avoid hers.

Phina Hollaney was the goddaughter of William W. Kolderup. An orphan, he had educated her, and given her the right to consider herself his daughter, and to love him as her father. She wanted for nothing. She was young, “handsome in her way” as people say, but undoubtedly fascinating, a blonde of sixteen with the ideas of a woman much older, as one could read in the crystal of her blue-black eyes. Of course, we must compare her to a lily, for all beauties are compared to lilies in the best American society. She was then a lily, but a lily grafted into an eglantine. She certainly had plenty of spirit, but she had also plenty of practical common-sense, a somewhat selfish demeanour, and but little sympathy with the illusions and dreams so characteristic of her sex and age.

Her dreams were when she was asleep, not when she was awake. She was not asleep now, and had no intention of being so.

“Godfrey?” she continued.

“Phina?” answered the young man.

“Where are you now?”

“Near you — in this room — ”

“Not near me, Godfrey! Not in this room! But far far away, over the seas, is it not so?”

And mechanically Phina’s hand sought the key-board and rippled along a series of sinking sevenths, which spoke of a plaintive sadness, unintelligible perhaps to the nephew of William W. Kolderup.

For such was this young man, such was the relationship he bore towards the master of the house. The son of a sister of this buyer of islands, fatherless and motherless for a good many years, Godfrey Morgan, like Phina, had been brought up in the house of his uncle, in whom the fever of business had still left a place for the idea of marrying these two to each other.

Godfrey was in his twenty-third year. His education now finished, had left him with absolutely nothing to do. He had graduated at the University, but had found it of little use. For him life opened out but paths of ease; go where he would, to the right or the left, whichever way he went, fortune would not fail him.

Godfrey was of good presence, gentlemanly, elegant — never tying his cravat in a ring, nor starring his fingers, his wrists or his shirt-front with those jewelled gimcracks so dear to his fellow-citizens.

I shall surprise no one in saying that Godfrey Morgan was going to marry Phina Hollaney. Was he likely to do otherwise? All the proprieties were in favour of it. Besides, William W. Kolderup desired the marriage. The two people whom he loved most in this world were sure of a fortune from him, without taking into consideration whether Phina cared for Godfrey, or Godfrey cared for Phina. It would also simplify the bookkeeping of the commercial house. Ever since their births an account had been opened for the boy, another for the girl. It would then be only necessary to rule these off and transfer the balances to a joint account for the young couple. The worthy merchant hoped that this would soon be done, and the balances struck without error or omission.

But it is precisely that there had been an omission and perhaps an error that we are about to show.

An error, because at the outset Godfrey felt that he was not yet old enough for the serious undertaking of marriage; an omission, because he had not been consulted on the subject.

In fact, when he had finished his studies Godfrey had displayed a quite premature indifference to the world, in which he wanted for nothing, in which he had no wish remaining ungratified, and nothing whatever to do. The thought of travelling round the world was always present to him. Of the old and new continents he knew but one spot — San Francisco, where he was born, and which he had never left except in a dream. What harm was there in a young man making the tour of the globe twice or thrice — especially if he were an American? Would it do him any good? Would he learn anything in the different adventures he would meet with in a voyage of any length? If he were not already satiated with a life of adventure, how could he be answered? Finally, how many millions of leagues of observation and instruction were indispensable for the completion of the young man’s education?

Things had reached this pass; for a year or more Godfrey had been immersed in books of voyages of recent date, and had passionately devoured them. He had discovered the Celestial Empire with Marco Polo, America with Columbus, the Pacific with Cook, the South Pole with Dumont d’Urville. He had conceived the idea of going where these illustrious travellers had been without him. In truth, he would not have considered an exploring expedition of several years to cost him too dear at the price of a few attacks of Malay pirates, several ocean collisions, and a shipwreck or two on a desert island where he could live the life of a Selkirk or a Robinson Crusoe! A Crusoe! To become a Crusoe! What young imagination has not dreamt of this in reading as Godfrey had often, too often done, the adventures of the imaginary heroes of Daniel de Foe and De Wyss?

Yes! The nephew of William W. Kolderup was in this state when his uncle was thinking of binding him in the chains of marriage. To travel in this way with Phina, then become Mrs. Morgan, would be clearly impossible! He must go alone or leave it alone. Besides, once his fancy had passed away, would not she be better disposed to sign the settlements? Was it for the good of his wife that he had not been to China or Japan, not even to Europe? Decidedly not.

And hence it was that Godfrey was now absent in the presence of Phina, indifferent when she spoke to him, deaf when she played the airs which used to please him; and Phina, like a thoughtful, serious girl, soon noticed this.

To say that she did not feel a little annoyance mingled with some chagrin, is to do her a gratuitous injustice. But accustomed to look things in the face, she had reasoned thus, —

“If we must part, it had better be before marriage than afterwards!”

And thus it was that she had spoken to Godfrey in these significant words.

“No! You are not near me at this moment — you are beyond the seas!”

Godfrey had risen. He had walked a few steps without noticing Phina, and unconsciously his index finger touched one of the keys of the piano. A loud C# of the octave below the staff, a note dismal enough, answered for him.

Phina had understood him, and without more discussion was about to bring matters to a crisis, when the door of the room opened.

William W. Kolderup appeared, seemingly a little preoccupied as usual. Here was the merchant who had just finished one negotiation and was about to begin another.

“Well,” said he, “there is nothing more now than for us to fix the date.”

“The date?” answered Godfrey, with a start. “What date, if you please, uncle?”

“The date of your wedding!” said William W. Kolderup. “Not the date of mine, I suppose!”

“Perhaps that is more urgent?” said Phina.

“Hey? — what?” exclaimed the uncle — ”what does that matter? We are only talking of current affairs, are we not?”

“Godfather Will,” answered the lady. “It is not of a wedding that we are going to fix the date to-day, but of a departure.”

“A departure!”

“Yes, the departure of Godfrey,” continued Phina, “of Godfrey who, before he gets married, wants to see a little of the world!”

“You want to go away — you?” said William W. Kolderup, stepping towards the young man and raising his arms as if he were afraid that this “rascal of a nephew” would escape him.

“Yes; I do, uncle,” said Godfrey gallantly.

“And for how long?”

“For eighteen months, or two years, or more, if — ”

“If — ”

“If you will let me, and Phina will wait for me.”

“Wait for you! An intended who intends until he gets away!” exclaimed William W. Kolderup.

“You must let Godfrey go,” pleaded Phina; “I have thought it carefully over. I am young, but really Godfrey is younger. Travel will age him, and I do not think it will change his taste! He wishes to travel, let him travel! The need of repose will come to him afterwards, and he will find me when he returns.”

“What!” exclaimed William W. Kolderup, “you consent to give your bird his liberty?”

“Yes, for the two years he asks.”

“And you will wait for him?”

“Uncle Will, if I could not wait for him I could not love him!” and so saying Phina returned to the piano, and whether she willed it or no, her fingers softly played a portion of the then fashionable “Départ du Fiancé,” which was very appropriate under the circumstances. But Phina, without perceiving it perhaps, was playing in “A minor,” whereas it was written in “A major,” and all the sentiment of the melody was transformed, and its plaintiveness chimed in well with her hidden feelings.

But Godfrey stood embarrassed, and said not a word. His uncle took him by the head and turning it to the light looked fixedly at him for a moment or two. In this way he questioned him without having to speak, and Godfrey was able to reply without having occasion to utter a syllable.

And the lamentations of the “Départ du Fiancé” continued their sorrowful theme, and then William W. Kolderup, having made the turn of the room, returned to Godfrey, who stood like a criminal before the judge. Then raising his voice, —

“You are serious,” he asked.

“Quite serious!” interrupted Phina, while Godfrey contented himself with making a sign of affirmation.

“You want to try travelling before you marry Phina! Well! You shall try it, my nephew!”

He made two or three steps and stopping with crossed arms before Godfrey, asked, —

“Where do you want to go to?”

“Everywhere.”

“And when do you want to start?”

“When you please, Uncle Will.”

“All right,” replied William W. Kolderup, fixing a curious look on his nephew.

Then he muttered between his teeth, —

“The sooner the better.”

At these last words came a sudden interruption from Phina. The little finger of her left hand touched a G#, and the fourth had, instead of falling on the key-note, rested on the “sensible,” like Ralph in the “Huguenots,” when he leaves at the end of his duet with Valentine.

Perhaps Phina’s heart was nearly full, she had made up her mind to say nothing.

It was then that William W. Kolderup, without noticing Godfrey, approached the piano.

“Phina,” said he gravely, “you should never remain on the ‘sensible’!”

And with the tip of his large finger he dropped vertically on to one of the keys and an “A natural” resounded through the room.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH T. ARTELETT, OTHERWISE TARTLET, IS DULY INTRODUCED TO THE READER.

If T. Artelett had been a Parisian, his compatriots would not have failed to nickname him Tartlet, but as he had already received this title we do not hesitate to describe him by it. If Tartlet was not a Frenchman he ought to have been one.

In his “Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem,” Chateaubriand tells of a little man “powdered and frizzed in the old-fashioned style, with a coat of apple green, a waistcoat of drouget, shirt-frill and cuffs of muslin, who scraped a violin and made the Iroquois dance ‘Madeleine Friquet.’”

The Californians are not Iroquois, far from it; but Tartlet was none the less professor of dancing and deportment in the capital of their state. If they did not pay him for his lessons, as they had his predecessor in beaver-skins and bear-hams, they did so in dollars. If in speaking of his pupils he did not talk of the “bucks and their squaws,” it was because his pupils were highly civilized, and because in his opinion he had contributed considerably to their civilization.

Tartlet was a bachelor, and aged about forty-five at the time we introduce him to our readers. But for a dozen years or so his marriage with a lady of somewhat mature age had been expected to take place.

Under present circumstances it is perhaps advisable to give “two or three lines” concerning his age, appearance, and position in life. He would have responded to such a request we imagine as follows, and thus we can dispense with drawing his portrait from a moral and physical point of view.

“He was born on the 17th July, 1835, at a quarter-past three in the morning.

“His height is five feet, two inches, three lines.

“His girth is exactly two feet, three inches.

“His weight, increased by some six pounds during the last year, is one hundred and fifty one pounds, two ounces.

“He has an oblong head.

“His hair, very thin above the forehead, is grey chestnut, his forehead is high, his face oval, his complexion fresh coloured.

“His eyes — sight excellent — a greyish brown, eyelashes and eyebrows clear chestnut, eyes themselves somewhat sunk in their orbits beneath the arches of the brows.

“His nose is of medium size, and has a slight indentation towards the end of the left nostril.

“His cheeks and temples are flat and hairless.

“His ears are large and flat.

“His mouth, of middling size, is absolutely free from bad teeth.

“His lips, thin and slightly pinched, are covered with a heavy moustache and imperial, his chin is round and also shaded with a many-tinted beard.

“A small mole ornaments his plump neck — in the nape.

“Finally, when he is in the bath it can be seen that his skin is white and smooth.

“His life is calm and regular. Without being robust, thanks to his great temperance, he has kept his health uninjured since his birth. His lungs are rather irritable, and hence he has not contracted the bad habit of smoking. He drinks neither spirits, coffee, liqueurs, nor neat wine. In a word, all that could prejudicially affect his nervous system is vigorously excluded from his table. Light beer, and weak wine and water are the only beverages he can take without danger. It is on account of his carefulness that he has never had to consult a doctor since his life began.

“His gesture is prompt, his walk quick, his character frank and open. His thoughtfulness for others is extreme, and it is on account of this that in the fear of making his wife unhappy, he has never entered into matrimony.”

Such would have been the report furnished by Tartlet, but desirable as he might be to a lady of a certain age, the projected union had hitherto failed. The professor remained a bachelor, and continued to give lessons in dancing and deportment.

It was in this capacity that he entered the mansion of William W. Kolderup. As time rolled on his pupils gradually abandoned him, and he ended by becoming one wheel more in the machinery of the wealthy establishment.

After all, he was a brave man, in spite of his eccentricities. Everybody liked him. He liked Godfrey, he liked Phina, and they liked him. He had only one ambition in the world, and that was to teach them all the secrets of his art, to make them in fact, as far as deportment was concerned, two highly accomplished individuals.

Now, what would you think? It was he, this Professor Tartlet, whom William W. Kolderup had chosen as his nephew's companion during the projected voyage. Yes! He had reason to believe that Tartlet had not a little contributed to imbue Godfrey with this roaming mania, so as to perfect himself by a tour round the world. William W. Kolderup had resolved that they should go together. On the morrow, the 16th of April, he sent for the professor to his office.

The request of the nabob was an order for Tartlet. The professor left his room, with his pocket violin — generally known as a kit — so as to be ready for all emergencies. He mounted the great staircase of the mansion with his feet academically placed as was fitting for a dancing-master; knocked at the door of the room, entered — his body half inclined, his elbows rounded, his mouth on the grin — and waited in the third position, after having crossed his feet one before the other, at half their length, his ankles touching and his toes turned out. Any one but Professor Tartlet placed in this sort of unstable equilibrium would have tottered on his base, but the professor preserved an absolute perpendicularity.

“Mr. Tartlet,” said William W. Kolderup, “I have sent for you to tell you some news which I imagine will rather surprise you.”

“As you think best!” answered the professor.

“My nephew's marriage is put off for a year or eighteen months, and Godfrey, at his own request, is going to visit the different countries of the old and new world.”

“Sir,” answered Tartlet, “my pupil, Godfrey, will do honour to the country of his birth, and — ”

“And, to the professor of deportment who has initiated him into etiquette,” interrupted the merchant, in a tone of which the guileless Tartlet failed to perceive the irony.

And, in fact, thinking it the correct thing to execute an “assemblée,” he first moved one foot and then the other, by a sort of semi-circular side slide, and then with a light and graceful bend of the knee, he bowed to William W. Kolderup.

“I thought,” continued the latter, “that you might feel a little regret at separating from your pupil?”

“The regret will be extreme,” answered Tartlet, “but should it be necessary — ”

“It is not necessary,” answered William W. Kolderup, knitting his bushy eyebrows.

“Ah!” replied Tartlet.

Slightly troubled, he made a graceful movement to the rear, so as to pass from the third to the fourth position; but he left the breadth of a foot between his feet, without perhaps being conscious of what he was doing.

“Yes!” added the merchant in a peremptory tone, which admitted not of the ghost of a reply; “I have thought it would really be cruel to separate a professor and a pupil so well made to understand each other!”

"Assuredly! — the journey?" answered Tartlet, who did not seem to want to understand.

"Yes! Assuredly!" replied William W. Kolderup; "not only will his travels bring out the talents of my nephew, but the talents of the professor to whom he owes so correct a bearing."

Never had the thought occurred to this great baby that one day he would leave San Francisco, California, America, to roam the seas. Such an idea had never entered the brain of a man more absorbed in choregraphy than geography, and who was still ignorant of the suburbs of the capital beyond ten miles radius. And now this was offered to him. He was to understand that *nolens volens* he was to expatriate himself, he himself was to experience with all their costs and inconveniences the very adventures he had recommended to his pupil! Here, decidedly, was something to trouble a brain much more solid than his, and the unfortunate Tartlet for the first time in his life felt an involuntary yielding in the muscles of his limbs, suppled as they were by thirty-five years' exercise.

"Perhaps," said he, trying to recall to his lips the stereotyped smile of the dancer which had left him for an instant, — "perhaps — am I not — "

"You will go!" answered William W. Kolderup like a a man with whom discussion was useless.

To refuse was impossible. Tartlet did not even think of such a thing. What was he in the house? A thing, a parcel, a package to be sent to every corner of the world. But the projected expedition troubled him not a little.

“And when am I to start?” demanded he, trying to get back into an academical position.

“In a month.”

“And on what raging ocean has Mr. Kolderup decided that his vessel should bear his nephew and me?”

“The Pacific, at first.”

“And on what point of the terrestrial globe shall I first set foot?”

“On the soil of New Zealand,” answered William W. Kolderup; “I have remarked that the New Zealanders always stick their elbows out! Now you can teach them to turn them in!”

And thus was Professor Tartlet selected as the travelling-companion of Godfrey Morgan.

A nod from the merchant gave him to understand that the audience had terminated. He retired, considerably agitated, and the performance of the special graces which he usually displayed in this difficult act left a good deal to be desired. In fact, for the first time in his life, Professor Tartlet, forgetting in his preoccupation the most elementary principles of his art, went out with his toes turned in!

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH THEY PREPARE TO GO, AND AT THE END OF WHICH THEY GO FOR GOOD.

Before the long voyage together through life, which men call marriage, Godfrey then was to make the tour of the world — a journey sometimes even more dangerous. But he reckoned on returning improved in every respect; he left a lad, he would return a man. He would have seen, noted, compared. His curiosity would be satisfied. There would only remain for him to settle down quietly, and live happily at home with his wife, whom no temptation would take him from. Was he wrong or right? Was he to learn a valuable lesson? The future will show.

In short, Godfrey was enchanted.

Phina, anxious without appearing to be so, was resigned to this apprenticeship.

Professor Tartlet, generally so firm on his limbs, had lost all his dancing equilibrium. He had lost all his usual self-possession, and tried in vain to recover it; he even tottered on the carpet of his room as if he were already on the floor of a cabin, rolling and pitching on the ocean.

As for William W. Kolderup, since he had arrived at a decision, he had become very uncommunicative, especially to his nephew. The closed lips, and eyes half hidden beneath their lids, showed that there was some fixed idea in the head where generally floated the highest commercial speculations.

“Ah! you want to travel,” muttered he every now and then; “travel instead of marrying and staying at home! Well, you shall travel.”

Preparations were immediately begun.

In the first place, the itinerary had to be projected, discussed, and settled.

Was Godfrey to go south, or east, or west? That had to be decided in the first place.

If he went southwards, the Panama, California and British Columbia Company, or the Southampton and Rio Janeiro Company would have to take him to Europe.

If he went eastwards, the Union Pacific Railway would take him in a few days to New York, and thence the Cunard, Inman, White Star, Hamburg-American, or French-Transatlantic Companies would land him on the shores of the old world.

If he went westwards, the Golden Age Steam Transoceanic would render it easy for him to reach Melbourne, and thence he could get to the Isthmus of Suez by the boats of the Peninsular and Oriental Company.

The means of transport were abundant, and thanks to their mathematical agreement the round of the world was but a simple pleasure tour.

But it was not thus that the nephew and heir of the nabob of Frisco was to travel.

No! William W. Kolderup possessed for the requirements of his business quite a fleet of steam and sailing-vessels. He had decided that one of these ships should be “put at the disposal” of Godfrey Morgan, as if he were a prince of the blood, travelling for his pleasure — at the expense of his father’s subjects.

By his orders the *Dream*, a substantial steamer of 600 tons and 200 horse-power, was got ready. It was to be commanded by Captain Turcott, a tough old salt, who had already sailed in every latitude in every sea. A thorough sailor, this friend of tornadoes, cyclones, and typhoons, had already spent of his fifty years of life, forty at sea. To bring to in a hurricane was quite child’s play to this mariner, who was never disconcerted, except by land-sickness when he was in port. His incessantly unsteady existence on a vessel’s deck had endowed him with the habit of constantly balancing himself to the right or the left, or behind or in front, as though he had the rolling and pitching variety of St. Vitus’s dance.

A mate, an engineer, four stokers, a dozen seamen, eighteen men in all, formed the crew of the *Dream*. And if the ship was contented to get quietly through eight miles an hour, she possessed a great many excellent nautical qualities. If she was not swift enough to race the waves when the sea was high, the waves could not race over her, and that was an advantage which quite compensated for the mediocrity of her speed, particularly when there was no hurry. The *Dream* was brigantine rigged, and in a favourable wind, with her 400 square yards of canvas, her steaming rate could be considerably increased.

It should be borne in mind all through that the voyage of the *Dream* was carefully planned, and would be punctually performed. William W. Kolderup was too practical a man not to put to some purpose a journey of

15,000 or 16,000 leagues across all the oceans of the globe. His ship was to go without cargo, undoubtedly, but it was easy to get her down to her right trim by means of water ballast, and even to sink her to her deck, if it proved necessary.

The *Dream* was instructed to communicate with the different branch establishments of the wealthy merchant. She was to go from one market to another.

Captain Turcott, never fear, would not find it difficult to pay the expenses of the voyage! Godfrey Morgan’s whim would not cost the avuncular purse a single dollar! That is the way they do business in the best commercial houses!

All this was decided at long, very secret interviews between William W. Kolderup and Captain Turcott. But it appeared that the regulation of this matter, simple as it seemed, could not be managed alone, for the captain paid numerous visits to the merchant’s office. When he came away, it would be noticed that his face bore a curious expression, that his hair stood on end as if he had been ruffling it up with fevered hands, and that all his body rolled and pitched more than usual. High words were constantly heard, proving that the interviews were stormy. Captain Turcott, with his plain speaking, knew how to withstand William W. Kolderup, who loved and esteemed him enough to permit him to contradict him.

And now all was arranged. Who had given in? William W. Kolderup or Turcott? I dare not say, for I do not even know the subject of their discussion. However, I rather think it must have been the captain.

Anyhow, after eight days of interviewing, the merchant and the captain were in accord, but Turcott did not cease to grumble between his teeth.

"May five hundred thousand Davy Joneses drag me to the bottom if ever I had a job like this before!"

However, the *Dream* fitted out rapidly, and her captain neglected nothing which would enable him to put to sea in the first fortnight in June. She had been into dock, and the hull had been gone over with composition, whose brilliant red contrasted vividly with the black of her upper works.

A great number of vessels of all kinds and nationalities came into the port of San Francisco. In a good many years the old quays of the town, built straight along the shore, would have been insufficient for the embarkation and disembarkation of their cargoes, if engineers had not devised subsidiary wharves. Piles of red deal were driven into the water, and many square miles of planks were laid on them and formed huge platforms. A good deal of the bay was thus taken up, but the bay is enormous. There were also regular landing-stages, with numberless cranes and crabs, at which steamers from both oceans, steamboats from the Californian rivers, clippers from all countries, and coasters from the American seaboard were ranged in proper order, so as not to interfere one with the other.

It was at one of these artificial quays, at the extremity of Mission Wharf Street, that the *Dream* had been securely moored after she had come out of dock.

Nothing was neglected, and the steamer would start under the most favourable conditions. Provisioning, outfit, all were minutely studied. The rigging was perfect, the boilers had been tested and the screw was an excellent one. A steam launch was even carried, to facilitate communication with the shore, and this would probably be of great service during the voyage.

Everything was ready on the 10th of June. They had only to put to sea. The men shipped by Captain Turcott to work the sails or drive the engine were a picked crew, and it would have been difficult to find a better one. Quite a stock of live animals, agouties, sheep, goats, poultry, &c. were stowed between decks, the material wants of the travellers were likewise provided for by numerous cases of preserved meats of the best brands.

The route the *Dream* was to follow had doubtless been the subject of the long conferences which William W. Kolderup had had with his captain. All knew that they were first bound for Auckland, in New Zealand, unless want of coal necessitated by the persistence of contrary winds obliged them to refill perhaps at one of the islands of the Pacific or some Chinese port.

All this detail mattered little to Godfrey once he was on the sea, and still less to Tartlet, whose troubled spirit exaggerated from day to day the dangers of navigation. There was only one formality to be gone through — the formality of being photographed.

An engaged man could not decently start on a long voyage round the world without taking with him the image of her he loved, and in return leaving his own image behind him.

Godfrey in tourist costume accordingly handed himself over to Messrs Stephenson and Co. photographers of Montgomery Street, and Phina, in her walking-dress, confided in like manner to the sun the task of fixing her charming but somewhat sorrowing features on the plate of those able operators.

It is also the custom to travel together, and so Phina’s portrait had its allotted place in Godfrey’s cabin, and Godfrey’s portrait its special position in Phina’s room. As for Tartlet, who had no betrothed and who was not thinking of having one at present, he thought it better to confide his image to sensitised paper. But although great was the talent of the photographers they failed to present him with a satisfactory proof. The negative was a confused fog in which it was impossible to recognize the celebrated professor of dancing and deportment.

This was because the patient could not keep himself still, in spite of all that was said about the invariable rule in studios devoted to operations of this nature.

They tried other means, even the instantaneous process. Impossible. Tartlet pitched and rolled in anticipation as violently as the captain of the *Dream*.

The idea of obtaining a picture of the features of this remarkable man had thus to be abandoned. Irreparable would be the misfortune if — but far from us be the thought! — if in imagining he was leaving the new world for the old world Tartlet had left the new world for the other world from which nobody returns.

On the 9th of June all was ready. The *Dream* was complete. Her papers, bills of lading, charter-party, assurance policy, were all in order, and two days before the ship-broker had sent on the last signatures.

On that day a grand farewell breakfast was given at the mansion in Montgomery Street. They drank to the happy voyage of Godfrey and his safe return.

Godfrey was rather agitated, and he did not strive to hide it. Phina showed herself much the most composed. As for Tartlet he drowned his apprehensions in several glasses of champagne, whose influence was perceptible up to the moment of departure. He even forgot his kit, which was brought to him as they were casting off the last hawsers of the *Dream*.

The last adieux were said on board, the last handshakings took place on the poop, then the engine gave two or three turns of the screw and the steamer was under way.

“Good-bye, Phina!”

“Good-bye, Godfrey!”

“May Heaven protect you!” said the uncle.

“And above all may it bring us back!” murmured Professor Tartlet.

“And never forget, Godfrey,” added William W. Kolderup, “the device which the *Dream* bears on her stern, ‘Confide, recte agens.’”

“Never, Uncle Will! Good-bye, Phina!”

“Good-bye, Godfrey!”

The steamer moved off, handkerchiefs were shaken as long as she remained in sight from the quay, and even after. Soon the bay of San Francisco, the largest in the world, was crossed, the *Dream* passed the narrow throat of the

Golden Gate and then her prow cleft the waters of the Pacific Ocean. It was as though the Gates of Gold had closed upon her.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH THE READER MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF A NEW PERSONAGE.

The voyage had begun. There had not been much difficulty so far, it must be admitted.

Professor Tartlet, with incontestable logic, often repeated, —

“Any voyage can begin! But where and how it finishes is the important point.”

The cabin occupied by Godfrey was below the poop of the *Dream* and opened on to the dining-saloon. Our young traveller was lodged there as comfortably as possible. He had given Phina’s photograph the best place on the best lighted panel of his room. A cot to sleep on, a lavatory for toilet purposes, some chests of drawers for his clothes and his linen, a table to work at, an armchair to sit upon, what could a young man in his twenty-second year want more? Under such circumstances he might have gone twenty-two times round the world! Was he not at the age of that practical philosophy which consists in good health and good humour? Ah! young people, travel if you can, and if you cannot — travel all the same!

Tartlet was not in a good humour. His cabin, near that of his pupil, seemed to him too narrow, his bed too hard, the six square yards which he occupied quite insufficient for his steps and strides. Would not the traveller in him absorb the professor of dancing and deportment? No! It was in the blood, and when Tartlet reached the hour of his last sleep his feet would be found placed in a horizontal line with the heels one against the other, in the first position.

Meals were taken in common. Godfrey and Tartlet sat opposite to each other, the captain and mate occupying each end of the rolling table. This alarming appellation, the “rolling table,” is enough to warn us that the professor’s place would too often be vacant.

At the start, in the lovely month of June, there was a beautiful breeze from the north-east, and Captain Turcott was able to set his canvas so as to increase his speed. The *Dream* thus balanced hardly rolled at all, and as the waves followed her, her pitching was but slight. This mode of progressing was not such as to affect the looks of the passengers and give them pinched noses, hollow eyes, livid foreheads, or colourless cheeks. It was supportable. They steered south-west over a splendid sea, hardly lifting in the least, and the American coast soon disappeared below the horizon.

For two days nothing occurred worthy of mention. The *Dream* made good progress. The commencement of the voyage promised well — so that Captain Turcott seemed occasionally to feel an anxiety which he tried in vain to hide. Each day as the sun crossed the meridian he carefully took his observations. But it could be noticed that immediately afterwards he retired with the mate into his cabin, and then they remained in secret conclave as if they were discussing some grave eventuality. This performance passed probably unnoticed by Godfrey, who understood nothing about the details of navigation, but the boatswain and the crew seemed somewhat astonished at it, particularly as for two or three times during the first week, when there was not the least necessity for the manœuvre, the course of the *Dream* at night was completely altered, and resumed again in the morning. In a sailing-ship this might be intelligible; but in a steamer, which could keep on the great circle line and only use canvas when the wind was favourable, it was somewhat extraordinary.

During the morning of the 12th of June a very unexpected incident occurred on board.

Captain Turcott, the mate, and Godfrey, were sitting down to breakfast when an unusual noise was heard on deck. Almost immediately afterwards the boatswain opened the door and appeared on the threshold.

“Captain!” he said.

“What’s up?” asked Turcott, sailor as he was, always on the alert.

“Here’s a — Chinee!” said the boatswain.

“A Chinese!”

“Yes! a genuine Chinese we have just found by chance at the bottom of the hold!”

“At the bottom of the hold!” exclaimed Turcott. “Well, by all the — somethings — of Sacramento, just send him to the bottom of the sea!”

“All right!” answered the boatswain.

And that excellent man with all the contempt of a Californian for a son of the Celestial Empire, taking the order as quite a natural one, would have had not the slightest compunction in executing it.

However, Captain Turcott rose from his chair, and followed by Godfrey and the mate, left the saloon and walked towards the forecastle of the *Dream*.

There stood a Chinaman, tightly handcuffed, and held by two or three sailors, who were by no means sparing of their nudges and knocks. He was a man of from five-and-thirty to forty, with intelligent features, well built, of lithe figure, but a little emaciated, owing to his sojourn for sixteen hours at the bottom of a badly ventilated hold.

Captain Turcott made a sign to his men to leave the unhappy intruder alone.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“A son of the sun.”

“And what is your name?”

“Seng Vou,” answered the Chinese, whose name in the Celestial language signifies “he who does not live.”

“And what are you doing on board here?”

“I am out for a sail!” coolly answered Seng Vou, “but am doing you as little harm as I can.”

“Really! as little harm! — and you stowed yourself away in the hold when we started?”

“Just so, captain.”

“So that we might take you for nothing from America to China, on the other side of the Pacific?”

“If you will have it so.”

"And if I don't wish to have it so, you yellow-skinned nigger. If I will have it that you have to swim to China."

"I will try," said the Chinaman with a smile, "but I shall probably sink on the road!"

"Well, John," exclaimed Captain Turcott, "I am going to show you how to save your passage-money."

And Captain Turcott, much more angry than circumstances necessitated, was perhaps about to put his threat into execution, when Godfrey intervened.

"Captain," he said, "one more Chinee on board the *Dream* is one Chinee less in California, where there are too many."

"A great deal too many!" answered Captain Turcott.

"Yes, too many. Well, if this poor beggar wishes to relieve San Francisco of his presence, he ought to be pitied! Bah! we can throw him on shore at Shanghai, and there needn't be any fuss about it!"

In saying that there were too many Chinese in California Godfrey held the same language as every true Californian. The emigration of the sons of the Celestial Empire — there are 300,000,000 in China as against 30,000,000 of Americans in the United States — has become dangerous to the provinces of the Far West; and the legislators of these States of California, Lower California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, and even Congress itself, are much concerned at this new epidemic of invasion, to which the Yankees have given the name of the "yellow-plague."

At this period there were more than 50,000 Chinese, in the State of California alone. These people, very industrious at gold-washing, very patient, living on a pinch of rice, a mouthful of tea, and a whiff of opium, did an immense deal to bring down the price of manual labour, to the detriment of the native workmen. They had to submit to special laws, contrary to the American constitution — laws which regulated their immigration, and withheld from them the right of naturalization, owing to the fear that they would end by obtaining a majority in the Congress. Generally ill-treated, much as Indians or negroes, so as to justify the title of "pests" which was applied to them, they herded together in a sort of ghetto, where they carefully kept up the manners and customs of the Celestial Empire.

In the Californian capital, it is in the Sacramento Street district, decked with their banners and lanterns, that this foreign race has taken up its abode. There they can be met in thousands, trotting along in their wide-sleeved blouses, conical hats, and turned-up shoes. Here, for the most part, they live as grocers, gardeners, or laundresses — unless they are working as cooks or belong to one of those dramatic troupes which perform Chinese pieces in the French theatre at San Francisco.

And — there is no reason why we should conceal the fact — Seng Vou happened to form part of one of these troupes, in which he filled the rôle of "comic lead," if such a description can apply to any Chinese artiste. As a matter of fact they are so serious, even in their fun, that the Californian romancer, Bret Harte, has told us that he never saw a genuine Chinaman laugh, and has even confessed that he is unable to say whether one of the national pieces he witnessed was a tragedy or a farce.

In short, Seng Vou was a comedian. The season had ended, crowned with success — perhaps out of proportion to the gold pieces he had amassed — he wished to return to his country otherwise than as a corpse, for Chinamen always like to get buried at home and there are special steamers who carry dead Celestials and nothing else. At all risks, therefore, he had secretly slipped on board the *Dream*.

Loaded with provisions, did he hope to get through, incognito, a passage of several weeks, and then to land on the coast of China without being seen?

It is just possible. At any rate, the case was hardly one for a death penalty.

So Godfrey had good reason to interfere in favour of the intruder, and Captain Turcott, who pretended to be angrier than he really was, gave up the idea of sending Seng Vou overboard to battle with the waves of the Pacific.

Seng Vou, however, did not return to his hiding-place in the hold, though he was rather an incubus on board. Phlegmatic, methodic, and by no means communicative, he carefully avoided the seamen, who had always some prank to play off on him, and he kept to his own provisions. He was thin enough in all conscience, and his additional weight but imperceptibly added to the cost of navigating the *Dream*. If Seng Vou got a free passage it was obvious that his carriage did not cost William W. Kolderup very much.

His presence on board put into Captain Turcott's head an idea which his mate probably was the only one to understand thoroughly.

"He will bother us a bit — this confounded Chinee! — after all, so much the worse for him."

“What ever made him stow himself away on board the *Dream*?” answered the mate.

“To get to Shanghai!” replied Captain Turcott. “Bless John and all John’s sons too!”

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH IT WILL BE SEEN THAT WILLIAM W. KOLDERUP WAS PROBABLY RIGHT IN INSURING HIS SHIP.

During the following days, the 13th, 14th, and 15th of June, the barometer slowly fell, without an attempt to rise in the slightest degree, and the weather became variable, hovering between rain and wind or storm. The breeze strengthened considerably, and changed to south-westerly. It was a head-wind for the *Dream*, and the waves had now increased enormously, and lifted her forward. The sails were all furled, and she had to depend on her screw alone; under half steam, however, so as to avoid excessive labouring.

Godfrey bore the trial of the ship’s motion without even losing his good-humour for a moment. Evidently he was fond of the sea.

But Tartlet was not fond of the sea, and it served him out.

It was pitiful to see the unfortunate professor of deportment deporting himself no longer, the professor of dancing dancing contrary to every rule of his art. Remain in his cabin, with the seas shaking the ship from stem to stern, he could not.

“Air! air!” he gasped.

And so he never left the deck. A roll sent him rolling from one side to the other, a pitch sent him pitching from one end to the other. He clung to the rails, he clutched the ropes, he assumed every attitude that is absolutely condemned by the principles of the modern choregraphic art. Ah! why could he not raise himself into the air by some balloon-like movement, and escape the eccentricities of that moving plane? A dancer of his ancestors had said that he only consented to set foot to the ground so as not to humiliate his companions, but Tartlet would willingly never have come down at all on the deck, whose perpetual agitation threatened to hurl him into the abyss.

What an idea it was for the rich William W. Kolderup to send him here.

“Is this bad weather likely to last?” asked he of Captain Turcott twenty times a day.

“Dunno! barometer is not very promising!” was the invariable answer of the captain, knitting his brows.

“Shall we soon get there?”

“Soon, Mr. Tartlet? Hum! soon!”

“And they call this the Pacific Ocean!” repeated the unfortunate man, between a couple of shocks and oscillations.

It should be stated that, not only did Professor Tartlet suffer from sea-sickness, but also that fear had seized him as he watched the great seething waves breaking into foam level with the bulwarks of the *Dream*, and heard the valves, lifted by the violent beats, letting the steam off through the waste-pipes, as he felt the steamer tossing like a cork on the mountains of water.

“No,” said he with a lifeless look at his pupil, “it is not impossible for us to capsize.”

“Take it quietly, Tartlet,” replied Godfrey. “A ship was made to float! There are reasons for all this.”

“I tell you there are none.”

And, thinking thus, the professor had put on his life-belt. He wore it night and day, tightly buckled round his waist. He would not have taken it off for untold gold. Every time the sea gave him a moment’s respite he would replenish it with another puff. In fact, he never blew it out enough to please him.

We must make some indulgence for the terrors of Tartlet. To those unaccustomed to the sea, its rolling is of a nature to cause some alarm, and we know that this passenger-in-spite-of-himself had not even till then risked his safety on the peaceable waters of the Bay of San Francisco; so that we can forgive his being ill on board a ship in a stiffish breeze, and his feeling terrified at the playfulness of the waves.

The weather became worse and worse, and threatened the *Dream* with a gale, which, had she been near the shore, would have been announced to her by the semaphores.

During the day the ship was dreadfully knocked about, though running at half steam so as not to damage her engines. Her screw was continually immerging and emerging in the violent oscillations of her liquid bed. Hence, powerful strokes from its wings in the deeper water, or fearful tremors as it rose and ran wild, causing heavy thunderings beneath the stern, and furious gallopings of the pistons which the engineer could master but with difficulty.

One observation Godfrey made, of which at first he could not discover the cause. This was, that during the night the shocks experienced by the steamer were infinitely less violent than during the day. Was he then to conclude that the wind then fell, and that a calm set in after sundown?

This was so remarkable that, on the night between the 21st and 22nd of June, he endeavoured to find out some explanation of it. The day had been particularly stormy, the wind had freshened, and it did not appear at all likely that the sea would fall at night, lashed so capriciously as it had been for so many hours.

Towards midnight then Godfrey dressed, and, wrapping himself up warmly, went on deck.

The men on watch were forward, Captain Turcott was on the bridge.

The force of the wind had certainly not diminished. The shock of the waves, which should have dashed on the bows of the *Dream*, was, however, very much less violent. But in raising his eyes towards the top of the funnel, with its black canopy of smoke, Godfrey saw that the smoke, instead of floating from the bow aft, was, on the contrary, floating from aft forwards, and following the same direction as the ship.

“Has the wind changed?” he said to himself.

And extremely glad at the circumstance he mounted the bridge. Stepping up to Turcott, —

“Captain!” he said.

The latter, enveloped in his oilskins, had not heard him approach, and at first could not conceal a movement of annoyance in seeing him close to him.

“You, Mr. Godfrey, you — on the bridge?”

“Yes, I, captain. I came to ask — ”

“What?” answered Captain Turcott sharply.

“If the wind has not changed?”

“No, Mr. Godfrey, no. And, unfortunately, I think it will turn to a storm!”

“But we now have the wind behind us!”

“Wind behind us — yes — wind behind us!” replied the captain, visibly disconcerted at the observation. “But it is not my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that in order not to endanger the vessel’s safety I have had to put her about and run before the storm.”

“That will cause us a most lamentable delay!” said Godfrey.

“Very much so,” answered Captain Turcott, “but when day breaks, if the sea falls a little, I shall resume our westerly route. I should recommend you, Mr. Godfrey, to get back to your cabin. Take my advice, try and sleep while we are running before the wind. You will be less knocked about.”

Godfrey made a sign of affirmation; turning a last anxious glance at the low clouds which were chasing each other with extreme swiftness, he left the bridge, returned to his cabin, and soon resumed his interrupted slumbers. The next morning, the 22nd of June, as Captain Turcott had said, the wind having sensibly abated, the *Dream* was headed in proper direction.

This navigation towards the west during the day, towards the east during the night, lasted for forty-eight hours more; but the barometer showed some tendency to rise, its oscillations became less frequent; it was to be presumed that the bad weather would end in northerly winds. And so in fact it happened.

On the 25th of June, about eight o'clock in the morning, when Godfrey stepped on deck, a charming breeze from the north-east had swept away the clouds, the sun's rays were shining through the rigging and tipping its projecting points with touches of fire. The sea, deep green in colour, glittered along a large section of its surface beneath the direct influence of its beams. The wind blew only in feeble gusts which laced the wave-crests with delicate foam. The lower sails were set.

Properly speaking, they were not regular waves on which the sea rose and fell, but only lengthened undulations which gently rocked the steamer.

Undulations or waves, it is true, it was all one to Professor Tartlet, as unwell when it was "too mild," as when it was "too rough." There he was, half crouching on the deck, with his mouth open like a carp fainted out of water.

The mate on the poop, his telescope at his eye, was looking towards the north-east.

Godfrey approached him.

“Well, sir,” said he gaily, “to-day is a little better than yesterday.”

“Yes, Mr. Godfrey,” replied the mate, “we are now in smooth water.”

“And the *Dream* is on the right road!”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet? and why?”

“Because we have evidently drifted north-eastwards during this last spell, and we must find out our position exactly.”

“But there is a good sun and a horizon perfectly clear.”

“At noon in taking its height we shall get a good observation, and then the captain will give us our course.”

“Where is the captain?” asked Godfrey.

“He has gone off.”

“Gone off?”

“Yes! our look-outs saw from the whiteness of the sea that there were some breakers away to the east; breakers which are not shown on the chart. So the steam launch was got out, and with the boatswain and three men, Captain Turcott has gone off to explore.”

“How long ago?”

“About an hour and a half!”

“Ah!” said Godfrey, “I am sorry he did not tell me. I should like to have gone too.”

“You were asleep, Mr. Godfrey,” replied the mate, “and the captain did not like to wake you.”

“I am sorry; but tell me, which way did the launch go?”

“Over there,” answered the mate, “over the starboard bow, north-eastwards.”

“And can you see it with the telescope?”

“No, she is too far off.”

“But will she be long before she comes back?”

“She won’t be long, for the captain is going to take the sights himself, and to do that he must be back before noon.”

At this Godfrey went and sat on the forecastle, having sent some one for his glasses. He was anxious to watch the return of the launch. Captain Turcott’s reconnaissance did not cause him any surprise. It was natural that the *Dream* should not be run into danger on a part of the sea where breakers had been reported.

Two hours passed. It was not until half-past ten that a light line of smoke began to rise on the horizon.

It was evidently the steam launch which, having finished the reconnaissance, was making for the ship.

It amused Godfrey to follow her in the field of his glasses. He saw her little by little reveal herself in clearer outline, he saw her grow on the surface of the sea, and then give definite shape to her smoke wreath, as it mingled with a few curls of steam on the clear depth of the horizon.

She was an excellent little vessel, of immense speed, and as she came along at full steam, she was soon visible to the naked eye. Towards eleven o’clock, the wash from her bow as she tore through the waves was perfectly distinct, and behind her the long furrow of foam gradually growing wider and fainter like the tail of a comet.

At a quarter-past eleven, Captain Turcott hailed and boarded the *Dream*.

“Well, captain, what news?” asked Godfrey, shaking his hand.

“Ah! Good morning, Mr. Godfrey!”

“And the breakers?”

“Only show!” answered Captain Turcott. “We saw nothing suspicious, our men must have been deceived, but I am rather surprised at that, all the same.”

“We are going ahead then?” said Godfrey.

“Yes, we are going on now, but I must first take an observation.”

“Shall we get the launch on board?” asked the mate.

“No,” answered the captain, “we may want it again. Leave it in tow!”

The captain’s orders were executed, and the launch, still under steam, dropped round to the stern of the *Dream*.

Three-quarters of an hour afterwards, Captain Turcott, with his sextant in his hand, took the sun’s altitude, and having made his observation, he gave the course. That done, having given a last look at the horizon, he called the mate, and taking him into his cabin, the two remained there in a long consultation.

The day was a very fine one. The sails had been furled, and the *Dream* steamed rapidly without their help. The wind was very slight, and with the speed given by the screw there would not have been enough to fill them.

Godfrey was thoroughly happy. This sailing over a beautiful sea, under a beautiful sky, could anything be more cheering, could anything give more impulse to thought, more satisfaction to the mind? And it is scarcely to be wondered at that Professor Tartlet also began to recover himself a little. The state of the sea did not inspire him with immediate inquietude, and his physical being showed a little reaction. He tried to eat, but without taste or appetite. Godfrey would have had him take off the life-belt which encircled his waist, but this he absolutely refused to do. Was there not a chance of this conglomeration of wood and iron, which men call a vessel, gaping asunder at any moment.

The evening came, a thick mist spread over the sky, without descending to the level of the sea. The night was to be much darker than would have been thought from the magnificent daytime.

There was no rock to fear in these parts, for Captain Turcott had just fixed his exact position on the charts; but collisions are always possible, and they are much more frequent on foggy nights.

The lamps were carefully put into place as soon as the sun set. The white one was run up the mast, and the green light to the right and the red one to the left gleamed in the shrouds. If the *Dream* was run down, at the least it would not be her fault — that was one consolation. To founder even when one is in order is to founder nevertheless, and if any one on board made this observation it was of course Professor Tartlet. However, the worthy man, always on the roll and the pitch, had regained his cabin, Godfrey his; the one with the assurance, the other in the hope that he would pass a good night, for the *Dream* scarcely moved on the crest of the lengthened waves.

Captain Turcott, having handed over the watch to the mate, also came under the poop to take a few hours' rest. All was in order. The steamer could go ahead in perfect safety, although it did not seem as though the thick fog would lift.

In about twenty minutes Godfrey was asleep, and the sleepless Tartlet, who had gone to bed with his clothes on as usual, only betrayed himself by distant sighs. All at once — at about one in the morning — Godfrey was awakened by a dreadful clamour.

He jumped out of bed, slipped on his clothes, his trousers, his waistcoat and his sea-boots.

Almost immediately a fearful cry was heard on deck, “We are sinking! we are sinking!”

In an instant Godfrey was out of his cabin and in the saloon. There he cannoned against an inert mass which he did not recognize. It was Professor Tartlet.

The whole crew were on deck, hurrying about at the orders of the mate and captain.

“A collision?” asked Godfrey.

“I don’t know, I don’t know — this beastly fog — ” answered the mate; “but we are sinking!”

“Sinking?” exclaimed Godfrey.

And in fact the *Dream*, which had doubtless struck on a rock was sensibly foundering. The water was creeping up to the level of the deck. The engine fires were probably already out below.

“To the sea! to the sea, Mr. Morgan!” exclaimed the captain. “There is not a moment to lose! You can see the ship settling down! It will draw you down in the eddy!”

“And Tartlet?”

“I’ll look after him! — We are only half a cable from the shore!”

“But you?”

“My duty compels me to remain here to the last, and I remain!” said the captain. “But get off! get off!”

Godfrey still hesitated to cast himself into the waves, but the water was already up to the level of the deck.

Captain Turcott knowing that Godfrey swam like a fish, seized him by the shoulders, and did him the service of throwing him overboard.

It was time! Had it not been for the darkness, there would doubtless have been seen a deep raging vortex in the place once occupied by the *Dream*.

But Godfrey, in a few strokes in the calm water, was able to get swiftly clear of the whirlpool, which would have dragged him down like the maelstrom.

All this was the work of a minute.

A few minutes afterwards, amid shouts of despair, the lights on board went out one after the other.

Doubt existed no more; the *Dream* had sunk head downwards!

As for Godfrey he had been able to reach a large lofty rock away from the surf. There, shouting vainly in the darkness, hearing no voice in reply to his own, not knowing if he should find himself on an isolated rock or at the extremity of a line of reefs, and perhaps the sole survivor of the catastrophe, he waited for the dawn.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHICH LEADS GODFREY TO BITTER REFLECTIONS ON THE MANIA FOR TRAVELLING.

Three long hours had still to pass before the sun reappeared above the horizon. These were such hours that they might rather be called centuries.

The trial was a rough one to begin with, but, we repeat, Godfrey had not come out for a simple promenade. He himself put it very well when he said he had left behind him quite a lifetime of happiness and repose, which he would never find again in his search for adventures. He tried his utmost therefore to rise to the situation.

He was, temporarily, under shelter. The sea after all could not drive him off the rock which lay anchored alone amid the spray of the surf. Was there any fear of the incoming tide soon reaching him? No, for on reflection he concluded that the wreck had taken place at the highest tide of the new moon.

But was the rock isolated? Did it command a line of breakers scattered on this portion of the sea? What was this coast which Captain Turcott had thought he saw in the darkness? To which continent did it belong? It was only too certain that the *Dream* had been driven out of her route during the storm of the preceding days. The position of the ship could not have been exactly fixed. How could there be a doubt of this when the captain had two hours before affirmed that his charts bore no indication of breakers in these parts! He had even done better and had gone himself to reconnoitre these imaginary reefs which his look-outs had reported they had seen in the east.

It nevertheless had been only too true, and Captain Turcott's reconnaissance would have certainly prevented the catastrophe if it had only been pushed far enough. But what was the good of returning to the past?

The important question in face of what had happened — a question of life or death — was for Godfrey to know if he was near to some land. In what part of the Pacific there would be time later on to determine. Before everything he must think as soon as the day came of how to leave the rock, which in its biggest part could not measure more that twenty yards square. But people do not leave one place except to go to another. And if this other did not exist, if the captain had been deceived in the fog, if around the breakers there stretched a boundless sea, if at the extreme point of view the sky and the water seemed to meet all round the horizon?

The thoughts of the young man were thus concentrated on this point. All his powers of vision did he employ to discover through the black night if any confused mass, any heap of rocks or cliffs, would reveal the neighbourhood of land to the eastward of the reef.

Godfrey saw nothing. Not a smell of earth reached his nose, not a sensation of light reached his eyes, not a sound reached his ears. Not a bird traversed the darkness. It seemed that around him there was nothing but a vast desert of water.

Godfrey did not hide from himself that the chances were a thousand to one that he was lost. He no longer thought of making the tour of the world, but of facing death, and calmly and bravely his thoughts rose to that Providence which can do all things for the feeblest of its creatures, though the creatures can do nothing of themselves. And so Godfrey had to wait for the day to resign himself to his fate, if safety was impossible; and, on the contrary, to try everything, if there was any chance of life.

Calmed by the very gravity of his reflections, Godfrey had seated himself on the rock. He had stripped off some of his clothes which had been saturated by the sea-water, his woollen waistcoat and his heavy boots, so as to be ready to jump into the sea if necessary.

However, was it possible that no one had survived the wreck? What! not one of the men of the *Dream* carried to shore? Had they all been sucked in by the terrible whirlpool which the ship had drawn round herself as she sank? The last to whom Godfrey had spoken was Captain Turcott, resolved not to quit his ship while one of his sailors was still there! It was the captain himself who had hurled him into the sea at the moment the *Dream* was disappearing.

But the others, the unfortunate Tartlet, and the unhappy Chinese, surprised without doubt, and swallowed up, the one in the poop, the other in the depths of the hold, what had become of them? Of all those on board the *Dream*, was he the only one saved? And had the steam launch remained at the stern of the steamer? Could not a few passengers or sailors have saved themselves therein, and found time to flee from the wreck? But was it not rather to be feared that the launch had been dragged down by the ship under several fathoms of water?

Godfrey then said to himself, that if in this dark night he could not see, he could at least make himself heard. There was nothing to prevent his shouting and hailing in the deep silence. Perhaps the voice of one of his companions would respond to his.

Over and over again then did he call, giving forth a prolonged shout which should have been heard for a considerable distance round. Not a cry answered to his.

He began again, many times, turning successively to every point of the horizon.

Absolute silence.

“Alone! alone!” he murmured.

Not only had no cry answered to his, but no echo had sent him back the sound of his own voice. Had he been near a cliff, not far from a group of rocks, such as generally border the shore, it was certain that his shouts, repelled by the obstacles, would have returned to him. Either eastwards of the reef, therefore, stretched a low-lying shore ill-adapted for the production of an echo, or there was no land in his vicinity, the bed of breakers on which he had found refuge was isolated.

Three hours were passed in these anxieties. Godfrey, quite chilled, walked about the top of the rock, trying to battle with the cold. At last a few pale beams of light tinged the clouds in the zenith. It was the reflection of the first colouring of the horizon.

Godfrey turned to this side — the only one towards which there could be land — to see if any cliff outlined itself in the shadow. With its early rays the rising sun might disclose its features more distinctly.

But nothing appeared through the misty dawn. A light fog was rising over the sea, which did not even admit of his discovering the extent of the breakers.

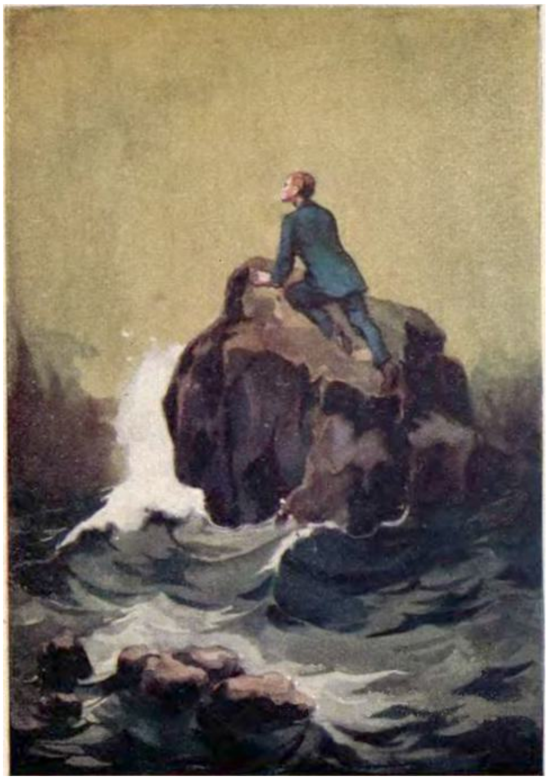

Nothing appeared through the mist.

He had, therefore, to satisfy himself with illusions. If Godfrey were really cast on an isolated rock in the Pacific, it was death to him after a brief delay, death by hunger, by thirst, or if necessary, death at the bottom of the sea as a last resource!

However, he kept constantly looking, and it seemed as though the intensity of his gaze increased enormously, for all his will was concentrated therein.

At length the morning mist began to fade away. Godfrey saw the rocks which formed the reef successively defined in relief on the sea, like a troop of marine monsters. It was a long and irregular assemblage of dark boulders, strangely worn, of all sizes and forms, whose direction was almost west and east. The enormous block on the top of which Godfrey found himself emerged from the sea on the western edge of the bank scarcely thirty fathoms from the spot where the *Dream* had gone down. The sea hereabouts appeared to be very deep, for of the steamer nothing was to be seen, not even the ends of her masts. Perhaps by some under-current she had been drawn away from the reefs.

A glance was enough for Godfrey to take in this state of affairs. There was no safety on that side. All his attention was directed towards the other side of the breakers, which the lifting fog was gradually disclosing. The sea, now that the tide had retired, allowed the rocks to stand out very distinctly. They could be seen to lengthen as there humid bases widened. Here were vast intervals of water, there a few shallow pools. If they joined on to any coast, it would not be difficult to reach it.

Up to the present, however, there was no sign of any shore. Nothing yet indicated the proximity of dry land, even in this direction.

The fog continued to lift, and the field of view persistently watched by Godfrey continued to grow. Its wreaths had now rolled off for about half a mile or so. Already a few sandy flats appeared among the rocks, carpeted with their slimy sea-weed.

Did not this sand indicate more or less the presence of a beach, and if the beach existed, could there be a doubt but what it belonged to the coast of a more important land? At length a long profile of low hills, buttressed with huge granitic rocks, became clearly outlined and seemed to shut in the horizon on the east. The sun had drunk up all the morning vapours, and his disc broke forth in all its glory.

“Land! land!” exclaimed Godfrey.

And he stretched his hands towards the shore-line, as he knelt on the reef and offered his thanks to Heaven.

It was really land. The breakers only formed a projecting ridge, something like the southern cape of a bay, which curved round for about two miles or more. The bottom of the curve seemed to be a level beach, bordered by trifling hills, contoured here and there with lines of vegetation, but of no great size.

From the place which Godfrey occupied, his view was able to grasp the whole of this side.

Bordered north and south by two unequal promontories, it stretched away for, at the most, five or six miles. It was possible, however, that it formed part of a large district. Whatever it was, it offered at the least temporary safety. Godfrey, at the sight, could not conceive a doubt but that he had not been thrown on to a solitary reef, and that this morsel of ground would satisfy his earliest wants.

“To land! to land!” he said to himself.

But before he left the reef, he gave a look round for the last time. His eyes again interrogated the sea away up to the horizon. Would some raft appear on the surface of the waves, some fragment of the *Dream*, some survivor, perhaps?

Nothing. The launch even was not there, and had probably been dragged into the common abyss.

Then the idea occurred to Godfrey that among the breakers some of his companions might have found a refuge, and were, like him, waiting for the day to try and reach the shore.

There was nobody, neither on the rocks, nor on the beach! The reef was as deserted as the ocean!

But in default of survivors, had not the sea thrown up some of the corpses? Could not Godfrey find among the rocks, along to the utmost boundary of the surf, the inanimate bodies of some of his companions?

No! Nothing along the whole length of the breakers, which the last ripples of the ebb had now left bare.

Godfrey was alone! He could only count on himself to battle with the dangers of every sort which environed him!

Before this reality, however, Godfrey, let it be said to his credit, did not quail. But as before everything it was best for him to ascertain the nature of the ground from which he was separated by so short a distance, he left the summit of the rock and began to approach the shore.

When the interval which separated the rocks was too great to be cleared at a bound, he got down into the water, and sometimes walking and sometimes swimming he easily gained the one next in order. When there was but a yard or two between, he jumped from one rock to the other. His progress over these slimy stones, carpeted with glistening sea-weeds, was not easy, and it was long. Nearly a quarter of a mile had thus to be traversed.

But Godfrey was active and handy, and at length he set foot on the land where there probably awaited him, if not early death, at least a miserable life worse than death. Hunger, thirst, cold, and nakedness, and perils of all kinds; without a weapon of defence, without a gun to shoot with, without a change of clothes — such the extremities to which he was reduced.

How imprudent he had been! He had been desirous of knowing if he was capable of making his way in the world under difficult circumstances! He had put himself to the proof! He had envied the lot of a Crusoe! Well, he would see if the lot were an enviable one!

And then there returned to his mind the thought of his happy existence, that easy life in San Francisco, in the midst of a rich and loving family, which he had abandoned to throw himself into adventures. He thought of his Uncle Will, of his betrothed Phina, of his friends who would doubtless never see him again.

As he called up these remembrances his heart swelled, and in spite of his resolution a tear rose to his eyes.

And again, if he was not alone, if some other survivor of the shipwreck had managed, like him, to reach the shore, and even in default of the captain or the mate, this proved to be Professor Tartlet, how little he could depend on that frivolous being, and how slightly improved the chances of the future appeared! At this point, however, he still had hope. If he had found no trace among the breakers, would he meet with any on the beach?

Who else but he had already touched the shore, seeking a companion who was seeking him?

Godfrey took another long look from north to south. He did not notice a single human being. Evidently this portion of the earth was uninhabited. In any case there was no sign, not a trace of smoke in the air, not a vestige.

“Let us get on!” said Godfrey to himself.

And he walked along the beach towards the north, before venturing to climb the sand dunes, which would allow him to reconnoitre the country over a larger extent.

The silence was absolute. The sand had received no other footmark. A few sea-birds, gulls or guillemots, were skimming along the edge of the rocks, the only living things in the solitude.

Godfrey continued his walk for a quarter of an hour. At last he was about to turn on to the talus of the most elevated of the dunes, dotted with rushes and brushwood, when he suddenly stopped.

A shapeless object, extraordinarily distended, something like the corpse of a sea monster, thrown there, doubtless, by the late storm, was lying about thirty paces off on the edge of the reef.

Godfrey hastened to run towards it.

The nearer he approached the more rapidly did his heart beat. In truth, in this stranded animal he seemed to recognize a human form.

Godfrey was not ten paces away from it, when he stopped as if rooted to the soil, and exclaimed, —

“Tartlet!”

It was the professor of dancing and deportment.

Godfrey rushed towards his companion, who perhaps still breathed.

A moment afterwards he saw that it was the life-belt which produced this extraordinary distension, and gave the aspect of a monster of the sea to the unfortunate professor.

But although Tartlet was motionless, was he dead? Perhaps this natatory clothing had kept him above water, while the surf had borne him to shore?

Godfrey set to work. He knelt down by Tartlet; he unloosed the life-belt and rubbed him vigorously. He noticed at last a light breath on the half-opened lips! He put his hand on his heart! The heart still beat.

Godfrey spoke to him.

Tartlet shook his head, then he gave utterance to a hoarse exclamation, followed by incoherent words.

Godfrey shook him violently.

Tartlet then opened his eyes, passed his left hand over his brow, lifted his right hand and assured himself that his precious kit and bow, which he tightly held, had not abandoned him.

“Tartlet! My dear Tartlet!” shouted Godfrey, lightly raising his head.

The head with his mass of tumbled hair gave an affirmative nod.

“It is I! I! Godfrey!”

“Godfrey?” asked the professor.

And then he turned over, and rose on to his knees, and looked about, and smiled, and rose to his feet! He had discovered that at last he was on a solid base! He had gathered that he was no longer on the ship’s deck, exposed to all the uncertainties of its pitches and its rolls! The sea had ceased to carry him! He stood on firm ground!

And then Professor Tartlet recovered the aplomb which he had lost since his departure; his feet placed themselves naturally, with their toes turned out, in the regulation position; his left hand seized his kit, his right hand grasped his bow.

Then, while the strings, vigorously attacked, gave forth a humid sound of melancholy sonorousness, these words escaped his smiling lips, —

“In place, miss!”

The good man was thinking of Phina.

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH IT IS SHOWN THAT CRUSOES DO NOT HAVE EVERYTHING AS THEY WISH.

That done, the professor and his pupil rushed into one another’s arms.

“My dear Godfrey!” exclaimed Tartlet.

“My good Tartlet!” replied Godfrey.

“At last we are arrived in port!” observed the professor in the tone of a man who had had enough of navigation and its accidents.

He called it arriving in port!

Godfrey had no desire to contradict him.

“Take off your life-belt,” he said. “It suffocates you and hampers your movements.”

“Do you think I can do so without inconvenience?” asked Tartlet.

“Without any inconvenience,” answered Godfrey. “Now put up your fiddle, and let us take a look round.”

“Come on,” replied the professor; “but if you don’t mind, Godfrey, let us go to the first restaurant we see. I am dying of hunger, and a dozen sandwiches washed down with a glass or two of wine will soon set me on my legs again.”

“Yes! to the first restaurant!” answered Godfrey, nodding his head; “and even to the last, if the first does not suit us.”

“And,” continued Tartlet, “we can ask some fellow as we go along the road to the telegraph office so as to send a message off to your Uncle Kolderup. That excellent man will hardly refuse to send on some necessary cash for us to get back to Montgomery Street, for I have not got a cent with me!”

“Agreed, to the first telegraph office,” answered Godfrey, “or if there isn’t one in this country, to the first post office. Come on, Tartlet.”

The professor took off his swimming apparatus, and passed it over his shoulder like a hunting-horn, and then both stepped out for the edge of the dunes which bordered the shore.

What more particularly interested Godfrey, whom the encounter with Tartlet had imbued with some hope, was to see if they too were the only survivors of the *Dream*.

A quarter of an hour after the explorers had left the edge of the reef they had climbed a dune about sixty or eighty feet high, and stood on its crest. Thence they looked on a large extent of coast, and examined the horizon in the east, which till then had been hidden by the hills on the shore.

Two or three miles away in that direction a second line of hills formed the background, and beyond them nothing was seen of the horizon.

Towards the north the coast trended off to a point, but it could not be seen if there was a corresponding cape behind. On the south a creek ran some distance into the shore, and on this side it looked as though the ocean closed the view. Whence this land in the Pacific was probably a peninsula, and the isthmus which joined it to the continent would have to be sought for towards the north or north-east.

The country, however, far from being barren, was hidden beneath an agreeable mantle of verdure; long prairies, amid which meandered many limpid streams, and high and thick forests, whose trees rose above one another to the very background of hills. It was a charming landscape.

But of houses forming town, village, or hamlet, not one was in sight! Of buildings grouped and arranged as a farm of any sort, not a sign! Of smoke in the sky, betraying some dwelling hidden among the trees, not a trace. Not a steeple above the branches, not a windmill on an isolated hill. Not even in default of houses a cabin, a hut, an ajoupa, or a wigwam? No! nothing. If human beings inhabited this unknown land, they must live like troglodytes, below, and not above the ground. Not a road was visible, not a footpath, not even a track. It seemed that the foot of man had never trod either a rock of the beach or a blade of the grass on the prairies.

“I don’t see the town,” remarked Tartlet, who, however, remained on tiptoe.

“That is perhaps because it is not in this part of the province!” answered Godfrey.

“But a village?”

“There’s nothing here.”

“Where are we then?”

“I know nothing about it.”

“What! You don’t know! But Godfrey, we had better make haste and find out.”

“Who is to tell us?”

“What will become of us then?” exclaimed Tartlet, rounding his arms and lifting them to the sky.

“Become a couple of Crusoes!”

At this answer the professor gave a bound such as no clown had ever equalled.

Crusoes! They! A Crusoe! He! Descendants of that Selkirk who had lived for long years on the island of Juan Fernandez! Imitators of the imaginary heroes of Daniel Defoe and De Wyss whose adventures they had so often read! Abandoned, far from their relatives, their friends; separated from their fellow-men by thousands of miles, destined to defend their lives perhaps against wild beasts, perhaps against savages who would land there, wretches without resources, suffering from hunger, suffering from thirst, without weapons, without tools, almost without clothes, left to themselves. No, it was impossible!

“Don’t say such things, Godfrey,” exclaimed Tartlet. “No! Don’t joke about such things! The mere supposition will kill me! You are laughing at me, are you not?”

“Yes, my gallant Tartlet,” answered Godfrey. “Reassure yourself. But in the first place, let us think about matters that are pressing.”

In fact, they had to try and find some cavern, a grotto or hole, in which to pass the night, and then to collect some edible mollusks so as to satisfy the cravings of their stomachs.

Godfrey and Tartlet then commenced to descend the talus of the dunes in the direction of the reef. Godfrey showed himself very ardent in his researches, and Tartlet considerably stupefied by his shipwreck experiences. The first looked before him, behind him, and all around him; the second hardly saw ten paces in front of him.

“If there are no inhabitants on this land, are there any animals?” asked Godfrey.

He meant to say domestic animals, such as furred and feathered game, not wild animals which abound in tropical regions, and with which they were not likely to have to do.

Several flocks of birds were visible on the shore, bitterns, curlews, bernicle geese, and teal, which hovered and chirped and filled the air with their flutterings and cries, doubtless protesting against the invasion of their domain.

Godfrey was justified in concluding that where there were birds there were nests, and where there were nests there were eggs. The birds congregated here in such numbers, because rocks provided them with thousands of cavities for their dwelling-places. In the distance a few herons and some flocks of snipe indicated the neighbourhood of a marsh.

Birds then were not wanting, the only difficulty was to get at them without fire-arms. The best thing to do now was to make use of them in the egg state, and consume them under that elementary but nourishing form.

But if the dinner was there, how were they to cook it? How were they to set about lighting a fire? An important question, the solution of which was postponed.

Godfrey and Tartlet returned straight towards the reef, over which some sea-birds were circling. An agreeable surprise there awaited them.

Among the indigenous fowl which ran along the sand of the beach and pecked about among the sea-weed and under the tufts of aquatic plants, was it a dozen hens and two or three cocks of the American breed that they beheld? No! There was no mistake, for at their approach did not a resounding cock-a-doodle-do-oo-oo rend the air like the sound of a trumpet?

And farther off, what were those quadrupeds which were gliding in and out of the rocks, and making their way towards the first slopes of the hills, or grubbing beneath some of the green shrubs? Godfrey could not be mistaken. There were a dozen agouties, five or six sheep, and as many goats, who were quietly browsing on the first vegetation on the very edge of the prairie.

“Look there, Tartlet!” he exclaimed.

And the professor looked, but saw nothing, so much was he absorbed with the thought of this unexpected situation.

A thought flashed across the mind of Godfrey, and it was correct: it was that these hens, agouties, goats, and sheep had belonged to the *Dream*. At the moment she went down, the fowls had easily been able to reach the reef and then the beach. As for the quadrupeds, they could easily have swum ashore.

“And so,” remarked Godfrey, “what none of our unfortunate companions have been able to do, these simple animals, guided by their instinct, have done! And of all those on board the *Dream*, none have been saved but a few beasts!”

“Including ourselves!” answered Tartlet naively.

As far as he was concerned, he had come ashore unconsciously, very much like one of the animals. It mattered little. It was a very fortunate thing for the two shipwrecked men that a certain number of these animals had reached the shore. They would collect them, fold them, and with the special fecundity of their species, if their stay on this land was a lengthy one, it would be easy to have quite a flock of quadrupeds, and a yard full of poultry.

But on this occasion, Godfrey wished to keep to such alimentary resources as the coast could furnish, either in eggs or shell-fish. Professor Tartlet and he set to work to forage among the interstices of the stones, and beneath the carpet of sea-weeds, and not without success. They soon collected quite a notable quantity of mussels and periwinkles, which they could eat raw. A few dozen eggs of the bernicle geese were also found among the higher rocks which shut in the bay on the north. They had enough to satisfy a good many; and, hunger pressing, Godfrey and Tartlet hardly thought of making difficulties about their first repast.

“And the fire?” said the professor.

“Yes! The fire!” said Godfrey.

It was the most serious of questions, and it led to an inventory being made of the contents of their pockets. Those of the professor were empty or nearly so. They contained a few spare strings for his kit, and a piece of rosin for his bow. How would you get a light from that, I should like to know? Godfrey was hardly better provided. However, it was with extreme satisfaction that he discovered in his pocket an excellent knife, whose leather case had kept it from the sea-water. This knife, with blade, gimlet, hook, and saw, was a valuable instrument under the circumstances. But besides this tool, Godfrey and his companion had only their two hands; and as the hands of the professor had never been used except in playing his fiddle, and making his gestures, Godfrey concluded that he would have to trust to his own.

He thought, however, of utilizing those of Tartlet for procuring a fire by means of rubbing two sticks of wood rapidly together. A few eggs cooked in the embers would be greatly appreciated at their second meal at noon.

While Godfrey then was occupied in robbing the nests in spite of the proprietors, who tried to defend their progeny in the shell, the professor went off to collect some pieces of wood which had been dried by the sun at the foot of the dunes. These were taken behind a rock sheltered from the wind from the sea. Tartlet then chose two very dry pieces, with the intention of gradually obtaining sufficient heat by rubbing them vigorously and continuously together. What simple Polynesian savages commonly did, why should not the professor, so much their superior in his own opinion, be able to do?

Behold him then, rubbing and rubbing, in a way to dislocate the muscles of his arm and shoulder. He worked himself into quite a rage, poor man! But whether it was that the wood was not right, or its dryness was not sufficient, or the professor held it wrongly, or had not got the peculiar turn of hand necessary for operations of this kind, if he did not get much heat out of the wood, he succeeded in getting a good deal out of himself. In short, it was his own forehead alone which smoked under the vapours of his own perspiration.

When Godfrey returned with his collection of eggs, he found Tartlet in a rage, in a state to which his choregraphic exercises had never doubtless provoked him.

“Doesn’t it do?” he asked.

“No, Godfrey, it does not do,” replied the professor. “And I begin to think that these inventions of the savages are only imaginations to deceive the world.”

“No,” answered Godfrey. “But in that, as in all things, you must know how to do it.”

“These eggs, then?”

“There is another way. If you attach one of these eggs to the end of a string and whirl it round rapidly, and suddenly arrest the movement of rotation, the movement may perhaps transform itself into heat, and then — ”

“And then the egg will be cooked?”

“Yes, if the rotation has been swift enough and the stoppage sudden enough. But how do you produce the stoppage without breaking the egg? Now, there is a simpler way, dear Tartlet. Behold!”

And carefully taking one of the eggs of the bernicle goose, he broke the shell at its end, and adroitly swallowed the inside without any further formalities.

Tartlet could not make up his mind to imitate him, and contented himself with the shell-fish.

It now remained to look for a grotto or some shelter in which to pass the night.

“It is an unheard-of thing,” observed the professor, “that Crusoes cannot at the least find a cavern, which, later on, they can make their home!”

“Let us look,” said Godfrey.

It was unheard of. We must avow, however, that on this occasion the tradition was broken. In vain did they search along the rocky shore on the southern part of the bay. Not a cavern, not a grotto, not a hole was there that would serve as a shelter. They had to give up the idea. Godfrey resolved to reconnoitre up to the first trees in the background beyond the sandy coast.

Tartlet and he then remounted the first line of sandhills and crossed the verdant prairies which they had seen a few hours before.

A very odd circumstance, and a very fortunate one at the time, that the other survivors of the wreck voluntarily followed them. Evidently, cocks and hens, and sheep, goats and agouties, driven by instinct, had resolved to go with them. Doubtless they felt too lonely on the beach, which did not yield sufficient food.

Three-quarters of an hour later Godfrey and Tartlet — they had scarcely spoken during the exploration — arrived at the outskirt of the trees. Not a trace was there of habitation or inhabitant. Complete solitude. It might even be doubted if this part of the country had ever been trodden by human feet.

In this place were a few handsome trees, in isolated groups, and others more crowded about a quarter of a mile in the rear formed a veritable forest of different species.

Godfrey looked out for some old trunk, hollowed by age, which could offer a shelter among its branches, but his researches were in vain, although he continued them till night was falling.

Hunger made itself sharply felt, and the two contented themselves with mussels, of which they had thoughtfully brought an ample supply from the beach. Then, quite tired out, they lay down at the foot of a tree, and trusting to Providence, slept through the night.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH GODFREY DOES WHAT ANY OTHER SHIPWRECKED MAN WOULD HAVE DONE UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

The night passed without incident. The two men, quite knocked up with excitement and fatigue, had slept as peacefully as if they had been in the most comfortable room in the mansion in Montgomery Street.

On the morrow, the 27th of June, at the first rays of the rising sun, the crow of the cock awakened them.

Godfrey immediately recognized where he was, but Tartlet had to rub his eyes and stretch his arms for some time before he did so.

“Is breakfast this morning to resemble dinner yesterday?” was his first observation.

“I am afraid so,” answered Godfrey. “But I hope we shall dine better this evening.”

The professor could not restrain a significant grimace. Where were the tea and sandwiches which had hitherto been brought to him when he awoke? How could he wait till breakfast-time, the bell for which would perhaps never sound, without this preparatory repast?

But it was necessary to make a start. Godfrey felt the responsibility which rested on him, on him alone, for he could in no way depend on his companion. In that empty box which served the professor for a cranium there could be born no practical idea; Godfrey would have to think, contrive, and decide for both.

His first thought was for Phina, his betrothed, whom he had so stupidly refused to make his wife; his second for his Uncle Will, whom he had so imprudently left, and then turning to Tartlet, —

“To vary our ordinary,” he said, “here are some shell-fish and half a dozen eggs.”

“And nothing to cook them with!”

“Nothing!” said Godfrey. “But if the food itself was missing, what would you say then, Tartlet?”

“I should say that nothing was not enough,” said Tartlet drily.

Nevertheless, they had to be content with this repast.

The very natural idea occurred to Godfrey to push forward the reconnaissance commenced the previous evening. Above all it was necessary to know as soon as possible in what part of the Pacific Ocean the *Dream* had been lost, so as to discover some inhabited place on the shore, where they could either arrange the way of returning home or await the passing of some ship.

Godfrey observed that if he could cross the second line of hills, whose picturesque outline was visible beyond the first, that he might perhaps be able to do this. He reckoned that they could get there in an hour or two, and it was to this urgent exploration that he resolved to devote the first hours of the day. He looked round him. The cocks and hens were beginning to peck about among the high vegetation. Agouties, goats, sheep, went and came on the skirt of the forest.

Godfrey did not care to drag all this flock of poultry and quadrupeds about with him. But to keep them more safely in this place, it would be necessary to leave Tartlet in charge of them.

Tartlet agreed to remain alone, and for several hours to act as shepherd of the flock.

He made but one observation, —

“If you lose yourself, Godfrey?”

“Have no fear of that,” answered the young man, “I have only this forest to cross, and as you will not leave its edge I am certain to find you again.”

“Don’t forget the telegram to your Uncle Will, and ask him for a good many hundred dollars.”

“The telegram — or the letter! It is all one!” answered Godfrey, who so long as he had not fixed on the position of this land was content to leave Tartlet to his illusions.

Then having shaken hands with the professor, he plunged beneath the trees, whose thick branches scarcely allowed the sun’s rays to penetrate. It was their direction, however, which was to guide our young explorer towards the high hill whose curtain hid from his view the whole of the eastern horizon.

Footpath there was none. The ground, however, was not free from all imprint. Godfrey in certain places remarked the tracks of animals. On two or three occasions he even believed he saw some rapid ruminants moving off, either elans, deer, or wapiti, but he recognized no trace of ferocious animals such as tigers or jaguars, whose absence, however, was no cause for regret.

The first floor of the forest, that is to say all that portion of the trees comprised between the first fork and the branches, afforded an asylum to a great number of birds — wild pigeons by the hundred beneath the trees, ospreys, grouse, aracaris with beaks like a lobster’s claw, and higher, hovering above the glades, two or three of those lammergeiers whose eye resembles a cockade. But none of the birds were of such special kinds that he could therefrom make out the latitude of this continent.

So it was with the trees of this forest. Almost the same species as those in that part of the United States which comprises Lower California, the Bay of Monterey, and New Mexico.

Arbutus-trees, large-flowered cornels, maples, birches, oaks, four or five varieties of magnolias and sea-pines, such as are met with in South Carolina, then in the centre of vast clearances, olive-trees, chestnuts, and small shrubs. Tufts of tamarinds, myrtles, and mastic-trees, such as are produced in the temperate zone. Generally, there was enough space between the trees to allow him to pass without being obliged to call on fire or the axe. The sea breeze circulated freely amid the higher branches, and here and there great patches of light shone on the ground.

And so Godfrey went along striking an oblique line beneath these large trees. To take any precautions never occurred to him. The desire to reach the heights which bordered the forest on the east entirely absorbed him. He sought among the foliage for the direction of the solar rays so as to march straight on his goal. He did not even see the guide-birds, so named because they fly before the steps of the traveller, stopping, returning, and darting on ahead as if they were showing the way. Nothing could distract him.

His state of mind was intelligible. Before an hour had elapsed his fate would be settled! Before an hour he would know if it were possible to reach some inhabited portion of the continent.

Already Godfrey, reasoning on what had been the route followed and the way made by the *Dream* during a navigation of seventeen days, had concluded that it could only be on the Japanese or Chinese coast that the ship had gone down.

Besides the position of the sun, always in the south, rendered it quite certain that the *Dream* had not crossed the line.

Two hours after he had started Godfrey reckoned the distance he had travelled at about five miles, considering several circuits which he had had to make owing to the density of the forest. The second group of hills could not be far away.

Already the trees were getting farther apart from each other, forming isolated groups, and the rays of light penetrated more easily through the lofty branches. The ground began slightly to slope, and then abruptly to rise.

Although he was somewhat fatigued, Godfrey had enough will not to slacken his pace. He would doubtless have run had it not been for the steepness of the earlier ascents.

He had soon got high enough to overlook the general mass of the verdant dome which stretched away behind him, and whence several heads of trees here and there emerged.

But Godfrey did not dream of looking back. His eyes never quitted the line of the denuded ridge, which showed itself about 400 or 500 feet before and above him. That was the barrier which all the time hid him from the eastern horizon.

A tiny cone, obliquely truncated, overlooked this rugged line and joined on with its gentle slope to the sinuous crest of the hills.

“There! there!” said Godfrey, “that is the point I must reach! The top of that cone! And from there what shall I see? — A town? — A village? — A desert?”

Highly excited, Godfrey mounted the hill, keeping his elbows at his chest to restrain the beating of his heart. His panting tired him, but he had not the patience to stop so as to recover himself. Were he to have fallen half fainting on the summit of the cone which shot up about 100 feet above his head, he would not have lost a minute in hastening towards it.

A few minutes more and he would be there. The ascent seemed to him steep enough on his side, an angle perhaps of thirty or thirty-five degrees. He helped himself up with hands and feet; he seized on the tufts of slender herbs on the hill-side, and on a few meagre shrubs, mastics and myrtles, which stretched away up to the top.

A last effort was made! His head rose above the platform of the cone, and then, lying on his stomach, his eyes gazed at the eastern horizon.

It was the sea which formed it. Twenty miles off it united with the line of the sky!

He turned round.

Still sea — west of him, south of him, north of him! The immense ocean surrounding him on all sides!

“An island!”

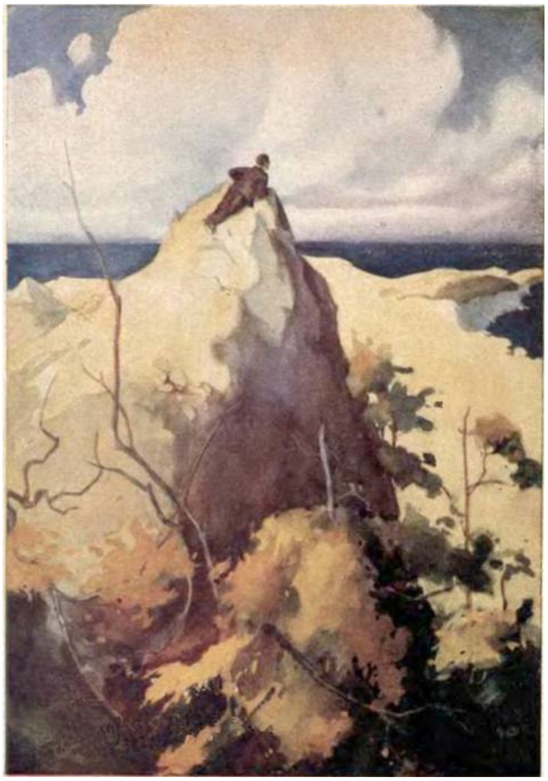

“An Island!”

As he uttered the word Godfrey felt his heart shrink. The thought had not occurred to him that he was on an island. And yet such was the case! The terrestrial chain which should have attached him to the continent was abruptly broken. He felt as though he had been a sleeping man in a drifted boat, who awoke with neither oar nor sail to help him back to shore.

But Godfrey was soon himself again. His part was taken, to accept the situation. If the chances of safety did not come from without, it was for him to contrive them.

He set to work at first then as exactly as possible to ascertain the disposition of this island which his view embraced over its whole length. He estimated that it ought to measure about sixty miles round, being, as far as he could see, about twenty miles long from south to north, and twelve miles wide from east to west.

Its central part was screened by the green depths of forest which extended up to the ridge dominated by the cone, whose slope died away on the shore.

All the rest was prairie, with clumps of trees, or beach with rocks, whose outer ring was capriciously tapered off in the form of capes and promontories. A few creeks cut out the coast, but could only afford refuge for two or three fishing-boats.

The bay at the bottom of which the *Dream* lay shipwrecked was the only one of any size, and that extended over some seven or eight miles. An open roadstead, no vessel would have found it a safe shelter, at least unless the wind was blowing from the east.

But what was this island? To what geographical group did it belong? Did it form part of an archipelago, or was it alone in this portion of the Pacific?

In any case, no other island, large or small, high or low, appeared within the range of vision.

Godfrey rose and gazed round the horizon. Nothing was to be seen along the circular line where sea and sky ran into each other. If, then, there existed to windward or to leeward any island or coast of a continent, it could only be at a considerable distance.

Godfrey called up all his geographical reminiscences, in order to discover what island of the Pacific this could be. In reasoning it out he came to this conclusion.

The *Dream* for seventeen days had steered very nearly south-west. Now with a speed of from 150 to 180 miles every four-and-twenty hours, she ought to have covered nearly fifty degrees. Now it was obvious that she had not crossed the equator.

The situation of the island, or of the group to which it belonged, would therefore have to be looked for in that part of the ocean comprised between the 160th and 170th degrees of west longitude.

In this portion of the Pacific it seemed to Godfrey that the map showed no other archipelago than that of the Sandwich Islands, but outside this archipelago were there not any isolated islands whose names escaped him and which were dotted here and there over the sea up to the coast of the Celestial Empire?

It was not of much consequence. There existed no means of his going in search of another spot on the ocean which might prove more hospitable.

“Well,” said Godfrey to himself, “if I don’t know the name of this island, I’ll call it Phina Island, in memory of her I ought never to have left to run about the world, and perhaps the name will bring us some luck.”

Godfrey then occupied himself in trying to ascertain if the island was inhabited in the part which he had not yet been able to visit.

From the top of the cone he saw nothing which betrayed the presence of aborigines, neither habitations on the prairie nor houses on the skirt of the trees, not even a fisherman’s hut on the shore.

But if the island was deserted, the sea which surrounded it was none the less so, for not a ship showed itself within the limits of what, from the height of the cone, was a considerable circuit.

Godfrey having finished his exploration had now only to get down to the foot of the hill and retake the road through the forest so as to rejoin Tartlet. But before he did so his eyes were attracted by a sort of cluster of trees of huge stature, which rose on the boundary of the prairie towards the north. It was a gigantic group, it exceeded by a head all those which Godfrey had previously seen.

“Perhaps,” he said, “it would be better to take up our quarters over there, more especially as if I am not mistaken I can see a stream which should rise in the central chain and flow across the prairie.”

This was to be looked into on the morrow.

Towards the south the aspect of the island was slightly different. Forests and prairies rapidly gave place to the yellow carpet of the beach, and in places the shore was bounded with picturesque rocks.

But what was Godfrey’s surprise, when he thought he saw a light smoke, which rose in the air beyond this rocky barrier.

“Are there any of our companions?” he exclaimed. “But no, it is not possible! Why should they have got so far from the bay since yesterday, and round so many miles of reef? Is it a village of fishermen, or the encampment of some indigenous tribe?”

Godfrey watched it with the closest attention. Was this gentle vapour which the breeze softly blew towards the west a smoke? Could he be mistaken? Anyhow it quickly vanished, a few minutes afterwards nothing could be seen of it.

It was a false hope.

Godfrey took a last look in its direction, and then seeing nothing, glided down the slope, and again plunged beneath the trees.

An hour later he had traversed the forest and found himself on its skirt.

There Tartlet awaited him with his two-footed and four-footed flock. And how was the obstinate professor occupying himself? In the same way. A bit of wood was in his right hand another piece in his left, and he still continued his efforts to set them alight. He rubbed and rubbed with a constancy worthy of a better fate.

“Well,” he shouted as he perceived Godfrey some distance off — ”and the telegraph office?”

“It is not open!” answered Godfrey, who dared not yet tell him anything of the situation.

“And the post?”

“It is shut! But let us have something to eat! — I am dying with hunger! We can talk presently.”

And this morning Godfrey and his companion had again to content themselves with a too meagre repast of raw eggs and shell-fish.

“Wholesome diet!” repeated Godfrey to Tartlet, who was hardly of that opinion and picked his food with considerable care.

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH THE QUESTION OF LODGING IS SOLVED AS WELL AS IT COULD BE.

The day was already far advanced. Godfrey resolved to defer till the morrow the task of proceeding to a new abode. But to the pressing questions which the professor propounded on the results of his exploration he ended by replying that it was an island, Phina Island, on which they both had been cast, and that they must think of the means of living before dreaming of the means of departing.

“An island!” exclaimed Tartlet.

“Yes! It is an island!”

“Which the sea surrounds?”

“Naturally.”

“But what is it?”

“I have told you, Phina Island, and you understand why I gave it that name.”

“No, I do not understand!” answered Tartlet, making a grimace; “and I don’t see the resemblance! Miss Phina is surrounded by land, not water!”

After this melancholy reflection, he prepared to pass the night with as little discomfort as possible. Godfrey went off to the reef to get a new stock of eggs and mollusks, with which he had to be contented, and then, tired out, he came back to the tree and soon fell asleep, while Tartlet, whose philosophy would not allow him to accept such a state of affairs, gave himself over to the bitterest meditations. On the morrow, the 28th of June, they were both afoot before the cock had interrupted their slumbers.

To begin with, a hasty breakfast, the same as the day before. Only water from a little brook was advantageously replaced by a little milk given by one of the goats.

Ah! worthy Tartlet! Where were the “mint julep,” the “port wine sangaree,” the “sherry cobbler,” the “sherry cocktail,” which he hardly drank, but which were served him at all hours in the bars and taverns of San Francisco? How he envied the poultry, the agouties, and the sheep, who cheerfully quenched their thirst without the addition of such saccharine or alcoholic mixtures to their water from the stream! To these animals no fire was necessary to cook their food; roots and herbs and seeds sufficed, and their breakfast was always served to the minute on their tablecloth of green.

“Let us make a start,” said Godfrey.

And behold the two on their way, followed by a procession of domestic animals, who refused to be left behind. Godfrey’s idea was to explore, in the north of the island, that portion of the coast on which he had noticed the group of gigantic trees in his view from the cone. But to get there he resolved to keep along the shore. The surf might perhaps have cast up some fragment of the wreck. Perhaps they might find on the beach some of their companions in the *Dream* to which they could give Christian burial. As for finding any one of them living, it was hardly to be hoped for, after a lapse of six-and-thirty hours.

The first line of hills was surmounted, and Godfrey and his companion reached the beginning of the reef, which looked as deserted as it had when they had left it. There they renewed their stock of eggs and mollusks, in case they should fail to find even such meagre resources away to the north. Then, following the fringe of sea-weed left by the last tide, they again ascended the dunes, and took a good look round.

Nothing! always nothing!

We must certainly say that if misfortune had made Crusoes of these survivors of the *Dream*, it had shown itself much more rigorous towards them than towards their predecessors, who always had some portion of the vessel left to them, and who, after bringing away crowds of objects of necessity had been able to utilize the timbers of the wreck. Victuals for a considerable period, clothes, tools, weapons, had always been left them with which to satisfy the elementary exigencies of existence. But here there was nothing of all this! In the middle of that dark night the ship had disappeared in the depths of the sea, without leaving on the reefs the slightest traces of its wreck! It had not been possible to save a thing from her — not even a lucifer-match — and to tell the truth, the want of that match was the most serious of all wants.

I know well, good people comfortably installed in your easy-chairs before a comfortable hearth at which is blazing brightly a fire of wood or coals, that you will be apt to say, —

“But nothing was more easy than for them to get a fire! There are a thousand ways of doing that! Two pebbles! A little dry moss! A little burnt rag,” — and how do you burn the rag? “The blade of a knife would do for a steel, or two bits of wood rubbed briskly together in Polynesian fashion!”

Well, try it!

It was about this that Godfrey was thinking as he walked, and this it was that occupied his thoughts more than anything else. Perhaps he too, poking his coke fire and reading his travellers' tales, had thought the same as you good people! But now he had to put matters to the test, and he saw with considerable disquietude the want of a fire, that indispensable element which nothing could replace.

He kept on ahead, then, lost in thought, followed by Tartlet, who by his shouts and gestures, kept together the flock of sheep, agouties, goats, and poultry.

Suddenly his look was attracted by the bright colours of a cluster of small apples which hung from the branches of certain shrubs, growing in hundreds at the foot of the dunes. He immediately recognized them as "manzanillas," which serve as food to the Indians in certain parts of California.

"At last," he exclaimed, "there is something which will be a change from our eggs and mussels."

"What? Do you eat those things?" said Tartlet with his customary grimace.

"You shall soon see!" answered Godfrey.

And he set to work to gather the manzanillas, and eat them greedily.

They were only wild apples, but even their acidity did not prevent them from being agreeable. The professor made little delay in imitating his companion, and did not show himself particularly discontented at the work.

Godfrey thought, and with reason, that from these fruits there could be made a fermented liquor which would be preferable to the water.

The march was resumed. Soon the end of the sand dunes died away in a prairie traversed by a small stream. This was the one Godfrey had seen from the top of the cone. The large trees appeared further on, and after a journey of about nine miles the two explorers, tired enough by their four hours’ walk, reached them a few minutes after noon.

The site was well worth the trouble of looking at, of visiting, and, doubtless, occupying.

On the edge of a vast prairie, dotted with manzanilla bushes and other shrubs, there rose a score of gigantic trees which could have even borne comparison with the same species in the forests of California. They were arranged in a semi-circle. The carpet of verdure, which stretched at their feet, after bordering the stream for some hundreds of feet, gave place to a long beach, covered with rocks, and shingle, and sea-weed, which ran out into the water in a narrowing point to the north.

These “big trees,” as they are commonly called in Western America, belong to the genus *Sequoia*, and are conifers of the fir family. If you ask the English for their distinguishing name, you will be told “Wellingtonias,” if you ask the Americans they will reply “Washingtonias.” But whether they recall the memory of the phlegmatic victor of Waterloo, or of the illustrious founder of the American Republic, they are the hugest products known of the Californian and Nevadan floras. In certain districts in these states there are entire forests of these trees, such as the groups at Mariposa and Calaveras, some of the trees of which measure from sixty to eighty feet in circumference, and some 300 feet in height. One of them, at the entrance of the Yosemite Valley, is quite 100 feet round. When living — for it is now prostrate — its first branches could have overtopped Strasburg Cathedral, or, in other words, were above eighty feet from the ground.

Besides this tree there are “The Mother of the Forest,” “The Beauty of the Forest,” “The Hut of the Pioneer,” “The Two Sentinels,” “General Grant,” “Miss Emma,” “Miss Mary,” “Brigham Young and his Wife,” “The Three Graces,” “The Bear,” &c. &c.; all of them veritable vegetable phenomena. One of the trees has been sawn across at its base, and on it there has been built a ball-room, in which a quadrille of eight or ten couples can be danced with ease.

But the giant of giants, in a forest which is the property of the state, about fifteen miles from Murphy, is “The Father of the Forest,” an old sequoia, 4000 years old, which rises 452 feet from the ground, higher than the cross of St. Peter’s, at Rome, higher than the great pyramid of Ghizeh, higher than the iron bell-turret which now caps one of the towers of Rouen Cathedral, and which ought to be looked upon as the highest monument in the world.

It was a group of some twenty of these colossi that nature had planted on this point of the island, at the epoch, probably, when Solomon was building that temple at Jerusalem which has never risen from its ruins. The largest was, perhaps, 300 feet high, the smallest nearly 200.

Some of them, hollowed out by age, had enormous arches through their bases, beneath which a troop of horsemen could have ridden with ease.

Godfrey was struck with admiration in the presence of these natural phenomena, as they are not generally found at altitudes of less than from 5000 to 6000 feet above the level of the sea. He even thought that the view alone was worth the journey. Nothing he had seen was comparable to these columns of clear brown, which outlined themselves almost without sensible diminution of their diameters to their lowest fork. The cylindrical trunks rising from 80 to 100 feet above the earth, ramified into such thick branches that they themselves looked like tree-stems of huge dimensions bearing quite a forest in the air.

One of these specimens of *Sequoia gigantea* — one of the biggest in the group — more particularly attracted Godfrey’s attention.

Gazing at its base it displayed an opening of from four to five feet in width, and ten feet high, which gave entrance to its interior. The giant’s heart had disappeared, the alburnum had been dissipated into soft whitish dust; but if the tree did not depend so much on its powerful roots as on its solid bark, it could still keep its position for centuries.

“In default of a cavern or a grotto,” said Godfrey, “here is a ready-made dwelling. A wooden house, a tower, such as there is in no inhabited land. Here we can be sheltered and shut in. Come along, Tartlet! come!”

And the young man, catching hold of his companion, dragged him inside the sequoia.

The base was covered with a bed of vegetable dust, and in diameter could not be less than twenty feet.

As for the height to which its vault extended, the gloom prevented even an estimate. For not a ray of light found its way through the bark wall. Neither cleft nor fault was there through which the wind or rain could come. Our two Crusoes would therein find themselves in a position to brave with impunity the inclemency of the weather. No cave could be firmer, or drier, or compacter. In truth it would have been difficult to have anywhere found a better.

“Eh, Tartlet, what do you think of our natural house?” asked Godfrey.

“Yes, but the chimney?” answered Tartlet.

“Before we talk about the chimney,” replied Godfrey, “let us wait till we have got the fire!”

This was only logical.

Godfrey went to reconnoitre the neighbourhood. As we have said, the prairie extended to this enormous mass of sequoias which formed its edge. The small stream meandering through the grassy carpet gave a healthy freshness to its borders, and thereon grew shrubs of different kinds; myrtles, mastic bushes, and among others a quantity of manzanillas, which gave promise of a large crop of their wild apples.

Farther off, on ground that grew gradually higher, were scattered several clumps of trees, made up of oaks and beeches, sycamores and nettle-trees, but trees of great stature as they were, they seemed but simple underwood by the side of the “mammoths,” whose huge shadows the sun was throwing even into the sea. Across the prairie lay minor lines of bushes, and vegetable clumps and verdant thickets, which Godfrey resolved to investigate on the following day.

If the site pleased him, it did not displease the domestic animals. Agouties, goats, and sheep had soon taken possession of this domain, which offered them roots to nibble at, and grass to browse on far beyond their needs. As for the fowls they were greedily pecking away at the seeds and worms in the banks of the rivulet. Animal life was already manifesting itself in such goings and comings, such flights and gambols, such bleatings and gruntings and cluckings as had doubtless never been heard of in these parts before.

Then Godfrey returned to the clump of sequoias, and made a more attentive examination of the tree in which he had chosen to take up his abode. It appeared to him that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to climb into the first branches, at least by the exterior; for the trunk presented no protuberances. Inside it the ascent might be easier, if the tree were hollow up to the fork.

In case of danger it would be advisable to seek refuge among the thick boughs borne by the enormous trunk. But this matter could be looked into later on.

When he had finished his inquiries the sun was low on horizon, and it seemed best to put off till to-morrow the preparations for their definitely taking up their abode.

But, after a meal with dessert composed of wild apples, what could they do better than pass the night on a bed of the vegetable dust which covered the ground inside the sequoia?

And this, under the keeping of Providence, was what was done, but not until after Godfrey, in remembrance of his uncle, William W. Kolderup, had given to the giant the name of “Will Tree,” just as its prototypes in the forests of California and the neighbouring states bear the names of the great citizens of the American Republic.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH ENDS WITH A THUNDER-BOLT.

It must be acknowledged that Godfrey was in a fair way to become a new man in this completely novel position to one so frivolous, so light-minded, and so thoughtless. He had hitherto only had to allow himself to live. Never had care for the morrow disquieted his rest. In the opulent mansion in Montgomery Street, where he slept his ten hours without a break, not the fall of a rose leaf had ever troubled his slumbers.

It was so no longer. On this unknown land he found himself thoroughly shut off from the rest of the world, left entirely to his own resources, obliged to face the necessities of life under conditions in which a man even much more practical might have been in great difficulty. Doubtless when it was found that the *Dream* did not return, a search for him would be made. But what were these two? Less than a needle in a hayrick or a sand-grain on the sea-bottom! The incalculable fortune of Uncle Kolderup could not do everything.

When Godfrey had found his fairly acceptable shelter, his sleep in it was by no means undisturbed. His brain travelled as it had never done before. Ideas of all kinds were associated together: those of the past which he bitterly regretted, those of the present of which he sought the realization, those of the future which disquieted him more than all!

But in these rough trials, the reason and, in consequence, the reasoning which naturally flows from it, were little by little freed from the limbo in which they had hitherto slept. Godfrey was resolved to strive against his ill-luck, and to do all he could to get out of his difficulties. If he escaped, the lesson would certainly not be lost on him for the future.

At daybreak he was astir, with the intention of proceeding to a more complete installation. The question of food, above all that of fire, which was connected with it, occupied the first place; then there were tools or arms to make, clothes to procure, unless they were anxious of soon appearing attired in Polynesian costume.

Tartlet still slumbered. You could not see him in the shadow, but you could hear him. That poor man, spared from the wreck, remained as frivolous at forty-five as his pupil had formerly been. He was a gain in no sense. He even might be considered an incubus, for he had to be cared for in all ways. But he was a companion!

He was worth more in that than the most intelligent dog, although he was probably of less use! He was a creature able to talk — although only at random; to converse — if the matter were never serious; to complain — and this he did most frequently! As it was, Godfrey was able to hear a human voice. That was worth more than the parrot’s in Robinson Crusoe! Even with a Tartlet he would not be alone, and nothing was so disheartening as the thought of absolute solitude.

“Crusoe before Friday, Crusoe after Friday; what a difference!” thought he.

However, on this morning, that of June 29th, Godfrey was not sorry to be alone, so as to put into execution his project of exploring the group of sequoias. Perhaps he would be fortunate enough to discover some fruit, some edible root, which he could bring back — to the extreme satisfaction of the professor. And so he left Tartlet to his dreams, and set out.

A light fog still shrouded the shore and the sea, but already it had commenced to lift in the north and east under the influence of the solar rays, which little by little were condensing it. The day promised to be fine. Godfrey, after having cut himself a substantial walking-stick, went for two miles along that part of the beach which he did not know, and whose return formed the outstretched point of Phina Island.

There he made a first meal of shell-fish, mussels, clams, and especially some capital little oysters which he found in great abundance.

“If it comes to the worst,” he said to himself, “we need never die of hunger! Here are thousands of dozens of oysters to satisfy the calls of the most imperious stomach! If Tartlet complains, it is because he does not like mollusks! Well, he will have to like them!”

Decidedly, if the oyster did not absolutely replace bread and meat, it furnished an aliment in no whit less nutritive and in a condition capable of being absorbed in large quantities. But as this mollusk is of very easy digestion, it is somewhat dangerous in its use, to say nothing of its abuse.

This breakfast ended, Godfrey again seized his stick, and struck off obliquely towards the south-east, so as to walk up the right bank of the stream. In this direction, he would cross the prairie up to the groups of trees observed the night before beyond the long lines of shrubs and underwood, which he wished to carefully examine.

Godfrey then advanced in this direction for about two miles. He followed the bank of the stream, carpeted with short herbage and smooth as velvet. Flocks of aquatic birds noisily flew round this being, who, new to them, had come to trouble their domain. Fish of many kinds were seen darting about in the limpid waters of the brook, here abouts some four or five yards wide.

It was evident that there would be no difficulty in catching these fish, but how to cook them? Always this insoluble question!

Fortunately, when Godfrey reached the first line of shrubs he recognized two sorts of fruits or roots. One sort had to pass through the fiery trial before being eaten, the other was edible in its natural state. Of these two vegetables the American Indians make constant use.

The first was a shrub of the kind called “camas,” which thrives even in lands unfit for culture. With these onion-like roots, should it not be found preferable to treat them as potatoes, there is made a sort of flour very rich and glutinous. But either way, they have to be subjected to a certain cooking, or drying.

The other bush produces a species of bulb of oblong form, bearing the indigenous name of “yamph,” and if it possesses less nutritive principles than the camas, it is much the better for one thing, — it can be eaten raw.

Godfrey, highly pleased at his discovery, at once satisfied his hunger on a few of these excellent roots, and not forgetting Tartlet’s breakfast, collected a large bundle, and throwing it over his shoulder, retook the road to Will Tree.

That he was well received on his arrival with the crop of yamphs need not be insisted on. The professor greedily regaled himself, and his pupil had to caution him to be moderate.

“Ah!” he said. “We have got some roots to-day. Who knows whether we shall have any to-morrow?”

“Without any doubt,” replied Godfrey, “to-morrow and the day after, and always. There is only the trouble of going and fetching them.”

“Well, Godfrey, and the camas?”

“Of the camas we will make flour and bread when we have got a fire.”

“Fire!” exclaimed the professor, shaking his head. “Fire! And how shall we make it?”

“I don’t know yet, but somehow or other we will get at it.”

“May Heaven hear you, my dear Godfrey! And when I think that there are so many fellows in this world who have only got to rub a bit of wood on the sole of their boot to get it, it annoys me! No! Never would I have believed that ill-luck would have reduced me to this state! You need not take three steps down Montgomery Street, before you will meet with a gentleman, cigar in mouth, who thinks it a pleasure to give you a light, and here — ”

“Here we are not in San Francisco, Tartlet, nor in Montgomery Street, and I think it would be wiser for us not to reckon on the kindness of those we meet!”

“But, why is cooking necessary for bread and meat? Why did not nature make us so that we might live upon nothing?”

“That will come, perhaps!” answered Godfrey with a good-humoured smile.

“Do you think so?”

“I think that our scientists are probably working out the subject.”

“Is it possible! And how do they start on their research as to this new mode of alimentation?”

“On this line of reasoning,” answered Godfrey, “as the functions of digestion and respiration are connected, the endeavour is to substitute one for the other. Hence the day when chemistry has made the aliments necessary for the food of man capable of assimilation by respiration, the problem will be solved. There is nothing wanted beyond rendering the air nutritious. You will breathe your dinner instead of eating it, that is all!”

“Ah! Is it not a pity that this precious discovery is not yet made!” exclaimed the professor. “How cheerfully would I breathe half a dozen sandwiches and a silverside of beef, just to give me an appetite!”

And Tartlet plunged into a semi-sensuous reverie, in which he beheld succulent atmospheric dinners, and at them unconsciously opened his mouth and breathed his lungs full, oblivious that he had scarcely the wherewithal to feed upon in the ordinary way.

Godfrey roused him from his meditation, and brought him back to the present. He was anxious to proceed to a more complete installation in the interior of Will Tree.

The first thing to do was to clean up their future dwelling-place. It was at the outset necessary to bring out several bushels of that vegetable dust which covered the ground and in which they sank almost up to their knees. Two hours’ work hardly sufficed to complete this troublesome task, but at length the chamber was clear of the pulverulent bed, which rose in clouds at the slightest movement.

The ground was hard and firm, as if floored with joists, the large roots of the sequoia ramifying over its surface. It was uneven but solid. Two corners were selected for the beds and of these several bundles of herbage, thoroughly dried in the sun, were to form the materials. As for other furniture, benches, stools, or tables, it was not impossible to make the most indispensable things, for Godfrey had a capital knife, with its saw and gimlet. The companions would have to keep inside during rough weather, and they could eat and work there. Daylight did not fail them, for it streamed through the opening. Later on, if it became necessary to close this aperture for greater safety, Godfrey could try and pierce one or two embrasures in the bark of the sequoia to serve as windows.

As for discovering to what height the opening ran up into the trunk, Godfrey could not do so without a light. All that he could do was to find out with the aid of a pole ten or twelve feet long, held above his head, that he could not touch the top.

The question, however, was not an urgent one. It would be solved eventually.

The day passed in these labours, which were not ended at sunset. Godfrey and Tartlet, tired as they were, found their novel bed-clothes formed of the dried herbage, of which they had an ample supply, most excellent; but they had to drive away the poultry who would willingly have roosted in the interior of Will Tree. Then occurred to Godfrey the idea of constructing a poultry-house in some other sequoia, as, to keep them out of the common room, he was building up a hurdle of brushwood. Fortunately neither the sheep nor the agouties, nor the goats experienced the like temptation. These animals remained quietly outside, and had no fancy to get through the insufficient barrier.

The following days were employed in different jobs, in fitting up the house or bringing in food; eggs and shell-fish were collected, yamph roots and manzanilla apples were brought in, and oysters, for which each morning they went to the bank or the shore. All this took time, and the hours passed away quickly.

The "dinner things" consisted now of large bivalve shells, which served for dishes or plates. It is true that for the kind of food to which the hosts of Will Tree were reduced, others were not needed.

There was also the washing of the linen in the clear water of the stream, which occupied the leisure of Tartlet. It was to him that this task fell; but he only had to see to the two shirts, two handkerchiefs, and two pairs of socks, which composed the entire wardrobe of both.

While this operation was in progress, Godfrey and Tartlet had to wear only waistcoat and trousers, but in the blazing sun of that latitude the clothes quickly dried. And so matters went on without either rain or wind till July 3rd. Already they had begun to be fairly comfortable in their new home, considering the condition in which they had been cast on the island.

However, it was advisable not to neglect the chances of safety which might come from without. Each day Godfrey examined the whole sector of sea which extended from the east to the north-west beyond the promontory.

This part of the Pacific was always deserted. Not a vessel, not a fishing-boat, not a ribbon of smoke detaching itself from the horizon, proclaimed the passage of a steamer. It seemed that Phina Island was situated out of the way of all the itineraries of commerce. All they could do was to wait, trusting in the Almighty who never abandons the weak.

Meanwhile, when their immediate necessities allowed them leisure, Godfrey, incited by Tartlet, returned to that important and vexed question of the fire.

He tried at first to replace amadou, which he so unfortunately lacked, by another and analogous material. It was possible that some of the varieties of mushrooms which grew in the crevices of the old trees, after having been subjected to prolonged drying, might be transformed into a combustible substance.

Many of these mushrooms were collected and exposed to the direct action of the sun, until they were reduced to powder. Then with the back of his knife, Godfrey endeavoured to strike some sparks off with a flint, so that they might fall on this substance. It was useless. The spongy stuff would not catch fire. Godfrey then tried to use that fine vegetable dust, dried during so many centuries, which he had found in the interior of Will Tree. The result was equally discouraging.

In desperation he then, by means of his knife and flint, strove to secure the ignition of a sort of sponge which grew under the rocks. He fared no better. The particle of steel, lighted by the impact of the silex, fell on to the substance, but went out immediately. Godfrey and Tartlet were in despair. To do without fire was impossible. Of their fruits and mollusks they were getting tired, and their stomachs began to revolt at such food. They eyed, the professor especially, the sheep, agouties, and fowls which went and came round Will Tree. The pangs of hunger seized them as they gazed. With their eyes they ate the living meat!

No! It could not go on like this!

But an unexpected circumstance, a providential one if you will, came to their aid.

In the night of the 3rd of July the weather, which had been on the change for a day or so, grew stormy, after an oppressive heat which the sea-breeze had been powerless to temper.

Godfrey and Tartlet at about one o’clock in the morning were awakened by heavy claps of thunder, and most vivid flashes of lightning. It did not rain as yet, but it soon promised to do so, and then regular cataracts would be precipitated from the cloudy zone, owing to the rapid condensation of the vapour.

Godfrey got up and went out so as to observe the state of the sky.

There seemed quite a conflagration above the domes of the giant trees and the foliage appeared on fire against the sky, like the fine network of a Chinese shadow.

Suddenly, in the midst of the general uproar, a vivid flash illuminated the atmosphere. The thunder-clap followed immediately, and Will Tree was permeated from top to bottom with the electric force.

Godfrey, staggered by the return shock, stood in the midst of a rain of fire which showered around him. The lightning had ignited the dry branches above him. They were incandescent particles of carbon which crackled at his feet.

Godfrey with a shout awoke his companion.

“Fire! Fire!”

“Fire!” answered Tartlet. “Blessed be Heaven which sends it to us!”

Instantly they possessed themselves of the flaming twigs, of which some still burned, while others had been consumed in the flames. Hurriedly, at the same time, did they heap together a quantity of dead wood such as was never wanting at the foot of the sequoia, whose trunk had not been touched by the lightning.

Then they returned into their gloomy habitation as the rain, pouring down in sheets, extinguished the fire which threatened to devour the upper branches of Will Tree.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH GODFREY AGAIN SEES A SLIGHT SMOKE OVER ANOTHER PART OF THE ISLAND.

That was a storm which came just when it was wanted! Godfrey and Tartlet had not, like Prometheus, to venture into space to bring down the celestial fire! “It was,” said Tartlet, “as if the sky had been obliging enough to send it down to them on a lightning flash.”

With them now remained the task of keeping it!

“No! we must not let it go out!” Godfrey had said.

“Not until the wood fails us to feed it!” had responded Tartlet, whose satisfaction showed itself in little cries of joy.

“Yes! but who will keep it in?”

“I! I will! I will watch it day and night, if necessary,” replied Tartlet, brandishing a flaming bough.

And he did so till the sun rose.

Dry wood, as we have said, abounded beneath the sequoias. Until the dawn Godfrey and the professor, after heaping up a considerable stock, did not spare to feed the fire. By the foot of one of the large trees in a narrow space between the roots the flames leapt up, crackling clearly and joyously. Tartlet exhausted his lungs blowing away at it, although his doing so was perfectly useless. In this performance he assumed the most characteristic attitudes in following the greyish smoke whose wreaths were lost in the foliage above.

But it was not that they might admire it that they had so longingly asked for this indispensable fire, not to warm themselves at it. It was destined for a much more interesting use. There was to be an end of their miserable meals of raw mollusks and yamph roots, whose nutritive elements boiling water and simple cooking in the ashes had never developed. It was in this way that Godfrey and Tartlet employed it during the morning.

“We could eat a fowl or two!” exclaimed Tartlet, whose jaws moved in anticipation. “Not to mention an agouti ham, a leg of mutton, a quarter of goat, some of the game on the prairie, without counting two or three freshwater fish and a sea fish or so.”

“Not so fast,” answered Godfrey, whom the declaration of this modest bill of fare had put in good humour. “We need not risk indigestion to satisfy a fast! We must look after our reserves, Tartlet! Take a couple of fowls — one apiece — and if we want bread, I hope that our camsa roots can be so prepared as to replace it with advantage!” This cost the lives of two innocent hens, who, plucked, trussed, and dressed by the professor, were stuck on a stick, and soon roasted before the crackling flames.

Meanwhile, Godfrey was getting the camas roots in a state to figure creditably at the first genuine breakfast on Phina Island. To render them edible it was only necessary to follow the Indian method, which the Californians were well acquainted with.

This was what Godfrey did.

A few flat stones selected from the beach were thrown in the fire so as to get intensely hot. Tartlet seemed to think it a great shame to use such a good fire “to cook stones with,” but as it did not hinder the preparation of his fowls in any way he had no other complaint to make.

While the stones were getting warm Godfrey selected a piece of ground about a yard square from which he tore up the grass; then with his hands armed with large scallop shells he dug the soil to the depth of about ten inches. That done he laid at the bottom of the cavity a fire of dry wood, which he so arranged as to communicate to the earth heaped up at its bottom some considerable heat.

When all the wood had been consumed and the cinders taken away, the camas roots, previously cleaned and scraped, were strewn in the hole, a thin layer of sods thrown over them and the glowing stones placed on the top, so as to serve as the basis of a new fire which was lighted on their surface.

In fact, it was a kind of oven which had been prepared; and in a very short time — about half an hour or so — the operation was at an end.

Beneath the double layer of stones and sods lay the roots cooked by this violent heating. On crushing them there was obtainable a flour well fitted for making into bread, but, even eaten as they were, they proved much like potatoes of highly nutritive quality.

It was thus that this time the roots were served and we leave our readers to imagine what a breakfast our two friends made on the chickens which they devoured to the very bones, and on the excellent camas roots, of which they had no need to be sparing. The field was not far off where they grew in abundance. They could be picked up in hundreds by simply stooping down for them.

The repast over, Godfrey set to work to prepare some of the flour, which keeps for any length of time, and which could be transformed into bread for their daily wants.

The day was passed in different occupations. The fire was kept up with great care. Particularly was the fuel heaped on for the night; and Tartlet, nevertheless, arose on many occasions to sweep the ashes together and provoke a more active combustion. Having done this, he would go to bed again, to get up as soon as the fire burnt low, and thus he occupied himself till the day broke. The night passed without incident, the cracklings of the fire and the crow of the cock awoke Godfrey and his companion, who had ended his performances by falling off to sleep.

At first Godfrey was surprised at feeling a current of air coming down from above in the interior of Will Tree. He was thus led to think that the sequoia was hollow up to the junction of the lower branches where there was an opening which they would have to stop up if they wished to be snug and sheltered.

“But it is very singular!” said Godfrey to himself.

“How was it that during the preceding nights I did not feel this current of air? Could it have been the lightning?”

And to get an answer to this question, the idea occurred to him to examine the trunk of the sequoia from the out side.

When he had done so, he understood what had happened during the storm.

The track of the lightning was visible on the tree, which had had a long strip of its bark torn off from the fork down to the roots.

Had the electric spark found its way into the interior of the sequoia in place of keeping to the outside, Godfrey and his companion would have been struck. Most decidedly they had had a narrow escape.

“It is not a good thing to take refuge under trees during a storm,” said Godfrey. “That is all very well for people who can do otherwise. But what way have we to avoid the danger who live inside the tree? We must see!”

Then examining the sequoia from the point where the long lightning trace began — ”It is evident,” said he, “that where the flash struck the tree has been cracked. But since the air penetrates by this orifice the tree must be hollow along its whole length and only lives in its bark? Now that is what I ought to see about!”

And Godfrey went to look for a resinous piece of wood that might do for a torch.

A bundle of pine twigs furnished him with the torch he needed, as from them exuded a resin which, once inflamed, gave forth a brilliant light.

Godfrey then entered the cavity which served him for his house. To darkness immediately succeeded light, and it was easy to see the state of the interior of Will Tree. A sort of vault of irregular formation stretched across in a ceiling some fifteen feet above the ground. Lifting his torch Godfrey distinctly saw that into this there opened a narrow passage whose further development was lost in the shadow. The tree was evidently hollow throughout its length; but perhaps some portion of the alburnum still remained intact. In that case, by the help of the protuberances it would be possible if not easy to get up to the fork.

Godfrey, who was thinking of the future, resolved to know without delay if this were so.

He had two ends in view; one, to securely close the opening by which the rain and wind found admission, and so render Will Tree almost habitable; the other, to see if in case of danger, or an attack from animals or savages, the upper branches of the tree would not afford a convenient refuge.

He could but try. If he encountered any insurmountable obstacle in the narrow passage, Godfrey could be got down again.

After firmly sticking his torch between two of the roots below, behold him then commencing to raise himself on to the first interior knots of the bark. He was lithe, strong, and accustomed to gymnastics like all young Americans. It was only sport to him. Soon he had reached in this uneven tube a part much narrower, in which, with the aid of his back and knees, he could work his way upwards like a chimney-sweep. All he feared was that the hole would not continue large enough for him to get up.

However, he kept on, and each time he reached a projection he would stop and take breath.

Three minutes after leaving the ground, Godfrey had mounted about sixty feet, and consequently could only have about twenty feet further to go.

In fact, he already felt the air blowing more strongly on his face. He inhaled it greedily, for the atmosphere inside the sequoia was not, strictly speaking, particularly fresh.

After resting for a minute, and shaking off the fine dust which he had rubbed on to him off the wall, Godfrey started again up the long tunnel, which gradually narrowed.

But at this moment his attention was attracted by a peculiar noise, which appeared to him somewhat suspicious. There was a sound as of scratching, up the tree. Almost immediately a sort of hissing was heard.

Godfrey stopped.

“What is that?” he asked. “Some animal taken refuge in the sequoia? Was it a snake? No! We have not yet seen one on the island! Perhaps it is a bird that wants to get out!”

Godfrey was not mistaken; and as he continued to mount, a cawing, followed by a rapid flapping of wings, showed him that it was some bird ensconced in the tree whose sleep he was doubtless disturbing.

Many a “frrr-frrr!” which he gave out with the whole power of his lungs, soon determined the intruder to clear off.

It proved to be a kind of jackdaw, of huge stature, which scuttled out of the opening, and disappeared into the summit of Will Tree.

A few seconds afterwards, Godfrey’s head appeared through the same opening, and he soon found himself quite at his ease, installed on a fork of the tree where the lower branches gave off, at about eighty feet from the ground.

There, as has been said, the enormous stem of the sequoia supported quite a forest. The capricious network of its upper boughs presented the aspect of a wood crowded with trees, which no gap rendered passable.

However, Godfrey managed, not without difficulty, to get along from one branch to another, so as to gain little by little the upper story of this vegetable phenomenon.

A number of birds with many a cry flew off at his approach, and hastened to take refuge in the neighbouring members of the group, above which Will Tree towered by more than a head.

Godfrey continued to climb as well as he could, and did not stop until the ends of the higher branches began to bend beneath his weight.

A huge horizon of water surrounded Phina Island, which lay unrolled like a relief-map at his feet. Greedily his eyes examined that portion of the sea. It was still deserted. He had to conclude once more, that the island lay away from the trade routes of the Pacific.

Godfrey uttered a heavy sigh; then his look fell on the narrow domain on which fate had condemned him to live, doubtless for long, perhaps for ever.

But what was his surprise when he saw, this time away to the north, a smoke similar to that which he had already thought he had seen in the south. He watched it with the keenest attention.

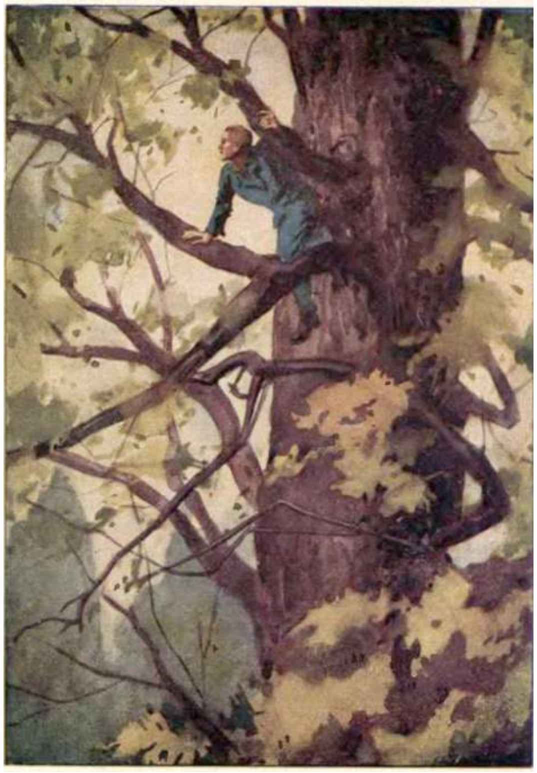

There was the column of smoke.

A very light vapour, calm and pure, greyish blue at its tip, rose straight in the air.

“No! I am not mistaken!” exclaimed Godfrey. “There is a smoke, and therefore a fire which produces it! And that fire could not have been lighted except by — By whom?”

Godfrey then with extreme precision took the bearings of the spot in question.

The smoke was rising in the north-east of the island, amid the high rocks which bordered the beach. There was no mistake about that. It was less than five miles from Will Tree. Striking straight to the north-east across the prairie, and then following the shore, he could not fail to find the rocks above which the vapour rose.

With beating heart Godfrey made his way down the scaffolding of branches until he reached the fork. There he stopped an instant to clear off the moss and leaves which clung to him, and that done he slid down the opening, which he enlarged as much as possible, and rapidly gained the ground. A word to Tartlet not to be uneasy at his absence, and Godfrey hastened off in the north-easterly direction so as to reach the shore.

It was a two hours’ walk across the verdant prairie, through clumps of scattered trees, or hedges of spiny shrubs, and then along the beach. At length the last chain of rocks was reached.

But the smoke which Godfrey had seen from the top of the tree he searched for in vain when he had reached the ground. As he had taken the bearings of the spot with great care, he came towards it without any mistake.

There Godfrey began his search. He carefully explored every nook and corner of this part of the shore. He called. No one answered to his shout. No human being appeared on the beach. Not a rock gave him a trace of a newly lighted fire — nor of a fire now extinct, which could have been fed by sea herbs and dry algæ thrown up by the tide.

“But it is impossible that I should have been mistaken!” repeated Godfrey to himself. “I am sure it was smoke that I saw! And besides! — ”

As Godfrey could not admit that he had been the dupe of a delusion, he began to think that there must exist some well of heated water, or kind of intermittent geyser, which he could not exactly find, but which had given forth the vapour.

There was nothing to show that in the island there were not many of such natural wells, and the apparition of the column of smoke could be easily explained by so simple a geological phenomenon.

Godfrey left the shore and returned towards Will Tree, observing the country as he went along a little more carefully than he had done as he came. A few ruminants showed themselves, amongst others some wapiti, but they dashed past with such speed that it was impossible to get near them.

In about four hours Godfrey got back. Just before he reached the tree he heard the shrill “twang! squeak!” of the kit, and soon found himself face to face with Professor Tartlet, who, in the attitude of a vestal, was watching the sacred fire confided to his keeping.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEREIN GODFREY FINDS SOME WRECKAGE, TO WHICH HE AND HIS COMPANION GIVE A HEARTY WELCOME.

To put up with what you cannot avoid is a philosophical principle, that may not perhaps lead you to the accomplishment of great deeds, but is assuredly eminently practical. On this principle Godfrey had resolved to act for the future. If he had to live in this island, the wisest thing for him to do was to live there as comfortably as possible until an opportunity offered for him to leave it.

And so, without delay, he set to work to get the interior of Will Tree into some order. Cleanliness was of the first importance. The beds of dried grass were frequently renewed. The plates and dishes were only scallop shells, it is true, but no American kitchen could show cleaner ones. It should be said to his praise that Professor Tartlet was a capital washer. With the help of his knife Godfrey, by flattening out a large piece of bark, and sticking four uprights into the ground, had contrived a table in the middle of the room. Some large stumps served for stools. The comrades were no longer reduced to eating on their knees, when the weather prevented their dining in the open air.

There was still the question of clothing, which was of great interest to them, and they did the best they could. In that climate, and under that latitude, there was no reason why they should not go about half naked; but, at length, trousers, waistcoat, and linen shirt were all worn out. How could they replace them? Were the sheep and the goats to provide them with skins for clothing, after furnishing them with flesh for food? It looked like it.

Meanwhile, Godfrey had the few garments he possessed frequently washed. It was on Tartlet, transformed into a laundress, that this task fell, and he acquitted himself of it to the general satisfaction.

Godfrey busied himself specially in providing food, and in arranging matters generally. He was, in fact, the caterer. Collecting the edible roots and the manzanilla fruit occupied him some hours every day; and so did fishing with plaited rushes, sometimes in the waters of the stream, and sometimes in the hollows of the rocks on the beach when the tide had gone out. The means were primitive, no doubt, but from time to time a fine crustacean or a succulent fish figured on the table of Will Tree, to say nothing of the mollusks, which were easily caught by hand.

But we must confess that the pot — of all the pieces in the battery of the cook undoubtedly the most essential — the simple iron pot, was wanting. Its absence could not but be deeply felt. Godfrey knew not how to replace the vulgar pipkin, whose use is universal. No hash, no stew, no boiled meat, no fish, nothing but roasts and grills. No soup appeared at the beginning of a meal. Constantly and bitterly did Tartlet complain — but how to satisfy the poor man?

Godfrey was busied with other cares. In visiting the different trees of the group he had found a second sequoia of great height, of which the lower part, hollowed out by the weather, was very rugged and uneven.

Here he devised his poultry-house, and in it the fowls took up their abode. The hens soon became accustomed to their home, and settled themselves to set on eggs placed in the dried grass, and chickens began to multiply. Every evening the broods were driven in and shut up, so as to keep them from birds of prey, who, aloft in the branches, watched their easy victims, and would, if they could, have ended by destroying them.

As for the agoutis, the sheep, and the goats, it would have been useless then to have looked out a stable or a shelter for them. When the bad weather came, there would be time enough to see to that. Meanwhile they prospered on the luxuriant pasturage of the prairie, with its abundance of sainfoin and edible roots, of which the porcine representatives showed genuine appreciation. A few kids had been dropped since the arrival in the island, and as much milk as possible was left to the goats with which to nourish their little ones.

From all this it resulted that the surroundings of Will Tree were quite lively. The well-fed domestic animals came during the warm hours of the day to find there a refuge from the heat of the sun. No fear was there of their wandering abroad, or of their falling a prey to wild beasts, of which Phina Island seemed to contain not a single specimen.

And so things went on, with a present fairly comfortable perhaps, but a future very disquieting, when an unexpected incident occurred which bettered the position considerably.

It was on the 29th of July.

Godfrey was strolling in the morning along that part of the shore which formed the beach of the large bight to which he had given the name of Dream Bay. He was exploring it to see if it was as rich in shell-fish as the coast on the north. Perhaps he still hoped that he might yet come across some of the wreck, of which it seemed to him so strange that the tide had as yet brought in not a single fragment.

On this occasion he had advanced to the northern point which terminated in a sandy spit, when his attention was attracted by a rock of curious shape, rising near the last group of algæ and sea-weeds.

A strange presentiment made him hasten his steps. What was his surprise, and his joy, when he saw that what he had taken for a rock was a box, half buried in the sand.

Was it one of the packages of the *Dream*? Had it been here ever since the wreck? Was it not rather all that remained of another and more recent catastrophe? It was difficult to say. In any case no matter whence it came or what it held, the box was a valuable prize.

Godfrey examined it outwardly. There was no trace of an address not even a name, not even one of those huge initials cut out of thin sheet metal which ornament the boxes of the Americans. Perhaps he would find inside it some paper which would indicate the origin, or nationality, or name of the proprietor? Any how it was apparently hermetically sealed, and there was hope that its contents had not been spoiled by their sojourn in the sea-water. It was a very strong wooden box, covered with thick leather, with copper corner plates at the angles, and large straps all over it.

Impatient as he was to view the contents of the box, Godfrey did not think of damaging it, but of opening it after destroying the lock; as to transporting it from the bottom of Dream Bay to Will Tree, its weight forbade it, and he never gave that a thought.

“Well,” said Godfrey to himself, “we must empty it where it is, and make as many journeys as may be necessary to take away all that is inside.”

It was about four miles from the end of the promontory to the group of sequoias. It would therefore take some time to do this, and occasion considerable fatigue. Time did not press, however. As for the fatigue, it was hardly worth thinking about.

What did the box contain? Before returning to Will Tree, Godfrey had a try at opening it.

He began by unbuckling the straps, and once they were off he very carefully lifted the leather shield which protected the lock. But how was he to force it?

It was a difficult job. Godfrey had no lever with which to bring his strength to bear. He had to guard against the risk of breaking his knife, and so he looked about for a heavy stone with which he could start the staple.

The beach was strewn with lumps of hard silex in every form which could do for a hammer.

Godfrey picked out one as thick as his wrist, and with it he gave a tremendous whack on the plate of copper.

To his extreme surprise the bolt shot through the staple immediately gave way.

Either the staple was broken by the blow, or the lock was not turned.

Godfrey’s heart beat high as he stooped to lift up the box lid.

It rose unchecked, and in truth had Godfrey had to get it to pieces he would not have done so without trouble. The trunk was a regular strong-box. The interior was lined with sheet zinc, so that the sea-water had failed to penetrate. The objects it contained, however delicate they might be, would be found in a perfect state of preservation.

And what objects! As he took them out Godfrey could not restrain exclamations of joy! Most assuredly the box must have belonged to some highly practical traveller, who had reckoned on getting into a country where he would have to trust to his own resources.

In the first place there was linen — shirts, table-cloths, sheets, counterpanes; then clothes — woollen jerseys, woollen socks, cotton socks, cloth trousers, velveteen trousers, knitted waistcoats, waistcoats of good heavy stuffs; then two pairs of strong boots, and hunting-shoes and felt hats.

Then came a few kitchen and toilet utensils; and an iron pot — the famous pot which was wanted so badly — a kettle, a coffee-pot, a tea-pot, some spoons, some forks, some knives, a looking-glass, and brushes of all kinds, and, what was by no means to be despised, three cans, containing about fifteen pints of brandy and tafia, and several pounds of tea and coffee.

Then, in the third place, came some tools — an auger, a gimlet, a handsaw, an assortment of nails and brads, a spade, a shovel, a pickaxe, a hatchet, an adze, &c. &c.

In the fourth place, there were some weapons, two hunting-knives in their leather sheaths, a carbine and two muskets, three six-shooter revolvers, a dozen pounds of powder, many thousand caps, and an important stock of lead and bullets, all the arms seeming to be of English make. There was also a small medicine-chest, a telescope, a compass, and a chronometer. There were also a few English books, several quires of blank paper, pencils, pens, and ink, an almanac, a Bible with a New York imprint, and a "Complete Cook's Manual."

Verily this is an inventory of what under the circumstances was an inestimable prize.

Godfrey could not contain himself for joy. Had he expressly ordered the trousseau for the use of shipwrecked folks in difficulties, he could not have made it more complete.

Abundant thanks were due for it to Providence. And Providence had the thanks, and from an overflowing heart.

Godfrey indulged himself in the pleasure of spreading out all his treasure on the beach. Every object was looked over, but not a scrap of paper was there in the box to indicate to whom it belonged, or the ship on which it had been embarked.

Around, the sea showed no signs of a recent wreck.

Nothing was there on the rocks, nothing on the sands. The box must have been brought in by the flood, after being afloat for perhaps many days. In fact, its size in proportion to its weight had assured for it sufficient buoyancy.

The two inhabitants of Phina Island would for some time be kept provided in a large measure with the material wants of life, — tools, arms, instruments, utensils, clothes — due to the luckiest of chances.

Godfrey did not dream of taking all the things to Will Tree at once. Their transport would necessitate several journeys but he would have to make haste for fear of bad weather.

Godfrey then put back most of the things in the box. A gun, a revolver, a certain quantity of powder and lead, a hunting-knife, the telescope, and the iron pot, he took as his first load.

The box was carefully closed and strapped up, and with a rapid step Godfrey strode back along the shore.

Ah! What a reception he had from Tartlet, an hour later! And the delight of the Professor when his pupil ran over the list of their new riches! The pot — that pot above everything — threw him into transports of joy, culminating in a series of “hornpipes” and “cellar-flaps,” wound up by a triumphant “six-eight breakdown.”

It was only noon as yet. Godfrey wished after the meal to get back at once to Dream Bay. He would never rest until the whole was in safety at Will Tree.

Tartlet made no objection, and declared himself ready to start. It was no longer necessary to watch the fire. With the powder they could always get a light. But the Professor was desirous that during their absence the soup which he was thinking about might be kept gently on the simmer. The wonderful pot was soon filled with water from the stream, a whole quarter of a goat was thrown in, accompanied by a dozen yamph roots, to take the place of vegetables, and then a pinch or two of salt found in the crevices of the rocks gave seasoning to the mixture.

“It must skim itself,” exclaimed Tartlet, who seemed highly satisfied at his performance.

And off they started for Dream Bay by the shortest road. The box had not been disturbed. Godfrey opened it with care. Amid a storm of admiring exclamations from Tartlet, he began to pick out the things.

In this first journey Godfrey and his companion, transformed into beasts of burden, carried away to Will Tree the arms, the ammunition, and a part of the wearing apparel.

Then they rested from their fatigue beside the table, on which there smoked the stewed agouti, which they pronounced most excellent. As for the meat, to listen to the Professor it would have been difficult even to imagine anything more exquisite! Oh! the marvellous effect of privation!

On the 30th, the next day, Godfrey and Tartlet set forth at dawn, and in three other journeys succeeded in emptying and carrying away all that the box contained. Before the evening, tools, weapons, instruments, utensils, were all brought, arranged, and stowed away in Will Tree.

On the 1st of August, the box itself, dragged along the beach not without difficulty, found a place in the tree, and was transformed into a linen-closet.

Tartlet, with the fickleness of his mind, now looked upon the future through none but rosy glasses. We can hardly feel astonished then that on this day, with his kit in his hand, he went out to find his pupil, and said to him in all seriousness, as if he were in the drawing-room of Kolderup’s mansion, —

“Well, Godfrey, my boy, don’t you think it is time to resume our dancing lessons?”

CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH THERE HAPPENS WHAT HAPPENS AT LEAST ONCE IN THE LIFE OF EVERY CRUSOE, REAL OR IMAGINARY.

And now the future looked less gloomy. But if Tartlet saw in the possession of the instruments, the tools, and the weapons only the means of making their life of isolation a little more agreeable, Godfrey was already thinking of how to escape from Phina Island. Could he not now construct a vessel strong enough to enable them to reach if not some neighbouring land, at least some ship passing within sight of the island?

Meanwhile the weeks which followed were principally spent in carrying out not these ideas, but those of Tartlet. The wardrobe at Will Tree was now replenished, but it was decided to use it with all the discretion which the uncertainty of the future required. Never to wear any of the clothes unless necessity compelled him to do so, was the rule to which the professor was forced to submit.

“What is the good of that?” grumbled he. “It is a great deal too stingy, my dear Godfrey! Are we savages, that we should go about half naked?”

“I beg your pardon, Tartlet,” replied Godfrey; “we are savages, and nothing else.”

“As you please; but you will see that we shall leave the island before we have worn the clothes!”

“I know nothing about it, Tartlet, and it is better to have than to want.”

“But on Sunday now, surely on Sunday, we might dress up a little?”

“Very well, on Sundays then, and perhaps on public holidays,” answered Godfrey, who did not wish to anger his frivolous companion; “but as to day is Monday we shall have to wait a whole week before we come out in our best.”

We need hardly mention that from the moment he arrived on the island Godfrey had not omitted to mark each day as it passed. By the aid of the calendar he found in the box he was able to verify that the day was really Monday.

Each performed his daily task according to his ability. It was no longer necessary for them to keep watch by day and night over a fire which they had now the means of relighting.

Tartlet therefore abandoned, not without regret, a task which suited him so well. Henceforwards he took charge of the provisioning with yamph and camas roots — of that in short which formed the daily bread of the establishment, so that the professor went every day and collected them, up to the lines of shrubs with which the prairie was bordered behind Will Tree. It was one or two miles to walk, but he accustomed himself to it. Between whiles he occupied his time in collecting oysters or other mollusks, of which they consumed a great quantity.

Godfrey reserved for himself the care of the domestic animals and the poultry. The butchering trade was hardly to his taste, but he soon overcame his repugnance. Thanks to him, boiled meats appeared frequently on the table, followed by an occasional joint of roast meat to afford a sufficiently varied bill of fare. Game abounded in the woods of Phina Island, and Godfrey proposed to begin his shooting when other more pressing cares allowed him time. He thought of making good use of the guns, powder, and bullets in his arsenal, but he in the first place wished to complete his preparations. His tools enabled him to make several benches inside and outside Will Tree. The stools were cut out roughly with the axe, the table made a little less roughly became more worthy of the dishes and dinner things with which Professor Tartlet adorned it. The beds were arranged in wooden boxes and their litter of dry grass assumed a more inviting aspect. If mattresses and palliasses were still wanting, counterpanes at least were not. The various cooking utensils stood no longer on the ground, but had their places on planks fixed along the walls. Stores, linen, and clothes were carefully put away in cavities hollowed out in the bark of the sequoia. From strong pegs were suspended the arms and instruments, forming quite a trophy on the walls.

Godfrey was also desirous of putting a door to the house, so that the other living creatures — the domestic animals — should not come during the night and trouble their sleep. As he could not cut out boards with his only saw, the handsaw, he used large and thick pieces of bark, which he got off very easily. With these he made a door sufficiently massive to close the opening into Will Tree, at the same time he made two little windows, one opposite to the other, so as to let light and air into the room. Shutters allowed him to close them at night, but from the morning to the evening it was no longer necessary to take refuge in flaring resinous torches which filled the dwelling with smoke. What Godfrey would think of to yield them light during the long nights of winter he had as yet no idea. He might take to making candles with the mutton fat, or he might be contented with resinous torches more carefully prepared. We shall see.

Another of his anxieties was how to construct a chimney in Will Tree. While the fine weather lasted, the fire outside among the roots of the sequoia sufficed for all the wants of the kitchen, but when the bad weather came and the rain fell in torrents, and they would have to battle with the cold, whose extreme rigour during a certain time they reasonably feared, they would have to have a fire inside their house, and the smoke from it must have some vent. This important question therefore had to be settled.

One very useful work which Godfrey undertook was to put both banks of the river in communication with each other on the skirt of the sequoia-trees.

He managed, after some difficulty, to drive a few stakes into the river-bed, and on them he fixed a staging of planks, which served for a bridge. They could thus get away to the northern shore without crossing the ford, which led them a couple of miles out of their road.

But if Godfrey took all these precautions so as to make existence a little more possible on this lone isle of the Pacific, in case he and his companion were destined to live on it for some time, or perhaps live on it for ever, he had no intention of neglecting in any way the chances of rescue.

Phina Island was not on the routes taken by the ships — that was only too evident. It offered no port of call, nor means of revictualling. There was nothing to encourage ships to take notice of it. At the same time it was not impossible that a war-ship or a merchant-vessel might come in sight. It was advisable therefore to find some way of attracting attention, and showing that the island was inhabited.

With this object Godfrey erected a flagstaff at the end of the cape which ran out to the north, and for a flag he sacrificed a piece of one of the cloths found in the trunk. As he thought that the white colour would only be visible in a strong light, he tried to stain his flag with the berries of a sort of shrub which grew at the foot of the dunes. He obtained a very vivid red, which he could not make indelible owing to his having no mordant, but he could easily re-dye the cloth when the wind or rain had faded it.

These varied employments occupied him up to the 15th of August. For many weeks the sky had been constantly clear, with the exception of two or three storms of extreme violence which had brought down a large quantity of water, to be greedily drunk in by the soil.

About this time Godfrey began his shooting expeditions. But if he was skilful enough in the use of the gun, he could not reckon on Tartlet, who had yet to fire his first shot.

Many days of the week did Godfrey devote to the pursuit of fur and feather, which, without being abundant, were yet plentiful enough for the requirements of Will Tree.

A few partridges, some of the red-legged variety, and a few snipes, came as a welcome variation of the bill of fare. Two or three antelopes fell to the prowess of the young stalker; and although he had had nothing to do with their capture, the professor gave them a no less welcome than he did when they appeared as haunches and cutlets.

But while he was out shooting, Godfrey did not forget to take a more complete survey of the island. He penetrated the depths of the dense forests which occupied the central districts. He ascended the river to its source. He again mounted the summit of the cone, and redescended by the talus on the eastern shore, which he had not, up to then, visited.

“After all these explorations,” repeated Godfrey to himself, “there can be no doubt that Phina Island has no dangerous animals, neither wild beasts, snakes, nor saurians! I have not caught sight of one! Assuredly if there had been any, the report of the gun would have woke them up! It is fortunate, indeed. If it were to become necessary to fortify Will Tree against their attacks, I do not know how we should get on!”

Then passing on to quite a natural deduction —

“It must also be concluded,” continued he, “that the island is not inhabited at all. Either natives or people shipwrecked here would have appeared before now at the sound of the gun! There is, however, that inexplicable smoke which I twice thought I saw.”

The fact is, that Godfrey had never been able to trace any fire. As for the hot water springs to which he attributed the origin of the vapour he had noticed, Phina Island being in no way volcanic did not appear to contain any, and he had to content himself with thinking that he had twice been the victim of an illusion.

Besides, this apparition of the smoke or the vapour was not repeated. When Godfrey the second time ascended the central cone, as also when he again climbed up into Will Tree, he saw nothing to attract his attention. He ended by forgetting the circumstance altogether.

Many weeks passed in different occupations about the tree, and many shooting excursions were undertaken. With every day their mode of life improved.

Every Sunday, as had been agreed, Tartlet donned his best clothes. On that day he did nothing but walk about under the big trees, and indulge in an occasional tune on the kit. Many were the glissades he performed, giving lessons to himself, as his pupil had positively refused to continue his course.

“What is the good of it?” was Godfrey’s answer to the entreaties of the professor. “Can you imagine Robinson Crusoe taking lessons in dancing and deportment?”

“And why not?” asked Tartlet seriously. “Why should Robinson Crusoe dispense with deportment? Not for the good of others, but of himself, he should acquire refined manners.”

To which Godfrey made no reply. And as he never came for his lesson, the professor became professor “emeritus.”

The 13th of September was noted for one of the greatest and cruellest deceptions to which, on a desert island, the unfortunate survivors of a shipwreck could be subjected.

Godfrey had never again seen that inexplicable and undiscoverable smoke on the island; but on this day, about three o’clock in the afternoon, his attention was attracted by a long line of vapour, about the origin of which he could not be deceived.

He had gone for a walk to the end of Flag Point — the name which he had given to the cape on which he had erected his flagstaff. While he was looking through his glass he saw above the horizon a smoke driven by the west wind towards the island.

Godfrey’s heart beat high.

“A ship!” he exclaimed.

But would this ship, this steamer, pass in sight of Phina Island? And if it passed, would it come near enough for the signal thereon to be seen on board?

Or would not rather the semi-visible smoke disappear with the vessel towards the north-west or south-west of the horizon?

For two hours Godfrey was a prey to alternating emotions more easy to indicate than to describe.

The smoke got bigger and bigger. It increased when the steamer re-stoked her fires, and diminished almost to vanishing-point as the fuel was consumed. Continually did the vessel visibly approach. About four o’clock her hull had come up on the line between the sky and the sea.

She was a large steamer, bearing north-east. Godfrey easily made that out. If that direction was maintained, she would inevitably approach Phina Island.

Godfrey had at first thought of running back to Will Tree to inform Tartlet. What was the use of doing so? The sight of one man making signals could do as much good as that of two. He remained there, his glass at his eye, losing not a single movement of the ship.

The steamer kept on her course towards the coast, her bow steered straight for the cape. By five o’clock the horizon-line was already above her hull, and her rig was visible. Godfrey could even recognize the colours at her gaff.

She carried the United States’ ensign.

“But if I can see their flag, cannot they see mine? The wind keeps it out, so that they could easily see my flag with their glasses. Shall I make signals, by raising it and lowering it a few times, so as to show that I want to enter into communication with them? Yes! I have not an instant to lose.”

It was a good idea. Godfrey ran to the end of Flag Point, and began to haul his flag up and down, as if he were saluting. Then he left it half-mast high, so as to show, in the way usual with seafaring people, that he required help and succour.

The steamer still approached to within three miles of the shore, but her flag remained immovable at the peak, and replied not to that on Flag Point. Godfrey felt his heart sink. He would not be noticed! It was half-past six, and the sun was about to set!

The steamer was now about two miles from the cape, which she was rapidly nearing. At this moment the sun disappeared below the horizon. With the first shadows of night, all hope of being seen had to be given up.

Godfrey again, with no more success, began to raise and lower his flag. There was no reply.

He then fired his gun two or three times, but the distance was still great, and the wind did not set in that direction! No report would be heard on board!

The night gradually came on; soon the steamer’s hull grew invisible. Doubtless in another hour she would have passed Phina Island.

Godfrey, not knowing what to do, thought of setting fire to a group of resinous trees which grew at the back of Flag Point. He lighted a heap of dry leaves with some gunpowder, and then set light to the group of pines, which flared up like an enormous torch.

But no fire on the ship answered to the one on the land, and Godfrey returned sadly to Will Tree, feeling perhaps more desolate than he had ever felt till then.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN WHICH SOMETHING HAPPENS WHICH CANNOT FAIL TO SURPRISE THE READER.

To Godfrey the blow was serious. Would this unexpected chance which had just escaped him ever offer again? Could he hope so? No! The indifference of the steamer as she passed in sight of the island, without even taking a look at it, was obviously shared in by all the vessels venturing in this deserted portion of the Pacific. Why should they put into port more than she had done? The island did not possess a single harbour.

Godfrey passed a sorrowful night. Every now and then jumping up as if he heard a cannon out at sea, he would ask himself if the steamer had not caught sight of the huge fire which still burnt on the coast, and if she were not endeavouring to answer the signal by a gun-shot?

Godfrey listened. It was only an illusion of his over-excited brain. When the day came, he had come to look upon the apparition of the ship as but a dream, which had commenced about three o’clock on the previous afternoon.

But no! He was only too certain that a ship had been in sight of Phina Island, maybe within two miles of it, and certainly she had not put in.

Of this deception Godfrey said not a word to Tartlet. What was the good of talking about it? Besides, his frivolous mind could not see more than twenty-four hours ahead. He was no longer thinking of the chances of escaping from the island which might offer. He no longer imagined that the future had great things in store for them. San Francisco was fading out of his recollection. He had no sweetheart waiting for him, no Uncle Will to return to. If at this end of the world he could only commence a course of lessons on dancing, his happiness would be complete — were it only with one pupil.

If the professor dreamt not of immediate danger, such as to compromise his safety in this island — bare, as it was, of wild beasts and savages — he was wrong. This very day his optimism was to be put to a rude test.

About four o’clock in the afternoon Tartlet had gone, according to his custom, to collect some oysters and mussels, on that part of the shore behind Flag Point, when Godfrey saw him coming back as fast as his legs could carry him to Will Tree. His hair stood on end round his temples. He looked like a man in flight, who dared not turn his head to the right or to the left.

“What is the matter?” shouted Godfrey, not without alarm, running to meet his companion.

“There! there!” answered Tartlet, pointing with his finger towards the narrow strip of sea visible to the north between the trees.

“But what is it?” asked Godfrey, whose first movement was to run to the edge of the sequoias.

“A canoe!”

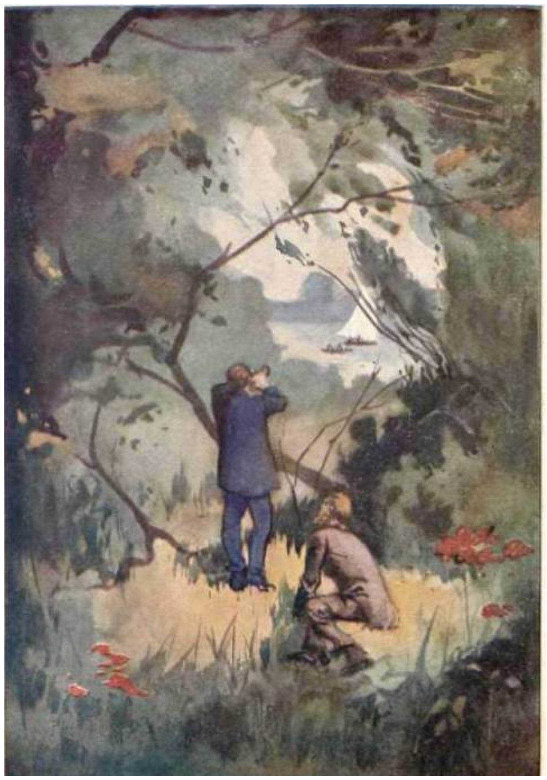

“A Canoe!”

“A canoe?”

“Yes! Savages! Quite a fleet of savages! Cannibals, perhaps!”

Godfrey looked in the direction pointed out.

It was not a fleet, as the distracted Tartlet had said; but he was only mistaken about the quantity.

In fact, there was a small vessel gliding through the water, now very calm, about half-a-mile from the coast, so as to double Flag Point.

“And why should they be cannibals?” asked Godfrey, turning towards the professor.

“Because in Crusoe Islands,” answered Tartlet, “there are always cannibals, who arrive sooner or later.”

“Is it not a boat from some merchant-ship?”

“From a ship?”

“Yes. From a steamer which passed here yesterday afternoon, in sight of our island?”

“And you said nothing to me about it!” exclaimed Tartlet, lifting his hands to the sky.

“What good should I have done?” asked Godfrey. “Besides, I thought that the vessel had disappeared! But that boat might belong to her! Let us go and see!”

Godfrey ran rapidly back to Will Tree, and, seizing his glass, returned to the edge of the trees.

He then examined with extreme attention the little vessel, which would ere then have perceived the flag on Flag Point as it fluttered in the breeze.

The glass fell from his hands.

“Savages! Yes! They are really savages!” he exclaimed.

Tartlet felt his knees knock together, and a tremor of fright ran through his body.

It was a vessel manned by savages which Godfrey saw approaching the island. Built like a Polynesian canoe, she carried a large sail of woven bamboo; an outrigger on the weather side kept her from capsizing as she heeled down to the wind.

Godfrey easily distinguished the build of the vessel. She was a proa, and this would indicate that Phina Island was not far from Malaysia. But they were not Malays on board; they were half-naked blacks, and there were about a dozen of them.

The danger of being found was thus great. Godfrey regretted that he had hoisted the flag, which had not been seen by the ship, but would be by these black fellows. To take it down now would be too late.

It was, in truth, very unfortunate. The savages had probably come to the island thinking it was uninhabited, as indeed it had been before the wreck of the *Dream*. But there was the flag, indicating the presence of human beings on the coast! How were they to escape them if they landed?

Godfrey knew not what to do. Anyhow his immediate care must be to watch if they set foot on the island. He could think of other things afterwards.

With his glass at his eye he followed the proa; he saw it turn the point of the promontory, then run along the shore and then approach the mouth of the small stream, which, two miles up, flowed past Will Tree.

If the savages intended to paddle up the river, they would soon reach the group of sequoias — and nothing could hinder them. Godfrey and Tartlet ran rapidly back to their dwelling. They first of all set about guarding them selves against surprise, and giving themselves time to prepare their defence.

At least that is what Godfrey thought of. The ideas of the professor took quite a different turn.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “It is destiny! This is as it was written? We could not escape it! You cannot be a Crusoe without a canoe coming to your island, without cannibals appearing one day or another! Here we have been for only three months, and there they are already! Assuredly, neither Defoe, nor De Wyss exaggerated matters! You can make yourself a Crusoe, if you like!”

Worthy Tartlet, folks do not make themselves Crusoes, they become Crusoes, and you are not sure that you are wise in comparing your position with that of the heroes of the two English and Swiss romances!

The precautions taken by Godfrey as soon as he returned to Will Tree were as follows. The fire burning among the roots of the sequoia was extinguished, and the embers scattered broadcast, so as to leave no trace; cocks, hens, and chickens were already in their house for the night, and the entrance was hidden with shrubs and twigs as much as possible; the other animals, the goats, agoutis, and sheep, were driven on to the prairie, but it was unlucky that there was no stable to shut them up in; all the instruments and tools were taken into the tree. Nothing was left outside that could indicate the presence or the passage of human beings.

Then the door was closely shut, after Godfrey and Tartlet had gone in. The door made of the sequoia bark was indistinguishable from the bark of the trunk, and might perhaps escape the eyes of the savages, who would not look at it very closely. It was the same with the two windows, in which the lower boards were shut. Then all light was extinguished in the dwelling, and our friends remained in total darkness. How long that night was! Godfrey and Tartlet heard the slightest sounds outside. The creaking of a dry branch, even a puff of wind, made them start. They thought they heard some one walking under the trees. It seemed that they were prowling round Will Tree. Then Godfrey climbed up to one of the windows, opened one of the boards, and anxiously peered into the gloom.

Nothing!

However, Godfrey at last heard footsteps on the ground. His ear could not deceive him this time. He still looked, but could only see one of the goats come for shelter beneath the trees.

Had any of the savages happened to discover the house hidden in the enormous sequoia, Godfrey had made up his mind what to do: he would drag up Tartlet with him by the chimney inside, and take refuge in the higher branches, where he would be better able to resist. With guns and revolvers in his possession, and ammunition in abundance, he would there have some chance against a dozen savages devoid of fire-arms.

If in the event of their being armed with bows and arrows they attacked from below, it was not likely that they would have the best of it against fire-arms aimed from above. If on the other hand they forced the door of the dwelling and tried to reach the branches from the inside, they would find it very difficult to get there, owing to the narrow opening, which the besieged could easily defend.

Godfrey said nothing about this to Tartlet. The poor man had been almost out of his mind with fright since he had seen the proa. The thought that he might be obliged to take refuge in the upper part of a tree, as if in an eagle's nest, would not have soothed him in the least. If it became necessary, Godfrey decided to drag him up before he had time to think about it.

The night passed amid these alternations of fear and hope. No attack occurred. The savages had not yet come to the sequoia group. Perhaps they would wait for the day before venturing to cross the island.

"That is probably what they will do," said Godfrey, "since our flag shows that it is inhabited! But there are only a dozen of them, and they will have to be cautious! How are they to know that they have only to deal with a couple of shipwrecked men? No! They will risk nothing except by daylight — at least, if they are going to stop."

"Supposing they go away when the daylight comes?" answered Tartlet.

"Go away? Why should they have come to Phina Island for one night?"

"I do not know," replied the professor, who in his terror could only explain the arrival of the blacks by supposing that they had come to feed on human flesh.

"Anyhow," continued Godfrey; "to-morrow morning, if they have not come to Will Tree, we will go out and reconnoitre."

"We?"

"Yes! we! Nothing would be more imprudent than for us to separate! Who knows whether we may not have to run to the forest in the centre of the island and hide there for some days — until the departure of the proa! No! We will keep together, Tartlet!"

“Hush!” said the professor in a low voice; “I think I hear something outside.”

Godfrey climbed up again to the window, and got down again almost immediately.

“No!” he said. “Nothing suspicious! It is only our cattle coming back to the wood.”

“Hunted perhaps!” exclaimed Tartlet.

“They seem very quiet then,” replied Godfrey; “I fancy they have only come in search of shelter against the morning dew.”

“Ah!” murmured Tartlet in so piteous a tone that Godfrey could hardly help laughing, “these things could not happen at your uncle’s place in Montgomery Street!”

“Day will soon break,” said Godfrey, after a pause. “In an hour’s time, if the savages have not appeared, we will leave Will Tree and reconnoitre towards the north of the island. You are able to carry a gun, Tartlet?”

“Carry? Yes!”

“And to fire it in a stated direction?”

“I do not know! I have never tried such a thing, and you may be sure, Godfrey, that my bullet will not go — ”

“Who knows if the report alone might not frighten the savages?”

An hour later, it was light enough to see beyond the sequoias.

Godfrey then cautiously reopened the shutters.

From that looking to the south he saw nothing extraordinary. The domestic animals wandered peacefully under the trees, and did not appear in the least alarmed. The survey completed, Godfrey carefully shut this window. Through the opening to the north there was a view up to the shore. Two miles off even the end of Flag Point could be seen; but the mouth of the river at the place where the savages had landed the evening before was not visible. Godfrey at first looked around without using his glass, so as to examine the environs of Will Tree on this side of Phina Island.

All was quite peaceful.

Godfrey then taking his glass swept round the coast to the promontory at Flag Point. Perhaps, as Tartlet had said, though it was difficult to find the reason, the savages had embarked, after a night spent on shore, without attempting to see if the island were inhabited.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH PROFESSOR TARTLET'S GUN REALLY DOES MARVELS.

But Godfrey suddenly uttered an exclamation which made the professor jump. There could be no doubt that the savages knew the island was inhabited, for the flag hitherto hoisted at the extremity of the cape had been carried away by them and no longer floated on the mast at Flag Point. The moment had then come to put the project into execution, to reconnoitre if the savages were still in the island, and to see what they were doing.

“Let us go,” said he to his companion.

“Go! But — ” answered Tartlet.

“Would you rather stay here?”

“With you, Godfrey — yes!”

“No — alone!”

“Alone! Never!”

“Come along then!”

Tartlet, thoroughly understanding that Godfrey would not alter his decision, resolved to accompany him. He had not courage enough to stay behind at Will Tree.

Before starting, Godfrey assured himself that the fire-arms were ready for action. The two guns were loaded, and one passed into the hands of the professor, who seemed as much embarrassed with it as might have been a savage of Pomotou. He also hung one of the hunting-knives to his belt, to which he had already attached his cartridge-pouch. The thought had occurred to him to also take his fiddle, imagining perhaps that they would be sensible to the charm of its squeaking, of which all the talent of a virtuoso could not conceal the harshness.

Godfrey had some trouble in getting him to abandon this idea, which was as ridiculous as it was impracticable.

It was now six o'clock in the morning. The summits of the sequoias were glowing in the first rays of the sun.

Godfrey opened the door; he stepped outside; he scanned the group of trees.

Complete solitude.

The animals had returned to the prairie. There they were, tranquilly browsing, about a quarter of a mile away. Nothing about them denoted the least uneasiness.

Godfrey made a sign to Tartlet to join him. The professor, as clumsy as could be in his fighting harness, followed — not without some hesitation.

Then Godfrey shut the door, and saw that it was well hidden in the bark of the sequoia. Then, having thrown at the foot of the tree a bundle of twigs, which he weighted with a few large stones, he set out towards the river, whose banks he intended to descend, if necessary, to its mouth. Tartlet followed him not without giving before each of his steps an uneasy stare completely round him up to the very limits of the horizon; but the fear of being left alone impelled him to advance.

Arrived at the edge of the group of trees, Godfrey stopped.

Taking his glasses from their case, he scanned with extreme attention all that part of the coast between the Flag Point promontory and the north-east angle of the island.

Not a living being showed itself, not a single smoke wreath was rising in the air.

The end of the cape was equally deserted, but they would there doubtless find numberless footprints freshly made. As for the mast, Godfrey had not been deceived. If the staff still rose above the last rock on the cape, it was bereft of its flag. Evidently the savages after coming to the place had gone off with the red cloth which had excited their covetousness, and had regained their boat at the mouth of the river.

Godfrey then turned off so as to examine the western shore.

It was nothing but a vast desert from Flag Point right away beyond the curve of Dream Bay.

No boat of any kind appeared on the surface of the sea. If the savages had taken to their proa, it only could be concluded that they were hugging the coast sheltered by the rocks, and so closely that they could not be seen.

However, Godfrey could not and would not remain in doubt. He was determined to ascertain, yes or no, if the proa had definitely left the island.

To do this it was necessary to visit the spot where the savages had landed the night before, that is to say, the narrow creek at the mouth of the river.

This he immediately attempted.

The borders of the small watercourse were shaded by occasional clumps of trees encircled by shrubs, for a distance of about two miles. Beyond that for some five or six hundred yards down to the sea the river ran between naked banks. This state of affairs enabled him to approach close to the landing-place without being perceived. It might be, however, that the savages had ascended the stream, and to be prepared for this eventuality the advance had to be made with extreme caution.

Godfrey, however thought, not without reason, that, at this early hour the savages, fatigued by their long voyage, would not have quitted their anchorage. Perhaps they were still sleeping either in their canoe or on land; in which case it would be seen if they could not be surprised.

This idea was acted upon at once. It was important that they should get on quickly. In such circumstances the advantage is generally gained at the outset. The fire-arms were again examined, the revolvers were carefully looked at, and then Godfrey and Tartlet commenced the descent of the left bank of the river in Indian file. All around was quiet. Flocks of birds flew from one bank to the other, pursuing each other among the higher branches without showing any uneasiness.

Godfrey went first, but it can easily be believed that his companion found the attempt to cover step rather tiring. Moving from one tree to another they advanced towards the shore without risk of discovery. Here the clumps of bushes hid them from the opposite bank, there even their heads disappeared amid the luxurious vegetation. But no matter where they were, an arrow from a bow or a stone from a sling might at any moment reach them. And so they had to be constantly on their guard.

However, in spite of the recommendations which were addressed to him, Tartlet, tripping against an occasional stump, had two or three falls which might have complicated matters. Godfrey was beginning to regret having brought such a clumsy assistant. Indeed, the poor man could not be much help to him. Doubtless he would have been worth more left behind at Will Tree; or, if he would not consent to that, hidden away in some nook in the forest. But it was too late. An hour after he had left the sequoia group, Godfrey and his companion had come a mile — only a mile — for the path was not easy beneath the high vegetation and between the luxuriant shrubs. Neither one nor the other of our friends had seen anything suspicious.

Hereabouts the trees thinned out for about a hundred yards or less, the river ran between naked banks, the country round was barer.

Godfrey stopped. He carefully observed the prairie to the right and left of the stream.

Still there was nothing to disquiet him, nothing to indicate the approach of savages. It is true that as they could not but believe the island inhabited, they would not advance without precaution, in fact they would be as careful in ascending the little river as Godfrey was in descending it. It was to be supposed therefore that if they were prowling about the neighbourhood, they would also profit by the shelter of the trees or the high bushes of mastics and myrtles which formed such an excellent screen.

It was a curious though very natural circumstance that, the farther they advanced, Tartlet, perceiving no enemy, little by little lost his terror, and began to speak with scorn of “those cannibal laughing-stocks.” Godfrey, on the contrary, became more anxious, and it was with greater precaution than ever that he crossed the open space and regained the shadow of the trees. Another hour led them to the place where the banks, beginning to feel the effects of the sea’s vicinity, were only bordered with stunted shrubs, or sparse grasses.

Under these circumstances it was difficult to keep hidden or rather impossible to proceed without crawling along the ground.

This is what Godfrey did, and also what he advised Tartlet to do.

“There are not any savages! There are not any cannibals! They have all gone!” said the professor.

“There are!” answered Godfrey quickly, in a low voice, “They ought to be here! Down Tartlet, get down! Be ready to fire, but don’t do so till I tell you.”

Godfrey had said these words in such a tone of authority that the professor, feeling his limbs give way under him, had no difficulty in at once assuming the required position.

And he did well!

In fact, it was not without reason that Godfrey had spoken as he had.

From the spot which they then occupied, they could see neither the shore, nor the place where the river entered the sea. A small spur of hills shut out the view about a hundred yards ahead, but above this near horizon a dense smoke was rising straight in the air.

Godfrey, stretched at full length in the grass, with his finger on the trigger of his musket, kept looking towards the coast.

“This smoke,” he said, “is it not of the same kind that I have already seen twice before? Should I conclude that savages have previously landed on the north and south of the island, and that the smoke came from fires lighted by them? But no! That is not possible, for I found no cinders, nor traces of a fireplace, nor embers! Ah! this time I’ll know the reason of it.”

And by a clever reptilian movement, which Tartlet imitated as well as he could, he managed, without showing his head above the grass, to reach the bend of the river.

Thence he could command, at his ease, every part of the bank through which the river ran.

An exclamation could not but escape him! His hand touched the professor’s shoulder to prevent any movement of his! Useless to go further! Godfrey saw what he had come to see!

A large fire of wood was lighted on the beach, among the lower rocks, and from it a canopy of smoke rose slowly to the sky. Around the fire, feeding it with fresh armfuls of wood, of which they had made a heap, went and came the savages who had landed the evening before. Their canoe was moored to a large stone, and, lifted by the rising tide, oscillated on the ripples of the shore.

Godfrey could distinguish all that was passing on the sands without using his glasses. He was not more than two hundred yards from the fire, and he could even hear it crackling. He immediately perceived that he need fear no surprise from the rear, for all the blacks he had counted in the proa were in the group.

Ten out of the twelve were occupied in looking after the fire and sticking stakes in the ground with the evident intention of rigging up a spit in the Polynesian manner. An eleventh, who appeared to be the chief, was walking along the beach, and constantly turning his glances towards the interior of the island, as if he were afraid of an attack.

Godfrey recognized as a piece of finery on his shoulders the red stuff of his flag.

The twelfth savage was stretched on the ground, tied tightly to a post.

Godfrey recognized at once the fate in store for the wretched man. The spit was for him! The fire was to roast him at! Tartlet had not been mistaken, when, the previous evening, he had spoken of these folks as cannibals!

It must be admitted that neither was he mistaken in saying that the adventures of Crusoes, real or imaginary, were all copied one from the other!

Most certainly Godfrey and he did then find themselves in the same position as the hero of Daniel Defoe when the savages landed on his island. They were to assist, without doubt, at the same scene of cannibalism.

Godfrey decided to act as this hero did! He would not permit the massacre of the prisoner for which the stomachs of the cannibals were waiting! He was well armed. His two muskets — four shots — his two revolvers — a dozen shots — could easily settle these eleven rascals, whom the mere report of one of the fire-arms might perhaps be sufficient to scatter. Having taken his decision he coolly waited for the moment to interfere like a thunder-clap.

He had not long to wait!

Twenty minutes had barely elapsed, when the chief approached the fire. Then by a gesture he pointed out the prisoner to the savages who were expecting his orders.

Godfrey rose. Tartlet, without knowing why, followed the example. He did not even comprehend where his companion was going, for he had said nothing to him of his plans.

Godfrey imagined, evidently, that at sight of him the savages would make some movement, perhaps to rush to their boat, perhaps to rush at him.

They did nothing. It did not even seem as though they saw him; but at this moment the chief made a significant gesture. Three of his companions went towards the prisoner, unloosed him, and forced him near the fire.

He was still a young man, who, feeling that his last hour had come, resisted with all his might.

Assuredly, if he could, he would sell his life dearly. He began by throwing off the savages who held him, but he was soon knocked down, and the thief, seizing a sort of stone axe, jumped forward to beat in his head.

Godfrey uttered a cry, followed by a report. A bullet whistled through the air, and it seemed as though the chief were mortally wounded, for he fell on the ground.

At the report, the savages, surprised as though they had never heard the sound of fire-arms, stopped. At the sight of Godfrey those who held the prisoner instantly released him.

Immediately the poor fellow arose, and ran towards the place where he perceived his unexpected liberator.

At this moment a second report was heard.

It was Tartlet, who, without looking — for the excellent man kept his eyes shut — had just fired, and the stock of the musket on his right shoulder delivered the hardest knock which had ever been received by the professor of dancing and deportment.

But — what a chance it was! — a second savage fell close to his chief.

The rout at once began. Perhaps the savages thought they had to do with a numerous troop of natives whom they could not resist. Perhaps they were simply terrified at the sight of the two white men who seemed to keep the lightning in their pockets. There they were, seizing the two who were wounded, carrying them off, rushing to the proa, driving it by their paddles out of the little creek, hoisting their sail, steering before the wind, making for the Flag Point promontory, and doubling it in hot haste.

Godfrey had no thought of pursuing them. What was the good of killing them? They had saved the victim. They had put them to flight, that was the important point. This had been done in such a way that the cannibals would never dare to return to Phina Island.

All was then for the best. They had only to rejoice in their victory, in which Tartlet did not hesitate to claim the greatest share.

Meanwhile the prisoner had come to his rescuer. For an instant he stopped, with the fear inspired in him by superior beings, but almost immediately he resumed his course. When he arrived before the two whites, he bowed to the ground; then catching hold of Godfrey’s foot, he placed it on his head in sign of servitude.

One would almost have thought that this Polynesian savage had also read Robinson Crusoe!

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHICH TREATS OF THE MORAL AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION OF A SIMPLE NATIVE OF THE PACIFIC.

Godfrey at once raised the poor fellow, who lay prostrate before him. He looked in his face.

He was a man of thirty-five or more, wearing only a rag round his loins. In his features, as in the shape of his head, there could be recognized the type of the African negro. It was not possible to confound him with the debased wretches of the Polynesian islands, who, with their depressed crania and elongated arms, approach so strangely to the monkey.

Now, as he was a negro from Soudan or Abyssinia who had fallen into the hands of the natives of an archipelago of the Pacific, it might be that he could speak English or one or two words of the European languages which Godfrey understood. But it was soon apparent that the unhappy man only used an idiom that was absolutely incomprehensible — probably the language of the aborigines among whom he had doubtless arrived when very young. In fact, Godfrey had immediately interrogated him in English, and had obtained no reply. He then made him understand by signs, not without difficulty, that he would like to know his name.

After many fruitless essays, the negro, who had a very intelligent and even honest face, replied to the demand which was made of him in a single word, —

“Carefinotu.”

“Carefinotu!” exclaimed Tartlet. “Do you hear the name? I propose that we call him ‘Wednesday,’ for to-day is Wednesday, and that is what they always do in these Crusoe islands! Is he to be allowed to call himself Carefinotu?”

“If that is his name,” said Godfrey; “why should he not keep it?”

And at the moment he felt a hand placed on his chest, while all the black’s physiognomy seemed to ask him what his name was.

“Godfrey!” answered he.

The black endeavoured to say the word, but although Godfrey repeated it several times, he could not succeed in pronouncing it in an intelligible fashion. Then he turned towards the professor, as if to know his name.

“Tartlet,” was the reply of that individual in a most amiable tone.

“Tartlet!” repeated Carefinotu.

And it seemed as though this assemblage of syllables was more agreeable to his vocal chords, for he pronounced it distinctly.

The professor appeared to be extremely flattered. In truth he had reason to be.

Then Godfrey, wishing to put the intelligence of the black to some profit, tried to make him understand that he wished to know the name of the island. He pointed with his hand to the woods and prairies and hills, and then the shore which bound them, and then the horizon of the sea, and he interrogated him with a look.

Carefinotu did not at first understand what was meant, and imitating the gesture of Godfrey he also turned and ran his eyes over the space.

“Arneka,” said he at length.

“Arneka?” replied Godfrey, striking the soil with his foot so as to accentuate his demand.

“Arneka!” repeated the negro.

This told Godfrey nothing, neither the geographical name borne by the island, nor its position in the Pacific. He could not remember such a name; it was probably a native one, little known to geographers.

However, Carefinotu did not cease from looking at the two white men, not without some stupor, going from one to the other as if he wished to fix in his mind the differences which characterized them. The smile on his mouth disclosed abundant teeth of magnificent whiteness which Tartlet did not examine without a certain reserve.

“If those teeth,” he said, “have never eaten human flesh may my fiddle burst up in my hand.”

“Anyhow, Tartlet,” answered Godfrey; “our new companion no longer looks like the poor beggar they were going to cook and feed on! That is the main point!”

What particularly attracted the attention of Carefinotu were the weapons carried by Godfrey and Tartlet — as much the musket in the hand as the revolver in the belt.

Godfrey easily understood this sentiment of curiosity. It was evident that the savage had never seen a fire-arm. He said to himself that this was one of those iron tubes which had launched the thunder-bolt that had delivered him? There could be no doubt of it.

Godfrey, wishing to give him, not without reason, a high idea of the power of the whites, loaded his gun, and then, showing to Carefinotu a red-legged partridge that was flying across the prairie about a hundred yards away, he shouldered it quickly, and fired. The bird fell.

At the report the black gave a prodigious leap, which Tartlet could not but admire from a choregraphic point of view. Then repressing his fear, and seeing the bird with broken wing running through the grass, he started off and swift as a greyhound ran towards it, and with many a caper, half of joy, half of stupefaction, brought it back to his master.

Tartlet then thought of displaying to Carefinotu that the Great Spirit had also favoured him with the power of the lightning; and perceiving a kingfisher tranquilly seated on an old stump near the river was bringing the stock up to his cheek, when Godfrey stopped him with, —

“No! Don’t fire, Tartlet!”

“Why not?”

“Suppose that by some mishap you were not to hit the bird, think how we would fall in the estimation of the nigger!”

“And why should I not hit him?” replied Tartlet with some acerbity. “Did I not, during the battle, at more than a hundred paces, the very first time I handled a gun, hit one of the cannibals full in the chest?”

“You touched him evidently,” said Godfrey; “for he fell. But take my advice, Tartlet, and in the common interest do not tempt fortune twice!”

The professor, slightly annoyed, allowed himself to be convinced; he threw the gun on to his shoulder with a swagger, and both our heroes, followed by Carefinotu, returned to Will Tree.

There the new guest of Phina Island met with quite a surprise in the habitation so happily contrived in the lower part of the sequoia. First he had to be shown, by using them while he looked on, the use of the tools, instruments, and utensils. It was obvious that Carefinotu belonged to, or had lived amongst savages in the lowest rank of the human scale, for fire itself seemed to be unknown to him. He could not understand why the pot did not take fire when they put it on the blazing wood; he would have hurried away from it, to the great displeasure of Tartlet, who was watching the different phases of the cooking of the soup. At a mirror, which was held out to him, he betrayed consummate astonishment; he turned round, and turned it round to see if he himself were not behind it.

“The fellow is hardly a monkey!” exclaimed the professor with a disdainful grimace.

“No, Tartlet,” answered Godfrey; “he is more than a monkey, for his looks behind the mirror show good reasoning power.”

“Well, I will admit that he is not a monkey,” said Tartlet, shaking his head as if only half convinced; “but we shall see if such a being can be of any good to us.”

“I am sure he will be!” replied Godfrey.

In any case Carefinotu showed himself quite at home with the food placed before him. He first tore it apart, and then tasted it; and then I believe that the whole breakfast of which they partook the — agouti soup, the partridge killed by Godfrey, and the shoulder of mutton with camas and yamph roots — would hardly have sufficed to calm the hunger which devoured him.

“The poor fellow has got a good appetite!” said Godfrey.

“Yes,” responded Tartlet; “and we shall have to keep a watch on his cannibal instinct.”

“Well, Tartlet! We shall make him get over the taste of human flesh if he ever had it!”

“I would not swear that,” replied the professor. “It appears that once they have acquired this taste — ”

While they were talking, Carefinotu was listening with extreme attention. His eyes sparkled with intelligence. One could see that he understood what was being said in his presence. He then spoke with extreme volubility, but it was only a succession of onomatopœias devoid of sense, of harsh interjections with *a* and *ou* predominant, as in the majority of Polynesian idioms.

Whatever the negro was, he was a new companion; he might become a devoted servant, which the most unexpected chance had sent to the hosts of Will Tree.

He was powerful, adroit, active; no work came amiss to him. He showed a real aptitude to imitate what he saw being done. It was in this way that Godfrey proceeded with his education. The care of the domestic animals, the collection of the roots and fruits, the cutting up of the sheep or agouties, which were to serve for food for the day, the fabrication of a sort of cider they extracted from the wild manzanilla apples, — he acquitted himself well in all these tasks, after having seen them done.

Whatever Tartlet thought, Godfrey felt no distrust in the savage, and never seemed to regret having come across him. What disquieted him was the possible return of the cannibals who now knew the situation of Phina Island.

From the first, a bed had been reserved for Carefinotu in the room at Will Tree, but generally, unless it was raining, he preferred to sleep outside in some hole in the tree, as though he were on guard over the house.

During the fortnight which followed his arrival on the island, Carefinotu many times accompanied Godfrey on his shooting excursions. His surprise was always extreme when he saw the game fall hit at such a distance; but in his character of retriever, he showed a dash and daring which no obstacles, hedge or bush, or stream, could stop.

Gradually, Godfrey became greatly attached to this negro. There was only one part of his progress in which Carefinotu showed refractoriness; that was in learning the English language. Do what he might he could not be prevailed upon to pronounce the most ordinary words which Godfrey, and particularly Professor Tartlet tried to teach him.

So the time passed. But if the present was fairly supportable, thanks to a happy accident, if no immediate danger menaced them, Godfrey could not help asking himself, if they were ever to leave this island, by what means they were to rejoin their country! Not a day passed but he thought of Uncle Will and his betrothed. It was not without secret apprehension that he saw the bad season approaching, which would put between his friends and him a barrier still more impassable.

On the 27th of September a circumstance occurred deserving of note.

If it gave more work to Godfrey and his two companions, it at least assured them of an abundant reserve of food.

Godfrey and Carefinotu were busied in collecting the mollusks, at the extreme end of Dream Bay, when they perceived out at sea an innumerable quantity of small moving islets which the rising tide was bringing gently to shore. It was a sort of floating archipelago, on the surface of which there walked, or flew, a few of those sea-birds, with great expanse of wing, known as sea-hawks.

What then were these masses which floated landwards, rising and falling with the undulations of the waves?

Godfrey did not know what to think, when Carefinotu threw himself down on his stomach, and then drawing his head back into his shoulders, folded beneath him his arms and legs, and began to imitate the movements of an animal crawling slowly along the ground.

Godfrey looked at him without understanding these extraordinary gymnastics. Then suddenly —

“Turtles!” he exclaimed.

Carefinotu was right. There was quite a square mile of myriads of turtles, swimming on the surface of the water.

About a hundred fathoms from the shore the greater part of them dived and disappeared, and the sea-hawks, finding their footing gone, flew up into the air in large spirals. But luckily about a hundred of the amphibians came on to the beach.

Godfrey and the negro had quickly run down in front of these creatures, each of which measured at the least from three to four feet in diameter. Now the only way of preventing turtles from regaining the sea is to turn them on their backs; and it was in this rough work that Godfrey and Carefinotu employed themselves, not without great fatigue.

The following days were spent in collecting the booty. The flesh of the turtle, which is excellent either fresh or preserved, could perhaps be kept for a time in both forms. In preparation for the winter, Godfrey had the greater part salted in such a way as to serve for the needs of each day. But for some time the table was supplied with turtle soup, on which Tartlet was not the only one to regale himself.

Barring this incident, the monotony of existence was in no way ruffled. Every day the same hours were devoted to the same work. Would not the life become still more depressing when the winter season would oblige Godfrey and his companions to shut themselves up in Will Tree? Godfrey could not think of it without anxiety. But what could he do?

Meanwhile, he continued the exploration of the island, and all the time not occupied with more pressing tasks he spent in roaming about with his gun. Generally Carefinotu accompanied him, Tartlet remaining behind at the dwelling. Decidedly he was no hunter, although his first shot had been a master-stroke!

Now on one of these occasions an unexpected incident happened, of a nature to gravely compromise the future safety of the inmates of Will Tree.

Godfrey and the black had gone out hunting in the central forest, at the foot of the hill which formed the principal ridge of Phina Island. Since the morning they had seen nothing pass but two or three antelopes through the high underwood, but at too great a distance for them to fire with any chance of hitting them.

As Godfrey was not in search of game for dinner, and did not seek to destroy for destruction's sake, he resigned himself to return empty-handed. If he regretted doing so it was not so much for the meat of the antelope, as for the skin, of which he intended to make good use.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon. He and his companion after lunch were no more fortunate than before. They were preparing to return to Will Tree for dinner, when, just as they cleared the edge of the wood, Carefinotu made a bound; then precipitating himself on Godfrey, he seized him by the shoulders, and dragged him along with such vigour that resistance was impossible.

After going about twenty yards they stopped. Godfrey took breath, and, turning towards Carefinotu, interrogated him with a look.

The black, exceedingly frightened, stretched out his hand towards an animal which was standing motionless about fifty yards off.

It was a grizzly bear, whose paws held the trunk of a tree, and who was swaying his big head up and down, as if he were going to rush at the two hunters.

Immediately, without pausing to think, Godfrey loaded his gun, and fired before Carefinotu could hinder him.

Was the enormous plantigrade hit by the bullet? Probably. Was he killed? They could not be sure, but his paws unclasped, and he rolled at the foot of the tree. Delay was dangerous. A struggle with so formidable an animal might have the worst results. In the forests of California the pursuit of the grizzly is fraught with the greatest danger, even to professional hunters of the beast.

And so the black seized Godfrey by the arms to drag him away in the direction of Will Tree, and Godfrey, understanding that he could not be too cautious, made no resistance.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH THE SITUATION ALREADY GRAVELY COMPROMISED BECOMES MORE AND MORE COMPLICATED.

The presence of a formidable wild beast in Phina Island was, it must be confessed, calculated to make our friends think the worst of the ill-fortune which had fallen on them.

Godfrey — perhaps he was wrong — did not consider that he ought to hide from Tartlet what had passed.

“A bear!” screamed the professor, looking round him with a bewildered glare as if the environs of Will Tree were being assailed by a herd of wild beasts. “Why, a bear? Up to now we had not even got a bear in our island! If there is one there may be many, and even numbers of other ferocious beasts — jaguars, panthers, tigers, hyænas, lions!”

Tartlet already beheld Phina Island given over to quite a menagerie escaped from their cages.

Godfrey answered that there was no need for him to exaggerate. He had seen one bear, that was certain. Why one of these animals had never been seen before in his wanderings on the island he could not explain, and it was indeed inexplicable. But to conclude from this that wild animals of all kinds were prowling in the woods and prairies was to go too far. Nevertheless, they would have to be cautious and never go out unarmed.

Unhappy Tartlet! From this day there commenced for him an existence of anxieties, emotions, alarms, and irrational terrors which gave him nostalgia for his native land in a most acute form.

“No!” repeated he. “No! If there are animals — I have had enough of it, and I want to get off!”

He had not the power.

Godfrey and his companions then had henceforth to be on their guard. An attack might take place not only on the shore side or the prairie side, but even in the group of sequoias. This is why serious measures were taken to put the habitation in a state to repel a sudden attack. The door was strengthened, so as to resist the clutches of a wild beast. As for the domestic animals Godfrey would have built a stable to shut them up in at least at night, but it was not easy to do so. He contented himself at present with making a sort of enclosure of branches not far from Will Tree, which would keep them as in a fold. But the enclosure was not solid enough nor high enough to hinder a bear or hyæna from upsetting it or getting over it.

Notwithstanding the remonstrances made to him, Carefinotu persisted in watching outside during the night, and Godfrey hoped thus to receive warning of a direct attack.

Decidedly Carefinotu endangered his life in thus constituting himself the guardian of Will Tree; but he had understood that he could thus be of service to his liberators, and he persisted, in spite of all Godfrey said to him, in watching as usual over the general safety.

A week passed without any of these formidable visitors appearing in the neighbourhood. Godfrey did not go very far from the dwelling, unless there was a necessity for his doing so. While the sheep and goats grazed on the neighbouring prairie, they were never allowed out of sight. Generally

Carefinotu acted as shepherd. He did not take a gun, for he did not seem to understand the management of fire-arms, but one of the hunting-knives hung from his belt, and he carried an axe in his right hand. Thus armed the active negro would not have hesitated to throw himself before a tiger or any animal of the worst description.

However, as neither a bear nor any of his congeners had appeared since the last encounter Godfrey began to gather confidence. He gradually resumed his hunting expeditions, but without pushing far into the interior of the island. Frequently the black accompanied him; Tartlet, safe in Will Tree, would not risk himself in the open, not even if he had the chance of giving a dancing lesson. Sometimes Godfrey would go alone, and then the professor had a companion to whose instruction he obstinately devoted himself.

Yes! Tartlet had at first thought of teaching Carefinotu the most ordinary words in the English language, but he had to give this up, as the negro seemed to lack the necessary phonetic apparatus for that kind of pronunciation. “Then,” had Tartlet said, “if I cannot be his professor, I will be his pupil!”

And he it was who attempted to learn the idiom spoken by Carefinotu. Godfrey had warned him that the accomplishment would be of little use. Tartlet was not dissuaded. He tried to get Carefinotu to name the objects he pointed at with his hand. In truth Tartlet must have got on excellently, for at the end of fifteen days he actually knew fifteen words! He knew that Carefinotu said “birsi” for fire, “aradore” for the sky, “mervira” for the sea, “doura” for a tree, &c. He was as proud of this as if he had taken the first prize for Polynesian at some examination!

It was then with a feeling of gratitude that he wished to make some recognition of what had been done for him, and instead of torturing the negro with English words, he resolved on teaching him deportment and the true principles of European choregraphy.

At this Godfrey could not restrain his peals of laughter. After all it would pass the time away, and on Sunday, when there was nothing else to do, he willingly assisted at the course of lectures delivered by the celebrated Professor Tartlet of San Francisco. Indeed, we ought to have seen them! The unhappy Carefinotu perspired profusely as he went through the elementary exercises. He was docile and willing, nevertheless; but like all his fellows, his shoulders did not set back, nor did his chest throw out, nor did his knees or his feet point apart! To make a Vestris or a Saint Leon of a savage of this sort!

The professor pursued his task in quite a fury. Carefinotu, tortured as he was, showed no lack of zeal. What he suffered, even to get his feet into the first position can be imagined! And when he passed to the second and then to the third, it was still more agonizing.

“But look at me, you blockhead!” exclaimed Tartlet, who added example to precept. “Put your feet out! Further out! The heel of one to the heel of the other! Open your knees, you duffer! Put back your shoulders, you idiot! Stick up your head! Round your elbows!”

“But you ask what is impossible!” said Godfrey.

“Nothing is impossible to an intelligent man!” was Tartlet’s invariable response.

“But his build won’t allow of it.”

“Well, his build must allow of it! He will have to do it sooner or later, for the savage must at least know how to present himself properly in a drawing-room!”

“But, Tartlet, he will never have the opportunity of appearing in a drawing-room!”

“Eh! How do you know that, Godfrey?” replied the professor, drawing himself up. “Do you know what the future may bring forth?”

This was the last word in all discussions with Tartlet. And then the professor taking his kit would with the bow extract from it some squeaky little air to the delight of Carefinotu. It required but this to excite him. Oblivious of choregraphic rules, what leaps, what contortions, what capers!

And Tartlet, in a reverie, as he saw this child of Polynesia so demean himself, inquired if these steps, perhaps a little too characteristic, were not natural to the human being, although outside all the principles of his art.

But we must leave the professor of dancing and deportment to his philosophical meditations, and return to questions at once more practical and pressing.

During his last excursions into the plain, either by himself or with Carefinotu, Godfrey had seen no wild animal. He had even come upon no traces of such. The river to which they would come to drink bore no footprint on its banks. During the night there were no howlings nor suspicious noises. Besides the domestic animals continued to give no signs of uneasiness.

“This is singular,” said Godfrey several times; “but I was not mistaken! Carefinotu certainly was not! It was really a bear that he showed me! It was really a bear that I shot! Supposing I killed him, was he the last representative of the plantigrades on the island?”

It was quite inexplicable! Besides, if Godfrey had killed this bear, he would have found the body where he had shot it. Now they searched for it in vain! Were they to believe then that the animal mortally wounded had died far off in some den. It was possible after all, but then at this place, at the foot of this tree, there would have been traces of blood, and there were none.

“Whatever it is,” thought Godfrey, “it does not much matter; and we must keep on our guard.”

With the first days of November it could be said that the wet season had commenced in this unknown latitude. Cold rains fell for many hours. Later on probably they would experience those interminable showers which do not cease for weeks at a time, and are characteristic of the rainy period of winter in these latitudes.

Godfrey had then to contrive a fireplace in the interior of Will Tree — an indispensable fireplace that would serve as well to warm the dwelling during the winter months as to cook their food in shelter from the rain and tempest.

The hearth could at any time be placed in a corner of the chamber between big stones, some placed on the ground and others built up round them; but the question was how to get the smoke out, for to leave it to escape by the long chimney, which ran down the centre of the sequoia, proved impracticable.

Godfrey thought of using as a pipe some of those long stout bamboos which grew on certain parts of the river banks. It should be said that on this occasion he was greatly assisted by Carefinotu. The negro, not without effort, understood what Godfrey required. He it was who accompanied him for a couple of miles from Will Tree to select the larger bamboos, he it was who helped him build his hearth. The stones were placed on the ground opposite to the door; the bamboos, emptied of their pith and bored through at the knots, afforded, when joined one to another, a tube of sufficient length, which ran out through an aperture made for it in the sequoia bark, and would serve every purpose, provided it did not catch fire. Godfrey soon had the satisfaction of seeing a good fire burning without filling the interior of Will Tree with smoke.

He was quite right in hastening on these preparations, for from the 3rd to the 10th of November the rain never ceased pouring down. It would have been impossible to keep a fire going in the open air. During these miserable days they had to keep indoors and did got venture out except when the flocks and poultry urgently required them to do so. Under these circumstances the reserve of camas roots began to fail; and these were what took the place of bread, and of which the want would be immediately felt.

Godfrey then one day, the 10th of November, informed Tartlet that as soon as the weather began to mend a little he and Carefinotu would go out and collect some. Tartlet, who was never in a hurry to run a couple of miles across a soaking prairie, decided to remain at home during Godfrey’s absence.

In the evening the sky began to clear of the heavy clouds which the west wind had been accumulating since the commencement of the month, the rain gradually ceased, the sun gave forth a few crepuscular rays. It was to be hoped that the morning would yield a lull in the storm, of which it was advisable to make the most.

“To-morrow,” said Godfrey, “I will go out, and Carefinotu will go with me.”

“Agreed!” answered Tartlet.

The evening came, and when supper was finished and the sky, cleared of clouds, permitted a few brilliant stars to appear, the black wished to take up his accustomed place outside, which he had had to abandon during the preceding rainy nights. Godfrey tried to make him understand that he had better remain indoors, that there was no necessity to keep a watch as no wild animal had been noticed; but Carefinotu was obstinate. He therefore had to have his way.

The morning was as Godfrey had foreseen, no rain had fallen since the previous evening, and when he stepped forth from Will Tree, the first rays of the sun were lightly gilding the thick dome of the sequoias.

Carefinotu was at his post, where he had passed the night. He was waiting. Immediately, well armed and provided with large sacks, the two bid farewell to Tartlet, and started for the river, which they intended ascending along the left bank up to the camas bushes.

An hour afterwards they arrived there without meeting with any unpleasant adventure.

The roots were rapidly torn up and a large quantity obtained, so as to fill the sacks. This took three hours, so that it was about eleven o’clock in the morning when Godfrey and his companion set out on their return to Will Tree.

Walking close together, keeping a sharp look-out, for they could not talk to each other, they had reached a bend in the small river where there were a few large trees, grown like a natural cradle across the stream, when Godfrey suddenly stopped.

This time it was he who showed to Carefinotu a motionless animal at the foot of a tree whose eyes were gleaming with a singular light.

“A tiger!” he exclaimed.

He was not mistaken. It was really a tiger of large stature resting on its hind legs with its forepaws on the trunk of a tree, and ready to spring.

In a moment Godfrey had dropped his sack of roots. The loaded gun passed into his right hand; he cocked it, presented it, aimed it, and fired.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” he exclaimed.

This time there was no room for doubt; the tiger, struck by the bullet, had bounded backwards. But perhaps he was not mortally wounded, perhaps rendered still more furious by his wound he would spring on to them!

Godfrey held his gun pointed, and threatened the animal with his second barrel.

But before Godfrey could stop him, Carefinotu had rushed at the place where the tiger disappeared, his hunting-knife in his hand.

Godfrey shouted for him to stop, to come back! It was in vain. The black, resolved even at the risk of his life to finish the animal which perhaps was only wounded, did not or would not hear.

Godfrey rushed after him.

When he reached the bank, he saw Carefinotu struggling with the tiger, holding him by the throat, and at last stabbing him to the heart with a powerful blow.

The tiger then rolled into the river, of which the waters, swollen by the rains, carried it away with the quickness of a torrent. The corpse, which floated only for an instant, was swiftly borne off towards the sea.

A bear! A tiger! There could be no doubt that the island did contain formidable beasts of prey!

Godfrey, after rejoining Carefinotu, found that in the struggle the black had only received a few scratches. Then, deeply anxious about the future, he retook the road to Will Tree.

CHAPTER XX.

IN WHICH TARTLET REITERATES IN EVERY KEY THAT HE WOULD RATHER BE OFF.

When Tartlet learnt that there were not only bears in the island, but tigers too, his lamentations again arose. Now he would never dare to go out! The wild beasts would end by discovering the road to Will Tree! There was no longer any safety anywhere! In his alarm the professor wanted for his protection quite a fortification! Yes! Stone walls with scarps and counterscarps, curtains and bastions, and ramparts, for what was the use of a shelter under a group of sequoias? Above all things, he would at all risks, like to be off.

“So would I,” answered Godfrey quietly.

In fact, the conditions under which the castaways on Phina Island had lived up to now were no longer the same. To struggle to the end, to struggle for the necessaries of life, they had been able, thanks to fortunate circumstances. Against the bad season, against winter and its menaces, they knew how to act, but to have to defend themselves against wild animals, whose attack was possible every minute, was another thing altogether; and in fact they could not do it.

The situation, already complicated, had become very serious, for it had become intolerable.

“But,” repeated Godfrey to himself, without cessation, “how is it that for four months we did not see a single beast of prey in the island, and why during the last fortnight have we had to encounter a bear and a tiger? What shall we say to that?”

The fact might be inexplicable, but it was none the less real.

Godfrey, whose coolness and courage increased, as difficulties grew, was not cast down. If dangerous animals menaced their little colony, it was better to put themselves on guard against their attacks, and that without delay.

But what was to be done?

It was at the outset decided that excursions into the woods or to the sea-shore should be rarer, and that they should never go out unless well armed, and only when it was absolutely necessary for their wants.

“We have been lucky enough in our two encounters!” said Godfrey frequently; “but there may come a time when we may not shoot so straight! So there is no necessity for us to run into danger!”

At the same time they had not only to settle about the excursions, but to protect Will Tree — not only the dwelling, but the annexes, the poultry roost, and the fold for the animals, where the wild beasts could easily cause irreparable disaster.

Godfrey thought then, if not of fortifying Will Tree according to the famous plans of Tartlet, at least of connecting the four or five large sequoias which surrounded it.

If he could devise a high and strong palisade from one tree to another, they would be in comparative security at any rate from a surprise.

It was practicable — Godfrey concluded so after an examination of the ground — but it would cost a good deal of labour. To reduce this as much as possible, he thought of erecting the palisade around a perimeter of only some three hundred feet. We can judge from this the number of trees he had to select, cut down, carry, and trim until the enclosure was complete.

Godfrey did not quail before his task. He imparted his projects to Tartlet, who approved them, and promised his active co-operation; but what was more important, he made his plans understood to Carefinotu, who was always ready to come to his assistance.

They set to work without delay.

There was at a bend in the stream, about a mile from Will Tree, a small wood of stone pines of medium height, whose trunks, in default of beams and planks, without wanting to be squared, would, by being placed close together, form a solid palisade.

It was to this wood that, at dawn on the 12th of November, Godfrey and his two companions repaired. Though well armed they advanced with great care.

“You can have too much of this sort of thing,” murmured Tartlet, whom these new difficulties had rendered still more discontented, “I would rather be off!”

But Godfrey did not take the trouble to reply to him.

On this occasion his tastes were not being consulted, his intelligence even was not being appealed to. It was the assistance of his arms that the common interest demanded. In short, he had to resign himself to his vocation of beast of burden.

No unpleasant accident happened in the mile which separated the wood from Will Tree. In vain they had carefully beaten the underwood, and swept the horizon all around them. The domestic animals they had left out at pasture gave no sign of alarm. The birds continued their frolics with no more anxiety than usual.

Work immediately began. Godfrey, very properly did not want to begin carrying until all the trees he wanted had been felled. They could work at them in greater safety on the spot.

Carefinotu was of great service during this toilsome task. He had become very clever in the use of the axe and saw. His strength even allowed him to continue at work when Godfrey was obliged to rest for a minute or so, and when Tartlet, with bruised hands and aching limbs, had not even strength left to lift his fiddle.

However, although the unfortunate professor of dancing and deportment had been transformed into a wood-cutter, Godfrey had reserved for him the least fatiguing part, that is, the clearing off of the smaller branches. In spite of this, if Tartlet had only been paid half a dollar a day, he would have stolen four-fifths of his salary!

For six days, from the 12th to the 17th of November, these labours continued. Our friends went off in the morning at dawn, they took their food with them, and they did not return to Will Tree until evening. The sky was not very clear. Heavy clouds frequently accumulated over it. It was harvest weather, with alternating showers and sunshine; and during the showers the wood-cutters would take shelter under the trees, and resume their task when the rain had ceased.

On the 18th all the trees, topped and cleared of branches, were lying on the ground, ready for transport to Will Tree.

During this time no wild beast had appeared in the neighbourhood of the river. The question was, were there any more in the island, or had the bear and the tiger been — a most improbable event — the last of their species?

Whatever it was, Godfrey had no intention of abandoning his project of the solid palisade so as to be prepared against a surprise from savages, or bears, or tigers. Besides, the worst was over, and there only remained to take the wood where it was wanted.

We say "the worst was over," though the carriage promised to be somewhat laborious. If it were not so, it was because Godfrey had had a very practical idea, which materially lightened the task; this was to make use of the current of the river, which the flood occasioned by the recent rains had rendered very rapid, to transport the wood. Small rafts could be formed, and they would quietly float down to the sequoias, where a bar, formed by the small bridge, would stop them. From thence to Will Tree was only about fifty-five paces.

If any of them showed particular satisfaction at this mode of procedure, it was Tartlet.

On the 18th the first rafts were formed, and they arrived at the barrier without accident. In less than three days on the evening of the 25th, the palisade had been all sent down to its destination.

On the morrow, the first trunks, sunk two feet in the soil, began to rise in such a manner as to connect the principal sequoias which surrounded Will Tree. A capping of strong flexible branches, pointed by the axe, assured the solidity of the wall.

Godfrey saw the work progress with extreme satisfaction, and delayed not until it was finished.

“Once the palisade is done,” he said to Tartlet, “we shall be really at home.”

“We shall not be really at home,” replied the professor drily, “until we are in Montgomery Street, with your Uncle Kolderup.”

There was no disputing this opinion.

On the 26th of November the palisade was three parts done. It comprised among the sequoias attached one to another that in which the poultry had established themselves, and Godfrey’s intention was to build a stable inside it.

In three or four days the fence was finished. There only remained to fit in a solid door, which would assure the closure of Will Tree.

But on the morning of the 27th of November the work was interrupted by an event which we had better explain with some detail, for it was one of those unaccountable things peculiar to Phina Island.

About eight o’clock, Carefinotu had climbed up to the fork of the sequoia, so as to more carefully close the hole by which the cold and rain penetrated, when he uttered a singular cry.

Godfrey, who was at work at the palisade, raised his head and saw the black, with expressive gestures, motioning to him to join him without delay.

Godfrey, thinking Carefinotu would not have disturbed him unless he had serious reason, took his glasses with him and climbed up the interior passage, and passing through the hole, seated himself astride of one of the main branches.

Carefinotu, pointing with his arm towards the rounded angle which Phina Island made to the north-east, showed a column of smoke rising in the air like a long plume.

“Again!” exclaimed Godfrey.

And putting his glasses in the direction, he assured himself that this time there was no possible error, that it must escape from some important fire, which he could distinctly see must be about five miles off.

Godfrey turned towards the black.

Carefinotu expressed his surprise, by his looks, his exclamations, in fact by his whole attitude.

Assuredly he was no less astounded than Godfrey at this apparition.

Besides, in the offing, there was no ship, not a vessel native or other, nothing which showed that a landing had recently been made on the shore.

“Ah! This time I will find out the fire which produces that smoke!” exclaimed Godfrey.

And pointing to the north-east angle of the island, and then to the foot of the tree, he gesticulated to Carefinotu that he wished to reach the place without losing an instant.

Carefinotu understood him. He even gave him to understand that he approved of the idea.

“Yes,” said Godfrey to himself, “if there is a human being there, we must know who he is and whence he comes! We must know why he hides himself! It will be for the safety of all!”

A moment afterwards Carefinotu and he descended to the foot of Will Tree. Then Godfrey, informing Tartlet of what had passed and what he was going to do, proposed for him to accompany them to the north coast.

A dozen miles to traverse in one day was not a very tempting suggestion to a man who regarded his legs as the most precious part of his body, and only designed for noble exercises. And so he replied that he would prefer to remain at Will Tree.

“Very well, we will go alone,” answered Godfrey, “but do not expect us until the evening.”

So saying, and Carefinotu and he carrying some provisions for lunch on the road, they set out, after taking leave of the professor, whose private opinion it was that they would find nothing, and that all their fatigue would be useless.

Godfrey took his musket and revolver; the black the axe and the hunting-knife which had become his favourite weapon. They crossed the plank bridge to the right bank of the river, and then struck off across the prairie to the point on the shore where the smoke had been seen rising amongst the rocks.

It was rather more easterly than the place which Godfrey had uselessly visited on his second exploration.

They progressed rapidly, not without a sharp look-out that the wood was clear and that the bushes and underwood did not hide some animal whose attack might be formidable.

Nothing disquieting occurred.

At noon, after having had some food, without, however, stopping for an instant, they reached the first line of rocks which bordered the beach. The smoke, still visible, was rising about a quarter of a mile ahead. They had only to keep straight on to reach their goal.

They hastened their steps, but took precautions so as to surprise, and not be surprised.

Two minutes afterwards the smoke disappeared, as if the fire had been suddenly extinguished.

But Godfrey had noted with exactness the spot whence it arose. It was at the point of a strangely formed rock, a sort of truncated pyramid, easily recognizable. Showing this to his companion, he kept straight on.

The quarter of a mile was soon traversed, then the last line was climbed, and Godfrey and Carefinotu gained the beach about fifty paces from the rock.

They ran up to it. Nobody! But this time half-smouldering embers and half-burnt wood proved clearly that the fire had been alight on the spot.

“There has been some one here!” exclaimed Godfrey. “Some one not a moment ago! We must find out who!”

He shouted. No response! Carefinotu gave a terrible yell. No one appeared!

Behold them then hunting amongst the neighbouring rocks, searching a cavern, a grotto, which might serve as a refuge for a shipwrecked man, an aboriginal, a savage —

It was in vain that they ransacked the slightest recesses of the shore. There was neither ancient nor recent camp in existence, not even the traces of the passage of a man.

“But,” repeated Godfrey, “it was not smoke from a warm spring this time! It was from a fire of wood and grass, and that fire could not light itself.”

Vain was their search. Then about two o’clock Godfrey and Carefinotu, as weary as they were disconcerted at their fruitless endeavours, retook their road to Will Tree.

There was nothing astonishing in Godfrey being deep in thought. It seemed to him that the island was now under the empire of some occult power. The reappearance of this fire, the presence of wild animals, did not all this denote some extraordinary complication?

And was there not cause for his being confirmed in this idea when an hour after he had regained the prairie, he heard a singular noise, a sort of hard jingling.

Carefinotu pushed him aside at the same instant as a serpent glided beneath the herbage, and was about to strike at him.

“Snakes, now. Snakes in the island, after the bears and the tigers!” he exclaimed.

Yes! It was one of those reptiles well-known by the noise they make, a rattlesnake of the most venomous species: a giant of the Crotalus family!

Carefinotu threw himself between Godfrey and the reptile, which hurried off under a thick bush.

But the negro pursued it and smashed in its head with a blow of the axe. When Godfrey rejoined him, the two halves of the reptile were writhing on the blood-stained soil.

Then other serpents, not less dangerous, appeared in great abundance on this part of the prairie which was separated by the stream from Will Tree.

Was it then a sudden invasion of reptiles? Was Phina Island going to become the rival of ancient Tenos, whose formidable ophidians rendered it famous in antiquity, and which gave its name to the viper?

“Come on! come on!” exclaimed Godfrey, motioning to Carefinotu to quicken the pace.

He was uneasy. Strange presentiments agitated him without his being able to control them.

Under their influence, fearing some approaching misfortune, he had hastened his return to Will Tree.

But matters became serious when he reached the planks across the river.

Screams of terror resounded from beneath the sequoias — cries for help in a tone of agony which it was impossible to mistake!

“It is Tartlet!” exclaimed Godfrey. “The unfortunate man has been attacked! Quick! quick!”

Once over the bridge, about twenty paces further on, Tartlet was perceived running as fast as his legs could carry him.

An enormous crocodile had come out of the river and was pursuing him with its jaws wide open. The poor man, distracted, mad with fright, instead of turning to the right or the left, was keeping in a straight line, and so running the risk of being caught. Suddenly he stumbled. He fell. He was lost.

Godfrey halted. In the presence of this imminent danger his coolness never forsook him for an instant. He brought his gun to his shoulder, and aimed at the crocodile. The well-aimed bullet struck the monster, and it made a bound to one side and fell motionless on the ground.

Carefinotu rushed towards Tartlet and lifted him up. Tartlet had escaped with a fright! But what a fright!

It was six o’clock in the evening.

A moment afterwards Godfrey and his two companions had reached Will Tree.

How bitter were their reflections during their evening repast! What long sleepless hours were in store for the inhabitants of Phina Island, on whom misfortunes were now crowding.

As for the professor, in his anguish he could only repeat the words which expressed the whole of his thoughts, “I had much rather be off!”

CHAPTER XXI.

WHICH ENDS WITH QUITE A SURPRISING REFLECTION BY THE NEGRO CAREFINOTU.

The winter season, so severe in these latitudes, had come at last. The first frosts had already been felt, and there was every promise of rigorous weather. Godfrey was to be congratulated on having established his fireplace in the tree. It need scarcely be said that the work at the palisade had been completed, and that a sufficiently solid door now assured the closure of the fence.

During the six weeks which followed, that is to say, until the middle of December, there had been a good many wretched days on which it was impossible to venture forth. At the outset there came terrible squalls. They shook the group of sequoias to their very roots. They strewed the ground with broken branches, and so furnished an ample reserve for the fire.

Then it was that the inhabitants of Will Tree clothed themselves as warmly as they could. The woollen stuffs found in the box were used during the few excursions necessary for revictualling, until the weather became so bad that even these were forbidden. All hunting was at an end, and the snow fell in such quantity that Godfrey could have believed himself in the inhospitable latitudes of the Arctic Ocean.

It is well known that Northern America, swept by the Polar winds, with no obstacle to check them, is one of the coldest countries on the globe. The winter there lasts until the month of April. Exceptional precautions have to be taken against it. It was the coming of the winter as it did which gave rise to the thought that Phina Island was situated in a higher latitude than Godfrey had supposed.

Hence the necessity of making the interior of Will Tree as comfortable as possible. But the suffering from rain and cold was cruel. The reserves of provisions were unfortunately insufficient, the preserved turtle flesh gradually disappeared. Frequently there had to be sacrificed some of the sheep or goats or agouties, whose numbers had but slightly increased since their arrival in the island.

With these new trials, what sad thoughts haunted Godfrey!

It happened also that for a fortnight he fell into a violent fever. Without the tiny medicine-chest which afforded the necessary drugs for his treatment, he might never have recovered. Tartlet was ill-suited to attend to the petty cares that were necessary during the continuance of the malady. It was to Carefinotu that he mainly owed his return to health.

But what remembrances and what regrets! Who but himself could he blame for having got into a situation of which he could not even see the end? How many times in his delirium did he call Phina, whom he never should see again, and his Uncle Will, from whom he beheld himself separated for ever! Ah! he had to alter his opinion of this Crusoe life which his boyish imagination had made his ideal! Now he was contending with reality! He could no longer even hope to return to the domestic hearth.

So passed this miserable December, at the end of which Godfrey began to recover his strength.

As for Tartlet, by special grace, doubtless, he was always well. But what incessant lamentations! What endless jeremiads! As the grotto of Calypso after the departure of Ulysses, Will Tree "resounded no more to his song" — that of his fiddle — for the cold had frozen the strings!

It should be said too that one of the gravest anxieties of Godfrey was not only the re-appearance of dangerous animals, but the fear of the savages returning in great numbers to Phina Island, the situation of which was known to them. Against such an invasion the palisade was but an insufficient barrier. All things considered, the refuge offered by the high branches of the sequoia appeared much safer, and the rendering the access less difficult was taken in hand. It would always be easy to defend the narrow orifice by which the top of the trunk was reached.

With the aid of Carefinotu Godfrey began to cut regular ledges on each side, like the steps of a staircase, and these, connected by a long cord of vegetable fibre, permitted of rapid ascent up the interior.

"Well," said Godfrey, when the work was done, "that gives us a town house below and a country house above!"

"I had rather have a cellar, if it was in Montgomery Street!" answered Tartlet.

Christmas arrived. Christmas kept in such style throughout the United States of America! The New Year's Day, full of memories of childhood, rainy, snowy, cold, and gloomy, began the new year under the most melancholy auspices.

It was six months since the survivors of the *Dream* had remained without communication with the rest of the world.

The commencement of the year was not very cheering. It made Godfrey and his companions anticipate that they would still have many trials to encounter.

The snow never ceased falling until January 18th. The flocks had to be let out to pasture to get what feed they could. At the close of the day, a very cold damp night enveloped the island, and the space shaded by the sequoias was plunged in profound obscurity.

Tartlet and Carefinotu, stretched on their beds inside Will Tree, were trying in vain to sleep. Godfrey, by the struggling light of a torch, was turning over the pages of his Bible.

About ten o’clock a distant noise, which came nearer and nearer, was heard outside away towards the north. There could be no mistake. It was the wild beasts prowling in the neighbourhood, and, alarming to relate, the howling of the tiger and of the hyæna, and the roaring of the panther and the lion were this time blended in one formidable concert.

Godfrey, Tartlet, and the negro sat up, each a prey to indescribable anguish. If at this unaccountable invasion of ferocious animals Carefinotu shared the alarm of his companions, his astonishment was quite equal to his fright.

During two mortal hours all three kept on the alert. The howlings sounded at times close by; then they suddenly ceased, as if the beasts, not knowing the country, were roaming about all over it. Perhaps then Will Tree would escape an attack!

“It doesn’t matter if it does,” thought Godfrey. “If we do not destroy these animals to the very last one, there will be no safety for us in the island!”

A little after midnight the roaring began again in full strength at a moderate distance away. Impossible now to doubt but that the howling army was approaching Will Tree!

Yes! It was only too certain! But whence came these wild animals? They could not have recently landed on Phina Island! They must have been there then before Godfrey’s arrival! But how was it that all of them had remained hidden during his walks and hunting excursions, as well across the centre as in the most out-of-the-way parts to the south? For Godfrey had never found a trace of them. Where was the mysterious den which vomited forth lions, hyænas, panthers, tigers? Amongst all the unaccountable things up to now this was indeed the most unaccountable.

Carefinotu could not believe what he heard. We have said that his astonishment was extreme. By the light of the fire which illuminated the interior of Will Tree there could be seen on his black face the strangest of grimaces.

Tartlet in the corner, groaned and lamented, and moaned again. He would have asked Godfrey all about it, but Godfrey was not in the humour to reply. He had a presentiment of a very great danger, he was seeking for a way to retreat from it.

Once or twice Carefinotu and he went out to the centre of the palisade. They wished to see that the door was firmly and strongly shut.

Suddenly an avalanche of animals appeared with a huge tumult along the front of Will Tree.

It was only the goats and sheep and agouties. Terrified at the howling of the wild beasts, and scenting their approach, they had fled from their pasturage to take shelter behind the palisade.

“We must open the door!” exclaimed Godfrey.

Carefinotu nodded his head. He did not want to know the language to understand what Godfrey meant.

The door was opened, and the frightened flock rushed into the enclosure.

But at that instant there appeared through the opening a gleaming of eyes in the depths of the darkness which the shadow of the sequoias rendered still more profound.

There was no time to close the enclosure!

To jump at Godfrey, seize him in spite of himself, push him into the dwelling and slam the door, was done by Carefinotu like a flash of lightning.

New roarings indicated that three or four wild beasts had just cleared the palisade.

Then these horrible roarings were mingled with quite a concert of bleatings and groanings of terror. The domestic flock were taken as in a trap and delivered over to the clutches of the assailants.

Godfrey and Carefinotu, who had climbed up to the two small windows in the bark of the sequoia, endeavoured to see what was passing in the gloom.

Evidently the wild animals — tigers or lions, panthers or hyænas, they did not know which yet — had thrown themselves on the flock and begun their slaughter.

At this moment, Tartlet, in a paroxysm of blind terror, seized one of the muskets, and would have taken a chance shot out of one of the windows.

Godfrey stopped him.

“No!” said he. “In this darkness our shots will be lost, and we must not waste our ammunition! Wait for daylight!”

He was right. The bullets would just as likely have struck the domestic as the wild animals — more likely in fact, for the former were the most numerous. To save them was now impossible. Once they were sacrificed, the wild beasts, thoroughly gorged, might quit the enclosure before sunrise. They would then see how to act to guard against a fresh invasion.

It was most important too, during the dark night, to avoid as much as possible revealing to these animals the presence of human beings, whom they might prefer to the flock. Perhaps they would thus avoid a direct attack against Will Tree.

As Tartlet was incapable of understanding either this reasoning or any other, Godfrey contented himself with depriving him of his weapon. The professor then went and threw himself on his bed and freely anathematized all travels and travellers and maniacs who could not remain quietly at their own firesides.

Both his companions resumed their observations at the windows.

Thence they beheld, without the power of interference, the horrible massacre which was taking place in the gloom. The cries of the sheep and the goats gradually diminished as the slaughter of the animals was consummated, although the greater part had escaped outside, where death, none the less certain, awaited them. This loss was irreparable for the little colony; but Godfrey was not then anxious about the future. The present was disquieting enough to occupy all his thoughts.

There was nothing they could do, nothing they could try, to hinder this work of destruction.

Godfrey and Carefinotu kept constant watch, and now they seemed to see new shadows coming up and passing into the palisade, while a fresh sound of footsteps struck on their ears.

Evidently certain belated beasts, attracted by the odour of the blood which impregnated the air, had traced the scent up to Will Tree.

They ran to and fro, they rushed round and round the tree and gave forth their hoarse and angry growls. Some of the shadows jumped on the ground like enormous cats. The slaughtered flock had not been sufficient to satisfy their rage.

Neither Godfrey nor his companions moved. In keeping completely motionless they might avoid a direct attack.

An unlucky shot suddenly revealed their presence and exposed them to the greatest danger.

Tartlet, a prey to a veritable hallucination, had risen. He had seized a revolver; and this time, before Godfrey and Carefinotu could hinder him, and not knowing himself what he did, but believing that he saw a tiger standing before him, he had fired! The bullet passed through the door of Will Tree.

“Fool!” exclaimed Godfrey, throwing himself on Tartlet, while the negro seized the weapon.

It was too late. The alarm was given, and growlings still more violent resounded without. Formidable talons were heard tearing the bark of the sequoia. Terrible blows shook the door, which was too feeble to resist such an assault.

“We must defend ourselves!” shouted Godfrey.

And, with his gun in his hand and his cartridge-pouch round his waist, he took his post at one of the windows.

To his great surprise, Carefinotu had done the same! Yes! the black, seizing the second musket — a weapon which he had never before handled — had filled his pockets with cartridges and taken his place at the second window.

Then the reports of the guns began to echo from the embrasures. By the flashes, Godfrey on the one side, and Carefinotu on the other, beheld the foes they had to deal with.

There, in the enclosure, roaring with rage, howling at the reports, rolling beneath the bullets which struck many of them, leapt of lions and tigers, and hyænas and panthers, at least a score. To their roarings and growlings which reverberated from afar, there echoed back those of other ferocious beasts running up to join them. Already the now distant roaring could be heard as they approached the environs of Will Tree. It was as though quite a menagerie of wild animals had been suddenly set free on the island!

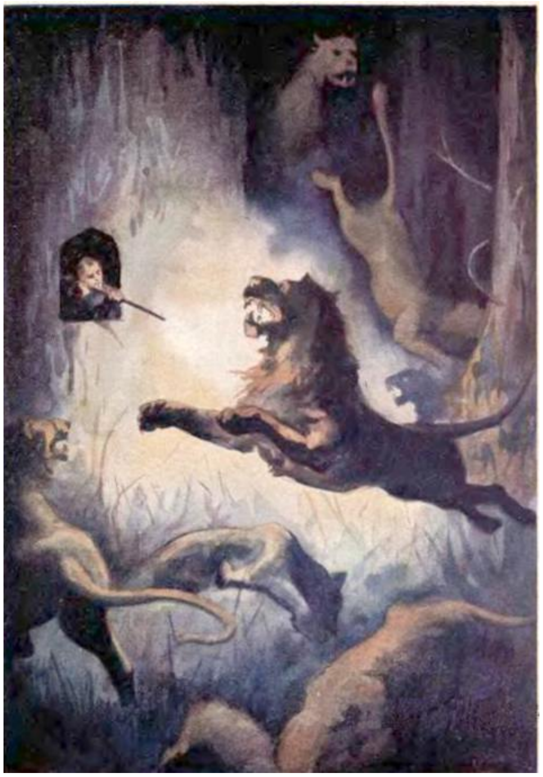

Of lions and tigers quite a score.

However, Godfrey and Carefinotu, without troubling themselves about Tartlet, who could be of no use, were keeping as cool as they could, and refraining from firing unless they were certain of their aim. Wishing to waste not a shot, they waited till a shadow passed in front of them. Then came the flash and the report, and then a growl of grief told them that the animal had been hit.

A quarter of an hour elapsed, and then came a respite. Had the wild beasts given up the attack which had cost the lives of so many amongst them? Were they waiting for the day to recommence the attempt under more favourable conditions?

Whatever might be the reason, neither Godfrey nor Carefinotu desired to leave his post. The black had shown himself no less ready with the gun than Godfrey. If that was due only to the instinct of imitation, it must be admitted that it was indeed surprising.

About two o’clock in the morning there came a new alarm — more furious than before. The danger was imminent, the position in the interior of Will Tree was becoming untenable. New growlings resounded round the foot of the sequoia. Neither Godfrey nor Carefinotu, on account of the situation of the windows, which were cut straight through, could see the assailants, nor, in consequence, could they fire with any chance of success.

It was now the door which the beasts attacked, and it was only too evident that it would be beaten in by their weight or torn down by their claws.

Godfrey and the black had descended to the ground. The door was already shaking beneath the blows from without. They could feel the heated breath making its way in through the cracks in the bark.

Godfrey and Carefinotu attempted to prop back the door with the stakes which kept up the beds, but these proved quite useless.

It was obvious that in a little while it would be driven in, for the beasts were mad with rage — particularly as no shots could reach them.

Godfrey was powerless. If he and his companions were inside Will Tree when the assailants broke in, their weapons would be useless to protect them.

Godfrey had crossed his arms. He saw the boards of the door open little by little. He could do nothing. In a moment of hesitation, he passed his hand across his forehead, as if in despair. But soon recovering his self-possession, he shouted, —

“Up we go! Up! All of us!”

And he pointed to the narrow passage which led up to the fork inside Will Tree.

Carefinotu and he, taking their muskets and revolvers, supplied themselves with cartridges.

And now he turned to make Tartlet follow them into these heights where he had never ventured before.

Tartlet was no longer there. He had started up while his companions were firing.

“Up!” repeated Godfrey.

It was a last retreat, where they would assuredly be sheltered from the wild beasts. If any tiger or panther attempted to come up into the branches of the sequoia, it would be easy to defend the hole through which he would have to pass.

Godfrey and Carefinotu had scarcely ascended thirty feet, when the roaring was heard in the interior of Will Tree. A few moments more and they would have been surprised. The door had just fallen in. They both hurried along, and at last reached the upper end of the hole.

A scream of terror welcomed them. It was Tartlet, who imagined he saw a panther or tiger! The unfortunate professor was clasping a branch, frightened almost out of his life lest he should fall.

Carefinotu went to him, and compelled him to lean against an upright bough, to which he firmly secured him with his belt.

Then, while Godfrey selected a place whence he could command the opening, Carefinotu went to another spot whence he could deliver a cross fire.

And they waited.

Under these circumstances it certainly looked as though the besieged were safe from attack.

Godfrey endeavoured to discover what was passing beneath them; but the night was still too dark. Then he tried to hear; and the growlings, which never ceased, showed that the assailants had no thought of abandoning the place.

Suddenly, towards four o’clock in the morning, a great light appeared at the foot of the tree. At once it shot out through the door and windows. At the same time a thick smoke spread forth from the upper opening and lost itself in the higher branches.

“What is that now?” exclaimed Godfrey.

It was easily explained. The wild beasts, in ravaging the interior of Will Tree, had scattered the remains of the fire. The fire had spread to the things in the room. The flame had caught the bark, which had dried and become combustible. The gigantic sequoia was ablaze below.

The position was now more terrible than it had ever been. By the light of the flames, which illuminated the space beneath the grove, they could see the wild beasts leaping round the foot of Will Tree.

At the same instant, a fearful explosion occurred. The sequoia, violently wrenched, trembled from its roots to its summit.

It was the reserve of gunpowder which had exploded inside Will Tree, and the air, violently expelled from the opening, rushed forth like the gas from a discharging cannon.

Godfrey and Carefinotu were almost torn from their resting-places. Had Tartlet not been lashed to the branch, he would assuredly have been hurled to the ground.

The wild beasts, terrified at the explosion, and more or less wounded, had taken to flight.

But at the same time the conflagration, fed by the sudden combustion of the powder, had considerably extended. It swiftly grew in dimensions as it crept up the enormous stem.

Large tongues of flame lapped the interior, and the highest soon reached the fork, and the dead wood snapped and crackled like shots from a revolver. A huge glare lighted up, not only the group of giant trees, but even the whole of the coast from Flag Point to the southern cape of Dream Bay.

Soon the fire had reached the lower branches of the sequoia, and threatened to invade the spot where Godfrey and his companions had taken refuge.

Were they then to be devoured by the flames, with which they could not battle, or had they but the last resource of throwing themselves to the ground to escape being burnt alive? In either case they must die!

Godfrey sought about for some means of escape. He saw none!

Already the lower branches were ablaze and a dense smoke was struggling with the first gleams of dawn which were rising in the east.

At this moment there was a horrible crash of rending and breaking. The sequoia, burnt to the very roots, cracked violently — it toppled over — it fell!

But as it fell the stem met the stems of the trees which environed it; their powerful branches were mingled with its own, and so it remained obliquely cradled at an angle of about forty-five degrees from the ground.

At the moment that the sequoia fell, Godfrey and his companions believed themselves lost!

“Nineteenth of January!” exclaimed a voice, which Godfrey, in spite of his astonishment, immediately recognized.

It was Carefinotu! Yes, Carefinotu had just pronounced these words, and in that English language which up to then he had seemed unable to speak or to understand!

“What did you say?” asked Godfrey, as he followed him along the branches.

“I said, Mr. Morgan,” answered Carefinotu, “that to-day your Uncle Will ought to reach us, and that if he doesn’t turn up we are done for!”

CHAPTER XXII.

WHICH CONCLUDES BY EXPLAINING WHAT UP TO NOW HAD APPEARED INEXPLICABLE.

At that instant, and before Godfrey could reply, the report of fire-arms was heard not far from Will Tree.

At the same time one of those rain storms, regular cataracts in their fury, fell in a torrential shower just as the flames devouring the lower branches were threatening to seize upon the trees against which Will Tree was resting.

What was Godfrey to think after this series of inexplicable events? Carefinotu speaking English like a cockney, calling him by his name, announcing the early arrival of Uncle Will, and then the sudden report of the fire-arms?

He asked himself if he had gone mad; but he had no time for insoluble questions, for below him — hardly five minutes after the first sound of the guns — a body of sailors appeared hurrying through the trees.

Godfrey and Carefinotu slipped down along the stem, the interior of which was still burning.

But the moment that Godfrey touched the ground, he heard himself spoken to, and by two voices which even in his trouble it was impossible for him not to recognize.

“Nephew Godfrey, I have the honour to salute you!”

“Godfrey! Dear Godfrey!”

“Uncle Will! Phina! You!” exclaimed Godfrey, astounded.

Three seconds afterwards he was in somebody’s arms, and was clasping that somebody in his own.

At the same time two sailors, at the order of Captain Turcott who was in command, climbed up along the sequoia to set Tartlet free, and, with all due respect, pluck him from the branch as if he were a fruit.

And then the questions, the answers, the explanations which passed!

“Uncle Will! You?”

“Yes! me!”

“And how did you discover Phina Island?”

“Phina Island!” answered William W. Kolderup. “You should say Spencer Island! Well, it wasn’t very difficult. I bought it six months ago!”

“Spencer Island!”

“And you gave my name to it, you dear Godfrey!” said the young lady.

“The new name is a good one, and we will keep to it,” answered the uncle; “but for geographers this is Spencer Island, only three days’ journey from San Francisco, on which I thought it would be a good plan for you to serve your apprenticeship to the Crusoe business!”

“Oh! Uncle! Uncle Will! What is it you say?” exclaimed Godfrey. “Well, if you are in earnest, I can only answer that I deserved it! But then, Uncle Will, the wreck of the *Dream*?”

"Sham!" replied William W. Kolderup, who had never seemed in such a good humour before. "The *Dream* was quietly sunk by means of her water ballast, according to the instructions I had given Turcott. You thought she sank for good, but when the captain saw that you and Tartlet had got safely to land he brought her up and steamed away. Three days later he got back to San Francisco, and he it is who has brought us to Spencer Island on the date we fixed!"

"Then none of the crew perished in the wreck?"

"None — unless it was the unhappy Chinaman who hid himself away on board and could not be found!"

"But the canoe?"

"Sham! The canoe was of my own make."

"But the savages?"

"Sham! The savages whom luckily you did not shoot!"

"But Carefinotu?"

"Sham! Carefinotu was my faithful Jup Brass, who played his part of Friday marvellously well, as I see."

"Yes," answered Godfrey. "He twice saved my life — once from a bear, once from a tiger — "

"The bear was sham! the tiger was sham!" laughed William W. Kolderup. "Both of them were stuffed with straw, and landed before you saw them with Jup Brass and his companions!”

“But he moved his head and his paws!”

“By means of a spring which Jup Brass had fixed during the night a few hours before the meetings which were prepared for you.”

“What! all of them?” repeated Godfrey, a little ashamed at having been taken in by these artifices.

“Yes! Things were going too smoothly in your island, and we had to get up a little excitement!”

“Then,” answered Godfrey, who had begun to laugh, “if you wished to make matters unpleasant for us, why did you send us the box which contained everything we wanted?”

“A box?” answered William W. Kolderup. “What box? I never sent you a box! Perhaps by chance — ”

And as he said so he looked towards Phina, who cast down her eyes and turned away her head.

“Oh! indeed! — a box! but then Phina must have had an accomplice — ”

And Uncle Will turned towards Captain Turcott, who laughingly answered, —

“What could I do, Mr. Kolderup? I can sometimes resist you — but Miss Phina — it was too difficult! And four months ago, when you sent me to look round the island, I landed the box from my boat — ”

“Dearest Phina!” said Godfrey, seizing the young lady’s hand.

“Turcott, you promised to keep the secret!” said Phina with a blush.

And Uncle William W. Kolderup, shaking his big head, tried in vain to hide that he was touched.

But if Godfrey could not restrain his smiles as he listened to the explanations of Uncle Will, Professor Tartlet did not laugh in the least! He was excessively mortified at what he heard! To have been the object of such a mystification, he, a professor of dancing and deportment! And so advancing with much dignity he observed, —

“Mr. William Kolderup will hardly assert, I imagine, that the enormous crocodile, of which I was nearly the unhappy victim, was made of pasteboard and wound up with a spring?”

“A crocodile?” replied the uncle.

“Yes, Mr. Kolderup,” said Carefinotu, to whom we had better return his proper name of Jup Brass. “Yes, a real live crocodile, which went for Mr. Tartlet, and which I did not have in my collection!”

Godfrey then related what had happened, the sudden appearance of the wild beasts in such numbers, real lions, real tigers, real panthers, and then the invasion of the snakes, of which during four months they had not seen a single specimen in the island!

William W. Kolderup at this was quite disconcerted. He knew nothing about it. Spencer Island — it had been known for a long time — never had any wild beasts, did not possess even a single noxious animal; it was so stated in the deeds of sale.

Neither did he understand what Godfrey told him of the attempts he had made to discover the origin of the smoke which had appeared at different points on the island. And he seemed very much troubled to find that all had not passed on the island according to his instructions, and that the programme had been seriously interfered with.

As for Tartlet, he was not the sort of man to be humbugged. For his part he would admit nothing, neither the sham shipwreck, nor the sham savages, nor the sham animals, and above all he would never give up the glory which he had gained in shooting with the first shot from his gun the chief of the Polynesian tribe — one of the servants of the Kolderup establishment, who turned out to be as well as he was.

All was described, all was explained, except the serious matter of the real wild beasts and the unknown smoke. Uncle Will became very thoughtful about this. But, like a practical man, he put off, by an effort of the will, the solution of the problems, and addressing his nephew, —

“Godfrey,” said he, “you have always been so fond of islands, that I am sure it will please you to hear that this is yours — wholly yours! I make you a present of it! You can do what you like with it! I never dreamt of bringing you away by force; and I would not take you away from it! Be then a Crusoe for the rest of your life, if your heart tells you to — ”

“I!” answered Godfrey. “I! All my life!”

Phina stepped forward.

“Godfrey,” she asked, “would you like to remain on your island?”

“I would rather die!” he exclaimed.

But immediately he added, as he took the young lady’s hand, —

“Well, yes, I will remain; but on three conditions. The first is, you stay with me, dearest Phina; the second is, that Uncle Will lives with us; and the third is, that the chaplain of the *Dream* marries us this very day!”

“There is no chaplain on board the *Dream*, Godfrey!” replied Uncle Will. “You know that very well. But I think there is still one left in San Francisco, and that we can find some worthy minister to perform the service! I believe I read your thoughts when I say that before to-morrow we shall put to sea again!”

Then Phina and Uncle Will asked Godfrey to do the honours of his island. Behold them then walking under the group of sequoias, along the stream up to the little bridge.

Alas! of the habitation at Will Tree nothing remained. The fire had completely devoured the dwelling in the base of the tree! Without the arrival of William W. Kolderup, what with the approaching winter, the destruction of their stores, and the genuine wild beasts in the island, our Crusoes would have deserved to be pitied.

“Uncle Will!” said Godfrey. “If I gave the island the name of Phina, let me add that I gave our dwelling the name of Will Tree!”

“Well,” answered the uncle, “we will take away some of the seed, and plant it in my garden at ‘Frisco!”

During the walk they noticed some wild animals in the distance; but they dared not attack so formidable a party as the sailors of the *Dream*. But none the less was their presence absolutely incomprehensible.

Then they returned on board, not without Tartlet asking permission to bring off “his crocodile” — a permission which was granted.

That evening the party were united in the saloon of the *Dream*, and there was quite a cheerful dinner to celebrate the end of the adventures of Godfrey Morgan and his marriage with Phina Hollaney.

On the morrow, the 20th of January, the *Dream* set sail under the command of Captain Turcott. At eight o’clock in the morning Godfrey, not without emotion, saw the horizon in the west wipe out, as if it were a shadow, the island on which he had been to school for six months — a school of which he never forgot the lessons.

The passage was rapid; the sea magnificent; the wind favourable. This time the *Dream* went straight to her destination! There was no one to be mystified! She made no tackings without number as on the first voyage! She did not lose during the night what she had gained during the day!

And so on the 23rd of January, after passing at noon through the Golden Gate, she entered the vast bay of San Francisco, and came alongside the wharf in Merchant Street.

And what did they then see?

They saw issue from the hold a man who, having swum to the *Dream* during the night while she was anchored at Phina Island, had succeeded in stowing himself away for the second time!

And who was this man?

It was the Chinaman, Seng Vou, who had made the passage back as he had made the passage out!

Seng Vou advanced towards William W. Kolderup.

“I hope Mr. Kolderup will pardon me,” said he very politely. “When I took my passage in the *Dream*, I thought she was going direct to Shanghai, and then I should have reached my country, but I leave her now, and return to San Francisco.”

Every one, astounded at the apparition, knew not what to answer, and laughingly gazed at the intruder.

“But,” said William W. Kolderup at last, “you have not remained six months in the hold, I suppose?”

“No!” answered Seng Vou.

“Where have you been, then?”

“On the island!”

“You!” exclaimed Godfrey.

“Yes.”

"Then the smoke?"

"A man must have a fire!"

"And you did not attempt to come to us, to share our living?"

"A Chinaman likes to live alone," quietly replied Seng Vou. "He is sufficient for himself, and he wants no one!"

And thereupon this eccentric individual bowed to William W. Kolderup, landed, and disappeared.

"That is the stuff they make real Crusoes of!" observed Uncle Will. "Look at him and see if you are like him! It does not matter, the English race would do no good by absorbing fellows of that stamp!"

"Good!" said Godfrey, "the smoke is explained by the presence of Seng Vou; but the beasts?"

"And my crocodile!" added Tartlet; "I should like some one to explain my crocodile!"

William W. Kolderup seemed much embarrassed, and feeling in turn quite mystified, passed his hand over his forehead as if to clear the clouds away.

"We shall know later on," he said. "Everything is found by him who knows how to seek!"

A few days afterwards there was celebrated with great pomp the wedding of the nephew and pupil of William W. Kolderup. That the young couple were made much of by all the friends of the wealthy merchant can easily be imagined.

At the ceremony Tartlet was perfect in bearing, in everything, and the pupil did honour to the celebrated professor of dancing and deportment.

Now Tartlet had an idea. Not being able to mount his crocodile on a scarf-pin — and much he regretted it — he resolved to have it stuffed. The animal prepared in this fashion — hung from the ceiling, with the jaws half open, and the paws outspread — would make a fine ornament for his room. The crocodile was consequently sent to a famous taxidermist, and he brought it back to Tartlet a few days afterwards. Every one came to admire the monster who had almost made a meal of Tartlet.

“You know, Mr. Kolderup, where the animal came from?” said the celebrated taxidermist, presenting his bill.

“No, I do not,” answered Uncle Will.

“But it had a label underneath its carapace.”

“A label!” exclaimed Godfrey.

“Here it is,” said the celebrated taxidermist.

And he held out a piece of leather on which, in indelible ink, were written these words, —

“From Hagenbeck, Hamburg,

“To J. R. Taskinar, Stockton, U.S.A.”

When William W. Kolderup had read these words he burst into a shout of laughter. He understood all.

It was his enemy, J. R. Taskinar, his conquered competitor, who, to be revenged, had bought a cargo of wild beasts, reptiles, and other objectionable creatures from a well-known purveyor to the menageries of both hemispheres, and had landed them at night in several voyages to Spencer Island. It had cost him a good deal, no doubt, to do so; but he had succeeded in infesting the property of his rival, as the English did Martinique, if we are to believe the legend, before it was handed over to France.

There was thus no more to explain of the remarkable occurrences on Phina Island.

“Well done!” exclaimed William W. Kolderup. “I could not have done better myself!”

“But with those terrible creatures,” said Phina, “Spencer Island — ”

“Phina Island — ” interrupted Godfrey.

“Phina Island,” continued the bride, with a smile, “is quite uninhabitable.”

“Bah!” answered Uncle Will; “we can wait till the last lion has eaten up the last tiger!”

“And then, dearest Phina,” said Godfrey, “you will not be afraid to pass a season there with me?”

“With you, my dear husband, I fear nothing from anywhere,” answered Phina, “and as you have not had your voyage round the world — ”

“We will have it together,” said Godfrey, “and if an unlucky chance should ever make me a real Crusoe — ”

“You will ever have near you the most devoted of Crusoe-esses!”

THE END.

KÉRABAN THE INFLEXIBLE

Anonymous translation, 1884

This adventure novel was first published in 1883. It tells the story of Keraban, who is determined not to pay the tax required to cross the Bosphorus by boat, so he journeys by land around the Black Sea.

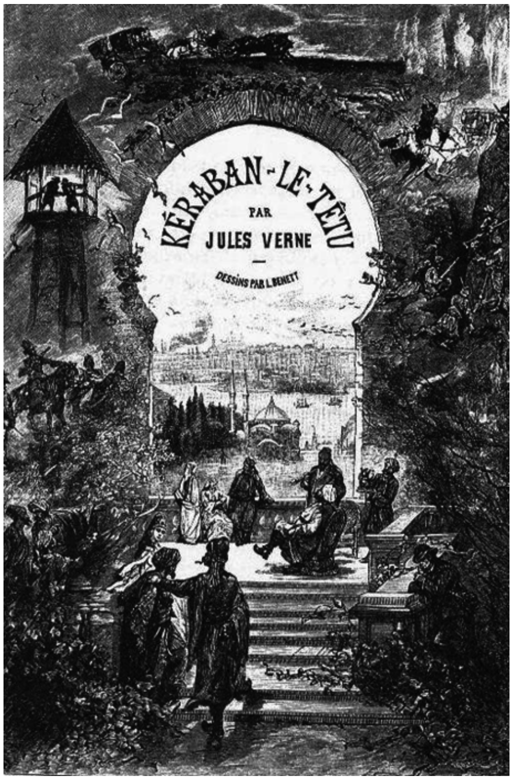
KÉRABAN-LE-TÊTU
PAR
JULES VERNE
DESSINS PAR L. BENETT

The original frontispiece

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KERABAN THE INFLEXIBLE

OR

ADVENTURES IN THE EUXINE.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

AT six o’clock on the evening of the 16th of August in a certain year which need not be particularly specified, the quay of Top-Hané in Constantinople, usually so crowded and full of life and bustle, was silent — almost deserted. The view from this place over the Bosphorus was certainly a very charming one, but life was wanting to give it its full effect. Very few strangers were visible at that time and they were hurrying on their way to Pera. The narrow, dirty and dog-infested streets which led to what may be termed the “European” quarters were almost free from the presence of the representatives of western civilization. Pera is more especially affected as a residence by the Franks, whose white- stone mansions contrast vividly with the dark cypress groves upon the hill.

But the quay is always picturesque, even when deprived of the rainbow hues of the various costumes worn by the passers-by. The Mosque of Mahmoud with its graceful minarets, its pretty Arabic fountain (now deprived of its elegant roof) its shops where sweatmeats of all kinds are vended; the stalls piled with gourds, Smyrna melons, Scutari raisins, contrasting with the wares of the vendors of perfumery, and the bead sellers — the landing place, or port, where lie hundreds of gaudy caiques, double banked, the oars of which caressed rather than struck the blue waters of the Bosphorus or the Golden Horn.

But there were at that particular time many of the habitual loungers of the Top- Hané — Persians, coquettishly crowned with head-gear of Astrachan; Greeks, balancing the many folded fustanelle; Circasians, nearly always in military dress; Georgians, still Russian in their costume though many miles from the frontier; Armenians, saturnine and swarthy, whose sun-browned skins were perceptible between the folds of their embroidered vests; but the Turks — the Osmanlis — the sons of ancient Byzantium and old Stamboul — where were they?

Where were they? It would have been no use to question two Western strangers who with inquisitive eyes, noses in the air, and with somewhat undecided steps, were walking almost apart upon the terrace. They could not have answered you.

But there is something more yet. In the town properly so called, beyond the port, a visitor would have remarked the same characteristic air of silence and desertion. On the other side of the Golden Horn — a deep indentation between the old Serail and the landing place of Top-Hané on the right bank, which is united with the left by three bridges of boats — the whole of Constantinople appeared to be asleep. Was no one awake in the Palace of Serai Bournou? Were there none of the Faithful, no Hadjis or pilgrims in the mosques of Ahmed of Bayezidieh, Saint Sophia, or Suleimanieh?

Was this the hour of repose, of siesta, for the careless guardian of the tower of the Seraskierat following the example of his colleague on the tower of Galata, on both of whom devolved the duty of giving warning of the frequent fires which break out in Constantinople? The stillness even appeared to extend to the port, notwithstanding the presence of the Austrian, French, and other steamers — the boats, steam launches, and caiques which passed and repassed upon the waters that laved the bases of the houses.

Was this, then, the much vaunted Constantinople, the vision of the east realized by the will of Constantine and Mahomet II.? That is just what the two strangers above referred to were asking each other as they walked to and fro; and if they did not answer the question in Turkish it was not for want of acquaintance with that language.

They were both well acquainted with the native tongue: one of them because he had been employed for twenty years in correspondence and merchants’ business in the country; the other because he had frequently discharged the duties of secretary to his master, even while he acted in the capacity of a domestic servant.

These men were natives of Holland, and hailed from Rotterdam. Their names were Jan Van Mitten, and Bruno, his valet, whom destiny had driven to the extreme borders of Europe.

Van Mitten, a well-known individual, was a man of forty-five or forty-six years of age, still fair haired, of fresh complexion, with blue eyes and yellow whiskers. He wore no mustaches. His nose was rather short relatively to his face; his head was massive; he had broad shoulders; stood somewhat below the middle height, and inclined to stoutness. His feet were more remarkable for usefulness than elegance. Altogether he had the air of a brave, resolute man; he was a good specimen of hi6 nation.

Morally speaking, perhaps Van Mitten was of a plastic temperament, of a somewhat pliable disposition — one of those men who, while of an extremely sociable and indeed humorous turn of mind, are ready to avoid discussion and ready to cede points; more fitting to obey than to command — quiet, phlegmatic individuals, who are supposed to have no decided will of their own. They are by no means the worse for that. Once and once only during his former life Van Mitten had been engaged in a discussion, the consequences of which had been very serious.

On that occasion certainly he had come out of himself, but before long he had re-entered his shell, so to speak. It would have been better perhaps had he yielded, and no doubt he would have done so could he have foreseen the consequences. But it will not do to anticipate the events which form the ground-work of this tale.

“Well, sir?” said Bruno, when he and his master had reached Top-Hané
“Well, Bruno!”

“Here we are, sir, in Constantinople.”

“Yes,” replied Van Mitten; “and some thousands of miles from Rotterdam.”

“Don’t you think, sir, that we are quite far enough from Holland by this time?” said the valet, drily.

“I do not think I can ever be too far from it,” replied his master in a low voice; as if he were afraid of Holland hearing him.

In Bruno, Van Mitten possessed a most devoted servitor. This faithful valet in some respects resembled his master, as much so, indeed, as his deference would permit him to resemble that personage, with whom he had been so many years associated. For twenty years master and man had not been separated for a day. If Bruno in the house was something less than a friend, he was more than a servant. He performed his service intelligently, methodically, and did not scruple to give advice, of which Van Mitten might take advantage; or make complaints which his master would accept without remonstrance. He was very much annoyed, however, when he had to obey the orders of any but his master; yet he could not resist — in a word, he wanted “character.”

It may be added that Bruno, who was at this time forty years of age, was of a rather lazy temperament; he could not bear to move about. To be able to endure an active life, one must train and get thin; but Bruno was in the habit of having himself weighed every week so as to ensure his maintaining his rotundity of form.

When he entered the service of Van Mitten he turned the scale at only one hundred pounds, which was a miserable weight for a Dutchmah. But within a year afterwards he had gained thirty pounds in weight, and was not ashamed to go anywhere. To his master therefore he owed it that he had reached the hundred and sixty-seven pounds of flesh which he then carried about with him, and which put him in such a good position amongst his countrymen. He found it necessary also to be modest and reserved, so that in time he might arrive at the proud distinction of pulling down two hundred pounds in the scale.

In fine, Bruno, who was greatly attached to his native land, which he looked upon as the finest in Europe, or in the world for that matter, would never, unless under very urgent circumstances, have quitted Rotterdam, the first city in Holland in his estimation, on the banks of the Niewe Haven canal. Nevertheless it was a fact that Bruno was then at Constantinople, the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

But what was Van Mitten?

Nothing less than a rich merchant of Rotterdam; a dealer in tobacco; a consignee of the best products of Havana, Maryland, Virginia and Porto Rico; and particularly of those of Macedonia, Syria, and Asia Minor.

For twenty years Van Mitten had done a considerable business of this kind with the house of Kéraban of Constantinople, who exported tobaccos all over the world. Thus it happened that in his dealings with this large Eastern house Van Mitten had picked up something of the Turkish tongue, which he soon spoke like one of the "Faithful." So also Bruno, from sympathy, and in order to be better acquainted with his patron's business, made it a point to learn the language too; and spoke it scarcely less fluently than his master.

This pair of originals had made an agreement with each other, only to speak the Ottoman tongue in Turkey. In fact, but for their dress they might have passed for natives. This was by no means unwelcome to Van Mitten, and Bruno was too obedient to manifest his objections.

So he compelled himself to say every morning to his master "Efendum emriniz nfe dir?" which means, being interpreted, "Sir, what do you require?"

Then Van Mitten would reply —

"Sitrimi pantalounymi purtcha," which signified that he required his clothes brushed.

From what has been said, the reader will now understand that Van Mitten and Bruno had no difficulty in finding their way about Constantinople, firstly because they understood the native language, and secondly because they were sure of a welcome at the "house" of Kéraban, the chief of which firm had already been in Holland, and according to the law of contracts had struck up a great friendship with his Dutch correspondent.

For this reason Van Mitten, when he quitted Rotterdam, made up his mind to go to Constantinople, and Bruno made no objection though he only resigned himself to the move unwillingly. So it came to pass that master and servant found themselves in the quay of Top-Hané in the city of the Faithful About this time of the evening some passers-by appeared, strangers chiefly. Then two or three Turks walked past conversing, and the keeper of a cafe established at the end of the square arranged his unfilled tables leisurely, pending the expected arrival of his customers.

“In less than an hour,” remarked one of the Turks, “the sun will have dipped beneath the waves of the Bosphorus, and then — ”

“And then,” continued another, “we shall be able to eat and drink in comfort, and smoke at our ease.”

“This Fast of Ramadan is very long.”

“All Fasts are tedious,” was the reply, as the interlocutors passed on.

Meanwhile two strangers were exchanging opinions upon the same subject, as they paced in front of the cafe.

“These Turks are extraordinary fellows,” said one. “Really, a traveller who happened to arrive in Constantinople during this melancholy Lenten season would have but a poor opinion of the capital.”

“Bah,” replied the other, “London is no more gay on a Sunday. If the Turks fast during the day, they make up for their abstinence at night. When the sunset gun is fired, the odour of cooking and the smoke of tobacco will arise simultaneously with the people, and the streets will resume their wonted gaiety.”

It would seem that the stranger was right in his estimate, for at that moment the proprietor of the cafe called out to his waiter —

“See that everything is prepared. In an hour we shall be overwhelmed by the flood of customers.”

The two strangers meanwhile continued their conversation.

I think that Constantinople is best worth visiting during this period of the Ramadan. If the days are sad and *triste*, like a succession of Ash Wednesdays, the evenings are gay and festive as a carnival.”

“There is the contrast, you see, to emphasise it.”

While these men exchanged their views the Turks were regarding them not without a kind of envy.

“They are happy, those Franks,” said one of the subjects of the Sultan. “They can eat, drink, and smoke as they please.”

“No doubt,” replied his companion; “but they cannot at this moment procure a kebal of mutton, nor a pilaw of nice fowl and rice, nor a cake of baklava — not even a slice of water-melon or cucumber.”

“Because they are ignorant of the right places in which to find them. By means of a few piastres one can always find willing vendors who have received the dispensation of the Prophet.”

“By Allah,” said his friend, “my cigarettes are drying up in my pocket, I cannot lose so much good tobacco.”

So at the risk of his future happiness the “Believer,” who paid little attendance to his creed, took out a cigarette and lighting it puffed rapidly the perfumed weed.

“Look out,” said his companion; “if some Ulema less tolerant than usual should see you — ”

“Oh, I can soon swallow the smoke — he will see nothing,” replied the faithful one.

Thus these men continued their promenade, lounging up and down the square, and subsequently disappearing up one of the narrow streets which lead to Pera and Galata.

“This is certainly a singular city,” said Bruno as he gazed around him. “Ever since we left our hotel I have scarcely seen even the ‘ ghost’ of a native. There are only phantoms in Constantinople apparently. The people and the place seem to be equally asleep — even the dogs, yellow and lean as they are, will scarcely trouble themselves to bite you. After all that travellers have said I cannot see the object in travelling. What do you gain by it? I would rather be in our own city of Rotterdam, under the grey sky of Holland.”

“Patience, Bruno, patience,” said the calm Van Mitten. “We have only been here a few hours yet Nevertheless I cannot say this is altogether the Constantinople I had pictured to myself. I fancied we should plunge into the Arabian Nights at once, into all the dreams of the East, and we actually find ourselves imprisoned in the depths of — ”

“An immense convent,” added Bruno, “in the midst of a people as sad as a Trappist Priory.”

“My friend Kéraban will explain to us what it all means by-and-by;” said Van Mitten.

“But where are we at this moment?” asked Bruno. “What is this place? what do they call this quay?”

“If I am not mistaken we are in the Top- Hane,” replied Van Mitten — ” at the end of the Golden Horn. There is the Bosphorus, which laves the shores of Asia, and on the opposite side you may see the Seraglio Point and the Turkish town which is raised above it.”

“The Seraglio!” exclaimed Bruno. “Is that the palace of the Sultan wherein the eighty thousand odalisques live?”

“Eighty thousand?” repeated Van Mitten smiling; “I fancy you have estimated the number somewhat too highly — even for a Turk. In Holland we find one wife sufficient for a household, and even then one cannot always have peace!”

“Quite so; certainly, sir; let us not speak of that unless we must.” Then Bruno turning towards the cafe, said —

“This looks like a cafe, and after his exertions combined with this baking Turkish sun I should not be surprised if my master would like some refreshment.”

“That is one way of saying that you are thirsty,” replied Van Mitten. “Well let us enter this cafe.”

So they seated themselves at one of the small tables on the façade of the establishment “Cawadjii,” cried Bruno, rapping on the table, European fashion.

But as no one answered the summons, he called again more loudly.

After this second summons the proprietor of the cafe appeared at the end of the shop, but made no signs of approaching nearer.

“Strangers,” he murmured, when he caught sight of his customers. “Do they really believe they can be served? “Then he came to the table.

“Cawadjii, let us have some cherry- water, quite fresh,” said Van Mitten.

“At gun-fire,” replied the man.

“What!” exclaimed Bruno. “Cherry- water with gun-fire? No, cawadjii — no — with mint!”

“If you have no cherry-water,” continued Van Mitten, “let us have a glass of rose- rahtlokoum. I remember it — it is very nice.”

“At gun-fire,” was the answer of the proprietor as he shrugged his shoulders.

“What does he mean by gun-fire?” asked the valet of his master.

“We shall see,” replied the latter, who, always willing to be accommodating, said, “If you have not rahtlokoum, let us have a cup of coffee, some sherbet — what you please!”

“At gun-fire!”

“At gun-fire?” repeated Van Mitten. “Not before,” said the cafe-keeper as he unceremoniously re-entered his shop.

“Let us come away from here,” said Bruno. “There is no use in remaining with this stupid Turk, who deafens us with his ‘ gun-fire!’”

“Come along, Bruno,” said Van Mitten. “I daresay we shall find a more complaisant cafe-keeper presently.”

So they made their way across the open space once more “I am quite of opinion, sir,” said Bruno, “that we cannot meet your friend, M. Kéraban a moment too soon. We should have known what was in store for us had he been at his house of business.”

“Yes, Bruno, but we must have patience a little longer. They told us we should find him here.”

“But not before seven o’clock, sir. It is hither that his caique will come to take us across to his villa at Scutari on the opposite side of the Bosphorus.”

“Quite so, Bruno; and my estimable friend will soon put us au courant with all that is going on. He is a true Turk, one of the old Conservative party, who will not permit any innovations to be made in existing circumstances; who protest against all modern inventions — one of those men who still prefer a coach (when they find one) to the railroad, and a sailing vessel to a steamer. During the twenty years I have know Kéraban, I have never known him to change ever so little. When, three years ago, he came to visit me in Rotterdam he arrived in a post-chaise, and instead of eight days he had been quite a month on the journey. I have known a good many obstinate people in my time, Bruno, but of all Kéraban is the most ‘ pig-headed’ person I ever met.”

“He will be considerably astonished to meet you again in Constantinople “said the valet.

“I fancy so,” replied Van Mitten, “and I would rather take him by surprise. At least in his company we shall be thoroughly the Turk. My friend

Kéraban is not the man to adopt the costume of the Nizam and to wear the blue coat and red fez of the modern ‘ believer.’”

“When they take off their fezzes they look like bottles with the corks out,” remarked Bruno.

“Ah, my dear and inimitable Kéraban will come dressed just as he was when he visited me at the other side of Europe; he will have his turban and caftan on — ”

“Just like a date merchant,” interrupted Bruno.

“Yes like a date merchant who sells golden fruit, and who might even eat them at every meal,” replied Van Mitten. “He has the very business for this country — a merchant in tobacco. How could he fail to make his fortune in such a business in this place, where every one smokes, morning, noon, and night.”

“Smoke!” exclaimed Bruno. “Where have you seen anyone smoke? I have not seen any smokers at all — not one, yet I quite expected to find groups of Turks at every door smoking long curling pipes or tubes of cherry with amber mouthpieces. But no! Not even a cigarette much less a cigar!”

“There is something we do not understand, depend upon it, Bruno. Why even in Rotterdam we shall find more smokers than in the streets of Constantinople.”

“Are you quite sure that we have not mistaken the route and gone somewhere else?” continued Bruno. “Are you certain that we are in the Turkish capital, sir? Perhaps after all we have come wrong, and that is the Thames yonder and not the Golden Horn in the Bosphorus. That mosque yonder may be St Paul’s instead of St Sophia. This Constantinople? Never. It is London!”

“Be quiet, Bruno. Moderate your spirits, you are much too volatile for a native of Holland. Be calm, patient, phlegmatic, as I am, and never be surprised at anything. We left Rotterdam, as you know — ”

“Yes, yes,” assented Bruno, shaking his head in a melancholy manner.

“We came by way of Paris, St. Gothard, Italy, Brindisi, and the Mediterranean, and yet you would have me believe that the Messageries steamer landed us at London Bridge after eight days’ steaming — and not at Galata at all?”

“Nevertheless — ” began Bruno.

“I trust,” continued Van Mitten, “that you will not give way to these little eccentricities before my friend Kéraban. He might take such joking in ill part, and begin to argue in his obstinate way.”

“I will take care, sir,” replied Bruno. “But though one cannot obtain any refreshment, I suppose it is permissible to light a pipe. Do you see any objection to that, sir?”

“None whatever,” replied his master. “In my capacity of tobacco importer nothing pleases me more than to see people smoking. Indeed I am extremely sorry that Nature has only endowed each individual with one mouth. It is true we can consume snuff by the nose.”

“And by the teeth in chewing,” added Bruno.

So saying he pulled out an enormous pipe of painted porcelain, and having lighted it, puffed it contentedly and with evident satisfaction.

But at this moment the Turks, who had so emphatically protested against the abstinence of the Ramadan, reappeared upon the quay, and the individual who had been indulging in the cigarette at once perceived Bruno smoking his pipe.

“By Allah,” he exclaimed, “here is one of those accursed Franks defying the ordinances of the Koran. I cannot suffer it”

“At least put out your own cigarette,” said his companion.

“Of course,” he replied; and throwing it away he marched directly up to the Dutchman, who by no means expected such a meeting.

“Not till gun-fire,” said the Turk, as he snatched the pipe from Bruno’s lips.

“Here; my pipe!” exclaimed Bruno, whom his master vainly tried to control.

“Dog of a Christian — not till gun-fire,” said the polite Turk.

“Dog yourself, Turk,” retorted Bruno with Christian spirit.

“Be quiet, Bruno,” said Van Mitten.

“Let him give me my pipe then, at least,” said the valet.

“At gun-fire,” replied the Turk, as he placed the pipe in the folds of his caftan.

“Come, Bruno, it is no use to transgress the customs of the country one visits,” said his master.

“Robbers’ customs,” said Bruno indignantly.

“Come along, I say. My friend Kéraban will not arrive before seven o’clock. Let us resume our promenade, and we will meet him when the time comes.”

So Van Mitten dragged away Bruno, who was much disgusted at being separated from his pipe, to which he clung with all the tenacity of a confirmed smoker.

As the strangers walked away, the Turks remarked one to the other.

“Truly these Frankish strangers think they can do anything they please.”

“Even to smoke before sunset!” said the other.

“Do you want a light?” enquired his friend.

“Yes, thank you,” replied the other as he lighted a fresh cigarette.

CHAPTER II.

WHILE Van Mitten and Bruno were promenading ‘ upon the Top-Hané, and at the moment they reached the 61st bridge of boats which puts Galata in communication with the ancient Stamboul, a Turk rapidly turned the corner of the Mosque of Mahmoud and halted in the open space beyond it.

It was then six o’clock in the afternoon. For the fourth time that day the muezzins were mounting the minarets to call the people to prayer, and their voices were soon heard calling out the formula — ”There is but one God and Mahomet is His Prophet.”

The Turk who had arrived so hastily upon the scene, turned about and gazed intently at the few passers-by. He then advanced to the meeting-place or axis of all the streets, with a view to obtain the greatest range in all directions. But the object of his quest had not appeared, and the Turk manifested considerable impatience.

“So Yarhud has not come,” he muttered. “He knows he ought to have been here punctually at the appointed time!”

The Turk then took a few turns up and down the open space, and advanced as far as the northern angle of the barracks, whence he gazed in the direction of the cannon- foundry, as he stood tapping his foot upon the ground impatiently. Then he turned back again to the cafe at which Van Mitten and Bruno had vainly demanded refreshments. Here he seated himself at one of the empty tables, but was too careful to summon the waiter, for being a scrupulous observer of the Ramadan, he knew the time had not yet arrived for indulging in any of the various products of the Ottoman distilleries.

This individual’s name was Scarpante, the intendant or steward of the Seigneur Saffar, a rich Turk who lived at Trebizond.

Saffar himself was at that particular time travelling in Southern Russia, and intended to return to Trebizond when he had visited the Caucasian provinces, never doubting that his intendant would meanwhile have succeeded in carrying to a successful termination an enterprise with which he had been specially charged. Scarpante was to rejoin him at his palatial residence when he had accomplished his mission, which Saffar never admitted to himself even was likely to fail. He could not conceive that any emissary of his should not succeed when he had commanded success, and backed his orders with the powerful aid of money. In everything he acted with the ostentation which is characteristic of these “nabobs “of Asia Minor.

{ The steward was a very audacious fellow, an adept at all enterprises which required skill and force to carry them out. He hesitated at nothing to carry out his master’s designs, which were put through per fas et nefas. It was upon one of these desperate undertakings that he arrived in Constantinople, and that he was then awaiting the meeting with a certain Maltese captain, who was no better than himself.

The captain’s name was Yarhud; he was commander of a felucca — the Guidare —

and made periodical voyages across the Black Sea. To his ordinary smuggling he added even a less creditable trade, that of carrying black slaves from the Soudan.

Ethiopia, or Egypt, and others from Georgia and Circassia. The market for these human commodities was at that very corner of Top- Hane — a market in regard to which the Government, very conveniently, shut its eyes.

Scarpante was still waiting, but the captain did not come. Although the intendant remained outwardly impassable and nothing betrayed his feelings, he was inwardly boiling with indignation.

“Where is the dog?” he muttered. “Has any accident happened to him? He ought to have quitted Odessa the day before yesterday. He should now be here on this spot at this cafe at this hour, for which I gave him rendezvous.”

As he finished his half-articulate speech, a Maltese sailor appeared at the angle of the quay. This man was Yarhud. He glanced right and left and perceived Scarpante, who immediately rose and advanced to meet the captain of the Guidare in the midst of the increasing numbers of the passers-by.

“I am not accustomed to be kept waiting, Yarhud,” was Scarpante’s address, in a tone the Maltese could not fail to understand.

“You must forgive me,” said the captain; “I made all possible haste.”

“You have only this moment arrived?”

“This instant by the Janboli and Andrinople Railway, and had not the train been late — ”

“When did you leave Odessa?”

“Two days ago.”

“Where is your vessel?”

“Waiting for me there, — in Odessa harbour.”

“Are you certain of your crew?”

“Absolutely. They are all Maltese like myself; and devoted — to generous paymasters!”

“They will obey your orders then?”

“Certainly; in everything.”

“Good. What news have you, Yarhud?”

“Well, both good and bad news,” replied the captain, lowering his voice.

“Let us have the bad news first, then;” said Scarpante.

“Very well. The bad news is that the girl Amasia — Selim’s, the Odessa banker’s, daughter — is about to be married, soon. So her kidnapping will be a more difficult matter, and will have to be accomplished more hurriedly than if she were not to be married so quickly.”

“The marriage must not take place, Yarhud,” said Scarpante, in a tone louder than was altogether prudent “No, by the Prophet, it must not take place.”

“I did not say that it would.” replied Yarhud. “I said that it had been arranged to take place.”

“Quite so. But my Lord Saffar is under the impression that in three days the young lady will have been carried on board your ship and bound for

Trebizond. Now, if you think that impossible — ”

“I never said it was impossible, Scarpante. Nothing is impossible when audacity and money are combined. I merely said that the enterprise will be more difficult under the circumstances; that is all.”

“Difficult!” exclaimed Scarpante, contemptuously. “This will not be the first time that a Turkish girl, or a young Russian lady, has disappeared from Odessa!”

“And it won’t be the last time, or the Captain of the Guidare will know the reason why,” replied Yarhud.

“Who is the fellow who wants to marry Amasia?” asked Scarpante.

“A young Turk; of the same race as Amasia herself,” was the reply. “From Odessa?”

“No; of Constantinople.”

“What is his name?”

“Ahmet.”

“Who is this Ahmet, then?”

“Nephew and sole heir of a rich merchant of Galata, Seigneur Kéraban.”

“What is his business?”

“Tobacco, in which he has made an immense fortune. Selim the banker is his correspondent at Odessa. They have put through some very important business together, and often pay each other visits. Under these circumstances, Amasia and Ahmet have become acquainted; and so the marriage has been arranged by the father of the girl and the uncle of the young man.”

“Where is the marriage fixed to take place?” asked Scarpante, “Will it be solemnized here, in Constantinople?”

“No; at Odessa.”

“When?”

“I do not know; but if young Ahmet’s wishes are consulted, it may be any day.”

“So we have no time to lose, eh?”

“Not an instant”

“Where is this Ahmet now?”

“At Odessa.”

“And Kéraban?”

“Here; in Constantinople.”

“Did you see this young man, Yarhud, while you were passing through Odessa?”

“I had a particular object in seeing him, and in taking notice of him. I have seen him, and know him!”

“What kind of man is he? “« A young, and rather interesting fellow; very acceptable to the banker’s daughter too.”

“Is he to be feared, think you?”

“They say he is both brave and resolute, and in this business at any rate we must reckon with him.”

“Is he independent, in fortune, I mean?” continued Scarpante, who kept putting leading questions concerning the young man who gave him some uneasiness.

“No,” replied Yarhud: “Ahmet is entirely dependent upon his uncle and guardian, Kéraban, who loves him as a son; and he will no doubt soon go to Odessa, so as to be present at the marriage.”

“Cannot we find some means to prevent the Seigneur Kéraban from going thither?” suggested Scarpante.

“That certainly would be a good thing to do, and would give us more time; but in what way do you propose to prevent him?”

“The way I must leave to your invention,” replied Scarpante. “But bear in mind the wishes of Seigneur Saffa must be carried out, and the young Amasia must be carried off to Trebizond. It will not be the first visit of the Guidare to that part of the coast, and you know how your services will be remunerated.”

“I know!” replied Yarhud, briefly.

“My patron, Saffar, saw the girl, though only for an instant in his house at Odessa. Her beauty has made a deep impression on him, and she will not complain of the exchange from the banker’s home to the Palace at Trebizond. Amasia will surely be carried off, Yarhud; and if not by you, by some one else.”

“I will do it: you may depend upon me,” replied the Maltese simply. “But as I have told you the bad news, let me now tell you more favourable tidings.”

“Speak!” said Scarpante, who, after pacing up and down in a thoughtful attitude, returned to his companion.

“If this projected marriage renders it more difficult to carry the girl off, since Ahmet will not be long absent from her, I will find opportunity to enter the banker’s house. The fact is, I am not only the captain of the Guidare, but a merchant. My vessel carries a rich cargo; silk stuffs, brocades enriched with diamonds, and a hundred kindred articles, calculated to attract the attention of a young girl about to be married. At that time too she will be all the more easily tempted. I shall be able to attract her on board and then, taking advantage of a favourable wind, I shall be able to put to sea before her absence has caused any alarm.”

“That seems a good notion, Yarhud;” replied Scarpante: “and I have no doubt you will succeed. But you must be very careful to keep all this a profound secret.”

“You may make your mind quite easy on that point, Scarpante.”

“You are not in want of money, I suppose?”

“No: there is no fear of that when your generous patron is concerned.”

“Well, now lose no time. The marriage once contracted, Amasia will be Ahmet’s wife, and it is not in that capacity that my lord wishes to see her at

Trebizond.”

“I quite understand.”

“Very well. As soon as the banker’s daughter is on board the Guidare you will set sail.”

“Yes, for before I make my advances I will wait for a favourable breeze — a steady westerly wind.”

“How long do you anticipate it will take you to run from Odessa to Trebizond?”

“With possible delays, calms or changes of wind — for the wind is very uncertain in the Black Sea — the voyage may perhaps occupy three weeks.”

“Good!” replied Scarpante. “I will make my way to Trebizond about that time, and my patron will not be long after me.”

“I hope to be there before you,” said Yarhud.

“The orders of my master,” continued the intendant, “are very strict concerning the treatment of the young lady. Every consideration possible is to be shown her. There must be no violence or ill treatment, mind!”

“She shall be treated with as much respect as the Seigneur Saffar can desire, and with as much deference as if he were present himself,” replied Yarhud.

“I count upon your zeal, Yarhud.”

“You shall have it, Scarpante.”

“And upon your skill and address.”

“In truth, I shall be all the more certain to succeed if the wedding be postponed,” said Yarhud; “and it will be, if some obstacle can be put in Seigneur Kéraban’s way so as to prevent his departure.”

“Do you know this great merchant?”

“It is always as well to know one’s enemies, or those also may become such,” replied the Maltese. “Thus my first care on my arrival here was to present myself at his office under the pretext of doing some business.”

“You have seen him, then?”

“Just for an instant, but that was enough and —

At the same moment Yarhud suddenly approached Scarpante and whispered —

“Eh! this is a singular coincidence, isn’t it? Perhaps it may prove a happy chance for us.”

“What do you mean?” enquired Scarpante.

“Look at yonder stout man descending the Rue de Pera, accompanied by his servant”

“Is that he?”

“The very same,” replied the captain. “Let us keep aloof, but we will not lose sight of him. I know that he returns every evening to his house at Scutari, and if necessary I will follow him to the other side of the Bosphorus and find out when he proposes to start for Odessa.”

Scarpante and Yarhud then mixed with the other pedestrians, but in such a manner as to observe Kéraban and to overhear his orders. A feat all the easier inasmuch as “my lord Kéraban,” as they called him, always spoke in a very loud tone, and never attempted to conceal his imposing person nor his sentiments.

CHAPTER III.

“My lord Kéraban “was very much “on the surface,” to employ a modern term. This was the case physically as well as morally. He was, in face, about forty years old, at least fifty in his figure, and actually forty-five. Yet his face was intelligent, his figure majestic. He wore a beard, turning grey, which was cut rather close, and divided into two points. His eyes were black and piercing, as sensitive to passing impressions as the most delicately adjusted scales to the weight of a grain. His chin was square, his nose somewhat hooked, and this feature added to the natural piercing appearance of the dark eyes. His lips were parted sufficiently to display his white and even teeth. His forehead was high, and displayed a vertical fold or line — a true type of obstinacy — between the bushy black brows. Kéraban’s face was peculiar, and one not easily forgotten by anyone who had ever seen it, if only once.

Kéraban, in his dress, remained faithful to the old Turkish costume of the time of the Janissaries. The large turban, the capacious trousers, the sleeveless waistcoat garnished with enormous buttons, the shawl around the waist already sufficiently developed by nature, and finally the caftan with its majestic folds. There was nothing European in this style of dress, which contrasted strongly with the modern costume of the Orientals. It was designed to repress the invasions of industrial enterprise, a protest in favour of local colour which had a tendency to disappear, a defiance hurled at the edicts of the Sultan Mahmoud, who had upheld the modern costume of the Turk.

It is scarcely necessary to add that Seigneur Kéraban had a servant — a man about twenty-five years of age, named Nizib, so thin as to drive Bruno to desperation, and clad in the same ancient costume as his master. As he never contradicted his master in words, so he assimilated himself to Kéraban in dress. He was a devoted valet, but absolutely devoid of any ideas of his own. He always said "Yes" in advance; and, like an echo, repeated unconsciously the last phrase of the influential merchant. This was the surest way of being of his master's opinion and to avoid reprimands, of which the Seigneur Kéraban was prodigal.

Both master and man reached the Top- Hane by one of the narrow streets which descend from Pera. Kéraban as usual was speaking in a very loud voice without caring whether or not he was overheard.

"Well," he was saying, "may Allah protect us, but in the time of the Janissaries everyone had the right to do as his fancy dictated, when evening had set in. No; I will not submit to these new police regulations, and I will go by the streets without a lanthom, if it please me to do so, although I may tumble into a puddle or break my legs over a stray dog."

"Stray dog," assented Nizib the Echo.

"So you need not worry me with your stupid remonstrances," continued Kéraban, "or by Mahomet I will pull your ears so long that an ass will be jealous of you, as well as the driver."

"The driver," said Nizib; who by the way had not ventured upon a single expostulation, as one may imagine.

"If the inspector of police fine me, I will pay the fine: if he put me in arrest, I will go to prison. But I will never give way on this point, nor on any other.”

Nizib made a sign of assent. He was quite ready to follow his master to prison if circumstances so fell out “Ah, you new-fashioned Turks,” exclaimed Kéraban, as some Constantinopolitans, clothed in their modern dress, passed him. “Ah, you would make laws, and alter our old customs, would you? Ah, when I cease to protest... Nizib, did you tell my caidji to wait with the caique at the steps of Top-Hané at seven o’clock?”

“Yes; at seven o’clock.”

“Why is it not there?”

“Why is it not there?” echoed Nizib. “I suppose because it is not yet seven.”

“It is not yet seven.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you say so,” replied Nizib. “Suppose I were to say it was five o’clock?”

“Then it would be five o’clock,” said the human echo. “One is not so stupid as that!”

“No, not so stupid,” was the answer. “This fellow by such constant agreement will end by causing disagreement,” muttered Kéraban.

At this moment Van Mitten and Bruno reappeared, and the latter kept urging his master to leave the city.

“Let us go on,” he said, “by the first train. This Constantinople, indeed! This the capital of the Commander of the Faithful! Never!”

“Be quiet, Bruno,” said Van Mitten; “calm yourself.”

The sun was setting and had already dipped behind the hills of old Stamboul, leaving the Top-Hané in a sort of penumbra. The twilight prevented Van Mitten from recognizing Kéraban as they crossed the quay from opposite directions; but it so happened that they met, and each in his anxiety to pass got in the other’s way. This produced a balancing movement which is ridiculous to a beholder.

“Well, monsieur, I may pass, surely!” said Kéraban, who was not a man to yield the path to anyone.

“But — ” said Van Mitten, who in his anxiety to be polite effectually precluded the passage.

“I tell you I will pass, sir.”

“But,” again said the Dutchman, and he was about to explain when he suddenly recognized the man with whom he had such important business.

“What! My friend Kéraban?” he cried.

“You!” exclaimed Kéraban. “You! here — in Constantinople!”

“Yes, ‘tis I,” replied Van Mitten.

“Since when have you been here?”

“Since this morning.”

“And you did not call on me the very first-!”

“On the contrary,” replied the Dutchman, “I went to your office, but you were not there, and they told me I should find you here at seven o’clock.”

“They were right,” replied Kéraban shaking the hand of his correspondent with great vigour. “My dear Van Mitten, I never — no never — expected to see you in Constantinople. Why did not you write?”

“I quitted Holland so hurriedly.”

“On business?”

“No, simply travelling for a change. I had never been in Constantinople, nor in Turkey at all, and I wished to return the visit you paid me in Rotterdam.”

“Very good. But how is it Madame Van Mitten is not with you?”

“Well, the fact is, I did not bring her,” replied the Dutchman hesitating. “Madame Van Mitten is not so easily moved. So I came alone with my valet Bruno.”

“Ah, yonder lad,” said Kéraban nodding at Bruno, who believed he ought to bow to the Turk with his hands to his forehead, like the arms of a semaphore.

“Yes,” replied Van Mitten. “He wished to leave me just now and go — ”

“Go away!” exclaimed Kéraban. “Go home again without my permission!”

“Yes, he finds your capital too dull. There is no life about it, he thinks.”

“It is nothing but a mausoleum,” said Bruno. “There is no one in the shops, there are no carriages in the streets. There are only ghosts in the city, and one cannot even smoke a pipe!”

“But it is the Ramadan, Van Mitten,” said Kéraban. “We are in full fast!”

“Ah, so this is the Ramadan,” said Bruno. “Well now, if you please, what is the Ramadan?”

“A time of fasting and abstinence,” replied Kéraban. “While it lasts we are forbidden to drink, smoke, or eat — that is between the rising and setting of the sun. But in half an hour hence a cannon will signify the close of the day.”

“Ah, now I understand what those fellows meant by their cannon-shots,” exclaimed Bruno.

“We recompense ourselves fully during the night, though, for the abstinence practised by day,” continued Kéraban.

“So,” said Bruno to Nizib, “you have had nothing since morning because it is Ramadan?”

“Because it is Ramadan,” replied Nizib. “Well, that system would very soon make me thin,” exclaimed Bruno. “Why it costs me a pound a day to live, at least!”

“At least,” assented Nizib. “But,” continued Kéraban, addressing Van Mitten, “wait until after sunset: you will be astonished. You will perceive a complete transformation — a dead city will prove a living one. Ah, you new-fashioned Turks, you have not yet entirely concealed the old customs under your modern veneer. The Koran holds good against all your absurdities. May Mahomet strangle you!”

“Good friend Kéraban,” replied Van Mitten, “I” perceive you are still faithful to your ancient usage.”

“It is more than fidelity, Van Mitten; it is obstinacy. But tell me, my worthy friend: you will remain some time in Constantinople, will you not?”

“Yes; and even — ”

“Well, then you belong to me. I will take care of you and be responsible. You shall not leave me.”

“So be it; I am yours,” said Van Mitten.

“And you, Nizib, you must look after yonder valet,” adding Kéraban indicating Bruno. “I charge you particularly to modify his ideas concerning our wonderful capital.”

Nizib made a sign of assent, and at once carried Bruno away into the midst of the crowd which was becoming more and more compact.

“Now I think of it,” said Kéraban suddenly,” you have come very opportunely.

Van Mitten. Six weeks later I should have been far away from Constantinople.”

“You, Kéraban?”

“Yes; I should have embarked for Odessa by that time.”

“For Odessa! Indeed!”

“Well, if you remain so long, we can go to Odessa together. Why should you not accompany me, eh?”

“Why, you see — ”

“Nonsense: you will come, won’t you?”

“I rather counted upon resting after such a long and fatiguing journey.”

“Very well, you shall rest here. Then you can repose at Odessa afterwards for three weeks.”

“Kéraban, my friend, — ’’ began the Dutchman.

“I won’t listen to you, Van Mitten. You are not going to annoy me at our very first meeting, I suppose? You know I am right, and am not easily put off.”

“Yes, I know,” said Van Mitten; “yet — ”

“Besides,” continued his friend, “you do not know my nephew Ahmet, and you really must become acquainted with him.”

“You have already spoken of your nephew to me — ”

“Say rather, my son: but I have no child. Business, you know; all business. I never have had five minutes to spare to get married in!”

“One minute is enough,” replied Van Mitten seriously; “and very often one minute is too long.”

“You will meet Ahmet at Odessa,” said Kéraban. “A charming fellow. He detests business, for instance; he is somewhat of an artist, and trifles with

The Muses; but charming, charming! He resembles his uncle in nothing, and obeys him without argument”

“Friend Kéraban — ”

“Yes, yes; I understand: it is for his wedding that we are going to Odessa.”

“His wedding!”

“Certainly. Ahmet is going to marry a lovely girl, Amasia, daughter of my banker Selim — a true Turk — like myself. We shall have a regular fete; it will be splendid. You will be there.”

“But I should prefer — if — ”

“It is all arranged,” interrupted the inflexible Kéraban, cutting short Van Mitten’s last feeble protest. “You can never have the face to resist me.”

“I should like to — ”

“But you can’t There! “At that moment Scarpante and the Maltese captain, who had been walking up and down the open space, approached the two friends. Seigneur Kéraban was saying to his companion: “That’s understood. In six weeks at latest, we will start for Odessa together.”

“And the wedding will take place — ”

“As soon as we arrive,” replied Kéraban. Yarhud whispered to Scarpante —

“Six weeks! We have plenty of time.”

“Yes, but not too much; however, the more the better,” replied his friend. “Don’t forget, Yarhud, that before the six weeks have passed, Seigneur Saffar will have returned to Trebizond.”

So they continued their promenade, but with eyes and ears open.

Meantime Kéraban had continued his conversation with Van Mitten.

“My friend Selim,” he said, “is always hurried, and my nephew is in tremendous haste and more impatient still for the conclusion of the marriage. I must tell you that they have some reason for their impatience. The young lady must be married before she is seventeen, or she will lose a fortune of one hundred thousand pounds (Turkish) which an old fool of an aunt has left her under that condition. Her seventeen years will expire in six weeks. So I made her listen to reason, and told her that the marriage need not take place till the end of next month.”

“Your friend Selim has no objection, then?”

“Naturally, none.”

“And Ahmet — ”

“He is most willing, of course. He adores Amasia, and I approve. He has plenty of time for marrying and has no business at all. You can understand his anxiety, being a married man, Van Mitten.”

“Yes, oh, certainly!” replied the Dutchman. “But it is a long time ago, and I can scarcely remember all about it.”

“But, though in Turkey we are forbidden by etiquette to enquire concerning the health of our friends’ wives, it is not forbidden in the cases of strangers.

I hope Madame Van Mitten is quite well?”

“Oh yes, thank you. Quite well; very well indeed,” replied Van Mitten, who did not appear very much at his ease. “Yes, perfectly well. But always suffering, you know. Women, as you are aware — ”

“No, no; I don’t know anything about them,” interrupted Kéraban. “Women!

No. Business, as much as you like. Macedonian tobacco for the cigarettes, Persian for the narghiles. My correspondents at Salonica, Erzeroum, Latakia, Bafra, Trebizond, not omitting my good friend Van Mitten of Rotterdam. For thirty years, I have exported tobacco from these places to the four corners of Europe.”

“And smoked them too!” said Van Mitten.

“Yes, smoked too, like a factory chimney; and may I ask you, do you know anything better in the world?”

“Certainly not, friend Kéraban.”

“I have smoked for forty years, my friend: faithful to my chiboque and my narghile. They constitute my whole harem, and there is not a woman in the world that I value at a pipe of tompeki.”

“I am quite of your opinion,” replied the Dutchman.

“Now that I have got you here,” said Kéraban, “I am going to keep you. You shall not escape me. My caique is coming to meet me to carry me across the Bosphorus. I dine at my villa at Scutari and will carry you across.”

“That is, of course if — ”

“I will carry you across,” reiterated Kéraban, “do you hear? So, make up your mind; are you going to make excuses?”

“No, I accept,” replied Van Mitten. “I am yours, body and soul.”

“You shall see what a charming place I have got. I built it myself, under the cypress trees, half way up the hill of Scutari, in full view of the Bosphorus and Constantinople. Ah, your true Turk is always on the Asiatic side. Here we have Europe — yonder is Asia, and our progressionists in frock coats cannot carry their ideas so far. They would stultify themselves if they crossed the Bosphorus. Come, let us go to dinner.”

“You may do as you please with me,” replied Van Mitten, resigning himself to his impetuous friend.

“And you cannot help yourself,” he replied. Then turning round he called out, “Nizib! Where is Nizib?”

The valet, who was walking about with Bruno, came hurrying up with him when he heard his master’s voice.

“Has the caidji arrived with the caique?” enquired Kéraban.

“With the caique!” said Nizib.

“I will thrash him, he may be sure. Yes, he shall have a hundred strokes of the stick.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Van Mitten.

“Five hundred,” continued Kéraban angrily.

“Oh!” exclaimed Bruno.

“A thousand,” cried the merchant, “if he disappoints me!”

“Seigneur Kéraban,” said Nizib, “I see your boatman. He has quitted Seraglio Point, and in ten minutes will have reached the steps yonder.”

While Kéraban loitered about with impatience, leaning upon the arm of Van Mitten, Yarhud and Scarpante did not cease to observe him closely.

CHAPTER IV.

HOWEVER, as it proved, the caidji had arrived, and he came to inform Kéraban that his caique was waiting at the steps.

These “caidjis” may be numbered in hundreds on the waters of the Bosphorus, and the Golden Horn. Their boats are impelled by two rowers, one in front, the other astern, and can be rowed in either direction at will They are about fifteen or twenty feet long, made of beech or cypress wood, carved and painted. It is astonishing with what rapidity these graceful boats glide about and cross each other’s course on the splendid stretch of water that separates the two continents. The influential corporation of watermen, (caidjis) is charged with maintaining the service from the Sea of Marmora as far as the Chateau d’Europe and the Chateau d’Asie, which face each other at the mouth of the Bosphorus.

The caidjis are generally respectable men, dressed in a kind of shirt of silk — a many coloured “yelek” embroidered with gold, and short white cotton drawers. They wear a fez, and shoes, their arms and legs are naked.

If the caidji daily employed by Seigneur Kéraban to row him from Scutari to Constantinople had been harshly received for his delay, one must not be surprised.

The phlegmatic boatman did not make any complaint, he knew very well he had an excellent customer, and made no answer. He merely indicated the steps at which the boat was moored.

Then Kéraban, accompanied by Van Mitten and followed by Bruno and Nizib, proceeded to the place of embarkation, but halted when a movement was perceived amongst the crowd on the Top-Hané.

“What is the matter yonder?” asked Kéraban.

At that moment the chief of the police of Galata, accompanied by several of his men, was perceived upon the “place.” A drummer and a bugler accompanied them. The former beat the “ruffle” and the latter blew a “call,” and by these means succeeded in imposing silence upon the crowd, which was composed of very heterogeneous elements — Asiatic and European.

“Here is some other iniquitious proclamation, no doubt,” muttered Kéraban, in the tone of a man who was determined to stand upon his rights everywhere and always.

The chief of police then drew from his pocket a paper, which was embellished with the official seals; and in a loud voice read the contents as follows: —

“By command of the Muchir, President of the Council of the Police: — An impost of ten paras from this day will be demanded from everyone who may cross the Bosphorus from Constantinople to Scutari, or from Scutari to Constantinople, by caique, or by any other species of vessel, by steam or sail. Whosoever refuses to pay this tax shall be arrested, sent to prison, and fined for his contumacy.

“Given at the Palace, the 16th of the present month,

(Signed) “The Muchir.”

Murmurs of discontent arose when this novel tax was thus proclaimed. The impost was equal to about five centimes or one half-penny a head.

“Very good! Another tax!” exclaimed an old Turk, sarcastically, who ought to have been accustomed to these exactions so capriciously demanded by the Financiers of the Padischah.

“Ten paras! The price of a small cup of coffee,” remarked another, gloomily.

The chief of police, knowing very well that Turks like other people will grumble but pay nevertheless, was about to quit the Top-Hané when Kéraban accosted him.

“So,” said he, “there’s a new tax imposed upon all those who cross the Bosphorus?”

“By proclamation of the Muchir,” replied the chief of police. “But,” he added, “surely the rich Kéraban is not complaining of it?”

“Yes, the rich Kéraban,” replied that individual.

“And you are quite well, Seigneur Kéraban, I hope?”

“Quite well; as well as taxes will permit Now is this tax already imposed?”

“Certainly. Since the proclamation was issued.”

“And if I wish to go across to Scutari this evening in my caique, as I usually do — ?”

“You must pay ten paras.”

“And as I cross the Bosphorus every morning and evening — ”

“That will cost you twenty paras a-day,” replied the chief of police. “A mere nothing for the rich, Seigneur Kéraban.”

“Indeed!” was the answer.

“My master will get into some scrape,” muttered Nizib to Bruno.

“He must give way though, eventually,” said Bruno.

“He — give way? You don’t know him yet,” replied Nizib.

Meanwhile, Seigneur Kéraban, folding his arms and staring into the very soul of the chief of the police, appeared to be working himself up into a nice little passion. He spoke at length in a voice in which his irritation was very evident “Well, there is my boatman, who has come to tell me that my caique is waiting for me; and as my friend Van Mitten, and my servant and his will accompany me — ”

“You will have to pay forty paras,” replied the officer; “and, as I said before, you can very easily afford such a trifle.”

“That I have the means to pay forty paras, or a hundred, or a thousand, or a hundred thousand is nothing to the purpose,” replied Kéraban. “But I will pay nothing, and I will cross just the same.”

“I am very sorry to oppose Seigneur Kéraban,” replied the chief of the police, “but he cannot pass without payment”

“He will pass without paying.”

“No, indeed!”

“Yes, indeed!”

“Friend Kéraban,” began Van Mitten, with the laudable intention of making this headstrong individual listen to reason, “My friend — ”

“Let me alone, Van Mitten,” retorted Kéraban, angrily. “This tax is perfectly iniquitous, vexatious. It ought not to be submitted to. Never — no never would the old regime have dared to levy a tax upon the caiques on the Bosphorus.”

“Well, at any rate, the new regime have need of money,” remarked the chief of the police, “and they have not hesitated to do so.”

“We shall see about that,” said Kéraban.

“Guard,” said the chief, addressing his men, “you will see that the new proclamation is carried out.”

“Come, Van Mitten,” said Kéraban, stamping his foot. “Bruno, Nizib, follow us.”

“You must pay forty paras,” remarked the chief of police quietly.

“Forty blows of the stick,” replied Kéraban, irritably. But scarcely had he advanced towards the steps where the caique lay, when the guard surrounded him and his friends, and obliged them to retrace their steps.

“Let me pass,” he exclaimed, putting himself into a defiant attitude. “Do not dare to touch me, any of you, even with the tips of your fingers! I will” pass, by Allah; and that too without the loss of a single para.”

“Yes, you may pass, certainly; through the prison-door,” replied the chief of police, who was getting rather excited also; “and you will pay a pretty fine before you come out again.”

“I will go to Scutari.”

“Not by crossing the Bosphorus; and as it is impossible to go any other way — ”

“You think so, do you?” sneered Kéraban, who with clenched hands and red face looked quite apoplectic. “You think so; well, then, I will go to Scutari, and I will not cross the Bosphorus, neither will I pay the fine.”

“Really!”

“Even if I have to go all round the Black Sea,” said Kéraban in conclusion.

“Seven hundred leagues to save ten paras!” exclaimed the chief of police, shrugging his shoulders.

“Seven hundred leagues! A thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand,” shouted Kéraban the obstinate; “were it a question of only five — two — or even a single para.”

“But, my friend,” began Van Mitten.

“Let me alone, I tell you,” exclaimed Kéraban, putting him aside.

“He is off now,” muttered Bruno.

“And,” continued Kéraban to the chief of police, “I will go through Turkey and the Chersonese, I will cross the Caucasus, walk through Anatolia, and reach Scutari without having paid a single para of your iniquitous impost”

“We shall see about that,” responded the chief of police.

“You shall see it all,” retorted Kéraban, now thoroughly roused, “and I will start this evening.”

“Diable,” exclaimed captain Yarhud to his friend Scarpante, who had not lost a word of this discussion. “This will rather disarrange our plans!”

“Yes, indeed,” replied the other. “A very little would induce this headstrong fellow to persist in his mad project; and if so, he will pass Odessa when the marriage may be concluded.”

“But,” again said Van Mitten to Kéraban, with the hope of dissuading him from his mad project, “you must — -”

“Will you be quiet! Leave me alone!” said Kéraban.

“Remember the marriage of your nephew Ahmet,” said Van Mitten, persistently. “We will see that is completed.” Scarpante then whispered to Yarhud aside: —

“We have not an hour to lose!”

“You are right,” replied the Maltese captain, “and early to-morrow morning I will start for Odessa by the railway.”

Then these two worthies withdrew from the crowd, and as they turned away, Kéraban called out to his servant: “Nizib,” he said.

“Yes, sir!”

« Follow me to the counting-house.”

“To the counting-house,” replied Nizib.

“And you too, Van Mitten,” added Kéraban.

“I?”

“And you also, Bruno.”

Yes, but — ”

“We will go all together.”

“Eh!” exclaimed Bruno pricking up his ears.

“Yes; I have invited you to dinner at Scutari,” said the Seigneur Kéraban to Van Mitten; “and, by Allah, at Scutari you shall dine — when we return.”

“But we shall not be back for — how long?” said Bruno.

“Not for a month, a year, ten years perhaps,” replied Kéraban, in a tone that admitted of no discussion. “You have accepted my invitation to dinner, and my dinner you shall eat!”

“It will have got cold by that time;’’ muttered Bruno.

“Will you allow me, friend Kéraban — ”

“I will allow you nothing, friend Van Mitten. Come.”

So saying, Kéraban advanced a few steps towards the end of the promenade.

“We are quite unable to withstand this ‘ pig-headed’ fellow,” said Van Mitten to Bruno.

“But are you really going to yield to such caprice, sir?”

“Whether I remain here, or go elsewhere, it is all the same to me, so long as we do not touch Rotterdam,” replied his master.

“But, sir — ”

“And since I follow my friend Kéraban, you have no alternative but to follow me,” continued Van Mitten.

“Here is a pretty complication!” remarked the valet.

“Let us be off,” cried Kéraban, who then addressed himself to the chief of the police in a sneering tone, calculated to exasperate that official.

“I am going,” he said. “I shall depart despite all your arrests. I will go to Scutari without crossing the Bosphorus.”

“I will do myself the pleasure of witnessing your return from such a strange journey,” replied the chief of police.

“I shall be extremely glad to meet you on my return,” responded Kéraban politely.

“But I may as well inform you that if the tax is still in force when you come back — ”

“Well?” said Kéraban.

“I cannot let you pass from Scutari to Constantinople across the Bosphorus without paying the ten paras per head.”

“Well then, if your iniquitous impost is still in force when I return, I will find out some way of crossing to. Constantinople without paying a single para: there!”

So saying Kéraban took Van Mitten’s arm and made a sign to Nizib and Bruno to follow them. The party quickly disappeared, amid the crowd which cheered this partizan of the Old Turkish regime who was so tenacious of his rights.

Just then the report of a cannon was heard. The sun was setting beyond the Sea of Marmora: the fast of Ramadan was at an end, and the faithful subjects of the Sultan might now indemnify themselves for the privations of that long day.

As suddenly as by means of an enchanter’s wand Constantinople was transformed. To the silence of the Top-Hané succeeded cries of joy and pleasure. Cigarettes and every description of pipe were immediately produced and lighted: the air was odorous with tobacco. The cafes were quickly crowded to overflowing by hungry and thirsty customers. All kinds of pastry and sweetmeats and more solid food were eaten, and every known beverage appeared on the tables as if by magic. The shops were brilliantly illuminated, and the transformation was complete in the twinkling of an eye!

Then the old town and its new quarters were lighted up as magically. The Mosques — St Sophia, the Suleimanieh, Sultan- Ahmed, all the civil and religious edifices from Serai Burnou as far as the hills of Eyoub, were crowned with many-coloured fires. Luminous verses were suspended from one minaret to another, tracing the precepts of the Koran upon the dark background of the sky. The Bosphorus studded by the lanthorns carried by the caiques which were tossed about by the waves, scintillated as if the stars had fallen upon the water. The palace upon the margin, the villas on both the European and the Asiatic sides, Scutari, the ancient Chrysopolis, and its houses built up in amphitheatre form, by stages; presented only lines of fire which were reflected from the sparkling sea- From the far distance resounded the notes of the tambourine, the lute, or guitar, the tabourka, the rebek and the flute; mingled with the chanting of hymns and psalms of evensong, for the dying day. And at the summits of the minarets, the muezzins, in the call of three prolonged notes, sent over the city — the city now in festive array — the last summons to the evening prayer, which consists of one Turkish with two Arabic words, Allah, Haekk Kebir!

CHAPTER V

Turkey in Europe actually comprehends three principal provinces, Roumania (Thrace and Macedonia), Albania and Thessaly, and a tributary province, Bulgaria. It is only since the treaty of 1878, that the kingdom of Roumania, with the principalities of Servia and Montenegro, have been declared independent, and Austria occupied Bosnia, less the “sanjak” of Novi Bazar.

Seigneur Kéraban, when he made up his mind to follow the littoral of the Black Sea, perceived he would have to proceed by the coasts of Roumelia, Bulgaria and Roumania to reach the Russian frontier. Thence crossing Bessarabia, the Chersonese, Tauridis, or even the Tcherkess country, over the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, the route would turn southward and eastward by the Euxine to the limit which separates Russia from the Ottoman Empire.

Afterwards, by the littoral of Anatolia to the south of the Black Sea, the most headstrong of Ottomans would reach the Bosphorus at Scutari once again without having paid the newly imposed tax.

In fact he had to make a journey of six hundred and fifty Turkish “agatchs,” which are equal to about two thousand, eight hundred kilometres, or to reckon by the Ottoman league — that is to say, the distance which a horse will ordinarily walk in an hour — the tour embraced a distance of seven hundred leagues, twenty-five to a degree. Now, from the 17 th August to 30th September, there are forty-five days; so Kéraban must make fifteen leagues in four-and-twenty hours, if he wished to return by the 30th September, the last day on which the marriage of Amasia could take place if the conditions of the will respecting the hundred thousand pounds of her aunt must be fulfilled. In any case, Kéraban and his guest would not be able to sit down at his table in Scutari, and eat the dinner there awaiting them, in less than forty-five days.

Nevertheless, by taking advantage of the several railway lines, the journey and the time could have been very considerably abridged. Thus, from Constantinople the railway may be traversed to Andrinople and a branch thence to Janboli. The Varna and Rutschuck line unites with the Roumanian railways, and these extend to southern Russia by Jassi, Kisscheneff, Kharkow, Taganrog, and so on up to the Caucasus. A line from Tiflis to Poti runs to the Black Sea shore, and reaches almost to the Russian frontier. Certainly there is no railway across Turkey in Asia nearer than Broussa, but thence Scutari may be reached by the iron road.

But to argue on the above lines with Seigneur Kéraban, would have been so much time wasted. That he — one of the Old Turks — would condescend to make use of these modem appliances of locomotion, he, who for forty years had resisted all European encroachments! The idea was preposterous! Never! He would rather walk every step of the way than cede the point!

So that same evening when Van Mitten and the merchant had reached the office of the latter at Galata, the question had been already raised and settled. The Dutchman’s first suggestion respecting railroads was received with a shrug of the shoulders, and finally with a point-blank refusal, by Kéraban.

“Nevertheless,” continued Van Mitten, who thought it right to insist, though without any hope of persuading his host, “Nevertheless, it seems to me — ”

“When I say ‘No,’” interrupted Kéraban, “I mean No. Besides, you are my guest, I have to take care of you, and you cannot proceed without me,” he added.

“So be it,” answered Van Mitten. “But putting railways aside, perhaps there are some simple means whereby we may reach Scutari without crossing the Bosphorus, but still without going all round the Black Sea.”

“What are they?” enquired Kéraban frowning. “If they are good, I will adopt them; if bad, I decline.”

“I know an excellent way,” said Van Mitten.

“Speak quickly. We have to make all our preparations yet. We have not a minute to lose!”

“This is my idea,” said Van Mitten. “Let us go to one of the nearest ports and cross to Scutari by steamer.”

“By steamer! Use a steamboat!” exclaimed Kéraban, raised to “boiling point” at once by the very mention of steam.

“Very well then, by a sailing vessel, a zebec, a felucca, a skiff — anything you please: starting from one of the Anatolian ports, Kirpih for instance. Thence we could reach Scutari in a day, and drink the health of the muchir on our arrival!”

Seigneur Kéraban had permitted his friend to continue without interruption. Perhaps he was already inclined to adopt Van Mitten’s suggestion, which promised a solution of the difficulty, and, at the same time saved his own pride and amour propre. But after a while his eyes kindled, his fingers clenched and unclenched, and at length his fists, tightly closed, indicated a by no means reassuring temper to Nizib, who knew the signs.

“So, Van Mitten, you counsel me to embark upon the Black Sea to avoid crossing the Bosphorus? That is what your suggestion comes to.”

“That would be the best plan, I think,” replied Van Mitten.

“Have you ever heard any mention of a certain malady called sea sickness?” enquired Kéraban, quickly.

“Of course I have,” replied the Dutchman.

“And you have never experienced it?”

“Never. Besides the transit is such a short one — ”

“So short!” exclaimed Kéraban. “And may I enquire what you call ‘ so short?’”

“Scarcely sixty leagues, I imagine.”

“Well, it does not matter whether it be only fifty, or twenty, or ten, or only five,” exclaimed Kéraban, who always became excited when contradicted or opposed. “If it were only two leagues, they would be too long for me!”

“But just think for a moment — ”

“Do you know the Bosphorus?”

“Yes.”

“There is scarce half-a-league of water between here and Scutari?”

“I believe so.”

“Well then, whenever there is the least wind, I am always ill when crossing in my caique.”

“Sea-sick?” enquired Van Mitten. “I should be equally upset on a pond or in a bath. So now speak to me again about crossing the Black Sea, if you dare. Just dare to suggest to me any transit by sailing vessel again! try it!”

We need scarcely add that the worthy Dutchman did not discuss the question farther and the suggestion dropped.

But how should they proceed? Communications were not easily made — at least in Turkey; but they are not impossible. On the ordinary routes relays could be found, and the travellers could journey on horseback, with provisions and supplies and with a guide — at least they could put themselves under the care of the Tartar courier who is charged with the postal service. But as the courier has only a limited time to proceed from one station to another, to follow him would induce too much fatigue; and to those unaccustomed to such rapid travelling, riding “post haste “was out of the question.

In any case the Seigneur Kéraban did not intend to travel in this manner. He would proceed rapidly, but comfortably.

It was merely a question of expense, and that would have no weight with the rich merchant of Galata.

“Well,” said Van Mitten in a resigned tone, “since we can’t travel by railway, steam-boat or sailing vessel, how do you propose that we shall proceed?”

“By post chaise.”

“With your own horses?”

“With relays”

“And do you expect to find relays all along the route? “Yes, I do.”

“They will be very expensive!”

“What it will cost, it will cost,” replied Kéraban, who again began to feel ruffled.

“You won’t get out of this journey under a thousand pounds (Turkish) — perhaps fifteen hundred pounds,” said Van Mitten.

“Be it so! I will spend millions, I tell you: millions if necessary. Now have you come to the end of your objections?”

“Yes,” replied the Dutchman.

“And time too,” said Kéraban, in a tone which suggested to Van Mitten the propriety of holding his tongue.

Nevertheless, he could not refrain from remarking to his imperious host that the journey would be attended with great expense; that he himself was expecting large remittances from Holland which he intended to place in the Bank at Constantinople; that in fact he had not much money with him; and — ”

Here Kéraban put his hand upon his friend’s mouth, and informed him that the expenses of the journey concerned him (Kéraban) and him only; that

Van Mitten was his guest; and that it was his custom to pay his guests' expenses, etc, etc.

At the "etcs "the Dutchman gave in, and no more was said on that point Had Kéraban not been the fortunate possessor of an old English-built carriage, he would have been driven to the necessity of hiring a Turkish "araba" drawn by oxen. But the old post-chaise which had made the journey from Rotterdam was there in the stable and quite ready for use.

This chaise was comfortably arranged for three travellers. In front a great box of provisions and luggage was secured, and behind a seat was carried up in the form of a hooded "rumble," in which two servants could travel comfortably. There was no coachman's "box," so the journey must be accomplished by post-horses.

It no doubt appeared ridiculous to modern connoisseurs, but the vehicle was well-built, hung on good springs, had large wheels, and was capable of defying the roughest roads.

Van Mitten and Kéraban occupied the interior of the chaise; Bruno and Nizib were perched up behind in the "cabriolet," which afforded them shelter and was furnished with glasses which they could pull up at pleasure. Under such circumstances they felt equal to the journey to China, but fortunately the Black Sea did not extend so far, or Van Mitten would have been introduced to the "celestial "capital.

Preparations for the journey were at once commenced, and if Kéraban could not start that very evening, as in the heat of the discussion he said he would do, he determined to leave the city at dawn next morning.

One night is not too long a period to make arrangements for such an expedition, and to put business matters in train. So the employers at the counting-house were “requisitioned “just as they were about to refresh themselves after a long day’s fast. And Nizib was there, invaluable on all such occasions.

As for Bruno he had to return to the Hotel de Pesth, Grande Rue de Pera, where his master and he had arrived that very morning, and arrange for the transfer of their luggage to the business premises of Kéraban. The faithful Dutchman was accompanied by his master, for he would not have dared to leave him.

“So, sir, it is all decided; “he said, as soon as he and Van Mitten had quitted the merchant’s house.

“How can it be otherwise with such a man as Kéraban?” said Van Mitten.

“And we are going all round the Black Sea?”

“Yes; unless my friend alters his course, which is almost an impossible contingency.”

“I never thought we should ever find such a pig-headed Mussulman as he is,” remarked Bruno.

“Your comparison, if not polite, is nevertheless correct,” replied his master; “so, as I have hurt my hand in trying to hammer sense into him, I will abstain from attempting it in future.”

“I was hoping to rest a little in Constantinople,” said Bruno. “This journey and I — ”

“This is not a journey, Bruno; it is simply ‘another way’ that Kéraban is taking me home to dine with him!”

But this way of looking at things did not suit Bruno. He did not like moving; and here he was destined to be travelling about for weeks — perhaps months — across various countries; interesting, no doubt, but difficult and dangerous. Besides, the fatigue consequent upon such a journey would reduce him considerably in size and weight, and he would lose some of those hundred and sixty-seven pounds which he valued so highly.

Then his lamentable refrain came to his master’s ears over and over again —

“Something will happen to you, sir; something evil will come of it, I tell you.”

“We shall see in good time,” replied the Dutchman. “Meanwhile collect our luggage, while I go and purchase a ‘Guide’ of the countries, and a note-book to record our impressions. Then you can return here and go to bed — or rest yourself.”

“When?”

“When we have made the tour of the Black Sea, for it is fated we must make it”

With this fatalism, which a Mussulman need not have been ashamed of, Bruno shook his head, and departed. The journey certainly did not commend itself to him.

Two hours later, Bruno came back with the baggage carried by stout porters. These were the natives whom Theophile Gautier called “two-footed camels without humps.”

The “gibbosity,” however, was not wanting in this instance, for the men carried heavy packs or trunks on their backs. These were deposited in the court yard, and the chaise was loaded.

Meantime Kéraban was putting his affairs in order, and giving instructions to his clerks and managers. He wrote some letters, and drew a large sum in gold, as paper money was depreciated. He required Russian money, too, and he proposed to change his Ottoman gold at the caisse of his friend Selim, the banker, at Odessa.

The preparations were rapidly completed. Provisions were packed, and some defensive weapons deposited in the chaise, in readiness for an emergency. Kéraban had not forgotten two narghiles, for Van Mitten and himself, an article quite indispensible to a Turk, and particularly for a tobacco- merchant The horses had been ordered to arrive at daybreak. From midnight to sunrise there was time for supper and some sleep. Next morning, when Seigneur Kéraban sent to call the rest of the party, they jumped up and dressed in their travelling costumes.

The chaise was ready; the horses harnessed; the postillion mounted; he was waiting for the travellers.

Seigneur Kéraban repeated his instructions to his men. All were ready to start.

Van Mitten, Bruno, and Nizib waited, silent, in the yard.

“So you have really determined?” whispered Van Mitten to his friend Kéraban.

The latter merely pointed to the chaise, but made no verbal reply.

Van Mitten bowed, and gravely entered the carriage, taking the left-hand seat, Kéraban entered after him. Nizib and Bruno climbed up into the “cabriolet” at the back.

“Ah, my letter!” exclaimed Kéraban, just as the postillion was starting his horses.

Then, letting down the window, he handed a letter to one of his clerks, with directions to put it in the post.

This letter was addressed to his housekeeper at his villa at Scutari, and contained only these words —

“Dinner put off until my return. Change the menu. Soup au lait caille, shoulder of mutton aux ‘epices. Be sure it is not overdone.”

Then the chaise rolled away through the streets, crossed the Golden Horn on the bridge of Valideh Sultane, and quitted the town by Jene Kapoussi, the New-gate.

Seigneur Kéraban has gone! May Allah protect him!

CHAPTER VI.

FROM an administrative point of view, Turkey in Europe is divided into “vilayets” (governments or departments), administered by a “vali “(governor- general) — a sort of prefect nominated by the sultan. These “vilayets “are subdivided into “sanjaks” or districts governed by a “moustesarif,” into “kazas “or cantons administered by a “caimacan”; and “nahaies “or communes, with a “moudir “or mayor. This, as will be perceived, is something like the French system of administration.

But, as a matter of fact, Kéraban had few if any points of contact with the authorities of the “vilayets” of Roumelia, which cuts the route from Constantinople to the frontier. This route keeps, as nearly as possible, to the shore of the Black Sea, and shortened the journey he had to make.

The weather was very pleasant for travelling. The heat was tempered by a refreshing breeze from the sea, which came in an uninterrupted course across the somewhat flat country. First the fields of maize, barley, and rye, with vineyards, which are widely cultivated in the Ottoman empire, met the eye. Then came forests of oaks, pines, beech, birch; then clusters here and there of plantains, Judas-tree, laurels, figs, St John’s bread-tree, and, particularly near the sea, pomegranates and olives identical with those of the same latitude of lower Europe.

Leaving the gate of Jeni the carriage took the road to Choumla, whence a branch-road leads to Andrinople by way of Kirk-Kilisie. This road follows, and many times crosses, the railway which puts Andrinople, the second capital of the Ottoman empire, in communication with Constantinople.

As the carriage was being driven rapidly alongside the railway, the train overtook the travellers, and a man put his head out of a railway carriage to have a look at the chaise, which was proceeding at a great pace.

This traveller was no other than the Maltese captain, Yarhud, who was on his way to Odessa, where, thanks to the speed of the train, he would arrive long before the uncle of young Ahmet.

Van Mitten could not resist his impulse to call the attention of his companion to the train, which sped past them at a high speed. Kéraban merely shrugged his shoulders.

“Eh, friend Kéraban, they get to their destination very quickly,” said Van Mitten.

“Yes, when they do arrive at it,” replied Kéraban.

Not an hour was lost in this the first day of the expedition. As money in plenty was forthcoming, there were no delays in procuring horses: the animals were quite as willing as the postillions to work for a master who paid so handsomely.

The travellers passed Tchataldje, by Buyuk Khan, by the watershed of the tributaries of the Sea of Marmora, by the valley of Tchorloxa, by the village of Yeni Keni; then by the valley of Galata, across which, if the legend be true, are dug subterranean canals which used to supply the capital with water.

At nightfall the carriage stopped, but only for an hour, at the long, straggling village of Serai. As the provisions the travellers carried with them were more particularly destined for consumption in the localities where it would be difficult to procure food even of inferior quality, it was decided to keep the store in reserve. So Kéraban and his companions dined at Serai, and the journey was then resumed.

Bruno, we may venture to say, found it somewhat unpleasant to pass the night in the “dicky “of the carriage, but Nizib had no such feelings, and accepted the situation as a matter of course. He slept soundly, and set his companion such a good example that he could not do otherwise than profit by it The night passed without incident, thanks to the long and winding road which formed the approach to the town of Viga, and avoided the rude slopes and marshy ground of the valley. Van Mitten much regretted that he could not see that little town, which contains about a thousand people, almost all Greeks, and which is the seat of a bishop. But he had not come to see. He was the companion of the Inflexible Kéraban who did not trouble himself to collect any impressions of his journey.

About five o’clock the next evening, after having passed the villages of Bounar-Hissan, Jena, and Uskup, the travellers threaded a little wood wherein were several tombs. In the graves underneath lay the remains of the victims of a band of brigands who had at one time infested the neighbourhood. The travellers then reached a fair-sized town containing about 16,000 inhabitants, called Kirk-Kilisse. This name, which signifies “Forty Churches,” is justified by the number of religious edifices. It is situated in a valley, the sides and bottom of which are occupied by the houses where Van Mitten and his valet explored in a few hours.

The carriage was put up in the courtyard of a respectable hotel, where Seigneur Kéraban and his companions passed the night, and started again at daybreak.

During the day (19 August) the postillion cleared the village of Karabounar, and in the evening, late, arrived at Bourgaz, which is situated on the gulf of that name. The travellers slept that evening in a “khan,” or kind of rude inn, which certainly was not so comfortable as the post-chaise.

Next morning they found the road parted with the coast, and ran inland towards Aidos; in the evening the party arrived at Paravadi, one of the stations of the little railway from Choumla to Vama. They then traversed the province of Bulgaria to the southern extremity of the Dobroutcha, at the foot of the last spurs of the Balkan chain.

At this point the difficulties became serious: there were so many swampy valleys, so many forests of aquatic plants to be passed, through which it was almost impossible for the chaise to make way, and where its progress disturbed from their retreats thousands of wild-fowl The Balkans form a very important mountain chain. In its range between Bulgaria and Roumelia it detaches many spurs northward which extend in undulations almost to the Danube.

Hereabouts Kéraban’s patience was sorely tried.

When it became necessary to cross the extremity of the chain before descending into the Dobroutcha the tremendously steep slopes and awkward comers rendered it quite impossible to drive the carriage round. So the horses had to be unharnessed several times in these narrow roads only suitable for horses alone, and all these arrangements took up a great deal of time, and gave rise to considerable ill- temper and much recrimination. When the horses were taken out, the carriage-wheels had to be blocked and lifted round, and above all “greased” with a considerable handful of piastres, which the postillions put into their pockets, declaring all the time that they must retrace their steps.

Kéraban had good ground for inveighing against the existing government which permitted the roads to get so greatly out of repair, and which did so little to facilitate travelling in the provinces. The “divan” would not put itself out, except to impose taxes and restrictions of all kinds. Seigneur Kéraban knew all about it! Ten paras to cross the Bosphorus indeed! He always harked back to this fixed idea, which continually oppressed him. Ten paras: ten: paras, forsooth!

Van Mitten took very good care not to answer Kéraban. The very suspicion of contradiction would have enraged his inflexible companion. So Van Mitten, by way of appeasing his friend, found fault with all governments, and the Turkish administration in particular.

“But it is not possible that there could be such abuses in Holland!” exclaimed Kéraban.

“On the contrary, there are, my friend;” replied Van Mitten, who was desirous to appease his companion at any cost.

“I tell you there are not,” retorted the latter. “It is only in Constantinople that such things are possible. Do you mean to tell me that they would put a tax upon caiques at Rotterdam P”

“We have no caiques there,” replied Van Mitten. “That is no matter.”

“No matter — what do you mean?”

“Well, supposing you had them there, your king would never venture to tax them. Now don’t tell me that this new-fangled Turkish government is not the very worst in the world.”

“The worst! not a doubt of it,” responded Van Mitten, who was anxious to bring the discussion to a close.

And so, the better to put an end to what after all was a mere conversation, he took out his long Dutch pipe, and the appearance of the pipe made Kéraban anxious to stupefy himself also with the fumes of his narghili. The carriage was quickly filled with tobacco smoke and the glasses had to be let down to permit it to escape. So, by degrees and under the influence of the weed, the obstinate one became silent and even calm, until some trivial incident aroused him to the realities of the journey.

It became necessary, in the absence of shelter, to pass the night of the 20th of August in the carriage; and it was only when morning dawned that the last spurs of the Balkans were crossed, and the travellers found themselves beyond the Roumanian frontier in the more suitable roads of the Dobroutcha.

This region is almost a peninsula, formed by a great bend of the Danube, which, after turning northwards towards Galatz, bends to the east again towards the Black Sea, into which it discharges itself by many mouths. Indeed, the isthmus, so to speak, which unites the “peninsula” to the Balkans, is circumscribed by the portion of the province situated between Tchemavoda and Kustendjd, which are connected by railway. But south of the railroad, the country being essentially the same as the northern portion, topographical speaking, one may say that the plains of the Dobroutcha have their birth at the base of the last hills of the Balkan chain.

“The good country,” the Turks call this fertile tract wherein the land belongs to the first occupant. It is, if not inhabited, at any rate traversed by Tartar shepherds, and populated by Valaques in the portions near the river. The Ottoman Empire owns a considerable portion of this land, which exhibits a succession of plateaux, scarcely intersected by any valleys, which extend almost to the forests by the mouths of the Danube.

Upon the even roads the chaise proceeded rapidly. The post-masters had no occasion to grumble here when their horses were harnessed, or if they did it was only to keep themselves in practice.

Their progress was rapid, so fast indeed that on the 21st of August the travellers “changed” at Koslidcha and the same evening reached Bazardjik.

At the latter place Kéraban determined to pass the night, and let every member of the party enjoy a good rest, of which Bruno was greatly in need, though he prudently kept his opinion to himself on this subject.

At daylight next morning the travellers proceeded with fresh horses in the direction of Lake Karasou, an immense shaft or reservoir, the waters of which pour themselves into the Danube in dry seasons when the river is low. About twenty-four leagues were accomplished in twelve hours, and at eight o’clock in the evening the carriage stopped at the station of Medjidie on the Kustendjd and Tchemavoda Railway. This town is quite a new one, but it already boasts of twenty thousand inhabitants, and promises to become more important.

At this station the travellers were obliged to wait till the line was clear, greatly to Kéraban’s disgust, who was in a hurry to reach the “khan “in which he proposed to pass the night. But a train was on the line, and fifteen minutes elapsed before it proceeded. A torrent of invective was accordingly poured forth upon railway administration in general, which permitted all kinds of ill-doing, and not only smashed those travellers who were foolish enough to travel in the carriages, but hindered others who objected to use the railway.

“At any rate,” said Kéraban to Van Mitten, “an accident will never happen to me in a train.”

“Who knows?” returned the Dutchman somewhat imprudently.

“I know it!” replied Kéraban in a tone which brought the conversation to an abrupt conclusion.

At length the train moved away from the station; the gates were opened, and the carriage was permitted to pass. The travellers then reached the khan, where they were enabled to lodge comfortably in the place which was named after the Sultan Abdul Medjid.

Next day they crossed a desert to Babadagh, but so slowly was the journey made that it was deemed advisable to continue it through the night In the evening, about five o’clock, Toultcha was reached. This is one of the most important towns in Moldavia, and in such a city, containing representatives from nearly every country under heaven, Kéraban had no difficulty in selecting a suitable hotel Van Mitten also had time to explore the town and the filled with tobacco smoke.”

amphitheatre, which is very picturesquely situated.

On the next day (24th August) the travellers crossed the Danube, and it need scarcely be said that the origin of the name of the river was the subject of a lively discussion between Kéraban and Van Mitten, who argued from the Ister or Hister of the Greeks to the Roman name Danuvius, which in Thracian language signified “cloudy.” They argued from Celtic, Sanscrit, Greek, and. whether Professor Windish- man was wrong or Professor Bopp was right, till Kéraban as usual reduced his adversary to silence by saying that Danube came from the Zend word “asdanu,” which means the “Rapid River.”

But rapid as it may be, its course is not sufficiently quick to carry away all its waters; and consequently inundations of the Danube have to be calculated on. Now Kéraban in his obstinacy did not make any allowances for this, and notwithstanding all remonstrances persisted in crossing the Delta of the Danube.

He was not alone in this determination — that is, hundreds of aquatic birds were also crossing; but he ought to have recognized the fact that, if nature had made these residents web-footed, it was because they would have to inhabit a swampy region liable to inundations.

The horses and the carriage were, however, quite unfitted for such a transit; and the route was practically through a marsh which was almost impassable. Not withstanding the advice of the postillion, and Van Mitten’s remonstrances, Kéraban gave the order to go on. So the men obeyed him. The consequence was that towards evening the carriage became embedded in the slough, and the horses were quite unable to extricate it.

“The roads are not properly attended to in this country,” said Van Mitten.

“They are as they are,” replied Kéraban, “and just what you might expect under such a government!”

“We should do better if we retraced our steps and endeavoured to find another way,” said Van Mitten.

“On the contrary — we shall do better by continuing our journey and not changing our route at all.”

“But how are we to get on — ?”

“Get on? By sending for some more horses to the nearest village. It makes little difference whether we sleep in the carriage or in an inn, does it?”

There was nothing to be said to such an argument as this. The postillion and Nizib were dispatched for extra horses to the next village, which was not so very far away. They could not be expected to return, however, much before sunrise. So Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Bruno had to reconcile themselves to the fact of passing the night in that vast plain, as desolate a “steppe” as the deserts of central Australia. Fortunately the carriage, already embedded to the axles, gave no signs of sinking any deeper in the quagmire.

The night was very dark. Great clouds came down very near the earth, chased by the winds from the Black Sea. Though there was no actual rain, a thick mist from the saturated ground arose like an Arctic fog. Nothing could be seen at a greater distance than ten paces, and the lamps of the carriage threw only a perplexing gleam through the mist, so that it would have been better, perhaps, to have extinguished them. It was possible that the light might attract some undesirable visitor; but when Van Mitten said so, the obstinate Kéraban argued the point to such a length that it was quite lost. The Dutchman was right nevertheless, and had he been sharp enough to suggest their being left lighted, Kéraban would no doubt have had them extinguished.

Ten o’clock came. Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Bruno, after a light supper which consisted of some of the stores in the hampers, walked about smoking for about half an hour, pacing up and down a narrow path which was firm enough to sustain them.

“Now,” said Van Mitten, “I think, friend Kéraban, that there is no objection to our going to sleep in the carriage until the fresh horses come.”

“I see no objection whatever,” replied Kéraban, after a pause. This reply was somewhat extraordinary for a man who was always making objections.

“I do not think we have anything to fear in the middle of such an extensive plain,” said the Dutchman.

“I think not.”

“There is no attack likely to made upon us?”

“None.”

“Except, perhaps, the attacks of mosquitoes,” said Bruno, who had just succeeded in administering to himself a hard slap on the face, intended as a death-blow to half-a- dozen of those insects.

As a matter of fact, the worries of these insects became very trying. Attracted, perhaps, by the light of the carriage lamps the mosquitoes came singing in myriads around them.

“Hum,” said Van Mitten, “there is one thing needful, and that is a mosquito-net.”

“These are not mosquitoes,” said Kéraban, as he scratched the back of his neck, “they are gnats.”

“I’ll be hanged if I can tell the difference then,” remarked Van Mitten, who did not wish to enter upon an entomological discussion.

“It is a very curious thing,” remarked Kéraban, “that only the female insect attacks man.”

“I think I can understand that,” remarked Bruno, rubbing himself.

“I believe we should do well to get into the chaise,” said Van Mitten; “we shall be devoured if we remain here.”

“The countries of the Lower Danube are particularly plagued with these gnats, and one ought to sprinkle one’s bed and clothing with powder of pyrites.”

“Of which we have not a grain,” remarked Van Mitten.

“Precisely,” answered Kéraban. “But who could have foreseen that we should have been stranded in the marshes of the Dobroutcha?”

“No one, friend Kéraban.”

“I have heard it stated,” continued Kéraban, “that a colony of Crimean Tartars, to whom the government had made a concession in this delta, was obliged to be broken up in consequence of the attacks of these gnats.”

“After our own experience, the tale does not seem improbable,” replied Van Mitten.

“Let us get into the carriage again,” said Kéraban.

“We have remained out too long already,” said his friend, as the mosquitoes came buzzing round in myriads, beating their tiny wings thousands of times in a second.

Just as Kéraban and his friend were about to enter the chaise, the former said —

“As we have nothing to fear, had not Bruno better remain outside and wait the return of the postillion?”

“He will not object,” said Van Mitten.

“I will not object because it is my duty to obey,” replied Bruno. “But I shall be eaten alive.”

“No,” replied Kéraban. “I am informed that these gnats never bite twice in the same place; so that Bruno will soon be free from their attacks.”

“Yes, when I have been bitten in a million places,” said Bruno.

“That is what I mean,” retorted Kéraban.

“But may I not, at any rate, keep watch in the ‘ dicky’?” asked Bruno.

“Certainly, so long as you do not go to sleep there.”

“And how is it possible for me to sleep in the middle of this swarm of mosquitoes?’

“Gnats,” replied Kéraban; “merely gnats. Don’t forget that, Bruno.”

So saying, Kéraban and Van Mitten shut themselves up in the carriage, while Bruno climbed into the ‘dicky,’ to keep watch over his master, or masters; for since Kéraban and Van Mitten had met, Bruno could certainly count upon two masters.

Bruno, having carefully closed the carriage doors, went to see how the horses fared. The poor brutes, quite exhausted, lay prone upon the ground, breathing loudly, and mingling their hot breath with the fogs of the swamps.

“Old Nick himself will not drag them from this quagmire,” muttered Bruno. “Seigneur Kéraban must have had some fine ideas concerning this route; but after all that is his business.”

Then the valet ascended to his perch, and let down the glasses, through which he could see the luminous bars projected by the carriage lamps through the mist.

What better could Bruno do to keep himself awake and his eyes open than endeavour to review all the circumstances which had carried him in the train of the inflexible Kéraban, the most pig-headed of all Turks?

So he (Bruno), a native of ancient Batavia, a “loafer” in the streets and on the quays of Rotterdam, a fisherman of very slight pretence, a lounger by the canals which intersected his native town, had been carried away to the opposite end of Europe. He had made an enormous stride from Holland to Turkey. Scarcely disembarked in Constantinople, when fate dragged him to the steppes of the lower Danube. And there he was, perched up in the carriage, in the “dicky” of a post-chaise, in the midst of the marshes of the Dobroutcha, lost in the darkness of night, and fixed in the ground as firmly as the Gothic tower of Zuidekirk. And all this because he had undertaken to obey his master, who, without any necessity, had yielded to Kéraban.

“Oh for the strangeness of human experience,” muttered Bruno. “Here I am, in a fair way to make the lour of the Black Sea — if we ever do make it — all to save ten paras, which I would willingly have paid out of my own pocket! Ah, this headstrong fellow will ruin me: I have already lost two pounds weight, and in four days! How much shall I have lost in four weeks? Oh, hang these insects!”

Though Bruno had carefully closed the “cabriolet,” some dozens of gnats had found their way in, and were feasting on him. So he rubbed and slapped and scratched, but so that Kéraban should not hear him.

An hour passed; then another. Perhaps Bruno might have slept, had not the mosquitoes prevented any repose. But sleep under the circumstances was impossible.

It was nearly midnight when a brilliant idea occurred to Bruno: he would smoke, and so overcome the persistent attacks of the gnats with the puffs of tobacco. How did it happen he had not thought of it before? If the insects could live in such an atmosphere as he designed to create, they must be very hard to kill — these mosquitoes of the Danube.

So he drew his porcelain pipe — a sister of that which had been taken from him in Constantinople — and began to discharge thick volumes of tobacco smoke upon his enemies. The swarm hummed louder than ever, but soon dispersed and sought refuge in obscure corners of the cabriolet.

Bruno congratulated himself upon his manoeuvre. The battery which he had unmasked had routed his opponents, they had fled in disorder, but as he did not wish to make any prisoners — indeed, quite the contrary — he opened the glass and let the half stupefied insects escape, knowing that the tobacco would effectually keep the others at bay.

So, having gained the victory, Bruno paused to look around him over the field.

The night was very dark, and strong gusts of wind came tearing over the flats. Had not the carriage been so firmly embedded in the ground, it might have been overturned. But there was no fear of that.

Bruno stared northwards, endeavouring to distinguish some gleam of light which would indicate the approach of the postillion and Nizib with the horses. But the darkness was profound beyond the small space illumined by the carriage lamps. Nevertheless, while straining his eyes into the darkness, Bruno fancied he perceived, about 60 yards from his perch, some brilliant points of light, which moved about rapidly, and appeared sometimes on the ground, and sometimes about two or three feet above it The valet at first thought that the spots were the effects of “will-o’-the-wisp” or ignis fatuus, caused by the escape of gases from the marshy ground. But even if his reason led him into error, the horses would not have been conscious of the phenomenon, and they began to evince symptoms of uneasiness, and snorted loudly.

“Ah! what can this be?” said Bruno to himself. “Some new complication, no doubt. Perhaps they may be wolves yonder!”

This surmise was in no way extravagant; for these hungry animals are very numerous in the Delta of the Danube, and they had on this occasion no doubt been attracted by the smell of the horses.

“Diable,” muttered Bruno. “These are worse foes than mosquitos, or the gnats of our pig-headed friend. Tobacco will be no safeguard this time!”

CHAPTER VII.

MEANWHILE the horses displayed great uneasiness which it was impossible not to understand. They attempted to struggle through the slough, and tried to rear, shaking the carriage violently at every attempt. The luminous points which had been observed were approaching. A kind of growling was audible, carried down by the wind to the travellers’ ears.

“I think,” said Bruno to himself, “that it is about time to rouse my master and Seigneur Kéraban.”

The incident was sufficiently serious. Bruno slid down from his perch, let down the steps of the carriage, opened the door, and, having entered, closed it behind him. The two friends were sleeping soundly.

“Monsieur!” said Bruno, putting his hand on Van Mitten’s shoulder,” Master!”

“Go to the Devil!” was the Dutchman’s reply, as, half asleep, he regarded his servitor.

“There is no use sending people to the Devil when he is so close by,” muttered Bruno.

“Who are you?” enquired Van Mitten.

“I? Your servant!”

“Ah, Bruno, is it you? After all you did right to wake me. I was dreaming that Madam Van Mitten — ”

“You were seeking a quarrel,” replied Bruno; “well, there is food for one now.”

“What is the matter then?”

“Will you please wake Seigneur Kéraban!”

“Must I wake him?”

“Yes, we have not too much time.”

So Van Mitten, without another word.

though still but half awake, shook his companion vigorously.

None can sleep more soundly than a Turk, when the Turk has a good digestion and an easy conscience. This was the case with Kéraban, and many attempts were made to rouse him.

Kéraban, without opening his eyes, grumbled and growled like a man who was by no means disposed to stir. Had he been as headstrong in his sleeping as when waking, they would have been obliged to let him alone.

Nevertheless, the persistence of Van Mitten and Bruno was such that Seigneur Kéraban was awakened. He extended his arms, opened his eyes, and in a thick sleepy tone said —

“Have the postillion and Nizib arrived with the relays?”

“Not yet,” answered Van Mitten.

“Why did you wake me then?”

“Because if the horses have not come,” said Bruno, “some other animals of a very suspicious appearance are surrounding the carriage and preparing to attack us.”

“What animals do you mean?”

“Look!” said Bruno briefly.

Kéraban let down the glass and leant out of the window.

“Allah protect us!” he exclaimed. “There is a pack of wild boars.”

He was right. The assailants were wild boars, which are very numerous in the Danubian territory which confines the estuary. The attacks of these animals are greatly dreaded, and they may be well classed amongst the wild beasts.

“What are we going to do?” asked the Dutchman.

“Remain quiet if they do not attack us,” replied Kéraban. “We will defend ourselves if they do.”

“Why should they attack us?” asked Van Mitten. “Wild boars, so far as I am aware, are not carnivorous animals.”

“Quite so,” replied Kéraban, “but if we do not run the risk of being eaten, we have the chance of being ripped up by their tusks.”

“That’s about it,” said Bruno calmly.

“Therefore, let us make ready for any emergency,” remarked Kéraban.

The. travellers accordingly got their weapons ready. Van Mitten and Bruno had each a revolver carrying six shots; and a good supply of cartridges handy. The old Turk — a declared enemy of every modern invention — only carried two pistols of Ottoman make, with Damascus barrels, the butts ornamented with precious stones, but more suitable for ornament than defence. Van Mitten, Kéraban and Bruno had to content themselves with these arms, and determined to use them only when certain of success.

Meanwhile the wild boars, about twenty in number, were continually approaching and surrounding the carriage. By the light of the lamps, which had no doubt attracted them, the travellers could perceive the animals tossing up the earth with their tusks in their excitement. They were enormous specimens, almost as large as donkeys, of prodigious strength, and each quite capable of decimating, if not destroying, a whole pack of hounds. The situation of the travellers in the carriage would be by no means a pleasant one if they were attacked on both sides before daybreak.

The horses quite understood the position; and as the boars approached, the poor beasts plunged so that they seemed likely to break away from the traces altogether.

Just then some shots were heard. Van Mitten and Bruno had each fired twice at the boars which came to the attack. The animals more or less seriously wounded, uttered terrible cries and gruntings as they rolled upon the ground. But the rest, rendered more furious, precipitated themselves upon the carriage, and attacked it with their tusks. The panels were pierced in many places, and it became pretty clear that ere long they would be completely “stove in.”

“Fire! fire!” exclaimed Kéraban, as he discharged his pistols. They generally missed fire once in every four times, which was quite in accordance with precedent. The revolvers of Bruno and Van Mitten however did good execution and accounted for a number of the assailants, some of which were boldly attacking the horses.

The latter had no means of repelling the assailants save by kicking. If they had been free, they would have scampered over the plain, and then it would have been merely a question of speed between them and the boars. As it was, the horses did all in their power to break their traces and escape. But the harness was stout cord and refused to part. It was therefore a question whether the forepart of the carriage would give way, or the whole vehicle be pulled out of the mire.

Kéraban and his companions were quite alive to the situation. What they most feared was that the carriage would capsize. Under those circumstances, the boars which the bullets had not kept off would dart upon them. So they seemed quite at the mercy of the furious pack. Nevertheless the coolness of the three men never abandoned them, and they continued to fire upon the assailants.

At length a tremendous pull shook the chaise. They thought the front part had given way.

“All the better,” said Kéraban. “The horses will gallop away across the plain, and the wild boars will pursue them; so we shall be left undisturbed.”

But the forepart of the chaise resisted with a strength that did credit to its English builder. So, as it would not part, the whole chaise moved, and the shock became extremely violent; so much so, indeed, that the carriage was pulled from its oozy bed, and the horses, mad with terror, rushed at headlong speed across the marshy plain through the thick darkness of the night.

But the wild boars had by no means abandoned the party. They ran beside the carriage and kept worrying the horses while they attacked the chaise, which could not distance them.

Seigneur Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Bruno were very soon thrown to the bottom of the carriage.

“Either we shall be overturned — ” cried Van Mitten.”

“Or we shall not,” interrupted Kéraban.

“It would be better to seize the reins,” said Bruno judiciously as, lowering the front windows of the chaise, he sought to grasp the “ribbons;” but the horses had in their struggle broken them, and the valet was obliged to abandon his attempts, and to allow the animals to continue their headlong course across the swampy ground. There were no means of stopping them, and if any had presented themselves the boars would also have halted. So the three men had to depend upon their weapons.

Of the travellers, thrown against each other or into the corners of the carriage at every jolt of the conveyance, the one resigned! as a true Mussulman ought to be, the others as phlegmatic as Dutchmen, never exchanged a remark.

Thus an hour passed away, and the chaise still was dragged along at the same furious pace; but the wild boars did not abandon the chase.

“Van Mitten, my friend,” said Kéraban at length, “I can tell you how a traveller, under similar circumstances to these, when pursued by a pack of wolves in Russia, was saved by the sublime devotion of his servant”

“How was that?” enquired Van Mitten.

“In a very simple way,” replied Kéraban. “The servant took an affectionate farewell of his master; then, recommending himself to Heaven, he threw himself out of the carriage; and while the wolves stopped to devour him his master managed to distance them and was saved!”

“It is very unfortunate that Nizib is away just now,” remarked Bruno drily.

After this little speech the travellers relapsed into silence, and calmly waited events.

Night was now closing in, and still the horses did not abate their desperate speed, so the wild boars could not gain upon them to make a serious attack. If no accident occurred, — if the wheels did not come off, or if a shock more than usually severe did not overturn the chaise, — the occupants considered they had a chance of safety, even failing the devotion of which Bruno appeared incapable. Meanwhile the horses, directed by instinct, kept safely to the portion of the steppe which they had been accustomed to traverse. They proceeded in a direct line towards the post where relays were to be obtained.

Thus it happened that at daylight the travellers were not far from the much-needed assistance.

The pack of wild boars continued their course for about half an hour longer, and then by degrees fell away, but the horses did not slacken speed for a moment, nor did they halt until they fell, completely foundered, about a hundred paccs from the post-house.

Kéraban and his companions were safe, and they all returned thanks to the Supreme Being, the God alike of the Christian and the Mussulman, for their preservation.

Just as the carriage came to a stop, Nizib and the postillion, who had not dared to trust themselves upon the steppe in the dark, were setting out with fresh horses. These were immediately harnessed in place of those which had been so knocked up. For this Kéraban had to pay a large sum; then, without an hour's rest, the chaise, which had been overhauled and attended to, continued the journey and took the road to Kilia, a small town situated on the Danube.

The travellers reached Kilia without further adventure upon the evening of the 25 th of August. There they alighted at the principal hotel and had twelve hours' repose, which in a great measure compensated them for the fatigue they had undergone. Next day they started at daybreak and soon reached the Russian frontier.

There they encountered new difficulties. The formalities of the customs officers exasperated Kéraban, who, fortunately or unfortunately, knew enough of their language to make himself understood, and for a time his obstinacy threatened to prevent the continuation of the journey.

At length, however, Van Mitten succeeded in calming him, and Kéraban consented to submit to the exigences of the service and to have his baggage examined. He paid the duties demanded, and consoled himself by repeating the sage remark that "All governments were alike, and he did not estimate any of them at the value of a melon-rind!"

The Roumanian frontier was crossed, and the chaise traversed that portion of Bessarabia which forms the littoral of the Black Sea towards the north-west. Then the travellers were not more than twenty leagues from Odessa.

CHAPTER VIII.

Amasia, the only daughter of Selim the Banker, was walking and chatting with her personal attendant Nedjeb, in the verandah of a beautiful country-house, the gardens of which extended in terraces to the shore of the Black Sea.

From the last terrace, the steps of which were bathed by the calm water, Odessa could be perceived towards the South in all its glory. This town is quite an oasis in the surrounding desert, forming a splendid panorama of palaces, churches, hotels, and other habitations built upon a steep cliff which rises precipitously from the sea. From the banker’s house one could even perceive the great square surrounded with trees, and the staircase which marks the statue of Richelieu. This great man was the founder of the city, and was its ruler until he undertook the liberation of France.

As the climate is dry and “trying “in the season of the northerly and easterly winds, the inhabitants seek shelter during the summer heat under the welcome shade of the Khontors, and the residents have built their villas on the sea-shore; for business will not permit them all to seek relaxation in the Southern Crimea for the whole season. Amongst these elegant houses one would remark the banker’s residence, which was so situated as to be not much inconvenienced by the prevailing dryness of the season.

The name “Odessa “signifies the “town of Ulysses,” for so the inhabitants formerly petitioned Catharine II. to name their village. The empress consulted the Academy of St Petersburg, and the savants investigated the records of the siege of Troy. These records informed them that at one time a town, more or less problematical, existed there under the name of “Odyssos,”

whence Odessa arose in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Odessa has been, is, and always will be, a commercial city. Its 500,000 inhabitants consist of Russians, Turks, Greeks, and Armenians — in fact a gathering together of all people who have business tastes. Now, if commerce makes merchants, it equally makes bankers; and amongst the latter, Selim, from modest beginnings, had risen to be one of the most wealthy and esteemed.

Selim belonged to the rather numerous class of monogamous Turks. He had never had but one wife: Amasia was his only daughter, now engaged to Ahmet, Kéraban’s nephew. So Selim was the correspondent and intimate friend of the most obstinate Turk who ever wore a turban. The marriage of Amasia and Ahmet was to be celebrated at Odessa. She would be the sole wife of the young man, and return with him to his uncle’s house in Constantinople.

People also knew that Amasia’s aunt — her father’s sister — had left by will to her niece an enormous sum of money, amounting to £ 100,000 (Turkish), on the condition that she should marry before she was sixteen — a caprice of the old lady, who, never having been herself married, was determined that Amasia should lose no time — and the period fixed would expire in six weeks from the time we refer to. Failing this marriage, the money would go to collateral inheritors.

Amasia herself was charming even in the eyes of Europeans. Had her white muslin veil, her gold embroidered head-dress, and the triple row of sequins across her forehead been removed, her beautiful hair would have-been perceived in all its luxuriance. She was in no way indebted to art to heighten her beauty. No hanum pencilled her eye-brows, no kohl blackened her lashes, no henna darkened the eyelids. No bismuth or “rouge “improved her complexion: no carmine heightened the colour of her lips. A western woman of the present style would be found more painted than was Amasia. The elegance of her figure, her graceful mode of walking, and her natural ease of movement, were all discernible under the feredje, or cashmere cloak which draped her from neck to heels like a dalmatic.

That day, in the gallery which opened into the gardens, Amasia was wearing a long silken chemise, which was concealed by the ample chalwar united to a little embroidered vest, and an entari with a silken train slashed on the sleeves, and embroidered with a trimming of oya — a Turkish lace. A girdle of cashmere supported the train, so that it might not impede her steps. A pair of earrings and a ring were her only jewels. Elegant pad- joubs of velvet hid the lower part of the leg, and her pretty little feet were encased in gold-embroidered slippers.

Her attendant, Nedjeb, a bright and lively girl and a devoted servant — one might say friend — was at this time with Amasia; laughing, chattering, moving hither and thither and making the house quite gay by her good humour and cheerfulness. Nedjeb was a Zingara by descent, not a slave. Slavery is not the less abolished in principle because one occasionally sees some Ethiopians or Negroes sold in the open market. A large number of domestics is necessary for a great Turkish family — a number which in Constantinople includes a third of the Mussulman population — these servants are never reduced to a condition of slavery: and, it must be confessed that, looking to the fact that each domestic has his special work, there is not much to do individually.

The banker’s establishment was conducted somewhat on this principle, but Nedjeb was exclusively attached to Amasia. Having been received quite as a child into the house she occupied, a unique position, and never performed any menial duty.

Amasia was reclining upon a divan, covered with rich Persian stuffs, and was gazing out upon the Bay of Odessa.

“Dear mistress,” said Nedjeb,seating herself upon a cushion at Amasia’s feet.

“Seigneur Ahmet has not yet arrived! what is he about, I wonder?”

“He has gone into the city,” replied Amasia, “and perhaps he will bring back a letter from his uncle Kéraban.”

“A letter!” exclaimed the attendant “A letter! We don’t want that, we want Seigneur Kéraban himself; and, to tell the truth, this uncle keeps us waiting a good deal.”

“Patience, Nedjeb. A little patience,” said Amasia.

“Yes, you speak very calmly and take it easily. But if you were in my place, my dear young mistress, you would scarcely be so patient.”

“Silly girl!” replied Amasia. “It is not a question of your marriage, but mine.”

“And do you not think it is a very important thing to pass from the service of a young lady to that of a rich married dame?”

“I shall not love you any the better,” said Amasia.

“Nor could I love you any better, dear lady; but, truly, to see you so happy as the wife of Seigneur Ahmet would re-act on me, and make me very happy too.”

“Dear Ahmet!” murmured Amasia, as she veiled her eyes a moment, while she invoked the remembrance of her fiance.

“Ah! there you are, obliged to shut your eyes to see him,” cried Nedjeb maliciously, “while if he were here you would open them.”

“I tell you that he has gone to meet the messenger from the bank, who will no doubt have a letter from his uncle”

“Yes; a letter from Seigneur Kéraban, in which he will repeat as usual that business detains him in Constantinople; that he cannot as yet leave home; that tobacco is rising — that unless it falls he will arrive in eight days, without fail — unless indeed it happens to be sixteen days. And time presses. We have only sue weeks. If you are not married then, you must give up your fortune, and — ”

“It is not for my fortune that Ahmet is going to marry me, Nedjeb.”

“Quite so; but there is no need to lose it by delay. Oh! if Seigneur Kéraban were my uncle!”

“What would you do if he were?”

“I would do nothing, dear mistress, as no one can do anything. Nevertheless, if he were here — if he arrived to-day even — or to-morrow, or a little later, we would cany him to the judge, and have the contract completed. Afterwards we would go to the Imaun and be married, and well married too. The fetes should be prolonged for fifteen days, and

Seigneur Kéraban might go away then as soon as he pleased, if he wanted to return so particularly.”

There could be no doubt that the arrangements as detailed by Nedjeb could be made and carried out, if Seigneur Kéraban did not tarry longer in Constantinople. The contract would be registered before the Mollah, who filled the position of a ministerial officer, a contract by which the future husband bound himself to give his wife furniture and kitchen utensils. Then came the religious ceremony, and the various formalities — all of which could be accomplished within the period that Nedjeb named. But still was it necessary that Kéraban, whose presence as guardian of his nephew was indispensable, should occupy in business the few days which the impatient waiting-woman so anxiously claimed for her charming mistress?

Just then the girl exclaimed, “See what a pretty vessel is just coming to anchor under the garden steps!”

“So there is,” said Amasia.

Immediately the two girls proceeded towards the steps which led to the water’s edge, so that they might more conveniently observe the graceful little vessel which had just “brought up “opposite.

It was the felucca. The sail was still brailed up, and she was running in under the impetus of a light breeze. She came to anchor within a cable’s length of the shore, and dipped gently to the wavy undulations of the water which broke on the foot of the steps. The Turkish flag floated from the mast.

“Can you read her name?” enquired Amasia.

“Yes,” replied Nedjeb. “See, there it is on the stem. The ‘ Guidare.’”

So it was. Captain Yarhud had come to an anchor in this part of the bay, but it did not appear as if he intended to remain, because his sails were not furled, and a sailor would have noticed that the ship was in sea-going trim.

“Truly,” remarked Nedjeb, “it would be very pleasant to have a sail in that vessel upon such a blue sea, and with such a gentle wind, just enough to make it bend over with those great sails.”

Then, in the mutability of her imagination, the young Zingara perceiving a casket, in which were some jewels, upon a small table near the divan, opened the case and said —

“Ah! look at the beautiful things Seigneur Ahmet has brought for you. It must be more than an hour since we looked at them!”

“Do you think so?” murmured Amasia, taking out a necklace and a pair of bracelets, which glittered as she held them up.

“With these jewels Seigneur Ahmet hopes to make you more beautiful, but he will not succeed!” remarked Nedjeb.

“What do you say?” replied Amasia. “Where is the woman who would not gain by wearing such beautiful ornaments as these? Look at these diamonds from Visapour; they are exquisitely brilliant, almost fiery, and remind me of the eyes of my fianct.”

“Oh, dear lady, when yours look at him, do you not offer him a gift equal to his own?”

“Silly child!” replied Amasia. “Look at this sapphire of Ormuz; and these pearls of Ophir; these tourquoises of Macedonia — ”

“Tourquoise for tourquoise,” said Nedjeb, laughing joyously. “The Seigneur Ahmet will not lose by the exchange.”

“Fortunately he is not near, Nedjeb, to hear you say so.”

“Ah, but if he were he would tell you the same, and his words would have greater value than mine.”

Then, taking up a pair of slippers which were lying near, she continued, “Look at these pretty ‘babouches,’ all embroidered and trimmed with swansdown, made for a pretty pair of little feet I know. Let me see if I can put them on for you.”

“Try them on yourself, Nedjeb.”

“I?” exclaimed the girl.

“This is not the first time that, to please me, you — ”

“Certainly, certainly,” replied Nedjeb. “Yes, I have already tried on your pretty dresses, and I went out upon the terrace,

where they took me for you. If I was only pretty enough! — But no! that never will be, and to-day less than ever. Let me try these pretty slippers on.”

“Do you wish it?” said Amasia, as she yielded to the girl’s solicitations. So Nedjeb put on her young mistress’s feet the slippers which were worthy of a place in a glass-case of curiosities. “Ah, how can you now venture to walk in them?” exclaimed the young Zingara. “Your head may now be jealous of your feet”

“You make me laugh, Nedjeb,” replied Amasia. “Yet — ”

“And those arms, those beautiful arms, which you leave quite unadorned! Why should you? Seigneur Ahmet has not forgotten them, not he! I see here some bracelets which will suit them to a nicety. Poor little arms! — how badly they have treated you. Fortunately I am here.”

And, laughing all the time, Nedjeb passed two magnificent bracelets on Ama- sia’s wrists, and they looked more resplendent upon the white skin than within their case of velvet.

Amasia let her do as she pleased. Every ornament spoke to her of Ahmet, and to the incessant chatter of Nedjeb, her eyes, glancing from one jewel to another, responded in silence.

“Amasia, dearest!”

The girl at these words rose hastily and met a young man whose twenty-two years suited well his fiancee of sixteen. Ahmet was somewhat above the middle height, of a good figure; easy, yet somewhat dignified: his black eyes wore a very sweet expression and flashed like lightning in his passionate moments. His hair was brown and curly beneath his fez, his small moustache was trimmed Albanian fashion; his teeth were white — in fact, there was an aristocratic air about him, if the term “aristocratic “is permissible in referring to a man in whose country there is no hereditary aristocracy.

Ahmet adhered strictly to the Turkish dress. He could not do otherwise, being the nephew of such an uncle. His well-made costume became him well; it was of rich material and in good taste.

The young man advanced and seized the hands of his affianced bride, obliging her to reseat herself while Nedjeb said —

“Well, Seigneur Ahmet, is there any news from Constantinople?”

“No,” replied Ahmet, “not even a business letter from my uncle Kéraban.”

“Oh, the wretch!” exclaimed Nedjeb.

“I cannot myself understand,” said the i young man, “why the courier has not brought any letter from him. This is the j day he never fails to let us have some information, and to arrange matters with the banker; yet your father has not received any letters from him either.”

“For a punctillious man of business like your uncle, this certainly is a circumstance i to wonder at, dear Ahmet Perhaps a telegram — ”

! “He send a telegram! My dear Amasia, you know quite well he would no more telegraph than he would travel by railway. Utilize modern inventions, even for business! He would rather receive bad news by letter than good news by the telegraph, I believe. Ah, Uncle Kéraban — ”

“You have written to him, of course, dear Ahmet?” asked the girl, whose gaze was tenderly fixed upon her fiance.

“I have written to him a dozen times, to beg him to fix an earlier date for our marriage. I have told him over and over again that he was acting a barbarous part — ”

“Good!” exclaimed Nedjeb. “That he had no heart; though the best of men — ”

“Oh!” said Nedjeb, shaking her head. “Yet he had no pity,” continued Ahmet, “while acting the part of father to his nephew. But he replied that so long as he came within six weeks we had no reason to complain!”

“Well, we must only wait his good pleasure, Ahmet.”

“Wait, wait!” exclaimed the young man. “He is robbing us of so many days of happiness!”

“Men who have done no worse are often anested,” remarked Nedjeb, tapping her foot impatiently.

“What shall I do? await Uncle Kéraban? I declare, if he does not answer my letter by to-morrow, I will go to Constantinople! — ”

“No, dear Ahmet,” said Amasia, seizing his hand as if to detain him, “I should suffer so much by your absence that the few days gained would not please me at all; they would not recompense me for the separation. No, stay where you are: who knows? Perhaps, something may alter your uncle’s determination.”

“Alter Uncle Kéraban’s determination! You might as well hope to change the course of the stars, to make the moon rise instead of the sun, to change the laws of the universe — as to alter Kéraban’s decision,” said Ahmet.

“Ah, if I were his niece,” said Nedjeb.

“What would you do then?” asked Ahmet “I would seize his caftan, so that — ”

“You would only succeed in tearing it”

“Well, then, I would pull his beard for him, hard!”

“His beard might even be pulled off altogether,” replied Ahmet “And yet,” said Amasia, “Seigneur Kéraban is the best of men.”

“No doubt, no doubt,” replied Ahmet, “but so headstrong, so obstinate, that if an encounter were to take place between him and a mule, I should decline to bet on the latter.”

CHAPTER IX.

WHILE Ahmet was speaking, one of the servants of the house, whose duty, according to Ottoman usage, was only to announce visitors and nothing else, appeared at the entrance of the gallery.

“Seigneur Ahmet,” he said, addressing the young man, “a stranger is below and desires to speak with you.”

“Who is he?” asked Ahmet. “A Maltese captain; he insists upon seeing you, and says you will receive him.”

“Very well, I will come down,” said Ahmet. “My dear Ahmet, why not receive him here, if he has nothing of a private nature to communicate?” said Amasia.

“Perhaps he commands that pretty felucca,” observed Nedjeb, indicating the vessel which was anchored off the steps.

“Perhaps he does,” said Ahmet; “let him come in!”

The servant retired, and, almost immediately afterwards, the stranger presented himself.

Captain Yarhud — for he it was — had, greatly to his chagrin, been delayed considerably in his voyage. Immediately he and Scarpante, the intendant, had parted, the captain had started for Odessa by railway, and had thus got in advance of Kéraban by many days. But when the worthy Yarhud had reached Odessa, he found the weather so bad that he could not put to sea. The wind had only moderated that morning sufficiently to permit his making sail, and he had accordingly come out and anchored before the banker’s villa. So after all he had obtained but a little start of Kéraban, and the delay might prove very prejudicial to his interests.

Yarhud felt he must commence operations without losing an hour. His plans were all laid; he must try strategy first, and force after if his ruse did not succeed. But it was necessary that Amasia should be allured on board the Guidare that very day; thus before the alarm could be given and pursuit made, the felucca, he hoped, would be well on her way, running before the stiff nor’-wester.

Such abductions as Yarhud contemplated were by no means infrequent upon the coast — more frequent than one would imagine; nor are they altogether limited to Turkish territory. It is not very many years ago since Odessa was thrown into consternation by a series of abductions, the authors of which could not be traced. A number of young girls belonging to the highest grade of society disappeared, and it was only too certain that they had been carried away into slavery and sold in the markets of Asia Minor.

Now what had been done in the capital of southern Russia, Yarhud hoped to repeat for the benefit of Seigneur Saffar. This was not the first time either that the Guidare had been employed in such traffic, and the captain valued his profits on the transaction at more than ten per cent!

Yarhud’s plan was as follows: — To allure the young lady on board the Guidare under the pretence of showing her and selling to her many rich stuffs which he had bought from the principal markets on the coast. Ahmet would most likely accompany Amasia on her first visit, but he trusted she would return again with Nedjeb. It would then be possible to put to sea before assistance could be given. If, however, Amasia could not be tempted on board, then Yarhud intended to use force. The banker’s house was in a manner isolated at the curve of the bay, and his domestics were no match for the crew of the felucca; but there might be fighting, and in that case people would quickly ascertain the circumstances under which the abduction had been carried out. So it was much the better policy, in the interest of the abductors, that the affair should be accomplished without any disturbance.

“Seigneur Ahmet?” said the captain, interrogatively, as he entered the gallery, accompanied by one of his crew, who carried some fabrics in his arms.

“I am he,” replied the young man, “and you are — ?”

“Captain Yarhud, commanding the felucca Guidarc, which is moored yonder.”

“What is your business?’

“Seigneur Ahmet,” said the captain, “I have heard of your approaching marriage.”

“You have then heard, captain, of that which most dearly concerns me.”

“I can quite understand that,” replied the captain, turning towards Amasia; “so I had the idea that I might perhaps place at your disposal all the rich things which my vessel contains.”

“Well, that is not a bad idea of yours, Captain Yarhud,” replied Ahmet.

“My dear Ahmet, what can I possibly want with more than I have?” said Amasia.

“Who knows?” replied Ahmet. “These Levantine captains have often an extensive assortment of valuable things, and we may as well inspect them.”

“Yes; we must inspect them, and purchase some too,” exclaimed Nedjeb; “and ruin Seigneur Kéraban, which will punish him for his delay.”

“What does your cargo consist of, captain?” enquired Ahmet.

“Valuable stuffs which I have purchased at various places where they are made,” replied Yarhud, “and in which I usually trade.”

“Very well: we must let these young women see them — they know more about such things than I do; and I shall be very glad, my dear Amasia, if amongst the cargo of the Guidare you can find some pretty things to please you.”

“I have no doubt about it,” replied Yarhud, “and, besides, I have brought some samples with me, which I pray you to examine before you go on board.”

“Let us see them,” exclaimed Nedjeb. “But I tell you beforehand, captain, you have nothing in any way too beautiful for my mistress.”

“Certainly not. That is true,” remarked Ahmet.

At a sign from Yarhud the sailor who accompanied him unrolled some samples, which the captain presented to the young lady.

“Here are some Broussa silks embroidered with silver,” he said. “They are intended for sale in the bazaars of Constantinople.’’

“That is certainly a beautiful fabric,” said Amasia as she examined the silk, which under the skilful fingers of Nedjeb scintillated like luminous tissue.

“See! see!” cried the Zingara. “We could not have found anything better in the merchants’ houses in Odessa.”

“That really appears to have been made expressly for you, my dear Amasia,” said Ahmet “I would suggest that you should also examine these muslins from Scutari and Tumova. From this sample you may judge of the exquisite workmanship. But you will be fairly surprised, when you come on board, by the variety of the designs and the colours of the fabrics.”

“Well, it is quite understood that we are going to visit the Guidare, captain; “said Nedjeb”

“You will never regret your visit,” replied Yarhud. “But permit me to show you some other articles. Here are brocades studded with diamonds; chemises of silk crape of diaphanous texture; tissues for feredjis, muslins for jacmalls, Persian shawls for girdles, taffetas for pan talons.”

Amasia could not sufficiently admire the magnificient stuffs which the Maltese captain unfolded before her, and displayed with such cunning artifice. If he were as good a sailor as he was a skilful trader, the Guidare would never meet with any mishap under Yarhud’s command. All women — and young Turkish women are no exception to the general rule — permit themselves to be tempted by the sights of fabrics from the best looms of the east.

Ahmet perceived at once how much struck Amasia was with the display, and certainly, as Nebjeb had said, neither the bazaars of Odessa nor

Constantinople; not even the great stores of Ludovic the celebrated Armenian merchant, could offer a more extended choice.

“Dearest Amasia,-’ said Ahmet, “you would not like this worthy captain to take all this trouble for nothing. Since he has shown you these beautiful things, and there are even more beautiful ones on board, — we may, I think, pay the vessel a visit.”

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Nedjeb, who could not remain still. She ran down to the edge of the water as she spoke.

“And,” continued Ahmet, “we shall no doubt find some silk goods which will satisfy Nedjeb too.”

“Well, and must not I have something to do honour to the wedding-day?” retorted Nedjeb, who had overheard him; “something to celebrate my mistress’s wedding with the generous Seigneur Ahmet?”

“So good as he is too,” added Amasia, extending her hand to her affianced husband.

“That is settled then, captain,” said Ahmet; “you will see us on board your vessel.”

“At what hour?” enquired Yarhud, “for I would like to show you all my fine things.”

“Say in the afternoon,” replied Ahmet.

“Why not at once?” said Nedjeb.

“Oh the impatient creature!” replied Amasia, laughing. “She is even more anxious than I am to visit this floating bazaar. One might very easily perceive that Ahmet has promised her a present which will make her smarter and more coquettish than ever.”

“Coquettish for you alone, my dearest mistress,” said Nedjeb in an affectionate manner.

“It only rests with you, Seigneur Ahmet,” said Yarhud. “You can go on board at once if you please. My gig can be brought to the steps and in a few strokes we shall be on board.”

“Let us go then, captain,” said Ahmet.

“Yes, yes, let us go on board!” exclaimed Nedjeb.

“Very well, since Nedjeb wishes it,” added Amasia.

Then Captain Yarhud told the sailor to gather up all the samples which he had brought, and while the man was thus occupied he himself advanced to the edge of the terrace and hailed the Guidare.

Immediately there was a movement on board. The boat was launched; and in five minutes, under the impulse of four strong rowers, the gig came alongside the steps of the terrace.

Captain Yarhud then signified to Ahmet that he was at the young man’s disposal.

Yarhud, notwithstanding his habitual self- command, could scarcely conceal his satisfaction at the turn things had taken, and at the opportunity which had presented itself. Time pressed, for Kéraban might arrive now at any moment, and there was nothing to prevent his remaining for a day or two to celebrate the wedding of the young couple. Now Amasia, as the wife of Ahmet, would not be an acceptable visitor at the palace of the Seigneur Saffar.

Yes: captain Yarhud felt as if suddenly impelled to act by force. I was quite in h is line to act without any consideration or scruple. Besides the circumstances were all favourable, and the wind was in the proper quarter for his enterprise. The vessel would be well in the offing before any pursuit could be attempted, even supposing the abduction were immediately discovered. Had Ahmet been absent, Yarhud, would not have hesitated to carry Amasia and her maid on board then and there; and put to sea with them, while they were engaged in examining the various fabrics in the cabin. It would be easy enough to keep them pri- sonei sand stifle their cries until the Guidare had gained the open sea. With Ahmet present the difficulties had increased, but were not unsurmountable. The captain would not hesitate to put Ahmet “out of the way,” if necessary. The murder would be put in the bill, and Seigneur Safiar would have to pay the increased cost: that would be all!

Yarhud remained standing on the steps and thinking what course would be best when he had persuaded Ahmet and his companions to embark in the boat for the Guidare, which lay scarcely a cable’s length away, lifting gently to the motion of the waves.

Ahmet, standing upon the lowest step, was about to hand Amasia to her seat in the stern of the gig, when the door leading into the gallery opened, and a man of about fifty years of age, dressed something in the European style, entered hurriedly. “Amasia! Ahmet!” he cried. This was Selim the banker; the father of Amasia and the correspondent of Kéraban.

“Daughter — Ahmet! Where are you?”

“Father, what is the matter?” exclaimed Amasia. “Why have you returned so quickly?”

“I have important news.”

“Good news?” asked Ahmet.

“Excellent,” replied Selim. “An express sent by Kéraban has just reached me.”

“Really!” exclaimed Nedjeb. “A special messenger, who has advised me of Kéraban’s speedy arrival He was not far in advance of your uncle.”

“Uncle Kéraban! Do you mean that he has left Constantinople?” cried Ahmet “Yes, and I am expecting him here.” Fortunately for the captain of the Guidare, no one perceived the angry gestures with which he received this intelligence. The sudden arrival of Ahmet’s uncle was a contingency which would seriously interfere with the accomplishment of the worthy captain’s designs.

“Ah! Seigneur Kéraban is good,” exclaimed Nedjeb.

“But why is he coming?” asked Amasia.

“For your marriage, my dear young lady,” replied the attendant. “What other object could bring him to Odessa?”

“That must be the reason,” said Selim.

“I think so too,” said Ahmet. “Else why need he have quitted Constantinople? He must be enchanted. Fancy my worthy uncle leaving his business suddenly without any previous intimation of his intention. He wishes to surprise us.”

“He will be well received and gladly welcomed,” said Nedjeb.

“Did not his messenger tell you the reason for his coming?” enquired Amasia of her father.

“No, nothing whatever,” replied Selim. “The man had ridden post from Majaki, where Kéraban’s carriage was changing horses. He came to the banking-house and merely announced the immediate arrival of Kéraban at Odessa, and as he will halt nowhere, we may expect him at any moment”

If the contumacious Kéraban was at that time endowed with all the most amiable qualities of mankind as friend, uncle, and “seigneur,” by those interested, can we be surprised? His unexpected arrival meant the celebration of the wedding between Amasia and Ahmet, and the happiness of the young people was assured; no fatal delay would mar their future. Ah, if Kéraban were the most obstinate, he was, nevertheless, the best of men.

Yarhud, impassible as ever, was a spectator of this family scene; but he had not sent his boat away. It was very important that he should become aware of the plans of the Seigneur Kéraban; indeed he was afraid that he would insist upon the marriage of Amasia before he continued his journey around the Black Sea.

At that moment voices, which overpowered a more imperious voice, were heard outside. The door opened and Kéraban. followed by Van Mitten, Bruno, and Nizib, entered the gallery.

CHAPTER X.

“Good day, friend Selim, good day. May Allah protect you and yours!”

So saying, Kéraban shook Selim’s hand warmly.

“Good day, nephew Ahmet;” and then Kéraban folded the young man in his arms.

“Good day, my little Amasia,” he continued kissing the girl on both cheeks.

All this passed so quickly that no one had any time to reply to the salutations.

“Now we had better be going,” said Kéraban turning to Van Mitten.

The phlegmatic Dutchman, who had not been introduced, appeared like some strange personage in the scene. Seeing Kéraban distributing his hand-shakes and embraces with such prodigality, Van Mitten had no doubt that his friend had come to hasten the marriage; but when Kéraban cried “en route” the Dutchman was gTeatly amazed.

It was Ahmet, however, who first interposed.

“How!” he exclaimed. “Going away?”

“Yes, we are off again, nephew.”

“You really are going, uncle?”

“This moment”

The general astonishment was very marked, and Van Mitten whispered to Bruno —

“Certainly this way of acting is very characteristic of my friend Kéraban.”

“Very much so,” replied Bruno.

Meanwhile Amasia looked at Ahmet, who looked at Selim, while Nedjeb had eyes for no one but this mysterious uncle who was anxious to get away almost before you could say he had arrived.

“Come along, Van Mitten,” said Kéraban as he turned to the door.

“Monsieur, will you tell me — ” said Ahmet to Van Mitten.

“What can I tell you?” asked the Dutchman turning round suddenly, for he was following his host.

But Kéraban returned as he was at the door and said, addressing the banker, —

“By the way, friend Selim, can you change me a few thousand piastres?”

“A few thousand piastres!” echoed Selim, who did not understand.

“Yes, Selim; for Russian money: I want some for my journey in Muscovite Territory.”

“But, uncle, will you tell us,” — began Ahmet who was standingnowbeside Amasia, “will you tell us — ”

“At what rate is the exchange?” continued Kéraban without paying any attention to Ahmet.

“Three and a half per cent,” replied Selim, in whom the banker at once predominated.

“What! three and a half!”

“Roubles are at a premium,” replied Selim. “On the Exchange they are asking — ”

“Look here, friend Selim, it must be three and a quarter for me: you understand — three and a quarter.”

“Oh yes — for you certainly, friend Kdra- uan — and without any commission at all.”

Selim evidently had no longer any definite idea of what he was saying or doing.

All this time Yarhud at the end of the gallery was listening to what was going on very attentively. Would the issue be favourable or unfavourable to his projects?

Ahmet now seized his uncle by the arm, and, not without difficulty, succeeded in stopping him.

“Uncle,” he said, “you have embraced us all iust when you have arrived — ”

“Just as I am about to go away, you mean,” replied Kéraban.

“Well, be it so: I do not wish to contradict you. But at least tell me why you have come to Odessa.”

“Because Odessa was in my way. Had Odessa not been a stage in my journey, I should not have come here. Is not that so, Van Mitten?”

The Dutchman contented himself by assenting with a nod.

“Ah yes, by the by, you have not been introduced. I must present you.” Then, addressing Selim, Kéraban continued —

“My friend Van Mitten, my correspondent at Rotterdam, whom I am bringing to dine with me at Scutari.”

“At Scutari!” exclaimed the banker.

“It seems so,” said Van Mitten.

“And Bruno his servant,” continued Kéraban; “a brave follower who does not wish to be separated from his master.”

“It seems so,” said Bruno, like an echo.

“Now, let us be off,” said the impetuous Turk.

“If it must beso, uncle,” said Ahmet, “we will not endeavour to detain you. But if you are only here because Odessa happens to be in your way, may I enquire what route you are taking for Scutari?”

“The route which leads round the Black Sea.”

“Around the Black Sea!” exclaimed Ahmet.

A dead silence supervened for a few seconds, and then Kéraban said —

“Well, if you please, what is there so very surprising in that? Is there anything so very extraordinary in our going from Constantinople to Scutari by the sea-coast route?”

Selim and Ahmet looked at each other, significantly. Was the rich merchant of Galata going mad?

“Friend Kéraban,” said the banker at length, “we do not wish to oppose you in any way.” This was the usual phrase, and a prudent one when dealing with the obstinate Kéraban. “We have no wish to contradict you at all, only it appears to us that you might have perhaps reached Scutari more directly by crossing the Bosphorus.”

“There is no longer any Bosphorus!” said Kéraban.

“No longer any Bosphorus!” exclaimed Ahmet.

“Not for me — which is the same thing. There is a strait for such people as will submit to pay an iniquitous tax of four paras a head; a tax which these new Turks have imposed upon waters which have hitherto been free as air.”

“What! a new tax?” said Ahmet, who at once comprehended the situation; and that his uncle had had some discussion in which his obstinacy had refused to give way: hence his departure from Constantinople.

“Yes,” exclaimed Kéraban, working himself into a pitch of excitement. “Just as I was about to cross in my caique to dine at Scutari with my friend Van Mitten, this tax was ordained. Naturally I refused to pay it. The officials refused to let me pass. I said that I knew how to reach Scutari without crossing the Bosphorus. They said I could not: I replied that I could. And so I will, by Allah! I would rather have my hand cut off, than pay those ten paras. No, by Mahomet, they do not know Kéraban!"

Evidently they did not know Kéraban. But Selim, Ahmet, Van Mitten, and Amasia knew him; and they perceived that, after what had passed, all their efforts to change his resolution would be in vain. There was no use in attempting to argue the point.

Discussion would have only led to complications. They must accept the situation, and without any consultation it was accepted unanimously.

"After all, you are right, uncle;" said Ahmet.

"Quite right," added Selim.

"I am always right," replied Kéraban, modestly.

"One ought to resist such iniquitous imposts," continued Ahmet, "even though it cost you a fortune." — !

' Even my life," said Kéraban.

"You have done well to refuse payment,

and to show that you can reach Scutari I from Constantinople without crossing the Bosphorus."

"And without paying ten paras;" added Kéraban; "even though the alternative cost me five hundred thousand!"

"But you are not absolutely compelled to leave here at once, I suppose," said Ahmet persuasively.

“Absolutely compelled, nephew,” replied Kéraban. “I suppose you are aware that I must return in less than six weeks.”

“Quite so, uncle, — so you can give us eight days in Odessa.”

“Not five days — not four — not one day — not an hour” — exclaimed Kéraban.

Ahmet, perceiving that the natural obstinacy of the man was cropping up, signed to Amasia to intercede.

“And our marriage, Monsieur Kéraban?” asked the girl modestly, taking his hand.

“Your marriage, Amasia. That will still be a fixture. It must be accomplished before the end of next month, and so it shall be. My journey will not retard it by a day — if I leave here at once!”

So crumbled thecastle in the air which had been erected: the scaffolding of hopes which had been put up on the unexpected arrival of Kéraban fell to the ground. The wedding would not be hastened, but on the other hand it would not be delayed. How could he count upon the accomplishment of the conditions, with a long and toilsome journey in prospect?

Ahmet could not restrain an angry movement, which fortunately his uncle did not observe, any more than he noticed the shade of disappointment on Amasia’s brow, or than he heard Nedjeb’s whisper of “Oh, the Wretch!”

“Besides” — continued Kéraban in the tone of a person who makes a proposition to which no possible exception can be taken — “besides, I count, upon Ahmet accompanying me!”

“That is a home thrust which will be difficult to parry,” whispered Van Mitten to Bruno.

“They will not parry it,” said the valet.

In fact Ahmet had received it full in his heart. Amasia also was struck dumb and remained motionless, by the verdict which was to deprive her of her affianced husband. She clung to Nedjeb who would have liked to tear Kéraban’s eyes out!

The captain of the Guidare did not lose a word of the conversation. Things were taking a turn favourable for him.

Selim now througlit it time to interpose,

though he had no hope of altering Kéraban’s determination; so he said —

“Is it really necessary that your nephew should accompany you on your tour of the Black Sea, Kéraban?”

“Necessary, no; but I do not think that Ahmet will decline to accompany me!”

“Nevertheless — ” continued Selim.

“Nevertheless what?” cried Kéraban grinding his teeth, — and this question closed the discussion.

There was again silence for a space which seemed interminable. Meantime Ahmet made his decision boldly. He spoke to his fiancee apart, and succeeded in making her understand that, however terrible the parting would be, there was nothing to be gained by resisting the mandate; that, without him, the journey would very likely be prolonged and meet with numerous delays, which his perfect acquaintance with the Russian language would remove. So, by accompanying his uncle, Ahmet decided that no time would be lost, and he would also hasten the journey, even though it cost three times as much; and he would all the more certainly bring Kéraban back in time for the wedding fixed to take place at the end of the following month.

Amasia had not the courage to say yes; but she understood that Ahmet was right.

“Very well, uncle,” said the young man, “I will accompany you; I am ready to go; but — ”

“Oh, we will have no conditions, nephew.”

“Unconditionally, then,” said Ahmet; “but,” he added mentally, “I will make you run till you are out of breath; pig-headed uncle that you are!”

“Nowwe must start,” said Kéraban: and, turning to Selim —

“Are those roubles ready?” he asked.

“I will give them to you at Odessa, whither I will accompany you,” replied Selim.

“Are you ready, Van Mitten?”

“Always ready,” replied the Dutchman.

“Well now, Ahmet, embrace your fiancee and let us begone.”

Ahmet threw his arms round the young girl, who was bathed in tears.

“Do not cry, dearest Amasia,” he said: “if our marriage is not advanced, it will not be postponed, I promise you that. Only a few weeks — — — — ”

“Ah, my dear mistress,” said Nedjeb, “if Seigneur Kéraban would only break a leg or two, before he leaves this place! Shall I see about it?”

But Amasia desired the maid to hold her tongue. Still Nedjeb was quite capable of carrying out her threat, or of finding some other means to stop the intractable uncle.

Farewells were exchanged, the last kisses given; nearly everyone present was more or less affected, even the Dutchman felt an accelerated movement of the heart. Kéraban alone saw nothing, and wished to see nothing, of the general sorrow and tenderness.

“Is the chaise ready?” he asked.

“The chaise is ready,” replied Nizib.

“Come along, then. Ah! ycru new- fashioned Turks, who dress like Europeans, who do not even know how to get fat. (This was evidently an unpardonable sin in Kéraban’s eyes.) Ah, you renegades, who submit to the decrees of Mahmoud: I will show you that there is still one of the old believers left, of whom you will never get the better!”

No one contradicted him, yet he proceeded in a still more excited manner —

“Ah! you pretend to monopolize the Bosphorus, do you? Well, I will get to the opposite side of it. That for your Bosphorus! I laugh at your Bosphorus.

What did you say, Van Mitten?”

“I said nothing,” replied Van Mitten, who had taken very good care not to open his mouth.

“Your Bosphorus — their Bosphorus,” continued Kéraban shaking his fist towards the south. “Fortunately the Black Sea is there, and it has a coast line not exclusively for caravans. I will follow’that road. I will circumambulate it; and you will see the faces of your officials, when I appear upon the heights of Scutari, without having thrown my paras into the box of that set of administrative mendicants.”

We must confess that Kéraban, when he reached this crowning invective, was really magnificent in his anger.

“Come, Ahmet; come, Van Mitten. Away, away, away!”

He had reached the door, when Selim detained him —

“Friend Kéraban,” said he, “permit me a simple observation.”

“I will have no observations.”

“Well then, a remark which I wish to make,” persisted the banker.

“We have no time.”

“Listen to me,” continued Selim. “When you have reached Scutari, having made the tour of the Black Sea, what will you do?”

“I — do? why — I — I — ”

“You do not, I suppose, intend to remain at Scutari for ever without visiting Constantinople, where your business house is?”

“No,” replied Kéraban, with some hesitation.

“In fact, uncle,” said Ahmet, “if you still continue obstinate about crossing the Bosphorus, our wedding — ”

“Friend Selim,” interrupted Kéraban, eluding the main point, “nothing can be more simple. What is there to prevent you and Amasia from coming to Scutari? It will cost you ten paras each, it is true, to cross the Bosphorus, but your honour is not pledged like mine in the matter.”

“Yes, yes, come to Scutari in a month,” exclaimed Ahmet. “We will meet you there, dear Amasia; and, you may depend upon it, we will not keep you waiting.”

“So be it. We meet at Scutari,” said Selim, “and then the marriage shall be celebrated. But, after all, Kéraban, when the wedding is over, will you not return to Constantinople?”

“Certainly; I will return — certainly;” said Kéraban. “How?”

“Well, if the vexatious tax has been abolished, I will cross the Bosphorus, without paying.”

“And if the tax be not removed?” said Selim.

“If it be not taken off,” said Kéraban, with a superb gesture, “then, by Allah, I will retrace my steps, and make the tour of the Black Sea over again!”

CHAPTER XI.

THEY had departed. They had quitted the villa: Seigneur Kéraban to accomplish his journey, Van Mitten to accompany his friend, Ahmet to follow his uncle, Nizib and Bruno because they could not do otherwise. The villa was practically deserted, because we need not reckon ladies and the five or six servants who continued their ordinary avocations. Selim himself accompanied the travellers to Odessa to change the money required for the expedition.

The villa, therefore, now contained only the two girls, Amasia and Nedjeb.

The Maltese captain was quite aware of this. He had followed all the incidents of the leave-taking with unfailing interest. Would Seigneur Kéraban postpone the marriage until his return? He had postponed it for the present — one trump in the captain's hand already! Would Ahmet consent to accompany his uncle? He had consented — trump number two!

Now the Maltese had a third "honour "in his hand. Amasia and her attendant were left alone in the gallery which opened to the sea. The vessel he commanded was lying off shore; his boat was at the steps. His sailors were accustomed to obey his merest sign. He had nothing to wish for.

The captain was sorely tempted to employ violent measures in the abduction of Amasia; but as he was really a prudent man and did not wish to leave anything to "chance," he decided to leave no traces behind him. So he reflected seriously upon the means to be employed.

It was then broad day. If he attempted to carry away Amasia by force, she would call for assistance, and Nedjeb would join in giving the alarm. Perhaps they would be heard by the servants; the Guidare would be noticed sailing rapidly away; and the clue to the outrage would be supplied. No; better wait until darkness fell, and meantime act circumspectly. One important point had been already gained — Ahmet was away.

So the Maltese remained aloof, seated in the stern-sheets of his gig, which was partially concealed by the balustrade, and watched the two girls. They scarcely bestowed a thought upon that very dangerous personage in their vicinity.

If, however, the young people, in consequence of the arrangements already made, would consent to go on board the felucca to examine the stuffs, or for any other purpose — and Yarhud had some idea concerning this — he would be able to make up his mind and decide the question without waiting for night.

After Ahmet's departure, Amasia, struck down by the sudden blow, remained pensive and silent, tearfully regarding the distant northern horizon where lay the path which the travellers must follow, and on which route lay so many dangers and delays, that would try the endurance of Seigneur Kéraban and his companions whom he dragged, unwilling, at his chariot wheels.

Had the marriage been solemnized, Amasia would have unhesitatingly accompanied Ahmet. Would his uncle have opposed it? No, he would not have wished to do so.

Once she had become his niece, she fancied she would acquire some influence over him, and she would have arrested him in the dangerous course on which his obstinacy had launched him. Now she was alone, and had to wait many weeks before she and Ahmet could be again united in the Scutari villa, or their wedding solemnized.

But if Amasia was sad, Nedjeb was furious, and vented her indignation upon the headstrong merchant who had been the cause of the separation. Ah! if her own marriage had been in question, the young Zingara would never have permitted him to carry off her intended. She would have met obstinacy with obstinacy. No; nothing of the kind would have happened in her case!

Nedjeb approached her young mistress, and taking her by the hand led her to the sofa, whereon she forced her to repose; then, taking a stool, she seated herself by her mistress.

“In your place,” said Nedjeb, “instead of thinking of Seigneur Ahmet and lamenting his absence, I would think of Seigneur Kéraban and abuse him roundly.”

“What good would that do?” said Amasia listlessly.

“I fancy we should be less sad,” replied Nedjeb. “If you like, we will heap a series of maledictions upon this uncle’s head. He deserves them all, and I assure you I will give him full measure.”

“No, Nedjeb,”replied Amasia. “Letus rather speak of Ahmet. Of him alone ought I to think, and I only think of him.”

“Let us then speak of him,” said Nedjeb. “In truth, dear mistress, he is the most charming fianc’e ever girl possessed; but what an uncle he has! That despot, that selfish wretch, who had only a word to say and did not say it

— who refused to remain here for the few days he might have given us. Indeed, he deserves — ”

“Let us talk of Ahmet,” said Amasia. “Yes. Ah, how he adores you. How happy you will be with him. He would be perfection if he had not such a man for his uncle. Of what can he be made, I wonder! Do you know, I think he has done wisely not to marry. Against such a disposition as his even the very slaves of the harem would have rebelled.”

“There, you are speaking again of him,” said Amasia, whose thoughts were running on Ahmet “No, no; I was talking of Seigneur Ahmet — I am like yourself thinking only of Ahmet. Yes, in his place I would not have giver, way. I would have insisted. I really thought he had more determination!”

“People would tell you, Nedjeb, that Ahmet has displayed more energy in yield- ng to, than he would have done if resisting his uncle’s commands. Do not you perceive that, though it causes me anxiety, it is better he should go and thus endeavour to hasten the journey by all possible means, and prevent the numerous dangers which Kéraban’s obstinate rashness would lead to? No, Nedjeb, no; by going away, Ahmet has proved his courage, and has given me another proof of his devotion.”

“You may be right, my dear mistress,”

replied the attendant who, carried away by her native vivacity, could not yield her opinion. “Yes, Seigneur Ahmet certainly showed energy in going away; but don’t you think he would have displayed more had he prevented his uncle from going?”

“Was such a course possible?” said Amasia. “Now, Nedjeb, I ask you, was such a course possible?”

“Yes — no — perhaps,” replied Nedjeb. “It was not a question of breaking an iron bar. Ah, that Kéraban! It is all his fault, and if any accident should happen, he alone will be responsible. When I think of his running into danger, simply because he won’t pay ten paras, and imperilling the safety of Seigneur Ahmet, your safety, and consequently mine, — I wish; yes, I wish that the Black Sea extended to the end of the globe, to see whether he would be obstinate enough to make the tour.”

“He would do it,” replied Amasia, in a tone of sincere conviction. “But let us talk of Ahmet, Nedjeb, and of no else but him.”

At that moment Yarhud quitted his boat, and advanced unperceived towards the two girls. At the sound of his footsteps they turned round, and appeared surprised, as well as somewhat alarmed, at seeing the Maltese so near them. Nedjeb at once arose and said — “Is that you, captain? How came you here? what do you want?”

“I do not want anything,” replied Yarhud, pretending surprise at this reception. “I want nothing; I only came to put my services at your disposal for — ”

“Well, for what?” said Nedjeb, as he paused.

“To conduct you on board the vessel,” replied the captain. “Have not you decided to inspect the cargo, and to choose such articles as may seem good to you?”

“That is true, dear mistress,” said Nedjeb. “We have promised the captain.”

“Yes, we promised when Ahmet was here,” replied Amasia. “But he has gone away, and it is no longer fitting for us to go on board the Guidare.”

The captain frowned, but he quickly recovered himself, and replied calmly —

“The Guidare cannot remain here long; and I must sail to-morrow, or the day after at the latest. If the lady wishes to inspect my stock, and to purchase any of the goods, she must do so without delay and take advantage of the opportunity now. My boat lies yonder, and we can be on board in a few minutes.”

“We thank you, captain,” replied Amasia coldly, “but I have no taste for such excursions in Seigneur Ahmet’s absence. He must accompany us in our visit to the Guidare: he must assist us in our selection. He is no longer here, and I cannot, I will not, go without him.”

“I am sorry for that,” replied Yarhud; “and all the more because no doubt Seigneur Ahmet will be agreeably surprised on his return to find you have made the purchases you wished. The opportunity will not occur again, and you will regret the loss of it.”

“That is possible, captain,” replied Nedjeb; “but at this moment, I think you would do better not to press the point.”

“Be it so,” replied Yarhud, bowing. “In any case, let me hope that, if, a few weeks hence, the chances of trade compel me to remain at Odessa, you will not forget the promise you have made, to honour me with a visit.”

“We will not forget it, captain,” said Amasia, as she signed to the Maltese to retire.

Yarhud saluted the girls and advanced some paces towards the terrace, when suddenly he stopped as if an idea had just occurred to him, and, approaching Amasia as she was about to quit the verandah, he said —

“One word more — or rather let me offer a suggestion which cannot fail to be agreeable to the fiancee of the Seigneur Ahmet”

“What is the man worrying about?” exclaimed Amasia, who was somewhat impatient of the captain’s persistency in intruding himself and his opinions at the villa.

“Chance has made me a spectator of the scene which took place before the departure of Seigneur Ahmet”

“Chance?” exclaimed Amasia, who had become distrustful, as if by presentiment of evil.

“Simply chance,” repeated Yarhud. “I was in my boat — which is at your disposal.”

“What proposition have you to make to us, captain?” inquired Amasia.

“A very natural one,” he replied. “I have noticed how the daughter of Selim the Banker has been affected by the sudden departure of Seigneur Ahmet, and if she would like to see him again once more — ”

“See him once more? What do you mean?” exclaimed Amasia, whose heart was beating tumultuously.

“I mean,” said Yarhud,” that in an hour Seigneur Kéraban’s carriage will pass along the road which rounds yonder cape.”

Amasia stepped forward and gazed at the headland indicated by the wily captain.

“There? Over there?” she said.

“Yes.”

“Oh, my dear mistress, if we could only reach that point?”

“Nothing can be more easy,” said Yarhud. “Within half an hour, with this breeze, the Guidare could get there; so if you like to come you can embark at once.”

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Nedjeb, who in this excursion only perceived an opportunity for Amasia to see her affianced once again.

But Amasia was more prudent and reflected upon the suggestion. The captain could scarcely control his impatience at her hesitation, and this anxiety had not escaped the banker’s daughter. The appearance of Yarhud was not in his favour either, so she remained uninfluenced by the temptation.

“I await your orders,” said the captain.

“No, captain,” replied Amasia. “Were I to see my fiance under such conditions, I believe I should give him more pain thaO pleasure.”

Yarhud, comprehending that he had n° hope of altering her determination, retire coldly.

The next moment the boat put off, and the captain and his men returned to the vessel. The gig remained alongside, however.

The girls continued together in the gallery an hour or more. Amasia was seated, leaning her elbows upon the balustrade, and was gazing anxiously towards the headland indicated by Yarhud, for at that point the carriage would be visible for a moment. Nedjeb also eagerly watched the place. After the lapse of an hour or so, the Zingara exclaimed: "Ah! see, look yonder! Do you not perceive a carriage on the road? There on the summit of the cliff."

"Yes, yes," replied Amasia. "That is their chaise. 'Tis he! 'tis he!"

"He cannot see you," said Nedjeb.

"What matter?" replied Amasia; "I know he is looking at me."

"No doubt of it, dear lady. His eyes will discern the villa and perhaps ourselves."

"Au revoir, my Ahmet; an revoir," cried Amasia, as if the occupants of the carriage could have heard her farewell.

Amasia and Nedjeb quitted the gallery, and as soon as the chaise had disappeared they retired to the interior of the house.

Yarhud from the deck of his vessel perceived them departing, and gave orders to the men to watch for their return as the evening approached. Then he arranged his plan to gain by force what he could not effect by stratagem.

There was no such question of immediate hurry in the execution of the deed he proposed, since the marriage could not take place for six weeks, as Ahmet had gone away. Yet the impatience of Seigneur Saffar had to be considered, as well as his speedy return to Trebizond. Added to these impulses, the navigation of the Black Sea by a small sailing vessel which might be retarded by calms or contrary winds had to be taken into consideration, and fifteen or twenty days might be thus lost On all accounts, therefore, Yarhud felt obliged to sail at the earliest possible moment if he would arrive at the time agreed upon with Scarpante. Yarhud was, no doubt, a rogue, but he was a rogue who kept his engagements. So he decided to act at once.

Circumstances favoured him. Towards evening — before her father had returned — Amasia re-entered the gallery, and this time alone. The girl wished to gaze on the distant hills which contained in their embrace him she loved best. She took her place again and, leaning upon the balustrade, contemplated the darkening landscape with that fond, “far off” expression in her eyes which no distance could remove.

Thus plunged in reverie, Amasia did not perceive that the boat put off from the Guidare. She did not notice its almost noiseless approach by the terrace, nor its bringing up at the steps close by. Nevertheless Yarhud and three of his men were even then creeping cautiously towards her, up the slope; but the girl never noticed their approach.

Suddenly Yarhud leaped up and seized her with such force that she had no power of resistance.

“Help! help!” she screamed.

Her cries were immediately stifled, but they had been heard by Nedjeb, who at once came in search of her mistress.

Scarcely had the waiting-maid passed the door of the gallery, when she was seized by two sailors, who at once prevented her from giving any alarm by word or deed.

“On board!” exclaimed Yarhud.

The two girls were at once forcibly carried to the boat and rowed swiftly towards the Guidare, which, with her anchor a-peak and her sails hoisted, was lying-to, awaiting the captain’s return.

As soon as Amasia and Nedjeb were on board, they were carried to the stern cabin, where they could hear and see nothing of what passed, and the vessel was put before the wind, and her direction was made so that she would pass near the little creek at the extremity of the grounds of the villa.

But, rapidly as all this had been accomplished, the scene had attracted the attention of some of the out-door servants. They had heard Amasia’s cries and had given the alarm.

At that moment Selim returned and was informed what had passed. In agony he searched for his daughter — she had disappeared!

But perceiving the Guidare making for the point, Selim understood the whole matter in a moment. He quickly crossed the gardens towards the place which the vessel must pass, so as to avoid the rocks at the extremity of the creek.

“Wretches!” he exclaimed. “They are taking away my daughter, Amasia. Stop them! Stop!”

A musket fired from the deck of the Guidare was the only response to this appeal. Selim fell with a bullet in his shoulder.

In another moment, the felucca, with a flowing sheet, had disappeared from the sight of those at the villa.

CHAPTER XII.

The postchaise with fresh horses had quitted Odessa about one o’clock in the afternoon. Kéraban occupied the left corner of the interior, Van Mitten the right, and Ahmet was between them. Bruno and Nizib were in the “cabriolet,” where they chatted or slept — chiefly the latter. The sun was shining brightly, and the sea broke in dark blue waves against the gray cliffs.

In the interior of the chaise conversation was at first as limited as in the “cabriolet” outside, and if one party slept higher, the other reflected more deeply. Kéraban was thinking of his firm determination, and of the “turn” he was giving the Ottoman authorities. Van Mitten was thinking of the unexpected journey he was making, and did not cease to wonder how it had happened that he, a citizen of Holland, had been launched thus upon a tour of the Black Sea, when he ought to be resting quietly in Pera or Constantinople.

Ahmet had made up his mind to the journey, but he determined not to spare his uncle’s purse whenever delay or trouble might be avoided by using it They would travel by the quickest and shortest route. The young man was ruminating on this as the chaise turned the point, and he could perceive the banker’s villa. He fixed his gaze upon it, no doubt at the same time Amasia’s eyes were directed to the carriage, and their regards crossed in mid air.

Then, addressing his uncle, Ahmet resolved to open a delicate question, and ask whether he had mastered all the details of the journey.

“Yes,” replied Kéraban, “we shall continue upon the shore route all along.”

“And whither are we bound just now?”

“To Koblewo, about twelve leagues from Odessa. We shall arrive at the place this evening.”

“And after leaving Koblewo?”

“We shall travel all night, and reach Nikolaief to-morrow about mid-day. We shall then have made eighteen leagues more.”

“Very good, uncle; we must travel quickly. But after leaving Nikolaief don’t you think of reaching the Caucasus district in a day or two?”

“How?” asked Kéraban.

“By taking the train. The south-Russian line by Alexandroff and Rostow would enable us to accomplish a good third of our journey.”

“Use a railway?” exclaimed Kéraban.

At that instant Van Mitten touched his youthful neighbour, and said in a low tone —

“It is useless to discuss the question. He has a horror of railways.”

Ahmet was not unaware of his uncle’s peculiarities in this and other respects, but he fancied that for once he would yield.

But Kéraban would not be Kéraban if he did give way.

“I think you were speaking of railways?” he said.

“Yes, uncle.”

“And you wish that I should do what I have never yet done — ”

“It seems to me — ”

“You wish that I, Kéraban, should permit myself to be dragged like a fool along an iron-rail by a steam-engine?”

“When you have tried it — ”

“Ahmet, it is evident you have not reflected upon this suggestion which you dare to make to me!”

“But, uncle — ”

“I tell you, you have not thought of what you are saying.”

“I assure you, uncle, that in the ‘ wagons ‘ — ”

“Wagons!” exclaimed Kéraban, with an accent impossible to describe.

“Yes, the carriages which run on the rails —

“Rails? What horrible words are these, and, may I ask you what language you are speaking?”

“Only the language of modern travellers.”

“Look here, nephew,” exclaimed Kéraban, who was getting excited, “do I look like a modern traveller? Do I look like a man who would permit himself to be dragged along in a ‘ wagon ‘ by a machine? Is it likely that I should slide along ‘ rails’ when I can drive on a road?”

“When time presses, uncle — ”

“Ahmet, look me in the face and listen to me. If there are no carriages, I will go in a cart. If there is no cart, I will ride; if I cannot get a horse, I will hire a donkey. If there are no donkeys, I will walk; and, when I cannot walk, I will crawl; and,

when I can no longer crawl, I — ”

“For goodness sake, stop,” cried Van Mitten.

“When I cannot crawl on hands and knees, I will drag myself along on my stomach,” said Kéraban in conclusion — “yes, on my stomach!”

Then seizing Ahmet by the arm, he said —

“Did you ever hear that Mahomet took the train to go to Mecca?”

To this question there was obviously no answer; and Ahmet, who would have replied that had railways existed in the time of Mahomet he would no doubt have used them, thought it best to be silent: while Kéraban sat in his corner grumbling, and condemning all words of a “railway “character.

However, if the chaise did not travel so rapidly as an express, it proceeded quickly. The horses went well upon the level road, and there was nothing to complain of. There was no want of relays. Ahmet, who, with his uncle’s consent, had undertaken to pay the expenses, lavished “tips “freely on all concerned with imperial generosity. Bank-notes flew out of his pocket, and he might have been starting a “paper-chase “with rouble currency.

The result of all this liberality was that the travellers reached Koblewo the same day. Thence they turned more inland, and crossing the Bug river, to the heights of Nikolaief, the chaise reached that town easily by mid-day on the 28th August.

Three hours’ rest was allowed for breakfast, &c. and Ahmet took the opportunity to write to Selim the banker, telling him of the journey so far and sending all kinds of messages to Amasia. Seigneur Kéraban occupied himself congenially in drinking coffee and smoking. Van Mitten and Bruno explored the town, whose prosperity threatens to outdo its rival Kherson, and to usurp the title of the district from it.

Ahmet was the first to give the signal for departure. The Dutchman did not keep him waiting. Kéraban gave a last puff to his narghileh as the postillion mounted his horse and the carriage rolled away to Kherson.

There were seventeen leagues to travel across an uninteresting country. Here and there were a few mulberry-trees, poplars, and willows. As they approached the Dneiper, the course of which is terminated at Kherson, the travellers came upon long expanses of ground, planted with tall reeds which appeared to be covered with the cornflower. But at the approach of the chaise, these “cornflowers” took to themselves wings, and proved to be blue jays whose discordent chattering was as disagreeable to the ear as their beautiful colours were pleasant to the eye.

At day-break on the 29 th of August, Seigneur Kéraban and his companions reached Kherson without incident. Kherson is the chief seat of government, the foundation of which is due to Potemkin. The travellers could not but congratulate this creation of the imperial favour of Catherine II. for they found an excellent hotel, where they stopped several hours, and some good shops, where they were enabled to replenish their stock of provisions — a duty which Bruno, much sharper than Nizib, performed to a marvel.

Some hours later they changed horses at Aleschki and descended towards the isthmus of Pdrdkop, which unites the Crimea to Russia.

Ahmet had not neglected to send a letter to Selim from Aleschki, and when the travellers were again seated in the chaise Kéraban enquired whether his nephew had sent his regards also to his friend the banker.

“I did not forget to do so, uncle,” replied Ahmet, “and I added that we were using all diligence to reach Scutari as soon as possible.”

“You did well, nephew; and he must not neglect to give us news of himself on every possible occasion.”

“Unfortunately, as we never know beforehand where we may stop,” said Ahmet, “our letters must remain unanswered.”

“True,” said Van Mitten.

“By the by,” said Kéraban addressing his friend, “it seems to me that you do not correspond much with Madame Van Mitten. What will that excellent woman think of you?”

“Madame Van Mitten, do you mean?” asked the Dutchman.

“Certainly”

“Madame Van Mitten is undoubtedly an excellent woman. As a wife, I have not a word to say against her, but as a life companion — But why speak of Madame Van Mitten at all, Kéraban?”

“Eh? Well, because I remember her as a most agreeable woman.”

“Indeed!” said Van Mitten, in the tone of a man who hears something for the first time.

“Did not I speak of her in the highest terms, Ahmet, when I returned from Holland?” said Kéraban turning to his nephew.

“Yes indeed, uncle,” replied the young man.

“And during my journey, was I not particularly charmed with the reception she gave me?”

“Ah!” remarked Van Mitten.

“Nevertheless,” continued Kéraban, “I must allow that at times she is capricious, and has curious ideas on some points. Still, those qualities are inherent in women, and if they cannot get over them it is best to have nothing to do with them — which is precisely how I have acted!”

“And you have acted wisely,” said Van Mitten.

“Is your wife as fond of tulips as ever?” enquired Kéraban. “She is a true Hollander in that respect.”

“Yes, passionately fond of them,” replied Van Mitten.

“Look here, Van Mittea Frankly now, I think you are very cool about your wife.”

“Cool! The expression is even too warm, if applied to my regard in that quarter.”

“What do you say? “exclaimed Kéraban.

“I say,” replied the Dutchman, “that I did not wish you to talk of Madame Van Mitten at all! But since you have mentioned her, and the occasion is favourable, I will make a confession.”

“A confession!”

“Yes, friend Kéraban: Madame Van Mitten and I are separated.”

“Separated, by mutual consent?”

“Yes.”

“Forever?”

“For ever.”

“Tell me all about it, unless your feelings — ”

“Feelings,” exclaimed the Dutchman, “why should I have any feeling in the matter?”

“Very well, then. Go on: speak. In my position as a Turk, Van Mitten, I am fond of tales and, as an unmarried man, I delight in all matrimonial histories.”

“Well,” said Van Mitten, in a disinterested manner, as if he were telling a story concerning a stranger; “for many years Madame Van Mitten and I did not get on very well. We had disputes upon every subject — bed-time, getting-up time, dinnertime: concerning what we ahould eat, and what we should not eat; on what we should drink; upon what we did; on the time of day it was, and what it ought to be; on the placing of the furniture; whether the fire should be lighted in this or that room; whether the window or door should be shut or open; on what plants should be retained in the garden, and what should be torn up.”

“That promised well,” remarkedKéraban.

“Yes, but you see it all came to nothing as I am of a mild and long-suffering disposition, and I always yielded without causing an open rupture.”

“That was perhaps the wisest plan,” said Ahmet.

“On the contrary,” remarked Kéraban, ‘ it was foolish.”

“I don’t know anything about it,” continued Van Mitten; “but, at any rate, in our last altercation I wished to resist, and I did resist, like a regular Kéraban!”

“By Allah, that is impossible,” cried the individual referred to, who knew himself thoroughly.

“More strongly than any Kéraban,” added Van Mitten.

“Mahomet protect me!” replied the other. “Do you mean to assert that you can be more obstinate than I?”

“It seems improbable on the face of it,” said Ahmet, in a tone that went to his uncle’s heart “You will soon see,” replied Van Mitten quietly.

“We shall not see that,” cried Kéraban.

“Will you permit me to finish? It was concerning tulips that the discussion arose between me and my wife, about those beautiful tulips — so dear to amateurs — Genners, which grow straight on the stalk, and of which there are more than a hundred varieties. I had none which cost me less than a thousand florin-, a bulb.”

“Eight thousand piastres,”said Kéraban, who was accustomed to reckon in Turkish money.

“Yes, about that,” replied the Dutchman. “Now Madame Van Mitten took it into her head one day to root up a Valentia in order to put an CEil de Soleil in its place. This was too much. I objected. She insisted. I endeavoured to seize her; she escaped, and rushing upon the Valentias tore one up by the roots.”

“Cost! Eight thousand piastres,” muttered Kéraban.

“Then,” continued Van Mitten, “I precipitated myself on an (Eil de Soleil and broke it.”

“Cost! Sixteen thousand piastres,” said Kéraban.

“My wife destroyed a second Valentia.”

“Twenty-four thousand piastres,” replied Kéraban, as if he were calling over his books at his counting-house.

“I responded with another CEil de Soleil.”

“Thirty-two thousand piastres.”

“Then the battle became general,” said Van Mitten; “till madame’s ammunition was exhausted. I received two splendid ‘ cloves ‘ on my head.”

“Forty-eight thousand piastres!”

“She received three others full in the chest.”

“Sixty-thousand piastres!”

“It was a regular rain of bulbs — such a thing has never been seen — and it lasted half-an-hour. The whole garden was torn up, and the conservatory afterwards dismantled. My entire collection was destroyed.”

“And, finally, the cost was — how much?” asked Kéraban.

“Greater than if we had only wanted head-wounds, like Homer’s economical heroes,” replied Van Mitten. “One way and another I fancy the cost was about twenty-five thousand florins!”

“Two hundred thousand piastres,” said Kéraban.

“But I was firm,” said Van Mitten.

“That was worth something.”

“Besides, J came away, having given orders to have my property realized, and transmitted to the bank in Constantinople. Then I came to Rotterdam with my faithful Bruno, and made up my mind not to enter my house again until Madame Van Mitten had quitted it — for a better world.”

“Where tulip-throwing is unknown,” remarked Ahmet “Now, Kéraban,” said Van Mitten, “have you had many fits of obstinacy which have cost you two hundred thousand piastres?”

“I?” said Kéraban, secretly a little annoyed at this question.

“Yes, certainly,” said Ahmet, “my uncle has had some — I know at least one.”

“What was that, if you please?” asked Van Mitten.

“Why this obstinate fit, which, for the sake of ten paras, is sending us all round the Black Sea. This will cost more than your little eradication of tulips.”

“It will cost what it will cost,” replied Kéraban drily. “But I think my friend Van Mitten has not paid too dearly for his liberty. That’s what comes of having only one wife. Mahomet knew what he was about when he permitted his followers to have as many as they could support.”

“Certainly,” replied Van Mitten. “I think ten wives are much easier to govern than one.”

“What is still more easy,” added Kéraban, moralizing, “is to have no wife at all!”

With this observation the conversation ended.

The chaise continued its course: at the post-house relays were found, and the journey was resumed. After travelling all night, the tourists were somewhat fatigued; but, at the instigation of Ahmet, they decided not to lose an hour, and pressed on. Having passed Bolschoi-Kopani, and Kalantschak, they reached Pdrdkop, at the end of the gulf of the same name — the point where the Crimea unites with Russia proper.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE Crimea! the Tau- risian Chersonese of the ancients; a quadrilateral, or rather an irregular lozenge, which seems to have been lifted by enchantment from the Italian shores; a peninsula which M. de Lesseps would transform into an island with two strokes of his knife; a corner of the earth which has been the coveted possession and the objective, of all the jealous peoples who dispute for the empire of the East; an ancient kingdom of the Bosphorus, which the Heracleans subdued six hundred years before the Christian Era; which yielded to Mithri- dates, the Alains, the Goths, the Huns, the Hungarians, the Tartars, the Genoese; a province which Mahomet II. made a rich dependency of his empire, and which Catherine II. annexed definitively to Russia in 1791!

How is it possible that this country, blessed by the gods, and disputed for by mortals, should escape the network of mythological legend? Have not wiseacres sought in the marshes of Sivach the traces of the gigantic works of the problematic people of Atlantis? Have not the poets of antiquity placed one of the entrances to the infernal regions near Cape Kerberian, the three “moles” of which form the heads of Cerberus. Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, become a priestess of Diana “in Tauris,” was here on the point of sacrificing to the goddess her brother Orestes, cast upon the shores of Cape Parthenium.

And now the Crimea in its southern part — worth more than all the arid islands of the archipelago — with its Tchadir Dagh rising four thousand feet to a table-land, whereon a feast could be laid for all the deities of Olympus; with its amphitheatres of guests, whose green mantle falls to the seashore; its “bouquets” of chestnut-trees, cypress, olives, Judas-trees, almonds, and laburnum, and its waterfalls, — is it not the most beautiful jewel in the crown of provinces which extends from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean? Is it not that vivifying and temperate climate that the Russians of the north as well as of the south; unite in seeking, the former to gain a refuge from the severities of a hyperborean winter, the latter to find shelter from the dryness of the east winds? Have they not founded colonies, and built castles, houses, villas, and cottages around Cape Aia, whose Ram-like head defies the attacks of the Black Sea’s waves, even to the extreme south of Tauris? Here we find Yalta and Aloupka, which belong to Prince Woronsow — a feudal manor outwardly, a dream of an oriental imagination within; Kisil Tasch, belonging to Count Poniatowski; Arteck, to Prince Andrd Galitr zin; Marsanda, Orcanda, Eriklik, imperial properties, and Livadia, a splendid palace with its cascades and streams, and whose winter-gardens are the favourite retreat of the Empress of all the Russias.

Here all dispositions — the curious, the sentimental, the artistic, the romantic — will find something to satisfy them. This little corner of the earth is a microcosm wherein Europe and Asia mingle. Here we find Tartar villages, Greek towns, oriental cities, with mosques, minarets, muezzins, dervishes, monasteries of Russian foundation, seraglios,

theba’ides in which many romantic adventures are buried; holy places, to which pilgrims converge; a Jewish mountain, which belongs to the tribe of Karaites; and a valley of Jehosaphat filled with tombs, like an ante-chamber to its prototype by the Ceriron, where thousands of the justified will unite once again at the summons of the last trump.

What wonderful places Van Mitten had to see; what novel impressions would he not have to note in this country to which a strange destiny had led him! But his friend Kéraban did not travel for the purpose of seeing anything; and Ahmet,besides being familiar with the Crimea, would not allow an hour more than what was absolutely necessary to be spent in even a cursory examination.

“Perhaps, after all,” said Van Mitten to himself, “perhaps I may be able, in passing, to obtain a light impression of this antique Chersonese which has been so justly praised.”

But it was not to be. The chaise continued its course by the shortest way, following an oblique line, from north to southwest, without passing through the centre, or touching the southern shore of the ancient Tauris. Indeed, such a route as Van Mitten would have followed, had been vetoed at a consultation wherein he had no voice. If, by passing through the Crimea, they could shorten the tour of the Sea of Azof — which route would have lengthened the journey one hundred and fifty leagues at the least — they would gain by cutting direct from Per£kop to the peninsula of Kertsch.

Then, from the other side of the Strait of Jenikale,the peninsula of Taman would offer a regular passage to the Caucasian territories.

So the chaise continued its way along the narrow isthmus to which the Crimea hangs like a great orange to a bough. On one side is the bay of Pdrekop, on the other the marshes of Sivach, better known under the name of the Putrid Sea — a vast tarn fed by the waters of the Tauris and the Sea of Azof, to which the cutting of Ghdnitchd serves as a canal.

The travellers as they passed were able to observe the Sivach, which is scarcely three feet deep, and in which the degree of salt- ness is almost at “saturation point” in certain places. Now as it is in such spots that the salt crystals are deposited, naturally the “Putrid Sea “could be made the most productive salt-marsh in the world. It must be confessed that the odours of the Sivach are not pleasant The air is impregnated with sulphuretted hydrogen. The fish that penetrate into the lake are quickly killed. The Putrid Sea resembles in this respect the Lake Asphaltites in Palestine.

The railway from Alexandroff to Sebasto- pol traverses this marsh. So Seigneur Kéraban heard with horror the whistling of the locomotives and the rumbling of the trains upon the rails which are sometimes washed by the dense waters of the Putrid Sea.

Next day, on the 31st of August, the travellers found themselves journeying upon a road through a fertile country. The leaves of the olive trees, blown back by the wind, seemed to be sprinkled with quicksilver; dark green cypresses, magnificent oaks and arbutus of great height were numerous. Everywhere upon the slopes were vineyards, which produce wines little inferior to some good French vintages.

Thanks to the liberality of Ahmet, no delays were met with: the horses were always at hand to be harnessed, and the postillions, frequently rewarded, were always willing to take the shortest cuts. In the evening they had passed the long straggling village of Dorte, and some leagues farther on they would reach the borders of the Putrid Sea again. At this place, the curious lagoon is only separated from the Sea of Azof by a tongue of sand, the average breadth of which is about a quarter of a league. This tongue of sand is called the arrow of Arabat, and extends from the village of that name to Ghdnitchd northwards, on terra firma; divided only by a cutting of three hundred feet through which the water from the Sea of Azof enters the marsh, as already stated.

At daybreak Seigneur Kéraban and his companions were surrounded by clouds of damp vapor, thick miasmas, which gradually dispersed under the influence of the sun’s rays.

The country was less wooded and more deserted here. A few dromedaries were noticed, animals of great size, and their appearance gave somewhat of an Arabic touch to the landscape. The few carriages that passed were of wood, without a particle of iron, and creaked and groaned loudly. Their appearance was primitive in the extreme, but in the villages and in the more isolated farms, Tartar generosity and hospitality are continually the prevailing features. Anyone may enter, seat himself at table, eat and drink as much as he pleases, and pay his score with a simple “Thank-you.”

It need scarcely be said that our travellers never abused these simple customs, which are rapidly disappearing. They left always some sufficient renumeration as a memento of their journey. That evening the team, fatigued by such a long stage, stopped at the bourgade of Arabat at the southern extremity of the “arrow.” There a fortress has been erected, and is surrounded by houses, scattered in all directions. All about this part of the country are quantities of fennel, the hiding-places of adders; and whole fields of water-melons, the crop of which is very abundant.

It was nine o’clock in the evening when the chaise was stopped before an auberge of small pretensions. It was the best in the place. In the forsaken Chersonese it does not pay to be too particular, and our travellers had to put up with the inn.

“Nephew Ahmet,” said Kéraban, “we have travelled for many days and nights without any more delay than was necessary to change horses. Now, for my own part, I shall not be sorry to have a few hours’ sleep even in a hotel bed!”

“I shall be delighted to do the same,”

said Van Mitten, rubbing his hips to get rid of his stiffness.

“What, lose twelve hours!” exclaimed Ahmet “Twelve hours, in a journey of six weeks?”

“Do you wish to argue the point?” asked Kéraban, in the slightly aggressive tone he usually adopted.

“No, uncle — no,” said Ahmet “When you have need of repose — ”

“Well, I have need of repose now, so has Van Mitten and Bruno, I suppose, as well as Nizib, who is only too glad to get it.”

“Seigneur Kéraban,” said Bruno, “I regard this idea of yours as one of the best you have ever had, and all the more praiseworthy if supper be included and served first.”

This suggestion of Bruno’s was very much to the point, as the provisions which had been carried in the chaise were rapidly diminishing, and what remained, it would be necessary to leave untouched, until the travellers reached Kertsch, an important town in the peninsula of the same name, where they could obtain an abundant supply.

Unfortunately, if the beds of the Arabat Inn were pretty good, even for travellers of such distinction, the arrangements of the kitchen left much to be desired. Tourists are not numerous in the Taurida: the principal guests at the aubcrge of Arabat are merchants or salt-buyers, people not difficult to please, who sleep on the hard beds, and eat whatever is put before them.

Seigneur Kéraban and his companions had to put up with a meagre repast — that is to say, a dish of pilaw, the national food — but with more rice than fowl, and more bone than flesh. Besides, the fowl was so old and tough, that it nearly resisted and defied Kéraban himself; but the solid molars of the headstrong Turk gained the victory at last, and he did not yield any more than he had ever done.

After this dish, a veritable tureen of yaourtz, or curdled milk, came upon the board to assist in the digestion of the pilaw: then some cakes, of a not very appetising character, called katlamas.

Bruno and Nizib were scarcely as well supplied as their masters, as might be expected. Their jaws would, no doubt, have done justice to the toughest of fowls, but they had not the opportunity to exercise them in that way. The pilaw on their table was substituted by a black substance, something like a thin brick from the chimney-back.

“What is that?” asked Bruno.

“I don’t know what they call it,” replied Nizib.

“What! you a native of the country, and — ”

“I am not a native of the country.”

“Well, very nearly — you are a Turk,” replied Bruno. “Well, my friend, taste a piece of this dried boot-sole, and tell me what you think of it.”

Nizib, always willing, took a piece of the said leather sole, and bit it.

“Well?” asked Bruno.

“Well, it is not good, but it is possible to eat it, all the same.”

“Yes, Nizib, when one is dying of hunger, and one has no other choice of food.”

Then Bruno boldly attacked the dish like a man who has decided not to get thin, but to risk all in the attempt to keep up appearances. And this the men did, aided by several glasses of a certain alcoholized beer.

Suddenly Nizib cried, “Allah protect me!”

“What has happened?” enquired Bruno.

“Suppose what I have eaten prove to be pork?”

“Pork!” exclaimed Bruno. “Ah, just so, Nizib. A good Mussulman, like you, is not permitted to partake of that excellent but unclean animal. Well, it seems to me that if the thing we have eaten is pork, we have only one course open to us — ”

“That is — ?”

“To digest it as quietly as possible now we have eaten it.”

But Nizib was not so easily comforted, for he was a very strict observer of the law of the Prophet, and he felt greatly troubled in mind. So Bruno volunteered to ascertain from the landlord what he had sent up for dinner.

Nizib was quickly reassured, and his digestion was no longer troubled. The dish was not meat at all; it was fish, shebac, a kind of “Saint Peter’s “fish, which when caught, is split and dried in the sun, and then smoked. These fish are exported in considerable numbers from Rostow on the Sea of Azof.

Masters and servants had accordingly to be content with a very light supper at the Inn of Arabat. The beds appeared even more unpleasant than the gnats in the carriage; but the sleepers were not subjected to any violent jolting, and the rest they obtained in their not too comfortable rooms, was sufficient to recruit their energies.

Next morning, 2nd September, at daybreak Ahmet was afoot, and he set off to the post-house, in search of relays. The team which had brought our travellers to the inn was quite exhausted and unable to continue the journey without a further rest. Ahmet had made up his mind to bring the chaise, all ready horsed, to the inn door, so as to leave his uncle and Van Mitten no excuse — they had only to enter the chaise and depart for Kertsch.

The post-house was some distance off, at the end of the village; and the roof, ornamented with crosses of wood, gave it the appearance of the finger-board of a “double bass.” But of horses there was no sign whatever I The stable was empty, and the post-master could not supply the animals for any consideration.

Ahmet, very much annoyed at this check, returned to the inn. Kéraban, Van Mitten, Nizib, and Bruno, all ready to start, were waiting for the chaise. Already one of the party — it is needless to say which — was exhibiting signs of impatience.

“Well, Ahmet,” cried this individual, “have you returned alone? I thought you had gone to procure horses for us?”

“My errand was useless, uncle,” replied Ahmet “There is not a single horse to be had.”

“No horses?” exclaimed Kéraban.

“And we cannot have any before tomorrow,” added Ahmet.

“To-morrow!”

“Yes. That means a loss of twenty-four hours.”

“Twenty-four hours!” cried Kéraban, “but I do not mean to lose ten, not five, not even one.”

“Nevertheless,” said the Dutchman,” if there are no horses — ”

“There shall be some,” replied Kéraban, walking away, and signing to the others to accompany him. In a quarter of an hour they reached the post-house. The post-master was standing on the steps, in the easy attitude of a man who knew that one is not obliged to provide what he does not possess.

“You have no more horses, I hear?” said Kéraban, in a far from conciliatory tone.

“I have only those that you brought here yesterday, and they are unfit to travel,” replied the post-master.

“And why, if you please, have you no fresh horses in your stables?”

“Because they have been taken by a Turkish seigneur who has gone to Kertsch en route to Poti and the Caucasus.”

“A Turk!” exclaimed Kéraban. “One of your European Ottomans, no doubt. They are not content with interfering with us in the streets of Constantinople, but they must inconvenience us in the Crimea!”

“Who is this man, this Turk?” he continued, after a pause.

“His name is Seigneur Saffar; that’s all I know about him,” replied the post-master quietly.

“Why did you permit Seigneur Saffar to take all the horses?” asked Kéraban with contempt.

“Because the traveller arrived here twelve hours before you, and as the horses were available I had no reason for refusing them to him.”

“You ought to have done so — ”

“Ought to have done so?” echoed the post-master.

“Yes, certainly, when I was on the road hither,” replied Kéraban.

Now what could one reply to such arguments! Van Mitten endeavoured to interpose, but was only snapped up by his friend. As for the post-master, he only gazed at Kéraban with a contemptuous expression, and turned away to enter the house. But Kéraban stopped him by saying —

“After all, it does not matter whether you have horses or not: we must proceed at once.”

“Proceed at once! Have I not told you I have no horses?” replied the postmaster.

“We’ll find some.”

“There are none in Arabat.”

“Find a pair — find one,” replied Kéraban, who began to lose his self-control; “find half a one, but find something.”

“But if there are no horses,” began Van Mitten gently.

“There must be some found.”

“Perhaps you can procure for us a team of mules?” said Ahmet to the post-master.

“Very well, mules will do,” said Kéraban. “We will be content with mules.”

“I have never seen any mules in the province,” replied the post-master.

“He has seen one to-day,” whispered Bruno to Van Mitten, as he indicated Kéraban; “and a fine one too.”

“Are there any asses?” enquired Ahmet.

“No more asses than mules.”

“No asses!” exclaimed Kéraban. “You are playing with us, monsieur. No asses in this country — not enough to form a team, not sufficient to relay a carriage? You are joking.”

As he spoke Kéraban looked round at a number of natives who had assembled near the post-house.

“He is quite capable of having those people harnessed to the chaise,” muttered Bruno.

“Yes, them or us,” replied Nizib, who knew his master.

However, since there were neither horses, mules, nor asses, it was evident that the travellers could not proceed; and all they could do was to resign themselves to the delay of twenty-four hours. Ahmet, who was as greatly put out as his uncle, was about to try to make him hear reason in the absolute impossibility of procuring horses, when Kéraban cried out —

“A hundred roubles to anyone who will find me a team.” — ; A shiver passed over the the natives who heard this offer. At length one man boldly came forward, and said, —

“Seigneur Turk, I have two dromedaries to sell.”

“I will buy them,” said Kéraban. To harness a pair of dromedaries to a carriage was an experiment never hitherto made; but it was going to be attempted now.

In less than an hour the bargain was completed, and at a high rate. But no matter. Seigneur Kéraban would have paid double the amount. The two animals were harnessed, and with the assurance of a substantial “tip,” the late proprietor of the dromedaries, mounting as postillion, seated himself on the hump of one of the animals. Then the chaise, to the great astonishment of the natives, and to the extreme satisfaction of the travellers, descended the road towards Kertsch at a long slinging trot The same evening the travellers reached Argin, twelve leagues from Arabat There were no horses there either, in consequence of the Seigneur Saffar having had them. Our travellers were obliged to sleep at Argin and give the dromedaries a rest.

Next day, 3rd September, the chaise departed under the same conditions and reached Marienthal, seventeen leagues from Argin. The night was passed there, and at daybreak the travellers started again, and after a run of twelve leagues reached Kertsch without accident, but not without some rude jolting consequent upon the “pulling” of the dromedaries, which weie quite new to the business.

To sum up, Seigneur Kéraban and his companions, who had started on the 17th! of August, had, after nineteen days' journeying, accomplished three-sevenths of the required distance — three hundred leagues out of seven hundred. They had, therefore, done well; and if they continued to progress in like manner during the twenty- i six days still remaining — till the 30th of: September — they would complete the tour of the Black Sea within the prescribed period.

"Somehow," said Bruno to his master again, "Somehow I can't help thinking that the journey will end badly!"

"For my friend Kéraban, do you mean?"

"For your friend Kéraban, or for those who accompany him," replied Bruno.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE town of Kertsch is situated in the peninsula of that name at the eastern extremity of the Taurida. A hill on which formerly the Acropolis was situated dominates the town. This is Mount Mithridates, so called from the implacable enemy of the Romans who failed to drive them from Asia. The polyglot ancient, audacious general, and legendary poisoner, has justly his place in the front of a city which was the capital of the kingdom of the Bosphorus. There that King of Pontus, that terrible Eupator, fell on the sword of a Gallic soldier, after having vainly tried to poison his iron frame which he had accustomed to poison.

This little historical summary, Van Mitten gave his companions during a short halt. But the relation only called from Kéraban the remark: —

“Mithridates was a stupid blunderer.”

“How so?” asked Van Mitten.

“If he had really desired to poison himself, all he had to do was to dine at that inn at Arabat.”

After such a commentary as this, Van Mitten could not proceed with his eulogy of Mithridates, but he made up his mind to visit the monarch’s capital in the few hours left to him.

The chaise passed through the town and created considerable surprise amongst the inhabitants in consequence of the pair of dromedaries. Ahmet’s first care on arrival at the Hotel Constantine, was to enquire whether horses could be had on the following morning, and to his great satisfaction ascertained that there was no lack of steeds in the stables of the post-house.

“It is fortunate,” he said to his uncle, “that Seigneur Saffar has not taken all the relays.”

But the little-enduring uncle did not the less cherish a grudge against the man who had dared to travel before him and take his horses. However, as he had no further need for his dromedaries, he sold them to the conductor of a caravan, but only obtained for them living the same price as he would have gotten for the carcases. This loss Kéraban carried in his mind’s ledger to the account of Seigneur Saffar.

We may assume that Saffar was not in Kertsch, else a little dispute would probably have arisen which might have had serious consequences. He had quitted the town two days previously, by the Caucasus route. This was fortunate, as our travellers were about to travel by the lower road.

A good supper at the Hotel Constantine, a good night in comfortable quarters, made both the masters and servants forget past troubles. So a letter written by Ahmet to his fiancee at Odessa, was the bearer of good news and a report of the journey as regularly accomplished.

As the hour of departure had been fixed for ten o’clock next morning, Van Mitten was enabled to explore the town. Rising with the sun, he found Ahmet on this occasion ready to accompany him. So they walked through the wide streets of Kertsch, which have paved footways and are swarming with multitudes of vagabond dogs. These animals are looked after by a man specially appointed to knock them on the head, but that time he must have been asleep, for Ahmet and the Dutchman had considerable difficulty to escape from the dangerous brutes.

The stone quay, built into the sea at the curve of the bay, afforded them a more secure promenade. Upon the quay are the governor’s palace and the custom-house. At some distance out the vessels are anchored, for there is not much water in the bay, though the anchorage is good. The port has become very commercial since the cession of the town to the Russians in 1774, and there is a large salt depot there, the mineral being furnished from the mines Pere’kop.

“Have we time to ascend that hill?” asked Van Mitten, indicating Mount Mithridates, on which a Greek temple stands, enriched with the spoils of the tumuli which are so numeious in the province. This temple has replaced the ancient acropolis.

“Hum,” said Ahmet, “I would not like to run the risk of keeping Uncle Kéraban waiting.”

“Nor his nephew,” said Van Mitten, smiling.

“Quite true,” replied Ahmet. “All the journey I have scarcely thought of anything but our return to Scutari. You understand, I am sure, M. Van Mitten?”

“Yes, I understand, my young friend,” replied the Dutchman; “nevertheless, the husband of Madame Van Mitten might be excused if he did not comprehend you.”

With this profound reflection, justified by the condition of things in Rotterdam, the friends, finding that they had two hours to spare, commenced the ascent of Mount Mithridates.

From the summit an extensive view is to be had over the bay of Kertsch. In the south, the extreme end of the promontory is visible. Towards the east, the two tongues of land which enclose the bay of Taman are evident beyond the strait of Yenikale. The clear atmosphere permitted all the features of the country to be seen, and even the khourghans, or ancient tombs with which the province is studded, were visible, even to the smallest.

When Ahmet thought that time was up, he led Van Mitten down into the marketplace again by a monumental staircase ornamented with balustrades. A quarter of an hour later they rejoined Kéraban, who was endeavouring to discuss some point with his host-a placid Tartar. It was quite time that his friends arrived, for Kéraban was getting angry because there was nothing to put him out of temper. The chaise was quite ready. The horses, of Persian breed, were already harnessed; and when our travellers had taken their seats, they departed at a gallop, which was a pleasant relief from the fatiguing trot of the dromedaries.

Ahmet could not overcome a certain anxiety which oppressed him when approaching the strait. He was aware that it would have to be passed, when the route had been changed at Kherson. At his nephew's request, Kéraban had consented not to go round the Sea of Azof, and thus make a short cut across the Crimea. But it never occurred to Kéraban that there was not terra firma all the way. He was'

mistaken, and Ahmet did not undeceive him.

One may be a good Turk, an excellent tobacco merchant, and yet an indifferent geographer. Kéraban was probably unaware that the flow of the Sea of Azof into the Black Sea is carried through a wide "sound," the ancient Cimmerian Bosphorus, known as the Strait of Yenikale, and must be crossed by any one who wishes to pass between the peninsulas of Kertsch and Taman.

Now Seigneur Kéraban had for the sea a repugnance which his nephew was fully aware of. What would he say then when he found himself by the Strait, and if in consequence of currents or want of water it became necessary to cross it at its widest part — a distance of nearly twenty miles? Suppose he refused to venture? Suppose he insisted on remounting the whole eastern side of the Crimea to gain the littoral of the Sea of Azof, up to the spurs of the Caucasus? What a prolongation of the journey this would be — what lost time — what interests would be compromised. How could they then hope to reach Scutari by the appointed time?

These were the thoughts that perplexed Ahmet as the chaise rolled on. In less than two hours the shore would be reached, and the uncle would have to decide. How was he to prepare himself for the event? He must take care that no discussion arose. If the hot-headed Kéraban once took a side nothing would turn him from his idea, and he would insist on turning round and retracing his way to Kertsch.

Ahmet was at a loss. If he confessed his little ruse he might put his uncle in a passion. It would be better, he thought, to pass himself off as ignorant of the geographical features of the province and to feign the greatest surprise when he discovered a strait where he quite expected dry land.

“Allah aid me!” muttered Ahmet, and then he waited, with all a Turk’s fatalism, the result.

The peninsula of Kertsch is divided by a long trench, made in ancient times, which is called the rampart of Akos. The road which in part follows it is good enough as far as the Lazaretto; then it becomes difficult and slippery in descending towards the coast.

The horses could not proceed very fast during the morning, so Van Mitten had an opportunity to look over this portion of the Chersonese at leisure. He perceived a Russian steppe in all its bareness. Some caravans were crossing the plain, or seeking shade under the rampart of Akos in camp with all the picturesque surroundings of an Oriental halt Innumerable khourghans covered the country, and gave the plain the appearance of an immense cemetery. These, or similar tombs, had furnished antiquaries with the jewels, Etruscan vases, cenotaph stones, and other relics which now bedeck the walls of the Temple and the halls of the museum at Kertsch.

Towards mid-day the travellers came in sight of a great square tower flanked by four turrets: this is the fort which is situated to the north of the village of Yenikale. To the south, at the extremity of the Bay of Kertsch, is Cape Au-Bouroum, dominating the shore of the Black Sea. Then the strait opens with its two points, which enclose the Bay of Taman. In the distance the nearest profiles of the Caucasian range are visible.

The strait certainly resembles an arm of the sea at the point where Van Mitten, aware of his friend’s antipathy, gazed at Ahmet in consternation.

Ahmet made him a sign to hold his tongue. Fortunately his uncle was just then dozing, and saw nothing of the Black Sea or the Sea of Azof which confronted him in the sound, whose narrowest part measures five or six miles across.

“Diable!” muttered Van Mitten.

It was certainly annoying that Seigneur Kéraban did not live a hundred years later. Had his journey been made at that time Ahmet would not have felt so uneasy. For the sand in that strait has a growing tendency to silt up, and this cause will limit the passage to a swiftly running stream in time. If, a hundred and fifty years ago, the ships of Peter the Great were enabled to besiege Azof; at the present time vessels are forced to wait until the south wind heaps up the waves and gives them ten or twelve feet of water under their keels.

But our travellers were there in 1882, not in the year 2000, a d. and were obliged to accept hydrographical conditions as they then existed.

Meanwhile the chaise descended the slopes, which trend down to Yenikale, disturbing, as it rolled on, flocks of bustards from the high grass. The travellers stopped at the principal hotel, and then Seigneur Kéraban awoke.

“Is this the relay station? Are we having them put to?” he enquired.

“Yes; relays of Yenikale,” replied Ahmet simply.

All the travellers alighted, while the carriage went on to the posting-house. Thence it would be conveyed to the quay, where the ferry-barge was lying for the conveyance of travellers on foot, or on horseback, or in carriages, and even for the transport of whole caravans which pass and repass between Europe and Asia.

Yenikale is the headquarters of a lucra-! tive commerce in salt, caviare, tallow, and wool. The sturgeon and turbot fisheries occupy a large proportion of the population, which is almost entirely Greek. The sailors engaged in the coasting-trade pursue their avocation in small lateen-sail, boats. Yenikale occupies an important strategical position: that is why the

Russians fortified it after seizing it in 1771. It is one of the ports of the Black Sea, which hereabouts has two keys of safety, the key of Yenikale on one side and Taman on the other.

After a halt of half an hour Seigneur Kéraban gave his companions the signal to proceed, and they walked towards the quay where the ferry-barge was waiting for them.

Suddenly Kéraban glanced right and left and uttered an exclamation.

“What is the matter uncle?” asked Ahmet, who was not quite at his ease.

“There is a river yonder,” said Kéraban, indicating the strait.

“Yes, indeed; so there is,” replied Ahmet, who thought it best to leave his uncle under that impression.

“A river!” began Bruno.

But a sign from his master gave him to understand that the point need not be insisted on.

“No,” said Nizib. “It is a — ”

He was not permitted to finish his sentence, for a violent blow from his comrade Bruno cut short his explanation just as he was developing his hydrographkal attainments.

Meanwhile Seigneur Kéraban was steadfastly regarding the “river “that barred his way.

“It is wide,” he said.

“Well, yes — pretty wide — in consequence of a flood, most likely,” replied Ahmet.

“Floods, you know; owing to the melting of the snow,” added Van Mitten, with the laudable intention to back up his young friend.

“Melting of the snow — in September?” said Kéraban, turning upon Van Mitten.

“Certainly; the melting of the snow. The old snow of course, the Caucasian snow,” replied Van Mitten, who had not the least idea of what he was saying.

“But I do not see the bridge by which we can cross this river,” continued Kéraban.

“The fact is,” said Ahmet, “there is no longer a bridge.” As he spoke he closed his hands and looked through them, as through a field-glass, the better to examine the mythical bridge over the pretended river.

“They ought to have a bridge here,” said Van Mitten. “My ‘ guide ‘ mentions the existence of a bridge.”

“Ah, your guide mentions the bridge, does it?” said Kéraban, frowning as he gazed at the Dutchman.

“Yes, the famous bridge,” stammered Van Mitten, “the — the Pontus Euxinus, you know — Pontus Axenos — of the ancients.”

“So very ancient,” replied Kéraban, and the words came hissing through his set teeth, “so very ancient that it could not resist the flood caused by the melting of the ancient snows.”

“From the Caucasus,” added Van Mitten, who had come to the end of his imaginative topography.

Ahmet stood a little apart all this time. He did not know what reply to make to his uncle, and did not wish to provoke any discussion on the topic.

“Well, nephew,” said Kéraban, drily, “how are we to pass this ‘ river’ since the bridge has been carried away?”

“We shall find a ford, no doubt,” said Ahmet. “There is so little water — ”

“Scarcely enough to wet our feet,” added Van Mitten, who had better have held his tongue.

“Well, then, my friend, turn up your trousers and wade across this river. We will follow you,” said Kéraban.

“But — I — ”

“Come, come; tuck them up.”

The faithful Bruno here thought it time to interfere to bring his master out the dilemma.

“It is no use, Seigneur Kéraban. We can pass without wetting our feet. There is a ferry close by.”

“Ah, there is a ferry-boat, is there? It is very fortunate that we can go in a barge which has no doubt been kindly substituted for the bridge, the famous Pontus Axenos.

Why didn’t you say so before? Where is this barge — this raft?”

“Here, uncle,” replied Ahmet, indicating the flat-bottomed boat which was made fast to the quay. “Our carriage is already on board.”

“Indeed, our carriage is already on board?”

“Yes, and with the horses already harnessed.”

“Harnessed? Who gave that order?”

“Nobody, uncle. The post-master has done it as usuaL”

“Since the bridge has broken down, I suppose?”

“Besides, uncle, there is no other way of continuing our journey,” said Ahmet, ignoring the bridge.

“There is another way, nephew Ahmet. We can return and skirt the northern shore of the Sea of Azof.”

“Two hundred leagues further, uncle. And my wedding. The date is the thirtieth. Have you forgotten the thirtieth?”

“By no means, nephew; and before that date I shall have surely returned. Let us go.”

Ahmet experienced a pang for a moment.

Would his uncle put his mad project in execution and return; or would he take his place in the ferry, and cross the Strait of Yenikale?

Seigneur Kéraban directed his steps towards the boat; Van Mitten and the rest followed him, not wishing to afford him any pretext for the discussion which was threatening.

Kéraban paused for fully a minute upon the quay, looking round him. His companions also stopped.

Kéraban entered the ferry-barge. So did his friends.

Kéraban mounted into the chaise. The others did likewise.

Then the boat was cast off, and the current impelled it towards the opposite side.

Kéraban never spoke. His friends were equally silent.

Fortunately the water was calm and the boatmen had no trouble to guide the ferryboat with their long “gaffs “or poles according to the exigencies of the transit. Nevertheless there was moment when an accident seemed imminent.

A gentle current turned by the southern point of the bay of Taman had caught the boat obliquely, and instead of landing at that point, it seemed as if the boat would be carried out into the bay, and have to traverse five leagues instead of one. In that case probably Kéraban would have given orders to return.

But the boatmen, to whom Ahmet had said some encouraging words in which the term “rouble” was of frequent occurrence, manoeuvred the ferry-boat well and escaped the current Thus, in an hour after quitting the quay of Yenikale, travellers, horses, carriage, all were landed at the extreme point of the southern side of the bay which is by the Russians called Ioujnaia-Kossa. There was no difficulty in disembarking, and the men were liberally remunerated.

In former times the strip of land had formed two islands and a peninsula; that is to say, it was cut in two places by a channel, and it would have been impossible to cross it in a carriage. But the channels are now filled up. So the chaise had no difficulty in passing over the four versts which separate the point from the village of Taman.

An hour after disembarkation the travellers entered Taman, and Seigneur Kéraban, looking hard at his nephew, merely said —

“Decidedly, the waters of the Black Sea and the Sea of Azof agree wonderfully well in the Strait of Yenikale!”

That was all; and never after was there any mention of the “river “discovered by Ahmet, or of the celebrated “Pontus Axenos “of Van Mitten.

CHAPTER XV.

YAMAN is but a melancholy-looking town, with its comfortless houses, its thatched roofs discoloured by the weather, and its wooden church, the bell-tower of which is continually concealed by the flocks of falcons which wheel around it.

The chaise merely passed through Taman. So Van Mitten was not able to visit the military positions, nor the fortress ot Phanagoria, nor the _ — ruins of Tmoutarakan.

If Kertsch is Greek in population and costume, Taman itself is Cossack, a contrast which the Dutchman could not help remarking upon.

The chaise, invariably proceeding by the shortest routes, followed for an hour the southern shore of the bay of Taman. The travellers saw enough to perceive that the country was full of game, and afforded opportunities for shooting almost unequalled in any other part of the globe.

In fact,pelicans, cormorants, grebes, without counting the flocks of bustards, arose from the marshes in incredible numbers.

“I have never seen such quantities of water-fowl,” observed Van Mitten. “One might fire into the marsh at random: not a grain of shot would fail to hit.”

This remark evoked no discussion. Kéraban was no sportsman, and Ahmet was occupied with far different thoughts. There was not even the commencement of a dispute, except when a flock of wild ducks rose, alarmed at the approach of the carriage just as it was quitting the coast- road to turn to the south east.

“There is a flock,” exclaimed Van Mitten. “It is really a regiment!”

“A regiment! you mean an army,” replied Kéraban shrugging his shoulders.

“Ma foi, you are right,” said Van Mitten. “There are at least a hundred thousand ducks.”

“A hundred thousand!” exclaimed Kéraban. “If you had said two hundred thousand nowl”

“Oh, two hundred thousand!”

“I should even say three hundred thousand, Van Mitten, and then I should be in no way exaggerating.”

“You are right, Seigneur Kéraban,” replied the Dutchman prudently, for he did not wish to excite his companion to throw a million wild-ducks at his head. And he was right: a hundred thousand ducks is an immense flight, but there were certainly no fewer in that extensive cloud of birds which threw such an immense shadow on the waters of the bay.

The weather was very fine and the road was fairly passable for carriages. The horses proceeded rapidly, and there was no loss of time at the relays. They no longer had Seigneur Saffar in front of them.

We need hardly say that when night came on they passed it still rapidly journeying on towards the first slopes of the Caucasus, which appeared in the distant horizon. Since the night had been passed at the hotel at Kertsch no one had even thought of quitting the chaise for six-and- thirty hours.

However, towards evening at supper- time, the travellers stopped at one of the post-houses, which was also an inn. They did not know what the resources of the Caucasus were, and whether food was easily procurable there. They thought it prudent, therefore, to economize the provisions taken in at Kertsch.

The inn was of second-class quality, but there was an abundance of food, and they had nothing to complain of on that score. Only the hotel-keeper, perhaps out of his natural distrust, or according to the custom of the country, wished them to pay for everything as soon as they had it. Accordingly, when he brought the bread he said —

“This is ten kopecks.”

Ahmet gave him the money.

Then he came in with some eggs.

“These are eighty kopecks,” he said. And Ahmet paid the eighty kopecks demanded.

For the kwass for the wild ducks, so much: for the salt — yes, even for the salt — so much. Ahmet paid all, even to the knives, glasses, spoons, forks, and plates.

As may be expected such dealings served only to excite Kéraban so much that he finished by purchasing en bloc the various necessaries for the supper, but not without certain objurgations which the landlord listened to with an impassibility which would have done credit to Van Mitten. When the meal was finished Kéraban resold the utensils at a loss of fifty per cent.

“It is lucky that he does not charge us anything for our digestion,” remarked Kéraban. “What a man he is! He ought to be Financial Minister in Turkey. That is a man who would know how to tax every oar that ever rowed a caique across the Bosphorus.”

But they had supped well enough, which was an important matter, as Bruno remarked; and they proceeded on their way when night had fallen — a dark, moonless night.

It is quite a curious experience, but one not without charm, to find oneself hurried along in a carriage in profound darkness, through an unknown country in which villages are far apart and even farm-houses are scattered. The jingling of the harness- bells, the measured fall of the horses’ hoofs, the sound of the carriage-wheels upon the sandy plain: the jolting in the ruts, the cracking of the postillion’s whip, the gleam of the lamps which is soon lost in the darkness when the road is open, and which is vividly flashed back by trees, rocks, drinking sign-boards erected on the embankment of the road; all these constitute an ensemble of sights and sounds to which few travellers can remain insensible. They hear the noises; they see the objects in a dreamy manner, in a kind of half somnolence which lends to the surroundings a somewhat fantastic character.

Seigneur Kéraban and his companions were not insensible to this impression, which increased every instant. Through the windows of the carriage they contemplated, with half-closed eyes, the great shadows of the equipage — capricious, undefined, moving shadows — which developed themselves in front upon the vaguely lighted road.

It was about eleven o’clock when a peculiar sound awoke the travellers from their reverie. The noise was a kind of whistle, something like that which is produced by opening a bottle of mineral water, but increased tenfold. One might have imagined it was caused by steam blowing off from the safety-valve of a boiler.

The carriage stopped. The postillion could hardly hold his horses. Ahmet, anxious to know what the matter was, hastily let down the window of the chaise.

“What is the matter?” he cried. “Why do not you go on? What is that noise?”

“It is caused by the mud-volcanoes,” replied the postillion.

“Mud-volcanoes!” cried Kéraban. “Who ever heard of ‘ mud-volcanoes! This is certainly a pleasant way you are taking us, nephew Ahmet!”

“Seigneur Kéraban, you and your companions had better descend,” said the postillion.

“Descend!” exclaimed Kéraban. “Yes. I must trouble you to follow the chaise on foot, as I cannot manage the horses, and they may run away.”

“Let us do so,” said Ahmet. “The man is right. We must get out.”

“There are five or six versts to be traversed,” added the postillion: “perhaps eight, but no more.”

“Will you decide, uncle?” said Ahmet.

“Let us get out, Kéraban,” said Van Mitten. “We must see what kind of phenomena these mud-volcanoes are.”

Kéraban consented, but not without protest They all quitted the carriage and walked behind the chaise, which only advanced at a slow pace, guided by the light of the lamps. The night was very dark. If the Dutchman had any expectation of seeing the mud-volcanoes he was disappointed, but unless one were deaf it would have been impossible to avoid hearing the curious hissing sound they emitted.

Had it been daylight they would have seen an immense steppe, upon which had been puffed up on all sides little eruptive cones like the large ant-hills one meets with in Central Africa. From these cones escaped gaseous and bituminous springs, which are called mud-volcanoes, though volcanic action has nothing to do with their production. The eruption is simply a mixture of mud, gypsum, chalk, pyrites, with petroleum even, which, under the pressure of carbonetted, or sometimes phosphoretted, hydrogen gas, escapes with considerable violence. These little heaps, which are raised by degrees, give way to permit the eruptive matter to escape, and afterwards fall in when the tertiary formations are exhausted in a space of time of greater or less duration.

The hydrogen gas produced under these conditions is due to the slow but continuous decomposition of petroleum mixed with various other substances. The rocky regions in which it is enclosed is finally broken up under the action of water (rain or springs), the filtration of which is continuous. Then the effusion ceases, just as the effervescence of champagne will cease as the elasticity of the gas is exhausted.

These cones of ejected matter open in great numbers in the peninsula of Taman. There are other localities in the peninsula of Kertsch, for instance, where they may be observed; but our travellers did not see them, for they do not exist near the high road.

However, the travellers passed here between the great mounds surrounded with fumes, in the midst of the outpourings of liquid mud. Sometimes the pedestrians were obliged to approach so close to them that they received puffs of the gas right in their faces, which gave them a most disagreeable sensation, and was of a most unpleasant odour.

“Eh,” said Van Mitten, who recognized the presence of gas, “we are in danger here. I trust there will be no explosion.”

“You are right,” replied Ahmet “We must be cautious, and ought to extinguish the lamps.”

The postillion, who was doubtless conversant with the route, was evidently of the same opinion, for the lamps were suddenly extinguished.

“Mind you do not smoke, you fellows,” cried Ahmet to the servants.

“You may be quite easy on that point, Seigneur Ahmet,” replied Bruno; “we have no desire to be blown up.”

“What!” exclaimed Kéraban; “do you mean that we cannot smoke here?”

“No uncle,” replied Ahmet; “we must not smoke for some versts at least.”

“Not even a cigarette,”added the “headstrong one,” who was rolling a pinch of tombeki in his practised fingers.

“Later on, friend Kéraban, later on; it is for all our sakes,” said Van Mitten. “It would be as dangerous to smoke here as in a powder magazine.”

“A nice country this!” muttered Kéraban. “I should be surprised if a tobacco merchant made his fortune here. Nephew Ahmet, though we had lost a few days, it would have been better to have gone round the Sea of Azof.”

Ahmet made no answer. He did not wish to enter into a discussion on this subject. His uncle grumblingly put the cigarette in his pocket, and the travellers continued to follow the chaise, which was a shapeless mass looming in the obscurity of the night.

It was necessary then to proceed with extreme caution for fear of falling. The road was much cut up, and by no means firm under foot. The way ascended gradually towards the eastward. Fortunately there was no wind, so the vapours ascended straight into the air, instead of blowing against the travellers and thus greatly incommoding them.

They advanced very cautiously for about half an hour. The horses "whinnied" and plunged continually, so that the postillion had considerable difficulty to restrain them. The axletrees of the chaise groaned when the wheels slipped into some deep rut or other; but the carriage was pretty strong, as had been already proved in the marshes of the lower Danube.

In another quarter of an hour the region of the mud-cones would be passed. Suddenly a vivid light appeared on the left of the road. One of the cones had taken fire, and was burning with a tremendous flame. The steppe was illuminated to the extent of a verst around it.

"They are smoking there," muttered Ahmet, who was in advance of his companions. But no one was smoking.

Suddenly the postillion was heard calling out in front Then the loud cracking of his whip succeeded. He could not manage the horses, which darted forward, and the chaise was dragged away at a tremendous pace.

The pedestrians halted in consternation. The whole plain presented a most terrifying aspect. In fact the flames had been communicated by one cone to another, and they exploded successively with great violence like immense displays of fireworks.

Now the immense illumination quite filled the plain. In the weird light appeared hundreds of gTeat cones vomiting fire, the gas from which burned in the midst of ejected liquid matter; some cones flared with the sinister gleams of petroleum, others were coloured diversely by the presence of sulphur, pyrites, or carbonate of iron. All the time deep growling sounds were audible, and the travellers were afraid lest the earth should open, and form an immense crater under the pressure of so much eruptive matter.

There was indeed imminent danger. Instinctively Kéraban and his companions separated so as to diminish the danger of a common destruction. But they did not stop — they passed on more rapidly: it was absolutely necessary to traverse the dangerous zone as quickly as possible. The way, well lighted, appeared practicable. So winding in and out amongst the cones they traversed the fiery steppe.

“Come on — come on!” cried Ahmet.

The others did not answer him, but they complied. Each one hurried in the direction which the chaise had taken, but they could not perceive it. On the horizon night reigned darkly, and there it was evident the zone of fire terminated.

Suddenly a tremendous explosion burst out in the road itself. A jet of flame rose from a great heap which erupted the ground in an instant.

Kéraban was knocked down, and his companions could perceive him struggling through the flame. What would become of him if they did not go to his assistance?

With one bound Ahmet dashed to the assistance of his uncle. He seized him before the burning gas could reach him, and dragged him, half suffocated, beyond the influence of the vapours.

“Oh uncle, uncle,” cried the young man.

Then Van Mitten, Bruno, and Nizib, having assisted to carry him to the thicket near by, endeavoured to reanimate Kéraban.

At length, after some vigorous coughing, Kéraban began to breathe freely. When he was restored to his senses and to life, his first words were —

“Do you dare to dispute, Ahmet, that it would have been better to have made the tour of the Sea of Azof?”

“You are right, uncle,” he replied.

“As I always am, nephew, always!”

Kéraban had scarcely finished this little speech, when profound daakness fell upon the plain. The cones had become simultaneously and suddenly extinguished; as if the hand of a machinist had cut off the gas. Everj thing was pitchy dark, and appeared all the more sombre after the late glow, which had left upon the retina its impression of the light which had so suddenly been extinguished.

What had happened then? How had the cones caught fire, since no light had approached them?

We can offer a probable explanation. To the influence of a gas which will take when it comes in contact with the air, fire the phenomenon, which took place in the vicinity of Taman, in 1840, was due. This gas is phosphoretted hydrogen, generated in phosphates. It is visible in the carcases of dead animals, and in marshy places. It takes fire, and communicates the flame to the carbonetted hydrogen, which is only the ordinary gas we use for lighting purposes. So, under the influence, perhaps, of certain atmospheric conditions, the spontaneous combustion was suddenly produced in a way which could not have been foreseen.

From this point of view, the peninsulas of Kertsch and Taman present serious dangers, from which it is difficult to guard, as they are so very sudden.

Seigneur Kéraban was not far wrong when he said that any other route would have been preferable to that they were pursuing. But, after all, they had escaped the danger; uncle and nephew a little singed, no doubt, but the others without even a burn.

Three versts further on they found the carriage and horses, with the postillion, who had mastered his cattle. The moment the flames had gone out he had lighted the carriage lamps again; and, guided by their gleam, the travellers rejoined him without danger, and without fatigue.

Each one resumed his place. They started again, and the night passed without incident But Van Mitten preserved a vivid recollection of the scene. He could not have been more astonished if the chances of life had carried him to that part of New Zealand where the springs boil up in the eruptive hills.

Next day, the 6th of September, eighteen leagues from Taman, the chaise having turned the Bay of Kisiltasch, traversed the village of Anapa; and, at about eight o’clock in the evening stopped in Rajews- kaja, on the borders of the Caucasian district.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE Caucasus is that part of southern Russia composed of high mountains and extensive plains, of which the orographic system tends somewhat from west to east for a distance of three hundred and fifty kilometres. To the north extends the country of the Don Cossacks: the government of Stavropol with the Steppes of the Kalmouk and Nogais tribes. In the south are the principalities of Tiflis, capital of Georgia, of Koutais, Bakou, Elisabethpol, Erivan, besides the provinces of Min- grelia, Imeritia, Abkasia, and Gouriel. To the west of the Caucasus is the Black Sea, to the east the Caspian.

The whole country to the south of the principal chain of the Caucasus is named Transcaucasia, and has no other frontiers than those of Turkey and Persia: at the point of contact is Mount Ararat, on which the Ark of Noah rested.

There are numerous tribes which inhabit or traverse this important region. These belong to the Kazteval, Armenian, Tscherkess, Tochetschine and Lesghian races. In the north are the Kalmouks, Nogais, Mongolian Tartars; in the south are the Tartars of Turkish descent; Kurds and Cossacks.

If savants are to be credited, it is from this semi-European, semi-Asiatic district that the white race emanated — the whites who now inhabit Asia and Europe. So they are by them called the “Caucasian Race.”

Three main Russian roads traverse this enormous barrier, which comprises such mountains as Chat-Elbrouz, 4,000 metres; Kazbec, 4,500 metres; and Elbrouz, 5,600 metres, high.

The first of these routes, of both stra- getical and commercial importance, runs from Taman to Poti, along the littoral of the Black Sea. The second, from Mosdok to Tiflis, passes by the Col du Darial; the third, from Kizliar to Bakou, by Derbend.

We need scarcely say that Kéraban, in accord with his nephew Ahmet, took the first. What was the use of entangling themselves in the wilds of the Caucasus; so courting difficulty and delay? A road was open as far as Poti, and there are plenty of towns and villages on the littoral of the Black Sea.

There are railways, which it would have been possible to utilize, but Ahmet knew the strong objection his uncle entertained to this mode of locomotion, and avoided the subject which his uncle had tabooed in the case of the Taurus and the Chersonese Railways.

All that was quite understood, and the indestructible chaise, having undergone a few necessary repairs, took the road again, and quitted Rajewskaja early on the morning of the 7th September.

Ahmet was determined to proceed with the utmost possible speed. Twenty days remained in which the journey must be finished, so as to reach Scutari upon the appointed date. On this point Kéraban a greed with him. No doubt Van Mitten would have preferred to travel more at his ease — to receive and record more lasting impressions, and not to be tied to time — but Van Mitten was not consulted. As a guest only had he agreed to accompany and dine with Kéraban at Scutari. Well, was he not taking him to Scutari? What more did he wish for?

Nevertheless, Bruno felt it incumbent upon him to make a few observations as they were entering the Russian Caucasus. The Dutchman having listened, asked his servant to conclude.

“Well,” continued Bruno, “why not let Seigneur Kérabanand Ahmet proceed without rest along the Black Sea?”

“To leave them — do you mean?” enquired Van Mitten.

“Yes, leave them, after bidding them Ion voyage/”

“And remain here?”

“Yes; so then we may see the Caucasus at our ease, since our unlucky star has led us hither. After all, we shall be as well off as in Constantinople within reach of Madame Van — — ”

“Hold your tongue, Bruno: do not pronounce that name!”

“I will not if it is disagreeable to you, sir; but it is to her, in fact, that we owe this expedition. To run the risk of being engulfed in marshes, to be roasted in volcanic districts — is too much, it is indeed. I would therefore suggest, not a dispute with Seigneur Kéraban — you would come off second-best there — but just let him understand by a few gentle words that you will see him in Constantinople, when it pleases you to return thither!”

“That would not be quite practicable,” replied Van Mitten.

“It would be prudent,” replied Bruno. “You find a good deal to complain of then?”

“Yes, a great deal; and besides — I do not know whether you have remarked it — I am getting thin.”

“Not much, Bruno, not much.”

“Aye; but I know very well that I am; and if I go on like this I shall soon become a skeleton!”

“Have you been weighed, Bruno?”

“I wanted to get weighed at Kertsch,” replied Bruno, “but there was only a letter- weight obtainable.”

“And would not that suffice?” said Van Mitten laughing.

“No, sir,” replied Bruno, gravely, “but before long it will suffice to weigh your poor servant. Now shall we let Seigneur Kéraban continue his journey without us?”

Certainly this manner of travelling did not suit Van Mitten, who was of a phlegmatic temperament, and disliked hurry. But the idea of abandoning his friend Kéraban was so repugnant to him that he refused to entertain it.

“No, Bruno,” he said, “I am his invited guest — ”

“A guest!” exclaimed Bruno, “a guest who has to travel seven hundred leagues instead of one league!”

“No matter,” replied his master.

“Permit me to tell you that you are wrong, sir;” continued Bruno, “I repeat it for the tenth time. We are by no means at the end of our troubles, and I have a presentiment that you will have your full share of them.”

Would Bruno’s presentiments be realized? The future will reveal that. In any case he had done his duty as a devoted servant in warning his master;

and, since Van Mitten resolved to continue the journey — a journey as ridiculous as fatiguing — the valet had no choice but to follow him.

The road continued almost invariably along the shores of the Black Sea, following the contour of the land. If it sometimes branched away a little to avoid some obstacle of the shore, or to reach some village, it was never more than a few versts. The last spurs of the Caucasus which run parallel to the coast, die away on the boundaries of this little-used route. On the horizon eastward can be perceived the rugged teeth-like, snow-tipped summits, which seem to bite into the sky.

At one o’clock in the afternoon the travellers turned the little Bay of Zfemes, seven leagues from Rajewskaja, so as to i reach about eight leagues farther on, the village of Gelendschik. These townships are some distance from one another, you see.

Upon the littoral of the Black Sea we may reckon one little town at this average distance; but beyond these small groups of houses — frequently only a village or hamlet — the country is almost deserted, and is beginning to be even less frequented by the coasting vessels.

This band of terra firma between the mountains and the sea is well wooded trees of various kinds are plentiful, and are united by the wild vines which twine about their limbs as in a tropical forest. In every direction nightingales and warblers sing in the fields of azaleas, which nature has planted in this fertile country.

Towards mid-day the travellers fell in with a tribe of Kalmucks, nomads, who dwell in oulousscs, comprising many khotonnes. The latter are regular “ambulant villages,” composed of a certain number of kibitkas or tents, which are pitched at random — sometimes on the steppes; sometimes in the verdant valley; sometimes by the side of a water-course — according to the fancy of the leaders. The Kalmucks are of Mongolian extraction, and were formerly very numerous in the Caucasus; but the exigencies of the Russian administration, not to say its “vexations,” have compelled a retreat towards Asia.

The Kalmucks have carefully preserved their ancient manners and special costume. Van Mitten was able to note that the men wore large trousers, boots of Morocco leather, a khalate (a kind of very ample wadded dressing-gown), and a square cap, trimmed with sheepskin. The women were dressed very much in the same manner, with the exception of the girdle, and a cap, from which their hair, trimmed with particoloured ribbons, escaped. The children were almost naked; and, during the winter, to warm themselves, they crouch in the ashes in the kibiika, and sleep amid the hot cinders of the hearth.

The Kalmucks are small of stature, but robust; excellent horsemen, quick, agile, and smart. Their food is a little flour, mixed with water, and cooked with horseflesh. But they are confirmed drunkards, skilful thieves, ignorant, superstitious to excess, incorrigible gamblers, like all the nomads of the Caucasian steppes.

The post-chaise passed through one of the “khotonnes” without attracting any particular attention. The people scarcely took the trouble to look at the travellers, one of whom, at least, observed them with great interest. Perhaps they coveted the rapid horses of the vehicle; but, fortunately for Kéraban, they confined themselves to the wish. So the horses reached the next stage without having exchanged their loose box for the picket of the Kalmuck encampment.

The chaise, having skirted the Bay of Zfemes, found the road closed in between the spurs of the mountains and the sea But, beyond the bay, the route widened out, and became more easy.

At eight o’clock the “bourgade” of Gelendschik was gained. There the travellers supped hastily, and at nine o’clock continued their journey. They proceeded all night, and at seven o’clock in themorningreachedBeregowaja; at mid-day they gained Dschuba; at six p. m. Ten- ginsh; at midnight, Nebugsk; next morning, at eight o’clock, Golowinsk; at eleven, Lachowsk; and, two hours later, Ducha.

Ahmet would have been puzzled to complain of all this. The journey had been accomplished without accident; but, without incident, which did not altogether please Van Mitten. His tablets boasted only a record of geographical names. He had not seen anything particularly novel; and had not had any new impression worth recording.

At Ducha the chaise remained for two hours, while the postmaster sent to fetch the horses, which were at pasture.

“Well,” said Kéraban, “let us dine as comfortably, and for as long a time, as circumstances will permit!”

“Yes, let us dine,” assented Van Mitten.

“And dine well, if possible,” murmured Bruno, regarding his dwindling rotundity of figure.

“Perhaps this halt will provide us with something of interest, which, hitherto, our journey has lacked. I think my young friend Ahmet will permit no breathing time — ”

“Until the arrival of horses,” said Ahmet. “This is already the ninth of the month.”

“That is the kind of answer I like,” said Kéraban. “Let us go and see what we can have.”

The inn was but an indifferent one; built on the bank of the little river Mdsymta’ which rushes down from the neighbouring hills in a torrent.

The little town of Ducha resembles the Cossack villages, which are known as “stamisti” with palisades and gates, that are dominated by a square tower, wherein a watch is kept day and night. The houses have high thatched roofs, wooden walls, plastered over with clay, and shaded by fine trees. The people are well-to do. The Cossacks, however, have almost completely lost their individuality in the Russians. But they remain as brave and active as ever. They are excellent guardians of the boundaries committed to their charge, and are justly esteemed the best equestrians in the world, as well in the hunting down of the chronically rebellious mountaineers, as in the jousts and tourneys in which they prove themselves accomplished cavaliers.

The natives are a fine race, remarkable for the beauty and elegance of their forms, but not of their costume, which partakes of the nature of the dress of the Caucasian mountain tribes. Nevertheless, under the high-furred cap, it is still easy to recognize those energetic faces which a thick beard conceals as high as the cheek-bones.

When Kéraban, Ahmet, and Van Mitten seated themselves at table, a repast was served, the elements of which had been taken from a neighbouring doukhan — a kind of shop in which the characters, the pork- butcher, the victualler, and the grocer are all preserved in the same individual. There was a roast turkey, maize cakes, buffalo cheese, called “gatschapouri “ —

the inevitable national dish — blini, a kind of pancake made with sour milk. For beverages they had some batches of thick beer, and flasks of “vodka” a strong brandy, of which the Russians consume a great quantity.

Frankly, one could not expect to dine better at the little inn of a village, situated on the extreme limits of the Black Sea; and assisted by excellent appetites, the travellers did full justice to the repast which was a welcome change from their usual provisions on the journey.

After dinner, Ahmet left the table while Bruno and Nizib took their shares of the remains of the feast. The young man as usual went to the post-house to hurry the relays, and quite prepared to disburse tenfold the five kopecks per verst per horse — which the regulations permit — as well as liberal “tips “to the postillions.

Meanwhile, Kéraban and his friend Van Mitten made themselves very comfortable in a kind of summer-house which overhung the river. Now or never was the time to abandon themselves to the luxurious dolce far niente, which the Ottomans call “Kief.”

Besides the preparation of the narghiles became necessary to supplement such a meal. So the pipes were brought from the chaise to the smokers, who yielded themselves to the pleasures of the weed to which they owed their fortune.

The “bowls” of the narghiles were quickly filled with tobacco, but it is needless to remark that Kéraban used his own tom- b&i of Persian growth, while Van Mitten smoked the latakia of Asia Minor.

Then the pipes were lighted: the smokers reclined on the benches, and inhaled the smoke through the long flexible tubes. The atmosphere was soon filled with the odour of the smoke which was not permitted to reach the mouth until it had been cooled by the clear water of the narghile.

For some time the friends smoked in silent enjoyment with half-closed eyes, and apparently supported by the clouds of smoke which appeared like an “aerial eiderdown.”

“Ah, this is real enjoyment,” said Kéraban at length. “I know of no better way of passing an hour than this chat with one’s pipe.”

“Conversation without discussion,” remarked Van Mitten.

“The Turkish Government has been as usual very badly advised to impose a tax on tobocco ten times its value,” said Kéraban. “Thanks to that besotted folly, the use of the narghile is gradually disappearing.”

“That is much to be regretted, Kéraban,” said Van Mitten.

“For my own part,” continued his friend, “I have such a predilection for tobacco, that I would rather die than give up the use of it. Yes, die! Had I lived in the time of Amurat IV. the despot who wished to prohibit it on pain of death, I would have let them cut my head off with my pipe in my mouth.”

“I quite agree with you,” said the Dutchman, emitting two or three puffs of smoke.

“Gently — gently — do not smoke so fast,” cried Kéraban. “You have no time to taste the pleasant smoke. You are like a glutton who bolts his food.”

“You are always right, friend Kéraban,” replied Van Mitten, who would not have provoked a discussion at that time for the world.

“Always right, Van Mitten.”

“But what surprises me,” continued the Dutchman, “is that we tobacco merchants experience the greatest pleasure in smoking our own wares.”

“And what then?” said Kéraban, who was always ready for an argument.

“Well, because, if it be true that pastrycooks are usually disgusted by pastry, and sweetmeat sellers by sweetmeats, it seems to me that a tobacco merchant — ”

“Permit me an observation — just one remark, Van Mitten.”

“What is it?”

“Did you ever hear of a wine-merchant who never tasted the wines he sold?”

“No — certainly I never did.”

“Well then, wine merchant or tobacco merchant — it is the same thing.”

“Be it so,” replied the Dutchman.

“Your explanation seems to me conclusive.”

“But,” continued Kéraban, “as you appear to wish to argue — ”

“I assure you I do not,” replied Van Mitten, quickly.

“So?”

“No, I declare.”

“At any rate you made an observation which reflected on my taste for tobacco.”

“Believe me — ”

“You did — I say you did,” interrupted Kéraban, beginning to get excited. “I can understand insinuations — ”

“There was no insinuation on my part,” replied Van Mitten, who, without knowing why — perhaps it was the effect of the good dinner — began to wax impatient.

“There was,” replied Kéraban, “and it is my turn to make an observation.”

“Well then, make it.”

“I do not understand — I cannot understand — how you can bring yourself to smoke Latakia in a narghile! It displays a great want of taste in a smoker who has any self-respect.”

“It seems to me that I have the right to do so,” replied Van Mitten, “since I prefer the tobacco of Asia Minor.”

“Asia Minor. Really! Asia Minor is far behind Persia when tobacco is concerned.”

“That is a matter of opinion.”

“Tombeki, even after being submitted to a double ‘washing,’ still possesses active properties infinitely superior to those of latakia.”

“I quite believe it,” replied the Dutchman. “Very active properties; which are due to the presence of belladonna.”

“Belladonna, in proper proportion, only increases the qualities of the tobacco.”

“Yes, for people who wish to poison themselves by degrees.”

“It is not a poison!”

“It is, and a very strong poison!”

“Have I died of it?” exclaimed Kéraban, puffing away.

“No, but you will.”

“Well, then in my last hour I will maintain that tombeki is preferable to that dried hay you call latakia,” said Kéraban, in a solemnly-nervous tone.

“I cannot let such a mistaken idea pass without protest,” said Van Mitten, getting excited in his turn.

“It will pass, nevertheless.”

“And you dare to say this to a man who has sold tobacco for twenty years?”

“And you dare to assert the contrary to a man who has sold tobacco for thirty?”

“Twenty years!”

“Thirty years!”

At this point of the discussion the disputants rose at the same moment. While they gesticulated, they let their pipes fall; but they picked them up again, and continued the dispute, getting extremely personal.

“Van Mitten, you are, out and out, the most pig-headed man I have ever met.”

“After you, Kéraban; after you.”

“I?”

“You,” replied the Dutchman, who no longer could control himself. “Just look at the smoke of the latakia which is issuing from my lips!”

“And do you look at the fumes of the tombeki which I puff out in such odoriferous clouds.”

Then each one puffed into the face of the other.

“Now just inhale the flavour of my tobacco,” said one.

“Just inhale mine,” said the other.

“I am obliged to confess,” said Van Mitten, “that, as regards tobacco, you are perfectly ignorant.”

“And you,” retorted Kéraban, “are far behind the merest tyro in smoking.”

The dispute waxed so warm that the voices were audible outside; and, certainly, they had reached a point where serious consequences might be expected to ensue, when Ahmet came in. Bruno and Nizib, attracted by the uproar, followed him. All three remained standing on the threshold.

“Look here,” exclaimed Ahmet, laughing loudly. “My uncle is smoking M. Van Mitten’s pipe, and M. Van Mitten is smoking uncle Kéraban’s!”

Nizib and Bruno confirmed the assertion in chorus.

In fact, when they picked up their pipes the disputants had each seized the wrong one; and so, without perceiving the exchange, the disputants had respectively asserted the virtues of their favourite tobacco; Kéraban all the while smoking latakia, and Van Mitten, tombeki.

They could not help laughing, and finally they shook hands like friends whose good feeling no dispute could disturb.

“The horses are harnessed,” said Ahmet, “we have only to get into the chaise.”

“Let us go then,” said Kéraban.

Van Mitten and he then handed the narghiles to their valets, and the whole party were soon seated in their travelling carriage. But, as he got in, Kéraban could not help saying in a low tone to his friend —

“Now that you have tasted it, will you not confess that tombeki is far superior to latakia?”

“I willingly confess as much,” said the Dutchman, who did not wish to get into another discussion.

“Thank you, my friend,” replied Kéraban, much moved by this concession, “that is an avowal which I will never forget.”

Then the pair cemented, by a vigorous grasp of the hand, the truce which had lately been proclaimed between them, and which ought not to be broken. The chaise was urged rapidly along the coast road; and at eight o’clock in the evening the frontier of Abkasia was reached. The travellers halted here for relays, and slept soundly until the next morning.

CHAPTER XVII.

ABKASIA is a province by itself in the midst of the Caucasian region, in which only a military jurisdiction prevails. It is bounded on the south by the river Ingour, whose waters form the boundary of Mingrelia, one of the principal divisions of the government of Koutais.

It is a beautiful province, one of the richest in the Caucasus, but the prevailing system is not one to display its wealth to the best advantage. The inhabitants have scarcely yet begun to be proprietors of the soil, which belongs almost entirely to the reigning princes, descended from a Persian dynasty. So the native is still in a semi- savage condition, possessing little idea of time, without any written language, and speaking a kind of patois which his next neighbours can scarcely understand; and such a poor patois too, that it lacks words to express the most elementary idea.

Van Mitten was not slow to remark the great difference which existed between this country and the districts through which he had already passed. On the left of the road were fields of maize, very few of corn goats and sheep, well tended; oxen, horses, cows wandered at liberty in the meadows; there were fine trees, white poplars, fig-trees, nut-trees, oaks, limes, plane-trees, extensive thickets of box and holly: such is the appearance of Abkasia. As an intrepid traveller — Madame Serena — has remarked, “If one compares the three provinces of Mingrelia, Samourzakan, and Abkasia, one may say that their civilization respectively is in the ratio of the culture of the hills which surround them. Mingrelia, which socially is the foremost, has wooded and cultivated heights; Samourzakan, already behindhand, presents a half savage aspect; Abkasia, last, remains in almost a primitive condition, and has only a line of uncultivated hills, which are at present untouched by manual labour.” Such is Abkasia, which, of all the Caucasian districts, will be the last to enjoy the blessings of individual liberty.

The first halt which the travellers made after crossing the frontier was at the village of Gagri, which is a pretty place, possessing a beautiful church, the sacristy of which is used as a cellar; a fort, which is a military hospital; a torrent, which was then dry, named the Gagrinska: on one side is the sea, on the other a fruitful country, planted with fine accacias, and dotted with rose plantations. In the distance extends the boundary chain between Abkasia and Cir- cassia, whose inhabitants, after their defeat by the Russians in the terrible campaign of 1859, have abandoned the beautiful coast.

The chaise, which reached this place at nine o’clock at night, remained till next day. Seigneur Kéraban and his companions slept in one of the douklians of the village and quitted it early. At mid-day, six leagues farther on, Pizunda afforded them a change of horses, and Van Mitten had half an hour to admire the church wherein the patriarchs of the western Caucasus formerly resided. This edifice, with its brick cupolas, formerly covered with copper, the design of its naves, which followed the shape of the Greek cross, the frescoes on the walls, the fa9ade shaded by elms, is raised to a position amongst the most curious monuments of the Byzantine style of the sixth century.

Then the same day our travellers passed the villages of Goudouati and Gounista: at midnight, after a rapid journey of eighteen leagues, they snatched some repose at Soukhoum-Kale, which is built upon a wide bay which reaches to the south as far as Cape Kodor.

Soukhoum-Kale is the principal port of Abkasia; but in the last war in the Caucasus the town was partly destroyed. In it there was a motley crowd of

Greeks, Armenians, Turks, Russians even in greater numbers than natives. Now the military element is predominent, and the steamers from Odessa or Poti carry numerous visitors to the barracks, built near the ancient fortress, which was erected in the sixteenth century under the rule of Amurah at the time of the Ottoman dominion.

A very Georgian repast, consisting of an acid soup, a kind of chicken broth, a ragout seasoned with acid, saffron-flavoured milk — a repast little appreciated by two Turks and a Dutchman — preceded the departure of the party from the town at nine a m.

Having passed the pretty little town of Kelasouri, built in the shady valley of Kelassur, the travellers crossed the Kodor twenty-seven versts from Soukhoum-Kale'. The chaise skirted enormous groves of trees, which one might compare to virgin forests (with inextricable jungles and thick scrub, penetrable only by water or fire; and in which were swarms of serpents, wolves, bears and jackals) forming a corner of tropical America, planted upon the shore of the Black Sea. But already the axe of the explorer is heard in these forests, which centuries have left untouched; and the beautiful trees will disappear ere long into the frame-work of houses or ships.

Otchemchiri, the chief place of the district, which includes Kodor and Samourzakan, is an important maritime town situated upon two streams. Ilori, whose Byzantine church is worth seeing, but could not be visited by our travellers, who were pressed for time; Gajida and Anak- lifa were all passed during that day's travel, one of the longest and most rapid portions of the journey as regards the time and the pace. But about eleven o'clock in the evening, the travellers reached the frontier of Abkasia, passed the river Ingour, and twenty-five versts farther on stopped at Redout Kale, the chief town of Mingrelia, one of the provinces of the government of Koutais.

The remainder of the night was passed in sleeping. Tired though he was, Van Mitten rose early with a view to see something before they started again. But he found Ahmet already stirring, though Kéraban was still asleep in the fairly good room which had been assigned him at the principal hotel.

“Out of bed already?” said Van Mitten, when he perceived Ahmet “Is my young friend inclined to join me in a stroll this morning?”

“Have I time for it, M. Van Mitten?” said Ahmet. “Must I not replenish our stores for the journey? We shall soon pass the Russo-Turkish frontier, and it will not be an easy matter to revictual in the deserts of Lazistan and Anatolia. So, you see, I have not a moment to lose.”

“But when you have done that,” said the Dutchman, “have we not plenty of time?”

“When I have seen to the provisions,” replied Ahmet, “I must look to our carriage and get the wheelwright to examine the screws and grease the axles; I must examine the reins and the drag. It will never do to find any repairs are required after we have passed the frontier. I intend to put the chaise in thorough repair, and I depend upon its lasting to the end of this wonderful journey of ours.”

“Quite right. But when you have seen to all that?”

“Then I will examine the relays, and I must go to the postmaster to arrange that.”

“Very well; but after that?” said Van Mitten, who would not relinquish his idea.

“After that it will be time to start, replied Ahmet, “and we shall be off. So I must leave you.”

“One moment, my young friend “said the Dutchman. “Let me ask you a question.”

“Speak, but quickly please, M. Van Mitten.”

“You are doubtless aware of what is worth seeing in this province of Mingrelia?”

“Pretty well!”

“It is the country watered by the poetic Phasis, whose waters deposited gold dust upon the marble steps of the palaces built upon its banks.”

“Quite so.”

“Here is the legendary Colchis, where; Jason and his Argonauts, assisted by the magician Medea, obtained the Golden Fleece guarded by a formidable dragon, without mentioning the terrible bulls which vomited flame.”

“I do not deny it.”

“Finally row in those mountains yonder is the rock of Khomli, overlooking Koutais, to which Prometheus was bound, and where the vultures eternally feed upon his entrails as a punishment for having stolen the bolts of heaven.”

“Nothing is more true, M. Van Mitten, but I repeat I am in a hurry. But what are you coming to?”

“To this, my young friend,” replied the Dutchman in his most amiable manner: “Several days spent here in this part of Mingrelia, and as far as Koutais, would be well spent: and — ”

“So you propose that we should remain some days in Redout-Kate?”

“Oh, four or five days would suffice.”

“Would you make that suggestion to my uncle Kéraban?” said Ahmet somewhat maliciously.

“11 Never, my young friend,” replied the Dutchman. “It would give rise to a discussion, and since that regretable dispute about the tobacco I declare I will never enter into an argument with that excellent man again.”

“And you will act wisely.”

“But at this moment I am not addressing the terrible Kéraban. I am speaking to my young friend Ahmet”

“You are mistaken, M. Van Mitten,” said the young man, taking his hand: “You are not speaking to him at this moment”

“To whom then?”

“To the fiance of Amasia: and you know that he has not an hour to lose.”

As he finished speaking Ahmet hurried away to complete his preparations: and Van Mitten, much disappointed, was obliged to content himself with a promenade of a very unsatisfactory nature in the little town, accompanied by his faithful but discouraging Bruno.

At mid-day all the travellers were ready to start again. The chaise, which had been carefully examined and repaired, promised to last for many long journeys. The provision lockers had been replenished, so there was nothing to fear on the score of food for many versts, or rather "agatchs,"

since the provinces of Asiatic Turkey were to be traversed during the second portion of the journey; but Ahmet might well congratulate himself on having forestalled every eventuality which might arise either in food or in locomotion.

Seigneur Kéraban was delighted, as he perceived the journey was being accomplished without accident or incident. How his self-love as an "old Turk" would be flattered when he arrived upon the left shore of the Bosphorus, notwithstanding the Ottoman authorities and the tax-collectors, it is needless to insist.

Redout-Kald being only ninety versts from the Turkish frontier, in four-and twenty hours the most headstrong of Turks might depend upon stepping once more upon Ottoman territory. Then he would be at home.

"En route, nephew," cried Kéraban good- humouredly. "May Allah continue his protection!"

"En route!" said Ahmet.

They took their places, followed by Van Mitten, who in vain endeavoured to find out the mythological peak of the Caucasus on which Prometheus had expiated his crime. The chaise started with much cracking of the whip and neighing of horses.

In an hour the chaise passed the frontier of Gouriel, which since 1801 has been annexed to Mingrelia. Poti is the capital — a considerable port on the Black Sea, whence a railway is laid to Tiflis, the capital of Georgia.

The road ascends gently through and into a fertile country. Here and there are villages or houses scattered amid the fields of maize. The appearance of these structures is curious: they are not built of wood, but of platted straw like basket-work. Van Mitten made a note of this. Indeed there are only these petty detail to be noted in the journey across the ancient Colchis. Subsequently perhaps he be more happy when he reaches the banks of the Rion — the river of Poti — the celebrated Phasis of antiquity, which many geographers believe to have been one of the four Rivers of the Garden of Eden.

In another hour the travellers were stopped by the railway which runs from Poti to Tiflis; and which crosses the highway a verst below the Sakario Station. They were obliged to cross the line, to reach Poti, by the left bank of the stream. The horses were pulled up at the gate of the Ievel-cross-! ing. The windows of the carriage were down; so Kéraban and his friends could see j all that passed.

The postilion began to call for the gate- man, who had not put in an appearance. Kéraban put his head out of his window. “Are we to lose our time on account of a wretched railway company?” he cried, “Why is the gate closed?”

“No doubt a train is due,” said Van Mitten quietly.

“Why is a train due, then?” retorted Kéraban.

The postilion continued to call out, without achieving any result. No one appeared either in the hut or in the garden.

“May Allah choke him!” exclaimed Kéraban “If he do not come, I will open the gate myself!”

“Calm yourself, uncle,” said Ahmet, restraining him, for Kéraban was about to descend from the chaise.

“Calm myself?”

“Yes, here is the gate-keeper.”

In fact, the man appeared at that moment and came very leisurely towards the chaise.

“Now then, are we to pass, or not?’’ exclaimed Kéraban.

“You can pass,” replied the man, “the train from Poti will not come up for ten minutes.”

“Open your gate, then, and do not delay us needlessly here: we are in a hurry.”

“I am going to open it,” replied the man.

So saying, he proceeded to open the gate at the opposite side first; and then the gate before which the chaise was waiting, but all deliberately, and with complete indifference to the demands of the travellers.

Kéraban was already boiling over with impatience.

Finally the way was clear, and the chaise began to cross the line At this moment, on the opposite side, appeared a party of travellers. A Turkish noble, mounted upon a splendid horse, and attended by four riders as an escort, prepared to cross the line.

This personage was evidently an important individual. He was about thirty-five years old; tall; and comported himself with the peculiar nobility of the Asiatic race. He was good- looking enough; his eyes only sparkled when he was moved by passion. His forehead was bronzed; his beard black, and flowing to his chest; teeth white, and lips which seemed unused to smiling. In fine his was the physiognomy of an imperious man, powerful by position and fortune, accustomed to have everything he desired, and a man whom opposition would drive to excesses. There was still something of the savage in his nature, in which the Turk bordered on the Arab.

This gentleman wore a simple travelling costume cut in the fashion usual with rich Osmanlis, who are more Asiatic than European. No doubt he wished to conceal the fact of his real importance under his sombre cafetan.

Just as the chaise reached the centre o the railway, the riding party also arrived there. Owing to the narrow space between the gates, only the chaise or the riders could pass at a time. One party or the other must give way.

The chaise stopped. So did the cavalcade: but it did not appear that the newcomer was at all inclined to yield to Kéraban. Turk against Turk could hardly fail to bring about some complication.

“Stand aside!” cried Kéraban, as the horses were halted face to face.

“Stand aside yourselves!” replied the new-comer, who seemed determined not to budge an inch.

“I arrived first!”

“Well then you will pass second!”

“I will not give way.”

“Neither will I.”

Begun in this fashion, the discussion threatened to reach an unpleasant pitch.

“Uncle,” said Ahmet, “it will not matter to us — ”

“Nephew, it matters very much.”

“My friend — ” began Van Mitten.

“Leave me alone,” replied Kéraban, in at tone which drove the Dutchman into his corner.

Then the gate-keeper cried —

“Make haste, make haste! the train will be here directly, make haste!”

But Kéraban scarcely heard him. Having opened the door of the chaise he got out, followed by Van Mitten and Ahmet, while Bruno and Nizib jumped from the “cabriolet.”

Kéraban walked up to the chief cavalier and put his hand on the horse’s bridle.

“Will you let me pass?” he cried, with a violence he could not control.

“Never.”

“We will soon see that.”

“See that?”

“You do not know Kéraban.”

“Neither do you know Saffar.”

It was, in fact, Seigneur SafTar, who was proceeding to Poti after a rapid journey in the Southern Caucasus. But the name of Saffar, the man who had anticipated the relays at Kertsch, only excited Kéraban still more. To yield to this man, who had already annoyed him — never! He would rather be trampled under his horse’s! feet.

“Ah, so you are the Seigneur Saffar! Well then, go back, Seigneur Saffar!”

“Forward!” exclaimed Saffar, signing to his men to force their way across.

Ahmet and Van Mitten, feeling assured that nothing would make Kéraban yield, prepared to assist him.

“Pass on, pass on!” cried the gatekeeper. “Here is the train.”

At that moment the whistle of the approaching locomotive was heard as it came round the curve.

“Go back!” exclaimed Kéraban.

“Go back!” cried Saffar.

The whistle of the locomotive became more audible and warning in tone. The gate-keeper waved his flag with the intention to stop the train. He was too late. It came round the curve rapidly.

Seigneur Saffar, seeing that he had only just time to escape, retreated quickly. Bruno and Nizib threw themselves aside. Ahmet and Van Mitten, seizing Kéraban, dragged him through; and the postilion,: whipping his horses, impelled them outside the rapidly closing gates.

At that moment the express passed. But it struck the hinder portion of the chaise, which it knocked to pieces, and disappeared without the travellers having experienced any injury from the broken part Seigneur Kéraban, almost beside himself, wanted to throw himself upon his adversary; but the latter, spurring his horse, crossed the line, disdaining even to look at Kéraban; and then, followed by his escort, galloped away on the other road, which followed the right bank of the river.

“The coward! the wretch!” exclaimed Kéraban. “If ever I meet him again!”

“Yes; but meantime we have no longer a post-chaise,” said Ahmet, looking at the injured vehicle as it lay in the road.

“That may be, nephew; but nevertheless I passed over first” This was Kéraban all over! At that moment, some Cossacks who were charged with the care of the road approached. They had seen all that had occurred.

Their first move was to arrest Kéraban. He protested, and his nephew and Van Mitten vainly interfered. Then came violent resistence from the man who, after breaking the rules of the road, was threatening to complicate matters by resisting lawful authority.

One can no more argue with Cossacks than with gendarmes. It is no use to resist. So Kéraban was carried off to the Sakario station in a towering passion; while Ahmet, Van Mitten, Bruno, and Nizib, remained by the damaged vehicle.

“Here is a pretty state of things!” said Van Mitten.

“But what about my uncle?” said Ahmet. “We cannot abandon him!”

Twenty minutes later the train from Tiflis to Poti passed. They looked at it and —

In a compartment appeared the dishevelled head of Kéraban, red with fury, beside himself with rage, and none the less because he, for the first time in his life, had been compelled by the ferocious Cossacks to travel in a train.

But he could not be left alone in such a situation. It was necessary to release him from the consequences of the false step his impetuosity had induced him to take, and not to imperil the return to Scutari, by a delay which might be prolonged.

Leaving the remains of the chaise which was now useless, Ahmet and his companions hired a cart to which the postilion harnessed his horses; and then as rapidly as possible they proceeded to Poti; where they arrived in two hours.

Ahmet and Van Mitten, as soon as they reached the town, went to the police-station with the intention to release Kéraban. There they learned one circumstance which reassured them in a measure, and eased their minds concerning more delay.

Seigneur Kéraban, having been heavily fined for breaking the law and resisting its authority, had been put under the charge ot the Cossacks and sent across the frontier.

It was necessary that they should rejoin him as quickly as possible, and with this view they sought to procure means of transport.

As for Saffar, Ahmet made it his business to endeavour to ascertain what had become of him. He had already embarked in the steamer which had quitted Poti for various ports of Asia Minor. But Ahmet could learn nothing concerning this grand personage, and he did not perceive the trail of smoke which hung over the steamer that was carrying the Seigneur Saffar to Trebizond!

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

THE reader, no doubt remembers that Van Mitten, much disappointed at not having been able to visit the ruins of the ancient Colchis, had made up his mind to indemnify himself by exploring the “mythological” Phasis, which, under the less euphonious name of the Rion, now flows into the sea at Poti, where it forms a little harbour in the littoral of the Black Sea.

But in truth the worthy Dutchman was again destined to have his hopes crushed. He was certainly very desirous to trace out the course of Jason and of the Argonauts, to explore the celebrated places through which the bold son of AEson penetrated on his search for the Golden Fleece. No! Van Mitten was just at present in a great hurry to quit Poti, so as to follow up Seigneur Kéraban, and to rejoin him on the Russo-Turkish frontier.

But at the very outset a fresh disappointment awaited him. It was already five o’clock in the afternoon. They intended to start on the following morning, 13 th September. Of Poti, then, Van Mitten could only see the public gardens, in which are the ruins of an ancient fortress; the houses (built on piles), the abodes of some six thousand or seven thousand people; the wide streets flanked by ditches in which frogs croaked incessantly; and the harbour, well-filled with shipping, which is guarded by an excellent lighthouse, a guiding star of the first magnitude.

Van Mitten could only console himself for having so little time in which to make these observations, as he had to leave the town so quickly, by recollecting that it is situated in the midst of the marshes formed by the Rion and the Capatcha; and that by his rapid departure he would run no risk of the fever which is so prevalent there.

While the Dutchman was thus abandoning himself to all these kinds of reflections, Ahmet was busying himself in endeavouring to replace the chaise, which would have still done good service but for the indefensible imprudence of its proprietor. Now to find another post chaise, new or second-hand, in the little town of Poti was not to be expected. A perecladnaia — or Russian araba — might indeed be obtained, and Seigneur Kéraban’s purse was available to pay the cost, whatever it might be. But the available vehicles in fact were only more or less of a cart-like and primitive character, very uncomfortable, and had nothing in common with the travelling carriage. However willing the horses which might be yoked to it, they could not possibly proceed at the same pace as with a chaise. So there were many delays to be feared before the journey could be accomplished.

However, we may remark that Ahmet was at any rate not likely to be embarrassed in the choice of a carriage, for nothing in the nature of a conveyance could be obtained! It was most important that he should rejoin his uncle as quickly as possible, for Kéraban’s obstinacy would surely engage him in some deplorable adventure. So Ahmet decided to perform that journey of twenty leagues on horseback, for that was the distance which lay between Poti and the Turko-Russian frontier. He was an excellent horseman, and Nizib had often accompanied him in his rides. Van Mitten, when consulted, confessed that he had had some lessons in the principles of equitation, and he answered, if not for the actual skill of Bruno on horseback, at any rate for his obedience in following him under those conditions.

It was thus arranged that they should take their departure the following morning at an early hour, so as to be able to reach the frontier the same evening.

This settled, Ahmet wrote a long letter to the address of Selim the banker: a letter which naturally commenced with the words, “Dear Amasia.” To her he related the various incidents of the journey: what had happened at Poti, why he had been separated from his uncle, how he hoped to rejoin him. He added that their return would be in no way retarded by this adventure: that he knew very well how to make both men and animals “step out,” to accomplish the remainder of the journey in the shortest possible time. So he suggested that she should proceed with her father and Nedjeb to Scutari on the day fixed, or indeed, a little sooner, so that their meeting should not fail.

This letter — in which Ahmet scattered broadcast the most tender phrases and compliments — was intended to go by the regular mail-steamer next day. In eight- and-forty hours it would reach its destination, be opened and read — perhaps pressed to Amasia’s heart, which Ahmet believed he could hear beating across the Black Sea. The fact being that the young lovers were at that time farther apart than at any other period of the journey — at the ends of an immense ellipse as it were, whose curves must be followed ere the young people could meet again.

Now while Ahmet was writing to console Amasia, what was Van Mitten doing?

The Dutchman, having dined at the hotel, was walking about the streets of Poti with curiosity — under the trees of the Central Garden, along the quays and piers, which were in course of construction. But he was alone. Bruno, this time, did not accompany him.

But why did Bruno not go with his master, free to make respectful but just observations upon the complications of the present and the chances of the future?

Because Bruno had an idea. If there were no carriages of any kind in Poti, he might, perhaps, find a pair of scales. For this emaciated Dutchman it was now or never to compare his actual weight with his former figure.

So Bruno had quitted the hotel, taking care to carry with him his master’s “guide,” which gave him in Tartar pounds the value of the Russian weights and measures, with which he was unacquainted.

On the quays of a maritime town, near the custom house, there are always some large scales in which a man can ascertain his weight at his leisure.

Bruno had no misgivings on the subject. In consideration of a few kopecks the proprietor of the scales made no objection to the lad’s fancy. They placed a considerable weight in the one scale, and Bruno, not without secret misgivings, ascended into the other.

To his great disgust the latter remained upon the ground, and Bruno, notwithstanding his efforts, could not move the scale.

“The devil!” he muttered, “this is as I feared.”

Then a less weight was substituted, but the scale remained as immovable as before.

“Is it possible!” exclaimed Bruno, who felt all the blood rushing to his heart.

At that moment his gaze fell upon a pleasant face, which appeared quite benevolent in its regard.

“My master!” exclaimed Bruno.

It was Van Mitten, sure enough; who, by the chances of his promenade, had been led to the quay precisely at the time when his servant was undergoing the weighing operation.

“You here, sir!” said Bruno.

“Yes, myself,” replied Van Mitten. “I see you are in the act of — ”

“Of weighing myself, sir. Yes.”

“And what is the result of the operation?”

“The result is that I do not know whether there are any weights light enough to weigh me!”

Bruno made this reply with such adolorous expression of countenance that the plaint went direct to the heart of Van Mitten.

“What!” he exclaimed. “Have you grown so thin since you left home, my poor Bruno?”

“You may judge for yourself, sir,” replied the man.

Then a third weight, less than the previous one, was placed in the scale.

This time Bruno, by slow degrees, managed to tip the scales, and put them in equilibrio on the horizontal beam.

“At last!” he exclaimed “But what is such a weight as that?”

“Yes, what is that weight?” asked Van Mitten.

It was exactly, in Russian measure, four pounds, neither more nor less.

Van Mitten immediately took the guidebook, which Bruno still retained, and referred to the tables of weights and measures of the various nationalities.

“Well, sir?” asked Bruno, who was a prey to curiosity mingled with a kind of agonized feeling. “What is the value of the Russian pound weight?”

“About sixteen and a half Dutch ‘ponds,’” replied Van Mitten, after a little mental arithmetic.

“And that amounts to — ?”

“That makes exactly seventy-five and a half ponds, or one hundred and fifty-one pounds.”

Bruno uttered a cry of despair and suddenly leaped from the scale, the other platform of which fell heavily to the ground, and he fell upon a bench half fainting.

“One hundred and fifty-one pounds!” he repeated, as if he had lost a considerable slice of his existence.

In fact, at his departure from home, Bruno had weighed eighty-four ponds, or one hundred and sixty-eight pounds. Now he weighed only seventy-five and a half ponds, or one hundred and fifty-one pounds. He had then lost seventeen pounds in twenty-six days of comparatively easy traveling without any great privations or fatigue. And now that the evil had begun where was it to stop? What would become of the stoutness which Bruno was hoping to possess, which had taken him twenty years to gain, thanks to his observance of a well calculated treatment? How would he now fall away from the honourable condition in which he had formerly maintained himself, particularly at the present juncture, when, for want of a carriage travelling through a country without supplies, in daily threatening fatigues and dangers, this absurd journey was about to be continued under new and less favourable conditions?

That was the question which the anxious servant of Van Mitten kept asking himself. He pictured to himself, in a rapid glance into the probable future, terrible eventualities, in the midst of which appeared a quite unrecognizable Bruno reduced to a perambulating skeleton.

So he made up his mind without a moment’s hesitation. He rose, and dragging away his master who had not the strength to resist him, stopped him on the quay before entering the hotel.

“Master,” he said, “there are limits to everything, even to human folly. We will go no farther.”

Van Mitten received this statement with his usual placidity, from which nothing could move him.

“What do you mean Bruno? Do you ijitend us to stay for ever in this corner of the Caucasus?”

“No, sir, no. I merely would suggest that we leave Seigneur Kéraban to return as he pleases to Constantinople, while we go back in one of the steamers from Poti. The sea does not disagree with you nor me, and I run no risk of becoming thinner, a contingency which will certainly happen if I continue to travel under present conditions.”

“The idea is perhaps wise from your point of view, Bruno,” said Van Mitten, “but with me it is different. It requires some consideration before I can abandon my friend Kéraban after three parts of his journey have been accomplished.”

“Seigneur Kéraban is no longer your friend,” replied Bruno. “He is the friend of Seigneur Kéraban — that is all! Besides, he is not and cannot be my friend, and I will not sacrifice what little stoutness I still possess for his caprices. Three quarters of the journey accomplished, you say! That is true; but the fourth quarter seems to me to present many more difficulties in crossing this savage country. That nothing personally disagreeable to you may occur, I grant; but I repeat — if you will insist on going — take care; something unfortunate will eventuate!”

The insistence of Bruno, that something serious would happen, had its effect upon Van Mitten. The suggestions of his faithful servant had some, if not a great, influence. Indeed the contemplated journey beyond the Russian frontier, through the district almost entirely uncontrolled by the Turkish government, was one which could not be undertaken without consideration. So, being rather weak, Van Mitten felt somewhat shaken; Bruno, perceiving this, redoubled his efforts. He added a most convincing argument, by showing how loosely his clothes hung upon him around his waist, which was growing smaller daily. Insinuating, persuasive, even eloquent under the domination of profound conviction, he induced his master to share his ideas and to see the necessity to separate himself somehow or other from his friend Kéraban.

Van Mitten was reflecting: He nodded his head in the right places; and, when this serious conversation was finished, he was only restrained by the fear of having a discussion on the subject with his incorrigible travelling companion.

“Well,” said Bruno, who had combated all objections, “the circumstances are favourable. Since Seigneur Kéraban is no longer present, let us take French leave of him, and leave his nephew Ahmet to meet him at the frontier.”

Van Mitten shook his head.

“There is only one obstacle to that;” he said.

“That is?” enquired Bruno.

“Because I left Constantinople with very little money, and now my purse is empty!”

“Can you not procure sufficient from the bank at Constantinople?” said Bruno.

“No; that is impossible. The deposit has not yet arrived from Rotterdam.”

“So, to obtain the necessary money for our return — ?” asked Bruno.

“We must address ourselves to my friend Kéraban,” replied Van Mitten.

This reply by no means re-assured Bruno.

If his master once met Kéraban again and mentioned the project, there would be a discussion, in which Van Mitten would come off second best. But what was to be done? Should they speak to Ahmet? No, decidedly. Ahmet would never supply them with means to desert his uncle. There was no use in thinking of that.

At length it was decided between the master and man, after a long discussion, that they would leave Poti in Ahmet’s company, and proceed to rejoin Kéraban on the Turko-Russian frontier. There Van Mitten, under a pretext of failing health, and in view of the fatigue in prospect, would declare that he could not continue the journey. Under such circumstances, his friend Kéraban would never refuse to lend him the necessary funds to enable him to reach Constantinople by sea.

“No matter,” thought Bruno, “a conversation between my master and Seigneur Kéraban on this subject, will, nevertheless, be a serious one.”

They then returned to the hotel where Ahmet was awaiting them. They said nothing to him of their projects, for he would have endeavoured to combat them. They dined and slept. Van Mitten dreamed that Kéraban was chopping him into mincemeat. They awoke early next morning and found four horses at the door ready to “devour space.”

Bruno was a curious spectacle while he was attempting to mount his steed. This was a new grievance against Kéraban. But there were no other means of travelling, and so Bruno was obliged to resign himself to the inevitable. Fortunately, his horse was an old hack, incapable of misconducting himself, and easy to manage. Van Mitten’s- and Nizib’s steeds likewise were not formidable animals. Ahmet only rode a spirited horse; but, as he was quite at home in the saddle, he had no other anxiety than to moderate his pace so as not to distance his companions on the journey.

They quitted Poti at five o’clock in the morning. At eight they took their first breakfast at the village of Nikolaja, after a ride of thirty versts; a second breakfast at Kintryschi, fifteen versts farther on about eleven o’clock; and, towards two o’clock in the afternoon, Ahmet, after a stage of twenty versts more, halted at Batoum in that part of northern Lazistan which belongs to the Muscovite empire. This was formerly a Turkish port, very conveniendy situated at the mouth of the Tchorock, the Bathys of the ancients. It is very unfortunate that the Turks have lost it, for the harbour contains excellent I anchorage for a number of ships even of great draught. The town is simply an important bazaar, which lines the principal street. But the hand of Russia is being extended slowly over all the Transcaucasian regions; and it has seized Batoum, as it will seize, eventually, the farther limits of Lazistan.

There Ahmet was not quite so much at home as he had been in the place some years before. It was necessary to pass Gumeh, at the mouth of the river, and at twenty versts from Batoum, the town of Makrialos, to attain the frontier, ten versts further on.

In this place, by the wayside, a man was waiting under the scarcely paternal observation of a party of Cossacks. This individual's feet were placed at the very limit of Ottoman territory, and he was in a state of fury more easy to imagine than to describe.

The man was Seigneur Kéraban. It was six o'clock p m. and since the midnight previous — the precise moment at which he had been ejected from Russian territory — Kéraban had been in a towering rage.

A wretched hut, badly furnished and miserably supplied, had been his only shelter, or rather his only place of refuge.

Half a verst away Ahmet and Van Mitten had respectively perceived their uncle and friend; and, pressing their horses, dismounted near him.

Seigneur Kéraban was just then pacing up and down, gesticulating, and talking to himself since no one took any notice of him, and he did not appear to see his friends approaching.

“Uncle!” exclaimed Ahmet, extending his arms. Nizib and Bruno took care of the horses.

“My friend!” cried Van Mitten.

Kéraban seized the hands of both; and, indicating the Cossacks, who were still patrolling the road, he exclaimed —

“On a railway! Those wretches actually compelled me to travel in a train! I, I!”

Evidently he had been reduced to that mode of locomotion, so unworthy of a true Turk, and the indignity had excited in the breast of Seigneur Kéraban the most violent indignation. No! he would never put up with that. His meeting with Seigneur Saffar, his quarrel with that insolent personage and its consequences, the breaking down of the post-chaise — the obstacles to the continuation of the journey: he forgot all these in face of the one great enormity! He had been in a railway carriage! He! a true Believer of the old school!

“Yes, it is an insult,” replied Ahmet, who thought it best not to contradict his uncle under such circumstances.

“Yes, an insult indeed,” added Van Mitten. “But after all, friend Kéraban, nothing serious has happened to you.”

“Ah! you had better mind what you are saying, Monsieur Van Mitten,” cried Kéraban. “Nothing serious, say you?”

Ahmet made a sign to the Dutchman to warn him that he was on the wrong tack. His old friend had addressed him as “Monsieur Van Mitten,” and was continuing —

“Just tell me what you mean by those indefensible words ‘ nothing serious!’”

“I meant, friend Kéraban, any of the usual accidents which happen on railways — neither derailment, nor break-down, nor collision — ”

“Monsieur Van Mitten, it were better to have run off the line,” exclaimed Kéraban. “Yes, by Allah! better to have run off the line; to have broken an arm, a leg, or even my head, than to have put up with such an indignity — do you hear?”

“You may readily believe, friend Kéraban,” continued Van Mitten, who did not know how to palliate his unfortunate words.

“you may believe — ”

“It does not matter what /may believe,” interrupted Kéraban, walking up to the Dutchman, “but what you believe! It is a question of how you regard what has happened to a man who for thirty years has believed himself your friend.”

Ahmet was anxious to change the conversation of which the evident result had been to make matters worse.

“Uncle,” he said, “I can assure you, you have quite misunderstood M. Van Mitten.”

“Really!”

“Or rather M. Van Mitten has not expressed himself clearly. He, quite as much as I do, resents with the greatest indignation the treatment which those confounded Cossacks have inflicted upon you.”

Fortunately all this conversation was carried on in the Turkish language, and the “confounded Cossacks “did not understand a word of it.

“But really, uncle, it is to another person you must attribute all that has happened.

Another is responsible for all this; and he is that impudent individual who obstructed your crossing the railway at Poti — Seigneur Saffar!”

“Yes, that Saffar!” exclaimed Kéraban, very opportunely put on this new trail by his nephew.

“A thousand times yes — that Saffar!”

added Van Mitten, hastily. “He was the fellow I wished to speak of, friend Kéraban.”

“The infamous Saffar!” said Kéraban.

“The infamous Saffar!” repeated Van Mitten, putting himself in accord with his companion.

He would have employed even a more forcible epithet, had it occurred to him.

“If we ever meet him again “ — said Ahmet.

“And cannot we return to Poti to pay him out for his insolence,” cried Kéraban; “to pick a quarrel with him, to tear his heart from his body, to hand him over to the executioner — ?”

“To cause him to be impaled!” added Van Mitten, who adopted a ferocious tone, in order to preserve harmony.

This suggestion, so very Turkish, was successful in compromising matters, and gained for Van Mitten a grasp of his friend’s hand.

“Uncle,” said Ahmet, “it would be no use to return in pursuit of this Saffar now.”

“Why, nephew?”

“Because he is no longer in Poti,” replied Ahmet “When we arrived there he had already embarked in the coasting packet, which skirts the shore of Asia Minor.”

“The shore of Asia Minor — But our way lies along the coast!”

“Quite so, uncle.”

“Well, then,” exclaimed Kéraban, “if this infamous Saffar comes in my way — Vallah billah tillah — woe betide him!”

After pronouncing this formula, which is the sacred oath, Seigneur Kéraban could add nothing more terrible, and he was silent accordingly.

But how were they to travel now that they had no carriage? It was obviously useless to propose a journey on horseback to Seigneur Kéraban. His stoutness precluded any such suggestion. If he would suffer from riding, the horse would also have a bad time of it; and so it was arranged that they should all proceed to Choppa, the nearest town — which was not far off — and Kéraban could walk so far as that. Bruno also preferred to walk, as he could no longer sit his horse.

“And about that request for money you were going to make?” said he to his master, aside.

“At Choppa,” replied Van Mitten; but it was not without considerable trepidation that he perceived the moment approaching when he must touch upon such a delicate topic.

Soon afterwards the travellers descended the gently sloping road which skirts the littoral of Lazistan.

Seigneur Kéraban turned round to indulge himself with a last shake of his clenched hand towards the Cossacks, who had so very rudely carried him — him! — in a railway carriage; and then a curve in the road hid the Russian frontier from sight of the travellers.

CHAPTER II.

“A curious country,” writes Van Mitten in his note-book, as he hastily jotted down some random impressions of the journey. “The women work in the fields and carry burthens, while the men spin flax and knit in wool.”

The worthy Dutchman was not mistaken: such are still the customs in the distant province of Lazistan, where the second portion of the journey was commenced.

It is still a little-known country, this territory which extends from the Caucasian frontier; this portion of Turkish Armenia comprised between the valleys of the Charchout of the Tschorock, and the shore of the Black Sea. Few travellers, since the Frenchman M. Deyralles, have ventured across these districts of the pachalik of Trebizond, between the mountains which extend in an irregular manner, from the coast to the Lake Van, and embrace Erzeroum, the capital of Armenia, the chief place of a district which includes more than twelve hundred thousand inhabitants.

Nevertheless, this country has witnessed many grand historical events. When quitting the plains in which the two branches of the Euphrates rise, Xenophon and his Ten Thousand retreated before the armies of Artaxerxes Mnemon, and reached the banks of the Phasis. This Phasis is not the so-called Rion, which flows into the sea at Poti, but the Kour, which comes down from the Caucasian region, and not far from the province of Lazistan, across which Seigneur Kéraban and his companions were about to travel Ah! if Van Mitten had only had time, what precious observations he might have made, and which are now all lost for the erudite Hollanders! And why should he not have discovered the precise spot on which Xenophon, general, historian, and philosopher, gave battle to the Taochians and Chalybians when quitting the country of the Charduchians; and the mount Chenion, on which the Greeks welcomed, with loud acclamations, the appearance of the long-wished-for fleet in the Black Sea?

But Van Mitten had no time to see nor to study; or, rather, they did not give him time. And then Bruno returned to the charge concerning the loan from Kéraban, in order that they might separate from him.

“At Choppa,” was Van Mitten’s invariable reply.

So they all journeyed towards Choppa. But should they then find some means of proceeding — some vehicle which would replace the comfortable chaise that had been broken at Poti?

The situation was sufficiently grave. The travellers had still 240 leagues to traverse in seventeen days only. It was on the 30th of that month that Kéraban was due at home. It was on that day that Ahmet hoped to find in the villa at Scutari the youthful Amasia, who was waiting for the celebration of their marriage. One can quite understand then that both uncle and nephew were equally impatient; and on this account they were greatly embarrassed as to the means by which the second portion of the journey was to be accomplished.

It was not to be expected that they would find a post-chaise or even an ordinary carriage in the out-of-the-way towns of Asia Minor. Their only chance was to make use of one of the vehicles of the country, which are of a most rudimentary kind.

Under these circumstances, silent and pensive, Seigneur Kéraban proceeded along the coast-road on foot, Bruno also leading his own and his master’s horses by the bridle, for Van Mitten preferred to walk beside his friend. Nizib was mounted, and rode in front. Ahmet had already hurried on in advance, so as to prepare the lodgings at Choppa, and to make enquiries concerning a carriage, so that the journey could be continued at sunrise next day.

The road was followed slowly and in silence. Kéraban smothered the anger which was burning within him, but it was every now and then manifested by such exclamations as, “Cossacks!”

“railway!”

“waggon!”

“Saffar!” Van Mitten longed to converse with him upon the idea of the projected separation, but he did not dare — not thinking the time favourable in the state of mind in which his friend was, for the least suggestion would have upset him.

They reached Choppa at 9 o’clock in the evening. This stage accomplished on foot necessitated a night’s rest. The inn was second-rate, but fatigue made amends for want of accommodation, and the four travellers all slept for ten hours consecutively, while Ahmet that very evening set off into the country to procure a vehicle.

Next day, r4th September, at seven o’clock A.M. an araba, already horsed, was standing ready at the door of the inn.

Ah! how they regretted the old post- chaise, now replaced by a kind of rough cart on two wheels, and in which there was scarcely room for three persons! Two horses would not be one too many to drag such a heavy vehicle. Ahmet had fortunately been able to procure a waterproof awning, stretched upon a wooden framing, so as to protect the occupants from wind and rain. They were obliged to put up with this araba, pending better accommodation, but it was improbable that they would find better before they reached Trebizond.

One can easily understand how, at the sight of this rough cart, Van Mitten, philosophical as he was, and Bruno, absolutely knocked up, could neither of them repress a grimace, which, at a look of Kéraban's, disappeared in an instant.

“That is the only conveyance I could find, uncle;” said Ahmet.

‘It is all that is necessary,” replied Kéraban, who for the world would not have permitted anyone to perceive the shadow of a regret for the excellent post-chaise.

“Yes,” replied Ahmet, “with a good litter of straw in this araba — — ”

“We shall feel like princes, nephew,” interrupted Kéraban.

“Theatrical princes!” muttered Bruno. “Eh?” said Kéraban. “Besides,” continued Ahmet, “we are only sixty leagues from Trebizond, and there, I am assured, we shall find a much more comfortable mode of conveyance.”

“I tell you this will do very well,” said Kéraban, with a warning frown, as if he suspected his companions of some meditated contradiction.

But everyone, crushed by this formidable glance, preserved a passive demeanour.

So it was arranged that Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Bruno should occupy the araba, one of the horses being ridden by the postillion, who had charge of the relay, after each stage. Ahmet and Nizib, who were accustomed to ride, followed on horseback. By these means they hoped to reach Trebizond without much delay. Thence they determined to finish the journey in the quickest and most comfortable manner possible.

Then Seigneur Kéraban gave the signal for departure, after the araba had been furnished with provisions, &c. not forgetting the two narghiles, fortunately saved from the collision, carried by their respective owners. The towns in this portion of the littoral are not far apart They are rarely more than four of five leagues distant from each other. So the travellers could easily repose or replenish their stores — supposing that the impatient Ahmet would consent to accord them a few hours' rest, and that the villages had sufficient store of provisions.

"En route!" repeated Ahmet after his uncle, who had already taken his place in the araba.

At this moment Bruno approached his master, and in a grave but almost imperious tone said: —

"How about that proposition you have to make to Seigneur Kéraban?"

"I have not yet had the opportunity," replied Van Mitten evasively. "Besides, he does not appear to me very well disposed to — "

"So we are going to ride in that thing?" continued Bruno, indicating the araba with a gesture of contempt impossible to describe.

"Yes, for the present."

“But when do you intend to ask for the money which will ensure our liberty?”

“At the next town.”

“At the next town?”

“Yes: at Archawa.”

Bruno shook his head in disapprobation and seated himself in the araba behind his master. Then the heavy conveyance proceeded at a fair pace along the slopes of the coast-road.

The weather was not all that could be wished. Stormy-looking clouds were massed in the west and held out threats of disturbances beyond the horizon. This portion of the road, swept by the winds, is not an easy route to follow; but one cannot command the weather, and the faithful fatalists of Mahomet know how to “take things as they come “better than all other people. In any case there was reason to fear that the Black Sea would not justify its classic name of Pontus Euxinus or “well-disposed,” but rather the Turkish name of Kara Dequitz, which is of less fair augury.

Yery fortunately the route no longer crossed the elevated and hilly regions of Lazistan. There roads were entirely wanting, and one cannot venture into the forests without axes to clear the way. The passage of an araba would be well-nigh impossible to accomplish. But the coast- road was much more practicable, and there was no failure in the path from one town to another. The route curved amid fruit- trees under the shade of nut-bushes and chestnut-trees, amid clumps of laurels and Alpine roses intertwined by the inextricable tendrils of the wild vines.

But if this side of Lazistan offers a safe road to travellers, it is not remarkable for its sanitary condition in the low districts. There pestilent marshes extend: endemic typhus reigns from May until August. Fortunately it was now September, and the travellers ran no risk. Fatigue they would encounter; diseases, no. But if they could not always keep well they could always rest! And when the most headstrong of Turks reasoned thus his companions had no answer to make.

The araba stopped at the little town of Archawa about 9 a m. They were ready to start again in an hour without Van Mitten having found time to touch upon his famous project of the loan from his friend Kéraban.

Accordingly Bruno questioned him.

“Well, sir, have you done it?”

“No, Bruno, not yet”

“But it is time.”

“At the next town.”

“At the next town?”

“Yes: at Witze!”

And Bruno, who in a pecuniary sense depended on his master as Van Mitten was dependent upon Kéraban, took his place in the araba, not without ill-humour which he failed to conceal.

“What is the matter with that fellow now?” asked Kéraban.

“Nothing,” replied Van Mitten hastily, with a view to turn the conversation. “He is a little fatigued perhaps.”

“He!” exclaimed Kéraban. “He looks splendid I think he is growing fatter!”

“I?” cried Bruno, touched to the quick by this remark.

“Yes: you have all the appearance of becoming a good Turk of a majestic corpulence.”

Van Mitten seized his servant’s arm, for Bruno was ready to explode at this left-handed compliment So Bruno was silenced.

Meanwhile the araba continued its rapid course, and with the exception of the jolting which caused somewhat rough shocks, and consequent contusions to the occupants, there was nothing to complain of.

The route was by no means deserted. Some Lazes were visible descending the slopes of the Pontic Alps, on business connected with their wants or their commerce. Had Van Mitten been less occupied with his meditated request, he would have noted the difference in the costume, which exists between the Caucasians and the Lazes. A kind of Phrygian bonnet, the ribbons of which are tied around the head in the manner of a “coiffure,” replaces the Georgian cap. These fine, tall, well-made mountaineers of fair complexion, carry two cartridge-pouches arranged like pan-pipes. A short gun, a long-bladed poignard stuck in a girdle edged with copper, constitute their ordinary accoutrements.

Some donkeys followed after them, and carried to the villages on the coast the fruits of all kinds which grow in the “middle ‘ zone.” In fact, had the weather been less unsettled, the travellers would have had little to complain of in the journey, even made under such conditions.

At eleven o’clock in the forenoon, they reached Witze on the ancient Pyxites, whose Greek name buis (“box”) is sufficiently justified by the abundance of that plant in the neighbourhood At Witze they had breakfast, too quickly as it seemed to Kéraban’s taste, who, this time, made no concealment of his ill-humour.

Van Mitten, then, of course, found no favourable opportunity to mention his little business; and at the moment of departure, Bruno, drawing him aside, said — “Well, master?”

“Well, Bruno, at the next town — ”

“What?”

“Yes; at Artachen.” Bruno, disgusted at such weakness, lay down, grumbling, in the araba, while his master took a rapid survey of the romantic country which unites in itself all the cleanliness of Holland with the picturesqueness of Italy.

It was the same at Artachen as it had been at Witze and Archawa. They arrived at three, and started at four p m. with fresh horses; but after a serious protest by Bruno, who would hear of no more temporising, his master pledged himself to make the demand at Atina, where it had been agreed to pass the night.

There were five leagues to be traversed before this next town was reached, and then fifteen leagues of the journey would be accomplished. This, after all, was not excessive; but the rain which was threatening, would no doubt render the roads heavy and less practicable.

Ahmet saw with anxiety the period of bad weather obstinately setting in. The stormy clouds grew larger. The heavy atmosphere rendered breathing difficult. It was evident that, during the evening or in the night, a storm would break over the sea. After the first peals of thunder, the squall would be let loose, and the tempest would bring up the vapour to be discharged in rain.

There was only room for three travellers in the araba. Neither Ahmet nor Nizib could find shelter under the, tilt, which would, perhaps, not resist the force of the tempest. So the riders, as well as the others, were anxious to urge the horses on to the next village.

Two or three times Kéraban put his head outside the awning, and studied the sky, which became more and more overcast.

“Shall we have a storm?” he asked.

“Yes, uncle,” replied Ahmet. “Let us endeavour to reach the next relay before the rain commences.”

“As soon as it begins to fall, you can come inside here,” said Kéraban.

“And who will give up his place?”

“Bruno. That brave fellow will take your horse.”

“Certainly,” added Van Mitten, quickly, for his faithful follower. The Dutchman would have had bad taste to decline.

But we may be sure Van Mitten did not look at Bruno when he made this answer. He did not dare to do so. It was as much as Bruno could do not to break out His master felt it was so.

“The best thing we can do is to push on as quickly as possible,” said Ahmet. “Should the storm come on, the covering of the araba will be torn away in an instant, and the place will be untenable.”

“Hurry on,” cried Kéraban to the postillion, “and do not spare your cattle.”

And, indeed, the postillion, who was quite as anxious as the travellers to arrive at Atina, did not spare his horses. But the poor beasts, exhausted by the sultriness of the atmosphere, could not maintain the trot upon the road, which had not yet been macadamized.

How Seigneur Kéraban and his companions envied the “Cahapar,” whose carriage passed their araba about seven o’clock in the evening. This is the English courier, who every two weeks carries European despatches to Teheran. He only requires twelve days to go from Trebizond to the Persian capital, with two or three horses, which carry his valises, and his escort of Zapties. But in the matter of relays, he has the preference over all other travellers, and Ahmet began to be afraid that, when they arrived at Atina, they would find only jaded cattle.

Fortunately, this idea never occurred to Kéraban. Else he would have had legitimate occasion to make more complaints, and would have gained a great deal by them, no doubt! Perhaps he was seeking such an opportunity elsewhere. At anyrate one was furnished by Van Mitten.

The Dutchman could no longer avoid the performance of his promises made to Bruno, and at length he took the chances, but with all the skill of which he was master. The bad weather appeared to afford him an excellent text.

“Friend Kéraban,” he began, in the tone of a man who has no wish to give advice, but to seek it, “what do you think of the state of the atmosphere?”

“What do I think?”

“Yes; you know the autumnal equinox is close upon us, and it is to be feared that the latter portion of our journey may not be so pleasant as the former.”

“Well then, it will be less pleasant, that’s all,” was Kéraban’s dry reply. “I cannot alter atmospheric conditions at will; I am not aware that I command the elements, Van Mitten!

“No, evidently,” replied the Dutchman, who was not particularly encouraged by this opening. “But that was not what I meant, my worthy friend.”

“What did you mean then?”

“That after all, perhaps, it is only threatening a storm, and that it will pass over us.”

“All storms pass over, Van Mitten. They continue for a greater or less time — like discussions — but they pass away, and fine weather succeeds, naturally.”

“At least, if the atmosphere were less disturbed,” continued Van Mitten, “if the period of the equinox were not so near — ”

“When it is the equinox, it is as well to resign oneself to the conditions,” replied Kéraban. “I can’t do anything to prevent it. One might imagine that you are finding fault with me, Van Mitten!”

“No, I assure you. Reproach you? I find fault, friend Kéraban?” replied Van Mitten.

Things were not progressing favourably, that was plain. Perhaps, had Bruno not been behind him, Van Mitten would have abandoned this dangerous topic of conversation and resumed it later. But there were no means of retreat, particularly as Kéraban pointedly enquired as he bent a frowning brow upon him —

“What possesses you, Van Mitten? It would appear as if you had some hidden meaning in this!”

“I?” exclaimed Van Mitten. “Yes you. Let us consider this. Be frank with me. I do not like people who put on these lugubrious looks without giving any reason.”

“I — have I appeared discontented?”

“Have you anything to reproach me with? If I have invited you to dinner at Scutari, am not I taking you thither? Is it my fault if that chaise was smashed by that confounded train?”

Oh yes, indeed, it was his fault and his fault solely. But the Dutchman was careful not to reproach him.

“Is it my fault that the weather is not favourable?” continued Kéraban, “or that an araba is the only means of conveyance? Come, let us see. Speak!”

Van Mitten, sorely perplexed, had no answer to make to this. He forced himself, however, to ask his peremptory companion whether he intended to remain at Atina for the night, or at Trebizond in the event of the journey proving more difficult in consequence of the bad weather.

“Difficult is not the same as impossible, is it?” retorted Kéraban, “and, as I intend to reach Scutari by the end of the month, we will continue our journey though all the elements warred against us.”

Van Mitten then screwed up all his courage, and, not without evident hesitation, formulated his famous proposition.

“Well, Kéraban,” he said, “if it will not inconvenience you very much, I would request permission for Bruno and myself — yes, permission to remain at Atina.”

“You ask my permission to remain at Atina,” repeated Kéraban, dwelling on each syllable.

“Yes, permission — authority — for I do not wish to run counter to your wishes — and — ”

“You wish to separate from me,’ is that so?”

“Oh, temporarily, only for a very short time,” Van Mitten hastened to add. “We are very much fatigued — Bruno and I. We would rather return to Constantinople by sea — yes, by sea.”

“By sea!”

“Yes, friend Kéraban. Oh, I am aware you do not like the sea — I do not say so to annoy you. I can quite understand that the idea of crossing the sea is distasteful to you. So it is only natural that you should continue to follow the route along the shore. But fatigue makes this jolting very disagreeable to me, and you can plainly perceive that Bruno is growing much thinner.”

“Ah, Bruno is growing thinner, is he?” said Kéraban, without even turning towards the unfortunate servant, who with a shaking hand was clutching the ample garments which covered his emaciated figure.

“These are the reasons, friend Kéraban, why I beg you not to be offended with us if we remain at Atina, whence we may reach European territory again under more pleasant conditions. I repeat, you will find us again at Scutari, and you may depend upon us not to keep you waiting to solemnize the wedding of our young friend Ahmet.”

Van Mitten had now said all he wanted to say and he waited for Kéraban’s answer. Would it be a simple acquiescence with so natural a demand, or would he burst into an angry one-sided argument?

The Dutchman bent his head, without daring to lift his eyes to his terrible companion’s face.

“Van Mitten,” said Kéraban, in a calmer tone than had been anticipated, “Van Mitten, you must admit that your suggestion is calculated to astonish me, and even of a nature to provoke — ”

“Friend Kéraban,” interrupted Van Mitten, who at this juncture began to fear some violence was imminent.

“Let me conclude, if you please,” said Kéraban “You must admit that I cannot regard this separation without real pain, and I may add that I could not have anticipated such conduct on the part of a correspondent bound to me by business relations extending over thirty years.”

“Kéraban,” said Van Mitten —

“Eh, by Allah, cannot you let me finish?” exclaimed Kéraban, who could not restrain his habitual gesture. “But after all, Van Mitten, you are free. You are neither my relation nor my servant; you are only my friend, and a friend may permit himself anything, even to break the bonds of old friendship.”

“Kéraban, my dear Kéraban,” replied Van Mitten, much distressed by this reproach.

“You will accordingly remain at Atina if you please to stay there, or at Trebizond if you prefer it.”

Then Seigneur Kéraban withdrew into his corner with the air of a man who has no association with any others present, whom he regards as mere strangers that chance has thrown in his way, en route.

In fact, if Bruno were pleased at the course which things had taken, Van Mitten was much moved at having caused so much pain to his old friend. But, after all, his plan had succeeded, and although it came into his mind to withdraw the suggestion he did not do so: besides Bruno was present.

The question of the money still remained: the loan must be arranged, for they might have to remain in that country for some time, or to continue the journey under new conditions. There would be no difficulty on this point The important sum which stood to Van Mitten’s credit in Rotterdam would soon be transmitted to the Bank at Constantinople, and Seigneur Kéraban would only have to repay himself the sum lent by means of the cheque which the Dutchman would hand to him.

“Friend Kéraban,” said Van Mitten, after a silence of some minutes’ duration, which had been interrupted by no one. “Friend Kéraban — ”

“What is it, monsieur?” asked Kéraban, in the tone he would have addressed to an intruder.

“When we arrive at Atina,” continued Van Mitten, who felt cut to the heart by the word “monsieur.”

“Well, when we reach Atina, we will separate,” replied Kéraban. “That is understood.”

“Yes — no doubt, Kéraban.”

Van Mitten did not dare to say, “my friend Kéraban,” but he continued —

“Yes, of course; but I would ask you to lend me a little money.”

“Money! what money?”

“A small sum, which I will repay you through the Bank of Constantinople.”

“A small sum?”

“You know,” said Van Mitten, “that I left with very little money, as you were so generous as to defray all the expenses of this journey — ”

“The expenses concern me only.”

“Quite so — I do not wish to discuss that.”

“I would not have permitted you to spend a single livre,” said Kéraban. “Not a single one.”

“I am extremely grateful to you,” replied Van Mitten. “But at this moment I do not possess a single para; and I should be much obliged if — ”

“I have no money to lend you,” replied Kéraban, brusquely. “I have only sufficient remaining to carry me through this journey.”

“Nevertheless you may give me — ”

“Nothing — I tell you.”

“What?” exclaimed Bruno.

“Bruno, I think, is permitting himself to make an observation,” remarked Kéraban, in a menacing tone.

“Certainly,” replied Bruno.

“Hold your tongue, Bruno,” said Van Mitten, who did not wish the discussion embittered by any observations from his servant.

Bruno was silent “My dear Kéraban,” continued Van Mitten, “it is after all only a question of a relatively insignificant sum, which will suffice to maintain me at Trebizond for a few days.”

“Insignificant or not, monsieur,” replied Kéraban, “you must expect absolutely nothing from me.”

“A thousand piastres would suffice.”

“No, not a thousand, nor a hundred, nor ten, nor one,” replied Kéraban, who was beginning to get angry.

“What? nothing at all?”

“Nothing at all.”

“But then — ”

“Then you have only to continue your journey with us, Monsieur Van Mitten. You shall want for nothing. But as for lending you a piastre, a para, or half a para to enable you to travel by yourself — never!”

“Never?” echoed Van Mitten.

“Never!” replied Kéraban decisively.

The tone in which this “never” was pronounced was quite enough to carry conviction to Van Mitten, and even to Bruno, that the resolution of the Inflexible One was irrevocable. When he had once said No,” he had, as it were, said it ten times.

Whether Van Mitten was really hurt at this refusal of his quondam friend and correspondent, it would be difficult to explain, so reserved and phlegmatic is the human heart — particularly the human Dutch heart! Bruno, however, was outraged! What! was he to continue his journey under such conditions, and, it might be, in worse? He might be compelled to prosecute this mad journey in a cart, on horseback, even on foot — who could tell? And all because it suited a headstrong Osmanli before whom his master trembled! He (Bruno) was perhaps condemned to lose even the little rotundity he still possessed, while Seigneur Kéraban, in spite of crosses and fatigues, continued to maintain his usual corpulence.

Yes, but what was to be done? Bruno had no resource but to grumble, and so he did grumble in his corner. For one instant he thought of staying by himself, to abandon Van Mitten to all the consequences of such tyranny. But the money question arose before him, as it had uprisen before his master who had not sufficient to pay his wages even. So he was obliged to remain with him.

While these discussions were proceeding the araba continued its way with difficulty. The sky had become very threatening and the clouds seemed to be resting on the water. The roaring of the breakers on the shore indicated the rising of the sea, and in the offing the wind was already blowing a gale.

The postillion pressed his horses as hard as he could, but the poor animals only proceeded with great difficulty. Ahmet, on his part, encouraged them, as he was in a great hurry to reach Atina, which it was now evident would not be gained before they were overtaken by the storm.

Kéraban remained silent with his eyes closed. This silence weighed upon Van Mitten, who would have preferred to hear some snappish remark from his old friend. He felt that by the latter complaints were being accumulated against him, and when the shell burst the explosion would be terrible.

At length Van Mitten could contain himself no longer, and leaning towards Kéraban so that Bruno should not hear, he said —

“Friend Kéraban!”

“What is it?” asked Kéraban. “How could I yield to this idea of leaving you, for a moment?”

“Yes — how?”

“Indeed, I cannot understand it.”

“No more can I,” answered Kéraban. That was all. But the hand of Van Mitten sought the hand of Kéraban, who acknowledged the repentance by a generous squeeze, which made the Dutchman’s fingers tingle for a long time.

It was then 9 p m. The night was very dark. The storm burst with tremendous violence. The horizon was illuminated by frequent flashes of lightning, but the thunder was as yet inaudible. The hurricane soon became so violent that many times the occupants of the araba fancied it would be overturned. The horses, worn out and weary, stopped every minute and reared and backed so that the postillion had great difficulty to maintain his seat What was to be done under such circumstances? They could not halt in such an unsheltered locality, swept by the fierce west wind; and there was yet half an hour’s journey before they could reach the town.

Ahmet, who was very uneasy, did not know what to do, when on turning to the right, a light became visible like a flash from a gun. This came from the lighthouse of Atina, which, built on the cliffs in advance of the town, projected a bright gleam of light into the surrounding darkness.

Ahmet had conceived the idea of asking for shelter for the night from the caretakers of the lighthouse, so he knocked at the door of the hut erected at the foot of the building.

Some minutes later, Seigneur Kéraban with his companions, unsheltered, must have succumbed to the fury of the tempest

CHAPTER III.

An immense wooden structure, divided into two chambers, with windows opening seawards, a scaffolding supporting a catoptric apparatus — that is to say, a lanthorn with reflectors, and topping the roof by sixty feet — such was the very primitive lighthouse of Atina.

But such as it was, it rendered very excellent service to navigation in the midst of that wild water. It had been only erected a short time, so what a number of vessels must have been driven ashore before the difficult channels of the port had been illuminated! Against the power of adverse winds, from north to west, a steamer can scarcely make headway, and much less could sailing vessels withstand the storm which drives them upon a lee shore.

Two light-keepers resided in the small wooden hut erected at the base of the lighthouse. The first chamber was the common sitting-room, another contained the two beds, which were never occupied at the same time. One of the men was on duty every night, as much to attend to the lanthorn as to signal any ships which might venture without pilots into the intricate channels of Atina.

The door of the hut was opened in response to a loud knocking, and Seigneur Kéraban, under the violent impulse of the storm — a storm in himself — entered precipitately, followed by Ahmet, Van Mitten, Bruno, and Nizib.

“What do you want?” enquired one of the lighthouse keepers; while his companion, rudely awakened from sleep, joined his associate almost immediately.

“Shelter for the night,” replied Ahmet.

“If that is all you want, the house is open to you,” replied the man.

“Shelter till daybreak, and something to appease our hunger meanwhile,” added Kéraban.

“Very well,” replied the keeper. “But you would do better at one of the inns in Atina.”

“How far is the town from here?” asked Van Mitten.

“About half a league under the cliffs,” replied the man.

“Half a league in such weather as this!” exclaimed Kéraban. “No, my brave fellows, no! Here are benches upon which we can pass the night If our araba and our horses can find shelter under the lee of your lighthouse, that is all we shall require for them. To-morrow, as soon as it is light, we will proceed to the town; and may Allah find us some more convenient vehicle — ”

“And one more rapid,” added Ahmet.

“And less rough,” muttered Bruno between his teeth.

“ — Than this araba,” continued Kéraban, “of which it will not do to speak slightingly, nevertheless,” he concluded bending a severe brow upon Van Mitten’s spiteful follower.

“Seigneur,” replied the keeper, “I repeat that our habitation is quite at your disposal. Many travellers have before now availed themselves of its protection from the weather, and have been satisfied.”

“And with which we will know how to content ourselves,” replied Kéraban.

Then the travellers made their arrangements for passing the night in the little house. In any case they could not but congratulate themselves upon having discovered such a refuge, uncomfortable though it was, when they listened to the wind, and to the torrents of rain which raged and fell outside.

But as to sleep — that was very well, on the condition that rest was preceded by some supper. Naturally it was Bruno who made this observation, at the same time calling attention to the fact that the supplies which had been carried in the araba were all consumed.

“Well, what have you to offer us, my fine fellows — on payment, of course?” asked Kéraban.

“Good or bad,” replied one of the keepers, “there is only what there is, and all the gold in the imperial treasury would not avail to discover anything more than the little which remains of the provision allotted to the lighthouse.”

“That will do very well,” replied Ahmet.

“Yes, if there is enough of it,” muttered Bruno, whose teeth were growing longer under the influence of real hunger.

“Go into the next room,” replied the keeper, “what you will find on the table is at your service.”

“And Bruno shall wait upon us,” said Kéraban, “while Nizib assists the postillion to put up the horses and carriage as comfortably as possible under the lee of the lighthouse.

At a sign from his master, Nizib went out immediately to make things as snug as possible. Meanwhile Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Ahmet, followed by Bruno, entered the other room and sat down before a flaming wood fire beside a small table. On this they found some large dishes of cold meat, to which the travellers did full justice. Bruno, as he watched them eat, kept thinking that they were going rather far!

“But we must not forget Bruno and Nizib,” said Van Mitten at last, after a quarter of an hour of mastication, which to the servant appeared interminable.

“No, certainly not,” replied Kéraban, “there is no reason why they should die of hunger any more than their masters.”

“That is very true,” murmured Bruno.

“Nor is it necessary to treat them like the Cossacks,” added Kéraban. “Ah, those Cossacks! I would hang a hundred of them.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Van Mitten.

“A thousand — ten thousand — a hundred thousand,” said Kéraban shaking his friend’s hand violently. “Yes, until none were left. But it is getting late. Let us go to sleep.”

“Yes, that will be better,” said Van Mitten, who by his thoughtless “Oh!” had apparentiy provoked the massacre of a great part of the nomad tribes of the Russian Empire.

Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Ahmet retired to the first chamber at the moment when Nizib came in to join Bruno at supper. Then the three, wrapped in their cloaks, lay down upon the benches and sought to pass in slumber the long hours of the tempestuous night. But it must have been very difficult to sleep under such conditions.

Meantime Bruno and Nizib seated themselves opposite each other at table, and prepared to give a good account of such viands as remained; Bruno all the while "lording it over "Nizib, who was extremely deferential vis-d-vis of Bruno.

"Nizib," said Bruno, "my opinion is that when the masters have supped it is only right that the servants should eat all that is left."

"You are always hungry, Monsieur Bruno," said Nizib, admiringly.

"Always, Nizib, particularly after twelve hours have elapsed since the last meal."

"You do not look like it!"

"Not look like it! Don't you perceive that I have lost ten pounds in eight days? My clothes have become loose enough to accommodate a man twice my size!"

"It is very extraordinary that you should do so. I have grown rather stouter."

"Ah, you grow fatter, do you?" murmured Bruno, looking askance at his companion.

"Let us see what is in that dish," said Nizib.

“Hum! not much,” replied Bruno, “There is scarcely sufficient for one indeed — not enough for two.”

“When travelling one must put up with what one can get, Monsieur Bruno.”

“Ah, you are playing the philosopher,” said Bruno to himself, “and yet you manage to get fat upon it!”

Then, pulling Nizib’s plate towards him, he continued —

“Eh! what the deuce have you got here?”

“I don’t know, it looks to me like mutton,” replied Nizib, recovering his plate.

“Mutton!” exclaimed Bruno, “I say, Nizib, take care! I believe you are making a mistake.”

“I will soon ascertain,” replied Nizib, putting a piece in his mouth.

“No, no,” cried Bruno, seizing his friend’s hand. “Don’t be in such a hurry. By Mahomet I believe it is the flesh of an animal forbidden to a Turk — not for a Christian — do you understand?”

“Do you think so, Monsieur Bruno?”

“Let me assure myself on the point,” said Bruno.

So saying he transferred the food from Nizib’s plate to his own, and under the pretext of tasting it, ate it in a few mouthfuls.

“Well?” asked Nizib, with a certain uneasiness of manner.

“Well,” replied Bruno, “I was not mistaken. It is pork. Horrible! Fancy you were about to eat pork!”

“Pork!” exclaimed Nizib; “that is forbidden.”

“Absolutely!”

“Nevertheless it seemed to me — ”

“What do you mean, Nizib? Are you going to dictate to a man who knows so much better than yourself?”

“But then, Monsieur Bruno — ”

“Then — in your place! — I would content myself with this morsel of goat’s- cheese.”

“It is very poor,” replied Nizib. “Yes, but it looks excellent.”

Then Bruno placed the cheese before his companion. Nizib began to eat it — not without grimaces — while his vis-d-vis began to devour the more substantial food which he falsely designated as pork 1

“Your health, Nizib,” he said, filling a goblet from a jug on the table.

“What is that drink?” asked Nizib.

“Hum,” replied Bruno, “it seems to me — ”

“What?” said the _ ____ — other, holding out his glass.

“It seems to me that there is “brandy in it, and a good Mussulman cannot partake of it,” replied Bruno. “But I cannot eat without drinking.’’”Without drinking — no — and here is a jugful of fresh water, which ought to satisfy you, Nizib. How happy you Turks ought to feel in being accustomed to such a wholesome beverage.”

And while Nizib was drinking, Bruno muttered, “Get fat, my friend; get fat!”

But just then Nizib, turning round, perceived another dish on the mantel-shelf, in which some food of appetising appearance still remained.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, “I shall have something more satisfying after all.”

“Yes: this time, Nizib, we will share like good comrades. Indeed, I was quite sorry to see you reduced to sup upon goat’s cheese.”

“This seems to be mutton, M. Bruno.”

“I believe it is, Nizib.”

And the Dutchman, taking the dish, began to cut the morsel which Nizib was devouring with his eyes.

“Well,” he said at last “Yes, it is mutton,” replied Bruno; “it ought to be mutton, for we have met with so many flocks of sheep on our journey. Indeed, I believe that there are only sheep in this country, now I come to think of it!”

“Very well,” said Nizib, holding out his plate.

“Wait a moment, Nizib, wait. In your interest I must make certain of this. You understand, though we are at some distance from the frontier, the cooking is still Russian, and we must beware of the Russians.”

“I tell you, M. Bruno, that in this case no mistake is possible.”

“No,” said Bruno, who was busy eating. “No, it is really mutton, nevertheless — ”

“Eh?” said Nizib.

“One might say,” continued Bruno, as he bolted piece after piece. “One might say —

“Not so fast, M. Bruno.”

“Hum. If this is mutton it has a most peculiar taste.”

“Ah! I will just know what it is,” cried Nizib, who, despite his calm temperament, was beginning to be angry.

“Take care, Nizib, take care!” So saying, Bruno quickly swallowed the remaining morsels of the food.

“That is the end of it, M. Bruno!”

“Yes, Nizib, that is the finish. I am convinced you were quite right this time.”

“It was mutton then.”

“Decidedly, mutton.”

“Which you have devoured!”

“Devoured, Nizib! Ah, that is a word which I cannot admit. Devoured? No! I have merely tasted it.”

“And a nice supper I have had!” said Nizib, in a piteous tone. “It seems to me, M. Bruno, that you might as well have left me my share, and not have eaten it all to satisfy yourself that — ”

“That it was mutton in fact,” said Bruno. “My conscience obliged me — ”

“Say, your stomach rather.”

“Obliged me to ascertain what it was,” continued Bruno. “After all, there is not much room for regret, Nizib.”

“But if — ”

“No; you could not have eaten it”

“Why not?”

“Because it was dressed with lard, Nizib; you understand, lard! Lard is not orthodox.”

Then Bruno rose from table with the air of a man who has supped well, and reentered the common room, followed by the discomfited Nizib.

Seigneur Kéraban, Ahmet, and Van Mitten lay extended upon the benches, but had not been able to snatch a moment’s repose. The tempest was increasing in fury. The planks of the wooden structure creaked loudly. The occupants feared that the lighthouse would be demolished. The hurricane shook the door and rattled the window-shutters as if they were being “butted” by a mad bull; and they had to be firmly secured. But by the shocks of the lighthouse “scaffolding “encased in the wall they were enabled to estimate what the force of the wind was fifty feet above the roof. Would the lighthouse be able to resist the tempest? would the gleam of the lanthorn be extinguished? would it still illumine the straits of Atina, when the sea now ran in “mountains high? “All this was doubtful, and such doubts were full of grave eventualities. It was then half-past eleven at night.

“It is quite impossible to sleep here,” remarked Kéraban, as he rose and paced the apartment.

“No, indeed,” replied Ahmet, “and if the storm should increase, this hut will be endangered. I think we should be prepared for any eventuality.”

“Are you asleep, Van Mitten? Can you sleep?” asked Kéraban, as he shook his friend.

“I was dozing,” replied Van Mitten.

“Look what placid people can do!” cried Kéraban. “Under circumstances in which no one else can snatch a moment’s rest, a Dutchman will manage to sleep!”

“I never remember such a night as this,” remarked one of the light-keepers. “The wind is dead ashore, and who knows but by morning the sea will be strewn with wreckage.”

“Were there any vessels in sight this evening?” asked Ahmet.

“No, fortunately, at least not at sunset,” replied the keeper. “When I went up to light the lanthorn I could see nothing in the offing. That is lucky, for the channels of Atina are dangerous; and even with the light, which can be seen for five miles, it is difficult to weather them.”

At that moment a gust of more than ordinary fury blew the door into the middle of the room as if it would knock the whole thing to splinters.

But Seigneur Kéraban threw himself against the door, and, struggling with the furious wind, succeeded in closing the aperture with the assistance of the keeper.

“What a headstrong wind,” he cried, “but I was the more determined!”

“A terrible tempest indeed,” said Ahmet.

“Terrible,” acquiesced Van Mitten. “It is almost comparable with the storms from the Atlantic which beat upon the coast of Holland.”

“Oh!” said Kéraban, “you can scarcely compare them!”

“Just think a moment, Kéraban,” said Van Mitten. “They are storms which come all across the ocean from America.”

“And how can the tempests of the Atlantic compare with those of the Black Sea, Van Mitten?”

“Friend Kéraban, I do not wish to contradict you, but really — ”

“Really you are about to contradict me,” replied Kéraban, who was not in the best of tempers.

“No, I merely say — ”

“You say — ?”

“I say that, compared with the ocean — with the Atlantic — the Black Sea is but a lake!”

“A lake!” exclaimed Kéraban, drawing himself up! “By Allah! Did you say a lake?”

“An immense lake, if you please,” replied Van Mitten, who sought to modify his terms, “a large lake, but a lake nevertheless.”

“Why not a pond?”

“I said nothing about a pond.”

“Why not a pool?”

“I did not say a pool.”

“Why not a cistern?”

“I never hinted at a cistern.”

“No, Van Mitten, but you thought so.”

“I assure you — ”

“Very well, so be it — a cistern, but when some cataclysm occurs and throws your Holland into this cistern it will be entirely swallowed up in it. Cistern indeed!”

And muttering this word between his teeth Seigneur Kéraban continued to pace the room.

“Iam quite certain I never used the word cistern,” remarked Van Mitten, who was quite disconcerted. “Believe me, my young friend,” he added, adressing Ahmet, “that I never even thought of such a term. The Atlantic — ”

“Quite so, M. Van Mitten. But I do not think this is either the time or place to discuss the question,” replied Ahmet.

“Cistern,” muttered the inflexible Kéraban. Then he halted to look his Dutch friend in the face, but Van Mitten did not dare to take up the cudgels for Holland, which Kéraban had threatened with submersion in the Black Sea.

For quite an hour after this the tempest continued to increase in fury. The caretakers, very anxious, went out from time to time to observe the wooden structure which sustained the light. Their guests, overcome by fatigue, had once more stretched themselves on the benches, and sought repose for a few hours.

Suddenly, about two o’clock in the morning, masters and servants were all aroused from their lethargy. The windows, the shutters of which had already been wrenched off, were blown in with a crash; and, during the momentary lull which succeeded the furious gust, the report of a cannon was heard from the offing.

CHAPTER IV.

All the occupants of the hut rose hurriedly and rushed to the windows to look out upon the sea. The waves, scattered in foam by the wind, were dashing more violently against the lighthouse. The darkness was profound, and it was impossible to see anything, even at a few paces distant, unless when the vivid flashes of lightning illuminated the horizon.

It was in one of these flashes that Ahmet reported some object which appeared and disappeared in the distance.

“It must be a ship!” he cried.

“If there be a ship there, the crew must have fired that cannon,” remarked Kéraban.

“I will ascend into the gallery,” said one of the light-keepers as he advanced towards a little wooden staircase which opened and led upwards from one of the corners of the sitting-room.

“I will accompany you,” said Ahmet.

All this while, Kéraban, Van Mitten, Bruno, and the other guardian, notwithstanding the tempest and the spray, remained standing in the bays of the broken windows.

Ahmet and his companion were not long in reaching the platform, which, on a level with the roof of the hut, served as a base for the scaffolding which sustained the lanthorn. Thence in the spaces between the beams which were fixed by cross-ties and formed the “tower,” a rough staircase ascended in sixty steps to the upper part of the structure which contained the light The hurricane was so fierce, that it was an undertaking of no small danger to ascend this stairway. The solid supports oscillated from their bases. Ahmet frequently was obliged to cling to the balustrade so firmly that he began to imagine he would never be able to let go; but, taking advantage of a slight lull, he was able to ascend a few more steps, and, following the keeper, who was quite as embarrassed as Ahmet himself, he managed to reach the upper gallery.

What a sight he beheld! A terrific sea dashing its enormous waves against the rocks; thick clouds of spray drove like rain above the lanthorn, while great mountains of water reared their crests in the offing still distinguishable by the atmospheric reflection; a sky of inky hue, covered with low clouds which chased each other with tremendous speed across the firmament, sometimes discovering as they parted, other masses of vapour more elevated, from which at times escaped the long livid flashes — so silent and so pale — reflections which told of another storm raging at a still greater distance above.

Ahmet and the light-keeper, crouching and holding tightly to the supports of the gallery, right and left, gazed seaward, seeking either the moving point already noticed or the flash of the cannon which would indicate the direction of the vessel.

Neither of the men spoke — it would have been impossible to hear each other, but their view embraced a considerable segment of the sea. The light of the lanthorn, surrounded by powerful reflectors, could not dazzle them, as it threw its brilliant rays of light before them to a distance of several miles.

But there was also a continual fear that the lanthom would be extinguished, and frequently the gusts of wind would reduce the flame to the very lowest ebb of light, threatening to extinguish it altogether. Birds, too, blinded by the storm, came dashing blindly against the lanthorn, like so many insects attracted by the light of a lamp, and bruised themselves against the iron grating which protected the apparatus. The force of the wind was so great that the upper part of the lighthouse oscillated frightfully. Nor need we be surprised at this, for the stone lighthouses in Europe, at times, rock so much that the pendulums of the clocks are stopped. All the more reason therefore for the oscillation of these wooden structures, which cannot possess the solidity of stone-work. In the particular case of which we are writing, Seigneur Kéraban, who felt ill while crossing the Bosphorus, would have experienced all the horrors of sea-sickness had he stood on the gallery of the lighthouse.

Ahmet and the light-keeper sought to perceive the moving speck which they had already noticed in the sea. But, either it had disappeared or the flashes of lightning did not illuminate the spot it occupied. If it were a ship it was but too probable that the vessel had already been dashed to pieces by the tempest.

Suddenly Ahmet pointed towards the horizon. His eyes did not deceive him. An extraordinary meteor came along the surface of the sea, extending from the edges of the clouds.

Two columns, of vesicular shape, gaseous at the tops, liquid at the bases, united by a conical point and animated by a simultaneous rotatory movement of extreme velocity, presented a vast concavity to the wind, which was blowing fiercely over the waters, and causing the waves to form a whirlpool. In the intervals of the storm a sharp whistling noise could be heard, of such intensity that it must have been audible at a great distance. Frequent vivid flashes of forked lightning showed out the enormous body of the water-spout in strong relief, and then again it was lost in the darkness.

Suddenly, at a little distance from these water-spouts, the exact cause of which has never been accurately determined, a vivid flash was succeeded by a loud detonation.

“A cannon!” exclaimed Ahmet, extending his hand in the direction of the sound.

The light-keeper also concentrated his gaze upon the spot indicated.

“There, there!” he exclaimed; and by the glare of a tremendous flash of lightning, Ahmet perceived a vessel of considerable tonnage battling with the storm.

It was a felucca, disabled, her great lateen- sail in ribbons: without any power of resistance, she was driving helplessly on shore. With the rocks to leeward, and in the vicinity of the water-spouts which were proceeding towards her, it appeared impossible that she could escape destruction. It seemed merely a question of minutes, whether she was dashed to pieces or swamped.

Nevertheless, she bore up bravely. Perhaps, if she could escape the water-spouts, she would find a current which would carry her towards the harbour of Atina. Even scudding under bare poles, she might hit upon the channel, the direction of which was indicated by the lighthouse. It was her sole chance.

So the vessel was endeavouring to rid herself of the nearer of the two columns of water which threatened to drag her into the vortex around its base. Hence the firing of the Cannon: the shots were for defence, not signals of distress. It was necessary to break these columns of water, and the gunners succeeded in their aim, but imperfectly. A shot cut through the column about one-third of the way up; the two portions separated, floating in space like the “trunks “of some fantastic animal; then they re-united and resumed their rotatory movement, sucking up the air and water as they revolved.

It was then three o’clock in the morning, and the vessel was still driving towards the opening of the channel. At that moment, a tremendous blast shook the tower from base to summit Ahmet and the keeper feared the timbers would be uprooted from the ground. They found it therefore advisable to descend and seek shelter in the hut as quickly as possible. But the descent was not accomplished without difficulty and danger.

“Well?” asked Kéraban, when they again appeared in the room.

“There is a ship,” replied Ahmet “In danger?”

“Yes,” replied the keeper — ”at least unless it happens to find the channel of Atina.”

“But can it do so?”

“Yes, if the captain is acquainted with the straits; the light indicates their direction.”

“Can we do anything to guide the crew, or carry them assistance?” asked Kéraban.

“Nothing!” was the reply.

As he spoke, a fearful flash of lightning, followed immediately by a tremendous peal of thunder, almost paralysed Kéraban and his companions. It was a miracle that none of them were struck, if not directly, by the return-stroke. At the same time, a loud noise was heard, and a heavy mass came falling through the roof. The furious wind entered through the aperture, and levelled the wooden walls of the hut to the ground.

Providentially, none of those who were within were injured. The roof had fallen towards the right, while the travellers and their hosts were gathered in the left corner near the door.

“Outside, outside!” exclaimed one of the keepers, rushing out upon the rocks. They all followed him, and at once understood the cause of the catastrophe. The lightning had struck the lighthouse, and loosened the upper part, which in its fall, had demolished the roof, and the storm had completed the destruction of the hut.

Now, there was no longer a light to indicate the channel into the harbour of refuge. So, even if the vessel should escape the water-spouts, nothing could prevent her from being dashed to pieces on the reefs.

The spectators could perceive her carried helplessly along, while the columns of air and water whirled around her. Scarcely half a cable’s length intervened between the vessel and an enormous rock which stood out of the water, some fifty feet or more from the north-west extremity of the harbour. On this rock, the vessel would inevitably strike, break up, and perish.

Kéraban and his companions paced the beach, regarding with horror the sad and terrible sight; powerless to assist the crew of the distressed ship;

scarcely able themselves to resist the violence of the wind which covered them with spray and sand mixed with sea-water.

Some fishermen came hurrying up, perhaps to dispute over the timbers of the doomed ship which the hurricane was driving to destruction on the rocks. But Kéraban and his companions did not regard the men in that light. They wished them to do all they could for the rescue of the shipwrecked crew: they desired more — that they would indicate the passage, and guide the steersman to the channel; for might not some current carry them in, and so avoid the shoals right and left?

“Torches! bring torches!” cried Kéraban. Immediately some resinous pine-branches, torn from the adjacent trees, were lighted, and their dusky glare replaced in a measure the light of the lanthorn which had been extinguished.

Nevertheless, the doomed vessel rushed to destruction. While the lightning flashes lasted, the spectators could see the men on board working the ship. The captain was endeavouring to rig up a square sail, so as to steer her upon the beach, but, scarcely had he succeeded in getting it up when it was blown to ribbons, and the fragments were carried ashore like a covey of stormy petrels.

The prow of the little vessel was sometimes elevated high in air, and then plunged into a gulf where it was swallowed up, and appeared as if it had struck upon a submerged rock and would never rise again.

“Poor creatures!” cried Kéraban. “Can nothing be done to save them?”

“Nothing,” replied the fishermen.

“A thousand piastres — ten thousand — a hundred thousand — to any who will afford them assistance,” exclaimed Kéraban, excitedly.

But these offers were not accepted. It was impossible to swim in such a sea. Perhaps, with a rocket apparatus, one could have established communication; but no such apparatus was to be had, and the little port of Atina did not even boast a life-boat “But we cannot let the people perish!” repeated Kéraban, who could contain himself no longer.

Ahmet and his companions were perfectly powerless.

Suddenly a cry from the deck of the doomed vessel made Ahmet start violently. He fancied he heard his name called — yes, his name had been pronounced distinctly amid all the uproar of the elements. In fact this was the case, for during a lull the cry was repeated plainly —

“Ahmet! Ahmet! Help!”

Who could be calling on him thus? His heart beat violently under the pressure of a terrible presentiment That vessel! he seemed to recognize it, he had seen it before! Where? Was it not at Odessa, in front of the villa of the banker Selim, on the very day when he had left it? “Ahmet — Ahmet!”

Again the cry resounded through the storm.

Kéraban, Van Mitten, Bruno, Nizib came close to the young man, who with his arms extended towards the sea remained as if petrified.

“Your name — it is your name,” said Kéraban.

“Yes, yes,” replied Ahmet — “my name.”

At that moment a flash of lightning which must have lasted two seconds — for it extended from one side of the horizon to the other — lit up the scene. In the midst of that brilliant illumination the vessel appeared as clearly as if it had been designed in white by some electrical effulgence. The main-mast was struck by the lightning, and burned like a torch in the midst of the hurricane.

At the stern of the felucca, two females, two young girls, stood wrapped in a close embrace, and from their lips escaped the supplication — ” Ahmet, Ahmet!”

“She! ‘Tis she — Amasia!” exclaimed the young man as he leaped upon one of the rocks.

Ahmet, Ahmet,” cried Kéraban in his turn warningly.

He rushed towards his nephew, not to prevent but to assist him if necessary.

“Ahmet, Ahmet!”

Once more the name was carried across the raging water. Doubt was no longer possible.

“I come, I come,” screamed Ahmet, and precipitating himself from the rock into the foaming water, he disappeared.

Almost at the same moment, one of the water-spouts reached the bow of the vessel, which was sucked into the vortex and cast upon the reefs to the left, not far from that particular rock which rose from the waves near the north-west point On this the little vessel was beaten with a noise which was audible over the roaring of the tempest, then it sank in an instant, and the waterspout as if it too had been broken by the shock against the rock, exploded like a gigantic bomb-shell; the watery base mingling with the sea, while the whirling vapoury column was dissipated in the atmosphere.

It seemed certain that all on board the felucca had been lost, as well as the courageous young man who had gone to the assistance of the two girls.

Kéraban himself wished to plunge into the waves, and was only withheld forcibly by his companions from certain death.

Meanwhile, by the light of the flashes, Ahmet could be perceived. He had, by almost superhuman efforts, succeeded in pulling himself up on the rock, holding on his arm one of the shipwrecked maidens. The other clinging to his garments climbed up with him. But no others appeared. No doubt the crew had all perished, as they had cast themselves into the sea when the water-spout struck the ship; so these two were the only survivors of the shipwreck.

Ahmet, as soon as he had climbed out of reach of the waves, paused for an instant to gaze upon the distance which separated him from the point of the channel The space was more than fifteen feet, but, taking advantage of the retreat of an enormous wave which left but little water upon the sand, he rushed ashore with his burthen, followed by the other young woman, and reached the beach in safety.

A moment later he was surrounded by his friends, and fell on the shingle, overcome by emotion and fatigue, after he had placed in their arms the girl he had saved.

“Amasia, Amasia I” cried Kéraban.

Yes, it was Amasia, indeed: Amasia whom he had left at Odessa, the daughter of his friend Selim. She had been on board the felucca, and had been shipwrecked three hundred leagues away from Odessa, at the other extremity of the Black Sea! With her was Nedjeb, her servant. What could have happened? But neither Amasia nor the young Zingara could just then explain matters, for both girls had fainted.

Seigneur Kéraban took Amasia in his arms, while one of the lighthouse keepers assisted Nedjeb. Ahmet soon came to himself, but seemed like a man in a dream; he did not appear to realize the actuality of the scene. The whole party then made their way towards the little town of Atina, where one of the fishermen had offered them shelter.

Amasia and Nedjeb were placed before the hearth, on which a bright fire of vine- stalks was burning.

Ahmet bent down and raised up Amasia’s head. He called her by her name, and said —

“Amasia, my dear Amasia! She does not hear me! She does not answer. Ah! she is dead. I will die too!”

“No, she is not dead,” replied Kéraban. “She breathes, Ahmet. She is alive!”

At that very time Nedjeb recovered consciousness; and, throwing herself upon Amasia, exclaimed —

“My mistress, my dearest mistress! Yes, she lives — her eyes are opening.”

And in fact the lids were slowly rising and discovering the girl’s eyes.

“Amasia, Amasia,” cried Ahmet. “Ahmet, my dear Ahmet,” she replied. Kéraban enfolded them both in his embrace, j “But what felucca was that?” asked Ahmet at length.

“The same we visited, Seigneur Ahmet, i after you left Odessa,” replied Nedjeb. “The Guidare, Captain Yarhud’s ship?”

“Yes, he carried us off.”

“For whom was he acting, then?”

“That we do not know.”

“Whither were you bound?”

“That we are also ignorant of,” replied Amasia. “But you are here: I can remember nothing else.”

“/will not forget,” said Kéraban sternly. If he had turned round at that moment, he would have perceived a man, who had been spying at the door of the hut, hurry away at top speed.

It was Yarhud, the Maltese Captain, the only sailor surviving. Almost immediately he rushed away unnoticed in a direction J opposite to the little town of Atina.

Yarhud had heard everything. He knew now that, by some inconceivable fatality, Ahmet had reached the coast when the Guidare was wrecked, just as Amasia was about to perish.

Having passed the last houses, Yarhud stopped at a turn of the road.

“It is a long way from Atina to the Bosphorus,” he muttered, “and on the road I will find a way to carry out Seigneur Saffar’s orders.”

CHAPTER V.

How our Travellers Talked, and what thev Saw, on the road between Atina and Trebizond.

How happy the young lovers were to be thus united again; how grateful they were to Allah for bringing Ahmet to the very place where the storm wrecked the vessel; and how they experienced one of those mingled impressions of joy and terror the remembrance of which is ineffaceable — it is useless to describe.

But it will be readily understood that Ahmet, as well as Kéraban, was very anxious to know all that had taken place since their departure from Odessa; so Amasia, aided by Nedjeb, could not delay to inform them of all the details.

It is of course understood that change of costume had been procured for the young girls, and that Ahmet himself was arrayed in rustic garb; that everyone, master as well as servant, was enjoying the fire, without any regard for the storm which was now blowing itself out.

With what feelings did the listeners learn all that had passed at the villa a few hours after Kéraban’s departure. No, it was not to sell precious stuffs that Yarhud had cast anchor in the little bay. It was to carry out his vile plot, and everyone perceived that the scheme must have been maturing for some time.

The vessel had put to sea as soon as the girls had been taken on board, but neither of them could tell that! Selim had heard their cries and that he had rushed out just as the Guidare had cleared the rocks at the extremity of the bay, that he had been wounded and had fallen — perhaps had died — without having been able to put anyone on the track of the ravishers.

Amasia had little to tell concerning their treatment on board. The captain had evidently taken particular care of her and: Nedjeb, under powerful authority. The: cabin occupied by the girls was most comfortable, and there they ate and slept. They; were permitted to go on deck when they: pleased; but they were closely watched, for fear they should attempt to escape by death the fate which threatened them.

Ahmet listened to their recital with beating heart. He wished to know whether the captain had acted on his own account, and carried off the girls to sell them in one of the slave-markets of Asia Minor; or whether he was acting for some rich citizen of Anatolia.

To that question neither Amasia nor Nedjeb could reply. To all their demands and protestations, Yarhud had vouchsafed no reply. They could not tell for whom the captain had acted, nor — and this was what Ahmet particularly desired to ascertain — whither the Guidare had been bound.

The passage had at first been good, but slow because of calms. These delays were evidently very galling to the captain, who was at no pains to conceal his impatience. So the prisoners concluded — and Ahmet and Kéraban were of the same opinion — that Yarhud had arranged to arrive at a specified time; — but where? Of that they were ignorant, though it was certain that the Guidare was expected at some port of Asia Minor on the Black Sea.

At length the calms ceased, and the vessel sailed eastwards, or, as Amasia said, towards the rising sun. For two weeks she proceeded thus without incident to break the monotony of the voyage. Many times vessels were perceived; steamers, war ships, and merchantmen passed or overtook the Guidare; but Captain Yarhud always obliged the prisoners to go below on these occasions, for fear they would give the alarm or show some signal of distress.

Then the weather began to look threatening: it got worse, and then very bad indeed. Two days before the Guidare was wrecked, a violent tempest arose. Amasia and Nedjeb perceived, from the anger of the captain, that he had been obliged to alter his course and that the storm was forcing him out of his way. The girls rather enjoyed the storm, inasmuch as it was removing them from the dreaded termination of the voyage.

“Yes, dear Ahmet,” said Amasia in conclusion. “When I reflected on the fate that awaited me, carried away where I should never see you again, my resolve was taken. Nedjeb knew it: she would not have prevented me. Before the vessel had reached her destination, I would have thrown myself into the sea. But the tempest came. The very thing which threatened to destroy us, was the means of our safety. My own Ahmet, you came through the furious waves to my assistance. Never shall I forget that: never!”

“Dearest Amasia,” replied Ahmet, “Allah willed that you should be saved, and saved by me! But if I had not anticipated my uncle, he would have rushed to your assistance.”

“By Mahomet, that is true, I believe,” exclaimed Kéraban.

“Fancy such a hard-headed man having such a soft heart!” murmured Nedjeb, involuntarily.

“Ah! that little lady aroused me,” said Kéraban. “And now, my friends, confess that my obstinacy does good sometimes!”

“Sometimes?” exclaimed Van Mitten, very incredulous on this point; “I should just like to know — ”

“No doubt, friend Van Mitten. If I had yielded to Ahmet’s fancies, if we had travelled by railway instead of skirting the shore, Ahmet would not have been at the place to save his fianc’ee from shipwreck.”

“No! quite right,” replied Van Mitten, “but if you had not compelled him to quit Odessa, the abduction would not have taken place, and — ”

“Ah! that is the way you argue, is it?” retorted Kéraban. “You want to discuss the subject?”

“No! no!” exclaimed Ahmet, who knew, that in a discussion of this kind, the Dutchman would come off second-best. “It is too late to go into all the pros and cons now; much better take some rest — ”

“In view of our departure to-morrow,” added Kéraban.

“To-morrow, uncle! To-morrow! Why Amasia and Nedjeb must have some repose.”

“Oh! I am quite strong, Ahmet, and tomorrow — ”

“Ah! nephew,” said Kéraban, “you are not in such a hurry now you have got my little Amasia with you. Nevertheless, the end of the month is approaching — the fatal day draws near, and we have interests we cannot afford to neglect. You must permit an old merchant to be more practical than you. So let each one sleep as well as he, or she, can; and to-morrow, when we have found a conveyance, we will continue our journey.”

They installed themselves as well as they could in the fisherman’s hut, and were quite as comfortable as they could possibly have been in one of the inns of Atina. Every member of the party, after so much excitement, was quite ready to rest for some hours. Van Mitten dreamt that he was again engaged in a discussion with his intractable friend: the latter dreamed that he was face to face with Seigneur Saffar, upon whom he was heaping all the maledictions of Allah and his prophet.

Ahmet only could not sleep. The desire to ascertain for what purpose Amasia had been carried away by Yarhud disquieted him, not only as regards the past, but for fear in the future. He kept thinking whether all danger had disappeared with the Guidare. Certainly he had reason to believe that not one of the crew had escaped, and he was quite unaware that Captain Yarhud had emerged from the shipwreck safe and sound. But the catastrophe would soon become known in the adjacent districts. The person for whom Yarhud had been acting — some rich merchant no doubt, or perhaps some pacha of the Anatolian provinces — would soon become acquainted with what had occurred. It would not be very difficult for him to put himself upon the girl’s track. Between Trebizond and Scutari, across the deserted province through which the highway ran — what dangers might hot be accumulated, what traps set, what ambushes prepared!

Ahmet, therefore, made up his mind to watch most carefully. He would never again separate himself from Amasia. He would himself undertake the leadership of the caravan, and would, when necessary, select some trustworthy guide who would be able to lead the party by the shortest route along the shore.

At the same time Ahmet determined to put the banker Selim in possession of all the circumstances relating to the abduction of his daughter. It was most important that Selim should be informed concerning Amasia’s safety, so that he might appear at Scutari on the appointed day — in a fortnight But a letter forwarded from Atina or Trebizond would not reach Odessa in time. So Ahmet resolved to “wire “without saying a word about it to his uncle — who would almost have a fit at the very mention of the word “telegram “ — and forward a telegraphic message to Selim via Trebizond. He made up his mind to advise him that probably all danger was not over, and that Selim must not hesitate to come to meet the little caravan, en route.

Next morning, the 15th September, as soon as Ahmet met Amasia he acquainted her with his designs — partly at least — and without laying any particular stress upon the dangers which he fancied would ensue. Amasia perceived only one idea, viz. that her father would be re-assured concerning her safety, and in the very shortest possible time. So Ahmet and Amasia were very anxious to reach Trebizond, whence a telegram might be despatched without Uncle Kéraban knowing anything about it After some hours’ sleep, Kéraban was more impatient than ever; Van Mitten resigned to all the caprices of his friend; Bruno endeavouring to ascertain how much of his figure still remained within his loose clothing, and only replying to his master in monosyllables.

First of all Ahmet searched Atina through. It is an unimportant town, which, as its name indicates, was formerly the “Athens “of the Black Sea. There are still existent some columns of the Doric order of architecture remaining in the Temple of Pallas. But if these ruins interested Van Mitten they had no attraction whatever for Ahmet. He would have much preferred to find some means of conveyance less rough, less primitive than the cart he had secured on the frontier. But it was absolutely necessary to return to the araba, which was specially reserved for the!

two young girls. Then there was need to provide mounts — horses, donkeys, or mules — so that masters and servants might reach Trebizond.

Ah, how Kéraban regretted the post- chaise smashed at Poti! And what recriminations and menaces did he not send j to the address of the haughty Saffar, who was responsible, according to Kéraban, for all the mischief.

As for Amasia and Nedjeb nothing could be more agreeable to them than the journey in the araba. It was a quite new and unexpected experience. They would not have exchanged the vehicle for the finest carriage of the Padischah. How comfortable they would be under the tilt upon a litter of fresh straw, which could be easily renewed at every stage. From time to time they would offer a place beside them to Seigneur Kéraban, or young Ahmet, or Van Mitten! And the riders would escort them as if they were princesses! In fine it was perfectly charming!

It will be surmised that these foolish ideas emanated from the brain of the simple Nedjeb, who was so transported as to look upon things only on the good side. Amasia could not complain, since Ahmet was near her, and the journey was about to be completed under conditions so different, and with so little delay, to Scutari.

“I am certain,” repeated Nedjeb, “that if we stood on tip-toe we should see the place!”

In fact, in the whole company there were only two individuals who had any misgivings — Seigneur Kéraban, who feared some delay in consequence of not finding a proper conveyance, and Bruno, who found that thirty- five leagues — and thirty-five leagues on mule-back — intervened between him and Trebizond, where, as Nizib confided to him, some more comfortable means of transport would surely be obtainable to cross the plains of Anatolia.

So, on the morning of the 15th September at eleven, the cavalcade quitted Atina. The tempest had been so violent that it had quickly subsided, and a perfect calm reigned in the atmosphere. The clouds which floated high in the air remained almost motionless though still lacerated by the wind. The sun shot out a few rays now and then, and lighted up the landscape. The sea alone was still agitated and beat fiercely on the beach.

Seigneur Kéraban and his companions traversed Western Lazistan as quickly as possible, with the intention to reach Trebizond before nightfall. The roads were by no means deserted. The travellers passed many caravans in which camels were numbered by hundreds, and the ear was deafened by the clang and jingle of the various bells which the animals carried round their necks, while the eye was amused by the varied and brilliant colours of their trappings. These caravans, were coming from Persia or proceeding thither.

The sea-shore was not any less lively than the roads. The entire fishing population seemed to have assembled there. The fishermen at night-fall, their boats lighted up at the stern with burning resin, took in. considerable quantities of the species o£ anchovy known as khamsi, of which they cure thousands all along the coast of Anatolia, and even as far as Central Armenia. The hunters on the other hand had no- reason to envy the fishermen, for game was- quite as plentiful as fish. Thousands of sea- birds of the grebe species — konkarinas — flock to these districts of Asia Minor. So- the immense number slain for their feathers, which are much sought after, recompense the hunters for the time, the trouble, and the expense of ammunition incurred in procuring them.

About three o’clock in the afternoon the little caravan halted at Mapavra, situated at the mouth of the river of the same name, the waters of which are mixed with an oily stream of petroleum, which falls from the neighbouring springs. Three o’clock was a little too early for dinner, but as the party could not reach their camping place until quite late in the evening, it seemed only prudent to take some sustenance. This was at any rate Bruno’s advice, and it had due weight Of course there was an abundance of khamsis on the table, which are the most esteemed food of the district These anchovies are served cured and fresh, to please all palates; but there were, besides, more substantial dishes, to which our travellers paid their attention. So good humour reigned amongst them, and good humour is the best seasoning after all.

“Well, Van Mitten,” said Kéraban, “do you regret the wilfulness — the legitimate obstinacy — of your friend and correspondent, which has compelled you to make this journey?”

“No, Kéraban, no,” replied Van Mitten, “and I will continue it whenever you please.”

“We shall see — we shall see,” said Kéraban. “And you, my little Amasia, what do you think of your wicked uncle who carried away your Ahmet?”

“That he is what I have always known him to be — the best of men,” replied Amasia.

“And the most accommodating,” added Nedjeb. “It seems to me that Seigneur Kéraban is not quite so obstinate as he used to be.”

“Good!” cried Kéraban, with a loud laugh, “that stupid girl is quizzing me!”

“No, indeed, seigneur — no, indeed.”

“But, yes, indeed! Bah! you are right: I no longer argue — I am no more obstinate. Even Van Mitten here would not succeed in provoking me.”

“Oh! that remains to be proved!” replied the Dutchman, shaking his head dubiously.

“It has been proved, Van Mitten.”

“If they were to get you on certain subjects — ”

“You are quite mistaken, I swear!”

“Do not swear.”

“But I will swear!” replied Kéraban, becoming excited. “Why should not I swear?”

“Because it’s so often difficult to keep an oath.”

“Less difficult to keep than to hold one’s tongue, in any case, Van Mitten; for it is quite evident at this moment, and just for the pleasure of contradicting me — ”

“I, friend Kéraban!”

“Yes, you; and when I tell you that I am resolved never again to be obstinate about trifles, I beg you will not be so, just to prove the contrary.”

“You see you are quite wrong this time, Monsieur Van Mitten,” said Ahmet, “absolutely wrong!”

“Entirely wrong,” continued Amasia, with a smile.

“Altogether wrong,” added Nedjeb.

So the worthy Dutchman, finding the majority against him, thought it best to say no more.

But, after all the lessons he had received, and particularly during this journey so imprudently entered upon, and which might yet end disastrously — was Kéraban so “tamed “as he wished people to believe? That was to be seen; but no doubt everyone was secretly of Van Mitten’s opinion. It was indeed an open question whether the bump of combativeness was reduced on the head of this Inflexible One.

“En route” said Kéraban, when dinner was over. “This meal has been an excellent one, but I know a better!”

“Which is that?” asked Van Mitten.

“The dinner which awaits us at Scutari!”

The party resumed their journey at four o’clock, and at eight the same evening reached the village of Rize. Then they found they must pass the night in a rather uncomfortable khan — so uncomfortable, indeed, that the young women of the party preferred to remain in the araba. The important question turned on rest and forage for the horses; fortunately straw and corn were in sufficiency in the racks. Kéraban and his companions had only one litter at their disposal, but it was dry and fresh, and they contented themselves with it Next night they hoped to rest in Trebizond, with all the comfort that the best of the hotels in that town could afford.

As for Ahmet, whether the sleeping accommodation was good or bad, it made no difference to him. He would not be able to sleep with suspicion in his mind, for he was always in fear for the safety of Amasia, and confessed to himself that all danger had not been passed with the wreck of the Guidare; so he stood sentinel, well armed, near the khan.

Ahmet was right to do so. He had reason to fear, for Captain Yarhud had not lost sight of the party all day. He followed in their tracks, but kept out of sight; for Ahmet knew him as well as the two girls did. As he watched, he resolved upon his plans to recapture the prey which had escaped him, and at all hazards — he had written to Scarpante. This creature of Saffar's, as had been already arranged, was waiting at Trebizond, and Yarhud had appointed to meet him at the caravanserai of Rissar, about three miles from the town, without, however, telling him of the shipwreck and its sad consequences.

So Ahmet had only too good reason to be on his guard. His presentiments did not deceive him. Yarhud approached near enough to assure himself that the young girls were sleeping in their araba. Fortunately for himself, he also saw Ahmet on the watch, and was enabled to retire without being perceived.

But this time, instead of remaining behind the caravan, he started westward along the road to Trebizond, so as to get in front of Kéraban and his party. Before their arrival in the town he wished to confer with Scarpante. So, mounting his horse, which he had ridden from Atina, he proceeded rapidly towards the caravanserai of Rissar.

Next day, the 16th September, as soon as daylight appeared, the whole party were on foot and in high spirits, except Bruno, who was wondering how many more pounds he would lose before he reached Scutari.

“My little Amasia,” said Kéraban, rubbing his hands together, “come and let me embrace you.”

“Willingly, uncle,” she replied, “if you will let me always call you so.”

“If I will permit you, my dear child! You may call me your father. Is not Ahmet as a son to me?”

“He is so, uncle Kéraban,” said Ahmet, “so much so that he comes to give you an order, as it is right a son should do!”

“What order?”

“To depart at once. The horses are ready, and we must reach Trebizond this morning, you know.”

“And so we will,” cried Kéraban, “and quit it at sunrise to-morrow. Well, Van Mitten, you see it is fated that you shall visit Trebizond.”

“Yes, Trebizond! What a splendid name for a town,” exclaimed the Dutchman. “Trebizond and its hill where the Ten Thousand under Xenophon exhibited their games and combats under the presidency of Dracentius, if I may believe my guide-book. In truth, friend Kéraban, I shall not be at all sorry to see Trebizond.”

“Well, you will carry away some important reminiscences of this journey, Van Mitten.”

“They might have been fuller, perhaps.”

“At anyrate, you have had nothing to complain of.”

“It is not over yet,” whispered Bruno to his master, like an oracle of evil omen charged to remind men of the instability of human affairs.

The caravan left the khan at 7 o’clock a m. The weather was improving, and the sky was rapidly clearing.

At mid-day, they halted at Of, on the Ophis of the ancients, where the old Grecian race still survives. They dined at a small inn, on the supplies obtained from the araba, which were, however, nearly exhausted.

Besides, the innkeeper did not trouble himself about his guests, for his wife wa-s very ill, and he was at his wits’ end. There was no doctor in the district, and to send to Trebizond for one would be too great an expense for a poor hotel-keeper.

So it followed that Kéraban, aided by Van Mitten, undertook the office of hakim, or physician, and prescribed some simple drugs which could be obtained easily at Trebizond.

“May Allah protect you, seigneur,” said the stingy husband; “but what will these drugs cost me?”

“Twenty piastres,” replied Kéraban.

“Twenty piastres!” exclaimed the man; “why, for that sum I can buy another wife!”

And so saying he turned away, not without thanking the visitors for their advice, by which, however, he did not intend to profit.

“There is a practical husband for you,” said Kéraban. “You ought to marry in this country, Van Mitten!”

“Perhaps I ought,” replied the Dutchman.

At five o’clock in the evening the travellers halted at Surmeneh. They continued their journey at six, with the intention to reach Trebizond before day declined. But there was delay occasioned by the breaking of a wheel of the araba some six miles from the town, — about nine o’clock in the evening, — and they were thus compelled to pass the night in the caravanserai at the road side, a building well known to all travellers in that part of Asia Minor.

CHAPTER VI.

The caravanserai of Rissar, like all other buildings of its class, is entirely appropriated to the service of travellers. The host, or guardian, of this particular halting-place near Trebizond, was a certain Turk named Kidros, a cunning rogue and more “tricky” than are members of his race: he usually took great care of the place. He sought to please his guests, with much advantage to his own interests, which he understood thoroughly; he was always of their opinion, even to the extent of reducing their bills (which he had previously “swollen “with a view to this very reduction, and still left himself a handsome profit) out of pure regard for such honourable travellers!

The arrangement of the caravanserai was as follows: — A vast court-yard, encircled by four walls, out of which a gate opened into the country. At each side of this gate were two watch-towers, whence one could overlook the environs in case the roads were unsafe. In the thickness of the walls were doors giving access to separate rooms in which travellers could pass the night, for they were seldom occupied during the day. A few sycamore trees planted round the court-yard threw a little shade upon it. In the centre was a well, worked by an endless chain pump, the buckets of which could empty themselves into a trough which formed a semi-circular basin. Outside was a line of boxes in sheds where the horses found food and litter. Behind were the pickets, to which mules and dromedaries were attached as being less particular than horses in the matter of accommodation.

That evening of which we are writing, the caravanserai without being full, had a good many occupants; some on the way to Trebizond, others to the eastern provinces, Armenia, Persia, or Kurdistan. Twenty chambers were full, and the occupants were for the most part asleep.

About nine o’clock, only two men were walking up and down the courtyard; they were talking earnestly, and only interrupted their conversation to cast a suspicious look around occasionally. These two individuals, dressed so as not to attract particular notice, were Seigneur Saffar and his steward Scarpante.

“I repeat that it is here, Seigneur, that Yarhud has appointed to meet us. Here is the caravanserai Rissar,” said the steward.

“Dog!” exclaimed Saffar. “Why is he not here then?”

“He will not tarry now.”

“And why has he thought of bringing Amasia here instead of carrying her direct to Trebizond?”

Saffar and Scarpante, it must be remembered, were ignorant of the wreck of the Guidare, and of the succeeding events.

“Yarhud’s letter to me came from the harbour of Atina,” said Scarpante. “It makes no mention of the young lady, but begs me to meet him here.”

“And he is not come,” exclaimed Saffar, advancing towards the gate. “Ah, he had better beware how he tries my patience! I have a presentiment that some accident has occurred.”

“Why, seigneur? The weather has been stormy, and perhaps the vessel could not reach Trebizond, so she put in at Atina.”

“But who can tell whether Yarhud succeeded in the first instance in carrying Amasia away from Odessa?”

“Yarhud is not only a skilful seaman,” replied Scarpante, “he is also a very sharp fellow!”

“Yet his sharpness is not always successful,” replied the calm voice of the Maltese captain himself, who had for a few moments been standing motionless on the threshold of the caravanserai.

Seigneur Saffar and Scarpante both turned round suddenly, and the latter exclaimed —

“Yarhud!”

“At last you are here,” said Saffar, roughly, as he advanced towards the captain.

“Yes, Seigneur Saffar,” he replied, bowing. “Here I am — at last!”

“And Selim’s daughter? Did you succeed in carrying her away from Odessa?”

“The bankers daughter .”replied Yarhud, “was carried away by me about six weeks ago, soon after the departure of Ahmet, who was obliged to accompany his uncle in his journey round the Black Sea. I at once set sail for Trebizond, but my vessel was carried to the eastward, and, notwithstanding all my efforts, was wrecked on the rocks near Atina, and all my crew were drowned!”

“All your crew?” exclaimed Scarpante.

“Yes.”

“And Amasia?” enquired Saffar, who seemed little affected by the loss of the Guidare.

“She was saved: saved with the young servant, whom I carried off with her.”

“But if she was saved — ” said Scarpante.

“Where is she?” interrupted Saffar.

“Seigneur,” replied the Maltese. “Fate was adverse to me — or rather, to you.”

“Speak,” cried Saffar, menacingly.

“The banker’s daughter,” replied Yarhud, “was rescued by her fiance, Ahmet, who was by some unfortunate chance on the spot”

“Saved by him!” exclaimed Scarpante.

“And at this moment?” enquired Saffar.

“At this moment she is under the protection of Ahmet, of his uncle, and his companions on the way to Trebizond. Thence they propose to proceed to Scutari to celebrate their marriage.”

“Bungler!” roared Saffar. “Why did you let her escape instead of saving her yourself?”

“I would have done so at the peril of my life; if Ahmet had not come up, she would now be safe in your palace at Trebizond.”

“Ah, you are quite unworthy of any mission,” replied Saffar, who could not restrain an angry movement “Will you listen to me, seigneur?” said Scarpante. “When you are calmer you will recognize the fact that Yarhud did all that was possible.”

“All,” added the Maltese.

“All is not enough,” replied SafTar, “when the accomplishment of my orders fails.”

“The past is past, Seigneur Saffar,” said Scarpante. “Let us look at the present and see what chances it offers us. Amasia is not yet Ahmet’s wife — nothing is lost!”

“No, nothing,” added Yarhud. “After the shipwreck I followed her; I have watched Ahmet and his companions ever since their departure from Atina. They are travelling without any suspicion. The way is long across Anatolia from Trebizond to the shores of the Bosphorus. Now neither Amasia nor her servant have any idea whither the Guidare was bound. Besides, no one in the caravan knows Seigneur Saffar nor Scarpante. Can we not take them in a trap?”

“Scarpante,” said Saffar coldly: “this girl is necessary to me. If fate is against me I will fight against fate. It shall never be said that my wishes cannot be complied with.”

“It shall be as you desire,” replied Scarpante. “Yes; between Trebizond and Scutari, in those deserted plains, it is possible, even easy, to lie in wait for the caravan, perhaps to find a guide for it who will know how to lose his way: then you may attack it with your men. But that is force — better succeed by stratagem if we can.”

“But in what manner?” inquired Saffar.

“You said, Yarhud,” replied Scarpante, turning to the Maltese, “that Ahmet and his companions were making for Trebizond?”

“Yes, and they will soon arrive here, and will certainly pass the night in the caravanserai,” said Yarhud.

“Well then,” said Scarpante, “cannot we stir up some excitement which will detain them here — which will separate Amasia from her betrothed?”

“I have more faith in force,” remarked Saffar, brutally.

“Very well,” replied Scarpante. “We can use force if stratagem fail. But leave me here to watch what goes on.”

“Hush, Scarpante,” said the Maltese. “We are not alone.”

As he spoke, two men entered the courtyard. One was Kidros, the other an important personage — at least by repute — who must be introduced to the reader.

Seigneur Saffar, Scarpante, and Yarhua moved away into an obscure corner apart. There they could listen at their ease, and so much the more easily, as the personage in question always spoke in very loud tones, and very haughtily.

This person was a Kurdish “lord,” and his name was Yanar.

The mountainous region of Asia which includes ancient Assyria and Media, is now called Kurdistan. It is divided into Turkish and Persian Kurdistan, and the former province contains many hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, not the least considerable amongst them being this Seigneur Yanar, who, with his sister, the noble Saraboul, had arrived at the caravanserai the day before.

Seigneur Yanar and his sister had quitted Mossoul two months previously, and were travelling for pleasure. They came to Trebizond, where they intended to remain some weeks. The "noble Saraboul," as she was generally called in her native pachalik, was at this time thirty or thirty-three years of age, and had been for some years a widow. The Turkish governor to whom she had been married had been only able to devote to her a very brief existence. The widow was of pleasing and agreeable appearance, and was not altogether unwilling to enter into matrimonial bonds for a second time. This was a more difficult aim to accomplish than at first sight would appear, for, though rich and well born, she was of a violent and impetuous temper; and, being a Kurd, extremely fond of her own way; so any suitor for her hand might not unnaturally be alarmed at her temper. Her brother Yanar, who also constituted himself her body-guard, had advised the journey — chances are so many while travelling! And that is the reason why these two "personages," having quitted their native Kurdistan, found themselves on the highroad to Trebizond.

Seigneur Yanar was a man of about forty-five years old, tall, imperious, and with a stern countenance; one of those hectoring fellows who are born with a frown. His aquiline nose, his deep-set eyes, his shaven head, and enormous moustaches, indicated him as a specimen of the Armenian, rather than of the Turkish, type. His head was adorned with a felt cap, tied round with brilliantly red silk. He wore a robe with wide sleeves under an embroidered vest; large trousers which fell to his ankles, and embroidered leather boots. His middle was girt about with a scarf, in which he carried a varied assortment of poignards, pistols, and yataghans. He had a truly terrifying appearance.

So Kidros always addressed him with extreme deference, and bore himself like a person who was obliged to bow and scrape before a cannon loaded with grape-shot.

“Yes, Seigneur Yanar,” said Kidros emphasising his words with suitable gestures. “I repeat that the judge will arrive here this very evening, and to-morrow morning, at daybreak, will begin his quest.”

“Master Kidroe,” replied Yanar, “you are the host of this caravanserai, and may Allah choke you if you do not take care of your guests’ safety and comfort here.”

“Certainly, Seigneur Yanar. By all means.”

“Well then, last night some ruffians, robbers, or others, penetrated, had the audacity to enter the chamber in which my sister, the noble Saraboul, reposed.” And Yanar indicated the particular opening in the wall to which he referred.

“The ruffians!” exclaimed Kidros.

“And we will not quit this caravanserai,” continued Yanar, “until they have been discovered, arrested, condemned, and hanged!”

Master Kidros was not quite assured that any real attempt at robbery had been made. One thing alone was certain. For some reason or other the affrighted widow had rushed from her chamber, screaming and calling for her brother; the whole establishment had been upset, and the malefactors, supposing there had been any, had managed to escape, without leaving a trace of their presence.

At any rate, Scarpante, who had not lost a word of the conversation, at once began to think how he might turn this business to his own profit “Now we are Kurds,” continued Yanar, drawing himself up proudly to give full effect to his words, “we are Kurds of Mossoul, the splendid capital of Kurdistan, and we will never admit that any slight can be put upon Kurds without reparation being obtained by law, or by force!”

“But, seigneur, what injury has been done?” asked Master Kidros, with some temerity, but prudently retreating a pace or two as he spoke.

“What injury!” exclaimed Yanar.

“Yes, seigneur. No doubt some scoundrels did endeavour to enter last night, into the chamber apportioned to the noble Saraboul, but they took away nothing!”

“Nothing; as a matter of fact, nothing; but only thanks to my sister’s energy and courage! She can handle a pistol as well as a yataghan!”

“So the malefactors, whoever they might have been, ran away?” remarked Kidros.

“A very good thing for them that they did, Master Kidros. The noble and valiant Saraboul would have exterminated them two by two — four by four! That is the reason why she will remain armed, as I am, tonight; and woe to anyone who ventures near her room!”

“You may well believe, Seigneur Yanar, that there is nothing to fear now. The robbers — if there were any — will not again hazard — ”

“How, if there were any robbers!” roared Yanar. “Who do you think these bandits were then?”

“Perhaps some venturesome — some foolish people; or some one who, smitten by the charms of the noble Saraboul, — ”

“By Mahomet,” exclaimed Yanar, seizing his weapon. “Here is a pretty affair. The honour of a Kurd is at stake! Ah! arrest, imprisonment, impalement will not suffice in this case! No; the most horrible tortures will not be sufficient — unless the ruffian has position and fortune sufficient to repair his fault!”

“Calm yourself, Seigneur Yanar,” replied Master Kidros. “The enquiry, which will be instituted, will discover the author, or authors, of this insult. I tell you again, the judge has been summoned. I myself sought him in Trebizond, and when I told him the particulars he assured me that he possessed means of ascertaining — sure means of discovering — who the malefactors are.”

“And what means are these?” enquired Yanar ironically.

“I cannot tell,” replied Kidros, “but the judge maintains they are infallible.”

“Be it so,” replied Yanar. “We shall see when to-morrow comes. I will retire, but I will watch. I will watch, armed. Oh, my sister, my noble sister!”

So saying, the terrible Yanar turned away to his apartment, which was next to his sister’s. There he paused at the door for a moment, and shook his fist at the keeper of the caravanserai.

“You cannot play tricks with a Kurd,” he cried in a loud voice; then he disappeared within his chamber.

Master Kidros gave vent to a long sigh of relief.

“At last,” he said. “We shall soon see how this will end. Bat it is as well that the thieves — if there were any — have decamped!”

Meanwhile Scarpante was talking in an undertone with Saffar and Yarhud. “Yes,” he was saying, “thanks to this affair of Seigneur Yanar there can be some plan attempted.”

“You propose — ” said Saffar.

“I propose to stir up here some unpleasant circumstances which will have the effect of keeping that Ahmet here for some clays, and of separating him from his betrothed, perhaps.”

“Good; but if the ruse fail?”

“We must use force then,” replied Scarpante.

At that moment Kidros perceived Saffar.

Scarpante, and Yarhud, whom he had not previously noticed. He advanced towards them and in the most amiable manner said, “What do you require, gentlemen?”

“We are waiting for some travellers who may arrive at any moment now,” replied Scarpante.

Just then a noise was heard from the outside; a caravan was evidently approaching; mules and horses halted at the door.

“Here they are, no doubt,” said Master Kidros, as he crossed the court-yard to admit the travellers.

“Here are rich personages,” he muttered, “on horseback. I had better go out and offer them my services.” So he did.

But Scarpante had advanced to the door also, and looked out.

“Are these people Ahmet and his companions?” he enquired of the Maltese.

“Yes, yes; they are,” replied Yarhud, who retired hastily so as not to be recognized.

“They!” exclaimed Saffar advancing in his turn, but without going outside the door.

“I am not mistaken,” replied Yarhud, “there is Ahmet and his fiancee, with her servant.”

“Let us be on our guard,” said Scarpante, signing to Yarhud to keep out of sight.

“You can already recognize Kéraban’s voice,” continued the Maltese.

“Kéraban!” cried Saffar quickly, as he rushed towards the door.

“What is the matter, Seigneur Saffar?” asked Scarpante, much astonished. “Why does the name of Kéraban agitate you so?”

“Ha! Yes he is there, ‘tis he indeed,” replied Saffar. “That is the traveller who encountered me on the Caucasian railway; and who wanted to prevent my carriage from crossing!”

“He knows you?”

“Yes, and he will not find it difficult to continue the quarrel; to stop him — ”

“Ah! that will not stop the nephew,” remarked Scarpante.

“I know how to disembarrass myself of the nephew as well as of the uncle,” replied Saffar.

“No, no; we must have no quarrelling, no noise,” insisted Scarpante. “Take my advice, Seigneur Saffar. Let Kéraban once suspect your presence, let him only be made aware that Yarhud carried off Amasia on your account, and all will be lost.”

“Very well, I will retire and trust to your skill, Scarpante. But succeed!”

“I wil! succeed, Seigneur Saffar, if you will allow me to act. Go back to Trebizond, to-night”

“I will,” replied Saffar.

“And you too, Yarhud, leave the caravanserai at once,” continued Scarpante. “They know you, and they may recognize you if you remain.”

“Here they are,” said Yarhud.

“Leave me; go,” cried Scarpante pushing the captain of the Guidare away.

“But how can we go unobserved?” asked Saffar.

“This way,” replied Scarpante, opening a door cut in the wall which led to the fields.

Signor Saffar and the Maltese passed out at once.

“Just in time,” muttered Scarpante, “and now I must keep my eyes and ears open.”

CHAPTER VII.

Seigneur Kéraban and his friends, having left their horses in the sheds outside, entered the caravanserai, attended by Master Kidros in a most obsequious fashion. He had placed his lanthorn in a corner, and but very little light was thrown into the interior of the court.

“Yes, seigneur, come in,” he continued, bowing to the ground. “This is the caravanserai of Rissar.”

“And we are only two leagues from Trebizond?” said Kéraban.

“Two leagues — at most.”

“Good. Let our horses be cared for, as we intend to leave here at daybreak.”

Then, turning to Ahmet, who had led Amasia to a seat, where she was sitting with Nedjeb, he continued, good humouredly —

“There! since my nephew has found this little one, he thinks of no one but her, and leaves to me the arrangements for our journey?”

“That is only natural, Seigneur Kéraban; what is the use of being an uncle, else?” said Nedjeb.

“You must not blame me,” said Ahmet smiling.

“Nor me,” added Amasia.

“Oh, I am blaming no one,” replied Kéraban. “Not even this fellow, Van Mitten, who actually had conceived the idea — the unpardonable idea —

of leaving us!”

“Oh, do not speak of that,” cried Van Mitten, “not now, nor ever.”

“By Mahomet, why not? A little discussion upon it, or on some other subject, would stimulate ns.”

“I thought, uncle,” observed Ahmet “that you had made a resolution to have no more discussions!”

“That is so — quite right, and I will never break it — even if I have a hundred reasons for so doing.”

“We shall see that,” murmured Nedjeb.

“Besides,” continued Van Mitten, “the best thing for us now would he a sleep for some hours”

“If we can sleep here at all,” muttered Bruno, who was as usual in a bad temper.

“You can give us rooms for the night?” asked Kéraban of Kidros.

“Yes, seigneur, as many as you please.”

“Good, excellent!” exclaimed Kéraban. “To-morrow we shall reach Trebizond, and Scutari ten days later. There we will have a good dinner — the dinner which I promised you. Van Mitten.”

“You certainly owe us that, friend Kéraban!”

“A dinner at Scutari,” whispered Bruno to his master, “yes, if we ever get there.”

“Get out, Bruno! Have a little courage, man. if only for the honour of Holland.”

Eh, I am something like Holland, myself,” replied Bmno, touching his loose garments, “I am all en cites!”

Scarpante, standing apart, listened to this conversation, and waited for the moment when it would suit his interests to interfere.

“Well,’” said Kéraban, “which room is intended for these young ladies?”

“This one,” replied Master Kidros, indicating a door in the wall on the left Good night, my little Amasia.” continued Kéraban, “and may Allah give you pleasant dreams.”‘

“The same to you, Seigneut Kéraban,” replied the girl. “Till to-morrow, dear Ahmet ‘“

“Till to-morrow, dearest Amasia,” replied the young man as he embraced her. Come, Nedjeb,” said Amasia.

“I follow you, dear lady,” replied the maid; “but I know on what subject we shall converse for the next hour ‘“

Then the girls entered the chamber the door of which was held open by Kidros.

“Now, where are these good fellows to sleep? “‘ asked Kéraban, indicating Bruno and Nizib.

In one of the exterior rooms,” replied Kidros, “I will show it to them.”

So saying, he advanced towards the door, and beckoned to the servants to follow. Nizib and Bruno, feeling tired, obeyed without hesitation, after bidding their masters uood-night “Now, or never!” muttered Scarpante to himself.

Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Ahmet were pacing the court waiting the return of Kidros. The uncle was in high spirits. Everything was going well. He would soon reach the Bosphorus, and was already chuckling over the visages of the authorities when they would see him appear. For Ahmet, the return to Scutari meant his long-desired union with Amasia: for Van Mitten, the return meant — well, the return and no more.

“It seems they have forgotten us,” said Kéraban. “Where is our room?”

Turning round he perceived Scarpante, who immediately advanced towards the party, slowly.

“Were you seeking the room allotted to Seigneur Kéraban and his friends?” he enquired with a low bow, as if he were one of the servants of the caravanserai.

“Yes.”

“Here it is.”

Scarpante then indicated, on the right, the door which opened into a corridor in which the chamber of the Kurdish lady was situated; next to that occupied by Yanar.

“Come along, my friends.” said Kéraban, pushing at the door indicated by Scarpante. The door, slightly fastened, gave way at once.

All three men entered the passage, but ere they had time to close the door a terrible clamour arose — cries succeeded — and an alarming female voice made itself audible, quickly sustained by the deeper tones of a man.

Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Ahmet, quite at a loss to understand what it all meant, retreated precipitately to the court-yard again.

Immediately doors were opened on all sides, and travellers came out of the rooms. Amasia and Nedjeb re-appeared. Bruno and Nizib came in again; while in the semi- darkness, the form of the fierce Yanar loomed threateningly. Finally a woman precipitated herself from the passage into which Kéraban and his friends had so imprudently entered.

“Robbery — assault — murder!” screamed this woman.

She was the noble Saraboul j tall, strong, and of firm carriage; her eyes flashing, her, cheeks burning, her black hair flowing, her teeth disclosed by the haughty upper lip in a word, the Seigneur Yanar in female shape.

Evidently the lady had been watching in her room, at the moment that Kéraban and his companions had forced open the door, for she had not taken off her yellow, gald- embroidered costume, nor had she discarded any of the weapons which she carried in her girdle. She still wore the fez from fwhich hung a long puskul like a bell-rope, and her leather boots, concealed by the chalwar or Oriental pantaloons.

Some people might have taken her for a wasp in her present costume. Well, the noble Sarabpul would not have been annoyed at the comparison — she was a wasp, and with a very formidable sting!

“What a woman!” ejaculated Van Mitten.

“And what a man!” replied Kéraban pointing to Yanar.

Thn Kurd then exclaimed —

“Another attempt of the scoundrels! Let everyone be arrested!”

“We must be on the alert here,” said Ahmet to his uncle, “or I fear we shall be convicted as the cause of the uproar.”

“Nobody saw us,” replied Kéraban, “and Mahomet himself could not recognise us.”

“What is it, Ahmet?” cried Amasia, who nestled to her lover’s side.

“Nothing, dearest, nothing,” he replied.

At this instant Master Kidros appeared on the door-step at the end of the court, saying —

“You have arrived in the very nick of time, Monsieur le Juge.”

In fact the judge had arrived from Trebizond, intending to pass the night at the caravanserai, so as to proceed leisurely upon the enquiry demanded by the Kurdish pair. He was followed by his clerk, and stood upon the door-sill.

“Ah,” he exclaimed. “So the malefactors have repeated their attempt of last night!”

“It would appear so, monsieur,” replied Kidros.

“Let the gates be all closed,” said the magistrate in an authoritative voice. “Let no one quit the caravanserai without my permission.”

His orders were immediately executed, and all the travellers thus became virtually prisoners.

“Now, judge,” cried the noble Saraboul, “I demand justice upon the wretches who have not scrupled a second time to attack a defenceless woman.”

“Not only a woman,” added Yanar with a threatening gesture, “but a Kurd!”

Scarpante, as may be imagined, followed ever}- incident carefully.

The judge, a sly-looking individual, with a pointed nose, little gimlet eyes, and wearing a long beard which concealed his closed mouth, sought to examine the faces of all the travellers, a by no means easy task in the dim light which was diffused by the single lanthorn in the corner. This examination rapidly concluded, he addressed himself to the noble lady tourist —

“You swear, that last night some people attempted to enter your apartment?”

“I swear it!”

“And that they repeated their criminal offence?”

“They, or others. Yes.”

“Only just now? “Just this instant.”

“Could you recognise them?”

“No: my room is dark and I could not see their faces.”

“Were there many of them?”

“I do not know.”

“We will know, sister!” exclaimed Yanar. “We will know; and then, woe to the scoundrels!”

Kéraban then whispered to Van Mitten — “There is nothing to fear. No one perceived us. Mahomet himself could not discover us.”

“Fortunately it is so,” replied the Dutchman, who was by no means completely assured as to the consequences of the adventure. “With these devilish Kurds, the affair might have turned out badly for us.”

Meanwhile, the judge kept walking about He did not know which side to take, to the great indignation of the plaintiffs.

“Judge,” said the noble Saraboul, folding her arms across her chest, “is justice to remain inactive in your hands? Are not we subjects of the Sultan, and entitled to his protection? Is a woman of my station to be insulted, and are the guilty to escape punishment?”

“She is really superb,” remarked Nedjeb. “Superb, but alarming,” replied Van Mitten.

“How do you decide, judge?” asked Yanar.

“Let them bring torches!” exclaimed Saraboul, “then I shall see, I will seek, and perhaps recognize, the perpetrators of this outrage, who have dared — ”

“It is useless,” remarked the judge. “I charge myself with the discovery of the perpetrators.”

“Without lights?”

“Without lights!”

As he made this reply, the judge whispered to his secretary, who nodded, and left the court-yard.

The Dutchman at this time could not help whispering to Kéraban — ” I do not know why, but I am by no means assured respecting the issue of this affair.”

“By Allah, you are always afraid,” retorted Kéraban.

Then they were silent, and waited like the rest, in anxious silence, the return of the secretary.

“Come, judge,” said Yanar at length, “do you pretend that in this gloom you will indicate — ”

“I? no,” replied the judge, interrupting him. “But I am going to enlist in my service an intelligent animal which has before now assisted me in my investigations.”

« An animal!” exclaimed the lady.

“Yes, a goat; a fine cunning beast, that will denounce the criminal if he be present. Now, he must be here somewhere, for no one has quitted the caravanserai since the assault was attempted.”

“This judge is an idiot,” muttered Kéraban.

At this juncture the secretary returned, dragging a goat into the court-yard. This animal was of the species that furnishes the “bezoar,” a stony concretion which is found in the entrails and much esteemed for its supposed medicinal qualities. The intelligent-looking goat looked quite worthy of the role of “diviner “which his master was about to call upon it to play. It lay gracefully upon the sand, and watched the audience with his cunning eyes.

“What a pretty animal,” remarked Nedjeb.

“But what is the judge going to do with it?” asked Amasia.

“Some ‘ sorcery ‘ no doubt,” replied Ahmet, “by which these ignorant natives will be ‘taken in.’”

Kéraban was of the same opinion, and shrugged his shoulders; while Van Mitten looked on uneasily.

“How now, judge?” said the noble Saraboul. “Is it by means of this goat that you hope to ascertain who the culprits are?”

“Just so,” replied the judge.

“And it will answer?”

“It will answer.”

“In what way?” asked Yanar, who, in his Kurdish heart was quite ready to accept anything that “smacked” of superstition.

“Nothing is more simple,” replied the judge. “Every traveller will approach and place his or her hand upon the back of the goat, and as soon as the animal feels the touch of the guilty person it will designate him by bleating.”

“This fellow is simply a humbug,” muttered Kéraban; “a common conjuror.”

“But, judge,” said the noble Saraboul, “surely such a silly animal as that — ”

“You will soon see,” replied the judge.

“And why not?” remarked Yanar. “I will set the example and begin the trial.”

So saying, Yanar approached the goat, which remained quite still, and passed his hand down the animal’s back, from head to tail.

The goat remained silent.

“Now the rest,” cried the judge.

Then in succession all the others present imitated Seigneur Yanar, and caressed the back of the animal. But none of those who touched her were apparently guilty, for the goat made no sign nor did she utter any accusatory bleatings.

CHAPTER VIII.

While the trial was proceeding, Seigneur Kéraban had taken his nephew and Van Mitten apart, and, forgetting all his good resolutions, sought to bend them to his own mode of proceeding.

“Well, my friends, this sorcerer is simply the biggest idiot — ”

“Why?” interrupted Van Mitten.

“Because there is nothing to prevent the guilty parties, ourselves for instance, from appearing to caress the goat, and we can pass our hands over instead of upon its back, without touching it. The judge should at anyrate have tried this test with lights, so as to check any evasion. In this semi-darkness it is absurd!”

“Well,” said Van Mitten —

“That is what I am going to do, and I advise you strongly to follow my example,” said Kéraban.

“But, uncle, whether we caress the goat or not, you know it cannot tell the innocent from the guilty.”

“Certainly not, Ahmet, but since that stupid judge is acting in this way, I claim to be less simple than he, and I will not touch the beast, and I beg you to do as I do.”

“But, uncle, — ”

“Ah, are we going to have an argument?” exclaimed Kéraban, who was beginning to get excited.

“Nevertheless,” began Van Mitten.

“Van Mitten, if you are so foolish as to put your hand on the back of that goat, I will never forgive you!”

“Very well; I will pat nothing at all, if I should disoblige you,” replied Van Mitten. “Besides, they will not see us in the dark.”

By this time the majority of the travellers had submitted to the test, and the goat had accused nobody.

“Now it is our turn, Bruno,” said Nizib. “How stupid these Orientals are!”

So, one after the other, they caressed the goat, which did not bleat for them any more than for the rest “But your animal says nothing!” remarked the noble Saraboul to the judge.

“Is this a practical joke?” demanded Seigneur Yanar. “You will find it expensive to joke with Kurds!”

“Patience,” replied the judge, bowing. “If the goat has not bleated, it is because the guilty person has not yet stroked her.”

“We are now the only ones left,” muttered Van Mitten, who, without knowing why, felt some vague presentiment of evil.

It is our turn,” said Ahmet “Yes, mine first,” said Kéraban. So saying, he advanced before his nephew and Van Mitten.

“Now, take care you do not touch it,” he repeated in a low voice.

Then extending his hand above the animal's back he pretended to caress it slowly, but without touching one of its silky hairs.

The goat did not bleat.

"That is so far comforting," said Ahmet, and, following his uncle's example, he passed his hand over the animal's back, without touching it The goat did not bleat Then it came to the Dutchman's turn. Van Mitten, last of all, was compelled to try the ordeal. He advanced towards the goat, which seemed to eye him askance; but he also, fearing to displease Kéraban, only pretended to stroke the goat.

The goat did not bleat.

There was a general exclamation of astonishment "Ohs" and "ahs "were heard from every one of the audience.

"Decidedly your goat is a beast," remarked Yanar, angrily.

"She has not discovered the culprit after all," cried the noble Kurdish woman, "and nevertheless the guilty one is here."

"Ha!" exclaimed Kéraban, "this judge is making himself very ridiculous, Van Mitten."

"Not a doubt about it," replied Van Mitten, now reassured as to the result of the trial.

"Poor little goat," cried Nedjeb to her mistress. "Are they going to do it any injury because it has said nothing?"

Every person present looked at the judge, whose eyes scintillated in the obscurity like carbuncles.

“Now, Monsieur le Juge,” said Kéraban sarcastically, “now that your enquiry has terminated, there is no reason, I suppose, why we should not retire to our rooms?”

“That must not be,” exclaimed the angry Lady Kurd. “Certainly not: an assault has been attempted.”

“Eh, madame?” replied Kéraban, not without some asperity. “You cannot have the assurance to keep honest people out of their beds when they want to go there!”

“You are giving yourself airs, Monsieur le Turc!” said Yanar.

“I speak as it suits me, Monsieur le Kurd,” retorted Kéraban.

Scarpante, who deemed that the trial had failed, was not sorry to perceive this quarrel arising between Yanar and Kéraban. Some further complication of a nature favourable to his own projects might arise from it.

In fact, the dispute was becoming serious, and Ahmet was about to assist his uncle, when the judge interposed and said quietly —

“Range yourselves in line, and let lights be brought.”

Master Kidros, to whom the latter order was addressed, hastened to comply with it. In a moment four servants, carrying torches, appeared, and the court was brilliantly illuminated.

“Let each one hold up his right hand,” said the judge.

At this order each right hand was elevated, and everyone was black — with the exception of those of Kéraban, Ahmet, and Van Mitten!

The judge at once pointed to the three men.

“There are the culprits!” he said.

“What?” said Kéraban.

“We?” exclaimed Van Mitten, who did not understand anything.

“Yes, you,” repeated the judge. “Whether these men were or were not afraid of being denounced by the goat, matters little. One thing is certain, and that is, knowing themselves to be guilty, instead of caressing the animal, whose back was rubbed with soot, they only passed their hands above the fur, and so accused themselves.”

A complimentary murmur pervaded the audience at the judge’s ingenuity, while Seigneur Kéraban and his companions, greatly disappointed, hung their heads!

“So,” began Ya- nar, “these are the three culprits, who last night — ”

“Last night we were ten leagues from here,” said Ahmet.

“Who can prove that!” exclaimed the judge. “In any case you have this evening attempted to make your way into the apartment of this lady.”

“Well, yes,” replied Kéraban, who was furious at having been caught in such a snare. “Yes, we did enter the passage, but under a misapprehension on our part, or rather on the part of one of the servants of the caravanserai.”

“Indeed!” said Yanar ironically.

“Yes, indeed! The lady’s room was shown to us as ours.”

“That won’t do!” remarked the judge.

“They are caught,” muttered Bruno, “all three!”

Seigneur Kéraban, indeed, was so absolutely put out of countenance that he had lost all his usual assurance; and he was entirely upset when he heard the judge say, “Let them be taken to prison.”

“Yes, to prison,” cried Seigneur Yanar, while all the crowd echoed the order, “To prison! To prison!”

When Scarpante perceived the turn things had taken he congratulated himself upon what he had done. Seigneur Kéraban, Van Mitten, and Ahmet in custody, the journey would be interrupted and the wedding postponed Above all, an immediate separation would be effected be- j tween Amasia and her betrothed; and there was thus a possibility of acting with success, and of renewing the attempt in which the Maltese captain had failed.

Ahmet, when he thought of the consequences and of his separation from Amasia, felt very angry with his uncle. Was it not Kéraban who by his obstinacy- had placed them in this dilemma? Had not he prevented them from caressing the animal in order to spite the foolish judge, who had nevertheless got the better ot them? It was Kéraban’s fault that they had fallen into the trap, and were now menaced with imprisonment, for some days at least.

Kéraban, too, on his part was very angry, for he remembered how little time remained to him to complete his journey, if he would arrive at Scutari at the appointed time, i One bit of obstinacy, as useless as absurd, had cost a fortune to his nephew.

As for Van Mitten he kept balancing himself on either leg alternately, very much embarrassed, and not daring to look Bruno in the face: while the valet seemed to be repeating the ominous words —

“Did I not tell you that we would come to grief sooner or later?”

Then Van Mitten, addressing Kéraban, said —

“Now, why did you prevent us caressing the goat’s back?”

For the first time in his life Kéraban was unable to make any answer to a question addressed to him.

Meanwhile the cries of, “To prison!” continued, and Scarpante joined in them heartily.

“Yes, send these malefactors to prison,” cried the vindictive Yanar, who was well disposed to aid the law by force. “Away with them, all three!”

“Yes, all three, unless one will take upon himself the responsibility of the act,” replied the noble Saraboul, who did not wish that two innocent persons should suffer with the guilty one.

“That is only fair,” assented the judge. “Well now, which of you really attempted to enter this lady’s apartment?”

There was a momentary indecision in the minds of the accused, but it was not of long duration. Kéraban requested permission to confer with his friends. This favour was accorded. Then, taking Van Mitten and Ahmet aside, he said in a tone which admitted of no discussion —

“My friends, there is only one way out of this. One of us must be the scapegoat for the others: the matter is very serious.”

Here the Dutchman, as if he had a presentiment of what was coming,” pricked up his ears.”

“Now,” continued Kéraban, “there can be no question of choice. The presence of Ahmet is necessary at Scutari to celebrate his marriage.”

“Yes, uncle, yes,” assented Ahmet.

“My attendance also is necessary,” proceeded Kéraban, “in my capacity of guardian.”

“Ha!” ejaculated Van Mitten.

“So, friend Mitten, there is no alternative. You must sacrifice yourself.”

“I — ? What?”

“You must accuse yourself. What risk do you run? A few day’s imprisonment Bagatelle! We will soon have you out!”

Van Mitten, who felt he was being disposed of rather unceremoniously, began to protest “My dear M. Van Mitten, you really must,” said Ahmet “I beg you to do so in Amasia’s name. All her future will be blighted unless we reach Scutari at the appointed time.”

“Oh, Monsieur Van Mitten,” pleaded the young lady who had approached him.

“Well, as you will,” replied Van Mitten.

“Hum,” muttered Bruno, “here is another act of folly they are making my master commit!”

“Monsieur Van Mitten,” began Ahmet —

“Well done!” exclaimed Kéraban, wringing his friend’s hand.

While this conversation was proceeding, the cries of “To prison!” became louder.

The unhappy Dutchman did not know what to say or do. He wished to say “Yes,” and then “No,” but the approach of the people to arrest the three culprits finally decided him.

“Stop,” he cried. “Stop, I confess that I am the person who — ”

“Foiled,” muttered Scarpante, with an angry gesture of disappointment.

“It was you then,” said the judge.

“I — yes — I — ”

“Dear M. Van Mitten!” murmured Amasia in his ear.

“Ah yes, indeed,” added Nedjeb.

But what was the noble Saraboul doing all this time? Well, that admirable lady was observing with some curiosity the man who had dared to attempt to enter her apartments.

“So then,” cried Yanar, “you are the individual who had the temerity to enter the rooms allotted to this noble Kurdish lady?”

“Yes, I,” replied Van Mitten.

“You have not the appearance of a thief!”

“A thief! I? I am a merchant — a Dutchman;” exclaimed Van Mitten, with much indignation.

“But then — ” continued Yanar.

“Then,” interrupted his sister, “you had other and more dishonourable motives.”

“To insult a Kurdish lady,” roared Yanar, grasping his yataghan.

“After all, he is not so bad, this Dutchman,” remarked the noble lady mincingly.

“Not all your blood will suffice to wash out this insult,” continued Yanar.

“Brother, brother!” remonstrated Saraboul.

“Ifyou refuse to make reparation,” added Yanar.

“Ah!” said Ahmet.

“You shall marry my sister, or else — ”

“By Allah!” said Kéraban, “here is another complication now.”

“Marry! I marry!” repeated Van Mitten, raising his hands to heaven.

"You refuse?" roared Yanar.

"If I refuse, — if I refuse," replied Van Mitten, in the depths of despair. "But I am already — "

Van Mitten had not time to conclude his sentence. Kéraban seized him by the arm, and said —

"Not another word. Consent you must. Don't hesitate."

"Consent? Why, I am married already," pleaded Van Mitten. "It would be bigamy."

"No matter in Turkey whether it be bigamy, trigamy, or quadrigamy, — it is perfectly lawful So now say ' Yes'!"

"But — "

"Marry her, Van Mitten, marry her. Then you will not have an hour in prison. We shall be able to continue our journey- all together. Once at Scutari you can be off the shortest way, and bid the new Madame Van Mitten good evening!"

"But you demand impossibilities, Kéraban," replied the Dutchman.

"You must, or all will be lost."

At that moment Seigneur Yanar came over, and grasping Van Mitten by the arm, said —

"He must!"

"He must!" repeated the noble Saraboul, seizing the other arm.

“Since I must, then,” replied Van Mitten, whose shaking limbs could scarcely sustain him.

“What! are you going to give in again?” cried Bruno.

“Needs must, Bruno,” muttered Van Mitten, in a feeble voice.

“Come! stand up!” cried Yanar, giving his future brother-in-law a violent push.

“And firmly,” continued Saraboul, with a reminder on the other side to her intended husband.

“As becoming a brother-in-law!” said he.

“And the husband of a Kurdish lady!” added she.

Van Mitten stood upright under the influence of these repeated shocks, but his head was swimming round as if it was only half fixed on his shoulders.

“A Kurd,” he muttered. “I, a citizen of Rotterdam, the husband of a Kurd!”

“Have no fear, it is only a mock ceremonial,” whispered Kéraban. “A joke.”

“You can’t joke with these people,” replied Van Mitten, piteously, and so comically withal, that his friends could scarcely keep from laughter.

Nedjeb, indicating the noble Saraboul, said to her mistress —

“I am very much mistaken it this is not all got up by the widow to secure a second husband.”

“Poor M. Van Mitten!” said Amasia.

“I would rather have eight months in prison than eight hours of such married life,” said Bruno, sadly.

Seigneur Yanar turned to the audience and said loudly —

“To-morrow we will celebrate, with all due pomp at Trebizond, the betrothal of Seigneur Van Mitten and the noble Saraboul.”

At the word “betrothal,”Van Mitten and his companions began to hope that the consequences of the adventure would be less serious than they had feared.

Here it may be remarked that, according to the usages of Kurdistan, these betrothals constitute an indissoluble bond of marriage. They may be compared to the “civil contract” of certain European nations, and that which follows it to the religious marriage. But in Kurdistan, though after the betrothal the man is only “engaged,” he is bound for life to the fiancee he has chosen — or, as in the present case, to the lady who had chosen him!

All this was duly explained to Van Mitten by Seigneur Yanar.

“But after all,” whispered Kéraban, “it can make no difference to you whether you are betrothed or married.”

Scarpante, who quitted the caravanserai as soon as the gates were re-opened, muttered this threat —

“The trick has failed. Now we shall try force!”

Then he disappeared, unnoticed by either Kéraban or any of his friends.

“Poor M. Van Mitten,” said Ahmet, as he watched the discomfited mien of the Dutchman.

“We must make light of it,” replied Kéraban. “The betrothal is nothing. In ten days the whole affair will be at an end. That will not matter!”

“No; but ten days’ engagement to such an imperious lady as the Kurdish woman is, must count for something!” replied Ahmet.

Five minutes later the court of the caravanserai was empty. Everyone had gone to bed. Van Mitten was guarded by his terrible brother-in-law, and silence fell upon the scene of the tragic comedy, the principal part in which had fallen so heavily upon the unfortunate Dutchman.

CHAPTER IX.

A town which dates from the year (a m.) 4790, which owes its existence to the inhabitants of a Milesian colony which was conquered by Mithradates; fell under the power of Pompey; submitted to the rule of the Persians and Scythians: which was “Christian” under Constantine the Great, and Pagan to the middle of the 6th century (a d.): which was relieved by Belisarius and enriched by Justinian; which was owned by the Comneni, of whom Napoleon I. was said to be the descendant; then by the Sultan Mahomet; till the end of the 16th century, when the Empire of Trebizond came to an end, after lasting 250 years: — this town, as will readily be conceded, has some right to figure in the history of the World. So neither will any one be surprised that Van Mitten had been very anxious to see such a celebrated place, and one so renowned in the annals and romances of chivalry.

But when this delightful anticipation possessed Van Mitten, he had been free from all care. He had only to follow his friend Kéraban round the antique Euxine; but now an engaged man, for some days provisionally, but still engaged to the noble lady who held him in leash; he was not altogether in the vein to appreciate the historic splendours of Trebizond.

It was on the 17th September, about 9 a m. two hours after quitting the Caravanserai of Rissar, that Kéraban and his companions, Yanar, his sister, and their respective attendants, entered the capital of the modern pachalik, built in the midst of an Alpine country, including valleys, mountains, and waterfalls, which recall the scenes of central Europe, and make one fancy that a slice of Switzerland or of the Tyrol has been transported to the shores of the Black Sea.

Trebizond, situated 325 kilometres from Erzeroum, the important capital of Armenia, is now in direct communication with Persia, by a route which the Turkish government has opened by way of Garnuch Kane, Baiborut, and Erzeroum, and by this means something of its ancient commercial prosperity is preserved.

The city is divided into the Turkish and Latin quarters. The former bristles with the minarets of at least forty mosques, which rise above the orange and olive groves. The latter, the Christian quarter, is the commercial centre in which the Grand Bazaar is situated, wherein are found all kinds of stuffs, arms, money, and precious stones. The harbour is served by a weekly line of steamers which keep open the communication with the principal points of the Black Sea.

In the town lives, or vegetates, according to the various elements of which it is composed, a population of 40,000 inhabitants.

Turks, Persians, Christians of the Armenian and Latin churches, orthodox Greeks, Kurds and Europeans. But when our travellers entered the city the population was augmented more than five times beyond its normal strength by the numbers of the Faithful who had come from all parts of Asia Minor to attend the festivities which were about to be celebrated in honour of Mahomet The little caravan had some difficulty in finding a lodging for the twenty-four hours they intended to remain in Trebizond, as Kéraban intended to quit the town the next morning for Scutari In fact he had not a day to lose if he would arrive there by the end of the month.

At length, in a regular district of caravanserais, khans, auberges, at a Franco-Italian hotel, they found accommodation near the Giaour Meidan, the commercial quarter, and consequently outside the Turkish city. But the hotel was comfortable, and Kéraban had not the shadow of an excuse for finding fault Now when Seigneur Kéraban and his friends had reached this stage in their journey, in the belief that they had passed all the danger, if they had not [escaped all the fatigues of the way — a plot was hatching in the Turkish town, where their mortal enemy resided.

It was at the palace of Seigneur Saffar, which was built on the slopes of the Boshpeh mountain, which slopes gently towards the sea, that, early in the morning, Scarpante arrived, two hours after he had quitted the caravanserai of Rissar.

Seigneur Saffar and Yarhud had been The Harbour awaiting him, and to them Scarpante related the incidents which had occurred the night before. He told them how Kéraban and Ahmet had been saved from imprisonment which would have left Amasia virtually unprotected, and how they had been released by the stupid unselfish devotion of Van Mitten. The plans discussed by the three men ended in the resolve to interrupt of Trebizond.

the travellers between Trebizond and Scutari. What the plan was, the sequel will tell; but we may say that a commencement was made that very day, for Seigneur Saffar and Yarhud, without thinking of the fetes, quitted Trebizond, and took the western road through Anatolia, which leads to the Bosphorus shore.

Scarpante himself remained in Trebizond.

He was not known to either Kéraban, Ahmet, or the ladies, and so could have full liberty of action. He was to play the important part in the drama which would in future substitute force in action for cunning.

So Scarpante was enabled to mingle with the crowd, and to stroll in the Giaour Meidan. He was not likely to be recognized by Kéraban or his nephew, for they had only seen him in the semi-darkness of the court-yard at the caravanserai of Rissar. It was easy enough for Scarpante to spy upon them unsuspected.

This is how it happened, that he perceived Ahmet, soon after his arrival, proceed through the encumbered streets, and obtain the direction of the telegraph office. Scarpante also noticed that Ahmet despatched a long telegram to Amasia’s father.

“Bah,” muttered the spy, “that message will never reach the hand for which it is intended. Selim was mortally wounded by Yarhud, and there is nothing to alarm us in this.”

So Scarpante was quite easy in his mind, and thought no more of the telegram.

Then Ahmet returned to the hotel, and Amasia was convinced that in a few hours those at the Villa Selim would be reassured concerning her safety.

“A letter would have taken too long to reach Odessa,” added Ahmet, “and besides I am always afraid — ”

He checked himself suddenly.

“You are afraid of what, my dearest Ahmet? What do you mean?” asked Amasia, somewhat surprised.

“Nothing, dearest,” replied Ahmet, “nothing, I wished to remind your father to be at Scutari to meet us, and even to be there before us, so as to make sure that no delay shall occur in our marriage.”

The truth was that Ahmet, still distrustful of new attempts to carry Amasia away, had notified the banker that all danger had not passed: but, fearful of alarming Amasia, he had quieted her apprehensions, vague and only founded on presentiments though they were.

Amasia thanked Ahmet tenderly for the forethought he had displayed in telegraphing to her father, and for running the risk of Kéraban's malediction for using the wire.

But what had become of Van Mitten all this time? He had most unwillingly become the affianced husband of Saraboul, and the pitiful brother-in-law of Yanar the Kurd.

How could he resist? On one side was Kéraban, telling him he must carry out the sacrifice to the bitter end, or else the judge would send them all to prison — an act which would irreparably compromise the issue of the journey; that the marriage, though legal in Turkey, was a "dead letter "in Holland, where Van Mitten had a wife already: that he might if he pleased, have one wife in Europe or two in Turkey. But Van Mitten's choice was made; he was not going to be made game of.

On the other side there were a brother and sister who were not likely to let their prey escape. It was then only prudent to satisfy them, to give them the slip beyond the Bosphorus, and prevent them from exercising their pretended rights as brother- in law and wife respectively.

So Van Mitten made no attempt to resist, and calmly awaited events.

Fortunately Kéraban had got them to consent to proceed to Scutari, before returning to Mossoul, so that they might be present at the wedding of

Ahmet and Amasia, and the Kurdish lady was not to carry off her fiance till three or four days after the marriage.

It was arranged that Bruno, though thinking his master had got only what he deserved for his weakness, was not to leave him under the control of that terrible female. But we must confess that Bruno was seized with a fit of laughter which Kéraban could not repress, when they saw Van Mitten proceeding to attend the betrothal ceremony in the costume of Kurdistan.

“Is that really you, Van Mitten?” cried Kéraban. “Have you arrayed yourself in. the Oriental dress?”

“It is I,” replied Van Mitten.

“As a Kurd?”

“As a Kurd! Exactly.”

“Well, it is not unbecoming to you, and I am sure when you become accustomed to it you will find the costume much more convenient than your scanty European garments.”

“You are very good, friend Kéraban.”

“Look here, Van Mitten, banish this sad expression of yours. Tell yourself that it is carnival time, and that you are merely disguised for a mock marriage.”

“It is not the disguise that! troubles me,” replied Van Mitten.

“What is it then that does?”

“The marriage!”

“Bah! Merely a temporary arrangement, Van Mitten. Madame Saraboul must put up with the loss. Yes, when you tell her that these betrothals are not binding on you as you have a wife already in Rotterdam, when you take leave of her and her terrible brother, I shall be there, Van Mitten. Truly, people must not be married against their wills. It is quite bad enough when they consent to it”

As everything tended to this end the worthy Dutchman had finally accepted the situation. It was best after all to look at the matter from the comic side, since such a course helps one to resign oneself, while it also serves the interests of alL

Besides, on that day Van Mitten had hardly had time to look about him, or to think of himself. Yanar and his sister were not people to let the grass grow under their feet They were for summary “execution,” and the marriage gibbet was quite ready to hang up the child of Holland.

Still it must not be imagined that any custom or formality of Turkestan would be omitted or neglected. No, the brother-in- law took all these preparations under his own particular care, and in such a large town nothing would be wanting to give all possible solemnity to the marriage.

Amid the population of Trebizond are included a number of Kurds, and amongst them Yanar and his sister found some acquaintances and friends. These worthy people considered it their duty to assist their compatriots on the auspicious occasion, and to do all in their power to help their countrywoman to a second husband. So there was quite a clan on the side of the bride, while Ahmet, Kéraban, and their companions were engaged to figure on the side of the bridegroom. Nevertheless Van Mitten was closely watched and had never been permitted to see his friends alone since the time he had spoken to Kéraban about the change of dress.

But for one instant only Bruno was able to glide up to his side and whisper in a warning tone —

“Mind what you are about, master. Take care; you are risking a heavy stake in this game!”

“How can I act otherwise, Bruno?” replied Van Mitten in a resigned tone. “At any rate if I am guilty of folly it will relieve my friends from embarrassment, and the consequences of it will not be serious.”

“Hum!” muttered Bruno, “Master is going to be married, and says the consequences will not be — hum!”

If some one had not at that moment come for Van Mitten, there is no knowing what the termination of the sentence might have been.

It was mid-day and the Seigneur Yanar with the other Kurds came to Van Mitten whom they would not again leave until the ceremony had been performed.

Then the knot was tied with much ceremony. During the performance of the rite, Van Mitten would not permit his anxiety to appear; the noble Saraboul was delighted at having won a European to wed her a woman of Asia — what a glorious alliance was this of Holland with Kurdistan!

The bride was resplendent in her wedding-dress, which she carried about with her in case of need — a necessary precaution, as events proved. Her robe of cloth of gold, her jewellery and ornaments were all magnificent Never had such a splendid bride been seen in the streets of Trebizond, which ought to have been laid down with a purple carpet, as they were at the birth of Constantine.

But if the noble Saraboul was superb, Seigneur Van Mitten was magnificent; while Kéraban congratulated him warmly — though the compliments could not fail to be of a somewhat ironical flavour from an old Believer who retained the ancient Oriental dress.

Van Mitten had quite a martial appearance in his new dress, a haughty air, and a somewhat forbidding aspect, quite at variance with the general appearance of a Rotterdam merchant. He could not be otherwise in such a costume, booted and spurred as he was; a fez ornamented with yeminis and the puskul, the enormous length of which indicated the rank which the Dutchman would shortly attain as the husband of the noble Saraboul.

The great Bazaar of Tre- bizond had furnished all these adjuncts, which, had they been made to measure, could not have fitted better. Van Mitten had also procured a perfect armoury of weapons, damascened poignards, double-edged and jade- hilted daggers, silver- mounted pistols, a short handled sabre, saw-bladed and ornamented with silver; and finally a long-hafted steel weapon with designs in relief, and with a curving blade like the blades of the old scythes.

Ah! Kurdistan might declare war against Turkey. The army of the Padischah could not hope to vanquish such warriors as these! Poor Van Mitten, who could have ever imagined you in such a position? Fortunately, all his friends, except Bruno, kept tellinghim tha t it was “only a joke!”

During the ceremony nothing particular occurred, and if the bridegroom had not been found somewhat cold by his terrible brother-in-law, and his not less terrible sister, all would have been well.

At Trebizond there is no want of judges, acting as ministerial officers, who would gladly register such a marriage contract — so much the more as it was not unattended with profit. But the magistrate who had so sagaciously unfolded the mystery at the caravanserai of Rissar, was the person entrusted with the honourable duty, and he complimented in proper terms the future pair.

Then when the contract had been signed, the fiances and their suite, in the midst of an enormous concourse of people, proceeded to the enclosed town, and to a mosque which had formerly been a Byzantine church, the walls of which were decorated with curious mosaics. Then there was some Kurdish chanting, which is more melodious and rythmical than the Turkish or Armenian chants, and some simple musical instruments of metallic tone, with some little flutes, united in the quaint concert Then the Imaum offered up a simple prayer, and Van Mitten was legally affianced, tightly tied up, as Kéraban, with some “arritrc pensee,” assured the noble Saraboul when he felicitated her on her marriage.

Later on, the ceremony would be repeated in Kurdistan, where other fetes would be carried on for many weeks. Van Mitten would have to conform to the customs of the country, or, at least, he would have to try to do so. The husband there has to carry off his wife unexpectedly in his arms when she reaches her future house, no doubt to save her blushes at the idea of going of her own will into a strange home. When he arrived there Van Mitten would do nothing to slight the customs of Kurdistan; but, fortunately, that country was still far distant.

But at that time the ceremonies of the betrothal were naturally eclipsed by those which were performed to celebrate the night of the ascension of the Prophet, thzeil-et-ul- myrcidy, which usually takes place on the 29th month of Redjeb. That year, in consequence of the particular circumstances of a politico-religious ceremony, an ordinance of the chief Imaum had fixed the great fete for the same date as the marriage ceremony.

That evening, in the largest palace of the town, magnificently arranged for the purpose, thousands and thousands of the Faithful lent themselves to the ceremonial which had attracted them to Trebizond from every corner of Mussulman Asia.

The noble Saraboul could not resist the temptation to exhibit her husband in public. As for Seigneur Kéraban, his nephew, the two young girls, and their servants, what could they do better in order to pass the evening than to attend this marvellous ceremony!

And marvellous it is indeed! and how could it fail to be so in that country of the East in which all the dreams of the rest of the world become realities. It would be more easy for the painter to depict the scene than for the writer, even though he could command all the hyperbole, the imagery, the periods, of the most illustrious poets of the world.

“Riches are in the Indies; wit in Europe; but pomp is in the Ottoman Empire,” is a Turkish proverb.

And it was really in the midst of incomparable pomp and magnificence that the poetic fable displayed itself, and to which the most charming daughters of Asia Minor lent their grace and beauty. The ceremony is based upon the legend imitated from the Christian record that, until his death, which happened in the 10th year of the Hegeira, his paradise was closed to all the faithful ones sleeping in the arms of space, pending the arrival of the Prophet. On that day he appeared on horseback on “El-borak,” the hippogriff which waited his arrival at the gate of the Temple of Jerusalem. Then his tomb miraculously quitted the earth, ascended to the heavens, and remained suspended between the zenith and the nadir in the midst of the splendours of the Paradise of Islam. All the Faithful then awoke to render homage to the Prophet. The period of eternal happiness promised to them began, and Mahomet raised himself up in a dazzling apotheosis, while the stars of heaven in the form of innumerable houris circled round the resplendent throne of Allah.

In a word this fete is as the realization of the dream of one of the poets, who best interpreted the Oriental poetry when he said, Apropos of the ecstatic performances of the dervishes, carried away by their dances and strange rhymes —

“What saw they in those visions in which they rocked themselves? Forests of emeralds bearing rubies as fruit; the mountains of amber and myrrh; the kiosks of diamonds, and the tents of pearl of the Paradise of Mahomet.”

CHAPTER X.

The next day, the 18th of September, as the sun was beginning to light up the highest minarets of the town, a little caravan came out by one of the gates of the old fortification, and the travellers waved a last adieu to poetic Trebizond.

This caravan, en route for the Bosphorus, was proceeding along the coast, led by a guide, whose sendees Kéraban had willingly accepted. This guide ought, at any rate, to be acquainted with this part of Anatolia, for he was one of those nomads known in the country as loupeurs.

By this name are designated a certain class ofwoodcutterswhose occupation it is to scour the forests of the districts for walnuts. On those trees grow large natural excrescences of remarkable hardness, the wood of which, inasmuch as it lends itself to all the requirements of the cabinet-makers, is particularly sought after.

This guide, having learnt that the strangers were about to quit Trebizond for Scutari, had come the previous evening to offer his services. He appeared intelligent, quite conversant with all the routes, with the windings of which he was familiar. So, after giving distinct and straightforward replies to the questions put by Kéraban, the loupeur had been engaged at a high price, which he was assured would be doubled if the caravan reached the hills above the Bosphorus within twelve days, the extreme period fixed for the celebration of the marriage of Amasia and Ahmet.

Ahmet, after having questioned the guide, and particularly having sought to discover in his inexpressive countenance and reserved manner that indescribable “something” which always speaks in favour of people, and to which one never hesitates to accord one’s confidence, was satisfied. No one could be more useful than a man who had been perfectly well acquainted with these regions all his life, nothing could be more reassuring under such circumstances, when a journey had to be accomplished so speedily. So, then, the loupeur became guide to Seigneur Kéraban and his companions. To him the little troop turned for direction. He chose the halting places, and organized the encampments; he looked after them all; and when he was promised that his salary should be doubled on condition they arrived at Scutari with as little delay as possible, he replied —

“Seigneur Kéraban may be assured I will do my best, and, since he has proposed to double the money for my services, I pledge my word I will demand nothing if before twelve days he is not in Scutari.”

“By Mahomet! that is the man for me,” said Kéraban, when he told his nephew of the proposal.

“Yes, uncle,” replied Ahmet; “but, however good a guide he may be, do not let us forget how imprudent it is to venture on the roads of Anatolia.”

“Ah! always afraid of something, Ahmet!”

“Uncle Kéraban, I shall not think we are safe until we are at Scutari.”

“And you will be married! Is it not so?” said Kéraban, taking Ahmet’s hand. “Very well, in twelve days I promise you Amasia shall be the wife of the most distrustful of nephews.”

“And the niece of — ”

“The best of uncles!” cried Kéraban with a roar of laughter.

The little caravan was made up of two “talikas “(a “talika “is a kind of not uncomfortable open carriage, which can be closed in case of wet weather; with four horses each “talika”), and two horses saddled. Ahmet was glad, even at the high price, to find such vehicles in Trebizond, so that he might finish his journey in comfort.

Seigneur Kéraban, Amasia, and Nedjeb were in the first talika, Nizib being in the seat at the back. At the back of the second the noble Saraboul was enthroned near her fianci, and opposite her brother, with Bruno to act as valet Ahmet was mounted on one of the saddle horses, the guide on the other; the latter sometimes rode by the talikas, and sometimes showing by which way to go.

As the country was not very safe, the travellers were provided with guns and revolvers, besides the usual arms that Yanar and his sister carried in their belts, and Seigneur Kéraban’s famous pistols. Although the guide assured Ahmet that there was nothing to be afraid of on the roads, he determined to take precautions against all aggression.

After all, there was no absolute difficulty in travelling two hundred miles in twelve days, without changing horses (as post- houses were rare in the country), even letting the horses rest every night Then, unless any unseen or improbable accidents happened, this roundabout journey would be completed in the wished-for time.

The country that extends from Trebizond to Sinope is called “Djanik “by the Turks. It is on the other side that Anatolia — commonly called Ancient Bi- thynia — commences. It has become a great pachalic of Turkey in Asia, being on the west of Asia Minor. Kutaya is the capital, and Brusa, Smyrna, Angora, &c. the principal towns.

The little caravan started at 6 o’clock in the morning from Trebizond, arriving, at 9 o’clock at Platana, after a stage of five leagues.

Platana is the ancient Hermonassa. To get there one must pass through a sort of valley where barley, com, and maize grow; where magnificent tobacco plantations prosper marvellously. Seigneur Kéraban could not help admiring these plantations, where the leaves become, without any drying preparation, a golden yellow. Very likely his correspondent and friend, Van Mitten, would also have been unable to restrain his admiration if he had not been altogether wrapt-up in the noble Saraboul. In all this country grow beautiful trees. The pines and the beeches may be compared to the most majestic trees of Holstein and Denmark; also the nut trees, the currant and wild raspberry bushes. Bruno, with an envious feeling, observed the natives of this country, even at an early age, were stout — this was rather humiliating for a Dutchman reduced to a skeleton.

At noon they passed the little market town of Tol, leaving on the left the first undulations of the Pontic Alps. Along the roads going towards Trebizond, or returning, were peasants, clothed in thick brown woollen stuff, and a bonnet made of sheep-skin for their head-dress, accompanied by their wives, wrapped in a piece of striped cotton cloth, which went well with their short red woollen petticoats.

All this country Xenophon made illustrious by his famous retreat of the Ten Thousand. But the unfortunate Van Mitten would cower under the menacing look of Yanar, without even being able to consult his guide book. So he had ordered Bruno to consult it for him and take notes. It is true Bruno would think of other things than the exploits of the great general, and that is why, in leaving Trebizond, he had forgotten to show his master the hill that over-looked the coast, and from the height of which the Ten Thousand saluted with their enthusiastic cries the waves of the Black Sea. In truth he was not a faithful servant!

That evening after a journey of 20 leagues, the caravan arrived and slept at Tirebola. There the “caiwak,” a sort of cream obtained by lukewarm milk, made with lamb’s rennet; and the “yaourk,” cheese made with sour milk by means of pressure, were thoroughly appreciated by the travellers, who had gained an appetite from the long journey. Besides, mutton in all forms was not absent at the repast, and Nizib could now regale without fear of infringing the Mussulman law. Bruno this time did not cheat him out of his part of the supper.

This little market town, which is only a simple village, was left on the morning of the 19th of September. During the day they passed Zepe and its narrow port where only three or four merchant ships of small draught are able to shelter. Then, still under the direction of the guide, who knew these roads perfectly, the party proceeded on the sometimes troublesome tracks, in the middle of long plains. They arrived, very late, at Kérésoum, after a stage of 25 leagues.

Kérésoum is built at the foot of a hill, in a double escarpment of its side. This, the ancient Pharnace, where the Ten Thousand stopped during ten days to recruit their strength, is very picturesque, with the ruins of its castle overlooking the entrance of the port. There Seigneur Kéraban would have easily been able to make an ample provision of cheny-wood pipes, which are objects of an important trade. In fact the cherry tree abounds on this part of the pachalic, and Van Mitten thought he ought to relate again to his fiancee the great historical fact, that it was to this same Kérésoum that the proconsul Lucullus sent the first cherry-trees that were acclimatized in Europe. Saraboul had never heard of the celebrated gourmet, and appeared to take but small interest in the learned dissertations of Van Mitten. The latter, under the dominion of this haughty person, became a sadder Kurd than one can imagine. In the meantime, his friend Kéraban, without anyone being able to guess whether he jested or not, did not cease to congratulate Van Mitten on the way in which he wore his new costume, which made him shrug his shoulders at Bruno.

“Yes, Van Mitten, yes!” repeated Kéraban, “that suits you perfectly; this robe, this ‘ chalwar,’ this turban; but to be a complete Kurd, you want larger and fiercer moustaches, like Seigneur Yanar’s.”

“I have never had moustaches,” replied Van Mitten.

“You never had moustaches?” cried Saraboul.

“He has never had moustaches?” repeated Seigneur Yanar disdainfully.

“Scarcely any, noble SarabouL”

“Very well, you shall have them,” replied the imperious Kurd, “and I undertake to make them grow.”

“Poor Monsieur Van Mitten!” murmured young Amasia, rewarding him with a kind look.

“Good! all that will end in smoke,” repeated Nedjeb, while Bruno shook his head like a bird of ill omen.

The following day, the 20th of September, after having followed an enticing Roman road that Lucullus had constructed, they said, to reunite Anatolia to the Armenian provinces, the little troop, favoured by the weather, left behind them the village of Aptas, then towards noon the market town of

Ordu was gained. This stage skirted the verge of splendid forests, that clothed the hills on which abounded the most varied species of trees; oaks, witch-elms, elms, maples, planes, plum-trees, wild olives, junipers, white poplars, pomegranates, white and black mulberries, walnut trees and sycamore. There the vine is an exuberant vegetable that grows like ivy in some mild country, twining as far as the tree-tops. All these! without speaking of the shrubs, hawthorns, barberries, filbert-trees, laburnums, elders, medlar trees, jasmines, tamarisks, nor of various other plants, blue and white saffron flowers, iris, rhododendrons, scabiouses, yellow narcissi, mallows, centaury, gilliflowers, oriental clematis, and wild tulips — yes, even tulips! that Van Mitten could not see without all the instinct of the amateur awakening in him, indeed the sight of these plants was rather of a nature to evoke some displeasing remembrance of his first union. It is true the existence of the other Madam Van Mitten was now a guaranty against the matrimonial pretentions of the second. So far the worthy Dutchman was happy, and ten times happier because he had been already married.

The Cape Jessoun Bouroun once passed, the guide directed the caravan across the ruins of the old village of Polemonium, towards the market town of Fatisa, where travellers and horses slept soundly all night Ahmet, always on the alert, had not, so far, had any great cause of suspicion. Fifty odd leagues had been got over since leaving Trebizond; during that time no danger had threatened Seigneur Kéraban and his companions. The guide was of a communicative nature, so was always discussing matters during the walks and stoppages, skilfully and shrewdly. Nevertheless, Ahmet felt for this man a certain mistrust that he could not overcome. So he neglected nothing that he ought to have done to assure the security of all, and he watched for the common safety without even letting them perceive his anxiety.

On the 21 st, at daybreak, they left Fatisa; about noon they left on the right the Ouruck port and its erection of woodyards, at the mouth of the ancient CEnus. Thence the road proceeded to cross immense plains of hemp, as far as the mouth of Tcher- cherebet (where a rumour has placed a tribe of Amazons), so as to "turn" the capes and the headlands, that are covered with ruins, like all those upon that historical coast The market town of Terma was passed in the afternoon, and in the evening the travellers halted at Sansoun for the night Sansoun is one of the most important ports on this slope of the Black Sea, although its roadstead is scarcely a safe one, and the harbour is rather shallow at the mouth of the Ekil-Irmak. However, trade is fairly active and cargoes of water-melons which flourish in the vicinity are forwarded, under the name of arbute-berries, to Con.

stantinople. An old fort, picturesquely placed upon the margin of the coast, defends but imperfectly the place from attack by sea. In the state of emaciation to which Bruno was reduced it seemed to him thatt the water-melons, on which Seigneu Kéraban and his friends were regaling, were, scarcely sufficient nourishment, and he declined to partake of them. The fact was, the brave fellow, although already much reduced in size, found still an opportunity to grow thinner, and Kéraban felt constrained to remark it.

"But," he added, in a consolatory manner, "we are approaching Egypt; and there, Bruno, if he likes, may make a good bargain for his body."

"In what way?" asked Bruno.

"By selling yourself as a mummy!"

If this joke displeased the unfortunate valet, and if he wished for Kéraban a more unpleasant fate than his master's second marriage, he kept his wishes to himself!

“But you will see that nothing will happen to this Turk,” muttered Bruno, “all the unpleasantness will fall upon the Christians, as we are!”

And indeed Kéraban was in capital form, for he did not consider that his good! humour had been much tried, as all his plans were being accomplished under the best conditions of time and safety.

The travellers did not halt, except to rest the horses, either at Meletsch or by the Kysie, which was crossed by a bridge of boats, in the course of the 22nd September; nor at Gerse where they arrived next day, nor at Tschobanlar. Nevertheless Kéraban would have liked to explore, if only for a few hours, Bafria, or Bafra, situated a little inland, where a great trade in tobacco is carried on, the “tays” or packets of which, tied up between long laths, had so often replenished his stores in Constantinople; but it would have been necessary to make a detour of a dozen leagues or so, and it was thought wiser not to lengthen a journey already long enough.

On the 23rd the little caravan arrived without opposition at Sinope on the frontier of Anatolia proper.

Sinope, another important port of the Black Sea, situated on the isthmus of the same name, the ancient Sinope of Strabo and Polybius. The anchorage is always excellent, and ships are built in the place with the splendid woods of the Aio-Antonio mountains, which rise close by. There is a castle, with a double enceinte, but there are only five hundred houses at most, and scarcely six thousand inhabitants.

Ah, why had not Van Mitten been born two thousand or three thousand years sooner! How he would have admired that celebrated town, the origin of which is attributed to the Argonauts; which became such an important Milesian colony as to deserve the name of the Euxine Carthage; whose ships covered the Black Sea in the time of the Romans, and which ended by being ceded to Mahomet II. because it delighted the Commander of the Faithful! But it was now too late to recall the decayed splendour of the architecture of such various styles. It is only necessary here to recall the fact that it derived its name of Sinope from a daughter of the Asopus and Methone, who was carried away by Apollo to this place. On the present occasion the nymph was carrying away the object of her tenderness, and her name was Saraboul! This reflection caused Van Mitten some lively pangs.

The distance between Sinope and Scutari is about one hundred and twenty-five leagues, and Kéraban had only seven days left in which to traverse that distance. If he was not behindhand neither was he much ahead of time. So it was absolutely necessary that no time should be lost.

On the 24th, at sunrise, the caravan quitted Sinope to follow the Anatolian coast-line. About ten o’clock the little troupe reached Istifan, at mid-day Apena was passed, and in the evening, after a day’s journey of fifteen leagues, the travellers stopped at Ineboli, which, open to all winds, has only unsafe anchorage for merchant vessels.

Ahmet then proposed to rest for two hours only, and to travel the rest of the night. Twelve hours gained would be well worth a little fatigue. Seigneur Kéraban accepted the situation. No one objected, not even Bruno. Besides, Yanar and Saraboul were anxious to reach the Bosphorus, so as to proceed towards Kurdistan; and Van Mitten was in no less haste, but to fly as far as possible from Kurdistan, the very name of which made him shudder.

The guide made no objection to this plan, and declared himself ready to start whenever they liked. By day or night the road was all the same to him, and this lou- pcur, accustomed to traverse thick forests by instinct, had no difficulty in following the coast road.

So, at eight in the evening, they started under a beautiful full moon, which was rising in the east after the sun had set. Amasia, Nedjeb, Kéraban, the noble Saraboul, Yanar, and Van Mitten stretched in the vehicles, permitted themselves to sleep, lulled by the quick motion of the carriages and the tramp of the horses.

They saw nothing of Cape Kerenebe, half hidden in the crowd of sea-birds whose cries filled the air. In the morning they passed Tenileh without any incident having occurred to trouble them: then they reached Kidros, and in the evening halted at Amastia. They had now a right to some hours' rest, after having made more than sixty leagues in thirty-six hours.

Perhaps Van Mitten — for we must always turn to this excellent man, who had been diligently reading up his guide-book — perhaps Van Mitten, had he been a free agent, and had time and money not been wanting, would have dug out the harbour in the hope of seeking an archaeological object of which an antiquary would not dare to dispute the value.

Everyone knows that 290 years before Christ, Queen Amastris, wife of Lysimachus, one of Alexander's captains, and the foundress of this town, was enclosed in a leathern sack, and thrown by her two brothers into the harbour she had constructed. Now, what a glorious thing it would be for Van Mitten, if on the faith of his guide-book he could fish up this famous sack. But, as we have said, time and money were wanting and, without imparting his idea to anyone, not even to the noble Saraboul, the subject of his reverie, he kept his archaeological regrets to himself.

Next morning, 26th September, at daybreak, they left this ancient metropolis of the Genoese, which is now only a miserable village of toy-makers. Three or four leagues further on is the little town of Bartan, which was passed close by, and in the afternoon Jelias; at nightfall Ozina, and towards midnight Eregli was gained.

There the party reposed until daylight This was indeed little enough rest, for the horses as well as the travellers began to feel greatly fatigued by the exigencies of the long journey, which had left them little time for repose since they had left Trebizond. Only four days remained — the 27th, 28th, 29th, and 30th of September — and the last day would have to be deducted from the total, as the 30th was intended to be passed in another fashion. So, if Seigneur Kéraban and his companions did not reach the shores of the Bosphorus very early on the morning of the 30th, the situation would be seriously compromised. There was not a moment to lose, and Kéraban hastened the start at sunrise.

Eregli is the ancient Heraclea, of Greek origin. It was formerly an immense city, whose walls, now in ruins, still indicate the extent. The harbour, at one time very important and well-sheltered, has degenerated with the town which boasts only six or seven thousand inhabitants. After the Romans, after the Greeks, after the Genoese, it fell under the domination of Mahomet II. and the city, which had known long days of splendour, became a simple market-town, devoid of any industry or commerce.

The happy fiance of Saraboul would have still had some curiosity to satisfy there. Was it not at Heraclea, that peninsula of Acherusias, that the mythological cavern, one of the entrances to Tartarus, opened. Does not Diodorus of Sicily tell us that it was by this gate Hercules brought back Cerberus, when returning from the infernal regions? But Van Mitten still kept his desires deep down in his heart. Besides, as to Cerberus, did not he recognise in Yanar his faithful image — his watchful guardian. Of course the Kurdish gentleman had not three heads, but one was enough for him, and when he held that up with a ferocious air, it seemed that his teeth appeared under his thick moustaches as ready to bite as were those of the tri-headed dog, which Pluto had enchained.

On the 27th September the little caravan passed through the town of Sacaria, and towards evening reached Cape Kerp£, where sixteen centuries before the Emperor Aure- lius was slain. There they halted for the night and took counsel as to the means by which the journey might be more readily completed, so as to reach Scutari within forty-eight hours — that is to say, on the morning of the last day fixed for their return.

CHAPTER XI.

The suggestion made at the end of the last chapter had been advanced by the guide, and it was desirable that it should be taken into consideration.

What distance still lay between them, and the heights of Scutari? About sixty leagues. How much time remained to them to accomplish that distance? Forty- eight hours. That was little enough, if the cattle could not be made to proceed during the night.

Well then, by quitting the road, the windings of which lengthened the journey considerably; and by cutting across the extreme angle of Anatolia, which is included between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmora — the travellers could shorten the journey by a good dozen leagues.

“This, Seigneur Kéraban, is the plan I would suggest to you,” said the guide, in the cool manner which characterized him, “and I advise you to adopt it”

41 But is not the coast road safer than the interior?” enquired Kéraban.

“There is no more danger to be feared in one than in the other,” replied the guide.

“And are you well acquainted with these roads by which you offer to lead us?”

“I have traversed them twenty times, when I was working in the forests of Anatolia,” replied the man.

“It seems to me that we ought not to hesitate in our choice,” said Kéraban. “Twelve leagues is a considerable saving in our journey, and worth the extra fatigue we may have to endure!”

Ahmet listened, but said nothing. “What are you thinking of, Ahmet,” asked Kéraban, turning to his nephew.

Ahmet made no answer. He had certainly nursed suspicions against the guide — suspicions which, it must be confessed, were growing stronger as the termination of the journey was approaching.

In fact, the crafty manner of the man — his frequent inexplicable absences, during which he got ahead of the caravan — the care with which he always held aloof at camping time under the pretext of preparing the camp — the curious, even suspicious glances he bestowed upon Amasia — a care I which he seemed specially to entertain for the young girl: — all these signs did not tend to reassure Ahmet So he would not lose sight of this guide, accepted at Trebizond, of whom they knew nothing.

But Kéraban was not a man to share these fears; and it would have been very difficult to make him accept as a fact what was still only a presentiment of ill.

“Well, Ahmet, before closing with this suggestion of the guide, I await your answer. What do you think of the itinerary proposed?”

“I think, uncle, that so far we have done well in following the coast road, and it would be imprudent to quit it.”

“But why, Ahmet? Our guide is perfectly well acquainted with the roads of the interior, which he proposes we shall follow. Besides, the economy of time is worth the trouble.”

“We can, by pushing our teams, very easily make up the — ”

“You say this because Amasia is of the party,” replied Kéraban. “But if she were waiting for us at Scutari, you would be the first to hasten our journey.”

“Very likely, uncle.”

“Well, for my part, as I have your interests to serve, I think the sooner we arrive the better. We are at the mercy of the least delay; and since we can gain a dozen leagues by changing our route, we ought not to hesitate.”

“So be it, uncle,” replied Ahmet “Since you desire it shall be so, I will not discuss the matter farther.”

“It is not because I wish it, it is because you have nothing to advance against my argument,” replied Kéraban, “and I am too much for you!”

Ahmet did not answer. At any rate, the guide could not fail to perceive that the young man had some distrust of the modification proposed by him. Their eyes met, but for a second; yet that glance was sufficient to measure swords, as they say in the fencing-school. So Ahmet determined to be on his “guard “in future, not merely on the watch. The guide seemed to him an adversary, only waiting the suitable moment to make a treacherous attack.

As for the others, the abridgment of the journey could not fail to please them, who had scarcely felt “at home “since they had quitted Trebizond. Van Mitten and Bruno were anxious to reach Scutari, to put an end to an irksome and unpleasant situation. Seigneur Yanar and the noble Saraboul, because they wanted to return to Kurdistan with brother-in-law and fiatict in the steamer; Amasia to be united to Ahmet, and Nedjeb to assist at the ceremony, and the rejoicings at the wedding.

So the suggestion was well received. It was decided that they would repose that night, 26-2 7th September, so as to be able to accomplish a long “stage” on the following day.

But there were some precautions to be observed, as the guide indicated. They must furnish themselves with food sufficient for forty-eight hours, for the region through which they proposed to travel was almost uninhabited. They would find neither “khans” nor “doukhans,” nor inns, on the journey. So it was necessary to provide themselves with supplies for all requirements.

Fortunately they were able to procure what was wanted at Cape Kerp£ on payment of a round sum, and they also acquired a donkey to carry the supplies.

It must be confessed that Seigneur Kéraban had a weakness for donkeys — the sympathy of one headstrong animal for another — and the ass he purchased at Cape Kerpd pleased him particularly.

It was rather a small animal, but it was strong enough to carry a horse’s load about ninety “oks” or more than one hundred kilogrammes, one of those donkeys which one meets by thousands in Anatolia, where they carry cereals down to the various ports of the coast This frisky and active donkey had his nostrils artificially divided, so that he might the more effectually disembarrass himself of the flies which introduced themselves into his nose. This gave him a smiling appearance, quite a gay physiognomy and he quite merited the nickname of the “laughing jackass.” He was a very different creature from those wretched-looking beasts described by Th. Gautier with drooping ears, and of a thin and scraggy backbone. The animal in question could be probably as obstinate as Kéraban himself, and Bruno maintained that the Seigneur had met his master!

A quarter of a sheep, cooked with “bourghoul,” a kind of bread made with dried wheat, worked up with butter, was all the provision they needed for such a short journey. A small two-wheeled cart to which the donkey was harnessed served to carry the food.

On the 28th September, just before sunrise, the whole party were afoot The horses were harnessed to the “talikas “in which each person occupied his or her accustomed place. Ahmet and the guide mounting their horses led the way. In an hour the vast expanse of the Black Sea had disappeared behind the hills. The country appeared undulating as it opened before them.

The journey was not very trying, though the condition of the road left much to be desired, a circumstance which gave Kéraban an opportunity to repeat a “litany of lamentations” against the neglect of the Ottoman authorities.

“One may easily perceive that we are approaching their modern Constantinople,” he said.

“The roads in Kurdistan are infinitely superior to this,” remarked Yanar.

“I can quite believe it “replied Kéraban, “and my friend Van Mitten will not have to regret Holland in that respect”

“In no respect” retorted the noble Kurd quickly, whose imperious character now displayed itself in all its grandeur!

Van Mitten would willingly have consigned his friend Kéraban to the Prince of Darkness, for the merchant appeared to take a malicious pleasure in tormenting him. But after all only eight-and-forty hours had to elapse before he should recover his liberty fully and completely, and then he would have his joke 1

That evening the caravan halted near a dilapidated village, a mass of ruined huts scarcely fit to shelter cattle. There vegetated some hundreds of miserable beings who existed on milk and on meat of poor quality, and on bread which contained more bran than wheat An unpleasant smell pervaded the place; this odour arose from the burning of “tezek “a kind of peat made of mud and dung, a fuel much used in the country, and of which the walls of the hovels are sometimes composed.

It was fortunate that as suggested by the guide, provisions had been provided by the travellers. There was nothing to be obtained in that miserable village, the inhabitants of which would have been much more likely to demand provisions than to supply them.

The night was passed, without incident, in a ruined cart-shed, wherein were some bundles of fresh straw. Ahmet kept watch with more than his usual circumspection, not without reason, for during the night the guide quitted the village and went off by himself some hundreds of paces in front Ahmet followed him unseen, and did not return to the encampment till just before the guide himself came back.

What was the man doing during the time he was absent? Ahmet could not make out. He assured himself that the guide held communication with no one. Not a living being had approached him. Not a cry had been heard in the deep silence of the night. Not a signal had been made from any point on the plain.

“Not a signal,” said Ahmet to himself when he had returned to his place in the shed. “But was not the fire which appeared for an instant on the western horizon an expected signal?”

And then a circumstance which Ahmet had not at the time remarked, came vividly before him. He recalled very distinctly that while the guide was standing on a small hillock a fire had gleamed out in the distance — flashed three times distinctly, at short intervals, and then disappeared. Ahmet had at first put this down as a herdsman’s fire, but now in the silence of the night, under the peculiar impression which the lethargy — which is not sleep — gives, he reflected: he recalled the appearance of the fire, and came to the conclusion — a conviction which was far beyond any presentiment — that the gleam was a signal.

“Yes,” he thought, “our guide is betraying us, that is evident. He is acting in the interest of some powerful personage.”

But in whose? Ahmet could not divine, though he was convinced the treachery had something to do with the abduction of Amasia. Though snatched from the hands of those who had carried her away from Odessa, might Amasia not be threatened by new perils? And now, when approaching Scutari, within a few days’ journey of the goal, was there not all the more reason to fear!

Ahmet passed the remainder of the night in extreme anxiety. What was he to do? He did not know. Ought he at once to unmask the treason of the guide — treason of which there was no doubt — or to wait for the commencement of the execution of the plot before confronting and punishing him.

Daybreak found him more calm. He then decided to let things go on as they were for that day so as to ascertain more clearly the intentions of the guide. Resolved not to lose sight of him for an instant, Ahmet would not permit him to stray away either on the march or when the party halted. Besides, he and his friends were well armed, and, if the safety of Amasia had not been at stake, he would have had no fear of any attack.

Ahmet had once again resumed his wonted serenity. Hisfeaturesgave no indication of his feelings to any one of the party, not even to Amasia, whose affection could read his heart deepest; not even to the guide, who, on his part, did not cease to observe him with some considerable penetration.

The only resolution Ahmet made was to confide to his uncle Kéraban the suspicions he had confirmed, and that he would do as soon as occasion offered, even if he had to sustain the most stormy of discussions.

Next morning, very early, they quitted the miserable village. If it revealed neither treason nor mistake, this would be the last day of the journey undertaken to satisfy the amour propre of the most inflexible of Osmanlis. In any event the day would be a fatiguing one. The teams would have considerable difficulty in crossing the hilly country which belongs to the orographic system of the Elken. If only on this account, Ahmet had much to regret in having consented to an alteration in the route. Many times they had to dismount to lighten the carriages. Amasia and Nedjeb displayed great energy on these occasions. The noble Kurdish lady was not behind her companions in determination. As for Van Mitten, the husband of her choice, who had been very downcast since his departure from Trebizond, he was obliged to walk as he was bidden despotically.

There was, however, no hesitation as to the direction they had to take. The guide, evidently, was perfectly well acquainted with all the d’etours of the country. He knew it quite well, according to Kéraban — he knew it too well, according to Ahmet. So the latter could not accept the compliments of his uncle upon the conduct of the man so suspected. It must be stated that all that day the guide never quitted the travellers, but rode at the head of the caravan the whole time.

So things seemed to occur quite naturally, apart from the difficulties inherent to the condition of the roads — to their steepness when they ascended a hill-side, to their ruts when some places, which had been broken up by the late rains, were passed. However, the horses extricated the party from all these trials; for as it was the last day, the “cattle “were called on for some extra exertion. They would have plenty of time to rest afterwards.

Even the little donkey carried his burthen uncomplainingly, so Seigneur Kéraban took a great fancy to him.

“By Allah, this animal pleases me,” he said; “and, to spite those Ottomans still more, I have a great mind to arrive on the shores of the Bosphorus on donkey-back.”

This was quite understood to be only an idea of Kéraban’s, but no one disputed the chances of its being carried out, so the author ot it had no excuse for putting it in execution.

Towards nine o’clock in the evening after a really fatiguing day’s march the caravan halted, and by the guide’s advice began to form an encampment “How far are we from the heights of Scutari?” asked Ahmet Five or six leagues,” replied the guide.

“Then why not push on?” continued Ahmet. “In a few hours we should arrive.”

“Seigneur Ahmet,” replied the guide, “I do not care to venture on this portion of the province at night I am afraid I would lose my way. To-morrow at daybreak there will be nothing to fear; and, before noon, we shall arrive at the end of our journey.”

“The man is right,” said Kéraban. “We must not compromise our safety by too great haste. Let us camp here, nephew; let us take our last meal as travellers together, and to-morrow, before ten o’clock, we shall salute the Bosphorus.”

Everyone except Ahmet was of Kéraban’s opinion; so they disposed themselves in the best available manner under the circumstances.

The place had been well-chosen by the guide. It was a somewhat straight defile between the mountains — or, more correctly, hills — of this part of Anatolia. The pass is called the Gorge of Nerissa.

At the end the high rocks united with the lower strata of the cliff, whose semicircular shelves extended to the left in rising stages. On the right was a deep cavern, in which all the party could find shelter.

If the place was suitable for an encampment of the travellers, it was none the less adapted to the horses, which needed rest and food. A few hundred paces off, beyond the winding gorge, a plain extended, in which were water and grass in abundance. Thither the horses were led by Nizib who was appointed their guardian as usual during noctural halts.

Nizib accordingly directed his steps towards the plain, and Ahmet accompanied him, at once to reconnoitre the district, and to assure himself that there was absolutely nothing to fear.

In fact Ahmet saw nothing suspicious. The prairie, which was bounded westward by an undulating range of hills, was absolutely deserted. The night was calm, and the moon, which would rise about eleven o’clock, was sufficiently old to give good light. Some stars shone between the light clouds, as if they were sleeping in the high zones of the heavens. Not a breath of wind stirred, and no sound was audible in the atmosphere.

Ahmet scrutinized the horizon most searchingly. Would some flame once again illumine the crests of the surrounding hills? Would some signal be made that the guide would come and detect afterwards?

No fire displayed itself on the boundary of the plain. No signal was sent from the distant horizon.

Ahmet desired Nizib to keep a most vigilant watch. He enjoined him particularly to return without a moment’s delay in case of any eventuality occurring before the horses had been brought into camp. Then he himself, having given these orders, hurried back through the Gorge of Nerissa.

CHAPTER XII.

When Ahmet rejoined his companions, the final arrangements for supping first and sleeping afterwards had been completed. The sleeping apartment, or rather the common dormitory, was the cavern, which, high and spacious, contained many convenient recesses wherein each member of the party might repose at his or her pleasure, comfortably. The dining-room was the level plain outside, whereon were scattered boulders and stones which would serve admirably for tables and chairs Some provisions had been taken from the cart which had been drawn by the little i donkey. The latter was amongst the number of the convives, having been specially invited by his friend Kéraban. A: little forage, on which the animal had made an excellent meal, sufficed for his part of the feast, and he brayed his satisfaction.

“Let us have supper,” cried Kéraban, in a cheerful tone, “let us sup, my friends. Let us eat and drink at our ease. There will then be so much less for this brave little donkey to drag to Scutari.”

Of course, at an open-air meal, in the midst of the camp illuminated by resinous torches, every person placed himself as he pleased. Seigneur Kéraban seated himself on a rock, a true seat of honour, the “chair” of the meeting. Amasia and Nedjeb sat together, like dear friends, no longer mistress and servant, on smaller rocks; and reserved a place for Ahmet, who quickly joined them.

As for Van Mitten, he was flanked right and left by the inevitable Yanar and the inseparable Saraboul, and all three were seated before an immense slab of rock, which the sighs of the unfortunate Van Mitten ought to have softened.

Bruno, thinner than ever, with his mouth full waited upon the party.

Not only was Kéraban in a good humour as was natural to him fortune favoured, but, as was usual with him, his enjoyment escaped in joking, and some of his jests were directed at Van Mitten. It is a fact that ever since the Dutchman had devoted himself to save his friends, he had not ceased to excite the caustic humour of Kéraban. In twelve hours it is true the story would be told, and Van Mitten would hear no more of the Kurds, brother and sister, but that was precisely the reason why Kéraban continued to sharpen his wit upon his travelling companion.

“Well, Van Mitten, all goes well, eh?” he said rubbing his hands. “You are at the summit of your desires. Good friends accompany you, an amiable lady whom you have encountered in your travels is by your side. Allah could not have done more for you had you been one of the Faithtul yourself.”

The Dutchman looked at his friend and pulled a long face, but said nothing.

“Well, you are silent?” asked Yanar.

“No, no, I was speaking, inwardly,” replied Van Mitten.

“To whom?” demanded the lady Kurd, imperatively.

“To you, dear Saraboul, to you,” said the victim.

Then rising, he stretched out his arms and ejaculated, “Ouf!”

Seigneur Yanar and his sister rose at the same moment, and accompanied him in all his movements. “If you wish,” said Saraboul, in that tender tone which admits of no contradiction; “if you wish, we will only stop an hour or two in Scutari?”

“If I wish it?” said Van Mitten.

“Are you not my master?” continued the insinuating lady.

“Yes,” muttered Bruno, “he is her master, as much as one is master of a hound that every minute is flying at one’s throat!”

“Fortunately,” thought Van Mitten, “tomorrow we shall part. But what a scene in perspective will that breaking off be!”

Amasia regarded him with true commiseration; and, not daring to pity him openly, she whispered to his faithful attendant —

“Poor M. Van Mitten! This comes of his devotion to us.”

“And of his pliability in the hands of Seigneur Kéraban,” replied Bruno, who could not forgive his master for his weakness.

“At anyrate,” said Nedjeb, “that proves that M. Van Mitten has a good and generous heart.”

“Too generous,” said Bruno. “Besides, since my master consented to accompany Seigneur Kéraban on this journey, I have never ceased to repeat that ill would come of it sooner or later. But such a misfortune as this! To become engaged, if only for a few days, to such a woman! I never could have imagined such a thing; no, never. The first Madame Van Mitten was a perfect dove compared with the second.”

Meanwhile the Dutchman had again seated himself, still flanked by his bodyguard, and Bruno came to offer him some food. But Van Mitten had no appetite.

“You do not eat, Seigneur Van Mitten,” said Saraboul, looking him straight in the face.

“I am not hungry,” he replied.

“Really, you are not hungry?” said Yanar. “But in Kurdistan everyone is hungry, even after a meal!”

“Ah! in Kurdistan; “said Van Mitten, as he swallowed the double helping, which he had been obliged to accept.

“And drink,” said Saraboul.

“But I am drinking, I drink in your words — ”

He did not dare to add, “Only I know they will disagree with me!”

“Drink,” continued Yanar.

“But I am not thirsty.”

“In Kurdistan we are always thirsty, even after a meaL”

Meanwhile Ahmet, who was always on his guard, was watching the guide closely. The man sat apart eating his share of the supper, but he could not conceal some movement of impatience. At least Ahmet thought so, and how could he think otherwise believing him to be a traitor? The man was anxious that Ahmet and his party should take refuge in the cavern, when sleep would render them defenceless against any pre-arranged attack.

Perhaps the guide wished to depart on some secret errand, but he did not dare while Ahmet, whom he feared, kept observing him.

“There, my friends,” said Kéraban. “We have had an excellent meal for an open- air supper. We have well recruited ourselves for our last stage. Is not that true, my little Amasia?”

“Yes, Seigneur Kéraban,” replied the girl. “I am quite ready to resume the journey if necessary — ”

“You would continue it — ?”

“To follow you.”

“Particularly to make a certain halt at Scutari,” returned Kéraban, laughing loudly; “a halt such as our friend Van Mitten made at Trebizond.”

“He is laughing at me to boot,” murmured Van Mitten, who was very angry, but did not dare to reply in the presence of the susceptible Saraboul.

“Ah,” continued Kéraban, “the marriage of Amasia and Ahmet may not be so imposing as the betrothal of Van Mitten and the noble Kurdish lady; of course I cannot give them a fete like the Paradise of Mahomet, but I can manage a thing or two, I daresay. I want all Scutari to be present, and wish that my friends from Constantinople shall fill the gardens of the villa.”

“There is no need for so much for us,” said Amasia.

“Yes, yes, my dear mistress,” exclaimed Nedjeb.

“And if I desire it, if I wish it,” continued Kéraban; “would my little Amasia thwart me?”

“Oh, Seigneur Kéraban!” she said.

“Well then,” continued he, holding up his glass, “let us drink to the happiness of the young people, who so well deserve to be happy.”

“To Seigneur Ahmet, to the fair Amasia,” cried the convives with one accord, in high good humour.

“And,” continued Kéraban, “to the alliance of Kurdistan with Holland.”

To this toast, given in a cheerful tone and with all hands extended towards him, Van Mitten was obliged to return thanks, whether he wished it or not.

The supper, rough, but very pleasant, was at length over. Now for a few hours rest, and the journey might be accomplished without fatigue.

“We will sleep until daybreak,” said Kéraban, “and I order the guide to call us at that time!”

“Very well, Seigneur,” replied the man. “But would it not be better for me to relieve Nizib in his guard over the horses?”

“No, stay where you are,” said Ahmet quickly. “Nizib will do very well where he is, and I prefer you to remain here. We will keep watch together!”

“Keep watch!” exclaimed the man, who in vain endeavoured to conceal his chagrin. “There is no danger here, in this extreme district of Anatolia.”

“Very likely not,” replied Ahmet, “but a little excess of prudence can do no harm. I will myself replace Nizib in his charge. So remain here, you.”

“As you please, Seigneur Ahmet,” replied the guide. “Let us place everything in the cavern then, so that your friends may sleep more contentedly."

"Do so," said Ahmet, "and Bruno will assist you, if M. Van Mitten has no objection."

"Go, Bruno, go," said Van Mitten.

The guide and Bruno entered the cavern and carried in all the cloaks, cafetans and coverings which might serve as bedding. Amasia, Nedjeb, and their companions had not made any difficulty concerning the supper, and the question of bed would find them equally accommodating, no doubt.

While preparations were being concluded, Amasia approached Ahmet, and, taking his hand, said: "So, my dear Ahmet, you are really going to pass the night without repose?"

"Yes," replied Ahmet, who did not wish Amasia to observe his anxiety. "Must I not watch over one who is so dear to me?"

"Well, this will be the very last time?"

"The very last. To-morrow all the fatigues of our journey will be ended."

"To-morrow," repeated Amasia, raising her eyes to his; "that to-morrow which seems never to come."

"But which will last for ever," replied Ahmet "For ever," murmured the girl. The noble Saraboul, too, had seized Van Mitten by the hand, and, indicating Amasia and Ahmet, said with a sigh —

"You see them, Seigneur Van Mitten; you see those two?"

“Who?” asked the Dutchman, whose thoughts were far from such a tender course of ideas.

“Who?” retorted the lady sharply, “who but those two fiances. In fact I find you curiously reserved.”

“You know that Dutchmen are very self- contained,” replied Van Mitten. “Holland is a country of dikes and barriers; dikes everywhere!”

“There are no dikes in Kurdistan,” exclaimed the noble Saraboul, who was mystified by his coldness.

“No, indeed there are not,” added Yanar, seizing his brother-in-law’s arm violently, as if he would crush it in his vice-like grip.

“Fortunately,” Kéraban could not help saying, “fortunately our friend Van Mitten will be free to-morrow.”

Then, turning to the others, he cried, “Well, now the dormitory is prepared, a chamber wherein is room for all. It is nearly eleven o’clock; the moon is already rising, let us retire to rest.”

“Come, Nedjeb,” said Amasia.

“I follow you, dear mistress.”

“Good night, Ahmet.”

“Till to-morrow, dear Amasia, d demain,” replied Ahmet, as he led the young girl to the entrance of the cavern.

“You will follow me, M. Van Mitten,” said Saraboul in a tone which could scarcely be called “engaging.”

“Certainly,” replied the Dutchman; “but, all the same, if necessary I could remain with my young friend Ahmet.”

“What did you say?” asked the imperious woman.

“What did he say?” asked Yanar. “I said,” replied Van Mitten, “I said, my dear Saraboul, that my duty obliged me to watch over you; and that — ”

“Very well, you shall watch; there!” She indicated the cavern, while Yanar shoved him by the shoulder, saying —

“There is one thing of which you may rest quite assured, Seigneur Van Mitten: you need have no doubt of it — ”

“What is that, if you please, Seigneur Yanar?”

“That in espousing my sister, you have married a Volcano!” said Yanar.

Under the impulse of his vigorous arm, Van Mitten was hurried into the cavern, whither his fiancee had preceded him, and whither Seigneur Yanar immediately followed him.

Just as Kéraban was entering in his turn, Ahmet stopped him.

“Uncle, just one word,” he said. “Well, only one,” said Kéraban, “I am tired, and want to go to sleep.”

“Very well; but I want you to hear me.”

“What have you to say?”

“Do you know where we are?”

“Yes; in the defiles of the gorges of Nerissa.”

“At what distance from Scutari?”

“About five or six leagues.”

“Who told you that?”

“Well, the guide.”

“Have you confidence in that man?”

“Why should I distrust him?”

“Because the fellow, whom I have been watching for several days, has been going I on in a way more and more suspicious,” ‘ replied Ahmet. “Do you know him, uncle? No. At Trebizond he came and offered to conduct us to the Bosphorus. ‘ You accepted his services without knowing who he was. We came away under his guidance — ”

“Well, Ahmet, it seems to me he has proved his acquaintance with thesa roads.”

“Undoubtedly, uncle.”

“Do you wish to argue, nephew?” demanded Kéraban, whose brow began to knit ominously.

“No, uncle, no; and I beg you to believe that I have no intention to say anything disagreeable. But I am by no means easy in my mind, and I fear for those I love.”

Ahmet’s emotion was so evident as he spoke, that Kéraban was quite touched.

“Look here, Ahmet, my boy; what ails you? Why these fears, when all our trials are just over? I will confess to you — only to you, mind — that I must have been rather mad to undertake this journey. I confess, but for my obstinacy in causing you to leave Odessa, that the abduction of Amasia would not have been accomplished Yes, all that was my fault. But here we are, at the end of our journey. Your marriage will not be retarded by a day. To-morrow we shall be in Scutari, and to-morrow — ”

“But if we are not in Scutari to-morrow, uncle? Suppose we are much further from it than this guide tells us we are? Suppose we have been purposely led astray, after being advised to leave the coast-road? In fine, suppose this man is a traitor!”

“A traitor!” exclaimed Kéraban. “Yes; what if this man be a traitor, and serving those who carried off Amasia?”

“By Allah, nephew, how did you conceive this idea? On what foundation does it rest? On mere presentiment!”

“No uncle, on facts! Listen to me. For several days this man has been in the habit of leaving us during our halts, on the pretext of examining the route. Last night he was away from the camp for an hour. I followed him, and I declare that a signal by fire was given to him from a certain point in the horizon, a signal that he was expecting!”

“This is a very serious matter, Ahmet,” replied Kéraban. “But how do you connect the acts of this man with the abduction of Amasia by the captain of the GuidareV’

“Well, uncle, whither was the vessel bound? To Atina? Evidently not, for we know the storm drove her out of her course. My opinion is that she was bound for Trebizond, where the harems of the nabobs of Anatolia are often replenished. There it might have become known that the girl had been saved from the shipwreck, and the abductors put on her track may have despatched this guide to conduct our little caravan into an ambush.”

“Yes, Ahmet Yes, you may be right It is quite possible that danger threatens us. You have watched and done well, and tonight I will watch with you.”

“No, uncle, rest yourself. I am well armed, and at the first alarm — ”

“I tell you I will watch,” replied Kéraban. “It shall never be said that such an obstinate man as I am could bring about a new catastrophe.”

“No; do not fatigue yourself unnecessarily. The guide by my orders will pass the night in the cavern. Go in.”

“I will not”

“Uncle — ”

“Once for all, are you going to withstand me? Ah, take care, Ahmet: it is a long time since anyone has contradicted me!”

“Very well, uncle, let us watch together.”

“Yes, under arms; and woe to him who enters our encampment!”

So Kéraban and Ahmet paced up and down, their gaze fixed upon the narrow pass, listening to the least noise, and keeping watch and ward upon the cavern faithfully. Two hours, then a third, passed thus. Nothing suspicious happened — nothing to justify the fears of Kéraban and his nephew occurred. They began to hope that the night would pass without incident; but about three o’clock in the morning cries of terror arose from the direction of the pass.

Kéraban and Ahmet at once seized their weapons, which had been placed at the foot of a rock; this time Kéraban, mistrusting his pistols, had got a musket.

At that instant Nizib came rushing up, out of breath.

“Ah, master!”

“What is it, Nizib?”

“Master — yonder; below there — ”

“Yonder?” said Ahmet.

“The horses — ”

“Our horses?”

“Yes.”

“Speak out, you stupid animal,” exclaimed Kéraban, shaking the lad roughly. “Our horses?”

“Stolen!” said Nizib.

“Stolen!”

“Yes,” continued the servant. “Two or three men came rushing out and carried them off.”

“They have got away with our horses, you say?”

“Yes.”

“On the road — that side?” asked Ahmet, pointing in a westerly direction.

“On that side — yes!”

“We must run after them; we must give chase,” exclaimed Kéraban.

“Let us remain where we are, uncle,” said Ahmet “To hope to catch our horses is vain. We must, before all things, put our camp in a state of defence.”

“Ah, master, look,” cried Nizib. “See there — there!”

He pointed to the hollow of a large rock which stood up high, on the left of the place where they were consulting.

CHAPTER XIII.

Seigneur Kéraban and Ahmet turned round, and looked in the direction indicated by Nizib. What they saw caused them to retire and crouch down out of sight.

On the upper ledge of the rock, opposite the cavern, a man was crawling along, with the object, apparently, to reach the extreme angle — no doubt in order to watch the camp. It was only natural to conclude that some secret understanding existed between this man and the guide.

It must be confessed that Ahmet bad been correct in his estimate of the machinations which had been formed against Kéraban and his companions: his uncle was forced to admit as much. It was pretty obvious, too, that the danger was imminent; that an attack in the dark was being prepared, and that very night the little caravan, after being surprised by an ambuscade, would be destroyed.

Kéraban, at first, unreflectingly, raised his musket, and was about to fire at this spy who had the hardihood to venture so close to the camp. In another second the gun would have been discharged, and the man would have been shot, no doubt; but such a course — which would have given the alarm — might have had serious consequences, and complicated a situation already sufficiently grave.

“Stop, uncle,” whispered Ahmet, throwing up the levelled musket.

“But, Ahmet — ”

“No; the report would only be the signal for attack; and, besides, we had better take that man alive. He must know on whose account these wrctches are acting.”

“But, how are we to take him?”

“Let me manage that,” replied Ahmet.

So saying, he disappeared towards the left, so as to “turn “the rock and climb it from the back. Meantime, Kéraban and Nizib held themselves in readiness to interfere, should occasion demand it.

The spy, crouched face downwards, had reached the extremity of the rock. His head alone protruded over the ledge; he was endeavouring to see into the cavern by the aid of the brilliant moonlight.

In about half-a-minute Ahmet re-appeared upon the upper ledge; and, creeping cautiously along, he advanced towards the spy, who had not perceived him.

Unfortunately, an unexpected incident put the man on his guard, and revealed to him the danger which threatened him.

Almost at that moment Amasia came out of the cavern. A feeling of anxiety, for which she could not account, prevented her from sleeping. She fancied Ahmet was threatened by some danger from the musket or the dagger of the assassin.

Kéraban at once made a sign to the girl to stop, but she did not understand him; and, looking up, perceived Ahmet just as he was raising himself upright on the rock. A cry of alarm escaped her.

At the sound of her voice the spy turned round rapidly and stood up. Perceiving Ahmet still bending down, he threw himself upon him.

Amasia, nailed by terror to the spot, cried to her lover. The spy, knife in hand, was about to stab his adversary, when Kéraban, shouldering his piece, fired.

The spy, hit full in the chest, let fall his dagger and rolled to the ground from the ledge of the rock.

In another instant Amasia was clasped in the arms of Ahmet, who had let himself down from the rock and rejoined her.

At the sound of the shot all the occupants of the cavern came hurrying out — all except the guide. Kéraban, brandishing his musket, exclaimed —

“That was a splendid shot, by Allah!”

“More dangers!” muttered Bruno. “Do not leave me, Van Mitten,” cried the noble Saraboul, seizing the arm of her fiance.

“He shall not leave you, sister,” said the resolute Yanar.

By this time Ahmet had advanced to the spot where the spy lay.

“The man is dead,” he said, “and he would have been worth more to us living.”

Nedjeb had joined him, and she immediately exclaimed —

“But that man is — is — ”

Amasia now approached in her turn, and cried out —

“Yes, yes; ‘tis he — Yarhud; the captain of the Guidare!”

“Yarhud!” exclaimed Kéraban. “Ah, then, I was right,” said Ahmet. “Yes,” continued Amasia, “that is the very man who carried us away!”

“I recognise him now,” said Ahmet. “I remember him myself. He came to the villa to show us his merchandize just before my departure; but he cannot be alone. The whole band of ruffians is on our track, and to prevent us from continuing our journey they have stolen our horses!”

“Our horses stolen!” exclaimed Saraboul. “If we had taken the road home to Kurdistan, this would not have happened to us,” said Yanar.

And his look, as it rested on Van Mitten, seemed to hold him responsible for all these complications.

“But whom is this Yarhud acting for?” remarked Kéraban.

“If he were alive we would drag his secret from him.” said Ahmet.

“Perhaps he carries some paper,” suggested Amasia.

“Yes: let us search the body,” said Kéraban.

Ahmet bent over the corpse, while Nizib held a lantem which he had procured from the cavern, j “Here is a letter,” said Ahmet, as he withdrew his hand from the dead man’s pocket.

The latter was addressed to a certain “Scarpante.” .

“Read it, Ahmet, read it,” said his uncle, who could not control his impatience.

Ahmet opened the paper and read as follows: “The horses of the caravan once seized, while Kéraban and his companions are asleep in the cavern whither Scarpante will conduct them — ”

“Scarpante!” exclaimed Kéraban, “that is the guide — the traitor!”

“Yes: I was not deceived in him,” remarked Ahmet. “Then,” he continued — “let Scarpante make a signal by waving a torch, and our men will descend upon them in the gorge of Nerissa.”

“And that is signed — ?” asked Kéraban.

“It is signed — Saffar!”

“Saffar — Saffar — so it is he then!”

“Yes,” replied Ahmet, “it is evident it is the same insolent person whom we encountered on the railway line at Poti, and who some hours later embarked for Trebizond. Yes, it is this Saffar who caused Ama- sia to be carried off, and who wants to recapture her at any price.”

“Ah, Seigneur Saffar,” cried Kéraban, raising his clenched hand, and letting it fall on an imaginary head, “if ever I find myself face to face with you — !”

“But where is this Scarpante?” asked Ahmet.

Bruno hurried into the cavern, but returned almost immediately, and said —

“He has disappeared — by some other aperture, no doubt”

That was in fact what had occurred. Scarpante, his treason discovered, had made his escape from the other extremity of the cavern.

So the disgraceful plot was now disclosed in all its details. It was indeed the inten- dant of Saffar who had offered himself as guide; it was Scarpante who had conducted the party, first along the coast and afterwards across the mountainous regions of Anatolia. It was no other than Yarhud whose signals had been perceived by Ahmet the night before, and it was the Captain of the Guidare who had come secretly to convey Saffar’s last commands to Scarpante.

But the vigilance and perspicacity of Ahmet had checkmated this manoeuvre. The traitor unmasked, the criminal designs of his master were revealed. The name of the abductor of Amasia was known to be Saffar who had been threatened by Kéraban with his vengeance and reprisals.

But if the trap into which the party had been led was discovered, the peril was none the less imminent, and might befall them at any moment.

So Ahmet, with his usual quickness, perceived the only solution, and made his decision at once.

“My friends,” he said, “we must at once quit these gorges of Nerissa. If we are attacked amongst these rocky defiles, not one of us will come out alive.”

“Let us proceed,” said Kéraban. “Bruno, Nizib, and you, Seigneur Yanar, have your weapons ready for any event.”

“You may depend upon us, Seigneur Kéraban,” replied Yanar. “You will see what my sister and I are capable of.”

“Yes, indeed,” responded the courageous lady, brandishing her yataghan with magnificent action. “I will not forget that I have an affianced husband to defend.”

If ever Van Mitten experienced deep humiliation, it was when he heard the intrepid woman speak thus. But he also seized his revolver and was quite determined to do his devoir.

The whole party then proceeded to mount the defile and gain the plateau, when Bruno who could never escape from ideas of feeding remarked —

“But we cannot leave the ass here.”

“There is something in that observation,” remarked Ahmet “Perhaps Scarpante has led us astray; or perhaps we are farther from Scutari than we imagine. The cart contains all the provisions we possess.”

These hypotheses were both plausible. It was to be feared that the traitor had compromised the arrival of Kéraban and his party on the shores of the Bosphorus by leading the caravan astray.

But there was no time to argue the point, action was necessary and at once.

“Well,” said Kéraban, “the ass will follow us — why should he not?”

So saying he took the animal by the bridle, and attempted to pull him towards him.

“Come on,” said Kéraban.

The ass never moved.

“Will you come with good will?” asked Kéraban, giving the bridle a violent jerk. But the ass, which no doubt was inflexible in his way, declined to budge.

“Shove him, Nizib,” said Kéraban.

Nizib assisted by Bruno then endeavoured to push the donkey from behind, but the animal moved backwards farther than he advanced.

“Ah! you intend to try conclusions with me, do you?” said Kéraban, who began to be angry.

“Good,” muttered Bruno, “obstinacy against obstinacy.”

“You resist me then! resist me!” repeated Kéraban.

“Your master has found his,” said Bruno to Nizib in an undertone.

“That would astonish me,” replied Nizib.

Ahmet then broke in impatiently —

“We must depart. We have not a moment to lose — let the ass alone — leave him where he is.”

“I? yield to an ass? Never!” exclaimed Kéraban.

Then seizing the quadruped by the ears he pulled as if he would pull them out altogether.

“Will you come on?” he said.

The ass did not stir.

“Ah! won’t you obey me? Well then, I will compel you to do so, somehow.”

Then Kéraban entered the cavern, and emerged with some handfuls of hay which he twisted up and presented to the donkey. The animal made a step in advance.

“Ah, ha!” exclaimed Kéraban, “that makes you step out, and by Mahomet you shall go on.”

The hay was then fastened to the extremities of the shafts of the cart, but in such a way as to be just without the reach of the ass, which by extending his neck could smell the hay, and so he proceeded, in a continuous but vain endeavour to reach the tempting morsels, towards the pass.

“Very ingenious,” said Van Mitten.

“Well, then, imitate him,” said the noble Saraboul, dragging him after the cart. She was also a tempting morsel, which continued progressing before him, but Van Mitten was, unlike the ass, not desirous to reach to it The whole troop, continuing in the same direction, had soon cleared their camping- ground, which was a position quite untenable.

“So, Ahmet,” said Kéraban, “in your opinion this Saffar is the same insolent individual, who by his obstinacy caused the destruction of our chaise on the Poti railway?”

“Yes, uncle; but he is, above all, the’ miscreant who endeavoured to carry off Amasia, and his punishment belongs to me.”

“Let us proceed two by two now,” said Kéraban, “and may Allah assist us.”

Scarcely had Kéraban and his company ascended fifty paces when they perceived the rocks surmounted by assailants, who utttered loud cries and fired a volley at them.

“Retreat, retire,” cried Ahmet, who led his party back to the limits of the encampment.

It was too late to escape from the gorges of Nerissa: too late to seek a better position on the plateau. Saffar’s mercenaries, to the number of a dozen, had attacked the caravan; their chief was exciting them to this criminal proceeding, and in the position they occupied they had the advantage.

Seigneur Kéraban and his companions were actually at their mercy.

“Keep together,” cried Ahmet.

“The women in the centre,” said Kéraban.

Amasia, Saraboul, Nedjeb, formed a group around which Kéraban, Van Mitten, Ahmet, Yanar, Nizib and Bruno ranged themselves. There were six men against twelve, one against two, and in a disadvantageous position besides.

Almost immediately the banditti, uttering horrible cries, came down the pass and dashed into the encampment.

“My friends,” said Ahmet, “let us fight to the death!”

The combat at once began. Nizib and Bruno were immediately wounded, but slightly. Yet they did not give ground, they all fought valiantly, and none more courageously than the Kurdish lady, who fired many shots at the assailants.

It was evident that they had had orders to take Amasia alive, and that they preferred to fight cautiously with that object, so that no harm might befall her. So, notwithstanding superiority of numbers, the first success did not lie with the banditti, many of whom fell dangerously wounded.

At that juncture two new combatants appeared on the scene — Saffar and Scarpante.

“Ah! the villain; there he is,” exclaimed Kéraban. “That is the railway-man!”

Many times Kéraban aimed at him, but could not fire on account of the attacks made by the assailants.

Ahmet and his friends fought valiantly. They all were possessed with the same idea to save Amasia at any hazard, at any price to save her from falling into the hands of Saffar.

But, notwithstanding all their courage and devotion, they had to yield to superior numbers. So, little by little, Kéraban and his companions gave way, became separated, and then had to take to the rocks in the defile; confusion was already setting in amongst them.

Saffar perceived this.

“Seize her, Scarpante, seize her,” he cried, indicating Amasia.

“Yes, Seigneur,” replied Scarpante, “and this time she shall not evade you.”

Then, profiting by the disorder, he managed to seize Amasia, and endeavoured to drag her away.

“Amasia, Amasia,” cried Ahmet, who attempted to advance to her rescue, but was opposed by the band, who intercepted him, and compelled him to fight Yanar also attempted to reach the young girl and to rescue her from the hands of Scarpante, but he could not, and the intendant succeeded in dragging her away some paces up the defile.

But Kéraban aimed at him, and Scarpante fell mortally wounded, letting go the young lady, who at once attempted to rejoin Ahmet.

“Scarpante is dead. Let us avenge him,” exclaimed the chief of the bandits.

They at once threw themselves on Kéraban and his friends with a ferocity it was impossible to resist. Pressed so closely at all points, the assailed found it almost impossible to use their arms.

“Amasia! Amasia!” exclaimed Ahmet, as he vainly endeavoured to rush to the assistance of the girl, whom Saffar had now seized and was carrying away.

“Courage, courage,” cried Kéraban continually.

But he felt that his party and himself, overpowered by numbers, must be soon destroyed.

At that moment a shot fired from the top of the rocks struck down one of the assailants. Other shots succeeded quickly, and more of the banditti fell. Their fall disheartened their companions.

Saffar stopped at once, and sought to find the cause of this diversion in his enemy’s favour. What was this unexpected reinforcement?

Already Amasia had disengaged herself from the clutches of Saffar, for he had been disconcerted by the sudden attack.

“Father, father!” she cried.

It was indeed Selim, who, followed by twenty men, well armed, had come to the assistance of the little caravan, just as it was in imminent danger of destruction.

“Sauve qui peut,” shouted the bandit leader, setting the example by running away. He quickly disappeared into the cavern, followed by his troupe, who were aware of the existence of the exit at the back “Cowards!” exclaimed Saffar, seeing himself thus abandoned. “Well, they shall not have her living!”

So saying he dashed at Amasia, just as Ahmet was rushing on him.

Saffar discharged the last barrel of his revolver at the young man; it missed fire. But Kéraban, who had lost none of his coolness, did not fail. He rushed at Saffar, seized him by the throat, and plunged his dagger in his enemy’s heart One I shudder and all was over. Saffar, in his death-struggle, did not even hear his foe exclaim —

“That will teach you how to smash my carriage!”

Seigneur Kéraban and his friends were saved. Scarcely any had been severely wounded. Nevertheless they had all fought valiantly: Bruno and Nizib, whose courage had not failed; Seigneur Yanar, who had performed prodigies of valour; Van Mitten, who had quite distinguished himself in the melee; and the energetic Saraboul, whose pistol had often been discharged in the thickest of the fight.

However, had not Selim so unexpectedly arrived, Amasia and her defenders would have been no more. All would have perished, for they had determined to die for her.

“My father, my father,” cried the girl, throwing herself into Selim’s arms.

“My old friend,” said Kéraban; “you here!”

“Yes, I,” replied Selim.

“What fortunate chance brought you hither?” asked Ahmet “No chance at all,” replied Selim; “and I would long ago have started in search of my daughter, if at the moment of her abduction I had not been wounded.”

“Wounded, father!”

“Yes, by a shot fired from the felucca. For a whole month I was condemned to remain at Odessa by my wound. But a few days ago Ahmet’s telegram — ”

“A telegram!” exclaimed Kéraban, whose attention was at once arrested by this hated word.

“Yes, a telegram from Trebizond.”

“Ah, that was a — ”

“No doubt, uncle,” said Ahmet, embracing Kéraban; “but, for the first time that I have ventured to send a telegram without your knowledge, confess I did well.”

“Yes, wrong well done,” replied Kéraban, shaking his head, “but I will not reprove you, nephew.”

"So," continued Selim, "learning from the telegram that danger threatened your little caravan, I assembled my brave servants, reached Scutari, and pursued the coast-road."

"By Allah, you arrived only just in time, friend Selim," said Kéraban. "We would have been lost without you. Nevertheless we fought well!"

"Yes, indeed," said Yanar, "and my sister proved that she could, in case of necessity, use her weapons!"

"What a woman!" muttered Van Mitten.

At that moment the first streaks of day began to appear on the horizon. Some clouds in the zenith variegated the first rays of sunlight "But where are we, friend Selim?" asked Kéraban; "and how have you managed to find us in this region, into- which we have been misguided by a traitor!"

"And so far out of our way," added Ahmet.

"Not so, my friends, not so," replied Selim, "you are on the way to Scutari, only a few leagues from the sea!"

"Eh? "said Kéraban.

"The shores of the Bosphorus are yonder," continued Selim, pointing northeast.

"The Bosphorus!" exclaimed Ahmet. And all the party ascended the rocks to gain the plateau which extends above the gorges of Nerissa.

"There! see!" said Selim.

And in fact at that moment a natural phenomenon revealed to the travellers the desired locality. As daylight strengthened, a mirage presented, one by one, the objects situated below the horizon. One would have said that the hills which formed the boundary of the plain, had been engulfed in the earth as a theatrical scene sinks beneath the stage.

“The sea! the sea!” exclaimed Ahmet, and the cry was echoed by all present.

Although the appearance was only the effects of a mirage, the sea was distant but a few leagues.

“The sea! the sea!” repeated Kéraban. “But if it is not the Bosphorus, if it be not Scutari, — this is the last day of the month, and — ”

“It is the Bosphorus. It is Schtari,” said Ahmet The mirage grew more distinct and presented the profile of the town on the horizon.

“By Allah, it is Scutari,” said Kéraban, “there is the mosque of Buyuk Djami!”

It was indeed Scutari, which Selim had, left only three hours before.

“En route! En Route!” cried Kéraban; and like a good Mussulman, who in all circumstances acknowledges the greatness of Providence, he added —

“IIlah il Allah!” as he turned towards the rising sun.

A moment after, the little caravan was hastening along the road which lies close by the left shore of the strait. Four hours later, on that day, the 30th September, the last day permitted for the marriage of Amasia and Ahmet, — Seigneur Kéraban, his friends, and the donkey, having achieved the tour of the Black sea — gained the heights of Scutari, and with loud acclamations welcomed the shores of the Bos- phorus.

CHAPTER XIV.

SEIGNEUR KERA- BAN’S villa occupied one of the most advantageous sites upon the hill on which Scutari is built.

Scutari — the Asiatic faubourg of Constantinople, the ancient Chrysopolis, with its gilt-roofed mosques, and all the medley throng of a population of fifty-thousand inhabitants; its floating landing-place, and the extensive grove of cypress-trees in the cemetery; — Scutari, the resting-place elected by rich Mussulmans, who are afraid lest the capital may be taken while the faithful are at prayers, according to the legend; then, a league farther on, is Mount Bouljourlon, which dominates the scene, and affords a prospect embracing the Sea of Marmora, the Gulf of Nicomedia, the canal of Constantinople: — nothing can give an idea of the grandeur of the panorama, which is unique, and of which the windows of the rich merchant’s villa commanded a view.

The exterior of the villa — its terraced gardens, its beautiful trees and shrubs- were in worthy keeping with the interior of; the mansion. Truly it was a pity to have deprived one’s self of all this for the sake of a few paras demanded daily for crossing the Bosphorus.

It was mid-day. For three hours the owner and his guests had been installed in that elegant villa. Having made their toilette, they were reposing after the fatigues and trials of the journey. Kéraban, very proud of his success, was holding the Muchir and his imposts up to ridicule; Amasia and Ahmet, as happy as an engaged couple could be; Nedjeb, in a state of continuous laughter; Bruno, satisfied that he was growing fatter, but anxious on his master’s account! Nizib, always calm even in the midst of the grand surroundings of the place; Seigneur Yanar, more ferocious than ever, no one knew why; the noble Saraboul, as imperious as if she were in the capital of Kurdistan; and, finally, Van Mitten, much pre-occupied concerning the issue of this adventure.

It was not without reason that Bruno fancied he was gaining flesh. He had enjoyed a dejeuner as ample as magnificent! This was not the famous dinner to which Kéraban had invited his friend Van Mitten six weeks before; but it was none the less magnificent. And now all the party, seated in the charming salon, whose bay windows opened on the Bosphorus, congratulated each other in animated sentences.

“My dear Van Mitten,” said Kéraban, who moved about cordially among his guests, “I did invite you to a dinner, but you must not blame me if the hour has obliged us to — ”

“I do not complain,” replied Van Mitten, “your cook has done very well.”

“Yes, excellently, in truth,” added Yanar, who had eaten more than was convenient, even for a Kurd with a voracious appetite.

“One could not have done better in Kurdistan,”replied Saraboul,”and, Seigneur Kéraban, if ever you come to Mossoul to pay us a visit — ”

“Oh, I will come,” replied Kéraban. “I will come and see you and my friend Van Mitten.”

“And we will endeavour to make you forget your villa; and you will not regret your native Holland,” added the amiable woman, turning to her betrothed.

“Near you, noble Saraboul — ” Van Mitten ought to have said; but he could not manage to finish the phrase, and gave it up.

Then, while the Kurdish lady turned towards the window which opened upon the Bosphorus, he said to Kéraban —

“The moment has come to tell her that the marriage is null and void.”

“As void as if it had never been celebrated, Van Mitten.”

“You will assist me a little, Kéraban, in this business: it will be unpleasant.”

“Hum,” remarked Kéraban, “there are some private matters which are best discussed tete-d-tete.”

“The devil!” was the Dutchman’s reply. Then he retired to a corner to consider the best mode of action.

“Worthy Van Mitten,” remarked Kéraban, to his nephew, “what a scene he will have with this Kurdish woman!”

“We ought not to forget that he was impelled into this scrape by his devotion to us,” replied Ahmet.

“So we should assist him? Bah, he was married at the time he was affianced, and for an Occidental this is a final barrier. So he has nothing to fear.”

“I know that,” replied Ahmet, “but when Madame Saraboul receives this blow she will leap like an enraged panther! As for her brother, Yanar, he will explode like a powder-magazine.”

“By Mahomet, but we will make them listen to reason,” replied Kéraban. “After all, Van Mitten is not guilty of any misconduct.”

“Certainly not, uncle, and it is equally certain that this tender widow wants to be married again at any price.”

“No doubt, and she did not hesitate to put her hand upon good M. Van Mitten.”

“A hand of iron, uncle Kéraban.”

“Of steel, rather,” replied her uncle.

“At anyrate, uncle, if it is necessary to undo this pretended marriage, it is — ”

“Also necessary to perform a real one, eh?” interrupted Kéraban, rubbing his hands as if he were washing them.

“Precisely so — mine,” replied Ahmet.”

“Ours,” said Amasia, who had approached the pair. “We have deserved it.”

“Well deserved it,” said Selim.

“Yes, indeed, my little Amasia; deserved it ten, a hundred, a thousand times! Ah, my dear child, to think that by my obstinacy, by my fault — that you were nearly — ”

“We will not speak of that,” said Ahmet.

“No, never, uncle Kéraban,” said the girl putting her little hand on his mouth.

“So,” continued Kéraban, “I made a vow — yes, I made a resolution — that I would never be ‘ pig-headed’ again, no matter what happened.”

“I must see that, to believe it,” laughed Nedjeb.

“Eh, what does that quizzical Nedjeb say?” exclaimed Kéraban.

“Oh, nothing, Seigneur.”

“Yes,” continued Kéraban: “I will never again be obstinate, except in my affection for you both.”

“When Seigneur Kéraban ceases to be the most head-strong of men — ,” began Bruno.

“That will be when he has no longer a head,” remarked Nizib parenthetically.

“Just so,” said Bruno.

Meanwhile the noble Kurdish lady approached her fiance, who was seated very pensive in his corner — no doubt finding his task all the more difficult as the time approached for executing it alone and unaided.

“What is the matter with you, M. Van Mitten?” she asked. “You look very serious.”

“Yes, indeed, brother-in-law,” added Yanar. “What are you about? You surely have not brought us to Scutari for nothing, to see nothing. Show us the Bosphorus, as one of these days we will show you Kurdistan.”

At this celebrated name the Dutchman started as if he had received an electric shock.

“Come, let us go, M. Van Mitten,” said Saraboul, compelling him to rise.

“At your service, beautiful Saraboul,” replied Van Mitten, aloud; but, mentally, he was thinking how he best could break the subject of separation to her.

At that moment the young Zingara, having opened one of the great bay-windows which was shaded by an awning, exclaimed, “Look, look! Scutari is all alive. It would be very pleasant to walk about the city today!”

The guests at once advanced to the windows.

“Indeed,” remarked Kéraban, “the Bosphorus is covered with gaily decked boats. In all the squares and streets there are jugglers and acrobats, there is music, and the quays are crowded with people!”: “Yes “said Selim, “the town is en fete.”

“I trust that will prove no bar to our marriage,” remarked Ahmet.

“Certainly not,” replied Kéraban. “We are going to have at Scutari a repetition of the feast at Trebizond, and these appear to be in honour of our friend Van Mitten!”

“He will make game of me to the end,” muttered the Dutchman. “But he cannot help it, it is in the blood!”

“My friends,” said Selim, “let us look at this important affair. To-day is the last day — ”

“And we will not forget that fact,” replied Kéraban.

“I will proceed to the judge’s house, so that the contract may be drawn up,” said Selim.

“We will meet you there,” replied Ahmet. “You know, uncle, that your presence is indispensable.”

“Almost as much as your own,” replied Kéraban, laughing loudly by way of confirmation.

“Yes, uncle, more indispensable, if one may say so, in your position as trustee.”

“Well,” said Selim, “in an hour we will meet you at the house of the judge of Scutari.”

As he quitted the room, Ahmet, addressing Amasia, said —

“Then, dear Amasia, after the signing of the contract, we pay a visit to the Imaun, who will put up his best prayer, and then — ”

“Then we shall be married,” exclaimed Nedjeb, as if the ceremony included herself.

“Dear Ahmet,” murmured Amasia.

Meanwhile the noble Saraboul had a second time approached Van Mitten, who, more and more pensive, was seated in a corner of the room.

“Pending this ceremony,” she said, “why cannot we go as far as the Bosphorus?”

“The Bosphorus!” exclaimed Van Mitten, with an abstracted air; “you are speaking of the — Bosphorus?”

“Yes, the Bosphorus,” said Yanar. “One would almost imagine you did not understand.”

“Yes, yes, I am quite ready,” said Van Mitten, rising as his powerful brother-in-law placed his hand upon his shoulder. “Yes, the Bosphorus. But first I desire — I wish — ”

“You wish?” repeated Saraboul.

“I would be happy to have an interview, a private interview with you, beautiful Saraboul.”

“A private conversation?”

“Very well, I will leave you,” said Yanar.

“No, stay where you are, brother,” replied Saraboul, who was staring her fiance out of countenance. “I have a presentiment that your presence will be needed.”

“By Mahomet! I wonder how he will get it done,” said Kéraban in his nephew’s ear.

“It will be difficult,” replied Ahmet.

“We will not go far away, so that we may be at hand to support Van Mitten.”

“They will certainly tear him to pieces,” remarked Bruno.

Seigneur Kéraban, Ahmet, Amasia, and Nedjeb, Bruno and Nizib, then moved towards the door so as to leave the field clear for the encounter.

“Courage, Van Mitten,” said Kéraban, shaking his friend’s hand as he passed him. “I will not go far away. I will remain in the next room, and watch over your safety.”

“Courage, master,” said Bruno, “or beware Kurdistan!”

A moment later, Van Mitten and the two Kurds were left alone in the room, and the Dutchman, as he rubbed his head, made a melancholy “aside “ —

“If I only knew how to begin!”

Saraboul then advanced quickly towards him.

“What have you to say to us, Monsieur Van Mitten?” she asked in a tone which prevented too much pleasantness from being imported into the discussion.

“Yes, speak out,” added Yanar.

“If we might sit down,” began Van Mitten, who felt his limbs giving way beneath him.

“What you can say seated you can say standing up,” replied Saraboul. “We are listening.”

Van Mitten summoned all his courage, which had given way on hearing those words, so eminently calculated to embarrass a timid speaker.

“Beautiful Saraboul, you may be sure, first of all, and very much against my will, I regret that — ”

“You regret?” said Saraboul, “you regret what? Is it our marriage? That is, after all, only a legitimate reparation — ”

“Oh! reparation, reparation! “Van Mitten ventured to remark in an undertone.

“And I also regret,” continued Saraboul. “Yes, certainly I regret — ”

“Ah! you also regret — ?”

“I regret that the intruder at Rissar was neither Seigneur Ahmet nor Kéraban. In either case I should have married a man — ”

“Well said, sister,” remarked Yanar.

“Instead of a — ”

“Well said again, although you have not finished your sentence,” continued Yanar.

“Excuse me,” interrupted Van Mitten, who was injured by such personal remarks.

“Whoever would believe,” continued Saraboul, “that the author of such an attempt was a Dutchman preserved in ice!”

“Ah! I can’t stand this,” cried Van Mitten, absolutely hurt at being thus compared to a sweetmeat “First and foremost, Madame Saraboul, there was no intrusion at all!”

“Really?” said Saraboul, sacastically.

“No,” continued Van Mitten, “It was a mistake. We — or rather I — under a false and perfidious direction, mistook the room.”

“Indeed!” remarked Saraboul, sarcastically.

“A mere misdirection, which,under threat of imprisonment, has compelled me to perpetrate a preliminary marriage — ”

“Preliminary or not,” remarked Saraboul, “you are not the less married — married to me; and you may depend upon it, monsieur, that the ceremonial begun at Trebizond will be completed in Kurdistan.”

“Yes? Let us talk of it in Kurdistan, then,” retorted Van Mitten, who was beginning to lose his temper.

“And,” continued Saraboul, “as I perceive that the society of your friends renders you insensible to my regard, we will leave Scutari this very day, and start for Mossoul, where I will infuse a little of the Kurd into your veins.”

“I protest,” exclaimed Van Mitten.

“Another word, and we will start this instant.”

“You may depart, Madame Saraboul,” replied Van Mitten, ironically, “you may depart if it is convenient, and no one will dream of detaining you, but I will not go!”

“You will not go?” cried Saraboul, much enraged at this defiance of two tigers by a sheep.

“No.”

“And you have the temerity to resist us?” asked Yanar, crossing his arms.

“I have.”

“Resist me, and her, a Kurdish lady!”

“Yes, were she ten times a Kurd!”

“Just remember, Mr. Dutchman, what kind of woman I am,” said Saraboul, marching towards her fiance, “and remember what I have been. Recollect that at fifteen I was already a widow.”

“Yes,” said Yanar, “and when one begins so early — ”

“It may be so, madame,” replied Van Mitten, “but one thing you can never be, notwithstanding your early habits — ”

“And that is?”

“You can never be my widow.”

“Monsieur Van Mitten,” said Yanar, putting his hand on his yataghan, “one blow of this would suffice — ”

“That is where you are mistaken,” replied Van Mitten. “Your sabre would not make Madame Saraboul a widow, for the very excellent reason that I cannot be her husband.”

“Eh?”

“And our marriage would be null.”

“Null?”

“Because if Madame Saraboul has the happiness to be the widow of her first husband, I am not the widower of my first wife.”

“Married? He is already married!”

exclaimed the noble Saraboul, beside herself at the announcement.

“Yes,” replied Van Mitten, now fairly in for it. “Yes, married! It was only to save my friends, and to prevent our arrest at the caravanserai of Rissar that I sacrificed myself!”

“Sacrificed!” screamed Saraboul, falling back on the divan.

“Knowing quite well that the marriage was not valid,” continued Van Mitten, “since the first Madame Van Mitten is no more dead than I am a widower, for she is in Holland — ”

The outraged “bride” rose, and, turning to Yanar, exclaimed —

“You hear him!”

“I hear.”

“Your sister has been jilted!”

“Insulted!”

“And this traitor still lives!”

“He has only a few seconds more to live!”

“How savage they are,” cried Van Mitten, really nervous at the turn the matter had taken.

“I will avenge you, sister,” exclaimed Yanar, who, with uplifted weapon, advanced upon Van Mitten.

“I will avenge myself!” she cried.

So saying, the noble Saraboul rushed at the Dutchman, uttering cries of rage, which were fortunately audible in the next room.

CHAPTER XV.

In which Kéraban is more obstinate than he had ever been.

The door was immediately flung open, and Kéraban, Ahmet, Amasia, Nedjeb, and Bruno appeared on the threshold.

Kéraban quickly disengaged Van Mitten. “Come, madame,” said Ahmet, “you must not strangle people for a misunderstanding.”

“Diable!” muttered Bruno, “it was quite time we arrived!”

“Poor Monsieur Van Mitten,” said Amasia, who felt sincere pity for her travelling companion.

“She is decidedly not the wife for him,” added Nedjeb, shaking her head.

Meanwhile Van Mitten had recovered his spirits a little.

“It was rather hard, wasn’t it?” asked Kéraban.

“Yes,” replied Van Mitten, “a little more and I would have died!”

At that moment the noble Saraboul turned to Kéraban and, taking him aside, said —

“And have you lent yourself to this — ”

“Mystification,” interrupted Kéraban, “that is the proper word — mystification.”

“I will be revenged. There are judges in Constantinople.”

“Charming Saraboul,” replied Kéraban, “you can only accuse yourself. You were anxious, on account of a pretended insult, to stop our journey. By Allah, we had to get out of the scrape as best we could. We extricated ourselves by a pretended marriage, and we assuredly had a right to this retaliation.”

At this answer Saraboul fell a second time upon the divan, a prey to one of those attacks of nerves of which women, even in Kurdistan, possess the secret.

Nedjeb and Amasia hastened to her assistance.

“I am going — I am going!” she cried.

“Bon voyage!” said Bruno.

At this juncture Nizib came in.

“What is it?” demanded Kéraban.

“A telegram brought from the office at Galata,” replied Nizib.

“For whom?”

“For M. Van Mitten. It came to-day.”

“Give it to me,” said the Dutchman.

He took the telegram, opened it, and looked at the signature.

“It is from my managing clerk in Rotterdam,” he said. Then he read the message as follows —

“Madame Van Mitien — five weeks ago — died!”

The despatch was crushed in his hand. Van Mitten was thunderstruck, and (why conceal the fact?) his eyes filled with tears.

On hearing the last words Saraboul suddenly rose.

“Five weeks!” she exclaimed in rapture. “He said five weeks — ”

“Imprudent man,” muttered Ahmet, “what business had he to divulge the date at such a moment!”

“Yes,” continued Saraboul triumphantly, “it is only ten days since he was affianced to me; and — ”

“Mahomet choke you,” muttered Kéraban, a little louder than he perhaps intended.

“You were then a widower, my dear spouse,” said Saraboul, triumphantly.

“Absolutely a widower, dear brother-in- law,” added Yanar.

“And our marriage is valid!”

Then Van Mitten, crushed by the logic of this argument, in his turn sank upon the divan.

“Poor man!” said Ahmet to his uncle, “nothing now remains for him but to throw himself into the Bosphorus.”

“Good,” replied Kéraban. “She will then throw herself after him and save him — for revenge!”

The noble Saraboul had already seized her property by the arm!

“Get up,” she said.

“Yes, dear Saraboul,” replied Van Mitten, hanging his head, “I am quite ready.”

“And follow us,” said Yanar.

“Yes, dear brother-in-law,” replied Van Mitten, absolutely checkmated, “I am ready to follow you wherever you please.”

“To Constantinople, where we will take the first steamer,” said Saraboul.

“For — ?”

“For Kurdistan,” replied Yanar.

“Kurdistan! You will accompany me, Bruno? They live well there: that will fully compensate you.”

Bruno could only make a sign in the affirmative.

The noble Saraboul and the Seigneur Yanar then dragged the unfortunate Dutchman away, though his friends in vain attempted to detain him, and his faithful servant followed him, muttering —

“I told him that some evil would befall him!”

Kéraban and the others remained stupefied and mute at this shock.

“Then he is married!” said Amasia.

“For his devotion to us,” said Ahmet.

“For good and all this time,” added Nedjeb.

“He will have only one resource in Kurdistan,” said Kéraban with much seriousness.

“That will be, uncle — ?”

“That will be — in order to neutralise her, he must marry a dozen!”

At that moment the door opened and Selim appeared quite out of breath as if he had been running.

“Oh, father, what is the matter?” exclaimed Amasia.

“What has happened?” cried Ahmet.

“My friends,” replied Selim, “it is impossible to celebrate the marriage of Amasia and Ahmet.”

“What do you say?”

“At Scutari at least”

“At Scutari?”

“It can only take place at Constantinople.”

“At Constantinople!” cried Kéraban, who began to prick up his ears, “why?”

“Because the judge of Scutari refuses to register the contract.”

“He refuses?” said Ahmet “Yes, on the pretext that Kéraban’s domicile, and consequently Ahmet’s, is not Scutari but Constantinople!”

“In Constantinople,” said Kéraban, frowning.

“Now,” continued Selim, “this is the last day appointed for the marriage of my daughter, if she is to succeed to the fortune to which she is entitled. We must, therefore, without losing a moment, hurry to the house of the judge who will register the contract in Constantinople.”

“Let us go,” cried Ahmet, turning to the door.

“Let us go,” added Amasia, following him. “Seigneur Kéraban, can you refuse to go with us?”

Kéraban remained silent and thoughtful.

“Well, uncle,” said Ahmet turning to him.

“Will not you come?” asked Selim.

“Must I use force;” said Amasia, gently taking Kéraban by the arm.

“I have got a caique ready to cross the Bosphorus,” said Selim.

“The Bosphorus!” echoed Kéraban, and then he added severely: “Is the tax of ten paras still demanded from those who cross?”

“Yes, certainly, friend Kéraban j but now that you have played such a fine trick on the Ottoman authorities as to go from Constantinople to Scutari without paying, I think you will not refuse — ”

“I will refuse,” replied Kéraban.

“Then they will not let you cross.”

“Very well. I will not cross.”

“And our wedding,” exclaimed Ahmet. “Our marriage, which should take place to-day?”

“You can be married without me.”

“That is impossible. You are my guardian,” uncle Kéraban, “and you know quite well your presence is indispensable.”

“Well then, Ahmet, wait till I have established my domicile at Scutari — and you can be married at Scutari.”

All these replies were given in a decided tone, which left little hope in the minds of the opponents of the headstrong personage.

“Friend Kéraban, to-day is the last day, and all the fortune which ought to come to my daughter will be lost — if — ”

Kéraban shook his head, and accompanied the action with a more negative gesture.

“Uncle,” pleaded Ahmet, “you cannot wish to — ”

“If they compel me to pay ten paras,” replied Kéraban, “never — no never, will I cross the Bosphorus. By Allah, I would rather go round the Black Sea again!”

And indeed he was just the man to do it.

“Uncle,” said Ahmet, “this is bad — under such circumstances as these, let me tell you, this obstinacy is inexplicable in a man like you. You will cause misery to those who have always regarded you with true affection. It is wrong of you!”

“Ahmet, mind what you are saying,” cried Kéraban, angrily.

“No, uncle, no. My heart is overflowing, and nothing shall prevent me from speaking. It is the act cf a bad man!”

“Ahmet, dearest Ahmet, be calm,” cried Amasia. “Do not address your uncle so.

If this fortune on which you counted escapes you — renounce the marriage ‘“

“What — renounce you?” exclaimed the young man, catching her to his heart. “Never, no never. Come, let us leave this town forever. We have still enough left to pay the ten paras to cross to Constantinople.”

Ahmet, scarcely master of himself, dragged the maiden towards the door.

“Kéraban,” said Selim, who wished to make a last attempt to turn his friend from his determination — ” Kéraban!”

“Leave me, Selim — leave me alone!”

“Alas! Let us go, father,” said Amasia, casting a tearful look on Kéraban; and, restraining her emotion with difficulty, she directed her steps towards the door of the room, where she stopped, with Ahmet “For the last time, uncle,” he said, “do you refuse to accompany us to Constantinople, to the house of the judge, where your presence is indispensable to our marriage?”

“What I refuse,” said Kéraban, “is to pay the tax. That I will never submit to.”

“Kéraban!” said Selim. “No, by Allah, no!”

“Well then, farewell, uncle,” said Ahmet, “your obstinacy will cost us a fortune, you will have ruined her who ought to be your niece. So be it It is not the fortune I regret, but you have deprived us of our happiness. We will never see you again.”

Then the young man led Amasia away, and, followed by Selim, Nedjeb, and Nizib, quitted the salon, then the villa, and shortly afterwards embarked for Constantinople.

Seigneur Kéraban remained alone, a prey to the greatest agitation.

“No, by Allah! no, by Mahomet!” he muttered; “it would be undignified. To have made the circuit of the Black Sea to avoid the tax, and then to pay immediately on my return! No. Rather than thus put foot in Constantinople, I will sell my house at Galata; I will retire from business; I will give all my fortune to Ahmet to replace Amasia’s. He will be rich, I shall be poor; but then I shall not have yielded! I will not yield.”

As he continued, his anger became greater. “Yield — pay, — I, Kéraban! To arrive before the chief of the police who defied me; who saw me depart; who is waiting my return; who will snap his fingers at me before all the crowd as he claims the hateful tax? Never!”

It was quite evident that Kéraban was arguing against his conscience, and that he was fully aware that the consequences of his foolish obstinacy would fall on others as well as himself.

“Yes,” he continued, “but would Ahmet accept my offer? He has gone away desolate, and angry at my obstinacy. I can conceive it. He is proud. He will refuse anything from me now. Let me see. I am an honest man. Am I about to snatch happiness from those young people by my stupid resolve? May Mahomet choke the whole Divan, and all the new regime of Turks besides.”

Seigneur Kéraban paced his room irresolutely. He pushed the cushions and chairs aside. He sought some fragile object with the intention to break it to assuage his anger, and very soon two vases were smashed. Then he returned to the question.

“Ahmet, Amasia, no! I cannot be the cause of their misery, and only for a point of self-love. To delay this marriage will be, perhaps, to prevent it altogether. But to yield — to give way — I! Ah, Allah, guide me.”

And with this invocation Kéraban, impelled by a rage he could no longer interpret, or give vent to, by words or actions, rushed out of the salon.

CHAPTER XVI.

If Scutari was en fete, if on the quays from the harbour to the Sultan’s Kiosk the crowd was surging to and fro — there was no less a concourse on the other side of the strait on the quays of Galata from the first bridge of boats to the barracks of Top-hand. The tranquil waters were likewise covered with caiques and other craft, laden with Turks, Albanians, Greeks, Europeans or Asiatics, which passed constantly to and fro. Certainly it was no ordinary attraction which had brought together such multitudes of spectators.

So when Ahmet and Selim, Amasia and Nedjeb, having paid the new tax, disembarked at the Top-han6 steps, they found themselves in the midst of a regular “fair “with all its pleasures, in which however they had little inclination to take part.

But since the spectacle, whatever it was, had attracted such a crowd, it was only natural that Seigneur Van Mitten, who was quite well now and a Kurdish lord to boot, his fiancee, the noble Saraboul, and his brother-in-law, Seigneur Yanar, followed by the obedient Bruno, were among the curious.

So Ahmet found on the quay his former travelling companions. Was Van Mitten “shewing around” his new relatives, or were they showing him off? The latter case appeared the more probable.

However that might have been, the moment when Ahmet met them Saraboul was saying to her fiance —

“Yes, Seigneur Van Mitten, we have more beautiful fetes than this in Kurdistan.”

And Van Mitten replied in a resigned tone —

“I can quite believe that, beautiful Saraboul.”

This remark drew from Yanar the caustic comment, “You are wise to think so!”

However, some exclamations — one might say cries of impatience — were heard sometimes in the crowd; but Amasia and Ahmet paid scarcely any attention to them.

“No, dear Amasia,” said Ahmet, “I know my uncle well, and, nevertheless, I would not have deemed him capable of pushing his obstinacy so far as hardness of heart”

“Then,” said Nedjeb, “so long as this tax remains, will he never return to Constantinople?”

“He? Never!” replied Ahmet.

“If I regret the fortune which Seigneur Kéraban has deprived us of, it is not for myself, it is on your account, dear Ahmet, for your sake only.”

“Let us forget all that,” said Ahmet; “and the easier to forget it, and to break with this intractable uncle, who has been hitherto a father to me, let us leave Constantinople, and return to Odessa.”

“That Kéraban ought to be tortured,” said Selim, who felt greatly outraged.

“Yes,” replied Nedjeb, “married to this Kurdish lady, for instance — why did not she espouse him?”

It need scarcely be said that Saraboul heard neither Nedjeb’s pert observation, nor Selim’s reply to this effect —

“He? Why he would subdue her by his obstinacy as he would conquer a wild beast.”

“Perhaps so,” muttered Bruno, “but, meantime, it is my poor master who has entered the cage.”

So Ahmet and his companions took but a lukewarm interest in what was going on.

In such a temper the proceedings interested them but little, and they did not hear one Turk say to another —

“An audacious fellow, this Storchi, indeed, to venture to cross the Bosphorus in such a fashion.”

“Yes, in a manner never contemplated by the tax-gatherers.”

But if Ahmet paid no attention to these observations, he was obliged to reply when he heard himself accosted.

“Ah I here is Seigneur Ahmet!”

The speaker was the chief of the police, the man who had incited Kéraban to make the tour of the Black Sea.

“Ah! it is you, monsieur,” said Ahmet.

“Yes, I congratulate you indeed I have just heard that Seigneur Kéraban has performed his promise. He has reached Scutari without crossing the Bosphorus.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Ahmet, bitterly.

“It is heroic. For the sake of ten paras he has spent thousands of pounds.”

“Just so.”

“Well, he has made great progress, truly,” continued the chief of police, ironically. “The tax still exists, and if he continues as obstinate, he will have to go back the same way to reach Constantinople again.”

“If he wishes to, he will,” answered Ahmet, who, furious as he was against his uncle, could not refrain from replying to the mocking observations of the officer.

“Bah, he will give in at last,” continued the man, “and he will cross the Bosphorus. But the tax-collectors let the caiques, and attend at the landing-places. So, unless he swim or fly across — ”

“Why not, if it suits him?” replied Ahmet, coldly.

At this juncture a general movement of curiosity agitated the crowd. A murmur arose. Many hands were extended towards the Bosphorus in the direction of Scutari. All heads were elevated, and the people cried —

“There he is: Storchi, Storchi!”

Ahmet and Amasia, Selim and Nedjeb, Saraboul, Van Mitten, and Yanar, with Bruno, found themselves at the angle of the quay of the Golden Horn, near the landing- place of Top-hand, and all had an excellent view of the spectacle now offered to the public.

On the Scutari bank, about six hundred feet from the margin of the Bosphorus, in the water, rises a tower miscalled the Tower of Leander. This portion of the strait is the Hellespont, the real Dardanelles, across which the classic swimmer passed from Sestos to Abydos to join Hero, the beautiful priestess of Venus — an exploit afterwards performed by Lord Byron, who was very proud of having swam in one hour and ten minutes the twelve hundred mitres of water which stretch between the banks.

Was this feat going to be emulated by some amateur, jealous of the mythological hero, and the author of the Corsair 1

A long rope was stretched between the Scutari side and the Tower of Leander, the modern name of which is Keuz-Koulessi, which means the Tower of the Virgin. From that point the rope, about thirteen hundred metres in length, being thus firmly supported, crossed the strait, and was attached to an elevated scaffolding, raised at the angle of the quay of Galata with the Place Top- hand.

Now it was upon this rope that the celebrated acrobat Storchi, an imitator of Blondin, was about to try to cross the Bos phorus. True, Blondin had risked his life when crossing the Niagara Falls. Here Storchi had only to fear a plunge into the smooth waters, whence he could be rescued without serious injury.

But as Blondin had crossed Niagara carrying a very brave friend upon his shoulders, so Storchi was about to cross now with an acrobatic friend. Only he was not going to carry him on his back: he was going to wheel him in a barrow, the wheel of which traversed the rope securely in a groove.

Storchi appeared on the first portion of the cord which connected the Asiatic side with the Tower of the Virgin. He wheeled his companion in the barrow, and reached the tower without any misadventure. Cheers greeted this first success.

Then the gymnast adroitly descended the rope, which nearly touched the water in the centre, and wheeled him so far with consummate coolness. It was superb! When Storchi had reached the centre, the difficulty commenced; for he had to ascend the sloping cord to the top of the scaffolding. But his muscles were firm, his arms and legs worked mechanically. He continued to wheel the barrow, while his companion remained perfectly motionless, and did not by the slightest movement endanger the stability of the wheelbarrow.

At length a shout of relief and congratulation arose. Storchi had reached the summit of the scaffolding, and then he descended with his companion at the angle of the quay where Ahmet and his companions had remained as spectators. The bold enterprize had succeeded, but the man who I had been wheeled over had a right to half the congratulations which Asia sent to Europe in their honour. But why does Ahmet exclaim, “Can he believe his eyes? “The companion of the celebrated acrobat, after shaking hands with Storchi, stopped before Ahmet and smilingly regarded him!

“Kéraban — my uncle Kéraban,” cried Ahmet, while the ladies, with Van Mitten, Yanar, Selim, and Bruno pressed round him.

It was, indeed, Kéraban himself.

“Yes, my friends, it is I — I, who, finding the brave acrobat ready to start, took the place of his companion. Yes, I have passed the Bosphorus — or rather over it — to sign the marriage contract, Ahmet”

“Ah, Seigneur Kéraban — uncle,” cried Amasia, “I felt sure you would not abandon us.”

“This is splendid,” exclaimed Nebjeb, clapping her hands.

“What a man this is,” said Van Mitten.

“you would not find his equal in the whole of Holland!”

“Just my opinion,” remarked Saraboul drily.

“Well, you see, I have crossed without paying,” said Kéraban to the chief of the police. “Yes, without paying — at least only two thousand piastres for my place in the barrow, and the eight hundred thousand expended in going round the Black Sea.”

“I congratulate you with all my heart,” replied the officer, who could only bow to this unparalleled obstinacy.

Loud cries greeted Seigneur Kéraban from all sides, when that good-natured if inflexible man embraced Ahmet and Amasia heartily.

But he was not a man to lose time, even in the midst of his triumph.

“Now,” said he, “let us go to the judge of Constantinople.”

“Yes, uncle, to the judge’s house,” said Ahmet. “Oh, uncle, you are indeed the best of men.”

“Well, what did I tell you?” replied Kéraban. “I am not at all headstrong unless I am thwarted!”

We need not dwell upon the succeeding events. That very afternoon the judge received the contract, the Imaum said prayers in the mosque; then, on returning to Galata, Ahmet was married, and well married, to his dear Amasia, the rich banker’s daughter, on that 30th September, before the clock struck midnight.

That same evening, Van Mitten, quite subdued, was preparing to depart for Kurdistan with Yanar and Saraboul, and in that distant country the last ceremony would finally make Saraboul his wife.

As they were bidding farewell to Ahmet, Amasia, Nedjeb, and Bruno, Van Mitten could not help saying to Kéraban in a reproachful tone —

“When I think, Kéraban, that because I did not like to thwart you, I am married a second time — !”

“My poor Van Mitten, if this marriage turns out anything but a dream, I will never forgive myself,” replied Kéraban.

“A dream! Does it look like it! This telegram — ”

As he spoke, he unfolded it again, and perused it mechanically.

“Yes, this despatch: — ’ Madame Van Mitten, who Jive weeks ago deceased, — to rejoin her husband.’”

“Deceased to rejoin!” exclaimed Kéraban, “what does that mean?”

Then, snatching the telegram, he read, “Madame Van Mitten, who five weeks ago decided to rejoin her husband, has started for Constantinople.”

“Decided, not deceased!” Then he is not a widower! These words escaped everyone, and Kéraban, not without reason, added —

“Another error in these stupid telegrams. They never make anything else but mistakes.”

“No, I am not a widower, not a widower,” repeated Van Mitten, “and too delighted to return to my first wife, for fear of the second!”

When Yanar and Saraboul understood the case, there was a terrible explosion, but they were obliged to yield at last. Van Mitten was a married man, and that day he was reunited to his wife, who brought him, as a peace offering, a magnificent Valentia bulb. “We shall do better, my sister,” said Yanar, “much better than — ”

“That icicle of a Dutchman,” said Saraboul. “That will not be a difficult matter.”

So they departed for Kurdistan, but it is probable that the handsome indemnity paid by Kéraban tended to render their return less irksome.

However, Kéraban could not always have a rope extended between Constantinople and Scutari, to cross the Bosphorus. Did he, therefore, cease to cross?

No. For some time he would not yield, and remained firm. But one day he offered to buy up the tax on caiques, and the offer was accepted by the government. This cost him a large sum, no doubt, but he became more popular than ever; and strangers never fail to pay a visit to Kéraban the Inflexible as one of the most astonishing curiosities of the capital of the Ottoman Empire!

THE END

THE ARCHIPELAGO ON FIRE

Anonymous translation, 1885

This adventure novel is set during the Greek War of Independence 1821-1832.

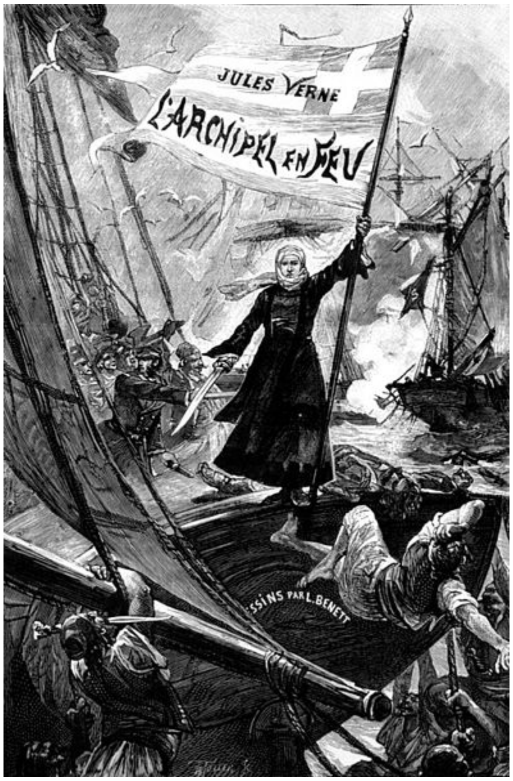
JULES VERNE
L'ARCHIPEL EN FEU
DESSINS PAR L. BENETT

The original frontispiece

THE ARCHIPELAGO ON FIRE

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CHAPTER I.

A SHIP IN THE OFFING.

ON the 18th of October, 1827, about five o’clock in the evening, a small Levantine vessel was heading close-hauled for Vitylo, in the Gulf of Koron, endeavouring to reach that port before nightfall.

Vitylo, the ancient Oitylos of Homer, is situated in one of the three deep indentations which on the Ionian and Aegean coasts cut into the mulberry leaf to which southern Greece has been so aptly compared. This mulberry leaf is the Peloponnesus of the ancients, the Morea of the moderns. The first of its indentations on the west is the Gulf of Koron, between Messene and Maina; the second is the Gulf of Kolokythi, cutting back some distance into Laconia the severe the third is the Gulf of Nauplia, whose waters divide Laconia from Argolis.

Vitylo is in the first of these three bays. On its eastern shore, at the end of an irregular preek, it lies sheltered at the foot of one of the advanced buttresses of Taygetus, whose orographical prolongation forms the backbone of this district of Maina. The safety of its anchorages, the direction of its channels, and the covering heights around, make it one of the best of harbours on a coast ceaselessly swept by every wind of the Mediterranean.

The craft, laid as close as possible to the freshening breeze from the north north-west, was invisible from the wharves of Vitylo. She was six to seven miles away; and although the air was clear enough, the top edge of her higher canvas had not yet appeared above the luminous horizon.

But what could not be seen from below could be seen from above, that is to say, from the hills round the village. Vitylo is built in the form of an amphitheatre on the rugged rocks which defend the old acropolis of Kelapha. Above it rise several ruined towers of an origin long prior to that of the curious remains of the Temple of Serapis, whose Ionic columns and capitals now ornament the village church. Near the old towers are two or three chapels where the monks hold service, but which are seldom visited.

And here perhaps some explanation is required of this “hold service,” and even of “monks,” as applied to the Caloyers of the Messenian coast; one of the latter is just leaving the chapel, and we can study him from nature.

In those days religion in Greece was a curious mixture of pagan legend and Christian belief. Many of the faithful looked upon the goddesses of antiquity as the saints of the new religion, and, as Mr. Henry Bell has remarked,” amalgamated the saints with the demigods, the angels of Paradise with the elves of the enchanted valleys, and called on all the sirens and furies of the Panagia.” Hence many strange practices and many anomalies at which we might smile, and hence a clergy very little inclined to clear away so feebly orthodox a chaos.

During the first quarter of the present century more especially — for our story opens some fifty years ago — the clergy of the Peninsula were steeped in ignorance, and the monks — a careless, simple-minded, homely, genial set — seemed little fitted to guide a naturally superstitious people.

Would that the Caloyers had only been ignorant! In certain districts, however, and particularly in the wilder parts of Maina, these paupers by nature and necessity, these persistent beggars for the few drachmas thrown them by charitable travellers, having nothing to do beyond holding out to the faithful some apocryphal image of a saint to be kissed, or trimming the lamp in the saint’s niche, and despairing at the pitiful income from tithes, confessions, burials, and baptisms, had not been ashamed to act as look-outs — and such look-outs — for the people of the coast.

And so as soon as the Vitylo sailors caught sight of the Caloyer hurrying down to the village and signalling with his arms, they jumped to their feet, for they were lying sprawling about the harbour in the style *of* the Lazzaroni, who take hours to recover from a few minutes’ work. He was a man of from forty to fifty-five, corpulent, with that greasy corpulence due to idleness, and with a countenance whose cunning expression was anything but reassuring.

“What is the news, father?” exclaimed one of the sailors, running to meet him.

The Vitylian spoke in that nasal tone which leads us to believe that Naso must have been one of the ancestors of the Greeks, and in the Mainot dialect, in which Greek, Turkish, Italian, and Albanian are all mixed up as if it had existed at the time of the building of Babel.

“Have Ibrahim’s soldiers invaded the heights of Taygetus?” asked another sailor, with a careless gesture that said very little for his patriotism.

“Unless it is the French!” answered the first speaker.

“They are worth more!” replied a third.

And the reply showed what little interest the inhabitants of the Southern Peloponnesus took in the war which was then in its most critical stage —

thereby differing considerably from the Mainots of the north, who distinguished themselves so brilliantly in the struggle for independence.

But the corpulent Caloyer would answer neither one nor the other. Out of breath from his rapid descent of the cliff, he stood there puffing and panting. He would have spoken, but could not. One of his ancestors in Hellas, the soldier of Marathon, before falling dead, had been able to announce the victory of Miltiades; but we are not now concerned with Miltiades nor with the wars of the Athenians, and Persians; we are hardly dealing with Greeks, but with the wildest race of the remotest point of Maina.

“Come, speak up, father, speak up!” exclaimed an old sailor, named Gozzo, who was more impatient than the rest, as if he guessed what the monk was going to say.

Slowly the fat man recovered his breath. Then, pointing towards the horizon, he said, —

“A sail in sight!”

And at these words every idler arose, clapped his hands, and scrambled up a rock that commanded a view of the harbour. Thence they could scan a wide expanse of the open sea.

A stranger might perhaps have thought that the movement was prompted by the interest naturally felt at a ship arriving from the open. Nothing of the sort, or rather if interest did excite these people, it was interest of quite a special character.

Even at the moment of writing, Maina is still a district apart from the rest of Greece. The Mainots, or rather those who bear the name, living at the extremities of the gulfs, remain in a half-savage state, thinking more of their own liberty than of that of their country. And these remote projections of Morea, it had been almost impossible to subdue; neither the Turkish janissaries nor the Greek gendarmes were equal to the task. Quarrelsome, vindictive, handing down, like the Corsicans, an inheritance of hate that can only be wiped out in blood, thieves from their birth, and although hospitable, assassins when the theft required an assassination, these rude mountaineers claimed to be the descendants of the old Spartans; but shut up in the ramifications of Taygetus, where the almost inaccessible little citadels or pyrgos can be counted in thousands, they lived the life of the robber barons of the middle ages, and exercised their feudal rights with the aid of the dagger and the gun.

And if the Mainots now are semi-savages, it is easy to imagine what they were fifty years ago. Before the steamers had swept them from the sea in the earlier third of the century, they were the most redoubtable pirates to be met with in the Levant.

And Vitylo by its situation at the very end of the Peloponnesus, at the gate of two seas, and its proximity to the island of Cerigo, so dear to the Corsairs, was admirably placed to receive the scoundrels who swarmed in the Archipelago and the neighbouring parts of the Mediterranean. The district into which the people of this part of Maina were principally concentrated bore the special name of Kakovonni, and the Kakovonniotes, planted across the promontory that terminates in Matapan, could operate as they pleased. On sea they could attack the ships; on land they could draw them to destruction by false signals. Every way they robbed and burnt. Little did it matter to them if the crews were Turkish, Maltese, Egyptian, or even Greek; pitilessly they were massacred, or sold as slaves. And when trade grew slack, and coasters appeared but rarely in the gulfs of Koron, or Kolokythi, or from Cerigo or Cape Gallo, public prayers were offered to God in the storms, that He would condescend to cast ashore some vessel of heavy tonnage and rich cargo. And the Caloyers never refused to offer such prayers for the greater profit of their flocks.

For many weeks no pillage had been possible. No vessel had come ashore on the coast of Maina. And it was like a burst of joy when the monk, between his asthmatic pantings, gave forth the words, —

“A sail in sight!”

Immediately there sounded the dull heavy strokes of the simander — that wooden bell with the iron tongue in use in these provinces where the Turks would allow no bells of metal — and the lugubrious strokes brought together the whole population, men, women, children, savage dogs and tame dogs, all equally eager for pillage and massacre. And the Vitylians gathered on tne cliff discussed in a loud tone the approach of the vessel signalled by the Caloyer.

With the nor’-nor’-westerly breeze freshening as the night fell, the ship advanced rapidly on the starboard tack. From her course it seemed as though she had come from Crete. Her hull began to appear above the white foam she was leaving behind her, but her sails formed as yet but a confused mass to the eye. It was no easy matter to make out her rig; and hence the shouts that each moment contradicted each other.

“She is a xebec!” said one of the sailors. “I see the square sails on her mizen.”

“No,” answered another, “she is a pink! see how high in the stern and broad in the bow she is.”

“Xebec or pink, who can tell one from the other at this distance?”

“Isn’t she a polacca with square sails?” remarked another sailor, making a telescope of his hands.

“Heaven help us anyhow!” said old Gozzo. “Polacca, pink, or xebec, they are all three-masters, and three masts are worth more than two when they come ashore with a good cargo of wine from Crete, or stuffs from Smyrna!”

After this judicious observation a still more attentive watch was kept on the vessel. She came nearer and nearer, and gradually grew in size, but owing to her sailing so close to the wind it was impossible to get a side view of her. It was not easy to say if she had three masts or two, and therefore the watchers were unable to ascertain what tonnage to expect.

“What miserably unlucky wretches we are!” said Gozzo. “She is only a felucca.”

“Or perhaps a speronare!” exclaimed the Caloyer, as much disappointed as his flock.

And that shouts of disappointment greeted both observations it is hardly necessary to say; but whatever the vessel might be, there could be no doubt that she ranged from about a hundred to a hundred and fifty tons. And after all it mattered not for the cargo to be large if it was rich. These simple feluccas and speronares are often laden with precious wines, fine oils, and expensive tissues. In that case it would be well worth the trouble to attack and capture her as she stood. There was no need to despair. Besides, the older men, who had a good deal of experience in the matter, were very much taken with the look of the craft. The sun began to sink behind the horizon on the west of the Ionian Sea. However, in the October twilight there would still be light enough for an hour to make out the vessel. After rounding Cape Matapan she dropped off a couple of points so as to make the entrance of the gulf more easily, and thus showed herself under better conditions to those who were watching her.

“A saccoleva!” exclaimed Gozzo.

“A saccoleva!” exclaimed his companions, whose disappointment betrayed itself in a volley of curses.

But the discussion was at an end; doubt was no longer possible. The vessel, which was manoeuvring to enter the Gulf of Koron, was a saccoleva. After all, the Vitylians were premature in bewailing their fate. Saccolevas very often carry valuable cargoes.

A saccoleva is a Levantine vessel of moderate tonnage, whose sheer, that is to say, the curve of her deck, gradually increases as it goes aft. Her two pole masts carry lateen sails. Her foremast has square sails, course, topsail, and top-gallant, and these with a couple of jibs complete her singular sail plan. The gay pictures painted on her hull, the curve of her deck, the variety of her masts, and the fantastic cut of her sails, make her one of the most curious specimens of those graceful craft which swarm in the Archipelago.

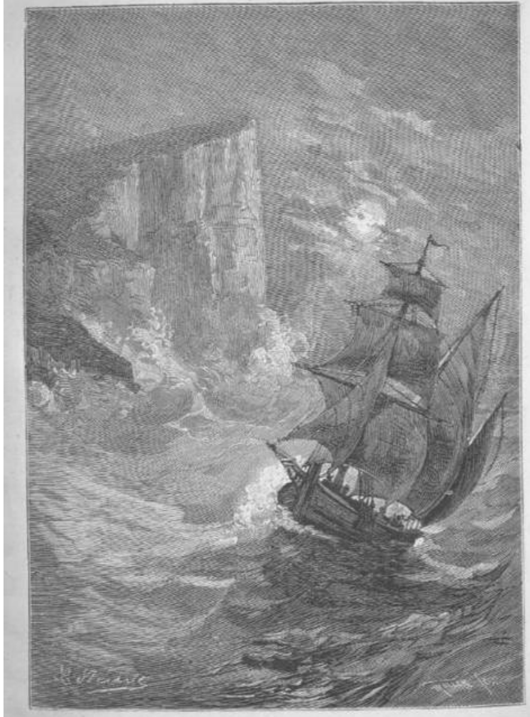

It was a saccoleva. Page 8.

Nothing could be more elegant than this swift little vessel dipping and rising to the waves, crowned with spray, and bounding along without an effort like some enormous bird whose wings skim the sea as it sparkles in the parting rays of the setting sun.

Although the wind increased and the sky became covered with waterspouts, as the Levantines call a certain kind of cloud, the saccoleva took in none of her sail. She had even kept up her top-gallant sail, which a less audacious mariner would certainly have had down. Evidently the captain was coming into harbour, not caring to pass the night on the sea, which was already rough, and promised to be rougher. But if the sailors of Vitylo could no longer doubt that the saccoleva was going to enter the gulf, they were still able to ask themselves if their port was her destination.

“Ah!” exclaimed one, “she is only going to hug the wind; she is not coming ashore.”

“May the devil take her in tow!” remarked another. “Is she going about so as to get an offing on the other tack?”

“Perhaps she is bound for Koron?”

“Or Kalamata?”

Both hypotheses were admissible. Koron is on the Mainot coast, and is much frequented by the traders of the Levant. It exports a good deal of oil to the south of Greece. Kalamata is further up the gulf, and its bazaars are filled with manufactured goods, stuffs, and pottery, which are thence shipped to many of the western states of Europe. It was therefore possible that the saccoleva was bound for one or the other of these ports, much to the disappointment of the Vitylians, who were in eager quest of plunder.

While they were watching her with such interest, the saccoleva made rapid way. She soon got up as high as Vitylo. Now came the moment in which her fate would be decided. If she continued up the gulf, Gozzo and his companions could give up all hope of stopping her. In fact, if they had betaken themselves to the swiftest craft they possessed, they would have no chance of her capture, so superior was her speed under the cloud of canvas that she carried with such ease.

“She is coming in!”

So said the old sailor, launching his bent hand at the little vessel as if it was a grappling-iron.

Gozzo was right. Her helm was put down and the saccoleva came round. As she did so, her top-gallant sail and second jib were taken in. Then her topsail was clewed up. Thus relieved of some of her canvas, she was more under command.

Night was coming on apace. The saccoleva had only just time to get through the channels into Vitylo. Below the water level the entrance was dotted with numerous rocks which she would have to pass in safety or meet with instant and complete destruction. And the signal for a pilot had not yet been hoisted. The captain must know his way in among these dangerous depths, or he would ask for help. Perhaps he despised — so much the better — the Vitylian pilots, who were quite equal to landing him on one of the rocks, and adding his ship to the others that had been lost there.

Besides, at that time there was no such thing as a lighthouse in this part of Maina. A simple port fire was the only guide into the narrow channel.

Meanwhile the saccoleva approached. Soon she was only half a mile from Vitylo. She came on without the slightest hesitation. It was obvious that the man who handled her was no novice.

This was not quite satisfactory to the rascally Vitylians. It was to their interest that this vessel should go to pieces on one of the rocks. Once the ship was wrecked, the plunder would follow. Such was the customary routine, and it saved them a hand-to-hand fight, in which some of them might lose their lives.

Gozzo’s companions accordingly left their post of observation and ran down to the harbour. There they set to work on those familiar devices which all the wreck robbers use, either in the Levant or elsewhere. To lead the saccoleva to destruction in the narrow passages of the channel, by guiding her in a false direction, was easy enough in the darkness, which, without being profound, was deep enough to render her working difficult.

“A port fire!” said Gozzo, whom his comrades obeyed without hesitation.

The old sailor was understood. Two minutes afterwards, the fire — merely a lantern hoisted on a pole at the quay-head was suddenly extinguished.

At the same instant, the light was replaced by another which was at first placed in the same direction; but if the first, remaining motionless on the mole, showed the navigator a fixed point to steer by, the second, thanks to its mobility, would lead him out of the channel on to one of the rocks; for it was a lantern whose light was the same as that of the port fire, hung on to the horns of a goat, which was gently driven up the cliff. It consequently shifted its position as the goat moved, and ought to have led the saccoleva to destruction.

It was not the first time that the good folks of Vitylo had done this. Not by any means. And it was very rare that they failed in their little enterprise.

The saccoleva entered the channel. Having furled the mainsail, she was under mizen and’ jib, quite sufficient sail to bring her to her anchorage.

To the extreme surprise of the sailors on the watch, the little vessel came down the winding channel with incredible assurance. Of the moving light on the goat’s horns she seemed to take not the slightest notice. Had it been broad daylight, she could not have manoeuvred more correctly. Her captain had evidently been to Vitylo before, and knew the way well enough to bring his ship in during the darkest night.

At last the bold sailor could be seen. His figure stood out in the shadow on the bow of the saccoleva. He was wrapped in the large folds of his aba, a sort of linen mantle which has the hood falling on to the head. His attitude showed that he had nothing in common with those humble padrones such as are met with everywhere throughout the Archipelago, who hold a rosary between their fingers as they con the ship. No; this man only occupied himself in giving his orders in a deep calm voice to the helmsman at the stern. And now the lantern walking up the cliff was suddenly extinguished. It made no difference to the saccoleva, which imperturbably kept on her way. For an instant it seemed that she must run on a dangerous rock, whose surface was awash with the tide, and which about a cable's length away it was impossible to see in the gloom. A slight movement of the helm brought the ship up a little; and nearly grazing the rock, she kept on in safety.

Another word to the steersman when it was necessary to skirt another rock that left but a narrow passage through the channel — a rock on which many a ship had struck on her way in, with or without thanks to an accomplice of the Vitylians.

All chance of the saccoleva being delivered into their hands by shipwreck was at an end. In a few minutes she would be at anchor. To capture her the Vitylians would have to board.

It was resolved to do so. After a little consultation the preparations were commenced in a darkness highly favourable for the attempt.

"To the boats!" said Gozzo, whose orders were never disobeyed — when he led on to plunder.

Thirty powerful men, some armed with pistols, more of them with daggers and axes, jumped into the boats moored to the quay, and advanced in number evidently superior to the crew of the saccoleva.

At this instant a word of command was heard on board, brief and decisive. The saccoleva, after leaving the channel, found herself in the centre of the harbour. Her halyards were let go, her anchor dropped, and she remained motionless after the slight grating as the chain ran out.

The boats were but a few fathoms off. Even without showing exaggerated defiance, the crew, knowing the evil reputation of the Vitylo people, might, have been armed so as to be, if needed, in a state of defence.

There was nothing of the sort in this case. THE captain of the saccoleva, after he had anchored, had gone aft, while his men, without troubling themselves about the arrival of the boats, were quietly getting the sails in order and clearing up the deck. And the sails were so stowed as to be available for use at a moment’s notice.

The first boat struck the saccoleva on the starboard quarter: the others followed immediately. And as the freeboard was very low, the assailants in full cry had only to stride over to reach the deck.

The most energetic rushed to the stern. One of them seized a lighted lantern and held it to the captain’s face.

The captain, with a movement of his hand, threw back his hood on to his shoulders; his face appeared in the full blaze of the light.

“Well!” said he, “then you Vitylo gentlemen do not recognize your old comrade, Nicholas Starkos?”

As the captain spoke, he coolly crossed his arms. A minute later the boats had fled from the ship and were moored to the quay.

CHAPTER II.

FACE TO FACE.

TEN minutes had hardly elapsed before a gig left the saccoleva and brought to the foot of the jetty, companionless and weaponless, the man before whom the Vitylians had so hastily fled.

He was the captain of the *Karysta* — such was the name of the little vessel just anchored in the port. He was of medium height, and under his broad sailor's cap a high and haughty forehead was visible. Above his lip a pair of Klepht moustaches stuck out horizontally, ending in thick tufts instead of in a point. His chest was broad, his limbs were powerful. His black hair fell in ringlets on his shoulders. If he had passed thirty-five, it could be only by a few months. But his complexion, tanned by the breeze, the hard set look, and the wrinkle in his forehead like a furrow from which nothing honest could spring, made him appear older than he really was.

His costume, the same as he always wore, was neither the jacket, the waistcoat, nor the fustianello of Palikare. His caftan, with its brown hood, embroidered with its quiet coloured braid, his greenish pantaloons hanging in large folds and thrust into his high boots, resembled much more nearly the sailor's dress of these barbarous coasts.

And Nicholas Starkos was not only a Greek by birth, but a native of Vitylo. Here he had passed his early youth. Boy and man, it was among these rocks that he had served his apprenticeship to the sea. It was in this neighbourhood that he had learnt the ways of the currents and the winds. Not a creek was there of which he could not tell the depths and the shores; not a reef, not a bank, not a submarine rock whose position was unknown to him; not a bend in the channel whose twists and turns he was not capable of following without compass or pilot. It is easy, then, to understand how, in spite of the false signals of his compatriots, he had been able to bring in the saccoleva with so sure a hand. Besides, he knew that caution was desirable in dealing with the Vitylians. He had seen them at work; and perhaps he did not disapprove of their plundering instincts, so long as he himself did not suffer by them.

But if he knew them, they knew Nicholas Starkos equally well. After the death of his father, who was one of the thousands of the victims of Turkish cruelty, his mother, maddened by hate, had hesitated not a moment to throw herself into the first rising against Ottoman tyranny. When he was eighteen, he had left Maina for the sea, and more especially for the Archipelago, where he not only followed the trade of a sailor, but added to it that of a pirate. No one knew on what ships he had served during this period of his life, under what filibusters or corsairs he had been, under what flag he had first borne arms, or what blood had first flowed at his hand — whether that of the enemies of Greece or that of her defenders. Frequently, however, had he returned to the different ports in the Gulf of Koron. A few of his companions had told of the feats of piracy in which they had taken part with him; of the merchant ships they had attacked and destroyed, of the rich cargoes they had shared amongst them. But a certain mystery surrounded the name of Nicholas Starkos, though, at the same time, he was so favourably known in Maina that every one greeted him with respect.

And thus is explained his reception by the natives of Vitylo, his meeting them alone, and their abandoning the plan of plundering the saccoleva as soon as they discovered who commanded her.

When the captain of the *Karysta* reached the wharf, a little beyond the mole, men and women ran up to receive him, and respectfully formed a line to welcome him as he passed. As he left the boat, not a sound was heard. It seemed as though Nicholas Starkos had sufficient prestige to command silence by merely a look. The people waited till he spoke, and if he did not speak which was possible none of them would dare address him.

After ordering his men to take the gig on board, Starkos started towards the angle the wharf makes at the harbour end. But in less than a dozen strides he stopped, and, turning to the old man who followed him as if waiting for some command, “Gozzo,” said he, “I want ten strong active men to complete my crew.”

“You shall have them, Nicholas Starkos,” was Gozzo’s answer.

The captain of the *Karysta* might have asked for a hundred if he could have found them, and taken first choice among the whole seafaring population. And the hundred, without asking where they were going, to what trade they were destined, or on whose account they were to sail or fight, would have followed their compatriot, ready to share his fate, knowing that in one way or another they would be in safe hands.

“Let the ten men be on board the *Karysta* in an hour!” added the captain.

“They shall be there!” replied Gozzo.

Starkos, showing by a gesture that he did not wish to be followed any further, walked off the quay and disappeared up one of the narrow roads opening on to the harbour.

Old Gozzo returned to his companions, and busied himself in selecting the ten men to complete the crew of the saccoleva.

Starkos gradually made his way up the slopes of the cliff on which the village is built. At the height he had reached, the only sound he could hear was the barking of the dogs — mastiff-looking dogs, with tremendous jaws, almost as formidable to travellers as jackals and wolves. A few gulls were sailing round below him, and with lazy little flaps of their large wings flying back to the shore.

Starkos was not long before he passed the last houses of Vitylo, and then he took a rough footpath leading up round the acropolis of Kerapha. After skirting the ruins of a citadel that had once been raised here by Villehardouin when many such spots in the Peloponnesus were occupied by the Crusaders, he reached the foot of the old towers with which the cliff is still crowned. There he stopped for a moment; then he turned and looked back.

On the horizon, this side of Cape Gallo, the moon’s crescent was just sinking in the waters of the Ionian Sea. A few stars were twinkling in the narrow gaps between the clouds. During the lulls in the breeze, absolute silence reigned round the acropolis. Two or three tiny sails, only just visible, were gliding across the gulf towards Koron, or farther up, towards Kalamata. Without the lamp at the mast-head it would have been impossible to discover them. Below burnt seven or eight fires at different points on the sea-shore, whose light was multiplied by the trembling reverberation of the water. Were the fires from fishingboats, or from houses lighting up for the night? No one could say.

Nicholas Starkos, with his eyes accustomed to the darkness, glanced round the wide stretch of sea. The eye of the sailor possessed a power of penetrating vision, which permitted him to see what others could not. But at the moment it seemed as though exterior things were making no impression on the captain of the *Karysta*, accustomed, as he doubtless was, to far different scenes. No. He was looking within, and not without. His native air, the breath of the country, he breathed almost unconsciously. And he remained motionless, thoughtful, his arms crossed, while his head, with his hood thrown off it, was as still as if it had been stone.

For nearly a quarter of an hour Starkos remained gazing towards the western horizon, and then he began to ascend the hill again. His footsteps were not guided by chance. A secret thought led him on; but it seemed as though his eyes avoided seeing what he had come to seek on the cliffs of Vitylo.

Nothing can be more desolate than this coast from Cape Matapan to the top of the gulf. It boasts neither orange, lemon, eglantine, laurel, jasmine, fig, arbutus, mulberry, nor any of the trees and bushes which make of certain parts of Greece a green and fruitful country. Not an oak, a plane, or pomegranate breaks the solemn curtain of its cypresses and cedars. Heaped up everywhere lie the masses of rock that the next volcanic outburst would precipitate into the waters of the gulf. Everywhere throughout Maina a sort of wild ruggedness reigns. A few gaunt pinetrees there are, distorted and fantastic, whose resin has been taken and whose sap has gone, and the deep wounds in whose trunks lie open. Here and there lie a few straggling cactuses, regular spiny thistles, whose leaves resemble half-skinned hedgehogs. Nowhere, in short, not even among the stunted bushes, or on the ground itself, which consists more of gravel than of vegetable mould, is there enough to feed the goats on; and little, indeed, do goats require.

After a few paces, Starkos stopped again. Then he returned towards the north-east, where the lengthening crest of Taygetus cut with its profile the less gloomy depths of the sky. One or two stars, gleaming like huge glow-worms, were just rising above the horizon.

Starkos remained motionless. His eyes rested on a small cottage, built of wood, on the ridge, about fifty yards away; a modest dwelling, isolated above the village, attainable only by the steep footpath, built in the centre of an enclosure of a few half-ruined trees, and surrounded by a spiny hedge. The house seemed to have been abandoned for some time; the hedge was in a bad state, here in thicket, there in gaps, and offered but a feeble barrier for its protection; the stray dogs and jackals that haunted the spot in the past had more than once laid waste this little corner of Mainot ground. Noxious herbs and bushes had been brought thither by Nature as soon as the place no longer felt the hand of man.

And why this abandonment? Because the owner of this piece of ground had been dead for many years. Because his widow, Andronika Starkos, had left the district to join those valiant women who played so conspicuous a part in the War of Independence., Because hereon, since his first going away, had never set foot in his father’s home.

There Nicholas Starkos had been born. There had he passed the early years of his childhood. His father, after a long and honest life as a sailor, had . retired thither, keeping himself apart from the people of Vitylo,” whose excesses he viewed with horror. Better educated, and in better circumstances than the natives of the harbour, he had been able to keep his wife and child aloof from them. He lived thus in this lonely retreat, forgotten and in peace, when one day, in a moment of anger, he tried to resist his country’s oppressors, and paid for his resistance with his life. There was no escape from Turkish emissaries even at the furthest ends of the peninsula.

The father was there no longer to guide his son; the mother was powerless to restrain him. Nicholas Starkos deserted his home to become a sea-rover, bringing to the aid of the pirates and piracy that marvellous genius for seamanship which he had inherited.

For ten years the house had been abandoned by the son; for six years by the mother. It was said in the neighbourhood, however, that Andronika occasionally returned thither. She was thought to have been seen there at rare intervals, and for but a few moments, without communicating in any way with the inhabitants of Vitylo.

As for Nicholas Starkos, never before to-day, although once or twice his voyages had by chance brought him to Maina, had he shown any intention of revisiting the humble cottage on the cliff. Never had he asked a question as to the state it was in. Never had he alluded to his mother, to ascertain if she had returned to the deserted home. But in the tales of the terrible events which deluged Greece in blood, the name of Andronika probably reached him — a name which should have filled him with remorse, had not his conscience been impenetrable.

And now Nicholas Starkos had come to Vitylo, not. alone to add ten men to the crew of the saccoleva, but because a desire — more than a desire — an imperious instinct, for which he could not account, had driven him there. He felt himself forced to return home, for the last time doubtless, to tread once more that spot of ground on which his earliest footsteps had trod; to breathe the air shut in by its walls which he had inhaled with his first breath, and with which he had lisped the first syllables of infancy. That was why he had mounted the rugged footpaths of the cliff, and that was why at this moment he found himself before the gate of the enclosure.

There he hesitated. His heart was not quite so hard that it could not soften a little in the presence of these memories of the past. The man does not live whose feelings are unthrilled when he revisits the spot where he first felt the touch of a mother’s hand. The fibres of a man’s frame are never so strung but that one does not vibrate at the remembrance of that touch.

And so it was with Nicholas Starkos as he stopped on the threshold of the deserted hut, as sombre, as silent, as dead within as it was without.

“Enter! Yes! Enter!”

These were the first words he had uttered. And these he only whispered, as if afraid that they would evoke some apparition of the past.

To enter the enclosure — what could be easier? The bar was out of place; the posts lay on the ground. There was not even a door to open, or a rail to push back.

Starkos entered. He stopped before the house whose weather-boards, half-rotted by the rain, held on by the worn and rusted ends of the ironwork.

As he did so, a brown owl gave a scream and flew out of a tuft of mastic-trees which grew in the doorway.

Again Starkos hesitated. Nevertheless, he was resolved to see the room in the cottage. But he was deeply hurt to find himself a prey to a sort of remorse. He was agitated, but he was angry as well. It seemed as though the paternal roof was as it were a protest against him, a parting malediction.

And so, before entering the house, he resolved to walk round it. The night was dark. No one would see him; he would not see himself. In broad daylight it might not have suggested itself to him. In the darkness of night he felt bold enough to brave its memories.

Then, with furtive step, like a criminal reconnoitring the surroundings of a house he is about to rob, see him skirt the walls that broke away at each angle, turning the corner whose crumbling edge stands hidden by the moss, feeling with his hand the tottering stones as if to see if a little life still dwells in this corpse of a house, listening if its heart still beats. At the back, the enclosure lay in deeper gloom. The slanting rays of the fast vanishing moon no longer reached there.

Starkos slowly made his way round. The dismal cottage maintained a disquieting silence. It seemed to be haunted. He returned to the front facing the west. Then he approached the door to open it if it was not locked; to force it if the bolt was still in the staple.

Then the blood mounted to his eyes. He grew red — red as fire. The house that he had come to visit once again, he dare not enter. It seemed to him that his father or his mother would appear on the threshold with arms stretched forth to curse him — the bad son and bad citizen, traitor to his family, and traitor to his country.

Slowly the door opened. A woman appeared on the threshold. She was clothed in the Mainot costume, black cotton skirt with narrow red border, dark coloured jacket cut to the figure, on her head a large brownish cap wrapped round with a handkerchief of the colours of the Greek flag.

The woman had an energetic face, with large black eyes of almost savage vivacity, and a complexion as brown as that of the fisherwomen of the coast. She was tall and upright, though certainly not less than sixty years of age.

It was Andronika Starkos. The mother and the son, separated so long, were face to face.

Nicholas Starkos had not expected to find himself in the presence of his mother. He was startled at the apparition.

Andronika stretched out her hand and forbade his entering the house. But a few words she spoke, and these were they, and these in a voice that made them terrible, —

“Never shall Nicholas Starkos set foot in his father’s house! Never!”

And the son, submitting to the command, gradually drew back. His feelings, however, urged him on as though they urged a traitor. He would advance — a still more energetic gesture that seemed to curse him — and he stopped.

He turned away. He escaped from the enclosure, he retook the path down the cliff, he descended it hurriedly, and never once turned back, as though some invisible hand were pushing him down by his shoulders.

Andronika, motionless on the threshold of her house, watched him disappear into the night.

Ten minutes later Starkos was again master of his feelings, and, reaching the harbour, hailed the gig and went on board the saccoleva.

Without a word he mounted the deck of the *Karysta*, and, by a sign, gave the order to get under way.

The manoeuvre was soon executed. The sails, arranged for a prompt farewell, had only to be run up. The land breeze, just rising, rendered his departure from the harbour quite easy.

Five minutes later the *Karysta* was moving down the channel surely and silently, without a single shout from the men on board or from the folks of Vitylo.

But the saccoleva had not got a mile out before a fire illuminated the crest of the cliff.

It was the cottage of Andronika Starkos, ablaze from its foundations. The mother’s hand had lighted the flames. She wished not a vestige to remain of the house in which her son was born.

For three miles or more the captain could not withdraw his gaze from the fire that burnt on the Mainot coast, and he followed it in the shadow to its last gleam.

Andronika had said, “Never shall Nicholas Starkos set foot in his father’s house! Never!”

CHAPTER III.

GREEKS AGAINST TURKS.

IN times prehistoric, when the earth’s crust was being slowly moulded into shape, Greece owed its birth to a cataclysm, which thrust it above sea level while the continent to the east and south of it sank beneath the waves. The hills of that old continent are the islands of the Archipelago. Greece is in fact on the line of volcanic force running through Cyprus and Tuscany.

It would seem as though the Hellenes owed to their country’s unstable soil the instinct of that physical and moral restlessness which led them to such excess in heroic deeds. Thanks to their natural gifts and their indomitable courage, their patriotism and their love of liberty, they have succeeded in making an independent state out of the provinces crushed for so many centuries beneath the Turkish yoke.

Pelasgic in the remotest times, when it was peopled by tribes from Asia; Hellenic from the sixteenth to the fourteenth century before the Christian Era in the days of the Hellenes — from one of whose tribes, the Graii, it obtained its name in the almost mythologie period of the Argonauts; the Heraclidae, and the Trojan war; Greek from the days of Lycurgus with Miltiades, Themistocles, Aristides, Leonidas, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Thucydides, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Phidias, Pericles, Alcibiades, Pelopidas, Epaminondas, Demosthenes; then Macedonian with Philip and Alexander; Greece ended by becoming a Roman province under the name of Achaia, B.C. 146, and continuing so for four centuries.

After then it was invaded in succession by Visigoths, Vandals, Ostrogoths, Bulgarians, Sclavs, Arabs, Normans, and Sicilians; conquered by the

Crusaders at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and split up into a great number of fiefs in the fifteenth; and finally this much-troubled country sank into insignificance in the hands of the Turks.

For nearly two hundred years it may be said that the political life of Greece was absolutely extinct. The despotism of the Ottoman functionaries who then represented authority exceeded all limits. The Greeks were neither an annexed, a conquered, nor a vanquished people; they were slaves beneath the whip of the pasha, who had the imam or priest on his right hand, and the jellah or executioner on his left.

But all life had not yet abandoned the dying country. At last its heart began to beat under the very excess of its sorrow. The Montenegrins of Epirus in 1766, the Mainots in 1769, the Suliots of Albania, rose and proclaimed their independence; but in 1804 the whole of this attempt at insurrection was crushed by Ali Pàsha of Yanina.

The time had not yet come when the European powers were to decline to help in the total annihilation of Greece. Left to itself, it could not but die in its attempt to recover its independence.

In 1821 the Pasha of Yanina himself revolted against the Sultan Mahmoud, and called the Greeks to his aid under promise of their liberty, Philhellenes gathered to help from all parts of Europe. Italians, Poles, Germans, and Frenchmen, ranged themselves against the oppressors. The names of Guy de Sainte Hélene, of Gaillard, of Chauvassaigne, of Captains Baleste and Jourdain, of Colonel Fabvier, of Major Regnaud de Saint Jean d’Angély, of General.Maison, and last, but not least, those of the three Englishmen, Lord Cochrane, Lord Byron, and Colonel Hastings, will live for ever in the memory of the country for whom they came to fight and to die. With these men rendered illustrious by all that devotion to the cause of the oppressed could render heroic, Greece was represented — the three Hydriots, Tombasis, Tsamados, Miaoulis, and Colocotroni, Marco Bozzaris, Mavrocordato, Mavromichalis, Constantine Canaris, Negris, Constantine and Demetrius Ypsilanti, Ulysses, and many others. From the outset, the rising became a war to the knife, tooth for tooth, eye for eye, provoking the most horrible reprisals on either side.

In 1821 the Suliots and the Mainots broke into insurrection. At Patras, Bishop Germanos, cross in hand, took the lead. Morea, Moldavia, the Archipelago raised the standard of independence. The Hellenes, victorious on the sea, succeeded in taking Tripolizza. At the first news of these successes the Turks replied by the massacre of all the Greeks in Constantinople.

In 1822 Ali, besieged in his fortress of Yanina, was shamefully assassinated at a conference to which he had been invited by the Turkish general Kourschid. Not long afterwards Mavrocordato and the Philhellenes were routed at the battle of Arta, to recover the advantage, however, at the first siege of Missolonghi, which Omar Vrioni was obliged to raise after suffering considerable loss.

In 1823, foreign powers began to intervene.’ They proposed a mediation to the Sultan. The Sultan refused, and to give weight to his refusal landed ten thousand Asiatic soldiers in Euboea, and gave the command in chief of the Turkish Army to his vassal, Mehemet Ali, Pasha of Egypt. It was during this year that there occurred the death of Marco Bozzaris, the patriot, of whom it has been said, “He lived like Aristides, and died like Leonidas.”

In 1824, that year of misfortune for the cause of Independence, Lord Byron landed on the 24th of January, and on Easter Day died at Missolonghi, without finding any advance towards the accomplishment of his dream. The

Ipsariots were massacred by the Turks, and the town of Candia in Crete surrendered to the soldiers of Mehemet Ali. The only consolation for the Greeks amid so many disasters was in the victories at sea.

In 1825, Ibrahim Pasha, the son of Mehemet Ali, landed at Modon in the Morea, with eleven thousand men. He captured Navarino, and defeated Colocotrini at Tripolizza. It was then that the Greek Government entrusted a body of regulars to the Frenchmen, Fabvier and Regnaud de Saint Jean d'Angély; but before these troops were ready to resist him, Ibrahim devastated Messenia and Maina. He abandoned his operations in those districts only to take part in the second siege of Missolonghi, which General Kioutagi could not succeed in capturing, although the Sultan had told him "Either Missolonghi or your head."

In 1826, on the 5th of January, after the burning of Pyrgos, Ibrahim arrived before Missolonghi. For three days, from the 25th to the 28th, he rained on to the town eight thousand shells and shot, without being able to enter even after a triple assault, although he had to deal with only two thousand four hundred combatants enfeebled by famine. He was bound, however, to succeed, particularly after Miaoulis and his relieving squadron had been repulsed. On the 23rd of April, after a siege which had cost the lives of nineteen hundred of the defenders, Missolonghi fell into the power of Ibrahim, and his soldiers massacred men, women, and children, and nearly all that survived out of its nine thousand inhabitants. In the same year, the Turks under Kioutagi, after ravaging Phocis and Bœotia, arrived at Thebes on the 10th of July, entered Attica, invested Athens, and laid siege to the Acropolis, which was then defended by fifteen hundred Greeks. With the help of the citadel, the key of Greece, the new Government sent Karaiskakis, one of the combatants at Missolonghi, and Colonel Fabvier with his regulars. The battle fought at Chaidari was lost, and Kioutagi continued the siege of the Acropolis. At the same time, Karaiskakis was fighting in the defiles of Parnassus, and on the 5th of December beat the Turks at Arachova, and raised a trophy on the battle-field of three hundred of their heads. Northern Greece was then almost entirely freed.

Unfortunately, owing to these struggles, the Archipelago was handed over to the most formidable corsairs who had ever desolated those seas. And amongst these, it was said one of the boldest and most sanguinary was the pirate Sacratif, whose very name was a terror throughout the Levant.

Seven months before our story opens, the Turks had been obliged to take refuge in the strong places of Southern Greece. In February, 1827, the Greeks had reconquered their independence from the Gulf of Arta to the confines of Attica. The Turkish flag no longer floated over Missolonghi, Vonizza', or Naupacte. On the 31st of March, under the influence of Lord Cochrane, the Greeks of the North and the Greeks of the Peloponnesus abandoned their intestine struggles, and united in sending representatives of the nation to Trezene, and concentrating all power in a single hand, that of a foreigner, a Russian diplomatist of Greek birth, Capo d'Istria, a native of Corfu.

But Athens was still in the hands of the Turks. Its citadel had capitulated on the 5th of June. Northern Greece was then compelled to submit. On the 6th of July France, England, Russia, and Austria signed a convention which, while admitting the suzerainty of the Porte, recognized the existence of the Greek nation, and by a secret article the signatory powers engaged to unite against the Sultan if he refused to accept a pacific arrangement.

Such are the general facts of this sanguinary war, which should be borne in mind by the reader, as they are very closely connected with what follows. And now for the special facts which concern the personages of this dramatic history, among the foremost of whom comes Andronika, the widow of the patriot Starkos.

The struggle for their country’s independence not only brought forth heroes, but heroines also appeared whose names are gloriously connected with the events of the period.

Amongst them was Bobolina, born in a small island at the entrance of the Gulf of Nauplia. In 1812 her husband was made prisoner, taken to Constantinople, and impaled by order of the Sultan. As soon as the War of Independence broke out, Bobolina in 1821, out of her own resources, equipped three ships, and as related by Mr. H. Bell from the information of an old Klepht, after hoisting her flag, which bore the motto of the Spartan women, *“Over or under,”* sailed away to Asia Minor, capturing and burning the Turkish ships with the intrepidity of a Tsamados or a Canaris; then having generously handed over her ships to the new government, she assisted at the siege of Tripolizza, organized a blockade round Nauplia, which lasted for fourteen months, and at last forced the citadel to surrender. This woman, whose whole life was a romance, met her death from being stabbed by her brother in a family quarrel.

Another grand figure deserves to be placed side by side with this valiant Hydriot. Similar effects invariably produce similar results. By the Sultan’s orders there was strangled at Constantinople the father of Modena Mavrœinis, a woman whose beauty was worthy of her birth. Modena immediately joined the insurrection, raised the people of Mycone in revolt, armed their ships, organized guerilla companies, and took the command, stopped the army of Selim Pasha in the narrow gorges of Pelion, and till the end of the war distinguished herself brilliantly, harassing the Turks in the mountain defiles of Phthiotis.

Another heroine worthy of mention was Kaidos, who destroyed by mines the walls of Vilia, and fought with indomitable courage at the monastery of St. Venerande; Moskos, her mother, fighting by her husband's side and crushing the Turks beneath the masses of rock; Despo, who, to prevent herself falling into the hands of the Mussulmans, blew herself up with her daughters and grandchildren. And the Suliot women who, to protect the new government installed at Salamis, brought thither the fleet they commanded; and that Constance Zacharias, who after giving the signal of insurrection in the plains of Laconia, threw herself on Leondari at the head of four hundred peasants; and very many others whose generous blood was not spared in this war, during which it was clearly shown of what the descendants of the Hellenes were capable.

And like unto them had been the widow Starkos. Under the name of Andronika, she allowed herself to be drawn into the movement by an irresistible instinct of reprisal as much as by the love of independence.

Like Bobolina — a widow whose husband had been executed for attempting to defend his country — like Modena, like Zacharias, if she had not the means of arming ships or raising companies of volunteers, she could at least contribute her personal services in the great drama of the insurrection.

Since 1821 Andronika had joined the Mainots, whom Colocotroni — condemned to death, and a fugitive in the Ionian Islands — called to action, when, on the 18th of January in this year, he landed at Scardamoula. She took part in the first battle fought in Thessaly, when Colocotroni attacked the inhabitants of Phanari and Caritene, united under the Turks, on the banks of the Rhouphia. She was in the battle of Valtetsio on the 17th of May, which resulted in the rout of the army of Mustapha Bey. More especially did she distinguish herself at the siege of Tripolizza, where the Spartans taunted the Turks as “scoundrelly Persians,” and the Turks taunted the Greeks as “poor Laconian hares.” And the hares got the best of it. On the 5th of October the capital of the Peloponnesus, having been unrelieved by the Turkish fleet, was forced to capitulate, and, notwithstanding the Convention, was given to fire and sword for three days; and ten thousand Turks, irrespective of age or sex, were massacred.

The following year, on the 4th of March, during a naval combat, in which she had taken part under the orders of Miaoulis, Andro’nika, after a fight of five hours, beheld the Turkish vessels take to flight, and seek refuge in the port of Zante. But on one of these ships she had recognized her son, acting as pilot of the Ottoman squadron. From that day forward she threw herself even more desperately into the fight in search of death. And death would not come to her.

And Nicholas Starkos had advanced still further on his path of crime. A few weeks later he had joined Kara Ali in the bombardment of Scio, in the island of that name. He had taken part in those frightful massacres, in which there perished twenty-three thousand Christians, without counting forty-seven thousand who were sold for slaves in the markets of Smyrna. And one of the ships that transported the prisoners was commanded by him — the Greek who sold his brethren.

During the interval that followed, in which the Hellenes had to resist the combined forces of Turks and Egyptians, Andronika did not for an instant cease from imitating those heroic women whose names are more famous.

A grievous time it was, particularly for the Morea. Ibrahim let loose over it his ferocious Arabs, who were far more ferocious than the Turks. Andronika was one of those four thousand combatants whom Colocotroni, the commander-in-chief in the Peloponnesus, was able to keep round him. But Ibrahim had landed eleven thousand men on the Messenian coast to raise the sieges of Koron and Patras, and had occupied Navarino, whose citadel afforded him a base of operations, and whose harbour gave him a shelter for his fleet. Argos was soon burnt, Tripolizza seized, and, until the winter came, he extended his ravages over the adjoining provinces; and Messenia especially was horribly devastated.

Andronika had to flee to the south of Maina, to avoid falling into the hands of the Arabs. But she thought not of resting. Who could rest in an oppressed land? In 1825 and 1826 she was at the fight at the defiles of Verga, after which Ibrahim had to retire to Polyaravos, where the Mainots of the north again repulsed him. Then she joined the regulars under Colonel Fabvier during the battle of Chaidari in the month of July, 1826. There she was seriously wounded, and had it not been for the courage of a young Frenchman serving under the flag of the Philhellenes, she would have fallen into the hands of the ruffians of Kioutagi.

For many months Andronika was in danger of her life. Her robust constitution saved her; but the year 1826 ended without her being sufficiently recovered to take her place in thê struggle.

It was under these circumstances that, in the month of August, 1827, she returned to the mountains of Maina. She wished to see her home at Vitylo once more. A singular chance brought her son thither on the same day. We know the result of the meeting of Andronika with Nicholas Starkos, and how her parting malediction was hurled at him on the threshold of his father’s house.

And now, having nothing to keep her to her native soil, Andronika returned to continue the fight until Greece gained her independence.

Matters were at this point on the 10th of March, 1827, when the widow Starkos again set out along the roads of Maina to rejoin the Greeks of the Peloponnesus, who, foot by foot, were disputing their native land with the soldiers of Ibrahim.

CHAPTER IV.

A HOUSE OF SORROW.

WHILE the *Karysta* sailed away to the north for a destination known only to the captain, an event happened at Corfu which, though of a private nature, attracted public attention to the principal persons in this history.

Since 1815, by the treaties of that year, the group of Ionian Islands had been under the protection of England. Of all the group, which comprises Cerigo, Zante, Ithaca, Cephalonia, St. Maura, Paxo, and Corfu, the last, the most northerly, is the most important. It is the ancient Corcyra. The island which had for its king Alcinous, the generous host of Jason and Medea, and who in later days received the crafty Ulysses after the Trojan war, might well be of considerable importance in ancient history. After having been attacked by the Franks, the Bulgarians, the Saracens, the Neapolitans; ravaged in the sixteenth century by Barbarossa; protected in the eighteenth by Count Schulemburg, and at the end of the first Napoleonic empire defended by General Donzelot, it was now the residence of the British High Commissioner.

At this time this High Commissioner was Sir Frederick Adam. In view of eventualities which might any time happen in this struggle between Greeks and Turks, there were on the station a few frigates to keep the peace on the sea, and several larger vessels to maintain order in the Archipelago, which was now given over to Greeks and Turks and bearers of letters of marque, to say nothing of pirates having no other commission than that they had given to themselves, to plunder at their convenience the ships of every nation.

At Corfu were many foreigners — more especially people who had been attracted thither during the last three or four years by the different phases of the war of independence. It was from Corfu that people started to take part in it. It was at Corfu that others who had taken part in it came to rest.

Amongst these latter was a young frenchman. Enraptured with the noble cause, he had for the last few years taken an active and glorious share in the events of which the Hellenic peninsula was the theatre.

Lieutenant Henry D’Albaret, of the French navy — one of the youngest officers of his rank, on protracted leave — had from the commencement of the war fought under the flag of the French Philhellenes. Aged twenty-nine, of medium height, and possessing a robust constitution that enabled him to support all the trials of a seafaring life, the young officer, by the grace of his manners, the distinction of his bearing, the frankness of his look, and the charm of his features, at the first glance inspired a sympathy which a long intimacy could not but increase.

Henry D’Albaret belonged to a rich family of Parisian origin. He had hardly known his mother; his father had died before his majority, that is to say, two or three years before he left the naval school. Having inherited an ample fortune, he had failed to understand that that was any reason for his abandoning his profession as a sailor. On the contrary, he remained in the service and had gained his lieutenancy when the Greek cross was unfurled in face of the Turkish crescent in Northern Greece and the Peloponnesus.

Henry D’Albaret did not hesitate. Like so many other brave men, he was irresistibly dragged into the movement. He accompanied the volunteers that the French officers led to Eastern Europe. He was one of the first of the Philhellenes to shed his blood for the cause of independence. He had found himself among the glorious vanquished of Mavrocordato at the famous battle of Arta, and among the conquerors at the first siege of Missolonghi.

He was present in the following year, when Marco Bo2zaris fell. During the year 1824 he took a distinguished part in the sea-fights with which the Greeks revenged the victories of Mehemet Ali. After the defeat at Tripolizza in 1825 he commanded a detachment of regulars, under the orders of Colonel Fabvier. In July, 1826, he fought at Chaidari, when he saved the life of Andronika Starkos, who fell among the feet of the horses of Kioutagi — that terrible battle in which the loss of the Philhellenes was irreparable.

However, Henry D’Albaret did not abandon his chief, but shortly afterwards rejoined him at Methenes.

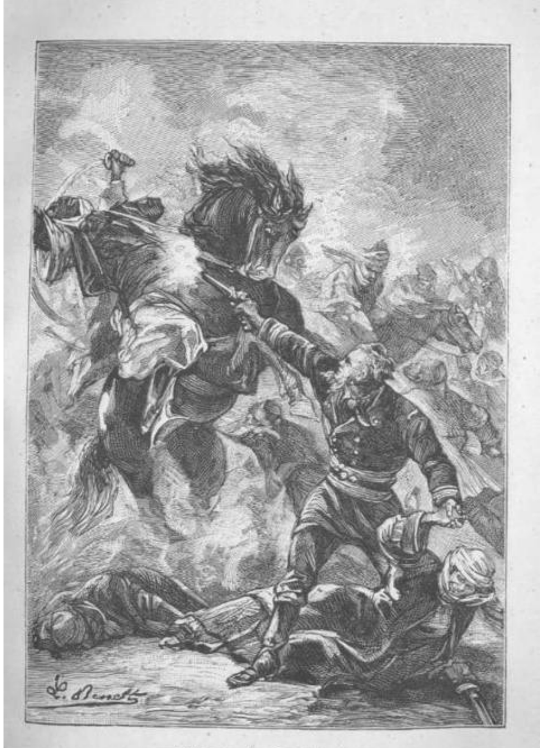

. . . fell among the feet of the horses.

The Acropolis of Athens was then being defended by Commandant Gomas, with fifteen hundred men under his orders. In the citadel there were four hundred women and children, who had been unable to escape when the Turks took possession of the town. Gomas had provisions for a year, and he had fourteen guns and three howitzers, but was short of ammunition.

Fabvier resolved to re-victual the Acropolis. He called for volunteers for the daring attempt. Five hundred and thirty came forward; among them were forty Philhellenes, and among them and at their head was Henry D’Albaret. Each of these bold partisans was furnished with a bag of powder, and under Fabvier’s orders embarked at Methenes.

On the 13th of December, the little troop landed almost at the foot of the Acropolis. A ray of moonlight discovered them. The musketry of the Turks rang out its welcome. Fabvier shouted, “Forward! “Each man, without abandoning his bag of powder, which might blow up at any instant, cleared the ditch, and made his way into the citadel, whose gates were standing open. The Turks were successfully repulsed, but Fabvier was wounded; his second was killed. Henry D’Albaret fell, hit by a bullet. The regulars and their leaders were now shut up in the citadel with those they came to help, and who would not let them leave.

There the young officer, down with a wound which, fortunately, was not a serious one, shared in the misery of the besieged, who were now reduced to rations of barley. “Six months elapsed before the capitulation of the Acropolis, agreed to by Kioutagi, gave him his liberty. It was not till the 5th of June, 1827, that Fabvier, his volunteers and the besieged, left the citadel of Athens and embarked on the ships which took them to Salamis.

Henry D’Albaret, who was still very weak, did not care to stop in that town, and sailed for Corfu. There for two months he recovered from his hardships, and was preparing to again take his place in the front rank, when chance gave a new motive to his life, which had hitherto been only that of a soldier.

There was at Corfu, at the end of the Strada Reale, an old, half-Greek, half-Italian, house. In this house lived a personage of whom little was seen and a good deal was said. This was the banker Elizundo. Was his age sixty or seventy? None could tell. For twenty years he had lived in this gloomy house, from which he seldom went out. But if he did not visit others, very many people of all countries and all conditions came to visit him. Assuredly he did a very large business in this house, and his credit was unimpeachable. Besides, Elizundo was supposed to be extremely rich. No one stood higher in the Ionian Islands, or amongst his Dalmatian rivals in Zara and Ragusa. A draft accepted by him was worth all its face-value. It is true he did nothing rashly. He was entirely immersed in his business. He required excellent references and complete guarantees; but his cash-box seemed inexhaustible. One thing is worth noting. Elizundo did nearly everything himself, employing only one man in his house, of whom we shall speak later on, to do such writing as was of slight importance. He was his own cashier and bookkeeper. Not an agreement was drafted, nor a letter written except by his own hand. No clerk from without ever sat at his desk; and thus the secrets of his business were carefully kept.

Whence came this banker? Some said he was an Illyrian, others a Dalmatian; but nothing definite was really known about him. Silent as to his past, silent as to his present, he made no attempt to mix in Corfiote society. While the islands were under French protection, he had lived as he did now under an English Governor. Popular rumour estimated his fortune at several millions, and he was really a rich man, although his wants and tastes were moderate enough.

Elizundo was a widower; he had been so when he first came to settle here with his little daughter, then only two years of age. Now this little daughter, whose name was Hadjine Elizundo, was twenty-two, and lived in the house, and took charge of it.

Even in the East, where the beauty of the women is undeniable, Hadjine Elizundo would have been considered remarkably handsome in spite of her slightly melancholy expression. How could it be otherwise when her youth had been passed without a mother to guide her, or a companion with whom to exchange her early girlish confidences?

Hadjine Elizundo was very graceful. Through her Greek origin on the mother’s side, she was of the type of those handsome young Laconian women who are the pride of the Peloponnesus.

Between father and daughter the intimacy was not and could not be very close. The banker lived alone — silent and reserved — one of those men who are always turning away their head, and shading their eyes as if the light hurt them. As uncommunicative in private as in public life, he never spoke about himself, even in his communications with the customers of his house. How could Hadjine Elizundo find a charm in her secluded life, when within these walls she had almost failed to find a father’s heart?

Fortunately she had near her one who was kind, devoted, and loving, who lived only for his young mistress, who sympathized in her sorrows, and whose face lighted up at her smiles. All her life he had been with Hadjine. From this it might be thought we were speaking of a faithful dog — that “aspirant to humanity,” according to Michelet, that “humble friend,” according to Lamartine. But we are speaking of a man, although he was worthy of being a dog. He had been at Hadjine’s birth; he had never left her; he had nursed her as a child, and been her servant as a girl.

He was a Greek, and his name was Xaris. He was a foster-brother of Hadjine’s mother, and had accompanied her when she married the banker of Corfu. He had been for more than twenty years in the house, in a superior position to that of an ordinary servant, and he it was that helped Elizundo when he had papers to copy.

Xaris, like others of the Laconians, was tall, broad-shouldered, and exceptionally strong, with good features, fine frank-looking eyes, and long aquiline nose above his superb black moustaches. On his head he wore the cap of dark-coloured linen, and round his waist he wore the elegant fustanello.

When Hadjine Elizundo went out on housekeeping business, or to attend the church of St. Spiridion, or to breathe a little of that sea air which rarely reached the house in the Strada Reale, Xaris accompanied her. Many of the young Corfiotes had seen her on the esplanade, and even in the streets of Kastrades, which stretch by the bay of the same name. More than one had endeavoured to gain an introduction to her father. Who could resist the attractions of the daughter’s beauty and — possibly — the father’s wealth? But all propositions of this kind Hadjine had met with a negative, and the banker had never interfered to alter her resolution.

Such, then, was the house, isolated, as it were, in a corner of the capital of ancient Corcyra, into which the chances of life were to introduce Henry D’Albaret.

At first it was merely a business acquaintance between the banker and the French officer. On leaving Paris he had taken his drafts on Elizundo, and it was from Corfu that he drew his money during his Philhellenic campaign. At different times he had returned to the island, and thus made the acquaintance of Hadjine Elizundo. He was smitten with her girlish beauty, and the remembrance of it followed him to the battlefields of the Morea.

After the surrender of the Acropolis, Henry D’Albaret found nothing better to do than to return to Corfu. He had had a painful recovery from his wound. The excessive hardships of the siege had affected his health. Hence, though not living in the banker’s house, he had been hospitably entertained, whenever he called, in a way that no stranger had ever been before.

Three months passed in this manner. Gradually his visits to Elizundo, which had at first been purely on business matters, became more interested and more frequent. The young officer was much charmed with Hadjine. And how could she help seeing this, when she found him so constant in his attentions, so entirely given over to listening to her and watching her?

And Xaris took no pains to hide the sympathy with which the frank, amiable character of Henry D’Albaret inspired him.

“You are right, Hadjine,” he often said to the young girl. “Greece is your country as well as mine, and we must not forget that if this young officer has suffered, it has been in fighting for her.”

“He loves me!” said she to Xaris one day.

And the girl said it with the same simplicity she showed in other things.

“Well, let him love you,” replied Xaris. “Your father is getting old, Hadjine. I shall not always be with you. Where in life will you find a more trustworthy protector than Henry D’Albaret?”

Hadjine said nothing. If he loved her, she loved him, and a very natural modesty forbade her confessing it, even to Xaris.

Such was the state of affairs, and it was no secret in Corfiote society. No official step had been taken, and yet the marriage of Henry D’Albaret and Hadjine Elizundo was spoken of as if it had been definitely arranged.

The banker showed no signs of regret at the attentions paid by D’Albaret to his daughter. As Xaris had said, he was getting old. Unfeeling as he was, he could hardly imagine that Hadjine would remain single all her life, and he must have been glad to know who would possess the fortune she would inherit from him. This question of money was, however, of little interest to Henry. The banker’s daughter might be rich or poor, but it made no difference to him. It was for her goodness as much as for her beauty that he loved her. It was for the keen sympathy which he felt for Hadjine in her sombre surroundings. It was for the elevation of her ideas, the grandeur of her views, and the true-hearted energy of which he felt her capable, if ever an opportunity arose for her to show it. And all this was clear enough to him when Hadjine spoke of her downtrodden country, and the superhuman efforts which its children were making for their liberty. On that subject the young people could never meet but to be in complete accord.

What pleasant hours did they pass discussing these events in that Greek language which D’Albaret spoke as if it were his mother tongue! What happiness they shared when a maritime success occurred to compensate for the reverses in Attica and the Morea! Of course D’Albaret had to relate at length all the adventures in which he had taken part, and give the names of the natives and foreigners who had distinguished themselves in the sanguinary strife, and those of the women whom, if Hadjine were free to choose, she would wish to imitate. Bobolina, Modena, Zacharias, Kaidos, not forgetting that brave Andronika whom he had saved from the massacre at Chaidari.

One day, after he had mentioned her name, Elizundo, who overheard the conversation, gave a sudden start that attracted his daughter's attention.

"What is the matter, father?" asked she.

"Nothing," replied the banker.

Then addressing the young man in the tone of a man who wished to appear indifferent to what he was asking, —

"You knew Andronika?" he said.

"Yes."

"And do you know what has become of her?"

"I do not," answered D'Albaret. "After the fight of Chaidari, I fancy she went back to Maina, which is her native place. Some day, however, I expect to see her reappear on the battlefield."

"Yes," added Hadjine, "her proper place."

Why had Elizundo asked this question about Andronika? No one had asked him to do so. He had certainly answered evasively. And the daughter, who knew little of the banker's business, could not help noticing it. Did her father know anything about this Andronika that she so much admired?

In all that concerned the War of Independence, Elizundo maintained a rigid reserve. To what party did he belong — the oppressors or the oppressed? It was difficult to say, even if he were a man to commit himself to any particular party. It was certain that the post brought him as many letters from Turkey as from Greece. But it is important to note that, although the young officer was devoted to the cause of the Hellenes, Elizundo had none the less given him a cordial welcome.

However, Henry D'Albaret could no longer delay his departure. He had recovered from his wounds, and decided to follow out to the end what he considered to be his duty. Often did he speak of it to Hadjine.

“It is your duty,” she replied. “Whatever grief your departure may cause me, Henry, I know that you ought to rejoin your companions-in-arms! Yes — so long as Greece has not recovered her independence, so long must the strife continue.”

“I must go, Hadjine. I am going,” said D'Albaret to her one day. “But if I can take with me the assurance that you love me as I love you — ”

“Henry, I have no reason to hide what I feel to-, wards you,” answered Hadjine. “I am no longer a child, and I can seriously contemplate the future. I trust you,” she said, giving him her hand; “trust me! Just as you leave me, just will you find me.”

D'Albaret clasped the hand which Hadjine placed in his.

“I thank you with all my heart,” answered he. “Yes, we are everything to each other now! And if our separation is painful, none the less shall I carry away with me the assurance that I am loved by you! But before I go, Hadjine, I must speak to your father — I must make certain that he approves, and that no obstacle will come from him.”

“Yes,” replied Hadjine. “Obtain his promise, as you have mine.”

And D’Albaret had no time to lose, for he had decided to resume his service under Colonel Fabvier.

In truth, matters were going very badly for the cause of independence. The Convention of London had had no sensible result, and people were asking if the Powers intended it merely to end in purely officious and therefore platonic observations.

On the other hand, the Turks, infatuated with their success, appeared little disposed to yield any of their pretensions. Although two squadrons, an English one under Admiral Codrington, and a French one under Admiral de Rigny, were cruising in the *Ae*gean, and although the Greek Government were installed at Egina to consider their best means of security, the Turks displayed an obstinacy which made them most formidable.

And this was more than ever apparent when a fleet of eighty ships, Turkish, Egyptian, and Tunisian, gathered in the roadstead of Navarino on the 7th of September. The fleet was bringing the immense commissariat stores which Ibrahim required for the expedition he was organizing against the Hydriots.

And so it was at Hydra that Henry D’Albaret resolved to rejoin the volunteers. This island, situated at the end of Argolis, is one of the richest in the Archipelago. After having done so much for the Hellenic cause in blood and treasure, under her intrepid seamen Tombasis, Miaoulis, and Tsamados, it was threatened with terrible reprisals.

D’Albaret must not delay leaving Corfu, if he wished to reach Hydra before the soldiers of Ibrahim; and so his departure was definitely fixed for the 21st of October.

A few days before this, the young officer went to Elizundo and asked him for his daughter’s hand. He did not conceal from him that Hadjine’s happiness could be assured if he gave his consent, and this he doubted not he would obtain. He did not wish the marriage to take place until after his return, though absence, he hoped, would not be of long duration.

The banker knew D’Albaret’s position, the state of his fortune, and the consideration in which his family was held in France, so that he had no need to make inquiries on that head. On the subject of his own fortune he said nothing, as D’Albaret had done, and as to the proposition itself, Elizundo replied that he accepted it.

It was said very coolly, but the important fact was that it was said. Henry D’Albaret had now Elizundo’s word, and in return the banker received from his daughter a thankful recognition, which he took with his accustomed coolness. All things seemed to work to the young people’s satisfaction — and, we may add, to the satisfaction of Xaris.

But Henry D’Albaret had no more time to stay with Hadjine Elizundo. He had decided to embark on a levantine brig, and the brig left Corfu on the 21st of the month for Hydra.

There is no need to dwell on what passed during the last few days in the house on the Strada Reale. Henry and Hadjine never left each other for an hour. The nobleness of their sentiments gave to their interviews a charm that softened their regrets. The future was for them, if the present escaped them; and it was the present that they thought about most. They calculated its chances, good or bad, but without discouragement.

One evening — that of the 20th of October — they were talking over these matters for the last time, and, perhaps, with rather more emotion. For on the morrow the young officer was to leave.

Suddenly Xaris entered the room. He could not speak. He was out of breath. He had been running; and at what a rate! In a few minutes his athletic limbs had brought him across the town from the citadel to the end of the Strada Reale.

“What do you want? What is the matter? Why this excitement?” asked Hadjine.

“When I — what I! News! Important!”

“Speak! Speak! Xaris!” said D’Albaret.

“I cannot, I cannot!” said Xaris, whose excitement positively suffocated him.

“Is it news from the war?” asked the girl, taking his hand.

“Yes! Yes!”

“Speak, then!” she repeated. “Speak, then, good Xaris! What is it?”

“Turks! to-day routed at Navarino!”

It was then that Henry D’Albaret and Hadjine heard the news of the naval battle on the 20th of October.

The banker entered the room at the moment. When he heard the cause of the disturbance his lips closed involuntarily, his brow contracted; but he showed neither satisfaction nor displeasure, while the younger folks freely expressed their joy.

The news of the battle of Navarino had, in fact, just reached Corfu. Scarcely had it spread in the town than its details were known, brought thither telegraphically along the Albanian coast.

The English, French, and Russian squadrons, comprising twenty-seven ships and twelve hundred and seventy-six guns, had attacked the Ottoman fleet in the roadstead of Navarino. Although the Turks were superior in numbers — although they amounted to sixty vessels, with nineteen hundred and ninety-four guns — they had been defeated. Many of their ships had been sunk or blown up, with a large number of officers and sailors. Ibrahim could no longer trust in the Sultan’s army helping him in the expedition against Hydra. “This was important; in fact, it ought to be a new departure in the affairs of Greece. Although the three Powers had resolved not to take advantage of their victory and annihilate the Porte, yet it seemed certain that their agreement would finish by freeing the country of the Hellenes from the Turkish domination, and certain also that sooner or later the new kingdom would gain its autonomy.

So it was thought at Elizundo’s, and Hadjine, Henry D’Albaret, and Xaris clapped their hands. Their joy found an echo in the town. The guns of Navarino brought independence to the children of Greece.

The young officer’s plans were changed by this victory of the allied Powers, or rather — for the expression is better — by this defeat of the Turkish navy. Ibrahim, in consequence, would have to renounce his intended campaign against Hydra; there could be no doubt of that.

It was no longer necessary for D’Albaret to join the volunteers mustering for the defence of Hydra. He resolved, then, to await at Corfu the course of events.

The fate of Greece could no longer be doubtful. Europe would not allow her to be crushed. In the Hellenic peninsula the crescent would have to give place to the banner of independence. Ibrahim, already forced to occupy the maritime towns, would have to withdraw even from them.

Under these circumstances, whither should D Albaret go? Doubtless, Fabvier was preparing to leave Mitylene to begin the campaign against the Turks of Scio; but his preparations were not complete, and would not be so for some time. There was no necessity, therefore, to dream of an early departure.

It was thus that the young officer summed up the position; it was thus that Hadjine agreed with him. Then there was no reason for postponing their marriage. Elizundo made no objection, and the date was fixed ten days in advance — on the last day of October.

There is no occasion to dwell on the feelings with which the young couple beheld the approach of their wedding-day. No more was said of that departure for the war, in which Henry D'Albaret might lose his life; no more of that sorrowful waiting, in which Hadjine might count the days and the hours in vain! Xaris, if it were possible, was the happiest in the house. Had it been his own marriage, he could not have been more demonstrative. Even the banker, in spite of his habitual coldness, allowed his satisfaction to be seen. The future of his daughter was assured.

Things were arranged as simply as possible, and there appeared to be no necessity to invite the whole town to the ceremony. Neither Hadjine nor Henry desired many witnesses of their happiness. But some preparations were necessary, and these were set about without ostentation.

It was the 23rd of October. There were seven days yet before the celebration. It seemed that no obstacle could intervene — no delay was to be feared; and yet something happened which would have very greatly disquieted Hadjine and D'Albaret, had they known of it.

That day the morning's post brought Elizundo a letter, the reading of which seemed to startle him. He crumpled it, he tore it, he threw it into the fire — a fact which always denotes a certain amount of trouble in a man who was so much the master of himself as the banker.

And he could have been heard to mutter these words: —

"Why did not this letter come eight days later? Curse him who wrote it!"

CHAPTER V.

THE COAST OF MESSENIA.

THROUGHOUT the night, after leaving Vitylo, the *Karysta* steered south-west, so as to cross the Gulf of Koron. Nicholas Starkos retired to his cabin and did not appear till daybreak.

The wind was favourable — one of those fresh breezes from the south-west which generally prevail in these seas at the end of the summer or the beginning of spring about the time of the equinoxes, when the vapours of the Mediterranean are condensed into rain.

In the morning, Cape Gallo, at the extreme point of Messenia, was doubled, and the last summits of Taygetus were soon bathed in the mist of the rising sun.

When the point had been passed, Starkos appeared on the saccoleva's deck. His first look was towards the east.

The land of Maina was no longer visible. On that side, a little behind the promontory, there now rose the mighty buttresses of Hagios-Dimitrios.

For a moment the captain stretched forth his hand in the direction of Maina. Was it in menace? Was it an eternal adieu to his native land? — who knows? But there boded no good to any one in the look which at that moment shone in the eyes of Nicholas Starkos.

The saccoleva, under her square sails and lateens, went about on the starboard tack, and headed for the north-west. She passed on her left the islands of Œnus, Kabrera, Sapienza, and Venetico; then she took her course between Sapienza and the mainland, so as to pass in sight of Modon.

The marvellous mountain panorama of the Messenian coast, with its well-marked volcanic character, unrolled before her as she went. This Messenia was destined to become, after the constitution of the kingdom had been definitely decided, one of the thirteen nomes of which modern Greece consists. But at this period it was only a collection of areas of strife held sometimes by Ibrahim, sometimes by the Greeks, according to the fortune of war, as it had formerly been the theatre of the three Messenian wars against the Spartans which rendered for ever illustrious the names of Aristomenes and Epaminondas.

Without a word, after having checked the saccoleva's course with the compass and looked round at the weather, Nicholas Starkos sat himself down.

Meanwhile an exchange of news had been going on forward between the crew of the *Karysta* and the ten men picked up at Vitylo. These made twenty sailors in all, and were headed by a boatswain under the orders of the captain; for the mate of the saccoleva was not at present on board.

And this is the gist of the talk as to the vessel's destination as she coasted the isles of Greece.

"Captain Starkos seldom speaks."

"As seldom as possible; but when he speaks, it is very much to the point, and you have to obey orders."

"Where is the *Karysta* bound?"

'"You never know where the *Karysta* is bound."

"Oh! Well, we were engaged honestly, and, after all, it does not matter."

"Yes; and you can be sure that where the captain takes us, he will go himself."

"But it isn't with those two little carronades in the bow that the *Karysta* tickles up the merchantmen of the Archipelago."

"But she is not intended to do so! Captain Starkos has other ships well armed and fitted out for that line of business. The *Karysta* is what you might call his pleasure yacht! Her innocent look deceives the cruisers, let them be English, French, Greek, or Turk."

"But the prize money?"

"The prize money is for those who take it, and you will be amongst it when the saccoleva has finished her run. You will be busy enough, and if there is danger, there will also be profit."

"Then there is nothing to do at present round about Greece and the islands?"

"Nothing — no more than in the Adriatic, if the captain's fancy takes us there! So we are under fresh orders and have become honest mariners on board an honest saccoleva, honestly sailing up the Ionian Sea! But there will be a change some day!"

"The sooner the better!"

It was obvious that the new-comers, like the rest of the *Karystas* crew, would not hang back when the time came. Scruple, remorse, or even simple prejudice was unknown to the maritime population of Maina. In truth, they were worthy of him who commanded them, and he knew he could trust them.

But if the Vitylo men knew Captain Starkos, they did not know his mate, who combined the occupations of sailor and trader — his evil genius in fact. This was a certain Skopelo, a native of Cerigotto, a little island of ill-fame at the southern limit of the Archipelago, between Cerigo and Crete. And so one of the newcomers asked the boatswain, —

“What about the mate?”

“The mate is not on board,” was the reply.

“Shall we see him?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“When it is necessary to see him.”

“But where is he? “‘

“Where he should be.”

They had to be content with this answer, which meant nothing. And the boatswain’s whistle soon after sounded to call the men on deck to haul the sheets a little closer, so as to keep the vessel on her course along the Messenian coast. About noon the *Karysta* passed Modon. It was not her port of destination. She made no attempt to stop at the little town built on the ruins of the ancient Methone, at the end of the rocky promontory which juts out towards the island of Sapienza. Soon the lighthouse at the harbour mouth was lost behind the continuation of the cliffs.

A signal was, however, made on the saccoleva. A black pennant quartered with a red cross was hoisted at the end of the mainyard. But there was no answer from the land, and the cruise was continued towards the north.

That evening the *Karysta* arrived at the entrance of the roadstead of Navarino, a large maritime lake enclosed in a frame of lofty mountains. For a moment the town, capped by the confused mass of its citadel, appeared through a natural arch in a gigantic rock, at the extremity of that natural breakwater which checks the fury of north-west winds as they sweep down the long gulf of the Adriatic to pour their torrents on to the Ionian Sea.

The setting sun was still lighting up the summits of the higher ranges on the east, but the roadstead was already wrapped in gloom. This time the crew might well believe that the *Karysta* was going to anchor. She unhesitatingly entered the channel of Megalo-Thouro, to the south of the narrow island of Sphacteria. On the island, which is about three miles in length, there, even then, were two tombs to two of the noblest victims of the war. One to the French captain Mallet, who was killed in 1825, and, at the end of a cave, one to an Italian count, Santa Rosa, an old minister of Piedmont, who had died during the same year for the same cause.

When the saccoleva had arrived at about a dozen cable-lengths from the town she puffed up and lay to. A red lantern was run up to the mainyard-arm, as the red-crossed pennant had been. The signal met with no response.

The *Karysta* had nothing more to keep her in the roadstead, where a great number of Turkish vessels were lying. She fell off and coasted the whitish-looking island of Kouloneski, in the centre of the bay. Then the sheets were eased off at the boatswain’s order, the helm put a-starboard, and the course laid to skirt Sphacteria.

It was on this island of Kouloneski that many hundreds of Turks, surprised by the Greeks, had been shut up at the commencement of the war in 1821, and here they died of famine rather than surrender under promise to be shipped back to Turkey. Later, in 1825, when Ibrahim’s troops were besieging Mavrocordato in Sphacteria, eight hundred Greeks were here massacred in reprisal.

The saccoleva passed through to the Sikia Channel, two hundred yards across, between the northern point of the island and Cape Coryphasion. It is necessary to thoroughly know the channel before venturing through, as it is almost impracticable for ships of any considerable draught. But Nicholas Starkos, as if he were one of the best pilots in the roadstead, boldly took the ship among the precipitous rocks at the point and doubled the cape. Then perceiving several squadrons at anchor — in all, some thirty English, French, and Russian vessels — he prudently gave them a wide berth, and kept along during the night up the coast of Messenia, passing between the mainland and the island of Prodana; and at dawn the saccoleva, before a fresh south-easterly breeze, was following the irregularities of the coast on the peaceful waters of the Gulf of Arkadia.

The sun rose behind the peaks of that Ithome which had seen the site of the ancient Messene vanish on one side of it into the Gulf of Koron, and on the other into the gulf to which the town of Arkadia has given its name. And the sea sparkled along the ripples raised by the breeze as it was swept by the sun’s earliest rays.

Starkos sailed the ship so as to run close into the town which lies in one of the hollows in the coast, here sweeping round in a huge curve, and forming an open roadstead.

At ten o’clock the boatswain betook himself aft, and reported himself to the captain, as though he were waiting for orders.

All the immense entanglement of the Arkadian mountains was now in full view on the east; villages half-way up the hills peeping out of masses of olive-trees, almond-trees, and vines; brooks running into rivers among the clumps of myrtles and oleanders; and clinging at all heights and in all places and positions thousands of those famous Corinthian vines which leave not an inch of ground unoccupied. Lower, on the foreground ridges, the red houses of the town shone prominent, like pieces of bunting on the cypress curtain. Such is the magnificent panorama of one of the most picturesque coasts of the Peloponnesus.

But in approaching nearer to Arkadia — the ancient Cyparissia, the principal point of Messenia in the time of Epaminondas, and then one of the fiefs of the French Ville Hardouin, after the Crusades, — what a disheartening spectacle met the eyes!

Two years before, Ibrahim had destroyed the town, massacred the children, women, and old men! In ruins was its old castle, built on the site of its ancient acropolis; in ruins was the church of St. George, destroyed by the fanatical Moslem; in ruins were its houses and public edifices.

“You can see that our friends the Egyptians have been along there!” muttered Nicholas Starkos, who showed not the least emotion at the scene of desolation.

“And now the Turks are its masters!” answered the boatswain.

"Yes — for a time — and we may even hope for ever!" added the captain.

"Shall the *Karysta* speak them or leave them alone?"

Starkos carefully scanned the harbour, which was only a few cable-lengths away. Then his eyes sought the town itself, built about a mile off, on the flanks of Mount Psykro. He seemed to hesitate whether to signal to the shore, or to regain an offing.

The boatswain awaited the captain's reply to his inquiry.

"Signal!" said Starkos.

The red pennant with a silver cross ran up to the end of the mainyard and fluttered in the breeze. A few minutes afterwards, a similar pennant was run up to the end of a flagstaff on the pierhead.

"Run in," said the captain.

The helm was put down. As the entrance was a wide one, the passage was easy. The mizen was soon in, then the mainsail, and the *Karysta* glided down the channel under topsail and jib. Her way was enough to take her into the middle of the harbour. Then she dropped anchor.

Almost immediately the boat was launched the captain embarked, and the four men soon rowed him to a small staircase cut out of the solid rock of the quay. A man was waiting for him. and welcomed him in these words: —

"Skopelo is at the orders of Nicholas Starkos."

A familiar gesture was all the captain's reply. He sprang up the steps, and walked towards the town. After passing the ruins due to the last siege, through the streets crowded with Turkish and Arab soldiers, he stopped before an inn of the sign of the Minerva, into which his companion led the way.

A minute later Starkos and Skopelo were seated at a table with two glasses and a bottle of raki, a strong spirit extracted from asphodel. Cigarettes of the light-coloured, sweet-scented tobacco of Missolonghi were rolled, lighted, and puffed, and then the conversation began between the two men, of whom one was the very humble servant of the other.

An evil-looking, low, crafty, but withal intelligent face had Skopelo. If he was fifty, it was as much as he was, although he looked a little older. A pawnbroker's face, with little glittering, false-looking eyes, snub nose, hair cut short, and hands with curved fingers; long feet, like those of the Albanians, of whom it is said that the toe is in Macedonia and the heel in Bœotia. With his round face, no moustaches, grey goat's-beard on chin, shiny bald head, and miserable-looking body of medium height he was the very type of an Arab Jew of Christian birth; and he wore a very simple costume of waistcoat and trousers of the Levantine sailor cut, with an overcoat over all.

Skopelo was the business man, indispensable to the pirates of the Archipelago — clever in disposing of the prizes and selling the prisoners in the Turkish markets.

There is no difficulty in imagining what would be the subject of conversation between Starkos and Skopelo, or the way in which the events of the war would be appreciated.

“How is Greece getting on?” asked the captain.

“Not quite as you left it,” answered Skopelo. “A month ago the *Karysta* was off the coast of Tripoli, and since your departure you have probably had no news?”

“None.”

“Well, then, captain, the Turkish vessels are ready to take Ibrahim and his troops to Hydra.”

“Yes,” answered Starkos, “I saw them last night as I crossed the harbour of Navarino.”

“You have not been ashore since you left Tripoli?” asked Skopelo.

“Yes, once! I stopped a few hours at Vitylo to complete the crew of the *Karysta*. But since I lost sight of the coasts of Maina, I did not have an answer to my signals till I got here.”

“Nothing to say, perhaps,” said Skopelo.

“Tell me,” continued Starkos, “what are Miaoulis and Canaris doing now?”

“Reduced to little dashes and forays which can only give them partial successes and never a decisive victory. While they keep on chasing the Turkish vessels, the pirates will have a good time of it in the Archipelago.”

“And are they always talking of — ”

“Of Sacratif?” answered Skopelo, slightly lowering his voice. “Yes, everywhere, and always — and they do not say much to his credit.”

"Let them talk about him."

Starkos arose, having emptied his glass, which Skopelo refilled. He strode up and down the room; then with his arms crossed, he stopped before the window, and listened to the gruff singing of the Turkish soldiers, which was heard at a distance.

At length he sat down, facing Skopelo, and abruptly changed the conversation.

"I understood from your signal that you have a load of prisoners here?"

"Yes, Starkos, enough to fill a four hundred ton ship, all that were left after the massacre at Kremmydi. The Turks killed enough that time! If we had left them alone, there would not have been a prisoner left."

"Are there men and women?"

"Yes, and children too."

"Where are they?"

"In the citadel."

"Did they cost much?"

"Well, the Pasha was not very accommodating," answered Skopelo. "He thought the War of Independence was over — unfortunately. No more war, no more battles; no more battles, no more razzias; no more razzias, no more man-trade! But if prisoners are rare, the price goes up. That is some compensation, captain. I know from a good source that slaves are now in great demand in the African market, and we can sell them at a profit."

“Be it so,” answered Starkos. “Is all ready, and can you come on the *Karysta?”*

“All is ready, and nothing keeps us here.”

“That is well, Skopelo. In eight or ten days or so, the ship sent from Skarpanto will be here for the cargo. They will hand it over without raising any difficulties?”

“That is understood,” answered Skopelo, “but for cash you must arrange with Elizundo about accepting the bills. His signature is all right, and the Pasha thinks it is as good as gold.”

“I will write to Elizundo that T will not forget to call at Corfu, where I can finish this affair.”

“This affair — and another no less important, Nicholas Starkos,” added Skopelo.

“Perhaps,” answered the captain.

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“That is only right! Elizundo is rich, exceedingly rich, they say! And what has enriched him? Our trade, at the risk of ending our lives at a yardarm at a whistle from a boatswain! Ah! it is an excellent thing to be the banker of the pirates of the Archipelago! And so I repeat, Starkos, it is only right! “What is only right?” asked the captain, looking mate straight in the face.

“Eh? Don’t you know?” answered Skopelo.

Now, confess you only ask to hear me answer for the hundredth time!”

“Perhaps!”

“Elizundo’s daughter.”

“What is only right shall be done!” interrupted Nicholas Starkos as he rose.

Then he left the Minerva, and, followed by Skopelo, walked down to the harbour, where the boat was waiting for him.

“Get in,” said he to Skopelo; “we will arrange the drafts with Elizundo after our arrival at Corfu. That done, you can return to Arkadia to see about the cargo.”

An hour afterwards the *Karysta* sailed out of the gulf. But before the day had ended, Starkos heard a distant thundering, whose echo reached him from the south.

It was the guns of the combined squadrons thundering in the roadstead of Navarino.

CHAPTER VI.

DOWN WITH THE PIRATES OF THE ARCHIPELAGO!

THE north-north-westerly course kept by the saccoleva took her up among the picturesque group of Ionian Islands, of which one no sooner vanishes than another appears.

Fortunately for her safety, the *Karysta*, seemingly an honest Levantine — half pleasure yacht, half trader — in no way betrayed her real character; for to venture in this way among armed forts and British frigates was a very risky business.

From Arkadia to the island of Zante,” the flower of the Levant, “as it is poetically named by the Italians, about fifty miles have to be traversed. Far up the gulf as the *Karysta* crossed it, towered the green summits of Mount Scopos, on whose flanks clustered the orange and olive woods which have taken the place of the forests of Homer and Virgil.

The wind was favourable. A land breeze had sprung up from the south-west. The saccoleva under her studding-sails and all she could carry, ploughed through the Zante waters, which were now as smooth as those of a lake.

Towards evening she sighted the capital, bearing the same name as that of the island, a picturesque Italian city built on the land of Zacynthos, the son of Dardanus the Trojan.

The lights of the town, stretching along for over a mile at the end of the circular bay, were all that could be seen from the deck of the *Karysta*. These, scattered at different heights, from the wharves round the harbour to the crest of the Venetian castle built three hundred feet above, formed an enormous constellation, of which the principal stars marked the positions of the Renaissance palace, and the cathedral of St. Denis of Zacynthos.

With the Zantiot population, influenced as it was by contact with the Venetians, English, French, and Russians, Nicholas Starkos could have none of those commercial connections which he kept up with the Turks of the Morea. He had, therefore, no signals to make, nor any cause for delay off the island, which is known as the birthplace of two celebrated poets — the Italian, Ugo Foscolo, at the end of the eighteenth century, and Salomos, one of the glories of modern Greece.

The *Karysta* ran across the narrow arm of the sea which separates Achaia from Elis. Probably more than one on board of her had his ears tortured with the boat songs borne on the breeze from Lido. But the infliction had - to be borne. The saccoleva made her way through the Italian melodies, and on the morrow was off the Gulf of Patras, that deep indentation which is continued by the Gulf of Lepanto up to the Isthmus of Corinth.

Starkos was then on the bow of the *Karysta*, scanning the whole of the Acarnanian coast to the north of the gulf, that coast steeped with imperishable memories enough to thrill the heart of any child of Greece, had not that child for many years denied and betrayed her!

“Missolonghi!” said Skopelo, stretching his hand to the north-east. “A bad lot, who would be blown up rather than give in.”

There, two years before, the buyers of prisoners and sellers of slaves had, indeed, found their occupation gone. After a ten months’ struggle, the besieged in Missolonghi, crushed with hardship and exhausted with hunger, had blown up the fortress rather than - capitulate to Ibrahim. Men, women, and children, — all had perished in the explosion, which did not even spare the victors.

And the year before, almost on the same spot where Marco Bozzaris, one of the heroes of the War of Independence, was buried, there had come to die, in discouragement and despair, Lord Byron, whose corpse now rests at Westminster — though his heart remained in that land of Greece he loved so well, which gained not its freedom till he had passed away.

A sudden gesture was all the reply that Starkos vouchsafed. Then the saccoleva swiftly left the Gulf of Patras, and bore off towards Cephalonia.

With the favouring wind, the distance from Zante to Cephalonia was covered in a few hours. The *Karysta* was not headed for Argostoli, the capital, whose harbour, though shallow, is well adapted for ships of moderate tonnage. She kept on in the narrow channels along the eastern coast, and at half -past six in the evening rounded the point of Thiaki — the ancient Ithaka.

The island, some twenty-four miles in length, by five broad, is singularly rocky and wild, and rich in oil and wine, which it produces in abundance. It has about twelve thousand inhabitants. Without any history of its own, it has a name celebrated through all antiquity. It was the country of Ulysses and Penelope, whose memory lives in the crests of Anogi, in the depths of the cave in Mount St. Stephen, amid the ruins of Mount Œtos, among the fields of Eumœa, and at the foot of the rock of the Crows, over which flow the poetic waters of the fountain of Arethusa.

At nightfall the land of the son of Laertes had gradually disappeared into the gloom, five and forty miles beyond the last cape of Cephalonia. During the night the *Karysta* made more of an offing, so as to avoid the narrow passage which separates the northern point of Ithaka from the southern point of Santa Maura stretching for a couple of miles along the eastern coast of that island.

By the light of the moon, a whitish cliff could be seen rising from the sea, some hundred and eighty feet away. This was the leap of Leucadia, famous for Sappho and Artemis. But of the island which also bears the name of Leucadia, not a trace was left when the sun rose, and the saccoleva, skirting the Albanian coast, sped along under all her canvas to Corfu. Sixty miles had to be done that day, if Starkos wished to reach the capital before the night set in.

The sixty miles were rapidly covered by the bold *Karysta*, which, under a cloud of sail, tore along with her rail almost underwater. The breeze had freshened considerably, and the helmsman’s skill was required at its best to keep her straight and safe. Fortunately the spars held, and the rigging was nearly new and all of it good. Not a rope, not a sail, was carried away. The saccoleva behaved as if she had been built for ocean-racing, and was sailing at her very best in an international match.

Thus she ploughed past the little island of Paxo.

Already towards the north the first heights of Corfu appeared above the horizon. On her left the Albanian coast showed the jagged profile of the Acroceraunian hills. A few ships of war carrying the English and Turkish flags were sighted in the more-frequented parts of the Ionian Sea. The *Karysta* heeded neither one nor the other. Had a signal been made to heave to, she would have obeyed without hesitation, having on board neither cargo nor papers to betray her origin.

At four o’clock in the evening the saccoleva was a little closer hauled, so as to enter the strait which divides Corfu from the mainland. The sheets were hardened in a trifle, and the helmsman luffed a quarter point, so as to weather Cape Blanco at the southern extremity of the island.

The first portion of the channel is more pleasing than that to the north. It forms a happy contrast to the Albanian coast, which is almost uncultivated and half wild. A few miles further up, the strait widens as the Corfiote coast is cut away. The saccoleva had thus to wear a little to cross it obliquely. The many deep indentations give the island a circumference of nearly two hundred miles, although its extreme length is only sixty, and its breadth only eighteen.

About five o’clock the *Karysta* was off the islet of Ulysses, at the opening by which Lake Kalikiopulo, the ancient Hyllaic port, communicates with the sea. Then she followed the contours of that charming “cannone “planted with aloes and agaves, already crowded with carriages — coming for a league or more south of the town to seek with the fresh sea air all the charm of that admirable panorama of which the Albanian coast forms the horizon on the other side of the channel. She passed the Bay of Kardakio and the ruins above it; she passed the summer palace of the Lord High Commissioner, the Bay of Kastrades, along which extends the suburb of that name, the Strada Marina, which is less a road than a promenade, the penitentiary, the old fort of Salvador, and the first houses of the Corfiote capital. She doubled Cape Sidero, on which stands the citadel — a kind of small military town large enough to include the residence of the commandant, the lodgings of his officers, a hospital, and a Greek church, converted by the English into a Protestant temple. Then, steering full to the westward, Captain Starkos rounded Point San Nikolo, and after running along the shore, from which rise the houses at the north of the city, he dropped anchor about half a cable's length from the wharf.

The boat was launched. Starkos and Skopelo took their seats in it, after the captain had stuck in his belt one of those short, broad daggers in use amongst the natives of the Messenian provinces. They landed at the Health Office and showed their papers, which were all in due order. They were then free to go where they pleased, after ordering the boat at eleven to take them on board.

Skopelo, on business connected with the *Karysta*, betook himself to the commercial quarter, down the narrow, tortuous streets with Italian names, with their shops in arcades, and all the ordinary confusion of a Neapolitan town.

Starkos, wishing to employ the evening in picking up the news, made his way to the esplanade, the most fashionable part of the Corfiote city.

This esplanade, or drill-ground, is planted with magnificent trees, and extends between the town and the citadel, from which it is separated by a wide ditch.

Natives and foreigners were moving about as if it were a holiday. Messengers were continually entering the palace, built on the north of the parade by General Maitland, and quitting it by the gates of St. George and St. Michael, which flank its front. A constant interchange of communications was in progress between the Governor and the citadel, where the drawbridge was down in front of the statue of Marshal Schulemburg.

Starkos mixed with the crowd. He saw at once that it was under some extraordinary excitement. Having no one to ask, he had to be content to listen. What struck him most was a name invariably repeated by all the groups with very unsympathetic qualifications. This name was Sacratif.

At first the name seemed to excite his curiosity. But after slightly shrugging his shoulders he continued his walk along the esplanade to the terrace at the end where it looks over the sea.

A few people had there taken up their positions round a small circular temple that had been recently erected to the memory of Sir Thomas Maitland. A few years later, an obelisk was to be erected there to one of his successors, Sir Howard Douglas, to balance the statue of the then Lord High Commissioner, Sir Frederick Adam, for which the site had already been selected opposite the Government House.

If there were any great differences of opinion, if among the seventy thousand inhabitants of the ancient Corcyra and the twenty thousand inhabitants of the capital, there were orthodox Christians, Greek Christians, Jews in large numbers, who at that period occupied a district by themselves as a sort of Ghetto, if in the daily life of these types of different races there were divergent ideas or antagonistic interests — in that day all disagreement seemed to have been sunk in one common thought, a sort of curse on the name which constantly recurred: — -

“Sacratif! Sacratif! Down with Sacratif!”

And whether the people spoke English, Italian, or Greek, although the pronunciation might differ, the curses were the same, and were none the less an expression of the same sentiment of horror.

Starkos heard all and said nothing. From the top of the terrace he could see over the greater part of the harbour of Corfu, shut in like a lake by the Albanian hills, whose summits were just being gilded by the setting sun.

The captain of the *Karysta* noticed an unmistakable movement going on at one side of the harbour. Numerous boats were pulling out to the ships of war. Signals were being exchanged between the ships and the flagstaff on the citadel, whose batteries and casemates were hidden behind their curtain of gigantic aloes. Evidently — and in these symptoms a sailor could not be mistaken — one of the many ships was preparing to leave Corfu. If so, the Corfiote population seemed to take a very unusual interest in the event.

But already the sun had disappeared behind the higher hills of the island, and with the twilight, short as it is in these latitudes, night would soon close in.

Starkos left the terrace and returned to the esplanade; then he walked along at a quiet pace towards the row of houses on the west side of the parade, where there was a group of cafés ablaze with light, with the chairs on the footway in front of them, already occupied by many customers. And again he could not help observing that they talked in an unusually excited way.

He sat down at a small table, determined not to lose a single word of his neighbours' conversation.

“The fact is,” said an outfitter on the Strada Marina, “trade was no longer safe; you dared not send a cargo into the Levant.”

“And very soon,” said a portly Englishman, “you would not have got a crew for a vessel bound to the Archipelago.”

“Thanks to Sacratif!” and “Sacratif” was repeated in various tones of indignation by the various groups.

“At what time is the *Syphanta* going?” asked the merchant.

“At eight o’clock,” answered the Corfiote, “but,” added he in a tone which showed that his confidence was not quite absolute — ” it isn’t so much when she goes, as when she comes back.”

“Oh, she will come back all right,” exclaimed another Corfiote; “it will never be said that a pirate held the British navy at defiance — ”

“And the French navy and the Italian navy and the Greek navy into the bargain,” added an English officer, who seemed to think that all nations ought to share in the blame.

“Then,” said the merchant, rising, “the time is nearly up, and if we are to see the *Syphanta* leave, we had better get on to the esplanade.”

“No,” answered the other, “there’s no hurry; we shall hear the gun when she is ready.”

And the conversation continued, and consisted, as before, chiefly of curses on this Sacratif.

Starkos thought the time had come for him to strike in, and with the least possible accent betraying him as a native of Southern Greece, addressed the party, —

“Gentlemen, may I ask, if you please, what is this *Syphanta* that everybody is talking about to-day?”

“A corvette, sir,” was the reply, “a corvette, bought and armed by an association of English, French, and Corfiote merchants, with a crew of mixed nationalities, under the command of the gallant Captain Stradena! Perhaps she may do what the English and French have failed in doing!”

“Oh, indeed,” said Starkos, “a corvette going out — and whither is she bound?”

She is bound to meet, capture, and hang the notorious Sacratif!”

“Indeed!” replied Starkos. “And may I ask who is this notorious Sacratif?”

“You ask who is Sacratif?” exclaimed the Corfiote, astounded, the Englishman coming to his aid with a long “Oh!” of surprise.

The fact that there existed a man who had never heard of Sacratif, and that in the town of Corfu, where his name was in every mouth, seemed to be quite a phenomenon.

The captain of the *Karysta*, seeing the effect produced by his ignorance, hastened to add, —

“I am a stranger here, gentlemen! I have only just come from Zara, at the top of the Adriatic, and I am not quite up to date in what is going on in these Ionian Islands.”

“Say rather what is going on in the whole Archipelago!” exclaimed the Corfiote; “for in truth the whole Archipelago has been taken by Sacratif for his piratical hunting-ground.”

“Oh!” said Starkos; “he is a pirate.”

“A pirate; a corsair; a skimmer of the seas!” added the Englishman. “Sacratif is worthy of all the names, and even of a few more you might invent to describe such a thorough-paced scoundrel.”

Then the Englishman gave a long breath, and added, —

“What puzzles me, though, is that I have met a man who never heard of Sacratif.”

“Oh!” said Starkos, “the name is not unknown to me, but I did not know that it was the same man who had upset all this town. Is Corfu threatened with a descent from the pirate?”

“He daren’t come here!” exclaimed the merchant. “He would never set foot in our island!”

“Oh, indeed!” said the captain of the *Karysta*.

“If he did, why the gallows — yes, the very gallows would rise of themselves and hang him!”

“But why this excitement?” asked Starkos. “I have hardly been here an hour, and I don’t quite understand — ”

“Simply this,” said the Englishman. “Two vessels, the *Three Brothers* and the *Carnatic*, were taken by Sacratif about a month ago, and the survivors of the crews were sold by him in the Tripoli market.”

“Oh!” answered Starkos, “that is a dreadful thing, and Sacratif will repent it.”

“And so,” continued the Corfiote, “a certain number of merchants have combined together and armed a corvette, an excellent vessel, with a picked crew commanded by an intrepid seaman, Captain Stradena, and he is going out in chase of Sacratif. This time there is good reason to hope that the pirate who holds the trade of the Archipelago in check will meet with his doom.”

“He will not find it easy to escape,” replied Starkos.

“And,” added the Englishman, “you see the whole town is excited, and has collected on the esplanade to witness the departure of the *Syphanta*, who will be greeted with a thousand cheers as she drops down the harbour!”

Starkos had learnt all he wanted to know. He thanked his informants. Then he rose and joined the crowd with which the esplanade was thronged.

There had been no exaggeration in what he had been told by the Englishman and the Corfiotes. It was only too true. For some years the depredations of Sacratif had developed most revoltingly. Trading-ships of all nations had been attacked by the pirate, who was as daring as he was sanguinary. Whence came he? What was his origin? Did he belong to the race of Corsairs produced by the coast of Barbary? Who could say? No one knew. He had never been seen. Not one had returned of those who came under his guns. Some had been killed; the others had been sold into slavery. Who could detect the ships he sailed in? He was constantly moving from one to the other.

Sometimes he attacked in a swift-sailing Levantine brig, sometimes in a light corvette, but always under the same black flag. When in any of his encounters he found he was not strong enough, and had to seek safety in flight in the presence of some formidable warship, he would suddenly disappear.

And in what unknown shelter, in what corner of the Archipelago was he to be looked for? He knew the most secret lurking-places on its shores, whose hydrography at the time we are speaking of left much to be desired.

The pirate Sacratif was not only a good seaman, but a terrible leader in an attack. Invariably backed up by his crews, who stopped at nothing, he never forgot to give them, after victory, their “Devil’s allowance,” an hour or two of pillage and massacre. His companions thus followed him wherever he chose to lead, and executed his orders without a murmur. They would all have died for him. The threat of the most horrible punishments could never make them denounce their chief. With such men hurled on to board her, it was rare indeed that a ship could resist, especially if a merchant vessel without the means of defence.

In any case, had Sacratif, in spite of his cleverness, been surprised by a warship, he would have blown up his vessel rather than surrender. It was even told of him that on one occasion when shot had failed him, he had loaded his guns with the heads of the corpses that were lying on his decks.

Such was the man whom the *Syphanta* had to pursue; such was the redoubtable pirate whose cursed name so greatly excited the Corfiote city.

Soon a loud report was heard. A cloud of smoke rose near the citadel. It was the farewell gun. The *Syphanta* was under way for the Southern Ionian Sea.

The people rushed to the esplanade, and crowded round the monument to Sir Thomas Maitland.

Starkos, attracted by a sentiment more intense perhaps than that of simple curiosity, pushed his way through to the front.

Gradually in the moonlight the corvette came on. A second gun spoke from the citadel, then a third, and to them responded three from the ports of the *Syphanta.* To the guns succeeded cheer upon cheer until she had cleared the Bay of Kardakio.

Then silence fell on the scene. Gradually the crowd dispersed into the streets of Kastrades, and left the field free to those few strollers whom the cares of business or pleasure detained on the esplanade.

For nearly an hour Starkos, deep in thought, loitered on the parade, now almost deserted. But quiet had no place in his head or his heart. His eyes burnt with a fire that nothing could hide. His looks, by involuntary movements, followed the course of the corvette, which slowly disappeared in the confused mass of the distant island.

When eleven struck from the church of St. Spiridion, Starkos remembered his appointment to rejoin Skopelo at the quay. He strode along the street towards the fort, and soon reached the rendezvous.

Skopelo was waiting.

The captain of the saccoleva walked up to him.

“The corvette *Syphanta* has just gone out,” he said.

“Ah!” ejaculated Skopelo.

“Yes — to look for Sacratif!”

“Or somebody else. What does it matter?” answered Skopelo, pointing to the gig, which had appeared at the foot of the steps.

A few minutes later the boat reached the *Karysta*, and Starkos leaped on board, saying as he did so, —

“To-morrow — at Elizundo’s!”

CHAPTER VII.

THE UNEXPECTED.

ABOUT ten o’clock next morning Nicholas Starkos landed at the pier and walked off to the banker’s house. It was not his first visit, by any means, and he had always been welcomed as a client whose business was not to be despised.

Elizundo was well acquainted with him. He could not help knowing something about his mode of life. He was aware that he was the son of that heroine whom Henry D’Albaret had once mentioned. But nobody knew or could know who the captain of the *Karysta* really was.

Nicholas Starkos was evidently expected. He was admitted as soon as he presented himself. In fact the letter which had arrived forty-eight hours before, and dated from Arkadia, had come from him. He was immediately ushered into the office, and the banker took the precaution of locking the door. Elizundo and his client were now alone. No one could disturb them. No one could overhear what was said at their interview.

“Good morning, Elizundo,” said the captain of the A*arysta,* dropping into an arm-chair with the familiarity of a man who was quite at home. “It is six months since I have seen you, although you have often heard of me! But I could not pass Corfu without making a call to shake hands with you.”

“It was not to see me; it was not to pass compliments that you came here, Nicholas Starkos,” said the banker quietly. “What do you want?”

“Eh!” exclaimed the captain. “There I recognize my old friend Elizundo! Away with sentiment; business only! It is a long time now since you put your heart in the secret drawer of your cash-box and lost the key!”

“Will you tell me what brings you here, and why you wrote to me?”

“You are right, Elizundo! No nonsense! Let us be serious. We have important matters to discuss to-day, and have no time to lose.”

“Your letter mentions two matters,” continued the banker. “One of them is an ordinary transaction, the other is a purely personal affair.”

“Quite so.”

“Well, go on then, Starkos, I shall be glad to hear about both.”

The banker was categorical in his manner. He wished to induce his visitor to explain without wasting time in digression or evasion. But what contrasted forcibly with the directness of the questions, was the low tone in which they were put. Of the two men, thus face to face, it was obviously not the banker who held the advantage. The captain of the *Karysta* could not help a slight smile, unperceived by Elizundo, who had his eyes cast down.

“Which of the questions shall we take first?” asked Starkos.

“The one that concerns you personally,” answered the banker quickly.

“I prefer to take the one that does not,” replied the captain in a decided tone.

“Be it so! What is it about?”

“A convoy of prisoners we have taken over at Arkadia. There are two hundred and thirty-seven head — men, women, and children — who are to go to Scarpanto, whence I am to ship them to the Barbary coast. Now you know, Elizundo, for you have done this sort of thing before, that the Turks only deliver their goods in exchange for cash, or paper with a good signature. I have come to ask for your signature, and I reckon on your giving it to Skopelo when he brings you the papers. There will be no difficulty about that, will there?”

The banker made no reply, but his silence could only be taken by the captain as consent. There were so many precedents in which he had committed himself.

“I ought to say,” continued Starkos in a careless tone, “that it will not be a bad business. The Turkish operations have taken a turn for the worse in Greece. The battle of Navarino will have serious consequences for the Turks if the European Powers are going to follow up their interference. If the struggle is given up, there will be no more prisoners, no more sales, no more profits. Hence this last lot, which we shall deliver under favourable circumstances, ought to fetch good prices in . Africa. We shall do well in this adventure — and so will you. I can reckon on your signature?”

“I will discount your bills,” answered Elizundo, “but I have no signature to give you.”

“As you please, Elizundo,” answered the captain, but we should be content with your signature. You never hesitated to give it before.”

“Before is not now,” said Elizundo, “and now I think differently.”

“Oh, indeed!” exclaimed the captain. “There is no reason why you shouldn’t! But is it true that you are thinking of retiring from business, as I have heard people say?”

“Yes, Starkos,” answered the banker in a firmer voice; “and as far as you are concerned this is the last transaction we shall have together; so see that you keep to your engagements.”

“I will do so, Elizundo,” replied Starkos drily. Then he rose and walked up and down the office, without, however, taking his eyes off the banker. Then he stopped and faced him.

“Elizundo,” said he in a bantering tone, “you must be well off, or you would not think of retiring from business.”

The banker made no reply.

“Well,” continued the captain, “what are you going to do with the millions you have amassed? You cannot take them to another world with you. They would be rather in the way during the last voyage! When you go, where are they to go? “Elizundo remained silent.

“They will go to your daughter,” continued Starkos, “the lovely Hadjine Elizundo! She will inherit her father’s fortune! Nothing could be more just. But what will she do with it? Alone in this world with so many millions?”

The banker rose, not without an effort, and like a man confessing something, the weight of which was choking him, said very quickly, —
“My daughter will not be alone!”

“You will marry her?” answered the captain. “And to whom, if you please? What man will marry Hadjine Elizundo when he knows whence most of her father’s fortune came? and, I add, when she herself knows it, to whom will she dare to give her hand?”

“How should she know it?” replied the banker. “She does not know it now — who will tell her?”

“I will!”

“You?”

“I! Listen, Elizundo, and give heed to my words,” said the captain of the *Karysta* with intentional insolence. “Your huge fortune is due to me — is due to the schemes we have carried out together in which I have risked my head. It is in dealing with stolen cargoes, with prisoners bought and sold during this Independence War, that you have amassed the wealth which is now counted by millions! Well, is it not just that those millions should return to me? I am quite free from prejudice, as you know! I will not ask how you gained your wealth! When the war is over, I also will retire from business! But I shall not be alone in life, and I intend, understand me, I intend that Hadjine Elizundo shall be the wife of Nicholas Starkos! “The banker sank into his chair. He felt he was in the hands of the man who for so long had been his accomplice. He knew that the captain of the *Karysta* would stop at nothing to gain his ends. He did not doubt for a moment, that if he felt inclined he would proclaim the whole past history of the bank.

For an answer, even at the risk of provoking an explosion, Elizundo had only one thing to say, and, not without hesitation, he said it:

“My daughter cannot be your wife, because she is to marry somebody else.”

“Somebody else!” exclaimed Starkos. “Verily, I have arrived in time! And Elizundo’s daughter is going to marry?”

“In five days!”

“And who is she going to marry?” asked the captain, his voice quivering with rage. “A French officer.”

“A French officer! doubtless one of the Philhellenes who have come to the help of Greece?”

“Yes.”

“And his name?”

“Captain Henry D’Albaret.”

“Well, Mr. Elizundo,” said Starkos, stepping up to the banker and glaring in his eyes, “I repeat, that when this Captain Henry D’Albaret knows who you are, he will have nothing to do with your daughter; and when your daughter knows the origin of her father’s fortune, she will give up all thoughts of becoming the wife of this Captain Henry D’Albaret. If, then, you do not break off this marriage this very day, it will be broken off tomorrow of itself, for to-morrow the two parties to it shall know all! Yes, yes, they shall! “The banker again rose from his chair. He looked straight at the captain of the *Karysta*, and then in a tone of despair, which could not be mistaken, —

“Be it so! I will kill myself, Starkos,” he said. “And my daughter need no longer be ashamed.”

“Do it,” answered the captain. “You will be in the future what you are now, and your death will never wipe out the fact that Elizundo was the banker of the pirates of the Archipelago.”

Elizundo fell back, overwhelmed, and had not a word to say in reply. The captain continued, —

“And why — if Hadjine Elizundo cannot be the wife of this Henry D’Albaret — why should she not, whether she likes it or not, be the wife of Nicholas Starkos? “For half an hour or more the interview continued, with pleadings on the part of one, and menaces on the part of the other. Assuredly there was no mention of love when Starkos demanded his daughter from Elizundo. The talk was only of the millions of which he wished to gain possession, and which no argument would induce him to resign.

Hadjine Elizundo knew nothing of this “letter which had announced the coming of the captain of the *Karysta*; but ever since the day it arrived, her father had appeared sadder and gloomier than was his wont, as if he were overwhelmed by some secret anxiety. And when Nicholas Starkos appeared at the bank, she could not help feeling uneasy.

She knew this personage from having seen him many times during the war. He inspired her with an abhorrence for which she could not account, and she noticed that for some time after his visits her father always remained in a sort of prostration, mingled with fear. Hence her antipathy, which up to then had no other justification.

Hadjine Elizundo had never mentioned his name to Henry D'Albaret. The bond which united him to the banking house could only be a business one, and of her father’s business she was ignorant, and never asked questions. Thus the young officer knew nothing of the connection between the banker and Nicholas Starkos, or between the captain and the valiant woman whose life he had saved at Chaidari, and whom he only knew under the name of Andronika.

Xaris, like Hadjine, had often seen and received Starkos at the office in the Strada Reale; and he had impressed him with exactly the same feelings as he had the young lady. But being gifted with a vigorous and decided temper, his feelings were displayed in another fashion. If Hadjine Elizundo shunned every occasion she could of being in the man's presence, Xaris rather sought them "to break his back for him," as he said.

"I have no right to do so now," he thought; "but I feel sure I shall have!"

It follows, therefore, that this visit of the captain of the *Karysta* to Elizundo was not viewed with pleasure by either Xaris or Hadjine. Quite the contrary. And it was a relief to both of them when Starkos, after an interview of which nothing transpired, left the house, and walked off to the harbour.

For an hour Elizundo remained shut up in his room. They did not even hear him move. But his orders were precise: neither his daughter nor Xaris dare enter without being asked. As the visit had been a long one, they felt somewhat anxious.

Suddenly Elizundo's bell was heard — a timid sort of a ring from a hesitating hand.

Xaris answered the call, opened the door, which was no longer locked from within, and entered the banker's presence.

Elizundo was in his arm-chair, looking like a man who had just emerged from a violent struggle with himself. He raised his head, looked at Xaris as if he had some difficulty in recognizing him, and, passing his hand over his eyes, said in a choking voice, —

"Hadjine?"

Xaris bowed and went out. A moment afterwards the girl was with her father. At once, without any preamble, but with his eyes cast down, he said to her in a voice hoarse with emotion, —

“Hadjine — you must — you must give up your marriage with Henry D’Albaret.”

“What do you say, father?” exclaimed the girl, amazed at the unexpected blow.

“It must be so, Hadjine!”

“Father! why do you recall your promise to him and to me? I am not accustomed to disobey your wishes, as you know, and this time I shall not disobey them, hard though they be. But tell me, why must I give up Henry D’Albaret?”

“Because you must — because you must be the wife of another.”

His daughter heard him, though he spoke so low.

“Another!” she said, struck as cruelly by this blow as by the first; “and this other?”

“Is Captain Starkos.”

“That man! That man!”

The words escaped involuntarily from her lips as she grasped the table to prevent herself from falling.

Then in the final effort of revolt that the decision provoked in her, —

“Father,” said she, “there is something in this that I cannot understand! There is some secret you hesitate to tell me.”

“Ask me nothing!” exclaimed Elizundo, “nothing!”

“Nothing, father! Be it so! But if in obedience to you I give up being the wife of Henry D’Albaret, I would rather die than marry Nicholas Starkos. You cannot wish me to do that.”

“You must, Hadjine!” replied Elizundo.

“And my happiness?” exclaimed the girl.

“And my honour?” said the father.

“Does Elizundo’s honour depend on another than himself?” asked Hadjine.

“Yes — on another — on this other — Nicholas Starkos.”

And saying so, the banker rose, with his eyes haggard, his face contracted, as if in pain.

Seeing him thus, Hadjine recovered all her energy.

“Be it so, father; I will obey you.”

And she walked from the room.

Her life was to be rendered wretched for ever. She saw that there was some terrible secret in the connection between the banker and the *Karystals* captain! She saw that he was in the power of that hateful man. She would submit to the sacrifice! Her father’s honour required it.

Xaris caught her in his arms as she nearly fainted away. He carried her to her room. And then he learnt all that had passed, and the renunciation to which she had consented. And his hatred of Starkos was thereby in nowise diminished.

An hour afterwards, according to his custom, D'Albaret called at the banking house. One of the maids replied that Hadjine was not to be seen. He asked for the banker. The banker could not receive him. He asked for Xaris. Xaris was out.

D'Albaret returned to his hotel extremely weary. Never had he had such a reception before. He resolved to call again in the evening, and waited till then in deep anxiety.

At six o'clock a letter was sent to him at his hotel. The address was in Elizundo's handwriting. It contained only a few lines: —

"M. Henry D'Albaret is requested to consider the projected marriage between himself and Elizundo's daughter as at an end. For reasons with which he is in no way connected the marriage cannot take place, and M. D'Albaret is requested to abstain from visiting the banking house."

At first the young officer could not understand what he read. Then he re-read the letter. Then he was astounded.

What had happened at Elizundo's? Why this sudden change? The evening before, when he left the house, the preparations for the wedding were in progress! The banker had been the same to him as he had always been. Nothing in Hadjine's manner had shown that her feelings towards him had changed.

“But the letter is not from Hadjine!” he said to himself. “It is from Elizundo! Hadjine does not know, could not know, that her father has written to me! It is without her knowledge that he has changed his plans! Why? I have given him no reason. Ah! I will know what obstacle has intervened between us.”

And then, as he was forbidden the house, he wrote — ” having an absolute right to know the reasons that could break off the marriage on the eve of its accomplishment.”

His letter elicited no reply. He wrote another — two others — and still the same silence.

Then he wrote to Hadjine. He implored her, in the name of their love, to reply to him, should she even refuse to ever see him again. No reply.

Probably his letter did not reach the girl. So at least did he think. He knew her character too well to be sure that she would have replied to him. Then the young officer, in despair, attempted to see Xaris. He never left the ‘Strada Reale. He loitered about the banking house for hours. It was useless. Xaris, in accordance perhaps with the banker’s orders, perhaps with those of Hadjine, never went out.

Thus passed the 24th and 25th of October. In his bitter anguish D’Albaret thought he had reached the very limit of suffering.

He was mistaken. .

On the 26th some news reached him which tortured him still more cruelly.

Not only was his marriage with Hadjine Elizundo broken off — a fact now known all over the town — but Hadjine was about to marry another.

Henry was overwhelmed when he heard the news. Another to be the husband of his Hadjine!

“I will know who the man is!” he exclaimed. “No matter who he is, or what he is, I will find him out! I will go to him, and he must answer me.’’

He was not long in recognizing his rival. He saw him enter the banking house, he followed him at his departure, he watched him down to the harbour, where he entered his boat; he saw him board the saccoleva, moored about half a cable’s length away.

It was Nicholas Starkos, the captain of the *Karysta.* This was on the 27th of October. From the information D’Albaret obtained, it seemed that the marriage was to take place very shortly, and that the preparations were being urged on in haste. The religious ceremony had been arranged for at St. Spiridion’s on the 30th instant, that is to say, on the very date formerly fixed for the marriage with himself! But he would not be the bridegroom! His place would be taken by this captain, who had come, nobody knew whence, and was to go, nobody knew whither, and Henry D’Albaret, under an excitement he could not master, determined to provoke Starkos, to seek him at the foot of the altar If he did not kill him, he would himself be killed, and one way or the other the thing would be at an end.

In vain he told himself, if the marriage takes place it must be with Elizundo’s consent. In vain he said to himself that Hadjine’s hand was given away by her father.

“Yes — but it is against her will! She has submitted to some pressure to yield herself to that man! She is sacrificing herself!”

During the whole of the 28th of October, D’Albaret lay in wait for Starkos. He watched for him on the jetty, he watched for him at the house. In vain. In two days the hateful marriage would take place — two days, during which the young officer did his utmost to reach Hadjine, or come face to face with Starkos!

But on the 29th, about six o’clock in the evening, there occurred an unexpected event which precipitated the crisis.

In the afternoon a rumour spread that the banker had been struck with congestion of the brain.

And two hours afterwards Elizundo was dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

TWENTY MILLIONS AT STAKE.

THE consequences of this event no one could foresee. Henry D’Albaret, as soon as he learnt it, very naturally thought that the consequences could not be unfavourable as far as he was concerned. Anyhow, Hadjine Elizundo’s marriage must be postponed. As the girl must be grieving at her sudden loss, he did not hesitate to call at the house on the Strada Reale, but he could see neither Hadjine nor Xaris. All he could do was to wait.

“If in marrying this Captain Starkos,” he thought, “Hadjine had been sacrificed to her father’s wishes, the marriage would not take place now her father was dead.”

The reasoning was just. Hence the very natural deduction that if D’Albaret’s chances had improved, those of Starkos had diminished.

There is, therefore, no need to be astonished if during the morning a conversation on the subject was originated by Skopelo between the captain and himself, aboard the saccoleva.

The mate of the *Karysta*, coming on board about ten o’clock in the morning, had himself brought the news of Elizundo’s death — news which had made a great stir in the town.

It might be thought that Starkos at the first words he heard would give way to a paroxysm of anger. Nothing of the sort. He knew how to command himself, and had no curses for accomplished facts.

“Ah! Elizundo’s dead,” he said quietly.

“Yes, he is dead!”

“Did he kill himself?” asked Starkos in an undertone.

“*No,*” replied Skopelo, who understood the remark. “*No* — the doctors say that he died from congestion — ”

“Suddenly?”

“Almost. He lost consciousness immediately, and did not speak a word before he died.”

“He is worth as much to us dead as alive.”

“Undoubtedly, particularly if the Arkadia matter is over.”

“Quite,” replied Starkos. “The bills are discounted, and now you can take over the convoy of prisoners in return for the cash.”

“And, by Jingo, it was time!” exclaimed the mate. “But if that transaction is over, how about the other?”

“The other?” quietly answered Starkos. “Well, the other will end as it ought to end! I see no change in the situation! Hadjine Elizundo will obey her father dead as if her father were alive, and for the same reasons!”

“Then, captain,” said Skopelo, “you have no intention of abandoning the game?”

“Abandon it!” exclaimed Starkos in a tone which showed his full intention to break down every obstacle.

“Tell me, Skopelo, do you think there is in this world a man who would hold his hand when twenty millions are ready to fall into it?”

“Twenty millions!” repeated Skopelo, smiling, as he shook his head. “Yes, it was at twenty millions that I estimated the fortune of our old friend Elizundo!”

“A fortune unencumbered and well invested,” continued Starkos, “and realizable without delay.”

“As soon as you get it, captain, for now the whole of it will come to the fair Hadjine — ”

“And from her it will come to me! Never fear, Skopelo! By a word I can destroy the banker’s honour. And his daughter, now he is dead, will cling to that honour rather than the fortune, just as if he were living. But I will say nothing. I shall have nothing to say. The pressure I put on the father I shall keep upon her. The twenty millions she will only be too glad to bring as dowry to Nicholas Starkos, and if you doubt it, Skopelo, you don’t know the captain of the *Karysta.”*

Starkos spoke with such assurance, that the mate, although little inclined to indulge in illusions, persuaded himself that the tragedy of the previous evening would not prevent the marriage. It might delay it, and that was all.

The length of this delay was the only question that troubled Skopelo and even Starkos, although the latter would not admit it. He could not be absent from the funeral, which took place next day. There he met Henry D’Albaret, but they had only exchanged a few glances — that was all.

During the five days which followed Elizundo's death, the captain of the *Karysta* tried in vain to see the daughter. The door was closed to all. It seemed that the banking house had died with the banker.

And Henry D'Albaret was no happier than Nicholas Starkos. He could not communicate with Hadjine, either by visit or letter. As Hadjine did not show herself, it was not improbable that she had left Corfu under the protection of Xaris.

However, the captain of the *Karysta*, far from abandoning his plans, affirmed that their realization was only retarded. Thanks to him, thanks to the manoeuvres of Skopelo, to the reports which they assiduously circulated, the marriage of Starkos and Hadjine Elizundo was public property. It would take place as soon as the mourning was over, and perhaps as soon as the financial arrangements were completed.

As for the fortune left by the banker — it was known to be enormous. Growing naturally as the amount passed from gossip to gossip, it had already been quintupled. Yes! It was even affirmed that Elizundo had left no less that a hundred millions! What an heiress was the youthful Hadjine! what a happy man was this Nicholas Starkos, to whom she had promised her hand! Nothing else was talked about in Corfu, in its two suburbs, in the further villages on the island. And strangers crowded into the Strada Reale, and in want of something better to do, stood and looked at the famous house in which so much money had entered, and so much remained, for so little had gone out.

The truth is that the fortune was enormous. It amounted to nearly twenty millions, and, as Starkos had told Skopelo, it was invested in easily realizable securities, and not in real estate.

Hadjine learnt this, and Xaris learnt it with her, during the few days following the banker's decease, but they also discovered the means by which the fortune had been gained. In fact, Xaris knew enough of the business from his position in the office, so that when the books and papers were presented to him he was able to thoroughly unravel its history. Elizundo had doubtless intended to destroy them, but death had surprised him. They were there. They spoke for themselves.

Hadjine and Xaris now knew too well whence came these millions. On how much odious traffic, on how many miseries all this wealth reposed, they now learnt too clearly. This, then, was why Starkos had Elizundo in his power! He had been his accomplice. With a word he could dishonour him! If he chose to disappear, it would be impossible to find him! And he was making the father, pay for his silence by seizing the daughter.

"The scoundrel! the scoundrel!" exclaimed Xaris.

"Be silent!" said Hadjine.

And he was silent, for he understood that his words might go further than Nicholas Starkos.

The state of affairs must, however, end. In the interest of all, Hadjine took upon herself to bring matters to a crisis.

On the sixth day after Elizundo's death, about seven o'clock in the evening, Xaris met Starkos at the steps on the jetty, and asked him to come immediately to the banking house.

To say that the message was politely delivered, would be going too far. The tone adopted by Xaris was anything but conciliatory when he addressed the captain of the *Karysta.* But Starkos was not the man to be disturbed by such trifles, and he followed Xaris to the house, and was instantly admitted.

He found Hadjine in her father’s room. She was seated at the desk, on which were a great number of papers, documents, and books. It at once occurred to the captain that the girl had made herself acquainted with the affairs of the bank; and he was not mistaken. But he asked himself, Did she know of the banker’s dealings with the pirates of the Archipelago?

As the captain entered, Hadjine rose — and thus dispensed with offering him a chair — and nodded to Xaris to leave them alone.

She was in mourning. Her serious face, her eyes wearied with sleeplessness, indicated great physical lassitude, but no mental weakness. In this interview, which was to be of grave consequence to both of them, her coolness must not for an instant abandon her.

“I am here, Hadjine Elizundo,” said the captain; “I am at your orders. Why have you sent for me?”

“For two reasons, Nicholas Starkos,” said the girl, going straight to the point. “In the first place to tell you that the projected marriage my father, as you know very well, imposed on me. is to be considered at an end.”

“And,” coolly replied Starkos, “I am content to say that in so speaking, Hadjine Elizundo has perhaps not considered the consequences.”

“I have considered them,” said Hadjine, “and you will understand that my resolution is irrevocable, and that I have nothing to learn concerning the nature of the business which the house of Elizundo has had with you and yours, Nicholas Starkos.”

This very clear reply was not very pleasant for the captain of the *Karysta*. He was waiting for Hadjine to give him his dismissal in due form, and then reckoned on breaking down her resistance by telling her the state of affairs between himself and her father, out now she knew all this. Hence his weapon, his best weapon perhaps, had broken in his hand. But he did not consider himself disarmed, and so he replied in a tone of irony, —

"And so you know all about the business, and knowing it, you hold to such language?"

"I hold to it, and I will always hold to it, for it is my duty to hold to it."

"Then I am to believe," answered Starkos, "that Captain Henry D'Albaret — "

"Don't mention Henry D'Albaret's name in this matter," replied she quickly.

Then, more mistress of herself, and to prevent any provocation from intervening, she added, —

"You know well that Captain D'Albaret would never consent to marry Elizundo's daughter."

"It would be difficult."

"It would not be honest."

"And why?"

"Because no one would marry an heiress whose father had been the banker of the pirates of the Archipelago! No! An honest man would never accept a fortune acquired in so shameful a manner!”

“But,” answered Starkos, “it seems to me we are talking about things quite foreign to the question we were discussing.”

“That question is settled.”

“Permit me to observe that it was Captain Starkos and not Captain D’Albaret that Hadjine Elizundo was to marry! Her father’s death should no more change her intentions than it has mine.”

“I obeyed my father without knowing his motives for sacrificing me. I know now that I saved his honour by obeying him!”

“Well, if you knew — ” interrupted Starkos. “I know,” said Hadjine, not heeding the interruption, “that it was you, his accomplice, who dragged him into this hateful business; you who brought the millions into the bank, which was an honest one until you came. I know that you threatened to publicly disclose his infamy if he refused to give you his daughter! In truth, did you ever think, Nicholas Starkos, that in consenting to marry you, I could do anything but obey my father?”

“Be it so, Hadjine Elizundo! There is nothing left for me to tell you. But if you were jealous of your father’s honour during his life, you should be quite as jealous after his death, and if you persist in not keeping to your engagement with me — ”

“You will tell all, Nicholas Starkos!” exclaimed the girl, with such an expression of disgust and contempt that a kind of blush overspread the insolent fellow’s forehead.

“Yes — everything,” he replied.

“You will do nothing of the sort, Nicholas Starkos.”

“And why?”

“Because you would accuse yourself!”

“Accuse myself, Hadjine Elizundo. Do you think the business has ever been transacted in my name? Do you imagine it is Nicholas Starkos that scares the Archipelago, and deals in prisoners of war? No! When I speak, I shall not compromise myself; and if you compel me, I shall speak.”

The girl looked him straight in the face. Her eyes, with all the boldness of honesty, did not quail before his, terrible as they looked.

“Nicholas Starkos!” she said, “I could get rid of you by one word. It is not for sympathy or for love that you require this marriage. It is simply for you to get hold of my father’s fortune! Yes, I could say to you, ‘ It is only the millions you want! Here they are. Take them! Be off! and may I never see you again! ‘ But I shall not say that, Nicholas Starkos. The millions I inherit you shall not have! I shall keep them! I shall do what I please with them! No! You shall never have them! And now, go! — leave the house! At once!”

Hadjine Elizundo, with her arm stretched forth and her head thrown back, seemed to curse the captain, as Andronika had cursed him a few weeks before on the threshold of his father’s house. But if on that day Starkos had recoiled before his mother, he now stepped up boldly to the girl.

“Hadjine Elizundo,” hissed he, “yes, I must have your money! One way or another I must have it — and I will!”

“No, and rather than part with it I will throw it into the sea!” answered Hadjine.

“I will have it, I tell you! I want it!”

Starkos seized her arm. His rage overmastered him. He was capable of murdering her!

Hadjine saw it all in an instant. To die! Well, what mattered it now? Death could not frighten her. But she had other plans for herself. She was condemned to live!

“Xaris!” she shouted.

The door opened — Xaris appeared.

“Turn this man out!”

Starkos had no time to look round before he was seized in two arms of iron. He could not even breathe. He would have spoken; he would have shouted. He could not do so any more than he could escape from that powerful embrace. And nearly squeezed to death, nearly choked to suffocation point, unable to utter a sound, he was dropped outside the door.

Then Xaris spoke, and all he said was, —

“I did not kill you because she did not tell me to kill you! When she does tell me, I will do so!”

And he shut the door.

There was then no one in the street. No one had seen that Starkos had been turned out of Elizundo’s house. But they had seen him enter it, and that was enough. Consequently, when D’Albaret heard that his rival had been received where he had been forbidden, he thought, as did every one else, that the captain of the *Karysta* had been invited as the lady’s accepted husband.

This was indeed a blow to him. Nicholas Starkos admitted to a house whence a pitiless command excluded him! At first he felt inclined to curse Hadjine, and who in his place would not have done so? But he checked himself; his love overpowered his anger, although appearances were so much against the girl.

“No! no!” he exclaimed; “it is not possible! She — to that man? It cannot be.”

In spite of his threats to Hadjine Elizundo, Starkos, after considering matters, thought it best to keep quiet. Of the secret of the banker’s life he decided to say nothing. This left him all freedom of action, and there would always be time to publish it later on if circumstances required.

This was the result of his consultation with Skopelo. He concealed nothing from the mate of the *Karysta i*f what had passed at his visit. Skopelo approved his saying nothing and of keeping himself in reserve for a favourable opportunity. What puzzled them was that the heiress would not purchase their silence by abandoning her heritage! Why? They were quite at a loss.

During the following days up to the 12th of November Starkos never left his ship for an hour. He thought over every scheme that could lead him to attain his end. He trusted à little to chance, which had always turned in his favour during his abominable career. This time he trusted in vain.

D’Albaret also kept entirely indoors. He did not think he was justified in renewing his attempts to see Hadjine. But he did not despair.

On the 12th a letter was brought to his hotel. A presentiment told him it was from Hadjine Elizundo. He opened it. He glanced at the signature. He was not mistaken.

The letter contained but a few lines in the girl’s own handwriting. These were they: —

“HENRY, — My father’s death has set me free, but you must give up all thoughts of me. Elizundo’s daughter is not worthy of you. I shall never be the bride of Nicholas Starkos — a scoundrel! — nor shall I ever belong to you — an honest man! Forgive me, and — farewell.

“HADJINE ELIZUNDO.”

As soon as he had finished reading this letter, D’Albaret, without stopping to think, ran off to the house in the Strada Reale.

The house was shut up, and deserted, as if Hadjine Elizundo with her faithful Xaris had left it never to return.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ARCHIPELAGO IN FLAMES.

THE island of Scio, more generally at this period known as Chios, is situated in the Aegean, on the west of the Gulf of Smyrna, and not far from Asia Minor. With Lesbos on the north and Samos on the south, it belongs to the group of the Sporades in the east of the Archipelago. In circumference it is barely 120 miles. Mount Pelineus, now Mount Elias, which is its principal feature, rises to about 2400 feet above sea-level.

Of the principal towns in the island, Volysso, Pitys, Delphinium, Leuconia, Caucasa, Scio, the capital, is the most important. It was there, on the 30th October, 1827, that Colonel Fabvier had landed a small expeditionary force, whose effectives amounted to 700 regulars, 200 horse, and 1500 irregulars, in the pay of the Sciotes, with ten howitzers and ten guns.

The intervention of the European Powers, after the battle of Navarino, had not yet definitely settled the Greek question. England, France, and Russia wished to confine the new kingdom to the boundaries that the insurrection had not at any time exceeded. With this determination the Hellenic Government could hardly be expected to agree. They required the whole of continental Greece, with Crete and Scio. So that, while Miaoulis was despatched to Crete, and Ducas took charge of the mainland, Fabvier sailed for Scio, and landed at Maurolimena on the date we have given.

The intention of the Hellenes was to deprive the Turks of this magnificent jewel in the chaplet of the Sporades. Its sky is the clearest in Asia Minor, its climate is a wonderful one, with neither extreme heat nor excessive cold. Swept by a gentle breeze, it is the healthiest island in the Archipelago In a hymn attributed to Homer — whom Scio claims as one of its children — the poet calls it “very fertile.” On the west it produces delicious wines which rival the best varieties of antiquity, and honey which can hold its own with that of Hymettus. On the east there ripen oranges and citrons whose excellence is known throughout Eastern Europe. On the south it abounds in lentisk-trees of different species, producing that precious gum-mastic, which is used so much in the arts and in medicine. In this country, blessed of the gods, there also grow the fig, the date, the almond, the pomegranate, the olive, and all the best trees of the south of Europe.

The Government, then, wished to include this island in the new kingdom, and the gallant Fabvier, in spite of all the rebuffs he had received, even at the hands of those for whom he had come to shed his blood, was ordered to effect its capture.

During the concluding months of the year the Turks had continued their massacres and razzias in the Hellenic peninsula, even up to the landing of Capo D’Istria at Nauplia. The diplomatist’s arrival had put a stop to the intestine quarrels of the Greeks, and concentrated the government in one hand. But although Russia was to declare war in six months and so come to the aid of the new kingdom, Ibrahim still kept possession of half the country and of the maritime towns of the Peloponnesus. And if eight months later, on the 6th of July, 1828, he was preparing to leave the land in which he had wrought so much havoc, if in September of that year there was to remain not a single Egyptian on the soil of Greece, their savage hordes none the less continued their excesses.

While the Turks or their allies occupied certain towns on the coast of the Peloponnesus and in Crete, it was not surprising that numerous pirates continued to overrun the neighbouring seas. If they were the cause of a good deal of damage to the vessels trading between the islands, it was not because Miaoulis, Canaris, and Tsamados had retired from the pursuit. But the corsairs were numerous and indefatigable, and the sea was no longer safe. From Crete to Mitylene, from Rhodes to Negropont, the Archipelago was in flames.

In Scio, even, bands composed of the scum of all nations scoured the surrounding sea, and helped the pacha in the citadel to which Fabvier had laid siege.

It will be remembered that the merchants of the Ionian Islands, alarmed at the state of things which prevailed throughout the Levant, had between them fitted out a corvette to look after these pirates. Five weeks had elapsed since the *Syphanta* left Corfu for the Archipelago. Her start had been encouraging. Two or three successful engagements had taken place, and several very justly suspected vessels had been captured. Round about Psara, Scyros, Zea, Lemnos, Paros and Santorin, Captain Stradena continued his work with as much bravery as good fortune. The only drawback was that he seemed unable to come across the unseizable Sacratif, whose appearance was always marked by some sanguinary catastrophe. Often did he hear of him; never could he catch sight of him.

On the 13th. of November the *Syphanta* was sighted from Scio. One of her prizes was sent into harbour, and Fabvier inflicted summary justice on the pirate crew. But since then there had been no news of the corvette. None could say in what part of the Archipelago she was tracking down the skimmers of the seas. Anxiety began to be felt on her account. In the narrow seas, so thick with islands, where there were so many opportunities of putting into port, it was rare, indeed, for many days to elapse without her being signalled.

It was while matters were in this state that, on the 27th of November, Henry D’Albaret arrived at Scio, eight days after leaving Corfu. He had come to rejoin his old commander in continuing the campaign against the Turks.

The disappearance of Hadjine Elizundo had proved a terrible blow to him. The girl had rejected Starkos because he was a scoundrel and unworthy of her, and had rejected the man she had accepted because she was unworthy of him! What was the mystery here? Where should he seek for it? In her life — so calm and so pure? Evidently not. Was it in her father’s life? But what was there in common between the banker Elizundo and Captain Nicholas Starkos?

To these questions who could reply? The banking house was abandoned. Xaris had left it at the same time as the young lady. There was no getting at him to elucidate the mystery.

He then thought of searching the town of Corfu, and then the whole island. Perhaps Hadjine had taken refuge in one of the out-of-the-way places? There were in the island several villages in which it would be easy to find a safe shelter. For those who wished to quit the world and forget it, Benizze, Santa Decca, Lucimne, and twenty others offered appropriate retreats. D’Albaret tried all the roads and all the hamlets and found no trace.

He found a clue, however, which showed that Hadjine might have left Corfu. At the small port of Alipa, in the west-north-west of the island, he learnt that a light speronare had recently gone to sea with two passengers by whom it had been secretly chartered.

But this was very vague. However, certain circumstances of dates and facts very soon after gave the young officer a new subject of alarm.

When he returned to Corfu, he learnt that the saccoleva had also left the harbour — and, what seemed serious, that she had left the same day that Hadjine Elizundo had disappeared. Was there any connection between the two events? . Had the girl been drawn into a trap with Xaris and taken away by force? Was she now in the power of the captain of the *Karysta?*

The thought was agony to D’Albaret. But what was to be done? Where should he look for Nicholas Starkos? Indeed, what was this adventurer? The *Karysta*, coming none knew whence, and going none knew whither, might well be considered a suspicious craft! But whenever the young officer became master of himself he thrust the thought far from him. As Hadjine Elizundo had declared herself unworthy of as she did not wish to see him again, what could be more natural than she should have voluntarily gone away attended by Xaris?

If so, D’Albaret might find her. Perhaps her patriotism had urged her to take part in the strife which was deciding the fate of her country. Perhaps the enormous fortune of which she was free to dispose, she was going to employ in the service of the War of Independence? Why should she not follow Bobolina, Modena, Andronika, and the many others for whom her admiration had been so great?

And so Henry D’Albaret, having assured himself that Hadjine Elizundo was no longer at Corfu, resolved to resume his place among the Philhellenes. Colonel Fabvier was at Scio with his regulars. He would rejoin him. He left the Ionian Islands, crossed the south of Greece, embarked in the Gulf of Aegina, escaped not without difficulty from some pirates about the

Cyclades, and reached Scio after a speedy passage Fabvier greeted him most cordially, and thus showed the esteem in which he was held. The gallant soldier saw in him not only a companion-in-arms, but a true friend to whom he could confide his troubles — and they were many. The indiscipline of the irregulars, who formed an important part of the expedition, the bad and infrequent pay, and the disagreements among the Sciotes themselves, all checked and interfered with his operations.

However, the siege of the citadel of Scio had begun. D’Albaret had arrived in time to take part in the works of approach. On two occasions the allied Powers had enjoined Fabvier to withdraw, but the colonel, openly supported by the Hellenic Government, took no notice of the injunctions, and continued his works.

Soon the siege was converted into a sort of blockade, but so inefficient was it, that fire-arms and munitions were constantly passed in to the besieged. Nevertheless, it seemed as though Fabvier would eventually possess himself of the citadel, and his army, daily enfeebled by famine, did not disperse over the island for pillage and food. Such were the conditions when a Turkish fleet of five vessels forced the blockade of Scio and threw in a reinforcement of 2500 men. A little time afterwards Miaoulis appeared with his squadron, but it was too late, and he had to retire.

With the Greek admiral there came several vessels with volunteers for the force in Scio. Among them was a woman.

After struggling till the last against Ibrahim’s soldiers in the Peloponnesus, Andronika, who had been present at the beginning, determined to see the end of the war. Hence she had come to Scio, resolved, if need be, to die in the island which the Greeks wished to secure for their new kingdom. For her it was a sort of compensation for the harm that her unworthy son had done in these parts during the frightful massacres in 1822. In those days the Sultan had launched against Scio his mandate of bloodshed and slavery. The Capitan-Pacha Kara Ali was put in command. He accomplished his mission. His sanguinary hordes were landed. All the males above twelve, all the females above fourteen, were pitilessly massacred. The rest were seized as slaves and sold in the markets of Smyrna and Barbary. The entire island was put to the sword and overrun by 30,000 Turks; 23,000 Sciotes were killed, and 47,000 were sold as slaves.

Here it was that Starkos intervened. He and his companions, after taking part in the massacres and the pillage, became the principal brokers of-the slave traffic. It was this renegade’s ships that transported thousands of the poor wretches to Asia Minor and Africa, and it was by means of this that Starkos had come in contact with Elizundo. Hence the enormous profits, of which the greater portion fell to Hadjine’s father.

Andronika knew too well the part her son had played in the Scio massacres. That was why she had come there. Had it been known she was the scoundrel’s mother, she would have been bitterly cursed. It seemed to her that to shed her blood for the cause of the Sciotes would be some reparation for her son’s crimes.

But from the moment that Andronika landed at Scio it was difficult for her to avoid meeting with D’Albaret, and, in fact, a few days after her arrival, on the 15th of January, Andronika found herself unexpectedly in the presence of the young officer who had saved her life at Chaidari.

She ran up to him, opened her arms, and said, “Henry D’Albaret!”

“You, Andronika! you!” said the officer; “you here?”

“Yes,” she answered, “is not my place where the oppressors are being fought?”

“Andronika,” answered Henry D’Albaret,” be proud of your country! Be proud of her children, who have defended her by your side! Before long not a Turkish soldier will be left on the soil of Greece.”

“I know it, Henry D’Albaret, and may Heaven grant me life to see it!”

And then Andronika told him how she had lived since they had left each other after the battle of Chaidari. She told him of her voyage to Maina, her native country, which she had revisited for the last time. Then of her reappearance in the army of the Peloponnesus. Then of her arrival at Scio.

On his part, Henry D’Albaret told her how he had gone back to Corfu, and how he had been received at Elizundo’s; how his marriage had been arranged and broken off, and how Hadjine had disappeared, and how one day he hoped to find her.

“Yes, Henry D’Albaret,” answered Andronika, “although you do not know the mystery that weighs on her, she is worthy of you. Yes! you will see her again, and you will both be happy, as you deserve to be.”

“But tell me, Andronika,” asked Henry. “Do you know who Elizundo really was?”

“No!” answered Andronika, “how should I know, and why do you ask me the question?”

“Because I once or twice happened to mention your name in his presence, and it seemed to attract his attention in a very strange way. One day he asked me if I knew what had become of you since Chaidari.”

“I know nothing about him, and I never heard his name.”

“Then there is some mystery I cannot explain, and which, now Elizundo is dead, never will be explained, 1 suppose.”

D’Albaret remained silent. He was thinking of Corfu. He was thinking of all he had suffered, and all he should suffer So long as he was away from Hadjine. Suddenly he said to Andronika, “When the war is over, what will become of you?”

God will then give me grace to retire from the world, in which I am sorry I ever lived.”

“Sorry — Andronika?”

“Yes.”

The mother meant that her life had been an evil one, because such a son had been born to her.

But dismissing the thought, she continued, — “You, Henry D’Albaret, are young, and Heaven will give you a long life. Employ it in finding her you have lost — and who loves you.”

“Yes, Andronika; and I will seek for her everywhere, and will seek out the hateful rival that came between her and me!”

“And who is this man?”

“A captain commanding some suspicious craft, I know not what,” answered D’Albaret. “And who left Corfu immediately after Hadjine had disappeared!”

“And his name?”

“Nicholas Starkos!”

“What!”

Another word and her secret would have escaped her, and Andronika would have proclaimed herself the mother of Nicholas Starkos!

The name uttered so unexpectedly by D’Albaret had frightened her. Strong-minded as she was, she grew pale at her son’s name. All the harm done to the man who had saved her life at the risk of his own was then due to Nicholas Starkos!

But D’Albaret had noticed the effect that the name had produced on Andronika.

“What is the matter with you?” he exclaimed. “Why this emotion at the name of the captain of the *Karysta?* Speak! speak! Do you know him who bears it?”

“No — Henry D’Albaret — no!” answered Andronika, who stammered in spite of herself.

“So! you know him? Andronika, I beg you tell me who is this man? What is he doing? Where is he now — where can I meet him?”

“I know not!”

“No — you do know it! You know it, Andronika, and you refuse to tell me — me — me! Perhaps by a single word you could put me on her track — on the track of Hadjine, and you refuse to speak.”

“Henry D’Albaret,” answered Andronika, “I know nothing! I do not know this captain! I don’t know Nicholas Starkos!”

And so saying she left the young officer, who remained in deep emotion. But every effort he made to again meet Andronika was useless. Doubtless she had abandoned Scio and returned to Greece. Henry D’Albaret had to give up all hope of finding her.

And Colonel Fabvier’s campaign soon after ended without result.

Desertion had set in amongst the expeditionary troops. The soldiers, notwithstanding the entreaties of their officers, deserted and left the island. The artillerymen, on whom Fabvier specially counted, abandoned their pieces. They would do no more in face of such discouragement as had fallen on the best of them.

The siege had to be raised, and a return made to Syra, where the unfortunate expedition had been organized. There, as the reward of his heroic resistance, Fabvier received only reproaches and the tokens of the blackest ingratitude.

Henry D’Albaret had arranged to leave Scio at the same time as his chief. But to what part of the Archipeiago should he shape his course? He was still undecided, when an unexpected event put an end to his hesitation.

The night before he was to embark for Greece a letter arrived by the post.

The letter, with the postmark of Corinth, was addressed to Captain Henry D'Albaret, and all it said was —

"There is a vacancy in the staff of the corvette *Syphanta*, of Corfu. Would Captain D'Albaret like to join her and continue the campaign against Sacratif and the pirates of the Archipelago? "In the early days of March the *Syphanta* will be off Cape Anapomera in the north of the island, and one of her boats will remain in the bay of Ora at the foot of the cape.

"Captain D'Albaret can act as his patriotism prompts him."

No signature. An unknown handwriting. Nothing to indicate whence the letter came. At any rate, here was news of the corvette, which had not been heard of for some time. Also here was an opportunity for Henry D'Albaret to resume his profession as a sailor. Also the possibility of pursuing Sacratif, perhaps of ridding the Archipelago of him, perhaps also — and that was not without influence on his resolution — a chance of meeting Nicholas Starkos and his saccoleva.

D'Albaret's decision was soon taken — to accept the offer made in the anonymous letter. He bade farewell to Fabvier as he embarked for Syra; and then, chartering a boat, sailed round to the north of the island.

The voyage, with the land breeze from the south-west, was not a long one., The boat passed Coloquinta between the island of Anossai and Cape Pampaca. Leaving this cape the course was laid to Cape Ora, and along it to the bay of the same name.

Here Henry D'Albaret landed, on the afternoon of the 1 st of March.

A boat was waiting near the rocks. A corvette was hove-to outside.

“I am Captain Henry D’Albaret,” said the young officer to the quartermaster in charge of the boat.

“Does Captain D’Albaret wish to go on board?”

“At once.”

The boat pushed off. The six oars rapidly cleared the mile that separated her from the corvette. As soon as D’Albaret reached the starboard quarter of the *Syphanta* a prolonged whistle was heard, then came the report of a gun, quickly followed by that of two others. As the young officer set his foot on the deck the whole crew in inspection order presented arms, and the Corfiote flag was run up to the peak.

The acting captain of the corvette stepped forward and said in a loud voice, so as to be heard by all, —

“The officers and crew of the *Syphanta* are glad to welcome their commander — Henry D’Albaret.”

CHAPTER X.

THE CAMPAIGN IN THE ARCHIPELAGO.

THE *Syphanta* was a second-class corvette with twenty-two 24-pounders, and six 12-pound carronades. Fine in the bow, graceful in the run, and of beautiful symmetry, she was one of the best-looking ships of her, time. Easy under any trim, rolling little, and very fast and weatherly, her captain, if a bold seamen, could carry on when he pleased without fear. The *Syphanta* could no more have been upset than a frigate. She would have lost her masts rather than capsize under sail, and hence the possibility of driving her at high speed in a rough sea. Hence also the likelihood that she would succeed in her adventurous cruise against the pirates of the Archipelago.

Although she was not a war-ship in the proper sense, that is, a ship belonging to the service of the State, she was commanded in man-of-war fashion. Her officers and crew would have done credit to the finest corvette in the French navy. The same regularity of manœuvre, the same discipline on board, the same arrangements. Nothing of the freedom of the privateer, where the sailors are not always under such control as in the man-o'-war service.

The *Syphanta* had two hundred and fifty men on her books, a good half of them French from the western coast, or Provençals, and the rest English, Greeks, and Corfiotes. They were thoroughly drilled, trustworthy in fight — born sailors, in fact, in whom every confidence could be placed. The petty officers were worthy of their functions as intermediaries between the officers and the crew. Her officers were four lieutenants, eight ensigns — Corfiotes, Englishmen, and Frenchmen in equal numbers — and an assistant commander. This was Captain Todros, an old stager in the Archipelago, who could confidently take the corvette into nearly all its out-of-the-way places. Not an island was there that he did not know in all its bays, gulfs, creeks, and coves; not an islet that he had not visited in his former voyages; not a sounding that he did not know like a chart.

Todros was about fifty years of age. He was a Greek, from Hydra, and had already served under the orders of Canaris and Tomasis. He was a most valuable auxiliary for the commander of the *Syphanta.*

The corvette had begun her career in the Archipelago under the orders of Captain Stradena. The first weeks of her cruise were fortunate enough, as we have said. Ships destroyed and important prizes gave a good beginning. But the campaign was not without its losses among her crew and officers. If there had been a long interval without news of the *Syphanta,* it had been because on the 27th of February she had had an obstinate battle with a pirate flotilla off Lemnos.

The fight not only cost forty of the men’s lives, but that of the captain, who fell, mortally wounded, on the quarter-deck.

Captain Todros then took command of the corvette, and after gaining the victory had sailed for Aegina, to make the necessary repairs to her hull and spars.

There, a few days after the arrival of the *Syphanta,* he learnt, not without surprise, that she had just been sold at a high price to a banker of Ragusa, whose agent came to Aegina and brought the fresh papers. Everything was done in due order, and there was no doubt but that the corvette had ceased to belong to her old owners, the Corfiote merchants, who had made a very fair profit out of her sale.

But if the *Syphanta* had changed owners, her destination remained the same. To clear the Archipelago of the pirates that infested it; to set free the prisoners she met with on her cruise; and never to give up the game until she had rid the seas of the most terrible of the corsairs, the pirate Sacratif — such was her mission. Repairs having been made, Todros received orders to cruise off the north coast of-Scio, and there take on board the new captain.

It was at this time that Henry D'Albaret received the laconic letter in which he was informed that there was a vacancy among the officers of the *Syphanta.*

We know that he accepted the offer, hardly doubting that the place was that of commander, and that is why, as soon as he set foot on the deck, the officers and crew placed themselves under his orders, while the guns saluted the Corfiote colours.

All this Henry D'Albaret learnt in a conversation which he had with Captain Todros. The commission with which he was put in command of the corvette was in due order. The authority of the young officer could not be disputed — and it was not. Besides, many of the officers knew him. They knew that he was as naval lieutenant one of the youngest, but one of the most distinguished in the French marine. The part he had taken in the War of Independence had given him a well-merited reputation. And so from the first he was welcomed by the whole crew.

"Officers and men," said D'Albaret in reply to their greeting, "I know the mission that has been confided to the *Syphanta.* We will carry it out to the end. All honour to your old chief Captain Stradena, who gloriously fell on this quarter-deck! I trust you! You trust me! Break off!"

The next day, March 2nd, the corvette under all plain sail lost sight of the coasts of Scio, then of the summit of Mount Elias, and cruised off to the north of the Archipelago.

A seaman reckons up his ship at a glance, and after half a day's sailing. The wind was fresh from the north-west, and there was no need to shorten canvas. Captain D'Albaret had thus an excellent opportunity of seeing what his ship could do.

"She can carry her royals," said Captain Todros, "in what to other ships would be a double-reef breeze."

This meant that no vessel would beat the *Syphanta* in speed, and that her stability would enable her to hold her own at times when other ships would have to shorten sail to prevent their sinking.

Close-hauled on the starboard tack the *Syphanta* bore away so as to leave on the east of her the island of Mitylene or Lesbos, one of the largest in the Archipelago. The next day the corvette passed within sight of this island, where at the outbreak of the war in 1821 the Greeks gained a great advantage over the Ottoman fleet.

"I was there," said Captain Todros to D'Albaret.

'It was in May; we had seventy brigs to chase five Turkish ships, four frigates, and four corvettes, that had taken shelter in the harbour of Mitylene. A seventy-four was sent off for help to Constantinople. But we gave chase, and she blew up with some hundred and fifty men. Yes! I was there, and I set fire to the shirts of sulphur and pitch we hung on to her hull! Good shirts that clung close and hot, captain, and might come in useful for our piratical friends!"

It was a treat to hear Captain Todros tell yarns about his exploits with all the freedom of a forecastle hand. But what he said, he had done, and done well.

D'Albaret was not without a reason for steering to the northwards. A few days before his departure from Scio, some suspicious vessels had been reported about Lemnos and Samothraki. Several Levantine coasters had been captured and destroyed off the shores of Turkey in Europe. Perhaps while the *Syphanta* continued out in chase, the pirates proposed to take refuge in the northern parts of the Archipelago. And on their part the decision was a prudent one.

In the waters of Mitylene nothing was visible beyond a few trading-vessels, which communicated with the corvette, by whose presence they were considerably reassured.

In a fortnight the *Syphanta*, although out during the equinoctial gales, conscientiously continued her work. After a heavy squall or two, D'Albaret had thoroughly acquainted himself with the powers and merits of his crew; and they had acquainted themselves with his as well. And he did not belie his reputation. His talents as a tactician in a naval combat would be apparent later on. Of his courage under fire, there was no doubt.

Under all difficulties the young commander proved as remarkable in theory as in practice. He was bold, with great fortitude, steady coolness, and always ready to foresee and take advantage of what might happen. In one word, he was a seaman, and that says all.

During the second fortnight in March the corvette was off Lemnos, the most important island in this part of the Aegean. It is some forty-five miles long, and from fifteen to eighteen wide. Like the neighbouring Imbro, it had not been reached by the War of Independence; but on many occasions the pirates had visited it, and carried off the trading-vessels from the roadstead. The corvette entered the harbour to revictual. It was much crowded, for in those days a good many ships were built at Lemnos; and if, through fear of the corsairs, no more were built than could be sold there, those that were sold dared not go to sea. Hence the crowd of shipping.

The information gained here by D’Albaret and his officers urged him to continue the campaign in the north of the Archipelago. Many times the name of Sacratif was mentioned.

“Ah!” exclaimed Captain Todros, “I am very anxious to find myself face to face with that gentleman. He seems to me to be somewhat legendary, although that might prove he exists.”

“Do you doubt his existence, then?” asked D’Albaret sharply.

“Upon my word,” replied Todros, “if you ask my opinion, I hardly believe in Sacratif. I never heard of anybody seeing him. Perhaps it is a fancy name taken my turn by the pirate chiefs. I fancy that more than one that bore the name has been run up to the yard arm. But it is of no consequence. The main thing is that the beggars ought to have been hanged, and they were.”

“After all, what you say is possible,” replied D ‘Albaret,” and that would explain the gift of ubiquity in which this Sacratif seems to rejoice.”

“You are right, captain,” said one of the Frenchmen. “If Sacratif has been seen, as they pretend, at different places at the same time, that would prove that the name was taken at the same time by different men.”

“And taken to throw pursuers off the scent,” said Todros. “But I say, there is one sure way of causing the name to disappear, and that is to take and hang all who bear it, and even those who do not! In that fashion, if the genuine Sacratif does exist, he will not escape the rope he so richly deserves."

Captain Todros was right; but the difficulty was, to catch these unseizable scoundrels.

"Captain Todros," asked D'Albaret," during your cruise in the *Syphanta*, and previous to that even, did you ever come across a saccoleva of about a hundred tons called the *Karysta?"*

"Never."

"And you, gentlemen?" added the captain, addressing the officers.

Not one had ever heard of the saccoleva, although most of them had been in the Archipelago from the outbreak of the war.

"The name of Nicholas Starkos, the captain of the *Karysta*, is unknown to you?" asked D'Albaret.

The name had never been met with by the officers of the corvette. There was nothing astonishing in this, as Starkos seemed to be but the master of an ordinary merchantman, such as would be met with by hundreds in the Levant.

Todros, however, had a vague recollection of hearing the name when he once put in at Arkadia, in Messenia. It was that of the captain of one of the smugglers that took away to Barbary the prisoners sold by the Ottoman authorities.

"But that could not be the Starkos you mean," he added, "for your man was the master of a saccoleva, and a saccoleva would not be big enough for the trade.”

“Just so,” answered D’Albaret, and the conversation ended.

But if he thought about Nicholas Starkos, it was because his thoughts again and again returned to the impenetrable mystery of the double disappearance of Hadjine Elizundo and Andronika — for the two names were now inseparable in his memory.

On the 25th of March the *Syphanta* was in the latitude of Samothraki, about 180 miles to the northward of Scio. The time occupied on the voyage allowed of all the hiding-places in these parts being carefully searched. In fact, wherever the corvette was unable to enter, on account of the shallowness of the water, the boats were sent in to explore. Nevertheless, the search proved fruitless.

The island of Samothraki had been cruelly devastated during the war, and the Turks still held it. The corsairs accordingly found a safe refuge in its numberless creeks. Mount Saoce is from five to six thousand feet high, and from it those on the watch could signal the approach of any suspected ship. The pirates, forewarned in this manner, had every chance of escape; and this was probably the reason why the *Syphanta* found the neighbouring seas almost deserted.

From Samothraki, D’Albaret steered to the northwest for Thasos, about sixty miles away. The wind was now ahead of her, and the corvette had to make her way to windward against a strong breeze. Soon, however, she got under the lee of the land and found a smoother sea that rendered her progress easier.

How strange the fate of these different isles of the Archipelago! While Scio and Samothraki had suffered so much from the Turks, Thasos, like Lemnos and Imbro, had experienced nothing of the war. The population is entirely Greek at Thasos; the manners are primitive; the men and women have retained in their surroundings, their costume, and their head-dresses all the grace of ancient art. The Ottoman authorities, to whom the island had belonged since the fifteenth century, could have pillaged it at their ease without the slightest resistance. But by some inexplicable privilege, and although the wealth of the inhabitants was sufficient to excite the covetousness of these unscrupulous barbarians, it had always, up to then, been spared.

However, had it not been for the arrival of the *Syphanta*, Thasos would probably have known the horrors of pillage.

In fact, on the 2nd of April, the harbour in the north of the island, now known as Port Pyrgo, was seriously threatened by a descent of pirates. Five or six of their vessels, luggers and djerms, supported by a brigantine of twelve guns, came in view of the town. The landing of these bandits in the midst of a population unaccustomed to strife would have ended in disaster, for the island had no sufficient forces to oppose them. But the corvette appeared in the roadstead; and as soon as she was signalled, a flag was hoisted on the brigantine, and the vessels drew up in line of battle.

“Are they going to attack us?” exclaimed Todros, who was on the quarter-deck with the captain.

“Either attack or defend themselves,” replied D’Albaret, as much surprised as his assistant at the attitude of the pirates.

“I expected to see them sheer off under all the canvas they could carry.”

“Let them fight, Captain Todros! let them even attack us! If they take to flight, some are sure to escape. Beat to quarters.”

The orders were immediately executed. The guns were loaded and primed, and the ammunition brought up. On the upper deck the carronades were got ready for action, and the arms, muskets, pistols, swords, and boarding-axes served out. The topmen sprang up the masts to their stations. Everything was done with as much regularity as on board a man-of-war.

The corvette approached the flotilla, prepared to attack as well as to repulse an attack. The captain’s plan was to make for the brigantine, give her a broadside to disable her, and then board.

But it was probable that the pirates, while preparing to fight, were thinking only of escape. If they had not done so before, it was because they had been surprised by the corvette, which now shut them in the harbour. Their only chance was to combine their movements and try and force a passage.

The brigantine began the fire. Her guns were aimed so as to dismast the corvette. If she succeeded, she would be excellently placed to escape from her enemy.

The broadside passed seven or eight feet above the *Syphanta’s* deck. It cut a few halliards, broke a few sheets and braces, shattered the pile of spare spars between the mainmast and the mizen into splinters, and slightly wounded a sailor or two; but it did no serious damage.

D’Albaret did not immediately reply. He kept straight on to the brigantine, and his starboard guns were not fired until the smoke of the brigantine’s broadside had disappeared.

Fortunately for the brigantine her captain had put her about and taken advantage of the breeze, and she only got two or three shot-holes in her above the water-line. Although two or three men were killed, she was not rendered helpless.

But the corvette’s broadside had not been wasted. The lugger, uncovered by the brigantine, had received a good deal of it on her port side, and began to sink.

“If the brigantine hasn’t got it, that lugger has,” said one of the sailors on the *Syphanta’s* forecastle.

“Bet you my grog she’ll sink in five minutes!”

“In three!”

“Done! And may your liquor go down as easily as the water slipping into her hull!”

“She sinks! — she sinks!”

“She’s over her water-line — she’ll be over her masthead in a minute!”

“And all her scoundrels are clearing out, and swimming away from her.”

“Well, if they prefer being hanged to being drowned, let them come on!”

And in fact the lugger sank lower and lower. As soon as the water touched the gunwale the crew jumped into the sea, so as to reach one of the other vessels.

But these had something else to do besides looking after the lugger’s crew. They were intent only on getting off, and the poor wretches were drowned without even a single rope being thrown overboard to help them.

The *Syphanta's* second broadside was let fly at one of the djerms, and disabled her completely; and soon she disappeared in flames, half a dozen red-hot shot having set fire to her deck.

Seeing this, the other vessels discovered that they had no chance against the corvette's guns. It was evident that in flight lay their only chance of escape.

The captain of the brigantine took the only step he could to save the crew. He signalled for his flotilla to close. In a few minutes the pirates were safe on board, and had abandoned a lugger and a djerm to which they had set fire, and which soon blew up.

The crew of the brigantine, thus reinforced by a hundred men, were better able to resist an attempt to board, in case they could not succeed in escaping.

But if her crew now equalled that of the corvette in number, her best plan was still to seek safety in flight; and so she made the best of the speed she possessed to reach the Ottoman coast. There her captain hoped to hide where the corvette could not discover her, and if she discovered her, could not follow.

The breeze had freshened. The brigantine, notwithstanding, kept her topgallant sail aloft at the risk of carrying away her mast, and began to leave the Syphanta.

"Good!" exclaimed Todros, "I should not be surprised if her legs are not as long as ours." And he returned to the captain for orders. But D'Albaret's attention had just been called off in another quarter. He no longer watched the brigantine. His glass was turned towards the port of Thasos, where he noticed a small vessel speeding away in full sail. She was a saccoleva. Under a splendid breeze from the north-west, which allowed her to carry all her canvas, she was running through the south channel, which her light draught allowed her to clear.

D’Albaret, after carefully examining her, shut up his telescope.

“The *Karysta!*” he exclaimed.

“What! That is the saccoleva you were talking about?” said Todros.

“.Herself, and to catch her — ”

D’Albaret did not finish the phrase. Between the brigantine, with its numerous crew of pirates, and the *Karysta,* although probably commanded by Nicholas Starkos, his duty did not allow him to hesitate. By abandoning the pursuit of the brigantine lie could easily stop the channel, cut off the saccoleva, and capture her. But that was to sacrifice the general interest to his personal interest. He could not do it. To chase the brigantine without losing a moment, to attempt her capture, was what he ought to do, and what he did do. He threw a last glance at the *Karysta*, which cleared off with marvellous speed by the channel he had left open, and gave orders for the chase of the pirate ship which was skimming away in the opposite direction.

Immediately the *Syphanta* followed in her wake. At the same time the bow-chasers were put in position, and as there was only a bare half a mile between the ships, the corvette began to be busy.

But her business was not appreciated by the brigantine, and she luffed a couple of points to try if she could leave the corvette on a different tack.

The change was useless.

The *Syphanta's* helmsman put his helm down, and the corvette luffed in turn.

For an hour the chase went on. The pirates began to gain, and it was obvious that they would not be caught before the night closed in. But the battle ended in another way.

By a lucky shot the *Syphanta*. brought down the brigantine's foremast. The pirate fell away from the wind, and in a quarter of an hour the corvette was alongside.

A frightful explosion followed. The *Syphanta* let fly her starboard broadside at half a cable's length. The brigantine was almost lifted out of the water; but her upper works only were destroyed, and she did not sink.

At the same time her captain, with his crew, decimated by the discharge, saw that resistance was hopeless and hauled down his flag.

In a moment the boats of the corvette were alongside the brigantine, bringing off the survivors. Then the vessel, afire from stem to stern, burnt down to her water-line, and sank beneath the waves.

The *Syphanta* had done her work well. The chief of the flotilla refused to answer any questions, and his name, origin, and antecedents remained for ever unknown. In the same way nothing was known of his companions; but that ‘ they were pirates was undoubted, and prompt justice was meted out to all.

out the appearance and disappearance of the saccoleva gave Henry D'Albaret a good deal to think about.

The circumstances under which she had left Thasos were very suspicious. Had she profited by the fight between the corvette and the flotilla to escape more surely? Had she been afraid to appear before the *Syphanta*, whom she had perhaps recognized?

An honest vessel would have remained in harbour while the pirates ran away!

On the other hand, here was this *Karysta*, at the risk of falling into their hands, setting every sail she could carry, and running out to sea! From her course of action, one would suspect she was in collusion with them! In fact, Captain D'Albaret would not have been surprised if Nicholas Starkos were not one of the pirates. Unfortunately he could only trust to chance to get again on his track. Night was approaching, and the *Syphanta* on her southern course would have little chance of meeting the saccoleva. What regrets had D'Albaret for having let slip the chance of capturing Nicholas Starkos! He had, however, done his duty. The result of the Thasos fight was that five vessels were destroyed without any harm to the crew of the corvette, and the security of the Southern Archipelago assured for some time to come.

CHAPTER XI.

UNANSWERED SIGNALS.

EIGHT days after the fight at Thasos, the *Syphanta* had searched the creeks on the Ottoman coast from Cavale to Orphana, had crossed the bay of Contessa and opened the gulfs of Monte Santa and Cassandra. On the 15th of April she began to lose sight of the summit of Mount Athos, whose loftiest point attains an elevation of 6800 feet above, the sea.

No suspicious sail was seen during this part of the cruise. Many times Turkish squadrons hove in sight, but the *Syphanta,* sailing under the Corfiote flag, thought better not to enter into communication with vessels who might receive her with a salute of shotted guns. She also met a few Greek coasters, from whom she obtained a good deal of information that might eventually be useful.

On the 26th of April, D’Albaret learnt a fact of great importance.. The allied Powers had decided that any reinforcement by sea for Ibrahim’s troops should be intercepted; and Russia officially declared war against the Sultan. The situation was thus improving, and although there might be some delay, Greece was surely advancing to the conquest of her independence.

On the 30th of April the corvette had made her way up to the end of the Gulf of Salonica, her extreme north-westerly point in the Archipelago during this cruise. She here had an opportunity of giving chase to a few xebecs, snows, and polaccas, which only escaped by running on shore. If the crews did not perish to the last man, at least the ships were destroyed.

The *Syphanta* then headed south-east, so as to carefully examine the northern shore of the Gulf of Salonica. The alarm had doubtless been given, for not a single pirate appeared.

But a very singular and indeed almost inexplicable event happened on board the corvette. On the 10th of May, about seven in the evening, D’Albaret found a letter on his table. He took it up, held it to the swinging lamp suspended from the ceiling, and read the address. The address was: —

“To Captain Henry D’Albaret, commanding the corvette *Syphanta*, at sea.”

D’Albaret might well recognize the handwriting. It was that of the letter he had received at Scio, telling him of the vacancy on board the corvette.

The following were the contents of this letter which had so strangely arrived, independently this time of all postal assistance: —

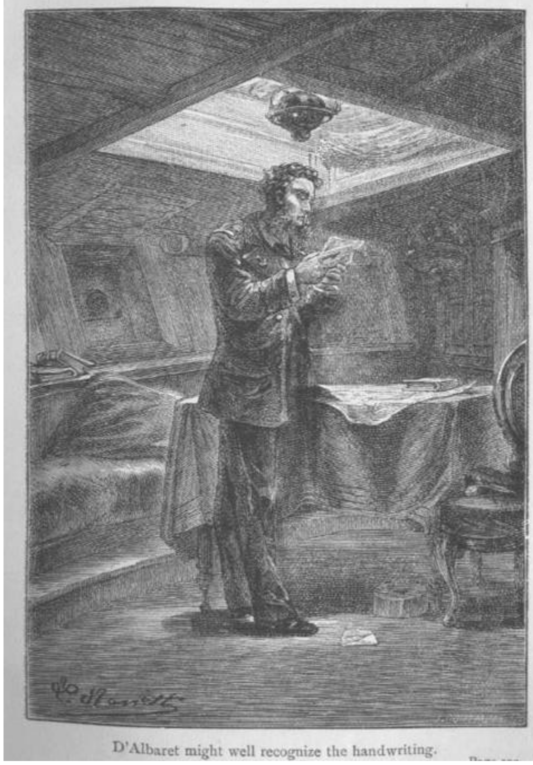

D'Albaret might well recognize the handwriting.

"If Captain D'Albaret can arrange his plan of campaign so as to cross the Archipelago and visit the neighbourhood of the island of Scarpanto in the first week of September, he will act for the best for all the interests that are entrusted to him."

No date, and no more signature than that of the letter he received at Scio; and when D'Albaret had compared them, he felt sure that they were both written by the same hand.

How was this? The first letter had come by post, but this one must have been placed on the table by some one on board. It followed, therefore, that this person must have had it in his possession since the commencement of the campaign, or that it had been given to him at one of the last halting-places of the *Syphanta*. The letter was not there when the captain left the cabin an hour before to make his arrangements for the night. Consequently it must have been placed on the cabin-table not an hour ago.

D’Albaret struck the bell. A sailor appeared.

“Who came in here while I was on deck?”

“Nobody, captain,” answered the sailor.

Nobody! But somebody may have come in without your seeing him.”

“No, captain, for I have not left the door for a moment.”

“Good.”

The sailor saluted and retired.

“It seems to me impossible that a man could come in at the door without being seen,” said D’Albaret. “But at nightfall might he not slip along the outside gallery and come in through one of the cabin windows?”

He went and examined the scuttles, but they were securely fastened from the inside. It was manifestly impossible for any one from without to have entered through these openings.

There was not much in all this to cause anxiety to D’Albaret; he was only rather surprised, and his curiosity was aroused owing to the affair being so difficult to explain. The fact, however, remained, that somehow or other the anonymous letter had reached its address, and that it was intended for no one else than the captain of the *Syphanta*.

After thinking the matter over, D’Albaret decided to say nothing about it even to Todros. What would be the use? His mysterious correspondent, whoever he might be, would not be discovered by his doing so.

And now, ought the captain to take any notice of the letter?

“Certainly,” he said. “Whoever wrote the first time at Scio did not deceive me in saying that there was a berth vacant on the *Syphanta*. Why should they deceive me the second time in inviting me to cruise off Scarpanto in the first week of September? It can only be in the interest of the mission entrusted to me! Yes! I will change my plan, and I will keep my appointment.’’

D’Albaret carefully folded up the letter that gave him his new instructions. Then he took his charts and began to work out a new cruise, so as to occupy the four months before the end of August.

The isle of Scarpanto is in the south-east, at the other end of the Archipelago — that is, about three hundred miles away in a straight line from the *Syphanta’s* present position. There would, therefore, be time enough for the corvette to visit the shores of the Morea, as well as the group of the Cyclades scattered about the gulf of Aegina up to the island of Crete.

In fact, this appointment to appear in sight of Scarpanto on the date indicated would only very slightly modify the itinerary already decided upon. What he had resolved to do, he would do without shortening his programme. And so the *Syphanta* on the 20th of May, after sighting the small islands of Pelerissa, Peperi, Sarakino, and Skantxoura, to the north of Negropont, bore down for Scyros.

Scyros is the most important of the nine islands forming the group whose antiquity is remote enough to make them the domain of the nine Muses. In the harbour of St. George — safe, roomy, and affording good anchorage — the corvette could easily be re-victualled on fresh meat, sheep, partridges, corn, and barley; and take in a stock of that excellent wine which is one of the greatest riches of the country. The island, which played a considerable part in the semi-mythological events of the Trojan war, was soon to enter the Greek kingdom as part of the eparchy of Eubcea.

As the coast-line of Scyros is much cut up into bays and creeks, in which pirates might easily find shelter, D’Albaret had it most carefully searched. While the corvette lay-to a few cable-lengths away, her boats left not a creek unexplored.

But there was no result. The shelters were deserted. The only information that could be got from the authorities of the island was that about a month before, several merchantmen had been attacked, plundered, and destroyed by a vessel under a pirate ensign, and that the act of piracy had been attributed to the notorious Sacratif. But on what grounds the assertion was made they could not say, there being so much uncertainty even as to the existence of this personage.

After a stay of five or six days the corvette left Scyros. Towards the end of May she approached the shores of that large island of Eubœa, known also as Negropont, and carefully coasted down its hundred and twenty miles. This island was one of the first to revolt at the outbreak of the war in 1821; but the Turks, after being shut up in the citadel of Negropont, had maintained an obstinate resistance and at the same time entrenched themselves at Carystos. Reinforced by the troops of Yussuf Pacha, they overran the island began their customary massacre, when one of the Greek leaders, Diamantis, arrived in September, 1823, to stop them. Having attacked the Ottoman soldiers by surprise, he killed them in great numbers and drove the fugitives across the strait into Thessaly.

But in the end the advantage remained with the Turks, who were superior in number. After a vain attempt on the part of Colonel Fabvier and Regnaud de Saint Jean d’Angély in 1826, they were definitely left in possession of the whole island.

They were still there when the *Syphanta* passed down the coast. From the ship D’Albaret could review the theatre of that sanguinary strife in which he had personally taken part. The fighting had, however, ceased, and after the recognition of the new kingdom, the island of Eubœa, with its sixteen thousand inhabitants, became one of the nomarchies of Greece.

Although the danger was great within range of the Turkish guns, the corvette did not suspend her search, and a score of pirate vessels were destroyed on her way to the Cyclades.

These proceedings occupied the greater part of June. Then she moved off to the south-east. In the last days of the month she was off Andros, a patriotic island, whose people rose against the Ottoman rule at the same time as did those of Psara. Thence the captain of the corvette altered his course towards the Peloponnesus. On the 2nd of July he sighted the island of Zea, the ancient Ceos or Cos, with the commanding height of Mount Elia. For some days the *Syphanta* anchored in the harbour of Zea, which is one of the best in these parts.

There D’Albaret and his officers met many of the gallant Zeotes who had been their companions-in-arms in the earlier years of the war. The arrival of the corvette was warmly welcomed. But as no pirate would ever have thought of hiding in the creeks of that island, the *Syphanta* very soon resumed her cruise, and on the 5th of July doubled Cape Colonna, the southwest point of Attica.

At the end of the week the wind fell and little progress was made across the Gulf of Aegina, which cuts so deeply into Greece up to the Isthmus of

Corinth. A careful watch had to be kept. The *Syphanta* was almost becalmed. The crew were kept ready to repel any attack. And they were wise. Several boats approached her with very suspicious intentions; but they dared not brave the guns and small arms of the corvette.

On the 10th of July the wind went round to the north, and the *Syphanta*, after sighting the little town of Damala, doubled Cape Skyli, at the extreme point of the Gulf of Nauplia. On the 11th she appeared off Hydra, and the next day but one off Spezzia. We need not enlarge on the part that the inhabitants of these two islands took in the War of Independence. At the beginning the Hydriotes, Spezziotes, and their cousins the Ipsariotes possessed more than three hundred trading-vessels. After altering them into ships of war they sent them out, not without success, against the Turkish fleet. Here was the cradle of the families of Condouriotis, “Tombasis, Miaoulis, Orlandos, and so many others of distinction, who first paid with their fortune, and then with their blood, the debt they owed to their country. Hence departed the redoubtable fire-ships which caused such terror to the Turks. And, in spite of revolt in the interior, never were the two islands soiled by the feet of the oppressor.

When Henry D’Albaret visited them the struggle was nearly over. The hour was not far distant when they would be united to the new kingdom, and form two eparchies in the department of Corinth and Argolis.

On the 20th of July the corvette anchored at Hermopolis, in the island of Syra, the land of the faithful Eumea, so poetically sung of by Homer, and at this time the refuge of all whom the Turks had chased from the continent. Syra, whose Catholic bishop is under French protection, put all its resources at D’Albaret’s disposal. In no port did the young captain meet a warmer reception. Only one regret mingled with the pleasure he felt at his reception. That was that he had not arrived the day before.

In course of conversation with the French Consul he learnt that a saccoleva bearing the name of the *Karysta,* and sailing under Greek colours, had left the harbour only sixteen hours previously. Hence the conclusion that the *Karysta* in escaping from Thasos, during the fight between the corvette and the pirates, had run down into the southern parts of the Archipelago.

“But perhaps somebody knows whither she has gone,” said D’Albaret.

“From all I hear,” replied the consul, “she is off to the south-eastern islands, even if she is not bound for one of the Cretan ports.”

‘‘ You have had no communication with her captain?”

“None.”

“And you do not know if his name was Nicholas Starkos?”

“No.”

“And nothing made you suspect that the saccoleva was part of the pirate flotilla which infests this part of the Archipelago?”

Nothing; but if so,” said the consul, “there is nothing extraordinary in her being bound for Crete, as several of its ports are open to the corsairs.”

This news was very disquieting to the captain of the *Syphanta,* as was everything bearing directly or indirectly on the disappearance of Hadjine Elizundo. It was unfortunate that he arrived so soon after the departure of the saccoleva. But as she had gone southwards, perhaps if the corvette took the same course she might fall in with her? And so D'Albaret, who ardently desired to find himself face to face with Starkos, left Syra in the evening of the 21 st of July, before a slight breeze which, according to the barometer, was likely to freshen.

For a fortnight, it must be admitted, the captain of the corvette was on the look out more for the saccoleva than for pirates. In his way of thinking, the *Karysta* ought to be treated in similar fashion, and for - the same reason.

However, the corvette came upon no trace of the saccoleva. At Naxos, all of whose ports were visited, the *Karysta* had not put in. Among the islets and reefs that surround that island the *Syphanta* was no more fortunate, and there was a complete absence of corsairs in this district, where they usually swarmed. There is a fair amount of trade between these rich Cyclades, and the chances of plunder were particularly attractive to them.

It was the same at Paros, which a channel about seven miles across separates from Naxos. Neither Parkia, Naussa, St. Mary, Angola, nor Dico had been visited by Starkos. Undoubtedly, as the consul at Syra had said, the saccoleva was bound for one of the Cretan ports.

On the 9th of August the *Syphanta* anchored off Milo. This island, now impoverished by its volcanic disturbances, was at the close of the eighteenth century very rich. It is poisoned by the noxious vapours of the soil, and the population is gradually decreasing.

Here the search was equally vain. Not only had the *Karysta* not been seen, but not a single pirate was found to give chase to. In fact it seemed as though the approach of the *Syphanta* was somehow notified in time for them to escape. The corvette had so served the corsairs in the north of the Archipelago that those in the south avoided meeting her. Never, for some reason or other, had the seas been so safe. It seems that merchantmen could henceforth use them in perfect security. Every one of the larger coasters, xebecs, snows, polaccas, tartans, feluccas, or caravellas met with on the road was questioned'; but from the answers of their masters nothing important could be ascertained.

It was now the 14th of August. Only a fortnight remained for the corvette to reach the island of Scarpanto on the 1 st of September. Leaving the Cyclades, the *Syphanta* kept her southerly course for nearly two hundred and forty miles. Ahead of her there appeared above the horizon the long stretch of Cretan coast with its high hills capped with perpetual snow.

The *Syphanta*, in leaving Milo, had gone away to the south-west to Santorin, and searched among the sombre cliffs of that island — a dangerous coast — whereon at any moment a new shoal may rise, thrust up by the volcanic fires below. Then taking as a beacon the ancient Mount Ida, the modern Psilanti, which towers up some seven thousand feet above the Cretan shore, the corvette spread her sails to a favouring breeze, and bore down on the island.

On the 15th of August the higher ground became clearly outlined on the horizon from Cape Spada to Cape Stavros. A sudden break in the line hid the inlet at the bottom of which stands Candia, the capital.

“Is it your intention to put in at any of the ports on the island?” asked Captain Todros.

“Crete is all in the hands of the Turks,” answered D’Albaret,” and I do not think we shall do any good there. According to the news I heard at Syra, Mustapha’s soldiers, after seizing on Retimo, have made themselves masters of the whole island, in spite of the valour of the Sphakiotes.”

“Gallant mountaineers those Sphakiotes,” said Captain Todros; “since the outbreak of the war they have made themselves a great reputation for bravery.”

“Yes, bravery and covetousness,” answered D’Albaret. “Scarcely two months ago they held the fate of Crete in their hands. Mustapha and his people were surprised in a ravine, and could have been exterminated; but at his orders the soldiers threw away their jewels, ornaments, and valuables, and while the Sphakiotes dispersed to seize them, the Turks escaped through the defile in which they might have met their deaths.”

“That is very sad, captain, but after all the Cretans are hardly Greeks.”

It may seem astonishing that Todros, who was of Greek origin, should say such a thing. Not alone in his eyes, despite their patriotism, were the Cretans not Greeks, but they did not become so at the final formation of the new kingdom. Like Samos, Crete remained under the Ottoman yoke, and in 1832 the Sultan ceded

to Mehemet Ali all his rights over the island. Such being the state of affairs, Captain D’Albaret gained little by running into the Cretan ports. Candia had become the principal arsenal of the Egyptians/ and it was thence that the pasha had sent his soldiery against Greece. As for Candia, at the instigation of the Ottoman authorities its inhabitants had given a very equivocal greeting to the Corfiote flag at the *Syphanta’s* peak. Neither at Gira-Petra, nor at Suda, nor at Cisamos did Henry D’Albaret obtain any information to enable him to crown his expedition with some notable exploit.

“No,” he said to Captain Todros, “it seems useless to keep a watch on the northern coast, but we can run round the north-west, and cruise for a day or two off Grabousa.”

This was obviously the best thing to do. In the ill-famed waters of Grabousa the *Syphanta* might have the opportunity, denied her for a month or more, of sending a broadside or so into the pirates of the Archipelago.

Besides, if the saccoleva, as they imagined, had sailed for Crete, it was not impossible that she had put in at Grabousa. And thus the more reason for Captain D'Albaret to watch the approaches to its harbour.

In those days Grabousa was a nest of pirates. About seven months before, it had required an Anglo-French fleet and a detachment of Greek regulars under Mavrogordato to bring this abode of scoundrels to reason. It was the Cretan authorities themselves who refused to surrender a dozen pirates claimed by the commander of the English squadron; and he had to open fire on the citadel, burn some of the ships, and effect a landing before he could obtain satisfaction.

It was, then, natural to suppose that since the departure of the allied squadron the pirates would gather at Grabousa, and Henry D'Albaret decided to lay his course for Scarpanto along the south of Crete so as to pass it. He gave orders to this effect, and Todros hastened to execute them.

The weather was splendid. In this agreeable climate December is the beginning of winter, and January is its end. A fortunate island is Crete, the country of King Minos and Daedalus the inventor.

The *Syphanta* doubled Cape Spada, which projects from the end of that tongue of land between the bays of Canea and Kisamo. The cape was passed, and during the night — one of those clear Eastern nights — the corvette turned the extreme point of the island. A veering wind took her to the south, and in the morning, under reduced sail, she tacked down to Grabousa.

For six days Captain D’Albaret kept a constant watch on this western coast of the island between Grabousa and Kisamo. Many ships came out of the port — feluccas or trading xebecs. The *Syphanta* hailed several of them, but none replied suspiciously. To questions about the pirates that might be sheltered in Grabousa they answered with considerable reserve. They were evidently afraid of committing themselves. D’Albaret was not able to ascertain if the saccoleva *Karysta* were then in the harbour.

The corvette then enlarged her field of observation. She cruised along between Grabousa and Cape Crio. On the 22nd, under a splendid breeze, that freshened as the day wore on, and moderated during the night, she doubled that cape, and coasted down the Lybian shore, which is less varied, less cut into, and less beset with points and promontories than that of the opposite coast of the island. On the northern horizon there rose the mountain chain of Asprovouna, with Mount Ida to the east, whose snows never melt beneath the sun of the Archipelago.

Without stopping at the smaller ports of the island, the corvette lay-to off Roumeli, Anopoli, and Sphakia, but the look-outs did not report a single pirate.

On the 27th of August the *Syphanta*, after following the line of the large bay of Messara, doubled Cape Matala, the most southern point of Crete, which hereabouts is from thirty to thirty-three miles across. It did not appear that the search would be of the least use to the cruiser. There are very few ships crossing the Lybian Sea in this latitude. They go more to the north, across the Archipelago, or more to the south, along the coasts of Egypt. Hardly any were seen but fishing-boats moored to the rocks, and from time to time a few of those long boats laden with periwinkles, of which enormous quantities are collected in the islands.

If the corvette met with nothing off that part of the coast ending with Cape Matala, it was not probable that she would be more fortunate along the second half. D'Albaret, therefore, decided to sail straight away for Scarpanto, and get there a little earlier than requested in the mysterious letter. On the evening of the 29th of August, however, his plans were changed.

It was six o'clock. The captain and a few of the officers were on the poop, looking at Cape Matala. From the look-out at the topgallant cross-trees there came a shout of, —

"Sail ho! on the port bow."

Telescopes were immediately brought to bear in the direction indicated.

"Yes," said Captain D'Albaret," there is a vessel close in shore."

"And she ought to know it well to get as near in as that," added Todros.

"Does she show any colours?"

"No, captain," replied one of the officers.

"Ask the look-outs if they can tell what she is."

The orders were given. In a few moments the reply came down that there was no flag either at her peak or masthead.

However, there was still light enough to take stock of her.

She was a brig, with a mainmast raking well aft; extremely long, finely built, heavily sparred, she promised to be very fast in all weathers. Her size showed her to be of from seven to eight hundred tons burden. But was she armed? Did she carry guns? Were her sides pierced with ports, whose mantlets were down? This was a puzzle the best of the telescopes could not solve.

The brig was about four miles away from the corvette. The sun was just disappearing behind the heights of Asprovouna, night was coming on, and the darkness along the foot of the land was profound.

“Strange craft!” said Captain Todros.

“You would think she was going between Platana Island and the coast,” added one of the officers.

“Yes; as if she was sorry to have been seen,” said the second, “and was anxious to get out of sight.”

D’Albaret made no reply, but evidently he shared in the opinion of his officers. The brig’s proceedings were very suspicious.

“Captain Todros,” said he at length, “we must not lose sight of that vessel during the night. We must arrange to remain in this neighbourhood till daybreak. But as we do not want them to see us, you will please have all the lights out on board.”

The necessary orders were given. A watch was still kept on the brig, which remained visible under the high sheltering land. When night fell, she disappeared completely, and not a single light betrayed her position.

In the morning, at the first streak of dawn, D'Albaret was on the forecastle of the *Syphanta*, waiting for the mist to clear away off the sea.

About seven o'clock the fog vanished, and all glasses were turned towards the east.

The brig was still there, close to the coast, off Cape Alikaporitha, some six miles ahead of the corvette. She had sensibly gained on her during the night, and that although she had made no sail since the evening before. Now, as then, she was under foresail, topsails, and fore-topgallant sail, with her mainsail and spanker reefed.

"That is not the trim of a vessel that tries to escape," said Todros.

"It does not matter," answered the captain. "Let us have a closer look at her. Take us down on to that brig."

The boatswain's whistle sounded, the upper sails were set, and the corvette's speed sensibly increased.

But, doubtless, the brig wished to keep her distance, for she shook the reef out of the spanker, and set the main-topgallant sail — nothing more. If she did not want the corvette to approach, she did not apparently want to leave her behind. At the same time she kept close in shore — as close as possible.

About ten o'clock, whether it was owing to the wind or the unknown vessel having permitted the approach, the corvette had made up quite four miles, and could observe her at her ease. She was armed with twenty carronades, and there was room in her for a second deck, although it would be rather near to the water.

“Run up the ensign,” said D’Albaret.

The flag was hoisted at the peak and saluted by a gun. This meant that the corvette wished to ascertain the nationality of the vessel in sight. But to the signal there was no reply. The brig changed neither her course nor her speed, and held on so as to double the bay of Keraton.

“That fellow is not very polite,” said the sailors.

“But prudent, probably,” said an old foretopman, “with his raking mainmast he looks as though he carried his hat over his ear, and does not use it for saluting.”

A second gun was discharged from the bow of the corvette in vain. The brig took no notice, and continued on her way, paying no more attention to the corvette than if she were at the bottom of the sea.

And now there began a regular trial of speed between the two vessels. Every stitch of canvas was set on the *Syphanta* — studding-sails, water-sails, sky-sails, and fakers — but the brig crammed on her sail in reply, and inperturbably maintained her distance.

“She has got a steam-engine inside her,” exclaimed one of the sailors.

In fact all on board the corvette began to get excited at the chase; and the excitement spread from the crew to the officers, and above all to the impatient Todros.

He would have given all his prize-money to outsail this brig, no matter what might be her nationality.

The *Syphanta* carried in her bow a long-range gun capable of sending a thirty-pound shot a distance of nearly a couple of miles.

Captain D'Albaret, seemingly very calm, gave the order to fire.

The shot ricochetted, and fell about twenty fathoms behind the brig, whose only reply was to set her upper studding-sails and increase the distance between her and the corvette.

Would it then be necessary to give up the chase? A humiliating question for so speedy a vessel as the *Syphanta.*

The night began to close in. The corvette was almost off Peristera. The breeze began to freshen, and the studding-sails had to be taken in and all made snug for the night.

The captain thought that when day came he would see no more of the brig, not even the tops of her masts as she vanished on the eastern horizon.

He was mistaken.

At sunrise there was the brig under the same sail at the same distance. It looked as though she regulated her speed by that of the corvette.

"She has got us in tow," said the men on the forecastle; "at least, it looks like it."

Nothing could be truer.

And now the brig having entered the channel of Kouphonisi, between the island of that name and the mainland, turned the point of Kakialithi so as to hug the eastern coast of Crete.

Was she going to take refuge in some harbour, and vanish up one of the narrow creeks?

Not at all.

At seven o’clock the brig headed to the north-west, and laid her course straight out to sea.

“Is she going to Scarpanto?” asked D’Albaret, astounded.

And under a breeze that gradually increased, at the risk of carrying away his masts, he continued the interminable pursuit, which the interests of his mission and the honour of his ship enjoined him never to abandon.

Well away out in the Archipelago, open to all points of the compass and no longer sheltered by the highlands of Crete, the *Syphanta* at first appeared to gain on the brig.

About one o’clock in the afternoon the vessels were only three miles apart. A few shot were sent after the brig, but they fell short, and in no way provoked her to alter her course.

Already the heights of Scarpanto appeared on the horizon behind the small island of Caso, which hangs from the point of the island, as Sicily hangs from the point of Italy.

Captain D’Albaret and his officers and crew were thus led to hope that they would get alongside this mysterious vessel that so uncivilly refused to reply to either signal or shot.

But towards evening the wind abated, and the brig regained all she had lost.

“Ah! the beggar! Deuce take him! He will escape us!” exclaimed Todros.

And then all was done that an experienced seaman could do to increase the speed of his ship. The sails were skeeted to make them sit flatter, the hammocks were hung for the swing to help the vessel’s trim, everything was done — not without some success. About seven o’clock, a little after sunset, there were only about two miles between the vessels.

But night falls quickly in these latitudes. The twilight is very short. The speed of the corvette would have to be further increased to reach the brig before darkness set in.

And now they were passing between the islets of Caso-Poulo and the isle of Casos. As she turned into the narrow channel between Casos and Scarpanto they lost sight of her.

Half an hour afterwards the *Syphanta* reached the same spot, keeping close to the land to make the most of the wind. There was still light enough to distinguish a vessel at a range of several miles.

The brig had vanished.

CHAPTER XII.

AN AUCTION AT SCARPANTO.

IF Crete, according to the fable, was formerly the cradle of the gods, the ancient Carpathos, the Scarpanto of to-day, was the-cradle of the Titans — their boldest foes. In the attack of ordinary mortals the modern pirates were worthy of those mythological malefactors who feared not to assault Olympus.

At the date of our story, it seemed as though pirates and corsairs of every description had taken up their headquarters in the island which gave birth to the four sons of Japetus, the grandson of Titan and Terra.

And, in truth, Scarpanto was most convenient for those who plied the pirate trade in the Archipelago. It lies almost isolated in the extreme south-west of these seas, about forty miles from Rhodes. Its lofty hills proclaim it from afar. Its sixty miles of coastline are cut into by numberless indentations protected by an infinity of reefs and shoals. If it has given its name to the surrounding sea, it is because it was as formidable to the ancients as it has been to the moderns. Even for the experienced mariner, and the old experienced mariner of the Carpathian Sea, it was, and is still, a very dangerous coast to venture on.

But there are some good anchorages in the island, which forms the last pearl in the long chaplet of the Sporades. Between Cape Sidro and Cape Pernisa, and Capes Bonandrea and Andemo on its southern coast, there are several havens of shelter. Four harbours — Agata, Porto di Tristano, Porto Grato, and Porto Malo Nato — were formally much frequented by the coasters of the Levant before Rhodes had deprived them of their commercial importance. Now it is a very rare occurrence for a ship to call there.

Scarpanto is a Greek island, or rather it is inhabited by a Greek population, but belongs to the Ottoman empire. On the settlement of the Greek constitution, it remained in possession of the Turks under a cadi, who then lived in a sort of fortified house just outside the modern town of Arkassa. In the town were a great number of Turks, who were, it is only fair to say, on good terms with the natives, who took no part in the War of Independence. Having become the centre of the most rascally of commercial operations, Scarpanto welcomed alike Ottoman ships and piratical craft coming thither to tranship their cargoes of prisoners. There the brokers of Asia Minor and the Barbary coast thronged the market-place, where the human merchandise was disposed of. There the auctions were held, and there the prices varied in accordance with slave supply and demand. And the cadi took sufficient interest in the transactions as to preside in person, and the brokers would have been considered to have failed in their duty had they not allowed him a certain percentage in the business done.

The transport of these unfortunates to the bazaars of Smyrna or Africa was principally carried on by vessels coming to Arkassa, on the western side of the island. If they were not equal to their task, an express was sent across to the eastern coast, and the pirates took their share in the odious trade.

At the time we speak of, in the east of Scarpanto, up the numerous — almost impenetrable — creeks, there were not less than a score of vessels, little and big, employing from twelve to thirteen hundred men. This flotilla was only waiting for the arrival of its chief to start upon some new criminal expedition. The *Syphanta* on the evening of the 2nd of September anchored about a cable’s length off the jetty at Arkassa, in some ten fathoms of water. D’Albaret, as he set foot on the island, did not for a moment doubt that the chances of the cruise had brought him to the headquarters of the slave-trade.

“Are you going to stop any time at Arkassa?” asked Todros, when the vessel had been brought safely to her anchor.

“I do not know,” answered D’Albaret. “Circumstances may cause me to leave pretty sharply, or they may keep me here some time.”

“Are the men to go ashore?”

“Yes, but in watches only. Half the crew must always be on board.”

“That is understood, captain,” answered Todros. “We are more in a Turkish country than a Greek one here, and it is only prudent to keep widè awake.”

It may be remembered that D’Albaret had said nothing to his officers as to the motives which had brought him to Scarpanto, nor how an appointment to be here in the early days of September had been given him in an anonymous letter which had arrived on board in such an inexplicable manner. Besides, he calculated on receiving some new communication indicating that his mysterious correspondent was awaiting the corvette in the waters of the Carpathian Sea.

But what was none the less strange, was the sudden disappearance of the brig in the Casos channel when the *Syphanta* was on the point of reaching her. And before anchoring at Arkassa, D’Albaret had not quite given up the chase. After coming as close to the shore as the draught of water allowed him, he set to work to examine all the windings of the shore-line. But amid the network of shoals which defend it, and under the shelter of the lofty cliffs which bound it, a vessel, such as the brig, could easily get out of sight. Behind the barrier of breakers that the *Syphanta* could not approach without risk of destruction, a captain knowing the channels could easily throw his pursuers off the track. If, then, the brig was in some secret creek, it would be very difficult to find her, but not more so than to find the other piratical vessels to whom the island had given shelter.

The explorations of the corvette lasted for two days, and were in vain. The brig seemed to have vanished in the waters, and D'Albaret in despair had to give up all thoughts of discovering her. He resolved to anchor at Arkassa and await events.

Between three and five o'clock on the following afternoon, the little town of Arkassa was invaded by a considerable portion of the population of the island, to say nothing of the strangers, Europeans and Asiatic, whom the crowd could not be without on such an occasion. It was, in fact, the day of the great market. Miserable creatures of every age and condition, who had recently been taken prisoners by the Turks, were to be duly put up for sale.

At this date there was in Arkassa a special bazaar for this trade, a "batistan," such as is found in certain towns of the Barbary States. The batistan then contained about a hundred prisoners, men, women, and children, the fruits of the last razzias made in the Peloponnesus. They were crowded together in a heap, in a court without shade or shelter, under a burning sun, with their clothes in rags; and their disconsolate attitudes and despairing features bore witness to their sufferings. Ill and half-fed, they were huddled together in families, until the caprice of their purchasers would separate the wife from her husband, and the child from father and mother. They would have inspired the deepest pity in all but the cruel "bachis," their guardians, whom no grief could move. And what were these tortures compared to those that awaited them in the bagnios of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli?

Nevertheless, all hope of freedom had not yet been lost by the captives. If the purchasers did well by purchasing them, they did none the less well by giving them their liberty for a consideration — above all, by giving it to those whose value was based on their social position in their own country. A good many were thus saved from slavery by public redemption when the State bought them back before their departure, when their buyers treated directly with their families, and when the monks with their contributions from the charitable of Europe came to deliver them in the chief centres of Barbary. Frequently also individuals, in the same spirit of charity, would set aside a part of their fortune for this benevolent work. In these later times considerable sums from unknown sources had been employed in these purchases, but principally for the benefit of slaves of Greek origin whom the chances of war had during the last six years handed over to the dealers of Africa and Asia Minor.

The market at Arkassa was conducted like a public auction. Every one, foreigners and natives, could take part in it; but on this occasion, as the buyers were only present for the Barbary trade, there was only one batch of captives. As this lot was disposed of to this or that broker, it would be despatched to Algiers, Tripoli, or Tunis.

Nevertheless, there were two classes of prisoners; some came from the Peloponnesus — these were the most numerous. Others had recently been captured on a Greek vessel outward bound from Tunis to Scarpanto. These were to be the last lot offered that day. The bidding would go on till five o’clock, when the gun from the Citadel of Arkassa would terminate the sale at the same time as it closed the harbour.

On this 3rd of September, there was no lack of dealers round the batistan. There were many agents from Smyrna and other neighbouring points of Asia Minor, who, so it was said, were all acting for the Barbary market.

The excitement was not unintelligible. Recent events foreshadowed an early close to the War of Independence. Ibrahim had been driven back into the Morea, while Marshal Maison had landed with an expeditionary force of two thousand French.’ The export of prisoners would thus be greatly reduced for the future, and their value, to the great satisfaction of the cadi, would considerably increase.

During the morning the dealers had visited the batistan and ascertained the quantity and quality of the prisoners, who, it seemed, would fetch very good prices.

“By the Prophet!” exclaimed a Smyrna merchant, who was holding forth to a group of his companions, “the good time has gone by! Do you remember when the ships used to bring the prisoners here by thousands, instead of hundreds?”

“Yes! As it was after the Scio massacres!” answered another dealer. “At one go, more than forty thousand slaves. The hulks could not hold them.”

“Quite so,” said a third dealer, who seemed to have a keen eye for trade. “But too many prisoners meant low prices. Better have them in moderation; for the expenses are always the same.”

“Yes! In Barbary in particular! Twelve per cent, on the gross profit for the pasha, the cadi, or the governor.”

“To say nothing of the one per cent, for the support of the wharf and the coast batteries.”

“And another one per cent, out of our pockets into those of the marabouts.”

“In fact it is ruinous for the shipowners as well as the dealers.”

Such were the opinions interchanged among the agents, who seemed to have no idea of the infamy of the trade. Always the same complaints against the same charges! And they would probably have continued to enlarge on their grievances, had not the clock put an end to them by announcing the opening of the market.

The cadi presided. His duty, as representing the Turkish Government, obliged him to do so, to say nothing of his personal interests. There he was, enthroned on a sort of platform in the shade of a tent above which floated the red flag and crescent, and lounging on large cushions with truly Turkish nonchalance.

Near him the public crier prepared for his duties. But there is no necessity to suppose that the crier would have to shout very loudly. No! In this business the dealers take “their time in out-bidding each other. If there is a struggle for the final decision, it takes place during the last quarter of an hour.

The first bid was a thousand pounds Turkish, by one of the Smyrna brokers.

“A thousand pounds Turkish!” repeated the crier. Then he shut his eyes, as if he had time to take a nap before another bid. For the first hour the bidding rose from a thousand to two thousand pounds Turkish, or about eighteen hundred pounds sterling. The dealers looked on and talked amongst themselves on other matters. Their plans were all agreed upon. They would not risk their best offers until the last minutes preceding the report of the gun.

But the arrival of a new-comer caused a change in their plans, and gave unexpected excitement to the bidding.

About four o’clock two men appeared in the marketplace of Arkassa. Whence came they? From the east of the island, doubtless, to judge from the direction taken by the araba which had brought them to the very gate of the batistan.

Their appearance caused a sudden movement of surprise and anxiety. Evidently the dealers had not expected any one to compete with them.

“By Allah!” exclaimed one, “it is Nicholas Starkos himself.”

“And his cursed Skopelo,” answered another.

These were the two men, and they were well known in the market of Arkassa. On more than one occasion they had done an enormous trade by buying prisoners for the African merchants. Money never failed them: none knew whence it came, but that nobody minded. And the cadi, who was much concerned, could not but be pleased at the arrival of such formidable bidders.

A single glance had sufficed for Skopelo to estimate the value of the prisoners. He had had much experience in such matters. He whispered a few words to Starkos, who answered affirmatively with a nod.

Those in the market-place could not help noticing the movement of horror with which the arrival of Starkos was greeted by one of the prisoners.

She was an old woman, of very tall stature. Seated on a step in a corner of the batistan, she rose as if some irresistible force possessed her. She even made two or three steps forward, and a cry was about to escape from her lips. She had energy enough to restrain it. Then slowly recoiling, she wrapped herself from head to foot in the folds of a miserable cloak, and resumed her place behind a group of captives so as to be quite out of sight.

The dealers, without a word to him, continued to watch the captain of the *Karysta*, while he seemed to take no notice of them. Had he come to bid for their prisoners? They feared so, knowing the connection between Starkos and the beys and pashas of the Barbary States.

They were not long left in suspense. The crier raised his voice and repeated the last bid, —

“Two thousand pounds.”

“Two thousand four hundred,” said Skopelo, who on these occasions constituted himself the captain’s mouthpiece.

“Two thousand four hundred pounds!” announced the crier.

And the private conversations recommenced among the different groups, who noted it defiantly.

A quarter of an hour elapsed. No other bid had been made since Skopelo’s. Starkos, indifferent and haughty, Strolled round the batistan. No one doubted but that he would finally secure the lot, though it might be only after a sharp struggle.

Nevertheless, the Smyrna broker, after previously consulting his colleagues, made a bid of two thousand seven hundred pounds.

“Two thousand seven hundred pounds,” repeated the crier.

“Three thousand.”

It was Starkos who spoke this time.

What had happened? Why had he personally interfered in the struggle? Whence came the voice, customarily so cool, which showed such violent agitation as to surprise even Skopelo?

The fact was that Starkos, after passing the barrier of the batistan, had strolled among the prisoners. The old woman, as she saw him approach, hid herself more closely under her cloak. He did not notice her.

But suddenly his attention was arrested by two prisoners who formed a group apart. He stopped as if rooted to the spot.

By a tall man’s side a girl was lying exhausted on the ground.

As he caught sight of Starkos, the man suddenly rose, and at the same moment the girl opened her eyes. As soon as she saw the captain of the *Karysta* she drew back.

“Hadjine!” exclaimed Starkos.

It was Hadjine Elizundo, whom Xaris caught in his arms to protect her.

“Herself!” said Starkos.

Hadjine disengaged herself from the grasp of Xaris, and looked her father's former client in the face.

It was at this moment that Starkos, who did not even think of what he was to do with Elizundo's heiress thus exposed for sale in the market-place of Arkassa, shouted in agitation his new bid of three thousand pounds.

"Three thousand pounds!" repeated the crier. It was then a little after half-past four. Still five and twenty minutes, and the gun would sound, and the lot would fall to the highest bidder.

But already the dealers having conferred together, were preparing to leave, resolved not to advance in their price. It seemed certain to them that the captain of the *Karysta* would remain in possession of the field. The Smyrna dealer, however, made a last effort to continue the struggle.

"Three thousand five hundred pounds!" he bid. "Four thousand!" immediately replied Starkos. Skopelo, who had not noticed Hadjine, failed to understand this immoderate ardour of the captain. In his opinion the value of the lot had already been exceeded, and greatly exceeded by this bid of four thousand pounds. And he was wondering what could have possessed Starkos to launch forth so strangely.

A long silence followed the crier's last words. The Smyrna dealer, at a sign from his colleagues, was about to abandon the lot, which there was no reason to doubt would, in the few remaining minutes, finally fall to Starkos.

Xaris understood all. He clasped the girl tightly in his arms. They should not take her from him until they had killed him!

At this moment, in the midst of a deep silence, there was heard a clear, penetrating voice, and these three words were hurled at the crier,-

“Five thousand pounds!”

Starkos turned round. A group of sailors had just arrived in the batistan. In front of them stood an officer. “Henry D’Albaret!” exclaimed Starkos. “Henry D’Albaret! Here-at Scarpanto!”

Chance alone had brought the captain of the *Syphanta* to the market-place. He did not even know that on this day — twenty-four hours after his arrival at Scarpanto — a slave sale was going on in the capital of the island. And on the other hand, as he had not seen the saccoleva at the anchorage, he was no less astonished to see Nicholas Starkos at Arkassa, than Starkos was to see him.

For Starkos did not know that D’Albaret commanded the corvette, although he knew she was at Arkassa.

We can imagine the feelings of these two enemies when they found themselves face to face.

And if Henry D’Albaret had made the unexpected bid, it was because he had just caught sight of Hadjine and Xaris — Hadjine about to fall into the power of Nicholas Starkos! But Hadjine had heard him — had seen him — :and would have rushed to him, had not the keepers prevented her.

With a gesture D’Albaret reassured her.

Great as was his indignation when he found himself in the presence of his hated rival, he kept his temper under control. Yes! If it were at the cost of his whole fortune, he would snatch from Nicholas Starkos the prisoners grouped in the batistan of Arkassa, and with them, her whom he had sought for so long, and whom he had never hoped again to see.

The contest was sure to be severe. In fact, if Starkos could not understand how Hadjine Elizundo had become one of the prisoners, he did understand that she was still the rich heiress of the Corfu banker. His millions could not have disappeared. They would always be there to buy her back from slavery. Hence at any price he must secure her. And he resolved to do it all the more passionately, as he had to contend with his rival, and his accepted rival.

“Six thousand pounds!” he shouted.

“Seven thousand,” answered the captain of the *Syphanta* without even a look at Starkos.

The cadi could not but be delighted at the turn matters had taken, and took no pains to hide his satisfaction beneath his Ottoman gravity.

But if the greedy magistrate was already counting up his gains, Skopelo was losing all his self-control. He had recognized Henry D’Albaret, and then Hadjine Elizundo. If, through his hatred, Starkos was obstinate, ‘ the matter, which might under certain circumstances turn out well, might on the other hand prove disastrous, particularly if the girl had lost her fortune as she had lost her liberty — and that was possible.

So taking Starkos aside, he tried in all humility to submit a few suggestions. But he met with such a reception that he did not dare to repeat them. The captain of the *Karysta* shouted his bids at the crier, and that in such a tone as to insult -his rival.

As may be supposed, the dealers, finding the battle become warm, remained to watch it. The curious crowd, in this struggle of thousand-pound shots, manifested their interest by noisy clamours. Most of them recognized the captain of the saccoleva, but none knew the captain of’ the *Syphanta.* They did not even know whence this corvette, sailing under the Corfiote flag, had come. But since the outset of the war, so many vessels of all nations had been employed in the transport of slaves, that they thought the *Syphanta* was also engaged in the traffic. Thus whether the prisoners were bought by D’Albaret or Starkos it still meant slavery for them.

In any case the question would be settled within the next five minutes.

To the last bid the crier had repeated, Starkos had replied —

“Eight thousand pounds!”

“Nine thousand!” said D’Albaret.

Silence again. The captain of the *Syphanta* as coolly as possible, looked round at Starkos, who was striding up and down in such a rage that Skopelo dared not approach him. Nothing could now stand in the way of his furious bidding.

“Ten thousand pounds!” shouted Starkos.

“Eleven thousand!” replied D’Albaret.

“Twelve thousand!” said Starkos, without stopping to think.

The captain of the *Syphanta* did not immediately reply. Not that he hesitated to do so, but he saw Skopelo rush up to Starkos to stop him in his work of folly, and this for a moment diverted his attention. At the same moment the old prisoner who had so obstinately concealed herself in her cloak had just risen as if to show her face to Starkos. As she did so, from the top of the citadel of Arkassa there shot forth a bright flash and a wreath of smoke, but before the report reached the batistan another bid had been shouted forth in a loud, clear voice, —

“Thirteen thousand pounds!”

And instantly came the report of the gun, followed by prolonged cheers.

Starkos had hurled back Skopelo with such violence that he fell to the ground. But it was too late. Starkos had no longer ‘ the right to bid. Hadjine Elizundo had escaped him, and perhaps for ever.

“Come,” he said gruffly to Skopelo, and he was heard to mutter, —

“It will be surer and cheaper.”

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Starkos and Skopelo gained their araba-and disappeared at the turning in the road which led to the interior of the island.

Already Hadjine Elizundo, dragged along by Xaris, had passed the barrier of the batistan. Already she was in the arms of Henry D’Albaret, who said as he pressed her to his heart, —

“Hadjine! Hadjine! All I have, I gave to buy you back to me.”

“As I have given all mine to buy’ back the honour of my name! Yes, Henry, Hadjine Elizundo is now poor, and now worthy of you.”

CHAPTER XIII.

ON BOARD THE “SYPHANTA.”

ON the 3rd of September, the day following that of the auction, the *Syphanta* about ten o’clock got under way, and sailed out of the harbour of Scarpanto.

The prisoners brought back by D’Albaret were accommodated, some in the ‘tween decks, and some on the main deck. As the passage of the Archipelago would only take a few days, the officers and sailors made the poor people as comfortable as possible.

The captain had got everything ready to go to sea the evening before. For the thirteen thousand pounds he had given guarantees, with which the Cadi had been satisfied. The embarkation of the prisoners was easily effected, and in three days the captives, instead of being consigned to the tortures of the Barbary bagnios, would be landed in Northern Greece, where they need have no fears for their freedom.

For this deliverance they were indebted to him who had snatched them from the hands of Nicholas Starkos. And their gratitude was displayed in a touching manner as soon as they reached the deck of the corvette.

Amongst them was a “pappa,” an old priest from Leondari. Followed by his companions in misfortune, he advanced to the poop, on which Hadjine and D’Albaret were standing with some of the officers. There they all knelt down, and the old man, kneeling in front of them, stretched out his hands to the captain, and said, —

“Henry D’Albaret! receive the blessing of all those to whom you have given their liberty!”

“My friends, I have only done my duty,” answered the captain of the *Syphanta*, profoundly moved.

“Yes! blessed by all — by all — and by me, Henry! added Hadjine, as she also knelt before him.

D’Albaret raised her quickly j and then shouts of “Hurrah for Henry D’Albaret! Hurrah for Hadjine Elizundo!” thundered forth from the poop to the forecastle, from the main deck to the lower yards, on which some fifty sailors had clustered, and were cheering vigorously.

One prisoner only — she who the evening before had hid herself in the batistan — took no part in this manifestation. As she came on board she had done her utmost to pass in unnoticed among the crowd. She had succeeded in doing so, and no one noticed her, huddled in an obscure corner of the ‘tween decks. Evidently she hoped to land without being seen. But why such precautions? Was she known to any of the officers or sailors of the corvette? In any case, she seemed to have urgent reasons for remaining incognito during the three or four days it would take to cross the Archipelago.

But if D’Albaret merited the gratitude of the passengers in the corvette, what did Hadjine merit for all she had done since her departure from Corfu?

“Henry,” she had said the evening before, “Hadjine Elizundo is now poor, and worthy of you!”

Poor she indeed was. Worthy of him? Let us see. And if Henry D’Albaret loved Hadjine. when such serious matters had separated them from each other, how much did his love increase when he learnt what she had been doing during this long year of separation. The fortune which had been left her by her father, as soon as she knew whence it came, she had resolved to devote to the re-purchase of the prisoners in trading in whom it had been chiefly gained. Of these twenty millions so odiously acquired she would keep nothing. Her plan she confided to Xaris. Xaris approved of it, and all the securities of the house were rapidly realized.

D’Albaret received the letter in which the girl bid him farewell. Then, in company with the brave, devoted Xaris, Hadjine secretly left Corfu for the Peloponnesus.

At that time Ibrahim’s soldiers still waged fierce war on the people in the interior of the Morea. The unfortunates who escaped massacre were sent to the principal ports of Messenia, Patras, or Navarino, whence ships, some freighted by the Turkish Government, some by the pirates of the Archipelago, transported them in thousands to Scarpanto, to Smyrna, or wherever the slave-markets were held.

For two months Hadjine Elizundo and Xaris spared no price to buy back hundreds of prisoners from among those who had not left the coast, and to place them in safety, some in the Ionian Islands, others in the free portions of Northern Greece.

Then they went to Asia Minor and Smyrna, where the slave-trade was extensively carried on. There quantities of Greek prisoners arrived in convoys’, and these Hadjine Elizundo did her best to set free. Such were her offers — so superior to those of the dealers for the Barbary or Asiatic ports — that the Turkish authorities derived great profit from treating with her. That her generous efforts were taken advantage of by these agents was of course inevitable, but nevertheless many thousands of captives escaped the bagnios of the African beys.

There was, however, something else to do, and it occurred to Hadjine to attain her end by two different routes.

It was not enough to buy back the captives put up for sale at the public markets or to deliver them from the bagnios. It was also desirable to annihilate the pirates who captured the ships in the Archipelago.

Hadjine was at Smyrna when she learnt what had happened to the *Syphanta* during the early months of her cruise. She knew that the Corfiote merchants had fitted out the corvette, and the mission on which they had sent her. She knew that the outset of the campaign had been promising, but at this time the news arrived that the *Syphanta* had just lost her captain, some of her officers, and part of her crew in a fight against a pirate flotilla commanded, it was said, in person by Sacratif.

Hadjine immediately entered into communication with the agent who represented the owners of the *Syphanta.* She offered them such a price for the ship that they accepted it. The corvette was bought in the name of the banker at Ragusa, but it belonged to the heiress of Elizundo, who thus followed the example of Bobolina, Modena, Zacharias, and the other valiant patriots whose ships, armed at their own cost, had at the outbreak of the War of Independence done so much harm to the Turkish cause.

But in acting thus Hadjine had intended to offer the command of the *Syphanta* to Captain Henry D’Albaret. One of her servants, a nephew of Xaris, a sailor of Greek origin, like his uncle, had secretly followed the young officer at Corfu when he made his useless inquiries to discover her, and to Scio when he rejoined Colonel Fabvier.

By her orders this man had shipped as a sailor on the corvette when she recruited after the battle at Lemnos. He it was who conveyed to the captain the two letters written by Xaris, the first at Scio, which informed him of the vacancy on board the *Syphanta*, the second placed on the cabin table when he was at the door as sentry, which gave the rendezvous for the neighbourhood of Scarpanto in the early days of September.

There Hadjine expected to have finished her campaign of charity and devotion. She deemed that the *Syphanta* would take back the convoy of prisoners bought by all that remained of her fortune.

But during the following six months how great were the hardships and dangers to be borne!

She went to Barbary, to the ports infested by pirates on the African coast. There she risked her liberty, risked her life, in braving the dangers to which her beauty and youth exposed her.

Nothing could stop her. She went.

As a sister of mercy she appeared at Tripoli, at Algiers, at Tunis, and in the most infamous markets of the African coast. Everywhere she met with Greek prisoners she bought them back at a premium. Everywhere she heard of an auction for human beings she went with her money in her hand. Thus did she see all the horrors of slavery in a country where passion is unbridled.

Algiers was then in the power of an army of Mussulmans and renegades, the scum of the three continents that form the coast-line of the Mediterranean, who lived only on the sale of the prisoners brought by the pirates, and then re-purchased by the Christians. In the seventeenth century there were in Africa more than forty thousand slaves of both sexes, collected from France, Italy, Britain, Germany, Flanders, Holland, Greece, Hungary, Russia, Poland, and Spain, in all the seas of Europe.

At Algiers, in the bagnios of the pacha, of Ali Mauri, of the Kouloughis, and of Sidi Hassan; at Tunis, in those of Yussuf Dey, of Galere Patrone, and of Cicala; and at Tripoli, Hadjine Elizundo especially searched for those whom the Greek war had sent into slavery. As if protected by some talisman, she passed through all dangers and relieved much misery. From the thousand perils with which she was surrounded she escaped as if by a miracle. During the six months, in the small coasters of the country, she visited the remotest ports from Tripoli to the furthest limits of Morocco”; to Tetuan, which was formerly a regularly organized pirate republic; to Tangier, whose bay was the winter haunt of the corsairs; to Sallee on the western coast of Africa, where the unfortunate captives had to live in caverns dug twelve or fifteen feet under ground.

At length her mission was over. Nothing was left of all her father’s wealth, and Hadjine Elizundo thought of returning to Europe with Xaris. She embarked in a Greek vessel with the last prisoners she had purchased, and sailed for Scarpanto. There she hoped to meet Henry D’Albaret. Thence she hoped to return to Greece on the *Syphanta*. But three days after leaving Tunis, the ship was captured by a Turkish man-of-war, and she was taken to Arkassa to be sold for a slave with those she had come to free.

The results of Hadjine’s enterprise were that many thousands of prisoners had been bought back with the money gained by their sale. The girl, reduced to poverty, had repaired as well as she could the evil done by her father.

This was what D’Albaret now learnt! Yes! Hadjine, poor, was now worthy of him, and to save her from Nicholas Starkos he had become as poor!

At daybreak on the following morning the *Syphanta* sighted the coast of Crete. Her course lay northwesterly across the Archipelago. Her captain’s intention was to make the eastern coast of Greece about Eubœa. There, either at Negropont or Aegina, the prisoners could safely disembark, well away from the Turks who were now shut up in the Peloponnesus.

The captives were well treated on the *Syphanta*, and some recovered from the frightful sufferings they had undergone. During the day they stood about the deck breathing the refreshing breeze of the Archipelago — children, mothers, and husbands and wives, threatened with eternal separation, henceforth re-united for ever. They knew also all that Hadjine Elizundo had done for them, and when she passed by on the arm of D’Albaret she was received with every mark of gratitude conveyed in the most touching manner.

In the early morning hours of the 4th of September, the *Syphanta* lost sight of the Cretan hills; but the breeze began to drop, and during the day, although under full canvas, her progress was very slight. The sea was smooth, the sky was superb. Nothing showed an approaching change in the weather. All that could be done was to “let her run,” as the sailors said, and wait.

This peaceful sailing was highly favourable for conversation. There was very little to do. The officers had only to stroll about the quarter-deck, while the look-outs forward signalled the land in sight or the ships in the offing.

Hadjine and D'Albaret used to sit on a seat that had been reserved for them on the poop. There they often talked, not only of the past, but of the future, which they now felt they could arrange for. Many were the plans they made, and submitted to Xaris, who was looked upon as one of the family. Their wedding was to take place as soon as they landed in Greece. That done, there would be no delay in dealing with purely business matters. The year spent in her charitable mission had simplified them considerably. As soon as he was married, D'Albaret. was to hand over the command of the corvette to Todros, and depart with his bride to France.

But on this particular evening they were thinking of something quite different. The gentle breeze hardly filled the *Syphanta's* sails. A marvellous sunset had lighted up the horizon, and a few rays of gold still spread over the misty circle in the west. Opposite to them there shone the few first stars of evening. The sea gleamed beneath the undulation of the phosphorescent flakes that floated on its bosom. The night promised to be magnificent.

D'Albaret and Hadjine yielded themselves to the charm of this delightful time. They watched the vessel's wake just faintly edged with white. The silence was only broken by the flapping of the sail as the folds softly swept across it. Lost in the thoughts of each other they saw nothing, but they were called back to reality by a voice behind D'Albaret. He turned and beheld Xaris.

"Captain," said Xaris for the third time.

"What is the matter, my friend?" answered D'Albaret, seeing Xaris hesitate.

“What do you want, Xaris?” asked Hadjine.

“I have something to say to you, captain.”

“What?”

“This. The passengers on the corvette — the people you are taking back to their country — have had an idea, and they have asked me to tell you about it.”

“Well, I am listening, Xaris.”

“Well, captain, they know you are going to marry Hadjine.”

“Doubtless,” said D’Albaret with a smile,” that is a mystery to nobody!”

“Well, these people would be very pleased to be present at your wedding.”

“And so they shall, Xaris; they shall, and never would a bride have a better following if we could gather round her all those she had freed from slavery.”

“Henry!” said Hadjine, interrupting.

“The captain is right,” answered Xaris. “In any case the corvette’s passengers will be there, and — ”

“On our arrival in Greece,” continued D’Albaret, “I will invite them all to the ceremony of our marriage.”

“Good!” answered Xaris. “But after having conceived that idea, the good people became possessed of a second.”

“As good?”

“Better! It is to ask you to let the marriage take place on board the *Syphanta*. Is not this gallant corvette a part of our country?”

“Quite so,” answered D’Albaret. “Will you consent, Hadjine?”

Hadjine in reply held out her hand.

“Well answered,” said Xaris.

“You can inform the passengers on the *Syphanta* that it shall be as they wish.”

“That is understood, captain. But,” added Xaris, hesitating slightly, “that is not all.”

“Go on then, Xaris,” said Hadjine.

“These excellent people having had a good idea, and then a better one, have had a third, which they think the best of all.”

“Indeed! a third!” exclaimed D’Albaret; “and what is the third?”

“Not only that the marriage should take place on the open sea-but tomorrow. There is amongst us an old priest — ”

“Sail ho!” shouted the look-out on the foretopmast crosstrees.

D’Albaret arose and joined Todros, who was already looking in the direction indicated.

A flotilla composed of a dozen vessels of different sizes had appeared in sight about six miles to the eastward, and as the *Syphanta* was almost becalmed, the flotilla, urged by a fading breeze which had not reached the corvette, would certainly come up with her.

D’Albaret took his telescope, and attentively watched the approach of the ships.

“Captain Todros,” said he, “the flotilla is still too far off for us to make out its intentions or its strength.”

“Just so; and with this moonless night coming on we shall not be able to tell. We must wait till tomorrow.

“Yes,” said the captain; “but as the surroundings are not very safe, give orders to keep a very careful watch.

Take every precaution in ease the ships approach the *Syphanta.”*

Captain Todros gave the necessary orders, which were immediately executed.

In the presence of the accidents that might happen, the decision as to the marriage was postponed. Hadjine, at D’Albaret’s wish, returned to her cabin.

During the night there was little sleep on board. The presence of the flotilla in the offing was enough to cause uneasiness. As much us possible, a watch was kept on its movements. But a thick mist arose about nine o’clock and shut out the view.

In the morning the horizon at sunrise was masked with vapour. As the wind had fallen entirely, the mist did not clear off before ten o’clock. Nothing suspicious, however, appeared through the fog; but when it had vanished, the whole flotilla rose to view some four miles away. It had thus gained some two miles since the evening in the direction of the *Syphanta*, and if it had not come closer, it was because the fog had kept it back.

There were a dozen vessels coming along propelled by their sweeps. The corvette, whose size was too great to permit her of using such things, remained motionless; all she could do was to wait without being able to move.

And there could be no mistake about the intentions of the flotilla.

“That is a remarkably suspicious lot!” said Captain Todros.

“More than suspicious!” answered D’Albaret; “there is the brig we chased on the coast of Crete.”

The captain of the *Syphanta* was not mistaken. The brig that had so strangely vanished at Scarpanto was the leading vessel, sailing so as to keep with the other vessels.

A few light airs now reached them from the east. They favoured the advance of the flotilla. But they only slightly ruffled the sea, and died away to nothing a few cable-lengths from the corvette.

Suddenly, DAlbaret threw down the telescope.

“Beat to quarters,” he said.

A long jet of white vapour rose from the brig, and a flag floated up to her peak at the same moment as the report of a gun reached the corvette.

The flag was black, and a fiery-red S appeared across it.

It was the flag of the pirate SACRATIF.

CHAPTER XIV.

SACRATIF.

THE flotilla, composed of a dozen ships, had left Scarpanto the evening before. Whether they were to attack the corvette in front, or surround her, the fight would take place with all the chances in their favour. But the fight, in the absence of the wind, would have to be fought. Besides, had it been possible to avoid the struggle D’Albaret would have refused to do so. The *Syphanta* could not, without dishonour, retreat before the pirates of the Archipelago.

In the twelve ships were four brigs, carrying from sixteen to eighteen guns. The eight other vessels were of inferior tonnage, but armed with light artillery. They consisted of two-masted saics, snows, feluccas, and saccolevas. As far as the corvette’s officers could judge, there would be about a hundred pieces opened on to them, to which they would have to reply with twenty-two guns and six carronades. There would be nearly eight hundred men for the two hundred of their crew to battle with. An unequal combat, assuredly. The heavier artillery of the *Syphanta* might give her some chance of success, but only on condition that the enemy were not allowed too near. The flotilla must be kept at a distance so as to disable them with her broadsides. In a word, everything would have to be done to prevent them boarding, for then the numbers would tell — more so, in fact, than on land, for retreat being impossible, the men would be obliged to die or surrender.

An hour after the fog had risen the flotilla had sensibly gained on the corvette, which remained motionless as if at anchor.

D’Albaret kept a careful watch on the approach and preparations of the pirates. His men were all at their stations. The passengers who were well enough had all volunteered to take part in the fight, and arms had been served out to them. Absolute silence reigned on the decks, scarcely broken by the few words the captain exchanged with Todros.

“We must not let them board,” said he. “Wait till the leaders are well within range, and then let fly the starboard guns.”

“Shall we dismast them or sink them?”

“Sink them.”

This was the best thing to do in fighting these pirates — more particularly this Sacratif who had so insolently hoisted his flag, in the expectation, doubtless, that not a man in the corvette would escape to boast that he had seen him face to face.

About one o’clock the flotilla had advanced to within a mile of the corvette. It continued to be rowed along by its sweeps. The *Syphanta*, with her head to the north-west, could hardly keep from drifting off her course. The pirates came on in line of battle — two of the brigs in the middle of the line, and the others at the ends. They manoeuvred so as to surround the corvette, and close on to her. Their object was evidently to crush her under a converging fire; and then to board.

D’Albaret saw the manœuvre, which would be so dangerous to him and which he could not prevent, owing to his being condemned to remain motionless.

But, perhaps, he might break the line with his guns before he was completely surrounded. Already the officers were asking themselves why the captain, in that quiet voice they knew so well, did not give the order to open fire.

No! D'Albaret intended to strike hard, and he wished to get well within range.

Ten minutes went by. Every one was ready; the captains of the guns with their eyes at the sights, the officers ready to transmit the captain's orders, the sailors on the deck. Was the first broadside to come from the enemy now he was near enough to fire with effect?

D'Albaret said not a word. He looked at the line whose ends began to curve round. The brigs in the centre — from one of which flew the flag of Sacratif — were then less than a mile away.

But if the captain of the *Syphanta* was in no hurry to begin firing, it seemed as though the leader of the flotilla thought the same. Perhaps he intended to board the corvette without a gun being discharged.

At last D'Albaret thought he had waited long enough. A light breeze rose, just strong enough to enable him to get into position and rake the two brigs about half a mile off.

"Attention!" he shouted.

A slight noise was heard on board, and then all was still.

"Aim low!" said the captain.

The order was immediately repeated by the officers and their guns were pointed at the hulls, while those on deck were aimed at the rigging.

“Fire!” shouted D’Albaret The starboard broadside was discharged. Eleven guns and three carronades despatched their projectiles, and amongst them were several chain-shot to damage the rigging.

As soon as the smoke cleared away, the effect on the two vessels was apparent. It was not complete, but it was important.

One of the brigs had been struck above the water-line. Many of her shrouds and backstays had been cut. Her foremast, pierced a few feet above the deck, had fallen forward. She would then have to lose time in repairing damages, but could still advance on the corvette. The danger of being surrounded had not been diminished by this commencement of the fight.

The two other brigs on the right and left wings were now level with the *Syphanta*. They began to turn on to her, and gave her a raking broadside, which she could not avoid.

The consequences were unfortunate; the corvette’s mizenmast was cut off at the cheeks, and all the after rigging came down with a run, fortunately without hurting the mainmast. At the same time a boat was cut to pieces. An officer and two sailors were killed on the spot, and three or four men were seriously wounded and carried below.

Immediately D'Albaret gave orders to clear the poop, and this was done without delay. Rigging, sails, broken yards and spars were stowed away in a few minutes. The artillery fight began again. The corvette taken between two fires was fighting both broadsides.

The second broadside of the *Syphanta* was so well aimed that two of the fleet — a snow and a saic — were struck below the water-line, and sank. The crews had only just time to jump overboard and swim to the brigs.

Cheers arose from the crew of the corvette at this double success.

“Two down!” said Todros.

“Yes,” said D’Albaret,” but the fellows have got to the brigs, and I want to stop the boarding, which will give them such an advantage.”

For a quarter of an hour the cannonade continued on both sides. The pirate ships as well as the corvette disappeared in a cloud of powder smoke, and it would have to clear off before the damages done to each other could be distinguished. Unfortunately, the *Syphanta* suffered heavily. Many of the men were killed, others grievously wounded. One French officer was cut in two while the captain was speaking to him.

The dead and the wounded were taken below. The surgeon and his assistants were busy with dressings and operations necessitated by the state of those who were struck directly by the shots, or indirectly by the splinters. Although the musketry had not yet spoken, and the vessels remained within half gun-shot, the wounds were serious and terrible.

On this occasion the women, who had been sent into the hold, failed not in their duty. Hadjine Elizundo set them an example. They did their utmost to take care of the wounded, to encourage them and comfort them.

It was then that the old prisoner of Scarpanto left her retreat. The sight of the blood frightened her not; doubtless the chances of life had already brought her on many a battle-field. By the light of the lamps on the orlop-deck, she leant’ over the cots in which lay the wounded, assisted at the most dreadful operations, and when a fresh broadside made the corvette tremble to her keelson, not a movement of her eyes betrayed that the noise even startled her.

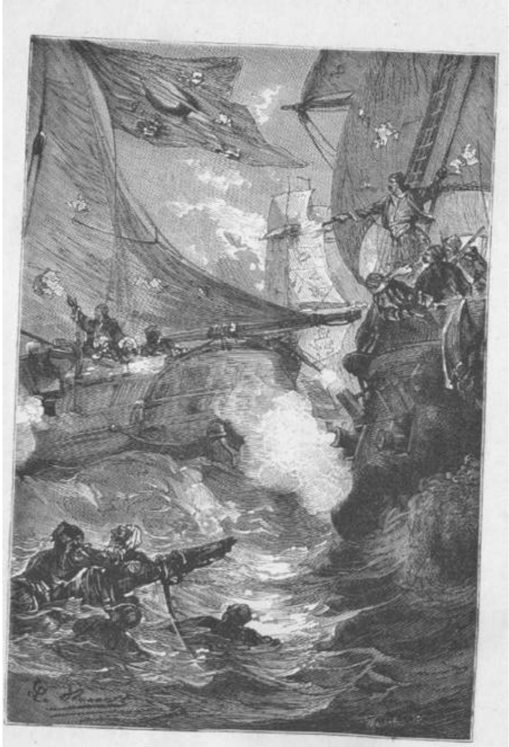

Prepared to receive the assault.

But the time was coming when the crew of the *Syphanta* would be obliged to fight the pirates with cold steel. The line had closed around her. The circle grew smaller and smaller. The corvette had become the target for all the converging guns.

But she defended herself well for the honour of the flag. Her artillery made huge ravages on board the flotilla. Two other vessels, a saic and a felucca, were destroyed. One sank; the other disappeared in flames.

But it was inevitable that she should be boarded. The *Syphanta* could only avoid being so by forcing the line that surrounded her. But there was not a breath of wind. She could not move, while the pirates kept at their long sweeps and rowed closer and closer.

The brig with the black flag was now but a pistol-shot away. She fired her broadside. One of the shots struck the pintle on the stern-post and unshipped the rudder.

D'Albaret prepared to receive the assault, and got ready the boarding-nettings. Then the small arms began. Swivels and blunderbusses, muskets and pistols, rained a hail of bullets on to the deck. Many of the sailors fell, most of them mortally wounded. Twenty times D'Albaret should have been hit, but motionless and calm on his quarter-deck, he gave his orders as coolly as if he were firing a salvo of honour at a royal review.

At this time, through the rifts in the smoke, the crews could see each other. The horrible curses of the bandits could be heard above the din. On board the brig with the black flag, D'Albaret sought in vain to descry this Sacratif, whose very name was a terror in the Archipelago.

It was then that to port and starboard of her, this brig and one of those that closed the ring, ranged alongside the corvette. The grappling-irons caught in the rigging and bound the three ships together. Their guns were silent, but as the *Syphanta's* ports were so many open doorways for the pirates, the men remained at their posts to defend them with axes, pistols, and pikes.

Suddenly a shout arose on all sides, and with such fury that the noise of the musketry was for an instant drowned.

"All hands to board!"

The hand-to-hand combat became frightful. Neither the swivels, the blunderbusses, the guns, the axes, nor the pikes could keep off the pirates, who, drunk with rage and greedy for blood, leapt on to the corvette. From their tops they kept up a plunging fire of grenades, which rendered the deck of the *Syphanta* untenable.

D’Albaret beheld himself assailed on all sides. His nettings, although higher than those of the brigs, were carried by assault. The pirates passed along the yards, and, cutting the overhead nettings, dropped them on to the deck. What mattered it that a few were killed before they reached them! Their number was such that it made no difference.

The crew of the corvette, now reduced to less than two hundred men, had to deal with more than six hundred.

The two brigs kept passing on to the corvette the crews of the rest of the fleet, who mounted them on their off-sides, and rushed on to battle. They formed a mass it was impossible to resist. The blood flowed in streams on the *Syphanta's* deck. The wounded, in their last convulsions, rose to give a last shot with their pistols, or a farewell stab with their daggers. All was confusion amid the smoke. But the Corfiote flag remained aloft while there was a man to defend it.

In the thick of the horrible fight Xaris fought like a lion. He had never left the poop. Twenty times his axe, looped to his powerful wrist, had cleft a pirate’s head, and saved D’Albaret’s life.

In the midst of all this the captain never lost his self-control. Of what was he thinking? Of surrender? No! But what was he doing? Was he going to imitate that heroic Bisson, who ten months before, under similar circumstances, had blown up his ship rather than surrender to the Turks?

Was he going to annihilate with the corvette the two brigs on her sides? But that was to envelop in the same destruction the wounded of the *Syphanta*, the prisoners snatched from Starkos, the women, the children! To sacrifice Hadjine! And those who escaped the explosion, if Sacratif gave them their lives, how were they, this time, to escape the horrors of slavery?

“Look out, captain,” exclaimed Xaris, jumping before him.

Another second, and D’Albaret would have been killed. But Xaris seized the pirate who would have struck at him by the hands and hurled him into the sea. Thrice did others rush at; D’Albaret; thrice did Xaris stretch them at his feet.

And now the deck was completely invaded by the swarm of assailants. Scarcely was there heard a report. The fight was hand-to-hand with cold steel, and the shouts rose above the noise of the guns.

The pirates, already masters of the forecastle, had carried the deck to the foot of the mainmast. Gradually they were driving the crew towards the poop. They were ten to one. How was resistance possible?

Had Captain D’Albaret desired to blow up his ship he could not now do so. The pirates occupied the hatchways, giving access to below. They swarmed on to the main-deck, where the sanguinary struggle went on. To reach the magazine was not to be thought of. Everywhere the superior number of the pirates carried the day. A barrier of the bodies of their dead and wounded comrades kept them from the after part of the *Syphanta*. The front ranks, urged on from behind, came climbing over it to add more corpses to its height. Then, crowding over the barricade and soaking their feet in the blood, they rushed to the assault of the poop.

There some fifty men and five or six officers had gathered under Captain Todros. They surrounded their captain — determined to resist to death.

In that narrow space the fight was desperate. The flag had been hoisted on a boarding-pike. This was the last post that honour required the last man to defend.

But determined as they might be, what could this little group do against five or six hundred pirates who then occupied the forecastle, the deck, the tops, and rained down the grenades? The crews of the flotilla kept swarming to the help of their comrades. So many pirates were there that the combat had not in the least weakened their fighting force, although the defenders of the poop grew less and less every minute. The poop was, however, a fortress. Many times it had to be charged. None knows what blood was poured forth to carry it. At last it was taken! The men of the *Syphanta* recoiled beneath the avalanche which swept on to it. Then they closed round the flag and made a barricade of their bodies. D'Albaret was in the centre with his dagger in one hand and his pistol in the other.

The captain of the corvette would not surrender! He was overwhelmed by numbers! Then he would die! It was in vain! It seemed that those who attacked him had secret orders to take him alive — an order whose execution cost twenty lives beneath the axe of Xaris. He was at last taken with those of his officers who had survived. Xaris and the other sailors were reduced to helplessness. The flag of the *Syphanta* ceased to float on her poop.

At the same time, shouts, vociferations, and cheers resounded on all sides. They came from the victors, who were hailing their leader.

“Sacratif! Sacratif!”

He appeared in the boarding-nettings of the corvette. The mass of pirates divided to let him pass. Slowly he walked aft over the corpses of his comrades. Then mounting the steps of the poop, he advanced towards Henry DAlbaret.

The captain of the *Syphanta* could at last behold the man whom the crowd of pirates hailed as Sacratif.

It was Nicholas Starkos!

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

THE fight between the corvette and the flotilla had lasted for more than two and a half hours. On the side of the assailants there were at least five hundred killed and wounded; of the crew of the *Syphanta* there were about two hundred and fifty. These figures tell how fierce had been the fight. But numbers only had won. Henry D’Albaret, his officers, his sailors, and his passengers were now in the hands of the pitiless Sacratif.

Sacratif and Starkos were in fact the same man. Up till then no one had known that under this name there lived a Greek, a child of Maina, a traitor gone over to the cause of the oppressors. Yes, it was Nicholas Starkos who commanded the flotilla, whose excesses had made it the terror of the seas. It was he who joined the trade of pirate to that of a still more infamous occupation! It was he who sold to the infidels of Barbary his fellow-countrymen who had escaped from the massacres of the Turks! Sacratif, the accursed, was the son of Andronika Starkos.

Sacratif — for it is better we should now call him so — Sacratif had for many years made Scarpanto the centre of his operations. There up the unknown creeks of its eastern coast had he fixed the chief stations of his fleet. There his companions, faithless and lawless, obeying him blindly and ready for any violence, formed the crews of the score of vessels of whom the command incontestably belonged to him.

After his departure from Corfu in the *Karysta*, Sacratif had sailed straight to Scarpanto. His idea was to begin a campaign in the Archipelago, in the hope of meeting the corvette he had seen go out in search of him. However, while thinking of the *Syphanta*, he had not given up the idea of recovering Hadjine Elizundo and her millions, or of being revenged on Henry DAlbaret. The pirate flotilla went in search of the corvette, but although Sacratif often heard of the reprisals she had inflicted on the skimmers of the seas in the north of the Archipelago, he had never been able to fall in with her. He had not been in command at Lemnos when the fight occurred in which Captain Stradena had lost his life, but he had been at Thasos on the saccoleva and escaped during the fight off the harbour. But he did not then know that the corvette was commanded by D’Albaret, and he did not ascertain it until the meeting in the market-place of Scarpanto.

Sacratif on leaving Thasos had stopped at Syra, and he only left the island sixteen hours before the corvette’s arrival. There was no mistake about the saccoleva’s sailing for Crete, and at Grabousa he left the saccoleva for the brig, which took him on to Scarpanto, there to prepare for another campaign. The corvette sighted the brig soon after she left Grabousa, and chased her in vain, as we know.

Sacratif had recognized the *Syphanta.* To turn on her and carry her by boarding to satisfy the hate which consumed him, had been his first thought. But on reflection he thought it better to let her follow him along the coast of Crete, inveigle her into the neighbourhood of Scarpanto, and then disappear in one of the hiding-places he alone knew.

This he did, and the pirate chief was preparing his flotilla to attack the *Syphanta*, when circumstances precipitated the end of the drama.

We know what passed’, we know how Sacratif had visited the market-place of Arkassa, and after finding Hadjine Elizundo among the prisoners in the batistan, came face to face with Henry D’Albaret, the captain of the corvette.

Sacratif, believing that Hadjine Elizundo was still the wealthy heiress of the Corfiote banker, wished at any price to become her master. D’Albaret’s intervention frustrated his attempt.

More resolved than ever to seize Hadjine Elizundo, to revenge himself on his rival, and to destroy the corvette, Sacratif dragged away Skopelo and returned to the west of the island. That D’Albaret would immediately leave Scarpanto with his prisoners could hardly be doubted. The flotilla was completed and got together, and the next morning went to sea. Circumstances had favoured its progress. The *Syphanta* had fallen into his power.

When Sacratif set foot on the corvette’s deck it was three o’clock in the afternoon. The breeze had begun to spring up so as to allow the other ships to take up their stations and keep the *Syphanta* under their guns. The two brigs on her sides were kept there until the chief went on board of them. At present, however, he had no thought of doing so, and a hundred pirates remained with him on the *Syphanta*.

Sacratif had not yet spoken to D’Albaret. He had contented himself with exchanging a few words with Skopelo who was ordering off the prisoners, officers, and men towards the hatchways. There they would join their comrades who had surrendered on the main-deck; but all were sent down into the hold, and the hatches fastened over them. What fate was reserved for them? Doubtless a horrible death awaited them when the *Syphanta* was destroyed.

D’Albaret and Todros were left on the poop, disarmed, handcuffed, and guarded.

Sacratif, surrounded by a dozen of the pirates, stepped towards them.

“I did not know,” he said, “that the *Syphanta* was commanded by Henry D’Albaret. If I had known it I should not have hesitated to fight him in the waters of Crete, and he would not have had to bid against the fathers of mercy at Scarpanto.”

“If Nicholas Starkos had waited for us in the waters of Crete,” answered D’Albaret,” he would long ago have been hanged at the *Syphanta’s* foreyard-arm.”

“Indeed?” exclaimed Sacratif; “Summary justice!”

“Yes, the justice that a pirate best deserves.”

“Take care, Henry D’Albaret,” said Sacratif; “take care; your foreyard is still on the mast, and I have only to give a sign.”

“Do it!”

“You don’t hang officers!” exclaimed Todros. “You shoot them! That scoundrel’s death — ”

“Is all that a scoundrel can give!” said D’Albaret.

At these words Sacratif made a gesture whose meaning the pirates knew too well.

It was a sentence of death.

Five or six men threw themselves on to D’Albaret, while the others seized Todros, who tried in vain to break his bonds.

The captain of the *Syphanta* was dragged forward amid the most awful vociferations. Already a block and a line were in position at the yardarm, and but a few seconds would have elapsed before the captain was swung up, when Hadjine Elizundo appeared on the deck.

The girl had been brought there by Sacratif’s order. She knew that the pirate chief was Nicholas Starkos. But neither her composure nor her spirit deserted her.

And first her eyes sought Henry D’Albaret. She knew not if he had survived the carnage. She saw him! He was alive — alive, and about to submit to the last penalty!

Hadjine Elizundo ran to him.

“Henry! Henry!”

The pirates would have separated them, but Sacratif, who was walking forward, stopped a few paces from Hadjine and Henry D’Albaret.

He looked at them with cruel irony.

“Hadjine Elizundo is now in the power of Nicholas Starkos,” said he, crossing his arms; “I have now in my power the heiress of the rich banker of Corfu!”

“The heiress but not the heritage!” answered Hadjine coldly.

The distinction Sacratif could not understand, and he continued, —

“I believe that the betrothed of Nicholas Starkos will not refuse him her hand now she finds him under the name of Sacratif.”

“I!” exclaimed Hadjine.

“You!” answered Sacratif with still more irony. “That you should be so grateful towards the generous captain of the *Syphanta*, who bought you, is well. But what he did I tried to do. It was for you, not for these prisoners that I cared. Yes! for you alone it was that I was sacrificing my fortune! One moment longer, fair Hadjine, and I should have been your master — or rather your slave!”

And saying so Sacratif made a step in advance. The girl pressed more closely to D’Albaret.

“Miserable!” she exclaimed.

“Yes! rather miserable, Hadjine!” answered Sacratif. “And it is on your millions I rely to alleviate my misery!”

At the words the girl raised herself to her full height.

“Nicholas Starkos,” said she composedly, “Hadjine Elizundo has no longer the fortune you covet! That fortune she has spent in repairing some of the evil her father wrought to acquire it! Nicholas Starkos, Hadjine Elizundo is now poorer than most of the unfortunate people the *Syphanta* was taking home.”

For the moment Sacratif was quite staggered at the unexpected revelation; then his attitude suddenly changed. His eyes blazed with fury. Yes! he had reckoned that Hadjine would have sacrificed her millions to save Henry

D’Albaret’s life! And of those millions — he had just been told in a tone whose truthfulness he could not doubt — there remained nothing.

Sacratif looked at Hadjine. He looked at D’Albaret. Skopelo kept his eyes fixed on him, knowing how the drama would end, for the orders as to the corvette’s destruction had already been given, and he was only waiting for a sign to put them into execution. Sacratif turned towards him.

“Go, Skopelo!” he said.

Skopelo, followed by a few of his companions, ran down the steps on to the main deck, and made for the magazine in the stern of the *Syphanta*.

At the same time Sacratif ordered the pirates to return to the brigs, which remained alongside the corvette.

D’Albaret understood. It was not by his death alone that Sacratif was going to gratify his revenge. Hundreds were condemned to perish with him to assuage the monster’s hate.

Already the two brigs had thrown off their grappling-irons and let fall some of their sails to help the sweeps to move them away. Of the pirates hardly a score remained on board the corvette. The boats were waiting alongside the *Syphanta* till Sacratif ordered his men to retire.

And now Skopelo and his men appeared on deck.

“To the boats!” said he.

“To the boats!” shouted Sacratif in a terrible voice. “In a few minutes not a timber will remain of this cursed ship! You did not wish to have a scoundrel’s death, Henry D’Albaret! Be it so. We will blow you up and spare neither the prisoners, the crew, nor the officers of the *Syphanta!* You ought to thank me for allowing you to die in such excellent company."

"Yes, thank him. Henry," said Hadjine. "Thank him for letting us die together!"

"You die, Hadjine?" answered Sacratif. "No! you shall live, and you shall be my slave. My slave! Do you understand?"

"Scoundrel!" said D'Albaret.

The girl clung closer to him. She to be in the power of such a man!

"Seize her!" said Sacratif.

"And to the boats!" said Skopelo. "There is only just time."

Two pirates caught hold of Hadjine.

They dragged her to the gangway.

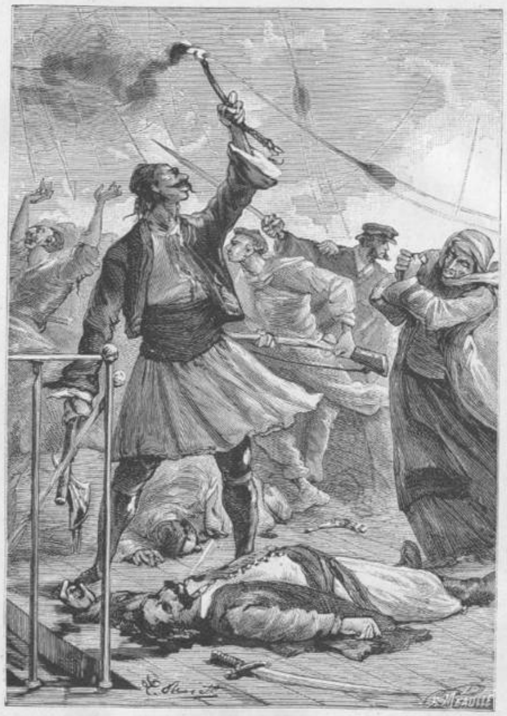

With one swing of the axe cut him down to the deck.

“And now,” sneered Sacratif, “that all will perish with the *Syphanta*, all — ”

“Yes, all — and your mother with them!”

The old prisoner had just appeared on the deck — her face unveiled.

“My mother! on board here?” exclaimed Sacratif.

“Your mother, Nicholas Starkos,” replied Andronika, “and it is by your hand that I shall die.”

“Bring her away! bring her away!” shouted Sacratif.

Some of his comrades sprang towards Andronika; but at the same moment the survivors of the *Syphanta* swarmed on to the deck. They had cut through the hatches of the hold where they were imprisoned, and broken out through the forecastle.

“Here, here!” yelled Sacratif.

The pirates on the deck, under Skopelo, tried to rush to the rescue. The sailors with their daggers and boarding-axes cut them down to the last man.

Sacratif saw that he was lost. But at least all those he hated so cruelly would perish with him!

“Blow up, you cursed thing!” he exclaimed. “Up you go!”

“Blow up our *Syphanta*. Never!”

It was Xaris who appeared — with a torch in one hand, snatched from the powder-barrels, and a boarding-axe in the other. He made a leap at Sacratif, and with one swing of the axe cut him down to the deck.

Andronika shrieked. All the maternal feeling in a mother’s heart, even after such a career of crime, reacted within her. The blow that had killed her son she would have thrust aside.

She stepped up to the body, she knelt, as if to give it her last pardon and her last adieu. And she fell lifeless by its side.

D’Albaret bent over her.

“Dead!” he said. “May Heaven pardon the son for the sake of the mother!”

But some of the pirates in the boats had boarded the brigs. The news of Sacratif’s death spread like lightning.

It must be avenged! and the guns of the flotilla began again to thunder against the *Syphanta*.

But it was in vain. D'Albaret had resumed the command of the corvette. What remained of his crew — a hundred men — again took their places at the guns, and vigorously replied to the broadsides of the pirates.

Soon one of the brigs — the very one on which Sacratif had hoisted his flag — was struck below the water-line and sank amid the horrible imprecations of the bandits she bore to the bottom.

"Go it, my lads! go it," exclaimed D'Albaret; "we shall yet save the *Syphanta."*

And the fight spread around. But the redoubtable Sacratif was no longer there to cheer on the pirates, and they dared not again attempt to board.

Soon only four vessels remained out of the whole flotilla. These the guns of the *Syphanta* could sink at a distance, and as the breeze was strong enough, the pirates availed themselves of it and took to flight.

"Three cheers for Greece!" shouted Henry D'Albaret, as the *Syphanta's* colours again mounted the mainmast.

It was then five o'clock. In spite of all that they had gone through, not a man would rest until the corvette was in a position to resume her course.

They bent new sails; they fished the lower masts; they raised a jury-mast to replace the broken mizen; they strung new halyards, set up new shrouds, and repaired the rudder. And that very evening the *Syphanta* resumed her voyage to the north-west.

The body of Andronika Starkos was laid out on the poop, and sentries placed over it, in recognition of her patriotism. D’Albaret resolved to bury her in her native ground.

As for the corpse of Nicholas Starkos, a shot was fastened to its feet and it vanished beneath the waters of the Archipelago which the pirate Sacratif had so long troubled with his crimes.

Twenty-four hours afterwards, on the 7th of September, about six o’clock in the evening, the *Syphanta* sighted the island of Aegina, and entered the harbour after a year’s cruise, in which she had henceforth given safety to the seas of Greece.

Her passengers rent the air with their cheers. Henry D’Albaret bid farewell to his officers and crew, and handed over the command of the corvette to Captain Todros; and Hadjine presented the ship to the new Government.

A few days afterwards, amid a great throng of the people, and in the presence of the officers, the crew, and the passengers of the *Syphanta*, the wedding took place between Henry D’Albaret and Hadjine Elizundo. On the morrow the happy couple departed for France, with Xaris, who would not leave them.

The surrounding seas began to calm down. The last pirates had disappeared, and the *Syphanta*, under Captain Todros, discovered not a trace of the black flag which had sunk with Sacratif. It was no longer the Archipelago in flames. It was the Archipelago after the flames had gone out, re-welcomed to the commerce of the East.

The Hellenic kingdom, thanks to the heroism of its children, took its place among the free states of Europe. On the 22nd of March, 1829, the Sultan signed the convention with the allied powers; on the 22nd of September the battle of Petra assured the victory of the Greeks. In 1832 the Treaty of London bestowed the Crown on Prince Otho of Bavaria. The kingdom of Greece was definitely founded.

And about that time Henry and Hadjine D’Albaret returned to settle in the country. Their fortune was but moderate, it is true, but happiness could not fail to be theirs — for they were happy in each other.

THE END

THE STAR OF THE SOUTH

Anonymous translation, 1885

Also known as *The Vanished Diamond*, this novel was first published in 1884. It takes place in South Africa and tells the story of French mining engineer Victor Cyprien, who moves to the Griqualand district to study the formation of diamonds. While he is there he falls in love with the daughter of the wealthy landowner. However, the course of love does not run smooth…

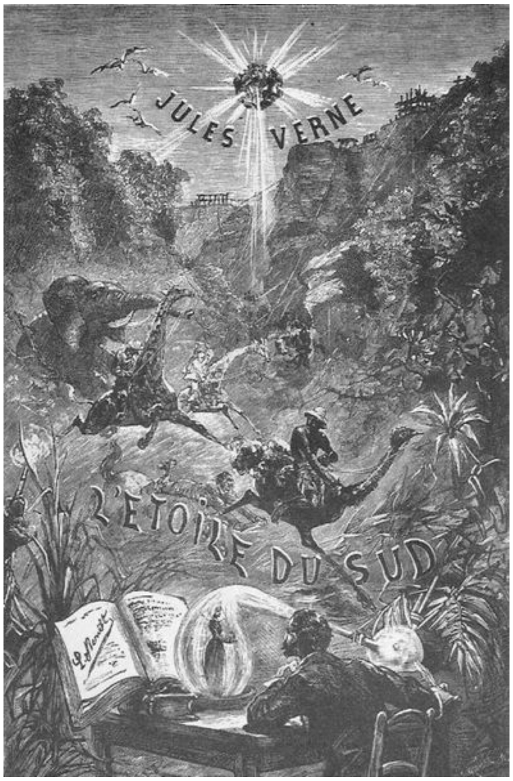
JULES VERNE
L'ÉTOILE DU SUD

The original front page of the French edition

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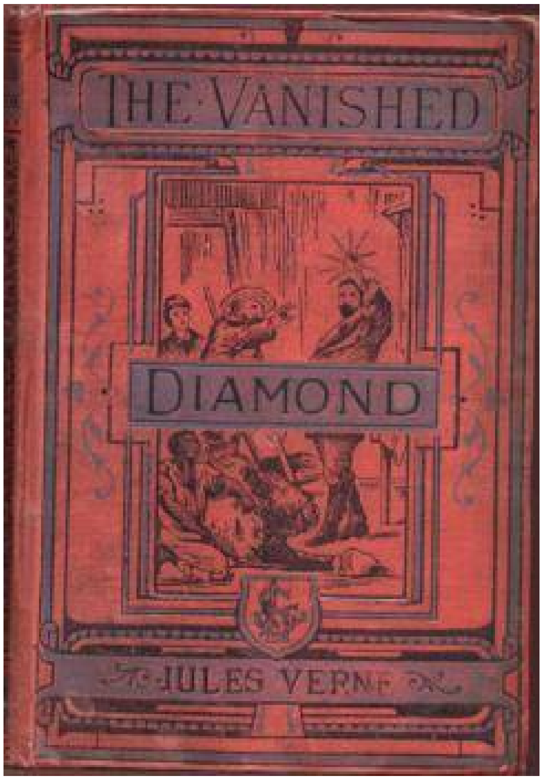
THE VANISHED
DIAMOND
JULES VERNE

The first edition in English

CHAPTER I

ONE FOR THE FRENCHMAN

“GO on, I am listening.”

“I have the honor to ask you for your daughter’s hand.”

“Alice?”

“Yes. My request seems to surprise you. Perhaps you will forgive me if I have some difficulty in understanding why it appears so strange. I am twenty-six years old; my name is Victor Cyprien; I am a mining engineer, and left the Polytechnic as second on the list. My family is honest and respected, if it is not rich. The French consul at Capetown can answer any questions about me you are likely to ask, and my friend Pharamond Barthes, the explorer, whom you — like everybody else in Griqualand — know right well, can add his testimony. I am here on a scientific mission in the name of the Academy of Sciences and the French Government. Last year I gained the Houdart prize at the Institute for my researches on the chemistry of the volcanic rocks of Auvergne. My paper on the diamantiferous basin of the Vaal, which is nearly finished, is sure of a good reception from the scientific world. When I started on my mission I was appointed Assistant-Professor at the Paris School of Mines, and I have already engaged my rooms on the third floor at No. 104 of the Rue Université. My appointments will, during the first year, bring me in two hundred pounds. That is hardly an El Dorado, I know, but with my private work I can nearly double it. My wants being few, I have enough to be happy on. And so, Mr. Watkins, I have the honor to ask you for your daughter’s hand.”

From the firm, decided tone of this little speech it was easy to see that Cyprien was accustomed to go straight to the point in what he did, and to speak his mind freely.

His looks did not belie his words. They were those of a young man habitually occupied in the abstrusest problems of science, and only giving to worldly vanities the time that was absolutely necessary. All about him showed an earnest and serious disposition, while his clear, keen glance proclaimed an untroubled conscience. He was by birth a Frenchman, but he spoke English as well as if he had lived all his life beneath the British flag.

Seated in his arm-chair, with his left leg thrust out on to a stool, and his elbow resting on the table, Mr. Watkins listened to Cyprien's speech and puffed away at his pipe. The old man wore white trousers, a blue linen jacket, and a yellow flannel shirt, and had neither waistcoat nor cravat. His huge felt hat seemed to be screwed on to his gray head. The red, bloated face was cut into by a bristly beard, and lighted up by two little gray eyes that spoke of anything but patience and good-nature.

As some excuse for Mr. Watkins, it may be mentioned that he was a terrible sufferer from the gout — hence his bandaged leg; and the gout in Africa, as elsewhere, is not calculated to soften the asperities of a man's character.

The scene is at Watkins' Farm, in lat. 290 S. long. 250 E. on the western border of the Orange Free State, and nearly five hundred miles from Capetown. On the older maps the surrounding district bears the title of Griqualand, but for the last dozen years it has been better known as the Diamond Fields.

The parlor in which the interview is in progress is as remarkable for the luxury of some of its furniture as for the poverty of the rest. The floor is simply the natural earth leveled and beaten flat, and this is covered here and there with thick carpets and precious furs. The walls are destitute of paper or paint, and yet .they are decked with a magnificent candelabrum, and valuable weapons of various kinds hang side by side with gorgeously colored lithographs in resplendent frames. A velvet sofa stands next to a plain deal table, such as is generally found in kitchens. Arm-chairs direct from Europe offer their arms in vain to Mr. Watkins, who is taking his ease in a solid construction of his own design. On the whole, however, the heap of objects of value, and the numerous furs — panther-skins, leopard-skins, giraffe-skins, and tiger-cat- skins, that cover nearly every article of furniture, give the room a certain air of barbarous wealth.

The ceiling shows that the house is not built in stories; it can only boast of a ground floor. Like all the rest in the neighborhood, its walls are of planks and clay, and its roof of corrugated iron.

It is obviously a new house. From its windows, to the right and left of it, can be seen five or six abandoned buildings of the same order of architecture, but of different ages, in various stages of decay. These are the mansions that Mr. Watkins has successively built, inhabited, and deserted as he built up his fortune, and now serve to mark the several steps of his progress to affluence.

That farthest off is a hut of sods. Next to it comes one with walls of clay. The third has walls of clay and wood. The fourth rejoices in a little zinc.

The group of buildings is situated on a gentle rise that commands the junction of the Vaal and the Modder, the two principal tributaries of the Orange. Around, as far as the eye can see, there stretches the bare and dreary-looking plain. The Veld, as this plain is called, has a reddish soil, dry, barren, and dusty, with here and there at considerable intervals a straggling bush or a clump of thorn- shrubs.

The total absence of trees is characteristic; and as there is no coal, owing to the communication with the sea being so difficult and lengthy, the only fuel for domestic purposes is that yielded by the sheep’s droppings.

Through this dismal and monotonous plain there flow the two rivers, with their banks so low and sloping that it is difficult to understand why the water does not break its bounds and flood the country.

Eastward the horizon is cut by the distant outlines of two mountains, the Platberg and the Paardeberg, at whose base the dust and smoke and the little white spots of huts and tents denote a busy human colony.

It is in this Veld that the diamond mines are situated — Dutoit’s Pan, New Rush, and perhaps the richest of all, Vandergaart Kopje. These dry diggings, as mines open to the sky are called, have since 1870 yielded about 16,000,000l in diamonds and precious stones. They are all close together, and can be distinctly seen with a good glass from the windows of Watkins’ Farm, about four miles away.

Farm, by-the-bye, is rather a misnomer. There are no signs of cultivation in the neighborhood. Like all the so-called farmers of this part of South Africa, Mr. Watkins is rather a master shepherd, an owner of flocks and herds, than an agriculturist.

But Mr. Watkins has not yet replied to the question put to him so clearly and politely by our hero. After giving himself three minutes for reflection, he decided to remove his pipe from his lips. Then he made the following observation, which would seem to be but very distantly connected with the subject at issue.

“I think we shall have a change in the weather! My gout never worried me more than it has done since this morning.”

The young engineer frowned, and turned away his head for a moment. It was only by an effort that he concealed his disappointment.

“It might do you good if you were to give up your gin, Mr. Watkins,” replied he, very dryly, pointing to the jug on the table.

“Give up my gin! Well, that’s a good ‘un!” exclaimed the farmer. “Is it the gin that does it? Oh! I know what you are driving at. .You mean the medicine the Lord Mayor was recommended when he had the gout. Whose was it? Abernethy’s? Tf you want to be well, live on a shilling a day and earn it.’ That’s all very fine. But if you have to live on a shilling a day to be well, what’s the use of making a fortune? Such rubbish is unworthy of a sensible man like you. So don’t say any more about it. I’ll do as I please. I’ll eat well, drink well, and smoke a good pipe when I am worried. I have no other pleasure in this world, and you want me to give it up, do you?”

“It is a matter of no consequence,” answered Cyprien; “I only dropped a hint that I thought might be of use to you. But let it pass, Mr. Watkins, if you please, and get back to the special object of my visit.”

The farmer’s flow of eloquence came to a sudden pause. He relapsed into silence and puffed away at his pipe.

And now the door opened, and a young lady entered, carrying a glass on a salver.

And very charming she looked in her neat print dress and large white cap, such as is always worn by the ladies of the Veld. Aged about nineteen or twenty, with singularly clear complexion, fair, silky hair, pure blue eyes, and gentle, thoughtful face, she was quite a picture of health, grace, and good-nature.

“Good morning, Mr. Cyprien.”

“Good morning, Miss Watkins!” answered Cyprien, rising and bowing.

“I saw you come in,” said Alice, “and as I know you don’t care for papa’s horrible gin, I have brought you some orangeade, which I hope you will find to your taste.”

“It is very kind of you, I am sure.”

“Of course it is! Now, what do you think my ostrich Dada gobbled up this morning? The ivory ball I darn the stockings on! Yes, my ivory ball; and it is of good size, as you know. Well, that greedy Dada swallowed it as if it had been a pill. I know he will give me serious trouble some day.”

As she said this the laughing look in her eyes did not betray much alarm at the anticipated sorrow. In an instant, however, there was a change. With quick intuition she noticed the constraint that her father and Cyprien felt at her presence.

“I am an intruder, I see,” she said. “I am sorry I should have interrupted you, particularly as I have no time to lose. I must study my sonata before I begin to look after the dinner. I am sure no one could complain of your talkativeness today, gentlemen. I leave you to your conspiracies.”

She had reached the door, when she turned around and gravely said, as if the subject were of the deepest importance, “When you wish to talk about oxygen, Mr. Cyprien, I am quite prepared for you. Three times have I read over the chemical lesson you gave me to learn, and ‘the gaseous, colorless, scentless, and tasteless body’ has no longer any secrets from me.”

And with that Miss Watkins dropped a slight curtsy and disappeared like a meteor. A moment later the notes of an excellent piano, heard from one of the rooms at some distance from the parlor, announced that the daughter of the house was engaged in her musical exercises.

“Well, Mr. Watkins,” said Cyprien, reminded of his request by this apparition — if it had been possible for him to forget it — ”will you give me an answer to the question I had the honor to ask you?”

Mr. Watkins removed his pipe from the corner of his mouth, expectorated with great majesty, abruptly raised his head, and looked at the young man with the air of a grand inquisitor.

“Was it by chance that you spoke about this to her?”

“Spoke about what? To whom?”

“What you have been talking about now; my daughter.”

“For whom do you take me, Mr. Watkins?” replied the young engineer, warmly. “I am a Frenchman, sir, and that is to say, that without your consent I should never think of speaking to your daughter about marriage.”

Mr. Watkins looked somewhat mollified, and his tongue seemed to move more freely. “So much the better, my boy. I expected no less of you,” answered he, in almost a cordial tone. “And now as I can trust you, you will give me your word of honor never to speak of it in the future.”

“And why, sir?”

“Because the marriage is impossible, and the best thing you can do is to drop all thoughts of it,” continued the farmer. “Mr. Cyprien, you are an honest young fellow, a perfect gentleman, an excellent chemist, a distinguished professor, and have a brilliant future; I do not doubt it at all. But you will never have my daughter, and that because I have quite different plans for her.”

“But, Mr. Watkins — ”

“Say no more; it is useless,” interrupted the farmer. “If you were an English duke, you might convince me; but you are not even an English subject, and you have just told me with perfect frankness that you have no money! Look you here; do you seriously think that, educating Alice as I have done, giving her the best masters of Victoria and Bloemfontein, I had intended to send her, as soon as she was twenty, to Paris, on the third floor at No. 104 of the Roo University, to live with a man whose language I don’t even understand? Just give that a thought, and put yourself in my place. Suppose you were John Watkins, farmer and proprietor of Vandergaart Kopje Mine, and I was Victor Cyprien, on a scientific mission to the Cape; suppose that you here were seated in this chair, smoking your pipe; suppose that you were I, and I were you; would you for a moment think of giving me your daughter in marriage?”

“Certainly I would, Mr. Watkins,” replied Cyprien, “and without the slightest hesitation, if I thought you were likely to make her happy.”

“Oh! ah! Well, then, you would be wrong. You would act like a man unworthy of being the owner of Vandergaart Kopje, or rather, you never would have been the owner of it! For do you think I only had to hold my hand out as it came by? Do you think I wanted neither sense nor energy when I found it out and made it my property? Well, Mr. Cyprien, the sense I showed in that affair, I show and will show in every act of my life, and particularly in all that concerns my daughter. And so I say, drop it. Alice will never be yours.” And at this triumphant conclusion Mr. Watkins tossed off his glass.

The young engineer was silent, and the old man continued, “You Frenchmen are an astonishing lot! There is nothing very backward about you. You come here as if you had dropped from the moon into this out-of-the-way spot in Griqualand, call on a man who had never heard of you three months ago, and who has not set eyes on you a dozen times, and say to him, ‘John Stapleton Watkins, you have a nice daughter, well educated, everywhere known as the pride of the place, and, what is anything but a draw-back, the sole heiress of the richest diamond kopje in the world. I am Mr. Victor Cyprien, of Paris, an engineer with two hundred a year, and I should like you to give me your daughter, so that I can take her home, and you can never hear of her for the future, except by post or telegraph!’ And you think that is quite natural? I think it is consummate impudence!”

Cyprien rose, looking very pale. He picked up his hat and prepared to leave.

“Yes, consummate impudence!” continued the farmer.

“No gilded pills for me. I am an Englishman of the old sort, sir. I have been poorer than you — yes, much poorer. I have tried my hand at everything. I have been a cabin- boy on a merchant ship, a buffalo-hunter in Dakota, a digger in Arizona, and a shepherd in the Transvaal. I have known heat and cold and hunger and trouble. For twenty years I earned my crust by the sweat of my brow. When I married Alice's mother, we hadn't enough to feed a goat on. But I worked. I never lost courage. And now I am rich, and intend to profit by the fruit of my labors. I am going to keep my daughter to nurse me, to look after my gout, and to give me some music in the evening when I am tired. If she ever marries, she will marry here; and she will marry some fellow who lives here, a farmer or a digger like I am, and who will not talk to me of semi- starvation in a third floor in a country that I never had the slightest desire to go near. She will marry James Hilton or some fellow of that stamp. There will be no lack of offers."

Cyprien had already reached the door.

"No animosity, my boy; I wish you no harm. I shall always be glad to see you as a tenant and a friend. We have got some people coming to dinner this evening. Will you make one?"

"No, thank you, sir," answered Cyprien, coldly. "I have my letters to write for the mail."

"One for the Frenchman!" chuckled Mr. Watkins.

CHAPTER II

TO THE DIAMOND FIELDS

WHAT most humiliated the young engineer in the answer he received from Mr. Watkins was the fact that, in spite of the rudeness in which it was couched, the decision was not unreasonable. When he came to think matters over, he was surprised at himself for not having seen the farmer’s very obvious objections.

But the fact is, that up till then he had never dreamed of the difference of fortune, race, and education between the young lady and himself. Accustomed for the last five or six years to regard minerals merely from their scientific point of view, diamonds were in his eyes but specimens of carbon adapted for exhibition in the museum of the School of Mines. In France he had moved in quite a different social circle from what he did here, and he had quite lost sight of the commercial value of the rich mine possessed by the farmer. The thought that there was a difference in station between the daughter of the owner of Vandergaart Kopje and himself had never entered his head.

The sharp reprimand he had received from Watkins awoke him from his illusion. Cyprien had too much sense not to appreciate the farmer’s reasons, and too much- honesty to be angry at a decision which he admitted was, in the main, a just one.

But the blow was none the less severe, and now that he had to give up Alice he found how dear she had become to him in those three months. For only three months had elapsed since his arrival in Griqualand.

How far off it all seemed!

Landing with his friend Pharamond Barthes — an old schoolfellow who had come out to South Africa on his third hunting and exploring expedition — he had separated from him at the Cape. Barthes started for Basutoland to engage an escort; Cyprien secured a seat in the heavy, lumbering, fourteen-horse wagon — the stage-coach of the Veld — and set out for the Diamond Fields.

Five or six huge cases — a complete chemical and min- eralogical laboratory, from which he was very loath to part — formed the luggage of the youthful scientist; but the coach only allowed a hundredweight of luggage to each passenger, and he had consequently been obliged to entrust his precious cases to the tender mercies of a bullock cart.

The “coach” held twelve passengers. It was covered with a canvas tilt, and had four enormous wheels constantly wet from crossing the fords. The horses, which were occasionally replaced by mules, were harnessed in pairs, and driven by two coachmen seated side by side on the front bench. One held the reins, while the other manipulated a tremendously long bamboo whip, not unlike a huge fishing-rod, and used it to guide the horses as well as to urge them on.

The road goes by Beaufort, a pleasant little place at the foot of the Nieuwveld Mountains, across the hills to Victoria, then to Hopetown on the Orange, and thence to Kimberley and the principal diamond centers, which are but a few miles away from it.

It is a wearying, monotonous journey across the Veld, and takes from eight to nine days. The landscape is most miserable — red plains, scattered stones like moraine rubbish on the surface, and gray rock cropping out from below, half-starved-looking bushes, and here and there a stunted sickly plant At long intervals a few dilapidated farms doing duty for inns. The hospitality of these inns is somewhat rudimentary. The “good accommodation for man and beast” comprises neither a bed for the man nor litter for the beast, and the provisions are tinned ones that have gone the round of the world, and sell at the buyer’s risk for their weight in gold.

There being nothing for the horses at the farms, the teams are unharnessed and allowed to wander about in search of their own food. They have to be caught again before a start can be made, and the loss of time thus occasioned may be imagined.

Great is the jolting of the primitive coach along the still more primitive roads. The seats are the lids of the wooden lockers which hold the light luggage of the passengers, and on them for a week or more their possessors go thump-jump, like so many forge hammers, as the wagon rolls along. Impossible to read, impossible to sleep, nay, even impossible to talk!

Cyprien’s fellow-travelers were fairly representative of the floating population peculiar to gold and diamond fields. There was an ungainly Neapolitan, with long black hair, a face like parchment, and a pair of glittering treacherous- looking eyes, who said his name was Annibale Pantalacci; a Portuguese Jew named Nathan, an expert in diamonds, who kept himself quiet in a corner and looked upon humanity like a philosopher; a tall collier, Thomas Steel, with a red beard and broad shoulders, who had left his native Lancashire to try his fortune in Griqualand; a German, Herr Fredel, who spoke like an oracle, and knew everything about diamonds and diamond digging — in theory; a thin-lipped Yankee, who reckoned to open a canteen and persuade the miners to waste their hard-earned wealth; a farmer from the Hartz; a Boer from the Orange Free State; an ivory trader on his way to Namaqualand; two Transvaal colonists; and a Chinaman named Li — like every other Chinaman — made up the most heterogeneous, noisy, and disorderly company in which it was ever given to a man to find himself.

At first Cyprien was amused, but not for long. There was only Steel, with his massive strength and loud laughter, and Li, with his gentle catlike ways, in whom he continued to take the slightest interest. To the Neapolitan, with his spiteful buffooneries, he felt the strongest aversion.

One of the most popular jokes of this personage consisted in his tying on to the Chinaman's pigtail, whenever he got an opportunity, a collection of miscellaneous objects, such as bundles of greens, cabbage-stalks, a cow's tail, and a horse's bladebone, picked up on the road.

The Chinaman unconcernedly removed the articles from his appendage, and neither by word, look, nor gesture showed that he considered the pleasantry beyond the bounds of propriety. His yellow face and little almond eyes were as unalterably placid as if he were quite a stranger to what was passing around him. In fact it seemed as though he understood not a word of all that was spoken in this Noah's Ark bound north for Griqua- land.

And Annibale Pantalacci, in his broken English, was profuse in his very vulgar witticisms on the same subject, and kept the travelers in a roar of laughter. What made the laugh all the longer was that the Boers invariably took some time to see the joke, and burst out noisily about three minutes after everybody else.

Cyprien at last became indignant at the dead set thus made against the unfortunate Li, and told Pantalacci that he ought to be ashamed of himself. The Neapolitan would probably have made some insolent rejoinder, but a word from Steel put a sudden check on him.

“No,” said the Lancashire man, regretting that he had laughed with the others, “it isn’t fair play to keep on like that at a chap who doesn’t even understand your lingo.”

Here the matter dropped for a time. But a few minutes after, Cyprien was surprised to see the quietly ironical look of thanks with which the Chinaman regarded him, and which made him think that Li knew rather more English than he gave him credit for.

But it was in vain that at the next halt he tried to engage the Chinaman in conversation. Li remained mute and impassible. Henceforward the young engineer looked upon him as an enigma whose key might be found with perseverance, and made a constant study of the smooth yellow face, the mouth like a sword-cut opening on to the row of very white teeth, the short, broad nose, the large forehead, and the slanting eyes, always cast down, as if to hide the latent malice in their look.

What age was Li? Fifteen or sixty? Impossible to say. If his teeth, his eyes, and his hair, black as soot, made him look quite young, the wrinkles in his forehead, his cheeks, and even around his mouth, gave him the appearance of an old man. He was short and of slight active build, and seemed to be rather a good sort of fellow than otherwise.

Was he rich or poor? Another dubious question! His gray trousers, yellow blouse, plaited string hat, felt-soled shoes, and stockings of immaculate whiteness, might have belonged to a mandarin of the first class or to a man of the people. His luggage consisted of a solitary red box with an address in black ink, —

“H. Li, “From Canton to the Cape.”

The Chinaman was the very pattern of neatness, never smoked, nor drank anything but water, and took advantage of every halt to carefully shave his head. Cyprien found he could make nothing of him, and soon gave him up as a mystery.

The days went by, and the miles were slowly rolled off. Sometimes the horses would cover the ground in fine style, at others it seemed impossible to move them. Little by little the journey was completed, and one fine day the coach reached Hopetown. Another long spell and then Kimberley was passed. Then a few wooden huts appeared on the horizon. It was New Rush.

There the diggers' camp differed but little from the temporary towns which spring from the ground, as if by enchantment, in all new countries — wooden huts of no great size and roughly built, a few tents, a dozen coffee bars or canteens, an alhambra or dancing-saloon, several "stores," and the usual johnny-all-sorts shops.

In the shops were clothes and furniture, boots and glasses, books and saddles, weapons and drapery, brushes and brooms, blankets and cigars, green vegetables and patent medicines, wheel plows and toilet soaps, hair-combs and condensed milk, frying-pans and cheap lithographs — everything, in short, but buyers.

For the whole population of the camp was now at work at the mine, which is about a quarter of a mile from New Rush.

Cyprien, like the other fresh arrivals, hastened off thither, while dinner was being got ready at the Continental Hotel.

It was about six o'clock in the afternoon. Already the sun had begun to veil the horizon in a thin cloud of gold. Once again the engineer noticed the enormous apparent diameter assumed by the sun as well as the moon in these latitudes, a phenomenon of which no sufficient explanation has yet been advanced — the said diameter being about double as large as in Europe.

But a spectacle of much greater novelty for Cyprien awaited him at the Kopje, that is to say, at the diamond diggings. Before the opening of the works the site of the mine was an elliptical knoll, the only elevation in a plain as level as the sea. But now an immense gap with sloping sides, a sort of circus, oval in form and about forty yards across, had taken the place of the hill. The surface was cut up into three or four hundred "claims," or concessions, each thirty-one feet long.

The ground, consisting chiefly of reddish sand and gravel, was being excavated by pickaxe and spade, and sent to the surface. Thence it was taken to the sorting- tables, to be washed, crushed, sifted, and, finally, examined with extreme care to see if it contained any of the precious stones.

The claims, having been excavated independently of each other, formed ditches of varying depths. Some went down for a hundred yards or more, others for thirty, twenty, or even fifteen. To give room for working and intercommunication, each holder is officially required to leave untouched on one of the sides of his claim a space of seven feet. This space, with that left by his neighbor, serves as a sort of gangway or embankment flush with the original level of the ground. On it joists are placed so as to overhang the claims for about a yard on each side, and by this means sufficient width is obtained to allow a couple of carts to pass abreast.

Unfortunately for the solidity of this hanging way and the safety of the miners, the holders of the claims gradually work in as the wall goes down, and as in some cases the depth is two or three hundred feet, the result is that the partition becomes a reversed pyramid, standing on its apex. The consequences can be guessed. The walls fall in, particularly during the rainy season, when, owing to the abrupt changes of temperature, the surface is seamed with cracks, and the sides split off along them. Nevertheless, the periodic recurrence of these disasters has no effect on the miners, and they persist in excavating their claims up to the very farthest limit of the dividing line.

As Cyprien approached the mine, he could see nothing but the carts moving about on the hanging roads; but when he had got near enough to peer into the depths of the curious quarry, he beheld a busy crowd of diggers of every nation, every color, and every costume at work in the claims. Negroes and whites, Europeans and Africans, Mongols and Celts — most of them in a state of semi- nudity, or wearing cotton drawers, flannel shirts, and straw hats, decked in many instances with ostrich plumes.

All were engaged in throwing the soil into leather buckets and sending them to the bank along wire ropes by means of cowskin halliards working over drams of open woodwork. There the buckets were emptied into the carts, and then sent down to the bottom of the claim to be returned with a fresh load.

These long iron ropes, stretched diagonally across the rectangular chasms, give a peculiar look to all dry diggings or diamond mines, and resemble the threads of a gigantic spider's web, whose weaving has been suddenly interrupted.

For some time Cyprien amused himself with contemplating this human ant-hill. Then he returned to New; Rush, where the dinner-bell rang almost immediately after his arrival. There during the evening he had the pleasure of hearing of the wonderful finds that had been made, of miners poor as Job suddenly becoming rich men by finding a solitary diamond, of others ever down on their luck, of the greed of the brokers, of the dishonesty of the Kaffirs employed in the mines, who stole the best stones, and of many other technical matters. The talk was of nothing but diamonds, carats, and hundreds of pounds.

Every one seemed the picture of misery, and instead of the happy digger noisily calling for his champagne to wet his luck, there were a dozen lanky, long-faced fellows drinking nothing but small beer.

Occasionally a stone would be passed around the table to be weighed, examined, valued, and returned to its owner’s belt. That dull grayish pebble, with no more sparkle than a fragment of quartz rolled in a torrent, was a diamond in its gangue!

At night the coffee bars filled, and the same conversation, the same discussion which had occupied the dinner- hour, began again.

Cvprien went to bed early in the tent next to the hotel which had been assigned to him. There he soon fell asleep, despite the noise of a ball in the open air among the Kaffir diggers close by, and the piercing brays of a B-flat cornet from a neighboring dancing-saloon, in which the whites were amusing themselves with a few energetic lessons in choregraphy.

CHAPTER III

A LITTLE SCIENCE

To his honor, be it said, the young engineer had not come to Griqualand to spend his time in an atmosphere of greed, drunkenness, and tobacco smoke. His object was to make sundry topographical and geological surveys of certain parts of the country, to collect specimens of the rocks and diamantiferous gravels, and to conduct a few delicate analyses on the spot. His first care, therefore, was to procure a quiet dwelling-place, where he could set up his laboratory, and which would serve as the center of his explorations in the mining districts.

The knoll on which Watkins' Farm was situated soon attracted his attention as a site particularly favorable for his work, far enough away to suffer but little from the noisy proximity of the camp, and at the same time within an hour's walk of the farthest kopjes, for the diamond field is not more than ten miles in circumference. And so it happened that in the course of a single afternoon he had selected one of the houses abandoned by Mr. Watkins, agreed to take it, and installed himself therein. The farmer was most agreeable. At heart he was thoroughly tired of being alone, and highly pleased to find a young man anxious to take up his quarters close by, and break into the wearisome monotony.

But if Mr. Watkins expected to find in his tenant a mere table-companion or a partner in his assaults on the gin-bottle, he was very much mistaken. Almost before he had taken up his quarters with his retorts, furnaces, and reagents, almost before the chief articles of his laboratory had arrived, he was out on his geological excursions. Coming home in the evening nearly knocked up with fatigue, with rock specimens in his satchel, in his pockets, and even in his hat, he had much more inclination to go to sleep than to listen to the sub-fossil yarns of Mr. Watkins. Besides, he smoked very little, and drank much less; and take him altogether, he was hardly the jolly companion that the farmer had anticipated.

Nevertheless, Cyprien was so straightforward and considerate, so simple in his manner and speech, so well informed and so modest, that it was impossible to meet him frequently without liking him. And Mr. Watkins soon held him in more respect than any other man he knew.

“If he only knew how to drink! But what are you to do with a man who will not touch the least drop of gin?” Thus did the farmer conclude his frequent disquisition on his tenant’s merits.

Miss Watkins, for her part, found herself suddenly placed on a footing of unrestrained friendship with the young scientist. Finding in him a distinction of manner, an intellectual superiority which she had hardly met with before in her usual circle, she had taken advantage of the unexpected opportunity to complete experimentally, the varied chemical knowledge she had obtained by reading scientific works.

The young engineer’s laboratory, with its strange-looking apparatus, interested her greatly. She was above all things anxious to learn what she could about the nature of the diamond, that precious stone which played so important a part in the conversation and commerce of the country. In fact, Alice had almost come to look upon the gem as a worthless pebble. Cyprien, she could not but see, held much the same opinion on the subject as she did, and this community of sentiment had had no little influence on the friendship which speedily grew up between them. We may say without fear of contradiction that these two were alone in Griqualand in thinking that the sole object of life did %n%o%t% consist in finding, cutting, and selling the little stones so keenly coveted among the nations of the earth.

“The diamond,” said Cyprien to her on one occasion, “is only pure carbon. It is a fragment of crystallized coal; nothing more. You can burn it like a lump of coke, and it was its property of combustion that first led to the knowledge of its real nature. Newton, who observed so many things, noticed that the diamond refracted light more than any other transparent body; and as he knew that this property belonged to most combustibles, he, with his usual boldness, deducted from the fact the conclusion that the diamond ought to be combustible. And experience proved that he was right.”

“But, Mr. Cyprien, if the diamond is only carbon, why does it fetch such a price?” asked Alice.

“Because of its rarity,” answered Cyprien, “and because it has only as yet been found in small quantities. For a long time it came only from India, Brazil, and Borneo. And surely you can remember, when you were about seven or eight years old, how it was first discovered in South Africa.”

“Oh, yes! I remember!” said Miss Watkins. “Everybody seemed to go mad in Griqualand! There was nothing to be seen but people with pickaxes and shovels prospecting all over the place, changing the courses of the streams to examine their beds, and dreaming and speaking of nothing but diamonds. Young as I was, I can assure you that I was quite weary of it at times. But you say that the diamond is dear because it is rare. Is that its only merit?”

“Not entirely. Its transparency, its brilliancy when it has been cut so as to refract the light, even the difficulty of this cutting, and its extreme hardness, make it a very interesting body for the scientist, and, I should add, very useful in the arts. You know it can only be polished with its own dust, and that it is its peculiar hardness which has caused it to be used for many years for rock-boring purposes. Without its help, not only would it be very difficult to work in glass and other hard substances, but the boring of tunnels, mine-galleries, and deep wells would be much more difficult.”

“I understand now,” said Alice, who began to have a slight respect for the poor diamonds she had hitherto so despised. “But, Mr. Cyprien, this carbon. of which you say the diamond is composed, in a crystalline state — that is right, isn’t it? — this carbon, what is it?”

“A simple body, not a metal, and one of the most widely distributed bodies in nature,” answered Cyrien. “All organic matter without exception possesses it. Wood, meat, bread, vegetables, etc. all have it among their constituents!”

“How strange!” said Miss Watkins. “To think that those bushes, the grass, the tree, the flesh of my ostrich Dada, and my own, and yours, Mr. Cyprien, are all partly made of carbon — like diamonds! Is everything carbon in this world?”

“Well, some people have been suspecting something of the sort for a considerable time. And contemporary science is making rapid advances toward some such solution.. That is to say, the tendency is to reduce the number of simple bodies, and prove many of the old elements to be mere compounds. The spectroscope has lately thrown quite a new light on chemistry, and the sixty-two substances classed hitherto as elements would seem to be but forms of one — hydrogen perhaps — under different electric, dynamic, and calorific forms.”

“Oh! you frighten me, Mr. Cyprien, with your long words,” said Miss Watkins. “Let us only talk about carbon. Why do not you chemists crystallize it as you did the sulphur in those pretty needles the other day? It would be so much more convenient, surely, than having to dig among the rocks to find it.”

“People have often tried to do so,” replied Cyprien, “and attempted the manufacture of diamonds by the crystallization of pure carbon, and to a certain extent have succeeded. Despretz in 1883, and quite recently in England another experimenter, have produced diamond dust by employing a strong electric current in vacuo to act on carbon cylinders free from mineral substances, and prepared with sugar-candy. But up to the present, the problem has not met with solution that would bring it into trade. Notwithstanding, it may be only a question of time. Any day, perhaps at this very moment, the method of making diamonds may be discovered.”

It was thus they talked as they strolled along the sandy terrace which extended by the farm, or, seated under the veranda, watched the stars twinkling in the southern sky.

Sometimes Alice would leave the engineer and return to the house, at others she would take him to visit her flock of ostriches, kept in an enclosure at the foot of the knoll on which Watkins’ Farm was situated. Their small, white heads craning over their black bodies, and the bunches of yellowish feathers ornamenting their wings and tails, interested the young lady, who for a year or more had kept quite a poultry-yard full of the giants.

Ostriches are very seldom tamed, and the Cape farmers leave them in a half wild state, parked in an enclosure of vast extent, surrounded by wire fencing like that in many countries running alongside the railroad. There they live all the year around in a captivity they know not of, feeding on what they can find, and seeking quiet corners wherein to deposit their eggs, which very strict laws protect against marauders. It is only at moulting time, when they throw off the feathers so much in request by the ladies of Europe, that the beaters drive them into a series of enclosures, diminishing in size, until the birds can be easily seized and made to give up their plumage.

This industry has been thriving at the Cape for many years. Every ostrich reduced to slavery brings to his proprietor without further expense a revenue of from eight to twelve pounds, nothing very extraordinary when it is remembered that a large feather of good quality will fetch from two to three pounds, and that even the medium and smallest feathers are of considerable value.

But it was only for her private amusement that Miss Watkins had made pets of a dozen of these huge birds. It pleased her to see them with their eggs, and come up with their chickens to be fed as if they were fowls or turkeys. Cyprien often accompanied her to the ostrich-yard, and amused himself by stroking the best-looking of the lot, a certain black-headed ostrich with golden eyes — that very Dada who had swallowed the ivory ball which Alice used for darning on.

Little by little there had grown up in Cyprien a feeling of much depth and tenderness toward the young lady. He had persuaded, himself that never would he find a companion more simple-hearted, more intelligent, more amiable, or more accomplished in every way to share his life of labor and meditation. In fact, Miss Watkins, having lost her mother very early, had been obliged to take charge of her father’s house, and was an accomplished housewife, at the same time a true woman of the world. It was this curious mixture of perfect refinement and attractive simplicity that made her so charming. Having none of the silly scruples of so many of the young ladies of Europe, she was never afraid of soiling her white hands in the paste for the pudding, or of superintending the dinner, or keeping the linen in proper repair. And all this did not hinder her from playing Beethoven’s sonatas as well as, and perhaps better than, most people, from speaking two or three languages, from taking pleasure in reading, from appreciating the masterpieces in literature, and, finally, from being eminently successful at the little weekly assemblies among the rich farmers of the district.

Cyprien had seen all this, and now, alas, great was the fall in his hopes. For the first time he saw the almost impassable gulf which separated him from Alice, and heavy was his heart as he returned from the decisive interview. But he was not the man to give up to despair. He was resolved to fight his way in the world, and in his work he had a sure solace for his grief.

Taking his seat at the small table, he finished, in a quick, firm hand, the long, confidential letter which he had begun in the morning to his revered master, Mr. J , a member of the Academy of Sciences, and titular professor at the School of Mines.

“One thing,” he wrote, “I thought better not to put in my official memoir, because it is as yet only a hypothesis, and that is, the opinion I have been led by my geological researches to entertain on the subject of the diamond’s formation. Neither the hypothesis that assumes it to be of volcanic origin, nor that which attributes its appearance in the beds to violent disturbances satisfies me any more than it does you, my dear master, and I need not repeat the reasons which led us to abandon it. The formation of the diamond in situ by the action of fire is likewise too vague an explanation to satisfy me. What was the nature of this fire? and why did it not affect the limestones of all kinds which are invariably met with in diamantiferous deposits? The idea seems to me quite childish, and on a par with the theories of the vortices and hooked atoms.

“The only explanation which satisfies me, if not entirely, at least in a certain degree, is that of the transportation by water of the gem’s elements, and the subsequent formation of the crystal in position. I have been much struck with the peculiar outline, almost identical in all cases, of the different beds which I have noted and measured with great care. All more or less are in the general form of a basin, or rather, considering the shape of the overlying strata, that of a hunting-flask on its side. This appears to have been a reservoir of from thirty to forty thousand cubic yards in extent, in which there has been a deposit of sandy conglomerate, of mud, and of alluvial earth laid down, on the older rocks. This character is very marked at Vandergaart Kopje, one of the most recently discovered of the diggings, and, which belongs, by the way, to the owner of the house in which I am writing.

“When a liquid containing bodies in suspension is poured into a cup, what happens? The bodies arrange themselves at the bottom of the cup or around its sides. That is exactly what has happened in this kopje. It is at the bottom and in the center of the basin as well as around the outer edges that the diamonds are met with. And this is so well understood that the claims between rapidly fall to a lower value, while the central concessionHor those bordering on the boundary enormously increase as soon as the shape of the deposit is made out.

“Besides, several circumstances that you find mentioned in my memoir tend to show the formation of the crystal in position rather than its transport thither in a perfect state. To mention only two or three, diamonds are nearly always found in groups of the same kind and color, which would hardly be the case had they been formed afar and brought thither by a torrent. Frequently two are found together, united but detachable at the least blow. How could they have resisted the grinding and jarring if brought down by water? Again, the larger diamonds are always found under the shelter of a rock, which seems to show that the influence of the rock — its radiation of heat, if nothing else — has helped on the crystallization. It is rare — very rare — that large and small diamonds are found together. Whenever a large specimen is discovered, it is almost always isolated. It is as if all the adamantine elements in the depression had been concentrated into a single crystal under the influence of special causes.

“These and many other reasons urge me to think that the diamond is formed in position, and that the elements of crystallization were brought down to the spot by water.

“But whence came the waters which bore down the organic detritus destined to be formed into diamonds? This I have not yet been able to determine in spite of my careful study of the district.

“The determination, however, may prove of some value. If we can find the route taken by the streams, why should we not, in tracing it up, arrive at the starting-point whence came the diamonds? and there we should doubtless find them in large numbers compared to that in the beds at present worked. It would be a complete demonstration of my theory, and one that I should be very glad to make. But it will not be my lot to do so, as I have nearly completed the period for which I was sent out. I have been more successful in my analysis of the rocks — ” and the young engineer, continuing his story, plunged into technical details, which, though doubtless of much interest to himself and his correspondent, are hardly likely to please the uninitiated reader. As soon as he had finished his long letter, Cyprien extinguished his lamp, stretched himself in his hammock, and slept the sleep of the just.

Work had driven out grief — at least, for an hour or so — but a pleasing vision haunted the young student’s dream, and seemed to whisper that there yet was hope.

CHAPTER IV

VANDERGAART KOPJE

“I MUST be off,” said Cyprien, as he dressed himself next morning. “I must leave Griqualand. After what that man said to me, to remain here a day would be weakness. He won’t give me his daughter? Perhaps he is right. Anyhow, it will never do to look as if I wanted to plead extenuating circumstances. I must accept the verdict like a man, however painful it may be, and trust to the future to set things right.”

And without further hesitation he began to stow away the apparatus in the packing-cases, which had served him for tables and cupboards. He worked with a will for an hour or so, and then through the open window came a sweet, girlish voice, clear and full as the voice of the skylark : —

‘Tis the last rose of summer

Left blooming alone;

All her lovely companions

Are faded and gone.

He ran to the window and saw Alice on her way to the ostriches, with her apron full of scraps for their food. She it was, who was singing to the rising sun.

The young engineer was not particularly susceptible to poetical influences, but something in the song affected him deeply. He stood still at the window and listened intently.

The song ceased. Miss Watkins began to feed the ostriches, and as she did so it was pleasant to see the birds craning their long necks and dodging their huge awkward heads in front of her hand as she tantalizingly held out and withdrew the morsels of food. Then she finished her task, and as she returned resumed her song.

Cyprien was standing in the same place, with tears welling up into his eyes, as if under a charm.

The voice grew more distant. Alice was within twenty yards of the farm, when the sound of hurried footsteps caused her to pause and turn around.

Cyprien, by an irresistible impulse, had left his hut, and was running after her bare-headed.

“Miss Watkins.”

“Mr. Cyprien.”

They were face to face in the full glow of the rising sun on the path that bordered the farm. Their shadows were thrown sharp and clear on the white wood of the paling?. And now that Cyprien had reached Miss Watkins, he seemed astonished at what he had done and undecided what to say.

“You have something to say to me, Mr. Cyprien?” asked the lady anxiously.

“I have come to bid you good-bye. I am going away today,” was the answer.

The delicate rose tint which gave the life to Alice’s face suddenly disappeared.

“Going away! You are going away? Where?” she asked tremblingly.

“Home — to France,” replied Cyprien. “My work is done here. My mission has ended. I have nothing else to do in Griqualand. And I am obliged to get back to Paris.” This with a pause between each sentence, and as if he were craving pardon for some crime.

The girl was astounded. The news fell on her like a blow from a crowbar. Suddenly the teardrops showed themselves, and hung suspended on the long lashes which shaded her eyes. And then, as if recalled to the reality of the scene, she recovered herself, and said, with a slight smile, “Going away! And you are going to run away from your scholar before she has finished her chemistry? You are going to leave me in oxygen and those mysteries of azote which were always a dead-letter for me? It is hardly the correct thing, sir.”

She tried to put a good face on it, and to laugh it off, but the tone of her voice belied her words. Beneath her jesting there was a deep reproach which went straight to the young man’s heart. She continued, but the jesting tone was gone. “And I? Do you think I am nothing? You quietly drop me back into chaos! You come here that I may see among all these Boers and greedy diggers a superior privileged being, learned, proud, disinterested, apart from the rest! you make me help you in your study and work! you open your heart to me, and make me share your hopes, your literary preferences, and your artistic tastes! you reveal to me the distance between a thinker such as you and the mere bimana that surround me! you encourage me to admire you and to like you! you nearly succeeded in doing so! Then you come and coolly tell me that it is all over,’ that you are off to Paris, and are in a hurry to forget me! And you think I am going to take it all as coolly as if I were a philosopher!”

Yes, he had done all that Alice with her tearful eyes had reproached him with.

He was just about to say in defense, “It is necessary that I do so! I yesterday asked your father to allow me to ask you to be my wife! He has refused, and gives me no hope! Now do you understand why I am going?” Then the thought of his promise crossed his mind. He had promised John Watkins never to speak to his daughter on the subject of his dream, and he judged it dishonorable to break his word.

But at the same time he felt that his idea of immediate departure was brutally unkind. It seemed to him impossible to thus suddenly abandon the girl he loved, and who evidently — there could be no doubt of it — loved him. At first the thought of delay frightened him, then it seemed to „ him as imperatively necessary.

“When I spoke of going away, Miss Watkins,” at last he said, “I did not mean this morning — nor today — nor — I have a few more notes to make — preparations to finish — Anyhow, I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again and — talking with you about — about — your studies!”

And then Cyprien abruptly turned away and ran off like a lunatic. He rushed into his hut, and throwing himself into an arm-chair, was immediately deep in thought.

And his thoughts were somewhat different from what they were before he spoke to Miss Watkins.

“Give her up because I have got no money!” he said to himself. “Knock under at the first blow! Is that the sort of man I am? Would it not be better to sacrifice a few prejudices and try and make myself worthy of her? How many fellows make their fortunes in a few months on the Diamond Fields? Why shouldn’t I turn up a hundred carat diamond as the others have done; or better still, find a new field? Surely I have more theoretical and practical knowledge than most of these men. Why should not knowledge give me what work and luck give them? After all, I risk little in having a try. Even from this standpoint of my mission it would not do me any harm to take a turn with shovel and pick and gain some practical experience as a digger. And, if I succeed; if I become rich in this primitive way, who knows but what Watkins may yield, and reverse his decision? The prize is well worth the trial!”

And Cyprien began to walk up and down the laboratory, but his hands were still, his brain only was at work. Suddenly he stopped, put on his hat, and walked out. He took the path down to the flat, and at a great pace set out for Vandergaart Kopje. In less than an hour he was there.

The miners were recrowding into the camp after their breakfast. Cyprien, as the bronzed visages passed by, was wondering to whom to apply for the information he wanted, when he recognized in one of the groups the honest face of Thomas Steel, the Lancashire miner. Two or three times had he met him since his arrival in Griqua- land, and found that he was prospering, a fact sufficiently shown by his contented features, his brand-new clothes, and the large leather belt around his waist. Cyprien made up his mind to accost him and tell him of his intention.

“Buy a claim? Nothing easier if you have got the money!” answered the miner. “There is one now close to mine. Four hundred pounds! It is giving it away! With half a dozen niggers to work for you, you’ll make thirty pounds a week.”

“But I haven’t got four hundred pounds, and I don’t possess a nigger!”

“.Well, buv a share in a claim — an eighth or a six teenth — and work it yourselfi! You can get one for forty pounds.”

“That is more my figure,” answered the engineer; “but you, Mr. Steel, how have you done, if I may be allowed to ask. Did you have any capital?”

“I got here with my arms and three sovereigns in my pocket,” replied the Lancashire lad; “but I was lucky. I first worked half-shares with a man who had an eighth. The fellow liked hanging about the liquor-shop better than working, and so we halved. I made some excellent finds, one a five-carat stone that we sold for two hundred pounds! Then I left off working for the first cove and bought a sixteenth for myself. As I only found small stones I got clear of that in ten days and went halves with an Australian on his claim. But we have hardly made a fiver this first week.”

“If I found a share in a good claim that would not cost too much, will you go partners with me and work it?” asked the engineer.

“If you like,” answered Steel; “but on one condition. That is, we each keep what we find. Not that I mistrust you, Mr. Cyprien. But you see, since I have been here I always lose when the sharing comes, for I am a good hand at the pickaxe and shovel, and I do about three times the work of the other fellows!”

“That seems fair enough,” said Cyprien.

“Well, then here’s an idea, perhaps a good ‘un. Let us two take one of John Watkins’ claims.”

“One of his claims? I thought all the kopje belonged to him.”

“So it does, but the Colonial Government, you know, lays hold of it as soon as it is declared a diamond field. The Government looks after it, measures it out, cuts up the claims, and keeps the best part of the price, and pays only a fixed royalty. And the royalty, when the kopje is as large as this one, amounts to something. But the freeholder always has the preference in buying back as many claims as he can work. That is the case with Watkins. He has got several going besides his property in the kopje. But he cannot work them as he ought to, for the gout stops him from coming down here, and I think he would let you have one cheap if you made an offer.”

“I would rather you do the bargaining,” said Cyprien.

“It makes no difference to me,” replied Steel. “Just as you like.”

Three hours later half-claim No. 942, duly marked out with stakes and identified on the plan, was handed over to Messrs. Cyprien and Steel for the sum of ninety pounds. It was expressly stipulated in the deed that the concessionaries should share the profits with John Watkins, and as a royalty hand him over the three first diamonds weighing more than ten carats that they should find. There was nothing to show that such a find was likely to be made, but still it was possible — everything was possible.

On the whole the bargain was a good one for Cyprien, and Watkins, with his customary frankness, told him so as he signed the contract.

“You have acted like a sensible chap,” said he, as he tapped Cyprien on the shoulder. “There is some stuff in you. I shouldn’t be surprised if you turn out one of the luckiest diggers in Griqualand.”

Cyprien could not but see in these words a happy augury for the future.

And Miss Watkins, who was present at the interview, had she a look bright as sunshine in her blue eyes? No! Seemingly she had been crying all the morning.

By tacit consent nothing was said about the meeting early in the day. Cyprien was going to stay, that was evident.

The young engineer left with a light heart, and having made up his mind to vnsit the farm for the future only in his leisure moments, set to work to pack up a few of his things and take them down to his tent at Vandergaart Kopje.

CHAPTER V

THE DIGGERS AT WORK

THE next morning the two partners set to work. Their claim was near the boundary of the kopje, and, if Cyprien's theory was correct, ought to prove a very rich one. Unfortunately the claim had already been overhauled, and had been driven down into for a hundred and fifty feet or more.

In one respect this was an advantage, as its owners, by finding themselves below the level of the neighboring claims, were entitled, by the custom of the country, to all the earth and all the diamonds that fell into it.

The proceedings were very simple. By means of the shovel and pickaxe the two men cut away a certain quantity of earth from the mass. That done one of them went to the surface, and hauled up along the wire rope the bucketfuls sent him from below.

This earth was then taken in a cart to Steel's hut, and there, after being crushed with wooden billets, so as to clear away the worthless pebbles, was passed through a fine sieve and separated from the tiniest stones, which were all carefully picked over before being rejected. Then the earth was sifted through a still finer sieve to get rid of the dust, and then it was in a fit condition to be looked over for the diamonds.

When it had been turned out on to the table, the two diggers sat down, and, armed with a sort of scraper made out of a piece of tin, went over it carefully, handful by handful, and then threw it under the table, whence, when the examination was over, it was taken and thrown away as rubbish.

All this was to find out if it contained any diamonds, no matter how small. The partners thought themselves very lucky when the day had gone if they had found but one solitary specimen. They worked with great eagerness, and minutely tried through the earth, but during the earlier days the results were almost negative.

Cyprien seemed to stand no chance whatever. If a tiny diamond was found in the earth it was always Steel who noticed it. The first one he found did not weigh, gangue and all, more than the sixth of a carat.

The carat is a weight of four grains. A diamond of the first water — that is to say, pure, limpid, and colorless — is worth, once it is cut, about ten pounds if it weighs a carat. But if smaller, diamonds are very much less valuable in proportion. Larger ones increase in value at a very rapid rate. Generally speaking, a stone of pure water is equal to the square of its weight in carats multiplied by the current price per carat. Thus if the price per carat is ten pounds, a stone of the same quality weighing ten carats would be worth a thousand pounds.

But stones of ten carats, and even of one carat, are very rare, and that is why they are so dear. And, besides, the Griqualand diamonds are nearly always yellowish in color, and that greatly detracts from their value in jewelry.

The finding of a stone weighing the sixth of a carat after seven or eight days' work, was a very poor return for the trouble it had cost. At that rate it would pay better to go out and dig, to look after sheep, or to break stones on the road. So thought Cyprien to himself. But the hope of coming across a splendid diamond, which would pay them at one stroke for the work of many weeks, or perhaps of many months, sustained him as it sustained all the other miners, even those least sanguine. Steel worked like a machine, and did not think at all — at least, he did not seem to do so.

The partners generally breakfasted together, contenting themselves with sandwiches brought from a bar close by; but they dined at one of the numerous ordinaries, like the rest of those in camp. The evenings they spent apart, Cyprien generally visiting the farm for an hour or two.

There he frequently had the disagreeable necessity of meeting his rival, James Hilton, a large man with red hair and freckled face. This rival was evidently making great progress in the esteem of John Watkins by dint of drinking more gin and smoking more tobacco than he did himself.

Alice, it is true, seemed to have the most perfect contempt for the clownish manners and commonplace conversation of young Hilton. But his presence was simply insupportable to Cyprien, who could not stand him at any price, and consequently took his departure,;; d left the field clear for him.

“The Frenchman is not satisfied!” Watkins would say to his companion, giving him a wink. “It seems that diamonds don’t come by themselves into the shovel;” and Hilton would laugh loudly at the joke.

Often on these occasions Cyprien would finish his evenings with an old Boer living near the camp, whose name was Jacobus Vandergaart.

It was from him that the kopje took its name, for he had been the freeholder in the early days of the concession. But if he was to be believed, he was, by some gross piece of injustice, dispossessed in favor of Watkins. Now he was completely ruined, and lived in an old mud hut, earning a living by diamond-cutting — a trade he had formerly followed in his native town of Amsterdam.

It often happened that the diggers, curious to know the exact weights that their diamonds would be once they were cut, would bring them to him sometimes to cleave them, sometimes to submit them to more delicate operations. But this work required a sure hand and keen eyesight, and old Jacobus Vandergaart, excellent workman though he had been in his time, had now great trouble in executing his orders. Cyprien had given him his first diamond to mount in a ring, and had immediately taken a fancy to him. He liked to come and sit in his humble workshop and have a chat, sometimes even merely to keep him company while he worked at his lapidary's wheel. Jacobus Vandergaart, with his white beard, bald head, and black velvet cap, and long nose, surmounted by a pair of round spectacles, looked like an alchymist of the fifteenth century seated among his quaint old tools and acid flagons.

In a bowl on a bench near the window were the rough diamonds entrusted to Jacobus Vandergaart. Their value was something considerable. If he wished to cleave a specimen whose crystallization did not seem quite perfect he would begin by ascertaining by means of his magnify- ing-glass the direction of the cleavage planes. Then with a splinter of another diamond he would make an incision in the selected face, and then he would introduce a thin steel blade into this incision, and give it a sharp blow. In this way he would cleave the diamond's faces one after the other.

If Jacobus Vandergaart wished to "cut" a diamond, or, to speak more accurately, to shape it into some desired form, he would begin by drawing in chalk on the gangue the facets he had selected. Then he would place each of the faces in succession in contact with a second diamond, and then he would submit them both to prolonged friction.

The two stones would mutually grind away each other and gradually the facets would be formed.

In this way Vandergaart would give the gem one of the customary forms, all of which can be classified under three headings, “double-cut brilliants,” “single-cut brilliants,” and “rose diamonds.”

A double brilliant has sixty-four facets, a “table,” and a “pavilion.”

A simple brilliant is just half a double brilliant.

A rose is flat below and has a faceted dome above.

Now and then Vandergaart had to cut a “briolette,” that is, a diamond with neither top nor bottom, and shaped like a pear. In India briolettes have a hole bored through the narrow ends, and by it are threaded in strings.

“Pendants,” which he very rarely had to cut, are half briolettes with table and pavilion and faceted on the inner side.

Once the diamond is cut, it has to be polished. This is done by means of a disk of steel or lead, about nine inches in diameter, spinning horizontally on a table at the rate of from two to three thousand revolutions per minute, and worked by a crank and fly-wheel. This disk is smeared with oil, and dusted over with diamond dust derived from previous cuttings, and against it Vandergaart would press the faces of his stone until they had acquired a perfect polish. The crank was worked sometimes by a little Hottentot boy, who was engaged by the day, sometimes by a friend like Cyprien, who was always very happy to oblige.

As the diamond-cutter worked he talked, and sometimes he would push his spectacles on to his forehead and stop short in his work to tell some story of the past. He had been forty years in South Africa, and knew nearly all its history, and what gave the charm to his conversation was that he spoke from personal experience, and honestly believed in the traditions and prejudices of his countrymen.

Often would he tell how in early days the colony had been captured by the British, and how the Boers, to avoid the restraints of laws to which they were unaccustomed, had moved farther and farther up the country. And he would enlarge on the perils and incidents of each exodus as with wagons and cattle and all their belongings the Dutch settlers penetrated into Kaffirland in search of a new home. And many were the stories he would tell of the wars with the natives occasioned by these irruptions into the countries of the savage kings.

“At last,” concluded he on one occasion, “I built this house where we are sitting, and started a farm. With me were my wife and two children. My kraal was on the site cf the present mine. Ten years later John Watkins arrived in these parts and built his first house. We did not then know that there were diamonds in this country, and so little occasion had I for thirty years to think of my old trade that I had almost forgotten the existence of such gems.

“Suddenly, in 1867, diamonds were discovered, the first recognized, as you know, while it was being thrown about by a child to whom it had been given as a pretty pebble for a plaything. In 1870 I lost my wife and children, and almost alone in the country I remained quite indifferent to the fever raging around me. I worked away on my farm just as if the deposit Dutoit’s Pan had been a thousand miles off instead of within musket-shot.

“One night I found the wall of my kraal had been knocked down and the boundary removed three hundred yards farther back, John Watkins, helped by a hundred Kaffirs, had built a wall joining on to his own so as to enclose a large patch of sandy, gravelly land, up to that moment always recognized as belonging to me.

“I complained to him. He only laughed. I threatened to go to law. He told me I might as soon as I liked.

“Three days later the mystery was solved. The patch of ground was a diamond mine. John Watkins had discovered it, and, hurrying off to Kimberley, had certified it as his own.

“I went %t%o% law, and you know what that means. One by one I lost my cattle, my horses, my sheep. I sold my furniture, I parted with everything. I lost my law-suit and I was ruined.

“The decision of the court was that I had made out no claim to the land in dispute, but that to avoid further trouble they would confirm me in possession of what I then held and certify the boundary. That boundary they took as the twenty-fifth degree of east longitude. The land to the west of it was adjudged to John Watkins, that to the east to Jacobus Vandergaart.

“The mine was to the west of the line, and so, although it bears my name, it became the property of John Watkins.”

CHAPTER VI

IN CAMP

THE subject of the conversation was not very agreeable to the young engineer. He scarcely liked to hear such imputations on the honor of the man whom he persisted in regarding as his future father-in-law. And so he came to consider Vandergaart’s statements as merely the pleadings in his law-suit and therefore liable to considerable alteration when compared with those of the other side.

Watkins, to whom he one day spoke on the subject, burst into a shout of laughter, and as his only reply tapped his head with his finger, thereby intimating that Vandergaart was simply mad.

Was it not possible that the old man, under the excitement of the discovery of the mine, had imagined that it was his property on insufficient evidence? The court had evidently decided against him all through, and it would be very strange had they no cause for doing so. And so Cyprien continued his visits to Watkins Farm, although he knew what Vandergaart thought of its owner.

There was another man in the camp with whom Cyprien was on visiting terms. This was Mathys Pre- torius, a name well known to all Griqualand miners.

Although only forty years old, Pretorius had for many years roamed about the great valley of the Orange before settling here. But this nomadic existence had not, as in Vandergaart’s case, had the effect of souring him. On the contrary, he had grown good-humored, and so fat that he could scarcely walk. He was just like an elephant.

At home he was nearly always seated in a huge wooden chair, built specially to support his majestic form. Abroad he never went except in a carriage made of wickerwork, and drawn by a gigantic ostrich. The ease with which the bird drew the huge mass after him was a striking demonstration of his muscular power.

Mathys Pretorius always came to the camp to arrange about the sale of his vegetables. He was very popular, although his popularity, being due to his extreme cowardice, was scarcely an enviable one. The miners amused themselves by endeavoring to frighten him with all sorts of fantastic rumors.

One day they would tell him of an inroad of the Basu- tos or the Zulus; another they would pretend to read in a newspaper that an act had been passed making it punishable for a man to weigh more than three hundred pounds; another they would declare that a mad dog had been reported on the Driesfon.tein road; and poor Pretorius, who was obliged to take that road home, would find a thousand excuses for remaining in camp.

But these imaginary alarms were nothing to his actual terror lest a diamond mine should be discovered on his estate. A horrible picture of the future presented itself to him — avaricious men invading his kitchen garden, upsetting his vegetable borders, and ending by turning him out and taking possession! For how could he help thinking that the fate of Jacobus Vandergaart would be his?

One of his most relentless persecutors was Annibale Pantalacci. This mischievous Italian — who seemed to prosper exceedingly, judging from his employing three Kaffirs on his claim, and sporting an enormous diamond on his shirt-front — had discovered the Boer’s weakness, and at least once a week made it his business to go digging and pecking near Pretorius Farm. The farm lay along the left bank of the Vaal, about two miles above the camp, and consisted of alluvial land that might be diamantiferous, though nothing as yet had shown that it was so.

Pantalacci, entering thoroughly into the spirit of his cumbrous joke, would place himself full in view of the windows of the farm, often bringing with him a few companions to assist in the comedy. The portly farmer would be seen dodging behind his cotton curtains anxiously following all their gestures, ready to rush to the stable, hitch up his ostrich, and be off at the first sign of their success.

Why had he been foolish enough to tell one of his friends that he kept his ostrich harnessed night and day, and his carriage packed with provisions, ready to start at the first unmistakable symptom of invasion?

“I shall go up among the Bushmen, to the north of the Limpopo,” he said. “Ten years ago I traded ivory with them, and I would a hundred times rather do that than remain among such a lot of lions and jackals as we have here!”

And the confidant — as is the custom of confidants — immediately hastened to make the confidence public, and Pantalacci seized the opportunity, to the great amusement of the miners.

Another constant victim of the same facetious individual was the Chinaman Li. Li had settled at Vandergaart Kopje, and opened a laundry. The mysterious red box contained nothing but brushes, soda, soap, and washing-blue. Such was all that an intelligent Chinaman required to make his fortune with in this country.

Cyprien could hardly help laughing when he met the ever-silent and uncommunicative Li carrying a large basketful of dirty clothes on their way to the wash. But what angered him was that Pantalacci's persecution of the unfortunate Celestial was absolutely cruel. He threw bottles of ink among the linen, stretched cords across the doorway so that Li tumbled over them, stuck him to his seat by a knife in the tail of his blouse, etc. Whenever he got a chance he would give him a sly kick, and call him a "pagan hound," and this he did invariably when he paid his weekly bill. Never was his washing done as he wished, although Li got it up most marvelously. For the least false fold he would fly into a most frightful rage and thrash the unhappy Chinee as if he were his slave.

Such were the ordinary "amusements" of the camp. Occasionally, however, they partook of a more tragic character. If, for instance, it happened that a negro employed in one of the mines was accused of stealing a diamond, the whole population turned out to escort him to the magistrate, and urged him along with their clenched fists. But the crime of receiving was held in greater detestation than that of stealing.

Ward, the Yankee, who arrived in Griqualand at the same time as the young engineer, Had some cruel experience of the consequence of buying diamonds from Kaffirs. By law, a Kaffir on the works is not allowed to possess diamonds, or to buy a claim, or work on his own account.

No sooner was it known what the Yankee had done than an excited crowd rushed to Ward's canteen, sacked it from top to bottom, set it on fire, and would have hanged the proprietor on the gallows that willing hands were preparing, had not a dozen of the mounted police opportunely arrived and marched him off to prison. . And such scenes of violence were frequent among this very mixed and half-savage population. Men of every race jostled each other in the incongruous crowd. The thirst for gold, the drunkenness, the torrid climate, the disappointments, and the dissipation combined to set their brains ablaze. Had all been lucky in their digging they would perhaps have been quieter and more patient. But for the one or two to whom the chance would come of finding a stone of great value there were hundreds who barely vegetated — who scarcely earned enough to keep themselves alive, even if they did not fall into absolute penury.

This Cyprien soon began to see, and he was asking himself if it were worth while or not to continue so un remunerative a trade when an opportunity offered for him to change his plan of operations.

One morning he found himself face to face with a dozen Kaffirs, who had arrived in camp in search of work. These men had come from the distant mountains that divide Kaffirland, properly so called, from the Basutos. For more than four hundred and fifty miles they had traveled in Indian file along the bank of the Orange, living on what they found on their way — roots, berries, and locusts. They were in a state of semi-starvation, and looked more like skeletons than living beings. With their emaciated limbs, long, naked bodies, parchment-like skins, bony sides, and hollow cheeks, they seemed more likely to devour a beefsteak of human flesh than to do a day’s work. No one offered to engage them, and they remained squatted by the side of the road, helpless, gloomy, and brutalized by misery and want.

Cyprien was much affected at their appearance, and took pity on them. He motioned them to wait a little, and then went off to the hotel, where he ordered a large potful of boiled maize-flour and some tins of preserved meat to be sent out, and then returned to amuse himself at seeing them enjoy these unaccustomed luxuries.

One would have thought they were shipwrecked sailors rescued from a raft after a fortnight's fasting. They ate so much that for their health's sake they had to be stopped to prevent their suffocation. Only one — the youngest and best-looking of the group — showed any signs of self- restraint, and — what was a still rarer thing for a Kaffir — he even went so far as to thank his benefactor. He stepped up to Cyprien, seized his hand, and solemnly passed it over his woolly head.

"What is your name?" asked Cyprien.

The Kaffir, understanding a few words of English, replied, "Mataki."

Cyprien liked his straightforward look, and conceived the idea of engaging him to work on his claim.

"After all," he said to himself, "it is what everybody does in these parts. Better for the Kaffir that he should have me for his master instead of some Pantalacci." And so — "Well, Mataki, you are looking for work, are you?"

The Kaffir nodded.

"Will you work for me? I will board you, find you in tools, and give you a pound a month."

Such was the customary rate, and Cyprien knew that he could not offer more without raising the whole camp against him. But he intended to make up the very poor pay with gifts of clothes, cooking utensils, and other things.

As his only reply, Mataki smiled, showed his white teeth, and again laid his protector's hand on, his head.

The contract was signed.

Cyprien took him to his tent and gave him a flannel shirt, a pair of cotton trousers, and an old hat. Mataki could hardly believe his eyes. To see himself thus splendidly arrayed as soon as he arrived in camp surpassed his dreams. He knew not how to express his gratitude or his joy. He jumped and capered and laughed and cried again and again.

At the end of a week Mataki had picked up so many words that he was able to make himself understood, and Cyprien learned his history. He did not know the name of the country where he was born, but it was in the mountains, toward the sun-rising. All he could say about it was that he was very miserable, and, like many other warriors of his tribe, to make his fortune he had come to the Diamond Fields.

What did he hope to gain? A red cloak and ten times ten pieces of silver! For the Kaffirs hate gold pieces, their prejudice against them being due to their having been used by the first European traders.

And what did Mataki, the ambitious, think of doing with these pieces of silver?

His intention was to get a red cloak, a gun, and ammunition, and then to return to his kraal. There he would buy a wife, who would work for him, take care of his cow, and cultivate his mealie-field. Then would he become a great chief. Every one would envy his gun and his good fortune, and he would die full of years and respected. Nothing could be simpler.

Cyprien remained deep in thought after hearing the simple program. Could he change it; enlarge the poor savage’s horizon, and show him a better object in life than a red cloak and a shot-gun? Or should he leave him in his ignorance and let him return to his kraal in peace, and live the life he hoped for? A serious question, which the engineer dared not solve, but which Mataki did for himself.

For as soon as the Kaffir had picked up sufficient of the language to make himself understood, he betrayed an extraordinary thirst for information. His questions were incessant; he wished to know everything — the name of each object, its use, and its origin. Then he devoted himself to reading, writing, and to ciphering. In short, his thirst for knowledge was insatiable. And Cyprien encouraged him, and every evening gave him an hour's lesson to help him on the road he had chosen.

Miss Watkins was also interested in his unusual eagerness, and undertook to give him lessons. And these the young Kaffir would repeat to himself as he worked at the bottom of the claim, dealing mighty strokes with the pickaxe below, drawing the buckets up above, or sorting out the pebbles at the sieves. So well did he work that his example was contagious, and the men on the neighboring claims made far more progress than they had ever done before.

On Mataki's recommendation, Cyprien engaged another Kaffir of the same tribe, whose name was Bardik, and his zeal and intelligence were equally appreciated.

Soon after Bardik's engagement, Cyprien had his first good find, a seven-carat stone, which he at once sold to Nathan, the broker, for twenty pounds. This was promising, and a miner who was only on the look-out for reasonable wages would have been content — but Cyprien was not.

"If I stay here for two or three months at this rate," he said to himself, "shall I be any better off? It is not one seven-carat stone that I want, but a thousand or two, or else Miss Watkins will be handed over to James Hilton, or some other worthless fellow.”

Thus thought Cyprien as he returned to the kopje one sultry, dusty day — the dust, that reddish, blinding cloud, that hangs like a pall over the site of a diamond mine. Suddenly he stopped, and stepped back, horror-struck at what he saw in the yard of one of the isolated huts.

A man was hanging from the pole of an ox-cart, which had been drawn up by the wall. The body hung like a plummet against a background of snowy white linen — motionless, lifeless, with the feet stretched to the ground, and the arms dropped limply at its side.

Cyprien was for a moment aghast. But as he recognized the Chinaman Li, hanging by the pigtail, which had been hitched around his neck, his astonishment gave way to pity. He did not hesitate very long. He sprang to the pole, caught the body in his arms, and cut the tail with his pocket-knife. That done, he carefully laid his burden in the shadow of the hut.

It was time. Li was not quite cold. His heart beat feebly, but still it did beat. Soon he opened his eyes, and, strange to relate, seemed to come to his senses as soon as he saw the light. His impassible face betrayed neither fear nor astonishment at emerging from so horrible a trial. He seemed as though he had been awakened from some gentle sleep.

Cyprien made him drink a few drops of vinegar and water that he happened to have in his flask.

“Can you speak now?” asked he, mechanically, forgetting that Li could not understand him.

Li, however, gave an affirmative nod.

“Who hanged you, then?”

“I did,” replied the Chinaman, as if he had said the most natural thing in the world.

“You? You were committing suicide, then, you scoundrel! And why?”

“Li was too warm! Li was tired of it!” replied the Celestial. And then he shut his eyes, as if to escape further questioning.

It now struck Cyprien for the first time that the Chinaman was not supposed to know the language.

“You speak English?” asked he.

“Yes,” answered Li, lifting his eyelids, or rather the two oblique button-holes alongside his nose.

The look he gave reminded Cyprien of that ironical glance which had surprised him on the coach to Kimber- ley.

“Your reasons are absurd!” he said severely. “People do not commit suicide because the weather is too hot! Speak seriously. There is something in all this, I know. Has that Pantalacci been doing anything to you?”

The Chinaman bowed his head. “He threatened to cut off my pigtail,” said he, in a low voice, “and I am sure that he would have done so in an hour or two.”

At that moment Li perceived the very pigtail in Cyprien’s hand, and saw that the misfortune he dreaded above all things had come to pass.

“Oh! sir! what! you! You cut it!” he screamed in terror.

“It was necessary to do so to prevent your being strangled,” said Cyprien; “but it is of no consequence to you in this place. Be calm!”

The Chinaman seemed so broken-hearted at the amputation that Cyprien, fearing he might make another attempt on his life, took him along with him.

Li followed without a word, sat down near his rescuer, listened to his reprimands, promised never to renew the attempt, and, under the influence of a cup of hot tea, even favored him with some scraps of his biography.

He was a native of Canton, and had been brought up in an English commercial house. From Canton he had gone to Ceylon, thence to Australia, and thence to South Africa. Fortune had never smiled on him. The laundry trade had been as unprofitable as the twenty other trades he had tried his hands at. But Pantalacci had simply rendered his life insupportable, and to escape his persecution he had made up his mind to hang himself.

Cyprien comforted the poor fellow, promised to protect him against the Neapolitan, gave him all the dirty clothes to wash that he could find, and sent him away contented at the loss of his capillary appendage, and free from superstition regarding the consequences.

CHAPTER VII

THE LANDSLIP

A FORTNIGHT passed, and Cyprien found not a single diamond. More and more did he become disgusted with his trade. It seemed to him, without capital enough to buy a first-class claim and pay a dozen Kaffirs to work it properly, but little better than a swindle.

One morning, while Mataki and Bardik went out with Steel to work, he stayed in his tent to answer a letter from Pharamond Barthes, which had been brought in by an ivory trader.

Barthes was enchanted with his life of hunting and adventure. He had already killed three lions, sixteen elephants, and an incalculable number of giraffes, antelopes, and such small game.

“Like the conquerors of history,” he said, “we make war feed on war. It frequently happens that we not only feed the whole expedition on what we bag, but also make considerable profit by selling or bartering the skins and ivory.” And in conclusion he said, “Why don’t you come with me and have a turn on the Limpopo? I shall be there about the end of next month, and intend to go down to Delagoa Bay, to return by sea to Durban, whither I have promised to take %m%y% Basutos. Leave your horrible Griqualand for a few weeks and join me.”

Cyprien was reading the letter over again when a tremendous noise, followed by a loud shouting in the camp, made him rush out of his tent.

An excited crowd were running toward the diggings.

“A landslip!” was the cry from all sides.

The night had been very cold, while the preceding day had been one of the hottest for some time. This sudden change of temperature had, as usual, caused the earth to crack and break away. Cyprien hurried to the kopje. A glance showed him what had happened.

An enormous block of earth, about sixty yards high and two hundred long, had been cleft vertically, and a fissure formed in it like a breach in a rampart. Thousands of tons of gravel had been detached from the main mass and rolled down into the claims, filling them with sand, pebbles, and rubbish. Everything on the spot at the time — men, oxen, and carts — had been hurled below. Fortunately the majority of the diggers had not yet gone down to work, so that but a very few were buried by the fall.

Cyprien's first thought was for Steel, and soon he had the pleasure of recognizing him among the men near the cleft. He ran up to ask him how it had happened.

"We are all right," said the Lancashire man, as he shook hands.

"Where's Mataki?" asked Cyprien.

"He is down under there," answered Steel, pointing to the rubbish which had heaped up on their claim. "I was waiting here till he had filled his first bucket when the slip took place."

"But we cannot leave him there without trying to rescue him. Perhaps he is still alive."

Steel shook his head. "It is not likely that he can be living under fifteen or twenty tons of earth. Besides, it would take ten men two or three days to clear all that off."

"Never mind," answered the engineer; "it shall not be said that we left a fellow-creature down in that grave without trying to get him out."

And then, through Bardik, who was standing near, he offered to the Kaffirs the high pay of five shillings a day to all who would help to clear out the claim.

Thirty negroes undertook the job, and without losing an instant set to work. Picks and shovels were there, buckets and ropes were ready, and the carts were standing by. A great number of the whites, hearing that they were trying to dig out a poor fellow buried alive by the landslip, volunteered their help, and Steel, thoroughly roused by Cyprien's energy, was by no means the least active among them.

By noon several tons of gravel had been cleared away. At three o'clock Bardik uttered a hoarse cry. Beneath his pickaxe he had just caught sight of a black head. The men worked with a will, and a few minutes later Mataki's body was exhumed. The unhappy man was lying on his back, motionless, and to all appearances dead. By a singular chance one of the leather buckets had been turned over on his face and covered it like a mask.

This Cyprien noticed at once, and it led him to think that he might recall the poor fellow to life. The hope, however, was very feeble, for the heart beat no longer, the skin was cold, the limbs had stiffened, the hands were clenched in agony, and the face — of that livid paleness peculiar to the negroes — was frightfully contracted by asphyxia.

Cyprien did not lose courage. He had Mataki carried to Steel's hut, which was nearer than his own, and here he was laid on the table where the gravel was usually tried over. Systematic rubbing was then begun, particularly that chafing the thoracic cage, with a view to establish artificial respiration, which is employed in the case of the apparently drowned. Cyprien knew that this treatment was equally applicable to all kinds of asphyxia, and in the present instance he had nothing else to attend to, as no wound or fracture, or even serious bruise, was apparent.

“Look!” said Steel, who was rubbing away assiduously; “he is holding something in his hand!”

The result of these measures soon became apparent. The corpse-like stiffness of the young Kaffir gradually relaxed; the temperature of the skin sensibly changed. Cyprien, who was watching the heart for the least sign of life, thought he could feel a gentle trembling that augured well.

Soon the symptoms became more marked. The pulse began to beat, a slight inspiration seemed to insensibly inflate Mataki’s chest, and then a stronger expiration betrayed a manifest return of the vital functions.

Suddenly two vigorous sneezes shook the black carcass from head to foot. Mataki opened his eyes, breathed, recovered his consciousness.

“Hurrah! hurrah! he’s all right!” exclaimed Thomas Steel, as, dripping with perspiration, he suspended his rubbing. “But look! he has never let go of that piece of earth in his hand!”

Cyprien had other things to think of than such a trifle as that! He made his patient swallow a spoonful of spirits, and then raised him so as to facilitate his breathing. Finally, when he found he had really returned to life, he wrapped him up in blankets, and, with the help of three or four willing companions, carried him to his own hut at Watkins Farm.

There the poor Kaffir was put to bed, and Bardik made him take a mug of hot tea. In a quarter of an hour he peacefully fell asleep. He was saved!

Cyprien felt that incomparable gladness in his heart which a man experiences when he has snatched a human life from the jaws of death; and, sitting down by Mataki, took up a book, interrupting his reading from time to time to look at him as he slept — like a father watching the sleep of a convalescent son.

During the six weeks Mataki had been in his service Cyprien had had every reason to be satisfied with him. His intelligence, obedience, and ardor in his work were astonishing. He was fearless and obliging, and of a singularly quiet and cheerful disposition. He had, however, one fault — a very serious one — due evidently to his earlier education, and to the Spartan customs that prevailed in his father’s kraal. Mataki was just a little of a thief, but almost unconsciously so. When he saw anything he liked he thought it the most natural thing in the world to annex it.

In vain his master, alarmed at the tendency, talked to him and argued with him. In vain he had threatened to send him away if he found him out in another attempt. Mataki promised never to do so again, cried, begged pardon, and the very next day stole something else, as if nothing at all had happened.

His larcenies were not heavy, however. His covet- ousness was not excited by things of great value; a knife, a cravat, a pencil, or some such trifle would be enough for him. But Cyprien was none the less broken-hearted at finding such a failing in so sympathetic a nature.

“Wait! hope!” he said. “Perhaps I shall some day make him understand how wicked it is.”

Toward nightfall Mataki awoke, as well as if nothing had happened, and then he told his story.

The bucket that had accidentally covered his face, and a long ladder serving as a buttress above him, had kept off the pressure, and saved him for some time from complete asphyxia by leaving him a little air to breathe. He had made the best he could of this fortunate circumstance by breathing only at long intervals. But little by little the air became foul. Mataki found his senses gradually going, and fell off into a deep, painless sleep, whence he roused for a moment now and then to make a determined attempt at inspiration. Then all was a blank.

Cyprien let him talk for a minute or two, and then got him to drink and eat, and compelled him, in spite of his protests, to remain in bed for the night. Then, feeling sure that all danger was over, he left him alone, and went to pay his customary visit to Watkins Farm.

He wished to tell Alice what he thought of the events of the day, and of the dislike he had taken to the mine — a dislike which the deplorable accident of the morning could not but increase. He told her of his disappointments and vexations, and of the letter he had received from Phara- mond Barthes. Would it not be better for him to take his friend’s advice? What would he lose by going to the Limpopo and trying his luck as a hunter? Surely it would be a nobler occupation than that of sifting the earth like a miser, or getting other people to sift it for him.

“What do you think, Miss Watkins?” he asked. “You have so much practical good sense, advise me. I have lost my moral equilibrium; I want a friendly hand to set me right again.”

Thus spoke he in all sincerity, pleased, he knew not why, at thus betraying his indecision to his gentle confidante, who listened with deep sympathy.

“I have long thought the same of you,” she answered. “I cannot understand how a scientific man like you can abandon yourself to such a life. Is it not a crime against yourself and against science itself? To give your precious time to mere hand labor, such as a Kaffir or a Hottentot could do much better, seems to me to waste it.”

Cyprien had only one explanation to give of the problem which so greatly astonished and shocked the young lady. Perhaps she was exaggerating her indignation a little to force him to an avowal? But that avowal he had promised not to make, and so he restrained himself, although it trembled on his lips.

Miss Watkins continued, “If you want to find diamonds so badly, why don’t you look where you are most likely to find them — in your crucible? What! you a chemist, knowing more than anybody what these wretched stones are which people value so highly, and set yourself to mere mechanical labor? If I were in your place I should try to make diamonds, not to find them!”

Unfortunately at this moment Watkins awoke from his sleep to ask the latest news from Vandergaart Kopje, but the seed had been thrown on good ground, and was sure to germinate.

As the young engineer returned home he pondered over Miss Watkins’ thrilling words. All that was fanciful about them disappeared when he thought of the generous and almost tender confidence that they had showed in him.

“And why not?” he asked himself. “The fabrication of the diamond may have appeared Utopian a century ago, but now it is as good as done. Frémy and Peil have made rubies, emeralds, and sapphires which are only differently colored crystals of alumina. MacTear and Han- nay, of Glasgow, really made diamonds, and their only fault was that they were so horribly dear — dearer than the natural diamonds of Brazil and Griqualand — and consequently the discovery was of no commercial value. But when the scientific solution of a problem has been arrived at, the industrial solution is not far off. Why should I not seek for it? The men who have failed hitherto have been mere theorists — men of the study and the laboratory. They have not studied the diamond in position — in its native earth — in its cradle, so to speak. I have the benefit of their work — of their experience — in addition to my own. I have extracted the diamond with my own hands. I have analyzed it, studied it under every aspect in which it has been found. If anybody had a good chance of succeeding, I am the man — at least, I ought to be the man.”

Thus thought Cyprien, as, turning the matter over in his mind, he lay awake during the greater part of the night.

His resolution was soon taken. On the following morning he told Steel that he did not intend to work his claim any more, and arranged with him to retire from the partnership as soon as some one could be found to take his place. Then he went back and shut himself up in his laboratory to think over his new scheme.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

“PERHAPS,” said Cyprien, “these diamond deposits are really carbonataras. If a lot of hydrogen and carbon hung about the streams and alluvial deposits in the form of marsh gas, why should there not have been an oxydation of the hydrogen with an accompanying partial oxydation of the carbon, such as would bring about a crystallization of the carbon in excess?”

With this idea to begin with, a chemist had little difficulty in selecting a compound to play the part of the oxygen in an analogous but artificial reaction, and Cyprien immediately entered on the investigation.

In the first place a state of things had to be devised experimentally to resemble as much as possible the supposed conditions under which the natural diamond was produced. This was simple enough. Everything great in science and art is simple. What can be less complicated than the greatest discoveries of humanity — gravitation, the compass, the printing-press, the steam-engine, the electric telegraph?

Cyprien himself went down to the lowest depths of the diggings and there selected samples of the earth which he thought best suited for his experiment. With it he made a thick pasty mortar, and with this he carefully lined a steel tube about half a yard long, two inches thick, and three inches in bore.

This tube was simply a piece of cannon condemned as unfit for service. He had managed to buy it at Kim- berley from a company of volunteers who had been disbanded after a campaign against the neighboring Kaffirs. This cannon, sawed in segments in old Vandergaart’s work-shop, gave the very instrument that was required — namely a chamber of sufficient resistance to support enormous internal pressure.

After firmly closing one end of the tube, he placed in it a few fragments of copper and about three pints of water. Then he filled it with marsh gas, and then carefully luting it with his mortar he drove stoppers into each end and fastened them in strongly enough to withstand any force. Thus was the apparatus constructed. The next thing to do was to submit it to intense heat.

To obtain this it was put into a large reverberating furnace kept going night and day for a fortnight, so as to give a constant white heat.

Both the furnace and the tube were then enveloped in a thick coating of refractory earth, so as to retain the greatest possible quantity of heat, and to cool down as slowly as possible when the time came. The furnace looked like a huge beehive or an Eskimo hut.

And now Mataki was able to be of use. All the preparations had been watched by him with great attention, and when he found that they were going to try and make a diamond his interest in the experiment became intense. He soon learned how to stoke the furnace, and the charge of that department was entrusted to him.

As can be imagined, these arrangements took some time. In a European laboratory the experiment would have been begun within a couple of hours of its having been planned out, but in this half-civilized place it took three weeks before all was ready. And Cyprien was very lucky in several things; for instance, in finding the old gun, which just suited him, and in procuring coal for fuel. In fact, so rare was coal at Kimberley that he had to apply to three merchants to scrape together a single ton..

At length all difficulties were surmounted, and once the fire was lighted, Mataki took it in charge.

The young Kaffir was very proud of his functions. They were not quite novel to him, as once or twice in his native land he had assisted at a more or less diabolical act of cookery. For among his fellows it seemed that Mataki had the reputation of being a magician. A few secrets of elementary surgery, and two or three mesmeric passes learned from his father, were his whole stock in trade. But the Kaffirs came to consult him for all their ailments, real or imaginary, for the interpretation of their dreams and the settlement of their disputes. Mataki was never at fault, and had always some formula ready, some portent to explain, or some sentence to pronounce. The formulas were generally strange and the sentences preposterous, but his countrymen were satisfied. And what more would you have?

Besides, the flasks and retorts by which he was surrounded in Cyprien’s laboratory — to say nothing of the mysterious operations in which he was allowed to take part — could not but contribute to his prestige.

Cyprien often smiled at the solemn airs the black gave himself in performing this humble task of stoker and preparer, in putting on the coal and poking the fire, or dusting the rows of crucibles and test tubes. And in this gravity there was something even pathetic — that artless expression of the awe inspired by science in a nature degraded, but intelligent and greedy to learn.

But Mataki had his play hours like other men, especially when he was in the company of Li. A firm friendship had sprung up between these two, different as they were in their origin, during the now very frequent visits that the Chinaman paid to Watkins Farm. They had both been rescued by

Cyprien from imminent death, and regarded him with the warmest gratitude. It was thus very natural that they should be first drawn toward each other by a sincere sympathy, and then that this sympathy should be changed into affection.

Between themselves Li and Mataki had given the young engineer a familiar name that well expressed the nature of the sentiment with which they regarded him. They called him “pa,” and never spoke of him except in terms of admiration and devotion.

On Li’s part this devotion showed itself “in the scrupulous attention with which he washed and got up Cyprien’s linen; on Mataki’s part by the rigid punctuality with which he carried out all his master’s instructions.

But sometimes the two friends went a little further in their endeavor to gratify their “pa.” Occasionally, for instance, Cyprien would find on his table certain fruits or dainties that he had never ordered, and which never appeared in the tradesmen’s bills. Now and then when his shirts returned from the wash they would be provided with gold studs of mysterious origin. An excellent easy- chair appeared among the furniture; an embroidered cushion, a panther-skin, and several costly nicknacks came into the hut none knew whence.

And if Cyprien asked Li or Mataki about them, all he could get were evasive responses, such as, “It wasn’t me, sir!” “I wonder who did it!” etc. etc.

Cyprien would have taken little notice of these things had he not suspected that the gifts had been very easily acquired. Had they cost more than the trouble of taking them? Nothing, however, happened to confirm his suspicions, and all his inquiries produced no result, while behind his back

Li and Mataki exchanged sly looks, significant smiles, and cabalistic signs that seemed to afford them intense gratification.

Cyprien had, however, other cares to attend to. John Watkins seemed to have made up his mind to get Alice married as soon as possible, and with this in view seemed to keep open quite a museum of probable admirers. Not only was James Hilton there every evening, but all the bachelor diggers whose success in the kopje had in Watkins' eyes given them the necessary qualifications for his son-in-law. The German Friedel and the Italian Pantalacci were among them, both having been among the lucky ones of the mine. Friedel was more pedantic and peremptory than ever; Pantalacci had blossomed out into a colonial swell, resplendent with gold chains and diamond pins. He wore a white linen suit, which made his yellow complexion look still yellower and more cadaverous.

With his buffooneries, his Neapolitan songs, and his attempts at being a fine gentleman, Pantalacci tried in vain to please Alice, who despised him heartily for the very obvious motive that brought him to the farm. She never listened to him if she could help it, and never gave the faintest smile either at his jokes or his attitudes.

And Cyprien was at work both night and day on other experiments which he intended to try should he fail in his first attempt at diamond-making. He was not content with theory and formula, though with them for hours he would fill notebook after notebook. Frequently did he visit the kopje, to bring home fresh specimens of the gravels and sands and submit them to a searching analysis, which, repeated in many ways, allowed of no margin for error. The greater the danger became of losing Alice Watkins, the more was he resolved to omit nothing that might give him the victory. And yet, so little confidence had he in himself that he whispered not a word to her of the experiment in progress. All Alice knew was that he had gone back to his chemistry — and she was very glad to hear it.

CHAPTER IX

A SURPRISE

IT was a great day when the experiment was completed. For two weeks the fire had been allowed to die out, so that the apparatus might gradually cool. Cyprien, considering that the crystallization of the carbon ought by now to have been effected, resolved to open the mound which covered the furnace.

This was no easy matter. The pickaxes had all their work to do to cut their way through the baked earth. It had been hardened like a brick. At length it yielded to the attacks of Mataki, and the upper part of the furnace, the capital, so to speak, was visible. Then the whole furnace was revealed to view.

Cyprien's heart beat a hundred and twenty to the minute as the Kaffir, assisted by Bardik and Li, lifted off the top.

That the experiment had succeeded he could hardly believe. He was one of those who always doubt themselves.

But after all it was possible! And if it had! All his hopes of happiness, of glory, and of fortune were contained in that huge black cylinder which now met his sight after so many weeks of trial!

Horror! The cannon had burst!

Yes! Against the formidable pressure of the vapor of the water and the marsh gas raised to such a tremendous temperature the very steel had been unable to contend. The barrel, although two inches thick, had split like a test tube. On one of its sides about half-way down there gaped a huge fissure blackened and twisted by the flames, which seemed to grin in the face of the discomfited engineer.

This was indeed unfortunate! So much trouble to reach a negative! Indeed Cyprien would have felt less humiliated if, thanks to his precautions, the cylinder had resisted the fire — and been found empty. That there might be no diamond inside the tube he was prepared for. But to have heated up and cooled down and cherished for a month or more that old lump of steel, and then to end like this, was the acme of misfortune! He felt inclined to kick the whole concern over his hut — but its weight forbade him.

He was about to leave the spot in despair, when curiosity led him to hold a match at the gap in the tube so as to examine the interior.

“Perhaps,” he thought, “the earth I plastered around it has been baked into a brick like that outside.”

He was right. But a very curious phenomenon presented itself which at first he could not understand. A sort of clay nodule seemed to have detached itself from the lining of the tube and hardened separately.

The nodule was of a reddish color. It was about the size of an orange, and could easily pass through the gap. Cyprien drew it out, and held it up carelessly to examine it. Then remembering that it was only a piece of clay like the rest, but separately baked, he was going to throw it aside. But it sounded hollow like a piece of pottery.

It was a sort of closed cup in which something seemed to shake. “A regular money-box!” said Cyprien.

But had he under pain of death been obliged to explain the mystery he could not have done so.

However, he resolved to see what it meant He took up a hammer and smashed the “money-box.”

And it was a money-box, and contained a magnificent treasure. There could be no mistake as to the nature of the pebble which disclosed itself to the astonished eyes of the engineer. The stone was a diamond in its gangue, in every respect like an ordinary diamond, but a diamond of colossal dimensions.

It was as large as a fowl’s egg. It looked not unlike a potato. It weighed over half a pound.

“A diamond! An artificial diamond!” repeated Cyprien in an undertone. “I have solved the problem notwithstanding the accident to the tube. I am a rich man! Alice, my dear Alice, is mine!”

Then he doubted his eyesight.

“But it is impossible! It is an illusion, a mirage! But I’ll soon find out the truth.”

And without stopping to put on his hat, mad with joy, like Archimedes jumping from the bath when he discovered his famous principle, Cyprien tore down the road from the farm and bounded like a shot into the workshop of Jacobus Vandergaart.

He found the old lapidary examining some stones which Nathan the broker had brought to be cut.

“Ha! Mr. Nathan, you are just in time,” exclaimed Cyprien. “Look here! and you, Mr. Vandergaart, see what I have brought you, and tell me what it is.”

He put the stone on the table and crossed his arms. Nathan first took it up. He turned pale with surprise, his eyes opened wide, as he handed the stone to Vandergaart.

Jacobus held it up to the level of his eyes, looked at it in the light from the window, and then looked at it over his spectacles. Then he laid it on the table, looked at Cyprien, and said very quietly :

“That is the biggest diamond in the world.”

“Yes! The biggest!” repeated Nathan. “Two or three times as large as the Kohinoor, the Mountain of Light, the pride of the royal jewels of England, and which weighs a hundred and seventy-nine carats.”

“Two or three times as large as the Grand Mogul, the largest known stone, which weighs two hundred and eighty carats,” said the lapidary.

“Four or five times as large as the Czar’s diamond, which weighs a hundred and ninety-three carats!” continued Nathan.

“Seven or eight times as large as the Regent, which weighs one hundred and thirty-six carats,” quoth Vandergaart.

“Twenty or thirty times as large as the Dresden diamond, which weighs only thirty-one!” said Nathan, adding immediately, “I should say that after it is cut it will weigh at least four hundred carats! But how can we dare to value it? It is beyond all calculation.”

“Why not?” answered Jacobus Vandergaart, who remained the coolest of the two. “The Kohinoor is estimated at a million and a quarter, the Grand Mogul at half a million, the Czar’s diamond at three hundred and fifty thousand, the Regent at two hundred and fifty thousand — and that certainly ought to be worth four millions of money!”

“It all depends on its color and quality,” said Nathan, who began to recover his senses, and to prepare for the future with a view to a future bargain. “If it is pure and of the first water its value will be inestimable; but if it is yellow, like most of our Griqualand stones, it will not be worth nearly so much. For a stone of that size, • I think I should prefer just a slight tinge of sapphire-blue, like the Hope diamond, or perhaps a rose tint, like that of the Grand Mogul, or even emerald shade, like that of the Dresden diamond.”

“No, no!” said the old lapidary, excitedly; “I believe in colorless diamonds! Give me the Kohinoor or the Regent! There are gems for you! By the side of them those others are but fancy stones.”

Cyprien had heard enough.

“Gentlemen, you must excuse me,” said he, hurriedly; “I must leave you for a minute,” and, picking up his precious pebble, he ran back along the road to the farm.

Without stopping to knock, he burst open the sitting- room door, found himself in Alice’s presence, and, without giving a thought, caught her in his arms and kissed her on both cheeks.

“Hallo! what’s up?” exclaimed Mr. Watkins, quite scandalized at the performance.

He was seated at a table in front of Annibale Panta- lacci.

“Miss Watkins, I beg your pardon!” stammered Cyprien, surprised at his boldness, but radiant with joy. “I am so happy! I have gone mad with joy. Look! see what I have brought you!” and he threw rather than placed the diamond on the table between the two men.

Like Nathan and Jacobus Vandergaart, they at once recognized it. Mr. Watkins, it being early in the day, was sufficiently sober to take in the matter at a glance.

“You found that — you yourself — in your claim?” exclaimed he.

“Found it!” answered Cyprien, triumphantly. “I did better than that! I made it! Ah, Mr. Watkins, there is some good in chemistry after all!” and he laughed, and he clasped Alice’s delicate hand in his own, and she, surprised at his passionate demonstrations, but delighted at his happiness, stood smiling, as he said, “It is you to whom I owe the discovery! You advised me to return to chemistry. It was your daughter, Mr. Watkins, that made me make artificial diamonds! I render homage to her like the knights to the ladies of old, and proclaim that to her alone belongs the credit of the invention! I should never have dreamed of it without her.”

Watkins and Pantalacci looked at the diamond, then they looked at each other and shook their heads. They were completely bewildered.

“You say you made that — you yourself?” said Watkins. “Then it is a sham!”

“A sham!” exclaimed Cyprien. “Well, yes! a sham! But Jacobus Vandergaart and Nathan value it as worth two millions at the least, and perhaps four! Although it is an artificial diamond, obtained by a process of which I am the inventor, it is none the less perfectly authentic! You see, there is nothing missing — not even the gangue!”

“And you are going to make other diamonds like it?” continued Watkins.

“If I like. I can make them by the bushel, and I can make them ten times — a hundred times — as large as that! I will make enough of them to pave your terrace with — to macadamize the roads of Griqualand with if you wish! It is but the first step that costs. Once the first stone is made, the rest is merely a detail — a simple affair of working certain technical formulae.”

“But if that is so,” gasped the miner, turning ashy pale, “you will ruin all the mine-owners! You will ruin me! You will ruin all Griqualand!”

“Certainly!” replied Cyprien. “Who would go grubbing for little diamonds in the ground when you can manufacture big ones that will give you a fortune in no time?”

“But it is monstrous!” exclaimed Watkins. “It is a shame! it is abominable! If what you say is true, if you really possess this secret — ”

He gasped for breath.

“Well, you see,” said Cyprien coldly, “I am not merely talking about it; I brought you my first specimen, and I think it is big enough to convince you.”

“Well, then,” said Watkins, who had at last recovered his breath, “if it is true — you — you ought to be shot, sir! That is my opinion!”

“And that is mine!” Pantalacci thought proper to add, with a threatening gesture.

Miss Watkins rose, looking very pale.

“Shot, because I have solved a chemical problem that men have been trying for the last fifty years?” answered the engineer, shrugging his shoulders. “That is rather too good!”

“There is nothing to laugh at in it, sir!” replied the furious farmer. “Think of the consequences of what you call your discovery — of all the work in the diggings stopped — of all Griqualand deprived of its glorious industry — of me reduced to beggary!”

“Well, I didn’t think of all that, I admit,” answered Cyprien, very frankly. “That is the inevitable consequence of industrial progress, and pure science cannot stop to worry itself about it! As to you personally, Mr. Watkins, you need not be alarmed. What is mine is yours, and you know very well the motive I had in working out the subject.”

Watkins took the hint, and, as he did not want the Italian to know too much, suddenly shifted his ground. “After all,” he said, “you may be right, and you speak like the plucky fellow you are. Perhaps we may understand each other yet. But why do you want to make a lot of diamonds that will soon make your discovery cheap? Why not carefully keep your secret, use it with moderation, and only make one or two stones like that, so as to raise sufficient capital, and become the richest man in these parts? No one would have anything to say against you, things would go on as they are, and you would not have to run counter to all the respectable people in the neighborhood.”

This was a new view of the question that Cyprien had never dreamed of. There was no mistake about the dilemma; either he must keep his secret, leave the world ignorant of it and abuse it for his own aggrandizement, or, as Watkins very truly said, depreciate at one blow all diamonds, natural and artificial, and consequently renounce the fortune. For what? To ruin every miner in Griqua- land, India, and Brazil!

With the alternative thus placed before him, Cyprien hesitated, but it was only for an instant. He saw that to take the side of sincerity, honor, and fidelity to science was to renounce the very hope that had urged him to the discovery.

The sorrow was as bitter, as poignant as it was unexpected. To fall so suddenly from so sweet a dream!

“Mr. Watkins,” said he, gravely, “if I kept the secret of my discovery to myself I should be an impostor! I should trade with false weights, and deceive the public as to the quality of the goods. The results obtained by the man of science do not belong to him alone; they are part of the patrimony of us all. To keep for himself in his own personal interest the smallest part of it would be to commit as vile an act as a man can do! I will not do it! No; I will not wait a week, nor a day, to give to the public the formula which chance and a little thought put into my power. My only reservation will be to give it first of all to those who sent me here. Tomorrow I will send the secret of my process to the Academy of Sciences. Good-bye, sir; I thank you for having taught me my duty. Miss Watkins, I was merely dreaming;” and before Alice could move to stop him Cyprien had taken up his diamond and gone.

CHAPTER X

JOHN WATKINS THINKS MATTERS OVER

CYPRIEN left the farm, sad at heart but resolved to do his duty. He made his way to Jacobus Vandergaart. He found him alone. Nathan, the broker, had gone off to be the first to spread the news so likely to interest the diggers. The news did not cause so much excitement as might be supposed, for Nathan did not then know that the huge diamond was an artificial one.

Cyprien had come to old Vandergaart to verify the quality and color of the stone before drawing up his report.

“My dear Jacobus,” said he, as he sat down beside him, “first cut a facet on that boss, so that we can see what is underneath.”

“Nothing easier,” said the old lapidary, taking the pebble from him. “You have chosen a capital place,” added he, as he noticed a slight swelling on one of the sides of the gem, which but for it was an almost perfect oval. “We shall risk nothing in cutting it here.”

Without further delay Vandergaart set to work. He took from his wooden bowl a common boort-stone of about four or five carats, and fixed it firmly at the end of a sort of handle. He then began to rub together the exterior surfaces of the two stones.

“We could do it more quickly by cleavage,” said he; “but who would dare to amuse himself by hammering at a gem of this value?”

The task was a long and monotonous one. It took nearly two hours. When the facet was large enough to allow of the nature of the stone being seen it had to be polished on the wheel, and that also took some time.

At last the work was finished, and Cyprien and Van- dergaart, yielding to their curiosity, took up the diamond to see the result.

A beautiful facet of the color of jet, but of matchless limpidity and splendor, revealed itself to their view.

The diamond was black!

But this almost unique peculiarity added to rather than diminished its value.

Vandergaart's hands trembled with emotion as he flashed the facet in the sunshine.

“It is the finest and most curious gem that ever reflected the sunlight,” said he, in a tone of the deepest reverence. “What will it be like when we have cut all its facets so that it can refract the light as well as reflect it?”

“Will you undertake to do it?” asked Cyprien.

“Yes, certainly, my boy, and the honor will be the crowning point of my long career! But perhaps you had better choose a younger and firmer hand than mine.”

“No!” answered Cyprien. “Nobody, I am sure, would do the work more carefully or cleverly than you! Take the diamond and cut it at your leisure; you will make it a masterpiece.”

The old man turned the stone over and over in his fingers, and sat as if hesitating to tell what was passing in his mind.

“One thing troubles me,” he said at length. “The thought of having under my roof a jewel of such value. Here is a couple of millions' worth at the least in the palm of my hand. It is not wise of me to take such a responsibility on myself.”

“None will know of it if you say nothing about it; and, as far as I am concerned, I will not betray your secret.”

“Perhaps. But you can be followed when you come here! Suppose you are? There are queer people about! I shall not sleep quietly!”

“Perhaps you are right,” replied Cyprien, as he understood the old man’s hesitation; “but what is to be done?”

“That is what I am thinking of,” said Vandergaart, and he remained silent for a moment or so.

Then he continued:

“Listen, my dear fellow. What I am going to say is of some delicacy, and presupposes that in me you have absolute confidence. But you know me well enough to see nothing strange in my suggestion. I must leave here at once with my tools and this stone, and get out of the way into some corner where I am not known — in Hope- town or Bloemfontein, for example. I will hire a room and there work in secret, and only return when my work is done. In that way I may perhaps out-manoeuvre these rascals. But, I repeat, I am very shy of proposing such a plan to you — ”

“But it is a very good one,” interrupted Cyprien, “and I shall be very glad if you will start on it.”

“I shall want at least a month, and all sorts of accidents may happen to me on the road.”

“Never mind, if you think it is all right. And after all, if the diamond does go it does not much matter.”

Vandergaart looked at his young friend as if he were horror-stricken. “Has such a stroke of luck bereft him of reason?” asked he of himself.

Cyprien divined his thoughts, and smiled to himself. Then he explained to him whence the diamond had come, and how, if he liked, he could make many more. But the old lapidary — whether it was that he hardly believed the story, or that he did not care to be left alone with a jewel of such price — all the time busied himself in his preparations for starting.

Putting his tools and his clothes in an old leather bag, Vandergaart stuck on his door a notice to the effect that he was “away on business,” put the key in his pocket and the diamond in his waistcoat, and set out.

Cyprien accompanied him for a mile or two on the road to Bloemfontein. It was night when the engineer returned, thinking perhaps more of Miss Watkins than of his wonderful discovery.

However, having done but scant justice to the dinner Mataki had prepared, he sat himself down at his writing- table and began the report he intended to send off by next mail to the Academy of Sciences. It consisted of a detailed account of his experiment, and a highly ingenious theory of the reaction which had given birth to this magnificent carbon crystal.

“Its most remarkable characteristic,” wrote he, “is its complete identity with the natural diamond, and more especially its possession of a gangue.”

And Cyprien did not hesitate to attribute this curious result to the care with which he had coated his apparatus with the earth from Vandergaart Kopje. The mode in which a portion of this earth had detached itself from the rest and formed a coating around the crystal was not very easy to explain, but this was a point on which further experiments would doubtless throw some light. It was possible that he had discovered a new phenomenon of chemical affinity, and he proposed to carefully work out the subject. He did not attempt to commit himself straight off to a complete theory of his discovery. His object was rather to communicate the news without delay to the scientific world, and to invite discussion on these hitherto obscure and unexplained facts.

Having made good progress in his memoir, and advanced it so far that only a few additional observations were required for its completion, he sat down to supper, and then went to bed.

In the morning he went for a walk among the diggings. The greeting he received was hardly as friendly as it might have been but this he did not notice. He had forgotten all the consequences of his grand discovery as unfolded the evening before by John Watkins — that is to say, the ruin sooner or later of the Griqualand claims and their owners. This was enough, however, to make a man uneasy in a semi-civilized country, whose people never hesitated to take the law into their own hands when the whim seized them. If the manufacture of the diamond was to become a trade, the millions invested in the Brazilian as well as the South African mines would irrevocably be lost. Most assuredly the young engineer would have done wisely to have kept his secret. But his resolution had been distinctly declared, and he had decided to act otherwise.

On the other hand, during the night — a night of torpor, during which Watkins dreamed of diamonds by the score, worth millions apiece — Alice's father had had time to consider. And his thoughts ran in this wise.

Nothing could be more natural than that Annibale Pantalacci and the other diggers should view with anger and anxiety the revolution which Cyprien's discovery would effect. But for him, merely as the owner of Watkins' Farm, the situation was somewhat different. If the claims were abandoned owing to the depreciation of the gems, if the whole mining population were to clear out from the Griqualand fields, the value of his farm would seriously diminish, his crops would not find buyers, his houses and huts would not let for want of tenants, and some day he might have to bid farewell to so poor a district "Good," said Watkins to himself, "but some years will have to elapse before then. Diamond-making has not yet reached a practical stage, notwithstanding Mr. Cyprien. There may be a good deal of chance about it. But, chance or not, he has at least made a stone of enormous value, and if a natural diamond is worth so much, an artificial one under such circumstances is worth considerably more! Yes, we must keep our eyes on this young man. At any rate, we must stop him from proclaiming his proceedings on the housetops. The stone must come into our family, and must not leave it unless handsomely paid for. To keep the maker of it is easy enough, even without committing ourselves too deeply. Alice is there, and by means of Alice I can put the stopper on his going to Europe. Yes; I can promise he shall marry her. I can even let him marry her."

Thus thought Watkins. Hither did his avarice lead him. Throughout he thought only of himself, he saw only himself. And if the old egotist gave a thought to his child, it was only to say, “And after all, Alice has nothing to complain of. The young fool is not so bad in his way. He loves her, and I fancy she is not indifferent to him. What can be better than to unite two hearts that have been made for each other — or rather to let them hope for the union, which need not take place until matters have shaped somewhat?”

So reasoned Watkins, pitting his daughter’s happiness against that little piece of crystallized carbon, and expecting he could keep the scales level. And in the morning he had made up his mind. He would see how things turned out, and act accordingly.

In the first place he wished to see his tenant again. Nothing could be easier, for the engineer came to the farm every day. In the second place he longed to gaze once more on the diamond that had assumed such fabulous proportions in his dreams. The second was if anything the greater attraction, and so Watkins strolled down to the laboratory. Cyprien was at home.

“Well, my young friend,” said he, most genially, “and how have you passed the night, the first night after your grand discovery?”

“Very well, Mr. Watkins, very well, thank you,” was the frigid reply.

“What! you went to sleep?”

“I did. As usual.”

“All the millions,” continued Watkins, “all the millions you have been making — did not the thought of them keep you awake?”

“Not at all,” replied Cyprien. “Don’t you see, Mr. Watkins, that the diamond is only worth millions when it is nature’s work. A chemist’s diamond — ”

“Yes, yes, Mr. Cyprien! But are you sure you can make another? — many others?”

Cyprien hesitated. He knew well that in such an experiment something might happen to prevent his attaining a similar result.

“Ah! you twig!” continued Watkins. “You won’t answer. Until you have scored again your diamond will retain its value. Until then, why should you say it is an artificial stone?”

“I repeat, Mr. Watkins, that it is out of my power to retain so important a scientific secret “

“Yes, yes, I know,” continued Watkins, with a gesture to the engineer not to speak so loudly, as people outside might hear him. “We will talk about that. Never you fear Pantalacci and his lot; they won’t tell of you; it is not their interest to do so. Take my word for it. And look here. Alice and I are overjoyed at your success. We are really. Yes! Can I have a look at the diamond? I hardly had time to examine it yesterday. Will you allow me?”

“I haven’t got it now,” answered Cyprien.

“You have sent it to France!” exclaimed Watkins aghast at the thought.

“No, not yet. In its rough state no one could judge of its beauty.”

“Who have you given it to, then?”

“I gave it to Jacobus Vandergaart to cut, and I have not the slightest idea where he has gone to with it.”

“You trusted a diamond like that to that old lunatic!” exclaimed Watkins, perfectly furious. “You must be mad, sir! stark, staring mad, sir!”

“Bosh!” answered Cyprien. “What does it matter what Vandergaart does with it? How could he get rid of a stone worth so many millions? Do you think he could sell it on the quiet?”

Watkins seemed struck with the argument. It would evidently be rather a difficult matter to dispose of so valuable a stone. Nevertheless, the farmer was uneasy, and he would have given a good deal to prevent Cyprien handing over the jewel to the old lapidary, or rather to make the old lapidary bring it back again immediately.

But Vandergaart had demanded a month, and the impatient Watkins had to wait.

Of course his cronies, Pantalacci, Friedel, and their companions, said all they could against the character of the honest old lapidary. In Cyprien’s absence they had a good deal to say about him, and invariably remarked to Watkins that the month was nearly up and no Vandergaart had put in an appearance.

“And why,” said Friedel, “should he return to Griqua- land? Why shouldn’t he keep the diamond of large value whose artificial origin is nowhere shown?”

“Because he would never find a buyer,” answered Watkins, reproducing Cyprien’s argument.

“That is a fine reason!”

“A very fine reason,” said Pantalacci. “And believe me, at this very moment the old crocodile is hundreds of miles away. Nothing could be easier than to doctor the stone so as to make it unrecognizable. You don’t even know what its color is! What is to hinder him from cutting it into five or six pieces and making a batch of good-sized stones?”

Greatly was the soul ‘ of Watkins troubled by these discussions. He began to think that Vandergaart would never come back. Cyprien alone believed in the old man’s honesty, and declared that he would return on the day he had said. He was right.

Vandergaart returned twenty-four hours before his time. Such had been his diligence, and so well had he worked, that in twenty-seven days he had cut the stone. He came back during the night to polish it on the wheel, worked at it till he had done, and in the morning of the twenty-ninth day Cyprien beheld him enter the door of the laboratory.

“There is your pebble,” was all that the old lapidary said as he placed a small wooden box on the table.

Cyprien opened the box and stood dazzled and motionless. On a pad of white cotton wool lay an enormous black crystal of the shape of a rhomboidal dodecahedron. From it streamed forth prismatic fires of such brilliancy as to light up the whole laboratory. The combination of ink-like color with absolutely perfect adamantine transparency and wondrous refractive power gave the most startling results conceivable.

It seemed as though he was in the presence of some unique phenomenon, of some unprecedented freak of nature. All idea of value apart, the splendor of the jewel was something to marvel at.

“It is not only the largest, it is the most beautiful diamond in the world,” said Vandergaart, with great gravity and in a tone of paternal pride. “It weighs four hundred and thirty-two carats! You have made something to be proud of, my friend. Your prentice hand has made a masterpiece.”

Cyprien gave no reply to the old lapidary’s compliments. In his own eyes he was but the author of a curious discovery, nothing more. Many others in the chemical field had failed where he had succeeded, it is true. But what use to humanity would be this manufacture of artificial diamonds? In the future it would inevitably ruin all who earn their living by trading in precious stones, and would enrich nobody.

Then he thought of his elation during the first few hours after his discovery. Now the diamond, beautiful as it had come from Vandergaart’s hands, appeared to him but as a worthless stone, to which even the prestige of rarity would not long remain.

Cyprien closed the box, and shaking hands with his old friend, hastened off to Watkins Farm.

The farmer was in the lower room, anxious and uneasy, and thinking of the doubtful chance of Vandergaart’s returning. His daughter was with him doing her best to allay his suspicions.

Cyprien opened the door and stood for an instant on the threshold.

“Well?” asked Watkins sharply, as he suddenly rose from his chair.

“Well, honest Jacobus Vandergaart came back this morning,” answered Cyprien.

“With the diamond?”

“With the diamond beautifully cut, and it even now weighs four hundred and thirty-two carats.”

“Four hundred and thirty-two carats!” exclaimed Watkins. “And you have brought it with you?”

“Here it is.”

The farmer took the box. He opened it, and his eyes sparkled almost as much as the diamond he looked at. Then when his fingers were allowed to close on the splendid crystal, he was so carried away with the thoughts of its colossal value that his excitement became quite laughable.

Tears came into his eyes, and he spoke to the gem as if it were some cherished friend.

“Oh! You love! You superb, you splendid stone! Here you are back again, my beauty! You are magnificent! You are a weight! How much are you worth in golden sovereigns? What shall we do with you, my darling? Send you to the Cape and on to London to be seen and admired? But who will be rich enough to buy you? The Queen herself could not afford so great a luxury! You would take two or three years of her income! She would want a Parliamentary vote! A national subscription! And they’ll do it, never fear! And you’ll go to the Tower of London and sleep by the Kohinoor, who is but a very little chap by the side of you. What are we to value you at, my pet?”

And then, betaking himself to his mental arithmetic, he continued :

“For the Czar’s diamond Catherine II. paid a million roubles and an annuity of four thousand pounds. Surely you are worth a million sterling, cash down, and twenty thousand a year for ever afterward.”

Then, struck with the sudden idea:

“Should not the owner of such a jewel be raised to the peerage? Look here, Alice! Two eyes are not enough to admire this with!”

For the first time in her life Miss Watkins looked at a diamond with some interest.

“It is really very beautiful. It glows like the piece of carbon that it is, but like the carbon when it is alight,” said she, as she carefully picked it up.

Then, by an instinctive movement, that every girl in her place would have had, she turned to the looking-glass and held the jewel to her forehead.

“A star set in gold!” said Cyprien gallantly.

“True. We’ll call it a star!” exclaimed Alice. “Let us christen it the %S%t%a%r% %o%f% %t%h%e% %S%o%u%t%h%.% What do you say, Mr. Cyprien? Is it not as black as our native beauties and as brilliant as the constellations of our southern sky?”

“Never mind the Star of the South,” said Watkins, who attached but little importance to a name, “but take care you don’t drop it, it will break like glass.”

“Indeed! Is it as fragile as that?” answered Alice, scornfully replacing the gem in its box. “Poor star! you are only a mockery — a vulgar bottle-stopper!”

“A bottle-stopper!” exclaimed Watkins, almost choked with horror. “You young people respect nothing!”

“Miss Alice,” said the engineer, “it was you who encouraged me to take up artificial diamond-making. It is owing to you that this stone now exists; and your father will allow me, I hope, to offer it to you in remembrance of your happy influence on my work!”

“What!” exclaimed the farmer unable to hide his delight at so unexpected an offer.

“Alice.” continued Cyprien, “the diamond is yours. If you will accept it, I give it!” and Miss Watkins, as her only reply, held out her hand to him, and he gently clasped it in his own.

CHAPTER XI

THE STAR DISAPPEARS

THE news of Vandergaart’s return promptly spread. Visitors to the farm soon began to arrive in crowds to gaze upon the wonder of the kopje. They were not long in learning that the diamond belonged to Miss Watkins, and that her father was its real owner. Hence a considerable increase in the public excitement.

It may be mentioned that the artificial origin of the stone had been kept veiy quiet. The Griqualand miners were not so ill-advised as to noise abroad a secret that might ruin them. And Cyprien, unwilling to trust to chance, had made up his mind to say nothing and to keep back his memoir until by a second experiment he had verified his facts. What he had done once he wished to be sure he could do again.

Public curiosity, then, was highly excited, and John Watkins could not with decency decline to gratify it. Greatly was his vanity flattered. He laid the Star on a pad of cotton wool, and placed it on the top of a small white marble column in the center of the mantelpiece in his parlor. There the whole day long did he remain seated in his arm-chair, admiring the incomparable jewel and exhibiting it to the public view.

James Hilton was the first to throw out a hint as to the imprudence of these proceedings. Had Watkins thought of the danger he was running in exhibiting to all comers a gem of such value? Ought he not immediately to send off to Kimberley for a special police guard? That very night, perhaps, might not pass without something occurring.

Watkins was rather scared at these warnings. He hastened to follow the judicious advice, and breathed very much more freely when toward evening a squadron of mounted police put in an appearance. These twenty-five men were put up in the outhouses of the farm.

.The crowds could not but increase during the following days, and the fame of the Star of the South extended beyond the boundaries of the district to the most distant towns. The colonial journals devoted article upon article to its dimensions, its figure, its color, and its brilliancy.

The telegraph cable from Durban carried its details by way of Zanzibar and Aden to Europe and Asia, and on to America and Australasia. Photographers begged to be allowed to take the portrait of the marvelous gem; special artists came from the illustrated journals to reproduce its image; in fact, the event became of world-wide celebrity.

And of course legend began to weave its web round the stone. Stories began to circulate among the miners of its mysterious properties. With bated breath they told how a black stone must necessarily bring bad luck. Practical men shook their heads, and vowed they would rather Watkins had the stone than they. In short, calumny, without which celebrity cannot exist, did its unenviable duty with the Star of South, and the Star very naturally was in no way troubled thereby, but continued to pour forth its brilliant rays on its obscure detractors.

Watkins, however, was much more sensitive to them. The gossip exasperated him. It seemed as though it depreciated the value of the stone, and he resented it as a personal insult. When the governor of the colony, the officers of the neighboring garrisons, the magistrates and all the high functionaries had done homage to his jewel, it seemed to him that such depreciatory comment was little less than sacrilege.

To create a reaction against this silly trash and to gratify his weakness for the pleasures of the table he resolved to give a grand banquet in honor of his cherished diamond, which, notwithstanding what Cyprien had said and Alice wished, he still dreamed of converting into coin.

Such, alas! is the influence of the stomach on the feelings of many men, that the mere announcement of the dinner effected quite a revolution in the opinion of Vandergaart Kopje. Those who had been most conspicuous in maligning the Star now changed their game, and confessed that after all the stone was innocent of the noxious influences they had ascribed to it, and that an invitation from Mr. Watkins would be thankfully received.

Long will the fame of that dinner continue. Eighty guests sat down in a tent pitched along one side of the parlor, the wall of which had been removed for the occasion. A baron of beef occupied the center of the table, and around it were samples of all the game in the district. Mountains of vegetables and fruit, and gallons of beer and wine, were the chief features of this truly pantagruelian repast.

The Star of the South, placed on its pedestal and begirt with lighted candles, presided behind John Watkins, at the festival given in its honor.

Twenty Kaffirs officiated as waiters under the directions of Mataki, who was loaned by his master for the occasion.

Besides the police, of whose services Mr. Watkins thus showed his appreciation, there were present all the chief personages of the camp and its neighborhood. Mathys Pretorius was there, and so were Nathan, James Hilton, Pantalacci, Friedel, Steel, and fifty others.

And even the dogs — and, above all, the ostriches — took part in the festivities and came in to beg during the meal.

Alice took the end of the table opposite to her father, and did the honors with her accustomed grace, but not without secret chagrin, for neither Cyprien nor Vandergaart was present, and she well knew the motives of their abstention.

The engineer had from the first avoided as much as possible the society of Friedel, Pantalacci, and their particular friends; and now, since his discovery, he was well aware of their anything but good wishes toward him, and even of their threats against the inventor of the process that would eventually ruin them. He therefore excused himself from appearing at the dinner. To Vandergaart, Watkins had made the most urgent offers of reconciliation, but the old lapidary had rejected them with scorn.

The banquet approached its end. Thanks to Alice's presence, the boisterous spirits of the diners had been happily somewhat restrained. Watkins arose, rested both hands on the tablecloth, and began the speech of the occasion.

"This day," he said, "is the greatest day of my colonial life. After the trials and struggles of my youth, to see myself here in wealthy Griqualand, surrounded by eighty friends assembled to do honor to the greatest diamond in the world, is a pleasure I shall never forget. It is true that tomorrow one of our honorable friends may find a bigger stone. That is the beauty and poetry of a digger's life! (Cheers.) I wish you may have such luck! (Laughter and cheers.) I do not hesitate to affirm that it would be difficult to satisfy the man who in my place would not declare himself satisfied. But to conclude, I invite you all to drink to the prosperity of Griqualand and a rising diamond market — notwithstanding all that may have happened —

and a happy voyage to the Star of the South down the country, around the Cape, and home, I hope, to England.”

“But,” said Steel, “won’t there be some danger in sending a stone of such value down to the Cape?”

“Oh, it will be strongly escorted!” replied Watkins. “Lots of diamonds have gone the same road in safety.”

“Even that of Durieux de Sancy,” said Alice; “although, had it not been for the servant’s devotion — ”

“Eh!” said Hilton; “what was that?”

“The anecdote runs,” said Alice, “that De Sancy was a French gentleman of the Court of Henry III. He owned a famous diamond, still called after him. The diamond had already been through some remarkable adventures. It had belonged to Charles the Bold, and he was wearing it when he was killed under the walls of Nancy. A Swiss soldier found it on the Duke of Burgundy’s corpse, and sold it for a florin to a poor priest, who parted with it for five or six florins to a Jew. At the time it belonged to De Sancy the royal treasury was in difficulties, and he consented to put the stone in pawn to raise funds for the king. The money-lender at the time was at Metz, and De Sancy entrusted the jewel to one of his servants to take it there. ‘Are you not afraid that the man will run away with it to England?’ people asked. T am sure of him!’ was the answer. In spite of this assurance neither the man nor the diamond arrived at Metz, and the court made great fun of De Sancy. T am sure of my servant,’ he persisted. ‘He must have been assassinated!’ And in fact, when a search was made, the man’s body was found in a ditch by the roadside. ‘Cut him open!’ said De Sancy; ‘the diamond ought to be in his stomach!’ They did as he ordered, and it was found to be so. The humble hero, whose name is unknown to history, had been faithful to death to his duty and honor, ‘outshining,’ as the old chronicler says, ‘by the splendor of his deeds the splendor of the jewel he carried!’ I shall be very much surprised,” said Alice, as she concluded her story, “if the Star of the South does not inspire some similar instance of devotion during its travels.”

The sentiment was received with loud acclamation, eighty arms lifted high an equal number of glasses, and all eyes turned instinctively to the mantelpiece to render homage to the incomparable gem.

The Star had disappeared!

The astonishment on the eighty faces was so manifest that the host turned sharply around to see what was the matter.

He fell back in his chair as if thunderstruck.

They crowded around him, loosened his cravat, dashed cold water over his face — and he soon came to.

“The diamond!” he roared. “The diamond! Who has taken the diamond?”

“See that no one leaves the room,” said the chief of the police, ordering his men to the doors.

The guests looked at each other in dismay, or spoke in whispers. Not five minutes before all of them saw, or thought they saw, the diamond in its place.

“I propose we shall all be searched before we leave the room,” said Steel with his usual frankness.

“Yes! yes!” replied the company, seemingly unanimous.

The suggestion gave Watkins a ray of hope.

The police officer drew up the guests along one side of the room and began to search himself to begin with. He turned out his pockets, took off his boots, and patted his clothes in the customary professional manner. Then he proceeded to search the guests in similar fashion, and then one by one they passed before him and were subjected to a more minute examination.

The investigation produced no result.

Every nook and cranny in the place was then carefully pried into. Not a trace of the diamond was discovered.

“There are the Kaffirs who were waiting on us!” said the police officer, who did not yet like to own himself defeated.

“That is so!” was the reply. “The Kaffirs are quite thieves enough to have done it!”

The waiters had, however, gone out just as Watkins began his speech, and were now grouped around a fire outside, making merry with the scraps of the meal that had been reserved for them. Their guitars made out of calabashes, flutes blown by the nose, and tom-toms of different kinds, had already commenced that deafening cacophony which precedes the musical manifestations of the natives of South Africa. The Kaffirs hardly knew what to make of it when they were brought back and searched in their scanty garments. And the search was as useless as all that had gone before.

“If the thief is one of the Kaffirs — and he ought to be — he has had quite time enough to clear off,” remarked one of the guests, very sensibly.

“That is so,” said the police officer; “and there is perhaps only one way of finding him out, and that is to apply to one of the native medicine-men. That might succeed — ”

“If you will let me,” said Mataki, “I will try.”

The offer was immediately accepted. The guests formed a circle around the natives, and Alataki, thoroughly accustomed to the work, began the ceremony.

He first breathed upon two or three pinches of tobacco, which he took from his pouch, and said :

“I will now try the wands.”

He then stepped to a neighboring bush and cut off a score of twigs. These he measured very carefully and cut them all down to the same length of about twelve inches. Then he distributed them one to each Kaffir, keeping one for himself.

“Now you can go away where you like for a quarter of an hour,” said he, in a solemn tone, “and you will come back when you hear the tom-tom! If one of you is the thief his wand will be three inches longer than the rest.”

The Kaffirs dispersed visibly affected by this little speech, knowing well that according to the summary proceedings of Griqualand justice they could be tried and hanged in a few minutes without a word being heard in their defense.

The guests, who had been much interested in the scene, were naturally impressed by it according to their different dispositions.

“The thief need not come back at all,” objected one.

“Well, then, that would show who -was the thief,” replied another.

“What bosh! He can easily do Mataki by cutting off three inches, so as to counterbalance the lengthening he is afraid of.”

“That is what the medicine-man is hoping for, perhaps, so as to catch him on the hop.”

However, the quarter of an hour elapsed, and Mataki beat the tom-tom and called in his compatriots. They all returned and handed back their sticks, Mataki formed a bundle of them, and found them all of the same length. He was going to put them on one side and declare that the honor of his friends was cleared, when he bethought him of measuring the bundle with the stick he had retained for himself.

He did so, and all the sticks in it were three inches short!

The Kaffirs had judged it best to provide against the lengthening, which, to their superstitious minds, was far from improbable.

A general shout of laughter saluted this unexpected result. Mataki seemed quite humiliated that this method whose efficacy he had frequently proved in his kraal, should turn out a failure in civilized life.

“We must give it up for the present,” said the police officer to Watkins, who was seated in his arm-chair, plunged in despair. “We may do better tomorrow if we offer a good reward for information that may put us on the track of the thief.”

“The thief!” exclaimed Pantalacci. “And why should he not be the man who was trying his comrades just now?”

“What do you say?” asked the officer.

“Why, Mataki, who played the medicine-man to divert your suspicions.”

Had Mataki been noticed at this moment he would have been seen to make a curious grimace and hurriedly leave the room and run inside his hut.

“Yes,” continued the Italian, “he was with his companions waiting on us during the dinner. He is a thorough cheating scoundrel, and why Mr. Cyprien has taken a fancy to him no one can make out.”

“Mataki is honest; I will answer for that,” said Miss Watkins, eager to defend Cyprien’s servant.

“Eh! How do you know?” exclaimed the farmer. “Yes, he is quite capable of laying hands on the Star!”

“He cannot be far off,” said the police officer. “We can soon search him.”

An instant later Mr. Watkins and his guests were at Mataki’s hut. The door was fastened. It was broken in. Mataki was not there, and they waited for him in vain throughout the night.

Nor did he come back next morning, and it seemed certain that he had fled from Vandergaart Kopje.

CHAPTER XII

MAKING READY

IN the morning, when Cyprien learned what had happened at the banquet, the first thing he did was to strenuously object to the serious charge brought against his servant. He agreed with Alice that Mataki could not be such a thief as was supposed. In fact he would rather have suspected Pantalacci and his companions who seemed to him very much more suspicious characters.

It was not likely, however, that a white man was the guilty party. To those who knew nothing of its origin, the Star of the South was a natural diamond, and consequently of such value that the getting rid of it would be difficult.

“All the same,” said Cyprien, “it cannot possibly be Mataki.”

But then he suddenly remembered certain petty larcenies of which the man had been guilty. In spite of all his master’s warning, the Kaffir had never been able to cure himself of his objectionable habits. What he had taken was, it is true, almost valueless, but still the tendency shown could not but tell against him in any judicial investigation.

And there were other things in favor of the presumption. There was his presence in the dining-room when the diamond was eclipsed as if by magic. There was his not having been found in his hut.

And then there was his flight.

For he had certainly left the district, and Cyprien waited in vain during the morning for Mataki to reappear. He could not believe in his servant’s guilt;

but his servant did not return. And further examination showed that sundry objects and utensils such as a man would take with him for a journey across the African desert had also gone. There was no further room for doubt. Guilty or not guilty, the Kaffir had fled.

About ten o'clock the engineer, very much more grieved at the conduct of Mataki than at the loss of the diamond, called at Watkins Farm.

There he found the farmer in conference with Pantalacci, Hilton, and Friedel. As he presented himself, Alice, who had seen him coming, also entered the room where her father and his three cronies were noisily discussing what to do to recover the stolen diamond.

"We must follow Mataki!" exclaimed Watkins angrily. "We must get hold of him, and if the diamond is not handed over, we must rip him open to see if he has swallowed it! Ah, my lass, it was a capital notion of yours to tell us that story yesterday!"

"But," said Cyprien, in a quiet tone, anything but pleasing to the farmer, "to swallow a stone of that size Mataki would have to have a stomach like an ostrich!"

"A Kaffir's stomach is capable of anything, Mr. Cyprien," replied Watkins. "And if you think there is anything to laugh at — "

"I did not laugh, Mr. Watkins," said Cyprien seriously. "But if I am sorry about the diamond, it is only because you allowed me to give it to Miss Watkins."

"I am just as grateful for it," said Alice, "as if I still had it."

“There’s a woman’s head for you!” exclaimed the farmer. “Just as grateful as if she still had it — a diamond whose equal exists not in the world!”

“Well, it is not quite the same thing,” said Hilton.

“Not quite!” added Friedel.

“On the contrary, it is the same thing!” answered Cyprien. “For as I made that diamond I can make another.”

“Oh, Mr. Engineer!” said Pantalacci, with a threatening look. “I should advise you not to try another experiment — in the interest of Griqualand — and of yourself!”

“Really?” replied Cyprien. “I am not aware that I had to ask your permission in the matter.”

“Don’t let us talk about that,” said Watkins. “Is Mr. Cyprien sure that he will succeed in a second attempt? Can he guarantee that the second diamond he makes will have the color, the weight, and consequently the value of the first? Can he even undertake to make a second stone, even of inferior value? Has not his success been due in a great measure to chance?”

The engineer could not but be struck with the reasonableness of these questions. His experiences were quite in accord with the teachings and practice of modern chemistry, but had not chance come in to make him succeed? And if he tried again, could he be certain of a triumph?

It was important then that the thief should be captured and the diamond recovered.

“By-the-bye, have you found any trace of Mataki?”

“None,” answered Cyprien.

“Have they searched the neighborhood?”

“Yes, and searched it well!” replied Friedel.

“The scoundrel probably cleared off during the night, and it is almost impossible to know where he has gone!”

“Has the police officer taken the matter in hand?” asked Watkins.

“Yes,” answered Cyprien, “and he has found no trace at present.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the farmer, “I will give five hundred pounds for him if they can catch him.”

“Very likely, Mr. Watkins,” said Pantalacci. “But I am afraid you will never see the diamond, nor the man who took it.”

“Why not?”

“Because once he has got a start,” replied the Italian, “he will never be fool enough to stop on the road. He will cross the Limpopo, plunge into the desert, and make for the Zambesi or Tanganyika, or go among the Bushmen if he thinks better.”

Did the astute Neapolitan really think what he said? Was he not speaking thus to prevent any pursuit of Mataki, in order that he mi Jit undertake it alone? Thus thought Cyprien as he watched him narrowly.

But Watkins was not the man to give up the game because it was difficult to play. He would have sacrificed his entire fortune to get back the incomparable stone, and through the open window his eyes in their angry impatience seemed to gleam across the green slopes of the Vaal as if he hoped to find the fugitive on the horizon.

“What does that matter? I must have my diamond! I must catch this scoundrel! If I hadn’t the gout it wouldn’t take long, I tell you!”

“Father!” said Alice, trying to soothe him.

“Look here! what do you want for your trouble?” asked the farmer, looking around him. “Who’ll go after the nigger? I’ll make it worth your while.”

And as nobody spoke he continued :

“You four want to marry my daughter! Well, catch me the man who stole my diamond” — he now called it %”%m%y% %diamond” — ”and I give you my word that the man who does so shall marry her.” . “Done!” exclaimed Hilton.

“Agreed!” said Friedel.

“Who would not endeavor to win so precious a prize?” simpered Pantalacci.

Alice blushed deeply and vainly endeavored to hide her confusion, ashamed at seeing herself thus put up to auction, and that in the presence of the young engineer.

“Miss Watkins,” said Cyprien in a low tone, and leaning respectfully toward her, “I should like to try my fortune in this, but have I your permission?”

“You have, and my best wishes, Mr. Cyprien!”

“Then I am ready to go to the end of the world!” exclaimed Cyprien, turning toward Mr. Watkins.

“You won’t be far out,” said Pantalacci, “for Mataki will lead you a nice dance. By tomorrow he ought to be at Potchefstroom, and he will have reached the hills before we have left our diggings.”

“And what prevents our starting immediately?” said Cyprien.

“You can go if you like.” replied the Italian. “But for my part I want some food with me — a wagon, a dozen oxen, and a couple of saddle-horses at the very least. And we cannot get that nearer than Potchefstroom.”

Again, was Pantalacci speaking seriously? Was it his object to discourage his rivals? Perhaps; but he was nevertheless quite right. Without such means of locomotion, without such resources, it would be folly to attempt a journey in Northern Griqualand.

But a team of oxen, as Cyprien knew, would cost about four hundred pounds, and he had only one hundred and sixty.

“An idea!” shouted Hilton, who, as an “Africander” of Scottish descent, had a strong vein of economy in his disposition. “Why shouldn’t we four go partners? The chances would be more equal, and the cost would be much less.”

“That seems reasonable,” said Friedel.

“I agree,” answered Cyprien.

“Then,” remarked Pantalacci, “it must be understood that each man retains his independence, and is free to leave his companions whenever he thinks fit.”

“Of course,” replied Hilton. “We club together to buy the wagon, the team, and the provender, but we can each leave when we please.”

“Agreed,” said Cyprien, Friedel, and Pantalacci.

“When will you start?” asked Watkins, whose chance of recovering his diamond was thus quadrupled.

“Tomorrow, by the coach to Potchefstroom,” answered Friedel; “there’s no good thinking of getting there earlier.” “Right!”

As soon as this was settled, Alice took Cyprien apart, and asked him if he really believed that Mataki was the author of the theft.

“I am forced to confess,” answered the engineer, “that all the presumptions arc against him, chiefly on account of his flight. But I feel sure that Pantalacci has some interest in spinning things out as long as he can in regard to it. What a partner to work with! Well, all is fair in war. It is better to keep him in hand, and I can watch his movements more easily than by letting him go off by himself.”

The four suitors soon bade farewell to Watkins and his daughter. As was only natural under the circumstances, the ceremony was a brief one, and consisted merely of a shake of the hand. What could the rivals say in thus going off together, each wishing the other at the bottom of the sea?

When he reached home, Cyprien found Li and Bardik. The young Kaffir, since he had entered his service, had done his work most zealously. He and the Chinaman were having a quiet chat together, when the young engineer announced that he was going away with Friedel, Hilton, and the Neapolitan in chase of Mataki.

A look passed between them — only one. Then, without an allusion to the fugitive, they came up to Cyprien and said :

“Pa. take us with you.”

“Take you with me? And why?”

“To do your cooking,” said Bardik.

“To do your washing,” said Li.

“And to stop the rascals from doing you harm,” said both, in chorus.

Cyprien gave them a keen glance.

“Very well,” he replied, “I will take you both, if you wish it.”

Then he went out to bid good-bye to Vandergaart, who, without showing approval or disapproval of the expedition, shook him cordially by the hand and wished him success.

In the morning, as, followed by his two men, he walked down to the camp to join the coach for Potchefstroom, he lifted his eyes to Watkins Farm, which was still wrapped in sleep.

Was it an illusion? He thought he recognized behind the muslin curtain of one of the windows a slight, girlish form waving a hand in token of farewell.

CHAPTER XIII

ACROSS THE TRANSVAAL

ON arriving at Potchefstroom, the four travelers ascertained that a young Kaffir, whose description tallied with that of Mataki, had passed through there the evening before. This promised well for the success of the expedition. But it seemed as though the enterprise would take some time, as the fugitive had provided himself with a light carriage drawn by an ostrich, and thus rendered it no easy matter to catch him.

For there are few better goers than these birds, either on the score of endurance or speed. Ostriches of burden, however, are somewhat rare, owing to the difficulty in breaking them in. Hence neither Cyprien nor his companions could obtain any at Potchefstroom, and Mataki was off to the north with a good start and an animal that could put a dozen horses on their mettle.

The only thing left was to follow him as quickly as possible. He had a great advantage in his superior speed as against that obtainable from the mode of locomotion his pursuers intended to adopt. But the strength of the ostrich has its limits. Mataki would be obliged to halt for a time, and if the worst came to the worst, was sure to be caught at the end of his journey.

Cyprien soon had cause to congratulate himself on having brought Li and Bardik with him, when he set about procuring his outfit. It was no easy matter to select only such articles as were useful and necessary. There is no guide like experience. Cyprien was an excellent hand at the calculus, but of the A B C of Veld life, of life “on trek,” he knew nothing. And his companions, instead of helping him with their advice, showed rather a tendency to lead him astray.

As far as the tilted wagon, the team of oxen, and the bulk of the commissariat were concerned, there was no difficulty. Mutual interest commanded that these should be judiciously chosen, and Hilton acquitted himself to perfection. But it was not so with matters that were left to individual choice, such, for example, as buying a horse.

Cyprien had noticed in the market a good-looking three-year-old, whose price was not excessive. He had tried his seat, found it suited him, and was about to hand over the money, when Bardik took him aside, and said:

“Are you going to buy that horse?”

“Yes. It is the best I can find at the price.”

“It is not worth having as a gift,” answered the Kaffir. It won’t stand a week’s travel.”

“Why not? Are you trying the medicine-man business?”

“No, Pa; but Bardik knows the desert, and says that that horse is not salted.”

“Not salted? Do you want me then to buy a horse in a cask?”

“No, Pa; but it means that he has not had the Veld disease. He must have it soon, and then if it does not kill him, it will make him useless.”

“Oh!” said Cyprien, thinking there was something in the caution after all. “What is the disease?”

“A burning fever and a cough,” said Bardik. “You must not buy a horse that has not had it. You can easily see those that have — and once they have had it, they very seldom catch it again.”

There was no excuse for hesitation under such circumstances. Cyprien postponed matters, and went in search of further information. Everybody he asked confirmed what he had heard from Bardik. The fact was so notorious that it was seldom mentioned.

Having been put on his guard, the engineer became more prudent, and betook himself to a veterinary surgeon. Thanks to his guidance, he in a few hours secured the very mount most suitable for his purpose, in the shape of an old gray horse consisting of nothing but skin and bone, and only possessing a fragment of tail. That he had been "salted" was obvious enough from his appearance; and, although his trot was rather stilted, he was evidently a good one to go, if a poor one to look at. Templar — such was his name — enjoyed quite a reputation in the country for endurance, and when Bardik had inspected him — for the Kaffir was of course consulted — he declared himself thoroughly satisfied.

Bardik himself was specially entrusted with the management of the wagon and the team, and therein had considerable assistance from Li. No mounts had to be bought for them, and Cyprien's horse-dealing terminated with his paying for his own steed.

Another difficult matter was the selection of the battery. Cyprien at last decided on a Martini-Henry and a Remington, which, though not very elegant in appearance, was a straight shooter and a rapid loader. One thing he would not have thought of, had the Chinaman not suggested it to him, and that was a stock of explosive bullets. He had imagined that five or six hundred cartridges would be sufficient, and was greatly surprised to find that four thousand was the minimum prudence demanded in this land of wild beasts and savage men.

Cyprien also purchased a couple of revolvers with ex-, plosive bullets, and completed his armament by securing a superb hunting-knife, which for five years had hung in the window of the gun-maker at Potchefstroom without any inquiry being made for it.

It was now bought to please Li, he having assured Cyprien that nothing would turn out more useful than this knife, and the trouble he afterward took in sharpening and polishing it, showed that confidence in the cold steel which he shared with the rest of his race.

Of course the famous red box went with the careful Chinaman. In it he stowed away, with other mysterious articles, about sixty yards of fine strong line. When he was asked what it was for, he replied, evasively:

“Have not your clothes got to be dried in the bush a? well as anywhere else?”

In twelve hours the purchases were all made. Waterproofs, wrappers, cooking utensils, tinned provisions, yokes, chains, spare harness, were stowed at the back of the wagon, and formed the basis of the general store. The front of the wagon was littered with straw, and served as the bedroom and shelter for Cyprien and his companions.

Hilton had done his part of the work thoroughly well, and seemed to have omitted nothing they were likely to require. He was very vain of his colonial experience, and to show his superiority, rather than from any feeling of friendliness, favored his companions with a good deal of information on the customs of the Veld.

At last Pantalacci interrupted with :

“What makes you want to tell the Frenchman all that? Do you want to see him win the prize? If I were you, I would keep all I knew to myself.”

Hilton regarded the Italian with sincere admiration.

“That is a good notion of yours. Such an idea would not have occurred to me.”

Cyprien had honestly told Friedel what he had learned about the horses of the country, but to no purpose. The German thought no one knew anything but himself, and bought the youngest and most fiery steed he could — the very one that Cyprien had refused. He also laid in a stock of fishing-tackle, asserting that there would be no lack of sport.

The preparations were finished at last, and the caravan formed up in the order it was to keep on the march.

The wagon, drawn by a dozen red and black oxen, went first, in charge of Bardik. Sometimes the Kaffir, whip in hand, walked by the side of his team; sometimes he took his seat in the front of the chariot, where, regardless of the jolting, he sat in triumph, enchanted with his mode of locomotion. The four horsemen formed the front and rear guards, except at such times as they separated to shoot a little game, or make a reconnaissance.

After a very brief consultation it had been decided to make for the source of the Limpopo. All advices tended to show that Mataki was following this road — and, in fact, he could not well take another, if his intention was to get as far from the British possessions as soon as he could. The Kaffir had an advantage over his pursuers in his perfect knowledge of the country, and the lightness of his equipage. He obviously knew where he was going, and the best road to take thither, and, thanks to his friends in the north, he was sure of welcome and shelter, and even help, if he wished it. There was, indeed, a chance that he might raise his tribe and turn to bay on those who were chasing him. Cyprien and his comrades were fully aware of this, and appreciated the need of their traveling together for their mutual safety and ultimate success.

The Transvaal, which they intended to cross from south to north, is that vast region of Equatorial Africa lying between the Vaal and the Limpopo. Geographically, it is divided into three regions — the table-land, or Hooge Veld; the hill country, or Banken Veld; and the Bush Veld.

The table-land is the most southerly; it is formed by the mountain chains which extend westward and southward from the Drakenberg. It is the mining country of the Transvaal, and the climate is as cold and as dry as that of the Bernese Oberland.

The Banken Veld is more particularly the agricultural district. Extending along the north of the Hooge Veld, its deep valleys, drained by pleasant watercourses, and shaded by evergreen trees, are inhabited by the descendants of the Dutch.

The Bush Veld — the hunting-ground of the Transvaal — comprises the wide, rolling plains stretching up to the banks of the Limpopo toward the north, and to Be- chuanaland toward the east.

Leaving Potchefstroom in the Banken Veld, they had to cross diagonally nearly the whole of it before reaching the Bush Veld. This first part of the Transvaal offered few difficulties to their progress. They were still in a half-civilized country. The worst that could happen was a wheel stuck fast in the mud, or a sick ox. Wild ducks, partridges, and antelopes abounded, and each day furnished an ample breakfast or dinner. The night was spent at some farm, whose inhabitants, isolated from the rest of the world for three-quarters of the year, were sincerely glad to receive their guests.

At almost every farm they stopped at, they heard news of Mataki. Everywhere he had been seen to pass in his ostrich carriage; at first, two or three days in advance, then five or six, then seven or eight. Evidently they were on his track, but evidently also he was gaining rapidly on his pursuers, who, however, felt sure of catching him at last.

Cyprien and his three companions began to take things easy, and to amuse themselves in their special ways. The engineer made a collection of rock specimens, the German botanized, Pantalacci tormented Bardik and Li, and atoned for his buffoonery by making delicious dishes of macaroni at every halt. Hilton's business was to keep the caravan provisioned with game, and hardly a day passed in which he did not bring down his six brace of partridges, his score of quails, and occasionally a wild boar or an antelope.

By easy stages they reached the Bush Veld. The farms became fewer, and at last disappeared altogether. The travelers were on the extreme verge of civilization. Henceforth they had to camp out at nights; huge fires had to be lighted for men and cattle to sleep around, and a constant watch had to be kept.

The country became wilder. Stretches of yellow sand, clumps of thorn-bushes, and at long intervals a marshy stream or so, took the place of the green valleys of the Banken Veld. Now and then the underwood was so thick and thorny that, instead of keeping on its straight course the caravan had to go some distance around. The thorn- trees were from nine to fifteen feet high, with numerous branches spread out almost horizontally, and armed with spines from two to four inches in length, as hard and sharp as daggers.

This outer zone of the Bush Veld is generally known as the Lion Veld, but it hardly seemed to justify its name, for after three days' working through it not a lion had been seen.

"The name," said Cyprien, "is probably traditional, and the lions have long since retired to the desert."

But Hilton laughed.

"You don't believe in the lions? That is because you don't know how to look for them."

"Not see a lion in the middle of a naked flat like this!" said Cyprien ironically.

"Well, I will bet you ten pounds," said Hilton, "that in less than an hour I show you one you didn't see."

"I never bet, on principle," said Cyprien, "but I shall be glad to see your lion, all the same."

The journey was continued. For about half an hour all went well, and nothing was said about lions, when suddenly Hilton exclaimed:

"Do you see that ant-hill over there on the right?"

"How beautiful!" said Friedel. "We have seen nothing else but those things for the last three days."

And, in fact, nothing is more common in the Bush Veld than these huge, yellow mounds, built up by ants innumerable, and, with the few clumps of straggling mimosas, -forming the only break in the plain's monotony.

Hilton laughed sarcastically.

“Mr. Cyprien,” he said, “if you like to take the trouble of galloping over there — where I am pointing with my finger — you will see what you want. Don’t you go too near, however, or you may come to grief.”

Cyprien gave his horse the spur, and trotted off.

“That is a family of lions over there,” said the German, as soon as he was out of earshot. “One out of every ten of those ant-hills is not an ant-hill.”

“Per Baccho!” exclaimed Pantalacci, “you need not have told him not to go too close.” And, noticing that Bardik and Li were listening, he added, “He’ll get awfully scared, and we shall have the pleasure of a good laugh at him.”

The Italian was wrong. Cyprien was not the man to get “awfully scared,” as he phrased it. A couple of hundred yards from the “ant-hill” he saw what it was. An enormous lion, a lioness, and three pups were stretched on the ground like cats, and quietly sleeping in the sun.

At the sound of Templar’s hoofs the lion opened his eyes, raised his huge head, and yawned. As he did so, there appeared between the two rows of powerful teeth, a deep, wide throat, down which a child might easily have dropped. Then he glared at the horseman, who had pulled up about twenty yards away.

Fortunately the lion was not hungry, and so he did not trouble himself to move.

Cyprien, with his hand on his rifle, waited for a minute or two, and then, seeing that the lion had no desire to commence hostilities, and not having the heart to spoil the happiness of the interesting family, turned around, and ambled off to his companions, who could not help recognizing his coolness and pluck.

“I should have lost my bet, Mr. Hilton,” was all he said.

That evening they halted near the right bank of the Limpopo. There, in spite of all that Hilton could say Friedel went out to fish.

“It is a dangerous game, I tell you,” said the Englishman. “In the Bush Veld people never hang about watercourses after sundown. Never — ”

“So!” said the German. “Well, then, I’ll be different.”

“What harm can there be,” said Pantalacci, “in his going down to the river-bank for an hour or two? I have often spent half the day wet through to the armpits when I have been after wild duck.”

“That is not at all the same thing,” said Hilton, again endeavoring to stop Friedel.

“Oh! Bother!” answered the Italian. “My dear Hilton, just hand us over that tin of scraped cheese for the macaroni, and let our friend go and catch us a few fish for supper. We want a change!”

Friedel went off, and kept his line in so long that it was quite night when he returned. Then he made a hearty meal off the fish he had caught, and when he went to bed in the wagon, complained of a slight shivering. In the morning when they rose to depart, he was in a violent fever, and found it impossible to mount his horse. Nevertheless, he insisted on their starting, affirming that he would be all right on the straw. They did as he requested.

At noon he was delirious.

At three o’clock he was dead!

“You see.” said Hilton philosophically, “I was right when I said that you mustn’t hang about water-courses after sundown.”

They halted for a few minutes to bury the corpse, that they could not leave to the mercy of the wild beasts. It was that of a rival, perhaps of an enemy, and yet Cyprien felt profoundly moved as the last sad rites were accomplished. The spectacle of death, solemn and impressive as it is everywhere, seemed to gain increased solemnity in the desert, for in Nature’s presence man is more fully conscious of his own inevitable end. Far from his friends, far from all who loved him, his melancholy thoughts flew back to home. “Perhaps,” thought he, “I myself may lie on this plain, never again to rise; perhaps I may be buried in a sandhill, capped with a bare stone, and have np friend to soothe my last moments.” And thus putting himself in his comrade’s place, and pitying him, he felt as though a part of himself lay buried there.

The day after the mournful ceremony Friedel’s horse was seized with the Veld disease, and in a few hours followed his master to the grave.

CHAPTER XIV

THE NORTH OF THE LIMPOPO

THREE days elapsed before a ford could be found across the Limpopo. Even then it probably would not have been discovered, had not some Macalacca Kaffirs undertaken to act as guides.

These Kaffirs are the subject race held in slavery by the Bechuanas as the Helots were by the Spartans of old — made to work without pay, treated with great severity, and, worse than all, forbidden to eat any flesh. The unhappy Macalaccas can kill as many birds as they please, but only on condition that they hand them over to their masters.

A Macalacca possesses nothing of his own, not even a hut or a calabash. Lean and half starved, he goes about nearly naked, with a bandolier over his shoulders, serving him for a water-bottle, made of buffalo intestines, and looking at a distance like yards of black pudding.

Bardik’s commercial genius was soon displayed in the consummate art with which he extracted from these savages the avowal that, in spite of their misery, they were the owners of sundry ostrich plumes, hidden away in a neighboring thicket. He immediately proposed to buy them, and an appointment was made for the bargain to be completed in the evening.

“You have some money with you, then, to give them in exchange?” asked Cyprien, much surprised.

And Bardik, with a broad grin, showed him a handful of brass buttons which had taken him a month or so to collect.

“That is not proper money,” said Cyprien, “and I cannot allow you to pay these poor people with a few old buttons.”

But he found it impossible to make Bardik understand in what way his idea was reprehensible.

“If the Maealaccas accept my buttons in exchange for their feathers, what is there tc find fault with?” he answered. “You know that the plumes have cost them nothing to collect — they have not even a right to keep them, and can only show them to us on the sly. But a button is something useful, more useful than an ostrich feather. Why, then, do you stop me from offering a dozen for a dozen plumes?”

The reasoning was specious, but worthless. What the Kaffir did not see was that the Macalaccas took the brass buttons, not for the use they would make of them, but for the supposed value they attributed to the metal disks which resembled coins so much in shape. And therein lay the wrong.

Cyprien, however, saw that the distinction was too refined to be grasped by the intelligence of the savage, and so he had to leave him to act as he pleased.

In the evening, by torchlight, Bardik’s bartering was resumed. The Macalaccas were evidently afraid of being taken in by their friend, and not satisfied with the fires prepared by the whites, brought with them a number of corn cobs, which they lighted and stuck in the ground.

They then brought forward the ostrich plumes, and proceeded to examine Bardik’s buttons. And then began with much shouting and gesticulation a most animated debate on the nature of these pieces of metal.

What they said was unintelligible to all except themselves, but from their excited faces, eloquent grimaces, and occasional serious outbursts of anger, it was obvious that the debate was one of much interest to them.

Suddenly the impassioned discussion was interrupted by an unexpected apparition.

A tall black, wearing an old red cotton mantle and the usual diadem of sheep-gut of the Kaffir warriors, stalked out of the thicket where the bargaining was going on, and with his spear struck away right and left at the Macalaccas thus taken in the very act of disobedience.

“Lopepe! Lopepe!” yelled the unfortunate savages, scattering on all sides like a lot of rats.

But a ring of black warriors appeared from among the bush-clumps surrounding the camp and barred their passage.

Lopepe immediately possessed himself of the buttons. After carefully examining them by the light of the maize torches, he dropped them with signs of much satisfaction into his leather pouch. Then he stepped up to Bardik, and taking away the feathers that had already been handed over, he appropriated them in the same way as he had done the buttons.

Of this scene the whites had remained passive spectators, having no excuse for interfering in it. Lopepe, however, solved the difficulty by advancing toward them, stopping a few paces off, and in an imperious tone delivering a long address, which was almost unintelligible.

Hilton, understanding a few words of Bechuana, succeeded in catching its general drift. The Kaffir chief protested against Bardik being allowed to trade with the Macalaccas, when they possessed no property of their own, and expressed his intention of confiscating what he had found as contraband, and asked what they were going to do.

Opinions were divided. Pantalacci wished to give in at once rather than cause a disturbance with the Bechuanas. Hilton and Cyprien were afraid that by doing so Lopepe’s arrogance would be encouraged, and still greater risk run in consequence.

After a short whispered consultation it was agreed to abandon the buttons to the Bechuana and to claim the feathers, and this Hilton explained to the chief in a few Kaffir words eked out by pantomime.

Lopepe then assumed a diplomatic air, and seemed to hesitate; but the guns he caught sight of in the gloom soon decided him, and the plumes were given up.

Then the chief, who was really a very intelligent fellow, made himself somewhat more agreeable to the three whites, and to Bardik and Li he offered a pinch from his tobacco-pouch, and then sat down at the bivouac. A glass of something offered him by the Neapolitan put him into excellent humor, and when he rose, after an hour or so, during which silence not unfrequently reigned for •minutes at a time, it was to invite the travelers to visit him in the morning at his kraal.

This was promised, and after shaking hands Lopepe majestically retired.

He had not been gone long before all in camp were asleep except Cyprien, who, wrapped in his blanket, lay gazing at the stars. There was no moon, but the black field of the sky was aglow with its glittering dust.

He thought of his people, who knew nothing of this plunge of his into the South African desert. He thought of Alice, dearer than all to him, who was, perhaps, at that moment star-gazing, as he was; and sinking deeper and deeper into his reverie, he was about to fall asleep, when a trampling of hoofs, a curious agitation on the side where the bullock team was parked for the night, made him wake up and start to his feet.

In the shadow Cyprien fancied he saw a dwarfish figure, more compact than that of the oxen, and this he took to be the cause of the agitation. Without a thought as to what he was doing, Cyprien seized a whip lying close by, and stealthily moved toward the cattle.

He was not mistaken. In their midst, come to trouble their sleep, crept an intruder. Hardly awake, and not thinking what he did, Cyprien raised the whip and brought it down with full force on the animal’s snout.

A fearful growl arose as the reply to this sudden attack.

It was a lion! and the young engineer had treated it as if it were a cur.

He had only just time to snatch a revolver from his belt and step aside as the lion came leaping on to him and seized his outstretched arm. Cyprien felt the pointed teeth grip into his flesh, and was borne to the ground by the angry beast. Suddenly there was an explosion, the lion’s body gave a last writhe, stiffened, and fell back motionless.

With the hand that remained free Cyprien had coolly aimed his revolver at the monster’s ear, and an explosive bullet had shattered its head.

The sleepers, aroused by the growling and the report, came running on to the battle-field. Cyprien was half crushed under the weight of the beast, but his wounds were merely superficial. Li bathed them with a little lint steeped in brandy, and then the best place on the floor of the wagon was given up to the wounded man, and soon all were again asleep except Bardik, who remained on guard till the morning.

The day had hardly broken when the voice of James Hilton, begging his comrades to come to his aid, proclaimed that something else had happened. Hilton was lying fully dressed on the front of the wagon across the tarpaulin, and in an accent of the keenest terror told them, without daring to move, "I have got a snake curled around my right knee under my trousers. Don't move, or I am a lost man. But see what you can do for me."

His eyes were dilated by fright, and his face was of livid paleness. Under his trousers and around his knee was some foreign body, like a piece of rope rolled around the limb.

The situation was serious. As Hilton had said, the first movement he made the snake would strike him.

But amid the general indecision Bardik resolved to act. Having noiselessly drawn his master's hunting-knife, he approached Hilton by a sort of worm-like movement that brought him almost imperceptibly toward him. Then with his eyes at the level of the snake he seemed for some seconds to carefully study the position of the dangerous reptile. Obviously he sought to discover how the animal's head was placed.

Suddenly, by a quick movement, he rose. His arm dashed down, and the knife gleamed as it cut in deeply across Hilton's knee.

"You can knock off the snake. He is dead!" said Bardik, showing all his teeth in a gigantic smile.

Hilton obeyed mechanically, and shook his leg. The reptile fell at his feet. It was a viper, and had a blackhead about an inch across. Its least bite meant death. The young Kaffir had decapitated it with marvelous precision. Hilton's trousers had a gash in them about six inches long, but his skin was not even grazed.

It was a curious thing that Hilton did not appear to dream of thanking Bardik. Now that he was out of danger, he seemed to consider the intervention quite as a matter of course. The idea never occurred to him to seize the Kaffir's hand and tell him he owed him his life, "Your knife is very sharp," was all he said, as Bardik replaced it in his sheath, without appearing to think very much of what he had done.

The impressions of this eventful night all faded off during breakfast, which on this occasion consisted of a single ostrich egg cooked with butter, and quite sufficient to satisfy the appetites of the five travelers.

Cyprien had a slight fever, and his wounds were somewhat painful. He insisted, notwithstanding, on joining Pantalacci and Hilton in their visit to Lopepe's kraal. The camp was thus left to Bardik and Li, who undertook to skin the lion — quite a monster of the so-called dog- muzzle species.

The Bechuana chief awaited his guests at the entrance of his kraal, surrounded by his warriors. Behind them, in the second rank, were grouped the women and children, eager with curiosity to look on the strangers. A few affected indifference. Seated in front of their hemispherical huts they continued at their work. Two or three were making a net with some long textile weeds twisted into string.

There was a general look of misery about everything, although the huts were fairly Built. That of Lopepe was raised a little in the center of the kraal. It was much larger than the others, and covered with straw mats.

The chief led his guests inside, pointed to three stools, and seated himself on one in front of them, while the guard of honor formed a circle behind him.

The interview began with the usual interchange of civilities; in short, the ceremonial mainly consisted of drinking a cup of fermented liquor, made by the host himself, and each time the chief, to show that no perfidious scheme lurked behind, first raised the cup to his own thick lips before passing it to his visitors. Not to drink after such a gracious invitation would have been a deadly insult. The three whites drank the Kaffir beer, not without violent grimacing on the part of Pantalacci, who said in a whisper that he would rather have had “a glass of spirits than this nasty brew of the Bechuanas.”

Business then began. Lopepe wished to buy a gun; but this was a satisfaction they could not grant him, although he offered for it a very passable horse, and a hundred and fifty pounds of ivory. In fact, the colonial edicts are very strict on this point, and forbid Europeans disposing of any weapons to the Kaffirs on the frontier, except under special authority from the Government. To make up for this, Lopepe’s guests had brought him a flannel shirt, a steel chain, and a bottle, which constituted a splendid present, and gave great pleasure.

The Bechuana chief, through Hilton, was only too happy to furnish all the information in his power. In the first place a traveler, answering in every respect to Mataki, had passed the kraal five days before. This was the first news the expedition had had of the fugitive for a fortnight, and it was received with gratitude. The young Kaffir had lost several days searching for the ford across the Limpopo, and now he was making for the mountains to the north. Would it take him many days to reach the mountains? Seven or eight at the least!

Was Lopepe the friend of the chief of the district to which Cyprien and his friends were going?

Lopepe gloried in being so! Who would not be the friend and ally of the great Tonaia, the invincible conqueror of the Kaffir lands?

Would Tonaia give a good welcome to the whites?

Yes, because he knew, like all the other chiefs, that the whites never failed to take vengeance when those belonging to them were hurt. What was the good of fighting the whites? Were they not always the stronger, thanks to the guns which loaded themselves? The best thing was to remain at peace with them, to receive them cordially and trade loyally.

Such was what was ascertained from Lopepe. One thing only was of much importance, and that was that Mataki had lost several days on the road, and that they were still on his track.

On returning to the camp, Cyprien, Pantalacci, and Hilton found Li and Bardik considerably alarmed. They had, they said, received a visit from a lot of Kaffirs of a different tribe from that to which Lopepe belonged, and these had subjected them to a strict cross-examination.

“Whence came they? Were they not spying on the Bechuanas, collecting information about them, finding out their number, force, and equipment? It was not for strangers to engage in such an enterprise! The great chief Tonaia would have nothing to say so long as they did not enter his territory, but he would look on things with a different eye if they did cross his frontier.”

This was the general drift of their remarks. The Chinese did not seem to be unreasonably scared. But Bardik, usually so composed, was suffering from quite a serious fright, and this Cyprien could not understand.

“Wicked Avarriors,” he said, rolling his large eyes, “warriors who hate the whites and their ‘be-quick’!”

What was to be done? Was much importance to be attributed to the incident? No! The warriors had done no harm and shown no disposition to pillage. Their threats were harmless. The great chief Tonaia only wanted a few civil remarks and explanations as to what really had brought the white men into the country, and all his suspicions would vanish and his good wishes would be gained.

It was agreed by all that they should keep on. The hope of catching Mataki and recovering the diamond overshadowed all other anxieties.

CHAPTER XV

A PLOT

IN another week the expedition arrived in a country which in no way resembled that they had traversed since leaving Griqualand. They were nearing the mountain chain to which Mataki had lied. The approach to the highlands whence the numerous water-courses flowed down to the Limpopo, was signaled by a flora and fauna differing entirely from those of the plain.

One of the first of these valleys was reached about sunset. A river, so limpid that they could see down to its bed, flowed through meadows of emerald green. Fruit trees, with varied foliage, clothed the slopes of the hills which circled around it. The plain in the center lay bathed in the sunshine, and beneath the shadows of the huge baobabs grazed herds of red antelopes, zebras, and buffaloes. A little farther off a white rhinoceros crossed the open, and slowly moved toward the river, snorting with joy at the thought of rolling his mass of flesh in the cooling stream. An onager was braying, and a troop of monkeys were chasing each other among the trees.

Cyprien and his two companions stopped on the top of the hill to contemplate the unaccustomed scene. At last they had reached the virgin country, where the wild beast, still the undisputed master of the soil, lived on in happiness, without a suspicion of danger. It was not so much the number of the animals that surprised the engineer, as the wonderful variety. It seemed like a diagram in which the painter had depicted each principal type of the animal kingdom.

Of other inhabitants there were few. The Kaffirs could not but be well scattered in a district of such extent. Cyprien felt that his artistic and scientific instincts were fully satisfied, and allowed himself to think that he had been transported into the pre-historic age of the megatherium.

“It only wants a mammoth or two to make the scene complete!” he exclaimed.

And immediately Li extended his arm and pointed to several gray masses in the distance. From afar they looked like rocks in their motionlessness and color. They were a troop of elephants. The plain was dotted with them for a space of several miles.

“You know something about elephants?” asked Cyprien of the Chinaman when they were halting for the night.

Li blinked his little oblique eyes. “I lived a couple of years in Ceylon as hunter’s help,” said he, with the marked reserve he maintained as to all that concerned his biography.

“If we could only bring down one or two!” exclaimed Hilton. “It is excellent sport.”

“And the game is worth the powder,” added Pantalacci. “The tusks are excellent booty, and we might easily carry three or four dozen behind the wagon. We might pay the costs of the expedition out of them.”

“That is an idea, and a good one!” exclaimed Hilton. “Why should we not have a try tomorrow before we start?”

The question was discussed, and it was decided that they would strike the camp at daylight, and try their fortune in the valley in which they had seen the elephants.

As soon as supper was over, they all retired under the tilt of the wagon with the exception of Hilton, whose turn it was to keep watch. He had been alone about two hours, and was beginning to nod, when, he felt a light touch on his elbow. He opened his eyes. Pantalacci was seated by his side.

“I could not sleep, and I thought I would keep you company,” said the Neapolitan.

“It is very kind of you, but I could do with a few hours’ sleep,” answered Hilton, stretching his arms. “If you like, we can arrange matters. I will take your place under the tilt, and you can stay here.”

“No, stop here. I have something to tell you,” answered Pantalacci in a low voice.

He cast a glance around to see that they were alone, and continued, “Have you ever hunted an elephant?”

“Yes,” answered Hilton, “twice before.”

“Well, you know it is a very dangerous business. The elephant is so ready and so well armed. A man does not always get the best of it against him.”

“You speak of the clumsy men,” said Hilton. “With a good gun and explosive bullets there is little to fear.”

“So I should think,” replied the Italian. “But there are such things as accidents. Suppose one was to happen to the Frenchman tomorrow; it would be a sad blow to science!”

“A great misfortune!” said Hilton, with a laugh.

“But for us the misfortune would not be so great,” continued Pantalacci, encouraged by the laugh. “There would only be two of us then to follow Mataki and his diamond, and between us we might — ”

The two men remained silent, gazing into the fire, each thinking out the dastardly idea.

“Yes,” said the Neapolitan; “two can understand each other, but three cannot.”

Again there was silence. Suddenly Pantalacci lifted his head and gazed into the darkness around him.

“Did you see anything?” asked he in a whisper. “I thought I saw a shadow behind that baobab.”

Hilton looked in the direction indicated, but noticed nothing suspicious.

“There is nothing Here,” he said, “only the linen the Chinaman has put out to bleach.”

Soon the conversation was resumed between the conspirators, but in a whisper.

“I can draw the cartridges out of his gun without his knowing it,” said Pantalacci; “and when we ride up to the elephant, I can fire behind him, so as to attract the brute’s attention that wav, and then it would not take long!”

Hilton feebly objected, “It may not be so easy as you think.”

“Bah!” replied the Italian. “Leave me alone, and you will see.”

An hour later, when Pantalacci resumed his place among the sleepers, he lighted a match to assure himself that no one had moved. All was well. Cyprien, Bardik, and the Chinaman were sound asleep.

At least, they seemed to be. But if the Italian had been a little more artful, he might have suspected a certain artificiality about the energetic snoring of the Chinee.

At daybreak all were afoot. Pantalacci took advantage of Cyprien's bathing in the river to extract the cartridges from the gun. It took him but twenty seconds to do this. He was alone; Bardik was making the coffee, and Li was collecting the clothes he had put out to bleach on the famous line he had stretched between a couple of baobabs. Assuredly no one had seen him.

The coffee having been finished, the party went off on horseback, and left Bardik in charge of the camp. Li had asked to accompany the hunters, and armed himself with his master's knife.

In less than half an hour they reached the spot where, the evening before, they had seen the elephants. But now they had to go farther on, out into the open between the foot of the mountain and the right bank of the river, before they came up with them.

In the clear fresh atmosphere illuminated by the rising sun, on the wide stretch of verdant carpet, wet with the morning dew, a group of elephants, two or three hundred in number, were busy breakfasting. The youngsters were playing around their mothers. The old ones, with heads to the ground, swinging their trunks as they strolled along, were quietly feeding on the thick grass of the meadow. Nearly all were flapping their huge ears as if they were cloaks of leather, fanning from side to side like Indian punkahs.

There was in all this calm domestic happiness something so sacred that Cyprien was profoundly moved, and asked his companions to abandon their projected massacre.

“What is the good of killing the inoffensive creatures?” he said. “Better leave them in peace.”

But the proposition was not to the taste of Pantalacci. “What is the good?” he asked, with a grin. “The good is to fill our purses, to get a few hundredweights of ivory! Are you afraid of those big fellows, Mr. Cyprien?”

Cyprien shrugged his shoulders, and took no further notice of the impertinence. As he saw the Neapolitan and his companion continue their advance toward the clearing, he went with them.

And now they were within a couple of hundred yards of the elephants. If, with their fine sense of hearing, the victims had not noticed their approach, it was because the wind blew toward the hunters, who were advancing through a thick clump of baobab trees.

However, one of the elephants began to show signs of disquietude, and raised his trunk interrogatively.

“Now is the time,” said Pantalacci, in a whisper. “If we are to do any good, we had better scatter; let each take his own position, and we will fire together at an agreed signal; for at the first shot the whole troop will take to flight.”

The advice was adopted. Hilton moved off to the right, Pantalacci to the left, and Cyprien remained in the center. Then the march toward the clearing was silently resumed.

At this moment Cyprien was much surprised to find himself grasped in somebody's arms, and to hear the voice of the Chinaman, "I have just jumped up behind you. Say nothing. You will soon see why."

He had then reached the edge of the underwood, and found himself about thirty yards from the elephants. Already he lifted his gun, to be ready for what might happen. As he did so, the Chinaman whispered, "Your/

gun is not loaded! Never mind. It's all right!" At the same instant there came the sound of a whistle — the signal of the attack — and immediately a gun, only one gun, was fired behind Cyprien.

Turning quickly, Cyprien saw Pantalacci gliding behind a tree. But at the instant his attention was called off in front of him.

One of the elephants had been hit, and, infuriated by his wound, came charging toward him. The others, as the Neapolitan had foretold, were off in flight in a terrible stampede that shook the ground for a mile or more.

"All right!" said Li, clutching tightly to Cyprien. "When he comes closer, jump Templar aside. Then turn around that bush, and cut, with the elephant after you. I will look after him!"

Cyprien mechanically obeyed the orders. He had barely time to do so. With trunk erect, eyes shot with blood, mouth open, and tusks at the charge, on came the elephant with fearful speed.

Templar behaved like an old campaigner. Obeying the pressure of the rider's knee, he executed a violent swerve to the right, and the elephant shot past, without touching! him, straight across the spot the horse that moment had left.

Without a word the Chinaman slipped to the ground, and leaped behind the bush he had shown his master.

“Here! here! Turn around the bush! Let him follow you!” he shouted.

The elephant rushed back, more furious than ever from having failed in his first attack. Cyprien, though he did not understand Li’s maneuver, executed it most carefully. He galloped around the bush, followed by the panting elephant, and twice foiled his attack by a sudden swerve. But would the maneuver succeed in the long run? Did Li hope to tire out the animal?

This did Cyprien ask himself, without being able to reply; when suddenly, to his great surprise, the elephant fell on his knees.

Li, with incomparable address, had seized on the propitious moment, glided from the bush up to the very feet of the pursuer, and with one sweep of the hunting- knife had cut the heel tendon which in man is called the Achilles. Such is the usual practice of the Indian huntsmen, and the Chinaman, thanks to his experience in Ceylon, had been able to deal the stroke with marvelous coolness and precision.

Fallen and helpless, the elephant remained without a movement, with his head laid down among the grass. A stream of blood flowed from his wound, and with it his strength flowed away.

“Hurrah! Bravo!” exclaimed Pantalacci and Hilton, appearing on the scene.

“We must finish him with a shot in the eye,” said Hilton, who seemed to feel an irresistible desire to take some active part in the drama.

And saying so, he shouldered his gun and fired.

The instant the explosion was heard, the bullet was imbedded in the body of the elephant. Then came a last convulsion. Then he remained motionless, as if he were a piece of gray rock.

“All over!” exclaimed Hilton, riding close up to the animal to get a better view of him.

“Wait! wait!” said the Chinaman, with a look.

They had not long to wait. As soon as Hilton reached the elephant, he stood up in his stirrups, and in derision tried to lift one of the enormous ears. But the animal by a sudden movement hurled aloft his trunk, and with one mighty blow brought it down on the hunter, smashing his backbone and crushing his head before the affrighted witnesses of the horrible scene could snatch him away.

Hilton uttered but one sharp cry of pain.

In three seconds he was but a mangled mass of flesh, on which the elephant had fallen, never to rise again.

“I was sure he would kill him!” said the Chinaman shaking his head. “Elephants never fail, when they get a chance.”

Such was the funeral oration on James Hilton. The young engineer thought of the treason of which he was to have been the victim, and could not help recognizing in the death a just punishment for the share in the plot to deliver him over defenseless to the fury of the angry beast. Whatever were the thoughts of the Neapolitan, he deemed it best to say nothing.

The Chinaman was already digging down into the grass of the prairie, and, with the aid of a knife, scooping out the grave in which, with Cyprien’s aid, the corpse was placed. All this took some time, and the sun was high above the horizon when the three hunters returned to the camp.

When they reached it, Bardik had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVI

TREASON

WHAT, then, had passed in camp during the absence of Cyprien and his two companions? It was difficult to say, for the young Kaffir did not reappear.

They waited for Bardik, they shouted for Bardik, and they looked for him everywhere. Not a trace of him could they find. The breakfast he had got ready remained by the fire, which had gone out, and seemed to show that he had been away from two to three hours.

Cyprien was reduced to conjectures, but the conjectures did nothing toward an explanation. That the young Kaffir had been attacked by some wild beast was not improbable, but there was not a sign of any struggle having taken place. That he had deserted and gone back to his own country, as Kaffirs often do, was very unlikely, and the engineer absolutely declined to accept the hypothesis when proffered by Pantalacci.

To sum up, half a day was spent in search, yet the young Kaffir had not been found, and his disappearance remained absolutely inexplicable.

Pantalacci and Cyprien took counsel together. They decided to wait till the next day before they struck the camp. Perhaps in the interval Bardik, if he had only wandered off, might return. But in thinking matters over, particularly with regard to the visit of the Kaffirs to one of the previous camps, and the questions they had put to Bardik and Li, they could hardly help asking if Bardik had not fallen into the hands of the natives, and been taken by them to their capital.

The day ended sadly, and the evening was even more lugubrious. A breeze of misfortune seemed to play over the expedition. Pantalacci was savage and dumb. His accomplices, Friedel and Hilton, were dead, and now he alone remained to face his young rival. But he was more than ever resolved to get rid of him.

Cyprien — whom Li had told all that he had heard about the withdrawal of the cartridges — had now to watch night and day over his traveling companion, though the Chinaman intended to share the task with him.

Cyprien and Pantalacci passed the evening silently smoking, and retired under the wagon-tilt without even a "good-night." It was Li's turn to watch near the fire and keep off the wild beasts.

The morning came, and the young Kaffir did not return. Cyprien would have waited "four-and-twenty hours longer, to give his servant a chance of rejoining, but the Neapolitan insisted on an immediate departure.

"We can very well do without Bardik, and to stop here is to risk being unable to rejoin Mataki."

Cyprien gave in, and the Chinaman set to work to put- to the team. And here came a discovery, and a serious one. The cattle were not to be found! The evening before, they had been sleeping in the high grass around the camp. Now they were nowhere visible.

And then they became fully aware of the loss the expedition had sustained in the person of Bardik. If that intelligent servant had been at his post, knowing as he did the peculiarities of the South African ox, he would not have omitted tying up to trees or pegs the beasts that had had a day's rest. Usually when reaching the halting- places after a long march, the precaution was unnecessary; the tired cattle never thought of straying beyond the outskirts of the wagon. But it was different after a day of rest and feasting.

Evidently the beasts' first care on awaking had been to seek for more delicate grasses than had satisfied them the day before. For the sake of mere wandering they had strayed off little by little, lost sight of the camp, and then, guided by that peculiar instinct that always leads them home, were probably on their way back again to the Transvaal.

The disaster is not an unusual one in Africa, but it is none the less serious. Without the team the wagon is useless, and the wagon is for the traveler his house, his store, and his fortress.

Great was the disappointment of Cyprien and Pantalacci when, after a wild chase of two or three hours along the track of the cattle, they found they must give up all hope of recovery. The position was thus changed greatly for the worse, and another consultation was held.

Only one practical solution could be arrived at, and that was to abandon the wagon, take as much provision and ammunition as they could carry, and continue the journey on horseback. If circumstances were propitious, they might be able to meet with some Kaffir chief, and from him buy a new team. As for Li, he could have Hilton's horse, which now wanted a master.

A lot of the thorn-tree branches were then cut and stacked over the wagon, so as to hide it in a kind of artificial bush. Their food and ammunition were stowed away in their pockets and in the large linen bag which each carried. The Chinaman, to his great regret, had to abandon the famous red box, but he could not tear himself away from his cord, and so he coiled it around his waist under his shirt as if it were a belt.

All being ready, the three horsemen gave a last look into the valley which had been the scene of such tragic events, and then set out for the hills. The road, like the others in this country, was merely a path formed by the wild animals, who always take the shortest road to water.

It was past noon when Cyprien, Pantalacci, and Li started; and beneath a burning sun they kept on at a good pace till the evening. Then they camped in a deep gorge, and, well sheltered by a rock, and seated around a fire of dry wood, they said to themselves that after all the loss of the wagon was not irreparable.

For two days they continued their journey, fully persuaded that they were on the track of him they sought. And on the evening of the second day, just before sundown, as they were making for a clump of trees ahead of them, in which to camp, Li uttered a guttural exclamation of, “Heugh!” and pointed with his finger to a black figure which had moved into view on the horizon in the streaks of the twilight.

Cyprien and Pantalacci looked in the direction indicated by the Chinaman. “A traveler!” remarked the Italian.

“Mataki himself!” said Cyprien, looking through his glasses. “I can see his carriage and his ostrich.”

And he handed the glasses to Pantalacci for him to satisfy himself that it was so.

“How far off is he?” asked Cyprien.

“Seven or eight miles at the least; perhaps ten,” was the reply.

“Then we must give up any hope of catching him today.”

“Certainly,” said Pantalacci. “In half an hour it will be dark, and we could not think of moving then.”

“Good! Tomorrow we will start early and catch him.”

“That is what I say.”

The horsemen reached the trees and dismounted. As usual, they began by carefully rubbing down and seeing to their horses before tethering them where they were to feed, the Chinaman being busy lighting the fire.

Night came on while they were so employed. The meal was a little more cheerful perhaps than it had been for the last three days. As soon as it was over, the travelers rolled themselves in their wraps and lay down by the fire, with their saddles for pillows, to sleep till dawn.

Cyprien and the Chinaman were soon asleep — not a very prudent proceeding perhaps on their part.

The Italian did not sleep. For two or three hours he rolled and twisted about in his wrapper like a man laboring under some fixed idea. Temptation had again come to him. At last he could withstand it no longer. He rose stealthily and silently, went to the horses, and saddled his own; then setting free Templar and the Chinaman’s horse, he led them after him. The grass which carpeted the ground stifled the sound of the hoofs, and the animals followed in stupid resignation at being so suddenly awakened. Pantalacci took them down into the valley below the camp, fastened them to a tree, and returned. Neither of the sleepers had moved.

He took his rifle, his ammunition, and some provisions. Then he coolly and deliberately abandoned his comrades in the desert.

The idea which had possessed him since sundown had been that by seizing the horses Cyprien and Li would be prevented from reaching Mataki. He thus made sure of victory. Neither the odious character of the treason, nor the utter heartlessness of the robbery, had any influence over him. He descended the slope, jumped into the saddle, and rode off with the two horses in the first rays of the rising moon, that was just peeping over the distant hills.

Cyprien and Li slept on. About three o'clock in the morning the Chinaman opened his eyes, gazed at the stars growing dim on the eastern horizon, and said to himself, “It is time to get the coffee!”

And immediately he threw off his blanket, jumped up, and set about his morning toilet, which in the desert, as in the town, was anything but elaborate.

“Where is Pantalacci?” he asked himself as he glanced around.

The day had begun to break, and the objects around were growing clearer in the light.

“The horses are not there!” said Li to himself. Perhaps our gallant friend has — ”

And suspecting what had happened, he ran up to the pegs to which he had seen the horses tethered the night before. Then he ran back to the camp, and at a glance assured himself that the Neapolitan's baggage had gone with him.

There could be no mistake.

A white man would probably have been unable to resist the temptation of waking Cyprien to tell him the important news. But the Chinese was of the tawny race, and thought there was no need to hurry in telling bad news. And he quietly set to work to get the coffee, remarking as he did so, “It was very kind of the gentleman to leave a little behind him!”

The coffee having been strained through the linen bag he had made for it, Li filled two cups cut out of ostrich eggs, and went up to Cyprien, who was still asleep. “Here is your coffee, Pa,” said he, touching him on the shoulder.

Cyprien opened his eyes, stretched his limbs, smiled at the Chinaman, drew himself up, and drank the steaming liquor.

It was not till then that he noticed the absence of the Italian. “Where is Pantalacci?” he asked.

“Gone away,” answered Li, in the most natural way in the world, as if there was nothing at all unusual in his doing so.

“What! Gone away?”

“Yes, Pa — with the three horses.”

Cyprien threw off his rug and gave a glance around, which told him everything.

But he was too proud to show his anxiety or his anger. “Very well,” he said. “The fellow fancies he has seen the last of us, I suppose;” and he walked briskly to and fro, and thought. “We must be off at once,” he said to the Chinaman. “We must leave the saddles and bridles, and all that would encumber us, and take only the guns and the food we have left. We may get on quicker unmounted, and perhaps find the shortest roads.”

Li hastened to obey. In a few minutes the rugs were rolled up and the bags shouldered, and then all that it was necessary to abandon were heaped together and hidden under a pile of brushwood.

Cyprien was right in supposing that, under certain circumstances, it would be better to travel on foot. He could go a nearer way, and climb heights that a horse was unequal to, but at the cost of what fatigue!

About one o’clock in the afternoon they reached the northern slope of the chain they had been following for three days. According to the information given by Lopepe, they could not be very far from Tonaia’s capital. Unfortunately in the Bechuana language the indications were so vague as to the route to follow and the distance, that Cyprien was not sure if he had to travel two days or five days before he reached the kraal.

As he and Li were descending into the first valley, after crossing the ridge, the latter gave a short, sharp laugh. “Giraffes!” he said.

Cyprien looked below and saw about a score of these animals feeding in the valley. Nothing could be more graceful from afar than their long necks, held upright like masts, or thrust like long serpents into the herbage for two or three yards from their brown-spotted bodies.

“We might catch one of those things to take the place of Templar,” observed Li.

“Ride a giraffe! Whoever saw such a thing?” exclaimed Cyprien.

“I do not know if any one ever saw it, but that is no reason why you shouldn’t see it,” answered the Chinaman. “And so you shall, if you let me try!”

Cyprien, who had begun by thinking it impossible, ended by promising to help.

“We are to leeward of the giraffes,” said Li; “that is lucky, for they have very quick noses, and would have smelled us. You go away to the right and frighten them with the report of the gun, so as to drive them this way, and I will look after the rest.”

Cyprien dropped on the ground all that could hamper his movements, and hurried off.

Li lost but little time. He ran down the valley and reached a track along the bottom. This was evidently that used by the giraffes, for it was all marked with their hoofs. The Chinaman took up his position behind a large tree. He then unwound his long cord, which he was never without, and, cutting it in two, made two lengths, each of about a hundred feet. To one end of each of these he tied a heavy pebble, and the other ends he hitched to the lower branches of the tree. Then he coiled the free ends over his arm, stepped behind the tree, and .waited.

Five minutes had barely elapsed when the report of a gun sounded some distance off. Instantly a swift trampling began, as of a squadron of cavalry at the charge, and this increased from moment to moment, and announced that the giraffes were coming, as Li expected. They came right down on him along the track, little suspecting what was awaiting them.

With their nostrils dilated, their heads bristling, and their tongues hanging out, the giraffes looked really superb, but Li had something else to do than admire them. His post had been judiciously chosen at a narrowing of the way, where the animals could only pass two abreast, and where they would be sure to crowd.

He let two or three go by. Then, picking out one of extraordinary size, he flung his first cord. It .whistled as it flew and swung around the victim’s neck. Suddenly the cord stretched, squeezed the throat, and pulled the giraffe up short.

The Chinaman lost no time in looking on. Scarcely had he seen his first cord strike than he launched the second, and brought down another giraffe.

All was over in half a minute. The frightened herd escaped in all directions, and two half-strangled giraffes remained prisoners.

“Come on, Pa!” shouted the Chinaman, as Cyprien ran up, rather doubtful of the success of the scheme.

But the evidence was too much for him. There were two magnificent animals, strong, fleshy, with splendid hams and lustrous necks. But Cyprien thought only of admiring them; to ride them did not seem possible.

“How can you hang on a ridge which slopes at thirty degrees?” asked he, with a laugh.

“By sitting on the shoulders, and not on the flanks,” answered Li. “Besides, we can roll up a blanket to put under the saddle.”

“We have not got a saddle.”

“I will soon find you one.”

“And what is your bridle to be?”

“You’ll see.” The Chinese had a reply for every question, and with him acts and words were not far apart.

The dinner-hour had not arrived before, with part of his cord, he had made two strong halters, which he slipped over the giraffes. The poor beasts were so frightened at their misfortune, and were, besides, so gentle in disposition, that they made no resistance. The other end of the cord did for reins. This being finished, nothing was easier than to lead off the prisoners. Cyprien and Li went back to the camp and repossessed themselves of the saddles and other articles they had abandoned.

By the evening everything was arranged. The Chinaman was a marvel of cleverness. Not only did he alter Cyprien’s saddle so that it would seat him horizontally on the giraffe, but he made himself a saddle of twigs; and took the precaution of breaking in the giraffes during half the night, mounting first one and then the other, accustoming them to the rein, and teaching them that, henceforth they must obey.

CHAPTER XVII

AN AFRICAN STEEPLECHASE

THE aspect of the horsemen — or rather the giraffemen — when they started in the morning, was curious in the extreme. It is very doubtful if Cyprien would have cared to have appeared in such guise before Miss Watkins in the chief street of Vandergaart Kopje. But in Rome, people must do as do the Romans. Our hero was in the desert, and giraffes were just as good mounts as dromedaries. Their gait was very much the same. Their backs were horribly hard, and they rolled and pitched in a way that nearly made their riders sea-sick.

In two or three hours Cyprien and the Chinee were sufficiently acclimatized, and after a few attempts at rebellion, which were promptly suppressed, the giraffes became quite docile, and sped along at a rapid pace.

The object now was to hurry on as much as possible, so as to make up for the time lost during the last three or four days. Had Pantalacci caught Mataki? Cyprien resolved that nothing should keep him from reaching him.

On the third day the giraffemen entered the plains. They were following the right bank of a much-winding water-course which flowed to the northward, and was probably one of the secondary affluents of the Zambesi. The giraffes, thoroughly subdued and weakened by the long stages and spare diet to which Li subjected them, were driven with the greatest ease. Cyprien could even let go the rope reins, and direct his steed by the mere pressure of his knee. Free from anxiety as to his mount, he took a good deal of pleasure in noticing around him the traces of advancing civilization. In one unbroken series there stretched away fields of manioc or taro, carefully tended, properly irrigated by means of bamboos placed end to end, and reached by broad and well-made roads. In fact, the district had an air of general prosperity. On the hills which bordered the horizon there appeared the groups of white huts, built of rushes, which served as the homes of its scattered population.

One thing that showed they were nearly out of the desert was the extraordinary number of wild animals peopling the plain. Here and there innumerable swarms of birds, of all sizes and species, darkened the air. Herds of antelopes and gazelles crossed the road before them. Occasionally a monstrous hippopotamus lifted his head in the river, brayed noisily, and plunged again beneath the stream with a sounding splash.

The last thing in Cyprien's thoughts was what greeted his eyes as he turned the flank of one of the small hills. This was no less than Pantalacci at full gallop in pursuit of Mataki! About a mile separated the men from each other, and Cyprien and Li were some four miles behind the Italian.

The delight of the latter was unbounded. Cyprien gave a loud "Hurrah!" Li a sounding "Hyugh!" meaning the same thing, and then they put their giraffes at the trot.

Evidently Mataki had seen the Neapolitan, who had begun to gain on him, though he could not see his old master and his companion, who were still too far off over the plain.

The young Kaffir, at sight of Pantalacci — who was not a man to give quarter, and who, without waiting for explanations, might kill him like a dog — hurried along furiously in his ostrich cart. The swift bird almost flew over the ground. It flew at such a rate that it suddenly crashed up against a large stone. The shock was so violent that the axletree broke, one of the wheels slipped off, and Mataki and the bits of his chariot were scattered in the road.

The unfortunate Kaffir was dreadfully injured by his fall, but the fright that possessed him was only thereby increased. Convinced that he would be killed, if caught by the Italian, he picked himself up, caught the ostrich, jumped astride of its back, and sped off at a run.

And then began an exciting steeplechase, such as the world had never seen since the days of the Roman hippodrome, when ostrich and giraffe races formed part of the program. While Pantalacci chased Mataki, Cyprien and Li chased them both. They wanted the Kaffir for the sake of the stolen diamond, they wanted the Italian to settle accounts with him for his cowardly treachery.

The giraffes were given the reins. They swept along, almost as fast as thorough-bred horses, as with their long necks stretched out, their mouths open, their ears flung back, they were spurred and whipped to their topmost speed.

Mataki's ostrich proved a prodigy. No winner of the Derby would have had a chance against him. His short wings, though useless for flying, helped him greatly. So fast did he speed over the ground that in a few minutes the young Kaffir had regained all he had lost.

Mataki had chosen his mount well when he took the ostrich. If he could only keep up as he was going for another quarter of an hour, he would be safe from the Italian's claws.

Pantalacci saw that the slightest halt would lose him all his advantage. Already the distance between him and the fugitive had sensibly increased.

Beyond the mealy- field through which they were racing, a thick mass of lentisks and Indian figs lay waving in the wind and bounding the view. If Mataki once reached it, he would escape, as it would be impossible to keep him in sight.

At full gallop Cyprien and the Chinee followed in chase. They reached the foot of the hill; they were tearing across the field; but three miles still separated them from the Kaffir's pursuer.

They could see that by a great effort the Italian had gained a little on the fugitive. Whether it was that the ostrich was exhausted, or had hurt itself against a stone, its speed had greatly slackened. Pantalacci was not more than three hundred feet from the Kafiir.

But Mataki had reached the edge of the wood. Suddenly he disappeared, and at the same moment Pantalacci was violently thrown, and his horse bolted.

“Mataki has escaped!” said Li.

“Yes; but Pantalacci is ours!” answered Cyprien.

And they pressed on their giraffes still faster.

In half an hour they had nearly crossed the mealy-field, and were only five hundred yards from where the Italian had come to grief. Had he gained the wood, or did he lie on the ground grievously wounded — or perhaps dead?

The unhappy man was where he had fallen. A hundred paces from him Cyprien and Li reined up their giraffes. And this is what they saw.

In the ardor of his pursuit the Neapolitan had not noticed a gigantic net which had been set by the Kaffirs to catch the birds that wage incessant war on their crops. In this net Pantalacci had become entangled.

And it was not a small net. It measured at least fifty yards along the side, and already contained several thousand birds of all sizes and plumage, and among them half a dozen of those enormous vultures, a yard and a half from wing-tip to wing-tip, which abound in South Africa. When the Neapolitan fell into their midst, the birds were naturally alarmed.

Pantalacci was stunned for a moment by his fall. Then he tried to rise. But his feet, legs, and hands were entangled in the meshes of the net, and he could not at first disengage them.

He had not much time to lose. He gave such terrible kicks and wrenches that he tore up the net from the pegs that fixed it to the ground. At the same time the birds, big and little, endeavored to escape.

But the more the Italian struggled, the more he was wrapped in the meshes. And a crowning humiliation was in store for him. One of the giraffes came up — the one that bore the Chinaman. Li jumped to the ground, and thinking that the best way to secure the prisoner was to roll him in the net, kicked it off the pegs in front of him, and began to throw it over.

But a most extraordinary thing happened. There came a tremendous gust of wind, bending down the trees as if a water-spout were sweeping over the ground. Pantalacci in his struggles had torn the net from many of the pegs, and seeing himself on the point of capture, made a desperate effort to get free. With a violent wrench the last peg was torn up, and the feathered colony that the net held down took flight with noisy tumult.

The small birds escaped, but the large ones were caught in the meshes by their talons at the same time as they spread their wings for flight, and together rose. All these aerial paddles and pectoral muscles working together, helped by the fury of the squall, formed so colossal a power that a hundredweight was but a featherweight to it.

The net, rolled and heaped and entangled on itself, became the sport of the wind, and, with Pantalacci hanging to it by his wrists and hands, rose thirty yards from the ground.

Cyprien arrived as the net rose, and beheld his enemy flying up to the clouds.

The vultures, tiring at their first effort, began to descend, describing a long parabola as they did so. In three seconds they had reached the lentisks and Indian figs to the west of the mealy-field. Then, having shaved the tops of the bushes at about a dozen feet from the ground, they rose again into the air.

Cyprien and Li looked on with horror at the sight of the unfortunate man borne upward for a hundred and fifty feet by the prodigious efforts of the vultures and the force of the breeze.

Suddenly a few meshes broke, and the Italian clutched wildly at the cords. But his hands missed their hold, and he fell in a heap to the earth.

The net, freed from his weight, shot up in the air, and was soon shaken off by the vultures.

When Cyprien reached him, his enemy was dead — killed in this horrible way.

And now there remained but one of the four rivals who had started on the Kaffir chase across the Transvaal.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TALKING OSTRICH

AFTER this dreadful catastrophe Cyprien and Li thought only of hurrying from the spot as quickly as possible.

They skirted the north edge of the wood, and after an hour’s walk reached the bed of a torrent, which was then dry. The torrent-bed formed a path through the lentisks and figs. Into it they turned.

There a fresh surprise awaited them. The torrent led into a good-sized lake, surrounded with luxuriant vegetation. Cyprien tried to follow the banks, but these were in places too steep.

To return by the road he had come would have been to give up all hope of catching Mataki; and as on the other side of the lake there were ranges of hills leading up to mountains of considerable height, the travelers set off around the sheet of water in the hope that they would there obtain a good view over the surrounding district. The absence of any road made the operation a somewhat difficult one, owing to their having occasionally to dismount and lead the giraffes by the bridle. It took them more than three hours to advance five miles as the crow flies.

When they reached the point on the other side of the lake opposite to that they had started from, night came on; and, thoroughly tired out, they decided to camp. But with their scanty resources they could not be very comfortable.

Li busied himself with his usual zeal, and did what he could, but the result was not encouraging.

“You are very tired, Pa!” said he, sympathizingly. “Our provisions have nearly all gone! Let me go off in search of something to some village close by. I am sure to bring somebody to help you.”

“Leave me, Li?” asked Cyprien.

“It is necessary that I should,” said the Chinaman. “I will take one of the giraffes and strike off to the north. Tonaia’s town that Lopepe spoke of cannot be far off, and I will manage it so that they will welcome you. Then we can go back to Griqualand, where you need no longer trouble yourself about the three scoundrels that have died.”

Cyprien thought over the Chinaman’s proposition. He saw that if the Kaffir was to be caught, it would be in this neighborhood; consequently it would not do to leave it. On the other hand, more provisions must be obtained. And so he with great regret decided to separate from Li and wait where he was for forty-eight hours. In that time the Chinaman on his giraffe would be able to secure assistance and return.

Li did not delay an instant. Thinking nothing of his own rest, and abandoning all idea of sleep, he wished Cyprien good-bye, kissed his hand, jumped on his giraffe, and disappeared in the night.

For the first time since his departure from Vandergaart Kopje Cyprien found himself alone in the desert. He felt profoundly miserable, and as he lay rolled in his blanket, gave himself over to the gloomiest thoughts. Isolated, almost without food and ammunition, what was to become of him in this unknown country, hundreds of miles away from civilization? The chance of catching Mataki was now a very feeble one. He might be only half a mile from him, and yet be ignorant of his whereabouts. The whole expedition had been disastrous. Every hundred miles had cost the death of one of its members. One only remained — himself! Was he destined to die miserably, like the others?

Such were Cyprien’s reflections as he gradually fell asleep.

The freshness of the morning and the night’s rest gave a more confident tone to his thoughts when he awoke. While waiting for the Chinaman’s return he resolved to ascend the mountain at the foot of which he had camped. He could from the summit command an extensive view, and might with the help of his glasses discover some trace of Mataki. But to do so he had to leave his giraffe, for no naturalist has as yet grouped that animal with the climbers.

He began by taking off the halter so ingeniously contrived by Li. One end of it he tied to the animal’s leg, the other to a tree surrounded by long luscious grass; and he left sufficient length for the giraffe to feed at its ease. And if we add to the length of the rope the length of the giraffe’s neck we must admit that very little rope was required to give it an ample radius of action.

Having secured his mount, Cyprien threw his gun on to one shoulder and his blanket on to the other, and, giving the giraffe a friendly pat in token of farewell, began the ascent of the mountain.

The ascent was long and difficult. The whole of the day was passed in scaling its steep slopes, turning its rocks and unclimbable peaks, and recommencing on the east or south an attempt made unsuccessfully on the north or west. When the night came, Cyprien had only got halfway up, and he had to wait till morning to continue the ascent.

Starting at daybreak, after assuring himself by means of his glasses that Li had not returned to the camp, he reached the top of the mountain about eleven o’clock. There a cruel deception awaited him. The summit was wrapped in cloud, and a thick mist hung over its lower flanks. In vain Cyprien tried to pierce the curtain and see down into the neighboring valleys. The whole district had disappeared, covered with a mantle of shapeless vapor which hid everything beneath it.

Cyprien was obstinate, and waited, hoping the fog would clear off. He hoped in vain. As the day wore on, the clouds grew in density, and when night came, the mist turned to rain. He was on a bare plateau with not a single tree or rock to shelter him, and night coming on, with an increasing downpour of fine steady rain that gradually soaked through his blanket and his clothes, and wet him to the skin.

Matters were growing serious. To descend under such circumstances would have been foolish. Cyprien made up his mind to shiver in the rain all night, and dry himself in the morning in the sun.

The rain was most refreshing after the drought that had preceded it, and Cyprien soon persuaded himself that there was nothing very disagreeable about it after all. One of its most unpleasant consequences was that he would have to eat his dinner uncooked. To light a fire, or even a match, in such weather was out of the question, and so he had to content himself with opening a tin of meat and eating it as he found it.

In an hour or two, in a half-torpid state from the continual rain, he fell asleep on a large stone for a pillow and his dripping blanket for a bed. When he awoke, he was in a high state of fever.

Knowing that he was lost, if he remained any longer beneath the deluge — for the rain was still falling in torrents — Cyprien made an effort, rose to his feet, and, using his gun as a stick, began the descent of the mountain.

How did he reach the bottom? It would have puzzled him to say. Sometimes gliding down the greasy slope, sometimes scrambling down the slippery rocks, bruised and breathless, and weakened by the fever, he kept on his downward way, and about noon reached the camp where he had left the giraffe.

The animal had gone, impatient probably at having been left alone, and perhaps pinched with hunger, for the grass within the circle of which the halter formed the radius had all been cropped. The giraffe had bitten through the rope, and gained its liberty.

Cyprien would have keenly felt this new piece of ill- fortune, had he been in his normal state, but extreme lassitude and weariness had almost crushed the life out of him. He could only throw himself on his waterproof bag, which he fortunately found untouched, change his wet clothes for dry ones, and then drop back to sleep under the shelter of the baobab beneath which he had camped.

Then began a strange period of half-slumber, of fever, of delirium, in which everything was mixed up, wherein time, space, and distance retained not a ghost of reality. Was it night or day? Sunshine or rain? Had he been there twelve hours or sixty? Was he alive or dead? He did not know. Pleasant dreams and frightful nightmares followed each other without intermission. Paris, the School of Mines, his home, Vandergaart Kopje, Miss Watkins, Pantalacci, Hilton, Friedel, legions of elephants, Mataki, and flights of birds spread over a boundless sky, all his remembrances, sensations, sympathies, and antipathies jostled each other in his wandering brain as if in a straggling battle of incoherences. To the creations of the fever were added the impressions of what was going on around him. And what made things all the more horrible was that in the thick of a storm of jackals barking, tiger-cats molrowing, hyenas laughing, he painfully pursued the romance of his delirium, and thought that he heard the crack of a rifle, followed by a deep silence. Then the concert began again, and lasted till morning.

During this delirium Cyprien would probably have passed from the fever into everlasting rest, if the strangest, most extravagant event had not happened to bring him back to reason.

The morning came. It rained no longer; the sun was high on the horizon. Cyprien had just opened his eyes. He looked, not without curiosity, at an ostrich of large stature that, after approaching him, stood still a vard or two off.

“Is that Mataki’s ostrich?” asked he to himself, still pursuing his main line of thought.

It was the bird itself that spoke, and that in excellent English, “There’s no mistake! Cyprien! My poor fellow, whatever are you doing here?”

An ostrich that spoke English, an ostrich that knew his name, was certainly enough to astonish any man even in his sober senses. But Cyprien was not in the least astonished, and took the remarkable phenomenon as a matter of course. He had seen so many strange phenomena during the night, it seemed quite a natural consequence of his mental derangement.

“You are not very polite, Mrs. Ostrich,” he answered. “What business is it of yours?”

He spoke in that dry, jerky way peculiar to those suffering from fever, and which left no doubt as to the state he was in. The ostrich seemed greatly troubled.

“Cyprien, my friend, you are ill, and all alone in the desert!” exclaimed the bird as it knelt by his side.

This was a physiological phenomenon no less abnormal among struthious birds than that of the gift of speech, for kneeling is a movement generally denied to them by nature. But Cyprien in his fever persisted in showing no astonishment. It seemed just as natural when the ostrich felt under its left wing, and took out a leather flask, and gave him a mouthful of the contents.

The only thing that began to surprise him was when the strange animal rose and threw off what seemed to be his plumage, and took off his neck and head, and then changed into a tall, sturdy, active man, and no other than that mighty hunter, Pharamond Barthes!

“Yes, it’s nobody else!” exclaimed Barthes. “Did you not recognize my voice? You are astonished at my outfit? It is a dodge I learned from the Kaffirs to get nearer the real ostriches and reach them with their assegais! But let us talk about yourself my poor fellow. How came you here, sick and abandoned? It was the merest chance I saw you as I went by. I did not even know you were in these parts.”

Cyprien was hardly in a state to talk to his friend, and could only make a few signs. Barthes saw that what was wanted, was to get the sick man the help he needed, and to attack the fever as soon as possible.

His experience in the desert had been a long one, and the bold hunter had learned from the Kaffirs a method of treatment of great efficacy in marsh fever such as his companion was suffering from. He dug in the ground a sort of ditch, which he filled with wood, having arranged it so that there was a good draft through it. When the wood had been lighted and consumed, it converted the ditch into a veritable oven. Barthes laid Cyprien in the ditch, after carefully wrapping him up so as to leave only his head exposed to the air. Ten minutes had hardly elapsed before an abundant perspiration showed itself — a perspiration which the amateur doctor took care to foster with the help of five or six cups of an infusion he made with some herbs he had gathered; and then Cyprien dropped off into a refreshing sleep.

At sundown, when he awoke, he was sufficiently recovered to ask for something to eat. His ingenious friend was quite prepared for him, and immediately offered him some excellent soup which he had made out of the spoils of his rifle and different sorts of vegetables. A wing of roast bustard and a cup of cold water with just a suspicion of cordial completed the meal, which greatly strengthened Cyprien, and began to clear his brain of the fumes which clouded it.

About an hour afterward, Barthes having treated himself to some dinner, sat down by the engineer and told him how he came to be there so strangely disguised.

“You know what I am capable of in search of any novelty in sport. During the last six months I had killed so many elephants, zebras, giraffes, lions, and all sorts of big game and little game, fur and feather — without counting a cannibal eagle that is the pride of my collection — that a few days ago I was seized with the idea of making a change in my sporting proceedings. Up to then I had only traveled escorted by my Basutos — thirty resolute fellows whom I pay at the rate of a bag of glass beads a month, and who would throw themselves into the fire to please their lord and master. But I was very hospitably received by Tonaia, the great chief of this country, and with a view of obtaining the right of shooting, over his territory — a right of which he is as jealous as a Highland laird — I consented to lend my Basutos with four guns for an expedition that he was thinking of against one of his neighbors.The reinforcement rendered him simply invincible, and he gained a signal triumph over his enemy. Hence a close friendship sealed in blood — that is to say, we mutually sucked a pin-prick in our forearms, and for the future Tonaia and I are brothers for life — and death! Assured of being let alone wherever I might wander throughout his possessions, I started off the day before yesterday in chase of tiger-cats and ostriches. As far as tiger-cats are concerned, I had the pleasure of shooting one last night, and I am rather surprised that you did not hear the row which preceded the shot. The fellow had been attracted by the odor of raw flesh, and two or three hundred jackals and hyenas had been favored with the same idea. You can imagine the concert that took place!”

“I think I heard it,” said Cyprien. “I even fancied it was given in my honor.”

“Not at all,” said Barthes. “It was in honor of a buffalo’s carcass at the bottom of the valley opening to your right. When day dawned, nothing was left of it but the bones. I will show you; it is a very creditable piece of anatomizing. You shall also see my prey, the biggest I have brought down since I landed in Africa.”

“But why the strange disguise you wore this morning?” asked Cyprien.

“It is an ostrich dress. As I told you, the Kaffirs often use it to approach the birds, for they are very shy and difficult to get within range. You will say that I have my capital rifle. So I have, but what of that? The fancy struck me to go out in the Kaffir style, and to that I owe my finding you, don't I?"

"And just in time. Without you I shouldn't have troubled the world much longer," answered Cyprien, as he cordially clasped his friend's hand.

He was now out of his ditch, and comfortably lying on a bed of leaves that his companion had arranged at the foot of the baobab. The gallant fellow's kindness did not stop at that. He went down into the neighboring valley in search of his tent, which he always took with him on such expeditions, and a quarter of an hour afterward he had pitched it above the invalid.

"And now, Cyprien," said he, "let us have your History, if you are not too tired to tell it."

Cyprien felt himself well enough to satisfy Barthes' very natural curiosity. Very shortly he told him of what had occurred in Griqualand, why he had come in pursuit of Mataki and his diamond, and what had been the chief incidents of the expedition. He told him of the deaths of Friedel, Hilton, and Pantalacci; the disappearance of Bardik; and how he was waiting for Li to return to the camp.

Barthes listened with profound attention. When asked if he had come across a young Kaffir whose appearance tallied with that given by Cyprien, he replied in the negative.

"But," added he, "I found a horse that had been turned adrift, and which may be yours." And he explained how the horse had fallen into his hands. "Two days ago," he said, "I was out hunting with three young Basutos in the mountains to the south, when I suddenly saw a gray horse dash out of one of the ravines. He had no harness, only a halter and a rope trailing behind him. He seemed very undecided which way to go, and I called out to him and showed him a handful of sugar, and he came with me. I took him prisoner. He is an excellent brute, full of courage and fire, and ‘salted like a ham.’”

“He is mine! That is Templar!” exclaimed Cyprien.

“Well, Templar is yours, then,” answered Barthes, “and I am glad to return him to you. Now, good-night; go to sleep, and at daybreak tomorrow we clear off from here.”

Then, adding practice to precept, Barthes rolled himself in his blanket, and went to sleep by the side of Cyprien.

In the morning the Chinaman returned with provisions, and before Cyprien awoke, Barthes explained matters to Li, and left him in charge, while he went off to fetch the horse.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WONDERFUL GROTTO

IT was indeed Templar that Cyprien saw before him when he awoke. The interview was most affectionate. The horse seemed to be as much pleased as his master at again meeting his traveling companion.

After breakfast Cyprien felt well enough to mount and set out. Barthes put all the baggage on Templar and then took him by the bridle and led the way to Tonaia's capital.

As they went along, Cyprien told his friend more in detail of the principal events of the expedition since leaving Griqualand. When he came to the final disappearance of Mataki, whose description he gave, Barthes burst out laughing.

"Oh!" said he; "that is news! I can tell you something about the thief, if not about the diamond!"

"What do you know?" asked Cyprien, much surprised.

"This," replied Barthes, "that hardly twenty-four hours ago my Basutos took prisoner a young Kaffir, whom they found wandering about the country, and handed him over, bound hand and foot, to my friend Tonaia. I fancy he would have made it hot for him, for he doesn't like spies, and the stranger evidently belonged to a tribe at war with his. But his life was saved! Fortunately they found out that he knew a little hanky-panky business, and was something of a medicine man — "

"That must be Mataki," said Cyprien.

“Well, he got off easily,” said Barthes. “Tonaia has invented all sorts of punishments for his enemies; but you need not be the least alarmed for your old servant. His reputation as a wizard protects him, and you will see him this afternoon in excellent health.”

The news could not be otherwise than grateful to Cyprien. He would, after all, attain his object, having no doubt that if Mataki had the diamond in his possession, he would hand it over.

The two friends continued in conversation as they crossed the plain which Cyprien had galloped over on giraffe-back a few days before.

In the evening Tonaia’s capital appeared in sight, lying like a huge amphitheater on the side of a hill which formed the northern horizon. It was a regular town, of from ten to fifteen thousand inhabitants, with well-marked roads and good-sized huts, some of them almost elegant in shape, bearing outward signs of ease and affluence. The king’s palace, surrounded by high palisades, and guarded by black warriors armed with assegais, occupied almost a quarter of the city.

Barthes had only to show himself for the Darners to fall before him, and he and Cyprien were immediately conducted across a series of large courts to the hall of ceremony, where the “invincible conqueror” sat in state, surrounded by his officers and guards.

Tonaia was about forty years of age. He was tall and well built. A sort of diadem of boars’ teeth was on his head, and he wore a red, sleeveless tunic, and an apron of the same color richly embroidered with beads. On his arms and legs were numerous copper bracelets. His face showed intelligence and refinement, but he had a crafty, hard-hearted look.

He accorded a grand reception to Barthes, whom he had not seen for some days, and in it Cyprien shared, as the friend of his faithful ally.

“The friends of our friends are our friends,” said the chief.

And learning that his new guest was not very well, Tonaia bestirred himself to install him in one of the best rooms in the palace, and to provide him with an excellent supper.

Acting on the advice of Barthes, all mention of Mataki was deferred till the morrow, when Cyprien had sufficiently recovered to appear before the king.

The whole court was assembled in the great saloon of the palace. Tonaia and his two guests were in the center of the circle. Barthes opened the negotiations in the language of the country, which he spoke fluently.

“My Basutos,” he said, “have recently brought to you a young Kaffir. The young Kaffir turns out to be the servant of my comrade, the learned philosopher, Victor Cyprien, who trusts to your generosity to surrender him. And I, as he is my friend and your friend, ask you this favor.”

As soon as Barthes began his speech Tonaia assumed an appropriate diplomatic air.

“The great white philosopher is welcome!” he answered. “But what ransom does he offer for my prisoner?”

“An excellent gun, ten times ten cartridges, and a bag of beads,” answered Barthes.

A flattering murmur ran around the audience in recognition of the splendor of the offer. Tonaia alone did not appear dazzled at it.

“Tonaia is a great prince,” he said, rising on his throne, “and the gods watch over him! A month ago they sent Pharamond Barthes with his brave warriors and wonderful guns to help us conquer our foes! That is why, if Pharamond Barthes desires it, the servant shall be given over safe and sound to his master.”

“And where is he at this moment?” asked the hunter.

“In the sacred grotto, where he is guarded night and day,” answered Tonaia, with all the importance of one of the most powerful of the Kaffir chiefs.

Barthes translated the reply to Cyprien, and asked the king’s permission to go with his companion and seek the prisoner in the grotto.

As he said so, there was a murmur of disapproval among the assembly. The demand of the Europeans seemed unreasonable. Never under any pretext had a stranger been admitted within the mysterious grotto. A cherished tradition declared that the day the white men learned the secret, the empire of Tonaia would crumble to dust.

But the king was not particularly pleased at his decisions being prejudged in this way, and the murmur induced him, from mere caprice, to grant what, without it, he would probably have refused.

“Tonaia is the blood-brother of Pharamond Barthes, and there is nothing he need hide from him! Can you and your friend keep an oath?”

Barthes nodded affirmatively.

“Then,” said the Kaffir king, “swear to touch nothing that you see in the grotto! Swear to live ever afterward when you come out as though you had never known its existence! Swear to never seek to enter it again, nor even to attempt to do so! Swear that you will tell no one what you will see!”

Barthes and Cyprien raised their hands, and repeated word for word the formula of the oath that had been delivered to them; and then Tonaia gave a few orders in a low tone, the court rose, and the guards formed into two lines. Slaves brought in a few pieces of fine linen, with which the eyes of the strangers were bandaged. Then the king sat down between them in a large palanquin(

of straw, which several Kaffirs lifted to their shoulders, and then the procession moved off.

The journey was quite long enough; it took nearly two hours. From the motions of the palanquin the friends made out that they were being carried over hilly ground.

Then the coolness of the air and the echo of the steps of the escort resounding from walls quite close together indicated that they were journeying underground. Then the puffs of resinous smoke which floated into their faces told them that torches had been lighted to show the way.

A quarter of an hour afterward the palanquin was unshouldered. Tonaia made his guests step out, and ordered their bandages to be removed.

Dazzled with the light after so long a darkness, Barthes and Cyprien thought at first they were the prey of some ecstatic illusion, so splendid and unexpected was the sight that greeted their eyes.

They were in the center of an immense grotto. The ground was covered with fine sand bespangled with gold. The vault was as high as that of a

Gothic cathedral, and stretched away out of sight into the distant darkness. The walls were covered with stalactites of varied hue and wondrous richness, and from them the light of the torches was reflected, flashing back with all the colors of the rainbow, with the glow of a furnace fire and the wealth of the aurora.

Colors of the most dazzling, shapes the most extraordinary, dimensions the most unexpected, distinguished these innumerable crystals. They were not, as in most grottoes, pendants, monotonously similar to each other, but nature had given free scope to fancy, and seemed to have exhausted every combination of tint and effect to which the marvelous brilliancy of the rocks could lend itself.

Blocks of amethyst, walls of sardonyx, masses of rubies, needles of emeralds, colonnades of sapphires deep and slender as forest pines, bergs of aquamarine, whorls of turquoise, mirrors of opal, masses of rose gypsum, and gold-veined lapis lazuli — all that the crystal kingdom could offer that was precious and rare and bright and dazzling had served as the materials for this astonishing specimen of architecture; and, further, every form, even of the vegetable kingdom, seemed to have been laid under contribution in the wondrous work. Carpets of mineral mosses soft and velvety as the finest gauze, crystalline trees loaded with flowers and fruits of jewels recalling the fairy gardens of Japanese art, lakes of diamonds, palaces of chalcedony, turrets and minarets of beryl and topaz, rose pile upon pile, and heaped together so many splendors that the eye refused to grasp them. The decomposition of the luminous rays by the thousands of prisms, the showers of brilliancy that flashed and flowed from every side, produced the most astonishing combination of light and color that had ever dazzled the eyes of man.

Cyprien doubted no longer. He beheld himself transported to one of those mysterious receptacles whose existence he had long suspected, in which nature stored and crystallized wholesale those precious gems which she only gives to man in favored spots and in fragmentary and isolated specimens. For a moment he was tempted to doubt the reality of his vision, but as he passed a huge heap of crystal he tried to scratch it with the ring on his finger, and found the attempt was in vain. The immense crypt was built up of genuine diamonds, rubies, and sapphires, and in masses so prodigious that their value was beyond all calculation.

Only astronomical numbers could be called in to give an approximate amount. In fact, there, buried in the earth, unknown and unproductive, lay a mass of wealth that could be reckoned in trillions and quadrillions.

Was Tonaia acquainted with the enormous wealth he here possessed? Probably not. Even Barthes who knew little about such matters, did not suspect for a moment that the marvelous crystals were precious stones. Most likely the Kaffir king thought himself simply the master and guardian of a particularly curious grotto, whose secret an oracle or some traditional superstition forbade him to reveal.

One thing seemed to confirm this opinion. In several corners of the cave Cyprien noticed heaps of human bones. Was this, then, the burial-place of the tribe, or — what was more horrible and more probable — did they here shed human blood in the rites of sacrifice or the practice of cannibalism?.

Barthes was of the latter opinion and whispered to Cyprien, “Tonaia told me that since his accession nothing of this sort had occurred, but the sight of those bones rather shakes my confidence in him;” and he pointed to a huge heap that had been recently formed, and which bore obvious marks of having been cooked.

The impression was confirmed a few minutes later.

The king and his guests reached the end of the grotto, before an opening which ran back into a recess similar to one of the lateral chapels in a basilica. Behind the iron grating which shut it in there was a wooden cage; in the cage was a prisoner. The cage was just large enough to allow him to crouch, while — the fact was too obvious — he was fattened up for an approaching feast!

The prisoner was Mataki.

“You! you! pa!” exclaimed the unfortunate Kaffir as soon as he recognized Cyprien. “Take me with you! Deliver me! I would rather go back to Griqualand and be hanged than remain in this poultry-coop for the horrible punishment Tonaia intends before he eats me!”

This was said in such a pitiful voice that Cyprien was quite moved by it.

“Be it so, Mataki,” he said; “I can obtain your liberty, but you cannot come out of that cage until you have given up the diamond — ”

“The diamond, pa!” interrupted the Kaffir — ”the diamond! I have no diamond! I never had it! I swear it! I swear it!”

He said this in such a tone of truth that Cyprien had no doubt of his veracity. Besides, he had always doubted that Mataki was the thief.

“But then, if you did not take the diamond,” he asked, “why did you run away?”

“Why? Because when my comrades were tried with the wands, they said that I must be the thief, and that I had acted as I did to disarm their suspicion. When in Griqualand you accuse a Kaffir, you know it is not long before he is sentenced and hanged; and, for fear that they should catch me. I ran away, as if I had been guilty.”

“He is speaking the truth, I think,” said Barthes.

“So do I,” said Cyprien; “and perhaps he was not far wrong in getting out of the way of Griqualand justice.”

Then he turned to Mataki. “Well, I do not doubt your innocence, but at Vandergaart Kopje they will not believe you when you tell your story. Are you willing to take your chance, and go back?”

“Yes; I will risk everything rather than remain here!” said Mataki, who seemed a prey to the keenest terror.

“We will see about it,” answered Cyprien — ”my friend will do so at once.”

Barthes stepped up to the king. “Speak out,” he said. “What do you want for the prisoner?”

.Tonaia reflected for a moment, and then said, “Four guns, ten times ten cartridges, and four bags of beads. That is not too much, is it?”

“It is twenty times too much, but Pharamond Barthes is your friend, and he will give you what you ask;” and then he stopped for an instant, and continued, “Listen, Tonaia. You shall have the four guns, the ten times ten cartridges, and the four bags of beads; but you shall give us a team of bullocks to take us back across the Transvaal, with the necessary provisions and an escort of honor.”

“That I will do,” said Tonaia, in a tone of complete satisfaction.

Then he whispered confidentially into Barthes’ ear, “The team is all ready. They came out of your friend’s wagon when my men came across them on their way home.”

The prisoner was at once handed over; and after a final glance at the splendors of the grotto, Cyprien, Barthes, and Mataki were blindfolded, and returned to Tonaia’s palace, where a grand banquet was given in honor of the treaty.

It was agreed that Mataki should not appear immediately at Vandergaart Kopje, but should remain in the neighborhood and re-enter the engineer’s service when he was sure it was safe to do so.

On the morrow Barthes, Cyprien, Li, and Mataki departed with a numerous escort for Griqualand. But the Star of the South seemed to be irretrievably lost, and Mr. Watkins might as well give up his idea of sending it to the Tower of London to sparkle among the crown jewels of Great Britain.

CHAPTER XX

THE RETURN

JOHN WATKINS had never been in a worse humor than since the departure of the four rivals in search of Mataki. As the days and weeks went by it seemed to him that all chance of recovering the precious diamond was rapidly vanishing. And his companions had all gone; and Friedel, Hilton, Pantalacci, even Cyprien, whom he had been accustomed to see so often, were much missed. So he betook himself to his gin, and, as may be easily imagined, the alcoholic support he administered to his grief was not much calculated to sweeten his character.

At the farm the greatest anxiety prevailed as to the fate of the expedition, for Bardik had been carried off by a party of Kaffirs, and, escaping a few days afterward, had made his way back to Griqualand with the news of the deaths of Hilton and Friedel. Alice was very unhappy; she sang no longer, and her piano remained dumb. Even her ostriches but slightly interested her. Dada no longer made her smile at his greediness, and impudently swallowed the most extraordinary things without the slightest protest.

Miss Watkins had two causes of alarm. The first was lest Cyprien should never return; the second, lest Pantalacci, the most hated of her admirers, should bring back “The Star” and claim the reward of his success. The idea of becoming the wife of the Italian was absolutely abhorrent to her. She thought of it by day, and dreamed of it by night; and her bright cheeks grew paler and paler, and her blue eyes clouded still deeper with gloom.

Three months had passed. It was evening. She was sitting near the lamp in the parlor; her father was on the other side of the table, smoking and drinking as usual. Her head was bent over her woolwork, which she had taken up in place of her neglected music, and in silent and sorrowful reverie she was thinking over her fate.

There came a gentle tap at the door.

“Come in!” she said, somewhat surprised, and wondering who it could be at such an hour.

“It is only I, Miss Watkins,” said a voice which made her start — Cyprien’s voice!

He had come back — thin, sunburned, with a long beard which disguised him, and clothes faded and worn by travel, but active and courteous and cheery as ever.

Alice jumped up and uttered a cry of astonishment and gladness. With one hand she strove to check the beatings of her heart; the other she held out to the engineer, and he was clasping it in his when Mr. Watkins awoke from his slumbers and asked, “What’s up?”

It took the farmer two or three minutes to grasp the situation. But scarcely had the first gleam of intelligence struck him than a cry — a cry straight from the heart — escaped him — ”And the diamond?”

The diamond, alas! had not come back.

Cyprien briefly told the story of the expedition. He related the death of Friedel, of Hilton, of Pantalacci, the pursuit of Mataki and his imprisonment by Tonaia — without mentioning his return to Griqualand — and explained his reasons for feeling sure of the Kaffir’s innocence. He did not forget to mention the devotion of Bardik and Li, and the friendship of Barthes, and enlarged on what he owed to the gallant hunter, and how, thanks to him, he had been able to return with his two servants from a journey that had proved fatal to his companions. He said nothing of the criminal schemes of his rivals, and he did not forget his promise to keep the secret of the wonderful grotto and its mineral riches, to which those of the Griqualand diamond field were as worthless ballast.

“Tonaia,” said he, in conclusion, “faithfully kept his engagements. Two days after I reached his capital, everything was ready for our return — provisions, teams, and escort. Under the command of the king in person about three hundred blacks with flour and smoked meat accompanied us to the camp where we had abandoned the wagon, which we found untouched beneath the brushwood we had heaped upon it. We then bade good-bye to our host, having given him five guns instead of the four he expected, and thus made him the most redoubtable potentate between the Limpopo and the Zambesi!”

“Bill how about your return journey when you left your camp?” asked Miss Watkins.

“Our return journey was slow, but devoid of accidents. Our escort left us at the Transvaal frontier, where Pharamond Barthes and his Basutos separated from us to go to Durban, and after a forty days’ march across the Veld, here we are, very much as we were before we left.”

“But why did Mataki run away?” asked Watkins, who had listened to the recital with much interest, without showing the slightest emotion about the three men who would never return.

“Mataki fled because he was afraid.”

“Is there no justice in Griqualand?” asked the farmer.

“Yes, but justice that is often too summary, Mr. Watkins; and I hardly blame the poor fellow, when wrongfully accused, for having thought it best to disappear during the first excitement at the diamond’s loss.”

“Nor do I,” said Alice.

“And I repeat that he is not guilty, and I think they will leave him alone for the future.”

“Hum!” said Watkins, apparently unconvinced. “Don’t you think Mataki shammed that fear, so as to get out of reach of the police?”

“No! He is innocent! I am sure of it,” said Cyprien rather dryly, “and I think that I have bought the assurance rather dear.”

“Oh! you are welcome to your opinion, and I am welcome to mine.”

Alice saw that the discussion was likely to end in a dispute, and so struck in by way of diversion with, “Do you know, Mr. Cyprien, that during your absence your claim has turned out a splendid one, and that your partner, Mr. Steel, is on the road to become one of the richest diggers in the Kopje?”

“No, I did not,” answered Cyprien frankly. “My first visit I paid to you, Miss Watkins, and I know nothing of what has happened during my absence.”

“Perhaps you have not had any dinner?” asked Alice, with the instinct of the thorough little housewife that she was.

“I am sorry to say I have not,” said Cyprien, blushing, though why he blushed, he did not know.

“Oh! But you must not go without food. An invalid like you — after such a trying journey. Why, it is nearly eleven o’clock!”

And without heeding his protestations she ran to the kitchen, and reappeared with a tray covered with a spotless cloth, and bearing some cold viands and a beautiful peach tart that she herself had made.

The tray was deposited in front of Cyprien, who seemed much confused, and as he hesitated to use the knife on a superb “biltong” —

“Shall I cut it for you?” asked Miss Watkins, with one of her sweetest smiles.

And the farmer, suddenly getting hungry at the sight of the gastronomic display, asked for another plate and a slice of biltong. Alice was delighted to wait on them, and merely to keep the gentlemen company, as she said, began to eat a few almonds.

The hurriedly-prepared supper was simply delightful. Never had the young engineer experienced such a triumphant appetite. He had three helpings of peach tart, and quite won the heart of Mr. Watkins, who, however, soon dropped off to sleep.

“And what have you been doing during the last three months?” asked Cyprien. “I am afraid you have forgotten all your chemistry.”

“No, sir; you are wrong. I have been working very hard, and I have been trying some experiments in your laboratory. Oh! I didn’t break anything! You needn’t look so frightened. I am very fond of chemistry, and cannot understand how you could leave such a splendid science to become a digger or a bushman.”

“But you know why I gave up chemistry.”

“I know nothing,” said Alice, with a blush, “and I think you were wrong. Were I in your place, I should try and make another diamond. That is much better than looking for one underground!”

“Is that an order, then?” asked Cyprien, with his voice all of a tremble.

“Oh, no!” answered Alice, with a smile, “only a request. Oh, Mr. Cyprien,” she continued more seriously, “if you only knew how unhappy I have been in knowing that you were exposed to all the fatigues and dangers you have been through. You have not told me all, but I can guess. A man like you, so learned, so well prepared to do good work and make great discoveries, ought not to have been exposed to perish in the desert from the bite of a snake or the grip of a lion without any gain to science or humanity. It was so wrong to let you go; and it was only by a miracle that you escaped to come back. Without your friend Mr. Barthes — ”

She did not finish, but the tears welling up into her eyes completed the thought for her.

“Those tears,” said Cyprien, “are more precious to me than all the diamonds in the world, and make me forget all my troubles.”

There was a short silence, which Alice broke with her usual tact, by resuming her account of her chemical studies.

It was past midnight when Cyprien returned to his hut, where a packet of letters awaited him, carefully arranged on his work-table by Miss Watkins.

These letters, reaching him after so long an absence, he hardly dared open. If they brought him news of some misfortune! His father, his mother, his little sister Jane! So many things can happen in three months!

He rapidly glanced through them, and found they contained nothing but good news. All his people were well. There were the warmest congratulations on his excellent theory of diamond formation. He could stay another six months in Griqualand, if he thought his doing so would be in the interests of science. Everything was for the best, and Cyprien went to sleep with a lighter heart than he had had for many a day.

In the morning he visited his friends, and stayed some time with Thomas Steel, who had been working to considerable purpose. The hearty Lancashire lad received his partner with the greatest cordiality. Cyprien arranged with him for Bardik and Li to resume work as before, intending, if they were successful, to give them a share in the claim.

On his part, he had given up all thoughts of again trying his hand at digging, and, in accordance with Alice's wish, resolved to resume his chemical researches.

His conversation with her had confirmed him in his own ideas. He had for some time thought that his true course was to abandon the rougher work, and leave travel and adventure alone. Too loyal and faithful to his word to think for an instant of abusing the confidence of Tonaia, and profiting by his knowledge of the cavern with its marvelous minerals, he found in it a valuable confirmation of his theory of gems, which could not but increase his ardor in research. And so he returned to his laboratory and resumed his investigations.

And he had a strong incentive to do so, for since the artificial diamond had been lost, Mr. Watkins said no more about his daughter's marriage. If the engineer could make another gem of extraordinary value, the farmer might again be induced to entertain the subject.

And so Cyprien resolved to set to work without delay, and made no attempt to conceal his proceedings from the diggers of Vandergaart Kopje. It would have been well, perhaps, had he done so.

He obtained a new tube of great resisting power, and filled it in the same way.

“What I want,” said he to Alice, “to crystallize the carbon — that is to say, make the diamond — is a proper solvent, which by evaporation or cooling will give the crystallization. We have a solvent for aluminium in sulphide of carbon, and by analogy we must find something similar for carbon, such as boron or silicon.”

Although Cyprien was not in possession of this solvent, he went on with his work. Instead of Mataki, who prudently kept away from the camp, Bardik was employed in keeping in the fire night and day, a task he fulfilled as zealously as his predecessor.

In the meantime, foreseeing that after this prolongation of his stay in Griqualand he would have to leave for Europe, Cyprien started on another item in his program, which he had hitherto left untouched. This was the determination of the exact position of a certain depression in the north-east of the plain, which seemed to have been the spot where the waters debouched at the time the diamantiferous deposit was formed.

Five or six days after his return from the Transvaal he was working at this with all his usual precision. For an hour or more he had been placing his poles, and noting his bench-marks on a fully detailed map he had procured at Kimberley, and, strange to relate, in every case he found that nowhere did his figures agree with the plan! At last, after repeated trials, there was no resisting the evidence that the map was out of truth as regards its compass bearings, and that the latitudes and longitudes were erroneous.

He was using an excellent chronometer, that had been duly rated, and which he had specially brought out with him for the purpose of determining the longitude, and the time was high noon. Hence, feeling assured of the infallibility of his compass and his declination needle, he had no hesitation in deciding that the map on which he was marking his observations was entirely untrustworthy, owing to some serious oversight.

In fact, the north of the map, as shown by the arrow was really the north-north-west, and all the positions had necessarily to be altered.

“I see what it is,” Cyprien suddenly exclaimed, “the asses who did this forgot to allow for the variation, and that is nearly twenty-nine degrees west! All their latitude and longitude lines ought to be swung around twenty-nine degrees! They must have funny surveyors that produced this masterpiece.”

And he chuckled loudly at the blunder.

“Well, to err is human. Let him throw the first stone at these fellows who never made a mistake in his life.”

Cyprien had no reason for keeping secret the rectification he had made in the orientation of the diamantiferous beds of the district. As he was returning to the farm, he met Vandergaart, and casually mentioned it to him.

"It is very curious that such a huge mistake was not found out before. It affects all the maps of the district."

The old lapidary pricked up his ears and looked Cyprien straight in the face.

"Are you sure you are right?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!"

"And will you swear it in a court of justice?"

"In a dozen courts, if you like."

"And no one can deny what you say?"

"Certainly not; I should only have to point out the mistake. It is open, gross, palpable. They have omitted the magnetic variation, that is all."

Vandergaart shook hands and walked off without another word, and Cyprien soon forgot the strange way in which the intelligence had affected him.

But two or three days afterward, when he went to call on the old lapidary, he found the door shut. On it was a notice, "AWAY ON BUSINESS."

CHAPTER XXI

VENETIAN JUSTICE

DURING the following days Cyprien was busy attending to his experiment. He had introduced several changes in the construction of his furnace and contrived a better draft. By doing so he hoped to make his second diamond in much less time than he had done the first.

Miss Watkins took great interest in the attempt which she had really originated. Frequently was she seen at the furnace, watching through the grating the fire that roared within.

John Watkins was no less interested than his daughter, but from other motives. He wished to become once more the owner of a gem whose value could be reckoned in millions. Great was his fear that the experiment would not succeed a second time, and that chance would fail to play the important part in it that it had done on the previous occasion.

But if the farmer and Miss Watkins encouraged the experimenter to persevere, it was not so with the diggers. Their opinions were the same as those of Pantalacci, Hilton, and Friedel; and the Jew Nathan never ceased in his scheming to excite them against the young engineer. If this manufacture of diamonds was to become a trade — if, like white sapphires, amethysts, topazes, and emeralds made from crystals of alumina colored by metallic acids, diamonds were to be turned out from the laboratory without trouble — the market value of the stones would tend to diminish. If making diamonds was to become a recognized handicraft, the diamond-fields at the Cape and elsewhere would be ruined.

All this had been said after the first experiment, and now it was repeated with more violence and acrimony. The diggers wished little good to Cyprien or his works. But he thought little of the diggers, and went on his way, determined to see his experiment through. He was not going to hang back before public opinion, and had no intention of keeping a secret that might do good to all.

But if he continued his work without fear or hesitation, Miss Watkins, who heard what was going on, began to tremble for him. She reproached herself with having led him on to the track. To trust to the police protecting him was to trust to a broken reed. A murderous stroke is quickly dealt, and may fall before any one can intervene. Cyprien might have to atone with his life for the supposed injury he had done to the diggers of South Africa.

Alice grew anxious, and could not hide her anxiety from the engineer. He reassured her as well as he could, and thanked her for the motive that had prompted her to speak. In the interest she took in him he saw the proof of a tender sentiment, whose existence was now no secret between them. Cyprien was only too pleased that his experiment led to closer intimacy with Alice, and bravely continued his work.

“What I am doing is for us both,” he said to her. But Miss Watkins, noticing what people were saying down at the claims, lived a life of terror.

And not without reason. A regular agitation was organized against Cyprien, and the diggers did not confine themselves to threats and recriminations, but proceeded to do damage.

One evening, when Cyprien went off to look at the furnace, he found it had been broken down. During Bardik’s absence a lot of men had taken advantage of the darkness and in a couple of minutes destroyed what had been the work of days. The bricks had been thrown about, the furnaces had been smashed, the fires put out, and the tools scattered and rendered useless. Nothing was left of what had cost so much thought and trouble. All had to be begun over again, if he was the man not to give in to mere brute strength, or he would have to abandon the game.

“No!” he exclaimed. “No, I will not give in! And tomorrow I will give information against the scoundrels who have destroyed my property. We shall see if there is justice in Griqualand.”

There was justice, but not the sort Cyprien imagined.

Without saying a word to anybody, without even telling Miss Watkins, for fear of adding to her alarm, Cyprien regained his hut, and lay down to sleep, resolved to begin legal proceedings in the morning, even if he had to go eventually to the Governor of the Cape.

He had slept perhaps two hours, when the noise of his door opening awoke him with a start.

Five men in crape masks, armed with revolvers and rifles and carrying bull’s-eye lanterns, took up their position around the bed.

Cyprien had no idea that anything serious was intended. In fact, he would have laughed, had not the pleasantry seemed to him unworthy of such a compliment.

But a heavy hand struck him hard on the shoulder, and one of the masked men opened a paper he held, and in a gruff voice read as follows: —

“Victor Cyprien —

“This is to give you notice that the secret tribunal of Vandergaart Kopje, twenty-two members being present, acting in the name of the public safety, have this day, at twenty-five minutes past midnight, sentenced you to death. You have by a treacherous discovery threatened their interests, their lives, and the lives of their families, and of all men who earn their livelihood by the cutting and sale of diamonds. The tribunal in their wisdom have decided that such a discovery deserves annihilation, and that the death of one man is preferable to that of many thousands of his fellows. It has decreed that you shall now have ten minutes to prepare for death, and that you shall choose the manner in which you will die; that your papers shall be burned, with the exception of an open letter you can address to your relatives; and that your hut shall be razed to the ground.

“And thus be it with all traitors!”

As he heard this death warrant, Cyprien’s confidence began to quail, and he wondered if this curious comedy was one of the savage customs of the country or was really in earnest.

The man who held him by the shoulders soon cleared away his doubts.

“Get up at once,” he said gruffly; “we have no time to lose.”

“It is a murder!” replied Cyprien, as he rose and began to dress by his bedside.

He was more disgusted than frightened, and concentrated his thoughts on what had happened to him with the coolness with which he would have attacked a mathematical problem. Who were these men? He could not discover even by the sound of their voices. Evidently those among them who knew him personally were advisedly silent.

“Have you chosen what death you will die?” asked the masked man.

“I have no choice to make, and I protest against the odious crime of which you wish to be guilty,” said Cyprien in a firm voice.

“You can protest, but you will none the less be hanged. Don’t you want to write anything?”

“Nothing I would care to trust to assassins like you!”

“Forward, then!” said the chief.

Two men placed themselves on each side of the engineer, and the procession was formed to pass through the doorway.

But as the advance began, something very unexpected happened. Into the middle of the secret commissioners of Vandergaart Kopje a man rushed with a bound.

It was Mataki.

The young Kaffir, who often prowled around the camp after dark, had noticed the masked men, and followed them. He had heard all that passed, had understood the danger that threatened his master, and suddenly leaped in, scattered the diggers right and left, and threw himself at Cyprien’s feet.

“Why do these men want to kill you, pa?” asked he, clasping his master’s legs, while the masked men in vain endeavored to tear him away.

“Because I made an artificial diamond,” answered Cyprien, clasping Mataki’s hands to prevent his being torn away from him.

“Oh, pa! I am so sorry for the harm I have done!” said the Kaffir, bursting into tears.

“What?” asked Cyprien.

“Yes, I will confess everything now they want to kill you!” said Mataki. “Yes, they ought to kill me, not you, for I put the big diamond in the cannon!”

“Take this fellow away!” said the leader of the gang.

“I put it — I put the diamond in the tube!” said Mataki, struggling. “Yes, I swindled you, pa! I thought you would like to think that your experiment had come off!”

His protestations were so fierce in their energy that the masked men stopped to listen to them.

“Is that true?” asked Cyprien, surprised and disappointed at what he heard.

“Yes! a hundred times yes! I speak the truth!”

And then the men released him, and he sat on the ground and spoke as follows —

“The day of the landslip, when I was buried by the fall, I found the big diamond! I was holding it in my hand and wondering how I was to hide it, when the wall fell on me, to punish me for my wicked thought. When I came back to life, I found the stone in the bed you had put me in. I was going to give it you, but I was ashamed to confess that I was a thief, and I waited for a favorable opportunity. Not long afterward pa wanted to make a diamond, and set me to look after the fire. The second day, while I was there alone, the gun burst, and the furnace was all broken. Then I thought that pa would be sorry because his experiment had failed; and I squeezed a handful of clay around the big diamond and slipped it into the cracked gun; and I made the furnace all right again, so that pa could not see it had broken. I waited and said nothing, and when pa found the diamond, he was very glad."

A burst of laughter that the five men could not restrain saluted these last words of Mataki.

Cyprien did not laugh; he bit his lips in vexation.

It was impossible to mistake the Kaffir's story; it was obviously too true. In vain Cyprien sought for some reason for his telling a falsehood. In vain he said to himself, "A diamond exposed to such a temperature would have been volatilized!"

His sound sense showed him at once that, protected in its envelope of clay, the gem had escaped the heat, or been only partially affected by it. Perhaps, even, it was the torréfaction that had given it its sable tint. Perhaps it had been volatilized and recrystallized in its shell!

These thoughts crowded into his brain and associated themselves with extraordinary rapidity. He was stupefied.

"I remember seeing the piece of earth in the Kaffir's hand on the day of the landslip," said one of the men, when the laughter had somewhat subsided; "and he clutched it so tight in his fingers that we couldn't get it out."

"There is no doubt now," said another. "Is it possible to make a diamond? We must have been mad to think so! As well try to make a star!"

And they began to laugh again.

Assuredly Cyprien suffered more from their mirth than their menaces.

After consulting together in a whisper, the leader said to him, “We are of opinion that the execution of the sentence passed on you, Victor Cyprien, may be respited. You are free! but remember that the sentence always hangs on you! One word — one sign, even — to the police, and you shall die! Your very good health!” and, followed by his companions, he disappeared through the doorway.

The room was left in darkness. Cyprien might have imagined he had been the prey of a nightmare. But the sobs of Mataki, who lay stretched on the ground, and wept noisily with his head between his hands, proclaimed the reality of what he had passed through.

It was cruelly true! He had escaped from death, but at the cost of a deep humiliation. He, a mining engineer, a pupil of the Polytechnique, a distinguished chemist, and well-known geologist, had been taken in by a miserable Kaffir! Or rather, it was his own vanity, his ridiculous presumption, that had led him to this unheard-of blunder. He had even thought out a theory accounting for his discovery! What could be more ridiculous?

“My paper!” he exclaimed. “Have the brutes taken it away with them?”

He lighted a candle. No! His memoir was there. No one had seen it. He could not rest until he had burned it.

Mataki’s grief was so intense that he endeavored to comfort him. This was not very difficult. At the first kind words of his “pa” he seemed to live again. And Cyprien assured him of his forgiveness on condition that he left off such tricks for ever.

Mataki promised by all that was sacred that he would do so, and Cyprien went to bed.

In the morning, when it became known that the Star of the South was neither more nor less than a natural diamond, that the diamond had been found by the young Kaffir, who was quite conversant with its value, all the suspicion against him was again awakened. Watkins made a tremendous noise. Mataki must be the thief! After having thought of stealing it once, it was evident that he had stolen it on the night of the dinner.

Cyprien protested, and offered to guarantee the Kaffir’s innocence, but no one would listen to him. And this showed him how well founded had been Mataki’s fear of returning to Griqualand.

But the young engineer had no idea of giving in, and so brought forward an argument which, to his mind, sufficiently cleared the Kaffir.

“I believe in his innocence,” said he to John Watkins; “and, besides, if he was guilty, it is my business, and no one else’s. Natural or artificial, the diamond belonged to me before I gave it to Miss Alice — ”

“Oh, it belonged to you, did it?” said Watkins, with a sneer.

“Certainly,” said Cyprien. “Was it not found on my claim by Mataki, who was in my service?”

“Nothing could be more correct,” answered the farmer, “and consequently it belonged to me by the terms of our agreement, which gave me the three first stones which turned up.”

Cyprien gazed in astonishment. It was true, and he said nothing.

“My claim is just, I believe?” asked John .Watkins.

“Quite just,” answered Cyprien.

“I shall be very much obliged to you, then, if you will say so in writing, in case we come across the diamond which some scoundrel has so impudently stolen.”

Cyprien seized a sheet of blank paper, and wrote:

I beg to state that the diamond found on my claim by a Kaffir in my service is, under the terms of my agreement, the property of Mr. John Stapleton Watkins.

“VICTOR CYPRIEN.”

And with this vanished all the dreams of our youthful engineer. If the diamond ever did appear, it belonged of right to Watkins, and a new abyss that many millions could not fill had opened between Alice and him.

And if the farmer’s claim was disastrous to these two, it was none the less so to Mataki. The diamond had been stolen from John Watkins, and John Watkins was not the man to abandon the chase when he thought the thief was in his power.

And so Mataki was arrested, imprisoned, and in twelve hours had been sentenced to be hanged, in spite of all that Cyprien could say or do for him.

He would escape, if he would restore the Star of the South. But he could not restore it, for he had never taken it. And Cyprien did not know what to do to save the unfortunate man, in whose innocence he was obstinate enough still to believe.

CHAPTER XXII

A MINE OF A NEW SORT

Miss WATKINS notwithstanding Cyprien’s silence, soon heard all about the visit of the masked men.

“Ah!” she said to him. “Is not your life worth more than all the diamonds in the world?”

“Dearest Alice — ”

“You must not experiment in that way any more.”

“You order me?”

“Yes! I order you to leave off, as I once ordered you to begin. That is, if you like to take orders from me.”

“As I like always to obey them,” said Cyprien, taking the hand that Alice held out to him.

But when he told her what had happened to Mataki, she was in despair, particularly when she learned that her father was the cause.

She, like Cyprien, did not believe in the poor Kaffir’s guilt She, like him, would do all she could to save him. But how to do so, and how to influence her father in his favor was more than she could discover.

Mr. Watkins had obtained no confession from Mataki. He had shown him the gallows on which he was to hang; .he had promised him pardon, if he would only confess; Ibut all to no purpose. Then, having to give up all hope ‘of ever recovering the Star of the South, he had gone quite mad with rage. No one dare come near him.

The day after the sentence, Mr. Watkins, suffering ‘rather less than usual from his gout, took advantage of the relief to put his papers in order. Seated in front of a large writing-table of ebony inlaid with yellow marqueterie, a relic of the old Dutch domination, stranded after many vicissitudes in this remote corner of Griqua- land, he was leisurely running through his different assignments, agreements, and correspondence.

Behind him, Alice, lost in her work, was stitching away, without noticing the big ostrich, Dada, who stalked about the room with his usual gravity, sometimes giving a glance out of the window, sometimes giving a long, scrutinizing look at Mr. Watkins.

An exclamation from the farmer made Alice look up.

“That bird is a nuisance!” he said. “Look, he has swallowed a deed! Here, Dada! Tsh! Tsh! Give it up! Give it up!” And then came a torrent of abuse. “You wretched old brute! You have swallowed it! A most important thing like that! The deed of assignment that gave me the Kopje! It is abominable! I’ll make you give it up — if I have to throttle you!”

And Watkins jumped off the chair and ran after the ostrich, which made two or three turns of the room, and then bounded out through the open window.

“Father!” said Alice, aghast at her favorite’s greediness, “do be calm! Listen to me! You will make yourself ill!”

But Watkins did not hear her. The ostrich’s escape had driven him to distraction; and, almost choking with rage, he hobbled after the bird, and roared out:

“I have had too much of it! I will settle you! I am not going to give up my title-deeds in that way! I will put a bullet through you, and we’ll see!”

Alice burst into tears.

“Father! Do have mercy on the poor thing!” said she. “Is the paper so very important? Cannot you get a duplicate? Will you make me miserable and kill poor Dada for such a trifle as that?”

But John Watkins would hear nothing. He was looking around on all sides in search of the victim.

At last he caught sight of Dada standing by the side of the hut occupied by Cyprien. Bringing his gun to his shoulder he took aim, but the ostrich seemed to recognize the danger, and disappeared around the corner.

“Just wait! Wait! I’ll have you, you brute!” said Watkins.

And Alice, more frightened than ever, followed him, to make yet another appeal for mercy.

They reached the hut and walked around it. No ostrich! Dada had become invisible!

He could not have left the hill, for they would have seen him. He must have gone inside the hut through the door, or through one of the windows which were open at the back.

So thought Watkins. And he hurried up and knocked at the door. Cyprien opened it.

“Mr. Watkins? Miss Watkins? I am delighted to see you. Come in,” said he, looking very much surprised at the unexpected visit.

The farmer hastily explained matters. He was very much out of breath, and very much excited.

“Well, well, have a look for the culprit,” said Cyprien.

“And I’ll precious soon settle his hash for him!” added the farmer, brandishing his gun like a tomahawk.

At the same moment a glance from the young lady showed Cyprien the horror with which she regarded the projected execution. His mind was consequently made up immediately. He would not find the ostrich.

“Li,” he whispered to the Chinaman, “I expect the ostrich is in your room. Tie it up there, and let it get away as soon as I have taken Mr. Watkins in the opposite direction.”

Unfortunately this excellent plan proved a failure at the outset, for the ostrich had taken refuge in the very first room into which Mr. Watkins went. There it was, making itself as small as possible, with its head stuck under a chair, but as visible as the sun at noonday.

Watkins rushed at it.

“Now, you brute, your time has come!”

But, angry as he was, he hesitated. To fire a gun point-blank in a house that did not belong to him was rather too strong a proceeding.

Alice turned away and wept, and saw nothing of this hesitation.

Then a brilliant idea occurred to the engineer.

“Mr. Watkins! You only want to recover your paper? Well, you need not kill Dada to do that! We can open the stomach, for the document can hardly have got out of it yet. Will you allow me to try the operation? I have worked at zoology at the museum, and I know quite enough to manage a little surgical affair like that.”

Whether it was that the idea of vivisection flattered the vengeful instincts of the farmer, or that his anger was cooling down, or that he was touched by his daughter’s tears, any way, he allowed himself to be persuaded, and accepted the compromise.

“But we must not lose the document,” insisted he; “if it is not in the stomach, we must go farther down for it! I must have it at any price.”

The operation was not quite so easy as it looked at first sight, notwithstanding the resigned attitude of the wretched Dada. A small ostrich has prodigious strength, and once the patient felt the amateur surgeon’s knife, the gigantic Dada might turn on them in anger, and escape. And so Li and Bardik were called in to assist.

First of all the ostrich had to be secured. The lines which Li always kept in his room came in very handy. An arrangement of hitches and knots soon bound Dada beak and foot.

Cyprien did not stop there. In order to spare the sensibility of Miss Watkins, he resolved to save the ostrich all pain, and so covered its head with a handkerchief moistened with chloroform.

That done, he began the operation, not without considerable anxiety.

Alice, shuddering at these preliminaries and pale as death, had taken refuge in an adjoining room.

Cyprien began by feeling at the base of the bird's neck so as to find the gizzard. This was not very difficult, for the gizzard forms at the upper part of the thoracic region a mass of some size, hard and prominent, which the fingers could easily distinguish among the softer parts of its vicinity.

With a sharp penknife the skin of the neck was carefully cut into. It was large and loose, like that of a turkey, and covered with gray down, which was easily pressed aside. The incision caused just a little blood to flow, and this was carefully wiped off with a wet rag.

Cyprien notice'd the position of ihe two or three important arteries, and carefully pulled them aside with the wire hooks he had given Bardik to hold. Then he opened a white, pearly tissue, which filled a large cavity above the collar-bone. He had reached the gizzard.

Imagine the gizzard of a fowl increased almost a hundred-fold in size, hardness, and weight, and you have the gizzard of the ostrich.

Dada's gizzard looked like a large, brown pocket, greatly distended with the food or the foreign bodies that the voracious animal had swallowed during the day — or in the past. And it was quite enough to see this brawny, healthy organ to understand that there was little danger in resolutely attacking it.

With the sharp hunting-knife that Li placed in his hand, Cyprien cut deeply down into the mass.

Down the fissure it was easy to introduce the hand to the very bottom of the gizzard.

The first thing Cyprien lighted on was the deed so much regretted by Mr. Watkins. It was rolled lip into a ball, slightly creased perhaps, but still intact.

“There is something else,” said Cyprien, who had put back his hand into the hole. And bringing it back, he found an ivory ball. “The darning-ball belonging to Miss Watkins,” he exclaimed. “Only think, it is five months ago since it was swallowed! Evidently it could not pass the lower orifice.”

He handed the ball to Bardik, and resumed his investigations like an archaeologist amid the ruins of a Roman camp.

“A copper candlestick!” he exclaimed, extracting one of those useful articles, crushed, flattened, oxydized, but still recognizable.

Here the laughter of Bardik and Li became so noisy that Alice, who had just entered the room, could not help joining in.

“Some coins! A key! A small-tooth comb!” continued Cyprien, proceeding with his inventory.

Suddenly he turned pale. His fingers seemed to grasp an exceptional form! No! There could be no doubt of it! And yet he hardly dared to believe in such good fortune!

At length he pulled out his hand, and held up the object he had found.

And what a shout escaped from John Watkins!

“The Star of the South!”

Yes. The famous diamond was recovered intact, and had lost none of its brilliancy. It sparkled in the light from the window like a constellation.

One strange thing about it was noticed at once by all present. It had changed color!

Instead of being black, as formerly, the Star of the South was now rose-color. A beautiful rose, which added, if possible, to its limpidity and splendor.

“Do you think that will damage its value?” asked Watkins, as soon as he could speak, for surprise and delight had almost deprived him of breath.

“Not the least in the world,” said Cyprien. “On the contrary, it is an additional peculiarity which classes the stone among the rare family of chameleon diamonds. It does not seem to be very cold in Dada’s gizzard, though it is generally due to sudden changes of temperature that we get the alteration in tint of the colored diamonds.”

“Ah! At all events, I have found you again, my beauty,” said Watkins, clasping the diamond in his hand to assure himself it was not all a dream. “You have caused me so much anxiety by your flight, ungrateful Star, that I shall not let you go again.” And he lifted it to his eyes, and he gave such a longing look that he seemed about to swallow it, like another Dada.

Cyprien ordered Bardik to give him a needle threaded with coarse thread, and then he carefully replaced the gizzard of the ostrich. Then he sewed up the incision in the neck, and then he undid the bandages. Dada, much crestfallen, hung his head, and did not seem disposed to move.

“Do you think he will get over it?” asked Alice, more interested in the sufferings of her favorite than in the reappearance of the diamond.

“Get over it, Miss Watkins?” said Cyprien. “Do you think I should have tried the operation, if I had not been sure he would? In three days he will feel nothing of it, and in two hours he will have filled the curious pouch we have just emptied.”

Reassured by the promise, Alice gave the engineer a look of gratitude that fully recompensed him for all his trouble. As she did so, Mr. Watkins had just succeeded in convincing himself that he was in his sober senses, and that he had really recovered his wonderful diamond. He left the window.

“Mr. Cyprien,” he said, in majestic and solemn tones, “you have done me a great service, and I do not know how to reward you for it.”

Cyprien’s heart began to leap.

To reward him! Well, Mr. Watkins, there was a very simple way! Was it so difficult to keep your promise and give your daughter’s hand to the man who brought back the Star of the South? Was it not the same as if he had brought it from the depths of the Transvaal?

So Cyprien thought, but he was too proud to speak. And, besides, he thought the same idea might occur to the farmer. But Watkins said nothing at all about it, and having beckoned to his daughter, left the hut, and returned to the farm.

It need hardly be said that a few minutes afterward Mataki was set free. But he had had a narrow escape of paying with his life for the greediness of Dada, and had got off unexpectedly well.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE HOUR OF TRIUMPH

THE fortunate John Watkins, now the richest farmer in Griqualand, having already given a dinner in honor of the birth of the Star of the South, considered that he could not do better than give another in honor of its restoration. This time, however, precautions were taken against a disappearance, and Dada was not one of the guests.

The dinner took place in the afternoon of the day after that on which the Star was recovered. Watkins had invited all his friends, of high and low degree. He had ordered from the butcher sufficient meat to feed a squadron of dragoons, and bought up all the wines, liquors, and provisions, preserved and otherwise, that the neighborhood could furnish.

By four o’clock the table was laid in the large room, the wine was ready on the sideboard, and the beef and mutton were roasting at the fire. At six o’clock the guests arrived, all dressed in their very best. At seven the diapason of conversation had attained such volume that a trumpet would have had hard work to make itself heard above the uproar. There was Mathys Pretorius, who had regained his equanimity now that he had no longer to fear the persecutions of Pantalacci; there was Thomas Steel, the picture of health and strength; there was Nathan the broker; and there were the farmers, the diggers and all the leading tradesmen of Vandergaart Kopje.

Cyprien, thanks to Alice’s commands, had not been able to decline his invitation, and Alice herself was, of course, present. And both of them were very miserable, for the “more than millionaire,” John Watkins, could no longer dream of giving his daughter to “a mere engineer, who did not even know how to make a diamond!”

Thus did the worthy egotist speak of the man to whom he owed his newly-found wealth.

The dinner proceeded amid the unrestrained enthusiasm of the diners. In front of the fortunate farmer — and not behind him, as on the former occasion — the Star of the South reposed on a tiny cushion of blue velvet. It was placed inside a glass globe, and the glass was inside a cage of substantial iron bars. Ten toasts had already been drunk to its beauty, to its incomparable limpidity, to its unequaled brilliancy. The heat was overpowering.

Isolated and meditative, Miss Watkins seemed unconscious of the tumult around her. She looked at Cyprien, and the tears began to gather in her eyes. Suddenly three loud knocks were heard at the door. The noise was instantly hushed.

“Come in!” shouted Watkins, “whoever you are. If you are thirsty, you are just in time.”

The door opened. The long, lean figure of Jacobus Vandergaart appeared in the doorway.

The guests looked at each other in surprise. The animosity between Watkins and Vandergaart was so notorious that a murmur of expectancy ran around the table. Every one anticipated something serious. Every sound was hushed! Every eye was turned on the old lapidary. Standing erect, with his arms crossed, with his silver locks escaping from beneath his hat, with his long black coat that he wore only on high days and holidays, he seemed the very spirit of revenge.

John Watkins was seized with a vague terror, and a secret shudder passed through him. He turned pale, notwithstanding the fiery tint with which his devotions at the alcoholic shrine had been repaid. He seemed to struggle against some unaccountable presentiment as he broke silence with, “Well, it is a long time, neighbor Vandergaart, since you gave me the chance of seeing you in my house. What good wind has blown you here this evening?”

“The wind of justice,” said the old man coldly. “I come to tell you that right has triumphed after an eclipse of seven years! I come to tell you that the hour of atonement has struck, that I take back my own again, and that the Kopje, which has always borne my name, is now mine in law as it always has been mine in equity! John Watkins, you have been stripped of what belongs to me! Today it is you whom the law has despoiled and condemned to give back what you took from me!”

When Watkins first caught sight of Vandergaart and the vague fear of danger stole over him he felt the blood run cold in his veins; but now the danger had become distinct and defined, his sanguine, violent temperament made him advance to meet it.

And so, lolling back in his arm-chair, he said, with a scornful laugh, “The good man is mad! I always thought he was cracked, and it seems that the hole has got bigger!”

The guests applauded the pleasantry. Vandergaart remained impassive. “He laughs best who laughs last,” said he, as he drew a folded paper from his pocket. “John Watkins, you know that a formal judgment, confirmed on appeal, so that the Queen herself could not put it aside, assigned to you the land in this district lying to the west of the twenty-fifth degree of east longitude, and assigned to me all that lying to the east of that meridian?”

“Precisely so, my worthy historian,” exclaimed John Watkins; “and you would spend your time much better at home in bed than in coming here and interrupting a lot of fellows at their dinner who do not happen to owe a farthing to any one.”

Vandergaart unfolded the paper. “This is a certificate,” continued he, in his mildest voice, “of the Lands Department, countersigned by the governor, and duly registered at Victoria the day before yesterday, to the effect that there is a serious error in all the existing maps and plans of Griqualand. The error was committed ten years ago by the surveyors who plotted the district, and who forgot to make the necessary allowance for magnetic variation in their determination of the true north. The error affects every map and plan of the district they surveyed. The rectification of that error, which has now been made, takes the twenty-fifth degree of longitude three miles farther west. That rectification reinstates me in possession of the Kopje which was adjudged to you — for, in the opinion of the lawyers and of the chief justice himself, the original judgment still stands! That, Mr. Watkins, is what I came here to tell you!”

Whether it was that the farmer had imperfectly understood, or that he simply refused to understand, he again tried to answer the lapidary with a scornful laugh. But this time the laugh sounded hollow, and received no echo from those around the table. The witnesses of the scene sat lost in astonishment,” with their eyes fixed on Vander- gaart, apparently as much struck by his gravity and assurance as by the confidence he evidently felt.

Nathan was the first to break silence, and give expression to the general feeling. “There is nothing absurd, at first sight, in what Vandergaart has said. The error might have been made in the longitude after all, and before doing anything either way, it may be as well to wait for further proofs.”

. “Wait for proofs!” exclaimed Watkins, slapping his fist down on the table. “I don’t want any proofs! I laugh at your proofs! Is this my house or is it not? Have I not been maintained in possession of the Kopje by a definite judgment, of which even this old crocodile recognizes the validity? Well, what does anything else matter to me? If I am to be molested in the peaceful possession of my own, I’ll do what I did before, I’ll go to the courts, and we’ll soon see who’ll win!”

“The courts,” replied Vandergaart, with his inexorable moderation, “have done all they can. There is now only a question of fact. Does the twenty-fifth degree of longitude run where it says it does on the plans, or does it not? And it has been officially decided that it does not; that there has been a mistake in the matter; and the conclusion is inevitable that the Kopje must be given back to me.” And so saying, Vandergaart displayed the official certificate, with all its seals and signatures.

The farmer’s embarrassment became manifestly serious. He fidgeted in his chair. He tried to laugh, and the attempt failed. His eyes by chance rested on the Star of the South. The sight seemed to restore the confidence that was fast forsaking him.

“And if so,” he replied, “if in defiance of all right and justice the property legally given to me, and peacefully enjoyed by me for the last seven years, has to be given back, what does it matter? Have I not something to console me in that solitary gem, which I can put in my waistcoat pocket and snap my fingers at the world?”

“You are wrong again, John Watkins,” answered Vandergaart very decidedly. “The Star of the South is now mine by the same title as that by which I hold the Kopje.

Everything is mine — your house and all it contains. And I am prepared to take it, as you see!”

And Vandergaart clapped his bony hands, and a file of police appeared at the open door, and a sheriff’s officer stepped in, seized a chair, and took possession in all due form. The guests had risen. The farmer remained in his chair, looking as crushed and helpless as if he had been struck by lightning.

Alice had thrown her arm around his neck, and was trying in vain to comfort him. Vandergaart never took his eyes off him. In his glance there was more of pity than of hate, as he followed the look which the farmer gave the Star of the South, now sparkling more brilliantly than ever in the center of the scene of disaster.

“Ruined! Ruined!” The words were all that escaped from the farmer’s quivering lips.

And then arose Cyprien. “Mr. Watkins,” he said, “now that your prosperity seems to be under a cloud, perhaps you will allow me to take advantage of the opportunity that offers. I have the honor to ask for your daughter’s hand!”

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FATE OF THE STAR

THE effect of the engineer’s speech was truly gratifying. Its complete disinterestedness touched the not very sensitive hearts of the guests, and there was a round of noisy applause.

Alice, with her eyes cast down and her heart beating violently, seemed the only one that betrayed no surprise at her lover’s proceedings; and she remained silent by her, father’s side. Watkins, still crushed by his terrible misfortune, raised his head. He knew enough of Cyprien to know that if he gave him his daughter, her happiness would be assured, but he would not yet admit that he saw no objection to the marriage. Cyprien, confused at the publicity to which his ardor had committed him, grew conscious of the strangeness of the position, and wished he had remained more master of his feelings.

The silence of mutual embarrassment was ended by Vandergaart, who stepped toward the farmer. “John Watkins,” said he, “I do not wish to abuse my victory, and I am not one of those that strike a man when he is down. In vindicating my right, I have only done my duty. But I know by experience that right may sometimes border closely on injustice, and I do not wish to visit your sins on the heads of those who are innocent. Besides, I am alone in the world, and not so very far from my grave. What is the use of so much wealth, if I cannot dispose of it? If, Watkins, you agree to the match between these two youngsters, I will give them the Star of the South as a wedding present! And I will make them my heirs; and thus, as fully as I can, repair the involuntary injury I have done to your daughter!”

At these words a murmur of sympathetic interest ran around the assemblage. Every one looked at John Watkins. His eyes seemed to glisten as he shaded them with his trembling hand. “Jacobus Vandergaart!” he cried, unable to restrain the tumultuous feelings which agitated him. “Yes! You are a real good fellow, and in thus ensuring the young people’s happiness you have nobly, avenged the wrong I did you.”

Neither Alice nor Cyprien could find words to reply, but their looks spoke for them. The old man held out his hand to his enemy, and Watkins clasped it eagerly. And every eye was moist; even the old police-sergeant, who looked as dry as an Admiralty biscuit, found it necessary to cough and use his handkerchief.

Watkins seemed quite a different man. His expression had changed to be as kindly and gentle as it had hitherto been hard and heartless. And Vandergaart had resumed his wonted look of placid good-nature. “Let us forget and forgive,” said he, “and let us wish the young couple every happiness.”

The storm having thus passed away, Vandergaart took his place at the table, and began to talk to Watkins of his plans for the future.

“Let us sell everything and go with the youngsters to Europe. We could settle near them, do some good with our money, and end our days in peace.”

Meanwhile the temperature continued to rise, the air becoming more and more oppressive, and converting the guests into so many electrical machines. In vain the windows and the doors were thrown open. Not a breath caused a candle-flame to flicker. Such pressure could only end in one way — there would be a storm with heavy thunder and torrential rain, and the relief that the storm would give was eagerly awaited.

Suddenly a blinding flash threw a sickly tint over all, and instantly the roar of the thunder, as it rolled over the plain, announced that the concert had begun. At the same moment a furious squall burst into the room and blew out all the lights. Then the cataracts of heaven were opened and the deluge commenced.

“Did you hear that sharp click after the thunderclap?” asked Thomas Steel, while the windows were being shut and the candles relighted. “I thought a glass globe had cracked.”

Immediately all eyes instinctively turned toward the Star of the South. The diamond had vanished!

But neither the iron cage nor the glass globe that covered it had changed its position. It was manifestly impossible that any one could have touched it.

The phenomenon seemed to verge on the miraculous. Cyprien eagerly leaned forward and noticed on the velvet cushion in place of the diamond, a little mound of ashy powder. He could not restrain a shout of surprise, and in a word told what had happened, “The Star of the South has crumbled into dust!”

Every one in Griqualand knows that this curious property is peculiar to the diamonds of the district. Though not often mentioned it is nevertheless true that, owing to some hitherto unintelligible molecular action, the most precious of the gems will sometimes fly to pieces like a bombshell, and leave nothing behind but a tiny pinch of dust, that may or may not be of use for industrial purposes.

The engineer was evidently thinking more of the scientific interest of the accident than of the enormous pecuniary loss it meant for him. “What is very curious," he said, while all looked on amazed, "is not so much that the stone has crumbled up, but that it should have waited till today to go off. Diamonds generally break up so much sooner after cutting. About ten days is the usual time, is it not, Mr. Vandergaart?"

"That is so, and it is the first time in my life that I ever saw a diamond go three months after it had been cut!" said the old man with a sigh. "You see, it was destined that the Star of the South should belong to nobody. When I think that we might have prevented the disaster, had we given the diamond a trifling coat of grease — "

"Really?" exclaimed Cyprien, with the satisfaction of a man who at last sees a way out of a difficulty. "Then I can explain it all. The poor fragile Star received the coating of grease in Dada's gizzard, and that is why it lasted till today. It might have been much better if it had gone to pieces four months ago, and saved us our scamper across the Transvaal!"

Watkins seemed very ill at ease in his arm-chair, and now he broke out with, "How can you take things so coolly? There you are, talking about the millions gone in smoke as if they were only a cigarette!"

"That shows we are philosophers," said Cyprien. "There is nothing like being wise when wisdom has become a necessity."

"Philosophers if you like," said the farmer. "But millions are millions, and you don't pick them up every day. Ah, Jacobus! you have done me a greater service than you think. I am afraid I should have gone off like a bombshell had the Star still been mine."

"Why should it matter?" said Cyprien, with a tender look at Alice's sunny face. "I have this evening won so precious a diamond that the loss of no other can trouble me.”

And thus ended, in a way well worthy of its brief and troubled history, the career of the largest cut diamond the world has seen.

THE END.

MATHIAS SANDORF

Translated by George Hanna

This 1885 adventure novel was first serialised in *Le Temps* in 1885 and is set in Trieste in 1867. The story concerns two petty criminals, Sarcany and Zirone, who intercept a carrier pigeon. They find a ciphered message attached to its leg and uncover a plot to liberate Hungary from Habsburg-Austrian rule. Interestingly, Verne dedicated the novel to the memory of Alexandre Dumas.

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Verne, close to the time of publication

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PART I

CHAPTER I.

THE CARRIER-PIGEON.

Trieste, the capital of Illyria, consists of two towns of widely dissimilar aspect. One of them — Theresienstadt — is is modern and well-to-do, and squarely built along the shore of the bay from which the land it occupies has been reclaimed; the other is old, and poor, and irregular, straggling from the Corso up the slopes of the Karst, whose summit is crowned by the picturesque citadel.

The harbor is guarded by the mole of San Carlo, with the merchant shipping berthed alongside. On this mole there may at most times be seen — and very often in somewhat disquieting numbers — many a group of those houseless and homeless Bohemians whose clothes might well be destitute of pockets, considering that their owners never had, and to all appearance never will have, the wherewithal to put into them.

To-day, however — it is the 18th of May, 1867 — two personages, slightly better dressed than the rest, are noticeable among the crowd. That they have ever suffered from a superabundance of florins or kieutzers is improbable, unless some lucky chance has favored them — and they certainly look as though they would stick at nothing that might induce that chance to come.

One of them calls himself Sarcany, and says he hails from Tripoli. The other is a Sicilian, Zirone by name. Together they have strolled up and down the mole at least a dozen times, and now they have halted at its furthest end, and are gazing away to the horizon, to the west of the Gulf of Trieste, as if they hoped to sight the ship which is bringing home their fortune.

“What time is it?” asked Zirone in Italian, which his comrade spoke as fluently as he did all the other tongues of the Mediterranean.

Sarcany made no reply.

“What a fool I am!” exclaimed the Sicilian. “It is the time you are hungry after you have had no breakfast!”

There is such a mixture of races in this part of Austria-Hungary that the presence of these two men, although they were obviously strangers to the place, provoked no attention. And besides, if their pockets were empty, no one had reason to think so, thanks to their long brown capes, which reached even to their boots.

Sarcany, the younger of the two, was about five-and-twenty, and of middle height, well set up, and of elegant manners and address. Sarcany, however, was not his baptismal name, and probably he had never been baptized, being of Tripolitan or Tunisian origin; but though his complexion was very dark, his regular features proclaimed him to be more of the white than the negro.

If ever physiognomy was deceptive, it was so in Sarcany’s case. It required a singularly keen observer to discover his consummate astuteness in that handsome, plausible face, with its large dark eyes, fine straight nose, and well-cut mouth shaded by the slight mustache. That almost impassible face betrayed none of the signs of contempt and hatred engendered by a constant state of revolt against society. If, as physiognomists pretend — and they are not unfrequently right — every rascal bears witness against himself in spite of all his cleverness, Sarcany could give the assertion the lie direct. To look at him no one would suspect what he was and what he had been. He provoked none of that irresistible aversion we feel toward cheats and scoundrels; and, in consequence, he was all the more dangerous.

Where had Sarcany spent his childhood? No one knew. How had he been brought up and by whom? In what corner of Tripoli had he nestled during his early years? To what protection did he owe his escape from the many chances of destruction in that terrible climate? No one could say — may be not even himself; born by chance, helped on by chance, destined to live by chance! Nevertheless, during his boyhood he had picked up a certain amount of practical instruction, thanks to his having to knock about the world, mixing with people of all kinds, trusting to expedient after expedient to secure his daily bread. It was owing to this and other circumstances that he had come to have business relations with one of the richest houses in Trieste, that of the banker, Silas Toronthal, whose name is intimately connected with the development of this history.

Sarcany’s companion, the Italian, Zirone, was a man faithless and lawless — a thorough-paced adventurer ever ready at the call of him who could pay him well, until he met with him who would pay him better, to undertake any task whatever. Of Sicilian birth and in his thirtieth year he was as capable of suggesting a villainy as of carrying it into effect. He might have told people where he had been born had he known, but he never willingly said where he lived or if he lived anywhere. It was in Sicily that the chances of Bohemian life had made him acquainted with Sarcany. And henceforth they had gone through the world, trying *per fas et nefas* to make a living by their wits. Zirone was a large, bearded man, brown in complexion and black of hair, taking much pains to hide the look of the scoundrel which would persist in revealing itself in spite of all his efforts. In vain he tried to conceal his real character beneath his exuberant volubility, and, being of rather a cheerful temperament, he was just as talkative about himself as his younger companion was reserved.

To-day, however, Zirone was very moderate in what he had to say. He was obviously anxious about his dinner. The night before fortune had been unkind to them at the gaming-table, and the resources of Sarcany had been exhausted. What they were to do next neither knew. They could only reckon on chance, and as that Providence of the Beggars did not seek them out on the mole of San Carlo, they decided to go in search of it along the streets of the new town.

There, up and down the squares, quays, and promenades on both sides of the harbor leading to the grand canal which runs through Trieste, there goes, comes, throngs, hastens and tears along in the fury of business a population of some seventy thousand inhabitants of Italian origin, whose mother tongue is lost in a cosmopolitan concert of all the sailors, traders, workmen, and officials, who shout and chatter in English, German, French, or Sclave. Although this new town is rich, it by no means follows that all who tread its streets are fortunate. No. Even the wealthiest could hardly compete with the foreign merchants — English, Armenian, Greeks, and Jews — who lord it at Trieste, and whose sumptuous establishments would do no discredit to the capital of Austria-Hungary. But, beyond these, how many are the poorer folks wandering from morning to night along the busy streets, bordered with lofty buildings closed like strong rooms, where lie the goods of all descriptions attracted to this free port, so happily placed at the furthest corner of the Adriatic! How many there are, breakfastless and dinnerless, loitering on the quays where the vessels of the wealthiest shipping firm of the Continent — the Austrian Lloyds — are unloading the treasures brought from every part of the world! How many outcasts there are, such as are found in London, Liverpool, Marseilles, Havre, Antwerp, and Leghorn, who elbow the opulent ship-owners, thronging around the warehouses, where admittance is forbidden them, around the Exchange, whose doors will never open for them, and everywhere around the Tergesteum, where the merchant has’planted his office and counting-house, and lives in perfect accord with the Chamber of Commerce.

It is admitted that in all the great maritime towns of the old and the new world there exists a class of unfortunates peculiar to these important centers. Whence they come we know not; whither they go we are equally ignorant. Among them the number of unclassed is considerable. Many of them are foreigners. The railroads and the steamers have thrown them in, as it were, on to a dust-heap, and there they lie crowding the thoroughfares, with the police striving in vain to clear them away.

Sarcany and Zirone, after a farewell look across the gulf to the light-house on St. Theresa Point, left the mole, passed between the Teatro Communale and the square, and reached the Piazza Grande, where they talked for a quarter of an hour in front of the fountain which is built of the stone from the neighboring Karst Hill, and stands by the statue to Charles VI.

Then they turned to the left and came back. To tell the truth, Zirone eyed the passers-by as if he had an irresistible desire to feed on them. Then they turned toward the large square of Tergesteum just as the hour struck to close the Exchange.

“There it is, empty — like we are!” said the Sicilian with a laugh, but without any wish to laugh.

But the indifferent Sarcany seemed to take not the slightest notice of his companion’s mistimed pleasantry as he indulged in a hungry yawn.

Then they crossed the triangle past the bronze statue of the Emperor Leopold I. A shrill whistle from Zirone — quite a street boy’s whistle — put to flight the flock of blue pigeons that were cooing on the portico of the old Exchange, like the gray pigeons in the square of St. Mark at Venice.

Then they reached the Corso which divides new from old Trieste. A wide street destitute of elegance, with well patronized shops destitute of taste, and more like the Regent Street of London or the Broadway of New York than the Boulevard des Italiens of Paris. In the street a great number of people, but of vehicles only a few, and these going between the Piazza Grande and the Piazza della Legna — names sufficiently indicating the town’s Italian origin.

Sarcany appeared insensible to all temptation, but Zirone as he passed the shops could not help giving an envious glance into those he had not the means to enter, And there was much there that looked inviting, particularly in the provision shops and chiefly in the “biereries,” where the beer flows more freely than in any other town in Austria-Hungary.

“There is rather more hunger and thirst about in this Corso,” said the Sicilian, whose tongue rattled against his parched lips with the click of a castanet.

Sarcany’s only reply to this observation was a shrug of his shoulders.

They then took the first turning to the left, and readied the bank of the canal near the Ponto Bosso — a swing bridge. This they crossed and went along the quays, where vessels of light draught were busy unloading. Here the shops and stalls looked much less tempting. When he reached the church of Sant Antonio, Sarcany turned sharply to the right. His companion followed him in silence. Then they went back along the Corso and crossed the old town whose narrow streets, impracticable for vehicles as soon as they begin to climb the slopes of the Karst, are so laid out as to prevent their being enfiladed by that terrible wind, the bora, which blows icily from the north-east. In this old town of Trieste, Zirone and Sarcany, the moneyless, found themselves more at home than among the richer quarters of the new.

It was, in fact, in the basement of a modest hotel not far from the church of Santa Maria Maggiore that they had lodged since their arrival in the Illyrian capital, But as the landlord, who remained unpaid, might become pressing as to his little bill, which grew larger from day to day, they sheered off from this dangerous shoal, crossed the square, and loitered for a few minutes near the Arco di Ricardo.

The study of Roman architecture did not prove very satisfying, and as nothing had turned up in the almost deserted streets, they began the ascent of the rough footpaths leading almost to the top of Karst, to the terrace of the cathedral.

“Curious idea to climb up here!” muttered Zirone, as he tightened his cape round his waist.

But he did not abandon his young companion, and away he went along the line of steps, called by courtesy roads, which lead up the slopes of the Karst. Ten minutes afterward, hungrier and thirstier than ever, they reached the terrace.

From this elevated spot there is a magnificent view extending across the Gulf of Trieste to the open sea, including the port, with its fishing boats passing and repassing, and its steamers and trading ships outward and homeward bound, and the whole of the town with its suburbs and furthest houses clustering along the hills. The view had no charm for them! They were thinking of something very different, of the many times they had come here already to ponder on their misery! Zirone would have preferred a stroll along the rich shops of the Corso. Perhaps the luck might reach them here which they were so impatiently waiting for!

At the end of the steps leading on to the terrace near the Byzantine Cathedral of Saint Just there was an inclosure, formerly a cemetery and now a museum of antiquities. There were no tombs, but odds and ends of sepulchral stones lying in disorder under the lower branches of the trees — Roman stelæ, mediæval cippi, pieces of triglyphs and metopes of different ages of the Renaissance, vitrified cubes with traces of cinders, all thrown anyhow among the grass.

The gate of the inclosure was open. Sarcany had only to push it. He entered, followed by Zirone, who contented himself with this melancholy reflection —

“If we wanted to commit suicide this is just place!”

“And if some one proposes it?” asked Sarcany, ironically.

“I should decline, my friend! Give me one happy day in ten, and I ask no more.”

“It shall be given you — and something else.”

“May all the saints of Italy hear you, and Heaven knows they are counted in hundreds.”

“Corne along,” said Sarcany.

They went along a semicircular path between a double range of urns and sat themselves down on a large Roman rose window, which had fallen flat on the ground.

At first they remained silent. This suited Sarcany, but it did not suit his companion. And, after one or two half-stifled yawns, Zirone broke out with —

“This something that we have been fools enough to wait for is a long time coming.”

Sarcany made no reply.

“What an idea,” continued Zirone, “to come and look for it among these ruins! I am afraid we are on the wrong tack, my friend. What are we likely to find in this old grave-yard? The spirits do not want it when they have left their mortal carcasses behind them. When I join them I shall not worry about a dinner that is late or a supper that never comes! Let us get away.”

Sarcany, deep in thought, with his looks lost in vacancy, never moved.

Zirone waited a few moments without saying anything. Then his habitual loquacity urged him to say:

“Sarcany,” he said, “do you know in what form I should like this something to appear? In the form of one of those cashier people from Toronthal’s with a pocket-book stuffed full of bank-notes, which he could hand over to us on behalf of the said banker with a thousand apologies for keeping us waiting so long.”

“Listen, Zirone,” answered Sarcany, knitting his brows; “for the last time I tell you that there is nothing to be hoped for from Silas Toronthal.”

“Are you sure of that?”

“Yes, all the credit I have with him is exhausted, and to my last demands he gave me a definite refusal.”

“That is bad.”

“Very bad, but it is so.”

“Good, if your credit is exhausted,” continued Zirone, “it is because you have had the credit! And to what is that due? To your having many times placed your intelligence and zeal at the service of his firm in certain matters of dellicacy. Now, during the first months of our stay in Trieste, Toronthal did not show himself too stingy in money matters. But it is impossible that there is not some way in which you have a hold over him, and by threatening him — ”

“What was to be done has already been done,” replied Sarcany, with a shrug of his shoulders; “and you can not go to him for a meal! No! I have no hold over him now; but I may have and shall have, and when that day comes he shall pay me capital and compound interest for what he has refused me to-day! I fancy his business is under a cloud, and that he is mixed up in several doubtful things. Several of those failures in Germany, at Berlin and Munich, have had their effect in Trieste, and Silas Toronthal seemed rather upset when I saw him last. Let the water get troubled, and when it is troubled — ”

“Quite so,” exclaimed Zirone; “but meanwhile we have only water to drink! Look here, Sarcany, I think you might try one more shot at Toronthal! You might tap his cash-box once more, and get enough out of it to pay our passage to Sicily by way of Malta.”

“And what should we do in Sicily?”

“That is my business. I know the country, and I can introduce yon to a few Maltese, who are a very tough lot and with them we might do something. If there is nothing to be done here we might as well clear out and let this wretched banker pay the cost. If you know anything about him he would rather see you out of Trieste.”

Sarcany shook his head.

“You will see it can not last much longer. We have come to the end now,” added Zirone.

He rose and stamped on the ground with his foot, as if it were a step-mother unwilling to help him. At the instant he did so he caught sight of a pigeon feebly fluttering down just outside the inclosure. The pigeon’s tired wings could hardly move as slowly it sunk to the ground.

Zirone, without asking himself to which of the 177 species of pigeons now known to ornithological nomenclature the bird belonged, saw only one thing — that the species it belonged to was edible.

The bird was evidently exhausted. It had tried to settle on the cornice of the cathedral. Not being able to reach it, it had dropped on to the roof of the small niche which gave shelter to the statue of St. Just; but its feeble feet could not support it there, and it had slipped on to the capital of a ruined column. Sarcany, silent and still, hardly followed the pigeon in its flight, but Zirone never lost sight of it. The bird came from the north. A long journey had reduced it to this state of exhaustion. Evidently it was bound for some more distant spot; for it immediately started to fly again, and the trajectory curve it traced in the air compelled it to make a fresh halt on one of the lower branches of the trees in the old cemetery.

Zirone received to catch it, and quietly ran off to the tree. He soon reached the gnarled trunk, climbed up it to the fork, and there waited motionless and mute like a dog pointing at the game perched above his head.

The pigeon did not see him and made another start; but its strength again failed it, and a few paces from the tree it fell into the grass.

To jump to the ground, stretch out his hands and seize the bird was the work of an instant for the Sicilian. And quite naturally he was about to wring its neck, when he stopped, gave a shout of surprise, and ran back to Sarcany.
“A carrier-pigeon!” he said.

“Well, it is a carrier that has done its carrying,” replied Sarcany.

“Perhaps so,” said Zirone, “and all the worse for those who are waiting for the message.”

“A message!” exclaimed Sarcany. “Wait, Zirone, wait! Give him a reprieve!”

And he stopped his companion, who had again caught hold of the neck. Then he took the tiny packet, opened it, and drew forth — a cryptogram.

The message contained only eighteen words, arranged in three vertical columns, and this is what it said:

ihnalz

zaemen

ruiopn

arnuro
trvree
mtqssl

odxhnp
estlev
eeuart

aeeeil
ennios
noupvg

spesdr
erssur
ouitse

eedgnc

toeedt

artuee

-

CHAPTER II.

THE PIGEON’S HOME.

There was nothing to show whence the message came or whither it was being sent. Only these eighteen words, each composed of an equal number of letters. Could they be made into sense without the key? It was not very likely, at least unless it was by some very clever decipherer. And yet the cryptogram could not be indecipherable.

The characters told him nothing, and Sarcany, who was at first much disappointed, stood perplexed. Did the letter contain any important news, and, above all, was it of a compromising nature? Evidently these precautions had been taken to prevent its being read if it fell into other hands than those for whom it was intended. To make use of neither the post nor the telegraph, but the extraordinary means of the carrier-pigeon, showed that it must be some curious affair that it was desired to keep quite secret.

“Perhaps,” said Sarcany, “there lies in these lines a mystery that will make our fortune.”

“And then,” answered Zirone, “this pigeon will represent the luck we have been running after all morning. And I was going to strangle it! After all it is important to keep the message, and we can cook the messenger.”

“Not so fast, Zirone,” interrupted Sarcany, who again saved the bird’s life. “Perhaps the pigeon may tell us whither it was bound, providing, of course, that the person who ought to have the message, lives in Trieste.”

“And then? That will not tell you how to read the message, Sarcany.”

“No, Zirone.”

“Nor to know where it came from.”

“Exactly. But of two correspondents I shall know one, and that may tell me how I am to find the other. So, instead of killing this bird, we will feed it and recruit its strength and help it to reach its destination.”

“With the letter?” asked Zirone.

“With the letter — of which I am just going to make an exact copy; and that I shall keep until the time comes to use it.”

And Sarcany took a note-book from his pocket, and in pencil he made a careful fac-simile of the message. Knowing that in most cryptograms it was important not to alter in the least the form and arrangement, he took great care to keep the words in exactly the same order and position and at the same distances as in the document. Then he put the fac-simile in his pocket, the message in its case, and the case in its place under the pigeon’s wing.

Zirone looked on. He did not share the hopes of fortune founded on this incident.

“And now?” he asked.

“Now,” answered Sarcany, “do what you can for the messenger.”

The pigeon was more exhausted by hunger than fatigue. Its wings were intact, without strain or breakage, and showed that his temporary weakness was due neither to a shot from a sportsman nor a stone from a street boy. It was hungry — it was thirsty; that was all.

Zirone looked around and found on the ground a few grains of corn which the bird ate greedily. Then he quenched its thirst with a few drops of water which the last shower had left in a piece of ancient pottery. So well did he do his work that in half an hour the pigeon was refreshed and restored and quite able to resume its interrupted journey.

“If it is going far,” said Sarcany, “if its destination is beyond Trieste, it does not matter to us if it falls on the way, for we shall have lost sight of it, and it will be impossible for us to follow it. But if it is going to one of the houses in Trieste, its strength is sufficient to take it there, as it will only have to fly for a couple of minutes or so.”

“Right you are,” replied the Sicilian; “but how are we to see where it drops, even if it is in Trieste?”

“We can manage that, I think,” answered Sarcany And this is what they did.

The cathedral consists of two old Roman churches, one dedicated to the Virgin, one to St. Just, the patron saint of Trieste, and it is flanked by a very high tower which rises from the angle of the front pierced with a large rose window, beneath which is the chief door. This tower commands a view over the plateau of Karst Hill and over the whole city, which lies spread as on a map below. From this lofty stand-point they could see down on the roofs of all the houses, even on to those clustering on the earlier slopes of the hill away to the shore of the gulf, It was therefore not impossible to follow the pigeon in its flight and recognize the house on which it found refuge, provided it was not bound for some other city of the Illyrian peninsula.

The attempt might succeed. It was at least worth trying. They only had to set the bird at liberty.

Sarcany and Zirone left the old cemetery, crossed the open space by the cathedral and walked toward the tower. One of the ogival doors — the one under the dripstone beneath St. Just's niche was open. They entered and began to ascend the stairs which led to the roof.

It took them two or three minutes to reach the top, They stood just underneath the roof, and there was no balcony. But there were two windows opening out on each side of the tower, and giving a view to each point of the double horizon of hills and sea.

Sarcany and Zirone posted themselves at the windows which looked out over Trieste toward the north-west.

The clock in the old sixteenth-century castle on the top of the Karst behind the cathedral struck four. It was still broad daylight. The air was clear and the sun shone brightly on the waters of the Adriatic, and most of the houses received the light with their fronts facing the tower. Thus far circumstances were favorable.

Sarcany took the pigeon in his hands, he stroked it, spoke to it, gave it a, last caress, and threw it free. The bird flapped its wings, but at first it dropped so quickly that it looked as though it was going to finish its career of aerial messenger by a cruel fall.

The excitable Sicilian could not restrain a cry of disappointment.

"No! It rises!" said Sarcany.

And the pigeon had found its equilibrium in the denser lower air; and then making a sudden curve it flew off toward the north-west.

Sarcany and Zirone followed it with their eyes.

In the flight of the bird there was no hesitation, it went straight to its home which it would have reached an hour before had it not been for its compulsory halt among the trees of the old grave-yard.

Sarcany and his companion watched it with the most anxious attention. They asked themselves if it was going beyond the town — and then all their scheming would come to naught.

It did nothing of the sort.

“I see it! I see it all the time!” said Zirone, whose sight was of the keenest.

“What you have to look for,” said Sarcany, “is where it stops, so as to fix the exact spot.”

A few minutes after its departure the pigeon settled on a house with one tall gable rising above the rest in the midst of a clump of trees in that part of the town near the hospital and public garden. Then it disappeared into a dormer window opening on the mansard, which was surmounted by a weather vane of wrought iron that ought to have been the work of Quentin Matsys — if Trieste had been in Flanders.

The general direction being ascertained, it would not be very difficult to find the weather vane and gable and window, and, in short, the house inhabited by the person for whom the cryptogram was intended.

Sarcany and Zirone immediately made their way down the tower and down the hill and along the roads leading to the Piazza della Legna. There they had to lay their course so as to reach the group of houses forming the eastern quarter of the city.

When they reached the junction of two main roads — the Corsa Stadion leading to the public garden, and the Acquedotto, a fine avenue of trees, leading to the large brewery of Boschetto — the adventurers were in some doubt as to the true direction. Should they take the right or the left? Instinctively they turned to the right, intending to examine one after the other every house along the avenue above which they had noted the vane among the trees.

They went along in this manner, inspecting in their turn every gable and roof along the Acquedotto, but they found nothing like the one they sought. At last they reached the end.

“There it is!” exclaimed Zirone.

And there was the weather vane, swinging slowly on its iron spindle above a dormer window, around which were several pigeons.

There was no mistake. It was the identical house to which the pigeon had flown.

The house was of modest exterior, and formed one of the block at the beginning of the Acquedotto.

Sarcany made inquiries at the neighboring shops, and learned all he wished to know.

The house for many years had belonged to, and been inhabited by, Count Ladislas Zathmar.

“Who is this Count Zathmar?” asked Zirone, to whom the name meant nothing.

“He is the Count Zathmar!” answered Sarcany.

“But perhaps if we were to ask him — ”

“Later on, Zirone; there’s no hurry! Take it coolly, and now to our hotel!”

“Yes, it is dinner-time for those who have got something to dine on!” said Zirone, bitterly.

“If we do not dine to-day, it is possible that we shall dine to-morrow,” answered Sarcany.

“With whom?”

“Who knows? Perhaps with Count Zathmar!”

They walked along quietly — why should they hurry? — and soon reached their modest hotel, still much too rich for them, seeing they could not pay their bill. What a surprise was in store for them! A letter had arrived, addressed to Sarcany.

The letter contained a note for 200 florins and these words — nothing more:

“Inclosed is the last money you will get from me. It is enough to pay your passage to Sicily. Go, and let me hear no more of you.

“Silas Toronthal.”

“Capital!” exclaimed Zirone: “the banker thinks better of it just in time. Assuredly we need never despair of those financial folks!”

“That is what I say,” said Sarcany.

“And the coin will do for us to leave Trieste.”

“No! we’ll stop here!”

CHAPTER IV.

TORONTHAL’S BANK.

At Trieste “society” is nearly non-existent. Between different races, as between different castes, it is seldom found. The Austrian officials assume the highest position and take precedence according to their respective ranks. Generally these men are distinguished, well educated, and well meaning; but their pay is so small for their position that they are unable to enter into competition with the trading and banking classes. These latter, as entertainments are rare among the rich, and the parties given by the officials are nearly all unambitious, have taken to display most of their wealth in outside show — in the streets by their sumptuous carriages, and at the theater by the extravagance of their dress and jewelry. Among these opulent families that of Silas Toronthal held a distinguished place.

The head of the house, whose credit extended far beyond the limits of Austro-Hungary, was then in his thirty-seventh year. With Mme. Toronthal, who was several years his junior, he occupied a mansion in the Acquedotto. He was supposed to be very rich — and he should have been. Bold and fortunate speculations on the Stock Exchange, a large business with the Austrian Lloyds and other extensive companies, and the issuing of several important loans, had, or ought to have, brought huge sums of money into his coffers. Hence his household was conducted on a scale of considerable splendor.

Nevertheless, as Sarcany had said to Zirone, there was a possibility that the affairs of Silas Toronthal were slightly embarrassed — at least for a time. Seven years before, when the funds were shaken by the Franco-Italian war, he had received a severe blow, and more recently the disastrous campaign which ended at Sadowa had sent down the prices on every exchange in Europe, more especially on those of Austria-Hungary, and chiefly those of Vienna, Pesth, and Trieste. The necessity of providing the large amounts then drawn out on the current accounts not improbably caused him serious inconvenience. But when the crisis had passed he doubtless recovered himself, and if what Sarcany had said was correct, it must have been his recent speculations only which had led him into difficulties.

During the last few months a great change had come over Toronthal. His whole look had altered without his knowledge. He was not, as formerly, master of himself. People had noticed that he no longer looked them in the face, as had been his custom, but rather eyed them askance. This had not escaped the notice of Mme. Toronthal, a confirmed invalid, without energy, and submissiveness itself, who knew very little about his business matters.

And if some disaster did menace Toronthal, it must be admitted that he would get very little sympathy. He had many customers, but few friends. The high opinion he held about his position, his native vanity, the airs he gave himself on all occasions, had not done him any good. And above all the people of Trieste looked upon him as a foreigner because he was born at Ragusa, and hence was a Dalmatian. No family ties attached him to the town to which he had come fifteen years before to lay the foundation of his fortune.

Such, then, was the position of Toronthal's bank. Although Sarcany had his suspicions, nothing had occurred to give rise to a rumor that it was in difficulties. Its credit remained unshaken. And Count Sandorf, after realizing his investments, had deposited with it a considerable sum — on condition that it should always be available at twenty-four hours' notice.

It may seem surprising that a connection of any sort should have been formed between a bank of such high reputation and such a very dubious character as Sarcany. It had existed, nevertheless, for two or three years. Toronthal had had a good deal of business with the Regency of Tripoli, and Sarcany had been employed as a kind of broker and general confidential agent, intrusted with the disposal of certain wine and other gifts under circumstances in which it was not always desirable that the Trieste banker should appear in person. Having been engaged in these and other rather suspicious schemes, Sarcany got his foot, or rather his hand, into the bank; and continued to carry on a sort of system of extortion on Toronthal, who was not, however, quite at his mercy; inasmuch as no material proof existed of their mutual dealings. But a banker's position is one of extreme delicacy. A word may ruin him. And Sarcany knew how to take advantage of this.

But Toronthal knew what he was about. He had parted with certain sums, which had been dissipated in the gambling-houses with the recklessness of an adventurer who takes no thought of the future, and then Sarcany became too inoportunate, the banker suddenly drew his purse-strings and refused further credit. Sarcany threatened; Toronthal remained firm. And he was safe in doing so, after all, for Sarcany had no proofs, and no one would believe him.

This was the reason that Sarcany, and his comrade, Zirone, found themselves at the end of their resources, and without even the wherewithal to leave the town and seek their fortune elsewhere. And we know how Toronthal came to their help with sufficient funds to enable them to return to Sicily, where Zirone belonged to one of the secret societies. The banker thus hoped to get rid of the Tripolitan, and hoped never to see or hear of him again. He was doomed to disappointment in this, as in most other matters.

It was on the evening of the 18th of May that the two hundred florins had reached the adventurers at their hotel.

Six days afterward, on the 24th of the same month, Sarcany presented himself at the bank and demanded to see Silas Toronthal, and so much did he insist that he was at length received.

The banker was in his private office, and Sarcany carefully closed the door as soon as he had been introduced.

“You again!” exclaimed Toronthal. “What are you doing here? I sent you, and for the last time, quite enough to help you to leave Trieste! You will get nothing more from me, whatever you may say or do! Why have you not gone? I’ll take steps to put a stopper on you for the future! What do you want?”

Sarcany received the broadside very coolly. He was quite prepared for it. His attitude was what it had always been of late in his visits to the banker — insolent and provoking.

Not only was he master of himself, but he was quite serious. Ho had stepped up to a chair, without being invited to sit down, and waited until the banker’s bad temper had evaporated before he replied.

“Well, why don’t you speak?” continued Toronthal, who, after hurriedly striding to and fro, had sat down.

“I am waiting till you are calm,” replied Sarcany, very quietly; “and I’ll wait as long as is necessary.”

“What does it matter whether I am calm? For the last time, what do yon want?”

“Silas Toronthal,” answered Sarcany, “I have a little business to propose to you.”

“I do not want to talk business to you!” exclaimed the banker. “There is nothing in common between you and me, and I only expect to hear that you are off from Trieste to-day forever.”

“I expect to leave Trieste,” answered Sarcany, “but I do not like to go until I have repaid you what I owe!”

“You repay me — you?”

“Yes, repay you interest, capital, without saying anything of the — ”

Toronthal shrugged his shoulders at this unexpected proposition.

“The sums I have advanced,” he said, “are charged to profit and loss, and are written off! I consider we are clear. I want nothing from you, and I am above such trifles.”

“And if it pleases me to remain your debtor?”

“And if it pleases me to remain your creditor?”

Then Toronthal and Sarcany looked at each other, and then Sarcany, with a shrug of his shoulders, continued:

“These are only phrases, and there is nothing in phrases, I repeat, I come to bring you some very important business.”

“And suspicious business, too, I dare say?”

“Well, it is not the first time that you have come to me — ”

“Words, nothing but words,” said the banker.

“Listen,” said Sarcany. “I will be brief.”

“And you had better.”

“If what I am going to tell you does not suit you, say go, and I’ll go.”

“From here or from Trieste?”

“From here and from Trieste.”

“To-morrow?”

“This evening!”

“Speak, then!”

“Well, then, this is it,” said Sarcany. “But,” added he, looking around, “you are sure no one can hear us?”

“You would like our interview to be secret then?” asked the banker ironically.

“Yes, Silas Toronthal, for you and I hold in our hands the lives of important personages.”

“You do, perhaps. I do not!”

“Well, then, see. I am on the track of a conspiracy What its object is I do not yet know. But after what has happened on the plains of Lombardy, after tho business at Sadowa, all that is not Austrian is against Austria. And I have some reason to think that a movement is on foot in favor of Hungary by which we can profit.”

Toronthal, as his only reply, contented himself with saying:

“I have nothing to get out of your conspiracy.”

“Perhaps not.”

“But how?”

“By denouncing it!”

“Explain!”

“Listen.”

And Sarcany told him of all that had happened in the old cemetery, of the carrier-pigeon, of the intercepted message — of which he had taken a facsimile — and of how he had found out the bird’s destination. He added that for five days he and Zirone had been watching the house; how the same people met there every night, not without great precautions; of some pigeons that had gone away, and others that had come; of how the house was guarded by an old servant, who carefully inspected all who approached; of how Sarcany and his companion had been obliged to act with circumspection to evade the attention of this old man, and of how, during the last few days, he had raised suspicions.

Toronthal began to listen more attentively to what Sarcany told him. He asked himself if it were true, and what gain he could get out of it. When the story was told, when Sarcany for the last time affirmed that there was a conspiracy against the State and that something could be made out of revealing its existence, the banker asked the following questions:

“Where is this house?”

“No. 89 Avenue de Acquedotto.”

“To whom does it belong?”

“To a Hungarian gentleman.”

“What is the hungarian gentleman’s name?”

“Count Ladislas Zathmar.”

“And who are the people that visit him?”

“Two chiefly; two of Hungarian birth.”

“One is — ?”

“A professor of this town. His name is Stephen Bathory.”

“The other is — ?”

“Count Mathias Sandorf.”

Toronthal made a start of surprise, which did not escape Sarcany. He had easily found the three names by following Bathory to the Corsia Stadion, and Sandorf to the Hotel Delorme.

“You see, Toronthal,” continued Sarcany, “these are the names I have no hesitation in giving you. You see I am not playing with you.”

“All that is very vague!” replied the banker, who evidently wished to know more before committing himself.

“Vague?” said Sarcany.

“Yes! To begin with, you have no material proof.”

“And what is this then?”

The copy of the message was placed in Toronthal’s hands. The banker examined it, not without curiosity. But its cryptographic words gave no sign of sense to him, and there was nothing to prove that they were of the importance that Sarcany asserted. If he had any interest in the affiar it was merely so far as it affected his customer, Count Sandorf, and with him nothing could occur to make him uneasy, unless it came to pass that he desired to draw out at short notice the funds deposited in the bank.

“Well,” said he at length, “my opinion still is that it is very vague.”

“Nothing seems clearer to me, on the contrary,” answered Sarcany, whom the banker’s attitude in no way dismayed.

“Have you been able to decipher this letter?”

“No, but I know how to to so when the time comes.”

“And how?”

“I have had something to do with such matters before,” said Sarcany, “and a good many ciphered dispatches have passed though my hands. From a careful examination of that one I see that its key does not depend on a number or a conventional alphabet which attributes to a letter different meaning to its real meaning. In this letter an *s* is an *s*, a *p* is a *p*; but the letters are arranged in a certain order, which order can be discovered by a grating."

Sarcany, as we know, was right. That was the system that had been used for the correspondence. We also know that it was the most indecipherable one that could be found.

"Be it so," said the banker, "I do not deny but what you are right; but without the grating you can not read the message."

"Evidently."

"And how will you get the grating?"

"I do not know yet," answered Sarcany; "but rest assured I shall get it."

"Really! Well, if I were in your place, Sarcany, I should not give myself a good deal of trouble to do so."

"I shall take the trouble that is necessary."

"To what end? I should content myself with going to the police and handing them the message."

"I will do so," replied Sarcany coldly, "but not with these simple presumptions. What I want before I speak are material, undeniable proofs. I intend to become master of this conspiracy — yes! absolute master of it, to gain advantages in which I ask you to share! And who knows even if it may not be better to join the conspirators instead of taking part against them?"

Such language did not astonish Toronthal. He well knew of what Sarcany was capable. But if Sarcany did not hesitate to speak in this way, it was because he, too, knew of what Toronthal was capable. His conscience was elastic enough for anything. Sarcany knew him of old, and suspected that the bank had been in difficulties for some time, so that this conspiracy, surprised, betrayed and made use of, might come to its aid. Such was Sarcany's idea.

Toronthal, on the other hand, was seeking to join in with his old broker. That there did exist some conspiracy against the Austrian Government, and that Sarcany had discovered the conspirators, he was inclined to admit. This house of Ladislas Zathmar, with the secret meetings, this cipher correspondence, the enormous sum held at call by Sandorf — all began to look very suspicious. Very likely Sarcany was right. But the banker was anxious to do the best he could for himself and sound the matter to the bottom, and would not yet give in. So he contented himself with saying:

"And when you have deciphered the letter — if you ever do — you will find it only refers to private affairs of no importance, and consequently there will be no profit for you — or me!"

"No!" said Sarcany, in a tone of the deepest conviction. "No! I am on the track of a serious conspiracy, conducted by men of high rank, and I add, Silas Toronthal, that you doubt it no more than I do."

"Well, what do you want?" asked the banker.

Sarcany rose, and, in a lower tone, looking straight at Toronthal, replied:

"What I want is this: I want admission to Count Zathmar's house, on some pretext, yet to be found, so that I can gain his confidence. Once there, where nobody knows me, I shall get hold of the grating and decipher this dispatch, which I can then make use of to further our interests.”

“Our interests? why do you want to mix me up in the affair?”

“Because it is well worth the trouble, and you will gain something out of it.”

“And could not you do that by yourself?”

“No! I have need of your help.”

“Explain.”

“To attain my end I want time, and while I am waiting I want money. I have none.”

“Your credit is exhausted here, you know!”

“Well, you will open another.”

“What good will that do to me?”

“This. Of the three men I have spoken to you about, two are poor — Zathmar and Professor Bathory — but the third is immensely rich. His possessions in Transylvania are considerable. You know that if he is arrested as a conspirator and found guilty, his goods will be confiscated and the greatest part of them will go to those who discovered and denounced the conspiracy! You and I, Silas Toronthal, we go shares!”

Sarcany was silent. The banker made no answer. He was thinking if it were worth while to join in the game. He was not the man to personally compromise himself in an affair of this nature; but he felt that his agent would be man enough to act for both. If he decided to join in the scheme he knew well how to make a treaty that would hold his man at his mercy and enable him to remain in the dark. He hesitated for all that. Good! To get all, what did he risk? He need not appear in this odious affair, and he would reap the profit — enormous profit, which would get the bank on a sound footing again.

“Well?” asked Sarcany.

“Well? No!” answered Toronthal, frightened at having such an associate, or to use the proper word, such an accomplice.

“You refuse?”

“Yes — I refuse — besides I do not believe in the success of your schemes.”

“Take care, Toronthal,” said Sarcany, is a threatening tone, which he could not restrain.

“Take care? And of what, if you please?”

“Of what I know of certain transactions — ”

“Clear out!” answered Toronthal.

“I shall know how to compel you — ”

“Go!”

At the moment there came a gentle knock at the door. As Sarcany quickly stepped to the window the door opened, and the messenger said in a loud voice:

“Count Sandorf will be glad if Mr. Toronthal will give him a few moments’ conversation.”

Then he retired.

“Count Sandorf?” exclaimed Sarcany.

The banker was anything but pleased that Sarcany should know of this visit. And he also foresaw that considerable difficulties would result from the count’s unexpected arrival.

“And what does Count Sandorf do here?” asked Sarcany, ironically. “You, then, have something to do with the conspirators at Count Zathmar’s! In fact, I have been talking to one of them!”

“Again, I tell you to go.”

“I shall not go, Toronthal, and I shall find out why Count Sandorf comes to your banking house.”

And he stepped into a cupboard leading out of the office and shut the door.

Toronthal was about to call and have him turned out, but he thought better of it.

“No!” he muttered; “after all, it is better Sarcany should hear all that goes on!”

The banker rang for the messenger, and requested him to admit the count.

Sandorf entered the office, replied coldly, as was his wont, to the obsequious inquiries of the banker, and seated himself in a chair, which

Toronthal brought forward.

“I did not know, count, that you were in Trieste, so that you call unexpectedly; but it is always an honor for the bank to receive a visit from you.”

“Sir,” replied the count, “I am one of your least important customers, and I never have much business, as you know. But I have to thank you for having taken charge of the money that I have with you.”

“Count,” observed Toronthal, “I would remind you that the money is on current account here, and that you are losing all interest for it.”

“I know,” replied Sandorf. “But I do not wish to make an investment with your house; it is left simply on deposit.”

“Quite so, count, but money is dear just now, and it does not seem right that yours should remain uuproductive. A financial crisis threatens to extend over the whole country. The position is not an easy one in the interior. Business is paralyzed. Many important failures have shaken public credit, and I am afraid others are coming — ”

“But your house, sir, is safe enough,” said Sandorf, “and on very good authority I know that it has been but little affected by these failures.”

“Oh, very little,” answered Toronthal, with the greatest calmness. “The Adriatic trade keeps us going with a constant flood of maritime business that is wanting to the Pesth and Vienna houses, and we have only been very slightly touched by the crisis. We have nothing to complain of, count, and we do not complain.”

“I can only congratulate you, sir,” answered Sandorf, “By the bye, with regard to this crisis, is there any talk of political complications in the interior?”

Although Sandorf had asked the question without appearing to attach any importance to it, Toronthal regarded it with rather more attention. It agreed so well, in fact with what he had just heard from Sarcany.

“I do not know of anything,” said the banker. “And I have not heard that the Austrian Government has any apprehension on the subject. Have you, count, any reason to suppose that something is — ”

“Not at all,” replied Sandorf, “but in banking circles things are frequently known which the public does not hear of till afterward. That is why I asked you the question, leaving it to you to answer or not as you felt inclined.”

“I have heard nothing in that way,” said Toronthal, “and, besides, with a customer like you, count, I should not think it right to remain silent if I knew anything, as your interests might suffer.”

“I am much obliged to you,” answered Sandorf; “and, like you, I do not think there is much to fear either in home or foreign matters. I am soon going to leave Trieste on urgent private affairs for Transylvania.”

“Oh, you are away?” asked Toronthal quickly.

“Yes, in a fortnight, or perhaps later.”

“And you will return to Trieste?”

“I do not think so,” answered Sandorf. “But before I go I want to get my accounts in order referring to the Castle of Artenak, which are standing over. I have received from my steward a quantity of notes, farm rents and forest revenues, and I have not time to check them. Do you know of any accountant, or could you spare one of your clerks to do it for me?”

“Nothing easier.”

“I should be much obliged.”

“When shall I send him to you, count?”

“As soon as possible.”

“To what address?”

“To my friend’s, Count Zathmar, whose house is 89, on the Acquedotto.”

“It shall be done, count.”

“It will take ten days or more, I should think; and when the accounts are in order I shall leave for Artenak. I shall be glad, therefore, if you will have the money ready, so that I can draw.”

Toronthal, at this request, could not restrain a slight movement, which, however, was unnoticed by Sandort.

“What date do you wish to draw?”

“The eighth of next month.”

“The money shall be ready.”

And Count Sandorf rose, and the banker accompanies him to the door of the anteroom.

When Toronthal re-entered his office he found Sarcany, who greeted him with:

“Before two days are over it is necessary that I get admission to Count Zathmar’s house in the character of this accountant.”

And Toronthal answered:

“It is indeed necessary.”

CHAPTER V.

THE MESSAGE IN CIPHER.

Two days afterward Sarcany was installed in the house of Ladislas Zathmar. He had been introduced by Silas Toronthal, and on his introduction had been received by Count Sandorf. The banker and his agent had become accomplices, the object of their schemes being the discovery of a secret which might cost the chiefs of the conspiracy their lives, and the result, as the price of their information, a fortune falling into the pocket of an adventurer, that it might find its way into the strong box of a banker who had reached the point of being unable to honor his engagements.

A formal agreement had been drawn up between Toronthal and Sarcany, according to which the expected profit was to be shared equally. Sarcany was to have sufficient to enable him and his companion, Zirone, to live comfortably at Trieste, and to meet all outgoings and expenses. In exchange and as a guarantee he had handed over to the banker the fac-simile of the message which contained — there could be no doubt — the secret of the conspiracy.

It may, perhaps, be said that Sandorf was imprudent in acting thus. Under such circumstances to introduce a stranger into the house where such important matters were in hand, on the very eve of a rising, of which the signal might be sent at any moment, might seem an act of strange imprudence. But the count had not acted thus without being obliged.

It was necessary that his personal affairs should be put in order now that he was about to enter on a perilous adventure in which he risked his life, or at least exile, if he was obliged to fly in the event of failure. Besides, the introduction of a stranger into Zathmar’s house appeared to him calculated to prevent suspicion. He fancied that for some days — and we know that he was not mistaken — there had been spies in the Acquedotto; spies who were no other than Sarcany and Zirone. Were the police of Trieste keeping their eyes on his friends and him and their proceedings? Sandorf might well think so and fear so. If the meeting-place of the conspirators, hitherto so obstinately kept hidden, seemed to him to be suspected, what better means of baffling suspicion could be devised than to admit within it an accountant merely busying himself with accounts? How could the presence of a clerk be dangerous to Zathmar and his guests? In no way. There was no longer any interchange of ciphered correspondence between Trieste and the other towns of Hungary. All the papers relating to the movement had been destroyed. There remained no written trace of the conspiracy. Measures had been taken; Count Sandorf had only to give the signal when the moment arrived. So that the introduction of a clerk into the house, which the government might have under surveillance, was calculated to allay all suspicion. That is to say, the reasoning was just and the precaution good had the clerk been any one else than Sarcany, and his introducer any other than Silas Toronthal.

Sarcany was a past-master in duplicity, and took full advantage of the gifts he possessed — his open face, his frank, clear expression, and his honest, straightforward look. Count Sandorf and his two companions could not but be taken with him, and they were taken with him. In no way did he show or learn that he was in the presence of the chiefs of a conspiracy to raise the Hungarian race in revolt against the Germans. Mathias Sandorf, Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar seemed at their meetings to be only occupied with discussions on art and science. There was no secret correspondence; there were no mysterious comings and goings about the house. But Sarcany knew what he wanted. The chance he wanted was sure to come in turn and he waited for it.

In entering Zathmar’s house Sarcany had but one object in view — to possess himself of the grating that would enable him to decipher the cryptogram; and as no ciphered dispatch arrived at Trieste, he began to ask himself if, for prudential reasons, the grating had been destroyed? This would be rather annoying for him, as all the scaffolding of his scheme was based on his being able to read the letter brought by the pigeon.

Thus, as he worked at putting in order the accounts of Mathias Sandorf, he kept his eyes open; he watched, he spied. Admission to the room where the meetings took place between Zathmar and his companions was not forbidden him. Very often he worked there all alone; and then his eyes and his fingers were occupied in quite-other tasks than making calculations or casting figures. He ferreted among the papers; he opened the drawers by means of skeleton keys made him by Zirone, who was quite an adept in such matters. And all the time he kept a strict watch on Borik, with whom he seemed, somehow, to be quite out of sympathy.

For five days Sarcany’s search was useless. Each morning he came with the hope of succeeding; each evening he returned to his hotel without having discovered anything. He feared he was going to fail after all in his criminal enterprise. The conspiracy — if there were a conspiracy, and he could not doubt that there was one — might come to a head at any moment before it had been discovered, and consequently before it had been reported.

“But rather than lose the benefit of a discovery, even without satisfactory proofs, better inform the police,” said Zirone, “and give them a copy of the letter.”

“That is what I am going to do, if necessary,” said Sarcany.

Of course Toronthal was kept informed of all that went on. And it was not without difficulty that the impatience of the banker was duly curbed.

Chance came at last to his assistance. On the first occasion it brought him the message, and now it came to him to show him how the message could be deciphered. It was the last day of May, about four o’clock in the afternoon. Sarcany, according to his custom, was going to leave Zathmar’s house at five. He was greatly disappointed that he had advanced no further than on the first day, and that the work he had been doing for Count Sandorf was approaching its end. When the task was finished he would evidently be dismissed with thanks and rewards, and he would have no chance of again entering the house.

Zathmar and his two friends were not at home. There was no one in the house but Borik, and he was busy on the ground-floor. Sarcany, finding himself free to do as he liked, resolved to go into Count Zathmar’s room — which he had not yet been able to do — and then search everything he could.

The door was locked. Sarcany with his skeleton keys soon opened it and entered.

Between the two windows opening on to the street there was a writing-desk, whose antique form would have delighted a connoisseur in old furniture. The shut-down front prevented any one inspecting what was inside.

It was the first time Sarcany had the chance of getting near this piece of furniture, and he was not the man to waste his opportunities. To rummage its different drawers he only had to force the front. And this he did with the aid of his instruments, without the lock being in any way injured.

In the fourth drawer under a pile of papers, was a kind of card cut into curious holes. The card caught his attention at once.

“The grating!” he said.

He was not mistaken.

His first idea was to take it with him, but on reflection he saw that its disappearance would awaken suspicion, if Count Zathmar noticed that it had gone.

“Good,” said he to himself; “as I copied the message, so I’ll copy the grating, and Toronthal and I can read the dispatch at our ease.”

The grating was merely a square of card about two and a half inches long, divided into thirty-six equal squares. Of these thirty-six equal squares, arranged in six horizontal and vertical lines, like those on a Pythagorean table of six ciphers, twenty-seven were shaded and nine were open — that is to say, nine squares had been cut out of the card and left nine openings in different positions.

Sarcany had to be careful to take the exact size of the grating and the exact position of the nine blank squares. And this he did by tracing the grating on a sheet of white paper and marking on his copy a small cross which he found on the original, and which seemed to distinguish the top side.

The following two paragraphs, footnote and image, critical to following the details of the cipher, were omitted in the Munro edition and have been added (translation of Verne’s text) by the redactor.

The disposition of the squares with openings, which allowed the paper on which he traced the contours of the chart to be seen, was — in the first line, three openings occupying places 2, 4 and 6; in the second line, an opening occupying place 5; in the third line, an opening occupying places 3; in the fourth line, two openings occupying places 2 and 5; in the fifth line, an opening occupying place 6; in the sixth line, an opening occupying place 4.

Here, besides, is this grating, in its natural size, of which Sarcany was soon going to make such criminal use, in complicity with the banker Silas Toronthal.

By means of this grating, which it would be easy to copy on a piece of ordinary card, Sarcany felt that he would have no difficulty in deciphering the fac-simile of the message then in possession of Toronthal; and so he put back the original grating among the papers, as he had found it, left Zathmar's room, left the house, and returned to his hotel.

A quarter of an hour afterward Zirone beheld him enter the room with such a triumphant air that he could not help exclaiming:

"Hallo! What is up? Take care of yourself! You are not so clever in hiding your joy as yon are your grief, and you'll betray yourself, if — "

"Shut up," answered Sarcany, "and to work without losing a moment."

"Before we feed?"

"Before we feed."

And then Sarcany picked up a card of moderate thickness. He cut it according to his tracing so as to obtain a grating of the exact shape of his copy, not forgetting the little cross which showed the right end uppermost. Then he took a rule and divided his rectangle into thirty-six squares, all of equal size. Then of these thirty-six squares, nine were marked as they appeared on the tracing, and cutout with the point of a penknife so as to show through them, when applied to the message, whatever signs or letters were to be read.

Zirone sat facing Sarcany, and watched him as he worked. He was deeply interested in the performance, because he thoroughly understood the system of cryptography employed in the correspondence.

“Now that is ingenious,” he said, “highly ingenious, and may be of some use! When I think that each of those empty squares may perhaps hold a million of money — ”

“And more!” said Sarcany.

The work was at an end. Sarcany rose and put the cut card into his pocket-book.

“The first thing to-morrow morning I call on Toronthal,” he said.

“Keep an eye on his cash-box.”

“If he has the message, I have the grating!”

“And this time he will have to give it up.”

“He will give it up.”

“And now we can feed?”

“We can feed.”

“Come on, then.”

And Zirone, always blessed with a healthy appetite, did full justice to the excellent meal he had, according to his custom, previously ordered.

In the morning — it was the 1st of June — at eight o’clock, Sarcany presented himself at the bank, and Toronthal gave orders for him to be shown into the office immediately.

“There is the grating,” was all that Sarcany said, as he laid the card on the table.

The banker took it, turned it round and round, jerked his head first to one side then the other, and did not seem at all to share in the confidence of his associate.

“Let us try it,” said Sarcany.

“Well, we’ll try it.”

Toronthal took the fac-simile of the message from one of the drawers in his desk and laid it on the table. It may be recollected that the message was composed of eighteen words, each containing six letters — the words being quite unintelligible. It was obvious that each letter ought to correspond with a square of the card; and consequently that the six first words of the message, composed of thirty-six letters, must have been obtained by means of the thirty-six squares.

And in the grating the arrangement of the blank squares had been so ingeniously thought out that for every quarter turn that is, for the four times the blank squares changed their position they came in a different place.

It will seen that this must be so; for if at the first application of the grating to white paper the figures 1 to 9 are inscribed in each blank space, and then, after a quarter turn, the figures 10 to 18, and then after another quarter turn the figures 19 to 27, and then, after another quarter turn, the figures 28 to 36, it will be found that no square has two numbers, and that each of the thirty-six squares is filled in. Sarcany very naturally began on the six first words of the message, intending to make four successive applications of the grating. He then thought of treating the next six, and then the six finals in the same way, and thus use up the eighteen words of the cryptogram.

It need scarcely be said that Sarcany had told Toronthal what he intended to do, and that the banker had approved of the plan.

Would the practice confirm the theory? Therein lay all the interest of the experiment.

The eighteen words of the message were these:

ihnalz

zaemen

ruiopn

arnuro

trvree

mtqssl

odxhnp

estlev

eeuart

aeeeil

ennios

noupvg

spesdr

erssur

ouitse

eedgnc

toeedt

artuee

At first they set to work to decipher the first six words. To do this Sarcany wrote them out on a sheet of white paper, taking care so to space the letters and lines as to bring each letter under one of the squares of the grating.

And this was the result.

i

h

n

a

l

z

a

r

n

u

r

o

o

d

x

h

n

p

a

e

e

e

i

l

s

p

e

s

d

r

e

e

d

g

n

c

Then the grating was placed over the letters so that the little cross was on top, and then through the nine openings there appeared the nine letters shown below, while the other twenty-seven were hidden:

h a z r x e i r g.

CHAPTER VI.

CAN THE CIPHER BE SOLVED?

Then Sarcany made a quarter turn of the grating from right to left, so as to bring the side with the cross right. And these were the letters that appeared through the spaces:

n o h a l e d e c

At the third attempt the letters visible were these:

n a d n e p e d n

To the astonishment of Toronthal and Sarcany, none of these combinations gave any sense. They endeavored to read them consecutively in the order they had been obtained, but they proved as meaningless as the dispatch itself. Was the message to remain indecipherable?

The fourth application of the grating resulted thus:

i l r u o p e s s

which was as obscure as the others.

In fact, the four words which had been discovered were:

hazrxeirg

nohaledec

nadnepedn

ilruopess

And these meant — Nothing.

Sarcany could not conceal his rage at such a disappointment. The banker shook his head, and remarked, in a slight tone of irony —

“Perhaps that is not the grating!”

Sarcany simply writhed in his chair.

“Let us try again!” he said.

“Try again,” said Toronthal.

Sarcany, having mastered his nervous agitation, began experimenting on the six words forming the second column of the message. Four times did he apply the grating; and these are the four meaningless words that he obtained:

amnetnore

velessuot

etseirted

zerreones

This time Sarcany threw the grating on to the table with an oath.

In curious contrast Toronthal kept quite cool. He was carefully studying the words hitherto obtained, and remained deep in thought.

“Confound all gratings and all who use them!” exclaimed Sarcany, rising.

"Sit down," said Toronthal.

"Sit down?"

"Yes; and go on."

Sarcany gave Toronthal a look. Then he sat down, took the grating, and applied it to the last six words of the message, as he had done to the others. He did it mechanically, as though he took no interest in what he was doing.

And the words given by the four applications of the grating were:

uonsuoveu

qlangisre

imerpuate

rptsetuot

That was all. The words were as meaningless as the others.

Sarcany, enraged beyond all bounds, took the paper on which he had written the barbarous words which the grating had yielded, and was about to tear it into tatters, when Toronthal stopped him.

"Do not get excited," he said.

"Eh!" exclaimed Sarcany, "what can you do with an insolvable logograph like that?"

"Write all those words in a line, one after the other," said the banker.

“And why?”

“To see.”

Sarcany obeyed, and he obtained the following:

hazrxeirgnohaledecnadnepednilruopessamnetnorevelessuotetseirts

dzerrevnesuonsuoveuqlangisreimerpuaterptsetuot

The letters had scarcely been written before Toronthal itched the paper from Sarcany and read it and gave a shout. It was the banker who now lost his head. Sarcany thought he had gone mad.

“Read!” said Toronthal, holding out the paper to Sarcany. “Read!”

“Read!”

“Yes! don’t you see that, before thev used the grating, Count Sandorfs correspondents wrote the letter backward?”

Sarcany took the paper, and this is what he read, proceeding from the last letter to the first:

“Tout est pret. Au premier signal que vous nous enverrez de Trieste, tous se leveront en masse pour l’independence de la Hongrie. Xrzah.”

“And the four last letters?” he asked.

“An agreed-upon signature, or something to fill up,” said Toronthal.

“0h, then! `All is ready. At the first signal you send us from Trieste, all of us will rise together for the independence of Hungary!’ That is it, is it? Well, we have got them at last!”

“But the police have not got them!”

“That is my business.”

“You will act with great secrecy?”

“That is my business,” said Sarcany. “The Governor of Trieste shall be the only person to know the names of the two honest patriots who have nipped in its bud this conspiracy against the empire of Austria!”

And as he spoke, the mockery of each tone and gesture betrayed the true feeling with which he uttered the words.

“And now I have nothing else to do,” said the banker.

“Nothing,” answered Sarcany, “except to take your share of the profit.”

“When?”

“When the three heads fall which are worth a million apiece.”

Toronthal and Sarcany bid each other adieu. If they wished to gain anything out of the secret that chance had handed over to them they must be quick and denounce the conspirators before the plot broke out.

Sarcany returned to Zathmar’s house as if nothing had occurred, and went on with the accounts. His work was nearly finished. Count Sandorf, in thanking him for the zeal he had shown, told him that he should not require his services after the next eighteen days.

To Sarcany’s mind this meant that about that time the signal was to be given from Trieste to the chief Hungarian towns.

He continued, therefore, to watch with the greatest care, but so as to give rise to no suspicion, all that took place in Zathmar’s house. And he played his part so well, he seemed so imbued with liberal ideas, and had taken so little pains to hide the invincible repulsion he said he felt for the Germans, that Sandorf had thought of giving him a post later on, when the rising should have made Hungary a free country. It was not so with Borik, who had never got over the first feeling of dislike with which the young man had inspired him.

Sarcany neared his triumph.

It was on the 9th of June that Count Sandorf had agreed with his friends to give the signal, and the 8th had come.

But the informer had been at work.

In the evening, about eight o’clock, the police suddenly entered Zathmar’s house. Resistance was impossible. Count Sandorf, Count Zathmar, Professor Bathory, Sarcany himself, who made no protest, and Borik were secretly arrested.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TRIAL.

Istria, which became part of Austria-Hungary in accordance with the treaty of 1815, is a triangular peninsula of which the isthmus forms the base. The peninsula extends from the Gulf of Trieste to the Gulf of Qnarnero; and along its coast line are several harbors. Among others, almost at the extreme southern point, is Pola, which the government was then forming into a dock-yard and arsenal of the first class.

The province, more especially on its western coast, is still Italian, and even Venetian in its customs and language. The Sclave element still struggles with the Italian element, and the German element has some difficulty in maintaining its influence.

There are several important towns on the coast and in the interior. Among these are Capo d’Istria and Pirano, whose population is almost entirely employed in the salt works at the mouths of the Risano and Corna-Lunga; Parenzo, the head-quarters of the Istrian Diet and the residence of the bishop; Rivigno, rich in its olive-trees, and Pola, where tourists find interest in the superb monuments of Roman origin, and which is destined to become the most important military port in the Adriatic.

But neither of these towns has the right to call itself the capital of Istria. The place that bears the title is Pisino, situated almost in the center of the triangle, and thither, unknown to them, the prisoners were about to be taken after their secret arrest.

At the door of Zathmar’s house a post-chaise was waiting. The four prisoners entered it, and two of the Austrian police, who were put in charge during the journey, took their places beside them. They were thus prevented from exchanging a word which might in any way compromise them, or lead to a mutual understanding before their appearance in the dock.

An escort of twelve mounted gendarmes, commanded by a lieutenant, took up their positions in front, behind, and at the doors of the carriage, and ten minutes afterward they were out of the town. Borik was taken direct to the prison at Trieste, and there put into solitary confinement.

Where were the prisoners going? In what fortress of the Austrian Government were they to be lodged, since the castle at Trieste was not to receive them? Count Sandorf and his friends would have been glad to know, but they tried to discover in vain!

The night was dark. By the light of the carriage lamps only the first rank of the mounted escort could be seen. The pace was rapid. Sandorf, Bathory and Zathmar remained motionless and silent in their corners. Sarcany did not seek to break the silence, either to protest against his arrest, or to ask why the arrest had been made.

After leaving Trieste the post-chaise made a bend which took it obliquely toward the coast. Count Sandorf, amid the noise of the trotting horses and the jingling sabers, could hear the distant murmur of the surf on the rocks along the shore. For a moment a few lights shone out in the night, and almost immediately disappeared. This was the small town of Muggia, which the post-chaise had just passed without halting. Then Sandorf noticed that the road lay into the interior.

At eleven o’clock the chaise stopped to change horses. It was only at a farm, where the horses were waiting ready to be harnessed. It was not a post-station.

The escort resumed its journey. The carriage passed along a road among the vineyards where the vines interlaced themselves in festoons to the branches of the mulberry-trees. The road was flat and the carriage made rapid progress. The darkness now grew more profound, for heavy clouds, brought up by a violent sirocco from the south-east, covered the sky; and, although the windows were let down from time to time to admit a little fresh air — for the nights are warm in Istria — it was impossible to distinguish anything even close at hand. Although Sandorf and his friends noted every incident on the road, the direction of the wind and the time elapsed since their departure, they could not discover the direction in which the carriage was traveling. The object was doubtless to keep it as secret as possible, so that their place of confinement should not be known to the public.

About two o’clock in the morning they again changed horses. As at the first change, the halt did not last five minutes.

Count Sandorf thought he could make out in the gloom a few houses at the end of a road, as though on the extreme outskirt of a town.

This was Buje, the chief place of a district situated about twenty miles south of Muggia.

As soon as the horses were put to, the lieutenant spoke a few words to the postilion in a low tone, and the chaise set off at a gallop.

About half past three o’clock the day began to dawn. An hour later the position of the rising sun would have shown them the direction in which they were going, but the police shut down the shutters, and the interior of the carriage was plunged into complete darkness. Neither Count Sandorf nor his friends made the least observation. It would not have been replied to; that was quite certain. The best thing to do was to submit and wait.

An hour or two afterward — it was difficult to reckon how the time went — the post-chaise stopped for the last time, and the change of horses was very quickly performed at Visinada.

As they left here all that could be noticed was that the road had become very hard. The shouts of the postilion, the cracking of his whip, incessantly urged the horses forward, and the shoes rattled on the hard, stony ground of a mountainous region. A few hills with little clumps of grayish trees could be made out on the horizon. Two or three times the prisoners heard the sounds of a flute. They came from the young shepherds who were playing their curious tunes as they gathered together their flocks of black goats, but this afforded no sufficient indication of the country the prisoners were passing through. That had to be found out without seeing it.

About nine o’clock the chaise went off in quite a different direction. Unless they were mistaken they were descending rapidly after having reached the highest point of their journey. The speed was much increased, and occasionally the wheels had to be skidded.

In fact, after leading through the hilly country commanded by Mont Majeur, the road drops down obliquely as it approaches Pisino. Although the town is very much above sea level it seems to be in a deep valley to judge from the neighboring hills. Some distance before it is reached the campanile above the houses picturesquely grouped on the hill-side becomes visible.

Pisino is the chief place of the district, and contains about 24,000 inhabitants. It is situated almost in the center of the peninsula, and particularly at fair-time a large business is done among the mixed population of Morlaques, Sclaves of different tribes, and even Tsiganes, who flourish there.

The capital of Istria is an old city, and has retained its feudal character. This strikingly appears in the ancient castle, which towers above several more modern military establishments where the administration of the government is carried on.

It was in the court-yard of this castle that the post-chaise stopped on the 9th of June, about ten o'clock in the morning, after a journey of fifteen hours. Count Sandorf, his two companions and Sarcany left the vehicle, and a few minutes afterward were shown into separate vaulted cells.

Although they had had no communication with each other, and had not been able to exchange ideas in any way, yet Sandorf, Zathmar and Bathory were all engaged in pondering over the same subject. How had the secret of the plot been discovered? Had the police come on the track by chance? There had recently been no correspondence between Trieste and the Hungarian and Transylvanian towns. Was there a traitor in the camp? But who could be the traitor? Confidence had been placed in none. There were no papers to fall into a spy's hands. All the documents had been destroyed. Had they rummaged the most secret corners of the Acquedotto they would not have found a single suspicious note! And that is what had happened. The police had discovered nothing — except the grating, which Zathmar had not destroyed in case he should want it for future use. But unhappily the grating was serious evidence, for it was impossible to explain its use except as a means of ciphered correspondence.

In fact, everything rested on the copy of the message that Sarcany, with Toronthal's connivance, had handed over to the Governor of Trieste after having made out its real meaning. But, unfortunately, that was quite enough to make good the accusation of conspiring against the state; and it had been decided to bring Count Sandorf and his friends before a special tribunal, a military tribunal, which would proceed in military fashion.

Sarcany's game was a deep one, and he played it with the coolness and deliberation that distinguished him. He had allowed himself to be arrested, to be convicted, if need be, on the understanding that he should receive a pardon; and in this way he hoped to disarm suspicion.

Sandorf was completely deceived by him — and who would not have been? — and resolved to do his utmost to clear him of the charge. It would not be difficult, he thought, to show that Sarcany had taken no part in the conspiracy, that he was merely an accountant only recently introduced into Zathmar's house to arrange certain private matters which in no way had reference to the plot. If needful, he could call Silas Toronthal to testify to the young man's innocence. There could be no doubt, therefore, that Sarcany would be found innocent of having been either a principal or accessory, in the event of the prosecution being persisted in.

The Austrian Government knew nothing of the conspiracy beyond what they heard at Trieste. The conspirators in Hungary and Transylvania remained absolutely unknown. There was no trace in existence of their complicity in the plot. Sandorf, Bathory and Zathmar need have felt no anxiety on this head. As far as they were concerned they had made up their minds to deny everything until some material evidence was produced. In that case they knew that their lives were forfeit. Others would one day take up the movement that had now proved abortive. The cause of independence would find new leaders. If they wore convicted they would avow what had been their hopes. They would show the object at which they had aimed, and which one day or the other would be attained.

It was not without some reason that Count Sandorf and his two friends thought that the action of the police had been restricted in the matter. At Buda, at Pesth, at Klausenburg, in all the towns in which the rising was to take place at the signal from Trieste, inquiries had been made in vain. That was why the government had arrested the chiefs so secretly at Trieste. They had sent them to Pisino, and desired that nothing should be known of the matter, in the hope that something would happen to betray the senders of the cipher message. The hope was not realized. The expected signal was not given. The movement was stopped for a time at least. The government had to content itself with trying Sandorf and his companions for high treason.

The inquiries took several days; and it was not till the 20th of June that the proceedings began with the examination of the accused. They were not even confronted with each other, and were only to meet before their judges.

The chiefs of the Trieste conspiracy were, as we have said, to be tried before a court-martial. The proceedings before such a court never take long, the trial is conducted very quickly, and there is no delay in the execution of the sentence.

It was so in this matter.

On the 25th of June the court-martial met in one of the lower rooms of the fortress of Pisino, and the accused were brought before it. The proceedings did not take very long, and nothing startling was discovered.

The court opened at nine o’clock in the morning. Count Sandorf, Count Zathmar, and Professor Bathory, on the one side, and Sarcany on the other, saw each other for the first time since their imprisonment. The clasp of the hand which Sandorf and his friend interchanged as they met, gave yet another proof of their unanimity. A sign from Zathmar, and Bathory gave

Sandorf to understand that they left it to him to speak for them. Neither would undertake the defense. All Sandorf had done up till then had been well done. All that he thought fit to say to the judges would be well said.

The hearing was a public one, in the sense that the doors of the room were open. But few persons were present, for the affair had not yet transpired; and the spectators, some twenty in number, belonged to the staff of the castle.

The identity of the accused was first proved. Then immediately afterward, Sandorf asked the president the name of the place to which he and his companion had been brought for trial, but no reply was given to the question.

The identity of Sarcany was likewise established. He still did nothing to distinguish his case from that of his companions.

Then the fac-simile of the message handed over to the police was produced; and the accused were asked if they remembered receiving the original. They replied that it was the duty of the prosecution to prove that they received it.

At this reply the grating which had been found in Zathmar's desk was produced.

Sandorf and his companions could not deny that the grating had been in their possession. They did not try to. To such material evidence there was no reply. The application of the grating permitted the cryptographic letter to be read, and the letter must consequently have been received.

And thus they learned how the secret of the conspiracy was discovered and the basis on which the prosecution was originated.

Prom this time forward question and answer passed rapidly and clearly told the story.

Sandorf denied nothing. He spoke on behalf of his two friends. A movement intended to bring about the separation of Hungary from Austria, and the autonomic reconstitution of the kingdom of the ancient Magyars had been organized by them. Had they not been arrested, it would shortly have broken out, and Hungary would have reconquered its independence. Sandorf claimed to be the chief of the conspiracy, and insisted that his fellow-prisoners were merely his agents. But Zathmar and Bathory protested against this contention, and claimed the Honor of having been his accomplices, and desired to share his fate.

When the president interrogated the prisoners as to their dealings with others they refused to reply. Not a name was given.

“You have now three heads,” said Sandorf, “and that must be enough for you.”

Three heads only, for Sandorf then set himself to exculpating Sarcany, a young clerk employed in Count Zathmar’s house on the recommendation of Silas Toronthal.

Sarcany could not confirm what Sandorf stated. He knew nothing of the conspiracy. He had been greatly surprised to learn that in this quiet house on the Acquedotto a plot was in progress against the safety of the state. If he had made no protest when he was arrested, it was because he had no idea what it was all about.

Neither Count Sandorf nor Sarcany had any difficulty in proving this — and it is probable that the court had already made up his mind in the matter.

At the suggestion of the judge-advocate the charge against Sarcany was then and there abandoned.

By two o’clock in the afternoon the pleadings were all over, and the sentence was given without even an adjournment.

Count Mathias Sandorf, Count Ladislas Zathmar and Professor Stephen Bathory were found guilty of high treason against the state and sentenced to death.

The prisoners were to be shot in the court-yard of the castle.

The execution was to take place within forty-eight hours. Sarcany was to be kept in custody until the closing of the jail books, which would not take place until after the execution of the sentence.

By the same judgment all the possessions of the prisoners were confiscated.

The prisoners were then removed.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE SENTENCE.

Sarcany was taken back to the cell he occupied at the bottom of an elliptic corridor on the second floor of the donjon. Sandorf and his two friends, during the last hours of life that remained to them, were quartered in a large cell on the same level, exactly at the end of the major axis of the ellipse which this corridor made. The secret was now known. The condemned were to be left together until their execution.

This was a consolation, even a pleasure for them, when they found themselves alone and allowed to give way to feelings which they could not at first restrain.

“My friends,” said Sandorf, “I am the cause of your deaths! But I have nothing to ask your pardon for! We worked for the independence of Hungary! Our cause was just! It is our duty to defend her! It is an honor to die for her!”

“Mathias,” said Bathory, “we thank you for having associated us with you in the patriotic work which would have been the work of all your life — ”

“As we are associated with you in death!” added Zathmar.

Then during a momentary silence the three gazed round the gloomy cell in which they were to spend their last hours. A narrow window some four or five feet high, cut through the thick wall of the donjon, let in a certain amount of light. There were three iron bedsteads, a few chairs, a table and a shelf or two, on which were a few articles of crockery.

Zathmar and Bathory were soon lost in thought.

Sandorf began to walk up and down the cell.

Zathmar was alone in the world, had no family ties and no near relations. There was only his old servant, Borik, to mourn for him.

It was not so with Bathory. His death would not only prove a blow to himself. He had a wife and son whom it would reach. That wife and child might even die! And if they survived him, how were they to live? What was to be the future of a penniless woman and her eight-year-old child? Had Bathory possessed any property, how much of it would remain after a judgment which directed it to be confiscated and sentenced him to death?

As for Sandorf, all his past life returned to him! His wife came to him! His little daughter came a child of two years old, now left to the care of the steward. And there were his friends whom he had led to ruin! He asked himself if he had done well, if he had not gone further than his duty toward his country required? Would that the punishment had fallen on him alone, and not upon those that were innocent!

“No! no! I have only done my duty!” he said to himself. “My country before all and above all!”

At five o’clock a warder entered the cell, placed the dinner on the table, and went out again without saying a word. Sandorf would have liked to know in what fortress he was kept a prisoner, but as the president of the court-martial had not thought fit to answer the question it was quite certain that the warder would not give the information.

The prisoners hardly touched the dinner which had been prepared for them. They passed the rest of the day talking on various matters, in the hope that their abortive attempt would one day be resumed. Very often they returned to the incidents of the trial.

“We now know,” said Zathmar, “why we have been arrested, and how the police discovered us from that letter which they came across.”

“Yes, Ladislas,” said Sandorf, “but into whose hands did that message, which was one of the last we received, at first fall, and who copied it?”

“And when it was copied,” added Bathory, “how did they read it without the grating?”

“The grating must have been stolen,” said Sandorf.

“Stolen! and by whom?” asked Zathmar. “The day we were arrested it was still in the drawer on my desk, whence the police took it.”

This was, indeed, inexplicable. That the letter had been found on the pigeon; that it had been copied before being sent to its destination; that the house where the person to whom it was addressed had been discovered — all that could be explained. But that the cryptographic dispatch could have been deciphered without the grating by which it had been formed was incomprehensible.

“And besides,” continued Sandorf, “we know that the letter was read, and it could not have been read without the grating! It was this letter which put the police on our traces, and it was on it that the whole charge was based.”

“It matters very little, after all,” answered Bathory.

“On the contrary, it does matter,” said Sandorf. “We have been betrayed! And if there has been a traitor — not to know — ”

Sandorf suddenly stopped. The name of Sarcany occurred to him; but he abandoned the thought at once without caring to communicate it to his companions.

Far into the night Sandorf and his companions continued their conversation on all that was unintelligible with regard to these matters.

In the morning they were awakened from sound sleep by the entry of the warder. It was the morning of their last day but one. The execution was fixed to take place in twenty-four hours from then.

Bathory asked the warder if he might be permitted to see his family.

The warder replied that he had no orders on the subject. It was not likely that the government would consent to give the prisoners this last consolation, inasmuch as they had conducted the affair throughout with the greatest secrecy, and not even the name of the fortress which served them as a prison had been revealed.

“If we write letters, will they be forwarded?” asked Sandorf.

“I will bring you paper, pens and ink,” replied the warder; “and I promise to give your letters into the governor’s hands.”

“We are much obliged to you,” said Sandorf. “If you do that, you do all you can! How shall we reward you?”

“Your thanks are sufficient, gentlemen,” said the warder, who could not conceal his emotion.

He soon brought in the writing materials. The prisoners spent the greater part of the day in making their last arrangements. Sandorf said all that a father’s heart could prompt in his instructions regarding his baby girl, who would soon be an orphan; Bathory, all that a husband and father could think of in bidding a loving farewell to his wife and son; Zathmar, all that a master could say to an old servant who remained his only friend.

But during the day, although absorbed in their writing, how many times did they stop to listen! How many times did they seek to discover if some distant noise was not coming along the corridors of the donjon! How many times did it seem to them as though the door of their cell had opened, and that they were to be permitted one last embrace of wife, son or daughter! That would have been some consolation! But, in truth, the pitiless order deprived them of this last adieu and spared them the heart-rending scene.

The door did not open. Doubtless neither Mme. Bathory nor her son, nor the steward, Lendeck, to whose care Sandorf’s daughter had been given, knew any more where the prisoners had been taken to after their arrest than Borik in his prison at Trieste. Doubtless, also, neither knew of the doom in store for the conspirators.

Thus passed the earlier hours of the day. Occasionally Sandorf and his friends would talk for awhile. Occasionally they would be silent for some time, and then the whole of their lives would be lived over again in their memories with an intensity of impression quite super-natural. It was not with the past, as affecting the past, that they were entirely concerned; the recollections seemed all to shape themselves with a view to the present. Was it, then, a prescience of that eternity which was about to open on them, of that incomprehensible and incommensurate state of things which is called the infinite?

Bathory and Zathmar abandoned themselves without reserve to their reveries, but Sandorf was invincibly dominated by an idea which had taken possession of him. He could not doubt that there had been treachery in this mysterious affair. For a man of his character to die without punishing the traitor, whoever he was, without knowing even who had betrayed him, was to die twice over. Who had got hold of this message to which the police owed the discovery of the conspiracy and the arrest of the conspirators? Who had read it, who had given it up, who had sold it, perhaps? Pondering over this insoluble problem, Sandorfs excited brain became a prey to a sort of fever. And while his friends wrote on or remained silent and motionless, he strode about, uneasy and agitated, pacing the floor of his cell like a wild beast shut up in a cage.

A phenomenon — strange but not unintelligible, in accordance with acoustical law — came at last to his aid and whispered the secret he had despaired of discovering.

Several times he had stopped short as he turned at the angle which the dividing wall of the cell made with the main wall of the corridor, on to which the different cells opened. In this angle, just where the door was hinged he seemed to hear a murmur of voices, distant and hardly recognizable. At first he paid no attention to this, but suddenly a name was pronounced — his own — and he listened intently. At once he detected an acoustical phenomenon, such as is observable in the interiors of galleries and domes or under vaults of ellipsoidal form. The noise traveling from one point of the ellipse, after following the contour of the walls without being perceptible at any intermediate point, is plainly heard at the other focus. Such is the phenomenon met with in the crypts of the Pantheon in Paris, in the interior of the dome of St. Peter’s at Rome, and in the whispering gallery at St. Paul’s in London. The faintest word uttered at one focus is distinctly heard at the focus opposite.

There could be no doubt that two or more persons were talking in the corridor or in a cell situated at the end of the diameter, the vocal point of which was close to the door of the cell occupied by Sandorf.

By a sign he called his companions to him. The three stood listening.

Fragments of phrases distinctly reached their ears; phrases broken off and dying away as every now and then the speakers moved from and toward the point whose position determined the phenomenon.

And these are the phrases they heard at different intervals:

“To-morrow, after the execution, you will be free.”

“And then Count Sandorf’s goods we share — ”

“Without me you never would have deciphered that message.”

“And without me — if I had not taken it from the pigeon, you would never have got hold of it — ”

“Well, no one would suspect that the police owe — ”

“Even the prisoners have no suspicion — ”

“Neither relatives nor friends are coming to see them — ”

“To-morrow, Sarcany — ”

“To-morrow, Silas Toronthal.”

Then the voices were silent, and the sound of a door being shut was heard.

“Sarcany! Silas Toronthal!” exclaimed Sandorf. “That is where it came from!”

He looked at his friends, and was quite pale. His heart stopped beating in the grip of the spasm.

His eyes dilated, his neck stiffened, his head sunk back to his shoulders — everything showed that his energetic nature was in the grasp of terrible anger, pushed to its furthest extreme.

“Those two! The scoundrels! Those two!” he repeated, with a sort of roar.

Then he corrected himself, looked around him, and strode across the cell.

“Escape! Escape!” he exclaimed. “We must escape!”

And this man, who would have walked bravely to death a few hours later, this man who had never even thought of making an effort for his life, this man had now but one thought — to live, and live to punish those two traitors, Sarcany and Toronthal!

“Yes! To be revenged!” exclaimed Bathory and Zathmar.

“To be revenged? No! To do justice!”

All the Count Sandorf was in these words.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DONJON OF PISINO.

The fortress of Pisino is one of the most curious specimens of those formidable buildings which arose in the middle ages. It has a fine feudal aspect. It only wants the knights in its vaulted halls and the ladies in their long broaded robes and pointed bonnets at its arched windows, and the archers and crossbowmen on its machicolations, its battlemented galleries, at the embrasures its mangonels, its portcullis and its draw-bridges. The stone-work is still intact; but the governor with his Austrian uniform, the soldiers with their modern weapons, the warders and turnkeys who no longer wear the particolored costume, half yellow and half red, of the old days, strike a false note in the midst of all this magnificence of the past.

It was from the donjon of this fortress that Count Sandorf was endeavoring to escape during the last hours before his execution. A mad attempt, no doubt; for the prisoners did not even know in what part of the donjon their prison lay, nor anything of the country across which they would have to journey after their escape.

And perhaps it was fortunate that their ignorance was complete in the matter. Had they known more they might have recoiled before the difficulties, to say nothing of the impossibilities, of such an enterprise.

It is not that this province of Istria offers no favorable chances for an escape, for no matter what direction the fugitives took they would reach the sea-coast in a few hours. It is not that the streets of Pisino are so carefully guarded that there is a risk of being arrested at the very first step. But to escape from the fortress, and particularly from the donjon occupied by the prisoners, had up to then been considered impossible. Even the idea had never occurred to any one.

The situation and exterior arrangements of the donjon in the fortress of Pisino were as follows: The donjon occupies one side of the terrace with which the town here ends. Leaning over the parapet of this terrace the eye plunges into a large, deep gulf, whose rugged sides, covered with thick entanglements of creepers, are cut down perpendicularly. Nothing overhangs the wall; there is not a step to enable any one to ascend or descend: not a fence to halt at; not a prominence to seize hold upon in any part of it; nothing but the uncertain lines, smooth, rubbed and irregular, which mark the oblique clearage of the rocks. In a word, it is an abyss which attracts, fascinates and never gives back anything that drops into it.

Above the abyss rises one of the side walls of the donjon, pierced with a few windows giving light to the cells on the different floors. Were a prisoner to lean out of one of these openings he would recoil with terror, lest vertigo drag him into the void below. And if he fell, what would be his fate? His body would be dashed to pieces on the rocks at the bottom, or it would be carried away by the torrent whose current during flood is irresistible.

The abyss is the Brico, as it is called in the district. Through it runs a river known as the Foiba. This river finds its only outlet in a cavern which it has gradually cut out of the rocks, and into which it falls with the impetuosity of a tide-race or a whirlpool. Where does it go as it passes under the town? No one knows. Where does it reappear? Not one knows of this cavern, or rather this canal, bored in the schists and clays — no one knows the length, the height or the direction. Who can say what thousands of angles, what forests of pillars supporting the enormous substructure of the fortress and entire city its waters are dashed against in their course? Many bold explorers, when the water-level has been neither too high nor too low, have taken a light boat and endeavored to descend the Foiba through the gloomy tunnel, but the arches have been too low and have soon interposed an impracticable obstacle. In fact, nothing is known of this subterranean river. Perhaps it is lost in some still deeper cavern and enters the Adriatic below the tidemark.

Such, then, was the Brico, of which Count Sandorf did not even know the existence; and as the only escape was by the window of his cell, which opened above the Brico, he would be almost as certain to meet his death there as if he stood in front of the firing party on the morning of his execution.

Zathmar and Bathory waited but for the time to act, ready to remain behind, if necessary, and sacrifice themselves to help Count Sandorf, or ready to follow him, if their flight would not hamper his.

“We’ll all three go,” said Sandorf. “Wait till we get out before we separate!”

Eight o’clock then struck from the clock in the town. The prisoners had only twelve hours to live.

Night began to close in — a night which promised to be very dark. Thick, almost motionless, clouds unrolled themselves cumbrously across the sky. The atmosphere was heavy, almost unbreathable, and saturated with electricity. A violent storm was coming on. Lightning had not yet passed between these masses of vapor, heaped around like so many accumulators, but distant growlings were heard along the summits of the hills that encircle Pisino.

Under such circumstances there might have been some chance of success, if an unknown gulf had not gaped beneath the feet of the fugitives. In a dark night they might not be seen; in a noisy night they might not be heard.

As Sandorf had instantly recognized, flight was only possible through the window of the cell. To force the door, to cut into its strong planks of oak, all bound and ironed, was not to be dreamed of. Besides, the step of a sentinel resounded on the flags of the corridor. And once the door was cleared, how were they to find their way through the labyrinth of the fortress? How were they to pass the portcullis and draw-bridges, at which there were always so many men on guard? On the side of the Brico there was no sentinel; but the Brico was a better defense to the face of the donjon than a cordon of sentries.

Sandorf then went to the window and examined it, to see if they could squeeze through it.

This window was exactly three and a half feet wide and two feet high. The gap widened, as it ran outward through the wall, which hereabouts was nearly four feet thick. A solid crossbar of iron guarded it. It was fixed in the side near the interior opening. There were none of those wooden boards which allow the light only to enter from above, for they would have been useless, owing to the position of the opening. If, then, the crossbar could be removed or displaced it would be easy to get through the window, which was not unlike an embrasure in a fortress wall.

But once the passage was free, how were they to make the descent down the perpendicular side? By a ladder? The prisoners had not one and could not make one. By the bedclothes? They had only the heavy woollen counterpanes thrown on the mattresses which lay on the iron frames fixed to the wall. It would have been impossible to have escaped by the window if Count Sandorf had not noticed a chain, or rather an iron rope, hanging outside, which might aid them to escape.

The cable was the lightning conductor fixed to the crest of the roof above the side of the donjon, the wall of which rose straight from the Brico.

“Do you see that cable?” said Count Sandorf to his two friends. “You must have the courage to use it if you want to make your escape.”

“The courage we have,” said Zathmar; “but have we the strength?”

“What does it matter?” replied Bathory; “if strength fail us we shall die an hour or two sooner, that is all.”

“There is no need to die, Stephen,” said Sandorf. “Listen to me, and you also, Ladislas; do not miss any of my words. If we possessed a rope, we should not hesitate to suspend ourselves outside the window, so that we might slip down it to the ground. Now, this cable is better than a rope, because its rigidity will render its descent much easier. Like all lightning conductors, there is no doubt but that it is fastened to the wall with staples. These staples will be fixed points, on which our feet may find a rest. There is no swinging to dread, because the cable is fixed to the wall. There is no vertigo to fear, because it is night, and you will see nothing. Then, once through the window, we have only to keep our coolness and courage, and we are free. That we risk our lives is possible. But it gives us ten chances to one; whereas, if we wait till the morning, and our keepers find us here, it is hundreds upon hundreds to one that we have to die!”

“Be it so,” replied Zathmar.

“Where does the cable end?” asked Bathory.

“In a well, probably,” answered Sandorf; “but certainly outside the donjon, and we’ll take advantage of it. I do not know. I only see one thing at the end of it, and that is liberty — perhaps!”

Count Sandorf was right in his supposition that the lightning conductor was fastened to the wall by staples at equal distances. The descent would thus be easy, for the fugitives could use the staples as stepping-stones to keep them from sliding down too swiftly. But what they did not know was that when it left the crest of the plateau on which rose the wall of the donjon, the iron cable became free, floating, abandoned in the void, and its lower end plunged into the waters of the Foiba, then swollen by recent rains. Where they reckoned on finding firm ground at the bottom of the gorge was a foaming torrent, leaping impetuously into the caverns of the Brico. If they had known this, would they then have recoiled from their attempted escape? No.

“Death for death,” said Sandorf. “We may die after doing all we can to escape death.”

The first thing was to clear the passage through the window. The crossbar that obstructed it would have to be removed. How was this to be done without a pair of pincers, a wrench, or any other tool? The prisoners had not even a knife.

“The rest will not be difficult,” said Sandorf, “but that may prove impossible! To work!”

And he climbed up to the window, seized the crossbar vigorously with his hand, and felt that it would not require such a very great effort to pull it down.

The iron bars which formed it were loose in their sockets. The stone, split away at the edges, did not offer very much resistance. Probably the lightning conductor, before it was repaired, had been in inferior condition for its purpose, and electric sparks had been attracted by the iron of the crossbar, and had acted on the wall, and how powerful such influence would be we are well aware. This may have been the cause of the breakages round the sockets into which the ends of the bars were thrust, and of the decomposition of the stone, which was reduced to a sort of spongy state, as if it had been pierced by millions of electric points.

This explanation was given by Stephen Bathory as soon as he noticed the phenomenon.

But it was not explanation, but work that was wanted, and that without losing a moment. If they could manage to clear the extremity of the bars, after forcing them backward and forward in their sockets, so as to knock off the angles of the stone, it might be easy to push the iron-work out of the embrasure,which widened as it went outward. The noise of the fall was not likely to be heard amid the long rollings of the thunder which were going on almost continuously in the lower strata of the clouds.

“But we shall never get that iron-work out with our hands,” said Zathmar.

“No!” answered Sandorf. “We ought to have a piece of iron, a blade — ”

Something of the sort was necessary, there could be no doubt. Friable as the wall might be round the sockets, the nails would be broken, and the fingers worn till they bled in trying to reduce it to powder. It could never be done without some hard point or other.

Sandorf looked around the cell, which was feebly lighted from the corridor by the small fanlight over the door. Then he felt the walls on the chance of a nail having been left in them. He found nothing. Then it occurred to him that it would not be impossible to take off one of the legs of the iron bedsteads, which were fixed to the wall. The three set to work and soon Bathory called to his companions in a whisper.

The rivet of one of the metal laths forming the lattice-work of the bed had given way. All that was necessary was to seize hold of this by the free end and twist it backward and forward until it broke off.

This was soon done. Sandorf thus obtained a thin piece of iron, about an inch wide and five inches long, which he wrapped around the end with his silk cravat, and with it he began to clear away the four sockets.

This could not be done without some noise. Fortunately the rumbling of the thunder prevented the noise from being heard. During the intervals of silence Sandorf stopped to resume his task as soon as the storm began again. The work advanced rapidly.

Bathory and Zathmar took up their positions near the door and listened, so as to stop him when the sentry went by.

Suddenly a “Sh — sh — sh — ” escaped from Zathmar’s lips.

The work instantly stopped.

“What is the matter?” asked Bathory.

“Listen,” answered Zathmar.

His ear was again at the focus of the ellipsoidal curve and again there was evident the acoustical phenomenon which had told the prisoners the secret of the treachery

These are the fragments of speech which were caught at short intervals:

“To-morrow — set — liberty — ”

“Yes — books closed — and — ”

“After the execution — I shall rejoin my comrade Zirone, who is waiting for me in Sicily.”

“Yours has been a short visit to the donjon of — ”

Evidently Sarcany and a warder were engaged in conversation. Further, Sarcany had pronounced the name of a certain Zirone, who was mixed up in the whole affair. Sandorf made a careful note of the new name.

Unfortunately the last word, which would have been so useful for the prisoners to know, did not reach them. At the end of the last sentence a violent clap of thunder took place, and while the electricity followed the lightning conductor a shower of sparks escaped from the strip of metal that Count Sandorf held in his hand. Had it not been for the silk with which he held it he would probably have been affected by the discharge.

And so the last word, the name of the donjon, was lost in a loud peal of thunder. The prisoners could not hear it. Had they known in what fortress they were confined and through what district they would have to make their way, how much greater would have been the chances of escape attempted under such difficult circumstances!

CHAPTER X.

DOWN THE BRICO.

Count Sandorf resumed his task at the window. Three out of the four sockets were already scraped away sufficiently to allow the ends of the crossbar to be moved out of them. The fourth was then attacked by the light of the dazzling flashes which constantly illumined the sky.

At half past ten o’clock the work was done. The crossbar was clear of the walls, and could be slipped out of the embrasure. It only had to be pushed forward and dropped on the outside of the wall. And this was done as soon as Zathmar heard that the sentry had reached the far end of the corridor.

The crossbar was moved along the embrasure. It fell over and vanished.

At the moment there was a lull in the storm. Sandorf listened to hear when the heavy frame struck the ground. He heard not a sound!

“The donjon is built on a high rock which rises from the valley,” remarked Bathory.

“The height does not matter,” answered Sandorf. “There can be no doubt that the lightning conductor reaches the ground, because that is necessary for it to be of any use. And so we shall reach the ground without the risk of a fall.”

The reasoning was right, as a rule, but it was wrong in this instance, for the end of the conductor was plunged in the waters of Foiba.

The window being clear, the moment for escape had come.

“My friends,” said Sandorf, “this is what we had better do: I am the youngest, and, I think, the strongest. It is my place, therefore, to be the first to go down this iron rope. In case of some obstacle, which is impossible for us to foresee, preventing my reaching the ground, I may have strength enough to climb back to the window. Two minutes after I have gone, Stephen, you get out of the window and fellow me. Two minutes after him, Ladislas, yon come the same way. When we three have reached the foot of the donjon we will act according to circumstances.”

“We will obey you, Mathias,” answered Bathory. “We will do what you tell us to do; we will go where you tell us to go. But we do not like your taking the greatest share of the danger on yourself — ”

“Our lives are not worth as much as yours,” added Zathmar.

“They are worth quite as much in the face of an act of justice which has to be done,” answered Count Sandorf. “And if one of us alone survives he will be the one to perform the act. Shake hands, my friends.”

And then, while Zathmar went to watch at the door of the cell, Sandorf climbed into the embrasure. ‘ A moment afterward he was hanging in the air. Then, while his knees gripped the iron rope, he slid down, hand under hand, feeling with his feet for the staples on which to rest.

The storm burst forth again with extraordinary violence. It did not rain, but the wind was terrific. Flash over-lapped flash. The zigzags crossed and crossed above the donjon, attracted by its isolated position and its towering height. The point of the lightning rod gleamed with pallid brilliancy as the electricity streamed off in a long spear-point of flame, and the cable shook and swung with the furious lashing of the storm.

The risk that was run in hanging on to this conductor, through which the electricity was traveling, to lose itself in the waters of the Brico, was terrible. Had the apparatus been in perfect condition there would have been no danger of a stroke, for the extreme conductibility of the metal compared to that of the human body, which is very much less, would have preserved the daring man who was suspended from it. But if the point of the conductor were blunted or there were any breakage of continuity in the cable, or a rupture occurred at any spot below, a stroke was quite possible due to the meeting of the positive and the negative; and this without a lightning flash, owing to the tension of the accumulation in the defective apparatus.

Count Sandorf was fully aware of the danger to which he was exposed. A sentiment more powerful than that of the instinct of preservation made him brave it. He slipped down slowly, cautiously through the electric emanations which enveloped him as in a mist. His foot sought each staple down the wall, and for an instant he paused, and as a blinding flash illumined the abyss beneath him he tried, but in vain, to discover its depth.

When Mathias had descended about sixty feet from the window he found a firm resting-place. It was a sort of ledge a few inches wide which marked the beginning of the base of the wall. The lightning conductor did not end here; it went down lower, and — unknown to the fugitive — from this point downward it was unfastened and floated free, sometimes skirting the rocky wall, sometimes swinging in mid-air, sometimes scraping against the rocks that overhung the abyss.

Count Sandorf stopped to recover his breath. His feet rested on the ledge, his hands grasped the iron cable. He saw that he had reached the first course of the masonry of the donjon. But how far he was above the valley he could not estimate.

“That must be very deep,” he thought.

In fact a few large birds, dazed by the brilliancy of the lightning, were flying round him with heavily flapping wings, and instead of rising, sunk out of sight beneath his feet. Hence he must be on the brink of a precipice which fell away, deep down below him.

As the birds disappeared he heard a noise above, and by the light of a vivid flash he saw a confused mass detach itself from the wall.

It was Stephen Bathory escaping from the window. He had grasped the conductor and was slowly slipping down to join Count Sandorf. Mathias waited for him, his feet firmly planted on the narrow ledge. There Stephen could wait while he continued to descend.

In a few minutes both were standing on the narrow stone-work.

As soon as the thunder ceased for an instant they could speak and hear each other.

“And Ladislas?” asked Sandorf.

“He will be here in a minute.”

“Nothing wrong aloft?”

“Nothing.”

“Good! I will make room for Ladislas, and you, Stephen, wait till he reaches you.”

“Agreed.”

A tremendous flash seemed to envelop them in flame. It seemed as though the electricity coursing through the cable had penetrated their nerves. They thought they had been struck.

“Mathias! Mathias!” exclaimed Bathory, under an impression of terror that he could not master.

“Be cool! I am going down! You will follow!” was Sandorf’s reply.

And already he had seized the cable with the intention of slipping to the first staple below, where he intended to wait for his companion.

Suddenly there were shouts from above. They seemed to come from the window of the cell. Then these words rang out:

“Save yourselves!”

It was Zathmar’s voice.

Immediately a bright light shot from the wall, followed by a sharp report. This time it was not the cable broken by a lightning flash which lit up the gloom; it was not the roar of the thunder which resounded m the air. A gun had been fired, a chance shot probably from one of the embrasures of the donjon. It was just as much a signal to the guard as if a bullet had been aimed at the fugitives. The escape had been discovered.

The sentry had heard some noise. He had called five or six of the warders and entered the cell. The absence of two of the prisoners had been immediately discovered, the state of the window showing how they had escaped. And Zathmar rushing to the window had given the alarm.

“Poor fellow!” exclaimed Bathory. “To desert him, Mathias! To desert him!”

A second time there came the discharge of a gun. The report mingled with the roll of the thunder.

“Heaven have pity on him!” said Sandorf. “But we must escape — we must avenge him! Come, Stephen, come!”

It was time. Other windows on the lower story of the donjon were being opened. New discharges lighted them up. Shouts were heard. Perhaps the warders could run round the base of the wall and cut off the retreat of the fugitives! Perhaps they might be shot!

“Come!” exclaimed Sandorf for the last time.

And he slid down the iron cable, which Bathory grasped immediately after him.

Then they saw the rope hung loosely over the abyss. Resting-places, staples, there were none. They were swinging wildly at the end of the rope, which cut their hands as it slipped through them. Down they went with their knees chafing and bleeding, without the power to stop themselves as the bullets whistled past.

For a minute, for eighty feet and more, they glided down — down — asking themselves if the abyss in which they were ingulfed were really bottomless. Already the roar of the raging waters below them could be heard. Then they understood that the lightning conductor led down into the torrent. What was to be done? To climb back to the base of the donjon they could not; their strength was unequal to the task. And death for death, it was better to chance that which waited for them in the depths below.

Suddenly there came a fearful clap of thunder and an intense electric glare. Although the conductor was not struck, yet the tension of the electricity was such that the iron rope grew white as a platinum thread beneath the discharge of a battery or a pile.

Bathory uttered a cry of despair — and let go.

Sandorf saw him pass him, almost touching him his arms wide open.

And then he let go the iron rope which glowed in his hands; and he fell more than forty feet into the torrent of Foiba which foamed along at the foot of the unknown Brico.

CHAPTER XI.

ALONG THE FOIBA.

It was about eleven o’clock. The clouds had begun to dissolve in drenching showers mingled with rain. Then fell huge hailstones which shot into the waters of the Foiba and rattled over the rocks down its sides like the stream of lead from a mitrailleuse. The firing from the embrasures had ceased. Why waste ammunition on the fugitives? The Foiba would only give them up as corpses — if even it did that.

As soon as Count Sandorf fell into the torrent he found himself swept helplessly into the Brico. In a few moments he passed from the intense light with which the electricity filled the ravine into the profoundest darkness. The war of the waters had taken the place of the roll of the thunder. For into that impenetrable cavern there entered none of the outside light or sounds.

“Help!”

There was a cry. It was Stephen Bathory. The cold of the water had called him back to life, but he could not keep himself afloat, and he would have been drowned had not a vigorous arm seized him as he was sinking.

“I am here! Stephen! Don’t be afraid!”

Count Sandorf was by his side, holding him with one hand while he swam with the other. The position was critical. Bathory could hardly move his limbs. They had been half paralyzed by the stroke. Although the pain of his burned hands had been sensibly lessened by their plunge into the cold, the state of inertia into which he had been thrown did not allow of his using them. Had Sandorf abandoned him for a moment he would have been drowned; and yet Sandorf had enough to do to save himself.

There was the complete uncertainty as to the direction which this torrent took, the place it ended, the river or sea into which it flowed. Had even Sandorf known that the river was the Foiba, the position could not have been more desperate than if he knew what became of its impetuous waters. Bottles thrown into the entrance of the cavern had never come to sight again in any stream on the Istrian Peninsula; perhaps from their having been broken against the rocks in their course, perhaps from having been swept below into some mysterious rift in the earth's crust.

The fugitives were carried along with extreme rapidity, and thus found it easy to keep on the surface. Bathory had become unconscious. He was quite helpless and motionless in the hands of Sandorf, who fought well for both, but felt that all would soon end in his sinking from sheer exhaustion. To the danger of being dashed against some projecting rock or the side of the cavern or the hanging prominences of the roof, there was added that of being sucked down in one of the whirlpools which foamed in many a corner where a sharp angle of the bank gave the current a sudden curve. Twenty times were Sandorf and his friend seized in one of these liquid suckers and irresistibly drawn to its center in the manner of the Maelstrom. Then they would be spun round by the gyratory movement, and then thrown off from the edge like a stone from a sling as the eddy broke.

Half an hour went by under such circumstances with death imminent each minute and each second. Sandorf endowed with superhuman energy, had not yet yielded to despair. He rejoiced that his companion was almost senseless. Had he retained the instinct of self-preservation he would struggle, and then Sandorf would be oblige. to leave him to his fate, or both would be overwhelmedd

Nevertheless, this state of affairs could not continue very long. Sandorfs strength began to fail him. Every now and then as he supported Bathory's head his own would sink back into the liquid pillow. Suddenly respiration became difficult. He gasped for breath, he was choking, he was wrestling with asphyxia. Often he had to leave go of his companion, whose head sunk instantly, but invariably he managed to grip him again, and that amid the wild racing of the waters, which, shouldered back and piled on each other by the occasional narrowing of the channel, thundered along in foam.

At last Count Sandorf thought that all was lost. Bathory slipped from his grasp. He tried to rescue him. He could not. He had lost him; and he himself was dragged down to the torrent's bed.

A violent shock nearly broke his shoulder. He stretched out his hand instinctively. His fingers closed in a clump of roots which were swimming by.

The roots were those of a tree trunk being brought down by the torrent. Sandorf fastened on to this raft ind dragged himself back to the surface of the Foiba. Then, while he grasped the roots with one hand he sought for his companion with the other.

A moment afterward Bathory was seized by the arm, and after a violent effort hoisted on to the trunk, where Sandorf took his place beside him. Both were for a time saved from the danger of drowning, but they had bound up their destiny with that of their raft, and given themselves over to the caprices of the rapids of the Brico.

Sandorf had not lost his consciousness for a moment. He made it his first care to assure himself that Bathory could not slip from the tree. By excess of precaution he placed himself behind him, so as to hold him in his arms. In this position he kept watch for the end. At the first glimpse of light that penetrated the cavern he would see what the waters were like as they emerged. But there was nothing as yet to show that they were near the end of this wonderful stream.

However, the position of the fugitives had improved. The tree was about twelve feet long, and the spreading roots were now and then struck against the projections. If it were not subjected to a very violent shock its stability, in spite of the irregularities of the stream, seemed to be assured. Its speed could not be less than nine miles an hour, being equal to that of the torrent that bore it.

Sandorf had recovered all his coolness. He tried to revive his companion, whose head rested on his knees. He found that his heart still beat, but that his breathing was difficult. He bent over and tried to breathe a little air into his lungs. Would that the preliminaries of asphyxia had not injured him without hope of relief!

Soon Bathory made a slight movement. More marked expirations came from his parted lips. At last a few Words escaped from his mouth:

“Wife! My boy! Mathias!”

His whole life was in those three words.

“Stephen, do you know me? do you know me?” asked Sandorf, who had to shout to make himself heard above the wild tumult with which the torrent filled the vaults of the Brico.

“Yes! Yes! I know you. Speak! Speak! Your hand in mine!”

“We are no longer in immediate danger,” answered Sandorf. “A raft is carrying us. Where, I can not say, but it will not leave us!”

“Mathias, and the donjon?”

“We are far away from it now! They will think we found our death in the torrent, and assuredly they will never dream of pursuing us. Wherever this torrent flows out, into sea or river, we shall go; and we shall get there alive! Keep your courage up, Stephen! I will look after you. Be quiet for a little, and recover the strength you will soon want. In a few hours we shall be saved, we shall be free!”

“And Ladislas?” murmured Bathory.

Sandorf gave no answer. What could he say? Zathmar, after giving the alarm from the window, must have been seized, so that flight was impossible, and now under strict guard could in no way be helped by his friends.

Stephen’s head again fell back. He had not the physical energy to master his torpor. But Sandorf watched over him, ready for anything, even to abandon the raft if it happened to crash up against the rocks which in the midst of the profound darkness it was impossible to avoid.

It was nearly two o’clock in the morning before the speed of the current, and consequently that of the tree, began sensibly to slacken. Evidently the channel was getting wider, and the waters, finding a freer passage between the walls, were traveling at a more moderate pace. And it was not unreasonable to expect that the end of the subterranean pass was close at hand.

But if the walls were widening the roof was closing down on them. By raising his hand Count Sandorf could skim the surface of the irregular schists which stretched above his head. Frequently there came a grating noise as the roots of the tree ground against the roof. Then the trunk would stagger as it recoiled from some violent collision and swing off in a new direction. And then it would drift across the stream, and twist and writhe till the fugitives feared they would be wrenched away. That danger over — after it had been experienced several times — there remained another, of which Sandorf coolly calculated the consequences. What was to happen if the roof continued to close down? Already his only way of escape was to fall backward the instant his hand felt a projecting rock. Would he have to take to the stream? As far as he was concerned he might attempt it; but how could his companion keep afloat? And if the channel kept low for a long distance how were they to come out of it alive? How, indeed — and was death to be the end after so many escapes from death?

Sandorf, energetic as he was, felt his heart wrung with anguish. He saw that the supreme moment was approaching. The tree roots ground against the overhanging rocks more violently, and at times the top of the trunk was driven so deeply into the current that the water entirely covered it.

“But,” said Sandorf, “the outlet can not be far off.”

And then he looked to see if some vague streak of light did not filter into the darkness ahead. By this time was the night advanced enough for the darkness outside to have lifted? Was the lightning still flashing beyond the Brico? If so, a little light perhaps would show itself in this channel, which threatened to get too small to hold the Foiba. But there was nothing.

Nothing but absolute darkness and roaring waters, of which even the foam remained black!

Suddenly there was a terrific shock. At its forward end the tree had dashed against an enormous pendant from the roof. As it struck, it completely turned over. But Sandorf did not let go of it. With one hand he desperately clung to the roots, with the other he held his companion. And the tree sunk, and with it the men sunk into the mass of waters which then filled the channel to the roof.

This lasted for nearly a minute. Sandorf felt that he was lost. Instinctively, he stopped breathing, so as to economize the little air that remained in his lungs.

Suddenly through the liquid mass, although his eyes were closed, he felt the impression of a vivid light. A lightning flash it was, followed by the noise of thunder. It was the light, at last!

The Foiba had emerged from the subterranean channel and was flowing in the open. But whither was it flowing? On what sea-coast was its mouth? That was still the insoluble question — a question of life or death.

The trunk of the tree had floated to the surface again. Bathory, by a strong effort, was dragged up and took his place at the end. Then Sandorf looked before him, around him, above him.

Upstream a dark mass was being left behind, This was the huge cliff of the Brico, in which the underground channel opened, which gave passage to the waters of the Foiba. Day was already showing itself by the scattered streaks of light overhead, vague as the nebulæ which the eye can only just see on a winter’s night. From time to time a few pale lightning flashes lighted up the background amid the dull roar of occasional thunder. The storm was slowly dying away.

To the right, to the left, Sandorf threw a glance of keen anxiety. He saw that the river flowed between two high cliffs and that its speed was terrific.

They were in a rapid which was taking them along amid all its races and eddies. But above their head now was the infinite, and no longer the narrowing vault with its ledges threatening each instant to crush them. But there was no bank on which they could set foot, no slope on which thev could disembark. Two steep high walls shut in the narrow Foiba, and it was really the old channel with its vertical walls, but without its roof of stone.

The last immersion had greatly revived Bathory. His hand had sought Sandorf's, who clasped it as he whispered:

“Saved.”

But had he a right to use the word saved, when he did not even know where the river ended or what country it traversed, or when they would be able to abandon their raft? Such, however, was his energy that he sat upright on the tree and three times shouted:

“Saved! Saved! Saved!”

Who could hear him? No one on these rocky cliffs, whose bowlders and schists had not mold enough to bear even a bramble. The country hidden by the high banks would be sought by no human being — a desolate country through which the Foiba runs imprisoned like an artificial canal between its rocky walls. Not a brook flows in to feed it. Not a bird skims its surface, not even a fish ventures into its too rapid waters. Here and there huge rocks rise in its bed, and their parched summits show that the watercourse with all its violence is nothing but a sudden overflowing due to heavy rain. At ordinary times the bed of the Foiba is simply a deep ravine.

The only danger now was lest the tree should be hurled on the rocks. It avoided them of itself as it kept in the middle of the currents which swept round them. But it was impossible to check its speed to get to shore in case a suitable landing-place was noticed.

An hour passed and no immediate danger appeared. The final flashes had died out in the distance, and the storm only manifested itself by the heavy thundering which reverberated among the lofty clouds whose long narrow bands streaked the horizon. Day was breaking, and the gray was rising over the sky that had been cleared by the tumult of the night. It was about four o’clock in the morning.

Stephen lay in Sandorfs arms.

A distant report was heard toward the south-west.

“What is that?” asked Sandorf, who was still on the lookout. “Is that a gun announcing that a harbor is open? If so we can not be far from the sea. What port can it be? Trieste? No, for there is the east, where the sun is rising. Can it be Pola, at the extreme south of Istria? But then — ”

A second report was now heard, and this was almost immediately followed by a third.

“Three cannon shots,” said Sandorf. “That is the signal for an embargo placed upon ships that are anxious to sail. Has that anything to do with our escape?”

He might fear so. Assuredly the authorities would neglect nothing to keep the fugitives from getting away from the coast.

“Heaven help us!” murmured Sandorf.

And now the lofty cliffs which shut in the Foiba began to shorten. Nothing could be seen of the country. Sudden bends marked the horizon and bounded the view a few hundred feet away. To take the bearings was impossible.

The much widened river-bed, silent and deserted, allowed the current to flow more slowly. A few trees brought down by the stream were floating near them. The June morning was quite chill. In their wet clothes the fugitives shook till their teeth chattered.

Toward five o’clock the cliffs had given place to long low banks, and the country on each side was flat and naked. The Foiba had widened to about half a mile, and become a stretch of stagnant water which might be called a lagoon, if not a lake. In the distance toward the west there were a few vessels. Some at anchor, some with their canvas set waiting for the breeze, and these seemed to show that the lagoon was a haven cut well back into the coast. The sea then was not far off, and there would be no difficulty in finding it. But it would not be prudent to seek shelter with the fishermen. To trust themselves in their power, supposing they had heard of the escape, would be to risk being handed over to the Austrian gendarmes, who were probably now scouring the country.

Sandorf knew not what to do, when the tree struck against a stump on the left side of the lagoon and stopped abruptly. The roots got entangled with a clump of brushwood, and the tree swung round parallel with the bank as if it had been a boat under the control of a steersman.

Sandorf got ashore and looked around. He wished to make sure that no one saw him.

As far as he could see there was no one, fisherman otherwise, within sight on the lagoon.

And yet within a hundred yards of him, there was a man stretched at full length on the sand who could see both him and his companion.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RUINED FARM.

Sandorf, thinking all was safe, went back to the tree, lifted his companion in his arms and laid him on the bank. He knew nothing of where he was or where he was to go.

In reality this sheet of water, which served as the mouth of the Foiba, is neither a lagoon nor a lake, but an estuary. It bears the name of Lerne Canal and it communicates with the Adriatic by a narrow creek between Orsera and Rovigno on the western side of the Istrian Peninsula. But it was not known before this voyage that its waters came from the Foiba and were brought through the gorge of the Brico during heavy rains.

A few paces from the bank there was a deserted hut and Sandorf and Bathory after a short rest took shelter in it. There they stripped and waited while they sun-dried their clothes. The fishing vessels were leaving the Lerne Canal and as far as they could see the place was deserted.

The man who had been watching them since they landed now got up and carefully noted the position of the hut And then he disappeared around a knoll and made off toward the south.

Three hours afterward Sandorf and his companion resumed their clothes. They were still damp, but it was necessary to move on.

“We must not stay too long in this hut,” said Bathory.

“Do you feel yourself strong enough to start?” asked Sandorf.

“I am almost exhausted with hunger.”

“Let us try to reach the coast! There we may perhaps procure something to eat and something to take us to sea Come, Stephen!”

And they left the hut, evidently suffering more from hunger than fatigue.

Sandorfs intention was to follow the southern bank of the Leme Canal until he reached the sea. The country was deserted, it is true, but quite a number of streams intersected it on their way to the estuary. This watery network along the banks is nothing more nor less than a vast sponge, and the mud is impassable, so that the fugitives had to strike southward obliquely, easily keeping their course by the sun, which had now risen. For two hours they kept on without meeting a human being, and without finding anything to satisfy the hunger that was devouring them.

Then the country became less arid. They found a road running east and west, which boasted a milestone that gave no indication as to the region across which they were feeling their way like the blind. There were, however, some hedges of mulberry-trees, and further on a field of sorghum, which enabled them to allay their hunger, or rather to cheat the wants of their stomachs. The sorghum chewed, and even eaten, and the refreshing mulberries, might perhaps be enough to keep them from fainting from exhaustion before they reached the coast.

But if the country was inhabited, if a few fields showed that the hand of man was employed about them, the fugitives had to be careful how they met the inhabitants.

About noon five or six foot passengers appeared on the road. As a matter of caution Sandorf thought he and Bathory had better get out of sight. Fortunately an inclosure around an old ruined farm lay some fifty yards to the left. There, before they had been noticed, he and his companion took refuge in a kind of dark cellar, where m the event of any one stopping at the farm they ran little risk of discovery if they waited till the night.

The foot passengers were peasants and salt-marsh workers. Some were driving a flock of geese, doubtless to market at some town or village which could not be very far from the canal. Men and women were clothed in Istrian style, with the jewels, medals, ear-rings, breast crosses and filigree pendants which ornament the ordinary costume of both sexes. The salt-marsh workers were more simply dressed, as, with sack on back and stick in hand, they marched along to the salterns in the neighborhood, or perhaps even to the important establishments at Stagnone or Pirano, in the west of the province.

Some of them stopped when they reached the farm and rested for a little on the door-step. They talked in a loud voice, not without a certain animation, but only of things concerning their trade.

The fugitives leaned against the corner and listened. Perhaps these people had already heard of the escape, and were talking about it? Perhaps they were saying something which might reveal in what part of Istria they then were?

Not a word passed on the subject. They could only continue to guess.

“If the country people say nothing about our escape, it is a fair inference,” said Sandorf, “that they have not yet heard of it.”

“That,” said Bathory, “would go to prove that we are some distance from the fortress. Considering the rapidity of the torrent which kept us underground for more than six hours, I am not surprised at that.”

“That must be it,” said Sandorf.

A couple of hours passed, and then some salt-workers, as they passed the farm without stopping, were heard to speak abou the gendarmes they had met at the gate of the town.

What town? They gave it no name.

This was not very reassuring. If gendarmes were about, it was probable that they were scouring the country in search of the fugitives.

“But,” said Bathory, “considering how we escaped, they might well believe us dead, and never think of pursuit.”

“They will believe we are dead when they find our bodies,” answered Sandorf.

There being no doubt that the police were afoot and in search of them, they decided to stay till it was night Although they were tortured with hunger they dared not leave their retreat; and they were wise.

About five o’clock the tramp of a small troop of horse was heard along the road.

Sandorf, who had been out to the gate of the inclosure, hurriedly rejoined his companion and dragged him into the darkest corner of the cellar. There they hid themselves under a heap of brushwood and remained motionless.

Half a dozen gendarmes headed by a sergeant were coming along the road toward the east. Would they stop at the farm? Sandorf anxiously asked. If they searched the place they could not fail to find them.

They halted. The sergeant and two of the men dismounted, while the others remained in the saddle and received orders to search the country along the canal and then return to the farm, where the rest would meet them at seven o clock.

The four gendarmes moved off immediately. The sergeant and the two others picketed their horses and sat down to talk. From the corner of the cellar the fugitives could hear all that passed.

“Yes, we shall go back to the town this evening and get the orders for to-night,” said the sergeant in reply to one of the men. “The telegraph may bring us fresh instructions from Trieste.”

The town in question was not Trieste; that was one point of which Count Sandorf made a note.

“Are you not, afraid,” said the second gendarme, “that while we are looking about here the fugitives may have got down the Quamero Canal?”

“Yes, that is possible,” said the first gendarme, “for they might think it safer than here.”

“If they do,” said the sergeant, “they none the less risk being found, for the whole coast is being looked after from one end to the other.”

Second fact worth noting: Sandorf and his companion were on the west coast of Istria, that is to say, near the Adriatic shore, and not on the banks of the opposite canal which runs out at Flume.

“I think they are having a look round the salt-works at Pirano and Capo d’lstria,” said the sergeant. “They might hide there easily and get on board a vessel crossing the Adriatic and bound for Rimini or Venice.”

“They had much better have waited patiently in their cell,” said one of the gendarmes philosophically.

“Yes,” added the other, “sooner or later they’ll be caught, if they have not fished them up out of the Brico! That would finish it, though, and we should not have to trot about the country in all this heat.”

“And who says it hasn’t finished it?” replied the sergeant. “Perhaps the Foiba has been the executioner, and when it is in flood the wretched men could not have chosen a worse road out of the donjon of Pisino.”

The Foiba then was the name of the river which had carried off Count Sandorf and his companion. It was the fortress of Pisino to which they had been taken after their arrest, and there they had been imprisoned, tried and sentenced. It was from its donjon that they had escaped. Count Sandorf knew this town of Pisino well. He had at last fixed on this point, which was so important for him to know, and it would no longer be by chance that he would cross the Istrian Peninsula, if flight was still possible.

The conversation of the gendarmes did not stop here; but in these few words the fugitives had learned all they wished to know — except, perhaps, the name of the town by the canal on the Adriatic coast.

Soon the sergeant got up and walked about the inclosure, watching if his men were returning to the farm. Twice or thrice he entered the ruined house and looked into the rooms, rather from professional habit than suspicion. He even came to the door of the cellar, and the fugitives would certainly have been discovered if the darkness had not been so great. He even entered it, and tossed about the brushwood in the corner with his scabbard, but without reaching those beneath. At this moment Sandorf and Bathory passed through almost the whole gamut of anguish. They had resolved to sell their lives dearly if the sergeant reached them. To throw themselves on him, profit by his surprise to deprive him of his arms, to attack him two to one, to kill him or make him kill himself, they had fully made up their minds.

At this moment the sergeant was called out, and he left the cellar without noticing anything suspicious. The four gendarmes sent off to search had just returned to the farm. Despite all they could do they had not come across any traces of the fugitives in the district between the coast and the canal. But they had not come back alone — a man accompanied them.

He was a Spaniard employed in the salt-works in the neighborhood. He was returning to the town when the gendarmes met him. As he told them that he had been all over the country between the town and the salt-works they resolved to bring him to the sergeant that he might interrogate him. The man had no objection to go with them.

The sergeant asked him if he had noticed any strangers in the salt-works.

“No, sergeant,” said the man; “but this morning, about an hour after I left the town, I saw two men who had just landed at the point along the canal.”

“Two men, do you say?” asked the sergeant.

“Yes, but as in these parts we thought the execution at Pisino took place this morning, and had heard nothing about the escape, I did not pay much attention to the men. Now I know what has occurred, I should not be surprised if they were the two you want.”

From the corner of the cellar Sandorf and Bathory could hear every word of this conversation which affected them so nearly. Then when they landed on the bank they had been seen.

“What is your name?” asked the sergeant.

“Carpena, and I am employed at the salt-works.”

“Could you recognize these two men you saw this morning?”

“Yes, probably.”

“Well, you can come and make a declaration, and put yourself at the disposal of the police.”

“I am at your orders.”

“Do you know there is a five thousand florins reward for the discovery of the fugitives?”

“Five thousand florins!”

“And the hulks to him who harbors them!”

“You don’t say so?”

“Go,” said the sergeant.

The Spaniard’s news had the effect of sending off the gendarmes. The sergeant ordered his men to mount, and as night had fallen he started for the town, after having thoroughly searched the banks of the canal. Carpena at the same time set out, congratulating himself that the capture of the fugitives would be worth so much to him.

Sandorf and Bathory remained in hiding for some time before they left the cellar which had served them for a refuge. Their thoughts ran as follows: As the gendarmerie were on their traces, as they had been seen and were likely to be recognized, the Istrian provinces were no longer safe for them, and they must leave the country as soon as possible, either for Italy, on the other side of the Adriatic, or across Dalmatia and the military frontier.

The first plan offered the best chances of success, providing they could possess themselves of a vessel, or prevail on some fisherman to land them on the Italian coast. And this plan they adopted.

Hence, about half past eight o'clock, as soon as the night was dark enough, Sandorf and his companion, after leaving the ruined farm, started off toward the south-west, so as to reach the Adriatic coast. And at first they were obliged to keep to the road to avoid being lost in the marshes of the Leme.

But did not this unknown road lead to the town which it put into communication with the heart of Istria? Were they not running into great danger? Undoubtedly, but what else could they do?

About half-past nine the vague outline of a town appeared about a quarter of a mile ahead in the darkness; and it was not easy to recognize it.

It was a collection of houses clumsily built in terraces on an enormous mass of rock which towered over the sea above the harbor cut back into the re-entering angle on one of its sides. The whole was surmounted by a high campanile, whose proportions were much exaggerated in the gloom.

Sandorf had quite decided not to enter the town where the presence of two visitors would soon be known. He tried, therefore, to pass round the wall so as to reach one of the points on the coast if possible.

But this they did not do without being followed for some distance by the same man who had already seen them on the Leme Canal — the same Carpena whose information they had heard given to the sergeant of gendarmerie. In fact as he went home and thought over the reward that had been offered, the Spaniard left the road so as to watch it better, and chance, luckily for him but unluckily for them, again put him on the track of the fugitives.

Almost at the same moment a squadron of police came out from one of the gates of the town and threatened to bar the way. They had only just time to scramble out of sight, and then to hurry at full speed toward the shore by the side of one of the walls of the port.

Here they found a fisherman’s hut, with its little windows lighted up and its door open. If they could not find a refuge here, if the fisherman refused to receive them, they were lost. To seek refuge was to risk everything, but the time had gone by for hesitation. Sandorf and his companion ran toward the door of the hut and stopped on the threshold. Inside was a man mending his nets by the light of a ship’s lantern.

“My friend,” asked Count Sandorf, “can you tell me the name of this town?”

“Rovigno.”

“And whom are we speaking to?”

“Andrea Ferrato, the fisherman.”

“Will Andrea Ferrato consent to give us a night’s lodging?”

Andrea Ferrato looked at them, advanced toward the door, caught sight of the sqadron of police at the other end of the wall, divining doubtless who they were that asked his hospitality, and understood that they were lost if he hesitated to reply.

“Come in,” he said.

But the two fugitives did not move.

“My friend,” said Sandorf, “there are five thousand florins reward for whoever will give up the prisoners who escaped from the donjon of Pisino.”

“I know it.”

“There are the hulks,” added Sandorf, “for him who harbors them.”

“I know it.”

“You could not deliver — ”

“I told you to come in; come in, then,” answered the fisherman.

And Andrea Ferrato shut the door as the squadron of police came tramping past the hut.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FISHERMAN’S HUT.

Andrea Ferrato was a Corsican, a native of Santa Manza, a little port in the arrondissement of Sartene, situated at the back of the southern point of the island. This port and Bastia and Porto Vecchio are the only ones that open on to that monotonous eastern coast of which the sea has gradually destroyed the capes, filled up the gulfs, effaced the bays, and devoured the creeks.

It was at Santa Manza, on that narrow portion of the sea between Corsica and the Italian mainland, and often among the rocks of the straits of Bonifacio, that Andrea Ferrato followed his trade as a fisherman. Twenty years before he had married a young girl of Sartene. Two years afterward they had had a daughter who was christened Maria. The fisherman’s calling is a rough one, particularly when to the fishing for fish there is added the fishing for coral, which was to be sought for at the bottom of the most dangerous channels in the strait. But Andrea Ferrato was bold, robust, indefatigable, as clever with the net as with the trawl. His business prospered. His wife active and intelligent, ruled the little house at Santa Manza to perfection. Both of them knew how to read, write, and calculate, and were fairly educated, if we compare them with the 150,000 who can not write their names which statistics now reveal to exist out of the 260,000 inhabitants of the island.

Besides — perhaps on account of this education — Andrea Ferrato was very French in his ideas and feelings, although he was of Italian origin, like the majority of the Corsicans. And at that time this had occasioned some animosity against him.

The canton, in fact, situated at the southern extremity of the island, far from Bastia, far from Ajaccio, far from the chief centers of administration, is at heart very much opposed to everything that is not Italian or Sardinian — a regrettable state of things that we hope to see the end of as the rising generation becomes better educated.

Hence, as we have said, there was more or less latent animosity against the Ferratos. In Corsica animosity and hatred are not very far apart. Certain things occurred which imbittered this animosity. One day Andrea driven out of all patience, in a moment of anger, killed a well-known vagabond who was threatening him, and he had to seek safety in flight.

But Andrea Ferrato was not at all the man to take refuge in the *maquis*, to live a life of daily strife, as much against the police as against the companions and friends of the deceased, to perpetrate a series of revenges which would end by reaching his own people. Resolving to expatriate himself, he managed to leave Corsica secretly and reached the Sardinian coast. When his wife had realized their property, given up the house at Santa Manza, sold the furniture, the boat and the nets, she crossed over and joined him. They had given up their native land forever.

But the murder, although it was justifiably committed in self-defense, weighed on Andrea's conscience. With the somewhat superstitious ideas due to his origin, he greatly desired to ransom it. He had heard that a man's death is never pardoned till the day when the murderer saves another life at the risk of his own. He made up his mind to save a life as soon as an occasion presented itself.

Andrea did not remain long in Sardinia, where he would easily have been recognized and discovered. Energetic and brave — although he did not fear for himself, he feared for those who belonged to him — he feared that the reprisals of family on family might reach him. He merely waited till he could go without exciting suspicion, and then sailed for Italy, where, at Ancona, an opportunity ottered for him to cross the Adriatic to the Istrian coast, of which he availed himself.

And that is the story of why the Corsican had settled at Rovigno. For seventeen years he had followed his trade as a fisherman, and had become as well off as he nad been. Nine years afterward a son was born to him, who was named Luigi. His birth cost his mother her life.

Andrea Ferrato now lived entirely for his daughter and his son. Maria, then aged eighteen, acted as mother to the little boy of eight. And except the deep and constant grief for the loss of his wife, the fisherman of Rovigno was as happy as he could be in his work and the consciousness of having done his duty. He was respected throughout the district. He was ever ready to help, and his advice was always valuable. He was known to be clever at his trade. Among the long ridges of rocks which guard the Istrian shore, he had no reason to regret the Gulf of Santa Manza or the Straits of Bonifacio. He had become an excellent pilot in those parts where the same language is spoken as in Corsica. From his pilotage of the ships between Pola and Trieste he earned almost as much as from his fishing. And in his house the poor were not forgotten, and Maria did her best in works of charity.

But the fisherman of Santa Manza had never forgotten his vow — a life for a life! He had taken one man’s life He would save another’s.

That is why, when the two fugitives presented themselves at his door, guessing who they were, knowing the penalty to which he was exposing himself, he had not hesitated to say to the. “Come in,” and adding in his thoughts, “And may Heaven protect us all!”

The squadron of police passed the door and did not stop. Sandorf and Bathory could thus fancy they were safe — at least for that night.

The hut was built not in the town itself, but about five hundred yards from its walls, below the harbor and on a ridge of rocks which commanded the beach. Beyond, at less than a cable's length, was the sea breaking on the sands and stretching away to the distant horizon. Toward the south-west there jutted out the promontory whose curve shuts in the small roadstead of Rovigno.

It had but four rooms, two at the front and two at the back, but here was a lean-to of boards in which the fishing and other tackle was kept. Such was the dwelling of Andrea Ferrato. His boat was a balancello with a square stern about thirty feet long, rigged with a mainsail and foresail — a description of boat well adapted for trawling. When she was not in use, she was moored inside the rocks, and a little boat drawn up on the beach was used in journeying to and from her. Behind the house was an inclosure of about half an acre, in which a few vegetables grew among the mulberry- and olive-trees and the vines. A hedge separated it from a brook about six feet broad, and beyond was the open country.

Such was this humble, but hospitable dwelling, to which Providence had led the fugitives; such was the host, who risked his liberty to give them shelter. As soon as the door closed on them, Sandorf and Bathory examined the room into which the fisherman had welcomed them.

It was the principal room of the house, furnished in a way that showed the taste and assiduity of a careful house-keeper.

"First of all you want something to eat," said Andrea.

“Yes, we are dying with hunger!” answered Sandorf. “For twelve hours we have had no food.”

“You understand, Maria.”

And in a minute Maria had put on the table some salt pork, some boiled fish, a flask of the local wine of the dry grape, with two glasses, two plates, and a white table-cloth. A “veglione,” a sort of lamp with three wicks, fed with oil, gave light in the room.

Sandorf and Bathory sat down to the table; they were quite exhausted.

“But you?” said they to the fisherman.

“We have had our meal,” answered Andrea.

The two famished men devoured — that is the proper word — the provisions which were offered with such simplicity and heartiness.

But, as they ate, they kept their eves on the fisherman, his daughter and his son, who sat in a corner of the room and looked at them back, without saying a word. Andrea was then about forty-two, a man of severe expression, even a little sorrowful, with expressive features, a sunburnt face, black eyes and a keen look. He wore the dress of the fishermen of the Adriatic, and was evidently of active, powerful build.

Maria — whose face and figure recalled her mother — was tall, graceful, pretty rather than handsome, with bright, black eyes, brown hair, and a complexion lightly tinted by the vivacity of her Corsican blood. Serious by reason of the duties she had fulfilled from her childhood, having in her attitude and movements the serenity a reflective nature gives, everything about her showed an energy that would never fail, no matter in what circumstances she might be placed. Many times she had been sought in marriage by the young fishermen of the country, but in vain. Did not all her life belong to her father and the child who was so dear to him?

That boy Luigi was already an experienced sailor — hard-working, brave, and resolute. Bareheaded in wind and rain, he accompanied Andrea in his fishing and piloting. Later on he promised to be a vigorous man, well trained and well built, more than bold, even audacious, ready for anything and careless of danger. He loved his father. He adored his sister.

Count Sandorf had been keenly examining these three, united in such touching affection. That he was among people he could trust he felt sure. When the meal was finished, Andrea rose and approaching Sandorf, said:

“Go and sleep, gentlemen. No one knows you are here. To-morrow we can talk.”

“No, Andrea Ferrato, no!” said Sandorf. “Our hunger is now appeased! We have recovered our strength! Let us leave the house this instant, where our presence is so dangerous to yon and yours.”

“Yes, let us leave,” added Bathory. “And may Heaven reward you for what you have done.”

“Go and sleep; it is necessary,” said the fisherman. “The beach is watched to-night. An embargo has been put upon all the ports on the coast. You can do nothing now.”

“Be it so, if you wish it,” answered Sandorf.

“I wish it.”

“One word only. When was our escape known?”

“This morning,” answered Andrea. “But there were four prisoners in the donjon of Pisino. You are only two. The third, they say, was set free.”

“Sarcany!” exclaimed Sandorf, immediately checking the movement of anger that seized him as he heard the hated name.

“And the fourth?” asked Bathory, without daring to finish the sentence.

“The fourth is still living,” answered Ferrato. “His execution has been put off.”

“Living!” exclaimed Bathory.

“Yes,” answered Sandorf, ironically. “They are keeping him till they have got us, to give us the pleasure of dying together.”

“Maria,” said Ferrato, “take our guests to the room at the back, but do not have a light. The window must not show from without that there is a light in the room. You can then go to bed. Luigi and I will watch.”

“Yes, father,” answered the boy.

“Come, sirs,” said the girl.

A moment afterward Sandorf and his companion exchanged a cordial shake of the hand with the fisherman. Then they passed into the chamber, where they found two good mattresses of maize on which they could rest after so many fatigues.

But already Andrea had left the house with Luigi. He wished to assure himself that no one was prowling round the neighborhood, neither on the beach nor beyond the brook. The fugitives could then sleep in peace till the morning.

The night passed without adventure. The fisherman had frequently been out. He had seen nothing suspicious.

In the morning of the 18th of June, while his guests were still asleep, Andrea went out for news into the center of the town and along the wharves. There were many groups talking over the events of the past day. The placard stuck up the evening before relating the escape, the penalties incurred and the reward promised, formed the general subject of conversation. Some were gossiping, some detailing the latest news, some repeating the rumors in vague terms which meant nothing in particular. There was nothing to show that Sandorf and his companion had been seen in the neighborhood, nor even that there was any suspicion of their presence in the province. About ten o’clock when the sergeant and his men entered Rovigno after their night expedition, a rumor spread that two strangers had been seen twenty-four hours before on the Leme Canal. The district from there to the sea had been searched for them in vain. There was not a vestige of their visit. Had they then reached the coast, possessed themselves of a boat and gone to some other part of Istria, or had they crossed the Austrian frontier? It would seem so.

“Good,” said one of the men. “There are five thousand florins saved to the treasury.”

“Money that might be better spent than in paying rascally informers!”

“And they have managed to escape?”

“Escape? Yes. And they are safe on the other side of the Adriatic.”

From this conversation, which took place among a group of peasants, working-men and shop-keepers who were standing in front of one of the placards, it seemed that public opinion was rather in favor of the fugitives — at least among the people of Istria, who are either Sclaves or Italians by birth. The Austrian officials could hardly count on their being betrayed to them.

But they were doing all they could to recover the fugitives. All the squadrons of police and companies of gendarmerie had been afoot since the evening, and an incessant exchange of dispatches was taking place between Bovigno, Pisino and Trieste.

When Andrea returned home about eleven o'clock he brought back the news, which was thus rather favorable than otherwise.

Sandorf and Bathory had had their breakfast taken into their room by Maria, and were finishing it as he appeared. The few hours' sleep, the good food and the careful attention had entirely recovered them from their fatigues.

"Well, my good friend?" asked Count Sandorf as soon as Andrea closed the door.

"Gentlemen, I do not think you have anything to be afraid of at present."

"But what do they say in the town?" asked Bathory.

"They are talking a good deal about two strangers who were seen yesterday morning when they landed on the bank of the Leme Canal and that concerns you."

"It does concern us," answered Bathory. "A man, a salt-worker in the neighborhood, has seen and reported us."

And Andrea Ferrato was told of what had passed at the ruined farm while they were in hiding.

“And you do not know who this informer was?” asked the fisherman.

“We did not see him,” replied Sandorf; “we could only hear him.”

“That is a pity,” said Ferrato. “But the important thing is that they have lost trace of you, and if it is supposed that you have taken refuge in my house, I do not think any one would betray you. The promise of one is binding on all in these parts.”

“Yes,” answered Sandorf, “and I am not surprised at it. A fine lot of fellows are the people of these provinces! But we have to do with the Austrian officials, and they will not leave a stone unturned to retake us.”

“There is one thing in your favor,” said the fisherman, “and that is the pretty general opinion that you have already crossed the Adriatic.”

“And would to Heaven they had!” added Maria, who had joined her hands as if in prayer.

“That we shall do, my dear child,” said Sandorf, in a tone of entire confidence, “that we shall do with Heaven’s help — ”

“And mine, count,” replied Andrea. “Now I am going on with my work as usual. People are accustomed to see us getting our nets ready on the beach, or cleaning up the balancello, and we must not alter that. Besides I must go and study the weather before I decide what to do. You remain in this room. Do not leave it on any pretext. If necessary you can open the window on to the yard, but remain at the back of the room and do not let yourselves be seen. I will come back in an hour or two."

Andrea then left the house accompanied by Luigi, and Maria busied herself with the housework as usual.

A few fishermen were on the beach. As a matter of precaution he went and exchanged a few words with them before beginning on his nets.

"The wind is pretty steady now," said one of them.

"Yes," answered Andrea, "that last storm cleared the weather for us."

"Hum!" added another, "the breeze will freshen toward evening and turn to a storm if the bora joins in with it."

"Good! Then the wind will blow off the land, and the sea will not be so lively among the rocks."

"We shall see!"

"Are you going fishing to-night, Andrea?"

"Certainly, if the weather will let me."

"But the embargo?"

"The embargo is only on big ships, not on coasting boats."

"All the better; for we have got a report that shoals of tunnies are coming up from the south, and there is no time to lose in getting out the madragues."

"Good," said Andrea. "But we shall lose nothing."

“Eh? Perhaps not.”

“No, I tell you, if I go out to-night I shall go after bonicous, out Orsera or Parenzo way.”

“As you like. But we will set to work to get the madragues out at the foot of the rocks.”

“All right.”

Andrea and Luigi then went after their nets, stowed away in the outhouse, and stretched them out on the sand so as to dry them in the sun. Then, two hours later the fishermen came back, having told Luigi to get ready the hooks for the bonicous, which are a sort of fish with a brownish-red flesh belonging to the same genus as the tunnies and the same species as the anxides.

CHAPTER XIV.

CARPENA’S OFFER.

Ten minutes later, after a smoke at his door, Andrea rejoined his guests in the room, while Maria continued her work about the house.

“Count,” said the fisherman, “the wind is off the land, and I do not think the sea will be rough to-night The simplest way, and consequently the best way to avoid observation, is for you to come with me. If you think so, it would be better to get away to-night about ten o’clock. You can then get down between the rocks to the water’s edge. No one will see you. My boat will take you off to the balancello, and we can at once put to sea without attracting attention, for they know I am going out to-night. If the breeze freshens too much I will run down the coast so as to set you ashore beyond the Austrian frontier at the mouths of the Cattaro.”

“And if it does not freshen, what are you going to do?” asked Sandorf.

“We will go out to sea,” answered the fisherman, “and I will land you on the coast of Rimini or at the mouth of the Po.”

“Is your boat big enough for a voyage like that?” asked Bathory.

“Yes; it is a good boat, half-decked, and my son and I have been out in her in very bad weather. Besides we must run some risk.”

“We must run some risk,” said Count Sandorf; “our lives are at stake, and nothing is more natural. But for you, my friend, to risk your life — ”

“That is my business, count,” answered Andrea, “and I am only doing my duty in wishing to save you.”

“Your duty?”

“Yes.”

And Andrea Ferrato related that episode in his life on account of winch he had left Santa Manza, and told how the good he was about to do would be a just compensation for the evil he had done.

“You are a splendid fellow!” exclaimed Sandorf, much affected by the recital.

Then continuing:

“But if we go to the mouths of the Cattaro, or the Italian coast, that will necessitate a long absence, which, on your part, will astonish the people of Rovigno. After have put us in safety, there is no need for you to return and be arrested — ”

“Never fear,” answered Andrea. “Sometimes I am five or six days at sea. Besides, I tell you that is my business. It is what must be done, and it is what shall be done.”

So that the only thing to do was to discuss the scheme, which was evidently a good one, and easy of execution, for the balancello was quite equal to the voyage. Care would have to be taken in getting on board; but the night was sure to be dark and moonless, and probably with the evening one of those thick mists would come up along the coast which do not extend far out to sea. The beach would then be deserted. The other fishermen, Ferrato’s neighbors, would be busy, as they had said, among their madragues on the rocks, two or three miles below Rovigno. When they sighted the balancello, if they did sight her, she would be far out at sea, with the fugitives under her deck.

“And what is the distance in a direct line between Rovigno and the nearest point of the Italian coast?” asked Bathory.

“About fifty miles.”

“And how long will it take you to do that?”

“With a favorable wind we ought to cross in twelve hours. But you have no money. You will want some. Take this belt, it has three hundred florins in it, and buckle it around you.”

“My friend — ” said Sandorf.

“You can return it later on,” replied the fisherman, “when you are in safety. And now wait here till I come back.”

Matters being thus arranged Ferrato went to resume his usual occupation, sometimes on the beach and sometimes about his house. Luigi, without being noticed, took on board in a spare sail provisions for several days. There seemed no possibility of suspicion that might alter Ferrato’s plans. He was even so careful in his precautions as not to see his guests again during he day. Sandord and Bathory remained in hiding at the back of the room in which the window remained open. The fisherman was to call them when it was time for them to go.

Many of the neighbors came in to have a chat during the afternoon about the appearance of the tunnies and the fishing. Andrea received them in the front room and offered them something to drink as usual.

The greater part of the day was thus passed in going backward and forward and in talk. Many times the subject of the prisoners cropped up. There was a rumor that they had been caught near the Quarnero Canal on the opposite side of Istria — a rumor winch was soon afterward contradicted.

All seemed working for the best. That the coast was more closely watched than usual by the custom-house men, the police, and the gendarmes, was certain; but there would probably be no difficulty in evading the guard when night came on.

The embargo, as we know, had only been put on the long-voyage ships and the Mediterranean coasters, and not on the local fishing-boats. The balancello would thus be able to get under sail without suspicion.

But Andrea Ferrato had not reckoned on a visit he received in the evening. This visit was a surprise at first and made him anxious, although he did not understand the meaning of the threat until after his visitor's departure.

Eight o'clock was on the point of striking, and Maria was preparing the supper, and had already laid the table in the large room when there came two knocks at the door. Andrea did not hesitate to go and open it. Much surprised, he found himself in the presence of the Spaniard, Carpena.

This Carpena was a native of Almayati, a little town in the province of Malaga. As Ferrato had left Corsica, so had he left Spain, to settle in Istria. There he found employment in the salt-works and in carrying the products of the western coast into the interior — a thankless occupation that barely brought him enough to live upon.

He was a strong fellow, still young, being not more than five-and-twenty, short of stature, but broad of shoulder, with a large head covered with curly, coarse black hair, and one of those bull-dog faces that look as forbidding on a man as on a dog. Carpena was unsociable, spiteful, vindictive, and a good deal of a scoundrel, and was anything but popular. It was not known why he had left his country. Several quarrels with his fellow-workmen, a good deal of threatening with one and the other, followed by fights and scuffles, had not added to his reputation. People liked Carpena best at a distance.

He, however, had a sufficiently good opinion of himself and his person — as we shall see — and was ambitious of becoming Ferrato's son-in-law. The fisherman, it must be confessed, did not give his overtures a cordial reception. And that will be understood better when the man's pretensions have been disclosed in the conversation that followed.

Carpena had hardly set foot in the room when Andrea stopped him short with —

"What have you come here for?"

"I was passing, and as I saw a light in your window I came in."

"And why?"

"To visit you, neighbor."

"But your visits are not wanted, you know!"

"Not usually," answered the Spaniard; "but to-night it will be different."

Ferrato did not understand and could not guess what such enigmatic words meant in Carpena's mouth. But he could not repress a sudden start, which did not escape his visitor, who shut the door behind him.

“I want to speak to you!” said he.

“No. You have nothing to say to me.”

“Yes — I must speak to you — in private,” added the Spaniard, lowering his voice.

“Come, then,” answered the fisherman, who during this day had his reasons for not refusing any one admittance. Carpena, at a sign from Ferrato, crossed the room and entered his bedroom, which was separated only by a thin partition from that occupied by Sandorf and his companion. One room opened on to the front, the other on to the back of the house. As soon as they were alone —

“What do you want with me?” asked the fisherman.

“Neighbor,” answered Carpena, “I again come to appeal to your kindness.”

“What for?”

“About your daughter.”

“Not another word.”

“Listen then! You know that I love Maria, and that my dearest wish is to make her my wife.”

And in fact Carpena had for several months been pursuing the girl with his attentions. As may be imagined, these were due more to interest than to love. Ferrato was well off for a fisherman and, compared to the Spaniard, who possessed nothing, he was rich. Nothing could be more natural than that Carpena should wish to become his son-in-law, and on the other hand nothing could be more natural than that the fisherman invariably showed him the door.

“Carpena,” answered Ferrato, “you have already spoken to my daughter and she has told you no. You have already asked me and I have told you no. You again come here to-day and I tell you no for the last time.”

The Spaniard’s face grew livid. His lips opened and showed his teeth. His eyes darted a ferocious look at the fisherman. But the badly lighted room prevented Ferrato from seeing that threatening physiognomy.

“That is your last word?” asked Carpena.

“That is my last word, if it is the last time you ask me. But if you renew the request you shall have the same reply.”

“I shall renew it! Yes! I shall renew it,” repeated Carpena — ”if Maria tells me to do so.”

“She do so!” exclaimed Andrea. “She! You know she has neither friendship nor esteem for you!”

“Her sentiments may change when I have had an interview with her,” answered Carpena.

“An interview?”

“Yes, Ferrato. I wish to speak to her.”

“When?”

“Now! You understand — I must speak to her — I must — this very night!”

"On her behalf I refuse."

"Take care what you are doing," said Carpena, raising his voice. "Take care!"

"Take care?"

"I will be revenged."

"Oh! Take your revenge, if you like, or if you dare!" answered Ferrato, who was getting angry in turn. "All your threats won't frighten me! And now get out, or I'll throw you out!"

The blood mounted to the Spaniard's eyes. Perhaps he thought of attacking the fisherman! But he restrained himself and, making a snatch at the door, he dashed out of the room and out of the house without saying another word.

He had scarcely gone before the door of the other room opened and Count Sandorf, who had lost none of the foregoing conversation, appeared on the threshold. Stepping up to Andrea, he said to him in a low voice:

"That is the man that gave the information to the sergeant of gendarmerie. He knows us. He saw us when we landed on the bank of the Leme Canal. He followed us to Rovigno. He evidently knows that you have sheltered us in your house. So let us be off at once or we shall be lost — and you too!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE FINAL EFFORT OF THE FINAL STRUGGLE.

Andrea Ferrato remained silent. He said nothing in answer to Count Sandorf. His Corsican blood boiled within him. He had forgotten the fugitives for whom up to then he had risked so much. He thought only of the Spaniard, he saw only Carpena!

“The scoundrel! The scoundrel!” he murmured, at length. “Yes! He knows all. We are at his mercy! I ought to have understood.”

Sandorf and Bathory looked anxiously at the fisherman. They waited for what he was going to say, what he was going to do. There was not an instant to lose. The informer had, perhaps, already done his work.

“Count,” said Andrea, “the police may enter my house at any moment. That beggar knows or supposes that you are here. He came to bargain with me. My daughter was to be the price of his silence. He would ruin you to be revenged on me. If the police come you can not escape, and yon will be discovered. Yes; you must go at once.”

“You are right, Ferrato,” answered Count Sandorf, “but before we separate let me thank you for all you have done and all you intended to do — ”

“What I intended to do I shall still do,” said Andrea, seriously.

“We refuse,” said Bathory.

“Yes, we refuse,” added Sandorf. “You are already too deeply compromised as it is. If they find us in your house they will send you to the hulks. Come, Stephen, let us leave this house before we bring ruin and misfortune on it. Escape, but escape alone!"

Ferrato seized Sandorf's hand.

"Where will you go?" said he. "The country is all watched by the authorities, the police are patrolling it night and day; there is not a spot on the coast that you can get off from, not a footpath across the frontier that is free. To go without me is to go to your death."

"Follow my father," added Maria. "Whatever happens he will do his duty and try to save you."

"That is it, daughter," said Ferrato. "It is only my duty. Your brother can wait for us in the boat. The night is dark. Before we can be seen we shall be at sea. Good-bye, Maria. Good-bye!"

But Sandorf and Bathory would not let him move. They refused to profit by his devotion. To leave the house so as not to compromise the fisherman, yes! But to embark under his charge and send him to the hulks, no.

"Come," said Sandorf, "once out of the house we shall only have to fear for ourselves."

And by the open window they began to get down into the yard to cross it and escape when Luigi rushed in.

"The police!" he said.

"Adieu!" said Sandorf.

And followed by Bathory he leaped to the ground.

And at the same moment the police came running into the front room.

Carpena was at their head.

“Scoundrel!” said Ferrato.

“This is my answer to your refusal,” replied the Spaniard.

The fisherman was seized and garroted. In a moment the police had seized and visited every room in the house. The window opening on to the yard showed the road taken by the fugitives. They started in pursuit.

Sandorf and his companion had reached the hedge which ran along the stream. Sandorf leaped it at a bound and turned to help over Stephen when the report of a gun rang out some fifty paces off.

Bathory was hit by the bullet, which only grazed his shoulder, it is true; but his arm remained paralyzed and he could not let his companion seize it to help him.

“Escape, Mathias!” he exclaimed. “Escape.”

“No, Stephen, no. We will die together,” replied Sandorf, after trying for the last time to lift his wounded companion in his arms.

“Escape, Mathias!” repeated Bathory. “And live to punish the traitors!”

Bathory’s last words were, as it were, a command to Sandorf. To him there fell the work of the three — to him alone. The magnate of Transylvania, the conspirator of Trieste, the. companion of Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar, must give place to the messenger of justice.

At this moment the police had reached the end of the yard and thrown themselves on the wounded man. Sandorf would fall into their hands if he hesitated another second.

“Adieu, Stephen, adieu!” he exclaimed.

With a leap he cleared the brook which ran along by the hedge, and disappeared.

Five or six shots were fired after him, but the bullets missed, and turning aside he ran quickly toward the sea.

The police, however, were on his track. Not being able to see him in the darkness they did not try to run straight after him. They dispersed so as to cut him off not only from the interior, but from the town and from the promontory which shelters the Bay of Rovigno.

A brigade of gendarmes re-enforced them,and were so maneuvered as to prevent him from taking any other route than that toward the sea. But what could he do there? Could he possess himself of a boat and put out to the open sea? He would not have time, and before he could get her clear he would be shot. From the first he saw that his retreat to the east was cut off. The noise of the guns, the shouts of the police and the gendarmes as they approached, told him that he was hedged in on the beach. His only chance of escape was to the sea and by the sea. It was doubtless to rush to certain death; but better to find it among the waves than before the firing party in the court-yard of the fortress of Pisino.

Sandorf then ran toward the beach. In a few bounds he had reached the first small waves that licked the sand. He already felt the police behind him, and the bullets fired at random whistled past his head.

All down this Istrian coast there is a reef of isolated rocks just a little way out from the shore. Between these rocks there are pools filling the depressions in the sand — some of them several feet deep, some of them quite shallow.

It was the last road that was open, and although Sandorf thought death was at the end he did not hesitate to take it.

Behold him then clearing the pools, jumping from rock to rock; but his profile thus became more visible against the less dense darkness of the horizon. And immediately the shouts gave the alarm and the police dashed out after him.

He had resolved not to be taken alive. If the sea gave nim up it would give up a corpse.

The difficult chase over the slippery rocks, over the viscous wracks and weeds, through the pools where every step might mean a fall, lasted for more than a quarter of an hour. The fugitive was still ahead, but the solid ground was soon to fail him.

He reached the last rocks of the reef. Two or three police were not more than ten yards away, the others were about double as far behind.

Count Sandorf stopped. A last cry escaped him — a cry of farewell thrown to Heaven. Then, as a discharge of bullets rained around him, he precipitated himself into the sea.

The police came to the very edge of the rock, and saw nothing but the head of the fugitive, like a black point, turned toward the offing.

Another volley pattered into the water round the count. And doubtless one or two bullets reached him, for he sunk under the waves and disappeared.

Till day broke the police kept watch along the reef and the beach, from the promontory to beyond the fort of Rovigno. It was useless. Nothing showed that Sandorf had again set foot on shore. It remained undoubted then that if he had not been shot he had been drowned.

But though a careful search was made no body was ever found among the breakers nor on the sands for more than a couple of leagues along the coast, But as the wind was off shore and the current running to the south-west, there could be no doubt that the corpse of the fugitive had been swept out to the open sea.

Count Sandorf, the Magyar nobleman, had then found his grave in the waves of the Adriatic.

After a minute investigation this was the verdict, a very natural one, to which the Austrian Government came.

Stephen Bathory, captured as we have seen, was taken under escort during the night to the donjon of Pisino, there for a few hours to rejoin Ladislas Zathmar.

The execution was fixed for the 30th of June.

Doubtless at this supreme moment Stephen would have a last interview with his wife and child; Ladislas would see his servant for the last time, for permission had been given to admit them to the donjon. But Mme. Bathory and her son, and Borik, who had been let out of prison, had left Trieste. Not knowing where the prisoners had been taken, for their arrest had been a secret one, they had searched for them even in Hungary, even in Austria, and after the sentence was announced they could not reach them in time.

Bathory had not the last consolation of seeing his wife and son. He could not tell them the names of those who had betrayed him.

Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar at five o’clock in the evening were shot in the court-yard of the fortress. They died like men who had given their lives for their country.

Toronthal and Sarcany could now believe that they were beyond all chance of reprisal. In fact the secret of their treachery was only known to themselves and to the Governor of Trieste. Their reward was half the possessions of Count Sandorf, the other half, by special favor, being reserved for his heiress when she attained her eighteenth year.

Toronthal and Sarcany, insensible to all remorse, could enjoy in peace the wealth obtained by their abominable treachery.

Another traitor seemed to have nothing to fear. This was the Spanish Carpena to whom had been paid the reward of 5,000 florins.

But if the banker and his accomplice could remain and hold up their heads at Trieste, Carpena under the weight of public reprobation had to leave Rovigno to live no one knew where. What did it matter? He had nothing to fear; not even the vengeance of Ferrato.

For the fisherman had been arrested, found guilty and sentenced to imprisonment for life for having sheltered the fugitives. Maria and her young brother Luigi were now left alone to live in misery in the house from which the father had been taken never to return.

And so three scoundrels for mere greed, without a sentiment of hatred against their victims — Carpena excepted perhaps — one to restore his embarrassed affairs, the others to gain money, had carried through this odious scheme.

Was such infamy to remain unpunished in this world? Count Sandorf, Count Zathmar, Stephen Bathory — these three patriots — and Andrea Ferrato, the honest fisherman, were they not to be avenged? The future will show.

END OF PART I.

PART II

CHAPTER I.

PESCADE AND MATIFOU.

Fifteen years after the events related in the prologue of this history, on the 24th of May, 1882, there was a holiday at Ragusa, one of the chief towns of the Dalmatian provinces.

Dalmatia is a narrow tongue of land lying between the southern Dinaric Alps, Herzegovina and the Adriatic. It is just large enough to hold a population of from four to five hundred thousand, with a little squeezing.

A fine race are these Dalmatians, sober in an arid country where arable land is rare, proud amid the many political vicissitudes they have undergone, haughty toward Austria, which gained it by the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1815, and honest toward all, so much so that the country can be called, according to a beautiful expression reported by M. Yriarte, “the land of the lockless doors.”

Dalmatia is divided into four circles, and these are subdivided into districts; the circles are those of Zara, Spalato, Cattaro, and Ragusa. The governor-general resides at Zara, the capital of the province, where the Diet meets, of which many members form Part of the Upper House at Vienna.

Times are much changed since the sixteenth century, when Uscoques, fugitive Turks at war with the Mussulmans as well as the Christians, with the Sultan as well as the Venetian Republic, were the terror of the sea. But the Uscoques have disappeared, and traces of them are no longer to be found in Carniola. The Adriatic is now as safe as any other part of the poetical Mediterranean.

Ragusa, or rather the small state of Ragusa, has been republican for centuries, even before Venice — that is to say, since the ninth century. It was only in 1808 that a decree of Napoleon united it, the year following, to the Kingdom of Illyria and made of it a duchy for Marshal Marmont. In the ninth century Ragusan vessels, which plowed every sea of the Levant, had the monopoly of the trade with the infidels — a monopoly granted them by the Holy See — and Ragusa, in consequence, was of great importance among the small republics of Southern Europe. In these days Ragusa is famous for still nobler things, and. the reputation of its scientists, the renown of its writers, and the taste of its artists have given it the name of the Sclavonic Athens.

The modern shipping trade must have harbors where there is a good anchorage, and water deep enough to receive vessels of large tonnage. Ragusa has no such harbor. The basin is narrow, crowded with rocks at the water level, and hardly large enough to admit small coasters and fishing-boats.

Fortunately about a mile and a half to the north, on one of the indentations of the Bay of Ombla Fumera, a caprice of nature has formed an excellent harbor adapted for all the needs of modern navigation. This is at Gravosa, and the harbor is, perhaps, the best on the Dalmatian coast. It has water enough even for war ships; there are several yards for repairing and building ships; and there the large mail boats can put in with which the immediate future is to endow the waters of the world. It follows, therefore, that the road from Ragusa to Gravosa has become a regular boulevard, planted with magnificent trees, bordered with charming villas, frequented by the population of the town, which in 1882 amounted to from 16.000 to 17,000 inhabitants.

On this 24th of May, about four o'clock on a beautiful spring afternoon, the Ragusans were crowding in great numbers toward Gravosa. In that suburb — for Gravosa, being built at the gates of the town, may well be called such — a local fair was in progress with the usual games and sports, traveling booths, music and dancing in the open air, quacks, acrobats and entertainers, from whose shouts, and songs, and instruments there arose a tremendous uproar along the streets and jetties.

For a stranger it afforded an excellent opportunity for studying the various types of the Sclave race and the mixture of Bohemians of all kinds. In addition to the traveling showman who had come to the fair to make money out of the curiosity of the locals, the country folk and mountaineers had thronged in to take part in the public rejoicings. The women were in great numbers, girls from Ragusa, peasants from the neighborhood, fish-women from the coast. Some were in dresses approaching the latest fashions of Western Europe; others were in dresses which varied with each district, at least in detail, white bodices embroidered on the arms and breast, cloaks of many colors, waistband with thousands of silver pins — quite a mosaic, in which the colors were as confusing as in a Persian carpet — white bonnet over hair tied up with many-colored ribbons, the "okronga" surmounted by he veil, which hung down behind like the puskul of the Oriental turban, leggings and shoes, fixed to the feet with plaited straw. And with all this elaborate rig-out, a heap of jewels in the form of bracelets, collars or pieces of silver arranged in a hundred ways as ornaments for the neck, the arms, the breast, and the waist. Jewelry, too, was conspicuous in the dress of the men, whose clothes were edged with bright colored embroideries.

But among all the Ragusan costumes which even the seamen of the port wore gracefully, those of the commissionaires — a privileged corporation — were of a kind to attract special notice. These porters were regular

Orientals with turban, jacket, waistcoat, belt, large Turkish trousers, and slippers. They would not have disgraced the quays of Galata, or the Tophane at Constantinople.

The fair was in full swing. The booths were doing a roaring trade. There was an additional attraction provided which was bound to bring a crowd together: this was the launch of a trabacolo, a sort of craft peculiar to the Adriatic, rigged with two masts and two sails bent to a yard top and bottom by the upper and lower bolt-ropes.

The launch was to take place at six o’clock in the evening, and the hull of the trabacolo, with the shores already cleared away, was only waiting for the key to be knocked away to glide into the sea. But up to the present the mountebanks, wandering minstrels and acrobats had been in full work amusing the public by their talents or agility.

The musicians drew the most spectators, and among them the guzlars, or players on the guzla, were the best patronized. Accompanying themselves on their strange instruments, they sung in guttural tones the songs of their country, and they were well worth stopping to hear.

The guzla used by these virtuosos of the street has several strings stretched on a long frame, and it is simply scraped with a bow. There is no risk of the singers failing for want of a note, for they go in search of them high and low, as much in their heads as in their chests.

One of the singers — a huge fellow, yellow of skin and brown of hair, holding between his knees the guzla, which looked like a cello grown thin — was singing with much mimicry and gesture a canzonet of which the following is almost a literal translation:

“When gay the song comes ringing,

The song of the gypsy girl,

Mark well the work she’s flinging

To help the words she’s singing!

Oh beware

Of the gypsy girl!

“Too far away from her you stay,

And then her love-lit eyes grow tender

And ‘neath their veiling lashes say,

’Come nearer, love and I’ll surrender!’

“When gay the song comes ringing,

The song of the gypsy girl,

Mark well the look she’s flinging

To help the words she’s singing!

Oh take care

Of the gypsy girl!”

After this the singer with his wooden bowl in his hand went round the ring and made a collection of a few coppers. But the take seemed to be rather poor, and he returned to his place to soften his auditors with the second couplet of his canzonet:

“When full the gaze of her glorious eyes

Meets yours, and all their witchcraft lends her

Your heart she wins as her rightful prize,

She’ll keep it and she’ll ne’er surrender!

“When gay the song comes ringing,

The song of the gypsy girl,

Mark well the look she’s flinging,

To help the words she’s singing!

Oh beware

Of the gypsy girl!”

A man of from fifty to fifty-five was listening to the song of the Bohemians; but, being little sensible to such poetical seductions, his purse had hitherto remained unopened; and he was about to move off, when the young lady who accompanied him stopped him and said:

“Father, I have no money with me. Will you give that man something?”

And that is why the guzlar received four or five kreutzers which he would not have had without the girl’s intervention, Not that her father, who was very rich, was mean enough to refuse alms to a poor foreigner, but simply because he was never moved at human misery.

The father and daughter passed through the crowds toward other booths just as noisy, while the guzla player disappeared, probably to liquidate his receipts.

But all the open-air artists, singers and mountebanks were not similarly patronized. Among the most deserted were two acrobats who were figuring away on a platform with no one encourage them.

Above the stand was a sheet of canvas in very bad state of repair, with portraits of wild animals daubed on in distemper, in which in most fantastic outline there could be seen lions, jackals, hyenas, tigers, bears, etc. leaping and disporting themselves in marvelously unreal landscapes. Behind was a tiny arena, railed off with pieces of old canvas, which boasted of so many holes for the eyes of the indiscreet to look through that they must have seriously diminished the receipts. In front of one of the poles was a dilapidated piece of plank as an apology for a signboard. On it these five words were roughly written in charcoal:

PESCADE and MATIFOU,

French Gymnasts.

From a physical point of view — and probably from a moral one also — these two men were as different one from the other as two human beings could be. They were both natives of Provence, and it was that fact alone that had brought them together to fight the battle of life in commic.

Whence came their queer names? Were they the two geographical points between which curves the Bay of Algiers? Yes. And the names fitted them perfectly, as of Atlas does some giant wrestler.

Cape Matifou is an enormous mamelon, strong and unshakable, which rises at the north-east end of the vast roadstead of Algiers as if to defy the unchained elements and illustrate the celebrated line —

“Its mass indestructible wearied our time.”

And such was the athlete Matifou, an Alcides, a Porthos, a fortunate rival of the Ompdrailles, of Nicholas Creste, and other famous wrestlers who have shone in the arenas of the South.

This giant was more than six feet in height, with a voluminous head, shoulders in proportion, chest like a smith’s bellows, and limbs like tree-trunks, with the strength of steel. He was manly strength in all its magnificence, and had he known his age, we should have found, not without surprise, that he had only just entered his twenty-second year. Although this giant was not gifted with striking intelligence, yet his heart was good, and his character was simple and gentle. He knew not hate or anger. He would do no one an injury. Seldom, indeed, would he shake the hand that was offered him, for fear he should crush it in his own. In his powerful nature there was nothing of the tiger, although he had the strength. And besides, at a word, at a sign even from his companion, he would obey, as if he had been the gigantic son of that little slip of a man.

As a contrast, at the western extremity of the Bay of Algiers, Point Pescade, opposite Cape Matifou, is a thin, spare, narrow, rocky tongue running out into the sea. From it the name of Pescade was given to this fellow of twenty, who was small, slender, skinny, and of not half the weight of his friend, but supple, active, quick-witted, of inexhaustible good humor through good and evil fortune, a philosopher in his way, inventive and practical — a regular monkey without his mischief — and indissolubly linked by fate to the enormous pachyderm whom he led through all the phases of a mountebank’s life.

Both were acrobats by profession and traveled from fair to fair. Matifou — or Cape Matifou as he was also called — wrestled in the ring, giving all sorts of displays of strength, bending iron bars on his biceps, lifting the heaviest of his audience at arm’s length, and juggling with his young companion as if he were a tennis ball. Pescade — or Point Pescade, as he was commonly called — gesticulated, sung, played the fool, amused the public by his clownish wit, astonished them by his feats as an equilibrist, at which he was very clever, and mystified them with his conjuring tricks.

But why on this occasion on the quay at Gravosa are these poor fellows left out in the cold, while the people crowd to the other booths? Why have they taken so little when they want it so much? It is difficult to say.

Their language, an agreeable mixture of Provençal and Italian, was more than enough for them to make themselves understood. Since their departure from Provence, where they had known no relatives and seemed to have been produced by spontaneous generation, they had wandered about from markets to fairs, living ill rather than well, but still living, and if not dining every day, at least having something for supper every night; and that was good enough for them, for, as Point Pescade remarked, “We need not ask for the impossible.”

But if the worthy fellow did not ask for it on this occasion he tried at it none the less in his endeavor to get together a dozen spectators before his platform in the hope that they would pay a visit to his miserable arena. But neither his witticisms, to which his foreign accent gave such point, nor his patter which would have made the fortune of a vandevillist, nor his facial twists which would have drawn a grin from a graven image, nor his acrobatic contortions which were quite prodigies of dislocation, nor the attractions of his grass wig whose goat's beard tail dusted the hem of his jacket, nor his sallies which were worthy of a Paleinello of Rome or a Stentarello of Florence, had the slightest effect on the public.

And yet they had been practicing on the Sclaves for many months. After leaving Provence they had crossed Lombardy and Venetia, mounted, it could almost be said, one on the other — Cape Matifou famous for his strength, Point Pescade celebrated for his agility. Their renown had preceded them to Trieste in Illyria. From Trieste they had advanced through Istria, descending on the Dalmatian coast at Zara, Salone, Ragusa, finding it more profitable to advance than to retreat. Behind them they were used up; in front of them their entertainment was new and likely to bring good business. Now, alas! the tour which had never been very good threatened to become very bad, and the poor fellows had but one desire, and that they knew not how to realize; it was to get back to their native land and never come so far away from it again. But they were dragging a weight behind them, the weight of misery, and to walk many leagues with that weight at their feet was very hard.

But without thinking of the future they had to think of the present — that is, of the night's supper, which had not yet been earned. They had not a kreutzer in the treasury, if that pretentious name could be given to the corner of the handkerchief in which Point Pescade used to keep the money. In vain he sparred away on his trestles. In vain he shouted despairing appeals into vacancy. In vain Cape Matifou exhibited his biceps, on which the veins stood out like the ivy on an old tree! Not a spectator showed the slightest idea of entering the canvas ring.

“Hard to move these Dalmatians!” said Point Pescade.

“As paving-stones,” remarked Cape Matifou.

“I don’t think we shall have any luck to-day! Look here, Cape Matifou, we shall have to pack up.”

“Pack up — where for?”

“You are curious!”

“Tell us.”

“Well, I will think of some place where we are at least sure of one meal a day.”

“What place is that, Point Pescade?”

“Oh, it’s far, far away — and much further than very far, Cape Matifou.”

“At the end of the world?”

“The world has no end,” sententionsly replied Pescade. “If it had an end it wouldn’t be round! If it didn’t turn it would be immovable, and if it was immovable — ”

“Well?” asked Cape Matifou.

“Well, it would tumble into the sun in less time than I could juggle a rabbit.”

"And then?"

"And then there will happen what happens to a clumsy juggler when two balls go smash in the air! Crack! crash, collapse, and the people hiss and want their money back, and you have to give it to them, and to-night we shall have nothing for supper!"

"And so," asked the giant, "if the earth tumbles into the sun we shall have nothing for supper?"

And Cape Matifou fell into infinite perspectives. Seated on a corner of the platform, with his arms crossed on his tights, he began to nod his head like a crockery mandarin: he said no more, he saw no more, he heard no more. He was absorbed in a most unintelligible association of ideas, all mixed up in his mighty noddle. And this is what he felt gape like a gulf in the depths of bis being. It seemed to him that he rose high, very high, higher than very high; this expression of Pescade had struck him as being very appropriate. Then suddenly he was left alone, and he fell — into his own stomach — that is to say, into emptiness.

It was quite a nightmare. The poor fellow rose on the stops, with his hands extended, as if he were blind. A moment later he tumbled on to the platform.

"Eh! Cape Matifou, what's up?" exclaimed Point Pescade, seizing his comrade by the hand, and dragging him back.

"Me?" answered the giant, in great confusion. "The — do you mean?"

"Yes, you."

“I have,” said Matifou, collecting his ideas a difficult operation, notwithstanding their number was so inconsiderable — ”I have been thinking that it is necessary I should speak to you, Point Pescade!”

“Say on, then, my Cape, and fear not that I shall not listen! Avaunt, thou public, avaunt!”

The giant sat down on the steps, and, in his strong arms, gently, as if he was afraid of smashing him, he drew his companion to his side.

CHAPTER II.

THE LAUNCH OF THE TRABACOLO.

“And so this does not do?” asked Cape Matifou.

“What does not do?” replied Point Pescade.

“This business.”

“It might do better, it must be admitted, but it might do worse!”

“Pescade!”

“Matifou!”

“Don’t you wish to hear what I am going to say?”

“I do wish, on the contrary, if it is worth wishing for.”

“Well — you ought to leave me,” said the giant.

“What do yon mean by leaving you? To leave you to yourself?” asked Point Pescade.

“Yes.”

“Continue, Hercules of my dreams! You interest me!”

“Yes — I am sure that if you were alone you would draw the people! I prevent you. It is my fault that you don’t, and without me you would be able to — ”

“Now, look here, Cape Matifou,” replied Pescade seriously. “You are big, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“And tall?”

“Yes.”

“Well, big and tall as you are, I do not understand how you could manage to hold such a huge stupidity as you have just uttered.”

“And why, Point Pescade?”

“Because it is bigger and taller than you are, Cape Matifou! Me to leave you! But if I was not here, with whom would you do the juggling?”

“With whom?”

“Whom would you have to do the dangerous jump on to your occiput?”

“I do not know — ”

“Or the grand flight between your hands?”

“Booh!” answered the giant, embarrassed by these pressing questions.

“Yes — in presence of a delighted audience, when by chance there is an audience!”

“An audience!” murmured Matifou.

“There, shut up,” continued Pescade, “and just think of earning something for supper to-night.”

“I am not hungry.”

“You are always hungry, Cape Matifou; and even now you are hungry,” said Point Pescade, opening his companion’s enormous jaws with his hands. “I see your canines as big as those of a bull-dog! You are hungry, I tell you; and when we have earned half a florin or a quarter of a florin you shall eat.”

“But you, my little Pescade?”

“Me? a grain of millet will be enough. I don’t want to be strong like you, my son. This is how I look at it. The more you eat the more you grow. The more you grow the more you become a phenomenon — ”

“A phenomenon — yes!”

“But with me, on the contrary, the less I eat the more I waste, and the more I waste the more I become a phenomenon. Is that true?”

“That is true,” answered Matifou, innocently. “And so, Point Pescade, in my own interest I ought to eat.”

“Just so, my big dog, and in mine I ought not to eat.”

“But suppose there is only enough for one?”

“Then it will be yours.”

“But suppose there is enough for two?”

“It would still be yours. *My dear Matifou, you are worth any two men.”

“Four — six — ten!” exclaimed the giant.

And putting aside the emphatic exaggeration so common to all giants, ancient and modern, Matifou had in truth thrown every wrestler hitherto opposed to him. Two facts were told of him which showed his prodigious strength. One evening in a circus at Nimes an upright supporting the wood-work began to give way. The cracking caused a good deal of alarm among the spectators, who were threatened with being crushed by the fall of the roof or crushed by one another as they thronged to the door. But Cape Matifou was there. He made a leap to the beam which was already out of the perpendicular, and as the frame-work sagged down he held it upon his shoulders as long as it was necessary to allow the audience to disperse. Then with another bound he jumped out, and the same moment the roof collapsed behind him. That was done by strength of shoulder. The following was done by strength of arm.

One day on the plains of Camargue a bull went mad and escaped from the inclosure and chased and injured several people, and would have done a great deal of damage had it not been for Cape Matifou. The giant ran at the animal, waited for it, and as it lowered its head for the rush he seized it by the horns, and with one twist of his arm he laid it on its back with its four hoofs kicking helplessly in the air.

Of his superhuman strength there had been other proofs, but these will serve to show not only Matifou’s muscularity, but also his courage and devotion, for he never hesitated to risk his life when he could help his fellows. So that he was as good as he was strong. But that he should lose none of his strength it was necessary, as Pescade had said, that he should eat, and his companion obliged him to eat, stinting himself when there was only enough for one. This night, however, supper — even for one — had not yet appeared above the horizon.

“We are in a fog,” said Point Pescade.

And to dissipate it he returned to his jokes and grimaces.

He strode along the platform, he gesticulated, he did a few dislocations, he walked on his hands when he did not walk on his feet, having observed that you do not feel so hungry with your head downward. He began again in his half Provençal, half Sclave lingo, that perpetual patter of the show-booth which the clown fires off at the crowd.

“Come in, gentlemen!” shouted Point Pescade. “There is nothing to pay till you go out — and then it’s only a krentzer.”

But to go out it was necessary to go in, and although five or six people stopped, no one attempted to enter the arena.

Then Point Pescade with a long switch pointed out the ferocious animals depicted on the canvas. Not that he had a menagerie to show the public! But these terrible creatures existed in some parts of Africa and India, and if ever Cape Matifou met them on the road, why they would only make a mouthful for Cape Matifou!

And thus he chattered on, interrupted every now and then by the giant with a bang on the big drum that echoed like a cannon-shot.

“The hyena, gentlemen, the hyena comes from the Cape of Good Hope. Active and sanguinary, you see him clearing the walls of the grave-yard, on which he preys.”

Then turning to the other side of the stand he pointed at a daub of yellow in a clump of blue trees.

“Here you are! The young and interesting rhinoceros, only fifteen mouths old! He came from Sumatra, and nearly wrecked the ship he was brought over in by sticking his horn through the hull.”

Then to the other end he turned again to show the lion amidst a greenish mass of the bones of his victims.

“Behold, gentlemen! The terrible lion of the Atlas! He lives in the depths of the Sahara, in the burning sands of the desert! When the heat gets too much for him he hides in the caves! If he finds any water dropping he opens his mouth and drinks it as it drops! And that’s why he’s called an humidian!”

But all the attractions seemed to fail. Point Pescade shouted in vain. In vain Cape Matifou banged the big drum. Things were growing desperate.

However, a few Dalmatians — powerful-looking mountaineers — came at last, and stopped before the athletic Matifou and coolly examined him with the air of connoisseurs.

Point Pescade immediately challenged them.

“Walk up, gentlemen! Come in! Now’s your time! Grand contest! Man to man ! A clear field! Cape Matifou will throw any amateur that honors him with his confidence! A pair of cotton tights as the prize for the conqueror! Are you game», gentlemen?” added Point Pescade, addressing these big fellows who stared at him with astonishment.

But the big fellows did not see the fun of accepting the challenge, and Point Pescade had to announce that as no amateurs were forthcoming the contest would take place between Cape Matifou and himself. Yes! “Skill shall be pitted against strength.”

“Walk up! Walk up! Don’t all come at once!” vociferated poor Pescade. “You will see now what you never saw before! Point Pescade and Cape Matifou at it hammer and tongs! The twins of Provence! Yes-twins — but not of the same age, nor of the same mother! Eh? Aren’t we like each other — me particularly!”

A young man stopped in front of the platform. He listened gravely to these threadbare pleasantries.

The young man was about twenty-two or a little older, and was above the middle height. His handsome features, with a certain severity about them, denoted a pensive nature, disciplined probably in the school of suffering. His large black eyes, his beard which he kept short, his mouth rarely accustomed to smile, but clearly cut beneath his silky mustache, proclaimed unmistakably his Hungarian origin and the preponderance of Magyar blood. He was dressed quietly in a modern suit, without any pretense of being in the fashion. His bearing could not be mistaken; the young man was already a man.

He listened, we have said, to the useless patter of Point Pescade. With some sympathy he looked at him showing off on the platform. Having suffered himself he probably could not remain indifferent to the sufferings of others.

“Two Frenchmen,” he said to himself. “Poor fellows! They have not done much to-day.”

And then the idea occurred to him to constitute himself an audience — an audience that paid. It was only a bit of charity, perhaps, but it was a bit of charity in disguise, and it might be welcome.

So he advanced toward the door — that is, toward the piece of canvas, which, on being raised, gave admittance to the ring.

“Walk in, sir! walk in!” said Pescade. “We are just going to commence!”

“But — I am alone — ” said the young man goodnaturedly.

“Sir,” replied Point Pescade proudly, and somewhat chaffingly, “the true artist looks at the quality and not at the quantity of his audience.”

“However — you will allow me,” said the gentleman taking out his purse.

And he picked out two florins and placed them on a tin plate in a corner of the platform.

“Bravo!” said Pescade.

Then he turned to his companion with:

“To the rescue, Matifou, to the rescue! We’ll give him something for his money.”

But as he was about to step in, the sole spectator of the French and Provençal arena, he stopped abruptly. He had just caught sight of the girl and her father, who a quarter of an hour before had been listening to the guzlar. Both he and she had had the same thought and done a charitable action. The one had given an alms to the gipsy, the other had given an alms to the acrobats.

But evidently the meeting in this way was not enough for him — for as soon as be saw the lady he forgot all about the arena and the money he had paid for his place, and dashed off toward the spot where she had again mixed with the crowd.

“Hi! sir! — sir!” shouted Pescade. “Your money! We haven’t earned it! What’s up? Where are you going? Vanished! Sir!”

But he sought to find his “audience” in vain. It had been eclipsed. Then he looked at Matifou, who, with bis mouth wide open, was quite as much astonished as he was.

“Just as we were going to commence!” said the giant. “We are unlucky.”

“Let us commence all the same!” said Pescade, running down the steps into the ring.

But at this moment there was a great shouting in the direction of the harbor. The crowd was growing excited, and moving toward the sea-side, and then was heard above the din of words:

“The trabacolo! the trabacolo!”

The time had come for the launch of the small vessel, The sight, always an attractive one, was of a kind to excite the public curiosity. And the quays where the people had gathered were soon deserted for the yard in which the launch was to take place.

Point Pescade and Matifou saw that there was no chance of an audience at present, and being anxious to find the solitary stranger who had failed to fill their arena, they left it without even stopping to shut the door — and why should they shut it? — and walked off to the yard.

This yard was situated at the end of a point just beyond the harbor, where the beach sloped gradually to the sea. Pescade and his companion after a good deal of elbowing found themselves in the front row of spectators. Never, even on a benefit night, had they had such an audience.

The shores had been cleared away from the trabacolo, and she was now ready for the ceremony. The anchor was ready to be let go as soon as the hull entered the water, so as to stop her running too far out into the channel. Although the trabacolo measured only about fifty tons, the mass was considerable enough for every precaution to be taken against accident. Two of the workmen of the yard were on deck aft near the flagstaff that bore the Dalmatian colors, and two others were forward standing by the anchor.

The trabacolo was to be sent into the water stern first, as is done in all other launches. Her keel resting on the soaped slide was kept in its place by a key. When the key was removed the boat should begin to slip, and then with increasing swiftness she would rush down the ways into her natural element.

Half a dozen carpenters with sledge hammers were knocking in wedges under the keel forward, so as to increase the speed at which she would take the sea. Every one followed the operation with the greatest interest amidst general silence.

At this moment from behind the point to the south there suddenly glided into view a yacht. She was a schooner of about three hundred and fifty tons. She was keeping on past the point so as to open the entrance into the harbor. As the breeze was from the north-west, she was close-hauled on the port tack, so as to take her straight to her anchorage. In ten minutes after she had been sighted she had come up rapidly, as if she had been looked at through a telescope with continually lengthening tube.

To enter the harbor the schooner would have to pass in front of the yard where the trabacolo was ready for launching; and as soon as she was sighted it was thought best to suspend operations for a time, and wait until she had gone by. A collision between the two vessels, one broadside on, the other coming at great speed, would have caused a catastrophe on board the yacht.

The workmen then stopped driving in the wedges, and the man in charge of the key was then told to wait. It would only be for a minute or two. On came the schooner. She could be seen to be getting ready to anchor. Two of the jibs were taken in and the foresail hauled up. But she went on at a good speed under her fore, staysail and Spanish reefed mainsail.

All eyes were turned on this graceful vessel whose white sails were now gilded by the oblique rays of the sun. Her sailors, in Levantine uniform, with red caps, were running about at their various duties, while the captain, near the man at the helm, gave his orders in a quiet voice.

Very soon the schooner was abreast of the building-yard. Suddenly a shout arose. The trabacolo began to move. For some reason the key had given way, and she began to slide at the moment the yacht was passing with starboard side toward her.

A collision seemed inevitable. There was neither the time nor the means to prevent it. Nothing could be done. To the cries of the spectators there had come in reply a shout of alarm from the schooner’s crew.

The captain put down his helm, but it was impossible for his ship to get by in time to avoid the shock.

The trabacolo was slipping down the ways. A white smoke rose from the friction forward, and the stern had already plunged into the waters of the bay.

Suddenly a man jumped out from the crowd. He seized a rope which hung from the fore part of the trabacolo. But in vain he tried to hold it back at the risk of being dragged away. Close by them was an iron cannon stuck into the ground like a post. In an instant he slipped the rope over it, and let it out hand over hand at the risk of being dragged round with it. He kept it back, and with superhuman strength he checked it for ten seconds.

Then the rope broke. But the ten seconds were enough. The trabacolo had plunged into the waves and recovered as from a dive. She shot across the channel, grazing by hardly a foot the schooner’s stern, just as the anchor dropped into the depths, and brought her sharply up by the tension of the chain.

The schooner was saved.

The hero of this daring maneuver was no other than Cape Matifou.

“Well done! Very well done!” exclaimed Point Pescade, running up to the giant, who lifted him in his arms, not to juggle with him, but to embrace him as he always embraced him — that is, almost to the point of suffocation.

And then the applause resounded from all sides. Five minutes later the schooner had taken up her position in the center of the harbor; then an elegant whale-boat with six oars brought the owner ashore.

He was a tall man, about sixty, with almost white hair, and gray beard cut in the Oriental fashion. Large black eyes lit up his face and a curious vivacity displayed itself in his healthily brown face. The most striking thing about him was the air of nobility which distinguished him. As soon as he set foot on the shore he walked up to the two acrobats, whom the crowd was greeting and applauding.

The people stood back as he advanced. As soon as he reached Cape Matifou his first action was not to open his purse and take something from it. No! he held out his hand to the giant, and said to him in Italian:

“Thank you, my friend, for what you did.”

Cape Matifou was too bashful to notice the compliment.

“Yes! It was good! It was superb!” said Pescade, with all the redundance of the Provençal idiom.

“You are Frenchmen?” asked the stranger.

“French of the French!” answered Pescade. “French of the south of France.”

The stranger looked at them with sympathy and feeling. Their misery was too apparent for him to pass over. Before him were two mountebanks, one of whom at the risk of his life had done him a great service, for a collision between the trabacolo and the schooner would have meant several victims.

“Come and see me on board!” he said.

“And when?” asked Pescade, with a most gracious salute.

“To-morrow morning.”

“To-morrow morning!” answered Pescade, while Matifou gave sign of consent by nodding his head.

But the crowd had not ceased to surround the hero of the adventure. He would have been carried about in triumph had he not been too big. But Point Pescade, always wide awake, thought he could make some money out of the public excitement. And as soon as the stranger after a gesture of friendship had left for the jetty, he broke out with —

“The match, sirs, the match between Pescade and Cape Matifou. Walk up, gentlemen, walk up. You don’t pay till you go out — or you can pay as you come in — just as you please.”

This time he was listened to and followed by a public he had never dreamed of before.

The ring was too small! They even had to refuse money!

The stranger passed on, but scarcely had he advanced a step in the direction of the quay when he found him near the young lady and her father who had been present throughout the scene.

Close by was the young man who had followed them, and to whose salute the father only had given a very haughty acknowledgment.

In this man’s presence the stranger experienced a movement he could hardly suppress. It was as if his whole body was repelled, while his eye flashed like the lightning.

The girl’s father stepped up to him and said, “You have just escaped a great danger, sir, thanks to the courage of that acrobat.”

“Quite so,” replied the stranger, whose voice voluntarily not was masked by emotion.

Then addressing his interlocutor he asked —

“To whom may I have the honor to speak?”

“To Silas Toronthal of Ragusa,” answered the old banker of Trieste. “And may I ask who is the owner of the yacht?”

“Dr. Antekirtt!” replied the stranger.

Then they parted, while shouts of applause were heard from the distant ring of the French gymnasts.

And that evening not only did Cape Matifou have enough to eat, — that is, to eat as much as four ordinary people, — but enough was left for one. And that did for the supper of his comrade, Point Pescade.

CHAPTER III.

DOCTOR ANTEKIRTT.

There are people who give a good deal of employment to fame — that woman of a hundred mouths whose trumpets blare forth their names toward the four cardinal points of the earth.

This was so in the case of the celebrated Dr. Antekirtt, who had just arrived in the harbor of Gravosa. His arrival had been signalized by an incident which would have been enough to attract public attention to the most ordinary traveler. And he was not an ordinary traveler.

For several years there had been woven around Dr. Antekirtt a sort of legend in all the legendary countries of the extreme East. Asia from the Dardanelles to the Suez Canal, Africa from Suez to Tunis, the Red Sea along the whole Arab coast, resounded with his name as that of a man of extraordinary knowledge in the physical sciences, a sort of gnostic or taleb who possessed the last secrets of the universe. In earlier times he would have been called an Epiphane; in the countries of the Euphrates he would have been venerated as a descendant of the ancient Magians.

How much of this reputation was undeserved? All that would make the Magian a magician, all that would attribute to him supernatural power. The truth is that Dr. Antekirtt was a man, nothing but a man of high education, powerful mind, shrewd judgment, great penetration and marvelous perspicacity, who had been remarkably served by circumstances. For example, in one of the central provinces of Asia Minor he had been able by a discovery of his own to save a whole population from a terrible epidemic up to then considered to be contagious; and in consequence his fame was unequaled.

One thing that contributed to his celebrity was the impenetrable mystery which surrounded him. Whence came he? No one knew. What had been his history? None could say. Where had he lived, and how? All that was certain about Dr. Antekirtt was that he was adored by the people in Asia Minor and Eastern Africa, that he was held to be a physician of wonderful skill, that the report of his extraordinary cures had even reached the great scientific centers of Europe, and that his attentions were as freely bestowed on the poorest as on the richest men and pashas of these provinces. But he had never been seen in the West, and for many years his place of residence was unknown; and hence the propensity to regard him as some mysterious avatar, some Hindoo incarnation, some supernatural being curing by supernatural means.

But if Dr. Antekirtt had not yet practiced his art in the principal States of Europe, his reputation had preceded him. Although he had only arrived at Ragusa as an ordinary traveler — a wealthy tourist yachting in the Mediterranean — the news of his arrival soon spread through the town, and the accident so narrowly prevented by the courage of Cape Matifou had had the effect of still further arousing the public attention.

The yacht would have done credit to the wealthiest and most fastidious of nautical sportsmen. Her two masts without rake and placed well amidships, thus giving her the full benefit of a large mainsail and fore-staysail; her long bowsprit, with its two jibs; her yards on the foremast, and her powerful spars were designed for a sail plan that would drive her at immense speed. She was, as we have said, a schooner of about three hundred and fifty tons. Of long, fine lines, neither too broad in the beam, nor too deep in the draught, but of ample stability, she was a craft that in a seaman’s hands could be depended on in all weathers. In a decent breeze, either on or off the wind, she could easily reel off her thirteen knots an hour, and would have held her own in a match with any of the crack cruisers of the British clubs.

Her interior fittings were in keeping with her external appearance. The whiteness of her Canadian pine deck, without a knot in its planking; her companions and sky-lights of teak, with their brass-work as bright as gold; her beautifully carved helm; her spare spars under their white cases; her taut halyards and running rigging contrasting with her galvanized iron shrouds and stays; her varnished boats hanging gracefully from their davits, the brilliant black of her hull relieved only by a plain gold ribbon, combined to make her a vessel of exquisite taste and extreme elegance.

This yacht is of considerable importance in our story. She was the floating home of that mysterious personage — its hero. Below, luxury strove with comfort. The cabins and saloons were decorated regardless of cost. The carpets and hangings and the rest of the furniture were ingeniously adapted for all the requirements of pleasure navigation; and this was shown not only in the cabins but even in the pantry, where the silver and porcelain services were kept secure from the movement of the ship, in the galley which was a picture of Dutch cleanliness, and in the crew’s quarters. The men, numbering about twenty, were dressed like Maltese sailors, with short trousers, sea boots, striped shirts, brown waistbands, red caps and guernseys — on which in white letters there appeared the initials of the schooner’s name and that of her proprietor.

But to what port did this yacht belong? On what register had she been entered? In what Mediterranean country did she lay up for the winter? What was her nationality? No one knew, just as no one knew the nationality of the doctor! A green flag with a red cross in the upper corner floated at her gaff.

And the flags of all nations could be sought through in vain for such an ensign. Nevertheless the officer of the port before Dr. Antekirtt came ashore had had the papers sent to them, and doubtless found them all in due order, for after the visit of the health officers they had given her free pratique.

But what was this schooner’s name? There was written on her counter in the neatest of gold lettering the solitary word “Savarena.”

Such was the splendid pleasure craft that was now the admired of all in the harbor of Gravosa. Point Pescade and Cape Matifou, who in the morning were to be received on board by Dr. Antekirtt, regarded her with no less curiosity, and with a great deal more emotion than the sailors of the port. As natives of the coast of Provence they were well up in seafaring matters. Point Pescade especially regarded this gem of marine architecture with all the feeling of a connoisseur. And this is what they said to each other in the evening after they had closed their show:

“Ah!” said Cape Matifou.

“Oh!” said Point Pescade.

“Eh, Point Pescade?”

“Who said she wasn’t, Cape Matifou?”

And these words doing duty for admirative interjections were as expressive in the mouths of the two acrobats as others much longer could have been.

The “Savarena” was now anchored; her sails even stowed, her rigging was all coiled carefully down, and the awning had been pitched aft. She was moored across an angle of the harbor, and thus showed that rather a long stay was in contemplation.

During the evening Dr. Antekirtt contented himself with a short walk in the neighborhood of Gravosa. While Silas Toronthal and his daughter returned to Ragusa in their carriage, which had waited for them on the quay and the young man we have mentioned went back down the long avenue without waiting for the end of the fair then in full swing, the doctor strolled about the harbor. It is one of the best on the coast, and at the time contained a considerable amount of shipping of different nationalities. Then, after leaving the town, he followed the shore of the bay of Ombra Flumera, which extends for about thirty-six miles to the mouth of the little river Ombra, which is deep enough for vessels of moderate draught to ascend almost to the foot of the Vlastiza Mountains. About nine o'clock he returned to the jetty, where he watched the arrival of a large Lloyd mail steamer from the Indian Ocean. Then he returned on board, went down to his cabin, and remained there till the morning.

Such was his custom, and the captain of the "Savarena" — a seaman named Narsos, then in his fortieth year — had orders never to trouble the doctor during his hours of solitude.

It should be said that the officers and crew knew no more of the past history of the owner than outsiders. They were none the less devoted to him body and soul. Although the doctor would not tolerate the least infraction of discipline, he was very kind and liberal to all. And men were always ready to join the "Savarena." Never was there a reprimand to give, a punishment to inflict, or a dismissal to effect. It was as though the schooner's crew were all one family.

After the doctor had come aboard all arrangements were made for the night. The lights were got up fore and aft, the watch was set, and complete silence reigned on board.

The doctor was seated on a large couch in an angle of his apartment. On the table were a few newspapers that his servant had bought in Gravosa. The doctor ran them over carelessly, taking no note of the leaders, but picking out the facts and reading the shipping news and the fashionable movements. Then he threw the papers down, a sort of somnolent torpor gained upon him, and about eleven o’clock, without calling in his valet, he lay down, though it was some time before he slept.

And if we could have read the thought that especially troubled him we might have been surprised to find that it found shape in words as, “Who was that young man who bowed to Silas Toronthal on the quay at Gravosa?”

About eight o’clock next morning the doctor appeared on deck. The day promised to be magnificent. The sun was already shining on the mountain tops which form the background of the bay. The shadows were swiftly retreating to the shore across the surface of the waters, and very soon the sun shone direct on the “Savarena.”

Captain Narsos came up to the doctor to receive his orders, which, after a pleasant greeting, were given him in a very few words.

A minute afterward a boat left the schooner with four men and a coxswain and headed for the wharf, where she was to wait the convenience of Point Pescade and Cape Matifou.

It was a grand day and a grand ceremony in the nomadic existence of the two honest fellows who had wandered so many hundred miles away from that beloved Provence they so longed to see.

They were both on the jetty. They had changed their professional costume for ordinary clothes — rather worn, perhaps, but clean — and stood there looking at the yacht and admiring her as before. And they were in particularly good spirits. Not only had they supped last night, but they had breakfasted this morning; a piece of extravagance that could only be explained by their having taken the extraordinary amount of forty-two florins. But do not let it be thought that they had dissipated all their receipts. No! Point Pescade was prudent, and looked ahead, and life was assured them for a dozen days at the least.

“It’s to you we owe that, Cape Matifou!”

“Oh! Pescade!”

“Yes, you, you big man.”

“Well, yes, to me if you like!” answered Matifou.

The “Savarena’s” boat now came alongside the wharf. The coxswain rose, cap in hand, and hastened to say that he was “at the gentlemen’s orders.”

“Gentlemen! What gentlemen?” asked Point Pescade.

“Yourselves,” answered the coxswain. “You, whom Dr. Antekirtt is waiting for on board.”

“Good! You see we are gentlemen already,” said Point Pescade.

Cape Matifou opened his huge eyes and twirled his hat in his hands.

“When you are ready, gentlemen,” said the coxswain.

“Oh, we are quite ready — quite ready,” said Point Pescade, with a most affable bow.

And a moment afterward the two friends were comfortably seated on the black rug with red edging which covered the thwart, while the coxswain had taken his place behind them.

Of course the enormous weight of our Hercules brought the boat down four or five inches below her usual load-line. And the corners of the rug had to be turned in to prevent their dragging in the water. The four oars dipped, and the boat slipped quickly along toward the “Savarena.”

It must be admitted that the two passengers were rather excited and even shy. Such honors for a pair of mountebanks! Cape Matifou dared not stir. Point Pescade, with all his confusion, could not conceal that cheerful smile which always animated his intelligent face.

The boat passed round the schooner’s stern and stopped at the starboard gangway — the place of honor.

CHAPTER IV.

THE YOUNG RECRUITS.

THE ladder bent beneath Matifou’s weight as he went up the side. As soon as he and Pescade had reached the deck they were taken aft to the doctor.

After a cordial “Good-morning,” several formalities and ceremonies had to be gone through before the visitors would consent to sit down. At last they did so.

The doctor looked at them a minute or so without speaking. His passionless, handsome face impressed them greatly. But there could be no doubting that if the smile was not on his lips, it was in his heart.

“My friends,” said he, “yesterday you saved my crew and myself from a great danger. I wished to thank you once more for having done so, and that is why I asked you to come on board.”

“Doctor,” answered Point Pescade, who began to recover some of his assurance, “you are very kind. But what my comrade did any man would have done in his place, if he had had the strength. Wouldn’t he, Cape Matifou?”

Matifou gave an affirmative sign, which consisted in shaking his head up and down.

“Be it so,” said the doctor; “but that is not all, for your companion has risked his life, and I consider I am under an obligation to him.”

“Oh, doctor,” replied Point Pescade, “you will make my old Cape blush, and it will never do to let the blood rush to his head.”

"Well, my friend," continued the doctor, "I see you do not care for compliments. So I will not insist upon them. However, as every service is worthy of — "

"Doctor," answered Point Pescade, "I beg pardon for interrupting you, but a good action, as the copy-book says, is its own reward, and we have been rewarded."

"Already! And how?" asked the doctor, who began to think that he had been anticipated.

"Undoubtedly," replied Pescade. "After that extraordinary exhibition of strength on the part of our Hercules, the public were anxious to judge for themselves of his powers under more artistic conditions. And so they came in crowds to our Provençal arena. Cape Matifou threw half a dozen of the stoutest mountaineers and strongest porters of Gravosa, and we took an enormous, sum!"

"Enormous?"

"Yes, unprecedented in our acrobatic careers."

"And how much?"

"Forty-two florins!"

"Oh! indeed! But I did not know that," answered the doctor, good-humoredly. "If I had known that you were giving a performance, I should have made it a duty and pleasure to be present. You will allow me then to pay for my seat — "

“This evening, doctor,” answered Point Pescade, “if you come to honor our efforts with your presence.”

Cape Matifou bowed politely and shrugged up his huge shoulders, “which had never yet bitten the dust,” to quote from the verbal programme issued by Point Pescade.

The doctor saw that he could not persuade the acrobats to receive any reward — at least of a pecuniary kind. He resolved therefore to proceed differently. Besides, his plans with regard to them had been decided on the previous night, and from inquiries he had made regarding the mountebanks, he had found that they were really honest men in whom all confidence could be placed.

“What are your names?” asked he.

“The only name I am known by is Point Pescade.”

“And yours?”

“Matifou,” answered Hercules.

“That is to say, Cape Matifou,” added Pescade, not without some pride in mentioning a name of such renown in the arenas of the south of France.

“But those are surnames,” observed the doctor.

“We have no others,” answered Pescade; “or if we had, our pockets got out of repair, and we lost them on the road.”

“And — your relations?”

“Relations, doctor! Our means have never allowed us such luxuries! But if we ever get rich, we can easily find them.”

“You are Frenchmen? From what part of France?”

“From Provence,” said Pescade, proudly; “that is to say, we are Frenchmen, twice over.”

“You are facetious, Point Pescade!”

“That is my trade; just imagine a clown with a red tail, a street jester, with a solemn humor. He would get more apples in an hour than he could eat in a life-time! Yes, I am rather lively, extremely lively, I must admit.”

“And Cape Matifou?”

“And Cape Matifou is more serious, more thoughtful, more everything!” said Pescade, giving his companion a friendly pat, much as if he were caressing a horse. “That is his trade also. When you are pitching half hundreds about you have to be serious! When you wrestle you not only use your arms, but your head! And Cape Matifou has always been wrestling — with misery! And he has not yet been thrown!”

The doctor listened with interest to the brave little fellow who brought no complaint against the fate that had used him so ill. He saw that he possessed as much heart as intelligence, and wondered what he would have become had material means not failed him at the outset of life.

“And where are you going now?” he asked.

“Where chance leads us,” answered Point Pescade. “And it is not always a bad guide, for it generally knows the roads, although I fancy it has taken us rather too far away from home this time. After all that is our fault. We ought to have asked at first where it was going.”

The doctor looked at them both for a minute. Then he continued:

“What I can do for you?”

“Nothing, sir,” answered Pescade — ”nothing, I assure you.”

“Would you not like very much to go back to Provence?”

At once a light sprung into their eyes.

“I can take you there.”

“That would be capital,” said Pescade.

And then addressing his companion, he said:

“Cape Matifou, would you like to go back?”

“Yes — if you come, Point Pescade.”

“But what should we do? How should we live?”

Cape Matifou knit his brows, as was his way when in a fix.

“We can do — we can do — ” he muttered.

“You know nothing about it, and neither do I. But anyhow it is our country! Isn’t it strange, doctor, that fellows like us have a country; that, although we have no parents, we are born somewhere? It has always seemed queer to me.”

“Can you arrange for both of you to stop with me?” asked the doctor.

At this unexpected proposition Pescade jumped up with a start, while Hercules looked on, wondering if he ought to get up too.

“Stop with you, doctor?” answered Point Pescade. “But what good shall we be to you? Exhibitions of strength and activity we are accustomed to, but we can do nothing else! And unless it is to amuse you during the voyage — ”

“Listen,” said the doctor. “I want a few men, brave, devoted, clever, and intelligent, who can help me in my plans. There is nothing to keep you here. Will you join these men?”

“But when your plans are realized — ” said Point Pescade.

“You need not leave me unless you like,” said the doctor with a smile. “You can stay on board with me. And look here, you can give a few lessons in gymnastics to the crew. But if you want to go back to your country you can do so, and I’ll see you do not want for the rest of your lives.”

“Oh! doctor,” said Pescade. “But you do not intend to leave us nothing to do! It will not do for us to be good for nothing!”

“I will give you something to do that will suit you.”

“The offer is a tempting one,” said Pescade.

“What is your objection to it?”

“Only one perhaps. You see us two, Cape Matifou and me. We are of the same country, and we ought to be of the same family if we had a family.

Two brothers at heart. Cape Matifou could not exist without Point Pescade, nor could Point Pescade without Cape Matifou. Imagine the Siamese twins! You must never separate us, for separation would cost us our lives. We are quite Siamese, and we like you very much, doctor.”

And Point Pescade held out his hand to Cape Matifou, who pressed it against his breast as if had been a child.

“My friend,” said the doctor, “I had no idea of separating you, and I understand that you will never leave each other.”

“Then we can look upon it as arranged if — ”

“If what?”

“If Cape Matifou consents.”

“Say yes, Point Pescade,” answered Hercules, “and you will have said yes for both.”

“Good,” said the doctor, “that is all right, and you will never repent it! From this day forward you need do nothing else.”

“Oh, doctor! Take care!” said Pescade. “You may be engaging more than you think.”

“And why?”

“We may cost you too much! Particularly Matifou! He is a tremendous eater, and you wouldn’t like him to lose his strength in your service.”

“I hope he will double it.”

“Then he’ll ruin you.”

“He won’t ruin me, Point Pescade.”

“But he’ll want two meals — three meals a day!”

“Five, six, ten if he likes,” said the doctor, with a smile. “He’ll find the table always laid for him.”

“Eh! Old Cape!” exclaimed Point Pescade, quite delightedly. “You will be able to grub away to your heart’s content.”

“And so will you, Point Pescade.”

“Oh! I! I am a bird. But may I ask, sir, if we are going to sea?”

“Very frequently. I have now business in all quarters of the Mediterranean. My patients are scattered all over the coast! I am going to carry on a sort of international practice of medicine! When a sick man wants me in Tangier or in the Balearics when I am at Suez, am I not o go to him? What a physician does in a large town from one quarter to another I do from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Archipelago, from the Adriatic to the Gulf of Lyons, from the Ionian Sea to the Gulf of Cadiz! I have other vessels ten times faster than this schooner, and generally you will come with me in my visits.”

“That we will, doctor,” said Point Pescade, rubbing his hands.

“Are you afraid of the sea?” asked the doctor.

“Afraid of the sea!” exclaimed Point Pescade. “Children of Provence! Ragamuffins rolling about in the coast boats! No! We are not afraid of the sea, nor of the pretended sickness it yields. We are used to walk about with our heads down and our heels up, and if the ladies and gentlemen who are inclined to be seasick only had a couple of months of that exercise, they would never want to stick their noses in the basins! Walk up! walk up! gentlemen and ladies, and do as the others do!”

And Pescade came out with a scrap of his patter as gayly as if he were on the stand in front of his arena.

“That’s good, Point Pescade!” said the doctor. “We will listen to you as long as you like, and I advise you never to lose your cheerful humor. Laugh, my boy laugh and sing as much as you like. The future may have such sad things in store for us that we cannot afford to despise happiness as we go.”

As he spoke the doctor became serious again, and Pescade, who was watching him, came to the conclusion that m his past life he had experienced a greater share of grief than usual.

“Sir,” said he after a pause, “from to-day we belong to you, body and soul.”

“And from to-day,” answered the doctor, “you can take possession of your cabin. Probably I shall remain a few days at Gravosa and Ragusa, but it is as well you should get into the way of living on board the ‘Savarena.’”

“Until you take us off to your country,” added Pescade.

“I have no country,” said the doctor, “or rather I have a country, a country of my own, which can become yours if you like.”

“Come on, Matifou, then. We’ll go and liquidate our house of business! Be easy. We owe no one anything, and we are not going to offer a composition!”

And having taken leave of the doctor, they embarked in the boat that was waiting for them, and were rowed to the quay.

In a couple of hours they had made out their inventory and transfered to some brother showman the trestles, painted canvas, big drum and tambourine which formed the whole assets. The transfer did not take long, and was not very difficult, and the weight of the money realized did not seriously inconvenience them.

But Point Pescade kept back his acrobat's costume and his cornet, and Matifou kept his trombone and his wrestling suit. It would have been too much for them to part with such old friends that reminded them of so many triumphs and successes; and so they were packed at the bottom of the small trunk which contained their furniture, their wardrobe, and all their belongings.

About one o'clock in the afternoon Point Pescade and Matifou returned to the "Savarena." A large cabin forward had been assigned to them — a comfortable cabin, "furnished with everything you can desire," as Pescade said.

The crew gave a cordial greeting to the new-comers, who had saved them from a terrible accident, and Point Pescade and Matifou had no occasion to grieve for the food they had left behind them.

"You see, Cape Matifou," said Pescade, "when you are led you will reach everything. But you must be led."

Cape Matifou only replied by a nod; his mouth was full of a huge piece of grilled ham, which, accompanied by ten fried eggs, very soon disappeared down his throat.

“It is worth all the money to see you eat!” said Pescade.

CHAPTER V.

THE WIDOW OF STEPHEN BATHORY.

The arrival of Dr. Antekirtt had been noised about not only in Ragusa, but throughout the province of Dalmatia. The newspapers, after announcing the schooner’s arrival, had hurried down to the prey which promised to yield such a series of sensational articles. The owner of the “Savarena” could not escape the honors and drawbacks of celebrity. His personality was the order of the day. Legend had seized upon him for its own. No one knew who he was, whence he came, or whither he was going. This was just the thing to pique public curiosity. And naturally where nothing is known the field is more open and imagination has more scope.

The reporters, anxious to gratify their readers, had hurried in to Gravosa — some of them even went out to the schooner. But the personage about whom rumor was so busy was not to be seen. The orders were precise. The doctor would not receive such visitors. And the answers given to the visitors were always the same.

“Where does the doctor come from?”

“Where he pleases.”

“Where is he going?”

“Where he likes.”

“But who is he?”

“No one knows, and perhaps he does not know any more than you do.”

Not much to be gained for their readers from such answers as these. And so they gave reins to their imagination. Dr. Antekirtt became all they pleased. He became all these interviewers at bay thought fit to invent. To some he was a pirate chief. To some he was an African king cruising incognito in quest of knowledge. Some affirmed that he was a political exile, others that a revolution had driven him from his country, and that he was traveling for purposes of science and art. The readers could take their choice. As to his title of doctor there seemed to be two opinions: in the opinion of some he was a great physician who had effected wonderful cures in desperate cases; in the opinion of others he was a great quack who would have had some difficulty in producing his diplomas!

Under any circumstances the physicians of Gravosa and Ragusa would have no chance of prosecuting him for the illegal practice of medicine. Dr. Antekirtt maintained a constant reserve, and whenever a patient would have done him the honor to consult him he invariably declined.

The owner of the “Savarena” took no apartments on shore. He did not even enter any of the hotels in the town. During the first two days after his arrival at Gravosa he hardly got as far as Ragusa. He contented himself with a few walks in the neighborhood, and two or three times he took with him Point Pescade, whose natural intelligence he appreciated.

But if he did not go to Ragusa, one day Pescade went there for him. He had been sent on some confidential errand, and these were his replies to the questions asked him when he returned:

“And so he lives in the Stradone?”

“Yes, doctor — that is to say, in the best street of the town. He has a house not far from the place where they show visitors the palace of the old doges;

a magnificent house with servants and carriages. Quite in the style of a millionaire."

"And the other?"

"The other, or rather the others?" answered Pescade. "They live in the same neighborhood, but their house is down a narrow, winding, hilly street that takes you to houses that are more than modest."

"And their house?"

"Their house is humble, small and dismal-looking outside, but I should think it was all right inside. It looks as though the people that lived there were poor and proud."

"The lady?"

"I did not see her, and I heard that she hardly ever went out of the Rue Marinella."

"And her son?"

"I saw him, doctor, as he came back to his mother."

"What was he like?"

"He seemed thoughtful and anxious. They say that the young fellow has seen sorrow. And he looks like it."

"But, Pescade, you have seen sorrow, and yet you do not look like it."

"Physical suffering is not moral suffering, doctor. That is why I have always hidden mine — and even laughed over it."

After this the doctor stopped his walks about Gravosa He seemed to be waiting for something that he had not desired to provoke by going to Ragusa, where the news of his arrival in the “Savarena” was of course known. He remained on board, and what he was waiting for happened.

On the 29th of May, about eleven o’clock in the morning, the doctor was examining the quays of Gravosa through his telescope, when he suddenly gave orders for the whale-boat to be launched, entered it and landed at the mole, where a man seemed to be watching for him.

“It is he,” said the doctor. “It is really! I recognize him, though he is so changed.”

The man was old and broken down with age, and although he was not more than seventy, his hair was white and his head was bowed. His expression was sad and weary, and his face was feebly illuminated by the half-extinguished look that his tears often drowned. He remained motionless on the quay, never having lost sight of the boat since it left the schooner.

The doctor looked as though he did not see the old man, still less recognize him. He took no notice of his presence. But before he had taken many steps the old man advanced upon him and humbly uncovered.

“Dr. Antekirtt?”

“Yes,” answered the doctor, looking at the poor old man, whose eyes as they looked at his gave not the slightest sign of recognition.

Then he added:

“Who are you, my friend, and what do you want with me?”

“My name is Borik,” answered the old man, “and I am in the service of Madame Bathory, and I have been sent by her to ask you to make an appointment for her to see you.”

“Madame Bathory?” repeated the doctor. “Is she the widow of the Hungarian who paid for his patriotism with his life?”

“The same,” answered the old man. “And as you have never seen her it would be impossible for yon to know her, seeing you are Dr. Antekirtt.”

The doctor listened attentively to the old man, who kept his eyes on the ground. He seemed to ask if the words contained some hidden meaning.

Then he resumed:

“What does Madame Bathory want with me?”

“For reasons you can understand, she desires to have an interview with you.”

“I will go and see her.”

“She would prefer to come to you on board.”

“Why?”

“It is important that the interview should be secret.”

“Secret? From whom?”

“From her son! It is not desirable that Mr. Peter should know that Madame Bathory had a visit from you.”

The reply seemed to surprise the doctor, but he did not allow Borik to notice it.

“I prefer to go to Madame Bathory’s house,” said he. “Can I not do so in her son’s absence?”

“You can, doctor, if you can arrange to come to-morrow. Peter Bathory is going this evening to Zara, and he will not be back for twenty-four hours.”

“And what is Peter Bathory?”

“He is an engineer, but up to the present he has not been able to secure an appointment. Ah! life has been hard for his mother and him.”

“Hard!” answered the doctor. “Has Madame Bathory been in want — ?”

He stopped himself. The old man bowed his head, and his chest heaved with sobs.

“Doctor,” said he, at last, “I can not tell you more. In the interview which she desires Madame Bathory will tell you all that you should know.”

It was evident that the doctor was thoroughly master of himself to conceal his emotion so successfully.

“Where does Madame Bathory live?” asked he.

“At Ragusa, in the Stradone quarter, at 17 in Rue Marinella.”

“Can I see Madame Bathory to-morrow between one and two o’clock in the afternoon?”

“You can, doctor, and I will introduce you.”

“Tell Madame Bathory she can expect me at that time.”

“Thank you, in her name,” replied the old man. Then after some hesitation:

“You may think,” he added, “that she wishes to ask some favor of you.”

“And what may that be?” asked the doctor, quickly.

“Nothing,” answered Borik.

Then, after an humble bow, he walked away down the road from Gravosa to Ragusa.

Evidently the last words had been rather a surprise for the doctor. He remained motionless on the quay, looking after Borik as he walked away. And when he returned on board he shut himself up in his room and remained there during the rest of the day.

Point Pescade and Cape Matifou took advantage of the holiday thus given them. They did themselves the pleasure of visiting the fair as spectators. To say that the active clown was not tempted to remonstrate at the clumsy juggler, or that the powerful wrestler did not burn to take part in the struggle between the athletes, is to say what is contrary to the truth. But both remembered that they had the honor of belonging to the crew of the “Savarena.” They remained as simple spectators, and did not spare the bravos when they thought them deserved.

The next day the doctor went ashore a little after noon. After he had sent the boat back he started along the road from Gravosa to Ragusa — a fine avenue a mile and a quarter long, bordered with villas and shaded with trees. The avenue was not as lively as it would be a few hours later, when it would be crowded with carriages and loungers on horse and foot.

The doctor, thinking all the time of his interview with Mme. Bathory, followed one of the side streets and soon reached the Borgo Pille, a kind of stone arm which stretches along the triple line of the fortifications of Ragusa. The gate was open, and through the three walls gave access to the interior of the city.

A splendid paved road is the Stradone, extending from the Borgo Pille to the suburb of Plocce, after passing straight through the town. It runs along the foot of a hill on which rises quite an amphitheater of houses. At one end is the palace of the doges, a fine monument of fifteenth century age, with an interior court-yard, Renaissance portico and semi-circular windows whose slender columns are worthy of the best period of Tuscan architecture.

The doctor had not to go as far as this. The Rue Marinella that Borik had mentioned the day before turns off to the left about the middle of the Stradone. If his pace slackened at all it was when he threw a rapid glance at a mansion built of granite, whose rich façade and square out-buildings were to the right of him. Through the open gate of the court-yard he could see the master’s carriage with superb horses, with the coachman on the box, while a man-servant was waiting on the flight of steps under the elegant veranda.

Immediately afterward a man got into the carriage, the horses came out of the court-yard, and the gate closed behind them. This was the individual who three days before had accosted Dr. Antekirtt on the quay at Gravosa; he was the old banker of Trieste, Silas Torenthal.

The doctor, desirous of avoiding a meeting, turned quickly back, and did not resume his journey until the carriage had disappeared at the end of Stradone.

“Both in the same town!” he murmured. “This is chance; it is not my fault.”

Narrow, steep, badly paved, and of poor appearance are the roads which open on to the left of the Stradone. Imagine a large river with the tributaries on one of its sides all mountain torrents! To secure a little air the houses cluster on the hill-side one above the other and touch one another. Their eyes look into their eyes, if it is allowable so to speak of the windows or dormers that open along their fronts. Thus they mount one over another to the crest of one of the two hills whose summits are crowned by Forts Mincetro and San Lorenzo.

No vehicle could travel there. If the torrent was absent, except on days of heavy rain, the road was none the less a ravine, and its slopes and inequalities were rendered passable merely by steps and landing-places. There was a great contrast between the modest dwellings and the splendid mansions of the Stradone.

The doctor reached the corner of the Rue Marinella and began to mount the interminable staircase which did duty for it. He had gone about sixty yards when he stopped in front of No. 17.

There was a door opened immediately. Old Borik was waiting for the doctor. He introduced him without saying a word into a room cleanly kept, but poorly furnished.

The doctor sat down. There was nothing to show that he felt the least emotion at finding himself in this house, not even when Mme. Bathory entered and said:

“Dr. Antekirtt?”

“Yes,” said the doctor.

“I should have liked to have saved you the trouble of coming so far and so high,” said Mme. Bathory.

“I came to call on you, madame, and I hope you will think I am quite at your service.”

“Sir,” replied Mme. Bathory, “it was only yesterday that I heard of your arrival at Gravosa, and I immediately sent Borik to request an interview with you.”

“Madame, I am ready to hear what you have to say.”

“I will retire,” said the old man.

“No, you can stay, Borik!” answered Mme. Bathory. “You are the only friend our family has, and you had better know all I am going to say to Dr. Antekirtt.”

Mme. Bathory sat down and the doctor sat in front of her, while Borik remained standing at the window.

Professor Stephen Bathory’s widow was then in her sixtieth year. If her figure was still upright in spite of the burden of age, her white hair and deeply wrinkled face showed how much she had to struggle against grief and misery. But she seemed still as energetic as ever, and in her was apparent the valiant companion and confiding friend of him who had sacrificed his life for what he deemed to be his duty.

“Sir,” said she in a voice of which she in vain endeavored to hide the emotion, “you being Dr. Antekirtt, I am under an obligation to you, and I ought to tell you what happened at Trieste fifteen years ago — ”

“Madame, being Dr. Antekirtt I can spare you the mournful story. I know it, and may add — being Dr. Antekirtt — that I know what has been your life since the never-to-be-forgotten 30th of June, 1867.”

“Will you tell me,” said Mme. Bathory, “what the reason of the interest you take in my life?”

“The interest, madame, that a man must feel for the widow of a Magyar who did not hesitate to risk his life for the independence of his country.”

“Did you know Professor Bathory?” asked the widow.

“I knew him, I loved him, and I reverence all who bear his name.”

“Are you, then, a native of the country for which he died?”

“I am of no country, madame.”

“Who are you, then?”

“A dead man not yet gone to his grave,” answered the doctor coldly.

Mme. Bathory and Borik started at this unexpected reply; but the doctor immediately continued:

“However, madame, it is necessary that the story that I asked you not to tell should be told by me, for if there are any circumstances about it that you know there are others you do not know, and of these you will not be ignorant much longer.”

“Be it so, then; I am listening.”

“Madame,” began the doctor, “fifteen years ago three Hungarian nobles became the chiefs of a conspiracy, the object of which was to give Hungary her ancient independence. These men were Count Mathias Sandorf, Professor Stephen Bathory and Count Ladislas Zathmar — three friends united for years in the same hope, three living beings with but one heart.

“On the 8th of June, 1867, the evening before the day on which the signal of the rising was to be given which was to extend through Hungary to Transylvania, Count Zathmar’s house at Trieste was entered by the Austrian police. Count Sandorf and his two companions were seized, taken away and thrown into prison that very night in the donjon of Pisino, and a week or two afterward were condemned to death.

“A young accountant named Sarcany was arrested at the same time in Count Zathmar’s house; he was a perfect stranger to the plot, and was set at liberty after the affair was Over.

“The night before the execution an attempt at escape was made by the prisoners who were left together in the same cell. Count Sandorf and Stephen Bathory availed themselves of the lightning conductor and got out of the donjon of Pisino. They fell into the torrent of the Foiba at the moment when Ladislas Zathmar was seized by the warders and prevented from following them.

“Although the fugitives had very little chances of escaping death, for a subterranean stream bore them through the center of a country they did not even know, they succeeded in reaching the banks of the Leme Canal, near the town of Rovigno, and at Rovigno they found shelter in the house of a fisherman, Andrea Ferrato.

"This fisherman — a brave fellow — had made all preparations to take them across the Adriatic, when, out of pure personal revenge, a Spaniard named Carpena, who had discovered the secret of their retreat, gave information to the police of Rovigno. They tried to escape a second time. But Stephen Bathory was wounded and recaptured, while Mathias Sandorf was pursued to the beach, and sunk under a shower of bullets, the Adriatic never giving up his corpse.

"The day after, Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar were shot in the fortress of Pisino. Then, for having given them shelter, the fisherman, Andrea Ferrato, was sentenced to imprisonment for life, and sent to Stein."

Mme. Bathory bowed her head. Sad at heart, she had listened without a word to the doctor's story.

"You knew all these details, madame?" asked he.

"Yes, as you do probably, from the newspapers."

"Yes, from the newspapers," was the reply. "But one thing which the newspapers did not tell the public, because the matter was conducted in secret, I happened to learn owing to the indiscretion of one of the warders of the fortress, and that I will now tell you."

"Proceed."

"Count Mathias Sandorf and Stephen Bathory were found in Ferrato's house, owing their being betrayed by Carpena, the Spaniard. And they were arrested three weeks before in the house at Trieste, owing to traitors having informed against them to the Austrian police."

"Traitors?" exclaimed Mme. Bathory.

“Yes, madame, and the proof of the treason was produced at the trial. In the first place these traitors had intercepted a letter addressed to Count Sandorf, which they had found on a carrier-pigeon and copied; and in the second place they had managed to obtain a tracing of the grating which enabled, them to read the dispatch. Then when they had read the message they handed it over to the Governor of Trieste. And doubtless a share of Count Sandorf’s wealth was their reward.”

“The wretches! Are they known?” asked Mme. Bathory, in a voice trembling with emotion.

“No, madame,” answered the doctor. “But perhaps the three prisoners knew them and would have said who they were had they been able to see their families before they died.”

It will be remembered that neither Mme. Bathory, then away with her son, nor Borik, who was in prison in Trieste, had been able to visit the prisoners in their last hours.

“Shall we never know the names of these wretches?” asked Mme. Bathory.

“Madame,” answered the doctor, “traitors always end by betraying themselves. But this is what I have to say to complete my story:

“You remained a widow with a boy of eight, almost penniless. Borik, the servant of Count Zathmar, would not leave you after his master’s death; but he was poor, and had only his devotion to offer you.”

“Then, madame, you left Trieste for this humble dwelling at Ragusa. You have worked, worked with your hands to earn sufficient for your material as well as your mental needs. You wished, in fact, that your son should follow in science the path that his father had made illustrious. But what an incessant struggle it was, what misery you had so bravely to submit to! And with what respect I now bend to the noble woman who has shown such energy as a mother, and made of her son — a man!”

And as he spoke the doctor rose, and a shade of emotion just made itself visible despite his habitual reserve.

Mme. Bathory had nothing to say in reply. She waited, not knowing if the doctor had finished, or if he was going on to relate such facts as were personally known to him, and concerning which she had asked for the interview.

“However, madame,” continued the doctor, divining her thoughts, “human strength has doubtless its limits, and as you fell ill and exhausted with such trials you would doubtless have succumbed if an unknown — no, a friend of Professor Bathory — had not come to your aid. I should never have said anything about this had not your old servant told me of your wish to see me — ”

“Quite so,” answered Mme. Bathory. “Have I not to thank Dr. Antekirtt?”

“And why, madame? Because, during the last five or six years, in remembrance of the friendship which bound him to Count Sandorf and his two companions, and to help you in your work, Dr. Antekirtt has sent you a sum of a hundred thousand florins? Was he not only too happy to put the money at your disposal? No, madame; it is I, on the contrary, who ought to thank you for having accepted the gift if it was of any help to the widow and son of Stephen Bathory.”

The widow bowed, and answered:

“In any case I have to thank you. This is the first object of the visit I wished you to make. But there was a second — ”

“What is that, madame?”

“It was — to give you back the money — ”

“What, madame,” said the doctor, quickly, “you do not wish to accept it?”

“Sir, I do not think I have any right to the money, I do not know Dr. Antekirtt. I never heard his name. The money may be a sort of alms coming from those whom my husband fought and whose pity is hateful to me. And so I do not care to use it, even for the purposes Dr. Antekirtt intended.”

“And — so this money — ”

“Is untouched.”

“And your son?”

“My son will have nothing but what he owes to himself.”

“And to his mother!” added the doctor, with whom such grandeur of soul and energy of character could not but excite admiration and command respect.

Mme. Bathory had risen, and from a desk which she unlocked took forth a roll of notes, which she handed to the doctor.

“Sir,” she said, “take back the money, for it is yours, and receive the thanks of a mother as if she had used it to educate her son.”

“The money no longer belongs to me, madame,” replied the doctor, refusing it with a gesture.

“I repeat that it never belonged to me.”

“But if Pierre Bathory can use it — ”

“My son will find the situation for which he is fit, and I can trust him as I can trust myself.”

“He will not refuse what his father’s friend insists on his accepting.”

“He will refuse.”

“At least, madame, will you allow me to try?”

“I beg you will do nothing, doctor,” answered Mme. Bathory. “My son does not know that I have received this money, and I do not wish him ever to know it!”

“Be it so, madame! I understand your feelings, although I am a stranger and unknown to you! Yes, I understand and admire them. But I repeat, if the money is not yours it is not mine.”

Dr. Antekirtt rose. There was nothing in Mme. Bathory’s refusal to annoy him personally; and her delicacy only filled him with a feeling of profound respect. He bowed to the widow, and was turning to leave when another question stopped him.

“Sir,” said Mme. Bathory, “you have told me of some miserable proceedings which sent to their deaths Ladislas Zathmar, Stephen Bathory and Count Sandorf?”

“I said what was true, madame.”

“But does any one know these people?”

“Yes, madame.”

“Who?”

“God.”

And as he spoke the doctor made a low obeisance and left.

Mme. Bathory remained in deep thought. By some sweet sympathy, for which she could not account, she felt herself irresistibly drawn toward the mysterious personage who was so mixed up with the events of her life. Would she ever see him again? And if the “Savarena” had only brought him to Ragusa to make this visit, would the yacht go to sea and never return?

The next day’s newspapers announced that an anonymous gift of 100,000 florins had been made to the hospitals of the town.

It was the gift of Dr. Antekirtt, but was it not also the gift of the widow who had refused it for herself and her son?

CHAPTER VI.

ON BOARD THE “SAVARENA.”

The doctor was in no such hurry to leave Gravosa as Mme. Bathory imagined. After endeavoring in vain to help the mother, he resolved to try and help the son. If up to then Pierre Bathory had not found the post for which his brilliant acquirements fitted him, he would probably not refuse the doctor’s offers. To put him in a position worthy of his talents, worthy of the name he bore, was not an act of charity, if was only an act of justice to the young man!

But as Borik had said, Pierre Bathory had gone to Zara on business.

The doctor wrote to him without delay. He wrote that same day. The letter stated that he would be glad to receive Pierre Bathory on board the “Savarena,” having a proposition to make that might interest him.

The letter was posted at Gravosa, and all that could be done then was to wait for the young engineer’s return. Meanwhile the doctor continued to live more retired than ever on board the schooner. The “Savarena,” moored in the center of the harbor, with her crew never coming ashore, was as isolated as if she were in the center of the Mediterranean or the Atlantic.

This was a peculiarity that much exercised the minds of the curious, reporters and others, who had never given up all hope of interviewing the mysterious owner, although they had not yet been allowed on board the yacht, which was almost as much a mystery as himself. As Point Pescade and Cape Matifou occasionally had shore-leave, they often found themselves quite an attraction to the reporters desirous of obtaining a particle or two of information that might bear working up.

We know that with Point Pescade a certain amount of fun had been introduced on board the schooner, and if Cape Matifou remained as serious as the capstan, of which he had the strength, Pescade, laughing and singing all day long, was as lively as a man-of-war pennant. When active as a seaman and agile as a cabin-boy, he was not clambering about the spars to the delight of the crew, to whom he was delivering a series of lessons on ground and lofty tumbling, he was amusing them by his interminable jokes. Dr. Antekirtt had recommended him to retain his cheerful spirits. And he kept them and yet parted with them to others.

We have said above that he and Cape Matifou often had shore-leave. They in fact were free to come and go as they pleased. The rest of the crew remained on board, they could go ashore, when they pleased. And hence the very natural propensity of the curious to follow them and attempt to draw them into conversation. But they could get nothing out of Point Pescade, whether he wished to be silent or to speak, for he had really nothing to tell.

“Who is your Dr. Antekirtt?”

“A famous physician! He can cure all your complaints — even those you are going to take with you to the other world!”

“Is he rich?”

“Hasn’t got a half-penny! I lend him something to go on with every Sunday!”

“But where does he come from?”

“Why, from no one knows where!”

“And where is that?”

“All I can tell you about it is that it is bordered on the north by something big, and on the south by nothing at all!”

Evidently there was not much to be got out of the laughing companion of Cape Matifou, who for his part remained as dumb as a lump of granite.

But although they said nothing to strangers, the two friends, between themselves, often had a talk about their new master. They liked him already, and they liked him very much. Between them and the doctor there was a sort of chemical affinity, a cohesion which from day to day bound them more firmly together.

And each morning they waited to be called into the cabin to hear him say —

“My friends, I have need of you.”

But nothing came — to their vexation.

“Is this sort of thing going on much longer?” asked Point Pescade. “It is rather hard to remain doing nothing when you have not been brought up to it, eh, Cape?”

“Yes, your arms get rusty,” answered Hercules, looking at his enormous biceps motionless as the rods of an engine at rest.

“Shall I tell you something, Cape Matifou?”

“Tell me what you like.”

“Do you know what I think about Dr. Antekirtt?”

“No, but tell me, and that will help me to answer you.”

“Well, that in his past life there have been things — things! Look at his eyes, which every now and then give a glance that, almost blinds you like the lightning! And when the thunder rolls — ”

“It makes a noise.”

“Exactly, Cape Matifou, a noise — and I fancy we shall come in useful at that game.”

It was not without reason that Point Pescade spoke in this way. Although the most complete calm reigned on board the schooner, the intelligent little fellow could not help noticing certain things which set him thinking. Nothing could be more evident than that the doctor was not a simple tourist on a yacht cruise in the Mediterranean. The “Savarena” was the center of a web of many threads whose ends were held in the hands of her mysterious owner.

Letters and dispatches seemed to arrive from every corner of the mighty sea whose waters bathe the shores of so many different countries. They came from the French coast, the Spanish coast, the coast of Morocco, of Algiers and Tripoli. Who sent them? Evidently correspondents occupied on certain matters, the gravity of which could not be mistaken unless they were patients consulting the celebrated doctor by correspondence, which did not seem to be probable.

In the telegraph office at Ragusa, the meaning of these messages was a mystery, for they were in an unknown tongue, of which the doctor alone seemed to know the secret. And even when the language was intelligible, what sense could be made out of such phrases as:

“Almeira. They thought they were on the track of Z. R. False trail now abandoned.”

“Recovered the correspondent of H. V. 5. * * * Connected with troop K. 3 between Catania and Syracuse. To follow.”

“In the Manderaggio, La Valetta, Malta, have verified the passage T. R. 7.”

“Cyrene. Wait fresh orders. Flotilla of Antek — ready. ‘Electric No. 3’ under pressure day and night.”

“R. O. 3. Since death. Both disappeared.”

And this other telegram containing some special news by means of an agreed upon number:

“2,117. Sare. Formerly a broker. Service Toronth. Ceased connection Tripoli of Africa.”

And to nearly all these dispatches there was sent from the “Savarena”:

“Let the search proceed. Spare neither money nor trouble. Send new papers.”

Here was an exchange of incomprehensible correspondence that seemed to embrace the whole circuit of the Mediterranean. The doctor was not as much at leisure as he wished to appear. Notwithstanding the professional secrecy, it was difficult to prevent the fact of this interchange of mysterious telegrams from becoming known to the public, and hence a redoubling of the curiosity about this enigmatic individual.

In the upper circles of Ragusa Silas Toronthal was perhaps the most perplexed of men. On the quay at Gravosa he had met the doctor a few minutes after the “Savarena” arrived. During this meeting he had experienced in the first place a strong feeling of repulsion, and in the second an equally strong feeling of curiosity, which up to the present circumstances had not allowed the banker to gratify.

To tell the truth, the doctor’s presence had had a disturbing influence on Toronthal which he could not explain. By preserving the incognito at Ragusa, and continuing the difficulty of access, the banker’s desire to see him again had been greatly increased; and several times he had gone to Gravosa. There he had stood on the quay, looking at the schooner, and burning with envy to get on board. One day even he had been rowed out to her, and received the invariable reply:

“Dr. Antekirtt does not see anybody.”

The result of all this was that Toronthal felt a sort of chronic irritation in face of an obstacle he could not overcome. And so, at his own expense, he set a detective to watch, if the mysterious stranger made any visits in Gravosa or the neighborhood.

We may judge, therefore, of the uneasiness with which the banker heard that Borik had had an interview with the doctor, and that the day following a visit had been made to Mme. Bathory.

“Who is this man?” he asked himself.

But what had he to fear in his present position? For fifteen years nothing had transpired of his former machinations. And yet anything referring to the family of those lie had betrayed and sold rendered him uneasy. If remorse never troubled his conscience fear occasionally did, and the appearance of this doctor, powerful owing to his fame and powerful owing to his wealth, was anything but reassuring to him.

“But who is this man?” he repeated. “Who is he that comes to Ragusa and visits Madame Bathory? Did she send for him as a physician? What can she and he have in common?”

To this there could be no answer. One thing comforted Toronthal a little, and that was that the visit to Mme. Bathory was not repeated.

The banker had made up his mind that cost what it might he would make the doctor’s acquaintance. The thought possessed him day and night. By a kind of illusion to which overexcited brains are subject he fancied that he would recover his peace of mind if he could only see Dr. Antekirtt, talk to him and ascertain the motives of his arrival at Gravosa. And he sought about for some way of obtaining an interview.

And he thought he had found it, and in this way. For many years Mme. Toronthal had suffered from a languer which the Ragusan doctors were powerless to overcome. In spite of all their advice, in spite of all the attentions of her daughter, Mme. Toronthal was not quite bedridden but she was visibly wasting away. Was her complain, due to mental causes? Perhaps, but no one had been able to discover it. The banker alone was aware that his wife, owing to her knowledge of his past life, had conceived an invincible disgust at an existence which filled her with horror. Whatever might be the cause of Mme. Toronthal’s state of health, which had puzzled the doctors of the town, seemed to afford the banker the opportunity he desired for entering into communication with the owner of the “Savarena;” and he wrote a letter and sent it off to the schooner by a messenger. “He would be glad," he said, "to have the advice of a physician of such undoubted distinction."

Then apologizing for the inconvenience it would occasion to one living in such retirement, he begged Dr. Antekirtt "to appoint a time when he could expect him at his house in the Stradone."

When the doctor received this letter in the morning he looked first at the signature, and then not a muscle of his face moved. He read the letter through to the last line and yet nothing showed the thoughts it suggested.

What reply should he give? Should he take advantage of the opportunity to visit Toronthal's house, and become acquainted with his family? But to enter the house even in the character of a physician, would that not embarrass his future action?

The doctor hesitated not a moment. He answered by a very short note which was handed to the banker's servant. All it said was:

"Dr. Antekirtt regrets that he is unable to attend Madame Toronthal. He does not practice in Europe."

When the banker received this laconic reply he crumpled it in his hand in his vexation. It was evident that the doctor would have nothing to do with him. It was a transparent refusal indicative of a settled plan.

"And then," said he to himself, "if he does not practice in Europe why did he go to Madame Bathory — if it was in the character of a physician that he went to her? What was he doing there? What is there between them?"

The uncertainty worried Toronthal exceedingly. His life had become a burden to him since the doctor had appeared at Gravosa, and would continue to be so until the “Savarena” had sailed. He said not a word to his wife or daughter about his futile letter. He kept his anxiety to himself. But he did not give up watching the doctor’s movements, and kept himself informed of all his proceedings at Gravosa and Ragusa.

The very next day came a new and equally serious cause of alarm.

Pierre Bathory had returned, disappointed, to Zara. He had not been able to accept the position that had been offered to him — the management of important smelting works at Herzegovina.

“The terms would not suit me.” This was all he said to his mother. Mme. Bathory did not think it worth while to ask why the terms were unacceptable; a look sufficed her. Then she handed him a letter that had arrived during his absence.

This was the letter in which Dr. Antekirtt asked Pierre Bathory to visit him on board the “Savarena” to discuss a proposal he was in a position to make to him.

Pierre Bathory handed the letter to his mother. The doctor’s offer was no surprise to her.

“I was expecting that,” she said.

“You expected this?” asked the young man in astonishment.

“Yes, Pierre! — Dr. Antekirtt came to see me while you were away.”

“Do you know who this man is, then, that everybody is talking about at Ragusa?”

“No; but Dr. Antekirtt knew your father, and he was the friend of Count Sandorf and Count Zathmar, and that character he came here.”

“Mother,” asked Pierre, “what proof did the doctor give that he was my father’s friend?”

“None,” answered Mme. Bathory, who did not care to mention the hundred thousand florins that she wished to keep secret from all but herself and the doctor.

“And suppose he is some informer, some spy, some Austrian detective?”

“You will see that.”

“Do you advise me to go, then?”

“Yes that is my advice. We should not neglect a man who is desirous of befriending you for the friendship he bore your father.”

“But what has he come to Ragusa for?” asked Pierre. “Has he any business in this country?”

“Perhaps he thinks of doing something. He is supposed to be very rich, and it is possible that he thinks of offering you a post worth accepting.”

“I will go and see him and find out.”

“Go to-day then, and at the same time return the visit that I am unable to return myself.”

Pierre embraced his mother, and it seemed as he lingered near her as though some secret was choking him — some secret that he dare not tell. What was there in his heart so sad and serious that he dare not confide it to his mother?

“My poor child!” murmured Mme. Bathory.

It was one o’clock in the afternoon when Pierre entered the Stradone on his way to the harbor of Gravosa. As he passed Toronthal’s house he stopped for an instant — only for an instant. He looked up at one of the wings, the windows of which opened on to the road. The blinds were drawn. Had the house been uninhabited it could not have been more shut up.

Pierre Bathory continued his walk, which he had rather slackened than stopped. But his movements had not escaped the notice of a woman who was watching on the opposite side of the Stradone.

She was above the usual height. Her age? Between forty and fifty. Her walk? Almost mechanical. This foreigner — her nationality could be easily seen from her brown frizzled hair and Moorish complexion — was wrapped in a dark colored cloak, with its hood thrown over her head-dress ornamented with its sequins. Was she a Bohemian, a Gitana, a Gypsy, an Egyptian or a Hindoo? So many types did she resemble that it was difficult to say Anyhow she was not asking for charity and did not look as though she would accept any. She was there on her own account, or on the account of somebody else, watching not only what went on at Toronthal’s, but also what took place in the Rue Marinella.

As soon as she caught sight of the young man coming into the Stradone and walking toward Gravosa, she followed so as to keep him in view; but so adroitly that he was unaware of her proceedings. Besides, he was too much occupied to bother himself with what was taking place behind him. When he slackened his pace in front of Toronthal’s the woman slackened hers. When he started on again she started on, suiting her pace to his.

Reaching the first gate at Ragusa, Pierre strode through it swiftly, but not swiftly enough to distance the stranger. Once through the gate she found him hurrying on to Gravosa, and twenty yards behind him she followed down the avenue.

At the same moment Silas Toronthal was returning to Ragusa in a covered carriage, so that he could not avoid meeting Pierre.

Seeing them both the Moor stopped for a moment. “Perhaps,” she thought, “they will have something to say to each other.” And so with kindling eyes she slipped behind a neighboring tree. But if the men were to speak how could she hear what they said?

They did not speak. Toronthal had seen Pierre twenty yards before he reached him, and instead of replying with the haughty salute he had used on the quay at Gravosa when his daughter was with him, he turned away his head as the young man raised his hat and his carriage drove rapidly on toward Ragusa.

The stranger lost nothing of this little scene; and a feeble smile animated her impassible face.

Pierre, more in sorrow than anger, continued his walk without turning back to look after Toronthal.

The Moor followed him from afar, and might have been heard to mutter in Arabic:

“It is time that he came!”

CHAPTER VII.

THE DOCTOR’S DILEMMA.

A quarter of an hour afterward Pierre arrived on the quays of Gravosa. For a few minutes he stopped to admire the schooner, whose burgee was lazily fluttering from the mainmast-head.

“Whence comes this Dr. Antekirtt?” he said to himself. “I do not know that flag.”

Then addressing himself to a pilot who was standing near, he asked:

“Do you know what flag that is?”

The pilot did not know. All he could say about the schooner was that she had come from Brindisi, and that all her papers had been found correct by the harbor-master; and as she was a pleasure yacht the authorities had respected her incognito.

Pierre Bathory then hired a boat and was rowed off to the “Savarena,” while the Moor, very much surprised, watched him as he neared the yacht.

In a few minutes the young man had set foot on the schooner’s deck and asked if Dr. Antekirtt was on board. Doubtless the order which denied admittance to strangers did not apply to him, for the boatswain immediately replied that the doctor was in his room. Pierre presented his card and asked if he could see the doctor. A sailor took the card and disappeared down the companion which led to the aft saloon. A minute afterward he returned with the message that the doctor was expecting Mr. Pierre Bathory.

The young man was immediately introduced into a saloon where only a half light found its way in through the curtains overhead. But when he reached the double doors both of which were wide open, the light from the glass panels at the end shone on him strong and full.

In the half-shadow was Dr. Antekirtt seated on a divan. At the sudden appearance of the son of Stephen Bathory he felt a sort of thrill go through him, unnoticed by Pierre, and these words escaped, so to speak, from his lips:

"'Tis he! 'tis he!"

And in truth Pierre Bathory was the very image of his father, as the noble Hungarian had been at his age. There was the same energy in his eyes, the same nobleness in his attitude, the same look prompt at enthusiasm for all that was good and true and beautiful.

"Mr. Bathory," said the doctor, rising, "I am very glad to see you in response to the invitation contained in my letter."

And he motioned Pierre to sit down in the other angle of the saloon.

The doctor had spoken in Hungarian, which he knew was the young man's native language.

"Sir," said Pierre Bathory, "I would have come to return the visit you made to my mother even if you had not asked me to come on board. I know you are one of those known friends to whom the memory is so dear of my father and the two patriots who died with him. I thank you for having kept a place for them in your remembrance."

In thus evoking the past, now so far away, in speaking of his father, and his friends Mathias Sandorf and Ladislas Zathmar, Pierre could not hide his emotion.

“Forgive me,” he said. “When I think of these things I can not help — ”

Did he not feel that Dr. Antekirtt was more affected than he was, and that if he did not reply it was the better to keep hidden what he felt?

“Mr. Bathory,” he said, after a lengthened pause, “I have nothing to forgive in so natural a grief. You are of Hungarian blood, and what child of Hungary would become so denaturalized as not to feel his heart shrink at such remembrances? At that time, fifteen years ago — yes, already fifteen years have passed you were still young. You can scarcely remember your father and the events in which he took part.”

“My mother is his other self,” answered Pierre. “She brought me up in the creed of him she has never ceased to mourn. All that he did, all that he tried to do, all the life of devotion to his people and his country, I have learned from her. I was only eight years old when my father died, but it seems that he is still living, for he lives again in my mother.”

“You love your mother as she deserves to be loved,” said the doctor; “and we venerate her as if she were a martyr’s widow.”

Pierre could only thank the doctor for thus expressing himself. His heart beat loudly as he listened; and he did not notice the coldness, natural or acquired, with which the doctor spoke, and which seemed to be characteristic.

“May I ask if you knew my father personally?” asked he.

"Yes, Mr. Bathory," was the reply, not without a certain hesitation; "but I knew him as a student knew a professor who was one of the most distinguished men in the Hungarian universities. I studied medicine and physics in your country. I was one of your father's pupils, for he was only my senior by twelve years. I learned to esteem him, to love him, for I felt that through all his teaching there thrilled all that which made him later on an ardent patriot, and I only left him when I went away to finish the studies I had begun in Hungary. But shortly afterward Professor Stephen Bathory sacrificed his position for the sake of ideas he believed to be noble and just, and no private interest could stop him in his path of duty. It was then that he left Presburg to take up his residence in Trieste. Your mother had sustained him with her advice and encompassed him with her thoughtfulness during that time of anxiety. She possessed all the virtues of a woman as your father had all the virtues of a man. Yon will forgive me for awakening your sad recollections, and if I have done so it is only because you are not one of those that can forget them!"

"No, sir, no," replied the young man with the enthusiasm of his age; "no more than Hungary can forget the three men who were sacrificed for her Ladislas Zathmar, Stephen Bathory, and the boldest of the three, Mathias Sandorf!"

"If he was the boldest," answered the doctor, "do not think that his two companions were inferior to him in devotion, in sacrifices or in courage! The three are worthy of the same respect! The three have the same right to be avenged!"

The doctor paused and then asked if Mme. Bathory had told him the circumstances under which the chiefs of the conspiracy had been delivered up, if she had told him that treason had been at work? But the young engineer had not heard anything.

In fact Mme. Bathory had been silent on the subject. She shrunk from instilling hatred into her son’s life and perhaps sending him on a false track, for no one knew the names of the traitors. And the doctor thought that for the present he had better maintain the same reserve.

What he did not hesitate to say was that, without the odious deed of the Spaniard who had betrayed the fugitives in the house of Ferrato the fisherman, Count Sandorf and Stephen Bathory would probably have escaped. And once beyond the Austrian frontier, no matter in what country, every door would be opened to receive them.

“With me,” he concluded, “they would have found a refuge which never would have failed them.”

“In what country, sir?”

“In Cephalonia, where I then lived.”

“Yes, in the Ionian Islands under the protection of the Greek flag they would have been safe, and my father would be still alive.”

For a minute or two the conversation was broken off with this return to the past. The doctor broke the silence:

“Our recollections have taken us far from the present. Shall we now talk about it, and especially of the future I have been thinking of for you?”

“I am ready,” answered Pierre. “In your letter you gave me to understand that it might be to my interest — ”

“In short, Mr. Bathory, as I am aware of your mother’s devotion during the childhood of her son, I am also aware that you are worthy of her, and after the bitter experience you have become a man — ”

“A man,” said Pierre, bitterly, “a man who has not enough to keep himself, nor to give his mother a return for what she has done for him.”

“That is so!” answered the doctor; “but the fault is not yours. I know how difficult it is for any one to obtain a position with so many rivals struggling against you. You are an engineer?”

“Yes. I passed out of the schools with the title but I am an engineer unattached, and have no employment from the State. I have been seeking an appointment with some manufacturing company, and up to the present I have found nothing to suit me — at least at Ragusa.”

“And elsewhere?”

“Elsewhere?” replied Pierre, with some hesitation.

“Yes! Was it not about some business of the sort that you went to Zara a few days ago?”

“I had heard of a situation which a metallurgical company had vacant — ”

“And this situation?”

“It was offered to me.”

“And you did not accept it?”

“I had to refuse it because I should have had to settle permanently in Herzegovina.”

"In Herzegovina? Would not Madame Bathory have gone with you?"

"My mother would go wherever my interests required."

"And why did you not take the place?" persisted the doctor.

"Sir," said the young man, "as I am situated, I have strong reasons for not leaving Ragusa."

And as he made the remark, the doctor noticed that he seemed embarrassed. His voice trembled as he expressed his desire — more than his desire — his resolution not to leave Ragusa. What was the reason for his refusing the offer that had been made?

"That will make what I was going to offer you unacceptable," said the doctor.

"Should I have to go — "

"Yes — to a country where I am about commencing some very considerable works which I should put under your management."

"I am very sorry, but, believe me, that as I have made this resolution — "

"I believe, you, and, perhaps, I regret it as much as you. I should have been very glad to have been able to help you in consideration of my feelings toward your father."

Pierre made no reply. A prey to internal strife, he showed that he was suffering — and suffering acutely. The doctor felt sure that he wished to speak and dared not. But at last an irresistible impulse impelled Pierre toward the man who had shown such sympathy with his mother and himself.

“Sir — sir,” said he with an emotion that he took no pains to hide, “do not think it is caprice or obstinacy that makes me refuse your offer. You have spoken like a friend of Stephen Bathory. You would show me all the friendship you felt for him; I feel it, although I have only known you for a few minutes. Yes, I feel for you all the affection that I should have had for my father.”

“Pierre, my child!” said the doctor, seizing the young man’s hand.

“Yes, sir!” continued Pierre, “and I will tell you all! I am in love with a young lady in this town! Between us there is the gulf which separates poverty from wealth. But I will not look at the abyss, and maybe she has not seen it! If occasionally I can see her in the street or at the window, it gives me a happiness I have not strength to renounce! At the idea that I must go away, and go away for long, I become insane! Ah! sir! understand me, and forgive my refusal!”

“Yes, Pierre,” answered the doctor, “I understand you, and I have nothing to forgive. You have done well to tell me so frankly; and it may lead to something! Does your mother know of what you have been telling me?”

“I have said nothing to her yet. I have not dared, because, in our modest position she would perhaps have the wisdom to deprive me of all hope! But she may have divined and understood what I suffer — what I must suffer.”

“Pierre,” said the doctor, “you have confided in me, and you are right to have done so! Is the young lady rich?”

“Very rich! Too rich! Yes, too rich for me!”

“Is she worthy of you?”

“Ah! sir, could I dream of giving my mother a daughter that was not worthy of her?”

“Well, Pierre,” continued the doctor, “perhaps the abyss may be bridged!”

“Sir,” said the young man, “do not encourage me with hopes that are unrealizable!”

“Unrealizable!”

And the accent with which the doctor uttered the word betrayed such confidence in himself that Pierre Bathory seemed as it were transformed, as if he believed himself master of the present, master of the future.

“Yes, Pierre,” continued the doctor, “have confidence in me. When you think fit and think the time has come you will tell me the lady’s name — ”

“Why should I hide it now? It is Sava Toronthal — ”

The effort the doctor made to keep calm as he heard the hated name was as that of a man who strives to prevent himself from starting when the lightning strikes at his feet. An instant — several seconds — he remained motionless and mute.

Then in a voice that betrayed not the slightest emotion he remarked:

“Good! Pierre, good! I must think it over! Let me see — ”

“I will go,” interrupted the young man, clasping the hand which the doctor held out to him, “and allow me to thank you as I would have thanked my father.”

He left the doctor alone in the saloon, and then gaining the deck he entered his boat, landed at the quay, and returned to Ragusa.

Pierre felt very much happier in his mind. At last his heart had been opened! He had found a friend in whom he could trust — more than a friend perhaps. To him this had been one of those happy days of which fortune is so stingy in this world.

And how could he doubt it when as he passed along the Stradone he saw the corner of the curtain at one of the windows of Toronthal’s house slowly rise and suddenly fall!

But the stranger had also seen the movement, and as Pierre turned up the Rue Marinella she remained motionless at the corner. Then she hurried to the telegraph office and dispatched a message which contained but one word — and that was —

“Come!”

The address of that monosyllabic message was — ”Sarrany; to be called for; Syracuse. Sicily.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MOUTHS OF THE CATTARO.

And so fatality, which plays so predominant a rôle in the events of this world, had brought together in Ragusa the families of Bathory and Toronthal; and brought them not only to the same town, but to the same quarter of that town — the Stradone. And Sava Toronthal and Pierre Bathory had seen each other, met each other, loved each other! Pierre, the son of a man who had been betrayed to death, and Sava, the daughter of the man who betrayed him!

As soon as the engineer had left the schooner the doctor might have been heard to say to himself:

“And Pierre goes away full of hope, hope he never had before, hope that I have just given him!”

Was the doctor the man to undertake a merciless struggle against this fatality? Did he feel himself strong enough to dispose of the affairs of humankind at his will? That force, that moral energy, which must be his if he was to succeed in fighting destiny, would it not fail him?

“No! I will fight against it!” he said. “Such love is hateful, criminal! That Pierre Bathory should become the husband of Toronthal’s daughter and one day learn the truth would be to deprive him of all hope of revenge, He could only kill himself in despair. And I will tell him all if need be. I will tell him what this family has done to his. At all costs I will break this thing off.”

And in truth such a union did seem monstrous. It will be remembered that in his conversation with Mme. Bathory the doctor had told her that the three chiefs of the Trieste conspiracy had been the victims of an abominable scheme, which had come to light in the course of the trial, and that this had come to his knowledge through the indiscretion of one of the Pisino warders.

And it will also be remembered that Mme. Bathory for certain relisons had thought it best to say nothing of this treachery to her son. Besides, she did not know who were the traitors. She did not know that one of them was wealthy and respected and lived at Ragusa, a few yards away from her in the Stradone. The doctor had not named them? Why? Doubtless because the hour had not yet come for him to unmask them! But he knew them. He knew that Silas Toronthal was one of the traitors and that Sarcany was the other. And if he had not taken her more into his confidence it was because he reckoned on Pierre's assistance, and he wished to associate the son in the retribution with which he was about to visit the murderers of his father.

And that is why he could not say more to the son of btephen Bathory without breaking his heart.

“It matters little,” he repeated. “I shall break off this match.”

Having made up his mind, what did he do? Reveal to Mme. Bathory and her son the history of the banker of Triests? But did he hold material proofs of the treachery? No, for Mathias Sandorf, Stephen Bathory, and Ladislas Zathmar, who alone had these proofs, were dead. Did he spread through the town the report of this abominable act without first telling Mme. Bathory? That would probably have been enough to open an abyss between Pierre and the young lady — an abyss that could not be bridged. But if the secret were divulged, would not Silas Toronthal try to leave Ragusa?

But the doctor did not want the banker to disappear. He wanted the traitor to remain ready for the executioner when the day of execution arrived, and were he to disappear events might turn out differently to what he had imagined.

After having weighed the pros and cons the doctor resolved to proceed more vigorously against Toronthal. In the first place it was necessary to get Pierre away from the town where the honor of his name was in danger. Yes! He would spirit him away so that no one could trace him! When he had him in his power he would tell him all he knew about Toronthal, and Sarcany his accomplice, and he would associate him in his work. But he had not a day to lose.

It was with this object that a telegram from the doctor brought to the mouths of the Cattaro, south of Ragusa, on the Adriatic, one of the swiftest vessels of his fleet. This was one of those huge launches which served as the forerunners of our modern torpedo boats. This long steel tube was about forty-four yards in length and seventy tons measurement, had neither mast nor funnel, and carried simply an exterior deck and a steel cage, with lenticular scuttles for the steersman, who could be hermetically shut up in it when the state of the sea rendered such precautions necessary. She could slip through the water without losing time or distance in following the undulations of the surge, and, having a speed excelling that of all the torpedo boats of the Old or the New World, could easily travel her thirty miles an hour. Owing to this excessive speed the doctor had been able to accomplish many extraordinary voyages, and hence the gift of ubiquity with which he had been credited, for at very short intervals of time he had been able to run from the furthest corners of the Archipelago to the outermost borders of the Libyan Sea.

There was, however, one striking difference between steam launches and the doctor’s boats, and that was that instead of superheated steam it was electricity that furnished the motive power by means of powerful accumulators invented by himself long before the later inventions that have become so famous. In these accumulators he could store the electricity to a practically unlimited extent. These dispatch boats were known as electrics, with merely a number denoting the order in which they had been built. It was “Electric No. 2” that had been telegraphed for to the months of the Cattaro.

Having given these orders, the doctor waited for the moment of action, and warned Point Pescade and Cape Matifou that he would soon require their services, and it is hardly necessary to say that they were very glad at having at last an opportunity of showing their devotion. One cloud, one only, threw its shadow over the gladness with which they welcomed the doctor’s warning.

Point Pescade was to wait at Ragusa to keep watch on the houses in the Stradone and Rue Marinella, while Cape Matifou was to go with the doctor to Cattaro. This was a separation — the first after so many years of misery that they had lived through together — and hence a touching anxiety on the part of Cape Matifou in thinking that he would no longer be near his little Pescade!

“Patience, old Cape, patience! It will not last! The play’s beginning, and unless I am mistaken it is a splendid piece they are getting ready for us, and we have a famous manager who has given us both good telling parts! Believe me, you will have no reason to complain of yours.”

“Think so?”

“I am sure of it. Ah! no lover’s part for you. It is not in your nature, although you are so sentimental. No traitor’s part either! You are too big for that. No, you are to be the good genius coming in at the end to punish vice and recompense virtue.”

“Like they do in the traveling booths?” answered Cape Matifou.

“Like they do in the traveling booths! Yes. I can see you in the part, old Cape! At the moment the traitor expects it least you appear with your huge hands open, and you have only to clasp him in them to bring about the end. If the part is not long, it is sympathetic; and what bravos, what coin you will get during the run!”

“Yes, perhaps so,” answered Hercules; “but all the same we must separate.”

“For a few days! Only promise me you will not destroy yourself during my absence! Get your six meals regularly and grow! And now clasp me in your arms; or rather pretend to do so as if you were on the stage, else you will risk stifling me. We must get used to a little play-acting in this world! Now embrace me again, and never forget your little Point Pescade who will never forget his big Cape Matifou!”

Such was the affecting farewell of these two friends when their separation came; and Cape Matifou was truly sad at heart when he returned on board the “Savarena.” The same day his companion took up his quarters in Ragusa, with orders not to lose sight of Pierre Bathory, to watch Toronthal’s house, and to keep the doctor informed of all that went on.

During this time Point Pescade should have met in the Stradone with the mysterious stranger, who was evidently on a similar mission, and doubtless he would have done so had not the Moor after sending off the telegram left

Ragusa for some place further south, where Sarcany could join her. Pescade was not thus interfered with in his operations, and could carry out his instructions with his habitual intelligence.

Pierre Bathory never imagined that he had been so closely watched, nor did he know for the eyes of the Moor there had now been substituted those of Point Pescade. After his conversation with the doctor, after the avowal he had made, he had felt more confident. Why should he now hide from his mother what had taken place on board the “Savarena”? Would she not read it in his look, and even in his soul? Would she not see that a change had taken place in him, and that grief and despair had given place to hope and happiness?

Pierre then told his mother everything. He told her who the girl was that he loved, and how it was for her that he had refused to leave Ragusa. His situation was of little consequence! Had not Dr. Antekirtt told him to hope?

“That is why you suffered so much, my child,” answered Mme. Bathory. “May heaven help you and bring you all the happiness we have missed up to now!”

Mme. Bathory lived in great retirement in her house in the Rue Marinella. She did not go out of it except to church with her old servant, for she attended to her religious duties with all the practical and austere piety of her race. She had never heard tell of the Toronthals. Never had she looked at the large mansion she passed on her way to the Church of the Redeemer, which is situated just where the Stradone begins. She therefore did not know the daughter of the old banker of Trieste.

And so Pierre had to describe her and tell what she had said to him when they had first met, and how he did not doubt that his love was returned. And all these details he gave with an ardor that his mother was not surprised to find in the tender passionate soul of her son.

But when Pierre told her of the position of the Toronthals, when she found that the young lady would be one of the richest heiresses of Ragusa, she could not conceal her uneasiness. Would the banker consent to his only child becoming a poor man's wife?

But Pierre did not think it necessary to insist on the coolness and even contempt with which Toronthal had always received him. He was content to repeat what the doctor had said to him — how he had told him that he could, that he ought even, have confidence in his father's friend who felt for him a quasi-paternal affection. A fact which Mme. Bathory did not doubt, knowing what he had already wished to do for her and hers. And in the end, like her son and like Borik, who thought it his duty to give his advice, she did not abandon all hope; and there was a trifling gleam of happiness in the humble home in the Rue Marinella.

On the following Sunday Pierre had again the happiness of seeing Sava Toronthal at church. The girl's face always rather sad in its expression, lighted up when she caught sight of Pierre, as if it had been transfigured. They spoke to each other with their looks, and they understood each other. And when Sava returned home she bore with her a portion of that happiness she had so clearly read in the young man's countenance.

But Pierre had not again seen the doctor. He waited for an invitation to revisit the schooner. Some days elapsed, but no letter came.

"Doubtless," he thought, "the doctor is making inquiries. He has come or sent to Ragusa to ascertain something about the Toronthals. Perhaps he has been getting an introduction to Sava. Yes. It is not impossible that he has already seen her father and spoken to him on the subject. A line from him, only a word, how happy it would make me — particularly if that word were ‘Come.’”

The word did not arrive, and Mme. Bathory had some trouble in calming her son’s impatience. He began to despair, and now it was her turn to give him hope, although she was not without anxiety. The house in the Rue Marinella was open to the doctor, as he knew; and even without this new interest he had taken in Pierre, was not the interest he took in the family for whom he had already shown such sympathy enough to attract him there?

And so Pierre, after counting the days and the hours, had no longer strength to resist. He must at all costs again see Dr. Antekirtt. An invincible force urged him to Gravosa. Once on board the schooner his impatience would be understood, his action would be excused, even if it were premature.

On the 7th of June at eight o’clock in the morning Pierre Bathory left his mother without saying anything to her of his plans. He left Ragusa and hurried to Gravosa at such a rate that Point Pescade could hardly keep up with him. As he reached the quay in front of the moorings occupied by the “Savarena” at his last visit he stopped.

The schooner was not in the harbor.

Pierre looked about to see if she had changed her place. He could not see her.

He asked a sailor who was walking on the quay what had become of Dr. Antekirtt’s yacht.

The “Savarena” had sailed the night before, he replied, and he no more knew where she had gone than where she had come from.

The schooner gone! The doctor had disappeared as mysteriously as he had arrived.

Pierre went back to Ragusa in greater despair than ever.

Had an accident revealed to the young man that the schooner had left for Cattaro he would not have hesitated to follow her. But his journey would have been useless. The “Savarena” reached the mouths, but did not enter them. The doctor, accompanied by Matifou, went on shore in one of her boats, and the yacht departed for son unknown destination.

There is no more curious spot in Europe, and perhaps in the Old World, than this orographic and hydrographic curiosity known as the mouths of Cattaro. Cattaro is not a river, as any one might be tempted to think; it is a town, the seat of a bishop, and the capital of a Circle. The mouths are six bays side by side, communicating with each other by narrow channels which can be sailed through in six hours. Of this string of lakes, which stretch along in front of the mountains of the coast, the last, situated at the foot of Mount Norri, marks the limit of the Austrian Empire. Beyond that it is the Ottoman Empire.

It was at the entrance of the mouths that the doctor landed after a rapid passage. There one of the swift electric boats was in waiting to take him to the last of the bays. After doubling the point of Ostro, passing before Castel Nuovo, between the two panoramas of towns and chapels, before Stolivo, before Perasto, a celebrated place of pilgrimage, before Risano, where the Dalmatian costumes begin to mingle with the Turkish and Albanian, he arrived from lake to lake at the last bight at the bottom of which is built Cattaro.

“Electric No. 2” was moored a few cable-lengths from the town on the sleepy, gloomy waters which not a breath of air troubled on this fine night in June.

But it was not on board of her that the doctor intended to take up his quarters. For the purpose of his ulterior projects he did not wish it to be known that this swift vessel belonged to him; and he landed at Cattaro, and with Cape Matifou accompanying him, went off to one of the hotels in the town.

The boat that had brought them was soon lost in the darkness to the right of the harbor up a small creek, where it could remain invisible. There at Cattaro the doctor could be as unknown as if he had taken refuge in the most obscure of the world’s corners. The Bocchais, the inhabitants of this rich district of Dalmatia, who are of Sclavish origin, would hardly notice the presence of a stranger among them.

From the bay it looks as though Cattaro were built in hollows on the side of Mount Norri. The first houses border on a quay, an esplanade won from the sea at the apex of the acute angle of a small lake which runs deep into the mountain mass. It is at the extremity of this funnel, with its splendid trees and background of verdure, that the Lloyd mail boats and the large coasters of the Adriatic run in to unload.

The doctor was busy in search of a lodging. Cape Matifou had followed him without even asking where they had landed. It might be in Dalmatia, or it might be in China, but it mattered little to him. Like a faithful dog he followed his master. He was only a tool, perhaps, a machine — a machine to turn, to bore, to pierce, which the doctor kept till he thought the time had come to use it.

Having left the quincunxes of the quay they entered the fortifications of Cattaro; then they passed along a series of narrow hilly roads in which is crowded a population of from four to five thousand. As he did so they were closing the Marine Gate — a gate which remains open only till eight o’clock at night except on the arrival of the mail boats.

The doctor soon discovered that there was not a single hotel in the town, and he had to look about for lodgings. At last he found a house, and obtained a room on the ground-floor in a sufficiently respectable street. At first it was arranged that Cape Matifou should be boarded by the proprietor, and although the price charged was enormous on account of his enormous proportions, the matter was soon satisfactorily settled. Dr. Antekirtt reserved the right of taking his meals elsewhere in the town.

In the morning, after leaving Cape Matifou to employ his time as he pleased, the doctor walked to the post-office for any letters or telegrams that might be waiting for him. There was nothing there, and then he went for a stroll out of the town. He soon found a restaurant patronized by the better class of the inhabitants, and Austrian officers and officials who looked upon being quartered here as equivalent to exile, or even to being in prison.

Now, the doctor was only waiting for the moment to act; and this was his plan. He had decided to kidnap Pierre Bathory. But to take him away on board the schooner while she lay at Ragusa would have been difficult. The young engineer was well known at Gravosa, and as public attention had been attracted to the “Savarena,” the affair, even if it succeeded, would be very much noised about. Further, the yacht being only a sailing vessel, if any steamer went after her from the harbor she would almost be certain to be caught.

At Cattaro, on the contrary, Pierre could be spirited off much more quietly. Nothing would be easier than to get him there. At a word sent from the doctor there was no doubt but that he would start immediately. He was as unknown at Cattaro as the doctor himself, and once he was on board the “Electric” could speed off to sea, where he could be told the past life of Silas Toronthal and Sava’s image become effaced by the remembrance of his father’s wrongs.

Such was the doctor’s very simple plan of campaign, two or three days more and the work would be accomplished; Pierre would be separated forever from Sava Toronthal.

Next day, the 9th of June, arrived a letter from Point Pescade. It reported that there was nothing new at the house in the Stradone, and that Point Pescade had seen nothing of Pierre since the day he had gone to Gravosa, twelve hours after the schooner sailed. He had not left Ragusa, and remained at home with his mother. Point Pescade supposed — and he was not wrong in doing so — that the departure of the “Savarena” had brought about this change in his habits, for, as soon as he had found her gone, he had gone home, looking the picture of despair.

The doctor decided to write next day, and invite Pierre Bathory to join him immediately at Cattaro.

But something very unexpected happened to change his plans, and allow chance to intervene and lead to the same end.

About eight o’clock in the evening the doctor was on the wharf at Cattaro, when the mail steamer “Saxonia” was signaled.

The “Saxonia” came from Brindisi, where she had put in to take on board a few passengers. She was bound for Trieste, calling at Cattaro, Ragusa, and Zara, and the other ports on the Austrian coast of the Adriatic.

The doctor was standing near the gang-way, along which the people came ashore, when, in the twilight, his attention was monopolized by one of the travelers, whose luggage was being brought off to the wharf.

The man was about forty, of haughty, even impudent, bearing. He gave his orders loudly; and was evidently one of those persons who, even when polished, show that they have been badly brought up.

“That fellow! here! at Cattaro!”

The passenger was Sarcany. Fifteen years had elapsed since he had acted as accountant in Zathmar’s house. With the exception of his clothes, he was still the adventurer we saw in the streets of Trieste at the beginning of this story. He wore an elegant traveling suit, with a dust-coat of the latest fashion, and his trunks, with their many mountings, showed that the old Tripolitan broker was accustomed to make himself comfortable.

For fifteen years Sarcany had lived a life of pleasure and luxury, thanks to the fortune he had acquired from his share of Count Sandorf’s wealth. How much was there left of it? His best friends, if he had any, would have been puzzled to say. He had a look of preoccupation, of anxiety even, the cause of which was difficult to discover behind the mask with which he concealed his true disposition.

“Where does he come from? Where is he going?” asked the doctor, who did not lose sight of him.

Where he had come from was easily ascertained by asking the purser of the “Saxonia.” The passenger had come on board at Brindisi. Did he come from Upper or Lower Italy? They did not know. In reality he came from Syracuse. On receipt of the telegram from the Moor he had instantly left Sicily for Cattaro.

For it was at Cattaro that the woman was waiting to meet him, her mission at Ragusa having apparently come to an end.

The Moor was there on the wharf waiting for the steamer. The doctor noticed her, he saw Sarcany walk up to her, he heard the words she said to him in Arabic, and he understood them —

“It was time!”

Sarcany’s reply was a nod. Then, after seeing his luggage passed by the custom-house officer, be went off with the Moor toward the right so as to go outside the town.

The doctor hesitated for a moment. Was Sarcany going to escape him? Ought he to follow him?

Turning round he saw Cape Matifou, who was standing gaping at the “Saxonia’s” passengers. He beckoned him, and he was at his side in an instant.

“Cape Matifou,” said he, pointing to Sarcany, who was walking away, “do you see that man?”

"Yes."

"If I tell you to carry him off, will you do so?"

"Yes."

"And you will give him something to prevent his getting away if he resists?"

"Yes."

"Remember I want him alive!"

"Yes."

Cape Matifou was a man of few words, but he had the merit of speaking to the point. The doctor could depend upon him. What he received the order to do, he would do.

The Moor could be seized, gagged, thrown aside in any corner, and before she could give the alarm Sarcany would be on board the "Electric."

The darkness, though it was not very profound, would facilitate matters.

Sarcany and the Moor continued their walk round the town without noticing that they were being watched and followed. They did not yet speak to each other. They did not wish to do so until they reached some quiet place where they could be safe from interruption. They reached the south gate opening on the road which leads from Cattaro to the mountains on the Austrian frontier.

At this gate is an important market, a bazaar well known to the Montenegrins. Here they have to transact their business, for they are not allowed to enter the town except in very limited numbers, and after having left their weapons behind them. On the Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday of each week the mountaineers come down from Niegons or Cettinge, having walked for five or six hours carrying eggs, potatoes, poultry and even fagots of considerable weight.

This was a Thursday. A few groups whose business had not been finished till late had remained in the bazaar intending to pass the night there. There were about thirty of these mountaineers, moving about and chatting and disputing, some stretched on the ground to sleep, others cooking before a coal fire a small sheep impaled on a wooden spit in Albanian fashion.

To this place, as though it was well known to them, came Sarcany and his companion. There it would be easy for them to talk at their ease, and even remain all night without having to go in search of a lodging. Since her arrival at Cattaro the Moor had not troubled herself about another lodging.

The doctor and Cape Matifou followed them in, one after the other. Here and there a few fires were smoldering and giving but little light. The doctor regretted that he had not put his project into execution on his way from the wharf. But it was now too late. All that could be done was to wait till an opportunity presented itself.

In any case the boat was moored behind the rocks less than two hundred yards from the bazaar, and about two cable-lengths away lay the “Electric” with a small light at the bow to show where she was moored.

Sarcany and the Moor took up their positions in a dark corner near a group of mountaineers already asleep. There they could talk over their business without being understood, if the doctor wrapped in his traveling-cloak had not joined the group without attracting their attention. Matifou concealed himself as well as he could and waited, ready to obey orders.

Sarcany and his companion spoke in Arabic, thinking that no one in the place could understand them. They were mistaken, for the doctor was there. Familiar with all the dialects of Africa and the East, he lost not a word of their conversation.

“You got my telegram at Syracuse?” said the Moor.

“Yes, Namir,” answered Sarcany, “and I started next day with Zirone.”

“Where is Zirone?”

“Near Catania, organizing his new gang.”

“You must get to Ragusa to-morrow, and you must see Silas Toronthal.”

“I’ll be there, and I’ll see him! You have not made a mistake, Namir? It was time.”

“Yes, the banker’s daughter — ”

“The banker’s daughter!” said Sarcany in such a singular tone that the doctor could hardly prevent himself from giving a start.

“Yes! His daughter!” answered Namir.

“What? Does he allow her to be made love to and without my permission?”

“Are you surprised, Sarcany? Nothing is more certain nevertheless! But you will be still more surprised when you hear who wishes to be the husband of Sava Toronthal!”

“Some ruined gentleman anxious for her father’s millions!”

“No!” replied Namir. “But a young man of good birth and no money!”

“And the name of this fellow?”

“Pierre Bathory.”

“Pierre Bathory!” exclaimed Sarcany. “Pierre Bathory marry the daughter of Silas Toronthal!”

“Be calm, Sarcany. That the daughter of Silas Toronthal and the son of Stephen Bathory are in love with each other is no secret from me! But perhaps Silas Toronthal does not know it.”

“Does he not know it?”

“No! And besides he would never consent.”

“I do not know,” answered Sarcany. “Toronthal is capable of anything — even of consenting to this marriage if it could quiet his conscience, supposing he has a conscience after these fifteen years. Fortunately here I am ready to spoil his game, and to-morrow I shall be at Ragusa.”

“Good!” said Namir, who seemed to have a certain ascendency over her companion.

“The daughter of Silas Toronthal marries nobody but me, you understand, Namir, and with her I will get out of my difficulties again.”

The doctor had heard all he wanted. It mattered not what else Sarcany had to say to the Moor.

A scoundrel coming to claim a scoundrel’s daughter! Heaven had indeed intervened in the work of human justice. Henceforth there was nothing to fear for Pierre whom this rival was to set aside. There was no use, then, in summoning him to Cattaro, or in attempting to carry off the man who wished to be Toronthal’s son-in-law.

“May the wretches marry among themselves, and become all the same family!” said the doctor. “And then we shall see.”

He left, and beckoned to Matifou to follow him. Matifou had not asked why the doctor wished him to walk off with the “Saxonia’s” passenger, and he did not ask why the attempt was postponed.

The next day, June 10, at Ragusa, the doors of the principal drawing-room at the house in the Stradone were thrown open about half-past eight in the evening, and a servant announced in a loud tone:

“Mr. Sarcany.”

CHAPTER IX.

COMPLICATIONS.

Fourteen years had elapsed since Silas Toronthal had left Trieste to take up residence at Ragusa. Being of Dalmatian birth nothing could be more natural than that when he retired from business he should return to his native land.

The traitors had kept their secret well. The price of their treachery had been duly paid. And thereby a handsome fortune fell to the banker and his old Tripolitan correspondent.

After the execution of the prisoners in the fortress of Pisino, after the flight of Count Mathias Sandorf, who had found his death in the waves of the Adriatic, the sentence had been completed by the seizure of their possessions. Of the house and small estate belonging to Ladislas Zathmar nothing remained — not even enough to yield a living to his old servant. Of Stephen Bathory's possessions nothing remained, for he had no fortune and the lessons he gave produced his only income. But the castle of Artenak and its rich dependencies, the neighboring mines and the forests on the northerly slopes of the Carpathians were of considerable value. They were divided into two parts, one of which was sold to pay the informers and the other was placed under sequestration to be restored to the count's heiress when she had attained her eighteenth year. If the child died before then her share was to revert to the estate.

The two quarters given to the informers amounted to a little over 1,500,000 florins, and with this huge sum they could do as they pleased.

At the outset the accomplices made up their minds to separate. Sarcany did not care to remain with Toronthal, and the banker had no wish to continue his business relations with him. And so Sarcany left Trieste with Zirone, who, not having left him in adversity, was not the man to leave him in prosperity. Both disappeared, and the banker heard nothing about them for some time. Where had they gone? Probably to some large European city, where people did not bother themselves about a man's origin providing he was rich, and cared nothing how a man had gained his wealth, providing he spent it among them.

The banker breathed more freely when they left him. He thought he had no more to fear from a man who, to a certain extent, held him in his power, and who might some time or other use that power. Nevertheless, although Sarcany was rich, it was never safe to trust to prodigals of his species, and if he ran through his money what was to prevent his coming back to his old accomplice?

Six months afterward Toronthal, having cleared off his difficulties, sold his business and definitely abandoned Trieste for Ragusa. Although there was nothing to fear from the indiscretion of the governor, who was the only person that knew the part he had played in the discovery of the conspiracy, this seemed the safest course fer a man who did not wish to lose reputation, and whom an ample fortune assured an easy life wherever he went.

This resolution to leave Trieste was probably further encouraged by a peculiar circumstance — which will be mentioned later on. This circumstance was known only to himself and his wife, and had but on one occasion only brought him into connection with Namir, whom we have seen as acquainted With Sarcany.

It was at Ragusa then that the banker had settled down. He had left it very young without either friends or relatives. He had quite dropped out of recollection, and it was as a stranger that he returned to the town which he had not revisited for forty years.

To a rich man appearing under such circumstances Ragusan society gave hearty welcome. Only one thing was known about him, and that was that he had held a high position at Trieste. The banker sought and found a mansion in the most aristocratic quarter of the town. He started a large establishment, and engaged a fresh staff of servants to what he had at Trieste. He visited and was visited. As no one knew anything of his past life, was he not one of those privileged beings who in this World are called happy?

Toronthal did not suffer much from remorse. Had it not been for the fear that some day his abominable treachery would be discovered, there would apparently have been nothing to trouble his existence — except his wife, who remained a silent but living reproach to him.

For that unhappy woman, honest and straightforward as she was, knew of the hateful scheme that had sent the three patriots to their deaths. A word escaped from her husband when his affairs were in jeopardy, a hope imprudently expressed that some of Sandorf's money might help him out of his difficulties, some signatures he had had to obtain from his wife had drawn from him the confession of his share in the Trieste conspiracy.

An insurmountable aversion for the man who was bound to her was the feeling she thereupon experienced — and the feeling was all the keener from her being of Hungarian birth. But as we have said she was a woman of no moral energy. The blow fell on her, and she could not recover from it. Henceforth at Trieste and afterward at Ragusa she lived apart from her husband, as much as her position permitted. She appeared at the receptions in the house in the Stradone; it was necessary for her so do so, and her husband insisted on it; but when she had played her part as a woman of the world, she retired to her apartments. There she devoted herself entirely to the education of her daughter, on whom she had concentrated all her affection, and endeavored to forget what she knew. To forget when the man who had acted this way was living under the same roof with her!

Two years after their removal to Ragusa the state of things became still more complicated. And if the complication was an annoyance to the banker, it was a subject of further grief to his wife.

Mme. Bathory, her son, and Borik had also left Trieste to take up their quarters at Ragusa, where they had a few relatives. Stephen Bathory's widow knew nothing of Silas Toronthal; she did not even know that he and Count Sandorf had ever had business together.

But if Mme. Bathory did not know the banker, he knew her. To find himself in the same town, to meet her as he passed by, poor, working to educate her child, was anything but agreeable to him. Had Mme. Bathory come to Ragusa before he had made up his mind to live there, he would probably have chosen otherwise. But when the widow came to live at her humble house in Rue Marinella his mansion had already been bought, he had occupied it, and the position had been definitely accepted. It would not have done to change his residence for the third time.

"We get accustomed to everything," he said to himself. And he resolved to shut his eyes to this permanent witness to his treachery.

But what was only an unpleasantness for the banker was an incessant cause of grief and remorse to Mme. Toronthal. Secretly on several occasions she had tried to send help to this widow who had no other wealth than her work; but the help was always refused, like that of other unknown friends.

Then the position became almost insupportable, owing to an occurrence, most unforeseen, almost improbable, and even terrible by the complications it might bring about.

Mme. Toronthal had concentrated all her affections on her daughter, who was two-and-a-half years old when at the end of 1867 her husband came to live at Ragusa.

Sava was now seventeen — a beautiful girl, more of the Hungarian than the Dalmatian type. With her dark abundant hair and bright glowing eyes set deep beneath a somewhat lofty forehead of “psychic form” — if we can appropriately use the term that chiromantists apply more particularly to the hand — with her well-curved mouth and sweet complexion and her graceful figure rather above the middle height, she was at least certain of never being passed by with indifference.

But that which was most striking about her was the pensive, serious mien that seemed to show she was ever in search of some long-faded remembrance of something, she knew not what, that at once allured and saddened her. On this account it was that she treated with extreme reserve all those whom she met in her father’s house or out of doors.

She was supposed to be the heiress of an enormous fortune which one day would be entirely her own, and was of course much sought after. But although many eligible individuals were introduced in whom all the social proprieties were duly found, she had always refused, under her mother’s advice, to give them the slightest encouragement. Toronthal himself had never alluded to the subject of her marriage. Probably the son-in-law he wanted — more for himself than Sava — had not yet come forward.

To finish this portrait of Sava Toronthal, we should note a very marked tendency to admire such acts of virtue or courage as were due to patriotism. Not that she took much interest in politics; but in the recital of all that affected her country, in the sacrifices made for it, and in recent examples by which its history had been made illustrious, she took deep interest. And these sentiments were hardly owing to the accident of her birth — for assuredly she did not inherit them from Silas Toronthal — but seemed to have arisen spontaneously in her own noble, generous heart.

What would explain the sympathetic attraction between her and Pierre? Yes! A stroke of ill-luck had intervened in the banker's game, and brought these two young people together. Sava was only twelve years old when one day somebody had said in her presence —

"There goes the son of the man who died for Hungary!" And that was never effaced from her memory.

Both grew up. Sava thought of Pierre long before he had noticed her. She saw him looking so serious, so thoughtful! But if he was poor he could at least work to be worthy of his father's name — and she did not know the whole story.

We know the rest, we know how Pierre Bathory was in his turn attracted and won by a nature which sympathized completely with his own, and how, when the girl knew not her real feelings toward him, the young man already loved her with a profound affection that she was soon to share. All that concerns Sava will have been said when we have described her position in the family.

Toward her father she had always been most reserved. Never had the banker betrayed the slightest feeling of kindness toward her, never had he greeted his daughter with a caress. This coolness between them arose from a complete want of accord on every subject. Sava had for Toronthal the respect a daughter should have for her father — nothing more. He let her do as she liked, he did not interfere with any of her tastes, he placed no limit on her works of charity which his natural ostentation willingly encouraged. In short, on his part there was indifference; on hers there was, it must be confessed, antipathy, or rather aversion.

For Mme. Toronthal Sava had quite a different feeling. The banker's wife submitted to her husband's control, although he showed her but little deference, but she was kind and good and worth a thousand times more in the honesty of her life and the care of her personal dignity. She was very fond of Sava. Beneath the young girl's shyness she had discovered her real worth, but the affection she felt for her was rather artificial and modified by a kind of admiration, of respect, and even of fear. The elevation of Sava's character, her straightforwardness, and at certain times her inflexibility, might perhaps explain this strange form of maternal love. However, the girl returned love for love, and even without the ties of relationship the two would have been deeply attached to each other.

There is therefore nothing to be astonished at in Mme. Toronthal being the first to discover what was passing in the mind and heart of Sava. Frequently had the girl spoken of Pierre Bathory and his family without noticing the sorrowful impression that the name made on her mother. And when Mme. Toronthal discovered that Sava was in love with the young man, "Heaven wills it then!" was all she murmured.

We may imagine what these words meant, but it is somewhat difficult to understand how the love of Sava for Pierre could make amends for the injury done to the Bathory family.

Mme. Toronthal having, however, satisfied herself that it was all in accordance with the designs of Providence, had brought herself to think in her pious, trustful heart that her husband would consent to this union of the families, and so without saying anything to Sava she resolved to consult him on the subject.

At the first words his wife uttered Toronthal flew into a towering rage which he made no effort to control, and she had to retreat to her apartment with the following threat ringing in her ears:

“Take care, madame! If ever you dare speak to me again on that subject I will make you repent it.”

And so what Silas Toronthal called “destiny” had not only brought the Bathory family to live in the same town, but had even brought Sava and Pierre to meet and love one another.

Why, it may be asked, so much irritation on the banker’s part? Had he formed any secret designs on Sava, on her future, that were prejudiced by this complication? In the event of his treachery being one day exposed was it not his interest that the consequences should be atoned for as much as possible? What would Pierre say when he had become Sava Toronthal’s husband? What could Mme. Bathory do? Assuredly it would be a horrible situation, the victim’s son married to the murderer’s daughter, but it would be horrible for them, not for him, Silas Toronthal!

Yes, but there was Sarcany, of whom there was no news, but whose return was always possible — a return that might lead to further engagements between the accomplices. He was not the man to forget if fortune turned against him.

Toronthal was, it need scarcely be said, not without anxiety at what was to become of his old Tripolitan agent. He had no news from him since he left Trieste, fifteen years ago. Even in Sicily where Sarcany was most likely to be heard of, all inquiries had proved in vain. But he might come back any day, and hence a constant state of terror for the banker until the adventurer was dead. And the news of his death Toronthal would have received with easily intelligible satisfaction. Perhaps then he would have looked upon the possibility of a marriage with Pierre in a somewhat different light; but at present it was not to be dreamed of.

Toronthal never alluded to the way in which he received his wife when she had spoken to him about Pierre Bathory. He offered her no explanation of his conduct. What he did was to keep a strict watch on Sava, and even to set spies to look after her: and with regard to the young engineer to behave toward him as haughtily as possible, to turn his head when he met, and to act in every way so as to crush out all hope. And he succeeded only too well in showing that every attempt on his part would be useless.

It was under these circumstances that on the evening of the 10th of June the name of Sarcany was heard across the room in the mansion in the Stradone as the door opened and that individual entered. In the morning Sarcany and Namir had taken the train at Cattaro for Ragusa. Sarcany had gone to one of the chief hotels in the town, dressed himself in the height of fashion, and without losing an hour, had hurried round to visit his old friend, Toronthal welcomed him and gave orders that they were not to be disturbed. How did he take this visit? Was he master enough of himself to conceal his true feelings at the reappearance? Was Sarcany as imperious and insolent as formerly? Did he remind the banker of promises made and engagements entered into years before? Did they speak of the past, the present or the future? What they said we know not, for their interview was secret.

But this was its result.

Twenty-four hours afterward a rumor was afloat which might well startle society at Ragusa. Every one was talking of the marriage of Sarcany — a wealthy Tripolitan — with Sava Toronthal.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER BLOW.

Evidently the banker had to yield to the threats of the man who could destroy him by a word. Neither his wife’s prayers nor Sava’s horror availed anything against the father who claimed to dispose of his daughter as best suited his convenience.

One word only as to Sarcany’s interest in the marriage — an an interest he had not thought it worth while to hide from Toronthal. Sarcany was now ruined. The fortune which had been sufficient to help Toronthal out of his difficulties had hardly been enough to keep the adventurer during the fifteen years. Since his departure from Trieste Sarcany had run through Europe, living in the height of extravagance, and the hotels of Paris, London Berlin, Vienna and Rome had never had windows enough for him to throw the money through to gratify his fancies. After a career of pleasure he had taken to gambling to finish his ruin, and had visited nearly every famous gaming haunt on the Continent.

Zirone had, of course, been his constant companion and when the money had been run through they had returned together to the east of Sicily and waited till an opportunity offered to resume the connection with the banker of Trieste. Nothing could be simpler than that he could restore his fortunes by marrying Sava, the sole heiress of the rich Silas Toronthal — who could refuse him nothing.

In fact no refusal was possible, and no refusal was attempted. Perhaps after all, between the two men there was still something hidden concerning the problem they were seeking to solve which the future would reveal!

However, a very clear explanation was required from Sava by her father. What would she do?

“My honor depends on the marriage,” said Silas Toronthal, “and the marriage must take place.”

When Sava took back the reply to her mother she nearly fainted in her daughter’s arms and burst into tears of despair.

Toronthal had then told the truth.

The wedding was fixed for the 6th of July.

We can imagine what a life had been led by Pierre during these three weeks. His misery was dreadful. A prey to impotent rage, sometimes he remained at home in the Rue Marinella; sometimes he escaped from the accursed town, and his mother feared he would never return.

What consolation could she offer him? While no marriage was talked of, while Pierre Bathory was repulsed by Sava’s father, some hope did remain. But with Sava married came a new abyss — an abyss that could not be bridged. Dr. Antekirtt in spite of his promises had abandoned Pierre. And besides, she asked herself, how could the young lady who loved him, and whose energetic nature she knew, how could she agree to this union? What was the mystery in this house in the Stradone which brought such things about? Pierre would have done better to leave Ragusa, to accept the situation which had been offered him abroad, to go far away from Sava, if they were going to hand her over to this stranger, this Sarcany! Despair had in truth entered the house which a ray of happiness had brightened but for a few days.

Point Pescade kept constant watch, and was one of the first to discover what was going on.

As soon as he heard of the new marriage between Sava Toronthal and Sarcany he wrote to Cattaro. And as soon as he heard of the pitiable state to which the young engineer was reduced he sent off the news to the doctor.

The only reply was for him to continue the observations, and to keep Cattaro thoroughly informed of all that happened.

As the 6th of July approached Pierre's state became worse. His mother could not keep him quiet. How could they possibly make Toronthal change his plans? Was it not evident from the haste with which it had been declared and fixed that the marriage had been decided on for some time, that Sarcany and the banker were acquaintances of old date, that the "rich Tripolitan" had some peculiar influence over Sava's father?

Pierre Bathory wrote to Toronthal eight days before the date fixed for the wedding. His letter received no reply.

Then Pierre tried to speak to the banker in the street. He did not succeed in meeting him. Pierre then sought him at his house. He was not allowed to cross the threshold. Sava and her mother remained invisible There was no possibility of communicating with them.

But if Pierre could not see Sava nor her father, he very often ran against Sarcany. To the looks of hate with which he greeted him Sarcany replied with looks of disdain. Pierre then thought of insulting him, of provoking him to fight. But why should Sarcany accept a meeting which he had every inducement to refuse?

Six days went by. Pierre, in spite of the entreaties of his mother and the prayers of Borik, left the house in the Rue Marinella on the evening of the 4th of July. The old servant attempted to follow, but soon lost sight of him. Pierre hurried on at a venture as if he was mad along the most deserted streets of the town and by the side of the walls.

An hour afterward they brought him home — dying. He had been stabbed in the upper part of the left lung.

There seemed to be no doubt that in a paroxysm of despair he had committed suicide.

As soon as Point Pescade heard of the misfortune he ran to the telegraph office.

An hour later the doctor received the news at Cattaro.

It would be difficult to describe the grief of Mme. Bathory when she found herself in the presence of her son, who had perhaps but a few hours to live. But the mother's energy steeled itself against, the woman's weakness, To work, first; to weep, afterward.

A doctor was sent for. He arrived in a few minutes, he examined the wounded man, he listened to the feeble intermittent breathing, he probed the wound, he bandaged it, he did all that his art told him — but he save no hope.

Fifteen hours afterward the case was aggravated by the occurrence of considerable hemorrhage, and respiration, becoming hardly apparent, threatened soon to end.

Mme. Bathory was on her knees by the bedside, praying to God not to take away her son. The door opened.

Dr. Antekirtt walked in and approached the bed.

Mme. Bathory would have rushed toward him. He stopped her with a gesture.

Then he went to Pierre and carefully examined him without uttering a word. Then he looked at him long and fixedly. As if some strange magnetic power shot forth from his eyes to the very brain where thought was lingering for a moment before it finally left, he seemed to fill that brain with his own life, with his own will.

Suddenly Pierre half rose toward him. His eyelids lifted. He looked at the doctor. He then fell back inanimate.

Mme. Bathory threw herself on her son, gave one scream, and fainted in Borik’s arms.

The doctor closed the eyes of the corpse; then he rose, left the house, whispering as he did so the old phrase from the Indian legend:

“Death destroyeth not; it only rendereth invisible.”

CHAPTER XI.

A MEETING IN THE STRADONE.

The death made a good deal of noise in town, but no one suspected that Sarcany and Silas Toronthal were in any way concerned in it.

It was on the morrow, the 6th of July, that the marriage was to take place.

Neither Mme. Toronthal nor her daughter heard anything about the death, precautions having been taken by Toronthal and his destined son-in-law to keep it from their ears.

It had been agreed that the wedding should be a very quiet one. As an excuse it was given out that Sarcany's family were in mourning, This was hardly in accordance with Toronthal's usual love of show, but he thought it better that no more fuss than necessary should be made. The newly married couple were to remain a few days at Ragusa, and then leave for Tripoli, where Sarcany, it was said, usually lived. There would therefore be no party in the Stradone, either for the reading of the settlements or after the religious services which were to immediately follow the civil ceremony.

During the day, while the last preparations were being made at the Toronthals', two men strolled along the opposite side of the Stradone.

One was Cape Matifou, the other Point Pescade.

The doctor had brought Matifou back with him to Ragusa. His presence was no longer necessary at Cattaro, and the two friends, the "twins," as Pescade said, were supremely happy at again seeing one another.

As soon as the doctor had reached Ragusa he had made his first appearance in the Rue Marinella, then he had retired to a quiet hotel in the suburb of Plocce, where he waited until the wedding had taken place in furtherance of his plans.

Next morning he had again visited Mme. Bathory and helped to put Pierre in his coffin. He had then returned to his hotel, having sent Pescade and Matifou to keep watch on the Stradone.

And although Pescade was all eyes and ears, that did not prevent him from talking.

“I think you are bigger, old Cape!” he said, reaching up to pat his companion’s chest.

“Yes, and in better condition!”

“So I felt when you embraced me.”

“But how is the play getting on we were talking about?”

“Oh, the drama? Oh, it’s going on, going on. But, yon see, the action is getting complicated.”

“Complicated?”

“Yes. It isn’t a comedy; it’s a drama, and there will be a big fight before the curtain drops — ”

Point Pescade stopped suddenly.

A carriage drove up rapidly to Toronthal’s house. The gate opened immediately, and, as it shut, Pescade recognized Sarcany in the carriage.

“Yes — lots of fighting,” he continued, “and it looks as though it was going to be a great success.”

“And the villain?” asked Matifou, who seemed to be more particularly concerned with that personage.

“Well — the villain is triumphant at the present moment, as he always is in a well-built piece! But, patience! Wait for the end!”

“At Cattaro,” said Matifou, “I thought I was coming on.”

“Coming on the scene?”

“Yes, Point Pescade, yes!”

And Matifou related what had passed at the bazaar at Cattaro, and how his two arms had been requisitioned for a kidnapping which did not take place.

“Good! That was too soon!” replied Point Pescade, who spoke for the sake of speaking, so to speak, keeping a keen lookout right and left of him. “You won’t be wanted till the fourth or fifth act! Perhaps you may only have to appear in the last scene! But don’t be uneasy! You will make a great success when you do begin! You can reckon on that!”

At this moment a distant murmur was heard in the Stradone where the Rue Marinella ran in.

Point Pescade broke off the conversation abruptly and hurried to the right of Toronthal’s house.

A procession was coming along the road to enter the Stradone on its way to the Church of the Franciscans, where the funeral service was to be held.

There were few followers at the funeral, and nothing to attract much attention — merely a coffin carried under a black pall.

The procession slowly advanced, when suddenly Point Pescade, stifling an exclamation, seized Cape Matifou’s arm.

“What is the matter?”

“Nothing! It would take too long to tell you now!”

He had just recognized Mme. Bathory, who had resolved to be present at her son’s burial.

The church had not refused its ministrations, and the priest was waiting in the Franciscan chapel to lead the procession to the grave.

Mme. Bathory walked behind the coffin, looking into vacancy. She had no longer strength to cry. Her eyes were almost haggard, and sometimes wandered from side to side for a moment, to return plunged for a time beneath the pall which hid the coffin of her son.

Borik dragged himself along after her — a piteous sight to see.

Point Pescade felt the tears come into his eyes. Yes! If he had not had to remain on duty at his post he would not have hesitated to join the few friends and neighbors that were following all that was left on earth of Pierre Bathory.

Suddenly, as the procession was about to pass Toronthal’s mansion, the main gates opened. In the court-yard before the steps two carriages stood ready to start. The first came through the gate and turned down the Stradone.

In this carriage Point Pescade saw Silas Toronthal, his wife and his daughter.

Mme. Toronthal, overwhelmed with grief, was seated next to Sava, who looked whiter than her nuptial veil.

Sarcany, accompanied by some relatives or friends, occupied the second carriage.

The wedding and funeral equally destitute of show! In both the same grief! It was frightful!

Suddenly, as the first carriage turned out of the gate there was a piercing shriek.

Mme. Bathory had stopped, and with her hand pointed to Sava, was cursing her.

It was Sava who had shrieked. She had seen the mother in mourning. She had understood all they had hidden from her. Pierre was dead, dead by her, and for her, and it was his funeral that was passing as they were taking her to be married.

She fell back fainting. Mme. Toronthal, distracted, tried to bring her back to consciousness. In vain! She scarcely breathed!

Toronthal could not restrain a gesture of anger. But Sarcany, who was hurried to her side, gave no sign of his annoyance.

Under these circumstances it was impossible to attend before the registrar, and the order was given to return to the house, of which the big gates shut with a clang.

Sava, carried to her room, was laid on her bed without being moved. Her mother knelt by her side, and a physician was summoned in all haste. During this time the funeral continued its progress to the Franciscan church, and then after the service it went on to the cemetery.

Point Pescade saw that the doctor ought at once to know what had happened. Saying to Matifou:

“Stop here and watch,” he ran off to the Plocce.

While Pescade told his story, the doctor remained silent.

“Have I exceeded my right?” he said to himself. “No! Have I struck one who is innocent? Yes, certainly! But she is the daughter of Silas Toronthal!”

Then he turned to Pescade.

“Where is Cape Matifou?”

“In front of Toronthal’s house.”

“I want you both this evening.”

“At what time?”

“Nine o’clock.”

“Where shall we be?”

“At the cemetery gates.”

Point Pescade instantly returned to Matifou, who had not left his post.

That evening about eight o’clock the doctor, enveloped in an ample cloak, went for a walk toward the harbor ot Ragusa. At the angle of the wall on the left he reached a small creek running up among rocks a little above the harbor.

The place was quite deserted. Neither houses nor boats were near. The fishing craft never came there to anchor for fear of the numerous reefs which lay round the creek. The doctor halted, looked round him, and uttered a peculiar cry which had doubtless been agreed upon beforehand. Almost immediately a sailor appeared and, approaching him, said:

“At your orders, sir!”

“The boat is there, Pazzer?”

“Yes, behind the rock.”

“With all the men?”

“All.”

“And the ‘Electric’?”

“Further away to the northward, about three cables away outside the creek.”

And the sailor pointed to a long gray tube just visible in the gloom, but without a light of any kind to indicate its presence.

“When did she arrive from Cattaro?”

“Hardly an hour ago.”

“And she was not seen?”

“No! she came along by the reefs.”

“Pazzer, see that no one leaves his post, and wait for me here all night if necessary.”

“Ay, ay, sir!”

The seaman returned to the boat, which was indistinguishable among the rocks.

Dr. Antekirtt remained for some time on the beach waiting probably for the darkness to increase. Sometimes he would stride along for a minute. Then he would stop. And then with folded arms, silent and motionless, he would look out over the Adriatic as if telling it his secrets.

The night was moonless and starless. The land breeze that rises with the evening and lasts but an hour or two had now lulled until it could scarcely be felt. A few thick clouds almost covered the sky except in the west, where the last streaks of the sunset gave a feeble light that was swiftly fading.

“Now!” said the doctor.

And returning toward the town he kept outside the wall all the way to the cemetery.

There before the gate were Point Pescade and Cape Matifou hidden under a tree so as not to be seen, in the shadow.

The cemetery was closed at this time of night. A light had just been extinguished in the gatekeeper’s lodge. No one was expected there again before the morning.

The doctor seemed to know the plan of the cemetery And it also appeared that he had no intention of entering by the gate. What he was going to do was to be done in secret.

“Follow me!” he said to Point Pescade and his companion as they came to meet him.

And the three silently crept along the slope that runs at the foot of the exterior wall.

After some ten minutes of this work the doctor stopped, and pointing to a breach caused by a recent fall of the wall, said:

“Through.”

He glided through the breach, Point Pescade and Matifou followed him.

The darkness was profound beneath the large trees that overshadowed the tombs, but without hesitation the doctor went down one path and then turned off into another leading to the upper part of the cemetery. Some birds of night, disturbed by his presence, flew backward and forward overhead, but not another living thing lurked round the grave-stones scattered on the turf.

Soon the three stood in front of what looked like a small chapel with the gate left unfastened.

The doctor pushed back the gate, and then pressing the button of a small electric lantern he threw on the light, but so that it could not be seen from without.

“Enter,” said he to Matifou.

Cape Matifou entered and found himself facing a wall on which were three marble tablets.

On one of these tablets, the center one, he read:

“Stephen Bathory,

“1867.”

The tablet to the left bore no inscription, that to the right was soon to have one.

“Take away that slab,” said the doctor.

Cape Matifou easily removed the slab, which had not yet been fixed down. He laid it on the ground, and a bier was seen at the bottom of a cavity in the wall.

There was the coffin containing the body of Pierre Bathory.

“Bring out that coffin,” said the doctor.

Cape Matifou pulled out the coffin without any help from Point Pescade, heavy though it was, and after lifting it outside the chapel he placed it on the ground.

“Take this,” said the doctor, handing Pescade a screwdriver, “and get the lid off that coffin.”

In a few minutes it was done.

The doctor moved aside the white garments with his hand, and placing his head to the body seemed to listen for the beating of the heart.

Then he rose.

“Lift out that body,” said he to Cape Matifou.

Matifou obeyed, and neither he nor Pescade made the slightest objection, although such an exhumation was against the law.

When the body of Pierre Bathory was laid on the grass, Cape Matifou wrapped it up again in its winding-sheet and over it the doctor threw his mantle. The coffin was then screwed down and returned to the cavity, and the tablet placed over it as before.

The doctor broke the current of his electric lantern, and the darkness became profound again.

“Take up that body,” said he to Cape Matifou.

Matifou lifted it in his arms as if it had been the body of a child. Then led by the doctor, and followed by Point Pescade, he regained the cross-path leading to the breach in the wall.

Five minutes later they were through the breach and on their way to the shore.

Not a word was spoken; but if the obedient Cape Matifou thought no more than a machine, what a succession of ideas crowded through the active brain of Point Pescade!

In that journey from the cemetery to the shore they had met nobody. But as they approached the creek where the “Electric’s” boat was waiting for them, they saw a coast-guardsman walking about the rocks.

They continued on their way without troubling themselves about his presence.

Again the doctor uttered his peculiar cry, and the sailor came up from the boat, which remained invisible.

At a sign Cape Matifou went down behind the rocks and was about to step into the boat.

At this moment the coast-guardsman hurried up, and just as they were entering the boat, he asked:

“Who are you?”

“People who can give you your choice between twenty florins cash down and a slap in the face from that gentleman” — pointing to Matifou — ”also cash down!”

The coast-guardsman did not hesitate; he took the twenty florins.

A moment afterward the boat had vanished in the darkness. Five minutes later it was alongside “the Electric.” It was hoisted on board. The silent, engines were started, and the launch was off to sea.

Matifou bore the body below and laid it on a couch in the saloon, from which not a light-port allowed a ray to escape through the hull.

The doctor was left alone with the corpse. He bent over it, kissed the pallid forehead, and said:

“And now, Pierre, awake!”

Immediately, as if he had only been asleep, Pierre opened his eyes.

A look of aversion stole over his face when he recognized the doctor.

“You!” he murmured. “You who abandoned me!”

“I! Pierre!”

“But who are you then?”

“A dead man — like you!”

“A dead man?”

“I am Count Mathias Sandorf!”

PART III

CHAPTER I.

THE MEDITERRANEAN.

“The Mediterranean is beautiful above all in two respects — harmonious setting and transparency of light and atmosphere. Such as it is, it is an admirable temperer of man. It gives him a hard, unyielding strength: it produces the most substantial races.”

Micholet has said this, and said truly. But it is fortunate for humanity that nature, in place of Hercules, has separated the rock of Calpe from the rock of Abyla, to to form the Strait of Gibraltar. It must even be admitted, in spite of the assertions of most geologists, that this strait has always existed. Without it no Mediterranean. For, in truth, evaporation carries off from this sea three times as much water as is furnished it by tributary rivers, and in default of this Atlantic inflow — which, diffusing itself through the strait, regenerates it — it would have been these many centuries back no more than a kind of Dead Sea, instead of the Living Sea, *par excellence*.

It was in one of the deepest retreats and least known of this vast Mediterranean Sea that Count Mathias Sandorf — until the wished-for hour, until the entire fulfillment of his work, he should remain Dr. Antekirtt — had secluded himself in order to profit by all the benefits which his supposed death had given him.

There are two Mediterraneans on the terrestrial globe — one in the old world, the other in the new. The American Mediterranean is the Gulf of Mexico; it covers not less than four million and a half kilometers. If the Latin Mediterranean, having but an area of two million eight hundred and eighty-five thousand five hundred and twenty-two square kilometers, be but the half of the other, it is more varied in general design, richer in harbors and distinct gulfs, in large hydrographical subdivisions which have merited the name of seas. Such as Greek Archipelago, the Sea of Crete above the island of that name, the Libyan Sea below, the Adriatic, between Italy, Austria, Turkey and Greece; the Ionian, which washes Corfu, Zante, Cephalonia and other isles; the Tyrrhenian in the west of Italy, the Æolienne around the Liparis, the Gulf of Lyons hollowing out Provence, the Gulf of Genoa indenting the Ligurias, the Gulf of Gabes hollowing out the Tunisian shores, the two Syrtes of such profound depth between Cyrene and Tripoli in the African continent.

What secret place in or about this sea, of which many a landing is still but little known, had Dr. Antekirtt chosen as a dwelling-place? There are islands by hundreds, islets by thousands on the periplus of this immense basin. One would seek in vain to count its capes and coves. How many people of different race, customs and political state throng forward to this seaboard, where the story of humanity has left its imprint for more than twenty centuries past — Frenchmen, Italians, Spaniards, Austrians, Ottomans, Greeks, Arabians, Egyptians, Tripolitans, Tunisians, Algerians, Moroccoans, even Englishmen, at Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus. Three great continents embrace it with their shores, Europe, Asia and Africa. When, then, had Count Mathias Sandorf become Dr. Antekirtt — a name dear to Oriental lands — sought the remote dwelling-place, in which the programme of his life should work itself out? This was what Pierre Bathory was bound to learn ere long.

After opening his eyes for an instant he had fallen back completely exhausted, as insensible as when the doctor had left him for dead in the house of Ragusa. It was then that the doctor had succeeded in one of those physiologic experiments in which the will plays so important a part, and of which the phenomena are no longer open to doubt. Gifted with a singular power of magnetism, he had been able, without the aid of magnesium light or even a brilliant point of metal, simply by the penetration of his look, to cast the dying man into a hypnotic state and substitute his own will for Pierre's. Pierre, enfeebled by the loss of blood, had lost the very look of life, and had fallen asleep to wake when the doctor wished. But his life was wellnigh spent, and now it had to be revived. It was a difficult task, and required the most minute care and all the resources of the medical art. The doctor must not fail.

"He will live. I must have him live," he repeated.

"Ah, why at Cattaro did I not act on my first idea? Why did the arrival of Sarcany at Ragusa prevent my snatching him from that accursed town? But I'll save him. In the time to come Pierre Bathory will be Mathias Sandorfs right hand."

And for fifteen years to punish and reward had been the constant thought of Dr. Antekirtt. He had never forgotten what he owed to his companions, Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar. The time has come now to act, and that was why the "Savarena" had gone to Ragusa.

During these long years the doctor had so altered in appearance that it was impossible to recognize him. His hair, worn short, had become white, and his complexion had turned deadly pale. He was one of those men of fifty who have kept the strength of their youth and acquired the coolness and calm of ripe old age. The bushy hair, fresh complexion, and Venetian mustache of the young Count Sandorf would never have recurred to those who looked at Doctor Antekirtt. But more rigidly refined and more highly tempered, he remained one of those natures of iron of whom it can be said that with them the magnet swings only as they near it. Of Stephen Bathory's son he wished to make what he had made of himself.

For a long time Doctor Antekirtt had been the sole representative of the great family of Sandorf. It will be remembered that he had a child, a daughter, who after his arrest had been intrusted to the care of the wife of Landeck, the steward of the Castle of Artenak. This little daughter, then only two years old, had been the count's sole heiress. To her when she was eighteen was to come the half of her father's goods, in accordance with the sentence which enjoined the confiscation and the death penalty. The steward Landeck had been retained as manager of that part of the Transylvanian domain put under sequestration, and his wife and he remained at the castle with the child, intending to devote their lives to her. But it seemed as though some fatality pursued the Sandorf family, now reduced to this one small individual. A few months after the conviction of the Trieste conspirators, and the events which succeeded, the child had disappeared, and it had proved impossible to find her. Her hat had been found on the bank of one of the numerous rivulets that run through the park. It was only too obvious that the little girl had fallen into one of the ravines into which run the torrents of the Carpathians, and not a vestige of her could be found. Rosina Landeck, the steward's wife, took the loss so much to heart that she died a few weeks afterward. The government made no change in the arrangements entered into at the time of the sentence. The sequestration was maintained, and the possessions of Count Sandorf would revert to the state if the heiress, whose death had not been legally proved, did not reappear to claim them.

Such was the last blow that had reached the Sandorf race, now doomed to extinction by the disappearance of the last representative of the family. Time was gradually accomplishing its work, and oblivion was throwing its shade over this event, as well as over all the other facts of the conspiracy of Trieste.

It was at Otranto, where he was living in the strictest incognito, that Sandorf heard of his child’s death. With his little daughter there disappeared all that remained to him of the Countess Rena, who had died so soon, and whom he had loved so much. Then he left Otranto, as unknown as when he arrived there, and no one could tell where he began his life anew.

Fifteen years later, when Sandorf had reappeared on the scene, no one suspected that he was playing the part of Dr. Antekirtt. Thenceforth Sandorf could devote himself entirely to his work. Now he was alone in the world with a task to perform — a task regarded as sacred. Many years after he had left Otranto, powerful by all the power that immense wealth gives, acquired under circumstances which will soon be ascertained, forgotten and concealed by his incognito, he had put himself on the track of those he had sworn to punish and reward. Already in his thoughts Pierre Bathory had been associated in the work of justice. Agents were stationed in the different coast towns of the Mediterranean. Well paid and sworn to secrecy, they corresponded only with the doctor either by the swift launches we know of, or the submarine cable which joined Antekirtta to Malta, and Malta to Europe.

It was in verifying the statement of his agents that the doctor had discovered the traces of all those who directly or indirectly had been mixed up in Sandorf’s conspiracy. He could then watch them from afar, and let them have their run, as it were, uninterfered with for four or five years. Silas Toronthal, he knew, had left Trieste and settled at Ragusa with his wife and daughter. Sarcany he traced to the principal cities of Europe, where he wasted his fortune, and then to Sicily, to the eastern provinces where he and his companion Zirone were meditating some new scheme to again put them in funds. Carpena, he learned, had left Rovigno and Istria, to do nothing in

Italy or Austria — the florins he had gained by his information permitting him to live in idleness.

Andrea Ferrato he would have helped to escape from the prison of Stein in the Tyrol — where he was expiating his generous conduct toward the fugitives of Pisino — had not death delivered the honest fisherman from his fetters a few months after he went there. His children, Maria and Luigi, had left Rovigno, and were now probably having a hard struggle for life. But they had disappeared, and he had not yet been able to come upon any trace of them. Of Mme. Bathory at Ragusa, with her son Pierre and Borik, the old servant of Ladislas Zathmar, the doctor never lost sight, and we know how he had sent them a considerable sum of money which was not accepted by the proud, courageous woman.

But the hour had come for the doctor to begin his difficult campaign. Assuring himself that he would never be recognized after his fifteen years' absence and his supposed death, he arrived in Ragusa and found Stephen Bathory's son in love with Silas Soronthal's daughter. It will be remembered how Sarcany had intervened and thrust them apart, how Pierre had been taken to his mother's house, how Dr. Antekirtt had acted when he was at the point of death, and how he had called him back to life to reveal himself to him under his real name of Mathias Sandorf. Now his task was to cure him, to tell him what he did not know, how treachery had delivered over his father and his companions, to acquaint him with the names of the traitors, to win over his help in the work the doctor had set himself to, of dealing out justice far beyond that ordinary justice of which he had been the victim.

In the first place, then, Pierre had to be restored to health,and it was to this restoration that he entirely devoted himself. In the first eight days after his arrival in the island Pierre literally hung between life and death. Not only was his wound very serious, but his mental state was even more so. The thought of Sava being now Sarcany's wife, the resurrection of Count Mathias Sandorf as Dr. Antekirtt — Sandorf, the most devoted of all his father's friends — all was enough to unsettle a mind already sorely shaken. Day and night the doctor did not leave him. He heard him in his delirium repeat the name of Sava Toronthal. He learned how deep and true was his love for her, and how her marriage was torturing him. He asked if this love would not prove resistless even when he learned that Sava was the daughter of the man who had sold and killed his father. The doctor would tell him, nevertheless. He had made up his mind to do so. It was his duty.

Again and again Pierre almost succumbed. Doubly injured, in mind and body, he was so near to death that he did not recognize Sandorf at his bedside. He had not even strength to whisper Sava's name.

But skillful care prevailed and the reaction began.

Youth gained the mastery. The sick man was cured in body before he was cured in mind. His wound began to heal, his lungs regained their normal powers, and on the 17th of July the doctor knew that Pierre was saved.

That day the young man recognized him. In a voice still weak he called him by his true name.

"To you, my son, I am Mathias Sandorf," was the reply, "but to you alone."

And as Pierre by his looks seemed to ask for explanations which he was naturally anxious to hear —

"Later on," added the doctor, "later on."

It was in a beautiful room with the windows opening to the fresh sea breezes, beneath the shade of lovely trees which the running streams kept evergreen, that Pierre swiftly and surely grew convalescent. The doctor untiring in his attention, he was with him every moment, but as the recovery became assured there was no strange in his calling in an assistant, in whose kindness and intelligence he had absolute confidence.

This was Point Pescade, as devoted to Pierre as he was to the doctor. We need hardly say that he and Cape Matifou had kept profoundly secret what had taken place at the cemetery of Ragusa, and that they had revealed to none that the young man had been snatched alive from the tomb.

Point Pescade had been rather closely connected with the facts which had been brought out during this period of several months. In consequence he was seized with a lively interest in his patient. This love affair of Pierre Bathory, thwarted by the interference of Sarcany — an impudent fellow, who had inspired him with justifiable antipathy — the meeting of the funeral procession and the wedding carriages before the hotel of Stradone, the exhumation in the Ragusa cemetery, all these had deeply affected this good being, and the more so because he felt himself associated, without understanding their purpose, with the designs of Dr. Antekirtt.

It follows, then, that Point Pescade accepted eagerly the task of nursing the invalid. It had been recommended that he at the same time divert him as much as possible by cheerful humor. He did not fail in this. Besides since the *fête* of Gravosa, he considered Pierre Bathory as a creditor, and on that occasion he had resolved to, in one way or another, discharge the indebtedness.

This, then, is why Point Pescade, installed at the side of the convalescent, made the attempt to divert his thoughts, and by chatting and jabbering not to allow him time for reflection.

It was under these circumstances that one day, by direct demand of Pierre, he was led to tell how he made the acquaintance of Dr. Antekirtt.

“It was the trabacolo affair, Mr. Pierre,” he replied. “You ought to remember! The trabacolo affair, which so easily made a hero of Cape Matifou!”

Pierre by no means had forgotten the grave event which had marked the *fête* of Gravosa on the arrival of the pleasure yacht; but he was unaware that, at the doctor’s», proposing it, the two acrobats had abandoned their calling to go over to his service.

“Yes, Mr. Bathory,” said Point Pescade. “Yes, that is it, and the devotion of Cape Matifou has been a stroke of fortune for us! But what we owe to the doctor should not cause us to forget what we owe to *you*.”

“To me?”

“To you, Mr. Pierre; to you, who that day just missed becoming our public — that is to mention a sum of two florins we had not earned, since our public was missing, well as he had paid for his place.”

And Point Pescade recalled to Pierre Bathory how, at the moment for entering the Provençal arena, he had suddenly disappeared.

The young man had lost recollection of this incident, but he answered Point Pescade with a smile — a sad smile, for he also remembered that he had only mingled with the crowd in order to once again meet Sava Toronthal!

His eyes closed once more. He reflected upon all that had occurred since that day. In thinking of Sava, whom he believed, whom he had to believe, married, a bitter anguish seized him, and he was tempted to curse those who had snatched him from death.

Point Pescade saw quickly that this *fête* at Gravosa recalled sad memories. He did not, therefore, persist; he even remained silent, saying to himself, "A half teaspoonful of good humor, to be administered every five minutes to my patient. Yes, a very good doctor's prescription, but not easy to follow."

"It was Pierre who, opening his eves again some moments later, re-opened the conversation."

"And so, Point Pescade," he said, "before the trabacolo affair you did not know Doctor Antekirtt?"

"We had never seen him, Mr. Pierre," replied Point Pescade, "and were ignorant even of his name."

"Since that day you have never left him?"

"Never, unless upon errands with which he has charged us."

"And in what country are we now? Could you tell me that, Point Pescade?"

"I have reason to believe, Mr. Pierre, that we are on an island, for the sea surrounds us."

"Undoubtedly. But in what part of the Méditerranean?"

"Ah! That's it? South, north, east, or west," said Point Pescade; "that is just what I do not know at all. After that it matters little! What is certain is that we are at Doctor Antekirtt’s home, and that one is well fed, well clothed, well sheltered here, without counting th consideration — ”

“But at least you know the name of this island, whose situation you do not know?” Pierre questioned.

“The name of it? Oh, certainly,” answered Point Pescade. “The name of it is Antekirtta!”

Pierre Bathory sought vainly to remember any island of the Mediterranean with such a name, and he looked at Point Pescade.

“Yes, Mr. Pierre, yes!” responded the honest fellow. “Antekirtta — nothing at all of longitude, and still less of latitude — the Mediterranean. It is to this address that my uncle would write to me if I had an uncle, but thus far Heaven has denied me that blessing. After all, it is not surprising that this island should be called Antekirtta, for it belongs to Doctor Antekirtt. However, for me to tell you whether the doctor took his name from the island or the island from the doctor, would be impossible, even if I were general secretary of the Geographical Society.”

Nevertheless, Pierre’s convalescence pursued its due course. None of the complications one might have feared made an appearance. With substantial, yet judicious diet, the invalid recovered his strength perceptibly from day to day. The doctor visited him often, and conversed with him upon no subjects save those in which he was most interested. And Pierre, not wishing to provoke premature confidence, waited until it should please him to give it.

Point Pescade had always faithfully reported to the doctor the fragments of conversation exchanged by himself and his patient. Evidently the incognito, which covered not only Mathias Sandorf, but even the island he inhabited, quite engrossed Pierre Bathory. It was equally evident that he constantly thought of Sava Toronthal, now so far away from him, since all communication between Antekirtta and the rest of the European Continent seemed broken off. But the time approached when he should be strong enough to hear all.

Yes! to hear all; and that day, like the surgeon who operates, the doctor would be insensible to the cries of the patient.

Several days slipped by. The young man’s wound was completely healed. Already he could rise and seat himself at the window of his chamber. The Mediterranean sunshine came to caress him there, the quickening sea-breeze filled his lungs and gave him health and vigor. In spite of all, he felt himself renewed. Then his eyes would fasten obstinately on the limitless horizon, beyond which he would have gladly pierced, but reason was still sick with him. This vast extent of water around the unknown isle was almost always deserted. Some coasters — xebecs or tartans or polacks — would appear in the distance, but never turn or veer about to come alongside; never any great trading vessel, never any of the steamships, whose paths traverse the great European lake in every direction.

One had said truly that Antekirtta was banished to the confines of the world.

The 24th of July the doctor announced to Pierre Bathory that upon the following afternoon he might take a walk, and offered to accompany him in his first outing.

“Doctor,” said Pierre, “if I have strength to go out, I should have strength enough to listen to you.”

“To listen to me, Pierre? What do you mean?”

“I mean that you know all my history and I do not know yours.”

The doctor regarded him attentively, not as friend, but as physician who is about to decide if he shall apply steel or fire to the quick flesh of the patient. Then, seating himself near to him:

“You wish to know my history, Pierre? Then listen to me!”

CHAPTER II.

“PAST AND PRESENT.”

And from the first the history of Dr. Antekirtt, which begins at the moment when Count Mathias Sandorf precipitated himself into the waters of the Adriatic.

“Through the midst of this hail of shot, with which the last discharge of police agents covered me, I passed safe and sound. The night was very dark. They could not see me. The current carried me out, and I could not have returned even had I wished. I did not wish it, moreover. Far better to die than be taken again and thrown into — perhaps slaughtered, in the donjon of Pisino. Should I succumb, all was ended. Should I succeed in saving myself, I could at least pass as one dead.

“Naught would longer impede me in the work of justice, which I had sworn to Count Zathmar, to your father, and to myself to accomplish, and which I shall accomplish.”

“A work of justice?” repeated Pierre, whose eyes shone at this word so unlooked for.

“Yes, Pierre, and this work you will know, for it is in order to associate you with myself in it, that I have snatched you, dead like myself, yet living as myself, from. the cemetery of Ragusa.”

At these words Pierre Bathory felt himself carried backward fifteen years, to the time when his father fell on the place of arms of the Pisino fortress.

“Before me,” resumed the doctor, “lay the sea as far as the Italian seaboard. Good swimmer as I was, I could not pretend to traverse it. Unless providentially succored, either by grasping a floating spar, or by a strange vessel perceiving me on board, I was destined to perish. But when one has risked one’s life, one is very strong to defend it, if possible.

“At first I had dived several times to escape their last shots. Then, when certain I was no longer perceived, I kept myself on the surface, and directed myself out to sea. My clothing troubled me little, being light and fitting close to the body.

“It must have been half past nine in the evening, according to my reckoning. I swam for more than an hour in a direction opposite from the coast, thus removing myself from Rovigno, whose lights disappeared one by one in the distance.

“Where was I going then, and what was my hope? I had none, Pierre, but I felt in me a strength to resist, a tenacity, a superhuman, sustaining will. It was not only my life which I sought to save, but my work in the future. And even at this moment, if any fishing-bark had passed I would have dived to avoid it. On this Austrian seaboard how many traitors might I not still find ready to deliver me up in order to receive their premium? How many Carpenas for an honest Andrea Ferrato?

“It was even this that happened at the end of the first hour. A craft appeared in the darkness, almost unexpectedly. She came from far out at sea and ran near as if to touch land. Being already fatigued, I lay upon my back, but instinctively turned over again in readiness to dive. A fishing-bark which lay to in one of the Istrian ports could not but suspect me.

“I was almost certain as to this. One of the sailors cried out in a Dalmatian language to tack about.

“Of a sudden I dived, and the vessel, before those in command could have seen me, passed above my head.

“After a deep respiration I breathed freely and continued on my way westward.

“The breeze became lighter; the waves fell with the wind, and I was carried out to sea on the wide sweeping surge.

“Sometimes swimming, sometimes floating, I kept on further and further for about another hour. I saw but the object to attain, and not the road to reach it. Fifty miles across the Adriatic! Yes! And I was willing to swim them. Yes! I would swim them. Ah! Pierre, you must go through such trials before you know of what man is capable, before you know what the human machine can do when all its mental and physical forces are combined.

“For the second hour I thus kept afloat. That part of the Adriatic was absolutely deserted. The last birds had left it to regain their hollows in the rocks. Overhead the gulls and mews no longer circled in couples nor uttered their despairing screams.

“Although I felt no fatigue my arms became heavy, my legs seemed like lead. My fingers began to open and I found it most difficult to keep my hands together. My head felt as if it were a shot on my shoulders, and I began to lose the power of keeping myself on the surface.

“A kind of hallucination seized me. The guidance of my thoughts escaped me. Strange associations of ideas arose in my troubled brain. I felt that I could no longer hear or see properly, but I fancied that some distance away from me a noise was being produced and a light was approaching and I was right in its road. And that proved to be the case.

“It must have been about midnight when a dull, distant booming arose in the east — a booming that I could not explain. A light flashed through my eyelids, which had shut in spite of all I could do. I tried to raise my head, and I could not do so without letting myself almost sink. Then I looked.

“I give you all these details, Pierre, because it is necessary you should know them, and through them know me as well!”

“There is no need of that, doctor, none!” answered the young man. “Do you think my mother has never told me what sort of a man was Mathias Sandorf?”

“She may have known Mathias Sandorf, Pierre, but Doctor Antekirtt she does not know! And he it is you must know! Listen then! Hear me out!

“The noise I heard was produced by a vessel coming from the east and bound for the Italian coast. The light was her white light hanging on her forestay — which showed her to be a steamer. Her side lights I also saw, red at port and green at starboard, and as I saw them both together the steamer must have been bearing straight down on me.

“That moment was a critical one. In fact the chances were that the steamer was an Austrian bound outward from Trieste. To ask help from her were to put myself again in the power of the gendarmes of Rovigno. I resolved to do nothing of the kind, but to take advantage of another means of safety that I had thought of.

“The steamer was a fast one. She grew rapidly larger as she neared me, and I saw the foam leaping off white from her bows. In less than two minutes she would cut through the place where I lay motionless.

“That the steamer was an Austrian I had no doubt. But there was nothing impossible in her destination being Brindisi and Otranto, or at least she might call there. If so, she would arrive in less than twenty-four hours.

“My decision was taken, and I waited. Sure of being unseen in the darkness, I kept myself in the steamer’s path, and fortunately she slowed slightly as she gently rose and fell with the waves.

“At length the steamer reached me; her bow, some twenty feet from the sea, towered above me. I was wrapped in foam as she cleft the sea, but I was not struck. I was grazed by the long iron hull, and I pushed myself away from it with my hands as it passed me. This only lasted for a second or so. Then I found her lines began to curve in for her stem, and at the risk of being cut up by the screw I caught hold of the rudder.

“Fortunately the steamer had a full cargo, and her screw was deep down and did not strike above the water, else I should not have been able to get out of the whirlpool or retain my hold of the support to which I had clung. Like all steamships, she had a pair of chains hanging from her stern and fixed on to the rudder, and I had seized one of these chains, pulled myself up to the ring to which it hung, and there I sat on the chain close to the stern-post and just a inches above the sea. I was in comparative safety.

“Three hours elapsed and day broke. I reckoned I would have to remain where I was for another twenty-four hours if the steamer was going to call at Brindisi or Otranto. What I should have to suffer most from would be hunger and thirst. The important thing for me was that I could not be seen from the deck nor even from the boat hanging by the stern davits. Some vessel meeting us might, it is true, see me and signal me. But very few ships met us that day, and they passed too far off for them to notice a man banging by the rudder chains.

“A scorching sun soon dried my clothes. Andrea Ferrato’s 300 florins were in my belt. They would make me feel safe once I got to land. There I should have nothing to fear. In a foreign country Count Mathias Sandorf would have nothing to fear from the Austrian police. There is no extradition for political refugees. But it was not enough that they should think my life was saved. I wished them to think I was dead. No one should know that the last fugitive from the donjon of Pisino had set foot on Italian soil.”

“What I wished happened. The day passed without adventure. Night came. About ten o’clock in the evening I saw a light at regular intervals away to the south-west. It was the light-house at Brindisi. Two hours afterward the steamer was just outside the harbor.

“But then before the pilot came on board, when we were about a mile from the land, after making a parcel of my clothes and tying them to my neck, I slipped off the rudder chain into the sea.

“A minute afterward I had lost sight of the steamer, whose steam-whistle then began its shrieking. In half an hour I had reached the shore, hidden among the rocks, resumed my clothes, and on a bed of sea-weed had fallen asleep. In the morning I entered Brindisi, found one of the humblest hotels in the place, and there awaited events before settling on the plan of an entirely new life.

“Two days afterward, Pierre, the newspapers informed me that the conspiracy of Trieste was at an end. They said that the search for Count Sandorf’s body had been fruitless. I was held to be dead — as dead as if I had fallen with my two companions, Ladislas Zathmar and your father, Stephen Bathory, in the donjon of Pisino.

“I, dead! No, Pierre, and they shall see that I am living!”

Pierre had listened greedily to the doctor’s story. He was as deeply moved by it as if the story had been told him from the tomb. Yes! It was Count Mathias Sandorf who thus had spoken. In the presence of him, the living portrait of his father, his habitual coldness had gradually abandoned him, he had revealed his real character, he had shown himself as he really was, after years of disguise. What he had said about the audacious voyage across the Adriatic was true in the minutest details. It was thus that he arrived at Brindisi, where Mathias Sandorf remained dead to the world.

But he had to leave Brindisi without delay. The town is only a transfer station. People come to it merely to embark for India or land for Europe. It is generally except on the two days of the week when the P. and 0. boats come in.

If the doctor had no further fear for his life, it was important that his death should be believed in. Thus he thought on the morning after his arrival, as he was walking at the foot of the terrace, which overlooks the column of Cleopatra, at the very spot where the old Appian Way begins. Already he had formed his plans. He would go to the East in search of wealth and power. But to embark on one of the steam-boats trading to Asia Minor among a crowd of passengers of all nations was not what he wanted. He wanted some more secret means of transport than he could find at Brindisi. And that evening he took train for Otranto.

In an hour and a half the train reached this town, situated almost at the end of the heel of the Italian boot. There, in this almost abandoned port, the doctor agreed with the captain of a xebec departing for Smyrna. In the morning the xebec sailed, and the doctor saw the light-house of Punta di Luca, the extreme point of Italy, sink beneath the horizon, while on the opposite coast the Aeroceraunian Mountains were hidden in the mist. A few days afterward, after a voyage without incident, Cape Matifou at the extremity of Southern Greece was doubled and Smyrna safely reached.

The doctor had succinctly related to Pierre this part of his voyage, and also how he had learned from the newspapers of the unexpected death of his daughter that had left him alone in the world.

“At last,” he said, “I was in the land of Asia Minor, where for so many years I was to live unknown. It was in studies of medicine, chemistry, natural science, that I had delighted during my youth, at the schools and universities of Hungary — where your father gained his renown — and it was to these studies that I was to trust to gain the means of livelihood.

“I was fortunate enough to succeed, and more promptly than I had hoped, first at Smyrna, where for seven or eight years I obtained great reputation as a physician. Some unexpected cures brought me into connection with the richest people of those countries in which the medical art is still in a rudimentary state. I then made up my mind to leave the town. And like the doctors of the days gone by, healing at the same time as I taught the art of healing, studying the almost unknown therapeutics of the talebs of Asia Minor, the pundits of India, I traveled through the whole of those provinces, stopping here a few weeks, there a few months, called for and asked for at Karabissar, Binder, Adana, Haleb, Tripoli, Damas, always preceded by a renown which increased without ceasing and brought me a fortune that increased with my renown.

“But that was not enough. What I wanted was unbounded power, such as that possessed by the wealthy rajahs of India, whose knowledge is equal to their wealth.

“My opportunity came.

“There was at Hans in Northern Syria a man dying of a slow disease. No physician had been able to tell what was the matter with him. Hence none of them knew how to treat him. This man was Faz-Rhat, and he had occupied very high posts in the Turkish Empire. He was then forty-five years of age, and an immense fortune allowed him to enjoy all the pleasures of life.

“Faz-Rhat had heard of me, for at the time my reputation was at its height. He invited me to Hans, and I accepted the invitation.

“‘Doctor,’ said he, ‘the half of my fortune is yours if you will give me back my life.’

“‘Keep the half of your fortune,’ I said. ‘I will take care of you and cure you if Heaven permits.’

“I carefully studied the malady the physicians had abandoned. A few months at the outside was all they had given him to live. But I was lucky enough to diagnose him unmistakably. For three weeks I remained with Faz-Rhat so as to follow the effects of the treatment I had prescribed. His cure was complete. When he wished to pay me I would accept only what seemed to me to be reasonable. And then I left Hans.

“Three years later by an accident when hunting, Faz-Rhat lost his life. He had no relatives whatever, and his will made me the sole heir of all his possessions. Their value was certainly not less than fifty millions of florins.

“Thirteen years had then elapsed since the fugitive of Pisino had taken refuge in Asia Minor. The name of Dr. Antekirtt, although somewhat legendary, was known throughout Europe. I had obtained the result I wished, and now I was ready to set to work at the object of my life.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRESENT.

“I had resolved to return to Europe, or at least to some point on the Mediterranean. I visited the African coast, and for a considerable sum I became the owner of an important island, rich, fertile, and suitable in every way for a small colony — this isle of Antekirtta. Here, Pierre, I am sovereign, absolute master, king without subjects, but with a people devoted to me body and soul, with means of defense that will be very formidable when I have finished them, with means of communication that link me to different points of the Mediterranean border, with a flotilla of such speed that I may almost say I have made this sea my dominion!”

“Where is Antekirtta situated?” asked Pierre.

“In the neighborhood of the Syrtis Major, which has had an evil reputation from the remotest antiquity, in the south of the sea which the north wind makes so dangerous even to modern ships, in the deepest bend of the Gulf of Sidra, which cuts back into the African coast between Tripoli and Barca.”

There at the north of the group of the Syrtic Islands, is the island of Antekirtta. A few years before the doctor had traveled through the Tripolitan coasts, and visited Souza, the old port of Cyrene, the Barca country, the towns that have replaced the old Ptolemais, Berenice, Adrianapolis, and in a word, that old Pentapolis, formerly Greek, Macedonian, Roman, Persian, Saracenic, and now Arabian, and belonging to the Pachalik of Tripoli. The chances of his voyage — for he went to a certain extent where he was called took him among the numerous archipelagoes off the Lybian sea-board, Pharos and Anthiroda, the Plinthine twins, Eucripte, and the Tyndaric rocks, Pyrgos, Platea, Ilos, the Hyphales, the Pontiaris, the White Islands, and last of all the Syrtics.

In the Gulf of Sidra, about thirty miles south-west of the vilayet of Ben Ghazi, the nearest point on the mainland, he found the isle of Antekirtta. It was large enough — eighteen miles in circumference — to accommodate all those he thought necessary for his plans; sufficiently elevated, consisting chiefly of a conical hill, towering up some eight hundred feet from the sea, and commanding the whole sweep of the gulf; and sufficiently varied in its productions, and watered by its streams, to satisfy the wants of several thousand inhabitants. Besides, it was in that sea, terrible on account of its storms, which, in prehistoric times, had been fatal to the Argonauts, whose perils were sung by Apollonius of Rhodes, Horace, Virgil, Propertius, Valerius Flaccus, Lucan, and so many others who were more geographers than poets, such as Polybius, Sallust, Strabo, Mela, Pliny and Procopius.

The doctor was the island’s absolute owner. He had obtained the freehold for a consideration, clear of every feudal and other obligation, and the deed of cession which made him sovereign proprietor had been fully ratified by the sultan.

For three years the doctor had lived in this island. About 300 European and Arabic families, attracted by his offers and the guarantee of a happy life, formed a small colony of some 2,000 souls. They were not slaves, nor were they subjects; they were companions devoted to their chief, and none the less so because that small corner of the terrestrial globe had become their new home.

Gradually a regular administration had been organized, with a militia for the defense of the island, and a magistrate chosen from among the notables, who very seldom found his services required. Then, according to plans sent by the doctor to the leading builders of England, France, and America, he had constructed his wonderful fleet of steamers, steam yachts, schooners and “Electrics” for his rapid passages across the Mediterranean. At the same time fortifications began to be thrown up round Antekirtta, but they were not yet finished, although the doctor for serious reasons was urging on the works.

Had then Antekirtta some enemy to fear in the vicinity of the Gulf of Sidra? Yes. A formidable sect, or rather a society of pirates, who had not seen without envy and hatred a foreigner founding a colony off the Lybian coast.

This sect was the Mussulman Brotherhood of Sidi Mohammed Ben Ali Es Senoussi. In this year (1300 of the Hegira) it had become much more menacing than formerly, and its geographical dominion embraced some 3,000,000 of adherents. His zaouiyas, his vilayets, his centers of activity established in Egypt, in the Turkish Empire, in Europe and Asia, in Eastern Nigritia, Tunis, Algeria, Morocco and the independent Sahara up to the frontiers of Western Nigritia, existed in still greater numbers in Barca and Tripoli. This was a source of serious danger to the European establishments of Northern Africa, including Algeria, destined to become hereafter the richest country in the world, and specially to Antekirtta, and hence the doctor was only acting with ordinary prudence in availing himself of every modern means of protection and defense.

So Pierre learned from the conversation which followed, and which taught him many other things as well. It was to the isle of Antekirtta that he had been brought, to the midst of the Syrtic Sea, as to one of the most forsaken corners of the ancient world, many hundred miles from Ragusa, where he had left behind two whose memory would never leave him — his mother and Sava Toronthal.

In a few words the doctor completed the details concerning the second half of his existence. While he was making his arrangements for the security of his island, while he was developing the riches of the soil and providing for the material and mental wants of the little colony, he had kept himself acquainted with all that was going on respecting his former friends, of whom he had never lost sight, and among whom were Mme. Bathory, her son, and Borik.

Pierre then learned why the “Savarena” had arrived at Gravosa under conditions that so greatly excited the curiosity of the public, why the doctor had visited Mme. Bathory, how and why her son had not been informed of his visit, how the money put at his mother’s disposal had been refused by her, and how the doctor had arrived in time to snatch Pierre from the tomb to which he had been carried when in his magnetic sleep.

“Yes, my son,” he added. “Yes! You lost your head entirely and did not recoil from suicide — ”

At this word Pierre in a movement of anger found strength enough to sit up.

“Suicide!” he exclaimed. “Do you then think I stabbed myself?”

“Pierre — in a moment of despair — ”

“Despair? Yes! I was! I thought I had been abandoned even by you, my father’s friend, after the promises you had made! In despair? Yes! and I am now! But Heaven does not give death to those in despair! It says live — and be avenged!”

“No — punish!” answered the doctor. “But, Pierre who stabbed you then?”

“A man that I hate;” replied Pierre; “a man that on that night I met by chance in a deserted road by the side of the walls of Ragusa! Perhaps he thought I was going to quarrel with him! But he prevented me! He stabbed me! This man, this Sarcany is — ”

Pierre could not finish the sentence. At the thought of the wretch in whom he saw the husband of Sava his brain seemed to fail him, his eyes closed and life seemed to leave him as if his wound had been reopened.

In a moment the doctor had restored him to consciousness, and looking at him fixedly —

“Sarcany! Sarcany!” he whispered to himself.

It was advisable for Pierre to take some rest after the shock he had just received. He declined to do so.

“No,” said he. “You told me to begin with — and now for the story of Dr. Antekirtt from the moment when Count Mathias Sandorf precipitated himself into the waves of the Adriatic — ”

“Yes, Pierre.”

“Then there is something else I ought to know about Count Mathias Sandorf.”

“Are you strong enough to hear it?”

“Speak.”

“Be it so,” replied the doctor. “It is better to finish with the secrets that you have a right to know, with all the terrible past that will never return. Pierre, you thought I had abandoned you because I had left Gravosa! Listen, then, and judge for yourself.

“You know, Pierre, that on the evening of the day fixed for our execution my companions and I attempted to escape from the fortress of Pisino. But Ladislas Zathmar was caught by the warders just as he was going to join us at the foot of the donjon. Your father and I, swept away by the torrent of the Buco, were already out of their reach.

“After miraculously escaping from the whirlpools of the Foiba, when we set foot on the Leme Canal we were perceived by a scoundrel who did not hesitate to sell our heads to the Government, who had just put a price on them. Discovered in the house of a Rovigno fisherman, just as he was about to take us across the Adriatic, your father was arrested and returned to Pisino. I was more fortunate, and escaped! You know that? But this you do not know:

“Before the information given to the police by this Spaniard named Carpena — information which cost Ferrato, the fisherman, his liberty, and, a few months afterward, his life — two men had sold the secret of the conspirators of Trieste — ”

“Their names?” interrupted Pierre.

“First of all ask me how their treachery was discovered,” said the doctor.

And he hurriedly told what had passed in the cell of the donjon, and explained the acoustic phenomenon which had revealed the names of the traitors.

“Their names, doctor!” exclaimed Pierre. “You will not refuse to give me their names?”

“I will tell you.”

“Who were they?”

“One of them was the accountant who had introduced himself as a spy into Zathmar’s house! The man who tried to assassinate you! Sarcany!”

“Sarcany!” exclaimed Pierre, who found sufficient strength to rise and walk toward the doctor. “Sarcany! that scoundrel. And you knew it! And you, the companion of Stephen Bathory; you, who offered his son your protection; you, to whom I had intrusted the secret of my love; you, who had encouraged me — you allowed him to introduce himself into Silas Toronthal’s house when you could have kept him out with a word! And by your silence you have authorized this crime — yes, this crime — which has delivered over that unfortunate girl to Sarcany!”

“Yes, Pierre; I did all that!”

“And why?”

“Because she can never be your wife!”

“She can never be my wife!”

“Because if Pierre Bathory marries Miss Toronthal he will be guilty of a still more abominable crime!”

“But why? Why?” asked Pierre in a paroxysm of anguish.

“Because Sarcany had an accomplice! Yes, an accomplice in the horrible scheme which sent your father to his death! And that accomplice — it is necessary that you should know it — was the banker of Trieste, Silas Toronthal!”

Pierre heard and understood! He could make no reply A spasm contracted his lips. He sunk, crushed to the earth, and horror completely paralyzed him. His pupils dilated and his look seemed to be plunged into unfathomable darkness.

The paroxysm lasted but a few seconds, during which the doctor asked himself if the patient were about to succumb under the dreadful operation to which he had submitted him.

But Pierre’s nature was as energetic as his own He gained the mastery over his tortured feelings. Tears welled up m his eyes. Then he fell back into his chair and held out his hand to the doctor.

“Pierre,” said he to him in a gentle, serious voice, “to the whole world you and I are dead ! Now I am alone in the world with no friend, no child. Will you be my son?”

“Yes, father,” answered Pierre.

And the father and son sat clasped in each other’s arms.

CHAPTER IV.

EVENTS AT RAGUSA.

Meanwhile what was taking place at Ragusa?

Mme. Bathory no longer lived there. After her son’s death, Borik and a few of her friends had persuaded her to give up the house in the Rue Marinella. At first it seemed as though the unhappy mother had been driven mad, and strong-minded though she was, she had really given signs of derangement that alarmed her physicians. Under their advice she was removed to the little village of Vinticello, where a friend of her family was living. There she would receive every attention, but what consolation could they offer to the mother and the wife who had suffered twice over in her love for her husband and her son?

Her old servant would not leave her, and the house in the Rue Marinella having been shut up, he had followed to Vinticello to become the humble and assiduous confidant of her sorrows.

They had ceased altogether to trouble themselves about Sava Toronthal, and were even unaware that the marriage had been put off for some time. And in fact the young lady’s health necessitated her keeping to her bed. She had received a blow as unexpected as it was terrible to her. He whom she loved was dead — dead of despair probably! And it was his corpse they were taking to the grave at the very moment she was leaving the house on her way to her hateful wedding! For ten days, that is till the 16th of July, Sava was in a most alarming state. Her mother would not leave her. Moreover that care and attention was the last her mother could give, for she herself had received a fatal blow.

During these long hours what thoughts were interchanged between mother and daughter? We can imagine, and we need not enlarge on them. Two names were of constant recurrence amid their sobs and tears — one, that of Sarcany, to be cursed, the other that of Pierre, to be wept over.

From these conversations in which Silas Toronthal refrained from taking part — for he even avoided seeing his daughter — it resulted that Mme. Toronthal made one more appeal to her husband. She asked him to consent to break off a marriage which Sava regarded only with fear and horror.

The banker remained unmoved in his resolution. Had he been left to himself he might, perhaps, have yielded, but in the power of his accomplice, more even than may be imagined, he refused to listen to his wife. The marriage of Sava and Sarcany was decided on, and it would take place as soon as the state of her health would allow.

It is easy to imagine what was Sarcany's irritation when this unexpected incident intervened, with what ill-dissembled anger he saw his game interfered with, and with what persistency he attacked Toronthal. It was only a delay, doubtless, but the delay if prolonged would lead to the collapse of the whole scheme on which he had arranged his future. And, besides, he knew that Sava felt for him nothing but insurmountable aversion.

And what would this aversion become if the young lady suspected that Pierre Bathory had been stabbed by the man who was forced upon her as her husband? For his part he was only too pleased at having had the chance of getting rid of his rival. Not a shade of remorse did he feel, for he was dead to every human sentiment.

“It is lucky,” said he one day to Toronthal, “that that fellow thought of killing himself! There might have been too many Bathorys! Heaven does indeed protect us!”

And who was there left of these three families of Sandorf, Zathmar and Bathory? An old woman whose days were numbered! Yes! Heaven did seem to protect the scoundrels, and assuredly would carry its protection to its extreme limits the day that Sarcany became the husband of Sava Toronthal!

Nevertheless it appeared as though Heaven were trying people’s patience very much, for the delay as to the marriage grew more and more prolonged. No sooner had Sava recovered — physically, that is — and Sarcany was again thinking of realizing his projects, than Mme. Toronthal fell ill. She had indeed lived out her life. After all that had occurred at Trieste when she learned to what a scoundrel she was bound, after all her troubles about Pierre, in whom she had tried to repair the wrong done to his family, after all she had suffered since Sarcany’s unwelcome return, her illness could hardly be wondered at.

From the first it was evident that her illness would be fatal. A few days of life were all that her doctors could promise her. She was dying of exhaustion. Nothing could save her, even if Pierre Bathory could rise from his grave to become her daughter’s husband.

Sava could now return with interest the care and attention she had received from her, and never left her bedside by night or day.

What Sarcany felt at this new delay can be imagined Daily he came to abuse the banker, who like him was powerless. All they could do was to wait for the end.

On the 28th of July Mme. Toronthal seemed to have recovered a little of her strength; and then she fell into a burning fever, which threatened to carry her off in forty-eight hours.

In this fever she was seized with delirium: she began to wander in her mind, and many unintelligible phrases escaped her.

One word — one name repeated incessantly — came as a surprise to Sava. It was that of Bathory, not the name of the young man, but that of his mother, that the sick woman appealed to, prayed to, and returned to again and again as if she was assailed with remorse.

“Pardon! madame! Forgive me!”

And when madame during a lull in the fever was interrgated by her daughter —

“Hush! Sava! Hush! I said nothing!” she exclaimed in terror.

The night between the 30th and 31st of July arrived For a little the doctors might think that the fever, having reached its maximum, was about to subside. During the day she had been better, there had been no mental troubles and the change in the patient seemed somewhat surprising. The night promised to be as calm as the day.

But if so, it was because Mme. Toronthal on the point of death discovered an energy of which she had previously thought herself incapable. She had made her peace with God, and taken a resolution which she only waited for the opportunity to carry out.

That night she insisted that Sava should go to bed for a few hours. Although she strongly objected to leave her, yet she did not think it right to disobey her mother's commands, and at eleven o'clock she went to her own room.

Mme. Toronthal was then alone. All in the house were asleep, and a silence reigned which has been aptly named the silence of death.

Mme. Toronthal rose from her bed, and this sick woman, whom all thought too feeble to make even the slightest movement, dressed herself and sat down in front of her writing-table.

Then she took a sheet of letter paper and with trembling hand wrote a few lines and signed them. Then she slipped the letter into an envelope, which she sealed, and which she thus addressed:

"Mme. Bathory, Rue Marinella, Stradone, Ragusa."

Mme. Toronthal, then making a great effort to overcome the fatigue she had thus caused herself, opened the door of her room, descended the main staircase, crossed the court-yard and by the small gate let herself out into the Stradone.

The Stradone was then dark and deserted, for it was nearly midnight.

With tottering steps Mme. Toronthal went along the pavement to the left for some fifty feet or so and stopped before a post-box into which she threw her letter. And then she returned to the hotel.

But all the strength she had mustered was now exhaust- ed, and she fell helpless and motionless on the step of the side gate. There an hour afterward she was found. There Toronthal and Sava were brought to recognize her, and from there they took her back to her room before she had recovered her consciousness.

The next day Toronthal informed Sarcany of what had happened. Neither one nor the other suspected that Mme. Toronthal had gone that night to post a letter in the Stradone. But why had she gone out of the house? They were unable to explain, and it proved to them a subject of great anxiety.

The sick woman lingered throughout another twenty-four hours. She gave no sign of life save by occasional convulsive starts, the last efforts of a soul about to escape. Sava had taken her hand, as if to still keep her in this world, where she herself would soon be so forsaken. But the lips of the mother were dumb now, and the name of Bathory came no more from them. Doubtless, her conscience tranquilized, her last wish accomplished, Mme. Toronthal had no longer prayer to offer or pardon to implore.

The following night, toward three of the morning, while Sava found herself alone with the dying one, the latter made a movement and her hand touched that of her daughter.

At this contact her eyes half opened and her gaze fell upon Sava. This gaze was so questioning that Sava could not mistake it.

“Mother, mother,” she said, “what is that you wish?”

Mme. Toronthal made a sign.

“To speak to me?”

“Yes,” came distinctly from the mother.

Sava was bending over the bedside, but a new sign caused her to approach still nearer. She laid her head close to her mother’s.

“My child, I am about to die!”

“Mother — mother!”

“Softly,” murmured Mme. Toronthal. “More softly that no one hear us!”

Then, after a new effort —

“Sava,” she said, “I have to ask your pardon — your pardon for the wrong I have done you — the wrong I have not had the courage to hinder.”

“You — mother — you to have wronged me! You to ask my pardon!”

“One last kiss, Sava! — yes — the last — to say that you will pardon!”

The young girl pressed her lips gently on the pale forehead of the dying woman.

The latter took sudden strength and passed an arm about her daughter’s neck. Then raising herself and regarding the girl with a terrifying fixedness:

“Sava,” she said, “Sava, you are not the daughter of Silas Toronthal! You are not my daughter! — your father — ”

She could not conclude. A convulsion threw her from, the arms of Sava, and her soul fled with these last words.

The young girl bent over the dead, striving to restore her. It was useless.

Then she called aloud, until they ran in from all parts of the hotel. Silas Toronthal was one of the first to arrive in the chamber of his wife.

Perceiving him, Sava, seized with an irresistible feeling of repulsion, recoiled from this man, whom now she had a right to despise, to hate, for he was not her father. The dead had said this, and one does not die upon a falsehood.

Then Sava fled, terrified at that which had been said by the unhappy woman who had loved her as a daughter — all the more terrified perhaps at that which she had not had time to say.

On the third day the funeral of Mme. Toronthal occurred with ostentation. The crowd of friends that every rich man numbers surrounded the banker. Near him marched Sarcany, thus affirming by his presence that nothing was altered in the projects which would cause him to enter the Toronthal family. This was, in truth, his hope; but should he never realize it, it would not be because he had not surmounted many obstacles. Sarcany believed, moreover, that circumstances could only be favorable to the accomplishment of his plans, since they left Sava so completely at his mercy.

The arrangements which had been hindered by the illness of Mme. Toronthal, would be prolonged by her death. During the period of mourning there could be no talk of marriage. The proprieties demanded that several months at least should have elapsed since the decease.

Sarcany, eager to obtain his object, must have found this annoying. Be that as it might, necessity compelled him to respect the proprieties, but not without lively discussions between himself and Silas Toronthal. And these discussions always terminated with this sentence of the banker’s:

“I can do no better; and besides, providing the marriage occurs within five months hence, you have no reason to complain.”

In addition to this, the two had not ceased to he disturbed by the strange action of Mme. Toronthal just before ber death. The idea even occurred to Sarcany that the dying woman might have wished to post a letter, whose destination she kept a secret.

The banker, to whom Sarcany communicated this suspicion, was not indisposed to believe it might be so. “If it is,” said Sarcany, “this letter threatens us directly and gravely. Your wife always upheld Sava against me. She even sustained my rival, and who knows if in her dying moments she may not have found a strength one would have believed impossible, to betray our secrets. In this case ought we not to forestall it, and leave a city where you and I have more to lose than gain?”

“If this letter threatens us,” observed Silas Toronthal some days later, “the menace would have already produced its effect, and thus far nothing is altered in our situation.”

To this argument Sarcany knew not how to answer. In reality if Mme. Toronthal’s letter referred to their future projects nothing had come of it, and there seemed no danger in their remaining there. When danger appeared it would be time to act.

This is what happened, unanticipated by the twain, five days after the death of Mme. Toronthal.

Since the death of her mother Sava had kept aloof, not even leaving her room for her meals. The banker, constrained whenever he found himself *vis-à-vis* with her, sought not such a *tête-à-tête*, which could only prove embarrassing. He allowed her to act as she pleased, and his part lived in another portion of the hotel.

More than once Sarcany had severely censured Silas Toronthal for accepting this situation. In consequence of the arrangement he had now no opportunity to meet the young girl. This did not conform to his ulterior designs. And this he explained very emphatically to the banker. Notwithstanding there could be no question of celebrating the marriage during the months of mourning, he did not wish that Sava should accustom herself to the idea that her father and himself had renounced their thoughts of the union.

At length Sarcany appeared so imperious and exacting before Silas Toronthal, that the latter, on the 16th of August, sent word to Sava that he wished to speak with her that same evening. As he also sent word that Sarcany desired to be present at the interview, he expected a refusal. But none came. Sava replied that she would abide by his orders.

Evening arrived, Silas Toronthal and Sarcany awaited Sava impatiently in the grand salon. The first of the two decided not to be moved by anything, having such rights as paternal authority gives. The second resolved to remain silent to listen to what was said, wishing above all to try and discover what the secret thoughts of the young girl were. He feared constantly that she might be informed of certain things to an extent of which they knew not.

Sava entered the salon at the hour appointed. Sarcany arose at her appearance, but to his salutation the young girl responded only with an inclination of the head. She seemed hardly to have seen him, or rather not to wish to see him.

At a motion from Silas Toronthal, Sava seated herself. Then, with countenance paler in contrast with her garb of mourning, she listened coldly to the remarks addressed to her.

“Sava,” said the banker, “I have respected your sorrow at the death of your mother by not disturbing your solitude. But following these sad occurrences, one finds one’s self brought necessarily to consider certain affairs of interest. Although you have not yet attained your majority, it is well that you should know what portion accrues to you in the inheritance of — ”

“If it be only a question of fortune,” said Sava, “it is unnecessary to discuss it. I lay claim to nothing in the inheritance you refer to.”

Silas Toronthal moved uneasily; his face displayed a suspicion of disappointment, moreover astonishment and annoyance.

“I believe, Sava,” resumed Silas Toronthal, “that you have not realized the import of your words. Whether you wish it or no, you are the heir of Madame Toronthal, your mother, and the law obliges me to render account to you when you come of age.”

“Unless I renounce the inheritance,” the girl replied tranquilly.

“And why?”

“Because, beyond question, I have no right to it.”

The banker sat up in his chair. He had hardly expected such a response. As for Sarcany, he said nothing. In his opinion Sava was playing a game, and he occupied himself with trying to see through it.

"I do not know, Sava," said Silas Toronthal, impatient at her cold responses, "I do not know what such words signify, nor who has suggested them. Besides, I am not here to discuss law and jurisprudence. You are under my guardianship. You are not qualified to accept or refuse, Now, you will submit to the authority of your father: you will not deny it, I fancy?"

"Perhaps!" said Sava.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Silas Toronthal, beginning to lose composure. "But you speak three too soon, Sava. When you have attained your majority you may do what you please with your fortune. Until then your interests are intrusted to me, and I will guard them as I intend."

"Be it so," replied Sava. "I will wait."

"And what will you wait for?" replied the banker. "You doubtless forget that your situation will be altered as soon as the usages permit. You will then have less right to manage your fortune when you are not the only one interested in the business — "

"Yes! — the business!" answered Sava with contempt.

"Believe me," said Sarcany, aroused by the word, which had been pronounced in a tone of the most seathing disdain, "believe me, that a more honorable sentiment — "

Sava did not seem to hear him, and kept her eyes fixed on the banker, who continued, angrily:

"Not the only one — for your mother's death in no way has altered our plans."

“What plans?” asked the girl.

“The marriage you pretend to forget, and which is to make Mr. Sarcany my son-in-law.”

“Are you sure that this marriage will make Mr. Sarcany your son-in-law?”

The insinuation this time was so direct that Toronthal would have left the room to hide his confusion. But Sarcany, with a gesture, kept him back. He wished to find out all he could, to know what it all meant.

“Listen, my father,” said Sava, “and it is for the last time I give you the title. It is not I Mr. Sarcany wants to marry; he wants to marry the fortune that I abandon from to-day! Great as may be his impudence, he will not dare deny it! You remind me that I had consented to this marriage, and my reply is easy. Yes! I would have sacrificed myself when I thought my father’s honor was at stake; but my father you know well is in no way concerned in this hateful scheme! If you wish to enrich Mr. Sarcany give him your money. That is all he wants!”

The girl rose and walked toward the door.

“Sava,” said Toronthal, barring the way, “there is in your words such incoherence that I do not understand them — that you probably do not understand them yourself. Has the death of your mother — ?”

“My mother! — yes, she was my mother — my mother in her feelings toward me!”

“If grief has not deprived you of reason,” continued Toronthal, who heard only himself; “yes, if you are not mad — ”

“Mad!”

“But what I have resolved on shall take place, and before six months have elapsed you shall be Sarcany’s wife.”

“Never!”

“I know how to compel you.”

“And by what right?” answered the girl, indignantly.

“The right given me by parental authority.”

“You — sir! You are not my father, and my name is not Sava Toronthal!”

At these words the banker stepped back speechless, and the girl, without even turning her head, walked out of the room.

Sarcany, who had been carefully watching Sava during the interview, was not surprised at the way it ended. He had suspected it. What he feared had taken place. Sava knew that she was bound by no tie to the Toronthals.

The banker was overwhelmed at the unexpected blow. He was hardly master of himself. Sarcany, therefore, began to sum up the case as it stood, while he simply listened. Besides he could have nothing but approval for what his old accomplice proposed with so much indisputable logic.

“We can no longer reckon on Sava voluntarily consenting to this marriage,” he said. “But for reasons we know, it is more than ever necessary that the marriage should take place! What does she know of our past life? Nothing! For she told you nothing! What she knows is that she is not your daughter, that is all! Does she know her father? Not likely! His would have been the first name she would have thrown in your face! Has she known our position for long? No, probably since the moment of Madame Toronthal’s death!”

Toronthal nodded his approval of Sarcany’s argument. He was right, as we know, in his suspicions as to how the girl had gained her information, as to how long she had known it, and as to what she had learned of the secret of her birth.

“Now to conclude,” continued Sarcany. “Little as she knows of what concerns her, and although she is ignorant of our proceedings in the past, we are both of us in danger — you in the position you hold at Ragusa, I in what I should gain by marriage, and which I have no intention of giving up! What we must do then is this, and we must do it as soon as possible. Leave Ragusa, you and I, and take Sava with us without a word to any one either to-day or to-morrow, then return here only when the marriage is over, and when she is my wife Sava will have to keep her mouth shut. Once we get her away she will be so removed from outside influences that we shall have nothing to fear from her. It will be my business to make her consent to this marriage which will bring me in so much, and if I don’t succeed, why then — ”

Toronthal agreed; the position was the same as it had been with the cryptogram. He did not see how to resist. He was in his accomplice’s power, and could not do otherwise. And why should he?

That evening it was agreed that the plan should be put into execution before Sava could leave the house. Then Toronthal and Sarcany separated, and set to work as we shall soon see.

The next day but one Mme. Bathory, accompanied by Borik, had left the village of Vinticello to return to the house in the Rue Marinella for the first time since her son’s death. She had resolved to leave Ragusa forever, and had come to prepare for her departure.

When Borik opened the door he found a letter which had been slipped into the letter-box.

It was the letter Mme. Toronthal had posted the day before her death.

Mme. Bathory took the letter, opened it, looked first at the signature, and then read the few lines that had been traced by the dying hand, and revealed the secret of Sava’s birth.

What sudden connection was there between the names of Sava and Pierre in Mme. Bathory’s mind?

“She! He!” she exclaimed.

And without another word — without answering her old servant, whom she thrust aside as he tried to hold her, she rushed out, ran down the Rue Marinella into the Stradone, and did not stop till she reached Toronthal’s house.

Did she know what she was doing? Did she know that in Sava’s interest it would be better for her to act with less precipitation and more prudence? No! she was irresistibly urged toward the girl as if her husband and her son had come from their grave and sent her to the rescue.

She knocked at the door. The door opened. A domestic inquired her busines.

Mme. Bathory wished to see Sava.

Miss Toronthal was not in the house.

Mme. Bathory would speak with Mr. Toronthal.

The banker had gone away the day before without saying where he was going, and he had taken his daughter with him.

Mme. Bathory staggered and fell into the arms of Borik, who had just come up to her.

And when the old man had taken her back to the house in the Rue Marinella —

“To-morrow, Borik,” she said, “to-morrow we will go together to the wedding of Sava and Pierre!”

Mme. Bathory was mad.

CHAPTER V.

THE DOCTOR DELAYS.

During these events which concerned Pierre so intimately he grew better from day to day. Soon there was no reason for anxiety about his wound. It had almost completely healed. But great were Pierre’s sufferings as he thought of his mother and of Sava — whom he believed to be lost to him.

His mother? She could not be left under the supposition of her son’s fictitious death. It had been agreed that she should be cautiously informed of the real state of things and brought to Antekirtta. One of the doctor’s agents at Ragusa had orders not to lose sight of her until Pierre was completely restored to health and that would be very soon.

As far as Sava was concerned, Pierre was doomed never to speak of her to Dr. Antekirtt. But although he thought she was now Sarcany’s wife, how could he forget her? Had he ceased to love her because she was the daughter of Silas Toronthal? No! After all, was Sava responsible for her father’s crime? But it was that crime that brought Stephen Bathory to his death! Hence a continual struggle within him, of which Pierre alone could tell the innumerable vicissitudes.

The doctor felt this. And to give the young thoughts another direction, he constantly spoke to him of the act of justice they were to work out together. The traitors must be punished, and they should be. How they were to reach them they did not yet know, but they would reach them.

“A thousand roads, one end!” said the doctor.

And if need be he would follow the thousand roads to reach that end.

During the last days of his convalescence Pierre went about the island, sometimes on foot, sometimes in a carriage. And he was astonished at what the little colony had become under the administration of Dr. Antekirtt.

Work was going on at the fortifications destined to protect the town, the harbor, and in short the whole island from attack. When the works were finished they were to be armed with long-range guns, which from their position would cross their fires and thus render the approach of an enemy’s ship impossible.

Electricity was to play an important part in the defensive system, not only in firing the torpedoes with which the channel was armed, but even in discharging the guns in the batteries. The doctor had learned how to obtain the most marvelous results from this agent to which the future belongs. The central station, provided with steam motors and boilers, contained twenty dynamo machines on a new and greatly improved system, and there the currents were produced which special accumulators of extraordinary intensity stored up in convenient form for the general use of Antekirtta — the water supply, the lighting of the town, telegraphs, telephones, and the circular and other railways on the island. In a word, the doctor had applied the studies of his youth to practical purposes, and realized one of the desiderata of modern science — the transmission of power to a distance by electric agency. Having succeeded in this he had had vessels built as we have seen, and the “Electrics” with their excessive speed enabled him to move with the rapidity of an express from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. As coal was indispensable for the steam engines which were required to produce the electricity, there was always a considerable stock in store at Antekirtta, and this stock was continually renewed by a ship that traded backward and forward to Wales.

The harbor from which the little town rose in the form of an amphitheater was a natural one, and had been greatly improved. Two jetties, a mole, and a breakwater made it safe in all weathers. And there was always a good depth of water, even alongside the wharves, so that at all times the flotilla of Antekirtta was in perfect security. This flotilla comprised the schooner “Savarena,” the steam collier working to Swansea and Cardiff, a steam yacht of between seven and eight hundred tons named the “Ferrato,” and three “Electrics,” of which two were fitted as torpedo boats which could usefully contribute to the defense of the island.

Under the doctor’s direction Antekirtta saw its means of resistance improve from day to day, and of this the pirates of Tripoli were well aware. Great was their desire to capture it, for its possession would be of great advantage to the grand master of Senousism, Sidi Mohammed El Mahdi. But knowing the difficulties of the undertaking, they waited their opportunity with that patience which is one of the chief characteristics of the Arab. The doctor knew all this, and actively pushed on his defensive works. To reduce them when they were finished the most modern engines of destruction would be required, and these the Senousists did not yet possess. All the inhabitants of the island between eighteen and forty were formed into companies of militia, provided with the newest arms of precision, drilled in artillery maneuvers, and commanded by officers of their own élection, and this militia made up a force of five to six hundred trustworthy men.

Although there were a few farms in the country, by far the greater number of colonists lived in the town which had received the Transylvanian name of Artenak in remembrance of the Count Sandorf’s estate on the Carpathian slopes. A picturesque place was Artenak with its few hundred houses. Instead of being built like a chessboard in the American style, with roads and avenues running at right angles, it was arranged irregularly. The houses clustered on the smaller hills shaded with orange-trees and standing amid beautiful gardens, some of European, some of Arab design, and past them flowed the pleasant, cooling streams from the water-works. It was a city in which the inhabitants were members of the same family, and could live their lives in common without forfeiting the quiet and independence of home. Happy were the people of Antekirtta. “Ubi bene, ibi patria,” is perhaps not a very patriotic motto, but it was appropriate enough for those who had gathered at the doctor’s invitation and left their old country, in which they had been miserable, to find happiness and comfort in this hospitable island.

Doctor Antekirtt lived in what was known as the Stadthaus — not as their master, but as the first among them. This was one of those beautiful Moorish dwellings with miradores and moucharabys, interior court, galleries, porticoes, fountains, saloons and rooms decorated by clever ornamentists from the Arabic provinces. In its construction the most precious materials had been employed — marble and onyx from the rich mountain of Filfila on the Numidian Gulf, a few miles from Philippeville — worked and introduced with as much knowlege as taste. carbonates lend themselves marvelously to an architect’s fancies, and under the powerful climate of Africa soon clothe themselves with that golden tone that the sun bestows on the buildings of the East. At the back of the city rose the tower of the small church built of the black and white marble from the same quarry, which served indeed for all the requirements of architecture and statuary, and which with its blue and yellow veins was curiously similar to the ancient products of Paros and Carrara.

Outside the town on the neighboring hills were a few houses, a villa or two, a small hospital at the highest point, where the doctor intended to send his patients — when he had them. On the hill-sides, sloping to the sea there were groups of houses forming a bathing station. Among the other houses one of the most comfortable — a low block-house-looking building near the entrance on to the mole — was called “Villa Pescade and Matifou,” and there the two inseparables had taken up their quarters with a servant of their own. Never had they dreamed of such affluence!

“This is good!” remarked Cape Matifou over and over again.

“Too good!” answered Point Pescade. “It is much too good for us! Look here, Cape Matifou, we must educate ourselves, go to college, get the grammar prize, obtain our certificates of proficiency.”

“But you are educated, Point Pescade.” replied the Hercules. “You know how to read, to write, to cipher — ”

In fact, by the side of his comrade Point Pescade would have passed for a man of science! But he knew well enough how deficient he was. All the schooling he had had was at the “Lycée des Carpes de Fontainebleau,” as he called it. And so he was an assiduous student in the library of Artenak, and in his attempt to educate himself he read and worked, while Cape Matifou, with the doctor’s permission, cleared away the sand and rocks on the shore, so as to form a small fishing harbor.

Pierre gave Pescade every encouragement, for he had recognized his more than ordinary intelligence which only required cultivation. He constituted himself his professor, and directed his studies so as to give him very complete elementary instruction, and his pupil made rapid progress. There were other reasons why Pierre should interest himself in Point Pescade. Was he not acquainted with his past life? Had he not been intrusted with the task of watching Toronthal’s house? Had he not been in the Stradone during the procession when Sava had swooned? More than once Point Pescade had

had to tell the story of the sad events in which he had indirectly taken part. It was to him alone that Pierre could talk when his heart was too full for him to be silent. But the time was approaching when the doctor could put his double plan into execution — first to reward, then to punish.

That which he could not do for Andrea Ferrato, who had died a few months after his sentence, he wished to do for his children. Unfortunately his agents had as yet been unable to discover what had become of them. After their father's death Luigi and his sister had left Rovigno and Istria, but where had they gone? No one knew, no one could say. The doctor was much concerned at this, but he did not give up the hope of finding the children of the man who had sacrificed himself for him, and by his orders the search was continued.

Pierre's wish was that his mother should be brought to Antekirtta; but the doctor, thinking of taking advantage of Pierre's pretended death, as he had of his own, made him understand the necessity of preceeding with extreme prudence. Besides, he wished to wait till the convalescent had regained sufficient strength to accompany him in his campaign; and as he knew that Sava's marriage had been postponed by the death of Mme. Toronthal, he had decided to do nothing until the wedding had taken place.

One of his agents at Ragusa kept him informed of all that took place, and watched Mme. Bathory's house with as much care as he did Toronthal's. Such was the state of affairs, and the doctor waited with impatience for the delay as to the wedding to come to an end. If he did not know what had become of Carpena, whose track he had lost after his departure from Rovigno, Toronthal and Sarcany at Ragusa could not escape him. Suddenly, on the 20th of August, there arrived a telegram informing him of the disappearance of Silas Toronthal, Sava, and Sarcany, and also of Mme.

Bathory and Borik, who had just left Ragusa without giving any clew to their destination.

The doctor could delay no longer. He told Pierre what had happened, and hid nothing from him. Another terrible blow for him! His mother disappeared, Sava dragged off they knew not where by Silas Toronthal, and, there was no doubt, still in Sarcany's hands.

"We shall start to-morrow," said the doctor.

"To-day!" exclaimed Pierre. "But where shall we look for my mother? Where shall we look for — "

He did not finish the sentence. The doctor interrupted him —

"I do not know if it is only a coincidence. Perhaps Toronthal and Sarcany have something to do with Madame Bathory's disappearance. We shall see. But we must be after the two scoundrels first."

"Where shall we find them?"

"In Sicily — perhaps."

It will be remembered that in the conversation between Sarcany and Zirone which the doctor overheard in the donjon of Pisino, Zirone had spoken of Sicily as the usual scene of his exploits, and proposed that his companion should join him there if circumstances required it. The doctor had not forgotten this, nor had he forgotten the name of Zirone. It was a feeble clew, perhaps, but in default of any other it might set them again on the trail of Sarcany and Toronthal.

The start was immediately decided on. Point Pescade and Cape Matifou were informed that they would be wanted to go to the doctor. Point Pescade at the same time was told who Toronthal, Sarcany and Carpena were,

“Three scoundrels!” he said. “And no mistake!”

Then he told Cape Matifou —

“You will come on the scene soon.”

“Now?”

“Yes, but you must wait for the cue.”

CHAPTER VI.

OFF MALTA.

They started that evening. The “Ferrato,” always ready for sea, with provisions on board, bunkers coaled and compasses regulated, was ordered to sail at eight o’clock.

It is nine hundred and fifty miles from the Syrtis Major to the south of Sicily, near Porto di Palo. The swift steam yacht, whose mean speed exceeded eighteen knots, would take about a day and a half to accomplish the distance. She was a wonderful vessel. She had been built at one of the best yards on the Loire. Her engines could develop nearly fifteen hundred horse power effective. Her boilers were on the Belleville system — in which the tubes contain the flame and not the water — and possessed the advantage of consuming little coal, producing rapid vaporization, and easily raising the tension of the steam to nearly thirty pounds without danger of explosion. The steam, used over again by the reheaters, became a mechanical agent of prodigious power, and enabled the yacht, although she was not as long as the dispatch boats of the European squadrons, to more than equal them in speed.

It need scarcely be said said that the “Ferrato” was fitted so as to insure every possible comfort to her passengers. She carried four steel breech-loaders, mounted on the barbette principle, two revolving Hotchkiss guns, two Gatlings, and, in the bow, a long chaser which could send a five-inch conical shot a distance of four miles.

The captain was a Dalmatian named Kostrik, and he had under him a mate and second and third officers. For the machinery there were a chief engineer, a second engineer, and six firemen; the crew consisted of thirty men, with a boatswain and two quartermasters, and there was a steward, a cook, and three native servants. During the first hour or two the passage out of the gulf was made under favorable conditions. Although the wind was contrary — a brisk breeze from the north-west — the captain took the “Ferrato” along with remarkable speed; but he did not set either of the head sails or the square sails on the foremast, or the lateens on the main and mizzen.

During the night the doctor and Pierre in their rooms aft, and Point Pescade and Matifou in their cabins forward, could sleep without being inconvenienced by the movement of the vessel, which rolled a little like all fast boats. But although sleep did not fail the two friends, the doctor and Pierre bad too much anxiety to take any rest. In the morning when the passengers went on deck, more than 120 miles bad been run in the twelve hours since they had left Antekirtta. The wind was in the same direction, with a tendency to freshen. The sun had risen on a stormy horizon, and everything betokened a roughish day.

Point Pescade and Cape Matifou wished the doctor and Pierre good-morning.

“Thank you, my friends,” said the doctor. “Did you sleep well in your bunks?”

“Like dormice with an easy conscience!” answered Point Pescade.

“And has Cape Matifou had his first breakfast?”

“Yes, doctor, a tureen of black coffee and four pounds of sea biscuit.”

“Hum! A little hard, that biscuit!”

“Bah! For a man that used to chew pebbles between his meals!”

Cape Matifou slowly nodded his huge head in sign of approval of his friend’s replies.

The “Ferrato” by the doctor’s orders was now driving along at her utmost speed and sending off from her prow two long paths of foam. To hurry on was only prudent Already Captain Kostrick, after consulting the doctor, had begun to think of putting for shelter into Malta, whose lights were sighted about eight o’clock in the evening. The state of the weather was most threatening. Notwithstanding the westerly breeze, which freshened as the sun went down, the clouds mounted higher and higher, and gradually overspread three quarters of the sky. Along the sea-line was a band of livid gray, deepening in its density and becoming black as ink, when the sun’s rays shot from behind its jagged edges. Now and then the silent flashes tore asunder the cloud bank, whose upper edge rounded off into heavy volutes and joined on to the masses above. At the same time, as if they were struggling with the wind from the west and the wind from the east that they had not yet felt, but, whose existence was shown by the disturbed state of the sea, the waves increased as they met, and, breaking up confusedly, began to come rolling on to the deck. About six o’clock the darkness had completely covered the cloudy vault, and the thunder growled, and the lightning vividly flashed in the gloom.

“Better keep outside!” said the doctor to the captain.

“Yes,” answered Captain Kostrik. “In the Mediterranean it is either one thing or the other. East and west strive which shall have us, and the storm coming in to help, I am afraid the first will get the worst of it. The sea will become very rough off Gozo or Malta, and it may hinder us a good deal. I don't propose to run into Valette, but to find a shelter till daylight under the western coast of either of the islands."

"Do as you think best," was the reply.

The yacht was then about thirty miles to the westward of Malta. On the island of Gozo, a little to the north-west of Malta and separated from it only by two narrow channels formed by a central islet, there is a large light-house with a range of twenty-seven miles.

In less than an hour, notwithstanding the roughness of the sea, the "Ferrato" was within range of the light. After carefully taking its bearings and running toward the land for some time the captain considered he was sufficiently near to remain in shelter a few hours. He therefore reduced his speed so as to avoid all chance of accident to the hull or machinery. About half an hour afterward, however, the Gozo light suddenly vanished.

The storm was then at its height. A warm rain fell in sheets. The mass of cloud on the horizon, now driven into ribbons by the wind, flew overhead at a terrible pace. Between the rifts the stars peeped forth for a second or two, and then as suddenly disappeared, and the ends of the tatters dragging in the sea swept over its surface like streamers of crape. The triple flashes struck the waves at their three points, sometimes completely enveloping the yacht, and the claps of thunder ceaselessly shook the air. The state of affairs had been dangerous; it rapidly became alarming.

Captain Kostrik, knowing that he ought to be at least within twenty miles of the range of the Gozo light, dared not approach the land. He even feared that it was the height of the cliffs which had shut out the light, and if so, he was extremely near. To run aground on the isolated rocks at the foot of the cliffs was to risk immediate destruction.

About half past nine the captain resolved to lay-to and keep the screw at half speed. He did not stop entirely, for he wanted to keep the ship under the control of her rudder.

For three hours she lay head to wind. About midnight things grew worse. As often happens in storms, the strife between the opposing winds from the east and west suddenly ceased. The wind went round to the point from which it had been blowing during the day.

“A light on the starboard bow!” shouted one of the quartermasters, who was on the lookout by the bowsprit.

“Put the helm hard down!” shouted Captain Kostrik, who wished to keep off the shore.

He also had seen the light. Its intermittent flashes showed him it was Gozo. There was only just time for him to come round in the opposite direction, the wind sweeping down with intense fury. The “Ferrato” was not ten miles from the point on which the light had so suddenly appeared.

Orders to go full speed were telegraphed to the engineer; but suddenly the engine slowed, and then ceased to work.

The doctor, Pierre, and all those on deck feared some serious complication. An accident had in fact happened. The valve of the air pump ceased to act, the condenser failed, and after two or three loud reports, as if an explosion had taken place in the stern, the screw stopped dead.

Under such circumstances the accident was irreparable. The pump would have to be dismantled, and that would take many hours. In less than twenty minutes the yacht, driven to leeward by the squalls, would be on shore.

“Up with the forestaysail! Up with the jib! Set the mizzen!”

Such were the orders of Captain Kostrik, whose only chance was to get under sail at once. The orders were rapidly executed. That Point Pescade with his agility and Cape Matifou with his prodigious strength rendered efficient service we need hardly stop to say. The halyards would have soon broken if they had not yielded to the weight of Cape Matifou.

But the position of the “Ferrato” was still very serious. A steamer, with her long hull, her want of beam, her slight draught, and her insufficient canvas, is not made for working against the wind. If she is laid too near, and the sea is rough, she is driven back in irons, or she is blown off altogether. That is what happened to the “Ferrato.” She found it impossible to beat off the lee shore. Slowly she drifted toward the foot of the cliffs, and it seemed as though all that could be done was to select a suitable place to beach her. Unfortunately, the night was so dark that the captain could not make out the coast. He knew that the two channels separated Gozo from Malta on each side of the central islet, one the North Comino, the other the South Comino. But how was it possible for him to find the entrances in the pitch darkness, or to take his ship across the angry sea to seek shelter on the eastern coast of the island, and perhaps get into Valetta harbor? A pilot might, perhaps, attempt the dangerous maneuver; but in this dense atmosphere, in this night of rain and fog, what fisherman would venture out, even to a vessel in distress? There was, perhaps, a chance that one might come, and so the steam whistle was set going, and three cannon-shots were fired, one after the other, as a signal.

Suddenly from the landward side a black point appeared in the fog. A boat was bearing down on the “Ferrato” under close-reefed sail. Probably it was some fisherman who had been obliged by the storm to take shelter in the little creek of Melleah, where his boat, run in behind the rocks, had found safety in that admirable grotto of Calypso, which bears a favorable comparison with the grotto of Fingal in the Hebrides. He had evidently heard the whistle and signal of distress, and at the risk of his life had come to the help of the half-disabled yacht. If the “Ferrato” was to be saved it could only be by him.

Slowly his boat came up. A rope was got ready to be thrown to him as soon as he came alongside. A few minutes elapsed, which seemed interminable. The steamer was not half a cable’s length from the reefs. The rope was thrown, but a huge wave caught the boat on its crest and dashed it against the side of the “Ferrato.” It was smashed to pieces, and the fisherman would have certainly perished had not Matifou snatched at him, lifted him at arm’s length, and laid him on the deck as if he had been a child.

Then without a word — would there have been time? — the man ran to the bridge, seized the wheel, and as the bows of the “Ferrato” fell off toward the rock, he sent the wheel-spokes spinning round, headed her straight for the narrow channel of the North Comino, took her down with the wind dead aft, and in less than twenty minutes was off the east shore of Malta in a much calmer sea. Then with sheets hauled in he ran along about half a mile from the coast, and about four o’clock in the morning, when the first streaks of dawn began to tinge the horizon, he run down the Valetta channel, and brought up the steamer off Senglea Point. Doctor Antekirtt then mounted the bridge and said to the young sailor:

“You saved us, my friend.”

“I only did my duty.”

“Are you a pilot?”

“No, I am only a fisherman.”

“And your name?”

“Luigi Ferrato!”

CHAPTER VII.

MALTA

And so it was the son of the Rovigno fisherman who had just told his name to Dr. Antekirtt. By a providential chance it was Luiga Ferrato whose courage and ability had saved the yacht and her passengers and crew from certain destruction.

The doctor was going to seize Luigi and clasp him in his arms. He checked himself. It would have been Count Sandorf who would have thus shown his gratitude; and Count Sandorf was dead to everybody, even to the son of Andrea Ferrato.

But if Pierre Bathory was obliged keep the same reserve, and for the same reasons, he was about to forget it when the doctor stopped him by a look. The two went into the saloon, and Luigi was asked to follow.

“My friend,” asked the doctor, “are you the son of an Istrian fisherman, whose name was Andrea Ferrato?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you not a sister?”

“Yes, and we live together at Valetta; but — ” he added, with a certain amount of hesitation — ”did you know my father?”

“Your father!” answered the doctor. “Your father fifteen years ago gave shelter to two fugitives in his house at Rovigno. Those fugitives were friends of mine whom his devotion was unable to save. But that devotion cost Andrea Ferrato his liberty and his life, for on account of it he was sent to Stein, where he died.”

“Yes, died, but he did not regret what he had done,” said Luigi.

The doctor took the young man’s hand.

“Luigi,” said he, “it was to me that my friends gave the task of paying the debt of gratitude they owed your father. For many years I have been seeking to find what had become of your sister and you, but all trace had been lost when you left Rovigno. Thank Heaven you were sent to our assistance! The ship you have saved I named the ‘Ferrato,’ in remembrance of your father, Andrea! Come to my arms, my child!”

While the doctor clasped him to his breast Luigi felt the tears start into his eyes. At this affecting scene Pierre could not remain unmoved. He felt his whole soul go forth toward this young man of his own age, the brave son of the fisherman of Rovigno.

“And I! I!” exclaimed he, with outstretched arms.

“You, sir?”

“I! The son of Stephen Bathory!”

Did the doctor regret the avowal? No! Luigi Ferrato could keep the secret as well as Pescade and Matifou.

Luigi was then informed how matters stood, and learned Dr. Antekirtt’s objects. One thing he was not told, and that was that he was in the presence of Count Mathias Sandorf.

The doctor wished to be taken at once to Maria Ferrato. He was impatient to see her again, impatient, above all, to hear how she had lived a life of work and misery since Andrea's death had left her alone, with her brother to look after.

"Yes, doctor," answered Luigi, "let us go ashore at once! Maria will be very anxious about me! It is forty-eight hours since I left her to go fishing in Melleah Creek, and during last night's storm she will be afraid I have got drowned!"

"You are fond of your sister?" asked the doctor.

"She is my mother and my sister combined," answered Luigi.

Does the isle of Malta, situated about sixty-two miles from Sicily, belong to Europe or to Africa, from which it is separated by one hundred and sixty miles? This is a question which has much exercised geographers; but, in any case, having been given by Charles V. to the Hospitalers whom Solyman drove out of Rhodes, and who then took the name of Knights of Malta, it now belongs to England — and it would take some trouble to get it away from her. It is about eighteen miles long and ten across. It has Valetta and its suburbs for its capital, besides other towns and villages, such as Citta Vecchia — a sort of sacred town, which was the seat of the bishop at the time of the Knights — Dingzi, Zebbug, Birchircara, etc. Rather fertile in its eastern half, and very barren in its western half, the density of its population toward the east is in striking contrast to that toward the west. In all it contains about a hundred thousand inhabitants. What Nature has done for this island in cutting out of its coast its four or five harbors, the most beautiful in the world, surpasses all that can be imagined. Everywhere water; everywhere points, capes and heights ready to receive fortifications and batteries. The Knights had already made it a difficult place to take, and the English have made it impregnable. No ironclad could hope to force her way in against such an array of guns, which, among others, include two at the water’s edge, each of a hundred tons, fully equipped with hydraulic apparatus, and capable of sending a shot weighing seventeen and a half hundredweight a distance of nine and a half miles. A piece of information that may be profitably noted by the powers who regret to see in England’s hands this admirable station, commanding the Central Mediterranean, and which could hold the whole British fleet.

Assuredly there are English at Malta. There is a governor lodged in the ancient palace of the Grand Master, there is an admiral to look after the fleet and the harbors, and a garrison of from four to five thousand men; but there are Italians who wish to be considered at home, a floating cosmopolitan population as at Gibraltar, and there are, of course, Maltese.

The Maltese are Africans. In the harbors they work their brightly colored boats, in the streets they drive their vehicles down the wildest slopes, in the markets they deal in fruits, vegetables, meats, fish, making a deafening uproar under the lamp of some small sacred daub. It is said that all the men are alike, copper in color, with black, slightly woolly, hair, with piercing eyes, robust, and of medium height. It seems as though all the women were of the same family, with large eyes and long lashes, dark hair, charming hands, supple figures and skin of a whiteness that the sun cannot touch beneath the “falzetta,” a sort of black silk mantle worn in Tunisian fashion, common to all classes, and which answers at the same time for head-dress, mantle, and even fan.

The Maltese have the mercantile instinct. Everywhere they are found doing a trade. Hard-working, thrifty, economic, industrious, sober, but violent, vindictive and jealous, it is among the lower classes that they are best worth studying. They speak a dialect of which the base is Arabic, the result of the conquest which followed the fall of the Roman Empire, a language animated and picturesque, lending itself easily to metaphor and to poetry. They are good sailors when you can keep them, and bold fishermen familiarized with danger by their frequent storms.

It was in this island that Luigi pursued his calling with as much audacity as if he had been a Maltese, and here he had lived for nearly fifteen years with his sister Maria.

Valetta and its suburbs, we said. There are really six towns on the Grand and Quarantine harbors — Floriana Senglea, Bighi, Burmola, Vittoriosa, Sliema, are hardly suburbs, nor even mere assemblages of houses inhabited by the poorer classes; they are regular cities with sumptuous mansions, hotels and churches, worthy of a capital which boasts some 25,000 inhabitants.

It was at Valetta that the brother and sister lived. It would perhaps be more correct to say “under Valetta,” for it was in a kind of subterranean quarter known as the Manderaggio, the entrance to which is on the Strada San Marco, that they had found a lodging suitable for their slender means; and it was into this hypogeum that Luigi led the doctor as soon as the yacht was moored.

After declining the services of the hundreds of boats that surrounded them, they landed on the quay. Entering by the Marine Gate, and deafened by the pealing and ringing of the bells which hover like a sonorous atmosphere over the Maltese capital, they passed beneath the double-casemated fort, and mounted first a steep slope and then a narrow staircase. Between the high houses with their greenish miradores and niches with lighted lamps they arrived before the Cathedral of St. John, and mingled with a crowd of the noisiest people in the world.

When they had reached the back of this hill, a little lower than the cathedral, they began their descent toward the Quarantine harbor; there in the Strada San Marco they stopped midway before a staircase which went off to the right down into the depths.

The Manderaggio runs along under the ramparts with narrow streets where the sun never shines, high yellow walls irregularly pierced with innumerable holes, which do duty as windows, some of them grated and most of them free. Everywhere round about are flights of steps; leading to veritable sewers, low gate-ways, humid, sordid, like the houses of a Kasbah, miserable court-yards, and gloomy tunnels, hardly worthy of the name of lanes. And at every opening, every breathing-place, on the ruined landings and crumbling footpaths, there gathers a repulsive crowd of old women with faces like sorceresses, mothers dirty and pallid and worn, daughters of all ages in rags and tatters, boys half naked, sickly, wallowing in the filth; beggars with every variety of disease and deformity; men, porters or fisher folk of savage look capable of everything evil, and among this human swarm a phlegmatic policeman, accustomed to the hopeless throng, and not only familiarized, but familiar with it! A true court of miracles, but transported into a strange underwork, the last ramifications of which open on to the curtain walls on the level of the Quarantine harbor, and are swept by the sun and sea breeze.

It was in one of the houses in this Manderaggio, but in the upper portion of it, that Maria and Luigi Ferrato lived in two rooms. The doctor was struck with the poverty of the miserable lodging and also with its neatness. The hand of the careful housekeeper again showed itself, as it had done in the house of the fisherman of Rovigno.

As the doctor entered Maria rose, saying to her brother, “My child! my Luigi!”

Luigi embraced his sister, and introduced his friends.

The doctor related in a few words how Luigi had risked his life to save a ship in distress, and at the same time he mentioned Pierre as the son of Stephen Bathory.

While he spoke Maria looked at him with so much attention and even emotion that he feared for a moment she had recognized him. But it was only a flash that vanished from her eyes almost immediately. After fifteen years how was it possible for her to recognize a man who had only been in her father’s house for a few hours?

Andrea Ferrato’s daughter was then thirty-three years old. She had always been beautiful, owing to the purity of her features and the bright look of her splendid eyes. The white streaks here and there in her raven hair showed that she had suffered less from the length than from the severity of her life. Age had nothing to do with this precocious grayness, which was due entirely to the fatigues and troubles and griefs she had been through since the death of the fisherman of Rovigno.

“Your future and that of Luigi now belong to us,” said Dr. Antekirtt as he finished his story. “Were not my friends deeply indebted to Andrea Ferrato? You will not object, Maria, to Luigi remaining with us?”

“Sirs!” said Maria, “my brother has only acted as he should have done in going to your help last night, and I thank Heaven that he was inspired with the thought to do so. He is the son of a man who never knew but one thins and that was his duty.”

“And we know only one,” replied the doctor, “and that is to pay a debt of gratitude to the children of him — ”

He stopped. Maria looked at him again, and the look seemed to pierce through him. He was afraid he had said too much.

“Maria,” broke in Pierre, “you will not prevent Luigi from being my brother?”

“And you will not refuse to be my daughter?” added the doctor, holding out his hand.

And then Maria told the story of her life since she left Rovigno: how the espionage of the Austrian police rendered her existence insupportable, and how they had come to Malta for Luigi to perfect himself in his trade of a seaman by continuing that of a fisherman; and how for many years they had struggled against misery, their feeble resources being soon exhausted.

But Luigi soon equaled the Maltese in boldness and ability. A wonderful swimmer like them he could almost be compared to that famous Nicolo Pescei, a native of Valetta, who carried dispatches from Naples to Palermo by swimming across the Æolian sea. He was an adept at hunting the curlews and wild pigeons, whose nests have to be sought for among the almost inaccessible caves that border on the sea. He was the boldest of fishermen, and never had the wind kept him ashore when it had been necessary for him to go out to his nets and lines. And it was owing to this that he had been in Melleah Creek when he heard the signals of the yacht in distress.

But at Malta the sea-birds, the fish, the mollusks are so abundant that the moderation of their price makes fishing anything but a lucrative trade. Do all he could, Luigi could hardly manage to supply the wants of the humble home, although Maria contributed something toward it by what she earned from her needle-work. And so they had been obliged to reduce their expenses and take this lodging in the Manderaggio. While Maria was telling her story Luigi went into the other room and came back with a letter in his hand. It was the one Andrea Ferrato had written just before he died:

“Maria,” he said, “take care of your brother. He will soon have only you in the world! For what I have done, my children, I have no regret, unless it is for not having succeeded in saving those who trusted in me, even at the sacrifice of my liberty and my life. What I did I would do again! Never forget your father, who is dying as he sends you this — his last love.

“Andrea Ferrato.”

As he read this Pierre Bathory made no attempt to conceal his emotion, and Dr. Antekirtt turned away his head to avoid Maria’s searching look.

“Luigi,” said he, abruptly, “your boat was smashed last night against my yacht — ”

“She was an old one, doctor,” answered Luigi, “and for any one but me the loss would not be much.”

“Perhaps so, but you will allow me to give you another for her. I will give you the boat you saved.”

“What?”

“Will you be the mate of the Ferrato? I want a man who is young, active and a good sailor.”

“Accept, Luigi,” said Pierre, “accept!”

“But my sister?”

“Your sister shall become one of the family that lives on my island, of Antekirtta!” replied the doctor. “Your lives henceforth belong to me, and I will do all I can to make them happy, and that the only regret for your past life shall be that of having lost your father.”

Luigi seized the doctor’s hands; he clasped them; he kissed them, while Maria could find no other way of showing her gratitude than by bursting into tears.

“To-morrow I expect you on board!” said the doctor.

And if he could no longer master his emotion he hurriedly left, after beckoning Pierre to follow him.

“Ah!” he said, “it is good — it is good to make ammends — ”

“Yes, better than to punish!” answered Pierre.

“But it is necessary to punish!”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPY IN THE MANDERAGGIO.

The next morning the doctor was waiting ready to receive Maria and Luigi Ferrato. Already Captain Kostrik had taken steps to have the engine repaired. Thanks to the efforts of Messrs. Samuel Grech & Co. shipping agents of the Strada Levante, to which the ship had been consigned, the work advanced rapidly. But they required five or six days, for they had to unship the air pump and the condenser, several tubes of which were working badly The delay was very serious to Dr. Antekirtt, who was most anxious to get to the Sicilian coast. And he even thought of sending for the “Savarena,” but it seemed better to wait a few days longer and start for Sicily in a fast and well-armed ship.

However, as a matter of precaution, and in view of eventualities that might arise, he sent a message by submarine cable to Antekirtta, and ordered “Electric No. 2” to cruise off the coast of Sicily near Cape Passaro.

About nine o’clock in the morning a boat came on board with Maria Ferrato and her brother. Both were received by the doctor with the liveliest affection. Luigi was introduced to the captain and crew as the mate, the officer he replaced being transferred to “Electric No. 2.”

With regard to Luigi there could be no mistake; he was a thorough sailor. His courage and boldness were known from the way in which thirty-six hours before he had acted in the Creek of Melleah. He was received with acclamation. Then his friend Pierre and Captain Kostrik did the honors of the ship, which he went round to examine in all her details; while the doctor conversed with Maria and spoke of her brother in a way that deeply affected her.

"Yes!" she said, "he is all his father!"

To the doctor's proposal either for her to remain on board until the end of the projected expedition, or to return direct to Antekirtta, where he offered to take her, Maria asked to be allowed to go with him to Sicily; and it was agreed that she should profit by the stay of the "Ferrato" at Valetta to put her affairs in order, to sell certain things which were only valuable as remembrances, and realize the little she possessed, so as to take up her quarters the day before the yacht left.

The doctor had told her of his plans, and how he was going to persist until he had accomplished them. Part of his plan had been realized, for the children of Andrea Ferrato need now have no anxiety for the future. But to get hold of Toronthal and Sarcany on the one hand, and Carpena on the other, remained to be done, and it would be done. The two former he thought he should meet with in Sicily, the latter he had still to seek.

Thus he told Maria, and when he had finished she asked to speak with him in private.

"What I am going to tell you I have hitherto thought it my duty to keep hidden from my brother. He would not have been able to contain himself; and probably new misfortunes would have come upon us."

"Luigi is at this moment among the crew forward," answered the doctor. "Let us go into the saloon and there you can speak without fear of being overheard."

When the door of the saloon was shut they sat down on one of the benches, and Maria said:

“Carpena is here, doctor.”

“In Malta?”

“Yes, and has been for some days.”

“At Valetta?”

“In the Manderaggio, where we live.”

The doctor was much surprised and pleased.

“You are not mistaken, Maria?”

“No, I am not mistaken. The man’s face remains on my memory, and a hundred years might go by, but I would recognize him! He is here!”

“Luigi does not know this?”

“No, doctor; and you understand why I did not tell him. He would have found Carpena — he would have provoked him perhaps — ”

“You have done well, Maria! The man belongs to me alone! But you do think he has recognized you?”

“I do not know,” answered Maria. “Two or three times I have met him in the Manderaggio, and he has turned to look after me with a certain suspicious attention. If he has followed me, if he has asked my name, he ought to know who I am.”

“He has never spoken to you?”

“Never.”

"And do you know why he has come to Valetta, and what he has been doing since his arrival?"

"All I can say is that he lives with the most hateful men in the Manderaggio. He hangs about the most suspicious drinking-houses, and associates with the worst of the scoundrels. Money seems to be plentiful with him, and I fancy that he is busy enlisting bandits like himself to take part in some villainous scheme — "

"Here?"

"I do not know."

"I will know."

At this moment Pierre entered the saloon followed by the young fisherman, and the interview was at an end.

"Well, Luigi," asked the doctor, "are you contented with what you have seen?"

"The 'Ferrato' is a splendid ship."

"I am glad you like her," answered the doctor, "for you will act as her mate until circumstances take place to make you her captain."

"Oh, sir — !"

"My dear Luigi," said Pierre, "with Doctor Antekirtt do not forget that all things will come."

"Yes, all things come, Pierre, but say rather with the help of God."

Maria and Luigi then took their leave to return to their small lodging. It was arranged that Luigi should commence his duties as soon as his sister had come on board, lt would not do for Maria to remain alone in the Manderaggio, for it was possible that Carpena had recognized the daughter of Andrea Ferrato.

When the brother and sister had gone, the doctor sent for Point Pescade, to whom he wished to speak in Pierre's presence.

Pescade immediately came in, and stood in the attitude of a man ever ready to receive an order and ever ready to execute it.

"Point Pescade," said the doctor, "I have need of you."

"Of me and Cape Matifou?"

"Of you alone at present."

"What am I to do?"

"Go ashore at once to the Manderaggio, and get a lodging in the dirtiest public-house you can find."

"Yes, sir."

"And then keep your eyes on a man that it is very important we should not lose sight of. But nobody must suspect you know him! If necessary, you can disguise yourself."

"That is my business."

"This man, I am told, is trying to buy over some of the chief scoundrels in the Manderaggio. What his object is I do not know, and that is what I want you to find out as soon as possible.”

“I understand.”

“When you have found out, do not return on board, as you may be followed. Put a letter in the post and meet me in the evening at the other end of Senglea. You will find me there.”

“Agreed,” answered Point Pescade; “but how am I to know the man?”

“Oh, that will not be very difficult! You are intelligent, my friend, and I trust to your intelligence.”

“May I know the gentleman’s name?”

“His name is Carpena.”

As he heard the name Pierre exclaimed —

“What! the Spaniard here?”

“Yes,” replied the doctor; “and he is living in the very street where we found the children of Andrea Ferrato, whom he sent to prison and to death.”

The doctor told them all that he had heard from Maria. Point Pescade saw how urgent it was for them to clearly understand the Spaniard’s game, for he was evidently at work at some dark scheme in the slums of Valetta.

An hour afterward Point Pescade left the yacht. To throw any spy off the track in case he was followed he began by a stroll along the Strada Reale, which runs from Saint Elmo to Floriana, and it was only when evening closed in that he reached Manderaggio.

To get together a band of ruffians ready for either murder or robbery, no better place could be chosen than this sink of corruption. Here were scoundrels of every nation from the rising to the setting of the sun, runaways from merchant ships, deserters from war ships and Maltese of the lowest class, cut-throats in whose veins ran the blood of their pirate ancestors who made themselves so terrible in the razzias of the past.

Carpena was endeavoring to enlist a dozen of these determined villains — who would stick at nothing — and was quite embarrassed in his choice. Since his arrival he had hardly been outside the taverns in the lower streets of the Manderaggio, and Pescade had no difficulty in recognizing him, though he could not easily find out on whose behalf he was acting.

Evidently his money was not his own. The reward of 5,000 florins for his share in the Rovigno matter must have been exhausted long ago. Carpena, driven from Istria by public reprobation, and warned off from all the salt-works along the coast, had set out to see the world. His money soon disappeared, and rascal as he was before, he had become still more of a rascal.

No one would be astonished to find him in the service of a notorious band of malefactors, for whom he recruited to fill the vacancies the halter had caused. It was in this way that he was employed at Malta, and more particularly in the Manderaggio. The place to which he took his recruits Carpena was too mistrustful of his companions to reveal. And they never asked him. Provided he paid them cash down, provided he guaranteed them a future of successful robbery, they would have gone to the world’s end — in confidence.

It should be noted that Carpena had been considerably surprised at meeting Maria in the Manderaggio. After an interval of fifteen years he had recognized her at once, as she had recognized him. And he was very anxious to keep her from knowing what he was doing in Valetta.

Point Pescade had therefore to act warily if he wished to discover what the doctor had such interest in learning, and the Spaniard so jealously guarded. However, Carpena was completely circumvented by him. The precocious young bandit who became so intimate with him, who took the lead of all the rascality in the Manderaggio, and boasted to have already such a history that every page of it would bring him the rope in Malta, the guillotine in Italy, and the garrote in Spain, who looked with the deepest contempt at the poltroons whom the very sight of a policeman rendered uneasy, was just the man whom Carpena, a judge in such matters, could fully appreciate!

In this adroit way Point Pescade succeeded in gaining what he wanted, and on the 26th of August the doctor received a word making an appointment for that evening at the end of Senglea.

During the last few days the work had been pushed ahead on board the “Ferrato.” In three days or more the repairs would be finished, and she would be coaled up and ready for sea.

That evening the doctor went to the place named by Pescade. It was a sort of arcade near a circular road at the end of the suburb.

It was eight o’clock. There were about fifty people gathered about the market, which was still in progress.

Dr. Antekirtt was walking up and down among these people — nearly all of them men and women of Maltese birth — when he felt a hand touch his arm.

A frightful scamp, very shabbily dressed, and wearing a battered old hat, presented him with a handkerchief, saying —

“See here what I have just stolen from your excellency! Another time you had better look after your pockets.”

It was Point Pescade, absolutely unrecognizable under his disguise.

“You funny rascal!” said the doctor.

“Funny, yes! Rascal, no!” said Pescade, as the doctor recognized him; and immediately came to the point with —

“Carpena?”

“He is at work collecting a dozen of the biggest ruffians in the Manderaggio.”

“What for?”

“On account of a certain Zirone!”

The Sicilian Zirone, the companion of Sarcany? What connection was there between those scoundrels and Carpena?

As he thought thus the following explanation presented itself to him, and it was the correct one.

The Spaniard’s treachery, which had brought about the arrest of the fugitives from Pisino, had not been unknown to Sarcany, who had doubtless sought him out, and, finding him in want, had easily gained him over to be an agent of Zirone’s band. Carpena would therefore be the first link in the chain which the doctor could now follow up.

“Do you know what his object is?” he asked of Pescade.

“The gang is in Sicily.”

“In Sicily? Yes! That is it! And particularly — ?”

“In the eastern provinces between Syracuse and Catania!”

The trail was evidently recovered.

“How did you obtain that information?”

“From Carpena himself, who has taken me into his friendship, and whom I recommend to your excellency.”

A nod was the doctor’s reply.

“You can now return on board and resume a more fashionable costume.”

“No; this is the best for me.”

“And why?”

“Because I have the honor to be a bandit in the gang of the aforesaid Zirone!”

“My friend,” answered the doctor, “be careful! At that game you are risking your life — ”

“In your service, doctor,” said Pescade, “and it is my duty to do so.”

“You are a brave lad.”

“Besides, I am rather a knowing one, I fancy, without boasting too much, and I have made up my mind to trap these beggars!”

The doctor saw that in this way the help of Point Pescade might prove very useful. It was in playing this game that the intelligent fellow had gained Carpena’s confidence and wormed out his secrets. He had better leave him to go on.

After five minutes the doctor and Point Pescade, not wishing to be surprised together, left each other. Point Pescade, following the wharves of Senglea, took a boat at the end and returned to the Manderaggio.

Before be arrived Dr. Antekirtt was already on board the yacht. There he told Pierre of what had taken place. At the same time he thought it his duty to tell Cape Matifou that his friend had started on a very dangerous enterprise for the common good.

Hercules lifted his head and three times opened and shut his huge hands. Then he was heard to repeat to himself:

“If he has lost a hair of his head when he comes back — yes! a hair of his head — I’ll — ”

To finish the phrase was too much for Cape Matifou. He had not the gift of making long sentences.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ENVIRONS OF CATANIA.

The coast of Sicily between Aci Reale and Catania abounds in capes and reefs and caves and cliffs and mountains. It faces the Tyrrhenian Sea just where the Straits of Messina begin, and is immediately opposite the hills of Calabria. Such as the Straits with the hills round Etna were in the days of Homer, so they are to-day, superb! If the forest in which Æneas received Achemenides has disappeared, the grotto of Galatea, the cave of Polyphemus, the isles of the Cyclops, and a little to the north Scylla and Charybdis, are still in their historic places, and we can set foot on the very spot where the Trojan hero landed when he came to found his new kingdom.

That the giant Polyphemus is credited with exploits to which our herculean Cape Matifou could not pretend, it may perhaps be as well to remember. But Cape Matifou had the advantage of being alive, while Polyphemus has been dead some three thousand years — if he ever existed, notwithstanding the story of Ulysses. Reclus has remarked that it is not unlikely that the celebrated Cyclops was simply Etna, “the crater of which during eruption glares like an immense eye at the summit of the mountain, and sends down from the top of the cliffs the rocky fringes which become islets and reefs like the Faraglioni.”

These Faraglioni, situated a few hundred yards from the shore by the road to Catania, now doubled by the railway from Syracuse to Messina, are the ancient islands of the Cyclops. The cave of Polyphemus is not far off, and along the whole coast there is heard that peculiar roar which the sea always makes when it beats against basaltic rocks.

Half way along these rocks on the evening of the 29th of August two men were to be seen quite indifferent to the charms of historic associations, but conversing of certain matters that the Sicilian gendarmes would not have been sorry to hear.

One of these men was Zirone. The other, who had just come by the Catania road, was Carpena.

“You are late,” exclaimed Zirone. “I really thought that Malta had vanished like Julia, her old neighbor, and that you were food for the tunnies and bonicous at the bottom of the Mediterranean.”

It was obvious that although fifteen years had passed over the head of Sarcany’s companion neither his loquacity nor his natural effrontery had left him. With his hat over his ear, a brownish cape over his shoulders, leggings laced up to the knee, he looked what he was and what he had never ceased to be — a bandit.

“I could not come any sooner,” answered Carpena, “and it was only this morning I landed at Catania.”

“You and your men?”

“Yes.”

“How many have you?”

“Twelve.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, but good ones!”

“Manderaggio fellows?”

“A few, and chiefly Maltese.”

“Good recruits, but not enough of them; the last few months times have been rough and costly. The gendarmes have begun to swarm in Sicily, and they will soon get as thick as — well, if your goods are good — ”

“I think so, Zirone, and you will see when you try them. Besides, I have brought with me a jolly fellow, an old acrobat from the shows, active and artful, of whom yon can make a girl if you like, and who will be of great use, I fancy.”

“What was he doing at Malta?”

“Watches when he had an opportunity, handkerchiefs when he could not get watches — ”

“And his name?”

“Pescador.”

“Good!” said Zirone. “We will see how to use his talents and his intelligence. Where have you put your men?”

“At the inn at Santa Grotta above Nicolosi.”

“And you are going to begin again there as landlord?”

“To-morrow.”

“No, to-night,” answered Zirone, “when I have received my new orders. I am waiting here for the train from Messina. I am going to get a message from its last carriage.”

“A message from — him?”

“Yes — from him — with his marriage that never comes off he obliges me to work for my living! Bah! What would not a fellow do for such a friend?”

At this moment a distant roar that could not be mistaken for the roar of the surf was heard along the Catanian shore. It was the train Zirone was waiting for. Carpena and he then climbed up the rocks, and in a few moments they were alongside the line. Two whistles, as the train entered a short tunnel, told them it was near. Its speed was not very great. Soon the puffing of the engine became louder, the lamps showed their two white lights in the darkness, the rails in front were rendered visible by the long projecting glare.

Zirone attentively watched the train as it rolled past some three yards away from him.

A moment before the last carriage reached him a window was put down and a woman put her head out of the window. As soon as she saw the Sicilian at his post she threw him an orange, which rolled on the ground about a dozen yards from Zirone.

The woman was Namir, Sarcany’s spy. A few seconds afterward she had disappeared with the train in the direction of Aci Reale.

Zirone picked up the orange, or rather the two halves of orange skin that were sewed together. The Spaniard and he then hurried behind a lofty rock, broke open the orange skin and drew out a letter which contained the following message:

“I hope to join you at Nicolosi in five or six days. Be particularly careful of a Dr. Antekirtt.”

Evidently Sarcany had learned at Ragusa that this mysterious personage, who had so much exercised public curiosity, had twice visited Mme. Bathory’s house. Hence a certain uneasiness on his part, although he had hitherto defied everybody and everything; and hence also his sending this message to Zirone, not through the post, but by Namir.

Zirone put the letter in his pocket, extinguished the lantern, and, addressing Carpena, said:

“Have you ever heard of a Dr. Antekirtt?”

“No,” answered the Spaniard, “but perhaps Pescador has. That little beggar knows everything.”

“We will see about it, then,” said Zirone. “There is no danger in going out at night, is there?”

“Less than in going out during the day!”

“Yes — in the day there are the gendarmes who are so thoughtless! Come on! In three hours we must be inside your place at Santa Grotta!”

And crossing the railway, they took to the footpaths well known to Zirone, and were soon lost to sight as they crossed the lower buttresses of Etna.

For eighteen years there had existed in Sicily, and principally at Palermo, its capital, a formidable association of malefactors. Bound together by a sort of Freemasonry, their adherents were to be counted in thousands. Theft and fraud by every possible means were the objects of the Society of Maffia, to which a number of shopkeepers and working-people paid a sort of annual tithe to be allowed to carry on their trade without molestation.

At this time Sarcany and Zirone — this was before the Trieste conspiracy — were among the chiefs of the Maffia, and none were more zealous than they.

However, with the general progress, with a better administration of the towns, if not of the country round them, the association became somewhat interfered with in its proceedings. The tithes and black-mail fell off, and most of the members separated and tried to get a more lucrative means of existence by brigandage. The government of Italy then underwent a change, owing to the unification, and Sicily, like the other provinces, had to submit to the common lot, to accept other laws, and especially to receive the yoke of conscription. Rebels who would not conform to the new laws, and fugitives who refused to serve in the army, then betook themselves to the “maffissi” and other unscupulous ruffians, and formed themselves into gangs to scour the country.

Zirone was at the head of one of these gangs, and when the share of Count Sandorfs possessions which had fallen to Sarcany, had been run through, he and his friend had returned to their old life and waited till another opportunity offered to acquire a fortune. The opportunity came — the marriage of Sarcany with Toronthal’s daughter. We know how that had failed up to the present, and the reasons for the failure.

Sicily at the time in question was singularly favorable for the pursuit of brigandage. The ancient Trinacria in its circuit of 450 miles round the points of the triangle, Cape Faro on the north-east, Cape Marsala on the west, and Cape Passaro on the south-east, includes the mountains of Pelores and Nebrodes, the independent volcanic group of Etna, the streams of Giarella, Cantara, and Platani, and torrents, valleys, plains, and towns communicating with each other with difficulty, villages perched on almost inaccessible rocks, convents isolated in the gorges or on the slopes, a number of refuges in which retreat was possible, and an infinity of creeks by which the sea offered innumerable means of flight. This slip of Sicilian ground is the world in miniature; in it everything that is met with on the globe can be found — mountains, volcanoes valleys, meadows, rivers, rivulets, lakes, torrents, towns, villages, hamlets, harbors, creeks, promontories, capes, reefs, breakers all ready for the use of a population of nearly three millions of inhabitants scattered over a surface of sixteen thousand square miles.

Where could there be found a better region for the operations of banditti? And so, although they were decreasing in number, although the Sicilian brigand, like his cousin of Calabria, seemed to have had his day, although they are prescribed — at least in modern literature — although they have begun to find work more profitable than robbery, yet travelers do well to take every precaution when they venture into the country so dear to Cacus, and so blessed by Mercury.

However, in the last few years the Sicilian gendarmerie always on the alert, had made many successful forays into the eastern provinces, and many bands had fallen into ambuscades and been partly destroyed. One of these bands was Zirone’s, which had thus been reduced to thirty men, and on account of this he had conceived the idea of infusing some foreign blood into his troop, and Maltese blood more particularly. He knew that in the Manderraggio, which he used to frequent, bandits out of work could be picked up in hundreds, and that was why Carpena had gone to Valetta, and if he had only brought back a dozen men, they were at least picked men. There was nothing surprising in the Spaniard showing himself so devoted to Zirone. The trade suited him, but as he was a coward by nature, he put himself as little as possible within range of the rifles. It pleased him best to prepare matters, to draw up plans, to keep this tavern at Santa Grotta, situated in a frightful gorge on the lower slopes of the volcano.

Although Sarcany and Zirone knew all about Carpena's share in the matter of Andrea Ferrato, Carpena knew nothing of the Trieste affair. He thought he had become connected with honest brigands who had been carrying on their "trade" for many years in the mountains of Sicily.

Zirone and Carpena in the course of their walk of eight Italian miles from the rocks of Polyphemus to Nicolosi, met with no mishap, in the sense that not a single gendarme was seen on the road. They went along the rough footpaths among the vineyards and olive-trees, orange-trees and cedars, and through the clumps of ash-trees, cork-trees, and fig-trees. Now and then they went up one of the dry torrent beds which seem from a distance to resemble macadamized roads in which the roller has left the pebbles unbroken. The Sicilian and the Spaniard passed through the villages of San Giovanni and Tramestieri at a considerable height above the level of the Mediterranean. About half-past ten they reached Nicolosi, situated as in the middle of an open plain flanking on the north and west the eruptive cones of Montpilieri, Monte Rossi and Serra Pizzuta.

The town has six churches, a convent dedicated to San Nicolo D'Arena, and two taverns — a significant token of its importance. But with these taverns

Carpena and Zirone had nothing to do. Santa Grotta was an hour further on, in one of the deepest gorges in the volcanic range, and they arrived there before midnight.

People were not asleep at Santa Grotta. They were at supper with an accompaniment of shouts and curses. Carpena’s recruits were there, and the honors were being done by an old fellow named Benito. The rest of the gang, some forty in number, were then about twenty miles off to the westward, on the other side of the Etna. There were therefore at Santa Grotta only the dozen Maltese recruited by the Spaniard, and among these Pescador — otherwise Point Pescade — was playing quite a prominent part, at the same time as he heard, saw, and noted everything, so as to forget nothing that might prove useful.

And one of the things he had made a mental note of was Benito’s shout to his comrades just before Carpena and Zirone arrived.

“Be quiet, you Maltese, be quiet! They will hear you at Cassone, where the central commissary, the amiable quæstor of the province, has sent a detachment of carbineers!”

A playful threat considering how far Cassone was from Santa Grotta. But the new-comers supposed their vociferations might possibly reach the ears of the soldiers and moderated them considerably as they drank off large flasks of the Etna wine that Benito himself poured out for them. In short, they were more or less intoxicated when the door opened.

“Jolly fellows!” exclaimed Zirone as he entered. “Carpena has been lucky, and I see that Benito has done his work well.”

“These gallant fellows were dying of thirst!” answered Benito.

“And from that worst of deaths,” said Zirone, with a grin, “you thought to save them. Good! Now let them go to sleep. We will make their acquaintance to-morrow.”

“Why wait till to-morrow?” said one of the recruits.

“Because you are too drunk to understand and obey orders.”

“Drunk! Drunk! After drinking a bottle or two of this washy wine when we are accustomed to gin and whisky in the Manderaggio!”

“And who are you?” asked Zirone.

“That is little Pescador,” answered Carpena,

“And who are you?” asked Pescador.

“That is Zirone,” answered the Spaniard.

Zirone looked attentively at the young bandit whom Carpena had praised so much, and who introduced himself in such a free and easy manner. Doubtless he thought he looked intelligent and daring, for he gave an approving nod. Then he spoke to Pescador:

“You have been drinking like the others?”

“More than the others.”

“And you have kept your senses?”

“Bah ! It has not hurt me in the least.”

“Then tell me this, for Carpena says you may give me some information that I want.”

“Gratis?”

“Catch!”

And Zirone threw him a half piastre which Pescador instantly slipped into his waistcoat pocket as a professional juggler would a ball.

“He is obliging!” said Zirone.

“Very obliging!” replied Pescador. “And now what do you want?”

“You know Malta?”

“Malta, Italy, Istria, Dalmatia, and the Adriatic,” answered Pescador.

“You have traveled?”

“Much; but always at my own expense.”

“I’ll see that you never travel otherwise; for when it is the Government that pays — ”

“It costs too much,” interrupted Pescador.

“Exactly,” replied Zirone, who was delighted to have found a new companion with whom he could talk.

“And now?” asked Pescador.

“And now, Pescador, in your numerous voyages did you ever hear of a certain Doctor Antekirtt?”

In spite of all his cleverness Point Pescade had never expected that; but he was sufficiently master of himself hot to betray his surprise.

How Zirone, who was not at Ragusa during the stay of “Savarena,” nor at Malta while the “Ferrato” was there, could have heard of the doctor was a puzzler. But with his decision of character he saw that his reply might be of use to him, and he did not hesitate to say at once —

“Doctor Antekirtt! Oh, perfectly! People talk of nothing else throughout the Mediterranean!”

“Have you seen him?”

“Never!”

“But do you know who he is?”

“A poor fellow, a hundred times a millionaire, who never goes about without a million in each pocket, and he has at least six! An unfortunate who is reduced to practice medicine as an amusement, sometimes on a schooner, sometimes on a steam yacht; a man who has a cure for every one of the 22,000 maladies with which nature has gratified the human species.”

The mountebank of former days was again in his glory, and the fluency of his patter astonished Zirone, and none the less Carpena, who muttered —

“What a recruit!”

Pescador was silent and lighted a cigarette, from which the smoke seemed to come out of his eyes, his nose and his ears as he pleased.

“You say the doctor is rich?” asked Zirone.

“Rich enough to buy Sicily, and turn it into an English garden,” replied Pescador.

Then thinking the moment had come for him to inspire Zirone with the idea of the scheme he had resolved to put into execution, he continued:

“And look here, Captain Zirone, if I have not seen Doctor Antekirtt I have seen one of his yachts, for they say he has quite a fleet to sail about the sea in.”

“One of his yachts?”

“Yes, the ‘Ferrato,’ which would suit me nicely to go for a sail in the Bay of Naples with a princess or two.”

“Where did you see the yacht?”

“At Malta.”

“And when?”

“The day before yesterday at Valetta as we were going on board with Sergeant Carpena. She was then at her moorings in the military port, but they said she was going out four-and-twenty hours after us.”

“Where to?”

“To Sicily, to Catania!”

“To Catania?” asked Zirone.

The coincidence between the departure of Dr. Antekirtt and the warning he had received from Sarcany to beware of him could not but awake Zirone’s suspicions.

Point Pescade saw that some secret thought was working in Zirone’s brain, but what was it? Not being able to guess, he resolved to press Zirone more directly, and when he had asked —

“What does the doctor want in Sicily, and at Catania more especially?”

He replied:

“Eh! By Saint Agatha, he is coming to visit the town! He is going to ascend Mount Etna! He is going to travel like the rich traveler that he is!”

“Pescador,” said Zirone, with a certain amount of suspicion, “you seem to have known this man some time.”

“Not so long as I would like to if I had an opportunity.”

“What do you mean?”

“That if Dr. Antekirtt, as is probable, comes for a walk in our ground we might as well make his excellency pay his footing.”

“Indeed!” said Zirone.

“And if that only comes to a million or two it will be good business.”

“You are right.”

“And in that case Zirone and his friends would not have been fools.”

“Good!” said Zirone with a smile. “After that compliment you can go to sleep.”

“That will suit me, for I know what I shall get dreaming about.”

“What?”

“The millions of Dr. Antekirtt — dreams of gold!”

And then Pescador, having given his cigarette its last puff, went off to join his companions in the barn of the inn, while Carpena retired to his room.

And then he set to work to piece together all that he had said and heard. From the time that Zirone to his great astonishment had spoken to him of Dr. Antekirtt, had he done the best for the interests that were intrusted to him? Let us see.

In coming to Sicily the doctor hoped to again meet with Sarcany, and perhaps Toronthal, in case he accompanied him, which was not improbable, considering that they had left Ragusa together. Failing Sarcany, he reckoned on capturing Zirone, and by bribe or threat making him reveal where Sarcany and Toronthal could be found. That was his plan, and this was how he intended executing it.

In his youth the doctor had several times visited Sicily, particularly the district round Etna. He knew the different roads by which the ascent is made, the most used being that which passes by a house built at the commencement of the central cone, and which is known as the “Casa degli Inglesi.”

Zirone’s gang, for which Carpena had been recruiting at Malta, was then at work on the Etna slopes, and it was certain that the arrival of a personage as famous as Dr. Antekirtt would produce the usual effect at Catania. If the doctor were to put it about that he was going to make the ascent of Etna

Zirone would be sure to hear of it, especially with the help of Point Pescade. The scheme had begun well, for Zirone himself had introduced the subject of the doctor to Pescade.

The trap which was to be laid for Zirone, and in which there was a good chance of his being caught, was the following:

The night before the doctor was to make the ascent of the volcano a dozen well-armed men from the “Ferrato” were to make their way secretly to the Casa degli Inglesi. In the morning the doctor, accompanied by Luigi, Pierre, and a guide, would leave Catania and follow the usual road so as to reach the Casa degli Inglesi about eight in the evening, and then pass the night like all tourists do who wish to see the sun rise over the mountains of Calabria.

Zirone, urged by Point Pescade, would doubtless endeavor to capture the doctor, thinking he had only to do with him and his two companions; but when he reached the Casa degli Inglesi he would be received by the sailors of the “Ferrato” and resistance would be impossible.

Point Pescade, knowing this scheme, had happily profited by the circumstances that presented themselves to put this idea of capturing the doctor into Zirone’s head. It meant a heavy ransom, and would also work in with the message he had received. If he was to be careful of this man, would it not be better for him to seize him even if he lost the ransom? And Zirone decided to do so and wait for further instructions from Sarcany. But to be certain of success, as he had not his whole gang with him, he resolved to make the attempt with Carpena’s Maltese much to the comfort of Pescade, as the dozen ruffians would be no match for the “Ferrato” men.

But Zirone trusted nothing to chance. As Pescador had told him that the steam yacht was to arrive in the morning, he left Santa Grotta early, and walked down to Catania. Not being known, he could go there without danger.

In a few hours the steam yacht arrived at her moorings, not near the quay, which is always crowded with ships, but a sort of entrance harbor between the north jetty and a huge mass of blackish lava which the eruption of 1669 sent down into the sea.

Already at daybreak Cape Matifou and eleven men of the “Ferrato” crew under Luigi had been landed at Catania and separately had started on the road to the Casa degli Inglesi. Zirone knew nothing of this landing, and as the “Ferrato” was moored a cable’s length from the shore he could not even see what was passing on board.

About six o’clock in the evening the gig brought ashore two passengers. These were the doctor and Pierre Bathory. They went up the Via Stesicoro and the Strada Etnea toward the Villa Bellini, a public garden perhaps one of the most beautiful in Europe, with its masses of flowers, its varied slopes, its terraces shaded with large trees, its running streams, and the superb volcano plumed with mist rising in the background.

Zirone had followed the two passengers, doubting not that one of them was this famous Dr. Antekirtt. He even managed to get rather near them in the crowd that the music had attracted to the Villa Bellini, but he did not do this without being noticed by the doctor and Pierre. If this suspicious fellow were the Zirone they were looking for, here was a fine opportunity for enticing him still further into the snare that they had laid.

And so about eleven o’clock in the evening, when they were leaving the garden to return on board, the doctor, replying to Pierre, in a loud tone, said:

“Yes, it is understood! We start to-morrow, and will sleep at the Casa degli Inglesi”

Doubtless the spy had learned what he wanted, for a moment afterward he had disappeared.

CHAPTER X.

THE CASA DEGLI INGLESI.

Next day, about one o'clock in the afternoon, the doctor and Pierre Bathory completed their preparations to go ashore.

The gig received its passengers; but before he left, the doctor ordered Captain Kostrik to watch for the arrival of "Electric No. 2," then hourly expected, and to send her out beyond the Farrighonis, otherwise known as the rocks of Polyphemus. If the plan succeeded: if Sarcany, or even Zirone and Carpena, were taken prisoners, the launch would be ready to convey them to Antekirtta, where he would have them in his power.

The gig put off. In a few minutes she reached the steps at the wharf. Dr. Antekirtt and Pierre had assumed the usual dress of tourists ascending the mountain, who may have to endure a temperature of fourteen degrees below freezing, while at the sea level it stands at fifty degrees above that point. A guide was in waiting with the horses, which at Nicolosi were to be replaced by mules, as more untiring and surer of foot.

The town of Catania is of little width, compared to its length, and was soon crossed. Nothing occurred to show that the doctor was watched and followed. Pierre and he, after taking the Belvidere road, began to ascend the earlier slopes of the mountain to which the Sicilians give the name of Mongibello, and of which the diameter is not less than twenty-five miles.

The road is uneven and winding. It turns aside frequently to avoid the lava streams and basaltic rocks solidified millions of years ago, the dry ravines filled in the spring-time with the impetuous torrents, and on its way it cuts through a well-wooded region of olive-trees, orange-trees, carob-trees, ash-trees and long-branched vines. This is the first of the three zones which gird the volcano, the “mountain of the smithy,” the Phœnician translation of the word Etna — ”the spike of the earth and the pillar of the sky” for the geologists of an age when geological science did not exist.

After a couple of hours’ climbing, during a halt of some minutes more needed by the horses than the riders, the doctor and Pierre beheld at their feet the town of Catania, the superb rival of Palermo. They could look down on the lines of its chief streets running parallel to the quays, the towers and domes of its hundred churches, the numerous and picturesque convents, and the houses in the pretentious style of the seventeenth century — all inclosed in the belt of green that encircles the city. In the foreground was the harbor, of which Etna itself formed the principal walls in the eruption of 1669 which destroyed fourteen towns and villages and claimed 18,000 victims, and poured out over the country more than a million cubic yards of lava.

Etna is quieter now, and it has well earned the right to rest. In fact there have been more than thirty eruptions since the Christian era. That Sicily has not been overwhelmed is a sufficient proof of the solidity of its foundation. It should be noted, however, that the volcano has not formed a permanent crater. It changes it as it pleases. The mountain falls in where one of the fire-vomiting abysses opens, and from the gap there spreads the lavic matter accumulated on the flanks. Hence the numerous small volcanoes — the Monte Rossi, a double mountain piled up in three months to a height of 400 feet by tho sands and scoriæ of 1669, Frumento, Simoni, Stornello, Crisinco, arranged like the turrets around a cathedral dome, to say nothing of the craters of 1809, 1811, 1819, 1838, 1852, 1865, 1875, whose funnels perforate the flanks of the central cone like the cells of a bee-hive.

After crossing the hamlet of Belvidere the guide took a short cut so as to reach the Kamertieri road near that from Nicolosi. The first cultivated zone extends almost from this town to 2,120 feet above. It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when Nicolosi appeared, and the travelers had not met with a single adventure along the nine miles from Catania, and had seen neither boars nor wolves. They had still twelve and a half miles to go before they reached the Casa degli Inglesi.

"How long will your excellency stop here?" asked the guide.

"No longer than necessary," answered the doctor; "let us get in to-night about nine o'clock."

"Forty minutes then?"

"Forty minutes be it."

And that was enough to procure a hasty meal in one of the two inns of the town, which — be it said to the honor of the 3,000 inhabitants of Nicolosi, including the beggars who swarm in it — has rather a better culinary reputation than most Sicilian inns.

A piece of kid, some fruit, raisins, oranges, and pomegranates, and San Placido wine from the environs of Catania — there are very few more important towns in Italy in which an innkeeper would offer as much.

Before five o'clock the doctor, Pierre, and the guide, mounted on their mules, were climbing the second stage of the ascent — the forest zone. Not that the trees there are numerous, for the wood-cutters, as everywhere else, are at work destroying the ancient forests, which will soon be no more than a mythologic remembrance. Here and there, however, in clumps and groups, along the sides of the lava streams and on the edges of the abysses, grow beeches and oaks and almost black-leaved figs, and then, still higher, firs and pines and birches. Even the cinders, mixed with a little mold, give birth to large masses of ferns, fraxinellas, and mallons, rising from a carpet of moss.

About eight o’clock in the evening the doctor and Pierre had already reached the 3280 feet almost marking the limit of perpetual snow, which on the flanks of Etna is abundant enough to supply all Italy and Sicily. They were then in the region of black lavas, cinders, and scoriæ which stretches away beyond an immense crevasse, the vast elliptic amphitheater of the Valle del Bove, forming cliffs from 1000 to 3000 feet high, at whose base lie the strata of trachyte and basalt which the elements have not yet destroyed.

In front rose the cone of the volcano, on which here and there a few phanerogams formed hemispheres of verdure. This central hump, which is quite a mountain in itself — a Pelion on Ossa rises till it reaches an altitude of 10,874 feet above the level of the sea.

Already the ground trembled under foot. Vibrations caused by the plutonic laboring ever present in the mountain ran beneath the patches of snow. The cloud of sulphurous vapors drawn down by the wind from the mouth of the crater occasionally reached to the base of the cone, and a shower of scoriæ, like incandescent coke, fell on the whitish carpet, where it hissed as it suddenly cooled.

The temperature was then very low — many degrees below zero — and respiration had become difficult, owing to the rarefaction of the air. The travelers wrapped their cloaks more closely round them. A biting wind cut across the shoulder of the mountain, whirling along the snow-flakes it had swept from the ground. From the height there could be seen the mouth whence issued the faintly flickering flame and many other secondary craters, narrow solfataras or gloomy depths, at the bottom of which could be heard the roaring of the subterranean fire — a continuous roaring, rising occasionally into a storm, as if it were due to an immense boiler from which the steam had forced up the valves. No eruption was anticipated, however, and all this internal rage was due to the rumblings of the higher crater and the eructations from the volcanic throats that opened out on to the cone.

It was then nine o’clock. The sky was resplendent with thousands of stars that the feeble density of the atmosphere at this altitude rendered still more sparkling. The moon’s crescent was dipping in the west in the waters of the Æolian Sea. On a mountain that was not an active volcano the calm of the night would have been sublime.

“We ought to have arrived,” said the doctor.

“There is the Casa degli Inglesi,” answered the guide.

And he pointed to a short wall having two windows and a door, which its position had protected from the snow, about fifty paces away to the left, and nearly 1400 feet below the summit of the central zone. This was the house constructed in 1811 by the English officers then stationed in Sicily. It is built on a plateau at the base of the lava mass named Piano del Lago.

However, Dr. Antekirtt, Pierre Bathory, and the guide came up to the Casa degli Inglesi, and as soon as they reached it they knocked at the door, which was opened immediately. A moment afterward they were among their men.

The Casa degli Inglesi consists of only three rooms, with table, chairs, and cooking utensils; but that was enough for the climbers of Etna, after reaching a height of 9469 feet. Till then Luigi, fearing that the presence of his little detachment might be suspected, had not lighted a fire, although the cold was extreme. But now there was no need to continue the precaution, for Zirone knew that the doctor was to spend the night at the Casa degli Inglesi. Some wood found in reserve in the shed was therefore piled on the hearth, and soon a crackling flame gave the needed warmth and light.

The doctor took Luigi apart and asked him if anything had happened since he arrived.

“Nothing,” answered Luigi. “But I am afraid that our presence here is not as secret as we wished.”

“And why?”

“Because after we left Nicolosi, if I am not mistaken, we were followed by a man who disappeared just before we reached the base of the cone.”

“That is a pity, Luigi! That may prevent Zirone from having the honor to surprise me! Since sundown no one has been looking round the Casa degli Inglesi?”

“No one, sir,” answered Luigi; “I even took the precaution to search the ruins of the Philosopher’s Tower; there is nobody there.”

“See that a man is always on guard at the door! You can see a good way to-night, for it is so clear, and it is important that we should not be surprised.”

The doctor’s orders were executed, and when he had taken his place on a stool by the fire the men lay down on the bundles of straw around him.

Cape Matifou, however, came up to the doctor. He looked at him without daring to speak. But it was easy to understand what made him anxious.

“You wish to know what has become of Point Pescade?” asked the doctor. “Patience! He will return soon, although he is now playing a game that might cost him his neck.”

An hour elapsed, and nothing occurred to trouble the solitude around the central cone. Not a shadow appeared on the shining slope in front of the Piarro del Lago. Both the doctor and Pierre experienced an impatience and even an anxiety that they could not restrain. If unfortunately Zirone had been warned of the presence of the little detachment he would never dare to attack the Casa degli Inglesi. The scheme had failed. And yet somehow it was necessary to get hold of this accomplice of Sarcany, failing Sarcany himself.

A little before ten o’clock the report of a gun was heard about half a mile below the Casa degli Inglesi.

They all went out and looked about, but saw nothing suspicious.

“It was unmistakably a gun!” said Pierre.

“Perhaps some one out after an eagle or a boar!” answered Luigi.

“Come in,” said the doctor, “and keep yourselves out of sight.”

They went back into the house.

But ten minutes afterward the sailor on guard without rushed in hurriedly.

“All hands!” he said. “I think I can see — ”

"Many of them?" asked Pierre.

"No, only one!"

The doctor, Pierre, Luigi, Cape Matifou went to the door, taking care to keep out of the light.

They saw a man bounding along like a chamois, and crossing the lines of the old lava which ran alongside the plateau. He was alone, and in a few bounds he fell into the arms that were held open for him — the arms of Cape Matifou.

It was Point Pescade.

"Quick! Quick! Undercover, doctor!" he exclaimed.

In an instant all were inside the Casa degli Inglesi, and the door was immediately shut.

"And Zirone?" asked the doctor, "what has become of him? You have had to leave him?"

"Yes, to warn you!"

"Is he not coming?"

"In twenty minutes he will be here."

"So much the better."

"No! So much the worse! I do not know how he was told that you had first sent up a dozen men."

“Probable by the mountaineer that followed us!” said Luigi.

“Anyhow he knows it,” answered Pescade, “and he saw that you were trying to get him in a trap.”

“He will come then!” said Pierre.

“He is coming, Mr. Pierre! But to the dozen recruits he had from Malta there has been added the rest of the band, who came in this very morning to Santa Grotta.”

“And how many bandits are there?” asked the doctor.

“Fifty,” replied Pescade.

The position of the doctor and his little band, consisting of the eleven sailors, Luigi, Pierre, Cape Matifou and Point Pescade — sixteen against fifty — was rather alarming; and if anything was to be done it should be done immediately.

But in the first place the doctor wanted to know from Pescade what had happened, and this is what he was told:

That morning Zirone had returned from Catania, where he had passed the night, and he it was whom the doctor had noticed prowling about the gardens of the Villa Bellini. When he returned to Santa Grotta he found a mountaineer who gave him the information that a dozen men, coming from different directions, had occupied the Casa degli Inglesi.

Zirone immediately understood how matters lay. It was no longer he who was trapping the doctor, but the doctor who was trapping him. Point Pescade, however, insisted that Zirone ought to attack the Casa degli

Inglesi, assuring him that the Maltese would soon settle the doctor’s little band. But Zirone remained none the less undecided what he should do, and the urgency of Point Pescade appeared so suspicious that Zirone gave orders that he should be watched, which Pescade easily and immediately discovered. It is probable that Zirone would have given up his idea of carrying off the doctor had not his band been re-enforced about three o’clock in the afternoon. Then, with fifty men under his orders, he no longer hesitated, and leaving Santa Grotta with all his followers, he advanced on the Casa degli Inglesi.

Point Pescade saw that the doctor and his people were lost if he did not warn them in time, so as to let them escape, or, at least, put them on their guard. He waited until the gang were in sight of the Casa degli Inglesi, the position of which he did not know. The light shining in the windows rendered it visible about nine o’clock, when he was less than two miles off on the slopes of the cone. As soon as he saw it, Point Pescade set off at a run. A gun was fired at him by Zirone — the one that was heard up at the Casa — but it missed him. With his acrobatic agility, he was soon out of range. And that is how he had arrived at the house only about twenty minutes in advance of Zirone.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIGHT ON MOUNT ETNA.

When Point Pescade had told his story, a clasp from the doctor’s hand thanked him for what he had done. The next question was how to foil the brigands. To leave the Casa degli Inglesi, and retreat in the middle of the night down the flanks of the volcano, with Zirone and his people knowing every footpath and every refuge, was to expose themselves to complete destruction. To wait for daylight to entrench themselves and defend themselves in the house, would be a far more advantageous plan. When the day came, if they had to retreat, they could at least do so in broad daylight, and would not go out, like blind men, down the precipices and solfataras. The decision was, therefore, to remain and fight. The preparations for the defense immediately commenced.

At first the two windows of the Casa degli Inglesi had to be closed, and their shutters firmly fastened down. As embrasures there were the openings between where the rafters of the roof rested on the front wall. Each man was provided with a quick-firing rifle and twenty cartridges. The doctor, Pierre, and Luigi could assist with their revolvers, but Cape Matifou had only his arms, and Point Pescade had only his hands. Perhaps they were not the worst armed.

Nearly forty minutes passed and no attempt at attack had been made. Zirone, knowing that Dr. Antekirtt had been warned by Point Pescade, and could not be surprised, had possibly abandoned his idea. With fifty men under his command and all the advantage that a thorough knowledge of the ground could give him, he had certainly all the chances on his side.

Suddenly about eleven o’clock the sentry reported a number of men approaching in skirmishing order so as to attack the hut on three sides — the fourth side, for its backing on to the slope, afforded no possible retreat. The maneuver having been discovered, the door was shut and barricaded, and the men took their posts near the rafters with orders not to fire unless they were sure of their object.

Zirone and his men advanced slowly and cautiously, taking advantage of the cover of the rocks to reach the crest of the Piarro del Lago. On this crest there were heaped up enormous masses of trachyte and basalt, intended probably to protect the Casa degli Inglesi from being destroyed by the snow during the winter. Having reached this plateau the assailants could more easily charge up to the house, break through the door or windows, and with the aid of their superior numbers carry off the doctor and his people.

Suddenly there was a report. A light smoke drifted in between the rafters. A man fell mortally wounded. The bandits at once rushed back and disappeared behind the rocks. But gradually, profiting by the unevenness of the ground, Zirone brought his men to the foot of the Piarro del Lago; but he did not do so until a dozen shots had been fired from the eaves of the Casa degli Inglesi — and two more of his associates were stretched dead on the snow.

Zirone then gave the word to storm, and at the cost of several more wounded the whole band rushed on the Casa degli Inglesi. The door was riddled with bullets, and two sailors were wounded, but not seriously, and had to stand aside while the struggle grew brisker. With their pikes and hatchets the assailants attempted to break in the door and one of the windows, and a sortie had to be undertaken to repel them under an incessant fusillade from all sides. Luigi had his hand pierced by a bullet, and Pierre, without the assistance of Cape Matifou, would have been killed by a pike thrust, had not Hercules seized the pike and settled its possessor at one blow.

During this sortie Cape Matifou was quite a terror. Twenty times was he shot at, and not a bullet reached him. If Zirone won Point Pescade was a dead man, and the thought of this redoubled his anger. Against such resistance the assailants had again to retreat; and the doctor and his friends returned into the Casa and reviewed their position.

“What ammunition have you left?” asked he.

“Ten or a dozen cartridges per man,” said Luigi.

“And what o’clock is it?”

“Hardly midnight.”

Four hours still to daybreak! The men must be more careful with the ammunition, for some of it would be wanted to protect the retreat at the earliest streak of dawn.

But how could they defend the approaches or prevent the capture of the Casa degli Inglesi if Zirone and his band again tried an assault? And that is what he did in a quarter of an hour’s time, after taking all the wounded to the rear under shelter of a line of lava that did duty for an intrenchment. When they had done this the bandits, enraged at the resistance, and drunk with fury at the sight of five or six of their injured comrades, mounted the ridge and appeared on the crest of the plateau.

Not a shot was fired as they crossed the open, and hence Zirone concluded that the besieged were running short of ammunition. The idea of carrying off a millionaire was just the thing to excite the cupidity of the scoundrels that followed him. Such was their fury during this attack that they forced the door and the window, and would have taken the house by assault had not a volley point blank killed five or six of them. They had, therefore, to return to the foot of the plateau, not without wounding two of the sailors, who could take no further part in the fray.

Four or five rounds were all that remained to the defenders of the Casa degli Inglesi. Under these circumstances retreat even during daylight had almost become impossible. They felt that they were lost if help did not come. But where could help come from? Unfortunately they could not expect that Zirone and his companions would give up their enterprise. They were still nearly forty in number, unhurt and well armed. They knew that the besieged would soon be unable to reply to their fire, and they returned to the charge.

Suddenly enormous blocks like the rocks of an avalanche came rolling down the slope and crushed three between them before they had time to step aside.

Cape Matifou had started the rocks in order to hurl them over the crest of the Piarro del Lago. But this means of defense was not enough. The heap of rocks would soon be used up, and the besieged would have to surrender or seek help from outside.

Suddenly an idea occurred to Point Pescade which he did not care to mention to the doctor for fear that he would not give his consent. But he went and whispered it to Cape Matifou.

He knew from what he had heard at Santa Grotta that a detachment of gendarmes was at Cassone. To reach Cassone would only take an hour, and it would take another hour to get back. Could he not run away and fetch this detachment? Yes, but only by passing through the besiegers, and making off to the westward.

“It is necessary for me to go through, and I will through!” he said. “I am an acrobat, or I am not.”

And he told Cape Matifou what he proposed to do.

“But,” said Matifou, “your risk — ”

“I will go!”

Cape Matifou never dared to resist Point Pescade.

Both then went to the right of the Casa degli Inglesi, where the snow had accumulated to a considerable depth.

Ten minutes afterward, while the struggle continued along the front, Cape Matifou appeared pushing before him a huge snowball, and among the rocks that the sailors continued to hurl on to their assailants he sent the snowball, which rolled down the slope past Zirone’s men, and stopped fifty yards in the rear at the bottom of a gentle hollow. It half broke with the shock; it opened and from it emerged a living man, active and “a little malicious,” as he said of himself.

It was Point Pescade. Inclosed in the carapace of hardened snow, he had dared being started on the slope of the mountain at the risk of being rolled into the depths of some abyss!

And now he was free, he made the best haste he could along the footpaths to Cassone.

It was then half past twelve.

At this moment the doctor, not seeing Pescade, thought he was wounded. He called him.

“Gone!” said Cape Matifou.

“Gone?”

“Yes! To get some help!”

“And how?”

“In a snowball!”

And Cape Matifou told him what Pescade had done.

“Ah! Brave fellow!” exclaimed the doctor. “Courage, my friends! The scoundrels will not have us after all.”

And the masses of rock continued to roll down on the assailants, although the means of defense were rapidly becoming exhausted.

About three o’clock in the morning the doctor, Pierre, Luigi, Cape Matifou, and the sailors, carrying their wounded, would have to evacuate the house and allow it to fall into the possession of Zirone, twenty of whose companions had been killed. The retreat would have to be up the central cone — that heap of lava, scoriæ and cinders, whose summit, the crater, was an abyss of fire. All, however, were to ascend the cone, and carry their wounded with them. Of the 1000 feet they would have to climb over 700 feet would be through the sulphurous fumes that the winds beat down from the top.

The day began to break, and already the crests of the Calabrian Mountains above the eastern coast of the Straits of Messina were tipped with the coming light. But in the position in which the doctor and his men found themselves the day had no chance of being welcomed. They would have to fight as they retreated up the slope, using their last cartridges and hurling down the last masses of rock that Matifou sent flying along with such superhuman strength. They had almost given themselves up for lost when the sound of guns was heard below them. A moment of indecision was observed among the bandits; they hesitated; and then they broke into full flight down the mountain side. They had sighted the gendarmes who had arrrived from Cassone, Point Pescade at their head.

He had not had to go as far as the village. The gendarmes had heard the firing and were already on the road. All he had to do was to lead them to the Casa degli Inglesi.

Then the doctor and his men took the offensive. Cape Matifou, as if he were an avalanche himself, bounded on the nearest and knocked down two before they had time to get away, and then he rushed at Zirone.

“Bravo, old Cape! Bravo!” shouted Pescade, running up. “Down with him! Lay him flat! The contest, gentlemen, the desperate contest between Zirone and Cape Matifou!”

Zirone heard him, and with the hand that remained free he fired his revolver at Pescade, who fell to the ground.

And then there was a terrible scene. Cape Matifou had seized Zirone and was dragging him along by his neck. The wretch, half-strangled, could do nothing to help himself.

In vain the doctor, who wished to have him alive, shouted out for him to be spared. In vain Pierre and Luigi rushed up to stop him. Cape Matifou thought of one thing only — Zirone had mortally wounded Point Pescade! He heard nothing, he saw nothing. He gave one last leap on to the edge of the gaping crater of a solfatara, and hurled the bandit into the abyss of fire!

Point Pescade, seriously wounded, was lifted on to the doctor’s knee. He examined and bathed the wound. When Cape Matifou returned to him, great tears were rolling down his cheeks.

“Never fear, old Cape; never fear! It is nothing!” murmured Pescade.

Cape Matifou took him in his arms like a child, and followed by all, went down the side of the cone, while the gendarmes gave chase to the last fugitive of Zirone’s band.

Six hours afterward the doctor and his men had returned to Catania, and were on board the “Ferrato.” Point Pescade was laid in the cabin, with Dr. Antekirtt for surgeon, and Cape Matifou for nurse; he was well looked after. His wound, a bullet in the shoulder, was not of a serious kind. His cure was only a question of time. When he wanted sleep Cape Matifou told him tales, always the same tales and Point Pescade was soon in sound slumber.

However, the doctor’s campaign had opened unsuccessfully. After nearly falling into Zirone’s hands he had not been able to get hold of Sarcany’s companion and obtain the information from him that he wanted — and all owing to Cape Matifou! Although the doctor stayed at Catania for eight days he could obtain no news of Sarcany. If Sarcany had intended to rejoin Zirone in Sicily his plans had been changed probably when he heard the result of the attempt on Dr. Antekirtt.

The “Ferrato” put to sea on the 8th of September, bound for Antekirtta, and she arrived after a rapid passage.

Then the doctor, Pierre, and Luigi conferred as to their future plans. The first thing to do was obviously to get hold of Carpena, who ought to know what had become of Sarcany and Silas Toronthal.

Unfortunately for the Spaniard, although he escaped the destruction of Zirone’s band he remained at Santa Grotta, and his good fortune was of short duration. In fact, ten days afterward one of the doctor’s agents informed him that Carpena had been arrested at Syracuse — not as an accomplice of Zirone, but for a crime committed more than fifteen years ago, a murder at Almayate in the province of Malaga, which had caused his flight to Rovigno.

Three weeks later Carpena, whose extradition was obtained, was condemned to the galleys and sent to the coast of Morocco, to Ceuta, which is one of the chief penitentiary establishments of Spain.

“At last,” said Pierre, “there is one of the scoundrels settled for life!”

“For life? No!” answered the doctor. “If Andrea Ferrato died in prison, it is not in prison that Carpena ought to die.”

CHAPTER XII.

CEUTA.

On the 21st of September, three weeks after the doctor left Catania, a swift steam yacht — the “Ferrato” — could have been seen running before a north-easterly breeze between the European cape, the English hold on Spanish ground, and the African cape, the Spaniards hold on Moorish ground. If we are to believe mythology, the twelve miles that separate these capes from each other were cleared away by Hercules — a predecessor of De Lesseps who let in the Atlantic by knocking a hole with his club in the border of the Mediterranean.

Point Pescade would not have forgotten to tell this to his friend Cape Matifou as he showed him to the north the rock of Gibraltar, and to the south Mount Hacho. And Cape Matifou would have appreciated at its full value this wonderful feat, and not a shade of envy overshadowed his simple, modest soul. The Provençal Hercules would have bowed low before the son of Jupiter and Alcmena.

But Cape Matifou was not among the yacht’s passengers, and neither was Point Pescade. One taking care of the other, both had remained at Antekirtta. If, later on, their assistance became necessary, they could be summoned by telegram, and brought from the island by one of the “Electrics.”

On the “Ferrato” were the doctor and Pierre Bathory, and in command were Kostrik and Luigi. The last expedition to Sicily in search of Sarcany and Toronthal had resulted in nothing beyond the death of Zirone. They had therefore decided to resume the chase by obtaining from Carpena all the information he possessed as to Sarcany and his accomplice; and as the

Spaniard had been sent to the galleys and shipped to Ceuta, they were on their way there to find him.

Ceuta is a small fortified town, a sort of Spanish Gibraltar, built on the eastern slopes of Mount Hacho; and it was in sight of its harbor that the yacht was now steaming some three miles from the coast. No more animated spot exists than this famous strait. It is the mouth of the Mediterranean. Through it come the thousands of vessels from Northern Europe and the two Americas, bound for hundreds of ports on the coast of the inland sea. Through it come the powerful mail-boats and ships of war, for which the genius of a Frenchman has opened a way to the Indian Ocean and the Southern Seas. Nothing can be more picturesque than this narrow channel through the mountains. To the north are the sierras of Andalusia. To the south, along the strangely varied coast-line, from Cape Spartel to Almina, are the black summits of the Bullones, the Apes’ Hill, and the Seven Brothers. To the right and left are picturesque towns crouching in the curves of the bays, straggling on the flanks of the lower hills and stretching along the beaches at the base of the mountainous background — such as Tarifa, Algesiras, Tangiers, and Ceuta. Between the two shores, cut by the prows of the rapid steamers that stop not for wind or wave, and the sailing vessels that the westerly winds keep back at times in hundreds, there stretches the expanse of ever-moving water, ever changing, here gray and streaked with foam, there blue and calm, and broken into restless bills that mark the zigzagged current-line. No one can remain insensible to the sublime beauties that the two continents, Europe and Africa, bring face to face along the double panorama of the Straits of Gibraltar.

Swiftly does the “Ferrato” approach the African coast. The bay at the back of which Tangiers is hidden begins to close, while the rock of Ceuta becomes more visible as the shore beyond trends away to the south. Above, toward the top of Mount Hacho, there appears a fort, built on the site of a Roman citadel, in which the sentries keep constant watch over the straits and the Moorish territory of which Ceuta is but a slip.

At ten o’clock the “Ferrato” dropped anchor in the harbor, or rather about two cable-lengths from the pier which receives the full strength of the sea; for there is nothing but an open roadstead exposed to the surf of the Mediterranean waves. Fortunately when vessels can not anchor to the west of Ceuta, they find a second anchorage on the other side of the rock, in which they lie sheltered from the easterly winds.

When the health officer had been on board, and the clean bill duly passed, about one o’clock in the afternoon, the doctor, accompanied by Pierre, went ashore, and landed at the little quay at the foot of the town walls. That he was fully determined to carry off Carpena did not admit of a doubt. But how would he do so? Nothing could be done until he had seen the place and made himself acquainted with the circumstances, and then he would be able to decide if it were best to carry off the Spaniard by force, or help him to escape.

This time the doctor did not attempt to remain incognito. Quite the contrary. Already his correspondents had been on board and gone off again to announce the arrival of so famous an individual. Who throughout that Arab country from Suez to Cape Spartel had not heard of the reputation of the learned taleb who now lived in retirement at Antekirtta in the Syrtic Sea? And so the Spaniards, like the Moors, gave him a hearty welcome, and as there were no restrictions on visiting the “Ferrato,” very many boats came off to her.

All this excitement was evidently part of the doctor’s plan. His celebrity was to be brought in to help his enterprise. Pierre and he did nothing to restrain the public enthusiasm. An open carriage obtained from the chief hotel enabled them to visit the town with its narrow streets of gloomy houses destitute of character and color, and its little squares with sickly, dusty trees shading some miserable inn or one or two official buildings. In a word, there was nothing original to be seen except perhaps in the Moorish quarter, where color had not entirely disappeared.

About three o’clock the doctor requested to be taken to the governor of Ceuta, whom he wished to visit — an act of courtesy quite natural on the part of a stranger of distinction.

It need scarcely be said that the governor was not a civil functionary. Ceuta is above all things a military colony. It contains about 10,000 people, officers and soldiers, merchants, fishermen or coasting sailors housed in the town and along the strip of land whose prolongation toward the east completes the Spanish possession.

Ceuta was then administered by Colonel Guyarre. He had under his orders three battalions of infantry detached from the continental army to serve their time in Africa, one regiment permanently quartered in the colony, two batteries of artillery, a company of engineers and a company of Moors, whose families occupied special quarters. The convicts amounted to nearly 2000.

To reach the governor’s house the carriage had to traverse a macadamized road outside the town which ran through the colony to its eastern end. On each side of the road a narrow band between the foot of the hills and the waste along be beach is well tilled, thanks to the assiduous labor of the inhabitants, who have a hard struggle against the poverty of the soil. Vegetables of all sorts and even trees are there to be found — and the laborers are many.

For the convicts are sentenced to various periods ranging from twenty years to detention for life, and are set to work in various ways under conditions determined by the government. They are not only employed by the state in special workshops, on the fortifications and the roads which require constant repair, but fulfill the duties of urban police when their good conduct permits

During his visit to Ceuta the doctor met several of these moving about freely in the streets of the town, and even engaged in domestic work, but he saw a much larger number outside the fortifications, employed on the roads and in the fields. To which class Carpena belonged it was important he should know, as his scheme would have to be modified to suit the man’s being at work, guarded or unguarded, either for the State or a private individual.

“But,” said he to Pierre, “as his conviction is so recent it is unlikely that he would have obtained the advantages accorded to old stagers for good conduct.”

“But if he is under lock and key?” asked Pierre

“Then his capture will be more difficult, but it must be managed.”

The carriage rolled slowly along. At a couple of hundred yards beyond the fortifications a number of convicts under a guard were working at macadamizing the road. They were about fifty, some breaking stones, others scattering them, and others rolling them in. The carriage had to proceed slowly along the side where the repairs had not been commenced.

Suddenly the doctor touched Pierre’s arm.

“There he is!” said he, in a low voice.

A man was resting on the handle of his pickax, about twenty paces in front of his companions.

It was Carpena.

The doctor, after fifteen years, recognized the salt-marsh worker of Istria in his convict garb, as Maria Ferrato had recognized him in his Maltese dress in the lanes of the Manderaggio. He was even then only pretending to work. Unfit for any trade, he could not be employed in any of the workshops, and he was not really able to break stones on the road.

Although the doctor had recognized him, Carpena had not recognized Count Mathias Sandorf. He had only seen him for so short a time on the banks of the canal and in the house of Ferrato, the fisherman, when he brought in the police. But like everybody else he had heard that Dr. Antekirtt had arrived at Ceuta; and Dr. Antekirtt he remembered was the personage of whom Zirone had spoken during their interview near the grotto of Polyphemus on the coast of Sicily. He was the man whom Sarcany had warned them to beware of, he was the millionaire over whom Zirone’s band had met their destruction at the Casa degli Inglesi.

What passed in Carpena’s brain when he found himself so unexpectedly in the doctor’s presence? Did he receive an impression with that instantaneousness which characterizes certain photographic processes? It would be difficult to say. But he did feel that the doctor had taken possession of him by a sort of moral ascendency, that his personality had been annihilated, that a strange will had taken the place of his own will. In vain he would have resisted; he had to yield to the domination.

The carriage stopped and the doctor continued to gaze into his eyes with penetrating fixity. The brilliancy of those eyes produced, in Carpena's brain a strange and irresistible effect. Gradually the Spaniard's senses faded. His eyelids blinked and closed and retained only a flickering vibration. Then the anæsthesia became complete and he fell by the side of the road without his companions seeing anything of what had passed; and there he slept in a magnetic sleep from which not one of them could rouse him.

The doctor gave orders for the coachman to drive on to the governor's house. The scene had not occupied more than half a minute. No one had noticed what had passed between the Spaniard and the doctor — no one except Pierre Bathory.

"Now that man is mine," said the doctor, "and I can do what I like with him."

"Shall we find out all he knows?" asked Pierre.

"No, but he will do all that I require, and that unconsciously. At the first glance I gave at the scoundrel I saw I could become his master, and substitute my will for his."

"But the man was not ill."

"Eh! Do you think then that these effects of hypnosis can only be produced on neuropaths? No, Pierre, the most refractory are not safe from them. On the contrary, it is necessary that the subject should have a will of his own, and I was favored by circumstances in finding in Carpena a nature entirely disposed to submit to my influence. And so he will remain asleep until I choose to wake him."

"Exactly," said Pierre, "but what is the good of it seeing that even in the state he now finds himself it is impossible to make him tell us what we are so anxious to know?"

"Doubtless," answered the doctor, "and it is obvious that I can not make him say what I do not know myself. But he is in my power. I can make him do what I please and when I think fit I shall make him do it, and he will be powerless to prevent it. For example, to-morrow, or the day after, or a week after, or six months after, even if he has awoke, if I desire him to leave Ceuta he will leave Ceuta!"

"Leave Ceuta!" said Pierre. "Gain his liberty! But will the warders let him? The influence of the suggestion can not make him break his chain, nor open the prison gate, nor scale an unscalable wall — "

"No Pierre," replied the doctor, "I can not compel him to do what I could not do myself, and it is for that reason that I am now on my way to visit the Governor of Ceuta."

The doctor was not exaggerating. The fact of the influence of suggestion in the hypnotic state is now admitted. The works and observations of Charcot, Brown-Sequard, Azam, Richet, Dumontpallier, Maudslay, Bernheim, Hack Tuke, Reiger, and many others leave no doubt on the subject. During his travels in the East the doctor had studied some of the more curious cases, and had added to that branch of physiology a rich contingent of new observations. He was thoroughly well informed as to the phenomena and the results that could be obtained from them. Gifted himself with great suggestive power, which he had often exercised in Asia Minor, it was on it that he relied to carry off Carpena, if chance had not made the Spaniard insensible to its influence.

But if the doctor was henceforth master of Carpena, if he could make him do what he liked in suggesting to him his own will, it was still necessary that the prisoner should be free to move when the time came for him to accomplish whatever might be his work. And this permission the doctor hoped to obtain from Colonel Guyarre in such a form as to render it possible for the Spaniard to escape.

Ten minutes later the carriage arrived at the entrance to the large barracks just inside the Spanish boundary, and drew up before the governor’s house.

Colonel Guyarre had already been informed that Dr. Antekirtt was in Ceuta. Thanks to the reputation he had gained by his talents and fortune, this famous individual was a sort of monarch on his travels, and as soon as he entered the reception-room the colonel gave a hearty welcome to him and his young companion, Pierre Bathory, and at the outset offered to put at their entire disposal the “little piece of Spain so fortunately cut off from the Moorish territory.”

“We thank yon for your offer,” was the doctor’s reply in Spanish, a language which, like him, Pierre understood and spoke fluently. “But I am not sure that we shall be able to take advantage of your kindness.”

“Oh! The colony is not a large one, Doctor Antekirtt,” answered the governor. “In half a day you could get round it! Are you going to stay here any time?”

“Four or five hours at the most,” said the doctor, “I must leave to-night for Gibraltar, where I have an appointment to-morrow morning.”

“Leave this evening!” exclaimed the governor. “Allow me to insist! I assure you, Doctor Antekirtt, that our military colony is worth studying thoroughly! You have doubtless seen much and observed much during your travels, but perhaps have not paid much attention to the question of prison discipline; and I assure you that Ceuta is worth study, not only by scientific men, but by economists.”

Naturally the governor was not without some conceit in singing the praises of his colony, but he did not exaggerate in the least. The administrative system of Ceuta is considered one of the best in the world, both as affecting the material well-being of the convicts and their moral amelioration. The governor insisted that a man in Dr. Antekirtt’s position should delay his departure so as to honor by a visit the different departments of the Penitentiary.

“That would be impossible, but to-day I am at your service, and if you like — ”

“It is four o’clock,” said Colonel Guyarre, “and you see there is so little time — ”

“Quite so,” said the doctor, “and I am in a similar fix, for just as you wish me to do the honors of your colony, I am anxious to do you the honors of my yacht.”

“Can not you postpone for to-day your departure to Gibraltar?”

“I would do so if an appointment had not been arranged for me for to-morrow, and which, as I say, compels me to sail.”

“That is really annoying!” replied the governor, “and I shall never console myself for not having kept you longer! But take care! I have got your vessel under the guns of my forts and I can sink her if I give the word!”

“And the reprisals?” answered the doctor with a laugh. “Are you prepared for a war with the mighty Kingdom of Antekirtta?”

“I know that would be serious!” replied the governor, in the same tone. “But what would we not risk to keep you here twenty-four hours longer?”

Pierre did not take part in this conversation. He contented himself with wondering if the doctor was making any progress toward the object he had in view. The decision to leave Ceuta that evening astonished him not a little. How, in so short a time, could he take the indispensable steps for bringing about Carpena’s escape? In a few hours the convicts would be sent back to jail and shut up for the night, and then to get the Spaniard away was a very doubtful undertaking indeed.

But Pierre saw that the doctor was acting on a quickly formed plan when he heard the reply —

“Really, I am deeply grieved that I can not accept your invitation — to-day at least! But we might perhaps arrange it in some way?”

“Say on, doctor, say on!”

“As I must be at Gibraltar to-morrow morning, I must leave here to-night. But I do not think my stay on the rock will last more than two or three days. It is now Thursday, and instead of continuing my voyage up the north of the Mediterranean, nothing could be easier than for me to call at Ceuta on Sunday morning — ”

“Nothing could be easier,” interrupted the governor, “and nothing would give me greater pleasure. Of course my vanity has something to do with it, but who has not some vanity in this world? So it is agreed, Dr. Antekirtt, Sunday?”

“Yes, on one condition!”

“Whatever it be, I accept!”

“That you and your aid-de-camp come to breakfast with me on the ‘Ferrato.’”

“With pleasure, but on one condition also!”

“Following you, whatever it be, I accept.”

“That Monsieur Bathory and you come and dine with me!”

“Very good, and we will go the rounds between breakfast and dinner.”

“And I will abuse my authority to make you admire all the splendors of my kingdom!” replied Guyarre, shaking hands with the doctor.

Pierre also accepted the invitation, and bowed respectfully to the very obliging and very much satisfied Governor of Ceuta.

The doctor then prepared to take his leave, and Pierre read in his eyes that he had gained his object. But the governor would not allow them to leave alone, and accompanied them to the town. The three, therefore, took their seats in the carriage, and drove along the only road which put the residence in communication with Ceuta.

The governor would not have been a Spaniard if he had not enlarged on the more or less contestable beauties of the little colony, on the improvements he proposed to introduce in both military and civic matters, on superiority of the situation of the ancient Abyla to that of Calpe, on the fact of its being possible to make of it a Gibraltar as impregnable as that belonging to Britain, and of course he protested against the insolence of Mr. Ford in saying that “Ceuta ought to belong to England, for Spain does nothing, and hardly knows how to keep it,” and showed great irritation against the English, “who never put their foot on a piece of ground without the foot taking root.”

“Yes,” he remarked, “before they think of taking Ceuta let them take care of Gibraltar! There is a mountain there that Spain will one day shake down on their heads!”

The doctor, without inquiring how the Spaniards were to bring about such a geological commotion, did not contest the statement, which was made with all the loftiness of a hidalgo. And besides, the conversation was interrupted by the sudden stoppage of the vehicle. The driver had to pull in his horses before a crowd of some fifty convicts that barred the road.

The governor beckoned to one of the sergeants to approach. The sergeant immediately advanced to the carriage with military step, and with his heels together and his hand at his peak, waited to be spoken to.

The other prisoners and warders were drawn up on each side of the road.

“What is the matter?” asked the governor.

“Excellency,” replied the sergeant, “here is a convict we have found on the bank who seems to be asleep, and we can not wake him.”

“How long has he been in that state?”

“About an hour.”

“Has he been asleep all the time?”

“He has, your excellency. He is as insensible as if he was dead. We have shaken him, and prodded him, and even fired a pistol close to his ear. But he feels nothing and hears nothing.”

“Why did you not send for the surgeon?” asked the governor.

“I did send for him, your excellency, but he was not at home, and until he comes we do not know what to do with this man.”

“Well, take him to the hospital.”

The sergeant was about to execute the order when the doctor intervened.

“Will your excellency allow me, as a physician, to examine this recalcitrant sleeper? I shall not be sorry to have a closer look at him.”

“And it is really your trade, is it not?” answered the governor. “A lucky rascal to be a patient of Doctor Antekirtt! He will not have much cause to complain.”

The three left the carriage and the doctor walked up to the convict, who was stretched at full length by the side of the road. In the man’s heavy sleep the only signs of life were the panting respiration and the beating of the pulse.

The doctor made a sign that the crowd should stand away from him. Then he bent over the inert body, spoke to it in a low voice, looked at it for some time, as if he wished to penetrate its brain with his will.

Then he arose.

“It is nothing,” said he. “The man has simply fallen into a magnetic sleep!”

“Indeed!” said the governor. “That is very curious! And can you wake him?”

“Nothing can be easier,” answered the doctor. And after touching Carpena’s forehead he gently lifted his eye-lids and said:

“Awake! I will it so!”

Carpena shook himself and opened his eyes, though he still remained in a state of somnolence. The doctor made several passes across his face so as to stir the cushion of air, and gradually the torpor left him. Then he sat up; then unconscious of all that had happened he took his place among his companions.

The governor, the doctor, and Pierre Bathory stepped into the carriage and resumed their road to the town.

“Had not that rascal had something to drink?” asked the governor.

“I do not think so,” replied the doctor. “It was only a simple effect of somnambulism.”

“But how is it produced?”

“That I can not say. Perhaps the man is subject to such attacks. But now he is on his legs again, and none the worse for it.”

Soon the carriage reached the fortifications, entered the town, crossed it obliquely, and stopped in the little square above the wharf.

The doctor and the governor took leave of each other with great cordiality.

“There is the ‘Ferrato,’” said the doctor, pointing to the yacht, which was gracefully riding at her anchor.

“You will not forget that you have accepted my invitation to breakfast on board of her on Sunday?”

“No more than you will forget, Doctor Antekirtt, that yon are to dine with me on Sunday evening.”

“I shall not fail to be with you!”

They separated; and the governor did not leave the wharf until the gig had started.

And when as they were on their way back Pierre asked the doctor if all had gone as he wished, the reply was:

“Yes! On Sunday evening, with the permission of the Governor of Ceuta, Carpena will be on board the ‘Ferrato.’”

At eight o’clock the steam yacht left her anchorage, proceeded to the north, and Mount Hacho, the most prominent height of this part of the Moorish coast, soon vanished in the mists of the night.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEETING AT GIBRALTAR.

The passenger who had not been told whither the ship was bound that carried him would hardly guess in what part of the world he had set foot if he landed at Gibraltar.

First there is a quay, cut up into little docks for ships to be moored along, then a bastion and a wall with an insignificant gate, then an irregular square, bordered by high barracks, which rise one behind the other up a hill, then the long, narrow, winding thoroughfare known as Main Street.

At the end of this road, which is always sloppy and dirty, among the porters, smugglers, bootblacks, and sellers of cigar lights, among the trucks, trollies, and carts of vegetables and fruits, all on the move, there crowds a cosmopolitan mixture of Maltese and Moors, Spaniards and Italians, Arabs and Frenchmen, Portuguese and Germans — a little of everything, in fact, even of citizens of the United Kingdom, who are specially represented by infantrymen in red coats, and artillerymen in blue tunics, with their caps only kept above their ears by a miracle of equilibrium.

Main Street runs right through the town, from the Sea Gate to the Alameda Gate. Thence it runs on toward Europe, by the side of many-colored villas and verdant squares, shaded by large trees, through beds of flowers, green parks, batteries of cannons of all designs, and masses of plants of all countries for a length of four miles and three hundred yards. Such is the rock of Gibraltar, a sort of headless dromedary that crouches on the sands of San Roque, with its tail dragging in the Mediterranean Sea.

This enormous rock is nearly 1400 feet above the shore of the continent that it menaces with its guns — ”the teeth of the old woman,” as the Spaniards call them — more than 700 pieces of artillery, whose throats stretch forth from the embrasures of its casements. Twenty thousand inhabitants and 6000 men of the garrison are housed on the lower spurs of the hill, without counting the quadrumana, the famous “monos,” the tailless apes, the descendants of the earlier families of the place, the real proprietors of the soil, who now occupy the heights of the ancient Calpe. From the summit of the rock the view extends across the straits; the Moorish coast can be seen; the Mediterranean is looked down upon from one side, the Atlantic from the other; and the English telescopes have a range of 124 miles, of which they can keep watch over every foot — and they do keep watch.

If happily the “Ferrato” had arrived two days sooner in the roadstead of Gibraltar, if between the rising and the setting of the sun Dr. Antekirtt and Pierre Bathory had landed on the little quay, entered by the Sea Gate, walked along Main Street, passed the Alameda Gate, and reached the lovely gardens that are planted half-way up the hill to the left, perhaps the events reported in this narrative would have advanced more rapidly, and had a different result. For on the afternoon of the 19th of September, on one of the wooden benches under the shade of the trees with their backs turned to the batteries commanding the roadstead, two persons were talking together, and carefully avoiding being overheard by the people around. They were Sarcany and Namir.

It may be remembered that Sarcany was to rejoin Namir in Sicily when the expedition took place against the Casa degli Inglesi, which resulted in Zirone’s death. Warned in time Sarcany changed his plan of campaign; and consequently the doctor waited a week in vain at his moorings off Catania. Acting on the orders she received, Namir immediately left Sicily to return to Tetuan where she then lived. From Tetuan she returned to Gibraltar, where Sarcany had appointed to meet her. He had arrived the night before and intended to leave next day.

Sarcany’s companion was devoted to him body and soul. She it was who had brought him up in the douars of Tripoli, as if she had been his mother. She had never left him, even when he was living as a broker in the Regency, where through his secret acquaintances he became one of the formidable sectaries of Senousism, whose schemes, as we have said above, were being directed against Antekirtta.

Namir in thought and deed treated Sarcany with almost maternal affection, and was even more attached to him than Zirone, the companion of his pleasures and miseries. At a sign from him she would have committed any crime; at a sign from him she would have walked to death without hesitation. Sarcany could thus have absolute confidence in Namir, and when he sent for her to Gibraltar it was to talk to her about Carpena, from whom he had now much to fear.

This interview was the first that had taken place between them since Sarcany’s arrival at Gibraltar; it was to be the only one, and the conversation was carried on in Arabic.

Sarcany began with a question and received an answer which both probably regarded as of the utmost importance, for their future depended on it.

“Sava?” asked Sarcany.

“She is safe at Tetuan,” replied Namir, “and you can feel quite easy concerning her.”

“But during your absence?”

“During my absence the house is in charge of an old Jewess, who will not leave it for an instant! It is like a prison to which nobody goes or can go! Sava does not know she is at Tetuan, she does not know who I am, and she does not even know that she is in your power.”

“You are always talking to her about the wedding?”

“Yes, Sarcany,” replied Namir, “I never allow her to be free from the idea that she is to be your wife and she will be!”

“She must, Namir, she must; and all the more because Toronthal’s money has nearly gone! Gambling does not agree with poor Silas!”

“You have no need of him, Sarcany; without him you can become richer than you have ever been.”

“I know it Namir, but tho latest date at which my marriage with Sava must take place is approaching! I must have a voluntary consent on her part, and if she refuses — ”

“I will make her!” replied Namir. “Yes! I will tear her consent from her! You can trust me, Sarcany!”

And it would be difficult to imagine a more savage, determined-looking face than that of the Moor as she thus expressed herself.

“Good, Namir!” answered Sarcany. “Continue to keep good watch over her! and I will soon be with you.”

“Do you intend us to leave Tetuan soon?” asked the Moor.

“No, not till I am obliged, for no one there knows, or can know, Sava! If events oblige me to send you away, you will get notice in time.”

“And now, Sarcany,” continued Namir, “tell me why you have sent for me to Gibraltar.”

“Because I have certain things to say to you that are better said than written.”

“Say on then, Sarcany, and if it is in order I will obey it.”

“This is now the position,” answered Sarcany. “Madame Bathory has disappeared and her son is dead. From that family I have nothing further to fear. Madame Toronthal is dead and Sava is in my power! On that side I am also safe! Of the others who know my secret, one — Silas Toronthal, my accomplice — is under my thumb; the other, Zirone, died in Sicily. Of all those I have mentioned none can speak, and none will speak.”

“What are you afraid of, then?”

“I am afraid only of the interference of two individuals: one knows a part of my past life, and the other seems to mix himself up with my present more than is convenient.”

“One is Carpena?” asked Namir.

“Yes,” answered Sarcany; “and the other is that Dr. Antekirtt, whose communications with the Bathory family at Rugusa always seemed to me to be suspicious! Besides, I have heard from Benito, the innkeeper at Santa Grotta, that this personage, who is a millionaire, laid a trap for Zirone by introducing a certain Pescador into his service. If that is so, it was certainly to get possession of him — in default of me — and get my secret out of him!”

“Nothing can be clearer,” answered Namir, “than that you should be more careful than ever of Dr. Antekirtt.”

“And as much as possible we should know what he is doing, and above all things where he is.”

“That is not easy, Sarcany,” answered Namir, “for when I was at Ragusa, for instance, I heard that to-day he would be at one end of the Mediterranean and to-morrow at the other.”

“Yes. The man seems to have the gift of ubiquity,” growled Sarcany. “But it shall not be said that I let him interfere with my game without making a fight for it, and when I go to his home in his island of Antekirtta I know well — ”

“That the wedding will have taken place,” answered Namir, “and you will have nothing to fear from him or any one.”

“That is so, Namir, and till then — ”

“Till then we must mind what we are about! One way we shall always have the best of it, for we shall know where he is without his knowing where we are! Now about Carpena, Sarcany; what have you to fear from him?”

“Carpena knows my connection with Zirone! For many years he took part in expeditions in which I had a hand, and he might talk — ”

“Agreed; but Carpena is now imprisoned for life at Ceuta.”

“And that is what makes me anxious, Namir! Carpena, to improve his position, may say something. If we know he has been sent to Ceuta, others know it as well; others know him personally. There is that Pescador that found him out at Malta. And through that man Dr. Antekirtt may be able to get at him. He can buy his secrets from him! He may even try to help him to escape. In fact, Namir, it is all so very obvious that I wonder why it has not yet happened.”

Sarcany, wide awake and keen-sighted, had thus guessed at the doctor’s plans with regard to the Spaniard, and perceived the danger. Namir agreed that there was considerable cause for anxiety.

“Why,” said Sarcany, “why did we not lose him instead of Zirone?”

“But what did not happen in Sicily might happen in Ceuta,” said Namir coolly.

That, in short, was what the interview meant. Namir then explained to Sarcany that nothing could be easier than for her to go from Tetuan to Ceuta as often as she liked. It was only twenty miles from one town to the other. Tetuan was a little to the south of the penitentiary colony. As the convicts worked on the roads leading to the town, it would be easy to enter into communication with Carpena, whom she knew, to make him think that Sarcany was anxious for him to escape, and to give him a little money or even a little extra food. And if it did happen that one of the pieces of bread or fruit was poisoned, who would trouble himself about the death of the convict Carpena? Who would make any inquiries?

One scoundrel less would not seriously inconvenience the Governor of Ceuta. And Sarcany would have nothing further to fear from the Spaniard, nor from the attempts of Dr. Antekirtt to fathom his secrets.

And from this interview it resulted that while one side was busy scheming the escape of Carpena, the other was endeavoring to render it impossible by sending him prematurely to the penal colony in the other world from which there is no escape!

Having agreed on their plans, Sarcany and Namir returned to the town and separated. That evening Sarcany left Spain to join Silas Toronthal, and the next morning Namir, after crossing the Bay of Gibraltar, embarked at Algesiras on the steamer that runs regularly between Europe and Africa. As she left the harhor the steamer ran past a yacht which was steaming into the bay.

It was the “Ferrato.” Namir, who had seen her while she lay at Catania, recognized her immediately.

“Dr. Antekirtt here?” she murmured. “Sarcany was right. There is danger, and the danger is close at hand.”

A few hours afterward the Moor landed at Ceuta. But before returning to Tetuan she had taken steps to enter into communication with the Spaniard. Her plan was simple, and it was almost sure to succeed if she had sufficient time.

But a complication had arisen which Namir did not expect. Carpena, owing to the doctor’s intervention at his first visit to Ceuta, had been put on the sick-list and been obliged to go into hospital for some days. Namir could only loiter round the hospital without being able to get at him. One thing she contented herself with, and that was, that if she could not see Carpena, neither could the doctor nor his agents. There was therefore no danger, she thought, and no fear of escape until the convict got back to his work on the roads. Namir was mistaken. Carpena’s entrance into the hospitable favored the doctor’s plans and would probably bring about their success.

The “Ferrato” anchored on the evening of September 22 in the Bay of Gibraltar, which is so frequently swept by the easterly and south-easterly winds. But she was only to remain there during the 23d. The doctor and Pierre landed on the Saturday morning and went for their letters to the post-office in Main Street.

One of these, addressed to the doctor from his Sicilian agent, informed him that since the departure of the “Ferrato” Sarcany had not appeared at Catania, Syracuse, or Messina. Another, addressed to Pierre, was from Point Pescade, and informed him that he was much better and felt none the worse for his wound; that Dr. Antekirtt could command his services as soon as he pleased, in addition to those of Cape Matifou, who also presented his respects. There was a third letter to Luigi from Maria. It was more than the letter of a sister — it was the letter of a mother.

If the doctor and Pierre had taken their walk in the gardens of Gibraltar thirty-six hours before, they would have come across Sarcany and Namir.

The day was spent in coaling the “Ferrato” from the lighters which carry the coals from the floating stores moored in the harbor. Fresh-water tanks were also replenished, and everything was in trim when the doctor and Pierre, who had dined at the hotel in Commercial Square, returned on board at gun-fire.

The “Ferrato” did not weigh anchor that evening. As it would only take her a couple of hours to cross the straits, she did not start till eight o’clock the next morning. Then, passing the English batteries, she went out under full steam toward Ceuta. At half past nine she was under Mount Hacho, but as the breeze was blowing from the north-west she could not bring up in the same position she had occupied three days before. The captain therefore took her to the other side of the town and anchored about two cable-lengths from the shore in a small well-sheltered creek.

A quarter of an hour later the doctor landed at the wharf. Namir was on the watch, and had followed all the yacht’s maneuvers. The doctor did not recognize the Moor, whom he had only seen in the shadow of the bazaar at Cattaro. But she had often met him at Gravosa and Ragusa, and recognized him immediately; and she resolved to be more on her guard than ever during his stay at Ceuta.

As he landed the doctor found the governor and an aid-de-camp waiting for him on the wharf.

“Good morning, my dear friend, and welcome!” said the governor. “You are a man of your word, and now you belong to me for the rest of the day at least — ”

“I do not belong to your excellency until you have been my guest! Don’t forget that breakfast is waiting for you on board the ‘Ferrato.’”

“And if it is waiting, Dr. Antekirtt, it would not be polite to keep it waiting any longer.”

The gig took the doctor and his guests out to the yacht. The breakfast was luxuriously served, and all did it honor.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DOCTOR’S EXPERIMENT.

During the breakfast the conversation chiefly dwelt on the administration of the colony, on the manners and customs of the inhabitants, on the relations which had been established between the Spanish and native populations. Incidentally the doctor was led to speak of the convict whom he had awakened from the magnetic sleep two or three days before on the road into the town.

“He remembers nothing about it, probably?” asked the doctor.

“Nothing,” replied the governor; “but he is not now at work on the roads.”

“Where is he, then?” asked the doctor with a certain feeling of anxiety that Pierre was the only one to remark.

“He is in the hospital,” answered the governor. “It seems that the shock upset his precious health.”

“Who is he?”

“A Spaniard named Carpena, a vulgar murderer, not at all interesting, Dr. Antekirtt; and if he happened to die, I can assure you that he would be no loss to us!”

Then the conversation took another turn. Doubtless it did not suit the doctor to lay too much stress on the case of the convict, who would be quite recovered after a day or two in hospital.

Breakfast over, coffee was served on deck, and cigars and cigarettes vanished in smoke beneath the awning. Then the doctor suggested going ashore without delay. He now belonged to the governor and was ready to visit the Spanish colony in all its branches.

The suggestion was accepted, and up to dinner-time the governor devoted himself to doing the honors of the colony to his illustrious visitor. The doctor and Pierre were conscientiously taken all over the place, both town and country. They did not miss a single detail either in the prisons or the barracks. The day being Sunday the convicts were not at their ordinary tasks, and the doctor could observe them under different circumstances. Carpena he only saw as they passed through one of the wards in the hospital, and he did not appear to attract his attention.

The doctor intended to leave for Antekirtta that night, but not until he had given the greater part of the evening to the governor; and about six o'clock he returned to the house, where an elegantly served dinner awaited them — the reply to the morning's breakfast.

We need hardly say that during this walk through the colony the doctor was followed by Namir, and was quite unaware that he was so closely watched.

The dinner was a pleasant one. A few of the chief people in the colony, officers and their wives, and two or three rich merchants had been invited, and did not conceal the pleasure they experienced at seeing and hearing Dr. Antekirtt. The doctor spoke of his travels in the East, in Syria, in Arabia, in the north of Africa. Then leading the conversation round to Ceuta, he complimented the governor, who administered the Spanish colony with so much ability.

“But,” he added, “looking after the convicts must give you a great deal of trouble.”

“And why, my dear doctor?”

“Because they must try to escape; and as the prisoner must think more of getting away than the warders think of stopping him, it follows that the advantage is on the side of the prisoner; and I should not be surprised if there is sometimes one or two missing at roll-call.”

“Never,” answered the governor. “Never! Where would the fugitives go? By sea escape is impossible! By land, among the savage people of Morocco, flight would be dangerous. And so the convicts remain here, if not from pleasure, from prudence.”

“Well,” answered the doctor, “I must congratulate you; for it is to be feared that guarding the prisoners will become more and more difficult in the future.”

“And why, if you please?” asked one of the guests, who was much interested in the conversation owing to his being the director of the penitentiary.

“Because, sir,” replied the doctor, “the study of magnetic phenomena has made great progress; because their action can be applied to everything in the world; because the effects of suggestion are becoming more and more frequent and tend so much toward substituting one personality for another.”

“And in that case?” asked the governor.

“In that case I think that if it is wise to watch your prisoners, it is just as wise to watch your warders. During my travels I have witnessed some extraordinary things, that I would not have believed possible, with regard to these phenomena. And in your own interest do not forget that if a prisoner can unconsciously escape under the influence of a stranger’s will, a warder subject to the same influence can none the less unconsciously allow him to escape.”

“Will you explain to us of what these phenomena consist?” asked the director of the penitentiary.

“Yes, sir, and 1 will give yon an example to make them clear to you. Suppose a warder has a natural disposition to submit to magnetic or hypnotic influence; and admit that a prisoner can exercise such influence over him. Well, from that moment the prisoner has become the warder’s master and can do what he likes with him. He can make him go where he pleases, and can make him open the prison doors whenever he likes to suggest the idea to him.”

“Doubtless,” replied the director, “but on condition that he has first sent him to sleep — ”

“That is where you make a mistake,” said the doctor. “He can do all these things when he is awake, and yet he will know nothing about them.”

“What, do you mean to say — ”

“I mean to say, and I affirm, that under the influence the prisoner can say to the warder, ‘On such a day at such an hour you will do such a thing,’ and he will do it. ‘On such a day you will bring me the keys of my cell,’ and he will bring them. ‘On such a day you will open the gate of the prison,’ and he will open it. ‘On such a day I will pass by you,’ and he will not see him pass.”

“Not when he is awake?”

“Quite wide awake!”

To this affirmation of the doctor a shrug of incredulity passed round the company.

“Nothing can be truer, nevertheless,” said Pierre, “for I myself have seen such things.”

“And so,” said the governor, “the materiality of one person can be suppressed at the look of another?”

“Entirely,” said the doctor; “and in some people in such a way as to cause such changes in their senses that they will take salt for sugar, milk for vinegar, and wine for physic. Nothing is impossible in the way of illusion or hallucination while the brain is under the influence.”

“It seems to me, Dr. Antekirtt,” said the governor, “that the general feeling of the company is that those things must be seen to be believed!”

“And more than once!” said one of the guests.

“It is a pity,” said the governor, “that the short time you have to give us will not allow you to convince us by an experiment.”

“But I can!” replied the doctor.

“Now?”

“Yes, now, if you like!”

“How?”

“Your excellency has not forgotten that three days ago one of the convicts was found asleep on the road, and I told yon that it was a magnetic sleep?”

“Yes,” said the director of the penitentiary, “and the man is now in the hospital.”

“You remember I awakened him, for none of your warders could.”

“Quite so.”

“Well, that was enough to create between me and this convict — what is his name?”

“Carpena.”

“Between me and Carpena a bond of suggestion putting him completely in my power.”

“When he is in your presence.”

“And when we are apart.”

“Between you here and him in the hospital?” asked the governor.

“Yes; and if you will give orders for them to leave the doors open, do you know what he will do?”

“Run away!” said the governor, with a laugh, in which all joined.

“No, gentlemen,” replied the doctor, very seriously, “Carpena will not run away until I wish him to run away, and he will only do what I want him to do.”

“And what is that, if yon please?”

“For example, when he gets out of prison, I can order him to take the road here.”

“And will he come here?”

“Into this very room, if I please, and he will insist on speaking to you.”

“To me?”

“To you. And if you like, as he will have to obey all my suggestions, I will suggest the idea to him to take you for somebody else — say for his Majesty Alfonso XII.”

“For his Majesty the King of Spain?”

“Yes, your excellency, and he will ask you — ”

“To pardon him?”

“Yes, to pardon him, and, if you like, to give him the Cross of Isabella into the bargain.”

Shouts of laughter greeted this last assertion.

“And the man wide awake all the time?” asked the director of the penitentiary.

“As wide awake as we are.”

“No, no! It is not credible, it is not possible,” exclaimed the governor.

“Then try the experiment! Give orders for Carpena to be allowed to do what he likes, and for security let one or two warders be told off to follow him at a distance. He shall do all I have just told you.”

“Very well, when would you like to begin?”

“It is now eight o’clock,” said the doctor, consulting his watch. “At nine o’clock?”

“Be it so; and after the experiment?”

“After the experiment Carpena will go quietly back to the hospital without the slightest remembrance of what has passed. I repeat — and it is the only explanation I can give you of the phenomenon — that Carpena will be under a suggestive influence coming from me, and in reality I shall be doing these things, not Carpena.”

The governor, whose incredulity was manifest, wrote a note to the chief warder, directing him to allow Carpena full liberty of action, and to follow him from a distance; and the note was immediately dispatched to the hospital.

The dinner at an end, the company at the governor’s invitation adjourned to the drawing-room.

Naturally the conversation still dwelt on the different phenomena of magnetism or hypnotism, and controversy between the believers and unbelievers grew animated. Dr. Antekirtt, while the cups of coffee circulated amid the smoke of the cigars and cigarettes, which even the Spanish ladies did not despise, related a score of facts of which he had been the witness or the author during the practice of his profession, all to the point, all indisputable, but none of them, seemingly, convincing.

He added also that this faculty of suggestion would give serious trouble to legislators and magistrates, for it could be used for criminal purposes; and cases could arise in which crime could be committed without its being possible to discover its author.

Suddenly at twenty-seven minutes to nine the doctor interrupted himself, and said:

“Carpena is now leaving the hospital!”

And a minute afterward he added:

“He has just passed through the gate of the penitentiary!”

The tone with which the words were pronounced had a strange effect on those around him. The governor alone continued to shake his head.

Then the conversation for and against began again, each one saying but little at a time, until at five minutes to nine the doctor interrupted them for the last time:

“Carpena is at the front door.”

Almost immediately afterward, one of the servants entered the drawing-room and told the governor that a man dressed like a convict was waiting below, and insisted on seeing him.

“Let him come in!” replied the governor, whose incredulity began to vanish in the face of the facts.

As nine o’clock struck, Carpena appeared at the door of the drawing-room. Without appearing to see any of those present, although his eyes were wide open, he walked up to the governor, and kneeling before him, said:

“Sire, I ask you to pardon me.”

The governor absolutely dumfounded, as if he himself was under an hallucination, knew not what to say.

“You can pardon him,” said the doctor, with a smile; “he will have no recollection of all this.”

“I grant you your pardon,” said the governor, with all the dignity of the King of all the Spains.

“And to that pardon, sire,” said Carpena, still bending low, “will you add the Cross of Isabella?”

“I give it you.”

And then Carpena made as though to take something from the governor’s hand and attach the imaginary cross to his breast. Then he rose, and walking backward quitted the room.

This time the whole company followed him to the front door.

“I will go with him, I will see him to the hospital,” said the governor, struggling with himself, as if loath to yield to the evidence of his senses.

“Come, then!” said the doctor.

And the governor, Pierre Bathory, Dr. Antekirtt, and the rest followed after Carpena as he went along the road toward the town. Namir, who had watched him since he left the penitentiary, glided along in the shadow and continued to watch.

The night was rather dark. The Spaniard walked along at a regular pace with no hesitation in his stride. The governor and his guests were twenty paces behind him with the two warders who had received orders to keep him. in sight.

The road as it approaches the town bends round a small creek, forming the second harbor on that side of the rock. On the black, motionless water flickered the reflections of two or three lights. They came from the ports and lanterns of the “Ferrato,” whose hull loomed large in the darkness.

As he reached this spot Carpena left the road and inclined to the right toward a heap of rocks which rose from the shore a dozen feet away. Doubtless a gesture from the doctor, unseen by any one — perhaps a simple suggestion of his will — had obliged the Spaniard to leave the path.

The warders prepared to close up so as to send him back, but the governor, knowing that no escape from that side was possible, ordered them to leave him to himself.

However, Carpena halted on one of the rocks as if he had been struck motionless and fixed there by some irresistible power. He tried to lift his feet, to move his arms, but he could not. The doctor’s will within him nailed him to the ground.

The governor looked at him for a minute or so. Then he said to his guest —

“Well, doctor, whether he is awake or not, we must give in to the evidence!”

“You are convinced, quite convinced?”

“Yes, quite convinced that there are things we must believe in like the brutes! Now, Dr. Antekirtt. suggest to him to go back to the penitentiary! Alfonso XII. commands it!”

The governor had hardly finished the sentence before Carpena, without uttering a sound, threw himself into the water. Was it an accident? Was it a voluntary act on his part? Had some fortuitous circumstance intervened to snatch him out of the doctor’s power? No one could say.

Immediately there was a general rush to the rocks, and the warders ran on to the beach. There was no trace of Carpena. Some fishing-boats came up, as did the boats from the yacht. All was useless. They did not even find the corpse, which the current would carry out to sea.

“I am very sorry, your excellency,” said the doctor, “that our experiment has had so tragical an end, which it was impossible to anticipate.”

“But how do you account for it?” asked the governor.

“The reason is that in the exercise of this suggestive power, of which you can not deny the effects, there are intermittences. That man escaped me for an instant, undoubtedly, and either from his being seized with vertigo or some other cause he fell off the rocks! It is a great pity, for we have lost such a splendid specimen!”

“We have lost a scamp — nothing more!” said the governor philosophically.

And that was Carpena's funeral oration!

The doctor and Pierre then took leave of the governor. They had to start before daybreak for Antekirtta, and they were profuse in their thanks to their host for the hospitable welcome he had given them in the Spanish colony.

The governor shook the doctor's hand, wished him a pleasant journey, and after promising to come and see him, returned to his house.

Perhaps it may be said that Dr. Antekirtt had somewhat abused the good faith of the Governor of Ceuta. His conduct under the circumstances is certainly open to criticism. But we should not forget the work to which Count Sandorf had consecrated his life. "A thousand roads — one end!" And this was one of the thousand roads he had to take.

A few minutes afterward one of the boats of the "Ferrato" had taken them on board. Luigi was waiting for them as they came up the side.

"That man?" asked the doctor.

"According to your orders," said Luigi, "our boat was near the rocks and picked him up after his fall, and he is under lock and key in the fore-cabin."

"He has said nothing?" asked Pierre.

"How could he say anything? He seems asleep and unconscious of his acts."

"Good," answered the doctor. "I willed that Carpena should fall from those rocks, and he fell. I willed that he should sleep, and he sleeps. When I will that he wakes, he shall wake. And now, Luigi, up anchor and away!"

The steam was up, and a few minutes afterward the “Ferrato” was off, heading out to sea, straight for Antekirtta.

CHAPTER XV.

SEVENTEEN TIMES.

“Seventeen times?”

“Seventeen times!”

“Yes, the red has passed seventeen times!”

“Is it possible?”

“It may be impossible, but it is.”

“And the players are mad against it?”

“More than 900,000 francs won by the bank!”

“Seventeen times! Seventeen times!”

“At roulette or trente-et-quarante?”

“At trente-et-quarante.”

“It is fifteen years since anything like it!”

“Fifteen years three months and fourteen hours,” coolly replied an old gambler, belonging to the honorable class of the ruined. “Yes, sir, and a very strange thing — it was in the height of summer, on the 16th of June, 1867 — I know something about it.”

Such was the conversation, or rather the chorus of exclamation that was heard in the vestibule and peristyle of the Cercle des Etrangers at Monte

Carlo, on the evening of the 3d of October, eight days after the escape of Carpena from the Spanish penitentiary.

Among the crowd of gamblers — men and women of all nations, ages, and classes — there was quite an uproar of enthusiasm. They would willingly have greeted the red as the equal of the horse that had carried off the Epsom Derby or the Longehamps Grand Prix. In fact, for the people that the Old and New Worlds daily pour into the little principality of Monaco, this series of seventeen had quite the importance of a political event affecting the laws and equilibrium of Europe.

It will easily be believed that the red in its somewhat extraordinary obstinacy had made a good many victims and the winnings of the bank had been considerable. Nearly a million of francs said some — which meant that nearly the whole of the players had become infuriated at the extraordinary series of passes.

Between them, two foreigners had paid a large part of what these gentlemen of the board of green cloth call the “deveine” — one, very cool, very self-restrained, although the emotions within him were traceable in his pallid face; the other with his features distorted, his hair in disorder, his look that of a madman or a desperado — and these had just descended the steps of the peristyle, and were strolling out under the trees on the terrace.

“That makes more than 400,000 francs that the cursed series has cost us,” said the elder.

“Yon may as well say 413,000,” said the younger in the tone of a cashier casting a column.

“And now I have only got 200,000 — and hardly that,” said the first gambler.

“One hundred and ninety-seven thousand,” said the other, in the same tone.

“Yes! Of nearly two millions that I once had, when you made me come with you.”

“One million seven hundred and seventy-five thousand francs!”

“And that in less than two months.”

“In one month and sixteen days.”

“Sarcany!” exclaimed the elder, whom his companion’s coolness seemed to exasperate as much as the ironical precision with which he rolled out the ciphers.

“Well, Silas?”

Toronthal and Sarcany were the speakers. Since leaving Ragusa, in the short space of three months, they had reached the verge of ruin. After dissipating all that they had received as the reward of their abominable treachery, Sarcany had hunted his accomplice out of Ragusa, taking Sava with them, and then had enticed him into gambling and every dissipation in which he could squander his wealth. It is only just, however, to say that the old banker, daring speculator as he was, had in times gone by more than once risked his fortune in hazardous adventures in which luck was his only guide.

How could Toronthal resist? Was he not more than ever in the power of the Tripolitan broker? Sometimes he revolted, but Sarcany had obtained an irresistible ascendency over him, and the wretched man fell so heavily that strength almost failed him to rise again, so that Sarcany was not at all uneasy about the occasional fancies that Toronthal had to withdraw from his influence. The brutality of his retorts and the implacability of his logic soon brought Toronthal back beneath the yoke.

In leaving Ragusa under circumstances which will not have been forgotten, their first care had been to put Sava in some safe place under the charge of Namir. And now in this retreat at Tetuan, on the borders of Morocco, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to find her. There Sarcany's pitiless companion undertook to break down the girl's resolution and tear from her her consent to the marriage. Unshaken in her repulsion and strengthened by the recollection of Pierre, Sava hitherto had obstinately resisted. But could she always do so?

In the meantime Sarcany never ceased from exciting his companion to plunge into the follies of the gambling-table, although he had lost his own fortune in a similar way. In France, in Italy, in Germany, in the great centers where chance keeps house in all its forms, on the exchange, on the race-course, in the clubs of the great capitals, in the watering-places as in the sea-side towns, Silas Toronthal had followed as Sarcany led, and had soon been reduced to a few hundred thousand francs. While the banker risked his own money, Sarcany risked the banker's, and down this double slope both went to ruin at double-quick time. What gamblers call the "deveine" had been dead against them, and it was not for want of trying every chance that offered. In short, their amusement cost them the best part of the millions received from the possessions of Count Sandorf, and it had even become necessary to offer for sale the house in the Stradone at Ragusa.

And so they had been at Monte Carlo for the last three weeks, never leaving the tables of the club, trying the most infallible dodges, working out schemes that went always awry, studying the rotation of the cylinder of the roulette when the croupier's hand was tiring through his last quarter hour of duty, loading to the maximum numbers, which obstinately refused to come, combining simple combinations with multifold combinations, listening to the advice of ruined old stagers, becoming professional gamblers, trying in fact every imbecile device, employing every stupid fetish which could class the gambler between the child who has no reason and the idiot who has forever lost it. And not only did they risk their money, but they enfeebled their intelligence by imagining absurd combinations, and they compromised their personal dignity by the familiarity which the frequenting of the very mixed assembly imposed upon all. In short, at the close of this evening, which would hereafter be celebrated in the annals of Monte Carlo, owing to their obstinacy in struggling against a series of seventeen rouges at trente-et-quarante, they had left off with less than 200,000 francs between them.

But if they were nearly ruined, they had not yet lost their senses, and while they were talking on the terrace they noticed a gambler who had become suddenly deranged, and who was running through the gardens shouting:

"It turns! It goes on turning!"

The unfortunate man imagined that he had just put his money on the coming number, and that the cylinder in a movement of fantastic gyration was turning and doomed to turn for ages. He was mad.

"Have you become calmer, Silas?" asked Sarcany of his companion. "Does not that lunatic teach you to keep cool? We have not won, it is true, but the luck will turn, for it must turn, and without our doing anything to make it. Why try to better it? It is dangerous, and besides it is useless. You can not change the run if it is bad, and you would not change it when it is good. Wait then, and when the luck turns, let us be bold and make our game while the run lasts."

Did Toronthal listen to this advice — absurd as is all advice connected with games of chance? No! He was overwhelmed, and he had then but one idea — to escape from this domination of Sarcany, to get away, and to get away so far that his conscience could not reproach him! But such a fit of resolution could not last long in his enervated, helpless nature. Besides, he was watched by his accomplice. Before he left him to himself, Sarcany wanted him until his marriage had taken place with Sava. Then he would get rid of Silas Toronthal, he would forget him, and he would not even remember that that feeble individual had ever existed, or that he had ever been associated with him in any enterprise whatever! Until then it was necessary for the banker to remain under his thumb!

"Silas," continued Sarcany, "we have been unfortunate to-day; chance was against us. To-morrow it will be for us!"

"And if I lose the little that is left?" answered Toronthal, who struggled in vain against these deplorable suggestions.

"There is still Sava, Toronthal!" answered Sarcany quickly. "She is an ace of trumps, and you can not overtrump her!"

"Yes! To-morrow! to-morrow!" said the banker, who was just in that mental condition in which a gambler would risk his head.

The two then entered their hotel, which was situated half-way down the road from Monte Carle to La Condamine.

The port of Monaco lies between Point Forcinana and Fort Antoine, and is an open bay exposed to the north-east and south-east winds. It rounds off between the rock on which stands the capital, and the plateau on which are the hotels and villas, at the foot of the superb Mount Agel, whose summit rising to 3600 feet towers boldly above the picturesque panorama of the Ligurian coast. The town has a population of some 1200 inhabitants, and is situated on the rock of Monaco, surrounded on three of its sides by the sea. It lies hidden beneath the never-fading verdure of palms, pomegranates, sycamores, pear-trees orange-trees, citron-trees, eucalyptuses, and arborescent bushes of geraniums, aloes, myrtles, lentisks and palmachristis heaped all over the place in marvelous confusion.

At the other side of the harbor Monte Carlo faces the tiny capital, with its curious pile of houses, built on all the ledges, its zigzags of narrow climbing roads running up to the Corniche suspending in mid-mountain its chessboard of gardens in perpetual bloom, its panorama of cottages of every shape, its villas of every style, of which some seem actually to hang over the limpid waters of this Mediterranean bay.

Between Monaco and Monte Carlo at the back of the harbor from the beach up to the throat of the winding valley which divides the group of mountains is a third city, La Condamine.

Above to the right rises a large mountain, whose profile, turned toward the sea, had gained it the name of Dog’s Head. On this head there is now a fort which is said to be impregnable, and which has the honor to be French. For it marks the limit on that side of the principality of Monaco.

From La Condamine to Monte Carlo vehicles have to ascend a superb hill, at the upper end of which are the private houses and the hotels, in one of which were now staying Toronthal and Sarcany. From the windows of their apartment the view extended from La Condamine to beyond Monaco, and was only stopped by the Dog's Head, which seemed to be interrogating the Mediterranean as the Sphynx does the Lybian Desert.

Sarcany and Toronthal had retired to their rooms. There they examined the situation, each from his own point of view. Had the vicissitudes of fortune broken the community of interests which for fifteen years had bound them so closely together?

Sarcany when he entered had found a letter addressed to him. It came from Tetuan, and he hastily tore it open.

In a few lines Namir told him of the two things that interested him deeply. The first was the death of Carpena, drowned in the harbor of Ceuta under such extraordinary circumstances; the second was the appearance of Dr. Antekirtt on the Moorish coast, the way in which he had dealt with the Spaniard, and then his immediate disappearance.

Having read the letter, Sarcany opened the window. Leaning on the balcony he looked into space and set himself to think.

“Carpena dead? Nothing could be more opportune! Now his secrets are drowned with him! On that side I am at ease! Nothing more to fear there!”

Then coming to the second passage of his letter: “As to the appearance of Dr. Antekirtt at Ceuta, that is more serious! Who is this man? It would not matter much after all if I had not found him for some time more or less mixed up in my concerns! At Ragusa his interviews with the Bathory family! At Catania, the trap he laid for Zirone! At Ceuta, this interference, which has cost the life of Carpena! Then he is very near Tetuan, but it does not seem that he has gone there, nor that he has discovered Sava's retreat.

That would be the most terrible blow, and it may yet come! We shall see if we can not keep him off, not only in the future, but in the present. The Senousists will soon be masters of all the Cyrenaic, and there is only an arm of the sea to cross to get at Antekirtta! If they must be urged on — I know well.”

It is evident that Sarcany’s horizon was not without its black spots. In the dark schemes which he followed out step by step in face of the object he had set himself and which he had almost attained, he might stumble over the very smallest stone in his path, and perhaps never get up again. Not only was this intervention of Dr. Antekirtt enough to unsettle him, but the position of Toronthal was also beginning to cause him anxiety.

“Yes,” he said to himself, “we are in a corner! To-morrow we must stake everything! Either the bank goes, or we go! If I am ruined by his ruin. I know how to recoup myself! But for Silas it is different. He may become dangerous, he may talk, he may let out the secret on which all my future rests! I have been his master up to now, but he may become my master!”

The position was exactly as Sarcany had described it. He was under no mistake as to the moral courage of his accomplice. He had his lesson before; Silas Toronthal when he had nothing to lose, would only use him to make money out of him.

Sarcany pondered over what was best to be done. Absorbed in his reflections he did not see what was happening at the entrance to the harbor of Monaco a few hundred feet beneath him.

About a half cable-length away a long hull without mast or funnel, came gliding through the waves. Altogether, it did not show for more than three feet above the water level. Soon after, gradually nearing Point Focinana, it slipped into smoother water near the beach. Then there shot off from it a little boat, which had appeared like an incrustation on the side of the almost invisible hull. Three men were in the boat. In a few strokes of the sculls they reached the shore, two of them landed, and the third took back the boat. A few minutes afterward the mysterious craft, which had not betrayed its presence either by light or sound, was lost in the darkness, and had left no trace of its passage.

The two men as soon as they had left the beach went along by the edge of the rocks toward the railway station, and then went up the Avenue des Spelugues, which runs around the gardens of Monte Carlo.

Sarcany bad seen nothing of this. His thoughts were far away from Monaco — at Tetuan. But he would not go there alone, he would compel his accomplice to go with him.

“Silas my master!” he repeated. “Silas able to checkmate me with a word! Never! If to-morrow the game does not give us back what it has taken away from us, 1 shall be obliged to make him follow me! Yes! To follow me to Tetuan, and then on the coast of Morocco, if Silas Toronthal gives trouble, Silas Toronthal will disappear!”

As we know, Sarcany was not the man to recoil at one crime more, particularly when circumstances, the distance of the country, the wildness of the inhabitants, and the impossibility of seeking and finding the criminal, rendered its accomplishment so easy.

Having decided on his plans, Sarcany shut the window, went to bed, and was soon asleep without being in the least troubled by his conscience.

It was not so with Toronthal. He passed a horrible night. Of his former fortune what had he left? Hardly 200,000 francs — and these were to be squandered in play. It was the last throw! So his accomplice wished, and so he himself wished. His enfeebled brain, filled with chimerical calculations, was no longer able to reason coolly nor justly. He was even incapable, at this moment at least, of understanding his real position with regard to Sarcany. He could not see that the parts had shifted, and that he who had been the victor was in turn the vanquished. He only saw the present with its immediate ruin, and only dreamed of the morrow which might float him again or plunge him into the depths of misery.

Thus passed the night for the two associates. One was permitted to spend it in repose, the other to struggle with all the anguish of insomnia.

In the morning about ten o'clock Sarcany joined Toronthal. The banker was seated before a table, covering the pages of his note-book with figures and formulæ.

"Well, Silas," said he in a careless tone the tone of a man who would not assign more importance to the world's miseries than he could help — "well, Silas, in your dreams did you give the preference to the red or the black?"

"I did not sleep a wink!" replied the banker.

"So much the worse, Silas, so much the worse. To-day you must be cool, and a few hours of repose were what you wanted. Look at me! I have had a little, and I am in the best condition to struggle with Fortune! She is a woman after all, and she loves best the men who can command her."

"She has betrayed us all the same!"

“Bah! Merely caprice! And the caprice will pass, and she will smile on us!”

Toronthal made no reply. Did he even understand what Sarcany had said to him, while his eyes were fixed on the pages of his note-book and the useless combinations?

“What are you doing there?” asked Sarcany. “Tips? Diddles! Tut-tut. You are ill, Silas! You can’t mix up mathematics and luck; it is luck alone we want to-day!”

“Be it so!” said Toronthal, shutting up his book.

“Eh! 0f course, Silas! I only know one way to go to work,” said Sarcany, ironically. “But to do that we must have made special studies — and our education has been neglected on that point! Then stick to chance! She stuck to the bank yesterday! She may desert it to-day! And if she does, she’ll give back all she took!”

“All!”

“Yes, all, Silas! But don’t be cast down! Cheer up and keep cool!”

“And to-night if we are ruined?” asked the banker, looking straight at Sarcany.

“Well, we’ll clear out of Monaco.”

“Where to?” exclaimed Toronthal. “Cursed be the day I knew you, Sarcany! Cursed be the day I employed you! I should never have been where I am if it had not been for you!”

“It is too late to abuse me, my dear fellow, and it is not quite the thing to quarrel with people who are going to help you.”

“Be careful!” said the banker.

“I am careful,” said Sarcany.

And Toronthal’s threat confirmed him in his scheme to put it out of his power to injure him.

“My dear Silas,” he continued, “do not worry yourself! Why should you? It excites your nerves, and you must not be nervous to-day! Have confidence and don’t despair about me! If unfortunately the deveine goes against us think of the other millions that are waiting for me, in which you will share.”

“Yes! Yes! I must have my revenge!” said Toronthal with the gambler’s instinct. “The bank was too lucky yesterday — and to-night — ”

“To-night we shall be rich, very rich,” said Sarcany. “And I engage that we shall get back all we have lost! And then we shall leave Monte Carlo! And start for — ”

“For where?”

“For Tetuan, where we have another part to play! And that the finest and the best!”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST STAKE.

The salon of the Cercle des Etrangers — otherwise the Casino — had been open since eleven o’clock. The number of players was still few, but some of the roulette tables were already in operation.

The equilibrium of these tables had previously been rectified, it being important that their horizontality should be perfect. In fact the slightest flaw affecting the movements of the ball thrown into the turning cylinder would be remarked and utilized to the detriment of the bank. At each of the six tables of roulette 16,000 francs in gold, silver, and notes had been placed; on each of the two tables of trente-et-quarante 150,000. This is the usual stake of the bank during the season, and it is very seldom that the administration has to replenish the starting fund. Except with a draw game or a zero the bank must win — and it always wins. The game is immoral in itself; but it is more than that, it is stupid, for its conditions are unfair.

Round each of the roulette tables are eight croupiers, rake in hand, occupying the places reserved for them. By their side, sitting or standing, are the players and spectators. In the saloons the inspectors stroll to and fro, watching the croupiers and the stakes, while the waiters move about for the service of the public and the administration, which employs not less than 150 people to look after the tables.

About half past twelve the train from Nice brings its customary contingent of players. To-day they were, perhaps, rather numerous. The series of seventeen for the rouge had produced its natural result. It was a new attraction, and all who worshiped chance came to follow its vicissitudes with increased ardor.

An hour afterward the rooms had filled. The talk was chiefly of that extraordinary run, but it was carried on in subdued voices. In these immense rooms with their prodigality of gilding, their wealth of ornamentation, the luxury of their furniture, the profusion of the lusters that poured forth their floods of gaslight, to say nothing ot the long pendent from which the green-shaded oil-lamps more especially illuminated the gaming-tables, the dominating sound, notwithstanding the crowd of visitors, was not that of conversation; it was the clatter and chinking of the gold and siver pieces as they were counted or thrown on the table, the rustling of the bank-notes, and the incessant "Rouge gagne et couleur," or "dixsept, noir, impair et manque" in the indifferent voices of the chiefs of the parties and a very sad sound it was!

Two of the losers who had been among the most prominent the evening before had not yet appeared in the saloons. Already some of the players were following the different chances, endeavoring to tap the run of luck, some at roulette, others at trente-et-quarante. But the altercations of gain and loss seemed to be pretty equal, and it did not look as though the phenomenon of the night before would be repeated.

It was not till three o'clock that Sarcany and Toronthal entered the Casino. Before entering the gaming-room, they took a stroll in the hall, where they were the object of a little public curiosity. The crowd looked at them and watched them, and wondered if they would again try a struggle with this chance which had cost them so dear. Several of the profession would willingly have taken advantage of the occasion to favor them with infallible dodges — for a consideration — had they seemed more accessible. The banker, with a wild look in his eyes, did not seem to notice what was passing around him. Sarcany was cooler and firmer than ever. Both shrunk for a time from trying their last stake.

Among the people who were watching him with that special curiosity accorded chiefly to patients or convicts, there was one stranger, who seemed resolved never to lose sight of them. He was a knowing-looking young man of about three-and-twenty, with a thin face and pointed nose — one of those noses that seem to look at you. His eyes, of singular vivacity, were sheltered behind spectacles merely of preserved glass. As if he had live money in his veins, he kept his hands in his coat pocket to prevent their gesticulating, and he kept his feet close together in the first position, to make sure of remaining in his place. He was fashionably dressed, without any sacrifices to the latest exigencies of dandyism, and he gave himself no airs — but probably felt very ill at ease in his well-fitting clothes. For the young man — there could be no doubt about it — was nobody else but Point Pescade.

Outside, in the gardens, Cape Matifou was in attendance. The person on whose behalf these two had come on a special mission to this heaven or hell of Monte Carlo was Dr. Antekirtt.

The vessel that had dropped them the night before at Monte Carlo point was “Electric No. 2,” of the flotilla of Antekirtta, and this was their object:

Two days after the kidnapping on board the “Ferrato” Carpena had been brought ashore and in spite of his protests imprisoned in one of the casemates on the island. There he found that he had only changed one prison for another. Instead of being in the penitentiary of Ceuta, he was, although he knew it not, in the power of Dr. Antekirtt. Where was he? He could not tell. Had he gained by the change? He wondered much, and not without anxiety. He resolved at any rate to do all he could to improve his position.

And to the first question propounded by the doctor he replied with the utmost frankness.

Did he know Silas Toronthal and Sarcany?

Toronthal, no; Sarcany, yes; but he had only seen him at rare intervals.

Had Sarcany been in communication with Zirone and his band while they were in the neighborhood of Catania?

Yes; Sarcany was expected in Sicily, and he would certainly have come if it had not been for the unfortunate expedition which ended in the death of Zirone.

Where was he now?

At Monte Carlo, at least unless he had left that town, where he had been living for some time, and very likely with Silas Toronthal.

Carpena knew no more. But what he had just told the doctor was sufficient information for a fresh campaign.

Of course, the Spaniard did not know what object the doctor had in helping him to escape from Ceuta and carrying him off; he did not know that his treachery to Andrea Ferrato was known to him who interrogated him, and he did not know that Luigi was the son of the fisherman of Rovigno. In his casemate he was as strictly guarded as he had been in the penitentiary at Ceuta, without being able to communicate with any one until his fate had been decided.

One, then, of the three traitors who had brought about the sanguinary collapse of the conspiracy of Trieste was in the hands of the doctor. There were the other two still to be seized, and Carpena had just told where they could be found.

As the doctor was known to Toronthal, and Pierre was known to Toronthal and Sarcany, it seemed best for them not to appear until they could do so with some chance of success. But now they were on the track of the accomplices, it was important not to lose sight of them until circumstances favored the attack. And so Point Pescade, to follow them wherever they went, and Cape Matifou, to lend the strong hand when needed, were sent to Monaco, where the doctor, Pierre, and Luigi would come in the “Ferrato” as soon as they were wanted.

As soon as they arrived they set to work. They had no difficulty in discovering the hotel in which Toronthal and Sarcany had taken up their quarters. While Cape Matifou walked about the neighborhood till the evening, Point Pescade kept watch. He saw the two friends come out at about one o’clock in the afternoon. It seemed that the banker was much depressed and spoke little, while Sarcany was particularly lively. During the morning Pescade had heard what had happened the previous evening in the saloons of the Cercle, that is to say, of that extraordinary series which had made so many victims, among the chief of whom were Toronthal and Sarcany. He therefore assumed that their conversation was about that curious piece of bad luck. In addition he had learned how these two men had been heavy losers for some time, and he also assumed that they had almost exhausted their funds, and that the time was coming when the doctor could usefully intervene.

This information was contained in a telegram which Pescade, without mentioning names, sent off during the morning to Malta, whence it was forwarded by private wire to Antekirtta.

When Sarcany and Toronthal entered the hall of the Casino, Pescade followed them; and when they entered the gaming-saloons he was close behind.

It was then three o'clock in the afternoon. The play was growing animated. The banker and his companion first strolled round the rooms. For a minute or so they stopped at different tables and watched the game, but took no part in it.

Point Pescade strolled about among the spectators, but did not lose sight of them. He even thought it best, so as to disarm suspicion, to risk a few five-franc pieces on the columns and dozens of roulette, and, as was proper, he lost them — with the most exemplary coolness. But he did not avail himself of the excellent advice given him in confidence by a professor of great merit.

"To succeed, sir, you should study to lose the small stakes and win the big ones. That is the secret!"

Four o'clock struck, and then Sarcany and Toronthal thought the time had come for them to try their luck. There were several vacant places at one of the roulette-tables. They seated themselves, facing each other, and the chief of the table soon saw himself surrounded not only by players, but by spectators eager to assist at the revenge of the famous losers of the night before. Quite naturally, Pescade found himself in the front rank of the spectators, and he was not one of those least interested m the vicissitudes of the battle.

For the first hour the chances seemed about equal. To divide them better, Toronthal and Sarcany played independently of each other. They staked separately and won a few large amounts, sometimes on simple combinations, sometimes on multiple combinations, and sometimes on many combinations at once. Luck decided neither for nor against them, but between four and six o clock it seemed to be running in their favor. At roulette the maximum is six thousand francs, and this they gained several times on full numbers.

Toronthal’s hands shook as he stretched them across table to stake his money, or as he snatched from under the rake the gold and notes of the croupiers. Sarcany was quite master of himself, and his countenance gave no sign of his emotions. He contented himself with encouraging his companion with his looks, and it was Toronthal whom chance then followed with most constancy.

Point Pescade, although rather dazzled by the constant movement of the gold and notes, kept close watch on them, and wondered if they would be prudent enough to keep the wealth which was growing under their hands and if they would stop in time. Then the thought occured to him that if they had that good sense — which he doubted — they would leave Monte Carlo and fly to some other corner of Europe, where he would have to follow them. If money did not fail them they would not fall so easily into the power of Dr. Antekirtt.

“Certainly,” he thought, “in every way it will be better for them to get ruined, and I am very much mistaken if that scoundrel Sarcany is the man to stop once he is in the swim!”

Whatever were Pescade’s thoughts and fears, the luck did not abandon the two friends. Three times in fact they would have broken the bank if the chief of the table had not thrown in an additional 20,000 francs.

The strife was quite an event among the spectators, the majority of whom were in favor of the players. Was not this in revenge for the insolent series of rouge by which the administration had so largely profited during the previous evening?

At half past six, when they suspended their play, Toronthal and Sarcany had realized more than £20,000. They rose and left the roulette table. Toronthal walked with uncertain step, as if he were slightly intoxicated, intoxicated with emotion and cerebral fatigue. His companion, impassible as ever, watched him, thinking if he would be tempted to escape with the money he had won and withdraw himself from his influence.

Without a word they passed through the hall, descended the peristyle, and walked toward their hotel.

Pescade followed them at a distance.

As he came out he saw near one of the kiosks in the garden Cape Matifou seated on a bench.

Point Pescade stepped up to him.

“Has the time come?” asked Matifou.

“What time?”

“To — to — ”

“To come on the stage? No! not yet! You must wait at the wings! Have you had your dinner?”

“Yes.”

“My compliments to you! My stomach is in my heels — and that is not the place for a stomach! But I will get it up again if I have time! Do not move from here till I get back.”

And Pescade rushed off down the hill after Toronthal and Sarcany.

When he found that they were at dinner in their rooms he sat down at the table d’hôte. He was only just in time, and in half an hour, as he said, he had brought back his stomach to the normal place that that organ occupies in the human machine.

Then he went out with a capital cigar in his mouth and took up his position opposite the hotel.

“Assuredly,” he said to himself, “I must have been made for a policeman! I have mistaken my profession!”

The question he then asked himself was: Were these gentlemen going back to the Casino this evening?

About eight o’clock they appeared at the hotel door.

Pescade saw and heard that they were in eager discussion.

Apparently the banker was trying to resist once more the entreaties and injunctions of his accomplice, for Sarcany in an imperious voice was heard to say:

“You must, Silas! I will have it so!”

They walked up the hill to the gardens of Monte Carlo. Point Pescade followed them without being able to overhear the rest of their conversation — much to his regret.

But this is what Sarcany was saying, in a tone which admitted of no reply by the banker, whose resistance was growing feebler every minute.

“To stop, Silas, when luck is with us is madness! You must have lost your head ! In the ‘deveine’ we faced our game like fools, and in the ‘veine’ we must face it like wise men. We have an opportunity, the only one perhaps, an opportunity that may never occur again, to be masters of our fate, masters of fortune, and by our own fault we shall let it escape us! Silas, do you not feel that luck — ”

“If it is not exhausted,” said Toronthal.

“No! a hundred times no!” replied Sarcany. “It can not be explained, but it can be felt, and it thrills you even to your spinal cord! A million is waiting for us to-night on the Casino tables. Yes, a million, and I will not let it slip!”

“You play, then, Sarcany.”

“Me!. Play alone? No! Play with you, Silas? Yes; and if we have to choose between us, I will yield you my place. The ‘veine’ is personal, and it is manifest that to you it has returned. Play on then and win!”

In fact what Sarcany wished was that Toronthal should not be content with the few hundred thousand francs that would allow him to escape from his power; but that he would either become the millionaire he had been or be reduced to nothing. Rich, he would continue his former life. Ruined, he would have to follow Sarcany where he pleased. In either case he would be unable to injure him.

Resist as he might, Toronthal felt all the passions of the gambler rising within him. In the miserable abasement into which he had fallen he felt afraid to go, and at the same time longed to go back to the tables. Sarcany's words set his blood on fire. Visible luck had declared in his favor, and during the last few hours with such constancy that it would be unpardonable to stop.

The madman! Like all gamblers he spoke in the present when he should have spoken only in the past! Instead of saying, "I have been lucky" — which was true — he said I am lucky — which was false. And in his brain, as in that of all who trust to chance, there was no other reasoning! They forget what was recently said by one of the greatest mathematicians of France, "Chance has its caprices, it has not its habits."

Sarcany and Toronthal walked on to the Casino, followed by Pescade. There they stopped for a moment.

"Silas," said Sarcany, "no hesitation! You have resolved to play, have you not?"

"Yes — resolved to risk everything for everything," replied the banker, in whom all hesitation had ceased when he found himself on the steps of the peristyle.

"It is not for me to influence you," continued Sarcany. "Trust to your own inspiration, not mine. It will not lead you astray. Are you going for roulette?"

“No — trente-et-quarante,” said Toronthal, as he entered the hall.

“You are right, Silas! Listen only to yourself. Roulette has almost given you a fortune! Trente-et-quarante will do the rest!”

They entered the saloons and walked round them. Ten minutes afterward Pescade saw them seat themselves at one of the trente-et-quarante tables.

There, in fact, they could play more boldly, for if the chances of the game are simple, the maximum is 12,000 francs, and a few passes can give considerable difference in gain or loss. Hence it is the favorite game with desperate players, and at it wealth and poverty can be made with a vertiginous rapidity sufficient to raise the envy of all the Stock Exchanges of the world.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CHECK FOR SARCANY.

Toronthal lost his fear as soon as he was seated at the trente-et-quarante table. There was no timidity now about his play; he staked his money like a man in a fury. And Sarcany watched his every movement, deeply interested in this supreme crisis, deeply interested in the issue.

For the first hour the alternations between loss and gain almost balanced each other, the advantage being on Toronthal’s side. Sarcany and he imagined they were sure of success. They grew excited and staked higher and higher until they staked only the maximum. But soon the luck returned to the imperturbable bank, which by this maximum protects its interests in no inconsiderable measure, and which knows no transports of folly.

Then came blow after blow. The winnings during the afternoon went heap by heap. Toronthal was an awful spectacle; his face became congested, his eyes grew haggard, he clung to the table, to his chair, to the rolls of notes, and the rouleaux of gold that his hand would hardly yield over, with the twitchings and convulsions of a drowning man! And no one was there to stop him on the brink of the chasm! Not a hand was stretched out to help him! Not an effort from Sarcany to tear him from the place before he was lost, before he finally sunk beneath the wave of ruin!

At ten o’clock Toronthal had risked his last stake, his last maximum. He won! Then he staked again — and again — and lost. And when he rose, dazed and scared, and fiercely wishing that the very walls would crumble and crush the crowd around him, he had nothing left — nothing of all the millions that had been left in the bank when the millions of Count Sandorf had poured in to its aid.

Toronthal, accompanied by Sarcany, who acted as his jailer, left the gaming-room, crossed the hall, and hurried out of the Casino. Then they fled across the square to the footpaths leading to La Turbie.

Point Pescade was already on their tracks, and as he passed had shaken up Cape Matifou as he lay half asleep on his bench with a shout of —

“Wake up! Eyes and legs!”

And Cape Matifou had come along with him on a trail it would not do to lose.

Sarcany and Toronthal continued to hurry on side by side, and gradually mounted the paths which twist and wind on the flank of the mountain among the olive and orange gardens. The capricious zigzags allowed Pescade and Matifou to keep them in view, although they could not get near enough to hear them.

“Come back to the hotel, Silas!” Sarcany continued to repeat in an imperious tone. “Come back, and be cool again!”

“No! we are ruined! Let us part! I do not want to see you again. I do not want — ”

“Part? and why? You will follow me, Silas. To-morrow we will leave Monaco. We have enough to take us to Tetuan, and there we will finish our work.”

“No, no! Leave me, Sarcany, leave me!” said Toronthal.

And he pushed him violently aside as he tried to catch hold. Then be darted off at such speed that Sarcany had some trouble in keeping up. Unconscious of his acts, Toronthal at every step risked falling into the steep ravines above which the winding footpaths lay unrolled. Only one idea possessed him — to escape from Monte Carlo, where he had consummated his ruin, to escape from Sarcany, whose counsels had led him to misery, to escape without caring where he went or what became of him.

Sarcany felt that his accomplice was at last beyond him, that he was going to escape him! Ah! if the banker had not known those secrets which might ruin him, or at least irretrievably compromise the third game he wished to play, how little anxiety he would have felt for the man he had dragged to the brink of destruction! But, before he fell, Toronthal might give a last cry, and that cry he must stifle at all hazards!

Then from the thought of the crime on which he had resolved to its immediate execution was only a step, and this step Sarcany did not hesitate to take. That which he had intended to do on the road to Tetuan in the solitudes of Morocco might be done here this very night, on this very spot which would soon be deserted.

But just at present between Monte Carlo and La Turbie a few belated wayfarers were along the slopes. A cry from Silas might bring them to his help, and the murderer intended the murder to be committed in such a way that it would never be suspected. And so he had to wait. Higher up, beyond La Turbie and the frontier of Monaco, along the Corniche clinging to the lower buttresses of the Alps, two thousand feet above the sea, Sarcany could strike a far surer blow. Who could then come to his victim’s help? How at the foot of such precipices as border that road could Toronthal’s corpse be found?

But, for the last time, Sarcany tried to stop his accomplice, and tempt him back to Monte Carlo.

“Come, Silas, come,” said he, seizing him by the arm. “To-morrow we will begin again! I have some money left.”

“No! Leave me! Leave me!” exclaimed Toronthal with an angry gesture.

And if he had been strong enough to struggle with Sarcany, if he had been armed, he might not even have hesitated to take vengeance on his old Tripolitan broker for all the evil he had done him.

With a hand that anger made the stronger, Toronthal thrust him aside, then he rushed toward the last turn of the path and ran up a few steps roughly cut in the rock between the little gardens. Soon he reached the main road of La Turbie, along the narrow neck which divides the Dog’s Head from Mont Agel, the old frontier line between Italy and France.

“Go, then, Silas!” exclaimed Sarcany. “Go! but you. will not go far.”

Then, turning off to the right, he scrambled over a stone hedge, scaled a garden-wall, and ran on in front so as to precede Toronthal along the road.

Pescade and Matifou, although they had not heard what had passed, had seen the banker thrust Sarcany away, and Sarcany disappear in the shade.

“Eh!” exclaimed Pescade. “Perhaps the best of them has gone. Anyhow, Toronthal is worth something. And we have no choice. Come on, Cape; forward, away!”

And in a few rapid strides they were close to Toronthal who was hurrying up the road. Leaving to the left the little knoll with the tower of Augustus, he passed at a run the houses, then closed for the night, and at length came out on the Corniche.

Point Pescade and Cape Matifou followed him, less than fifty yards behind.

But of Sarcany they thought no more. He had either taken the crest of the slope to the right or abandoned his accomplice to return to Monte Carlo.

The Corniche is an old Roman road. When it leaves La Turbie it drops toward Nice, running in mid-mountain by magnificent rocks, isolated cones, and profound precipices that cleave their ravines down to the railway line along the shore. Beyond, on this starry night by the light of the moon, then rising in the east, there showed forth confusedly the six gulfs, the Isle of Sainte Hospice, the mouth of the Var, the peninsula of Garoupe, the Cape of Antibes, the Juan Gulf, the Lerius Islands, the Gulf of Napoule and the Gulf of Cannes, with the mountains of Esterel in the background. Here shone the harbor lights of Beaulieu at the base of the escarpments of Petite-Afrique, then of Ville franche in front of Mont Leuza, and yonder the lamps of the fishing-boats were reflected on the calm waters of the open sea.

It was just after midnight. Toronthal, as soon as he got out of La Turbie, left the Corniche, dashed down a little road leading directly to Eza, a sort of eagle’s nest with a half savage population, boldly placed on a rock above a mass of pines and carob-trees.

The road was quite deserted. The madman kept on for some time without slackening his pace or turning his head; suddenly he threw himself off to the left, down a narrow footpath running close to the high cliff along the shore, under which the railway and carriage roads pass by the tunnel.

Point Pescade and Cape Matifou hurried after him. A hundred paces further on Toronthal stopped. He had jumped on to a rock which overhung a precipice whose base, hundreds of feet below, dropped deep into the sea.

“What was he going to do? Had the idea of suicide entered his brain? Would he then end his miserable existence by hurling himself into the waves?”

“A thousand devils!” exclaimed Pescade; “we must have him alive! Catch him, Cape Matifou, and hold him tight!”

But they had not gone twenty yards before they saw a man appear to the right of the path, glide along the slope among the myrtles and lentisks, and clamber up so as to reach the rock upon which Toronthal stood.

It was Sarcany.

“Hallo!” exclaimed Point Pescade. “He is going to give his friend something to send him from this world into the next! Hurry up, Matifou. You take one — I’ll take the other!”

But Sarcany stopped. He risked being recognized. A curse escaped his lips. Then springing off to the right before Pescade could reach him, he vanished among the bushes.

An instant afterward as Toronthal had gathered himself together to jump from the rock, he was seized by Cape Matifou and pulled back on to the road.

“Let me go! Let me go!”

“Let you make a mistake, Mr. Toronthal? Oh dear no!” answered Point Pescade.

He was quite prepared for this incident, which his instructions had not foreseen. But although Sarcany had escaped, Toronthal was captured, and all that could now be done was to take him to Antekirtta, where he would be received with all the honor that was his due

“Will you forward the gentleman — at a reduced rate?” asked Point Pescade.

“With pleasure,” said Matifou.

Toronthal, hardly knowing what had happened, made but very slight resistance. Pescade found a rough footpath leading to the beach, and down it he was followed by Cape Matifou, who sometimes carried and sometimes dragged his inert prisoner.

The descent was extremely difficult, and without Pescade’s extraordinary activity and his friend’s extraordinary strength they would certainly have had a fatal fall. However, after risking their lives a score of times, they gained the rocks on the beach. There the shore is formed of a succession of small creeks, capriciously cut back into the sandstone, shut in by high reddish walls and bordered by ferruginous reefs tinting the waves a bright blood color as they curl over them.

Day had begun to break when Point Pescade found a shelter at the back of a deep ravine that had been cut down into the cliff in geologic ages. Here he left Toronthal in charge of Cape Matifou.

“You will stop here!” he said.

"As long as you like."

"Twelve hours even, if I am twelve hours away?"

"Twelve hours."

"And without eating?"

"If I do not breakfast this morning I shall dine this evening — and for both of us!"

"And if you do not have dinner for two you shall have supper for four!"

And then Cape Matifou sat down on a rock so as not to lose sight of his prisoner; and Point Pescade made his way along the shore from creek to creek toward Monaco. He was not away as long as he expected. In less than two hours he came upon the "Electric" moored in one of the deserted creeks. And an hour later that swift vessel had arrived off the ravine in which Cape Matifou, seen from the sea, looked like a mythological Proteus herding the sheep of Neptune.

A minute or two afterward he and his prisoner were on board, and without having been noticed by the coastguard or the fishermen the "Electric" was off, under full power, for Antekirtta.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE EXAMINATION OF TORONTHAL.

And now we must return to Antekirtta.

Toronthal and Carpena were in the doctor’s power, and the pursuit of Sarcany would be resumed as soon as opportunity offered. The agents intrusted with the discovery of Mme. Bathory’s retreat were still unresting in their endeavors — but with no result. Since his mother had disappeared with only old Borik to help her, Pierre’s anxiety had been constant. What consolation could the doctor give to that twice-broken heart? When Pierre spoke of his mother how could he help thinking of Sava Toronthal, whose name was never mentioned between them?

Maria Ferrato occupied one of the prettiest houses in Artenak. It was close to the Stadthaus. There the doctor’s gratitude had endeavored to insure her all the comforts of life. Her brother lived near her, when he was not at sea, occupied on some service of transport or surveillance. Not a day elapsed without her visiting the doctor, or his going to see her. His affection for the children of the fisherman of Rovigno increased as he knew them better.

“How happy we are!” said Maria very often. “If Pierre could only be so!”

“He can not be so,” Luigi would answer, “until he finds his mother! But I have not lost all hope of that. Maria, with the doctor’s means, we ought to discover where Borik took Madame Bathory after they left Ragusa!”

“And I also have that hope, Luigi. But if he got back his mother would he be happy?”

“No, Maria, that would, be impossible until Sava Toronthal is his wife.”

“Luigi,” answered Maria, “is that which seems impossible to man impossible to God?”

When Pierre had told Luigi that they were brothers, he did not then know Maria Ferrato, he did not know what a sister, tender and devoted, he would find in her. And when he had become able to appreciate her, he had confided to her all his troubles. It soothed him à little to talk them over with her. When he could not say to the doctor what he had been forbidden to say to him, he could say to Maria. He found then a loving heart, open to all compassion, a heart that understood him, that consoled him, a soul that trusted in God and did not know despair.

In the casemates of Antekirtta there was now a prisoner who knew what had become of Sava, and if she were still in Sarcany’s power. It was the man who had passed her off as his daughter — Silas Toronthal. But out of respect to his father’s memory Pierre would never speak to him on the subject.

Ever since his capture Toronthal had been in such a state of mind, in such physical and mental prostration, that be could have told nothing even if it had been his interest to do so. But he would gain no advantage in revealing what he knew of Sava, for he did not know on the one hand that he was Dr. Antekirtt’s prisoner, and on the other that Pierre Bathory was alive on this island of Antekirtta, of which the name even was unknown to him.

So that, as Maria Ferrato said, God alone could unravel the mystery!

No sketch of the state of the colony would be complete without mention of Point Pescade and Cape Matifou.

Although Sarcany had managed to escape, although his track was lost, the capture of Toronthal had been of such importance that Point Pescade was overwhelmed with thanks. And when the doctor was satisfied, the two friends were quite satisfied with themselves. They had had again taken up their quarters in their pretty cottage, and waited ready for any services that might be required, hoping that they would still be of use to the good cause.

Since their return to Antekirtta they had visited Maria and Luigi Ferrato, and then they had called on several of the notables of Artenak. Everywhere they were warmly welcomed, for everywhere they were esteemed. It was worth a journey to see Cape Matifou under such solemn circumstances, always very much embarrassed at his enormous figure taking up nearly all the room.

“But I am so small that that makes up for it!” said Point Pescade.

His constant good humor made him the delight of the colony. His intelligence and skill were at every one’s disposal. And when everything had been settled to the general satisfaction, what entertainments would he not organize, what a programme of gayety and attractions would he not keep going in the town and its neighborhood! Yes! If necessary, Cape Matifou and Point Pescade would not hesitate to resume their old profession and astonish their Antekirttian audience with their wonders of acrobatism!

Till that happy day arrived Point Pescade and Cape Matifou improved their garden under the shade of the huge trees, and their cottage was hidden beneath its masses of bloom. The work at the little dock began to grow into shape. To see Cape Matifou lifting and carrying the huge masses of rock was convincing enough that the Provençal Hercules had lost none of his prodigious strength.

The doctor’s correspondents had found no trace of Mme. Bathory, and they were equally unsuccessful with regard to Sarcany. They could find no trace of his movements since he left Monte Carlo.

Did Toronthal know what had become of him? It was at the least doubtful, considering the circumstances under which they had separated on the road to Nice. And, admitting that he knew, would he consent to say? Impatiently did the doctor wait until the banker was in a fit state to be questioned.

It was in a fort at the north-west angle of Artenak that Toronthal and Carpena had been secured in the most rigorous secrecy. They were known to each other, but by name only, for the banker had never been mixed up with Sarcany’s Sicilian affairs. And so there was a formal order against their being allowed to suspect each other’s presence in this fort. They occupied two casements far apart from each other, they came out for exercise at different hours in different courts. Sure of the fidelity of those who had charge of them — two of the militia sergeants of Antekirtta — the doctor could be certain that no communication could take place between them.

And there was no indiscretion to fear, for none of the questions from Toronthal and Carpena as to where they were had been replied to or would be replied to. And there was nothing to lead them to suppose that they had fallen into the hands of the mysterious Dr. Antekirtt, whom Toronthal had once or twice met at Ragusa.

But to find Sarcany, to carry him off like his accomplices, was now the doctor’s object. And on the 16th of October, having learned that Toronthal was now strong enough to reply to any questions that might be put to him, he resolved to proceed with his examination.

To begin with, the subject was talked over by the doctor, Pierre and Luigi and Point Pescade, whose advice was not to be despised.

The doctor informed them of his intentions.

“But,” said Luigi, “to ask Toronthal if he knows anything about Sarcany is enough to make him suspect that we want to get hold of him.”

“Well,” replied the doctor, “what does it matter if Toronthal does know that now? he can not escape us.”

“One thing,” answered Luigi, “is that Toronthal might think it to be to his interest to say nothing that might damage Sarcany.”

“And why?”

“Because it might damage him.”

“May I make an observation?” asked Pescade, who was seated a little apart.

“Certainly, my friend!” said the doctor.

“Owing,” said Point Pescade, “to the peculiar circumstances under which these gentlemen parted I have reason to believe that they are not likely to care very much for each other. Mr. Toronthal must very cordially hate Mr. Sarcany for leading him to his ruin. If then Mr. Toronthal knows where Mr. Sarcany is to be found he will have no hesitation in telling you — at least I think not. If he says nothing it is because he has nothing to say.”

The reasoning was at least plausible. It was very likely that if the banker did know where Sarcany had gone to he would willingly reveal the secret, for his true interest was to break with him.

“We shall know to-day,” said the doctor. “And if Toronthal knows nothing, or will tell us nothing, I will see what next to do. But as he must be kept ignorant that he is in the power of Dr. Antekirtt, and that Pierre Bathory is alive, it must be Luigi’s task to examine him.”

“I am at your orders, doctor,” said the mate.

Luigi then went to the fort and was admitted into the casemate which served as Toronthal’s prison.

The banker was seated in a corner at a table. He had just left his bed. There could be no doubt that he was in much better health. It was not of his ruin that he was now thinking, nor of Sarcany. What was troubling him was why and where he was in prison, and who was the powerful individual who had carried him off.

When he saw Luigi Ferrato enter he rose; but at a sign he resumed his seat. The following dialogue then ensued:

“You are Silas Toronthal, formerly a banker at Trieste, and lately living at Ragusa?”

“I have no reply to that question. It is for those that keep me prisoner to know who I am.”

“They do know.”

“Who are they?”

“You will learn in due time.”

“And who are you?”

“A man who has been sent to interrogate you.”

“By whom?”

“By those with whom you have accounts to settle.”

“Once more, who are they?”

“I shall not tell you.”

“In that case I shall not reply.”

“Be it so! You were at Monte Carlo with a man you have known for many years, and who has not left you since your departure from Ragusa. This man is a Tripolitan by birth, and his name is Sarcany. He escaped at the moment you were arrested on the road to Nice. Now, this is what I have been sent to ask you: Do you know where that man now is, and if you know, will you tell me?”

Toronthal took a long time to reply. If they want to know, he thought, where Sarcany is, it is obvious that they want to get hold of him, as they have got hold of me. Why? Is it for something we have both been concerned in during the years gone by, and particularly for our schemes in the Trieste conspiracy? But how can these things have been found out, and who is there interested in avenging Mathias Sandorf and his two friends, who died fifteen years ago? These were the banker’s first thoughts. Then he went on to himself: It can not be any properly constituted authority that threatens me and my companion — and that is serious. And so, although he had no doubt that Sarcany had fled to Tetuan to Namir, where he was trying his third game, and forcing it as much as he could, he resolved to say nothing about it. If, later on, he could gain anything by speaking, he would speak. Now he would be as reserved as possible.

“Well?” asked Luigi, after giving him time to reflect.

“Sir,” answered Toronthal, “I could tell you that I know where Sarcany is, and that I will not say. But in reality I do not know.”

“This is your only reply?”

“My only reply and the truth.”

Then Luigi returned to inform the doctor of what had passed. As there was nothing inadmissible in the reply, they had to be content with it. And to discover Sarcany’s retreat all that could be done was to press on the search, and spare neither pains nor money.

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CHAPTER XIX.

BORIK’S LETTER.

While waiting for some clew to Sarcany’s whereabouts, the doctor was busy with questions seriously affecting the general safety of Antekirtta.

He had recently had secret information from the Cyrenaic provinces, and had been advised to keep a sharp lookout toward the Gulf of Sidra. The formidable association of the Senousists seemed to be collecting their forces on the Tripolitan frontier. A general movement was taking them gradually toward the Syrtic coast. An exchange of messages was going on between the different zaouiyas of Northern Africa. Arms from foreign parts had been delivered to and received by the brotherhood. And a concentration was evidently taking place in the vilayet of Ben Ghazi, and consequently close to Antekirtta.

In preparation for the danger which seemed imminent the doctor took all possible precautions. During the last three weeks of October, Pierre and Luigi were busy helping him, and the whole of the colonists placed their services at his disposal. Several times Point Pescade was secretly dispatched to the coast, and returned with the news that the danger was not imaginary. The pirates of Ben Ghazi had been re-enforced by quite a mobilization of the confederates in the province, and were preparing an expedition of which Antekirtta was the objective. Was it to take place soon? That could not yet be discovered. In any case the chiefs of the Senousists were still in the southern vilayets, and it was not likely that any enterprise would be undertaken without their being present to direct it. The result of this was that the “Electrics” were ordered to cruise in the Syrtic Sea, and reconnoiter the coasts of Cyrenaic and Tripoli, and that of Tunis up to Cape Bon.

The defenses of the island, as we know, were still incomplete. But if it was not possible to finish them in time, at least provisions and stores of all sorts abounded in the arsenal.

Antekirtta was about twenty miles from the Cyrenaic coast, and would have been quite isolated in the gulf, had it not been for an islet known under the name of Kencraf which measured about three hundred yards around, and emerged from the sea about a couple of miles to the south-west. The doctor's idea was that this islet would do for the prison if any of the colonists were sentenced to be imprisoned after conviction by the regular judicial authority of the island and which event had not yet happened And a few buildings had been erected for this purpose.

But Kencraf was not fortified, and in case a hostile flotilla came to attack Antekirtta its very position constituted a danger. In fact the islet would easily become a solid base of operation. With the facility of landing munitions and food, with the possibility of establishing a battery, it would afford an assailant an excellent center, and all the more because there was now no time to put it into a proper state of defense.

The position of this island and the advantages it would give to an enemy of Antekirtta made the doctor uneasy. Thinking matters over, he resolved to destroy it, but at the same time to make its destruction serve for the complete annihilation of the pirates who risked its capture. The project was immediately put in execution. Galleries were driven in the ground, and Kencraf became an immense mine united to Antekirtta by a submarine cable. All that was wanted was a current through the wire, and not a trace of the island would remain on the surface of the sea.

For this formidable effort of destruction the doctor had not used ordinary powder nor gun-cotton nor even dynamite. He knew the composition of a recently discovered explosive whose destructive power is so considerable that it may be said it is to dynamite what dynamite is to gunpowder. More manageable than nitro-glycerine and more portable, for it only requires two isolated liquids whose mixture does not take place until the moment of using them, it is refractory to congelation down to six below zero, while dynamite turns to jelly at ten below freezing, and is only liable to explode from a violent shock, such as that from a fulminating capsule. How is it obtained? Quite simply by the action of protoxide of nitrogen, pure and antydrous, in a liquid state on different carburets, mineral oils, vegetable oils or animal oils derived from fatty bodies. Of these, two liquids, which are harmless when apart and are soluble in each other, can be produced in the desired proportion as easily as a mixture of water and wine, without any danger in manipulation. Such is panclastile, a word meaning to smash everything, and it does smash everything.

This panclastile was buried in the islet in the form of several fougasses. By means of the cable from Antekirtta which led the spark into the charges of fulminate with which each fougasse was furnished, the explosion would take place instantaneously. As it might happen that the cable was cut and put out of action, by excess of precaution, a certain number of electric batteries were buried in the ground and joined by subterranean wires, so that they had only to be trod upon accidentally to bring the wires in contact, make the current and cause the explosion. If many assailants landed on Kencraf it would thus be difficult for them to avoid utter destruction.

These different works were well advanced by the early days of November, when something occurred to take the doctor away from the island for some days.

On the 3d of November, in the morning, the steamer engaged in the bringing of coals from Cardiff dropped anchor in the harbor of Antekirtta. During the voyage she had had to put in at Gibraltar. There at the post-office, waiting “to be called for,” the captain found a letter addressed to the doctor, a letter which the coast-offices had been sending after him from time to time without being able to find him.

The doctor took the letter, the envelope of which was crowded with postmarks — Malta, Catania, Ragusa, Ceuta, Otranto, Malaga, Gibraltar.

The superscription — in a large, shaky hand — was evidently that of somebody who was not accustomed, or perhaps had not the strength, to write many words. The envelope bore but the name — that of the doctor — with the following pathetic recommendation:

“Dr. Antekirtt,

“To the merciful care of God.”

The doctor tore open the envelope, opened the letter — a sheet of paper now yellow with age — and read as follows:

“Doctor, — May God bring this letter to your hands! I am very old! I am going to die! She will be alone in the world! In the last days of a life that has been so sorrowful have pity on Madame Bathory! Come and help her! Come.

“Your humble servant,

Borik.”

In a corner was the word “Carthage,” and below it “Regency of Tunis.”

The doctor was alone in the saloon in the Stadthaus when he received this letter. A cry of joy and of despair escaped him — of joy at having come on the track of Mme. Bathory — of despair, or rather of fear, for the marks on the envelope showed that the letter was nearly a month old.

Luigi was immediately summoned.

“Luigi,” said the doctor, “tell Captain Kostrik to get the ‘Ferrato’ under steam in two hours.”

“In two hours she will be ready for sea,” answered Luigi. “Is it for your service, doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Is it to be a long voyage?”

“Three or four days only.”

“Are you going alone?”

“No! Find Pierre and tell him to be ready to go with me.”

“Pierre is away, but he will be back in an hour from the works at Kencraf.”

“I also want your sister to come with us. Let her prepare to do so at once.”

“At once.”

And Luigi immediately went out to execute the orders he had just received.

An hour afterward Pierre arrived at the Stadthaus.

“Read,” said the doctor.

And he showed him Borik’s letter.

CHAPTER XX.

THE APPARITION.

The steam yacht went out a little before noon. Her passengers were the doctor, Pierre, and Maria, who had come to take care of Mme. Bathory in the event of its being impossible to take her back immediately from Carthage to Antekirtta.

There is no need to say much about what Pierre felt when be knew be was on his way to meet his mother. But why had Borik taken her away so precipitately from Ragusa to this out-of-the-way spot in Tunis? In what state of misery would they be found? To the anxieties Pierre confided to her Maria did not cease to respond with words of sympathy and hope.

The “Ferrato” was driven at her utmost speed, and attained a mean of at least fifteen knots. The distance between the Gulf of Sidra and Cape Bon, the north-east point of Tunis, is about 620 miles; from Cape Bon to La Goulette, which is the port of Tunis, is only about an hour and a half’s run for a steamer. In thirty hours, therefore, barring accidents, the “Ferrato” would reach her destination.

The sea was smooth outside the gulf, but the wind blew from the north-west with no signs of increasing, however. Captain Kostrik steered for a little below Cape Bon, so as to get the shelter of the land, in case the breeze freshened. He did not, therefore, sight the island of Zantellaria half way between Cape Bon and Malta, for he intended to round the cape as close as possible.

As it bends out of the Gulf of Sidra the shore line is much cut into toward the west, and describes a wide curve. This is the coast of Tripoli, running up to the Gulf of Gabes, between the Island of Dscherba and the town of Sfax, then the line trends a little to the east, toward Cape Dimias, to form the Gulf of Hammamet, and it thence develops south and north to Cape Bon. It was toward the Gulf of Hammamet that the “Ferrato” was headed. There it was she would make the land, and hug it till she got to La Goulette.

During the 3d of November and the following night, the size of the waves increased considerably. It takes but little wind to raise the Syrtic Sea, and through it flow the most capricious currents in the Mediterranean. In the morning at eight o’clock land was sighted at Cape Dimias, and under the shelter of the high shore the progress became rapid and easy.

The “Ferrato” ran along two miles away from the shore. Beyond the Gulf of Hammamet, in the latitude of Kelibia, there lies the little creek of Sidi Yussuf, sheltered on the north by a long ridge of rocks. Round the curve is a magnificent sandy beach with a background of low hills, covered with stunted bushes that grow in a soil far richer in stones than in vegetable mold. This range of hills joins on to the “djebels,” which form the mountains in the interior. Here and there, like white spots in the distant verdure, are a few abandoned marabouts. In front is a small ruined fort, and higher up there is one in better repair, built on the hill that shuts in the creek toward the north.

The place was not deserted. Close to the rocks were several Levantine vessels, xebecs and polaccas, anchored in about five or six fathoms; but such was the transparency of the green water that the black rocks and streaked sand beneath them on which the anchors lay, and to which refraction gave the most fantastic forms, could be plainly seen.

Along the beach at the foot of the small sand hills with their lentisks and tamarinds, a “douar,” composed of some twenty huts, displayed its yellow striped roofs, and looked like a large Arab mantle thrown in a heap on the shore. Outside the folds of the mantle were a few sheep and goats, seeming at the distance like large black crows, that a gunshot would frighten into noisy flight. A dozen camels, some stretched on the sand, others motionless as if turned to stone, ruminated near a narrow strip of rock that served as a landing-stage.

As the “Ferrato” steamed past Sidi Yussuf the doctor noticed that arms, ammunition, and a few field-pieces were being taken ashore, and owing to its remote position on the confines of Tunis, the creek is well fitted for such contraband trade. Luigi pointed out to the doctor what was going on.

“Yes, Luigi,” he said, “and if I am not mistaken, the Arabs are the destined owners of those weapons. If they are, are they for the use of the mountaineers against the French troops, who have been landing at Tunis? I do not think so, somehow. I think they must be for the Senvinists or land and water pirates now gathering in the Cyrenaic. I fancy those Arabs are more of the type of those in the interior than in the Tunisian province!”

“But,” asked Luigi, “why do not the authorities of the Regency or the French authorities stop that landing of arms and ammunition?”

“At Tunis they hardly know what passes on the other side of Cape Bon, and when the French become masters of Tunisia it will take them a long time to reduce the coast to the east of the djebels into order! At any rate that landing looks very suspicious, and if it were not that the speed of the ‘Ferrato’ prevents their making an attempt, I expect that flotilla would have come out to attack us.”

If the Arabs had any notion of doing so, there was nothing to fear from them. In less than half an hour the yacht had passed Sidi Yussuf. Then, having reached the extremity of Cape Bon, standing out so boldly from the Tunisian range, she swiftly steamed by the light-house at its point with the superbly rugged pile of rocks at its base.

The “Ferrato,” then at full speed, shot across the Gulf of Tunis between Cape Bon and Cape Carthage. On the left runs the series of escarpments of the djebels, Bon Karnin, Rossas, and Zaghouan, with a few villages half hidden in their gorges. On the right, in all the splendor of the Arab Kasbar, in the full glare of the sun, shone the sacred city of Sibi-Bou-Said, which was perhaps one of the suburbs of the ancient Carthage. In the background Tunis lay, as a mass of white, not far from Lake Bahira, a little behind the arm with which La Goulette welcomes its visitors from Europe. Two or three miles from the port lay a squadron of French vessels; then, more in the offing, a few merchant ships were riding at anchor, and with their fluttering flags gave life to the roadstead.

In an hour the “Ferrato” had dropped anchor at about three cable-lengths from the harbor. As soon as the necessary formalities were complied with, *pratique* was given to her passengers, and the doctor, Pierre, Luigi, and his sister took their places in the gig, which immediately took them ashore. After rounding the mole she glided into that narrow canal, crowded with vessels ranged along both wharves, and reached that irregular square planted with trees and bordered with villas, shops, and cafés, swarming with Maltese Jews, Arabs, and French and native soldiers, into which runs the main street of La Goulette.

Borik’s letter was dated from Carthage, and the name, with a few ruins scattered on the ground, is about all that remains of the old city of Hannibal.

To reach the shore of Cartluige there is no need to take the little Italian railway that runs between La Goulette and Tunis, skirting the lake of

Bahira. The hard, fine sand affords excellent walking, or the dusty road across the plain a little behind it gives easy access to the base of the hill on which stand the Chapel of Saint Louis and the convent of the Algerian missionaries.

At the time the doctor and his companions landed, several carriages, drawn by pigmy horses, were waiting in the square. To hail one and order it to drive rapidly to Carthage was the work of a minute. The carriage, after traversing the main road of La Goulette at a trot, passed by the sumptuous villas that the rich Tunisians inhabit during the hot season, and the palaces of Keredin and Mustapha that rise on the shore close to the outskirts of the Carthaginian city. Two thousand years ago the rival of Rome covered the whole extent between the point of La Goulette and the cape that still bears its name.

The chapel of St. Louis is built upon a knoll about 200 feet high, on which the King of France died in 1270. It occupies the middle of a small inclosure containing many more remains of ancient architecture and broken statuary, vases, columns, capitals and stezse, than trees or shrubs, Behind it, is the missionary convent, of which Pere Delathe, the archæologist, is now the prior. The top of this inclosure commands the stretch of sand from Cape Carthage up to the first houses of La Goulette.

At the foot of the hill are a few houses of Arab design, with piers in the English style, which run out into the sea for the vessels of the roadstead to unload alongside. Beyond is the superb gulf, of which every promontory, point, and mountain has historic interest.

But if there are palaces and villas on the site of the old harbors, there are on the slopes of the hill among the ruins a few wretched houses inhabited by the poor of the place. Most of these have no other trade beyond searching for more or less precious Carthaginian relics — bronzes, stones, pottery, medals, and coins, which the convent buys for its archæological museum; rather for pity's sake, than because they are wanted.

Some of these refuges are merely two or three fragments of wall, such as the ruins of the marabouts which lie whitening in the broiling sun.

The doctor and his companions journeyed from one to the other in search of Mme. Bathory, hardly believing she could have been reduced to such misery. Suddenly the carriage stopped before a dilapidated building, with a door that was merely a hole in a wall overgrown with bushes.

An old woman with a black cloak was seated before this door.

Pierre had recognized her. He uttered a cry! It was his mother! He rushed toward her, he knelt to her, he clasped her in his arms! But she replied not to his caresses, and did not even seem to recognize him.

“My mother! my mother!” he exclaimed, while the doctor, Luigi, and his sister crowded round her.

At the same moment an old man appeared at the angle of the ruin.

It was Borik.

At first sight he recognized Dr. Antekirtt, and his knees shook. Then he caught sight of Pierre — Pierre whose body he had followed to the cemetery of Ragusa! The shock was too much for him. He fell motionless to the ground, and as he did so these words escaped from his lips:

“She has lost her reason!”

And so, when the son recovered his mother, all that was left to him was an inert body. And the sudden appearance of her son, whom she thought to be dead, had not been enough to restore her to any recollection of the past

Mme. Bathory rose, her eyes were haggard, but still there was in them the light of life. Then, without seeing anything, without uttering a single word, she entered the marabout, and Maria, at a sign from the doctor, followed her in.

Pierre remained at the door without daring to move — without being able to do so.

With the doctor’s help Borik began to regain his consciousness.

“You, Mr. Pierre! You! Alive!”

“Yes!” answered Pierre. “Yes! Alive! Though it would be better if I were dead!”

In a few words the doctor informed Borik of what had taken place at Ragusa. Then the old servant told him the story of those two months of misery.

“But,” asked the doctor at the outset, “was it her son’s death that caused Mme. Bathory to lose her reason?”

“No, sir, no!” answered Borik.

And this is what he told them:

Mme. Bathory, being alone in the world, had left Ragusa and gone to live at the little village of Vinticello, where she had a few relatives. While there she had been planning how to dispose of her house, as she had no further intention of inhabiting it.

Six weeks afterward, accompanied by Borik, she had returned to Ragusa to arrange all these matters, and when she reached the house in the Rue Marinella, she found that a letter had been dropped into the box.

“Having read the letter — and the reading seemed to have given her mind its first shock — Mme. Bathory screamed and ran into the road and down into the Stradone, and knocked at Toronthal’s door, which opened immediately.”

“Toronthal’s?” exclaimed Pierre.

“Yes,” answered Borik; “and when I came up to Mme. Bathory she did not recognize me. She was — ”

“But why did my mother go to Toronthal’s? Yes! Why?” asked Pierre, looking at the old servant as if he was quite mystified.

“She probably desired to speak with Mr. Toronthal,” answered Borik, “and two days before Mr. Toronthal had left his house with his daughter, and no one knew where he had gone.”

“And this letter — this letter?”

“I have not been able to find it, Mr. Pierre,” answered the old man. “Mme. Bathory must have lost it or destroyed it, or had it taken from her, and I do not know what it was about.”

There was some mystery here. The doctor, who had listened without saying a word, could see no reason for this act of Mme. Bathory’s. What imperious motive had urged her to the house in the Stradone, which everything would have made her avoid; and why, when she learned that Toronthal had disappeared, had she received so violent a shock as to drive her mad?

Borik’s story only took a few minutes. He succeeded in keeping Mme. Bathory’s mental state secret, and busied himself in realizing her property. The calm, gentle mania of the unhappy widow allowed him to act without suspicion. His only object, then, was to leave Ragusa and obtain shelter in some distant town, it mattered not where, provided it was far away from that accursed place. A few days afterward he took Mme. Bathory on board one of the steamers that trade with the Mediterranean coast, and arrived at Tunis, or rather La Goulette. There he resolved to stop.

And then, in this deserted marabout, he devoted himself entirely to the care of Mme. Bathory, who seemed to have lost her speech as well as her senses. But his resources were so slight that he could see the time coming when they would both be reduced to the last misery.

It was then that the old servant thought of Dr. Antekirtt, of the interest he had always taken in the Bathory family. But Borik did not know his usual residence. He, however, wrote, and the letter he trusted, in despair to Providence, and it appeared that Providence had brought the letter into the doctor’s hands.

There could be no doubt what was next to be done. Mme. Bathory, without any resistance on her part, was placed m the carriage with Borik, and Pierre and Maria. And then the doctor and Luigi walked back by way of the beach, while the carriage returned along the road to La Goulette.

An hour afterward they all embarked on the yacht, which was under steam. The anchor was immediately weighed, and as soon as she bad doubled Cape

Bon, the “Ferrato” steered so as to sight the lights of Pantellaria. The day after the next, in the early morning, she ran into harbor at Antekirtta.

Mme. Bathory was taken ashore at once, led to Artenak and installed in one of the rooms at the Stadthaus.

Another sorrow for Pierre Bathory! His mother, deprived of reason, become mad under circumstances which would probably remain inexplicable! If the cause of this madness could be ascertained, some salutary reaction might have been provoked, but nothing about it was known and nothing could be known.

“She must be cured! Yes! she must!” said the doctor, who devoted himself to the task.

And the task was a difficult one, for Mme. Bathory remained quite unconscious of her actions, and not a remembrance of her past life did she display.

Could the power of suggestion that the doctor possessed in so high a degree be employed to change the mental state of the patient? Could she by magnetic influence be recalled to reason and kept in that state till the reaction took place?

Pierre adjured the doctor to try even the impossible to cure his mother.

“No!” answered the doctor. “That would not do. Mad people are the most refractory subjects for the purpose! For the influence to act, your mother must have a will of her own, for which I can substitute mine! And I assure you I should have no influence over her.”

“No! I will not admit it,” said Pierre, who would not be convinced. “I will not admit that we shall not see the day when my mother will recognize me — her son whom she believes to be dead.”

“Yes! That she believes to be dead!” answered the doctor. “But perhaps if she believed you to be alive or if she saw you coming out of the grave — if she saw you appear — ”

The doctor paused at the thought. Why should not a sudden shock, provoked under favorable conditions, have some effect on Mme. Bathory?

“I will try it!” he exclaimed.

And when he explained the experiment on which he based his hope of curing his mother, Pierre threw himself into the doctor’s arms.

From that day the scenery and surroundings, to bring about the success of the attempt, were the object of anxious care. The idea was to revive in Mme. Bathory the effects of memory, of which her derangement had deprived her, and to revive it under such striking circumstances that a reaction would be caused in her brain.

The doctor appealed to Borik, to Point Pescade, so as to reproduce with sufficient exactness the appearance of the cemetery at Ragusa and the monument which served as the tomb of the Bathory family. And in the cemetery of the island, about a mile from Artenak, under a group of trees they built a small chapel as much as possible like that at Ragusa. Everything was done to produce the most striking resemblance between the two monuments; and on the wall there was placed a slab of black marble bearing the name of Stephen Bathory, with the date of his death, 1867.

On the 13th of November the time seemed come for beginning the preparatory attempt to revive Mme. Bathory's reason.

About seven o'clock in the evening Maria and Borik took the widow's arm, and leading her from the Stadthaus walked out to the cemetery. There Mme. Bathory remained before the threshold of the little chapel motionless and silent as always, although, by the light of the lamp which burned within, she could read the name of Stephen Bathory engraved on the marble slab. Only when Maria and the old man knelt as they went along did she have a faint look of intelligence in her eyes which almost instantly vanished.

An hour afterward she was taken back to the Stadthaus followed by a crowd who had come to join the procession at this first experiment.

The next and succeeding mornings the experiments were continued, but without result. Pierre looked on with poignant emotion and despaired of their success, although the doctor told him that time would be his most useful auxiliary. He did not intend to strike his last blow until Mme. Bathory had been sufficiently prepared to feel its full force.

Each time she visited the cemetery a slight but unmistakable change took place in her; and one evening when Borik and Maria were kneeling at the chapel door she had slowly come forward, put her hand on the iron grating, looked at the wall beyond, brightly illuminated by the lamp, and hurriedly ran back.

Maria, returning to her, heard her murmur a name several times.

It was the first time for mouths that her lips had opened to speak!

But what was the astonishment — more than astonishment — the stupefaction of those who heard her?

The name was not that of her son, of Pierre — it was the name of Sava!

If we can understand what Pierre felt, who can describe what passed in the doctor’s soul when he heard this unexpected invocation of Sava Toronthal? But he made no observation; he gave no sign of what he felt.

Another evening the experiment was repeated. This time, as if she had been led by an invisible hand, Mme. Bathory went and knelt on the chapel step. She bowed her head, a sigh escaped her, and tears fell from her eyes. But that evening not a name escaped her lips, and it seemed as though she had forgotten Sava.

She was taken back to the Stadthaus and there showed herself a prey to unusual nervous agitation. The calm hitherto characteristic of her mental state gave place to singular exaltation. Some work of vitality was evidently going on in her brain, and this looked hopeful.

The night proved troubled and restless. She several times muttered vague words which Maria could scarcely hear, but it was evident she was dreaming. And if she dreamed, reason was coming back, and she might be cured if her reason would only stay with her till she woke.

Then the doctor decided to make a fresh attempt on the morrow, of which the surroundings should be more striking.

During the whole of the 18th she continued under violent mental excitement. Maria was much struck with her state, and Pierre, who spent nearly all his time with his mother, felt a presentiment of happy augury.

The night arrived — a night dark and gloomy, without a breath of wind, after a day that had been very warm in this low latitude of Antekirtta.

About half past eight, the patient, accompanied by Maria and Borik, left the Stadthaus. The doctor, with Luigi and Point Pescade, followed a few steps behind.

The whole of the little colony was anxiously expectant of the success of what was going to happen. A few torches beneath the trees threw a runginous light on the chapel and its surroundings. Afar, at regular intervals, the bell in Artenak church sounded a funeral knell.

Pierre was the only one absent from the procession which advanced slowly toward the cemetery. But, if he was not there, it was because he was to appear in the closing scene of this final experiment.

It was about nine o’clock when Mme. Bathory reached the cemetery. Suddenly she shook, herself free from Maria’s arm, and walked toward the little chapel. She was allowed to do as she pleased, under the influence of this new feeling, which seemed to have entire possession of her.

Amid a profound silence, broken only by the tolling of the bell, Mme. Bathory stopped, and remained motionless. Then she knelt on the first step, and bent down, and then they heard her weep.

At this moment the railing of the chapel slowly opened. Wrapped in a white shroud, as if he had risen from his grave, Pierre appeared in the light.

“My son! my son!” exclaimed Mme. Bathory, who stretched out her arms and fell senseless.

It mattered little. Memory and thought had returned to her! The mother was awakened! She had recognized her son!

The doctor soon revived her, and when she had recovered her consciousness, when her eyes rested on her son —

“Alive! My Pierre! Alive!” she exclaimed.

“Yes! Living for your sake, mother, living to love you.”

“And to love her — her also!”

“Her?”

“Her! Sava!”

“Sava Toronthal?” exclaimed the doctor.

“No! Sava Sandorf!”

And Mme. Bathory took from her pocket the crumpled letter which contained the last lines written by the hand of the dying Mme. Toronthal, and held it out to the doctor.

The letter left no doubt as to Sava’s birth! Sava was the child that had been carried away from the Castle of Artenak! Sava was the daughter of Count Mathias Sandorf.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SQUEEZE FROM CAPE MATIFOU.

Count Mathias, as we know, wished to remain Dr. Antekirtt to the whole colony except Pierre, until his work had been accomplished. When his daughter’s name was suddenly pronounced by Mme. Bathory he had sufficient control over himself to suppress his emotion. But his heart for a moment ceased to beat, and he fell on the threshold of the chapel as if he had been struck by lightning.

And so his daughter was alive! And she loved Pierre, and she was loved! And it was Mathias Sandorf who had been doing everything to prevent the marriage! And the secret which gave Sava back to him would never have been discovered had not Mme. Bathory’s reason been restored to her as by a miracle!

But what had happened fifteen years ago at the Castle of Artenak? That was obvious enough. This child, the sole heiress of Count Sandorf’s wealth, whose death had never been proved, had been stolen by Toronthal. And shortly afterward, when the banker settled at Ragusa, Mme. Toronthal had had to bring up Sava Sandorf as her own daughter.

Such had been the scheme devised by Sarcany and executed by his accomplice Namir. Sarcany knew perfectly that Sava would come into possession of a considerable fortune when she reached eighteen, and when she had become his wife, he would then procure her acknowledgment as the heiress of Sandorf’s estates. This was to be the crowning triumph of his abominable existence. He would become the master of Artenak.

Had he then foiled this odious scheme? Yes, undoubtedly. If the marriage had taken place Sarcany would already have availed himself of all its advantages.

And now how great was the doctor's grief! Was it not owing to him that there had been brought about this deplorable chain of events; at first in refusing his help to Pierre, then in allowing Sarcany to pursue his plans, then in not rendering him harmless at the meeting at Cattaro, then in not giving back to Mme. Bathory the son he had snatched from death? In fact, what misfortunes would have been avoided had Pierre been with his mother when Mme. Toronthal's letter had reached the house in the Rue Marinella! Knowing that Sava was Sandorf's daughter, would not Pierre have known how to get her away from the violence of Sarcany and Toronthal?

Where was Sava Sandorf now? In the power of Sarcany, of course! But where was she hidden? How could they get her away? And besides, in a few weeks she would attain her eighteenth year — the limit fixed for the time during which she could be the heiress — and that fact would impel Sarcany to use every effort to make her consent to the marriage!

In an instant this succession of thoughts passed through Dr. Antekirtt's mind. As he built together the past, as Mme. Bathory and Pierre were themselves doing, he felt the reproaches, unmerited assuredly, that Stephen Bathory's wife and son might be tempted to assail him with. And now, as things had turned out, would he be able to bring together Pierre and her whom for all and for himself he must still continue to call Sava Toronthal?

He must before everything find Sava, his daughter — whose name, added to that of the Countess Rena, his wife he had given to the schooner "Savarena," as he had given that of "Ferrato" to his steam yacht. But there was not a day to lose.

Already Mme. Bathory had been led back to the Stadthaus, when the doctor came to visit her, accompanied by Pierre, whom he left to his alternations of joy and despair. Much enfeebled by the violent reaction, whose effects had just been produced in her, but cured of her illness, Mme. Bathory was sitting at the window when the doctor and her son entered.

Maria, seeing it would be better to leave them together, retired to the large saloon.

Dr. Antekirtt then approached her, and laid his hand on Pierre’s shoulder.

“Madame Bathory,” he said, “I have already made your son my own. But what he is not yet through friendship I will do all I can to make him through paternal love in marrying him to Sava, my daughter.”

“Your daughter!” exclaimed Mme. Bathory.

“I am Count Mathias Sandorf.”

Mme. Bathory jumped up and fell back into her son’s arms. But if she could not speak, she could hear. In a few words Pierre told her what she did not know: how Mathias Sandorf had been saved by the devotion of the fisherman Andrea Ferrato, why for fifteen years he had passed as dead, and how he had reappeared at Ragusa as Dr. Antekirtt. He told her how Sarcany and Toronthal had betrayed the Trieste conspirators, and related the treachery of Carpena, of which Ladislas Zathmar and his father had been the victims, and how the doctor had taken him from the cemetery at Ragusa to associate him in the work he had undertaken. He finished his story by stating that two of the scoundrels, the banker Toronthal and the Spaniard Carpena, were then in their power, but that the third, Sarcany, was still at large — the Sarcany who desired Sava Sandorf for his wife!

For an hour the doctor, Mme. Bathory, and her son went over in detail the facts regarding the young lady. Evidently Sarcany would stick at nothing to bring about Sava's consent to the marriage which would bring him the wealth of Count Sandorf; and this state of affairs was what principally exercised them during their interview. But if the plans of the past had now collapsed, those of the present promised to be even more formidable. Above everything it was necessary to move heaven and earth to recover Sava.

It was in the first place agreed that Mme. Bathory and Pierre should alone know that Mathias Sandorf was concealed under the name of Dr. Antekirtt. To reveal the secret would be to say that Sava was his daughter, and in the interest of the new search that was to be undertaken it was necessary to keep this quiet.

"But where is Sava? Where are we to look for her?" asked Mme. Bathory.

"We will know!" answered Pierre, in whom despair had given place to an energy that nothing could quench.

"Yes! We will know!" said the doctor. "And in admitting that Silas Toronthal does not know where Sarcany is, we can not suppose that he does not know where my daughter — "

"And if he knows, he must tell!" said Pierre.

"Yes! He must speak!" answered the doctor.

"Now?"

"Now!"

The doctor, Mme. Bathory and Pierre would remain in this state of uncertainty no longer.

Luigi, who was with Point Pescade and Cape Matifou in the large saloon of the Stadthaus, where Maria had joined them, was immediately called in. He received orders to go with Cape Matifou to the fort and bring back Silas Toronthal.

A quarter of an hour afterward, the banker left the casemate that served him for a prison, and, with his hand grasped in the large hand of Cape Matifou, was brought along the main street of Artenak. Luigi, whom he had asked where he was going, had given him no reply, and the banker, who knew not into what powerful person's hands he had fallen, was extremely uneasy.

Toronthal entered the hall. He was preceded by Luigi, and held all the time by Cape Matifou. He just saw Point Pescade, but he did not see Mme. Bathory and her son, who had stepped aside. Suddenly he found himself in the presence of the doctor, with whom he had vainly endeavored to enter into communication at Ragusa.

“You! You!” he exclaimed. “Ah!” he said collecting himself with an effort, “it is Dr. Antekirtt who arrests me on French territory. He it is who keeps me prisoner against all law.”

“But not against all justice!” interrupted the doctor.

“And what have I done to you?” asked the banker, to whom the doctor's presence had evidently given confidence. “Yes! What have I done to you?”

“To me? You will know soon,” answered the doctor. “But to start with, Silas Toronthal, ask what you have done to this unhappy woman — ”

“Madame Bathory!” exclaimed the banker, recoiling before the widow, who advanced toward him.

“And to her son!” added the doctor.

“Pierre! Pierre Bathory!” stammered Silas Toronthal. And he would certainly have fallen if Cape Matifou had not held him upright.

And so Pierre, whom he thought dead, Pierre whose funeral he had seen, who had been buried in the cemetery at Ragusa, Pierre was there, before him, like a specter from the tomb! Toronthal grew frightened. He felt that he could not escape the chastisement for his crimes. He felt he was lost.

“Where is Sava?” asked the doctor, abruptly.

“My daughter?”

“Sava is not your daughter! Sava is the daughter of Count Mathias Sandorf, whom Sarcany and you sent to death after having treacherously denounced him and his companions, Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar!”

At this formal accusation the banker was overwhelmed. Not only did Dr. Antekirtt know that Sava was not his daughter, but he knew that she was the daughter of Count Mathias Sandorf! He knew how and by whom the Trieste conspirators had been betrayed!

“Where is Sava?” said the doctor, restraining himself only by a violent effort of his will. “Where is Sava, whom Sarcany, your accomplice, in all these crimes, stole fifteen years ago from Artenak? Where is Sava, whom that scoundrel is keeping in a place you know, to which you have sent her that her consent to this horrible marriage may be obtained! For the last time, where is Sava?”

So alarming had been the doctor’s attitude, so threatening had been his words, that Toronthal did not reply. He saw that the present position of the girl might prove his safety. He felt that his life might be respected so long as he kept the secret.

“Listen,” continued the doctor, beginning to recover his coolness, “listen to me, Silas Toronthal. Perhaps you think you can assist your accomplice! You perhaps think you may betray him. Well, know this: Sarcany, in order to insure your silence after he had ruined you, tried to assassinate you as he assassinated Pierre Bathory at Rugusa! Yes! at the moment my people seized you on the road to Nice he was going to stab you! And now will you persist in your silence?”

Toronthal, obstinately imagining that his silence would compel them to make terms with him, said nothing.

“Where is Sava? Where is Sava?” said the doctor, getting angry.

“I do not know! I do not know!” replied Toronthal, resolved to keep his secret.

Suddenly he screamed, and writhing with pain he tried in vain to thrust Matifou away.

“Mercy! mercy!” he cried.

Matifou, unconsciously perhaps, was squeezing his hand in his own.

“Mercy!”

“Will you speak?”

“Yes! Yes! Sava — Sava — ” said Toronthal, who could only speak in broken sentences — ”Sava — in Namir’s house — Sarcany’s spy — at Tetuan!”

Cape Matifou let go Toronthal’s arm, and the arm remained motionless.

“Take back the prisoner!” said the doctor. “We know what we wished to know!”

And Luigi took back Toronthal to his casemate.

Sava at Tetuan! Then, when the doctor and Pierre, hardly two months before, were at Ceuta capturing the Spaniard, only a few miles separated them from Sava!

“This very night, Pierre, we start for Tetuan.”

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CHAPTER XXII.

THE HOUSE AT TETUAN.

In those days the railroad did not run from Tunis to the Moorish frontier; and to reach Tetuan as quickly as possible they had to embark in one of the swiftest boats of the Antekirtta flotilla.

Before midnight “Electric No. 2” had been got ready for sea, and was on her way across the Syrtic Sea.

On board were the doctor, Pierre, Luigi, Point Pescade, and Cape Matifou. Pierre was known to Sarcany, the others were not. When they reached Tetuan they would consult as to their proceedings. Would it be better to act by stratagem or force? That would depend on Sarcany’s position in this absolutely Moorish town, or his arrangements in Namir’s house, and on the following he could command. Before everything, they must get to Tetuan!

From the end of the Syrtes to the Moorish frontier as about 2,000 kilometers — nearly 1,350 nautical miles. At full-speed “Electric No. 2” could do her twenty-seven miles an hour. How many railway trains there are that are not as fast! That long steel tube, offering no resistance to the wind, could slip through the waves without hinderance, and reach its destination in fifty hours.

Before daybreak the next morning the “Electric” had doubled Cape Bon. Then, having crossed the Gulf of Tunis, it only took her a few hours to lose sight of Point Bizerte, La Calle, Bone, the Iron Cape, whose metallic mass is said to disturb the compasses, the Algerian coast, Stora, Bougie, Dellys, Algiers, Cherchell, Mostaganem, Oran, Nemons; then the shores of Riff, the Point of Mellelah, which, like Ceuta, is Spanish, Cape Tres Forcas, whence the continent rounds off to Cape Negro — all this panorama of the African coast line was unrolled during the 20th and 21st of November without either incident or accident. Never had the machine worked by the currents from the accumulators had such a run. If the “Electric” had been perceived either along the shore or crossing the gulfs from cape to cape, there would have been telegrams as to the appearance of a phenomenal ship, or perhaps a cetacean of extraordinary power that no steamer had yet exceeded in speed in the Mediterranean waters.

About eight o’clock in the evening the doctor, Pierre, Luigi, Point Pescade, and Cape Matifou landed at the mouth of the small river of Tetuan, in which their rapid vessel had dropped anchor. A hundred yards from the bank, in the middle of a small caravansary, they found mules and a guide to take them into the town, which was about four miles distant. The price asked was agreed to instantly, and the party set off.

In this part of the Riff Europeans have nothing to fear from the indigenous population, nor even from the nomads of the district. The country is thinly peopled and almost uncultivated. The road lies across a plain dotted with straggling shrubs, and it is a road made by the feet of the beasts rather than by the hand of man. On one side is the river, with muddy banks, alive with the croak of frogs and the chirp of crickets, and bearing a few fishing-boats moored in the center or drawn up on the shore. On the other side, to the right, is the outline of the bare hills, running off to join the mountain masses of the south.

The night was magnificent. The moon bathed the country in its light. Reflected by the mirror of the river the moonlight seemed to soften the heights on the northern horizon. In the distance, white and gleaming, lay the town of Tetuan — a shining patch in the dark clouds of mist beyond!

The Arab did not waste much time on the road. Twice or thrice he had to pull up before isolated houses, where the windows on the side, not lighted by the moon, threw a yellow beam out into the shadow, and from them would come two or three Moors with a lantern, who, after a hurried conference with the guide, would let them pass.

Neither the doctor nor his companions spoke a word. Absorbed in their thoughts, they left the mules to follow the road which here and there was cut through by gullies strewed with bowlders or cumbered with roots which they avoided with sure feet. The largest of the mules, was, however, very often in the rear. This might have been expected, for it bore Cape Matifou.

It was that that led Point Pescade to reflect —

“Perhaps it would have been better for Cape Matifou to carry the mule, instead of the mule carrying Cape Matifou!”

About half past nine the Arab stopped before a large blank wall, surmounted by towers and battlements, which on that side defends the town. In this wall was a low door, decorated with arabesques in Moorish fashion. Above, through the numerous entrances, pointed the throats of the cannons, looking like crocodiles carelessly sleeping in the light of the moon.

The gate was shut. Some conversation was needed, with cash in hand, before it could be opened. Then the party passed in down the winding, narrow and open vaulted streets, with other gates, barred with iron, which were successfully opened by similar means. At length the doctor and his companions, in a quarter of an hour, reached an inn or “fonda” — the only one in the place — kept by a Jewess, with a one-eyed girl as servant.

The total want of comfort in this fonda, which had the rooms disposed round the central court, was a sufficient explanation as to why strangers so very seldom venture into Tetuan. There is even only one representative of the European power, the Spanish Consul, among a population of several thousands, with whom the native element predominates.

Although Dr. Antekirtt wished exceedingly to ask for Namir's house, and to be taken there at once, he restrained himself. It was necessary to act with great prudence. To carry Sava away under such circumstances was a serious matter. Everything for and against it had been taken into consideration. Perhaps they might be able to get the girl set free for a consideration. But the doctor and Pierre would have to keep themselves out of sight — more especially from Sarcany, who might perhaps be in Tetuan. In his hands Sava would become a guarantee for the future that he would not easily part with. Here they were not in one of the civilized countries of Europe, where justice and police could easily interfere. In this country of slaves how could they prove that Sava was not Namir's legitimate slave? How could they prove that she was Count Sandorf's daughter, otherwise than by Mme. Toronthal's letter and the banker's confession? The house in these Arab towns are carefully guarded and not easily accessible. They are not entered easily. The intervention of a cadi might even be useless, even if it could be obtained.

It had been decided that at the outset, but in a way to prevent suspicion, Namir's house should be carefully watched. In the morning Point Pescade would go out with Luigi to pick up information. During his stay in Malta, Luigi had learned a little Arabic, and the two would start to find out in what street Namir lived, and then to act accordingly.

Meanwhile “Electric No. 2” would be concealed in one of the narrow creeks along the coast near the entrance of the Tetuan River, and kept ready for sea at a moment’s notice. The night, whose hours were so long for the doctor and Pierre, was thus passed in the fonda. If Point Pescade and Cape Matifou had any desire to lie on beds incrusted with crockery ware, they were satisfied.

In the morning Luigi and Point Pescade began by visiting the bazaar, in which there had already gathered a large part of the Tetuan population. Pescade knew Namir, whom he had a score of times noticed in the streets of Ragusa while she was acting as spy for Sarcany. He would therefore recognize her, and, as she did not know him, there was no reason why he should not meet her. And then he could follow her.

The principal bazaar of Tetuan is a collection of sheds, penthouses, and hovels, low, narrow, and sordid, arranged in humid lanes. A few cloths of different colors are stretched on lines and protect it from the heat of the sun. Around are dull-looking shops with bordered silk, gorgeous trimmings, slippers, purses, cloaks, pottery, jewels, collars, bracelets, rings, and other common good such as are found in the shops of the large towns of Europe.

It was already crowded. The people were taking advantage of the coolness of the morning. Moors veiled to the eyes, Jewesses with uncovered faces, Arabs, Kabyles, moved to and from the bazaar, elbowed by a certain number of strangers so that the presence of Luigi Ferrato and Point Pescade did not attract special attention.

For an hour they traversed the motley crowd in search of Namir. In vain! The Moor did not appear, nor did Sarcany.

Luigi then asked one of the half-naked boys — hybrid products of all the African races from the Riff to the Sahara — who swarm in the bazaars of Morocco.

The first he spoke to made no reply. At last one of them, a Kabyle, about twelve years old, said that he knew the house, and offered to take the Europeans there — for a trifle.

The offer was accepted, and the three started through the tangled streets which radiate toward the fortifications. In ten minutes they had reached a part that was almost deserted, in which the houses were few and far between and had no windows on their outer sides.

During this time the doctor and Pierre were waiting the return of Luigi and Pescade with feverish impatience. Twenty times were they tempted to go out and look for themselves. But they were both known to Sarcany and the Moor. It would perhaps be risking everything to meet them and give them an alarm which might enable them to escape. So they remained a prey to the keenest anxiety. It was nine o’clock when Luigi and Point Pescade returned to the fonda.

Their mournful faces told that they were the bearers of bad news.

In fact, Sarcany and Namir, accompanied by a girl whom nobody knew, had left Tetuan five weeks before, and the house was now in charge of an old woman.

The doctor and Peirre had not expected this; they were in despair.

“Their departure is easily accounted for!” said Luigi. “Sarcany was evidently afraid that Toronthal, for revenge or some other motive, would reveal the place of his retreat.”

While he was only in pursuit of his betrayers the doctor never despaired of success. But now it was his daughter that he sought to rescue from Sarcany, he did not feel the same confidence.

However, Pierre agreed with him that they had better go at once to Namir’s house. Perhaps they might find some trace or remembrance of Sava. Perhaps the old Jewess who had been left in charge might give, or rather sell, some hint that might prove useful.

Luigi led them there immediately. The doctor, who spoke Arabic as if he had been born in the desert, introduced himself as a friend of Sarcany’s. He was passing Tetuan, he said, and would have been glad to see him.

The old woman at first raised difficulties, but a handful of sequins made her much more obliging; and she willingly answered the questions the doctor asked with the appearance of the most lively interest in her master.

The young lady who had been taken away by the Moor was Sarcany’s intended wife. That had been arrranged for some time, and probably the marriage would have taken place at Tetuan, had it not been for the hurried departure. The young lady, since her arrival three months before, had not been outside the house. They said she was an Arab but the Jewess thought she was a European. She had seen her very little and only during the Moor’s absence, and she could not find out any more about her.

The old woman could not say where Sarcany had taken them. All she knew was that they went away about five weeks before with a caravan to the eastward, and that since then the house had been in her care, and was to continue so until Sarcany found some one to buy it, which showed that he did not intend returning to Tetuan.

The doctor listened coldly to these replies, and as they passed to Pierre translated them.

From them it appeared that Sarcany had not thought it desirable to embark on one of the steamers calling at at Tangiers, nor to go by the railway which has its terminus at Oran. He had joined a caravan that had left Tetuan — bound whether? To some oasis in the desert, or still further, to some half-savage country, where Sava would be entirely at his mercy? How could they know? On the roads of Northern Africa it is as difficult to recover the track of a caravan as the track of an individual.

And so the doctor continued to interrogate the Jewess. He had received important news which was of interest to Sarcany, he said, and it referred to this very house which he wished to dispose of. But do what he could, no other information could be got. It was evident that the woman did not know where Sarcany had fled to bring about the close of the drama.

The doctor, Pierre, and Luigi then asked to be allowed to see the house, which was built in Arab fashion, with different rooms lighted from a court-yard surrounded by a rectangular gallery.

They soon reached the room that Sava had occupied. It was quite a prison cell. There what hours the unhappy girl must have passed a prey to despair, and without hope of help! The doctor and Pierre looked around the room seeking the least indication that might put them on the track.

Suddenly the doctor stepped up to a small brasero which stood on a tripod m a corner of the room. In this brasero were a few fragments of paper that had been destroyed by fire, but the incineration of which had not been completed.

Had Sava written them? And surprised by the hurried departure had she burned the letter before she left Tetuan? Or rather — and that was possible — had the letter been found on Sava and destroyed by Sarcany or Namir?

Pierre had watched the doctor’s look as he bent over the brasero. What had he found?

On the fragments of paper that a breath would reduce to dust a few words stood out in black — among others these, unfortunately incomplete:

“Mad — Bath — ”

Had Sava attempted to write to her as the only person in the world to whom she could appeal for help, not knowing and not being able to know that she had disappeared from Ragusa?

Then after Mme. Bathory’s name another could be deciphered — that of her son.

Pierre held his breath and tried to find some other word still legible! But his look was troubled. He could see no more.

But there was one word that might perhaps put them on the girl’s track — a word which the doctor found almost intact.

“Tripoli!” he exclaimed.

Was it in the Regency of Tripoli, his native country where he might be absolutely safe, that Sarcany had sought refuge? Was it thither that the caravan was bound!

“To Tripoli!” said the doctor.

That evening they were again at sea. If Sarcany had already reached the capital of the Regency they were in hopes that they would be only a few days behind him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FEAST OF THE STORKS.

On the 23d of November the plain of Soung-Ettelate around the walls of Tripoli afforded a curious spectacle. On that day no one could tell if the plain were barren or fertile, for its surface was hidden beneath multi-colored tents adorned with feathers and flags, miserable gourbis with their roofs so tattered and patched as to give very insufficient shelter from that bitter dry wind, the “gibly,” which sweeps across the desert from the south; here and there groups of horses in rich Oriental trappings, meharis stretched on the sand with their flat heads like half-empty goat-skin bottles, small donkeys about as big as large dogs, large dogs as big as small donkeys, mules with the enormous Arab saddle that has the cantle and pommel as round as a camel hump; horsemen with their guns across their shoulders and knees up to their stomachs, and feet in slipper-like stirrups, and having double sabers at their belt, galloping among a crowd of men, women, and children, careless of whom they might run down as they dashed along; and natives almost uniformly clothed in the Barbary “haouly,” beneath which the women would be indistinguishable from the men, if the men did not fix the folds to their waist with a brass pin, while the women let the upper part, fall over their faces so that they can only see with the left eye — a costume which varies with the classes, the poor having nothing on but the simple linen mantle, the more affluent having the waistcoat and wide breeches of the Arabs, and the wealthy having splendid patterns in white and blue over a second haouly of gauze, a glossy silk above the dead-white of the gold-spangled shirt.

Were they only Tripolitans that had gathered on the plain? No. The environs of the capital were crowded with merchants from Ghadames and Sokna, escorted by their black slaves; Jews and Jewesses of the province with uncovered faces; negroes from the neighboring villages, who had come from their cabins of rushes and palms to assist in the general gayety, poorer in linen than in jewelry, large brass bracelets, shell-work collars, strings of teeth, rings of silver in their ears and their noses, and Benoulies and Awaguirs, from the shores of the Syrtes, to whom the date-palm of their country yielded its wine, its fruit, its bread, and its preserves. Among the agglomeration of Moors, Berbers, Turks, Bedouins and Muzaffirs, who are Europeans, were pashas, sheiks, cadis, all the lords in the land walking through the crowds of raayas, which opened humbly and prudently before the drawn swords of the soldiers, or the truncheons of the police or the zapties as there passed in haughty indifference the governor-general of this African eyelet, of this province of the Turkish Empire whose administration belongs to the Sultan.

If there are more than 1,500,000 in Tripoli, with 6000 soldiers — 1000 for the djebel and 500 for the Cyrenaic — the town of Tripoli itself has not more than from 20,000 to 24,000 souls. But on this occasion it appeared as though the population had been at least doubled by the crowd of spectators coming from all parts of the territory. These rurals had not, it is true, entered the capital of the Regency. Within the walls of the fortifications neither the houses, which, through the worthlessness of their materials, soon fall into ruins; nor the narrow, tortuous, unpaved streets, nor the neighboring mole with its consulates, nor the western quarter, inhabited by the Jews, nor the rest of the town, inhabited by the Mussulmans, were equal to such an invasion.

But the plain of Soung-Ettelate was large enough for the crowd of spectators attracted to this feast of the storks, where legend always receives due honor in the eastern countries of Africa. This plain — a small fragment of the Sahara, with its yellow sand often invaded by the sea during the violent winds from the east — surrounds the town on three sides, and is about one thousand yards across. In strong contrast is the oasis of Menchie, with its white-walled houses, its gardens watered by the leather chain pump worked by a skinny cow, its woods of orange-trees, citrons, dates, its green clumps of shrubs and flowers, its antelopes, gazelles, fennecs, and flamingoes — a huge patch of ground in which live not less than thirty thousand people. Beyond is the desert, which in no part of Africa comes nearer to the Mediterranean, the desert and its shifting sand-hills, its immense carpet of sand on which, says Baron Krafft, "the wind raises the waves as easily as on the ocean," the Lybian Ocean with its mists of impalpable dust.

Tripoli — a country almost as large as France — is bounded by Tunis and Egypt and by the Sahara at a distance of one hundred and ninety miles from the Mediterranean coast.

It was in this province — one of the least known in Northern Africa, and which will be perhaps one of the last to be thoroughly explored — that Sarcany had taken refuge after leaving Tetuan. A native of Tripoli, he had returned to the country which had been the scene of his earliest exploits. Affiliated to the most formidable sect of Northern Africa, he had sought the powerful protection of the Senousists, whose agent for the acquisition of arms and ammunition in foreign parts he had never ceased to be. And when he arrived at Tripoli he had taken up his quarters in the house of the moquaddem, Sida Hazam, the recognized chief of the sectaries of the district.

After the capture of Toronthal on the road to Nice — a capture which still remained inexplicable to him — Sarcany had left Monte Carlo. A few thousand francs that he had kept back from his earlier winnings had enabled him to pay his passage and defray his expenses. He had good reason to fear that Toronthal would be reduced to despair and urged to seek vengeance on him, either by revealing his past life, or giving information as to the whereabouts of Sava. The banker knew that the girl was at Tetuan, in charge of Namir, and hence Sarcany's decision to leave Morocco as soon as possible.

He resolved to take refuge in Tripoli, where he could avail himself, not only of the means of action, but the means of defense. But to go there by steamer or the Algerian railway — as the doctor had suspected — would have been too dangerous. And so he joined a caravan of Senousists, who were on their way to Cyrenaic, recruiting as they went in the chief villages of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunis. This caravan, which would quickly travel the 500 leagues between Tetuan and Tripoli, following the northern edge of the desert, set out on the 12th of October.

And now Sava was entirely at the mercy of her captors. But her resolution was-not shaken. Neither the threats of Namir nor the rage of Sarcany had had any effect on her.

At its departure from Tetuan the caravan already numbered fifty of the brethren, or Khouans, under the leadership of an Imam, who had organized it in military fashion. There was no intention of crossing provinces under French influence, or the journey might give rise to difficulties.

The coast of Algeria and Tunis forms an arc up to the western coast of the Grand Syrtes, where it drops abruptly to the south. The most direct road from Tetuan to Tripoli is along the chord of this arc, and that does not run higher than Laghouat, one of the most distant French towns on the borders of the Sahara.

The caravan, on leaving the empire of Morocco, skirted the boundary of Algeria, and in Beni Matan, in Oulad Nail, in Charfat-el-Hamel, secured a goodly number of recruits, so that when it reached the Tunisian coast at the Syrtis Magna it numbered more than 300 men. Then it followed the coast, recruiting Khouans in the different villages, and on the 20th of November, after a six weeks' journey, it reached the frontier of Tripoli. On the day, therefore, that this feast of the storks was taking place, Sarcany and Namir had only been the guests of Sidi Hazam for three days.

The moquaddem's house, which was now Sava's prison, was surrounded by a slender minaret, and with its white walls pierced with loop-holes, its embattled terraces, its want of exterior windows, and its low, narrow doorway, had very much the appearance of a small fortress. It was in reality a regular zaouiya, situated beyond the town, on the skirts of the sandy plain, and the plantations of Menchie, with its gardens defended by the high wall running up on to the oasis.

Its interior was of the ordinary Arab design, but with three court-yards instead of one. Around each of these court-yards was a quadrilateral of galleries, columns, and arcades, on to which opened the rooms of the house, which for the most part were luxuriously furnished. In the second court-yard the visitors or guests found a vast "skifa," a sort of hall or vestibule in which more than one conference had been held by Sidi Hazam.

The house was naturally defended by its high walls, and the defense was further assured by the number of servants who could be summoned in case of an attack from the wandering tribes, or even the recognized authorities of the province whose efforts were directed to keeping the Senousists in check. There were, in fact, fifty of the brethren, well armed and equally ready for the defensive or the offensive.

There was only one door to the zaouiya, but this door was very thick and solid, and bound with iron and could not be easily forced, and once forced could not be easily entered. Sarcany had thus found a safe refuge in which he hoped to end his work successfully. His marriage with Sava would bring him considerable wealth, and if needed he could count on the assistance of the brotherhood, who were directly interested in his success.

The brethren from Tetuan and the vilayets on the road had been dispersed in the oasis of Menchie, ready for action at the first signal. The Feast of the Storks as the Tripolitan police knew well, would be most convenient for the Senousists. On the plain of Soung-Ettelate the Khouans of Northern Africa could receive their orders from the muftis as to their concentration in the Cyrenaic, where they were to found a regular pirate kingdom under the all-powerful authority of a Caliph. And the circumstances were highly favorable, for it was in the vilayet of Ben Ghazi in the Cyrenaic, that the association already had its greatest number of adherents.

On this day of the Feast of Storks three strangers were strolling through the crowd on the plain of Soung-Ettelate. These strangers, these Muzaffirs, would not have been recognized as Europeans under their Arab dress. The oldest of them wore his with that perfect ease which only long custom gives. He was Dr. Antekirtt, and his companions were Pierre Bathory and Luigi Ferrato. Point Pescade and Cape Matifou were stopping in the town, where they were engaged in certain preparations, and probably would not appear on the scene until they were wanted.

The “Electric” had only come in the forenoon before and anchored under shelter of the long rocks which act as a natural breakwater to the harbor of Tripoli. The passage had been as rapid as the voyage outward. A three hours’ stay at Philippeville, in the little bay of Filfila, and no longer, had been all that was necessary to procure the Arab dresses. Then the “Electric” had departed immediately, and its presence had not even been detected in the Numidian Gulf.

When the doctor and his companions came ashore, not at the quay, but on the rocks outside the harbor, they were no longer five Europeans entering Tripolitan territory, they were five Orientals whose garb would attract no attention. Pierre and Luigi, dressed up in this way, might betray themselves to the eyes of a close observer, but Pescade and Matifou, accustomed to the many dresses of the mountebank, were completely at their ease.

When night came the “Electric” moved round to one of the creeks on the other side of the harbor, where she ran little risk of being observed; and there she remained ready for sea at any moment. As soon as they had landed, the doctor and his companions ascended the rocks that skirt the coast until they reached the quay leading to Bab-el-Bahr, the marine gate, and entered the narrow streets of the town. The first hotel they came to seemed good enough for a few days — a few hours perhaps. They seemed to be respectable folks. Tunisian merchants, probably, taking advantage of their journey through Tripoli to be present at the Feast of the Storks. As the doctor spoke Arabic as correctly as he did all the Mediterranean languages, there was no danger that his speech would betray them.

The innkeeper with great cordiality received the five travelers who did him the great honor of selecting his house. He was a large man and very talkative. And so, in encouraging him to talk, the doctor soon learned certain things that interested him greatly. In the first Place, he heard that a caravan had recently arrived from Morocco in Tripoli, that Sarcany, who was well known in the regency, formed part of this caravan, and that he had availed himself of the hospitality of Sidi Hazam.

And hence that evening the doctor, Pierre, and Luigi, taking such precaution as insured their not being observed, had mixed with the crowd of nomads encamped in the plain of Soung-Ettelate. As they strolled about they took careful notes of the moquaddem's house on the skirt of the oasis.

There, then, Sava Sandorf was a prisoner. Since the doctor had been at Ragusa the father and daughter had never been so near together. But now an impassable wall lay between them. To get her away Pierre would have consented to everything, even to Sarcany's terms. Count Sandorf and he were ready to abandon the fortune which the scoundel coveted. And this, although he did not forget that justice ought to be done on the betrayer of Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar.

Situated as they were, there would seem to be almost insurmountable difficulties in carrying off Sarcany or getting Sava away from Sidi Hazam's house. Force was not likely to succeed; would stratagem? Would to-morrow's festival in any way assist? Probably it would, and this was the plan which bad been suggested by Point Pescade and had been under the consideration of the doctor, Pierre, and Luigi during the evening. In executing it Pescade would risk his life, but if he could enter the moquaddem's house he might succeed in managing Sava's escape. Nothing seemed impossible with his courage and cleverness.

It was, then, in execution of this plan, that the next day the doctor and Pierre and Luigi were on the watch among the crowd on the Plain of Soung-Ettelate, while Pescade and Matifou were preparing their parts.

There was then no sign of the noise and excitement with which the plain would be full beneath the glare of the innumerable torches when the evening arrived. In the compact crowd they scarcely noticed the Senousists who, in their simple costumes, communicated with each other only by Masonic signs.

But it is desirable that we should know the Oriental, or rather, African legend, of which the chief incidents were to be reproduced in the Feast of the Storks, which is the “great attraction” for the Mohammedans.

There was formerly on the African continent a race of Djins. Under the name of Bou-Chebris, these Djins occupied a vast territory situated on the borders of the desert of Hammada, between Tripoli and the Kingdom of Fezzan. They were a powerful people, fearless and feared. They were unjust, perfidious, aggressive, inhuman, and no African monarch had been able to suppress them.

There came a day when the prophet Suleyman attempted, not to attack, but to convert these Djins. And with this object he sent one of his apostles to preach to them the love of good and the hatred of evil. Vain effort! The ferocious horde seized the missionary and put him to death. The Djins showed so much audacity because their country was isolated and difficult of access, and they knew that no neighboring ruler would dare to venture there with his armies. Besides, they thought that no messenger would carry to the prophet Suleyman the news of what they had done to his apostle. They were mistaken.

In the country were a great number of storks. As we know, storks are birds of good manners, of unusual intelligence, and above all things, of great common sense, for the legend affirms that they never inhabit a country the name of which appears on a piece of money — for money is the source of all wickedness and the great power that draws all men to the abyss of their evil passions.

These storks, then, seeing the perverse way in which the Djins lived, mustered one day in deliberative assembly and decided to dispatch one of their number to the prophet Suleyman, so as to procure his just vengeance on the missionary's assassins.

And so the prophet called the hoopoe, his favorite courier, and ordered him to collect in the upper zones of the African sky all the storks on earth. This was done and when the innumerable flocks of these birds were gathered before the prophet Suleyman, the legend says they formed a cloud which put in shadow all the land between Mezda and Mourzouk.

Then each one, taking a stone in its beak, flew toward the country of the Djins. And from above they stoned to death the unhappy race whose souls are now imprisoned for all eternity in the desert of Hammada.

Such is the fable which has given rise to the festival of the day. Many hundreds of storks had been got together under huge nets stretched over the surface of the plain of Soung-Ettelate. And there, for the most part standing on one leg, they waited for the hour of their deliverance and the clicking of their beaks caused a sound in the air as if a tambourine was being beaten. At the given signal they would be set free to fly off, dropping harmless stones of clay among the crowd of the faithful, amid the cheers of the spectators, the uproar of the instruments, the reports of the musketry, and the light from the torches with colored flames.

Pescade knew the programme of this festival, and it was from it that he received the suggestion as to the part he intended to play, and by the aid of which he was to obtain admission to Sidi Hazam's house.

As soon as the sun set a gun from the fortress of Tripoli gave the signal so impatiently expected by the people of Soung-Ettelate. The doctor, Pierre, and Luigi were at first almost deafened by the frightful noise which arose on every side, and were then nearly blinded by the thousands of lights that sprung up all over the plain.

When the gun was heard the crowd of nomads were still busy at their evening meal. Here the roast mutton, the pillau of fowls for those who were Turks and wished it to be seen; there the couscoussou for the well-to-do Arabs; further off a simple bazinu, a sort of barley-flour boiled in oil, for the poorer people, whose pockets contained more mahboubs of brass than mictals of gold; and everywhere the "lagby," the juice of the date-palm, which, when it is taken as an alcoholic beer, is productive of the worst excesses of intoxication.

A few minutes after the gun had been heard men, women, children, Turks, Arabs, and negroes had finished their meals. The instruments of the barbaric orchestras necessarily rejoiced in alarming sonority to make themselves heard above the human tumult. In places horsemen were leaping about, discharging their long guns and their saddle pistols, while fire-works were thrown about amid an uproar it would be impossible to describe.

Here in the torchlight, to the rattling of the wooden drum and the intonations of a monotonous chant, a negro chief, fantastically dressed with a rattling belt of bones, his face hidden beneath a diabolical mask, was inciting to dance some thirty blacks, grimacing m a circle of convulsionary women who beat them with their hands. And then savage Aissassouas in the last stage of religious exaltation and alcoholic intoxication, with froth on their faces and eyes out of their orbits, were biting at wood, chewing iron, gashing their skins, juggling with live coals and wrapping themselves with the long serpents which bit their hands, their cheeks, their lips, and like them devoured their blood.

But soon the crowd hurried with extraordinary eagerness to the house of Sidi Hazam, as though some new spectacle had attracted them.

Two men were there, one large, the other small — two acrobats whose curious feats of strength and agility amid a quadruple row of spectators were calling forth the most noisy cheers that could escape from Tripolitan throats.

It was Point Pescade and Cape Matifou. They had taken up their stand only a few paces from Sidi Hazam’s house. Both on this occasion had resumed their characters as foreign artists. Their dresses cut out of Arab materials, they were again in quest of success.

“You have not got rusty?” Point Pescade had previously asked Cape Matifou.

“No.”

“And you will not shrink from anything that may amuse the imbeciles?”

“Me! Shrink!”

“If even you have to chew pebbles with your teeth and swallow serpents?”

“Cooked?” asked Cape Matifou.

“No, raw.”

“Raw?”

“And living!”

Cape Matifou made a grimace, but if necessary he resolved to eat a snake like a simple Aissassou.

The doctor, Pierre, and Luigi mingled in the crowd of spectators and did not lose sight of the two friends.

No! Cape Matifou was not rusty; he had lost nothing of his prodigious strength. At first the shoulders of five or six robust Arabs, who had risked a fall with him, were laid on the ground.

Then followed the juggling, which astonished the Arabs, above all when the flaming torches were launched from Pescade to Matifou, coming and recoming in their zigzags of fire.

And the public might well be critical. There were there a goodly number of the admirers of the Touaregs, those semi-savages "whose agility is equal to that of the most formidable animals in these latitudes," according to the astounding programme of the famous Bracco troupe. These connoisseurs had already applauded the intrepid Mustapha, the Samson of the Desert, the "man-cannon to whom the Queen of England had sent her valet begging him not to continue his performance for fear of accident." But Cape Matifou was incomparable in his feats of strength, and feared no rivals.

At last came the final exercise which was to raise to the highest pitch the enthusiasm of the cosmopolitan crowd that surrounded the European performers. Although it had done frequent duty in the circuses of Europe, it seemed that it was still unknown to the loungers of Tripoli. And the crowd crushed more and more round the ring to look at the two acrobats who were at work by torchlight.

Cape Matifou seized a pole nearly thirty feet long and held it upright against his chest with his two hands. At the end of this pole Point Pescade, who had climbed up like a monkey, began to balance himself in attitudes of astonishing audacity, and made it bend alarmingly.

But Cape Matifou remained undismayed, shifting about gradually so as to retain his equilibrium. Then when he was close to the wall of Sidi Hazam's house, he summoned strength enough to lift the pole at arm's length, while Point Pescade assumed the attitude of a favorite actress throwing kisses to the public.

The crowd of Arabs and negroes roared in transports of delight, clapped their hands, and stamped their feet. Never had Samson of the Desert, the intrepid Mustapha, the boldest of the Touaregs, been raised to such a height!

At this moment the report of a gun echoed over the plain from the Fortress of Tripoli. At the signal, the hundreds of storks, suddenly delivered from the immense nets which kept them prisoners, rose in the air, and a shower of sham stones began to fall on the plain, amid a deafening concert of aerial cries, to which the terrestrial concert gave back an equally noisy reply.

This was the paroxysm of the festival. It seemed as though all the mad-houses in the old continent had been emptied on to Soung-Ettelate!

But, as if it was deaf and mute, the moquaddem's house had remained obstinately closed during those hours of public rejoicing, and not one of Sidi Hazam's people had shown themselves at the gate or on the terraces.

But, strange to relate! at the moment tho torches were extinguished, after the flight of the storks, Point Pescade had suddenly disappeared, as if he had been borne upward to the sky by the faithful birds of the prophet Suleyman.

What had become of him?

Cape Matifou did not seem to be at all concerned at the disappearance. He threw the pole into the air, caught it adroitly by the other end, and turned it as a drum-major does his cane. Point Pescade's performance seemed to him to be the most natural thing in the world.

The astonishment of the spectators was unbounded, and their enthusiasm displayed itself in an immense hurrah, which extended far beyond the limits of the oasis. None of them doubted but what the active acrobat had jumped off into space, on his way to the kingdom of the storks.

What charms the multitude most? Is it not that which they are unable to explain?

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE HOUSE OF SIDI HAZAM.

It was about nine o’clock. Musketry, music, shouting, all had suddenly ceased. The crowd had begun to disperse; some went back to Tripoli, others regained oasis of Menchie and the neighboring villages. In an hour the plain of Soung-Ettelate would be silent and empty. Tents would be folded up, camps would be raised, negroes and Berbers were already on the road to the different Tripolitan districts, while the Senousists were off toward the Cyrenaic, and more especially toward the vilayet of Ben Ghazi to join the concentration of the Caliph s forces.

The doctor, Pierre, and Luigi were the only people that did not leave the place during the night. Ready for all that might happen since the disappearance of Point Pescade, each of them had chosen his post of observation at the base of the walls of Sidi Hazam’s house.

Point Pescade had given a tremendous leap, as Matifou held the pole up at arm’s length, and fallen on the parapet of one of the terraces at the foot of the minaret which commanded the different court-yards of the house.

On that dark night no one within or without had noticed him. He was not even observed from the skifa in the court-yard, and in which there were a few Khouans, some of whom were asleep and some on the watch by order of the moquaddem.

Point Pescade, be it understood, had really no definite plan. The interior arrangement of the house was unknown to him and he did not know in what part the girl was detained, if she was alone or kept out of sight, or if he had sufficient strength to help her escape? Hence he must act a little at a venture, and this is what he thought:

“Anyhow by force of stratagem, I must reach Sava Sandorf. If she can not come with me immediately, if I can not get her away to-night, she must be told that Pierre Bathory is alive; that be is here at the foot of these walls; that Doctor Antekirtt and his companions are ready to help her and that if her escape must be delayed she must not yield to any threats! I may, of course, be found out before I reach her! But then I must take care of that.”

Pescade’s first care was to unwind a slender, knotted cord that he had hidden under his clown’s dress. Then he tied one end of this around the angle of one of the battlements, and then over the other, so that it hung down to the ground. This was only a measure of precaution, a good one nevertheless. That done, Pescade, before going far, then lay down on his stomach. In this attitude, which prudence demanded, he waited without moving. If he had been seen, the terrace would soon be invaded by Sidi Hazam’s people, and then he would have to use the cord on his own account, instead of that of Sava Sandorf, as he intended.

Complete silence reigned in the moquaddem’s house. As neither Sidi Hazam, nor Sarcany, nor any of their people, had taken part in the Feast of the Storks, the door of the zaouiya had not been opened since sunrise.

After waiting some minutes, Point Pescade moved toward the angle from which arose the minaret. The staircase which led to the upper part of this minaret evidently ran down to the ground in the first court-yard. In fact, a door opening on to the terrace gave admission to the stairs leading to the rooms below.

This door was shut from the inside, not with a key, but with a bolt that it would be impossible to slip back from the outside unless a hole were made through the wood. This labor Point Pescade would have attempted, for he had in his pocket a many-bladed knife, a precious present from the doctor, of which he could make good use. But that would be a long and perhaps noisy task.

It was unnecessary. Three feet above the terrace a window in the form of a loop-hole opened in the minaret wall. If the window was small, Point Pescade was not large. Besides, was he not like a cat who can elongate herself to pass through where there seems to be no passage? And so he tried, and after some squeezing of the shoulders he found himself in the minaret.

“Cape Matifou could not have done that!” he thought.

Then feeling his way around, he returned to the door and unbolted it, so that it remained unfastened in case he had to return by the same road.

As he went down the winding stairs of the minaret, Point Pescade glided rather than stepped, so that his Weight would not cause the wooden stairs to creak. At the bottom he found a second door. It was shut, but he had only to push it for it to open.

The door opened on to a gallery of little columns, by which access was given to a certain number of rooms. After the complete darkness of the minaret the gallery seemed light to Pescade; but there was no light in the interior, and not a sound.

In the center of the court-yard was a basin of running water surrounded by large pots of shrubs, pepper-trees, palms, laurel roses, and cacti, the thick foliage forming a clump of verdure round the edge.

Point Pescade stole round this gallery like a wolf, stopping before each room. It seemed they were inhabited. Not all of them, however; but behind one of the doors he distinctly heard the murmur of a voice he knew.

He stepped back. It was Sarcany's voice! The voice he had often heard at Ragusa; but, although he kept his ear to the door, he could near nothing of what was going on.

At this moment there suddenly came a loud noise, and Point Pescade had only just time to slip behind one of the flower pots round the water.

Sarcany came out of the room. An Arab of tall stature accompanied him. They continued their conversation, walking up and down the gallery of the court-yard.

Unfortunately Point Pescade could not understand what Sarcany and his companion were saying, for they were talking in that Arab tongue which he did not know. Two words he frequently heard, or rather two names. One of these was Sidi Hazam, for it was the moquaddem himself who was talking with Sarcany; the other was Antekirtta, which was mentioned several times during the conversation.

"That is strange," thought Pescade. "Why are they talking about Antekirtta? Are Sidi Hazam, Sarcany, and all the pirates of Tripoli thinking of a campaign against an island? Confound it! And not to know the lingo these two rascals are using."

And Point Pescade tried hard to catch another suspicious word, keeping himself well hid behind the flower-pots when Sarcany and Sidi Hazam came near. But the night was too dark for them to see him.

“And yet,” said he to himself “if Sarcany were alone in this court-yard I might have jumped at his throat, and put it out of his power to damage us. But that would not help Sava Sandorf, and it was for her I made that risky jump! Patience! Sarcany’s turn will come some day.”

The conversation between Sidi Hazam and Sarcany lasted about twenty minutes. The name of Sava was mentioned several times, with the qualification “arronee,” and Point Pescade remembered that, he had already heard the word, and that it meant betrothed in Arabic. Evidently the moquaddem knew of Sarcany’s projects, and was assisting him.

Then the two men retired through one of the doors in the angle of the court-yard which put this gallery in communication with the other parts of the house.

As soon as they had disappeared, Point Pescade glided along the gallery and stopped at this door. He had only to push it to find himself in a narrow corridor whose wall he felt his way along. At its end was a double arcade supported by a central column, and giving access to the second court-yard. A few bright lights from between the bays by which the skifa obtained its light from the court-yard were thrown in luminous sections on the earth, and at the moment it would not be prudent to cross them, for a noise of many voices was heard behind the door of this room.

Point Pescade hesitated a moment. What he sought was the room in which Sava was living, and he could only trust to chance to find it.

Suddenly a light appeared in the other end of the court-yard. A woman carrying an Arab lantern had just come out of the room in the far angle of the court-yard and turned along the gallery on to which the door of the skifa opened.

Point Pescade recognized her as Namir.

As it was possible that the Moor was going to the girl’s room, it was necessary to find the means of following her, and, in order to follow her, let her go by without her seeing him. The moment was decisive of the audacious attempt of Point Pescade and the fate of Sava Sandorf.

Namir came on. Her lantern swinging almost on the ground left the upper part of the gallery in as deep a gloom as the lower part was brightly lighted. And as she passed along the arcade Point Pescade did not know what to do.

A ray from the lantern, however, showed him that the upper part of the arcade was ornamented with open arabesques, in Moorish fashion.

To climb the central column, seize hold of one of these arabesques, draw himself up by main force, and crouch in the central oval, where he remained as motionless as a saint in a niche, was the work of a second.

Namir passed along the arcade without seeing him, and crossed to the opposite side of the gallery. Then, when she reached the door of the skifa, she opened it. A bright light shot across the court-yard, and was instantly extinguished as soon as the door was shut.

Point Pescade set himself to reflect, and where could he find a better position for reflection?

“That is Namir who has just gone into that room,” he said to himself. “It is evident she is not going to Sava Sandorf! But perhaps she came from her, and, in that case, her room will be that one in the angle over there — I will go and see!”

He waited a few minutes before he left his post. The light inside the skifa seemed to grow less, and the voices died out to a faint murmur. Doubtless the hour had come when Sidi Hazam’s household retired to rest. The circumstances were, therefore, more favorable for him, for that part of the habitation would be plunged in silence when the last light had gone out. And that was exactly what happened.

Pescade glided along the columns of the arcade, crept across the flags of the gallery, passed the door of the skifa, went round the end of the court-yard, and reached the angle near the room from which Namir had come. He opened the door, which was unlocked, and then, by the light of an Arab lamp, placed like a night-light beneath its shade, he gave a rapid glance round the room.

A few hangings suspended from the walls here and there, a stool of Moorish pattern, cushions piled in the angles, a double carpet on the mosaic floor, a low table, with the fragments of a meal, a divan covered with linen cloth — that was what he first saw.

He entered, and shut the door.

A woman, dozing rather than sleeping, was reclining on the divan, half covered in one of those burnouses with which the Arabs wrap themselves from head to foot.

It was Sava Sandorf.

Point Pescade had no difficulty in recognizing the young lady he had met so many times in the streets of Ragusa. How changed she seemed to be. Pale as she had been when in her wedding-carriage she had met the funeral procession of Pierre Bathory, her attitude and the expression of her face all told she had had to suffer.

There was not an instant to lose.

And in fact, as the door had not been locked, was not Namir coming back? Perhaps the Moor guarded her night and day! And if the girl could leave her room, how could she escape without help from the outside? Sidi Hazam’s house was walled like a prison.

Point Pescade bent over the divan. What was his astonishment at a resemblance which had never struck him before — the resemblance between Sava Sandorf and Dr. Antekirtt!

The girl opened her eyes.

In seeing a stranger standing near her in that fantastic dress of the acrobat, with his finger on his lips, and an appealing look in his eyes, she was at first bewildered rather than frightened. But she arose, and had sufficient coolness to make no sound.

“Silence!” said Point Pescade. “You have nothing to fear from me! I have come here to save you! Behind those walls your friends are waiting for you, friends who will give their lives to get you out of Sarcany’s hands! Pierre Bathory is alive — ”

“Pierre — alive?” exclaimed Sava, restraining the beatings of her heart.

“Read!”

And Point Pescade gave the girl a letter, which contained these words —

“Sava, trust him who has risked his life to reach you! I am alive! I am here!

Pierre Bathory.”

Pierre was alive! He was at the foot of these walls! By what miracle? Sava would know later on! But Pierre was there.

“Let us escape!” she said.

“Yes! Let us escape,” answered Pescade. “But let us have all the chances on our side! One question, Is Namir accustomed to spend the night in this room?”

“No,” answered Sava.

“Does she take the precaution of locking you in when she is away?”

“Yes.”

“Then she will come back?”

“Yes! Let us go!”

“Now,” answered Pescade.

And first they must reach the staircase of the minaret to gain the terrace. Once they got there the rope that hung down outside would render escape easy.

“Come!” said Point Pescade, taking Sava’s hand.

And he was going to open the door when he heard steps coming along the gallery. At the same time a few words were pronounced in an imperious tone. Point Pescade recognized Sarcany's voice. He stopped at the threshold.

"It is he!" whispered the girl. "You are lost if he finds you here!"

"He will not find me," answered Pescade.

And throwing himself to the ground he then, by one of those acrobatic contortions he had often performed in sight of an audience, wrapped himself up in one of the carpets on the floor and rolled himself into the darkest corner of the room.

At the same moment the door opened to admit Sarcany and Namir, who shut it behind them.

Sava resumed her seat on the divan. Why had Sarcany come to her at that hour? Was this a new attempt to overcome her refusal? But Sava was strong now! She knew that Pierre Bathory was alive, that he was waiting outside.

Beneath the carpet which covered him Point Pescade, although he could not see, could hear everything.

"Sava," said Sarcany, "to-morrow morning we are going to leave this for another residence. But I do not wish to leave here until you have consented to our marriage, until it has been celebrated. All is ready, and it is necessary that now — "

"Neither now nor later!" replied the girl, in a voice as cold as it was resolute.

"Sava," continued Sarcany, as though he had not heard this reply, "in the interest of both of us, it is necessary that your consent should be free. In the interest of both of us; you understand?"

"We have not, and we never shall have, any interest in common."

"Take care! I may remind you that you gave your consent at Ragusa."

"For reasons which no longer exist."

"Listen to me, Sava," said Sarcany, whose apparent calm hid the most violent irritation; "this is the last time I shall ask you for your consent."

"And I shall refuse it as long as I have strength to do so."

"Well, that strength we will take away from you," exclaimed Sarcany. "Do not drive me to extremes! Yes! the strength which you use against me Namir will take from you, and in spite of you if necessary. Do not resist me, Sava. The woman is here, ready to celebrate our marriage according to the custom of my own country. Follow me then!"

Sarcany advanced toward the girl, who quickly rose and stepped back to the end of the room.

"Scoundrel!" she exclaimed.

"You will come with me! You will come with me!" exclaimed Sarcany.

"Never!"

"Ah! Take care!"

And Sarcany, having seized the girl’s arm, was violently dragging her toward the skifa, with Namir’s help, where Sidi Hazam and the imam were waiting.

“Help! Help!” screamed Sava. “Help me — Pierre Bathory!”

“Pierre Bathory!” exclaimed Sarcany. “You are calling a dead man to your help!”

“No! He is alive! Help me — Pierre!”

The answer was so unexpected by Sarcany that he could not have been more frightened had he seen Pierre’s ghost. But he was himself again soon. Pierre alive! Pierre, whom he had stabbed with his own hand, and seen buried in the cemetery at Ragusa! In truth, it could only be the idea of a mad woman, and it was possible that Sava, in the excess of her despair, had lost her reason!

Point Pescade had heard all that passed. In telling Sarcany that Pierre was alive, Sava had staked her life, that was certain. And in case the scoundrel offered any violence, he so disposed his carpet as to be ready to appear on the scene instantly, knife in hand, and those who thought he would hesitate to strike did not know Point Pescade.

There was no necessity for him to do so. Sarcany abruptly dragged Namir out of the room. Then the key was turned in the lock while the girl’s fate was being decided.

At a bound Pescade had thrown off the carpet and was by her side.

“Come!” said he.

As the lock was inside the room, to unscrew it by means of his knife was neither a long, a difficult, nor a noisy job.

As soon as the door was opened, and then shut behind them, Pescade led the way along the gallery around the court-yard wall.

It was about half past eleven. A few beams of light filtered through the skifa’s bays. Pescade avoided crossing them on his way to the passage that led to the first court-yard.

They reached the passage and went along it; but when they were only a few yards from the minaret staircase Pescade suddenly stopped, and held back Sava, whose hand his had never left.

Three men were talking in this first court-yard by the side of the water. One of them — it was Sidi Hazam — was giving orders to the others. Almost immediately they disappeared up the minaret staircase, while the moquaddem went into one of the lateral chambers. Pescade perceived that Sidi Hazam had sent the men to watch the neighborhood, and that when he and the girl appeared on the terrace, it would be occupied and guarded.

“We must risk it, however,” said Point Pescade.

“Yes. Everything!” replied Sava.

Then they crossed the gallery and reached the staircase, which they mounted with extreme care. Then when Point Pescade had reached the upper landing he stopped.

No sound on the terrace, not even a sentinel’s step!

Point Pescade quietly opened the door, and followed by Sava he glided along the battlements.

Suddenly a shout came from the minaret above from one of the men on guard. At the same moment the other jumped on Pescade, while Namir rushed on to the terrace, and the whole household came hurrying across the court-yard.

Would Sava allow herself to be retaken? No! To be retaken by Sarcany was to be lost! A hundred times would she prefer death!

With a prayer to God the brave girl ran to the parapet, and, without hesitation, leaped from the terrace.

Pescade had not even time to interfere; but throwing off the man that held him, he caught hold of the rope and in a second was at the foot of the wall.

“Sava! Sava!” he shouted.

“Here is the young lady!” said a familiar voice, “and no bones broken! I was just in the way — ”

A shout of fury, followed by a heavy thud, cut short Cape Matifou’s speech.

Namir, in a moment of rage, unwilling to abandon the prey that was escaping her, would have been smashed to pieces if two strong arms had not caught her as she fell.

Dr. Antekirtt, Pierre and Luigi had rejoined Cape Matifou and Point Pescade, who were running toward the shore. Although Sava had fainted, she weighed almost nothing in the arms of her rescuer.

A few minutes afterward Sarcany, with a score of armed men, came out in pursuit of the fugitives.

When he reached the creek where the “Electric” had been waiting, the doctor and his companions were already on board, and in a few turns of the screw the swift vessel Was out of range.

Sava, alone with the doctor and Pierre, soon regained her consciousness. She learned that she was the daughter of Count Mathias Sandorf! She was in her father’s arms!

CHAPTER XXV.

ANTEKIRTTA.

Fifteen hours after leaving the coast of Tripoli the “Electric” was signaled by the lookout at Antekirtta, and in the afternoon she came into harbor.

We can easily imagine the reception given to the doctor and his companions.

Now that Sava was out of danger, it was decided to still keep secret her relationship to Dr. Antekirtt.

Count Mathias wished to remain unknown until the accomplishment of his work. But it was enough that Pierre, whom he had made his son, was the betrothed of Sava Sandorf for signs of rejoicing to be shown on all sides in the Stadthaus as well as in the town of Artenak.

We may judge what were Mme. Bathory’s feelings when Sava was given back to her after so many trials! And Sava herself soon recovered her health — a few days of happiness were sufficient for its complete re-establishment.

That Point Pescade had risked his life there could be no doubt. But as he seemed to think it quite a natural thing to do, there was no possibility of rewarding him — except with a few simple words. Pierre Bathory had clasped him to his breast, and the doctor had given him such a look of gratitude that he would hear of no other recompense. According to his custom, he gave the whole credit of the adventure to Cape Matifou.

“He is the man that should be thanked,” he said. “He did it all! If old Cape had not been so clever with that pole I should never have been able to jump into Sidi Hazam’s house, and Sava Sandorf would have been killed by her fall if Cape Matifou had not been below to receive her in his arms!”

“Look here! Look here!” answered Cape Matifou. “You are going too far, and the idea of — ”

“Be quiet!” continued Pescade. “I am not strong enough to receive compliments of that caliber, while you — Come, let us look after the garden!”

And Cape Matifou held his peace, and returned to his pleasant villa, and finally accepted the felicitations that were thrust upon him “so as not to disoblige his little Pescade.”

It was arranged that the wedding of Pierre and Sava should took place on the 9th of December. When Pierre was Sava’s husband he could claim his wife’s rights in the inheritance of Count Sandorf. Mme. Toronthal’s letter left no doubt as to the girl’s birth, and if necessary they could obtain a formal statement from the banker. And this statement would be obtained in time, for Sava had not yet reached the age at which she would enter her rights. She would not be eighteen until six months later.

It should be added that in the fifteen years a political change had taken place favorable to the Hungarian question, and this had considerably ameliorated the situation — particularly with regard to the conspiracy of Trieste.

It was not intended to come to any decision as to the fate of Carpena and Toronthal until Sarcany had joined them m the casemates of Antekirtta. Then, and not till then, would the work of justice be completed.

But while the doctor was still scheming how to attain his object, it was absolutely necessary that he should provide for the safety of the colony. His agents in the Cyrenaic and Tripoli had informed him that the Senousist movement was attaining great importance, particularly in the vilayet of Ben Ghazi, which is the nearest to the island. Special messengers were continually on the move to the minor chiefs of the province from Jerboub, “the new pole of the Islamic world,” as Dr. Duveyrier calls it, the metropolitan Mecca, where lived Sidi Mohammed El-Mahdi, grand master of the order, and as the Senousists are the worthy descendants of the old Barbary pirates and bear a mortal hate to everything European, the doctor had to take steps to be very carefully on his guard.

In fact, is it not to the Senousists that we can attribute the massacres in African necrology during the last twenty years? The sanguinary brotherhood has put in practice the Senousistic doctrines against our explorers, and we have seen Beurman killed at Kanem in 1863; Vonder Decken and his companions on the Djouba River, in 1865; Mme. Alexine Tinne and her people in Wady Abedjouch, in 1865; Dournaux-Dupeire and Joubert, at the wells of In-Azhar, in 1874; Fathers Panlmier Bouchard and Menoret beyond the In-Calah, in 1876; Fathers Richard Morat and Poupiard, of the Ghadames mission, in the north of Adzjer; Colonel Flattore, Captains Masson and Dianous, Dr. Guiard, and Engineers Beringer and Roone on the road to Wargia, in 1881.

On this subject the doctor often talked with Pierre Bathory, Luigi Ferrato, the captains of the flotilla, the chiefs of the militia, and the principal notables of the island. Could Antekirtta resist an attack from the pirates? Yes, doubtless, although the fortifications were not complete, but on condition that the number of assailants was not too great. On the other hand, had the Senousists any interest in capturing it? Yes, for it commanded all the Gulf of Stora, which formed the coast of Tripoli and the Cyrenaic.

It will not have been forgotten that south-west of Antekirtta, at a distance of some two miles, there lay the islet of Kencraf. This islet, which there was no time to fortify, would constitute a serious danger if a hostile flotilla made it its base of operation, and so the doctor had taken the precaution to mine it extensively. And now a terrible explosive agent filled the fougasses amid its rocks. It would suffice for an electric spark to be sent through the cable from Antekirtta, and the island of Kencraf would be annihilated with everything that was on it.

With regard to the other defenses of the island this is what had been done. The flanking batteries had been completed, and only waited for the militia assigned to them to move to their stations. The fortress on the central cave was ready with its long-range pieces. Numerous torpedoes had been sunk in the channel and defended the entrance to the harbor. The “Ferrato” and three “Electrics” were ready for all eventualities, either in awaiting the attack or advancing on a hostile flotilla.

But in the south-west of the island there was a vulnerable spot. A landing might take place there in shelter from the guns of the fortress. There was the danger, and it might be too late to become sufficiently advanced with the works of defense.

After all, was it quite certain that the Senousists intended to attack Antekirtta? It was a big affair, a dangerous expedition which would require a good deal of material. Luigi still doubted, and he said so one day while the doctor and Pierre were inspecting the fortifications.

“That is not my opinion,” said the doctor. “Antekirtta is rich, it commands the Syrtic Sea; and these are sufficient reasons for the Senousists sooner or later to attack it.”

“Nothing can be more certain,” added Pierre, “and it is an eventuality against which we should be prepared.”

“But what makes me fear an immediate attack is that Sarcany is one of the brotherhood of these Khouans, and I know that he has always been in their service as an agent in foreign parts. Do you not remember that Point Pescade overheard in the moquaddem’s house a conversation between him and Sidi Hazam? In that conversation the name of Antekirtta was mentioned several times, and Sarcany knows that this island belongs to the Doctor Antekirtt, the man he fears, the man whom he made Zirone attack on the slopes of Etna. As he did not succeed in Sicily there is little doubt he will try to succeed here under better circumstances.”

“Has he any personal hate against you?” asked Luigi. “And does he know you?”

“It is possible that he has seen me at Ragusa,” replied the doctor. “In any case he would not be ignorant that in that town I was in communication with the Bathory family. Besides, the existence of Pierre was revealed to him when Sava was carried off by Pescade from the house of Sidi Hazam. In his mind he would see the association, and would have no doubt that Pierre and Sava had taken refuge in Antekirtta. He will, therefore, urge on against us the whole Senousistic horde, and we shall get no quarter if he succeeds in getting possession of our island.”

The argument was quite plausible. That Sarcany did not know that the doctor was Count Sandorf was certain, but he knew enough to wish to get away from him the heiress of the Artenak estate; and there was nothing surprising in his attempt to excite the Caliph to undertake an expedition against the Antekirttian colony.

However, they had reached the 3d of December, and there had been no sign of an imminent attack.

Besides, the thought of the approaching marriage of Pierre Bathory and Sava Sandorf occupied everybody. And the colonists tried to persuade themselves that the evil days had passed and would not return.

Point Pescade and Cape Matifou of course shared in the general sense of security. They were so happy in the happiness of others that they lived in a state of perpetual enchantment with everything.

“I can hardly believe it!” repeated Point Pescade.

“What can you hardly believe?” asked Cape Matifou.

“That yon are to become a big, fat annuitant, my Cape! I must think of marrying you.”

“Marrying me?”

“Yes, to some nice little woman.”

“Why little?”

“That would be only just! A large, an enormous fine woman! Eh! Madame Cape Matifou, we should have to look for you among the Patagonians!”

But pending the marriage of Cape Matifou, which would end well if he could find a companion worthy of him, Point Pescade busied himself about the marriage of Pierre and Sava. With the doctor's permission, he was thinking of organizing a public festival, with foreign games, songs and dances, discharges of artillery, a grand banquet in the open-air, a serenade, and a torchlight procession and fire-works. That just suited him! He was in his element! It would be splendid! They would talk of it for long afterward! They would talk of it forever!

All this excitement was nipped in the bud.

During the night of the 3d and 4th of December — a calm night, but a very cloudy one — an electric-bell sounded in Dr. Antekirtt's room in the Stadthaus.

It was ten o'clock.

At the call, the doctor and Pierre left the saloon in which they had passed the evening with Mme. Bathory and Sava Sandorf. On entering the room they saw that the call was from the lookout on the central cone. Questions and answers immediately passed by means of the telephone.

The lookout signaled the approach of a flotilla to the south-west of the island, the vessels appearing very confusedly in the thick mist.

"We must summon the council," said the doctor.

In less than ten minutes afterward the doctor, Pierre, Luigi, Captains Narsos and Kostrik, and the chiefs of the militia were at the Stadthaus, considering the information sent down from the cone. A quarter of an hour afterward they were down at the harbor, at the end of the main jetty, on which the bright light was burning.

From this point, which was very little above sea-level, it would be impossible to distinguish the flotilla that the lookouts on the central cone could clearly see. But in brightly illuminating the horizon, toward the south-west, it would doubtless be possible to make out the number of ships and their plan of attack.

Was it not unwise to thus disclose the position of the island? The doctor did not think so. If it was the enemy expected, that enemy was not coming as a blind man. He knew the position of Antekirtta, and nothing could keep him away from it.

The machinery was put in action, and with the aid of the two electric beams projected into the offing, the horizon was suddenly illuminated over a vast section.

The lookouts were not mistaken. Two hundred boats, at the least, were advancing in line, xebecs, polaccas, trabacolos, saccolevas, and others of less importance. There was no doubt that this was the flotilla of the Senousists, recruited by the pirates in every port along the coast. The wind failing, they had had recourse to their sweeps. The passage between Antekirtta and the Cyrenaic was not a long one. The calm might even help them, for it would allow of a landing taking place under favorable conditions.

At the moment the flotilla was about four or five miles off, in the south-west. It could not reach the coast before sunrise.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BATTLE.

After the first reconnaissance the lights were extinguished. The only thing to do was to wait for day.

However, by the doctor’s orders, the militia were mustered and sent to their stations.

It was necessary to be in a position to strike the first blow, on which, perhaps, the issue of the enterprise would depend.

It was now certain that the assailants could no longer hope to take the island by surprise, inasmuch as the projection of the light had allowed of their course and numbers being known.

A most careful watch was kept during the last hours of the night. Many times was the horizon illuminated so as to permit of the exact position of the flotilla being noted. That the as»sailants were numerous there could be no doubt. That they were sufficiently armed to have a chance against the Antekirtta batteries was doubtful. They were probably without artillery. But the number of men that the chief could land at once would make the Senousists really formidable.

Day at once began to break, and the first rays of the sun dissipated the mists on the horizon. Every eye was turned seaward toward the east and south. The flotilla was advancing in a long circle in which were over 200 vessels, some small boats and some of over forty tons. Altogether they could carry about 2000 men.

At five o’clock the flotilla was off Kencraf. Would the enemy stop there and take up their position before attacking the island? If they did so, it would indeed be fortunate. The mines laid by the doctor would seriously damage their attack, if they did not entirely settle it.

An anxious half hour elapsed. It seemed as though the vessels, as they reached the islet, were about to land — but they did nothing of the sort. Not one stopped, the line curved further off to the south, leaving it to the right and it became evident that Antekirtta would be directly attacked, or rather invaded, in an hour.

“The only thing now is to defend ourselves,” said the doctor to the chief of the militia.

The signal was given, and those in the island hastened into the town to take the posts that had been assigned them beforehand. By the doctor’s orders Pierre Bathory took command of the fortifications to the south, Luigi of those to the east. The defenders — five hundred at the most — were posted so that they could face the enemy wherever he attempted to force the walls. The doctor held himself ready to go where his presence might be necessary. Mme. Bathory, Sava Sandorf, Maria Ferrato remained in the hall of the Stadthaus. The other women, should the town be carried, were ordered to take shelter with their children in the casemates where they would have nothing to fear even if the assailants possessed a few landing guns.

The question of Kencraf being settled — unfortunately to the doctor’s disadvantage — there remained the question of the harbor. If the flotilla attempted to force an entry, the forts on the two jetties, with their cross-fires, the guns of the “Ferrato,” the torpedoes of the “Electrics,” and the torpedoes sunk in the channel would have something to say in the matter. It would, in short, be fortunate if the attack were made on that side.

But — as was only too evident — the chief of the Senousists was perfectly acquainted with Antekirtt's means of defense. To attempt a direct attack on the harbor would have been to run to complete and immediate annihilation. A landing in the southern part of the island, where the operation would be an easy one, was the plan he adopted. And so, baring passed by the harbor, as he had passed by Kencraf, he took his flotilla, still rowing, toward the weak point of Antekirtta.

As soon as he saw this the doctor took such measures as circumstances demanded. Captains Kostrik and Narsos each took command of a torpedo boat and slipped out of harbor.

A quarter of an hour afterward the two "Electrics" had rushed into the midst of the flotilla, broken the line, sunk five or six of the vessels, and stove in more than a dozen others. But the number of the enemy was so great that, to avoid being boarded, the "Electrics" had to retreat to the shelter of the jetties.

But the "Ferrato" had now come into position and begun firing on the flotilla. Her guns and those of the batteries that could be brought to bear were, however, insufficient to prevent the pirates landing. Although a great number had perished, although twenty of their vessels had been sunk, more than 1000 scrambled on to the rocks in the south, to which the calm sea rendered the approach so easy.

It was then found that the Senousists were not without artillery. The largest of the xebecs had several field-pieces on wheeled carriages, and these were landed on the shore, which was out of range of the guns either of the town or the central cone.

The doctor, from his position on the nearest salient, had seen all this, and with his much fewer men could not attempt to stop it. But as they were sheltered by the walls, the assailants, numerous as they were, would find their task a difficult one.

The Senousists, dragging their light guns with them, formed up into two columns, and came marching along with all the careless bravery of the Arab and the audacity of the fanatics, who glory in their contempt of death, their hope of pillage, and their hate of the European.

When they were well within range the batteries opened on them. More than 100 fell, but the others still kept on. Their field-pieces were bought into position, and they began to breach the wall in the angle of the unfinished curtain toward the south.

Their chief, calm amid those who were falling at his side, directed the operation. Sarcany, close by, was exciting him to deliver the assault and hurl several hundred men at the falling wall.

From the distance Dr. Antekirtt and Pierre had recognized him, and he had recognized them.

And now the mass of besiegers began their advance to the wall, which had been beaten in sufficiently to let them through. If they succeeded in clearing this breach, they would spread themselves over the town, and the besieged too weak to resist, would have to abandon it, and, with the sanguinary temperament of the pirates, the victory would be followed by a general massacre.

The hand-to-hand struggle at this point was terrible. Under the doctor’s orders, who stood as impassable in the danger as he was invulnerable amid the bullets, Pierre and his companions performed prodigies of valor, Point Pescade and Cape Matifou lent their assistance and displayed the most brilliant audacity.

The Hercules, with a knife in one hand and an ax in the other, kept clear the space around him.

“Go it, Cape, go it! Down with them!” shouted Point Pescade, whose revolver, incessantly recharging and discharging, was going like a Gatling.

But the foe would not yield. After being many times driven out of the breach, they had again swarmed on to the attack and were slowly fighting their way through it They suddenly found themselves attacked in the rear.

The “Ferrato” had managed to get into a commanding position within three cable-lengths of the shore, and with her carronades all brought to the one side, her long chaser, her Hotchkiss cannons and her Gatling mitrailleuses she opened such a fire on the assailants that they were mowed down as the grass before the scythe. She attacked them in the rear and cannonaded them on the beach at the same time, so as to sink and destroy the boats which had been moored round the rocks.

The blow was a terrible one, and was quite unexpected by the Senousists. Not only were they taken in the rear, but all means of escape would be cut off if their vessels were knocked to pieces by the guns of the “Ferrato.” The assailants hesitated in the breach that the militia were defending so obstinately. Already more than 500 had met their deaths, while the besieged had lost but few.

The leader of the expedition saw that he must immediately retreat toward the sea, or expose his companions to certain and complete destruction. In vain Sarcany demanded that they might continue the attack on the town. The order was given to return to the shore; and the Senousists drew off as if they would be killed to the last man, were the orders given them to die.

But it was necessary to give these pirates a lesson they would never forget.

“Forward! my friends! forward!” shouted the doctor.

And, under the orders of Pierre and Luigi, a hundred of the militia threw themselves on to the fugitives as they retreated to the shore. Between the fire from the “Ferrato” and the fire from the batteries the Senousists had to give way. Their ranks broke in disorder and they ran in a crowd to the seven or eight vessels that still were left to them.

Pierre and Luigi amid the confusion endeavored above all things to take one man prisoner. That man was Sarcany. But they wished to have him alive, and it was only by a miracle that they escaped the revolver shots the scoundrel fired at them.

It seemed, however, that fate would again withdraw him from their hands.

Sarcany and the leader of the Senousists, followed by a dozen of their companions, had managed to regain a small polacca, which they had cast off and were preparing to get under way. The “Ferrato” was too far off for them to signal her to pursue, and it looked as though she would escape.

At the moment Cape Matifou saw a field-gun dismounted from its carriage and thrown on the beach.

To huri himself on the still loaded gun, to lift it, with superhuman force on to one of the rocks, to steady it by the trunnions, and in a voice of thunder to shout, “Come here, Pescade! Here!” was the work of a moment.

Pescade heard Matifou’s shout and saw what he had done; instantly he understood, ran up, pointed the gun at the polacca, and fired.

The shot went clear through the hull. The recoil hardly shook the living gun-carriage. The leader of the Senousists and his companions were pitched into the water and for the most part drowned. Sarcany was struggling with the surf when Luigi threw himself into the sea.

A minute afterward Sarcany was safe in the huge hands of Cape Matifou.

The victory was complete. Of the two thousand assailants who had landed on the island only a few hundred escaped to the Cyrenaic to tell the story of the disaster.

Antekirtta would, it could be hoped, for many a year be free from another attack from pirates.

CHAPTER XXVII.

JUSTICE.

Count Mathias Sandorf had paid his debt of gratitude to Maria and Luigi Ferrato, Mme. Bathory, Pierre, and Sava were at last reunited. After the reward came the punishment.

For some days following the defeat of the Senousists the colonists were actively employed in repairing damages. With the exception of a few trifling scars Pierre, Luigi, Point Pescade, and Cape Matifou — that is to say, all those who had been most intimately connected with the events of this drama — were safe and sound. That they had not spared themselves, however, needs no affirmation.

Great, therefore, was the rejoicing when they met together in the Stadthaus with Sava Sandorf, Maria Ferrato, Mme. Bathory, and her old servant Borik. After the funeral of those who had fallen in battle the little colony resumed its happy existence. Its future would be free from trouble. The defeat of the Senousists had been overwhelming, and Sarcany, who had persuaded them to undertake this campaign against Antekirtta, would no longer be with them to fan the flame of hatred and vengeance.

The doctor proposed completing his system of defense without delay. Not only would Artenak be promptly rendered secure from a sudden surprise, but the island itself would nowhere afford a landing-place. And it was intended to invite thither a few more colonists, to whom the fertility of the soil would prove an attraction and a guarantee of well-being.

Meanwhile no further obstacle existed to the marriage of Pierre and Sava. The ceremony had been fixed for the 9th of December; and it would take place on that date. And so Point Pescade was particularly busy with the preparations that had been interrupted by the invasion of the pirates from the Cyrenaic.

And now without delay the fate of Sarcany, Toronthal, and Carpena was to be decided.

On the 6th of December, two days after the retreat of the Senousists, the doctor ordered them to be brought to the Stadthaus. The prisoners were unaware of each other’s presence on the island, and for the first time found themselves together, when, under guard of a detachment of militia, they came before the tribunal of Artenak, presided over by the chief magistrate of Antekirtta.

Carpena appeared uneasy; but having lost nothing of his sneakish look, he merely threw furtive glances to the right and left of him, and dared not lift his eyes to his judges.

Toronthal seemed quite cast down, and bowed his head, and instinctively avoided the touch of his old accomplice.

Sarcany had only one feeling — he was furious at having fallen into the hands of this Dr. Antekirtt.

Luigi advanced toward the judges, and began by addressing the Spaniard.

“Carpena,” said he, “I am Luigi Ferrato, the son of the fisherman at Rovigno, whom you informed against and sent to prison at Stein, where he died.”

Carpena drew himself up for an instant. A paroxysm of anger sent the blood to his eyes. Then it was Maria whom he had recognized in the lanes of the

Manderaggio, and it was her brother Luigi who thus accused him.

Pierre then advanced, and at first pointing to the banker, he said:

“Silas Toronthal, I am Pierre Bathory, the son of Stephen Bathory, the Hungarian patriot, whom you, with your accomplice Sarcany, most shamefully betrayed to the Austrian police at Trieste, and sent to death!”

Then to Sarcany he said:

“I am Pierre Bathory, whom you tried to assassinate in the road at Ragusa. I am the intended husband of Sava, the daughter of Count Mathias Sandorf, whom you stole fifteen years ago from the Castle of Artenak!”

Toronthal was struck as by a crowbar, when he recognized Pierre Bathory, who he thought was dead.

Sarcany stood with crossed arms, and except for a slight trembling of his eyelids, retained his impudent immobility.

Neither Toronthal nor Sarcany said a word in reply. And what could they say to their victim, who seemed to have risen from the tomb to accuse them?

But it was quite another thing when Dr. Antekirtt rose in his turn, and said in a grave voice:

“And I, I am the companion of Ladislas Zathmar and Stephen Bathory, whom your treachery caused to be shot in the donjon of Pisino! I am the father of Sava, whom you stole to get possession of her fortune! I am Count Mathias Sandorf!”

This time the effect of the declaration was such that the knees of Silas Toronthal bent to the ground, while Sarcany crouched down as if he would sink into himself.

Then the three accused were examined one after the other. Their crimes they could not deny, and for their crimes no pardon was possible. The chief magistrate reminded Sarcany that the attack on the island, undertaken in his own personal interest, had made many victims whose blood cried out for vengeance. Then having given the accused full liberty to reply, he gave sentence conformably to the right given him by this regularly constituted jurisdiction.

“Silas Toronthal, Sarcany, and Carpena, you have caused the deaths of Stephen Bathory, Ladislas Zathmar, and Andrea Ferrato! You are sentenced to death!”

“Whenever you like!” replied Sarcany, whose impudence again asserted itself.

“Pardon!” cried Carpena.

Toronthal had not the strength to speak.

The three were taken away to the casemates and there kept under guard.

How were these scoundrels to die? Were they to be shot in some corner of the island? That would be to defile the soil of Antekirtta with the blood of traitors! And it was decided that the execution should take place at Kencraf.

That evening one of the “Electrics,” commanded by Luigi Ferrato, took the prisoners on board and bore them off to the island, where they were to wait till sunrise for the firing-party.

Sarcany, Toronthal, and Carpena saw that their time had come; and, when they had been landed, Sarcany went up to Luigi, and asked him:

“Is it to be this evening?”

Luigi made no reply. The three doomed men were left there all alone, and night had fallen when the “Electric” returned to Antekirtta.

The island was now free from the presence of the traitors. That they could escape from Kencraf, which was twenty miles away from the mainland, was impossible.

“Before to-morrow,” said Point Pescade, “they will have eaten each other!”

“Porrao!” said Cape Matifou in disgust.

The night passed at the Stadthaus. Count Sandorf had not a moment’s repose. Locked in his room, he did not leave it until four o’clock in the morning, when he descended to the hall to meet Pierre and Luigi, who were immediately summoned.

A file of militia was waiting in the court-yard of the Stadthaus under orders to embark for Kencraf.

“Pierre Bathory, Luigi Ferrato,” said Count Sandorf, “have these traitors been justly condemned to die?”

“Yes, they deserve it,” answered Pierre.

“Yes,” replied Luigi, “and the scoundrels deserve no mercy.”

“Then let justice be done, and may God give the pardon that man can not — ”

He had scarcely finished speaking when a fearful explosion shook the Stadthaus, and the whole of the island as if an earthquake had taken place.

Count Sandorf and his companions rushed out and the whole population in terror came streaming into the streets of Artenak.

An immense sheaf of flame, with enormous masses of rock and showers of stones, was blazing to a prodigious height toward the sky. Then the masses fell back round the islet, raining huge waves in the sea, and a thick cloud remained suspended in space.

Not a trace was left of the islet of Kencraf nor of the three men whom the explosion had annihilated.

What then had happened?

It will not have been forgotten that the island had been mined in preparation for the landing of the Senousists, and that in case the submarine cable which united it to Antekirtta were put out of action, certain electric batteries had been buried in the ground, so that the wires had only to be pressed by the feet to be brought in contact and fire the fougasses of panclastile.

What had happened was this. By chance one of the doomed men had trodden on these wires. And hence the complete and instantaneous destruction of the islet.

“Heaven has spared us the horrors of an execution!” said Count Sandorf.

* * * * *

Three days afterward the marriage of Pierre and Sava was duly celebrated at the church of Artenak. On that occasion Dr. Antekirtt signed his real name of Mathias Sandorf; which he would never again lay down, now justice had been done.

A few words will suffice to finish our story.

Three weeks afterward Sava Bathory was recognized as the heiress of the Sandorf property. The letter from Mme. Toronthal and a declaration obtained from the banker, in which the circumstances and the object of her being stolen were duly set forth, proved sufficient to establish her identity. As Sava was not yet eighteen all that remained of the Carpathian estates in Transylvania came back to her.

Count Sandorf himself could, if he had so chosen, have entered into possession of this property under an amnesty which had been issued in favor of political prisoners. But if he returned to public life as Mathias Sandorf he could not remain chief of the great family of Antekirtta. And he wished to pass his life among those who loved him.

The little colony, thanks to his renewed efforts, began to flourish exceedingly. In less than a year it had doubled its population. Scientists and inventors, invited thither by Count Sandorf, had come to make good use of discoveries that would have remained barren without his advice, and the wealth of which he was the master. And so Antekirtta would soon become the most important place in the Syrtic Sea, and with the accomplishment of its defensive system its security would become absolute.

Of Mme. Bathory, Maria and Luigi Ferrato, and of Pierre and Sava, we need say no more; who does not feel that their lives were happy? Nor need we say more about Point Pescade and Matifou, who were now, perhaps, the most famous colonists of Antekirtta.

If they regretted anything it was that they had no more occasion to display their devotion to him to whom they owed their happy existence.

Count Sandorf had accomplished his task, and had it not been for the remembrance of his two companions, Stephen Bathory and Ladislas Zathmar, he would have been as happy as a generous man can be on this earth when he is doing good around him.

In the whole Mediterranean, in all the other seas of the globe — even in the Fortunate Islands — we may seek in vain for an island whose prosperity rivals that of Antekirtta!

And when Cape Matifou, in the exuberance of his good fortune, thought fit to say — ”Do you think we deserve to be so happy?” Point Pescade replied —

“No, my Cape! I don’t! But what can you do? Shall we resign?”

ROBUR THE CONQUEROR

Anonymous translation, 1887

This novel was first published in 1886. The narrative begins with strange lights and sounds reported in the skies all over the world. The events are capped by the mysterious appearance of black flags with gold suns atop tall historic landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty in New York, the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris.

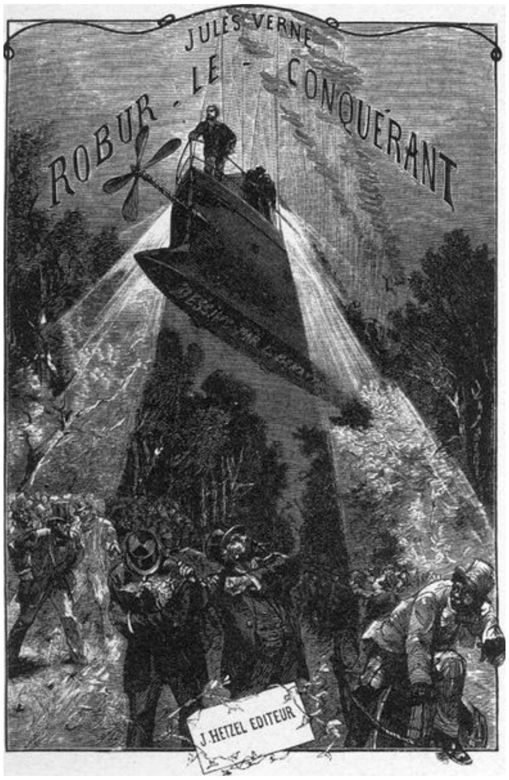
JULES VERNE
ROBUR - LE - CONQUÉRANT
J. HETZEL EDITEUR

The original frontispiece

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CHAPTER I

MYSTERIOUS SOUNDS

BANG! Bang!

The pistol shots were almost simultaneous. A cow peacefully grazing fifty yards away received one of the bullets in her back. She had nothing to do with the quarrel all the same.

Neither of the adversaries was hit.

Who were these two gentlemen? We do not know, although this would be an excellent opportunity to hand down their names to posterity. All we can say is that the elder was an Englishman and the younger an American, and both of them were old enough to know better.

So far as recording in what locality the inoffensive ruminant had just tasted her last tuft of herbage, nothing can be easier. It was on the left bank of Niagara, not far from the suspension bridge which joins the American to the Canadian bank three miles from the falls.

The Englishman stepped up to the American.

“I contend, nevertheless, that it was ‘Rule Britannia!’”

“And I say it was ‘Yankee Doodle!’” replied the young American.

The dispute was about to begin again when one of the seconds — doubtless in the interests of the milk trade — interposed.

“Suppose we say it was ‘Rule Doodle’ and ‘Yankee Britannia’ and adjourn to breakfast?”

This compromise between the national airs of Great Britain and the United States was adopted to the general satisfaction. The Americans and Englishmen walked up the left bank of the Niagara on their way to Goat Island, the neutral ground between the falls. Let us leave them in the presence of the boiled eggs and traditional ham, and floods enough of tea to make the cataract jealous, and trouble ourselves no more about them. It is extremely unlikely that we shall again meet with them in this story.

Which was right; the Englishman or the American? It is not easy to say. Anyhow the duel shows how great was the excitement, not only in the new but also in the old world, with regard to an inexplicable phenomenon which for a month or more had driven everybody to distraction.

Never had the sky been so much looked at since the appearance of man on the terrestrial globe. The night before an aerial trumpet had blared its brazen notes through space immediately over that part of Canada between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. Some people had heard those notes as “Yankee Doodle,” others had heard them as “Rule Britannia,” and hence the quarrel between the Anglo-Saxons, which ended with the breakfast on Goat Island. Perhaps it was neither one nor the other of these patriotic tunes, but what was undoubted by all was that these extraordinary sounds had seemed to descend from the sky to the earth.

What could it be? Was it some exuberant aeronaut rejoicing on that sonorous instrument of which the Renommée makes such obstreperous use?

No! There was no balloon and there were no aeronauts. Some strange phenomenon had occurred in the higher zones of the atmosphere, a phenomenon of which neither the nature nor the cause could be explained. Today it appeared over America; forty-eight hours afterwards it was over Europe; a week later it was in Asia over the Celestial Empire.

Hence in every country of the world — empire, kingdom, or republic — there was anxiety which it was important to allay. If you hear in your house strange and inexplicable noises, do you not at once endeavor to discover the cause? And if your search is in vain, do you not leave your house and take up your quarters in another? But in this case the house was the terrestrial globe! There are no means of leaving that house for the moon or Mars, or Venus, or Jupiter, or any other planet of the solar system. And so of necessity we have to find out what it is that takes place, not in the infinite void, but within the atmospherical zones. In fact, if there is no air there is no noise, and as there was a noise — that famous trumpet, to wit — the phenomenon must occur in the air, the density of which invariably diminishes, and which does not extend for more than six miles round our spheroid.

Naturally the newspapers took up the question in their thousands, and treated it in every form, throwing on it both light and darkness, recording many things about it true or false, alarming and tranquillizing their readers — as the sale required — and almost driving ordinary people mad. At one blow party politics dropped unheeded — and the affairs of the world went on none the worse for it.

But what could this thing be? There was not an observatory that was not applied to. If an observatory could not give a satisfactory answer what was the use of observatories? If astronomers, who doubled and tripled the stars a hundred thousand million miles away, could not explain a phenomenon occurring only a few miles off, what was the use of astronomers?

The observatory at Paris was very guarded in what it said. In the mathematical section they had not thought the statement worth noticing; in the meridional section they knew nothing about it; in the physical observatory they had not come across it; in the geodetic section they had had no observation; in the meteorological section there had been no record; in the calculating room they had had nothing to deal with. At any rate this confession was a frank one, and the same frankness characterized the replies from the observatory of Montsouris and the magnetic station in the park of St. Maur. The same respect for the truth distinguished the Bureau des Longitudes.

The provinces were slightly more affirmative. Perhaps in the night of the fifth and the morning of the sixth of May there had appeared a flash of light of electrical origin which lasted about twenty seconds. At the Pic du Midi this light appeared between nine and ten in the evening. At the Meteorological Observatory on the Puy de Dome the light had been observed between one and two o’clock in the morning; at Mont Ventoux in Provence it had been seen between two and three o’clock; at Nice it had been noticed between three and four o’clock; while at the Semnoz Alps between Annecy, Le Bourget, and Le Léman, it had been detected just as the zenith was paling with the dawn.

Now it evidently would not do to disregard these observations altogether. There could be no doubt that a light had been observed at different places, in succession, at intervals, during some hours. Hence, whether it had been produced from many centers in the terrestrial atmosphere, or from one center, it was plain that the light must have traveled at a speed of over one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

In the United Kingdom there was much perplexity. The observatories were not in agreement. Greenwich would not consent to the proposition of Oxford. They were agreed on one point, however, and that was: “It was nothing at all!”

But, said one, “It was an optical illusion!” While the other contended that, “It was an acoustical illusion!” And so they disputed. Something, however, was, it will be seen, common to both “It was an illusion.”

Between the observatory of Berlin and the observatory of Vienna the discussion threatened to end in international complications; but Russia, in the person of the director of the observatory at Pulkowa, showed that both were right. It all depended on the point of view from which they attacked the phenomenon, which, though impossible in theory, was possible in practice.

In Switzerland, at the observatory of Sautis in the canton of Appenzell, at the Righi, at the Gäbriss, in the passes of the St. Gothard, at the St. Bernard, at the Julier, at the Simplon, at Zurich, at Somblick in the Tyrolean Alps, there was a very strong disinclination to say anything about what nobody could prove — and that was nothing but reasonable.

But in Italy, at the meteorological stations on Vesuvius, on Etna in the old Casa Inglesi, at Monte Cavo, the observers made no hesitation in admitting the materiality of the phenomenon, particularly as they had seen it by day in the form of a small cloud of vapor, and by night in that of a shooting star. But of what it was they knew nothing.

Scientists began at last to tire of the mystery, while they continued to disagree about it, and even to frighten the lowly and the ignorant, who, thanks to one of the wisest laws of nature, have formed, form, and will form the immense majority of the world’s inhabitants. Astronomers and meteorologists would soon have dropped the subject altogether had not, on the night of the 26th and 27th, the observatory of Kautokeino at Finmark, in Norway, and during the night of the 28th and 29th that of Isfjord at Spitzbergen — Norwegian one and Swedish the other — found themselves agreed in recording that in the center of an aurora borealis there had appeared a sort of huge bird, an aerial monster, whose structure they were unable to determine, but who, there was no doubt, was showering off from his body certain corpuscles which exploded like bombs.

In Europe not a doubt was thrown on this observation of the stations in Finmark and Spitzbergen. But what appeared the most phenomenal about it was that the Swedes and Norwegians could find themselves in agreement on any subject whatever.

There was a laugh at the asserted discovery in all the observatories of South America, in Brazil, Peru, and La Plata, and in those of Australia at Sydney, Adelaide, and Melbourne; and Australian laughter is very catching.

To sum up, only one chief of a meteorological station ventured on a decided answer to this question, notwithstanding the sarcasms that his solution provoked. This was a Chinaman, the director of the observatory at Zi-Ka-Wey which rises in the center of a vast plateau less than thirty miles from the sea, having an immense horizon and wonderfully pure atmosphere. “It is possible,” said he, “that the object was an aviform apparatus — a flying machine!”

What nonsense!

But if the controversy was keen in the old world, we can imagine what it was like in that portion of the new of which the United States occupy so vast an area.

A Yankee, we know, does not waste time on the road. He takes the street that leads him straight to his end. And the observatories of the American Federation did not hesitate to do their best. If they did not hurl their objectives at each other’s heads, it was because they would have had to put them back just when they most wanted to use them. In this much-disputed question the observatories of Washington in the District of Columbia, and Cambridge in Massachusetts, found themselves opposed by those of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, and Ann Arbor in Michigan. The subject of their dispute was not the nature of the body observed, but the precise moment of its observation. All of them claimed to have seen it the same night, the same hour, the same minute, the same second, although the trajectory of the mysterious voyager took it but a moderate height above the horizon. Now from Massachusetts to Michigan, from New Hampshire to Columbia, the distance is too great for this double observation, made at the same moment, to be considered possible.

Dudley at Albany, in the state of New York, and West Point, the military academy, showed that their colleagues were wrong by an elaborate calculation of the right ascension and declination of the aforesaid body.

But later on it was discovered that the observers had been deceived in the body, and that what they had seen was an aerolite. This aerolite could not be the object in question, for how could an aerolite blow a trumpet?

It was in vain that they tried to get rid of this trumpet as an optical illusion. The ears were no more deceived than the eyes. Something had assuredly been seen, and something had assuredly been heard. In the night of the 12th and 13th of May — a very dark night — the observers at Yale College, in the Sheffield Science School, had been able to take down a few bars of a musical phrase in D major, common time, which gave note for note, rhythm for rhythm, the chorus of the Chant du Départ.

“Good,” said the Yankee wags. “There is a French band well up in the air.”

“But to joke is not to answer.” Thus said the observatory at Boston, founded by the Atlantic Iron Works Society, whose opinions in matters of astronomy and meteorology began to have much weight in the world of science.

Then there intervened the observatory at Cincinnati, founded in 1870, on Mount Lookout, thanks to the generosity of Mr. Kilgour, and known for its micrometrical measurements of double stars. Its director declared with the utmost good faith that there had certainly been something, that a traveling body had shown itself at very short periods at different points in the atmosphere, but what were the nature of this body, its dimensions, its speed, and its trajectory, it was impossible to say.

It was then a journal whose publicity is immense — the “New York Herald” — received the anonymous contribution hereunder.

“There will be in the recollection of most people the rivalry which existed a few years ago between the two heirs of the Begum of Ragginahra, the French doctor Sarrasin, the city of Frankville, and the German engineer Schultze, in the city of Steeltown, both in the south of Oregon in the United States.

“It will not have been forgotten that, with the object of destroying Frankville, Herr Schultze launched a formidable engine, intended to beat down the town and annihilate it at a single blow.

“Still less will it be forgotten that this engine, whose initial velocity as it left the mouth of the monster cannon had been erroneously calculated, had flown off at a speed exceeding by sixteen times that of ordinary projectiles — or about four hundred and fifty miles an hour — that it did not fall to the ground, and that it passed into an aerolitic stage, so as to circle for ever round our globe.

“Why should not this be the body in question?”

Very ingenious, Mr. Correspondent on the “New York Herald!” but how about the trumpet? There was no trumpet in Herr Schulze’s projectile!

So all the explanations explained nothing, and all the observers had observed in vain. There remained only the suggestion offered by the director of Zi-Ka-Wey. But the opinion of a Chinaman!

The discussion continued, and there was no sign of agreement. Then came a short period of rest. Some days elapsed without any object, aerolite or otherwise, being described, and without any trumpet notes being heard in the atmosphere. The body then had fallen on some part of the globe where it had been difficult to trace it; in the sea, perhaps. Had it sunk in the depths of the Atlantic, the Pacific, or the Indian Ocean? What was to be said in this matter?

But then, between the 2nd and 9th of June, there came a new series of facts which could not possibly be explained by the unaided existence of a cosmic phenomenon.

In a week the Hamburgers at the top of St. Michael’s Tower, the Turks on the highest minaret of St. Sophia, the Rouennais at the end of the metal spire of their cathedral, the Strasburgers at the summit of their minister, the

Americans on the head of the Liberty statue at the entrance of the Hudson and on the Bunker Hill monument at Boston, the Chinese at the spike of the temple of the Four Hundred Genii at Canton, the Hindus on the sixteenth terrace of the pyramid of the temple at Tanjore, the San Pietrini at the cross of St. Peter's at Rome, the English at the cross of St. Paul's in London, the Egyptians at the apex of the Great Pyramid of Ghizeh, the Parisians at the lighting conductor of the iron tower of the Exposition of 1889, a thousand feet high, all of them beheld a flag floating from some one of these inaccessible points.

And the flag was black, dotted with stars, and it bore a golden sun in its center.

CHAPTER II

AGREEMENT IMPOSSIBLE

“And the first who says the contrary — ”

“Indeed! But we will say the contrary so long as there is a place to say it in!”

“And in spite of your threats — ”

“Mind what you are saying, Bat Fynn!”

“Mind what you are saying, Uncle Prudent!”

“I maintain that the screw ought to be behind!”

“And so do we! And so do we!” replied half a hundred voices confounded in one.

“No! It ought to be in front!” shouted Phil Evans.

“In front!” roared fifty other voices, with a vigor in no whit less remarkable.

“We shall never agree!”

“Never! Never!”

“Then what is the use of a dispute?”

“It is not a dispute! It is a discussion!”

One would not have thought so to listen to the taunts, objurgations, and vociferations which filled the lecture room for a good quarter of an hour.

The room was one of the largest in the Weldon Institute, the well-known club in Walnut Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U. S. A. The evening before there had been an election of a lamplighter, occasioning many public manifestations, noisy meetings, and even interchanges of blows, resulting in an effervescence which had not yet subsided, and which would account for some of the excitement just exhibited by the members of the Weldon Institute. For this was merely a meeting of balloonists, discussing the burning question of the direction of balloons.

In this great saloon there were struggling, pushing, gesticulating, shouting, arguing, disputing, a hundred balloonists, all with their hats on, under the authority of a president, assisted by a secretary and treasurer. They were not engineers by profession, but simply amateurs of all that appertained to aerostatics, and they were amateurs in a fury, and especially foes of those who would oppose to aerostats “apparatuses heavier than the air,” flying machines, aerial ships, or what not. That these people might one day discover the method of guiding balloons is possible. There could be no doubt that their president had considerable difficulty in guiding them.

This president, well known in Philadelphia, was the famous Uncle Prudent, Prudent being his family name. There is nothing surprising in America in the qualificative uncle, for you can there be uncle without having either nephew or niece. There they speak of uncle as in other places they speak of father, though the father may have had no children.

Uncle Prudent was a personage of consideration, and in spite of his name was well known for his audacity. He was very rich, and that is no drawback even in the United States; and how could it be otherwise when he owned the greater part of the shares in Niagara Falls? A society of engineers had just been founded at Buffalo for working the cataract. It seemed to be an excellent speculation. The seven thousand five hundred cubic meters that pass over Niagara in a second would produce seven millions of horsepower. This enormous power, distributed amongst all the workshops within a radius of three hundred miles, would return an annual income of three hundred million dollars, of which the greater part would find its way into the pocket of Uncle Prudent. He was a bachelor, he lived quietly, and for his only servant had his valet Frycollin, who was hardly worthy of being the servant to so audacious a master.

Uncle Prudent was rich, and therefore he had friends, as was natural; but he also had enemies, although he was president of the club — among others all those who envied his position. Amongst his bitterest foes we may mention the secretary of the Weldon Institute.

This was Phil Evans, who was also very rich, being the manager of the Wheelton Watch Company, an important manufactory, which makes every day five hundred movements equal in every respect to the best Swiss workmanship. Phil Evans would have passed for one of the happiest men in the world, and even in the United States, if it had not been for Uncle Prudent. Like him he was in his forty-sixth year; like him of invariable health; like him of undoubted boldness. They were two men made to understand each other thoroughly, but they did not, for both were of extreme violence of character. Uncle Prudent was furiously hot; Phil Evans was abnormally cool.

And why had not Phil Evans been elected president of the club? The votes were exactly divided between Uncle Prudent and him. Twenty times there had been a scrutiny, and twenty times the majority had not declared for either one or the other. The position was embarrassing, and it might have lasted for the lifetime of the candidates.

One of the members of the club then proposed a way out of the difficulty. This was Jem Chip, the treasurer of the Weldon Institute. Chip was a confirmed vegetarian, a proscriber of all animal nourishment, of all fermented liquors, half a Mussulman, half a Brahman. On this occasion Jem Chip was supported by another member of the club, William T. Forbes, the manager of a large factory where they made glucose by treating rags with sulphuric acid. A man of good standing was this William T. Forbes, the father of two charming girls — Miss Dorothy, called Doll, and Miss Martha, called Mat, who gave the tone to the best society in Philadelphia.

It followed, then, on the proposition of Jem Chip, supported by William T. Forbes and others, that it was decided to elect the president "on the center point."

This mode of election can be applied in all cases when it is desired to elect the most worthy; and a number of Americans of high intelligence are already thinking of employing it in the nomination of the President of the Republic of the United States.

On two boards of perfect whiteness a black line is traced. The length of each of these lines is mathematically the same, for they have been determined with as much accuracy as the base of the first triangle in a trigonometrical survey. That done, the two boards were erected on the same day in the center of the conference room, and the two candidates, each armed with a fine needle, marched towards the board that had fallen to his lot. The man who planted his needle nearest the center of the line would be proclaimed President of the Weldon Institute.

The operation must be done at once — no guide marks or trial shots allowed; nothing but sureness of eye. The man must have a compass in his eye, as the saying goes; that was all.

Uncle Prudent stuck in his needle at the same moment as Phil Evans did his. Then there began the measurement to discover which of the two competitors had most nearly approached the center.

Wonderful! Such had been the precision of the shots that the measures gave no appreciable difference. If they were not exactly in the mathematical center of the line, the distance between the needles was so small as to be invisible to the naked eye.

The meeting was much embarrassed.

Fortunately one of the members, Truck Milnor, insisted that the measurements should be remade by means of a rule graduated by the micrometrical machine of M. Perreaux, which can divide a millimeter into fifteen-hundredths of a millimeter with a diamond splinter, was brought to bear on the lines; and on reading the divisions through a microscope the following were the results: Uncle Prudent had approached the center within less than six fifteenth-hundredths of a millimeter. Phil Evans was within nine fifteen-hundredths.

And that is why Phil Evans was only secretary of the Weldon Institute, whereas Uncle Prudent was president. A difference of three fifteen-hundredths of a millimeter! And on account of it Phil Evans vowed against Uncle Prudent one of those hatreds which are none the less fierce for being latent.

CHAPTER III

A VISITOR IS ANNOUNCED

The many experiments made during this last quarter of the nineteenth century have given considerable impetus to the question of guidable balloons. The cars furnished with propellers attached in 1852 to the aerostats of the elongated form introduced by Henry Giffard, the machines of Dupuy de Lome in 1872, of the Tissandier brothers in 1883, and of Captain Krebs and Renard in 1884, yielded many important results. But if these machines, moving in a medium heavier than themselves, maneuvering under the propulsion of a screw, working at an angle to the direction of the wind, and even against the wind, to return to their point of departure, had been really “guidable,” they had only succeeded under very favorable conditions. In large, covered halls their success was perfect. In a calm atmosphere they did very well. In a light wind of five or six yards a second they still moved. But nothing practical had been obtained. Against a miller’s wind — nine yards a second — the machines had remained almost stationary. Against a fresh breeze — eleven yards a second — they would have advanced backwards. In a storm — twenty-seven to thirty-three yards a second — they would have been blown about like a feather. In a hurricane — sixty yards a second — they would have run the risk of being dashed to pieces. And in one of those cyclones which exceed a hundred yards a second not a fragment of them would have been left. It remained, then, even after the striking experiments of Captains Krebs and Renard, that though guidable aerostats had gained a little speed, they could not be kept going in a moderate breeze. Hence the impossibility of making practical use of this mode of aerial locomotion.

With regards to the means employed to give the aerostat its motion a great deal of progress had been made. For the steam engines of Henry Giffard, and the muscular force of Dupuy de Lome, electric motors had gradually been substituted. The batteries of bichromate of potassium of the Tissandier brothers had given a speed of four yards a second. The dynamo-electric machines of Captain Krebs and Renard had developed a force of twelve horsepower and yielded a speed of six and a half yards per second.

With regard to this motor, engineers and electricians had been approaching more and more to that desideratum which is known as a steam horse in a watch case. Gradually the results of the pile of which Captains Krebs and Renard had kept the secret had been surpassed, and aeronauts had become able to avail themselves of motors whose lightness increased at the same time as their power.

In this there was much to encourage those who believed in the utilization of guidable balloons. But yet how many good people there are who refuse to admit the possibility of such a thing! If the aerostat finds support in the air it belongs to the medium in which it moves; under such conditions, how can its mass, which offers so much resistance to the currents of the atmosphere, make its way against the wind?

In this struggle of the inventors after a light and powerful motor, the Americans had most nearly attained what they sought. A dynamo-electric apparatus, in which a new pile was employed the composition of which was still a mystery, had been bought from its inventor, a Boston chemist up to then unknown. Calculations made with the greatest care, diagrams drawn with the utmost exactitude, showed that by means of this apparatus driving a screw of given dimensions a displacement could be obtained of from twenty to twenty-two yards a second.

Now this was magnificent!

“And it is not dear,” said Uncle Prudent, as he handed to the inventor in return for his formal receipt the last installment of the hundred thousand paper dollars he had paid for his invention.

Immediately the Weldon Institute set to work. When there comes along a project of practical utility the money leaps nimbly enough from American pockets. The funds flowed in even without its being necessary to form a syndicate. Three hundred thousand dollars came into the club’s account at the first appeal. The work began under the superintendence of the most celebrated aeronaut of the United States, Harry W. Tinder, immortalized by three of his ascents out of a thousand, one in which he rose to a height of twelve thousand yards, higher than Gay Lussac, Coxwell, Sivet, Crocé-Spinelli, Tissandier, Glaisher; another in which he had crossed America from New York to San Francisco, exceeding by many hundred leagues the journeys of Nadar, Godard, and others, to say nothing of that of John Wise, who accomplished eleven hundred and fifty miles from St. Louis to Jefferson county; the third, which ended in a frightful fall from fifteen hundred feet at the cost of a slight sprain in the right thumb, while the less fortunate Pilâtre de Rozier fell only seven hundred feet, and yet killed himself on the spot!

At the time this story begins the Weldon Institute had got their work well in hand. In the Turner yard at Philadelphia there reposed an enormous aerostat, whose strength had been tried by highly compressed air. It well merited the name of the monster balloon.

How large was Nadar’s Géant? Six thousand cubic meters. How large was John Wise’s balloon? Twenty thousand cubic meters. How large was the Giffard balloon at the 1878 Exhibition? Twenty-five thousand cubic meters.

Compare these three aerostats with the aerial machine of the Weldon Institute, whose volume amounted to forty thousand cubic meters, and you will understand why Uncle Prudent and his colleagues were so justifiably proud of it.

This balloon not being destined for the exploration of the higher strata of the atmosphere, was not called the Excelsior, a name which is rather too much held in honor among the citizens of America. No! It was called, simply, the “Go-Ahead,” and all it had to do was to justify its name by going ahead obediently to the wishes of its commander.

The dynamo-electric machine, according to the patent purchased by the Weldon Institute, was nearly ready. In less than six weeks the “Go-Ahead” would start for its first cruise through space.

But, as we have seen, all the mechanical difficulties had not been overcome. Many evenings had been devoted to discussing, not the form of its screw nor its dimensions, but whether it ought to be put behind, as the Tissandier brothers had done, or before as Captains Krebs and Renard had done. It is unnecessary to add that the partisans of the two systems had almost come to blows. The group of “Beforists” were equaled in number by the group of “Behindists.” Uncle Prudent, who ought to have given the casting vote — Uncle Prudent, brought up doubtless in the school of Professor Buridan — could not bring himself to decide.

Hence the impossibility of getting the screw into place. The dispute might last for some time, unless the government interfered. But in the United States the government meddles with private affairs as little as it possibly can. And it is right.

Things were in this state at this meeting on the 13th of June, which threatened to end in a riot — insults exchanged, fisticuffs succeeding the insults, cane thrashings succeeding the fisticuffs, revolver shots succeeding the cane thrashings — when at thirty-seven minutes past eight there occurred a diversion.

The porter of the Weldon Institute coolly and calmly, like a policeman amid the storm of the meeting, approached the presidential desk. On it he placed a card. He awaited the orders that Uncle Prudent found it convenient to give.

Uncle Prudent turned on the steam whistle, which did duty for the presidential bell, for even the Kremlin clock would have struck in vain! But the tumult slackened not.

Then the president removed his hat. Thanks to this extreme measure a semi-silence was obtained.

“A communication!” said Uncle Prudent, after taking a huge pinch from the snuff-box which never left him.

“Speak up!” answered eighty-nine voices, accidentally in agreement on this one point.

“A stranger, my dear colleagues, asks to be admitted to the meeting.”

“Never!” replied every voice.

“He desires to prove to us, it would appear,” continued Uncle Prudent, “that to believe in guiding balloons is to believe in the absurdest of Utopias!”

“Let him in! Let him in!”

“What is the name of this singular personage?” asked secretary Phil Evans.

“Robur,” replied Uncle Prudent.

“Robur! Robur! Robur!” yelled the assembly. And the welcome accorded so quickly to the curious name was chiefly due to the Weldon Institute hoping to vent its exasperation on the head of him who bore it!

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH A NEW CHARACTER APPEARS

“Citizens of the United States! My name is Robur. I am worthy of the name! I am forty years old, although I look but thirty, and I have a constitution of iron, a healthy vigor that nothing can shake, a muscular strength that few can equal, and a digestion that would be thought first class even in an ostrich!”

They were listening! Yes! The riot was quelled at once by the totally unexpected fashion of the speech. Was this fellow a madman or a hoaxer? Whoever he was, he kept his audience in hand. There was not a whisper in the meeting in which but a few minutes ago the storm was in full fury.

And Robur looked the man he said he was. Of middle height and geometric breadth, his figure was a regular trapezium with the greatest of its parallel sides formed by the line of his shoulders. On this line attached by a robust neck there rose an enormous spheroidal head. The head of what animal did it resemble from the point of view of passional analogy? The head of a bull; but a bull with an intelligent face. Eyes which at the least opposition would glow like coals of fire; and above them a permanent contraction of the superciliary muscle, an invariable sign of extreme energy. Short hair, slightly woolly, with metallic reflections; large chest rising and falling like a smith’s bellows; arms, hands, legs, feet, all worthy of the trunk. No mustaches, no whiskers, but a large American goatee, revealing the attachments of the jaw whose masseter muscles were evidently of formidable strength. It has been calculated — what has not been calculated? — that the pressure of the jaw of an ordinary crocodile can reach four hundred atmospheres, while that of a hound can only amount to one hundred. From this the following curious formula has been deduced: If a kilogram of dog produces eight kilograms of masseteric force, a kilogram of crocodile could produce twelve. Now, a kilogram of, the aforesaid Robur would not produce less than ten, so that he came between the dog and the crocodile.

From what country did this remarkable specimen come? It was difficult to say. One thing was noticeable, and that was that he expressed himself fluently in English without a trace of the drawling twang that distinguishes the Yankees of New England.

He continued: “And now, honorable citizens, for my mental faculties. You see before you an engineer whose nerves are in no way inferior to his muscles. I have no fear of anything or anybody. I have a strength of will that has never had to yield. When I have decided on a thing, all America, all the world, may strive in vain to keep me from it. When I have an idea, I allow no one to share it, and I do not permit any contradiction. I insist on these details, honorable citizens, because it is necessary you should quite understand me. Perhaps you think I am talking too much about myself? It does not matter if you do! And now consider a little before you interrupt me, as I have come to tell you something that you may not be particularly pleased to hear.”

A sound as of the surf on the beach began to rise along the first row of seats — a sign that the sea would not be long in getting stormy again.

“Speak, stranger!” said Uncle Prudent, who had some difficulty in restraining himself.

And Robur spoke as follows, without troubling himself any more about his audience.

“Yes! I know it well! After a century of experiments that have led to nothing, and trials giving no results, there still exist ill-balanced minds who believe in guiding balloons. They imagine that a motor of some sort, electric or otherwise, might be applied to their pretentious skin bags which are at the mercy of every current in the atmosphere. They persuade themselves that they can be masters of an aerostat as they can be masters of a ship on the surface of the sea. Because a few inventors in calm or nearly calm weather have succeeded in working an angle with the wind, or even beating to windward in a gentle breeze, they think that the steering of aerial apparatus lighter than the air is a practical matter. Well, now, look here; You hundred, who believe in the realization of your dreams, are throwing your thousands of dollars not into water but into space! You are fighting the impossible!”

Strange as it was that at this affirmation the members of the Weldon Institute did not move. Had they become as deaf as they were patient? Or were they reserving themselves to see how far this audacious contradictor would dare to go?

Robur continued: “What? A balloon! When to obtain the raising of a couple of pounds you require a cubic yard of gas. A balloon pretending to resist the wind by aid of its mechanism, when the pressure of a light breeze on a vessel’s sails is not less than that of four hundred horsepower; when in the accident at the Tay Bridge you saw the storm produce a pressure of eight and a half hundredweight on a square yard. A balloon, when on such a system nature has never constructed anything flying, whether furnished with wings like birds, or membranes like certain fish, or certain mammalia — ”

“Mammalia?” exclaimed one of the members.

“Yes! Mammalia! The bat, which flies, if I am not mistaken! Is the gentleman unaware that this flyer is a mammal? Did he ever see an omelette made of bat’s eggs?”

The interrupter reserved himself for future interruption, and Robur resumed: “But does that mean that man is to give up the conquest of the air, and the transformation of the domestic and political manners of the old world, by the use of this admirable means of locomotion? By no means. As he has become master of the seas with the ship, by the oar, the sail, the wheel and the screw, so shall he become master of atmospherical space by apparatus heavier than the air — for it must be heavier to be stronger than the air!”

And then the assembly exploded. What a broadside of yells escaped from all these mouths, aimed at Robur like the muzzles of so many guns! Was not this hurling a declaration of war into the very camp of the balloonists? Was not this a stirring up of strife between ‘the lighter’ and ‘the heavier’ than air?

Robur did not even frown. With folded arms he waited bravely till silence was obtained.

By a gesture Uncle Prudent ordered the firing to cease.

“Yes,” continued Robur, “the future is for the flying machine. The air affords a solid fulcrum. If you will give a column of air an ascensional movement of forty-five meters a second, a man can support himself on the top of it if the soles of his boots have a superficies of only the eighth of a square meter. And if the speed be increased to ninety meters, he can walk on it with naked feet. Or if, by means of a screw, you drive a mass of air at this speed, you get the same result.”

What Robur said had been said before by all the partisans of aviation, whose work slowly but surely is leading on to the solution of the problem. To Ponton d’Amécourt, La Landelle, Nadar, De Luzy, De Louvrié, Liais, Beleguir, Moreau, the brothers Richard, Babinet, Jobert, Du Temple, Salives, Penaud, De Villeneuve, Gauchot and Tatin, Michael Loup, Edison, Planavergne, and so many others, belongs the honor of having brought forward ideas of such simplicity. Abandoned and resumed times without number, they are sure, some day to triumph. To the enemies of aviation, who urge that the bird only sustains himself by warming the air he strikes, their answer is ready. Have they not proved that an eagle weighing five kilograms would have to fill fifty cubic meters with his warm fluid merely to sustain himself in space?

This is what Robur demonstrated with undeniable logic amid the uproar that arose on all sides. And in conclusion these are the words he hurled in the faces of the balloonists: “With your aerostats you can do nothing — you will arrive at nothing — you dare do nothing! The boldest of your aeronauts, John Wise, although he has made an aerial voyage of twelve hundred miles above the American continent, has had to give up his project of crossing the Atlantic! And you have not advanced one step — not one step — towards your end.”

“Sir,” said the president, who in vain endeavored to keep himself cool, “you forget what was said by our immortal Franklin at the first appearance of the fire balloon, ‘It is but a child, but it will grow!’ It was but a child, and it has grown.”

“No, Mr. President, it has not grown! It has got fatter — and this is not the same thing!”

This was a direct attack on the Weldon Institute, which had decreed, helped, and paid for the making of a monster balloon. And so propositions of the following kind began to fly about the room: “Turn him out!” “Throw him off the platform!” “Prove that he is heavier than the air!”

But these were only words, not means to an end.

Robur remained impassible, and continued: “There is no progress for your aerostats, my citizen balloonists; progress is for flying machines. The bird flies, and he is not a balloon, he is a piece of mechanism!”

“Yes, he flies!” exclaimed the fiery Bat T. Fynn; “but he flies against all the laws of mechanics.”

“Indeed!” said Robur, shrugging his shoulders, and resuming, “Since we have begun the study of the flight of large and small birds one simple idea has prevailed — to imitate nature, which never makes mistakes. Between the albatross, which gives hardly ten beats of the wing per minute, between the pelican, which gives seventy — ”

“Seventy-one,” said the voice of a scoffer.

“And the bee, which gives one hundred and ninety-two per second — ”

“One hundred and ninety-three!” said the facetious individual.

“And, the common house fly, which gives three hundred and thirty — ”

“And a half!”

“And the mosquito, which gives millions — ”

“No, milliards!”

But Robur, the interrupted, interrupted not his demonstration. “Between these different rates — ” he continued.

“There is a difference,” said a voice.

“There is a possibility of finding a practical solution. When De Lucy showed that the stag beetle, an insect weighing only two grammes, could lift a weight of four hundred grammes, or two hundred times its own weight, the problem of aviation was solved. Besides, it has been shown that the wing surface decreases in proportion to the increase of the size and weight of the animal. Hence we can look forward to such contrivances — ”

“Which would never fly!” said secretary Phil Evans.

“Which have flown, and which will fly,” said Robur, without being in the least disconcerted, “and which we can call streophores, helicopters, orthopters — or, in imitation of the word ‘nef,’ which comes from ‘navis,’ call them from ‘avis,’ ‘efs,’ — by means of which man will become the master of space. The helix — ”

“Ah, the helix!” replied Phil Evans. “But the bird has no helix; that we know!”

“So,” said Robur; “but Penaud has shown that in reality the bird makes a helix, and its flight is helicopteral. And the motor of the future is the screw — ”

“From such a maladee Saint Helix keep us free!” sung out one of the members, who had accidentally hit upon the air from Herold’s “Zampa.”

And they all took up the chorus: “From such a maladee Saint Helix keep us free!” with such intonations and variations as would have made the French composer groan in his grave.

As the last notes died away in a frightful discord Uncle Prudent took advantage of the momentary calm to say, “Stranger, up to now, we let you speak without interruption.” It seemed that for the president of the Weldon Institute shouts, yells, and catcalls were not interruptions, but only an exchange of arguments.

“But I may remind you, all the same, that the theory of aviation is condemned beforehand, and rejected by the majority of American and foreign engineers. It is a system which was the cause of the death of the Flying Saracen at Constantinople, of the monk Volador at Lisbon, of De Leturn in 1852, of De Groof in 1864, besides the victims I forget since the mythological Icarus — ”

“A system,” replied Robur, “no more to be condemned than that whose martyrology contains the names of Pilâtre de Rozier at Calais, of Blanchard at Paris, of Donaldson and Grimwood in Lake Michigan, of Sivel and of Crocé-Spinelli, and others whom it takes good care, to forget.”

This was a counter-thrust with a vengeance.

“Besides,” continued Robur, “With your balloons as good as you can make them you will never obtain any speed worth mentioning. It would take you ten years to go round the world — and a flying machine could do it in a week!”

Here arose a new tempest of protests and denials which lasted for three long minutes. And then Phil Evans look up the word.

“Mr. Aviator,” he said “you who talk so much of the benefits of aviation, have you ever aviated?”

“I have.”

“And made the conquest of the air?”

“Not unlikely.”

“Hooray for Robur the Conqueror!” shouted an ironical voice.

“Well, yes! Robur the Conqueror! I accept the name and I will bear it, for I have a right to it!”

“We beg to doubt it!” said Jem Chip.

“Gentlemen,” said Robur, and his brows knit, “when I have just seriously stated a serious thing I do not permit anyone to reply to me by a flat denial, and I shall be glad to know the name of the interrupter.”

“My name is Chip, and I am a vegetarian.”

“Citizen Chip,” said Robur, “I knew that vegetarians had longer alimentary canals than other men — a good foot longer at the least. That is quite long enough; and so do not compel me to make you any longer by beginning at your ears and — ”

“Throw him out.”

“Into the street with him!”

“Lynch him!”

“Helix him!”

The rage of the balloonists burst forth at last. They rushed at the platform. Robur disappeared amid a sheaf of hands that were thrown about as if caught in a storm. In vain the steam whistle screamed its fanfares on to the assembly. Philadelphia might well think that a fire was devouring one of its quarters and that all the waters of the Schuyllkill could not put it out.

Suddenly there was a recoil in the tumult. Robur had put his hands into his pockets and now held them out at the front ranks of the infuriated mob.

In each hand was one of those American institutions known as revolvers which the mere pressure of the fingers is enough to fire — pocket mitrailleuses in fact.

And taking advantage not only of the recoil of his assailants but also of the silence which accompanied it.

“Decidedly,” said he, “it was not Amerigo that discovered the New World, it was Cabot! You are not Americans, citizen balloonists! You are only Cabo — ”

Four or five shots cracked out, fired into space. They hurt nobody. Amid the smoke, the engineer vanished; and when it had thinned away there was no trace of him. Robur the Conqueror had flown, as if some apparatus of aviation had borne him into the air.

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER DISAPPEARANCE

This was not the first occasion on which, at the end of their stormy discussions, the members of the Weldon Institute had filled Walnut Street and its neighborhood with their tumult. Several times had the inhabitants complained of the noisy way in which the proceedings ended, and more than once had the policemen had to interfere to clear the thoroughfare for the passersby, who for the most part were supremely indifferent on the question of aerial navigation. But never before had the tumult attained such proportions, never had the complaints been better founded, never had the intervention of the police been more necessary.

But there was some excuse for the members of the Weldon Institute. They had been attacked in their own house. To these enthusiasts for “lighter than air” a no less enthusiast for “heavier than air” had said things absolutely abhorrent. And at the moment they were about to treat him as he deserved, he had disappeared.

So they cried aloud for vengeance. To leave such insults unpunished was impossible to all with American blood in their veins. Had not the sons of Amerigo been called the sons of Cabot? Was not that an insult as unpardonable as it happened to be just — historically?

The members of the club in several groups rushed down Walnut Street, then into the adjoining streets, and then all over the neighborhood. They woke up the householders; they compelled them to search their houses, prepared to indemnify them later on for the outrage on their privacy. Vain were all their trouble and searching. Robur was nowhere to be found; there was no trace of him. He might have gone off in the “Go-Ahead,” the balloon of the

Institute, for all they could tell. After an hour’s hunt the members had to give in and separate, not before they had agreed to extend their search over the whole territory of the twin Americas that form the new continent.

By eleven o’clock quiet had been restored in the neighborhood of Walnut Street. Philadelphia was able to sink again into that sound sleep which is the privilege of non-manufacturing towns. The different members of the club parted to seek their respective houses. To mention the most distinguished amongst them, William T. Forbes sought his large sugar establishment, where Miss Doll and Miss Mat had prepared for him his evening tea, sweetened with his own glucose. Truck Milnor took the road to his factory in the distant suburb, where the engines worked day and night. Treasurer Jim Chip, publicly accused of possessing an alimentary canal twelve inches longer than that of other men, returned to the vegetable soup that was waiting for him.

Two of the most important balloonists — two only — did not seem to think of returning so soon to their domicile. They availed themselves of the opportunity to discuss the question with more than usual acrimony. These were the irreconcilables, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute.

At the door of the club the valet Frycollin waited for Uncle Prudent, his master, and at last he went after him, though he cared but little for the subject which had set the two colleagues at loggerheads.

It is only an euphemism that the verb “discuss” can be used to express the way in which the duet between the president and secretary was being performed. As a matter of fact they were in full wrangle with an energy born of their old rivalry.

“No, Sir, no,” said Phil Evans. “If I had had the honor of being president of the Weldon Institute, there never, no, never, would have been such a scandal.”

“And what would you have done, if you had had the honor?” demanded Uncle Prudent.

“I would have stopped the insulter before he had opened his mouth.”

“It seems to me it would have been impossible to stop him until he had opened his mouth,” replied Uncle Prudent.

“Not in America, Sir; not in America.”

And exchanging such observations, increasing in bitterness as they went, they walked on through the streets farther and farther from their homes, until they reached a part of the city whence they had to go a long way round to get back.

Frycollin followed, by no means at ease to see his master plunging into such deserted spots. He did not like deserted spots, particularly after midnight. In fact the darkness was profound, and the moon was only a thin crescent just beginning its monthly life. Frycollin kept a lookout to the left and right of him to see if he was followed. And he fancied he could see five or six hulking follows dogging his footsteps. Instinctively he drew nearer to his master, but not for the world would he have dared to break in on the conversation of which the fragments reached him.

In short it so chanced that the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute found themselves on the road to Fairmount Park. In the full heat of their dispute they crossed the Schuyllkill river by the famous iron bridge.

They met only a few belated wayfarers, and pressed on across a wide open tract where the immense prairie was broken every now and then by the patches of thick woodland — which make the park different to any other in the world.

There Frycollin's terror became acute, particularly as he saw the five or six shadows gliding after him across the Schuyllkill bridge. The pupils of his eyes broadened out to the circumference of his iris, and his limbs seemed to diminish as if endowed with the contractility peculiar to the mollusca and certain of the articulate; for Frycollin, the valet, was an egregious coward.

He was a pure South Carolina Negro, with the head of a fool and the carcass of an imbecile. Being only one and twenty, he had never been a slave, not even by birth, but that made no difference to him. Grinning and greedy and idle, and a magnificent poltroon, he had been the servant of Uncle Prudent for about three years. Over and over again had his master threatened to kick him out, but had kept him on for fear of doing worse. With a master ever ready to venture on the most audacious enterprises, Frycollin's cowardice had brought him many arduous trials. But he had some compensation. Very little had been said about his gluttony, and still less about his laziness.

Ah, Valet Frycollin, if you could only have read the future! Why, oh why, Frycollin, did you not remain at Boston with the Sneffels, and not have given them up when they talked of going to Switzerland? Was not that a much more suitable place for you than this of Uncle Prudent's, where danger was daily welcomed?

But here he was, and his master had become used to his faults. He had one advantage, and that was a consideration. Although he was a Negro by birth he did not speak like a Negro, and nothing is so irritating as that hateful jargon in which all the pronouns are possessive and all the verbs infinitive. Let it be understood, then, that Frycollin was a thorough coward.

And now it was midnight, and the pale crescent of the moon began to sink in the west behind the trees in the park. The rays streaming fitfully through the branches made the shadows darker than ever. Frycollin looked around him anxiously. “Brrr!” he said, “There are those fellows there all the time. Positively they are getting nearer! Master Uncle!” he shouted.

It was thus he called the president of the Weldon Institute, and thus did the president desire to be called.

At the moment the dispute of the rivals had reached its maximum, and as they hurled their epithets at each other they walked faster and faster, and drew farther and farther away from the Schuyllkill bridge. They had reached the center of a wide clump of trees, whose summits were just tipped by the parting rays of the moon. Beyond the trees was a very large clearing — an oval field, a complete amphitheater. Not a hillock was there to hinder the gallop of the horses, not a bush to stop the view of the spectators.

And if Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had not been so deep in their dispute, and had used their eyes as they were accustomed to, they would have found the clearing was not in its usual state. Was it a flour mill that had anchored on it during the night? It looked like it, with its wings and sails — motionless and mysterious in the gathering gloom.

But neither the president nor the secretary of the Weldon Institute noticed the strange modification in the landscape of Fairmount Park; and neither did Frycollin. It seemed to him that the thieves were approaching, and preparing for their attack; and he was seized with convulsive fear, paralyzed in his limbs, with every hair he could boast of on the bristle. His terror was extreme. His knees bent under him, but he had just strength enough to exclaim for the last time, “Master Uncle! Master Uncle!”

“What is the matter with you?” asked Uncle Prudent.

Perhaps the disputants would not have been sorry to have relieved their fury at the expense of the unfortunate valet. But they had no time; and neither even had he time to answer.

A whistle was heard. A flash of electric light shot across the clearing.

A signal, doubtless? The moment had come for the deed of violence. In less time that it takes to tell, six men came leaping across from under the trees, two onto Uncle Prudent, two onto Phil Evans, two onto Frycollin — there was no need for the last two, for the Negro was incapable of defending himself. The president and secretary of the Weldon Institute, although taken by surprise, would have resisted.

They had neither time nor strength to do so. In a second they were rendered speechless by a gag, blind by a bandage, thrown down, pinioned and carried bodily off across the clearing. What could they think except that they had fallen into the hands of people who intended to rob them? The people did nothing of the sort, however. They did not even touch Uncle Prudent’s pockets, although, according to his custom, they were full of paper dollars.

Within a minute of the attack, without a word being passed, Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans, and Frycollin felt themselves laid gently down, not on the grass, but on a sort of plank that creaked beneath them. They were laid down side by side.

A door was shut; and the grating of a bolt in a staple told them that they were prisoners.

Then there came a continuous buzzing, a quivering, a frrrr, with the rrr unending.

And that was the only sound that broke the quiet of the night.

Great was the excitement next morning in Philadelphia Very early was it known what had passed at the meeting of the Institute. Everyone knew of the appearance of the mysterious engineer named Robur — Robur the Conqueror — and the tumult among the balloonists, and his inexplicable disappearance. But it was quite another thing when all the town heard that the president and secretary of the club had also disappeared during the night.

Long and keen was the search in the city and neighborhood! Useless! The newspapers of Philadelphia, the newspapers of Pennsylvania, the newspapers of the United States reported the facts and explained them in a hundred ways, not one of which was the right one. Heavy rewards were offered, and placards were pasted up, but all to no purpose. The earth seemed to have opened and bodily swallowed the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRESIDENT AND SECRETARY SUSPEND HOSTILITIES

A bandage over the eyes, a gag in the mouth, a cord round the wrists, a cord round the ankles, unable to see, to speak, or to move, Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans, and Frycollin were anything but pleased with their position. Knowing not who had seized them, nor in what they had been thrown like parcels in a goods wagon, nor where they were, nor what was reserved for them — it was enough to exasperate even the most patient of the ovine race, and we know that the members of the Weldon Institute were not precisely sheep as far as patience went. With his violence of character we can easily imagine how Uncle Prudent felt. One thing was evident, that Phil Evans and he would find it difficult to attend the club next evening.

As to Frycollin, with his eyes shut and his mouth closed, it was impossible for him to think of anything. He was more dead than alive.

For an hour the position of the prisoners remained unchanged. No one came to visit them, or to give them that liberty of movement and speech of which they lay in such need. They were reduced to stifled sighs, to grunts emitted over and under their gags, to everything that betrayed anger kept dumb and fury imprisoned, or rather bound down. Then after many fruitless efforts they remained for some time as though lifeless. Then as the sense of sight was denied them they tried by their sense of hearing to obtain some indication of the nature of this disquieting state of things. But in vain did they seek for any other sound than an interminable and inexplicable f-r-r-r which seemed to envelop them in a quivering atmosphere.

At last something happened. Phil Evans, regaining his coolness, managed to slacken the cord which bound his wrists. Little by little the knot slipped, his fingers slipped over each other, and his hands regained their usual freedom.

A vigorous rubbing restored the circulation. A moment after he had slipped off the bandage which bound his eyes, taken the gag out of his mouth, and cut the cords round his ankles with his knife. An American who has not a bowie-knife in his pocket is no longer an American.

But if Phil Evans had regained the power of moving and speaking, that was all. His eyes were useless to him — at present at any rate. The prison was quite dark, though about six feet above him a feeble gleam of light came in through a kind of loophole.

As may be imagined, Phil Evans did not hesitate to at once set free his rival. A few cuts with the bowie settled the knots which bound him foot and hand.

Immediately Uncle Prudent rose to his knees and snatched away his bandage and gag.

“Thanks,” said he, in stifled voice.

“Phil Evans?”

“Uncle Prudent?”

“Here we are no longer the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute. We are adversaries no more.”

“You are right,” answered Evans. “We are now only two men agreed to avenge ourselves on a third whose attempt deserves severe reprisals. And this third is — ”

“Robur!”

“It is Robur!”

On this point both were absolutely in accord. On this subject there was no fear of dispute.

“And your servant?” said Phil Evans, pointing to Frycollin, who was puffing like a grampus. “We must set him free.”

“Not yet,” said Uncle Prudent. “He would overwhelm us with his jeremiads, and we have something else to do than abuse each other.”

“What is that, Uncle Prudent?”

“To save ourselves if possible.”

“You are right, even if it is impossible.”

“And even if it is impossible.”

There could be no doubt that this kidnapping was due to Robur, for an ordinary thief would have relieved them of their watches, jewelry, and purses, and thrown their bodies into the Schuyllkill with a good gash in their throats instead of throwing them to the bottom of — Of what? That was a serious question, which would have to be answered before attempting an escape with any chance of success.

“Phil Evans,” began Uncle Prudent, “if, when we came away from our meeting, instead of indulging in amenities to which we need not recur, we had kept our eyes more open, this would not have happened. Had we remained in the streets of Philadelphia there would have been none of this.

Evidently Robur foresaw what would happen at the club, and had placed some of his bandits on guard at the door. When we left Walnut Street these fellows must have watched us and followed us, and when we imprudently ventured into Fairmount Park they went in for their little game."

"Agreed," said Evans. "We were wrong not to go straight home."

"It is always wrong not to be right," said Prudent.

Here a long-drawn sigh escaped from the darkest corner of the prison.
"What is that?" asked Evans.

"Nothing! Frycollin is dreaming."

"Between the moment we were seized a few steps out into the clearing and the moment we were thrown in here only two minutes elapsed. It is thus evident that those people did not take us out of Fairmount Park."

"And if they had done so we should have felt we were being moved."

"Undoubtedly; and consequently we must be in some vehicle, perhaps some of those long prairie wagons, or some show-caravan — "

"Evidently! For if we were in a boat moored on the Schuyllkill we should have noticed the movement due to the current — "

"That is so; and as we are still in the clearing, I think that now is the time to get away, and we can return later to settle with this Robur — "

"And make him pay for this attempt on the liberty of two citizens of the United States."

"And he shall pay pretty dearly!"

“But who is this man? Where does he come from? Is he English, or German, or French — ”

“He is a scoundrel, that is enough!” said Uncle Prudent. “Now to work.” And then the two men, with their hands stretched out and their fingers wide apart, began to feel round the walls to find a joint or crack.

Nothing. Nothing; not even at the door. It was closely shut and it was impossible to shoot back the lock. All that could be done was to make a hole, and escape through the hole. It remained to be seen if the knives could cut into the walls.

“But whence comes this never-ending rustling?” asked Evans, who was much impressed at the continuous f-r-r-r.

“The wind, doubtless,” said Uncle Prudent.

“The wind! But I thought the night was quite calm.”

“So it was. But if it isn’t the wind, what can it be?”

Phil Evans got out the best blade of his knife and set to work on the wall near the door. Perhaps he might make a hole which would enable him to open it from the outside should it be only bolted or should the key have been left in the lock. He worked away for some minutes. The only result was to nip up his knife, to snip off its point, and transform what was left of the blade into a saw.

“Doesn’t it cut?” asked Uncle Prudent.

“No.”

“Is the wall made of sheet iron?”

“No; it gives no metallic sound when you hit it.”

“Is it of ironwood?”

“No; it isn’t iron and it isn’t wood.”

“What is it then?”

“Impossible to say. But, anyhow, steel doesn’t touch it.” Uncle Prudent, in a sudden outburst of fury, began to rave and stamp on the sonorous planks, while his hands sought to strangle an imaginary Robur.

“Be calm, Prudent, be calm! You have a try.”

Uncle Prudent had a try, but the bowie-knife could do nothing against a wall which its best blades could not even scratch. The wall seemed to be made of crystal.

So it became evident that all flight was impracticable except through the door, and for a time they must resign themselves to their fate — not a very pleasant thing for the Yankee temperament, and very much to the disgust of these eminently practical men. But this conclusion was not arrived at without many objurgations and loud-sounding phrases hurled at this Robur — who, from what had been seen of him at the Weldon Institute, was not the sort of man to trouble himself much about them.

Suddenly Frycollin began to give unequivocal signs of being unwell. He began to writhe in a most lamentable fashion, either with cramp in his stomach or in his limbs; and Uncle Prudent, thinking it his duty to put an end to these gymnastics, cut the cords that bound him.

He had cause to be sorry for it. Immediately there was poured forth an interminable litany, in which the terrors of fear were mingled with the tortures of hunger. Frycollin was no worse in his brain than in his stomach, and it would have been difficult to decide to which organ the chief cause of the trouble should be assigned.

“Frycollin!” said Uncle Prudent.

“Master Uncle! Master Uncle!” answered the Negro between two of his lugubrious howls.

“It is possible that we are doomed to die of hunger in this prison, but we have made up our minds not to succumb until we have availed ourselves of every means of alimentation to prolong our lives.”

“To eat me?” exclaimed Frycollin.

“As is always done with a Negro under such circumstances! So you had better not make yourself too obvious — ”

“Or you’ll have your bones picked!” said Evans.

And as Frycollin saw he might be used to prolong two existences more precious than his own, he contented himself thenceforth with groaning in quiet.

The time went on and all attempts to force the door or get through the wall proved fruitless. What the wall was made of was impossible to say. It was not metal; it was not wood; it was not stone, And all the cell seemed to be made of the same stuff. When they stamped on the floor it gave a peculiar sound that Uncle Prudent found it difficult to describe; the floor seemed to sound hollow, as if it was not resting directly on the ground of the clearing.

And the inexplicable f-r-r-r-r seemed to sweep along below it. All of which was rather alarming.

“Uncle Prudent,” said Phil Evans.

“Well?”

“Do you think our prison has been moved at all?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Because when we were first caught I distinctly remember the fresh fragrance of the grass and the resinous odor of the park trees. While now, when I take in a good sniff of the air, it seems as though all that had gone.”

“So it has.”

“Why?”

“We cannot say why unless we admit that the prison has moved; and I say again that if the prison had moved, either as a vehicle on the road or a boat on the stream, we should have felt it.”

Here Frycollin gave vent to a long groan, which might have been taken for his last had he not followed it up with several more.

“I expect Robur will soon have us brought before him,” said Phil Evans.

“I hope so,” said Uncle Prudent. “And I shall tell him — ”

“What?”

“That he began by being rude and ended in being unbearable.”

Here Phil Evans noticed that day was beginning to break. A gleam, still faint, filtered through the narrow window opposite the door. It ought thus to be about four o’clock in the morning for it is at that hour in the month of June in this latitude that the horizon of Philadelphia is tinged by the first rays of the dawn.

But when Uncle Prudent sounded his repeater — which was a masterpiece from his colleague’s factory — the tiny gong only gave a quarter to three, and the watch had not stopped.

“That is strange!” said Phil Evans. “At a quarter to three it ought still to be night.”

“Perhaps my watch has got slow,” answered Uncle Prudent.

“A watch of the Wheelton Watch Company!” exclaimed Phil Evans.

Whatever might be the reason, there was no doubt that the day was breaking. Gradually the window became white in the deep darkness of the cell. However, if the dawn appeared sooner than the fortieth parallel permitted, it did not advance with the rapidity peculiar to lower latitudes. This was another observation — of Uncle Prudent’s — a new inexplicable phenomenon.

“Couldn’t we get up to the window and see where we are?”

“We might,” said Uncle Prudent. “Frycollin, get up!”

The Negro arose.

“Put your back against the wall,” continued Prudent, “and you, Evans, get on his shoulders while I buttress him up.”

“Right!” said Evans.

An instant afterwards his knees were on Frycollin’s shoulders, and his eyes were level with the window. The window was not of lenticular glass like those on shipboard, but was a simple flat pane. It was small, and Phil Evans found his range of view was much limited.

“Break the glass,” said Prudent, “and perhaps you will be able to see better.”

Phil Evans gave it a sharp knock with the handle of his bowie-knife. It gave back a silvery sound, but it did not break.

Another and more violent blow. The same result.

“It is unbreakable glass!” said Evans.

It appeared as though the pane was made of glass toughened on the Siemens system — as after several blows it remained intact.

The light had now increased, and Phil Evans could see for some distance within the radius allowed by the frame.

“What do you see?” asked Uncle Prudent.

“Nothing.”

“What? Not any trees?”

“No.”

“Not even the top branches?”

“No.”

“Then we are not in the clearing?”

“Neither in the clearing nor in the park.”

“Don’t you see any roofs of houses or monuments?” said Prudent, whose disappointment and anger were increasing rapidly.

“No.”

“What! Not a flagstaff, nor a church tower, nor a chimney?”

“Nothing but space.”

As he uttered the words the door opened. A man appeared on the threshold. It was Robur.

“Honorable balloonists” he said, in a serious voice, “you are now free to go and come as you like.”

“Free!” exclaimed Uncle Prudent.

“Yes — within the limits of the “Albatross!”

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans rushed out of their prison. And what did they see?

Four thousand feet below them the face of a country they sought in vain to recognize.

CHAPTER VII

ON BOARD THE ALBATROSS

“When will man cease to crawl in the depths to live in the azure and quiet of the sky?”

To this question of Camille Flammarion’s the answer is easy. It will be when the progress of mechanics has enabled us to solve the problem of aviation. And in a few years — as we can foresee — a more practical utilization of electricity will do much towards that solution.

In 1783, before the Montgolfier brothers had built their fire-balloon, and Charles, the physician, had devised his first aerostat, a few adventurous spirits had dreamt of the conquest of space by mechanical means. The first inventors did not think of apparatus lighter than air, for that the science of their time did not allow them to imagine. It was to contrivances heavier than air, to flying machines in imitation of the birds, that they trusted to realize aerial locomotion.

This was exactly what had been done by that madman Icarus, the son of Daedalus, whose wings, fixed together with wax, had melted as they approached the sun.

But without going back to mythological times, without dwelling on Archytas of Tarentum, we find, in the works of Dante of Perugia, of Leonardo da Vinci and Guidotti, the idea of machines made to move through the air. Two centuries and a half afterwards inventors began to multiply. In 1742 the Marquis de Bacqueville designed a system of wings, tried it over the Seine, and fell and broke his arm. In 1768 Paucton conceived the idea of an apparatus with two screws, suspensive and propulsive. In 1781 Meerwein, the architect of the Prince of Baden, built an orthopteric machine, and protested against the tendency of the aerostats which had just been invented. In 1784 Launoy and Bienvenu had maneuvered a helicopter worked by springs. In 1808 there were the attempts at flight by the Austrian Jacques Degen. In 1810 came the pamphlet by Denian of Nantes, in which the principles of “heavier than air” are laid down. From 1811 to 1840 came the inventions and researches of Derblinger, Vigual, Sarti, Dubochet, and Cagniard de Latour. In 1842 we have the Englishman Henson, with his system of inclined planes and screws worked by steam. In 1845 came Cossus and his ascensional screws. In 1847 came Camille Vert and his helicopter made of birds’ wings. In 1852 came Letur with his system of guidable parachutes, whose trial cost him his life; and in the same year came Michel Loup with his plan of gliding through the air on four revolving wings. In 1853 came Béléguic and his aeroplane with the traction screws, Vaussin-Chardannes with his guidable kite, and George Cauley with his flying machines driven by gas. From 1854 to 1863 appeared Joseph Pline with several patents for aerial systems. Bréant, Carlingford, Le Bris, Du Temple, Bright, whose ascensional screws were left-handed; Smythies, Panafieu, Crosnier, &c. At length, in 1863, thanks to the efforts of Nadar, a society of “heavier than air” was founded in Paris. There the inventors could experiment with the machines, of which many were patented. Ponton d’Amécourt and his steam helicopter, La Landelle and his system of combining screws with inclined planes and parachutes, Louvrié and his aeroscape, Esterno and his mechanical bird, Groof and his apparatus with wings worked by levers. The impetus was given, inventors invented, calculators calculated all that could render aerial locomotion practicable. Bourcart, Le Bris, Kaufmann, Smyth, Stringfellow, Prigent, Danjard, Pomés and De la Pauze, Moy, Pénaud, Jobert, Haureau de Villeneuve, Achenbach, Garapon, Duchesne, Danduran, Pariesel, Dieuaide, Melkiseff, Forlanini, Bearey, Tatin, Dandrieux, Edison, some with wings or screws, others with inclined planes, imagined, created, constructed, perfected, their flying machines, ready to do their work, once there came to be applied to thereby some inventor a motor of adequate power and excessive lightness.

This list may be a little long, but that will be forgiven, for it is necessary to give the various steps in the ladder of aerial locomotion, on the top of which appeared Robur the Conqueror. Without these attempts, these experiments of his predecessors, how could the inquirer have conceived so perfect an apparatus? And though he had but contempt for those who obstinately worked away in the direction of balloons, he held in high esteem all those partisans of "heavier than air," English, American, Italian, Austrian, French — and particularly French — whose work had been perfected by him, and led him to design and then to build this flying engine known as the "Albatross," which he was guiding through the currents of the atmosphere.

"The pigeon flies!" had exclaimed one of the most persistent adepts at aviation.

"They will crowd the air as they crowd the earth!" said one of his most excited partisans.

"From the locomotive to the aeromotive!" shouted the noisiest of all, who had turned on the trumpet of publicity to awaken the Old and New Worlds.

Nothing, in fact, is better established, by experiment and calculation, than that the air is highly resistant. A circumference of only a yard in diameter in the shape of a parachute can not only impede descent in air, but can render it isochronous. That is a fact.

It is equally well known that when the speed is great the work of the weight varies in almost inverse ratio to the square of the speed, and therefore becomes almost insignificant.

It is also known that as the weight of a flying animal increases, the less is the proportional increase in the surface beaten by the wings in order to sustain it, although the motion of the wings becomes slower.

A flying machine must therefore be constructed to take advantage of these natural laws, to imitate the bird, “that admirable type of aerial locomotion,” according to Dr. Marcy, of the Institute of France.

In short the contrivances likely to solve the problem are of three kinds: —

1. Helicopters or spiralifers, which are simply screws with vertical axes.

2. Ornithopters, machines which endeavour to reproduce the natural flight of birds.

3. Aeroplanes, which are merely inclined planes like kites, but towed or driven by screws.

Each of these systems has had and still has it partisans obstinately resolved to give way in not the slightest particular. However, Robur, for many reasons, had rejected the two first.

The ornithopter, or mechanical bird, offers certain advantages, no doubt. That the work and experiments of M. Renard in 1884 have sufficiently proved. But, as has been said, it is not necessary to copy Nature servilely. Locomotives are not copied from the hare, nor are ships copied from the fish. To the first we have put wheels which are not legs; to the second we have put screws which are not fins. And they do not do so badly. Besides, what is this mechanical movement in the flight of birds, whose action is so complex? Has not Doctor Marcy suspected that the feathers open during the return of the wings so as to let the air through them? And is not that rather a difficult operation for an artificial machine?

On the other hand, aeroplanes have given many good results. Screws opposing a slanting plane to the bed of air will produce an ascensional movement, and the models experimented on have shown that the disposable weight, that is to say the weight it is possible to deal with as distinct from that of the apparatus, increases with the square of the speed. Herein the aeroplane has the advantage over the aerostat even when the aerostat is furnished with the means of locomotion.

Nevertheless Robur had thought that the simpler his contrivance the better. And the screws — the Saint Helices that had been thrown in his teeth at the Weldon Institute — had sufficed for all the needs of his flying machine. One series could hold it suspended in the air, the other could drive it along under conditions that were marvelously adapted for speed and safety.

If the ornithopter — striking like the wings of a bird — raised itself by beating the air, the helicopter raised itself by striking the air obliquely, with the fins of the screw as it mounted on an inclined plane. These fins, or arms, are in reality wings, but wings disposed as a helix instead of as a paddle wheel. The helix advances in the direction of its axis. Is the axis vertical? Then it moves vertically. Is the axis horizontal? Then it moves horizontally.

The whole of Robur’s flying apparatus depended on these two movements, as will be seen from the following detailed description, which can be divided under three heads — the platform, the engines of suspension and propulsion, and the machinery.

Platform. — This was a framework a hundred feet long and twelve wide, a ship's deck in fact, with a projecting prow. Beneath was a hull solidly built, enclosing the engines, stores, and provisions of all sorts, including the watertanks. Round the deck a few light uprights supported a wire trellis that did duty for bulwarks. On the deck were three houses, whose compartments were used as cabins for the crew, or as machine rooms. In the center house was the machine which drove the suspensory helices, in that forward was the machine that drove the bow screw, in that aft was the machine that drove the stern screw. In the bow were the cook's galley and the crew's quarters; in the stern were several cabins, including that of the engineer, the saloon, and above them all a glass house in which stood the helmsman, who steered the vessel by means of a powerful rudder. All these cabins were lighted by port-holes filled with toughened glass, which has ten times the resistance of ordinary glass. Beneath the hull was a system of flexible springs to ease off the concussion when it became advisable to land.

Engines of suspension and propulsion. — Above the deck rose thirty-seven vertical axes, fifteen along each side, and seven, more elevated, in the centre. The "Albatross" might be called a clipper with thirty-seven masts. But these masts instead of sails bore each two horizontal screws, not very large in spread or diameter, but driven at prodigious speed. Each of these axes had its own movement independent of the rest, and each alternate one spun round in a different direction from the others, so as to avoid any tendency to gyration. Hence the screws as they rose on the vertical column of air retained their equilibrium by their horizontal resistance. Consequently the apparatus was furnished with seventy-four suspensory screws, whose three branches were connected by a metallic circle which economized their motive force. In front and behind, mounted on horizontal axes, were two propelling screws, each with four arms. These screws were of much larger diameter than the suspensory ones, but could be worked at quite their speed. In fact, the vessel combined the systems of Cossus, La Landelle, and Ponton d'Amécourt, as perfected by Robur. But it was in the choice and application of his motive force that he could claim to be an inventor.

Machinery. — Robur had not availed himself of the vapor of water or other liquids, nor compressed air and other mechanical motion. He employed electricity, that agent which one day will be the soul of the industrial world. But he required no electro-motor to produce it. All he trusted to was piles and accumulators. What were the elements of these piles, and what were the acids he used, Robur only knew. And the construction of the accumulators was kept equally secret. Of what were their positive and negative plates? None can say. The engineer took good care — and not unreasonably — to keep his secret unpatented. One thing was unmistakable, and that was that the piles were of extraordinary strength; and the accumulators left those of Faure-Sellon-Volckmar very far behind in yielding currents whose ampères ran into figures up to then unknown. Thus there was obtained a power to drive the screws and communicate a suspending and propelling force in excess of all his requirements under any circumstances.

But — it is as well to repeat it — this belonged entirely to Robur. He kept it a close secret. And, if the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute did not happen to discover it, it would probably be lost to humanity.

It need not be shown that the apparatus possessed sufficient stability. Its center of gravity proved that at once. There was no danger of its making alarming angles with the horizontal, still less of its capsizing.

And now for the metal used by Robur in the construction of his aeronef — a name which can be exactly applied to the "Albatross." What was this material, so hard that the bowie-knife of Phil Evans could not scratch it, and Uncle Prudent could not explain its nature? Simply paper!

For some years this fabrication had been making considerable progress. Unsized paper, with the sheets impregnated with dextrin and starch and squeezed in hydraulic presses, will form a material as hard as steel. There are made of it pulleys, rails, and wagon-wheels, much more solid than metal wheels, and far lighter. And it was this lightness and solidity which Robur availed himself of in building his aerial locomotive. Everything — framework, hull, houses, cabins — were made of straw-paper turned hard as metal by compression, and — what was not to be despised in an apparatus flying at great heights — incombustible. The different parts of the engines and the screws were made of gelatinized fiber, which combined in sufficient degree flexibility with resistance. This material could be used in every form. It was insoluble in most gases and liquids, acids or essences, to say nothing of its insulating properties, and it proved most valuable in the electric machinery of the “Albatross.”

Robur, his mate Tom Turner, an engineer and two assistants, two steersman and a cook — eight men all told — formed the crew of the aeronef, and proved ample for all the maneuvers required in aerial navigation. There were arms of the chase and of war; fishing appliances; electric lights; instruments of observation, compasses, and sextants for checking the course, thermometers for studying the temperature, different barometers, some for estimating the heights attained, others for indicating the variations of atmospheric pressure; a storm-glass for forecasting tempests; a small library; a portable printing press; a field-piece mounted on a pivot; breech loading and throwing a three-inch shell; a supply of powder, bullets, dynamite cartridges; a cooking-stove, warmed by currents from the accumulators; a stock of preserves, meats and vegetables sufficient to last for months. Such were the outfit and stores of the aeronef — in addition to the famous trumpet.

There was besides a light india-rubber boat, insubmersible, which could carry eight men on the surface of a river, a lake, or a calm sea.

But were there any parachutes in case of accident? No. Robur did not believe in accidents of that kind. The axes of the screws were independent. The stoppage of a few would not affect the motion of the others; and if only half were working, the “Albatross” could still keep afloat in her natural element.

“And with her,” said Robur to his guests — guests in spite of themselves — ”I am master of the seventh part of the world, larger than Africa, Oceania, Asia, America, and Europe, this aerial Icarian sea, which millions of Icarians will one day people.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE BALLOONISTS REFUSE TO BE CONVINCED

The President of the Weldon Institute was stupefied; his companion was astonished. But neither of them would allow any of their very natural amazement to be visible.

The valet Frycollin did not conceal his terror at finding himself borne through space on such a machine, and he took no pains whatever to hide it.

The suspensory screws were rapidly spinning overhead. Fast as they were going, they would have to triple their speed if the “Albatross” was to ascend to higher zones. The two propellers were running very easily and driving the ship at about eleven knots an hour.

As they leaned over the rail the passengers of the “Albatross” could perceive a long sinuous liquid ribbon which meandered like a mere brook through a varied country amid the gleaming of many lagoons obliquely struck by the rays of the sun. The brook was a river, one of the most important in that district. Along its left bank was a chain of mountains extending out of sight.

“And will you tell us where we are?” asked Uncle Prudent, in a voice tremulous with anger.

“I have nothing to teach you,” answered Robur.

“And will you tell us where we are going?” asked Phil Evans.

“Through space.”

“And how long will that last?”

“Until it ends.”

“Are we going round the world?” asked Phil Evans ironically.

“Further than that,” said Robur.

“And if this voyage does not suit us?” asked Uncle Prudent.

“It will have to suit you.”

That is a foretaste of the nature of the relations that were to obtain between the master of the “Albatross” and his guests, not to say his prisoners. Manifestly he wished to give them time to cool down, to admire the marvelous apparatus which was bearing them through the air, and doubtless to compliment the inventor. And so he went off to the other end of the deck, leaving them to examine the arrangement of the machinery and the management of the ship or to give their whole attention to the landscape which was unrolling beneath them.

“Uncle Prudent,” said Evans, “unless I am mistaken we are flying over Central Canada. That river in the northwest is the St. Lawrence. That town we are leaving behind is Quebec.”

It was indeed the old city of Champlain, whose zinc roofs were shining like reflectors in the sun. The “Albatross” must thus have reached the forty-sixth degree of north latitude, and thus was explained the premature advance of the day with the abnormal prolongation of the dawn.

“Yes,” said Phil Evans, “There is the town in its amphitheater, the hill with its citadel, the Gibraltar of North America. There are the cathedrals. There is the Custom House with its dome surmounted by the British flag!”

Phil Evans had not finished before the Canadian city began to slip into the distance.

The clipper entered a zone of light clouds, which gradually shut off a view of the ground.

Robur, seeing that the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute had directed their attention to the external arrangements of the “Albatross,” walked up to them and said: “Well, gentlemen, do you believe in the possibility of aerial locomotion by machines heavier than air?”

It would have been difficult not to succumb to the evidence. But Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans did not reply.

“You are silent,” continued the engineer. “Doubtless hunger makes you dumb! But if I undertook to carry you through the air, I did not think of feeding you on such a poorly nutritive fluid. Your first breakfast is waiting for you.”

As Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were feeling the pangs of hunger somewhat keenly they did not care to stand upon ceremony. A meal would commit them to nothing; and when Robur put them back on the ground they could resume full liberty of action.

And so they followed into a small dining-room in the aftermost house. There they found a well-laid table at which they could take their meals during the voyage. There were different preserves; and, among other things, was a sort of bread made of equal parts of flour and meat reduced to powder and worked together with a little lard, which boiled in water made excellent soup; and there were rashers of fried ham, and for drink there was tea.

Neither had Frycollin been forgotten. He was taken forward and there found some strong soup made of this bread. In truth he had to be very hungry to eat at all, for his jaws shook with fear, and almost refused to work. “If it was to break! If it was to break!” said the unfortunate Negro. Hence continual faintings. Only think! A fall of over four thousand feet, which would smash him to a jelly!

An hour afterwards Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans appeared on the deck. Robur was no longer there. At the stem the man at the wheel in his glass cage, his eyes fixed on the compass, followed imperturbably without hesitation the route given by the engineer.

As for the rest of the crew, breakfast probably kept them from their posts. An assistant engineer, examining the machinery, went from one house to the other.

If the speed of the ship was great the two colleagues could only estimate it imperfectly, for the “Albatross” had passed through the cloud zone which the sun showed some four thousand feet below.

“I can hardly believe it,” said Phil Evans.

“Don’t believe it!” said Uncle Prudent. And going to the bow they looked out towards the western horizon.

“Another town,” said Phil Evans.

“Do you recognize it?”

“Yes! It seems to me to be Montreal.”

“Montreal? But we only left Quebec two hours ago!”

“That proves that we must be going at a speed of seventy-five miles an hour.”

Such was the speed of the aeronef; and if the passengers were not inconvenienced by it, it was because they were going with the wind. In a calm such speed would have been difficult and the rate would have sunk to that of an express. In a head-wind the speed would have been unbearable.

Phil Evans was not mistaken. Below the “Albatross” appeared Montreal, easily recognizable by the Victoria Bridge, a tubular bridge thrown over the St. Lawrence like the railway viaduct over the Venice lagoon. Soon they could distinguish the town’s wide streets, its huge shops, its palatial banks, its cathedral, recently built on the model of St. Peter’s at Rome, and then Mount Royal, which commands the city and forms a magnificent park.

Luckily Phil Evans had visited the chief towns of Canada, and could recognize them without asking Robur. After Montreal they passed Ottawa, whose falls, seen from above, looked like a vast cauldron in ebullition, throwing off masses of steam with grand effect.

“There is the Parliament House.”

And he pointed out a sort of Nuremburg toy planted on a hill top. This toy with its polychrome architecture resembled the House of Parliament in London much as the Montreal cathedral resembles St. Peter’s at Rome. But that was of no consequence; there could be no doubt it was Ottawa.

Soon the city faded off towards the horizon, and formed but a luminous spot on the ground.

It was almost two hours before Robur appeared. His mate, Tom Turner, accompanied him. He said only three words. These were transmitted to the two assistant engineers in the fore and aft engine-houses. At a sign the helmsman changed the-direction of the “Albatross” a couple of points to the southwest; at the same time Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans felt that a greater speed had been given to the propellers.

In fact, the speed had been doubled, and now surpassed anything that had ever been attained by terrestrial Engines. Torpedo-boats do their twenty-two knots an hour; railway trains do their sixty miles an hour; the ice-boats on the frozen Hudson do their sixty-five miles an hour; a machine built by the Patterson company, with a cogged wheel, has done its eighty miles; and another locomotive between Trenton and Jersey City has done its eighty-four.

But the “Albatross,” at full speed, could do her hundred and twenty miles an hour, or 176 feet per second. This speed is that of the storm which tears up trees by the roots. It is the mean speed of the carrier pigeon, and is only surpassed by the flight of the swallow (220 feet per second) and that of the swift (274 feet per second).

In a word, as Robur had said, the “Albatross,” by using the whole force of her screws, could make the tour of the globe in two hundred hours, or less than eight days.

Is it necessary to say so? The phenomenon whose appearance had so much puzzled the people of both worlds was the aeronef of the engineer. The trumpet which blared its startling fanfares through the air was that of the mate, Tom Turner. The flag planted on the chief monuments of Europe, Asia, America, was the flag of Robur the Conqueror and his “Albatross.”

And if up to then the engineer had taken many precautions against being recognized, if by preference he traveled at night, clearing the way with his electric lights, and during the day vanishing into the zones above the clouds, he seemed now to have no wish to keep his secret hidden. And if he had come to Philadelphia and presented himself at the meeting of the Weldon Institute, was it not that they might share in his prodigious discovery, and convince “ipso facto” the most incredulous? We know how he had been received, and we see what reprisals he had taken on the president and secretary of the club.

Again did Robur approach his prisoners, who affected to be in no way surprised at what they saw, of what had succeeded in spite of them. Evidently beneath the cranium of these two Anglo-Saxon heads there was a thick crust of obstinacy, which would not be easy to remove.

On his part, Robur did not seem to notice anything particular, and coolly continued the conversation which he had begun two hours before.

“Gentlemen,” said he, “you ask yourselves doubtless if this apparatus, so marvelously adapted for aerial locomotion, is susceptible of receiving greater speed. It is not worth while to conquer space if we cannot devour it. I wanted the air to be a solid support to me, and it is. I saw that to struggle against the wind I must be stronger than the wind, and I am. I had no need of sails to drive me, nor oars nor wheels to push me, nor rails to give me a faster road. Air is what I wanted, that was all. Air surrounds me as it surrounds the submarine boat, and in it my propellers act like the screws of a steamer. That is how I solved the problem of aviation. That is what a balloon will never do, nor will any machine that is lighter than air.”

Silence, absolute, on the part of the colleagues, which did not for a moment disconcert the engineer. He contented himself with a half-smile, and continued in his interrogative style, “Perhaps you ask if to this power of the “Albatross” to move horizontally there is added an equal power of vertical movement — in a word, if, when, we visit the higher zones of the atmosphere, we can compete with an aerostat? Well, I should not advise you to enter the “Go-Ahead” against her!”

The two colleagues shrugged their shoulders. That was probably what the engineer was waiting for.

Robur made a sign. The propelling screws immediately stopped, and after running for a mile the “Albatross” pulled up motionless.

At a second gesture from Robur the suspensory helices revolved at a speed that can only be compared to that of a siren in acoustical experiments. Their f-r-r-r-r rose nearly an octave in the scale of sound, diminishing gradually in intensity as the air became more rarified, and the machine rose vertically, like a lark singing his song in space.

“Master! Master!” shouted Frycollin. “See that it doesn’t break!”

A smile of disdain was Robur’s only reply. In a few minutes the “Albatross” had attained the height of 8,700 feet, and extended the range of vision by seventy miles, the barometer having fallen 480 millimeters.

Then the “Albatross” descended. The diminution of the pressure in high altitudes leads to the diminution of oxygen in the air, and consequently in the blood. This has been the cause of several serious accidents which have happened to aeronauts, and Robur saw no reason to run any risk.

The “Albatross” thus returned to the height she seemed to prefer, and her propellers beginning again, drove her off to the southwest.

“Now, sirs, if that is what you wanted you can reply.” Then, leaning over the rail, he remained absorbed in contemplation.

When he raised his head the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute stood by his side.

“Engineer Robur,” said Uncle Prudent, in vain endeavoring to control himself, “we have nothing to ask about what you seem to believe, but we wish to ask you a question which we think you would do well to answer.”

“Speak.”

“By what right did you attack us in Philadelphia in Fairmount Park? By what right did you shut us up in that prison? By what right have you brought us against our will on board this flying machine?”

“And by what right, Messieurs Balloonists, did you insult and threaten me in your club in such a way that I am astonished I came out of it alive?”

“To ask is not to answer,” said Phil Evans, “and I repeat, by what right?”

“Do you wish to know?”

“If you please.”

“Well, by the right of the strongest!”

“That is cynical.”

“But it is true.”

“And for how long, citizen engineer,” asked Uncle Prudent, who was nearly exploding, “for how long do you intend to exercise that right?”

“How can you?” said Robur, ironically, “how can you ask me such a question when you have only to cast down your eyes to enjoy a spectacle unparalleled in the world?”

The “Albatross” was then sweeping across the immense expanse of Lake Ontario. She had just crossed the country so poetically described by Cooper. Then she followed the southern shore and headed for the celebrated river which pours into it the waters of Lake Erie, breaking them to powder in its cataracts.

In an instant a majestic sound, a roar as of the tempest, mounted towards them and, as if a humid fog had been projected into the air, the atmosphere sensibly freshened. Below were the liquid masses. They seemed like an enormous flowing sheet of crystal amid a thousand rainbows due to refraction as it decomposed the solar rays. The sight was sublime.

Before the falls a foot-bridge, stretching like a thread, united one bank to the other. Three miles below was a suspension-bridge, across which a train was crawling from the Canadian to the American bank.

“The falls of Niagara!” exclaimed Phil Evans. And as the exclamation escaped him, Uncle Prudent was doing all could do to admire nothing of these wonders.

A minute afterwards the “Albatross” had crossed the river which separates the United States from Canada, and was flying over the vast territories of the West.

CHAPTER IX

ACROSS THE PRAIRIE

In one, of the cabins of the after-house Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had found two excellent berths, with clean linen, change of clothes, and traveling-cloaks and rugs. No Atlantic liner could have offered them more comfort. If they did not sleep soundly it was that they did not wish to do so, or rather that their very real anxiety prevented them. In what adventure had they embarked? To what series of experiments had they been invited? How would the business end? And above all, what was Robur going to do with them?

Frycollin, the valet, was quartered forward in a cabin adjoining that of the cook. The neighborhood did not displease him; he liked to rub shoulders with the great in this world. But if he finally went to sleep it was to dream of fall after fall, of projections through space, which made his sleep a horrible nightmare.

However, nothing could be quieter than this journey through the atmosphere, whose currents had grown weaker with the evening. Beyond the rustling of the blades of the screws there was not a sound, except now and then the whistle from some terrestrial locomotive, or the calling of some animal. Strange instinct! These terrestrial beings felt the aeronef glide over them, and uttered cries of terror as it passed. On the morrow, the 14th of June, at five o’clock, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were walking on the deck of the “Albatross.”

Nothing had changed since the evening; there was a lookout forward, and the helmsman was in his glass cage. Why was there a look-out? Was there any chance of collision with another such machine? Certainly not. Robur had not yet found imitators. The chance of encountering an aerostat gliding through the air was too remote to be regarded. In any case it would be all the worse for the aerostat — the earthen pot and the iron pot. The "Albatross" had nothing to fear from the collision.

But what could happen? The aeronef might find herself like a ship on a lee shore if a mountain that could not be outflanked or passed barred the way. These are the reefs of the air, and they have to be avoided as a ship avoids the reefs of the sea. The engineer, it is true, had given the course, and in doing so had taken into account the altitude necessary to clear the summits of the high lands in the district. But as the aeronef was rapidly nearing a mountainous country, it was only prudent to keep a good lookout, in case some slight deviation from the course became necessary.

Looking at the country beneath them, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans noticed a large lake, whose lower southern end the "Albatross" had just reached. They concluded, therefore, that during the night the whole length of Lake Erie had been traversed, and that, as they were going due west, they would soon be over Lake Michigan. "There can be no doubt of it," said Phil Evans, "and that group of roofs on the horizon is Chicago."

He was right. It was indeed the city from which the seventeen railways diverge, the Queen of the West, the vast reservoir into which flow the products of Indiana, Ohio, Wisconsin, Missouri, and all the States which form the western half of the Union.

Uncle Prudent, through an excellent telescope he had found in his cabin, easily recognized the principal buildings. His colleague pointed out to him the churches and public edifices, the numerous "elevators" or mechanical, granaries, and the huge Sherman Hotel, whose windows seemed like a hundred glittering points on each of its faces.

“If that is Chicago,” said Uncle Prudent, “it is obvious that we are going farther west than is convenient for us if we are to return to our starting-place.”

And, in fact, the “Albatross” was traveling in a straight line from the Pennsylvania capital.

But if Uncle Prudent wished to ask Robur to take him eastwards he could not then do so. That morning the engineer did not leave his cabin. Either he was occupied in some work, or else he was asleep, and the two colleagues sat down to breakfast without seeing him.

The speed was the same as that during last evening. The wind being easterly the rate was not interfered with at all, and as the thermometer only falls a degree centigrade for every seventy meters of elevation the temperature was not insupportable. And so, in chatting and thinking and waiting for the engineer, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans walked about beneath the forest of screws, whose gyratory movement gave their arms the appearance of semi-diaphanous disks.

The State of Illinois was left by its northern frontier in less than two hours and a half; and they crossed the Father of Waters, the Mississippi, whose double-decked steam-boats seemed no bigger than canoes. Then the “Albatross” flew over Iowa after having sighted Iowa City about eleven o’clock in the morning.

A few chains of hills, “bluffs” as they are called, curved across the face of the country trending from the south to the northwest, whose moderate height necessitated no rise in the course of the aeronef. Soon the bluffs gave place to the large plains of western Iowa and Nebraska — immense prairies extending all the way to the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Here and there were many rios, affluents or minor affluents of the Missouri. On their banks were towns and villages, growing more scattered as the “Albatross” sped farther west.

Nothing particular happened during this day. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were left entirely to themselves. They hardly noticed Frycollin sprawling at full length in the bow, keeping his eyes shut so that he could see nothing. And they were not attacked by vertigo, as might have been expected. There was no guiding mark, and there was nothing to cause the vertigo, as there would have been on the top of a lofty building. The abyss has no attractive power when it is gazed at from the car of a balloon or deck of an aeronef. It is not an abyss that opens beneath the aeronaut, but an horizon that rises round him on all sides like a cup.

In a couple of hours the “Albatross” was over Omaha, on the Nebraskan frontier — Omaha City, the real head of the Pacific Railway, that long line of rails, four thousand five hundred miles in length, stretching from New York to San Francisco. For a moment they could see the yellow waters of the Missouri, then the town, with its houses of wood and brick in the center of a rich basin, like a buckle in the iron belt which clasps North America round the waist. Doubtless, also, as the passengers in the aeronef could observe all these details, the inhabitants of Omaha noticed the strange machine. Their astonishment at seeing it gliding overhead could be no greater than that of the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute at finding themselves on board.

Anyhow, the journals of the Union would be certain to notice the fact. It would be the explanation of the astonishing phenomenon which the whole world had been wondering over for some time.

In an hour the “Albatross” had left Omaha and crossed the Platte River, whose valley is followed by the Pacific Railway in its route across the prairie. Things looked serious for Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans.

“It is serious, then, this absurd project of taking us to the Antipodes.”

“And whether we like it or not!” exclaimed the other.

“Robur had better take care! I am not the man to stand that sort of thing.”

“Nor am I!” replied Phil Evans. “But be calm, Uncle Prudent, be calm.”

“Be calm!”

“And keep your temper until it is wanted.”

By five o’clock they had crossed the Black Mountains covered with pines and cedars, and the “Albatross” was over the appropriately named Bad Lands of Nebraska — a chaos of ochre-colored hills, of mountainous fragments fallen on the soil and broken in their fall. At a distance these blocks take the most fantastic shapes. Here and there amid this enormous game of knucklebones there could be traced the imaginary ruins of medieval cities with forts and dungeons, pepper-box turrets, and machicolated towers. And in truth these Bad Lands are an immense ossuary where lie bleaching in the sun myriads of fragments of pachyderms, chelonians, and even, some would have us believe, fossil men, overwhelmed by unknown cataclysms ages and ages ago.

When evening came the whole basin of the Platte River had been crossed, and the plain extended to the extreme limits of the horizon, which rose high owing to the altitude of the “Albatross.”

During the night there were no more shrill whistles of locomotives or deeper notes of the river steamers to trouble the quiet of the starry firmament. Long bellowing occasionally reached the aeronef from the herds of buffalo that roamed over the prairie in search of water and pasturage. And when they ceased, the trampling of the grass under their feet produced a dull roaring similar to the rushing of a flood, and very different from the continuous f-r-r-r-r of the screws.

Then from time to time came the howl of a wolf, a fox, a wild cat, or a coyote, the “Canis latrans,” whose name is justified by his sonorous bark.

Occasionally came penetrating odors of mint, and sage, and absinthe, mingled with the more powerful fragrance of the conifers which rose floating through the night air.

At last came a menacing yell, which was not due to the coyote. It was the shout of a Redskin, which no Tenderfoot would confound with the cry of a wild beast.

CHAPTER X

WESTWARD — BUT WHITHER?

The next day, the 15th of June, about five o’clock in the morning, Phil Evans left his cabin. Perhaps he would today have a chance of speaking to Robur? Desirous of knowing why he had not appeared the day before, Evans addressed himself to the mate, Tom Turner.

Tom Turner was an Englishman of about forty-five, broad in the shoulders and short in the legs, a man of iron, with one of those enormous characteristic heads that Hogarth rejoiced in.

“Shall we see Mr. Robur to-day?” asked Phil Evans.

“I don’t know,” said Turner.

“I need not ask if he has gone out.”

“Perhaps he has.”

“And when will he come back?”

“When he has finished his cruise.”

And Tom went into his cabin.

With this reply they had to be contented. Matters did not look promising, particularly as on reference to the compass it appeared that the “Albatross” was still steering southwest.

Great was the contrast between the barren tract of the Bad Lands passed over during the night and the landscape then unrolling beneath them.

The aeronef was now more than six hundred miles from Omaha, and over a country which Phil Evans could not recognize because he had never been there before. A few forts to keep the Indians in order crowned the bluffs with their geometric lines, formed oftener of palisades than walls. There were few villages, and few inhabitants, the country differing widely from the auriferous lands of Colorado many leagues to the south.

In the distance a long line of mountain crests, in great confusion as yet, began to appear. They were the Rocky Mountains.

For the first time that morning Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were sensible of a certain lowness of temperature which was not due to a change in the weather, for the sun shone in superb splendor.

“It is because of the “Albatross” being higher in the air,” said Phil Evans.

In fact the barometer outside the central deck-house had fallen 540 millimeters, thus indicating an elevation of about 10,000 feet above the sea. The aeronef was at this altitude owing to the elevation of the ground. An hour before she had been at a height of 13,000 feet, and behind her were mountains covered with perpetual snow.

There was nothing Uncle Prudent and his companion could remember which would lead them to discover where they were. During the night the “Albatross” had made several stretches north and south at tremendous speed, and that was what had put them out of their reckoning.

After talking over several hypotheses more or less plausible they came to the conclusion that this country encircled with mountains must be the district declared by an Act of Congress in March, 1872, to be the National Park of the United States. A strange region it was. It well merited the name of a park — a park with mountains for hills, with lakes for ponds, with rivers for streamlets, and with geysers of marvelous power instead of fountains.

In a few minutes the “Albatross” glided across the Yellowstone River, leaving Mount Stevenson on the right, and coasting the large lake which bears the name of the stream. Great was the variety on the banks of this basin, ribbed as they were with obsidian and tiny crystals, reflecting the sunlight on their myriad facets. Wonderful was the arrangement of the islands on its surface; magnificent were the blue reflections of the gigantic mirror. And around the lake, one of the highest in the globe, were multitudes of pelicans, swans, gulls and geese, bernicles and divers. In places the steep banks were clothed with green trees, pines and larches, and at the foot of the escarpments there shot upwards innumerable white fumaroles, the vapor escaping from the soil as from an enormous reservoir in which the water is kept in permanent ebullition by subterranean fire.

The cook might have seized the opportunity of securing an ample supply of trout, the only fish the Yellowstone Lake contains in myriads. But the “Albatross” kept on at such a height that there was no chance of indulging in a catch which assuredly would have been miraculous.

In three quarters of an hour the lake was overpassed, and a little farther on the last was seen of the geyser region, which rivals the finest in Iceland. Leaning over the rail, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans watched the liquid columns which leaped up as though to furnish the aeronef with a new element. There were the Fan, with the jets shot forth in rays, the Fortress, which seemed to be defended by waterspouts, the Faithful Friend, with her plume crowned with the rainbows, the Giant, spurting forth a vertical torrent twenty feet round and more than two hundred feet high.

Robur must evidently have been familiar with this incomparable spectacle, unique in the world, for he did not appear on deck. Was it, then, for the sole pleasure of his guests that he had brought the aeronef above the national domain? If so, he came not to receive their thanks. He did not even trouble himself during the daring passage of the Rocky Mountains, which the “Albatross” approached at about seven o’clock.

By increasing the speed of her wings, as a bird rising in its flight, the “Albatross” would clear the highest ridges of the chain, and sink again over Oregon or Utah, But the maneuver was unnecessary. The passes allowed the barrier to be crossed without ascending for the higher ridges. There are many of these canyons, or steep valleys, more or less narrow, through which they could glide, such as Bridger Gap, through which runs the Pacific Railway into the Mormon territory, and others to the north and south of it.

It was through one of these that the “Albatross” headed, after slackening speed so as not to dash against the walls of the canyon. The steersman, with a sureness of hand rendered more effective by the sensitiveness of the rudder, maneuvered his craft as if she were a crack racer in a Royal Victoria match. It was really extraordinary. In spite of all the jealousy of the two enemies of “lighter than air,” they could not help being surprised at the perfection of this engine of aerial locomotion.

In less than two hours and a half they were through the Rockies, and the “Albatross” resumed her former speed of sixty-two miles an hour. She was steering southwest so as to cut across Utah diagonally as she neared the ground. She had even dropped several hundred yards when the sound of a whistle attracted the attention of Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans. It was a train on the Pacific Railway on the road to Salt Lake City.

And then, in obedience to an order secretly given, the “Albatross” dropped still lower so as to chase the train, which was going at full speed. She was immediately sighted. A few heads showed themselves at the doors of the cars. Then numerous passengers crowded the gangways. Some did not hesitate to climb on the roof to get a better view of the flying machine. Cheers came floating up through the air; but no Robur appeared in answer to them.

The “Albatross” continued her descent, slowing her suspensory screws and moderating her speed so as not to leave the train behind. She flew about it like an enormous beetle or a gigantic bird of prey. She headed off, to the right and left, and swept on in front, and hung behind, and proudly displayed her flag with the golden sun, to which the conductor of the train replied by waving the Stars and Stripes.

In vain the prisoners, in their desire to take advantage of the opportunity, endeavored to make themselves known to those below. In vain the president of the Weldon Institute roared forth at the top of his voice, “I am Uncle Prudent of Philadelphia!” And the secretary followed suit with, “I am Phil Evans, his colleague!” Their shouts were lost in the thousand cheers with which the passengers greeted the aeronef.

Three or four of the crew of the “Albatross” had appeared on the deck, and one of them, like sailors when passing a ship less speedy than their own, held out a rope, an ironical way of offering to tow them.

And then the “Albatross” resumed her original speed, and in half an hour the express was out of sight. About one o’clock there appeared a vast disk, which reflected the solar rays as if it were an immense mirror.

“That ought to be the Mormon capital, Salt Lake City,” said Uncle Prudent. And so it was, and the disk was the roof of the Tabernacle, where ten thousand saints can worship at their ease. This vast dome, like a convex mirror, threw off the rays of the sun in all directions.

It vanished like a shadow, and the “Albatross” sped on her way to the southwest with a speed that was not felt, because it surpassed that of the chasing wind. Soon she was in Nevada over the silver regions, which the Sierra separates from the golden lands of California.

“We shall certainly reach San Francisco before night,” said Phil Evans.

“And then?” asked Uncle Prudent.

It was six o’clock precisely when the Sierra Nevada was crossed by the same pass as that taken by the railway. Only a hundred and eighty miles then separated them from San Francisco, the Californian capital.

At the speed the “Albatross” was going she would be over the dome by eight o’clock.

At this moment Robur appeared on deck. The colleagues walked up to him.

“Engineer Robur,” said Uncle Prudent, “we are now on the very confines of America! We think the time has come for this joke to end.”

“I never joke,” said Robur.

He raised his hand. The “Albatross” swiftly dropped towards the ground, and at the same time such speed was given her as to drive the prisoners into their cabin. As soon as the door was shut, Uncle Prudent exclaimed, “I could strangle him!”

“We must try to escape.” said Phil Evans.

“Yes; cost what it may!”

A long murmur greeted their ears. It was the beating of the surf on the seashore. It was the Pacific Ocean!

CHAPTER XI

THE WIDE PACIFIC

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had quite made up their minds to escape. If they had not had to deal with the eight particularly vigorous men who composed the crew of the aeronef they might have tried to succeed by main force. But as they were only two — for Frycollin could only be considered as a quantity of no importance — force was not to be thought of. Hence recourse must be had to strategy as soon as the “Albatross” again took the ground. Such was what Phil Evans endeavored to impress on his irascible colleague, though he was in constant fear of Prudent aggravating matters by some premature outbreak.

In any case the present was not the time to attempt anything of the sort. The aeronef was sweeping along over the North Pacific. On the following morning, that of June 16th, the coast was out of sight. And as the coast curves off from Vancouver Island up to the Aleutians — belonging to that portion of America ceded by Russia to the United States in 1867 — it was highly probable that the “Albatross” would cross it at the end of the curve, if her course remained unchanged.

How long the night appeared to be to the two friends! How eager they were to get out of their cabins! When they came on deck in the morning the dawn had for some hours been silvering the eastern horizon. They were nearing the June solstice, the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, when there is hardly any night along the sixtieth parallel.

Either from custom or intention Robur was in no hurry to leave his deck-house, When he came out this morning be contented himself with bowing to his two guests as he passed them in the stern of the aeronef.

And now Frycollin ventured out of his cabin. His eyes red with sleeplessness, and dazed in their look, he tottered along, like a man whose foot feels it is not on solid ground. His first glance was at the suspensory screws, which were working with gratifying regularity without any signs of haste. That done, the Negro stumbled along to the rail, and grasped it with both hands, so as to make sure of his balance. Evidently he wished to view the country over which the “Albatross” was flying at the height of seven hundred feet or more.

At first he kept himself well back behind the rail. Then he shook it to make sure it was firm; then he drew himself up; then he bent forward; then he stretched out his head. It need not be said that while he was executing these different maneuvers he kept his eyes shut. At last he opened them.

What a shout! And how quickly he fled! And how deeply his head sank back into his shoulders! At the bottom of the abyss he had seen the immense ocean. His hair would have risen on end — if it had not been wool.

“The sea! The sea!” he cried. And Frycollin would have fallen on the deck had not the cook opened his arms to receive him.

This cook was a Frenchman, and probably a Gascon, his name being Francois Tapage. If he was not a Gascon he must in his infancy have inhaled the breezes of the Garonne. How did this Francois Tapage find himself in the service of the engineer? By what chain of accidents had he become one of the crew of the “Albatross?” We can hardly say; but in any case be spoke English like a Yankee. “Eh, stand up!” he said, lifting the Negro by a vigorous clutch at the waist.

“Master Tapage!” said the poor fellow, giving a despairing look at the screws.

“At your service, Frycollin.”

“Did this thing ever smash?”

“No, but it will end by smashing.”

“Why? Why?”

“Because everything must end.

“And the sea is beneath us!”

“If we are to fall, it is better to fall in the sea.”

“We shall be drowned.”

“We shall be drowned, but we shall not be smashed to a jelly.”

The next moment Frycollin was on all fours, creeping to the back of his cabin.

During this day the aeronef was only driven at moderate speed. She seemed to skim the placid surface of the sea, which lay beneath. Uncle Prudent and his companion remained in their cabin, so that they did not meet with Robur, who walked about smoking alone or talking to the mate. Only half the screws were working, yet that was enough to keep the apparatus afloat in the lower zones of the atmosphere.

The crew, as a change from the ordinary routine, would have endeavored to catch a few fish had there been any sign of them; but all that could be seen on the surface of the sea were a few of those yellow-bellied whales which measure about eighty feet in length. These are the most formidable cetaceans in the northern seas, and whalers are very careful in attacking them, for their strength is prodigious. However, in harpooning one of these whales, either with the ordinary harpoon, the Fletcher fuse, or the javelin-bomb, of which there was an assortment on board, there would have been danger to the men of the “Albatross.”

But what was the good of such useless massacre? Doubtless to show off the powers of the aeronef to the members of the Weldon Institute. And so Robur gave orders for the capture of one of these monstrous cetaceans.

At the shout of “A whale! A whale!” Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans came out of their cabin. Perhaps there was a whaler in sight! In that case all they had to do to escape from their flying prison was to jump into the sea, and chance being picked up by the vessel.

The crew were all on deck. “Shall we try, sir?” asked Tom Turner.

“Yes,” said Robur.

In the engine-room the engineer and his assistant were at their posts ready to obey the orders signaled to them. The “Albatross” dropped towards the sea, and remained, about fifty feet above it.

There was no ship in sight — of that the two colleagues soon assured themselves — nor was there any land to be seen to which they could swim, providing Robur made no attempt to recapture them.

Several jets of water from the spout holes soon announced the presence of the whales as they came to the surface to breathe. Tom Turner and one of the men were in the bow. Within his reach was one of those javelin-bombs, of Californian make, which are shot from an arquebus and which are shaped as a metallic cylinder terminated by a cylindrical shell armed with a shaft having a barbed point. Robur was a little farther aft, and with his right hand signaled to the engineers, while with his left, he directed the steersman. He thus controlled the aeronef in every way, horizontally and vertically, and it is almost impossible to conceive with what speed and precision the “Albatross” answered to his orders. She seemed a living being, of which he was the soul.

“A whale! A whale!” shouted Tom Turner, as the back of a cetacean emerged from the surface about four cable-lengths in front of the “Albatross.”

The “Albatross” swept towards it, and when she was within sixty feet of it she stopped dead.

Tom Turner seized the arquebus, which was resting against a cleat on the rail. He fired, and the projectile, attached to a long line, entered the whale’s body. The shell, filled with an explosive compound, burst, and shot out a small harpoon with two branches, which fastened into the animal’s flesh.

“Look out!” shouted Turner.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, much against their will, became greatly interested in the spectacle.

The whale, seriously wounded, gave the sea such a slap with his tail, that the water dashed up over the bow of the aeronef. Then he plunged to a great depth, while the line, which had been previously wetted in a tub of water to prevent its taking fire, ran out like lightning. When the whale rose to the surface he started off at full speed in a northerly direction.

It may be imagined with what speed the “Albatross” was towed in pursuit. Besides, the propellers had been stopped. The whale was let go as he would, and the ship followed him. Turner stood ready to cut the line in case a fresh plunge should render this towing dangerous.

For half an hour, and perhaps for a distance of six miles, the “Albatross” was thus dragged along, but it was obvious that the whale was tiring. Then, at a gesture from Robur the assistant engineers started the propellers astern, so as to oppose a certain resistance to the whale, who was gradually getting closer.

Soon the aeronef was gliding about twenty-five feet above him. His tail was beating the waters with incredible violence, and as he turned over on his back an enormous wave was produced.

Suddenly the whale turned up again, so as to take a header, as it were, and then dived with such rapidity that Turner had barely time to cut the line.

The aeronef was dragged to the very surface of the water. A whirlpool was formed where the animal had disappeared. A wave dashed up on to the deck as if the aeronef were a ship driving against wind and tide.

Luckily, with a blow of the hatchet the mate severed the line, and the “Albatross,” freed from her tug, sprang aloft six hundred feet under the impulse of her ascensional screws. Robur had maneuvered his ship without losing his coolness for a moment.

A few minutes afterwards the whale returned to the surface — dead. From every side the birds flew down on to the carcass, and their cries were enough to deafen a congress. The "Albatross," without stopping to share in the spoil, resumed her course to the west.

In the morning of the 17th of June, at about six o'clock, land was sighted on the horizon. This was the peninsula of Alaska, and the long range of breakers of the Aleutian Islands.

The "Albatross" glided over the barrier where the fur seals swarm for the benefit of the Russo-American Company. An excellent business is the capture of these amphibians, which are from six to seven feet long, russet in color, and weigh from three hundred to four hundred pounds. There they were in interminable files, ranged in line of battle, and countable by thousands.

Although they did not move at the passage of the "Albatross," it was otherwise with the ducks, divers, and loons, whose husky cries filled the air as they disappeared beneath the waves and fled terrified from the aerial monster.

The twelve hundred miles of the Behring Sea between the first of the Aleutians and the extreme end of Kamtschatka were traversed during the twenty-four hours of this day and the following night. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans found that here was no present chance of putting their project of escape into execution. Flight was not to be thought of among the deserts of Eastern Asia, nor on the coast of the sea of Okhotsk. Evidently the "Albatross" was bound for Japan or China, and there, although it was not perhaps quite safe to trust themselves to the mercies of the Chinese or Japanese, the two friends had made up their minds to run if the aeronef stopped.

But would she stop? She was not like a bird which grows fatigued by too long a flight, or like a balloon which has to descend for want of gas. She still had food for many weeks and her organs were of marvelous strength, defying all weakness and weariness.

During the 18th of June she swept over the peninsula of Kamtschatka, and during the day there was a glimpse of Petropaulovski and the volcano of Kloutschew. Then she rose again to cross the Sea of Okhotsk, running down by the Kurile Isles, which seemed to be a breakwater pierced by hundreds of channels. On the 19th, in the morning, the “Albatross” was over the strait of La Perouse between Saghalien and Northern Japan, and had reached the mouth of the great Siberian river, the Amoor.

Then there came a fog so dense that the aeronef had to rise above it. At the altitude she was there was no obstacle to be feared, no elevated monuments to hinder her passage, no mountains against which there was risk of being shattered in her flight. The country was only slightly varied. But the fog was very disagreeable, and made everything on board very damp.

All that was necessary was to get above this bed of mist, which was nearly thirteen hundred feet thick, and the ascensional screws being increased in speed, the “Albatross” was soon clear of the fog and in the sunny regions of the sky. Under these circumstances, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans would have found some difficulty in carrying out their plan of escape, even admitting that they could leave the aeronef.

During the day, as Robur passed them he stopped for a moment, and without seeming to attach any importance to what he said, addressed them carelessly as follows: “Gentlemen, a sailing-ship or a steamship caught in a fog from which it cannot escape is always much delayed. It must not move unless it keeps its whistle or its horn going. It must reduce its speed, and any instant a collision may be expected. The “Albatross” has none of these things to fear. What does fog matter to her? She can leave it when she chooses. The whole of space is hers.” And Robur continued his stroll without waiting for an answer, and the puffs of his pipe were lost in the sky.

“Uncle Prudent,” said Phil Evans, “it seems that this astonishing “Albatross” never has anything to fear.”

“That we shall see!” answered the president of the Weldon Institute.

The fog lasted three days, the 19th, 20th, and 21st of June, with regrettable persistence. An ascent had to be made to clear the Japanese mountain of Fujiyama. When the curtain of mist was drawn aside there lay below them an immense city, with palaces, villas, gardens, and parks. Even without seeing it Robur had recognized it by the barking of the innumerable dogs, the cries of the birds of prey, and above all, by the cadaverous odor which the bodies of its executed criminals gave off into space.

The two colleagues were out on the deck while the engineer was taking his observations in case he thought it best to continue his course through the fog.

“Gentlemen,” said he, “I have no reason for concealing from you that this town is Tokyo, the capital of Japan.”

Uncle Prudent did not reply. In the presence of the engineer he was almost choked, as if his lungs were short of air.

“This view of Tokyo,” continued Robur, “is very curious.”

“Curious as it may be — ” replied Phil Evans.

“It is not as good as Peking?” interrupted the engineer.

“That is what I think, and very shortly you shall have an opportunity of judging.”

Impossible to be more agreeable!

The “Albatross” then gliding southeast, had her course changed four points, so as to head to the eastward.

CHAPTER XII

THROUGH THE HIMALAYAS

During the night the fog cleared off. There were symptoms of an approaching typhoon — a rapid fall of the barometer, a disappearance of vapor, large clouds of ellipsoid form clinging to a copper sky, and, on the opposite horizon, long streaks of carmine on a slate-colored field, with a large sector quite clear in the north. Then the sea was smooth and calm and at sunset assumed a deep scarlet hue.

Fortunately the typhoon broke more to the south, and had no other result than to sweep away the mist which had been accumulating during the last three days.

In an hour they had traversed the hundred and twenty-five miles of the Korean strait, and while the typhoon was raging on the coast of China, the “Albatross” was over the Yellow Sea. During the 22nd and 23rd she was over the Gulf of Pechelee, and on the 24th she was ascending the valley of the Peiho on her way to the capital of the Celestial Empire.

Leaning over the rail, the two colleagues, as the engineer had told them, could see distinctly the immense city, the wall which divides it into two parts — the Manchu town, and the Chinese town — the twelve suburbs which surround it, the large boulevards which radiate from its center, the temples with their green and yellow roofs bathed in the rising sun, the grounds surrounding the houses of the mandarins; then in the middle of the Manchu town the eighteen hundred acres of the Yellow town, with its pagodas, its imperial gardens, its artificial lakes, its mountain of coal which towers above the capital; and in the center of the Yellow town, like a square of Chinese puzzle enclosed in another, the Red town, that is the imperial palace, with all the peaks of its outrageous architecture.

Below the “Albatross” the air was filled with a singular harmony. It seemed to be a concert of Aeolian harps. In the air were a hundred kites of different forms, made of sheets of palm-leaf, and having at their upper end a sort of bow of light wood with a thin slip of bamboo beneath. In the breath of the wind these slips, with all their notes varied like those of a harmonicon, gave forth a most melancholy murmuring. It seemed as though they were breathing musical oxygen.

It suited Robur’s whim to run close up to this aerial orchestra, and the “Albatross” slowed as she glided through the sonorous waves which the kites gave off through the atmosphere.

But immediately an extraordinary effect was produced amongst the innumerable population. Beatings of the tomtoms and sounds of other formidable instruments of the Chinese orchestra, gun reports by the thousand, mortars fired in hundreds, all were brought into play to scare away the aeronef. Although the Chinese astronomers may have recognized the aerial machine as the moving body that had given rise to such disputes, it was to the Celestial million, from the humblest tankader to the best-buttoned mandarin, an apocalyptical monster appearing in the sky of Buddha.

The crew of the “Albatross” troubled themselves very little about these demonstrations. But the strings which held the kites, and were tied to fixed pegs in the imperial gardens, were cut or quickly hauled in; and the kites were either drawn in rapidly, sounding louder as they sank, or else fell like a bird shot through both wings, whose song ends with its last sigh.

A noisy fanfare escaped from Tom Turner's trumpet, and drowned the final notes of the aerial concert. It did not interrupt the terrestrial fusillade. At last a shell exploded a few feet below the "Albatross," and then she mounted into the inaccessible regions of the sky.

Nothing happened during the few following days of which the prisoners could take advantage. The aeronef kept on her course to the southwest, thereby showing that it was intended to take her to India. Twelve hours after leaving Peking, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans caught a glimpse of the Great Wall in the neighborhood of Chen-Si. Then, avoiding the Lung Mountains, they passed over the valley of the Hoangho and crossed the Chinese border on the Tibet side.

Tibet consists of high table-lands without vegetation, with here and there snowy peaks and barren ravines, torrents fed by glaciers, depressions with glittering beds of salt, lakes surrounded by luxurious forests, with icy winds sweeping over all.

The barometer indicated an altitude of thirteen thousand feet above the level of the sea. At that height the temperature, although it was in the warmest months of the northern hemisphere, was only a little above freezing. This cold, combined with the speed of the "Albatross," made the voyage somewhat trying, and although the friends had warm traveling wraps, they preferred to keep to their cabin.

It need hardly be said that to keep the aeronef in this rarefied atmosphere the suspensory screws had to be driven at extreme speed. But they worked with perfect regularity, and the sound of their wings almost acted as a lullaby.

During this day, appearing from below about the size of a carrier pigeon, she passed over Garlock, a town of western Tibet, the capital of the province of Cari Khorsum.

On the 27th of June, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans sighted an enormous barrier, broken here and there by several peaks, lost in the snows that bounded the horizon.

Leaning against the fore-cabin, so as to keep their places notwithstanding the speed of the ship, they watched these colossal masses, which seemed to be running away from the aeronef.

“The Himalayas, evidently,” said Phil Evans; “and probably Robur is going round their base, so as to pass into India.”

“So much the worse,” answered Uncle Prudent. “On that immense territory we shall perhaps be able to — ”

“Unless he goes round by Burma to the east, or Nepal to the west.”

“Anyhow, I defy him to go through them.”

“Indeed!” said a voice.

The next day, the 28th of June, the “Albatross” was in front of the huge mass above the province of Zang. On the other side of the chain was the province of Nepal. These ranges block the road into India from the north. The two northern ones, between which the aeronef was gliding like a ship between enormous reefs are the first steps of the Central Asian barrier. The first was the Kuen Lung, the other the Karakorum, bordering the longitudinal valley parallel to the Himalayas, from which the Indus flows to the west and the Brahmapootra to the east.

What a superb orographical system! More than two hundred summits have been measured, seventeen of which exceed twenty-five thousand feet. In front of the “Albatross,” at a height of twenty-nine thousand feet, towered Mount Everest. To the right was Dhawalagiri, reaching twenty-six thousand eight hundred feet, and relegated to second place since the measurement of Mount Everest.

Evidently Robur did not intend to go over the top of these peaks; but probably he knew the passes of the Himalayas, among others that of Ibi Ganim, which the brothers Schlagintweit traversed in 1856 at a height of twenty-two thousand feet. And towards it he went.

Several hours of palpitation, becoming quite painful, followed; and although the rarefaction of the air was not such as to necessitate recourse being had to the special apparatus for renewing oxygen in the cabins, the cold was excessive.

Robur stood in the bow, his sturdy figure wrapped in a great-coat. He gave the orders, while Tom Turner was at the helm. The engineer kept an attentive watch on his batteries, the acid in which fortunately ran no risk of congelation. The screws, running at the full strength of the current, gave forth a note of intense shrillness in spite of the trifling density of the air. The barometer showed twenty-three thousand feet in altitude.

Magnificent was the grouping of the chaos of mountains! Everywhere were brilliant white summits. There were no lakes, but glaciers descending ten thousand feet towards the base. There was no herbage, only a few phanerogams on the limit of vegetable life. Down on the lower flanks of the range were splendid forests of pines and cedars. Here were none of the gigantic ferns and interminable parasites stretching from tree to tree as in the thickets of the jungle. There were no animals — no wild horses, or yaks, or Tibetan bulls. Occasionally a scared gazelle showed itself far down the slopes. There were no birds, save a couple of those crows which can rise to the utmost limits of the respirable air.

The pass at last was traversed. The “Albatross” began to descend. Coming from the hills out of the forest region there was now beneath them an immense plain stretching far and wide.

Then Robur stepped up to his guests, and in a pleasant voice remarked, “India, gentlemen!”

CHAPTER XIII

OVER THE CASPIAN

The engineer had no intention of taking his ship over the wondrous lands of Hindustan. To cross the Himalayas was to show how admirable was the machine he commanded; to convince those who would not be convinced was all he wished to do.

But if in their hearts Uncle Prudent and his colleague could not help admiring so perfect an engine of aerial locomotion, they allowed none of their admiration to be visible. All they thought of was how to escape. They did not even admire the superb spectacle that lay beneath them as the "Albatross" flew along the river banks of the Punjab.

At the base of the Himalayas there runs a marshy belt of country, the home of malarious vapors, the Terai, in which fever is endemic. But this offered no obstacle to the "Albatross," or, in any way, affected the health of her crew. She kept on without undue haste towards the angle where India joins on to China and Turkestan, and on the 29th of June, in the early hours of the morning, there opened to view the incomparable valley of Cashmere.

Yes! Incomparable is this gorge between the major and the minor Himalayas — furrowed by the buttresses in which the mighty range dies out in the basin of the Hydaspes, and watered by the capricious windings of the river which saw the struggle between the armies of Porus and Alexander, when India and Greece contended for Central Asia. The Hydaspes is still there, although the two towns founded by the Macedonian in remembrance of his victory have long since disappeared.

During the morning the aeronef was over Serinuggur, which is better known under the name of Cashmere. Uncle Prudent and his companion beheld the superb city clustered along both banks of the river; its wooden bridges stretching across like threads, its villas and their balconies standing out in bold outline, its hills shaded by tall poplars, its roofs grassed over and looking like molehills; its numerous canals, with boats like nut-shells, and boatmen like ants; its palaces, temples, kiosks, mosques, and bungalows on the outskirts; and its old citadel of Hari-Pawata on the slope of the hill like the most important of the forts of Paris on the slope of Mont Valerien.

“That would be Venice,” said Phil Evans, “if we were in Europe.”

“And if we were in Europe,” answered Uncle Prudent, “we should know how to find the way to America.”

The “Albatross” did not linger over the lake through which the river flows, but continued her flight down the valley of the Hydaspes.

For half an hour only did she descend to within thirty feet of the river and remained stationary. Then, by means of an india-rubber pipe, Tom Turner and his men replenished their water supply, which was drawn up by a pump worked by the accumulators. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans stood watching the operation. The same idea occurred to each of them. They were only a few feet from the surface of the stream. They were both good swimmers. A plunge would give them their liberty; and once they had reached the river, how could Robur get them back again? For his propellers to work, he must keep at least six feet above the ground.

In a moment all the chances pro and con were run over in their heads. In a moment they were considered, and the prisoners rushed to throw themselves overboard, when several pairs of hands seized them by the shoulders.

They had been watched; and flight was utterly impossible.

This time they did not yield without resisting. They tried to throw off those who held them. But these men of the “Albatross” were no children.

“Gentlemen,” said the engineer, “when people, have the pleasure of traveling with Robur the Conqueror, as you have so well named him, on board his admirable “Albatross,” they do not leave him in that way. I may add you never leave him.”

Phil Evans drew away his colleague, who was about to commit some act of violence. They retired to their cabin, resolved to escape, even if it cost them their lives.

Immediately the “Albatross” resumed her course to the west. During the day at moderate speed she passed over the territory of Cabulistan, catching a momentary glimpse of its capital, and crossed the frontier of the kingdom of Herat, nearly seven hundred miles from Cashmere.

In these much-disputed countries, the open road for the Russians to the English possessions in India, there were seen many columns and convoys, and, in a word, everything that constitutes in men and material an army on the march. There were heard also the roar of the cannon and the crackling of musketry. But the engineer never meddled with the affairs of others where his honor or humanity was not concerned. He passed above them. If Herat as we are told, is the key of Central Asia, it mattered little to him if it was kept in an English or Muscovite pocket. Terrestrial interests were nothing to him who had made the air his domain.

Besides, the country soon disappeared in one of those sandstorms which are so frequent in these regions. The wind called the “tebbad” bears along the seeds of fever in the impalpable dust it raises in its passage. And many are the caravans that perish in its eddies.

To escape this dust, which might have interfered with the working of the screws, the “Albatross” shot up some six thousand feet into a purer atmosphere.

And thus vanished the Persian frontier and the extensive plains. The speed was not excessive, although there were no rocks ahead, for the mountains marked on the map are of very moderate altitude. But as the ship approached the capital, she had to steer clear of Demavend, whose snowy peak rises some twenty-two thousand feet, and the chain of Elbruz, at whose foot is built Teheran.

As soon as the day broke on the 2nd of July the peak of Demavend appeared above the sandstorm, and the “Albatross” was steered so as to pass over the town, which the wind had wrapped in a mantle of dust.

However, about six o’clock her crew could see the large ditches that surround it, and the Shah’s palace, with its walls covered with porcelain tiles, and its ornamental lakes, which seemed like huge turquoises of beautiful blue.

It was but a hasty glimpse. The “Albatross” now headed for the north, and a few hours afterwards she was over a little hill at the northern angle of the Persian frontier, on the shores of a vast extent of water which stretched away out of sight to the north and east.

The town was Ashurada, the most southerly of the Russian stations. The vast extent of water was a sea. It was the Caspian.

The eddies of sand had been passed. There was a view of a group of European houses rising along a promontory, with a church tower in the midst of them.

The “Albatross” swooped down towards the surface of the sea. Towards evening she was running along the coast — which formerly belonged to Turkestan, but now belongs to Russia — and in the morning of the 3rd of July she was about three hundred feet above the Caspian.

There was no land in sight, either on the Asiatic or European side. On the surface of the sea a few white sails were bellying in the breeze. These were native vessels recognizable by their peculiar rig — kesebeys, with two masts; kayuks, the old pirate-boats, with one mast; teimils, and smaller craft for trading and fishing. Here and there a few puffs of smoke rose up to the “Albatross” from the funnels of the Ashurada steamers, which the Russians keep as the police of these Turcoman waters.

That morning Tom Turner was talking to the cook, Tapage, and to a question of his replied, “Yes; we shall be about forty-eight hours over the Caspian.”

“Good!” said the cook; “Then we can have some fishing.”

“Just so.”

They were to remain for forty-eight hours over the Caspian, which is some six hundred and twenty-five miles long and two hundred wide, because the speed of the “Albatross” had been much reduced, and while the fishing was going on she would be stopped altogether.

The reply was heard by Phil Evans, who was then in the bow, where Frycollin was overwhelming him with piteous pleadings to be put “on the ground.”

Without replying to this preposterous request, Evans returned aft to Uncle Prudent; and there, taking care not to be overheard, he reported the conversation that had taken place.

“Phil Evans,” said Uncle Prudent, “I think there can be no mistake as to this scoundrel’s intention with regard to us.”

“None,” said Phil Evans. “He will only give us our liberty when it suits him, and perhaps not at all.”

“In that case we must do all we can to get away from the ‘Albatross’.”

“A splendid craft, she is, I must admit.”

“Perhaps so,” said Uncle Prudent; “but she belongs to a scoundrel who detains us on board in defiance of all right. For us and ours she is a constant danger. If we do not destroy her — ”

“Let us begin by saving ourselves” answered Phil Evans; “we can see about the destruction afterwards.”

“Just so,” said Uncle Prudent. “And we must avail ourselves of every chance that comes, along. Evidently the “Albatross” is going to cross the Caspian into Europe, either by the north into Russia or by the west into the southern countries. Well, no matter where we stop, before we get to the Atlantic, we shall be safe. And we ought to be ready at any moment.”

“But,” asked Evans, “how are we to get out?”

“Listen to me,” said Uncle Prudent. “It may happen during the night that the “Albatross” may drop to within a few hundred feet of the ground. Now there are on board several ropes of that length, and, with a little pluck we might slip down them — ”

“Yes,” said Evans. “If the case is desperate I don’t mind — ”

“Nor I. During the night there’s no one about except the man at the wheel. And if we can drop one of the ropes forward without being seen or heard — ”

“Good! I am glad to see you are so cool; that means business. But just now we are over the Caspian. There are several ships in sight. The “Albatross” is going down to fish. Cannot we do something now?”

“Sh! They are watching us much more than you think,” said Uncle Prudent. “You saw that when we tried to jump into the Hydaspes.”

“And who knows that they don’t watch us at night?” asked Evans.

“Well, we must end this; we must finish with this “Albatross” and her master.”

It will be seen how in the excitement of their anger the colleagues — Uncle Prudent in particular — were prepared to attempt the most hazardous things. The sense of their powerlessness, the ironical disdain with which Robur treated them, the brutal remarks he indulged in — all contributed towards intensifying the aggravation which daily grew more manifest.

This very day something occurred which gave rise to another most regrettable altercation between Robur and his guests. This was provoked by Frycollin, who, finding himself above the boundless sea, was seized with another fit of terror. Like a child, like the Negro he was, he gave himself over to groaning and protesting and crying, and writhing in a thousand contortions and grimaces.

“I want to get out! I want to get out! I am not a bird! Boohoo! I don’t want to fly, I want to get out!”

Uncle Prudent, as may be imagined, did not attempt to quiet him. In fact, he encouraged him, and particularly as the incessant howling seemed to have a strangely irritating effect on Robur.

When Tom Turner and his companions were getting ready for fishing, the engineer ordered them to shut up Frycollin in his cabin. But the Negro never ceased his jumping about, and began to kick at the wall and yell with redoubled power.

It was noon. The “Albatross” was only about fifteen or twenty feet above the water. A few ships, terrified at the apparition, sought safety in flight.

As may be guessed, a sharp look-out was kept on the prisoners, whose temptation to escape could not but be intensified. Even supposing they jumped overboard they would have been picked up by the india-rubber boat. As there was nothing to do during the fishing, in which Phil Evans intended to take part, Uncle Prudent, raging furiously as usual, retired to his cabin.

The Caspian Sea is a volcanic depression. Into it flow the waters of the Volga, the Ural, the Kour, the Kouma, the Jemba, and others. Without the evaporation which relieves it of its overflow, this basin, with an area of 17,000 square miles, and a depth of from sixty to four hundred feet, would flood the low marshy ground to its north and east. Although it is not in communication with the Black Sea or the Sea of Aral, being at a much lower level than they are, it contains an immense number of fish — such fish, be it understood, as can live in its bitter waters, the bitterness being due to the naphtha which pours in from the springs on the south.

The crew of the “Albatross” made no secret of their delight at the change in their food the fishing would bring them.

“Look out!” shouted Turner, as he harpooned a good-size fish, not unlike a shark.

It was a splendid sturgeon seven feet long, called by the Russians beluga, the eggs of which mixed up with salt, vinegar, and white wine form caviar. Sturgeons from the river are, it may be, rather better than those from the sea; but these were welcomed warmly enough on board the “Albatross.”

But the best catches were made with the drag-nets, which brought up at each haul carp, bream, salmon, saltwater pike, and a number of medium-sized sterlets, which wealthy gourmets have sent alive to Astrakhan, Moscow, and Petersburg, and which now passed direct from their natural element into the cook’s kettle without any charge for transport.

An hour’s work sufficed to fill up the larders of the aeronef, and she resumed her course to the north.

During the fishing Frycollin had continued shouting and kicking at his cabin wall, and making a tremendous noise.

“That wretched nigger will not be quiet, then?” said Robur, almost out of patience.

“It seems to me, sir, he has a right to complain,” said Phil Evans.

“Yes, and I have a right to look after my ears,” replied Robur.

“Engineer Robur!” said Uncle Prudent, who had just appeared on deck.

“President of the Weldon Institute!”

They had stepped up to one another, and were looking into the whites of each other’s eyes. Then Robur shrugged his shoulders. “Put him at the end of a line,” he said.

Turner saw his meaning at once. Frycollin was dragged out of his cabin. Loud were his cries when the mate and one of the men seized him and tied him into a tub, which they hitched on to a rope — one of those very ropes, in fact, that Uncle Prudent had intended to use as we know.

The Negro at first thought he was going to be hanged. Not he was only going to be towed!

The rope was paid out for a hundred feet and Frycollin found himself hanging in space.

He could then shout at his ease. But fright contracted his larynx, and he was mute.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans endeavored to prevent this performance. They were thrust aside.

“It is scandalous! It is cowardly!” said Uncle Prudent, quite beside himself with rage.

“Indeed!” said Robur.

“It is an abuse of power against which I protest.”

“Protest away!”

“I will be avenged, Mr. Robur.”

“Avenge when you like, Mr. Prudent.”

“I will have my revenge on you and yours.”

The crew began to close up with anything but peaceful intentions. Robur motioned them away.

“Yes, on you and yours!” said Uncle Prudent, whom his colleague in vain tried to keep quiet.

“Whenever you please!” said the engineer.

“And in every possible way!”

“That is enough now,” said Robur, in a threatening tone. “There are other ropes on board. And if you don’t be quiet I’ll treat you as I have done your servant!”

Uncle Prudent was silent, not because he was afraid, but because his wrath had nearly choked him; and Phil Evans led him off to his cabin.

During the last hour the air had been strangely troubled. The symptoms could not be mistaken. A storm was threatening. The electric saturation of the atmosphere had become so great that about half-past two o'clock Robur witnessed a phenomenon that was new to him.

In the north, whence the storm was traveling, were spirals of half-luminous vapor due to the difference in the electric charges of the various beds of cloud. The reflections of these bands came running along the waves in myriads of lights, growing in intensity as the sky darkened.

The "Albatross" and the storm were sure to meet, for they were exactly in front of each other.

And Frycollin? Well! Frycollin was being towed — and towed is exactly the word, for the rope made such an angle, with the aeronef, now going at over sixty knots an hour, that the tub was a long way behind her.

The crew were busy in preparing for the storm, for the "Albatross" would either have to rise above it or drive through its lowest layers. She was about three thousand feet above the sea when a clap of thunder was heard. Suddenly the squall struck her. In a few seconds the fiery clouds swept on around her.

Phil Evans went to intercede for Frycollin, and asked for him to be taken on board again. But Robur had already given orders to that effect, and the rope was being hauled in, when suddenly there took place an inexplicable slackening in the speed of the screws.

The engineer rushed to the central deck-house. “Power! More power!” he shouted. “We must rise quickly and get over the storm!”

“Impossible, sir!”

“What is the matter?”

“The currents are troubled! They are intermittent!” And, in fact, the “Albatross” was falling fast.

As with the telegraph wires on land during a storm, so was it with the accumulators of the aeronef. But what is only an inconvenience in the case of messages was here a terrible danger.

“Let her down, then,” said Robur, “and get out of the electric zone! Keep cool, my lads!”

He stepped on to his quarter-deck and his crew went to their stations.

Although the “Albatross” had sunk several hundred feet she was still in the thick of the cloud, and the flashes played across her as if they were fireworks. It seemed as though she was struck. The screws ran more and more slowly, and what began as a gentle descent threatened to become a collapse.

In less than a minute it was evident they would get down to the surface of the sea. Once they were immersed no power could drag them from the abyss.

Suddenly the electric cloud appeared above them. The “Albatross” was only sixty feet from the crest of the waves. In two or three seconds the deck would be under water.

But Robur, seizing the propitious moment, rushed to the central house and seized the levers. He turned on the currents from the piles no longer neutralized by the electric tension of the surrounding atmosphere. In a moment the screws had regained their normal speed and checked the descent; and the “Albatross” remained at her slight elevation while her propellers drove her swiftly out of reach of the storm.

Frycollin, of course, had a bath — though only for a few seconds. When he was dragged on deck he was as wet as if he had been to the bottom of the sea. As may be imagined, he cried no more.

In the morning of the 4th of July the “Albatross” had passed over the northern shore of the Caspian.

CHAPTER XIV

THE AERONEF AT FULL SPEED

If ever Prudent and Evans despaired on escaping from the “Albatross” it was during the two days that followed. It may be that Robur considered it more difficult to keep a watch on his prisoners while he was crossing Europe, and he knew that they had made up their minds to get away.

But any attempt to have done so would have been simply committing suicide. To jump from an express going sixty miles an hour is to risk your life, but to jump from a machine going one hundred and twenty miles an hour would be to seek your death.

And it was at this speed, the greatest that could be given to her, that the “Albatross” tore along. Her speed exceeded that of the swallow, which is one hundred and twelve miles an hour.

At first the wind was in the northeast, and the “Albatross” had it fair, her general course being a westerly one. But the wind began to drop, and it soon became impossible for the colleagues to remain on the deck without having their breath taken away by the rapidity of the flight. And on one occasion they would have been blown overboard if they had not been dashed up against the deck-house by the pressure of the wind.

Luckily the steersman saw them through the windows of his cage, and by the electric bell gave the alarm to the men in the fore-cabin. Four of them came aft, creeping along the deck.

Those who have been at sea, beating to windward in half a gale of wind, will understand what the pressure was like. But here it was the “Albatross” that by her incomparable speed made her own wind.

To allow Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans to get back to their cabin the speed had to be reduced. Inside the deck-house the “Albatross” bore with her a perfectly breathable atmosphere. To stand such driving the strength of the apparatus must have been prodigious. The propellers spun round so swiftly that they seemed immovable, and it was with irresistible power that they screwed themselves through the air.

The last town that had been noticed was Astrakhan, situated at the north end of the Caspian Sea. The Star of the Desert — it must have been a poet who so called it — has now sunk from the first rank to the fifth or sixth. A momentary glance was afforded at its old walls, with their useless battlements, the ancient towers in the center of the city, the mosques and modern churches, the cathedral with its five domes, gilded and dotted with stars as if it were a piece of the sky, as they rose from the bank of the Volga, which here, as it joins the sea, is over a mile in width.

Thenceforward the flight of the “Albatross” became quite a race through the heights of the sky, as if she had been harnessed to one of those fabulous hippogriffs which cleared a league at every sweep of the wing.

At ten o’clock in the morning, of the 4th of July the aeronef, heading northwest, followed for a little the valley of the Volga. The steppes of the Don and the Ural stretched away on each side of the river. Even if it had been possible to get a glimpse of these vast territories there would have been no time to count the towns and villages. In the evening the aeronef passed over Moscow without saluting the flag on the Kremlin. In ten hours she had covered the twelve hundred miles which separate Astrakhan from the ancient capital of all the Russias.

From Moscow to St. Petersburg the railway line measures about seven hundred and fifty miles. This was but a half-day’s journey, and the “Albatross,” as punctual as the mail, reached St. Petersburg and the banks of the Neva at two o’clock in the morning.

Then came the Gulf of Finland, the Archipelago of Abo, the Baltic, Sweden in the latitude of Stockholm, and Norway in the latitude of Christiania. Ten hours only for these twelve hundred miles! Verily it might be thought that no human power would henceforth be able to check the speed of the “Albatross,” and as if the resultant of her force of projection and the attraction of the earth would maintain her in an unvarying trajectory round the globe.

But she did stop nevertheless, and that was over the famous fall of the Rjukanfos in Norway. Gousta, whose summit dominates this wonderful region of Tellermarken, stood in the west like a gigantic barrier apparently impassable. And when the “Albatross” resumed her journey at full speed her head had been turned to the south.

And during this extraordinary flight what was Frycollin doing? He remained silent in a corner of his cabin, sleeping as well as he could, except at meal times.

Tapage then favored him with his company and amused himself at his expense. “Eh! eh! my boy!” said he. “So you are not crying any more? Perhaps it hurt you too much? That two hours hanging cured you of it? At our present rate, what a splendid air-bath you might have for your rheumatics!”

“It seems to me we shall soon go to pieces!”

“Perhaps so; but we shall go so fast we shan’t have time to fall! That is some comfort!”

“Do you think so?”

“I do.”

To tell the truth, and not to exaggerate like Tapage, it was only reasonable that owing to the excessive speed the work of the suspensory screws should be somewhat lessened. The “Albatross” glided on its bed of air like a Congreve rocket.

“And shall we last long like that?” asked Frycollin.

“Long? Oh, no, only as long as we live!”

“Oh!” said the Negro, beginning his lamentations.

“Take care, Fry, take care! For, as they say in my country, the master may send you to the seesaw!” And Frycollin gulped down his sobs as he gulped down the meat which, in double doses, he was hastily swallowing.

Meanwhile Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, who were not men to waste time in wrangling when nothing could come of it, agreed upon doing something. It was evident that escape was not to be thought of. But if it was impossible for them to again set foot on the terrestrial globe, could they not make known to its inhabitants what had become of them since their disappearance, and tell them by whom they had been carried off, and provoke — how was not very clear — some audacious attempt on the part of their friends to rescue them from Robur?

Communicate? But how? Should they follow the example of sailors in distress and enclose in a bottle a document giving the place of shipwreck and throw it into the sea? But here the sea was the atmosphere. The bottle would not swim. And if it did not fall on somebody and crack his skull it might never be found.

The colleagues were about to sacrifice one of the bottles on board when an idea occurred to Uncle Prudent. He took snuff, as we know, and we may pardon this fault in an American, who might do worse. And as a snuff-taker he possessed a snuff-box, which was now empty. This box was made of aluminum. If it was thrown overboard any honest citizen that found it would pick it up, and, being an honest citizen, he would take it to the police-office, and there they would open it and discover from the document what had become of the two victims of Robur the Conqueror!

And this is what was done. The note was short, but it told all, and it gave the address of the Weldon Institute, with a request that it might be forwarded. Then Uncle Prudent folded up the note, shut it in the box, bound the box round with a piece of worsted so as to keep it from opening it as it fell. And then all that had to be done was to wait for a favorable opportunity.

During this marvelous flight over Europe it was not an easy thing to leave the cabin and creep along the deck at the risk of being suddenly and secretly blown away, and it would not do for the snuff-box to fall into the sea or a gulf or a lake or a watercourse, for it would then perhaps be lost. At the same time it was not impossible that the colleagues might in this way get into communication with the habitable globe.

It was then growing daylight, and it seemed as though it would be better to wait for the night and take advantage of a slackening speed or a halt to go out on deck and drop the precious snuff-box into some town.

When all these points had been thought over and settled, the prisoners, found they could not put their plan into execution — on that day, at all events — for the “Albatross,” after leaving Gousta, had kept her southerly course, which took her over the North Sea, much to the consternation of the thousands of coasting craft engaged in the English, Dutch, French, and Belgian trade. Unless the snuff-box fell on the deck of one of these vessels there was every chance of its going to the bottom of the sea, and Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were obliged to wait for a better opportunity. And, as we shall immediately see, an excellent chance was soon to be offered them.

At ten o’clock that evening the “Albatross” reached the French coast near Dunkirk. The night was rather dark. For a moment they could see the lighthouse at Grisnez cross its electric beam with the lights from Dover on the other side of the strait. Then the “Albatross” flew over the French territory at a mean height of three thousand feet.

There was no diminution in her speed. She shot like a rocket over the towns and villages so numerous in northern France. She was flying straight on to Paris, and after Dunkirk came Doullens, Amiens, Creil, Saint Denis. She never left the line; and about midnight she was over the “city of light,” which merits its name even when its inhabitants are asleep or ought to be.

By what strange whim was it that she was stopped over the city of Paris? We do not know; but down she came till she was within a few hundred feet of the ground. Robur then came out of his cabin, and the crew came on to the deck to breathe the ambient air.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans took care not to miss such an excellent opportunity. They left their deck-house and walked off away from the others so as to be ready at the propitious moment. It was important their action should not be seen.

The “Albatross,” like a huge coleopter, glided gently over the mighty city. She took the line of the boulevards, then brilliantly lighted by the Edison lamps. Up to her there floated the rumble of the vehicles as they drove along the streets, and the roll of the trains on the numerous railways that converge into Paris. Then she glided over the highest monuments as if she was going to knock the ball off the Pantheon or the cross off the Invalides. She hovered over the two minarets of the Trocadero and the metal tower of the Champ de Mars, where the enormous reflector was inundating the whole capital with its electric rays.

This aerial promenade, this nocturnal loitering, lasted for about an hour. It was a halt for breath before the voyage was resumed.

And probably Robur wished to give the Parisians the sight of a meteor quite unforeseen by their astronomers. The lamps of the “Albatross” were turned on. Two brilliant sheaves of light shot down and moved along over the squares, the gardens, the palaces, the sixty thousand houses, and swept the space from one horizon to the other.

Assuredly the “Albatross” was seen this time — and not only well seen but heard, for Tom Turner brought out his trumpet and blew a rousing tarantaratara.

At this moment Uncle Prudent leant over the rail, opened his hand, and let his snuff-box fall.

Immediately the “Albatross” shot upwards, and past her, higher still, there mounted the noisy cheering of the crowd then thick on the boulevards — a hurrah of stupefaction to greet the imaginary meteor.

The lamps of the aeronef were turned off, and the darkness and the silence closed in around as the voyage was resumed at the rate of one hundred and twenty miles an hour.

This was all that was to be seen of the French capital. At four o’clock in the morning the “Albatross” had crossed the whole country obliquely; and so as to lose no time in traversing the Alps or the Pyrenees, she flew over the face of Provence to the cape of Antibes. At nine o’clock next morning the San Pietrini assembled on the terrace of St. Peter at Rome were astounded to see her pass over the eternal city. Two hours afterwards she crossed the Bay of Naples and hovered for an instant over the fuliginous wreaths of Vesuvius. Then, after cutting obliquely across the Mediterranean, in the early hours of the afternoon she was signaled by the look-outs at La Goulette on the Tunisian coast.

After America, Asia! After Asia, Europe! More than eighteen thousand miles had this wonderful machine accomplished in less than twenty-three clays!

And now she was off over the known and unknown regions of Africa!

It may be interesting to know what had happened to the famous snuff-box after its fall?

It had fallen in the Rue de Rivoli, opposite No. 200, when the street was deserted. In the morning it was picked up by an honest sweeper, who took it to the prefecture of police. There it was at first supposed to be an infernal machine. And it was untied, examined, and opened with care.

Suddenly a sort of explosion took place. It was a terrific sneeze on the part of the inspector.

The document was then extracted from the snuff-box, and to the general surprise, read as follows:

“Messrs. Prudent and Evans, president and secretary of the Weldon Institute, Philadelphia, have been carried off in the aeronef Albatross belonging to Robur the engineer.”

“Please inform our friends and acquaintances.”

“P. and P. E.”

Thus was the strange phenomenon at last explained to the people of the two worlds. Thus was peace given to the scientists of the numerous observatories on the surface of the terrestrial globe.

CHAPTER XV

A SKIRMISH IN DAHOMEY

At this point in the circumnavigatory voyage of the “Albatross” it is only natural that some such questions as the following should be asked. Who was this Robur, of whom up to the present we know nothing but the name? Did he pass his life in the air? Did his aeronef never rest? Had he not some retreat in some inaccessible spot in which, if he had need of repose or revictualing, he could betake himself? It would be very strange if it were not so. The most powerful flyers have always an eyrie or nest somewhere.

And what was the engineer going to do with his prisoners? Was he going to keep them in his power and condemn them to perpetual aviation? Or was he going to take them on a trip over Africa, South America, Australasia, the Indian Ocean, the Atlantic and the Pacific, to convince them against their will, and then dismiss them with, “And now gentlemen, I hope you will believe a little more in heavier than air?”

To these questions, it is now impossible to reply. They are the secrets of the future. Perhaps the answers will be revealed. Anyhow the bird-like Robur was not seeking his nest on the northern frontier of Africa. By the end of the day he had traversed Tunis from Cape Bon to Cape Carthage, sometimes hovering, and sometimes darting along at top speed. Soon he reached the interior, and flew down the beautiful valley of Medjeida above its yellow stream hidden under its luxuriant bushes of cactus and oleander; and scared away the hundreds of parrots that perch on the telegraph wires and seem to wait for the messages to pass to bear them away beneath their wings.

Two hours after sunset the helm was put up and the “Albatross” bore off to the southeast; and on the morrow, after clearing the Tell Mountains, she saw the rising of the morning star over the sands of the Sahara.

On the 30th of July there was seen from the aeronef the little village of Geryville, founded like Laghouat on the frontier of the desert to facilitate the future conquest of Kabylia. Next, not without difficulty, the peaks of Stillero were passed against a somewhat boisterous wind. Then the desert was crossed, sometimes leisurely over the Ksars or green oases, sometimes at terrific speed that far outstripped the flight of the vultures. Often the crew had to fire into the flocks of these birds which, a dozen or so at a time, fearlessly hurled them selves on to the aeronef to the extreme terror of Frycollin.

But if the vultures could only reply with cries and blows of beaks and talons, the natives, in no way less savage, were not sparing of their musket-shots, particularly when crossing the Mountain of Sel, whose green and violet slope bore its cape of white. Then the “Albatross” was at last over the grand Sahara; and at once she rose into the higher zones so as to escape from a simoom which was sweeping a wave of ruddy sand along the surface of the ground like a bore on the surface of the sea.

Then the desolate tablelands of Chetka scattered their ballast in blackish waves up to the fresh and verdant valley of Ain-Massin. It is difficult to conceive the variety of the territories which could be seen at one view. To the green hills covered with trees and shrubs there succeeded long gray undulations draped like the folds of an Arab burnous and broken in picturesque masses. In the distance could be seen the wadys with their torrential waters, their forests of palm-trees, and blocks of small houses grouped on a hill around a mosque, among them Metlili, where there vegetates a religious chief, the grand marabout Sidi Chick.

Before night several hundred miles had been accomplished above a flattish country ridged occasionally with large sandhills. If the “Albatross” had halted, she would have come to the earth in the depths of the Wargla oasis hidden beneath an immense forest of palm-trees. The town was clearly enough displayed with its three distinct quarters, the ancient palace of the Sultan, a kind of fortified Kasbah, houses of brick which had been left to the sun to bake, and artesian wells dug in the valley — where the aeronef could have renewed her water supply. But, thanks to her extraordinary speed, the waters of the Hydaspes taken in the vale of Cashmere still filled her tanks in the center of the African desert.

Was the “Albatross” seen by the Arabs, the Mozabites, and the Negroes who share amongst them the town of Wargla? Certainly, for she was saluted with many hundred gunshot, and the bullets fell back before they reached her.

Then came the night, that silent night in the desert of which Felicien David has so poetically told us the secrets.

During the following hours the course lay southwesterly, cutting across the routes of El Golea, one of which was explored in 1859 by the intrepid Duveyrier.

The darkness was profound. Nothing could be seen of the Trans-Saharan Railway constructing on the plans of Duponchel — a long ribbon of iron destined to bind together Algiers and Timbuktu by way of Laghouat and Gardaia, and destined eventually to run down into the Gulf of Guinea.

Then the “Albatross” entered the equatorial region below the tropic of Cancer. Six hundred miles from the northern frontier of the Sahara she crossed the route on which Major Laing met his, death in 1846, and crossed the road of the caravans from Morocco to the Sudan, and that part of the desert swept by the Tuaregs, where could be heard what is called “the song of the sand,” a soft and plaintive murmur that seems to escape from the ground.

Only one thing happened. A cloud of locusts came flying along, and there fell such a cargo of them on board as to threaten to sink the ship. But all hands set to work to clear the deck, and the locusts were thrown over except a few hundred kept by Tapage for his larder. And he served them up in so succulent a fashion that Frycollin forgot for the moment his perpetual trances and said, “these are as good as prawns.”

The aeronef was then eleven hundred miles from the Wargla oasis and almost on the northern frontier of the Sudan. About two o’clock in the afternoon a city appeared in the bend of a large river. The river was the Niger. The city was Timbuktu.

If, up to then, this African Mecca had only been visited by the travelers of the ancient world Batouta, Khazan, Imbert, Mungo Park, Adams, Laing, Caillé, Barth, Lenz, on that day by a most singular chance the two Americans could boast of having seen, heard, and smelt it, on their return to America — if they ever got back there.

Of having seen it, because their view included the whole triangle of three or four miles in circumference; of having heard it, because the day was one of some rejoicing and the noise was terrible; of having smelt it, because the olfactory nerve could not but be very disagreeably affected by the odors of the Youbou-Kamo square, where the meatmarket stands close to the palace of the ancient Somai kings.

The engineer had no notion of allowing the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute to be ignorant that they had the honor of contemplating the Queen of the Sudan, now in the power of the Tuaregs of Taganet.

“Gentlemen, Timbuktu!” he said, in the same tone as twelve days before he had said, “Gentlemen, India!” Then he continued, “Timbuktu is an important city of from twelve to thirteen thousand inhabitants, formerly illustrious in science and art. Perhaps you would like to stay there for a day or two?”

Such a proposal could only have been made ironically. “But,” continued he, “it would be dangerous among the Negroes, Berbers, and Foullanes who occupy, it — particularly as our arrival in an aeronef might prejudice them against you.”

“Sir,” said Phil Evans, in the same tone, “for the pleasure of leaving you we would willingly risk an unpleasant reception from the natives. Prison for prison, we would rather be in Timbuktu than on the “Albatross.”“

“That is a matter of taste,” answered the engineer. “Anyhow, I shall not try the adventure, for I am responsible for the safety of the guests who do me the honor to travel with me.”

“And so,” said Uncle Prudent, explosively, “you are not content with being our jailer, but you insult us.”

“Oh! a little irony, that is all!”

“Are there any weapons on board?”

“Oh, quite an arsenal.”

“Two revolvers will do, if I hold one and you the other.”

“A duel!” exclaimed Robur, “a duel, which would perhaps cause the death of one of us.”

“Which certainly would cause it.”

“Well! No, Mr. President of the Weldon Institute, I very much prefer keeping you alive.”

“To be sure of living yourself. That is wise.”

“Wise or not, it suits me. You are at liberty to think as you like, and to complain to those who have the power to help you — if you can.”

“And that we have done, Mr. Robur.”

“Indeed!”

“Was it so difficult when we were crossing the inhabited part of Europe to drop a letter overboard?”

“Did you do that?” said Robur, in a paroxysm of rage.

“And if we have done it?”

“If you have done it — you deserve — ”

“What, sir?”

“To follow your letter overboard.”

“Throw us over, then. We did do it.”

Robur stepped towards them. At a gesture from him Tom Turner and some of the crew ran up. The engineer was seriously tempted to put his threat into execution, and, fearful perhaps of yielding to it, he precipitately rushed into his cabin.

“Good!” exclaimed Phil Evans.

“And what he will dare not do,” said Uncle Prudent, “I Will do! Yes, I Will do!”

At the moment the population of Timbuktu were crowding onto the squares and roads and the terraces built like amphitheaters. In the rich quarters of Sankere and Sarahama, as in the miserable huts at Raguidi, the priests from the minarets were thundering their loudest maledictions against the aerial monster. These were more harmless than the rifle-bullets; though assuredly, if the aeronef had come to earth she would have certainly been torn to pieces.

For some miles noisy flocks of storks, francolins, and ibises escorted the “Albatross” and tried to race her, but in her rapid flight she soon distanced them.

The evening came. The air was troubled by the roarings of the numerous herds of elephants and buffaloes which wander over this land, whose fertility is simply marvelous. For forty-eight hours the whole of the region between the prime meridian and the second degree, in the bend of the Niger, was viewed from the “Albatross.”

If a geographer had only such an apparatus at his command, with what facility could he map the country, note the elevations, fix the courses of the rivers and their affluents, and determine the positions of the towns and villages! There would then be no huge blanks on the map of Africa, no dotted lines, no vague designations which are the despair of cartographers.

In the morning of the 11th the “Albatross” crossed the mountains of northern Guinea, between the Sudan and the gulf which bears their name. On the horizon was the confused outline of the Kong mountains in the kingdom of Dahomey.

Since the departure from Timbuktu Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans noticed that the course had been due south. If that direction was persisted in they would cross the equator in six more degrees. The “Albatross” would then abandon the continents and fly not over the Bering Sea, or the Caspian Sea, or the North Sea, or the Mediterranean, but over the Atlantic Ocean.

This look-out was not particularly pleasing to the two friends, whose chances of escape had sunk to below zero. But the “Albatross” had slackened speed as though hesitating to leave Africa behind. Was Robur thinking of going back? No; but his attention had been particularly attracted to the country which he was then crossing.

We know — and he knew — that the kingdom of Dahomey is one of the most powerful on the West Coast of Africa. Strong enough to hold its own with its neighbor Ashantee, its area is somewhat small, being contained within three hundred and sixty leagues from north to south, and one hundred and eighty from east to west. But its population numbers some seven or eight hundred thousand, including the neighboring independent territories of Whydah and Ardrah.

If Dahomey is not a large country, it is often talked about. It is celebrated for the frightful cruelties which signalize its annual festivals, and by its human sacrifices — fearful hecatombs intended to honor the sovereign it has lost and the sovereign who has succeeded him. It is even a matter of politeness when the King of Dahomey receives a visit from some high personage or some foreign ambassador to give him a surprise present of a dozen heads, cut off in his honor by the minister of justice, the “minghan,” who is wonderfully skillful in that branch of his duties.

When the “Albatross” came flying over Dahomey, the old King Bahadou had just died, and the whole population was proceeding to the enthronization of his successor. Hence there was great agitation all over the country, and it did not escape Robur that everybody was on the move.

Long lines of Dahomians were hurrying along the roads from the country into the capital, Abomey. Well kept roads radiating among vast plains clothed with giant trees, immense fields of manioc, magnificent forests of palms, cocoa-trees, mimosas, orange-trees, mango-trees — such was the country whose perfumes mounted to the “Albatross,” while many parrots and cardinals swarmed among the trees.

The engineer, leaning over the rail, seemed deep in thought, and exchanged but a few words with Tom Turner. It did not look as though the “Albatross” had attracted the attention of those moving masses, which were often invisible under the impenetrable roof of trees. This was doubtless due to her keeping at a good altitude amid a bank of light cloud.

About eleven o’clock in the morning the capital was sighted, surrounded by its walls, defended by a fosse measuring twelve miles round, with wide, regular streets on the flat plain, and a large square on the northern side occupied by the king’s palace. This huge collection of buildings is commanded by a terrace not far from the place of sacrifice. During the festival days it is from this high terrace that they throw the prisoners tied up in wicker baskets, and it can be imagined with what fury these unhappy wretches are cut in pieces.

In one of the courtyards which divide the king's palace there were drawn up four thousand warriors, one of the contigents of the royal army — and not the least courageous one. If it is doubtful if there are any Amazons an the river of that name, there is no doubt of there being Amazons at Dahomey. Some have a blue shirt with a blue or red scarf, with white-and-blue striped trousers and a white cap; others, the elephant-huntresses, have a heavy carbine, a short-bladed dagger, and two antelope horns fixed to their heads by a band of iron. The artillery-women have a blue-and-red tunic, and, as weapons, blunderbusses and old cast cannons; and another brigade, consisting of vestal virgins, pure as Diana, have blue tunics and white trousers. If we add to these Amazons, five or six thousand men in cotton drawers and shirts, with a knotted tuft to increase their stature, we shall have passed in review the Dahomian army.

Abomey on this day was deserted. The sovereign, the royal family, the masculine and feminine army, and the population had all gone out of the capital to a vast plain a few miles away surrounded by magnificent forests.

On this plain the recognition of the new king was to take place. Here it was that thousands of prisoners taken during recent razzias were to be immolated in his honor.

It was about two o'clock when the "Albatross" arrived over the plain and began to descend among the clouds which still hid her from the Dahomians.

There were sixteen thousand people at least come from all parts of the kingdom, from Whydah, and Kerapay, and Ardrah, and Tombory, and the most distant villages.

The new king — a sturdy fellow named Bou-Nadi — some five-and-twenty years old, was seated on a hillock shaded by a group of wide-branched trees. Before him stood his male army, his Amazons, and his people.

At the foot of the mound fifty musicians were playing on their barbarous instruments, elephants' tusks giving forth a husky note, deerskin drums, calabashes, guitars, bells struck with an iron clapper, and bamboo flutes, whose shrill whistle was heard over all. Every other second came discharges of guns and blunderbusses, discharges of cannons with the carriages jumping so as to imperil the lives of the artillery-women, and a general uproar so intense that even the thunder would be unheard amidst it.

In one corner of the plain, under a guard of soldiers, were grouped the prisoners destined to accompany the defunct king into the other world. At the obsequies of Ghozo, the father of Bahadou, his son had dispatched three thousand, and Bou-Nadi could not do less than his predecessor. For an hour there was a series of discourses, harangues, palavers and dances, executed not only by professionals, but by the Amazons, who displayed much martial grace.

But the time for the hecatomb was approaching. Robur, who knew the customs of Dahomey, did not lose sight of the men, women, and children reserved for butchery.

The minghan was standing at the foot of the hillock. He was brandishing his executioner's sword, with its curved blade surmounted by a metal bird, whose weight rendered the cut more certain.

This time he was not alone. He could not have performed the task. Near him were grouped a hundred executioners, all accustomed to cut off heads at one blow.

The “Albatross” came slowly down in an oblique direction. Soon she emerged from the bed of clouds which hid her till she was within three hundred feet of the ground, and for the first time she was visible from below.

Contrary to what had hitherto happened, the savages saw in her a celestial being come to render homage to King Baha-dou. The enthusiasm was indescribable, the shouts were interminable, the prayers were terrific — prayers addressed to this supernatural hippogriff, which “had doubtless come to” take the king’s body to the higher regions of the Dahomian heaven. And now the first head fell under the minghan’s sword, and the prisoners were led up in hundreds before the horrible executioners.

Suddenly a gun was fired from the “Albatross.” The minister of justice fell dead on his face!

“Well aimed, Tom!” said Robur,

His comrades, armed as he was, stood ready to fire when the order was given.

But a change came over the crowd below. They had understood. The winged monster was not a friendly spirit, it was a hostile spirit. And after the fall of the minghan loud shouts for revenge arose on all sides. Almost immediately a fusillade resounded over the plain.

These menaces did not prevent the “Albatross” from descending boldly to within a hundred and fifty feet of the ground. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, whatever were their feelings towards Robur, could not help joining him in such a work of humanity.

“Let us free the prisoners!” they shouted.

“That is what I am going to do!” said the engineer.

And the magazine rifles of the “Albatross” in the hands of the colleagues, as in the hands of the crew, began to rain down the bullets, of which not one was lost in the masses below. And the little gun shot forth its shrapnel, which really did marvels.

The prisoners, although they did not understand how the help had come to them, broke their bonds, while the soldiers were firing at the aeronef. The stern screw was shot through by a bullet, and a few holes were made in the hull. Frycollin, crouching in his cabin, received a graze from a bullet that came through the deck-house.

“Ah! They will have them!” said Tom Turner. And, rushing to the magazine, he returned with a dozen dynamite cartridges, which he distributed to the men. At a sign from Robur, these cartridges were fired at the hillock, and as they reached the ground exploded like so many small shells.

The king and his court and army and people were stricken with fear at the turn things had taken. They fled under the trees, while the prisoners ran off without anybody thinking of pursuing them.

In this way was the festival interfered with. And in this way did Uncle Prudent and, Phil Evans recognize the power of the aeronef and the services it could render to humanity.

Soon the “Albatross” rose again to a moderate height, and passing over Whydah lost to view this savage coast which the southwest wind hems round with an inaccessible surf. And she flew out over the Atlantic.

CHAPTER XVI

OVER THE ATLANTIC

Yes, the Atlantic! The fears of the two colleagues were realized; but it did not seem as though Robur had the least anxiety about venturing over this vast ocean. Both he and his men seemed quite unconcerned about it and had gone back to their stations.

Whither was the “Albatross” bound? Was she going more than round the world as Robur had said? Even if she were, the voyage must end somewhere. That Robur spent his life in the air on board the aeronef and never came to the ground was impossible. How could he make up his stock of provisions and the materials required for working his machines? He must have some retreat, some harbor of refuge — in some unknown and inaccessible spot where the “Albatross” could revictual. That he had broken off all connections with the inhabitants of the land might be true, but with every point on the surface of the earth, certainly not.

That being the case, where was this point? How had the engineer come to choose it? Was he expected by a little colony of which he was the chief? Could he there find a new crew?

What means had he that he should be able to build so costly a vessel as the “Albatross” and keep her building secret? It is true his living was not expensive. But, finally, who was this Robur? Where did he come from? What had been his history? Here were riddles impossible to solve; and Robur was not the man to assist willingly in their solution.

It is not to be wondered at that these insoluble problems drove the colleagues almost to frenzy. To find themselves whipped off into the unknown without knowing what the end might be doubting even if the adventure would end, sentenced to perpetual aviation, was this not enough to drive the President and secretary of the Weldon Institute to extremities?

Meanwhile the “Albatross” drove along above the Atlantic, and in the morning when the sun rose there was nothing to be seen but the circular line where earth met sky. Not a spot of land was insight in this huge field of vision. Africa had vanished beneath the northern horizon.

When Frycollin ventured out of his cabin and saw all this water beneath him, fear took possession of him.

Of the hundred and forty-five million square miles of which the area of the world’s waters consists, the Atlantic claims about a quarter; and it seemed as though the engineer was in no hurry to cross it. There was now no going at full speed, none of the hundred and twenty miles an hour at which the “Albatross” had flown over Europe. Here, where the southwest winds prevail, the wind was ahead of them, and though it was not very strong, it would not do to defy it and the “Albatross” was sent along at a moderate speed, which, however, easily outstripped that of the fastest mail-boat.

On the 13th of July she crossed the line, and the fact was duly announced to the crew. It was then that Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans ascertained that they were bound for the southern hemisphere. The crossing of the line took place without any of the Neptunian ceremonies that still linger on certain ships. Tapage was the only one to mark the event, and he did so by pouring a pint of water down Frycollin’s neck.

On the 18th of July, when beyond the tropic of Capricorn, another phenomenon was noticed, which would have been somewhat alarming to a ship on the sea. A strange succession of luminous waves widened out over the surface of the ocean with a speed estimated at quite sixty miles an hour. The waves ran along at about eight feet from one another, tracing two furrows of light. As night fell a bright reflection rose even to the “Albatross,” so that she might have been taken for a flaming aerolite. Never before had Robur sailed on a sea of fire — fire without heat — which there was no need to flee from as it mounted upwards into the sky.

The cause of this light must have been electricity; it could not be attributed to a bank of fish spawn, nor to a crowd of those animalculae that give phosphorescence to the sea, and this showed that the electrical tension of the atmosphere was considerable.

In the morning an ordinary ship would probably have been lost. But the “Albatross” played with the winds and waves like the powerful bird whose name she bore. If she did not walk on their surface like the petrels, she could like the eagles find calm and sunshine in the higher zones.

They had now passed the forty-seventh parallel. The day was but little over seven hours long, and would become even less as they approached the Pole.

About one o’clock in the afternoon the “Albatross” was floating along in a lower current than usual, about a hundred feet from the level of the sea. The air was calm, but in certain parts of the sky were thick black clouds, massed in mountains, on their upper surface, and ruled off below by a sharp horizontal line. From these clouds a few lengthy protuberances escaped, and their points as they fell seemed to draw up hills of foaming water to meet them.

Suddenly the water shot up in the form of a gigantic hourglass, and the “Albatross” was enveloped in the eddy of an enormous waterspout, while twenty others, black as ink, raged around her. Fortunately the gyratory movement of the water was opposite to that of the suspensory screws, otherwise the aeronef would have been hurled into the sea. But she began to spin round on herself with frightful rapidity. The danger was immense, and perhaps impossible to escape, for the engineer could not get through the spout which sucked him back in defiance of his propellers. The men, thrown to the ends of the deck by centrifugal force, were grasping the rail to save themselves from being shot off.

“Keep cool!” shouted Robur.

They wanted all their coolness, and their patience, too. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, who had just come out of their cabin, were hurled back at the risk of flying overboard. As she spun the “Albatross” was carried along by the spout, which pirouetted along the waves with a speed enough to make the helices jealous. And if she escaped from the spout she might be caught by another, and jerked to pieces with the shock.

“Get the gun ready!” said Robur.

The order was given to Tom Turner, who was crouching behind the swivel amidships where the effect of the centrifugal force was least felt. He understood. In a moment he had opened the breech and slipped a cartridge from the ammunition-box at hand. The gun went off, and the waterspouts collapsed, and with them vanished the platform of cloud they seemed to bear above them.

“Nothing broken on board?” asked Robur.

“No,” answered Tom Turner. “But we don’t want to have another game of humming-top like that!”

For ten minutes or so the “Albatross” had been in extreme peril. Had it not been for her extraordinary strength of build she would have been lost.

During this passage of the Atlantic many were the hours whose monotony was unbroken by any phenomenon whatever. The days grew shorter and shorter, and the cold became keen. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans saw little of Robur. Seated in his cabin, the engineer was busy laying out his course and marking it on his maps, taking his observations whenever he could, recording the readings of his barometers, thermometers, and chronometers, and making full entries in his log-book.

The colleagues wrapped themselves well up and eagerly watched for the sight of land to the southward. At Uncle Prudent’s request Frycollin tried to pump the cook as to whither the engineer was bound, but what reliance could be placed on the information given by this Gascon? Sometimes Robur was an ex-minister of the Argentine Republic, sometimes a lord of the Admiralty, sometimes an ex-President of the United States, sometimes a Spanish general temporarily retired, sometimes a Viceroy of the Indies who had sought a more elevated position in the air. Sometimes he possessed millions, thanks to successful razzias in the aeronef, and he had been proclaimed for piracy. Sometimes he had been ruined by making the aeronef, and had been forced to fly aloft to escape from his creditors. As to knowing if he were going to stop anywhere, no! But if he thought of going to the moon, and found there a convenient anchorage, he would anchor there! “Eh! Fry! My boy! That would just suit you to see what was going on up there.”

“I shall not go! I refuse!” said the Negro, who took all these things seriously.

“And why, Fry, why? You might get married to some pretty bouncing Lunarian!”

Frycollin reported this conversation to his master, who saw it was evident that nothing was to be learnt about Robur. And so he thought still more of how he could have his revenge on him.

“Phil,” said he one day, “is it quite certain that escape is impossible?”

“Impossible.”

“Be it so! But a man is always his own property; and if necessary, by sacrificing his life — ”

“If we are to make that sacrifice,” said Phil Evans, “the sooner the better. It is almost time to end this. Where is the “Albatross” going? Here we are flying obliquely over the Atlantic, and if we keep on we shall get to the coast of Patagonia or Tierra del Fuego. And what are we to do then? Get into the Pacific, or go to the continent at the South Pole? Everything is possible with this Robur. We shall be lost in the end. It is thus a case of legitimate self-defence, and if we must perish — ”

“Which we shall not do,” answered Uncle Prudent, “without being avenged, without annihilating this machine and all she carries.”

The colleagues had reached a stage of impotent fury, and were prepared to sacrifice themselves if they could only destroy the inventor and his secret. A few months only would then be the life of this prodigious aeronef, of whose superiority in aerial locomotion they had such convincing proofs! The idea took such hold of them that they thought of nothing else but how to put it into execution. And how? By seizing on some of the explosives on board and simply blowing her up. But could they get at the magazines?

Fortunately for them, Frycollin had no suspicion of their scheme. At the thought of the “Albatross” exploding in midair, he would not have shrunk from betraying his master.

It was on the 23rd of July that the land reappeared in the southwest near Cape Virgins at the entrance of the Straits of Magellan. Under the fifty-second parallel at this time of year the night was eighteen hours long and the temperature was six below freezing.

At first the “Albatross,” instead of keeping on to the south, followed the windings of the coast as if to enter the Pacific. After passing Lomas Bay, leaving Mount Gregory to the north and the Brecknocks to the west, they sighted Puerto Arena, a small Chilean village, at the moment the churchbells were in full swing; and a few hours later they were over the old settlement at Port Famine.

If the Patagonians, whose fires could be seen occasionally, were really above the average in stature, the passengers in the aeronef were unable to say, for to them they seemed to be dwarfs. But what a magnificent landscape opened around during these short hours of the southern day! Rugged mountains, peaks eternally capped with snow, with thick forests rising on their flanks, inland seas, bays deep set amid the peninsulas, and islands of the Archipelago. Clarence Island, Dawson Island, and the Land of Desolation, straits and channels, capes and promontories, all in inextricable confusion, and bound by the ice in one solid mass from Cape Forward, the most southerly point of the American continent, to Cape Horn the most southerly point of the New World.

When she reached Fort Famine the “Albatross” resumed her course to the south. Passing between Mount Tam on the Brunswick Peninsula and Mount Graves, she steered for Mount Sarmiento, an enormous peak wrapped in snow, which commands the Straits of Magellan, rising six thousand four hundred feet from the sea. And now they were over the land of the Fuegians, Tierra del Fuego, the land of fire. Six months later, in the height of summer, with days from fifteen to sixteen hours long, how beautiful and fertile would most of this country be, particularly in its northern portion! Then, all around would be seen valleys and pasturages that could form the feeding-grounds of thousands of animals; then would appear virgin forests, gigantic trees-birches, beeches, ash-trees, cypresses, tree-ferns — and broad plains overrun by herds of guanacos, vicunas, and ostriches. Now there were armies of penguins and myriads of birds; and, when the “Albatross” turned on her electric lamps the guillemots, ducks, and geese came crowding on board enough to fill Tapage’s larder a hundred times and more.

Here was work for the cook, who knew how to bring out the flavor of the game and keep down its peculiar oiliness. And here was work for Frycollin in plucking dozen after dozen of such interesting feathered friends.

That day, as the sun was setting about three o’clock in the afternoon, there appeared in sight a large lake framed in a border of superb forest. The lake was completely frozen over, and a few natives with long snowshoes on their feet were swiftly gliding over it.

At the sight of the “Albatross,” the Fuegians, overwhelmed with terror — scattered in all directions, and when they could not get away they hid themselves, taking, like the animals, to the holes in the ground.

The “Albatross” still held her southerly course, crossing the Beagle Channel, and Navarin Island and Wollaston Island, on the shores of the Pacific. Then, having accomplished 4,700 miles since she left Dahomey, she passed the last islands of the Magellanic archipelago, whose most southerly outpost, lashed by the everlasting surf, is the terrible Cape Horn.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SHIPWRECKED CREW

Next day was the 24th of July; and the 24th of July in the southern hemisphere corresponds to the 24th of January in the northern. The fifty-sixth degree of latitude had been left behind. The similar parallel in northern Europe runs through Edinburgh.

The thermometer kept steadily below freezing, so that the machinery was called upon to furnish a little artificial heat in the cabins. Although the days begin to lengthen after the 21st day of June in the southern hemisphere, yet the advance of the “Albatross” towards the Pole more than neutralized this increase, and consequently the daylight became very short. There was thus very little to be seen. At night time the cold became very keen; but as there was no scarcity of clothing on board, the colleagues, well wrapped up, remained a good deal on deck thinking over their plans of escape, and watching for an opportunity. Little was seen of Robur; since the high words that had been exchanged in the Timbuktu country, the engineer had left off speaking to his prisoners. Frycollin seldom came out of the cook-house, where Tapage treated him most hospitably, on condition that he acted as his assistant. This position was not without its advantages, and the Negro, with his master’s permission, very willingly accepted it. Shut up in the galley, he saw nothing of what was passing outside, and might even consider himself beyond the reach of danger. He was, in fact, very like the ostrich, not only in his stomach, but in his folly.

But whither went the “Albatross?” Was she in mid-winter bound for the southern seas or continents round the Pole? In this icy atmosphere, even granting that the elements of the batteries were unaffected by such frost, would not all the crew succumb to a horrible death from the cold? That Robur should attempt to cross the Pole in the warm season was bad enough, but to attempt such a thing in the depth of the winter night would be the act of a madman.

Thus reasoned the President and Secretary of the Weldon Institute, now they had been brought to the end of the continent of the New World, which is still America, although it does not belong to the United States.

What was this intractable Robur going to do? Had not the time arrived for them to end the voyage by blowing up the ship?

It was noticed that during the 24th of July the engineer had frequent consultations with his mate. He and Tom Turner kept constant watch on the barometer — not so much to keep themselves informed of the height at which they were traveling as to be on the look-out for a change in the weather. Evidently some indications had been observed of which it was necessary to make careful note.

Uncle Prudent also remarked that Robur had been taking stock of the provisions and stores, and everything seemed to show that he was contemplating turning back.

“Turning back!” said Phil Evans. “But where to?”

“Where he can reprovision the ship,” said Uncle Prudent.

“That ought to be in some lonely island in the Pacific with a colony of scoundrels worthy of their chief.”

“That is what I think. I fancy he is going west, and with the speed he can get up it would not take, him long to get home.”

“But we should not be able to put our plan into execution. If we get there — ”

“We shall not get there!”

The colleagues had partly guessed the engineer’s intentions. During the day it became no longer doubtful that when the “Albatross” reached the confines of the Antarctic Sea her course was to be changed. When the ice has formed about Cape Horn the lower regions of the Pacific are covered with icefields and icebergs. The floes then form an impenetrable barrier to the strongest ships and the boldest navigators. Of course, by increasing the speed of her wings the “Albatross” could clear the mountains of ice accumulated on the ocean as she could the mountains of earth on the polar continent — if it is a continent that forms the cap of the southern pole. But would she attempt it in the middle of the polar night, in an atmosphere of sixty below freezing?

After she had advanced about a hundred miles to the south the “Albatross” headed westerly, as if for some unknown island of the Pacific. Beneath her stretched the liquid plain between Asia and America. The waters now had assumed that singular color which has earned for them the name of the Milky Sea. In the half shadow, which the enfeebled rays of the sun were unable to dissipate, the surface of the Pacific was a milky white. It seemed like a vast snowfield, whose undulations were imperceptible at such a height. If the sea had been solidified by the cold, and converted into an immense icefield, its aspect could not have been much different. They knew that the phenomenon was produced by myriads of luminous particles of phosphorescent corpuscles; but it was surprising to come across such an opalescent mass beyond the limits of the Indian Ocean.

Suddenly the barometer fell after keeping somewhat high during the earlier hours of the day. Evidently the indications were such as a shipmaster might feel anxious at, though the master of an aeronef might despise them. There was every sign that a terrible storm had recently raged in the Pacific.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon when Tom Turner came up to the engineer and said, “Do you see that black spot on the horizon, sir — there away to due north of us? That is not a rock?”

“No, Tom; there is no land out there.”

“Then it must be a ship or a boat.”

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, who were in the bow, looked in the direction pointed out by the mate.

Robur asked for the glass and attentively observed the object.

“It is a boat,” said he, “and there are some men in it.”

“Shipwrecked?” asked Tom.

“Yes! They have had to abandon their ship, and, knowing nothing of the nearest land, are perhaps dying of hunger and thirst! Well, it shall not be said that the “Albatross” did not come to their help!”

The orders were given, and the aeronef began to sink towards the sea. At three hundred yards from it the descent was stopped, and the propellers drove ahead full speed towards the north.

It was a boat. Her sail flapped against the mast as she rose and fell on the waves. There was no wind, and she was making no progress. Doubtless there was no one on board with strength enough left to work the oars. In the boat were five men asleep or helpless, if they were not dead.

The “Albatross” had arrived above them, and slowly descended. On the boat’s stern was the name of the ship to which she belonged — the “Jeannette” of Nantes.

“Hallo, there!” shouted Turner, loud enough for the men to hear, for the boat was only eighty feet below him.

There was no answer. “Fire a gun!” said Robur.

The gun was fired and the report rang out over the sea.

One of the men looked up feebly. His eyes were haggard and his face was that of a skeleton. As he caught sight of the “Albatross” he made a gesture as of fear.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Robur in French, “we have come to help you. Who are you?”

“We belong to the barque “Jeannette,” and I am the mate. We left her a fortnight ago as she was sinking. We have no water and no food.”

The four other men had now sat up. Wan and exhausted, in a terrible state of emaciation, they lifted their hands towards the “Albatross.”

“Look-out!” shouted Robur.

A line was let down, and a pail of fresh water was lowered into the boat. The men snatched at it and drank it with an eagerness awful to see.

“Bread, bread!” they exclaimed.

Immediately a basket with some food and five pints of coffee descended towards them. The mate with difficulty restrained them in their ravenousness.

“Where are we?” asked the mate at last.

“Fifty miles from the Chili coast and the Chonos Archipelago,” answered Robur.

“Thanks. But we are becalmed, and — ?”

“We are going to tow you.”

“Who are you?”

“People who are glad to be of assistance to you,” said Robur.

The mate understood that the incognito was to be respected. But had the flying machine sufficient power to tow them through the water?

Yes; and the boat, attached to a hundred feet of rope, began to move off towards the east. At ten o’clock at night the land was sighted — or rather they could see the lights which indicated its position. This rescue from the sky had come just in time for the survivors of the “Jeannette,” and they had good reason to believe it miraculous.

When they had been taken to the mouth of the channel leading among the Chonos Islands, Robur shouted to them to cast off the tow-line. This, with many a blessing to those who had saved them, they did, and the “Albatross” headed out to the offing.

Certainly there was some good in this aeronef, which could thus help those who were lost at sea! What balloon, perfect as it might be, would be able to perform such a service? And between themselves Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans could not but admire it, although they were quite disposed to deny the evidence of their senses.

CHAPTER XVIII

OVER THE VOLCANO

The sea was as rough as ever, and the symptoms became alarming. The barometer fell several millimeters. The wind came in violent gusts, and then for a moment or so failed altogether. Under such circumstances a sailing vessel would have had to reef in her topsails and her foresail. Everything showed that the wind was rising in the northwest. The storm-glass became much troubled and its movements were most disquieting.

At one o’clock in the morning the wind came on again with extreme violence. Although the aeronef was going right in its teeth she was still making progress at a rate of from twelve to fifteen miles an hour. But that was the utmost she could do.

Evidently preparations must be made for a cyclone, a very rare occurrence in these latitudes. Whether it be called a hurricane, as in the Atlantic, a typhoon, as in Chinese waters a simoom, as in the Sahara, or a tornado, as on the western coast, such a storm is always a gyratory one, and most dangerous for any ship caught in the current which increases from the circumference to the center, and has only one spot of calm, the middle of the vortex.

Robur knew this. He also knew it was best to escape from the cyclone and get beyond its zone of attraction by ascending to the higher strata. Up to then he had always succeeded in doing this, but now he had not an hour, perhaps not a minute, to lose.

In fact the violence of the wind sensibly increased. The crests of the waves were swept off as they rose and blown into white dust on the surface of the sea. It was manifest that the cyclone was advancing with fearful velocity straight towards the regions of the pole.

“Higher!” said Robur.

“Higher it is,” said Tom Tumor.

An extreme ascensional power was communicated to the aeronef, and she shot up slantingly as if she was traveling on a plane sloping downwards from the southwest. Suddenly the barometer fell more than a dozen millimeters and the “Albatross” paused in her ascent.

What was the cause of the stoppage? Evidently she was pulled back by the air; some formidable current had diminished the resistance to the screws. When a steamer travels upstream more work is got out of her screw than when the water is running between the blades. The recoil is then considerable, and may perhaps be as great as the current. It was thus with the “Albatross” at this moment.

But Robur was not the man to give in. His seventy-four screws, working perfectly together, were driven at their maximum speed. But the aeronef could not escape; the attraction of the cyclone was irresistible. During the few moments of calm she began to ascend, but the heavy pull soon drew her back, and she sunk like a ship as she founders.

Evidently if the violence of the cyclone went on increasing the “Albatross” would be but as a straw caught in one of those whirlwinds that root up the trees, carry off roofs, and blow down walls.

Robur and Tom could only speak by signs. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans clung to the rail and wondered if the cyclone was not playing their game in destroying the aeronef and with her the inventor — and with the inventor the secret of his invention.

But if the “Albatross” could not get out of the cyclone vertically could she not do something else? Could she not gain the center, where it was comparatively calm, and where they would have more control over her? Quite so, but to do this she would have to break through the circular currents which were sweeping her round with them. Had she sufficient mechanical power to escape through them?

Suddenly the upper part of the cloud fell in. The vapor condensed in torrents of rain. It was two o’clock in the morning. The barometer, oscillating over a range of twelve millimeters, had now fallen to 27.91, and from this something should be taken on account of the height of the aeronef above the level of the sea.

Strange to say, the cyclone was out of the zone to which such storms are generally restricted, such zone being bounded by the thirtieth parallel of north latitude and the twenty-sixth parallel of south latitude. This may perhaps explain why the eddying storm suddenly turned into a straight one. But what a hurricane! The tempest in Connecticut on the 22nd of March, 1882, could only have been compared to it, and the speed of that was more than three hundred miles an hour.

The “Albatross” had thus to fly before the wind or rather she had to be left to be driven by the current, from which she could neither mount nor escape. But in following this unchanging trajectory she was bearing due south, towards those polar regions which Robur had endeavored to avoid. And now he was no longer master of her course; she would go where the hurricane took her.

Tom Turner was at the helm, and it required all his skill to keep her straight. In the first hours of the morning — if we can so call the vague tint which began to rise over the horizon — the “Albatross” was fifteen degrees below Cape Horn; twelve hundred miles more and she would cross the antarctic circle. Where she was, in this month of July, the night lasted nineteen hours and a half. The sun’s disk — without warmth, without light — only appeared above the horizon to disappear almost immediately. At the pole the night lengthened into one of a hundred and seventy-nine hours. Everything showed that the “Albatross” was about to plunge into an abyss.

During the day an observation, had it been possible, would have given 66° 40’ south latitude. The aeronef was within fourteen hundred miles of the pole.

Irresistibly was she drawn towards this inaccessible corner of the globe, her speed eating up, so to speak, her weight, although she weighed less than before, owing to the flattening of the earth at the pole. It seemed as though she could have dispensed altogether with her suspensory screws. And soon the fury of the storm reached such a height that Robur thought it best to reduce the speed of her helices as much as possible, so as to avoid disaster. And only enough speed was given to keep the aeronef under control of the rudder.

Amid these dangers the engineer retained his imperturbable coolness, and the crew obeyed him as if their leader’s mind had entered into them. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had not for a moment left the deck; they could remain without being disturbed. The air made but slight resistance. The aeronef was like an aerostat, which drifts with the fluid masses in which it is plunged.

Is the domain of the southern pole a continent or an archipelago? Or is it a palaeocrystic sea, whose ice melts not even during the long summer? We know not. But what we do know is that the southern pole is colder than the northern one — a phenomenon due to the position of the earth in its orbit during winter in the antarctic regions.

During this day there was nothing to show that the storm was abating. It was by the seventy-fifth meridian to the west that the “Albatross” crossed into the circumpolar region. By what meridian would she come out — if she ever came out?

As she descended more to the south the length of the day diminished. Before long she would be plunged in that continuous night which is illuminated only by the rays of the moon or the pale streamers of the aurora. But the moon was then new, and the companions of Robur might see nothing of the regions whose secret has hitherto defied human curiosity, There was not much inconvenience on board from the cold, for the temperature was not nearly so low as was expected.

It seemed as though the hurricane was a sort of Gulf Stream, carrying a certain amount of heat along with it.

Great was the regret that the whole region was in such profound obscurity. Even if the moon had been in full glory but few observations could have been made. At this season of the year an immense curtain of snow, an icy carapace, covers up the polar surface. There was none of that ice “blink” to be seen, that whitish tint of which the reflection is absent from dark horizons. Under such circumstances, how could they distinguish the shape of the ground, the extent of the seas, the position of the islands? How could they recognize the hydrographic network of the country or the orographic configuration, and distinguish the hills and mountains from the icebergs and floes?

A little after midnight an aurora illuminated the darkness. With its silver fringes and spangles radiating over space, it seemed like a huge fan open over half the sky. Its farthest electric effluences were lost in the Southern Cross, whose four bright stars were gleaming overhead. The phenomenon was one of incomparable magnificence, and the light showed the face of the country as a confused mass of white.

It need not be said that they had approached so near to the pole that the compass was constantly affected, and gave no precise indication of the course pursued. Its inclination was such that at one time Robur felt certain they were passing over the magnetic pole discovered by Sir James Ross. And an hour later, in calculating the angle the needle made with the vertical, he exclaimed: “the South Pole is beneath us!”

A white cap appeared, but nothing could be seen of what it bid under its ice.

A few minutes afterwards the aurora died away, and the point where all the world’s meridians cross is still to be discovered.

If Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans wished to bury in the most mysterious solitudes the aeronef and all she bore, the moment was propitious. If they did not do so it was doubtless because the explosive they required was still denied to them.

The hurricane still raged and swept along with such rapidity that had a mountain been met with the aeronef would have been dashed to pieces like a ship on a lee shore. Not only had the power gone to steer her horizontally, but the control of her elevation had also vanished.

And it was not unlikely that mountains did exist in these antarctic lands. Any instant a shock might happen which would destroy the “Albatross.” Such a catastrophe became more probable as the wind shifted more to the east after they passed the prime meridian. Two luminous points then showed themselves ahead of the “Albatross.” There were the two volcanos of the Ross Mountains — Erebus and Terror. Was the “Albatross” to be shriveled up in their flames like a gigantic butterfly?

An hour of intense excitement followed. One of the volcanoes, Erebus, seemed to be rushing at the aeronef, which could not move from the bed of the hurricane. The cloud of flame grew as they neared it. A network of fire barred their road. A brilliant light shone round over all. The figures on board stood out in the bright light as if come from another world. Motionless, without a sound or a gesture, they waited for the terrible moment when the furnace would wrap them in its fires.

But the storm that bore the “Albatross” saved them from such a fearful fate. The flames of Erebus were blown down by the hurricane as it passed, and the “Albatross” flew over unhurt. She swept through a hail of ejected material, which was fortunately kept at bay by the centrifugal action of the suspensory screws. And she harmlessly passed over the crater while it was in full eruption.

An hour afterwards the horizon hid from their view the two colossal torches which light the confines of the world during the long polar night.

At two o’clock in the morning Balleny Island was sighted on the coast of Discovery Land, though it could not be recognized owing to its being bound to the mainland by a cement of ice.

And the “Albatross” emerged from the polar circle on the hundred and seventy-fifth meridian. The hurricane had carried her over the icebergs and icefloes, against which she was in danger of being dashed a hundred times or more. She was not in the hands of the helmsman, but in the hand of God — and God is a good pilot.

The aeronef sped along to the north, and at the sixtieth parallel the storm showed signs of dying away. Its violence sensibly diminished. The “Albatross” began to come under control again. And, what was a great comfort, had again entered the lighted regions of the globe; and the day reappeared about eight o’clock in the morning.

Robur had been carried by the storm into the Pacific over the polar region, accomplishing four thousand three hundred and fifty miles in nineteen hours, or about three miles a minute, a speed almost double that which the “Albatross” was equal to with her propellers under ordinary circumstances. But he did not know where he then was owing to the disturbance of the needle in the neighborhood of the magnetic pole, and he would have to wait till the sun shone out under convenient conditions for observation. Unfortunately, heavy clouds covered the sky all that day and the sun did not appear.

This was a disappointment more keenly felt as both propelling screws had sustained damage during the tempest. Robur, much disconcerted at this accident, could only advance at a moderate speed during this day, and when he passed over the antipodes of Paris was only going about eighteen miles an hour. It was necessary not to aggravate the damage to the screws, for if the propellers were rendered useless the situation of the aeronef above the vast seas of the Pacific would be a very awkward one. And the engineer began to consider if he could not effect his repairs on the spot, so as to make sure of continuing his voyage.

In the morning of the 27th of July, about seven o’clock, land was sighted to the north. It was soon seen to be an island. But which island was it of the thousands that dot the Pacific? However, Robur decided to stop at it without landing. He thought, that he could repair damages during the day and start in the evening.

The wind had died away completely and this was a favorable circumstance for the maneuver he desired to execute. At least, if she did not remain stationary the “Albatross” would be carried he knew not where.

A cable one hundred and fifty feet long with an anchor at the end was dropped overboard. When the aeronef reached the shore of the island the anchor dragged up the first few rocks and then got firmly fixed between two large blocks. The cable then stretched to full length under the influence of the suspensory screws, and the “Albatross” remained motionless, riding like a ship in a roadstead.

It was the first time she had been fastened to the earth since she left Philadelphia.

CHAPTER XIX

ANCHORED AT LAST

When the “Albatross” was high in the air the island could be seen to be of moderate size. But on what parallel was it situated? What meridian ran through it? Was it an island in the Pacific, in Australasia, or in the Indian Ocean? When the sun appeared, and Robur had taken his observations, they would know; but although they could not trust to the indications of the compass there was reason to think they were in the Pacific.

At this height — one hundred and fifty feet — the island which measured about fifteen miles round, was like a three-pointed star in the sea.

Off the southwest point was an islet and a range of rocks. On the shore there were no tide-marks, and this tended to confirm Robur in his opinion as to his position for the ebb and flow are almost imperceptible in the Pacific.

At the northwest point there was a conical mountain about two hundred feet high.

No natives were to be seen, but they might be on the opposite coast. In any case, if they had perceived the aeronef, terror had made them either hide themselves or run away. The “Albatross” had anchored on the southwest point of the island. Not far off, down a little creek, a small river flowed in among the rocks. Beyond were several winding valleys; trees of different kinds; and birds — partridges and bustards — in great numbers. If the island was not inhabited it was habitable. Robur might surely have landed on it; if he had not done so it was probably because the ground was uneven and did not offer a convenient spot to beach the aeronef.

While he was waiting for the sun the engineer began the repairs he reckoned on completing before the day was over. The suspensory screws were undamaged and had worked admirably amid all the violence of the storm, which, as we have said, had considerably lightened their work. At this moment half of them were in action, enough to keep the “Albatross” fixed to the shore by the taut cable. But the two propellers had suffered, and more than Robur had thought. Their blades would have to be adjusted and the gearing seen to by which they received their rotatory movement.

It was the screw at the bow which was first attacked under Robur’s superintendence. It was the best to commence with, in case the “Albatross” had to leave before the work was finished. With only this propeller he could easily keep a proper course.

Meanwhile Uncle Prudent and his colleague, after walking about the deck, had sat down aft. Frycollin was strangely reassured. What a difference! To be suspended only one hundred and fifty feet from the ground!

The work was only interrupted for a moment while the elevation of the sun above the horizon allowed Robur to take an horary angle, so that at the time of its culmination he could calculate his position.

The result of the observation, taken with the greatest exactitude, was as follows:

Longitude, 176° 10’ west.

Latitude, 44° 25’ south.

This point on the map answered to the position of the Chatham Islands, and particularly of Pitt Island, one of the group.

“That is nearer than I supposed,” said Robur to Tom Turner.

“How far off are we?”

“Forty-six degrees south of X Island, or two thousand eight hundred miles.”

“All the more reason to get our propellers into order,” said the mate. “We may have the wind against us this passage, and with the little stores we have left we ought to get to X as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Tom, and I hope to get under way tonight, even if I go with one screw, and put the other to-rights on the voyage.”

“Mr. Robur,” said Tom “What is to be done with those two gentlemen and their servant?”

“Do you think they would complain if they became colonists of X Island?”

But where was this X? It was an island lost in the immensity of the Pacific Ocean between the Equator and the Tropic of Cancer — an island most appropriately named by Robur in this algebraic fashion. It was in the north of the South Pacific, a long way out of the route of inter-oceanic communication. There it was that Robur had founded his little colony, and there the “Albatross” rested when tired with her flight. There she was provisioned for all her voyages. In X Island, Robur, a man of immense wealth, had established a shipyard in which he built his aeronef. There he could repair it, and even rebuild it. In his warehouses were materials and provisions of all sorts stored for the fifty inhabitants who lived on the island.

When Robur had doubled Cape Horn a few days before his intention had been to regain X Island by crossing the Pacific obliquely. But the cyclone had seized the “Albatross,” and the hurricane had carried her away to the south. In fact, he had been brought back to much the same latitude as before, and if his propellers had not been damaged the delay would have been of no importance.

His object was therefore to get back to X Island, but as the mate had said, the voyage would be a long one, and the winds would probably be against them. The mechanical power of the “Albatross” was, however, quite equal to taking her to her destination, and under ordinary circumstances she would be there in three or four days.

Hence Robur’s resolve to anchor on the Chatham Islands. There was every opportunity for repairing at least the fore-screw. He had no fear that if the wind were to rise he would be driven to the south instead of to the north. When night came the repairs would be finished, and he would have to maneuver so as to weigh anchor. If it were too firmly fixed in the rocks he could cut the cable and resume his flight towards the equator.

The crew of the “Albatross,” knowing there was no time to lose, set to work vigorously.

While they were busy in the bow of the aeronef, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans held a little conversation together which had exceptionally important consequences.

“Phil Evans,” said Uncle Prudent, “you have resolved, as I have, to sacrifice your life?”

“Yes, like you.”

“It is evident that we can expect nothing from Robur.”

“Nothing.”

“Well, Phil Evans, I have made up my mind. If the “Albatross” leaves this place tonight, the night will not pass without our having accomplished our task. We will smash the wings of this bird of Robur’s! This night I will blow it into the air!”

“The sooner the better,” said Phil Evans.

It will be seen that the two colleagues were agreed on all points even in accepting with indifference the frightful death in store for them. “Have you all you want?” asked Evans.

“Yes. Last night, while Robur and his people had enough to do to look after the safety of the ship, I slipped into the magazine and got hold of a dynamite cartridge.”

“Let us set to work, Uncle Prudent.”

“No. Wait till tonight. When the night comes we will go into our cabin, and you shall see something that will surprise you.”

At six o’clock the colleagues dined together as usual. Two hours afterwards they retired to their cabin like men who wished to make up for a sleepless night.

Neither Robur nor any of his companions had a suspicion of the catastrophe that threatened the “Albatross.”

This was Uncle Prudent’s plan. As he had said, he had stolen into the magazine, and there had possessed himself of some powder and cartridge like those used by Robur in Dahomey. Returning to his cabin, he had carefully concealed the cartridge with which he had resolved to blow up the "Albatross" in mid-air.

Phil Evans, screened by his companion, was now examining the infernal machine, which was a metallic canister containing about two pounds of dynamite, enough to shatter the aeronef to atoms. If the explosion did not destroy her at once, it would do so in her fall. Nothing was easier than to place this cartridge in a corner of the cabin, so that it would blow in the deck and tear away the framework of the hull.

But to obtain the explosion it was necessary to adjust the fulminating cap with which the cartridge was fitted. This was the most delicate part of the operation, for the explosion would have to be carefully timed, so as not to occur too soon or too late.

Uncle Prudent had carefully thought over the matter. His conclusions were as follows. As soon as the fore propeller was repaired the aeronef would resume her course to the north, and that done Robur and his crew would probably come aft to put the other screw into order. The presence of these people about the cabin might interfere with his plans, and so he had resolved to make a slow match do duty as a time-fuse.

"When I got the cartridge," said he to Phil Evans, "I took some gunpowder as well. With the powder I will make a fuse that will take some time to burn, and which will lead into the fulminate. My idea is to light it about midnight, so that the explosion will take place about three or four o'clock in the morning."

"Well planned!" said Phil Evans.

The colleagues, as we see, had arrived at such a stage as to look with the greatest nonchalance on the awful destruction in which they were about to perish. Their hatred against Robur and his people had so increased that they would sacrifice their own lives to destroy the “Albatross” and all she bore. The act was that of madmen, it was horrible; but at such a pitch had they arrived after five weeks of anger that could not vent itself, of rage that could not be gratified.

“And Frycollin?” asked Phil Evans, “have we the right to dispose of his life?”

“We shall sacrifice ours as well!” said Uncle Prudent. But it is doubtful if Frycollin would have thought the reason sufficient.

Immediately Uncle Prudent set to work, while Evans kept watch in the neighborhood of the cabin. The crew were all at work forward. There was no fear of being surprised. Uncle Prudent began by rubbing a small quantity of the powder very fine; and then, having slightly moistened it, he wrapped it up in a piece of rag in the shape of a match. When it was lighted he calculated it would burn about an inch in five minutes, or a yard in three hours. The match was tried and found to answer, and was then wound round with string and attached to the cap of the cartridge. Uncle Prudent had all finished about ten o’clock in the evening without having excited the least suspicion.

During the day the work on the fore screw had been actively carried on, but it had had to be taken on board to adjust the twisted blades. Of the piles and accumulators and the machinery that drove the ship nothing was damaged.

When night fell Robur and his men knocked off work. The fore propeller not been got into place, and to finish it would take another three hours.

After some conversation with Tom Turner it was decided to give the crew a rest, and postpone what required to be done to the next morning.

The final adjustment was a matter of extreme nicety, and the electric lamps did not give so suitable a light for such work as the daylight.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans were not aware of this. They had understood that the screw would be in place during the night, and that the “Albatross” would be on her way to the north.

The night was dark and moonless. Heavy clouds made the darkness deeper. A light breeze began to rise. A few puffs came from the southwest, but they had no effect on the “Albatross.” She remained motionless at her anchor, and the cable stretched vertically downward to the ground.

Uncle Prudent and his colleague, imagining they were under way again, sat shut up in their cabin, exchanging but a few words, and listening to the f-r-r-r-r of the suspensory screws, which drowned every other sound on board. They were waiting till the time of action arrived.

A little before midnight Uncle Prudent said, “It is time!” Under the berths in the cabin was a sliding box, forming a small locker, and in this locker Uncle Prudent put the dynamite and the slow-match. In this way the match would burn without betraying itself by its smoke or spluttering. Uncle Prudent lighted the end and pushed back the box under the berth with “Now let us go aft, and wait.”

They then went out, and were astonished not to find the steersman at his post.

Phil Evans leant out over the rail.

“The “Albatross” is where she was,” said he in a low voice. “The work is not finished. They have not started!”

Uncle Prudent made a gesture of disappointment. “We shall have to put out the match,” said he.

“No,” said Phil Evans, “we must escape!”

“Escape?”

“Yes! down the cable! Fifty yards is nothing!”

“Nothing, of course, Phil Evans, and we should be fools not to take the chance now it has come.”

But first they went back to the cabin and took away all they could carry, with a view to a more or less prolonged stay on the Chatham Islands. Then they shut the door and noiselessly crept forward, intending to wake Frycollin and take him with them.

The darkness was intense. The clouds were racing up from the southwest, and the aeronef was tugging at her anchor and thus throwing the cable more and more out of the vertical. There would be no difficulty in slipping down it.

The colleagues made their way along the deck, stopping in the shadow of the deckhouses to listen if there was any sound. The silence was unbroken. No light shone from the portholes. The aeronef was not only silent; she was asleep.

Uncle Prudent was close to Frycollin’s cabin when Phil Evans stopped him. “The look-out!” he said.

A man was crouching near the deck-house. He was only half asleep. All flight would be impossible if he were to give the alarm. Close by were a few ropes, and pieces of rag and waste used in the work at the screw.

An instant afterwards the man was gagged and blindfolded and lashed to the rail unable to utter a sound or move an inch. This was done almost without a whisper.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans listened. All was silent within the cabins. Every one on board was asleep. They reached Frycollin's cabin. Tapage was snoring away in a style worthy of his name, and that promised well.

To his great surprise, Uncle Prudent had not even to push Frycollin's door. It was open. He stepped into the doorway and looked around. "Nobody here!" he said.

"Nobody! Where can he be?" asked Phil Evans.

They went into the bow, thinking Frycollin might perhaps be asleep in the corner. Still they found nobody.

"Has the fellow got the start of us?" asked Uncle Prudent.

"Whether he has or not," said Phil Evans, "we can't wait any longer. Down you go."

Without hesitation the fugitives one after the other clambered over the side and, seizing the cable with hands and feet slipped down it safe and sound to the ground.

Think of their joy at again treading the earth they had lost for so long — at walking on solid ground and being no longer the playthings of the atmosphere!

They were staring up the creek to the interior of the island when suddenly a form rose in front of them. It was Frycollin. The Negro had had the same idea as his master and the audacity to start without telling him. But there was no time for recriminations, and Uncle Prudent was in search of a refuge in some distant part of the island when Phil Evans stopped him.

“Uncle Prudent,” said he. “Here we are safe from Robur. He is doomed like his companions to a terrible death. He deserves it, we know. But if he would swear on his honor not to take us prisoners again — ”

“The honor of such a man — ”

Uncle Prudent did not finish his sentence.

There was a noise on the “Albatross.” Evidently, the alarm had been given. The escape was discovered.

“Help! Help!” shouted somebody. It was the look-out man, who had got rid of his gag. Hurried footsteps were heard on deck. Almost immediately the electric lamps shot beams over a large circle.

“There they are! There they are!” shouted Tom Turner. The fugitives were seen.

At the same instant an order was given by Robur, and the suspensory screws being slowed, the cable was hauled in on board, and the “Albatross” sank towards the ground.

At this moment the voice of Phil Evans was heard shouting, “Engineer Robur, will you give us your word of honor to leave us free on this island?”

“Never!” said Robur. And the reply was followed by the report of a gun, and the bullet grazed Phil’s shoulder.

“Ah! The brutes!” said Uncle Prudent. Knife in hand, he rushed towards the rocks where the anchor had fixed itself. The aeronef was not more than fifty feet from the ground.

In a few seconds the cable was cut, and the breeze, which had increased considerably, striking the “Albatross” on the quarter, carried her out over the sea.

CHAPTER XX

THE WRECK OF THE ALBATROSS

It was then twenty minutes after midnight. Five or six shots had been fired from the aeronef. Uncle Prudent and Frycollin, supporting Phil Evans, had taken shelter among the rocks. They had not been hit. For the moment there was nothing to fear.

As the “Albatross” drifted off from Pitt Island she rose obliquely to nearly three thousand feet. It was necessary to increase the ascensional power to prevent her falling into the sea.

When the look-out man had got clear of his gag and shouted, Robur and Tom Turner had rushed up to him and torn off his bandage. The mate had then run back to the stern cabin. It was empty! Tapage had searched Frycollin’s cabin, and that also was empty.

When he saw that the prisoners had escaped, Robur was seized with a paroxysm of anger. The escape meant the revelation of his secret to the world. He had not been much concerned at the document thrown overboard while they were crossing Europe, for there were so many chances that it would be lost in its fall; but now!

As he grew calm, “They have escaped,” said he. “Be it so! But they cannot get away from Pitt Island, and in a day or so I will go back! I will recapture them! And then — ”

In fact, the safety of the three fugitives was by no means assured. The “Albatross” would be repaired, and return well in hand. Before the day was out they might again be in the power of the engineer.

Before the day was out! But in two hours the “Albatross” would be annihilated! The dynamite cartridge was like a torpedo fastened to her hull, and would accomplish her destruction in mid-air. The breeze freshened, and the aeronef was carried to the northeast. Although her speed was but moderate, she would be out of sight of the Chatham Islands before sunrise. To return against the wind she must have her propellers going, particularly the one in the bow.

“Tom,” said the engineer, “turn the lights full on.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And all hands to work.”

“Yes, Sir.”

There was no longer any idea of putting off the work till tomorrow. There was now no thought of fatigue. Not one of the men of the “Albatross” failed to share in the feelings of his chief. Not one but was ready to do anything to recapture the fugitives!

As soon as the screw was in place they would return to the island and drop another anchor, and give chase to the fugitives. Then only would they begin repairing the stern-screw; and then the aeronef could resume her voyage across the Pacific to X Island.

It was important, above all things, that the “Albatross” should not be carried too far to the northeast, but unfortunately the breeze grew stronger, and she could not head against it, or even remain stationary. Deprived of her propellers she was an unguidable balloon. The fugitives on the shore knew that she would have disappeared before the explosion blew her to pieces.

Robur felt much disappointment at seeing his plans so interfered with. Would it not take him much longer than he thought to get back to his old anchorage?

While the work at the screw was actively pushed on, he resolved to descend to the surface of the sea, in the hope that the wind would there be lighter. Perhaps the “Albatross” would be able to remain in the neighborhood until she was again fit to work to windward.

The maneuver was instantly executed. If a passing ship had sighted the aerial machine as she sunk through the air, with her electric lights in full blaze, with what terror would she have been seized!

When the “Albatross” was a few hundred feet from the waves she stopped. Unfortunately Robur found that the breeze was stronger here than above, and the aeronef drifted off more rapidly. He risked being blown a long, way off to the northeast, and that would delay his return to Pitt Island. In short, after several experiments, he found it better to keep his ship well up in the air, and the “Albatross” went aloft to about ten thousand feet. There, if she did not remain stationary, the drifting was very slight. The engineer could thus hope that by sunrise at such an altitude he would still be in sight of the island.

Robur did not trouble himself about the reception the fugitives might have received from the natives — if there were any natives. That they might help them mattered little to him. With the powers of offense possessed by the “Albatross” they would be promptly terrified and dispersed. The capture of the prisoners was certain, and once he had them again, “They will not escape from X Island!”

About one o’clock in the morning the fore-screw was finished, and all that had to be done was to get it back to its place. This would take about an hour. That done, the “Albatross” would be headed southwest and the stern-screw could be taken in hand.

And how about the match that was burning in the deserted cabin? The match of which more than a third was now consumed? And the spark that was creeping along to the dynamite?

Assuredly if the men of the aeronef had not been so busy one of them would have heard the feeble sputtering that was going on in the deck-house. Perhaps he would have smelt the burning powder! He would doubtless have become uneasy! And told Tom Turner! And then they would have looked about, and found the box and the infernal machine; and then there would have been time to save this wonderful “Albatross” and all she bore!

But the men were at work in the bow, twenty yards away from the cabin. Nothing brought them to that part of the deck; nothing called off their attention from their work. Robur was there working with his hands, excellent mechanic as he was. He hurried on the work, but nothing was neglected, everything was carefully done. Was it not necessary that he should again become absolute master of his invention? If he did not recapture the fugitives they would get away home. They would begin inquiring into matters. They might even discover X Island, and there would be an end to this life, which the men of the “Albatross” had created for themselves, a life that seemed superhuman and sublime.

Tom Turner came up to the engineer. It was a quarter past one. “It seems to me, sir, that the breeze is falling, and going round to the west.”

“What does the barometer say?” asked Robur, after looking up at the sky.

“It is almost stationary, and the clouds seem gathering below us.”

“So they are, and it may be raining down at the sea; but if we keep above the rain it makes no difference to us. It will not interfere with the work.”

“If it is raining it is not a heavy rain,” said Tom. “The clouds do not look like it, and probably the wind has dropped altogether.”

“Perhaps so, but I think we had better not go down yet. Let us get into going order as soon as we can, and then we can do as we like.”

At a few minutes after two the first part of the work was finished. The fore-screw was in its place, and the power was turned on. The speed was gradually increased, and the “Albatross,” heading to the southwest, returned at moderate speed towards the Chatham Islands.

“Tom,” said Robur, “it is about two hours and a half since we got adrift. The wind has not changed all the time. I think we ought to be over the island in an hour.”

“Yes, sir. We are going about forty feet a second. We ought to be there about half-past three.”

“All the better. It would suit us best to get back while it is dark, and even beach the “Albatross” if we can. Those fellows will fancy we are a long way off to the northward, and never think of keeping a look-out. If we have to stop a day or two on the island — ”

“We’ll stop, and if we have to fight an army of natives?”

“We’ll fight,” said Robur. “We’ll fight then for our “Albatross.”“

The engineer went forward to the men, who were waiting for orders. “My lads,” he said to them, “we cannot knock off yet. We must work till day comes.”

They were all ready to do so. The stern-screw had now to be treated as the other had been. The damage was the same, a twisting from the violence of the hurricane during the passage across the southern pole.

But to get the screw on board it seemed best to stop the progress of the aeronef for a few minutes, and even to drive her backwards. The engines were reversed. The aeronef began to fall astern, when Tom Turner was surprised by a peculiar odor.

This was from the gas given off by the match, which had accumulated in the box, and was now escaping from the cabin. “Hallo!” said the mate, with a sniff.

“What is the matter?” asked Robur.

“Don’t you smell something? Isn’t it burning powder?”

“So it is, Tom.”

“And it comes from that cabin.”

“Yes, the very cabin — ”

“Have those scoundrels set it on fire?”

“Suppose it is something else!” exclaimed Robur. “Force the door, Tom; drive in the door!”

But the mate had not made one step towards it when a fearful explosion shook the “Albatross.” The cabins flew into splinters. The lamps went out. The electric current suddenly failed. The darkness was complete. Most of the suspensory screws were twisted or broken, but a few in the bow still revolved.

At the same instant the hull of the aeronef opened just behind the first deck-house, where the engines for the fore-screw were placed; and the after-part of the deck collapsed in space.

Immediately the last suspensory screw stopped spinning, and the “Albatross” dropped into the abyss.

It was a fall of ten thousand feet for the eight men who were clinging to the wreck; and the fall was even faster than it might have been, for the fore propeller was vertical in the air and still working!

It was then that Robur, with extraordinary coolness, climbed up to the broken deck-house, and seizing the lever reversed the rotation, so that the propeller became a suspender. The fall continued, but it was checked, and the wreck did not fall with the accelerating swiftness of bodies influenced solely by gravitation; and if it was death to the survivors of the “Albatross” from their being hurled into the sea, it was not death by asphyxia amid air which the rapidity of descent rendered unbreathable.

Eighty seconds after the explosion, all that remained of the “Albatross” plunged into the waves!

CHAPTER XXI

THE INSTITUTE AGAIN

Some weeks before, on the 13th of June, on the morning after the sitting during which the Weldon Institute had been given over to such stormy discussions, the excitement of all classes of the Philadelphia population, black or white, had been much easier to imagine than to describe.

From a very early hour conversation was entirely occupied with the unexpected and scandalous incident of the night before. A stranger calling himself an engineer, and answering to the name of Robur, a person of unknown origin, of anonymous nationality, had unexpectedly presented himself in the club-room, insulted the balloonists, made fun of the aeronauts, boasted of the marvels of machines heavier than air, and raised a frightful tumult by the remarks with which he greeted the menaces of his adversaries. After leaving the desk, amid a volley of revolver shots, he had disappeared, and in spite of every endeavor, no trace could be found of him.

Assuredly here was enough to exercise every tongue and excite every imagination. But by how much was this excitement increased when in the evening of the 13th of June it was found that neither the president nor secretary of the Weldon Institute had returned to their homes! Was it by chance only that they were absent? No, or at least there was nothing to lead people to think so. It had even been agreed that in the morning they would be back at the club, one as president, the other as secretary, to take their places during a discussion on the events of the preceding evening.

And not only was there the complete disappearance of these two considerable personages in the state of Pennsylvania, but there was no news of the valet Frycollin. He was as undiscoverable as his master. Never had a

Negro since Toussaint L’Ouverture, Soulouque, or Dessaline had so much talked about him.

The next day there was no news. Neither the colleagues nor Frycollin had been found. The anxiety became serious. Agitation commenced. A numerous crowd besieged the post and telegraph offices in case any news should be received. There was no news.

And they had been seen coming out of the Weldon Institute loudly talking together, and with Frycollin in attendance, go down Walnut Street towards Fairmount Park! Jem Chip, the vegetarian, had even shaken hands with the president and left him with “Tomorrow!”

And William T. Forbes, the manufacturer of sugar from rags, had received a cordial shake from Phil Evans who had said to him twice, “Au revoir! Au revoir!”

Miss Doll and Miss Mat Forbes, so attached to Uncle Prudent by the bonds of purest friendship, could not get over the disappearance, and in order to obtain news of the absent, talked even more than they were accustomed to.

Three, four, five, six days passed. Then a week, then two weeks, and there was nothing to give a clue to the missing three. The most minute search had been made in every quarter. Nothing! In the park, even under the trees and brushwood. Nothing! Always nothing! Although here it was noticed that the grass looked to be pressed down in a way that seemed suspicious and certainly was inexplicable; and at the edge of the clearing there were traces of a recent struggle. Perhaps a band of scoundrels had attacked the colleagues here in the deserted park in the middle of the night!

It was possible. The police proceeded with their inquiries in all due form and with all lawful slowness. They dragged the Schuyllkill river, and cut into the thick bushes that fringe its banks; and if this was useless it was not quite a waste, for the Schuyllkill is in great want of a good weeding, and it got it on this occasion. Practical people are the authorities of Philadelphia!

Then the newspapers were tried. Advertisements and notices and articles were sent to all the journals in the Union without distinction of color. The "Daily Negro," the special organ of the black race, published a portrait of Frycollin after his latest photograph. Rewards were offered to whoever would give news of the three absentees, and even to those who would find some clue to put the police on the track. "Five thousand dollars! Five thousand dollars to any citizen who would — "

Nothing was done. The five thousand dollars remained with the treasurer of the Weldon Institute.

Undiscoverable! Undiscoverable! Undiscoverable! Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, of Philadelphia!

It need hardly be said that the club was put to serious inconvenience by this disappearance of its president and secretary. And at first the assembly voted urgency to a measure which suspended the work on the "Go-Ahead." How, in the absence of the principal promoters of the affair, of those who had devoted to the enterprise a certain part of their fortune in time and money — how could they finish the work when these were not present? It were better, then, to wait.

And just then came the first news of the strange phenomenon which had exercised people's minds some weeks before. The mysterious object had been again seen at different times in the higher regions of the atmosphere.

But nobody dreamt of establishing a connection between this singular reappearance and the no less singular disappearance of the members of the Weldon Institute. In fact, it would have required a very strong dose of imagination to connect one of these facts with the other.

Whatever it might be, asteroid or aerolite or aerial monster, it had reappeared in such a way that its dimensions and shape could be much better appreciated, first in Canada, over the country between Ottawa and Quebec, on the very morning after the disappearance of the colleagues, and later over the plains of the Far West, where it had tried its speed against an express train on the Union Pacific.

At the end of this day the doubts of the learned world were at an end. The body was not a product of nature, it was a flying machine, the practical application of the theory of “heavier than air.” And if the inventor of the aeronef had wished to keep himself unknown he could evidently have done better than to try it over the Far West. As to the mechanical force he required, or the engines by which it was communicated, nothing was known, but there could be no doubt the aeronef was gifted with an extraordinary faculty of locomotion. In fact, a few days afterwards it was reported from the Celestial Empire, then from the southern part of India, then from the Russian steppes.

Who was then this bold mechanician that possessed such powers of locomotion, for whom States had no frontiers and oceans no limits, who disposed of the terrestrial atmosphere as if it were his domain? Could it be this Robur whose theories had been so brutally thrown in the face of the Weldon Institute the day he led the attack against the utopia of guidable balloons? Perhaps such a notion occurred to some of the wide-awake people, but none dreamt that the said Robur had anything to do with the disappearance of the president and secretary of the Institute.

Things remained in this state of mystery when a telegram arrived from France through the New York cable at 11-37 A.M. on July 13. And what was this telegram? It was the text of the document found at Paris in a snuff-box revealing what had happened to the two personages for whom the Union was in mourning.

So, then, the perpetrator of this kidnapping “was” Robur the engineer, come expressly to Philadelphia to destroy in its egg the theory of the balloonists. He it was who commanded the “Albatross!” He it was who carried off by way of reprisal Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans and Frycollin; and they might be considered lost for ever. At least until some means were found of constructing an engine capable of contending with this powerful machine their terrestrial friends would never bring them back to earth.

What excitement! What stupor! The telegram from Paris had been addressed to the members of the Weldon Institute. The members of the club were immediately informed of it. Ten minutes later all Philadelphia received the news through its telephones, and in less than an hour all America heard of it through the innumerable electric wires of the new continent.

No one would believe it! “It is an unseasonable joke,” said some. “It is all smoke,” said others. How could such a thing be done in Philadelphia, and so secretly, too? How could the “Albatross” have been beached in Fairmount Park without its appearance having been signaled all over Pennsylvania?

Very good. These were the arguments. The incredulous had the right of doubting. But the right did not last long. Seven days after the receipt of the telegram the French mail-boat “Normandie” came into the Hudson, bringing the famous snuff-box. The railway took it in all haste from New York to Philadelphia.

It was indeed the snuff-box of the President of the Weldon Institute. Jem Chip would have done on at day to take some more substantial nourishment, for he fell into a swoon when he recognized it. How many a time had he taken from it the pinch of friendship! And Miss Doll and Miss Mat also recognized it, and so did William T. Forbes, Truck Milnor, Bat T. Fynn, and many other members. And not only was it the president’s snuff-box, it was the president’s writing!

Then did the people lament and stretch out their hands in despair to the skies. Uncle Prudent and his colleague carried away in a flying machine, and no one able to deliver them!

The Niagara Falls Company, in which Uncle Prudent was the largest shareholder, thought of suspending its business and turning off its cataracts. The Wheelton Watch Company thought of winding up its machinery, now it had lost its manager.

Nothing more was heard of the aeronef. July passed, and there was no news. August ran its course, and the uncertainty on the subject of Robur’s prisoners was as great as ever. Had he, like Icarus, fallen a victim to his own temerity?

The first twenty-seven days of September went by without result, but on the 28th a rumor spread through Philadelphia that Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had during the afternoon quietly walked into the president’s house.

And, what was more extraordinary, the rumor was true, although very few believed it.

They had, however, to give in to the evidence. There could be no doubt these were the two men, and not their shadows. And Frycollin also had come back! The members of the club, then their friends, then the crowd, swarmed into the president's house, and shook hands with the president and secretary, and cheered them again and again. Jem Chip was there, having left his luncheon's joint of boiled lettuces, and William T. Forbes and his daughters, and all the members of the club. It is a mystery how Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans emerged alive from the thousands who welcomed them.

On that evening was the weekly meeting of the Institute. It was expected that the colleagues would take their places at the desk. As they had said nothing of their adventures, it was thought they would then speak, and relate the impressions of their voyage. But for some reason or other both were silent. And so also was Frycollin, whom his congeners in their delirium had failed to dismember.

But though the colleagues did not tell what had happened to them, that is no reason why we should not. We know what occurred on the night of the 27th and 28th of July; the daring escape to the earth, the scramble among the rocks, the bullet fired at Phil Evans, the cut cable, and the "Albatross" deprived of her propellers, drifting off to the northeast at a great altitude. Her electric lamps rendered her visible for some time. And then she disappeared.

The fugitives had little to fear. Now could Robur get back to the island for three or four hours if his screws were out of gear? By that time the "Albatross" would have been destroyed by the explosion, and be no more than a wreck floating on the sea; those whom she bore would be mangled corpses, which the ocean would not even give up again. The act of vengeance would be accomplished.

Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans looked upon it as an act of legitimate self-defence, and felt no remorse whatever. Evans was but slightly wounded by the rifle bullet, and the three made their way up from the shore in the hope of meeting some of the natives. The hope was realized. About fifty natives were living by fishing off the western coast. They had seen the aeronef descend on the island, and they welcomed the fugitives as if they were supernatural beings. They worshipped them, we ought rather to say. They accommodated them in the most comfortable of their huts.

As they had expected, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans saw nothing more of the aeronef. They concluded that the catastrophe had taken place in some high region of the atmosphere, and that they would hear no more of Robur and his prodigious machine.

Meanwhile they had to wait for an opportunity of returning to America. The Chatham Islands are not much visited by navigators, and all August passed without sign of a ship. The fugitives began to ask themselves if they had not exchanged one prison for another.

At last a ship came to water at the Chatham Islands. It will not have been forgotten that when Uncle Prudent was seized he had on him several thousand paper dollars, much more than would take him back to America. After thanking their adorers, who were not sparing of their most respectful demonstrations, Uncle Prudent, Phil Evans, and Frycollin embarked for Auckland. They said nothing of their adventures, and in two weeks landed in New Zealand.

At Auckland, a mail-boat took them on board as passengers, and after a splendid passage the survivors of the “Albatross” stepped ashore at San Francisco. They said nothing as to who they were or whence they had come, but as they had paid full price for their berths no American captain would trouble them further. At San Francisco they took the first train out on the Pacific Railway, and on the 27th of September, they arrived at Philadelphia, That is the compendious history of what had occurred since the escape of the fugitives. And that is why this very evening the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute took their seats amid a most extraordinary attendance.

Never before had either of them been so calm. To look at them it did not seem as though anything abnormal had happened since the memorable sitting of the 12th of June. Three months and a half had gone, and seemed to be counted as nothing. After the first round of cheers, which both received without showing the slightest emotion, Uncle Prudent took off his hat and spoke.

“Worthy citizens,” said he, “the meeting is now open.”

Tremendous applause. And properly so, for if it was not extraordinary that the meeting was open, it was extraordinary that it should be opened by Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans.

The president allowed the enthusiasm to subside in shouts and clappings; then he continued: “At our last meeting, gentlemen, the discussion was somewhat animated — (hear, hear) — between the partisans of the screw before and those of the screw behind for our balloon the “Go-Ahead.” (Marks of surprise.) We have found a way to bring the beforists and the behindists in agreement. That way is as follows: we are going to use two screws, one at each end of the car.” Silence, and complete stupefaction.

That was all.

Yes, all! Of the kidnapping of the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute not a word! Not a word of the “Albatross” nor of Robur! Not a word of the voyage! Not a word of the way in which the prisoners had escaped! Not a word of what had become of the aeronef, if it still flew through space, or if they were to be prepared for new reprisals on the member’s of the club!

Of course the balloonists were longing to ask Uncle Prudent and the secretary about all these things, but they looked so close and so serious that they thought it best to respect their attitude. When they thought fit to speak they would do so, and it would be an honor to hear. After all, there might be in all this some secret which would not yet be divulged.

And then Uncle Prudent, resuming his speech amid a silence up to then unknown in the meetings of the Weldon Institute, said, “Gentlemen, it now only remains for us to finish the aerostat ‘Go-Ahead.’ It is left to her to effect the conquest of the air! The meeting is at an end!”

CHAPTER XXII

THE GO-AHEAD IS LAUNCHED

On the following 19th of April, seven months after the unexpected return of Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, Philadelphia was in a state of unwonted excitement. There were neither elections nor meetings this time. The aerostat “Go-Ahead,” built by the Weldon Institute, was to take possession of her natural element.

The celebrated Harry W. Tinder, whose name we mentioned at the beginning of this story, had been engaged as aeronaut. He had no assistant, and the only passengers were to be the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute.

Did they not merit such an honor? Did it not come to them appropriately to rise in person to protest against any apparatus that was heavier than air?

During the seven months, however, they had said nothing of their adventures; and even Frycollin had not uttered a whisper of Robur and his wonderful clipper. Probably Uncle Prudent and his friend desired that no question should arise as to the merits of the aeronef, or any other flying machine.

Although the “Go-Ahead” might not claim the first place among aerial locomotives, they would have nothing to say about the inventions of other aviators. They believed, and would always believe, that the true atmospheric vehicle was the aerostat, and that to it alone belonged the future.

Besides, he on whom they had been so terribly — and in their idea so justly — avenged, existed no longer. None of those who accompanied him had survived. The secret of the “Albatross” was buried in the depths of the Pacific!

That Robur had a retreat, an island in the middle of that vast ocean, where he could put into port, was only a hypothesis; and the colleagues reserved to themselves the right of making inquiries on the subject later on. The grand experiment which the Weldon Institute had been preparing for so long was at last to take place. The “Go-Ahead” was the most perfect type of what had up to then been invented in aerostatic art — she was what an “Inflexible” or a “Formidable” is in ships of war.

She possessed all the qualities of a good aerostat. Her dimensions allowed of her rising to the greatest height a balloon could attain; her impermeability enabled her to remain for an indefinite time in the atmosphere; her solidity would defy any dilation of gas or violence of wind or rain; her capacity gave her sufficient ascensional force to lift with all their accessories an electric engine that would communicate to her propellers a power superior to anything yet obtained. The “Go-Ahead” was of elongated form, so as to facilitate her horizontal displacement. Her car was a platform somewhat like that of the balloon used by Krebs and Renard; and it carried all the necessary outfit, instruments, cables, grapnels, guide-ropes, etc. and the piles and accumulators for the mechanical power. The car had a screw in front, and a screw and rudder behind. But probably the work done by the machines would be very much less than that done by the machines of the “Albatross.”

The “Go-Ahead” had been taken to the clearing in Fairmount Park, to the very spot where the aeronef had landed for a few hours.

Her ascensional power was due to the very lightest of gaseous bodies. Ordinary lighting gas possesses an elevating force of about 700 grams for every cubic meter. But hydrogen possesses an ascensional force estimated at 1,100 grams per cubic meter. Pure hydrogen prepared according to the method of the celebrated Henry Gifford filled the enormous balloon. And as the capacity of the "Go-Ahead" was 40,000 cubic meters, the ascensional power of the gas she contained was 40,000 multiplied by 1,100 or 44,000 kilograms.

On this 29th of April everything was ready. Since eleven o'clock the enormous aerostat had been floating a few feet from the ground ready to rise in mid-air. It was splendid weather and seemed to have been made specially for the experiment, although if the breeze had been stronger the results might have been more conclusive. There had never been any doubt that a balloon could be guided in a calm atmosphere; but to guide it when the atmosphere is in motion is quite another thing; and it is under such circumstances that the experiment should be tried.

But there was no wind today, nor any sign of any. Strange to say, North America on that day omitted to send on to Europe one of those first-class storms which it seems to have in such inexhaustible numbers. A better day could not have been chosen for an aeronautic experiment.

The crowd was immense in Fairmount Park; trains had poured into the Pennsylvania capital sightseers from the neighboring states; industrial and commercial life came to a standstill that the people might troop to the show-master, workmen, women, old men, children, members of Congress, soldiers, magistrates, reporters, white natives and black natives, all were there. We need not stop to describe the excitement, the unaccountable movements, the sudden pushings, which made the mass heave and swell.

Nor need we recount the number of cheers which rose from all sides like fireworks when Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans appeared on the platform and hoisted the American colors. Need we say that the majority of the crowd had come from afar not so much to see the “Go-Ahead” as to gaze on these extraordinary men?

Why two and not three? Why not Frycollin? Because Frycollin thought his campaign in the “Albatross” sufficient for his fame. He had declined the honor of accompanying his master, and he took no part in the frenzied declamations that greeted the president and secretary of the Weldon Institute.

Of the members of the illustrious assembly not one was absent from the reserved places within the ropes. There were Truck Milnor, Bat T. Fynn, and William T. Forbes with his two daughters on his arm. All had come to affirm by their presence that nothing could separate them from the partisans of “lighter than air.”

About twenty minutes past eleven a gun announced the end of the final preparations. The “Go-Ahead” only waited the signal to start. At twenty-five minutes past eleven the second gun was fired.

The “Go-Ahead” was about one hundred and fifty feet above the clearing, and was held by a rope. In this way the platform commanded the excited crowd. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans stood upright and placed their left hands on their hearts, to signify how deeply they were touched by their reception. Then they extended their right hands towards the zenith, to signify that the greatest of known balloons was about to take possession of the supra-terrestrial domain.

A hundred thousand hands were placed in answer on a hundred thousand hearts, and a hundred thousand other hands were lifted to the sky.

The third gun was fired at half-past eleven. “Let go!” shouted Uncle Prudent; and the “Go-Ahead” rose “majestically” — an adverb consecrated by custom to all aerostatic ascents.

It really was a superb spectacle. It seemed as if a vessel were just launched from the stocks. And was she not a vessel launched into the aerial sea? The “Go-Ahead” went up in a perfectly vertical line — a proof of the calmness of the atmosphere — and stopped at an altitude of eight hundred feet.

Then she began her horizontal maneuvering. With her screws going she moved to the east at a speed of twelve yards a second. That is the speed of the whale — not an inappropriate comparison, for the balloon was somewhat of the shape of the giant of the northern seas.

A salvo of cheers mounted towards the skillful aeronauts. Then under the influence of her rudder, the “Go-Ahead” went through all the evolutions that her steersman could give her. She turned in a small circle; she moved forwards and backwards in a way to convince the most refractory disbeliever in the guiding of balloons. And if there had been any disbeliever there he would have been simply annihilated.

But why was there no wind to assist at this magnificent experiment? It was regrettable. Doubtless the spectators would have seen the “Go-Ahead” unhesitatingly execute all the movements of a sailing-vessel in beating to windward, or of a steamer driving in the wind’s eye.

At this moment the aerostat rose a few hundred yards. The maneuver was understood below. Uncle Prudent and his companions were going in search of a breeze in the higher zones, so as to complete the experiment. The system of cellular balloons — analogous to the swimming bladder in fishes — into which could be introduced a certain amount of air by pumping, had provided for this vertical motion. Without throwing out ballast or losing gas the aeronaut was able to rise or sink at his will. Of course there was a valve in the upper hemisphere which would permit of a rapid descent if found necessary. All these contrivances are well known, but they were here fitted in perfection.

The “Go-Ahead” then rose vertically. Her enormous dimensions gradually grew smaller to the eye, and the necks of the crowd were almost cricked as they gazed into the air. Gradually the whale became a porpoise, and the porpoise became a gudgeon. The ascensional movement did not cease until the “Go-Ahead” had reached a height of fourteen thousand feet. But the air was so free from mist that she remained clearly visible.

However, she remained over the clearing as if she were a fixture. An immense bell had imprisoned the atmosphere and deprived it of movement; not a breath of wind was there, high or low. The aerostat maneuvered without encountering any resistance, seeming very small owing to the distance, much as if she were being looked at through the wrong end of a telescope.

Suddenly there was a shout among the crowd, a shout followed by a hundred thousand more. All hands were stretched towards a point on the horizon. That point was the northwest. There in the deep azure appeared a moving body, which was approaching and growing larger. Was it a bird beating with its wings the higher zones of space? Was it an aerolite shooting obliquely through the atmosphere? In any case, its speed was terrific, and it would soon be above the crowd. A suspicion communicated itself electrically to the brains of all on the clearing.

But it seemed as though the “Go-Ahead” had sighted this strange object. Assuredly it seemed as though she feared some danger, for her speed was increased, and she was going east as fast as she could.

Yes, the crowd saw what it meant! A name uttered by one of the members of the Weldon Institute was repeated by a hundred thousand mouths:

“The “Albatross!” The “Albatross!”“

CHAPTER XXIII

THE GRAND COLLAPSE

It was indeed the “Albatross!” It was indeed Robur who had reappeared in the heights of the sky! It was he who like a huge bird of prey was going to strike the “Go-Ahead.”

And yet, nine months before, the aeronef, shattered by the explosion, her screws broken, her deck smashed in two, had been apparently annihilated.

Without the prodigious coolness of the engineer, who reversed the gyratory motion of the fore propeller and converted it into a suspensory screw, the men of the “Albatross” would all have been asphyxiated by the fall. But if they had escaped asphyxia, how had they escaped being drowned in the Pacific?

The remains of the deck, the blades of the propellers, the compartments of the cabins, all formed a sort of raft. When a wounded bird falls on the waves its wings keep it afloat. For several hours Robur and his men remained unhelped, at first on the wreck, and afterwards in the india-rubber boat that had fallen uninjured. A few hours after sunrise they were sighted by a passing ship, and a boat was lowered to their rescue.

Robur and his companions were saved, and so was much of what remained of the aeronef. The engineer said that his ship had perished in a collision, and no further questions were asked him.

The ship was an English three-master, the “Two Friends,” bound for Melbourne, where she arrived a few days afterwards.

Robur was in Australia, but a long way from X Island, to which he desired to return as soon as possible.

In the ruins of the aftermost cabin he had found a considerable sum of money, quite enough to provide for himself and companions without applying to anyone for help. A short time after he arrived in Melbourne he became the owner of a small brigantine of about a hundred tons, and in her he sailed for X Island.

There he had but one idea — to be avenged. But to secure his vengeance he would have to make another “Albatross.” This after all was an easy task for him who made the first. He used up what he could of the old material; the propellers and engines he had brought back in the brigantine. The mechanism was fitted with new piles and new accumulators, and, in short, in less than eight months, the work was finished, and a new “Albatross,” identical with the one destroyed by the explosion, was ready to take flight. And he had the same crew.

The “Albatross” left X Island in the first week of April. During this aerial passage Robur did not want to be seen from the earth, and he came along almost always above the clouds. When he arrived over North America he descended in a desolate spot in the Far West. There the engineer, keeping a profound incognito, learnt with considerable pleasure that the Weldon Institute was about to begin its experiments, and that the “Go-Ahead,” with Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, was going to start from Philadelphia on the 29th of April.

Here was a chance for Robur and his crew to gratify their longing for revenge. Here was a chance for inflicting on their foes a terrible vengeance, which in the “Go-Ahead” they could not escape. A public vengeance, which would at the same time prove the superiority of the aeronef to all aerostats and contrivances of that nature!

And that is why, on this very day, like a vulture from the clouds, the aeronef appeared over Fairmount Park.

Yes! It was the “Albatross,” easily recognizable by all those who had never before seen her.

The “Go-Ahead” was in full flight; but it soon appeared that she could not escape horizontally, and so she sought her safety in a vertical direction, not dropping to the ground, for the aeronef would have cut her off, but rising to a zone where she could not perhaps be reached. This was very daring, and at the same time very logical.

But the “Albatross” began to rise after her. Although she was smaller than the “Go-Ahead,” it was a case of the swordfish and the whale.

This could easily be seen from below and with what anxiety! In a few moments the aerostat had attained a height of sixteen thousand feet.

The “Albatross” followed her as she rose. She flew round her flanks, and maneuvered round her in a circle with a constantly diminishing radius. She could have annihilated her at a stroke, and Uncle Prudent and his companions would have been dashed to atoms in a frightful fall.

The people, mute with horror, gazed breathlessly; they were seized with that sort of fear which presses on the chest and grips the legs when we see anyone fall from a height. An aerial combat was beginning in which there were none of the chances of safety as in a sea-fight. It was the first of its kind, but it would not be the last, for progress is one of the laws of this world. And if the “Go-Ahead” was flying the American colors, did not the “Albatross” display the stars and golden sun of Robur the Conqueror?

The “Go-Ahead” tried to distance her enemy by rising still higher. She threw away the ballast she had in reserve; she made a new leap of three thousand feet; she was now but a dot in space. The “Albatross,” which followed her round and round at top speed, was now invisible.

Suddenly a shout of terror rose from the crowd. The “Go-Ahead” increased rapidly in size, and the aeronef appeared dropping with her. This time it was a fall. The gas had dilated in the higher zones of the atmosphere and had burst the balloon, which, half inflated still, was falling rapidly.

But the aeronef, slowing her suspensory screws, came down just as fast. She ran alongside the “Go-Ahead” when she was not more than four thousand feet from the ground.

Would Robur destroy her?

No; he was going to save her crew!

And so cleverly did he handle his vessel that the aeronaut jumped on board.

Would Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans refuse to be saved by him? They were quite capable of doing so. But the crew threw themselves on them and dragged them by force from the “Go-Ahead” to the “Albatross.”

Then the aeronef glided off and remained stationary, while the balloon, quite empty of gas, fell on the trees of the clearing and hung there like a gigantic rag.

An appalling silence reigned on the ground. It seemed as though life were suspended in each of the crowd; and many eyes had been closed so as not to behold the final catastrophe. Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans had again become the prisoners of the redoubtable Robur. Now he had recaptured them, would he carry them off into space, where it was impossible to follow him?

It seemed so.

However, instead of mounting into the sky the “Albatross” stopped six feet from the ground. Then, amid profound silence, the engineer’s voice was heard.

“Citizens of the United States,” he said, “The president and secretary of the Weldon Institute are again in my power. In keeping them I am only within my right. But from the passion kindled in them by the success of the “Albatross” I see that their minds are not prepared for that important revolution which the conquest of the air will one day bring, Uncle Prudent and Phil Evans, you are free!”

The president, the secretary, and the aeronaut had only to jump down.

Then Robur continued.

“Citizens of the United States, my experiment is finished; but my advice to those present is to be premature in nothing, not even in progress. It is evolution and not revolution that we should seek. In a word, we must not be before our time. I have come too soon today to withstand such contradictory and divided interests as yours. Nations are not yet fit for union.

"I go, then; and I take my secret with me. But it will not be lost to humanity. It will belong to you the day you are educated enough to profit by it and wise enough not to abuse it. Citizens of the United States — Good-by!"

And the "Albatross," beating the air with her seventy-four screws, and driven by her propellers, shot off towards the east amid a tempest of cheers.

The two colleagues, profoundly humiliated, and through them the whole Weldon Institute, did the only thing they could. They went home.

And the crowd by a sudden change of front greeted them with particularly keen sarcasms, and, at their expense, are sarcastic still.

And now, who is this Robur? Shall we ever know?

We know today. Robur is the science of the future. Perhaps the science of tomorrow. Certainly the science that will come!

Does the "Albatross" still cruise in the atmosphere in the realm that none can take from her? There is no reason to doubt it.

Will Robur, the Conqueror, appear one day as he said? Yes! He will come to declare the secret of his invention, which will greatly change the social and political conditions of the world.

As for the future of aerial locomotion, it belongs to the aeronef and not the aerostat.

It is to the "Albatross" that the conquest of the air will assuredly fall.

THE LOTTERY TICKET

Translated by Laura E. Kendall

First published in 1886, this adventure novel tells the story of Hulda Hansen of Norway, who anxiously awaits the return of her betrothed, Ole Kamp who promised her great fortune on his return. Ole works on the fishing boat, Viking, which is expected to return soon, but when it doesn't, it is feared lost.

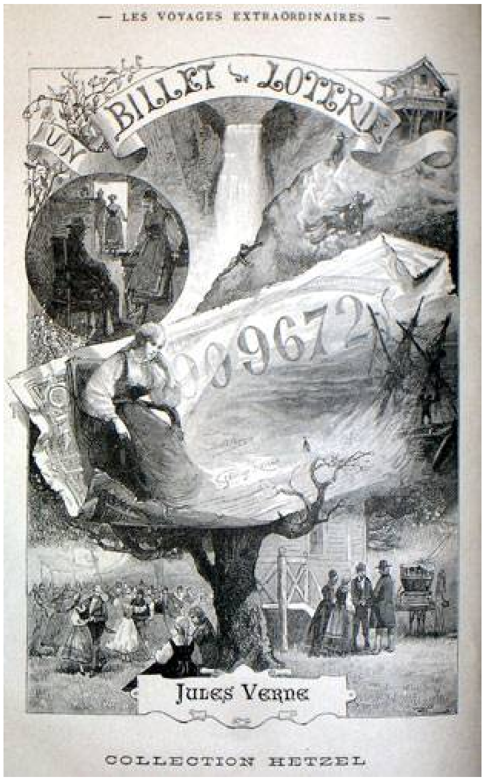
— LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES —
UN BILLET DE LOTERIE
9672
JULES VERNE
COLLECTION HETZEL

An original illustration

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CHAPTER I.

“What time is it?” inquired Dame Hansen, shaking the ashes from her pipe, the last curling rings from which were slowly disappearing between the stained rafters overhead.

“Eight o’clock, mother,” replied Hulda.

“It isn’t likely that any travelers will come to-night. The weather is too stormy.”

“I agree with you. At all events, the rooms are in readiness, and if any one comes, I shall be sure to hear them.”

“Has your brother returned?”

“Not yet.”

“Didn’t he say he would be back to-night?”

“No, mother. Joel went to take a traveler to Lake Tinn, and as he didn’t start until very late, I do not think he can get back to Dal before to-morrow.”

“Then he will spend the night at Moel, probably.”

“Yes; unless he should take it into his head to go on to Bamble to see Farmer Helmboe.”

“And his daughter Siegfrid.”

“Yes. Siegfrid, my best friend, whom I love like a sister!” replied the young girl, smiling.

“All, well, Hulda, shut up the house, and let’s go to bed.”

“You are not ill, are you, mother?”

“No; but I want to be up bright and early to-morrow morning. I must go to Moel.”

“What for?”

“Why, we must be laying in our stock of provisions for the coming summer, and — ”

“And I suppose the agent from Christiania has come down with his wagon of wines and provisions.”

“Yes; Lengling, the foreman at the saw-mill, met him this afternoon, and informed me of the fact as he passed. We have very little left in the way of ham and smoked salmon, and I don’t want to run any risk of being caught with an empty larder. Tourists are likely to begin their excursions to the Telemark almost any day now; especially, if the weather should become settled, and our establishment must be in a condition to receive them. Do you realize that this is the fifteenth of April?”

“The fifteenth of April!” repeated the young girl, thoughtfully.

“Yes, so to-morrow I must attend to these matters,” continued Dame Hansen. “I can make all my purchases in two hours, and I will return with Joel in the kariol.”

“In case you should meet the postman, don’t forget to ask him if there is a letter for us — ”

“And especially for you. That is quite likely, for it is a month since you heard from Ole.”

“Yes, a month — a whole month.”

“Still, you should not worry, child. The delay is not at all surprising. Besides, if the Moel postman has nothing for you, that which didn’t come by the way of Christiania may come by the way of Bergen, may it not?”

“Yes, mother,” replied Hulda. “But how can I help worrying, when I think how far it is from here to the Newfoundland fishing banks. The whole broad Atlantic to cross, while the weather continues so bad. It is almost a year since my poor Ole left me, and who can say when we shall see him again in Dal?”

“And whether we shall be here when he returns,” sighed Dame Hansen, but so softly that her daughter did not hear the words.

Hulda went to close the front door of the inn which stood on the Vesfjorddal road; but she did not take the trouble to turn the key in the lock. In hospitable Norway, such precautions are unnecessary. It is customary for travelers to enter these country inns either by night or by day without calling any one to open the door; and even the loneliest habitations are safe from the depredations of thieves or assassins, for no criminal attempts against life or property ever disturb the peace of this primitive land.

The mother and daughter occupied two front rooms on the second story of the inn — two neat and airy, though plainly furnished rooms. Above them, directly under the sloping roof, was Joel’s chamber, lighted by a window incased in a tastefully carved frame-work of pine.

From this window, the eye, after roaming over the grand mountain horizon, returned with delight to the narrow valley through which flowed the Maan, which is half river, half torrent.

A wooden staircase, with heavy balusters and highly polished steps, led from the lower hall to the floors above, and nothing could be more neat and attractive than the whole aspect of this establishment, in which the travelers found a comfort that is rare in Norwegian inns.

Hulda and her mother were in the habit of retiring early when they were alone, and Dame Hansen had already lighted her candle, and was on her way upstairs, when a loud knocking at the door made them both start.

“Dame Hansen! Dame Hansen!” cried a voice.

Dame Hansen paused on the stairs.

“Who can have come so late?” she exclaimed.

“Can it be that Joel has met with an accident?” returned Hulda, quickly.

And she hastened toward the door.

She found a lad there — one of the young rascals known as *skydskarls*, that make a living by clinging to the back of kariols, and taking the horse back when the journey is ended.

“What do you want here at this hour?” asked Hulda.

“First of all to bid you good-evening,” replied the boy, mischievously.

“Is that all?”

“No; that isn’t all; but a boy oughtn’t to forget his manners, ought he?”

“You are right. But who sent you?”

“Your brother Joel.”

“And what for?” asked Dame Hansen, advancing to the door with the slow and measured tread that is a characteristic of the inhabitants of Norway. There is quicksilver in the veins of their soil, but little or none in the veins of their bodies.

The reply had evidently caused the mother some anxiety, however, for she added hastily:

“Has anything happened to my son?”

“No, but the Christiania postman gave him a letter, and — ”

“A letter from Drammen?” repeated Dame Hansen, in a lower tone.

“I don’t know about that,” replied the youth. “All I do know is, that Joel can’t get home before to-morrow, and he sent me here to deliver the letter.”

“It is important then?”

“I should judge so.”

“Hand it here,” said Dame Hansen, in a tone that betrayed keen anxiety.

“Here it is, clean and not wrinkled in the least. But the letter is not for you.”

Dame Hansen seemed to breathe more freely.

“Then who is it for?” she asked.

“For your daughter.”

“For me!” cried Hulda. “It is a letter from Ole! I am sure it is — a letter that came by way of Christiania. My brother did not want me to be kept waiting.”

Hulda had snatched the letter from the boy’s hand, and now taking it to the table upon which her mother had deposited the candle, she examined the address.

“Yes, it is from him. It is certainly from him! Heaven grant that he writes to announce the speedy return of the ‘Viking’!”

“Won’t you come in?” said Dame Hansen, turning to the boy.

“Only for a minute. I must get back home to-night, for I am to go with a kariol to-morrow morning.”

“Very well. Tell Joel, from me, that I expect to go to Moel to-morrow, and that he must wait for me there.”

“To-morrow evening?”

“No; to-morrow morning, and he must not leave Moel until he sees me. We will return to Dal together.”

“Very well, Dame Hansen.”

“Won’t you take a drop of *brandevin*?”

“With pleasure.”

The boy approached the table, and Dame Hansen handed him a glass of the beverage which is such a powerful protection against the evening fogs. It is needless to say that he drained the glass, then,

“*God-aften!*” he said.

“*God-aften*, my son!”

This is the Norwegian good-night. It was simply spoken, without even an inclination of the head, and the lad instantly departed, without seeming to mind in the least the long walk that he had before him. The sound of his footsteps soon died away beneath the trees that border the swiftly flowing river.

Hulda still stood gazing at Ole’s letter. Think of it! This frail envelope must have crossed the broad ocean to reach her, the broad ocean in which the rivers of western Norway lose themselves. She examined the different postmarks. Though mailed on the 15th of March, the missive had not reached Dal until the 15th of April. Why! a month had already elapsed since the letter was written! How many things might have happened in a month on the shores of Newfoundland! Was it not still winter, the dangerous season of equinoxes? Are not these fishing banks the most dangerous in the world, swept by terrible gales from the North Pole? A perilous and arduous vocation was this business of fishing which Ole followed! And if he followed it was it not that she, his betrothed, whom he was to marry on his return, might reap the benefits?

Poor Ole! What did he say in this letter? Doubtless that he loved Hulda as faithfully and truly as Hulda loved him, that they were united in thought, in spite of the distance that separated them, and that he longed for the day of his return to Dal.

Yes, he said all this, Hulda was sure of it. But perhaps he might add that the day of his return was near at hand — that the fishing cruise which had enticed the inhabitants of Bergen so far from their native land, was nearly at an end. Perhaps Ole would tell her that the "Viking" had finished taking aboard her cargo, that she was about to sail, and that the last days of April would not pass without a blissful meeting in the pleasant home at Vesfjorddal. Perhaps, too, he would assure her, at last, that she might safely appoint the day for the pastor to come to Moel to unite them in the little chapel whose steeple rose from a small grove not a hundred yards from Dame Hansen's inn.

To learn all this, it might only be necessary to break the seal, draw out Ole's letter, and read it, through the tears of joy or sorrow that its contents would be sure to bring to Hulda's eyes, and doubtless more than one impatient girl of the south, or even of Denmark or Holland, would already have known all! But Hulda was in a sort of a dream, and dreams terminate only when God chooses to end them, and how often one regrets them, so bitter is the reality.

"Is it really a letter from Ole that your brother has sent you, my daughter?" inquired Dame Hansen.

"Yes; I recognize the handwriting."

"Well, are you going to wait until to-morrow to read it?"

Hulda took one more look at the envelope, then, after slowly breaking the seal, she drew out the carefully written letter, which read as follows:

"Saint-Pierre-Miquelon, March 17th, 1862.

“My Dearest Hulda, — You will hear, with pleasure, that our fishing venture has prospered, and that it will be concluded in a few days. Yes; we are nearing the end of the season, and after a year’s absence how glad I shall be to return to Dal and find myself in the midst of the only friends I have in the world — yours and mine.

“My share in the profits of the expedition amounts to quite a handsome sum, which will start us in housekeeping. Messrs. Help Bros. the owners of the ship, have been informed that the ‘Viking’ will probably return by the 15th or 20th of May; so you may expect to see me at that time; that is to say, in a few weeks at the very longest.

“My dear Hulda, I trust to find you looking even prettier than at my departure, and in the best of health, you and your mother as well, also that hardy, brave comrade, my cousin Joel, your brother, who asks nothing better than to become mine.

“On receipt of this, give my very best respects to Dame Hansen — I can see her now, sitting in her wooden arm-chair by the old stove in the big hall — and tell her I love her with a twofold love, for she is my aunt as well as your mother.

“Above all, don’t take the trouble to come to Bergen to meet me, for it is quite possible that the ‘Viking’ will arrive at an earlier date than I have mentioned. However that may be, my dear Hulda can count upon seeing me at Dal twenty-four hours after we land. Don’t be too much surprised if I should arrive considerably ahead of time.

“We have had a pretty rough time of it, this past winter, the weather having been more severe than any our fishermen have ever encountered; but fortunately fish have been plenty. The ‘Viking’ brings back nearly five thousand quintals, deliverable at Bergen, and already sold by the efforts of Help Bros. And last, but not least, we have succeeded in selling at a handsome profit, and I, who have a share in the venture, will realize something quite handsome from it.

“Besides, even if I should not bring a small competence home with me, I have an idea, or rather, I have a presentiment that it is awaiting me on my return. Yes; comparative wealth, to say nothing of happiness! In what way? That is my secret, my dearest Hulda, and you will forgive me for having a secret from you! It is the only one! Besides, I will tell you all about it. When? Well, as soon as an opportunity offers — before our marriage, if it should be delayed by some unforeseen misfortune — afterward, if I return at the appointed time, and you become my wife within a week after my arrival, as I trust you will.

“A hundred fond kisses, my darling Hulda. Kiss Dame Hansen, and Joel, too, for me. In fancy, I imprint another kiss upon your brow, around which the shining crown of the brides of the Telemark will cast a saint-like halo. Once more, farewell, dearest Hulda, farewell!

“Your devoted lover,

“OLE KAMP.”

CHAPTER II.

Dal is a modest hamlet consisting of but a few houses; some on either side of a road that is little more than a bridle-path, others scattered over the surrounding hills. But they all face the narrow valley of Vesfjorddal, with their backs to the line of hills to the north, at the base of which flows the Maan.

A little church erected in 1855, whose chancel is pierced by two narrow stained-glass windows, lifts its square belfry from out a leafy grove hard by. Here and there rustic bridges cross the rivulets that dance merrily along toward the river. In the distance are two or three primitive saw-mills, run by water-power, with a wheel to move the saw, as well as a wheel to move the beam or the tree; and seen from a little distance, the chapel, saw-mills, houses, and cabins, all seem to be enveloped in a soft olive haze that emanates from the dark-green firs and the paler birches which either singly or in groups extend from the winding banks of the Maan to the crests of the lofty mountains.

Such is the fresh and laughing hamlet of Dal, with its picturesque dwellings, painted, some of them, in delicate green or pale pink tints, others in such glaring colors as bright yellow and blood-red. The roofs of birch bark, covered with turf, which is mown in the autumn, are crowned with natural flowers. All this is indescribably charming, and eminently characteristic of the most picturesque country in the world. In short, Dal is in the Telemark, the Telemark is in Norway, and Norway is in Switzerland, with thousands of fiords that permit the sea to kiss the feet of its mountains.

The Telemark composes the broad portion of the immense horn that Norway forms between Bergen and Christiania.

This dependency of the prefecture of Batsberg, has the mountains and glaciers of Switzerland, but it is not Switzerland. It has gigantic water-falls like North America, but it is not America. The landscape is adorned with picturesque cottages, and processions of inhabitants, clad in costumes of a former age, like Holland, but it is not Holland. The Telemark is far better than any or all of these; it is the Telemark, noted above all countries in the world for the beauty of its scenery. The writer has had the pleasure of visiting it. He has explored it thoroughly, in a kariol with relays of post-horses — when he could get them — and he brought back with him such a vivid recollection of its manifold charms that he would be glad to convey some idea of it to the reader of this simple narrative.

At the date of this story, 1862, Norway was not yet traversed by the railroad that now enables one to go from Stockholm to Drontheim, by way of Christiania. Now, an extensive network of iron rails extends entirely across these two Scandinavian countries, which are so averse to a united existence. But imprisoned in a railroad-carriage, the traveler, though he makes much more rapid progress than in a kariol, misses all the originality that formerly pervaded the routes of travel. He misses the journey through Southern Sweden on the curious Gotha Canal, in which the steamboats, by rising from lock to lock, manage to reach an elevation of three hundred feet. Nor does he have an opportunity to visit the falls of Trolletann, nor Drammen, nor Kongsberg, nor any of the beauties of the Telemark.

In those days the railroad existed only upon paper. Twenty years were to elapse before one could traverse the Scandinavian kingdom from one shore to the other in forty hours, and visit the North Cape on excursion tickets to Spitzberg.

In those days Dal was, and may it long remain, the central point for foreign or native tourists, these last being for the most part students from Christiania. From Dal they could wander over the entire Telemark and Hardanger region, explore the valley of Vesfjorddal between Lakes Mjos and Tinn, and visit the wonderful cataracts of the Rjukan Tun. The hamlet boasts of but one inn, but that is certainly the most attractive and comfortable imaginable, and one of the most important also, for it can offer four bed-chambers for the accommodation of its guests. In a word, it is Dame Hansen's inn.

A few benches surround the base of its pink walls, which are separated from the ground by a substantial granite foundation. The spruce rafters and weather-boarding have acquired such hardness and toughness with age that the sharpest hatchet can make little or no impression upon them. Between the roughly hewn rafters, which are placed horizontally one above the other, a mixture of clay and turf forms a stanch roof, through which the hardest winter rains can not force their way.

Upstairs, in the bedrooms, the ceilings are painted in dark red or black tints to contrast with the more cheerful and delicate hues of the wood-work.

In one corner of the large hall stands a huge cylinder stove, the pipe of which rises nearly to the ceiling, before it disappears in the kitchen chimney. In another corner stands a tall clock which emits a sonorous tick-tack, as its carved hands travel slowly around its enameled face. Here is a secretary, black with age, side by side with a massive iron tripod. Upon the mantel is an immense terra-cotta candlestick which can be transformed into a three-branched candelabrum by turning it upside down. The handsomest furniture in the house adorns this spacious hall — the birch-root table, with its spreading feet, the big chest with its richly wrought brass handles, in which the Sunday and holiday clothing is kept, the tall arm-chair, hard and uncomfortable as a church-pew, the painted wooden chairs, and the spinning-wheel striped with green, to contrast with the scarlet petticoat of the spinner.

Yonder stands the pot in which the butter is kept, and the paddle with which it is worked, and here is the tobacco-box, and the grater of elaborately carved bone.

And, finally, over the door which opens into the kitchen is a large dresser, with long rows of brass and copper cooking-utensils and bright-colored dishes, the little grindstone for sharpening knives, half-buried in its varnished case, and the egg-dish, old enough to serve as a chalice.

And how wonderful and amusing are the walls, hung with linen tapestries representing scenes from the Bible, and brilliant with all the gorgeous coloring of the pictures of Epinal.

As for the guests' rooms, though they are less pretentious, they are no less comfortable, with their spotless neatness, their curtains of hanging-vines that droop from the turf-covered roof, their huge beds, sheeted with snowy and fragrant linen, and their hangings with verses from the Old Testament, embroidered in yellow upon a red ground.

Nor must we forget that the floor of the main hall, and the floors of all the rooms, both upstairs and down, are strewn with little twigs of birch, pine, and juniper, whose leaves fill the house with their healthful and exhilarating odor.

Can one imagine a more charming *posada* in Italy, or a more seductive *fonda* in Spain? No. And the crowd of English tourists have not yet raised the scale of prices as in Switzerland — at least, they had not at the time of which I write. In Dal, the current coin is not the pound sterling, the sovereign of which the travelers' purse is soon emptied. It is a silver coin, worth about five francs, and its subdivisions are the mark, equal in value to about a franc, and the skilling, which must not be confounded with the English shilling, as it is only equivalent to a French *sou*.

Nor will the tourist have any opportunity to use or abuse the pretentious bank-note in the Telemark. One-mark notes are white; five-mark notes are blue; ten-mark notes are yellow; fifty-mark notes, green; one hundred mark notes, red. Two more, and we should have all the colors of the rainbow.

Besides — and this is a point of very considerable importance — the food one obtains at the Dal inn is excellent; a very unusual thing at houses of public entertainment in this locality, for the Telemark deserves only too well its surname of the Buttermilk Country. At Tiness, Listhus, Tinoset, and many other places, no bread is to be had, or if there be, it is of such poor quality as to be uneatable. One finds there only an oaten cake, known as *flat brod*, dry, black, and hard as pasteboard, or a coarse loaf composed of a mixture of birch-bark, lichens, and chopped straw. Eggs are a luxury, and a most stale and unprofitable one; but there is any quantity of poor beer to be had, a profusion of buttermilk, either sweet or sour, and sometimes a little coffee, so thick and muddy that it is much more like distilled soot than the products of Mocha or Rio Nunez.

In Dame Hansen's establishment, on the contrary, cellar and larder were alike well-stored. What more could the most exacting tourist ask than salmon, either salt or smoked — fresh salmon that have never tasted tainted waters, fish from the pure streams of the Telemark, fowls, neither too fat nor too lean, eggs in every style, crisp oaten and barley cakes, fruits, more especially strawberries, bread — unleavened bread, it is here, but of the very best quality — beer, and some old bottles of that Saint Julien that have spread the fame of French vineyards even to this distant land?

And this being the case, it is not strange that the inn at Dal is well and favorably known in all the countries of Northern Europe.

One can see this, too, by glancing over the register in which many travelers have not only recorded their names, but paid glowing tributes to Dame Hansen’s merits as an inn-keeper. The names are principally those of Swedes and Norwegians from every part of Scandinavia; but the English make a very respectable showing; and one of them, who had waited at least an hour for the summit of Gousta to emerge from the morning mist that enveloped it, wrote upon one of the pages:

“Patientia omnia vincit?”

CHAPTER III.

Without being very deeply versed in ethnography, one may be strongly inclined to believe, in common with many *savants*, that a close relationship exists between the leading families of the English aristocracy and the oldest families of Scandinavia. Numerous proofs of this fact, indeed, are to be found in the ancestral names which are identical in both countries. There is no aristocracy in Norway, however; still, though the democracy everywhere rules, that does not prevent it from being aristocratic to the highest degree. All are equals upon an exalted plane instead of a low one. Even in the humblest hut may be found a genealogical tree which has not degenerated in the least because it has sprung up anew in humble soil; and the walls are adorned with the proud blazons of the feudal lords from whom these plain peasants are descended.

So it was with the Hansens of Dal, who were unquestionably related, though rather remotely, to the English peers created after Rollo’s invasion of Normandy, and though rank and wealth had both departed they had at least preserved the old pride, or rather dignity, which becomes all social ranks.

It was a matter of very little consequence, however. Whether he had ancestors of lofty lineage or not, Harald Hansen was simply a village innkeeper. The house had come down to him from his father and from his grandfather, who were widely known and respected, and after his death his widow continued the business in a way that elicited universal commendation.

Whether or not Harald had made a fortune in the business, no one was able to say; but he had been able to rear his son Joel and his daughter Hulda in comfort; and Ole Kamp, a son of his wife’s sister, had also been brought up like one of his own children. But for his uncle Harald, this orphan child would doubtless have been one of those poor creatures who come into the world only to leave it; and Ole Kamp evinced a truly filial devotion toward his parents by adoption. Nothing would ever sever the tie that bound him to the Hansen family, to which his marriage with Hulda was about to bind him still more closely.

Harald Hansen had died about eighteen months before, leaving his wife, in addition to the inn, a small farm on the mountain, a piece of property which yielded very meager returns, if any. This was especially true of late, for the seasons had been remarkably unpropitious, and agriculture of every kind had suffered greatly, even the pastures. There had been many of those “iron nights,” as the Norwegian peasants call them — nights of north-easterly gales and ice that kill the corn down to the very root — and that meant ruin to the farmers of the Telemark and the Hardanger.

Still, whatever Dame Hansen might think of the situation of affairs, she had never said a word to any living soul, not even to her children. Naturally cold and reserved, she was very uncommunicative — a fact that pained Hulda and Joel not a little. But with that respect for the head of the family innate in Northern lands, they made no attempt to break down a reserve which was eminently distasteful to them. Besides, Dame Hansen never asked aid or counsel, being firmly convinced of the infallibility of her own judgment, for she was a true Norwegian in that respect.

Dame Hansen was now about fifty years old. Advancing age had not bowed her tall form, though it had whitened her hair; nor had it dimmed the brightness of her dark-blue eyes, whose azure was reflected in the clear orbs of her daughter; but her complexion had taken on the yellow hue of old parchment, and a few wrinkles were beginning to furrow her forehead.

The madame, as they say in Scandinavia, was invariably attired in a full black skirt, for she had never laid aside her mourning since her husband's death. Below the shoulder-straps of a brown bodice appeared the long full sleeves of an unbleached cotton chemise. On her shoulders she wore a small dark-colored fichu that crossed upon her breast, which was also covered by the large bib of her apron. She always wore as a head-dress a close-fitting black-silk cap that covered almost her entire head, and tied behind, a kind of head-dress that is rarely seen nowadays.

Seated stiffly erect in her wooden arm-chair, the grave hostess neglected her spinning-wheel only to enjoy a small birchwood pipe, whose smoke enveloped her in a faint cloud.

Really, the house would have seemed very gloomy had it not been for the presence of the two children.

A worthy lad was Joel Hansen. Twenty-five years of age, well built, tall, like all Norwegian mountaineers, proud in bearing, though not in the least boastful or conceited. He had fine hair, verging upon chestnut, with blue eyes so dark as to seem almost black. His garb displayed to admirable advantage his powerful shoulders, his broad chest, in which his lungs had full play, and stalwart limbs which never failed him even in the most difficult mountain ascents. His dark-blue jacket, fitting tightly at the waist, was adorned on the shoulders with epaulets, and in the back with designs in colored embroidery similar to those that embellish the vests of the Breton peasantry. His yellow breeches were fastened at the knee by large buckles. Upon his head he wore a broad-brimmed brown hat with a red-and-black band, and his legs were usually incased either in coarse cloth gaiters or in long stout boots without heels.

His vocation was that of a mountain guide in the district of the Telemark, and even in the Hardanger. Always ready to start, and untiring in his exertions, he was a worthy descendant of the Norwegian hero Rollo, the walker, celebrated in the legends of that country. Between times he accompanied English sportsmen who repair to that region to shoot the riper, a species of ptarmigan, larger than that found in the Hebrides, and the jerpir, a partridge much more delicate in its flavor than the grouse of Scotland. When winter came, the hunting of wolves engrossed his attention, for at that season of the year these fierce animals, emboldened by hunger, not unfrequently venture out upon the surface of the frozen lake. Then there was bear hunting in summer, when that animal, accompanied by her young, comes to secure its feast of fresh grass, and when one must pursue it over plateaus at an altitude of from ten to twelve thousand feet. More than once Joel had owed his life solely to the great strength that enabled him to endure the embraces of these formidable animals, and to the imperturbable coolness which enabled him to eventually dispatch them.

But when there was neither tourist nor hunter to be guided through the valley of the Vesfjorddal, Joel devoted his attention to the *soetur*, the little mountain farm where a young shepherd kept guard over half a dozen cows and about thirty sheep — a *soetur* consisting exclusively of pasture land.

Joel, being naturally very pleasant and obliging, was known and loved in every village in the Telemark; but two persons for whom he felt a boundless affection were his cousin Ole and his sister Hulda.

When Ole Kamp left Dal to embark for the last time, how deeply Joel regretted his inability to dower Hulda and thus avert the necessity for her lover’s departure! In fact, if he had been accustomed to the sea, he would certainly have gone in his cousin’s place. But money was needed to start them in housekeeping, and as Dame Hansen had offered no assistance, Joel understood only too well that she did not feel inclined to devote any portion of the estate to that purpose, so there was nothing for Ole to do but cross the broad Atlantic.

Joel had accompanied him to the extreme end of the valley on his way to Bergen, and there, after a long embrace, he wished him a pleasant journey and a speedy return, and then returned to console his sister, whom he loved with an affection which was at the same time fraternal and paternal in its character.

Hulda at that time was exactly eighteen years of age. She was not the *piga*, as the servant in a Norwegian inn is called, but rather the *froken*, the young lady of the house, as her mother was the madame. What a charming face was hers, framed in a wealth of pale golden hair, under a thin linen cap projecting in the back to give room for the long plaits of hair! What a lovely form incased in this tightly fitting bodice of red stuff, ornamented with green shoulder-straps and surmounted by a snowy chemisette, the sleeves of which were fastened at the wrist by a ribbon bracelet! What grace and perfect symmetry in the waist, encircled by a red belt with clasps of silver filigree which held in place the dark-green skirt, below which appeared the white stocking protected by the dainty pointed toed shoe of the Telemark!

Yes, Ole’s betrothed was certainly charming, with the slightly melancholy expression of the daughters of the North softening her smiling face; and on seeing her one instantly thought of Hulda the Fair, whose name she bore, and who figures as the household fairy in Scandinavian mythology.

Nor did the reserve of a chaste and modest maiden mar the grace with which she welcomed the guests who came to the inn. She was well known to the world of tourists; and it was not one of the smallest attractions of the inn to be greeted by that cordial shake of the hand that Hulda bestowed on one and all. And after having said to her, “*Tack for mad*” (Thanks for the meal), what could be more delightful than to hear her reply in her fresh sonorous voice: “*Wed bekomme*!” (May it do you good!)

CHAPTER IV.

Ole Kamp had been absent a year; and as he said in his letter, his winter's experience on the fishing banks of Newfoundland had been a severe one. When one makes money there one richly earns it. The equinoctial storms that rage there not unfrequently destroy a whole fishing fleet in a few hours; but fish abound, and vessels which escape find ample compensation for the toil and dangers of this home of the tempest.

Besides, Norwegians are excellent seamen, and shrink from no danger. In the numberless fiords that extend from Christiansand to Cape North, among the dangerous reefs of Finland, and in the channels of the Loffoden Islands, opportunities to familiarize themselves with the perils of ocean are not wanting; and from time immemorial they have given abundant proofs of their courage. Their ancestors were intrepid mariners at an epoch when the Hanse monopolized the commerce of northern Europe. Possibly they were a trifle prone to indulge in piracy in days gone by, but piracy was then quite common. Doubtless commerce has reformed since then, though one may perhaps be pardoned for thinking that there is still room for improvement.

However that may be, the Norwegians were certainly fearless seamen; they are to-day, and so they will ever be. Ole Kamp was not the man to belie his origin; besides, he had served his apprenticeship under his father, who was the master of a Bergen coasting vessel. His childhood had been spent in that port, which is one of the most frequented in Scandinavia. Before he ventured out upon the open sea he had been an untiring fisher in the fiords, and a fearless robber of the sea-birds' nests, and when he became old enough to serve as cabin-boy he made a voyage across the North Sea and even to the waters of the Polar Ocean.

Soon afterward his father died, and as he had lost his mother several years before, his uncle Harald Hansen invited him to become a member of his family, which he did, though he continued to follow the same calling.

In the intervals between his voyages he invariably spent his time with the friends he loved; but he made regular voyages upon large fishing vessels, and rose to the rank of mate when he was but twenty-one. He was now twenty-three years of age.

When he visited Dal, Joel found him a most congenial companion. He accompanied him on his excursions to the mountains, and across the highest table-lands of the Telemark. The young sailor seemed as much at home in the fields as in the fiords, and never lagged behind unless it was to keep his cousin Hulda company.

A close friendship gradually sprung up between Joel and Ole, and quite naturally the same sentiment assumed a different form in respect to the young girl. Joel, of course, encouraged it. Where would his sister ever find a better fellow, a more sympathetic nature, a warmer and more devoted heart? With Ole for a husband, Hulda's happiness was assured. So it was with the entire approval of her mother and brother that the young girl followed the natural promptings of her heart. Though these people of the North are undemonstrative, they must not be accused of a want of sensibility. No! It is only their way; and perhaps their way is as good as any other, after all.

So it came to pass that one day, when all four of them were sitting quietly together, Ole remarked, without any preamble whatever:

"An idea occurs to me, Hulda."

“What is it?”

“It seems to me that we ought to marry.”

“I think so too.”

“And so do I,” added Dame Hansen as coolly as if the matter had been under discussion for some time.

“I agree with you,” remarked Joel, “and in that case I shall naturally become your brother-in-law.”

“Yes,” said Ole; “but it is probable that I shall only love you the better for it.”

“That is very possible.”

“We have your consent, then?”

“Upon my word! nothing would please me better,” replied Joel.

“So it is decided, Hulda?” inquired Dame Hansen.

“Yes, mother,” replied the girl, quietly.

“You are really willing?” asked Ole. “I have loved you a long time, Hulda, without saying so.”

“And I you, Ole.”

“How it came about, I really do not know.”

“Nor I.”

“But it was doubtless seeing you grow more beautiful and good day by day.”

“That is saying a little too much, my dear Ole.”

“No; I certainly ought to be able to say that without making you blush, for it is only the truth. Didn’t you see that I was beginning to love Hulda, Dame Hansen?”

“I suspected as much.”

“And you, Joel?”

“I was sure of it.”

“Then I certainly think that you ought to have warned me,” said Ole, smiling.

“But how about your voyages, Ole?” inquired Dame Hansen. “Won’t they seem intolerable to you after you are married?”

“So intolerable that I shall not follow the sea any more after my marriage.”

“You will not go to sea any more?”

“No, Hulda. Do you think it would be possible for me to leave you for months at a time?”

“So this is to be your last voyage?”

“Yes, and if we have tolerable luck, this voyage will yield me quite a snug little sum of money, for Help Bros. have promised me a share in the profits.”

“They are good men,” remarked Joel.

“The best men living,” replied Ole, “and well known and highly respected by all the sailors of Bergen.”

“But what do you expect to do after you cease to follow the sea, my dear Ole?” inquired Hulda.

“I shall go into partnership with Joel in his business, I have pretty good legs, and if they are not good enough, I will improve them by going into regular training. Besides, I have thought of a plan which will not prove a bad one perhaps. Why can’t we establish a messenger service between Drammen, Kongsberg and a few other towns in the Telemark Communication now is neither easy nor regular, and there might be money in the scheme. Besides, I have other plans, to say nothing of — ”

“Of what?”

“Never mind, now. I will tell you on my return. But I warn you that I am firmly resolved to make my Hulda the happiest woman in the country. Yes, I am.”

“If you but knew how easy that will be!” replied Hulda, offering him her hand. “Am I not that already, and is there a home in all Dal as pleasant as ours?”

Dame Hansen hastily averted her head.

“So the matter is settled?” asked Ole, cheerfully.

“Yes,” replied Joel.

“And settled beyond recall?”

“Certainly.”

“And you feel no regret, Hulda?”

“None whatever, my dear Ole.”

“I think, however, that it would be better not to appoint the day for your marriage until after your return,” remarked Joel.

“Very well, but it will go hard with me if I do not return in less than a year to lead Hulda to the church at Moel, where our friend, Pastor Andersen, will not refuse to make his best prayer for us!”

And it was in this way that the marriage of Hulda Hansen and Ole Kamp had been decided upon.

The young sailor was to go aboard his vessel a week later; but before they parted the lovers were formally betrothed in accordance with the touching custom of Scandinavian countries.

In simple and honest Norway lovers are almost invariably publicly betrothed before marriage. Sometimes the marriage is not solemnized until two or three years afterward, but one must not suppose that the betrothal is simply an interchange of vows which depend only upon the honesty of the parties interested. No, the obligation is much more sacred, and even if this act of betrothal is not binding in the eyes of the law, it is, at least, so regarded by that universal law called custom.

So, in this case, it was necessary to make arrangements for a ceremony over which Pastor Andersen should preside. There was no minister in Dal, nor in any of the neighboring hamlets. In Norway they have what they call Sunday towns, in which the minister resides, and where the leading families of the parish assemble for worship. They even lease apartments there, in which they take up their abode for twenty-four hours or more — time to perform their religious duties — and people return from the town as from a pilgrimage.

Dal, it is true, boasted of a chapel, but the pastor came only when he was summoned.

After all, Moel was not far off, only about eight miles distant, at the end of Lake Tinn, and Pastor Andersen was a very obliging man, and a good walker; so the worthy minister was invited to attend the betrothal in the twofold capacity of minister and family friend. The acquaintance was one of long standing. He had seen Joel and Hulda grow up, and loved them as well as he loved that young sea-dog, Ole Kamp, so the news of the intended marriage was very pleasing to him.

So Pastor Andersen gathered together his robe, his collar, and his prayer-book, and started off for Dal one misty, moisty morning. He arrived there in the company of Joel, who had gone half-way to meet him, and it is needless to say that his coming was hailed with delight at Dame Hansen's inn, that he had the very best room in the house, and that the floor was freshly strewn with twigs of juniper that perfumed it like a chapel.

At one o'clock on the following day the little church was thrown open, and there, in the presence of the pastor and a few friends and neighbors, Ole and Hulda solemnly promised to wed each other when the young sailor should return from the last voyage he intended to make. A year is a long time to wait, but it passes all the same, nor is it intolerable when two persons can trust each other.

And now Ole could not, without good cause, forsake her to whom he had plighted his troth, nor could Hulda retract the promise she had given to Ole; and if Ole had not left Norway a few days after the betrothal, he might have profited by the incontestable right it gave him to visit the young girl whenever he pleased, to write to her whenever he chose, walk out with her arm in arm, unaccompanied by any member of the family, and enjoy a preference over all others in the dances that form a part of all fêtes and ceremonies.

But Ole Kamp had been obliged to return to Bergen, and one week afterward the “Viking” set sail for the fishing banks of Newfoundland, and Hulda could only look forward to the letters which her betrothed had promised to send her by every mail.

And these impatiently expected letters never failed her, and always brought a ray of happiness to the house which seemed so gloomy after the departure of one of its inmates. The voyage was safely accomplished; the fishing proved excellent, and the profits promised to be large. Besides, at the end of each letter, Ole always referred to a certain secret, and of the fortune it was sure to bring him. It was a secret that Hulda would have been glad to know, and Dame Hansen, too, for reasons one would not have been likely to suspect.

Dame Hansen seemed to have become even more gloomy and anxious and reticent than ever, and a circumstance which she did not see fit to mention to her children increased her anxiety very considerably.

Three days after the arrival of Ole’s last letter, as Dame Hansen was returning alone from the saw-mill, to which place she had gone to order a bag of shavings from the foreman, Lengling, she was accosted near her own door by a man who was a stranger in that part of the country.

“This is Dame Hansen, is it not?” he inquired.

“Yes; but I do not know you,” was the reply.

“That doesn’t matter,” rejoined the man. “I arrived here only this morning from Drammen, and am now on my way back.”

“From Drammen?” repeated Dame Hansen, quickly.

“You are acquainted, I think, with a certain Monsieur Sandgoist, who lives there?”

“Monsieur Sandgoist!” repeated Dame Hansen, whose face paled at the name. “Yes, I know him.”

“Ah, well! When Monsieur Sandgoist heard that I was coming to Dal, he asked me to give his respects to you.”

“Was that all?”

“And to say to you that it was more than probable that he would pay you a visit next month. Good health to you, and good-evening, Dame Hansen.”

CHAPTER V.

Hulda was considerably surprised at the persistency with which Ole alluded in his letters to the fortune that was to be his on his return. Upon what did the young man base his expectations? Hulda could not imagine, and she was very anxious to know. Was this anxiety due solely to an idle curiosity on her part? By no means, for the secret certainly affected her deeply. Not that she was ambitious, this modest and honest young girl; nor did she in looking forward to the future ever aspire to what we call wealth. Ole's affection satisfied, and would always satisfy her. If wealth came, she would welcome it with joy. If it did not come, she would still be content.

This is precisely what Hulda and Joel said to each other the day after Ole's last letter reached Dal. They agreed perfectly upon this subject, as upon all others, by the way. And then Joel added:

"No; it is impossible, little sister. You certainly must be keeping something from me."

"Keeping something from you!"

"Yes; for I can not believe that Ole went away without giving you some clew to his secret."

"Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No; but you and I are not one and the same person."

"Yes, we are, brother."

"I am not Ole's betrothed, at all events."

“Almost,” said the young girl; “and if any misfortune should befall him, and he should not return from this voyage, you would be as inconsolable as I would be, and your tears would flow quite as freely as mine.”

“Really, little sister. I forbid you to even speak of such a thing,” replied Joel. “Ole not return from his last voyage to the great fishing banks! What can have put such an idea into your head? You surely can not mean what you say, Hulda!”

“No, certainly not. And yet, I do not know. I can not drive away certain presentiments — the result, perhaps, of bad dreams.”

“Dreams are only dreams.”

“True, brother, but where do they come from?”

“From ourselves, not from heaven. You are anxious, and so your fears haunt you in your slumber. Besides, it is almost always so when one has earnestly desired a thing and the time when one’s desires are to be realized is approaching.”

“I know it, Joel.”

“Really, I thought you were much more sensible, little sister. Yes, and more energetic. Here you have just received a letter from Joel saying that the ‘Viking’ will return before the end of the month, and it is now the 19th of April, and consequently none too soon for you to begin your preparations for the wedding.”

“Do you really think so, Joel?”

“Certainly I think so, Hulda. I even think that we have delayed too long already. Think of it. We must have a wedding that will not only create a sensation in Dal, but in all the neighboring villages. I intend it shall be the grandest one ever known in the district, so I am going to set to work immediately.”

An affair of this kind is always a momentous occasion in all the country districts of Norway, particularly in the Telemark, so that every day Joel had a conversation with his mother on the subject. It was only a few moments after Dame Hansen’s meeting with the stranger, whose message had so deeply agitated her, and though she had seated herself at her spinning-wheel as usual, it would have been plain to a close observer that her thoughts were far away.

Even Joel noticed that his mother seemed even more despondent than usual, but as she invariably replied that there was nothing the matter with her when she was questioned on the subject, her son decided to speak only of Hulda’s marriage.

“Mother,” he began, “you, of course, recollect that Ole announced in his last letter that he should probably return to Dal in a few weeks.”

“It is certainly to be hoped that he will,” replied Dame Hansen, “and that nothing will occur to occasion any further delay.”

“Do you see any objection to our fixing upon the twenty-fifth of May as the day of the marriage?”

“None, whatever, if Hulda is willing.”

“Her consent is already given. And now I think I had better ask you, mother, if you do not intend to do the handsome thing on that occasion?”

“What do you mean by the handsome thing?” retorted Dame Hansen, without raising her eyes from her spinning-wheel.

“Why, I am anxious, if you approve, of course, that the wedding should correspond with the position we hold in the neighborhood. We ought to invite all our friends to it, and if our own house is not large enough to accommodate them, our neighbors, I am sure, will be glad to lodge our guests.”

“Who will these guests be, Joel?”

“Why, I think we ought to invite all our friends from Moel, Tiness and Bamble. I will attend to that. I think, too, that the presence of Help Bros. the shipowners, would be an honor to the family, and with your consent, I repeat, I will invite them to spend a day with us at Dal. They are very fine men, and they think a great deal of Ole, so I am almost sure that they will accept the invitation.”

“Is it really necessary to make this marriage such an important event?” inquired Dame Hansen, coldly.

“I think so, mother, if only for the sake of our inn, which I am sure has maintained its old reputation since my father’s death.”

“Yes, Joel, yes.”

“And it seems to me that it is our duty to at least keep it up to the standard at which he left it; consequently, I think it would be advisable to give considerable publicity to my sister’s marriage.”

"So be it, Joel."

"And do you not agree with me in thinking that it is quite time for Hulda to begin her preparations, and what do you say to my suggestion?"

"I think that you and Hulda must do whatever you think necessary," replied Dame Hansen.

Perhaps the reader will think that Joel was in too much of a hurry, and that it would have been much more sensible in him to have waited until Ole's return before appointing the wedding-day, and beginning to prepare for it, but as he said, what was once done would not have to be done over again; besides, the countless details connected with a ceremonial of this kind would serve to divert Hulda's mind from these forebodings for which there seemed to be no foundation.

The first thing to be done was to select the bride's maid of honor. That proved an easy matter, however, for Hulda's choice was already made. The bride-maid, of course, must be Hulda's intimate friend, Farmer Helmboe's daughter. Her father was a prominent man, and the possessor of a very comfortable fortune. For a long time he had fully appreciated Joel's sterling worth, and his daughter Siegfrid's appreciation, though of a rather different nature, was certainly no less profound; so it was quite probable that at no very distant day after Siegfrid had served as Hulda's maid of honor, Hulda, in turn, would act in the same capacity for her friend. This is the custom in Norway, where these pleasant duties are generally reserved for married women, so it was rather on Joel's account that Siegfrid Helmboe was to serve Hulda Hansen in this capacity.

A question of vital importance to the bride-maid as well as to the bride, is the toilet to be worn on the day of the wedding.

Siegfrid, a pretty blonde of eighteen summers, was firmly resolved to appear to the best possible advantage on the occasion. Warned by a short note from her friend Hulda — Joel had kindly made himself responsible for its safe delivery — she immediately proceeded to devote her closest attention to this important work.

In the first place, an elaborately embroidered bodice must be made to incase Siegfrid's charming figure as if in a coat of enamel. There was also much talk about a skirt composed of a series of jupons which should correspond in number with the wearer's fortune, but in no way detract from her charms of person. As for jewelry, it was no easy matter to select the design of the collar of silver filigree, set with pearls, the heart-shaped ear-rings, the double buttons to fasten the neck of the chemisette, the belt of red silk or woolen stuff from which depend four rows of small chains, the finger-rings studded with tiny bangles that tinkle musically, the bracelets of fretted silver — in short, all the wealth of country finery in which gold appears only in the shape of the thinnest plating, silver in the guise of tin and pearls, and diamonds in the shape of wax and crystal beads. But what does that matter so long as the *tout ensemble* is pleasing to the eye? Besides, if necessary, Siegfrid would not hesitate to go to the elegant stores of M. Benett, in Christiania, to make her purchases. Her father would not object — far from it! The kind-hearted man allowed his daughter full liberty in such matters; besides, Siegfrid was sensible enough not to draw too heavily upon her father's purse, though everything else was of secondary importance provided Joel would see her at her very best on that particular day.

As for Hulda, her anxiety on the subject was no less serious, for fashions are pitiless, and give, besides, not a little trouble in the selection of their wedding-toilet.

Hulda would now be obliged to abandon the long plaits tied with bright ribbons, which had heretofore hung from under her coquettish cap, the broad belt with fancy buckles that kept her apron in place upon her scarlet skirt, the girdle to which were appended several small embroidered leather cases containing a silver tea-spoon, knife, fork, needle-case and scissors — articles which a woman makes constant use of in the household.

No, on the fast approaching day of the nuptials, Hulda's hair would be allowed to float down upon her shoulders, and it was so abundant that it would not be necessary for her to have recourse to the jute switches used by Norwegian girls less favored by nature. Indeed, for her clothing, as well as for her ornaments, Hulda would only be obliged to resort to her mother's big chest. In fact, these articles of clothing are transmitted from marriage to marriage through all the different generations of the same family. So one sees reappearing again and again upon the scene the bodice embroidered in gold, the velvet sash, the skirt of striped silk, the gold chain for the neck, and the crown — the famous Scandinavian crown — carefully preserved in the most secure of all the chests, and made of pasteboard covered with embossed gilt paper, and studded with stars, or garlanded with leaves — that takes the place of the wreath of orange-blossoms worn by brides in other European countries.

In this case the crowned betrothed, as the bride is styled, would certainly do honor to her husband; and he would be worthy of her in his gay wedding suit: a short jacket trimmed with silver buttons, silk-embroidered waistcoat, tight breeches fastened at the knee with a bunch of bright ribbons, a soft felt hat, yellow top-boots, and in his belt the Scandinavian knife — the dolknife — with which the true Norwegian is always provided.

Consequently, there was plenty to occupy the attention of the young ladies for some time to come. Two or three weeks would barely suffice if they wished to have everything in readiness before Ole's return; but even if Ole should arrive sooner than he expected, and Hulda should not be quite ready, she would not be inconsolable, nor would he.

The last weeks of April and the first weeks of May were devoted to these matters. Joel assumed charge of the invitations, taking advantage of the fact that his vocation of guide gave him considerable leisure at this season of the year. One would have supposed that he had a large number of friends in Bamble, for he went there very often. He had already written to Help Bros. inviting them to attend his sister's wedding, and in accordance with his prediction, these worthy shipowners had promptly accepted the invitation.

The fifteenth of May came, and any day now they might expect Ole to alight from his kariol, throw open the door, and shout in his hearty, cheerful voice:

"It is I! Here I am!"

A little patience was all that was needed now, for everything was in readiness, and Siegfrid needed only a word to appear before them in all her splendor.

The 16th and 17th passed, and still no Ole, nor did the postman bring any letter from Newfoundland.

“There is no cause for anxiety, little sister,” Joel said, again and again. “A sailing-vessel is always subject to delays. It is a long way from St. Pierre-Miquelon to Bergen. How I wish the ‘Viking’ were a steamer and I the engine. How I would drive along against wind and tide, even if I should burst my boiler on coming into port.”

He said all this because he saw very plainly that Hulda’s uneasiness was increasing from day to day.

Just at this time, too, the weather was very bad in the Telemark. Violent gales swept the high table-lands, and these winds, which blew from the west, came from America.

“They ought to have hastened the arrival of the ‘Viking,’” the young girl repeated again and again.

“Yes, little sister,” replied Joel; “but they are so strong that they may have hindered its progress, and compelled it to face the gale. People can’t always do as they like upon the sea.”

“So you are not uneasy, Joel?”

“No, Hulda, no. It is annoying, of course, but these delays are very common. No; I am not uneasy, for there is really not the slightest cause for anxiety.”

On the 19th a traveler arrived at the inn, and asked for a guide to conduct him over the mountains to the Hardanger, and though Joel did not like the idea of leaving Hulda, he could not refuse his services. He would only be absent forty-eight hours at the longest, and he felt confident that he should find Ole at Dal on his return, though, to tell the truth, the kind-hearted youth was beginning to feel very uneasy. Still, he started off early the next morning, though with a heavy heart, we must admit.

On the following day, at precisely one o’clock, a loud rap resounded at the door of the inn.

“It is Ole!” cried Hulda.

She ran to the door.

There, in a kariol, sat a man enveloped in a traveling-cloak, a man whose face was unknown to her.

CHAPTER VI.

“Is this Dame Hansen’s inn?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” answered Hulda.

“Is Dame Hansen at home?”

“No; but she will soon return, and if you wish to speak to her — ”

“I do not. There is nothing I want to say to her.”

“Would you like a room?”

“Yes; the best in the house.”

“Shall we prepare dinner for you?”

“As soon as possible, and see to it that everything is of the very best quality.”

These remarks were exchanged between Hulda and the traveler before the latter had alighted from the kariol, in which he had journeyed to the heart of the Telemark across the forests, lakes, and valleys of Central Norway.

Every one who has visited Scandinavia is familiar with the kariol, the means of locomotion so dear to the hearts of her people. Two long shafts, between which trots a horse wearing a square wooden collar, painted yellow and striped with black, and guided with a simple rope passed, not through his mouth, but around his nose, two large, slender wheels, whose springless axle supports a small gay-colored, shell-shaped wagon-body, scarcely large enough to hold one person — no covering, no dash-board, no step — but behind, a board upon which the *skydskarl* perches himself. The whole vehicle strongly reminds one of an enormous spider between two huge cobwebs represented by the wheels of the vehicle.

At a sign from the traveler the *skydskarl* sprung to the horse’s head, and the stranger rose, straightened himself out, and finally alighted, though not without some difficulty, judging from two or three muttered curses.

“Will they put my kariol under shelter?” he asked, curtly, pausing upon the threshold.

“Yes, sir,” replied Hulda.

“And find my horse?”

“I will have him put in the stable immediately.”

“Have him well cared for.”

“Certainly, sir. May I ask if you intend to remain in Dal several days?”

“I don’t know yet.”

The kariol and horse were taken to a small barn built under the shelter of some trees at the foot of the mountain. It was the only stable connected with the inn, but it sufficed for the requirements of its guests.

In a few moments the traveler was duly installed in the best chamber, where, after removing his cloak, he proceeded to warm himself before the fire he had ordered lighted. In the meantime, Hulda, to satisfy this exacting guest, bade the *piga* (a sturdy peasant-girl, who helped in the kitchen, and did the rough work of the inn during the summer) prepare the best dinner possible.

A strong, hardy man was this new-comer, though he had already passed his sixtieth year. Thin, slightly round-shouldered, of medium stature, with an angular head, smoothly shaven face, thin, pointed nose, small eyes that looked you through and through from behind large spectacles, a forehead generally contracted by a frown, lips too thin for a pleasant word ever to escape them, and long, crooked fingers, he was the very personification of an avaricious usurer or miser, and Hulda felt a presentiment that this stranger would bring no good fortune to Dame Hansen's house.

He was a Norwegian unquestionably, but one of the very worst type. His traveling costume consisted of a broad-brimmed, low-crowned hat, a snuff-colored suit, the breeches fastened at the knee with a leather strap, and over all a large brown cloak, lined with sheep-skin to protect its wearer from the chilly night air.

Hulda did not ask him his name, but she would soon learn it, as he would have to enter it upon the inn register.

Just then Dame Hansen returned, and her daughter announced the arrival of a guest who demanded the best room and the best food that the inn afforded, but who vouchsafed no information in regard to the probable length of his stay.

"And he did not give his name?" asked Dame Hansen.

"No, mother."

"Nor say whence he came?"

"No."

“If he is not a tourist, what can have brought him to Dal?” said Dame Hansen to herself rather than to her daughter, and in a tone that indicated some uneasiness.

But Hulda could not answer this question, as the new-comer had acquainted her with none of his plans.

About an hour after his arrival the man came out into the main hall, from which his door opened, but seeing Dame Hansen sitting there, he paused upon the threshold.

Evidently he was as much of a stranger to his hostess as his hostess was to him; but he finally walked toward her, and after a long look at her from over his spectacles:

“You are Dame Hansen, I suppose?” he said, without even touching the hat he had not yet removed from his head.

“Yes, sir.”

In the presence of this man the widow, strange to say, experienced, like her daughter, an uneasiness for which she could not account, but which her guest must have noticed.

“So you are really Dame Hansen, of Dal?” he continued.

“Certainly, sir. Have you anything particular to say to me?”

“Nothing; I only wished to make your acquaintance. Am I not your guest? And now I should like you to see that I have my dinner as soon as possible.”

“Your dinner is ready,” interposed Hulda, “and if you will step into the dining-room — ”

“I will.”

As he spoke, the stranger directed his steps toward the door indicated, and a moment afterward he was seated near the window in front of a small, neatly spread table.

The dinner was certainly good. The most fastidious traveler could not have found fault with it; nevertheless, this ill-tempered individual was not sparing in his signs and words of dissatisfaction — especially signs, for he did not appear to be very loquacious. One could hardly help wondering whether this fault-finding was due to a poor digestion or a bad temper. The soup of cherries and gooseberries did not suit him, though it was excellent, and he scarcely tasted his salmon and salt-herring. The cold ham, broiled chicken and nicely seasoned vegetables did not seem to please him, and his bottle of claret and his half bottle of champagne seemed to be equally unsatisfactory, though they came from the best cellars in France; and when the repast was concluded the guest had not even a “*tack for mad*” for his hostess.

After dinner the old curmudgeon lighted his pipe and went out for a walk along the river bank.

On reaching the stream he turned and fixed his eyes upon the inn. He seemed to be studying it under all its varied aspects, as if trying to form a correct estimate of its value.

He counted every door and window, and finally on his return to the inn he stuck his knife into the horizontal beams at its base, as if to test the quality of the wood and its state of preservation. Could it be that he was trying to find out how much Dame Hansen’s inn was really worth? Did he aspire to become the owner of it, though it was not for sale? All this was certainly very strange, especially as he afterward turned his attention to the little yard, the trees and shrubs of which he counted carefully, and finally measured both sides of the inclosure with regular strides, after which the movement of his pencil over a page of his memorandum-book seemed to indicate that he was multiplying one by the other.

All the while Dame Hansen and her daughter were watching him from one of the windows of the inn. What strange creature was this, and what could be the object of his visit? It was greatly to be regretted that all this took place during Joel’s absence, especially as the eccentric individual was going to spend the night at the inn.

“What if he is a madman?” said Hulda.

“A madman? no,” replied Dame Hansen. “But he is a very eccentric person, to say the least.”

“It is always unpleasant to be ignorant of the name of the person you are entertaining,” remarked the young girl.

“Before he re-enters the house, Hulda, be sure that you carry the register into his room. Perhaps he will conclude to write his name in it.”

“Yes, mother.”

Just at dusk a fine rain began to fall, so the stranger returned to the inn. He asked for a small glass of brandy, then without saying a word, or even bidding any one good-night, he took his wooden candlestick, and entering his room bolted the door behind him, and nothing further was heard from him that night.

The *skydskarl* had taken refuge in the barn, where he was already sound asleep in company with the sorrel horse.

Dame Hansen and her daughter rose with the sun the next morning, but no sound came from the room of their guest, who was probably still sleeping. A little after nine o'clock he made his appearance even more glum and ill-tempered than the evening before, complaining that his bed had been hard, and that the noise in the house had kept, him awake; then he opened the door and looked out at the sky.

The prospect was not very cheering, certainly, for the wind was blowing a gale, and the stranger concluded not to venture out. Still he did not waste his time. With his pipe in his mouth he walked about the inn as if trying to familiarize himself with the arrangement of the interior. He visited all the different rooms, examined the furniture, and peered into cupboards and sideboards with as much coolness as if he had been in his own house.

Though the man was singular in appearance, his actions were certainly even more singular. Finally he seated himself in the big arm-chair, and proceeded to question Dame Hansen in a curt, almost rude tone. How long had the inn been built? Was it her husband that built it, or did he inherit it? How much land was there around it, and what was the extent of the adjoining *souter*? Was the inn well patronized, and did it pay well? How many tourists came there on an average during the summer? Did they usually spend one or several days there? etc. etc.

It was evident that the stranger had not looked at the register that had been placed in his room, for that would have given him all the information he desired upon this last point.

In fact, the book was still on the table where Hulda had placed it the evening before, and the traveler’s name was not in it.

“I do not understand how and why these matters can interest you, sir,” said Dame Hansen at last; “but if you wish to know the state of our business, nothing could be easier. You have only to examine the register, in which you would greatly oblige me by entering your name according to custom.”

“My name? I will write my name in it, certainly. I will write it there before I leave, which will be immediately after breakfast, as I am anxious to get back to Drammen by to-morrow evening.”

“Drammen!” repeated Dame Hansen, hastily.

“Yes. Will you give me my breakfast as soon as possible?”

“Do you live in Drammen?”

“Yes. May I ask if there is anything astonishing about the fact that I reside in Drammen?”

So, after spending scarcely twenty-four hours in Dal, or rather at the inn, the traveler left without making the slightest effort to see anything of the surrounding country, Gousta, and Rjukanfos, and the wonders of the valley of the Vesfjorddal were entirely ignored.

It certainly could not have been for pleasure that he left Drammen, so he must have come on business, and the sole object of his visit seemed to have been a careful examination of Dame Hansen’s establishment.

It was plain to Hulda that her mother was deeply troubled, for she seated herself in her big arm-chair, and pushing aside her spinning-wheel, remained there silent and motionless.

In the meantime the traveler had gone into the dining-room and seated himself at the table. Though the breakfast was as carefully prepared as the dinner of the evening before, it seemed to give no better satisfaction; and yet the guest eat and drank in the same leisurely fashion. His attention seemed to be chiefly bestowed upon the silver — a luxury highly prized among Norwegian peasants, where the few forks and spoons which are handed down from father to son are carefully preserved with the family jewels.

Meanwhile the *skydskarl* busied himself with his preparations for departure; and by eleven o’clock the horse and kariol were standing before the door of the inn.

The weather was still threatening; the sky was dull and overcast, and now and then big drops of rain dashed against the window-panes; but this traveler with his heavy cloak lined with sheep-skin was not a man to worry about the weather.

Breakfast over, he called for one more glass of brandy, lighted his pipe, and put on his coat, then stepping out into the hall he called for his bill.

“I will make it out immediately,” replied Hulda, seating herself at a small desk.

“Be quick about it,” said the traveler. “And now,” he added, “you had better bring me your book so I can write my name in it.”

Dame Hansen rose and left the room to get the register, which, on her return, she placed upon the large table.

The stranger picked up a pen and took one more long look at Dame Hansen over his spectacles; then he wrote his name in a large, round hand, and closed the book.

Just at that moment Hulda handed him his bill. He took it, examined each item separately, and then proceeded to add up the figures, grumbling all the while.

“Hum!” he exclaimed. “This is very dear! Seven marks and a half for a night’s lodging and two meals!”

“You forget the *skydskarl* and the horse,” remarked Hulda.

“Nevertheless, I think your charge very high. I really don’t see how you can expect to prosper if you are so exorbitant in your charges.”

“You owe me nothing, sir,” said Dame Hansen, in a voice that trembled so that it was scarcely audible.

She had just opened the register and read the name inscribed upon it, and now taking the bill and tearing it up, she repeated:

“You owe me nothing.”

“That is exactly my opinion,’” replied the stranger.

And without bidding them good-bye on his departure any more than he had bidden them good-day on his arrival, he climbed into his kariol, and the *skydskarl* jumped upon the board behind him. A few seconds later he had disappeared around a turn in the road. When Hulda opened the book she found there only this name —

“Sandgoist, from Drammen.”

CHAPTER VII.

It was on the afternoon of the following day that Joel was to return home; and Hulda, who knew that her brother would come back by the table-lands of the Gousta and along the left bank of the Maan, went to meet him at the ferry across that impetuous stream. On arriving there she seated herself on the little wharf which serves as a landing-place for the ferry-boat, and abandoned herself to her thoughts.

To the deep uneasiness caused by the non-arrival of the “Viking” was now added another great anxiety. This last was caused by the mysterious visit of Sandgoist, and Dame Hansen’s agitation in his presence. Why had she destroyed the bill and declined to accept the money due her as soon as she learned her guest’s name? There must be some secret concealed under all this — and a grave one.

Hulda was finally aroused from her reverie by the approach of Joel. She first caught a glimpse of him as he was descending the topmost slope; soon he reappeared in the midst of a narrow clearing between the burned and fallen trees. Then he vanished from sight behind a clump of pines, and at last reached the opposite bank and jumped aboard the ferry-boat. With a few vigorous strokes of the oar he propelled the boat swiftly through the rapids, and then leaped upon the little pier beside his sister.

“Has Ole returned?” he asked, hastily.

It was of Ole that he thought first of all; but his question remained unanswered.

“Have you received no letter from him?”

“Not one.”

And Hulda burst into tears.

“Don’t cry, little sister,” exclaimed Joel, “don’t cry. You make me wretched. I can not bear to see you weep. Let me see! You say you have received no letter. The matter is beginning to look a little serious, I must admit, though there is no reason to despair as yet. If you desire it, I will go to Bergen, and make inquiries there. I will call on Help Bros. Possibly they may have some news from Newfoundland. It is quite possible that the ‘Viking’ may have put into some port for repairs, or on account of bad weather. The wind has been blowing a hurricane for more than a week, and not unfrequently ships from Newfoundland take refuge in Iceland, or at the Faroe Islands. This very thing happened to Ole two years ago, when he was on board the ‘Strenna,’ you remember. I am only saying what I really think, little sister. Dry your eyes. If you make me lose heart what will become of us?”

“But I can’t help it, Joel.”

“Hulda! Hulda! do not lose courage. I assure you that I do not despair, not by any means.”

“Can I really believe you, Joel?”

“Yes, you can. Now, to reassure you, shall I start for Bergen to-morrow morning, or this very evening?”

“No, no, you must not leave me! No, you must not!” sobbed Hulda, clinging to her brother as if he was the only friend she had left in the world.

They started toward the inn. Joel sheltered his sister from the rain as well as he could, but the wind soon became so violent that they were obliged to take refuge in the hut of the ferryman, which stood a few hundred yards from the bank of the Maan.

There they were obliged to remain until the wind abated a little, and Joel was glad of an opportunity to have a longer conversation with his sister.

“How does mother seem?” he inquired.

“Even more depressed in spirits than usual,” replied Hulda.

“Has any one been here during my absence?”

“Yes, one traveler, but he has gone away.”

“So there is no tourist at the inn now, and no one has asked for a guide?”

“No, Joel.”

“So much the better, for I would much rather not leave you. Besides, if this unpleasant weather continues, it is not likely that many tourists will visit the Telemark this season. But tell me, was it yesterday that your guest left Dal?”

“Yes, yesterday morning.”

“Who was he?”

“A man who resides in Drammen, and whose name is Sandgoist.”

“Sandgoist?”

“Do you know him?”

“No.”

Hulda had asked herself more than once if she should tell her brother all that had occurred in his absence. When Joel heard how coolly their guest had conducted himself, and how he seemed to have come merely to appraise the house and its contents, what would he think? Would not he, too, fear that his mother must have had grave reasons for acting as she had? What were these reasons? What could there be in common between her and Sandgoist? Joel would certainly desire to know, and would be sure to question his mother, and as Dame Hansen, who was always so uncommunicative, would doubtless persist in the silence she had maintained hitherto, the relations between her and her children, which were so unnatural and constrained now, would become still more unpleasant.

But would Hulda be able to keep anything from Joel? A secret from him! Would it not be a violation of the close friendship that united them? No, this friendship must never be broken! So Hulda suddenly resolved to tell him all.

“Have you ever heard any one speak of this Sandgoist when you were in Drammen?” she asked.

“Never.”

“But our mother knew him, Joel; at least by name.”

“She knew Sandgoist?”

“Yes.”

“I certainly never heard the name before.”

“But she has, though she had never seen the man until day before yesterday.”

Then Hulda related all the incidents that had marked Sandgoist’s sojourn at the inn, not neglecting to mention Dame Hansen’s singular conduct at the moment of his departure. Then she hastened to add:

“I think, Joel, it would be best not to say anything to mother about it at present. You know her disposition, and it would only make her still more unhappy. The future will probably reveal what has been concealed from us in the past. Heaven grant that Ole may be restored to us, and then if any misfortune should befall the family there will at least be three of us to share it.”

Joel had listened to his sister with profound attention. Yes, it was evident that Dame Hansen must be at this man’s mercy, and it was impossible to doubt that he had come to take an inventory of the property. And the destruction of the bill at the time of his departure — a destruction that seemed only right and proper to him — what could be the meaning of that?

“You are right, Hulda,” said Joel. “I had better not say anything to mother about it. Perhaps she will feel sorry by and by that she has not confided in us. Heaven grant that it may not be too late! She must be wretched, poor woman! How strange it is that she can not understand that her children were born to sympathize with her.”

“She will find it out some day, Joel.”

“Yes; so let us wait patiently, little sister. Still, there is no reason why I should not try to find out who the man is. Perhaps Farmer Helmboe knows him. I will ask him the first time I go to Bamble, and if need be I will push on to Drammen. There it will not be difficult for me to at least learn what the man does, and what people think of him."

"They do not think well of him, I am sure," replied Hulda. "His face is very unprepossessing, and I shall be very much surprised if there is a noble soul concealed under such a repulsive exterior."

"Come, come, little sister, it will not do to judge people by outward appearances," exclaimed Joel. "Don't be so suspicious, Hulda, and cheer up. Ole will soon be with us, and we will scold him roundly for having kept us waiting."

The rain having ceased the pair left the hut and started up the path leading to the inn.

"By the way, I must go away again to-morrow, little sister," said Joel.

"Go away again to-morrow!" repeated Hulda.

"Yes, early in the morning. On leaving the Hardanger I was informed by a comrade that a traveler, coming from the north by way of the Rjukanfos would arrive to-morrow."

"Who is this traveler?"

"I don't know his name, but I must be on hand to conduct him to Dal."

"Ah, well! go, then, as there is no help for it," replied Hulda, with a sigh.

"Yes, I must start to-morrow at sunrise. Do you really feel so badly about it, Hulda?"

“Yes, brother, I feel much more unhappy when you leave me, even if it is only for a few hours.”

“Ah, well, this time I shall not go alone.”

“Why, who is to accompany you?”

“You, little sister. You need diversion, and I am going to take you with me.”

“Oh, thank you, Joel, thank you!”

CHAPTER VIII.

The brother and sister left the inn at sunrise the next morning. The fifteen mile walk from Dal to the celebrated falls of the Rjukan, and back again, was a mere trifle for Joel, but it was necessary to economize Hulda's strength, so Joel hired foreman Lengling's kariol. This, like all kariols, had but one seat, but the worthy man was so large that he had been obliged to have his kariol built to order, and this being the case the vehicle was large enough to enable Hulda and Joel to sit side by side quite comfortably; and if the expected tourist was waiting for them at Rjukanfos as they anticipated, he could take Joel's place and the latter could either return afoot or mounted upon the step behind the kariol.

The road from Dal to the falls is very rough but indescribably charming. It is really rather a footpath than a road. The bridges across the countless streams that dance merrily along to the Maan are all constructed of unhewn logs, but the Norwegian horse traverses them with a sure step, and though the kariol has no springs, its long and slightly elastic shafts soften the jolting at least to some extent.

The day was charming, and Hulda and Joel drove along at a brisk pace through the flowery fields, bathed on the left by the clear waters of the Maan. Clumps of birches here and there shaded the sunny road, and the dew still glittered on the blades of grass. To the right of the torrent towered the snow-clad summit of the Gousta, which rises to an altitude of six thousand feet.

For nearly an hour, the vehicle moved on rapidly, the ascent being comparatively slight; but soon the valley became narrower, the gay rivulets were transformed into foaming torrents, and though the road wound in and out it could not avoid all the inequalities of the ground. Beyond came really dangerous passes, through which Joel guided the vehicle with no little skill; besides, with him Hulda feared nothing. When the road was very rough she clung to his arm, and the freshness of the morning air brought a glow to the pretty face which had been unusually pale for some time.

But it was necessary for them to ascend to still greater heights, for the valley here contracted into merely a narrow channel for the passage of the river, a channel inclosed on either side by massive walls of rock. Over the neighboring fields were scattered a few dilapidated farm-houses, the remains of *soeters*, which were now abandoned, and a few shepherd's huts almost hidden from view by clumps of birches and oaks. Soon it became impossible for them to see the river, though they could distinctly hear it dashing along in its rocky channel, and the country assumed an indescribably wild and imposing aspect.

A drive of two hours brought them to a rough saw-mill perched upon the edge of a water-fall at least fifteen hundred feet in height. Water-falls of this height are by no means rare in the Vesfjorddal, but the volume of water is usually small. This is not the case with the falls of the Rjukanfos however.

On reaching the saw-mill, Joel and Hulda both alighted.

“A half hour's walk will not be too much for you, will it, little sister?” asked Joel.

“No, brother; I am not tired, and a little exercise will do me good.”

“It will be a good deal instead of a little, for you will have some pretty hard climbing to do.”

“I can cling to your arm, Joel.”

It was evident that the kariol must be abandoned at this point, for it would be impossible for it to make its way through the rough paths, the narrow passes, and over the big, fantastically shaped rocks that heralded the close proximity of the great falls.

Already, they could see in the distance a thick mist, the spray from the seething waters of Rjukan.

Hulda and Joel took a shady path which is well known to guides, and which leads to the end of the valley. A few moments afterward they found themselves upon a moss-covered rock almost in front of the fall. In fact there was no chance of getting any nearer to it on that side.

The brother and sister would have had considerable difficulty in making themselves heard if they had wished to speak; but their thoughts were those that could be exchanged without the agency of the lips.

The volume of the Rjukan fall is enormous, its height very considerable, and its roar deafening. The earth makes an abrupt descent of nine hundred feet to the bed of the Maan midway between Lake Mjos and Lake Tinn, nine hundred feet, that is to say six times the height of Niagara, though the width of this last water-fall from the American to the Canadian shore is three miles.

The Rjukan is so grand and unique in its aspect that any description falls far short of the reality, and even a painting can not do justice to it. There are certain wonders of nature that must be seen if one would form any adequate conception of their beauty; and this water-fall, which is one of the most widely celebrated in Europe, belongs to this category.

These were the very thoughts that were passing through the mind of a tourist who was at that very moment sitting perched upon a rock on the right bank of the Maan, from which spot he could command a nearer and more extended view of the fall.

Neither Joel nor his sister had yet noticed him, though he was plainly visible from the rock on which they were seated.

In a few minutes the traveler rose and very imprudently ventured out upon the rocky slope that is rounded like a dome on the side next the Maan. What the adventurous tourist wished to see was evidently the two caverns under the fall, the one to the left, which is ever filled to the top with a mass of seething foam, and the one to the right, which is always enshrouded in a heavy mist. Possibly he was even trying to ascertain if there were not a third cavern midway down the fall to account for the fact that the Rjukan at intervals projects straight outward into space a mass of water and spray, making it appear as if the waters had suddenly been scattered in a fine spray over the surrounding fields by some terrific explosion in the rear of the fall.

And now the daring tourist was slowly but persistently making his way over the rough and slippery ledge of rock, destitute alike of shrubbery or grass, know as the Passe de Marie, or the Maristien.

It is more than probable, however, that he was ignorant of the legend that has made this pass so widely know. One day Eystein endeavored to reach his betrothed, the beautiful Marie of Vesfjorddal, by this dangerous path. His sweetheart was holding out her arms to him from the other side of the gorge, when suddenly he lost his footing, fell, slipped further and further down the ledge of rock which is as smooth as glass, and disappeared forever in the seething rapids of the Maan.

Was this rash traveler about to meet a similar fate?

It seemed only too probable; and in fact he soon perceived the danger of his position, though not until it was too late. Suddenly his foot slipped, he uttered a cry, and after rolling nearly twenty feet, he finally succeeded in securing a hold upon a projecting rock on the very edge of the abyss.

Joel and Hulda, though they had not yet caught sight of him, heard his cry.

“What is that?” exclaimed Joel, springing to his feet.

“A cry!” replied Hulda.

“Yes, a cry of distress.”

“From what direction did it come?”

“Let us listen.”

Both looked first to the right, and then to the left of the fall, but they saw nothing, though they had certainly heard the words “Help! help!” uttered during one of the intervals between each rebound of the Rjukan.

The cry was repeated.

“Joel, some one who is in danger is calling for help,” cried Hulda. “We must go to his aid.”

“Yes, sister; and he can not be far off. But in what direction? Where is he? I see no one.”

Hulda hastily climbed a little knoll behind the mossy rock upon which she had been sitting.

“Joel!” she cried, suddenly.

“Do you see him?”

“There, there!”

As she spoke she pointed to the imprudent man whose body seemed to be almost overhanging the abyss. If his foothold upon a tiny ledge of rock failed him, or he was seized with dizziness, he was lost.

“We must save him!” said Hulda.

“Yes,” replied Joel, “if we can keep our wits about us we shall perhaps be able to reach him.”

Joel gave a loud shout to attract the attention of the traveler, who immediately turned his head toward the spot from which the sound proceeded; then the worthy fellow devoted a few moments to deciding how he could best rescue the stranger from his dangerous position.

“You are not afraid, are you, Hulda?” he asked.

“No, brother.”

“You know the Maristien well, do you not?”

“I have crossed it several times.”

“Then walk along the brow of the cliff, gradually getting as near the traveler as you possibly can; then allow yourself to slide down gently toward him, and take him by the hand, so as to prevent him from falling any further; but do not let him try to lift himself up, because if he should be seized with vertigo he would certainly drag you down with him, and you would both be lost.”

“And you, Joel?”

“While you are traversing the brow of the cliff I will creep along the edge of it on the river-side. I shall reach him about as soon as you do, and if you should slip I shall perhaps be able to prevent you both from falling.”

Then, taking advantage of another interval in the roaring of the torrent, Joel shouted in stentorian tones:

“Don’t move, sir. Wait; we will try to get to you!”

Hulda had already disappeared behind the trees that crowned the ledge, in order to ascend the Maristien from the other side of the declivity, and Joel soon caught a glimpse of the fast-receding form of the brave girl at the turn in the path where the last trees grew.

He, in turn, at the peril of his life, had begun to creep slowly along the shelving edge of the ledge that surrounds the Rjukan. What wonderful coolness, what steadiness of foot and of hand were required to thus advance in safety along the edge of an abyss whose borders were drenched with the spray of the cataract!

In a parallel direction, but at least one hundred feet above his head, Hulda was advancing obliquely in order to reach the traveler more easily; but the position of the latter was such that she could not see his face, that being turned toward the cataract.

Joel, on reaching a spot directly below the unfortunate man paused, and after planting his foot firmly in a small crevice in the rock, called out:

“Hallo, sir!”

The traveler turned his head.

“Don’t move, sir; don’t move an inch, but hold fast!”

“I’ll do that, my friend, never fear,” replied the stranger in a tone that reassured Joel. “If I hadn’t a good grip, I should have gone to the bottom of the Rjukan a quarter of an hour ago.”

“My sister is also coming to help you,” continued Joel. “She will take hold of your hand, but don’t attempt to get upon your feet until I reach you. Don’t even move.”

“No more than a rock,” replied the traveler.

Hulda had already begun to descend the ledge, carefully selecting the less slippery parts of the slope with the clear head of a true daughter of the Telemark.

And she, too, now called out as Joel had done:

“Holdfast, sir.”

“Yes; I am holding fast, and I assure you that I shall continue to do so as long as I can.”

“And above all don’t be afraid!” added Hulda.

“I am not afraid.”

“We’ll save you yet!” cried Joel.

“I hope so, indeed; for by Saint Olaf I shall never succeed in getting out of this scrape myself.”

It was evident that the tourist had lost none of his presence of mind; but his fall had probably disabled him, and all he could do now was to keep himself upon the narrow shelf of rock that separated him from the abyss.

Meanwhile Hulda continued her descent, and in a few minutes reached the traveler; then, bracing her foot against a projecting point in the rock, she caught hold of his hand.

The traveler involuntarily attempted to raise himself a little.

“Don’t move, sir, don’t move,” cried Hulda. “You will be sure to drag me down with you, for I am not strong enough to keep you from falling! You must wait until my brother reaches us. When he gets between us and the fall you can then try to get up.”

“That is more easily said than done I fear.”

“Are you so much hurt, sir? I hope you have broken no bones.”

“No; but one leg is badly cut and scratched.”

Joel was about twenty yards from them, the rounded shape of the brow of the cliff having prevented him from joining them at once. He was now obliged to climb this rounded surface. This was, of course, the most difficult and also the most dangerous part of his task.

“Don’t make the slightest movement, Hulda!” he cried. “If you should both slip while I am not in a position to break your fall you would both be killed.”

"You need not fear that, Joel!" replied Hulda. "Think only of yourself, and may God help you!"

Joel began to crawl slowly up the rock, dragging himself along on his belly like a veritable reptile. Two or three times he narrowly escaped sliding down into the abyss below, but finally he succeeded in reaching the traveler's side.

The latter proved to be an elderly but still vigorous-looking man, with a handsome face, animated with a very genial and kindly expression.

"You have been guilty of a very imprudent act, sir," remarked Joel as soon as he recovered his breath.

"Imprudent!" repeated the traveler. "Yes, and as absurd as it was imprudent."

"You have not only risked your life, but — "

"Made you risk yours."

"Oh! that is my business," replied Joel, lightly. Then he added, in an entirely different tone: "The thing to be done now is to regain the brow of the cliff, but the most difficult part of the task is already accomplished."

"The most difficult?"

"Yes, sir. That was to reach you. Now we have only to ascend a much more gradual slope.

"Still, you had better not place much dependence upon me, my boy. I have a leg that isn't of much use to me just now, nor will it be for some time to come I fear.”

“Try to raise yourself a little.”

“I will gladly do so if you will assist me.”

“Then take hold of my sister’s arm. I will steady you and push you from below.”

“Very well, my friends, I will be guided entirely by you; as you have been so kind as to come to my assistance, I can not do less than yield you implicit obedience.”

Joel’s plan was carried out in the most cautious manner, and though the ascent was not made without considerable difficulty and danger, all three accomplished it more easily and quickly than they had thought possible. Besides, the injury from which the traveler was suffering was neither a sprain nor dislocation, but simply a very bad abrasion of the skin; consequently, he could use his limbs to much better purpose than he had supposed, and ten minutes later he found himself safe on the other side of the Maristien.

Once there, he would have been glad to rest awhile under the pines that border the upper *field* of the Rjukanfos, but Joel persuaded him to make one more effort. This was to reach a hut hidden among the trees, a short distance from the rock, on which the brother and sister had seated themselves on first arriving at the fall. The traveler yielded to their solicitations, and supported on one side by Hulda, and on the other by Joel, he finally succeeded in reaching the door of the humble dwelling.

“Let us go in, sir,” said Hulda. “You must want to rest a moment.”

“The moment will probably be prolonged to a quarter of an hour.”

“Very well, sir; but afterward you must consent to accompany us to Dal.”

“To Dal? Why, that is the very place I was going to!”

“Can it be that you are the tourist who was expected from the north?” asked Joel.

“Precisely.”

“Had I foreseen what was going to happen, I should have gone to the other side of the Rjukanfos to meet you.”

“That would have been a good idea, my brave fellow. You would have saved me from a foolhardy act unpardonable at my age.”

“Or at any age,” replied Hulda.

The three entered the hut which was occupied by a family of peasants, a father and two daughters, who received their unexpected guests with great cordiality.

Joel was able to satisfy himself that the traveler had sustained no injury beyond a severe abrasion of the skin a little below the knee; but though the wound would necessitate a week’s rest, the limb was neither broken nor dislocated.

Some excellent milk, an abundance of strawberries, and a little black bread were offered and accepted. Joel gave incontestable proofs of an excellent appetite, and though Hulda eat almost nothing, the traveler proved a match for her brother.

“My exertions have given me a famous appetite,” he remarked; “but I must admit that my attempt to traverse the Maristien was an act of the grossest folly. To play the part of the unfortunate Eystein when one is old enough to be his father — and even his grandfather — is absurd in the highest degree.”

“So you know the legend?” said Hulda.

“Of course. My nurse used to sing me to sleep with it in the happy days when I still had a nurse. Yes, I know the story, my brave girl, so I am all the more to blame for my imprudence. Now, my friends, Dal seems a long way off to a cripple like myself. How do you propose to get me there?”

“Don’t worry about that, sir,” replied Joel. “Our kariol is waiting for us at the end of the road, about three hundred yards from here.”

“Hum! three hundred yards!”

“But downhill all the way,” added Hulda.

“Oh, in that case, I shall do very well if you will kindly lend me an arm.”

“Why not two, as we have four at your disposal?” responded Joel.

“We will say two then. It won’t cost me any more, will it?”

“It will cost you nothing.”

“Except my thanks; and that reminds me that I have not yet thanked you.”

“For what, sir?” inquired Joel.

“Merely for saving my life at the risk of your own.”

“Are you quite ready to start?” inquired Hulda, rising to escape any further expression of gratitude.

“Certainly, certainly. I am more than willing to be guided by the wishes of the other members of the party.”

The traveler settled the modest charge made by the occupants of the cottage; then, supported by Joel and Hulda, he began the descent of the winding path leading to the river bank.

The descent was not effected without many exclamations of pain; but these exclamations invariably terminated in a hearty laugh, and at last they reached the saw-mill, where Joel immediately proceeded to harness the horse into the kariol.

Five minutes later the traveler was installed in the vehicle, with Hulda beside him.

“But I must have taken your seat,” he remarked to Joel.

“A seat I relinquish to you with the utmost willingness.”

“But perhaps by a little crowding we might make room for you?”

“No, no, I have my legs, sir — a guide’s legs. They are as good as any wheels.”

Joel placed himself at the horse’s head, and the little party started for Dal. The return trip was a gay one, at least on the part of the traveler, who already seemed to consider himself an old friend of the Hansen family. Before they reached their destination they found themselves calling their companion M. Silvius; and that gentleman unceremoniously called them Hulda and Joel, as if their acquaintance had been one of long standing.

About four o’clock the little belfry of Dal became visible through the trees, and a few minutes afterward the horse stopped in front of the inn. The traveler alighted from the kariol, though not without considerable difficulty. Dame Hansen hastened to the door to receive him, and though he did not ask for the best room in the house, it was given to him all the same.

CHAPTER IX.

Sylvius Hogg was the name that the stranger inscribed upon the inn register, that same evening, directly underneath the name of Sandgoist, and there was as great a contrast between the two names as between the men that bore them. Between them there was nothing whatever in common, either mentally, morally, or physically. One was generous to a fault, the other was miserly and parsimonious; one was genial and kind-hearted, in the arid soul of the other every noble and humane sentiment seemed to have withered and died.

Sylvius Hogg was nearly sixty years of age, though he did not appear nearly so old. Tall, erect, and well built, healthy alike in mind and in body, he pleased at first sight with his handsome genial face, upon which he wore no beard, but around which clustered curling locks of silvery hair; eyes which were as smiling as his lips, a broad forehead that bore the impress of noble thoughts, and a full chest in which the heart beat untrammeled. To all these charms were added an inexhaustible fund of good humor, a refined and liberal nature, and a generous and self-sacrificing disposition.

Sylvius Hogg, of Christiania — no further recommendation was needed. That told the whole story. And he was not only known, appreciated, loved and honored in the Norwegian capital, but throughout the entire country, though the sentiments he inspired in the other half of the Scandinavian kingdom, that is to say in Sweden, were of an entirely different character.

This fact can easily be explained.

Sylvius Hogg was a professor of law at Christiania. In some lands to be a barrister, civil engineer, physician, or merchant, entitles one to a place on the upper rounds of the social ladder. It is different in Norway, however. To be a professor there is to be at the top of the ladder.

Though there are four distinct classes in Sweden, the nobility, the clergy, the gentry, and the peasantry, there are but three in Norway — the nobility being utterly wanting. No aristocracy is acknowledged, not even that of the office-holder, for in this favored country where privileged persons are unknown, the office-holder is only the humble servant of the public. In fact, perfect social equality prevails without any political distinctions whatever.

Sylvius Hogg being one of the most influential men in the country, the reader will not be surprised to learn that he was also a member of the Storthing; and in this august body, by the well-known probity of his public and private life even more than by his mighty intellect, he wielded a powerful influence even over the peasant deputies elected in such large numbers in the rural districts.

Ever since the adoption of the Constitution of 1814, it may be truly said that Norway is a republic with the King of Sweden for its president; for Norway, ever jealous of her rights, has carefully guarded her individuality. The Storthing will have nothing whatever to do with the Swedish parliament; hence it is only natural that the most prominent and patriotic members of the Storthing should be regarded with distrust on the other side of the imaginary frontier that separates Sweden from Norway.

This was the case with Sylvius Hogg. Being extremely independent in character, and utterly devoid of ambition, he had repeatedly declined a position in the Cabinet; and a stanch defender of all the rights of his native land, he had constantly and unflinchingly opposed any threatened encroachment on the part of Sweden.

Such is the moral and political gulf between the two countries that the King of Sweden — then Oscar XV. — after being crowned at Stockholm, was obliged to go through a similar ceremony at Drontheim, the ancient capital of Norway. Such too is the suspicious reserve of Norwegian men of business, that the Bank of Christiania is unwilling to accept the notes of the Bank of Stockholm! Such too is the clearly defined line of demarkation between the two nations that the Swedish flag floats neither over the public buildings of Norway, nor from the masts of Norwegian vessels. The one has its blue bunting, bearing a yellow cross; the other a blue cross upon a crimson ground.

Sylvius Hogg was a thorough Norwegian in heart and in soul, and stoutly defended her rights upon all occasions; so, when in 1854 the Storthing was discussing the question of having neither a viceroy nor even a governor at the head of the state, he was one of the most enthusiastic champions of the measure.

Consequently, though he was by no means popular in the eastern part of Scandinavia, he was adored in the western part of it, even in the most remote hamlets. His name was a household word throughout Norway from the dunes of Christiansand to the bleak rocks of the North Cape, and so worthy was he of this universal respect that no breath of calumny had ever sullied the reputation of either the deputy or the professor. But though he was a Norwegian to the core he was a hot-blooded man, with none of the traditional coldness and apathy of his compatriots; but much more prompt and resolute in his thoughts and acts than most Scandinavians, as was proved by the quickness of his movements, the ardor of his words, and the vivacity of his gestures. Had he been born in France, one would have unhesitatingly pronounced him a Southerner.

Sylvius Hogg’s fortune had never exceeded a fair competence, for he had not entered into politics for the purpose of making money. Naturally unselfish, he never thought of himself, but continually of others; nor was he tormented by a thirst for fame. To be a deputy was enough for him; he craved no further advancement.

Just at this time Sylvius Hogg was taking advantage of a three months’ vacation to recuperate after a year of severe legislative toil. He had left Christiania six weeks before, with the intention of traveling through the country about Drontheim, the Hardanger, the Telemark, and the districts of Kongsberg and Drammen. He had long been anxious to visit these provinces of which he knew nothing; and his trip was consequently one of improvement and of pleasure. He had already explored a part of the region, and it was on his return from the northern districts that the idea of visiting the famous falls of the Rjukan — one of the wonders of the Telemark — first occurred to him. So, after surveying the route of the new railroad — which as yet existed only on paper — between the towns of Drontheim and Christiania, he sent for a guide to conduct him to Dal. He was to meet this guide on the left bank of the Maan; but lured on by the beauties of the Maristien, he ventured upon the dangerous pass without waiting for his guide. An unusual want of prudence in a man like him and one that nearly cost him his life, for had it not been for the timely assistance rendered by Joel and Hulda Hansen, the journey would have ended with the traveler himself in the grim depths of the Rjukanfos.

CHAPTER X.

The people of Scandinavia are very intelligent, not only the inhabitants of the cities, but of the most remote rural districts. Their education goes far beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic. The peasant learns with avidity. His mental faculties are ever on the alert. He takes a deep interest in the public welfare and no mean part in all political and local affairs. More than half of the Storthing is made up of members of this rank in life. Not unfrequently they attend its sessions clad in the costume of their particular province; but they are justly noted for their remarkable good sense, acute reasoning powers, their clear though rather slow understanding, and above all, for their incorruptibility.

Consequently it is not at all strange that the name of Sylvius Hogg was a household word throughout Norway, and was uttered with respect even in the wilds of the Telemark; so Dame Hansen on receiving such a widely known and highly esteemed guest, thought it only proper to tell him how highly honored she felt at having him under her roof, if only for a few days.

“I don’t know that I am doing you much honor, Dame Hansen,” replied Sylvius Hogg, “but I do know that it gives me great pleasure to be here. I have heard my pupils talk of this hospitable inn for years. Indeed, that is one reason I intended to stop here and rest for about a week, but by Saint Olaf! I little expected to arrive here on one leg!”

And the good man shook the hand of his hostess most cordially.

“Wouldn’t you like my brother to fetch a doctor from Bamble?” inquired Hulda.

“A doctor! my little Hulda! Why! do you want me to lose the use of both my legs?”

“Oh, Mr. Sylvius!”

“A doctor! Why not send for my friend, the famous Doctor Bork, of Christiania? All this ado about a mere scratch, what nonsense!”

“But even a mere scratch may become a very serious thing if not properly attended to,” remarked Joel.

“Well, Joel, will you tell me why you are so very anxious for this to become serious?”

“Indeed, I am not, sir; God forbid!”

“Oh, well, He will preserve you and me, and all Dame Hansen’s household, especially if pretty little Hulda here will be kind enough to give me some attention.”

“Certainly, Mr. Sylvius.”

“All right, my friends. I shall be as well as ever in four or five days. How could a man help getting well in such a pretty room? Where could one hope for better care than in this excellent inn? This comfortable bed, with its mottoes, is worth a great deal more than all the nauseous prescriptions of the faculty. And that quaint window overlooking the valley of the Maan! And the stream’s soft, musical murmur that penetrates to the remotest corner of my cozy nest! And the fragrant, healthful scent of the pines that fills the whole house! And the air, this pure exhilarating mountain air! Ah! is not that the very best of physicians? When one needs him one has only to open the window and in he comes and makes you well without cutting off your rations."

He said all this so gayly that it seemed as if a ray of sunshine had entered the house with him. At least, this was the impression of the brother and sister, who stood listening to him, hand in hand.

All this occurred in a chamber on the first floor, to which the professor had been conducted immediately upon his arrival; and now, half reclining in a large arm-chair, with his injured limb resting upon a stool, he gratefully accepted the kindly attentions of Joel and Hulda. A careful bathing of the wound with cold water was the only remedy he would use, and in fact no other was needed.

"Thanks, my friends, thanks!" he exclaimed, "this is far better than drugs. And now do you know that but for your timely arrival upon the scene of action, I should have become much too well acquainted with the wonders of the Rjukanfos! I should have rolled down into the abyss like a big stone, and have added another legend to those already associated with the Maristien. And there was no excuse for me. My betrothed was not waiting for me upon the opposite bank as in the case of poor Eystein!"

"And what a terrible thing it would have been to Madame Hogg!" exclaimed Hulda. "She would never have got over it."

"Madame Hogg!" repeated the professor. "Oh! Madame Hogg wouldn't have shed a tear — "

"Oh, Mister Sylvius."

“No, I tell you, for the very good reason that there is no Madame Hogg. Nor can I ever imagine what Madame Hogg would be like, stout or thin, tall or short.”

“She would, of course, be amiable, intelligent and good, being your wife,” replied Hulda, naïvely.

“Do you really think so, mademoiselle? Well, well, I believe you! I believe you!”

“But on hearing of such a calamity, Mister Sylvius,” remarked Joel, “your relatives and many friends — ”

“I have no relatives to speak of, but I have quite a number of friends, not counting those I have just made in Dame Hansen’s house, and you have spared them the trouble of weeping for me. But tell me, children, you can keep me here a few days, can you not?”

“As long as you please, Mister Sylvius,” replied Hulda. “This room belongs to you.”

“You see, I intended to stop awhile at Dal as all tourists do, and radiate from here all over the Telemark district; but now, whether I shall radiate, or I shall not radiate, remains to be seen.”

“Oh, you will be on your feet again before the end of the week, I hope, Mister Sylvius,” remarked Joel.

“So do I, my boy.”

“And then I will escort you anywhere in the district that you care to go.”

“We’ll see about that when Richard is himself again. I still have two months leave before me, and even if I should be obliged to spend the whole of it under Dame Hansen’s roof I should have no cause for complaint. Could I not explore that portion of the valley of Vesfjorddal lying between the two lakes, make the ascent of Gousta, and pay another visit to the Rjukanfos? for though I very narrowly escaped falling head foremost into its depths I scarcely got a glimpse of it, and am resolved to see it again.”

“You shall do so, Mister Sylvius,” replied Hulda.

“And we will visit it next time in company with good Dame Hansen if she will be kind enough to go with us. And now I think of it, my friends, I must drop a line to Kate, my old housekeeper, and Fink, my faithful old servant in Christiania. They will be very uneasy if they do not hear from me, and I shall get a terrible scolding. And now I have a confession to make to you. The strawberries and milk were delicious and extremely refreshing, but they scarcely satisfied my hunger, and as I won’t submit to being put upon short allowance may I not ask if it is not nearly your dinner hour?”

“Oh! that makes no difference whatever, Mister Sylvius.”

“On the contrary, it does make a great deal of difference. Do you think that I am going to sit in solitary grandeur at the table, and in my own room, all the time I stay at Dal? No, I want to take my meals with you and your mother if Dame Hansen has no objections.”

Of course Dame Hansen could but assent when she was apprised of the professor’s request, especially as it would be a great honor to her and hers to have a member of the Storthing at her table.

“It is settled, then, that we are to eat together in the living room,” remarked Sylvius Hogg.

“Yes, Mister Sylvius,” replied Joel. “I shall only have to wheel you out in your arm-chair when dinner is ready.”

“Indeed, Mister Joel! Why don’t you propose a kariol? No; with the aid of a friendly arm, I shall be able to reach the table. I haven’t had my leg amputated yet, that I am aware of.”

“As you please, Mister Sylvius,” replied Hulda. “But don’t be guilty of any imprudence, I beg of you, or Joel will have to hurry off in search of a doctor.”

“More threats! Oh, well, I will be as prudent and docile as possible; provided you do not put me on short allowance, you will find me the most tractable of patient. Can it be that you are not hungry, my friends?”

“Give us only a quarter of an hour,” replied Hulda; “and we will set before you a nice trout from the Maan, a grouse that Joel shot in the Hardanger yesterday, and a bottle of French wine.”

“Thank you, my dear child, thank you!”

Hulda left the room to superintend the dinner and set the table, while Joel took the kariol back to Lengling’s stable. Sylvius Hogg was left alone, and his thoughts very naturally reverted to the honest family whose guest and debtor he was. What could he do to repay Hulda and Joel for the inestimable service they had rendered him?

He had not much time for reflection, however, for scarcely ten minutes had elapsed before he was seated in the place of honor at the family table. The dinner was excellent. It corresponded with the reputation of the inn, and the professor ate very heartily.

The rest of the evening was spent in conversation in which Sylvius Hogg took the leading part. As Dame Hanson found it well-nigh impossible to overcome her habitual reserve, Joel and Hulda were obliged to respond to their genial host's advances, and the sincere liking the professor had taken to them from the very first naturally increased.

When night came, he returned to his room with the assistance of Joel and Hulda, gave and received a friendly good-night, and had scarcely stretched himself out upon the big bed before he was sound asleep.

The next morning he woke with the sun, and began to review the situation.

"I really don't know how I shall get out of the scrape," he said to himself. "One can not allow one's self to be saved from death, nursed and cured without any other return than a mere thank you. I am under deep obligations to Hulda and Joel, that is undeniable; but the services they have rendered me are not of a kind that can be repaid with money. On the other hand, these worthy people appear to be perfectly happy, and I can do nothing to add to their happiness! Still, we shall probably have many talks together, and while we are talking, perhaps — "

During the three or four days the professor was obliged to keep his leg upon a stool he and the young Hansens had many pleasant chats together, but unfortunately it was with some reserve on the brother's and sister's part. Neither of them had much to say about their mother, whose cold and preoccupied manner had not escaped Sylvius Hogg's notice, and from a feeling of prudence they hesitated to reveal to their guest the uneasiness excited by Ole Kamp’s delay, for might they not impair his good humor by telling him their troubles?

“And yet we perhaps make a great mistake in not confiding in Mister Sylvius,” Joel remarked to her sister, one day. “He is a very clever man, and through his influential acquaintances he might perhaps be able to find out whether the Naval Department is making any effort to ascertain what has become of the ‘Viking.’”

“You are right, Joel,” replied Hulda. “I think we had better tell him all; but let us wait until he has entirely recovered from his hurt.”

“That will be very soon,” rejoined Joel.

By the end of the week Sylvius Hogg was able to leave his room without assistance, though he still limped a little; and he now began to spend hours on the benches in front of the house, gazing at the snow-clad summit of Gousta, while the Maan dashed merrily along at his feet.

People were continually passing over the road that led from Dal to the Rjukanfos now. Most of them were tourists who stopped an hour or two at Dame Hanson’s inn either to breakfast or dine. There were also students in plenty with knapsacks on their backs, and the little Norwegian cockade in their caps.

Many of them knew the professor, so interminable greetings were exchanged, and cordial salutations, which showed how much Sylvius Hogg was loved by these young people.

“What, you here, Mister Sylvius?” they would exclaim.

“Yes, my friend.”

“You, who are generally supposed to be in the remotest depths of the Hardanger!”

“People are mistaken, then. It was in the remotest depths of the Rjukanfos that I came very near staying.”

“Very well, we shall tell everybody that you are in Dal.”

“Yes, in Dal, with a game leg.”

“Fortunately you are at Dame Hansen’s inn, where you will have the best of food and care.”

“Could one imagine a more comfortable place?”

“Most assuredly not.”

“Or better people?”

“There are none in the world,” responded the young travelers merrily.

Then they would all drink to the health of Hulda and Joel, who were so well known throughout the Telemark.

And then the professor would tell them all about his adventure, frankly admitting his unpardonable imprudence, and telling how his life had been saved, and how grateful he felt to his preservers.

“And I shall remain here until I have paid my debt,” he would add. “My course of lectures on legislation will not be resumed for a long time, I fear, and you can enjoy an extended holiday.”

"Good! good! Mister Sylvius," cried the light-hearted band. "Oh, you can't fool us! It is pretty Hulda that keeps you here at Dal."

"A sweet girl she is, my friends, and as pretty as a picture, besides; and by Saint Olaf! I'm only sixty."

"Here's to the health of Mister Sylvius!"

"And to yours, my dear boys. Roam about the country, gather wisdom, and yet be merry. Life is all sunshine at your age. But keep away from the Maristien. Joel and Hulda may not be on hand to rescue such of you as are imprudent enough to venture there."

Then they would resume their journey, making the whole valley ring with their joyful *God-aften*.

Once or twice Joel was obliged to act as guide to some tourists who wished to make the ascent of Gousta. Sylvius Hogg was anxious to accompany them. He declared that he was all right again. In fact, the wound on his leg was nearly healed; but Hulda positively forbade him to undertake a trip which would certainly prove too fatiguing for him, and Hulda's word was law.

A wonderful mountain, though, is this Gousta, whose lofty summit traversed by deep snow-covered ravines, rises out of a forest of pines that form a thick green ruff about its snowy throat! And what a superb view one enjoys from its summit. To the east lies the bailiwick of Numedal; On the west, the Hardanger and its magnificent glaciers; down at the base of the mountain, the winding valley of Vesfjorddal between Lakes Tinn and Mjos, Dal, and its miniature houses, and the bright waters of the Maan leaping and dancing merrily along through the verdant meadows to the music of its own voice.

To make the ascent Joel was obliged to leave Dal at five o’clock in the morning. He usually returned about six o’clock in the evening, and Sylvius Hogg and Hulda always went to meet him. As soon as the primitive ferry-boat landed the tourists and their guide a cordial greeting ensued, and the three spent yet another pleasant evening together. The professor still limped a little, but he did not complain. Indeed, one might almost have fancied that he was in no haste to be cured, or rather to leave Dame Hansen’s hospitable roof.

The time certainly passed swiftly and pleasantly there. He had written to Christiania that he should probably spend some time at Dal. The story of his adventure at the Rjukanfos was known throughout the country. The newspapers had got hold of it, and embellished the account after their fashion, so a host of letters came to the inn, to say nothing of pamphlets and newspapers. All these had to be read and answered, and the names of Joel and Hulda which were necessarily mentioned in the correspondence, soon became known throughout Norway.

Nevertheless, this sojourn at Dame Hansen’s inn could not be prolonged indefinitely, though Sylvius Hogg was still as much in doubt as ever, in regard to the manner in which he should pay his debt of gratitude. Of late, however, he had begun to suspect that this family was not as happy as he had at first supposed. The impatience with which the brother and sister awaited the arrival of the daily mail from Christiania and Bergen, their disappointment and even chagrin on finding no letters for them, all this was only too significant.

It was already the ninth of June, and still no news from the “Viking!” The vessel was now more than a fortnight overdue, and not a single line from Ole! No news to assuage Hulda’s anxiety. The poor girl was beginning to despair, and Sylvius Hogg saw that her eyes were red with weeping when he met her in the morning.

“What can be the matter?” he said to himself, more than once. “They seem to be concealing some misfortunes from me. Is it a family secret, I wonder, with which a stranger can not be allowed to meddle? But do they still regard me as a stranger? No. Still, they must think so; but when I announce my departure they will perhaps understand that it is a true friend who is about to leave them.”

So that very day he remarked:

“My friends, the hour is fast approaching when, to my great regret, I shall be obliged to bid you good-bye.”

“So soon, Mister Sylvius, so soon?” exclaimed Joel, with a dismay he could not conceal.

“The time has passed very quickly in your company, but it is now seventeen days since I came to Dal.”

“What! seventeen days!” repeated Hulda.

“Yes, my dear child, and the end of my vacation is approaching. I have only a week at my disposal if I should extend my journey to Drammen and Kongsberg. And though the Storthing is indebted to you for not being obliged to elect another deputy in my place, the Storthing will know no better how to compensate you than I do.”

“Oh! Mister Sylvius,” cried Hulda, placing her little hand upon his lips to silence him.

“Oh, I understand, Hulda. That is a forbidden subject, at least here.”

“Here and everywhere,” replied the girl, gayly.

“So be it! I am not my own master, and I must obey. But you and Joel must come and pay me a visit at Christiania.”

“Pay you a visit?”

“Yes, pay me a visit; spend several weeks at my house in company with your mother, of course.”

“And if we should leave the inn who will attend to things in our absence?” replied Joel.

“But your presence here is not necessary after the excursion season is over, I imagine; so I have fully made up my mind to come for you late in the autumn.”

“It will be impossible, my dear Mister Sylvius, for us to accept — ”

“On the contrary, it will be perfectly possible. Don’t say no. I shall not be content with such an answer. Besides, when I get you there in the very best room in my house, in the care of my old Kate and faithful Fink, you will be my own children, and then you can certainly tell me what I can do for you.”

“What you can do for us?” repeated Joel, with a glance at his sister.

“Brother!” exclaimed Hulda, as if divining his intention.

“Speak, my boy, speak!”

“Ah, well, Mister Sylvius, you can do us a great honor.”

“How?”

“By consenting to be present at my sister Hulda’s marriage, if it would not inconvenience you too much.”

“Hulda’s marriage!” exclaimed Sylvius Hogg. “What! my little Hulda is going to be married, and no one has said a word to me about it!”

“Oh, Mister Sylvius!” exclaimed the girl, her eyes filling with tears.

“And when is the marriage to take place?”

“As soon as it pleases God to bring her betrothed, Ole Kamp, back to us,” replied the girl.

CHAPTER XI.

Joel then proceeded to relate Ole Kamp’s whole history. Sylvius Hogg, deeply moved, listened to the recital with profound attention. He knew all now. He even read Ole’s letter announcing his speedy return. But Ole had not returned, and there had been no tidings from the missing one. What anxiety and anguish the whole Hansen family must have suffered!

“And I thought myself an inmate of a happy home!” he said to himself.

Still, after a little reflection, it seemed to him that the brother and sister were yielding to despair while there was still some room for hope. By counting these May and June days over and over again their imaginations had doubled the number, as it were.

The professor, therefore, concluded to give them his reasons for this belief, not feigned, but really sensible and plausible reasons that would also account for the delay of the “Viking.”

Nevertheless his face had become very grave, for the poor girl’s evident grief touched him deeply.

“Listen to me, my children,” said he. “Sit down here by me, and let us talk the matter over calmly.”

“Ah! what can you say to comfort us?” cried Hulda, whose heart was full to overflowing.

“I shall tell you only what I really and truly think,” replied the professor. “I have been thinking over all that Joel just told me, and it seems to me that you are more anxious and despondent than you have any real cause to be. I would not arouse any false hopes, but we must view matters as they really are.”

“Alas! Mister Sylvius,” replied Hulda, “my poor Ole has gone down with the ‘Viking,’ and I shall never see him again!”

“Sister, sister!” exclaimed Joel, “becalm, I beseech you, and hear what Mister Sylvius has to say.”

“Yes, be calm, my children, and let us talk the matter over quietly. It was between the fifteenth and twentieth of May that Ole expected to return to Bergen, was it not?”

“Yes; and it is now the ninth of June.”

“So the vessel is only twenty days overdue, if we reckon from the latest date appointed for the return of the ‘Viking.’ That is enough to excite anxiety, I admit; still, we must not expect the same punctuality from a sailing-vessel as from a steamer.”

“I have told Hulda that again and again, and I tell her so yet,” interrupted Joel.

“And you are quite right, my boy. Besides, it is very possible that the ‘Viking’ is an old vessel, and a slow sailer, like most Newfoundland ships, especially when heavily laden. On the other hand, we have had a great deal of bad weather during the past few weeks, and very possibly the vessel did not sail at the date indicated in Ole’s letter. In that case a week’s delay in sailing would be sufficient to account for the non-arrival of the ‘Viking’ and for your failure to receive a letter from your lover. What I say is the result of serious reflection. Besides, how do you know but the instructions given to the captain of the ‘Viking’ authorize him to take his cargo to some other port, according to the state of the market?”

“In that case, Ole would have written,” replied Hulda, who could not even be cheered by this hope.

“What is there to prove that he did not write?” retorted the professor. “If he did, it is not the ‘Viking’ that is behind time, but the American mail. Suppose, for instance, that Ole’s ship touched at some port in the United States, that would explain why none of his letters have yet reached Europe.”

“The United States, Mister Sylvius!”

“That sometimes happens, and it is only necessary to miss one mail to leave one’s friends without news for a long time. There is, at all events, one very easy thing for us to do; that is to make inquiries of some of the Bergen shipowners. Are you acquainted with any of them?”

“Yes,” replied Joel, “Messrs. Help Bros.”

“Help Bros. the sons of old Help?”

“Yes.”

“Why, I know them, too; at least, the younger brother, Help, Junior, they call him, though he is not far from my own age, and one of my particular friends. He has often dined with me in Christiania. Ah, well, my children, I can soon learn through him all that can be ascertained about the ‘Viking.’ I’ll write him this very day, and if need be I’ll go and see him.”

“How kind you are, Mister Sylvius!” cried Hulda and Joel in the same breath.

“No thanks, if you please; I won’t allow them. Did I ever thank you for what you did for me up there? And now I find an opportunity to do you a good turn, and here you are all in a flutter.”

“But you were just talking of returning to Christiania,” remarked Joel.

“Well, I shall go to Bergen instead, if I find it necessary to go to Bergen.”

“But you were about to leave us, Mister Sylvius,” said Hulda.

“Well, I have changed my mind, that is all. I am master of my own actions, I suppose; and I sha’n’t go until I see you safely out of this trouble, that is, unless you are disposed to turn me out-of-doors — ”

“What can you be thinking of, Mister Sylvius?”

“I have decided to remain in Dal until Ole’s return. I want to make the acquaintance of my little Hulda’s betrothed. He must be a brave, honest fellow, of Joel’s stamp, I am inclined to think.”

“Yes, exactly like him,” replied Hulda.

“I was sure of it!” exclaimed the professor, whose cheerfulness had returned, at least apparently.

“Ole is Ole, Mister Sylvius,” said Joel, “and that is equivalent to saying that he is the best-hearted fellow in the world.”

“I believe you, my dear Joel, and what you say only makes me the more anxious to see him. I sha’n’t have to wait long. Something tells me that the ‘Viking’ will soon come safely into port.”

“God grant it!”

“And why should He not hear your prayer? Yes, I shall certainly attend Hulda’s wedding, as you have been kind enough to invite me to it. The Storthing will have to do without me a few weeks longer, that is all. It would have been obliged to grant me a much longer leave of absence if you had let me fall into the Rjukanfos as I deserved.”

“How kind it is in you to say this, Mister Sylvius, and how happy you make us!”

“Not as happy as I could wish, my friends, as I owe my life to you, and I don’t know — ”

“Oh! please, please say no more about that trifle.”

“Yes, I shall. Come now, who drew me out of the frightful jaws of the Maristien? Who risked their own lives to save me? Who brought me to the inn at Dal, and cared for me, and nursed me without any assistance from the Faculty? Oh! I am as stubborn as an old cart-horse, I assure you, and I have made up my mind to attend the marriage of Hulda to Ole Kamp, and attend it I shall!”

Hopefulness is contagious, and how could any one resist such confidence as Sylvius Hogg displayed? A faint smile crept over poor Hulda’s face. She longed to believe him; she only asked to hope.

“But we must recollect that the days are passing very rapidly,” continued Sylvius Hogg, “and that it is high time we began our preparations for the wedding.”

“They are already begun, Mister Sylvius,” replied Hulda. “In fact, they were begun more than three weeks ago.”

“So much the better; but in that case, we must take good care not to allow anything to interrupt them.”

“Interrupt them!” repeated Joel. “Why, everything is in readiness.”

“What, the wedding-dress, the bodice with its silver clasps, the belt and its pendants?”

“Even the pendants.”

“And the radiant crown that will make you look like a saint, my little Hulda?”

“Yes”

“And the invitations are written?”

“All written,” replied Joel, “even the one to which we attach most importance, yours.”

“And the bride-maid has been chosen from among the sweetest maidens of the Telemark?”

“And the fairest, Mister Sylvius,” added Joel, “for it is Mademoiselle Siegfrid of Bamble.”

“From the tone in which he uttered those words, and the way in which he blushed as he uttered them, I judge that Mademoiselle Siegfrid Helmboe is destined to become Madame Joel Hansen of Dal,” said the professor, laughing.

“Yes, Mr. Sylvius,” replied Hulda.

“Good! so there is a fair prospect of yet another wedding,” exclaimed Sylvius Hogg. “And as I feel sure that I shall be honored with an invitation, I can do no less than accept it here and now. It certainly looks as if I should be obliged to resign my seat in the Storthing, for I really don’t see how I am to find time to attend its sessions. But never mind, I will be your best man, Joel, after first serving in that capacity at your sister’s wedding. You certainly are making me do just what you like, or rather what I like. Kiss me, little Hulda! Give me your hand, my boy, and now let me write to my friend Help, Junior, of Bergen.”

The brother and sister left the apartment of which the professor had threatened to take permanent possession, and returned to their daily tasks with rather more hopeful hearts.

Sylvius Hogg was left alone.

“Poor child! poor child!” he murmured. “Yes, I have made her forget her sorrow for a few moments. But the delay has been a long one; and the sea is very rough at this season of the year. What if the ‘Viking’ has indeed gone down, and Ole should never return!”

A moment afterward the professor was busily engaged in writing to his Bergen friend. He asked for the fullest possible particulars in regard to everything connected with the “Viking” and her cruise, and inquired if some event, unforeseen or otherwise, had made it necessary to send the vessel to a different port from that for which it was originally destined. He also expressed a strong desire to hear as soon as possible how the shipping merchants and sailors of Bergen explained the delay. In short, he begged his friend Help to give him all possible information in regard to the matter by return mail.

This urgent letter also explained Sylvius Hogg's interest in the mate of the "Viking," the invaluable service rendered him by the young man's betrothed, and the pleasure it would afford him to be able to give some encouragement to Dame Hansen's children.

As soon as this letter was finished Joel took it to Moel so it would go on the following day. It would reach Bergen on the eleventh, so a reply to it ought to be received on the evening of the twelfth or the morning of the thirteenth at the very latest.

Nearly three days of dreary waiting! How interminable they seemed! Still, by dint of reassuring words and encouraging arguments, the professor contrived to alleviate the painful suspense. Now he knew Hulda's secret, was there not a topic of conversation ever ready? And what a consolation it was to Joel and his sister to be able to talk of the absent one!

"I am one of the family now," Sylvius Hogg repeated again and again. "Yes, I am like an uncle that has just arrived from America or some foreign land."

And as he was one of the family, they must have no more secrets from him.

Of course he had not failed to notice the children's constrained manner toward their mother, and he felt satisfied that the reserve the parent displayed had its origin in something besides the uneasiness she felt on Ole Kamp's account. He thought he might venture to question Joel; but the latter was unable to give any satisfactory reply. The professor than ventured to sound Dame Hansen on the subject, but she was so uncommunicative that he was obliged to abandon all hope of obtaining any knowledge of her secret until some future day.

As Sylvius Hogg had predicted, the letter from Help, Junior, reached Dal on the morning of the thirteenth. Joel started out before daylight to meet the postman, and it was he who brought the letter into the large hall where the professor was sitting with Dame Hansen and her daughter.

There was a moment's silence. Hulda, who was as pale as death, was unable to utter a word so violent was the throbbing of her heart, but she seized the hand of her brother, who was equally agitated, and held it tightly.

Sylvius Hogg opened the letter and read it aloud.

To his great regret the missive contained only some very vague information; and the professor was unable to conceal his disappointment from the young people who listened to the letter with tears in their eyes.

The "Viking" had left Saint-Pierre-Miquelon on the date mentioned in Ole Kamp's last letter. This fact had been established by the reports received from other vessels which had reached Bergen since the "Viking's" departure from Newfoundland. These vessels had seen nothing of the missing ship on their homeward voyage, but they had encountered very bad weather in the neighborhood of Iceland. Still they had managed to weather the gales; so it was possible that the "Viking" had been equally fortunate, and had merely been delayed somewhere, or had put into some port for repairs. The "Viking" was a stanch craft, very substantially built, and commanded by Captain Frikel, of Hammersfest, a thoroughly competent officer. Still, this delay was alarming, and if it continued much longer there would be good reason to fear that the "Viking" had gone down with all on board.

The writer regretted that he had no better news to give the young Hansens, and spoke of Ole Kamp in the most complimentary terms. He concluded his letter by assuring the professor of his sincere friendship, and that of his family, and by promising to send him without delay any intelligence that might be received at any Norwegian port, in relation to the “Viking.”

Poor Hulda sunk half fainting into a chair while Sylvius Hogg was reading this letter, and she was sobbing violently when he concluded its perusal.

Joel, with his arms folded tightly upon his breast, listened in silence, without daring to glance at his sister.

Dame Hansen, as soon as the reading was concluded, went up to her room. She seemed to have been expecting the blow.

The professor beckoned Hulda and her brother to his side. He wanted to talk with them calmly and sensibly on the subject, and he expressed a confidence that was singular, to say the least, after Help, Junior’s letter. They had no reason to despair. Were there not countless examples of protracted delays while navigating the seas that lie between Norway and Newfoundland? Yes, unquestionably. And was not the “Viking” a strong craft, well officered, and manned by an excellent crew, and consequently in a much better condition than many of the vessels that had come safely into port? Most assuredly.

“So let us continue to hope,” he added, “and wait. If the ‘Viking’ had been wrecked between Iceland and Newfoundland the numerous vessels that follow the same route to reach Europe would certainly have seen some trace of the disaster. But no, not a single floating plank or spar did they meet on the whole of this route, which is so much frequented at the conclusion of the fishing season. Still, we must take measures to secure information of a more positive nature. If we receive no further news of the ‘Viking’ during the coming week, nor any letter from Ole, I shall return to Christiania and ask the Naval Department to make careful inquiries, and I feel sure that the result will prove eminently satisfactory to all concerned."

In spite of the hopeful manner assumed by the professor, Joel and Hulda both felt that he did not speak as confidently as he had spoken before the receipt of the letter from Bergen — a letter whose contents gave them little if any grounds for hope. In fact, Sylvius Hogg no longer dared to venture any allusion to the approaching marriage of Hulda and Ole Kamp, though he said to himself again and again:

"No, no, it is impossible! Ole Kamp never cross the threshold of Dame Hansen's house again? Ole not marry Hulda? Nothing will ever make me believe such a misfortune possible."

He was perfectly sincere in this conviction. It was due to the energy of his character, to a spirit of hopefulness that nothing could crush. But how could he hope to convince others, especially those whom the fate of the "Viking" affected so directly?

A few days were allowed to elapse. Sylvius Hogg, who was now entirely well, took a long walk every day, and persuaded Hulda and her brother to accompany him. One day all three of them went up the valley of Vesfjorddal half-way to the falls of the Rjukan. The next day they went to Moel and Lake Tinn. Once they were even absent twenty-four hours. This time they prolonged their excursion to Bamble, where the professor made the acquaintance of Farmer Helmboe and his daughter Siegfrid. What a cordial welcome the latter gave to her friend Hulda, and what words of tenderness she found to console her!

Here, too, Sylvius Hogg did all in his power to encourage these worthy people. He had written to the Navy Department, and the government was investigating the matter. Ole would certainly return at no distant day. He might drop in upon them, indeed, at any moment. No; the wedding would not have to be postponed more than six weeks! The good man seemed so thoroughly convinced of all this, that his auditors were influenced rather by his firm conviction than by his arguments.

This visit to the Helmboe family did the young Hansens good, and they returned home much calmer than they went away.

At last the fifteenth of June came. The "Viking" was now exactly one month overdue; and as the distance from Newfoundland to the coast of Norway is comparatively short, this delay was beyond all reason, even for a sailing-vessel.

Hulda seemed to have abandoned all hope; and her brother could not find a single word to say by way of encouragement. In the presence of these poor, unhappy creatures, the professor realized the utter futility of any well-meant attempt at consolation. Hulda and Joel crossed the threshold only to stand and gaze in the direction of Moel, or to walk up the road leading to Rjukanfos. Ole Kamp would probably come by the way of Bergen, but he might come by way of Christiania if the destination of the "Viking" had been changed. The sound of an approaching kariol, a hasty cry, the form of a man suddenly rounding a curve in the road made their hearts beat wildly; but all for naught. The good people of Dal were also eagerly watching. Not unfrequently they went half-way to meet the postman. Everybody was deeply interested, for the Hansen family was exceedingly popular in the neighborhood; and poor Ole was almost a child of the Telemark. But no letter came from Bergen or Christiania giving news of the absent one.

Nothing new occurred on the sixteenth. Sylvius Hogg could scarcely restrain his restlessness. He began to understand that he must proceed to act in person, so he announced to his friends that if no news was received on the following day he should go to Christiania and satisfy himself that nothing had been left undone. Of course, it was hard for him to leave Hulda and Joel, but there was no help for it; and he would return as soon as his task was accomplished.

On the seventeenth a greater part of the most wretched day they had ever spent together passed without bringing any new developments. It had rained incessantly since early morning; the wind was blowing a gale, and the rain dashed fiercely against the window on the side of the house nearest the Maan.

Seven o’clock came. They had just finished dinner, which had been eaten in profound silence, as if in a house of mourning. Even Sylvius Hogg had been unable to keep up the conversation. What could he say that he had not already said a hundred times before?

“I shall start for Christiania to-morrow morning,” he remarked at last. “Joel, I wish you would procure a kariol and drive me to Moel.”

“Very well, Mr. Sylvius. But wouldn’t you like me to accompany you further?”

The professor shook his head, with a meaning glance at Hulda, for he did not want to see her separated from her brother.

Just then a sound, which was as yet scarcely audible, was heard on the road in the direction of Moel. They all listened breathlessly. Soon all doubts vanished. It was the sound of an approaching kariol coming swiftly toward Dal. Was the occupant some traveler who intended to spend the night at the inn? This was scarcely probable, as tourists rarely arrived at so late an hour.

Hulda sprung up trembling in every limb. Joel went to the door, opened it and looked out.

The noise grew louder It was certain the clatter of horse’s hoofs blended with, the roll of kariol wheels; but the storm without was so violent that Joel was obliged to close the door.

Sylvius Hogg tramped up and down the room in a perfect fever of impatience. Joel and his sister held each other tightly by the hand.

The kariol could not be more than twenty yards from the house now. Would it pause or go by?

The hearts of all three throbbed to suffocation.

The kariol stopped. They heard a voice calling; but it was not the voice of Ole Kamp!

Almost immediately some one rapped at the door.

Joel opened it.

A man stood upon the threshold.

“Is Mr. Sylvius Hogg here?” he asked.

“I am he,” replied the professor. “Who are you, my friend?”

“A messenger sent to you by the Secretary of the Navy at Christiania.”

“Have you a letter for me?”

“Yes, sir; here it is.”

And the messenger handed him a large envelope sealed with the Government seal.

Hulda’s limbs tottered under her, and her brother sprung forward and placed her in a chair. Neither of them dared to ask Sylvius Hogg to open the letter.

At last he broke the seal and read the following:

“MR. PROFESSOR, — In reply to your last letter, I inclose a paper picked up at sea on the 3d instant by a Danish vessel. Unfortunately this discovery dispels any lingering doubt as to the fate of the ‘Viking’ — ”

Sylvius Hogg, without taking time to read the rest of the letter, drew the paper from the envelope. He looked at it; he turned it over.

It was a lottery ticket bearing the number 9672.

On the other side of the ticket were the following lines:

“May 3d.

“DEAREST HULDA, — The ‘Viking’ is going down. I have only this ticket left of all I hoped to bring back to you. I intrust it to God’s hands, hoping that it may reach you safely; and as I shall not be there, I beseech you to be present at the drawing. Accept the ticket with my last thought of you. Hulda, do not forget me in your prayers. Farewell, my beloved, farewell!

“OLE KAMP.”

CHAPTER XII.

So this was the young man’s secret! This was the source from which he expected to derive a fortune for his promised bride — a lottery ticket, purchased before his departure. And as the “Viking” was going down, he inclosed the ticket in a bottle and threw it into the sea with the last farewell for Hulda.

This time Sylvius Hogg was completely disconcerted. He looked at the letter, then at the ticket. He was speechless with dismay. Besides, what could he say? How could any one doubt that the “Viking” had gone down with all on board?

While Sylvius Hogg was reading the letter Hulda had nerved herself to listen, but after the concluding words had been read, she fell back unconscious in Joel’s arms, and it became necessary to carry her to her own little chamber, where her mother administered restoratives. After she recovered consciousness she asked to be left alone for awhile, and she was now kneeling by her bedside, praying for Ole Kamp’s soul.

Dame Hansen returned to the hall. At first she started toward the professor, as if with the intention of speaking to him, then suddenly turning toward the staircase, she disappeared.

Joel, on returning from his sister’s room, had hastily left the house. He experienced a feeling of suffocation in the dwelling over which such a dense cloud of misfortune seemed to be hanging. He longed for the outer air, the fierce blast of the tempest, and spent a part of the night in wandering aimlessly up and down the banks of the Maan.

Sylvius Hogg was therefore left alone. Stunned by the stroke at first, he soon recovered his wonted energy. After tramping up and down the hall two or three times, he paused and listened, in the hope that he might hear a summons from the young girl, but disappointed in this, he finally seated himself at the table, and abandoned himself to his thoughts.

“Can it be possible that Hulda is never to see her betrothed again?” he said to himself. “No; such a misfortune is inconceivable. Everything that is within me revolts at the thought! Even admitting that the ‘Viking’ has gone to the bottom of the ocean, what conclusive proof have we of Ole’s death? I can not believe it. In all cases of shipwreck time alone can determine whether or not any one has survived the catastrophe. Yes; I still have my doubts, and I shall continue to have them, even if Hulda and Joel refuse to share them. If the ‘Viking’ really foundered, how does it happen that no floating fragments of the wreck have been seen at sea — at least nothing except the bottle in which poor Ole placed his last message, and with it all he had left in the world.”

Sylvius Hogg had the ticket still in his hand, and again he looked at it, and turned it over and held it up between him and the waning light — this scrap of paper upon which poor Ole had based his hopes of fortune.

But the professor, wishing to examine it still more carefully, rose, listened again to satisfy himself that the poor girl upstairs was not calling her mother or brother, and then entered his room.

The ticket proved to be a ticket in the Christiania Schools Lottery — a very popular lottery in Norway at that time. The capital prize was one hundred thousand marks; the total value of the other prizes, ninety thousand marks, and the number of tickets issued, one million, all of which had been sold.

Ole Kamp’s ticket bore the number 9672; but whether this number proved lucky or unlucky, whether the young sailor had any secret reason for his confidence in it or not, he would not be present at the drawing, which was to take place on the fifteenth of July, that is to say, in twenty-eight days; but it was his last request that Hulda should take his place on that occasion.

By the light of his candle, Sylvius Hogg carefully reread the lines written upon the back of the ticket, as if with the hope of discovering some hidden meaning.

The lines had been written with ink, and it was evident that Ole’s hand had not trembled while tracing them. This showed that the mate of the ‘Viking’ retained all his presence of mind at the time of the shipwreck, and that he was consequently in a condition to take advantage of any means of escape that might offer, such as a floating spar or plank, in case the raging waters had not swallowed up everything when the vessel foundered.

Very often writings of this kind that are recovered from the sea state the locality in which the catastrophe occurred; but in this neither the latitude nor longitude were mentioned; nor was there anything to indicate the nearest land. Hence one must conclude that no one on board knew where the “Viking” was at the time of the disaster. Driven on, doubtless, by a tempest of resistless power, the vessel must have been carried far out of her course, and the clouded sky making a solar observation impossible, there had been no way of determining the ship’s whereabouts for several days; so it was more than probable that no one would ever know whether it was near the shores of North America or of Iceland that the gallant crew had sunk to rise no more.

This was a circumstance calculated to destroy all hope, even in the bosoms of the most sanguine.

With some clew, no matter how vague, a search for the missing vessel would have been possible. A ship or steamer could be dispatched to the scene of the catastrophe and perhaps find some trace of it. Besides, was it not quite possible that one or more survivors had succeeded in reaching some point on the shores of the Arctic continent, and that they were still there, homeless, and destitute, and hopelessly exiled from their native land?

Such was the theory that gradually assumed shape in Sylvius Hogg's mind — a theory that it would scarcely do to advance to Joel and Hulda, so painful would the disappointment prove if it should be without foundation.

"And though the writing gives no clew to the scene of the catastrophe," he said to himself, "we at least know where the bottle was picked up. This letter does not state, but they must know at the Naval Department; and is it not an indication that might be used to advantage? By studying the direction of the currents and of the prevailing winds at the time of the shipwreck might it not be possible? I am certainly going to write again. Search must be made, no matter how small the chances of success. No; I will never desert poor Hulda! And until I have positive proofs of it I will never credit the death of her betrothed."

Sylvius Hogg reasoned thus; but at the same time he resolved to say nothing about the measures he intended to adopt, or the search he intended to urge on with all his influence. Hulda and her brother must know nothing about his writing to Christiania; moreover, he resolved to postpone indefinitely the departure which had been announced for the next day, or rather he would leave in a few days, but only for a trip to Bergen. There, he could learn from the Messrs. Help all the particulars concerning the "Viking," ask the opinion of the most experienced mariners, and decide upon the way in which search could best be made.

In the meantime, from information furnished by the Navy Department, the press of Christiania, then that of Norway, Sweden, and finally all Europe, gradually got hold of this story of a lottery ticket transformed into an important legal document. There was something very touching about this gift from a shipwrecked mariner to his betrothed.

The oldest of the Norwegian journals, the “Morgen-Blad,” was the first to relate the story of the “Viking” and Ole Kamp; and of the thirty-seven other papers published in that country at the time, not one failed to allude to it in touching terms. The illustrated “Nyhedsblad” published an ideal picture of the shipwreck. There was the sinking “Viking,” with tattered sails and hull partially destroyed, about to disappear beneath the waves. Ole stood in the bow throwing the bottle containing his last message into the sea, at the same time commending his soul to God. In a luminous cloud in the dim distance a wave deposited the bottle at the feet of his betrothed. The whole picture was upon an enlarged representation of a lottery ticket bearing the number 9672 in bold relief. An unpretending conception, unquestionably, but one that could hardly fail to be regarded as a masterpiece in the land which still clings to legends of the Undines and Valkyries. Then the story was republished and commented upon in France and England, and even in the United States. The story of Hulda and Ole became familiar to every one through the medium of pencil and pen. This young Norwegian girl, without knowing it, held a prominent place in the sympathy and esteem of the public. The poor child little suspected the interest she had aroused, however; besides, nothing could have diverted her mind from the loss that engrossed her every thought.

This being the case, no one will be surprised at the effect produced upon both continents — an effect easily explained when we remember how prone we all are to superstition. A lottery ticket so providentially rescued from the waves could hardly fail to be the winning ticket. Was it not miraculously designated as the winner of the capital prize? Was it not worth a fortune — the fortune upon which Ole Kamp had counted?

Consequently it is not surprising that overtures for the purchase of this ticket came from all parts of the country. At first, the prices offered were small, but they increased from day to day; and it was evident that they would continue to increase in proportion as the day of the drawing approached.

These offers came not only from different parts of Scandinavia, which is a firm believer in the active intervention of supernatural powers in all mundane matters — but also from foreign lands, and even from France.

Even the phlegmatic English grew excited over the matter, and subsequently the Americans, who are not prone to spend their money so unpractically. A host of letters came to Dal, and the newspapers did not fail to make mention of the large sums offered to the Hansen family. A sort of minor stock exchange seemed to have been established, in which values were constantly changing, but always for the better.

Several hundred marks were, in fact, offered for this ticket, which had only one chance in a million of winning the capital prize. This was absurd, unquestionably, but superstitious people do not stop to reason; and as their imaginations became more and more excited, they were likely to bid much higher.

This proved to be the case. One week after the event the papers announced that the amounts offered for the ticket exceeded one thousand, fifteen hundred and even two thousand marks. A resident of Manchester, England, had even offered one hundred pounds sterling, or two thousand five hundred marks; while an American, and a Bostonian at that, announced his willingness to give one thousand dollars for ticket No. 9672 of the Christiania Schools Lottery.

It is needless to say that Hulda troubled herself very little about the matter that was exciting the public to such an extent. She would not even read the letters that were addressed to her on the subject; but the professor insisted that she must not be left in ignorance of these offers, as Ole Kamp had bequeathed his right and title in this ticket to her.

Hulda refused all these offers. This ticket was the last letter of her betrothed.

No one need suppose that this refusal was due to an expectation that the ticket would win one of the prizes in the lottery. No. She saw in it only the last farewell of her shipwrecked lover — a memento she wished to reverently preserve. She cared nothing for a fortune that Ole could not share with her. What could be more touching than this worship of a souvenir?

On apprising her of these different offers, however, neither Sylvius Hogg nor Joel made any attempt to influence Hulda. She was to be guided entirely by her own wishes in the matter. They knew now what her wishes were.

Joel, moreover, approved his sister’s decision unreservedly. Ole Kamp’s ticket must not be sold to any person at any price.

Sylvius Hogg went even further. He not only approved Hulda’s decision, but he congratulated her upon it. Think of seeing this ticket sold and resold, passing from hand to hand, transformed, as it were, into a piece of merchandise, until the time appointed for the drawing arrived, when it would very probably become a worthless scrap of paper?

And Sylvius Hogg went even further. Was it, perhaps, because he was slightly superstitious? No. Still, if Ole Kamp had been there, the professor would probably have said to him:

“Keep your ticket, my boy, keep it! First, your ticket, and then you, yourself, were saved from the wreck. You had better wait and see what will come of it. One never knows; no, one never knows!”

And when Sylvius Hogg, professor of law, and; a member of the Storthing, felt in this way, one can hardly wonder at the infatuation of the public, nor that No. 9672 could be sold at an enormous premium.

So in Dame Hansen’s household there was no one who protested against the young girl’s decision — at least no one except the mother.

She was often heard to censure it, especially in Hulda’s absence, a fact that caused poor Joel not a little mortification and chagrin, for he was very much afraid that she would not always confine herself to covert censure, and that she would urge Hulda to accept one of the offers she had received.

“Five thousand marks for the ticket!” she repeated again and again. “They offer five thousand marks for it!”

It was evident that Dame Hansen saw nothing either pathetic or commendable in her daughter’s refusal. She was thinking only of this large sum of five thousand marks. A single word from Hulda would bring it into the family. She had no faith either in the extraordinary value of the ticket, Norwegian though she was; and to sacrifice fire thousand marks for a millionth chance of winning one hundred thousand was an idea too absurd to be entertained far a moment by her cool and practical mind.

All superstition aside, it is undeniable that the sacrifice of a certainty, under such conditions, was not an act of worldly wisdom; but as we said before, the ticket was not a lottery ticket in Hulda's eyes; it was Ole's last farewell, and it would have broken her heart to part with it.

Nevertheless, Dame Hansen certainly disapproved her daughter's resolve. It was evident, too, that her dissatisfaction was constantly increasing, and it seemed more than likely that at no very distant day she would endeavor to make Hulda change her decision. Indeed, she had already intimated as much to Joel, who had promptly taken his sister's part.

Sylvius Hogg was, of course, kept informed of what was going on. Such an attempt on the mother's part would only be another trial added to those Hulda was already obliged to endure, and he was anxious to avert it if possible. Joel mentioned the subject to him sometimes.

"Isn't my sister right in refusing?" he asked. "And am I not justified in upholding her in her refusal?"

"Unquestionably," replied Sylvius Hogg. "And yet, from a mathematical point of view, your mother is a million times right. But the science of mathematics does not govern everything in this world. Calculation has nothing to do with the promptings of the heart."

During the next two weeks they were obliged to watch Hulda very closely, for the state of her health was such as to excite serious anxiety. Fortunately loving care and attention were not wanting. At Sylvius Hogg's request, the celebrated Dr. Bock, a personal friend, came to Dal to see the young invalid. He could only prescribe rest, and quiet of soul, if that were possible; but the only sure means of curing her was Ole's return, and this means God only could provide. Still, Sylvius Hogg was untiring in his efforts to console the young girl. His words were ever words of hope, and strange as it may appear, Sylvius Hogg did not despair.

Thirteen days had now elapsed since the arrival of the ticket forwarded by the Navy Department. It was now the thirteenth of June. A fortnight more, and the drawing of the lottery would take place with great pomp in the main hall of the University of Christiania.

On the morning of the thirtieth day of June Sylvius Hogg received another letter from the Navy Department. This letter advised him to confer with the maritime authorities of Bergen, and authorized him to immediately organize an expedition to search for the missing "Viking."

The professor did not want Joel or Hulda to know what he intended to do, so he merely told them that he must leave them for a few days to attend to some business matters.

"Pray do not desert us, Mister Sylvius," said the poor girl.

"Desert you — you, whom I regard as my own children!" replied Sylvius Hogg.

Joel offered to accompany him, but not wishing him to know that he was going to Bergen, the professor would only allow him to go as far as Moel.

Besides, it would not do for Hulda to be left alone with her mother. After being confined to her bed several days, she was now beginning to sit up a little, though she was still very weak and not able to leave her room.

At eleven o’clock the kariol was at the door of the inn, and after bidding Hulda good-bye, the professor took his seat in the vehicle beside Joel. In another minute they had both disappeared behind a large clump of birches at the turn in the road.

That same evening Joel returned to Dal.

END OF FIRST HALF.

CHAPTER XIII.

Meanwhile, Sylvius Hogg was hastening toward Bergen. His tenacious nature and energetic character, though daunted for a moment, were now reasserting themselves. He refused to credit Ole’s death, nor would he admit that Hulda was doomed never to see her lover again. No, until the fact was established beyond a doubt, he was determined to regard the report as false.

But had he any information which would serve as a basis for the task he was about to undertake in Bergen? Yes, though we must admit that the clew was of a very vague nature.

He knew merely the date on which the bottle had been cast into the sea by Ole Kamp, and the date and locality in which it had been recovered from the waves. He had learned those facts through the letter just received from the Naval Department, the letter which had decided him to leave for Bergen immediately, in order that he might consult with Help Bros. and with the most experienced seamen of that port.

The journey was made as quickly as possible. On reaching Moel, Sylvius Hogg sent his companion back with the kariol, and took passage upon one of the birch-bark canoes that are used in traversing the waters of Lake Finn. Then, at Tinoset, instead of turning his steps toward the south — that is to say, in the direction of Bamble — he hired another kariol, and took the Hardanger route, in order to reach the gulf of that name in the shortest possible time. From there, a little steamer called the “Run” transported him to the mouth of the gulf, and finally, after crossing a network of fiords and inlets, between the islands and islets that stud the Norwegian coast, he landed at Bergen on the morning of the second of July.

This old city, laved by the waters of both the Logne and Hardanger, is delightfully situated in a picturesque region which would bear a striking resemblance to Switzerland if an artificial arm of the sea should ever conduct the waters of the blue Mediterranean to the foot of the Alps.

A magnificent avenue of ash trees leads to the town.

The houses, with their fantastic, pointed gables, are as dazzling in their whiteness as the habitations of Arabian cities, and are all congregated in an irregular triangle that contains a population of about thirty thousand souls. Its churches date from the twelfth century. Its tall cathedral is visible from afar to vessels returning from sea, and it is the capital of commercial Norway, though situated off the regular lines of travel, and a long distance from the two cities which rank first and second in the kingdom, politically — Christiania and Drontheim.

Under any other circumstances the professor would have taken great pleasure in studying this important city, which is Dutch rather than Norwegian in its aspect and manners. It had been one of the cities included in his original route, but since his adventure on the Maristien and his subsequent sojourn at Dal, his plans had undergone important changes.

Sylvius Hogg was no longer the traveling deputy, anxious to ascertain the exact condition of the country from a commercial as well as a political point of view. He was the guest of the Hansens, the debtor of Joel and Hulda, whose interests now outweighed all else in his estimation — a debtor who was resolved to pay his debt of gratitude at any cost, though he felt that what he was about to attempt for them was but a trifle.

On his arrival in Bergen, Sylvius Hogg landed at the lower end of the town, on the wharf used as a fish-market, but he lost no time in repairing to the part of the town known as the Tyske Bodrone quarter, where Help, Junior, of the house of Help Bros. resided.

It was raining, of course, for rain falls in Bergen on at least three hundred and sixty days of every year; but it would be impossible to find a house better protected against the wind and rain than the hospitable mansion of Help, Junior, and nowhere could Sylvius Hogg have received a warmer and more cordial welcome. His friend took possession of him very much as if he had been some precious bale of merchandise which had been consigned to his care, and which would be delivered up only upon the presentation of a formal order.

Sylvius Hogg immediately made known the object of his visit to Help, Junior. He inquired if any news had yet been received of the “Viking,” and if Bergen mariners were really of the opinion that she had gone down with all on board. He also inquired if this probable shipwreck, which had plunged so many homes into mourning, had not led the maritime authorities to make some search for the missing vessel.

“But where were they to begin?” replied Help, Junior. “They do not even know where the shipwreck occurred.”

“True, my dear Help, and for that very reason they should endeavor to ascertain.”

“But how?”

“Why, though they do not know where the ‘Viking’ foundered, they certainly know where the bottle was picked up by the Danish vessel. So we have one valuable clew which it would be very wrong to ignore.”

“Where was it?”

“Listen, my dear Help, and I will tell you.”

Sylvius Hogg then apprised his friend of the important information which had just been received through the Naval Department, and the full permission given him to utilize it.

The bottle containing Ole Kamp’s lottery-ticket had been picked up on the third of June, about two hundred miles south of Iceland, by the schooner “Christian,” of Elsineur, Captain Mosselman, and the wind was blowing strong from the south-east at the time.

The captain had immediately examined the contents of the bottle, as it was certainly his duty to do, inasmuch as he might-have rendered very effectual aid to the survivors of the “Viking” had he known where the catastrophe occurred; but the lines scrawled upon the back of the lottery-ticket gave no clew, so the “Christian” could not direct her course to the scene of the shipwreck.

This Captain Mosselman was an honest man. Very possibly some less scrupulous person would have kept the ticket; but he had only one thought — to transmit the ticket to the person to whom it was addressed as soon as he entered port. Hulda Hansen, of Dal, that was enough. It was not necessary to know any more.

But on reaching Copenhagen, Captain Mosselman said to himself that it would perhaps be better to transmit the document through the hands of the Danish authorities, instead of sending it straight to the person for whom it was intended. This would be the safest, as well as the regular way. He did so, and the Naval Department at Copenhagen promptly notified the Naval Department at Christiania.

Sylvius Hogg's letter, asking for information in regard to the "Viking," had already been received, and the deep interest he took in the Hansen family was well known. It was known, too, that he intended to remain in Dal some time longer, so it was there that the ticket found by the Danish sea-captain was sent, to be delivered into Hulda Hansen's hands by the famous deputy.

And ever since that time the public had taken a deep interest in the affair, which had not been forgotten, thanks to the touching details given by the newspapers of both continents.

Sylvius Hogg stated the case briefly to his friend Help, who listened to him with the deepest interest, and without once interrupting him. He concluded his recital by saying:

"There is certainly one point about which there can be no possible doubt: this is, that on the third day of June, about one month after the departure from Saint-Pierre-Miquelon, the ticket was picked up two hundred miles south-west of Iceland."

"And that is all you know?"

"Yes, my dear Help, but by consulting some of the most experienced mariners of Bergen, men who are familiar with that locality, with the general direction of its winds, and, above-all, with its currents, will it not be a comparatively easy matter to decide upon the route followed by the bottle? Then, by calculating its probable speed, and the time that elapsed before it was picked up, it certainly would not be impossible to discover the spot at which it was cast into the sea by Ole Kamp, that is to say, the scene of the shipwreck."

Help, Junior, shook his head with a doubting air. Would not any search that was based upon such vague indications as these be sure to prove a failure? The shipowner, being of a decided, cool and practical turn of mind, certainly thought so, and felt it his duty to say as much to Sylvius Hogg.

"Perhaps it may prove a failure, friend Help," was the prompt rejoinder; "but the fact that we have been able to secure only vague information, is certainly no reason for abandoning the undertaking. I am anxious that nothing shall be left undone for these poor people to whom I am indebted for my life. Yes, if need be, I would not hesitate to sacrifice all I possess to find Ole Kamp, and bring him safely back to his betrothed, Hulda Hansen."

Then Sylvius Hogg proceeded to give a full account of his adventure on the Rjukanfos. He related the intrepid manner in which Joel and his sister had risked their own lives to save him, and how, but for their timely assistance, he would not have had the pleasure of being the guest of his friend Help that day.

His friend Help, as we said before, was an eminently practical man, but he was not opposed to useless and even impossible efforts when a question "of humanity was involved, and he finally approved what Sylvius Hogg wished to attempt.

"Sylvius," he said, "I will assist you by every means in my power. Yes, you are right. However small the chance of finding some survivor of the 'Viking' may be, and especially of finding this brave Ole whose betrothed saved your life, it must not be neglected."

“No, Help, no,” interrupted the professor; “not if it were but one chance in a hundred thousand.”

“So this very day, Sylvius, I will assemble all the most experienced seamen of Bergen in my office. I will send for all who have navigated or who are now navigating the ocean between Iceland and Newfoundland, and we will see what they advise us to do.”

“And what they advise us to do we will do,” added Sylvius Hogg, without an instant’s hesitation. “I have the approval of the government. In fact, I am authorized to send one of its dispatch-boats in search of the ‘Viking,’ and I feel sure that no one will hesitate to take part in such a work.”

“I will pay a visit to the marine bureau, and see what I can learn there,” remarked Help, Junior.

“Would you like me to accompany you?”

“It is not necessary, and you must be fatigued.”

“Fatigued! I — at my age?”

“Nevertheless, you had better rest until my return, my dear and ever-young Sylvius.”

That same day there was a large meeting of captains of merchant and whaling vessels, as well as pilots, in the office of Help Bros. — an assemblage of men who were still navigating the seas, as well as of those who had retired from active service.

Sylvius Hogg explained the situation briefly but clearly. He told them the date — May 3d — on which the bottle had been cast into the sea by Ole

Kamp, and the date — June 3d — on which it had been picked up by the Danish captain, two hundred miles south-west of Iceland.

The discussion that followed was long and serious. There was not one of these brave men who were not familiar with the currents of that locality, and upon the direction of these currents they must, of course, chiefly depend for a solution of the problem.

But it was an incontestable fact that at the time of the shipwreck, and during the interval that elapsed between the sailing of the “Viking” from Saint-Pierre-Miquelon, and the discovery of the bottle by the Danish vessel, constant gales from the south-east had disturbed that portion of the Atlantic. In fact, it was to one of these tempests that the catastrophe must be attributed. Probably the “Viking,” being unable to carry sail in the teeth of the tempest, had been obliged to scud before the windy and it being at this season of the year that the ice from the polar seas begins to make its way down into the Atlantic, it was more than likely that a collision had taken place, and that the “Viking” had been crushed by a floating iceberg, which it was impossible to avoid.

Still, in that case, was it not more than probable that the whole, or a part, of the ship’s crew had taken refuge upon one of these ice fields after having placed a quantity of provisions upon it? If they had really done so, the iceberg, having certainly been driven in a north-westerly direction by the winds which were prevailing at the time, it was not unlikely that the survivors had been able to reach some point on the coast of Greenland, so it was in that direction, and in those seas, that search should be made.

This was the unanimous opinion of these experienced mariners, and there could be no doubt that this was the only feasible plan. But would they find aught save a few fragments of the “Viking” in case the vessel had been crushed by some enormous iceberg? Could they hope to effect the rescue of any survivors?

This was more than doubtful, and the professor on putting the question perceived that the more competent could not, or would not, reply. Still, this was no cause for inaction — they were all agreed upon that point — but action must be taken without delay.

There are always several government vessels at Bergen, and one of the three dispatch-boats charged with the surveillance of the western coast of Norway is attached to this port. As good luck would have it, that very boat was now riding at anchor in the bay.

After making a note of the various suggestions advanced by the most experienced seamen who had assembled at the office of Help, Junior, Sylvius Hogg went aboard the dispatch-boat “Telegraph,” and apprised the commander of the special mission intrusted to him by the government.

The commander received him very cordially, and declared his willingness to render all the assistance in his power. He had become familiar with the navigation of the locality specified during several long and dangerous voyages from the Loffoden Islands and Finmark to the Iceland and Newfoundland fisheries; so he would have experience to aid him in the humane work he was about to undertake, as he fully agreed with the seamen already consulted that it was in the waters between Iceland and Greenland that they must look for the survivors, or at least for some trace of the “Viking.” If he did not succeed there, he would, however, explore the neighboring shores, and perhaps the eastern part of Baffin’s Bay.

“I am all ready to start, sir,” he added. “My coal and provisions are on board, my crew has been selected, and I can set sail this very day.”

“Thank you, captain,” replied the professor, “not only for your promptness, but for the very kind reception you have given me. But one question more: Can you tell me how long it will take you to reach the shores of Greenland?”

“My vessel makes about eleven knots an hour, and as the distance from Bergen to Greenland is only about twenty degrees, I can count upon arriving there in less than a week.”

“Make all possible haste, captain,” replied Sylvius Hogg. “If any of the shipwrecked crew did survive the catastrophe, two months have already elapsed since the vessel went down, and they are perhaps in a destitute and even famishing condition upon some desert coast.”

“Yes, there is no time to lose, Monsieur Hogg. I will start this very day, keep my vessel going at the top of her speed, and as soon as I find any trace whatever I will inform the Naval Department at Christiania by a telegram from Newfoundland.”

“God-speed you, captain,” replied Sylvius Hogg, “and may you succeed.”

That same day the “Telegraph” set sail, followed by the sympathizing cheers of the entire population of Bergen, and it was not without keen emotion that the kind-hearted people watched the vessel make its way down the channel, and finally disappear behind the islands of the fiord.

But Sylvius Hogg did not confine his efforts to the expedition undertaken by the dispatch-boat “Telegraph.” On the contrary, he was resolved to multiply the chances of finding some trace of the missing “Viking.” Would it not be possible to excite a spirit of emulation in the captains of merchant vessels and fishing-smacks that navigated the waters of Iceland and the

Faroe Islands? Unquestionably. So a reward of two thousand marks was promised in the name of the government to any vessel that would furnish any information in regard to the missing “Viking,” and one of five thousand marks to any vessel that would bring one of the survivors of the shipwreck back to his native land.

So, during the two days spent in Bergen Sylvius Hogg did everything in his power to insure the success of the enterprise, and he was cheerfully seconded in his efforts by Help, Junior, and all the maritime authorities. M. Help would have been glad to have the worthy deputy as a guest some time longer, but though Sylvius Hogg thanked him cordially he declined to prolong his stay. He was anxious to rejoin Hulda and Joel, being afraid to leave them to themselves too long, but Help, Junior, promised him that any news that might be received should be promptly transmitted to Dal.

So, on the morning of the 4th, after taking leave of his friend Help, Sylvius Hogg re-embarked on the “Run” to cross the fiord of the Hardanger, and if nothing unforeseen occurred he counted on reaching the Telemark by the evening of the 5th.

CHAPTER XIV.

The day that Sylvius Hogg left Bergen proved an eventful one at the inn.

After the professor’s departure the house seemed deserted. It almost seemed as if the kind friend of the young Hansens had taken away with him, not only the last hope, but the life of the family, and left only a charnel-house behind him.

During the two days that followed no guests presented themselves at the inn. Joel had no occasion to absent himself, consequently, but could remain with Hulda, whom he was very unwilling to leave alone with her own thoughts.

Dame Hansen seemed to become more and more a prey to secret anxiety. She seemed to feel no interest in anything connected with her children, not even in the loss of the “Viking.” She lived a life apart, remaining shut up in her own room, and appearing only at meal-time. When she did address a word to Hulda or Joel it was only to reproach them directly or indirectly on the subject of the lottery-ticket, which neither of them felt willing to dispose of at any price. Offers for the ticket continued to pour in from every corner of the globe. A positive mania seemed to have seized certain brains. Such a ticket must certainly be predestined to win the prize of one hundred thousand marks — there could be no doubt of it, so said every one. A person would have supposed there was but one ticket in the lottery, and that the number of it was 9672. The Manchester man and the Bostonian were still at the head of the list. The Englishman had outbid his rival by a few pounds, but he, in turn, was soon distanced by an advance of several hundred dollars. The last bid was one of eight thousand marks — and it could be explained only as the result of positive madness, unless it was a question of national pride on this part of an American and an Englishman.

However this may have been Hulda refused all these offers, and her conduct excited the bitter disapproval of Dame Hansen.

“What if I should order you to sell this ticket? Yes, order you to sell it,” she said to her daughter one day.

“I should be very sorry, mother, but I should be obliged to refuse.”

“But if it should become absolutely necessary, what then?”

“But how can that be possible?” asked Joel.

Dame Hansen made no reply. She had turned very pale on hearing this straightforward question, and now withdrew, muttering some incoherent words.

“There is certainly something wrong,” remarked Joel. “There must be some difficulty between mother and Sandgoist.”

“Yes, brother, we must be prepared for some serious complications in the future.”

“Have we not suffered enough during the past few weeks, my poor Hulda? What fresh catastrophe threatens us?”

“How long Monsieur Sylvius stays!” exclaimed Hulda, without paying any apparent heed to the question. “When he is here I feel less despondent.”

“And yet, what can he do for us?” replied Joel.

What could there have been in Dame Hansen’s past that she was unwilling to confide to her children? What foolish pride prevented her from revealing to them the cause of her disquietude? Had she any real cause to reproach herself? And on the other hand, why did she endeavor to influence her daughter in regard to Ole Kamp’s ticket, and the price that was to be set upon it? Why did she seem so eager to dispose of it, or rather, to secure the money that had been offered for it? Hulda and Joel were about to learn.

On the morning of the 4th Joel escorted his sister to the little chapel where she went every morning to pray for the lost one. Her brother always waited for her, and accompanied her back to the house.

That day, on returning, they both perceived Dame Hansen in the distance, walking rapidly in the direction of the inn. She was not alone. A man was walking beside her — a man who seemed to be talking in a loud voice, and whose gestures were vehement and imperious.

Hulda and her brother both paused suddenly.

“Who is that man?” inquired Joel.

Hulda advanced a few steps.

“I know him,” she said at last.

“You know him?”

“Yes, it is Sandgoist.”

“Sandgoist, of Drammen, who came here during my absence?”

“Yes.”

“And who acted in such a lordly way that he would seem to have mother, and us, too, perhaps, in his power?”

“The same, brother; and he has probably come to make us feel his power to-day.”

“What power? This time I will know the object of his visit.”

Joel controlled himself, though not without an evident effort, and followed his sister.

In a few moments Dame Hansen and Sandgoist reached the door of the inn. Sandgoist crossed the threshold first; then the door closed upon Dame Hansen and upon him, and both of them entered the large parlor.

As Joel and Hulda approached the house the threatening voice of Sandgoist became distinctly audible. They paused and listened; Dame Hansen was speaking now, but in entreating tones.

“Let us go in,” remarked Joel.

Hulda entered with a heavy heart; Joel was trembling with suppressed anger and impatience.

Sandgoist sat enthroned in the big arm-chair. He did not even take the trouble to rise on the entrance of the brother and sister. He merely turned his head and stared at them over his spectacles.

“Ah! here is the charming Hulda, if I’m not mistaken,” he exclaimed in a tone that incensed Joel even more deeply.

Dame Hansen was standing in front of the man in an humble almost cringing attitude, but she instantly straightened herself up, and seemed greatly annoyed at the sight of her children.

“And this is her brother, I suppose?” added Sandgoist.

“Yes, her brother,” retorted Joel.

Then, advancing until within a few steps of the arm-chair, he asked, brusquely:

“What do you want here?”

Sandgoist gave him a withering look; then, in a harsh voice, and without rising, he replied:

“You will soon learn, young man. You happen in just at the right time. I was anxious to see you, and if your sister is a sensible girl we shall soon come to an understanding. But sit down, and you, too, young woman, had better do the same.”

Sandgoist seemed to be doing the honors of his own house, and Joel instantly noted the fact.

“Ah, ha! you are displeased! What a touchy young man you seem to be!”

“I am not particularly touchy that I know of, but I don’t feel inclined to accept civilities from those who have no right to offer them.”

“Joel!” cried Dame Hansen.

“Brother, brother!” exclaimed Hulda, with an imploring look.

Joel made a violent effort to control himself, and to prevent himself from yielding to his desire to throw this coarse wretch out of the window, he retired to a corner of the room.

“Can I speak now?” inquired Sandgoist.

An affirmative sign from Dame Hansen was all the answer he obtained, but it seemed to be sufficient.

“What I have to say is this,” he began, “and I would like all three of you to listen attentively, for I don’t fancy being obliged to repeat my words.”

That he spoke like a person who had an indisputable right to his own way was only too evident to each and every member of the party.

“I have learned through the newspapers,” he continued, “of the misfortune which has befallen a certain Ole Kamp — a young seaman of Bergen — and of a lottery-ticket that he bequeathed to his betrothed, Hulda Hansen, just as his ship, the ‘Viking,’ was going down. I have also learned that the public at large feels convinced that this will prove the fortunate ticket by reason of the peculiar circumstances under which it was found. I have also learned that some very liberal offers for the purchase of this ticket have been received by Hulda Hansen.”

He was silent for a moment, then:

“Is this true?” he added.

He was obliged to wait some time for an answer to this question.

“Yes, it is true,” replied Joel, at last. “And what of it, if you please?”

“These offers are, in my opinion, the result of a most absurd and senseless superstition,” continued Sandgoist, “but for all that, they will continue to be made, and to increase in amount, as the day appointed for the drawing approaches. Now, I am a business man myself, and I have taken it into my head that I should like to have a hand in this little speculation myself, so I left Drammen yesterday to come to Dal to arrange for the transfer of this ticket, and to beg Dame Hansen to give me the preference over all other would-be purchasers.”

Hulda was about to make Sandgoist the same answer she had given to all offers of this kind, though his remarks had not been addressed directly to her, when Joel checked her.

“Before replying, I should like to ask Monsieur Sandgoist if he knows to whom this ticket belongs?” he said haughtily.

“To Hulda Hansen, I suppose.”

“Very well; then it is to Hulda Hansen that this application should be addressed.”

“My son!” hastily interposed Dame Hansen.

“Let me finish, mother,” continued Joel. “This ticket belonged originally to our cousin, Ole Kamp, and had not Ole Kamp a perfect right to bequeath it to his betrothed?”

“Unquestionably,” replied Sandgoist.

“Then it is to Hulda Hanson that you must apply, if you wish to purchase it.”

“So be it, Master Formality,” retorted Sandgoist. “I now ask Hulda to sell me this ticket Number 9672 that Ole Kamp bequeathed to her.”

“Monsieur Sandgoist,” the young girl answered in firm but quiet tones, “I have received a great many offers for this ticket, but they have been made in vain. I shall say to you exactly what I have said to others. If my betrothed sent me this ticket with his last farewell upon it it was because he wished me to keep it, so I will not part with it at any price.”

Having said this Hulda turned, as if to leave the room, evidently supposing that the conversation so far as she was concerned had been terminated by her refusal, but at a gesture from her mother she paused.

An exclamation of annoyance had escaped Dame Hansen, and Sandgoist’s knitted brows and flashing eyes showed that anger was beginning to take possession of him.

“Yes, remain, Hulda,” said he. “This is not your final answer. If I insist it is because I certainly have a right to do so. Besides, I think I must have stated the case badly, or rather you must have misunderstood me. It is certain that the chances of this ticket have not increased because the hand of a shipwrecked seaman placed it in a bottle and it was subsequently recovered; still, the public seldom or never reasons, and there is not the slightest doubt that many persons desire to become the owners of it. They have already offered to purchase it, and other offers are sure to follow. It is simply a business transaction, I repeat, and I have come to propose a good trade to you.”

“You will have some difficulty in coming to an understanding with my sister, sir,” replied Joel, ironically. “When you talk business to her she replies with sentiment.”

“That is all idle talk, young man,” replied Sandgoist. “When my explanation is concluded you will see that however advantageous the transaction may be to me it will be equally so to her. I may also add that it will be equally so to her mother, Dame Hansen, who is personally interested in the matter.”

Joel and Hulda exchanged glances. Were they about to learn the secret Dame Hansen had so long concealed from them?

“I do not ask that this ticket shall be sold to me for what Ole Kamp paid for it,” continued Sandgoist. No! Right or wrong, it has certainly acquired an increased financial value, and I am willing to make a sacrifice to become the owner of it.”

“You have already been told that Hulda has refused much better offers than yours,” replied Joel.

“Indeed!” exclaimed Sandgoist. “Much better offers, you say. How do you know?”

“Whatever your offer may be, my sister refuses it, and I approve of her decision.”

“Ah! am I dealing with Joel or Hulda Hansen, pray?”

“My sister and I are one,” retorted Joel. “It would be well for you to become satisfied of this fact, as you seem to be ignorant of it.”

Sandgoist shrugged his shoulders, but without being at all disconcerted, for like a man who is sure of his arguments, he replied:

“When I spoke of the price I was willing to pay for the ticket, I ought to have told you that I could offer inducements which Hulda Hansen can hardly reject if she takes any interest in the welfare of her family.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, and it would be well for you, young man, to understand, in your turn, that I did not come to Dal to beg your sister to sell me this ticket. No, a thousand times no.”

“For what, then?”

“I do not ask for it, I demand it. I will have it.”

“And by what right?” exclaimed Joel, “and how dare you, a stranger, speak in this way in my mother’s house?”

“By the right every man has to speak as he pleases, and when he pleases, in his own house,” retorted Sandgoist.

“In his own house?”

Joel, in his indignation, stepped threateningly toward Sandgoist, who, though not easily frightened, sprung hastily out of his arm-chair. But Hulda laid a detaining hand upon her brother’s arm, while Dame Hansen, burying her face in her hands, retreated to the other end of the room.

“Brother, look at her!” whispered the young girl.

Joel paused suddenly. A glance at his mother paralyzed him. Her very attitude revealed how entirely Dame Hansen was in this scoundrel’s power.

Sandgoist, seeing Joel's hesitation, recovered his self-possession, and resumed his former seat.

"Yes, in his own house," he continued in a still more arrogant voice. "Ever since her husband's death, Dame Hansen has been engaging in unsuccessful speculations. After losing the small fortune your father left at his death, she was obliged to borrow money of a Christiania banker, offering this house as security for a loan of fifteen thousand marks. About a year ago I purchased the mortgage, and this house will consequently become my property — and very speedily — if I am not paid when this mortgage becomes due."

"When is it due?" demanded Joel.

"On the 20th of July, or eighteen days from now," replied Sandgoist. "Then, whether you like it or not, I shall be in my own house here."

"You will not be in your own house here until that date, even if you are not paid at that time," retorted Joel, "and I forbid you to speak as you have been doing in the presence of my mother and sister."

"He forbids me — me!" exclaimed Sandgoist. "But how about his mother — what does she say?"

"Speak, mother!" cried Joel, approaching Dame Hansen, and endeavoring to remove her hands from her face.

"Joel, my brother," exclaimed Hulda. "I entreat you, for my sake, to be calm."

Dame Hansen bowed her head upon her breast, not daring to meet her son's searching eyes. It was only too true that she had been endeavoring to increase her fortune by rash speculations for several years past. The small sum of money at her disposal had soon melted away, and she had been obliged to borrow at a high rate of interest. And now the mortgage had passed into the hands of this Sandgoist — a heartless and unprincipled man — a well-known usurer, who was heartily despised throughout the country. Dame Hansen, however, had seen him for the first time when he came to Dal to satisfy himself in regard to the value of the property.

This was the secret that had weighed so heavily upon her. This, too, explained her reserve, for she had not dared to confide in her children. This was the secret she had sedulously kept from those whose future she had blighted.

Hulda scarcely dared to think of what she had just heard. Yes, Sandgoist was indeed a master who had the power to enforce his will! The ticket he wished to purchase would probably be worth nothing a fortnight hence, and if she did not consent to relinquish it certain ruin would follow — their house would be sold over their heads, and the Hansen family would be homeless and penniless.

Hulda dared not even glance at Joel, but Joel was too angry to pay any heed to these threats. He could think only of Sandgoist, and if the man continued to talk in this way the impetuous youth felt that he should not be able to control himself much longer.

Sandgoist, seeing that he had once more become master of the situation, grew even more arrogant and imperious in his manner.

“I want that ticket, and I intend to have it,” he repeated. “In exchange for it I offer no fixed price, but I promise to extend the mortgage for one — two, or three years — Fix the date yourself, Hulda.”

Hulda’s heart was so deeply oppressed with anguish that she was unable to reply, but her brother answered for her.

“Ole Kamp’s ticket can not be sold by Hulda Hansen. My sister refuses your offer, in spite of your threats. Now leave the house!”

“Leave the house,” repeated Sandgoist. “I shall do nothing of the kind. If the offer I have made does not satisfy you I will go even further. In exchange for the ticket I offer you — I offer you — ”

Sandgoist must certainly have felt an irresistible desire to possess this ticket — or at least he most have been convinced that the purchase would prove a most advantageous one to him, for he seated himself at a table upon which lay pen, ink, and paper, and a moment afterward he added:

“Here is what I offer.”

It was a receipt for the amount of Dame Hansen’s indebtedness — a receipt for the amount of the mortgage on the Dal property.

Dame Hansen cowered in her corner, with hands outstretched, and eyes fixed imploringly on her daughter.

“And now give me the ticket,” cried Sandgoist, “I want it to-day — this very instant. I will not leave Dal without it”

As he spoke he stepped hastily toward the poor girl as if with the intention of searching her pockets, and wresting the ticket from her.

This was more than Joel could endure, especially when he heard Hulda’s startled cry of “Brother! brother!”

“Get out of here!” he shouted, roughly. And seeing that Sandgoist showed no intention of obeying, the young man was about to spring upon him, when Hulda hastily interposed.

“Here is the ticket, mother,” she cried.

Dame Hansen seized it, and as she exchanged it for Sandgoist’s receipt her daughter sunk, almost fainting, into an arm-chair.

“Hulda! Hulda! Oh, what have you done?” cried Joel.

“What has she done,” replied Dame Hansen. “Yes, I am guilty — for my children’s sake I wished to increase the property left by their father, but instead I have reduced them to poverty. But Hulda has saved us all. That is what she has done. Thank you, Hulda, thank you.”

Sandgoist still lingered. Joel perceived the fact.

“You are here still,” he continued, roughly. And springing upon Sandgoist he seized him by the shoulders and hustled him out-of-doors in spite of his protests and resistance.

CHAPTER XV.

Sylvius Hogg reached Dal on the evening of the following day. He did not say a word about his journey, and no one knew that he had been to Bergen. As long as the search was productive of no results he wished the Hansen family to remain in ignorance of it. Every letter or telegram, whether from Bergen or Christiania, was to be addressed to him, at the inn, where he intended to await further developments. Did he still hope? Yes, though it must be admitted that he had some misgivings.

As soon as he returned the professor became satisfied that some important event had occurred in his absence. The altered manner of Joel and Hulda showed conclusively that an explanation must have taken place between their mother and themselves. Had some new misfortunes befallen the Hansen household?

All this of course troubled Sylvius Hogg greatly. He felt such a paternal affection for the brother and sister that he could not have been more fond of them if they had been his own children. How much he had missed them during his short absence.

“They will tell me all by and by,” he said to himself. “They will have to tell me all. Am I not a member of the family?”

Yes; Sylvius Hogg felt now that he had an undoubted right to be consulted in regard to everything connected with the private life of his young friends, and to know why Joel and Hulda seemed even more unhappy than at the time of his departure. The mystery was soon solved.

In fact both the young people were anxious to confide in the excellent man whom they loved with a truly filial devotion, but they were waiting for him to question them. During his absence they had felt lonely and forsaken — the more so from the fact that Sylvius Hogg had not seen fit to tell them where he was going. Never had the hours seemed so long. It never once occurred to them that the journey was in any way connected with a search for the "Viking," and that Sylvius Hogg had concealed the fact from them in order to spare them additional disappointment in case of failure.

And now how much more necessary his presence seemed to have become to them! How glad they were to see him, to listen to his words of counsel and hear his kind and encouraging voice. But would they ever dare to tell him what had passed between them and the Drammen usurer, and how Dame Hansen had marred the prospects of her children? What would Sylvius Hogg say when he learned that the ticket was no longer in Hulda's possession, and when he heard that Dame Hansen had used it to free herself from her inexorable creditor?

He was sure to learn these facts, however. Whether it was Sylvius Hogg or Hulda that first broached the subject, it would be hard to say, nor does it matter much. This much is certain, however, the professor soon became thoroughly acquainted with the situation of affairs. He was told of the danger that had threatened Dame Hansen and her children, and how the usurer would have driven them from their old home in a fortnight if the debt had not been paid by the surrender of the ticket.

Sylvius Hogg listened attentively to this sad story.

"You should not have given up the ticket," he cried, vehemently; "no, you should not have done it."

"How could I help it, Monsieur Sylvius?" replied the poor girl, greatly troubled.

“You could not, of course, and yet — Ah, if I had only been here!”

And what would Professor Sylvius Hogg have done had he been there? He did not say, however, but continued:

“Yes, my dear Hulda; yes, Joel, you did the best you could, under the circumstances. But what enrages me almost beyond endurance is the fact that this Sandgoist will profit greatly, no doubt, by this absurd superstition on the part of the public. If poor Ole’s ticket should really prove to be the lucky one this unprincipled scoundrel will reap all the benefit. And yet, to suppose that this number, 9672, will necessarily prove the lucky one, is simply ridiculous and absurd. Still, I would not have given up the ticket, I think. After once refusing to surrender it to Sandgoist Hulda would have done better to turn a deaf ear to her mother’s entreaties.”

The brother and sister could find nothing to say in reply. In giving the ticket to Dame Hansen, Hulda had been prompted by a filial sentiment that was certainly to be commended rather than censured. The sacrifice she had made was not one of more or less probable chance, but of Ole Kamp’s last wishes and of her last memento of her lover.

But it was too late to think of this now. Sandgoist had the ticket. It belonged to him, and he would sell it to the highest bidder. A heartless usurer would thus coin money out of the touching farewell of the shipwrecked mariner. Sylvius Hogg could not bear the thought. It was intolerable to him.

He resolved to have a talk with Dame Hansen on the subject that very day. This conversation could effect no change in the state of affairs, but it had become almost necessary.

“So you think I did wrong, Monsieur Hogg?” she asked, after allowing the professor to say all he had to say on the subject.

“Certainly, Dame Hansen.”

“If you blame me for having engaged in rash speculations, and for endangering the fortune of my children, you are perfectly right; but if you blame me for having resorted to the means I did to free myself, you are wrong. What have you to say in reply?”

“Nothing.”

“But seriously, do you think that I ought to have refused the offer of Sandgoist, who really offered fifteen thousand marks for a ticket that is probably worth nothing; I ask you again, do you think I ought to have refused it?”

“Yes and no, Dame Hansen.”

“It can not be both yes and no, professor; it is no. Under different circumstances, and if the future had appeared less threatening — though that was my own fault, I admit — I should have upheld Hulda in her refusal to part with the ticket she had received from Ole Kamp. But when there was a certainty of being driven in a few days from the house in which my husband died, and in which my children first saw the light, I could not understand such a refusal, and you yourself, Monsieur Hogg, had you been in my place, would certainly have acted as I did.”

“No, Dame Hansen, no!”

“What would you have done, then?”

“I would have done anything rather than sacrifice a ticket my daughter had received under such circumstances.”

“Do these circumstances, in your opinion, enhance the value of the ticket?”

“No one can say.”

“On the contrary, every one does know. This ticket is simply one that has nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine chances of losing against one of winning. Do you consider it any more valuable because it was found in a bottle that was picked up at sea?”

Sylvius Hogg hardly knew what to say in reply to this straightforward question, so he reverted to the sentimental side of the question by remarking:

“The situation now seems to be briefly as follows: Ole Kamp, as the ship went down, bequeathed to Hulda the sole earthly possession left him, with the request that she should present it on the day of the drawing, provided, of course, that the ticket reached her; and now this ticket is no longer in Hulda’s possession.”

“If Ole Kamp had been here, he would not have hesitated to surrender his ticket to Sandgoist,” replied Dame Hansen.

“That is quite possible,” replied Sylvius Hogg; “but certainly no other person had a right to do it, and what will you say to him if he has not perished and if he should return to-morrow, or this very day?”

“Ole will never return,” replied Dame Hansen, gloomily. “Ole is dead, Monsieur Hogg, dead, beyond a doubt.”

“You can not be sure of that, Dame Hansen,” exclaimed the professor. “In fact, you know nothing at all about it. Careful search is being made for some survivor of the shipwreck. It may prove successful; yes, even before the time appointed for the drawing of this lottery. You have no right to say that Ole Kamp is dead, so long as we have no proof that he perished in the catastrophe. The reason I speak with less apparent assurance before your children is that I do not want to arouse hopes that may end in bitter disappointment. But to you, Dame Hansen, I can say what I really think, and I can not, I will not believe that Ole Kamp is dead! No, I will not believe it!”

Finding herself thus worsted, Dame Hansen ceased to argue the question, and this Norwegian, being rather superstitious in her secret heart, hung her head as if Ole Kamp was indeed about to appear before her.

“At all events, before parting with the ticket,” continued Sylvius Hogg, “there was one very simple thing that you neglected to do.”

“What?”

“You should first have applied to your personal friends or the friends of your family. They would not have refused to assist you, either by purchasing the mortgage of Sandgoist, or by loaning you the money to pay it.”

“I have no friends of whom I could ask such a favor.”

“Yes, you have, Dame Hansen. I know at least one person who would have done it without the slightest hesitation.”

“And who is that, if you please?”

“Sylvius Hogg, member of the Storthing.”

Dame Hansen, too deeply moved to reply in words, bowed her thanks to the professor.

“But what’s done can’t be undone, unfortunately,” added Sylvius Hogg, “and I should be greatly obliged to you, Dame Hansen, if you would refrain from saying anything to your children about this conversation.”

And the two separated.

The professor had resumed his former habits, and his daily walks as well. In company with Joel and Hulda, he spent several hours every day in visiting the points of interest in and about Dal — not going too far, however, for fear of wearying the young girl. Much of his time, too, was devoted to his extensive correspondence. He wrote letter after letter to Bergen and Christiania, stimulating the zeal all who were engaged in the good work of searching for the “Viking.” To find Ole seemed to be his sole aim in life now.

He even felt it his duty to again absent himself for twenty-four hours, doubtless for an object in some way connected with the affair in which Dame Hansen’s family was so deeply interested; but, as before, he maintained absolute silence in regard to what he was doing or having done in this matter.

In the meantime Hulda regained strength but slowly. The poor girl lived only upon the recollection of Ole; and her hope of seeing him again grew fainter from day to day. It is true, she had near her the two beings she loved best in the world; and one of them never ceased to encourage her; but would that suffice? Was it not necessary to divert her mind at any cost? But how was her mind to be diverted from the gloomy thoughts that bound her, as it were, to the shipwrecked “Viking?”

The 12th of July came. The drawing of the Christiania Schools Lottery was to take place in four days.

It is needless to say that Sandgoist’s purchase had come to the knowledge of the public. The papers announced that the famous ticket bearing the number 9672 was now in the possession of M. Sandgoist, of Drammen, and that this ticket would be sold to the highest bidder; so, if M. Sandgoist was now the owner of the aforesaid ticket, he must have purchased it for a round sum of Hulda Hansen.

Of course this announcement lowered the young girl very decidedly in public estimation. What! Hulda Hansen had consented to sell the ticket belonging to her lost lover? She had turned this last memento of him into money?

But a timely paragraph that appeared in the “Morgen-Blad” gave the readers a true account of what had taken place. It described the real nature of Sandgoist’s interference, and how the ticket had come into his hands. And now it was upon the Drammen usurer that public odium fell; upon the heartless creditor who had not hesitated to take advantage of the misfortunes of the Hansen family, and as if by common consent the offers which had been made while Hulda held the ticket were not renewed. The ticket seemed to have lost its supernatural value since it had been defiled by Sandgoist’s touch, so that worthy had made but a bad bargain, after all, and the famous ticket, No. 9672, appeared likely to be left on his hands.

It is needless to say that neither Hulda nor Joel was aware of what had been said, and this was fortunate, for it would have been very painful to them to become publicly mixed up in an affair which had assumed such a purely speculative character since it came into the hands of the usurer.

Late on the afternoon of the 12th of July, a letter arrived, addressed to Professor Sylvius Hogg.

This missive, which came from the Naval Department, contained another which had been mailed at Christiansand, a small town situated at the mouth of the Gulf of Christiania. It could hardly have contained any news, however, for Sylvius Hogg put it in his pocket and said nothing to Joel or his sister about its contents.

But when he bade them good-night on retiring to his chamber, he remarked:

“The drawing of the lottery is to take place in three days as you are, of course, aware, my children. You intend to be present, do you not?”

“What is the use, Monsieur Sylvius?” responded Hulda.

“But Ole wished his betrothed to witness it. In fact, he particularly requested it in the last lines he ever wrote, and I think his wishes should be obeyed.”

“But the ticket is no longer in Hulda’s possession,” remarked Joel, “and we do not even know into whose hands it has passed.”

“Nevertheless, I think you both ought to accompany me to Christiania to attend the drawing,” replied the professor.

“Do you really desire it, Monsieur Sylvius?” asked the young girl.

“It is not I, my dear Hulda, but Ole who desires it, and Ole’s wishes must be respected.”

“Monsieur Sylvius is right, sister,” replied Joel. “Yes; you must go. When do you intend to start, Monsieur Sylvius?”

“To-morrow, at day-break, and may Saint Olaf protect us!”

CHAPTER XVI.

The next morning Foreman Lengling’s gayly painted kariol bore away Sylvius Hogg and Hulda, seated comfortably side by side. There was not room for Joel, as we know already, so the brave fellow trudged along on foot at the horse’s head.

The fourteen kilometers that lay between Dal and Moel had no terrors for this untiring walker.

Their route lay along the left bank of the Maan, down the charming valley of the Vesfjorddal — a narrow, heavily wooded valley, watered by a thousand dashing cataracts. At each turn in the path, too, one saw appearing or disappearing the lofty summit of Gousta, with its two large patches of dazzling snow.

The sky was cloudless, the weather magnificent, the air not too cool, nor the sun too warm.

Strange to say, Sylvius Hogg’s face seemed to have become more serene since his departure from the inn, though it is not improbable that his cheerfulness was a trifle forced, so anxious was he that this trip should divert Joel and Hulda from their sorrowful thoughts.

It took them only about two hours and a half to reach Moel, which is situated at the end of Lake Tinn. Here they were obliged to leave the kariol and take a small boat, for at this point a chain of small lakes begins. The kariol paused near the little church, at the foot of a water-fall at least five hundred feet in height. This water-fall, which is visible for only about one fifth of its descent, loses itself in a deep crevasse before being swallowed up by the lake.

Two boatmen were standing on the shore beside a birch-bark canoe, so fragile and unstable that the slightest imprudence on the part of its occupants would inevitably overturn it.

The lake was at its very best this beautiful morning. The sun had absorbed all the mist of the previous night, and no one could not have asked for a more superb summer’s day.

“You are not tired, my good Joel?” inquired the professor, as he alighted from the kariol.

“No, Monsieur Sylvius. You forget that I am accustomed to long tramps through the Telemark.”

“That is true. Tell me, do you know the most direct route from Moel to Christiania?”

“Perfectly, sir. But I fear when we reach Tinoset, at the further end of the lake, we shall have some difficulty in procuring a kariol, as we have not warned them of our intended arrival, as is customary in this country.”

“Have no fears, my boy,” replied the professor: “I attended to that. You needn’t be afraid that I have any intention of making you foot it from Dal to Christiania.”

“I could easily do it if necessary,” remarked Joel.

“But it will not be necessary, fortunately. Now suppose we go over our route again.”

“Well, once at Tinoset, Monsieur Sylvius, we for a time follow the shores of Lake Fol, passing through Vik and Bolkesko, so as to reach Mose, and afterward Kongsberg, Hangsund, and Drammen. If we travel both night and day it will be possible for us to reach Christiania to-morrow afternoon.”

“Very well, Joel. I see that you are familiar with the country, and the route you propose is certainly a very pleasant one.”

“It is also the shortest.”

“But I am not at all particular about taking the shortest route,” replied Sylvius Hogg, laughing. “I know another and even more agreeable route that prolongs the journey only a few hours, and you, too, are familiar with it, my boy, though you failed to mention it.”

“What route do you refer to?”

“To the one that passes through Bamble.”

“Through Bamble?”

“Yes, through Bamble. Don’t feign ignorance. Yes, through Bamble, where Farmer Helmboe and his daughter Siegfrid reside.”

“Monsieur Sylvius!”

“Yes, and that is the route we are going to take, following the northern shore of Lake Fol instead of the southern, but finally reaching Kongsberg all the same.”

“Yes, quite as well, and even better,” answered Joel smiling.

“I must thank you in behalf of my brother, Monsieur Sylvius,” said Hulda, archly.

“And for yourself as well, for I am sure that you too will be glad to see your friend Siegfrid.”

The boat being ready, all three seated themselves upon a pile of leaves in the stern, and the vigorous strokes of the boatsmen soon carried the frail bark a long way from the shore.

After passing Hackenoes, a tiny hamlet of two or three houses, built upon a rocky promontory laved by the narrow fiord into which the Maan empties, the lake begins to widen rapidly. At first it is walled in by tall cliffs whose real height one can estimate accurately only when a boat passes their base, appearing no larger than some aquatic bird in comparison; but gradually the mountains retire into the background.

The lake is dotted here and there with small islands, some absolutely devoid of vegetation, others covered with verdure through which peep a few fishermen’s huts. Upon the lake, too, may be seen floating countless logs not yet sold to the saw-mills in the neighborhood.

This sight led Sylvius Hogg to jestingly remark — and he certainly must have been in a mood for jesting:

“If our lakes are the eyes of Norway, as our poets pretend, it must be admitted that poor Norway has more than one beam in her eye, as the Bible says.”

About four o’clock the boat reached Tinoset, one of the most primitive of hamlets. Still that mattered little, as Sylvius Hogg had no intention of remaining there even for an hour. As he had prophesied to Joel, a vehicle was awaiting them on the shore, for having decided upon this journey several weeks before, he had written to Mr. Benett, of Christiania, requesting him to provide the means of making it with the least possible fatigue and delay, which explains the fact that a comfortable carriage was in attendance, with its box well stocked with eatables, thus enabling the party to dispense with the stale eggs and sour milk with which travelers are usually regaled in the hamlets of the Telemark.

Tinoset is situated near the end of Lake Tinn, and here the Maan plunges majestically into the valley below, where it resumes its former course.

The horses being already harnessed to the carriage, our friends immediately started in the direction of Bamble. In those days this was the only mode of travel in vogue throughout Central Norway, and through the Telemark in particular, and perhaps modern railroads have already caused the tourist to think with regret of the national kariol and Mr. Benett’s comfortable carriages.

It is needless to say that Joel was well acquainted with this region, having traversed it repeatedly on his way from Dal to Bamble.

It was eight o’clock in the evening when Sylvius Hogg and his protégées reached the latter village. They were not expected, but Farmer Helmboe received them none the less cordially on that account. Siegfrid tenderly embraced her friend, and the two young girls being left alone together for a few moments, they had an opportunity to discuss the subject that engrossed their every thought.

“Pray do not despair, my dearest Hulda,” said Siegfrid; “I have not ceased to hope, by any means. Why should you abandon all hope of seeing your poor Ole again? We have learned, through the papers, that search is being made for the ‘Viking.’ It will prove successful, I am certain it will, and I am sure Monsieur Sylvius has not given up all hope. Hulda, my darling, I entreat you not to despair.”

Hulda’s tears were her only reply, and Siegfrid pressed her friend fondly to her heart.

Ah! what joy would have reigned in Farmer Helmboe’s household if they could but have heard of the safe return of the absent one, and have felt that they really had a right to be happy.

“So you are going direct to Christiania?” inquired the farmer.

“Yes, Monsieur Helmboe.”

“To be present at the drawing of the great lottery?”

“Certainly.”

“But what good will it do now that Ole’s ticket is in the hands of that wretch, Sandgoist?”

“It was Ole’s wish, and it must be respected,” replied the professor.

“I hear that the usurer has found no purchaser for the ticket for which he paid so dearly.”

“I too have heard so, friend Helmboe.”

“Well, I must say that it serves the rascal right. The man is a scoundrel, professor, a scoundrel, and it serves him right.”

“Yes, friend Helmboe, it does, indeed, serve him right.”

Of course they had to take supper at the farm-house. Neither Siegfrid nor her father would allow their friends to depart without accepting the invitation, but it would not do for them to tarry too long if they wished to make up for the time lost by coming around by the way of Bamble, so at nine o’clock the horses were put to the carriage.

“At my next visit I will spend six hours at the table with you, if you desire it,” said Sylvius Hogg to the farmer; “but to-day I must ask your permission to allow a cordial shake of the hand from you and the loving kiss your charming Siegfrid will give Hulda to take the place of the dessert.”

This done they started.

In this high latitude twilight would still last several hours. The horizon, too, is distinctly visible for a long while after sunset, the atmosphere is so pure.

It is a beautiful and varied drive from Bamble to Kongsberg. The road passes through Hitterdal and to the south of Lake Fol, traversing the southern part of the Telemark, and serving as an outlet to all the small towns and hamlets of that locality.

An hour after their departure they passed the church of Hitterdal, an old and quaint edifice, surmounted with gables and turrets rising one above the other, without the slightest regard to anything like regularity of outline. The structure is of wood — walls, roofs and turrets — and though it strongly resembles a motley collection of pepper-boxes, it is really a venerable and venerated relic of the Scandinavian architecture of the thirteenth century.

Night came on very gradually — one of those nights still impregnated with a dim light which about one o’clock begins to blend with that of early dawn.

Joel, enthroned upon the front seat, was absorbed in his reflections. Hulda sat silent and thoughtful in the interior of the carriage. But few words were exchanged between Sylvius Hogg and the postilion, and these were almost invariably requests to drive faster. No other sound was heard save the bells on the harness, the cracking of the whip, and the rumble of wheels over the stony road. They drove on all night, without once changing horses. It was not necessary to stop at Listhus, a dreary station, situated in a sort of natural amphitheater, surrounded by pine-clad mountains. They passed swiftly by Tiness, too, a picturesque little hamlet, perched on a rocky eminence. Their progress was rapid in spite of the rather dilapidated condition of their vehicle, whose bolts and springs rattled and creaked dolorously, and certainly there was no just cause of complaint against the driver, though he was half asleep most of the time. But for all that, he urged his horses briskly on, whipping his jaded steeds mechanically, but usually aiming his blows at the off horse, for the near one belonged to him, while the other was the property of a neighbor.

About five o’clock in the morning Sylvius Hogg opened his eyes, stretched out his arms, and drank in huge draughts of the pungent odor of the pines.

They had now reached Kongsberg. The carriage was crossing the bridge over the Laagen, and soon it stopped in front of a house near the church, and not far from the water-fall of the Larbrö.

“If agreeable to you, my friends,” remarked Sylvius Hogg, “we will stop here only to change horses, for it is still too early for breakfast. I think it would be much better not to make a real halt until we reach Drammen. There we can obtain a good meal, and so spare Monsieur Benett’s stock of provisions.”

This being decided the professor and Joel treated themselves to a tiny glass of brandy at the Hotel des Mines, and a quarter of an hour afterward, fresh horses being in readiness, they resumed their journey.

On leaving the city they were obliged to ascend a very steep hill. The road was roughly hewn in the side of the mountain, and from it the tall towers at the mouth of the silver mines of Kongsberg were distinctly visible. Then a dense pine forest suddenly hid everything else from sight — a pine forest through which the sun’s rays never penetrate.

The town of Hangsund furnished fresh horses for the carriage. There our friends again found themselves on smooth level roads, frequently obstructed by turnpike gates, where they were obliged to pay a toll of five or six shillings. This was a fertile region, abounding in trees that looked like weeping willows, so heavily did the branches droop under their burden of fruit.

As they neared Drammen, which is situated upon an arm of Christiania Bay, the country became more hilly. About noon they reached the city with its two interminable streets, lined with gayly painted houses, and its wharves where the countless rafts left but a meager space for the vessels that come here to load with the products of the Northland.

The carriage paused in front of the Scandinavian Hotel. The proprietor, a dignified-looking personage, with a long, white beard, and a decidedly professional air, promptly appeared in the door-way of his establishment.

With that keenness of perception that characterizes inn-keepers in every country on the globe, he remarked:

“I should not wonder if these gentlemen and this young lady would like breakfast.”

“Yes,” replied Sylvius Hogg, “but let us have it as soon as possible.”

“It shall be served immediately.”

The repast was soon ready, and proved a most tempting one. Mention should especially be made of a certain fish, stuffed with a savory herb, of which the professor partook with evident delight.

At half past one o’clock the carriage, to which fresh horses had been harnessed, was brought to the hotel door, and our friends started down the principal street of Drammen at a brisk trot.

As they passed a small and dingy dwelling that contrasted strongly with the gayly painted houses around it, Joel could not repress a sudden movement of loathing.

“There is Sandgoist?” he exclaimed.

“So that is Sandgoist,” remarked Sylvius Hogg. “He certainly has a bad face.”

It was Sandgoist smoking on his door-step. Did he recognize Joel? It is impossible to say, for the carriage passed swiftly on between the huge piles of lumber and boards.

Next came a long stretch of level road, bordered with mountain ash-trees, laden with coral berries, and then they entered the dense pine forest that skirts a lovely tract of land known as Paradise Valley.

Afterward they found themselves confronted and surrounded by a host of small hills, each of which was crowned with a villa or farm-house. As twilight came on, and the carriage began to descend toward the sea through a series of verdant meadows, the bright red roofs of neat farm-houses peeped out here and there through the trees, and soon our travelers reached Christiania Bay, surrounded by picturesque hills, and with its innumerable creeks, its tiny ports and wooden piers, where the steamers and ferry-boats land.

At nine o’clock in the evening, and while it was still light, the old carriage drove noisily into the city through the already deserted streets.

In obedience to orders previously given by Sylvius Hogg, the vehicle drew up in front of the Hotel du Nord. It was there that Hulda and Joel were to stay, rooms having been engaged for them in advance. After bidding them an affectionate good-night the professor hastened to his own home, where his faithful servants, Kate and Fink, were impatiently awaiting him.

CHAPTER XVII.

Christiania, though it is the largest city in Norway, would be considered a small town in either England or France; and were it not for frequent fires, the place would present very much the same appearance that it did in the eleventh century. It was really rebuilt in 1624, by King Christian, however; and its name was then changed from Opsolo, as it had been previously called, to Christiania, in honor of its royal architect.

It is symmetrically laid out with broad, straight streets: and the houses are generally of gray stone or red brick. In the center of a fine garden stands the royal palace, known as the Oscarlot, a large quadrangular building, devoid of beauty, though built in the Ionic style of architecture. There are a few churches, in which the attention of worshipers is not distracted by any marvels of art; several municipal and government buildings, and one immense bazaar, constructed in the form of a rotunda, and stocked with both native and foreign goods.

There is nothing very remarkable about all this, but one thing the traveler can certainly admire without stint, and that is the site of the city, which is encircled by mountains so varied in shape and aspect as to form a most superb frame for Christiania.

Though the city is nearly flat in the new and wealthy quarter, the hilly portions, where the poorer classes live, are covered with brick or wooden huts of gaudy tints that astonish rather than charm the beholder.

Like all cities situated upon the water’s edge, and upon fertile hills, Christiania is extremely picturesque, and it would not be unjust to compare its fiord to the famous Bay of Naples. Its shores, like those of Sorrento and Castellamare, are dotted with chalets and villas, half hidden in the dark, rich verdure of the pines, and enveloped in the light mist that imparts such a wonderful softness to northern landscapes.

Sylvius Hogg had at last returned to Christiania, though under conditions that he little dreamed of at the beginning of his interrupted journey. Oh, well, he would try that again another year! He could think only of Joel and Hulda Hansen now. Had there been time to prepare for them, he would certainly have taken them to his own home, where old Fink and old Kate would have made them heartily welcome; but under the circumstances, the professor had thought it advisable to take them to the Hotel du Nord, where, as protégées of Sylvius Hogg, they were sure of every attention, though he had carefully refrained from giving their names, for there had been so much talk about the brother and sister, and especially about the young girl, that it would be very embarrassing for her if her arrival in Christiania should become known.

It had been decided that Sylvius Hogg should not see them again until breakfast the next day, that is to say, between eleven and twelve o’clock, as he had some business matters to attend to that would engross his attention all the forenoon. He would then rejoin them and remain with them until three o’clock, the hour appointed for the drawing of the lottery.

Joel, as soon as he rose the next morning, tapped at the door of his sister’s room, and being anxious to divert her thoughts, which were likely to be more melancholy than ever on such a day, he proposed that they should walk about the town until breakfast-time, and Hulda, to please her brother, consented.

It was Sunday, but though the streets of northern cities are usually quiet and well-nigh deserted on that day, an air of unusual bustle and animation pervaded the scene, for not only had the townspeople refrained from going to the country, as usual, but people from the surrounding towns and country was pouring in in such numbers that the Lake Miosen Railroad had been obliged to run extra trains.

The number of disinterested persons anxious to attend the drawing of the famous lottery was even greater than the number of ticket-holders, consequently the streets were thronged with people. Whole families, and even whole villages, had come to the city, in the hope that their journey would not be in vain. Only to think of it! one million tickets had been sold, and even if they should win a prize of only one or two hundred marks, how many good people would return home rejoicing!

On leaving the hotel, Joel and Hulda first paid a visit to the wharves that line the harbor. Here the crowd was not so great except about the taverns, where huge tankards of beer were being continually called for to moisten throats that seemed to be in a state of constant thirst.

As the brother and sister wandered about among the long rows of barrels and boxes, the vessels which were anchored both near and far from the shore came in for a liberal share of their attention, for might there not be some from the port of Bergen where the "Viking" would never more be seen?

"Ole! my poor Ole!" sighed Hulda, and hearing this pathetic exclamation, Joel led her gently away from the wharves, and up into the city proper.

There, from the crowds that filled the streets and the public squares, they overheard more than one remark in relation to themselves.

"Yes," said one man; "I hear that ten thousand marks have been offered for ticket 9672."

"Ten thousand!" exclaimed another. "Why, I hear that twenty thousand marks, and even more, have been offered."

"Mr. Vanderbilt, of New York, has offered thirty thousand."

"And Messrs. Baring, of London, forty thousand."

"And the Rothschilds, sixty thousand."

So much for public exaggeration. At this rate the prices offered would soon have exceeded the amount of the capital prize.

But if these gossips were not agreed upon the sum offered to Hulda Hansen, they were all of one mind in regard to the usurer of Drammen.

"What an infernal scoundrel Sandgoist must be. That rascal who showed those poor people no mercy."

"Yes; he is despised throughout the Telemark, and this is not the first time he has been guilty of similar acts of rascality."

"They say that nobody will buy Ole Kamp's ticket of him, now he has got it."

"No; nobody wants it now."

"That is not at all surprising. In Hulda Hansen's hands the ticket was valuable."

"And in Sandgoist's it seems worthless."

"I'm glad of it. He'll have it left on his hands, and I hope he'll lose the fifteen thousand marks it cost him."

“But what if the scoundrel should win the grand prize?”

“He? Never!”

“He had better not come to the drawing.”

“No. If he does he will be roughly handled. There is no question about that.”

These and many other equally uncomplimentary remarks about the usurer were freely bandied about.

It was evident that he did not intend to be present at the drawing, as he was at his house in Drammen the night before; but feeling his sister’s arm tremble in his, Joel led her swiftly on, without trying to hear any more.

As for Sylvius Hogg, they had hoped to meet him in the street; but in this they were disappointed, though an occasional remark satisfied them that the public was already aware of the professor’s return, for early in the morning he had been seen hurrying toward the wharves, and afterward in the direction of the Naval Department.

Of course, Joel might have asked anybody where Professor Sylvius Hogg lived. Any one would have been only too delighted to point out the house or even to accompany him to it; but he did not ask, for fear of being indiscreet, and as the professor had promised to meet them at the hotel, it would be better to wait until the appointed hour.

After a time Hulda began to feel very tired, and requested her brother to take her back to the hotel, especially as these discussions, in which her name was frequently mentioned, were very trying to her, and on reaching the house she went straight up to her own room to await the arrival of Sylvius Hogg.

Joel remained in the reading-room, on the lower floor, where he spent his time in mechanically looking over the Christiania papers. Suddenly he turned pale, a mist obscured his vision, and the paper fell from his hands.

In the “Morgen-Blad,” under the heading of Maritime Intelligence, he had just seen the following cablegram from Newfoundland:

“The dispatch-boat ‘Telegraph’ has reached the locality where the ‘Viking’ is supposed to have been lost, but has found no trace of the wreck. The search on the coast of Greenland has been equally unsuccessful, so it may be considered almost certain that none of the unfortunate ship’s crew survived the catastrophe.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Good-morning, Mr. Benett. It is always a great pleasure to me when I have an opportunity to shake hands with you.”

“And for me, professor, it is a great honor.”

“Honor, pleasure — pleasure, honor,” laughed the professor. “One balances the other.”

“I am glad to see that your journey through Central Norway has been safely accomplished.”

“Not accomplished, only concluded, for this year.”

“But tell me, pray, all about those good people you met at Dal.”

“Excellent people they were, friend Benett, in every sense of the word.”

“From what I can learn through the papers they are certainly very much to be pitied.”

“Unquestionably, Mr. Benett. I have never known misfortune to pursue persons so relentlessly.”

“It seems so, indeed, professor; for right after the loss of the ‘Viking’ came that miserable Sandgoist affair.”

“True, Mr. Benett.”

“Still, Mr. Hogg, I think Hulda Hansen did right to give up the ticket under the circumstances.”

“Indeed! and why, if you please?”

“Because it is better to secure fifteen thousand marks than to run a very great risk of gaining nothing at all.”

“You talk like the practical business man and merchant that you are; but if you choose to look at the matter from another point of view, it becomes a matter of sentiment, and money exerts very little influence in such cases.”

“Of course, Mr. Hogg, but permit me to remark that it is more than likely that your protégée has profited greatly by the exchange.”

“Why do you think so?”

“But think of it. What does this ticket represent? One chance in a million of winning.”

“Yes, one chance in a million. That is very small; it is true, Mr. Benett, very small.”

“Yes; and consequently such a reaction has followed the late madness that it is said that this Sandgoist who purchased the ticket to speculate upon it has been unable to find a purchaser.”

“So I have heard.”

“And yet, if that rascally usurer should win the grand prize, what a shame it would be!”

“A shame, most assuredly, Mr. Benett; the word is not too strong — a shame, unquestionably.”

This conversation took place while Sylvius Hogg was walking through the establishment of M. Benett — an establishment well known in Christiania, and indeed throughout Norway. It is difficult to mention an article that can not be found in this bazaar. Traveling-carriages, kariols by the dozen, canned goods, baskets of wine, preserves of every kind, clothing and utensils for tourists, and guides to conduct them to the remotest villages of Finmark, Lapland, or even to the North Pole. Nor is this all. M. Benett likewise offers to lovers of natural history specimens of the different stones and metals found in the earth, as well as of the birds, insects, and reptiles of Norway. It is well, too, to know that one can nowhere find a more complete assortment of the jewelry and bric-à-brac of the country than in his show-cases.

This gentleman is consequently the good angel of all tourists desirous of exploring the Scandinavian peninsula, and a man Christiania could scarcely do without.

“By the way, you found the carriage you had ordered waiting for you at Tinoset, did you not, professor?” he asked.

“Yes. Having ordered it through you, Monsieur Benett, I felt sure that it would, be there at the appointed time.”

“You are a sad flatterer, I fear, Monsieur Hogg. But I judged from your letter that there were to be three of you in the party.”

“There were three of us, as I told you.”

“And the others?”

"They arrived here safe and sound last evening, and are now waiting for me at the Hotel du Nord, where I am soon to join them."

"And these persons are — ?"

"Precisely, Monsieur Benett, precisely; but I must beg you to say nothing about it. I don't wish their arrival to be noised abroad yet."

"Poor girl!"

"Yes, she has suffered terribly."

"And you wish her to be present at the drawing, though the ticket her betrothed bequeathed to her is no longer in her possession?"

"It is not my wish, Monsieur Benett, but that of Ole Kamp, and I say to you as I have said to others, Ole Kamp's last wishes would be obeyed."

"Unquestionably. What you do is not only right, but always for the best, professor."

"You are flattering me now, dear Monsieur Benett."

"Not at all. But it was a lucky day for them when the Hansen family made your acquaintance."

"Nonsense! it was a much more fortunate thing for me that they crossed my path."

"I see that you have the same kind heart still."

"Well, as one is obliged to have a heart it is best to have a good one, isn't it?" retorted the professor, with a genial smile. "But you needn't suppose that I came here merely in search of compliments," he continued. "It was for an entirely different object, I assure you."

"Believe me, I am quite at your service."

"You are aware, I suppose, that but for the timely intervention of Joel and Hulda Hansen, the Rjukanfos would never have yielded me up alive, and I should not have the pleasure of seeing you to-day?"

"Yes, yes, I know," replied Mr. Benett. "The papers have published full accounts of your adventure, and those courageous young people really deserve to win the capital prize."

"That is my opinion," answered Sylvius Hogg, "but as that is quite out of the question now, I am unwilling for my friend Hulda to return to Dal without some little gift as a sort of memento of her visit to Christiania."

"That is certainly an excellent idea, Mr. Hogg."

"So you must assist me in selecting something that would be likely to please a young girl."

"Very willingly," responded Mr. Benett. And he forthwith invited the professor to step into the jewelry department, for was not a Norwegian ornament the most charming souvenir that one could take away with one from Christiania and from Mr. Benett's wonderful establishment?

Such at least was the opinion of Sylvius Hogg when the genial merchant exhibited the contents of his show-cases.

"As I am no connoisseur in such matters I must be guided by your taste, Mr. Benett," he remarked.

They had before them a very large and complete assortment of native jewelry, which is usually valuable rather by reason of the elaborateness of its workmanship than any costliness of material.

“What is this?” inquired the professor.

“It is a ring with pendants which emit a very pleasant sound.”

“It is certainly very pretty,” replied Sylvius Hogg, trying the bauble on the tip of his little finger. “Lay it aside, Mr. Benett, and let us look at something else.”

“Bracelets or necklaces?”

“At a little of everything, if you please, Mr. Benett — a little of everything. What is this?”

“A set of ornaments for the corsage. Look at that delicate tracery of copper upon a red worsted groundwork. It is all in excellent taste, though not very expensive.”

“The effect is certainly charming, Mr. Benett. Lay the ornaments aside with the ring.”

“But I must call your attention to the fact that these ornaments are reserved for the adornment of youthful brides on their wedding-day, and that — ”

“By Saint Olaf! you are right. Mr. Benett, you are quite right. Poor Hulda! Unfortunately it is not Ole who is making her this present, but myself, and it is not to a blushing bride that I am going to offer it.”

“True, true, Mr. Hogg.”

“Let me look then at some jewelry suitable for a young girl. How about this cross, Mr. Benett?”

“It is to be worn as a pendant, and being cut in concave facets it sparkles brilliantly with every movement of the wearer’s throat.”

“It is very pretty, very pretty, indeed, and you can lay it aside with the other articles, Mr. Benett. When we have gone through all the show-cases we will make our selection.”

“Yes, but — ”

“What is the matter now?”

“This cross, too, is intended to be worn by Scandinavian brides on their marriage-day.”

“The deuce! friend Benett. I am certainly very unfortunate in my selections.”

“The fact is, professor, my stock is composed principally of bridal jewelry, as that meets with the readiest sale. You can scarcely wonder at that.”

“The fact doesn’t surprise me at all, Mr. Benett, though it places me in a rather embarrassing position.”

“Oh, well, you can still take the ring you asked me to put aside.”

“Yes, but I should like some more showy ornament.”

“Then take this necklace of silver filigree with its four rows of chains which will have such a charming effect upon the neck of a young girl. See! it is studded with gems of every hue, and it is certainly one of the most quaint and curious productions of the Norwegian silversmiths.”

“Yes, yes,” replied Sylvius Hogg. “It is a pretty ornament, though perhaps rather showy for my modest Hulda. Indeed, I much prefer the corsage ornaments you showed me just now, and the pendant. Are they so especially reserved for brides that they can not be presented to a young girl?”

“I think the Storthing has as yet passed no law to that effect,” replied Mr. Benett. “It is an unpardonable oversight, probably, but — ”

“Well, well, it shall be attended to immediately, Mr. Benett. In the meantime I will take the cross and corsage ornaments. My little Hulda may marry some day after all. Good and charming as she is she certainly will not want for an opportunity to utilize these ornaments, so I will buy them and take them away with me.”

“Very well, very well, professor.”

“Shall we have the pleasure of seeing you at the drawing, friend Benett?”

“Certainly.”

“I think it will be a very interesting affair.”

“I am sure of it.”

“But look here,” exclaimed the professor, bending over a show-case, “here are two very pretty rings I did not notice before.”

“Oh, they wouldn’t suit you, Mr. Hogg. These are the heavily chased rings that the pastor places upon the finger of the bride and the groom during the marriage ceremony."

"Indeed? Ah, well, I will take them all the same. And now I must bid you good-bye, Mr. Benett, though I hope to see you again very soon."

Sylvius Hogg now left the establishment, and walked briskly in the direction of the Hotel du Nord.

On entering the vestibule his eyes fell upon the words *Fiat lux*, which are inscribed upon the hall lamp.

"Ah! these Latin words are certainly very appropriate," he said to himself, "Yes. *Fiat lux! Fiat lux!*"

Hulda was still in her room, sitting by the window. The professor rapped at the door, which was instantly opened.

"Oh. Monsieur Sylvius!" cried the girl, delightedly.

"Yes, here I am, here I am! But never mind about Monsieur Sylvius now; our attention must be devoted to breakfast, which is ready and waiting. I'm as hungry as a wolf. Where is Joel?"

"In the reading-room."

"Well, I will go in search of him. You, my dear child, must come right down and join us."

Sylvius Hogg left the room and went to find Joel, who was also waiting for him, but in a state of mind bordering upon despair. The poor fellow immediately showed the professor the copy of the "Morgen-Blad," containing the discouraging telegram from the commander of the “Telegraph.”

“Hulda has not seen it, I hope?” inquired the professor, hastily.

“No, I thought it better to conceal from her as long as possible what she will learn only too soon.”

“You did quite right, my boy. Let us go to breakfast.”

A moment afterward all three were seated at a table in a private dining-room, and Sylvius Hogg began eating with great zest.

An excellent breakfast it was, equal in fact to any dinner, as you can judge from the *menu*. Cold beer soup, salmon with egg sauce, delicious veal cutlets, rare roast beef, a delicate salad, vanilla ice, raspberry and cherry preserver — the whole moistened with some very fine claret.

“Excellent, excellent!” exclaimed Sylvius Hogg. “Why, we can almost imagine ourselves in Dame Hansen’s inn at Dal.”

And as his mouth was otherwise occupied his eyes smiled as much as it is possible for eyes to smile.

Joel and Hulda endeavored to reply in the same strain, but they could not, and the poor girl tasted scarcely anything. When the repast was concluded:

“My children,” said Sylvius Hogg, “you certainly failed to do justice to a very excellent breakfast. Still, I can not compel you to eat, and if you go without breakfast you are likely to enjoy your dinner all the more, while I very much doubt if I shall be able to compete with you to-night. Now, it is quite time for us to leave the table.”

The professor was already upon his feet, and he was about to take the hat Joel handed him, when Hulda checked him by saying:

“Monsieur Sylvius, do you still insist that I shall accompany you?”

“To witness the drawing? Certainly I do, my dear girl.”

“But it will be a very painful ordeal for me.”

“I admit it, but Ole wished you to be present at the drawing, Hulda, and Ole’s wishes must be obeyed.”

This phrase was certainly becoming a sort of refrain in Sylvius Hogg’s mouth.

CHAPTER XIX.

What a crowd filled the large hall of the University of Christiana in which the drawing of the great lottery was to take place — a crowd that overflowed into the very court-yards, as even the immense building was not large enough to accommodate such a throng, and even into the adjoining streets, as the court-yards, too, proved inadequate toward the last.

On that Sunday, the 15th of July, it certainly was not by their calmness and phlegm that one would have recognized these madly excited people as Norwegians. Was this unwonted excitement due solely to the interest excited by this drawing, or was it due, at least, in a measure, to the unusually high temperature of the summer’s day?

The drawing was to begin at three o’clock precisely. There were one hundred prizes — divided into three classes: 1st, ninety prizes ranging in value from one hundred to one thousand marks, and amounting in all to forty-five thousand marks; 2d, nine prizes of from one thousand to nine thousand marks, and amounting to forty-five thousand marks, and 3d, one prize of one hundred thousand marks.

Contrary to the rule that is generally observed in lotteries of this kind, the drawing of the grand prize was reserved for the last. It was not to the holder of the first ticket drawn that the grand prize would be given, but to the last, that is to say, the one hundredth. Hence, there would result a series of emotions and heart-throbbings of constantly increasing violence, for it had been decided that no ticket should be entitled to two prizes, but that having gained one prize, the drawing should be considered null and void if the same number were taken from the urns a second time.

All this was known to the public, and there was nothing for people to do but await the appointed hour; but to while away the tedious interval of waiting they all talked, and, chiefly, of the pathetic situation of Hulda Hansen. Unquestionably, if she had still been the possessor of Ole Kamp's ticket each individual present would have wished her the next best luck to himself.

Several persons having seen the dispatch published in the "Morgen-Blad," spoke of it to their neighbors, and the entire crowd soon became aware that the search of the "Telegraph" had proved futile. This being the case all felt that there was no longer any hope of finding even a vestige of the lost "Viking." Not one of the crew could have survived the shipwreck, and Hulda would never see her lover again.

Suddenly another report diverted the minds of the crowd. It was rumored that Sandgoist had decided to leave Drammen, and several persons pretended that they had seen him in the streets of Christiania. Could it be that he had ventured into this hall? If he had the wretch would certainly meet with a most unflattering reception. How audacious in him to think of such a thing as being present at this drawing! It was so improbable that it could not be possible. It must certainly be a false alarm, and nothing more.

About quarter past two quite a commotion was apparent in the crowd.

It was caused by the sudden appearance of Sylvius Hogg at the gate of the University. Every one knew the prominent part he had taken in the whole affair, and how, after having been received by Dame Hansen's children, he had endeavored to repay the obligation, so the crowd instantly divided to make way for him, and there arose from every side a flattering murmur, which Sylvius acknowledged by a series of friendly bows, and this murmur soon changed into hearty applause.

But the professor was not alone. When those nearest him stepped back to make way for him they saw that he had a young girl on his arm, and that a young man was following them.

A young man! a young girl! The discovery had very much the effect of an electric shock. The same thought flashed through every mind like a spark from an electric battery.

“Hulda! Hulda Hansen!”

This was the name that burst from every lip.

Yes, it was Hulda, so deeply agitated that she could hardly walk. Indeed, she certainly would have fallen had it not been for Sylvius Hogg’s supporting arm. But it upheld her firmly — her, the modest, heart-broken little heroine of the fête to which Ole Kamp’s presence only was wanting. How greatly she would have preferred to remain in her own little room at Dal! How she shrunk from this curiosity on the part of those around her, sympathizing though it was! But Sylvius Hogg had wished her to come, and she had done so.

“Room! room!” was heard on all sides.

And as Sylvius Hogg, and Hulda and Joel walked up the passage-way that had been cleared for them, as if by magic, how many friendly hands were outstretched to grasp theirs, how many kind and cordial words were lavished upon them, and with what delight Sylvius Hogg listened to these expressions of friendly feeling!

“Yes; it is she, my friends, my little Hulda, whom I have brought back with me from Dal,” said he. “And this is Joel, her noble brother; but pray, my good friends, do not smother them!”

Though Joel returned every grasp with interest, the less vigorous hands of the professor were fairly benumbed by such constant shaking, but his eyes sparkled with joy, though a tear was stealing down his cheek; but — and the phenomenon was certainly well worthy the attention of ophthalmologists — the tear was a luminous one.

It took them fully a quarter of an hour to cross the court-yard, gain the main hall, and reach the seats that had been reserved for the professor. When this was at last accomplished, not without considerable difficulty, Sylvius Hogg seated himself between Hulda and Joel.

At precisely half past two o’clock, the door at the rear of the platform opened, and the president of the lottery appeared, calm and dignified, and with the commanding mien befitting his exalted position. Two directors followed, bearing themselves with equal dignity. Then came six little blue-eyed girls, decked out in flowers and ribbons, six little girls whose innocent hands were to draw the lottery.

Their entrance was greeted with a burst of loud applause that testified both to the pleasure all experienced on beholding the managers of the Christiania Lottery, and to the impatience with which the crowd was awaiting the beginning of the drawing.

There were six little girls, as we have remarked before, and there were also six urns upon a table that occupied the middle of the platform. Each of these urns contained ten numbers: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 0, representing the units, tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands of the number one million. There was no seventh urn, for the million column, because it had been agreed that six ciphers drawn simultaneously should represent one million, as in this way the chances of success would be equally divided among all the numbers.

It had also been settled that the numbers should be drawn in succession from the urns, beginning with that to the left of the audience. The winning number would thus be formed under the very eyes of the spectators, first by the figure in the column of hundreds of thousands, then in the columns of tens of thousands, and so on until the column of units was reached, and the reader can judge with what emotion each person watched his chances of success increase with the drawing of each figure.

As the clock struck three, the president waved his hand, and declared the drawing begun.

The prolonged murmur that greeted the announcement lasted several minutes, after which quiet was gradually established.

The president rose, and though evidently much excited, made a short speech suited to the occasion, in which he expressed regret that there was not a prize for each ticket-holder; then he ordered the drawing of the first series of prizes, which consisted, as we have before remarked, of ninety prizes, and which would therefore consume a considerable length of time.

The six little girls began to perform their duties with automaton-like regularity, but the audience did not lose patience for an instant. It is true, however, that as the value of the prizes increased with each drawing, the excitement increased proportionately, and no one thought of leaving his seat, not even those persons whose tickets had been already drawn, and who had consequently nothing more to expect.

This went on for about an hour without producing any incident of particular interest, though people noticed that number 9672 had not been drawn, which would have taken away all chance of its winning the capital prize.

“That is a good omen for Sandgoist!” remarked one of the professor’s neighbors.

“It would certainly be an extraordinary thing if a man like that should meet with such a piece of good luck, even though he has the famous ticket,” remarked another.

“A famous ticket, indeed!” replied Sylvius Hogg; “but don’t ask me why, for I can’t possibly tell you.”

Then began the drawing of the second series of prizes, nine in number. This promised to be very interesting — the ninety-first prize being one of a thousand marks; the ninety-second, one of two thousand marks, and so on, up to the ninety-ninth, which was one of nine thousand. The third class, the reader must recollect, consisted of the capital prize only.

Number 72,521 won a prize of five thousand marks. This ticket belonged to a worthy seaman of Christiania, who was loudly cheered and who received with great dignity the congratulations lavished upon him.

Another number, 823,752, won a prize of six thousand marks, and how great was Sylvius Hogg’s delight when he learned from Joel that it belonged to the charming Siegfrid of Bamble.

An incident that caused no little excitement followed. When the ninety-seventh prize was drawn, the one consisting of seven thousand marks, the audience feared for a moment that Sandgoist was the winner of it. It was won, however, by ticket number 9627, which was within only forty-five points of Ole Kamp’s number.

The two drawings that followed were numbers very widely removed from each other: 775 and 76,287.

The second series was now concluded, and the great prize of one hundred thousand marks alone remained to be drawn.

The excitement of the assemblage at that moment beggars all description.

At first there was a long murmur that extended from the large hall into the court-yards and even into the street. In fact, several minutes elapsed before quiet was restored. A profound silence followed, and in this calmness there was a certain amount of stupor — the stupor one experiences on seeing a prisoner appear upon the place of execution. But this time the still unknown victim was only condemned to win a prize of one hundred thousand marks, not to lose his head; that is, unless he lost it from ecstasy.

Joel sat with folded arms, gazing straight ahead of him, being the least moved, probably, in all that large assembly. Hulda, her head bowed upon her breast, was thinking only of her poor Ole. As for Sylvius Hogg — but any attempt to describe the state of mind in which Sylvius Hogg found himself would be worse than useless.

“We will now conclude with the drawing of the one hundred thousand mark prize,” announced the president.

What a voice! It seemed to proceed from the inmost depths of this solemn-looking man, probably because he was the owner of several tickets which, not having yet been drawn, might still win the capital prize.

The first little girl drew a number from the left urn, and exhibited it to the audience.

“Zero!” said the president.

The zero did not create much of a sensation, however. The audience somehow seemed to have been expecting it.

“Zero!” said the president, announcing the figure drawn by the second little girl.

Two zeros. The chances were evidently increasing for all numbers between one and nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine, and every one recollected that Ole Kamp’s ticket bore the number 9672.

Strange to say, Sylvius Hogg began to move restlessly about in his chair, as if he had suddenly been stricken with palsy.

“Nine,” said the president, stating the number the third little girl had just extracted from the third urn.

Nine! That was the first figure on Ole Kamp’s ticket.

“Six!” said the president.

For the fourth little girl was timidly displaying a six to all the eyes riveted upon her.

The chances of winning were now one out of a hundred for all the numbers from one to ninety-nine, inclusive.

Could it be that this ticket of Ole Kamp’s was to be the means of placing one hundred thousand marks in that villainous Sandgoist’s pocket. Really such a result would almost make one doubt the justice of God!

The fifth little girl plunged her hand into the next urn, and drew out the fifth figure.

“Seven!” said the president, in a voice that trembled so as to be scarcely audible, even to those seated on the first row of benches.

But those who could not hear were able to see for themselves, for the five little girls were now holding up the following figures to the gaze of the audience:

00967.

The winning number consequently must be one between 9670 and 9679, so there was now one chance out of ten for Ole Kamp’s ticket to win the prize.

The suspense was at its height.

Sylvius Hogg had risen to his feet, and seized Hulda Hansen’s hand. Every eye was riveted upon the young girl. In sacrificing this last moment of her betrothed, had she also sacrificed the fortune Ole Kamp had coveted for her and for himself?

The sixth little girl had some difficulty getting her hand into the urn, she was trembling so, poor thing! but at last the figure appeared.

“Two!” exclaimed the president, sinking back in his chair, quite breathless with emotion.

“Nine thousand six hundred and seventy two!” proclaimed one of the directors, in a loud voice.

This was the number of Ole Kamp's ticket, now in Sandgoist's possession. Everybody was aware of this fact, and of the manner in which the usurer had obtained it; so there was a profound silence instead of the tumultuous applause that would have filled the hall of the University if the ticket had still been in Hulda Hansen's hands.

And now was this scoundrel Sandgoist about to step forward, ticket in hand, to claim the prize?

"Number 9672 wins the prize of one hundred thousand marks!" repeated the director. "Who claims it?"

"I do."

Was it the usurer of Drammen who answered thus?

No. It was a young man — a young man with a pale face, whose features and whole person bore marks of prolonged suffering, but alive, really and truly alive.

On hearing this voice, Hulda sprung to her feet, uttering a cry that penetrated every nook and corner of the large hall; then she fell back fainting.

But the young man had forced his way impetuously through the crowd, and it was he who caught the unconscious girl in his arms.

It was Ole Kamp!

CHAPTER XX.

Yes; it was Ole Kamp! Ole Kamp, who, by a miracle, had survived the shipwreck of the “Viking.” The reason the “Telegraph” had not brought him back to Europe can be easily explained. He was no longer in the region visited by the dispatch-boat, for the very good reason that he was already on his way to Christiania on board the vessel that had rescued him.

This is what Sylvius Hogg was telling. This is what he repeated to all who would listen to him. And what a crowd of listeners he had! This is what he related with the triumphant accents of a conqueror! Those around him repeated it to those who were not fortunate enough to be near him, and the good news flew from group to group until it reached the crowd that filled the court-yard and the neighboring streets.

In a few moments, all Christiania knew that the young mate of the “Viking” had returned, and that he had won the grand prize of the Schools Lottery.

It was a fortunate thing that Sylvius Hogg was acquainted with the whole story, as Ole certainly could not have told it, for Joel nearly smothered him in his embrace while Hulda was regaining consciousness.

“Hulda! dearest Hulda!” said Ole. “Yes, it is I — your betrothed — soon to be your husband!”

“Yes, soon, my children, very soon!” exclaimed Sylvius Hogg. “We will leave this very evening for Dal. And if such a thing was never seen before, it will be seen now. A professor of law, and a member of the Storthing will be seen dancing at a wedding like the wildest youth in the Telemark.”

But how had Sylvius Hogg become acquainted with Ole Kamp's history? Simply through the last letter that the Naval Department had addressed to him at Dal. In fact this letter — the last he had received, and one whose receipt he had not mentioned to any one — contained another letter, dated from Christiansand. This second letter stated that the Danish brig "Genius" had just reached Christiansand, with several survivors of the "Viking" on board, among them the young mate, Ole Kamp, who would arrive in Christiania three days afterward.

The letter from the Naval Department added that these shipwrecked men had suffered so much that they were still in a very weak condition, and for this reason Sylvius Hogg had decided not to say anything to Hulda about her lover's return. In his response he had also requested the most profound secrecy in regard to this return — and in compliance with this request the facts had been carefully kept from the public.

The fact that the "Telegraph" had found no traces nor survivors of the "Viking" can also be easily explained.

During a violent tempest the vessel — which had become partially disabled — being obliged to scud along before the wind in a north-westerly direction, finally found herself about two hundred miles from the southern coast of Iceland. During the nights of the third and fourth of May the worst nights of the gale — it collided with one of those enormous icebergs that drift down from the shores of Greenland. The shock was terrible, so terrible, indeed, that the "Viking" went to pieces five minutes afterward.

It was then that Ole hastily penned his farewell message to his betrothed, and after inclosing it in a bottle, cast it into the sea.

Most of the “Viking’s” crew, including the captain, perished at the time of the catastrophe, but Ole Kamp and four of his comrades succeeded in leaping upon the iceberg, just as the vessel went down; but their death would have been none the less certain if the terrible gale had not driven the mass of ice in a north-westerly direction. Two days afterward, exhausted and nearly dead with hunger, these survivors of the catastrophe were cast upon the southern coast of Greenland — a barren and deserted region — but where they nevertheless managed to keep themselves alive through the mercy of God.

If help had not reached them in a few days, it would have been all over with them, however; for they had not strength to reach the fisheries, or the Danish settlements on the other coast.

Fortunately the brig “Genius,” which had been driven out of her course by the tempest, happened to pass. The shipwrecked men made signals to her. These signals were seen, and the men were saved.

The “Genius,” delayed by head-winds, was a long time in making the comparatively short voyage between Greenland and Norway, and did not reach Christiansand until the 12th of July, nor Christiania until the morning of the 15th.

That very morning Sylvius Hogg went aboard the vessel. There he found Ole, who was still very weak, and told him all that had taken place since the arrival of his last letter, written from Saint-Pierre-Miquelon, after which he took the young sailor home with him, though not without having requested the crew of the “Genius” to keep the secret a few hours longer. The reader knows the rest.

It was then decided that Ole Kamp should attend the drawing of the lottery. But would he be strong enough to do it?

Yes; his strength would be equal to the ordeal, for was not Hulda to be there? But had he still any interest in this drawing? Yes, a hundred times, yes; both on his own account and that of his betrothed, for Sylvius Hogg had succeeded in getting the ticket out of Sandgoist’s hands, having repurchased it from him at the same price the usurer had given for it, for Sandgoist was only too glad to dispose of it at that price now there were no more bidders for it.

“It was not for the sake of an improbable chance of gain that I wished to restore it to Hulda, my brave Ole,” Sylvius Hogg remarked, as he gave him the ticket; “but because it was a last farewell you had addressed to her at the moment when you believed all was lost.”

And now it seemed almost as if Professor Sylvius Hogg had been inspired of Heaven, certainly much more so than Sandgoist, who was strongly tempted to dash his brains out against the wall when he learned the result of the drawing. And now there was a fortune of one hundred thousand marks in the Hansen family. Yes, one hundred thousand marks, for Sylvius Hogg absolutely refused to take back the money he had paid to secure possession of Ole Kamp’s ticket.

It was a dowry he was only too glad to offer little Hulda on her wedding-day.

Perhaps it will be considered rather astonishing that Ticket No. 9672, which had attracted so much attention from the public, should have happened to be the one that drew the grand prize.

Yes, it was astonishing, we must admit; but it was not impossible, and at all events, such was the fact.

Sylvius Hogg, Joel, and Hulda left Christiania that same evening. They returned to Dal by way of Bamble, as, of course, Siegfrid must be informed of her good fortune. As they passed the little church of Hitterdal, Hulda recollected the gloomy thoughts that beset her two days before, but the sight of Ole, seated beside her, speedily recalled her to the blissful reality.

By Saint Olaf! how beautiful Hulda looked under her bridal crown when she left the little chapel at Dal, four days afterward, leaning on her husband’s arm. The brilliant festivities that followed were the talk of the whole Telemark for days and days afterward. And how happy everybody was! Siegfrid, the pretty bride-maid, her father, Farmer Helmboe, Joel, her affianced husband, and even Dame Hansen, who was no longer haunted by a fear of Sandgoist.

Perhaps the reader will ask whether all these friends and guests — Messrs. Help Bros. and hosts of others — came to witness the happiness of the newly married couple, or to see Sylvius Hogg, professor of law and a member of the Storthing, dance. It is hard to say. At all events he did dance, and very creditably, and after having opened the ball with his beloved Hulda, he closed it with the charming Siegfrid.

The next day, followed by the acclamations of the whole valley of Vesjorddal, he departed, but not without having solemnly promised to return for Joel’s marriage, which was celebrated a few weeks afterward, to the great delight of the contracting parties.

This time the professor opened the ball with the charming Siegfrid, and closed it with his dear Hulda; and he has never given any display of his proficiency in the terpsichorean art since that time.

What happiness now reigned in this household which had been so cruelly tried! It was undoubtedly due in some measure, at least, to the efforts of Sylvius Hogg; but he would not admit it, and always declared:

“No, no; it is I who am still under obligations to Dame Hansen’s children.”

As for the famous ticket, it was returned to Ole Kamp after the drawing; and now, in a neat wooden frame, it occupies the place of honor in the hall of the inn at Dal. But what the visitor sees is not the side of the ticket upon which the famous number 9672 is inscribed, but the last farewell that the shipwrecked sailor, Ole Kamp, addressed to Hulda Hansen, his betrothed.

THE FLIGHT TO FRANCE

First published in 1887, this adventure novel concerns Natalis Delpierre, a Captain in the French Army. Delpierre recounts the tale of his visit in the summer of 1792 when he went to visit his sister, Irma, who was living in Prussia in the service of Madame Keller and her son Jean. The time of his visit coincides with rumours of France and Germany going to war.

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CHAPTER I.

My name is Natalis Delpierre. I was born in 1761, at Grattepanche, a village in Picardy. My father was a farm laborer. He worked on the estate of the Marquis d’Estrelle. My mother did her best to help him. My sisters and I followed our mother’s example.

My father never possessed any property. He was precentor at the church, and had a powerful voice that could be heard even in the grave-yard. The voice was almost all I inherited from him.

My father and mother worked hard. They both died the same year, 1779. God has their souls in His keeping!

Of my two sisters, Firminie, the eldest, at this time was forty-five; the younger, Irma, was forty, and I was thirty- one. When our parents died, Firminie married a man at Escarbotin, Benoin Fanthomme, a working blacksmith, who, however clever he might be, was never able to start in business on his own account. In 1781 they had had three children, and a fourth came a few years later. My sister Irma remained unmarried. Neither on her nor on the Fanthommes could I depend for my living. I had to make my own way in the world. In my old days I could then come back to help them.

My father died first; my mother six months afterward. It was a great blow to me. But such is destiny! We mast lose those we love as well as those we do not love. Let us, however, strive to be among those that are loved when our turn comes to depart.

The paternal inheritance amounted, when all was paid, to one hundred and fifty livres — the savings of sixty years of work. This was divided between my sisters and me.

At eighteen I thus found myself with practically nothing. But I was healthy, strongly built, accustomed to hard work, and I had a splendid voice. But I did not know how to read or write. I did not learn to do so till later, as you will see. And when one does not begin early at those things, the task is a hard one. I have always felt the effects of this in trying to express my ideas — as will appear clearly enough in what follows.

What was to become of me? Was I to continue in my father's trade? A hopeless lookout, indeed! And one I did not care to try. Something happened which decided my fate.

A cousin of the Marquis d'Estrelle, the Comte de Linois, arrived one day at Grattepanche. He was an officer, a captain in the Regiment de la Fere. He had two months' leave, and had come to pass them with his relative. There were great huntings of the boar and the fox, with the hounds and without; there were parties to which the great world were invited, and many fine folks, to say nothing of the wife of the marquis, who was as beautiful as any of them.

Among them all I only had eyes for Captain de Linois — an officer very free in his manners, who would speak with anybody. The idea came to me to be a soldier. Is it not best when you have to live by your arms, that your arms should be fixed to a solid body? Besides, with good conduct, courage, and a little by luck, there is no reason to stop on the road, particularly if you start with the left foot and march at a good pace.

There are many people who imagine that before 1789, a private soldier, the son of a tradesman or peasant, could not become an officer. It is an error. With perseverance and good conduct he could without very much trouble become a sub-officer. That was the first step. Then, after he had acted as such for ten years in time of peace or five years in time of war, he was in a position to obtain his epaulet. From sergeant he became lieutenant, from lieutenant, captain. Then — but halt! we must not go further than that. The outlook is promising enough!

The Comte de Linois, during the shooting-parties, had often noticed my strength and activity. Likely enough I was not so good as a dog for scent or intelligence, but on grand days there were none of the beaters who could teach me anything, and I scampered about as if my breeches were on fire.

“You look like a stout-spirited fellow,” said the Comte de Linois to me one day.

“Yes, sir.”

“And strong in the arms?”

“I can lift three hundred and twenty.”

“I congratulate you.”

And that was all. But it did not rest there, as you will see.

At that time there was a curious custom in the army. The way in which soldiers were enlisted was this: Every year recruiters were sent out into the country places. They made men drink more than was good for them; and got them to sign a paper if they knew how to write, or to mark it with a cross if they did not. The cross was as good as a signature. Then they were given a couple of hundred livres, which were drunk almost as soon as they were pocketed, and then they were oil to have their heads broken for the good of their country.

That style of proceeding did not suit me. If I wished to serve my country I did not wish to sell myself to it; and I fancy that all who have any dignity or respect for themselves will be of the same opinion.

Well, in those days, when an officer went away on leave, it was his duty to bring back with him on his return one or two recruits. And the sub-officers were under the same obligation. The bounty then varied from twenty to twenty-five livres.

I was not ignorant of all this, and I had my plan. When the leave of the Comte de Linois had nearly expired, I went boldly to him and asked him to take me as a recruit.

“You?” said he.

“Me, sir.”

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

“And you would be a soldier?”

“If it pleases you.”

“It is not if it pleases me, but if it pleases you.”

“It pleases me.”

“Ah! the charms of the twenty livres?”

“No, the wish to serve my country. And as I should be ashamed to sell myself, I shall not take your twenty livres.”

“What is your name?”

“Natalis Delpierre.”

“Well, Natalis, you shall come with me.”

“I am delighted to go with you, captain.”

“And if you choose to follow me you will go far.”

“I will follow you wherever the drum beats.”

“I tell you beforehand that I am going to leave La Fere, to go aboard ship. You do not dislike the sea?”

“Not at all.”

“Good! you will cross it. Do you know that a war is on to drive the English out of America?”, “What is America?”

And in truth I had never heard tell of America!

“A deuce of a country,” said Captain de Linois, “which is fighting for its independence. For the last two years the Marquis de Lafayette has been making himself talked about over there. Last year King Louis XVI. promised to send soldiers to help the Americans. The Comte de Rochambeau is going with Admiral de Grasse and six thousand men. I am going with him to the New World, and if you will come with me we shall go and deliver America.”

“Go and deliver America!”

And that, not to be long over it, is how I came to be engaged in the expeditionary force of Comte de Rochambeau, and landed at Newport in 1780.

There for three years I remained far away from France.

I saw General Washington — a giant of five feet eleven, with large feet, large hands, a blue coat turned up with wash-leather, and a black cockade. I saw the sailor Paul Jones on board his ship the “Bonhomme Richard.” I saw General Anthony Wayne, who was known as the Madman. I fought in several encounters, not without making the sign of the cross with my first cartridge. I took part in the siege of Yorktown, in Virginia, where, after a memorable defense, Lord Cornwallis surrendered to Washington. I returned to France in 1783. I had escaped without a scratch; and I was a private soldier as before. What would you have? I did not know how to read!

The Comte de Linois came back with us. He wished me to enter the Regiment de la Fere, in which he was to resume his rank. But I had an idea of serving in the cavalry. I had an instinctive love of horses, and for me to become a mounted officer of infantry I should have to pass through many steps, very many steps!

I knew that the uniform of the foot-soldier was a tempting one, and very becoming, with the queue, the powder, the side curls, and the white cross-belts. But what would you have? The horse, the horse for me; and after much thinking I found my trade as a horseman. And I thanked the Comte de Linois, who had recommended me to his friend Colonel Lostanges, and I joined the Eoyal Picardy Regiment.

I loved it, this splendid regiment, and you will pardon me if I speak of it with a tenderness that is ridiculous perhaps. In it I served nearly all my time, thought much of my superiors, whose protection was never denied me, and who, as they say in our village, put their shoulders to the wheel for me.

And besides, a few years later, in 1792, the Regiment de la Ffire behaved so strangely in its dealings with the Austrian general, Beaulieu, that I am not sorry I left it. I will say no more about it, but return to the Royal Picardy. No finer regiment could be seen. It became as it were a family to me. I remained faithful to it until it was disbanded. I was happy in it. I whistled all its fanfares and drum-calls, for I always had the bad habit of whistling through my teeth.

For eight years I did nothing but go from garrison to garrison. Not an occasion offered itself for a shot at an enemy. Bah! Such a life is not without its charms for those who know how to make the best of it. And besides, to see the country was something for a Picard picardizing as I was. After America, a little of France, while we were waiting to cover step on the main roads across Europe. We were at Sarrelouis in ‘85; at Angers in ‘88; in ‘91 in Brittany, at Josselin, at Pontivy, at Ploermel, at Nantes, with Colonel Serre de Gras; in ‘92 at Charleville, with Colonel de Wardner, Colonel de Lostende, Colonel la Roque; and in ‘93 with Colonel le Comte.

But I forgot to say that on the 1st of January, 1791, there came into force a law which changed the composition of the army. The Royal Picardy became the 20th Regiment of the cavalry of the line. This organization lasted till 1803. But the regiment did not lose its old title. It remained the Royal Picardy, although for some years there had been no king in France.

It was under Colonel Serre de Gras that I was made a corporal, to my great satisfaction. Under Colonel de Wardner I was made quartermaster, and that pleased me more. I had had thirteen years’ service, been through a campaign, and received no wound. That was a great advantage, as you may suppose. I could not rise higher, for, I repeat it, I could not read or write. And I was always whistling; and it is not quite the thing for a sub-officer to go about like a blackbird.

Quartermaster Natalis Delpierre! That was something to be proud of; something impressive! And deep was my gratitude to Colonel de Wardner, although he was as rough as barley-bread, and it was “attend to the word of command “with him.

That day the men of my company fusilladed my knapsack, and I put on my sleeves the lace which could never rise to my elbow.

We were in garrison at Charleville when I asked for two months’ leave, which was granted to me. It is the history of this leave that I am going to relate faithfully. These are my reasons for doing so.

Since I have retired from soldiering I have often had to tell the story of my campaigns during our evening meetings at the village of Grattepanche.

Friends have misunderstood me, or not understood me at all. Some have thought I was on the right when I was on the left, some that I was on the left when I was on the right. And thence have come disputes which have not ended over two glasses of cider or two coifees — two small pots. Above all, what happened to me during my leave in Germany they seem never to understand. And, as I have learned to write, I think it best to take up my pen and tell the story of my leave. I have thus set to work, although I am seventy years old this very day. But my memory is good, and when I look back I can see clearly enough. This recital is thus dedicated to my friends at Grattepanche, to the Ternisiens, Bettemboses, Irondarts, Pointe- fers, Quennehens, and others, who will, I hope, leaVe off disputing on the subject.

It was on the 7th of June, 1792, then, that I obtained my leave. There were then certain rumors of war with Germany, but they were still very vague. It was said that Europe looked with an evil eye on what was passing in France. The king was at the Tuileries, it is true. But the 10th of August was being scented from afar, and a breeze of republicanism was sweeping over the country.

Had I been prudent I should not have asked for leave. But I had business in Germany, in Prussia even. In case of war I should find it difficult to get back to my post. But what would you have? You can not ring the church bell and walk in the procession at the same time. And, although my leave was for two months, I had decided to cut it short if necessary. All the same I hoped the worst would not happen.

Now, to finish with what concerns me, and what concerns my gallant regiment, this is what in a few words I have to say.

First you will see how it was I began to learn to read, and then to write; and thus gained a chance of becoming officer, general, marshal of France, count, duke, prince, like Ney, Davout, or Murat, during the wars of the Empire. In reality I did not get beyond the rank of captain; but that is not so bad for the son of a peasant, a peasant himself.

As for the Royal Picardy, a very few lines will suffice to finish its story.

It had in 1793, as I have said, M. le Comte for its colonel; and it was in this year, owing to the decree of the 21st of February, that the regiment became a demi- brigade. It then went through the campaigns with the army of the

North, and the army of the Sambre and Meuse, until 1797. It distinguished itself at the battles of Lincelles and Courtray, where I was a lieutenant. Then, after staying in Paris from 1797 till 1800, it joined the army of Italy, and distinguished itself at Marengo in surrounding six battalions of Austrian grenadiers, who laid down their arms after the rout of a Hungarian regiment. In this affair I was wounded by a ball in the hip, which did not trouble me much, for it caused me to get my captaincy.

The Royal Picardy being disbanded in 1803, I entered the dragoons, and served in all the wars of the Empire until I retired in 1815.

Now, when I speak of myself, it is only to relate what happened during my leave in Germany. But do not forget that I am not a well-educated man. I hardly know how to tell these things. And if there escape me a few expressions or turns of phrase that betray the Picard, you must excuse them. I can not speak in another way. I will get along as fast as I can, and never stand with two feet in a shoe. I will tell you all, and if I ask you to allow me to express myself without reserve, I hope you will reply, “You are quite at liberty to do so, sir!”

CHAPTER II.

At the time I speak of, as I have read in history-books, Germany was divided into ten circles. Later on new arrangements were made which established the Confederation of the Rhine in 1806 under the protectorate of Napoleon; and then came the Germanic Confederation of 1815. One of these circles, comprising the electorates of Saxony aud Brandenburg, then bore the name of Upper Saxony.

This electorate of Brandenburg became later on one of the provinces of Prussia, and was divided into two districts, the district of Brandenburg and the district of Potsdam. I say this so that you will know where to find the little town of Belzingen, which is in the district of Potsdam — in the north-western part — a few leagues from the frontier.

It was on this frontier that I arrived on the 16th of June, after traversing the one hundred and fifty leagues that separated it from France. I had taken nine days on the journey, and that will show you that the communications were not easy. I had worn out more nails in my boots than in horse’s shoes or wheels of carriages — or rather carts, to be more correct. I was not quite reduced to my eggs, as they say in Picardy, but I had not saved much from my pay, and wished to be as economical as possible. Fortunately, during my stay in garrison on the frontier I had picked up a few words of German, which came in useful in getting me out of difficulties. It was, however, difficult to hide that I was a Frenchman; and consequently more than a passing look was given to me as I went by. I took care not to say that I was Quartermaster Natal is Del- pierre. You will think me wise under the circumstances, when a war was threatened between us and Prussia and Austria, the whole of Germany in fact.

At the frontier of the district I had a pleasant surprise. I was on foot. I was walking toward an inn to get my breakfast, the inn of Ecktvende — in French the Tourne Coin. After a coldish night a beautiful morning. The seven-o'clock sun was drinking the dew of the meadows. There was quite a swarm of birds on the beeches, oaks, elms, and birches. The country was but little cultivated. Many of the fields lay fallow. The climate is a severe one in these parts.

At the door of the Ecktvende a small cariole was waiting, drawn by a wiry-looking nag, able perhaps to do a couple of leagues an hour if there were not too many hills.

With it was a woman, a tall, strong, well-built woman, with a corsage with laced straps, straw hat with yellow ribbons, and red and violet banded skirt, all well fitting and very clean, as if it was a Sunday or holiday costume.

And it was a holiday for the woman, although it was not Sunday.

She looked at me, and I looked at her looking at me.

Suddenly she opened her arms, and ran toward me, exclaiming: “Natalis!”

“Irma!”

It was my sister. She had recognized me. Truly women have better eyes for remembrances that come from the heart — or rather quicker eyes. It was thirteen years since we had seen each other. How well she had kept herself! She reminded me of our mother, with her large, quick eyes, and her black hair just beginning to turn gray on the temples. I kissed her on her two plump cheeks, reddened by the morning breeze, and I leave you to imagine what smacks she gave mine!

It was for her, to see her, that I had obtained my leave. I was uneasy at her being out of France now the clouds had begun to gather. A French woman among the Germans would be in an awkward position should war be declared. It would be better for her to be in her own country; and, if my sister chose, I intended to take her back with me. To do that she would have to leave her mistress, Mme. Keller, and I doubted if she would consent. That was to be inquired into.

“How glad I am to see you, Natalis,” she said; “to find ourselves together again so far from Picardy! It feels as though you had brought some of our native air with you! It is time enough since we saw each other!”

“Thirteen years, Irma!”

“Yes, thirteen years! Thirteen years of separation! That is a long time, Natalis!”

“Dear Irma!” I replied.

And there we were, my sister and I, with arms linked together walking up and down the road.

“And how are you?” asked I.

“Always pretty well, Natalis. And you?”

“The same!”

“And you are a quartermaster! There is an honor for the family!”

“Yes, Irma, and a great honor! Who would have thought that the little goose-minder of Grattepanche would become a quartermaster! But we must not talk about it too much.”

“Why not?”

“Because to tell everybody I am a soldier would not be without its inconveniences in this country When rumors of war are flying about, it is a serious matter for a Frenchman to find himself in Germany. No! I am your brother, Monsieur Nothing-at-all, who has come to see his sister.”

“Good, Natalis; we shall be silent about it, I promise you.”

“That will be best, for German spies have good ears.”

“Do not be uneasy.”

“And if you will take my advice, Irma, I will take you back with me to France.”

A look of sorrow came into my sister’s eyes, as she gave me the answer I expected: “Go away from Madame Keller, Natalis! when you will see and understand that I can not leave her alone.”

I understood this as it was, and I thought it best to postpone what I had to say.

And then Irma resumed her bright eyes and sweet voice, asking me for the news of the country and our people.

“And our sister Firminie?”

“She is well. I have had news of her from our neighbor Letocard, who came to Charleville two months ago. You remember Letocard?”

“The wheelwright’s son?”

“Yes! You know, or you do not know, that he is married to a Matifas!”

“The daughter of the old woman at Fouencamps?”

“Herself. He told me that our sister does not complain of her health. Ah! they have to work, and work hard, at Escarbotin! They have four children now, and the last one — a troublesome boy! Luckily, she has an honest husband, a good workman, and not much of a drunkard, except on Mondays. But she has had much trouble in her time.”

“She is getting old.”

“She is five years older than you, Irma, and fourteen older than I am! That is something! But what would you have? She is a brave woman, and so are you.”

“Oh! Natalis! If I have known sorrow, it has only been the sorrow of others. Since I left Grattepanche I have had no trouble of my own. But to see people suffer near you when you can do nothing — ”

My sister’s face clouded again. She turned the conversation.

“And your journey?” she asked.

“All right! The weather has been good enough, for the season. And, as you see, my legs are pretty strong. Besides, who cares for fatigue, when he is sure of a welcome when he arrives?”

“As you are, Natalis, and they will give you a good welcome, and they will love you in the family as they love me.”

“Excellent Madame Keller! Do you know, sister, I shall not recognize her. For me she is still the daughter of Monsieur and Madame Acloque, the good people of Saint Sauflieu. When she was married, twenty-five years ago, I was only a boy. But father and mother used to tell us about her.”

“Poor woman,” said Irma, “she is much changed. What a wife she has been, Natalis; and what a mother she is still!”

. “And her son?”

“The best of sons, who has bravely set to work to take the place of his father, who died fifteen months ago.”

“Brave Monsieur Jean!”

“He adores his mother; he lives only for her, as she lives only for him.”

“I have never seen him, Irma, and I am impatient to know him. It seems that I love the young man already.”

“There is nothing astonishing in that, Natalis.”

“Then let us be off.”

“Come along, then.”

“In a minute! How far are we from Belzingen?”

“Five long leagues.”

“Bah!” was my answer. “If I was alone I would do that in three hours. But we must — ”

“I will do it quicker than you, Natalis.”

“On your legs?”

“No, on my horse’s legs.”

And Irma pointed to the cariole at the inn door.

“Did you come to look for me in that cariole?”

“Yes, Natalis; to bring you to Belzingen. I started early this morning, and I was here at seven o’clock to the minute. And if the letter you sent had come sooner, I should have gone further to meet you.”

“Oh! there would have been no good in that. Come, let us get off. You have nothing to pay at the inn? I have a few kreutzers — ”

“Thanks, Natalis, it is done, and all we have to do is to start.”

“While we were talking, the innkeeper of the Ecktvende, leaning against the door, seemed to be listening, without taking much notice of us.

I thought this unsatisfactory. Perhaps it would have been better for us to have spoken to each other further off. He was a fat man, quite a mountain, with a disagreeable face, eyes deeply set, folded eyelids, small nose, and a large mouth, as if he had eaten his soup with a sword when he was young.

After all, we had not said anything that could damage us. Perhaps he had not heard all that passed. If he did not know French he would not know that I came from France.

We got into the cariole. The innkeeper saw us leave without making the slightest move.

I took the reins. I started the nag briskly; we spun along like the wind in January. That did not keep us from talking, and Irma told me how matters stood. And from what I knew already, and what she told me, I will now say something about the Keller family.

CHAPTER III.

Mme. Keller was born in 1747, and was then forty-five years old. A native of Saint Sauflieu, as I have said, she belonged to a family of small proprietors. M. and Mme. Acloque, her father and mother, had a very modest competence, but saw it grow less year by year. They died, one shortly after the other, in 1765. Their daughter remained in the care of an old aunt, whose death would soon have left her alone in the world. — /

It was under these circumstances that she was found by M. Keller, who had come to Picardy on business. He established himself for eighteen months at Amiens, where he was engaged as a forwarding agent for goods and merchandise. He was a man of serious mind, good bearing, intelligent and active. At that time we had not that repulsion toward the German race, which grew later out of national hatred fostered by thirty years of war. M. Keller possessed a certain amount of fortune, which could not but be increased by his zeal and business capacity. He asked Mlle. Acloque to become his wife.

Mlle. Acloque hesitated, because she would have to leave Saint Sauflieu and the Picardy she loved. And would she not by this marriage cease to be a French woman? But then all she possessed was a small house which she would have to ‘sell. What would become of her after this last sacrifice? And Mme. Dufrenay, the old aunt, feeling that death was approaching, and alarmed at the position in which her niece would find herself, pressed her to consent.

Mlle. Acloque consented. The marriage took place at Saint Sauflieu. Mme. Keller left Picardy a few months later and followed her husband beyond the frontier. She never repented the choice she had made. Her husband was good to her and she was good to him. Always attentive to her, he so won her love that she seldom thought of having lost her nationality. The marriage was one of reason and expediency, and yet it turned out happy, which such marriages rarely did then or do in our time.

A year afterward, at Belzingen, Mme. Keller had a son. She resolved to devote herself entirely to the education of this child, who will fill a prominent part in our story.

It was some time after the birth of this son, about 1771, that my sister Irma, then nineteen, went into service at the Kellers. Mme. Keller had known her as a child. Our father had been occasionally employed by M. Acloque, whose wife and daughter took an interest in us. From Orattepanche to Saint Sauflieu is not very far. Mlle. Acloque often met my sister, kissed her, made her presents, and admitted her to a friendship which the truest devotion was one day to repay.

When she heard of the death of our father and mother, which left us almost without means, Mme. Keller thought of taking Irma into her service. Irma was then in the service of a family at Saint Sauflieu, but she gladly accepted the offer — and she never had cause to repent doing so.

M. Keller was of French descent. About a century before, the Kellers lived in French Lorraine. They were well-to-do commercial people of marked ability. And they were prospering, when there occurred that grave incident which changed the future of thousands of the most industrious families of France.

The Kellers were Protestants, much attached to their religion, whom no question of self-interest could induce to be renegades. This was clearly shown when the Edict of Nantes was revoked in 1685. Like many others, they had the choice of quitting their country or changing their faith. Like many others they preferred exile.

Manufacturers, artisans, workmen of all sorts, agriculturists, departed from France to enrich England, the Low Countries, Switzerland, Germany, and particularly Brandenburg. There they received a hearty welcome from the Elector of Prussia and Potsdam, to Berlin, Magdeburg, Stettin, and Frankfort-on-the-Oder. Twenty-five thousand natives of Metz, I am told, went to found the flourishing colonies of Stettin and Potsdam.

The Kellers then abandoned Lorraine, not without hope of return. Meanwhile they took up their abode with the stranger. New relations grew up, new interests arose. Years rolled by and still they remained.

At this time Prussia, the foundation of which as a kingdom dates only from 1701, possessed on the Rhine only the duchy of Cleves, the county of La Marck, and a part of Gueldres. It was in this last province that the Kellers sought refuge. There they founded factories, and got back the trade interrupted by the iniquitous and deplorable revocation of the Edict of Henry IV. Generation followed generation, and alliances were formed with the new countrymen, and gradually the French refugees became German subjects.

About 1760 one of the Kellers left Gueldres to establish himself in the little town of Belzingen, in the center of the circle of Upper Saxony which comprised a part of Prussia. He succeeded in his enterprise, and was thus enabled to offer Mlle. Acloque the comfortable home she could not find at Saint Sauflieu. It was at Belzingen that her son had come into the world, a Prussian on his father’s side, although through his mother French blood flowed in his veins.

And, I say it with emotion that still makes my heart leap, he was French to the soul, this brave young man in whom his mother’s spirit lived again. She had fed him on her milk. In his first childish words he had lisped in French. It was not “mamma” he said, but “maman!” Although Mme. Keller and my sister Irma soon learned to speak German, French was the language usually heard in the house at Belzingen, and French was the first language he heard.

The boy was rocked to sleep with the songs of our country. His father never thought of objecting. On the contrary, was not the language of his ancestors that Lorraine tongue which is so French, and the purity of which the neighborhood of the German frontier has not been able to alter?

And it was not only with her milk, but with her own ideas that Mme. Keller had nourished the child. She was deeply attached to her native country. She had never given up the hope of one day returning to it. She never concealed the fact that her joy would be great when she could again look over the old lands of Picardy. M. Keller in no way objected to this. When his fortune was made he would willingly leave Germany and settle in France, but he must work a few more years yet to make sure of a proper position for his wife and child. Unfortunately, death had surprised him about fifteen months before I met my sister.

Such were the things she told me as we rolled along in the cariole to Belzingen. This unexpected death had delayed the return of the family to France — and what misfortunes followed! When M. Keller died he was engaged in a lawsuit against the Prussian Government. For two or three years, as contractor of stores for the government, he had embarked not only his own capital, but certain funds that had been intrusted to him. From his first receipts he had been able to pay back his partners, but the bulk of the amount, equal to almost his entire fortune, remained owing to him and there were no hopes of a speedy settlement. The officials disputed with M. Keller, and raised difficulties of all kinds, and he had at last to appeal to the judges at Berlin. The lawsuit dragged on.

It is not a wise thing to go to law with a government in any country. The Prussian judges showed unmistakable ill-will toward him, although M. Keller had faithfully fulfilled his engagements, for he was an honest man. A sum of twenty thousand florins was in question — a fortune in those days — and the loss of the lawsuit would be his ruin. Had it not been for the delay in this matter, the position of affairs at Belzingen would have been settled for the best, and Mme. Keller's wish to return to Prance after her husband's death would have been accomplished.

This is what my sister told me. Her own place in the family can be imagined. She had brought up the child almost from his birth, and loved him with truly maternal affection. She was not looked upon as a servant in the house, but as a companion, an humble and modest friend. She was one of the family, treated as they were, and devoted to them. If the Kellers left Germany, it was with great joy she would go with them. If they remained at Belzingen she would remain with them.

"Separate me from Madame Keller! It would be like death to me!" said Irma.

I saw that nothing would persuade my sister to return with me, so long as her mistress was forced tto remain at Belzingen. But to see her in the midst of a country ready to rise against ours gave me great uneasiness, and pardonably so, for if a war began it would not be a short one.

When Irma had given me all the news about the Kellers, she asked: "You are going to stay with us during the whole of your leave?"

“Yes, all my leave, if I can.”

“Well, Natalis, it is riot unlikely that you will be asked to a wedding.”

“Whose? Monsieur Jean’s?”

“Yes.”

“And who is he to marry? A German?”

“No, Natalis, and that is why we are pleased. If his mother married a German, he is going to marry a French woman.”

“A good-looking one?”

“Beautiful as an angel.”

“I am glad of that, Irma.”

“And so are we. But are you never going to get married, Natalis?”

“I!”

“Are you married?”

“Yes, Irma.”

“And to whom?”

“To my country, sister! And what else can a soldier want?”

CHAPTER IV.

Belzingen is a little town not quite twenty leagues from Berlin, and near the village of Hagelberg, where in 1813 the French fought the Prussian Landwehr. It is picturesquely situated at the foot of Flameng, and is commanded by its ridge. Its trade is in horses, cattle, flax, clover, and cereals.

My sister and I arrived there about ten o'clock in the morning. In a few minutes the cariole had stopped before a house that was very clean and attractive, though unpretending It was Mme. Keller's.

In those parts you would think you were in Holland. The country people have long bluish coats, scarlet waistcoats, with a tall thick collar that would protect them splendidly from a saber-cut; the women have double and triple petticoats. Their caps, with white wings, would make them look like Sisters of Charity, were it not for the bright-colored dresses that fit tight to the figure, and the corsage of black velvet, which has nothing about it of the nun. At least that is what I saw as I went along.

The welcome I received may be imagined. Was I not Irma's own brother? I saw at once that her position in this family was not inferior to what she had told me. Mme. Keller honored me with an affectionate smile, and M. Jean with a hearty shake of the hand. My being a Frenchman stood me in good part.

"Monsieur Delpierre," he said to me, "my mother and I expect you to pass all your leave among us. A few weeks is not much to give to the sister whom you have not seen for thirteen years."

“To give to my sister, to your mother, and to yourself!” said I. “I have not forgotten how good your family has been to mine, and it was a great pleasure to us for Irma to have been taken into your service.”

I confess that I had prepared this little compliment, so as not to appear quite a stupid at my introduction. But it was not wanted. With such people you could say what your heart told you.

Looking at Mme. Keller, I recognized the features which were graven on my memory. Her beauty as a girl did not seem to have changed with her years. In her youth the seriousness of her look was already striking, and it was the same now. If her dark hair had grown white in places, her eyes had not lost their former vivacity. Fire still burned in them, in spite of the tears which had bathed them since the death of her husband. She bore herself calmly. She knew how to listen. She was not one of those women who chatter like a one-eyed magpie, or buzz like a bee. And frankly I do not like such folks. You felt that Mme. Keller was a person of sense, knowing how to think before she spoke or acted, and understanding how to deal with business matters.

And, as I soon found, she rarely left the domestic hearth. She did not go visiting. She avoided acquaintances. She stayed much at home. That is what I like in a woman. I do not think much of those who, like fiddlers, are always best outside the house.

One thing gave me great pleasure. This was that, without despising German customs, Mme. Keller had retained some of our customs in Picardy. The arrangement of the house reminded you of the house at Saint Sauflieu. In the way the furniture was arranged, and the meals prepared, you would have thought you were in Picardy. I made a note of this in my memory.

M. Jean was then twenty-four years old. He was above the middle height, with brown hair and mustaches, and eyes so dark that they seemed to be black. If he was a German, he had nothing of the Teutonic stiffness. His disposition was frank, open, sympathetic, attractive. He was much like his mother. Naturally serious as she was, he was obliging, and always ready to be of service. I quite took to him as soon as I set eyes on him. If he wanted a devoted friend he would find one in Natalis Delpierre.

I may add that he knew our language as well as if he had been brought up in our country. Did he know German? Yes, evidently, and knew it well. But you had to ask for it, as you had to ask I know not what Queen of Prussia who habitually spoke French. And, besides, he was above all things interested in French affairs. He liked our countrymen, he sought them out, and assisted them. The news from France was his favorite subject of conversation.

He belonged to the class of manufacturers and merchants, and as such suffered a good deal from the arrogance of functionaries and military people, as do all young men of business who are not in the government service.

It was a pity that Jean Keller was only half a Frenchman! I say what I think and what I feel. If I was not enraptured with the Germans it was because I had seen them at close quarters when in garrison on the frontier. In the upper classes, even when they are polite, as all ought to be, their natural haughtiness is always noticeable. I do not deny their good qualities, but the French have others as good. And my journey into Germany gave me no reason for changing my opinion.

At his father’s death M. Jean, then studying at the University of Gottingen, had had to take over the business. Mme. Keller had found in him an active, intelligent, hardworking assistant. But that was not the limit of his powers. Outside his business he was a well-informed man — at least my sister said so, for I am no judge myself. He was fond of books; he was fond of music. He had a splendid voice, not so strong as mine, but more agreeable. Each to his trade. When I shouted to my men, “Forward! Quick-march! Halt!” — particularly “Halt!” — they had no trouble in hearing me. But let us get back to M. Jean. If I had to listen to myself I should never end with his praises. You will judge for yourselves; but what you should remember now is, that after his father’s death, the whole burden of the business fell on him, and that he had to work hard, for matters were very complicated. He never deviated from his object to clear up the difficulties and retire from the business. Unfortunately this lawsuit against the government seemed to have no end. It had to be pursued assiduously, and in order that nothing might be neglected, he had to go often to Berlin. On it the future of the Keller family depended. After all, the justice of their claim was so undeniable that they could not fail, no matter how great might be the ill-will of the judges.

At noon that day we dined at the same table. We were a family party. That is the way they treated me. I sat next to Mme. Keller. My sister Irma occupied her usual place near M. Jean, who sat opposite to me.

We talked of my journey, of the difficulties I had met with on the way, of the state of the country. I guessed the anxiety of Mme. Keller and her son with regard to what was coming with this march of troops toward the frontier of France — Austrian troops, as well as Prussian troops. Their interests would be endangered for a long time if war broke out.

But it was best not to speak of such sad things at our first dinner. And M. Jean changed the conversation, and I was shut up.

“And how about your wars, Natalis?” he asked. “ You have been under fire in America. You met there the Marquis de Lafayette, the heroic Frenchman who devoted his life and fortune to the cause cf independence!”

“Yes, Monsieur Jean.”

“And did you see Washington?”

“As close as I see you; a splendid man, with large feet, and large hands — a giant!”

Evidently that is what struck me most about the American general.

Then I had to tell them what I knew about Yorktown, and how Comte de Rochambeau had properly beaten Lord Cornwallis.

“And since you came back to France,” asked M. Jean, “you have not been to war?”

“Not once,” answered I. “The Royal Picardy has only gone from garrison to garrison. We have been very busy — ”

“I believe it, Natalis, and so busy that you have never had time to send us any news, or to write a word to your sister!”

I turned very red at that. Irma looked rather annoyed too. But I made up my mind. There was nothing to be ashamed of, after all.

“Monsieur Jean,” said I, “if I have not written to my sister it is because that when I had time to write I was crippled in both arms!”

“Do you not know how to write, then?” said M. Jean.

“No, I am sorry to say.”

“Nor read?”

“No! When I was a child, even if my father and mother had had a few sous to pay for me to be taught, we had no school-master at Grattepanche or in the neighborhood. Since then I have always lived knapsack on back, musket on shoulder, and there has not been much time to study between the halting-places. That is why a quartermaster thirty-one years old does not yet know how to read and write!”

“We — we will teach you, Natalis,” said Mme. Keller.

“You, madame?”

“Yes,” said M. Jean. “My mother and I. We will both see about it. You have two months’ leave?”

“Two months.”

“And you intend to spend them here?”

“If I am not in the way.”

“You in the way?” said Mme. Keller. “You, Irma’s brother!”

“Dear mistress,” said my sister, “when Natalis knows you better he will not have such ideas as that.”

“You are to live here as if you were at home,” said M. Jean.

“At home!... Wait, Monsieur Keller!... I have never had a home...”

“Well, at your sister’s home, if you like that better. I say again, stay here as long as you like. And in your two months’ leave I will undertake to teach you to read. Writing comes afterward.’’

I did not know how to thank him enough.

“But, Monsieur Jean,” said I, “is not all your time occupied?”

“Two hours in the morning, two hours in the evening, that will be enough. I will set you your lessons, and you must do them.”

“I will help you, Natalis,” said Irma, ‘‘ for I know how to read and write a little.”

“So I should think,” added M. Jean. “She was my mother’s best pupil.”

What was I to reply to a proposition made in such a way?

“I am willing, Monsieur Jean; I am willing, Madame Keller; and if I do not do my lessons properly you must punish me.”

M. Jean answered: “You see, my dear Natalis, it is necessary that a man should know how to read and write. Think of what the poor people who have never learned can not know! What darkness there must be in their brains! What a void there must be in their intelligence! It is as bad as being without a limb! And you can not rise in rank. You are a quartermaster, that is well enough, but how are you to go higher? How are you to become lieutenant, captain, colonel? You will remain where you are, and it ought not to be that ignorance should stop you on your road.”

“It will not be ignorance that will stop me, Monsieur Jean,” said I, “but the regulation. To us of the people there is no going above the rank of captain.”

“At present, Natalis, that is possible. But the revolution of 1789 proclaimed equality in France, and the old prejudices will disappear. Among you, now, all men are equal. Be then the equal of those who are educated, to rise where education will lead you. Equality! It is a word that Germany does not yet know! Is it not so?”

“It is so, Monsieur Jean.”

“Well, we will begin this very day; and in a week you will be at the last letter of your ABO. We have finished dinner. Come and have a walk. When we come back we will set to work.”

And. that is how I began to learn to read at Mme. Keller’s. Could there be better people than these?

CHAPTER V.

We had a good walk along the road rising toward Hagelberg on the Brandenburg side. We paid more attention to our talk than to looking about us. In fact there is nothing much to see.

But I noticed all the time that people eyed me curiously. But what of that? A new face in a small town is an event. I also noticed that M. Keller seemed to be held in general esteem. Among those we met or passed there were few who did not know him. And there was much lifting of the hat which I thought best to acknowledge politely, although it was not personally addressed to me. It would not do to fail in old French politeness.

What did M. Jean talk about during our walk? Ah! Of that which troubled his people more than anything — of this lawsuit which never finished.

He told me the whole affair. The goods contracted for had been delivered at the dates agreed upon. M. Keller, being a Prussian, had fulfilled all the required conditions, and the payment legitimately and honestly earned ought to have been made to him without protest. If ever a lawsuit ought to be won it was this. Under the circumstances the agents of the government had acted like scoundrels.

“But wait,” said I; “these agents are not your judges. They will do you justice, and it is impossible to believe that you will lose — ”

“You can always lose a lawsuit, even the best. If there is a prejudice against me, can I hope they will do us justice? I have seen the judges, and I feel that they are prejudiced against a family which has French connections, particularly now that the relations between the countries are strained. For fifteen months after my father’s death no one would have doubted of the success of our suit, but now I do not know what to think. If we lose, all our fortune will be swallowed up. We shall have hardly enough left to live upon!"

"That shall not be!" said I.

"There is everything to fear, Natalis! Not for myself! I am young. I will work! But my mother! Until I have restored her to her position my heart quails at the thought that during those years she will be in misery."

"Good Madame Keller! My sister has told me so much in her praise! You love her dearly?"

"Do I not?"

M. Jean was silent for a moment. Then he resumed: "If it had not been for this lawsuit, Natalis, I should have realized our fortune, and, as my mother has only that one wish, returned to France, which twenty-five years of absence has not made her forget. I would have arranged matters so as to have given her that joy in a year, in a few months perhaps."

"But," asked I, "whether the suit is won or lost, can she not leave Germany?"

"What, Natalis, return to the Picardy she loves without the modest competence to which she is accustomed? How painful that would be to her! I will work, and with all the more courage that it is for her! Shall I succeed? Who can say, particularly amid the troubles I see coming on, when commerce will suffer so much."

To hear M. Jean speak thus gave me such feelings as I did not care to hide. Many times he took me by the hand. I responded to his clasp, and he understood what I felt. What would I not have done to save him and his mother from trouble!

Then he stopped speaking, and gazed with fixed eyes like a man who was regarding the future.

“Natalis!” said he to me in a strange tone, “have you noticed how things arrange themselves at cross-purposes in this world? My mother has become a German by her marriage, and I shall remain a German although I marry a French woman!”

This was the only allusion to the project of which Irma had told me in the morning. As M. Jean said no more I did not think it right to say anything. You have to be discreet with people who show friendship to you. When it was convenient for M. Keller to speak to me at length he would find an ear open to listen to him, and a tongue ready to compliment him.

Our walk continued. We talked of one thing and another, and particularly of my affairs. I had to say something about my campaign in America. M. Jean thought that France had acted well in helping the Americans to gain their freedom. He envied the lot of our countrymen, high or low, whom fortune had sent to help the just cause. If he had had the chance he would not have hesitated. He would have volunteered among the soldiers of Comte de Bochambeau. He would have bitten his cartridge at York- town. He would have fought to rescue America from the English domination.

And from the manner in which he spoke, his thrilling voice, and his emphasis which went to my heart, I felt sure that M. Jean would have done his duty. What great deeds would he not have done, and could he not have done! But it is destiny, and we must take it as it comes.

We returned toward Belzingen. The nearest houses were growing white in the sun. Their red roofs, plainly visible among the trees, glowed like flowers amid the foliage. We were about two gunshots off, when M. Jean said to me: “To-night, after supper, my mother and I have a visit to pay.”

“May it not bore you!” I answered. “I will remain with my sister.”

“No, on the contrary, Natalis, I ask you to come with us.”

“As you please.”

“They are compatriots of yours — Monsieur and Mademoiselle tie Lauranay, who have lived for some time at Bel- zingen. They will be pleased to see you on account of your coming from their country. And I should like you to make their acquaintance.”

“Your words are commands,” said I.

I understood well enough that M. Jean wished to introduce me further into his family secrets. But, thought I, would not this marriage be an obstacle to his return to France? Would it not be a tie that would attach him and his mother to the country if M. de Lauranay and his daughter had settled in it without hope of return? But I should soon know what to think. A little patience! You must not turn quicker than the mill or you Will grind bad flour.

We had reached the first houses of Belzingen. Already M. Jean had entered the principal street, when I heard the distant sound of a drum.

There was then in Belzingen a regiment of infantry, the Leib regiment, commanded by Colonel von Grawert. I learned later on that this regiment had been in garrison for five or six months. Probably on account of the movement of troops to the westward, it would soon join the bulk of the Prussian army.

A soldier always likes looking at other soldiers, even when they are foreigners. He likes to see what is good and what is bad about them. It is a matter of professional interest to him. From the last button of the gaiters to the plume in the cap, he examines their uniforms and notes the way they march. It is always of interest to him. I stopped accordingly; and so did M. Jean. The drummers were beating one of those marches of continuous rhythm which are of Prussian origin.

Behind them four companies of the Leib regiment kept step. It was not a departure, but merely a military promenade.

M. Jean and I stood by the side of the road to see them pass. The drummers had arrived opposite to us when I felt M. Jean catch hold of me by the arm as if he wished to keep himself from running away.

I looked at him.

“What is the matter?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

But M. Jean had first become pale, and now the blood was rising in his cheeks. It looked as though he had been stunned. Then his look became fixed, and it would have been difficult to distract it.

At the head of the leading company, on the left, marched a lieutenant, and, consequently, he was on the side where we stood.

He was one of those German officers whom I had seen so often, and have seen so often since. Bather a good-looking man, fair, and inclined to be sandy, with cold, blue eyes, and dandified swaggering air. In spite of his pretension to elegance you could see that he was a clumsy fellow after all. For my part the fop inspired me with antipathy, even with repulsion.

Doubtless that is what he inspired M. Jean with; perhaps it was more than repulsion. I noticed, too, that the officer did not seem to be animated with the best sentiments toward us. His look was anything but pleasant.

He was only a few paces from us as he passed. And at the moment he passed he made a disdainful gesture with his shoulders. M. Jean’s hand clasped mine with a grip of anger. In a moment I felt he might leap on to him; he was restraining himself.

Then the company passed, and the battalion disappeared at a turn in the road.

M. Jean had not said a word. He looked after the soldiers as they disappeared. He seemed to be nailed to the spot. He remained until the sound of the drums ceased to be heard. Then he turned to me and said: “Come, Natalis! let us go to school!” And we went into Mme. Keller’s.

CHAPTER VI.

I HAD a good master. “Would I do him credit? I did not know. To learn to read at one-and-thirty is not easy. You should have the brain of a child, the soft wax that will take any impression you put upon it; and my brain was as hard as the skull which covered it.

I set resolutely to work, however, and in truth I had to learn quickly. All the vowels were settled in the first lesson. M. Jean showed a patience for which I was grateful. To fix these letters in my memory he made me draw them in pencil ten times, twenty times, a hundred times, one after the other. In this way I learned to write as well as to read. I recommend this method to scholars of my age.

Zeal and attention did not fail him. I would have stuck at my alphabet all night if the servant had not come and told me supper was ready. I went up to my room, which was near my sister’s, and I washed my hands and came down.

Supper took us but half an hour. As we were not going to M. de Lauranay’s till a little later I asked permission to go outside. This was granted me, and on the steps I gave myself the pleasure of smoking what we Picards call the pipe of tranquillity.

That done I went in. Mme. Keller and her son were ready. Irma having something to do in the house, did not go with us. We started. Mme. Keller asked me for my arm. I offered it, rather clumsily perhaps. No matter! I was proud to feel the excellent lady leaning on me. It was an honor and a pleasure at the same time.

We had not far to walk. M. de Lauranay lived at the upper end of the road. His was a beautiful house, bright in color and attractive in look, with a bed of flowers in front, two large beech-trees at each side, and a large garden behind with shrubbery and lawn. The house showed that the owner was in easy circumstances. And M. de Lauranay was comfortably well off.

Just as we entered, Mme. Keller told me that Mlle, de Lauranay was not M. de Lauranay's daughter, but his granddaughter. I was, therefore, not surprised at their difference in age.

M. de Lauranay was then seventy years old. He was a man of tall stature whom age had not yet bent. His hair was gray rather than white, and it bordered a fine, noble- looking face. His eyes looked at you with a very gentle expression. In his manners you could easily recognize the man of quality. Nothing could be pleasanter than his address.

The "de "in his name unaccompanied by a title showed that he belonged to that class between the nobility and the shop-keeper class, which had not despised manufacture or commerce. If personally he had not been engaged in business his grandfather and father had been. And if he found a fortune ready to his hand we can not blame him for it.

The family of De Lauranay was of Lorraine origin, and Protestant in religion, like that of M. Keller. His ancestors had left France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, but not with the intention of remaining abroad. They intended to return to their country as soon as it returned to more liberal ideas. M. de Lauranay lived at Belzingen, in this corner of Prussia, because he had inherited from his uncle certain estates that he could not profitably sell. He would have preferred to sell them and return to Lorraine, but unfortunately no opportunity presented itself. M. Keller, the father, could only get offers at a low price, for money is not plentiful in

Germany; and, rather than part with them at a loss, M. de Lauranay thought it best to keep them.

The business relations between M. Keller and M. de Lauranay led to friendship between their families. This had lasted for twenty years. Never had a cloud obscured an intimacy founded on a resemblance of tastes and habits.

M. de Lauranay had lost his wife when he was young; and his son the Kellers hardly knew. He was married in France, and came only once or twice to Belzingen. His father went to see him every year, and thus had the pleasure of passing a few months in France.

The son had a daughter who cost her mother her life, and, much afflicted at the loss, he soon died. His daughter hardly knew him, for she was but five years old when she was left an orphan. Her only relation was her grandfather, who did not fail in his duty.

He sought out the child, brought her back to Germany, and devoted himself entirely to her education. In this he was helped by Mme. Keller, who took a great liking to the child, and treated her as if she had been her mother. That M. de Lauranay was glad to be on terms of friendship with a lady like Mme. Keller I need not say.

My sister Irma, as may be supposed, cordially helped her mistress. Often I know she nursed the little girl on her lap, or got her to sleep in her arms, and that not only with the approbation but with the thanks of her grandfather. To be brief, the little girl became a charming young woman, whom I at the moment looked at with much discretion, for I did not want to embarrass her in any way.

She was born in 1772, and was thus twenty years of age. She was tall for a lady, fair, with dark-blue eyes and a charming face, and a figure full of grace and ease, and not at all like the rest of the feminine population of Belzingen. I admired her straightforward, gentle look, not more serious than it ought to be, and her happy expression. She was the possessor of many gifts as agreeable to herself as to others. She could play the harpsichord very prettily, excusing herself at not being proficient at it, though to a quartermaster like me she seemed to be perfect at it; and she painted beautiful bouquets of flowers on paper screens.

It is not to be wondered at that M. Jean Keller fell in love with this young lady, or that Mlle, de Lauranay took notes of all that was good and amiable in the young man, nor that the families saw with pleasure the growth of the intimacy between the young people. They had, in fact, agreed to let matters take their course. And if the marriage had not taken place it was on account of an excess of delicacy on M. Jean’s part — a delicacy which all will appreciate who have their hearts in the right place.

It will not have been forgotten that the position of the Kellers was seriously threatened. Before his marriage M. Jean wished that the lawsuit on which his future depended should come to an end. If he won it, all the better. He would bring Mlle, de Lauranay a fortune. But if he lost the suit he would have nothing. Certainly Mlle. Martha was rich, and would be richer when she lost her grandfather; but M. Jean felt reluctant to share in what she had. And in my opinion the sentiment did him honor.

Circumstances, however, were becoming pressing for him to act in the matter. The marriage was agreeable and suitable to both families; their religion was the same, and they were of the same nationality, at least in the past. If the young couple settled in Prance, why should not their children become naturalized French subjects? In fact, everything was as it ought to be.

But it was necessary to decide, and without delay, because as things were then an excuse was given for the assiduities of a rival.

Not that M. Jean had cause to be jealous! And how could he be when he had only to say the word and mademoiselle would become his wife!

But it was not jealousy he felt, but a deep and very natural irritation against the young officer we saw with the Leib regiment during our walk in Belzingen.

For some months Lieutenant Frantz yon Grawert had taken notice of Mlle, de Lauranay. Belonging to a family that was rich and influential, he did not doubt for a moment that the De Lauranays would be much honored by his attentions.

And so this Frantz wearied Mlle. Martha with his assiduities. He followed her in the street with such persistency that she hesitated to go out.

M. Jean knew this. More than once he was nearly quarreling with this fop, who kicked up such a dust in the high society of Belzingen; but he had been kept from doing so by the fear of Mlle. Martha’s name being mixed up in the affair. When she was his wife, if this officer continued to pursue her he could soon settle him. At present it was best not to notice his attentions.

About three weeks before, however, Mlle, de Lauranay’s hand had been asked in marriage on behalf of Lieutenant Frantz. His father, the colonel, had called on M. de Lauranay. There he had told of his fortune, his titles, and the future that awaited his son. He was a brusque man, accustomed to command, tolerating neither hesitation nor refusal — ha fact, a Prussian from his spurs to his plumes.

M. de Lauranay thanked Colonel von Grawert, and expressed himself much honored by his call, but prior arrangements rendered the marriage impossible.

The colonel was politely bowed out, and retired much annoyed at his ill-success. Lieutenant Frantz was very angry. He knew that Jean Keller, a German like himself, was received into M. de Lauranay's house on a footing that was denied to him; and in consequence he cherished a hatred and a desire for revenge that only waited for opportunity.

Urged by jealousy or anger, the young officer continued his attentions; and mademoiselle had decided never to go out either alone, as German custom permitted, or with her grandfather, or with Mme. Keller, or with my sister.

These things I learned after a time, but I thought it better to mention them now.

I could not wish for a better welcome than I received from M. de Lauranay.

"Irma's brother must be a friend of ours," said Mlle. Martha; "and I am glad to shake hands with you."

And, will you believe it? I had nothing to say in reply! If ever I was stupid it was during that day. I was so confused that I said nothing. And the hand was held out to me so gracefully! At last I touched it, but I scarcely pressed it for fear of hurting it. What would you have had? I was only a poor quartermaster!

Then we went into the garden and walked. The conversation put me more at my ease. They spoke of France. M. de Lauranay questioned me as to the events in progress. He seemed to fear that they would give rise to much annoyance to his fellow-countrymen in Germany, and wondered if it would not be better for him to leave Belzingen and return to Lorraine.

“Are you thinking of going?” asked M. Keller.

“I fear we shall be obliged to go, my dear Jean.”

“But we should not like to go back alone,” added Mlle, t — Martha. “When is your leave up, Monsieur Delpierre?”

“In two months,” I replied.

“Well, my dear Jean,” she continued, “can not Monsieur Delpierre be present at our marriage before he goes?”

“Yes, Martha, yes!”

M. Jean did not know what to answer. His reason and his heart were at variance.

“Mademoiselle,” said I, “I shall indeed be happy — ”

“My dear Jean,” she continued, “can not we give Monsieur Natalis Delpierre this happiness?”

“Yes, dearest Martha,” said he, unable to say anything else, although that seemed enough.

And just as we were going away, for it was getting late, Mme. Keller clasped her in her arms and said, with deep emotion: “My daughter, you will be happy! He is worthy of you.”

“I know it,” said mademoiselle. “Is he not your son?”

We went back to the house. Irma was waiting for us. Mme. Keller told her that all was over except fixing the wedding-day.

Then we went to bed, and if ever I passed an excellent night, notwithstanding the vowels of the alphabet which danced through my dreams, it was this one.

CHAPTER VII.

It was late next morning when I awoke. It was quite seven o’clock. I made haste to dress myself — so as to learn my lesson, and get my vowels perfect, ready for the consonants.

As I reached the last steps of the staircase I met Irma.

“I was coming up to wake you,” she said.

“Yes. I have been too long abed, and I am late.”

“No, Natalis, it is only seven o’clock. But there is some one below asking for you.”

“Some one?”

“Yes — a policeman.”

A policeman! I do not care for those customers! What did he want with me? My sister did not seem too much at her ease.

At this moment M. Jean appeared.

“It is a policeman,” he said. “Take care, Natalis, to say nothing that may get you into trouble.”

“It may be that he knows I am a soldier.”

“That is not likely! You have come to Belzingen to see your sister, and for nothing else.”

And that was the truth, and I resolved to be cautious. I reached the door. There I saw the policeman; a villain in disguise, there could be no doubt, with a body all awry, legs like those of a camp-stool, and a drunkard’s face with a shelving throat, as they say.

M. Jean asked him in German what he wanted.

“You have a traveler here who came to Belzingen yesterday.”

“Yes. What then?”

“The director of police has given me the order for him to come to the office.”

“Well; he will go.”

M. Jean explained to me the result of the conversation. It was not an invitation, but an order that I received. I must obey it, therefore.

Spindleshanks took himself off. I liked him better for that. It rather went against me to have to walk through the streets of Belzingen with that catclipole! I was told where the director of the police was to be found.

“What sort of a man is he?” I asked M. Jean.

“Bather a crafty fellow, and you had better mind what you are about with him. His namo is Kalkreuth. He is always trying to annoy us, for he has discovered we take much interest in French matters. We keep him at arins’-length, and he knows it. I should not be surprised if he does not try to implicate us in some rascally affair, so be guarded in your words.”

“Will you not come with me?” asked I.

“Kalkreuth did not send for me, and I do not think he would be pleased to see me.”

“Can he jabber French at all?”

“He speaks it well. But do not forget, Natalis, to think before you speak, and do not tell him more than is necessary.”

“Never fear,” said I.

Kalkreutli’s house was close by, and I was soon there.

The policeman opened the door, and introduced me into the director’s presence.

He greeted me with a smile, I suppose, for his lips opened from one ear to the other. Then in inviting me to sit down he favored me with a gesture which in his estimation was most gracious.

At the same time he ran his finger through a bundle of papers on the table. I reconnoitered my Kalkreuth. He was a fellow of about five feet eight, very long in the chest, skinny, and bony, with huge feet, and a face like parchment, that was always dirty even when it was washed; large mouth, yellow teeth, turn-up nose, wrinkled temples, little, piercing eyes, mere luminous points under thick lids — in fact, a face like a blister. I had been told to distrust him — there was no need for the caution. The distrust came of itself as soon as I found myself in his presence.

When he had finished fiddling with his papers he cocked up his nose, and in very clear French began to question me. But in order that I might have time to think I pretended I had some difficulty in understanding him.

“Your name?” said he.

“Natalis Delpierre.”

“Frenchman?”

“Frenchman.”

“Your trade?”

“Traveling merchant.”

“Traveling merchant? Explain. I do not understand what that means.”

“Yes. I go about to fairs and markets to buy and sell things. In fact I travel.”

“You have come to Belzingen?”

“Apparently.”

“What for?”

“To see my sister, Irma Delpierre, whom I have not seen for thirteen years.”

“Your sister is a French woman in Madame Keller’s service?”

“Just so.”

Then there came a pause in his questions.

“Has your journey no other object?”

“None.”

“And when you leave?”

“I shall go back by the road I came.”

“And you will do well. When do you think of going away?”

“When I find it convenient to do so. I suppose a stranger can move about Prussia as he pleases?”

“Maybe.”

As Kalkreuth said this he gave me a keen look. My answers doubtless were more decided than he liked. But the look was only a flash, there were no signs of thunder as yet.

“Wait a bit!” said I to myself. “This fellow means mischief. I must be on my guard.”

Kalkreuth resumed in his sweetest tones.

“How long did you take coming here from France?”

“Nine days.”

“And which way did you come?”

“The shortest and the best.”

“May I ask you to tell me exactly the way you came?”

“Sir,” said I, “why all these questions, if you please?”

“Monsieur Delpierre,” said he, dryly, “in Prussia we are accustomed to question strangers who visit us. It is merely a matter of form. You do not intend to object?”

"No! I came from the Dutch frontier, through Brabant, Westphalia, Luxemburg, Saxony — "

"Then you went a long way round?"

"How so?"

"You arrived at Belzingen by the road from Thur- ingia?"

"Yes, from Thuringia."

I saw he knew what he was about. It would not do to contradict myself.

"Can you tell me where you crossed the French frontier?"

"At Tourney."

"That is strange."

"Why is it strange?"

"Because you have been reported as coming from Zerbst."

"That is explained by my not coming here direct."

Evidently I had been watched, and probably by the innkeeper at Ecktvende. It will be remembered that he had seen me arrive when my sister was waiting for me on the road. It was clear enough Kalkreuth wished to get out of me some news from France. More than ever I must be cautious.

He continued: "Then you did not meet with any Germans in the neighborhood of Thionville?"

“No.”

“And you know nothing of General Dumouriez?”

“Nothing.”

“Nor nothing of the movements of the French troops on the frontier?”

“I know nothing.”

Then Kalkreuth’s face changed, and his voice became imperious.

“Take care, Monsieur Delpierre,” he said.

“Of what?”

“It is not a good time for strangers to travel in Germany, particularly if they are Frenchmen. We do not like them seeing what is taking place here.”

“But you would not be sorry to know what is taking place elsewhere! I am not a spy, sir.”

“I hope not, for your own sake,” said Kalkreuth, in a threatening tone. “I shall keep an eye on you. You are a Frenchman. You have already visited at a Frenchman’s house — Monsieur de Lauranay’s. You are staying with the Kellers, who keep up correspondence with France. That is enough under present circumstances to make you suspected.”

“Was I not free to come to Belzingen?”

“Quite.”

“Are Germany and France at war?”

“Not yet. Tell me, Monsieur Delpierre, you seem to have good eyes?”

“Excellent.”

“Well, do not use them too much!”

“Why not?”

“Because when you look you see, and when you see you are tempted to tell what you have seen.”

“For the second time I tell you I am not a spy.”

“And for the second time I say I hope not. If so — ”

“If so — what?”

“You will compel me to have you sent back to the frontier, unless — ”

“Unless what?”

“Unless, in order to spare you the fatigue of the journey, we think it better to give you board and lodging for a more or less extended period.”

And so saying, Kalkreuth by a gesture indicated that I might go. This time at the end of his arm there was not an open hand, but a closed one.

Not caring to stay longer than I could help in a police- office, I turned on my heel, a little too much in military style, perhaps. And I am not at all sure that Kalkreuth did not notice it.

I returned to M. Keller’s house. But I had been warned. They would not lose sight of me.

M. Jean was waiting for me. I told him in detail what had passed.

“I am not at all surprised,” he said “You have not done with the Prussian police. For you as for us, Natalis, I fear there will be trouble in the future.”

CHAPTER VIII.

The days went by pleasantly enough in walking and study. My young master could testify to my progress. The vowels had been well fixed in my head. We had attacked the consonants. They gave me a good deal of trouble — particularly the last ones. But I got through. Then I came to putting the letters together to form words. It appeared that I had good abilities — for a boy of thirty-one.

We had heard no more from Kalkreuth. I had received no order to present myself at his office. But there was no doubt we were watched, particularly your humble servant, although my way of life gave no occasion for suspicion. I thought I had got off with a warning, and that the director of police would not have the trouble of putting me into lodgings, or escorting me to the frontier.

During the following week M. Jean was away for a day or two. He had to go to Berlin about his lawsuit. At any cost he wanted a decision, for the position was urgent. How would he be received? Would he come back without even having the date fixed for the trial? Would they try to gain time? It was to be feared so.

During M. Jean’s absence I was told off, at Irma’s suggestion, to keep an eye on the proceedings of Frantz von Grawert. But as Mlle. Martha only went out once, to go to church, she was not met by the lieutenant. Every day he passed M. de Lauranay’s house several times, sometimes on foot, swaggering along, and creaking his boots, sometimes cavalcading and caracoling on his horse — a magnificent animal; like his master. But the windows were down, and the door was shut. I leave you to imagine how he fumed. But it showed we had better hurry on the marriage. And it was on account of this that M. Jean had gone for the last time to Berlin. Whatever happened he had decided that the wedding-day should be fixed as soon as he came back to Belzingen.

M. Jean went away on the 18th of June. He could not come back till the 21st. While he was away I worked with ardor. Mme. Keller took her son's place with me; and filled it with a consideration that left nothing to be desired. With what impatience we awaited the return of the absent you can imagine. In fact, matters were pressing. You will see that by what follows, and which I am going to tell you in the light of what I learned later on, without at the time taking much notice of it, for — I confess it willingly — when the pool of politics is stirred, not a drop of it is intelligible to me.

Ever since 1790 the French emigres had taken refuge at Coblenz. In 1791 King Louis XVI. had accepted the constitution, and informed the powers of his acceptance. England, Austria, and Prussia then protested their friendly intentions. But could they be trusted? Would not the emigres persist in urging them to war? They were forming reg-'ments and equipping them. Although their king had ordered them to return to France they had not stopped their preparations. Although the legislative assembly had summoned the electors of Treves, Mayence and the other princes of the empire to disperse the musters on their frontier, yet they were always there ready to lead the invaders.

And then three armies were organized in the east in such a way as to help them.

The Comte de Rochambeau, my old general, took tha command of the army of the north, in Flanders. Lafay ette took that of the army of the center at Metz. Luckner took that of the army of Alsace. In all there were 200,000 men, as many sabers as bayonets. "Why should the emigres renounce their projects, and obey the orders of their king when Leopold of Austria was preparing to come to their aid?

Such was the state of affairs in 1791. And in 1792 the state of affairs was as follows: In France, the Jacobins, with Robespierre at their head, had vigorously pronounced against war. The Cordeliers supported them, fearing the rise of a military dictator. On the other hand, the Girondins, through Louvet and Brissot, demanded this war at all cost, so as to force the king to reveal his intentions.

Then it was that there appeared Dumouriez, who had commanded in Vendee and Normandy. He was called to put his military genius and political ability at the service of his country. He accepted and drew up a plan of campaign; a plan at once offensive and defensive. “With him there was no chance of things lying idle.

But up to then Germany had not moved. Her troops did not menace the French frontier, and she even said that nothing would be worse for the interest of Europe. “When things were in this way Leopold of Austria died. What would his successor do? “Would he be a partisan of moderation? No, and a note came forth requiring the re-establishment of the monarchy on the basis of the royal declaration of 1789.

As you may think, France could not submit to such an injunction, which was out of all reason. The effect of the note was considerable throughout the country. Louis XVI. had to propose to the National Assembly to declare war against Francis I. King of Hungary and Bohemia. This was agreed to, and it was resolved to attack him first in his possessions in Belgium.

Then Biron seized on Quievrain, and there was hope that nothing would stop the dash of the French troops when there came a panic at Mons that changed the whole situation. The soldiers raised shouts of treason, and massacred their officers Dillon and Berthois.

When he heard of this disaster, Lafayette stopped his march at Givet.

This happened in the last days of April, before I left Charleville. At this moment, as you see, Germany was not yet at war with France.

On the 13th of June Dumouriez was appointed Minister of War. That we learned at Belzingen, before M. Jean returned from Berlin. It is easy to see that these events would intensify the situation. In fact if Prussia up to then had kept neutral it was to be feared that at any moment she might declare war. They were already talking of 80,000 men on the march to Coblenz.

At the same time a report spread that the command of the old soldiers of Frederick the Great would be given to a general rejoicing in a certain celebrity in Germany, the Duke of Brunswick.

You can understand the effect of this news even before it was confirmed. The passage of the troops was incessant.

I would have given much to see the Leib regiment and Colonel Grawert and his son Frantz depart for the frontier. That would have rid us of these people. Unfortunately the regiment received no order. And so the lieutenant continued to haunt the streets of Belzingen, and particularly the one in front of the closed house of M. de Lauranay.

And for my own part I had something to think about.

I had a regulation leave, it is true, and in a country that had not yet broken with France. But could I forget that I belonged to the Royal Picardy, and my comrades were in garrison at Charleville, close to the frontier?

Assuredly, if we came to blows with the soldiers of Francis of Austria, or Frederick William of Prussia, the Royal Picardy would be in tie first line to get the first round, and I should be desperate at not being there to take my share in it.

I began to be seriously uneasy. But I kept my uneasiness to myself, not wishing to worry Mme. Keller or my sister. But, under the circumstances, the position of a Frenchman was a difficult one. My sister saw that, so far as concerned herself. Of her own free will she would never have separated from Mme. Keller; but what would she do if measures were taken against foreigners? and if Kalkreuth gave us twenty-four hours in which to leave Belzingen?

Our anxieties can therefore be imagined. They were not lessened when we thought of the position of M. de Lauranay. If he was compelled to leave the country, and cross a territory in a state of war, how dangerous the journey would be for both himself and his granddaughter! And where and when was the wedding to take place? Would there be time to celebrate it at Belzingen? In truth we were sure of nothing.

Every day there passed through the town troops on the road to Magdeburg — infantry, cavalry — mostly lancers — their ammunition wagons and carts in hundreds. There was an incessant beating of drums and blaring of trumpets. Frequently there was a halt of a few hours in the principal square. And then what a bustle there was, and what glasses of schnapps and kirschwasser, for the heat was great!

It will be understood that I could not keep mysel! from going to see, regardless of displeasing M. Kalkreuth. Wherever I heard a trumpet-call or a drum-roll, I was off, if I could get away. I say, if I could get away, for if

Mme. Keller was giving me a lesson in reading, nothing in the world would have made me leave her. When the hour for recreation came I slipped out-of-doors, lengthened my stride, struck the route of the troops, followed them to the square, and there Hooked at them, although M. Kalkreuth had told me to look at nothing.

If all this activity interested me as a soldier, in my position as a Frenchman I could not but say, “Stop a moment! That looks bad!” It was obvious that hostilities would soon break out.

On the 21st, M. Jean returned from his journey to Berlin. As we had feared, his journey had been futile. The lawsuit remained just as it was. It was impossible to see what would be the end, or when it would come. It was enough to drive us to despair.

From what he had heard, M. Jean reported that any day Prussia might declare war against France.

CHAPTER IX.

The next and following days we were all expecting the news. Something would happen within the week at the outside. There were passages of troops through Belzingen on the 21st, 22d, and 23d. A general passed through whom I was told was Count Kaunitz, and he had his staff with him. This mass of soldiers were bound for Coblenz, the emigres were waiting for them. Prussia had joined hands with Austria, and made no secret of the fact that she was marching against France.

The position at Belzingen grew worse from day to day. Evidently it would not improve for the family of M. de Lauranay or my sister Irma when war was declared. To be in Germany under such conditions was to incur great embarrassment — real peril, in fact — and almost anything was to be expected.

I often talked over matters with my sister. The good creature tried in vain to hide her uneasiness. The fear of having to leave Mme. Keller gave her not a moment’s rest. To leave the family! Never did she think that the future had such trouble in reserve for her. To go away from those she loved so much, with whom she had thought her whole life would be spent, perhaps never to see them again if events turned out badly, was enough to make her distracted.

“It will be the death of me, Natalis!”

“I understand you, Irma,” I replied; “the position is a difficult one, but you must get ready to go. Look here! Can not you get Madame Keller to leave Belzingen now that there is nothing to keep her in this country? I think it would be better to make up your minds to it before things get quite desperate.”

“That would be the best, Natalis; but Madame Keller would never consent to leave her son.”

“And why should not Monsieur Jean come with us? Why should he stay in Prussia? His business? He could manage that later! This lawsuit which has no end? May he not have to wait months and months before he gets a decision?”

“Probably.”

“What makes me most uneasy is this marriage between Monsieur Jean and Mademoiselle Martha! Do they not know what hinderances and delays may happen? If they expel the French from Germany — as is very likely — Monsieur de Lauranay and is granddaughter will have to go in twenty-four hours! And then, what a cruel separation for the young people! But if the marriage is concluded, whether Monsieur Jean takes his wife to France or remains at Belzingen, at least she will stop with him.”

“You are right, Natalis.”

“If I were in your place, Irma, I would speak to Madame Keller, she can speak to her sop, and they can make haste with the marriage. Once it is over, we can let things go.”

“Yes,” said Irma, “they ought to be married without delay. But the delay will not come from Mademoiselle Martha.”

“No! Excellent girl that she is. But then with a husband — a husband like Monsieur Jean — how safe she will be!

Think, Irma, if alone with her grandfather, an old man, she was obliged to leave Belzingen, to cross Germany, all crowded with troops! “What would become of them? You must make haste to get this matter ended, and must not wait until it has become impossible.”

“And do you often meet this officer?”

“Every day nearly. It is unlucky that his regiment remains at Belzingen. I should like mademoiselle’s marriage kept quiet until after his departure.”

“It would be better if it were.”

“If this Frantz hears of it, he is almost sure to try something desperate. Monsieur Jean is just the man to quarrel with him, and there — well, I am not easy in my mind.”

“Nor am I, Natalis! We must get this marriage over as soon as possible. There are certain formalities to get through, and I am afraid that bad news will interrupt them.”

“Then speak to Madame Keller.”

“I will, this very day.”

Yes, there was need to hurry; may be it was even now too late!

In fact, an event happened which caused Prussia and Austria to hurry on the invasion. This was the outbreak at Paris on the 20th of June, of which the rumor was designedly spread abroad by the agents of the coalition.

On the 20th of June the Tuileries had been invaded. The populace, led by Santerre, had marched past the Legislative Assembly and rushed at the palace of Louis XVI. Gates had been attacked by axes, railings had been forced down, guns bad been hoisted on to the first-floor, everything showed to what violence the outbreak might attain. The king’s calmness, coolness, and courage had saved him as well as his wife and two children. But at what price? His consent to wear the bonnet rouge.

Evidently among the partisans of the court and the constitutional party, this attack on the palace was looked upon as a crime. However, the king remained king. They yielded him certain homage. Eations for the dying! But how long would it last? Those most confident in him gave him two months to reign after these threats and insults. And they were not far out, for six weeks later, on the 10th of August, Louis XVI. was driven from the Tuileries, deposed, and imprisoned in the Temple, from which he only came when he lost his head on the place of the Eevolution.

If the result of this outbreak was great in Paris, great throughout France, you can easily imagine what a noise it made in foreign countries. At Coblenz there were shouts of grief, and hatred, and vengeance, and you will not be astonished at their echo resounding in the little corner of Prussia in which we found ourselves. It would not take much now to start the emigres on their march with the Imperialists, as they were already called, to support them, and the terrible war to begin.

So they thought at Paris. Energetic measures had been taken to prepare for all eventualities. The organization of the confederates was begun at once. The patriots having decided to hold the king and queen responsible for the invasion that threatened France, the Commission of the Assembly declared that the nation should be in arms, and that it must act for itself without the interference of the government.

And what was done to give enthusiasm to the cause? A solemn declaration was made by the Legislative Assembly: “The country is in danger!”

This we learned a few days after M. Jean’s return, and it caused extraordinary excitement.

The news arrived on the 23d, in the morning. Every hour we might hear that Prussia had replied to France by a declaration of war. There was unbounded agitation all over the country. Orderlies, staff officers, went through the town at full gallop. Orders were continually being interchanged between the troops on the march in the west and those coming from the east of Germany. It was said that the Sardinians were going to join the Imperialists, that they were already advancing and threatening the frontier. Unfortunately it was only too true!

These things threw the Kellers and De Lauranays into a state of extreme anxiety. Personally my position became more and more difficult. Every one saw this, and if I did not speak it was because I did not wish to add to the trouble.

In short there was no time to lose. The marriage ought to take place at once.

It was agreed that the 29th should be the day. This delay would be sufficient for the formalities which at that time were very simple. The ceremony would take place at the church before witnesses chosen from friends of the families. I was to be one of the witnesses. What an honor for a quartermaster!

As soon as it was decided preparations were made as secretly as possible. Nothing was said about what was going to take place except to the witnesses whose presence was indispensable. In these days of trouble it was best to avoid attracting attention. Kalkreuth might have put his nose in. And Lieutenant Erantz might be tempted to do something to gratify his vengeance. And these were complications we wished at all cost to avoid.

There was not much time for the preparations. But things were to be very simple, and without any of the entertainments that under less anxious circumstances would have been expected. Not an hour was to be lost. It was not the time to quote the old Picard saying, “There is no need to hurry, for the fair has not yet begun on the bridge.”

It had begun on the bridge, and any moment it might get so crowded as to prevent our getting by.

In spite of all our precautions it seemed that the secret was not kept as it should have been. Undoubtedly the neighbors — oh, the neighbors in a provincial town’ — were much troubled at what was going on next door. They could not help noticing an unusual running about; and their curiosity was awakened.

Kalkreuth, too, had not ceased to keep his eye on us. No doubt his men had orders to watch us more closely. But what was worse than all was that the news of the marriage reached the ears of Lieutenant von Grawert. My sister learned this from Mme. Keller’s servant, who had heard the officers of the Lieb regiment talking about it in the square.

When the lieutenant heard the news he went nearly mad with rage, and told his comrades that the marriage should not take place, and that he would try every means to stop it.

I had hoped that M. Jean would know nothing about this. But unfortunately he was told. He spoke to me about it, and was very angry. I had great difficulty in calming him. He asked me to go to Lieutenant Frantz and demand an explanation, although it was very doubtful if an officer would consent to fight a tradesman as he was.

At last I got him round, and made him understand that by acting in that way he ran the risk of spoiling everything. He gave in, and promised to take no notice of the lieutenant.

The day of the 25th had passed without incident. More than four days to wait. I began to count the hours and minutes. When the ceremony was over we could discuss the serious question of definitely abandoning Belzingen.

But the storm was overhead, and the thunder-clap came in the evening of that day. The terrible news arrived at nine o’clock in the evening.

Prussia had declared war against France.

CHAPTER X.

It was the first blow, and a rough one. And perhaps it would be followed by blows that would be rougher. But let us not anticipate, and let us submit to the decrees of Providence, as our cure used to say.

War was thus declared against France, and I, a Frenchman, was in the enemy’s country. If the Prussians did not know that I was a soldier, that made matters all the worse for me. My duty was to leave Belzingen by any means, secretly or publicly, and to take my place in the ranks. I had no longer to think of my leave, which had six weeks still to run. The Royal Picardy was at Charleville, only a few leagues from the French frontier. It would take part in the first engagement. I ought to be with it.

But what would become of my sister, of M. de Lauranay, and Mlle. Martha? Would not their nationality cause them serious trouble? The Germans are a rough people, who do not stand upon trifles when their passions are aroused. It was with terror I saw Irma, Mlle. Martha, and her grandfather thrust on the roads of Upper and Lower Saxony, when the Prussian army was there.

There was only one thing to do; to start at the same time as I did, and to return to France with me by the quickest and shortest road. They could trust me. If M. Jean brought his mother with him and joined us, it seemed to me that we should get through just as well.

But would Mme. Keller and her son do this? It seemed to me simple enough. Was not Mme. Keller a French woman by birth? Was not M. Jean, through her, half a Frenchman? There was no fear of his not being welcomed on the other side of the Rhine when the facts were known. I could not see that he need hesitate. It was the 26th.

The marriage was to take place on the 29 th. There would be no excuse for remaining in Prussia, and the next day we might leave it. It is true we had three days to wait, three centuries rather, in which I gnawed at my bit. Would that these people had been married already!

Yes! Quite so! Was it possible that this marriage that we desired so much, this marriage between a German and a French woman, could be forbidden now that war had been declared? I hardly dared look the position in the face, and I was not alone in thinking seriously about it. At present we avoided alluding to it. We felt it to be a weight that might crush us! What was going to happen? I could not imagine how things would turn out. It did not depend on us to change the order of march!

On the 26th and 27th there was nothing new. Always the troops kept passing through. But it seemed to me the police kept a stricter watch on Mme. Keller's house. I often saw old Spindleshanks, Kalkreuth's man. This constant watching made me uneasy. I was the special object of it; but the Kellers were in the same boat.

It was only too manifest that Mlle. Martha was crying her eyes out. M. Jean kept himself to himself, but he was troubled. I watched him. He became dull and gloomy. He was silent in our presence. He held himself aloof from us. During his visits to M. de Lauranay, it seemed that he was possessed with an idea that he dared not express. On the 28th in the evening we had met at M. de Lauranay's. M. Jean had asked us to go with him, for he wished, so he said, to tell us something he could not keep from us.

. We had begun to talk about one thing and another when the conversation collapsed. Since the declaration of war the line between the French and German race had been definitely drawn, and, as we all understood, M. Jean had been deeply affected by the deplorable complication. Although it was the evening before the wedding, no one spoke about it, and yet if all went well Jean Keller and Mlle. Martha would go to church in the morning, and bind themselves together for life! And yet there was not a word said!

Mlle. Martha rose and went to M. Jean, and said, trying in vain to hide her emotion: “What is the matter?”

“The matter?” said M. Jean in a tone so sad that my heart felt for him.

“Speak,” said Martha, “speak, although it may be as painful for us to hear as for you to speak.”

M. Jean lifted his head. He felt he was understood before he uttered a word.

No! Never shall I forget the details of this scene if I live to be a hundred!

M. Jean rose and stood before Mlle, de Lauranay and held her hands.

“Martha,” said he, “while war remained undeclared between Germany and France I could think of you as my wife. But now my country and yours are about to fight, and when I think of taking you away from your country, of depriving you of your French nationality by marrying you — I dare not do it! I have no right to do it! My life would be a life of remorse! You understand me! I can not do it — ”

As if we did not understand him! Poor M. Jean! His words failed him! But was there need for him to speak to be understood?

Mme. Keller, upright in her chair, with her eyes cast down, dared not look at her son. A slight trembling of the lips, a contraction of her fingers, all showed that her heart was ready to break.

M. de Lauranay had dropped his head between his hands. The tears fell from my sister's eyes.

"Those of whom I am one," said M. Jean, "are going to march against France, against the country I love! And who knows how soon I may be called upon to join them?"

He stopped suddenly. His chest heaved, stifled with sobs which he could only repress by superhuman strength, for it is not fitting that a man should weep.

"Speak, Jean," said Mlle, de Lauranay, "while I have strength to listen to you — "

"Martha," he said, "you know that I love you. But you are a French woman, and I have no right to make you a German, an enemy of — "

"Jean! And I love you. Nothing that can happen in the future will change my feelings toward you. I love you! and I shall always love you."

"Martha," said M. Jean, falling at her feet. "Dearest Martha, you have heard me talk like this, and to-morrow you would go to church with me! To-morrow you would be my wife, and nothing could separate us! No! It is impossible — !"

"Jean," said M. de Lauranay, "what seems impossible now — "

"May not be so later on!" exclaimed M. Jean. "Yes! This odious war will end! Then, Martha, I can come back to you! Then without remorse I can be your husband!"

And the unhappy man, as he rose, staggered, and nearly fell.

Mlle. Martha stopped him, and in a voice of great tenderness she said: “Jean! I have only one thing to tell you. It does not matter when you come to me, I shall be the same as I am to-day! I understand the feeling which has made you act in this way. Yes! I see that now there is an abyss between us. But I swear before Heaven, that if I am not yours, I shall be no other man’s — never!”

And in an irresistible movement Mme. Keller caught her in her arms.

“Martha!” she said, “what my son has done makes him more worthy of you. Later, not in this country, which I wish I had left, but in France, we shall meet again. You will become my daughter, my own child! And it is for my fault you must pardon my son — for being a German!”

Mme. Keller said this in such a tone of despair that M. Jean interrupted her.

“Mother! My mother,” he said, “is it for me to reproach you? Should I be so unnatural — ”

“Jean,” said Mlle. Martha, “your mother is mine.”

Mme. Keller opened her arms, and they clasped each other to the heart.

If the marriage did not take place before men, owing to circumstances rendering it impossible, at least it took place before God. All that could be done now was to prepare for the departure.

And that evening it was definitely arranged that we should leave Belzingen, Prussia, Germany, where the declaration of war made it impossible for French folks to remain. The lawsuit could not now stop the Kellers. The result could not but be delayed, and they could not wait for it.

It was decided that M. and Mme. de Lauranay should go back with me to France. On this head there was no hesitation, for we were French. Mme. Keller and her son would have to remain in some foreign land while this abominable war lasted. In France they might meet with Prussians, if our country were invaded by the allies. They decided to take refuge in the Low Countries, and await the course of events. We would leave together, and separate when we reached the French frontier.

As our preparations would take a few days, our departure was fixed for the 2nd of July.

CHAPTER XI.

After this night there was a sort of relief in the position. A swallowed morsel has no taste, they say. M. Jean and Mlle. Martha were like a married couple obliged to leave each other at any moment. The most dangerous part of the journey, that through Germany, they would travel together; then they would separate until the end of the war. One could then see only the beginning of this long strife against Europe, this long struggle of the Empire during such glorious years, and which was to end to the advantage of the powers of the Coalition.

As for me, I was at last able to rejoin, and I hoped that I should get back in time for Quartermaster Natalis Delpierre to be at his post when the first shot was fired against the soldiers of Prussia and Austria.

The preparations for departure had to be as secret as possible. It was important not to attract attention, especially that of the police. Better to leave Belzingen without anybody knowing of it.

I supposed that nothing would happen to stop us I reckoned without my guest. I say my guest, and really I would not have him come to me for a couple of florins a night; for the guest was Lieutenant Frantz.

I have said that the marriage of Jean Keller and Mlle. Martha de Lauranay had somehow been noised abroad. But it was not known that the night before it had been put off indefinitely. It follows, therefore, that the lieutenat thought the marriage was to be celebrated at once. Now he only had one way of hindering or stopping this marriage, and that was to call out M. Jean and wound him or kill him. But was his hatred keen enough to make him forget his position and his birth, and condescend to fight M. Jean Keller?

There was no doubt if he did he would find some one who was not afraid of him. But in our present circumstances we dreaded the consequences of a duel. I could not help being anxious. The lieutenant, I heard, was as angry as ever, and I feared he would resort to some act of violence.

How unfortunate it was that the Leib regiment had not got its orders to leave Belzingen! The colonel and his son would then be far away, at Coblenz or Magdeburg. I should have been much more comfortable, and so would my sister. Ten times a day I went out to the barracks, to see if they were getting ready for anything, but not the least sign of a move greeted my eyes.

So it was on the 29th; so it was on the 30th. I was happy in reckoning that in twenty-four hours I should be oil for the frontier.

I have said we were to travel together. But in order to avoid suspicion it was thought better that Mme. Keller and her son should not start at the same time as we did. They could join us a few leagues from Belzingen. Once out of the Prussian provinces, we should have less to fear from M. Kalkreuth and his dogs.

During this day the lieutenant passed by Mme. Keller’s house several times. He even stopped, as if he would like to come inside and arrange matters for himself. Through the blind I could see him without being seen, and note his lips pressed close together, and his hands opening and shutting nervously, and all the signs of intense irritation. In fact, if he had opened the door and asked for M. Jean Keller, I should not have been surprised. Fortunately M. Jean’s room looked out of the side of the house, and he saw nothing of this performance.

But what the lieutenant did not do that day he got others to do for him.

About four o’clock a soldier of the Leib regiment came and asked for M. Jean Keller.

He was alone with me at the time in the house, and he read the letter which the soldier handed to him.

What was his anger when he had finished reading it!

The letter was most insolent toward M. Jean and insulting to M. de Lauranay. Yes! Lieutenant von Grawert condescended to insult an old man. At the same time he cast a doubt on the courage of Jean Keller — and said that if he was not a coward, he could show it in the way he received two comrades who would call on him in the evening.

There could be no doubt hi my mind that Lieutenant Frantz knew that M. de Lauranay was preparing to leave Belzingen, and that Jean Keller was going after him, and, sacrificing his pride to his passion, he wished to stop this departure.

In the case of an insult, addressed not only to himself, but to the family of De Lauranay, I expected I should have more difficulty in restraining M. Jean.

“Natalis!” he said, in an angry voice. “I will not go till I have thrashed this scoundrel! I will not go with this stain upon me! It is disgraceful his daring to insult me in all I hold dear. I’ll let him see that a demi-Frenchman, as he calls me, is not afraid of a German.”

I tried to soothe M. Jean; to point out the consequences of a meeting with the lieutenant. If he wounded him, he might expect such proceedings as would cause us a thousand embarrassments. If he was wounded, how could we go at all?

M. Jean would listen to nothing. I quite understood him. The lieutenant’s letter passed all limits. No! It is not allowable to write such things as that! If I could only have taken the matter in my own hands, what satisfaction would it have been! To meet this rascal, provoke him, get him in front of me, point, counterpoint, pistol, anything he liked, and fight him till one of us was brought to the ground. And if it had been M. Lieutenant that fell, I should not have wanted a yard and a half of handkerchief to weep for him in.

“Well, the two comrades of the lieutenant were announced, and we must wait for them.

They came about eight in the evening. Fortunately Mme. Keller was out at M. de Lauranay’s. It was better she should know nothing of what was about to happy.

My sister Irma was also out, settling some of the tradesmen’s accounts. M. Jean and I were alone.

The officers, two lieutenants, presented themselves with their natural arrogance. That did not astonish me. They wished to make much of the honor done by a noble, an officer, when he consented to fight a tradesman; but M. Jean cut them short by his attitude, and told them at once he was at the orders of M. Frantz von Grawert. It was useless to add fresh insults to those contained in the letter of provocation.

The officers thought it best to put back their boasting in their scabbard.

One of them then remarked that the conditions of the duel should be arranged at once, as time was pressing.

M. Jean answered that he agreed to all the conditions in advance. All he asked was, that no other name should be mixed up in the affair, and that the meeting should be kept as secret as possible. To that the officers made no objection. They had nothing more to do, as M. Jean had left the arrangements to them.

It was the 30th of June. The duel was fixed for nine o’clock next morning. It would take place in a little wood on the left of the road from Belzingen to Magdeburg. There was no difficulty about that.

The men would fight with the saber, and not stop till one of them was unable to continue.

That was agreed. To these propositions M. Jean replied by merely nodding his head.

One of the officers then said — insolence getting the upper hand — that doubtless M. Jean Keller would be at the rendezvous at nine o’clock precisely.

To which M. Jean Keller replied that if M. von Grawert did not keep him waiting, all would be over by a quarter past nine.

At which reply the two officers rose, saluted somewhat cavalierly, and retired.

“You know how to use the saber?” I asked, as soon as they had left.

“Yes, Natalis. But now we must get our seconds. You will be one?”

"At your orders, and proud of the honor! For the other you surely have some friend who will do you this service?"

"I prefer to ask Monsieur de Lauranay, who, I am sure, will not refuse me."

"Certainly not."

"What I wish to avoid above all things is that my mother, Martha, and your sister should be told of this. It is useless to add to their troubles."

"Your mother and Irma will soon come back, Monsieur Jean, and as they will not leave the house till the morning it is impossible for them to find out — "

"So I think, Natalis; and as we have no time to lose, let us go to Monsieur de Lauranay."

"Come on, Monsieur Jean; your honor could;not be in better hands."

Mme. Keller and Irma, accompanied by Mlle, de Lauranay, came in as we were going out. M. Jean said we should be away for about an hour, as he had to see about the horses for the journey.

Mme. Keller and my sister suspected nothing. But Mlle, de Lauranay gave M. Jean an uneasy look. Ten minutes later we found M. de Lauranay alone. We could speak quite freely to him. M. Jean told him what had occurred, and showed him Lieutenant von Grawert's letter.

M. de Lauranay trembled with indignation as he read it. No! Jean could not leave after such an insult! He could reckon on his help.

M. de Lauranay then returned to Mme. Keller's to bring home his daughter.

We then went out together. As we went down the road we noticed Kalkreuth’s man in front of us. He gave me a look which I thought a strange one, and as he was coming from Mme. Keller’s I had a presentiment that the scoundrel had dealt us some spiteful blow.

Mme. Keller, Mlle. Martha, and my sister were in the little room downstairs. They seemed in trouble. Had they found out anything?

“Jean,” said Mme. Keller. “Here is a letter that Monsieur Kalkreuth’s man has just brought.”

The letter bore the military seal.

This is what it contained: “All young men under the age of five-and-twenty are hereby called to the colors. The within named, Jean Keller, will join the Leib regiment, at present in garrison at Belzingen. He shall report himself to-morrow, the 7th of July, before eleven o’clock in the morning.”

CHAPTER XII.

What a blow! A general levy by the Prussian Government! Jean Keller, aged less than twenty-five, liable to the levy! Obliged to join and march with the enemies of France! And no way of escape! Except by deserting, and that was not to be thought of!

And then, to complete the misfortune, he was to serve in this very Leib regiment commanded by Colonel Grawert, the father of Lieutenant Frantz, his rival, now his superior.

What more could happen to overwhelm the Kellers, and all those who were near to them?

Assuredly it was fortunate that the marriage had been postponed. Consider M. Jean married the day before and forced to join his regiment and fight against the countrymen of his wife.

“We were overwhelmed, and we said not a word. Tears fell from the eyes of Mlle. Martha and my sister Irma. Mme. Keller did not weep. She could not. She was as motionless as if she were dead. M. Jean, with his arms crossed, looked round him, steeling himself against fate. I was mad with rage. Do people who do us harm have to pay for it one day or other?

Then M. Jean spoke: “My friends, do not let this change your plans! You were to go to Prance to-morrow. Go! Do not stop one hour longer in this country than you can help. My mother and I thought of getting into some corner away from Germany. That is not now possible. Natalis, you will take your sister with you.”

"Jean, I will remain a Belzingen," said Irma. "I shall not leave your mother."

"You can not — "

"We will stay here, too!" exclaimed Mlle. Martha.

"No!" said Mme. Keller, recovering herself. "You must go. I will remain. I have nothing to fear from the Prussians. Am I not a German?"

And she motioned us toward the door, as if contact with her might be distasteful to us.

"Mother!" exclaimed M. Jean, stepping toward her.

"And what would you have, my son?"

"I would have that you go as well; I would that you go with them to France, to your own country! I am a soldier! My regiment may march any day. You will be alone here, quite alone, and it is not good for you to be so — "

"I will remain, my son. I will remain now you can not go with me."

"And when I leave Belzingen?" continued M. Jean, with his arms round his mother's neck.

"I will go with you."

The reply was made in so resolute a tone that M. Jean was silent. It was not the time to dispute with Mme. Keller. Another time, to-morrow, he would talk to her and bring her to a juster view of the situation. How could a woman accompany an army on the march? To what dangers would she not be exposed? I repeat, it would not have done to contradict her at the moment. She would reflect; she would allow herself to be persuaded.

Then, in an outburst of violent emotion, they separated.

Mme. Keller had not even embraced Mlle. Martha, whom an hour before she had called her daughter.

I went to my room. I did not lie down. How could I sleep? I no longer thought about our departure. And yet it might take place as agreed. I thought only of Jean Keller in the same regiment, and perhaps under the orders of Lieutenant Frantz. Scenes of violence presented themselves to my mind. How could M. Jean put up with such an officer? But he must! He would be a soldier, with not a word to say, not a gesture to make! The terrible Prussian discipline would weigh on him! It was horrible!

“Soldier! No, he is not one yet,” I said to myself. “He will not be one till to-morrow, when he takes his place in the ranks. Till then he belongs to himself!”

And that was the way I brought myself to reason — to unreason, rather!

“Yes,” I repeated to myself, “to-morrow at eleven o’clock when he joins his regiment he will be a soldier! Till then he has the right to fight this Frantz. And he will kill him, he must kill him, or later on the lieutenant will have only too many occasions to be revenged on him.”

What a night I passed! Never do I wish my enemy a worse one!

About three o’clock I had thrown myself on my bed, dressed as I was. I got up at five o’clock, and went quietly to M. Jean’s door.

He was up. I held my breath. I listened.

I heard him writing. Doubtless some last arrangements, in the event of the encounter being fatal. Sometimes he walked about once or twice, then he sat down, and the pen resumed its scratching on the paper. There was no other sound in the house.

I did not wish to trouble him. I returned to my room, and at six o’clock I went down into the street.

The news of the levy had got abroad. It produced an extraordinary effect. The measure affected nearly all the young men in the town, and from what I saw it was received with general displeasure. It was a hard measure, in fact, for no one was prepared for it. No one expected it. In a few hours it was necessary to be off, knapsack on back, musket on shoulder.

I did sentry-go before our house. It had been agreed that M. Jean and I should call on M. de Lauranay about eight o’clock, and bring him to the rendezvous. If M. de Lauranay had come to us suspicion would have been aroused.

I waited till half past seven; M. Jean had not yet come down.

Mme. Keller had not appeared in the lower room.

At this moment Irma found me.

“What is Monsieur Jean doing?” asked I.

“I do not know,” she replied. “He has not gone out. Perhaps you had better — ”

“It is useless, Irma, I heard him moving about in his room.”

And then we talked, not of the duel — my sister knew nothing about that — but of the serious state of affairs now this levy had been made.

Irma was in despair, and to separate from her mistress under such circumstances was heart-breaking.

We heard a noise in the upper room. My sister went out for a moment, and came back to tell me that M. Jean was with his mother.

I thought he had gone to kiss her, as was his custom every morning. In his mind it might be a last adieu, a last kiss he was giving her.

About eight o’clock they came down-stairs. M. Jean came to the doorstep.

Irma was just leaving me.

M. Jean shook hands with me.

“Monsieur Jean,” I said, “it is eight o’clock, and we must go.”

He gave me a nod of the head, as though it cost him too much to speak.

It was time to go to M. de Lauranay. We had gone about three hundred yards up the street when a soldier of the Leib regiment stopped in front of us.

“You are Jean Keller?” he said.

“Yes.”

“That is for you.”

And he presented a letter.

“Who sent you?” I asked.

“Lieutenant von Melhis.”

It was one of the seconds of Lieutenant Frantz. A shudder passed through me. M. Jean opened the letter.

This is what he read:

“Owing to circumstances that have just occurred, a duel is now impossible between Lieutenant Frantz Grawert and Private Jean Keller.

“B. G. Yon Melhis.”

My blood boiled within me! An officer could not fight a private! Be it so! But private Jean Keller was not! He belonged to himself for some hours yet!

It seemed to me that a French officer would not have acted like that! He would have given satisfaction to a man he had mortally insulted! He would have come on the ground —

There I stop! I might say too much! And besides, on reflection, was the duel possible?

M. Jean tore up the letter and with a gesture of scorn threw it on the ground, and only these words escaped him: “The scoundrel!”

Then he gave me a sign to follow him, and we returned to the house.

I was so choked with anger that I had to stay outside. I rambled off without knowing where I was going. My brain was upset at thinking of the future. Suddenly it occurred to me that I ought to go and tell M. de Lauranay that the duel would not take place.

It will be believed that I had no notion of the time, for when it seemed I had just left M. Jean, it was about ten o’clock when I found myself again before Mme. Keller’s house.

M. and Mlle, de Lauranay were there. M. Jean was preparing to leave them.

I pass over the scene which followed. I have no pen that could describe it in detail. I will content myself with saying that Mme. Keller was worthy of herself, and gave her son no example of feebleness. And on his side M. Jean was sufficiently master of himself not to give way in the presence of his mother and M. de Lauranay.

At the moment of separation Mlle. Martha and he threw themselves for the last time into Mme. Keller’s arms.

Then the door of the house closed.

M. Jean had gone! He was a Prussian soldier!

That very evening the Leib regiment received orders to march to Borna, a few leagues from Belzingen, almost on the frontier of the Potsdam district.

In spite of all the reasons M. de Lauranay could advance, in spite of all we could do, Mme. Keller persisted in her idea of following her son. The regiment was going to Boma, she would go to Borna. M. Jean had been unable to shake her resolve.

As for us, our departure must take place next day. What an affecting scene I expected when my sister bade farewell to Mme. Keller! Irma would have remained to accompany her mistress wherever she went. And I — I would hardly have the strength to bring her away with me! Mme. Keller would refuse — my sister would submit.

In the afternoon our preparations were complete. And then everything was upset!

About five o'clock M. de Lauranay received a visit from .Kalkreuth in person.

The director of police informed him that his plans of departure were known, and that he was under the necessity of ordering him to suspend them — for the present at all events. He must wait for the measures government intended to take with regard to French subjects residing in Prussia. He could not grant him passports; and the journey was consequently impossible.

As to Natalis Delpierre, it was another matter! Quite another matter! It seemed that Irma's brother had been denounced as a spy, and Kalkreuth was only too delighted to treat him accordingly. After all, perhaps, they had learned he belonged to the Royal Picardy? For the success of the Imperialists it was doubtless important that there should be one soldier less in the enemy's army!

And so, that very day, I saw myself arrested in spite of the supplications of my sister and Mme. Keller, and then taken by stages to Potsdam, where I was imprisoned in the citadel.

The rage I was in I need not describe! Separated from all those I cherished, unable to escape to regain my post at the moment when the first shots were to be exchanged.

They did not interrogate me, they put me away secretly. I could not communicate with anybody, for six weeks I had no news from outside. But the story of my imprisonment would take me away too far. My friends at Grattepanche would rather that I stuck to the bill of fare. Let it be enough for me to say that the time appeared long, and that the hours rolled by as slowly as the smoke in May. But I was lucky in not being tried, for my case was clear, said Kalkreuth, and I might remain a prisoner till the end of the campaign.

But I did not. A month and a half afterward, on the 15 th of August, the commandant of the citadel gave me my liberty; and they took me back to Belzingen without having had the kindness to tell me for what I had been arrested. That I was happy to see Mme. Keller, my sister, and M. and Mlle, de Lauranay, who had not left Belzingen, I need not say.

As the Leib regiment had not yet gone beyond Borna, Mme. Keller had remained at Belzingen. M. Jean wrote sometimes; as often as he could, no doubt. And in spite of the reserve in his letters, we could feel all that was horrible in his position.

But if they had given me my liberty, they had not allowed me to remain in Prussia. A decree had been issued by the government, expelling the French from their territory. We had twenty-four hours in which to leave Belzingen, and twenty days in which to clear out of Germany.

A fortnight before there had appeared Brunswick’s manifesto threatening France with invasion from the coalized powers.

CHAPTER XIII.

There was not a day to lose. We had about a hundred and fifty leagues to travel to reach the French frontier — one hundred and fifty leagues through an enemy's country, along roads blocked by regiments on the march, cavalry and infantry, to say nothing of the stragglers that always follow an army in the field. Although we might be sure of the means of transport, we might break down on the road. If our means of transport failed, we should have to go on foot.

Could we reckon on finding inns at the different stages? Evidently not. I alone, long accustomed to privations, marches, and outwalking the strongest walkers, had no fear I should get through in the end. But with M. de Lauranay, an old man of seventy, and two women, Mlle. Martha and my sister, it did not do to expect the impossible. But I would do my best to take them safe and sound to France, and I knew that all would do their best.

As I have said, we had no time to lose. And the police were on our heels. Twenty-four hours to leave Belzingen, twenty days to evacuate the German territory, which would be enough if we were not stopped on the road. The passports Kalkreuth would give us that evening would only be available for that period. The delay over, we might be stopped and detained until the end of the war. The passports would give us an itinerary we were forbidden to depart from, and we would have to get them examined in the towns or villages indicated as halting-places.

It was probable that events would follow each other with extreme rapidity. Perhaps the bullet rain had even now begun on the frontier.

To the Duke of Brunswick's manifesto, the nation, by the mouth of its deputies, had replied: "The country is in danger."

On the 16th of August we were ready at an early hour. All our arrangements had been made. M. de Lauranay's house was to be left in charge of an old domestic, a Swiss by birth, who had been in his service for years, and on whose faithfulness he could depend. Mme. Keller's house would remain, until it was disposed of, in charge of the servant, who was of Prussian nationality.

In the morning we ascertained that the Leib regiment had just left Borna on the way to Magdeburg.

M. de Lauranay, Mlle. Martha, my sister, and I made another attempt to persuade Mme. Keller to come with us.

“No, my friends,” she said; “say no more about it. To-day I will take the road to Magdeburg. I have a presentiment of some great misfortune, and I will be there.”

We saw that all our efforts would be in vain, and that Mme. Keller would not yield in her resolution. All we could do was to bid her good-bye, and let her know the towns and villages through which the police required us to go.

Our arrangements were as follows: M. de Lauranay possessed an old mail berline which seemed to me well adapted for our jnurney of one hundred and fifty leagues. In ordinary times it is easy to travel with the relays of horses at the stages on the roads. But in war time, as the horses were requisitioned from all parts for the service of the army, in the transport of ammunition and supplies, it would not have been wise to trust to the relays. In order to avoid any inconvenience, we decided to proceed differently. I was asked by M. de Lauranay to get two good horses, regardless of cost; and as I knew what I was about in such matters, I did very well. I found two, who though rather heavy, perhaps, had plenty of staying power. Then thinking that I should have to dispense with postilions, I volunteered for the duty, and it was naturally accepted. And a Boyal Picardy did not want showing how to manage a team!

On the 16th of August, at eight o’clock, everything was ready. I had only to get into the saddle. For arms we had a pair of horse-pistols, with which we could keep marauders at a respectful distance; and we had enough provisions to last us for the first few days. It had been arranged that M. and Mlle, de Lauranay should occupy the back seat of the berline, and that my sister should take the front, facing mademoiselle. I, in a substantial suit, and with a thick wagoner’s frock in addition, could face the weather.

The last farewells were said. We embraced Mme. Keller, wondering if we should see her again.

The weather was fine, but in the middle of the day it would probably be very warm. Between now and two o’clock I intended to give the horses a rest, an indispensable rest if we were to travel far.

At last we were off. I began to whistle to cheer up my team, and I rent the air with the cracking of my whip. We got clear of Belzingen without being hindered much by the troops on march to Coblenz. From Belzingen to Borna is about a couple of leagues, and we got there in an hour. There the Leib regiment had been in garrison for some weeks, and from there it had gone to Magdeburg, where Mme. Keller was to reach it.

Mlle. Martha betrayed considerable emotion as we drove through the streets. She pictured to herself M. Jean, under the orders of Lieutenant Frantz, marching along the road which we were obliged to leave on our way to the south-west.

I did not stop at Borna. I intended to keep on four leagues further to the present frontier of the province of Brandenburg. But at this time, according to the old divisions of the German territory, we were in Upper Saxony.

Noon came when we reached this point of the frontier. A few detachments of cavalry were there in bivouac. An isolated inn stood by the road-side. There I could give my horses a meal, and there we stopped for three long hours. On this, the first day of our journey, I considered it prudent to work the horses so as they should not break down at the beginning.

We had to get our passports examined here. As we were French, we of course came in for a few suspicious looks. But that did not matter! We were all in order. And as they were driving us out of Germany, and as we had to evacuate the territory with as little delay as possible, there was uo reason for stopping us.

Our intention was to pass the night at Zerbst. Only under exceptional circumstances were we to travel during the night. The roads did not seem safe enough for us to risk adventure in the dark. There were too many ugly customers about. In these northern parts the nights in August are not long. The sun rises before three o’clock in the morning, and does not set much before nine. Our halt would thus be only for a few hours — just time enough to give us all a rest. When it became necessary to make an effort, we could do so.

From the frontier, where the berline stopped at noon, to Zerbst is not more than eight leagues. We could do that between three in the afternoon and eight in the evening. And I saw that we might reckon on a good many delays.

This day we had a little difference with a sort of horse recruiter, a long skinny fellow, bragging like a jockey, who tried to requisition our team. It was, he said, for the service of the state. I fancy the state meant the same to him as it did to Louis XIV. and that he wanted it for himself.

But I stopped him at last! He had to give in to our passports and the signature of the director of police; but we lost quite an hour before he would leave us.

We then found ourselves on the territory since formed into the principality of Anhalt. The roads were less crowded now, because the main mass of the Prussian army had inclined off to the north toward Magdeburg.

We met with no difficulty in reaching Zerbst — a sort of village of little importance, with hardly anything to be got in it when we arrived, about nine o'clock. It was obvious that the thieves had been through it, and that they did not at all object to living on the country. We did not want much beyond quarters for the night. But these quarters, among houses prudently shut, we had some difficulty in obtaining. I thought we should have to stay in the berline. We might do that, but how about the horses? Did they not want forage and litter? I thought of them before everything, and I trembled at the thought of their failing us.

I therefore suggested that we should go on to Acken, for instance, three leagues and a half from Zerbst, to the south-west. We could get there before midnight, and start at ten next morning, so as to give the horses a rest. M. de Lauranay told me we should have to cross the Elbe before we reached Acken, and that we should have to go over in a boat, and that it was better to cross during daylight. He was right. We had to cross the Elbe before we got to Acken, and then we might meet with difficulty.

I ought to say that M. de Lauranay knew the road well. For many years during his son’s life-time he had traveled between Belzingen and the French frontier. I had only been along the road once, so that he was the best guide, and it was wise to defer to him.

So, purse in hand, we again tried to find quarters at Zerbst for ourselves and horses; and at last we were successful, and we also found something to eat, so as to make the reserves in the berline go further. And so we passed the night at Zerbst more comfortably than we expected.

CHAPTER XIV.

Just before we reached Zerbst our berline had entered the territory which forms the principality of Anhalt and its three duchies. Next day we were to traverse it from north to south, so as to reach the little town of Acken. This brought us into Saxony, into the district of Magdeburg. Then Anhalt appeared again, as we headed toward Berns- burg, the capital of the duchy of the same name. Thence, for a third time, we entered Saxon territory, and crossed through Merseburg. Such in these days was the Germanic Confederation, with its hundreds of small states that the Ogre of Petit Poucet was to clear away at one swoop.

As you of course have guessed, I learned all this from M. de Lauranay. He showed me his map, and with his finger pointed out the position of the provinces and chief towns and rivers. I had not been through a course of geography in the regiment. And, again, if I had only known how to read!

Ah! my poor alphabet, suddenly interrupted just as I had begun to put the vowels and consonants together! And my good professor, M. Jean, now with knapsack on back, captured in this levy! But we must not dwell on these things, we must get on our road.

Since the evening the weather had been warm, stormy, dull, with little bits of blue among the clouds, not big enough, as they say, to make a gendarme’s breeches. I pushed on the horses, for it was important to reach Berns- burg before nightfall — and that meant a dozen leagues, which was not impossible, if the weather held up and we met with no obstacle.

But the Elbe barred the way, and I feared we should be kept there longer than I wanted.

Leaving Zerbst at six o’clock, we were on the right bank of the Elbe two hours afterward. It is rather a fine river of good breadth, and bordered with high banks and thousands upon thousands of reeds.

Fortune favored us. The ferry-boat was on our side, and as M. de Lauranay spared neither florins nor kreutzers, we did not have to wait long. In a quarter of an hour berline and horses were afloat.

The passage was effected without accident. If we were to be treated in the same way at every river we came to, we should not have much to complain of.

We then reached the small town of Acken, through which we went without stopping, on the road to Bernsburg.

I took the team along at top speed. The roads were not as good then as they are to-day. Mere ribbons traced on uneven ground, made more by the wheels of carts than the hands of man. In the rainy season they would have been impracticable, and in summer they left much to be wished for.

We kept on all the morning without a check. About noon — fortunately during our halt — we were passed by a regiment of pandours on the march. This was the first time I had seen these Austrian cavalry. They passed at full gallop. There was an enormous cloud of dust that rose to the sky, and in the whirlwind were the red reflections of their cloaks and the black spot of the sheepskin cap worn by these savages.

We had turned off the road, and were resting by the side of a small clump of beeches in which I had put the carriage. They did not see us. With such friends there is no knowing what might not happen; our horses might have taken the fancy of the pandours, and our berline that of the officers! Most certainly if we had been on the road they would not have waited for us to stand aside for them; they would simply have swept us away.

About four o’clock I pointed out to M. de Lauranay some high ground ahead, about a league away to the west.

“That is the castle of Bernsburg,” he replied.

The castle is on the summit of a hill, and can be seen from a great distance.

I urged on the horses. Half an hour afterward we were in Bernsburg, and there our papers were verified. Then, tired out by the heat of the stormy day, we crossed the Saale in a boat and entered Alstleben about ten o’clock. The night was fine — we were lodged in a fairly comfortable hotel, where we found no Prussian officers; so that our peace was not troubled, and we left at ten o’clock precisely next morning.

I shall not stop to give you the details of all the towns, villages, and hamlets we passed through. We did not see much of them. We were not traveling for pleasure, but were being expelled from a country we left without regret. The important point is that nothing happened to hinder us, and that we made good progress.

On the 18th, at noon, we were at Hettstadt. We had had to cross the Wipper, which in our regiment we called the Viper, not far from the copper mines. At three o’clock we reached Leimbach, at the junction of the Wipper and the Thalbach — another pleasant name for the wits of the Eoyal Picardy. Having passed Mansfeld, with its high hill, which a ray of sunshine was caressing in a shower of rain, and then Sangerhausen on the Gena, our way lay across a country rich in mines, with the Hartz Mountains on the horizon, and at the close of the day we had reached Artern on the Unstrut.

It had been a very tiring day — nearly fifteen leagues without a stoppage. I had to look well after my horses, and get them a good feed when they arrived, and good litter for the night. That cost something. M. de Lauranay did not, however, mind a few extra kreutzers, and he was right.

We were off next morning at eight o’clock, after a few difficulties with the innkeeper. I know that there is no bad without a worse, but I will back the proprietor of the hotel at Artern as one of the most unscrupulous fleecers of the German Empire.

This day the weather was detestable. There was a heavy storm. The lightning blinded us. Violent peals of thunder frightened the horses, and we were soaked in a pouring rain — one of those rains that rain parsons, as we say in our country.

The next day, the 19th of August, was better. The country was bathed in dew, beneath the breath of the first breeze of the morning. There was no rain. A stormy sky and overpowering heat. The ground was hilly. My horses were tiring. Soon I saw I should have to give thema\ twenty-lour hours’ rest. But before that I hoped to reach Gotha.

The road crossed the fairly well-tilled lands around Heldmungen, on the Schmuke, where we halted. “We had not been much bothered during the four days we had left Belzingen, and I thought to myself: “If we had been able to travel together, we might have squeezed Mme. Keller and her son into the berline!”

Our road took us through Erfurth, one of the three districts of the province of Saxony. The roads were good, and our progress was rapid. I should have taken my horses along better if it had not been for an accident to one of the wheels, which we could not get repaired at Weissensee. At Tennstedt we had it taken in hand by a clumsy smith, and it worried me for the rest of the journey.

The stage was a long one to-day, but we were sustained by the hope of reaching Gotha. There we could rest — providing we got comfortable quarters. For me it did not matter much. Strongly built as I was, I could stand much worse treatment than I had had. But M. and Mlle, de Lauranay, although they did not complain, looked quite tired out already. My sister Irma was not so bad. But all of them were very sorrowful.

From five o'clock to nine in the evening we completed eight leagues, having passed Schambach, and left the territory of Saxony for that of Saxe-Coburg. At eleven we reached Gotha. Here we had decided to wait for a day. Our horses had well earned a night and day's rest. I had certainly been lucky when I chose them. There is nothing like knowing what you are buying, and being able to pay the price.

I said we reached Gotha at eleven o'clock. We were delayed a little by the formalities at the gate of the town. If our papers had not been in order we should have been stopped. Both the military officials and the civil officials were as strict as they could be. It was fortunate that the Prussian Government in expelling us had given us the means of obeying. I concluded that if we had tried our first plan of leaving before M. Jean's call to the regiment, Kalkreuth would not have given us our passports, and we should never have reached the frontier. So we had to thank Heaven first of all, and then his Majesty Frederick William for helping us on our journey. It is useless to go to the Cross before the time. That is one of our Picard proverbs, and it is worth a good many others.

There are some good hotels at Gotha. At the Prussian Arms I found four very acceptable rooms, and a stable for two horses. Although I regretted the delay, yet I felt I must resign myself to it. Of the twenty days allowed us for our journey, we had only occupied four, and we had done a third of the distance. If we could keep up at that rate, we should reach the French frontier in the time allowed. I only asked one thing, and that was that the Boyal Picardy did not get under fire until I got back.

In the morning, about eight o’clock, I went down to the parlor of the hotel, where my sister joined me.

“How are Monsieur and Mademoiselle de Lauranay?’ I asked.

“They have not yet left their rooms,” said Irma, “and we must not disturb them till breakfast.”

“That is understood, Irma. And where are you going?”

“Nowhere now. But in the afternoon I am going shopping, to make up our stock of provisions. Will you come with me?”

“Willingly. I will be ready. Meanwhile I will go and stroll about the streets.”

And oil I went in search of adventure.

What shall I tell you of Gotha? I did not see anything very grand. There were many troops — infantry, artillery, cavalry, and commissariat. I heard a good deal of bell-ringing, and saw some guard-relieving. At the thought that all these soldiers were marching against France, my heart was sore. What misery to think that the soil of my country was perhaps to be invaded by these strangers! How many of my comrades would die in defending it! Yes! I ought to be with them to fight at my post. Quartermaster Delpierre was not one of those tin- plates that dread the fire.

In returning I passed many churches whose steeples pointed into the mist. Round them I met with a great number of soldiers. The place seemed nothing but an enormous barracks.

I got back at eleven, having taken the precaution to have our passports examined as we had been ordered. M. de Lauranay was still in his room with Mlle. Martha. The poor girl had not the heart to go out; and that was intelligible. What would she have seen if she had? Nothing but what would have reminded her of M. Jean! Where was he then? Had Mme. Keller been able to come up with him, or at least to follow the regiment from halt to halt? How was she traveling? What could she do in the event of the misfortunes she anticipated? And M. Jean, a Prussian soldier marching against the country he loved, which he would have been happy to have the right to defend, for which he would willingly have shed his blood!

Naturally we were down-hearted. M. de Lauranay had his lunch in his room. The German officers came to the Prussian Arms for their meals, and it was better to avoid meeting them.

After lunch M. and Mlle, de Lauranay remained at the hotel with my sister. I went out to see that the horses wanted for nothing. The innkeeper accompanied me to the stables. I saw that he wanted to talk with me about our journey, and matters that were no business of his. But I was prepared for him, and he did not get much out of me.

At three o’clock my sister and I went out shopping. As Irma spoke German we could get on all right in the streets and shops. All the same they could see easily enough that we were French, and that might not improve their reception of us.

Between three and five o’clock we went to several places, and, in short, I saw all the chief streets of Gotha.

I should like to have heard news of what was happening in France, and I told Irma to keep her ears open to what was being said in the streets and shops. We did not even hesitate to get near such groups as were talking with much animation, in order to hear what they were talking about — which was not very prudent on my part. The little we learned was not very gratifying to a Frenchman; but better have bad news than none at all.

I noticed several placards on the walls. Most of them were announcements of the movements of troops, or tenders for army supplies. Now and then my sister stopped and read the first lines.

One of these notices at length specially attracted my attention. It was written in heavy black characters on yellow paper. I can see it now stuck up against a shed at the corner of a cobbler’s stall.

“Look,” said I to Irma; “look at that notice! Are those figures at the top?”

My sister approached the stall and began to read: What a cry she gave! Fortunately we were alone. No one heard her.

And this is what the notice said: “One thousand florins reward to any one giving up Jean Keller of Belzingen, a soldier sentenced to death for having struck an officer of the Leib regiment on the march to Magdeburg.”

CHAPTER XV.

How we got back to the Prussian Arms, and what we said by the way I have in vain tried to remember. Perhaps we did not interchange a word! The trouble in which we were might have been noticed. It would not have taken much to have brought us before the authorities. We might have been questioned, arrested perhaps, if they found by what ties we were bound to the Kellers!

We regained our rooms without running against anybody. My sister and I had a talk together before seeing M. and Mlle, de Lauranay. We wished to agree what had best be done.

There we sat, looking at each other, without daring to say a word.

“Poor fellow! Poor fellow! What has he done?” exclaimed my sister.

“What has he done?” said I. “He has done what I should have done in his place! He has been treated badly and insulted by this Frantz! He has struck him, as was sure to happen sooner or later! I should have done the same!”

“My poor Jean! my poor Jean!” murmured my sister, as the tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Irma,” said I, “courage! It was necessary!”

“Sentenced to death!”

“Not so fast! He has run away! At present he is out of their reach, and wherever he may be, he must be better off than in the regiment with the Grawerts!”

“And the thousand florins they promise to any one who will give him up, Natalis!”

“The thousand florins are not in anybody’s pocket at present, Irma, and probably no one will ever get them.”

“And how can he escape? The notice is up in all the towns and villages. How many low fellows there must be who would like nothing better than to find him!”

“Do not give way so, Irma,” I replied. “Nothing as yet is lost! There are many muskets pointing at the man — ”

“Natalis! Natalis!”

“But they may miss fire! That is clear! Do not give way, I tell you! Monsieur Jean has escaped and got away into the country. He is alive, and he is not the man to let them catch him. He will be safe!”

I must say candidly that when I said this it was not only with the idea of giving my sister hope. I believed it myself. Evidently M. Jean’s greatest difficulty was to escape, and if he had succeeded in that, it did not seem easy to get hold of him again, although the bills offered a reward of a thousand florins. No! I did not despair, although my sister would listen to nothing.

“And Madame Keller?” she said.

Yes! What had become of Mme. Keller? Had she been able to reach her son? Did she know what had happened? Was she with M. Jean in his flight?

“Poor woman! Poor mother!” repeated my sister. “If she reached the regiment at Magdeburg she must have heard of it! She knows her son is sentenced to death!”

“Irma,” said I, “be calm! If they were to hear you! You know Madame Keller is a woman of energy; perhaps Monsieur Jean has returned to her!”

This may seem surprising; but, I repeat, I said what I thought was true. It is not in my nature to abandon myself to despair.

“And Martha?” said my sister.

“My advice is to say nothing about it to them. If we speak, they may lose courage. The journey is still a long one, and Mademoiselle Martha wants all her strength of mind. If she learns what has happened — that Monsieur Jean is condemned to death, that he is in flight, that a price is on bis head, she will be half dead! She will refuse to follow us — ”

“Yes, you are right, Natalis! Shall we keep it secret from Monsieur de Lauranay?”

“Just as much, Irma. To tell him would do no good. Ah! if it were only possible for us to get away in search of Madame Keller and her son! We might then tell Monsieur de Lauranay everything. But our days are numbered. We are forbidden to remain in this country. We should soon be arrested, and I do not see how that could benefit Monsieur Jean. Come, Irma, be reasonable. Above all, take care that mademoiselle does not notice that you have been crying!”

“And if they go out, Natalis, can they not read that bill and learn — ”

“It is not likely, Irma, that they will go out at night if they did not go out during the day. And if they do, it is not easy to read a bill like that in the dark. We need not fear that they will find anything out. So take care of yourself, and be strong.”

“I will, Natalis! I feel that you are right! Yes! I will take care. They will see nothing; but when I am alone — ”

“When you are alone, you can cry, Irma, for it is all very sad; cry, but be silent! Those are your orders!”

After supper, during which I talked about everything, so as to attract attention to myself and relieve my sister, M. and Mlle, de Lauranay went back to their rooms as I thought they would. After a visit to the stable I went and arranged with them to rise early in the morning. I intended to start at five o’clock sharp, for our road for the day was to be a long one, and a tiring one, and through a mountainous country.

We went to bed. For my part I hardly slept at all. I thought of all that had happened. The confidence I felt when endeavoring to keep up my sister’s spirits seemed to be leaving me now. Things might turn out badly. Jean Keller betrayed — handed over. Is it not always thus when you are half asleep?

At five o’clock I was up, and had awakened my people and put-to my horses. I was in a hurry to leave Gotha.

At six o’clock they were all in the berline, I had started my well-rested horses, and was off on my first four leagues. We had reached the mountains of Thuringia.

We had now a difficult journey before us, and a good deal of management was required. It was not that the mountains were very high. They are not Pyrenees, nor are they Alps. But the country is not an easy one for driving through, and I had to be as careful of the carriage as of the horses. There were then hardly any proper roads. There were defiles, often very narrow ones, that we had to make our way through, not without danger; wooded gorges, with thick forests of oaks, firs, beeches, and larches; frequent windings, tortuous footpaths, where the berline could only just get by, with a cliff on one side and a precipice on the other, and a torrent growling below.

From time to time I had to dismount and lead the horses. M. de Lauranay, his granddaughter, and my sister occasionally got out and walked when the ascent was difficult. Often we had to halt to take breath. How I congratulated myself that I had said nothing about M. Jean! If my sister despaired in spite of my reasoning with her, what would have been the despair of Mlle. Martha and her grandfather?

This day, the 21st of August, we did not do five leagues in a straight line — for the road made a thousand curves, and at times seemed to be taking us back again. We should have had a guide, you say? But whom could we trust? Frenchmen at the mercy of a German when war had been declared! No, better trust to ourselves to get out of our difficulties! Besides, M. de Lauranay had traveled through Thuringia so often that he knew the road well. The most difficult part was through the forests. There we had often to trust to the sun, who, not being of German origin, did not lead us astray.

About eight o’clock in the evening the berline stopped at the skirt of a birch wood on the flank of a high chain of mountains. It would have been imprudent to venture further during the night. There was no inn, not even a woodman’s hut. We would have to sleep in the berline, I — or under the trees of the forest. We supped on the provisions in our boxes. I had unharnessed the horses. As grass was abundant at the foot of the hill, I left them to graze at liberty, my intention being to watch over them during the night.

I persuaded M. de Lauranay, Mlle Martha, and my sister to resume their places in the berline, where they would at least be under shelter. A slight rain was falling, a cold drizzle, for we were now at a considerable elevation. i M. de Lauranay offered to pass the night with me. I refused. Such watches are not good for a man of his age. I would rather spend it alone. Wrapped in my warm frock, with the branches of the trees over my head, I should have nothing to complain of. I had done the same before in the prairies of America, where the winter is worse than in any other climate.

Everything went as well as could be wished. Our tranquillity was not disturbed. The berline was as good as many of the rooms in the hotels. With the windows closed there was no damp; with the traveling-wraps there was no cold. And if it had not been for the thoughts of the absent all would have slept well.

At day-break, about four o’clock, M. de Lauranay came out of the berline, and offered to take my place, so that I might get an hour or two’s sleep. Fearing to annoy him if I still refused, I consented, and with my fists in my eyes, and my head in my frock, I had a good sound nap.

At half past six we were all afoot. “Are you not tired, Monsieur Natalis?” asked Mlle. Martha.

“I,” said I, “I have slept like a dormouse, while your father kept guard!”

“Natalis exaggerates a little,” replied M. de Lauranay, with a smile, “and to-night he will allow me — ”

“I will allpw you nothing, Monsieur de Lauranay. It would look well for the master to watch through the night while the servant — ”

“Servant!” exclaimed Mlle. Martha. “Yes! Servant! Coachman! See here! Am I not a coachman, and a good one, too, I flatter myself! Call me postilion, if you like, so as not to hurt my feelings. I am none the less your servant — ”

“No. You are our friend,” said Mlle. Martha, holding out her hand; “and the most faithful friend that Heaven could have given us to take us back to France.”

Ah! brave lady! What would men not do for people who speak like that, and in a tone of such friendship. As for me, if the chance came for me again to help her — Sufficit! And if I had to give my life for her — Amen! as the cur6 of our village would say.

By seven o’clock we were off. If the day brought no more obstacles than the last, we should before night have traversed Thuringia. It began well. The early hours brought hard work, it is true, for the road mounted between the ridges so sharply that we had to push up the wheels. At noon we had reached the highest part of the defile they call the Gebaiier, if my memory does not deceive me, and which crosses the highest point of the ridge. Thence we had only to go down. Without going full gallop, which would not be prudent, we could go fast.

The weather continued to be stormy. If the rain had not fallen since sunrise, the sky was covered with big clouds resembling enormous bombs. Only a shock was required to make them flash, and then we should have a storm, and storms are always dangerous in mountainous countries. In fact, about six o’clock we could hear the rolling of the thunder some distance off, but approaching very fast.

Mlle. Martha, leaning back in the berline, absorbed in thought, did not seem to be much frightened. My sister shut her eyes and remained motionless.

“Had we not better halt?” asked M. de Lauranay, leaning out of the window.

“I think so,” answered I, “and I will do so when I come to a comfortable place to camp. But on this slope that is hardly possible.”

“Be careful, Natalis.”

“Never fear, Monsieur de Lauranay.”

I had hardly finished the words when a mighty flash enveloped the berline and the horses. The lightning had struck an enormous birch-tree on our right. Fortunately the tree was struck on the side away from the road.

The horses became violently excited. I felt I had lost all power over them. They dashed down the defile at full gallop, despite all I could do to stop them. They and I were blinded by the flashes and deafened by the peals of thunder. If the frightened beasts swerved, the berline would be hurled into the ravine by the road-side. Suddenly the reins broke. The horses feeling their liberty dashed ahead still more furiously. An inevitable catastrophe was imminent.

Suddenly there was a shock. The berline had struck against the trunk of a tree that lay across the defile. The traces broke. The horses leaped over the tree. Just at the spot the defile made a sharp turn, and beyond it the unfortunate beasts disappeared in the abyss.

The berline was damaged by the shock, broken in the front wheels, but it was not overturned. M. de Lauranay, Mlle. Martha, and my sister escaped without a wound. I had been thrown out of the saddle, but I was safe and sound.

What an irreparable accident! What was to become of us now, without means of transport, in the middle of this Thurmgian desert: What a night we passed!

Next morning, that of the 23d of August, we had to abandon the berline, which we could not make use of again, even if other horses replaced those we had lost.

I had made up a bundle of provisions and things, that I carried over my shoulder at the end of a stick. We descended the narrow defile which, unless M. de Lauranay was mistaken, opened out on to the plain. I walked in front. My sister and the others followed as well as they could. I do not think we did more than three leagues that day. When we halted for the night the setting sun lighted up the vast plains, stretching away westward from the foot of the mountains of Thuringia.

CHAPTER XVI.

The position was serious, and it would become worse if we found no means of replacing the berline we had abandoned in the defiles of the Thuringer Wald!

But the first thing was to find a refuge for the night. Then we could think over matters.

I was in a fix. There was not a cottage to be seen. I did not know what to do until, on going up to the right, I perceived a sort of hut at the edge of the forest on the last spur of the hills.

The hut was open to the winds on three of its sides. Its rotten planks let through the rain and wind, but the shingles on the roof were sound and would keep off the wet if it came on to rain.

The storm of the night before had so cleared the sky that we had no rain during the day. Unfortunately, with the evening thick clouds had returned from the west, and overhead were banking up until they seemed to touch the ground. I considered myself lucky to have found this hut, wretched as it was, now that the berline was gone.

M. de Lauranay had been much affected by the accident, particularly for the sake of his granddaughter. We were still a long way from the French frontier. How would we finish the journey, and in the allotted time, if we had to do it on foot? We had thus many things to think of. But at first we had to attend to the most pressing.

In the interior of the hut, which did not seem to have been recently occupied, the ground was covered with a litter of dry herbs. Perhaps it was a refuge for the shepherds who brought their flocks to feed on the mountains. Below the hill lay the plains of Saxony in the direction of the Fulda, and the province of the Upper Rhine.

Under the rays of the setting sun, which slanted down on to them, the plains rose to the horizon in gentle undulations. Although they were ridged with hills, the road through them was nothing like so difficult as that by which we had come from Gotha.

When night came I helped my sister to get the supper ready. M. and Mlle, de Lauranay were probably overtired, for they could eat nothing. Neither could Irma touch anything. Fatigue had driven away hunger.

“You are wrong,” said I. “Eat first and sleep afterward, that is the way with a soldier in the field. We shall have need of our legs now. Mademoiselle Martha, you should take something — ”

“I would, good Natalis,” said she, “but it is impossible! To-morrow, before we start, I will try — ”

“That will be a meal the less!” was my answer.

“Exactly, but never fear. I will not delay you on the road.”

For all I could say I did no good, although I preached by example, and eat heartily. I had resolved to give myself the strength of the four, as I expected a quadruple task in the morning.

A few steps from the hut ran a limpid stream, which lost itself in a narrow gorge. A few drops of this water mixed with schnapps from my flask gave me a comforting drink.

Mlle. Martha consented to take two or three mouthfuls. M. de Lauranay and my sister followed her example — and they were right.

Then all three went and lay down in the hut, when they were soon fast asleep.

I had promised to sleep too, intending to do nothing of the sort. I said so because M. de Lauranay would have sat up with me, and it would not do to let him do so.

There I was then, pacing backward and forward like a sentinel. There is nothing new in sentry-go for a soldier. As a matter of prudence the two pistols I had brought from the berline were at my belt. I thought it was best to keep guard properly.

I had firmly resolved not to fall asleep, although my eyelids were heavy. When my legs failed me, I could sit down near the hut with ear and eyes well open.

The night was very dark, although the low mists had gradually floated into the sky. There was not a rift in the thick veil, not a sign of a star. The moon had set soon after the sun. The horizon was, however, clear of fog. If a fire had been lighted in the depths of the forest or on the surface of the plain, I should certainly have seen it. But all was dark in front over the fields, behind over the woods that came down the neighboring ridge and stopped at the angle of the hut. The silence was as deep as the darkness. Not a whisper troubled the calm of the atmosphere, as often happens in such weather when the storm can not even spend itself in mere heat-flashes.

There was a noise, however! There was a whistling that reproduced the calls and sounds of the Royal Picardy Regiment. Natalis Delpierre was at his bad habits, as you may guess. But he was the only whistler at a time when the birds slept under the foliage of the birches and oaks.

And as I whistled I thought of the past. I ran over what had happened at Belzingen since my arrival — the wedding put off, the meeting that did not take place with Lieutenant von Grawert, the recruiting of M. Jean, and our expulsion from German territory. Then in the future I saw the difficulties that were gathering round, Jean Keller with a price on his head flying with a ball at his feet, the ball being a sentence of death, his mother knowing not where to find him!

And if he were found! If some scoundrel did hand him over to pocket this prize of a thousand florins! No! I could not believe it! Bold and resolute M. Jean was not the man to let himself be taken or sold.

While I abandoned myself to these reflections I felt my eyelids shut in spite of me. I got up, not wishing to yield to sleep. I was sorry that nature was so calm during the night, and that the obscurity was so firofound. There was not a sound to interest me, not a light over the country or in the sky to attract my attention. And it required a constant effort of will to keep myself from yielding to fatigue.

But the time slipped away. What o’clock might it be? Was it past midnight? Perhaps, for the nights were short at this time of year. And I looked for the sky to get paler in the east over the crest of the mountains. But nothing showed the approach of dawn. I must have been wrong — and I was wrong.

It then occurred to me that during the day M. de Laurnay and I, after consulting the map, had discovered that the first town of importance we should come to would be Tann, in the district of Cassel, in the province of

Hesse Nassau. There we might be able to replace the berline. It did not matter how we managed to get to France, providing we got there. To reach Tann we should have to journey about a dozen leagues, and I was deep in my thoughts of this, when I gave a sudden start.

I jumped up and listened. It seemed as though I had heard a distant report. Was it the sound of a musket?

Almost immediately a second report reached me. There was no doubt now; it must be either a musket or a pistol. And I even thought I saw a flash among the trees behind the hut.

In our position in an almost deserted country, there was a good deal to fear. A band of camp followers or pillagers might be passing along the road, and we might be discovered. Even half a dozen men would be too much for us.

A quarter of an hour elapsed. I had not woke up M. de Lauranay. It might be that the report came from some hunter of the wild boar or roebuck. In any case, by the light I saw I reckoned he was half a league away from us.

I stood upright, motionless, looking fixedly toward the spot from whence the sound had come. As I heard nothing I began to be more confident, to ask myself if I had not been the plaything of an illusion of ear and eye. Sometimes you sleep when you do not think you are sleeping. The thing you take for a reality is but the fugitive impression of a dream.

I resolved to fight against this tendency to sleep, and I began to march backward and forward, whistling my loudest calls. I even went into the angle of the forest behind the hut for about a hundred yards under the trees.

Then I seemed to hear a sound of gliding through the underwood. It might be a fox; or it might be a wolf. My pistol was loaded, and ready for him, and such is the force of habit that at this moment, at the risk of betraying my presence, I kept on whistling — as I learned later on.

Suddenly I thought I saw a shadow leap. I fired almost at hazard. But as the report rang out a man rose before me.

In the flash I had recognized him. It was Jean Keller.

CHAPTER XVII.

At the noise M. de Lauranay, Mlle. Martha, and my sister suddenly awoke and ran out of the hut. In the man who had come with me out of the forest, they had not recognized M. Jean, nor Mme. Keller who had just come into view immediately behind him. M. Jean rushed toward them. Before he uttered a word Mlle. Martha knew him, and fell into his arms.

“Jean!” she murmured.

“Yes, Martha! And my mother! At last!”

Mlle, de Lauranay sprung into the arms of Mme. Keller.

It would not do to lose our coolness, or do anything imprudent.

“Get back all of you into the hut,” said I. “Your head is worth something, Monsieur Jean!”

“What! Do you know?” he said.

“My sister and I know all!”

“And you, Martha, and you, Monsieur de Lauranay?” asked Mme. Keller.

“What is it?” exclaimed Martha.

“You shall learn,” said I. “Go back!”

A moment later we were cowering down at the back of the hut. But if we could not be seen we might be heard, and I took up my position so that I could hear all that passed, and yet kept guard over the road.

And this is what M. Jean had to say, interrupting himself only to listen to what was going on outside. He told his story in a panting way, in disjointed phrases which allowed time to take breath, as if he had been thoroughly pumped out by a long run.

“Dearest Martha,” said he, “better here — hidden in this hut — than under the orders of Colonel von Grawert and in the same company as Lieutenant Frantz!”

And then in a few words Martha and my sister were told what had happened before our departure from Belzingen, the lieutenant’s insulting provocation, the meeting that had been arranged, the refusal to keep the appointment after the call on Jean Keller to join the Leib regiment.

“Yes,” said M. Jean, “I was to be under this officer’s orders. He could take his vengeance at his ease, instead of standing in front of me, sword in hand. This man, who insulted you, Martha, I would have killed — ”

“Jean — my poor Jean!” murmured the girl.

“The regiment was sent to Bonn,” continued Jean Keller. “There for a month, I was put to the worst duties that could be found, humiliated in the service, punished unjustly, treated as you would not treat a dog, and by this Frantz. I restrained myself — I bore it all, thinking of you, Martha, and my mother, and all my friends! Ah! what I had to put up with! At last the regiment started for Magdeburg. There my mother was to meet me. But there one evening, five days ago, Lieutenant Frantz met me in a street by myself, overwhelmed me with insults, and struck me with his whip. It was too much. I threw myself on him. I gave him a sound flogging.”

“Jean, my poor Jean!” murmured mademoiselle.

“I was lost if I could not escape. Luckily I found my mother at the inn where she was lodging. In a few moments I had changed my uniform for the dress of a peasant, and we had left Magdeburg. Next morning, as I soon knew, I was sentenced to death by a court-martial! A price was put on my head! A thousand florins to whoever would give me up! How could I escape? I did not know! But I had made up my mind to live, Martha — to live and see you all again!”

Here M. Jean broke off.

“Did you hear anything?” he asked.

I slipped out of the hut. The road was silent and deserted. I put my ear to the ground. There was no suspicious sound in the direction of the forest.

“Nothing,” said I, as I went back.

“My mother and I were thrown on the fields of Saxony in the hope of joining you, for my mother knew the road the police had ordered you to follow. We traveled at night, buying a little food at isolated houses, passing through villages where I could read the notice offering the reward for my capture — ”

“Yes,” said I, “the notice my sister and I read at Gotha.”

“My plan,” continued M. Jean, “was to try and reach Thuringia, where I thought you might still be. There, besides, I should be in more safety. At last we reached the mountains — a rough road, as you know, Natalis, for you have done some of it on foot — ”

“Quite so,” I replied, “but who told you that?”

“Yesterday evening when we had passed the Gebauer, I noticed a berline half smashed and abandoned on the road. I recognized the carriage as Monsieur de Lauranay’s. There had been an accident! Were you safe? Great was our anxiety! My mother and I walked all through the night. Then when day came we had to hide!”

“Hide?” said my sister. “And why? Were you followed?”

“Yes,” replied M. Jean, “followed by three scoundrels I met below the Gebauer defile, the poacher Buch of Belzingen and his two sons. I had seen them at Magdeburg, in the rear of the army, with a number of other thieves like them. Doubtless they knew a thousand florins could be gained by following me. This they did, and to-night, hardly two hours ago, we were attacked half a league from here on the edge of the forest — ”

“And that accounts for the two reports I thought I heard?”

“They were the two shots they fired. I had my hat shot through by a bullet. However, my mother and I hid in the underwood and escaped the scoundrels. They think we have gone back, for they went on toward the mountains. Then we resumed our road toward the plains, and when we reached the end of the forest, Natalis, I recognized you by your whistling — ”

“And I fired at you, Monsieur Jean! I saw a man jump — ”

“No matter, Natalis! But the shot may have been heard, and it is better I should be off at once.”

“Alone!” exclaimed Mlle. Martha.

“No! we go together!” replied M. Jean. “And if possible we will not part until we have reached the French frontier.”

We knew all we need know, that is to say, that M. Jean’s life was in danger, if the poacher and his two sons recovered his track. Doubtless we could defend him against these scoundrels. We should not give him up without a struggle! But how would it end if the Buchs were joined by other gentry of their species, such as were then so numerous?

In a few words M. Jean was informed of all that had happened since we left Belzingen, and how the journey had been favored until the accident in the Gebaiier.

Now the want of horses and carriage caused us great embarrassment.

“We must at all cost procure means of transport,” said M. Jean.

“I hope we shall be able to find them at Tann,” answered M. de Lauranay. “But do not let us stop any longer in this hut. Buch and his sons may not have gone away from the neighborhood. We must take advantage of the night.”

“Can you come with us, Martha?” asked M. Jean.

“I am ready,” said Mlle, de Lauranay.

“And you, mother, can you bear such fatigues?”

“Forward, my son!” answered Mme. Keller.

We had some provisions left; enough to take us to Tann. That would save us halting in the villages where Buch might pass or had passed.

Before we started we talked over what was best to be done, for, as we say at picquet, it is best to make sure of the baby. Although it was not without danger, we decided to keep together. That would be relatively easy for M. and Mlle, de Lauranay, my sister and I, inasmuch as our passports protected us up to the French frontier, but it would not be easy for Mme. Keller aud her son. They must be careful not to enter the villages we were obliged to pass through; they must leave us before we get to them. In this way it was not impossible for us to travel together.

“Let us be off,” said I. “If I can buy a carriage and horses at Tann, there will be a good many fatigues spared your mother and Mademoiselle Martha, and my sister and Monsieur de Lauranay. As to us, Monsieur Jean, we have only a few days’ march for us to see how beautiful the stars shine on the fair land of France.”

And I was off, twenty yards on the road. It was two o’clock in the morning. Darkness enveloped the whole country. But on the crests of the mountains, the first pale streaks of dawn were just growing visible.

If I could see nothing I could hear. I listened attentively. The air was so calm that the sound of a footstep on the road or in the thicket could not have escaped me.

Nothing! We could conclude that Buch and his son had lost the trail of Jean Keller.

We were all out of the hut. I was carrying what remained of our provisions, and believe me the weight was not a great one. One of our pistols I had given to M.

Jean; the other I kept. When the time came we knew how to use them.

At this moment Jean took Mlle, de Lauranay’s hand, and in a voice of great emotion said to her: “Martha! when I wished to make you my wife, my life was my own! Now I am a fugitive condemned to death! I have no right to associate your life with mine.”

“Jean, we are one in the sight of God! May He protect us!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

i will pass rapidly over the first two days of our journey with Mme. Keller and her son. We had the good luck in leaving Thuringia to meet with no adventure.

We were much excited, and we went along at a good pace. Fatigue seemed to have no power over us. Mme. Keller, Mlle. Martha, and my sister wished to set us an example. We had to quiet them down a little. We rested one hour in every four during the day.

The country was not very fertile and was cut up by sinuous ravines, bristling with willows and aspens — a wild place is this part of Hesse Nassau, which has since been formed into the district of Cassel. There are few villages, only a few flat-roofed farms. We crossed the little river of Schmalkalden in favorable weather, with a clear sky and a pleasant fresh breeze that blew us onward. Nevertheless, our companions were tired enough when on the 24th of August, after a dozen leagues on foot from the mountains of Thuringia, we arrived at Tann about ten o’clock at night.

Then, as had been agreed, M. Jean and his mother separated from us. It was not prudent to enter a town where he might be recognized, and we knew what that meant!

He had appointed to meet us in the morning about eight o’clock on the road to Fulda. If we were not punctual it would be because the acquisition of a carriage and horses had delayed us. But under no pretext were Mme. Keller and her son to enter Tann. And that was wise, for the police were very strict in examining our passports. I saw the time coming when they would detain the people they were expelling. We had to tell them how we were traveling, how we lost our carriage, etc.

That did us some good, however. One of the police, in the hope of a good commission, offered to introduce us to a jobmaster. His proposition was accepted. After taking Mlle. Martha and my sister to the hotel, M. de Lauranay, who spoke German well, went with me to the man.

A traveling carriage he had not. We had to be content with a sort of two-wheeled wagon covered with a tilt, drawn by one horse. I need not add that M. de Lauranay had to pay twice the value of the horse, and three times that of the wagon.

At eight o’clock next morning we found Mme. Keller and her son on the road. They had slept at a dirty inn. M. Jean had passed the night in a chair, while his mother had slept on a pallet. M. and Mlle, de Lauranay, Mme. Keller and Irma got into the wagon, where I had packed some provisions bought at Tann. By sitting close another place was left, which I offered to M. Jean. He refused it, and finally it was agreed we should take it in turns, and most of the time it happened that we both walked to make things easy for the horse.

On the 26th we reached Fulda, after seeing from afar the dome of its cathedral, and on a height a convent of Franciscans. On the 27th we went through Schlinchtern, Sodon, Salmunster, at the junction of the Salza and the Kinzig. On the 28th we reached Gelnhausen, and if we had been traveling for pleasure we should have visited the castle inhabited by Frederick Barbarossa, as they told me afterward. But fugitives, or little better than fugitives, had something else to do.

The wagon did not go as fast as I liked, owing to the bad state of the road, which principally in the neighborhood of Salmunster runs through interminable forests with huge fish-ponds, such as we call cuts in Picardy.

We could only go at a foot-pace; and the delay was getting serious. We had been thirteen days on the road; in seven more days our passports would be worthless.

Mme. Keller was almost tired out. What would happen if her strength gave out, and we had to leave her in some town or village? Her son could not remain with her. Until the French frontier was between M. Jean and the Prussian police he was in danger of his life.

What difficulties we had in the forest of Lomberg, which extends from the left to the right of Kinzig to the mountains of Hesse Darmstadt! I thought we should never get to the other side of the river; and we had to lose a lot of time before we found a ford.

On the 29th the wagon stopped a little short of Hanau. We ought to have passed the night in this town, where there was a considerable movement going on of troops and transport. As M. Jean and his mother would have had to make a circuit of two leagues to avoid it, M. de Lauranay and Mlle. Martha remained with them in the wagon. My sister and I went alone into the town to replenish our stores; and we joined them in the morning of the 30th on the road that runs through Wiesbaden. At noon we avoided the little town of Offenbach, and in the evening we reached Frankfort-on-the-Main.

Of this large city I shall say nothing, except that it is on the right bank of the river, and that it swarms with Jews. Having crossed the Main in the ferry-boat from Offenbach we were on the road to Mayence. But as we could not avoid entering Frankfort to get our passports examined, we went in, and complied with the order, and then came

back again, so that that night we were not separated. And what we appreciated even more was that we found a modest but very comfortable lodging in the suburb of Sahlsenhausen, on the left bank of the Main.

After supper together they all went to bed, while my sister and I went out to make a few purchases.

Among other things Irma heard people talking at the baker’s about Jean Keller. They said he had been captured near Salmunster, and the details of his capture were not given. We might have been amused at this had we been in the humor. But we heard something else that seemed to me to be very serious indeed. And that was that the Leib regiment was expected to march through Frankfort to Mayence, and so on to Thionville. If that was true, Colonel von Grawert and his son would be on the same road as we were. Would it not be better, then, to change our route at the risk of getting into trouble for avoiding the towns indicated by the Prussian police?

In the morning of the 31st I told M. Jean this unwelcome news. He advised me to say nothing about it to his mother or Mlle. Martha, who already had enough to worry them. Beyond Mayence we could talk over what had better be done, and, if need be, separate until we got to the frontier. By pressing forward we might gain on the Leib regiment.

We started at six o’clock. Unfortunately, the road was difficult and fatiguing. We had to go through the forests of Neilruh and La Ville, which border on Frankfort. There was a delay of some hours in turning the villages of Hochst and Hochheim, which were full of a transport- train. I saw the time coming when our old wagon and its bony horse would be taken for the transport of many a hundred-weight of bread. Although we were only fifteen leagues from Frankfort it was not till the evening of the 31st that we reached Mayence. We were then on the frontier of Hesse Darmstadt.

It will be guessed that Mme. Keller and her son had good reason for avoiding Mayence. The town is on the left bank of the Ehine, at the junction of the Main, and opposite Cassel, which is practically one of its suburbs, and is connected with it by a bridge of boats six hundred feet long.

To strike the roads to France we had necessarily to cross the Bhine, either above or below the town, or go over the bridge. We therefore went off in search of a boat to take over M. Jean and his mother. Our search was useless. All boats were forbidden to cross by the military authorities.

It was then eight o’clock in the evening. We did not know what to do.

“My mother and I must get over the Ehine somehow,” said Jean Keller.

“And where and how?” asked I.

“By the bridge of Mayence, if it is impossible to cross anywhere else.”

And then the following plan was adopted: M. Jean took my frock, which covered him from head to foot. Holding the horse by the bridle he walked toward the gate of Cassel.

Mme. Keller was hidden in the back of the wagon under our traveling-wraps. M. and Mlle, de Lauranay and my sister and I occupied the two seats. In this way we approached the old ramparts with their mossy walls, between the advanced parties, and the wagon stopped at the guard at the head of the bridge.

There was a great crowd of people coming home from the free-market held that day at Mayence. M. Jean put a bold face on the matter.

“Your passports?” they asked.

I held out the passports, which were handed on to the commander of the guard.

“Who are these people?” he asked.

“French subjects I am taking to the frontier.”

“ And who are you?”

“Nicholas Friedel, jobmaster at Hochst.”

Our passports were examined with extreme attention. Although they were all in order you can imagine the state of mind we were in.

“These passports have only four days to run,” said the commander of the guard. “In four days you must be off German territory.”

“They shall be,” said Jean Keller, “but we have no time to lose.”

“Pass!”

Half an hour afterward the Rhine was crossed, and we were at the Anhalt Hotel, where M. Jean could play his part of jobmaster to his heart’s content.

How strange things are! What a different reception would have awaited us a few months later, when, in October, Mayence surrendered to the French! What joy there would have been at our finding our countrymen there! How they would have welcomed us! And if we had stopped six months, eight months, in this capital, we would have gone out with our brave regiments and the honors of war to return to France.

But you do not always arrive when you like, and the chief thing is to be able to get away when you like.

When Mme. Keller, Mlle. Martha and Irma had gone to their rooms at the Anhalt Hotel, M. Jean went to look after his horse; and M. de Lauranay and I went out in search of news.

The best thing to be done was to go to a public-house and ask for the latest papers; and it was worth the trouble to find out what had happened in France since our departure. What had happened was the terrible 10th of August, the invasion of the Tuileries, the massacre of the Swiss, the shutting up of the royal family in the Temple, and the provisional deposition of royalty.

That was enough, at all events, to hurl the masses of the Coalition on the French frontier.

And France was already prepared to resist the invasion.

She had three armies. Luckner was in the north, Lafayette was in the center, Montesquieu was in the south Dumouriez was serving under Luckner as lieutenant-general.

But — the news was only three days old — Lafayette, with some of his companions, had visited the Austrian headquarters, and in spite of his protest, had been detained as a prisoner of war.

From that we could judge of the disposition of our enemies toward everything that was French, and the fate that awaited us if we were taken without passports.

Doubtless on what the newspapers said there was much to give and take. However, this was how things stood at that moment.

Dumouriez, the real commander-in-chief of the armies of the north and center, was a master man, as you know. Desirous of dealing him the first blow, the Kings of Prussia and Austria came to Mayence. The Duke of Brunswick was in command of the armies of the Coalition. After penetrating France through the Ardennes, they were to march on Paris by way of Chalons. A column of sixty thousand Prussians was advancing through Luxemburg on Longwy. Thirty - six thousand Austrians, in two corps, under the orders of Clairfayt and Prince Hohenlohe, flanked the Prussian army. Such were the terrible masses that threatened France.

I tell you now what I learned afterward, so that you may understand the position of things. Dumouriez was at Sedan with twenty-three thousand men. Kellermann, replacing Luckner, was at Metz with twenty thousand. Fifteen thousand were at Landau, under Custine; thirty thousand were in Alsace under Biron, and ready to join either Dumouriez or Kellermann as might be required.

The last news in the gazettes told us that the Prussians had taken Longwy; that they were blockading Thionville, and the bulk of their army was marching on Verdun.

We returned to the hotel, and when Mme. Keller knew what had happened, she refused to wait a day at Mayence, although she was very feeble, and rest was almost imperative for her. But she trembled lest her sou should be discovered. So we started next morning, that of the 1st of September. Thirty leagues still separated us from the frontier.

Our horse, notwithstanding all I could do, did not go quickly. And how time was pressing! It was evening when we sighted the ruins of the old castle on the Schloss- berg. At the foot lay Kreuznach, an important town of the district of Coblenz, situated on the Nahe, and which, after belonging to France in 1801, was returned to Prussia in 1815.

The next morning we reached the village of Kirn, and twenty-four hours afterward that of Birkenfeld. Fortunately provisions did not fail us, and we were able to get round these towns which were not mentioned on our itinerary. But the wagon was our only shelter, and the nights passed under such circumstances could not but be uncomfortable.

It was the same when we halted on the 3d of September. On the morrow at midnight would expire the time allowed us for evacuating German territory. And we were still two days' march from the frontier! What would become of us if we were stopped on the road without passports that the Prussian would recognize?

Perhaps we had better turn off toward the south, toward Sarrelouis, the nearest French town. But that was to risk falling into the hands of the Prussians coming up to re-enforce the blockade of Thionville. And it was better to lengthen our route to avoid that dangerous meeting.

In short, we were only a few leagues from the frontier, and all were safe and sound. That M. and Mlle, de Lauranay and my sister and I had reached here was not very extraordinary, but that Mme. Keller and her son had got so far was much to be thankful for. When Jean Keller joined our party in the mountains of Thuringia, I hardly thought we should shake hands on the frontier of France.

But we had to avoid Saarbrilck, not only for the sake of M. Jean and his mother, but for our own. It would be more likely to offer us the hospitality of a prison than of a hotel.

We spent the night at an inn, whose customary guests were not of first quality. More than once the innkeeper looked at us in a strange way. It seemed to me that when we left he exchanged a few words with some people seated in a small room out of our sight.

On the 4th of September we took the road which passes between Thionville and Metz, ready, if need be, to bear off to Metz, which the French then occupied.

An uncomfortable road it was through the patches of woodland scattered hereabouts. The poor horse was nearly knocked up, and about two o’clock in the afternoon, at the foot of a long hill running up behind thick brushwood, and bordered here and there by fields of hops, we had all to get down, all except Mme. Keller, who was too fatigued to leave the wagon.

We were advancing slowly. I held the horse by the bridle. My sister was near me. M. de Lauranay, his granddaughter and M. Jean were a little behind. Except ourselves, there was no one on the road. Far off we could hear heavy firing. Doubtless the fighting was going on under the walls of Thionville.

Suddenly on our right there was the report of a gun. Our horse, mortally wounded, fell between the shafts, which broke. At the same time there were shouts.

“We have got them at last!”

“Yes. That is Jean Keller!”

“We have got the thousand florins!”

“Not yet!” said M. Jean.

There was a second report. This time it was M. Jean who had fired, and a man rolled on the ground near our horse.

It all took place so quickly that I had not time to pull myself together.

“They are the Buchs!” said M. Jean.

“Well! Book them, then!” said I.

The rascals had been at the inn where we had passed the night. After a few words with the innkeeper they had followed on our track.

But of three only two were left, the father and second son. The other, with a bullet through his heart, was just dying.

Two against two was equal. But the fight did not last long. I aimed at young Buch, but I only wounded him. Then his father and he, seeing their stroke had failed, jumped into the thicket on the left and scuttled off.

I was going in chase. M. Jean stopped me. May be he was wrong.

“No,” said he, “the best thing is to get over the frontier! Come on! Come on!”

As we had no horse left we had to abandon our wagon. Mme. Keller had to get down and rest on her son’s arm.

In a few hours our passports would not protect us!

Thus we went on till the night. We camped under the trees. We eat the last of our provisions. Next day, the 5th of September, in the evening we crossed the frontier.

Yes! It was Franch soil we then trod! But the French soil was occupied by foreign soldiers!

CHAPTER XIX.

We were near the end of this long journey which the declaration of war had obliged us to make across the enemy's country; this painful road to France we had traversed at the cost of such extreme fatigue and danger. Except on two or three occasions — among others when the Buchs attacked us — our lives had never been in peril, nor had our liberty.

What I say of ourselves applies equally to M. Jean since we had met him in the Thuringian mountains. Now all he had to do was to find some town in the Low Countries where he could watch in safety the issue of events.

But the frontier was invaded. Austrians and Prussians in possession of this region, extending to the forest of Argonne, made it as dangerous for us as if we were in the districts of Potsdam or Brandenburg. After the fatigues of the past the future had reserved dangers as great for us.

What would you have? You think you have reached your journey's end and you are only on the road.

Before we could pass the advance-posts of the enemy and his cantonments we had twenty leagues to go. But in marches and counter-marches how long might not that become?

Perhaps it would have been better to have entered France to the south or north of Lorraine. In our state, however, deprived of all means of transport, with no hope of procuring any, we had to think twice before going out of the direct road.

M. de Lauranay, M. Jean and I had debated the question, and after discussing the pros and cons, we saw reason to abandon my proposition.

It was eight o’clock in the evening when we reached the frontier. Before us was a thick wood, through which it was not wise to venture during the night. We halted till the morning. It might not rain on these elevated places; but in the beginning of September the cold would make itself felt. As to lighting a fire, that would be too imprudent for fugitives who wished to get through unper- ceived. We hid ourselves as well as we could under the lower branches of a beech-tree. The provisions I had brought from the wagon — the bread, and cold meat, and cheese — were on our knees. A brook gave us clear water which we mixed with a few drops of schnapps. Then leaving M. de Lauranay, Mme. Keller, Mlle. Martha, and my sister to take a few hours’ rest, M. Jean and I went about ten yards away.

M. Jean was much absorbed, and did not at first speak, and I respected his silence. At last he said: “Listen, Natalis, and never forget what I am going to tell you. We do not know what may happen — to me especially. I may be forced to escape. Well, my mother need not leave you. The poor woman is almost dead; and if I am compelled to separate from you I do not wish her to follow me. You see how she is, in spite of her energy and courage. I intrust her to you then, Natalis, as I do Martha; that is to say, all I hold dearest in this world!”

“You can depend upon me, Monsieur Jean. I hope nothing will separate us! However, if it does happen, I will do all you can expect from a man who is entirely faithful to you.”

M. Jean clasped my hand.

“Natalis! if they catch me I have no doubt as to my fate! It will soon be over! Remember, then, that my mother must never return to Prussia. She was French before her marriage. Her husband and her son will be no more, and she should end her life in the country in which she was born.”

“She was French, you say, Monsieur Jean? Say rather she is French and has never ceased to be so in our eyes.”

“Be it so, Natalis! Take her with you to your own Picardy that I have never seen and wish so much to see. Let us hope that my mother, in default of happiness, may find there the rest which is her due! Poor woman! How great have been her sufferings!”

And had not M. Jean much to suffer?

“Ah! this country!” continued he. “If we had been able to come here together, Martha, my wife, and my mother, and I, how soon we should have forgotten our troubles. But am I not mad to dream of such things? I, a fugitive, a convict whom death may strike at any moment!”

“Wait, Monsieur Jean, do not speak like that! They have not got you yet, and I shall be much surprised if you are the man to be taken!”

“No, Natalis! I shall fight to the last, depend upon that!”

“And I’ll help you, Monsieur Jean!”

“I know it, my friend. Let me embrace you. It is the first time I am allowed to clasp in my arms a Frenchman on the soil of France!”

“And it will not be the last!” said I.

Yes! The depth of confidence that was in me had never been shaken, notwithstanding our trials. It was not without reason that I was considered at Grattepanche to be one of the most obstinate addlepates in all Picardy.

But night was passing. Each in turn, M. Jean and I, had a rest. It was so dark, so dark under the trees, that nothing could be seen of us. When I was on guard I listened with my ear against the wind; the least noise made me suspicious. Amid these woods we had to fear, not so much the soldiers of the regular army as the camp followers, as we clearly saw in the affair with the Buchs.

Unfortunately, two of these Buchs had escaped us. Their first care would be to recapture us; and to succeed they would probably bring with ihem a few rascals like them to share in the thousand florins.

Yes! I thought of all this, and it kept me awake. I thought also that if the Leib regiment had left Frankfort twenty-four hours after us it might have crossed the frontier. Might it not be in the neighborhood, in the forest of Argonue?

These apprehensions were exaggerated without doubt. And is it not always thus when the brain is overexcited? That was my case. I thought I heard marching among the trees. I seemed to see shadows gliding among the thickets. I need not say that if M. Jean was armed with one of the pistols, I had the other in my belt, and we were resolved to let no one come near us.

But the night passed without an alarm. Many times we heard distant trumpet-calls, and even the roll of drums, which toward morning beat the reveille. The sounds came from the south, and indicated a cantonment of troops.

Probably they were Austrian columns waiting to march on Thionville, or even on Montmedy, more to the north. As I have since heard, the intention of the allies was not to capture these places, but to mask them, to paralyze their garrisons, so as to cross unhindered the territory of the Ardennes.

We might run up against a column of these troops, and we should then soon be done for. Austrians or Prussians would be all the same to us. One would be as bad as the other.

We decided to bear off to the north in the direction of Stenay, or even of Sedan, so as to get right into the forest, but away from the road likely to be followed by the Imperialists.

At day-break we started.

The weather was beautiful. We heard the whistling of the bullfinches, and on the edge of the clearings the grasshoppers chirping in sign of warmth; then afar the skylarks trilling their sweet song as they mounted straight in the air.

We went along as fast as the weakness of Mme. Keller permitted. Under the thick leafage of the trees the sun had no power over us. What worried me was that our provisions were running out. And how could we replace them?

As agreed, we headed a little to the northward, far from such villages and hamlets as the enemy would certainly have occupied.

The day was distinguished by no adventure. The distance we covered in a direct line was not great. In the afternoon Mme. Keller gave up entirely. She whom I had known at Belzingen straight as an ash was now bent, her legs gave way as she walked, and I saw the time coming when she could go no further.

During the night the distant firing was heard continuously. It was artillery, and in the direction of Verdun.

The country we were crossing consisted of woods of no great size, and plains watered by numerous streams. They were but brooks in the dry season, and we could easily cross them. As much as possible we walked under the shelter of the trees, so as to throw pursuers off our trail.

Four days before, on the 2d of September, as we afterward learned, Verdun, so gallantly defended by the heroic Beaurepaire, who committed suicide rather than surrender, had opened its gates to fifty thousand Prussians. This occupation allowed the Coalition to muster their forces on the plains of the Meuse. Brunswick contented himself by taking Stenay, while Dumouriez — artful fellow! — who was secretly preparing his plan of resistance, remained at Sedan.

To return to what concerns us, and which we did not know, it was on the 30th of August — eight days before — Dillon had slipped with eight thousand men between the Argonne and the Meuse. After driving Clairfayt and his Austrians, who then occupied both banks of the river, to the other side, he had advanced so as to seize the southerly entrance to the forest.

If we had known that, instead of going to the north we should have made straight for this entrance. There, among French soldiers, our safety would have been assured. But there was nothing to tell us of this maneuver, and it seemed to be our fate to run into danger.

Next day, 7th of September, we exhuasted our provisions. Cost what they might, we must get some more. The evening came. An isolated house was seen at the side of a pond on the edge of a wood near an old stone wall. There was no room to hesitate. I knocked at the door. It was opened to us. We were among honest country people. At first these people told us that although the Prussians remained quiet in their cantonments the Austrians were expected on that side. As to the French, the rumor ran that Dumouriez had left Sedan to join Dillon, and was descending between the Argonne and the Meuse, so as to drive Brunswick over the frontier.

This was a mistake, as will be seen immediately; but the mistake fortunately did us no harm.

The hospitality offered us by the peasants was as complete as possible in the deplorable condition that they then were in. A good fire — what we call a battle fire — was lighted on the hearth, and we made a good meal of eggs and fried sausages, a large hunch of rye bread, a few of those aniseed-cakes that they call “kisch “in Lorraine, some green apples, and a little white wine of the Moselle.

We also bought provisions to last us for a few days, not forgetting tobacco, of which I was getting short. M. de Lauranay had some trouble in getting our hosts to accept what was their due. This gave Jean Keller a foretaste of the good-heartedness of the French. After a night’s rest we were off next day with the dawn.

It seemed indeed as though nature had accumulated difficulties on our road, gaps in the ground, impenetrable thickets, quagmires, in which we almost sunk to our middles. There was no footpath that we could safely follow. There were thick scrubs, such as I had seen in the New World before the ax of the pioneer had done its work. Sometimes in little hollows in the trees stood little statues of the Virgin and saints. At long intervals we met a few shepherds, goatherds, woodmen with their felt kneecaps, or swineherds leading their sows to the acorn-grounds. As soon as they caught sight of us they turned off into the thickets, and if we obtained information once or twice, that was all.

We also heard file firing, indicating a fight of outposts.

We got near to the Stenay, although the obstacles were so great and the fatigues such that we hardly did two leagues a day. It was the same during the 9th, 10th, and 11th of September; but though the ground was difficult it afforded us complete security. We met with nothing at which we could take alarm. We had no fear of hearing the terrible “Wer da?” which is the Prussian qui-vive.

In taking this direction we were in the’ hopes of joining the army under Dumouriez. But, as we had no means of knowing, he had already gone southward, so as to occupy the defile of Grand Pre, in the forest of Argonne.

Every now and then, I repeat, we could hear the sounds of firing. When they approached us we halted. Evidently no battalion was then engaged on the borders of the Meuse. They were simple attacks on villages, as we supposed from the columns of smoke that mounted above the trees, and the distant gleams of fire in the obscurity of the woods.

In the evening of the 11th we came to a resolution to stop our march on Stenay, and plunge into the Argonne.

Next day we did so. We dragged along, helping each other as we went. The sight of the poor women, so courageous, but so miserable-looking, with faces livid and wan, and clothes in rags, struggling through the holly and thorns, almost drove us to despair.

About noon we reached an opening in the wood, from which we could look over a considerable extent of country.

There, there had recently been a fight. Dead men lay on the ground. I recognized them by their blue uniforms with red lapels, white gaiters, and white crossbelts, so different from the sky-blue Prussians, or the white Austrians with the pointed caps.

They were French volunteers, who had been surprised by some column of Clairfayt's or Brunswick's. They had not given up without a struggle. A certain number of Germans were lying near them, and some of them were Prussians with their copper shakos and chains.

I went up to the heap of corpses and looked at it with horror, for never have I been able to accustom myself to the sight of a battle-field.

Suddenly I uttered a cry. M. de Lauranay, Mme. Keller and her son, Mlle. Martha and my sister, stopped on the edge of the trees, about fifty yards behind me, looking at me, and not daring to advance into the middle of the clearing.

M. Jean came running up to me.

"What is the matter, Natalis?"

Ah! how I regretted that I had not restrained myself! I tried to drag M. Jean away. It was too late. In an instant he had guessed why I had uttered the cry.

A corpse lay at my feet! M. Jean had not to look at it long to recognize it. And then with arms crossed he shook his head.

"Do not let my mother or Martha know."

But Mme. Keller had come out after us, and she saw what we would have hidden, the body of a Prussian soldier, a sergeant of the Leib regiment, stretched on the ground among some thirty of his comrades.

Within the last twenty-four hours, perhaps, the regiment had passed this way, and now it was scouring the country around us. Never had the danger been so great for Jean Keller. If he was captured, his identity would be immediately established, and his execution would take place forthwith.

We must get away from this dangerous place as soon as possible. We must dive into the deepest parts of the Argonne, where a column on the march could not penetrate. There we ought to hide for some days. That was our only chance of safety.

We traveled all that day, and all night.

Traveled? No! Dragged along! The next day, September 13th, we reached the end of this celebrated forest of Argonne, of which Dumouriez had said, “It is the Thermopylae of France, but I shall be more fortunate than Leonidas!”

And so he was. And it was thus that thousands of know-nothings like me learned who was Leonidas, and what was Thermopylae.

CHAPTER XX.

The forest of Argonne occupies a space of from thirteen to fourteen leagues, between Sedan on the north, and the little village of Passavant on the south, and it is about three leagues wide on the average. It is like an advanced fortification, covering our frontier on the east with a line that is almost impenetrable. Its woods and streams are mixed up in such extraordinary confusion among heights and valleys, and torrents and pools, that it is almost impossible for troops to cross them.

The forest lies between two rivers. The Aisne borders it on the left, from the furthest thickets in the south to the village of Semuy in the north. The Aire borders it from Fleury up to its chief defile. Then the river makes a sharp bend and returns toward the Aisne into which it flows not far from Senuc.

On the Aire side the chief towns are Clermont, Varennes, where Louis XVI. was arrested when he fled, Buzancy, and Le Chene-Populeux. On the Aisne side are Saint Menehould, Ville-sur-Tourbe, Monthois, and Vouziers.

In shape I can not compare the forest to anything better than a huge insect, with folded wings, motionless or asleep between two streams. Its abdomen will be all the lower part, which is the most important, its” thorax and its head are the upper parts about the Grand Pre defile through which runs the Aire, as I have already said.

If the Argonne is everywhere cut up by water-courses and bristles with thickets, it can, nevertheless, be crossed by different roads, narrow ones, no doubt, but practicable for regiments on the march. It is necessary that I say this here in order that you may understand better what follows.

Five defiles run quite through the Argonne. In the abdomen of my insect, the most southerly one, that of Islettes, goes almost straight from Clermont to Saint Menehould; the next, that of Chalade, is merely a footpath, which joins the bank of the Aisne near Vienne-le-Chateau.

In the upper part of the forest there are no less than three passages. The widest and most important is that which separates the thorax from the abdomen, the defile of Grand Pre. The Aire runs right through it from Saint Juvin, then on between Termes and Senuc, and there joining the Aisne a league and a half from Monthois. Beyond the defile of Grand Pre, hardly two leagues further, is the defile of Croix-aux-Bois — remember this name — crossing the forest of Argonne from Boult-aux-Bois to Longwe. It is but a woodman’s road. Two leagues further up is the defile of Chene-Populeux, through which runs the road from Bethel to Sedan, after making two or three bends, and touching the Aisne opposite Vouziers.

It was only by this forest that the Imperialists could advance on Chalons-sur-Marne. From there they would find the road open to Paris.

What had to be done then was to hinder Brunswick or Clairfayt from getting through the Argonne by closing the five defiles that could give access to their columns.

Dumouriez, an able soldier, had seen this at a glance. It seemed to him that it ought to be very easy to do so.

This plan offered the further advantage that it would not be necessary for him to retreat on the Marne, which is our last line of defense before Paris. At the same time, the allies would be compelled to remain in this Champagne-Pouilleux, where everything would fail them, instead of spreading over the rich plains beyond the Argonne during the winter — if they intended to remain during the winter.

He worked out his plan in all its details. And he began its execution on the 30th of August, when Dillon, at the head of eight thousand men, made the bold movement in which, as I have said, the Austrians were driven to the right bank of the Meuse. Then this column took possession of the most southerly defile, that of Islettes, after taking care to guard the defile of Chalade.

There was a certain boldness about these maneuvers. Instead of resting on the Aisne and taking shelter in the thick of the forest, Dillon lay along the Meuse with his flank exposed to the enemy. But Dumouriez had ordered it so in order to hide his scheme from the Coalition.

On the 4th of September, when Dillon reached the defile of Islettes, Dumouriez started after him with fifteen thousand men, and took possession of the defile of Grand Pre, thus closing the chief entrance to the Argonne. Four days afterward General Dubourg appeared at Chene-Populeux so as to defend the north of the forest against any Imperialist invasion.

Immediately the French generals arrived at their stations, they set to work to throw up intrenchments and palisade the footpaths, and establish batteries to close the defiles. The intrenchment at Grand Pre became a regular camp, with the troops stationed round the amphitheater of hills.

At this time, of five of the gates of the Argonne, four were closed like the posterns of a citadel with the portcullis down and draw-bridge up.

But there was a fifth passage left open. This had appeared so little practicable that Dumouriez had been in no hurry to occupy it. And it was toward this very passage that our ill-luck led us.

This defile of Croix-aux-Bois, between Chene-Populeux and Grand Pre, at an equal distance from each — about ten leagues — was to allow the enemy's columns to get through the Argonne.

And now let us return to what concerns ourselves. It was on the evening of the 13th of September that we arrived on the lateral slope of the Argonne, after avoiding the villages of Briquenay and Boult-aux-Bois, which were probably occupied by Austrians.

As I knew the defiles of the Argonne from having been through them many times while in garrison on the east frontier, I had chosen this one of Croix-aux-Bois because I thought it was the safest. But by excess of prudence it was not the defile itself I thought of following, but a narrow footpath near it, which runs from Briquenay to Longwe. By this road, we could cross through the thickest part of the forest beneath oaks, beeches, hornbeams, pines, service trees, willows, and chestnuts which flourish here, where they are less exposed to the snows of winter. By this road we were not likely to meet with many marauders, and we could strike the left bank of the Aisne near Vouziers, where we should have nothing to fear.

The night of the 13th we spent as usual under the shade of the trees.

Any moment there might appear the busby of a dragoon, or the shako of a Prussian grenadier. I therefore did my best to get well into the forest, and I began to breathe more at my ease when next day we struck the footpath to Longwe and left the village of Croix-aux-Bois on our right.

It was a hard day's work. The ground was hilly, with many quagmires and dead trees, and progress was not easy.

The road was almost deserted, probably on account of its being so difficult. M. de Lauranay kept up at a good pace in spite of the great fatigues for a man of his. age. Mlle, de Lauranay aud my sister, at the thought of our being near the end, had made up their minds not to give way for an instant. But Mme. Keller was almost helpless. We had to support her at every step to prevent her falling. But she made no complaint. If the body was exhausted, the spirit remained unsubdued. I doubted if we should reach the end of our journey.

In the evening we halted as usual. The knapsack furnished us with the wherewithal to satisfy our appetites, though hunger had to yield to the want of rest and sleep. When I was alone with M. Jean I spoke to him of the state of his mother, which had become very disquieting.

“She is doing more than she is able,” said I, “and if we can not give her a day’s rest — ”

“So I see, Natalis. Every step she takes is as if she were walking on my heart. What is to be done?”

“We must get to the nearest village, Monsieur Jean. You and I will take her there. Neither Austrians nor Prussians will venture through this part of the Argonne, and in some house we can wait until the country is quieter.”

“Yes, Natalis, that is the best thing to do. But could we not reach Longwe?”

“That village is too far off, Monsieur Jean. Your mother would never reach it!”

“Where shall we go, then?”

“Let us strike off to the right through the wood and get to Croix-aux-Bois.”

"How far is that?"

"About a league."

"Let us go to Croix-aux-Bois to-morrow, and start at daylight"

Frankly, I did not think there was anything better to do, for I was under the impression that the enemy would never venture in the north of the Argonne.

All through the night, however, we heard the cracking of musketry and from time to time the heavy boom of cannon. But as these reports were distant and came from our rear, I supposed, with some appearance of reason, that Clairfayt or Brunswick was trying to force the defile of Grand Pre, the only one that could offer a sufficient road for the passage of their columns. Neither M. Jean nor I had an hour's rest. We had to be constantly on the qui- vive, although we were in the thick of the wood some distance off the Briquenay footpath.

At day-break we were off. I had cut a few branches with which we made a sort of litter. An armful of dry herbs would allow Mme. Keller to lie upon it, and with great care we might perhaps save her some of the hardships of the road.

But Mme. Keller saw what an increase of fatigue that meant for us.

"No," said she, "no, my son! I am still strong enough to walk. I will go on foot."

"You are not able to!" answered M.. Jean.

"You can not, Madame Keller," said I. "Our idea is to get to the nearest village, and we must get there soon. There we will wait until you are well again. We are in France after all, and no door will be shut against us!”

Mme. Keller would not give in. She rose and tried to take a few steps, but she would have fallen had not her son and my sister caught her and supported her.

“Madame Keller,” then said I, “what we desire is safety for all. During the night we heard firing on the outskirts of the Argonne. The enemy is not far off. I am in hopes that he will not come thjs way. At Croix- aux-Bois we need have no fear of surprise, but we must get there to-day.”

Mlle. Martha and my sister added their entreaties to ours, M. de Lauranay joined in, and Mme. Keller yielded.

A minute afterward she was lying on the litter that M. Jean lifted at one end while I lifted the other. We began our march, and the Briquenay footpath was crossed obliquely in a northerly direction.

I need not dwell on the difficulties of traveling through a thick wood in this way, or of the frequent halts we had to make. We were through at last, and about noon on the 15th of September we arrived at Croix-aux-Bois, the league and a half having taken us five hours.

To my great astonishment and dismay, the village was abandoned. All the inhabitants had fled either to Vouziers or Chene-Populeux. What then was to be done?

We wandered along the street. Doors and windows were closed. Would the help on which I had reckoned fail us?

“There is some smoke!” said my sister to me, pointing to the end of the village.

I ran toward the little house from which the smoke rose. I knocked at the door.

A man appeared. He had a good face — one of those Lorraine peasant faces that inspire sympathy. He looked like a good fellow.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Welcome for my companions and myself.”

“Who are you?”

“French people driven from Germany, and who do not know where to find a refuge.”

“Enter!”

The peasant’s name was Hans Stenger. He lived in the house with his mother-in-law and his wife. He had not left Croix-aux-Bois because his mother-in-law could not move from the chair where for many years paralysis had imprisoned her.

And then Hans Stenger told us why the village was abandoned. All the defiles of the Argonne had been occupied by French troops. Only that of Croix-aux-Bois was left open. The Imperialists would thus soon seize on the village, and that meant disaster for us. We had come just where we should not have come. But to leave Croix-aux- Bois and again cross the forest was not to be thought of, for Mme. Keller’s state would not allow of such a thing. It was lucky that we had fallen into such good French hands as the Stengers’.

The Stengers were peasants in comfortable circumstances, and seemed pleased to be able to render a service to their countrymen in distress. I need not say we said nothing about the nationality of Jean Keller. That would have complicated matters.

The 15th of September ended without an alarm, and on the 16th there was nothing to justify the fears Hans Stenger had inspired us with. Even during the night we heard no firing at the back of the Argonne. Perhaps the Imperialists did not know that the Croix-aux-Bois defile was clear; in any case, as its narrowness would be a serious obstacle for the march of a column with its transport, it would be better to try and force the passages of Grand Pre or Isletttes. We therefore regained hope. Besides, the rest and attention had already had their effect on Mme. Keller. Courageous woman! It was strength that failed her, not energy!

What a hound is fate! In the afternoon of the 16th suspicious characters began to appear in the village, stealers of fowls who went straight to the hen-roosts to begin with. There were men-thieves among them doubtless; but it was easy to see they were of German nationality, and that most of them were spies.

To our great alarm, M. Jean had to hide himself. As this seemed strange to Stengers, I had almost decided to tell them everything, when about four o’clock Hans came in exclaiming: “The Austrians! The Austrians!”

Many thousand men in white coats and shakos, with a high plate and a double-headed eagle, were coming in by the defile from the village of Boult. Doubtless their spies had told them the road was free. Who could say if the whole invasion would not come by this road?

At the shout from Stenger, M. Jean had appeared in the room where his mother lay.

I see him still. He was standing before the fire. He was waiting! What was he waiting for? Till every outlet was closed? But if he was taken prisoner by the Austrians, the Prussians would claim him, and that meant his death.

Mme. Keller rose on her bed.

“Jean!” she said, “you must go! Go this moment!”

“Without you, mother?”

“Without me! I will have it so.”

“Escape, Jean!” said Mlle. Martha. “Your mother is mine! We will not abandon her.”

“Martha!”

“I wish you to go!”

There was nothing for it but to go. The noise was increasing. Already the head of the column was spreading out into the village. Soon the Austrians would occupy Hans Stenger’s house.

M. Jean embraced his mother. He gave Mlle. Martha a last kiss and disappeared.

And then I heard Mme. Keller murmur these words: “My son! My son! Alone in this country he does not know! Natalis — ”

“Natalis!” repeated Mlle. Martha, pointing to the door. I understood what they expected of me. “Adieu!” I said.

A minute afterward I was out of the village.

CHAPTER XXI.

Separated, after a three weeks' journey which a little more luck would have brought to a successful end! Separated, when a few leagues away there was safety for all! Separated, with the fear of never seeing each other again!

And these women abandoned in a peasant's hut, in a village occupied by the enemy, with only an old man of seventy to defend them!

In truth, ought I not to have kept with them? But thinking only of the fugitive in this terrible forest, which he did not know, could I hesitate to go with M. Jean, when I could be so useful to him? For M. de Lauranay and his companions there was only liberty at stake — at least I hoped so. For Jean Keller life was at stake! Nothing but this thought would have kept me back if I had been tempted to return to Croix-aux-Bois.

The reason this village had been occupied on the 16th of September was as follows: It will be rememberSd that of the five defiles through the Argonne, one only remained unoccupied by the French. But to guard against surprise, Dumouriez had sent to the entrance of this defile a colonel with two battalions and two squadrons; but this was too far away for Hans Stenger to know of their arrival. Such, however, was the conviction that the Imperialists would never risk themselves in this defile, that nothing was done to defend it. No abattis was made, no palisades erected. And imagining that there was no danger, the colonel had asked permission to send back some of his troops to head-quarters, and the permission had been given.

The Austrians, however, went to reconnoiter this passage, and hence the crowd of German spies who appeared at Croix-aux-Bois, and then the occupation of the defile. And that is how, owing to a miscalculation, one of the gates of the Argonne was left open.

As soon as Brunswick learned that the pass was free, he gave orders to occupy it. And this was done at the time when he was much hampered in the plains of Champagne, and was endeavoring to get up to Sedan so as to turn the Argonne from the north. But with the Croix-aux-Bois open, he could perhaps get through that way, and so he had sent an Austrian column with the emigres commanded by the Prince de Ligne, which surprised the French colonel, drove him back on Grand Pre, and seized the defile.

This happened just as we were about to take flight. Dumouriez, to repair his mistake, sent off General Chazot with two brigades, six squadrons, and four pieces of eight, to drive away the Austrians before they could intrench themselves.

Unfortunately, on the 14th, Chazot was not ready to attack, nor was he on the 15th, and when he tried on the evening of the 16th it was too late. He drove the Austrians from the defile and killed the Prince de Ligne, but he had to retire before superior forces. In spite of heroic efforts the passage of Croix-aux-Bois was definitely lost.

It was a regrettable mistake for France, and, I may add, for us, for if it had not been for this deplorable mistake on the 15th, we should have been among Frenchmen.

But now that was not possible. Chazot, seeing himself cut off from head-quarters, retreated on Vouziers, while Dubourg, who occupied Chene-Populeux, fearing to be surrounded, returned toward Attigny.

The French frontier was thus opened to the Imperial columns, and Dumouriez was in danger of being surrounded, and having to lay down his arms; and then there would be no serious obstacle to the advance of the invaders on Paris. As for us, Jeau Keller and I, we were in a bad way. Almost immediately after I left Stenger's house, I came up with M. Jean in the thick of the wood.

"You — Natalis?" he said.

"Yes, I!"

"And you promised never to leave my mother or Martha?"

"Stop a minute, Monsieur Jean. Listen to me!"

Then I told him all; how I knew this Argonne country and he did not, and how Mme. Keller and Mlle. Martha had, so to speak, ordered me to follow him, which I had not hesitated to do.

"And if I have done wrong, Monsieur Jean!" said I, "my Heaven punish me!"

"Come along, then!"

It would not do now to follow the defile to the frontier of the Argonne. The Austrians would have thrown themselves across the outlet of the Croix-aux-Bois and the Briquenay footpath. Hence we had to bear away to the north-west so as to strike the line of the Aisne.

We kept on in this direction until the light failed us. To keep on in the darkness was not possible. How could we make sure of our course! All we could do was to halt for the night.

In the earlier hours the sound of firing was incessant, and less than half a league away. These were the volunteers of Longwe trying to retake the defile from the Austrians. But not being in sufficient force they were obliged to disperse. Unfortunately, they did not retreat through the forest, where we would have run against them and ascertained that Dumouriez was at his head-quarters at Grand Pre. We would have accompanied them, and then, as I learned later, I would have rejoined my regiment, the Boyal Picardy, which had left Charleville to join the army of the center. Once we got to Grand Pre we should have been among friends, and could have taken measures for the safety of those we had abandoned at Croix-aux-Bois.

But the volunteers had evacuated the Argonne, and ascended the course of the Aisne so as to regain head-quar- ters.

It was a dreary night. A cold drizzle fell, which soaked us to the bone. Our clothes, torn by the thorns, were in rags. I had not my frock with me. Our boots had become so worn that they almost fell off our feet. Were we to have to walk barefooted? It looked like it. We were quite chilled, for the rain filtered through the foliage on to us, and I sought in vain for a shelter. Every now and then we had an alarm; the firing, at times, got so close that I thought I could see the flash, and expected every moment to hear the Prussian cheers! And we had to fly further away for fear of being taken. How long the day seemed coming!

At dawn we renewed our run through the forest. I say run, for we went as fast as the ground permitted, while I took the direction the best I could from the rising sun. We had nothing inside us, and hunger began to pinch. M. Jean had had no time to bring food with him when he fled from the Stengers. I had come away like a madman, when I found that our retreat would be cut off by the Austrians, and was just as badly provisioned.

Crows, sparrow- hawks, and numberless small birds, yellow-hammers chiefly, flew about us in the trees, but game there was little. Occasionally we caught sight of a hare or a couple or grouse running away under the brush-wood. But how could we catch them? Fortunately, chestnut - trees were not wanting in the Argonne, nor were chestnuts at this time of year. And I cooked a few in the ashes after lighting a fire of brush-wood with a little gunpowder. It was this only which prevented us dying of hunger.

The night came. The trees were so thick that we had only done three leagues since the morning. But the edge of the wood could not now be far off — two or three leagues at the outside. We could hear the musketry of the skirmishers along the Aisne. Twenty-four hours more and we should be on the other side of the river, perhaps at Vouziers, perhaps at one of the villages on the left bank.

I say nothing of our fatigue. We had no time to think of it. That night, although my brain was possessed with a thousand fears, I lay down to sleep at the foot of a tree. I remember that up to the time my eyes closed I thought of the regiment of Colonel von Grawert, which had left thirty of its men dead in the clearing a few days before.

In the morning I saw that M. Jean had not slept a wink. He hardly thought of himself — we know him well enough to be sure of that — but to think of his mother and Mlle. Martha in this house at Croix-aux-Bois in the hands of the Austrians, exposed to their insults, and outraged perhaps, almost drove him to desperation. In fact, during this night it was M. Jean who had kept guard. And I must have slept well, for the firing could still be heard close by, although it did not wake me, and M. Jean let me sleep on.

When we were starting, M. Jean said to me: “Natalis, listen to me!”

He said these words in the tone of a man who had finally made up his mind. I saw what he was driving at, and I answered without waiting for him.

“No, Monsieur Jean. I will not listen to you if you are going to talk of my leaving you.”

“Natalis,” continued he, “you are devoted to me, and so you came with me.”

“Well?”

“While it was only a question of fatigue I said nothing. Now it is a question of peril. If I am taken and you are with me they will not spare you. That means death for you, Natalis, and that I can not accept. Go, then! Get over the frontier. I will try to do the same from my side, and if we do not meet again — ”

“Monsieur Jean,” said I, “it is time to get on our road. We shall be saved or die together.”

“Natalis.”

“I mean I will not leave you!”

And so we started. The early hours of the day were noisy. The artillery boomed amid the crackle of the musketry. It was another attack on the defile of Croix-aux- Bois — an attack which did not succeed in the face of a more numerous enemy.

About eight o’clock silence came over all. Not a single gunshot did we hear. Terrible uncertainty for us! That a battle had been fought in the defile, there could be no doubt. But what had been the result? Ought we to turn back into the forest? Instinct told us no. We must keep on toward Vouziers.

At noon a few chestnuts baked in the cinders gave us our only repast. The thickets were so dense that we hardly did four hundred yards an hour. And then there began again sudden alarms, shots to the right, the left, and at last the sound of the alarm bell in all the villages of the Argonne.

Evening came. We could not be a league from the Aisne. Next day, if no obstacle stopped us, we should be safe on the other side of the river. We had only to go down stream a short distance and we could cross by the bridges of Senuc or Grand Ham, which neither Glairfayt nor Brunswick had yet seized.

We had halted about eight o’clock. We were looking about for a shelter against the cold. All we could hear was the dripping of the rain on the leaves. All was quiet, and yet I know not why, the quiet made me feel uneasy.

Suddeidy, not twenty yards away, we heard voices. M, Jean seized me by the hand.

“Yes,” said some one; “we have been on his track since he left Croix-aux-Bois!”

“He can not escape us.”

“But nothing of the thousand florins to the Austrians!”

“Not a word, comrades!”

I felt M. Jean’s hand clasp mine.

“Buch’s voice!” he whispered in my ear.

“The blackguards!” said L “There are five or six of them probably! Do not wait for them!”

And we slipped away through the thicket. Suddenly a branch broke, and the noise betrayed us. Immediately a flash of light illuminated the underwood. We had been seen.

“Come, Monsieur Jean, come!” I exclaimed.

“Not till I have settled one of them!” he said.

And he fired his pistol at the group which was coming after us.

I think one of the vagabonds fell, but I had something else to do than to stop and see. We ran as fast as our legs could carry us. I felt Buch and his comrades at our heels. We were nearly exhausted.

A quarter of an hour afterward, the band fell on us. There were half a dozen armed men.

In a moment we were knocked down, tied by the hand, and then pushed up and driven along with many blows.

An hour afterward we were in the hands of the Austrians at Longwe, and safe under guard at a house in the village.

CHAPTER XXII.

Was it chance that had put Buch on our track? I think so. But we learned afterward that since our last meeting the younger Buch had never given up the search, not so much to avenge his dead brother as to secure the thousand florins. He had lost our track when we entered the Argonne, but he had found it again at Croix-aux-Bois. He was one of the spies who appeared on the afternoon of the 16th, and had recognized M. and Mlle, de Lauranay at the Stengers'. He learned that we had only just left. We could not be far off. Half a dozen of his cronies joined him and he set off in pursuit. We know the rest.

Now that we were guarded in a way to prevent all escape, and were waiting till our fate was decided — which would not take long, and was not very doubtful — all we had to do was to write to our friends, as they say.

At first, I examined the room which served for our prison. It occupied half the ground-floor of a low house. Two windows, opposite to each other, admitted the light, one from the road, one from a yard. We should probably go forth from this house to die: M. Jean under the double charge of having struck an officer and deserting in time of war; I for complicity and probably as a spy, owing to my being a Frenchman.

I heard M. Jean murmur: "It is the end this time!"

I said nothing! I must confess that my confidence had received a severe shaking, and the position seemed desperate.

"Yes, the end!" said M. Jean. "But what would it matter if my mother and Martha and those we love were out of danger! But, after us, what will become of them? Are they still in the village in the hands of the Austrians?"

And if they had not been taken away, they were not very far from us. It is hardly a league and a half between Croix-aux-Bois and Longwe.

It was to be hoped the news of our arrest had not reached them!

That is what I was thinking of, and what I feared more than anything. It would be death to Mme. Keller. I hoped the Austrians had taken them to the advance posts beyond the Argonne. Perhaps Mme. Keller could hardly be moved! And if they forced her to take to the road! If there was no one to look after her!

The night passed. Our position was unchanged. What sad thoughts come into the mind when death is near!

Then it is that our whole life passes in a moment before our eyes.

We were very hungry, having lived on chestnuts for the last two days. The guard never thought of bringing us any food. We were worth a thousand florins to Buch, and he might have fed us well at that price!

We had not seen him again, it is true. Doubtless he had gone to report his capture to the Prussians. I thought that would take him some time. We were in Austrian hands, but it would be Prussians who would decide our fate. They would come to Croix-aux-Bois, whence they would take us to head-quarters. That would mean delay unless the order for execution came to Longwe. Whatever they might do they would not let us die of hunger.

About seven o’clock next morning the door opened and a sutler in a blouse appeared with a bowl of soup with bread soaked in it. The quantity took the place of quality. We had no right to be dainty, and I was so hungry that I set to work ravenously.

I should have liked to question this sutler, to ask him what was the news at Longwe, and at Croix-aux-Bois; if they were talking of the approach of the Prussians, if their intention was to take this defile in crossing the Argonne; in fact, how things stood generally. But I did not know enough German to be understood or understand. And M. Jean, deep in his reflections, kept silence. I did not like to disturb him. And it was thus impossible to talk with the man.

Nothing new occurred during the morning. We were kept in sight all the time; but were allowed to walk backward and forward in the little yard, where the Austrians examined us with rather more curiosity than sympathy as you may suppose. I put a good face on it, and walked about with my hands in my pockets, whistling the most lively marches of the Royal Picardy.

Should I not have said to myself: “Go on, whistle away, poor blackbird in your cage. They will soon cut short your whistle!”

At noon we had another bowl of soup and soaked bread. Our bill of fare was not varied, and I began to regret the chestnuts of the Argonne. But we had to make the best of it. All the more for our weasel-faced sutler giving us a look which said as plainly as possible, “It is much too good for you!’’ I would cheerfully have thrown the basin at his head. But it was better to get up our strength so as not to fail at the last moment.

I got M. Jean to share my meager repast with me. He understood my reasons and eat a little. He was thinking of something else, though. His mind was away in the house of Hans Stenger with his mother and his betrothed. He muttered their names, he called them! Sometimes, in a sort of delirium, he moved toward the door as if to rejoin them. And then he fell back, and if he did not weep, he was all the more terrible to look at, and tears would have comforted him. But no! and my heart bled for him.

Meanwhile files of soldiers went by, marching at ease; then came columns through Longwe. The trumpets were silent; so were the drums. The enemy was going off silently to the line of the Aisne. Thousands of men must have gone by. Were they Austrians or Prussians, I much wanted to know. There was only one report of a gun in the east of the Argonne. Then the gate of France must be wide open? They could not be defending it.

About ten o’clock in the evening a detachment of soldiers appeared in our room. This time they were Prussians. And, to my horror, I recognized the uniform of the Leib regiment come to Longwe after the engagement with the volunteers in the Argonne.

They tied our hands behind us and made us go out.

M. Jean addressed the corporal who commanded the party.

“Where are you taking us?” he said.

The only reply from this brute was a blow that sent us staggering into the road.

We looked like poor beggars going to execution without trial. But I had not been taken with arms in my hand! Tell that to these savages? They would have laughed in my face!

We followed the road from Longwe toward the edge of the Argonne, which bends of a little beyond the village on the way to Vouziers. In about five hundred yards we stopped in the center of a clearing where the Leib regiment had been encamped. A few minutes afterward we were brought before Colonel von Grawert.

He contented himself with looking at us without saying a word. Then he turned on his heel, gave the signal for departure, and the regiment began to march.

I understood from this that we would have to appear before a court-martial, that a few forms were needed before they administered a dozen pills to our stomach, and that that would have taken place immediately if the regiment had stopped at Longwe. But things, it seemed, were pressing, and the Imperialists had no time to lose if they were to drive the French from the Aisue.

In fact, Dumouriez, having learned that the Imperialists were masters of the defile of Croix-aux-Bois, hit upon another plan. This consisted in descending the left boundary of the Argonne to the defile of Islettes and there backing up against Dillon who occupied it. In this way our soldiers would be face to face with the columns of Clairfayt, who was advancing from the frontier, and with those of Brunswick on the French side. He was prepared, in fact, to see the Prussians get through the Argonne so as to cut the road to Chalons as soon as he struck the camp at Grand Pr6.

Silently he evacuated his head-quarters on the night of the 15th of September. After crossing the two bridges over the Aisne he halted on the heights of Autry, four leagues from Grand Pre. Thence, notwithstanding two panics which threw his troops into disorder, he advanced to Dammartin-sur-Hans so as to reach the positions at Saint Menehould, which are at the end of the defile of Islettes.

At the same time, as the Prussians would debouch from the Argonne through the defile of Grand Pre, he took precautions that the camp at Epine, on the Chalons road, should not be carried if the enemy attacked it instead of turning aside to fight him at Saint Menehould.

Generals Beurnoville, Chazot and Dubouquet received orders to rejoin Dumouriez, and Kellermann was ordered to hasten his march.

If all three generals were at the rendezvous to time, Dumouriez would have with him more than thirty-five thousand men, and could make a stand against the Imperialists.

Brunswick and his Prussians had begun to hesitate after definitely fixing their plan of campaign. At last they decided to cross by the Grand Pre, debouch from the Argonne so as to seize the Chalons road, and surround the French army at Saint Menehould.

That was why the Leib regiment had so hurriedly left Longwe, and why we were going toward the Aisne. The weather was frightful; it was foggy, and it rained. The roads were broken up; the mud covered us up to the waist. To march in this way, with arms strapped behind us, was torture; in fact they would have done better to have shot us on the spot.

And this Frantz von Grawert who ten times came and attacked us to our faces! M. Jean ground in vain at his cords to get his hands free and strangle the lieutenant there and then!

We struck the Aisne and kept along its bank. We had to wade the Dormoise, Tourbe, and Bionne brooks. We never stopped, our object being to arrive in time to occupy the heights of Saint Menehould. But we did not go very fast. Frequently we stuck in the mud.

At ten o’clock rations were served out, and as the Prussians went short, you may guess how it fared with the two prisoners they dragged along with them like beasts.

We could hardly speak. Every time we said anything we were saluted with a blow. Our guards probably wished to please Frantz von Grawert, and they succeeded only too well.

This night of the 19th of September was one of the worst we had passed. We regretted our halts under the trees in the Argonne when we were-still fugitives. Before it was daylight we reached a sort of marsh on the left of Saint Menehould. There the camp was pitched in a couple of feet of mud. No fire was lighted, for the Prussians did not wish to announce their presence.

At length day dawned — the day, doubtless, of battle. Perhaps the Boyal Picardy was there, and I should not be in the ranks with my comrades!

There was much going to and fro in the camp. Orderlies and aids-de-camp were flying across the marsh every instant. The drums beat, the trumpets sounded. There was a sound of firing on the right.

The French had outstripped the Prussians in the race to Saint Menehould!

It was nearly eleven o’clock when a file of soldiers came in search of M. Jean and me. At first they took us to a tent where half a dozen officers were seated, presided over by Colonel von Grawert. Yes! he presided at the court- martial in person!

It did not take long. It was a simple formality to establish our identity. Jean Keller, already sentenced to death for striking an officer, was again condemned for desertion, and I was condemned as a French spy!

There was no good in disputing the matter, and when the colonel added that the execution would take place at once —

“Vive la France!” said I. “Vive la France!” echoed Jean Keller.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It certainly seemed to be finished this time. The muskets were practically now pointing at us. They were only waiting for the word to fire. Well, Jean Keller and Natalis Delpierre knew how to die!

Outside the tent was the platoon that was to shoot us — a dozen men of the Leib regiment under the orders of a lieutenant.

They had not untied our hands. Why not? We could not escape. A few steps perhaps, and against a wall or at the foot of a tree we should fall under the Prussian bullets! Ah! what would I not have given to have died in fair fight with twenty sword-cuts, or shot in two by a can- non-ball! To receive your death without being able to defend yourself is very hard!

We marched along in silence, M. Jean thinking of Martha he would never again see, of his mother whom this last blow would kill.

I thought of my sister Irma, of my other sister Firminie, of all that were left of our family! I saw my father, my mother, my village, all I loved, my regiment, my country.

Neither of us took any notice of where the soldiers were taking us. What did it matter? We were to be killed like dogs!

Evidently as I am telling you this story, and have written it with my own hand, I must somehow have escaped. But I never thought then what was to be the end of this history!

About fifty yards from the tent we had to pass through the Leib regiment. All of them knew Jean Keller. Not one of them showed a sign of pity for him-the pity that is never refused to those about to die! What natures! lhey are well worthy of being commanded by Yon Gra- werts! The lieutenant saw us. He looked at M. Jean, who looked at him: with one it was the satisfaction of a hatred nothing could quench, with the other it was scorn. For a moment I thought the wretch was coming with us. In truth I wondered if he was going to command the firing party! But a trumpet-call was heard, and he disappeared among the soldiers.

We then turned off round one of the knolls that the Duke of Brunswick had just occupied. These heights command the small town and surround it for three quarters of a league. At their foot runs the road to Chalons. The French were in position on the neighboring ridges.

Below us were numerous columns ready to attack our positions so as to command Saint Menehould. If the Prussians succeeded, Dumouriez would be in difficulties in face of an enemy his superior in numbers.

In clear weather I could have recognized the French uniforms on the heights, but all was hidden in a thick fog which the sun had not yet dissipated. We could hear a few guns, but we could scarcely see the flashes.

Believe me, I still had hope, or rather I forced myself, not to despair. But what chance of help was there on the side we were? All the troops called in by Dumouriez were with him round Saint Menehound, were they not?

It was about a quarter past eleven. The noo of September 20th would never strike for us.

We had reached our destination. The platoon left the main road to Chalons on the left. The fog was still too thick for objects to be visible a hundred yards away. It could be felt, however, that the fog would soon disappear.

We were in a little wood, chosen as the place of execution, from which we were never to return.

In the distancewe heard the roll of the drums, the call of the trumpets, the heavy boom of the artillery, and the crackle of the musketry.

I tried to make out what it all meant, as if that could interest me at such a time! I observed that these sounds of battle came from the right, and seemed to be getting nearer to us. Was an engagement in progress on the Chalons road? Had a column made a sortie from the camp at Epine and taken the Prussians on the flank? I could not make it out.

If I have told you this with a certain precision, it is that you may know what was my state of mind. The details are graven on my memory. Besides, we do not forget such things. For me it is all as if it took place yesterday.

We had just entered the little wood. A hundred paces off the firing party stopped before an abattis of trees.

This was where we were to be shot.

The officer in command — a hard-faced man — gave the word to halt. The soldiers formed up, and I still hear the rattle of their muskets on the ground.

“This is the place,” said the officer.

“All right,” said Jean Keller.

He answered in a firm voice, with his head held high, and his look unquailing.

And then coming to me he spoke in that language of France he loved so well, and which I was to hear for the last time.

“Natalis,” he said, “we are going to die! My last thought will be for my mother, and after her for Martha, whom I love best in the world. Poor women! May Heaven have pity on them! As to you, Natalis, forgive me — ”

“What have I to forgive, Monsieur Jean?”

“It is I — ”

“Monsieur Jean,” I replied, “I have nothing to forgive. What I have done has been freely done, and I would do it again! Let me embrace you! and let us die like brave men!”

We fell into eacb other’s arms.

And never shall I forget Jean Keller’s bearing when he turned to the officer and said in a voice without a tremble: “At your orders!”

The officer made a sign. Four soldiers stepped out from the platoon, touched us on the back, and guided us to the foot of the same tree. We were to die together. It was best so!

I remember that this tree was a beech. I see it now with a broad scar of peeled bark. The fog began to rise, and other trees began to come out of the mist.

M. Jean and I stood upright, hand in hand, looking the platoon in the face.

The officer stepped back a little. The click of the locks, as the muskets were brought to the ready, is still in my ears. I squeezed Jean Keller's hand, and I tell you on my oath his did not tremble in mine.

The guns were brought up to the shoulder. At the first word of command they would drop to the aim, at the second they would fire, and all would be over. Suddenly there was a noise in the wood behind the soldiers.

Heavens! What did I see? Mme. Keller, bome up by Mlle. Martha and my sister Irma! Her voice I could hardly hear. Her hand waved a paper, and Mlle. Martha, my sister, and M. de Lauranay shouted with her: "They are French! They are French!"

At this instant there was a loud report, and I saw that Mme. Keller had fainted.

Neither M. Jean nor I had fallen. Was it not our platoon that had fired?

No! Half a dozen of them lay dead on the ground, while the officer and the rest were running off at full speed.

At the same time on every side through the woods I heard the shouts I still hear: "En avant! En avant!"

It was the shout of the French, and not the croaking "Vorwarts "of the Prussians!

A detachment of our soldiers had been thrown out across the Chalons road and had reached the wood just in time. Their fire had just preceded that of the platoon, and settled matters as we see. But how was it they had arrived in the nick of time? That I knew later on.

M. Jean leaped to his mother, whom Mlle. Martha and my sister were holding up. The unhappy woman, thinking the firing had been our deaths, had fainted quite away.

But under the kisses of her son she revived, and returned to herself with these words on her hps: “French! He is French!”

What did she want to say? I hurried to M. de Lauranay. He could not speak.

Mlle. Martha took the paper which Mme. Keller held so tightly, and gave it to M. Jean.

I see the paper now. It was a German journal, the “Zeitblatt.”

M. Jean took it! He read it. Tears flowed down his cheeks. Heavens! One is fortunate to be able to read under such circumstances!

And then the same word escaped from his lips. He rose. He looked like a man who would suddenly go mad. What he would have said I could not understand, so much was his voice choked by emotion.

“French! I am French!” he exclaimed. “Ah, mother! Martha! I am a Frenchman!”

Then he fell on his knees in a burst of thankfulness to God.

But Mme. Keller rose.

“And now, Jean, they will no longer force you to fight against France!”

“No, mother! It is now my right and my duty to fight for her!”

CHAPTER XXIV.

M. Jean dragged me away without stopping to explain. We were with the French, who came swarming out of the wood, and we marched toward the cannon which began to roll continuously.

I tried to think. How could Jean Keller, the son of M. Keller, a German by birth, be a Frenchman? I could not understand it! All I could say was that he would fight like one!

But now I must say something about what had happened on this morning of the 20th of September, when a detachment of our soldiers found themselves in the wood on the Chalons road at such a lucky moment for us.

It will be remembered that in the night of the 16th Dumouriez had left the camp at Grand Pre for the position at Saint Menehould, where he had arrived next day, after a march of four or five leagues.

In front of Saint Menehould were several hills, separated by deep ravines. Their base is defended by the quagmires and marshes formed by the Aure where it joins the Aisne.

The heights on the right are those of Hyron, facing the Lune hills; on the left they are those of Gizaucourt. Between them and Saint Menehould is a sort of flat marshy plain, through which runs the road to Chalons. This plain is varied by a few knolls of little importance, among others that of the mill of Valmy, which rises above the village of that name, which has become so celebrated since this 20th of September.

Since his arrival Dumouriez had occupied Saint Mene- hound, and touched hands with Dillon, who was ready to defend the defile of the Islettes against all comers trying to take the Argonne in reverse.

Kellermann, after the evacuation of the camp at Grand Pre, made a retrograde movement; and on the 19th was still two leagues from Saint Menehould, when Beurnonville with nine thousand men of the auxiliary army was at the camp of Maulde.

Dumouriez intended that Kellermann should establish himself on the heights of Gizaucourt, which command those of La Lune, toward which the Prussians were marching. But the order had been misunderstood, and it was the plateau of Valmy which Kellermann occupied with General Valence and the Due de Chartres, who, at the head of twelve battalions of infantry and twelve squadrons of artillery, particularly distinguished himself in the battle.

Meanwhile Brunswick had arrived, in the hope of cutting the road to Chalons and driving Dillon from the Islettes. Saint Menehould, surrounded by twenty-four thousand men, in addition to the cavalry of the emigres, would soon bring Dumouriez and Kellermann to surrender.

And it was to be feared that this would be the case, for the heights of Gizaucourt were not in the hands of the French, as Dumouriez had intended. If the Prussians, already masters of the Lune hills, seized on the heights of Gizaucourt, their artillery could sweep the French positions.

The King of Prussia saw this. That was why, instead of marching on Chalons, he disregarded Brunswick’s advice, and gave the order to attack, hoping to throw Dumouriez and Kellermann into the quagmires of Saint Menehould.

About half past eleven o’clock the Prussians began to descend the Lune hills in good order, and halted half-way.

It was at this moment, that is to say, at the beginning of the battle, that a Prussian column came up with Kellermann’s rear-guard on the Chalons road. A few companies of this rear-guard had been thrown out through the little wood, and they had put to flight the platoon that was to have shot us.

And it was just then, when M. Jean and I were in the thick of the advance, that I discovered my comrades of the Royal Picardy.

“Delpierre?” shouted one of the officers of my squadron, catching sight of me just as the bullets began to play on our ranks.

“Here, captain!” said I.

“Come back to time, eh?”

“As you see; in time to fight!”

“But you are on foot?”

“Well, captain, I must fight on foot, and I shall not do badly.”

They gave arms to each of us — M. Jean and myself — a musket and a sword apiece. We crossed the leathers on our chests, and if we were not in uniform it was because the regimental tailor had not had time to attend to us!

I should say that the French were repulsed at the beginning of the action, but the carabineers of General Valence came up in support, and order was re-established.

Meanwhile the fog, rent by the gun-flashes, had disappeared. We fought in bright sunshine. In the two hours twenty thousand discharges of artillery were exchanged between the heights of Valmy and those of La Lune. Twenty thousand, did I say? Good! say twenty-one thousand, and let it stand. Better hear that, as the proverb says, than be deaf!

At this time the position near the hill of Valmy was very difficult to hold. The artillery was cutting lanes in our troops. Kellermann's horse was shot. Not only did the Prussians hold the Lune hills, but they were trying to get possession of those of Gizaucourt. We held those of Hyron, it is true, but Clairfayt was trying to get at them with his twenty-five thousand Austrians; and if he succeeded, the French would be shattered back and front.

Dumouriez saw the danger. He sent Stengel with sixteen battalions to repulse Clairfayt, and Chazot, so as to occupy Gizaucourt before the Prussians. Chazot arrived too late. The place was taken, and Kellermann had to defend Valmy against artillery which opened on him on all sides. A powder-wagon blew up near the mill and caused a moment's confusion. We were there, M. Jean and I, and it is a miracle we were not killed.

Then it was that the Due de Chartres came with the reserve of artillery, and cheerily replied to the guns on La Lune and Gizaucourt. The affair was getting warm. The Prussians, in three columns, moved on to the assault of the mill of Valmy to dislodge us and hurl us into the marsh.

I still see Kellermann, and I can hear him now. He gave orders to let the enemy advance to the crest of the hill before we charged him. We were ready; we waited. All that was wanted was to sound the charge.

Then, at the right moment, this cry escaped from Kellermann's lips: "Vive la Nation!"

“Vive la Nation!” we answered.

And we roared it out so that you could hear it above the roar of the guns.

The Prussians had reached the crest of the hill. With their columns well in line, their steady step, the coolness they showed, they were terrible to face. But the French dash swept them away. We threw ourselves on them. The slaughter was terrible.

Suddenly, amid the flashes of fire that darted around us, I saw Jean Keller with his sword on high. He had recognized one of the Prussian regiment* that we had begun to hurl from the slopes of Valmy.

It was Colonel von Grawert’s regiment. Lieutenant Frantz was fighting with great courage, for it is not courage that German officers want!

M. Jean and Frantz von Grawert were face to face.

The lieutenant thought we had fallen under the Prussian bullets, and here he found us! You may guess his astonishment. But he had scarcely time to recognize us. “With a bound M. Jean was on him, and with his sword he hit him on the head.

The lieutenant fell dead, and I have always thought it was right that he should receive death at the hands of Jean Keller.

But the Prussians still tried to carry our position. They attacked us with extraordinary vigor. But we were too many for them, and by two o’clock they had ceased firing and returned to the plain.

But the battle was only suspended. At four o’olock the King of Prussia, marching at the head, again formed up three columns of attack with his best infantry and cavalry. Then our battery of twenty-four guns, stationed at the foot of the mill, cannonaded the Prussians with such violence that they could not climb the slope. Then the night came and they went back.

Kellermaun remained master of the plateau, and the name of Valmy rang through Prance, the very day that the Convention at its second sitting decreed the Bepublic.

CHAPTER XXV.

We have reached the end of my story, which I might have called “The Story of a Leave in Germany.”

That evening in a house in the village of Valmy, Mme. Keller, M. and Mlle, de Lauranay, my sister Irma, M. Jean, and I found ourselves together.

How great was our joy after such experiences! What passed between us you can guess.

“Wait a bit!” said I. “I am not curious, and I can remain with my beak in the water if you like — but I should like to know — ”

“How it is, Natalis, that Monsieur Jean is your countryman?” said my sister.

“Yes, Irma, and it seems so strange to me that I am afraid you must have made a mistake — ”

“We do not make such mistakes as those, my good Natalis,” said M. Jean. And this is what he told me in a few words. At the village of Croix-aux-Bois, where we left M. de Lauranay and his companions guarded by Austrians, the Austrians were soon replaced by Prussians. This column had in its ranks a certain number of young men whom the levy of the 31st of July had torn from their families.

Among them was a lad named Ludwig Pertz, who came from Belzingen. He knew Mme. Keller and came to see her when he heard she was a prisoner of the Prussians. They told him what had happened to M. Jean, and how he had taken flight through the Argonne. And then Ludwig Pertz had exclaimed: “But your son has nothing to fear, Madame Keller! They had no right to embody him. He is not a Prussian! He is a Frenchman!”

You may guess how this declaration was received. Pertz being asked for his authority, presented Mme. Keller with a copy of the “Zeitblatt” containing a report of the lawsuit which on the 17th of August had at last come to an end. The decision was that the Kellers must lose their claim, it being necessary that army contracts should be given out only to Germans of Prussian birth; and it had been discovered that M. Keller’s ancestors had never obtained naturalization, that therefore the said Keller was never a Prussian, and therefore the said Keller had nothing owing him by the State!

That was the decision! That M. Keller had remained French there could be no doubt, but that was no reason why he should not be paid his due! However, that was law in Berlin in 1792. I do not think M. Jean thought of an appeal. He gave up his cause as lost — quite lost. It was indisputable that he had had a French father and a French mother, and he could not be much more French! And if a baptism of fire was required, he had had one at Valmy.

After the communication from Pertz it was important to find M. Jean as soon as possible. His friends heard that he had been captured at Longwe and taken to the Prussian camp with your servant. There was not an hour to lose. Mme. Keller recovered her strength at the danger that menaced her son. After the departure of the Austrian column, accompanied by M. de Lauranay, Mlle. Martha, my sister, and guided by honest Hans Stenger, she left Croix-aux-Bois, traversed the defile, and reached Brunsr wick’s cantonment the very morning they were going to shoot us.

We had just come out of |the tent where the court-martial was held when she presented herself.

In vain she appealed to the judgment which made Jean Keller a Frenchman. She was repulsed. She then followed us along the Chalons road — and you know what happened.

The position of the French after Valmy I can dismiss in a few words.

At first, during the night, Kellermann occupied the heights of Gizaucourt, and assured the position of the entire army.

The Prussians had, however, cut the road to Chalons and we could not communicate with the depots. But as we were masters of Vitry the convoys could come in as usual, and the army in camp at Saint Menehould did not run short.

The enemy’s army remained in their cantonments until the last days of September. There were diplomatic advances which ended in nothing. The Prussians became anxious to pass the frontier. Provisions were failing them, sickness was making great ravages, and on the 1st of October the Duke of Brunswick decamped.

As the Prussians retired through the defiles of the Argonne we assisted them slightly, but not violently. They were allowed to retreat leisurely. Why, I do not know. Neither I nor many others understood the conduct of Dumouriez in the matter.

Doubtless there was some political reason for it, and as I said before, I do not understand politics.

The important fact is that the enemy repassed the frontier. It was done slowly, but it was done, and there was not a Prussian left in France — not even M. Jean, for he was out and out our countryman.

As soon after the departure as possible, in the first week of October, we returned together to our dear Picardy, when the marriage of Jean Keller and Martha de Lauranay took place. It wdl be remembered I was to be one of the witnesses at Belzingen, and you will not be surprised that I was one of the witnesses at Sauflieu. And if the marriage did not promise to be a happy one, there was never a marriage in this world that did.

As to me, I rejoined my regiment a few days afterward, I learned to read and to write, and became, as I have said, lieutenant, and then captain in the wars of the Empire.

That is my story, which I have written to put an end to those disputes among my friends at Grattenpache. If I have not spoken like a church book, I have told you the things as they happened. And now, readers, allow me to salute you with my sword.

Natalis Delpierre.

Captain of Cavalry,

(Retired List).

THE END

THE WRECK OF THE CYNTHIA

Published in 1885, this novel was co-authored by Andre Laurie and Verne. It tells the story of Hersebom Erik, a young Norwegian with a remarkable intelligence. However, there is something is different about him, as he does not have the characteristic physical features of the Slavic people he lives with. His friend Dr. Schwaryencrona takes him under his wing and eventually discovers that Erik was adopted by a family of Norwegian fishermen, after being rescued from the sinking of the Cynthia when he was only a few months old.

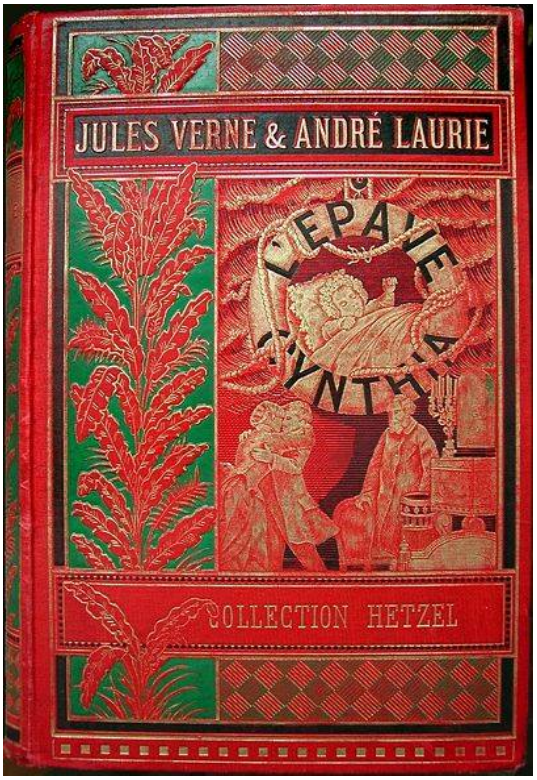
JULES VERNE & ANDRÉ LAURIE
L'EPAVE
CYNTHIA
COLLECTION HETZEL

First edition in France

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CHAPTER I.

MR. MALARIUS' FRIEND.

There is probably neither in Europe nor anywhere else a scholar whose face is more universally known than that of Dr. Schwaryencrona, of Stockholm. His portrait appears on the millions of bottles with green seals, which are sent to the confines of the globe.

Truth compels us to state that these bottles only contain cod liver oil, a good and useful medicine; which is sold to the inhabitants of Norway for a "couronnes," which is worth one franc and thirty-nine centimes.

Formerly this oil was made by the fishermen, but now the process is a more scientific one, and the prince of this special industry is the celebrated Dr. Schwaryencrona.

There is no one who has not seen his pointed beard, his spectacles, his hooked nose, and his cap of otter skin. The engraving, perhaps, is not very fine, but it is certainly a striking likeness. A proof of this is what happened one day in a primary school in Noroe, on the western coast of Norway, a few leagues from Bergen.

Two o'clock had struck. The pupils were in their classes in the large, sanded hall — the girls on the left and the boys on the right — occupied in following the demonstration which their teacher, Mr. Malarius, was making on the black-board. Suddenly the door opened, and a fur coat, fur boots, fur gloves, and a cap of otter, made their appearance on the threshold.

The pupils immediately rose respectfully, as is usual when a stranger visits the class-room. None of them had ever seen the new arrival before, but they all whispered when they saw him, “Doctor Schwaryencrona,” so much did the picture engraved on the bottles resemble the doctor.

We must say that the pupils of Mr. Malarius had the bottles continually before their eyes, for one of the principal manufactories of the doctor was at Noroe. But for many years the learned man had not visited that place, and none of the children consequently could have beheld him in the flesh. In imagination it was another matter, for they often spoke of him in Noroe, and his ears must have often tingled, if the popular belief has any foundation. Be this as it may, his recognition was unanimous, and a triumph for the unknown artist who had drawn his portrait — a triumph of which this modest artist might justly be proud, and of which more than one photographer in the world might well be jealous.

But what astonished and disappointed the pupils a little was to discover that the doctor was a man below the ordinary height, and not the giant which they had imagined him to be. How could such an illustrious man be satisfied with a height of only five feet three inches? His gray head hardly reached the shoulder of Mr. Malarius, and he was already stooping with age. He was also much thinner than the doctor, which made him appear twice as tall. His large brown overcoat, to which long use had given a greenish tint, hung loosely around him; he wore short breeches and shoes with buckles, and from beneath his black silk cap a few gray locks had made their escape. His rosy cheeks and smiling countenance gave an expression of great sweetness to his face. He also wore spectacles, through which he did not cast piercing glances like the doctor, but through them his blue eyes shone with inexhaustible benevolence.

In the memory of his pupils Mr. Malarius had never punished a scholar. But, nevertheless, they all respected him, and loved him. He had a brave soul, and all the world knew it very well. They were not ignorant of the fact that in his youth he had passed brilliant examinations, and that he had been offered a professorship in a great university, where he might have attained to honor and wealth. But he had a sister, poor Kristina, who was always ill and suffering. She would not have left her native village for the world, for she felt sure that she would die if they removed to the city. So Mr. Malarius had submitted gently to her wishes, and sacrificed his own prospects. He had accepted the humble duty of the village school-master, and when twenty years afterward Kristina had died, blessing him, he had become accustomed to his obscure and retired life, and did not care to change it. He was absorbed in his work, and forgot the world. He found a supreme pleasure in becoming a model instructor, and in having the best-conducted school in his country. Above all, he liked to instruct his best pupils in the higher branches, to initiate them into scientific studies, and in ancient and modern literature, and give them the information which is usually the portion of the higher classes, and not bestowed upon the children of fishermen and peasants.

“What is good for one class, is good for the other,” he argued. “If the poor have not as many comforts, that is no reason why they should be denied an acquaintance with Homer and Shakespeare; the names of the stars which guide them across the ocean, or of the plants which grow on the earth. They will soon see them laid low by their ploughs, but in their infancy at least they will have drunk from pure sources, and participated in the common patrimony of mankind.” In more than one country this system would have been thought imprudent, and calculated to disgust the lowly with their humble lot in life, and lead them to wander away in search of adventures. But in Norway nobody thinks of these things. The patriarchal sweetness of their dispositions, the distance between the villages, and the laborious habits of the people, seem to remove all danger of this kind. This higher instruction is more frequent than a stranger would believe to be possible. Nowhere is education more generally diffused, and nowhere is it carried so high; as well in the poorest rural schools, as in the colleges.

Therefore the Scandinavian Peninsula may flatter herself, that she has produced more learned and distinguished men in proportion to her population, than any other region of Europe. The traveler is constantly astonished by the contrast between the wild and savage aspect of nature, and the manufactures, and works of art, which represent the most refined civilization.

But perhaps it is time for us to return to Noroe, and Dr. Schwaryencrona, whom we have left on the threshold of the school. If the pupils had been quick to recognize him, although they had never seen him before, it had been different with the instructor, whose acquaintance with him dated further back.

“Ah! good-day, my dear Malarius!” said the visitor cordially, advancing with outstretched hands toward the school-master.

“Sir! you are very welcome,” answered the latter, a little surprised, and somewhat timidly, as is customary with all men who have lived secluded lives; and are interrupted in the midst of their duties. “But excuse me if I ask whom I have the honor of — ”

“What! Have I changed so much since we ran together over the snow, and smoked our long pipes at Christiania; have you forgotten our Krauss boarding-house, and must I name your comrade and friend?”

“Schwaryencrona!” cried Mr. Malarius. “Is it possible. — Is it really you. — Is it the doctor?”

“Oh! I beg of you, omit all ceremony. I am your old friend Roff, and you are my brave Olaf, the best, the dearest friend of my youth. Yes, I know you well. We have both changed a little in thirty years; but our hearts are still young, and we have always kept a little corner in them for those whom we learned to love, when we were students, and eat our dry bread side by side.”

The doctor laughed, and squeezed the hands of Mr. Malarius, whose eyes were moist.

“My dear friend, my good excellent doctor, you must not stay here,” said he; “I will give all these youngsters a holiday, for which they will not be sorry, I assure you, and then you must go home with me.”

“Not at all!” declared the doctor, turning toward the pupils who were watching this scene with lively interest. “I must neither interfere with your work, nor the studies of these youths. If you wish to give me great pleasure, you will permit me to sit here near you, while you resume your teaching.”

“I would willingly do so,” answered Mr. Malarius, “but to tell you the truth, I have no longer any heart for geometry; besides, having mentioned a holiday, I do not like to disappoint the children. There is one way of arranging the matter however. If Doctor Schwaryencrona would deign to do my pupils the honor of questioning them about their studies, and then I will dismiss them for the rest of the day.”

“An excellent idea. I shall be only too happy to do so. I will become their examiner.”

Then taking the master’s seat, he addressed the school:

“Tell me,” asked the doctor, “who is the best pupil?”

“Erik Hersebom!” answered fifty youthful voices unhesitatingly.

“Ah! Erik Hersebom. Well, Erik, will you come here?”

A young boy, about twelve years of age, who was seated on the front row of benches, approached his chair. He was a grave, serious-looking child, whose pensive cast of countenance, and large deep set eyes, would have attracted attention anywhere, and he was the more remarkable, because of the blonde heads by which he was surrounded. While all his companions of both sexes had hair the color of flax, rosy complexions, and blue eyes, his hair was of deep chestnut color, like his eyes, and his skin was brown. He had not the prominent cheek bones, the short nose, and the stout frame of these Scandinavian children. In a word, by his physical characteristics so plainly marked, it was evident that he did not belong to the race by whom he was surrounded.

He was clothed like them in the coarse cloth of the country, made in the style common among the peasantry of Bergen; but the delicacy of his limbs, the smallness of his head, the easy elegance of his poise, and the natural gracefulness of his movements and attitudes, all seemed to denote a foreign origin.

No physiologist could have helped being struck at once by these peculiarities, and such was the case with Dr. Schwaryencrona.

However, he had no motive for calling attention to these facts, and he simply proceeded to fulfill the duty which he had undertaken.

“Where shall we begin — with grammar?” he asked the young lad.

“I am at the command of the doctor,” answered Erik, modestly.

The doctor then gave him two or three simple questions, but was astonished to hear him answer them, not only in the Swedish language, but also in French and English. It was the usual custom of Mr. Malarius, who contended that it was as easy to learn three languages at once as it was to learn only one.

“You teach them French and English then?” said the doctor, turning toward his friend.

“Why not? also the elements of Greek and Latin. I do not see what harm it can do them.”

“Nor I,” said the doctor, laughing, and Erik Hersebom translated several sentences very correctly.

In one of the sentences, reference was made to the hemlock drunk by Socrates, and Mr. Malarius asked the doctor to question him as to the family which this plant belonged to.

Erik answered without hesitation “that it was one of the family of umbelliferous plants,” and described them in detail.

From botany they passed to geometry, and Erik demonstrated clearly a theorem relative to the sum of the angles of a triangle.

The doctor became every moment more and more surprised.

“Let us have a little talk about geography,” he said. “What sea is it which bounds Scandinavia, Russia and Siberia on the north?”

“It is the Arctic Ocean.”

“And what waters does this ocean communicate with?”

“The Atlantic on the west, and the Pacific on the east.”

“Can you name two or three of the most important seaports on the Pacific?”

“I can mention Yokohama, in Japan; Melbourne, in Australia; San Francisco, in the State of California.”

“Well, since the Arctic Ocean communicates on one side with the Atlantic, and on the other with the Pacific, do you not think that the shortest route to Yokohama or San Francisco would be through this Arctic Ocean?”

“Assuredly,” answered Erik, “it would be the shortest way, if it were practicable, but all navigators who have attempted to follow it have been prevented by ice, and been compelled to renounce the enterprise, when they have escaped death.”

“Have they often attempted to discover the north-east passage?”

“At least fifty times during the last three centuries, but without success.”

“Could you mention a few of the expeditions?”

“The first was organized in 1523, under the direction of Franois Sebastian Cabot. It consisted of three vessels under the command of the unfortunate Sir Hugh Willoughby, who perished in Lapland, with all his crew. One of his lieutenants, Chancellor, was at first successful, and opened a direct route through the Polar Sea. But he also, while making a second attempt, was shipwrecked, and perished. A captain, Stephen Borough, who was sent in search of him, succeeded in making his way through the strait which separates Nova Zembla from the Island of Waigate and in penetrating into the Sea of Kara. But the fog and ice prevented him from going any further.

“Two expeditions which were sent out in 1580 were equally unsuccessful. The project was nevertheless revived by the Hollanders about fifteen years later, and they fitted out, successively, three expeditions, under the command of Barentz.

“In 1596, Barentz also perished, in the ice of Nova Zembla.

“Ten years later Henry Hudson was sent out, but also failed.

“The Danes were not more successful in 1653.

“In 1676, Captain John Wood was also shipwrecked. Since that period the north-east passage has been considered impracticable, and abandoned by the maritime powers.”

“Has it never been attempted since that epoch?”

“It has been by Russia, to whom it would be of immense advantage, as well as to all the northern nations, to find a direct route between her shores and Siberia. She has sent out during a century no less than eighteen expeditions to explore the coasts of Nova Zembla, the Sea of Kara, and the eastern and western coasts of Siberia. But, although these expeditions have made these places better known, they have also demonstrated the impossibility of forcing a passage through the Arctic Ocean. The academician Van Baer, who made the last attempt in 1837, after Admiral Lutke and Pachtusow, declared emphatically that this ocean is simply a glacier, as impracticable for vessels as it would be if it were a continent.”

“Must we, then, renounce all hopes of discovering a north-east passage?”

"That seems to be the conclusion which we must arrive at, from the failure of these numerous attempts. It is said, however, that a great navigator, named Nordenskiold, wishes to make another attempt, after he has prepared himself by first exploring portions of this polar sea. If he then considers it practicable, he may get up another expedition."

Dr. Schwaryencrona was a warm admirer of Nordenskiold, and this is why he had asked these questions about the north-east passage. He was charmed with the clearness of these answers.

He fixed his eyes on Erik Hersebom, with an expression of the deepest interest.

"Where did you learn all this, my dear child?" he demanded, after a short silence.

"Here, sir," answered Erik, surprised at the question.

"You have never studied in any other school?"

"Certainly not."

"Mr. Malarius may be proud of you, then," said the doctor, turning toward the master.

"I am very well satisfied with Erik," said the latter.

"He has been my pupil for eight years. When I first took him he was very young, and he has always been at the head of his section."

The doctor became silent. His piercing eyes were fixed upon Erik, with a singular intensity. He seemed to be considering some problem, which it would not be wise to mention.

“He could not have answered my question better and I think it useless to continue the examination,” he said at last. “I will no longer delay your holiday, my children, and since Mr. Malarius desires it, we will stop for to-day.”

At these words, the master clapped his hands. All the pupils rose at once, collected their books, and arranged themselves in four lines, in the empty spaces between the benches.

Mr. Malarias clapped his hands a second time. The column started, and marched out, keeping step with military precision.

At a third signal they broke their ranks, and took to flight with joyous cries.

In a few seconds they were scattered around the blue waters of the fiord, where might be seen also the turf roofs of the village of Noroe.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOME OF A FISHERMAN IN NOROE.

The house of Mr. Hersebom was, like all others in Noroe, covered by a turf roof, and built of enormous timbers of fir-trees, in the Scandinavian fashion. The two large rooms were separated by a hall in the center, which led to the boat-house where the canoes were kept. Here were also to be seen the fishing-tackle and the codfish, which they dry and sell. These two rooms were used both as living-rooms and bedrooms. They had a sort of wooden drawer let into the wall, with its mattress and skins, which serve for beds, and are only to be seen at night. This arrangement for sleeping, with the bright panels, and the large open fire-place, where a blazing fire of wood was always kept burning, gave to the interior of the most humble homes an appearance of neatness and domestic luxury unknown to the peasantry of Southern Europe.

This evening all the family were gathered round the fire-place, where a huge kettle was boiling, containing “sillsallat,” or smoked herring, salmon and potatoes.

Mr. Hersebom, seated in a high wooden chair, was making a net, which was his usual occupation when he was not on the sea, or drying his fish. He was a hardy fisherman, whose skin had been bronzed by exposure to the arctic breezes, and his hair was gray, although he was still in the prime of life. His son Otto, a great boy, fourteen years old, who bore a strong resemblance to him, and who was destined to also become famous as a fisherman, sat near him. At present he was occupied in solving the mysteries of the rule of three, covering a little slate with figures, although his large hands looked as if they would be much more at home handling the oars.

Erik, seated before the dining-table, was absorbed in a Volume of history that Mr. Malarius had lent him. Katrina, Hersebom, the goodwife, was occupied peacefully with her spinning-wheel, while little Vanda, a blonde of ten years, was seated on a stool, knitting a large stocking with red wool.

At their feet a large dog of a yellowish-white color, with wool as thick as that of a sheep, lay curled up sound asleep.

For more than one hour the silence had been unbroken, and the copper lamp suspended over their heads, and filled with fish oil, lighted softly this tranquil interior.

To tell the truth, the silence became oppressive to Dame Katrina, who for some moments had betrayed the desire of unloosing her tongue.

At last she could keep quiet no longer.

“You have worked long enough for to-night,” she said, “it is time to lay the cloth for supper.”

Without a word of expostulation. Erik lifted his large book, and seated himself nearer the fire-place, whilst Vanda laid aside her knitting, and going to the buffet brought out the plates and spoons.

“Did you say, Otto,” asked the little girl, “that our Erik answered the doctor very well?”

“Very well, indeed,” said Otto enthusiastically, “he talked like a book in fact. I do not know where he learned it all. The more questions the doctor asked the more he had to answer. The words came and came. Mr. Malarius was well satisfied with him.”

“I am also,” said Vanda, gravely.

“Oh, we were all well pleased. If you could have seen, mother, how the children all listened, with their mouths open. We were only afraid that our turn would come. But Erik was not afraid, and answered the doctor as he would have answered the master.”

“Stop. Mr. Malarius is as good as the doctor, and quite as learned,” cried Erik, whom their praises seemed to annoy.

The old fisherman gave him an approving smile.

“You are right, little boy,” he said; “Mr. Malarius, if he chose, could be the superior of all the doctors in the town, and besides he does not make use of his scientific knowledge to ruin poor people.”

“Has Doctor Schwaryencrona ruined any one?” asked Erik with curiosity.

“Well — if he has not done so, it has not been his fault. Do you think that I have taken any pleasure in the erection of his factory, which is sending forth its smoke on the borders of our fiord? Your mother can tell you that formerly we manufactured our own oil, and that we sold it easily in Bergen for a hundred and fifty to two hundred kroners a year. But that is all ended now — nobody will buy the brown oil, or, if they do, they pay so little for it, that it is not worth while to take the journey. We must be satisfied with selling the livers to the factory, and God only knows how this tiresome doctor has managed to get them for such a low price. I hardly realize forty-five kroners now, and I have to take twice as much trouble as formerly. Ah, well. I say it is not just, and the doctor would do better to look after his patients in Stockholm, instead of coming here to take away our trade by which we earn our bread.”

After these bitter words they were all silent. They heard nothing for some minutes except the clicking of the plates, as Vanda arranged them, whilst her mother emptied the contents of the pot into a large dish.

Erik reflected deeply upon what Mr. Hersebom had said. Numerous objections presented themselves to his mind, and as he was candor itself — he could not help speaking.

“It seems to me that you have a right to regret your former profits, father,” he said, “but is it just to accuse Doctor Schwaryencrona of having diminished them? Is not his oil worth more than the home-made article?”

“Ah! it is clearer, that is all. It does not taste as strong as ours, they say; and that is the reason why all the fine ladies in the town prefer it, no doubt; but it does not do any more good to the lungs of sick people than our oil.”

“But for some reason or other they buy it in preference; and since it is a very useful medicine it is essential that the public should experience as little disgust as possible in taking it. Therefore, if a doctor finds out a method of making it more palatable, is it not his duty to make use of his discovery?”

Master Hersebom scratched his ear.

“Doubtless,” he said, reluctantly, “it is his duty as a doctor, but that is no reason why he should prevent poor fishermen from getting their living.”

“I believe the doctor’s factory gives employment to three hundred, whilst there were only twenty in Noroe at the time of which you speak,” objected Erik, timidly.

“You are right, and that is why the business is no longer worth anything,” said Hersebom.

“Come, supper is ready. Seat yourselves at the table,” said Dame Katrina, who saw that the discussion was in danger of becoming unpleasantly warm.

Erik understood that further opposition on his part would be out of place, and he did not answer the last argument of his father, but took his habitual seat beside Vanda.

“Were the doctor and Mr. Malarius friends in childhood?” he asked, in order to give a turn to the conversation.

“Yes,” answered the fisherman, as he seated himself at the table. “They were both born in Noroe, and I can remember when they played around the school-house, although they are both ten years older than I am. Mr. Malarius was the son of the physician, and Doctor Schwaryencrona only the son of a simple fisherman. But he has risen in the world, and they say that he is now worth millions, and that his residence in Stockholm is a perfect palace. Oh, learning is a fine thing.”

After uttering this aphorism the brave man took a spoon to help the smoking fish and potatoes, when a knock at the door made him pause.

“May I come in, Master Hersebom?” said a deep-toned voice. And without waiting for permission the person who had spoken entered, bringing with him a great blast of icy air.

“Doctor Schwaryencrona!” cried the three children, while the father and mother rose quickly.

“My dear Hersebom,” said the doctor, taking the fisherman’s hand, “we have not seen each other for many years, but I have not forgotten your excellent father, and thought I might call and see a friend of my childhood!”

The worthy man felt a little ashamed of the accusations which he had so recently made against his visitor, and he did not know what to say. He contented himself, therefore, with returning the doctor’s shake of the hand cordially, and smiling a welcome, whilst his good wife was more demonstrative.

“Quick, Otto, Erik, help the doctor to take off his overcoat, and you, Vanda, prepare another place at the table,” she said, for, like all Norwegian housekeepers, she was very hospitable.

“Will you do us the honor, doctor, of eating a morsel with us?”

“Indeed I would not refuse, you may be sure, if I had the least appetite; for I see you have a very tempting dish before you. But it is not an hour since I took supper with Mr. Malarius, and I certainly would not have called so early if I had thought you would be at the table. It would give me great pleasure if you would resume your seats and eat your supper.”

“Oh, doctor!” implored the good wife, “at least you will not refuse some ‘snorgas’ and a cup of tea?”

“I will gladly take a cup of tea, but on condition that, you eat your supper first,” answered the doctor, seating himself in the large arm-chair.

Vanda immediately placed the tea-kettle on the fire, and disappeared in the neighboring room. The rest of the family understanding with native courtesy that it would annoy their guest if they did not do as he wished, began to eat their supper.

In two minutes the doctor was quite at his ease. He stirred the fire, and warmed his legs in the blaze of the dry wood that Katrina had thrown on before going to supper. He talked about old times, and old friends; those who had disappeared, and those who remained, about the changes that had taken place even in Bergen.

He made himself quite at home, and, what was more remarkable, he succeeded in making Mr. Hersebom eat his supper.

Vanda now entered carrying a large wooden dish, upon which was a saucer, which she offered so graciously to the doctor that he could not refuse it. It was the famous “snorgas” of Norway, slices of smoked reindeer, and shreds of herring, and red pepper, minced up and laid between slices of black bread, spiced cheese, and other condiments; which they eat at any hour to produce an appetite.

It succeeded so well in the doctor’s case, that although he only took it out of politeness, he was soon able to do honor to some preserved mulberries which were Dame Katrina’s special pride, and so thirsty that he drank seven or eight cups of tea.

Mr. Hersebom brought out a bottle of “schiedam,” which he had bought of a Hollander.

Then supper being ended, the doctor accepted an enormous pipe which his host offered him, and smoked away to their general satisfaction.

By this time all feeling of constraint had passed away, and it seemed as if the doctor had always been a member of the family. They joked and laughed, and were the best of friends in the world, until the old clock of varnished wood struck ten.

“My good friends, it is growing late,” said the doctor.

“If you will send the children to bed, we will talk about more serious matters.”

Upon a sign from Dame Katrina, Otto, Erik, and Vanda bade them good-night and left the room.

“You wonder why I have come,” said the doctor, after a moments’ silence, fixing his penetrating glance upon the fisherman.

“My guests are always welcome,” answered the fisherman, sententiously.

“Yes! I know that Noroe is famous for hospitality. But you must certainly have asked yourself what motive could have induced me to leave the society of my old friend Malarius and come to you. I am sure that Dame Hersebom has some suspicion of my motive.”

“We shall know when you tell us,” replied the good woman, diplomatically.

“Well,” said the doctor, with a sigh, “since you will not help me, I must face it alone. Your son, Erik, Master Hersebom, is a most remarkable child.”

“I do not complain of him,” answered the fisherman.

“He is singularly intelligent, and well informed for his age,” continued the doctor. “I questioned him to-day, in school, and I was very much surprised by the extraordinary ability which his answers displayed. I was also astonished, when I learned his name, to see that he bore no resemblance to you, nor indeed to any of the natives of this country.”

The fisherman and his wife remained silent and motionless.

“To be brief,” continued the doctor, with visible impatience, “this child not only interests me — he puzzles me. I have talked with Malarius, who told me that he was not your son, but that he had been cast on your shore by a shipwreck, and that you took him in and adopted him, bringing him up as your own, and bestowing your name upon him. This is true, is it not?”

“Yes, doctor,” answered Hersebom, gravely.

“If he is not our son by birth, he is in love and affection,” said Katrina, with moist eyes and trembling hands. “Between him, and Otto, and Vanda, we have made no difference — we have never thought of him only as our own child.”

“These sentiments do you both honor,” said the doctor, moved by the emotion of the brave woman. “But I beg of you, my friends, relate to me the history of this child. I have come to hear it, and I assure you that I wish him well.”

The fisherman appeared to hesitate a moment. Then seeing that the doctor was waiting impatiently for him to speak, he concluded to gratify him.

“You have been told the truth,” he said, regretfully; “the child is not our son. Twelve years ago I was fishing near the island at the entrance of the fiord, near the open sea. You know it is surrounded by a sand bank, and that cod-fish are plentiful there. After a good day’s work, I drew in my lines, and was going to hoist my sail, when something white moving upon the water, about a mile off, attracted my attention. The sea was calm, and there was nothing pressing to hurry me home, so I had the curiosity to go and see what this white object was. In ten minutes I had reached it. It was a little wicker cradle, enveloped in a woolen cloth, and strongly tied to a buoy. I drew it toward me; an emotion which I could not understand seized me; I beheld a sleeping infant, about seven or eight months old, whose little fists were tightly clinched. He looked a little pale and cold, but did not appear to have suffered much from his adventurous voyage, if one might judge by his lusty screams when he awoke, as he did immediately, when he no longer felt himself rocked by the waves. Our little Otto was over two years old, and I knew how to manage such little rogues. I rolled up a bit of rag, dipped it in some *eau de vie* and water that I had with me, and gave it to him to suck. This quieted him at once, and he seemed to enjoy the cordial. But I knew that he would not be quiet long, therefore I made all haste to return to Noroe. I had untied the cradle and placed it in the boat at my feet; and while I attended to my sail, I watched the poor little one, and asked myself where it could possibly have come from. Doubtless from some shipwrecked vessel. A fierce tempest had been raging during the night, and there had been many disasters. But by what means had this infant escaped the fate of those who had had the charge of him? How had they thought of tying him to the buoy? How many hours had he been floating on the waves? Where were his father and mother, those who loved him? But all these questions had to remain unanswered, the poor baby was unable to give us any information. In half an hour I was at home, and gave my new possession to Katrina. We had a cow then, and she was immediately pressed into service as a nurse for the infant. He was so pretty, so smiling, so rosy, when he had been fed and warmed before the fire, that we fell in love with him at once; just the same as if he had been our own. And then, you see, we took care of him; we brought him up, and we have never made any difference between him and our own two children. Is it not true, wife?" added Mr. Hersebom, turning toward Katrina.

"Very true, the poor little one," answered the good dame, drying her eyes, which this recital had filled with tears. "And he is our child now, for we have adopted him. I do not know why Mr. Malarius should say anything to the contrary.”

“It is true,” said Hersebom, and I do not see that it concerns any one but ourselves.”

“That is so,” said the doctor, in a conciliatory tone, “but you must not accuse Mr. Malarius of being indiscreet. I was struck with the physiognomy of the child, and I begged my friend confidentially to relate his history. He told me that Erik believed himself to be your son, and that every one in Noroe had forgotten how he had become yours. Therefore, you see, I took care not to speak until the children had been sent to bed. You say that he was about seven or eight months old when you found him?”

“About that; he had already four teeth, the little brigand, and I assure you that it was not long before he began to use them,” said Hersebom, laughing.

“Oh, he was a superb child,” said Katrinn, eagerly. “He was so white, and strong, and plump; and such arms and legs. You should have seen them!”

“How was he dressed?” asked Dr. Schwaryencrona.

Hersebom did not answer, but his wife was less discreet.

“Like a little prince,” she answered. “Imagine a robe of piquè, trimmed all over with lace, a pelisse of quilted satin, a cloak of white velvet, and a little cap; the son of a king could not have more. Everything he had was beautiful. But you can see for yourself, for I have kept them all just as they were. You may be sure that we did not dress the baby in them. Oh, no; I put Otto’s little garments on him, which I had laid away, and which also served, later on, for Vanda. But his outfit is here, and I will show it to you.”

While she was speaking, the worthy woman knelt down before a large oaken chest, with an antique lock, and after lifting the lid, began searching the compartments.

She drew out, one by one, all the garments of which she had spoken, and displayed them with pride before the eyes of the doctor. She also showed the linen, which was exquisitely fine, a little quilt of silk, and a pair of white merino boots. All the articles were marked with the initials “E.D.” elegantly embroidered, as the doctor saw at a glance.

“‘E.D.;’ is that why you named the child Erik?” he asked.

“Precisely,” answered Katrina, who it was evident enjoyed this exhibition, while her husband’s face grew more gloomy. “See,” she said, “this is the most beautiful of all. He wore it around his neck.”

And she drew from its box a rattle of coral and gold, suspended from a little chain.

The initials “E.D.” were here surrounded by a Latin motto, “Semper idem.”

“We thought at first it was the baby’s name, but Mr. Malarius told us it meant ‘always the same,’” she continued, seeing that the doctor was trying to decipher the motto.

“Mr. Malarius told you the truth,” said the doctor. “It is evident the child belonged to a rich and distinguished family,” he added, while Katrina replaced the babe’s outfit in the oaken chest.

“Have you any idea what country he came from?”

“How could we know anything about it, since I found him on the sea?” replied Hersebom.

“Yes, but the cradle was attached to a buoy, you said, and it is customary on all vessels to write on the buoy the name of the ship to which it belongs,” answered the doctor, fixing his penetrating eyes upon those of the fisherman.

“Doubtless,” said the latter, hanging his head.

“Well, this buoy, what name did it bear?”

“Doctor, I am not a *savant*. I can read my own language a little, but as for foreign tongues — and then it was so long ago.”

“However, you ought to be able to remember something about it — and doubtless you showed it to Mr. Malarius, with the rest of the articles — make a little effort, Mr. Hersebom. Was not this name inscribed on the buoy, ‘Cynthia’?”

“I believe it was something like that,” answered the fisherman vaguely.

“It is a strange name. To what country does it belong in your judgment, Mr. Hersebom?”

“How should I know? Have I ever been beyond the shores of Noroe and Bergen, except once or twice to fish off the coast of Greenland and Iceland?” answered the good man, in a tone which grew more and more morose.

“I think it is either an English or a German name,” said the doctor, taking no notice of his crossness. “It would be easy to decide on account of the shape of the letters, if I could see the buoy. Have you preserved it?"

"By my faith no. It was burnt up ages ago," answered Hersebom, triumphantly.

"As near as Mr. Malarius could remember, the letters were Roman," said the doctor, as if he were talking to himself — "and the letters on the linen certainly are. It is therefore probable that the 'Cynthia' was not a German vessel. I think it was an English one. Is not this your opinion, Mr. Hersebom?"

"Well, I have thought little about it," replied the fisherman. "Whether it was English, German, or Russian, makes no difference to me. For many years according to all appearances, they have lain beneath the sea, which alone could tell the secret."

"But you have doubtless made some effort to discover the family to whom the child belonged?" said the doctor, whose glasses seemed to shine with irony. "You doubtless wrote to the Governor of Bergen, and had him insert an advertisement in the journals?"

"I!" cried the fisherman, "I did nothing of the kind. God knows where the baby came from; why should I trouble myself about it? Can I afford to spend money to find his people, who perhaps care little for him? Put yourself in my place, doctor. I am not a millionaire, and you may be sure if we had spent all we had, we should have discovered nothing. I have done the best I could; we have raised the little one as our own son, we have loved him and taken care of him."

"Even more than the two others, if it were possible," interrupted Katrina, drying her eyes on the corner of her apron. "If we have anything to reproach ourselves for, it is for bestowing upon him too large a share of our tenderness.”

“Dame Hersebom, you must not do me the injustice to suppose that your kindness to the little shipwrecked child inspires me with any other feeling than the greatest admiration,” said the doctor.

“No, you must not think such a thing. But if you wish me to speak frankly — I must say that this tenderness has blinded you to your duty. You should have endeavored to discover the family of the infant, as far as your means permitted.”

There was perfect silence for a few minutes.

“It is possible that we have done wrong,” said Mr. Hersebom, who had hung his head under this reproach. “But what is done can not be altered. Erik belongs to us now, and I do not wish any one to speak to him about these old reminiscences.”

“You need have no fear, I will not betray your confidence,” answered the doctor, rising.

“I must leave you, my good friends, and I wish you good-night — a night free from remorse,” he added, gravely.

Then he put on his fur cloak, and shook hands cordially with his hosts, and being conducted to the door by Hersebom, he took the road toward his factory.

The fisherman stood for a moment on the threshold, watching his retreating figure in the moonlight.

“What a devil of a man!” he murmured, as at last he closed his door.

CHAPTER III.

MR. HERSEBOM’S REFLECTIONS.

The next morning Dr. Schwaryencrona had just finished breakfast with his overseer, after having made a thorough inspection of his factory when he saw a person enter whom he did not at first recognize as Mr. Hersebom.

He was clothed in his holiday suit: his embroidered waistcoat, his furred riding coat, and his high hat, and the fisherman looked very different to what he did in his working clothes. But what made the change more apparent, was the deep sadness and humility portrayed in his countenance. His eyes were red, and looked as if he had had no sleep all the night.

This was in fact the case. Mr. Hersebom who up to this time had never felt his conscience trouble him, had passed hours of sad remorse, on his mattress of skins.

Toward morning he had exchanged confidences with Dame Katrina, who had also been unable to close her eyes.

“Wife, I have been thinking of what the doctor said to us,” he said, after several hours of wakefulness.

“I have been thinking of it also, ever since he left us,” answered his worthy helpmate.

“It is my opinion that there is some truth in what he said, and that we have perhaps acted more egotistically than we should have done. Who knows but that the child may have a right to some great fortune, of which he is deprived by our negligence? Who knows if his family have not mourned for him these twelve years, and they could justly accuse us of having made no attempt to restore him to them?”

“This is precisely what I have been saying to myself,” answered Katrina, sighing. “If his mother is living what frightful anguish the poor woman must have endured, in believing that her infant was drowned. I put myself in her place, and imagine that we had lost Otto in this manner. We would never have been consoled.”

“It is not thoughts of his mother that trouble me, for according to all appearances, she is dead,” said Hersebom, after a silence broken only by their sighs.

“How can we suppose that an infant of that age would travel without her, or that it would have been tied to a buoy and left to take its chances on the ocean, if she had been living?”

“That is true; but what do we know about it, after all. Perhaps she also has had a miraculous escape.”

“Perhaps some one has taken her infant from her — this idea has often occurred to me,” answered Hersebom. “Some one might be interested in his disappearance. To expose so young a child to such a hazardous proceeding is so extraordinary that such conjectures are possible, and in this case we have become accomplices of a crime — we have contributed to its success. Is it not horrible to think of?”

“And we thought we were doing such a good and charitable work in adopting the poor little one.”

“Oh, it is evident that we had no malicious intentions. We nourished it, and brought it up as well as we were able, but that does not prevent me from seeing that we have acted rashly, and the little one will have a right to reproach us some of these days.”

“We need not be afraid of that, I am sure. But it is too bad that we should feel at this late day that we have done anything for which we must reproach ourselves.”

“How strange it is that the same action regarded from a different point of view, can be judged so differently. I never would have thought of such a thing. And yet a few words from the doctor seems to have turned my brain.”

Thus these good people talked during the night.

The result of their nocturnal conversation was that Mr. Hersebom resolved to call upon the doctor, and ask him what they could do to make amends for the error of which they had been guilty.

Dr. Schwaryencrona did not revert to the conversation which had taken place the previous evening. He appeared to regard the visit of the fisherman as simply an act of politeness, and received him cordially, and began talking about the weather and the price of fish.

Mr. Hersebom tried to lead the conversation toward the subject which occupied his mind. He spoke of Mr. Malarius’ school, and at last said plainly: “Doctor, my wife and I have been thinking all night about what you said to us last evening about the boy. We never thought that we were doing him a wrong in educating him as our son. But you have changed our opinion, and we want to know what you would advise us to do, in order to repair our fault. Do you think that we still ought to seek to find Erik's family?"

"It is never too late to do our duty," said the doctor, "although the task is certainly much more difficult now than it would have been at first."

"Will you interest yourself in the matter?"

"I will, with pleasure," answered the doctor; "and I promise you to use every exertion to fulfill it, upon one condition: that is, that you let me take the boy to Stockholm."

If Mr. Hersebom had been struck on the head with a club, he would not have been more astonished than he was by this proposal.

"Intrust Erik to you! Send him to Stockholm! Why should I do this, doctor?" he asked, in an altered voice.

"I will tell you. My attention was drawn to the child, not only on account of his physical appearance, which was so different to that of his companions, but by his great intelligence and his evident taste for study. Before knowing the circumstances which had brought him to Noroe, I said to myself that it was a shame to leave a boy so gifted in a village school — even under such a master as Malarius; for here there is nothing to assist in the development of his exceptionally great faculties. There are no museums, nor scientific collections, nor libraries, nor competitors who are worthy of him. I felt a strong desire to give him the advantages of a complete education. You can understand that, after the confidence which you have bestowed upon me, I am more anxious to do so than before. You can see, Mr. Hersebom, that your adopted son belongs to some rich and distinguished family. If I succeed in finding them, would you wish to restore to them a child educated in a village, and deprived of this education, without which he will feel out of place among his kindred? It is not reasonable; and you are too sensible not to understand it."

Mr. Hersebom hung his head: without his being aware of it, two large tears rolled down his cheeks.

"But then," he said, "this would be an entire separation. Before we ever know whether the child will find his relations, he must be taken from his home. It is asking too much, doctor — asking too much of my wife. The child is happy with us. Why can he not be left alone, at least until he is sure of a better one?"

"Happy. How do you know that he will be so when he grows older? How can you tell whether he may not regret having been saved? Intelligent and superior as he will be, perhaps he would be stifled with the life which you would offer him in Noroe."

"But, doctor, this life which you disdain, is good enough for us. Why is it not good enough for him?"

"I do not disdain it," said the doctor. "Nobody admires and honors those who work more than I do. Do you believe, Mr. Hersebom, that I forget my birth? My father and grandfather were fishermen like yourself, and it is just because they were so far-seeing as to educate me, that I appreciate the value of it, and I would assure it to a child who merits it. It is his interest alone which guides me, I beg of you to believe."

"Ah — what do I know about it? Erik will be almost grown up when you have made a gentleman of him, and he will not know how to use his arms. Then if you do not find his family, which is more than possible, since twelve years have passed since I found him, what a beautiful future we are preparing for him! Do you not see, doctor, that a fisherman’s life is a brave one — better than any other: with a good boat under his feet and four or five dozen of cod-fish at the end of his lines, a Norwegian fisherman need have no fear, nor be indebted to any one. You say that Erik would not be happy leading such a life. Permit me to believe the contrary. I know the child well, he loves his books, but, above all, he loves the sea. It also almost seems as if he felt that he had been rocked upon it, and all the museums in the world would not console him for the loss of it.”

“But we have the sea around us also at Stockholm,” said the doctor, smiling — touched in spite of himself by this affectionate resistance.

“Well,” said the fisherman, crossing his arms, “what do you wish to do? what do you propose, doctor?”

“There, you see, after all, the necessity of doing something. Well this is my proposition — Erik is twelve years old, nearly thirteen, and he appears to be highly gifted. We will say nothing about his origin — he is worthy of being supplied with the means of developing and utilizing his faculties; that is all we need trouble ourselves about at present. I am rich, and I have no children. I will undertake to furnish the means, and give him the best masters, and all possible facilities for profiting by their instructions. I will do this for two years. During this time I will make inquiries, insert advertisements in the newspapers; make every possible exertion, move heaven and earth to discover his parents. If I do not find them in two years, we shall never do it. If his relatives are found, they will naturally decide his future career in life. If we do not find them, I will send Erik back to you. He will then be fifteen years old — he will have seen something of the world. The hour will have arrived to tell him the truth about his birth. Then aided by our advice, and the opinions of his teachers, he can choose what path he would prefer to follow. If he wishes to become a fisherman, I will not oppose it. If he wishes to continue his studies, I engage to furnish the means for him to follow any profession that he may choose. Does this seem a reasonable proposition to you?”

“More than reasonable. It is wisdom itself issuing from your lips, doctor,” said Mr. Hersebom, overcome in spite of himself. “See what it is to have an education!” he continued, shaking his head. “The difficulty will be to repeat all you have said to my wife. When will you take the child away?”

“To-morrow. I can not delay my return to Stockholm any longer.”

Mr. Hersebom heaved a deep sigh, which was almost a sob.

“To-morrow! So soon!” he said. “Well, what must be, must be. I will go and talk to my wife about it.”

“Yes, do so, and consult Mr. Malarius also; you will find that he is of my opinion.”

“I do not doubt it,” answered the fisherman, with a sad smile.

He shook the hand which Dr. Schwaryencrona held out to him, and went away looking very thoughtful.

That evening before dinner the doctor again directed his steps toward the dwelling of Mr. Hersebom. He found the family assembled round the hearth, as they were the evening before, but not wearing the same appearance of peaceful happiness. The father was seated the furthest from the fire, silent, and with idle hands. Katrina, with tears in her eyes, held Erik’s hands between her own, whose cheeks were reddened by the hope of the new destiny which seemed opening before him, but who looked sad at leaving all whom he loved, and who did not know what feeling he ought to yield to.

Little Vanda's face was hidden in her father's knees, and nothing could be seen except her long braids of golden hair. Otto, also greatly troubled at this proposed separation, sat motionless beside his brother.

“How sad and disconsolate you look!” said the doctor, stopping on the threshold. “If Erik were about to set out on a distant and most perilous expedition you could not show more grief. He is not going to do anything of the kind, I assure you, my good friends. Stockholm is not at the antipodes, and the child is not going away forever. He can write to you, and I do not doubt that he will do so often. He is only going away to school, like so many other boys. In two years he will return tall, and well-informed, and accomplished, I hope. Is this anything to feel sad about? Seriously, it is not reasonable.”

Katrina arose with the natural dignity of the peasant of the North.

“Doctor,” she said, “God is my witness that I am profoundly grateful to you for what you propose to do for Erik — but we can not help feeling sad because of his departure. Mr. Hersebom has explained to me that it is necessary, and I submit. Do not think that I shall feel no regret.”

“Mother,” said Erik, “I will not go, if it causes you such pain.”

“No, child,” answered the worthy woman, taking him in her arms. “Education is a benefit which we have no right to refuse you. Go, my son, and thank the doctor who has provided it for you, and prove to him by constant application to your studies that you appreciate his kindness.”

“There, there,” said the doctor, whose glasses were dimmed by a singular cloudiness, “let us rather speak of practical matters, that will be better. You know, do you not, that we must set out to-morrow very early, and that you must have everything ready. We will go by sleigh to Bergen, and thence by railroad. Erik only needs a change of linen, I will procure everything else that is necessary at Stockholm.”

“Everything shall be ready,” answered Dame Hersebom.

“Vanda,” she added, with Norwegian hospitality, “the doctor is still standing.”

The little girl hurriedly pushed a large arm-chair toward him.

“I can not stay,” said the doctor. “I promised my friend Malarius to dine with him, and he is waiting for me. Little girl,” he said, laying his hand gently upon Vanda’s blonde head, “I hope you do not wish me any harm because I am taking your brother away from you?”

“No, doctor,” she answered gravely. “Erik will be happier with you — he was not intended to live in a village.”

“And you, little one, will you be very unhappy without him?”

“The shore will seem deserted,” she answered; “the seagulls will look for him without finding him, the little waves will be astonished because they no longer see him, and the house will seem empty, but Erik will be contented, because he will have plenty of books, and he will become a learned man.”

“And his little sister will rejoice in his happiness — is it not so, my child?” said the doctor, kissing the forehead of the little girl. “And she will be proud of him when he returns — see we have arranged the whole matter — but I must hurry away. Good-bye until to-morrow.”

“Doctor,” murmured Vanda, timidly, “I wish to ask a favor of you!”

“Speak, child.”

“You are going in a sleigh, you said. I wish with my papa’s and mamma’s permission to drive you to the first relay.”

“Ah, ah! but I have already arranged that. Reguild, the daughter of my overseer, should do this.”

“Yes, I know it, but she is willing that I should take her place, if you will authorize me to do so.”

“Well, in that case you have only to obtain the permission of your father and mother.”

“I have done so.”

“Then you have mine also, dear child,” said the doctor, and he took his departure.

The next morning when the sleigh stopped before the door of Mr. Hersebom little Vanda held the reins according to her desire, seated upon the front seat.

She was going to drive them to the next village, where the doctor would procure another horse and sleigh, and thus procure relays until he reached Bergen. This new kind of coachman always astonishes a stranger, but it is the custom in Norway and Sweden. The men would think it a loss of time to pursue such a calling, and it is not rare to see children of ten or twelve years of age managing heavy equipages with perfect ease.

The doctor was already installed in the back of the sleigh, nearly hidden by his furs. Erik took his seat beside Vanda, after having tenderly embraced his father and brother, who contented themselves by showing by their mute sadness the sorrow which his departure caused them; but the good Katrina was more open in the expression of her feelings.

“Adieu, my son!” she said, in the midst of her tears. “Never forget what you have learned from your poor parents — be honest, and brave, and never tell a lie. Work as hard as you can — always protect those who are weaker than yourself — and if you do not find the happiness you merit come back and seek it with us.”

Vanda touched the horse which set out at a trot, and made the bells ring. The air was cold, and the road as hard as glass. Just above the horizon a pale sun began to throw his golden beams upon the snowy landscape. In a few minutes Noroe was out of sight behind them.

CHAPTER IV.

AT STOCKHOLM.

Doctor Schwaryencrona lived in a magnificent house in Stockholm. It was in the oldest and most aristocratic quarter of the charming capital, which is one of the most pleasant and agreeable in Europe. Strangers would visit it much more frequently if it were better known and more fashionable. But tourists, unfortunately for themselves, plan their journeys much upon the same principle as they purchase their hats. Situated between Lake Melar and the Baltic, it is built upon eight small islands, connected by innumerable bridges, and bordered by splendid quays, enlivened by numerous steam-boats, which fulfill the duties of omnibuses. The population are hardworking, gay, and contented. They are the most hospitable, the most polite, and the best educated of any nation in Europe. Stockholm, with its libraries, its museums, its scientific establishments, is in fact the Athens of the North, as well as a very important commercial center.

Erik, however, had not recovered from the sadness incident upon parting from Vanda, who had left them at the first relay. Their parting had been more sorrowful than would have been expected at their age, but they had not been able to conceal their emotion.

When the carriage stopped before a large brick house, whose double windows shone resplendently with gaslight, Erik was fairly dazzled. The copper knocker of the door appeared to him to be of fine gold. The vestibule, paved with marble and ornamented with statues, bronze torches, and large Chinese-vases, completed his amazement.

A footman in livery removed his master’s furs, and inquired after his health with the affectionate cordiality which is habitual with Swedish servants.

Erik looked around him with amazement.

The sound of voices attracted his attention toward the broad oaken staircase, covered with heavy carpet. He turned, and saw two persons whose costumes appeared to him the height of elegance.

One was a lady with gray hair, and of medium height, who wore a dress of black cloth, short enough to show her red stockings with yellow clock-work, and her buckled shoes. An enormous bunch of keys attached to a steel chain hung at her side. She carried her head high, and looked about her with piercing eyes. This was “Fru,” or Madame Greta — Maria, the lady in charge of the doctor’s house, and who was the undisputed autocrat of the mansion in everything that pertained to the culinary or domestic affairs. Behind her came a little girl, eleven or twelve years old, who appeared to Erik like a fairy princess. Instead of the national costume, the only one which he had ever seen worn by a child of that age, she had on a dress of deep blue velvet, over which her yellow hair was allowed to fall loosely. She wore black stockings and satin shoes; a knot of cherry-colored ribbon was poised in her hair like a butterfly, and gave a little color to her pale cheeks, while her large eyes shone with a phosphorescent light.

“How delightful, uncle, to have you back again! Have you had a pleasant journey?” she cried, clasping the doctor around the neck. She hardly deigned to cast a glance at Erik, who stood modestly aside.

The doctor returned her caresses, and shook hands with his housekeeper, then he made a sign for Erik to advance.

“Kajsa, and Dame Greta, I ask your friendship for Erik Hersebom, whom I have brought from Norway with me!” he said, “and you, my boy, do not be afraid,” he said kindly. “Dame Greta is not as severe as she looks, and you and my niece Kajsa, will soon be the best of friends, is it not so, little girl?" he added, pinching gently the cheek of the little fairy.

Kajsa only responded by making a disdainful face.

As for the housekeeper, she did not appear very enthusiastic over the new recruit thus presented to her notice.

"If you please, doctor," she said, with a severe air, as they ascended the staircase, "may I ask who this child is?"

"Certainly, Dame Greta; I will tell you all about it before long. Do not be afraid; but now, if you please, give us something to eat."

In the "matsal," or dining-room, the table was beautifully laid with damask and crystal, and the "snorgas" was ready.

Poor Erik had never seen a table covered with a white cloth, for they are unknown to the peasants of Norway, who hardly use plates, as they have only recently been introduced, and many of them still eat their fish on rounds of black bread, and find it very good. Therefore the doctor had to repeat his invitation several times before the boy took his seat at the table, and the awkwardness of his movements caused "Froken," or Miss Kajsa, to cast upon him more than one ironical glance during the repast. However, his journey had sharpened his appetite, and this was of great assistance to him.

The "snorgas" was followed by a dinner that would have frightened a Frenchman by its massive solidity, and would have sufficed to appease the appetites of a battalion of infantry after a long march. Soup, fish, home-made bread, goose stuffed with chestnuts, boiled beef, flanked with a mountain of vegetables, a pyramid of potatoes, hard-boiled eggs by the dozen, and a raisin pudding; all these were gallantly attacked and dismantled.

This plentiful repast being ended, almost without a word having been spoken, they passed into the parlor, a large wainscoted room, with six windows draped with heavy curtains, large enough to have sufficed a Parisian artist with hangings for the whole apartment. The doctor seated himself in a corner by the fire, in a large leather arm-chair, Kajsa took her place at his feet upon a footstool, whilst Erik, intimidated and ill at ease, approached one of the windows, and would have gladly hidden himself in its deep embrasure.

But the doctor did not leave him alone long.

“Come and warm yourself, my boy!” he said, in his sonorous voice; “and tell us what you think of Stockholm.”

“The streets are very black and very narrow, and the houses are very high,” said Erik.

“Yes, a little higher than they are in Norway,” answered the doctor, laughing.

“They prevent one from seeing the stars!” said the young boy.

“Because we are in the quarter where the nobility live,” said Kajsa, piqued by his criticisms. “When you pass the bridges the streets are broader.”

“I saw that as we rode along; but the best of them are not as wide as that which borders the fiord of Noroe,” answered Erik.

“Ah, ah!” said the doctor, “are you home-sick already?”

“No,” answered Erik, resolutely. “I am too much obliged to you, dear doctor, for having brought me. But you asked me what I thought of Stockholm, and I had to answer.”

“Noroe must be a frightful little hole,” said Kajsa.

“A frightful little hole!” repeated Erik, indignantly. “Those who say that must be without eyes. If you could only see our rocks of granite, our mountains, our glaciers, and our forests of pine, looking so black against the pale sky! And besides all this, the great sea; sometimes tumultuous and terrible, and sometimes so calm as scarcely to rock one; and then the flight of the sea-gulls, which are lost in infinitude, and then return, to fan you with their wings. Oh, it is beautiful! Yes, far more beautiful than a town.”

“I was not speaking of the country but of the houses,” said Kajsa, “they are only peasants’ cabins — are they not, uncle?”

“In these peasants’ cabins, your father and grandfather as well as myself were born, my child,” answered the doctor, gravely.

Kajsa blushed and remained silent.

“They are only wooden houses, but they answer as well as any,” said Erik.

“Often in the evening while my father mends his nets, and my mother is busy with her spinning-wheel, we three sit on a little bench, Otto, Vanda, and I, and we repeat together the old sagas, while we watch the shadows that play upon the ceiling; and when the wind blows outside, and all the fishermen are safe at home, it does one good to gather around the blazing fire. We are just as happy as if we were in a beautiful room like this.”

“This is not the best room,” said Kajsa proudly. “I must show you the grand drawing-room, it is worth seeing!”

“But there are so many books in this one,” said Erik, “are there as many in the drawing-room?”

“Books — who cares for them? There are velvet armchairs, and sofas, lace curtains, a splendid French clock, and carpets from Turkey!”

Erik did not appear to be fascinated by this description, but cast envious glances toward the large oaken bookcase, which filled one side of the parlor!

“You can go and examine the books, and take any you like,” said the doctor. Erik did not wait for him to repeat this permission. He chose a volume at once, and seating himself in a corner where there was a good light, he was soon completely absorbed in his reading. He hardly noticed the successive entrance of two old gentlemen, who were intimate friends of Dr. Schwaryencrona, and who came almost every evening to play a game of whist with him.

The first who arrived was Professor Hochstedt, a large man with cold and stately manners, who expressed in polished terms the pleasure which he felt at the doctor’s safe return. He was scarcely seated in the arm-chair which had long borne the name of the “professor’s seat,” when a sharp ring was heard.

“It is Bredejord,” exclaimed the two friends simultaneously.

The door soon opened to admit a thin sprightly little man, who entered like a gust of wind, seized both the doctor’s hands, kissed Kajsa on the forehead affectionately, greeted the professor, and cast a glance as keen as that of a mouse around the room.

It was the Advocate Bredejord, one of the most illustrious lawyers of Stockholm.

“Ha! Who is this?” said he, suddenly, as he beheld Erik.

The doctor tried to explain in as few words as possible.

“What — a young fisherman, or rather a boy from Bergen — and who reads Gibbon in English?” he asked. For he saw at a glance what the book was which so absorbed the little peasant.

“Does that interest you, my boy?” he asked.

“Yes, sir, it is a work that I have wanted to read for a long time, the first volume of the ‘Fall of the Roman Empire,’” answered Erik, simply.

“Upon my word,” exclaimed the lawyer, “it appears that the peasants of Bergen are fond of serious reading. But are you from Bergen?” he asked.

“I am from Noroe, which is not far from there,” answered Erik.

“Ah, have they usually eyes and hair as brown as yours at Noroe?”

“No, sir; my brother and sister, and all the others, are blondes like Miss Kajsa. But they are not dressed like her,” he added, laughing; “therefore they do not look much like her.”

“No; I have no doubt of it,” said Mr. Bredejord. “Miss Kajsa is a product of civilization. And what are you going to do at Stockholm, my boy, if I am not too curious?”

“The doctor has been kind enough to offer to send me to school,” said Erik.

“Ah, ah!” said Mr. Bredejord, tapping his snuff-box with the ends of his fingers.

His glance seemed to question the doctor about this living problem; but the latter made a sign to him, which was almost imperceptible, not to pursue his investigations, and he changed the conversation. They then talked about court affairs, the city news, and all that had taken place since the departure of the doctor. Then Dame Greta came, and opened the card-table, and laid out the cards. Soon silence reigned, while the three friends were absorbed in the mysteries of whist.

The doctor made pretension to being a great player, and had no mercy for the mistakes of his partners. He exulted loudly when their errors caused him to win, and scolded when they made him lose. After every rubber he took pleasure in showing the delinquent where he had erred; what card he should have led, and which he should have held back. It is generally the habit of whist-players, but it is not always conducive to amiability, particularly when the victims are the same every evening.

Happily for him, the doctor’s two friends never lost their temper. The professor was habitually cool, and the lawyer severely skeptical.

“You are right,” the first would say gravely, in answer to the most severe reproaches.

“My dear Schwaryencrona, you know very well you are only losing your time lecturing me,” Mr. Bredejord would say, laughing. “All my life I have made the greatest blunders whenever I play whist, and the worst of it is, I do not improve.” What could any one do with two such hardened sinners?

The doctor was compelled to discontinue his criticisms, but it was only to renew them a quarter of an hour later, for he was incorrigible.

It happened, however, that this evening he lost every game, and his consequent ill-humor made his criticisms very severe upon his two companions, and even upon the “dummy.”

But the professor coolly acknowledged his faults, and the lawyer answered his most bitter reproaches by jokes.

“Why should I alter my play, when I win by playing badly, and you lose by following your correct rules?” he said to the doctor.

They played until ten o’clock. Then Kajsa made the tea in a magnificent “samovar,” and served it with pretty gracefulness; then she discreetly disappeared. Soon Dame Greta appeared, and, calling Erik, she conducted him to the apartment which had been prepared for him. It was a pretty little room, clean and well furnished, on the second floor.

The three friends were now left alone.

“Now, at last, you can tell us who this young fisherman from Noroe is, who reads Gibbon in the original text?” said Mr. Bredejord, as he put some sugar into his second cup of tea. “Or is it a forbidden subject, which it is indiscreet for me to mention?”

“There is nothing mysterious about the matter, and I will willingly tell you Erik’s history, for I know that I can rely upon your discretion,” answered Dr. Schwaryencrona.

“Ah! I knew that he had a history,” said the lawyer, seating himself comfortably in his arm-chair. “We will listen, dear doctor. I assure you that your confidence will not be misplaced. I confess this youth arouses my curiosity like a problem.”

“He is, indeed, a living problem,” answered the doctor, flattered by the curiosity of his friend. “A problem which I hope to be able to solve. But I must tell you all about it, and see if you think as I do.”

The doctor settled himself comfortably, and began by telling them that he had been struck by Erik’s appearance in the school at Noroe, and by his unusual intelligence. He had made inquiries about him, and he related all that Mr. Malarius and Mr. Hersebom had told. He omitted none of the details. He spoke of the buoy, of the name of “Cynthia,” of the little garments which Dame Katrina had shown him, of the coral ornament, of the device upon it, and of the character of the letters.

“You are now in possession of all the facts as far as I have been able to learn them,” he said. “And you must bear in mind that the extraordinary ability of the child is only a secondary phenomenon, and largely due to the interest with which Mr. Malarius has always regarded him, and of which he has made the best use. It was his unusual acquirements which first drew my attention to him and led me to make inquiries about him. But in reality this has little connection with the questions which now occupy me, which are: where did this child come from, and what course would it be best for me to take in order to discover his family? We have only two facts to guide us in this search. First: The physical indications of the race to which the child belongs. Second: The name ‘Cynthia,’ which was engraved on the buoy.

“As to the first fact, there can be no doubt; the child belongs to the Celtic race. He presents the type of a Celt in all its beauty and purity.

“Let us pass to the second fact:

“‘Cynthia’ is certainly the name of the vessel to which the buoy belonged. This name might have belonged to a German vessel, as well as to an English one; but it was written in the Roman characters. Therefore, the vessel was an English one — or we will say Anglo-Saxon to be more precise. Besides, everything confirms the hypothesis, for more than one English vessel going and coming from Inverness, or the Orkneys, have been driven on the coast of Norway by a tempest; and you must not forget that the little living waif could not have been floating for a long while, since he had resisted hunger, and all the dangers of his perilous journey. Well, now you know all, and what is your conclusion my dear friends?”

Neither the professor nor the lawyer thought it prudent to utter a word.

“You have not been able to arrive at any conclusion,” said the doctor, in a tone which betrayed a secret triumph. “Perhaps you even think there is a contradiction between the two facts — a child of the Celtic race — an English Vessel. But this is simply because you have failed to bear in mind the existence on the coast of Great Britain of a people of the Celtic race, on her sister island, Ireland. I did not think of it at first myself, and it prevented me from solving the problem. But when it occurred to me, I said to myself: the child is Irish. Is this your opinion, Hochstedt?”

If there was anything in the world the professor disliked, it was to give a positive opinion upon any subject. It must also be confessed that to give such an opinion in this case would have been premature. He therefore contented himself with nodding his head, and saying:

“It is an incontestable fact that the Irish belong to the Celtic branch of the Arian race.”

This was a sufficiently safe aphorism, but Doctor Schwaryencrona asked nothing more, and only saw in it the entire confirmation of his theory.

“You think so, yourself,” he said eagerly. “The Irish were Celts, and the child has all the characteristics of the race. The ‘Cynthia’ having been an English vessel, it appears to me that we are in possession of the necessary links, in order to find the family of the poor child. It is in Great Britain that we must look for them. Some advertisements in the ‘Times’ will probably be sufficient to put us on their tracks.”

The doctor continued to enlarge upon his plan of proceeding, when he remarked the obstinate silence of the lawyer and the slightly ironical expression with which he listened to his conclusions.

“If you are not of my opinion, Bredejord, I wish you would say so. You know that I do not fear to discuss the matter,” he said, stopping short.

“I have nothing to say,” answered Mr. Bredejord. “Hochstedt can bear witness that I have said nothing.”

“No. But I see very well that you do not share my opinion; and I am curious to know why,” said the doctor.

“Is Cynthia an English name?” he asked, with vehemence. “Yes! it was written in Roman characters — it could not have been German. You have heard our eminent friend, Hochstedt, affirm that the Irish are Celts. Has the child all the characteristics of the Celtic race? You can judge for yourself. You were struck by his appearance before I opened my mouth about the subject. I conclude, therefore, that it is a want of friendship for you to refuse to agree with me, and recognize the fact that the boy belongs to an Irish family.”

“Want of friendship is a strong charge,” answered Mr. Bredejord, “if you apply it to me. I can only say that I have not, as yet, expressed the slightest opinion.”

“No; but I see that you do not spare mine.”

“Have I not a right?”

“But give some facts to support your theory.”

“I have not said that I have formed any.”

“Then it is a systematic opposition, just for the sake of contradicting me, as you do in whist.”

“Nothing is further from my thoughts, I assure you. Your reasoning appeared to me to be too peremptory, that is all.”

“In what way, if you please, I am curious to know?”

“It would take too long to tell you. Eleven o’clock is striking. I will content myself with offering you a bet. Your copy of Pliny against my Quintilian, that you have not judged rightly, and that the child is not Irish.”

“You know that I do not like to bet,” said the doctor, softened by his unconquerable good humor. “But I shall take so much pleasure in your discomfiture that I accept your offer.”

“Well, then it is a settled affair. How much time do you expect to take for your researches?”

“A few months will suffice, I hope, but I have said two years to Hersebom, in order to be sure that no efforts were wanting.”

“Ah! well — I give you two years. Hochstedt shall be our witness; and there is no ill-feeling, I hope?”

“Assuredly not, but I see your Quintilian in great danger of coming to keep company with my Pliny,” answered the doctor.

Then, after shaking hands with his two friends, he accompanied them to the door.

CHAPTER V.

THE THIRTEEN DAYS OF CHRISTMAS.

The next day Erik began his new life at school.

Dr. Schwaryencrona first took him to his tailors, and fitted him out with some new suits of clothes; then he introduced him to the principal of one of the best schools in town. It was called in Swedish “Hogre elementar larovek.”

In this school were taught the ancient and modern languages, the elementary sciences, and all that it was necessary to learn before entering college. As in Germany and Italy, the students did not board in the college. They lived with their families in the town, with the professors, or wherever they could obtain comfortable accommodations. The charges are very moderate; in fact, they have been reduced almost to nothing. Large gymnasiums are attached to each of the higher classes, and physical culture is as carefully attended to as the intellectual.

Erik at once gained the head of his division. He learned everything with such extreme facility that he had a great deal of time to himself. The doctor therefore thought that it would be better for him to utilize his evenings by taking a course at the “Slodjskolan,” the great industrial school of Stockholm. It was an establishment especially devoted to the practice of the sciences, particularly to making experiments in physics and chemistry, and to geometrical constructions which are only taught theoretically in the schools.

Doctor Schwaryencrona judged rightly that the teachings of this school, which was one of the wonders of Stockholm, would give a new impetus to the rapid progress which Erik was making, and he hoped for great results from this double training.

His young *protégé*, proved worthy of the advantages which he procured for him. He penetrated the depths of the fundamental sciences, and instead of vague and superficial ideas, the ordinary lot of so many pupils, he stored up a provision of just, precise, and definite facts. The future development of these excellent principles could only be a question of time.

Hereafter he would be able to learn without difficulty the more elevated branches of these studies which would be required in college; in fact it would be only play to him.

The same service which Mr. Malarius had rendered him, in teaching him languages, history, and botany, the “Slodjskolan” now did for him by inculcating the A, B, C, of the industrial arts; without which the best teaching so often remains a dead letter.

Far from fatiguing Erik’s brain, the multiplicity and variety of his studies strengthened it much more than a special course of instruction could have done.

Besides, the gymnasium was always open to him to recruit his body when his studies were over; and here as well as in the school Erik stood first. On holidays he never failed to pay a visit to the sea which he loved with filial tenderness. He talked with the sailors and fishermen, and often brought home a fine fish, which was well received by Dame Greta.

This good woman had conceived a great affection for this new member of the household. Erik was so gentle, and naturally so courteous and obliging, so studious and so brave, that it was impossible to know him and not to like him. In eight days he had become a favorite with Mr. Bredejord and Mr. Hochstedt, as he was already with Doctor Schwaryencrona.

The only person who treated him with coldness was Kajsa. Whether the little fairy thought that her hitherto undisputed sovereignty in the house was in danger, or whether she bore Erik a grudge, because of the sarcasms which her aristocratic air toward him inspired in the doctor, nobody knew. However, she persisted in treating him with a disdainful coldness, which no courtesy or politeness on his part could overcome. Her opportunities of displaying her disdain were fortunately rare, for Erik was always either out-of-doors, or else busy in his own little room.

Time passed in the most peaceful manner, and without any notable incidents.

We will pass with our reader without further comment over the two years which Erik spent at school and return to Noroe.

Christmas had returned for the second time since Erik's departure. It is in all Central and Northern Europe the great annual festival; because it is coincident with the dull season in nearly all industries. In Norway especially, they prolong the festival for thirteen days. — ”Tretten yule dage” (the thirteen days of Christmas), and they make it a season of great rejoicings. It is a time for family reunions, for dinners, and even for weddings.

Provisions are abundant, even in the poorest dwellings. Everywhere the greatest hospitality is the order of the day.

The “Yule ol,” or Christmas beer, is drunk freely. Every visitor is offered a bumper in a wooden cup, mounted in gold, silver, or copper, which the poorest families possess, and which cups have been transmitted to them from time immemorial. The visitor must empty this cup, and exchange with his hosts the joyful wishes of the season, and for a happy New Year.

It is also at Christmas that the servants receive their new clothes; which are often the best part of their wages — that the cows, and sheep, and even the birds of the air, receive a double ration, which is exceptionally large. They say in Norway of a "poor man," that he is so poor that he can not even give the sparrows their dinner at Christmas.

Of these thirteen traditional days, Christmas-eve is the gayest. It is the custom for the young girls and boys to go around in bands on their "schnee-schuhe," or snow-shoes, and stop before the houses, and sing in chorus the old national melodies. The clear voices suddenly sounding through the fresh night air, in the lonely valleys, with their wintery surroundings, have an odd and charming effect. The doors are immediately opened, the singers are invited to enter, and they offer them cake, dried apples, and ale; and often make them dance. After this frugal supper the joyous band depart, like a flock of gulls, to perform the same ceremony further away. Distances are regarded as nothing, for on their "schnee-schuhe," which are attached to their feet by leather straps, they glide over several miles with marvelous rapidity. The peasants of Norway also use, with these show-shoes, a strong stick, to balance themselves, and help them along. This year the festival would be a joyous one for the Herseboms. They were expecting Erik.

A letter from Stockholm had announced that he would arrive that evening. Therefore Otto and Vanda could not sit still. Every moment they ran to the door, to see if he was coming. Dame Katrina, although she reproved them for their impatience, felt in the same way herself. Mr. Hersebom smoked his pipe silently, and was divided in his mind between a longing to see his adopted son, and the fear that he would not be able to keep him with them very long.

For the fiftieth time, perhaps, Otto had gone to the door, when he gave a shout and cried out:

“Mother! Vanda! I believe it is he!”

They all rushed to the door. In the distance, on the road which led from Bergen, they saw a black object. It grew larger rapidly, and soon took the shape of a young man, clothed in gray cloth, wearing a fur cap, and carrying merrily over his shoulders a knapsack of green leather. He had on snow-shoes, and would soon be near enough to recognize.

The traveler perceived those who were watching before the door, and taking off his cap, he waved it around his head.

Two minutes later Erick was in the arms of Katrina, Otto, Vanda, and even Mr. Hersebom, who had left his arm-chair and advanced to the door.

They hugged him, and almost stifled him with caresses. They went into ecstasies over his improved appearance. Dame Katrina among them all could not get accustomed to it.

“What — is this the dear babe that I nursed on my knees?” she cried. “This great boy, with such a frank and resolute air, with these strong shoulders, this elegant form, and on whose lip I can already see signs of a mustache. Is it possible?”

The brave woman was conscious of feeling a sort of respect for her former nursling. She was proud of him, above all for the tears of joy which she saw in his eyes. For he also was deeply affected.

“Mother, is it really you,” he exclaimed. “I can hardly believe that I am with you all again. The two years have seemed so long to me. I have missed you all, as I know you have missed me.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Hersebom, gravely. “Not a day has passed without our having spoken of you. Morning and evening, and at meal times, it was your name that was constantly on our lips. But you, my boy, you have not forgotten us in the grand city? You are contented to return and see the old country and the old house?”

“I am sure that you do not doubt it,” said Erik, as he embraced them all. “You were always in my thoughts. But above all when the wind blew a gale. I thought of you, father. I said to myself, Where is he? Has he returned home in safety? And in the evening I used to read the meteorological bulletin in the doctor’s newspaper, to see what kind of weather you had had on the coast of Norway; if it was the same as on the coast of Sweden? — and I found that you have severe storms more often than we have in Stockholm, which come from America, and beat on our mountains. Ah! how often I have wished that I could be with you in your little boat to help you with the sail, and overcome all difficulties. And on the other hand when the weather was fine it seemed to me as if I was in prison in that great city, between the tall three-story houses. Yes! I would have given all the world to be on the sea for one hour, and to feel as formerly free, and joyfully exhilarated by the fresh air!”

A smile brightened the weather-beaten face of the fisherman.

“His books have not spoiled him,” he said. “A joyful season and a happy New-Year to you, my child!” he added. “Come, let us go to the table. Dinner is only waiting for you.”

When he was once more seated in his old place on the right hand of Katrina, Erik was able to look around him, and mark the changes that two years had made in the family. Otto was now a large, robust boy of sixteen years of age, and who looked twenty. As for Vanda, two years had added wonderfully to her size and beauty. Her countenance had become more refined. Her magnificent blonde hair, which lay in heavy braids upon her shoulders, formed around her forehead a light silvery cloud. Modest and sweet as usual, she busied herself, almost unconsciously, with seeing that no one wanted for anything.

“Vanda has grown to be a great girl!” said her mother, proudly. “And if you knew, Erik, how learned she has become, how hard she has worked and studied since you left us! She is the best scholar in the school now, and Mr. Malarius says she is his only consolation for no longer having you among his pupils.”

“Dear Mr. Malarius! how glad I shall be to see him again,” said Erik. “So our Vanda has become so learned, has she?” he replied with interest, while the young girl blushed up to the roots of her hair at these maternal praises.

“She has learned to play the organ also, and Mr. Malarius says that she has the sweetest voice of all the choir?”

“Oh, decidedly, it is a very accomplished young person whom I find on my return,” Erik said, laughing, to relieve the embarrassment of his sister. “We must make her display all her talents to-morrow.”

And without affectation he began to talk about all the good people of Noroe, asking questions about each one; inquiring for his old school-mates, and about all that had happened since he went away. He asked about their fishing adventures, and all the details of their daily life. Then on his part, he satisfied the curiosity of his family, by giving an account of his mode of life in Stockholm; he told them about Dame Greta, about Kajsa, and the doctor.

“That reminds me that I have a letter for you, father,” he said, drawing it out of the inside pocket of his vest. “I do not know what it contains, but the doctor told me to take good care of it, for it was about me.”

Mr. Hersebom took the letter, and laid it on the table by his side.

“Well!” said Erik, “are you not going to read it?”

“No,” answered the fisherman, laconically.

“But, since it concerns me?” persisted the young man.

“It is addressed to me,” said Mr. Hersebom, holding the letter before his eyes. “Yes, I will read it at my leisure.” Filial obedience is the basis of family government in Norway.

Erik bowed his head in acquiescence.

When they rose from the table, the three children seated themselves on their little bench in the chimney-corner, as they had so often done before, and began one of those confidential conversations, where each one relates what the other is curious to know, and where they tell the same things a hundred times.

Katrina busied herself about the room, putting everything in order; insisting that Vanda should for once “play the lady,” as she said, and not trouble herself about household matters.

As for Mr. Hersebom, he had seated himself in his favorite arm-chair, and was smoking his pipe in silence. It was only after he had finished this important operation that he decided to open the doctor's letter.

He read it through without saying a single word; then he folded it up, put it in his pocket, and smoked a second pipe, like the first, without uttering a sound. He seemed to be absorbed in his own reflections.

Although he was never a talkative man, his silence appeared singular to Dame Katrina. After she had finished her work, she went and seated herself beside him, and made two or three attempts to draw him into conversation, but she only received the most brief replies. Being thus repulsed, she became melancholy, and the children themselves, after talking breathlessly for some time, began to be affected by the evident sadness of their parents.

Twenty youthful voices singing in chorus before the door suddenly greeted their ears, and made a happy diversion. It was a merry band of Erik's old classmates, who had conceived the pleasant idea of coming to give him a cordial welcome home.

They hastened to invite them into the house, and offered them the customary feast, whilst they eagerly pressed around their old friend to express the great pleasure which they felt in seeing him again. Erik was touched by the unexpected visit of the friends of his childhood, and was anxious to go with them on their Christmas journey, and Vanda and Otto also were, naturally, eager to be of the party. Dame Katrina charged them not to go too far, but to bring their brother back early, as he needed rest after his journey.

The door was hardly closed upon them, when she resumed her seat beside her husband.

“Well, has the doctor discovered anything?” she asked, anxiously.

Instead of answering, Mr. Hersebom took the letter from his pocket, and read it aloud, but not without hesitating over some words which were strange to him:

“MY DEAR HERSEBOM,” wrote the doctor, “it is now two years since you intrusted your dear child to my care, and every day I have had renewed pleasure in watching his progress in all the studies that he has undertaken. His intelligence is as remarkable as his heart is generous. Erik is truly one of nature’s nobleman, and the parents who have lost such a son, if they knew the extent of their misfortune, would be objects of pity. But it is very doubtful whether his parents are still living. As we agreed, I have spared no efforts to discover them. I have written to several persons in England who have an agency for making special researches. I have had advertisements inserted in twenty different newspapers, English, Irish, and Scotch. Not the least ray of light has been thrown upon this mystery, and I have to confess that all the information which I have succeeded in procuring has rather tended to deepen the mystery.

“The name ‘Cynthia,’ I find in very common use in the English navy. From Lloyd’s office, they inform me, that there are seventeen ships, of different tonnage, bearing this name. Some of these ships belong to English ports, and some to Scotland and Ireland. My supposition concerning the nationality of the child is therefore confirmed, and it becomes more and more evident to me that Erik is of Irish parentage. I do not know whether you agree with me on this point, but I have already mentioned it to two of my most intimate friends in Stockholm, and everything seems to confirm it.

“Whether this Irish family are all dead, or whether they have some interest in remaining unknown, I have not been able to discover any trace of them.

“Another singular circumstance, and which I also think looks still more suspicious, is the fact that no shipwreck registered at Lloyd’s, or at any of the marine insurance companies, corresponds with the date of the infant’s arrival on your coast. Two vessels named ‘Cynthia’ have been lost, it is true, during this century; but one was in the Indian Ocean, thirty-two years ago, and the other was in sight of Portsmouth eighteen years ago.

“We are therefore obliged to conclude that the infant was not the victim of a shipwreck.

“Doubtless he was intentionally exposed to the mercy of the waves. This would explain why all my inquiries have been fruitless.

“Be this as it may, after having questioned successively all the proprietors of the vessels bearing the name of ‘Cynthia,’ without obtaining any information, and after exhausting all known means of pursuing my investigations, I have been compelled to conclude that there is no hope of discovering Erik’s family.

“The question that arises for us to decide, my dear Hersebom, and particularly for you, is what we ought to say to the boy, and what we ought to do for him.

“If I were in your place, I should now tell him all the facts about himself which affect him so nearly, and leave him free to choose his own path in life. You know we agreed to adopt this course if my efforts should prove unsuccessful. The time has come for you to keep your word. I have wished to leave it to you to relate all this to Erik. He is returning to Noroe still ignorant that he is not your son, and he does not know whether he is to return to Stockholm or remain with you. It is for you to tell him.

“Remember, if you refuse to fulfill this duty, Erik would have the right some day, perhaps, to be astonished at you. Recall to mind also that he is a boy of too remarkable abilities to be condemned to an obscure and illiterate life. Such a sentence would have been unmerited two years ago, and now, after his brilliant career at Stockholm, it would be positively unjustifiable.

“I therefore renew my offer: let him return to me and finish his studies, and take at Upsal the degree of Doctor of Medicine. I will continue to provide for him as if he were my own son, and he has only to go on and win honors and a fortune.

“I know that, in addressing you and the excellent adopted mother of Erik, I leave his future in good hands. No personal consideration, I am sure, will prevent you from accepting my offer. Take Mr. Malarius’ advice in this matter.

“While awaiting your reply, Mr. Hersebom, I greet you affectionately, and I beg you to remember me most kindly to your worthy wife and children.

“R.W. SCHWARYENCRONA, M.D.”

When the fisherman had finished reading this letter, Dame Katrina, who had been silently weeping while she listened to it, asked him what he intended to do.

“My duty is very clear,” he said. “I shall tell the boy everything.”

“That is my opinion also; it must be done, or we should never have another peaceful moment,” she murmured, as she dried her eyes.

Then they both relapsed into silence.

It was past midnight when the three children returned from their expedition. Their cheeks were rosy, and their eyes shone with pleasure from their walk in the fresh air. They seated themselves around the fire to finish gayly their Christmas-eve by eating a last cake before the enormous log which looked like a burning cavern.

CHAPTER VI.

ERIK’S DECISION.

The next day the fisherman called Erik to him, and in the presence of Katrina, Otto, and Vanda, spoke to him as follows:

“Erik, the letter of Doctor Schwaryencrona was about you. He writes that you have given entire satisfaction to your teachers, and the doctor offers to pay all the expenses of your education, if you wish to continue your studies. But this letter also requires you to decide for yourself, whether you will accept this offer, or remain with us at Noroe, which we would like so much to have you do, as you no doubt know. But before you make up your mind, I must tell you a great secret, a secret that my wife and I would have preferred to keep to ourselves.”

At this moment Dame Katrina could not restrain her tears, and, sobbing, she took the hand of Erik and pressed it to her heart, as if protesting against the information which the young man was now to hear.

“This secret,” continued Mr. Hersebom, in a strangely altered voice, “is that you are our son only by adoption. I found you on the sea, my child, and brought you home when you were only eight or nine months old. God is my witness that we never intended to tell you this, and neither my wife nor myself have ever made the least difference between you, and Otto, and Vanda. But Doctor Schwaryencrona requires us to do so. Therefore, I wish you to read what he has written to me.”

Erik had suddenly become deadly pale. Otto and Vanda, surprised at what they had heard, both uttered a cry of astonishment. Then they put their arms around Erik, and clung closely to him, one on the right, and the other on the left.

Then Erik took the doctor’s letter, and without trying to conceal his emotion, he read what he had written to Mr. Hersebom.

The fisherman then told him all the facts about himself. He explained how Dr. Schwaryencrona had undertaken to try and discover the family to which he belonged; and, also, that he had been unsuccessful. How, that but for his advice and suggestions, they would never have thought of doing so. Then Dame Katrina arose, and going to the oaken chest, brought out the garments that the baby had worn, and showed him also the coral which had been fastened around his neck. The story was naturally so full of dramatic interest to the children, that they forgot for a time, at least, how sad it was. They looked with wonder at the lace, and velvet, the golden setting of the coral, and the inscription. It almost seemed to them as if they were taking part in some fairy tale. The impossibility of obtaining any information, as reported by the doctor, only made them regard these articles as almost sacred.

Erik looked at them as if he were in a dream, and his thoughts flew to the unknown mother, who, without doubt, had herself dressed him in these little garments, and more than once shook the coral before the eyes of the baby to make him smile. It seemed to him when he touched them as if he held direct communion with her through time and space.

But where was this mother? Was she still living, or had she perished? Was she weeping for her lost son, or must the son, on the contrary, think of her as forever lost to him?

He remained for some minutes absorbed in these reflections, with his head bent, but a word from Dame Katrina recalled him to himself.

“Erik, you are always our child,” she cried, disturbed by his silence.

The eyes of the young man as he looked around him fell on all their loving countenances — the maternal look of the loving wife, the honest face of Mr. Hersebom, that of Otto even more affectionate than usual, and that of Vanda, serious and troubled. As he read the tenderness and disquietude displayed on all their faces, Erik felt as if his heart was melting within him. In a moment he realized his situation, and saw vividly the scene which his father had described. The cradle abandoned to the mercy of the waves, rescued by the hardy fisherman, and carried to his wife; and these people, humble and poor as they were, had not hesitated to take care of the little stranger, to adopt and cherish him as their own son. They had not spoken of the matter for fourteen years, and now they were hanging on his words as if they were a matter of life and death to them.

All this touched him so deeply that suddenly his tears came. An irresistible feeling of love and gratitude overwhelmed him. He felt eager on his part to repay by some devotion the tenderness which they had shown to him. He resolved to stay with them at Noroe forever, and content himself with their humble lot, while he endeavored to do everything in his power to repay them.

“Mother,” said he, throwing himself into Katrina’s arms, “do you think that I can hesitate, now that I know all? We will write to the doctor, and thank him for his kind offer, and tell him that I have chosen to remain with you. I will be a fisherman, like you, father, and like Otto. Since you have given me a place at your fireside, I would prefer to retain it. Since you have nourished me by the labor of your hands, I ask to be allowed to repay you in your old age for your generosity toward me when I was a helpless infant.”

“God be praised!” cried Dame Katrina, pressing Erik to her heart in a transport of joy and tenderness.

“I knew that the child would prefer the sea to all their books,” said Mr. Hersebom, not understanding the sacrifice that Erik’s decision would be to him.

“Come, the matter is settled. We will not talk about it any more, but only try to enjoy this good festival of Christmas!”

They all embraced each other, with eyes humid with happiness, and vowed they would never be separated.

When Erik was alone he could not help a stifled sigh, as he thought about all his former dreams of work, and of the career which he had renounced. But still he experienced at the same time a joy which he believed would repay him for the sacrifice.

“Since it is the wish of my adopted parents,” he said to himself, “the rest does not signify. I ought to be willing to work for them in the sphere and condition where their devotion has placed me. If I have sometimes felt ambitious to take a higher position in the world, was it not that I might be able to assist them? Since it makes them happy to have me with them, and as they desire nothing better than their present life, I must try to be contented, and endeavor by good conduct and hard work to give them satisfaction. Adieu, then, to my books.”

Thus he mused, and soon his thoughts returned to the time when the fisherman had found him floating in his little cradle on the waves. What country did he belong to? Who were his parents? Were they still alive? Had he in some foreign country brothers and sisters whom he would never know?

Christmas had also been in Dr. Schwaryencrona’s house in Stockholm a season of great festivity. It was at this time, as the reader doubtless remembers, that they had agreed to decide the bet between him and Mr. Bredejord, and that Professor Hochstedt was to be the umpire.

For two years not a word had been said by either of them about this bet. The doctor had been patiently pursuing his researches in England, writing to the maritime agencies, and multiplying his advertisements in the newspapers; but he had taken care not to confess that his efforts had been fruitless.

As for Mr. Bredejord, he had had the good taste to avoid all allusion to the subject, and contented himself with occasionally admiring the beautiful binding of the Pliny which was displayed in the doctor’s book-case.

But when he struck his snuff-box sharply with the ends of his fingers, while he looked at the book, the doctor correctly interpreted the pantomime, which was a shock to his nerves, and said to himself:

“Oh, yes; he is thinking how well the Pliny will look beside his elegant editions of Quintilian and Horace.”

On these evenings he was more merciless than ever, if his unfortunate partner made any mistakes at whist.

But time had taken its flight, and he was now obliged to submit the question to the impartial arbitration of Professor Hochstedt.

Dr. Schwaryencrona approached the subject frankly. Kajsa had hardly left him alone with his two friends when he confessed to them, as he had confessed in his letter to Mr. Hersebom, that his investigations had been without result. Nothing had occurred to throw any light on the mystery which surrounded Erik's origin, and the doctor in all sincerity declared that the problem was thought by him to be insolvable.

"But," he continued, "I should be doing myself an injustice if I did not declare with equal sincerity that I do not believe that I have lost my bet. I have not discovered Erik's family, it is true, but all the information that I have been able to obtain corroborates the conclusion which I had arrived at. The 'Cynthia' was, no doubt, an English vessel, for there are at least seventeen ships bearing this name registered at Lloyd's. As for ethnographical characteristics, they are clearly Celtic. My hypothesis, therefore, as to the nationality of Erik is victoriously confirmed. I am more than ever certain that he is of Irish extraction as I at first surmised. But I can not compel his family to come forward and acknowledge him, if they have any reasons of their own for wishing him to continue lost to them. This is all I have to say, my dear Hochstedt; and now you must be the judge as to whether the Quintilian of our friend Bredejord should not legitimately be transferred to my book-case!"

At these words, which seemed to occasion a strong inclination to laugh, the lawyer fell back in his arm-chair, raised his hands as if in protestation, then he fixed his brilliant eyes upon Professor Hochstedt to see how he would regard the matter. The professor did not betray the embarrassment which might have been expected. He would have certainly felt miserable if the doctor had urged any incontrovertible argument, which would have compelled him to decide in favor of one or the other. His prudent character led him to speak in indefinite terms. He excelled in presenting, one after the other, both sides of a question, and he reveled in his vagaries, like a fish in water. Therefore, this evening he felt quite equal to the situation.

“The fact is incontestable,” he said, shaking his head, “that there are seventeen English vessels bearing the name of ‘Cynthia,’ and this seems to favor the conclusion arrived at by our eminent friend. The characteristic traits also have assuredly great weight, and I do not hesitate to say that they appear to me to be quite conclusive. I do not hesitate to confess that if I were called upon to give an opinion as to Erik’s nationality, I should say that he was Irish. But to decide the bet in question we require something more than probabilities; we must have facts to guide us. The chances so far greatly favor the opinion of Dr. Schwaryencrona, but Bredejord can allege that nothing has actually been proved. I see, therefore, no sufficient reason for declaring that the Quintilian has been won by the doctor; neither can I say that the professor has lost his Pliny. In my opinion, as the question remains undecided, it ought to be annulled, which is the best thing to do in such a case.”

The doctor’s face clearly betrayed his dissatisfaction. As for Mr. Bredejord he leaped to his feet, saying:

“Your argument is a beautiful one, my dear Hochstedt, but I think you are hasty in your conclusions. Schwaryencrona, you say, has not verified his opinions sufficiently for you to say positively that he has won the bet, although you think that all the probabilities are in his favor. What will you say then, if I prove to you immediately that the ‘Cynthia’ was not an English vessel at all?”

“What would I say?” said the professor, somewhat troubled by this sudden attack. “Upon my word I do not know. I would have to consider the question in a different aspect.”

“Examine it then at your leisure,” answered the advocate, thrusting his hand into the inner pocket of his coat, and taking out a case from which he selected a letter inclosed in one of those yellow envelopes, which betray at the first glance their American origin.

“This is a document which you can not controvert,” he added, placing the letter before the doctor’s eyes, who read aloud:

“*To Mr. Bredejord, Stockholm.*

“NEW YORK, October 27th.

“SIR, — In reply to your letter of the 5th instant, I hasten to write you the following facts: —

“1st. — A vessel named ‘Cynthia,’ commanded by Captain Barton, and the property of the Canadian General Transportation Company, was lost, with her cargo and all on board, just fourteen years ago, in the neighborhood of the Faroe Islands.

“2d. — This vessel was insured in the General Steam Navigation Company of New York for the sum of eight hundred thousand dollars.

“3d. — The disappearance of the ‘Cynthia’ having remained unexplained, and the causes of the sad accident never having been clearly proved to the satisfaction of the insurance company, a lawsuit ensued, which was lost by the proprietors of the said vessel.

“4th. — The loss of this lawsuit occasioned the dissolution of the Canadian General Transportation Company, which has ceased to exist for the last eleven years, having gone into liquidation. While waiting to hear from you again, I beg of you, sir, to accept our sincere salutations.

“JEREMIAH SMITH, WALKER & CO.

“Maritime Agents.”

“Well, what do you say to that?” asked Mr. Bredejord, when the doctor had finished reading the letter. “It is a document of some value, I think. Do you agree with me?”

“I quite agree with you,” answered the doctor. “How did you procure it?”

“In the simplest way in the world. That evening when you spoke to me about the ‘Cynthia’ being necessarily an English vessel, I thought that you were taking too limited a field for your researches, and that the vessel might be an American one. When time passed, and you received no intelligence, for you would have told us if you had, the idea occurred to me of writing to New York. The third letter brought the result which you have before you. The affair is no longer a complicated one. Do you not think that it assures to me beyond contest the possession of your Pliny?”

“It appears to me to be rather a forced conclusion,” replied the doctor, taking the letter and reading it over again, to see if he could find any new arguments to support his theory.

“How forced?” cried the advocate.

“I have proved to you that the vessel was an American one, and that she was lost off the Faroe Islands, that is to say, near the coast of Norway, precisely at the time which corresponds to the arrival of the infant, and still you are not convinced of your error.”

“Not in the least, my dear friend. I do not dispute the value or your document. You have discovered what I have found it impossible to do — the true ‘Cynthia,’ which was lost at a little distance from our coast, and at a specified epoch; but permit me to say, that this only confirms precisely my theory, for the vessel was a Canadian one, or in other words, English, and the Irish element is very strong in some parts of Canada, and I have therefore more reason than ever for being sure that the child is of Irish origin.”

“Ah, is that what you find in my letter?” said Mr. Bredejord, more vexed than he was willing to appear to be. “Then without doubt you persist in believing that you have not lost your Pliny?”

“Assuredly!”

“Perhaps you think you have a right to my Quintilian?”

“I hope in any case to be able to prove my right, thanks to your discovery, if you will only give me time by renewing the bet.”

“I am willing. I ask nothing better. How much time do you want?”

“Let us take two more years, and wait until the second Christmas after this one.”

“It is agreed,” answered Mr. Bredejord. “But be assured, doctor, that you will finally see me in possession of your Pliny!”

“By my faith no. It will make a fine appearance in my book-case beside your Quintilian.”

CHAPTER VII.

VANDA’S OPINION.

In the beginning, Erik burning with zeal at the sacrifice which he had made, devoted all his energies to a fisherman’s life, and tried to forget that he had ever known any other. He was always the first to rise and prepare the boat for his adopted father, who found every morning all the arrangements completed, and he had only to step on board. If the wind failed, then Erik took the heavy oars, and rowed with all his strength, seeming to choose the hardest and most fatiguing duties. Nothing discouraged him, neither the long waiting for the fish to seize the bait, nor the various preparations to which the captive was subjected — first, the removal of the tongue, which is a most delicate morsel; then the head, then the bones, before placing them in the reservoir, where they receive their first salting. Whatever their work was, Erik did his part not only conscientiously, but eagerly. He astonished the placid Otto by his extreme application to the smallest details of their business.

“How you must have suffered, when you were shut up in the town,” said the lad to him, naively. “You only seem to be in your element when you are on the borders of the fiord or on the open sea.”

When their conversation took this turn, Erik always remained silent. Sometimes, however, he would revert to the subject himself, and try to prove to Otto, or rather to himself, that there was no better state of existence than their own.

“It is what I have always heard,” the other would answer with his calm smile.

And poor Erik would turn away and stifle a sigh.

The truth is that he suffered cruelly after renouncing his studies and seeing himself condemned to a life of manual labor. When these thoughts came to him he fought against them with all his might. He did not wish any one to suspect that he felt in this way, and in hiding them within his own breast he suffered all the more.

A catastrophe which occurred at the beginning of the spring, only served to increase his discouragement.

One day, as there was a great deal of work to do at home in piling together the salted fish, Mr. Hersebom had intrusted it to Erik and to Otto, and had gone out to fish alone. The weather was stormy, and the sky very cloudy for the time of the year. The two young men, although they worked actively, could not help noticing that it was exceptionally dull, and they felt the atmosphere very heavy.

“It is singular!” said Erik, “but I feel a roaring in my ears as if I were some distance above the earth in a balloon.”

Almost immediately his nose began to bleed. Otto had a similar sensation, although not quite so severe.

“I think the barometer must be very low,” said Erik. “If I had time I would run to Mr. Malarius’ and see.”

“You have plenty of time,” said Otto. “Our work is nearly done, and even if you were delayed I could easily finish it alone.”

“Then I will go,” replied Erik. “I do not know why the state of the atmosphere should trouble me so much. I wish father was home.”

As he walked toward the school, he met Mr. Malarius on the road.

“Is it you, Erik?” said the teacher. “I am glad to see you, and make sure that you are not on the sea. I was just going to inquire. The barometer has fallen with such rapidity during the last half hour. I have never seen anything like it. We are surely going to have a change of weather.”

Mr. Malarius had hardly finished speaking, when a distant grumbling, followed by a lugubrious roaring, fell upon their ears. The sky became covered with a cloud as black as ink, which spread rapidly in all directions, and obscured every object with great swiftness. Then suddenly, after an interval of complete silence, the leaves of the trees, the bits of straw, the sand, and even the stones, were swept away by a sudden gust of wind.

The hurricane had begun.

It raged with unheard-of violence. The chimneys, the window shutters, and in some places even the roofs of the houses were blown down; and the boat-houses without exception were carried away and destroyed by the wind. In the fiord, which was usually as calm as a well in a court-yard, the most terrible tempest raged; the waves were enormous and came and went, breaking against the shore with a deafening noise.

The cyclone raged for an hour, then arrested in its course by the heights of Norway, it moved toward the south, and swept over continental Europe. It is noted in meteorological annals as one of the most extraordinary and disastrous that ever was known upon the Atlantic coast. These great changes of the atmosphere are now generally announced beforehand by the telegraph. Most of the European sea-ports forewarned of the danger have time to warn vessels and seamen of the threatened tempest, and they seek a safe anchorage. By this means many disasters are averted.

But on the distant and less frequented coasts, in the fishing-hamlets, the number of shipwrecks was beyond computation.

In one office, that of “Veritas” in France, there were registered not less than 730.

The first thought of all the members of the Hersebom family, as well as of all the other families of fishermen, was naturally for those who were on the sea on this disastrous day. Mr. Hersebom went most often to the western coast of a large island which was about two miles distant, beyond the entrance to the fiord. It was the spot where he had first seen Erik. They hoped that during the tempest he had been able to find shelter by running his boat upon the low and sandy shore. But Erik and Otto felt so anxious that they could not wait until evening to see if this hope was well founded.

The fiord had hardly resumed its ordinary placidity, after the passage of the hurricane, when they borrowed a boat of one of their neighbors, in order to go in search of him. Mr. Malarius insisted upon accompanying the young men upon their expedition, and they all three set out, anxiously watched by Katrina and her daughter.

On the fiord the wind had nearly gone down, but it blew from the west, and to reach the entrance to the harbor they were obliged to use their oars. This took them more than an hour.

When they reached the entrance an unexpected obstacle presented itself. The tempest was still raging on the ocean, and the waves dashed against the island which, formed the entrance to the fiord of Noroe, forming two currents, which came and went with such violence in the narrow pass that it was impossible to gain the open sea. A steamboat could not have ventured through it, and a weak boat could not have resisted it for a moment.

The only thing they could do, therefore, was to return to Noroe, and wait as patiently as they could.

The hour when he habitually came home passed without bringing Mr. Hersebom, but none of the other fishermen returned; so they hoped that they were all detained by the impassable state of the entrance to the fiord, and would not believe that he had personally met with any disaster. That evening was a very sad one at all the firesides where a member was missing. As the night passed without any of the absent men making their appearance, the anxieties of their families increased. In Mr. Hersebom's house nobody went to bed. They passed the long hours of waiting seated in a circle around the fire, silent and anxious.

Dawn is late in these high latitudes in March, but when at last it grew light it was bright and clear. The wind was calm, and they hoped they would be able to get through the pass. A regular fleet of boats, composed of every one who could get away from Noroe, was ready to go in search of the absent men. Just at this moment several vessels hove in sight, and soon reached the village. They were the fishermen who had gone out the day before, not expecting such a cyclone; but Mr. Hersebom was not among them.

Nobody could give any account of him, and the fact of his not returning with the others increased their anxiety as all the men had been in great peril. Some had been surprised by the cyclone and dashed upon the shore, others had time to shelter themselves in a secure place of anchorage. A few had reached the land just in time to save themselves.

It was decided that the flotilla should go in search of those who were missing. Mr. Malarius who still wished to take part in the expedition accompanied Erik and Otto. A large yellow dog begged so earnestly to go with them, that at length they yielded. It was Kaas, the Greenland dog that Mr. Hersebom had brought back with him, after a voyage to Cape Farewell.

After issuing from the pass the boats separated, some going to the right, and others to the left, to explore the shores of the innumerable islands which lie scattered near the entrance to the fiord of Noroe, as well as all along the coast of Norway.

When they met at midday at a given point, which had been agreed upon before separating, no trace of Mr. Hersebom had been discovered. As the search had apparently been well conducted, everyone was of the opinion that they had nothing more to do but to go home.

But Erik was not willing to own himself defeated, and give up all hope so easily. He declared that having visited all the islands which lay toward the south, he now wished to explore those which were in the north. Mr. Malarius and Otto supported him; and seeing this they granted his desire.

This persistence deserved some recompense. Toward two o’clock as they approached a large island, Kaas began suddenly to bark furiously; then before they could prevent him he threw himself into the water, and swam to the shore.

Erik and Otto rowed with all their strength in the same direction. Soon they saw the dog reach the island, and bound, while he uttered loud howls, toward what appeared to be a human form lying extended upon the sand. They made all possible haste, and soon saw beyond a doubt that it was a man who was lying there, and this man was Mr. Hersebom; bloody, pale, cold, inanimate — dead, perhaps. Kaas was licking his hands, and uttering mournful cries.

Erik’s first action was to drop on his knees beside the cold body, and apply his ear to his heart.

“He is alive, I feel it beat,” he cried.

Mr. Malarias had taken one of Mr. Hersebom’s hand’s, and was feeling his pulse and he shook his head, sadly and doubtfully; but he would not neglect any of the means which are usually tried in such cases. After taking off a large woolen girdle which he wore around his waist, he tore it in three pieces, and giving one to each of the young men, they rubbed vigorously the body, the arms, and the legs of the fisherman.

It was soon manifest that this simple treatment had produced the effect of restoring the circulation. The beating of the heart grew stronger, the chest rose, and a feeble respiration escaped through the lips. In a little while Mr. Hersebom was partially restored to consciousness, for he distinctly moaned.

Mr. Malarias, and the two young men lifted him from the ground, and carried him to the boat, where they hastily arranged a bed for him of sails. As they laid him in the bottom of the boat he opened his eyes.

“A drink!” he said in a weak voice.

Erik held a flask of brandy to his lips. He swallowed a mouthful and appeared to be conscious of their arrival, for he tried to give them an affectionate and grateful smile. But fatigue overcame him almost immediately, and he fell into a heavy sleep which resembled a complete lethargy. Thinking justly that the best thing they could do was to get him home as speedily as possible, they took their oars and rowed vigorously; and in a very short time they reached Noroe.

Mr. Hersebom was carried to his bed, and his wounds were dressed with arnica. He was fed with broth, and given a glass of beer, and in a short time he recovered consciousness. His injuries were not of a very grave nature. One of his arms was fractured, and his body was covered with wound and bruises. But Mr. Malarius insisted that he should remain quiet and rest, and not fatigue himself by attempting to talk. He was soon sleeping peacefully.

It was not until the next day that they permitted him to speak and explain in a few words what had happened to him.

He had been overtaken by the cyclone just as he had hoisted his sail to return to Noroe. He had been dashed against the rocks of the island and his boat had been broken into a thousand pieces and carried away by the waves. He had thrown himself into the sea to escape the frightful shock, when she struck, but in spite of all his efforts, he had been dashed by the waves upon the rocks and terribly wounded; he had only been able to drag himself beyond the reach of the waves.

Exhausted by fatigue, one arm broken, and his whole body covered with wounds, he had lain in an unconscious state, unable to move. He could give no account of the manner in which he had passed the twenty hours; doubtless he had either been delirious or unconscious.

Now that he was saved, he began to lament for the loss of his boat, and because of his broken arm, which was now in splints. What would become of him, even admitting that he might be able to use his arm again after eight or ten weeks? The boat was the only capital possessed by the family, and the boat had been broken to pieces by the wind.

It would be very hard for a man of his age to be compelled to work for others. Besides, could he find work? It was very doubtful, for nobody in Noroe employed any assistant, and the factory even had lately reduced its hands.

Such were the bitter reflections of Mr. Hersebom, while he lay upon his bed of pain; and he felt still worse when he was able to get up, and occupy his accustomed seat in his arm-chair.

While waiting for his complete recovery, the family lived upon such provisions as they had in the house, and by the sale of the salt cod-fish which still remained. But the future looked very dark, and nobody could see how it was to be lightened.

This imminent distress had given a new turn to Erik's thoughts. For two or three days he reflected that it was by his good fortune that Mr. Hersebom had been discovered. How could he help feeling proud, when he saw Dame Katrina and Vanda look at him with intense gratitude, as they said: "Dear Erik, our father saved you from the waves, and now, in your turn, you have snatched him from death."

Certainly it was the highest recompense that he could desire for the self-abnegation of which he had given such a noble proof, in condemning himself to a fisherman's life. To feel that he had been able to render his adopted family such an inestimable benefit was to him a thought full of sweetness and strength. This family, who had so generously shared with him all that they possessed, were now in trouble, and in want of food. But, could he remain to be a burden to them? Was it not rather his duty to try and do something to assist them?

Erik did not doubt his obligation to do this. He only hesitated as to the best way for him to do it. Should he go to Bergen and become a sailor? or was there some better occupation open to him, where he could be immediately useful to them. He resolved to consult Mr. Malarius, who listened to his reasons, and approved of them, but did not think well of his project of becoming a sailor.

“I understood, but I deplored your decision when you were resigned to remain here and share the life of your adopted parents; but I can not understand why you should condemn yourself to the life of a sailor, which would take you far away from them, when Doctor Schwaryencrona offers you every advantage to pursue a more congenial career,” said Mr. Malarius. “Reflect, my dear child, before you make such a decision.”

Mr. Malarius did not tell him that he had already written to Stockholm to inform the doctor of the sad state of their affairs, and the change which the cyclone of the 3d of March had made in the circumstances of Erik’s family. He was not surprised, when three days after his conversation with Erik, he received the following letter, which he lost no time in carrying to the house of Mr. Hersebom.

The letter read as follows:

“STOCKHOLM, March 17th.

“MY DEAR MR. MALARIUS, — I thank you cordially for informing me of the disastrous consequences of the cyclone of the 3d of March to the worthy Mr. Hersebom. I am proud and happy to learn that Erik acted in these circumstances, as always before, like a brave boy and a devoted son. You will find a check in this letter for 500 kroners; and I beg you to give them to him from me. Tell him if it is not enough to buy at Bergen a first-class boat, he must let me know without delay. He must name this boat ‘Cynthia,’ and then present it to Mr. Hersebom as a souvenir of filial love. That done, if Erik wishes to please me he will return to Stockholm and resume his studies. His place is always ready for him at my fireside, and if he needs a motive to assist in this decision, I add that I have at length obtained some information, and hope yet to be able to solve the mystery enshrouding his birth.

“Believe me, my dear Malarius, your sincere and devoted friend,

“R.W. SCHWARYENCRONA, M.D.”

You may imagine with what joy this letter was received. The doctor, by sending this gift to Erik, showed that he understood the character of the old fisherman. If he had offered it directly to him, it is hardly probable that Mr. Hersebom would have accepted it. But he could not refuse the boat from Erik’s hand, and bearing the name of “Cynthia,” which recalled how Erik had become a member of the family. Their only grief now, which already began to sadden all their countenances, was the thought that he must soon leave them again. Nobody dared to speak about it, although it was constantly in their thoughts. Erik himself, with his head bowed, was divided between the desire of satisfying the doctor, and realizing the secret wishes of his own heart, and the no less natural wish of giving no offense to his adopted parents.

It was Vanda who first broke the reserve, and spoke upon the subject.

“Erik,” she said, in her sweet grave voice, “you can not say ‘No’ to the doctor after receiving such a letter. You can not do it, because it would be treating him most ungratefully, and sinning against yourself. Your place is among scholars, and not among fishermen. I have thought so for a long time. Nobody has dared to tell you, therefore I tell you.”

“Vanda is right,” said Mr. Malarius, with a smile.

“Vanda is right,” repeated Dame Katrina, drying her eyes.

And in this manner, for the second time, Erik’s departure was decided.

CHAPTER VIII.

PATRICK O’DONOGHAN.

The information which Dr. Schwaryencrona had received was not very important, but it sufficed to start his inquiries in a new direction.

He had learned the name of the ex-director of the Canadian Transportation Company, it was Mr. Joshua Churchill. But they did not know what had become of this gentleman since the dissolution of the company. If they could succeed in finding him, he might be able to give them some information about the old records of the company; perhaps there might have been a list of the passengers by the “Cynthia,” and the baby might have been registered with his family or with the persons who had charge of him. But their investigations proved very unsatisfactory. The solicitor who had formerly had the books in his possession as the receiver of the company about ten years before; did not know what had become of Mr. Churchill. For a moment Dr. Schwaryencrona consoled himself with a false hope. He remembered that the American newspapers usually published a list of the passengers embarking for Europe, and he sent for a number of old gazettes to see if he could find the “Cynthia’s” list; but he was soon convinced that this was a fruitless effort. He discovered that the practice of publishing the names of passengers on European steamships was of comparatively recent date. But the old gazettes were of one use to him, they gave the exact date of sailing of the “Cynthia,” which had left on the 3d of November, not from a Canadian port as they had at first supposed, but from New York, to go to Hamburg.

It was therefore in New York that the doctor must first make his investigations, and, if unsuccessful, then in other parts of the United States.

At Hamburg all his inquiries proved to be useless. The consignee of the Canadian Transportation Company knew nothing about the passengers of the “Cynthia,” and could only give them information about the freight, which they had already obtained.

Erik had been in Stockholm six months when they learned that the ex-director, Mr. Joshua Churchill, had died several years before, in an hospital, without leaving any known heirs, or probably any money. As for the registers of the company, they had probably been sold long before as waste paper.

These long researches led to nothing, except to provoke the sarcasms of Mr. Bredejord, which were wounding, to the doctor’s self-love, who, however, did not as yet give way to despair.

Erik’s history was now well known in the doctor’s household. They no longer forbore to speak openly about it, and the results of their researches were talked of both in the dining-room and the parlor.

Perhaps the doctor had acted more discreetly during the first two years of Erik’s sojourn with him, when he had kept his affairs a secret. Now they furnished food for the gossiping of Kajsa and Dame Greta, and even occupied the thoughts of Erik himself; and his reflections were often very melancholy.

Not to know whether his parents were still living, to reflect that he might never be able to discover the secret of his birth, was in itself a sad thought to him; but it was still more sad to be ignorant of the land of his birth.

“The poorest child in the streets, the most miserable peasant, knew at least what his country was, and to what branch of the great human family he belonged," he would sometimes say to himself, as he thought of those things. "But I am ignorant of all this. I am cast on the globe like a waif, like a grain of dust tossed by the winds, and nobody knows where I came from. I have no tradition — no past. The spot where my mother was born, and where her ashes now rest, is perhaps profaned and trodden under foot, and I am powerless to defend and protect it."

These thoughts saddened Erik. Sometimes he would tell himself that he had a mother in Dame Katrina, and a home at Mr. Hersebom's, and that Noroe was his country. He vowed that he would repay their kindness to him fourfold, and would always be a devoted son to Norway, but still he felt himself in an exceptional position.

Sometimes when he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror, he could observe the physical difference between himself and those surrounding him. The color of his eyes and his skin often occasioned him gloomy reflections. Sometimes he would ask himself which country he would prefer to be a native of if he had a choice, and he studied history and geography that he might become better acquainted with the civilization of different countries, and with the habits of their inhabitants. It was a sort of consolation to him to believe that he belonged to the Celtic race, and he sought in books a confirmation of the theory of the doctor.

But when the learned man repeated that in his opinion he was certainly Irish, Erik felt depressed. Why among all the Celtic race should he belong to the people who were the most oppressed? If he had felt absolutely sure of this, he would have loved this unfortunate country. But all proof being wanting, why might he not rather believe that he was French? There were certainly Celts in France, and it was a country that he would have been proud to claim as his own, with her glorious traditions, her dramatic history, and her fruitful principles, which she had disseminated all over the world. Oh! he could have passionately loved, and served with devotion, such a country. He would have felt a filial interest in studying her glorious annals, in reading the works of her great authors, and in studying her poets. But alas! all these delicate emotions were denied him, and he felt that the problem of his origin would never be solved, since after so many years spent in making inquiries they had learned nothing.

However, it seemed to Erik that if he could pursue these inquiries himself, and follow up the information already obtained, that he might discover something which might lead to some result, and his activity and zeal might succeed where money had failed. Would he not work with an ardor which must overcome all difficulties?

This idea took possession of his mind, and insensibly had a marked effect in his studies, giving them a special direction; although he was not aware of this fact himself. As he had made up his mind to travel, he commenced to study cosmography and nautical matters; in fact, everything that was taught in the school for marines.

“Some day,” he said to himself, “I will pass my examination as a captain, and then I shall go to New York in my own vessel, and pursue my inquiries with regard to the ‘Cynthia.’”

As a natural consequence, this project of personally investigating the matter of his birth soon became known, for he was candor itself.

Dr. Schwaryencrona, Mr. Bredejord and Professor Hochstedt ended by becoming interested, and finally adopted his views as their own. The question of Erik’s birth, which had at first only been an interesting problem in their eyes, engrossed them more and more. They saw how much Erik took it to heart, and as they were sincerely attached to him, they realized how important it was to him, and they were disposed to do everything in their power to cast some light upon the mystery.

One fine evening, just as the vacation was approaching, it occurred to them that it would be a good idea to make an excursion to New York together, and see if they could, obtain any further news about the matter.

Who first conceived this idea was a disputed point among them, and gave rise to many discussions between the doctor and Mr. Bredejord, each claiming a priority. Doubtless it occurred to them both simultaneously; but be this as it may, the proposal was adopted unanimously, and in the month of September the three friends, accompanied by Erik, embarked at Christiana for New York. Ten days later they had reached that city, and opened communication with the house of Jeremiah Smith, Walker & Company, from whom they had received the first intelligence.

And now a new agent appeared on the scene, whose assistance they had had little suspicion of, and this was Erik himself. In New York he only saw what would assist him in his search. He was up at daybreak visiting the wharves, accosting the sailors, whom he might chance to meet, working with indefatigable activity to collect the most minute intelligence.

“Do you know anything about the Canadian Transportation Company? Could you tell me of any officer, or passenger, or sailor, who had sailed on the ‘Cynthia’?” he asked everywhere.

Thanks to his perfect knowledge of the English language, his sweet and serious countenance, and his familiarity with everything pertaining to the sea, he was well received everywhere. They mentioned to him successively several old officers, sailors, and employs, of the Canadian Transportation

Company. Sometimes he was able to find them. Sometimes all traces of them were lost. But none of them could give him any useful information about the last voyage of the “Cynthia.” It took fifteen days of walking, and searching incessantly, to obtain one little bit of information which might prove valuable, among all the confused and contradictory accounts which were poured into poor Erik’s willing ears.

This one little truth however seemed to be worth its weight in gold.

They assured him that a sailor named Patrick O’Donoghan, had survived the shipwreck of the “Cynthia,” and had even returned to New York several times since that eventful voyage. This Patrick O’Donoghan had been on the “Cynthia,” on her last voyage, and had been a special attendant of the captain. In all probability he would know the first-class passengers, who always eat at the captain’s table. They judged by the fineness of the infant’s clothing that he belonged to this class. It was now a matter of the greatest importance to find this sailor.

This was the conclusion of Dr. Schwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord, when Erik informed them of his discovery, when he returned to the Fifth Avenue Hotel to dinner.

As usual it led to a discussion, since the doctor tried to draw from this discovery a confirmation of his favorite theory.

“If ever there was an Irish name,” he cried, “Patrick O’Donoghan is one. Did I not always say that I was sure that Erik was of Irish birth?”

“Does this discovery prove it?” asked Mr. Bredejord laughing. “An Irish cabin-boy does not prove much. It would be difficult, I fancy, to find an American vessel without one or two natives of Erin among her crew.”

They discussed the matter for two or three hours, neither of them willing to give way to the other.

From that day Erik devoted all his energies to the task of finding Patrick O’Donoghan.

He was not successful it is true, but by force of seeking, and questioning, he discovered a sailor who had known this man, and who was able to give him some information. Patrick O’Donoghan was a native of the County Cork. He was between thirty-three and thirty-four years old, of medium height, with red hair, black eyes, and a nose which had been broken by some accident.

“A boy one would remember among a thousand,” said the sailor. “I recollect him very well, although I have not seen him for seven or eight years.”

“Is it in New York you usually meet him?” asked Erik.

“Yes, in New York, and in other places; but the last time was in New York.”

“Do you know any one who could give me any information about him, so that I could find out what has become of him?”

“No, unless it is the proprietor of the hotel called the Red Anchor, in Brooklyn. Patrick O’Donoghan lodges there when he is in New York. The name of the hotel-keeper is Mr. Bowles, and he is an old sailor. If he does not know, I do not know of any one else who can tell you anything about him.”

Erik hurried on board one of the ferry-boats that cross the East River, and ten minutes later he was in Brooklyn.

At the door-way of the Red Anchor he saw an old woman, who was neatly dressed, and busily occupied in peeling potatoes.

“Is Mr. Bowles at home?” he said, saluting her politely, after the custom of his adopted country.

“He is at home, but he is taking a nap,” answered the good woman, looking with curiosity at her questioner. “If you have any message for him, you can give it to me. I am Mrs. Bowles.”

“Oh, madam, you can no doubt give me the information I desire as well as Mr. Bowles,” answered Erik. “I wish to know whether you are acquainted with a sailor named Patrick O’Donoghan, and whether he is now with you, or if you can tell me where I can find him?”

“Patrick O’Donoghan: yes, I know him, but it is five or six years since he has been here, and I am unable to say where he is now.”

Erik’s countenance displayed such great disappointment that the old woman was touched.

“Are you so anxious to find Patrick O’Donoghan that you are disappointed in not finding him here?” she asked.

“Yes, indeed,” he answered. “He alone can solve a mystery that I shall seek all my life to make clear.”

During the three weeks that Erik had been running everywhere in search of information, he gained a certain amount of experience in human nature. He saw that the curiosity of Mrs. Bowles was aroused by his questions, he therefore entered the hotel and asked for a glass of soda-water.

The low room in which he found himself was furnished with green tables, and wooden chairs, but it was empty. This circumstance emboldened Erik to enter into conversation with Mrs. Bowles, when she handed him the bottle of soda-water which he had ordered.

“You are doubtless wondering, madam, what I can want with Patrick O’Donoghan, and I will tell you,” said he, with a smile.

“An American vessel called the ‘Cynthia’ was lost about seventeen years ago on the coast of Norway; Patrick O’Donoghan was employed on board. I was picked up by a Norwegian fisherman when I was about nine months old. I was floating in a cradle attached to a buoy of the ‘Cynthia.’ I am seeking O’Donoghan to see if he can give me any information about my family, or at least about my country.”

Mrs. Bowles uttered a cry that put a stop to Erik’s explanation.

“To a buoy, do you say? You were tied to a buoy?”

But without waiting for any reply she ran to the stairway. “Bowles! Bowles! come down quickly,” she cried, in a piercing voice.

“On a buoy! you are the child who was tied to the buoy! Who ever would have expected such a thing to happen?” she said, as she returned to Erik, who had turned pale from surprise.

Was he going to learn the secret which he was so anxious to make out.

A heavy footstep was heard on the stairs, and soon an old man, fat and rosy, clothed in a complete suit of blue cloth, and with gold rings in his ears, appeared on the threshold.

“What is the matter?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Here is somebody who wants you,” said Mrs. Bowles; “sit down and listen to the gentleman, who will repeat what he has told me.”

Mr. Bowles obeyed without any protestation; Erik did the same. He repeated in as few words as he could what he had told the old woman.

As he listened, the countenance of Mr. Bowles dilated like a full moon, his lips parted in a broad smile, and he looked at his wife, and rubbed his hands. She on her side appeared equally well pleased.

“Must I suppose that you are already acquainted with my story?” asked Erik, with a beating heart.

Mr. Bowles made an affirmative sign, and scratching his ear, made up his mind to speak:

“I know it without your telling me,” he said, at length, “and my wife knows it as well as I do. We have often talked about it without understanding it.”

Erik, pale and with tightly compressed lips, hung upon his words, expecting some revelation, but this he had to wait for. Mr. Bowles had not the gift of either eloquence or clearness, and perhaps his ideas were still clouded with sleep, and in order to recover his faculties he took two or three glasses of a liquor called “pick me up,” which greatly resembled gin.

After his wife had placed the bottle and two glasses before him, and he had sufficiently fortified himself, he began to speak.

His story was so confused, and mingled with so many useless details, that it was impossible to draw any conclusions from it, but Erik listened attentively to all he said, and by questioning and insisting, and aided by Mrs. Bowles, he ended by gathering some facts about himself.

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH A REWARD OF FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS STERLING IS OFFERED.

Patrick O’Donoghan, as far as Erik could make out through Mr. Bowles’ rambling account of him, was not a model of virtue. The proprietor of the Red Anchor had known him as a cabin-boy and sailor, both before and after the loss of the “Cynthia.” Up to that time Patrick O’Donoghan had been poor, as all sailors are. After the shipwreck he had returned from Europe with a large bundle of bank-notes, pretending to have inherited some money in Ireland, which seemed likely enough.

Mr. Bowles, however, had never believed in this inheritance. He thought that this sudden accession of wealth was connected in some way with the loss of the “Cynthia,” and that Patrick O’Donoghan was afraid to say so; for it was evident that contrary to the usual habit of seamen in such cases, he carefully avoided speaking about the sad occurrence. He would always turn the conversation if any one alluded to it before him, and he was very anxious to start on a long voyage before the lawsuit brought by the company to recover the insurance due on the “Cynthia” should take place. He did not wish to be summoned as a witness. This conduct appeared very suspicious, as he was the sole known survivor from the shipwreck. Mr. Bowles and his wife had always suspected him, but they had kept their own counsel.

What looked still more suspicious was the fact that when Patrick O’Donoghan was in New York he was never short of money. He brought back very little with him after a voyage, but a few days after his return he always had gold and bank-notes; and when he was tipsy, which frequently happened, he would boast of being in possession of a secret which was worth a fortune to him. The words which most frequently escaped from his lips were, “the baby tied to the buoy!”

“The baby tied to the buoy,” he would say, striking the table with his fist, “The baby tied to the buoy is worth its weight in gold.”

Then he would laugh, as if well satisfied with himself. But they could never draw out of him any explanation of these words, and for many years the Bowles household were lost in conjectures as to what they could possibly mean.

This accounted for Mrs. Bowles’ excitement, when Erik suddenly announced to her that he was the famous baby who had been tied to a buoy.

Patrick O’Donoghan, who had been in the habit of lodging at the Red Anchor, whenever he was in New York, for more than fifteen years, had not been seen there now for more than four years. There had also been something mysterious about his last departure. He had received a visit from a man who had been closeted with him for more than an hour. After this visit Patrick O’Donoghan, who had seemed worried and troubled, had paid his board bill, taken his carpet bag, and left in a hurry.

They had never seen him since that day.

Mr. and Mrs. Bowles were naturally ignorant of the cause of his sudden departure, but they had always thought that it had some connection with the loss of the “Cynthia.” In their opinion the visitor had come to warn Patrick O’Donoghan of some danger which threatened him, and the Irishman had thought it prudent to leave New York immediately. Mrs. Bowles did not think he had ever returned. If he had done so, they would have been sure to hear of him through other seamen who frequented their house, and who would have been astonished if Patrick O'Donoghan had boarded anywhere else, and would have been sure to ask questions as to the reasons for his doing so.

This was the substance of the story related to Erik, and he hastened to communicate it to his friends.

His report was naturally received with all the interest which it merited. For the first time, after so many years, they were on the track of a man who had made reiterated allusions to the baby tied to a buoy. It was true they did not know where this man was, but they hoped to find him some day. It was the most important piece of news which they had as yet obtained. They resolved to telegraph to Mrs. Bowles, and beg her to prepare a dinner for six persons. Mr. Bredejord had suggested this idea, as a good means of drawing the worthy couple out; for while they talked during the dinner, they might be able to glean some new facts.

Erik had little hopes of obtaining any further information. He thought that he already knew Mr. and Mrs. Bowles well enough to be convinced that they had told him all that they knew. But he did not take into account Mr. Bredejord's skill in questioning witnesses, and in drawing from them information which they themselves were scarcely aware of.

Mrs. Bowles had surpassed herself in preparing the dinner. She had laid the table in the best room on the first floor. She felt very much flattered at being invited to partake of it, in the society of such distinguished guests, and answered willingly all of Mr. Bredejord's questions.

They gathered from this conversation a certain number of facts which were not unimportant.

One was that Patrick O’Donoghan had said at the time, of the lawsuit against the insurance company, that he was going away to avoid being summoned as a witness. This was evident proof that he did not wish to explain the circumstances under which the shipwreck had occurred, and his subsequent conduct confirmed this theory. It was also evident that in New York or its environs he received the suspicious revenue which seemed to be connected with his secret. For when he arrived he was always without money, but after he had been about for a short time he always returned with his pockets full of gold. They could not doubt that his secret was connected with the infant tied to the buoy, for he had frequently affirmed that such was the case.

The evening before his sudden departure Patrick O’Donoghan had said that he was tired of a sea-faring life, and that he thought he should give up making voyages, and settle in New York for the remainder of his life.

Lastly, the individual who had called to see Patrick O’Donoghan was interested in his departure, for he had called the next day and asked for the Irishman who was boarding at the Red Anchor, and had seemed pleased to hear that he was no longer there. Mr. Bowles felt sure that he would recognize this man if he saw him again. By his conversation and actions he had believed him to be a detective, or some agent of the police.

Mr. Bredejord concluded from these facts that Patrick O’Donoghan had been systematically frightened by the person from whom he drew the money, and that this man had been sent to make him fear that criminal proceedings were about to be taken against him. This would explain his precipitate flight, and why he had never returned to New York.

It was important to find this detective, as well as Patrick O’Donoghan.

Mr. and Mrs. Bowles, by referring to their books, were able to give the exact date of the Irishman’s departure, which was four years, lacking three months; although they had previously believed that it was four or five years ago.

Dr. Schwaryencrona was immediately struck by the fact that the date of his departure, and consequently of the visit of the detective, corresponded precisely with the date of the first advertisements which he had caused to be made in Great Britain for the survivors of the “Cynthia.” This coincidence was so striking that it was impossible not to believe that there was some connection between them.

They began to understand the mystery a little better. The abandonment of Erik on the buoy had been the result of some crime — a crime of which the cabin-boy O’Donoghan had been a witness or an accomplice. He knew the authors of this crime, who lived in New York or its environs, and he had for a long time enjoyed the reward of his secrecy. Then a day had come when the excessive demands of the Irishman had become burdensome, and the announcement in the newspapers by advertisement had been made use of to frighten Patrick, and cause his hurried departure.

In any case, even if these deductions were not correct in every point, they had obtained sufficient information to entitle them to demand a judicial investigation.

Erik and his friends therefore left the Red Anchor full of hope that they would soon obtain some favorable intelligence.

The next day Mr. Bredejord was introduced by the Swedish consul to the chief of police of New York, and he made him acquainted with the facts which had become known to him. At the same time he entered into conversation with the officers of the insurance company who had refused to pay the claims due on the “Cynthia,” and read the old documents relative to this matter, which had lain undisturbed so many years. But the examination of these papers did not afford him any important intelligence. The matter had been decided upon technical points, relating to an excess of insurance far above the value of the vessel and cargo. Neither side had been able to produce any person who had been a witness of the shipwreck. The owners of the “Cynthia” had not been able to prove their good faith, or to explain how the shipwreck had taken place, and the Court had decided in favor of their adversaries. Their defense had been weak, and their opponents had triumphed.

The insurance company, however, had been compelled to pay several claims on the lives of the passengers to their heirs. But, in all these law proceedings, there was no trace of any infant nine months old.

These examinations had occupied several days. Finally, the chief of police informed Mr. Bredejord that he had been unable to obtain any intelligence about the matter. Nobody in New York knew any detective who answered to Mr. Bowles’ description. Nobody could tell who the individual was who was interested in the departure of Patrick O’Donoghan. As for this sailor, he did not appear to have set his foot in the United States for at least four years. All they could do was to keep the address of the place where he was born, which might prove useful some time. But the chief of police told Mr. Bredejord, without any dissimulation, that the affair had happened so long ago — now nearly twenty years — that even if Patrick O’Donoghan ever returned to New York, it was at least doubtful if the authorities would be willing to investigate the matter.

At the moment when Erik believed that he was about to obtain a solution of the mystery which clouded his life, all their investigations came to a sudden end, and without producing the slightest result. The only thing that remained to be done was to pass through Ireland as they returned to Sweden, to see if perchance Patrick O'Donoghan had returned there to pass the remainder of his days planting cabbages.

Dr. Schwaryencrona and his friends, after taking leave of Mr. and Mrs. Bowles, resolved to pursue this route. The steamers between New York and Liverpool touch at Cork, and this was only a few miles from Innishannon, the place where Patrick was born. There they learned that Patrick O'Donoghan had never returned to his native place since he left it at the age of twelve years, and that they had never heard from him.

"Where shall we look for him now?" asked Dr. Schwaryencrona, as they embarked for England, on the way to Stockholm.

"At the seaport towns evidently, and clearly at those which are not American," answered Mr. Bredejord. "For note this point, a sailor, a seafaring man, does not renounce his profession at the age of thirty-five. It is the only one he knows. Patrick is doubtless still on the sea. And all vessels have some port or other for their destination, and it is only there that we can hope to find this man. What do you think, Hochstedt?"

"Your reasoning seems to be just, although not altogether indisputable," answered the professor, with his customary prudence.

"Admit that it is right," continued Mr. Bredejord. "We know that Patrick O'Donoghan was frightened away and would be in dread of pursuit, perhaps of being extradited. In that case, he would avoid his old companions, and seek in preference ports where he was not likely to meet any of them. I know that my ideas can be contradicted, but let us suppose they are well founded. The number of ports which are not frequented by American vessels is not very large. I think we might begin by seeking in these places news of Patrick O'Donoghan."

"Why not have recourse to advertisements?" asked Dr. Schwaryencrona.

"Because Patrick O'Donoghan would not answer them if he is trying to hide himself; even supposing that a sailor would be likely to see your advertisement."

"But you could word your advertisement so as to assure him that you intended to do him no injury, but rather that it would be greatly to his advantage to communicate with you."

"You are right, but still I am afraid that an ordinary seaman would not be likely to see such an advertisement."

"Well, you might try offering a reward to Patrick O'Donoghan, or to any one who would give you information as to where he might be found. What do you think about it, Erik?"

"It seems to me that such an advertisement to produce any result would have to be continued for a long time, and in a great many different papers. That would cost a great deal, and might only frighten Patrick O'Donoghan, no matter how well worded the advertisement might be, provided it is to his interest to remain concealed. Would it not be better to employ some one to visit personally those seaports which this man would be likely to frequent?"

"But where could we find a trusty man who would be willing to undertake such a task?"

“I can furnish one, if you wish it,” answered Erik. “I would go myself.”

“You, my dear child — and what would become of your studies?”

“My studies need not suffer. There is nothing to prevent me from pursuing them, even during my travels. And another thing, doctor, I must confess to you, that I have already secured the means of doing so without costing me anything.”

“How is that possible,” asked Dr. Schwaryencrona, Mr. Bredejord, and Professor Hochstedt, simultaneously.

“I have simply been preparing myself for a sea-faring life. I can pass the examination to-day if necessary. Once in possession of my diploma, it would be easy for me to obtain a position as a lieutenant in any sea-port.

“And you have done all this without saying a word to me?” said the doctor, half grieved, while the lawyer and the professor both laughed heartily.

“Well,” said Erik, “I do not think that I have committed any great crime. I have only made inquiries as to the requisite amount of knowledge, and I have mastered it. I should not have made any use of it without asking your permission, and I now solicit it.”

“And I shall grant it, wicked boy,” said the doctor, “But to let you set out all alone now is another matter — we will wait until you have attained your majority.”

Erik submitted to this decision willingly and gratefully.

However, the doctor was not willing to give up his own ideas. To search the sea-ports personally he regarded as a last expedient. An advertisement on the other hand would go everywhere. If Patrick O’Donoghan was not hiding away, they might possibly find him by this means. If he was hiding, some one might see it and betray him. He therefore had this advertisement written in seven or eight different languages, and dispatched to the four quarters of the globe in a hundred of the most widely circulated newspapers.

“Patrick O’Donoghan, a sailor, has been absent from New York for four years. A reward of one hundred pounds sterling will be paid to any one who can give me news of him. Five hundred pounds sterling will be given to the said Patrick O’Donoghan if he will communicate with the advertiser. He need fear nothing, as no advantage will be taken of him.

“DOCTOR SCHWARYENCRONA.

“Stockholm.”

By the 20th of October, the doctor and his companions had returned to their homes.

The next day the advertisement was sent to the advertising agency in Stockholm, and three days afterward it had made its appearance in several newspapers. Erik could not repress a sigh and a presentiment that it would be unsuccessful as he read it.

As for Mr. Bredejord, he declared openly that it was the greatest folly in the world, and that for the future he considered the affair a failure.

But Erik and Mr. Bredejord were deceived, as events afterward proved.

CHAPTER X.

TUDOR BROWN, ESQUIRE.

One morning in May the doctor was in his office, when his servant brought him a visitor’s card. This card, which was small as is usual in America, had the name of “Mr. Tudor Brown, on board the ‘Albatross’” printed upon it.

“Mr. Tudor Brown,” said the doctor, trying to remember whom he had ever known who bore this name.

“This gentleman asked to see the doctor,” said the servant.

“Can he not come at my office-hour?” asked the doctor.

“He said his business was about a personal matter.”

“Show him in, then,” said the doctor, with a sigh.

He lifted his head as the door opened again, and was surprised when he beheld the singular person who answered to the feudal name of Tudor, and the plebeian name of Brown.

He was a man about fifty years of age, his forehead was covered with a profusion of little ringlets, of a carroty color, while the most superficial examination betrayed that they were made of curled silk; his nose was hooked, and surmounted with an enormous pair of gold spectacles; his teeth were as long as those of a horse, his cheeks were smooth, but under his chin he wore a little red beard. This odd head, covered by a high hat which he did not pretend to remove, surmounted a thin angular body, clothed from head to foot in a woolen suit. In his cravat he wore a pin, containing a diamond as large as a walnut; also a large gold chain, and his vest buttons were amethysts. He had a dozen rings on his fingers, which were as knotty as those of a chimpanzee. Altogether he was the most pretentious and grotesque-looking man that it was possible to behold. This person entered the doctor’s office as if he had been entering a railway station, without even bowing. He stopped to say, in a voice that resembled that of Punch, its tone was so nasal and guttural:

“Are you Doctor Schwaryencrona?”

“I am,” answered the doctor, very much astonished at his manners.

He was debating in his mind whether he should ring for his servant to conduct this offensive person to the door, when a word put a stop to his intention.

“I saw your advertisement about Patrick O’Donoghan,” said the stranger, “and I thought you would like to know that I can tell you something about him.”

“Take a seat, sir,” answered the doctor.

But he perceived that the stranger had not waited to be asked.

After selecting the most comfortable arm-chair, he drew it toward the doctor, then he seated himself with his hands in his pockets, lifted his feet and placed his heels on the window-sill, and looked at the doctor with the most self-satisfied air in the world.

“I thought,” he said, “that you would listen to these details with pleasure, since you offer five hundred pounds for them. That is why I have called upon you.”

The doctor bowed without saying a word.

“Doubtless,” continued the other, in his nasal voice, “you are wondering who I am. I am going to tell you. My card has informed you as to my name, and I am a British subject.”

“Irish perhaps?” asked the doctor with interest.

The Granger, evidently surprised, hesitated a moment, and then said:

“No, Scotch. Oh, I know I do not look like a Scotchman, they take me very often for a Yankee — but that is nothing — I am Scotch.”

As he gave this piece of information, he looked at Dr. Schwaryencrona as much as to say:

“You can believe what you please, it is a matter of indifference to me.”

“From Inverness, perhaps?” suggested the doctor, still clinging to his favorite theory.

The stranger again hesitated for a moment.

“No, from Edinburgh,” he answered. “But that is of no importance after all, and has nothing to do with the matter in hand. I have an independent fortune and owe nothing to anybody. If I tell you who I am, it is because it gives me pleasure to do so, for I am not obliged to do it.”

“Permit me to observe that I did not ask you,” said the doctor, smiling.

“No, but do not interrupt me, or we shall never reach the end of this matter. You published an advertisement to find out what became of Patrick

O’Donoghan, did you not? — you therefore have some interest in knowing. I know what has become of him.”

“You know?” asked the doctor, drawing his seat closer to that of the stranger.

“I know, but before I tell you, I want to ask you what interest you have in finding him?”

“That is only just,” answered the doctor.

In as few words as possible, he related Erik’s history, to which his visitor listened with profound attention.

“And this boy is still living?” asked Tudor Brown.

“Assuredly he is living. He is in good health, and in October next he will begin his studies in the Medical University at Upsal.”

“Ah! ah!” answered the stranger, who seemed lost in reflection. “Tell me,” he said at length, “have you no other means of solving this mystery of his birth except by finding Patrick O’Donoghan?”

“I know of no other,” replied the doctor. “After years of searching I only found out that this O’Donoghan was in possession of the secret, that he alone could reveal it to me, and that is why I have advertised for him in the papers. I must confess that I had no great hopes of finding him by this means.”

“How is that?”

“Because I had reasons for believing that this O’Donoghan has grave motives for remaining unknown, consequently it was not likely that he would respond to my advertisement. I had the intention of resorting to other means. I have a description of him. I know what ports he would be likely to frequent, and I propose to employ special agents to be on the lookout for him.”

Dr. Schwaryencrona did not say this lightly. He spoke with the intention of seeing what effect these words would produce on the man before him. And as he watched him intently, he saw that in spite of the affected coolness of the stranger his eyelids fell and the muscles of his month contracted. But almost immediately Tudor Brown recovered his self-possession, and said:

“Well, doctor, if you have no other means of solving this mystery, except by discovering Patrick O’Donoghan, I am afraid that you will never find it out. Patrick O’Donoghan is dead.”

The doctor was too much taken aback by this disappointing announcement to say a word, and only looked at his visitor, who continued:

“Dead and buried, three hundred fathoms beneath the sea. This man, whose past life always appeared to me to have been mysterious, was employed three years on board my yacht, the ‘Albatross.’ I must tell you that my yacht is a stanch vessel, in which I often cruise for seven or eight months at a time. Nearly three years ago we were passing through the Straits of Madeira, when Patrick O’Donoghan fell overboard. I had the vessel stopped, and some boats lowered, and after a diligent search we recovered him; but though we spared no pains to restore him to life, our efforts were in vain. Patrick O’Donoghan was dead. We were compelled to return to the sea the prey which we had snatched from it. The accident was put down on the ship’s log, and recorded in the notary’s office at the nearest place we reached. Thinking that this act might be useful to you, I have brought you a certified copy of it.”

As he said this, Mr. Tudor Brown took out his pocket-book and presented the doctor with a paper stamped with a notarial seal.

The latter read it quickly. It was a record of the death of Patrick O’Donoghan, while passing through the Straits of Madeira, duly signed and sworn to, before two witnesses, as being an exact copy of the original — it was also registered in London, at Somerset House, by the commissioners of her Britannic Majesty.

This instrument was evidently authentic. But the manner in which he had received it was so strange that the doctor could not conceal his astonishment. He took it, however, with his habitual courtesy.

“Permit me to ask one question, sir,” he said to his visitor.

“Speak, doctor.”

“How is it that you have this document in your pocket duly prepared and certified? And why have you brought it to me?”

“If I can count, you have asked two questions,” said Tudor Brown. “I will answer them, however — I had this paper in my pocket, because I read your advertisement two months ago, and wishing to furnish you with the information which you asked for, I thought it better to give it to you, in the most complete and definite form that lay in my power. I have brought it to you personally, because I happened to be cruising in these waters; and I wished at the same time to gratify your curiosity and my own.”

There was nothing to answer to this reasoning — this was the only conclusion the doctor could draw.

“Yon are here, then, with the ‘Albatross’?” he asked, eagerly.

“Without doubt.”

“And you have still on board some sailors who have known Patrick O’Donoghan?”

“Yes, several.”

“Would you permit me to see them?”

“As many as you please. Will you accompany me on board now?”

“If you have no objection.”

“I have none,” said the stranger, as he arose.

Dr. Schwaryencrona touched his bell, and they brought him his fur pelisse, his hat, and his cane, and he departed with Mr. Tudor Brown.

Fifteen minutes later they were on board the “Albatross.”

They were received by an old gray-headed seaman, with a rubicund face, whose open countenance betrayed only truth and loyalty.

“Mr. Ward, this gentleman wishes to make some inquiries about the fate of Patrick O’Donoghan,” said Mr. Tudor Brown.

“Patrick O’Donoghan,” answered the old sailor, “God rest his soul. He gave us trouble enough to pick him up the day he was drowned in the Straits of

Madeira. What is the use of inquiries now that he has gone to feed the fishes?”

“Had you known him for a long time?” asked the doctor.

“The rascal — no — for a year or two perhaps. I believe that it was at Zanzibar that we took him on board — am I right, Tommy Duff?”

“Is any one hailing me?” asked a young sailor, who was busily employed in polishing a copper bowl.

“Come here,” said the other — ”Was it at Zanzibar that we recruited Patrick O’Donoghan?”

“Patrick O’Donoghan,” repeated the young sailor, as if his remembrance of the man was not very good. “Oh yes, I remember him. The man who fell overboard in the Straits of Maderia. Yes, Mr. Ward, it was at Zanzibar that he came on board.”

Dr. Schwaryencrona made him describe Patrick O’Donoghan, and was convinced that it was the same man whom he was seeking. Both these men seemed honest and sincere. They had honest and open countenances. The uniformity of their answers seemed a little strange, and almost preconcerted; but after all it might be only the natural consequence of relating facts. Having known Patrick O’Donoghan only a year at the most, they would have but little to say about him, except the fact of his death.

Besides the “Albatross” was a yacht of such large proportions, that if she had been furnished with some cannon she might easily have passed for a man-of-war. The most rigorous cleanliness was observed on board. The sailors were in good condition, well clothed, and under perfect discipline.

The general appearance of the vessel insensiby acted upon the doctor, and carried conviction of the truth of the statement which he had just heard. He therefore declared himself perfectly satisfied, and could not leave without inviting Mr. Tudor Brown to dine with him. But Mr. Tudor Brown did not think it best to accept this invitation. He declined it in these courteous terms:

“No — I can not — I never dine in town.”

It now only remained for Dr. Schwaryencrona to retire. This he did without having obtained even the slightest bow from this strange individual.

The doctor’s first thought was to go and relate his adventure to Mr. Bredejord, who listened to him without saying a word, only promising himself to institute counter inquiries.

But he, with Erik, who had been told the whole story upon his return from school, repaired to the vessel to see if they could elicit any further information, but the “Albatross” had left Stockholm, without leaving word where she was going, and they could not, therefore, obtain even the address of Mr. Tudor Brown.

All that resulted from this affair was the possession of the document, which legally proved the death of Patrick O’Donoghan.

Was this paper of any value? This was the question that Mr. Bredejord could not help doubting, in spite of the evidence of the British consul at Stockholm, whom he questioned, and who declared that the signatures and stamp were perfectly authentic. He also caused inquiries to be made at Edinburgh, but nobody knew Mr. Tudor Brown, which he thought looked suspicious.

But it was an undeniable fact that they obtained no further intelligence of Patrick O’Donoghan, and all their advertisements were ineffectual.

If Patrick O’Donoghan had disappeared for good, they had no hope of penetrating the mystery that surrounded Erik’s birth. He himself saw this, and was obliged to recognize the fact that, for the future, the inquiries would have to be based upon some other theory. He therefore made no opposition about commencing his medical studies the following autumn at the university at Upsal, according to the doctor’s wishes. He only desired, first, to pass his examination as a captain, but this sufficed to show that he had not renounced his project of traveling.

Besides, he had another trouble which lay heavy at his heart, and for which he saw no other remedy but absence.

Erik wished to find some pretext for leaving the doctor’s house as soon as his studies were completed; but he wished to do this without exciting any suspicion. The only pretext which he could think of was this plan of traveling. He desired to do this because of the aversion of Kajsa, the doctor’s niece. She lost no occasion of showing her dislike; but he would not at any price have had the excellent man suspect this state of affairs between them. His relations toward the young girl had always been most singular. In the eyes of Erik during these seven years as well as on the first day of his arrival at Stockholm, the pretty little fairy had always been a model of elegance and all earthly perfections. He had bestowed on her his unreserved admiration, and had made heroic efforts to overcome her dislike, and become her friend.

But Kajsa could not make up her mind calmly to see this “intruder,” as she called Erik, take his place in the doctor’s home, be treated as an adopted son, and become a favorite of her uncle and his friends. The scholastic success of Erik, his goodness and his gentleness, far from making him pleasing in her eyes, were only new motives of jealousy.

In her heart Kajsa could not pardon the young man for being only a fisherman and a peasant. It seemed to her that he brought discredit upon the doctor’s household and on herself, who, she liked to believe, occupied a very high position in the social scale.

But it was worse when she learned that Erik was even less than a peasant, only a child that had been picked up. That appeared to her monstrous and dishonorable. She thought that such a child had a lower place in society than a cat or a dog; she manifested these sentiments by the most disdainful looks, the most mortifying silence, and the most cruel insults. If Erik was invited with her to any little social gathering at the house of a friend, she would positively refuse to dance with him. At the table she would not answer anything he said, nor pay any attention to him. She tried on all occasions, and in every possible way, to humiliate him.

Poor Erik had divined the cause of this uncharitable conduct, but he could not understand how ignorance of his family, and of the land of his birth, could be regarded by her as such a heinous crime. He tried one day to reason with Kajsa, and to make her understand the injustice and cruelty of such a prejudice, but she would not even deign to listen to him. Then as they both grew older, the abyss which separated them seemed to widen. At eighteen Kajsa made her *début* in society. She was flattered and noticed as the rich heiress, and this homage only confirmed her in the opinion that she was superior to common mortals.

Erik, who was at first greatly afflicted by her disdain, ended by becoming indignant, and vowing to triumph over it. This feeling of humiliation had a great share in producing the passionate ardor with which he pursued his studies. He dreamed of raising himself so high in public esteem, by the force of his own industry, that every one would bow before him. But he also vowed that he would go away on the first opportunity, and that he would not remain under a roof where every day he was exposed to some secret humiliation.

Only the good doctor must be kept in ignorance of the cause of his departure. He must attribute it solely to a passion for traveling. And Erik therefore frequently spoke of his desire, when his studies were completed, of engaging in some scientific expedition. While pursuing his studies at Upsal, he prepared himself by work, and the most severe exercise, for the life of fatigue and danger which is the lot of great travelers.

CHAPTER XI.

THE “VEGA.”

In the month of December, 1878, Erik had attained the age of twenty, and passed his first examination for his doctor’s degree. The learned men of Sweden were greatly excited about the proposed arctic expedition of the navigator Nordenskiold, and their enthusiasm was shared by a large proportion of the population. After preparing himself for the undertaking by several voyages to the polar regions, and after studying the problem in all its aspects, Nordenskiold intended to attempt once more to discover the north-east passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which for three centuries had defied the efforts of all the maritime nations.

The programme for the expedition had been defined by the Swedish navigator, and he announced the reasons which led him to believe that the north-east passage was practicable in summer, and the means by which he hoped to realize this geographical desideratum. The intelligent liberality of two Scandinavian gentlemen, and the assistance of the Swedish government, enabled him to organize his expedition upon a plan which he believed would insure its success.

It was on the 21st of July, 1878, that Nordenskiold quitted From-sae, on board of the “Vega,” to attempt to reach Behring’s Strait by passing to the north of Russia and Siberia. Lieutenant Palanders, of the Swedish navy, was in command of the vessel, with the instigator of the voyage, and they had also a staff of botanists, geologists, and astronomical doctors.

The “Vega,” which had been especially prepared for the expedition under the surveillance of Nordenskiold, was a vessel of five hundred tons, which had been recently built at Bremen, and carried an engine of sixty-horse power. Three ships were to accompany her to successive points on the Siberian coast, which had been previously determined upon. They were all provisioned for a cruise of two years, in case it might be necessary for them to winter in those arctic regions. But Nordenskiold did not conceal his hope of being able to reach Behring's Strait before autumn, on account of his careful arrangements, and all Sweden shared this hope.

They started from the most northerly point of Norway, and the "Vega" reached Nova Zembla on the 29th of July, on the 1st of August the Sea of Kara, and on the 6th of August the mouth of the Gulf Yenisei. On the 9th of August she doubled Cape Schelynshin, or Cape North-East, the extreme point of the continent, which no vessel had hitherto been able to reach. On the 7th of September she cast anchor at the mouth of the Lena, and separated from the third of the vessels which had accompanied her thus far. On the 16th of October a telegraphic dispatch from Irkutsk announced to the world that the expedition had been successful up to this point.

We can imagine the impatience with which the friends of the Swedish navigator waited for the details of the expedition. These details did not reach them until the 1st of December. For if electricity flies over space with the rapidity of thought, it is not the same with the Siberian post. The letters from the "Vega," although deposited in the post-office at Irkutsk, at the same time that the telegraphic message was dispatched, did not reach Sweden until six weeks afterward. But they arrived at last; and on the 5th of December one of the principal newspapers of Sweden published an account of the first part of the expedition, which had been written by a young medical doctor attached to the "Vega."

That same day, at breakfast, Mr. Bredejord was occupied in reading with great interest the details of the voyage, given in four columns, when his eyes fell upon a paragraph which almost upset him. He re-read it attentively, and then read it again; then he arose, and seizing his hat and coat, he rushed to the house of Dr. Schwaryencrona.

“Have you read the correspondence of the ‘Vega’?” he cried, as he rushed like a hurricane into the dining-room where the doctor and Kajsa were taking their breakfast.

“I have just commenced it,” replied the doctor, “and was intending to finish reading it after breakfast, while I smoked my pipe.”

“Then you have not seen!” exclaimed Mr. Bredejord, out of breath. “You do not know what this correspondence contains?”

“No,” replied Doctor Schwaryencrona, with perfect calmness.

“Well, listen to this,” continued Mr. Bredejord, approaching the window. “It is the journal of one of your brethren, the aid of the naturalist of the ‘Vega.’”

“‘30th and 31st of July, we entered the strait of Jugor, and cast anchor before a Samoyede village called Chabarova. We landed, and I questioned some of the natives to discover, by Holmgren’s method, the extent of their perception of colors. I found that this sense was normally developed among them. Bought of a Samoyede fisherman two magnificent salmon.’”

“Pardon me,” interrupted the doctor; “but is this a charade you are reading to me. I confess I do not see how these details can interest me.”

“Ah! they do not interest you?” said Mr. Bredejord, in a triumphant tone. “Well, wait a moment and you will see:

“‘Bought of a Samoyede fisherman two magnificent salmon, which I have preserved in alcohol, notwithstanding the protestations of our cook. This fisherman fell into the water as he was quitting the ship. They pulled him out half suffocated and stiffened by the cold, so that he resembled a bar of iron, and he, also, had a serious cut on his head. We were just under way, and they carried him to the infirmary of the “Vega,” while still unconscious, undressed him, and put him to bed. They then discovered that this fisherman was an European. He had red hair; his nose had been broken by some accident, and on his chest, on a level with his heart, these words were tattooed: “Patrick O’Donoghan — Cynthia.”‘“

Here Dr. Schwaryencrona uttered a cry of surprise.

“Wait! listen to the rest of it,” said Mr. Bredejord; and he continued his reading:

“‘Being subjected to an energetic massage treatment, he was soon restored to life. But as it was impossible for him to leave us in that condition, we were compelled to take care of him. A fever set in and he became delirious. Our experiment of the appreciation of colors among the Samoyedes, therefore, was frustrated. — 3d of August. The fisherman of Chabarova has recovered from the effects of his bath. He appeared to be surprised to find himself on board the “Vega,” and *en route* for Cape Tahelyuskin, but soon became reconciled to his fate. His knowledge of the Ganwyede language may be useful to, us, and we have determined to take him with us on the coast of Siberia. He speaks English with a nasal accent like a Yankee, but pretends to be Scotch, and calls himself Tommy Bowles. He came from Nova Zembla with some fishermen, and he has lived on these shores for the last twelve years. The name tattooed upon his chest he says, ‘is that of one of the friends of his infancy who has been dead for a long time.’”

“It is evidently our man,” cried the doctor, with great emotion.

“Yes, there can be no doubt of it,” answered the lawyer. “The name, the vessel, the description, all prove it; even this choice of a pseudonym Johnny Bowles, and his declaring that Patrick O’Donoghan was dead, these are superabundant proofs!”

They were both silent, reflecting upon the possible consequences of this discovery.”

“How can we go so far in search of him?” said the doctor, at length.

“It will be very difficult, evidently,” replied Mr. Bredejord. “But it is something to know that he is alive, and the part of the world where he can be found. And, besides, who can tell what the future may have in store? He may even return to Stockholm in the ‘Vega,’ and explain all that we wish to find out. If he does not do this, perhaps we may, sooner or later, find an opportunity to communicate with him. Voyages to Nova Zembla will become more frequent, on account of this expedition of the ‘Vega.’ Ship-owners are already talking about sending every year some vessels to the mouth of the Yenisei.”

The discussion of this topic was inexhaustible, and the two friends were still talking about the matter, when Erik arrived from Upsal, at two o’clock. He also had read this great piece of news, and had taken the train for home without losing a moment. But it was a singular fact that he was not joyful, but rather disturbed by this new intelligence.

“Do you know what I am afraid of?” said he to the doctor and Mr. Bredejord. “I fear that some misfortune has happened to the ‘Vega.’ You know it is now the 5th of December, and you know the leaders of the expedition counted upon arriving at Behring’s Strait before October. If this expectation had been realized, we should have heard from her by this time; for she would have reached Japan, or at least Petropaulosk, in the Aleutian Islands, or some station in the Pacific, from which we should have received news of her. The dispatches and letters here came by the way of Irkutsk, and are dated the 7th of September, so that for three entire months we have heard nothing from the ‘Vega.’ So we must conclude that they did not reach Behring’s Strait as soon as they expected, and that she has succumbed to the common fate of all expeditious which for the last three centuries have attempted to discover the north-east passage. This is the deplorable conclusion which I have been compelled to arrive at.”

“The ‘Vega’ might have been obliged to encounter in the Polar regions a great deal which was unforeseen, and she might have been unprovided for such a contingency,” replied Dr. Schwaryencrona.

“Evidently; but this is the most favorable hypothesis; and a winter in that region is surrounded by so many dangers that it is equivalent to a shipwreck. In any case, it is an indisputable fact that if we ever have any news of the ‘Vega’ it will not be possible to do so before next summer.”

“Why, how is that?”

“Because, if the ‘Vega’ has not perished she is inclosed in the ice, and she will not be able, at the best, to extricate herself before June or July.”

“That is true,” answered Mr. Bredejord.

“What conclusion do you draw from this reasoning?” asked the doctor, disturbed by the sad tone of Erik’s voice as he made the announcement.

“The conclusion that it is impossible to wait so long before solving a question which is of such great importance to me.”

“What do you want to do? We must submit to what is inevitable.”

“Perhaps it only appears to be so,” answered Erik. “The letters which have reached us have come across the Arctic Ocean by the way of Irkutsk. Why could I not follow the same route? I would keep close to the coast of Siberia. I would endeavor to communicate with the people of that country, and find out whether any foreign vessel had been shipwrecked, or was held prisoner among the icebergs. Perhaps I might succeed in finding Nordenskiold, and Patrick O’Donoghan. It is an enterprise worth undertaking.”

“In the middle of winter?”

“Why not? It is the most favorable season for traveling in sleighs in that latitude.”

“Yes; but you forget that you are not there yet, and that it will be spring before you could get there.”

“That is true,” said Erik, who was compelled to recognize the force of this argument. He sat with his eyes fixed on the floor, absorbed in thought.

“No, matter,” said he suddenly; “Nordenskiold must be found, and with him Patrick O’Donoghan. They shall be, or it will not be my fault.”

Erik’s plan was a very simple one. He proposed to write an anonymous letter to the leading newspapers of Stockholm, and thus proclaim his fears as to the fate of the “Vega.” Had she been shipwrecked, or was she held a prisoner by icebergs, and he concluded his communication by representing how important it was that some vessel should be sent to her assistance in the latter case.

The truth of his reasoning was so apparent, and the interest in the expedition so general, that the young student of Upsal was certain that the question would be warmly discussed in scientific circles.

But the effect of his letter was beyond his highest expectations. All the newspapers without exception expressed their approval of his proposition while commenting upon his communication.

Public opinion was unanimously in favor of fitting out a relief expedition. Commercial men, manufacturers, the members of schools and colleges, the judicial corps — in fact, all classes voluntarily contributed to the enterprise. A rich ship-owner offered to equip a vessel at his own expense, to go to the relief of the “Vega;” and he named it the “Nordenskiold.”

The enthusiasm increased as days passed without bringing any intelligence of the “Vega.” By the end of December, the subscription had reached a considerable sum. Dr. Sehwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord had headed the list with a subscription of ten thousand kroners each. They were members of the committee who had chosen Erik for their secretary.

The latter was in fact the soul of the undertaking. His ardor, his modesty, his evident ability with regard to all questions relative to the expedition, which he studied untiringly, soon acquired for him a most decided influence. From the first he did not conceal the fact that it was his dream to take part in the enterprise, if only as a simple sailor, and that he had a supreme and personal interest in the matter. This only gave the greater weight to the excellent suggestions which he made to the originators of the expedition, and he personally directed all the preparatory labors.

It was agreed that a second vessel should accompany the “Nordenskiold,” and that it should be like the “Vega,” a steamship. Nordenskiold himself had demonstrated that the principal cause of the failure of previous attempts had been the employment of sailing vessels. Arctic navigators, especially when on an exploring expedition, must not be dependent upon the wind, but must be able to force their way speedily through a difficult or perilous pass — and above all, always be able to take the open sea, which it was often impossible to do with a sailing vessel.

This fundamental point having been established, it was decided also to cover the vessel with a lining of green oak, six inches thick, and to divide it into compartments, so that it would be better able to resist a blow from the ice. They were also desirous that she should not draw too much water, and that all her arrangements should be so made as to enable her to carry a full supply of coal. Among the offers which were made to the committee, was a vessel of one hundred and forty tons, which had been recently built at Bremen, and which had a crew of eighteen men, who could easily maneuver her. She was a schooner, but while she carried her masts, she also was furnished with an engine of eighty horse-power. One of her boilers was so arranged that it could burn oil or fat, which was easily procurable in the arctic regions, in case their coal should fail. The schooner protected by its lining of oak, was further strengthened by transverse beams, so as to offer the greatest possible resistance to the pressure of the ice. Lastly, the front of it was armed with a spur of steel, to enable it to break its way through a thick field of ice. The vessel when placed on the stocks, was named the

“Alaska,” on account of the direction which she was destined to take. It had been decided that while the “Nordenskiold” should pursue the same route which the “Vega” had followed, that the second vessel should take an opposite direction around the world, and gain the Siberian Ocean, by the island of Alaska and Behring’s Straits. The chances of meeting the Swedish expedition, or of discovering traces of her if she had perished would thus, they thought, be double, for while one vessel followed on her track, the other would, as it were, precede her.

Erik, who had been the originator of this plan, had often asked himself which of the vessels he had better join, and he had finally concluded to attach himself to the second.

The “Nordenskiold,” he said to himself, would follow the same course as the “Vega.” It was therefore necessary that she should be equally successful in making the first part of the voyage, and double Cape Tchelynskin, but they might not be able to do this, since it had only been accomplished once. Besides, the last news which they had received from the “Vega,” she was only two or three hundred leagues from Behring’s Straits; therefore they would have a better chance of meeting her. The “Nordenskiold” might follow her for many months without overtaking her. But the other vessel could hardly fail to meet her, if she was still in existence.

The principal thing in Erik’s eyes was to reach the “Vega” as quickly as possible, in order to meet Patrick O’Donoghan without delay.

The doctor and Mr. Bredejord warmly approved of his motives when he explained them to them.

The work of preparing the “Alaska” was pushed on as rapidly as possible. Her provisions, equipments, and the clothing, were all carefully chosen, for they profited by the experience of former Arctic explorers. Her crew were all experienced seamen, who had been inured to cold by frequent fishing voyages to Iceland and Greenland. Lastly, the captain chosen by the committee, was an officer of the Swedish marines, then in the employment of a maritime company, and well known on account of his voyages to the Arctic Ocean; his name was Lieutenant Marsilas. He chose for his first lieutenant Erik himself, who seemed designed for the position by the energy he had displayed in the service of the expedition, and who was also qualified by his diploma. The second and third officers were tried seamen, Mr. Bosewitz and Mr. Kjellguist.

The “Alaska” carried some explosive material in order to break the ice, if it should be necessary, and abundant provisions of an anti-scorbutic character, in order to preserve the officers and crew from the common Arctic maladies. The vessel was furnished with a heater, in order to preserve an even temperature, and also with a portable observatory called a “raven’s nest,” which they could hoist to the top of the highest mast, in those regions where they meet with floating ice, to signal the approach of icebergs.

By Erik’s proposal this observatory contained a powerful electric light, which at night could illuminate the route of the “Alaska.” Seven small boats, of which two were whale-boats, a steam-cutter, six sledges, snow-shoes for each of the crew, four Gatling cannons and thirty guns, with the necessary ammunition, were stored away on board. These preparations were approaching an end, when Mr. Hersebom and his son Otto arrived from Noroe with their large dog Kaas, and solicited the favor of being employed as seamen on board of the “Alaska.” They knew from a letter of Erik’s the strong personal interest which he had in this voyage, and they wished to share its dangers with him.

Mr. Hersebom spoke of the value of his experience as a fisherman on the coast of Greenland, and of the usefulness of his dog Kaas, who could be used as a leader of the dogs which would be necessary to draw the sledges. Otto had only his good health, his herculean strength, and his devotion to the cause to recommend him. Thanks to the influence of the doctor and Mr. Bredejord, they were all three engaged by the committee.

By the beginning of February, 1879, all was ready. The “Alaska” had therefore five months before the first of June to reach Behring’s Straits, which was accounted the most favorable season for the exploration. They intended also to take the most direct route, that is to say, through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Indian Ocean, and the China Seas, stopping successively to take in coal at Gibraltar, Aden, Colombo in Ceylon, Singapore, Hong Kong, Yokohama, and Petropaulosk.

From all these stations the “Alaska” was to telegraph to Stockholm, and it was also agreed that, if in the meantime any news was received of the “Vega,” they should not fail to send information.

The voyage of the “Alaska,” although intended primarily for an arctic exploration, would begin by a voyage through tropical seas, and along the continents most favored by the sun. The programme had not, however, been arranged to give them pleasure; it was the result of an imperative necessity, since they must reach Behring’s Straits by the shortest route and remain in telegraphic communication with Stockholm up to the last moment. But a serious difficulty threatened to retard the expedition. They had spent so much in equipping the vessel that the funds which were indispensable for the success of the enterprise, began to run short. They would require considerable to purchase coal, and for other incidental expenses.

A new appeal for money became necessary. As soon as it was issued the committee received two letters simultaneously.

One was from Mr. Malarius, the public teacher of Noroe, and laureate of the Botanical Society. It contained a check for one hundred kroners, and begged that he might be attached to the expedition as the assistant naturalist of the “Alaska.”

The other contained a check for twenty-five thousand kroners, with this laconic note:

“For the voyage of the ‘Alaska,’ from Mr. Tudor Brown, on condition that he is received as a passenger.”

CHAPTER XII.

UNEXPECTED PASSENGERS.

The request of Mr. Malarius could only be received with gratitude by the committee. It was therefore passed enthusiastically, and the worthy teacher, whose reputation as a botanist was greater than he himself suspected, was appointed assistant naturalist of the expedition.

As for the condition upon which Tudor Brown bestowed his donation of twenty-five thousand kroners, both Dr. Schwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord were strongly inclined to refuse to grant it. But if called upon to give some motive for their repugnance, they had to confess that they would not know what to say. What sufficient reason could they give the committee if they asked them to refuse such a large subscription? They really had no valid one. Tudor Brown had called upon Dr. Schwaryencrona, and brought him a certified account of the death of Patrick O’Donoghan; and now Patrick O’Donoghan appeared to be living. But they could not prove that Tudor Brown had willfully deceived them in this matter, and the committee would require some sufficient cause before rejecting so large a sum. Tudor Brown could easily declare that he had been truthful. His present attitude seemed to prove it. Perhaps he intended to go himself, only to find out how Patrick O’Donoghan, whom he believed to have been drowned in the Straits of Madeira, could now be living on the shores of Siberia. But even supposing that Tudor Brown had other projects, it would be to their interest to find them out, and keep him in their hands. For, one of two facts was certain: either Tudor Brown had no interest in the search which had occupied Erik’s friends for so long a time, and in that case it would be useless to treat him as an enemy; or he had some slight personal interest in the matter, and then it would be better to watch his plans, and overthrow them.

The doctor and Mr. Bredejord therefore concluded that they would not oppose his becoming a passenger. Then they gradually were filled with a desire to study this singular man, and find out why he wished to take passage on the “Alaska.” But how could they do this without sailing with him. It would not be such an absurd thing to do after all. The course which the “Alaska” was to take was a very attractive one, at least the first part of it. To be brief, Dr. Schwaryencrona, who was a great traveler, asked to be taken as a passenger, to accompany the expedition as far as the China seas, by paying such a price as the committee might judge proper.

This example immediately acted with irresistible force upon Mr. Bredejord, who had dreamed for a long time about an excursion to the land of the Sun. He also solicited a cabin under the same conditions.

Every one in Stockholm now believed that Mr. Hochstedt would do the same, partly out of scientific curiosity, and partly from terror at the thought of passing so many months without the society of his friends. But all Stockholm was deceived. The professor was strongly tempted to go, and he reviewed all the arguments for and against it, and found it almost impossible to arrive at any decision, but fate ordained that he should stay at home.

The time of their departure was irrevocably fixed for the 10th of February. On the 9th Erik went to meet Mr. Malarius, and was agreeably surprised to see Dame Hersebom, and Vanda, who had come to bid him farewell. They were modestly intending to go to a hotel in the town, but the doctor insisted that they should come and stay with him, to the great displeasure of Kajsa, who did not think that they were sufficiently distinguished.

Vanda was now a tall girl, whose beauty fulfilled its early promise. She had passed successfully a very difficult examination at Bergen which entitled her to take a professor's chair, in a superior school. But she preferred to remain at Noroe with her mother, and she was going to fill Mr. Malarius' place during his absence: always serious and gentle, she found in teaching a strange and inexplicable charm, but it had not changed the simplicity of her home life. This beautiful girl, in her quaint Norwegian costume, was able to give tranquilly her opinion on the deepest scientific subjects, or seat herself at the piano, and play with consummate skill a sonata of Beethoven. But her greatest charm was the absence of all pretension, and her perfectly natural manners. She no more thought of being vain of her talents, or of making any display of them, than she did of blushing on account of her rural costume. She bloomed like some wild flower, that, growing beside the fiord, had been transplanted by her old master, and cultivated and cherished in his little garden behind the school.

In the evening all Erik's adopted family were assembled in the parlor of Dr. Schwaryencrona; Mr. Bredejord and the doctor were about to play a last game of whist with Mr. Hochstedt. They discovered that Mr. Malarius was also an authority in this noble game, which would enable them to while away many leisure hours on board the "Alaska." Unfortunately the worthy instructor also told them, at the same time, that he was always a victim of sea-sickness, and nearly always confined to his bed as soon as he set foot upon a vessel. Only his affection for Erik had induced him to join the expedition, added to the ambition, long fondly cherished, of being able to add some more varieties to his catalogue of botanical families.

After which they had a little music: Kajsa, with a disdainful air, played a fashionable waltz; Vanda sung an old Scandinavian melody with a sweetness that surprised them all. The tea was served, and a large bowl of punch, which they drunk to the success of the expedition, followed. Erik noticed that Kajsa avoided touching his glass.

“Will you not wish me a happy voyage?” he said to her, in a low tone.

“What is the use of wishing for what we do not expect to see granted?” she answered.

The next morning, at day-break, every one went on board, except Tudor Brown.

Since the receipt of his letter containing the check they had not heard a word from him.

The time of departure had been fixed for ten o’clock. At the first stroke, the commander, Mr. Marsilas, had the anchor hoisted, and rang the bell to warn all visitors to leave the ship.

“Adieu, Erik!” cried Vanda, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Adieu, my son!” said Katrina, pressing the young lieutenant to her heart.

“And you, Kajsa, have you nothing to say to me?” he asked, as he walked toward her as if to embrace her also.

“I hope that you will not get your nose frozen, and that you will discover that you are a prince in disguise!” said she, laughing impertinently.

“If that should happen, then at least I might hope to win a little of your affection?” he said, trying to smile, to hide his feelings, for her sarcasm had cut him to the heart.

“Do you doubt it?” answered Kajsa, as she turned toward her uncle, to show that her adieu to him was finished.

The time of departure had indeed come. The warning bell rang imperiously.

The crowd of visitors descended the stairs to the boats which were waiting for them.

In the midst of this confusion every one noticed the arrival of a tardy passenger, who mounted to the deck with his valise in his hand.

The tardy one was Tudor Brown. He presented himself to the captain, and claimed his cabin, to which he was immediately shown.

A moment later, after two or three prolonged whistles, the engine began to work, and a sea of foam whitening the waters behind her, the “Alaska” glided majestically over the green waters of the Baltic, and soon left Stockholm behind her, followed by the acclamations of the crowd who were waving their hats and handkerchiefs.

Erik, on the bridge, directed the maneuvers of the vessel, while Mr. Bredejord and the doctor waved a last farewell to Vanda from the deck.

Mr. Malarius, already frightfully seasick, had retired to his bed. They were all so occupied with saying farewell that not one of them had noticed the arrival of Tudor Brown.

Therefore the doctor could not repress a start of surprise when as he turned around, he saw him ascending from the depths of the vessel, and marching straight toward him, with his hands in his pockets, clothed as he had been at their first interview, and with his hat always seemingly glued to his head.

“Fine weather!” said Tudor Brown, by way of salutation and introduction.

The doctor was stupefied by his effrontery. He waited for some moments to see if this strange man would make any excuse, or give any explanation of his conduct.

Seeing that he did not intend to say anything, he opened the subject himself.

“Well, sir, it appears that Patrick O’Donoghan is not dead, as we supposed!” he said, with his customary vivacity.

“That is precisely what I want to find out, and it is on that account I have undertaken this voyage.”

After saying this, Tudor Brown turned away, and began to walk up and down the deck, whistling his favorite air, appearing to think that his explanation was perfectly satisfactory.

Erik and Mr. Bredejord listened to this conversation with a natural curiosity. They had never seen Tudor Brown before, and they studied him attentively, even more so than Dr. Schwaryencrona. It seemed to them that the man, although he affected indifference, cast a furtive glance at them from time to time, to see what impression he made upon them. Perceiving this, they also immediately feigned to take no notice of him, and did not address a word to him. But as soon as they descended to the saloon, upon which their cabins opened, they took counsel together.

“What could have been Tudor Brown’s motive in trying to make them believe that Patrick O’Donoghan was dead? And what was his purpose in taking this voyage upon the ‘Alaska’? It was impossible for them to say. But it was difficult not to believe that it had some connection with the shipwreck of the ‘Cynthia,’ and the infant tied to the buoy. The only interest which Patrick O’Donoghan had for Erik and his friends, was the fact of his supposed knowledge of the affair, and this was their only reason for seeking for him. Now they had before them a man who was uninvited, and who had come to them, and declared that Patrick O’Donoghan was dead. And this man had forced his society upon the members of the expedition, as soon as his assertion in the most unexpected manner had been proved to be false. They were therefore obliged to conclude that he had some personal interest in the matter, and the fact of his seeking out Doctor Schwaryencrona indicated the connection between his interests, and the inquiries instituted by the doctor.”

All these facts therefore seemed to indicate that Tudor Brown was in this problem a factor quite as important as Patrick O’Donoghan himself. Who could tell whether he was not already in possession of the secret which they were trying to elucidate? If this was the case, was it a happy thing for them that they had him on board, or should they rather be disturbed by his presence?

Mr. Bredejord inclined to the latter opinion, and did not consider his appearance among them as at all reassuring. The doctor, on the other side, argued that Tudor Brown might have acted in good faith, and also that he might be honest at heart, notwithstanding his unattractive exterior.

“If he knows anything,” said he, “we can hope that the familiarity which a long voyage necessarily produces may induce him to speak out; in that case it would be a stroke of good luck to have had him with us. At least we shall see what he can have to do with O’Donoghan, if we ever find the Irishman.”

As for Erik, he did not even dare to express the sentiments which the sight of this man awakened in him. It was more than repulsion, it was positive hatred, and an instinctive desire to rush upon him and throw him into the sea. He was convinced that this man had had some share in the misfortune of his life, but he would have blushed to abandon himself to such a conviction, or even to speak of it. He contented himself with saying that he would never have allowed Tudor Brown to come on board if he had had any voice in the matter.

How should they treat him?

On this point also they were divided. The doctor declared that it would be politic to treat Tudor Brown with at least outward courtesy, in the hope of inducing him to speak out. Mr. Bredejord, as well as Erik, felt a great repugnance to act out such a comedy, and it was by no means certain that Dr. Schwaryencrona himself would be able to conform to his own programme. They determined to leave the matter to be decided by circumstances, and the behavior of Tudor Brown himself.

They did not have to wait long. Precisely at midday the bell rang for dinner. Mr. Bredejord and the doctor, went to the table of the commander. There they found Tudor Brown already seated, with his hat on his head, and he did not manifest the least inclination to enter into any relations with his neighbors. The man proved to be so rude and coarse that he disarmed indignation. He seemed to be ignorant of the simplest rules of politeness. He helped himself first, chose the best portions, and ate and drank like an ogre. Two or three times the commander, and Dr. Schwaryencrona addressed a few words to him. He did not even deign to speak, but answered them by gestures.

That did not prevent him however, when he had finished his repast, and armed himself with an enormous tooth-pick, from throwing himself back in his seat, and saying to Mr. Marsilas:

“What day shall we reach Gibraltar?”

“About the nineteenth or twentieth I think,” answered the captain.

Tudor Brown drew a book from his pocket, and examined his calendar.

“That will bring us to Malta on the twenty-second, to Alexandria on the twenty-fifth, and to Aden at the end of the month,” said he, as if speaking to himself.

Then he got up, and going on deck again, began to pace up and down.

“A pleasant traveling companion truly,” Mr. Marsilas could not help saying.

Mr. Bredejord was about to answer, when a frightful noise at the head of the staircase prevented him. They heard cries, and barking, and a confusion of voices. Everybody arose and ran on deck.

The tumult had been caused by Kaas, Mr. Hersebom’s Greenland dog. It seemed that he did not approve of Mr. Tudor Brown, for after evincing his displeasure by low growls every time he passed and repassed him, he finished by seizing him by the legs. Tudor Brown had drawn his revolver from his pocket, and was about to use it when Otto appeared on the scene and prevented him from doing so, and then sent Kaas away to his kennel. A stormy discussion then took place. Tudor Brown, white with rage and terror, insisted that the dog’s brains should be blown out. Mr. Hersebom, who had come to the rescue, protested warmly against such a project.

The commander arriving at this moment, settled the matter by desiring Tudor Brown to put away his revolver, and decreeing that henceforth Kaas must be kept chained.

This ridiculous incident was the only one that varied the monotony of their first days of voyaging. Every one became accustomed to the silence and strange manners of Tudor Brown. At the captain’s table they at length took no more notice of him than if he had not been in existence. Everybody pursued their own avocations.

Mr. Malarius, after passing two days in bed, was able to crawl upon deck, he commenced to eat, and was soon able to take his place at the innumerable whist parties of the doctor and Mr. Bredejord.

Erik, very much occupied with his business as lieutenant, spent every spare moment in reading.

On the eleventh they passed the island of Oland, on the thirteenth they reached Shayer Rock, passed through the sound, signaled Heligoland on the fourteenth, and on the sixteenth they doubled Cape Hogue.

On the following night Erik was sleeping in his cabin when he was awakened by a sudden silence, and perceived that he no longer felt the vibrations of the engine. He was not however alarmed, for he knew that Mr. Kjellguist was in charge of the vessel; but out of curiosity he arose and went on deck to see what had happened.

He was told by the chief engineer that the engine had broken down, and that they would be compelled to extinguish the fires. They could proceed, however, under sail, with alight breeze from the south-west.

A careful inspection threw no light on the cause of the damage, and the engineer asked permission to repair to the nearest port to repair the injury.

Commander Marsilas, after a personal examination, was of the same opinion. They found that they were thirty miles from Brest, and the order was given to steer for the great French port.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SHIPWRECK.

The next day the “Alaska” entered the harbor of Brest. The damage which she had sustained was fortunately not important. An engineer who was applied to immediately promised that her injuries should be repaired in three days. It was therefore not a very serious delay, and they could make up for it in a measure by taking in coal. They would therefore not be obliged to stop at Gibraltar for this purpose, as they had at first intended. Their next stopping-place was to be at Malta, which they hoped to reach twenty-four hours earlier than they had at first expected, and thus would reduce the time of their delay in reality to two days. They therefore had nothing to worry themselves about, and everyone felt disposed to view the accident in the most philosophical manner.

It soon became evident that their mischance was going to be turned into a festival. In a few hours the arrival of the “Alaska” became known through the town, and as the newspapers made known the object of the expedition, the commander of the Swedish vessel soon found himself the recipient of the most flattering attentions. The admiral and Mayor of Brest, the commander of the port, and the captains of the vessels which were lying at anchor, all came to pay an official visit to Captain Marsilas. A dinner and a ball were tendered to the hardy explorers, who were to take part in the search for the “Nordenskiold.” Although the doctor and Mr. Malarius cared little for such gatherings, they were obliged to take their places at the table which was prepared for them. As for Mr. Bredejord, he was in his true element.

Among the friends invited by the admiral, was a grand-looking old man with a refined but sad countenance. He soon attracted Erik's attention, who felt a sympathy for him which he could hardly explain. It was Mr. Durrien, Honorary Consul-general, and an active member of the Geographical Society, who was well known on account of his travels and researches in Asia Minor and the Soudan.

Erik had read his works with very great interest, and he mentioned that he had done so, when he had been presented to the French *savant*, who experienced a feeling of satisfaction as he listened to the enthusiastic young man.

It is often the fate of travelers, when their adventures make a stir in the world, to receive the loud admiration of the crowd; but to find that their labors are appreciated, by those who are well informed and capable of judging, does not occur so frequently. Therefore the respectful curiosity of Erik went straight to the heart of the old geographer, and brought a smile to his pale lips.

“I have never attached any great merit to my discoveries,” he said, in reply to a few words from Erik, regarding the fortunate excavations which had recently been made. “I went ahead seeking, to forget my own cruel misfortunes, and not caring so much for the results as I did for prosecuting a work which was in entire accordance with my tastes. Chance has done the rest.”

Seeing Erik and Mr. Durrien so friendly, the admiral took care to seat them together at table, so that they could continue their conversation during dinner.

As they were taking their coffee, the young lieutenant of the “Alaska” was accosted by a little bald-headed man, who had been introduced to him as Dr. Kergaridec, who asked him without any preamble to what country he belonged. A little surprised at first by the question, Erik answered that he was from Sweden, or, to be more exact, from Norway, and that his family lived in the province of Bergen. Then he inquired his motive for asking the question.

“My motive is a very simple one,” answered his interlocutor. “For an hour I have been studying your face across the table, while we were at dinner, and I have never seen anywhere such a perfect type of the Celt as I behold in you! I must tell you that I am devoted to Celtic studies, and it is the first time that I have met with this type among the Scandinavians. Perhaps this is a precious indication for science, and we may be able to place Norway among the regions visited by our Gaelic ancestors?”

Erik was about to explain to the worthy *savant* the reasons which would invalidate this hypothesis, when Dr. Kergaridec turned away to pay his respects to a lady who had just entered the room, and their conversation was not resumed.

The young lieutenant of the “Alaska” would probably never have thought of this incident again, but the next day as they were passing through a street near the market, Dr. Schwaryencrona said suddenly to him:

“My dear child, if I have ever had a doubt as to your Celtic origin, I should have lost it here. See how you resemble these Bretons. They have the same brown eyes, black hair, bony neck, colored skin and general appearance. Bredejord may say what he likes, but you are a pure-blooded Celt — you may depend upon it.” Erik then told him what old Dr. Kergaridec had said to him, and Dr. Schwaryencrona was so delighted that he could not talk of anything else all the day.

With the other passengers of the “Alaska,” Tudor Brown had received and accepted an invitation from the prefect. They thought up to the last moment that he would go in his accustomed dress, for he had made his appearance in it just as they were all going ashore to the dinner. But doubtless the necessity of removing his precious hat appeared too hard to him, for they saw him no more that evening.

When he returned after the ball, Erik learned from Mr. Hersebom that Tudor Brown had returned at seven o’clock and dined alone. After that, he had entered the captain’s room to consult a marine chart; then he had returned to the town in the same small boat which had brought him on board.

This was the last news which they received of him.

The next evening at five o’clock Tudor Brown had not made his appearance. He knew, however, that the machinery of the “Alaska” would be repaired by that time, and her fires kindled, after which it would be impossible to defer her departure. The captain had been careful to notify every one. He gave the order to hoist the anchor.

The vessel had been loosened from her moorings when a small boat was signaled making all speed toward them. Every one believed that it carried Tudor Brown, but they soon saw that it was only a letter which had been sent on board. It occasion general surprise when it was discovered that this letter was directed to Erik.

When he opened it, Erik found that it simply contained the card of Mr. Durrien, the Honorary Consul-general, and member of the Geographical

Society, with these words written in pencil:

“A good voyage — a speedy return.”

We can not explain Erik’s feelings.

This attention from an amiable and distinguished *savant* brought tears to his eyes. In leaving this hospitable shore where he had remained three days, it seemed to him as if he was leaving his own country. He placed Mr. Durrien’s card in his memorandum book, and said to himself that this adieu from an old man could not fail to bring him good luck.

It was now the 20th of February. The weather was fine. The sun had sunk below the horizon, leaving a sky as cloudless as that of summer.

Erik had the watch during the first quarter, and he walked the quarter-deck with a light step. It seemed to him that, with the departure of Tudor Brown, the evil genius of the expedition had disappeared.

“Provided that he does not intend to rejoin us at Malta or Suez,” he said to himself.

It was possible — indeed, even probable — if Tudor Brown wished to spare himself the long voyage which the “Alaska” would make before reaching Egypt. While the vessel was going around the coasts of France and Spain, he could, if it so pleased him, stay for a week in Paris, or at any other place, and then take the mail packet either to Alexandria or Suez, and rejoin the “Alaska” at either of those places; or he could even defer doing so until they reached Singapore or Yokohama.

But this was only a possibility. The fact was that he was no longer on board, and that he could not cast a damper upon the spirits of the company.

Their dinner, also, which they took at six o’clock, as usual, was the gayest which they had yet sat down to. At dessert they drank to the success of the expedition, and every one, in his heart, associated it, more or less, with the absence of Tudor Brown. Then they went on deck and smoked their cigars.

It was a dark night, but in the distance toward the north they could see the light of Cape Saint Matthew. They soon signaled, also, the little light on the shore at Bec-du-Raze, which proved that they were in their right course. A good breeze from the north-east accelerated the speed of the vessel, which rolled very little, although the sea was quite rough.

As the dinner-party reached the deck, one of the sailors approached the captain, and said: “Six knots and a quarter.”

“In that case we shall not want any more coal until we arrive at Behring’s Straits,” answered the captain. After saying these words, he left the doctor and went down to his room. There he selected a large chart, which he spread out before him under a brilliant light, which was suspended from the ceiling. It was a map of the British Admiralty, and indicated all the details of the course which the “Alaska” intended to take. The shores, the islands, the sand-banks, the light-houses, revolving lights, and the most minute details were all clearly marked out. With such a chart and a compass it seemed as if even a child might be able to guide the largest ship through these perilous passes; and yet, a distinguished officer of the French Navy, Lieutenant Mage, who had explored the Niger, had been lost in these waters, with all his companions, and his vessel, the “Magician.”

It had happened that Captain Marsilas had never before navigated in these waters. In fact, it was only the necessity of stopping at Brest which had brought him here now, otherwise he would have passed a long distance from shore. Therefore he was careful to study his chart attentively, in order to keep his proper course. It seemed a very easy matter, keeping on his left the Pointe-du-Van, the Bec-du-Raze, and the Island of Sein, the legendary abode of the nine Druidesses, and which was nearly always veiled by the spray of the roaring waters; he had only to run straight to the west and to the south to reach the open sea. The light on the island indicated clearly his position, and according to the chart, the island ended in rocky heights, bordered by the open sea, whose depth reached one hundred meters. The light on the island was a useful guide on a dark night, and he resolved to keep closer to it than he would have done in broad daylight. He therefore ascended to the deck, and told Erik to sail twenty-five degrees toward the southwest.

This order appeared to surprise the young lieutenant.

“To the south-west, did you say?” he asked in a respectful manner, believing that he had been mistaken.

“Yes, I said to the south-west!” repeated the commander, dryly: “Do you not like this route?”

“Since you ask me the question, captain, I must confess that I do not. I should have preferred running west for some time.”

“To what purpose? we should only lose another night.”

The commander spoke in a tone that did not permit of any contradiction, and Erik gave the order which he had received. After all the captain was an experienced seaman in whom they might have perfect confidence.

Slight as was the change in her course, it sufficed to modify sensibly the sailing of the vessel. The “Alaska” commenced to roll a great deal, and to dip her prow in the waves. The log indicated fourteen knots, and as the wind was increasing, Erik thought it prudent to take a couple of reefs.

The doctor and Mr. Bredejord both became a prey to seasickness, and descended to their cabins. The captain, who had for some time been pacing up and down the deck, soon followed their example.

He had hardly entered his own apartment when Erik stood before him.

“Captain,” said the young man, “I have heard suspicious noises, like waves breaking over rocks. I feel conscientiously bound to tell you that in my opinion we are following a dangerous route.”

“Certainly, sir, you are gifted with tenaciousness,” cried the captain. “What danger can you fear when we have this light at least three good miles, if not four, distant from us?”

And he impatiently with his finger pointed out their position upon the chart, which he had kept spread out upon his table.

Erik followed the direction of his finger, and he saw clearly that the island was surrounded by very deep waters. Nothing could be more decisive and reassuring, in the eyes of a mariner. But still he felt sure that it was not an illusion, those noises which he had heard, and which certainly were made by waves breaking upon a rocky shore very close to them.

It was a strange case, and Erik hardly liked to acknowledge it to himself, but it did not seem to him that he could recognize in this profile of the coast which lay spread out before his eyes the dangerous spot which he remembered in the same geographical studies which he had pursued. But could he venture to oppose his dim impressions and vague remembrances against a chart of the British Admiralty? Erik dared not do it. These charts are made expressly to guard navigators against errors or any illusions of their memory. He therefore bowed respectfully to his chief and returned to his position on deck.

He had scarcely reached it when he heard this cry resounding through the vessel, “Breakers on the starboard!” followed almost immediately by a second shout of “Breakers on the larboard!”

There was a loud whistle and a clattering of many feet followed by a series of effective maneuvers. The “Alaska” slackened her course, and tried to back out. The captain made a rush up the stairs.

At this moment he heard a grating noise, then suddenly a terrible shock which shook the vessel from prow to stern. Then all was silent, and the “Alaska” remained motionless.

She was wedged in between two submarine rocks.

Commander Marsilas, his head bleeding from a fall, mounted the deck, where the greatest confusion reigned. The dismayed sailors made a rush for the boats. The waves dashed furiously over the rocks upon which the vessel had been shipwrecked. The distant light-houses, with their fixed lights, seemed to reproach the “Alaska” for having thrown herself into the dangers which it was their duty to point out. Erik tried vainly to penetrate through the gloom and discover the extent of the damage which the vessel had sustained.

“What is the matter?” cried the captain, still half-stunned by his fall.

“By sailing south-west, sir, according to your orders, we have run upon breakers,” replied Erik.

Commander Marsilas did not say a word. What could he answer? He turned on his heel, and walked toward the staircase again.

Their situation was a tragical one, although they did not appear to be in any immediate peril. The vessel remained motionless between the rocks which seemed to hold her firmly, and their adventure appeared to be more sad than frightful. Erik had only one thought — the expedition was brought to a full stop — his hope of finding Patrick O’Donoghan was lost.

He had scarcely made his somewhat hasty reply to the captain, which had been dictated by this bitter disappointment, than he regretted having done so. He therefore left the deck to go in search of his superior officer with the generous intention of comforting him, if it were possible to do so. But the captain had disappeared, and three minutes had not elapsed when a detonation was heard.

Erik ran to his room. The door was fastened on the inside. He forced it open with a blow of his fist.

Commander Marsilas lay stretched out upon the carpet, with a revolver in his right hand, and a bullet wound in his forehead.

Seeing that the vessel was shipwrecked by his fault, he had blown his brains out. Death had been instantaneous. The doctor and Mr. Bredejord, who had run in after the young lieutenant, could only verify the sad fact.

But there was no time for vain regrets. Erik left to his two friends the care of lifting the body and laying it upon the couch. His duty compelled him to return to the deck, and attend to the safety of the crew and passengers.

As he passed the door of Mr. Malarius, the excellent man, who had been awakened by the stopping of the vessel, and also by the report of the pistol, opened his door and put out his white head, covered by his black silk night-cap. He had been sleeping ever since they left Brest, and was therefore ignorant of all that had occurred.

“Ah, well, what is it? Has anything happened?” he asked quietly.

“What has happened?” replied Erik. “My dear master, the ‘Alaska’ has been cast upon breakers, and the captain has killed himself!”

“Oh!” said Mr. Malarius, overcome with surprise. “Then, my dear child, adieu to our expedition!”

“That is another affair,” said Erik. “I am not dead, and as long as a spark of life remains in me, I shall say, ‘Go forward!’”

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE ROCKS.

The “Alaska” had been thrown upon the rocks with such violence that she remained perfectly motionless, and the situation did not appear to be immediately dangerous for her crew and passengers. The waves, encountering this unusual obstacle, beat over the deck, and covered everything with their spray; but the sea was not rough enough to make this state of affairs dangerous. If the weather did not change, day would break without any further disaster. Erik saw this at a glance. He had naturally taken command of the vessel, as he was the first officer. Having given orders to close the port-holes and scuttles carefully, and to throw tarred cloths over all openings, in case the sea should become rougher, he descended to the bottom of the hold, in company with the master carpenter. There he saw with great satisfaction that no water had entered. The exterior covering of the “Alaska” had protected her, and the precaution which they had taken against polar icebergs had proved very efficacious against the rocky coast; in fact the engine had stopped at once, being disarranged by the frightful shock, but it had produced no explosion, and they had, therefore, no vital damage to deplore. Erik resolved to wait for daybreak, and then disembark his passengers if it should prove necessary.

He, therefore, contented himself with firing a cannon to ask aid from the inhabitants of the Island of Sein, and with dispatching his small steam launch to L’Orient.

He said to himself, that at no place would they find the means of repairing their damages so promptly and well as at this great maritime arsenal of Western France.

Thus in this glooming hour when every one on board believed that their chances were irretrievably lost, he already began to feel hopeful, or rather he was one of those courageous souls who know no discouragement and never confess themselves vanquished.

“If we can only get the ‘Alaska’ off these rocks, everything may yet go well with us,” he said.

But he was careful not to express this hope to the others, who would doubtless have considered it chimerical. He only told them when he returned from his visit to the hold that they were in no danger at present, and that there was plenty of time for them to receive aid.

Then he ordered a distribution of tea and rum to all the crew.

This sufficed to put these children of a larger growth in a good humor, and their little steam-boat was speedily launched.

Some rockets from the light-house of Sein soon announced that aid was coming to the assistance of the shipwrecked vessel. Red lights now became visible, and voices hailed them. They answered that they had been shipwrecked upon the rocks surrounding Sein.

It was a full hour before the boat could reach them. The breakers were so strong that the attempt was perilous. But at length six men succeeded in seizing a small cable, and hoisting themselves on board of the “Alaska.”

They were six rude fishermen of Sein — strong, intrepid fellows — and it was not the first time they had gone to the assistance of shipwrecked mariners. They fully approved of the idea of sending to L’Orient for assistance, for their little port could not offer the necessary resources. It was agreed that two of them should depart in the little steamer with Mr. Hersebom and Otto, as soon as the moon arose above the horizon. While they were waiting for it to do so, they gave some account of the place where they were shipwrecked.

The rocks extend in a westerly direction for nine miles beyond the Island of Sein. They are divided into two parts, which are called the Pont du Sein and the Basse Froid.

The Pont du Sein is about four miles long, and a mile and a half wide. It is composed of a succession of high rocks, which form a chain above the waters. The Basse Froid extends beyond the Pont du Sein for five miles, and is two thirds of a mile wide; it consist of a great number of rocks of about an equal height, which can be seen at a great distance. The principal rocks are the Cornengen, Schomeur, Cornoc-ar-Goulet-Bas-ven, Madiou and Ar-men. These are the least dangerous, because they can be seen. The number and irregularity of their points under the water are not fully known, for the sea beats over them with extreme violence, the force of the current is very strong, and they are the scene of many shipwrecks. Light-houses have been erected on the Island of Sein and at Bec-du-Raze, so that these rocks can be seen and avoided by vessels coming from the west, but they are very dangerous for vessels coming from the south. Unfortunately there is no rock or small island at the extreme end where a signal could be placed, and the turbulence of the waters will not permit a floating one to be placed there. Therefore it was resolved to build a light-house on the rock Ar-men, which is three miles from the extreme point. This work is so extremely difficult that although it was commenced in 1867, twelve years later, in 1879, it was only half built. They say that during the latter year it was only possible to work for eight hours, although the workmen were always ready to seize a favorable moment. The light-house therefore was not yet completed at the time when the “Alaska” met with her disaster. But this did not suffice to explain how, after leaving Brest, they had been run into such peril. Erik promised himself that he would solve this difficulty as soon as the little steam-boat had been dispatched for aid. This departure was easily effected, the moon having soon made its appearance. The young captain then appointed the night watch, and sent the rest of the crew to bed, then he descended to the captain’s room.

Mr. Bredejord, Mr. Malarius, and the doctor were keeping watch beside the corpse. They arose as soon as they saw Erik.

“My poor child, what is the cause of this sad state of things? How did it happen?” asked the doctor.

“It is inexplicable,” answered the young man, looking at the chart which lay open upon the table. “I felt instinctively that we were out of our route, and I said so; but in my estimation we are at least three miles from the light-house; and all the seamen agree with me,” he added, designating a spot with his finger on the map — and you see no danger is indicated — no sand-banks or rocks. This coloring indicates deep water. It is inconceivable how the mistake can have occurred. We can not suppose that a chart of the British Admiralty can be at fault, for it is a region well known to mariners, as it has been minutely explored for centuries!”

“Is it not possible to make a mistake as to our position? Could not one light be mistaken for another?” asked Mr. Bredejord.

“That is scarcely possible in a voyage as short as ours has been since we left Brest,” said Erik. “Remember that we have not lost, sight of land for a moment, and that we have been passing from one point to another. We can only suppose that one of the lights indicated on the chart has not been lighted or that some supplementary light has been added — in a word, we must imagine what is highly improbable. Our course has been so regular, the soundings have been so carefully made, that it seems impossible that we could have mistaken our route, and yet the fact remains that we are on the rocks, when we ought to have been some distance out to sea.”

“But how is it going to end? That is what I want to know,” cried the doctor.

“We shall soon see,” answered Erik, “if the maritime authorities show any eagerness to come to our assistance. For the present the best thing that every one can do is to go quietly to bed, since we are as secure as if we were at anchor in some quiet bay.”

The young commander did not add that it was his intention to keep watch while his friends slept.

Nevertheless this is what he did for the remainder of the night, sometimes promenading the deck and encouraging the men, sometimes descending for a few minutes to the saloon.

As day commenced to dawn he had the satisfaction of perceiving that the waves visibly receded, and if they continued to do so the “Alaska” would be left almost on dry rocks. This gave him hope of being able speedily to determine the extent of the damage which the vessel had received, and, in fact, toward seven o’clock they were able to proceed with this examination.

They found that three points of the rocks had pierced the “Alaska,” and held her firmly on her rocky bed. The direction in which she lay, slightly inclined to the north, which was contrary to her course, showed that the commands given by Erik to back the vessel had saved her, and also rendered the shock, when she struck, less severe. The engine had been reversed some seconds before she touched, and she had been carried on the reef by the remainder of her previous speed, and by the force of the current. Doubtless but for this she would have gone to pieces. Besides, the waves having continued to break against her all night in the same direction, had helped to keep her in her place instead of fixing her more firmly on the rocks, which would have happened if the wind had changed. So, after all, there was a favorable view to take of the disaster. The question now was how to get the vessel off before the wind should change, and reverse these favorable conditions.

Erik resolved not to lose a moment. Immediately after breakfast he set all his men to work. He hoped that when the tow-boat should arrive, which he had sent for from L'Orient, it might be possible at high tide to disengage the "Alaska."

We can therefore imagine that the young captain waited impatiently for the first trace of smoke upon the horizon.

All turned out as he desired. The water remained calm and peaceful. Toward noon the boat arrived.

Erik, with his staff, received the mariners with due honors.

"But explain to me," said the captain of the tow-boat, "how you came to cast your vessel on these rocks after leaving Brest?"

"This chart will explain it," said Erik. "It does not point out any such danger."

The French officer examined the chart with curiosity at first, and then he looked stupefied.

“In fact the Basse-Froide is not marked down, nor the point of Sein,” he cried. “What unparalleled negligence. Why, even the position of the light-house is not correctly marked. I am more and more surprised. This is a chart of the British Admiralty. I should say that some one has taken pleasure in making it as deceitful and perfidious as possible. Navigators of olden times frequently played such tricks upon their rivals. I should never have believed such traditions would be imitated in England.”

“Are you sure that this is an English chart?” asked Mr. Bredejord. “For myself I suspect that the chart is the work of a rascal, and has been placed with criminal intentions among the charts of the ‘Alaska.’”

“By Tudor Brown!” cried Erik, impetuously. “That evening when we dined with the authorities at Brest he entered the captain’s room upon the pretense of examining the charts. Oh, the infamous wretch! This then is the reason that he did not come on board again!”

“It appears to be only too evident that he is the culprit,” said Dr. Schwaryencrona. “But such a dastardly action betrays such an abyss of iniquity. What motive could he have for committing such a crime?”

“What was his motive in coming to Stockholm, expressly to tell you that Patrick O’Donoghan was dead?” answered Mr. Bredejord. “For what purpose did he subscribe twenty thousand kroners for the voyage of the ‘Alaska,’ when it was doubtful if she would ever make the journey? Why did he embark with us to leave us at Brest? I think we must be blind indeed if we do not see in these facts a chain of evidence as logical as it is frightful. What interest has Tudor Brown in all this? I do not know. But this interest must be very strong, very powerful, to induce him to have recourse to such means to prevent our journey; for I am convinced now that it was he who caused the accident which detained us at Brest, and it was he who led us upon these rocks, where he expected we would all lose our lives.”

“It seems difficult, however, to believe that he could have foreseen the route that Captain Marsilas would choose!” objected Mr. Malarias. “Why did he not indicate this route by altering the chart? After delaying us for three days, he felt certain that the captain would take the shortest way. The latter, believing that the waters were safe around Sein, was thrown upon the rocks.”

“It is true,” said Erik; “but the proof that the result of his maneuvers was uncertain lies in the fact that I insisted, before Captain Marsilas, that we ought still to keep to the west.”

“But who knows whether he has not prepared other charts to lead us astray, in case this one failed to do so?” said Mr. Bredejord.

“That is easily determined,” answered Erik, who went and brought all the charts and maps that were in the case.

The first one which they opened was that of Corunna, and at a glance the French officer pointed out two or three grave errors. The second was that of Cape Vincent. It was the same.

The third was that of Gibraltar. Here the errors were apparent to every eye. A more thorough examination would have been superfluous, as it was impossible to doubt any longer. If the “Alaska” had not been shipwrecked on the Island of Sein, this fate would surely have awaited her before she could have reached Malta.

A careful examination of the charts revealed the means which had been employed to effect these changes. They were undoubtedly English charts, but they had been partly effaced by some chemical process, and then retouched so as to indicate false routes among the true ones. They had been recolored so skillfully that only a very slight difference in the tints could be perceived after the most careful scrutiny.

But there was one circumstance which betrayed the criminal intentions with which they had been placed on board the “Alaska.” All the charts belonging to the vessel bore the seal of the secretary of the Swedish navy. The forger had foreseen that they would not be examined too minutely, and had hoped that by following them they would all come to a watery grave.

These successive discoveries had produced consternation in the breasts of all who were present.

Erik was the first to break the silence which had succeeded the conversation.

“Poor Captain Marsilas!” he said, in a trembling voice, “he has suffered for us all. But since we have escaped almost by a miracle the fate which was prepared for us, let us run no more risks. The tide is rising, and it may be possible to draw the ‘Alaska’ off the rocks. If you are willing, gentlemen, we will go and commence operations without delay.”

He spoke with simple authority and a modest dignity, with which the feeling of responsibility had already inspired him.

To see a young man of his age invested with the command of a ship under such circumstances, and for such a hazardous expedition, was certainly an unforeseen occurrence. But he felt that he was equal to the performance of all his duties. He knew that he could rely upon himself and upon his crew, and these thoughts transfigured him. The youth of yesterday was a man to-day. The spirit of a hero burned in his eyes. He rose superior to the calamity which had befallen them. His ability impressed all who approached him. Even the doctor and Mr. Bredejord submitted to him like the others.

The operation of preparing for their morning's work proved easier than they had hoped.

Lifted by the rising waters, the vessel only required a slight force to take her off the rocks. A few hours of hard work were sufficient to accomplish this, and the "Alaska" was once more afloat, strained indeed, and weighed down by the water which made its way into some of her compartments, and with her engine silent, but manageable.

All the crew, who were assembled on the deck, watched anxiously the result of these efforts, and a loud hurrah greeted the deliverance of the "Alaska."

The Frenchmen replied to this joyful cry with similar acclamations. It was now three o'clock in the afternoon. Above the horizon the beautiful February sun inundated the calm sparkling sea with floods of sunshine, which fell also on the rocks of the Basse-Froide, as if to efface all remembrance of the drama which had been enacted there the previous night.

That same evening the "Alaska" had been safely towed into the harbor of L'Orient.

The next day the French maritime authorities, with the utmost courtesy, authorized the necessary repairs to be made without delay. The damage which the vessel had sustained was not serious, but that of the machinery was more complicated, although not irremediable. Necessarily it would take some time to render her seaworthy, but nowhere in the world, as Erik had foreseen, could this be accomplished so speedily as at this port, which possessed such immense resources for naval construction. The house of Gainard, Norris & Co. undertook to make the repairs in three weeks. It was now the 23d of February; on the 16th of March they would be able to resume their voyage, and this time with good charts.

That would leave three months and a half for them to reach Behring's Strait by the end of June. It was not impossible to do this, although the time was very limited. Erik would not hear of abandoning the enterprise. He feared only one thing, and that was being compelled to do so. Therefore he refused to send to Stockholm a report of the shipwreck, and he would not make a formal complaint against the presumed author of the attempt to shipwreck them for fear of being delayed by legal proceedings, yet he had his fears that this might encourage Tudor Brown to throw some new obstacle in the way of the "Alaska." This is what Dr. Schwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord asked each other as they were playing at whist with Mr. Malarius, in the little sitting-room of the hotel to which they had gone after arriving at L'Orient.

As for Mr. Bredejord, he had no doubts about the matter.

A rascal like Tudor Brown, if he knew of the failure of his scheme — and how could any one doubt that he was acquainted with this fact? — would not hesitate to renew the attempt.

To believe that they would ever succeed in reaching Behring's Strait was therefore more than self-delusion — it was foolishness. Mr. Bredejord did not know what steps Tudor Brown would take to prevent this, but he felt certain that he would find some means of doing so. Dr. Schwaryencrona was inclined to the same opinion, and even Mr. Malarius could not think of anything very reassuring to say. The games of whist were therefore not very lively, and the long strolls that the three friends took were not very gay.

Their principal occupation was to watch the erection of the mausoleum which they were building for poor Captain Marsilas, whose funeral obsequies had been attended by the entire population of L’Orient.

The sight of this funeral monument was not calculated to raise the spirits of the survivors of the “Alaska.”

But when they joined Erik again their hopes revived. His resolution was unshakable, his activity untiring, he was so bent upon overcoming all obstacles, so certain of success, that it was impossible for them to express, or even to preserve, less heroic sentiments.

They had a new proof of the malignity of Tudor Brown, and that he still was pursuing them.

On the 14th of March, Erik saw that the work upon the machinery was almost finished. They only had to adjust the pumps, and that was to be done the next day.

But in the night, between the 14th and 15th, the body of the pump disappeared from the workshop of the Messrs. Gainard, Norris & Co.

It was impossible to find it.

How had it been taken away — who had done it?

After investigation they were unable to discover.

However, it would take ten days more to replace it, and that would make it the 25th of March before the “Alaska” could leave L’Orient.

It was a singular fact, but this incident affected Erik’s spirits more than the shipwreck had done. He saw in it a sure sign of a persistent desire to prevent the voyage of the “Alaska.”

But these efforts only redoubled his ardor, and he determined that nothing should be wanting on his part to bring the expedition to a successful termination.

These ten days of delay were almost exclusively occupied by him in considering the question in all its aspects. The more he studied, the more he became convinced that he could not reach Behring’s Straits in three months, for they had suffered a detention of forty days since they had left Stockholm, and to persist would only be to court failure and perhaps some irremediable disaster.

This conclusion did not stop him, but it only led him to think that some modification of their original plans was indispensable.

He took care, however, to say nothing, rightly judging that secrecy was the first condition of victory. He contented himself with watching more closely than ever the work of repairing the vessel.

But his companions thought that they perceived that he was less eager to set out.

They therefore concluded that he saw that the enterprise was impracticable, which they had also believed for some time.

But they were mistaken.

On the 25th of March, at midday, the repairs of the “Alaska” were completed, and she was once more afloat in the harbor of L’Orient.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SHORTEST ROUTE.

Night was closing in when Erik summoned his three friends and counselors to hold a serious consultation.

“I have reflected a great deal,” he said to them, “upon the circumstances which have made our voyage memorable since we left Stockholm. I have been forced to arrive at one conclusion, which is that we must expect to meet with obstacles or accidents during our voyage. Perhaps they may befall us at Gibraltar or at Malta. If we are not destroyed, it appears to me certain that we shall be delayed. In that case we can not reach Behring’s Straits during the summer, which is the only season when it is practicable to navigate the polar sea!”

“That is also the conclusion which I formed some time ago,” declared Mr. Bredejord: “but I kept it to myself, as I did not wish to dampen your hopes, my dear boy. But I am sure that we must give up the idea of reaching Behring’s Strait in three months!”

“That is also my opinion,” said the doctor.

Mr. Malarius on his part indicated by a motion of his head that he agreed with them all.

“Well!” said Erik, “having settled that point, what line of conduct now remains for us to adopt?”

“There is one right course which it is our duty to take,” answered Mr. Bredejord, “it is to renounce an enterprise which we see clearly is impracticable and return to Stockholm. You understand this fact, my child, and I congratulate you upon being able to look the situation calmly in the face!"

"You pay me a compliment which I can not accept," said Erik smiling, "for I do not merit it. No — I have no thoughts of abandoning the expedition, for I am far from regarding it as impracticable. I only think that it is best for us all to baffle the machinations of that scoundrel who is lying in wait for us, and the first thing to do is to change our route."

"Such a change would only complicate our difficulties," replied the doctor, "since we have adopted the shortest one. If it would be difficult to reach Behring's Straits by the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, it would be impossible by the Cape of Good Hope, or Cape Horn, for either of these routes would necessarily take five or six months."

"There is another way which would shorten our voyage, instead of lengthening it, and where we would be sure not to meet Tudor Brown," said Erik.

"Another way?" answered Dr. Schwaryencrona; "upon my word I do not know of any unless you are thinking of the way of Panama. But it is not yet practicable for vessels, and it will not be yet for several years."

"I am not thinking of Panama, nor of Cape Horn, nor of the Cape of Good Hope," answered the young captain of the "Alaska." "The route I propose is the only one by which we can reach Behring's Strait in three months: it is to go by way of the Arctic Ocean, the north-west passage."

Then seeing that his friends were stupefied by this unexpected announcement, Erik proceeded to develop his plans.

“The north-west passage now is no longer what it was formerly, frightful to navigators — it is intermittent, since it is only open for eight or ten weeks every year, but it is now well known, marked out upon excellent charts, and frequented by hundreds of whaling-vessels. It is rarely taken by any vessel going from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, I must admit. Most of them who enter it from either side only traverse it partially. It might even happen, if circumstances were not favorable, that we might find the passage closed, or that it might not be open at the precise time when we desired to enter it. It is a risk that one must take. But I think there are many reasons to make us hopeful of success if we take this route, whilst as far as I can see there is none, if we take any of the others. This being the state of affairs, I think it is our duty — a duty which we owe to those who have fitted out the expedition — to take the shortest way of reaching Behring’s Strait. An ordinary vessel equipped for navigating tropical waters might hesitate before deciding upon such a course, but with a vessel like the ‘Alaska’ fitted out especially for polar navigation, we need not hesitate. For my part I declare that I will not return to Stockholm before having attempted to find Nordenskiold.”

Erik’s reasoning was so sound that nobody tried to contradict it.

What objections could the doctor, Mr. Bredejord, and Mr. Malarius raise?

They saw the difficulties which beset the new plan. But it was possible that these difficulties might not prove insurmountable, whilst, if they pursued any other course, they must abandon all hopes of success. Besides, they did not hesitate to agree with Erik that it would be more glorious, in any case, to make the attempt, than to return to Stockholm and acknowledge themselves conquered.

“I see but one serious objection, for my part,” said Dr. Schwaryencrona, after he had remained for a few moments lost in reflection. “It is the difficulty of procuring coal in the arctic regions. For without coal, adieu to the possibility of making the north-west passage, and of profiting by the time, often very short, during which it is practicable.”

“I have foreseen this difficulty, which is in fact the only one,” answered Erik, “and I do not think it is insurmountable. In place of going to Malta or Gibraltar, where we might doubtless expect new machinations on the part of Tudor Brown, I propose that we go to London; from there I can send, by transatlantic cable, a dispatch to a house in Montreal, to send without delay a boat loaded with coal to wait for us in Baffin’s Bay, and to a house in San Francisco to send to Behring’s Strait. We have the necessary funds at our disposal, and, besides, we will not require as much as we would have done if we had gone by the way of Asia, for our new route is a much shorter one. It is useless for us to reach Baffin’s Bay before the end of May, and we can not hope to reach Behring’s Strait before the end of June. Our correspondents in Montreal and San Francisco will therefore have plenty of time to execute our orders, which will be covered by funds deposited with bankers in London. This accomplished, we shall only have to find out whether the north-west passage is practicable, and that evidently depends upon ourselves. But, if we find the passage closed, at least we shall have the consolation of knowing that we have neglected nothing that could have insured our success.”

“It is evident!” said Mr. Malarius, “that your arguments are unanswerable!”

“Gently, gently,” said Mr. Bredejord. “Do not let us go too fast. I have another objection. Do you think, my dear Erik, that the ‘Alaska’ can pass unnoticed through these waters? No, it is not possible. The newspapers would mention our arrival. The telegraph companies would make it known. Tudor Brown would know it. He would know that we had changed our plans. What would prevent him from altering his? Do you think, for example, that it would be very difficult to prevent our boat with coals from reaching us? — and without it we could do nothing!"

"That is true," answered Erik, "and it proves that we must think of everything. We must not go to London. We must put into Lisbon as if we were *en route* to Gibraltar and Suez. Then one of us must go *incognito* to Madrid, and without explaining why, or for whom it is intended, must open telegraphic communications with Montreal and San Francisco, to order the supply of coal. The crews of these boats must not know for whom the coal is destined, but remain at designated points at the disposition of a captain who will carry an order to them previously agreed upon!"

"A perfect arrangement. It will be almost impossible for Tudor Brown to track us."

"You mean to track me, for I hope that you do not think of accompanying me to these arctic regions," said Erik.

"Indeed that is my intention!" answered the doctor. "It shall not be said that that rascal, Tudor Brown, made me turn back!"

"Nor me either," cried Mr. Bredejord and Mr. Malarius together.

The young captain tried to combat this resolution, and explained to his friends the dangers and monotony of the voyage which they proposed to take with him. But he could not alter their decision. The perils which they had already encountered, made them feel it a duty to keep together; for the only way of rendering such a voyage acceptable to them all was not to separate. Every precaution had been taken to protect the persons on board the “Alaska” from suffering unduly from cold; and neither Swedes nor Norwegians fear frost.

Erik was obliged to yield to their wishes, only stipulating that their change of route should not be made known to the crew of the vessel.

The first part of their voyage was quickly accomplished.

On the 2d of April the “Alaska” reached Lisbon. Before the newspapers had given notice of their arrival, Mr. Bredejord had gone to Madrid, and by means of a banking-house opened communications with two large firms, one in Montreal and one in San Francisco.

He had arranged to have two boat-loads of coal sent to two designated points, and had given the sign by which Erik was to make himself known.

This sign was the words found upon him when he was discovered floating, tied to the buoy of the “Cynthia,” “Semper idem.”

Finally these arrangements having all been happily concluded, on the 9th of April Mr. Bredejord returned to Lisbon, and the “Alaska” resumed her voyage.

On the twenty-fifth of the same month, having crossed the Atlantic and reached Montreal, where they took in coal, and Erik was assured that his orders had been punctually fulfilled, they left the waters of the St. Lawrence and Straits of Belle Isle, which separate Labrador from Newfoundland. On the 10th of May they reached the coast of Greenland and found the vessel with their coal, it having arrived before them.

Erik knew very well that at this early date it would be useless to attempt to force his way through the Arctic Ocean, which was still firmly frozen over the largest part of his route. But he counted upon obtaining on these shores, which were much frequented by whaling-vessels, precise information as to the best charts, and he was not mistaken. He was also able to buy, although at a high price, a dozen dogs, who with Kaas could draw their sledges if necessary.

Among the Danish stations on the coast of Greenland, he found Godhaven, which is only a poor village, and is used as a depot by dealers in oil and the furs of the country. At this time of the year the cold is not more severe than at Stockholm or Noroe. But Erik and his friends beheld with surprise the great difference between the two countries, both situated at the same distance from the pole. Godhaven is in precisely the same latitude as Bergen. But whilst the southern port of Norway is in April covered with green forests and fruit trees, and even cultivated vines trained upon trellises above green meadows, Greenland is still in May covered with ice and snow, without a tree to enliven the monotony. The shape of the Norwegian coast, deeply indented by forests and sheltered by chains of islands, which contribute almost as much as the warmth of the Gulf Stream to raise the temperature of the country. Greenland, on the contrary, has a low regular coast and receives the full shock of the cold blasts from the pole, consequently she is enveloped almost to the middle of the island by fields of ice several feet in thickness.

They spent fifteen days in the harbor and then the “Alaska” mounted Davis’ Straits, and keeping along the coast of Greenland, gained the polar sea.

On the 28th of May for the first time they encountered floating ice in 70 15’ of north latitude, with a temperature two degrees below zero. These first icebergs, it is true, were in a crumbling condition, rapidly breaking up into small fragments. But soon they became more dense, and frequently they had to break their way through them. Navigation, although difficult, was not as yet dangerous. By a thousand signs they perceived, however, that they were in a new world. All objects at a little distance appeared to be colorless, and almost without form; the eye could find no place to repose in this perpetually changing horizon, which every minute assumed a new aspect.

“Who can describe,” says an eye-witness, “these melancholy surroundings, the roaring of the waves beating beneath the floating ice, the singular noise made by the snow as it falls suddenly into the abyss of waters? Who can imagine the beauty of the cascades which gush out on all sides, the sea of foam produced by their fall, the fright of the sea-birds who, having fallen asleep on a pyramid of ice, suddenly find their resting-place overturned and themselves obliged to fly to some other spot? And in the morning, when the sun bursts through the fog, at first only a little of the blue sky is visible, but it gradually widens, until the view is only limited by the horizon.”

These spectacles, presented by the polar sea, Erik and his friends were able to contemplate at their leisure as they left the coast of Greenland, to which they had kept close until they had reached Uppernavik. Then they sailed westward across Baffin’s Bay. Here navigation became more difficult, for this sea is the ordinary course of the polar icebergs which are drawn in by the innumerable currents which traverse it. Sometimes they found their course checked by insurmountable barriers of ice, which it was impossible to break, and therefore they were compelled to turn aside. The “Alaska” was obliged continually to break her way through immense fields of ice. Sometimes a tempest of snow assailed them which covered the deck and the masts with a thick coat. Sometimes they were assailed by ice dashed over them by the wind, which threatened to sink the vessel by its weight.

Sometimes they found themselves in a sort of lake, surrounded on all sides by fields of ice apparently firm and impassable, and from which they had great difficulty to extricate themselves and gain the open sea. Then they had to exercise great vigilance to escape some enormous iceberg sailing down from the north with incredible swiftness, a frightful mass, which could have crushed the “Alaska” like a walnut. But a greater danger still was the submarine ice, which could injure her and act like a battering-ram.

The “Alaska” lost her two large boats. One must experience the dangers which polar navigation presents at every moment to have any just appreciation of them.

After one or two weeks of such experience the most intrepid crew become exhausted, and repose is necessary for them.

Sometimes, although surrounded by all these dangers, they made rapid progress; at others they made scarcely any; but at length, on the 11th of June, they came in sight of land again, and cast anchor at the entrance to Lancaster Sound.

Erik had expected to be obliged to wait some days before being able to enter the sound; but, to his surprise and joy, he found it open, at least at the entrance. He entered resolutely, but only to find the next day his passage impeded by ice, which held them prisoners for three days; but, thanks to the violent currents which sweep through this Arctic canal, he at last was able to free his vessel and continue his route as the whalers of Godhaven had told him he would be able to do.

On the seventeenth he arrived at Barrow’s Straits, and made all the speed he could; but on the nineteenth, as he was about to enter Melville Sound, he was again blocked in by the ice.

At first he patiently accepted the situation, waiting for it to break up; but day succeeded to day and still this did not happen.

There were, however, many sources of amusement open to the voyagers. They were near the coast and supplied with everything that could render their life comfortable in that latitude. They could take sleigh-rides and see in the distance the whales enjoying their diversions. The summer solstice was approaching. Since the fifteenth the occupants of the “Alaska” had beheld a new and astonishing spectacle, even for Norwegians and the natives of southern Sweden; it was the sun at midnight touching the horizon without disappearing and then mounting again in the sky. In these high latitudes and desolate coasts the star of day describes in twenty-four hours a complete circle in space. The light, it is true, is pale and languishing, objects lose their perfect shape, and all nature has a shadowy appearance. One realizes profoundly how far he is removed from the world, and how near he is to the pole. The cold, however, was not extreme. The temperature did not fall more than four or five degrees below zero, and the air was sometimes so mild that they could hardly believe that they were in the center of the arctic zone.

But those novel surrounding were not sufficient to satisfy Erik, or make him lose sight of the supreme object which had brought them there. He had not come to herbalize like Mr. Malarius, who returned every evening more and more delighted with his explorations, both of the country and of its unknown plants, which he added to his collection; nor to enjoy with Dr. Schwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord the novelty of the sights which nature offered to them in these polar regions. He wanted to find Nordenskiold and Patrick O’Donoghan — to fulfill a sacred duty while he discovered, perhaps, the secret of his birth. This was why he sought untiringly to break the circle of ice which hemmed them in. He made excursions with his sleigh and on his snow-shoes, reconnoitered in every direction for ten days, but it was all in vain. At the west, as well as the north and east, the banks of ice remained firm.

It was the 20th of June, and they were still far from the Siberian Sea.

Must he confess himself vanquished? Erik could not make up his mind to do this. Repeated soundings had revealed that under the ice there was a swift current running toward Franklin’s Strait, that is to say toward the south; he told himself that some effort might suffice to break up the ice, and he resolved to attempt it.

For the length of seven marine miles he had hollowed in the ice a series of chambers, and in each of them was placed a kilogramme of dynamite. These were connected by a copper wire inclosed in gutta percha.

On the 30th of June, at eight o’clock in the morning, Erik from the deck of the “Alaska” pressed the button of the electrical machine, and a formidable explosion took place. The field of ice shook and trembled, and clouds of frightened sea-birds hovered around uttering discordant cries. When silence was restored, a long black train cut into innumerable fissures met their anxious gaze. The explosion of the terrible agent had broken up the ice field. There was, so to speak, a moment of hesitation, and then the ice acted as if it had only been waiting for some signal to move. Cracking in all parts it yielded to the action of the current, and they beheld here and there whole continents, as it were, gradually moving away from them. Some portions, however, were more slow to move; they seemed to be protesting against such violence. The next day the passage was clear, and the “Alaska” rekindled her fires.

Erik and his dynamite had done what it would probably have taken the pale arctic sun a month longer to accomplish.

On the 2d of July, the expedition arrived at Banks' Straits; on the fourth, she issued from the Arctic Sea properly speaking. From this time the route was open notwithstanding icebergs, fogs, and snow-storms. On the twelfth, the "Alaska" doubled Ice Cape; on the thirteenth, Cape Lisburne, and on the fourteenth she entered the Gulf of Kotzebue to the north of Behring's Straits and found there, according to instructions, the boat loaded with coal which had been sent from San Francisco.

Thus in two months and sixteen days they had accomplished the programme arranged by Erik before they left the coast of France.

The "Alaska" had hardly ceased to move, when Erik rushed into a small boat and hurried off to accost the officer who had charge of the boat loaded with coal.

"*Semper idem!*" said he, as he approached.

"Lisbon!" answered the Yankee.

"How long have you been waiting here for me?"

"Five weeks — we left San Francisco one month after the arrival of your dispatch."

"Have you heard any news of Nordenskiold?"

"At San Francisco they had not received any reliable information about him. But since I have been here I have spoken to several captains of whaling-vessels, who said that they had heard from the natives of Serdze-

Kamen that an European vessel had been frozen in by the ice for nine or ten months; they thought it was the ‘Vega.’”

“Indeed!” said Erik, with a joy which we can easily understand. “And do you believe that it has not yet succeeded in getting through the straits?”

“I am sure of it — not a vessel has passed us for the last five weeks, which I have not seen and spoken to.”

“God be praised — our troubles will not be without recompense, if we succeed in finding Nordenskiold.”

“You will not be the first who has done so!” said the Yankee, with an ironical smile — ”an American yacht has preceded you. It passed here three days ago, and like you was inquiring for Nordenskiold.”

“An American yacht?” repeated Erik, half stupefied.

“Yes — the ‘Albatross,’ Captain Tudor Brown, from Vancouver’s Island. I told him what I had heard, and he immediately started for Cape Serdze-Kamen.”

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM SERDZE-KAMEN TO LJAKOW.

Tudor Brown had evidently heard of the change in the route of the “Alaska.” He had reached Behring’s Straits before them. But by what means? It seemed almost supernatural, but still the fact remained that he had done so.

Erik was greatly depressed by this information, but he concealed his feelings from his friends. He hurried on the work of transporting the coal, and set out again without losing a moment.

Serdze-Kamen is a long Asiatic-promontory situated nearly a hundred miles to the west of Behring’s Straits, and whaling-vessels from the Pacific visit it every year.

The “Alaska” reached there after a voyage of twenty-four hours, and soon in the bay of Koljutschin behind a wall of ice, they discovered the masts of the “Vega,” which had been frozen in for nine months.

The barrier which held Nordenskiold captive was not more than ten kilometers in size. After passing around it, the “Alaska” came to anchor in a little creek, where she would be sheltered from the northerly winds. Then Erik with his three friends made their way overland to the establishment which the “Vega” had made upon the Siberian coast to pass this long winter, and which a column of smoke pointed out to them.

This coast of the Bay of Koljutschin consists of a low and slightly undulating plain. There are no trees, only some dwarf willows, marine grasses and lichens. Summer had already brought forth some plants, which Mr. Malarius recognized as a species which was very common in Norway.

The encampment of the “Vega” consisted of a large store-house for their eatables, which had been made by the orders of Nordenskiold, in case the pressure of the ice should destroy his ship, which so frequently happens on these dangerous coasts. It was a touching fact that the poor population, although always half starved, and to whom this depot represented incalculable wealth in the shape of food, had respected it, although it was but poorly guarded. The huts of skin of these Tschoutskes were grouped here and there around the station. The most imposing structure was the “Tintinjaranga,” or ice-house, which they had especially arranged to use for a magnetic observatory, and where all the necessary apparatus had been placed. It had been built of blocks of ice delicately tinted and cemented together with snow; the roof of planks was covered with cloth.

The voyagers of the “Alaska” were cordially welcomed by the young astronomer, whom they found at the time of their arrival holding a consultation with the man in charge of the store-house. He offered with hearty goodwill to take them on board the “Vega” by the path which had been cut in the ice in order to keep open the means of communication between the vessel and the land, and a rope attached to stones served as a guide on dark nights. As they walked, he related to them their adventures since they had been unable to send home any dispatches.

After leaving the mouth of the Lena, Nordenskiold had directed his course toward the islands of New Siberia, which he wished to explore, but finding it almost impossible to approach them, on account of the ice which surrounded them, and the shallowness of the water in that vicinity, he abandoned the idea, and resumed his course toward the east. The “Vega” encountered no great difficulties until the 10th of September, but about that time a continuance of fogs, and freezing nights, compelled her to slacken her speed, besides the darkness necessitated frequented stoppages. It was therefore the 27th of September before she reached Cape Serdze-Kamen. They cast her anchor on a bank of ice, hoping to be able the next day to make the few miles which separated her from Behring's Straits and the free waters of the Pacific. But a north wind set in during the night, and heaped around the vessel great masses of ice. The "Vega" found herself a prisoner for the winter at the time when she had almost accomplished her work.

"It was a great disappointment to us, as you can imagine!" said the young astronomer, "but we soon rallied our forces, and determined to profit by the delay as much as possible, by making scientific investigations. We made the acquaintance of the 'Tschoutskes' of the neighborhood, whom no traveler has hitherto known well, and we have made a vocabulary of their language, and also gathered together a collection of their arms and utensils. The naturalists of the 'Vega' have also been diligent, and added many new arctic plants to their collection. Lastly, the end of the expedition has been accomplished, since we have doubled Cape Tchelynskin, and traversed the distance between it and the mouth of the Yenisei and of the Lena. Henceforth the north-east passage must become a recognized fact. It would have been more agreeable for us, if we could have effected it in two months, as we so nearly succeeded in doing. But provided we are not blocked in much longer, as the present indications lead us to hope, we will not have much to complain of, and we shall be able to return with the satisfaction of knowing that we have accomplished a useful work."

While listening to their guide with deep interest, the travelers were pursuing their way. They were now near enough to the "Vega" to see that her deck was covered over with a large canvas, and that her sides were protected by lofty masses of snow, and that her smoke-stacks had been carefully preserved from contact with the ice.

The immediate approach to the vessel was still more strange; she was not, as one would have expected, completely incrusted in a bed of ice, but she was suspended, as it were, in a labyrinth of lakes, islands, and canals, between which they had been obliged to throw bridges formed of planks.

“The explanation is very simple,” said the young astronomer, in reply to a question from Erik. “All vessels that pass some months surrounded by ice form around them a bed of refuse, consisting principally of coal ashes. This is heavier than snow, and when a thaw begins, the bed around the vessel assumes the aspect which you behold.”

The crew of the “Vega,” in arctic clothing, with two or three officers, had already seen the visitors whom the astronomer was bringing with him. Their joy was great when they saluted them in Swedish, and when they beheld among them the well-known and popular physiognomy of Dr. Schwaryencrona.

Neither Nordenskiold nor Captain Palender were on board. They had gone upon a geological excursion into the interior of the country, and expected to be absent five or six days. This was a disappointment to the travelers, who had naturally hoped when they found the “Vega” to present their congratulations to the great explorer.

But this was not their only disappointment.

They returned sooner, for on the 18th of July the ice broke up, and after 264 days of captivity the “Vega” resumed her voyage. On the 20th of July she issued from Behring’s Straits and set out for Yokohama.

They had hardly entered the officer’s room, when Erik and his friends were informed that three days before the “Vega” had been visited by an American yacht, or rather by its owner, Mr. Tudor Brown. This gentleman had brought them news of the world beyond their settlement, which was very acceptable, they being confined to the limited neighborhood of the Bay of Koljutschin. He told them what had happened in Europe since their departure — the anxiety that Sweden and indeed all civilized nations felt about their fate, and that the “Alaska” had been sent to search for them. Mr. Tudor Brown came from Vancouver’s Island, in the Pacific, and his yacht had been waiting there for him for three months.

“But,” exclaimed a young doctor, attached to the expedition, “he told us that he had at first embarked with you, and only left you at Brest, because he doubted whether you would be able to bring the enterprise to a successful termination!”

“He had excellent reasons for doubting it,” replied Erik, coolly, but not without a secret tremor.

“His yacht was at Valparaiso and he telegraphed for her to wait for him at Victoria, on the coast of Vancouver,” continued the doctor; “then he took the steamer from Liverpool to New York, and the railroad to the Pacific. This explains how he was able to reach here before you.”

“Did he tell you why he came?” asked Mr. Bredejord.

“He came to help us, if we stood in need of assistance, and also to inquire about a strange enough personage, whom I had incidentally mentioned in my correspondence, and in whom Mr. Tudor Brown seemed to take a great interest.”

The four visitors exchanged glances.

“Patrick O’Donoghan — was not that the name?” asked Erik.

“Precisely — or at least it is the name which is tattooed on his body, although he pretends it is not his own, but that of a friend. He calls himself Johnny Bowles.”

“May I ask if this man is still here?”

“He left us ten months ago. We had at first believed that he might prove useful to us by acting as interpreter between us and the natives of this coast, on account of his apparent knowledge of their language; but we soon discovered that his acquaintance with it was very superficial — confined, in fact, to a few words. Besides, until we came here, we were unable to hold any communications with the natives. This Johnny Bowles, or Patrick O’Donoghan, was lazy, drunken, and undisciplined. His presence on board would only have occasioned trouble for us. We therefore acceded without regret to his request to be landed on the large Island of Ljakow, as we were following the southern coast.”

“What! did he go there? But this island is uninhabited!” cried Erik.

“Entirely; but what attracted the man appeared to be the fact that its shores are literally covered by bones, and consequently by fossil ivory. He had conceived the plan of establishing himself there, and of collecting, during the summer months, all the ivory that he could find; then when, in winter, the arm of the sea which connects Ljakow with the continent should be frozen over, to transport in a sleigh this treasure to the Siberian coast, in order to sell it to the Russian traders, who come every year in search of the products of the country.”

“Did you tell these facts to Mr. Tudor Brown?” asked Erik.

“Assuredly, he came far enough to seek for them,” replied the young doctor, unaware of the deep personal interest that the commander of the “Alaska” took in the answers to the questions which he addressed to him.

The conversation then became more general. They spoke of the comparative facility with which Nordenskiold had carried out his programme. He had not met with any serious difficulties, and consequently the discovery of the new route would be an advantage to the commerce of the world. “Not,” said the officer of the “Vega,” “that this path was ever destined to be much frequented, but the voyage of the ‘Vega’ would prove to the maritime nations of the Atlantic and Pacific that it was possible to hold direct communication with Siberia by water. And nowhere would these nations, notwithstanding the vulgar opinions, find a field as vast and rich.”

“Is it not strange,” observed Mr. Bredejord, “that they have failed completely during the last three centuries in this attempt that you have now accomplished without difficulty?”

“The singularity is only apparent,” answered one of the officers. “We have profited by the experience of our predecessors, an experience often only acquired at the cost of their lives. Professor Nordenskiold has been preparing himself for this supreme effort during the last twenty years, in which he has made eight arctic expeditions. He has patiently studied the problem in all its aspects, and finally succeeded in solving it. Then we have had what our predecessors lacked, a steam vessel especially equipped for this voyage. This has enabled us to accomplish in two months a voyage that it would have taken a sailing vessel two years to do. We have also constantly been able not only to choose, but also to seek out, the most accessible route. We have fled from floating ice and been able to profit by the winds and tides. And still we have been overtaken by winter. How much more difficult it would have been for a mariner who was compelled to wait for favorable winds, and see the summer passing in the meantime.”

In such conversation they passed the afternoon, and after accepting their invitation and dining on board the “Vega,” they carried back with them to supper on board the “Alaska” all the officers who could be spared from duty. They mutually gave each other all the information and news in their power. Erik took care to inform himself exactly of the route followed by the “Vega,” in order to utilize it for his own profit. After exchanging many good wishes and with the heartfelt desire that they would all soon return in safety to their country, they separated.

The next day at dawn Erik had the “Alaska” steering for the island of Ljakow. As for the “Vega” she had to wait until the breaking up of the ice would permit her to reach the Pacific.

The first part of Erik’s task was now accomplished. He had found Nordenskiold. The second still remained to be fulfilled: to find Patrick O’Donoghan, and see if he could persuade him to disclose his secret. That this secret was an important one they were now all willing to admit, or Tudor Brown would never have committed such a dastardly crime to prevent them from becoming acquainted with it.

Would they be able to reach the Island of Ljakow before him?

It was hardly probable, for he was three days in advance of them: never mind — he would make the attempt.

The “Albatross” might lose her way, or meet with some unforeseen obstacles. As long as there was even a probability of success Erik determined to take the chances.

The weather was now mild and agreeable. Light fogs indicated an open sea, and a speedy breaking of the ice along the Siberian coast where the “Vega” had been held prisoner so long. Summer was advancing, and the “Alaska” could reasonably count upon at least ten weeks of favorable weather. The experience which they had acquired amongst the American ice had its value and would render this new enterprise comparatively easy. Lastly the north-east passage was the most direct way to return to Sweden, and besides the deep personal interest which induced Erik to take it, he had a truly scientific desire to accomplish in a reverse route the task which Nordenskiold had fulfilled. If he had succeeded, why should he not be able to do so? — this would be proving practically the experiment of the great navigator.

The wind favored the “Alaska.” For ten days it blew almost constantly from the south-east, and enabled them to make from nine to ten knots at least without burning any coal. This was a precious advantage, and besides the wind drove the floating ice toward the north and rendered navigation much less difficult. During these ten days they met with very little floating ice.

On the eleventh day, it is true they had a tempestuous snow storm followed by dense fogs which sensibly retarded the progress of the “Alaska.” But on the 29th of July the sun appeared in all its brilliancy, and on the morning of the 2d of August they came in sight of the Island of Ljakow.

Erik gave orders immediately to sail around it in order to see if the “Albatross” was not hidden in some of its creeks. Having done this they cast anchor in a sandy bottom about three miles from the southern shore. Then he embarked in his boat accompanied by his three friends and six of his sailors. Half an hour later they had reached the island.

Erik had not chosen the southern coast of the island to anchor his vessel without a reason. He had said to himself that Patrick O’Donoghan might have told the truth when he had stated that his object was to collect ivory; but if it was his intention to leave the island at the first opportunity which afforded, he would be sure to establish himself upon a spot where he would have a good view of the sea. He would undoubtedly choose some elevated place, and one as near as possible to the Siberian coast. Besides the necessity of sheltering himself against the polar winds would lead him to establish himself upon the southern coast of the island.

Erik did not pretend that his conclusions were necessarily incontrovertible, but he thought that, in any case, they would suffer no inconvenience from adopting them as the basis of a systematic exploration of the place. The results fully justified his expectations. The travelers had not walked along the shore for an hour, when they perceived on a height, perfectly sheltered by a chain of hills, facing the south, an object which could only be a human habitation. To their extreme surprise this little cottage, which was of a cubical form, was perfectly white, as if it had been covered with plaster. It only lacked green shutters to perfectly resemble a country home near Marseilles, or an American cottage.

After they had climbed the height and approached near to it, they discovered a solution of the mystery. The cottage was not plastered, it was simply built of enormous bones skillfully arranged, which gave it its white color. Strange as the materials were, they were forced to admit that the idea of utilizing them was a natural one; besides there was nothing else available on the island where vegetation was most meagre; but the whole place, even the neighboring hills were covered with bones, which Dr. Schwaryencrona recognized as the remains of wild beasts.

CHAPTER XVII.

AT LAST.

The door of the cottage was open. The visitors entered, and saw at a glance that the single room of which it consisted was empty, although it had been recently occupied. Upon the hearth, which was built of three large stones, lay some extinguished embers upon which the light ashes still lingered, although the lightest breeze would have been sufficient to carry them away. The bed, consisting of a wooden frame, from which was suspended a sailor’s hammock, still bore the impress of a human figure.

This hammock, that Erik examined immediately, bore the stamp of the “Vega.” On a sort of table formed from the shoulder-blade of some animal and supported by four thigh bones, lay some crumbs of ship’s biscuit, a pewter goblet, and a wooden spoon of Swedish workmanship.

They could not doubt that they were in the dwelling-place of Patrick O’Donoghan, and according to all appearances he had only left it a short time ago. Had he quitted the island, or had he only gone to take a walk? The only thing they could do was to make a thorough exploration of the island.

Around the habitation excavations bore witness to the fact that a great amount of hard work had been done; on a sort of plateau that formed the summit of the hill, a great quantity of ivory had been piled up, and indicated the nature of the work. The voyagers perceived that all the skeletons of elephants and other animals had been despoiled of their ivory, and they arrived at the conclusion that the natives of the Siberian coast had been aware, long before the visit of Patrick O’Donoghan, of the treasure which was to be found upon the island, and had come and carried off large quantities of it. The Irishman, therefore, had not found the quantity of ivory upon the surface of the ground which he had expected, and had been compelled to make excavations and exhume it. The quality of this ivory, which had been buried probably for a long time, appeared to the travelers to be of a very inferior quality.

Now the young doctor of the “Vega” had told them, as had the proprietor of the Red Anchor, in Brooklyn, that laziness was one of the distinguishing characteristics of Patrick O’Donoghan. It therefore seemed to them very improbable that he would be resigned to follow such a laborious and unremunerative life. They therefore felt sure that he would embrace the first opportunity to leave the Island of Ljakow. The only hope that still remained of finding him there was that which the examination of his cabin had furnished them.

A path descended to the shore, opposite to that by which our explorers had climbed up. They followed it, and soon reached the bottom, where the melting snows had formed a sort of little lake, separated from the sea by a wall of rocks. The path followed the shores of this quiet water, and going around the cliff they found a natural harbor.

They saw a sleigh abandoned on the land, and also traces of a recent fire; Erik examined the shore carefully, but could find no traces of any recent embarkation. He was returning to his companions, when he perceived at the foot of a shrub a red object, which he picked up immediately. It was one of those tin boxes painted outside with carmine which had contained that preserved beef commonly called “endaubage,” and which all vessels carry among their provisions. It was not so great a prize, since the captain of the “Vega” had supplied Patrick O’Donoghan with food. But what struck Erik as significant, was the fact that there was printed on the empty box the name of Martinez Domingo, Valparaiso.

“Tudor Brown has been here,” he cried. “They told us on board the ‘Vega’ that his vessel was at Valparaiso when he telegraphed them to wait for him at Vancouver. Besides, this box from Chili could not have been brought here by the ‘Vega,’ for it is evidently quite fresh. It can not be three days, perhaps not twenty-four hours since it has been opened!”

Dr. Schwaryencrona and Mr. Bredejord shook their heads, as if they hesitated to accept Erik’s conclusions, when turning the box in his hands, he descried written in pencil the word “Albatross,” which had doubtless been done by the person who had furnished the vessel with the beef. He pointed it out to his friends.

“Tudor Brown has been here,” he repeated, “and why should he come except to carry off Patrick O’Donoghan. Let us go, it is evident they embarked at this creek. His men, while they were waiting for him, have taken breakfast around this fire. He has carried off the Irishman, either willingly or unwillingly. I am as certain of it as if I saw them embark.”

Notwithstanding this firm belief, Erik carefully explored the neighborhood, to assure himself that Patrick O’Donoghan was no longer there. An hour’s walk convinced him that the island was uninhabited. There was no trace of a path, nor the least vestige of a human being. On all sides valleys extended as far as his sight could reach, without even a bird to animate its solitude. And above all, the gigantic bones which they beheld lying around in every direction, gave them a feeling of disgust; it seemed as if an army of animals had taken refuge in this solitary island only to die there.

“Let us go!” said Dr. Schwaryencrona. “There is no use in making a more complete search of the island; we have seen sufficient to assure us that Patrick O’Donoghan would not require much urging to induce him to leave this place!”

Four hours later they were again on board of the “Alaska,” and continuing their journey.

Erik did not hide the fact that his hopes had received a severe check. Tudor Brown had been ahead of him, he had succeeded in reaching the island first, and doubtless had carried off Patrick O’Donoghan. It was therefore hardly probable that they would succeed in finding him again. A man capable of displaying such ability in his fiendish attack upon the “Alaska,” and who could adopt such energetic measures to carry off the Irishman from such a place, would assuredly exert himself to the utmost to prevent them from ever coming in contact with him. The world is large, and its waters were open to the “Albatross.” Who could tell to what point of the compass Patrick O’Donoghan and his secret would be carried?

This is what the captain of the “Alaska” said to himself, as he walked the deck of his vessel, after giving orders to steer to the westward. And to these doleful thoughts was added a feeling of remorse that he had permitted his friends to share the dangers and fatigue of his useless expedition. It was doubly useless, since Tudor Brown had found Nordenskiold before the “Alaska,” and also preceded them to the Island of Ljakow. They must then return to Stockholm, if they ever succeeded in reaching it, without having accomplished one of the objects of the expedition. It was indeed a great disappointment. But at least their returning in a contrary direction to the “Vega” would prove the feasibility of the northeast passage. At any risk he must reach Cape Tchelynskin, and double it from east to west. At any risk he must return to Sweden by way of the Sea of Kara. It was this redoubtable Cape Tchelynskin, formerly considered impassable, that the “Alaska” crowded on steam to reach. They did not follow the exact route of the “Vega,” for Erik had no occasion to descend the Siberian coast.

Leaving to starboard the islands of Stolbovvi and Semenoffski, which they sighted on the 4th of August, they sailed due west, following closely the 76th degree of latitude, and made such good speed that in eight days they had made 35 degrees of longitude, from the 140th to the 105th degree east of Greenwich. It is true that they had to burn a great deal of coal to accomplish this, for the “Alaska” had had contrary winds almost all the time. But Erik thought rightly that everything was subordinate to the necessity of making their way out of these dangerous passes as speedily as possible. If they could once reach the mouth of the Yenisei, they could always procure the necessary fuel.

On the 14th of August, at midday they were unable to make a solar observation on account of a thick fog, which covered the whole sky. But they knew that they were approaching a great Asiatic promontory, therefore Erik advanced with extreme caution, while at the same time he had the speed of the vessel slackened.

Toward night he gave orders to have the vessel stopped. These precautions were not useless. The following morning at daylight they made soundings and found that they were in only thirty fathoms of water, and an hour afterward they came in sight of land; and the “Alaska” soon reached a bay in which she could cast anchor. They resolved to wait until the fog dispersed before going on land, but as the 15th and 16th of August passed without bringing about this desired result, Erik determined to start accompanied by Mr. Bredejord, Mr. Malarius, and the doctor. A short examination showed them that the “Alaska” was at the extreme north of the two points of Cape Tchelynskin; on two sides the land lay low toward the sea, but it rose gradually toward the south, and they perceived that it was about two or three hundred feet in height. No snow or ice was to be seen in any direction, except along the borders of the sea where there was a little band, such as is commonly seen in all arctic regions. The clayey soil was covered with abundant vegetation, consisting of mossy grasses and lichens. The coast was enlivened by great numbers of wild geese and walruses. A white bear displayed himself on top of a rock. If it had not been for the fog which cast a gray mantle over everything, the general aspect of this famous Cape Tchelynskin was not particularly disagreeable; certainly there was nothing to justify the name of Cape Severe, which it had borne for three centuries.

As they advanced to the extreme point at the west of the bay, the travelers perceived a sort of monument that crowned a height, and naturally pressed forward to visit it. They saw, as they approached, that it was a sort of "cairn," or mass of stones supporting a wooden column made out of a post. This column bore two inscriptions; the first read as follows:

"On the 19th of August, 1878, the 'Vega' left the Atlantic to double Cape Tchelynskin, *en route* for Behring's Straits."

The second read:

"On the 12th of August, 1879, the 'Albatross,' coming from Behring's Straits, doubled Cape Tchelynskin, *en route* for the Atlantic."

Once again Tudor Brown had preceded the "Alaska." It was now the 16th of August.

He had written this inscription only four days previously.

In Erik's eyes it appeared cruel and ironical; it seemed to him to say: "I will defeat you at every turn. All your efforts will be useless. Nordenskiold has solved the problem. Tudor Brown, the counter proof."

As for himself he would return humiliated and ashamed, without having demonstrated, found or proved anything. He was going without adding a single word to the inscriptions on the column. But Dr. Schwaryencrona would not listen to him, and taking out his knife from his pocket he wrote on the bottom of the post these words:

“On the 16th of August, 1879, the ‘Alaska’ left Stockholm, and came here across the Atlantic and the Siberian Sea, and has doubled Cape Tchelynskin, *en route* to accomplish the first circumpolar periplus.”

There is a strange power in words. This simple phrase recalled to Erik what a geographical feat he was in hopes of accomplishing, and without his being conscious of it restored him to good humor. It was true, after all, that the “Alaska” would be the first vessel to accomplish this voyage. Other navigators before him had sailed through the arctic-American seas, and accomplished the northwest passage. Nordenskiold and Tudor Brown had doubled Cape Tchelynskin; but no person had as yet gone from one to the other, completely around the pole, completing the three hundred and sixty degrees.

This prospect restored every one’s ardor, and they were eager to depart. Erik thought it best, however, to wait until the next day and see if the fog would lift; but fogs appeared to be the chronic malady of Cape Tchelynskin, and when next morning the sun rose without dissipating it, he gave orders to hoist the anchor.

Leaving to the south the Gulf of Taymis — which is also the name of the great Siberian peninsula of which Cape Tchelynskin forms the extreme point — the “Alaska,” directing her course westward, sailed uninterruptedly during the day and night of the 17th of August.

On the eighteenth, at day-break, the fog disappeared at last and the atmosphere was pure and enlivened by the sunshine. By midday they had rounded the point, and immediately descried a distant sail to the south-west.

The presence of a sailing-vessel in these unfrequented seas was too extraordinary a phenomenon not to attract special attention. Erik, with his glass in his hand, ascended to the lookout and examined the vessel carefully for a long time. It appeared to lie low in the water, was rigged like a schooner and had a smoke-stack, although he could not perceive any smoke. When he descended from the bridge the young captain said to the doctor:

"It looks exactly like the 'Albatross!'" Then he gave orders to put on all steam possible. In less than a quarter of an hour he saw that they were gaining on the vessel, whose appointments they were now able to discern with the naked eye. They could see that the breeze had slackened, and that her course was at right angles with that of the "Alaska."

But suddenly a change took place in the distant vessel; Clouds of smoke issued from her smoke-stack, and formed behind her a long black cloud. She was now going by steam and in the same direction as the "Alaska."

"There is now no doubt of it. It is the 'Albatross,'" said Erik.

He gave orders to the engineer to increase the speed of the "Alaska," if possible. They were then making fourteen knots, and in a quarter of an hour they were making sixteen knots. The vessel that they were pursuing had not been able to attain a like rate of speed, for the "Alaska" continued to gain upon her. In thirty minutes they were near enough to her to distinguish all her men who were maneuvering her. At last they could see the moldings and letters forming her name, "Albatross."

Erik gave orders to hoist the Swedish flag. The “Albatross” immediately hoisted the stars and stripes of the United States of America.

In a few minutes the two vessels were only separated by a few hundred yards. Then the captain of the “Alaska” took his speaking-trumpet and hailed the vessel in English:

“Ship ahoy! I wish to speak with your captain!”

In a few moments some one made his appearance on the bridge of the “Albatross.” It was Tudor Brown.

“I am the proprietor and captain of this yacht,” he said. “What do you want?”

“I wish to know whether Patrick O’Donoghan is on board!’”

“Patrick O’Donoghan is on board and can speak for himself,” answered Tudor Brown.

He made a sign, and a man joined him on the bridge.

“This is Patrick O’Donoghan,” said Tudor Brown. “What do you want with him?”

Erik was desirous of this interview so long, he had come so far in search of this man, that when he found himself unexpectedly in his presence and recognized him by his red hair and broken nose, he was at first taken aback and scarcely knew what to say to him. But gathering his ideas together, he at last made an attempt.

“I have been wishing to talk to you confidentially for several years,” he said. “I have been seeking for you, and it was to find you that I came into these seas. Will you come on board of my vessel?”

“I do not know you, and I am very well satisfied to stay where I am,” answered the man.

“But I know you. I have heard through Mr. Bowles that you were on board when the ‘Cynthia’ was wrecked, and that you had spoken to him about the infant who was tied to a buoy. I am that infant, and it is about this matter that I wish you to give me all the information in your power.”

“You must question somebody else, for I am not in the humor to give any.”

“Do you wish me to suppose that the information is not to your credit?”

“You can think what you like; it is a matter of perfect indifference to me,” said the man.

Erik resolved to betray no irritation.

“It would be better for you to tell me what I wish to know of your own free will than to be compelled to do so before a court of justice,” he said, coolly.

“A court of justice! They will have to catch me first,” answered the other, mockingly.

Here Tudor Brown interposed.

“You see it is not my fault if you have not obtained the information that you desired,” said he to Erik. “The best thing is now for us both to resume our course and go where we desire.”

“Why should we each go our way?” answered the young captain. “Would it not be better for us to keep together until we reach some civilized country where we can settle these matters.”

“I have no business with you, and do not want any one’s company,” answered Tudor Brown, moving as if he was about to leave the bridge.

Erik stopped him by a sign.

“Proprietor of the ‘Albatross,’” he said, “I bear a regular commission from my government, and am besides an officer of the maritime police. I therefore ask you to show me your papers immediately!”

Tudor Brown did not make the slightest answer, but descended the bridge with the man whom he had called. Erik waited a couple of minutes, and then he spoke again:

“Commander of the ‘Albatross,’ I accuse you of having attempted to shipwreck my vessel on the rocks of Sein, and I now summon you to come and answer this accusation before a marine tribunal. If you refuse to answer this summons it will be my duty to compel you to do so!”

“Try it if you like,” cried Tudor Brown, and gave orders to resume his journey.

During this colloquy his vessel had insensibly tacked, and now stood at right angles with the “Alaska.” Suddenly the wheel commenced to revolve and beat the water which boiled and foamed around it. A prolonged whistle was heard, and the “Albatross” carrying all the steam she could raise sped over the waters in the direction of the North Pole.

Two minutes later, the “Alaska” was rushing after her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CANNON-BALLS.

At the same time that he gave orders to pursue the “Albatross,” Erik also desired his men to get the cannon in readiness. The operation took some time, and when they had everything in order the enemy was beyond their reach. Doubtless they had taken advantage of the time occupied by their stoppage to increase their fires, and they were two or three miles ahead. This was not too great a distance for a Gatling gun to carry, but the rolling and speed of the two vessels made it probable that they would miss her; and they thought it better to wait, hoping that the “Alaska” would gain upon the enemy. It soon became evident, however, that the two vessels were equally matched, for the distance between them remained about the same for several hours.

They were obliged to burn an enormous amount of coal — an article which was becoming very scarce on board the “Alaska” — and this would be a heavy loss if they could not succeed in overtaking the “Albatross” before night set in. Erik did not think it right to do this without consulting his crew. He therefore mounted the bridge, and frankly explained to them the position in which he was placed.

“My friends,” he said, “you know that I am anxious to seize and deliver up to justice this rascal who attempted to shipwreck our vessel on the rocks of Sein. But we have hardly coal enough left to last us for six days. Any deviation from our route will compel us to finish our voyage under sail, which may make it very long and toilsome for all of us, and may even cause us to fail in our undertaking. On the other hand, the ‘Albatross’ counts upon being able to get away from us during the night. To prevent this we must not slacken our speed for a moment, and we must keep her within the range of our electric light. I feel sure, however, that we will eventually overtake her, but it may take us some time to do so. I did not feel willing to continue this pursuit without laying the facts plainly before you, and asking you if you were willing to risk the dangers which may arise for us.”

The men consulted together in a low tone, and then commissioned Mr. Hersebom to speak for them:

“We are of opinion that it is the duty of the ‘Alaska’ to capture this rascal at any sacrifice!” he said, quietly.

“Very well, then, we will do our best to accomplish it,” answered Erik.

When he found that he had the confidence of his crew, he did not spare fuel, and in spite of the desperate efforts of Tudor Brown, he could not increase the distance between them. The sun had scarcely set when the electric light of the “Alaska” was brought to bear unpityingly upon the “Albatross,” and continued in this position during the night. At day-break the distance between them was still the same, and they were flying toward the pole. At midday they made a solar observation, and found that they were in 78, 21’, 14” of latitude north, by 90 of longitude east.

Floating ice, which they had not encountered for ten or fifteen days, now became very frequent. It was necessary to ward it off, as they had been compelled to do in Baffin’s Bay. Erik, feeling sure that they would soon reach fields of ice, was careful to steer obliquely to the right of the “Albatross” so as to bar the way toward the east if she should attempt to change her course, finding her path toward the north obstructed. His foresight was soon rewarded, for in two hours a lofty barrier of ice casts its profile on the horizon. The American yacht immediately steered toward the west, leaving the ice two or three miles on its starboard. The “Alaska” immediately imitated this maneuver, but so obliquely to the left of the “Albatross” as to cut her off if she attempted to sail to the south.

The chase became very exciting. Feeling sure of the course which the “Albatross” would be compelled to take, the “Alaska” tried to push her more toward the ice. The yacht’s course becomes more and more wavering, every moment they made some change, at one time steering north at another west. Erik, mounted aloft, watched every movement she made, and thwarted her attempts to escape by appropriate maneuvers. Suddenly she stopped short, swung round and faced the “Alaska.” A long white line which was apparent extending westward told the reason of this change. The “Albatross” found herself so close to the ice-banks that she had no recourse but to turn and face them.

The young captain of the “Alaska” had scarcely time to descend, before some missile whistled past his head. The “Albatross” was armed, and relied upon being able to defend herself.

“I prefer that it should be so, and that he should fire the first shot,” said Erik, as he gave orders to return it.

His first attack was not more successful than that of Tudor Brown — for it fell short two or three hundred yards. But the combat was now begun, and the firing became regular. An American projectile cut the large sail yards of the “Alaska,” and it fell upon the deck killing two men. A small bomb from the Swedish vessel fell upon the bridge of the “Albatross,” and must have made great havoc. Then other projectiles skillfully thrown lodged in various parts of the vessel.

They had been constantly approaching each other, when suddenly a distant rumbling mingled with the roar of artillery, and the crews raising their heads saw that the sky was very black in the east.

Was a storm with its accompanying fog and blinding snow, coming to interpose between the “Albatross” and the “Alaska,” to permit Tudor Brown to escape?

This Erik wished to prevent at any price. He resolved to attempt to board her. Arming his men with sabers, cutlasses, and hatchets, he crowded on all the steam the vessel could carry and rushed toward the “Albatross.”

Tudor Brown tried to prevent this. He retreated toward the banks of ice, firing a shot from his cannon every five minutes. But his field of action had now become too limited; between the ice and the “Alaska” he saw that he was lost unless he made a bold attempt to regain the open sea. He attempted this after a few feigned maneuvers to deceive his adversary.

Erik let him do it. Then at the precise moment when the “Albatross” tried to pass the “Alaska,” she made a gaping hole in the side of the yacht which stopped her instantly, and rendered her almost unmanageable; then she fell quickly behind and prepared to renew the assault. But the weather, which had become more and more menacing, did not give him time to do this.

The tempest was upon them. A fierce wind from the south-east, accompanied by blinding clouds of snow, which not only raised the waves to a prodigious height, but dashed against the two vessels immense masses of floating ice. It seemed as if they were attacked at all points at once. Erik realized his situation, and saw that he had not a minute to lose in escaping, unless he wished to be hemmed in perhaps permanently. He steered due east, struggling against the wind, the snow, and the dashing ice.

But he was soon obliged to confess that his efforts were fruitless. The tempest raged with such violence that neither the engine of the “Alaska” nor her steel buttress were of much use. Not only did the vessel advance very slowly, but at times she seemed to be fairly driven backward. The snow was so thick that it obscured the sky, blinded the crew, and covered the bridge a foot in depth. The ice driven against the “Alaska” by the fierce wind increased and barred their progress, so that at length they were glad to retreat toward the banks, in the hope of finding some little haven where they could remain until the storm passed over.

The American yacht had disappeared, and after the blow it had received from the “Alaska” they almost doubted if it would be able to resist the tornado.

Their own situation was so perilous that they could only think of their own safety, for every moment it grew worse.

There is nothing more frightful than those arctic tempests, in which all the primitive forces of nature seem to be awakened in order to give the navigator a specimen of the cataclysms of the glacial period. The darkness was profound although it was only five o’clock in the afternoon. The engine had stopped, and they were unable to light their electric light. To the raging of the storm was added the roars of thunder and the tumult made by the floating blocks of ice dashing against each other. The ice-banks were continually breaking with a noise like the roar of a cannon.

The “Alaska” was soon surrounded by ice. The little harbor in which she had taken refuge was soon completely filled with it, and it commenced to press upon and dash against her sides until she began to crack, and they feared every moment that she would go to pieces.

Erik resolved not to succumb to the storm without a combat with it, and he set the crew to work arranging heavy beams around the vessel so as to weaken the pressure as much as possible, and distribute it over a wider surface. But, although this protected the vessel, it led to an unforeseen result which threatened to be fatal.

The vessel, instead of being suddenly crushed, was lifted out of the water by every movement of the ice, and then fell back again on it with the force of a trip-hammer. At any moment after one of these frightful falls they might be broken up, crushed, buried. To ward off this danger there was only one resource, and this was to re-enforce their barrier by heaping up the drift ice and snow around the vessel to protect her as well as they could.

Everybody set to work with ardor. It was a touching spectacle to see this little handful of men taxing their pygmy muscles to resist the forces of nature — trying with anchors, chains, and planks to fill up the fissures made in the ice and to cover them with snow, so that there might be a uniformity of motion among the mass. After four or five hours of almost superhuman exertions, and when their strength was exhausted, they were in no less danger, for the storm had increased.

Erik held a consultation with his officers, and it was decided that they should make a depot on the ice-field for their food and ammunition in case the “Alaska” should be unable to resist the powerful shocks to which she was being subjected. At the first moment of danger every man had received provisions enough for eight days, with precise instructions in case of disaster, besides being ordered to keep his gun in his belt even while he was working. The operation of transporting twenty tons of provisions was not easy of accomplishment, but at last it was done and the food was placed about two hundred yards from the ship under a covering of tarred canvas, which was soon covered by the snow with a thick white mantle.

This precaution, having been taken, everybody felt more comfortable as to the result of a shipwreck, and the crew assembled to recruit their strength with a supper supplemented with tea and rum.

Suddenly, in the midst of supper, a more violent shock than any that had as yet agitated the vessel, split the bed of ice and snow around the “Alaska.” She was lifted up in the stern with a terrible noise, and then it appeared as if she were plunging head-foremost into an abyss. There was a panic, and every one rushed on deck. Some of the men thought that the moment had come to take refuge on the ice, and without waiting for the signal of the officers they commenced clambering over the bulwarks.

Four or five of these unfortunate ones managed to leap on a snow-bank. Two others were caught between the masses of floating ice and the beams of the starboard, as the “Alaska” righted herself.

Their cries of pain and the noise of their crushed bones were lost in the storm. There was a lull, and the vessel remained motionless. The lesson which the sailors had been taught was a tragical one. Erik made use of it to enforce on the crew the necessity of each man’s retaining his presence of mind, and of waiting for positive orders on all occasions.

“You must understand,” he said to his men, “that to leave the ship is a supreme measure, to which we must have recourse only at the last extremity. All our efforts ought to be directed toward saving the ‘Alaska.’ Deprived of her, our situation will be a very precarious one on the ice. It is only in case of our vessel becoming uninhabitable that we must desert it. In any case such a movement should be made in an orderly manner to avoid disasters. I therefore expect that you will return quietly to your supper, and leave to your superior officers the task of determining what is best to do!”

The firmness with which he spoke had the effect of reassuring the most timid, and they all descended again. Erik then called Mr. Hersebom and asked him to untie his good dog Kaas, and follow him without making any noise.

“We will go on the field of ice,” he said, “and seek for the fugitives and make them return to their duty, which will be better for them than wandering about.”

The poor devils were huddled together on the ice, ashamed of their escapade, and at the first summons were only too glad to take the path toward the “Alaska.”

Erik and Mr. Hersebom having seen them safely on board, walked as far as their depot of provisions, thinking that another sailor might have taken refuge there. They went all around it but saw no one.

“I have been asking myself the last few moments,” said Erik, “if it would not be better to prevent another panic by landing part of the crew?”

“It might be better perhaps,” answered the fisherman. “But would not the men who remained on board feel jealous and become demoralized by this measure?”

“That is true,” said Erik. “It would be wiser to occupy them up to the last moment in struggling against the tempest, and it is in fact the only chance we have of saving the ship. But since we are on the ice we may as well take advantage of it, and explore it a little. I confess all these crackings and detonations inspire me with some doubt as to its solidity!”

Erik and his adopted father had not gone more than three hundred feet from their depot of provisions before they were stopped short by a gigantic crevasse which lay open at their feet. To cross it would have required long poles, with which they had neglected to supply themselves. They were therefore compelled to walk beside it obliquely toward the west, in order to see how far it reached.

They found that this crevasse extended for a long distance, so long that after they had walked for half an hour they could not see the end of it. Feeling more secure about the extent of this field of ice upon which they had established their depot of provisions, they turned to retreat their steps.

After they had walked over about half of the distance a new vibration occurred, followed by detonations and tumultuous heavings of ice. They were not greatly disturbed by this, but increased their speed, being anxious to discover whether this shock had had done the “Alaska” any mischief.

The depot was soon reached, then the little haven that sheltered the vessel.

Erik and Mr. Hersebom rubbed their eyes, and asked each other whether they were dreaming, for the “Alaska” was no longer there.

Their first thought was that she had been swallowed up by the waters. It was only too natural that they should think this after such an evening as they had just passed.

But immediately they were struck by the fact that no *débris* was visible, and that the little harbor had assumed a new aspect since their departure. The drift ice which the tempest had piled up around the “Alaska” had been broken up, and much of it had drifted away. At the same time Mr. Hersebom mentioned a fact which had not struck him while they were hurrying along, and this was that the wind had changed and was now blowing from the west.

Was it not possible that the storm had carried away the floating ice in which the “Alaska” had become embedded. Yes, evidently it was possible; but it remained for them to discover whether this supposition was true. Without delaying a moment, Erik proceeded to reconnoiter, followed by Mr. Hersebom.

They walked for a long time. Everywhere the drift was floating freely, the waves came and went, but the whole aspect of things around them looked strange and different.

At length Erik stopped. Now he understood what had befallen them. He took Mr. Hersebom’s hand and pressed it with both his own.

“Father,” said he, in a grave voice, “you are one of those to whom I can only speak the truth. Well, the fact is that this ice-field has split; it has broken away from that which surrounded the ‘Alaska,’ and we are on an island of ice hundreds of yards long, and carried along by the waters, and at the mercy of the storm.”

CHAPTER XIX.

GUNSHOTS.

About two o’clock in the morning Erik and Mr. Hersebom, exhausted with fatigue, laid down side by side between two casks, under the canvas that protected their provisions. Kaas, also, was close to them and kept them warm with his thick fur. They were not long in falling asleep. When they awoke the sun was already high in the heavens, the sky was blue and the sea calm. The immense bank of ice upon which they were floating appeared to be motionless, its movement was so gentle and regular. But along the two edges of it which were nearest to them enormous icebergs were being carried along with frightful rapidity. These gigantic crystals reflected like a prism the solar rays, and they were the most marvelous that Erik had ever beheld.

Mr. Hersebom also, although but little inclined in general, and especially in his present situation, to admire the splendor of Nature in the arctic regions, could not help being impressed with them.

“How beautiful this would look were we on a good ship!” he said, sighing.

“Bah!” answered Erik, with his usual good humor. “On board a ship one must be thinking only how to avoid the icebergs so as not to be crushed to pieces, whilst on this island of ice we have none of these miseries to worry us.”

As this was evidently the view of an optimist, Mr. Hersebom answered with a sad smile. But Erik was determined to take a cheerful view of things.

“Is it not an extraordinary piece of good luck that we have this depot of provisions?” he said. “Our case would, indeed, be a desperate one if we were deprived of everything; but, with twenty casks of biscuits, preserved meats, and, above all, our guns and cartridges, what have we to fear? At the most, we will only have to remain some weeks without seeing any land that we can reach. You see, dear father, that we have happened upon this adventure in the same manner as the crew of the ‘Hansa.’”

“Of the ‘Hansa’?” asked Mr. Hersebom, with curiosity.

“Yes, a vessel that set out in 1869 for the arctic seas. Part of her crew were left, as we are, on a floating field of ice, while they were occupied in transporting some provisions and coal. The brave men accommodated themselves as well as they could to this new life, and after floating for six mouths and a half over a distance of several thousand leagues, ended by landing in the arctic regions of North America.”

“May we be as fortunate!” said Mr. Hersebom, with a sigh. “But it would be well I think for us to eat something.”

“That is also my opinion!” said Erik. “A biscuit and a slice of beef would be very acceptable.”

Mr. Hersebom opened two casks to take out what they required for their breakfast, and as soon as his arrangements were completed they did ample justice to the provisions.

“Was the raft of the crew of the ‘Hansa’ as large as ours?” asked the old fisherman, after ten minutes conscientiously devoted to repairing his strength.

“I think not — ours is considerably larger. The ‘Hansa’s’ became gradually much smaller, so that the unfortunate shipwrecked men were at last compelled to abandon it, for the waves began to dash over them. Fortunately they had a large boat which enabled them, when their island was no longer habitable, to reach another. They did this several times before they at last reached the main-land.”

“Ah, I see!” said Mr. Hersebom, “they had a boat — but we have not. Unless we embark in an empty hogshead I do not see how we can ever leave this island of ice.”

“We shall see about it when the time comes!” answered Erik. “At the present moment I think the best thing that we can do is to make a thorough exploration of our domain.”

He arose, as did Mr. Hersebom, and they commenced climbing a hill of ice and snow — a hummock is the technical name — in order to obtain a general idea of their island.

They found it from one end to the other lying and floating insensibly upon the polar ocean. But it was very difficult to form a correct estimate either of its size or shape; for a great number of hummocks intercepted their view on all sides. They resolved, however, to walk to the extremity of it. As far as they could judge from the position of the sun, that end of the island which extended toward the west had been detached from the mass of which it had formerly been a part, and was now turning to the north. They therefore supposed that their ice raft was being carried toward the south by the influence of the tide and breeze, and the fact that they no longer saw any trace of the long barriers of ice, which are very extensive in the 78, fully corroborated this hypothesis.

Their island was entirely covered with snow, and upon this snow they saw distinctly here and there at a distance some black spots, which Mr. Hersebom immediately recognized as “ongionks,” that is to say, a species of walrus of great size. These walruses doubtless inhabited the caverns and crevasses in the ice, and believing themselves perfectly secure from any attack, were basking in the sunshine.

It took Erik and Mr. Hersebom more than an hour to walk to the extreme end of their island. They had followed closely the eastern side, because that permitted them to explore at the same time both their raft and the sea. Suddenly Kaas, who ran ahead of them, put to flight some of the walruses which they had seen in the distance. They ran toward the border of the field of ice in order to throw themselves into the water. Nothing would have been more easy than to have killed a number of them. But what would have been the use of their doing so, since they could not make a fire to roast their delicate flesh? Erik was occupied about other matters. He carefully examined the ice-field, and found that it was far from being homogeneous. Numerous crevasses and fissures, which seemed to extend in many cases for a long distance, made him fear that a slight shock might divide it into several fragments. It was true that these fragments might in all probability be of considerable size; but the possibility of such an accident made them realize the necessity of keeping as close as possible to their depot of provisions, unless they wished to be deprived of them. Erik resolved to examine carefully their whole domain, and to make his abode on the most massive portion; the one that seemed capable of offering the greatest resistance. He also determined to transport to this spot their depot of provisions.

It was with this resolve that Mr. Hersebom and Erik continued their exploration of the western coast, after resting a few minutes at the northerly point. They were now following that portion of the ice-field where they had attacked the American yacht.

Kaas ran on before them, seeming to enjoy the freshness of the air, and being in his true element on this carpet of snow, which doubtless reminded him of the plains of Greenland.

Suddenly Erik saw him sniff the air and then dart forward like an arrow, and stop barking beside some dark object, which was partially hidden by a mass of ice.

“Another walrus, I suppose!” he said, hurrying forward.

It was not a walrus which lay extended on the snow, and which had so excited Kaas. It was a man, insensible, and covered with blood, whose clothing of skins was assuredly not the dress worn by any seamen of the “Alaska.” It reminded Erik of the clothing worn by the man who had passed the winter on the “Vega.” He raised the head of the man; it was covered with thick red hair, and it was remarkable that his nose was crushed in like that of a negro.

Erik asked himself whether he was the sport of some illusion.

He opened the man’s waistcoat, and bared his chest. It was perhaps as much to ascertain whether his heart still beat as to seek for his name.

He found his name tattooed in blue, on a rudely designed escutcheon. “Patrick O’Donoghan, ‘Cynthia,’” and his heart still beat. The man was not dead. He had a large wound in his head, another in his shoulder, and on his chest a contusion, which greatly interfered with his respiration.

“He must be carried to our place of shelter, and restored to life,” said Erik, to Mr. Hersebom.

And then he added in a low tone as if he was afraid of being overheard.

“It is he, father, whom we have been seeking for such a long time without being able to find him — Patrick O’Donoghan — and see he is almost unable to breathe.”

The thought that the secret of his life was known to this bloody object upon which death already appeared to have set his seal, kindled a gloomy flame in Erik’s eyes. His adopted father divined his thoughts, and could not help shrugging his shoulders — he seemed to say:

“Of what use would it be to discover it now. The knowledge of all the secrets in the world would be useless to us.”

He, however, took the body by the limbs, while Erik lifted him under the arms, and loaded with this burden they resumed their walk.

The motion made the wounded man open his eyes. Soon the pain caused by his wounds was so great that he began to moan and utter confused cries, among which they distinguished the English word “drink!”

They were still some distance from their depot of provisions. Erik, however, stopped and propped the unfortunate man against a hummock, and then put his leathern bottle to his lips.

It was nearly empty, but the mouthful of strong liquor that Patrick O’Donoghan swallowed seemed to restore him to life. He looked around him, heaved a deep sigh and then said:

“Where is Mr. Jones?”

“We found you alone on the ice,” answered Erik. “Had you been there long?”

“I do not know!” answered the wounded man, with difficulty. “Give me something more to drink.” He swallowed a second mouthful and then he recovered sufficiently to be able to speak.

“When the tempest overtook us the yacht sunk,” he explained. “Some of the crew had time to throw themselves into the boats, the rest perished. At the first moment of peril Mr. Jones made a sign for me to go with him into a life-boat, which was suspended in the stern of the yacht and that every one else disdained on account of its small dimensions, but which proved to be safe, as it was impossible to sink it. It is the only one which reached the ice island — all the others were upset before they reached it. We were terribly wounded by the drift ice which the waves threw into our boat, but at length we were able to draw ourselves beyond their reach and wait for the dawn of day. This morning Mr. Jones left me to go and see if he could kill a walrus, or some sea-bird, in order that we might have something to eat. I have not seen him since!”

“Is Mr. Jones one of the officers of the ‘Albatross’?” asked Erik.

“He is the owner and captain of her!” answered O’Donoghan, in a tone which seemed to express surprise at the question.

“Then Mr. Tudor Brown is not the captain of the ‘Albatross’?”

“I don’t know,” said the wounded man, hesitatingly, seeming to ask himself whether he had been too confidential in speaking as freely as he had done.

Erik did not think it wise to insist on this point. He had too many other questions to ask.

“You see,” he said to the Irishman, as he seated himself on the snow beside him, “you refused the other day to come on board of my ship and talk with me, and your refusal has occasioned many disasters. But now that we have met again, let us profit by this opportunity to talk seriously and like rational men. You see you are here on a floating ice-bank, without food, and seriously wounded, incapable by your own efforts of escaping the most cruel death. My adopted father and myself have all that you need, food, fire-arms, and brandy. We will share with you, and take care of you until you are well again. In return for our care, we only ask you to treat us with a little confidence!”

The Irishman gave Erik an irresolute look in which gratitude seemed to mingle with fear — a look of fearful indecision.

“That depends on the kind of confidence that you ask for?” he said, evasively.

“Oh, you know very well,” answered Erik, making an effort to smile, and taking in his hands those of the wounded man. “I told you the other day; you know what I want to find out and what I have come so far to discover. Now, Patrick O’Donoghan, make a little effort and disclose to me this secret which is of so much importance to me, tell me what you know about the infant tied to the buoy. Give me the faintest indication of who I am, so that I may find my family. What do you fear? What danger do you run in satisfying me?”

O’Donoghan did not answer, but seemed to be turning over in his obtuse brain the arguments that Erik had used.

“But,” he said at last, with an effort, “if we succeed in getting away from here, and we reach some country where there are judges and courts, you could do me some harm?”

“No, I swear that I would not. I swear it by all that is sacred,” said Erik, hotly. “Whatever may be the injuries you have inflicted upon me or upon others, I guarantee that you shall not suffer for them in any way. Besides, there is one fact of which you seem to be ignorant, it is that there is a limit to such matters. When such events have taken place more than twenty years ago, human justice has no longer the right to demand an accounting for them.”

“Is that true?” asked Patrick O’Donoghan, distrustfully. “Mr. Jones told me that the ‘Alaska’ had been sent by the police, and you yourself spoke of a tribunal.”

“That was about recent events — an accident that happened to us at the beginning of our journey. You may be sure that Mr. Jones was mocking you, Patrick. Doubtless he has some interest of his own for wishing you not to tell.”

“You may be sure of that,” said the Irishman, earnestly. “But how did you discover that I was acquainted with this secret?”

“Through Mr. and Mrs. Bowles of the Red Anchor in Brooklyn, who had often heard you speak of the infant tied to the buoy.”

“That is true,” said the Irishman. He reflected again. “Then you are sure that you were not sent by the police?” he said, at length.

"No — what an absurd idea. I came of my own accord on account of my ardent desire, my thirst, to discover the land of my birth and to find out who my parents were, that is all."

O'Donoghan smiled, proudly:

"Ah, that is what you want to know," he said. "Well, it is true that I can tell you. It is true that I know."

"Tell me — tell me!" cried Erik, seeing that he hesitated. "Tell me and I promise you pardon for all the evil that you have done, and my everlasting gratitude if I am ever in a position to show it!"

The Irishman gave a covetous look at the leathern bottle.

"It makes my throat dry to talk so much," he said, in a faint tone. "I will drink a little more if you are willing to give it to me."

"There is no more here, but we can get some at our depot of provisions. We have two large cases of brandy there," answered Erik, handing the bottle to Mr. Hersebom.

The latter immediately walked away, followed by Kaas.

"They will not be gone long," said the young man, turning toward his companion. "Now, my brave fellow, do not make merchandise of your confidence. Put yourself in my place. Suppose that during all your life you had been ignorant of the name of your country, and that of your mother, and that at last you found yourself in the presence of a man who knew all about it, and who refused the information which was of such inestimable value to you, and that at the very time when you had saved him, restored him to consciousness and life. I do not ask you to do anything impossible. I do not ask you to criminate yourself if you have anything to reproach yourself with. Give me only an indication, the very slightest. Put me on the track, so that I can find my family; and that is all that I shall ask of you."

"By my faith, I will do you this favor!" said Patrick, evidently moved. "You know that I was a cabin-boy on board the 'Cynthia'?"

He stopped short.

Erik hung upon his words. Was he at last going to find out the truth? Was he going to solve this enigma and discover the name of his family, the land of his birth? Truly the scene appeared to him almost chimerical. He fastened his eyes upon the wounded man, ready to drink in his words with avidity. For nothing in the world would he have interfered with his recital, neither by interruption nor gesture. He did not even observe that a shadow had appeared behind him. It was the sight of this shadow which had stopped the story of Patrick O'Donoghan.

"Mr. Jones!" he said, in the tone of a school-boy detected in some flagrant mischief.

Erik turned and saw Tudor Brown coming around a neighboring hummock, where until this moment he had been hidden from their sight.

The exclamation of the Irishman confirmed the suspicion which during the last hour had presented itself to his mind.

Mr. Jones and Tudor Brown were one and the same person.

He had hardly time to make this reflection before two shots were heard.

Tudor Brown raised his gun and shot Patrick O’Donoghan through the heart, who fell backward.

Then before he had time to lower his rifle, Tudor Brown received a bullet in his forehead, and fell forward on his face.

“I did well to come back when I saw suspicious footprints in the snow,” said Mr. Hersebom, coming forward, his gun still smoking in his hands.

CHAPTER XX.

THE END OF THE VOYAGE.

Erik gave a cry and threw himself on his knees beside Patrick O'Donoghan, seeking for some sign of life, a ray of hope. But the Irishman was certainly dead this time, and that without revealing his secret.

As for Tudor Brown, one convulsion shook his body, his gun fell from his hands, in which he had tightly held it at the moment of his fall, and he expired without a word.

"Father, what have you done?" cried Erik, bitterly. "Why have you deprived me of the last chance that was left to me of discovering the secret of my birth? Would it not have been better for us to throw ourselves upon this man and take him prisoner?"

"And do you believe that he would have allowed us to do so?" answered Mr. Hersebom. "His second shot was intended for you, you may be sure. I have avenged the murder of this unfortunate man, punished the criminal who attempted to shipwreck us, and who is guilty perhaps of other crimes. Whatever may be the result, I do not regret having done so. Besides of what consequence is the mystery surrounding your birth, my child, to men in our situation? The secret of your birth before long, without doubt, will be revealed to us by God."

He had hardly finished speaking, when the firing of a cannon was heard, and it was re-echoed by the icebergs. It seemed like a reply to the discouraging words of the old fisherman. It was doubtless a response to the two gunshots which had been fired on their island of ice.

“The cannon of the ‘Alaska!’ We are saved!” cried Erik, jumping up and climbing a hummock to get a better view of the sea that surrounded them.

He saw nothing at first but the icebergs, driven by the wind and sparkling in the sunshine. But Mr. Hersebom, who had immediately reloaded his gun, fired into the air, and a second discharge from the cannon answered him almost immediately.

Then Erik discovered a thin streak of black smoke toward the west, clearly defined against the blue sky. Gunshots, answered by the cannon, were repeated at intervals of a few minutes, and soon the “Alaska” steamed around an iceberg and made all speed toward the north of the island.

Erik and Mr. Hersebom, weeping for joy, threw themselves into each other’s arms. They waved their handkerchiefs and threw their caps into the air, seeking by all means to attract the attention of their friends.

At length the “Alaska” stopped, a boat was lowered, and in twenty minutes it reached their island.

Who can describe the unbounded joy of Dr. Schwaryencrona, Mr. Bredejord, Mr. Malarius, and Otto when they found them well and safe; for through the long hours of that sad night they had mourned them as lost.

They related all that had befallen them — their fears and despair during the night, their vain appeals, their useless anger. The “Alaska” had been found in the morning to be almost entirely clear of the ice, and they had dislodged what remained with the assistance of their gunpowder. Mr. Bosewitz had taken command, being the second-officer, and had immediately started in search of the floating island, taking the direction in which the wind would carry it. This navigation amidst floating icebergs was the most perilous which the “Alaska” had as yet attempted; but thanks to the excellent training to which the young captain had accustomed his crew, and to the experience which they had acquired in maneuvering the vessel, they passed safely among these moving masses of ice without being crushed by them. The “Alaska” had had the advantage of being able to travel more swiftly than the icebergs, and she had been able to benefit by this circumstance. Kind Providence had willed that her search should not prove fruitless. At nine o’clock in the morning the island had been sighted. They recognized it by its shape, and then the two shots from the guns made them hopeful of finding their two shipwrecked friends.

All their other troubles now appeared to them as insignificant. They had a long and dangerous voyage before them, which they must accomplish under sail, for their coal was exhausted.

“No,” said Erik, “we will not make it under sail. I have another plan. We will permit the ice island to tow us along, as long as she goes toward the south or west. That will spare us incessantly fighting with the icebergs, for our island will chase them ahead of her. Then we can collect here all the combustibles that we will require in order to finish the voyage, when we are ready to resume it.”

“What are you talking about?” asked the doctor, laughing. “Is there an oil-well on this island?”

“Not exactly an oil-well,” answered Erik, “but what will answer our purpose nearly as well, multitudes of fat walruses. I wish to try an experiment, since we have one furnace especially adapted for burning oil.”

They began their labors by performing the last rites of the two dead men. They tied weights to their feet and lowered them into the sea. Then the

“Alaska” made fast to the ice bank in such a manner as to follow its movements without sustaining any injury to herself. They were able, with care, to carry on board again the provisions which they had landed, and which it was important for them not to lose. That operation accomplished, they devoted all their energies to the pursuit of the walrus.

Two or three times a day, parties armed with guns and harpoons and accompanied by all their Greenland dogs landed on the ice bank, and surrounded the sleeping monsters at the mouth of their holes. They killed them by firing a ball into their ears, then they cut them up, and placed the lard with which they were filled in their sleighs, and the dogs drew it to the “Alaska.” Their hunting was so easy and so productive, that in eight days they had all the lard that they could carry. The “Alaska,” still towed by the floating island, was now in the seventy-fourth degree; that is to say, she had passed Nova Zembla.

The ice island was now reduced at least one-half, and cracked by the sun was full of fissures, more or less extensive, evidently ready to go to pieces. Erik resolved not to wait until this happened, and ordering their anchor to be lifted, he sailed away westward.

The lard was immediately utilized in the fire of the “Alaska,” and proved an excellent combustible. The only fault was that it choked up the chimney, which necessitated a daily cleaning. As for its odor, that would doubtless have been very disagreeable to southern passengers, but to a crew composed of Swedes and Norwegians, it was only a secondary inconvenience.

Thanks to this supply, the “Alaska” was able to keep up steam during the whole of the remainder of her voyage. She proceeded rapidly, in spite of contrary winds, and arrived on the 5th of September in sight of Cape North or Norway. They pursued their route with all possible speed, turned the Scandinavian Peninsula, repassed Skager-Rack, and reached the spot from which they had taken their departure.

On the 14th of September they cast anchor before Stockholm, which they had left on the tenth of the preceding February.

Thus, in seven months and four days, the first circumpolar periplus had been accomplished by a navigator of only twenty-two years of age.

This geographical feat, which so promptly completed the great expedition of Nordenskiold, would soon make a prodigious commotion in the world. But the journals and reviews had not as yet had time to expatiate upon it. The uninitiated were hardly prepared to understand it, and one person, at least, reviewed it with suspicion — this was Kajsa. The supercilious smile with which she listened to the story of their adventures was indescribable.

“Was it sensible to expose yourself to such dangers?” was her only comment.

But the first opportunity that presented itself she did not fail to say to Erik:

“I suppose that now you will do nothing more about this tiresome matter, since the Irishman is dead.”

What a difference there was between these cold criticisms and the letters full of sympathy and tenderness that Erik soon received from Noroe.

Vanda told him in what a state of anxiety she and her mother had passed these long months, how the travelers had been ever present in their thoughts, and how happy they were when they heard of their safe return. If the expedition had not accomplished all that Erik hoped, they begged him not to worry himself too much about it. He must know that if he never succeeded in finding his own family he had one in the poor Norwegian village, where he would be tenderly cared for like one of themselves. Would he not soon come and see them, could he not stay with them one little month. It was the sincere desire of his adopted mother and of his little sister Vanda, etc. etc.

The envelope also contained three pretty flowers, gathered on the borders of the fiord, and their perfume seemed to bring back vividly to Erik his gay and careless childhood. Ah, how sweet these loving words were to his poor disappointed heart, and they enabled him to fulfill more easily the concluding duties appertaining to the expedition. He hoped soon to be able to go and tell them all he felt. The voyage of the “Alaska” had equaled in grandeur that of the “Vega.” The name of Erik was everywhere associated with the glorious name of Nordenskiold. The journals had a great deal to say about the new periplus. The ships of all nations anchored at Stockholm united in doing honor to this national victor. The learned societies came in a body to congratulate the commander and crew of the “Alaska.” The public authorities proposed a national recompense for them.

All these praises were painful to Erik. His conscience told him that the principal motive of this expedition on his part had been purely a personal one, and he felt scrupulous about accepting honors which appeared to him greatly exaggerated. He therefore availed himself of the first opportunity to state frankly that he had gone to the polar seas to discover if possible the secret of his birth, and of the shipwreck of the “Cynthia,” that he had been unsuccessful in doing so.

The occasion was offered by a reporter of one of the principal newspapers of Stockholm, who presented himself on board of the “Alaska” and solicited the favor of a private interview with the young captain. The object of this intelligent gazeteer, let us state briefly, was to extract from his victim the outlines of a biography which would cover one hundred lines. He could not have fallen on a subject more willing to submit to vivisection. Erik had been eager to tell the truth, and to proclaim to the world that he did not deserve to be regarded as a second Christopher Columbus. He therefore related unreservedly his story, explaining how he had been picked up at sea by a poor fisherman of Noroe, educated by Mr. Malarius, taken to Stockholm by Dr. Schwaryencrona; how they had found out that Patrick O'Donoghan probably held the key to the mystery that surrounded him. They discovered that he was on board of the "Vega;" they had gone in search of him. He related the accident which had induced them to change their route. Erik told all this to convince the world that he was no hero. He told it because he felt ashamed of being so overwhelmed with praises for a performance that only seemed to him natural and right.

During this time the pen of the delighted reporter, Mr. Squirrelius, flew over the paper with stenographic rapidity. The dates, the names, the least details were noted with avidity. Mr. Squirrelius told himself with a beating heart that he had obtained matter not only for one hundred lines, but that he could make five or six hundred out of it. And what a story it would be — more interesting than a novel!

The next day Erik's revelations filled the columns of the most largely circulated newspaper in Stockholm, and indeed in all Sweden. As is usually the case, Erik's sincerity, instead of diminishing his popularity, only increased it, on account of his modesty, and the romantic interest attached to his history. The press and the public seized upon it with avidity. These biographical details were soon translated into all languages, and made the tour of Europe. In this way they reached Paris, and penetrated in the form of a French newspaper into a modest drawing-room on Varennes Street.

There were two persons in this room. One was a lady dressed in black, with white hair, although she still appeared to be young, but her whole appearance betrayed profound sorrow. Seated under a lighted lamp she worked mechanically at some embroidery, which at times fell from her thin fingers, while her eyes, fixed on vacancy, seemed to be thinking of some overwhelming calamity.

On the other side of the table sat a fine-looking old gentleman, who took the newspaper abstractedly which his servant brought in.

It was Mr. Durrien, the honorary consul-general of the geographical society, the same person who had been at Brest when the "Alaska" reached that place.

This was doubtless the reason why Erik's name attracted his notice, but while reading the article carefully which contained the biography or the young Swedish navigator, he was startled. Then he read it again carefully, and little by little an intense pallor spread over his face, which was always pale. His hands trembled nervously, and his uneasiness became so evident that his companion noticed it.

"Father, are you suffering?" she asked with solicitude.

"I believe it is too warm here — I will go to the library and get some fresh air. It is nothing; it will pass off," answered Mr. Durrien, rising and walking into the adjoining room.

As if by accident, he carried the paper with him.

If his daughter could have read his thoughts, she would have known that amidst the tumults of hopes and fears that so agitated him was also a determination not to let her eyes rest upon that paper.

A moment later she thought of following him into the library, but she imagined that he wished to be alone, and discreetly yielded to his desire. Besides she was soon reassured by hearing him moving about and opening and closing the window.

At the end of an hour, she decided to look in, and see what Mr. Durrien was doing. She found that he was seated before his desk writing a letter. But she did not see that us he wrote his eyes filled with tears.

CHAPTER XXI.

A LETTER FROM PARIS.

Since his return to Stockholm, Erik had received every day from all parts of Europe a voluminous correspondence. Some learned society wished for information on some point, or wrote to congratulate him; foreign governments wished to bestow upon him some honor or recompense; ship-owners, or traders, solicited some favor which would serve their interests.

Therefore he was not surprised when he received one morning two letters bearing the Paris postmark.

The first that he opened was an invitation from the Geographical Society of France, asking him and his companions to come and receive a handsome medal, which had been voted in a solemn conclave “to the navigators of the first circumpolar periplus of the arctic seas.”

The second envelope made Erik start, he looked at it. On the box which closed it was a medallion upon which the letters “E.D.” were engraved, surrounded by the motto “Semper idem.”

These initials and devices were also stamped in the corner of the letter enclosed in the envelope, which was that from Mr. Durrien.

The letter read as follows:

“My dear child, — Let me call you this in any case. I have just read in a French newspaper a biography translated from the Swedish language, which has overcome me more than I can tell you. It was your account of yourself. You state that you were picked up at sea about twenty-two years ago by a Norwegian fisherman in the neighborhood of Bergen; that you were tied to a buoy, bearing the name of ‘Cynthia;’ that the especial motive of your arctic voyage was to find a survivor of the vessel of that name — ship wrecked in October, 1858; and then you state that you have returned from the voyage without having been able to gain any information about the matter.

“If all this is true (oh, what would I not give if it is true!), I ask you not to lose a moment in running to the telegraph office and letting me know it. In that case, my child, you can understand my impatience, my anxiety, and my joy. In that case you are my grandson, for whom I have mourned so many years, whom I believed lost to me forever, as did also my daughter, my poor daughter, who, broken-hearted at the tragedy of the ‘Cynthia,’ still mourns every day for her only child — the joy and consolation at first of her widowhood, but afterward the cause of her despair.

“But we shall see you again alive, covered with glory. Such happiness is too great, too wonderful. I dare not believe it until a word from you authorizes me to do so. But now it seems so probable, the details and dates agree so perfectly, your countenance and manners recall so vividly those of my unfortunate son-in-law. Upon the only occasion when chance led me into your society, I felt myself mysteriously drawn toward you by a deep and sudden sympathy. It seems impossible that there should be no reason for this.

“One word, telegraph me one word. I do not know how to exist until I hear from you. Will it be the response that I wait for so impatiently? Can you bring such happiness to my poor daughter and myself as will cause us to forget our past years of tears and mourning?

“E. DURRIEN, Honorary Consul-general,

“104 Rue de Varennes, Paris.”

To this letter was added one of explanation, that Erik devoured eagerly. It was also in Mr. Durrien’s handwriting, and read as follows:

“I was the French consul at New Orleans when my only daughter, Catherine, married a young Frenchman, Mr. George Durrien, a distant connection, and, like ourselves, of Breton origin. Mr. George Durrien was a mining engineer. He had come to the United States to explore the recently discovered mines of petroleum and intended to remain several years. I received him into my family — he being the son of a dear friend — and when he asked for my daughter’s hand, I gave her to him with joy. Shortly after their marriage I was appointed consul to Riga; and my son-in-law being detained by business interests in the United States, I was obliged to leave my daughter. She became a mother, and to her son was given my Christian name, united to that of his father — Emile Henry Georges.

“Six months afterward my son-in-law was killed by an accident in the mines. As soon as she could settle up his affairs, my poor daughter, only twenty years of age, embarked at New York on the ‘Cynthia’ for Hamburg, to join me by the most direct route.

“On the 7th of October, 1858, the ‘Cynthia’ was shipwrecked off the Faroe Islands. The circumstances of the shipwreck were suspicious, and have never been explained.

“At the moment of the disaster, when the passengers were taking their places one by one in the boat, my little grandson, seven months old — whom his mother had tied to a buoy for safety — slipped or was pushed into the sea, and was carried away by the storm and disappeared. His mother, crazed by this frightful spectacle, tried to throw herself into the sea.

She was prevented by main force and placed in a fainting condition in one of the boats, in which were three other persons, and who had alone escaped from the shipwrecked vessel. In forty-nine hours this boat reached one of the Faroe Islands. From there my daughter returned to me after a dangerous illness which lasted seven weeks, thanks to the devoted attentions of the sailor who saved her and who brought her to me. This brave man, John Denman, died in my service in Asia Minor.

“We had but little hope that the baby had survived the shipwreck. I, however, sought for him among the Faroe and Shetland Islands, and upon the Norwegian coast north of Bergen. The idea of his cradle floating any further seemed impossible, but I did not give up my search for three years; and Noroe must be a very retired spot, or surely some inquiries would have been made there. When I had given up all hope I devoted myself exclusively to my daughter, whose physical and moral health required great attention. I succeeded in being sent to the Orient, and I sought, by traveling and scientific enterprises, to draw off her thoughts from her affliction. She has been my inseparable companion sharing all my labors, but I have never been able to lighten her incurable grief. We returned to France, and we now live in Paris in an old house which I own.

“Will it be my happiness to receive there my grandson, for whom we have mourned so many years? This hope fills me with too much joy, and I dare not speak of it to my daughter, until I am assured of its truth; for, if it should prove false, the disappointment would be too cruel.

“To-day is Monday: they tell me at the post-office that by next Saturday I can receive your answer.”

Erik had hardly been able to read this, for the tears would obscure his sight. He also felt afraid to yield too quickly to the hope which had been so suddenly restored to him. He told himself that every detail coincided — the dates agreed; all the events down to the most minute particulars. He hardly dared to believe, however, that it could be true. It was too much happiness to recover in a moment his family, his own mother, his country. And such a country — the one that he could have chosen above all because she possessed the grandeur, the graces, the supreme gifts of humanity — because she had fostered genius, and the civilization of antiquity, and the discoveries and inventions of modern times.

He was afraid that he was only dreaming. His hopes had been so often disappointed. Perhaps the doctor would say something to dispel his illusions. Before he did anything he would submit these facts to his cooler judgment.

The doctor read the documents attentively which he carried to him, but not without exclamations of joy and surprise.

“You need not feel the slightest doubt!” he said, when he had finished. “All the details agree perfectly, even those that your correspondent omits to mention, the initials on the linen, the device engraved on the locket, which are the same as those on the letter. My dear child, you have found your family this time. You must telegraph immediately to your grandfather!”

“But what shall I tell him?” asked Erik, pale with joy.

“Tell him that to-morrow you will set out by express, to go and embrace him and your mother!”

The young captain only took time to press the hands of this excellent man, and he ran and jumped into a cab to hasten to the telegraph office.

He left Stockholm that same day, took the railroad to Malmo on the north-west coast of Sweden, crossed the strait in twenty minutes, reached Copenhagen, took the express train through to Holland and Belgium, and at Brussels the train for Paris.

On Saturday, at seven o’clock in the evening, exactly six days after Mr. Durrien had posted his letter, he had the joy of waiting for his grandson at the depot.

As soon as the train stopped they fell into each other’s arms. They had thought so much about each other during these last few days that they both felt already well acquainted.

“My mother?” asked Erik.

“I have not dared to tell her, much as I was tempted to do so!” answered Mr. Durrien.

“And she knows nothing yet?”

“She suspects something, she fears, she hopes. Since your dispatch I have done my best to prepare her for the unheard-of joy that awaits her. I told her of a track upon which I had been placed by a young Swedish officer, the one whom I had met at Brest, and of whom I had often spoken to her. She does not know, she hesitates to hope for any good news, but this morning at breakfast I could see her watching me, and two or three times I felt afraid that she was going to question me. One can not tell, something might have happened to you, some other misfortune, some sudden mischance. So I did not dine with her to-night, I made an excuse to escape from a situation intolerable to me.”

Without waiting for his baggage, they departed in the *coup* that Mr. Durrien had brought.

Mme. Durrien, alone in the parlor in Varennes Street, awaited impatiently the return of her father. She had had her suspicions aroused, and was only waiting until the dinner hour arrived to ask for an explanation.

For several days she had been disturbed by his strange behavior, by the dispatches which were continually arriving, and by the double meaning which she thought she detected beneath all he said. Accustomed to talk with him about his lightest thoughts and impressions, she could not understand why he should seek to conceal anything from her. Several times she had been on the point of demanding a solution of the enigma, but she had kept silence, out of respect for the evident wishes of her father.

“He is trying to prepare me for some surprise, doubtless,” she said to herself. “He is sure to tell me if anything pleasant has occurred.”

But for the last two or three days, especially that morning, she had been impressed with a sort of eagerness which Mr. Durrien displayed in all his manner, as well as the happy air with which he regarded her, insisting in hearing over and over again from her lips, all the details of the disaster of the “Cynthia,” which he had avoided speaking of for a long time. As she mused over his strange behavior a sort of revelation came to her. She felt sure that her father must have received some favorable intelligence which had revived the hope of finding her child. But without the least idea that he had already done so, she determined not to retire that night until she had questioned him closely.

Mme. Durrien had never definitely renounced the idea that her son was living. She had never seen him dead before her eyes, and she clung mother-like to the hope that he was not altogether lost to her. She said that the proofs were insufficient, and she nourished the possibility of his sudden return. She might be said to pass her days waiting for him. Thousands of women, mothers of soldiers and sailors, pass their lives under this touching delusion. Mrs. Durrien had a greater right than they had to preserve her faith in his existence. In truth the tragical scene enacted twenty-two years ago was always before her eyes. She beheld the “Cynthia” filling with water and ready to sink. She saw herself tying her infant to a large buoy while the passengers and sailors were rushing for the boats. They left her behind, she saw herself imploring, beseeching that they would at least take her baby. A man took her precious burden, and threw it into one of the boats, a heavy sea dashed over it, and to her horror she saw the buoy floating away on the crest of the waves. She gave a dispairing cry and tried to jump after him, then came unconsciousness. When she awoke she was a prey to despair, to fever, to delirium. To this succeeded increasing grief. Yes, the poor woman recalled all this. Her whole being had in fact received a shock from which she had never recovered. It was now nearly a quarter of a century since this had happened, and Mrs. Durrien still wept for her son as on the first day. Her maternal heart so full of grief was slowly consuming her life. She sometimes pictured to herself her son passing through the successive phases of infancy, youth, and manhood. From year to year she represented to herself how he would have looked, how he was looking, for she obstinately clung to her belief of the possibility of his return.

This vain hope nothing had as yet had the power to shake — neither travels, nor useless researches, nor the passage of time.

This is why this evening she awaited her father with the firm resolution of knowing all that he had to tell.

Mr. Darrien entered. He was followed by a young gentleman, whom he presented to her in the following words:

“My daughter, this is Mr. Erik Hersebom, of whom I have often spoken to you, and who has just arrived at Paris. The Geographical Society wish to bestow upon him a grand medal, and he has done me the honor to accept our hospitality.”

She had arisen from her arm-chair, and was looking kindly at him. Suddenly her eyes dilated, her lips trembled, and she stretched out her hands toward him.

“My son! you are my son!” she cried.

Then she advanced a step toward Erik.

“Yes, you are my child,” she said. “Your father lives over again in you!”

When Erik, bursting into tears, fell on his knees before her, the poor woman took his head in her hands, and fainted from joy and happiness as she tried to press a kiss on his forehead.

CHAPTER XXII.

AT VAL-FERAY.

A month later at Val-Féray, an old homestead of the family, situated half a league from Brest, Erik’s adopted family were assembled, together with his mother and grandfather. Mrs. Durrien had, with the delicacy of feeling habitual to her, desired that the good, simple-hearted beings who had saved her son’s life should share her profound and inexpressible joy. She had insisted that Dame Katrina, and Vanda, Mr. Hersebom, and Otto should accompany Doctor Schwaryencrona, Kajsa, Mr. Bredejord, and Mr. Malarius, and they held a great festival together.

Amidst the rugged natural scenery of Breton and near the sea, her Norwegian guests felt more at their ease than they could have done in Varennes Street. They took long walks in the woods together, and told each other all they knew about Erik’s still somewhat obscure history, and little by little many hitherto inexplicable points became clear. Their long talks and discussions cast light upon many obscure circumstances.

The first question they asked each other was, Who was Tudor Brown? What great interest did he have in preventing Patrick O’Donoghan from telling who Erik’s relations were? The words of that unfortunate man had established one fact, viz. that Tudor Brown’s real name was Jones, as it was the only one that the Irishman had known him by. Now, a Mr. Noah Jones had been associated with Erik’s father in working a petroleum mine, that the young engineer had discovered in Pennsylvania. The simple announcement of this fact gave a sinister aspect to many events which had so long appeared mysterious: the suspicious wreck of the “Cynthia,” the fall of the infant into the sea, perhaps the death of Erik’s father. A document that Mr.

Durrien found among his papers elucidated many of these perplexing questions.

“Several months before his marriage,” he said to Erik’s friends, “my son-in-law had discovered, near Harrisburg, a petroleum well. He lacked the capital necessary to purchase it, and he saw that he was in danger of losing all the advantages which the possession of it would secure to him. Chance made him acquainted with Mr. Noah Jones, who represented himself as a cattle dealer from the far West. But in reality, as he found out afterward, he was a slave-trader.

“This individual agreed to advance the sum necessary to purchase and work the petroleum mine, which was called the Vandalia. He made my son-in-law sign, in exchange for this assistance, an agreement which was very profitable to himself. I was ignorant of the terms of this contract at the time of his marriage to my daughter, and according to all appearances he thought but little of it. Unusually gifted, and understanding chemistry and mechanics, yet he was entirely ignorant of business matters, and already had to pay dearly for his inexperience. No doubt he had trusted all the arrangements to Noah Jones, according to his usual habit. Probably he signed with closed eyes the contract which was laid before him. These are the principle articles agreed upon:

“Art. III. The Vandalia shall remain the sole property of Mr. George Durrien, the discoverer, and Mr. Noah Jones, his silent partner.

“Art. IV. Mr. Noah Jones will take charge of moneys, and pay out what is necessary for the exploration of the mine, he will also sell the product, take charge of the receipts, and have a settlement with his partner every year, when they will divide the net profits.

“Art. V. If either of the partners should wish to sell his share, the other would have the first right to purchase it, and he should have three months in which to make arrangements to do so. He might then become sole proprietor by paying the capital and three per cent. on the net revenue, according to what it had been proved to be at the last inventory.

“Art. VI. Only the children of the two partners could become inheritors of these rights. In case one of the partners should die childless, or his children should not live until they were twenty-one years of age, the entire property to revert to the survivor, to the exclusion of all other heirs of the dead partner.

“N.B. The last article is on account of the different nationalities of the two partners, and because of the complications that could not fail to arise in case of the death of either of them without issue.”

“Such,” continued Mr. Durrien, “was the contract which my future son-in-law had signed at the time, when he had no thought of marrying, and when everybody, except, perhaps, Mr. Noah Jones, was ignorant of what immense value the Vandalia mine would become in the course of time. They had then hardly commenced operations, and they met with the usual discouragements incident to all new undertakings. Perhaps Noah Jones hoped that his associate would become disgusted with the whole business and retire, leaving him sole proprietor. The marriage of George with my daughter, the birth of his son, and the well becoming suddenly prodigiously fruitful, must have modified his plans by degrees. He could no longer hope to purchase for a trifling sum this splendid property; but before it came into the possession of Noah Jones, first George himself, and then his only child, must disappear from the world. Two years after his marriage and six months after the birth of my grandson, George was found dead near one of the wells — asphyxiated, the doctors said, by gas. I had left the United States upon my nomination as consul to Riga. The business relating to the partnership was left to an attorney to settle. Noah Jones behaved vert well, and agreed to all the arrangements that were made for the benefit of my daughter. He agreed to continue the work, and pay every six months into the Central Bank of New York that part of the net profits which belonged to the infant. Alas! he never made the first payment. My daughter took passage in the 'Cynthia' in order to join me. The 'Cynthia' was lost with her crew and freight under such suspicious circumstances that the insurance company refused to pay; and in this shipwreck the sole heir of my son-in-law disappeared.

"Noah Jones remained the sole proprietor of the Vandalia, which has yielded him at the least since that event an annual income of one hundred and eighty thousand dollars a year."

"Did you never suspect that he had had some hand in these successive catastrophies?" asked Mr. Bredejord.

"I have certainly suspected him; it was only too natural. Such an accumulation of misfortunes, and all tending to his private enrichment, seemed to point him out as the author only too clearly. But how could I prove my suspicions, particularly in a court of justice? They were only vague, and I knew too well that they would have but little weight in an international contest. And then, besides I had my daughter to console, or at least to try and draw away her thoughts from this tragedy, and a lawsuit would only have revived her grief. Briefly I resigned myself to silence. Did I do wrong? Is it to be regretted?"

"I think not, for I feel convinced that it would have produced no results. You see how difficult it is even today, after we have related all the facts in our possession, to arrive at any definite conclusion!”

“But how can you explain the part which Patrick O’Donoghan has taken in this matter?” asked Dr. Schwaryencrona.

“On this point, as on many others, we are reduced to conjectures, but it seems to me that there is one which is plausible enough. This O’Donoghan was cabin-boy on board of the ‘Cynthia,’ in the personal service of the captain, and consequently in constant communication with the first-class passengers, who always eat at the captain’s table. He therefore certainly knew the name of my daughter, and her French origin, and he could easily have found her again.

“Had he been commissioned by Noah Jones to perform some dark mission? Had he a hand in causing the shipwreck of the ‘Cynthia,’ or simply in pushing the infant into the sea? this they could never know for a certainty since he was dead. One thing was evident, he was aware how important the knowledge of this fact was for Noah Jones. But did this lazy drunken man know that the infant was living? Had he any hand in saving it? Had he rescued it from the sea to leave it floating near Noroe?

“This was a doubtful point. In any case he must have assured Noah Jones that the infant had survived. He was doubtless proud of knowing the country which had received him, and he had probably taken precautions to know all about the child, so that if any misfortune happened to him — O’Donoghan — Noah Jones would be obliged to pay him well for his silence. He was doubtless the person from whom he received money every time he landed in New York.”

“All this appears to me to be very probable,” said Mr. Bredejord, “and I think that subsequent events confirm it. The first advertisements of Doctor

Schwaryencrona disturbed Noah Jones, and he believed it to be an imperative necessity to get rid of Patrick O’Donoghan, but he was obliged to act prudently. He therefore contented himself with frightening the Irishman, by making him believe that he would be brought before a criminal court. The result of this we know from Mr. and Mrs. Bowles, of the Red Anchor, who told us of the haste with which Patrick O’Donoghan had taken flight. He evidently believed that he was in danger of being arrested, or he would not have gone so far, to live among the Samoyedes, and under an assumed name, which Noah Jones had doubtless advised him to do.

“But the announcement in the newspapers about Patrick O’Donoghan must have been a severe blow to him. He had made a journey to Stockholm expressly to assure us that the Irishman was dead, and doubtless to discover if possible how far we had pushed our inquiries. The publication of the correspondence of the ‘Vega, and the departure of the ‘Alaska,’ must have made Noah Jones, or Tudor Brown, as he called himself, feel that he was in imminent peril, for his confidence in Patrick O’Donoghan could be only very limited, and he would have revealed his secret to any one who would have assured him that he would not be punished. Happily as affairs have turned out, we may congratulate ourselves upon having escaped pretty well.”

“Who knows?” said the doctor, “perhaps all the danger we have encountered has only helped to bring us to the knowledge of the truth. But for running on the rocks of the Basse-Froide, we would probably have pursued the route through the Suez Canal, and then we should have reached Behring’s Strait too late to meet the ‘Vega.’ It is at least doubtful whether we would have undertaken the voyage to the Island of Ljakow, and more doubtful still whether we would have been able to extract any information from Patrick O’Donoghan if we had met him in company with Tudor Brown.

“So, although our entire voyage has been marked by tragical events, it is due to the fact of our having accomplished the periplus in the ‘Alaska, and the consequent celebrity which has been the result for Erik, that he has at last found his family.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Durrien, laying her hand proudly on the head of her son, “it is his glory which has restored him to me.”

And immediately she added:

“It was a crime that deprived me of you, but your own goodness which has restored you to me!”

“And the rascality of Noah Jones has resulted in making our Erik one of the richest men in America,” cried Mr. Bredejord.

Every one looked at him with surprise.

“Doubtless,” answered the eminent lawyer. “Erik is his father’s heir, and has a share in the income, derived from the Vandalia mine. Has he not been unjustly deprived of this for the last twenty-two years?

“We have only to give proofs of his identity, and we have plenty of witnesses, Mr. Hersebom, Dame Katrina and Mr. Malarius, besides ourselves. If Noah Jones has left any children, they are responsible for the enormous arrears which will probably consume all their share of the capital stock.

"If the rascal has left no children, by the terms of the contract which Mr. Durrien has just read, Erik is the sole inheritor of the entire property; and according to all accounts he ought to have in Pennsylvania an income of one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand dollars a year!"

"Ah, ah," said the doctor, laughing. "Behold the little fisherman of Noroe become an eligible *parti!* Laureate of the Geographical Society, author of the first circumpolar periplus, and afflicted with the modest income of two hundred thousand dollars. There are not many such husbands to be met with in Stockholm. What do you say Kajsa?"

The young girl blushed painfully at being thus addressed, but her uncle had no suspicion that he had made a cruel speech.

Kajsa had felt that she had not acted wisely in treating Erik as she had done, and she resolved for the future to show him more attention.

But it was a singular fact that Erik no longer cared for her, since he felt himself elevated above her unjust disdain. Perhaps it was absence, or the lonely hours which he had spent walking the deck at night, which had revealed to him the poverty of Kajsa's heart; or it might be the satisfaction he felt that she could no longer regard him as "a waif"; he only treated her now with the most perfect courtesy, to which she was entitled as a young lady and Dr. Schwaryencrona's niece.

All his preference now was for Vanda, who indeed grew every day more and more charming, and was losing all her little village awkwardness under the roof of an amiable and cultivated lady. Her exquisite goodness, her native grace, and perfect simplicity, made her beloved by all who approached her. She had not been eight days at Val-Fray, when Mrs.

Durrien declared positively that it would be impossible for her ever to part with her.

Erik undertook to arrange with Mr. Hersebom and Dame Katrina that they should leave Vanda behind them, with the express condition that he would bring her himself every year to see them. He had tried to keep all his adopted family with him, even offering to transport from Noroe the house with all its furniture where he had passed his infancy. But this project of emigration was generally regarded as impracticable. Mr. Hersebom and Katrina were too old to change their habits. They would not have been perfectly happy in a country of whose language and habits they were ignorant. He was obliged, therefore, to permit them to depart, but not before making such provision for them as would enable them to spend the remainder of their days in ease and comfort, which, notwithstanding their honest, laborious lives, they had been unable to accomplish.

Erik would have liked to have kept Otto at least, but he preferred his fiord, and thought that there was no life preferable to that of a fisherman. It must also be confessed that the golden-haired and blue-eyed daughter of the overseer of the oil-works had something to do with the attractions which Noroe had for him. At least we must conclude so, since it was soon made known that he expected to marry her at the next “Yule,” or Christmas.

Mr. Malarius counted upon educating their children as he had educated Erik and Vanda. He modestly resumed his position in the village school, after sharing in the honor of the decorations bestowed by the Geographical Society of France upon the captain of the “Alaska.” He was also busily occupied in correcting the proofs of his magnificent work on the “Flora of the Arctic Regions.” As for Dr. Schwaryencrona, he has not quite finished his “Treatise on Iconography,” which will transmit his name to posterity.

The latest legal business of Mr. Bredejord has been to establish Erik’s claim as sole proprietor of the Vandalia mine. He gained his case in the first instance, and also on appeal, which was no small success.

Erik took advantage of this, and of the enormous fortune thus accruing to him, to purchase the “Alaska,” which he converted into a pleasure yacht. He uses it every year to go to Noroe in company with Mme. Durrien and Vanda, to visit his adopted family. Although his civil rights have been accorded to him, and his legal name is Emile Durrien, he has added that of Hersebom, and among his relatives he is still called only Erik.

The secret desire of his mother is to see him some day married to Vanda, whom she already loves as a daughter, and, as Erik evidently shares this desire, we may suppose that it will be realized one of these days.

Kajsa still remains single, with the knowledge that she has lost her opportunity.

Dr. Schwaryencrona, Mr. Bredejord, and Professor Hochstedt still play innumerable games of whist.

One evening the doctor, having played worse than usual, Mr. Bredejord, as he tapped his snuff-box, had the pleasure of recalling to his mind a circumstance which had too long been forgotten.

“When do you intend to send me your Pliny?” he asked, with a wicked gleam in his eye. “Certainly you can no longer think that Erik is of Irish origin?”

The doctor was thunder-struck for a moment by this speech, but he soon recovered himself.

“Bah! an ex-president of the French Republic was a direct descendant of one of the Irish kings,” he said, seriously. “I should not be at all surprised if Mr. Durrien belongs to the same family!”

“Evidently,” replied Mr. Bredejord. “In fact it is so extremely probable that out of sport I will send you my Quintilian!”

THE END.

NORTH AGAINST SOUTH

Also known as *Texar's Revenge*, this novel was originally published in 1887. It tells the story of James Burbank, an antislavery northerner living near Jacksonville, Florida, and Texar, a pro-slavery southerner who holds a vendetta against Burbank.

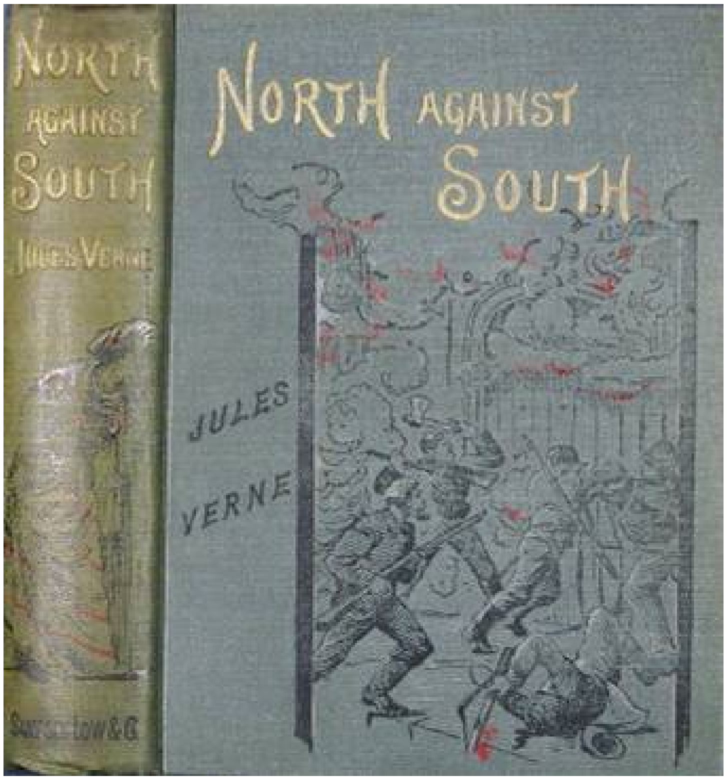
NORTH AGAINST SOUTH
JULES VERNE
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NORTH AGAINST SOUTH
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BURBANK THE NORTHERNER.

CHAPTER I.

ON BOARD THE “SHANNON.”

Florida was annexed to the American federation in 1819; it was organized into a state a few years afterwards. By the annexation the area of the republic was increased by some 67,000 square miles. But the star of Florida shines with second-rate brilliancy in that constellation of thirty- eight which spangle the banner of the United States of America.

Florida, throughout, is a low, narrow tongue of land, and its rivers, with one exception — the St. John’s — owing to the narrowness of the country, are of no importance. From such a slight rise, there is not sufficient fall for the watercourses to be of any rapidity; there are no mountains, only a few lines of “bluffs “or low hills such as are numerous in the central and southern regions of the Union. In form the peninsula is not unlike the tail of a beaver dipping into the ocean between the Atlantic on the east and the Gulf of Mexico on the west.

Florida’s nearest neighbour to the north is Georgia, the frontier running a little above the isthmus which joins the peninsula to the continent.

Florida seems to be a country apart, with its people half Spaniards, half Americans, and its Seminole Indians so different to their congeners in the west. In the south it is arid, sandy, almost entirely bordered by sand-hills formed by successive irruptions of the Atlantic; but in the north its plains are of marvellous fertility. Its name is justified, to the letter. The flora is superb, vigorous, and of exuberant variety, more especially in that portion watered by the St. John’s. This river is a broad stream flowing from south to north, over a course of some two hundred and fifty miles, of which one hundred and seventeen, up to Lake George, arc navigable. The rivers flowing east and west have no room for length; but the St. John’s, from its central course to the north, suffers from no such hindrance, and numerous branches run into it or rather into the multitudinous creeks along its banks. The St. John’s is in fact the chief artery of the country, which receives its life from its waters, for water is the blood of the earth.

It was the 7th of February, 1862. The steamboat Shannon was running down the St. John’s. At four o’clock in the afternoon she was due at Picolata, after calling at the piers higher up the river, and the forts in St. John’s and Putnam counties. A few miles beyond she would enter Duval county, which is bordered by Nassau county and cut off from it by the river bearing that name.

Picolata itself is not of much importance, but its neighbourhood is rich in indigo plantations, sugar plantations, rice fields, cotton fields, and vast cypress groves. For some distance round the population is numerous, and it is an important centre for trade and travellers. It is the landing-place for St. Augustine, one of the chief towns of eastern Florida, situated some dozen miles away on that part of the sea-coast sheltered by the long island of Anas- tasia. An almost straight road leads from the river port to the town.

On the pier at Picolata there are to-day many more travellers than usual. Some speedy vehicles known as stages, each seating eight persons, drawn by four or six mules galloping like mad along the road across the marsh, had brought them from St. Augustine. It was important for them not to miss the steamboat; to do so would be to risk a delay of at least forty-eight hours in getting back to the towns and villages down the river. For the Shannon made only one passage up or down each day, and she was the only means of transport. It was therefore necessary to be at Picolata when she called; and the vehicles had unloaded their passengers an hour before she was due.

There were about fifty men on the gangway at Picolata. While they waited they were talking excitedly. They had divided into two groups not at all anxious to mix with each other. What had brought them from St. Augustine? Was it some serious matter, some political contest? It was obvious that there was no chance of their agreeing. Enemies they had come and enemies they would return. That could be seen clearly enough from the angry looks they exchanged, from the marked division between the groups, from several ill-sounding words whose defiant meaning no one could mistake.

A prolonged whistling began to be heard above stream.

The Shannon soon appeared at the bend of the right bank half a mile above Picolata. Thick clouds of smoke escaped from her two funnels, and crowned the large trees which the sea breeze was shaking on the opposite bank. The moving mass grew larger rapidly. The tide had just turned; and the current, which for three or four hours had been against her, was now in her favour and taking the waters of the St. John's towards the sea.

At length the bell was heard. The wheels going astern stopped the Shannon, and her hawsers brought her alongside the pier.

The passengers went on board somewhat hastily. One of the groups went first; the other did not move. It looked as though they were waiting for one or several travellers who ran a chance of being late. Two or three men went up the pier to the place where the road from St. Augustine came in; and then they looked towards the east, evidently with impatience.

And not without reason; for the captain of the Shannon, who was on the bridge, shouted to them, —

“Now then! come on!”

“In a minute or two,” answered one of the men in the group that remained on the gangway.

“I can’t wait, gentlemen.”

“A few minutes!”

“No! not one!”

“Only a moment!”

“Impossible! The tide is running out, and I may have no water over the bar at Jacksonville.”

“And besides,” said one of those on board, “there is no reason why we should put up with their fancies.”

“That is what I think, Mr. Burbank,” said the captain. “Duty first. Now then, gentlemen, come on board; I am off.”

And the sailors began to push away the steamboat from the pier, while sonorous jets escaped from the steam- whistle. A shout stopped the manoeuvre.

“There is Texar! There is Texar!”

A carriage came rattling along at full speed and dashed round the turning up to the pier. The four mules, which formed the team, stopped at the gate. A man got down. Those of his companions who had gone up the road rejoined him at a run. Then all of them went on board the boat.

“A moment more, Texar, and you could not have gone. That would have been awkward for you,” said one of the group.

“Yes! It would have been two days before you got back to — where? — We shall know when you choose to tell us!” added another.

“And if the captain had listened to that rascal Burbank,” said a third, “the Shannon would have been a quarter of a mile down stream by now.”

Texar had just stepped on to the fore deck-house, accompanied by his friends. He contented himself with a look at James Burbank from where he was only separated from him by the bridge. Although he said not a word, the look he gave was sufficient to show the implacable hatred that existed between the two men. Burbank looked Texar straight in the face, turned his back on him, and went to sit on the after deck-house, where his friends had already- seated themselves.

“Burbank is not happy!” said one of Texar’s companions. “And no wonder! He lost by his lies, and the recorder did justice to his false witness — ”

“But not to himself,” interrupted Texar, “and that justice I will undertake.”

The Shannon had slacked off the hawsers. Her bow pushed off by the long poles, took the line of the current, and driven by her powerful wheels, helped by the ebbing tide, she glided rapidly between the banks of the St. John’s.

American river steamboats are well known. They are many-storied houses crowned with wide terraces, and dominated by the two funnels and the flagstaff’s which support the ironwork of the awnings. On the Hudson as on the Mississippi, these steamboats are floating palaces, and can hold the population of a small town. But there was no need for such grandeur on the St. John's. The Shannon was only a floating hotel, although in its interior and exterior arrangements it was similar to the Kentucky and the Dean Richmond.

The weather was magnificent. The very blue sky was spotted with light freckles of vapour that thinned off towards the horizon. In the thirtieth parallel of latitude the month of February is almost as warm in the New World as it is in the old on the confines of the Sahara; but a gentle breeze blown in from the sea tempers its excess.

Most of the passengers on the Shannon stopped on the deck-house to breathe the fresh air that the wind brought them from riverside forests. The slanting rays of the sun could not reach them beneath the awnings which were shaken like punkahs by the speed of the steamboat.

Texar and the five or six companions who had embarked with him, had thought well to go below to one of the boxes in the dining-room. There, with throats seasoned to the strongest drinks of American bars, they tossed off whole glasses of gin and Bourbon whiskey. They were indeed a rough lot, rude in habit and speech, wearing more leather than cloth, and more accustomed to live in the woods than in cities. Texar appeared to have some right of superiority over them, due, doubtless, to the energy of his character as well as to his position and means. When Texar did not talk, his comrades remained silent and spent the time in drinking.

Texar, after carelessly running his eye over one of the newspapers which littered the dining-room tables, had just thrown it aside, saying, —

"That is all old news."

“I believe you,” said one of his companions, “the paper is three days old.”

“And a good many things happen in three days,” added another.

“What is the latest about the war?” asked Texar.

“As far as we are concerned, the latest is that the Federals are preparing an expedition against Florida, and that means we may expect an invasion of northerners!”

“Is that true?”

“I don’t know, but I heard of it at Savannah, and I heard of it again at St. Augustine.”

“Well, let these Federals come!” exclaimed Texar, striking his fist on the table so as to make the glasses and bottles shake. “Yes! let them come! and we shall see if the Florida slave-owners will allow themselves to be robbed by the abolitionist thieves.”

Texar’s reply will have told two things to those readers who are unacquainted with what was then happening in America. First, that the war of Secession, declared really by the gun fired on Fort Sumter on the nth April, 1861, was then in its most critical phase, for it had extended almost to the farthest limits of the Southern States; and secondly, that Texar, a supporter of slavery, made common cause with the immense majority of the people in the slave states. On board the Shannon were representatives of both parties. One — to use the different appellations bestowed on them during the long struggle — consisting of northerners, anti-slavery men, abolitionists or federals; the other of southerners, slavery men, secessionists or confederates.

An hour afterwards Texar and his comrades, having had quite enough to drink, appeared on the upper deck of the Shannon. She had already passed Trent Creek and Six Mile Creek on the right bank, Trent Creek coming in from a vast cypress grove, Six Mile Creek bringing its waters down from the Twelve Mile Marsh, of which the name tells the extent The steamboat's course lay between borders of magnificent trees, tulip-trees, magnolias, pines, cypresses, yuccas, and many others, whose trunks were hidden by the wild undergrowth of azaleas and serpentarias. Occasionally, at the mouths of the creeks leading up to the marshy plains of St. John and Duval counties, a strong odour of musk impregnated the atmosphere, coming not from the shrubs, whose emanations are so penetrating in this climate, but from the alligators hurrying under the bushes at the noisy passage of the Shannon. Then there were birds of all sorts, woodpeckers, herons, jacamars, bitterns, white-headed pigeons, mocking-birds, and a hundred others differing in form and plumage, while the cat bird reproduced all the sounds of the forest with his ventriloquial voice.

As Texar mounted the last of the steps on to the upper deck, a woman met him on her way down to the interior of the saloon. When she found herself face to face with him, she stepped back. She was a half-breed in the service of the Burbank faildy; her first movement had been one of unconquerable repulsion at finding herself suddenly face to face with the declared- enemy of her master.

Texar gave her an evil look as she stepped back, and then shrugging his shoulders, he joined his companions.

“Yes, it is Zermah,” he said, “one of the slaves of Mr. James Burbank, who says he does not approve of slavery.”

Zermah made no reply. When the way to the saloon was clear, she went down it without turning to take any notice of the observation.

Texar strolled towards the bow of the steamboat; there after lighting a cigar, he apparently dismissed from his notice the friends who had followed him, and began to watch with some attention the left bank of the St John’s along the border of Putnam county.

Meanwhile, on the after-deck of the Shannon, the conversation had run on the war. When Zermah went, Burbank had remained with two of his friends, who had accompanied him to St. Augustine. One was his brother- in-law, Edward Carrol, the other was Mr. Walter Stannard, a Floridan living at Jacksonville. They were talking with considerable animation of the sanguinary strife of which the issue was a question of life or death to the United States. But, as we shall see, Burbank’s opinion of the issue differed considerably from Texar’s.

“I am anxious,” said he, “to get back to Camdless Bay. We have been two days away. Perhaps some news of the war has arrived. Perhaps Dupont and Sherman are now masters of Port Royal and the islands of South Carolina.”

“Anyhow, it will not be long before they are,” said Carrol, “and I shall be much astonished if President Lincoln does not carry the war into Florida.”

“And it will not be before it is time!” said Burbank. “It is quite time that the will of the Union should be imposed on these southerners of Georgia and Florida, who fancy they are too far off to be reached! See to what a degree of insolence vagabonds like Texar are led! He feels that he is supported by the slaveholders, and excites them against us northerners, whose position, which gets more and more difficult every day, lays us open to the back-wash of the war.”

“You are right, James,” said Edward Carrol. “It is of consequence that Florida should return as soon as possible to the authority of the Washington Government. If the Federal army does not come quickly we shall have to abandon our plantations.”

“It may be only a question of days, Burbank,” said Stannard. “When I left Jacksonville the day before yesterday, people were getting uneasy at the news of Commodore Dupont’s supposed plans for opening up the St. John’s, and that would give a pretext for threatening those who do not think with the slave-owners. I am afraid that a rising would turn out the authorities of the town in favour of fellows of the worst description.”

“I should not be surprised if it did,” said Burbank.” We shall have a bad time of it till the Federal army comes; but it cannot be helped.”

“What can we do?” asked Walter Stannard. “Supposing there exist at Jacksonville and other places a few brave colonists who think as we do on this slave question; they are not strong enough to withstand the Secessionists. We can only reckon for safety on the arrival of the Federals, and wish that when intervention is decided on it will take place without delay.”

“Yes. Would they were here,” exclaimed Burbank,” to deliver us from these blackguards!”

And we shall soon see that these Northerners, who, on account of family or other interests, were obliged to live amid a slave-holding population and conform to the usages of the country, were fully justified in their fears and the language they held concerning them.

The news discussed by Burbank and his friends was true. The Federal Government was preparing an expedition for the subjugation of Florida; not so much, however, for the military occupation of the State as the closing of the outlets against the blockade-runners, who took away local productions and brought in arms and munitions of war. It was in consequence of this blockade that the Shannon no longer plied up the southern coast of Georgia, which was then in the power' of the Northern generals. For prudential reasons she stopped a little beyond the mouth of the St. John's, towards the north of Amelia Island, at the port of Fernandina, the terminus of the Cedar Keys railway, which crosses the Florida peninsula obliquely to the Gulf of Mexico. Higher than Amelia Island and the river St. Mary the Shannon would have risked capture from the Federal cruisers which were constantly on the coast.

It follows that the passengers were chiefly Floridans, whose business did not require their crossing the frontier. All of them were dwellers in the towns or villages on the St. John's and its affluents, and for the most part lived at St. Augustine or Jacksonville. At the different places they landed, and embarked either by the gangways from the wharves, or by piers built out in the English fashion.

One of the passengers intended, however, to quit the steamer in mid-stream. His plan was to leave her at a part of the river where there was no wharf or pier, nor village, nor isolated house, nor even hunting or fishing hut in sight.

The passenger was Texar.

About six o'clock the Shannon gave three sharp screams from her steam whistle. Her wheels were almost immediately stopped, and she began to drift along with the stream, which hereabouts runs slowly. She was then off the entrance to Black Creek.

This creek is a deep gash in the left bank, into which flows a small river of the same name, which runs by the foot of Fort Heilman, almost on the boundary between Putnam and Duval counties. Its narrow opening is entirely hidden beneath an arch of boughs and foliage matted together, as close as the woof of some close tissue. This gloomy lagoon was almost unknown to the people of the country. No one knew that Texar had there his dwelling. The opening of the creek seemed in no way to break into the line of bank, and as night was failing rapidly, it would require a very skilful boatman ‘o take a boat into such a place.

At the first whistle of the Shannon, a shout had come in answer — three times. A light burning among the trees on the bank was put in motion, showing that a canoe was coming out to meet the steamer.

It was only a skiff — a little bark boat, driven by one paddle. Soon the skiff was half a cable-length from the Shannon.

Texar stepped up to the front of the fore-deck and making a speaking-trumpet with his hands, shouted, —

“Ahoy!”

“Ahoy!” came back in answer.

“Is that you, Squambo?”

“Yes, master!”

“Come alongside.”

The skiff came alongside. By the light of the lantern attached to its bow, the man could be seen who was paddling it. He was an Indian, black-headed, naked to the waist, and sturdily built, to judge from the torso revealed in the fitful light Texar returned towards his companions and shook hands with them, bidding them a significant au revoir. Then giving a threatening look towards Mr. Burbank, he descended the ladder from the sponson, and stepped into the skiff. In a few turns of the paddle-wheels the steamer was out of sight, and no one on board could suspect that the little craft was about to vanish under the dark thickets on the bank.

“One scoundrel the less on board,” said Carrol, without caring if he were heard by Texar’s companions.

“Yes,” said James Burbank, “and at the same time, a dangerous scoundrel. I have no doubt of it myself, although he has always been able to escape conviction.”

“Anyway,” said Stannard, “if a crime is committed to-night in the neighbourhood of Jacksonville, they cannot accuse him, for he has left the Shannon.”

“I don’t know that,” said Burbank, “if they told me he had been stealing or assassinating this very moment fifty miles off in the north of Florida, I should not be surprised. And if he managed to prove that he was not the author of the crime, I should not be surprised after what has happened. But it is not worth while to worry ourselves about such a man. You are going back to Jacksonville, Stannard?”

“To-night.”

“Is your daughter expecting you?”

“Yes, I am going to meet her.”

“I understand,” said Burbank; “and when are you coming to Camdless Bay?”

“In a day or so.”

“Then come as soon as you can, my dear fellow. We are on the eve of very important events, and matters will get worse as the Federal troops come nearer. And I fancy your daughter Alice and you would be in greater safety at Castle House than in the town, where the Southerners are capable of any excess.”

“Am I not a Southerner, Burbank?”

“Certainly, but you think and act as if you belonged to the North.”

An hour afterwards the Shannon, carried along by the ebb which became stronger and stronger, passed the little village of Mandarin, placed on its green hill. Then five or six miles farther she stopped on the right bank of the river. A quay had been built there for ships to load and discharge at. A little above was an elegant pier, with a light wooden bridge suspended from two chains. This was the landing-place for Camdless Bay.

At the end of the pier were two blacks with lanterns, for the night was now very dark.

Burbank took leave of Stannard, and followed by Edward Carrol stepped off on to the pier.

Behind him went the half-breed Zermah, who answered from a distance to a child’s voice.

“I am here, Dy! I am here I”

“And father?”

“Father is here too!”

The lights receded, and the Shannon continued her voyage, crossing obliquely to the left bank.

Three miles beyond Camdless Bay, on the other side of the river, she stopped at the pier of Jacksonville to put ashore most of her passengers.

There Walter Stannard went off with three or four of the men whom Texar had left an hour and a half before. Only half a dozen passengers were left on board, some for Pablo,; little town near the lighthouse at the mouth of the St John’s, others for Talbot Island, off the coast at the opening of the channels of the same name, and others for the port of Fernandina.

The Shannon continued to beat the waters of the river, and cleared the bar without accident. An hour afterwards she disappeared at the turn of Trout Creek, where the St. John’s mingles its already rough waters with the waves of the ocean.

CHAPTER II.

CAMDLESS BAY.

Camdless Bay was the name of the plantation that belonged to James Burbank. There he lived with his family. The name of Camdless comes from one of the creeks of the St. John’s, which runs in a little above Jacksonville, and on the opposite side of the river. Communication with the city was thus easy. A good boat, a north or south wind, and the ebb for going and the flood for returning, and in an hour the three miles could be sailed between Camdless Bay and the chief town of Duval county.

Burbank owned one of the finest properties in the country. He was rich himself, and his family was rich, and in addition to the Florida estate he held important landed property in the state of New Jersey, which adjoins the state of New York.

The site on the right bank of the St. John’s had been very happily chosen for the foundation of a wealthy establishment. To its natural conveniences man had little to add. The land itself was adapted for all the requirements of extensive works, and the plantation of Camdless Bay, managed by an intelligent man, active and in the prime of life, well helped by his staff, and with no want of capital, was in a most flourishing state.

The plantation was twelve miles round, and had an area of four thousand acres. There were larger plantations in the Southern States, but there were none better managed. Dwelling-house, outbuildings, stables, cattle-sheds, huts for the slaves, farm-buildings, stores for the products of the soil, yards for handling them, workshops and mills, railways converging to the landing-place and carriage roads, — everything was marvellously arranged from a practical point of view; that it was a Northerner who had conceived, organized, and executed these works could be seen at the first glance. It was only plantations of the first class in Virginia or the Carolinas that could rival Camdless Bay. Besides, the ground consisted of “high hummocks,” adapted for the culture of cereals, “low hummocks,” specially fitted for coffee-shrubs and cocoa-trees, and marshes, or salt savannahs, where rice and sugar-cane fields could flourish.

It is well known that the cotton of Georgia and Florida is the most appreciated in the different markets of Europe and America, owing to the length and quality of its fibres, and the cotton-fields, with their plants in long, regularly- spaced lines, their leaves of tender green and their yellow flowers, were among the chief sources of revenue. At harvest-time these fields, for an acre or an acre and a half, would be covered with huts in which lived the slaves, women and children, whose duty it was to collect the capsules and take out the tufts — a very delicate operation, for the fibres must not be disturbed. The cotton, dried in the sun, was cleaned in a mill by means of toothed wheels and rollers, squeezed in a hydraulic press, done up in bales, hooped with iron, and so packed for exportation; and sailing-ships or steamers could load alongside the wharf at Camdless Bay.

James Burbank also devoted much attention to large fields of coffee-shrubs and sugar-canes. Here were plantations of from a thousand to twelve hundred trees, from fifteen to twenty feet high, resembling Spanish jasmine in their flowers, and with fruits as big as a cherry containing the two grains, which it was only necessary to extract and dry. There were large fields, we might say marshes, bristling with thousands of those long reeds, nine to eighteen feet high, with their crests shaking like the plumes of a troop of cavalry on the march. This crop, which was the subject of special care at Camdless Bay, yielded the sugar in the form of a liquor, which the refinery transformed into refined sugar, and then, as derived products the syrups used in the manufacture of tafia and rum, and cane wine, a mixture of saccharine liquor with pineapple and orange juice. Although the crop was less important than that from the cotton, the cultivation was there a very profitable one. A few enclosures of cocoa-trees, fields of maize, yams, potatoes, tobacco, and two or three hundred acres under rice, brought in a large amount of additional profit.

But James Burbank had another enterprise on hand which produced at least equal profit to that of the cotton industry. This was the clearing of the forest which covered much of the estate. To say nothing of the products of the cinnamons, pears, oranges, citrons, olives, figs, mangoes, and bread fruits, or of all the fruit trees of Europe acclimatized so splendidly in Florida, the forests were regularly and constantly thinned. And great was the value of the logwoods, gazumas or Mexican elms, now used for so many purposes, baobabs, coral woods, with twigs and flowers as red as blood, buckeyes, a kind of yellow-flowered chestnut, black walnuts, oaks, southern pines, which yield such admirable specimens for the carpenter and shipwright, pachiriers whose seeds the sun at noon explodes like so many petards, parasol pines, tulip- trees, firs, cedars, and above all cypresses, the most widely extended tree in the peninsula, with its forests from sixty to a hundred miles in length. James Burbank had erected several sawmills in different parts of the plantation. Dams had been placed in several of the tributaries of the St. John’s, and the peaceful streams broken into falls, which gave the mechanical power required to produce the beams, joists and planks of which the ships each year took entire cargoes.

There was, besides, a considerable stretch of prairie, on which flourished the horses, mules, and cattle in numbers enough to supply every agricultural want.

There are birds of all species in the woods or on the fields or plains of every part of Florida, and it can be imagined how they swarmed at Camdless Bay. Above the trees soared the white-headed eagles with great spread of wing, whose shrill call resembles the fanfare of a cracked trumpet, vultures of extraordinary ferocity, giant bitterns, with a pointed beak like a bayonet. On the banks of the river among the reeds and beneath the interlacement of gigantic bamboos were flamingoes, pink or scarlet, white ibises looking as if they had been stolen from some Egyptian monolith, pelicans of colossal stature, myriads of terns, sea-swallows of all kinds, crab-catchers with tuft and green pelisse, purple-plumaged curlews, with brown down spotted with white, jacamars, kingfishers with golden reflections, a whole world of divers, waterhens, widgeons of the whistling species, quails, plovers, to say nothing of the petrels, puffins, scissorbeaks, seacrows, gulls, and tropic-birds which the wind would bring into the St. John’s, and occasionally even flying-fish, beloved of epicures. On the prairies swarmed snipe, woodcock, curlews, marbled godwits, sultan-fowls with plumage of red, blue, green, yellow and white, like a flying palette, partridges, and white-headed, red-winged pigeons; among the eatable quadrupeds, grey squirrels, long-tailed rabbits, half-way between the hare and rabbit of Europe, and herds of deer, and besides these, racoons, turtle, ichneumons, and unfortunately a good many serpents of venomous species. Such was the representation of the animal kingdom at Camdless Bay, without reckoning the negroes, male and female, employed on the plantation. And if these were human beings, what excuse was there for the monstrous custom of slavery, by which they were bought and sold like cattle?

How was it that James Burbank, a partisan of the anti- slavery cause, a Northerner, hoping for the triumph of the North, had not been able to free the slaves on his plantation? Would he hesitate to do it when circumstances became favourable? Certainly not! And it was now only a question of weeks, of days perhaps, before the Federal army, which already occupied the outposts, would advance into Florida.

Already Burbank had done all he could to improve the lot of his slaves. There were about seven hundred blacks, of both sexes, properly lodged in the large barracoons, well looked after and kindly treated, and worked well within their powers. The overseer had orders to treat them all with justice and consideration; and the duties were done none the worse for corporal punishment having for some time been abandoned at Camdless Bay. This was a striking contrast with the custom of the generality of Floridan plantations, and the system was not looked on with favour by James Burbank's neighbours. And, as may be imagined, this made matters somewhat embarrassing, particularly now the fortune of arms had come to the solution of the slavery question.

The slaves dwelt in healthy, comfortable huts. Grouped in fifties, these huts formed a dozen villages, otherwise called barracoons, by the side of a running stream. There the blacks lived with their wives and children. Each family was as much as possible employed in the same work in the fields, the forests or the workshops, so that its members were not scattered during working hours. At the head of these villages was a sub-overseer, acting as mayor practically, with his head-quarters in the private grounds of Camdless Bay. These grounds were enclosed by a high palisade, of which the pointed stakes rose vertically, half-hidden beneath the verdure of the exuberant" vegetation. Inside the palisade rose the private house of the Burbank family. Half house and half castle, it had appropriately been called Castle House.

For many years Camdless Bay had belonged to the ancestors of James Burbank. W hen there was a fear of Indian depredations, the owners had fortified the principal house. The time was not very distant when General Jessup defended Florida against the Seminoles. The colonists had suffered much from these nomads. Not only did the Indians rob them, but they added murder to the burning of their homes. Even the towns were threatened with invasion and pillage. In many a spot rose the ruins that the bloodthirsty Indians left smoking behind them. Less than fifty miles from Camilless Bay there was still to be seen “the house of blood “in which Mr. Motte and his wife and three daughters had been scalped and massacred by the Seminoles. But the war of extermination between the white man and the red man is practically over; the Seminoles were conquered, and sought refuge to the west of the Mississippi. People spoke of them no more, though a few bands still roamed among the marshes of Southern Florida.

It will therefore be understood that the houses of the colonists were built so as to defy a sudden attack of the Indians, and hold out until the arrival of battalions of volunteers, enrolled in the towns or neighbouring villages. And on this plan Castle House had been designed.

It stood on a slight rise of the ground, in the centre of a small park of about three acres, situated a few hundred yards from the St. John’s. A rather deep watercourse ran round the park, and the palisading on its inner bank completed the defence. The only entrance was by a little bridge thrown across the circular moat. Behind the rise, a mass of beautiful trees covered the slopes of the park. An avenue of young bamboos, with the stems crossing in pointed arches, formed a long nave, leading from the lawn to the landing-place. Beyond, among the trees, were green lawns and wide paths with white borders, ending in a sandy terrace along the principal front of Castle House.

The castle was irregularly built, and offered much of the unexpected in its grouping and of the capricious in its details. But should its assailants ever break through the park palisades, it would remain defensible, and could maintain a siege of some hours. Its windows on the ground- floor were protected by iron bars. The main door in the front face was as strong as a portcullis. At certain points along the walls, which were built of a sort of marble, were a few turrets, which rendered the defence easier, as they allowed of the aggressors being taken in flank In short, with its openings reduced to such only as were strictly necessary, the central tower, on which flew the standard of the United States, its lines of battlements along some of the ridges, the slope of its wall at the foot, its high roof, many pinnacles, the thickness of its inner walls, which here and there were loopholed, the place resembled a fortress much more than a dwelling house.

As we have said, it had been necessary to build it so for the security of its inhabitants at the time of the Indian troubles in Florida. There was even in existence a sort of subterranean tunnel which, after passing under the palisade and circular moat, put Castle House in communication with a little creek of the St. John’s called Marine Creek. This tunnel could serve as a means of secret escape in case of extreme danger.

At the time in question, the Seminoles, having been driven out of the peninsula twenty years before, were no longer to be feared. But who could say what was reserved for the future? and might not the danger James Burbank had no reason to fear from the Indians, come from his compatriots? Was he not an isolated Northerner at the end of the Southern States, exposed to all the changes of a civil war, which had been hitherto most sanguinary and fertile in reprisals?

But the necessity of providing for the safety of Castle House had in no way interfered with its interior comfort The rooms were large and luxuriantly and superbly furnished. The Burbank family were blessed with every comfort and every satisfaction fortune can give when it is united to artistic feeling on the part of its possessor.

Behind the house, in the private park, were splendid gardens, extending to the palisade. The stakes were hidden beneath climbing shrubs and passion-flowers, amid which humming-birds hopped in myriads. Orange-trees, olive-trees, fig-trees, pomegranate-trees, and pontederias with blue bouquets, and magnolias with calices of old ivory perfuming the air, palm-trees waving their fans in the breeze, garlands of violet-shaded coboeas, clumps of green rosetted tupeas, yuccas with their sharp clicking sabres, rosy rhododendrons, clumps of myrtle and shaddocks — in fact everything produced by the flora of a zone which touches the Tropics and could be gathered in its parterres to perfume the air or please the eye.

At the extremity of the palisading, under the cypresses and baobabs, were the stables, coachhouses, kennels, dairy, and poultry-yard. Under the thick foliage of these fine trees, impenetrable by the sun, the domestic animals had nothing to fear from the heat of summer, and the running water brought in from the streams close by gave an agreeable and healthy freshness to all.

This private domain was, it will be seen, a marvellously well-arranged nook in the centre of James Burbank's establishment. No rattle from the cotton-mills, roar from the saw-mills, ring of the axes on the tree-trunks, nor any of the sounds which are inseparable from such an important concern, could be heard beyond the palisades.

The thousands of birds of the Floridan fauna would pass and flutter from tree to tree. But these winged songsters, whose plumage rivalled the brilliancy of the flowers, were as welcome as the perfumes which the breeze bore with it as it swept over the neighbouring woods and prairies.

Such was Camdless Bay, the plantation of James Burbank, one of the richest in eastern Florida.

CHAPTER III.

THE WAR OF SECESSION.

And now for a few words on the war of secession, with which this history is intimately connected.

And in the first place let this be understood, as has been well said, in his remarkable “History of the Civil War in America,” by the Comte de Paris, who was formerly one of General McClellan’s aide-de-camps, this war was not caused by any question of tariffs, nor of a difference of origin between the North and the South. The Anglo-Saxon race reigns over the whole territory of the United States. The commercial question was never entertained in this terrible fratricidal strife. “It was slavery, which, prospering in one half of the Republic and abolished in the other, created two hostile societies. It had profoundly modified the manners of those where it prevailed, while leaving untouched the outward forms of government. It was not the pretext or the occasion, but the cause, and the only cause, of the antagonism which inevitably resulted in civil war.”

In the slave states there were three classes. The lowest consisted of four millions of enslaved negroes, a third of the population. The highest was the caste of the slaveholders, comparatively uneducated, rich, scornful, who kept the direction of public affairs completely in their hands. Between these classes was the lower class of whites, turbulent, idle and miserable, ardent advocates for the maintenance of slavery for fear of seeing the freed negroes elevated to their level.

The Northerners had against them not only the rich proprietors, but also those whites who lived, especially in the country, among the slave population. The strife was consequently frightful. In families such dissensions were produced that brothers fought against each other, some under the Federal, some under the Confederate flag. But a great nation could not hesitate to destroy slavery to its roots. In the last century the illustrious Franklin had demanded its abolition. In 1807 Jefferson had recommended Congress to “prohibit a traffic of which the morality, honour, and dearest interests of the country had long required the disappearance.” The North was therefore in the right to march against the South and subdue it. And to follow that with a closer union between the elements of the Republic, and the destruction of that fatal, threatening illusion that the citizen owed obedience first to his own state, and in the second place to the federation.

It was in Florida that the first question as to slavery had arisen. At the commencement of the century a half- breech Indian chief, named Osceola, had for his wife a maroon slave born in the marshy part of Florida known as the Everglades. One day the woman was recaptured as a slave and taken away by force. Osceola raised the Indians, began an anti-slavery campaign, and was taken prisoner and died in his prison. But the war continued, and, says the historian Thomas Higginson, “the money it cost was three times as much as that paid to Spain for the purchase of Florida.”

And now for the beginnings of the war of secession, and the state of affairs in the month of February, 1862, when James Burbank and his family were to experience such terrible counterblows that it has appeared interesting to us to make them the subject of this history.

On the 16th October, 1859, the heroic Captain John Brown, at the head of a small band of fugitive slaves, had seized on Harper’s Ferry in Virginia. His object was to free the men of colour. He proclaimed it loudly. Beaten by the militia, he was taken prisoner, condemned to death, and hanged at Charleston on the 2nd of December, 1859, with six of his companions.

On the 20th of December, 1860, a convention assembled in South Carolina and adopted with enthusiasm the proposal of secession. The following year, on the 4th of March, 1861, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the Republic. The Southern States regarded his election as a menace to the institution of slavery. On the nth of April, Fort Sumter, one of the forts defending Charleston harbour, fell into the power of the Southerners commanded by General Beauregard. North Carolina, Virginia, Arkansas, and Tennessee at once threw in their lot with the Separatists.

Seventy-five thousand volunteers were raised by the Federal Government. At the outset Washington, the capital of the United States of America, was prepared against a sudden attack, the arsenals of the North which were empty were revictualled — those of the South had been well provisioned by President Buchanan. War material was got together with extraordinary effort. Then Abraham Lincoln declared the Southern ports in a state of blockade.

Active hostilities broke out in Virginia. McClellan repulsed the rebels in the west; but on the 21st of July, at Bull Run, the Federal troops, under the orders of MacDowell, were routed, and fled to Washington. The Southerners feared no longer for the safety of Richmond, but the Northerners had much to fear for the capital of the American Republic. A. few months afterwards, the Federals were again defeated at Bull’s Bluff. These misfortunes were compensated for by the expeditions that put into the hands of the Unionists Fort Hatteras and Port Royal Harbour, which the Separatists never retook. At the end of 1861, the command-in-chief of the armies of the Union was given to Major-General George McClellan.

During this year the Confederate corsairs swept the seas of both worlds. They were welcomed in the ports of France, England, Spain, and Portugal — a great mistake which, by giving the Secessionists the rights of belligerents, resulted in encouraging and prolonging the civil war.

The naval events, which caused so much stir, were the appearance of the Sumter and her famous Captain Semmes; the appearance of the ram Manassas; on the 12th of October the sea-fight at the mouth of the Mississippi; on the 8th of November, the stoppage of the Trent, an English ship, on which Captain Wilkes captured the Confederate envoys — and which nearly brought on a war between Great Britain and the States.

Meanwhile Abolitionists and Slaveholders were engaged in sanguinary combats, with alternating success and defeat in the State of Missouri. One of the chief generals of the North, Lyon, was killed, and this necessitated the retreat of the Federals to Rolla, and the march of Price and his Confederates towards the North. There was a fight at Frederictown on the 21st of October, and at Springfield on the 25th, and on the 27th, Fremont occupied the latter town with his Federals. On the 19th of December, the fight at Belmont between Grant and Polk was indecisive. At length winter, which is always severe in North America, put an end to the operations.

In the first months of the year 1862, truly prodigious efforts were made by both sides.

In the North, Congress voted a levy of 500,000 volunteers — there were a million before the end of the struggle — and sanctioned a loan of 500 millions of dollars. Huge armies were created, the chief being that of the Potomac. Their generals were Banks, Butler, Sherman, McClellan, Meade, Thomas, Kearny, Halleck, to mention only the most famous. Infantry, cavalry, artillery, engineers, were formed and organized. War material was manufactured at express speed, Minie and Colt carbines, rifled cannon on the Parrott and Rodman systems, smoothbore cannon and Dahlgren columbiads, howitzers, revolver-cannons, siege artillery, and shrapnel shell. They organized army telegraphs and army balloons, the reporting service of the large newspapers, the transport service employing 20,000 carts, drawn by 84,000 mules. Provisions of all kinds were got in under the direction of the chief of the commissariat. New ships of the ram type were built on the plan of Colonel Ellet, and armoured gunboats were built on the plan of Commodore Foote, to make their first appearance in maritime war.

In the South equal zeal was shown. The cannon foundries of New Orleans and Memphis, and the forges of Tredegar, near Richmond, turned out their Parrotts and Rodmans. But that was not enough. The Confederate Government sent across to Europe. Liege and Birmingham sent shiploads of arms, and cannon on the Armstrong and Whitworth systems. Blockade-runners brought the war material into the ports, and took away cotton in exchange. Then the army was organized. Its generals were Johnston, Lee, Beauregard, Jackson, Crittenden, Floyd, and Pillow. Irregular troops, militia and guerillas, were raised in addition to the four hundred thousand volunteers enrolled for three years at the most, or one year at the least, voted by the Secessionist Congress on the 8th of August.

The preparations did not hinder the strife from beginning before the winter was half over. Of the slaveholding territory, the Federal Government occupied only Maryland, Western Virginia, some part of Kentucky, most part of Missouri, and a few points on the sea coast Hostilities first broke out again in the east of Kentucky. On the 7th of January, Garfield fought the Confederates at Middle Creek, and on the 25th they were beaten again at Logan Cross or Mill Springs. On the 2nd of February Grant embarked with two divisions on some of the large Tennessee steamboats, to support Foote’s cuirassed flotilla. On the 6th, Fort Henry fell into his power. Thus was broken a link of the chain “on which,” said the historian of this civil war, “rested the whole system of his adversary Johnston’s defence.” Cumberland and the capital of Tennessee were thus threatened, and were within easy reach of the Federal troops; and Johnston endeavoured to concentrate on Fort Donelson, so as to regain a surer base for the defensive.

At this time, another expedition, consisting of six thousand men, under the orders of Burnside, and a flotilla of twenty-four armed steamers and fifty transports, descended the Chesapeake and assembled in Hampton Roads on the 12th of January. In face of violent storms it started on the 24th of January for Pimlico Sound, to capture Roanoke Island, and reduce the coast of North Carolina. But the island was fortified. On the west the channel was defended by a barrier of sunken ships. Batteries and field works made access difficult. Five or six thousand men with a flotilla of seven gunboats, were ready to withstand any attempt at landing. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the bravery of the defenders, on the 7th and 8th of February the island surrendered to Burnside, with twenty guns and more than two thousand prisoners. Next day the Federals were masters of Elizabeth City and the coast of Albemarle Sound, that is to say, the north of this inland sea.

But to conclude this description of the position of affairs up to the 6th of February, it is necessary to speak of the Confederate general, the old professor of chemistry, Jackson the puritan soldier who defended Virginia. After the recall of Lee to Richmond he commanded the army. He left Winchester on the 13th of January, with his 10,000 men, then he crossed the Alleghanies, to advance on Bath on the Ohio railroad. Defeated by the climate, overwhelmed by the snowstorms, he was forced to return to Winchester, without having attained his object.

And now for that which concerns us more specially, on the southern coast from Carolina to Florida.

During the second half of 1861, the Northerners possessed sufficient swift vessels to police the seas, although they could not catch the famous Sumter which in January, 1862, put in at Gibraltar, before beginning her cruise in European waters. The Jefferson Davis endeavouring to escape from the Federals had fled to St. Augustine in Florida, and sunk as she entered the channel. Almost at the same time the Anderson, one of the cruisers off the Florida coast, captured the privateer Beatiregard. But in England new ships were fitting out for the fray. It was then that President Lincoln’s proclamation extended the blockade, a fictitious blockade of 2800 miles. To watch them only two squadrons were available: one to blockade the Atlantic, the other the Gulf of Mexico.

On the 12th of October, for the first time, the Confederates endeavoured to clear the mouth of the Mississippi with the Manassas — the first ship plated with iron used in the war — and a flotilla of fire-ships. The attempt did not succeed, and the corvette Richmond escaped from capture, safe and sound, on the 29th of December, though a small steamer, the Seabird, carried off a Federal schooner in sight of Fort Monroe.

It was, however, necessary to have a point which could serve as a base of operation for the Atlantic cruisers. The Federal government resolved to seize on Fort Hatteras? which defends the channel of the same name, at that time much used by the blockade runners. Its capture was not easy. It was supported by a square redoubt, called Fort Clarke. A thousand men and the Seventh North Carolina regiment, were entrusted with its defence. The Federal squadron composed of two frigates, three corvettes, a despatch-boat, and two large steamers anchored in the passes on the 27th of August.

Commodore Stringham and General Butler were in charge of the attack. The redoubt was taken. Fort Hatteras, after a long resistance, hoisted the white flag, and a base of operations was secured by the Northerners for the rest of the war.

In November the island of Santa Rosa, at the east of Pensacola, on the Gulf of Mexico, a dependency of Florida, fell into the hands of the Federals, notwithstanding the efforts of the Confederates.

The capture of Fort Hatteras not appearing sufficient for the proper conduct of their operations, it was decided to occupy other positions on the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Two steam frigates, the Wabash and Susquehannah, three sailing frigates, four corvettes, six gunboats, many despatch-boats, twenty-five colliers laden with provisions, and thirty-two steamers transporting 15,600 men under the orders of General Sherman, were placed under the command of Commodore Dupont. The flotilla mustered on the 25th of October before Fort Monroe. After experiencing a terrible storm off Cape Hatteras, the fleet reached Hilton Head between Charlestown and Savannah, close to Port Royal Harbour, one of the most important in the States, and where General Ripley held command. Forts Walker and Beauregard defended the entrance, about two miles and a half apart; eight steamers also formed part of the defences, and the bar rendered the harbour almost impregnable to an enemy’s fleet.

On the 5th of November, the channel having been buoyed, Dupont entered the harbour after a cannonade, but he was not able to land Sherman’s troops. On the 7th, in the afternoon, he attacked Fort Walker and then Fort Beauregard. He overwhelmed them with his storm of shell. The forts were evacuated; the Federals took possession of them almost without a struggle;

and Sherman occupied the position which was of so much importance for the military operations that were to follow.

This was a blow at the very heart of the Southern States. The neighbouring islands fell one after the other into the power of the Federals, even Tybee Island and Fort Pulaski, which commanded the Savannah river. At the end of the year Dupont was master of the five great bays of North Edisto, Saint Helena, Port Royal, Tybee, Warsaw, and all the islands scattered along the coast of Carolina and Georgia. And on the 1st of January, 1862, a final success enabled him to reduce the Confederate works on the banks of the Coosaw.

Such was the situation of the belligerents at the commencement of February, 1862. Such was the progress of the Federals towards the South, when the fleet of Dupont and the troops of Sherman were menacing Florida.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BURBANK FAMILY.

It was a few minutes past seven when James Burbank and Edward Carrol mounted the steps on which opened the principal door of Castle House, looking towards the St. John’s. Zermah, holding the little girl by the hand, walked behind them. They entered the hall, which was a kind of large vestibule with its back rounded into a dome, and containing the double twist of the great staircase which led to the upper floors.

Mrs. Burbank met them, accompanied by Perry, the chief overseer of the plantation.

“No news from Jacksonville?”

“No.”

“No news from Gilbert?”

“Yes — a letter.”

“Heaven be praised!”

Such were the first questions and answers that passed between Mrs. Burbank and her husband. James Burbank, after kissing his wife and little Dy, opened the letter which was handed to him. It had not been opened in his absence, for, in consideration of the existing state of affairs, Mrs. Burbank thought it best that her husband should be the first to know what it contained.

“This letter did not come by the post?” asked Burbank.

“No, sir,” said Perry, “that would have been too risky.”

“Who brought it?”

“A Georgia man Mr. Gilbert felt he could trust”

“When did it arrive?”

“Yesterday.”

“And the man?”

“Went away this evening.”

“Well paid for his work?”

“Yes, well paid,” said Mrs. Burbank, “but by Gilbert, and he would not take anything from us.”

The hall was lighted by two lamps placed on a marble table before a large sofa. James Burbank went and sat at the table, and his wife and daughter sat near him. Edward Carrol, after shaking hands with his sister, had thrown himself into an arm-chair. Zermah and Perry were standing together near the stairs; both of them were sufficiently of the family for the letter to be read in their presence.

The letter was opened.

“It is dated the 3rd of February,” said James Burbank.

“Four days after date!” said Carrol, “that is a long time under the circumstances.”

“Read it, papa, read it,” said the little girl, with a very natural impatience at her age.

“This is what it says, —

“On board the Wabash, at the anchorage of Edisto.

“3rd February, 1862.

“Dear Father, — I begin by sending my love to my mother, my little sister and yourself, not forgetting Uncle Carrol, and to omit nothing, I send Zermah all the remembrances of her husband, my brave and devoted Mars. We are going on as well as possible, and should very much like to be with you. It will not be long before we are, notwithstanding Mr. Perry, who, on seeing the progress of the North, must be much concerned — obstinate slave-owner as he is, the worthy overseer!”

“That is one for you, Perry,” said Carrol.

“Every man is welcome to his ideas,” said Perry, in the tone of a man who had no intention of giving up his own.

Burbank continued, —

“This letter will reach you by a man I can depend on. You will have heard that Commodore Dupont’s squadron has gained possession of Port Royal Harbour and the neighbouring islands. The North is gradually beating the South, and it is very likely that the Federal Government will occupy the chief ports of Florida. They are talking of an expedition under Dupont and Sherman at the end of the month. This is very probable, and we shall occupy the bay of St. Andrew’s, whence we shall advance into Florida. I am in a hurry to get there, dear father, and particularly with our victorious flotilla. The situation of my people among the slave-holding population, makes me very anxious; but the time is coming when triumph will wait upon the ideas that have always been to the fore at Camdless Bay. If I could get away I should be with you in twenty-four hours; but that would be too risky for you as well as for me, and you must be patient. In a few months we shall again meet together at Castle House. And now I must end, asking myself if I have forgotten anybody in my message. And I have! I have forgotten Mr. Stannard and my charming Alice, whom I am longing to see. Give my regards to her father, and to her give more than my regards.

“Respectfully and sincerely yours, “Gilbert Burbank.”

James Burbank laid the letter on the table, and Mrs. Burbank lifted it to her lips, then little Dy put a sounding kiss on her brother’s signature.

“Brave fellow!” said Edward Carrol.

“And brave man!” added Mrs. Burbank, looking at Zermah, who had clasped the little girl in her arms.

“We must tell Alice,” said Mrs. Burbank, “that we have received a letter from Gilbert.”

“Yes, I will write to her,” said James Burbank. “Besides, in a day or two I must go to Jacksonville and see Stannard. Since Gilbert wrote there may be other news of the proposed expedition. May our Northern friends soon come, and may Florida again be under the Union flag! Our position here may end in being untenable.”

In fact, as the war approached the South, a change took place in Floridan opinion on the subject which had set the United States at variance. Up to then slavery had not been extensively developed in the old Spanish colony, which had not taken part in the Secession movement with the same ardour as Virginia and the Carolinas. But leaders had sprung up among the slave party, and now these people, ready for outbreak at any moment, having everything to gain by disturbances, were in the majority among the authorities of St. Augustine, and principally of Jacksonville, where their supporters were the vilest of the populace. Hence the position of James Burbank, whose birth and ideas we know, had become an anxious one.

Twenty years before, James Burbank had left New Jersey, where he still possessed some property, and came to Camdless Bay with his wife and his son, then four years old. We know how the plantation had prospered, thanks to his own intelligent labours and the assistance of his brother-in-law, Edward Carrol. He had taken a great liking to the vast establishment which had been handed down to him by his ancestors. Here was born his second child, little Dy, fifteen years after he had fixed his home in the South.

He was then forty-six years old, of strong constitution, accustomed to work, and never sparing himself. We know he was of energetic character; firmly attached to his opinions, he did his utmost to let them be widely known. He was tall and slightly grey; his face had a somewhat severe but frank and encouraging look. With the goatee of the Americans of the North, without whiskers or moustache, he was a typical New England Yankee. Throughout the plantation he was liked, for he was kind, and he was obeyed, for he was just. His blacks were devoted to him, and he waited not without impatience for circumstances to permit of his giving them their liberty. His brother-in-law was about the same age, and took charge chiefly of the accounts of Camdless Bay. Carrol was quite at one with him in everything, and shared in his view of the slave question.

Mr. Perry, the overseer, was the only one of a different opinion in this little world of Camdless Bay. Let it not be thought that this worthy man ill-treated the slaves. Far from it. He even tried to make them as happy as their condition allowed him.

“But,” said he, “there are warm countries in which work on the land can only be done by blacks, and blacks who are not slaves are no longer blacks!”

Such was his theory, which he discussed on every occasion that offered. But he was in no way disconcerted at the fortune of war which favoured the anti-slavery cause. He was, in short, an excellent fellow, and a brave one too, and when James Burbank and Edward Carrol had joined the militia, known as “the minute men,” from being ready to start at any minute, he had gallantly joined them in their last struggle with the Seminoles.

Mrs. Burbank was at this time thirty-nine years of age. She was still very handsome. Her daughter would one day resemble her. James Burbank had found in her a loving, affectionate companion, to whom he owed most of the happiness of his life. The unselfish woman lived but for her husband and her children, whom she adored, and for whose safety she felt the keenest apprehension now that circumstances had brought the civil war into Florida. Diana, or rather Dy, as she was familiarly called, a child of six, quick, loving, and happy, lived at Castle House with her mother, but Gilbert was away, his absence causing continued anxiety, which Mrs. Burbank could not always dissimulate.

Gilbert was then in his twenty-fifth year, and in him were conspicuous the moral qualities of his father, with a little less stiffness, and the same physical qualities, with a little more grace and charm. A bold companion, skilled in all bodily exercises, he was as accomplished as a horseman as he was as a seaman and hunter. To the great alarm of his mother, the huge forests and marshes of Duval county had often been the scene of his exploits, as had the creeks and passes of the St. John's up to its furthest mouth at Pablo. Gilbert felt himself fully trained for the work of a soldier when the first shots were fired in the war. He considered that his duty called him to the Federal troops, and he did not hesitate. He asked to be allowed to go. Great was the grief he thus caused his mother, and great was the danger to all, but James Burbank did not dream for a moment of refusing his son's request. He thought, like him, that it was a duty, and everything must give place to duty.

Gilbert, then, set out for the North; but his departure was kept as secret as possible. If it was known at Jacksonville that James Burbank's son had entered the Northern service, reprisals would at once have been taken on Camdless Bay. The young man had been given letters of introduction to his father's friends in New Jersey. He had always shown a taste for the sea, and his friends had had no difficulty in procuring him an appointment in the Federal navy. Promotion was rapid in those days, and as Gilbert was not one of those who remained in the rear, he soon got on. The Washington Government had its eyes on this young man who in the position he found his family, did not hesitate to offer his services. Gilbert distinguished himself at the attack of Fort Sumter. He was on the Richmond when that ship was rammed by the Manassas at the mouth of the Mississippi, and contributed largely to recapture her. After this affair he was made an ensign, although he had not been through the naval school at Annapolis any more than many of the other officers who had been transferred from the mercantile marine. In his new capacity he joined the squadron of Commodore Dupont, and assisted at the brilliant attack on Fort Hatteras and the capture of the Seas Islands. During the last few weeks he had been a lieutenant on one of Dupont’s gunboats which were about to force the mouths of the St. John’s.

Gilbert himself longed for an early termination of the war. He loved and was loved; and when his service was over, he would return to Camdless Bay and marry the daughter of one of his father’s best friends.

Mr. Stannard did not belong to the class of Floridan planters. A widower, and a man of fortune, he had devoted himself entirely to the education of his daughter. He lived at Jacksonville, so that to get to Camdless Bay he had only to go up three or four miles of the river. For fifteen years not a week had passed without his visiting the Burbanks. It might almost be said that Gilbert and Alice were brought up together, and a marriage that had been planned for years had now been decided on, which would bring happiness to both. Although Walter Stannard was a native of the South, he was an anti-slavery man, as were several others of his Floridan fellow-citizens; but these were not numerous enough to withstand the majority of the inhabitants of Jacksonville, whose opinions daily tended more and more in favour of the Separatist movement. Stannard and his friends began consequently to be looked upon unfavourably by the leaders of the county, and especially by the small whites and populace, who were ready for any excess.

Walter Stannard was born at New Orleans. Mrs. Stannard was a Frenchwoman; she had died young, and left to her daughter those noble qualities which are peculiar to French blood. When Gilbert went away, Alice had shown an energy that had given Mrs. Burbank much comfort and support. Although she loved Gilbert as she herself was loved, she invariably told his mother that it was his duty to go and fight for the good cause, to fight for the freedom of a race, and, in short, for liberty. She was then nineteen; fair, with eyes almost blue, of warm complexion, elegant figure, and distinguished features. She might be a little serious, but so mobile was her expression, that the least smile would light up her beautiful face.

The Burbank family would not be known in all its most faithful members, if we omitted to say something of its two servants, Mars and Zermah.

As we have seen from his letter, Gilbert had not gone away alone. Mars, the husband of Zermah, had accompanied him. He could not have found a more devoted companion than this slave from Camdless Bay, who had become free by setting foot on anti-slavery soil. But to Mars, Gilbert was always “the young master,” and he would not leave him, although the Federal Government had already formed regiments of negroes, where he would have found a place.

Mars and Zermah were not of the negro race by birth. They were half-breeds. Zermah’s brother was that heroic slave, Robert Small, who, four months later, captured from the Confederates in the very bay of Charleston, a steamer with two guns, which he took over to the Federal fleet.

The marriage of Zermah and Mars was a happy one; which more than once, during its first years, the odious traffic in slaves had threatened to break. It was at the moment when they were about to be separated by the fortune of the auction-room, that they came to Camdless Bay.

These were the circumstances.

Zermah was thirty-one years old, Mars thirty-five. Seven years before, they had been married when they belonged to a Mr. Tickborn, whose plantation was on the river, twenty miles above Camdless Bay. For some years Tickborn had had business transactions with Texar, who was often a welcome visitor to the plantation. There was nothing surprising in this, for Tickborn was not thought much of in the county. His abilities were not very brilliant; and, his affairs not prospering, he was obliged to put up a lot of his slaves for sale.

At this very time Zermah, who was very badly treated like all the rest on Tickborn's plantation, brought a baby into the world, which was immediately taken away from her, for while she was in prison for a crime of which she was innocent, her baby died in her arms. It may be guessed what was the grief of Zermah, and the anger of Mars. But what could they do against a master to whom belonged their flesh, living or dead, because he had bought it?

To this sorrow another no less terrible was added. The day after their child died, Mars and Zermah were packed off to the auctioneer, and threatened with separation Yes! The consolation of finding themselves together under a new master was denied them. A man presented himself who offered to buy Zermah, and Zermah alone, although he did not own a plantation. This man was Texar. His friend Tickborn was about to sign the agreement when, at the last moment, another bidder appeared on the scene and offered a higher price. This was James Burbank, who happened to be at the sale, and was touched at the fate of the unhappy half-breed, praying in vain that she should not be separated from her husband.

Burbank was in want of a nurse for his little girl, and learning that one of Tickborn's slaves had just lost her child, he came to look at her; but, touched by Zermah's tears, he did not hesitate to offer for herself and husband a price that exceeded all that had been bid up to then.

Texar knew James Burbank. He had been several times warned off his plantation as a suspicious person. And from this arose the hatred which

Texar had vowed to all the family of Camdless Bay. Texar tried to bid against the rich planter. It was in vain. He grew obstinate. He rose to double the price that Tickborn had asked for the half-breed and her husband. This made Burbank pay very dearly for them — but he got them.

And so, not only were Zermah and Mars not separated from each other, but they had entered the service of the best of the planters in Florida. Six years afterwards, Zermah was still in all the maturity of her half- breed beauty. Of energetic character, heartily devoted to her master, she had more than once had occasion — and would soon have occasion again — to prove her fidelity. Mars was worthy of the wife to whom the charitable act of James Burbank had for ever attached him. He was a remarkable specimen of those Africans in whom there is a large proportion of Creole blood. Tall, stout, courageous to a fault, he served his new master well.

These two new servants were not treated like slaves. They had soon become appreciated for their kindness and intelligence. Mars was specially occupied in looking after young Gilbert; Zermah was Diana’s nurse. In such positions they were bound to be admitted to a certain intimacy with the family.

Zermah always felt a mother’s love for the’ little girl, the love she could not bear the child she had lost. Dy returned it, and the filial affection of the one responded to the maternal cares of the other, and Mrs. Burbank was as friendly to Zermah as she was grateful.

The same feeling existed between Gilbert and Mars. Active and strong, the half-breed had made his young master an expert in all manly exercises, and James Burbank could only congratulate himself at having found him for his son.

Never had Zermah and Mars been so happy, and that after leaving the hands of Tickborn and nearly falling into those of Texar. They were never to forget it.

CHAPTER V.

BLACK CREEK.

At dawn, the morning after the Shannon’s journey down the St. John’s, a man was walking on the bank of one of the islets at the bottom of the lagoon of Black Creek. It was Texar. A few steps away was an Indian sitting in the skiff which had met the steamer. It was Squambo.

After walking up and down for a minute or two, Texar stopped under a magnolia-tree, drew down one of the lower branches and picked off a leaf and its stem. Then he drew from his note-book a short letter, containing only three or four words written in ink. He rolled up the letter and stuffed it into one of the lower veins of the leaf. This was done so cleverly that the leaf lost nothing of its usual look.

“Squambo!” said Texar.

“Master!” replied the Indian.

“Go — you know where!”

Squambo took the leaf, put it in the bow of the skiff, sat down in the stern, paddled himself off, turned the extreme point of the islet, and entered the tortuous passage under the thick bower of trees.

The lagoon is cut up into a labyrinth of channels, among which only a man thoroughly conversant with the tangled network of black waters could find his way.

However, Squambo did not hesitate. Where no one could see an outlet he boldly entered with his skiff. The lower branches that he lifted up fell behind him, and left no trace of anything having passed beneath them. Along winding channels, no larger than drains, he paddled his canoe. Quite a world of aquatic birds flew up at his approach. Slimy eels, with suspicious heads, slipped under the roots which emerged from the water. Squambo cared for none of these things, no more than he did for the sleeping caymans, which he could wake by striking them as they lay on their beds of mud. He kept on without a stoppage, and when he had no room to paddle, he pushed himself along as if with a boat-hook. Although it was now broad daylight, and the heavy night mist had begun to evaporate under the first rays of the sun, nothing could be seen of it beneath this impenetrable roof of verdure. Even in the noonday sun no ray of light could pierce it. All was shrouded in semi-obscurity, which suited well the crawling creatures that warmed in its black waters, and the thousands of aquatic plants that floated on their surface.

For half an hour Squambo advanced from one island to another. When he stopped, it was because his skiff had reached one of the last branches of the creek.

At this spot, where the marshy part of the creek ended, the trees were less crowded and intergrown, and the light of day found admittance. Beyond was a vast prairie bordered with forest, but slightly above the level of the St. John’s. The foot, in treading on the marshy ground, gave the same sensation as if treading on an elastic mattress. A few sassafras bushes, with slender leaves and violet berries dotted the surface, with their capricious zigzags. After mooring his canoe to one of the twigs on the bank, Squambo jumped ashore. The night mist was drying off, the prairie, quite deserted, was gradually rising from the fog. Among a group of five or six trees close by was a magnolia of moderate height. The Indian stepped towards this tree. He reached it in a few minutes, and drew down one of the lower branches.

On its end he fixed the leaf that Texar had given him, then the bough, left to itself, sprung up, and the leaf was lost in the foliage.

Squambo returned to his skiff, and then paddled back to the islet where his master awaited him.

Black Creek is so called from the colour of its waters, and covers an area of about six hundred acres. Fed by the St. John's, it is a sort of archipelago quite impenetrable to those who do not know its infinite windings. A hundred islands dot its surface; no bridges or causeways join them. A few high branches interlace above the thousands of channels that separate but do not form easy communication lines between the different points of the lagoon.

One of these islands, nearly in the centre of the system, is the most important, on account of its size — some twenty acres — and its elevation, five or six feet above the mean tide of the St. John's.

At some distant period, this island had served as the site of a fortress, a sort of blockhouse, now abandoned — at least, in a military sense. Its palisades, half ruined by rot, still stood beneath the large trees, magnolias, cypresses, oaks, black walnuts, and austral pines, interlaced by festoons of coboeas and other endless creepers.

Beyond the outer ring the eye could make out under the heap of verdure the geometrical lines of the little fortress, or rather the outpost, which had never been intended to hold more than a score of men. Narrow loopholes peeped out of the wooden walls. Turfed roofs covered them with a carapace of earth. Inside were a few rooms arranged r, >und a central apartment, containing a store of provisions and munitions. To enter the fortress, it was necessary to get through the palisades at the narrow postern, then to cross the yard, planted with a few trees, and mount a few steps built up of boards. These led to the only door giving admittance to the interior, and was merely an embrasure that had been altered to suit the purpose.

Such was the usual retreat of Texar — a retreat which nobody knew. There, hidden from all eyes, he lived with this Squambo, who was devoted to a master of whom he did not think much, and with five or six slaves, who thought even less of him.

This islet of Black Creek was, it will be seen, some distance from the wealthy establishments on each side of the river. There was barely a living on it for Texar and his companions, whose wants were not great. A few domestic animals, half a dozen acres planted with potatoes, yams, cucumbers, twenty fruit-trees, almost in their wild state, — that was all, without counting what the hunter could find in the neighbouring forests, or the fisherman in the lagoon, which never failed to yield its harvest. But, doubtless, the dwellers at Black Creek had other resources, of which only Texar and Squambo knew the secret.

The safety of the blockhouse was almost assured by its situation in such an inaccessible spot. Besides, who would seek to attack it, and why? In any case, any suspicious approach would be signalled at once by the dogs of the island, two of those ferocious bloodhounds imported from the Caribbees, formerly employed by the Spaniards to hunt down the negroes.

Such was Texar’s dwelling, and it was worthy of him. Now for Texar himself.

Texar was then “about thirty-five. He was of medium height, and of vigorous constitution, hardened by the adventurous life in the open air which had always been his. A Spaniard by birth, he did not hide his origin. His hair was black and coarse, his eyebrows thick, his eyes greenish, his mouth large, with thin indrawn lips, as if it had been made by a sabre-stroke, his nose short, and his nostrils like those of a wild beast. His whole physiognomy denoted craft and violence. He had formerly grown his full beard; but for the last two years, after it had been half burnt in some affair that no one knew anything about, he had shaved it off, and the cruelty of his features was rendered all the more apparent.

Twelve years before, this adventurer had come to settle in Florida in this abandoned blockhouse, the possession of which nobody thought of disputing. Whence came he? Nobody knew. What had been his former life? It was said, and rightly so, that he had been a slave-dealer, and had sold his cargoes of blacks in the ports of Georgia and the Carolinas. Had he made a fortune in this odious trade?

It did not seem like it. And, in fact, his reputation was of the slightest even in a country where men of his sort are numerous.

Nevertheless, if Texar was better known than respected, that did not prevent his exercising a real influence in the county, and particularly at Jacksonville, although it was, it is true, among the least reputable inhabitants. He often went to the chief town on business, which he never spoke about, and had made a number of friends among the small whites and more objectionable people of the place. This we have seen when he was returning to St. Augustine with his companions. His influence extended to a few planters on the St. John’s, whom he sometimes visited, though they never visited him, for no one knew of his retreat at Black Creek.

Sport was a natural pretext for this intercourse, which established itself without difficulty among people of the same habits and tastes. This influence had grown during the last few years, owing to the opinions which Texar ardently defended. The slave question had hardly brought about the division between the United States, than the Spaniard had posed as the most obstinate and determined of slavery partisans. It should be understood that he had little real interest in the matter, for his slaves only amounted to half a dozen. It was the principle he sought to defend. By what means? By; an appeal to the most hateful passions, by exciting the cupidity of the populace, by urging them to pillage, incendiarism, even to murder, against the inhabitants or planters who shared in the ideas of the Northerners. And now this dangerous adventurer was seeking to supersede the civil authorities of Jacksonville, men of moderate opinions and high character, by the most furious of his partisans. By becoming master of the county, he would have a free field for the exercise of his personal vengeance.

It will be understood from this, why James Burbank and other planters had not neglected to keep an eye on the proceedings of such a man, whose evil instincts had already made him formidable; and why the hate on one side and defiance on the other had been augmented by the approaching events.

Besides, there was much in the past life of Texar after he had retired from trade which was suspicious. During the last outbreak of the Seminoles, everything seemed to prove that he had a secret understanding with them. Had he told them what blows to strike, what plantations to attack? Had he helped them in their ambushes and surprises? There was a strong suspicion that this was the case, and the magistrates had issued a warrant against the Spaniard, and brought him to trial. But Texar had pleaded an alibi, a plan of defence of which he again availed himself later on; and it was proved he could not have taken part in the attack on a farm in Duval county, when at the same moment he was at Savannah, in the State of, Georgia, about forty miles to the north.

During the following years there were many serious robberies, sometimes from plantations, sometimes from travellers. Was Texar an author or accomplice in these crimes? Suspicions were strong, but as there was no proof, nothing could be done.

At last an opportunity offered which seemed to bring this hitherto unseizable malefactor within reach of the law; and this was the affair for which he had the day before been brought before the court at St. Augustine.

Eight days before, James Burbank, Carrol, and Stannard were returning from visiting a plantation not far from Camdless Bay, when about seven o’clock in the evening, as night was falling, they heard cries of distress. They came to the spot whence the cries proceeded, and found themselves in front of the buildings of an isolated farm. The buildings were on fire. The farm had been previously pillaged by half-a-dozen men who had just dispersed. The authors of the crime were not far off. Two of them could be seen running away through the woods.

James Burbank and his friends courageously started in pursuit, and the chase took them towards Camdless Bay.

It was in vain. The incendiaries escaped in the woods. But Burbank, Carrol, and Stannard had recognized one of them. It was the Spaniard.

And more than this — and corroborating the proof — at the instant this individual had disappeared on the boundary of Camdless Bay, Zermah, who was passing, had been knocked aside by him. And she, like the others, recognized him as Texar, running at full speed.

It is easy to imagine that such an affair would make considerable stir in the county. A robbery, followed by incendiarism, was a most serious crime where the plantations were spread over a large extent of country. Burbank brought a formal accusation against Texar, and the authorities took proceedings.

The Spaniard was brought to St. Augustine before the Recorder, and then, when confronted by the witnesses, James Burbank, Walter Stannard, Edward Carrol, and Zermah, was unanimously recognized as the man who was running away from the fire. There could be no mistake as far as they were concerned. Texar was one of the authors of the crime.

The Spaniard, for his defence, brought a number of witnesses to St. Augustine. They declared that on the evening in question they were with Texar at Jacksonville, in the tienda of Torilla, a sufficiently ill-famed drinking- shop in those parts. Texar had not left them all the evening. And that there could be no mistake about this, at the very time the crime was committed, the Spaniard had had a dispute with one of them which had ended in blows and threats, for which legal proceedings would probably be taken.

At this evidence, which was beyond suspicion — for some of the witnesses were strangers to Texar — the magistrate at St. Augustine could only close the inquiry and allow the defendant his expenses.

The alibi had thus been once more fully established to the advantage of this strange individual It was after this affair, and in company with his witnesses’

that Texar had returned to St. Augustine on the evening of the 7th of February. We have seen how he conducted himself on board the Shannon while the steamer descended the river. Then, on the skiff brought to meet him by Squambo, he had regained the abandoned blockhouse.

Squambo was a Seminole, intelligent and crafty, and had become the confidant of Texar, who had taken him into his service immediately after the last expedition of the Indians with which his name had been mixed up.

The Spaniard had resolved to revenge himself on James Burbank by all possible means. Amid the many conjunctions that the war daily gave rise to, if Texar could upset the authorities of Jacksonville he could make himself formidable to Camdless Bay. James Burbank was of such energetic and determined character that he had no fear of such a man, but Mrs. Burbank had only too many reasons to tremble for her husband and her family.

And all the more would she have been anxious had she known that Texar suspected Gilbert Burbank of having joined the Northern army. How had he learnt this, for the departure had been secret? Probably from his spies.

If Texar thought that James Burbank’s son was in the Federal ships under the orders of Dupont, would he not probably devise some trap for the young lieutenant? Yes! And if he could entice him on to Floridan territory and capture him, we can imagine what would be his fate at the hands of these Southerners, exasperated at the progress of the Northern arms.

Such was the state of affairs when this story begins. Such was the position of the Federals on the maritime frontier of Florida, of the Burbanks in Duval county, and of Texar not only at Jacksonville but throughout the slave territories. If the Spaniard could gain his ends, if the authorities could be replaced by his partisans, it would be easy for him to send forth on Camdless Bay a populace maddened against the Abolitionists.

About an hour after Squambo had left Texar, he returned. He drew his skiff to the bank, entered the palisades, and mounted the steps into the blockhouse. “Is it done?” asked Texar. “It is done, master.”

“And — nothing?”

“Nothing.”

CHAPTER VI.

JACKSONVILLE.

"Yes, Zermah, yes, you were created and placed in the world to be a slave!" said the overseer, mounting his favourite hobby. "Yes 1 a slave, and never to be a free creature."

"That is not my opinion," replied Zermah calmly, without the least animation, so many had been these discussions with the overseer of Camdless Bay.

"It is possible, Zermah! But in any case you will in the long run come over to the opinion that no equality can exist between the whites and the blacks."

"It already exists, Mr. Perry, and it has always existed."

"You are mistaken, Zermah, and the proof is that the whites are ten times, twenty times — what am I talking about? — a hundred times more numerous on the earth than the blacks?"

"And it is on that account that they have made slaves of them," answered Zermah, "they had the strength and they abused it. But if the blacks had been in the majority, the whites would have been the slaves! Or rather they would not, for the blacks would have shown more justice, and certainly less cruelty."

Do not let it be supposed that this conversation hindered Zermah and the overseer from remaining on good terms with each other. At the moment they had nothing else to do but talk. They might, perhaps, have chosen a more useful subject of conversation, and they doubtless would have done so had it not been for the overseer's mania for continually discussing the slave question.

The two were seated in the stern of one of the Camdless Bay boats, worked by four men from the plantation. They were crossing the river, taking advantage of the ebbing tide, on their way to Jacksonville. The overseer had some of Mr. Burbank's business matters to attend to, and Zermah was going to buy a few things for little Dy.

It was the 10th of February. Three days before James Burbank had returned to Castle House, and Texar to Black Creek after the affair at St. Augustine.

The day before Mr. Stannard had heard from Camdless Bay, about the last letter from Gilbert. The news did not arrive any too soon for Alice, whose life had been one of continual anxiety since the outbreak of the war.

The boat under her lateen-sail slipped along swiftly. In a quarter of an hour she reached Jacksonville. The overseer had, therefore, little time to develop his pet theory, but he made the best of it.

"No, Zermah," said he. "No! If the blacks had been in the majority, it would have made no difference. And I tell you this, that whatever may be the result of the war, we shall certainly go back to slavery, for slaves are necessary to work the plantations."

"Mr. Burbank does not think so, as you know," said Zermah.

"I know, but I think Mr. Burbank is wrong notwithstanding the respect I have for him. A black ought to be part of the estate in the same way as the animals and implements. If a horse could go away when it chose, if a plough could change hands when it pleased, no work would be possible. Let

Mr. Burbank emancipate his slaves, and you will see what will become of Camdless Lay.”

“He would have done so already,” said Zermah, “if circumstances had allowed him to do so. And would you like to know what will happen when the emancipation of the slaves is proclaimed at Camdless Bay? Not a single black will leave the plantation, and nothing will be changed, except the right to treat them as beasts. And, as you have never exercised that right, Camdless Bay will remain as it was.”

“Do you consider you have converted me to your ideas?” asked the overseer.

“Not in the least. It would be useless to do so, and for a very simple reason.”

“What is that?”

“That at the bottom you think just the same as Mr. Burbank, Mr. Carrol, Mr. Stannard, and every one else who has a generous heart and a just mind.”

“Never, Zermah, never! And I even affirm that what I say is in the best interests of the blacks. If you leave them to themselves they will perish, and the race will soon disappear.”

“I know nothing about that, Mr. Perry. But anyhow, better the race should disappear than be condemned to the perpetual degradation of slavery.”

The overseer would have replied, for he had by no means reached the end of his arguments; but the sail was taken in and the boat ran alongside the pier, there to await the return of Zermah and the overseer, who landed at once and set off about their business.

Jacksonville is situated on the left bank of the St. John’s, at the end of a somewhat low plain, surrounded by an horizon of magnificent forests, which form an ever-verdant frame. Fields of maize and sugar-cane and rice, particularly by the river side, occupy a part of the plain.

Twelve years ago Jacksonville was but a big village, with a suburb, where the black population lived in huts built of mud and reeds. At the time of our story the village was becoming a town. Its houses were becoming more comfortable, its streets better planned and better kept, and the number of its inhabitants doubled. And the year before the chief town of Duval county had gained considerably by being united by railway to Tallahassee, which is the capital of Florida.

The overseer and Zermah noticed that there was a good deal of excitement in the town. Some hundreds of the inhabitants, Southerners of American birth, and mulattoes and half-breeds of Spanish origin, were waiting for the arrival of the steamboat, of which the smoke was in sight down stream over a low point of the St John’s. Some even, in order to reach the vessel more quickly, had started towards her in rowing-boats, and other* had gone off in a few of those one-masted dogger-boats which are so common at Jacksonville.

There had been serious news from the war the evening before. The scheme of operations hinted at in Gilbert Burbank’s letter had become partly known. It had been ascertained that Commodore Dupont’s flotilla was getting ready for sea, and that General Sherman was to take his troops on board. Where was the expedition going? They could not say for certain, but everything pointed to the St John’s and the coast of Florida as being its object.

When the steamer, which came from Fernandina, had stopped at Jacksonville, her passengers could only confirm that news. They even added that Commodore Dupont would probably anchor in St. Andrew’s Bay, while waiting for a favourable moment to force the passes at Amelia Island and the estuary of the St. John’s.

Immediately the mob swarmed up into the town, putting to noisy flight the flock of urubus which do the scavengering of the streets. Shouts arose, “Down with the Northerners! Death to the Northerners!” Such were the cries that Texar’s friends started to further excite the already excited population. The crowd gathered in front of the courthouse, the police-office, and the episcopal church. The authorities would have more trouble in quieting the outbreak, particularly as Jacksonville, as we have already remarked, was divided on this slave question. And in times of trouble, the noisiest and the hastiest make the Law, and the moderate men eventually submit to their domination.

Naturally in the taverns and tiendas the shouts were the loudest. There it was that the plans were formed for offering an indomitable resistance to the invasion.

“Let us send the militia to Fernandina,” said one.

Let us sink some ships in the channel of the St John’s,” said another.

“Let us run up some earthworks round the city, and get the guns for them,” said another.

“Let us send for help by the railway from Fernandina to Keys.”

“Let us put out the light at Pablo, and so prevent the enemy’s fleet getting in at night.”

“Let us put down torpedoes in the river.”

The torpedo was almost a new thing in the American war, and although they were not too well acquainted with the way to manage it, they were evidently longing to use it.

“Above all,” said one of the most excited orators at the tienda of Torillo, “we should send to gaol all the Northerners in the town, and all those Southerners who think with them.”

It would have been very strange if somebody had not brought forward this proposition, the ultima ratio of sectaries everywhere. And, of course, it was received with cheers. Luckily for the honest people of Jacksonville the magistrates were to hesitate some time before giving in to this popular prayer.

As she passed through the streets, Zermah took careful notice of what was going on, so as to tell her master. He would be seriously affected by the movement. If violent measures were taken, such measures would not stop at the town. They would extend beyond it to the plantations in the county. Camdless Bay would be one of the first to be visited. Hence the half-breed, in order to obtain more precise information, called at Mr. Stannard’s house a little way out of the town.

This was a charming, comfortable dwelling, agreeably situated in a sort of green oasis which the clearing-axe had left in a corner of the plain. Under Alice’s care the inside as well as the outside of the house was excellently looked after.

Zermah was received with great cordiality. At first Alice spoke to her about Gilbert's letter, and Zermah was able to tell her almost his very words.

"Yes," said Alice, "he is not far off now. But under what circumstances will he come back to Florida? And what dangers may there not be for him before the expedition is over!"

"Dangers, Alice,"said Mr. Stannard. "Do not be nervous. Gilbert faced greater when cruising off the coast of Georgia and in that Port Royal affair. I do not think Florida's resistance will be very terrible or very long. What can we do with this St. John's, which will let the gunboats into the very heart of the country? All defence seems to me difficult, if not impossible."

"May what you say be true," said Alice, "and may heaven grant that the war will soon be over!"

"It will only end by wiping out the South," replied Mr. Stannard. "That will take a long time, I am afraid; and Jefferson Davis and his Generals — Lee, Johnston, and Beauregard — will hold out for some time in the centre. The Federals will not have an easy triumph over the Confederates. But as to Florida, that can easily be captured; unfortunately its possession will not ensure the final victory."

"It is to be hoped that Gilbert will not be imprudent," said Alice, joining her hands. "If he yields to the wish to see his family for a few hours when he is so near them — "

"And seeing you, Miss Alice," said Zurmah, "for are you not already one of the family?"

"Yes, Zermah, in heart."

“No, Alice, there is nothing to be afraid of,” said Mr. Stannard. “Gilbert is too sensible to run any risk when Commodore Dupont could occupy Florida in a few days; there would be no excuse for the foolhardiness of coming here until the Federals are masters.”

“Particularly now that people are more than ever ready to break out into violence,” answered Zermah.

“The town this morning,” said Mr. Stannard, “is in a very excited state. I saw who are the ringleaders, and I heard them. Texar is with them, and is urging them on and exciting them. The scoundrels will end by raising the lower classes not only against the magistrates, but against all who do not agree with them.”

“Do you not think, Mr. Stannard,” said Zermah, “that it would be better for you to leave Jacksonville — at all events for a short time. It would be wisest not to come back till after the coming of the Federal troops. Mr. Bur-, bank told me to tell you that he would be glad to see you and Miss Alice at Castle House.”

“Yes, I know,” said Mr. Stannard. “I have not forgotten Mr. Burbank’s offer. But is Castle House any safer than Jacksonville? If these adventurers become masters here, will they not spread over the country, and will the plantations escape their ravages?”

“Mr. Stannard,” said Zermah, “it seems to me that if there is any danger it would be better to be together.”

“Zermah is right, father. It would be better for us all to be at Camdless Bay.”

“Certainly, Alice,” said Mr. Stannard. “I am not going to refuse Burbank’s invitation; but I don’t think the danger is so pressing. Zermah can tell our friends that it will take me a few days more to put things in order, and then we will avail ourselves of the hospitality of Castle House.”

“And when Mr. Gilbert arrives,” said Zermah, “he will at least find there all he loves.”

Leaving Mr. Stannard and his daughter, Zermah made her way through the crowd, which grew more and more excited, and regained the pier, where the overseer was waiting for her. They got into the boat, and Mr. Perry resumed the usual conversation at the very point he had left it.

In saying that the danger was not imminent Mr. Stannard was mistaken. Jacksonville was to have immediate experience of the effects of the war.

The Federal Government acted throughout with much circumspection; they proceeded step by step. Two years after the outbreak of hostilities, Abraham Lincoln had still to proclaim the abolition of slavery throughout the whole territory. Many months were still to elapse before the president’s message proposed to solve the slave question by gradually buying out and emancipating the blacks, before the vote was passed of 200,000/. with the authority, by way of indemnity, to give 60/. for every slave freed. If some of the Northern generals had been authorized to suppress slavery in the counties invaded by their armies, they had, up to then, disavowed it. Opinions were not unanimous on the subject, and there were several Unionist chiefs reported to be against the measure, as being neither logical nor opportune.

Meanwhile the war dragged on, and much to the disadvantage of the Confederates. General Price, on the 13th of February, had had to evacuate

Arkansas with his contingent of Missouri militia.

We have seen that Fort Henry was captured and occupied by the Federals. Now they were attacking Fort Donelson, which was defended by powerful artillery and covered by three miles of works, embracing the little town of Dover. Notwithstanding the cold and the snow, the fort, attacked on the land by the 15,000 then under General Grant and on the water by the gunboats of Commodore Foote, surrendered on the 14th of February, with an entire division of men and materials of war.

This was a serious check for the Confederates. The effect produced by the defeat was immense. As an immediate consequence came the retreat of General Johnston, who had to abandon the important town of Nashville on the Cumberland. The inhabitants were seized with panic, and left it as soon as he had gone, and a few days afterwards the same thing happened at Columbus. The whole State of Kentucky was thus in Federal hands.

We can easily imagine with what feelings of anger and ideas of revenge these events were received in Florida. The authorities were powerless to arrest the agitation, which spread to the most distant villages in the counties. The danger hourly increased for those who did not share in the opinions of the Southerners and join in the plans of resistance against the Federal troops. At Tallahassee and St. Augustine there were troubles which were easily put down; but at Jacksonville the rising of the populace threatened to degenerate into acts of unqualified violence.

The position at Camdless Bay became more and more disquieting. With his men so thoroughly devoted to him, James Burbank might perhaps hold out for a time, although it was then very difficult to procure arms and ammunition in sufficient quantities. At Jacksonville, Mr. Stannard was in great danger of losing his house, his daughter, and all he possessed. James

Burbank knowing how he was placed, wrote him letter after letter. He sent many messengers asking him to come to Castle House without delay. There he would be in comparative safety, and if he had to find another retreat, if he had to take refuge in the interior until the Federals had quieted the country by their presence, it would be easier for him to do so.

Mr. Stannard at last resolved to leave Jacksonville and take refuge at Camdless Bay. He started on the morning of the 23rd, with as much secrecy as possible, and without informing any one of his plans. A boat waited for him at a little creek about a mile up the St. John’s. Alice and he reached it in safety, crossed the river, and landed at the Camdless Bay pier, where the Burbanks were waiting for them. ““

It is easy to imagine their reception. Was not Alice already Mrs. Burbank’s daughter? Now they were reunited. The dark days that were coming would be passed together in greater safety and less anxiety.

It was indeed time to leave Jacksonville. The next day Mr. Stannard’s house was attacked by a lot of scoundrels, who marked their violence under a show of local patriotism. The authorities had great difficulty in saving the house from pillage, and in protecting some other houses belonging to honest citizens who did not share in the opinions of the mob. Evidently the hour was coming when the magistrates would be replaced by the chiefs of the rioters, who were doing their best to increase the excitement.

As Mr. Stannard had told Zermah, Texar had left his unknown retreat and was in Jacksonville among his habitual companions, who had been recruited from the very worst of the population, drawn from the plantations up the river.

These scoundrels had resolved that they would have their 5 way in the towns as they had had it in the country. They corresponded with their adherents in the different counties of Florida, and by keeping the question of slavery well to the front, gained In numbers every day. In a short time at Jacksonville, as at St. Augustine, the vagabonds, adventurers, and backwoodsmen who had come crowding in, would become the masters and have the military and civil power in their hands. The militia and regular troops would hasten to make common cause with them, as has often happened in times of trouble when violence is the order of the day.

James Burbank was fully aware of what was passing. Many of his confidential agents, on whom he could depend, kept him informed of what was taking place at Jacksonville. He knew that Texar had reappeared there, and that his detestable influence had extended over the whole of the lower population which, like him, was of Spanish origin. Such a man at the head of affairs was a direct menace to Camdless Bay. And so Burbank was making ready for either resistance, if it were possible, or retreat if it became necessary to abandon Castle House to fire and pillage. Above all things to provide for the safety of his family and friends was his first and constant care.

During these days Zermah’s devotion knew no bounds. At all hours she watched the boundaries of the plantation, particularly on the river side. A few slaves, chosen from among the most intelligent and best, lived day and night at posts which had been assigned to them. Any attempt against the estate would have been reported immediately. The Burbanks would not be taken unawares, without having time to take refuge in Castle House.

But James Burbank need not have been so anxious about a direct strong-handed attack. So long as the authority was not in the hands of Texar and his people there was no abandonment of official form. Under the pressure of public opinion the magistrates were brought to decide on a measure that would give a sort of satisfaction to the slavery partisans, who were so incensed against the North.

Burbank was the most important of the Florida planters, the richest of those who were known to hold liberal opinions. It was he who was first thought of to give an explanation of his personal ideas on enfranchisement in the midst of a slaveholding country.

In the evening of the 26th an orderly from Jacksonville arrived at Camdless Bay, and handed in a letter addressed to him. This is what the envelope contained: —

“Mr. James Burbank is ordered to present himself in person to-morrow, the 27th February, at eleven o’clock in the morning, at the Court of Justice before the authorities of Jacksonville.” That was all.

CHAPTER VII.

BEFORE THE COURT.

If this was not the clap of thunder, it was the lightning- flash that preceded it.

If James Burbank was not shaken by it, what were the feelings of his family? Why should the owner of Camdless Bay be summoned to Jacksonville? It was indeed a summons, not an invitation, to appear before the authorities. What were they going to do? Was this the beginning of some prosecution against him? Was it his liberty or his life that was in danger? If he obeyed — if he left Castle House — would they let him come back? If he did not obey, would they use force to bring him? And in that case to what dangers, to what violence, would his people be exposed?

“You shall not go, James.”

It was Mrs. Burbank, who spoke in the name of all.

“No, Mr. Burbank,” said Alice. “You must not think of leaving us — ”

“To put yourself in the power of such people,” added Carrol.

Burbank did not answer. When he first read the curt order to appear he had become so angry that he could scarcely restrain himself. What had happened to make the magistrates so daring? Had Texar’s companions and partisans found their way into office? Had they procured the dismissal of the authorities who had hitherto acted with some moderation? No. Overseer Perry had returned in the afternoon from Jacksonville and brought no such news.

“Could it be some event of the war?” said Mr. Stannard; “some advantage gained by the Southerners which has led them to attack us?”

“I am afraid that must be it,” said Edward Carrol. “If the North has experienced some check, these scoundrels will fancy they are no more in danger from Commodore Dupont, and are capable of proceeding to any excess.”

“They say that in Texas,” said Mr. Stannard, “the Federal troops have had to retire before the militia, and re-cross the Rio Grande, after a severe defeat at Valverde. At least, that is what I was told by a Jacksonville man I met about an hour ago.”

“Evidently that is what has made these fellows so bold,” said Carrol.

“Then Sherman’s army and Dupont’s flotilla will not come!” exclaimed Mrs. Burbank.

“It is only the 26th of February,” said Alice, “and, according to Gilbert’s letter, the Federal ships will not be ready for sea before the 28th.”

“Then you want the time to get down to the mouths of the St. John’s,” added Mr. Stannard, “to force the passes, clear the bar, and make a descent on Jacksonville. That will take ten days.”

“Ten days?” said Alice.

“Ten days!” added Mrs. Burbank. “And before then what may not happen to us?”

James Burbank took no part in the conversation. He .was thinking. He was asking himself what he was to do. To refuse to obey was to see the whole populace of Jacksonville advance on Camdless Bay with the open or tacit approval of the authorities. How great would then be the danger to his family! Better risk his own safety than theirs. If his life or liberty were in peril, better that the peril should threaten him alone.

Mrs. Burbank looked at her husband with the keenest anxiety. She felt that he was fighting a battle with himself. She hesitated to question him. Neither Alice, nor Stannard, nor Carrol dare ask him what his answer was to be. It was little Dy who, unconsciously, no doubt, made herself the mouthpiece of the family. She had gone near her father, who took her on his knee.

“Father!” said she.

“What is it, dear?”

“Are you going to those wicked people who want to do you such harm?”

“Yes. I will go.”

“James!” exclaimed Mrs. Burbank.

“I must; it is my duty. I will go!”

James Burbank had spoken so resolutely that it was . useless to say anything against his determination. He had evidently thought over all the consequences. His wife went and sat beside him, and put her arms round him, but she said nothing. And what could she say?

“My friends,” said Burbank, “it is possible that we are exaggerating the importance of this arbitrary act. What can they say against me? Nothing, as they know well. Accuse me of my opinions? My opinions are my own. I have never hidden them from my adversaries; and, as long as I live, I shall not hesitate to proclaim them to their face.”

“We will go with you, James!” said Carrol.

“Yes,” added Stannard. “We will not let you go to Jacksonville alone.”

“No, my friends,” answered Burbank. “To me alone comes the order to appear before the magistrates, and I alone will go. I may be kept there for some days. It is, therefore, better that you stay at Camdless Bay. To you I entrust my family during my absence.”

“And you are really going?” said Dy.

“Yes, my little daughter,” said Burbank playfully; “but if I do not lunch with you to-morrow I will come back to dinner, and we’ll pass the evening together. Now, tell me if, while I am at Jacksonville, there is anything I can buy you? What can I do to please you? What shall I bring you?”

“Bring yourself, father,” said the child; and at this expression of what all felt, the family separated, after Burbank had taken such measures of security as the occasion required.

The night passed without an alarm. In the morning Burbank was awake with the dawn, and was soon on his way down the avenue of bamboos leading to the pier. There he gave orders for a boat to be ready at eight o’clock to take him across the river.

As he returned to Castle House from the pier he was met by Zermah.

“Master,” she said, “your mind is made up? You are going to Jacksonville?”

“Yes, Zermah, and in the interest of all. You understand, do you not?”

“Yes, master. A refusal on your part would bring Texar’s mob on Camdless Bay.”

“And that is a serious danger which must be avoided at all cost,” said Burbank.

“Do you wish me to go with you?”

“On the contrary, I wish you to remain on the plantation. It is necessary that you should be near my wife, near my child, in case any danger should threaten them before my return.”

“I will not leave them.”

“You have no news?”

“No! It is true, however, that suspicious characters are prowling around the plantation. They have been watched. Last night two or three boats crossed the river. Do they think that Mr. Gilbert is with the Federals under Commodore Dupont, and is coming secretly to Camdless Bay?”

“My brave boy!” said Burbank. “No! he is too sensible to be so rash.”

“I am afraid Texar has some suspicion on the subject. They tell me his influence gets greater every day. When you are at Jacksonville beware of Texar, master — ”

“Yes, Zermah, as of a poisonous reptile! But I am on my guard. While I am away, if he makes any attempt against Castle House — ”

“Never fear, master, for yourself; and never fear for us. Your slaves will defend the plantation, and, if necessary, will die to the last man. They are devoted to you. They love you. I know what they think, what they say, what they will do. There have been people here from other plantations to raise them against you, but they will not listen to them. They are all one family with yours, and you can depend upon them.”

“I know it, Zermah, and I trust to them.”

Burbank returned to the house. The moment came; he bid farewell to »his wife, his daughter, and Alice. He promised them to do nothing to provoke the magistrates to violence. He would be sure to come back that night. He bid everybody good-bye and left them. Certainly James Burbank had much to fear for himself; but there was much to be feared for those he left at Castle House.

Stannard and Carrol went with him to the landing-place at the end of the avenue. There he gave them his last instructions; and with a beautiful breeze from the southwest, the boat rapidly left the pier of Camdless Bay.

An hour afterwards, about ten o’clock, Burbank landed at Jacksonville. The quay was then deserted. There were only a few sailors discharging the cargoes of the dogger-boats. He was not recognized; his arrival was not announced at all, and he was able to cross to the end of the harbour and call on one of his friends, Mr. Harvey.

Mr. Harvey was much surprised and uneasy at seeing him. He had not thought that he would have obeyed the order to present himself at the court. In the town it was not thought that he would. As to who had been the cause of the order being given, Mr. Harvey did not know. Probably, with a view to satisfy public opinion, the magistrates were going to ask him to explain his conduct since the beginning of the war, particularly with regard to his slaves. Perhaps they were going to keep the richest Federal farmer in Florida as a hostage. Would it not have been better to have stopped at Camdless Bay? So thought Mr. Harvey. Could he not go back as nobody knew he had come?

Burbank had not come merely to go back again. He wished to know what it was all about, and he would know.

Some very interesting questions as to the state of affairs generally were then put by him to his correspondent.

Had the authorities been replaced by the ringleaders of:he mob?

Not yet, but their position had become precarious.

Had the Spaniard Texar any hand in the popular movement that was about to take place?

Yes. He was looked upon as the leader of the advanced slave-holding party in Florida. He and his companions would probably soon be masters of the town.

Had the last news from the war been confirmed?

It had been. The organization of the Southern States lad just been completed. On the 22nd of February the government had been definitely formed, with Jefferson Davis as President and Stephens as Vice-President, and:hey had been invested with power for six years. Congress, composed of two houses, had assembled at Richmond. Jefferson Davis, three days before, had asked for compulsory service. Since then the Confederates had had a few successes of no great importance. On the 24th, an important detachment of McClellan’s had crossed the Upper Potomac, and the Southerners had consequently evacuated Columbus. A great battle was imminent on the Mississippi between them and the army of General Grant.

And how about the squadron that Dupont was to bring to the mouths-of the St. John’s?

Rumours were afloat that in ten days it would attempt to force the passes. If Texar and his partisans were meditating an outbreak to get the town into their hands, no time was to be lost.

Such was the state of affairs at Jacksonville; and who could tell if the Burbank incident would not hasten the catastrophe?

When the time came for him to appear James Burbank left his friend’s house and walked to the Courts of Justice. There was much excitement in the streets. The people were crowding towards the courts. It seemed as though the case, though it might be of little importance in itself, would bring about a rising that might have deplorable consequences.

The square was full of people, mostly of the poorer whites, half-breeds, and negroes. Naturally they were noisy. If those who could obtain admission to the court were few, a good many of Texar’s partisans would nevertheless be there. With them would be a sprinkling of law-abiding citizens opposed to such an act of injustice, but it would be difficult for them to withstand the party bent on removing the authorities of Jacksonville.

As soon as Burbank appeared in the square he was recognized. A loud shouting arose; and it was not in his favour. A few courageous citizens surrounded him, having no intention that an honourable and much-respected man should be exposed to the brutalities of the mob. In obeying the summons he had received Burbank had shown his dignity and decision of character, and his doing so was worthy ‘of recognition. — was therefore able to make his way across the square. He reached the door of the court, entered, and stopped at the bar to which he had been so unjustly summoned.

The chief magistrate of the town and his assistants were already on the bench. They were moderate, reasonable men. The menaces and recriminations to which they had been subject ever since the outbreak of the war may be imagined. To remain at their posts required no little courage and energy. It was only because the slave question caused less excitement in Florida than in the other states of the South that they had been able to withstand the attacks of the turbulent party. Secessionist ideas were, however, making way; and with them the influence of the lower classes and adventurous vagabonds daily increased; and it was to satisfy public opinion, to a certain extent under the pressure of the more violent agitators, that the magistrates had decided to summon James Burbank, on information given by one of their leaders — the Spaniard Texar.

The murmur — of approbation from one side, of disapprobation from another — which greeted the proprietor of “Camdless Bay as he entered the court soon subsided. Erect, with the dauntless look of a man that had never ailed, he did not even wait for the magistrate to ask him the usual questions, but in a firm voice he said, —

“You asked for James Burbank. James ‘Burbank is before you.”

After the first formalities, to which Burbank answered very briefly, he said, “Of what am I accused?”

“Of opposing by word, and probably by deed, such ideas and hopes as are now held by the majority in Florida.”

“And who is my accuser?”

“Iam.”

It was Texar. Burbank recognized his voice. He did not even turn his head; he contented himself with shrugging his shoulders in token of his contempt for his accuser.

On the other hand, Texar’s partisans encouraged their leader by voice and gesture.

“And in the first place,” said he, “I tell James Burbank to his face that he is a Northerner! His presence at Jacksonville, in a Confederate State, is a standing insult. He is a Northerner at heart and by birth; why has he not gone back to the North?”

“I am in Florida,” replied Burbank, “because it suits me to be there. I have lived in the county for twenty years. If I was not born in it you know at least where I came from; and that is more than you can say for those whose past is unknown, and who live not in the light of day, and whose private life ought to be inquired into much more than mine.”

Although this was a direct attack on Texar, he made no sign.

“What next?” asked Burbank.

“Next,” said the Spaniard, “when the country has risen for the maintenance of slavery, and is ready to shed its blood to repulse the Federal troops, I accuse James Burbank of being an anti-slavery man, and the head of an anti-slavery propaganda.”

“James Burbank,” said the magistrate, “in the circumstances in which we are placed, you will understand that this charge is of exceptional gravity. I shall be glad to have your answer.”

“Sir,” said Burbank, “my answer is very simple. I have assisted in no propaganda, nor do I intend doing so. The charge is false. As to my opinions on slavery, if I am permitted to refer to them here, I may say that I am an abolitionist! I deplore the strife that is raging between the South and the North. I am afraid that the South is marching to inevitable disaster, and it is in her own interest that I wish to see her on another road instead of engaging in a war against common sense. You will remember some day that those who spoke to you as I am speaking were in the right. When the time has come for a change, for a step in moral progress, it is foolish to withstand it. The separation of the North from the South would be a crime against the American country. Neither reason, nor justice, nor force is on your side, and the crime will never be accomplished.”

These words were received with a few shouts of approval, speedily drowned in more noisy demonstrations. The majority were not prepared to accept them.

When the magistrate had obtained silence in the court James Burbank continued: —

“And now,” said he, “I am ready for more precise charges, as to facts, be it understood, and I will reply to them when you tell me what they are,”

The magistrates were much embarrassed by this dignified bearing. They knew of no fact that could be charged against Mr. Burbank. Their object had been to let the charges be made and let them be proved, if proofs existed.

Texar saw that he must explain in greater detail or he would fail.

“Be it so,” said he. “But it is not my notion of what is best to invoke freedom of opinion on the slave question when the country has risen in support of the clause. But if James Burbank has the right to think as he likes on the subject — if it is true that he abstains from making converts to his ideas, at least he might abstain from corresponding with the enemy at the gates of Florida.”

This accusation of complicity with the Federals was a very serious one at that time, and hence the thrill of excitement that ran through the audience. It was, however, still vague, and had to be proved.

“You pretend that I correspond with the enemy?”

“Yes,’ said Texar.

“Prove it. I should like you to.”

“Very well,” said Texar. “About three weeks ago a messenger to James Burbank left the Federal army, or rather, the flotilla of Commodore Dupont. The man came to Camdless Bay, and he was followed from the time he left the plantation till he re-crossed the frontier. Do you deny that?”

Evidently this was the messenger who had brought the young lieutenant’s letter. Texar’s spies had not been deceived. This time the charge was definite, and Burbank’s reply was anxiously waited for.

He did not hesitate to tell them what was only the truth.

“Yes,” said he, “a man did come about that time to Camdless Bay, but the man was only a messenger. He did not belong to the Federal army, and he simply brought a letter from my son — ”

“From your son,” interrupted Texar; “from your son, who, if we are correctly informed, is in the Unionist service, who is, perhaps, in the van of the invaders now on the march to Florida.”

The vehemence with which Texar pronounced these words made a strong impression on the people in the court. If James Burbank, after admitting that he had received a letter from his son, admitted that Gilbert was in the Federal army, how could he get over the charge of being in communication with the enemies of the South?

“Will you reply to the evidence against your son?” asked the magistrate.

“No, sir,” replied Burbank, “I have nothing to say in the matter. There is no charge against my son that I know of. I alone am accused of holding communication with the Federal army, and I deny it, and I defy this man who attacks me on account of his own personal hatred towards me to bring forward a single proof.”

“He admits, then, that his son is now fighting against the Confederates!” exclaimed Texar.

“I admit nothing,” said Burbank. “It is for you to prove the charge you bring against me.”

“Good! I will prove it,” replied Texar. “In a few days I shall be in possession of the proof you ask, and when I have it — ”

“When you have it,” replied the magistrate, “we can take it into consideration. Until then, I do not see what charges Mr. Burbank has to answer.”

In deciding in this way the magistrate acted like an honest man. He was right undoubtedly; unfortunately he was wrong to be right with a public so prejudiced against the planter of Camdless Bay. And then followed an ominous murmuring, and even protesting, on the part of Texar's companions. The Spaniard saw how things were going, and abandoning the charges against Gilbert Burbank, returned to those against his father.

"Yes," he said, "I will prove all that I have advanced with regard to James Burbank's being in communication with the enemy preparing to invade Florida. Meanwhile, the opinions he publicly professes — opinions so dangerous for the cause of slavery — constitute a public danger; and, in the name of all the slaveholders who will not submit to the yoke of the North, I demand that he be secured."

"Yes! yes!" exclaimed the partisans of Texar, while some of the audience endeavoured in vain to protest against the unjustifiable proposal.

The magistrate succeeded in quieting the assembly, and then Burbank replied, —

"I shall do all that my strength and my rights allow me to oppose such tyranny. I am an abolitionist. And I have already told you so. But opinion is free, I suppose, in a system of government founded on freedom. Up to now it has not been a crime to be an anti-slavery man, and as I am not a criminal the law is powerless to punish me."

Renewed shouts of approval seemed to show that Burbank was getting the best of it. Texar saw that the time had come to change his batteries. We need not, therefore, be surprised when he hurled at Burbank the following unexpected challenge: —

“Well, if you do not believe in slavery, why do you not free your own slaves?”

“I will do so,” answered James Burbank. “I will do so as soon as the time comes.”

“Indeed! That means you will do so when the Federal army is in possession of Florida. You want Sherman’s soldiers and Dupont’s sailors to give you courage to act up to your ideas! That is prudent, but it is cowardly.”

“Cowardly!” exclaimed Burbank indignantly, and not seeing the snare spread for him.

“Yes, cowardly,” said Texar. “You dare not put your ideas into practice! You only want to curry popularity with the Northerners! You are an abolitionist only for appearance sake; at heart you are a slavery man.”

James Burbank drew himself up. He gave his opponent a long look of scorn. Such hypocrisy was manifestly absurdly out of keeping with his frank, loyal existence. In a clear, decided tone, that could be heard by all, he said: —

“Inhabitants of Jacksonville, from this day forth I shall not keep a slave. This very day I proclaim the abolition of slavery over the whole plantation of Camdless Bay.”

At first this bold declaration was greeted with cheers. It had required true courage to do such a thing — courage more than prudence perhaps. Burbank had allowed his indignation to get the better of him.

It was evident that his action would compromise the interests of the other Florida planters, and at once a reaction took place in the court. The applause was silenced ‘ by the vociferations not only of those who were slaveholders on principle, but of those who till then had been indifferent on the slavery question.

And Texar’s friends would have profited by this reaction to commit some act of violence on James Burbank if the Spaniard himself had not restrained them.

“Leave him alone,” said he. “Burbank has disarmed himself. Now he is ours!”

His meaning was immediately understood, and his partisans refrained from any act of violence. He even felt no misgivings when the magistrates told Burbank he might go — there was no proof to warrant his incarceration. If the Spaniard could make good his words later on, and produce witnesses to show that Burbank was in communication with the enemy, the magistrates could take action. Until then Burbank was free.

True, the declaration of enfranchisement relative to Camdless Bay was made publicly, and might eventually serve as a pretence on the part of the mob for proceedings against the authorities of the town.

As he left the court Burbank was followed by a disorderly crowd very evilly disposed towards him, but the police kept them from assaulting him. There were shouts and threats, but no acts of violence. Evidently Texar’s influence protected him.

He reached the quay, where his boat was waiting. There he took leave of his. friend Mr. Harvey; and then, pushing off, he was soon out of range of the vociferations with which the rabble of Jacksonville saluted him as he left them.

As the tide was going down, the boat took at least two hours to get across to Camdless Bay, where the family were waiting for him. Great was their joy when they saw him coming back. Many reasons had they had for fearing he would be kept away from them.

“No,” said he to little Dy as he kissed her; “I promised to come home to dinner, my dear, and you know I never break my promises.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAST SLAVE.

That evening James Burbank told his people what had happened at the court. Texar’s hateful conduct was revealed. It was at his instigation that the summons had been sent to Camdless Bay. The conduct of the magistrates had been worthy of praise. When the charge of communicating with the Federals had been made they had asked for the proof, and as the proof was not forthcoming Burbank was set at liberty.

With these vague charges Gilbert’s name had been mixed up. There could not be much doubt that the young man was with the Northern army. Was not James Burbank’s refusal a half-admission that the assertion was true? And consequently great was the fear and anxiety on the part of Mrs. Burbank, and Alice, and all the family. If the son could not be got at would not the rabble of Jacksonville take vengeance on his father? Texar had boasted that in a few days he would produce his proof; and it was not impossible that he could do so. What would have to be done then?

“Poor Gilbert,” said Mrs. Burbank, “to know he is so near to Texar, who will stop at nothing to attain his end.”

“Could we not let him know what is happening at Jacksonville?” asked Alice.

“Yes,” said Mr. Stannard, “we might let him know that the slightest imprudence on his part will have the most deplorable consequences for his and him.”

“And how are we to let him know?” asked James Burbank. “There are spies all round the plantation; there can be no doubt of that. The messenger Gilbert sent was watched back to the frontier. Every letter we write may fall into Texar’s hands. Every man we send with a verbal message may be arrested on the road. No, my friends, do not try to make matters worse. May heaven send the Federals into Florida without delay! It is time they came now; the minority of honest people is threatened by the scoundrels of the country.”

James Burbank was right. Owing to the watch kept round the plantation it would be very imprudent to hold any communication with Gilbert. And the time was approaching when he and his people would be in safety under the protection of the Federal army.

In fact, it was the very next morning that Commodore Dupont was to start from his anchorage at Edisto. In three days his flotilla would have dropped down the Georgia coast and reached St. Andrew’s Bay.

Then James Burbank told his friends of the very serious matter that had happened before the magistrates; how he had been led to reply to Texar’s taunt as to the slaves at Camdless Bay. Strong in his light, strong in his conscience, he had publicly declared the abolition of slavery on his estate. This was what no Southern state had yet allowed to be proclaimed without having been obliged by the fortune of war. He had done it entirely of his own free will.

The declaration was as bold as it was magnanimous. What would be its consequences no one could foresee. Evidently it would not make Burbank’s position less hazardous in this slave-holding country. It might, perhaps, provoke some desire of revolt among the slaves on other plantations. That did not matter! His friends, excited by the grandeur of the action, fully approved of what Burbank had done.

“James.” said Mrs. Burbank, “whatever may happen, you did quite right to reply in that way to Texar’s odious insinuations.”

“We are proud of you, father!” said Alice, giving Mr. Burbank the name for the first time.

“And so, my dear girl,” said James Burbank, “when Gilbert and his Federals enter Florida they will not find a single slave at Camdless Bay.”

“Thank you, Mr. Burbank,” said Zermah. “I thank you for my companions and myself. As far as I am concerned I never felt I was a slave. Your kindness and generosity have always made me seem like as free as I am to-day.”

“Quite so, Zermah,” said Mrs. Burbank. “Slave or free, we shall love you none the less.”

Zermah vainly tried to hide her emotion. She took Dy in her arms and clasped her to her bosom.

Carrol and Stannard cordially shook hands with Burbank to show how they applauded his deed of daring — and justice.

Evidently the Burbank family in their generous enthusiasm forgot all about the complications to which the act might give rise.

No one at Camdless Bay would think of blaming James Burbank, unless perhaps Mr. Perry, the overseer, when he heard what had taken place. But he was away on duty and would not be back till late at night.

When the family gathering broke up, Mr. Burbank told them that next morning he would give the slaves their liberty.

“We will be with you, James,” said Mrs. Burbank, “when you tell them they are free.”

“Yes, so will all of us,” said Carrol.

“And me, too!” said little Dy.

“Yes, my dear; you too.”

“Zermah,” said the little girl, “are you going to leave as now?”

“No, my child!” said Zermah. “No, I will never leave you!”

In the morning, the first person Mr. Burbank met in the private garden was Perry the overseer. As the secret had been kept, he had heard nothing about it. He soon heard it from the lips of his master — much to his amazement.

“Oh. Mr. James! oh, Mr. James!”

The worthy man was quite astounded, and other words failed him.

“But that ought not to surprise you, Perry,” said Burbank. “I am only anticipating matters. You know that the enfranchisement of the blacks is an act imposed on every State that is careful of its dignity.”

“Its dignity, Mr. James! What sort of a thing is this dignity?”

“You do not understand the word ‘ dignity’ Perry? Well, careful of its interests.”

“Its interests — its interests, Mr. James! You say careful of its interests!”

“Certainly, and the future will show you I am right.”

“But where are we to get the labour for the plantation, Mr. Burbank?”

“Amongst the blacks, Perry.”

“But if the blacks are free not to work they will not work.”

“They will work; and, what is more, work with more zeal and more pleasure, for their condition will be better.”

“But your blacks, Mr. James! Your blacks will begin by leaving you.”

“I shall be much astonished if a single one does anything of the sort.”

“But I am no longer overseer of the slaves at Camdless Bay.”

“No, but you are overseer at Camdless Bay; and I do not suppose your position will be any the worse for commanding free men instead of slaves.”

“But — ”

“My dear Perry, I warn you that I have an answer for all your buts. Look after what you have to do regarding a measure which you cannot prevent, and of which all my family approve.”

“And do the blacks know nothing about it?”

“Not yet,” said Burbank; “and do not say anything about it to them. They shall be told it to-day. You can assemble them in the park at three o’clock this afternoon, and tell them I have a communication to make to them.”

Then the overseer retired with many a gesture of astonishment.

“Blacks who are not slaves! Blacks who will work for themselves! Blacks who will have to look after their own wants! It is a regular capsize of the social order 1 It is the upsetting of all human law 1 It is against nature — yes, against nature!”

During the morning Burbank, Stannard, and Carrol went out in the break to visit the northern boundary of the plantation. The slaves were busy at their usual work in the fields of rice and coffee-shrubs and sugar-canes. There was the same bustle going on in the workshops and saw-mills. The secret had been well kept. No communication had been established between Jacksonville and Camdless Bay. These who were so directly interested knew nothing of James Burbank’s project.

In driving along the boundary of the estate Burbank and his friends wished to assure themselves that the neighbourhood of the plantation presented nothing suspicious. After yesterday’s declaration, it was to be feared that some of the Jacksonville mob or the people of the country round might find their way to Camdless Bay. But nothing of the sort was to be seen. No prowlers were noticed even on the bank of the river or along the St. John’s. The Shannon, which passed at ten o’clock, did not stop at the pier, but continued her voyage to Picolata. Neither up stream nor down stream was there anything to alarm the inhabitants of Castle House.

A little before noon Burbank, Stannard, and Carrol repassed the bridge into the enclosure and entered the house. The family’ were waiting for lunch. They seemed less anxious, and talked more at their ease. It seemed as though the course of events had paused for a while. Probably the energy of the Jacksonville magistrates had put a check on the violent spirits of Texar’s party. If that state ol things continued for a day or so, Florida would be occupied by the Federal army, and anti-slavery men, whether Northerners or Southerners, would be in safety.

James Burbank could thus proceed to the ceremony of emancipation — the first action of the kind that had ever voluntarily taken place in a slave State.

Of all the blacks on the plantation, the one who would be most gratified was evidently a fellow of about twenty, whose name was Pygmalion, or Pvg, as he was more commonly called. He looked after the servants’ quarters at Castle House, and so lived there. He did not work in the fields, nor in the factories, nor in the shops. Truth to tell, Pygmalion was a ridiculous, vain, idle fellow, whose faults his master very kindly overlooked. Since the slave question had come up, he had been heard to declaim in sounding phrases about human liberty. On all occasions he indulged in pretentious speeches to his fellow negroes, and was generally laughed down. As they said, he tried to ride the great horse when even a donkey would have thrown him. Many discussions had he had with Mr. Perry when the overseer was in a humour to listen to him; and we can imagine the enthusiasm with which he would welcome an act of enfranchisement that gave him the dignity of manhood.

The negroes had been told to assemble in the private park in front of Castle House, as an important communication was to be made to them by the planter.

A little before three o’clock — the time fixed for the meeting — the slaves began to assemble. They had not gone to work after the midday meal; and had tidied themselves up and changed their working clothes as was usual with them when admitted within the palisades. At the barracoons there had been great excitement, and the overseer had walked from one to the other growling to himself, —

“When I think that at this moment we can buy and sell these fellows as if they were merchandise, and in another hour we shall be able to do nothing of the sort! Yes! I will say so to the last! Mr. Burbank, you can do what you like and say what you like, and so can President Lincoln, and so can all the Federals of the North, and all the Liberals of the world!”

And here Pygmalion, who knew nothing as yet, found himself face to face with the overseer.

“Why are we to be called together, please, Mr. Jerry?” asked he. “Do you know?”

“Yes, idiot! It is to — ”

The overseer stopped, not wishing to betray the secret. An idea occurred to him.

“Come here, Pyg,” he said.

Pygmalion approached.

“Have I ever pulled your ear for you, my boy?”

“Yes, Mr. Perry, for contrary to all justice — human or divine — you have a right to do so.”

“Well, as it is my right I am going to use it once more!”

And without heeding the cries of Pyg, but without doing him any serious hurt, he pulled the ears which were already of tolerable length. And much did it relieve the overseer to take advantage of his right for the last time.

At three o’clock James Burbank and his people appeared on the terrace at Castle House. Before them stood seven hundred slaves, men, women, and children, among them a score of old negroes, who, when they were past work, found a comfortable retreat for old age in the Camdless Bay barracoons.

Deep silence fell on all. At a gesture from Mr. Burbank the overseer made the negroes form up closer, so that they could distinctly hear what was said to them.

“My friends,” said James Burbank, “you know that a civil war has been raging for a long time in the United States. The real cause of that war is the question of slavery. The South is only fighting for slavery, in which it thinks its interests are bound up and which it wishes to maintain. The North, in the name of humanity, desires to put an end to it in America. God has helped the defenders of a righteous cause, and victory has already more than once declared for those who are fighting for the freedom of a race. For some time, as everybody knows, I have shared in the opinions of the North without being able to put them in practice. But now, certain things have happened, and I can lose no time in acting up to my ideas. Listen, then, to what I have to tell you in the name of all my family.”

There was a subdued murmur of emotion in the crowd, but it died away almost instantly, and then James Burbank, in a voice that could be heard by all, made the following declaration: —

“From this 28th of February, 1862, henceforth the slaves on this plantation are free. They can leave here or stay here as they please. There are now none but free men at Camdless Bay.”

The first greeting from those who had thus ceased to be slaves was a loud cheering. Arms were lifted in sign of thankfulness. The name of Burbank was shouted again and again. The crowd rushed to the terrace. Men, women, and children wished to kiss the hands of their liberator. The enthusiasm was indescribable, and it was all the more vigorous from being unprepared. As to Pygmalion we can imagine how he gesticulated and perorated and attitudinized.

Then an old negro, the oldest on the plantation, advanced to the steps of the terrace. Then he lifted his head, and, speaking with much emotion said, —

“In the name of the old slaves of Camdless Bay, who are now free, I thank you, Mr. Burbank, for having let us hear the first words of freedom ever spoken in the State of Florida.”

As he spoke the old negro slowly mounted the steps, and kissed James Burbank’s hands; and then, as little Dy stretched out her arms to him, he lifted her up and held her out to his comrades.

“Hurray! Hurray for Mr. Burbank! “The joyous shouts again rent the air, loud enough to carry to Jacksonville, on the other bank of the St. John’s, the news of the great deed that bad been done.

The family were deeply moved. In vain did they try to quiet these shouts of enthusiasm. It was Zermah who succeeded in procuring silence as she advanced to the edge of the terrace to speak.

“My friends,” said she, “we are now free; thanks to the generosity, to the humanity of him who was our master, the best of masters!”

“Yes! yes!” shouted hundreds of voices in one great shout of gratitude.

“We can now go where we please. We can, if we like, avail ourselves of our liberty to leave the plantation. As for me I will follow the instinct of my heart; and I am sure that most of you will do as I do. For six years I have lived at Camdless Bay. My husband and I have lived here and we wish to die here. I ask Mr. Burbank to keep us now we are free as he kept us when we were slaves. Those who wish him to do so — ”

“All! all!”

And the words repeated a thousand times showed how much the master of Camdless Bay was appreciated, and proved the bond of friendship and gratitude that united all on the estate.

James Burbank then spoke. He told all those who wished to remain on the plantation that they might do so under new conditions; all that was to be done was to agree what price should be paid for their labour. It was necessary that the matter should be finished in due form, and consequently each of the negroes would now receive a certificate of liberation.

To issue these was the duty of the assistant overseers. Ever since Mr. Burbank had decided to free his slaves he had had these papers prepared, and as negro after negro came up to receive them, most affecting were the demonstrations of gratitude.

The end of the day was devoted to rejoicing. In the morning the blacks would return to their ordinary work, but to-day must be given over to festivity. The Burbanks, as they walked among the crowd, were greeted with tokens of the sincerest friendship and assurances of boundless devotion.

But among the crowd overseer Perry moved like a lost soul.

“Well, Perry,” asked Mr. Burbank, “what say you?”

“I say, Mr. James, that although they are free, these Africans are none the less Africans and have not changed their colour. They were born black and they will die black.”

“But they will live white,” said Burbank with a smile, “and that is everything!”

That evening the dinner at Castle House was a happy one; and more confidence was felt as to the future. In a few days the security of Florida would be completely assured No bad news had come from Jacksonville. It was possible that James Burbank’s conduct before the magistrates had had a favourable impression on the majority of the inhabitants.

One of the company at dinner was Mr. Overseer Perry, who had been obliged to help in what he could not hinder. He sat down opposite the old negro who had been invited by Mr. Burbank, in order to show that the freedom given him was not an empty declaration. Outside were heard the sounds of the holiday-making; and the park was illuminated by the reflection of the bonfires lighted in different parts of the plantation. In the middle of dinner a deputation arrived with a magnificent bouquet for the little girl, the finest, certainly, that “Miss Dy Burbank of Castle House “had ever received.

When all had gone, the family went back into the hall, to stay there till bedtime. It seemed as if a day so well begun could not but end as well. About eight o’clock the plantation was quiet. It seemed as though nothing would occur to trouble it, when a voice was heard without.

James Burbank rose and went to the front door.

In front of the terrace a few men were standing and talking in a loud tone.

“What is the matter?” asked James Burbank.

“Mr. Burbank,” said one of the overseers, “a boat has just run alongside the pier.”

“Where from?”

“The left bank.”

“Who is on board?”

“A messenger sent to you from the Jacksonville magistrates.”

“And what does he want?”

“He has a letter for you. Shall I let him land?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Burbank came to her husband’s side, Alice stepped up to one of the windows, while Stannard and Carrol walked to the door. Zermah, taking little Dy by the hand, stood up. All felt that some serious incident was at hand.

The overseer went back to the landing-place. Ten minutes afterwards he returned with the messenger whom the boat had brought from Jacksonville.

He was in the uniform of the County Militia. He was introduced into the hall, and asked for Mr. Burbank.

“I am James Burbank. What is your business?”

“To hand you this letter.”

The messenger held out a large envelope which bore the seal of the court.

Burbank broke the seal, and read, —

“By order of the authorities newly constituted at Jacksonville, every slave set free without the permission of the Confederate Government will be immediately expelled the territory.

“The expulsion to take place within the following forty-eight hours; and, in case of refusal, force will be used.

“TEXAR. “Done at Jacksonville, 28th February, 1862.”

The magistrates had been superseded. Texar had been placed by his partisans in charge of the town.

“What answer shall I take back?” asked the messenger. “None!” said James Burbank.

The messenger retired, and was escorted back to the boat, which put off towards the other side of the stream.

And so, at the Spaniard’s orders, the old slaves of the plantation were to be dispersed! Although they were free men, they were no longer free to live in Florida! Camdless Bay was to be deprived of all the men on whom he had reckoned to defend the plantation.

“Free on those conditions?” said Zermah. “Never! I refuse such freedom I And if I cannot remain near you I would rather be a slave.”

And, taking her certificate of freedom in her hands, Zermah tore it across, and fell at James Burbank’s feet.

CHAPTER IX.

WAITING.

SUCH were the first consequences of the generous action of freeing his slaves before the Federals were masters of the territory.

Texar and his partisans were now in power, and could indulge in any deed of violence that their brutal natures suggested. By his vague denunciations the Spaniard had not been able to put James Burbank in prison, but he had gained his end none the-less by taking advantage of the excitement of the people at the conduct of the magistrates. After the acquittal of the anti-slavery planter, who was going to proclaim emancipation on the estate, Texar had raised a crowd of malcontents and headed a revolution in the town. He had superseded the old magistrates by the most advanced members of his party, formed a committee of small whites and Floridans of Spanish origin, and assured himself of the co-operation of the militia, with whom he had been in treaty for a long time, and who at once fraternized with the people. The fate of every person in the county was now in his hands.

James Burbank's conduct had not been approved by the majority of the planters on the banks of the St. John's, who feared that their own slaves would compel them to follow his example. Most of them being ardent Southerners, pledged to withstand the pretensions of the Unionists, saw with extreme irritation the advance of the Federal armies, and declared that Florida should resist them as the other Southern States were resisting them. At the outset of the war they had treated the question of enfranchisement with indifference, but they had hastened to range themselves under the flag of Jefferson Davis, and to do their utmost to second the efforts of the rebels against the Government of Abraham Lincoln.

Under such circumstances there was little wonder that Texar, having the same opinions and interests to defend, should have succeeded as he had done, notwithstanding his evil reputation. He had seized his post, however, not so much to organize resistance and repulse Commodore Dupont’s flotilla as to gratify his evil instincts; and that is why, on account of the hatred he bore towards the Burbank family, his first care had been to reply to the liberation at Camdless Bay by the edict which obliged the slaves who had been freed to leave the territory in forty-eight hours.

“In acting thus,” he said, “I protect the interests of the planters. They cannot but approve of a measure which will prevent the rising of the slaves in Florida.”

The majority had thus applauded without reservation this order of Texar’s, arbitrary though it was. It was arbitrary, unique, and indefensible. In freeing his slaves, James Burbank was only acting within his right which he had always possessed. He could have done it before the war had divided the United States on the question of slavery. Nothing had occurred to supersede this right, and Texar’s action was neither just nor legal.

But Camdless Bay would be deprived of its natural defenders, and Texar’s object would be attained.

This was well understood at Castle House; and it would perhaps have been better if James Burbank had waited till he could act without danger. But, as we know, he had been charged before the Jacksonville magistrates with acting contrary to his opinions, and so placed that he must conform to them; and, incapable of mastering his indignation, he had declared himself publicly, and had publicly proceeded before the people of his plantation to give his slaves their freedom. By doing so he had injured his own position and that of his guests, and now it must be decided in all haste what was to be done.

In the first place — and this very evening the discussion was entered upon — could they go back on this act of emancipation? No. That would make no difference in the state of affairs. Texar would not recognize such a tardy going back. Besides, the negroes, when they learnt what the Jacksonville authorities had decided to do, would unanimously imitate Zermah's example. Rather than leave Camdless Bay and be hunted from the State, they would return to their condition as slaves until the time when they would have the right to be free and live freely where they pleased.

But what would be the good of this? They would, under their old master, defend the plantation which had become their home, and with all the more ardour now they had been freed. This Zermah guaranteed. James Burbank therefore decided that' he would not recall what he had done. All the rest were of his opinion.

And they were not mistaken. In the morning, when the new decree of the Jacksonville Committee was known, marks of devotion and tokens of fidelity came in from all sides. If Texar attempted to put his edict in force they would resist it. If he used force, they would use force to repel him.

"And, besides," said Carrol, "events are hurrying on. In a couple of days, in twenty-four hours perhaps, the slave question in Florida will be settled. To-morrow the Federal flotilla may force the mouths of the St. John's, and then — "

“And if the militia, aided by the Confederate troops, make any resistance?” asked Mr. Stannard.

“If they resist, their resistance will not last long,” said Carrol. “Without ships or gunners, how can they oppose the passage of Commodore Dupont, the landing of Sherman, the occupation of the ports of Fernandina, Jacksonville, and St. Augustine? When these points are occupied, the Federals will be masters of Florida. Then Texar and his friends will have to run.”

“If they could only catch him,” said James Burbank, “then we should see if, when he is in the hands of Federal justice, he could substantiate some alibi to escape the punishment he deserves.”

The night passed without the security of Castle House being disturbed. In the morning the rumours that were flying about were inquired into. The plantation was not threatened that day. Texar’s decree had ordered the expulsion of the blacks in forty-eight hours. James Burbank had determined to resist the order, and occupied the time in preparing for the defence of his house.

It was, however, important to get at all the reports from the theatre of war. Any moment the state of affairs might be changed; and James Burbank and his brother-in-law set off on horseback to learn what they could. Descending the right bank of the St. John’s, they rode towards the mouth of the river, so as to explore for a dozen miles the widening of the river, which ends at San Pablo, where the lighthouse stands. As they passed Jacksonville they would be able to see if there was any gathering of boats indicating an approaching attack on Camdless Bay. In half an hour they had passed the boundary of the plantation.

Meanwhile Mrs. Burbank and Alice were walking in the park of Castle House. In vain Mr. Stannard tried to calm their apprehensions. They both had a presentiment of a coming catastrophe.

Zermah had been among the barracoons. Although the threat of expulsion was known, the blacks heeded it not. They had returned to their usual work. Like their old master, they had made up their minds to resist If they were free, by what right were they to be expelled from the country of their adoption?, Nothing could be more satisfactory than Zermah's report — the blacks of Camdless Bay could be trusted.

"Yes," said she, "my companions will all return to slavery, as I have done, rather than leave their master! And if they are obliged, they will defend their rights."

Nothing more was to be done than to wait for the return of James Burbank and Edward Carrol.

At this date, the 1st of March, it was not impossible that the Federal flotilla had arrived in sight of Pablo lighthouse, ready to occupy the mouth of the St. John's. The Confederates had not too many militia to oppose their passage, and the authorities of Jacksonville would have none to spare to carry out their threats against the former slaves of Camdless Bay.

Mr. Perry made his daily visit to the different workshops and storehouses on the estate. He also could bear witness to the good disposition of the negroes. Although he did not care to admit it, he saw that if they had changed their condition, their assiduity at their work and devotion to the Burbank family had not changed. To resist all that the Jacksonville populace attempted against them they were firmly resolved. But, in Mr. Perry's opinion, these fine feelings would not last. Nature would reclaim her rights. After tasting independence, these enfranchised negroes would return to slavery, and descend to the place that Nature intended for them, between the man and the animal.

As he was thinking of these things, who should he run against but the conceited Pygmalion, strutting like a peacock with his head on high, his hands behind his back, and evidently thinking very much of himself as a free man. One thing was certain, and that was that he was not doing much work.

“Good morning, Mr. Perry!” said he superbly.

“What are you doing, Mr. Idle?”

“I am taking a walk! Have I not the right to do nothing now I am no longer a vile slave, and have the certificate of liberation in my pocket?”

“And who is to feed you, Pyg?”

“I am, Mr. Perry.”

“And how?”

“By eating.”

“And who is to give you what you eat?”

“My master.”

“Your master! Have you forgotten that now you have no master, noodle?”

“No. I had one, and I shall have one; and Mr. Burbank will not send me away from the plantation, where, I can say without boasting, I am of some use.”

“But he will send you away!”

“Will he?”

“Certainly. When yen belonged to him he could keep you to do nothing. But now you do not belong to him he will show you the door if you do not work, and we shall see what you will do with your liberty, poor lunatic!”

Evidently Pyg had not studied the question from that point of view.

“What, Mr. Perry? Do you think Mr. Eurbank would be so cruel — ”

“It is not cruel; it is only logical. Besides, whether Mr. James wishes it or no, there is, a decree of the Committee at Jacksonville ordering every freed slave out of Florida.”

“Then that is true, then?”

“Quite true; and we shall now see how you and your companions will get out of the difficulty now you have lost your master.”

“I am not going to leave Camdless Bay even if I am free.”

“You are free to go, but not free to stop! You had better pack up.”

“And what’s to become of me?”

“That is your business.”

“But if I am free,” said Pygmalion, returning again to that point, “If I am free — ”

“That is not enough, it seems!”

“Tell me what I ought to do, Mr. Perry.”

“What you ought to do? Well; listen, and follow me, if you can.”

“I follow.”

“You are free, are you not?”

“Yes, and I have got the certificate in my pocket”

“Well; tear it up.”

“Never.”

“Then there is only one way I can see for you to stop here.” —

“What is that?”

“Change your colour, Pyg! When you are white you can live at Camdless Bay; till then you cannot.”

The overseer, chuckling at having given Pyg’s vanity such a lesson, turned on his heel.

Pyg remained deep in thought. He saw that to be no longer a slave was not enough to keep him his place. He must be white? And how could he become white, when Nature had made him black as ebony? And as he returned to Castle House he scratched his head as if he were tearing the hair from the skin.

A little before noon James Burbank and Edward Carrol returned to Castle House. They had seen nothing alarming at Jacksonville. The boats were in their usual place, some moored to the pier, others anchored out in the stream. A few detachments of Confederates had been seen on the left bank of the river, marching towards the north towards Nassau county. Nothing seemed to threaten Camdless Bay.

When they reached the end of the estuary, Burbank and his companion had looked out over the open sea. There was not a sail in sight. Not a cloud of smoke from some steamer could be traced on the horizon to indicate the presence or approach of a squadron. Preparations for defence there were none. There were no batteries, no earthworks. If the Federal ships appeared either at Nassau Creek or at the mouth of the St. John’s, there was nothing to stop them. Only Pablo lighthouse was dismantled; the lantern was unshipped; and the passes were thus unlighted. But that would only prevent the entrance of a flotilla during the night.

Such was the report they brought back with them. There seemed to be nothing doing at Jacksonville to indicate an approaching attack on Camdless Bay.

“That is well,” said Mr. Stannard, “but it is unsatisfactory that Dupont’s ships are not yet in sight; there is a delay there that I cannot understand!”

“Yes,” said Carrol; “if the fleet sailed the day before yesterday from St. Andrew’s Bay, it ought now to be off Fernandina.”

“It has been very bad weather during these last two or three days,” said James Burbank. “It is possible that with these westerly winds Dupont has had to go out to sea.

The wind went down this morning, and I should not be surprised if this very night — ”

“May heaven listen to you, my dear James,” said Mrs. Burbank, “and come to our help.”

“If Pablo lighthouse,” said Alice, “is not lighted, how could the flotilla get into the St. John’s to-night?”

“It would be impossible for them to get into the St. John’s,” said Burbank. “But before attacking the mouths of the river the Federals would have to capture Amelia Island and then Fernandina, so as to command the railway to Cedar Keys. I do not expect Dupont’s vessels up the St. John’s for three or four days.”

“That is so, James,” said Carrol. “But I hope the capture of Fernandina would force the Confederates to retreat. The militia might even abandon Jacksonville before the arrival of the gunboats. Then Camdless Bay would no longer be threatened by Texar and his accomplices — ”

“That is possible,” said James Burbank. “Once the Federals set foot in Florida, our safety will be, to a certain extent, secured. Is there any news on the plantation?”

“None,” said Alice. “I heard from Zermah that the blacks had gone to work as usual, and that they are ready to fight to the last in defence of Camdless Bay.”

“Let us hope we shall not have to put their devotion to the proof! I shall not be at all surprised if the scoundrels- who have got the upper hand at Jacksonville take themselves off as soon as the Federal fleet is signalled.

But we must be on our guard. After lunch, Stannard, come with Carrol and me over to the most exposed part of the estate. I do not want you and Alice to be in as much danger here as at Jacksonville. In truth, I shall never forgive myself for bringing you here, if things turn out badly."

"My dear James," said Stannard, "if we had stayed in our house at Jacksonville we should have been exposed to the exactions of the authorities, like all the rest who hold anti-slavery opinions."

"In any case, Mr. Burbank," said Alice, "even if the danger is greater here, is it not better for us to share it with you?"

"Yes, my dear girl," said James Burbank. "Come on! I hope and think that Texar will not have time to put his scheme against our men into execution."

During the afternoon Burbank and his friends visited the barracoons with Mr. Perry. They could see for themselves that the feeling among the blacks was excellent. Burbank called the overseer's attention to the zeal with which the newly freed negroes had returned to work. Not one was absent from his post.

"Yes, yes!" answered Perry. "But we have to see how the work will turn out in the end."

"But they did not change their arms when they changed their condition, did they?"

"Not yet; but you will soon see that they have not the same hands at the end of the arms."

"Well, Perry," replied Burbank gaily, "their hands will always have five fingers, I imagine; and we cannot expect them to have more."

As soon as the round had been made, Mr. Burbank and his friends returned to Castle House. The evening passed as quietly as the last. In the absence of all news from Jacksonville there seemed to be ground for hope that Texar had given up his threat, or that he had no time to execute it.

Careful precautions were, however, taken during the night. Perry and the assistant overseers stationed sentries round the estate, and particularly watched the banks of the river. The blacks had been cautioned to retreat on the palisades in case of an alarm, and a sentry was on guard at the gate.

Many times did James Burbank and his friends go out to see that their orders had been attended to. When the sun rose nothing had happened. The night had passed without incident.

CHAPTER X.

THE MORNING OF THE 2ND OF MARCH.

NEXT day, March 2nd, James Burbank had news by one of his assistant overseers, who had crossed the river and returned to Jacksonville without awaking suspicion.

The news was undoubtedly correct and it was important.

Commodore Dupont had anchored at daybreak in St. Andrew’s Bay, on the coast of Georgia. The Wabash, on which he had hoisted his flag, was at the head of a squadron of twenty-six vessels, of which eighteen were gunboats, one a cutter, one an armed transport, and six were ordinary transports with General Wright’s brigade on board. And, as Gilbert had said in his last letter, General Sherman accompanied the expedition.

Commodore Dupont, whom the bad weather had kept back, had at once set to work to take possession of the passes of the St. Mary’s. These channels, difficult enough of access, open off the mouth of the river of the same name to the north of Amelia Island on the frontier of Georgia and Florida.

Fernandina, the principal position of the island, was protected by Fort Clinch with a garrison of fifteen hundred men behind its thick stone walls. Would the Southerners hold out against the Federals in this fortress,1 wherein they might make a lengthened defence? It would be thought so.

Nothing of the kind was done. According to the assistant-overseer’s report, a rumour had reached Jacksonville that the Confederates had evacuated Fort Clinch as soon as the squadron appeared in St. Mary’s Bay; and not only had they abandoned Fort Clinch, but they had cleared out of Fernandina, Cumberland Island, and all that part of the Florida coast.

This was all the news that reached Castle House, but there is no need to dwell on its importance with regard to the position at Camdless Bay. Now that the Federals had at last landed in Florida, the whole State would soon be in their power. Obviously a few days would elapse before the gunboats crossed the bar of the St. John’s. But their presence would have its effect on the new authorities of Jacksonville, and there was room to hope that, in fear of reprisals, Texar and his supporters would not dare to take action against the plantation of so prominent a Northerner as James Burbank.

This was reassuring for the family, whose fear was suddenly changed to hope. And Alice Stannard and Mrs. Burbank ceased to tremble for Gilbert’s safety, with the certainty that he was not far off and the assurance that he would soon return. The young lieutenant at St. Andrew’s was within thirty miles of Camdless Bay. He was on board the gunboat Ottawa, which had just been distinguished by a feat of arms unexampled in naval annals.

What had happened on the morning of the 2nd of March was this. The assistant-overseer had not ascertained these details during his visit to Jacksonville, but it is important that they should be known on account of the events that followed.

As soon as Commodore Dupont. discovered that Fort Clinch had been evacuated by the Confederate garrison, he sent a few vessels of light draught across St. Mary’s Channel. Already the white population had retired into the interior of the country with the Southern troops, abandoning the towns, villages, and plantations on the coast. There was a regular panic due to the fear of the reprisals which, the Secessionists falsely stated, were intended by the Federal chief. Not only in Florida, but along the Georgian frontier, along the whole extent of country between the bays of Ossabaw and St. Mary’s, the people beat a precipitate retreat so as to escape from the troops landed by General Wright. Under these circumstances, Commodore Dupont did not have to fire a shot to get possession of Fort Clinch and Fernandina. The gunboat Ottazva, on which was Gilbert, accompanied by Mars, acted as second, and had to use its guns in the manner following.

The town of Fernandina is connected with the west coast of Florida on the Gulf of Mexico by a branch railway which runs to Cedar Keys. The railway runs along the coast of Amelia Island; then before it reaches the mainland it crosses Nassau Creek on a long bridge of piles.

When the Ottawa reached the centre of the creek a train was on the bridge. The garrison of Fernandina was in flight, taking its provisions with it, and followed by many of the more or less important people of the town. Immediately the gunboat started at full speed towards the bridge and fired her bow-chasers at the piles and the train. Gilbert was in charge of the firing, and many good shots were made; among them a shell struck the last carriage of the train and broke the axle and the coupling. The train did not stop for an instant — to do so would have been dangerous — and leaving the carriage to look after itself, steamed off full speed to the south-west. A detachment of Federal troops landed at Fernandina appeared at this moment, and rushed on to the bridge. The carriage was captured with the fugitives it contained, who were chiefly civilians. The prisoners were taken to the superior officer, Colonel Gardner, in command at Fernandina, who took their names, kept them for twenty-four hours on one of the vessels of the squadron, as an example, and then released them.

When the train had run out of sight, the Ottawa went off to attack and seize a vessel laden with war material, which had taken refuge in the bay. These events were calculated to spread discouragement among the Confederate troops and the people of the Floridan towns; and this was particularly the case at Jacksonville. The estuary of the St. John’s would be forced as easily as had been that of the St. Mary’s; that was very evident, and probably the Unionists would meet with no more resistance at Jacksonville than at St. Augustine and the other coast towns.

This was good news for James Burbank. He might well believe that Texar dared not now give effect to his plans. He and his partisans would be superseded, and in due course the honest folks would resume the power of which an outbreak of the mob had deprived them.

There was every reason to think in this way and to hope; and as soon as the staff at Camdless Bay heard the important news, which was soon known at Jacksonville, their joy showed itself in noisy cheering, in which Pygmalion took a prominent part. Nevertheless, it would not do to abandon the precautions which had been taken to secure the safety of the estate, at least until the gunboats appeared in the river.

Unfortunately — and this James Burbank could neither imagine nor suppose — a whole week was to elapse before the Federals were ready to enter the St. John’s. And during that time what dangers were to threaten Camdless Bay!

Commodore Dupont’s plan was to show the Federal flag at every point where vessels could go. He split up his squadron into detachments. One gunboat was sent up the St. Mary’s River to occupy the little town of that name, and advance some sixty miles up the country. To the south were sent three other gunboats, commanded by Captain Godon, to explore the bays, seize Jekyll and St. Simon’s islands, and take possession of the small towns of Brunswick and Darien, which had been partly abandoned by their inhabitants. Six steamers of light draught were destined, under the orders of Commandant Stevens, to enter the St. John’s and reduce Jacksonville. The rest of the squadron, under Dupont, was to take care of St. Augustine’s and blockade the coast down to Mosquito Inlet, the passes of which would .be then closed against contraband of war.

But this series of operations could not be accomplished in twenty-four hours, and twenty-four hours would be enough for the devastation of the country by the Southerners.

About three o’clock in the afternoon James Burbank had his first suspicions of what was being devised against him. Mr. Perry, after a round of inspection on the frontier of the plantation, came hurriedly into Castle House and said —

“Mr. Burbank, they have reported that some suspicious vagabonds are on their way to Camdless Bay.”

“From the north?”

“From the north.”

Almost at the same moment Zermah, returning from the landing-place, told her master that there was a lot of boats crossing the river and approaching the right bank.

“They are coming from Jacksonville?”

“Certainly.”

“Go into the house,” said Burbank, “and don’t go out again, Zermah, on any pretence.”

“No, master”

Burbank went off to reconnoitre. When he returned, he could not but tell his friends that matters looked threatening. An attack seemed almost certain, and it was better that all should be forewarned.

“And so,” said Mr. Stannard, “these scoundrels, on the eve of being curbed by the Federals, dare — ”

“Yes,” said Burbank coldly. “Texar could not miss such an opportunity of being revenged when he is free to disappear as soon as his vengeance is satisfied. Then with more animation he resumed, “But will this man’s crimes always remain unpunished? Will he always get away? In truth after doubting the justice of man are we to doubt the justice of Heaven — ”

“James,” said Mrs. Burbank, “at a time when we may only have the help of God to trust to, do not reproach Him — ”

“And let us put ourselves under His care,” said Alice Stannard.

James Burbank, recovering his coolness, set about giving his orders for the defence of the house.

“Have the blacks been told?” asked Edward Carrol.

“They will be.” said Burbank. “My idea is to defend the palisades. We cannot think of defending the whole boundary of Camdless Bay against an armed mob, for it is likely that the assailants will be in large numbers. We must get all the defenders into the inner ring. If, unfortunately, the palisade is forced, Castle House, which once defied the Seminoles. may perhaps be held against Texar’s bandits. My wife, Alice, and Dy and Zermah, to whom I entrust them, must not leave the house without my order. If matters become serious, everything is prepared for them to save themselves by the tunnel which communicates with the little Marine Creek of the St. John’s; there a boat will be found in charge of two of our men. It is hidden in the bushes; and, Zermah, you must go in it up the river to Cedar Rock.”

“But you, James?”

“And you, father?”

Mrs. Burbank had seized the planter by the arm, and Alice had caught hold of Mr. Stannard, as if the time had come for them to escape from Castle House.

“We will do all we can to rejoin you,” said Burbank, “when the position is no longer tenable. But you must promise, if the danger becomes too great, to get away to safety at Cedar Rock. We shall want all we have of courage and audacity to keep back the scoundrels, and resist them till our ammunition fails.”

Evidently this is what would have to be done if the assailants were too numerous and succeeded in forcing the palisades and invading the park so as to make a direct attack on Castle House.

James Burbank then called together his men, and Perry and his assistants ran off to the barracoons with his orders. In less than an hour the blacks, in fighting trim, were drawn up near the gate in the palisades. Their wives and children had gone off to seek safety in the woods round Camdless Bay.

Unfortunately the means of organizing a serious defence were limited. Since the beginning of the war it had been almost impossible to procure arms and ammunition in efficient quantity. Burbank had in vain tried to buy

.hem at Jacksonville; and he had to be content with what remained in the house after the last siege by the Seminoles.

His plan was to preserve Castle House from being burnt Dr stormed. He could not dream of protecting the estate, saving the workshops, stores, factories, or barracoons, or preventing the plantation from being devastated. He had hardly four hundred negroes in a state to oppose the assailants, and these were insufficiently armed. A few dozen muskets were distributed to the best men, while the arms of precision were kept in reserve for James Burbank, his friends, Perry, and the assistant-overseers.

The whole force was drawn up at the gate in such a manner as to repulse the threatened assault on the palisades, which were also defended by the creek that ran round them.

Amid the confusion Pygmalion was very busy and exited, bustling hither and thither and doing nothing. He vas like one of those circus clowns who pretend to do everything and do nothing, much to the amusement of the audience. Pyg, considering himself as belonging specially:o the defenders of the house, did not dream of associating with his comrades outside. Never had he felt himself so devoted to James Burbank.

All was ready in the garrison. On what side was the attack to come? If the assailants appeared on the northern side the defence could be most easily conducted. If, on:he contrary, they attacked on the river-front, the defence Lou Id be more difficult, owing to Camdless Bay being open on that side. A landing is always a difficult operation, it is:rue, and, under any circumstances, it would require a good many boats to transport an armed band from one bank of he St. John’s to the other. Thus said Burbank, Carrol, and Stannard as they watched the return of the scouts who lad been sent to the boundary of the plantation. It would lot do to be in the dark as to the manner of attack.

About half-past four in the evening the scouts returned from the northern side of the estate and made their report.

A column of armed men were advancing in that direction. Was this a detachment of the county militia or only a division of the mob, attracted by the hope of pillage, and charged with the execution of Texar’s decree concerning the freed slaves? In any case, the column was a thousand strong, and nothing could be done against it with the force on the plantation. It might perhaps be hoped that, if the palisades were carried by assault, Castle House would offer a longer and more serious resistance.

It was evident that the column had avoided a landing under difficulties in the little harbour of Camdless Bay, and had crossed the river below Jacksonville in some fifty boats three or four journeys being sufficient to ferry it over. And Burbank’s precaution of collecting his men within the palisades had been a wise one, for it would have been impossible for him to defend his frontier against such an army.

Who was at the head of the assailants — Texar in person? Probably not. At the time when the approach of the Federals was threatened the Spaniard might consider it too risky to place himself at the head of his men. If lie had done so, it would be because, when his work of vengeance was accomplished, the plantation devastated, the Burbanks massacred or fallen into his hands, he had made up his mind to escape to the south, perhaps even to the Everglades (the backwoods of Southern Florida), where it would be difficult to get at him.

This was the most serious of the possibilities, and Burbank had given it anxious thought. Hence it was that he had decided to put in safety his wife and child, and Alice Stannard, entrusted to the devotion of Zermah, at Cedar Rock, which was about a mile above Camdless Bay. If they had to abandon Castle House to the assailants, he and his friends could there rejoin the family, and wait till safety was assured to the honest people of Florida under the protection of the Federal army.

And so a boat had been hidden in the reeds of the St.

John’s, and left to the keeping of two negroes at the end of the tunnel which, led from the house to Marine Creek.But before the parting took place, it would be necessary to defend the house for a few hours — at least until nightfall, when, in the darkness, the boat could go up the river in secret, without risk of pursuit from the suspicious-looking canoes that were prowling about in such numbers.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EVENING OF THE 2ND OF MARCH.

James Burbank, with his companions, and most of the blacks were ready for the fight. He had now nothing to do but to wait. His arrangements were to make his first stand at the palisades round the private park, and then, if driven back, to make another stand behind the walls of Castle House.

About five o’clock the increasing tumult showed that the assailants were not far off. From the shouting it was only too easy to understand that they were in possession of the northern part of the estate. On the right, thick columns of smoke began to rise above the trees. The sawmills had been set on fire, and the barracoons, after being pillaged, were in flames. The poor people had not had time to put in safety the few things that the act of liberation had made their own the evening before; and loud were the cries of despair and anger that answered the shouts of the marauders.

Gradually the shouters approached Castle House. A strange light appeared in the northern horizon, as if the sun was setting in that direction. Occasional puffs of warm smoky air swept up against the house. Violent detonations produced by the burning of the dry wood in the workshops were heard every now and then. Once a louder explosion than the rest showed that the boiler at one of the sawmills had been blown up. Devastation in all its horrors was evidently in progress.

Burbank, Carrol, and Stannard were at the gate in the palisades. There they received and disposed of the last detachment of negroes that were gradually coming in.

The assailants might appear at any moment. The increasing crackle of the musketry showed that they could not be far from the ring, which was easy of assault, for the nearest trees were not fifty yards away. The. Confederates could keep in cover to the last moment; and the bullets began to rain on the palisades, while the rifles remained invisible.

After consideration it was thought best to withdraw all the men within the fortress. There the armed negroes would be less exposed, as they could fire between the angles at the top of the timbers; and when the assailants tried to cross the stream and carry the stronghold by storm, they might manage to repulse them.

The negroes were all withdrawn, and the gate was about to be shut, when James Burbank, throwing a last glance around without, caught sight of a man at full run towards him, as if seeking safety amongst the defenders of Castle House. A few shots were aimed at him from the woods close by, but did not hit him. With a bound he jumped on the drawbridge and was in safety within the palisades. The gate was immediately shut and firmly fastened.

“Who are you?” asked James Burbank.

“One of the servants of Mr. Harvey, your correspondent at Jacksonville.”

“Did Mr. Harvey send you here with a message?”

“Yes, and as the river was guarded, I could not cross it hereabouts.”

“And you came with the militia without being suspected?”

“Yes. They are followed by a mob of looters. I came with them, and as soon as I was within range, 1 ran and risked a few shots.”

“Good, my friend! Thanks! You have Mr. Harvey’s message?”

“Yes, Mr. Burbank. Here it is.”

Burbank took the letter and read it. Mr. Harvey said he might put implicit confidence in his messenger, John Bruce, of whose sincerity there could be no doubt. After hearing the news he brought, Mr. Burbank would see what was best to be done.

At this instant a volley was heard from without. There was not a moment to lose.

“What would Mr. Harvey have me understand?” asked Burbank.

“That in the first place,” said Bruce, “the armed mob which is attacking Camdless Bay is from fourteen to fifteen hundred strong.”

“I did not reckon them at less. What next? Is Texar at their head?”

“Mr. Harvey found it impossible to ascertain. One thing is certain, and that is that Texar has not been at Jacksonville for the last four-and-twenty hours!”

“That ought to indicate some new scheme of the scoundrel’s,” said Burbank.

“Yes,” answered Bruce. “That is what Mr. Harvey thinks. Besides, Texar need not be there to execute the order as to setting adrift the freed slaves — ”

“Setting them adrift!” exclaimed Burbank. “Setting them adrift and helping them in incendiarism and robbery — ”

“And Mr. Harvey thinks that while there is time, you would do well to* put your family in safety by sending them away at once from Castle House.”

“Castle House,” said Burbank, “can be defended, and we will only leave it when it is untenable. Is there any fresh news from Jacksonville?”

“None.”

“Have not the Federal troops made any movement into Florida?”

“None since they occupied Fernandina and the Bay of St. Mary’s.”

“And what is the chief reason of your being sent?”

“To tell you that the dispersal of the slaves was only a pretext got up by Texar to enable him to lay waste the plantation, and make you his prisoner.”

“Yea do not know if Texar is at the head of these rascals?”

“No, Mr. Burbank. Mr. Harvey tried to find out, but could not. And I have tried since I left Jacksonville, but without success.”

“Are there many of the militia with this mob?”

“A hundred, at the outside,” replied Bruce, “but the mob is composed of the very worst characters. Texar had them supplied with weapons, and they will not stop at any excess. I repeat, Mr. Burbank, Mr. Harvey’s opinion is that you should abandon Castle House at once. He ordered me to invite you to his cottage at Hampton Red. It is about a dozen miles up stream on the right bank, and there you would be safe for some days — ”

“Yes, I know.”

“I could take you and your family there without risk of discovery, if you will go at once, before retreat is impossible.”

“I thank Mr. Harvey, and you too, my friend,” said Burbank, “but we have not yet come to that.”

“As you wish, Mr. Burbank,” answered Bruce. “I shall none the less remain until you require my services.”

The attack, which now began, required all James Burbank’s attention.

A violent fusillade burst out, although the assailants could not be seen owing to the shelter of the trees. The bullets rained on the palisades, but did little damage. Unfortunately, Burbank and his companions could only reply feebly, having only forty guns amongst them. Being stationed in the best positions for firing effectively, their shots did more execution than those of the militiamen at the head of the column, a few of whom were hit, though hidden in the wood.

This long-range fight lasted for about half an hour, rather to the advantage of the defenders. Then the assailants rushed at the palisades to storm them. > As the attack was to be delivered On several sides at once, they brought with them planks and beams from the workshops, now in flames. In twenty places these beams were thrown across the stream, and over them rushed’ the Spaniard’s men to the foot of the palisades, losing several of their number in killed and wounded. And then they climbed up the planks and hoisted one another up; but they did not succeed in getting over. The negroes, infuriated against the incendiaries, repulsed them with great bravery. But it was evident that the defenders of Camdless Bay could not for long hold out at all points, against the murderous foe. Until nightfall they might .keep them at bay, providing they were not seriously wounded.

Burbank and Stannard had, however, not been touched. Carrol alone had been hit, by a ball that tore open his shoulder. He had to retire to the hall, where Mrs. Burbank, Alice, and Zermah gave him every attention.

But night was coming to the help of the besiegers. Under cover of the darkness some fifty of the most determined amongst them ran up to the gate, axe in hand. Probably they would not have been able to force it had not a breach been opened by a daring manoeuvre.

A part of the outbuildings suddenly took fire, and the flames, fed by the dry w .god, seized on the,palisades against which the building leant.

Burbank rushed towards the fire, if .not to put it out, at least to defend the breach.

By the light of the flames he saw a man run through the smoke, climb the palisades, and escape over the planks across the stream.

It was one of the assailants, who had penetrated into the park on the St. John’s side, from among the reeds. Unseen, he had entered the stables, and at the risk of perishing in the flames, had set fire to some trusses of straw.

A breach was thus opened. In vain Burbank and his companions endeavoured to bar the way. A mass of assailants threw themselves into it, and the park was invaded by several hundred men.

Many fell in the hand-to-hand fight. The noise of the firing was heard on all sides. Soon Castle House was entirely surrounded, while the negroes, overwhelmed by the numbers, were forced out of the park to take flight in the woods of Camdless Bay. They had fought as long as they could, with courage and devotion; but if they had resisted longer, they would have been massacred to the last man.

Burbank, Stannard, Perry, the assistant-overseers, John Bruce, who had fought bravely, and a few blacks had to take refuge in Castle House.

It was then nearly eight o’clock in the evening. The night was dark in the west. In the north the sky was ablaze with the glare of the conflagration.

Burbank and Stannard came hurriedly into the house. “You must escape,” said Burbank. “You must go at . once. Whether the thieves force their way in, or are kept outside till we are obliged to surrender, there is danger in your remaining. The boat is ready. It is time to part. My wife, Alice, I implore you to follow Zermah with Dy to Cedar Rock. There you will be in safety, and if we are compelled to escape in our turn, we will find you there, we will join you.”

“My father,” said Alice, “come with us, and you too, Mr. Burbank.”

“Yes, James I Yes! Come!” said Mrs. Burbank.

“I!” answered Burbank, “I abandon Castle House to these scoundrels! Never, while resistance is possible! We can hold out for some time yet. And when you are in safety we shall be stronger to defend ourselves!”

. “James!”

“It is necessary!”

A terrible tumult was heard as he spoke. The door resounded with the blows dealt on it by the assailants, who were attacking the principal or river front of the house.

“Go!” exclaimed Burbank. “The night is already dark; they will not see you in the shadow! Go! you are only paralyzing us by remaining here! For God’s sake, go!”

Zermah went first, holding little Dy by the hand. Mrs. Burbank tore herself from her husband’s arms, Alice left her father’s. They disappeared down the staircase which led below the ground into the tunnel to Marine Creek.

“And now,” said Burbank, addressing himself to Perry, the assistant-overseers, and the few negroes remaining, “now, my friends, we must resist. to the death.”

Then they all ascended the grand staircase from the hall, and took up their positions at the windows on the first floor. There, to the hundreds of bullets that honeycombed the front of the house, they answered by fewer but more effective discharges, firing, as they did, into the mass of the ‘assailants, who came on to force their way through the door either by axe or flame. There was no one this time to open a breach into the house. Such an attempt as that against the wooden palisades would have been useless against stone walls.

Nevertheless, a score of men, stealing along in the darkness, which now was profound, gathered on the steps. The door was then attacked furiously. It needed all its solidity to withstand the blows of the picks and axes. The attempt cost many of the assailants their lives, for the position of the loopholes admitted of a cross fire on to the step.

And now something happened to make matters worse. Ammunition began to fail. Burbank, his friends and overseers, and the blacks, armed with guns, had used the greater part during the three hours the assault had lasted. If they had to hold out much longer, how could they do it after the last cartridges had gone? Would they have to abandon Castle House to the mob, who would leave nothing of it but ruins?

And this would certainly have to be done if the assailants broke in the door, which had already begun to shake. Burbank saw this, but he resolved to wait till the last. At any moment might not a diversion take place? There was now nothing to fear for Mrs. Burbank, his daughter, nor Alice Stannard. And as men they could fight to the end against this rabble of murderers, incendiaries, and thieves.

“We have still ammunition for an hour,” said Burbank. “Use it all, my friends, and don’t let us give up Castle House.”

He had hardly finished speaking when a loud report was heard in the distance.

“A cannon-shot I” he exclaimed.

Another report was heard to the westward, on the other side of the river.

“A second shot!” said Stannard.

“Listen!” said Burbank.

A third report was heard, the wind bringing it more distinctly to Castle House.

“Is that a signal to recall the assailants to the right bank?” asked Stannard.

“Perhaps,” said Bruce. “It is possible that there has been an alarm over there.”

“Yes,” said the overseer “and if these cannon-shots have not been fired from Jacksonville — ”

“They have been fired from the Federal fleet!” said Burbank. “Has the flotilla forced the entrance of the St. John’s and mounted the river?”

And there was nothing impossible in Commodore Dupont’s being now master of the river, at least in the lower part of its course.

But it was not so. The three gunshots had been fired from the battery at Jacksonville; that was quite evident, as no more firing was heard. There had been no engagement between the Northerners and Confederates on the St. John’s or in the plains of Duval county.

And there could be no doubt that this had been the signal of recall to the commander of the militia when Perry, who was stationed at one of the side loopholes, exclaimed, —

“They are retiring! They are retiring!”

Burbank and his companions hurried to the central window, which they opened.

The sounds of the axe were no longer heard against the door. Not one of the assailants was in sight. If their shouts and yells were still heard in the air, they were heard further and further away.

Evidently something had happened to oblige the authorities at Jacksonville to recall this mob to the other bank of the St. John’s. Doubtless it had been agreed that three gunshots should be fired in case any movement of the squadron should threaten the Confederate position.

So the assailants bad abruptly abandoned their final assault, and across the devastated fields of the estate had taken their way, lighted by the fires they had kindled. An hour later they re-crossed the river two miles below Camdless Bay, where the boats were waiting for them.

Soon their shouts died away in the distance. To the uproar succeeded absolute silence. It was as the silence of death over the plantation.

It was then half-past nine o’clock. Burbank and his companions went downstairs to the hall. There lay Edward Carrol, stretched on the sofa, slightly wounded, and somewhat weakened by the loss of blood.

They told him what had happened since the signal from Jacksonville. For the moment, at least, Castle House had nothing to fear from Texar’s gang.

“Yes,” said James Burbank. “But the scoundrel wished to disperse my liberated slaves, and they are dispersed 1 He wished to lay waste the plantation in revenge, and only its ruins are left!”

“James,” said Walter Stannard, “worse misfortunes might still happen to us. None of us fell in defending Castle House; but your wife, your daughter, and my daughter might have passed into the hands of these rascals, and they are safe.”

“You are right, Stannard, and God be praised for it! What has been done by Texar’s orders shall not go unpunished, and I will have justice to the last drop of his blood.”

“It is a pity,” said Carrol, “that Mrs. Burbank, Alice, Dy, and Zermah left us! I know we seemed to be in great danger then; but I would rather know they were here.”

“Before the morning,” said Burbank, “I will rejoin them. They will be dreadfully anxious, and we must set their minds at rest. I will then see if we can bring them back to Camdless Bay, or leave them for a day or two at Cedar Rock.”

“Yes,” said Stannard. “We must not be hasty. All may not be over; and as long as Jacksonville is under Texar’s control we have something to fear.”

“That is why I will act prudently,” answered Burbank. “Perry, you will see that a boat is ready a little before daybreak. I shall only want one man to go with me — ”

A cry of grief, .a shout of despair, suddenly interrupted him.

The cry came from that part of the park where the lawn lay in front of the house. It was immediately followed by the words ‘ Father! Father!”

“My daughter’s voice!” exclaimed Mr. Stannard.

“What new misfortune!” asked Burbank. And opening the door they rushed out.

Alice was standing a few yards away, and at her feet lay Mrs. Burbank.

Neither Dy nor Zermah, were with them.

“My child!” exclaimed Burbank. At the sound of his voice his wife rose. She could not speak. She stretched out her arms towards the river.

“Carried off? Carried off?”

“Yes! by Texar!” said Alice.

And then she fell senseless by Mrs. Burbank’s side.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SIX DAYS THAT FOLLOWED.

when Mrs. Burbank and Alice were in the tunnel leading to Marine Creek, Zermah was in front. The slave held the little girl with one hand; with the other she carried a lantern, by whose feeble light they walked. When she reached the end of the tunnel Zermah asked Mrs. Burbank to wait for her. She intended to make sure that the boat and the two negroes that were to take them to Cedar Rock were at their post. Opening the door at the end of the tunnel she stepped out towards the river.

For a minute — only a minute — Mrs. Burbank and Alice waited for Zermah's return, when Alice noticed that Dy was not with them.

"Dy! Dy!" shouted Mrs. Burbank, at the risk of betraying her presence.

The child did not answer. Accustomed to follow Zermah, she had gone with her out of the tunnel towards the creek before her mother had noticed her.

Suddenly a groaning was heard. Fearing some new danger, and thinking not for a moment of their own safety, they ran out to the bank of the creek, and reached it just in time to see a boat disappearing in the darkness.

"Help! Help! It is Texar!" shouted Zermah.

"Texar! Texar!" shouted Alice in reply. And with her hand she pointed to the Spaniard, revealed by the reflection of the fires at Camdless Bay. He was standing upright in the boat which rapidly shot away.

Then all was silent.

The two negroes with their throats cut lay dead on the ground.

Then Mrs. Burbank, in distraction, followed by Alice who in vain tried to stop her, ran along the bank, calling after her little daughter. No cry answered to hers. The boat had become invisible, either because the gloom had veiled it from her sight, or because it had crossed the river to some point on the left bank.

For an hour this vain pursuit continued. At last Mrs. Burbank fell exhausted. Alice, with extraordinary energy, helped the unfortunate mother to rise, supported her, and almost carried her. In the distance, in the direction of Castle House, rang out the reports of the firearms, mingled every now and then with the terrible yells of the besiegers. But it was necessary to go back in that direction, to try and get back to the house along the tunnel, to open the door which communicated with the underground stairs. When she reached that spot how would Alice make her-, self heard?

She dragged Mrs. Burbank along, but the mother was unconscious of what she was doing. Twenty times did they stop as they returned along the riverside. At any instant they might fall into the hands of those who were wrecking the plantation. Would it be better to wait till daylight? But how in this place could she give Mrs. Burbank the attention her state required? And so, cost what it might, Alice resolved to get back to Castle House. And as the winding of the river lengthened the way, she thought it would be better to go straight across the fields, guided by the light of the burning barracoons. This she did, and thus it was she came near the house.

There Mrs. Burbank fell motionless at her feet. She could support her no longer.

By this time the detachment of militia, followed by the ‘horde of pillagers, had given up the assault, and were far from the palisades. Not a shout was heard within or without. Alice imagined that the assailants had captured the house and abandoned it without leaving one of its defenders alive. Supreme was her anguish; her strength failed her, and she, too, fell to the ground, while a last groan escaped from her, a last appeal. It had been heard.

Burbank and his friends had rushed out. Now they knew all that had passed at Marine Creek. What mattered it to them that the plunderers had gone? What mattered it to them that there was no fear of falling into their power? A dreadful misfortune had come to them. Little Dy was in the hands of Texar!

This was the story told by Alice, broken with many sobs, and listened to by Mrs. Burbank, who had returned to consciousness and was bathed in tears. This is what was learnt by Burbank, Stannard, Carrol, Perry, and their few companions. The poor child, taken they knew not where, in the hands of her father’s cruellest enemy! What could be worse than that? Could the future have greater griefs in store?

All were overwhelmed at the blow. Mrs. Burbank was taken to her room and laid on her bed, and Alice remained with her.

Below, in the hall, Burbank and his friends endeavoured to devise some plan by which they could recover Dy and rescue Zermah from Texar’s hands. The devoted half- breed would certainly endeavour to defend the child to the death! But as the prisoner of a scoundrel animated by personal hatred, would she not pay with her life for the curses she hurled at him?

Then James Burbank blamed himself for having forced his wife to leave Castle House, for having arranged such a means of flight which had turned out so badly. Was Texar’s presence at Marine Creek to be attributed to chance? Evidently not. Texar, in some way or another, had heard of the existence of the tunnel. He had said to himself that the defenders of Camdless Bay would endeavour to escape by it when they could no longer hold out in the house. And, after leading his men to the right bank of the river, after forcing the palisades, and driving Burbank behind the walls of the house, there could be no doubt he and some of .his accomplices had posted themselves near Marine Creek. There he had suddenly, surprised the two blacks in charge of the boat, and cut their throats, their cries being unheard amid the tumult made by the besiegers of the house. The Spaniard had waited till Zermah appeared with little Dy close behind. Seeing them alone, he probably thought that neither Mrs. Burbank, nor her husband, nor her. friends were going to leave Castle House. Then he would have to be content with this prey, and had seized on the child and the half- breed to carry them off to some retreat whence it would be impossible to recover them.

And with what more terrible blow could the scoundrel have visited the Burbanks?

A horrible night was passed by the survivors. Was there not a chance that the assailants might return in greater numbers and better armed? Fortunately, they did not. When the day broke there had been no renewal of the attack.

But it was important to know why the three cannon- shots had been fired the night before, and why the assailants had retired when one effort more — an hour’s effort at the outside — would have given them the house. Was the recall due to some demonstration of the Federals at the mouth of the Sit. John’s? Had Commodore Dupont’s ships become masters of

Jacksonville? Nothing in Burbank’s interest could be more desirable. In all safety he could begin his search to recover Dy and Zermah, and openly attack Texar — if the Spaniard had not retreated with his partisans — and prosecute him as the promoter of the havoc at Camdless Bay and the double abduction of the half-breed and child.

This time no such alibi was possible as that which the Spaniard had produced at the opening of this history, when he appeared before the magistrate at Saint Augustine. If Texar was not at the head of this band of scoundrels who had invaded Camdless Bay — as Mr. Harvey’s messenger had been unable to ascertain — the last cry of Zermah had only too clearly revealed the part he took in the abduction. And had not Alice recognized him as the boat was rowing away?

Yes! Federal justice would make the scoundrel confess where he had taken his victims, and punish the crimes which he could not deny.

Unfortunately, nothing happened to confirm this hypothesis concerning the arrival of the Northern flotilla in the waters of the St. John’s. At this date, the 3rd of March, no ship had left the bay of St. Mary’s, as was only too clearly ascertained by the news which one of the assistant- overseers brought in during the day from the other bank of the river, to which he had gone to inquire. No vessel had appeared off Pablo light. The whole fleet was employed at Fernandina and Fort Clinch. It seemed as though Commodore Dupont could only advance into the centre of Florida with extreme circumspection. At Jacksonville the rioters were still in power. After the expedition to Camdless Bay the Spaniard had again appeared in the town, and was organizing the defence against Stevens’s gunboats, should they try to cross the bar. Doubtless some false alarm the evening before had called back the looters. After all, was not Texar’s vengeance sufficient, now that the plantation had been wasted, the factories fired, the negroes dispersed in the forests with nothing but the ruins of the barracoons left to them, and little Dy taken away from her father and mother, with no trace as to where she had gone?

Of this James Burbank felt only too certain, when during the morning he and Walter Stannard explored the right bank of the river. In vain they searched the smaller creeks for some clue as to the direction taken by the boat. The search could at the best be but incomplete, unless the left bank was searched as well.

But at this time, was not this impossible? Would it not be necessary to wait till Texar and his partisans were reduced to impotence by the arrival of the Federals? With Mrs. Burbank in such a state, Alice unable to leave her, and Carrol laid up for some days, would it not be imprudent to leave them alone at Castle House, when the return of the assailants was not unlikely?

And what was even more maddening was, that Burbank could not dream of proceeding against Texar, either for the devastation of his estate, nor the abduction of Zermah and his daughter. The only magistrate to whom he could address himself was the author of the crime. All that could be done was to wait until regular justice had resumed its course at Jacksonville.

“James,” said Mr. Stannard, “if the dangers which threaten your child are terrible, at least Zermah is with her, and you can depend on her devotion — ”

“Till death — quite so!” said Burbank. “And when will Zermah be dead?”

“Listen, my dear James. Consider for a moment. It is not Texar’s interest to proceed to such extremities. He has not yet left Jacksonville, and until he has I think his victims have no act of violence to fear. Your child will be a guarantee, a hostage against the reprisals which he has to guard against, not only from you, but from the Federals, for having suspended the regular authorities of Jacksonville, and devastated a Northerner’s plantation. It is his interest to spare them, and wait till Dupont and Sherman are masters of the territory before you do anything against him.”

“And when will that be?” asked Burbank.

“To-morrow! To-day, perhaps 1 I tell you, Dy is Texar’s safeguard. It is for that purpose he took the opportunity of carrying her off, knowing that it would also break your heart, my poor James; and the scoundrel has succeeded only too well.”

Thus reasoned Mr. Stannard, and he had good grounds for doing so. Would he convince James Burbank? Doubtless, no. Would he give him any hope? None. It was impossible. But Burbank saw that he must force himself to talk before his wife as Stannard had talked to him. Otherwise she would not survive the blow. And when he reached home, he made much use of the arguments which had no effect upon himself.

Meanwhile, Perry and his assistant overseers visited Camdless Bay. It was a heartrending spectacle which even made a great impression on Pygmalion, who accompanied them. The “free man” had never dreamt of following the freed slaves dispersed by Texar. The liberty to sleep in the woods and suffer cold and hunger seemed to him excessive. As he preferred to remain at Castle House, he ought, like Zermah, to have torn up his act of enfranchisement to gain the right to live there.

“You see, Pyg!” said Mr. Perry, “the plantation is laid waste, our workshops are in ruins. That is what has been the cost of giving liberty to people of your colour.”

“Mr. Perry,” replied Pygmalion, “it is not my fault — ”

“It is your fault. If fellows like you had not applauded the speechifiers who thundered against slavery, if you had protested against the ideas of the North, if you had taken arms to repulse the Federal troops, Mr. Burbank would never have to think of freeing you, and disaster would never have come to Camdless Bay.”

“But what can I do now?” said the disconsolate Pyg. “What can I do, Mr. Perry?”

“I will tell you, Pyg, if you have the least feeling of justice about you. You are free, are you not?”

“It seems so.”

“And consequently, you belong to yourself?”

“Certainly.”

“And if you belong to yourself, there is nothing to stop you from doing what you like with yourself?”

“Nothing, Mr. Perry.”

“Well, in your place, Pyg, I should not hesitate. I would go to the nearest plantation and again become a slave, and the price I realized by my sale I would bring back to my old master, to indemnify him for the wrong I did him when he set me free!”

Did the overseer speak seriously? It was impossible to know what nonsense the witty man might talk once he had mounted his hobby. Pygmalion, the piteous Pygmalion, disconcerted, irresolute, abashed, did not know what to reply.

It was only too evident that James Burbank's act of generosity had brought misfortune and ruin on the plantation. The disaster would cost him a considerable amount of money. There were no barracoons left; they had fallen after they had been sacked. The sawmills and workshops were only heaps of cinders from which grey wreaths of smoke still rose. In place of the stores where the timber was kept, of the factories where the cotton was heckled, of the hydraulic presses where it was squeezed into bales, of the sugar-mills, there were only blackened walls ready to fall, and where the chimney of the factory rose, there was now but a mound of reddened bricks. The fields of coffee and rice, the kitchen garden, the enclosures for the domestic animals, had been completely laid waste, as if a herd of wild beasts had ravaged them for hours. At the sight of this lamentable spectacle, Mr. Perry could hardly contain himself. His anger escaped in threatening words. Pygmalion felt anything but comfortable at the fierce looks the overseer gave him; and he ended by leaving, to return to Castle House, in order that, as he said, he might reflect more at his ease on the proposition as to selling himself, which the overseer had made. And, doubtless, the day was not long enough for his reflection, for when evening came, he was still undecided.

During the day a few of the old slaves returned in secret to Camdless Bay. It may be imagined what was their distress when they found not a single hut undestroyed. James Burbank gave orders that as much as possible should be done for them. A certain number were lodged within the palisades in the servants' quarters that the fire had not touched. They were, at first, employed in burying their companions who had died in the defence of the house, and also the corpses of the assailants who had fallen in the attack — the wounded had been carried away by their comrades. And they also buried the two negroes who had been killed by Texar and his accomplices when surprised at their post near Marine Creek.

This done, James Burbank could not set about getting his estate again into order until the question between North and South was settled in Florida. Other cares, equally serious but very different, absorbed his attention night and day. All in his power to do to recover some trace of his little daughter he did. Mrs. Burbank's health was in a precarious state, although Alice had not left her for a moment, and watched over her with filial solicitude; and it was necessary to find a doctor for her.

There was one in Jacksonville who possessed the full confidence of the Burbanks; and as soon as he was sent for he did not hesitate to come to Camdless Bay. He prescribed a few remedies. But would they be efficacious so long as Dy remained unrestored to her mother?

Leaving Carrol, who would have to keep to his room for some days, Burbank and Stannard went out each day to explore both banks of the river. They searched the islands in the St. John's; they asked the country people; they inquired in the smallest villages in the county; they promised a heavy reward to any one who would bring them any clue. Their efforts remained useless. How could they learn what was going on in Black Creek where the Spaniard hid himself? No one knew of it. And, besides, to withdraw his victims the better from all search, had not Texar taken them further up the river? Was not the county large enough, were there not enough hiding-places in the vast forests in the centre, amid the immense marshes in the

South of Florida, in the region of the inaccessible Everglades, for Texar to hide his victims so that they could not be reached?

At the same time, through the doctor coming to Camdless Bay, Burbank was kept informed of what was passing at Jacksonville and in the north of Duval County.

The Federals had made no new demonstration. Had special instructions arrived from Washington forbidding them to cross the frontier? Such a proceeding would be disastrous for the Unionists in the South, and particularly so for James Burbank.

Nevertheless, Commodore Dupont’s squadron remained in the estuary of the St. Mary’s, and if Texar’s men had been recalled by the three canon-shots fired on the 2nd of March, it was because the Jacksonville authorities had been deceived by a false alarm; and, through the error, Castle House had escaped from pillage and ruin.

But would not the Spaniard send another expedition to complete his work, seeing that James Burbank was not in his hands? An unlikely hypothesis! At present, the attack on Castle House and the carrying off of Dy and Zermah were probably enough for him. Besides, some of the better-class citizens had not hesitated to show their disapprobation of the affair at Camdless Bay, and their disgust at the chief of the Jacksonville rioters, although their opinion might matter little to Texar. The Spaniard was more powerful than ever in Duval County. His vagabonds and unscrupulous adventurers were quite at their ease. Each day they gave themselves up to pleasures of all sorts, degenerating into orgies. The noise of the merry-makings even reached the plantation; and the sky glowed with the public illuminations, which might be taken for the light of another incendiary fire.

Moderate men were reduced to silence, and had to submit to the yoke of this faction, which was supported by the populace of the county.

The temporary inaction of the Federal army opportunely came in to help the new authorities, who profited by it to spread the report that the Northerners would not pass the frontier; that they had received orders to retreat into Georgia and the Carolinas; that Florida would not be subjected to the invasion of the anti-slavery troops; that its position as an old Spanish colony put it outside the question the United States were seeking to solve by force of arms, &c. &c. And in all the counties there was produced a certain current favourable rather than contrary to the ideas which the partizans of violence represented. This was apparent in many places, particularly in the north, on the Georgian frontier, where the planters with Northern sympathies were atrociously treated, their slaves put to flight, their sawmills and factories destroyed by fire, Lair establishments devastated by the Confederate troops, as Camdless Bay had just been by the populace of Jacksonville.

It did not, however, seem — at present at least-that there was a chance of the plantation being again invaded. But much did James Burbank chafe at the delay of the Federals in making themselves masters .bf the territory.

As things stood, nothing could be done against Texar; either to bring him to justice for what could not be denied, or compel him to reveal the hiding-place of Dy and Zermah.

Burbank could not bring himself to believe that the Federals were going to remain quietly on the frontier. Gilbert’s last letter had expressly stated that the expedition of Commodore Dupont and Sherman was destined for Florida. Since this letter, had the Federal Government sent different orders to Edisto Bay, where the squadron was waiting.? Had a success of the

Confederate troops in Virginia or the Carolinas obliged the army of the Union to halt in its march to the South?

Thus passed the five days which followed the attack on Camdless Bay. There was no news of a movement of the Federals. No news of Dy and Zermah, although Burbank had done his best to come on their track, and not a day had passed without some fresh effort.

The 9th of March had come. Edward Carrol had completely recovered. He was now fit to join in the work of his friends. Mrs. Burbank continued extremely weak. It seemed as though her life threatened to take flight with her tears. In her delirium she called her little daughter in heartrending tones; she attempted to go in search of her. These crises were followed by syncopes, which put her life in danger. Often and often Alice feared that the unhappy mother would die in her arms.

A war rumour reached Jacksonville on the morning of the 9th of March. Unfortunately, it was calculated to give new encouragement to the partizans of Secession.

The Confederate general, Van Dorn, had repulsed the soldiers of Curtis on the 6th of March at the battle of Betonville, in Arkansas, and obliged them to retreat. Really this was an engagement with the rear-guard of a small Northern corps; and the success was more than compensated 1 r a few days afterwards by the victory of Pea Ridge. I however, provoked an increase of insolence among the Southerners. At Jacksonville, the unimportant action was celebrated as a complete check to the Federal army; and there were new festivities and new orgies, the murmur of which rolled mournfully over Camdless Bay.

When James Burbank returned, about six o’clock in the evening, from his exploration of the left bank of the river, he had ascertained the following facts.

A native of Putnam county fancied he had discovered some trace of the abduction on an island of the St. John’s a few miles above Black Creek. During the preceding night this man thought he had heard a cry of despair, and had come to report the fact to James Burbank. Squambo, the Indian, Texar’s confidant, had been seen in the neighbourhood in his skiff. There was no doubt about the Indian’s being seen, for the fact was confirmed by a passenger on board the Shannon, who, on his return to St. Augustine, had landed during the day at Camdless Bay.

It need not be said how eagerly James Burbank started on the track. Carrol and two negroes accompanied him in the boat with which he started up the river. They speedily reached the island in question, thoroughly searched it, and visited a few fishermen’s huts that did not seem to have been recently occupied. Among the almost impenetrable underwood in the interior there was not a vestige of ‘human beings. There was nothing on the bank to show that a boat had put in. Squambo could nowhere be seen, and if he had been prowing round the island he had probably not landed. The expedition was thus without result, like the others. The return had to be made to the plantation with the knowledge that a false track had been followed. In the evening, Burbank, Stannard, and Carrol, as they were together in the hall, talked over this useless search. About nine o’clock, Alice, having left Mrs. Burbank asleep, came to join them, and found that the last attempt had been without result.

The night was to be a dark one. The moon, in its first quarter, had already disappeared below the horizon. A deep silence enveloped Castle House, the plantation, and the river. The few blacks in the servants’ apartments were asleep. When the silence was troubled it was by the distant clamour and the reports of the fireworks at Jacksonville, where, with great uproar, the people were celebrating the successes of the Confederates.

Each time the noise was heard in the hall another blow was struck at the Burbanks.

“We ought to find out what it means,” said Carrol, “and see if the Federals really have renounced their plans on Florida.”

“Yes! It must be done,” answered Stannard. “We cannot exist in this uncertainty.”

“Well,” said Burbank, “I will go to Fernandina tomorrow — and then I will see — ”

At this moment there came a gentle tap on the front door of Castle House, on the side facing the river.

A scream escaped from Alice, who rushed to the door. Burbank vainly tried to keep the girl back. And as no, reply had come, another knock was heard, this time morel distinctly.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FEW HOURS.

JAMES BURBANK stepped to the door. He did not expect anybody. It might be some important news from Jacksonville brought by John Bruce from his correspondent, Mr. Harvey.

A third time there came a knock, and from a more impatient hand.

“Who is there?” asked James Burbank.

“I am,” was the reply.

“Gilbert!” exclaimed Alice.

She was not mistaken. Gilbert at Camdless Bay! Gilbert appearing among his people, glad to come and pass a few hours with them, knowing nothing, doubtless, of the disasters that had fallen on them!

In a moment the young lieutenant was in his father’s arms; while the man who accompanied him carefully shut the door, after taking a last look round outside.

It was Mars, Zermah’s husband, Gilbert Burbank’s devoted follower.

After embracing his father, Gilbert turned round. Then, seeing Alice, he took her hand and clasped it with an irresistible movement of affection.

“My mother “he said. “Where is mother? Is it true that she is dying?”

“You know all, then?” said James Burbank.

“I know all: the plantation laid waste by the Jacksonville ruffians, the attack on Castle House, my mother — dead perhaps!”

The young man’s presence in the county where he ran such peril was immediately explained.

This is what had happened: That evening, some gunboats from Commodore Dupont’s squadron had come to the mouth of the St. John’s. Ascending the river, they had had to stop at the bar, four miles below Jacksonville. A few hours later, a man, calling himself one of the lighthouse-keepers at Pablo, had boarded Stevens’s gunboat, on which Gilbert was second in command. The man had related all that had passed at Jacksonville, including the attack on Camdless Bay, the dispersal of the blacks, and the serious condition of Mrs. Burbank. It may be guessed what were Gilbert’s feelings on listening to the story of these deplorable events.

Then he was seized with an irresistible desire to see his mother. With the permission of Commandant Stevens he had left the flotilla in the gig. Accompanied by the faithful Mars, he passed unnoticed in the darkness — by the way he knew so well — and landed half a mile below Camdless Bay, so as to avoid touching at the pier, which would probably be watched.

But what he did not know, and could not know, was that he had fallen into a snare spread by Texar. At any price the Spaniard desired to obtain the proof required by the magistrates — the proof that James Burbank was in correspondence with the enemy. To entice the young lieutenant to Camdless Bay, a lighthouse-keeper at Pablo had been sent to acquaint Gilbert with what had occurred at Castle House, particularly the condition of his mother. The young lieutenant had set out, as we know; and he had been watched as he went up the river. As he glided along by the reeds that bordered the high bank of the St John’s he had, however, thrown the Spaniard’s men off the track; but though the spies had not seen him land below Camdless Bay, they hoped to capture him on his return, particularly as all that part of the river was under their surveillance.

“Mother!” continued Gilbert, “where is she?”

“Here, my son!” said Mrs. Burbank.

She had just appeared on the landing of the hall stair-

case; she descended slowly, holding the rail, and fell on a couch, while Gilbert covered her with kisses.

In her troubled sleep she had heard the knock at the door. Recognizing her son’s voice, she had collected sufficient strength to get up and meet Gilbert, to weep with him and the others. The young man clasped her in his arms.

“Mother! mother!” said he, “I see you again, after all. How you are suffering But you live I Ah! we will cure you! Yes! These evil days will soon end. We shall be re-united — soon We will give you back your health.

Fear nothing for me, mother. No one knows that Mars and I are here.” And as he spoke, Gilbert saw his mother was fainting, and tried to revive her by his caresses.

But Mars seemed to understand that he and Gilbert did not know the full extent of the calamity. James Burbank, Carrol, and Stannard stood silent with bowed heads. Alice could not restrain her tears. Dy was not there, nor was Zermah, who ought to have guessed that her husband was at Camdless Bay, that he was in the house, that he was waiting So, with his heart torn by anguish, he looked into all the corners of the hall, and then asked Mr. Burbank, —

`. Master, what is the matter?”

At this moment Gilbert rose.

“And Dy?” he asked. “Has Dy gone to bed? Where is my little sister?”

“Where is my wife?” said Mars.

An instant afterwards the young officer and Mars knew all. In coming from the St. John’s, from the place where their canoe was waiting for them, they had seen enough in the darkness of the ruins of the plantation. But they might naturally think that, with the disaster consequent on the enfranchisement of the blacks, the limit had been reached! Now nothing was hid from them. One did not find his sister at home, the other did not find his wife, and no one could tell them where Texar had hidden them for these seven days.

Gilbert returned to kneel near Mrs. Burbank. His tears mingled with hers. Mars, with bloodshot face and panting chest, walked to and fro, unable to contain himself.

At last his rage exploded.

“I will kill Texar!” he said. “I will go to Jacksonville — to-morrow — this very night — this very instant — ”

“Yes, come, Mars! come!” said Gilbert.

James Burbank stopped them.

“If that was what ought to be done,” said he, “I should not have waited for you to come, my son! The scoundrel would already have paid with his life for his evil deeds. But, before that is done, it is necessary that he should say what he alone can say. And when I speak thus, Gilbert — when I advise you and Mars to wait — it is because it is necessary to wait.”

“Be it so, father!” said the young man. “But at least I will ransack the country; I will search — ”

“And do you think I have not done so? Not a day has passed without our exploring the river-banks and islands which might serve as a refuge for Texar, and not a trace have we found, not a thing to put us on your sister’s track. Carrol and Stannard have helped me, and up to now our search has been fruitless.”

“Why did you not lodge a complaint at Jacksonville?” asked the young officer. “Why have you not brought an action against Texar for having caused the pillage of Camdless Bay and the abduction — ”

“Why?” answered James Burbank. ‘“Because Texar is now the master; because all honest men tremble before the scoundrels who are devoted to him; because the populace is with him, and the county militia is with him.”

“I will kill Texar!” said Mars, as if he were possessed by some fixed idea.

“You shall kill him when the time comes,” said James Burbank. “At present it would make matters worse.”

“And when will the time come?” asked Gilbert.

“When the Federals are masters of Florida — when they have occupied Jacksonville.”

“And if it is then too late?”

“My son! my son! I beseech you do not say that!” exclaimed Mrs. Burbank.

“No, Gilbert, do not say that,” added Alice.

James Burbank took his son’s hand.

“Gilbert, listen to me,” he said. “We, like you and Mars, will do instant justice on Texar if he refuses to tell us what he has done with his victims. But for your sister’s sake, Gilbert — for your wife’s sake, Mars — our anger must give place to our prudence. There is good reason to believe that in Texar’s hands Dy and Zermah are hostages for his safety. The scoundrel is afraid of having to answer for turning out the honest magistrates of Jacksonville and letting loose on Camdless Bay the mob of scoundrels to burn and pillage a Northerner’s plantation. If I did not believe this, Gilbert, would I speak with such conviction? Would I be strong enough to wait?”

“And would I still be alive?” asked Mrs. Burbank. The unfortunate woman felt that if her son went to Jacksonville he would fall into Texar’s power. And what could save an officer of the Federal navy fallen into the power of the Southerners when the Federals were threatening Florida?

Nevertheless, the young officer was not master of himself. He was obstinate in his wish to go; and, like Mars, he repeated, “I will kill Texar!”

“Come, then!” he said.

“You shall not go, Gilbert!”

Mrs. Burbank raised herself from the sofa. She placed herself before the door; but, exhausted by the effort, she could not support herself, and she fainted.

“Mother! mother!” exclaimed the young man.

Mrs. Burbank had to be carried to her room, where Alice remained with her. Then James Burbank rejoined Carrol and Stannard in the hall.

Gilbert was sitting on the sofa with his face in his hands. Mars was standing apart, and silent.

“Now, Gilbert,” said James Burbank, “you are in your right senses. Speak! On what you say depends what we shall do. Our only hope is in a prompt arrival of the Federals in the county. Have they given up their project of occupying Florida?”

“No.”

“Where are they?”

*’ A part of the squadron at this moment is on the way to Saint Augustine, to blockade the coast.”

“But is not the Commodore going to take possession of the St. John’s?” asked Carrol.

“The lower course of the St. John’s is ours. Our gunboats are anchored in the river under the orders of Commandant Stevens.”

“In the river, and they have not yet endeavoured to seize on Jacksonville?” asked Stannard.

“No, for they have had to stop at the bar, four miles below the town.”

“The gunboats stopped,” said James Burbank, “and by an insurmountable obstacle?”

“Yes, father,” answered Gilbert; “stopped by want of water. The tide must be high for them to pass the bar, and even then the passage would be difficult. Mars knows the channel, and he is to be the pilot.”

“Waiting! always waiting!” exclaimed James Burbank. “And for how long?”

Three days or twenty-four hours — how long the time would be for the people in Castle House! And if the Confederates saw that they could not defend the town! If they abandoned it, as they had abandoned Fernandina, Fort Clinch, and the other points of Georgia and northern Florida! If Texar did not run away! Then where would they search!

Mr. Stannard then asked if it was true that the Federals had met with a repulse in the North. What was thought of the defeat at Bentonville?

“The victory of Pea Ridge has enabled Curtis to re- occupy the ground he for a moment lost. The situation of the Northerners is .excellent; their success is assured in a delay which it was difficult to foresee. When they have occupied the principal points in Florida, they will stop contraband of war from entering through the coast passes; and arms and ammunition will no longer reach the Confederates. Then, in a little time, the territory will resume its calm and security under the protection of our squadron. Yes, in a few days 1 But now — ”

The idea of his sister being exposed to such peril returned to him with such force that Mr. Burbank, to divert his attention, changed the conversation.

How did the belligerents stand? Could Gilbert give them any news which had not reached Jacksonville or rather Camdless Bay?

Several things he could tell them, some of them of great importance for the Northerners in Florida.

It will be remembered that after the victory of Donelson, the State of Tennessee had almost entirely fallen under Federal domination. By a simultaneous combined attack of army and fleet, the Federals endeavoured to make themselves masters of the entire course of the Mississippi. They had descended it to Island 10, where the troops came in contact with Beauregard's division, which had charge of the defence of the river. Already, on the 24th of February, General Pope's brigade, after landing at Commerce, on the right bank of the Mississippi, had repulsed J. Thomson's corps. Arrived at Island 10 and the village of New Madrid, they had, it is true, to halt before a formidable system of redoubts prepared by Beauregard. Since the fall of Donelson and Nashville, all the positions on the river above Memphis had been considered as lost to the Confederates, but those below could still be defended, and here it was a battle would soon be fought which might be decisive.

But meanwhile, Hampton Roads, at the entrance of the James River, had been the scene of a memorable combat. The battle had been between the first examples of armour- plated ships, the employment of which has modified the navies and naval tactics of both the Old and New World.

On the 1st of March the Monitor, an armour-plated vessel built by the Swedish engineer Ericcsen, and the Virginia, the old Merrimac much altered, had been ready to put to sea, one at New York, the other at Norfolk.

At this time a Federal division, under the orders of Captain Marston, was at anchor in Hampton Roads, near Newport News. This division was composed of the Congress, the Saint Lawrence, the Cumberland, and two steam frigates.

Suddenly, on the 2nd of March, in the morning, there appeared the Virginia, commanded by the Confederate Captain Buchanan. Followed by a few other vessels of minor importance, she attacked the Congress, and then the Cumberland, which latter she rammed and sank with a hundred and twenty men of her crew. Returning then to the Congress, stranded on the mud, she shelled her and set her on fire. Only the night stopped her from destroying the other three vessels of the Federal squadron.

It is difficult to imagine the effect produced by the victory of a small armour-plated ship over the broadside ships of the Union. The news was propagated with marvellous rapidity. Great was the consternation among the partizans of the North, for the Virginia might enter the Hudson and sink every ship at New York. Great was the joy of the Southerners, who saw the blockade raised and trade again untramelled along their coast.

It was this naval success which was being so noisily celebrated at Jacksonville. The Confederates now fancied themselves safe from the Federal vessels. Following on the victory at Hampton Roads, might not Commodore Dupont’s squadron be immediately recalled to the Potomac or the Chesapeake? No landing would threaten Florida. The slavery ideas supported by the most violent of the Southerners would triumph without a contest. And this would strengthen Texar and his partizans in a position in which they could do so much evil.

But the Confederates were in too great a hurry. And the news already known in Florida, Gilbert was able to supplement with that which was current when he left Commandant Stevens's gunboat.

The second fight in Hampton Roads had been very different from the first. On the morning of the 9th of March, when the Virginia was preparing to attack the Minnesota, one of the two Federal frigates, an enemy whose presence was unsuspected by the Southerners suddenly appeared before her. A strange machine came away from the frigate's side, "a cheese-box on a raft," as the Confederates called it. This "cheese-box "was the Monitor, commanded by Lieutenant Warden. He had been sent to destroy the batteries on the Potomac, but on reaching the mouth of the James River, had heard the firing in Hampton Roads, and during the night had brought the Monitor on to the scene.

At half a dozen yards from each other these two formidable engines of war fought for four hours, and then the Virginia, struck on the water-line and in danger of sinking, took flight in the direction of Norfolk. The Monitor, which was to sink nine months later, had completely defeated her rival. Thanks to her, the ' Federal Government resumed its superiority in Hampton Roads.

"No, father," said Gilbert, as he ended his story, "our squadron has not been recalled to the north. Stevens's six gunboats are anchored in the St. John's in front of the bar. I tell you that in three days, at least, we shall be masters of Jacksonville."

"Then you must see, Gilbert, that you had better wait and return on board! But on your way to Camdless Bay do you not think you have been followed?"

"No. Mars and I have escaped all observation."

“And this man who told you what had passed at the plantation, the fire, the robbery, the illness of your mother. Who is he?”

“He said he was one of the lighthouse-keepers at Pablo, and had come to warn Captain Stevens of the danger run by the Northerners in this part of Florida.”

“Did he know of your presence on board?”

“No, and he seemed much surprised at it. But why these questions?”

“Because I am afraid it is some plot of Texar’s. He more than suspected — he knew that you were in the Federal navy. He learnt that you were under the orders of Commandant Stevens. If he wished to entice you here — ”

“Never fear. We have got to Camdless Bay without being seen coming up the river, and it will be the same when we go back.”

“If you go on board — not otherwise!”

“I promise you, father, Mars and I shall be on board before daybreak.”

“When will you go?”

“When the tide turns. That is about half-past two o’clock.”

“Who knows?” said Carrol. “Perhaps the gunboats will not stop three days at the bar?”

“The wind must freshen to give enough water on the bar,” said the lieutenant. “May it blow a gale! And then we can get at the scoundrels 1 And then — ”

“I will kill Texar,” said Mars..

“It was a little after midnight. Gilbert and Mars would not leave Castle House for two hours, waiting for the ebb to return to the flotilla. The darkness was great, and there was every chance of their getting away unperceived although several boats were on guard on the St. John’s below Camdless Bay.

The young officer went up to his mother. He found Alice seated at the bedside. Mrs. Burbank, exhausted by the efforts she had made, had fallen into a deep slumber — a very sorrowful one to judge by the way she sobbed.

Gilbert would not interfere with this state of torpor in which there was more prostration than sleep. He sat near the bed after Alice had motioned him not to speak. There in silence they watched together the poor woman whom misfortune had struck so cruelly. Had they words in which to exchange their thoughts? No! They felt the same suffering, they understood each other and said nothing — it was their hearts that spoke.

At last the time arrived for Gilbert to leave. He gave his hand to Alice, and both bent over Mrs. Burbank, whose eyes were half-closed and could not see them.

Then Gilbert pressed his lips to his mother’s forehead.

which the girl kissed after him. Mrs. Burbank gave a sorrowful sob, but she did not see her son go, nor Alice follow him to bid him a last farewell. —

Mars went out to see if the coast was clear. He came back as Gilbert and Alice entered the hall.

“It is time to go,” said he.

“Yes, Gilbert,” said James Burbank. “Go! we shall meet again at Jacksonville.”

“Yes! At Jacksonville, and to-morrow if the tide allows us to cross the bar. As for Texar — ”

“We must have him living! Do not forget that!”

“Yes, living!”

The young man embraced his father and shook hands with his uncle Carrol and Stannard.

“Come, Mars,” said he.

And following the right bank of the river they kept along for half an hour. They met no one. They reached the place where they had left the gig, and embarked in her to get into the stream, which would take them rapidly to the bar of the St. John’s.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON THE ST. JOHN’S.

They were alone on the river. Not a light could be seen on the opposite bank. The lights of Jacksonville were hidden by the bend of Camdless Creek, as it rounded towards the north; but the reflection mounted on high and tinged the lower bank of clouds.

Although the night was dark, the gig could without difficulty make its way down stream to the bar. No vapour, however, rose from the waters of the St. John’s, and it could easily be followed and pursued if any Confederate boat was in waiting for it, but this Gilbert and his companion had no reason to expect.

Both were silent. Instead of heading down stream they would much rather have crossed it to seek out Texar in Jacksonville, and meet him face to face. Then ascending the river they could search the forest and the creeks and their banks, and though James Burbank had failed they might succeed. But it was best to wait. When the Federals were masters of Florida, Gilbert and Mars could set to work against the Spaniard with more chances of success. Their duty now was to re-join the flotilla under Commandant Stevens. If the bar became practicable sooner than they hoped, the young lieutenant ought to be at his post ready for action, and Mars should be at his post ready to pilot the gunboats up the channel, the depth of which, at every moment of the rising tide, was so well known to him.

Mars, seated in the stern of the gig, plied his paddle with vigour. In the bow Gilbert kept careful watch down stream, ready to signal any danger that presented itself from boat or drifting tree. Leaving the right bank obliquely, they made for the middle of the channel, so as to take advantage of the full strength of the stream. Once they were there, Mars, by a stroke to port or starboard, could easily keep the gig on its course.

It would have been safer to have kept along by the dark fringe of trees and gigantic reeds which bordered the right bank of the St. John’s. In the shadow of the thick branches there was little risk of discovery. But a little below the plantation a sharp elbow of the bank threw the current out to the other side, and formed a wide eddy which made the navigation somewhat difficult. Mars, seeing nothing suspicious ahead, steered the boat out into the current, which was swiftly running to the sea. From the landing-place at Camdless Bay to the anchorage of the flotilla below the bar, the distance was four or five miles, and helped by the ebb and the vigorous strokes of the paddle, this ought to be accomplished within a couple of hours.

A quarter of an hour after their start, Gilbert and Mars were in mid-stream, and approaching Jacksonville. It may be that Mars unconsciously headed towards the town, drawn thither by some irresistible attraction. Nevertheless the hateful place must be avoided, for its neighbourhood was probably better guarded than the middle of the river.

“Starboard, Mars, starboard,” said the young officer.

And the gig curved into the line of the current about a quarter of a mile from the left bank.

Jacksonville was now neither dark nor silent. Scores of lights were moving about on the wharves, or swaying in the boats on the water. A few were gliding along from point to point, as if an active guard had been organized.

At the same time songs and shouts showed that scenes of amusement or riot continued to trouble the town. Did, then, Texar and his partizans believe in the defeat of the Northerners in Virginia and the possible retreat of the flotilla? Or were they making the best of the few days that were left to them in launching out into every excess, while the people around them were drunk with whiskey and gin?

The gig kept on her course in mid-stream. Gilbert had good reason to hope that he would be out of danger as soon as he had passed Jacksonville.

Suddenly he motioned to Mars to stop paddling. Within a mile below the town he had just caught sight of a long line of black objects stretching like a range of reefs from one side of the river to the other.

It was a line of boats broadside on, and guarding the St. John’s. Evidently, when the gunboats cleared the bar, these would be powerless to resist them, and would have to retreat, but if any Federal boats attempted to ascend the river they might offer some opposition to their passage. For this reason they had been placed in position during the night. They lay without moving, kept in station either by their grapnels or their oars. Although no men could be seen it was certain that a number were on board and well armed.

Gilbert, of course, remarked that the string of vessels had not barred the river when he came up to Camdless Bay. The precaution had been taken since the passage of the gig, and perhaps, in view of an expected attack from Commandant Stevens. Anyhow, the gig was forced to leave the centre of the stream, and keep as close as possible to the right shore, where it might pass unperceived among the reeds in the shadow of the trees. This was the only chance of passing the barrier.

Mars, mind you paddle without any noise until we are through the line,” said the lieutenant.

“Yes, sir.”

“We may get among the eddies, and if you want any help — ”

“I shall not want any.”

And with a powerful stroke he sent the boat towards the river side some three hundred yards above the guarded line. If she had not been sighted as she crossed the river — and she might have been — she would certainly be safe from discovery under the dark masses along its edge, and it the end of the line of boats did not extend to the bank, it was pretty certain she could get through.

Mars worked her carefully down in the darkness, which the thick curtain of leafage rendered darker. The stumps that here and there showed above the water he dexterously avoided, and with noiseless strokes he advanced, occasionally crossing an eddy or a counter current which, without some trouble, it was not easy to get through. Coasting in this way quite an hour would be lost, though it would matter little if daylight came before the voyage ended, as by that time they would be near enough to the gunboats to fear no danger from Jacksonville.

About four o’clock the gig reached the line of boats. As Gilbert had expected, the shallowness of the river close in shore had caused the passage near the edge to be left unguarded. A few hundred feet beyond, a point jutted out into the St. John’s, thickly wooded and crowded with mangroves and bamboos. This point on the up-stream side was as dark and gloomy as could be wished, but on the downstream face the trees and shrubs suddenly came to an end, and the shore was cut up into marshes and creeks, and lay low and exposed, with nothing to cast a shadow. The river there was as light as in the open, and a black moving point like the gig would probably be seen should any vessel be lying off in the neighbourhood.

Beyond it the eddies ended, and the current flowed straight and strong. If the boat could double the point, she would soon be swept down to the bar, and thence to the anchorage.

Cautiously Mars glided by under the bank. Peering into the darkness he intently watched the lower course of the river. Close to the edge as it was safe to go, clearing the eddies which, as the point curved out, grew more troublesome to him, he plied his paddle .silently, while Gilbert, forward, kept a steady look-out over the whole surface of the St. John’s.

Gradually the gig neared the point. A few minutes more and they would reach the end which ran out as a fine tongue of sand. They were not more than thirty yards from it when Mars abruptly stopped.

“Are you tired?” asked the lieutenant. “Shall I take your place?”

“Not a word, Mr. Gilbert!” whispered Mars.

And with two strong strokes of the paddle, he drove the gig towards the land as if to run her on the bank. Then, instantly, he grasped one of the branches hanging over the river, and under it guided the boat out of sight. In an instant they were alongside the root of one of the mangrove trees, and motionless in darkness so deep that they could not see each other.

in ten seconds the manoeuvre was accomplished.

The lieutenant seized his companion’s arm, and was 1 about to demand an explanation, when Mars pointed through the foliage and showed him a moving object just I off the spit.

It was a boat with four men in her rowing up-stream, J and rounding the point so as to skirt the bank as she passed.

The same thought occurred to Gilbert and Mars. Before everything, and in spite of everything, they must regain their ship. If the gig was discovered they would not hesitate to climb the bank, run under the trees, and escape along the riverside to the bar. There at daybreak, whether their signals were answered by the nearest of the gunboats or they had to swim for it, they would do all that was humanly possible to get back to their duty.

But a moment afterwards they found that all retreat by land was cut off.

When the boat arrived at some twenty feet from the spot | where they lay hid, a conversation suddenly began between I the men in her and half a dozen others who appeared in the gloom among the trees on the top of the bank.

“The worst is over!” said one from the land.

“Yes,” said a man in the boat. “To double that point ‘ against the tide is almost as bad as pulling up a rapid.”

“Are you going to anchor here now that we have been landed on the point?”

“Yes. We shall guard the end of the barrier better.”

“Right. We will look after the bank, and unless they take to the marshes, the scoundrels will not find it easy to get by us.”

“Have they done so, do you think?”

“No; they couldn’t. They’ll try to get back on board before daylight, and as they cannot pass the boat barrier, they will make their attempt along here. And here we are to stop them.”

Few as were the phrases, they were sufficient to explain what had happened. The departure of Gilbert and Mars had been observed — there could be no doubt of that. Although they had managed to reach Camdless Bay without falling aboard of the boats ordered to stop them, now that the river was barred, and their return waited for, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to reach the gunboats.

The gig was fairly caught between the men in the boat and the men landed on the point. Flight by the river was impracticable, and none the less so was it impracticable along this narrow bank, with the St. John’s on one side and the marshes on the other.

At the same time Gilbert learnt that his presence on the St. John’s was known; and there could be no doubt it was known that he and his companion had landed at Camdless Bay, that one of them was James Burbank’s son, an officer in the Federal navy, and “the other one of his men. The lieutenant could not well mistake the danger that threatened him when he heard the last words of the conversation.

“Keep your eyes open, then,” said one of the. men on the land.

“All right,” was the reply. “A Yankee officer is a good prize, particularly when the officer is the son of one of our cursed Floridan Federals.”

“And they’ll pay well for him, for Texar is the paymaster.”

“We may not catch them to-night, for they may lay up in some of the creeks. But when day comes we’ll search every cranny so well that not a water rat will escape us.”

“Don’t forget, you are to take them alive.”

“All right! Remember, if we get them on the land, we have to hail you to take them over to Jacksonville.”

“Unless we have to give chase we shall remain here.”

“And we shall stop here across the bank.”

“Good luck to you! You had better have spent the night in drinks at Jacksonville.”

“Yes, if the rascals outwit us! But never fear, tomorrow we shall take them to Texar bound hand and foot.”

The boat then moved off some twenty feet, and then the noise of a chain running out announced that she had dropped anchor. The men above spoke no more, but the sound of their feet was heard as they marched to and fro on the fallen leaves.

By the river as by the land flight was no longer possible.

So thought Gilbert and Mars. Neither of them had made a single movement or uttered a word. There was nothing to betray the presence of the gig under the dark arbour of foliage — an arbour which was a prison. To leave it was impossible. Supposing that they were not discovered during the night, how could they escape when day appeared?

The lieutenant's capture not only meant danger to his own life, but another attack on *his father by Texar, and proof of James Burbank's correspondence with the Federals. When Gilbert was in Texar's power, the necessary proof would be to hand. And then what would become of Mrs. Burbank? What would become of Dy and Zermah, when neither father, brother, nor husband could continue the search?

In a moment all these thoughts presented themselves, and Gilbert recognized the inevitable consequences.

If they were taken only one chance was left. The Federals might seize Jacksonville before Texar could injure them. The prisoners might be given enough time for this to take place between the sentence they could not escape and their execution. That was their only hope. But how could they hurry on the arrival of Stevens? How could he clear the bar if the water was still wanting? How could Stevens find his way through the windings of the channel-if his pilot, Mars, was in the hands of the Confederates?

Evidently, then, Gilbert must risk even the impossible to get on board before daylight; and he must leave this place at once. But could he do so? Could not Mars, by driving the gig suddenly across the eddy, get clear away? While the men in the boat were losing time by weighing the grapnel or letting out chain, could they not get by out of reach?

That was impossible! The lieutenant knew it only too well. The paddle was no match for four oars. The. gig would inevitably be caught. To make such an attempt was to court certain capture.

What was then to be done? Was he to wait? Day would soon appear. It was already half-past four o'clock, and a few streaks of the dawn had risen above the eastern horizon.

It was necessary to do something. Gilbert, bending towards Mars, spoke to him in a whisper.

“We cannot wait much longer. We are both armed with a revolver and a cutlass. In the boat there are only four men. That is only two to one; and we shall have the advantage of the surprise. You can send the gig up to the boat in a stroke or two; she is anchored and cannot stop our boarding. We will fall on the men and settle them before they have time to recognize us, and we can make a dash for it. Before the fellows on the bank have given the alarm we. may have got through the barrier and reached the ships. Do you understand?”

Mars replied by drawing his cutlass and slipping it into his belt near his revolver. Then he slacked off the painter of the gig from the mangrove root and grasped his paddle ready for a vigorous stroke.

But as he stooped to begin Gilbert stopped him with a gesture.

Something had come unexpectedly to alter his plans.

With the first streaks of the day, a thick mist began to rise on the water. Like a humid pile of cotton-wool it rolled along the river waves, clinging to them as it came. Formed over the sea, such vapours enter the estuary, and driven before a gentle breeze, ascend the course of the St. John’s. In less than a quarter of an hour Jacksonville, on the left bank, and the trees on the right bank had disappeared, wrapped in the yellowish mist whose characteristic odour filled the valley.

Did not this offer a means of safety? Instead of engaging in an unequal struggle in which they might both fall, why should they not try to get by in the fog?

Gilbert saw this, and that is why he stopped Mars from beginning his stroke. Now, instead of dashing out, he was to slip along cautiously and silently, and avoid the boat, which slowly vanished as the mist closed round it Then the voices were again heard replying to the bank from the river.

“Look out in the fog.”

“Yes. We are getting in the anchor, and coming closer in shore.”

“All right. But don’t break your communication with the line. If they come near you, keep them back till the fog lifts.”

“Yes! Never fear; you see that the beggars don’t get past you ashore.”

Evidently the orders were obeyed. There were certain boats crossing the river from one bank to the other, that also was obvious. But Gilbert did not hesitate. The gig, paddled noiselessly by Mars, glided out from her shelter under the trees, and crossed the eddy in which the boat had been anchored.

The fog seemed to thicken, although it was penetrated by a dim light such as is given by a horn lantern.’ Nothing could be seen a yard or two away. If the gig passed clear of the boat, there was an excellent chance of her escaping unobserved. And it was not difficult to avoid the boat, for the men in weighing the anchor made enough noise with the chain to leave no doubt as to their exact position.

The gig slipped by unnoticed, and Mars could ply his paddle a little more vigorously.

The difficulty was to keep a proper course without running out into midstream. If possible he would have remained at a little distance from the right bank; but the only guide was the lapping of the water on the shore. The day was breaking, and the light flooded the mass of vapour although the fog was very thick.

For half an hour the gig, so to speak, wandered about at a venture. Sometimes a vague outline unexpectedly appeared, which might be a boat much magnified by refraction — an instance of a phenomenon commonly observed in sea fogs.

In fact every object appeared with quite fantastic suddenness, and seemed to be of enormous dimensions. Luckily what Gilbert took for a boat would be only a buoy, or rock above water, or a pole with its upper end vanishing in the mist.

A few pairs of birds flew by with measured flap of wing. They could scarcely see them, but they heard their piercing!cry. Some came flying along the surface of the water, and turned to flight when the gig approached them. They vanished, but it was impossible to say if they flew to the bank or dived into the water.

From their paddling all the time with the stream Gilbert (knew that he must be nearing the anchorage of the gunboats; but as the ebb had slackened he could not say if he had passed the line, and he was in constant expectation of running aboard one of the boats.

, All chance of serious danger was not over. And it soon became evident that the danger was greater than ever. At short intervals Mars had to stop and hold the paddle out of the water. The noise of oars, sometimes far off, sometimes close by, would make itself heard. Shouts would be exchanged between the boats. Vague masses would loom and vanish in the fog, and these were evidently the guard boats it was their object to avoid. Sometimes the mist would suddenly open as if a puff of wind had penetrated it. The range of vision would increase to a hundred yards and more, and Gilbert and Mars would try to make out their whereabouts; and then the mist would thicken again, and all they could do was to drop down with the stream.

It was a little past five o’clock. Gilbert calculated that he was two miles from the anchorage. As a fact, he had not yet reached the bar of the river, which would be easily / recognizable by the increase in the sound of the stream, and by the numerous minor currents intermingling tumultuously in a way no sailor could mistake. Had he crossed the bar, Gilbert would have thought himself safe. It was not likely that the boats would venture so far from Jacksonville under the fire of the gunboats.

Gilbert and Mars bent over almost to the level of the water and listened. They could hear nothing. Perhaps they had gone astray to the right or left of the river? Had they not better take an oblique course so as to reach one of the banks, and wait till the fog grew lighter to get their proper bearings?

This seemed the best thing to do now that the mist had begun to rise. The sun, which they knew was now up was lifting the fog as it warmed it. The surface of the St. John’s would soon come into view for some distance round before the sky would show itself. Then the curtain would suddenly collapse, and the horizon appear out of the mist. A mile perhaps below the bar Gilbert would see the gunboats swinging to the ebb, and he would be able to reach them.

At this moment a sound of waters rushing together was heard. Almost immediately the gig began to turn as if caught in a whirlpool. There could be no mistake.

“The bar “exclaimed Gilbert.

“Yes; the bar!” said Mars; “and once we are over it we shall be at the anchorage.”

Mars seized the paddle, and endeavoured to keep the proper course.

Suddenly Gilbert stopped him. The mist had opened for a moment, and he caught sight of a boat close behind them. Had her men seen them? Were they trying to stop the way?

“Port!” said the young lieutenant.

In went the paddle, and in a few strokes the gig was out of the line.

But again voices were heard. They were hailing noisily. It wa3 evident that in this part of the river many boats were on guard.

Suddenly, as if a powerful gust had cleared the space, the mist fell shattered on the surface of the St. John’s.

Gilbert could not restrain a shout of alarm.

The gig was in the centre of a dozen boats. They were on the watch at this part of the winding channel which the bar cut across in a long slanting line.

“There they are! There they are!” came from the boats around them.

“Yes! here we are,” said the lieutenant. “Take your cutlass and revolver, Mars, and we will defend ourselves.”

Defend themselves! Two against thirty!

In a moment three or four of the boats were alongside. Mars and Gilbert fired their revolvers; the others did not fire, for the prisoners were to be taken alive. Three or four of the sailors were killed or wounded. But in this unequal strife, how could Gilbert and his companion fail to be overpowered?

The lieutenant was throttled in spite of his energetic resistance, and dragged on to one of the boats.

“Escape, Mars! escape!” he shouted for the last time.

With a sweep of his cutlass Mars released himself from the man who held him, and before they could seize him again he had thrown himself into the river. In vain they sought to recapture him. He had vanished among the whirlpools of the bar, where the tumultuous waters were being lashed into torrents by the return of the rising tide.

CHAPTER XV.

SENTENCE.

AN hour later Gilbert was landed at Jacksonville. The reports of the revolvers had been heard up-stream. Did they mean an engagement between the Confederate boats and the Federal flotilla? Was it not to be feared that the gunboats had cleared the channel? No wonder that there was serious excitement among the townspeople! Some of them rushed to the stockades. The civil authorities, represented by Texar and the most determined of his partizans, had followed them. All were looking in the direction of the bar, now free from mist. Field-glasses and telescopes were in constant use. But the distance was too great — about three miles — for them to ascertain the importance of the engagement or its results.

The flotilla evidently remained at the anchorage it occupied the night before, and Jacksonville need not fear an immediate attack from the gunboats. The people who had most deeply committed themselves would have time to escape into the interior of Florida.

If Texar and two or three of his companions had more reason than others to fear for their safety, there appeared to be no cause for anxiety in what had occurred. The Spaniard suspected that it meant the capture of the gig that he wanted at any cost.

“Yes, at any cost,” said he, endeavouring to recognize the boat as it neared the quay. “At any cost this son of Burbank’s must fall into the snare I spread for him. Then I shall hold the proof that James Burbank is in communication with the Federals! And when I have shot the son, twenty-four hours shall not slip by before I have shot the father!”.

Although his party were masters of Jacksonville, Texar, ‘ after the discharge of James Burbank, had been waiting for a propitious occasion of again arresting him. The opportunity came in the trap laid for Gilbert Burbank. With Gilbert identified as a Federal officer, arrested in the enemy’s country, condemned as a spy, the Spaniard could enjoy his revenge to the full.

Circumstances served him well. It was indeed the son of the Camdless Bay planter whom they were bringing to Jacksonville. That Gilbert was alone, that his companion had been drowned or saved made little difference so long as the young officer was captured. Texar had only to bring him before a committee composed of his partizans, where he would preside in person.

Gilbert was received with howls and threats by the people, who knew him well. He treated the shouts with disdain. He gave no sign of fear, although a detachment of soldiers had to be called up to protect his life against the violence of the crowd. But when he saw Texar he could not restrain himself, and would have thrown himself on him had he not been stopped by the soldiers.

Texar did not move. He did not say a word. He pretended not to see him, and allowed him to be taken away with the most perfect indifference.

A few minutes afterwards Gilbert Burbank found himself in the Jacksonville prison. There could be no doubt as to the fate for which the Southerners were keeping him.

In about an hour Mr. Harvey, James Burbank’s correspondent, presented himself at the prison and attempted to see Gilbert. He was denied admission. By Texar’s orders the lieutenant was kept in solitary confinement.

And the only result of Mr. Harvey’s application was that he himself was put under strict surveillance.

His connection with the Burbanks was known, and it was not in accordance with Texar’s plans that Gilbert’s arrest should immediately be known at Camdless Bay.

When the verdict was given and the sentence pronounced it would be time enough to inform James Burbank of what had passed, and when, he was informed of it there would be no time for him to leave Castle House and escape from Texar.

And so Mr. Harvey was unable to send a messenger to Camdless Bay. An embargo had been put on all the boats in the port. All communication was shut off between the left and right banks of the river. While his father thought he was safe on board the gunboat the lieutenant was in prison at Jacksonville.

At Castle House they listened with anxiety for some distant sound of firing to announce the arrival of the Federals above the bar. Jacksonville in the hands of the Northerners meant Texar in the hands of James Burbank.

Not a sound was heard from downstream. Overseer Perry, who went out to explore the St John’s up to the line of boats, Pyg and one of the assistant-overseers sent three miles down the riverside beyond the plantation, came back with the same report The flotilla was still at the anchorage, and there was no sign of preparation to start for Jacksonville.

And besides, how could they cross the bar? Admitting that the tide _rendered it practicable sooner than they hoped, how could they venture along the intricate channel now that the only pilot who knew the soundings was no longer with them? For Mars had not reappeared. And if James Burbank had known what had passed after the capture of the gig, would he not have believed that his son's companion had perished in the whirlpools? And if Mars had been saved, would not his first care have been to return to Camdless Bay as it was impossible for him to return on board?

Mars had not appeared at the plantation.

Next day, the nth of March, about eleven o'clock, the committee assembled, with Texar as president, in the very Court of Justice where the Spaniard had made his charge against James Burbank. This time, the charges against the young officer were too serious to allow of his escape. He was doomed beforehand. Once this business of the son was settled, Texar could devote himself to the father. With little Dy in his power, Mrs. Burbank would succumb to the successive blows he had dealt her, and he would be avenged. Did it not seem as though everything played into his hands to help him gratify his implacable hatred?

Gilbert was brought from his prison. The crowd accompanied him, groaning and yelling as on the previous evening. When he entered the court, where Texar's partizans were already in force, he was saluted with violent uproar.

“Death to the spy! Death!”

Gilbert took it all very coolly, and even in the Spaniard's presence kept himself well under control.

“Your name is Gilbert Burbank,” said Texar. “And you are an officer in the Federal Navy?”

“Yes.”

“And you are now a lieutenant on board one of the gunboats under Commandant Stevens?”

“Yes.”

“You are the son of James Burbank, a Northerner, the owner of the plantation at Camdless Bay?”

“Yes.”

“You admit that you left the flotilla anchored below the bar, during the night of the 10th of March?”

“Yes.”

“You admit that you were captured as you were trying to regain the flotilla with one of your men?”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me what your business was on the St. John’s?”

“A man came on board the gunboat of which I was second in command, and told me that my father’s plantation had been devastated by a horde of scoundrels, that Castle House had been besieged by thieves. I need not tell that to the President of this Committee, who is personally responsible for these crimes.”

“I tell Gilbert Burbank!” said Texar, “that his father had challenged public opinion by freeing his slaves, that an order had been issued commanding the newly freed slaves to disperse, that this order was executed — ”

“With pillage and incendiarism!” replied Gilbert, “and rape, of which Texar is personally the author.”

“When I am before my judges I will reply,” said the Spaniard coldly. “Gilbert Burbank, do not attempt to change our positions. You are the accused, not the accuser.”

“Yes, the accused — at this moment, at all events, but the Federal gunboats have only the bar of the St. John’s between them and Jacksonville, and then — ”

Then the uproar broke out against the young officer, who dared to brave the Southerners to their face.

“Death! Death!” shouted the crowd on all sides.

The Spaniard with difficulty quieted the angry crowd. Then he resumed his questions.

“Will you tell us, Gilbert Burbank, why you left your ship last night?”

“To see my dying mother.”

“You admit, then, that you landed at Camdless Bay?”

“I have no reason to hide it!”

“And only to see your mother?”

“Only.”

“We have reason to believe you had another object?”

“What?”

“To communicate with your father, James Burbank, who]has been under suspicion for some time of being in correspondence with the Federal army.”

“You know that is not true,” replied Gilbert with very natural indignation. “If I came to Camdless Bay, it was not as an officer, but as a son.”

“Or a spy?” said Texar.

The shouts began again.

“Death to the spy! Death!”

Gilbert saw that he was lost, and what was a terrible blow to him, that his father was lost with him.

“Yes,” said Texar, “the illness of your mother was only a pretext! You came as a spy to Camdless Bay to report to the Federals the state of the defences of the St. John’s.”

Gilbert rose.

“I came to see my dying mother, as you know well. Never should I have believed that in a civilized country there could be judges who would consider it a crime for a sailor to come to his mother’s deathbed, even in the enemy’s territory! Let him who blames me and would not do likewise, dare to tell me so!”

Men in whom hatred had not extinguished all feeling, would have applauded a declaration so noble and frank. But this was not the case here.

The declaration was received with renewed uproar; and when the Spaniard remarked that in receiving an officer of the enemy in time of war, James Burbank was as guilty as the officer, his statement was loudly applauded.’

Then the committee, making a note of the admissions as to the father, condemned Lieutenant Gilbert Burbank, of the Federal navy, to death.

The doomed man was then taken back to prison amid the shouts of the populace, who followed him with cries of “Death to the spy! Death!”

That evening a detachment of the Jacksonville militia arrived at Camdless Bay. The officer in command asked for Mr. Burbank.

James Burbank came forward to meet him, accompanied by Edward Carrol and Walter Stannard.

“What is it they want?” asked James Burbank.

“Read that order!” answered the officer.

The order was to arrest James Burbank, as the accomplice of Gilbert Burbank, condemned to death as a spy by the Committee of Jacksonville, and who was to be shot within twenty-four hours.

PART II.

TEXAR, THE SOUTHERNER.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER THE CAPTURE.

TEXAR! “ — such was the well-hated name that Zermah had shouted into the darkness at the moment Mrs. Burbank and Alice reached the bank of Marine Creek. The girl had recognized the Spaniard. There could be no doubt he was the author of the abduction, of which he now took personal charge.

It was indeed Texar, and with him were half a dozen accomplices.

For some time he had been planning this expedition, which had for its object the devastation of Camdless Bay, the pillage of Castle House, the ruin of the Burbank family, and the capture or death of its head. It was with this in view that he had launched his horde of pillagers on to the plantation. But he had not put himself at their head; he had left the task of leading them to a few of the most violent of his partisans, and hence John Bruce was right when he assured James Burbank that Texar was not among the assailants.

Texar was aware of the existence of the tunnel between Castle House and the Creek. If the house was captured, the defenders would evidently try to escape down the - tunnel. Taking a boat from Jacksonville, and followed by another boat with Squambo and two of his slaves, he had come to the creek to watch. He was not mistaken. That he saw at once when he found one of the Camdless Bay boats stationed among the reeds. The blacks in charge of it were surprised, attacked, and strangled. All that had then to be done was to wait. Soon Zermah appeared, and with her the little girl. Fearing that help might come in answer to Zermah’s shouts, the Spaniard had thrown her into

Squambo's arms; and when Mrs. Burbank and Alice appeared on the bank Zermah was being carried off to the middle of the river in the Indian's boat.

We know the rest.

When the prisoners were secured, Texar did not think it necessary to accompany Squambo, who was entirely devoted to him, and knew where to take Zermah and Dy. and when the three cannon-shots recalled the assailants from storming Castle House he had struck off obliquely across the St. John's and disappeared.

Where had he gone? No one knew. He did not return to Jacksonville during the night of the 3rd and 4th of March, nor for twenty-four hours afterwards. What was the meaning of this strange absence, which he took no trouble to explain? No one could tell. But it would be a somewhat compromising circumstance should he be charged with carrying off Dy and Zermah. The coincidence between the abduction and his disappearance could not but tell against him. Nevertheless, he did not return to Jacksonville till the morning of the 5th to take the necessary measures for the defence of the town — in time enough, however, to lay the snare for Gilbert Burbank, and preside at the committee which sentenced the young officer to death.

One thing was certain, and that was that Texar was not in the boat with Squambo, which was carried off into the gloom by the rising tide.

Zermah, knowing that her shouts would not be heard on the deserted banks of the St. John's, was silent. She sat in the stern with Dy in her arms. The child was quite frightened, and uttered not a single complaint She clung to the half-breed's breast, and hid herself in the folds of her mantle. Once or twice only did a few words escape her lips.

“Mamma! mamma! Good Zermah, I am afraid! I am afraid! I want to see mamma!”

“Yes, my dear,” answered Zermah, “we shall see her. Never fear; I am near you.”

At the same moment, Mrs. Burbank had run along the right bank of the-stream, and was seeking in vain to follow her daughter as she was borne away to the opposite side.

The darkness was then profound. The fires on the estate had begun to subside, but not without several explosions. From the heavy clouds of smoke in the north the flames shot up but seldom, when they illuminated the river for a second like a flash of lightning. Then all was silent and dark. The boat was in mid-stream, and the banks could not be seen. It could not have been more isolated, more alone, in the open sea.

Whither was Squambo bound? It was important for Zermah to know. To ask the Indian would be useless; and so she tried to make out the position for herself — not an easy thing to do in the darkness while Squambo kept in the middle of the St. John’s. The tide was running in, and, paddled by the two blacks, the boat, rapidly sped to the south.

And would it not be wise for Zermah to leave some trace of her route, so as to help her master in his search? But on the river that was impossible. On land, a rag torn from her mantle and left on a bush might be the beginning of a trail which, once recovered, might be followed to the end. But what would be the use of entrusting anything to the stream? Could it be hoped that chance would bring it to James Burbank’s hands? The idea must be given up, and she must content herself with ascertaining where she landed.

An hour elapsed, and Squambo had not uttered a word. The two slaves paddled in silence. No light appeared on the banks, neither in the houses nor under the trees.

Zermah watched right and left, ready to note the least indication, and thinking only of the danger which threatened the girl. Of her own danger she never thought; all her fears were concentrated on the child. It was Texar who had stolen her — of that there could be no doubt. She had recognized the Spaniard, who had been at Marine Creek either with the intention of entering Castle House through the tunnel or waiting for the defenders when they attempted to escape. If Texar had not been in such a hurry, Mrs. Burbank and Alice Stannard would now have ‘been in his power. If he had not headed the attack of the militia and rabble, it was because he felt surer of securing the Burbank family at Marine Creek.

In any case, Texar could not deny that he had taken part in the seizure. Zermah had shouted his name, and Mrs. Burbank and Alice must have heard her. Later on, when the hour of justice came, when the Spaniard would have to answer for his crimes, he would not on this occasion be able to invoke one of those inexplicable alibis that had hitherto succeeded with him.

What fate had he in reserve for his victims? Was he going to banish them to the marshy Everglades beyond the sources of the St. John’s? Did he look upon Zermah as a dangerous witness, whose evidence would one day ruin him?

Zermah would willingly have sacrificed her life to save the child that had been carried away with her. But if she were dead, what would become of Dy in the hands of Texar and his companions? The thought was torture to her, and she clasped the girl more closely to her heart, as if Squambo had shown some intention of taking her away.

Zermah noticed that the boat was nearing the left bank of the river. Would that give her any clue? No, for she did not know that the Spaniard lived in Black Creek, on one of the islets of the lagoon. Even Texar’s partisans were ignorant of this, for no one had ever been admitted to the blockhouse which he occupied with Squambo and the blacks.

It was to Black Creek that Squambo was taking the prisoners. In that mysterious place they would be safe from all search. The creek was, so to speak, impenetrable, for no one knew the plan of its waterways. It offered a thousand retreats where prisoners could be hidden without it being possible to discover any traces of them. If James Burbank tried to explore its tangled thickets, there would be time enough to remove the half-breed and child to the south of the peninsula. There all chance would be lost of recovering them amid the vast regions which the Floridan pioneers rarely visited, and the unhealthy plains where only Indians wandered.

The forty-five miles between Camdless Bay and Black Creek were quickly covered. About eleven o’clock the boat passed the bend which the St. John’s makes two hundred yards below the creek. All that had to be done was to find the entrance to the lagoon — not an easy thing to do in the profound darkness which enveloped the left bank of the river. Squambo, though well acquainted with the place, kept off the shore as much as possible. It would have been easier for him to have run close in, but the bank was cut into by a number of small creeks bristling with reeds and other aquatic plants, and he was afraid of running aground. And as the tide had turned he would be in a difficulty were he to do so. He would have to wait nearly eleven hours till the tide came back, and how could he avoid being seen during that time? There were always a good many boats on the river, and now events necessitated constant communication between Jacksonville and St. Augustine. If the members of the Burbank family had not perished in the attack on Castle House they would be sure to begin an active search in the morning, and Squambo stuck on a shoal at the foot of the bank would inevitably be seen. It would be a dangerous position, and for many reasons it was better for him to remain in the stream, even, if necessary, to anchor and wait for the dawn, when he could be sure of his road.

Suddenly he heard a noise approaching him. It was the sound of paddle-wheels. And almost immediately a moving mass appeared round the bend of the left bank.

A steamboat was advancing at half-speed. In less than a minute it would be upon them.

By a gesture Squambo stooped his men, and with a movement of the rudder turned the boat’s head towards the right bank so as to avoid being seen.

But the boat had been sighted by the look-out on board, and she was hailed from the steamer.

Squambo muttered a terrible oath. But he had to obey.

A moment afterwards he ran alongside the steamer, which had stopped to wait for him.

Zermah at once rose from her seat. Here was a chance of safety. Could she not appeal for help, make herself known, and escape from Squambo?

The Indian rose at the same moment, bowie-knife in hand. With the other hand he caught hold of Dy, whom Zermah in vain tried to snatch from him.

“One word,” he said, “and I will kill her!”

If it had been her own life that was threatened, Zermah would not have hesitated. But as it was the child’s, she was silent.

From the deck of the steamer nothing could be seen of what was taking place in the boat.

The steamer was coming from Picolata, where she had embarked a detachment of militia for Jacksonville, to reinforce the Southern troops defending the mouth of the river.

An officer leaning over the bridge spoke to the Indian: “Where are you going to?”

“Picolata.”

Zermah took note of the name, although she knew that Squambo wished to keep secret his real destination.

“Where do you come from?”

“Jacksonville.”

“Any news there?”

“No.”

“Nothing about Dupont’s flotilla?”

“Nothing.”

“No news since the attack on Fernandina and Fort Clinch?”

“No.”

“No gunboats in the St. John’s?”

“None.”

“What was the meaning of the lights we saw, and the reports we heard, while We were at anchor waiting for the tide to turn?”

, “An attack on Camdless Bay plantation.”

“By the Northerners? “ — s “No. By the Jacksonville Militia. The planter defied the orders of the committee — ”

“Right! Right! You mean James Burbank, the mad abolitionist?”

“Just so.”

“What was the result!”

“I do not know. I only saw it as I passed. It looked as though everything was in flames.”

At this moment a feeble cry escaped from the child’s lips. Zermah put her hand on Dy’s mouth, as the Indian’s fingers felt for her neck. The officer on the bridge heard nothing.

“Were the guns in action at Camdless Bay?”

“I do not think so.”

“Why the three reports which seemed to come from Jacksonville?”

“I do not know”

“Is the St. John’s clear from Picolata to the bar?”

“Quite clear, and you need not trouble yourself about the gunboats.”“All right. Sheer off!”

An .order was sent down to the engine-room, and the steamer resumed her way.

“Can you answer me a question?” asked Squambo.

“What?” said the officer.

“The night is very dark. I hardly know where I am.”

“Off Black Creek.”

“Thank you.”

The paddle-wheels churned the river face, and gradually the steamer disappeared in the night, leaving behind her a considerable troubling of the waters.

Squambo, left alone in mid-stream, sat down in the canoe and gave the order to resume paddling. He knew his position, and starboarding his helm beaded straight for the opening of Black Creek.

That it was to this place of such difficult access that the Indian was taking them, Zermah could no longer doubt, and little good did the knowledge do her. How could she tell her master, and how could he succeed in searching this impenetrable labyrinth? At the back of the creek were there not the forests of Duval county offering every facility for evading’ pursuit, in case James Burbank managed to get through the lagoon? This part of eastern Florida was in those days a lost country, in which it was almost impossible to find a trail. Nor was it prudent to venture on doing so. The Seminoles wandered about the forest and marshlands, and were formidable enemies. They robbed the travellers who fell into their hands, and massacred those who attempted to defend themselves.

A strange affair, much talked of at the time, had happened in the upper part of the country a little to the northwest of Jacksonville.

Twelve Floridans had landed on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and been surprised by a tribe of Seminoles. They had not been put to death because they had made no resistance, which, as they were one to ten, was not to be thought of. They were stripped, and robbed of all they possessed, even of their clothes. They were forbidden, on pain of instant execution, to again enter the territory, which the Indians claimed as their own; and, to recognize: them in case they disobeyed the order, the chief of the tribe availed himself of a very simple device. He tattooed them on the arm in a curious way with the juice of a dye-plant and a needle-point, so that they could not remove the mark. Without further ill-treatment, they were turned adrift. They reached the northern plantations in a piteous plight, branded, so to speak, with the crest of the Indian tribe, and not at all anxious, as may be imagined, to again fall into the hands of these Seminoles, who would massacre them in order to honour their signature.

At any other time the militia of Duval county would not have allowed such a proceeding to pass with impunity.

They would have gone off in pursuit of the Indians. But at present they had something else to do besides undertaking an expedition against the nomads. The fear of seeing their country invaded by the Northerners overshadowed everything. Their only object was to prevent the Northerners becoming masters of the St. John’s and the district it watered, and they could not spare a man from the Southern forces at Jacksonville and on the Georgian frontier. There would be time enough later on to take the field against the Seminoles, when they had been emboldened by the Civil War to the point of invading the “enemy’s territory. Then they would not be contented to drive them back into the Everglades, but would endeavour to destroy them to the last man.

It was thus dangerous to venture into the territories of Western Florida; and, if James Burbank pushed his researches in that direction, it would be to meet with more than the usual dangers.

The boat had reached the left bank of the river. Squambo, knowing where Black Creek enters the St. John’s, had no fear of grounding on a shoal, and in less than five minutes he was under the branching trees in darkness deeper than that extending over the river. Accustomed as he was to the navigation of the network of the lagoon, he could advance without fear, but as he could no longer be seen, why should he not have more light on his path? A resinous branch was cut from one of the trees, and lighted, and stuck in the bow of the boat, so that its smoky light showed the way. In about half an hour Squambo traversed the meanderings of the creek, and at last he reached the island of the blockhouse.

Zermah was there made to land. Overcome with fatigue, the little girl was asleep in her arms. She did not wake when the half-breed entered the door of the fortress and was shut up in one of the rooms communicating with the central redoubt.

Dy, wrapped in a covering which was dragged from one of the corners, was laid on a sort of pallet. Zermah watched by her side.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE OPERATION.

IN the morning, at eight o’clock — it was the 3rd of March — Squambo entered the room where Zermah had passed the night. He brought some food — bread, a piece of cold venison, fruits, a jug of strong beer, a pitcher of water, and the different utensils for the table. At the same time, one of the blacks placed in one of the corners an old piece of furniture with toilet necessaries, towels, and other things for the half-breed’s own use and that of the little girl.

Dy was still asleep. By a gesture Zermah had besought Squambo not to wake her.

When the negro had gone out, Zermah asked the Indian in a low voice, —

“What are they going to do with us?”

“I do not know,” said Squambo. “What orders have you had from Texar?”

“Whether they come from Texar or from somebody else they are these, and you would do well to conform to them. So long as you are here, this room will be yours, and you will be kept in it during the night.”

“And during the day?”

“You can walk about the enclosure.”

“While we are here. But where are we?”

“Where I was told to bring you.”

“And are we to remain here?”

“I have said what I had to say,” said the Indian. “It is useless to ask me more; I shall not answer.”

And Squambo, whose manner gave no hope of further conversation, left the room.

Zermah looked at the girl. A few tears rose to her eyes, tears which she at once wiped away. It would never do for Dy, when she awoke, to see that she had been crying. It was necessary that the child should gradually become accustomed to her new position, precarious as it might be, for all depended on the Spaniard.

Zermah thought over what had passed during the night. She had seen Mrs. Burbank and Alice on the bank while the boat moved away. Their desperate appeals, their heartrending cries, had reached her. But had they been able to get back to Castle House along the tunnel, reach the besieged, and tell James Burbank and his companions of the new misfortune that had fallen on them? Had they been captured by the Spaniard’s men, dragged far from Camdless Bay, killed perhaps? If so, James Burbank would not know that his child had been carried off with Zermah. He would think that his wife, Alice, his daughter, and the half-breed had got safe away from Marine Creek and reached Cedar Rock in safety. He would then make no immediate search for their recovery 1

Supposing that Mrs. Burbank and Alice had got back to Castle House, and James Burbank knew everything, was there not cause to fear that the house had been entered by the assailants, pillaged, burnt, destroyed? In that case, what had become of its defenders? If they had been made prisoners or killed in the struggle, Zermah could not hope for any assistance on their part.

Even if the Northerners had become masters of the St. John’s she was lost. Neither Gilbert Burbank nor Mars would know that the sister of one and the wife of the other were imprisoned in this islet in Black Creek.

And although these things were so, and Zermah had only herself to look to, her energy would not leave her. She would do all she could to save this child who had perhaps only her in the world to look to. Her life would centre in this idea — escape! Not an hour should pass without her doing something towards doing so.

But was it possible to escape from the fortress watched by Squambo and his companions, to get away from the ferocious bloodhounds that prowled round the enclosure, to fly from this island lost in the thousand windings of the lagoon? Yes, it was possible, but only on condition that she was secretly helped by one of the slaves who knew the channels of Black Creek. Why should not the temptation of a large reward induce one of the men to help her in her escape? That was the direction in which she must work.

Dy had just awoke. The first word she uttered was a call for her mother. Then she looked round the room. The remembrance of last night’s events returned to her. She saw the half-breed, and ran to her.

“Good Zermah! Good Zermah!” she murmured, “I am afraid! I am afraid!”

“You must not be afraid, my dear.”

“Where is mamma?”

“She will come — soon. We have been obliged to save ourselves — as you know 1 We are now in safety. There is nothing to fear. As soon as they have helped your father, he will come to us.”

Dy looked at Zermah, as much as to say —

“Is that really true?”

“Yes,” said Zermah, who wished to give the child confidence at any cost. “Yes, Mr. Burbank told us to wait for him here.”

“But the men who took us away in the boat?” said the child, returning to the charge.

“They are the servants of Mr. Harvey, my dear. You know Mr. Harvey, your father’s friend who lives at Jacksonville. We are in his cottage at Hampton Red.”

“And mamma and Alice, who were with us, why are they not here?”

“Mr. Burbank called them back as they were going to get into the boat. Do you not remember? As soon as the naughty men have been hunted from Camdless Bay, they will come and look for you. See now! Don’t cry! Don’t be afraid, my dear, even if we stay here for some days. We are well hidden. And now let me put you straight.”

Dy kept her eyes obstinately fixed on Zermah, and not- withstanding what she had been told, a heavy sigh escaped her lips. She had not woke with a smile as she usually did. It was important to keep her busy to distract her attention.

And Zermah tried to do so with the most tender solicitude. She performed her toilet with as much care as if the child were at Castle House, and at the same time tried to amuse her with her stories. Then Dy ate a little, and Zermah shared her first breakfast with her.

“Now, my dear, if you like, we will go out into the enclosure.”

“Is Mr. Harvey’s cottage very nice?” asked the child.

“Nice? No!” said Zermah. “I think it is an old hovel. But there are trees and watercourses, and a place where we can walk. We shall stay here for some days, and if you are not too tired, and are very good, mamma will be pleased.”

“Yes, good Zermah, I will be good!” said the little girl.

The door of the room was not locked. Zermah took the child’s hand and went out with her. They first found themselves in the central redoubt where it was dark. A moment afterwards they were in full daylight beneath the foliage of the great trees through which the sun shot its rays.

The enclosure was not large; it was about an acre in extent, and of this the blockhouse occupied the greater portion. The palisade which surrounded it did not allow Zermah to reconnoitre the position of the island in the lagoon. All she could see through the old gateway was a tolerably wide channel, with troubled waters separating it from the neighbouring islands. A woman and a child could not but find it difficult to escape. Even supposing Zermah could get possession of a boat, how could she get out of the interminable labyrinth? She did not know that Texar and Squambo alone knew the way, for the negroes rarely left the blockhouse. To reach the St. John’s, or the marshes to the west of the creek, she would have to trust to chance. And was not that running to certain destruction?

During the next day or two Zermah, on thinking matters over, saw that no help could be hoped from Texar’s slaves. They were for the most part half-brutish negroes of forbidding appearance. The Spaniard did not keep them chained, but they had not more liberty than if he had. With plenty to eat grown on the island, and addicted to strong drink, which Squambo was not at all stingy in giving them, and specially kept for defending the blockhouse, they had no interest in changing their existence for another. The slave question debated a few miles from Black Creek had no interest for them. To gain their freedom? Why? And what would they do with it? Texar assured their existence, and Squambo did not ill- treat them, although he would have smashed the head of the first man who advised them to mutiny. They never dreamt of such a thing. They were, indeed, brutes inferior to the hounds prowling round the palisade. And without exaggeration it could be said that the hounds excelled them in intelligence, for they knew all the ins and outs of the creek, and swam its multiple passes, running from islet to islet, guided by a marvellous instinct which never led them astray. Often their bark would be heard along the left bank of the river, and before night they would come back to the blockhouse all by themselves. No boat could enter Black Creek without being at once discovered by these formidable guardians. Except Squambo and Texar, no one would dare to leave the fortress without running the risk of being devoured by these savage Carib dogs.

When Zermah saw how the enclosure was watched, when she saw she could expect no help from those who guarded her, it might be thought that she gave up all thought of escape in despair. But she did not. Help might come from outside, and in that case it would come from James Burbank, if he was free to act, or from Mars when Mars learnt how his wife had disappeared. Failing these she must depend on herself for the child’s safety. And she would be equal to the task.

Isolated in this lagoon, she saw herself surrounded only by brutish men. Sometimes she thought that one of the negroes, who was still young, looked at her with pity. Was there any hope in that? Could she trust him to tell her the way to Camdless Bay, and help her to escape to Castle House? It was doubtful. And Squambo had evidently noticed that the slave was taking an interest in her, for now he was kept away, and Zermah met him no more in her walks about the enclosure.

Several days passed and there was no change in the circumstances. From morning till night Zermah and Dy were at liberty to move about as they chose. When night came, although Squambo did not lock them in their room, yet he did not allow them to leave the central redoubt. He never spoke to them, and Zermah had given up all attempts to question him. Not for a moment did he seem to leave the island. She felt that his watch over them was unceasing. And she employed herself in looking after the child, who constantly asked for her mother.

“She will come!” Zermah would reply. “I have had news of her. Your father will come too, my dear, and with Miss Alice.”

And when she had said this she knew not what else to imagine; and then she did her best to amuse the child, who showed more sense than could be expected at her age.

The 4th, 5th, and 6th of March went by. Although Zermah listened for some distant detonation to announce the presence of the Federal flotilla on the waters of the St. John’s, no sound reached her. All was silence at Black Creek. It was reasonable to suppose that Florida did not yet belong to the soldiers of the North. And this increased the half-breed’s anxiety to the utmost. Failing James Burbank, she must trust to Gilbert and Mars. And what was very strange was that the Spaniard had not once shown himself at the blockhouse, either in the day or the night. At least, Zermah saw nothing to make her think so. And she scarcely slept, passing her long hours of insomnia in listening — always in vain.

What could she do if Texar came to Black Creek Would he listen to her prayers or her threats? Was not the Spaniard's presence more to be feared than his absence?

It was the night of the 6th of March, and about eleven o'clock. For the thousandth time Zermah was thinking over these things, as little Dy quietly slept. The room which served them for a cell was in deep darkness. No sound was heard without, except the whistling of the wind along the crumbling planks of the blockhouse.

Suddenly she heard some one walking into the central redoubt. At first she supposed it was the Indian going to his room opposite hers, after making his usual round to see that all was safe.

Then she heard a few words spoken by two voices. She glided to the door, and placed her ear close to it, and listened. She recognized Squambo's voice, and almost immediately afterwards Texar's.

A shudder seized her. What did the Spaniard want at this hour? Was it some new scheme against her and the child? Were they going to take them from their room, carry them to some more unknown retreat, more impenetrable than this of Black Creek? In a moment all these suppositions presented themselves. Then her energy took the upper hand, and she leant against the door and listened.

"Nothing new?" said Texar.

"Nothing, master," said Squambo.

“And Zermah?”

“I refused to answer her questions.”

“Have any attempts been made to reach them from Camdless Bay?”

“Yes, but none have succeeded.”

From this reply Zermah learnt that people were searching for them. Who could they be?

“How do you know?”

“I have been several times to the river-bank,” said the Indian. “And a day or two ago I saw a boat laying off the Creek. The two men in her landed on one of the islands by the bank.”

“Who were these two men?”

“James Burbank and Walter Stannard.”

Zermah could hardly restrain her emotion. James Burbank and Walter Stannard! And so the defenders of Castle House had not perished in the attack on the plantation. And if they had begun to search, it was because (they knew that she and the child had been carried off. And if they knew that, it must be because Mrs. Burbank and Alice had told them so. So that they were alive, and they must have got back to Castle House after hearing her last shout for help against Texar. James Burbank thus knew what had happened. He knew the scoundrel’s name. Perhaps he even suspected where he had hidden his victims. He might even reach them!

This chain of thought linked itself together instantly in Zermah’s mind. A great hope took possession of her — a hope that vanished immediately when she heard the Spaniard answer —

“Yes! Let them search, and they will never find them. In a few days we need have no fear of James Burbank!”

What these words meant Zermah could not divine; but, coming from the man whom Jacksonville obeyed, they were a formidable menace.

“And now, Squambo, I want you for an hour,” said the Spaniard. “Right.”

“Follow me.”

A moment afterwards they had entered the Indian’s room. — *

What were they doing there? Was it some secret that Zermah ought to know? In her position she should neglect nothing that might be of use to her.

Her room door, as we know, was not locked during the night. The precaution would have been useless, as the redoubt was locked, and Squambo kept the key. It was impossible to get out of the blockhouse, and consequently to attempt escape.

Zermah could thus open her door and step out. She held her breath as she did so.

The darkness was intense. Only a few streaks of light came from the Indian’s room.

Zermah crept to the door, and peeped through the crack between two planks. What she saw was too strange for her to understand its meaning.

Although the room was lighted only by the fag-end of a resinous torch, the light was enough for the Indian, who was occupied in a work of great delicacy.

Texar was seated in front of him, with his leather coat thrown back, and with his left arm bare and stretched out on a little table just under the light of the torch. A piece of paper of curious shape, pierced with little holes, was laid on the inner part of the fore-arm. With a fine needle, Squambo pricked the skin in every place where there was a hole in the paper. The Indian was ‘tattooing, and, as a Seminole, he was an expert at such work. He did it with such skill and lightness of hand that the epidermis was only just touched by the needle-point, and the Spaniard felt not the least discomfort.

When he had done, Squambo lifted the paper then, taking a few leaves of a plant Texar had brought with him, he rubbed them over the fore-arm. The sap of the plant rubbed into the needle punctures caused a sharp itching, but the Spaniard was not the man to trouble himself about such small matters.

This part of the operation over, Squambo held the torch close to the tattooed place. A reddish design then appeared on the skin. The design was an exact copy of that formed by the needle-holes in the paper. It was a series of inter-crossed lines, representing one of the symbolic figures of the Seminole religion. The mark could never more be effaced from the arm on which Squambo had put it.

Zermah had seen it all, and, as we have said, could understand nothing of it. What interest could Texar have in being thus tattooed? Why this “particular -sign,” as the passports say? Did he wish to pass as an Indian? Neither his complexion nor his features would admit of his doing so. Was there any connection between this mark and that which had been put on the Floridans who had been robbed by the Seminoles? And, on account of it, was he going to prove one of those inexplicable alibis which had hitherto stood him in such good stead?

Perhaps this was one of the secrets of his life which the future would reveal.

Another question presented itself to Zermah. Had not the Spaniard come to the blockhouse to avail himself of Squambo's cleverness as a tattooer? Was he going back to Jacksonville, where his partisans were still in power.? Or was he going to stop at the blockhouse day after day and make fresh arrangements regarding his prisoners?

Zermah's anxiety was not of long duration. She had slipped back to her room as soon as the Spaniard rose to enter the central chamber. Hidden by the door, she heard the few" words exchanged between the Indian and his master. . .

"Watch them with more care than ever," he said.

"Yes," replied Squambo. "But if we are closely pressed by James Burbank — "

"James Burbank, I tell you, will not trouble you after a few days. Besides, you know where to take the half-breed and child — where I shall meet you again."

"Yes, master," said Squambo; "for we must provide against Gilbert Burbank, or Mars, Zermah's husband — " Before forty-eight hours they will both be in my power, and when I get them — "

Zermah did not hear the end of the sentence which threatened her husband and Gilbert so seriously.

Texar and Squambo then left the redoubt, and the door shut behind them.

A few minutes later the skiff paddled by the Indian left the island, traversed the sombre sinuosities of the lagoon, and put the Spaniard on board a boat that was waiting for him off the creek. Squambo and his master then separated, Texar going down with the tide to Jacksonville.

He arrived there at dawn, in time to put his plans into execution. And soon afterwards Mars disappeared in the waters of the St. John's, and Gilbert Burbank was condemned to death.

CHAPTER III.

THE DAY BEFORE.

It was in the morning of the nth of March that Gilbert Burbank had been tried by the Jacksonville Committee! and the same evening his father had been arrested. The next day but one the young officer was to be shot, and doubtless James Burbank, charged as being his accomplice,, and sentenced to the same penalty, would die with him.

As we know, Texar held the Committee in his hand. His word alone was law. The execution of the father and the son would be the prelude to sanguinary excesses against the Northerners in Florida, and all who shared in their ideas on the slavery question. What an amount of personal vengeance would be gratified under the cloak of civil war. Nothing but the presence of the Federal troops could put a 6top to this. But would they come, and, above all, would they come before the first victims had been sacrificed to the Spaniard’s hatred?

Unfortunately it seemed to be doubtful.

One can fancy the anguish at Castle House at this prolonged delay.

It seemed as though the plan of ascending the St. John’s had been temporarily abandoned by Stevens. The gunboats made no movement to leave their anchorage. Did they not dare to clear the bar now that Mars was not with them to pilot them along the channel? Had they given up the idea of taking Jacksonville, and by the capture assuring safety to the plantations on the St. John’s? What new events of the war had modified the projects of Commodore Dupont?

Such were the questions that Mr. Stannard and Overseer Perry asked themselves during this interminable day of the 12th of March.

From the news then current it seemed that the Federal efforts in this part of Florida, between the river and the sea, were confined to the coast. Commodore Dupont, in the Wabash, with the heaviest gunboats of the squadron, had just appeared in the Bay of St. Augustine. It was even reported that the militia were preparing to abandon the town without attempting to defend Fort Marion any more than Fort Church had been defended at the surrender of Fernandina.

Such, at least, was the news brought by the overseer during the morning to Castle House; and he at once reported it to Mr. Stannard and Edward Carrol, who, his wound not having healed, was obliged to recline on one of the sofas in the hall.

“The Federals at St. Augustine!” said the latter; “and why do they not come to Jacksonville?”

“Perhaps they wish only to blockade the river without taking possession,” answered Perry.

“James and Gilbert are lost if Jacksonville remains in Texar’s hands,” said Mr. Stannard.

“Could I not go,” said Perry, “and tell Commodore Dupont that Mr. Burbank and his son are in such danger?”

“It would take a day to reach St. Augustine,” said Carrol, “even supposing that you were not stopped by the retreating militia. And before Dupont could order Stevens to occupy Jacksonville, too much time would have gone! Besides, there is this bar — this river-bar, which the gun boats cannot pass. How can they save our poor Gilbert, who is to die to-morrow? No! it is not to St. Augustine you should go, but to Jacksonville! It is not to Commodore Dupont you should appeal, but to — Texar!"

"Mr. Carrol is right, father, and I will go!" said Alice, who had heard the few last words.

The brave girl was ready to risk everything for Gilbert's safety.

The evening before, when he left Camdless Bay, James Burbank had particularly enjoined that his wife should not be told of his departure to Jacksonville. It was better to hide from her that the Committee had ordered his arrest. Mrs. Burbank was thus unaware of his having gone, as she was unaware of the fate of her son, whom she believed to be on board the flotilla. How could the unhappy woman bear up under the double blow that had fallen on her? Her husband in the power of Texar, her son on the eve of being executed She would never survive it.. When she had asked to see James Burbank, Alice had replied that he had left Castle House in resumption of his search after Dy and Zermah, and that he would be away forty-eight hours. So that all Mrs. Burbank's thoughts were concentrated on her stolen child.

Alice knew all the dangers that threatened James and Gilbert Burbank. She knew that the young officer was to be shot in the morning, and that the same fate was in store for his father. But though she knew all this, she resolved to see Texar, and asked Mr. Carrol to take her across the river.

"You — Alice — at Jacksonville!" exclaimed Mr. Stannard.

"Father, it is necessary!"

Mr. Stannard’s very natural hesitation suddenly ceased before the necessity of acting without delay. If Gilbert could be saved, it was only by the way Alice wished to try. Perhaps by casting herself at Texar’s knees she could shake his resolution! Perhaps she might obtain a respite! Perhaps she might find support among the better citizens who might be induced to rise against the intolerable tyranny of the Committee! In short, she must go to Jacksonville whatever danger she might run.

“Perry,” she said, “will you take me to Mr. Harvey’s house?”

“Immediately,” said the overseer.

“No, Alice; I will go with you,” said Mr. Stannard. “Yes I will! Let us start — ”

“You, Stannard?” asked Carrol. “You are exposing your life. They know your opinions.”

“What does it matter?” said Mr. Stannard. “I will not let my daughter go alone amongst those vagabonds. Perry can stay at Castle House, as you cannot walk yet, for we must prepare in case we are detained — ”

“If Mrs. Burbank asks for you,” said Carrol, “if she asks for Alice, what am I to say?”

“Say that we have gone with James in his search on the other side of the river. Tell her, if necessary, that we have had to go to Jacksonville — in fact anything you like to keep her quiet, but nothing to lead her to suspect the dangers that surround her husband and son. Perry, get a boat ready.”

The overseer retired at once, leaving Mr. Stannard to prepare for his journey.

It would be better for Alice not to leave Castle House without telling Mrs. Burbank that she and her father had been obliged to go to Jacksonville. If need be she could even say that Texar's party had been superseded, that the Federals were masters of the river, that to-morrow Gilbert would be at Camdless. Bay.. But would the girl have sufficient self-command, would her voice not betray her when she asserted as facts what now seemed impossible?

When she arrived in the invalid's room Mrs. Burbank was asleep, or rather deep in sorrowful slumber, in profound torpor, from which Alice had not the courage to wake her. Perhaps It was better that the girl had no need to speak and soothe her.

One of the women of the house watched near the bed. Alice told her not to leave for a moment, and to ask Mr. Carrol to answer Mrs. Burbank's questions. Then she bent over the unhappy mother, almost till their lips met, and then she went out and joined her father.

As soon as she saw him, "Let us go," she said.

They clasped Carrol's hand and went out from the hall. In the middle of the bamboo-path to the landing-path they met the overseer.

"The boat is ready," said he.

"Good," said Mr. Stannard. "Keep careful guard over the house, my friend."

"Never fear, Mr. Stannard, our blacks are coming back: to the plantation, and that means much. What would they do with a freedom for which nature has not created them? Bring us back Mr. Burbank, and they will all be found at their post."

Mr. Stannard and his daughter took their places in the boat with four of the Camdless Bay men. The sail was hoisted, and under a light easterly breeze they speedily left the shore.

Mr. Stannard thought it best not to land at the wharf at Jacksonville, where he would inevitably be recognized, but to run into a little creek a short distance above. From there it would be easy to reach Mr. Harvey’s house, which was on this side and well out in the suburbs. Once there they could consult over matters and act accordingly.

The river at this time was deserted. Nothing above stream; nothing below. There had been no fight between the Floridan vessels and the gunboats under Commandant Stevens, whose anchorage could not even be seen, owing to a bend in the St. John’s closing the horizon below Jacksonville.

After a quick passage, Mr. Stannard and his daughter reached the left bank. Without being noticed they were able to land in the creek, which was not watched, and in a few minutes they found themselves in the house of James Burbank’s correspondent.

Mr. Harvey was much surprised and much alarmed to see them. Their presence could not be without danger among a mob more and more excited and quite devoted to Texar. It was known that Stannard shared in the anti-slavery ideas adopted at Camdless Bay. The pillage of his house at Jacksonville was a warning that could not be disregarded.

Assuredly he was running a great risk. The least that could happen to him, if he was discovered, was to be imprisoned as an accomplice of James Burbank’s.

“We must save Gilbert!” was all that Miss Alice could answer to Mr. Harvey’s observations.

“Yes,” he said. “We must try! But Mr. Stannard must not go out of this house! He must stay here while we act.”

“Will they let me into the prison?” asked Alice.

“I do not think so, Miss Stannard.”

“Shall I get to see Texar?”

“We will try.”

“Will you not let me go with you?” said Mr. Stannard.

“No! that would do harm with Texar and his Committee.”

“Come, then, Mr. Harvey,” said Alice.

Before they left, however, Mr. Stannard asked if there had been any war news which had not yet reached Camdless Bay.

“None,” said Mr. Harvey; “at least none that concerns Jacksonville. The Federal flotilla has appeared in the Bay of St. Augustine, and the town has been surrendered. At the St. John’s nothing has been done; the gunboats are still at anchor below the bar.”

“The water is too low for them to get over.”

“Yes, Mr. Stannard; but to-day we are to have one of the highest tides of the equinox. It will be high water for three hours, and perhaps the gunboats will clear it — ”

44 Clear it without a pilot, now that Mars is no longer there to guide them through the channels!” said Alice in a tone which showed that she thought little of this hope. “No! It is impossible! Mr. Harvey, I must see Texar, and if he repulses me, we must sacrifice everything to help Gilbert .escape — ”

“And we will do so, Miss Stannard.”

44 Feeling has not changed in Jacksonville?” asked Mr. Stannard.

M No,” replied Mr. Harvey. “The roughs are’ the masters, and Texar leads them. But owing to the exactions and menaces of the Committee the respectable people are growling with indignation, and it only wants a movement of the Federals on the river to bring about an immediate change. The mob is a cowardly mob; and if they have cause to fear, Texar and his partisans will be upset. I hope still that Commandant Sevens will be able to clear the bar — ”

“We will wait for that,” said Alice resolutely; “and before then I shall have seen Texar.”

It was then agreed that Mr. Stannard should remain in the house, so that his presence in Jacksonville should not be known. Mr. Harvey was to help Alice in all her plans, the success of which, it was well understood, was problematical. If Texar refused to give Gilbert his life, if Alice could not get to see him, they would try even at the cost of a fortune to procure the escape of the prisoners.

It was about eleven o’clock when Alice and Mr. Harvey left the house for the Courts of Justice, where the Committee under Texar’s presidency was in permanent session.

The town was still in a state of great excitement. The militia, reinforced by the detachments arrived from the South, were constantly on the move. Those set free by the surrender of St. Augustine were expected during the day, either by the St- John's or by the road through the forests on its right bank. The people thronged the streets. A thousand rumours were afloat, contradictory as usual, and provoking a tumult akin to disorder. It was easy to see that if the Federals did arrive there would be no unity of action in the defence; there would be no serious resistance. Fernandina had surrendered nine days before to the troops landed under General Wright; St. Augustine had received Dupont's flotilla without even attempting to bar his passage; and so would it be at Jacksonville. The Florida Militia would give place to the Northern troops, and would retire into the interior of the country. There was only one thing to save Jacksonville from capture, to prolong the powers of the Committee and allow them to accomplish their sanguinary plans; that was, that for want of water or want of a pilot the gunboats kept outside the bar. And in a few hours it would be seen if this were to be the case.

Through a crowd which grew closer at every step, Alice and Mr. Harvey made their way to the principal square. How were they to get into the court? They could not imagine. Once there, how could they get to see Texar? They did not know. Who could tell if the Spaniard, when he heard that Alice Stannard demanded to see him, would' not arrest her and imprison her until after the lieutenant's execution? But she would not think of such things. To see Texar, to compel him to have mercy on Gilbert, no personal danger would be too great for her to run.

When she and Mr. Harvey reached the square, they found there a still more tumultuous crowd. Shouts rent the air, and these words of menace were yelled from one group to another: “Death! Death!”

Mr. Harvey ascertained that the Committee had been sitting as a court of justice for an hour. A dreadful presentiment seized on him, and the presentiment was only too well justified. The Committee were trying James Burbank for being the accomplice of his son Gilbert, and holding communication with the Federal army. The same crime, the same sentence, there could be no doubt, and the crowning of Texar's work against the Burbank family.

Mr. Harvey would have gone no further. He tried to lead Alice away. He would not subject her to the sight of the violence which the people threatened when the condemned men came out of the court after sentence was pronounced. This was hardly the time to seek an interview with the Spaniard.

"Come away, Miss Stannard," said Mr. Harvey. "Come away! We will come back when the Committee — "

"No!" answered Alice. "I will throw myself between the accused and their judges — "

The girl's resolution was such that Mr. Harvey despaired of overcoming it. Alice led the way. He was bound to follow her. The crowd was quiet — some of them recognized her, perhaps, and yet it opened to let her pass. The cries of "Death!" sounded horribly in her ears. Nothing could stop her. She reached the doors of the court. Here the crowd was rougher than ever, — not the roughness that follows the storm, but that which precedes it. The most terrible excesses were to be feared.

Suddenly a tumultuous wave burst from the court. The shouts redoubled. Sentence had been given.

James Burbank, like Gilbert, had been condemned for the same pretended crime to the same penalty. Father and son would fall before the same firing platoon.

“Death! Death!” yelled the crowd of roughs.

James Burbank appeared on the steps. He was calm and collected. A look of scorn was all he had for the shouting crowd.

A detachment of militia surrounded him, with orders to take him back to prison.

He was not alone.

Gilbert was by his side.

Taken from the cell where he awaited the hour of execution, the young officer had been brought into the Committee’s presence to be confronted with James Burbank, who could only confirm what his son had said. Gilbert had come to Castle House to see his dying mother for the last time. On the evidence the charge would have collapsed, had not the trial been settled beforehand. The same doom awaited both innocent men — a doom imposed by personal vengeance, and pronounced by iniquitous judges.

The crowd closed on the prisoners. It was with great difficulty that the militia could clear the way.

There was a sudden movement in the crowd. Alice rushed towards the father and son.

Involuntarily the mob recoiled, surprised by this unexpected attempt.

“Alice!” exclaimed Gilbert. — ’

“Gilbert! Gilbert!” murmured Alice as she fell into his arms.

“Alice! why are you here?” asked James Burbank.

“To ask mercy for you. To beg it from your judges. Mercy! mercy for them!”

The girl’s cries were heart-breaking. She clung to the clothes of the doomed men, who had for a moment stopped.

Could they hope for pity from the wild crowd that surrounded them? No! But her intervention for a moment prevented them from proceeding to violence, in defiance of the militia guard.

Texar, informed of what was happening, appeared at the threshold of the Courts of Justice. A gesture from him silenced the crowd. The order he gave was to take the Burbanks back to prison.

The detachment resumed its march.

“Mercy! mercy!” sobbed Alice, throwing herself at Texar’s knees.

The Spaniard’s reply was a gesture of refusal. The girl stood up.
“Scoundrel!” she said.

She would have rejoined the prisoners, followed them to the prison, and spent with them the last hours left them to They were already out of the square, the crowd escorting them with yells and insults.

It was more than Alice could bear. Her strength abandoned her. She staggered and fell. She had neither feeling nor consciousness when Mrs.

Harvey received her in her arms. — . —

She did not come to herself till she was with her father in Mr. Harvey’s house.

“To the prison! To the prison!” she murmured. “Both of them must escape.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Stannard. “That is all we can try!

Wait till night comes!”

Nothing could be done during the day. When darkness enabled them to act with more safety, without fear of being surprised, Mr. Stannard and Mr. Harvey would endeavour to help the prisoners escape, with the connivance of their guard. They would take money with them, so much — so they hoped — that the man would be unable to resist them; particularly as a single shot from Stevens’ gunboats might end the Spaniard’s power. — .

But night came, and they had to give up all thought of their scheme. The prison was guarded by a detachment of militia, and all idea of flight was in vain.

CHAPTER IV.

A GALE FROM THE NORTH-EAST.

There was now only one chance for the doomed men — that before a dozen hours had elapsed the Federals were masters of the town. At sunrise James and Gilbert Burbank would be shot. Their prison was watched, so was Mr. Harvey’s house; how could they escape?

The capture of Jacksonville could not be made by the troops landed at Fernandina, who could not abandon that important position in the north of Florida. The task must be that of the gunboats: to accomplish it the bar must be crossed. Then when the line of boats was driven back, the flotilla could anchor opposite the town. Once they had the town under their guns, the militia would beat a retreat to the marshes. Texar and his partisans would certainly follow them, to avoid the well-deserved reprisals. The respectable citizens ‘would then resume the place from which they had been hunted with such indignity, and negotiate with the Federal representatives for the surrender.

Was it possible to effect this passage of the bar, and within the time? Was there any way of overcoming the obstacle which the want of water put in the way of the gunboats? It was very doubtful, as we shall see.

After sentence was pronounced Texar and the commander of the militia went down to the wharf to inspect the lower course of the river. Their attention was fixed on the bar.

“Nothing fresh has been reported?” asked Texar, as he stopped at the end of the stockade.

“Nothing,” said the officer. “A reconnaissance I sent out to the north tells me that the Federals have not left Fernandina for Jacksonville. Probably they are kept in observation on the Georgian frontier until their flotilla has forced the channel.”

“Have any troops come from the south, from St. Augustine, and crossed the St. John’s at Picolata?”

“I think not. Dupont has only troops enough to occupy the town, and his object is to blockade the whole coast from the St. John’s to the furthest inlets of Florida. We have nothing to fear from that side, Texar!”

“Then the only danger is from the flotilla if it clears the bar, below which it has been at anchor for three days.”

“That is so. And the question will be decided in a few hours. Perhaps, after all, the enemy’s object is to close the river so as to cut off the communication between St. Augustine and Fernandina! It is most to his interest not to occupy Florida at present, but to stop the contraband of war coming in from the south. The expedition has no other object — at least I think not. If it had, the troops at Amelia Island would have been on the march to Jacksonville.”

“You may be right,” said Texar. “It doesn’t matter! But I wish this question of the bar was over.”

“It will be settled this very day.”

“If the gunboats do come, what will you do?”

“Act according to my orders, and take the militia into the interior, so as to avoid all contact with the Federals. If they can occupy the towns, let them.

They cannot keep them long, for they will be cut off from their communications with Georgia and the Carolinas, and we shall soon retake them.”

“But,” said Texar, “if they are masters of Jacksonville only for a day, we must expect reprisals. All these pretended honest men, these rich planters, and abolitionists will return to power, and then — But it shall not be! No! and rather than abandon the town — ”

The Spaniard did not finish his thought, but it was easy to see his meaning. He would not surrender the town to the Federals, who would place it in the hands of the magistrates he had supplanted. He would give it to the flames; and perhaps his measures were taken with a view to this work of destruction. Then he and his followers would retire after the militia, and in the marshes of the south find an inaccessible retreat, where they could await events.

But there was nothing of this to be feared if the gunboats could not clear the bar, and the time had come to settle the question.

The people came crowding on to the wharves. A moment was enough to show why they had come. Deafening shouts arose.

“The gunboats are coming!”

“No! they have not moved.”

“The sea is open!”

“They are going to try it at full speed!”

“‘Look! look!”

“So they are “said the commander of the militia. “There is something I Look, Texar!”

The Spaniard did not reply. He never took his eyes from where the horizon was closed by the line of boats drawn across the stream. Half a mile below were the spars and funnels of the gun-vessels. A thick smoke was rising, and driven by the wind came floating up to Jacksonville.

Evidently Stevens, taking advantage of the full tide, was trying to cross the bar at all costs. Would he do so? Would he find enough water, even if he scraped his’ keels as he came? No wonder there was violent excitement among the crowds on the bank of the St. John’s.

And the excitement increased as some thought they saw something, and others thought they did not.

“They have gained half a cable!’

“No I they have not moved further than if their anchor was still down.”

“There is one moving.”

“Yes; but she is swinging on a pivot because she has not got water enough.”

“What a smoke!”

“They may burn, all the coal in the States, but they won’t get over.”

“And now the tide is slackening!”

“Hurrah for the South!”

“Hurrah!”

The flotilla’s attempt lasted about ten minutes — ten minutes which appeared long to Texar, to his partisans, and to all there whose liberty or life would be endangered by the capture of Jacksonville. What had really happened they did not know; the distance was too great for them to be sure. Had the channel been forced or not? By discharging all useless weight to lighten his draught, had Stevens been able to clear the narrow shoal that kept him out of the deep water, by which the passage up to the town would he easy? So long as the tide was on the turn ‘ there was a chance that he might.

But as the people said, the tide had begun to run out. Once the ebb began, the level of the St. John’s would soon sink.

Suddenly arms were stretched towards the bar, and there was a shout that was heard over all, —

“A boat! a boat!”

A little boat was sighted coming along the left bank, where the flow of the tide was still perceptible, while the ebb appeared in mid-channel. The boat rowed up rapidly. In the stern sat an officer in the uniform of the Florida Militia. He soon reached the stockade, and, running up the ladder, landed on the wharf. Perceiving Texar he came towards him; followed by a crowd almost choking with anxiety to see and hear.

“What is it?” asked the Spaniard.

“Nothing, and there will be nothing!” said the officer.

“Who sent you?”

“The commander of the boats, who will soon be back here.”

“And why?”

“Because the gunboats have failed in crossing the bar, although they were lightened for draught and were driven at full speed. There is now nothing to fear — ”

“For this tide?” asked Texar.

“Nor for any other — at least for some months.”

“Hurrah! Hurrah!”

The cheers spread over the town. And as the rough: more than ever cheered the Spaniard, in whom all their detestable instincts were incarnate, the respectable people saw with despair that for some time yet they would be under the iniquitous rule of the Committee and its chief.

The officer’s report was true. From that day the tide would decrease each day. The tide of the 12th of March was one of the highest of the year, and several months would elapse before it again reached the same level. The bar being impassable, Jacksonville would escape Stevens’s: guns. Texar would remain in power; the scoundrel would | accomplish his work of vengeance. Even if General Sherman sent Wright to occupy the town with the troops landed at Fernandina, the march would take several days. As far as the Burbanks were -concerned, their execution being fixed for the next morning, nothing could save them.

The news spread to the suburbs. We can imagine its effect on the riotous portion of the community. Decent people prepared to leave a town in which they could not be safe. — [

The cheering and shouting reached the prisoners, and told them that all hope of life had vanished, and they were heard in Mr. Harvey's house. We need not dwell on the despair with which they filled Mr. Stannard and his daughter. What could they do now to save James Burbank and his son? Corrupt the gaoler? They could not now leave the house in which they had taken refuge! A troop of desperadoes kept them in sight, whose curses could be heard at the door.

"Night came on. The weather, which had been threatening for some hours, changed rapidly; the wind had gone round to the north-east. Great masses of grey, broken clouds came racing past, too hurriedly to dissolve in rain, and almost low enough to sweep the surface of the sea. A frigate's masts would certainly have reached into the. mass of vapour. The barometer suddenly fell, and there was every sign of a storm over the distant Atlantic.

From its position the storm would strike full into the estuary of the St. John's. It would raise the waters and drive them back like the bores of large rivers, and the flood would rise over the lands by the river-side.

. During this night of trouble Jacksonville was swept with terrible violence. A part of the stockade succumbed to the fury of the surf against the stockades; the water came over the wharf, and dashed to pieces on it several doggerboats, whose cables broke like threads. It was impossible to remain in the streets or squares owing to the shower of fragments that rained down from the roofs. People took refuge in the public-houses, and the noise therein contended, not without advantage, with the roar of the storm.

It was not only over the land that the gale raged. In .the St. John's, the agitation of the waters produced quite a furious sea. The boats moored above the bar were caught: in the storm before they could get into safety; their grapnels broke, and their cables parted. The night's tide, increased by the gale, carried them up the river resistlessly. Some were stove against the piles, others were swept past Jacksonville and lost on the islands and points miles up the St. John’s. Many of the sailors lost their lives in the storm, which came on so suddenly as to render useless the measures usually taken under such circumstances.

Had the gunboats weighed anchor and steamed off to shelter in the creeks at the mouth? Had they, thanks to this precaution, escaped complete destruction? Had they gone out of the river? That they had remained at their anchors Jacksonville could not believe, for the bar would now be impassable.

Darkness enveloped the valley of the St. John’s, while the air and the water mingled together as if some chemical action was trying to combine them into one element. It was one of those cataclysms which are so frequent at the equinox, but in violence it exceeded all that this part of Florida had experienced.

Owing to its violence the storm lasted but a few hours. Before the sun rose the storm had passed over into the Gulf of Mexico.

About four o’clock, as the first streaks of dawn were tinting the horizon, a calm succeeded to the tumult of the night, and the people began to crowd into the streets from the drinking-bars where they had taken refuge. The militia reappeared at their deserted ‘posts. The damages caused by the tempest began to be taken in hand, particularly along the river front, where they were considerable, the tide bringing down with it many of the drifted boats that had been wrecked and carried up the river.

But these wrecks could only be seen for a few yards out from the bank, as a dense fog had accumulated over the river, and was rising towards the higher zones that had been cooled by the tempest. At five o’clock the centre of the stream was still invisible, although but a few moments would elapse before it would be dissipated in the rays of the sun.

Suddenly, just after five o’clock, loud reports broke through the mist. There could be no mistake. It was not the long roll of thunder, but the formidable detonations of artillery I Something whistled characteristically overhead; a shout of terror rose from the crowd, who rushed towards the wharf.

The fog began to open’; it was pierced by bang after bang. Its wreaths mingled with the smoke from the guns and fell to the river.

There lay Stevens’s gunboats in line before Jacksonville, which they commanded completely within short range!

“The gunboats! The gunboats!”

The words, repeated from mouth to mouth, soon spread to the outskirts. In a few minutes the respectable population with extreme satisfaction, the disreputable population with extreme alarm, learnt that Stevens was master of the St. John’s.

What had happened? Had the Northerners found the storm of unexpected assistance? Yes. The gunboats had not sought shelter. in the lower creeks of the estuary. Notwithstanding the violence of the wind and sea, they had held to their anchors. While the enemy cleared off with his small craft, Stevens rode out the hurricane at the risk of disaster, so as to attempt the passage, which circumstances had made practicable.

The storm, by driving back the waters up the estuary, had raised the level of the stream above the normal height, and the gunboats being driven at full speed at the bar, had safely got over, although they had scraped the sand with their keels..

About four o’clock in the morning, Stevens, coming up in the fog, calculated that he was off Jacksonville. There he had anchored. And when all was ready he had rent the mists by the discharge of his heavy guns, and hurled his first projectiles at the left bank of the St. John’s.

The effect was instantaneous. In a few minutes the militia had evacuated the town, following the example of the Southern troops at Fernandina and St. Augustine. Stevens, seeing the wharves deserted, began at once to slacken fire, his object being not to destroy Jacksonville, but to occupy it.

Almost immediately a white flag was displayed on the Courts of Justice.

When the guns were first heard in Mr. Harvey’s house, great was the anxiety. The town was certainly attacked. The attack could only come from the Federals. Either they had ascended the St. John’s, or come from the north of Florida. Was this the unhoped-for chance of safety — the only one that could save James and Gilbert Burbank?

Mr. Harvey and Alice rushed to the door of the house. Texar’s men who were on guard had taken flight and followed the militia.

Alice and her companion rushed to the riverside. The fog was just vanishing and the other bank of the river could be seen.

The gunboats were silent, for already Jacksonville had abandoned its resistance.

A number of boats had put off from the flotilla, and were landing on the quay a detachment aimed with rifles, revolvers, and axes.

‘Suddenly a shout was heard among the sailors.

The man who had shouted rushed towards Alice.

“Mars! Mars!” she exclaimed, stupefied to find herself in the presence of Zermah’s husband, who she, thought had been drowned.

“Mr. Gilbert! Mr. Gilbert!” asked Mars. “Where is he?”

“Prisoner with Mr. Burbank! Save him, Mars I Save him! and save his father!”

“To the prison!” shouted Mars, turning and joining his companions.

And then all set off at a run to prevent a last crime being committed by Texar.

Mr. Harvey and Alice followed them.

So that, after jumping into the water, Mars had escaped the eddies on the bar? Yes! And the brave half-breed had prudently refrained from letting his safety be known at Castle House. To have sought there for shelter would have been to risk his safety, and to accomplish his work he must be free. Having swum to the right bank of the river, he had been able, by creeping through the reeds, to get down opposite the flotilla, There his signals had been noticed, and a boat had been sent to bring him on board Stevens’s vessel. Stevens was fully informed of what had occurred, and on account of Gilbert’s imminent danger efforts were made to get through the channel. But they were useless, as we know, and the operation was about to be abandoned when, during the night, the storm raised the river level. But without knowledge of the difficult waterway the flotilla might have grounded on the shoals. Fortunately Mars was there. He had skilfully piloted the commandant’s gunboat, and the others followed, notwithstanding the storm. And before the fog had risen on the St. John’s, they were anchored with the town under their guns.

It was time, for the two men were to be executed at daylight. Dot already all cause for fear had been removed. The magistrates- had resumed the authority usurped by Texar. And when Mars and his companions reached the prison, James and Gilbert Burbank were coming out, free at last.

In a moment the young lieutenant had clasped Alice to his breast, while Stannard and James Burbank fell into each other’s arms.

“My mother?” asked Gilbert.

“She lives! she lives!” answered Alice.

“Well, let us go to Castle House!” said Gilbert.

“Not before justice is done!” answered James Burbank. Mars understood his master. He rushed towards the main square, in the hope of finding Texar.

Would not the Spaniard have already taken flight, so as to avoid reprisals? Would he not have withdrawn himself from public vengeance with all those concerned with him in the late period of excess? Would he not have followed the militia, who were in full retreat?

It would have been thought so.

But, without waiting for the intervention of the Federals, a number of the inhabitants had run to the Courts of Justice. Texar was arrested at the moment he was about to escape. He was put under a guard; and very resigned to his fate did he appear. But when Mars came towards him, he saw that his life was in danger.

The half-breed threw himself on him. In spite of the efforts of those who guarded him, he seized him by the throat, and would have strangled him there and then, if James Burbank and his son had not appeared.

“No! no! Living!” shouted James Burbank. “He must live! he must speak!”

“Yes, he must!” said Mars.

A few minutes later Texar was locked up in the very cell where his victims. had awaited the hour of execution.

CHAPTER V.

A PRISONER.

AT last the Federals were masters of Jacksonville, and consequently of the St. John's. The troops brought by Commandant Stevens immediately occupied the chief points of the city. The usurping authorities had fled. Of the old committee only Texar had been captured.

Whether owing to weariness at the exactions of the last few days, or to indifference on the slavery question, the people did not give at all a bad reception to the officers of the flotilla, who represented the government of Washington.

Meanwhile, Commodore Dupont at St. Augustine busied himself in closing the Floridan coast against contraband of war. The passes of Mosquito inlet were all seized. That at once cut off the trade in arms and munitions with the Bahamas. It was evident that henceforth Florida would be subject to the Federal Government.

The same day as the surrender of Jacksonville, James and Gilbert Burbank and Mr. Stannard and his daughter crossed the St. John's to Camdless Bay.

Perry and the assistant-overseers were waiting for them at the little landing-place with a few of the blacks who had returned to the plantation. It can be imagined how they were received, and with what demonstrations they were welcomed.

Soon James Burbank and his companions were at his wife's bedside."

It was when she thus again beheld her son that for the time she -learnt what had passed. The young officer -1 her in his arms. Her people would never leave

her again. Alice could give her all her attention. She would soon recover her strength. There was nothing now to fear from Texas's schemings. The Spaniard was in the hands of the Federals, and the Federals were masters of Jacksonville.

But if she had to tremble no more for her husband and son, her whole thought was on her daughter. She wanted Dy; and Mars must find Zermah.

“We shall find them!” exclaimed James Burbank. “Mars and Gilbert will help in the search.

“Yes, father, and without losing a day!”

“As we have got hold of Texar,” said Mr. Burbank, “Texar must speak.”

“And if he refuses, to speak?” asked Mr. Stannard. “If he pretends he knows nothing about the disappearance of Dy and Zermah?”

“And how can he?” said Gilbert. “Did not Zermah recognize him at Marine Creek? Did not Alice and mother hear Zermah shout his name as the boat moved off? Can you doubt that he was the author of the outrage, and was in command there?”

0 It was Texar!” said Mrs. Burbank, rising as if she would have thrown herself out of bed.

“Yes,” said Alice, “I recognized him! He was standing up in ‘the stern of the boat, which he was’ steering into mid-stream.”

“Be it so,” said Mr. Stannard. “It was Texar. There is no doubt! But if he refuses to say where he has hidden them, where are we to look? — for we have searched in vain along the river for miles.”

To this question, so clearly put, there was no reply. All depended on what the Spaniard said. Was it his interest to speak or be silent?

“Do you not know where the scoundrel usually lives?” asked Gilbert.

“No one knows; no one has ever known,” said James Burbank. “In the south of the country there are so many huge forests and inaccessible marshes where he could hide himself. To explore that country would be in vain. The Federals themselves could not there pursue the retreating militia. It would be trouble thrown away.”

“I must have my daughter!” exclaimed Mr. Burbank.

“My wife! I will find my wife!” said Mars; “and I will force the rascal to tell me where she is.”

“Yes,” said James Burbank, “when the man sees he may save his life by speaking, he will speak. If he were in flight we might despair. With him in Federal hands, we can get his secret out of him. Have confidence, my poor wife! We are on the track, and we will give you back your child.”

Mrs. Burbank fainted and fell back on her bed. Alice remained with her, while Mr. Stannard, James Burbank, Gilbert and Mars went down into the hall to talk matters over with Edward Carrol.

It was agreed to wait till the Federals had organized their capture, and that Commodore Dupont should be informed of the facts relative not only to

Jacksonville, but to Camdless Bay. Perhaps he would decide to bring Texar at once before a military tribunal?

Gilbert and Mars would not let the day pass without starting on their search. While James Burbank and Stannard and Carrol were thinking over the first steps, they would be off up the St, John’s, in the hope of discovering a clue.

Was it not to be feared that Texar would refuse to speak, and in his hatred prefer to undergo the last penalty, rather than surrender his victims? Better to do without him. Let them discover where it was he lived. But that was a vain search. They knew nothing of Black Creek. They thought the lagoon was inaccessible. And they passed along by the thicket on the bank without discovering the narrow entrance.

During the 13th of March there was no change in the situation. At Camdless Bay the reorganization of the estate proceeded slowly. From all parts of the district, from the neighbouring forests, into which they had been forced to disperse, the blacks were returning in great numbers. Although set at liberty by the generous act of James Burbank, they did not think that all obligation to him was at an end. They would be his servants if they could not be his slaves. They longed to get back on the plantation, to rebuild the barracoons destroyed by Texar’s roughs, to set up the factories and refit the workshops, and resume the work which for so many years had been the welfare and happiness of their families.

The routine of the plantation was first taken in hand. Edward Carrol, almost cured of his wound, resumed his accustomed work. There was plenty of zeal on the part of Perry and the assistant-overseers. Even Pyg bestirred himself, although he did not do much. The poor creature had rather come down in his ideas. He called himself free, but he acted like a platonic freedman, much embarrassed to use the liberty which he had the right to enjoy. When the men had returned to Camdless Bay, and rebuilt the houses that had suffered, the plantation would soon resume its accustomed aspect. Whatever might be the issue of the war, there was every reason to hope that security was assured to the Florida planters.

Order was re-established at Jacksonville. The Federals did not attempt to interfere with the municipal administration. They occupied the town for military purposes, and left the civic authority to the magistrates whom the outbreak had for a time suspended. It was enough that the stars and stripes floated over the buildings. If the majority of the inhabitants were not indifferent to the question which divided the States, they at least showed no repugnance at submitting to the victorious party. The unionist cause would meet with no opposition. The doctrine of “state’s right” dear to Georgia and the Carolinas was not held in Florida with anything like the same ardour, nor would it be, even if the Federals withdrew their troops.

The events of the war up to this had been as follows: — The Confederates, in order to support Beauregard, had sent six gunboats, under Commodore Hollins, who had taken up his position on the Mississippi, between New Madrid and Is and Ten. A struggle began, in which he was vigorously withstood by Admiral Foote, with the object of holding the upper river. The day that Jacksonville fell to Stevens, the Federal artillery opened against Hollins’s gunboats. The advantage rested with the Northerners, who took Island Ten and New Madrid, and thus occupied the course of the Mississippi for a hundred and twenty-four miles, reckoning the windings of the stream.

At this time much hesitation showed itself in the plans of the Federal government. General MacClellan had to submit his ideas to a council of war, and although they were approved by the majority of the council, President Lincoln’s yielding to regrettable influences postponed their execution. The army of the Potomac was divided so as to assure the safety of Washington. Fortunately the victory of the Monitor and the flight of the Virginia had opened the navigation on the Chesapeake; and the precipitate retreat of the Confederates, after the evacuation of Manassas, had allowed the army to go into cantonments in that town. In this way the question of the blockade of the Potomac was settled.

Politics have always a disastrous effect on military affairs, and the interests of the North now suffered severely from a decision come to for political purposes. General MacClellan was deprived of the command-in-chief of the Federal armies. His command was reduced to that of the army of the Potomac, and the other corps, now become independent, passed under the sole direction of President Lincoln.

It was a mistake. MacClellan keenly resented the affront of his undeserved dismissal. But like a soldier who thought only of his duty, he resigned himself to his fate. The very next day he formed a plan the object of which was to land troops on the beach of Fort Monroe. The plan was adopted by the chiefs of the corps and approved by the president. The war minister sent orders to New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and vessels of all kinds arrived in the Potomac to take on board General MacClellan’s army and its baggage. The threats which so long had made Washington tremble would cease, and Richmond, the Southern capital, would in its turn be threatened.

Such was the situation of the belligerents when Florida submitted to General Sherman and Commodore Dupont. At the same time that their squadron completed the blockade of the Floridan coast, they had become masters of the St. John’s, and assured themselves of the complete possession of the peninsula.

In vain had Gilbert and Mars explored the banks and islands up to Picolata. And all that could be done was to deal with Texar. From the day when the doors of the prison shut on him he had had no communication with his accomplices. And it seemed to follow that Dy and Zermah would be found wherever they might have been before the Federal occupation.

The state of things at Jacksonville was now such that justice could safely be left to take its course against the Spaniard, if he refused to give information. But before proceeding to extremes it was hoped he would make certain confessions on condition of being set at liberty.

‘ On the 14th it was decided to try what could be done, the military authorities having previously signified their approval.

Mrs. Burbank had recovered her strength. The return of her son, the hope of soon seeing her child, the peace which had settled down on the country, and the safety now guaranteed to Camdless Bay had all united in restoring to her the energy,she had lost. There was no more to fear from the partisans of Texar, who had terrorized over Jacksonville. The militia had retired into the interior of Putnam county. If, later on, the St. Augustine militia, after passing the river farther up, joined hands with them in attempting an expedition against the Federals, the peril would be distant, and need cause no anxiety while Dupont and Sherman remained in Florida.

It was agreed that James and Gilbert Burbank should go to Jacksonville this very day, and go alone. Carrol, Stannard, and Mars would remain at the plantation; Alice could not leave Mrs. Burbank. The young officer and his father thought they would be back before night, and with good news. As soon as Texar had told them where he was keeping Dy and Zermah, they would see about their deliverance, which would doubtless be accomplished in a few hours or a day at the outside.

Just as they were going away, Alice took the young officer apart.

“Gilbert,” she said, “you are going to see a man who has done much evil to your family. He is a scoundrel who would have killed both you and your father. Gilbert, you must promise me to keep your temper when you are with Texar.”

“Keep my temper!” exclaimed Gilbert, who grew pale with anger at the mere mention of the Spaniard’s name.

“It is necessary for you to do so. You will gain nothing by being angry. Forget all idea of vengeance to secure the safety of your sister, who will soon be mine! For that you must sacrifice everything. You must make Texar feel sure that he has nothing to fear in the future.”

“Nothing! Do you forget that owing to him my mother might have died, my father might have been shot?”

“And so might you, Gilbert; you whom I never thought to see again! Yes, he did all that, and we must not think of it any more! I tell you, because I am afraid that your father will not control himself, and if you do not do so you will fail. Why did you decide to go to Jacksonville without me? I might have gained by kindness — ”

“And if this man refuses to answer?” asked Gilbert, who felt the justice of Alice’s advice.

“If he refuses, you must leave the magistrates to compel him. He risks his life, and when he sees he can save it by speaking, he will speak. Gilbert, promise me, in the name of our love, promise me — ”

“Yes, my dear Alice; yes! Whatever he may have done, if he gives us back my sister, I will forget it.”

“Good, Gilbert. We have passed through a terrible trial, which will soon be at an end. For the sad days we have been through God will give us years of happiness.”

Gilbert clasped the hands of his sweetheart, who could not restrain a few tears, and they parted At ten o’clock James Burbank and his son took leave of their friends, and entered a boat at the little landing- place.

The river was being speedily crossed when, at an observation of Gilbert’s, the boat, instead of running straight to Jacksonville, was steered for Captain Stevens’s gunboat.

Stevens was in military charge of the town. It was therefore best that James Burbank’s undertaking should be first of all submitted to him for approval. His communications with the authorities were frequent. He knew what Texar had done when in power, what was his share of the responsibility in the events that had laid the plantation waste, and why and how he had been arrested when the militia had begun to retreat. He knew of the reaction which had taken place against Texar, and how the whole respectable population of Jacksonville were asking that he should be punished for his crimes.

Stevens gave a willing reception to the Burbanks. For the young officer he had particular esteem, having been able to appreciate his character and courage while Gilbert was under his orders: After the return of Mars to the flotilla, when he learnt that Gilbert had fallen into the hands of the enemy, he did his utmost to save him. But stopped before the bar of the St. John’s, how could he reach him in time? We know under what circumstances the safety of the prisoners had been obtained.

In a few words Gilbert told him what had passed, confirming what had already been reported by Mars. There could be no doubt that Texar was personally responsible for the outrage at Marine Creek, and that he alone could say where Dy and Zermah were now detained by his accomplices. That their fate was in the Spaniard’s hands was only too evident, and Stevens saw this at once. Would he allow the Burbanks to take the matter in hand and act as they thought fit? He approved of all that had been done; and if it was necessary to set Texar free, he would do so, and take the responsibility with the Jacksonville magistrates.

James and Gilbert Burbank, having obtained full permission, thanked the captain, and received from him a written permission to communicate with the Spaniard. They then resumed their voyage to Jacksonville.

There they met Mr. Harvey, by appointment. The three then went to the court, where they received from the magistrates an order to enter the prison.

A physiologist would have been much interested in Texar’s bearing and conduct since his incarceration. There could be no doubt that he was very angry at the arrival of the Federal troops, which put an end to his being first magistrate of the town. Although he had held the power to do what he liked, and had every facility for gratifying his personal hatred, yet a delay of a few hours had prevented him from shooting James and Gilbert Burbank! But his regret went no further. That he was in the hands of his enemies, imprisoned on the most serious charges, responsible for all the violent deeds that could be so justly laid to his charge, seemed to be a matter of perfect indifference to him. His only trouble was that he had not brought to completion his plans against the Burbanks. He seemed to take no interest whatever in the proceedings against him. Would he now render futile the attempts about to be made to get a word from him?

The ‘door of the cell opened. James and Gilbert Burbank were in the prisoner’s presence.

“Ah! the father and the son,” said Texar in the insolent tone that was habitual to him. “I ought to be much obliged to the Federals! Without them I should not have had the honour of this visit. The mercy you no longer ask for yourselves you have doubtless come to offer me?”

The tone was so provoking that James Burbank would have exploded had not his son restrained him.

“Father, let me speak. Texar would like to meet us on ground where we cannot follow him — that of recrimination. It is useless to talk about the past. It is with the present we are concerned — the present alone.”

“The present!” exclaimed Texar; “or father the present situation 1 It seems to me that is clear enough! Three days ago you were in this cell, which you would never have left but to meet your death. To-day I am in your place, and I feel much more comfortable than you think.”

The reply was disconcerting, for the Burbanks had come to offer him his freedom in exchange for his secret.

“Texar,” said Gilbert, “listen to me. We will act frankly with you. What you have done at Jacksonville is no concern of ours. What you have done at Camdless Bay we are willing to forget. We are interested in only one thing. My sister and Zermah disappeared the night your partisans invaded the plantation and laid siege to Castle House. It is certain that both were carried off — ”

“Carried off?” answered Texar, mechanically. “I am delighted to hear it.”

“To hear it!” exclaimed James Burbank. “Do you deny, you scoundrel, dare you deny — ”

“Father,” said the lieutenant, “keep cool — you must. Yes, Texar, they were carried off during the attack on the plantation. Do you admit that you did it?”

“I have nothing to answer.”

“Do you refuse to tell us where my sister and Zermah have been taken under your orders?”

“I repeat, I have nothing to answer.”

“Not even if by speaking we could set you free?”

“I do not want to be free.”

“And who will open the gates of this prison for you?” exclaimed James Burbank, whom so much impudence had completely astounded.

“The judges I ask for.”

“The judges! They will condemn you without mercy.”

“Then I shall see what is to be done.”

“So you definitely refuse to reply?” asked Gilbert, for the last time.

“I refuse.”

“Even at the price of the liberty I offer?”

“I do not want your liberty.”

“Even at the price of the fortune I offer you?”

“I do not want your fortune. And now, gentlemen, leave me alone.”

It must be admitted that the Burbanks were completely bewildered at such assurance. On what could it rest? How dare Texar expose himself to a trial which could only have one result? Neither liberty nor all the gold they had offered could tempt him to answer. Was his inextinguishable hatred forcing him to act against his own interests?

“Come, father, come!” said the young officer; and he led James Burbank out of the prison. At the door they rejoined Mr. Harvey, and the three went off to Captain Stevens to report their want of success.

Meanwhile a proclamation from Commodore Dupont had arrived on board the flotilla. It was addressed to the inhabitants of Jacksonville, and stated that no notice would be taken of political opinions, nor of what had happened in Florida since the outbreak of the civil war. Submission to the flag covered all responsibilities in a public point of view.

Evidently this measure, a very wise one in itself, and in accordance with President Lincoln’s policy in all similar circumstances, could not apply to private affairs as in Texar’s case. He had usurped the powers of the regular authorities, and used them to organize resistance. Be it so! That was a question between Southerners and Southerners in which the Federals did not wish to be concerned. But attempts on persons, the invasion of

Camdless Bay directed against a Northerner, the destruction of James Burbank’s property, the capture of his daughter and a woman in his service, were crimes against ordinary law, and for them redress could be had in the regular course of justice.

Such was the advice of Commandant Stevens. Such was the advice of Commodore Dupont as soon as the complaint was made to him, and permission asked to proceed against the Spaniard.

In the morning of the 15th of March an order was issued for Texar to appear before the military tribunal on the double charge of pillage and abduction. It was before the court-martial sitting at St. Augustine that the accused would have to answer for his crimes.

CHAPTER VI.

ST. AUGUSTINE.

St. Augustine is one of the oldest towns in North America, and dates from the fifteenth century. It is the capital of St. John’s county, which, large as it is, contains less than 3000 inhabitants.

Spanish in origin, St. Augustine remains very much as it was. It rises near the end of one of the islands on the coast. Its harbour is a safe refuge for ships of war or commerce; it is well protected against the winds which unceasingly sweep in from the sea along the dangerous shore. But to enter it vessels have to cross the bar which the eddies of the Gulf Stream heap back at its mouth.

The streets of St. Augustine are narrow, like those of all cities beneath the direct rays of the sun. Owing to their position, and to the sea-breezes which night and morning freshen the atmosphere, the climate is a mild one, and the town is to the United States what Nice and Mentone are to Provence.

The population is thickest about the harbour and the neighbouring streets. The suburbs, with their few huts covered with palm-leaves, would be completely deserted were it not for the dogs, pigs, and cows allowed to wander where they please.

The city, properly so-called, has a very Spanish look. The houses have strongly-barred windows, and in the interior they have the traditional patio, or central court, surrounded by slender colonnades, fantastic gables, and carved balconies. Sometimes, on Sundays or holidays, the houses pour forth their inhabitants into the town. Then there is the strangest mixture of senoras, negresses, mulattoes, half-breeds, Indians, thoroughbred blacks, English ladies, gentlemen, clergymen, monks, and Catholic priests, all with a cigarette in their lips, even when they are going to the Calvary, which is the parish church of St. Augustine, whose bells have rung their peal almost without interruption since the middle of the seventeenth century.

We must not forget the markets, richly stored with vegetables, fish, poultry, pigs, lambs — slaughtered as required by the buyers — eggs, rice, boiled bananas, frijoles — a sort of small cooked bean — in short, all the tropical fruits, pineapples, dates, olives, pomegranates, oranges, guavas, peaches, figs, maranons — all in the best condition to make life agreeable and easy in this part of Florida.

The highways are not cleansed by paid scavengers, but by flocks of vultures, which the law protects, and forbids being killed under very strong penalties. The birds eat everything, even snakes, which are in considerable numbers, notwithstanding the voracity of the feathered scavengers.

There is no want of green among the chief houses of the town. Where the roads cross, a glance will show many a group of trees with its branches above the roofs of the houses, and alive with its noisy crowd of wild parrots. Often there are huge palms waving their foliage in the air, like huge fans or Indian punkahs. Here and there are large oaks garlanded with lianas and glycenas, and bouquets of gigantic cactuses, which at their base form an impenetrable hedge. Everything is cheering and attractive, and would be more so if the vultures only did their work more conscientiously. Decidedly they are not as good as mechanical sweepers.

At St. Augustine there are but one or two steam sawmills, a cigar factory, and a turpentine distillery. The town is more commercial than industrial, and exports or imports molasses, cereals, cotton, indigo, gums, timber, fish, and salt. At ordinary times the harbour is busy enough with the arrival or departure of steamers employed in the trade and passenger service to the different ports of the ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

St. Augustine is the seat of one of the six courts of justice existing in Florida. Its only means of defence are

a solitary fort — Fort Marion, or St. Mark — built in the Castilian style in the seventeenth century. Vauban or Cormontaigne would doubtless have made very little of it, but it is admired by archeologists and antiquaries for its ‘towers and bastions, and demilune and machicolations, and its old guns and mortars, which would be more dangerous for those that fire them than those they are fired against.

It was this fort which the Confederate garrison had hurriedly abandoned at the approach of the Federal flotilla, although the Government a few years before the war, had improved its means of defence. After the militia had left, the inhabitants of St. Augustine had voluntarily submitted to Commodore Dupont, who occupied the town without a blow.

The proceedings against the Spaniard, Texar, had made much noise in the county. It seemed as though there was at last to be an end to the strife between this suspicious individual and the Burbank family. The abduction of the little girl and Zermah was calculated to intensify the public opinion, which had pronounced emphatically in favour of the planter of Camdless Bay. There could be no doubt that Texar was the author of the crime. But it would be curious to see how he would get out of the charge, and whether he would get off, as he had always done before.

Excitement threatened to be great at St. Augustine. The proprietors of the neighbouring plantations crowded in The matter was of great interest to them personally, as one of the charges referred to the overrunning and pillage of Camdless Bay. Other plantations had also been ravaged by the Southerners, and it was important to know how the Federal Government would look upon such crimes against the common welfare, though perpetrated under cover of politics.

The chief hotel in St. Augustine, the City, had accommodated a goodly number of visitors whose sympathy was entirely with the Burbank family, and it could accommodate a great many more. And, for a hotel, there could be no more appropriate building than this huge sixteenth century house, the old home of the corregidor, with its puerta, or principal door, covered with carvings, its sola or room. of honour, its interior court with the columns garlanded with passion-flowers, its verandah, on to which opened the most comfortable rooms with their wainscoting hidden under the brightest colours of emerald and golden yellow, its miradors on the walls in Spanish fashion, its leaping fountains and smiling grass plats, all in a vast enclosure, the high-walled patio.

There it was that James and Gilbert Burbank, and Mr. Stannard and his daughter, accompanied by Mars, had taken up their abode the evening before.

After their fruitless journey to the prison at Jacksonville, James Burbank and his son had returned to Castle House. When they learnt that Texar refused to answer any question about. Dy or Zermah, the family felt their last hope vanish, although the news that Texar would have to answer to military justice for his doings at Camdless Bay was some consolation. In view of a sentence which he could not escape, the Spaniard would doubtless break silence when it was necessary for him to treat for his liberty or his life.

In this matter Alice Stannard would be the principal witness. She had been at Marine Creek when Zermah had shouted Texar's name, and she had recognized the scoundrel in the boat which bore him away. She had come to St. Augustine, and her father and his friends had accompanied her. After dinner, on the 16th, they had bidden farewell to Mrs. Burbank and Edward Carrol. One of the steamboats had embarked them at Camdless Bay, and landed them at Picolata, and thence a stage-coach had brought them along the winding road, through the oaks, and cypresses, and plantains, which here abound. Before midnight comfortable hospitality had received them in the apartments of the City Hotel.

Texar had not been abandoned by his friends, as might be imagined. His partisans were chiefly among the smaller planters, all of them embittered slaveholders. Knowing that they would not have to answer for any of the troubles at Jacksonville, his companions resolved to rally round their old chief. Many of them had come to St. Augustine. It is true that it was not in the patio of the City Hotel that one would look for them; but there were many of them in the inns in the town, in the tiendas where the half-bred Spaniards and Creeks sell everything that can be eaten, drunk, or smoked. There these individuals of low origin and equivocal reputation lost no opportunity of protesting in Texar's favour.

Commodore Dupont was not now at St. Augustine. He was away on the blockade. But the troops landed after the surrender of Fort Marion were in firm possession of the city. There was no movement to be feared on the part of the Southerners or of the militia, who were retreating on the other side of the river. If the partisans of Texar attempted any rescue, they would be immediately put down.

One of the gunboats had brought the Spaniard to Picolata, and thence he had been brought under a strong escort, and placed in one of the cells in the fort, from which escape was impossible. As he had demanded a trial, he was not likely to attempt an escape. His partisans were aware of this. If he were condemned this time, they would see what they could do to help him, but till then they would be quiet.

In the absence of the Commodore, Colonel Gardner was in military command. He was the president of the court- martial appointed to try Texar in one of the rooms of Fort Marion. This was the colonel who had assisted at the capture of Fernandina, and it was at his orders that the prisoners captured from the train by the Ottawa had been detained for forty-eight hours, a fact which it is here important to notice.

The court-martial opened at eleven o’clock in the morning. A numerous public filled the room. Amongst the noisiest of the crowd were the friends and .partisans of the accused.

James and Gilbert Burbank, Mr. Stannard, his daughter, and Mars occupied the place reserved for the witnesses. There seemed to be no defence. No witnesses were apparently to be called. Did the Spaniard scorn all evidence, or had he found it impossible to bring any to his help? It would soon be known. Anyhow, there seemed to be no doubt as to the issue of the affair.

An indefinable presentiment had seized upon James Burbank. Was it not in this very town that he had before prosecuted Texar? Had not he, then, by an incontestable alibi, escaped from justice?

As soon as the court-martial was seated Texar was brought in. He sat down coolly and quietly. Nothing seemed to be able to disturb his natural impudence. A smile of disdain for his judges, a look full of assurance for the friends he recognized in the room, a look of hatred for James Burbank, and then he settled himself and waited for Colonel Gardner to begin.

The interrogatories began in the usual way.

“Your name?” asked Colonel Gardner.

“Texar.”

“Your age?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Where do you live.”

“At Jacksonville; at Torillo’s tienda.”

“I want to know your usual abode.”

“I have none.”

James Burbank felt his heart beat as he heard this reply, given in a tone which plainly denoted a firm resolve to keep secret the real place of residence.

The president again tried to get at the facts, but Texar persisted that he had no fixed abode. He gave himselt out to be a nomad, a backwoodsman, a hunter in the vast forests, a dweller in the cypress-groves, living by his rifle and his decoys. That was all that could be got from him.

“Be it so,” said Colonel Gardner. “It does not matter much.”

“It does not matter much,” said Texar impudently. “Put down, if you like, Colonel, that my domicile is now Fort Marion, in St. Augustine, where I am detained contrary to all justice. Of what am I accused, if you please?” he asked, as if he wished to take the management of his own trial.

“You are not called upon to answer for anything that took place at Jacksonville. A proclamation from Commodore Dupont has been issued announcing that the Government will not interfere in the local revolution which substituted for the regular authorities of the county certain new magistrates, whoever they may have been. Florida is now under the Federal flag, and the Government of Washington will soon proceed with its reorganization.”

“If I am not charged with the change in the municipality of Jacksonville, and that with the support of the majority of the people, why am I brought before this court-martial?”

“I will tell you what you pretend not to know. Crimes against the common welfare have been committed while you were exercising the functions of chief magistrate of the town. You are accused of having excited the violent part of the population to commit them.”

“What are these crimes?”

“In the first place, there is the outrage at Camdless Bay plantation, where a horde of thieves was set loose.”

“And a detachment of soldiers, commanded by an officer of the militia,” added the Spaniard quickly.

“Be it so. But there was robbery, incendiarism, and armed attack against a house, which it was right to repel — as was done.”

“Right?” answered Texar. “Right was not on the side of him who refused to obey the orders of a properly constituted Committee. James Burbank — for he it was — had given his slaves their freedom in defiance of public opinion, which, in Florida, as in most of the southern states of the Union, is in favour of slavery. That act might have been the cause of much disaster on the neighbouring plantations by exciting the blacks to revolt. The Committee of Jacksonville decided that under the circumstances it was their duty to interfere. They did not annul the act of enfranchisement, but they thought fit to expel the newly freed slaves from the district. James Burbank refused to obey the order, and the Committee had to use force. That is why the militia, accompanied by some of 15

the inhabitants, proceeded to disperse the former slaves at Camdless Bay.”

“Texar,” replied Colonel Gardner, “the court-martial cannot admit that the view you take of the outrage is the correct one. James Burbank is a Northerner by birth, and was quite within his rights in freeing his slaves. Nothing can excuse the excess which took place on his plantation.”

“I consider that I am losing time in discussing matters of opinion with the court-martial. The Committee of Jacksonville considered it their duty to act as they did. Am I accused as president of that Committee? Is it your intention to make me alone responsible for its acts?

“Yes. You were not only the president of the Committee, but you in person led the thieves.”

“Prove it,” said Texar coolly. “Have you a single witness who saw me among either the citizens or the soldiers of the militia who carried out the Committee’s orders?”

At this reply Colonel Gardner called on James Burbank to give his evidence.

James Burbank related what had happened since Texar and his partisans had superseded the regular authorities of Jacksonville. He laid stress on the attitude of the accused in inciting the people to attack his estate. But to Colonel Gardner’s question as to the presence of Texar among the assailants, he could only reply that he had not himself seen him. We know in fact that when John Bruce, Mr. Harvey’s messenger, had been asked if the Spaniard was one of the mob, the reply was he could not say.

u In any case no one can doubt,” added James Burbank, “that this man is solely responsible for the crime. He it was who incited the people to attack me, and had he had his way my house would have been given to the flames, and destroyed with its last defenders. His hand was in all this, as it will be found to have been in a still more criminal act.”

The witness offered no further evidence. Before dealing with the abduction it was best to finish with the first charge.

“And so,” continued Colonel Gardner, “you say that you only had a share in the responsibility which lay on the Committee in executing their order?”

“That is so.”

“And you adhere to your statement that you were not at the head of those who attacked the plantation?”

“I do. You have not a single witness who can swear he saw me. No; I was not among the brave citizens who executed the Committee’s orders. And I may add that on that day I was absent from Jacksonville.”

“Yes; that is possible after all,” said James Burbank, who considered that it would be better to rely on the second charge.

“It is true,” said Texar.

“But if you were not amongst the thieves at Camdless Bay,” continued James Burbank, “you were at Marine Creek, waiting for the opportunity of committing another crime.”

“I was not at Marine Creek,” coolly answered Texar. “I was not at Jacksonville during that day.”

It will not have been forgotten that John Bruce had told James Burbank that Texar had not been seen at Jacksonville during the forty-eight hours from the 2nd to the 4th of March.

After this statement of the Spaniard’s, the president of the court-martial put to him the following question: —

“If you were not at Jacksonville, where were you?”

“I will tell you when the time comes,” said Texar. “It is enough for me now to have proved that I was not on the plantation during the attack. And now, colonel, what is the next charge?”

And, with his arms crossed, he glared impudently at his accusers, and defied them to their face.

The charge was not long in coming, and Colonel Gardner put it in a way that made it difficult to meet.

“If you were not at Jacksonville, the charge is that you were at Marine Creek.”

“At Marine Creek? And what did I do there?”

“You carried away a child, Diana Burbank, the daughter of James Burbank, and Zermah, the wife of a half-breed named Mars, here present, who was with the child.”

“Ah! I am charged with this carrying away!” said Texar, in a tone of profound irony.

“Yes, you!” exclaimed James Burbank, Gilbert, and Mars, all at once.

“And why am I accused, if you please, and not somebody else?”

“Because you alone were interested in committing this crime.”

“How interested?”

“As an act of revenge on the Burbank family. More than once before James Burbank had prosecuted you. By pleading an alibi you escaped from justice; but you on many occasions proclaimed an intention of being revenged on those who accused you.”

“Be it so,” said Texar. “That between me and James Burbank there is an implacable hatred I do not deny; that I had an interest in making him break his heart over his child I do not deny; but that I did what you say is another matter. Have you any witnesses who saw me?”

“Yes,” said Colonel Gardner; and he called on Alice Stannard to be sworn.

Miss Stannard related what had passed at Marine Creek. She was absolutely certain as to the facts. In coming from the tunnel she a!nd Mrs. Burbank had heard the name shouted by Zermah, and that name was Texar’s.

After stumbling over the corpses of the murdered negroes, she had run along the river bank. Two boats were pushing off. In one were the victims; in the other was Texar, standing upright in the stern. And by the light of the fires of the burning plantation she had recognized the Spaniard.

“You swear that?” asked Colonel Gardner.

“I swear it,” answered Alice.

After this precise declaration there could be no doubt of Texar’s guilt. But James Burbank and the entire audience could not help observing that the accused had not for a moment lost his coolness.

“What have you to 1 say to the charge?” asked the president of the court-martial.

“This,” said the Spaniard. “I do not wish to accuse Miss Stannard of perjury. Nor do I accuse her of serving the hatred of the Burbank family against me, by affirming on oath that I am the author of a crime of which I never heard till after my arrest. All I say is that she is mistaken when she says she saw me in one of the boats.”

“But if Miss Stannard was mistaken on that point,” said Colonel Gardner, “she cannot be mistaken when she says that she heard Zermah cry, 4 Help! It is Texar!”‘

“Well,” said the Spaniard, “then if Miss Stannard was not mistaken, Zermah was, that is all.”

“Would Zermah have shouted your name if you were not there?”

“Very likely, for I was not there, and I was not even at Marine Creek.”

“That you must prove.”

“That is easy enough.”

“Another alibi?” asked Colonel Gardner.

“Another!” said Texar.

At this there was a movement of voices amongst the audience, a murmur of doubt that was not in favour of the accused.

“Texar,” said the colonel, “if you plead another alibi, can you prove it?”

“Easily, for I have only to ask you a question.”

“What is that?”

“Were you not in command of the troops landed to capture Fernandina and Fort Clinch?”

“Yes.”

“You remember the train for Cedar Keys that was attacked by the Ottawa on the bridge between Amelia Island and the mainland?”

“Yes.”

“Well, the rear carriage was knocked off and stopped on the bridge, and a detachment of Federal troops captured the fugitives, and the prisoners had their names taken, and did not receive their liberty for forty-eight hours afterwards.”

“I know that.”

“Well, I was one of those prisoners.”

“You?”

“Yes, I!”

A fresh murmur still more unfavourable to the accused greeted this declaration.

“Then,” continued Texar, “as these prisoners were in your custody from the 2nd to the 4th of March, and the attack on this plantation took place on the night of the 3rd of March, it is simply impossible that I could have been at Marine Creek. Alice Stannard could not have heard Zermah shout my name. She could not have seen me in the boat, for I was then a Federal prisoner.”

“That is false!” exclaimed James Burbank. “It cannot be!”

“I swear I saw that man,” said Alice, “and I recognized him there as I do now.”

“Look at the papers?” said Texar.

Colonel Gardner searched among the papers that had been sent to Commodore Dupont after the capture of Fernandina, and in the list of prisoners there appeared the name of Texar, with his description.

There could be no room for further doubt. The Spaniard was innocent of the abduction. Miss Stannard must have been mistaken. He could not have been at Marine Creek. His absence from Jacksonville for forty-eight hours was fully accounted for; he was then a prisoner on one of the gunboats. And, again, an indisputable alibi, proved by official evidence, had come to clear him of the charge.

James Burbank, Gilbert, Mars, and Miss Stannard were overwhelmed at the result. Texar had again escaped them, and with them all chance had gone of ascertaining what had become of Dy and Zermah.

The decision of the court-martial could not be in doubt for an instant. Texar was discharged, and walked out of the room amid the enthusiastic cheers of his friends.

Before night he had left St. Augustine, and no one knew to what part of Florida he had gone to resume his mysterious life of adventure.

CHAPTER VII.

LAST WORDS AND A LAST SIGH.

The same day, the 17th of March, James and Gilbert Burbank, Mr. Stannard and his daughter, and Zermah’s husband returned to Camdless Bay.

They could not hide the truth from Mrs. Burbank. The unfortunate mother received a fresh blow which, in the weak state she was, might prove fatal.

The last attempt to discover the fate of her child had failed. Texar had refused to answer. And how could he be obliged to do so when he asserted that he was not the author of the abduction? By an alibi more unintelligible than those that had preceded it, he had proved that he was not at Marine Creek when the crime took place. Had he been found guilty, they could have given him his choice between suffering the consequences or revealing the whereabouts of his victims.

“But if it was not Texar,” asked Gilbert, “who was it?”

“It must have been some of his people,” said Mr. Stannard.

“That is the only explanation,” said Edward Carrol.

“No, father, no, Mr. Carrol!” said Alice. “Texar was in the boat. I saw him. I recognized him when Zermah shouted his name! I saw him! I saw him!”

What could be the answer to this? Alice adhered to her statement that it was impossible for her to have been mistaken. And if she was not mistaken, how could the Spaniard have been at Fernandina, in one of Dupont’s gunboats at the time?

It was inexplicable. But if the others had any doubt, Mars had none. He made no effort to comprehend the incomprehensible. All he did was to make up his mind to follow after Texar and to wring from him the secret, even if it became necessary to torture him.

“You are right, Mars,” said Gilbert. “But we may have to do without the scoundrel if we do not know what has become of him. We must start on our search again! I have orders to remain on leave as long as is needful, and to morrow — ”

“Yes, Mr. Gilbert, to-morrow!”

And the half-breed went to his room, where he could give free vent to his sorrow and his anger.

In the morning Gilbert and Mars completed their preparations for departure. They were going to devote the day to a careful search among the minor creeks and small islets on both banks of the St. John’s above Camdless Bay.

During their absence James Burbank and Edward Carrol would prepare for a more extended campaign. Provisions, ammunition, means of transport, men — nothing would be neglected. If theyhad to go to the wild regions of Lower - Florida, to the southern marshes, and through the Everglades, they would go. That Texar had left Florida was impossible. To the north he would have found the Federal troops on the Georgian frontier. By sea he would have to make for the Bahamas, and Commodore Dupont’s flotilla had closed all the passes. He must be in Florida, hidden where his victims had been hidden for a fortnight, and the expedition would seek for his traces over the whole territory.

There was peace at Jacksonville. The old magistrates had resumed their position in the municipality. There were no more citizens in prison for their opinions. Texar’s partisans had all fled.

The war continued in the central states much to the advantage of the Federals. On the 18th and 19th the first division of the army of the Potomac landed at Fortress Monroe. On the 22nd the second division prepared to leave Alexandria for the same destination. In spite of the military genius of the old professor of chemistry, Stonewall Jackson, the Southerners were beaten at Kernstown. There was thus no rising to be feared in Florida, which always remained somewhat indifferent to the heated passions of North and South.

The Camdless Bay men gradually came back. After the capture of Jacksonville, the orders of Texar and his Committee relative to the expulsion of the freed men were of no effect. On the 17th of March the greater part of the blacks had returned, and were busy rebuilding the barracoons, while many were at work clearing the ruins of the stores and saw-mills. Under the direction of Edward Carrol, Perry and the assistant overseers were very busy. To him James Burbank left the whole task of reorganization. The father’s whole time was devoted to the search for his child. A dozen of the freed negroes were chosen to help in the expedition, who, with heart and soul, entered on their work.

Where was the expedition to go? There was much reason for hesitation. But an unhoped-for circumstance fortunately gave a clue.

On the 19th Gilbert and Mars left Castle House, and set off up the St. John’s. None of the negroes of the plantation accompanied them. It was necessary to act as secretly as possible, so as not to awake the suspicion of the spies, who might be watching Castle House.

Gilbert and Mars were coasting along the left bank. Among the masses of foliage and floating islands detached by the high tides of the equinox, the boat ran no risk of discovery.

Up to the village of Mandarin the river is almost a marsh. At high water the stream overflows the low banks, and it is not till half-tide that the ebb is enough to reduce the St. John’s to its normal level. The right bank is higher; the fields of maize are above the level of the periodical floods, which prevent any tillage being attempted. It might even be called a ridge, along which rise the few houses of Mandarin; and the ridge ends in a cape projecting into the stream.

Below numerous islands occupy the bend of the river, and, reflecting the white canopies of their magnificent magnolia-trees, the river divided into these channels runs in or out with the tide.

After examining the western arm, Gilbert and Mars were making their way along the main bank; they were assuring themselves that no creek opened up beneath the branches of the tulip-trees. Up to the present they had seen nothing but the wide marshes of the lower river, valleys bristling with tree-ferns and liquidambars, whose early blossoms, mingling with the garlands of serpentarias and aristolochias, impregnated the air with their penetrating perfumes. But the water was of no depth; it was running off in tiny streams, and the ebb would soon leave the ground quite dry. Among the streams were a few huts, which did not seem to have been recently occupied, although it seemed as though a good many animals had made it their home. There were dogs barking, and cats mewing, and frogs croaking, and snakes hissing, but there were neither dogs nor cats, nor frogs nor snakes, for the cries were the call of the cat-bird,a sort of thrush with a black head and orange throat.

It was about three o’clock in the afternoon. The boat was alongside a thick clump of reeds, when a powerful stroke of the gaff from Mars cleared away a heap of verdure that had seemed to be impenetrable. Beyond was a sort of backwater some half-acre in extent, where the sun never penetrated through the dome of tulip-trees.

“I did not know of this pond,” said Mars, rising so as to look round the banks.

“Let us explore it then,” said Gilbert. “It ought to communicate with that row of lagoons, which may be fed by some creek up which we may find our way.”

“That is so,” said Mars, “and I see an opening over there to the north-west.”

“Do you know where we are?”

“Not exactly, unless this is what they call Black Creek; but I thought, like everybody else, that it was impossible to get into it, and that it had noncommunication with the St. John’s.”

“Had there not used to be a blockhouse here, to keep the Seminoles in check?”

“Somewhere, yes. But that was years ago, and the entrance to the creek is shut and the fortress abandoned. I have never been there, but it is all in ruins.”

“Let us get there,” said Gilbert.

“We’ll try,” said Mars, “although it will be difficult to do so. The water will soon be off, and the marsh will not give very good footing.”

“Well, if there is not enough water, we’ll stop in the boat.”

“We must not lose any time; it is three o’clock, and the night soon makes under these trees.”

It was indeed Black Creek into which, by a lucky stroke of the boat-hook, Gilbert and Mars had found an entrance. The lagoon was, as we know, only practicable for light skiffs such as that used by Squambo when he and his master ventured on the St. John’s. To reach the blockhouse in the middle of the creek, a knowledge of the thousand twists and turns was necessary, and for many years no one had ventured to attempt such a thing. The existence of the fortress had dropped out of recollection, and hence its security for the strange malignant personage who had made it his home.

To steer up the labyrinth required the thread of Ariadne, for it was always in darkness, even when the sun was on the meridian. Without the thread, chance alone could reveal the central island; and it was to chance that Gilbert and Mars had to trust. When they were out of the first pond they entered a series of channels, and paddled on, urged by some secret presentiment. As they were going to explore the whole country, it would never do to leave this lagoon unknown.

In about half an hour the boat had gone a mile. More than once some bank had blocked the way, and they had had to paddle back and try another channel. Strong as he was, the half-br<xed felt that he wanted a rest after his efforts. But he would not stop until he had reached a larger island than the rest, where a few rays of the sun found their way through the trees.

“That is queer,” said he.

“What is the matter?” asked Gilbert.

“There are signs of cultivation on that island.”

Soon they landed on a less marshy bank than most of he others.

Mars was not mistaken. There were traces of culture.

few yams were visible here and there; there were fouror five furrows in the soil; a pick was sticking in the ground.

“The creek is inhabited!” said Gilbert. | “It looks like it. At any rate, it is known to some backwoodsmen or Indians who grow vegetables.”

“Then they may have built houses, cabins — ”

“If there is one to be found we shall find it.”

It was of great interest to discover what sort of people lived at Black Creek. Were they hunters from the lower country, or were they Seminoles, who still live in the marshy parts of Florida?

Without thinking of returning, Gilbert and Mars got back into the boat, and followed up the curves of the creek, peering into the thick of the bushes in every direction. Sometimes they thought they saw a house, but it was only a curtain of verdure stretching from tree to tree. Sometimes they thought a man was looking at them, but it was only a twisted root with an outline in the shape of a human figure. Perhaps what was hidden from their eyes would reveal itself to their ears? The least noise in this deserted place would reveal a man’s presence.

Half an hour after their first halt they reached the central island. The blockhouse was so completely hidden in the trees that nothing could be seen of it. It seemed as though the creek ended, and that further passage was impracticable.

“I do not think we can go further,” said Mars; “there is no water.”

“But,” said the officer, w we cannot have been wrong about that cultivated patch. People come to this creek. They may have been here recently? Perhaps they are here now?”

“Perhaps; but we must make the best of the daylight to get back to the St. John’s. Night is coming on. The darkness will soon be thick, and how can we then make out the way? I think we had better return and come back first thing to-morrow morning. Let us go back, as usual, to Castle House. We can tell them what we have seen, and prepare to explore Black Creek with better chance of success — ”

“Yes; that is best But before we go I should like — ”

Gilbert was standing motionless, taking a last look under the trees, and he was about to give the order to put off when he stopped Mars by a gesture.

The half-breed stood up and listened.

A cry, or rather a sort of groan, was heard which could not be confounded with that of a beast of the forest. It was a cry of despair and lamentation, the appeal of a human being in great pain, the last appeal of a voice about to be silent for ever.

“That is a man!” said Gilbert “He wants help 1 Perhaps he is dying.”

“Yes,” said xMars. “We must go to him. We must find out who he is. Jump’ ashore!”

This was done in a moment. The painter was hitched on to a stump, and they were up the bank and under the trees and looking at the footprints of men as revealed by the last rays of the sun. They followed these up. Now and then they stopped and listened. Could they hear the noise? They listened again. They heard it close by, very near them now; the darkness was growing deeper, but they would reach the spot from which the sounds came.

Suddenly a more doleful cry was heard. There was no mistake about the direction. In a few steps Gilbert and Mars were through a thicket and in the presence of a man stretched on the ground near a palisade.

Stabbed in the chest the blood was flowing from him, and formed a pool around. The last breath was on his lips. He had but a few moments to live.

Gilbert and Mars stooped over him. He opened his eyes and vainly tried to answer the questions put to him.

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“We must see this man!” said Gilbert. “Get a torch; set a knot on fire!”

Mars had already snapped off a resinous bough from one of the trees that grew in such numbers on the island. He lighted it with a match, and its smoky flame illuminated the gloom.

Gilbert knelt near the dying man. He was a negro, a slave, and still young. His shirt lay open and showed the gash made by the knife. The wound was mortal, for the lung was pierced.

“Who are you? Who are you?” asked Gilbert No reply.

“Who stabbed you?”

The slave could not utter a word.

Mars swung round the torch to recognize the place where the murder had been committed.

He then saw the palisade, and through the open door caught sight of the dim outline of the blockhouse.

“The fortress!” he exclaimed.

And leaving his master near the dying slave, he rushed through the door.

In an instant he had entered the blockhouse, been in the central redoubt, and into all the rooms. In one he found the remains of a fire. The fortress had therefore been recently occupied; but by whom? Floridans or Seminoles? That must be ascertained immediately, and from the wounded man. Who were his murderers? They had fled within the last hour or so.

Mars ran out of the blockhouse and round the palisade in the enclosure. But no one did he find. If he and Gilbert had come earlier in the day, they might have discovered the inhabitants of this fortress, but now they were too late.

The half-breed returned to his master, and told him they were at the blockhouse of Black Creek.

“Can the man speak?” he asked.

“No; he has lost consciousness, and I don’t think he will regain it.”

“Try and make him,” said Mars. “There is a secret here we must know, and no one can tell us when that unfortunate man is dead.”

“Yes! Let us take him into the blockhouse. He may come to himself there. We cannot let him die out here.”

“You hold the torch, Mr. Gilbert; I can carry him.”

Gilbert held the burning bough. The half-breed lifted the inert body in his arms, mounted the steps of the postern, entered the embrasure, and laid down his burden in one of the rooms of the redoubt.

The dying man was laid on a bed of herbs, and Mars put his flask to his mouth.

The heart still beat but feebly, and at long intervals. Life was failing. Would his secret escape him with his last sigh?

The few drops of brandy seemed to give him new life, His eyes opened. He fixed them on Mars and Gilbert, and strove to fight with death. He would speak! Some> vague sounds escaped from his lips — a name, perhaps!

“Speak! Speak!” said Mars.

The excitement of the half-breed was truly inexplicable. It seemed as though the task to which he had devoted his life depended on the last words of this dying man.

The young slave in vain endeavoured to utter a word. He had not the strength.

At this moment Mars noticed a slip of paper in his’ waistcoat pocket.

To seize this paper, open it, read it by the light of the torch, was the work of an instant.

There were a few words on it.

“Carried off by Texar from Marine Creek — taken to the Everglades — to Carneral Island — message given to the young slave — for Mr. Burbank.”

The handwriting Mars knew well.

Zermah!” he exclaimed.

At this name the dying man opened his eyes, and his head fell in sign of affirmation.

Gilbert raised him a little, and asked, —

“Zermah?”

“Yes.”

“And Dy?”

“Yes.”

“Who stabbed you?”

“Texar.”

And that was the poor slave’s last word. “He fell back dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

FROM CAMDLESS BAY TO LAKE WASHINGTON.

It was not till just upon midnight that Gilbert and Mars returned to Castle House. Great had been their difficulty in getting out of Black Creek. When they left the blockhouse night had begun to fall in the valley of the St. John’s, and beneath the trees of the lagoon the darkness was complete.

Mars took the boat back among the shoals and islets, guided by a sort of instinct, without which he would never have reached the river. Twenty times and more had he to stop before a barrier he could not pass, and return by the way he had come in search of a practicable channel. He had to light resinous pine-knots, and stick them in the bow of the boat, so as to throw some light on his course. The difficulty was greatest where he had to find the only mouth by which the waters joined the St. John’s. The gap in the reeds by which they had entered a few hours before proved unrecognizable; but luckily the tide was ebbing, and the boat floated out with the stream. Three hours afterwards they were at Camdless Bay.

At Castle House neither James Burbank nor his people had gone to bed. They were waiting anxiously for their long-delayed return. Gilbert and Mars came back every night, why had they not come now? Had they found a clue?

At last they arrived, and, as they entered, all in the room rushed towards them.

“Well, Gilbert?” said James Burbank.

“Father, Alice was not mistaken. It was Texar who carried off my sister and Zermah.”

“You have the proof?”

“Read!”

And Gilbert held out the scrap of paper with the few words in the half-breed’s writing.

“Yes,” continued he. “Doubt is no longer possible. It was the Spaniard! And he took or caused to be taken his two victims to the blockhouse at Black Creek. There they have been living isolated from all. A poor slave to whom Zermah had trusted this paper, that it might reach Castle House, and from whom she doubtless learnt that Texar was taking them to Carneral Island, has paid with his life for his devotion. We found him dying, stabbed by Texar, and now he is dead. But if “Dy and Zermah are not at Black Creek we know at least where they have gone. They are in the Everglades, and there we must find them. To-morrow we must start.”

“We are ready, Gilbert.”

“Then to-morrow let it be.”

Hope had returned. There would now be no fruitless endeavours. Mrs. Burbank, being told of what had happened, began to revive; and she had strength enough to rise from her bed and kneel and thank Heaven.

According to Zermah, it was Texar in person who had been in command at the capture at Marine Creek. He it really was whom Alice had seen. But how could this be reconciled with the Spaniard’s alibi? How could he have been a Federal prisoner at the time the crime was committed? Evidently the alibi was false like the others. But how could it be explained? What was the secret ol Texar’s ubiquity?

It mattered little after all. It had now been ascertained that the half-breed and child had been taken first to the blockhouse at Black Creek, and that now they had gone to Carneral Island. There they must seek for them; there they must take Texar by surprise. This time nothing must hinder them from visiting him with the just punishment of his crimes which he had so long deserved.

And there was not a day to lose. From Camdless Bay to the Everglades the distance was considerable. The voyage would take many days. Fortunately the expedition had been organized carefully and was ready.

Carneral Island was shown by the maps to be on Lake Okee-cho-bee.

The Everglades are in a marshy region bordering on Lake Okee-cho-bee, a little below the twenty-seventh parallel, in the southern part of Florida. From Jacksonville to the lake was about four hundred miles. And it was a rarely visited district; in fact, at this epoch it was almost unknown.

If the St. John’s had been navigable to its source the journey would not have been a difficult one, but there was every chance that they would only be able to sail up it for one hundred and seven miles; that is to Lake George. Beyond that the road would be choked with islands and shoals, the channel might even sometimes at ebb tide be dry, and a heavily-laden boat would under any circumstances find it difficult to pass. If it were possible to reach Lake Washington, in about the twenty-eighth degree of latitude, the end would be near. But it was only wise to prepare for a journey of two hundred and fifty miles across an almost deserted region, where there were no means of transport and no likelihood of provision.

On the 20th of March the expedition mustered at the landing-place. James Burbank and his son had said goodbye to Mrs. Burbank, who was not able to leave her room. Mr. Stannard and his daughter and the assistant overseers were there, and Pyg had come to bid farewell to Mr. Perry, for whom he, strange to say, had a great regard. He remembered the lessons he had received as to the inconveniences of a liberty for which he was not ready.

The expedition consisted of James Burbank and his brother-in-law, now cured of his wound, his son, Mr. Perry the overseer, Mars, and a dozen negroes chosen from the most devoted of those on the estate — in all, seventeen. Mars knew enough of the St. John's to serve as pilot below as well as above Lake George. The blacks were all experienced boatmen, and, when the current or the wind failed, could handle the oars to good purpose.

The boat, one of the largest on the plantation, would be worked under sail whenever the wind was favourable She carried arms and ammunition sufficient for James Burbank and his companions to fear nothing from either the Seminole bands or Texar's companions.

Gilbert embraced Alice, and James Burbank clasped her to his arms as if she were already his daughter.

“Father — Gilbert,” she said, “bring back to us little Dy! Bring me back my sister.”

“Yes, dearest Alice, yes! we will bring her back. May heaven protect us!”

Mrs. Stannard and Alice and the assistant overseers and Pyg remained at the landing-place till the boat put off. They signalled their last adieux as before the north-east wind and served by the flowing tide she disappeared behind the little point at Marin? Creek.

It was about six o’clock in the morning. An hour afterwards the boat passed the village of Mandarin, and it was nearly ten o’clock when, without having had to take to the oars, she was off Black Creek.

All hearts beat as they ran by the left bank of the river through which its waters flowed. It was behind those clumps of reeds and canes and mangroves that Dy and Zermah had first been hid. It was there that for more than a fortnight Texar and his companions had so closely concealed them that all trace of them had been lost. Ten times had James Burbank and Stannard and Gilbert and Mars passed by that lagoon without thinking for an instant that the old blockhouse might be their prison.

This time there was no reason for stopping. Their search took them now hundreds of miles to the south, and the boat passed Black Creek without even stopping.

The first meal was taken together. The boxes contained twenty days’ provisions, and there were a number of packages ready to be carried when the journey had to be continued overland. And there were the necessaries for camping, either by day or night, in the thick woods with which the river-banks are clothed.

At eleven o’clock, when the tide turned, the wind remained favourable, but the oars had to be taken to keep up the speed. The blacks bent cheerily to their work, and propelled by ten vigorous pairs the boat rapidly ascended the river.

Mars sat silently at the helm, taking the boat without hesitation through the channels among the islands and islets with which the river is dotted; Where the stream was weakest he took his way without hesitation. Never did he enter an impracticable channel; never did he risk grounding on any of the shoals which the ebb would soon leave dry. He knew the river up to Lake George as well as he knew it below Jacksonville, and he piloted the boat with as much certainty as he had piloted Stevens’s flotilla over the bar.

Hereabouts the St. John’s was deserted. Since the capture of Jacksonville the trading-boats on the river had been stopped, and there was no vessel on the river except for the use of the troops or under the orders of Commandant Stevens. Above Picolata even these would probably have disappeared.

About six o’clock in the evening Picolata was reached. A detachment of Northerners occupied the pier. The boat was hailed, and had to run alongside. Gilbert Burbank made himself known to the commanding officer, and showing the pass with which he had been furnished by Commandant Stevens, was allowed to proceed.

The halt lasted but a minute or so. The tide began to turn, the oarsmen stopped, and the boat under sail sped on between the woods that fringed the stream. On the left bank the forest soon ended in a marsh. On the right, the forest remained thick and interminable, and they would have it with them all the way to Lake George. At times it ran back a little, and fields of rice and indigo and cotton filled up the stretches in front, and bore witness to the fertility of the Floridan peninsula.

A little after six o’clock a bend of the river shut out the view of the red tower of the old Spanish fort, which for a century and more had been abandoned.

“Mars,” asked James Burbank, “you are not afraid to keep to the river during the night?”

“No, sir,” said Mars. “I can answer for myself all the way to Lake George. Beyond that we shall see. We have not a moment to lose, and as long as the tide serves we had better take advantage of it I think we might as well carry on night and day.”

There was no occasion to regret this decision. All night the boat kept on her way; when the tide failed the oars were got out. Neither that night nor the following, nor the day of the 22nd of March, nor the next twelve hours, were marked by any adventure. The upper course of the river seemed to be quite deserted. The route lay through a long forest of ancient cedars, whose leafy masses again and again came close to the bank and formed a thick bower of verdure. Villages they saw none. Plantations or isolated habitations there were none. The banks of the river showed no trace of cultivation. On the 23rd, at daybreak, the river broadened out into a wide stretch of water, bordered, as usual, by the interminable forest. The country became very flat, and opened out till the horizon was miles away.

They had reached the lake which the St. John s traverses from south to north, and from which it drains a part of its waters.

“Yes,” said Mars, “this is Lake George, which I came to when I was with the expedition to the upper river.”

“And how far are we from Camdless Bay?’ asked James Burbank.

“A hundred miles,” said Mars.

“That is not a third of the distance to the Everglades, said Carrol.

“Mars,” said Gilbert, “what are we to do now? Are we to leave the boat and take to the bank? That will be a slow, laborious affair. When we are through the lake, cannot we keep to the water as long as it is navigable? Shall we try it, keeping ready, of course, to take to the shore as soon as we run aground? We might as well try it. What do you think?”

“We will try it, Mr. Gilbert.”

And they could not have done better.

There would be time enough to take to the land. To keep to the water meant the saving of much fatigue and delay. And the boat headed out across the lake, keeping the eastern bank well in view.

Round the lake the vegetation is not so luxuriant as by the river-side. Extensive marshes stretch away almost out of sight. Some portions of the soil, less exposed to the invasion of the waters, are carpeted with black mosses, from which spring violet clouds of tiny fungi growing in millions. Only the waterfowl could venture across these marshes, and they were alive with infinite numbers of teal and duck and snipe. If the expedition ran short of provisions, here was enough to fill the vacancy without difficulty. But to follow the game on land they would have to risk meeting with armies of dangerous snakes, whose hissings could be even heard in the boat, and whose ravenous enemies, the white pelicans, rose in flocks along the margin of the lake.

The boat slipped along rapidly under sail with the wind from the north. The breeze was so fresh that the oars were not needed throughout the day, and when evening came the thirty miles which Lake George measures from north to south had been traversed without fatigue.

About six o’clock James Burbank and his men had reached the lower angle by which the St. John’s enters the lake.

If they stopped — and the stoppage was only to take breath for half an hour at the outside — it was because three or four houses formed a village at this place. These were occupied by some of those nomadic Floridans who devote themselves chiefly to hunting and fishing at the beginning of the season. At Carrol's suggestion it seemed opportune to ask for information relative to the passage of Texar.

One of the inhabitants was questioned. During the last few days had he seen a boat crossing Lake George towards Lake Washington; a boat with seven or eight people, one a woman of colour, and a little child of white birth?

"Yes," said the man. "Two days ago I saw a boat like that."

"Did it stop here?" asked Gilbert.

"No! It kept on as hard as it could go to the upper river. I distinctly saw a woman with a child in her arms."

"My friends," said Gilbert, "there is hope for us! We are really on the traces of Texar!"

"Yes," answered James Burbank, "he is only forty-eight hours in front of us; and if we can keep to the boat we shall gain on him."

"Do you know the river about Lake George?" asked Carrol.

"Yes, sir; I have been up it more than a hundred miles."

"Do you think it is navigable for a boat like ours?"

"What does she draw?"

"About three feet," said Mars.

“Three feet,” said the man “That may do. If you take soundings as you go, you will get into Lake Washington.”“And then,” said Carrol, “how far shall we be from Lake Okee-cho-bee?”

“About a hundred and fifty miles.”

“Thanks, my friend.”

“Let us get on board, and keep to the boat till the water fails us.”

The men took their places. The wind had fallen as evening closed; the oars were got out and pulled with vigour. The narrowing banks began to disappear. At nightfall the boat had made many miles to the south. There was no need to stop, as they could sleep on board. The moon was almost full. The light was enough to steer by. Gilbert was at the helm; Mars was in front with a long pole in his hand, sounding all the time, and ordering the boat to starboard or port as occasion required. He touched ground only five or» six times, and each time got off without effort. About four o’clock in the morning, when the sun rose, Gilbert estimated that at least fifteen miles had been rowed during the night.

If the river continued navigable for a few more days, James Burbank’s chances of success would be much improved. But several serious difficulties arose during the day. On account of the windings of the river, there were many projecting points in its course where the accumulated sands increased the number of shoals that had to be avoided. The wide sweeps necessary to avoid these made the journey so much longer, and caused delay. The wind, although it did not shift, was brought round so by the windings of the stream that the sail could not always be used, but the blacks bent to their oars and did their best to make up for lost time.

And many obstacles were met with peculiar to the St. John’s. There were the floating islands formed by a prodigious accumulation of that exuberant plant, the “pistia,” which certain explorers have justly compared to a gigantic lettuce spread on the top of the water. This herbaceous caroet is solid enough for otters and herons to disport themselves on; but it would never do to run into such vegetable massed, as withdrawal would not be easy, and so Mars did his best to avoid them.

On the river-banks the thick forest again had appeared. But now there were none of those innumerable cedars with their roots bathed by the river. There were, in their stead, quantities of pines, a hundred and fifty feet high, belonging to the southern species, which found a favourable soil amid the inundated tracts known as “barrens.” The mould there has a peculiar elasticity, so much so as to throw a man off his balance si ould he attempt to walk over it. Fortunately James Burbank’s men did not make the experiment.

The St. John’s continued to carry them through the regions of Lower Florida. The day passed without adventure. So did the night. The river continued to be completely deserted. Not a boat appeared on the waters. In this there was nothing to complain of. Better to find nobody in this distant country than to risk disaster, for the backwoodsmen and professional hunters of these parts are people to be treated with suspicion.

And there were the militia from Jacksonville or St. Augustine, whom Dupont and Stevens had driven to the south, who might be met with, and the meeting would have been still more undesirable. Among them Texar certainly had many partisans, who might attempt to avenge him on James and Gilbert Burbank. It was the object of the expedition to avoid fighting with every one except the Spaniard, and only to fight with him should he attempt to carry off his prisoners by force.

Fortunately, James Burbank was so well served by circumstances that on the evening of the 25th of March he reached Lake Washington. There the narrowness and shallowness of the river brought the boat to a stop. Two-thirds of the distance had, however, been sailed or rowed, and James Burbank was now only a hundred and forty miles from the Everglades.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GREAT CYPRESS FOREST.

Lake Washington is about a dozen miles long. It is one of the least important lakes in this part of southern Florida. Its waters are not deep, and they are crowded with bushes and branches brought down by the stream from the floating fields, where the snakes are in such numbers as even to render the navigation dangerous. Like its banks, its surface is almost deserted, and seldom indeed is it that a boat from the St. John's ventures so far.

At the southern end of the lake the river resumes its course, bending more towards the middle of the peninsula. It is then little more than a shallow brook, its source being some thirty miles further south, between the twenty-eighth and twenty-seventh degrees of latitude.

Below Lake Washington the St. John's is not navigable. Much to the regret of James Burbank, the stream had to be abandoned, and the land-road taken through a very difficult country, often no better than a marsh, through endless forests with the ground so cut up with rivulets and quagmires as to be almost impassable.

The expedition landed. The weapons and bales of provisions were divided amongst the blacks. Every one knew his place, and there would be no cause for delay. All had been thought out in advance, and when a halt was called the camp could be pitched in a few minutes.

Gilbert and Mars occupied themselves in hiding the boat, so that ‘it might escape the observation of any Seminoles or Floridans who might pass that way. Under the drooping branches of the trees by the bank, and among the gigantic reeds, it was easy to find a fitting piace of concealment There was another boat which Gilbert would have been glad to find — that which had brought Dy and Zermah to Lake Washington. Evidently Texar must have abandoned it somewhere in the neighbourhood. What James Burbank had been obliged to do the Spaniard must have done. And for some hours in the afternoon a search for this boat was made, in order to procure positive proof that Texar had reached Lake Washington.

The search was in vain. The boat could not be found. Perhaps the Spaniard had destroyed it, thinking it would be of no further use to him.

How painful must the journey now have become! There was no longer the river to save the woman and child from fatigue. Dy, carried in Zermah's arms, forced to follow the men who were used to such marches through this difficult country; the half-breed subject to insults and violence, and beaten to hasten her steps, and falling often to save the child when thinking nothing of herself — all this was pictured to the minds of those in pursuit. As Mars thought of all this he grew pale with anger, and muttered to himself —

"I will kill Texar!"

Would he were at Carneral Island face to face with the villain whose abominable machinations had caused such suffering to the Burbanks, and injured him more deeply by taking away Zermah his wife!

The camp was formed at the extremity of a small cape projecting northwards into the lake. It had not been thought wise to risk travelling in the forest during the night, and it was decided to wait for the dawn before the start was made. At four o'clock the signal to move was given. The bales and packages were distributed amongst half the crew, it being intended to work in relays. All, masters and men, were armed with Minie rifles, loaded with a bullet and four buckshot, and Colt revolvers, which came into general use during the war of Secession.

Armed in this way they were equal to attacking Texar even at the head of sixty of his men.

It had been decided to keep to the course of the river as closely as possible. This would take them to the south in the direction of Lake Okee-cho-bee. It was a thread through the forest labyrinth, and it was followed easily enough. Along the right bank was a sort of footpath, a towing-path, in fact, used by those who had dragged their light canoes up stream. Gilbert and Mars went first; James Burbank and Edward Carrol brought up the rear; Perry was in the middle and every hour saw that the loads were changed. Before the start a rapid breakfast had been taken, a stoppage was to be made at noon for dinner, and another at six o’clock for supper and camping, if matters did not look promising for a night-march. That was the programme, and it was punctually adhered to.

At first the road lay along the eastern shore of Lake f Washington, low and fiat, and almost on the move. Then the forest came on, but of slight extent compared to what it was to be. This forest was chiefly composed of thickets of logwood with small leaves and yellow clusters, and with the brownish heart-wood so well known to dyers; then there were Mexican elms, guazumas with white bouquets, used in so many ways, and with a shade giving, it is said, a most obstinate cold. Dotted about were a few groups of Cinchonas, here mere shrubs instead of magnificent trees as in Peru. Everywhere rose large masses of bright-coloured plants, such as gentians, amaryllides, and asclepias; all plants and flowers yellow or white in Europe being here of different shades of red and purple.

Towards evening the thickets disappeared, to give place to the great cypress forest, which extends to the Everglades.

During the day they had walked twenty miles. Gilbert asked of the negroes if they were tired.

“We are ready to go on, sir,” said one of them, answering for the rest “Are we not likely to go astray during the night?” asked Edward Carrol.

“Not said Mars. “We have only got to keep to the river.”

“And the night is clear,” said the young officer, “the sky is cloudless; the moon will rise at nine and last till day. Besides, the foliage of the cypresses is not very thick, and the darkness is not as great as in any other forest.”

So they made a fresh start. The next morning, after travelling part of the night, they stopped to breakfast at the foot of one of those huge cypress-trees which can be counted in millions in this region of Florida.

He who has not explored these natural marvels can hardly figure them to himself. Imagine a stretch of green more than a hundred feet above the river, with tree-trunks straight as towers, on whose tops it seems almost possible to walk. Below the ground is wet and marshy; the water in pools on the impermeable soil, round which and in which are crowds of frogs and toads, and lizards and scorpions, and spiders, turtles, snakes, and aquatic birds. Above the pools flash, like shooting stars, bright- plumaged orioles; in the trees leap squirrels and gather parrots, who fill the forest with their noisy screeches. A curious country it is, and difficult to penetrate. The ground must be carefully studied, for a foot-passenger may sink to his armpits in the many quagmires. But keeping a sharp look-out in the clear night, the expedition advanced without accident.

The river still gave them their true course. And this was fortunate, for the cypresses all resembled each other, with their twisted, spiral trunks, hollow below, and throwing out their long roots that ridged the soil, and rose for twenty feet or more in cylindrical stems, huge ribs with knotty handle supporting an immense green umbrella that gave but little protection from either rain or sun.

It was beneath these trees that James Burbank and his companions were journeying a little before daybreak. The weather was magnificent. There was no storm to fear, which might make the ground an impracticable marsh, although a constant look-out was necessary to keep clear of the never-drying bogs.

During the day no trace was met with of either Southerners or Seminoles. It might be that the Spaniard had gone down the left bank, which was clear of obstacles; but by either bank the road lay direct to the country mentioned in Zermah’s letter.

The night came. James Burbank halted for six hours; then the rest of the night speedily slipped away. The road lay in silence through the sleeping cypress-grove. Not a breath of wind troubled the dome of foliage. The moon outlined on the ground a light network of shadow. The river murmured in its almost level bed; many shoals appeared above its surface, and showed that it could be easily crossed, if necessary.

After a halt of two hours, the march was resumed, but during this day the guiding-thread occasionally gave out, as though the end of the skein would soon be reached. The river was a mere streak, diving every now and then under a clump of cinchonas, while beyond the cypress- forest shut in three-quarters of the horizon. At last it gave out altogether; they had passed its source.

And now they reached a cemetery reserved, according to native custom, for the blacks who had become Christians and died in the faith. Here and there were humble crosses, some of stone, some of wood, rising from the little mounds and marking the graves between the trees. Two or three aerial burials had taken place, and the skeletons were gently swaying in the wind on their cradle of boughs.

“The existence of a cemetery,” said Carrol, “ought to show that we are near a village — ”

“Which need not exist,” said Gilbert, “for it is not on our map; and villages often disappear in these parts, owing to the inhabitants abandoning them or their being destroyed by Indians.”

“Gilbert,” said James Burbank, “what shall we do now the St. John’s has gone out?”

“We must follow the compass. However thick the forest may be, it will be impossible for us to lose ourselves.”

“Well, let us get on,” said Mars, who could hardly keep still during these stoppages. “Let us get on, and trust to Providence.”

Half a mile beyond the negro cemetery they came out on to a green plain, and, compass in hand, struck off due south.

During the first part of the day no incident occurred. Up to then nothing had been found to give a clue; would it be so to the » end? Would they attain their object, or would the end be despair?

At noon they stopped. Gilbert, taking account of the distance from Lake Washington, estimated that they were still fifty miles from Okee-cho-bee. Eight days had elapsed since they left Camdless Bay, and more than three hundred miles had been traversed with exceptional rapidity. In the absence of heavy rain, which would have made the course of the St. John’s unnavigable, and flooded the country, and in the clearness of the moon, everything had been favourable for the journey.

A comparatively short distance now separated them from Carneral Island, and they expected to reach it during the next two days. What was to happen then it was impossible to foresee.

But if hitherto good fortune had been theirs, it seemed as though they were now to meet with insurmountable difficulties.

The journey had been resumed as usual after the noonday meal. The character of the road had not changed. There were still large sheets of water and quagmire to avoid, and tiny streams to be crossed knee-deep.

About four o’clock Mars suddenly stopped. When his companions came up with him he pointed out the print of feet on the ground.

“There can be no doubt,” said James Burbank, “that a body of men have recently passed here.”

“And a large body,” said Edward Carrol.

“Where do the footsteps come from? Where do they 17

go to?” asked Gilbert. “We must find that out before we do anything else.”

And they set to work to do so.

For five hundred yards to the east they traced the footsteps, and it seemed useless to go further. It was clearly shown that a band of from a hundred and fifty to two hundred men had come from the Atlantic coast into the cypress grove. The footprints were continued westward towards the Gylf of Mexico, and thus seemed to lead across the peninsula, which is here only two hundred miles wide. It was apparent that these men:had camped on the very spot that the Burbanks were now examining; and Gilbert and Mars went off to follow the westward trail for a little. To their astonishment, they found that it soon turned to the south. When they returned, Gilbert explained.

“We are preceded by a body of men who are going the same road as we are. They are armed, for we found the bits of the cartridges they used to light their fires with. Who they are I know not. All I can say is that they are numerous, and are going to the Everglades.”

“Are they not a band of wandering Seminoles?” asked Edward Carrol.

“No,” answered Mars; “the footprints show they are Americans.”

“Perhaps soldiers of the Floridan militia,” said James Burbank.

“That is to be feared,” said Perry. “They seem to me to be too many of them to belong to Texar.”

“Unless he has been joined by some of his partisans, who must have come to him in hundreds,” said Carrol.

“We are only seventeen,” said the overseer.

“What does that matter?” exclaimed Gilbert. “If they attack us, not one of us will run.”

“No! no!” said all his companions.

Their courage was ‘the same as it had been; but it seemed hard to meet with an obstacle when so near their object. And what an obstacle! A detachment of Southerners, come to join the Spaniard in the Everglades until the time came for them to appear again in the north of Florida. Therein was the danger. All felt it to be so. And after the first display of enthusiasm, they stood silent, looking at their chief, and asking what orders he would give. VEven Gilbert shared in the common impression, but notwithstanding, he gave the word — “Forward!”

CHAPTER X.

A MEETING.

Yes; forward they must go. But under these serious circumstances every precaution was taken. It was indispensable to clear the march, to reconnoitre the thickets on the road, to be ready for anything.

The weapons were carefully examined and held ready for immediate service. At the least alarm the packages were to be dropped on the ground and the men would fight behind them. The order of march remained as before. Gilbert and Mars formed the vanguard, but they kept further ahead to guard against surprise. The rate of progress was the same, but it seemed better not to follow in the same track as the others had gone. Better would it be if they did not meet with the detachment in advance of them on the road to the Everglades. But this did not seem to be easy, for the detachment had not moved in a straight line, but had diverged to the right and left, showing a certain amount of hesitation, though the general advance was unmistakably southwards.

A day passed. Nothing happened to bring James Burbank to a standstill. He had kept on at a good pace, and had evidently gained on those in front of him. Hour by hour the traces of their passage became more recent. It became easy so see how often they had halted either to camp or take counsel.

Gilbert and Mars studied the trail with great care; almost as if they had been Seminole trackers.

“We are certain,” said Gilbert, “that neither Zermah nor Dy are with this party. There are no footprints of a horse, and if Zermah was with them it is obvious that with Dy in her arms her footprints would be easily recognizable, and we should see Dy’s footsteps at the halting-places. But there is no mark of woman’s foot or girl’s foot. The detachment carries firearms. We can see the marks of the stocks on the ground. But I notice that the stocks are like those on “the rifles carried by sailors. Probably the Florida militia has such arms; if not, I cannot understand it. One thing is certain, and that is that the band is ten times as numerotis as ours, and we must be very careful as we get nearer to them.”

And everything was done to carry out his suggestion. His deductions from the evidence of the footprints were correct. It was obvious that neither Dy nor Zermah were with the detachment, and it seemed from this certain that they were not on the track of the Spaniard. The men from Black Creek could not be so numerous or so well armed. And there could be little doubt that a strong body of militia were on the march to the Everglades, where Texar had probably arrived a day or two before. And these militiamen might make matters serious for James Burbank.

That evening they halted on the edge of a narrow clearing, which had been occupied an hour or two beforehand, to judge from the heap of scarcely cold cinders and the traces of the camp. When this was ascertained, it was decided not to resume the march till after nightfall. The night was dark. The sky was cloudy. The moon did not rise till late. They could approach the detachment under the most favourable conditions. Could they reconnoitre the camp without being perceived? Could they get round it during the night, and hurry on in front so as to be first at Lake Okee-cho-bee and Carneral Island?

The expedition, with Mars and Gilbert ahead as scouts, started about half-past eight, and silently entered into the darkness under the trees. For two hours they kept on, making as little noise as possible.

A little after ten o’clock James Burbank stopped with a word the group of blacks at whose head he and the overseer were walking. His son and Mars were coming back towards him, and he waited anxiously for an explanation of their rapid retreat The explanation was soon given.

“What is it?” he asked. “What do you see?”

“A camp under the trees, and the fires alight.”

“Far off?” asked Carrol.

“About a hundred yards.”

“Did you see who they were?”

“No; the fires are dying down,” said Gilbert. “But I do not think we are wrong in saying there are two hundred men.”

“Are they asleep?”

“Most of them, but they have got men on the watch. We saw the sentinels with their rifles on their shoulders pacing backwards and forwards under the cypresses.”

“What are we to do?” asked Carrol.

“We must first of all reconnoitre them,” said Gilbert, “and see who they are, if possible.”

“I am ready,” said Mars.

“I’ll go with you,” said Perry.

“No; I’ll go,” said Gilbert; “I would rather see for myself.”

“Gilbert,” said James Burbank, “there is not one of us who would not risk his life for the good of us all; but to make this reconnaissance with some chance of not being seen, only one ought to go.”

“I’ll go alone.”

“

“No, my son. I would rather you stayed with us.”

“I am ready, master!”

And Mars, without another word, disappeared in the darkness.

While he was gone James Burbank prepared for an attack. The bales and packages were laid down in a circle; the bearers took to their weapons, and with the others went into hiding among the trees, awaiting further orders.

From where James Burbank stood he could not see the camp. He had to go about fifty yards before the fires were visible; and he resolved to wait till the half-breed returned before he took any further measures. The lieutenant was more impatient, and went forward a few yards..

Mars approached the camp, gliding silently from trunk to trunk, hoping to get near enough to see how the men were placed and who they were, and how many they were. This did not seem to be difficult. The night was dark, and the fires gave but little light. But to succeed he must get almost inside the camp.

To. have the free use of his limbs as much as possible he had taken with him neither rifle nor revolver. It would be necessary to defend himself in silence, and his only weapon was his axe.

Soon the brave half-breed was close to one of the sentries, who was only seven or eight yards from the fires. All was still. Evidently the men were tired after their long march, and were asleep. The sentinels alone were watching at their posts with more or less vigilance.

For a moment or so he looked at the man who was nearest him. He was standing upright against a cypress- trunk, and gave no sign of moving. His gun was resting on the ground, and he seemed half-asleep. Was it possible to slip round him?

Mars crept stealthily towards him. Suddenly the crackling of a dry branch revealed his presence.

Instantly the man raised his head and looked to the right and left.

Doubtless he saw something suspicious, for he brought his gun to his shoulder.

Before he could fire Mars had knocked his gun up against him and sent him flying to the ground, and at the same time clapped his large hand on his mouth so that he could utter no cry. A moment afterwards the man was gagged, and carried hurriedly to James Burbank.

The other sentinels took no notice of what had passed. Evidently their watch was a negligent one.

Mars laid his burden at his young master’s feet. The blacks crowded up. The man was half-suffocated, and when the gag was removed he could not for a moment or so say a word. The darkness was too great for his uniform to be seen.

“Help “he shouted.

“Not a word!” said James Burbank, stopping him.

“You have nothing to fear from us.”

“What do you want with me?”

“To answer truthfully to our questions.”

“That will depend on your questions,” said the man.

“Are you for the South or the North?”

“.For the North.”

“I am ready to reply.”

Gilbert took up the examination.

“How many men are there in that camp?

“Nearly two hundred.”

“Where are they going?”

“To the Everglades.”

“Who is in command?

“Captain Howick.”‘

“What, Captain Howick of the Wabash?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a detachment of seamen from Commodore Du pont’s squadron?”

“Yes; Federals, Northerners, Anti-slavery men, Unionists!” said the man, apparently quite proud at announcing the different titles of the followers of the good cause.

And so, instead of a body of Florida militia, of Texas’s partisans, James Burbank had met with friends, with companions in arms, whose_ reinforcement was most welcome.

“Hurrah’!” they shouted with such vigour that the whole camp was instantly afoot.

Suddenly torches flared up in the darkness. Burbank’s men rushed into the clearing, and Captain Howick, without a word of explanation, held out his hand to the young lieutenant, whom he never. expected to meet on the road to the Everglades. Explanations did not take long, nor were they difficult.

“What are you doing in Lower Florida, captain?” asked Gilbert.

“My dear Burbank,” said the captain, “we have been sent on an expedition by the commodore.”

“Where do you come from?”

“From Mosquito Inlet, and we have been to capture New Smyrna in the interior of the county.”

“And where are you going now?”

“To punish a band of Southerners who took a couple of our boats in an ambuscade, and to avenge the deaths of our brave comrades.”

And Captain Howick related what James Burbank could not know, for it took place two days after he left Camdless Bay.

Commodore Dupont was, it will be remembered, organizing the effective blockade of the coast. In doing this his flotilla was stationed off Anastasia Island, above St. Augustine, at the mouth of the channel separating the Bahamas from Cape Sable at the southern end of Florida. But this did not seem enough to him, and he resolved to give chase to the Southern vessels in the smaller rivers of the peninsula. One of the expeditions on this service consisted of a detachment of seamen and two boats. The Southerners kept a careful watch on-their proceedings, and allowed the boats to get well up into the wild part of Florida. To advance so far was certainly imprudent, for the Indians and militia were in great force in the neighbourhood, and the result was that they fell into an ambuscade on the shore of Lake Kissimmee, about eighty miles westward of Cape Malabar. They were attacked by a numerous body of the enemy, and the two officers in command and many of the men were killed. The survivors regained Mosquito Inlet by a miracle, and Commodore Dupont at once sent off an expedition to avenge the massacre of the Federals.

A detachment of two hundred men was placed under command of Captain Howick, and landed near Mosquito Inlet. It soon reached New Smyrna, some miles from the coast, and, after taking such measures as were necessary, Captain Howick struck off to the south-west in chase of the party who were responsible for the Kissiminee massacre, and this party had fled to the Everglades.

“We are alio going to the Everglades,” said Gilbert.

“You!” said the officer. “What are you going to do there?”

“Catch a few scoundrels and chastise them, as you are going to do, captain!”

“Who are these scoundrels?”

“Before I answer that, answer me one question. When did you leave New Smyrna?”

“Eight days ago.”

“And you have not met any party of Southerners on your way?”

“No, but we know from a sure source that detachments of militia are hiding in Lower Florida.”

“Who is in command of the detachment you are after? Do you know him?”

“Oh, yes! And if we catch him Mr. Burbank will not be sorry.”

“Why not?” asked James Burbank.

“Because he is the Spaniard the court-martial at St. Augustine acquitted for want of evidence.”

“Texar!”

“What!” exclaimed Gilbert, “Texar chief of the partisans you are after?”

“Himself! He was the author of the Kissimmee massacre, at the head of some fifty fellows like him; and we ascertained at New Smyrna that he had taken himself off to the Everglades.”

“And if you catch him what are you going to do?” asked Carrol.

“Shoot him on the spot,” said Captain Howick. “That is the commodore’s order, and rest assured we shall execute it without delay.”

It will easily be imagined what an effect this revelation produced on James Burbank. This reinforcement meant the almost certain deliverance of Dy and Zermah, the assured capture of the Spaniard and his accomplices, and the inevitable punishment for his crimes.

Gilbert then told Captain Howick the object of their expedition to Southern Florida, which, in the first place, meant the deliverance of Zermah and the girl, carried off to Carneral Island, as the half-breed’s letter showed. The captain also learnt that the alibi invoked by the Spaniard at the court-martial could not be true, although they could not at present disprove it. But with this massacre at Kissimmee there seemed to be no chance of Texar again escaping.

An unexpected observation of James Burbank’s, however, led to somewhat different thoughts.

“Can you tell me,” he asked Captain Howick, “when the Federal boats were attacked?”

“The massacre took place on the 22nd of March.”

“But on the 22nd of March Texar was at Black Creek! How could he have taken part in the massacre at Kissimmee, two hundred miles away?”

“What do you mean?” asked the captain.

“I mean that Texar could not .have been at the head of the Southerners who attacked your men.”

“You are mistaken, Mr. Burbank. The Spaniard was seen by some of the men who escaped. I examined them myself, and they recognized Texar from having seen him at St. Augustine.”

“That cannot be, captain. The letter written by Zermah proves that on the 22nd of March Texar was at Black Creek.”

Gilbert had listened without a word. He saw that his father must be right. The Spaniard could not have been near Kissimmee on the day of the massacre.

“What does it matter?” he said. “There is something about the man which at present we cannot understand, and why should we try to do so? On the 22nd of March he was at Black Creek, as Zermah says. On the 22nd he was at the head of a party of Floridans, two hundred miles away, so you say. Well, be it so. We are agreed that he is now in the Everglades. Let us catch him as soon as we can!”

“Yes, Gilbert, that’s it,” said Captain Howick. “And we’ll shoot him anyhow! Let us be off.”

The fact, like the others, was none the less incomprehensible. It seemed as though the Spaniard had a double.

Would the mystery be cleared up? In any case, the only thing to do was to make sure of Texar; and Howick’s seamen and Burbank’s negroes fell in together, and resumed their way to the south.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EVERGLADES.

A HORRIBLE district is that of the Everglades, and yet it is superb. Situated in the southern part of Florida, it extends right down to Cape Sable, the extreme point of the peninsula, and it is simply an immense marsh. The waters of the sea flood it in wide stretches, when the storms of the Atlantic or the Mexican Gulf beat on to its shores, and mingle with the waters from the clouds that the winter season pours down in cataracts. And in consequence it is a country half liquid and half solid, and almost uninhabitable.

But let it not be supposed that it is barren. On the contrary, it is on the surface of the islands in the marsh that nature asserts her rights. The malaria is, so to speak, conquered by the perfumes of the wonderful flowers; the islands are steeped in the fragrance of a thousand plants, blooming in such splendour as to justify the peninsula’s poetic name. And it is in these healthy oases that the Indians take refuge, though not for long at a time.

A few miles beyond the frontier of this territory is the wide sheet of water known as Lake Okee-cho-bee, which is just a little below the twenty-seventh parallel. In one of the angles of this lake lies Carneral Island, where Texar fancied he had an unknown retreat in which he could defy pursuit.

The country was worthy of him and his companions. When Florida belonged to the Spaniards, it was thither that all the white scoundrels fled from justice. Mixing with the native population, among whom there still were traces of Carib blood, they made common cause with the Creeks and Seminoles and nomadic Indians who were only subdued after the long bloody war that ended in 1845.

Carneral Island seemed safe from all attack. On the eastern side it is separated from the mainland by a narrow channel about a hundred feet across, and the only means of communication was a heavy boat To escape by swimming was impossible, for no one would dare to enter the slimy water which bristled with long interlacing plants and swarmed with reptiles.

Beyond was the cypress forest with the ground half under water and traversed but by narrow paths which were by no means easy to trace. A clayey soil sticking to the feet like glue, enormous trunks of fallen trees barring the way, and a suffocating odour of mouldiness were among the other obstacles to be overcome in the approach, And there were masses of formidable plants, such as the phylacias, and millions of pezizas, gigantic mushrooms, as explosive as if they were charged with gun-cotton or dynamite, going off with a violent report at the slightest shock and filling the air with a choking cloud of tawny spores that give the human skin an eruption of painful pustules, so that the spiteful vegetables have to be avoided as carefully as the most dangerous animals of the teratologic world.

Texar’s dwelling was an old Indian wigwam built on piles under the branches of the large trees in the eastern end of the island. Hidden amid the foliage, it was invisible even from the nearest bank. The two hounds guarded it with as much vigilance as they did the blockhouse at Black Creek, and trained to the chase of men would tear in pieces any one attempting to approach the wigwam.

Two days had passed since Zermah and little Dy had arrived. The journey had been easy enough till they reached Lake Washington, but after entering the cypress forest it had been exceedingly painful, even for the vigorous men who were used to the unhealthy climate and the long wearisome advance through the marsh. What the woman and child had suffered can be imagined! But Zermah was strong, brave, and devoted, and throughout the journey had carried little Dy whose legs would soon have failed her; and when she reached Carneral Island she was almost exhausted.

And after what had passed when Texar and Squambo had dragged her from Black Creek, is it not a wonder that she still held out? She had no means of knowing that the letter she had given to the young slave had fallen into James Burbank's hands, but she knew that he had paid with his life for the act of devotion by which he had attempted to save her. He had been surprised at the moment he was starting for Camdless Bay, and had been mortally wounded; and the half-breed had said to herself that now James Burbank would never know that the Spaniard was going to Carneral Island, and how could he get any clue to her whereabouts? How then could she retain the shadow of a hope? Every chance of safety seemed to have vanished in this region whose horrors she knew too well. And no escape was possible!

The little girl was in a state of great weakness; and in spite of Zermah's constant care, the fatigue had made her ill. Pale and emaciated as if she had been poisoned by the emanations from the marshes, she was no longer strong enough to remain upright, and could with difficulty utter but a few words, which were always an inquiry for her mother. Zermah could no longer tell her, as she had done for the first few days after her arrival at Black Creek, that she would soon see Mrs. Burbank, and that her father, brother, Miss Stannard, and Mars, would soon come to her. With her precocious intelligence rendered more acute since the dreadful scenes at the plantation, Dy saw that she had been torn from her home and was in the hands of a wicked man, and unless some one came to her rescue she would never again see Camdless Bay. And so Zermah knew not what to answer, and in spite of all she could do, saw the child gradually wasting away.

The wigwam was only a huge hut which in the winter season afforded no adequate protection. The wind and the rain penetrated it on all sides. But in the hot season which was now coming on in this latitude, it at least provided shelter from the heat of the sun. It was divided into two rooms of unequal size. One was narrow and badly lighted and did not communicate with the open air, but with the other room, which obtained its light from a door that opened on to the bank of the narrow channel. Zermah and Dy had been lodged in the small room, where a litter of herbs served them for a bed.

The other room was occupied by Texar and the Indian Squambo, who never left his master. For furniture, they had a table with many jars of brandy, and glasses and a few plates, a sort of cupboard for provisions, a half-squared tree-trunk for a seat and two bundles of herbs for beds. The fire necessary to cook the meals was made on the stone hearth outside, in one of the angles of the wigwam, and it proved sufficient for the preparation of the dried meat and venison that a hunter could find on the island, and the fruits and vegetables in an almost wild state, just enough, in fact, to keep them from dying of hunger.

The half-dozen slaves Texar had brought with him from Black Creek slept out of doors like the dogs, and like them served as guards on the approaches.

From the first day Dy and Zermah were allowed to go out and in as they pleased. They were no longer imprisoned in their rooms. But they were watched. The precaution was superfluous, for no one could cross the channel without using the boat that was always in the safe keeping of the blacks. And as she walked about Zermah took careful notice of the difficulties of escape.

The first day the half-breed was never out of sight of Squambo; but she did not see Texar. When night came she, however, heard the Spaniard talking to the Seminole, and ordering him to keep a strict watch. And soon all but Zermah were asleep in the wigwam.

Up to then Zermah, it should be said, had not had a single word spoken to her by Texar. As she ascended the river towards Lake Washington, she had in vain asked him what he was going to do with her and the child. And while she spoke the Spaniard contented himself with shrugging his shoulders and fixing his cruel eyes on her, and looking as if he scorned to answer. But Zermah had no intention of giving in. When she reached Carneral Island, she resolved to attack Texar so as to excite his pity, if not for herself, at least for the unfortunate child, and if his pity failed her to appeal to his self- interest.

An opportunity offered. The day after her arrival, while the little girl was asleep, Zermah walked out towards the channel by the side of which Texar was then standing and giving orders with Squambo to the slaves, who were at work weeding, for the water was so choked that the barge could hardly pass. While this was being done two of the negroes were striking the surface of the water with long poles so as to frighten away the reptiles whose heads appeared every now and then above the surface.

A moment afterwards Squambo left his master, and Texar was also going away when Zerinah came up.

“Texar!’ said Zermah firmly, “I wish to speak to you. This will be the last time, doubtless, and I beg you to hear me.”

The Spaniard, who had just lighted his cigarette, did not answer, and Zermah having waited a few seconds continued, —

“Will you tell me what you are going to do with Dy Burbank?”

No reply.

“I say nothing about my own fate. All I have to do with now is that of this child, whose life is in danger, and who will soon escape you.”

At this Texar made a gesture of the most absolute incredulity.

“Yes, very soon,” continued Zermah. “If not by flight it will be by death.”

The Spaniard took a long whiff at his cigarette, and replied, —

“Bah! The little girl will be all right after a few days’ rest, and I reckon on your care, Zerniah, to retain its precious existence for us.”

“No, I repeat. Before very long, the child will be dead, and dead without any profit to you.”

“Without profit!” replied Texar, “when I have her far from her dying mother, her father and her brother reduced to despair?”

“Be it so,” said Zermah. “You have your revenge, Texar, but believe me, it would be more to your advantage to give up the child than to keep her here.”

“What is that you say?”

“I say that you have made James Burbank suffer enough; that now it is your interest to speak.”

“My interest?”‘

“Certainly. The plantation of Camdless Bay has been laid waste. Mrs. Burbank is dying, perhaps dead at this moment; her daughter has disappeared, and her father is vainly endeavouring to find her. All this has been done by you, Texar. I know it! and I have the right to tell you so to your face. But take care! Your crimes will be discovered some day, and think of the punishment that will come to you! Your best interest now is to show pity. I do not speak for myself, though my husband will not find me when he returns. No, I speak only for the little girl who is dying. Keep me if you like, but send the child back to Camdless Bay to her mother; then they will never ask you about the past, and if you want it they will even pay you well for the girl’s liberty. If I take upon myself to speak like this, and propose this exchange, it is because I know James Burbank and his people to the bottom of their hearts; because I know they would sacrifice all their fortune to save the child, and I call God to witness they will keep the promise their slave has made.”

“Their slave?” exclaimed Texar ironically. “There are now no slaves at Camdless Bay.”

“There are; for in order to stay with my master I refused to be set free.”

“Indeed, Zermah, indeed!” answered the Spaniard. “Well, since you do not mind being a slave we can understand each other. Six or seven years ago I wished to buy you of my friend Tickborn. I offered for you, for you alone, a considerable sum, and you would have belonged to me ever since if James Burbank had not got hold of you. Now I have you, and I will keep you.”

“Be it so, Texar,” said Zermah. “I will be your slave. But the child! Will you not give her up?”

“The child of James Burbank \ “answered Texar in a tone of the deepest hatred. “Give her up to her father? Never!”

“Villain!” exclaimed Zermah in anger. “If her father does not take her from you, God will!”

A grin, a shrug of the shoulders, and that was all the Spaniard’s answer. He had rolled up a second cigarette and lighted it calmly with the end of the last, and strolled off up the bank of the channel without another look at Zermah, who would have struck him as if he had been a wild beast, at the risk of being massacred by Squambo and his companions, had she only had a weapon. But she could do nothing. Motionless she stood and watched the blacks at work. Nowhere a friendly face; nothing but the faces of brutes hardly seeming to be human. And she went back to the wigwam to resume her part of mother to the child who in a feeble voice was calling her. She tried to console the poor little creature, whom she took in her arms and animated with her kisses; and then she brought the child outside and gave her a warm drink made on the hearth. All she could do in her state of destitution she did. Dy thanked her with a smile — and such a smile — sadder than if it had been tears.

Zermah did not see the Spaniard again all that day. And she did not seek to see him. What good would it do? He would not change his sentiments, and by these recriminations things might become worse. For though up to then, during her stay at Black Creek, and since her arrival at Carneral Island, the worst treatment had been spared her and the child, there was everything to be feared from such a man. A fit of anger might drive him to the greatest violence. No pity could be expected from him, and as his interest did not stand in the way of his hate, Zermah had given up all hope in the future. As to the Spaniard’s companions, Squambo and the slaves, how could they be expected to be more human than their master? They knew the fate that awaited them if they showed the slightest sympathy. From them nothing was to be hoped. Zermah must trust to herself. Her resolution was taken. She would try and escape during the night.

But how? The ring of water that surrounded the island must be crossed, and though near the wigwam the channel was narrow, yet it could not be swum. There was only one chance, and that was to seize on the barge.

The night fell dark and gloomy, for the rain had come on, and the wind swept fiercely across the marsh.

If it was impossible for Zermah to quit the wigwam by the door of the large room, perhaps it would not be difficult for her to make a hole in the wall, and so get through.

Ten o'clock came, and nothing was heard outside but the moaning of the storm. Texar and Squambo were asleep. The hounds hiding under one of the thickets no longer prowled round the dwelling.

The moment was favourable.

While Dy lay sleeping on the couch of herbs, Zermah began to pull away quietly the straw and reeds in the side wall of the wigwam.

At the end of an hour the hole was only large enough for the girl to get through, and she was making it larger when a noise suddenly stopped her.

The noise came from far out in the darkness, and was the barking of the hounds announcing some arrival. Texar and Squambo suddenly awakened, got up, and hurriedly went out.

Voices were heard. Evidently a troop of men had reached the opposite bank of the channel. Zermah must for the present give up her attempt at flight.

Soon, in spite of the tumult of the storm, it was easy to distinguish the sound of many footsteps. Zermah listened. What was happening? Had Providence taken pity on her? Had the help come on which she had not dared to reckon?

No, and she knew it could not be so, for there was no sound of a struggle as the channel was crossed, no reports of firearms. It was a reinforcement that had arrived at Carneral Island.

A minute afterwards Zermah saw two persons enter the wigwam. The Spaniard was accompanied by another man who could not be Squambo, for the Indian's voice could be heard outside on the bank of the channel.

Two men were, however, in the room. They had begun to talk in a low voice, when they suddenly stopped. One of them, lantern in hand, came towards Zermah's room, and she had only just time to throw herself on the bed so as to hide the hole in the wall.

Texar, for it was he, opened the door, looked round the room, saw the half-breed apparently asleep by the side of the child, and retired.

Zermah then took her place behind the door he had shut If she could not see or recognize the strange man, she could hear all that passed.

And this is what she heard.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT ZERMAH OVERHEARD.

“YOU, at Carneral Island?”

“Yes. I have been here for some hours.”

“I thought you were at Adamsville, near Lake Apopka?”

“I was there a week ago.”

“And why have you come here?”

“Because I had to do so.”

“We ought never to meet, you know, except in the marsh at Black Creek, and then only after you have written to tell me!”

“But I had to beat a hurried retreat, and escape to the Everglades.”

“Why?”

“I am going to tell you.”

“But is there no risk of our being found out?”

“No! I came in the dark, and none of your slaves saw me.”

Zermah listened, but she could not up to this point make out the meaning of the conversation, nor could she imagine who was the wigwam’s unexpected guest. There were certainly two men talking; and yet it seemed as though it was only one man who questioned and answered. The voice was the same;

the accent was the same; the words seemed to come from the same mouth. In vain Zermah tried to look through a crack in the door. The room was lighted but feebly, and remained in a half-shadow which prevented the least object from being distinguished. The half-breed had therefore to content herself with listening as intently as possible to a conversation which might be of extreme importance for her.

After a moment’s silence the two men had continued as follows. Evidently it was Texar who asked the first question.

“You have not come alone?”

“No; some of our men came with me to the Everglades.”

“How many?”

“Forty.”

“Are you not afraid that they will find out what we have kept secret from them for so long?”

“No. They will never see us together. When they leave Carneral Island they will have learnt nothing, and the plan of our life will in no way be changed.”And Zermah thought she could hear the clasp of the hands as they met in token of continued friendship.

Then the conversation was resumed.

“What fyas happened since Jacksonville was taken?”

“A serious business. You know that Dupont took possession of St. Augustine?”

“Yes, I know; and you, I suppose, know why I know?”

“Yes! The story of the Fernandina train came in handy to allow you to establish the alibi that forced the court to acquit you.”

“Which did not quite suit them! Bah! It is not the first time we have got off like that.”

“And it won’t be the last. But do you know what the Federals are after in occupying St. Abgustine? It was not so much to hold the capital of St. John’s county as to organize the blockade of the Atlantic coast.”

* So I heard.”

Well, to watch the coast from the mouth of the St. John’s to the Bahamas did not seem to be enough for Dupont, and he resolved to follow up contraband of war into the interior of Florida. So he sent off two boats’ crews. Have you heard of this?”

“No.”

“But when did you leave Black Creek? Some days after you were acquitted?”

“Yes! The 22nd of this month.”

“This took place on the 22nd.”

part ii.

It should be remembered that Zermah knew nothing of the ambuscade at Kissimmee, of which Captain Howick had spoken to Gilbert at their meeting in the forest. So she, like the Spaniard, heard for the first time how the boats had been burnt, and hardly a dozen survivors had found their way back to the Commodore with news of the disaster.

“Well! well!” exclaimed Texar. “That is a happy revenge for the capture of Jacksonville, and if we can lure those infernal Northerners into the thick of Florida, not one of them will get back.”

“Not one. If we can get them among the marshes of the Everglades. And we shall have them there before long.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dupont has sworn to avenge the death of his officers and sailors, and a new expedition has been sent out to the south of St. John’s county.”

“The Federals are coming from that quarter?”

“Yes, but more numerous and better armed, and well on their guard against ambuscades.”

“Have you met them?”

“No, for our people are not in force now, and we have had to retreat. But, as we retired we drew them on after us. When we have been joined by the militia who are somewhere about, we will fall on them, and not one shall escape.”

“Where did they come from?”

“Mosquito Inlet.”

“Which way did they come?”

“Through the cypress grove.”

“Where are they now?”

“About forty miles from Carneral Island.”

“Good,” said Texar. “We must get them further south, for there is not a day to lose in concentrating the militia. If necessary, we must be off to-morrow to the shore of the Bahama Channel.”

“And from there, if we are pressed before we can collect our friends, we will find a safe retreat in the English islands.”

The different matters alluded to in this conversation were of the greatest interest to Zermah. If Texar decided to leave the island, would he take the prisoners with him, or would he leave them at the wigwam in charge of Squambo? In that case it would be better not to attempt to escape until after the Spaniard’s departure. Then she might, perhaps, have a better chance of success. And perhaps the Federal expedition then in Lower Florida might reach Lake Okee-cho-bee, in sight of Carneral Island?

But these hopes vanished almost as soon as they rose. For the next question that was asked was, what was to be done with the half-breed and child, and to it Texar answered, without hesitation, —

“I shall take them with me, if necessary, to the Bahamas.”

“But will the little girl bear the discomforts of the voyage?”

“Yes! I will answer for that; and besides, Zermah knows how she can avoid them!”

“But if the child were to die?”

“I had rather have her dead than give her back to her father!”

“Ah! you are a good hater of these Burbanks!”

“As good as you are!”

Zermah could hardly contain herself, and was on the point of throwing open the door and meeting face to face these two men, who were so like to each other, not only in voice, but in evil instinct and want of conscience and heart. But she controlled herself. Better hear to the end what Texar and his accomplice had to say. When their talk was at an end perhaps they would sleep! Then there might be time to escape before they left the island.

Evidently the Spaniard was in the position of one who had everything to learn from him he was talking to. And so he continued to question him.

“What news is there from the north?”

“Nothing of much importance. Unfortunately, it seems as though the Federals were getting the best of it, and that the slave cause is done for.”

“Bah!” said Texar, in a tone of indifference.

“Well, we are neither for South or North, really, are we?”

“No. The only thing is, while they are at each other’s throats to be always on the side where most is to be gained.”

In this remark Texar revealed his true character. The two men fished in the troubled water of civil war only for what they could catch.

“But,” said Texar, “what has happened in Florida during the last week?”

“Nothing that you do not know. Stevens remains master of the St. John’s up to Picolata.”

“And he does not seem to care to come further down?”

“No; the gunboats have not been sent to the south of the county. And I fancy the occupation of this river will soon end, and that the Confederates will get back the command of the whole stream.”

“How?”

“There is a rumour that Dupont intends to abandon Florida, and leave two or three ships to blockade the coast.”

“Can that be possible?”

“They are talking about it; and if so, St. Augustine will soon be evacuated.”

“And Jacksonville?”

“Jacksonville, too.”

“Then I can go back, get the committee together again, and resume the place -the Federals pushed me from! Ah! my Northerners, if I come back, you will see how I will treat you!”

“That is so.”

“And if James Burbank and his people have not cleared out of Camdless Bay they will not again escape me.”

“That is rght. All that you have suffered from them I have suffered with you. What you wish, I wish! what you hate, I hate I The two of us are but as one,”

“Yes! as one!” replied Texar.

The conversation stopped for an instant. The clink of the glasses told Zermah that the Spaniard and the other man were drinking together. Zermah was thunderstruck. To listen to them, it seemed as though these two men had had an equal hand in every crime committed during the last few years in Florida, and more particularly in those against the Burbank family. She learnt much as she listened to them for another half-hour, and all the time the same voice gave question and answer, as if Texar were alone and talking to himself. Here was a mystery which the half-breed had the greatest interest in discovering. But if the villains knew that Zermah had heard some of their secrets would they not settle the danger by killing her? And what would become of the child when Zermah was dead?

It was about eleven o’clock. The weather continued terrible; wind and rain blew and fell without ceasing. Assuredly Texar and his companion would not leave their shelter. They would pass the night in the wigwam, and do nothing till the morning.

And Zermah’s doubts ended when Texar’s accomplice — who ought to have been Texar himself — asked, —

“Well, what shall we do?”

“This,” said the Spaniard. “To-morrow morning we will go with our men and reconnoitre round the lake. We will explore the cypress grove for three or four miles, after sending on in advance those who know it best, particularly Squambo. If there are no signs of the approach of the Federal detachment, we will return and wait till it is time to retreat. If there is danger, we will get together our partisans and my slaves, and I will take Zermah off to the Bahama Channel while you concentrate the militia in Lower Florida.”

“Agreed,” said the other; “while you reconnoitre I will hide in the woods on the island. It will not do for us to be seen together.”

“No! certainly not!” said Texar. “We must keep from any imprudence that would reveal our secret. Do not come back here till to-morrow night; and, if I am obliged to go off during the day, do not leave the island till I have got clear away. Meet me, then, at Cape Sable.”

Zermah then saw that she could not be rescued by the Federals. If in the morning their approach was discovered, the Spaniard would not leave the island without her. She could only be saved by her own efforts, great as was the danger. Escape under such difficult circumstances was almost impossible.

But with what courage would she have attempted it had she known that James Burbank, Gilbert, Mars and his companions at the plantation were on their way to deliver her from Texar; that her letter had told them where to look for her; that already Mr. Burbank was up the St. John’s, beyond Lake Washington; that the greater part of the cypress grove had been crossed; that the little band from Camdless Bay had been joined by the detachment under Captain Howick; that it was Texar whom they looked upon as the author of the ambuscade at Kissimmee; that the scoundrel was to be hunted to death, and that he would be shot on the spot if they could only get hold of him!

But Zermah knew nothing of this. She could wait for help no longer. And she resolved to risk everything to get away from Carneral Island.

But she must wait for twenty-four hours before she made her attempt, although the night was every dark and favourable for her chance of escape. The men, who had not even taken shelter under the trees, were all round the wigwam. She could hear them walking about on the bank, smoking and talking. If her attempt failed, if her plan was discovered, she would be worse off than she was, and Texar would have an excuse for his violence.

Would the chance of escape be better to-morrow? Had not the Spaniard said that his companions, his slaves, even the Indian, Squambo, would accompany him to reconnoitre the Federal advance? Would something come out of this to increase her chance of getting away? If she could get across the channel without being seen, and reach the forest, she did not doubt that she would be safe. She could hide, and need not again fall into Texar’s hands. Captain Howick could not be far off. If he was advancing towards Lake Okee-cho-bee, was there not a chance that she might meet with him?

Better, therefore, wait for to-morrow! But hardly had she so decided, than something happened, that at once swept away the scaffold on which her last hopes were built.

There came a knock at the wigwam door. It was Squambo, who made himself known to his master.

“Enter!” said the Spaniard.

Squambo came in.

“Have you any orders for the night?” he asked.

“Keep careful watch, and let me know at the least alarm.”

. “I will do so,” said Squambo.

“To-morrow morning we will reconnoitre for some miles in the forest.”

“The half-breed and Dy?”

“Will be under guard as usual. See that no one disturbs us here.”

“Right.”

“What are the men doing?”

“Walking about. None of them seem to care to rest.”

“See that none get far away.”

“None shall go.”

“What is the weather like?”

“Not so bad as it was. The rain has stopped, and the wind will soon drop.”

“Good.”

Zermah had listened to all this. The conversation was evidently nearing its end, when a stifled sigh, a sort of attle, made itself heard.

Zermah’s blood flowed back to her heart. She rose, rushed to the bed of herbs, and bent over the little girl.

Dy had just awoke, and in what a state! A choking, husky breath was escaping from her lips. Her little hands were beating the air, as if she sought to drag it into her mouth. Zermah could just hear the words, —

“Drink! water!”

The child was being suffocated. She must be taken into the air at once. In the darkness Zermah, distracted, took her in her arms to revive her with her own breath. She felt her struggle in a convulsion. She uttered a cry — she burst open the door of the room.

Two men were there, standing before Squambo. But so like were they in face and build that Zermah could not tell which of them was Texar.

CHAPTER XIII.

A DOUBLE LIFE.

A FEW words will suffice to explain that which has hitherto seemed inexplicable in this story.

The men before whom Zermah had suddenly appeared were twins Where they were born they themselves did not know. Probably their birthplace was some village of Texas — whence the name of Texar by merely changing a letter.

Texas, it will be remembered, is an extensive territory, situated in the south of the United States, and on the Gulf of Mexico. After revolting against the Mexicans, Texas assisted by the United States in its work of independence was annexed to the Union in 1845, under the presidency of John Tyler.

It was about fifteen years before this annexation that two children were found abandoned in a village on the Texan coast, and were taken care of and brought up by public charity.

Attention was first directed to the children on account of their marvellous resemblance. They had the same gestures, the same voice, the same attitudes, the same physiognomy, and it may be added the same instincts testifying to a precocious perversity. We know not how they were educated, nor what instruction they received, nor to what family they belonged unless it was to one of those who roamed about the country after the declaration of independence.

As soon as the brothers Texar thought they could support themselves, they disappeared. This was when they were about twelve years old. They then took to a life of thieving among the fields and farms, stealing bread in one place, fruit in another, ending at length in highway robbery. Then they ceased to be seen in the Texan villages in the company of lawbreakers, who, even in those early days had put their strange resemblance to account. Years rolled by. The Texar brothers were soon forgotten even by name. And although the name became notorious enough in Florida, nothing happened to show that they had passed their early years in the coast districts of Texas.

But how was it that after their disappearance no one knew that there were two Texars? It was on this ignorance that their plans had been built. As was ascertained later on when the duality was discovered and proved, the brothers for twenty or thirty years lived apart. Fortune they sought in all ways; but they did not meet again except at rare intervals away from observation, either in America, or wherever their search after fortune led them.

One of them — which it was not known, though it was probably both — engaged in the slave trade. They brought cargoes of slaves from the coasts of Africa to the Southern States of the Union, acting as intermediaries between the merchants on the coast and the captains of the ships employed in the inhuman traffic.

Did their trade prosper? We do not know. But probably not; for it diminished rapidly, and was finally put a stop to when the slave trade was denounced as a barbarism, and gradually abolished by the civilized world.

The brothers had not made their fortune, and they resolved to do so at any price. It was then they resolved to avail themselves of their extraordinary resemblance.

It often happens that such a resemblance dies away as the children grow to manhood. But this was not the case with the Texars. The older they got, the more their physical and moral resemblance increased. It was impossible to distinguish one from the other either by his face or his figure or his gestures or voice. And resolving to take advantage of this natural peculiarity, they entered upon a hateful career of crime, intending if one was caught to establish an alibi by means of the other. When one went off to commit some act that would bring him within reach of the law, the other would show himself in public, so that all criminating evidence would fail. Of course, they never allowed themselves to be taken in the act, for then no alibi could have been pleaded.

Having drawn up their programme the twins came to Florida, where neither of them was known, the attraction being the numerous opportunities offered in a state where the Indians still carried on a struggle against the Americans and the Spaniards.

It was about 1850 or 1851 that Texar appeared in the Floridan peninsula — Texar, not the Texars, be it understood, for it was their intention never to be seen together, never to be on the same day in the same place.

Hiding themselves thus under a complete incognito, they found a retreat that was quite as mysterious. This was in Black Creek, which they discovered in one of their explorations of the St. John’s. There they brought a few slaves, to whom their secret was not revealed. Squambo alone knew the mystery of their double existence. The confidant was worthy of his masters, whom he served with unequalled devotion and discretion, and pitilessly executed their commands.

Never, it need scarcely be said, did they appear together at Black Creek. When they wished to consult on any matter they wrote to each other. We have, in fact, seen their post-office. A letter was slipped into the stalk of a leaf, and the leaf was fixed to the branch of a tulip- tree in the neighbouring marsh. This means never failed them. Every day Squambo cautiously visited the tree. If he was the bearer of a letter from the Texar then at Black Creek he fixed it to the branch of the tulip-tree. If the letter had been written by the other brother the Indian found it in the usual place and took it back to the blockhouse.

After their arrival in Florida the Texars leagued themselves with all that was bad among the population. Many of the criminal classes became their accomplices in the numerous robberies that then took place, and these 19

became their accomplices later on when the war brought them to the front in political matters. But although sometimes one and sometimes another took the lead in these matters, their companions never knew that there were two Texars. Thus it was that an alibi was always forthcoming when a Texar was brought to answer for his crimes. Thus it was that although James Burbank and Zermah had positively recognized the Spaniard as the author of the fire, he had been acquitted by the tribunal a!t St. Augustine, for numerous witnesses swore that at the time of the crime he was in Torillo’s tienda at Jacksonville. And so it was regarding the attack on Camdless Bay. How could Texar be leading the assault at Castle House, or carrying away Zermah and Dy when he was one of the prisoners made by the Federals at Fernandina, and then in safe keeping on one of the gunboats?

And even admitting that the duality of Texar was known, how could they tell which of them was the culprit? Were there not in fact two who were guilty? Should not the justly-merited punishment fall on both?

At Jacksonville it was probable that both brothers had in turn played the same part after the outbreak. When Texar No. I absented himself on some agreed expedition, Texar No. 2 would take his place without the people being aware of the change. They thus took an equal part in the excesses then committed against the colonists of Northern birth and the Southern planters holding, anti-slavery opinions.

Both were aware of what passed in the Central States of the Union, where, as in Florida, civil war underwent such unexpected changes in fortune; both had acquired great influence over the lower class of whites, and over the Spaniards, and even the American slave partisans. Their correspondence was considerable, and their meetings in out-of-the-way places were many, to enable them to conduct their operations and prepare their future alibis.

It was while one was in the hands of the Federals that the other organized the expedition at Camdless Bay.

And we know how they had turned this to account at the court-martial at St. Augustine.

Age, as it has been said, confirmed and increased the resemblance between the brothers; but it was possible that an accident or a wound might alter that resemblance. For instance, in a night-attack some time after their arrival in Florida, one of the Texars had his beard burnt by a rifle fired at him point blank. Immediately the other shaved his beard so as to be like his brother, a fact that was mentioned in the early part of this history.

Another fact requires explanation. It will not have been forgotten that one night while she was at Black Creek Zermah saw the Spaniard’s arm tattooed. The reason was that his brother had been captured by a band of Seminoles, and had been so indelibly marked on his left arm. Immediately a tracing of the device was sent to the fortress and Squambo set to work, so that the identity continued absolute.

In fact if Texar No. 1 had happened to lose a limb, Texar No. 2 would have submitted to amputation to resemble him.

For twelve years the Texar brothers lived this double life, but with such skill and prudence that justice was set at defiance.

Had the twins grown rich at this trade? Yes, in a certain measure. A considerable sum of money saved from the proceeds of pillage and theft had beeh hidden in a secret redoubt of the blockhouse at Black Creek, but as a precaution it had been taken away by the Spaniard when he started for Carneral Island, and we may rest assured he would not leave it behind him if he went to the Bahamas.

When the twins learnt that Commodore Dupont contemplated an early evacuation of Florida, they saw that there would be a chance of further enriching themselves, and the Northern planters could be made to pay dearly for the Federal occupation. They had therefore resolved to keep on th£ watch. Once they were back at Jacksonville, with the help of their partisans and the Southerners in league with them, they could resume the position which a riot had given them once and could give them again.

And besides this they had a means of acquiring wealth almost beyond their desires. They had only to listen to the proposition Zermah had made to one of them; they had only to return Dy to her parents. James Burbank would have given his fortune as his child’s ransom. He would have undertaken to make no complaint or instigate any pursuit against the Spaniard. But among the Texars hate was stronger than self-interest. They wished to be revenged on the Burbanks before they left Florida.

Such is all that need be said about the history of the brothers Texar. We can now resume our story.

When Zermah suddenly found herself in their presence, she understood all. The past instantly rushed back through her mind. In astonishment she looked at the men — motionless as if rooted in the ground, holding the little girl in her arms. Fortunately the air in the room was abundant, and all fear of the child’s suffocation had gone.

Her appearance before the brothers, her discovery of the secret of their lives, meant, she well knew, sentence of death.

CHAPTER XIV.

ZERMAH AT WORK.

The Texars were furious at Zermah’s interruption.

With the exception of Squambo, never before since their childhood had a third person seen them together. And this person was their mortal enemy. Their first impulse was to hurl themselves at her and murder her, so as to save the secret of their double life.

The child raised herself in Zermah’s arms; and holding out her little hands, she cried, —

“I am afraid! I am afraid!”

At a gesture from the two brothers Squambo stepped roughly up to the half-breed, took her by the shoulder, and pushed her back into her room and shut the door.

Then Squambo returned to the brothers. His attitude told them they had only to command for him to obey. But the interruption had been so unexpected that it had troubled them more than might be supposed. They seemed to consult each other with a look.

Zermah had thrown herself into a corner of the room, after laying the little girl on one of the beds. Her self- possession returned to her; and she went to the door to hear what was passing. In a moment her fate would probably be decided. But the Texars and Squambo had just gone out of the hut, and were no longer within earshot.

And this is what they were saying, —

"Zermah must die."

"She must! If she escapes, or if the Federals get hold of her, we are lost! She must die!"

"This moment!" said Squambo.

And knife in hand he had turned to go to the hut, when one of the Texars stopped him.

"Wait," said he. "It will always be time enough to put Zermah out of the way; and we have need of her to take care of the youngster. Let us first see how we stand. A detachment of Northerners is now in the cypress grove. Let us take a careful look-out round the lake, for there is no proof as yet that the detachment is coming this way. If it is coming we shall have time to get away; if it is not coming we can stop here and let it get deeper into the wilds of Florida when it will be at our mercy. We shall have time to muster the militia and cut off the Federal retreat. Some escaped from Kissimmee, but none will escape here."

This was obviously the best thing to do under the circumstances. A large number of Southerners were in the neighbourhood only waiting for an opportunity to try a stroke at the Federals. One of the Texars could go out and reconnoitre, and then they could decide either to remain at Carneral Island or move off to Cape Sable. That could be done to-morrow, and Squambo could be trusted to take care of Zermah whatever might be the result of the exploration.

"As for the child," said one of the brothers, "it is our interest to keep her alive. She cannot have understood as Zermah did, and she may be the price of our ransom should one of us fall into the hands of Captain Howick. To get back his daughter, James Burbank would accept any condition we like to impose.”

“If Zermah dies,” said the Indian, “are you not afraid that the child will die too?”

“No, she will be well looked after, and I can easily find an Indian woman to take the place of the half-breed.”

“Do so then 1 We must not have anything to fear from Zermah.”

“Well, whatever happens, we shall soon put her out of the way.”

And Zermah heard the brothers come back into the wigwam.

What a night it was for the unhappy woman! She - knew she was doomed, and yet she had no thought for herself, but for Dy, who would thus be abandoned to the cruelty of these pitiless men. It was to their interest that the child should live, but when Zermah was gone would she survive? And the thought of this returned to her so often and took such obstinate possession of her that she resolved to escape before Texar could separate her from the child.

In the conversation she had overheard, she had learnt that one of the Texars and his companions was going to reconnoitre round the lake, evidently with the object of fighting the Federal defachment should opportunity offer. Texar would therefore be away with all his men, and his brother would remain on the island so as in the first place not to be recognized, and in the second to watch the hut. Then was the time for Zermah to attempt her escape. Perhaps she might find a weapon of some sort, and in case of surprise she would not hesitate to use it.

The night went by. Vainly did Zermah listen for some sign among the sounds on the island of the arrival of Captain Howick and the capture of the Texars.

A few minutes before daybreak the little girl awoke. Zermah gave her a few drops of water. Then looking at her as if she would never see her again, she clasped her in her arms. At that moment had any one entered to tear her away from her charge she would have defended herself with the fury of a wild beast being taken from her little ones.

“What is the matter, Zermah?” asked the child. * “Nothing — nothing!” said the half-breed.

“And mamma — when shall we see her again?”

“Soon,” said Zermah; “to-day, perhaps! Yes, my dear! to-day I hope we are near her — ”

“And the men I saw to-night?”

“The men! Did you see them?”

“Yes, and they made me afraid.”

“But did you notice them? Did you see how muck they were alike?”

part ii.

“Yes.”

“Well, remember to tell your father, and your brother, that there are two brothers — do you understand? there are two brothers Texar, so alike that you cannot tell one from the other.”

“Will you tell them that too?” asked the child.

“Yes. I’ll tell them so. But if I am not there, you must not forget it.”

“And why will you not be there?” asked Dy, putting her arms round the half-breed’s neck.

“I shall be there, my dear, I shall be there! But if we go out, as we have a long way to go, we must get something to eat. I will get you something.”

“And you?”

“I had something while you were asleep, and I am not hungry.”

The truth was, that Zermah could not have eaten had she tried, owing to the state of excitement she was in. As soon as the child had finished, Zermah put her back on the herb couch, and went to a gap among the reeds in a corner of the room; and thence she watched for an hour the scene outside.

Preparations were being made for departure. One of the brothers, only one, was mustering the men that were to go into the cypress grove. The other, whom none of the men had seen, was concealed, either in the wigwam or in some corner of the island.

At least, so thought Zermah, who knew how careful they were to hide the secret of their lives. And she thought to herself that this other one had been told off to keep watch on Dy and herself.

And Zermah was not mistaken, as we shall soon see.

And now the men, to the number of about fifty, were all mustered ready before the hut waiting for orders. By about nine o’clock they had all entered the forest, the barge being only able to take some five or six at a time. Zermah saw them go off in small groups, and walk up the other bank; but she could not see the surface of the water.

Texar remained till the last, and then went off, followed by one of the dogs, whose instinct was to be made use of during the expedition. At a sign from his master the other hound returned to the hut, as if he was to be the only guard.

A minute afterwards Zermah saw Texar move up the opposite bank, and stop for an instant to arrange his men. Then, with Squambo at their head, and accompanied by the dog, the men disappeared among the trees. Doubtless one of the negroes had brought back the barge, so that no one could cross over to the island. But the half-breed did not see this.

She, however, hesitated no longer.

Dy had just awoke.

Come, darling," said Zermah.

"Where?" asked the child.

"There! Into the forest! Perhaps we shall find your father — your brother! You are not afraid?"

"Not when you are with me."

Then the half-breed opened the door carefully. As she had heard no noise in the hut, she supposed that Texar was not there.

And she was right She sought about for some weapon of defence. On the table was one of those large knives used by the Indians when hunting. She picked it up and hid it under her clothes; and she took a little dry meat to last her for a few hours.

But the time came for her to leave the wigwam. She looked out through the palisade in the direction of the channel. There was not a living creature in sight.

The half-breed tried to open the outer door.

The door was shut from the outside, and would not give way.

Then Zermah went back to the hut There was only one thing to be done. That was to make use of the hole she had already half made in the wall of her sleeping- room.

The work was easy. She had only to use her knife to cut into the reeds — and this she did with as little noise as possible.

But if the hound that had not gone with Texar were to appear? Would he not throw himself on her and the child?

There was, however, no time to hesitate. The hole was made large enough, and through it Zermah drew the child, whom she passionately embraced as she did so. Dy gave back kiss for kiss; she had understood. It was necessary to escape through this hole.

Zermah glided through and looked to the left, to the right, and listened. Not a sound could she hear.

But soon she heard the bark of a hound. It seemed to come from the west of the island. She picked up the child. Her heart beat ready to burst. She could not think she was safe until she was through the reeds on the opposite river-bank.

But to cross the hundred yards between the wigwam and the stream was the most critical part of the escape. There was a chance of her being seen either by Texar or by the slaves.

Luckily, to the right of the hut was a thicket of arborescent plants and reeds, extending to the bank of the channel, a few yards only from the barge.

Zermah entered the thicket. The plants opened to give passage to the fugitives, and closed behind them. The barking of the dog was heard no longer.

The way through the thicket was not easy. There was but a narrow path between the interlacing shrubs. Zermah's dress was in rags, and her hands were torn. Little did it matter so long as the child was unharmed!

The brave half-breed uttered no complaint, and although Dy often made acquaintance with the thorns, not a cry did she utter.

Although the distance was short, about sixty yards at the outside, it took quite half an hour before the channel was reached.

Zermah then stopped, and though the reeds she looked first at the wigwam, then at the forest.

There was no one to be seen. On the other bank was no sign of Texar and his companions, who were a couple of miles or so away. Unless they met the Northerners they would not be back for some hours.

But Zermah did not believe she had been left alone in the hut. It was not likely that one of the Texars had gone off unseen and taken the dog with him. Besides, had not the half-breed heard the barking — a proof that the hound was still prowling under the trees? Any moment she might see one or the other appear. But if she made haste she might reach the cypress grove.

While she watched the Spaniard’s men in their journey from bank to bank she had not been able to see the surface of the stream, and she supposed that the barge had been brought back by one of the slaves. This was necessary for the safety of the wigwam, in case Captain Howick and his men defeated the Southerners.

But if the barge was on the other side, so as to be ready to help in Texar’s retreat, should he have to retreat? If it were not there, would he not have to find another hiding- place?

But Zermah must have the barge to get across. She could not see it. Where could it be? For half a dozen yards she glided through the reeds. Then she stopped.

The barge was on the other side of the channel.

CHAPTER XV.

THE TWO BROTHERS.

The position was critical. How could she cross? The boldest swimmer could not do it without risking his life a score of times. There were but a hundred feet from bank to bank, but without the boat it was impossible to cross them. Triangular heads appeared every now and then above the surface of the water, and the weeds waved to let the reptiles pass.

Little Dy, almost dead with fright, clung close to Zermah. If she could have saved the child by throwing herself into the thick of this crowd of snakes, who would have closed on to her like the arms of some giant octopus, the half- breed would not have hesitated for a moment!

But only some special intervention of Providence could save her. And Zermah knelt and prayed for help.

Any moment some of Texar’s companions might appear On the edge of the forest. If the Texar remaining on the island went back to the wigwam and missed her, would he not come in pursuit?

“Oh God! have pity on me!”

And as she prayed she looked to the right of the channel.

A gentle current was running through towards the north of the lake, where a few affluents of the small river Calaooschatches flow out to the Gulf of Mexico. It is this river which feeds Lake Okee-cho-bee at the great monthly tides.

A trunk of a tree came drifting along from the right, and had just struck against the bank. Would not this tree afford the means of crossing the channel? Evidently.

In any case if the tree drifted back to the island the fugitives would be no worse off than they were now.

Without stopping to think, Zermah, as i’f by instinct, ran to the floating tree. If she had stopped she might have hesitated at the hundreds of reptiles swarming in the water, and the chance that the weeds would keep the trunk motionless in mid-channel! But anything would be better than remaining on the island! .And so Zermah, with Dy in her arms, climbed along into the branches and pushed off the tree, which immediately began to move with the current.

She tried to hide among the foliage which partly covered it. The banks were deserted. There was no sound from the island or the cypress grove. Once across the channel the half-breed would hide away till night-time, and then enter the forest without being seen. Hope returned to her. She scarcely gave a thought to the reptiles who swam open-mouthed round the tree and glided over its lower branches. The little girl kept her eyes shut as Zermah clasped her to her breast with one hand, while she held the knife in the other ready to defend herself. But whether it was that the monsters feared the sight of the knife, or were only dangerous in the water, they made no attempt to attack her.

At length the tree reached the middle of the stream, and was being steadily borne towards the forest. In a quarter of an hour if it did not get caught in the weeds it would ground on the other bank. And then, great as were the dangers she had to face, Zermah thought herself safe from Texar.

Suddenly she clasped the child more tightly to her.

There was a furious barking on the island. And soon afterwards a dog came bounding along the river-side.

Zermah recognized the hound that the Spaniard had left to guard the wigwam.

With coat bristling with anger and eyes flashing fire, he stood ready to leap among the reptiles that crowded the surface of the water.

At the same moment a man appeared on the bank.

It was the Texar who had stopped on the island. Warned by the dog's bark, he had run up to see what had happened. His rage at finding Zermah and Dy on the drifting tree may be imagined. He could not follow them, for the barge was on the other side of the stream. Only one thing could he do to stop them, and that was to shoot Zermah at the risk of killing the child.

He had brought his gun with him, and he did not hesitate to use it. He took careful aim at the half-breed, who tried to cover the child with her body.

Suddenly the dog in its mad excitement jumped into the water. Texar thought he had better wait to see what it could do.

The hound swam swiftly towards the tree, and Zermah, knife in hand, was ready. But it was not necessary.

In a moment the snakes had twisted themselves on to their prey, and with a few bites from its teeth in answer to those from their venomous fangs the dog had sunk among the weeds.

Texar saw the dog die before he could help it, and now Zermah was escaping him.

“Die then!” he exclaimed.

But the drifting tree had now reached the opposite bank, and the bullet only grazed the half-breed’s shoulder.

Next moment the tree grounded. Zermah carrying the child stepped ashore and vanished into a clump of reeds. Texar fired again, but missed.

She had escaped from the Texar on the island, but she was now in danger of falling into the hands of his brother. Her first endeavour was to get as far from Carneral Island as possible. When night came she would make for Lake Washington. Calling up all her strength and energy, she fled along, running rather than walking, and carrying the child in her arms. Dy’s little legs refused to run on the irregular ground amid the quagmires that sunk like traps, and the roots that grew in such tangled masses as to be impassable for her.

She did not seem to feel the weight of her burden. Sometimes she stopped, less to take breath than to listen to the sounds of the forest. Sometimes she thought she could hear the bark of the other dog that Texar had taken with him. Sometimes she thought she could hear the report of firing in the distance. And she wondered if the Southerners had come up with the Federal detachment. Then, when she had recognized that the noises were but the cries of a bird, or the breaking of some dry branch, she would resume her flight, and full of hope, think nothing of the dangers that threatened her until she reached the sources of the St. John’s.

For an hour she continued to leave Lake Okee-cho-bee, making towards the east, so as to approach the Atlantic shore. It appeared probable to her that ships of the squadron would be cruising off the coast in support of the detachment under Captain Howick.

Suddenly she stopped. This time there could be no mistake. A furious barking was heard under the trees, and it was coming quickly towards her. Zermah recognized the bark as one she had often heard while the dogs kept watch round the Black Creek blockhouse.

“The dog is on our track,” thought she, “and Texar cannot be far off.”

She looked round in search of a thicket, in which she and the child could hide. But the dog was as intelligent as he was fierce, and had been trained to slave-hunting, would he not scent her out?

The barking came nearer and nearer, and shouts could be heard in the distance.

A few yards away stood an old cypress-tree, hollow with age, round which serpentarias and lianas had thrown a thick network of branchlets.

Zermah ran to the hollow, which was just large enough to hold her and the child, while the network of lianas concealed them.

But the dog was on their track. A minute afterwards Zermah saw him in front of the tree. He barked with renewed fury and sprang at the cypress.

A stab with the knife made him retreat; and he began to bark more furiously than ever.

A minute or so afterwards voices were heard — those of Texar and Squambo, among others. It was the Spaniard and his companions who were running to the lake in an endeavour to escape from the Federal detachment which they had unexpectedly met in the cypress grove. and found too strong to resist. Texar's 'object was to get back to Carneral Island by the shortest way, so as to put a ring of water between the Federals and himself. The Federals would not be able to cross it without a boat After a few hours of respite the Southerners could reach the other side of the island, and when night came make use of the barge to land on the southern side of the lake.

When Texar and Squambo reached the cypress-tree in front of which the dog continued to bark, they saw that the ground was red with the blood that flowed from an open wound in the flank.

"Look! look!" exclaimed the Indian.

"Is the dog wounded?" asked Texar.

"Yes! wounded by a knife, and not a minute ago. The blood is still smoking,"

"Who could have done it?"

And here the dog again jumped at the network of foliage which Squambo lifted aside with the butt end of his gun.

"Zermah!" he exclaimed.

"And the child!" said Texar.

"Yes. How did they get away?"

“Kill her! Kill Zermah!”

The half-breed stabbed at the Spaniard, but Squambo snatched away the knife and drew her out from the tree so roughly that the child fell and rolled among a, lot of the giant pezizas, which abound under the cypress-trees.

At the shock, one of the mushrooms exploded like a gun, and a luminous dust crackled in the air. At the same moment other pezizas went off, and there was a noise all round as if the forest were filled with fireworks.

Blinded by the myriad spores, Texar had to leave go of Zermah, and the burning dust in Squambo’s eyes for a moment rendered the Indian powerless. Fortunately the half-breed and child were stretched on the ground, and lay unharmed while the spores crackled above them.

But Zermah could not escape from Texar. Already the air, after a few more explosions, had become breathable. . . Then a new series of reports began, but this time they were the reports of firearms.

It was the Federal detachment come up with the Southerners, whom they surrounded in an instant and ordered to lay down their arms. As the order was given, Texar seized hold of the half-breed and stabbed her in the breast.

“The child! Carry off the child!” shouted the Spaniard to Squambo.

The Indian caught up the girl and had run a stride or two towards the lake, when a gun was fired. He fell dead, shot through the heart by Gilbert Burbank.

For all had come up, James Burbank and Gilbert, and Carrol, and Perry, and Mars, and the blacks from Camdless Bay, and Captain Howick’s seamen, who had made prisoners of the Southerners. Among the prisoners was Texar standing upright by Squambo’s corpse. Only a few of the men had escaped towards Carneral Island.

Dy was in her father’s arms and he was clasping her as tightly as if he feared she was to be again taken away from him. Gilbert and Mars were leaning over Zermah endeavouring to revive her. She still breathed, but she could not speak. Mars held up her head, called to her, kissed her.

She opened her eyes. She saw the child in Mr. Burbank’s arms, recognized Mars covering her with kisses, and smiled. Then her eyelids fell.

Mars stood up, and catching sight of Texar jumped towards him shouting, “Kill Texar! Kill Texar!”

“Stop, Mars,” said Captain Howick, “and let us deal with the scoundrel.”

“Now,” said he, turning towards the Spaniard, “you are Texar of Black Creek.”

“I have nothing to say,” replied Texar.

“James Burbank, Lieutenant Burbank, Edward Carrol, and Mars, all know you and recognize you.”

“Be it so!”

“You are to be shot.”

“Well, shoot!”

Then, to the surprise of all who heard her, Dy said to her father, —

“Father, there are two brothers, two wicked men, who are so much alike — ”

“Two men?”

“Yes! Zermah told me to tell you so.”

It would, perhaps, have been difficult to understand the meaning of these strange words had not the explanation been almost immediately given, and in a very unexpected fashion.

Tcxar had been taken to the foot of a tree. There, looking James Bnrbank in’the face, he stood smoking a cigarette he had just lighted, when, suddenly, as the firing- party formed up, a man leaped past them and stood by the Spaniard’s side.

It was the second Tcxar, whom the men who had reached Carneral Island had told of his brother’s arrest.

The sight of these two men, so like to each other, explained the child’s meaning. Here at last was the explanation of the life of crime and the inexplicable alibis.

But the brother’s intervention could not but cause a certain amount of hesitation in carrying out the commodore’s orders.

The order for immediate execution only referred to the author of the ambuscade in which the officers and men of the Federal boats had perished. The author of the robbery at Camdless Bay and the seizure of the child ought certainly to be taken back to be re-tried at St. Augustine.

But could not both brothers be considered equally responsible for the long series of crimes they had been able to commit with impunity?

Certainly! But out of respect to the law Captain Howick thought it best to put the following question, —

“Which of you was guilty of the massacre at Kissimmee?”

There was no reply.

Evidently the Texars intended to say nothing in reply to the questions put to them.

Zermah alone could tell which was which. The brother who was at Black Creek on the 22nd of March could not be the author of the massacre committed a hundred miles off the same day. Zermah had a means of identifying the man who carried her off. But was she not dead now?

No. Supported by her husband she was seen to come forward. In a voice that could hardly be heard, she said, —

“The man who carried me off is tattooed on the left arm.”

At these words a smile of disdain appeared on the lips of the brothers, who folded up their sleeves and showed on the left arm of each a similar tattoo mark.

At this new impossibility of distinguishing one from the other, Captain Howick thought it was time to bring the scene to a close.

“The author of the massacre at Kissimmee is to be shot. Which of you was it?”

“I was,” said both the brothers together.

That was enough. At the words the firing-party took aim.

There was a flash and a report, and hand in hand the Texars fell.

That was the end of these two men, whose extraordinary resemblance had enabled them for so many years to commit crime with impunity. The only human sentiment they could be credited with was this savage friendship of brother to brother which had been theirs till death.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE civil war continued with varying fortune. Some things had recently happened of which James Burbank had not heard since his departure from Camdless Bay, and which he only knew when he got back.

During this time it seemed as though the advantage rested with the Confederates round Corinth, while the Federals occupied the position of Pittsburg Landing. The Southern army had Johnston as general-in-chief, and under him were Beauregard, Harder, Braxton-Wragg, and Bishop Polk, an old pupil at West Point; and these cleverly profited by the shortsightedness of the Northerners, who, on the 5th of April, were surprised at Shiloh. The result of that surprise was the dispersal of Peabody's brigade and the retreat of Sherman. The Confederates, however, paid cruelly for their success, the heroic Johnston being killed as he repulsed the Federal army.

Such was the first day of the battle of the 5th of April. The day but one after there was another fight along the whole line, and Sherman retook Shiloh. In their turn the Confederates had to retreat before the soldiers of Grant. The struggle was a sanguinary one; out of eighty thousand men engaged, twenty thousand were wounded or killed.

This was the last news of the war that James Burbank and his companions heard the morning after their return to Castle House, on the 7th of April.

After the execution of the Texars they had accompanied Captain Howick and his prisoners to the coast. At Cape Malabar one of the vessels of the flotilla had been stationed to cruise off the coast, and in her they were taken to St Augustine. Thence a gunboat took them from Picolata to Camdless Bay.

And so all got back to Castle House — even Zermah, who had recovered from her wounds. Carried to the Federal vessel by Mars and his companions, she had had every attention, and in her happiness at having saved little Dy, and restored her to those who loved her, how could she die?

Mrs. Burbank, with her child near her, gradually recovered her health. With her had she not her husband, her son, Alice (soon to become her daughter), Zermah, and Mars? And she had nothing to fear henceforth from the scoundrel, or rather, two scoundrels, whose chief accomplices were in Federal hands.

But a rumour was abroad which, it will be remembered, was mentioned by the brothers at their interview at Carneral Island. It was said that the Northerners were to abandon Jacksonville; that Dupont, confining himself to the blockade of the coast, was to withdraw the gunboats that assured the safety of the St. John's. This plan would evidently jeopardize the safety of the planters who held anti-slavery notions, and especially James Burbank.

The rumour was well founded. On the 8th of April, the day after that on which the family returned to Castle House, the Federals began the evacuation of Jacksonville. A few of the inhabitants, who were favourable to the Unionist cause, thought it better to leave the town, some for Port Royal, others for New York.

James Burbank did not think it necessary to follow their example. The negroes had returned to the plantation, not as slaves, but as free men, and their presence would assure the safety of Camdless Bay. The war had entered on a favourable phase for the North, and this allowed of Gilbert remaining on leave at Castle House to celebrate his marriage with Alice Stannard.

The work on the plantation was recommenced. There was no question of putting in force against Mr. Burbank the order expelling the freed slaves from Fleridan territory. Texar and his companions were no longer at hand to raise the populace, and the gunboats on the coast would promptly re-establish order at Jacksonville.

The war dragged on for three more years, and even Florida was destined to receive a few more of its counter- effects. In the month of September of this same year Dupont's flotilla appeared at St. John's Bluffs, near the mouth of the river, and Jacksonville was occupied for the second time. Later on it was occupied by General Seymour for a third time, after a trifling resistance.

On the ist of January, 1863, a proclamation by President Lincoln abolished slavery in all the States of the Union. But the war did not end till the 9th of April, 1865. On that day, at Appomattox Court House, General Lee surrendered with his whole army to General Grant, under a capitulation which did honour to both parties.

The sanguinary struggle of North against South had lasted four years. It had cost two thousand seven hundred millions of dollars, and killed more than half a million of men; but slavery was abolished throughout North America. And by it was assured the indivisibility of the Republic of the United States, thanks to the efforts of those Americans whose ancestors a century before had freed their country in the War of Independence.

THE END

TWO YEARS HOLIDAY

Anonymous translation, 1889

Also known as *Adrift in the Pacific*, this adventure novel was first published in 1888. It concerns the fortunes of a group of schoolboys stranded on a deserted island in the South Pacific, and of their struggles to overcome adversity. As with most of Verne's works, it was serialised in parts in the *Extraordinary Journeys* section of the French *Magasin d'Éducation et de Récréation* by Parisian publisher Hetzel.

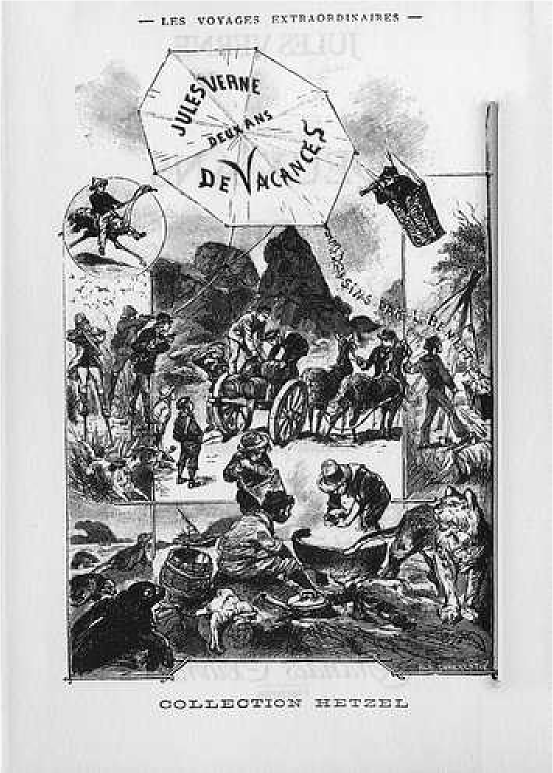

— LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES —

JULES VERNE

DEUX ANS

DE VACANCES

DESSINS PAR L. BENETT

COLLECTION HETZEL

The original title page

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PART I

CHAPTER I

THE STORM

IT was the 9th of March, 1860, and eleven o’clock at night. The sea and sky were as one, and the eye could pierce but a few fathoms into the gloom. Through the raging sea, over which the waves broke with a livid light, a little ship was driving under almost bare poles.

She was a schooner of a hundred tons. Her name was the *Sleuth*, but you would have sought it in vain on her stern, for an accident of some sort had torn it away.

In this latitude, at the beginning of March, the nights are short. The day would dawn about five o’clock. But would the dangers that threatened the schooner grow less when the sun illumined the sky? Was not the frail vessel at the mercy of the waves? Undoubtedly; and only the calming of the billows and the lulling of the gale could save her from that most awful of shipwrecks — foundering in the open sea far from any coast on which the survivors might find safety.

In the stern of the schooner were three boys, one about fourteen, the two others about thirteen years of age; these, with a young negro some twelve years old, were at the wheel, and, with their united strength, strove to check the lurches which threatened every instant to throw the vessel broadside on. It was a difficult task, for the wheel seemed as though it would turn in spite of all they could do, and hurl them against the bulwarks. Just before midnight such a wave came thundering against the stern that it was a wonder the rudder was not unshipped. The boys were thrown backwards by the shock, but they recovered themselves almost immediately.

“Does she still steer?” asked one of them.

“Yes, Gordon,” answered Briant, who had coolly resumed his place. “Hold on tight, Donagan,” he continued, “and don’t be afraid. There are others besides ourselves to look after. You are not hurt, Moko?”

“No, Massa Briant,” answered the boy. “But we must keep the yacht before the wind, or we shall be pooped.”

At this moment the door of the companion leading to the saloon was thrown open. Two little heads appeared above the level of the deck, and with them came up the genial face of a dog, who saluted with a loud, “Whough! whough!”

“Briant! Briant!” shouted one of the youngsters. “What is the matter?”

“Nothing, Iverson, nothing!” returned Briant. “Get down again with Dole, and look sharp!”

“We are awfully frightened down here,” said the other boy, who was a little younger. “All of you?” asked Donagan. “Yes; all of us!” said Dole.

“Well, get back again,” said Briant. “Shut up; get under the clothes; shut your eyes; and nothing will hurt you. There is no danger!”

“Look out,” said Moko. “Here’s another wave!” A violent blow shook the yacht’s stern. This time fortunately the wave did not come on board, for if the water had swept down the companion, the yacht would have been swamped.

“Get back, will you?” shouted Gordon. “Go down; or I’ll come after you!”

“Look here!” said Briant, rather more gently.” Go down, you young ‘uns.”

The two heads disappeared, and at the same moment another boy appeared in the doorway. “Do you want us, Briant?”

“No, Baxter,” said Briant. “Let you and Cross and Webb and Service and Wilcox stop with the little ones! We four can manage.”

Baxter shut the door from within. “Yes, all of us,” Dole had said. But were there only little boys on board this schooner thus driven before the storm? Yes, only boys! And how many were there? Fifteen, counting Gordon, ““Briant, Donagan, and the negro. How came they to be here? That you shall know shortly.

Was there not a man on the yacht? Not a captain to look after it? Not a sailor to give a hand in its management? Not a helmsman to steer in such a storm? No! Not one!

And more than that — there was not a person on board who knew the schooner’s position on the ocean! And what ocean? The largest of all, the Pacific, which stretches for 6000 miles from Australia and New Zealand to the coast of South America.

What, then, had happened? Had the schooner’s crew disappeared in some catastrophe? Had the Malay pirates carried them off and left on board only this batch of boys from fourteen downwards? A yacht of a hundred tons ought to have a captain, a mate, and five or six men, and of these all that had been left was the nigger boy!

Where did the schooner come from? From what Australian port or Oceanic archipelago did she hail? How long had she been at sea? Whither was she bound? The boys would probably have been able to answer these questions had they been asked them by any captain speaking the schooner on her course; but there was no vessel in sight, neither steamer nor sailing-ship, and had there been one, she would have had quite enough to do to look after herself, without giving assistance to this yacht that the sea was throwing about like a raft.

Briant and his friends did their utmost to keep the schooner straight ahead.

“What is to be done?” asked Donagan.

“All we can to save ourselves. Heaven helping us,” answered Briant, although even the most energetic man might have despaired under such circumstances, for the storm was increasing in violence.

The gale blew in thunderclaps, as the sailors say, and the expression was only too true. The schooner had lost her mainmast, gone about four feet above the partners, so that no trysail could be set under which she might have been more easily steered. The foremast still held, but the shrouds had stretched, and every minute it threatened to crash on to the deck. The fore-staysail had been split to ribbons, and kept up a constant cracking, as if a rifle were being fired. The only sail that remained sound was the foresail, and this seemed as though it would go every moment, for the boys had not been strong enough to manage the last reef. If it were to go, the schooner could not be kept before the wind, the waves would board her over the quarter, and she would go down.

Not an island had been sighted; and there could be no continent yet awhile to the eastward. To run ashore was a terrible thing to do, but the boys did not fear its terrors so much as those of this interminable sea. A lee shore, with its shoals, its breakers, the terrible waves roaring on to it, and beaten into surf by the rocks, might, they thought, prove safe enough to them; at least it would be firm ground, and not this raging ocean, which any minute might open under their feet. And so they looked ahead for some light to which they could steer.

But there was no light in that thick darkness!

Suddenly, about one o’clock, a fearful crash was heard above the roaring of the storm.

“There goes the foremast!” said Donagan.

“No,” said Moko; “it is the foresail blown out of the bolt ropes!”

“We must clear it,” said Briant. “You remain at the wheel, Gordon, with Donagan; and Moko, come and help me.”

Briant was not quite ignorant of things nautical. On his voyage out from Europe he had crossed the North Atlantic and Pacific, and had learnt a little seamanship, and that was why his companions, who knew none whatever, had left the schooner in his and Moko’s hands.

Briant and the negro rushed forward. At all costs the foresail must be cut adrift, for it had caught and was bellying out in such a way that the schooner was in danger of capsizing, and if that happened she could never be righted, unless the mast were cut away and the wire shrouds broken, and how could the boys manage that?

Briant and Moko set to work” with remarkable judgment. Their object was to keep as much sail on the schooner as possible, so as to steer her before the wind as long as the storm lasted. They slacked off the halliards and let the sail down to within four or five feet of the deck, and they cut off the torn strips with their knives, secured the lower corners, and made all snug. Twenty times, at least, were they in danger of being swept away by the waves.

Under her very small spread of canvas the schooner.-fluid still be kept on her course, and though the wind had *To* little to take hold of, she was driven along at the speed of a torpedo-boat. The faster she went the better. Her safety depended on her going faster than the waves, so that none could follow and board her.

Briant and Moko were making their way back to the wheel when the door of the companion again Opened. A boy's head again appeared. This time it was Jack, Briant's brother, and three years his junior.

“What do you want, Jack?” asked his brother.

“Come here I Come here!” said Jack. “There's water in the saloon.”

Briant rushed down the companionstaire. The saloon was confusedly lighted by a lamp, which the rolling swung backwards and forwards. Its light revealed a dozen boys lounging on the couches around. The youngest — there were some as young as eight — were huddling against each other in fear.

“There is no danger,” said Briant, wishing to give them confidence. “We are all right. Don't be afraid.”

Then holding a lighted lantern to the floor, he saw that some water was washing from side to side.

Whence came this water? Did it come from a leak? That must be ascertained at once.

Forward of the saloon was the day-saloon, then the dining saloon, and then the crew’s quarters.

Briant went through these in order, and found that the water had been taken in from the seas dashing over the bows, down the fore-companion, which had not been quite closed, and that it had been run aft by the pitching of the ship. There was thus no danger on this head.

Briant stopped to cheer up his companions as he went back through the saloon, and then returned to his place at the helm. The schooner was very strongly built, and had only just been re-coppered, so that she might withstand the waves for some time.

It was then about one o’clock. The darkness was darker than ever, and the dark clouds still gathered; and more furiously than ever raged the storm. The yacht seemed to be rushing through a liquid mass that flowed above, beneath, and around her. The shrill cry of the petrel was heard in the air. Did its appearance mean that ‘and was near? No; for it is often met with hundreds of miles at sea. And, in truth, these birds of the storm found themselves powerless to straggle against the aerial current, and by it were borne along like the schooner.

An hour later there was another report from the bow. What remained of the foresail had been split to ribbons, and the strips flew off into space like huge seagulls.

“We have no sail left!” exclaimed Donagan; “and it is impossible for us to set another.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” said Briant. “We shall not get along so fast, that is all!”

“What an answer!” replied Donagan. “If that is your style of seamanship — ”

“Look out for the wave astern!” said Moko. “Lash yourselves, or you’ll be swept overboard — — ”

The boy had not finished the sentence when several tons of water came with a leap over the taffrail. Briant, Donagan, and Gordon were hurled against the companion, to which they managed to cling. But the negro had disappeared in the wave which had swept the deck from stern to bow, carrying away the binnacle, a lot of spare spars, and the three boats which were swinging to the davits inboard. The deck was cleared at one blow, but the water almost instantly flowed off, and the yacht was saved from sinking beneath the flood.

“Moko! Moko!” shouted Briant, as soon as he could speak.

“See if he’s gone overboard,” said Donagan. “No,” said Gordon, leaning out to leeward. “No, I don’t see him, and I don’t hear him.”

“We must save him! Throw him a buoy! Throw him a rope!” said Briant.

And in a voice that rang clearly out in a few seconds of calm, he shouted again — “Moko! Moko!”

“Here! Help!” replied the negro. “He is not in the sea,” said Gordon. “ His voice comes from the bow.”

“I’ll save him,” said Briant.

And he crept forward along the heaving, slippery deck, avoiding as best we might the blocks swinging from the ropes that were all adrift. The boy’s voice was heard again, and then all was silent. By great effort Briant reached the fore-companion.

He shouted. There was no response. Had Moko been swept away into the sea since he uttered his last cry? If so, he must be far astern now, for the waves could not carry him along as fast as the schooner was going. And then he was lost.

No! A feeble cry reached Briant, who hurried to the windlass in the frame of which the foot of the bowsprit was fitted. There he found the negro stuck in the very angle of the bow. A halliard was tightening every instant round his neck. He had been saved by it when the wave was carrying him away. Was he now to be strangled by it?

Briant opened his knife, and, with some difficulty, managed to cut the rope. Moko was then dragged aft, and as soon as he had recovered strength enough to speak, “Thanks, Massa Briant,” he said, and immediately resumed his place at the wheel, where the four did their utmost to keep the yacht safe from the enormous waves that now ran behind them, for the waves now ran faster than the yacht, and could easily board her as they passed. But what could be done? It was impossible to set the least scrap of sail.

In the southern hemisphere the month of March corresponds to that of September in the northern, and the nights are shorter than the days. About four o’clock the horizon would grow grey in the east, whither the schooner was being borne. With daybreak the storm might lull. Perhaps land might be in sight, and the fate of the schooner’s passengers be settled in a few minutes!

About half-past four a diffused light began to appear overhead. Unfortunately the mist limited the range of view to less than a quarter of a mile. The clouds swept by with terrible rapidity. The storm had lost nothing of its fury; and but a short distance off the sea was hidden by the veil of spray from the raging waves. The schooner, at one moment mounting the wave-crest, at the next hurled into the trough, would have been shattered to pieces again and again had she touched the ground.

The four boys looked out at the chaos of wild water; they felt that if the calm was long in coming their situation would be desperate. It was impossible that the schooner could float for another day, for the waves would assuredly sweep away the companions and swamp her.

But suddenly there came a cry from Moko of “Land! Land!”

Through a rift in the mist the boy thought he had seen the outline of a coast to the eastward. Was he mistaken? Nothing is more difficult than to recognize the vague lineaments of land, which are so easily confounded with those of the clouds.

“Land!” exclaimed Briant.

“Yes,” replied Moko. “Land! to the eastward.” And he pointed towards a part of the horizon now hidden by a mass of vapours.

“Are you sure?” asked Donagan. “Yes! — Yes! — Certain!” said Moko. “If the mist opens again you look — -there — a little to the right of the foremast — Look I look!”

The mist began to open and rise from the sea. A few moments more and the ocean reappeared for several miles in front of the yacht.

“Yes! Land! It is really land!” shouted Briant. “And land that is very low,” added Gordon, who had just caught sight of the indicated coast.

There was now no room for doubt. A land — continent, or island — lay some five or six miles ahead, along a large segment of the horizon. In the direction she was going, and which the storm would not allow her to deviate from, the schooner would be driven on it in less than an hour. That she would be smashed, particularly if breakers stopped her before she reached the shore, there was every reason to fear. But the boys did not give that a thought. In this land, which had offered itself so unexpectedly to their sight, they saw, they could only see, a means of safety.

And now the wind blew with still greater strength, the schooner, carried along like a feather, was hurled towards the coast, which stood out like a line of ink on the whitish waste of sky. In the background was a cliff, from a hundred and fifty to two hundred feet high; in the foreground was a yellowish beach ending towards the right in a rounded mass which seemed to belong to a forest further inland.

Ah! If the schooner could reach the sandy beach without meeting with a line of reefs, if the mouth of a river would only offer a refuge, her passengers might perhaps escape safe and sound!

Leaving Donagan, Gordon, and Moko at the helm, Briant went forward and examined the land which he was nearing so rapidly. But in vain did he look for some place in which the yacht could be run ashore without risk. There was the mouth of no river or stream, not even a sandbank, on which they could run her aground; but there was a line of breakers with the black heads of rock rising amid the undulations of the surge, where at the first shock the schooner would be wrenched to pieces.

It occurred to Briant that it would be better for all his friends to be on deck when the crash came, and opening the companion-door he shouted down — “ Come on deck, every one of you! “Immediately out jumped the dog, and then the eleven boys one after the other, the smallest at the sight of the mighty waves around them beginning to yell with terror.

It was a little before six in the morning when the schooner reached the first line of breakers.

“Hold on, all of you!” shouted Briant, stripping off half his clothes, so as to be ready to help those whom the surf swept away, for the vessel would certainly strike.

Suddenly there came a shock. The schooner had grounded under the stern. But the hull was not damaged, and no water rushed in. A second wave took her fifty feet further, just skimming the rocks that ran above the water- level in quite a thousand places. Then she heeled over to port and remained motionless, surrounded by the boiling surf.

She was not in the open sea, but she was a quarter of a mile from the beach.

CHAPTER II

THE WRECK

THE veil of mist had gone, and the eye could range over a wide expanse round the schooner. The clouds still chased each other with extreme rapidity, and the storm had lost none of its strength. But it might be its last great effort so far as concerned this unknown land in the Pacific. It was to be hoped so, for the state of affairs was as perilous now as it had been during the night, when the schooner was writhing in the open sea. Huddled together, the boys might well think themselves lost, as wave after wave came dashing against the nettings and covering them with spray. The shocks were so violent that the schooner could not possibly endure them long. But though at every blow she quivered in her frame, there did not seem to be a plank started from the time she grounded until she was thrust amid this rocky frame. Briant and Gordon had been below and reported that the water had not gained entry to the hull; and they did their best to cheer up their comrades — particularly the little ones.

“Don’t be afraid,” said Briant. “The yacht is strongly built; the coast is near. Wait, and we will try to reach the shore.”

“And why wait?” asked Donagan.

“Yes — why?” added another boy, about twelve years old named Wilcox. “Donagan is right. Why wait?”

“Because the sea is too high at present, and we should be thrown out among the rocks,” answered Briant.

“And if the yacht goes to pieces?” asked a third boy, named Webb, who was about the same age as Wilcox.

“I do not think there is much fear of that,” said Briant; “at least till the tide turns. When it goes out we can see about saving ourselves.”

Briant was right. Although the tides are not very considerable in the Pacific, their range is enough to cause an appreciable difference of level between high and low water. There would therefore be an advantage in waiting a few hours, particularly if the wind dropped. The ebb might leave a part of the reef dry, and it would then be less dangerous to leave the schooner and easier to cross the quarter of a mile which separated her from the beach.

Reasonable as was this advice, Donagan and two or three others were not prepared to follow it; and they formed a small crowd in the bow and talked in whispers. During the schooner’s passage they had consented to obey Briant’s orders, on account of his knowledge of seamanship, but they had always intended to resume their freedom of action once they got ashore. And this was particularly the case with Donagan, who, in respect of education and ability, considered himself a long way the superior of Briant and the rest. Briant happened to be of French birth, and, not unnaturally, the English were by no means disposed to knock under to him.

So Donagan, Wilcox, Webb, and Cross stood in the bow and looked away across the sheet of foam, dotted with eddies, furrowed with currents which looked dangerous enough to satisfy any of them. The most skilful swimmer would have struggled in vain against the troubled tide that ebbed in the teeth of the boisterous wind. The advice to wait for an hour or two was only too sensible, and Donagan and his supporters had to yield to the evidence of their own eyes, and returned to the stern among the younger boys, just as Briant was saying to them —

“Above all things, do not separate! Let us keep together, or we are lost.”

“Do you presume to lay down the law for us?” exclaimed Donagan.

“I presume nothing,” said Briant, “except what is for the safety of all.”

“Briant is right,” said Gordon, who never spoke without thinking, and took things generally in a cool, quiet sort of way.

“Yes! yes!” joined in two or three of the youngsters, who felt drawn towards Briant by a secret instinct.

Donagan did not reply, but he and his friends kept away from the rest, and waited till it was time to begin work at saving themselves.

And now what was the land? Did it belong to one of the isles of the Pacific Ocean or to some continent? The question could not be answered, for the schooner was too near the shore for a long enough section of the coast-line to be seen. She was aground in a large bay, ended by two capes — that towards the north being high and hilly, that towards the south a long low spur. But beyond these capes did the sea run off as if to surround an island?

If it happened to be an island, how were the boys to get away if they failed to float the schooner, which at high water might possibly be dashed to pieces on the reef? And if the island were a desert one — and there axe such in the Pacific — how could these lads support existence for any time on the provisions they might save from the wreck”?

On a continent the chances of safety would be much greater, for the continent could be no other than South America. There, in either Chili or Bolivia, they would surely find assistance, if not immediately, at least within a few days of their getting to land. It is true that if the coast were that of the Pampas, some awkward adventures were to be feared.

At the present moment the main question was, how were they to get ashore? The weather was clear enough for all the details of the coast to be made out — the beach, the cliff behind, the clumps of trees at the base of the cliff — all were plain to see. Briant even saw the mouth of a small river some way to the right of them. The aspect of the coast was not attractive, but the curtain of verdure indicated a certain amount of fertility; and beyond the cliff, and sheltered from the sea breezes, the soil might be better, and perhaps capable of tillage.

There was no sign that the land was inhabited. There was no house or hut, not even at the mouth of the river. The natives, if there were any, might perhaps prefer to live away from the shore, where they were exposed to such boisterous winds from the westward.

“I see no smoke,” said Briant, lowering the binocular.

“And there is no boat on the beach,” said Moko.

“How could there be, if there is no harbour?” asked Donagan.

“It is not necessary that there should be a harbour,” said Gordon. “Fishing-boats could lay up the river mouth, and it might be that the storm has obliged the people to take them up the river.”

Gordon’s observation was true enough, but, anyhow, there was no sign of a boat to be seen, and the whole coast seemed uninhabited.

The tide was going out — very slowly, it is true — for the wind drove it back. But the wind was falling and edging more to the north-west, and everything ought to be in readiness when the reef offered a practicable passage.

It was nearly seven o’clock. Every one was busy bringing up on deck such things as were of first importance, leaving the others to be collected when the sea washed them ashore. There was on board a large store of preserved provisions, and some of them were made up into packages for the older boys to take with them. But for this to be done the reef ought to be dry. Would the tide be low enough to leave the beach dry up to the rocks? Anxiously did Briant and Gordon watch the sea. With the change in the wind it had become calmer, and the boiling of the surf began to subside; and it was now easy to note the decrease of the water round the pointed rocks. The schooner showed the effects of this decrease by giving a stronger list to port; and it was to be feared, if the heeling continued, that she would go right over on her side, for she was narrow and deep, like all modern yachts of high speed. If she did so, if the water reached the deck before the boys could leave her, matters would be serious.

What a pity it was that the boats had been carried away in the storm! They were large enough to hold all on board, and in them Briant and his comrades could have tried to reach the shore, and afterwards take many things from the wreck, which would now have to be left. If the schooner broke up during the night, would the wreckage be of use to them after it had been knocked about among the rocks? What would become of the provisions? Would the boys have to trust to the productions of the island for their food? It was indeed a pity that they had lost the boats.

Suddenly there was a shout in the bow. Baxter had made an important discovery. The yawl, instead of being washed away, was foul of the bowsprit and uninjured. It could only hold five or six, it is true, but it would be of great service if the tide did not run out far enough to leave a dry passage to land.

But here again a discussion broke out in which Briant and Donagan took opposite sides. In fact, as soon as the yawl was found, Donagan, Wilcox, Webb, and Cross had taken possession of her.

“What are you doing?” asked Briant.

“What we choose,” answered Wilcox.

“Are you going off in that boat?”

“Yes,” said Donagan, “and it will take more than you to stop us.”

“I will stop you,” said Briant; “I and those you are going to leave behind.”

“Leave behind!” said Donagan contemptuously. “That is what you think, is it? I am going to leave nobody behind, you see! We are going to the beach, and then one of us will bring the yawl back — ”

“And if you cannot get back?” said Briant, with difficulty keeping his temper. “If she gets stove on the rocks? — ”

“Come on!” said Webb, pushing Briant aside, and “let us get her off”!

Briant caught hold of the boat as they were trying to launch her.

“You shall not go,” he said.

“We’ll see about that,” said Donagan.

“You shall not go,” said Briant. “This boat is for the youngsters, if the tide is not low enough to let them walk ashore.”

“Leave it alone,” said Donagan angrily. “I tell you, Briant, you shall not stop us.”

“And I tell you, Donagan that I shall.”

There was to be a fight over it, evidently. Wilcox, Webb, and Cross took Donagan’s part; Baxter, Service, and Garnett were backing up Briant, when Gordon intervened. He was the oldest and coolest of the lot, and he showed his good sense by intervening in favour of Briant.

“Come, come, Donagan, don’t be so impatient! Can’t you see the water is very rough, and that there is a chance of your losing the boat?”

“I will not stand Briant domineering over us as he has been doing lately,” said Donagan.

“Hear! hear!” said Cross and Webb.

I am domineering over nobody,” said Briant; “but I will not let anybody act for himself at the expense of all the others.”

“We think just as much of the others as you do,” said Donagan; “and when we are ashore — ”

“Which we are not just yet!” said Gordon. “Come, Donagan, don’t be obstinate; leave the boat alone till there is a better chance.”

The efforts of the peacemaker were successful — as they had been more than once before — and the boys left the boat for a time.

The tide had now gone down a couple of feet. Was” there a channel through the breakers? Briant went forward to see. Mounting the starboard shrouds, he sat on the cross-trees. Through the reef there was a channel, which could be traced by the points of rock sticking up out of the water on each side. But there were too many eddies along it at present to think of venturing through it in the boat. Better wait a little until the outgoing tide had left it practicable.

From the cross-trees Briant carefully reconnoitred the coast in front of him. There were no signs of inhabitants in the bay, which from point to point was about eight miles long.

After being aloft half an hour, Briant returned to report what he had seen. Donagan and his supporters listened without saying anything. Not so Gordon, who asked —

“It was about six o’clock, was it not, when the yacht grounded?”

“Yes,” said Briant.

“And how long is the tide running out?”

“Five hours, I think. Isn’t it, Moko?” replied Briant.

“Yes, five or six hours,” said Moko.

“That would make it eleven,” said Gordon, “for the best time for us to try.”

“That is what I thought,” said Briant.

“Well, let us have all ready by then,” said Gordon. “And now let us have something to eat. If we have to take to the water, let it be some time after we have had a meal."

The suggestion was received with much applause, and acted upon immediately. With the biscuits and the jam the youngsters forgot their troubles, and as they had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours, they ate away steadily as if they never intended to stop.

After a time Briant went to the bow and took another long look at the rocks.

How slowly the tide seemed to go out! And yet the depth of water must be decreasing, for the yacht heeled over more and more. Moko got out the lead-line and found he touched bottom at eight feet. Would the schooner be left high and dry? Moko did not think: o, and he took an opportunity of telling Briant so on the quiet, so as to alarm nobody. Briant went and consulted with Gordon. Evidently the northerly wind prevented the tide running out as far as usual in calm weather.

"What is to be done?" said Gordon.

"I don't know," said Briant. "What a nuisance it is that we are only boys when we ought to be men!"

"It is rather!" said Gordon. "But necessity, you know, may bring us up to the mark. Never despair! we shall be all right if we are useful. We must co something."

"Yes; we must do something. If we don't get away from the ship before the tide comes back, we are done for.’’

"That is true enough, for she'll go to pieces. We must leave her somehow."

"Yes, somehow!"

"Couldn't we make a raft?"

"I thought of that, but nearly all the spars went overboard in the storm. We cannot break up the deck to make a raft with the planks, for we have no time. There is only the boat, and the sea's too rough for her. All I can see is to get a rope across the reef, and fasten it to one of those rocks over there. We might get them all ashore that way."

"Who'll take the rope?"

"I will," said Briant.

"I'll help you," said Gordon.

"No. I'll go alone."

"Won't you take the boat?"

"That would risk losing her. Better keep her as a last resource."

But before starting on this dangerous plan Briant took another precaution. There were a few life-belts on board, and these he got up from below, and made the smaller boys put on. If they had to leave the wreck while the water was too deep for them to wade, the belts would keep them afloat, and the bigger boys, as they clung to the rope, could push them ashore.

It was then a quarter-past ten. In forty-five minutes it would be low water. At the schooner's bow there was not more than four or five feet of water; but it seemed as though only a few inches more would run out. Sixty yards away the water shallowed considerably, as could seen by its colour, and by the numerous rocks sticking up out of it. To cross this sixty yards was the difficulty. If Briant could get a rope firmly fixed to one of the pointed rocks, and stretch it taut with the help of the windlass, all would get off in safety. And along the rope they could slide the packages of provisions and other articles from the wreck. But it was a risky undertaking, and Briant would allow no one to attempt it but himself.

He chose a rope of moderate size, and, slipping off his clothes, tied it round his waist.

Now, come along there," said Gordon. " Stand by to pay out the rope."

Donagan and his friends came forward with the rest, and stood ready to slack the rope out gently from the coil so as to ease off the weight as much as possible.

As Briant was about to plunge into the sea his brother ran up, crying —

"My brother I My brother!"

"Don't be afraid. Jack, don't be afraid for me!" was the reply, and in another moment Briant was on the surface of the sea, swimming strongly with the rope behind him.

In a calm the task would not have been easy, for the surf beat furiously among the rocks. Currents and counter-currents prevented the brave boy from keeping a straight line, and when he entered them he could with difficulty make his way through. Gradually he made his way towards the beach, but it was evident that his strength was failing him. He had not gone twenty yards from the schooner when he entered a whirlpool caused by the meeting of two streams of surf. If he could get round it or through it, all might be well, for the sea beyond was calm. He tried to pass it on the left hand, but the attempt was a failure. A strong swimmer in the pride of life would have tried in vain. The whirlpool seized him, and drew him irresistibly to the centre.

“Help! Pull! Pull!” he shouted, and then he disappeared.

On the yacht terror was at its height.

“Haul away!” said Gordon coolly.

And the boys hauled as if for their fives, and in less than a minute Briant was on board — unconscious, it is true, but soon brought back to life in his brother’s arms.

That attempt had failed. What was to be done now? Were they to wait? To wait for what? Help? And where was help to come from?

It was now past noon, and the tide began to make, and the surf increased as the water rose. And as it was new moon the tide would be higher than the evening before. And the wind had gone down but little; and the schooner might be lifted from its rocky bed, and strike again, and be shattered on the reef! And no one would survive! And yet nothing could be done!

In the stern the young boys gathered round the older ones, and watched the waters rise, and the rocks disappear in turn beneath the surf. The wind had gone round to the west again, and beat full on the shore. As the water deepened the waves rose, and rolled and broke up against her. By two o’clock the schooner had recovered from her heel and was upright, and her bow was free, and being dashed up and down on the rocks, while her stern remained firmly fixed. Soon she began to roll from side to side, and the boys had to cling together to prevent being thrown overboard. Suddenly a foaming mountain came rolling in from the open sea, and rose a few feet from the stern of the yacht. It was over twenty feet high; it came with the fury of a torrent; it covered the reef; if lifted the schooner from the rocks, and without even grazing them swept her onward: in less than a minute, amid the roaring mass of water, the wreck was carried to the beach, and laid on the sand within a couple of hundred feet of the trees at the foot of the cliff. And there it remained, while the sea flowed back and left it high and dry.

CHAPTER III

CAST ADRIFT

AT the time of our story, Charman’s boarding-school was one of the largest in Auckland, New Zealand. It boasted about a hundred pupils belonging to the best families in the colony, and the course of study and the management were the same as in high-class schools at home.

The archipelago of New Zealand has two principal islands, the North Island and the Middle Island, separated by Cook Strait. It lies between the thirty-fourth and fifty-fifth parallels of south latitude — a position equivalent to that part of the northern hemisphere occupied by France and Northern Africa. The North Island is much cut into at its southern end, and forms an irregular trapezium prolonged at its north-western angle and terminated by the North Cape and Cape Van Diemen. Just where the curve begins, and where the peninsula is only a few miles across, the town of Auckland is situated. Its position is similar to that of Corinth in Greece, and to that fact is due its name of the Corinth of the South, It has two harbours, one on the west, one on the east, the latter on Hauraki Gulf being rather shallow, so that long piers have had to be built into it where the smaller vessels can unload. One of these piers is Commercial Pier at the foot of Queen Street; and about half-way up Queen Street was Charman’s school.

On the 15th of February, 1860, in the afternoon, a crowd of boys and their relatives came out of the schoolhouse into Queen Street, merry and happy as birds just escaped from their cage. It was the beginning of the holidays. -Two months of independence; two months’ of liberty! And for some of the boys there was the prospect of a sea voyage which had been talked about in school for months. How the others envied those who were to go on this cruise in which New Zealand was to be circumnavigated! The schooner had been chartered by the boys' friends, and fitted out for a voyage of six weeks. She belonged to the father of one of the boys, Mr. William H. Garnett, an old merchant captain in whom every confidence was felt. A subscription had been raised among the parents to cover the expenses; and great was the joy of the young folks, who would have found it difficult to spend their holidays better.

The fortunate boys came from all of the first forms of the school, and as we have seen, were of all ages from ‘ eight to fourteen. With the exception of the Briants who were French, and Gordon who was an American, they were all English.

Donagan and Cross were the sons of rich landholders, who occupy the highest social rank in New Zealand. They were cousins; both were a little over thirteen and both were in the fifth form. Donagan was somewhat of a dandy, and was undoubtedly the most prominent pupil in the school. He was clever and hardworking, and by his fondness for study and his desire to excel, he easily maintained his position. A certain aristocratic arrogance had gained him the nickname of Lord Donagan, and his imperious character led him to strive to command wherever he was placed. Hence between him and Briant there had sprung up this rivalry, which had become keener than ever since circumstances had increased Briant's influence over his companions. Cross was a very ordinary sort of boy, distinguished by a constant admiration for everything his cousin said or did.

Baxter was also a fifth-form boy. He was thirteen years of age, a cool, thoughtful, ingenious fellow, who could do almost anything with his hands. He was the son of a merchant who was not particularly well off.

Webb and Wilcox, who were both about twelve and a half, were in the fourth form. They were not particularly bright, and were rather inclined to be quarrelsome. On one thing they prided themselves; that was their intimate knowledge of faggism in all its branches. Every information on the fag, and how to treat him, was to be obtained gratis from Messrs. Webb and Wilcox. Their fathers were wealthy men, and held high rank among the magistracy of the colony.

Garnett and Service were in the third form,, They were both twelve years old. One was the son of a retired merchant captain, the other's father was a well-to-do colonist living on the North Shore, on the upper coast of Waitemata Harbour. The families were very intimate, and Service and Garnett were almost inseparable. They were good-hearted boys, not over fond of work, and if they had been given the key of the fields, they would not have let it rest idle in their pockets. Garnett had an overmastering passion — he loved an accordion! And he took it with him on board the yacht, to occupy his spare time in a way befitting a sailor's son. Service was the school wag, the liveliest and noisiest of the lot, a devourer of travellers' tales, and a worshipper of "Robinson Crusoe "and the "Swiss Family Robinson," which he knew by heart.

Among the boys were two of nine years old. The first of these was Jenkins, the son of the secretary of the New Zealand Royal Society; the other was Iverson, whose father was the minister of the church of St. Paul. Jenkins was in the third form, Iverson in the second; but both were good boys. Dole and Costar were each a year younger than Iverson, and were the sons of military officers at Onehunga, six miles from Auckland, in Manukau Harbour. They were both little fellows. Dole was very obstinate, and Costar very greedy. Both were in the first form, and both knew how to read and write, and that is all we need say about them.

Of the three we have left to the last, Gordon, the American, was about fourteen, and, in his somewhat angular build, already betrayed his Yankee origin. Slightly awkward, and a little heavy, he was far and away the steadiest boy in the fifth form; and although there was nothing very brilliant about him, he had a clear head and a strong fund of common sense. His tastes ran in a serious direction, and he was of an observant character and cool temperament. He was methodic even to the slightest detail, classifying his ideas in his head as he arranged the things in his desk, where everything was classified, docketed, and entered in its special notebook. His companions liked him, and recognized his good qualities. He was a native of Boston, but having neither father nor mother, he had been taken care of by his guardian, a consular agent who had made his fortune and settled in New Zealand. For some years he had lived in one of those pretty villas scattered on the heights near the village of Mount St. John.

Briant and his brother were the sons of a French engineer, who, for two years and a half, had been employed in charge of the works for draining a marsh in the centre of the North Island. Briant was thirteen, an intelligent lad with no particular liking for hard work, and figuring with undesirable frequency at the wrong end of the fifth form. When he made up his mind, however, he speedily rose in the class, thanks to his facility of assimilation and his remarkable memory. He was bold, enterprising, active, quickly at repartee, and good-natured. He was generally liked, and when the schooner was in difficulties his companions, with a few exceptions, did as he told them, principally, as we know, from his having gained some nautical knowledge on his way out from Europe.

His young brother, Jack, was the funny boy of the third form, who would have been the school jester had it not been for Service. He spent his time chiefly in inventing new modes of mischief for the benefit of his schoolfellows, and being consequently in frequent hot water; but for some reason his conduct on the yacht differed very much from what it had been at school.

Such were the schoolboys whom the storm had cast ashore in the Pacific. During the cruise round New Zealand the schooner was to be commanded by Garnett’s father, who was one of the best yachtsmen in Australasia. Many times had the schooner appeared on the coast of Australia from the southernmost cape of Tasmania to Torres Straits, and even in the seas of the Moluccas and the Philippines, which are so dangerous to vessels of greater tonnage. But she was a well-built boat, handy, weatherly, and fit to keep the sea in all weathers.

The crew consisted of the mate, six sailors, a cook, and a boy, Moko, the young negro of twelve, whose family had been in the service of a well-known colonist for many years. And we ought to mention Fan, a dog of American extraction, which belonged to Gordon, and never left her master.

The day of departure had been fixed for the 15th of February. The yacht lay moored at the end of Commercial Pier. The crew was not on board when, on the evening of the 14th, the young passengers embarked. Captain Garnett was not expected” till the last moment, and the mate and the boy received Gordon and his companions, the men having gone ashore to take a patting glass. When the yacht had been cleared of visitors, and the boys had all gone to bed, so as to be ready early in the morning for the start, it occurred to the mate that he would go up into the town and look for his men, leaving Moko in charge. And Moko was too tired to keep awake.

What happened immediately the mate left was a mystery, but, accidentally or purposely, the moorings of the yacht got cast off without any one on board being the wiser.

It was a dark night. The land-breeze was strong, and the tide running out, and away went the schooner to sea.

When Moko awoke he found the yacht adrift!

His shouts brought up Gordon, Briant, Donagan, and a few of the others from below, but nothing could they do. They called for help in vain. None of the harbour lights were visible. The yacht was right out in the gulf three miles from land.

At the suggestion of Briant and Moko, the boys tried to get sail on the yacht so as to beat back into the harbour. But the sail was too heavy for them to set properly, and the result was that the yacht, instead of keeping her head up, dropped dead away to leeward. Cape Colville was doubled, and the strait between Great Barrier Island and the mainland run through, and soon the schooner was off to the eastward, many miles from New Zealand.

It was a serious position. There could be no help from the land. If a vessel were to come in search, several hours must elapse before she could catch them, even supposing that she could find them in the darkness. And even when day came, how could she descry so small a craft on the high sea? If the wind did not change, all hope of returning to land must be given up. There remained, on the chance of being spoken by some vessel on her way to a New Zealand port. And to meet this, Moko hastened to hoist a lantern at the foremast head. And then all that could be done was to wait for daylight.

Many of the smaller boys were still asleep, and it was thought best not to wake them.

Several attempts were made to bring the schooner up in the wind, but all were useless. Her head fell off immediately, and away she went drifting to the eastward.

Suddenly a light was sighted two or three miles off. It was a white masthead light, showing a steamer under way. Soon the side lights, red and green, rose above the water, and the fact of their being seen together showed that the steamer was steering straight for the yacht.

The boys shouted in vain. The wash of the waves, the roar of the steam blowing off, and the moan of the rising wind united to drown their voices. But if they could not hear the cries, the look-outs might see the light at the schooner’s foremast? It was a last chance, and unfortunately in one of the yacht’s jerky pitches, the halliard broke and the lantern fell into the sea, and there was nothing to show the presence of the schooner, which the steamer was steering straight down upon at the rate of twelve knots an hour.

In a few seconds she had struck the yacht, and would have sunk her, had she not taken her on the slant close to the stern; as it was she carried away only a bit of the name board.

The shock had been so feeble that the steamer kept on, leaving the schooner to the mercy of the approaching storm. It is often the case, unfortunately, that captains do not trouble about stopping to help a vessel they have run into. But in this case some excuse could be made, for those on board the steamer felt nothing of the collision, and saw nothing of the yacht in the darkness.

Drifting before the wind, the boys might well think they were lost. When day came the wide horizon was deserted. In the Pacific, ships bound from Australia to America, or from America to Australia, take a more northerly or more southerly route than that taken by the yacht. Not one was sighted, and although the wind moderated occasionally, yet it never ceased blowing from the westward.

How long this drifting was to last, neither Briant nor his comrades knew. In vain they tried to get the schooner back into New Zealand waters. It was under these conditions that Briant, displaying energy superior to his age, began to exercise an influence over his companions, to which even Donagan submitted. Although with Moko's help he could not succeed in getting the yacht to the westward, he could, and did, manage to keep her navigable. He did not spare himself. He watched night and day. He swept the horizon for any chance of safety. And he threw overboard several bottles containing an account of what had happened to the schooner; it was a slender chance, doubtless, but he did not care to neglect it.

A few hours after the yacht left Hauraki Gulf, the storm arose, and for two weeks it raged with unusual impetuosity. Assaulted by enormous waves, and escaping a hundred times from being overwhelmed by the mountains of water, the yacht had gone ashore on an unknown land in the Pacific.

What was to be the fate of these shipwrecked schoolboys? From what side was help to come to them if they could not help themselves?

Their families had only too good reason to suppose that they had been swallowed up. When it was found that the yacht had disappeared the alarm was given. We need not dwell on the consternation produced by the news.

Without losing an instant, the harbour-master sent out two small steamers in search, with orders to explore the gulf and some miles beyond it. All that night, though the sea grew rough, the little steamers sought in vain; and when day came and they returned to Auckland, it was to deprive the unfortunate relatives of every hope. They had not found the schooner, but they had found the wreckage knocked away in collision by the *Quito* — a collision of which those on board the *Quito* knew nothing.

And in this wreckage were three or four letters of the schooner’s name.

It seemed certain that the yacht had met with disaster, and gone down with all on board within a dozen miles of New Zealand.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST DAY ASHORE

THE shore was deserted, as Briant had discovered when he was on the foremast cross-trees. For an hour the schooner lay on her bed of sand, and no native was seen. There was no sign of house or hut either under the trees, in front of the cliff, or on the banks of the rivulet, now full with the waters of the rising tide. There was not even the print of a human foot on the beach, which the tide had bordered with a long line of seaweed. At the mouth of the river there was no fishing-boat to be seen, and no smoke arose in the air along the whole curve of the bay between the northern and southern capes.

The first idea that occurred to Briant and Gordon was to get through the trees and ascend the cliffs behind.

“We are on land, that is something!” said Gordon)

but what is this land which seems uninhabited? “; “The important thing is that it is not uninhabitable,”‘ answered Briant. “We have food and ammunition for some time. We want a shelter of some sort, and we must find one — at least for the youngsters.”

“Yes. Right you are!”

“As to finding out where we are,” said Briant, “there will be time enough for that when we have nothing else to do. If it is a continent, we may perhaps be rescued. If it is an island I an uninhabited island — well, we shall see j Come, Gordon, let us be off on our voyage of discovery.”

They soon reached the edge of the trees, which ran out on the slant from the cliff to the right bank of the stream three or four hundred yards above its mouth.

In the wood there was no sign of the passage of man; not a track, not a footpath. Old trunks, fallen through old age, lay on the ground, and the boys sank to their knees in the carpet of dead leaves. But the birds flew away in alarm as if they had learnt that man was their enemy, and it was therefore likely that if the island was not inhabited, it was occasionally visited by the natives of a neighbouring territory.

In ten minutes the boys were through the wood, which grew thicker where the rocks at the back rose like a wall for a hundred and eighty feet. Was there in the wall any break or hollow which would afford them refuge? A cave sheltered from the winds of the sea by the curtain of trees, and beyond the reach of the sea even in storms would be the very place for the boys to take up as their quarters until a careful exploration enabled them to move further inland.

Unluckily the wall was as bare of irregularity as the curtain of a fortification. There was no cave, nor was there any place where the cliff could be climbed. To reach the interior the shore would have to be followed till the cliff ended.

For half an hour Briant and his companion kept on to the southward along the foot of the cliff, and then they reached the right bank of the stream, which came meandering in from the east. On the right bank they stood under the shade of the lofty trees; but the left bank bordered a country of very different aspect; flat and verdure- less, it looked like a wide marsh extending to the southern horizon. Disappointed in their hope of reaching the top of the cliff where they might have had a view of many miles over the country, the boys returned to the wreck.

Donagan and a few others were strolling among the rocks, while Jenkins, Iverson, Dole and Costar were amusing themselves by collecting shellfish. The explorers reported the result of their journey. Until a more distant expedition could be undertaken, it seemed best not to abandon the wreck, which, although stove in below and heeling considerably, would do very well as a temporary dwelling-place. The deck had been half torn up forward, but the saloons yielded ample shelter against a storm. The galley had not been damaged at all, to the very great satisfaction of the smaller boys. It was lucky for them that the things had not had to be carried from the wreck to the shore. If the schooner had remained in her first position on the reef, it is difficult to see how the many useful articles could have been saved. The sea would soon have broken up the wreck, and provisions, weapons, clothes, bedding, and cooking traps would have been scattered in confusion on the beach. Fortunately the schooner had been swept on to the sand, in such a state, it is true, that she would never float again, but still habitable, at least for a time. Before she became useless as a dwelling the boys might hope to find some town or village, or, if the island was a desert one, some cave in the rocks which might make their home.

That very day they set to work to make the schooner comfortable. A rope-ladder on the starboard side gave easy access to the beach. Moko, who as a cabin-boy knew something of cooking, took charge of the galley, and, helped by Service, proceeded to cook a meal which, thanks to excellent appetite, gave general satisfaction; and even Jenkins, Iverson, Dole and Costar became quite lively. Jack alone continued miserable; his character seemed to have quite changed; but to all his companions said to him on the subject he gave evasive replies.

Thoroughly tired out after so many days and nights of danger, the need of a good sound sleep was apparent to all. The youngsters were the first to find their way to the saloon, and the others soon followed. Briant, Gordon and Donagan took it in turns to keep watch. Might not some wild beasts put in an appearance? Or even a band of natives, who would be more formidable? But neither came. The night passed without an alarm of any kind;' and when the sun rose the boys joined in prayer to God for their deliverance from peril, and started on such work as was necessary.

The first thing was to make a list of the provisions, and then of the weapons, instruments, utensils, clothes, tools, etc. The food question was serious, for it seemed they were in a desert land. They would have to trust to fishing and shooting, if anything remained to be shot. Donagan, who was a capital shot, had seen nothing yet but the birds on the reef and beach. But to be reduced to feeding on sea-bird3 was not a pleasant prospect, and it was desirable to know how long the schooner's provisions would last if managed with care.

It was found that except the biscuits, of which there was a large store, the preserves, hams, meat biscuits — made of flour, minced pork, and spice — corned beef, salt beef, and sea stores generally, could not last longer than two months, so that from the very first they must have recourse to the productions of the country, and keep the provisions in case they had to journey some hundreds of miles to reach a port on the coast or a town in the interior.

“Suppose some of these things have been damaged?” asked Baxter. “If the sea-water got into the hold — ”

“That we shall see when we open the cases that look as though they had been knocked about,” said Gordon. “If we were to cook them up again, they might do.”

“I’ll look after that,” said Moko.

“The sooner the better,” said Briant, “for the first day or two we shall have to live entirely on these things.”

“And why shouldn’t we start to-day?” asked Wilcox, ‘»and see if we cannot find some more eggs among those rocks to the northward?”

“Yes! that’s it!” said Dole.

“And why shouldn’t we go fishing?” asked Webb. “Are there not any fishing-lines on board? Who’ll go fishing?”

“I will! I will!” said the youngsters.

“All right,” said Briant. “But no playing about; we only give the lines to those who mean business.”

“Don’t get excited,” said Iverson. “We will be as steady as — ”

“But look here,” said Gordon; “we must first make a list of what there is on board. We have other things to think of besides what there is to eat.”

“You can go and get a few oysters for lunch,” said Service.

“Ah! that’ll do,” said Gordon. “Off you go in twos and threes; and, Moko, you go with them.”

The negro could be trusted. He was willing, clever, and plucky, and would probably be of great use. He was particularly attached to Briant, who did not conceal his liking for him.

“Come on!” said Jenkins.

“Are you not going with them/ Jack?” asked Briant.

Jack replied in the negative.

Jenkins, Dole, Costar, and Iverson then went off in charge of Moko, and scrambled up on to the reef which the sea had just left dry. In the cracks and crannies they might perchance come across many mollusks, mussels, . clams, and even oysters, which, either raw or cooked, would form a welcome reinforcement. Away they went running and jumping, and evidently looking on the expedition as one of pleasure rather than work; at their age they remembered little of the trials they had passed through, and thought less of the dangers to come.

As soon as they had gone the elder boys began their search on the yacht. Donagan, Cross, Wilcox, and Webb devoted themselves to the weapons, ammunition, clothes, bedding, tools, and utensils, while Briant, Garnett, Baxter, and Service took stock of the drinkables. As each article was called out Gordon entered it in his note-book.

It was found that the yacht had a complete set of spare sails and rigging of all sorts, cordage, cables, hawsers, etc. and if she could have been got afloat again could have been completely refitted. But these best quality sails and new . cordage would never again be used on the sea; they would come in useful in other ways. A few fishing appliances, hand-lines, and deep-sea-lines figured in the inventory, and very valuable they would be, for fish was abundant.

The list of weapons in the note-book gave eight central- fire fowling-pieces, a long-range duck-gun, and twelve I revolvers; for ammunition there were 300 cartridges for the breech-loaders, two barrels of gunpowder, each of twenty-five pounds, and a large quantity of lead, small shot and bullets. This ammunition, intended to be used on the New Zealand coast at the places the yacht put in at, would come in more useful for the general security. The store-room also contained a few rockets for night signalling, and thirty cartridges and projectiles for the two small cannons on board, which it was hoped would not have to be used in repulsing a native attack.

The cooking utensils, and such like, were enough, even if the stay was to be a lengthy one. Though a good deal of the crockery had been smashed when the yacht ran ashore on the reef, yet enough remained at the service of the table. And these things were not absolutely necessary. There were more valuable things, such as garments of flannel, cloth, cotton and linen in sufficient quantity to give a change for each change of climate. And if the land was in the same latitude as Auckland, which was likely, as the vessel had run before a westerly wind all the time, the boys might expect a hot summer and very cold winter. Fortunately there were on board a whole heap of clothes ready for an excursion of many weeks. In the seamen’s chests there were trousers, linen frocks, waterproof coats, and thick jerseys, that could be made to fit big or little, and enable them to defy the rigours of the winter. If circumstances obliged them to abandon the schooner, each could take away with him a complete set of bedding, for the bunks were well supplied with mattresses, sheets, blankets, pillows, and quilts, and with care these things would last a long time.

A long time I That might mean for ever. In Gordon’s note-book there was also a list of the instruments on board; two aneroid barometers, a spirit thermometer, two chronometers, several copper speaking-trumpets, three telescopes of short and long range, a binnacle compass, and two smaller ones, a storm-glass indicating the approach of tempestuous weather, several British ensigns and jacks, and a set of signalling flags. And there was also a Halkett boat — a little India-rubber canoe which folds up like a bag, and is large enough to take a person across a river or lake.

There were plenty of tools in the carpenter s chest, bags of nails, turrels, screws, and iron nuts and bands of all sorts for repairing the yacht. Thread and needles were not wanting, for the mothers had prepared for frequent mendings. There was no risk of being deprived of fire, for without reckoning matches there were enough tinder- boxes and tinder to last for a long time.

There were some large-scale charts, but only for the coast of New Zealand, and consequently useless for the part where they had been wrecked; but luckily Gordon had brought with him a general atlas, and the yacht’s library included several good works of travel and manuals of science, to say nothing of “Robinson Crusoe,” and the “Swiss Family Robinson,” which Service had saved from, the wreck as did Camoens his “Lusiad.” And of course Garnett had taken good care that his famous accordion had come off safe and sound. When the reading materials had been disposed of, the writing materials were noted down. There were pens and pencils, and ink and paper, and an almanac for 1860, which was at once handed over to Baxter for him to cancel each day as it elapsed.

“It was on the 10th of March,” said he, “that we came ashore. Well, out goes the 10th of March and all the days before it.”

In the strong box of the yacht there was from 150/. in gold, which might come in useful if the boys reached some port from which they could get home.

Gordon took careful stock of the casks stowed in the hold. Many of them, containing spirits, ale, or wine, had been stove while the yacht was being dashed about on the reef. But there were still a hundred gallons of claret and sherry, fifty gallons of gin, brandy, and whisky, and forty hogsheads of ale, besides thirty bottles of different liqueurs in straw envelopes which had not been broken.

So that, for some time at least, the fifteen survivors of the schooner were in no fear of starvation. It remained to be seen if the country would yield anything to allow of their provisions being economized. If it was an island on which the storm had thrown them, they could hardly hope to get away from it, unless a ship were to appear and make out their signals. To repair the yacht and make good the damage to the hull would be a task beyond their power, and require tools they did not possess. To build a new boat out of the ruins of the old one did not enter their minds; and as they knew nothing of navigation, how were they to cross the Pacific to get back to New Zealand? In the schooner’s boats they might have got away, perhaps; but the boats had gone, except the yawl, and that at the outside was only fit for sailing along the coast.

About noon, the youngsters, headed by Moko, returned. They had after a time quieted down and set seriously to work, and they had brought back a good store of shellfish, which the cabin-boy undertook to get ready. As to eggs, there ought to be a great quantity, for Moko had noted the presence of innumerable rock pigeons of an edible kind nestling on the higher ledges of the cliff.

“That is all right,” said Briant. “One of these mornings we will go out after them, and get a lot.”

“We are sure to do that,” said Moko. “Three or four shots will give us pigeons by the dozen. It will be easy to get to the nests if we let ourselves down with a rope.”

“Agreed!” said Gordon. “Suppose, Donagan, you go to-morrow?”

“That will suit me very well,” said Donagan. “Webb, Cross, and Wilcox, will you come too?”

“Rather!” said they; only too well pleased at the idea of blazing away into such a bird crowd.

“But don’t kill too many pigeons,” said Briant. “We know now where to find them when we want them.

Don’t waste powder and shot — ”

“All right!” said Donagan, who did not like advice — particularly from Briant. “It is not the first time we have had a gun.”

An hour afterwards Moko announced that dinner was ready, and the boys hurried up the ladder on to the schooner and took their seats in the dining-saloon. Owing to the yacht heeling over so much, the table sloped considerably; but that made little difference to those accustomed to the rolling of the ship. The shellfish, particularly the mussels, were declared to be excellent, although their seasoning left something to be desired; but at that age hunger is the best sauce. A biscuit and piece of corned beef and fresh water from the stream, taken when the tide was at the lowest so as to avoid its being brackish, made an acceptable meal.

The afternoon was spent in arranging the things that had been entered on the list; Jenkins and his companions going off to fish in the river and having fair sport among the finny crowd that swarmed about its mouth. After supper all were glad to get to bed, except Baxter and Wilcox, whose turn it was to keep guard.

CHAPTER V

THE VIEW FROM THE CAPE

WAS it an island, or a continent? That was the question constantly occupying the minds of Briant, Gordon, and Donagan, who by their character and intelligence were the chiefs of this little world. Thinking of the future when the youngsters only thought of the present, they often talked together on the subject. Whether it was insular or continental, the land was evidently not in the tropics. That could be seen by the vegetation — oaks, beeches, birches, alders, pines, and firs of different sorts, and several of the myrtaceae and saxifragaceae which are neither shrubs nor trees. It seemed as though the country must be nearer the southern pole than New Zealand, and if so, a severe winter might be anticipated. Already a thick carpet of dead leaves covered the ground in the wood near the cliff; the pines and firs alone retaining their foliage.

“That is why,” said Gordon, “the morning after the wreck I thought it best not to look out for a permanent settlement hereabouts.”

“That is what I think,” said Donagan. “If we wait for the bad season, it will be too late to get to some inhabited part, for we may have to go hundreds of miles.” “ But we are only in the first half of March,” said Briant.

Well,” said Donagan. “The fine weather may last till the end of April, and in six weeks we might get well on the road — ”

“If there is a road!”

“And why shouldn’t there be?”

“Quite so,” said Gordon. “But if there is, do you know where it leads?”

“I know one thing,” said Donagan. “It will be absurd not to have left the schooner before the cold and rainy season, and to do that, we need not see only difficulties at each step.”

“Better see them than ‘start off like fools across a country we know nothing about.”

“It is easy to call people fools when they don’t think the same as you do.”

Donagan’s observation might have soon led to a quarrel had not Gordon intervened.

“There is no good in arguing. Let us understand each other. Donagan is right in saying that if we are near an inhabited country, we should get there without delay. But Briant says, is it possible we are near to such a country? and there is no harm in that.”

But, Gordon,” said Donagan, “if you go to the north, or the south, or the east, you must get to the people in time.”

“Yes, if we are on a continent,” said Briant, “and not on an island, perhaps a desert island.”

“That is why we ought to find out,” said Gordon. “To leave the schooner before we know whether there is or is not a sea to the east of us — ”

“It is the schooner that will leave us,” said Donagan. “ She cannot last out the winter storms on this beach.”

“Agreed,” said Gordon, “but before we venture into the interior we must know where we are going.”

“I’ll go out and reconnoitre,” said Briant.

“So will I,” said Donagan.

“We’ll all go,” said Gordon, “but we don’t want to drag the youngsters with us, and two or three of ns will be enough.”

“It is a pity,” said Briant, “that there is no high hill from which we could have a good view. The land lies low, and even from the offing I saw no elevation. The highest ground seems to be this cliff. Beyond it I suppose there are forests, and plains, and marshes, through which that stream runs.”

“We ought to have a look over the country before trying to get round the cliff where Briant and I failed to find the cave.”

“Well, we’ll try the north,” said Briant. “If we can get up the cape at the far end, we might see a long way round.”

“That cape,” said Gordon, “is 250 or 300 feet high, and ought to look right over the cliff.”

“I’ll go,” said Briant.

The bay ended in a huge pile of rocks, like a hill rising into a peak on the side nearest the sea. Along the curve of the beach it was seven or eight miles away, but in a bee line, as the Americans say, it was probably not more than five, and Gordon had not over-estimated the height of the hill at 300 feet from the sea-level.

Was this sufficiently high for a good view over the country? Would not the landscape be shut in by high ground to the eastward? But at least it would be seen if the coast-line continued towards the north or not.

And so it was decided that the exploration should be made, and that the wreck should not be abandoned until it had been discovered whether the boys had been cast on an island or a continent, which could only be the American continent. But no start could be made for the next five days, owing to the weather having become misty and rainy; and until the wind freshened to blow the fog away, the view would not be worth the ascent.

The days were not lost. They were spent in work. Briant made it his duty to look after the younger boys, as if to watch over them with paternal affection was a want of his nature. Thanks to his constant care, they were as well looked after as circumstances permitted. The weather was getting colder, and he made them put on warmer clothes from the stores found in the seamen’s chests, and this gave a good deal of tailoring work, in which the scissors were more in request than the needle, and Moko greatly distinguished himself. Costar, Dole, Jenkins, and Iverson were elegantly attired in trousers and jerseys much too roomy for them, but reduced to a proper length of arm and leg. The others were not idle. Under Garnett or Baxter, they were off among the rocks at low tide, gathering mollusks, or fishing with lines and nets at the mouth of the stream, amusing themselves to the advantage of all. Busy in a way that pleased them, they hardly thought of the position in which they were placed, and they did not know how serious it was. When they thought of their parents and friends, as they often did, they were sorrowful enough; but the idea that they would never see them again never occurred to them.

Gordon and Briant seldom left the wreck. Service was with them a good deal, and was always good-tempered and useful. He liked Briant, and had never joined Donagan’s party, and Briant was not insensible to his loyalty.

“This is first-rate,” said Service. “The schooner must have been dropped gently on the beach by some good fairy! There was no such luck as this with Robinson Crusoe nor the Swiss family.”

Young Jack grew stranger in his manner every day.

Although he helped his brother in many ways, yet he rarely replied to a question, and turned away his eyes whenever he was looked at in the face. Briant was seriously uneasy at all this. Being his senior by some four years, he had always had a good deal of influence over him, and ever since they had come on board the schooner he had noticed that Jack seemed like a boy afflicted with remorse. Had he done anything that he dared not tell his brother? Several times Briant noticed that his eyes were red from crying. Was Jack going to be seriously ill? If so, how could they look after him? Here was trouble in store! And so ‘Briant asked his brother quietly what ailed him.

“There’s nothing the matter with me,” answered Jack. And that was all he could get from him.

During the nth and 15th of March, Donagan, Wilcox, Webb, and Cross went shooting rock pigeons. They always kept together, and it was obvious that they wished to form a clique apart from the rest. Gordon felt anxious about this; he saw that trouble must come of it, and when an opportunity offered he spoke about it, and tried to make the discontented ones understand how necessary union was for the good of the community. But Donagan replied to his advances so coldly that he thought it unreasonable to insist; though he did not despair of destroying the germs of dissension which might have deplorable results, for events might tend to bring about an understanding where advice failed.

While the excursion to the north of the bay was stopped by the misty weather, Donagan and his friends had plenty of sport. He was really an excellent shot, and he was very proud of his skill, and despised such contrivances as traps, nets, and snares, in which Wilcox delighted. Webb was a good hand with the gun, but did not pretend to equal Donagan. Cross had very little of the sacred fire, and contented himself with praising his cousin’s prowess. Fan, the dog, distinguished herself highly, and made no hesitation in jumping into the waves in retrieving the somewhat miscellaneous victims of the guns. Moko refused to have anything to do with the cormorants, gulls, seamews, and grebes, but there were quite enough rock pigeons as well as geese and ducks to serve his purpose. The geese were of the bernicle kind, and from the direction they took when the report of the gun scared them away, it was supposed that they lived in the interior of the country.

Donagan shot a few of those oyster-catchers which live on limpets, cockles, and mussels. In fact there was plenty of choice, although Moko found it no easy matter to get rid of the oily taste, and did not always succeed to the general satisfaction. But, as Gordon said, the boys need not be too particular, for the most must be made of the provisions on board.

On the 15th of March the weather appeared favourable for the excursion to the cape, which was to solve the problem as to island or continent. During the night the sky cleared up the mist which the calm of the preceding days had accumulated. A land-breeze swept it away in a few hours. The sun’s bright rays gilded the crest of the cliff. It looked as if in the afternoon the eastern horizon would be clearly visible; and that was the horizon on which their hopes depended. If the line of water continued along it, the land must be an island, and the only hope of rescue was from a ship.

The idea of this visit to the end of the bay first occurred, it will be remembered, to Briant, and he had resolved to go off alone. He would gladly have been accompanied by Gordon, but he did not feel justified in leaving his companions without any one to look after them.

On the evening of the 15th, finding the barometer remained steady, he told Gordon he would be off at dawn next morning. Ten or eleven miles, there and back, was nothing to a healthy lad who did not mind fatigue. The day would be enough for the journey, and he would be sure to get back before night.

Briant was off at daybreak without the others knowing he had gone. His weapons were only a stick and a revolver, so as to be prepared for any wild beast that came along, although Donagan had not come across any in his shooting expeditions. With these he also took one of the schooner's telescopes — a splendid instrument of great range and clearness of vision. In a bag hung to his belt he took a little biscuit and salt meat, and a flask of brandy, so as to be prepared in case any adventure delayed his return.

Walking at a good pace, he followed the trend of the coast along the inner fine of reefs, his road marked by a border of seaweed still wet with the retiring tide. In an hour he had passed the extreme point reached by Donagan in his foray after the rock pigeons. The birds had nothing to fear from him now. His object was to push on and reach the foot of the cape as soon as possible. The sky was clear of cloud, and if the mist came back in - the afternoon, his journey might be useless.

During the first hour he kept on as fast as he could walk, and got over half his journey. If no obstacle hindered him, he expected to reach the promontory by eight o'clock. But as the cliff ran nearer to the reefs, the beach became more difficult to traverse. The strip Of land grew so narrow that instead of the firm elastic path near the stream, he had to take to the slippery rocks, and make his way over viscous seaweed, and round deep pools and over loose pebbles, on which there was no safe footing. It was tiring walking, and took two full hours more than he expected.

“I must get to the cape before high water,” said he to himself. “The beach is covered by the tide, and the sea runs up to the foot of the cliff. If I am obliged to go back at all or to take refuge on some rock, I shall get there too late. I must get on at all cost before the tide runs up.”

And the brave boy, trying to forget the fatigue which began to creep over his limbs, struck out across what seemed the shortest way. Many times he had to take off his boots and stockings, and wade the pools, and now and then, with all his strength and activity, he could not avoid a fall.

It was here, as we have said, that the aquatic birds were in greatest number. There were literally swarms of pigeons, oyster-catchers, and wild ducks. A few couples of seals were swimming among the breakers, but they showed no fear, and never attempted to dive. As they were not afraid, it looked as though many years had elapsed since men had come in chase of them. Thinking further of the seals, Briant concluded that the coast must be in a higher latitude than he had imagined, and that it must be some distance south of New Zealand. The yacht must have drifted to the south-west on her way across the Pacific. And this conjecture was confirmed when Briant reached the foot of the promontory, and found a flock of penguins. These birds only haunt the Antarctic Ocean. They were strutting about- in dozens, flapping their tiny wings, which they use for swimming instead of flying.

It was then ten o’clock. Exhausted and hungry, Briant thought it best to have something to eat before attempting the ascent of the promontory, which raised its crest some 30c feet above the sea. And he sat down on a rock out of reach of the rising tide, which had begun to gain on the outer ridge of reefs. An hour later he would not have been able to pass along the foot of the cliff without running the danger of imprisonment by the flood. But there was nothing to be anxious about now, and in the afternoon the ebb would leave the passage dry.

While the food satisfied his hunger, the halt gave rest to his limbs, and he began to give the rein to his thoughts on matters in general. Alone, and far from his companions, he coolly reviewed the situation, resolving to do his best for the good of all. Then he thought of his brother Jack, whose health caused him much anxiety. It seemed to him that Jack must have done something serious — probably before his departure — and he decided to question him so closely that he would have to confess. For one hour Briant sat and thought, and rested himself. Then he shut up his bag, threw it over his shoulder, and began to climb the rocks.

The cape ended in a narrow ridge, and its geology was remarkable. It was a mass of metamorphic rock, quite detached from the cliff, and differing from it completely in structure; the cliff being composed of calcareous stratifications similar to those of La Marché in the west of Europe.

Briant noticed that a narrow gorge cut the promontory off from the cliff, and that the beach extended northwards out of sight. But the promontory, being at least 100 feet higher than the neighbouring heights, would afford an extensive view.

The ascent was not easy. He had to climb from one rock to another, the rocks being often so large that he could barely reach up them. But as he belonged to that order of boys we classify as climbers, and brought all his gifts into play, he eventually reached the top.

With his glass at his eye he first looked to the east. The country was flat as far as he could see. The cliff was the greatest elevation, and the ground gently sloped towards the interior. In the distance were a few hillocks hardly worth mentioning. There was much forest land, and under the yellow foliage rose many streams that ran towards the coast. The surface was level up to the horizon, which might be a dozen miles away. It did not look as though the sea was there.

To the north Briant could make out the beach running straight away for seven or eight miles; beyond another cape, and a stretch of sand that looked like a huge desert.

To the south was a wide marsh. Briant had surveyed the whole sweep of the westerly horizon.

Was he on an island or a continent? He could not say. If it was an island, it was a large one. That was all he could discover.

Then he looked to the westward. The sea was shining under the oblique rays o£ the sun, which- was slowly sinking in the heavens.

Suddenly he brought his glass to his eye, and looked away into the offing.

“Ships!” he exclaimed, “ships going past!”

Three black spots appeared on the circle of gleaming waters about fifteen miles away.

Great was his excitement. Was he the sport of an illusion? Were they vessels he saw?

He lowered the glass, and cleaned the eyepiece, which had clouded with his breath. He looked again.

The three points looked like ships with nothing visible but their hulls. There was no sign of their masts, and no smoke to show that they were under way.

And then the thought occurred to him, that they were too far off for his signals to be seen; and as it was likely that his companions had not seen these ships, the best thing he could do was to get back to the wreck and light a big fire on the beach. And then — when the sun went down —

As he thought he kept his eye on the three black spots. One thing was certain; they did not move.

Again he looked through the glass, and for some minutes he kept them in the field of his objective. And then he saw that they were three small islands that the schooner must have passed close by when they were hidden in the mist.

It was two o’clock. The tide began to retire, leaving the line of reefs bare at the foot of the cliff. Briant, thinking it was time to return to the wreck, prepared to descend the hill.

But once again he looked to the eastward. In the more oblique position of the sun he might see something that had hitherto escaped him. And he did not regret doing so; for beyond the border of forest he could now see a bluish line, which stretched from north to south for many miles, with its two ends lost behind the confused mass of trees.

“What is that?” he asked himself.

And again he looked.

“The sea! Yes! The sea! “And the glass almost dropped from his hands. It was the sea to the eastward, there could be no doubt! It was not a continent on which he had been cast, but an island. An island in the immensity of the Pacific, which it would be impossible to leave!

And then all the perils that begirt him presented themselves to his mind as in a vision. His heart almost cease d to beat. But struggling against the involuntary weakness, he resolved to do his best to the last, however threatening the future might be.

A quarter of an hour afterwards he had regained the beach, and by the same way as he had come in the morning he returned to the wreck. He reached it about five o’clock and found his comrades impatiently awaiting his return.

CHAPTER VI

A SPELL OF RAIN

IN the evening after supper Briant told the bigger boys the result of his exploration. Briefly it was as follows: to the east, beyond the forest zone, he had distinctly seen a line of water extending from north to south. That this was the horizon of the sea appeared indubitable. Hence it was on an island and not on a continent that the yacht had been wrecked.

Gordon and the others received the information with considerable excitement. What! They were on an island and deprived of every means of leaving it! Their scheme of finding a road to the eastward would have to be abandoned! They would have to wait till a ship came in sight! Could it be true that this was their only chance of rescue?

“But was not Briant mistaken?” asked Donagan.

“Did you not mistake a bank of clouds for the sea?” asked Cross.

“No,” answered Briant. “I am certain I made no mistake. What I saw was a line of water, and it formed the horizon.”

“How far off was it?” asked Wilcox.

it About six miles from the cape.”

“And beyond that,” asked Webb, “were there no mountains, no elevated ground? “No I Nothing but the sky.”

Briant was so positive that it was not reasonable to retain the least doubt in the matter.

But Donagan, as was always the case when he argued with Briant, continued obstinate.

“And I repeat that Briant has made a mistake. And until we have seen it with our own eyes — ”

“Which we shall do,” said Gordon, “for we must know the truth about it.”

“And I say we have not a day to lose,” said Baxter, ‘‘ if we are to leave this place before the bad weather, supposing we are on a continent.”

“We will go to-morrow, if the weather permits,” said Gordon. “We will start on an expedition that may last some days. I say weather permitting, for to plunge into the forest in bad weather would be madness — ”

“Agreed, Gordon,” answered Briant. “And when we reach the other side of the island — ”

“If it is an island?” interrupted Donagan. “But it is one!” replied Briant impatiently. “I have made no mistake. I distinctly saw the sea in the east.

It pleases Donagan to contradict me, as usual — ”

“And you are not infallible, Briant!”

“No, I am not! But this time I am! I will go myself to this sea, and if Donagan likes to come with me — ”

“Certainly I will go.”

“And so will we,” said three or four of the bigger boy3. “Good!” said Gordon. “But don’t get excited, my dear young friends. If we are only boys, we may as well act like men. Our position is serious, and any imprudence may make it worse. We must not all go into this forest. The youngsters cannot come with us," and we cannot leave them all on the wreck. Donagan and Briant may go, and two others may go with them — "

"I'll go!" said Wilcox. "So will I!" said Service.

"Very well," said Gordon. "Four is quite enough. If you are too long coming back we can send a few others to your assistance, while the rest remain with the schooner. Don't forget that this is our camp, our house, our home, and we can only leave it when we are sure that we are on a continent."

"We are on an island," said Briant. "For the last time I say so!"

"That we shall see!" replied Donagan. Gordon's sensible advice had had its effect in calming the discord. Obviously — and Briant saw it clearly enough — it was advisable to push through the central forest and reach the line of water. If it was a sea to the eastward, there might be other islands separated from them by a channel they might cross; and if they were on an island of an archipelago, surely it was better to know it before taking any steps on which their safety might depend. It was certain that there was no land to the west right away to New Zealand. The only chance of reaching an inhabited country was by journeying towards the sun-rising.

But it would not be wise to attempt such an expedition except in fine weather. As Gordon had just said, it would not do to act like children, but like men. In the circumstances in which they were placed, with the future so threatening, if the intelligence of these boys did not develop quickly, if the levity and inconsistency natural at their age carried them away, or if disunion was allowed amongst them, the position of things would become critical. And it was for this reason that Gordon resolved to do everything to maintain order amongst his comrades.

However eager Donagan and Briant might be to start, a change of the weather obliged them to wait. A cold rain had fallen since the morning. The falling of the barometer indicated a period of squally weather, of which it was impossible to predict the duration. It would have been too risky to venture out under such circumstances.

But was this to be regretted? Assuredly not. That all were in a hurry to know if the sea surrounded them may be imagined. But even if they were sure of being on a continent, were they likely to venture into a country they knew nothing about, and that when the rainy season was coming on? Suppose the journey was to extend to hundreds of miles, could they bear the fatigues? Would even the strongest among them reach the end? No! to carry out. such an expedition with success, it must be put off till the days were long, and the inclemency of winter, overpast. And so they would have to content themselves with spending the rainy season at the wreck.

Gordon had meanwhile been trying to find out in what part of the ocean they had been wrecked. His atlas contained a series of maps of the Pacific. In tracing the course from Auckland to the American coast he found that the nearest islands passed to the north were the society Islands, Easter Island, and the island of Juan Fernandez, on which Selkirk — a real Crusoe — had passed so much of his life. To the south there was not an island up to the boundary of the Antarctic Ocean. To the east there were only the Archipelagoes of the Chiloe Islands and Madre de Dios, along the coast of Patagonia, and lower down were those about the Straits of Magellan and Tierra del Fuego, which are lashed by the terrible sea round Cape Horn.

If the schooner had been cast on one of these uninhabited islands off the Patagonian pampas, there would be hundreds of miles to be traversed to reach Chili or the Argentine Republic. And the boys would have to act with great circumspection if they were not to perish miserably in crossing the unknown.

So thought Gordon. Briant and Baxter looked at the matter in the same way. And doubtless Donagan and the others would, in the end, agree with them.

The scheme of exploring the eastern coast was not given up, but during the next fortnight it was impossible to put it into execution. The weather was abominable, nothing but rain from morning to night, and violent squalls. The way through the forest would have been impracticable; and the expedition had to be postponed, notwithstanding the keen desire to unravel the mystery of continent or island.

During these stormy days the boys remained at the wreck, but they were not idle. They were constantly at work making good the damage done to the yacht by the inclement weather, for owing to the wet the planks began to give, and the deck ceased to be water-tight. In places the rain would come in through the joints where the caulking had been torn away, and this had to be made good without delay. Repairs were also needed to stop not only the water-ways, but the air-ways opened in the hull. Gordon would have used some of the spare sails for the purpose, but he could not bring himself to sacrifice the thick canvas which might come in so usefully for tents, and so he did the best he could with tarpaulins.

Besides this, there was the urgent question of finding a better shelter. Even if they did go eastward, they could not move for five or six months, and the schooner would not last as long as that, and if they had to abandon her in the rainy season, where were they to find a refuge? The cliff, on its western face, had not the slightest indentation that could be utilized. It was on the other side, where it was sheltered from the wind from the sea, that search must be made, and, if necessary, a house built large enough to hold them all.

Meanwhile the cargo was done up into bales and packages all duly numbered and entered in Gordon’s pocket- book, so that when it became necessary they could be quickly carried away under the trees.

Whenever the weather was fine for a few hours, Donagan, Wilcox, and Webb went off after the pigeons, which Moko more or less successfully cooked in different ways. Garnett, Service, Cross, and the youngsters, including Jack, when his brother insisted on it, went away fishing. Among the shoals of fishes that haunted the weeds on the reef were many specimens of the genus notothenia, and hake of large size, and in and out among the thongs of the huge fucoids, some of which were four hundred feet long, was a prodigious quantity of small fish that could be caught by the hand.

It was a treat to hear the exclamations of the youthful fishers as they drew their nets or lines to the edge of the reef.

“I have got a lot! I have a splendid lot!” exclaimed Jenkins. “Oh! they are big ones!”

“So are mine I Mine are bigger than yours!” exclaimed Iverson, calling on Dole to help him.

“They’ll get away!” said Costar, as he ran up to help.

“Hold on! Hold on!” said Garnett, going from one to the other. “Get in your net quickly.”

"But I can't! I can't!" said Costar, as the net was dragging him in.

And then with a united effort the nets were got in on the sand. It was time, for in the clear water there was a number of hyxines, or ferocious lampreys, who would have made short work of the fish caught in the meshes; and although many were lost in this way, enough were saved to furnish the table. A good deal of hake was caught, and was found to be excellent, eaten either fresh or salted. The ash at the mouth of the river were chiefly galaxias, a kind of gudgeon, which Moko found he could cook best fried.

On the 27th of March a more important capture afforded a somewhat amusing adventure.

When the rain left off in the afternoon, the youngsters started off to fish in the river.

Suddenly there were loud shouts from them — shouts of joy; it is true — but shouts for help.

Gordon, Briant, Service, and Moko, who were busy on board the schooner, dropped their work, ran off to help, and soon cleared the five or six hundred yards that separated them from the stream.

"Come along!" shouted Jenkins.

"Come and see Costar and his charger!" said Iverson.

"Quick, Briant, quick, or he'll get away!" shouted Jenkins.

“Let me get down! Let me get down! I am afraid,” said Costar, gesticulating in despair.

“Gee up!” said Dole, who was with Costar on some moving mass.

The mass was a turtle of huge size, one of those enormous chelonians that are usually met with floating on the surface of the sea. This time it had been surprised on the beach, and was seeking to regain its natural element.

In vain the boys, who had slipped a string round its neck, were trying to keep the animal back. He kept moving off with irresistible strength, dragging the whole band behind him. For a lark Jenkins had perched Costar on the carapace, with Dole astride behind him; and the youngster began to scream with fright as the turtle slowly neared the water.

“Hold on! Hold on, Costar!” said Gordon.

“Take care your horse doesn’t get the bit between his teeth!” shouted Service.

Briant could not help laughing; for there was no danger. As soon as Dole let go, Costar had only to slip off to be safe.

But it was advisable to catch the animal; and if Briant and the others united their efforts to those of the little ones, they might stop him; and they must put a stopper on his progress before he reached the water, where he would be safe.

The revolvers Gordon and Briant had brought with them from the schooner were useless, for the shell of a turtle is bullet-proof; and if they attacked him with the axe, he would draw in his head and paddles, and be unassailable.

“There is only one way,” said Gordon; “we must turn him over!”

“And how?” said Service. “He must weigh at least three hundredweight, and we can never — ”

“*Get* some spars! Get some spars!” said Briant. And, followed by Moko, he ran off to the schooner.

The turtle was now not more than thirty yards from the sea. Gordon soon had Costar and Dole off its back, and then, seizing the string, they all pulled as hard as they could, without in the least stopping the advance of the animal, which could have dragged all Charman’s school behind it.

Luckily, Briant and Moko returned before the turtle reached the sea.

Two spars were then run underneath it, and with a great effort he was pitched over on his back. Then he was a prisoner, for he could not turn over on to his feet. And just as he was drawing in his head Briant gave him such a crack with the hatchet, that he died almost immediately.

“Well, Costar, are you still afraid of this big brute?” asked Briant.

“No! No! Briant, for he’s dead.”

“Good!” said Service, “but you daren’t eat him!”

“Can you eat him?”

“Certainly.”

“Then I’ll eat him, if he’s good,” said Costar, licking his lips at the thought.

“It is good stuff,” said Moko, who was quite within the truth in saying that turtle meat was quite a dainty.

As they could not think of carrying away the turtle as a whole, they had to cut it up where it was. This was not very pleasant, but the boys had begun to get used to the occasionally disagreeable necessities of Crusoe life. The most difficult thing was to break into the carapace, for its metallic hardness turned the edge of the axe. They succeeded at last in driving in a cold chisel between the plates. Then the meat, cut away in pieces, was carried to the schooner. And that day the boys had an opportunity of convincing themselves that turtle soup was exquisite, to say nothing of the grilled flesh which Service had unfortunately let burn a little over too fierce a fire. Even Fan showed in her way that the rest of the animal was not to be despised by the canine race.

The turtle yielded over fifty pounds of meat — a great saving to the stores of the yacht.

In this way the month of March ended. During the three weeks since the wreck all the boys had done their best preparing for a long stay on this part of the coast. Before the winter set in there remained to be settled this important question of continent or island. ‘ On the 1st of April the weather gave signs of changing. The barometer slowly rose, and the wind began to moderate. There were unmistakable symptoms of an approaching calm of perhaps longish duration.

The bigger boys discussed the matter, and began to prepare for an expedition, the importance of which was obvious to all.

“I don’t think there’ll be anything to stop us tomorrow,” said Donagan.

“Nothing, I hope,” said Briant. “We ought to be ready to get away early.”

“I understand,” said Gordon, “that the line of water you saw in the east was six or seven miles from the cape.”

“Yes,” said Briant, “but as the bay is a deep curve, it is possible that the sea may be much nearer here.”

“Then,” continued Gordon, “you will not be away more than twenty-four hours?”

“That is, if we can go due east. But can we find a way through the forest when we have got round this cliff?”

“Oh! that won’t stop us!” said Donagan.

“Perhaps not,” said Briant, “but there may be other obstacles — a watercourse, a marsh, who knows? It will be best, I think, to take rations for some days — ”

“And ammunition,” added Wilcox.

“Quite so,” said Briant, “and let it be understood that if we are not back in two days you need not be anxious.”

“I shall be anxious if you are away more than half a day,” said Gordon. “But that is not the question. As the expedition has been decided on, let it proceed. You have not only to reach this eastern sea, but to reconnoitre the country behind the cliff. This side we have found no cave, and when we leave the schooner we shall have to carry the things where they’ll be sheltered from the sea breeze. To spend the rainy season on this beach seems to me impracticable.”

“You are right, Gordon,” answered Briant, “and we’ll look out for some place where we can install ourselves.”

“At least, until we have found that we cannot get out of this pretended island,” said Donagan, returning to his idea.

“That is understood,” said Gordon, “although the season is already rather advanced. At any rate, we’ll act for the best. So to-morrow you start!”

Preparations were soon finished. Four days’ provisions were stowed in bags to be carried over the shoulders, four guns, four revolvers, two boarding-axes, a pocket compass, a powerful telescope, and the usual pocket utensils, matches and tinder-box seemed enough for a short expedition that was not without its dangers. Briant and Donagan, and Service and Wilcox, who were to go with them, were cautioned to be careful not to push forward without extreme circumspection, and never to separate.

Gordon could not help feeling that he would have been of use to keep Briant and Donagan together. But it appeared to him the better plan to remain at the wreck, so as to watch the younger boys. So he took Briant apart, and made him promise to avoid any subject that might cause a quarrel or disagreement.

The barometrical prognostics were realized. Before nightfall the last clouds had vanished in the west. The line of sky and sea met in a clear horizon. The magnificent constellations of the southern hemisphere sparkled in the firmament, the Southern Cross conspicuously pointing to the Antarctic Pole.

On the eve of their separation Gordon and his comrades were sad at heart. And as their eyes sought the sky, there came to them the thought of the fathers and mothers and friends and country that they might never see again.

CHAPTER VII

THE EXPLORERS

AT seven o’clock in the morning, Briant, Donagan, Wilcox, and Service left the wreck. The sun rising in a cloudless sky gave promise of one of those pleasant October days that are almost peculiar to the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere. Neither the heat nor the cold would be excessive. If any obstacle was to be met with that would delay or stop the advance, it would be due entirely to the nature of the ground.

The young explorers set out obliquely across the beach so as to reach the foot of the cliff. Gordon had advised them to take Fan with them; her instinct might be of great use to them; and so Fan formed part of the expedition.

A quarter of an hour after their departure, the boys had disappeared under the trees. The birds were in numbers, but as no time was to be lost, Donagan had the good sense to restrain his shooting propensities. And Fan, recognizing that useless runnings to and fro were not advisable, kept near her masters without diverging to the left or right more than her duties as scout required.

The plan was to skirt the base of the cliff until the cape, at the north of the bay, was reached, and then strike oft for the sheet of water seen by Briant. This was not the shortest way, but it was the safest, and a mile or two extra was not much for healthy boys who were such good walkers.

When they reached the cliff, Briant recognized the place where he and Gordon had been on their first exploration. As there was no passage in this part of the limestone wall in a southerly direction, a practicable pass must be sought for towards the north, even if they went all the way to the cape. To do this would take a day, but no other way was open if there was no road through the cliff on its eastern face. Briant explained this to his companions, and Donagan, after vainly endeavouring to climb up the slope, made no objection.

They kept on for an hour, and as there could be no doubt they would have to go all the way to the cape, Briant was anxious about the passage being clear. Would not the tide be up over the beach when they got there? That would mean the loss of half a day waiting till the tide left the reef bare.

“Let us hurry on,” said he, after pointing out the importance of reaching the reef before the tide came in.

Bah!” answered Wilcox. “We are not afraid of wetting our ankles.”

“Your ankles, and perhaps your body, and perhaps your ears!” replied Briant. “The tide rises five or six feet at the least. We had better keep straight for the cape.”

“You are guide, Briant,” said Donagan. “If we are behindhand it will be your fault.”

“Then don’t let us lose any time. Where is Service? “And he shouted —

“Service! Service!”

The boy was not in sight. He had gone off with his friend Fan, and had just disappeared behind an angle of the cliff, a hundred yards off to the right.

But as if in answer there was a shout, and the dog was heard to bark. Was Service in danger, then?

In a minute Briant, Donagan, and Wilcox had reached their companion, who had stopped before a partial fall of the cliff — a fall of ancient date. Owing to infiltration, or the action of the weather in wearing away the limestone, a sort of half-funnel had been formed from the top of the wall to the ground, with the point below.

In the wall a gorge had been opened with the sides at a slope of from forty to fifty degrees, and the irregularities afforded a series of points on which it would be easy to find a footing. Active boys, such as our friends, could easily scramble up these to the top, unless a new fall took place to stop them.

Although it was risky they did not hesitate.

Donagan was the first to begin to mount the heap of stones at the base.

“Wait! Wait!” said Briant. “There is no use in being rash.”

But Donagan did not hear, and as he thought it was needful for his reputation to get in front of his companions — Briant in particular — he was soon half-way up the gorge.

His companions followed his example, taking care not to get immediately under him, so as not to be hit by the fragments he dislodged, and which came rolling down to the ground. All went well, and Donagan had the satisfaction of reaching the crest of the cliff before the others.

Already he had drawn his glasses from their case, and was observing the forests that stretched out of sight towards the east.

There was the same panorama of verdure and sky as Briant had observed from the summit of the cape, not so extended, though, for the cliff was some hundred feet lower.

“Well?” asked Wilcox. “Do you see nothing?”

“Nothing!” answered Donagan.

“Let me have a look,” said Wilcox.

Donagan held out the glasses to his companion, not without evident satisfaction.

“I do not see the least line of water,” said Wilcox, lowering the glasses.

“That is good enough,” said Donagan, “to prove that there is none. You can look, Briant, and I think yon will acknowledge your mistake.”

“I do not care to do so,” answered Briant. “I know; I have made no mistake.”

“That is rather strong!”

“Not in the least. The cliff is lower than the cape, and the range of view is less. If we were as high as I was the blue line would be seen six or seven miles off. You would then see it where I did, and you would see it was impossible to mistake it for a bank of cloud,”

“It is easy to say that,” said Wilcox.

“And just as easy to prove,” answered Briant. “Let us cross this flat and get through the forest, and keep on till we get there.”

“That is good,” said Donagan. “We shall have to go rather far, and I am not sure that it is worth the trouble.”

“Stay here then, Donagan,” said Briant. “Service and I will go on alone.”

“We’ll go too,” said Wilcox. “Come on, Donagan!”

“Not till we have had something to eat,” answered Service.

The necessity of this was acknowledged, and after half an hour the march was resumed.

The first mile was soon accomplished. The grassy soil presented no obstacle. Here and there a few mosses and lichens covered a few rocky mounds. An occasional clump of shrubs dotted the ground, a few tree-ferns or club mosses, heaths, hollies, or clumps of berberis with leathery leaves that will flourish even in the highest latitudes.

When Briant and his comrades had crossed the upper plateau, they found the descent on the other side of the cliff as high and perpendicular as that towards the sea. Had it not been for the bed of a half-dry torrent down which they made their way with difficulty, they would have had to keep on up to the cape.

When the forest was reached, the road became more difficult. Fallen trees obstructed the path, and the underwood was so thick that it had at times to be cut through. And the boys had to use their axes like the pioneers through the forests of the New World. This meant a stoppage almost every moment. Arms got more tired than legs, and owing to the delay not more than three or four miles had been accomplished when evening began to close in.

It certainly seemed as though no human beings had been through this forest before. At any rate they had left no trace of their passage. The trees had been felled by storms or old age, and not by the hand of man. Here and there through the thicket were signs of the recent passage of some small-sized animals, and the animals were caught sight of occasionally, without its being possible to recognize the species to which they belonged.

Donagan's hand often itched to seize his gun and fire at these timorous quadrupeds, but common sense coming to the rescue, Briant had only to intervene to prevent his companion committing the imprudence of revealing their presence by the report of fire-arms. But although Donagan understood he must keep his favourite weapon silent, it was necessary to speak to him pretty often. At every step there flew up partridges of the tinamou species, which have very delicate flesh, or else the birds known as martinettes, besides thrushes, wild geese, and grouse, and numbers of other birds that could have been knocked down in hundreds. If the boys had to stop in this place the gun would procure them abundant food. This Donagan could not but admit, as he resolved to make up later on for the reserve circumstances now imposed upon him.

The forest chiefly consisted of birch and beech trees, which developed their tender green foliage up to a hundred feet from the ground. Among the other trees were well- grown cypresses, myrtacea with reddish wood, and magnificent groups of “winters “with their bark throwing off an aroma like that of cinnamon.

At two o'clock a second halt was made in a little clearing, through which ran a shallow stream — such a stream as would have been called a creek in North America. The waters of the creek were of perfect limpidity, and flowed gently over the bed of blackish rocks. To look at its peaceful shallow current, cumbered with no deadwood or drifting bushes, no one would believe that its rise was far away. Nothing was easier than to cross it by the stones scattered in its bed. And in one place some flat stones lay so symmetrically as to attract attention.

“That is strange!” said Donagan.

It looked as though a causeway had been laid from one bank to the other.

“You might call it a dam!” said Service, beginning to cross it.

“Wait! wait!” said Briant. “We must have a look at these stones.”

“They could not have put themselves there,” said Wilcox.

“No,” said Briant. “It looks as though some one had been making a path across the stream. Let us get nearer!”

They examined every stone of this curious pathway, which projected only a few inches above the stream, and would be covered in the rainy season. But could they say that the hand of man had put these stones in the creek? No! It was more likely that the stones had been brought down by the floods, and gradually piled up to form the dam. And this was the explanation adoptee by Briant and his companion after a minute examination.

Neither the left nor right bank showed traces of foot- (steps, and there was nothing to prove that man had ever! set foot on the gap in the forest.

The creek flowed away towards the north-east. Did f it then throw itself into the sea, which Briant affirmed he had seen from the cape?

“At least,” said Donagan, “it may be the tributary of a river which flows towards the west.”

“We shall see in time,” said Briant, not caring to reopen the discussion. “But so long as it runs to the east, we may as well follow it, if it does not wind too much.”

Crossing the creek by the dam the four boys set out on! their road. It was easy to follow the bank except here and there where an occasional clump of trees ran their roots down into the water, while their branches met overhead and extended from bank to bank. Although the creek made an elbow now and then, yet its general direction was shown by the compass to be towards the east. But its mouth ought to be a long way off, for the stream did not gain in quickness nor did the bed become wider.

About half-past five Briant and Donagan were forced to agree that the creek’s course had undoubtedly turned towards the north, and to follow it would take them out of their way too much. So they had to abandon it, and plunge eastward under the thick foliage of beech and birch.

At times so high was the underwood that in order not to lose one another they had to keep up a constant shouting.

They had been walking all day and there was nothing to indicate the proximity of a sheet of water. Briant began to get anxious. Had he been the sport of an illusion when he descried the horizon from the summit of the cape?

“No! no!” he repeated to himself, “I am not mistaken! It cannot be I It is not so!”

It was now seven o’clock in the evening and the edge of the forest had not been reached. Darkness was coming on; it would soon be too dark to move.

as it might be against animals, was not dangerous as Attractive to such natives as might be prowling about.

“Better not run the risk of being seen,” said Donagan. E All agreed to this; and only supper was troubled about. There was no lack of appetite, and after making a deep hole in the rations they had brought with them, they were about to make themselves comfortable at the foot of a gigantic birch when Service pointed out a thicket a few- yards off. From it rose a moderately-sized tree whose lower branches bent till they touched the ground. There on a heap of dry leaves the four boys lay down and wrapped themselves well up. At their age sleep is not long in coming. And they were soon soundly off, while Fan, left to guard them, copied their example.

Once or twice, however, the dog heard a prolonged growling. Evidently there were some animals, tame or wild, prowling in the forest; but they did not come near the camp.

It was nearly seven o’clock when Briant and the others awoke. The oblique rays of the sun, piercing the thick mass of leafage, dimly lighted up the place where they had passed the night.

Service was the first to go out of the thicket. It immediately he began to shout, or rather to exclaim — “Briant! Donagan! Wilcox! Come here!”

“What is the matter?” asked Briant.

“Yes, what is the matter?” asked Wilcox, who must always say something. “Service, you frightened us.”

“All the better!” answered Service. “Look here I See where we have been sleeping.”

It was not a thicket at all. It was a cabin made of leaves, one of those huts the Indians call “ajoupas,” and which are formed by interlacing branches. The ajoupa was a very old one, for the roof and walls were L only held up by the tree; and its style was the same as I that in use among the natives of South America.

“Then there are inhabitants?” said Donagan, casting a rapid glance around him.

“Or at least there have been,” said Briant, “for this hut could not have made itself.”

“That explains the causeway across the creek,” said Wilcox.

“Well,” said Service, “if there are inhabitants, they are very good fellows to build this hut expressly for our | use last night.”

It was resolved to halt and pass the night beneath the shelter of the trees. With a good slice of corned beef there was no chance of starving; with good coverings they need not fear the cold. Besides, they might light a fire with some dead branches, if the precaution, excellent In reality nothing was less certain than that these natives were good fellows. It was evident that they frequented, or had frequented this part of the forest at some period more or less remote. But they might be Indians if the land was joined to the continent, or Polynesians, or even cannibals, if the land was an island of one of the archipelagoes of Oceania, and in that case the danger was great, and more than ever was it important to solve the difficulty.

Briant was starting off when Donagan proposed to carefully examine this hut, which seemed to have been abandoned for a long time. They might find some utensil or instrument or tool, the origin of which they could recognize.

The heap of dry leaves was carefully pulled over, and in one corner Service found a fragment of burnt clay which might have been a bowl or a flask — just a trace of the work-of man but that was all.

They therefore set out, and at half-past seven had fairly started, compass in hand, bearing due east, the ground sloping gradually as they went. For two hours they kept on, slowly, very slowly, through dense thickets of shrubs and small trees, and once or twice having to cut their way through with the axe.

A little before ten o'clock they caught sight of a horizon through the trees. Beyond the forest was a wide plain dotted with mastic trees, thyme bushes, and clumps of heath. Half a mile to the eastward it was bounded by a strip of sand, on which beat the surf of the sea seen by Briant, and which extended right up to the horizon.

Donagan said nothing. He was angry to find that his companion had not made a mistake.

And Briant said nothing. He did not wish to triumph over his friend.

And glass at his eyes he searched the view all round.

On the north the shore, now brightly lighted by the .sun's rays, seemed to curve off to the left. At the south it was the same, but the curve was sharper.

There could be no doubt any longer. It was not a continent, it was an island on which the schooner had been wrecked, and all hope would have to be given up of getting away from it except through help from without.

Beyond, there was no other land in sight. It seemed as though the island lay lost by itself in the immensity of the Pacific.

The four boys crossed the plain to the beach and halted at the foot of a sandhill. Their intention was to have lunch and then go back through the forest. If they made haste they might get back to the wreck before nightfall.

The meal was not a cheerful one. Hardly a word did they exchange.

At length Donagan picked up his bag and his gun, and said —

“Let us be off!”

And all four, giving a last look at the sea, were making a move, when Fan ran off along the beach.

“Fan! Here! Fan!” shouted Service.

But the dog continued to caper along the wet sand, and at last rushed into the sea, and began to drink.

“She drinks! She drinks!” exclaimed Donagan.

And in an instant he was by the side of the sea and drinking the water that Fan so much enjoyed.

It was fresh!

It was a lake stretching away to the eastern horizon. It was not the sea!

CHAPTER VIII

THE CAVE

AND so the important question on which the safety of the boys depended was still unsolved. That the imagined sea was a lake there could be no doubt. But was it not possible that the lake was on an island? If the exploration were continued, would not there be a sea discovered beyond — a sea there was no way of crossing?

The lake was of considerable size, for it touched the horizon on three of its sides, as Donagan observed, and it certainly was more likely to be on a continent than on an island.

“Then it must be the American continent on which we have been wrecked,” said Briant.

“I always thought so,” said Donagan, “and it seems that I was not mistaken.”

“Anyhow,” said Briant, “it was a line of water I saw to the east.”

“Yes, but it was not the sea.”

Donagan’s satisfaction with himself was obvious from this reply, which betrayed more vanity than good-nature. Briant said no more. For the common welfare it was better that he had been mistaken. On a continent they would not be imprisoned as they would be on an island. But they would have to wait for a favourable time before they started towards the east. The difficulties experienced in reaching the lake were as nothing to what might be expected by the whole party on a much longer journey. And it was already the beginning of April, and the southern winter is earlier than the northern. There could be no thought of setting out before the return of the fine weather.

But the position would soon be untenable in the bay, exposed as it was to the winds. Before the end of the month the schooner would have to be left. If no cavern could be found in the cliffs, would the boys be better off ‘ here by the lake? Would it not be as well to explore its neighbourhood more carefully? The exploration would delay their return for a day or two, and would give Gordon some anxiety, but Briant and Donagan did not hesitate. Their provisions would last another day, and there was no sign of a change of weather. So it was decided to go south by the side of the lake.

There was another motive for the exploration being extended.

Undoubtedly the district had been inhabited or rather frequented by man. The causeway in the creek and the hut were clear indications of man’s presence at a period more or less recent, and yielded evidence it was advisable to complete before moving to new quarters for the winter. Perhaps other evidence might be found? If savages had not been here, some shipwrecked sailor might have stayed for a time, until he started on his way to the towns of the continent. Evidently it was well worth while exploring the district bordering on the lake.

There was only one question to be decided. Should Briant and Donagan go to the south or the north? But as to go southwards was to move nearer the wreck, that direction was decided on. It would be seen later on if it was advisable to go to the end of the lake.

It was about half-past eight when the four boys began their march, skirting the grassy sandhills that mammillated the plain, bounded on the west by the masses of greenery.

Fan hunted about in front and put up several flocks of tinamous that hastened to shelter under the lentisk bushes and ferns. Here and there rose clumps of a sort of red and white cranberry, and plants of wild celery. But the guns had to be kept silent, for it was possible that the environs of the lake were visited by savages.

In following the shore, sometimes at the foot of the sandhills, sometimes along the sand, the boys easily accomplished a dozen miles during the day. They found no trace of savages. No smoke rose from the trees. No footprints marked the sand, wet with the sheet of water that stretched away into the offing. Not a sail was to be seen on the horizon, not a boat on the surface. The lake was deserted. If the country had been inhabited, it did not seem to be so now.

Wild beasts or ruminants there were none. Two or three times in the afternoon a few birds appeared on the edge of the forest, but it was impossible to get at them.

Service exclaimed —

“They are ostriches.”

“Very small ostriches, then,” answered Donagan,:- “for they are not over tall.”

“If they are ostriches,” said Briant, “and if we are on a continent — — ” I? “Do you still doubt it?” asked Donagan ironically. 5 “It must be the American continent, where such animals are very abundant,” continued Briant, “that is all I wished to say.”

About seven o’clock in the evening a halt was called. Next day, unless something happened, the journey would be resumed to the wreck. That evening it was not £ possible to go further to the southward. At the halting- | place one of the rivers flowed out from the lake, and this ‘ would have to be crossed by swimming. Darkness was setting in and the country could be but imperfectly: seen, but it appeared as though there was a cliff on the right bank of this watercourse.

Briant, Donagan, Wilcox, and Service, alter supper had been despatched, thought only of a night’s rest, under the stars this time, no hut being discoverable. And the stars were bright and sparkled brilliantly, and the crescent moon moved slowly down to set in the Pacific. All was quiet on the lake and on the beach. The four lads, nestled between the enormous roots of a beech-tree, slept so soundly that even a thunderstorm would not have awakened them.

Like Fan they heard not the barking close by, which ought to have been the barking of the jackal, or the more distant growling which was probably that of wild beasts.

In these countries where ostriches live in a wild state they might expect the approach of jaguars and cougars, which are the tiger and lion of South America. But the night passed without adventure.

About four o’clock in the morning, just as the dawn was showing on the horizon above the lake, the dog began to give signs of uneasiness, growling gently, and sniffing the ground as if she wanted to be sent off in search of something.

It was nearly seven o’clock when Briant awoke his comrades. All were up immediately, and while Service nibbled a bit of biscuit, the three others went to take a look round the country beyond the watercourse.

“Well,” exclaimed Wilcox, “it’s a good thing we didn’t try to cross the water yesterday. We should have stuck in the marsh.”

“Yes,” said Briant, “it is a marsh, and it stretches right away to the south, and we cannot see the end of it.”

“Just look at the ducks,” said Donagan, “and teal and snipe on it I If we could take up our quarters here for the winter, we should not want for game.”

“And why shouldn’t we?” asked Briant, walking towards the right bank of the stream.

At the back was a lofty cliff which ended in a peak. The two sides joined at an angle, one ran by the bank of the river, the other skirted the lake. Was this cliff the same as that which shut in the bay where the schooner was wrecked? That could not be ascertained for certain until a more complete exploration of the district had been made.

The right bank of the river was about twenty feet high, and ran along the base of the cliff, the left bank was very low, and could scarcely be distinguished from the pools and bogs of the marshy plain which extended out of sight towards the south. To make out the direction of the river they would have to ascend the cliff, and this Briant resolved to do before starting for the wreck.

The first thing was to take a look round the outlet of the stream from the lake. This was only about forty feet across, but as it increased in width, so did it increase in depth.

“Just look here!” said Wilcox, as he reached the end of the cliff.

A pile of stones attracted his attention, forming a sort of dam on the same plan as the one they had seen in the forest.

“There is no doubt this time,” said Briant.

“No! there is no doubt,” remarked Donagan, pointing to some pieces of wood at the end of the dam.

The remains were obviously those of a boat of some sort. One piece, half rotten and covered with moss, and curved like a stem, held an iron ring eaten away with rust.

“A ring! a ring!” exclaimed Service.

And the four stood still, looking around them as if the man who had used the boat and built the dam was about to appear before them.

But nobody came! Many years had evidently gone by since the boat had been left to rot by the side of the stream, and the man had rejoined his fellows or ended his miserable existence on this land he could not leave; and we can understand how the boys felt at this clear evidence of human intervention and the thoughts it gave rise to.

Meanwhile Fan had been behaving in a strange manner, as if she had at last got on a scent. Her ears were pricked up, her tail wagged, and her nose was held close to the ground, as she worried about under the bushes.

“Look at Fan,” said Service.

“She smells something,” said Donagan, stepping towards her.

Fan had just stopped with one paw raised and her neck stretched out. Then she suddenly rushed towards a clump of trees at the foot of the cliff by the side of the lake.

Briant and his comrades followed her. A few minutes afterwards they stopped before an old beech on the bark of which were cut two letters and a date in this fashion: F. B.

1827.

Briant, Donagan, Wilcox, and Service would have remained silent and motionless for some time before this inscription if Fan had not run back round the angle of the cliff.

“Here, Fan! here!” shouted Briant.

The dog did not return, but she began to bark loudly.

“Take care,” said Briant. “Do not separate, and be on your guard.”

Indeed they could not be too careful. A band of savages might be in the neighbourhood, and their presence was more to be feared than wished for, if they were of those Indians who infest the pampas of South America.

The guns were cocked, and the revolvers got out ready for the defensive. The boys advanced round the angle of the cliff, and up the narrow bank of the stream. They had not taken a dozen paces before Donagan stooped to pick up something from the ground. It was a pickaxe with the handle half rotten — a pickaxe of American or European origin, not one of those heavy tools made by the Polynesian savages. Like the ring on the boat it was deeply rusted, and must have been left behind many years ago.

At the foot of the cliff were traces of tillage, a few irregular furrows, a little square of yams, which, left to themselves, had run wild.

Suddenly a mournful bark was heard, and Fan reappeared, seized with some inexplicable agitation. She turned round’, she ran in front of her masters, looked back at them, called them, and seemed to invite them to follow.

“There is certainly something extraordinary the matter,” said Briant, trying in vain to get the dog quiet.

“Let us go where she is taking us to,” said Donagan, making a sign to Wilcox and Service to follow.

Ten yards further on Fan stood up before a mass of brushwood and bushes, which reached up to the very foot of the cliff.

Briant looked to see if the bushes hid the corpse of some animal, or even of a man on whose traces Fan had fallen. Clearing away the bushes, he saw a narrow opening.

“Is there a cave here?” he exclaimed, stepping back a few paces.

“Likely enough,” said Donagan. “But what is there in the cave?”

“We will see,” answered Briant.

And with his hatchet he began to cut away the entanglement about the entrance. He listened, but heard no suspicious noise.

Service was about to slip through into the cave, when Briant stopped him.

“See what Fan is going to do first.”

The dog barked angrily twice or thrice in a way that was anything but reassuring for’ a person in the cave, bad one been there.

What did it mean? The boys must find out. Briant put a handful of dry twigs across the opening and lighted them to see if the air was foul, The twigs crackled and burnt brilliantly: evidently the air was breathable.

“Shall we go in?” asked Wilcox.

“Yes,” said Donagan.

“Wait till we can see our way,” said Briant. And cutting a resinous branch from one of the pine-trees close by, he lighted it. Then followed by his companions he stepped into the cave.

The opening was about four feet high and two feet wide; but it grew larger immediately, forming a cavity twelve feet high and twice as wide, with a floor of hard, dry sand.

As he hurried to the front Wilcox stumbled over a wooden bench, near a table on which were certain domestic utensils, a jug of stoneware, some large shells that had been used as plates, a knife with a notched and rusty blade, two or three fish-hooks, a tin cup, empty like the jug. Near the opposite wall was a sort of box, made of planks roughly nailed together, and which contained a few tattered clothes.

There could be no doubt that the excavation had been inhabited. But when, and by whom? What had become of the human being who had lived here?

At the end was a miserable pallet covered with some fragments of linen. At the head, on a bench, was a second cup, and a wooden candlestick, with only a burnt match on the bowl.

The boys recoiled from the pallet, at first thinking it might hold a corpse.

Briant, repressing his repugnance, lifted up the covering.

The pallet was empty.

A minute afterwards, the boys, who were much affected, had rejoined Fan, who still kept up her mournful barking.

They descended the bank of the stream for about twenty yards, and suddenly stopped. A feeling of horror nailed them to the spot.

There, among the roots of a beech tree, were the remains of a skeleton.

And so to this place there had come to die the unhappy man who had lived on this continent, and the cave that had been his dwelling-place had not been his tomb.

CHAPTER IX

FRANCOIS BAUDOIN

THE boys were silent. Who was this man who had come to die here? Was he a shipwrecked sailor to whom no help had come in his last hour? To what nation did he belong? Was he a young man when he arrived in this corner of the earth? Was he an old man when he died? How had he supplied his wants? If he had been shipwrecked, had others survived the catastrophe with him? And if so, had he remained alone after the death of his companions in misfortune? Did the different things in the cave belong to his ship, or had he made them with his own hands? But to such questionings no answer might ever be given.

And here was a more serious one! If it was on a continent that this man had found refuge, why had he not reached some town in the interior, or some port on the shore? Were there such difficulties, such obstacles in his getting back to his own country that he could not overcome them? Was the distance so great that he thought he could not accomplish it? It was evident that he had fallen down, weak from sickness or old age, and had not had strength enough to regain the cave, but had died at the foot of the tree! And if the means of safety to the north and east had failed him, why should they not fail, these boys from the wreck of the schooner?

It was important to examine the cave with the greatest care. Who knew if they might not find a document which might throw some light on this man, or his birthplace, or the length of the stay! And on the other hand it was advisable to ascertain if they could take up their quarters here for the winter after abandoning the wreck.

“Come!” said Briant.

And, followed by Fan, they entered the cave by the light of another resinous torch.

One of the first things they saw was a shelf fixed against the right wall, on which was a bundle of clumsy candles made of fat and tow. Service lighted one of these candles, and placed it in the wooden candlestick, and the search began.

In the first place the shape of the cave was noted, for there was no doubt of its habitability. It was a large hollow, dating back from geologic times. There was no trace of damp, although the only ventilation was through the one opening on to the bank of the stream. The walls were as dry as if they were of granite, without any trace of crystallized infiltrations and strings of droplets which in certain grottoes of porphyry or basalt form stalactites. Its position sheltered it from the sea breezes. Daylight penetrated it but little, it is true, but by opening one or two windows in the wall it would be easy to make this right, and to ventilate it sufficiently for the accommodation of fifteen people.

Its dimensions — twenty feet by thirty feet — made it too small to be used at the same time as dormitory, refectory, general store, and kitchen. But it would only be required for five or six months, after which a start could be made to the north-east for some town of Bolivia or the Argentine Republic. Evidently, if they had to take up their permanent abode here, the cave would have to be made larger by digging into the friable limestone. But the cave as it was would do very well till the summer season.

This being ascertained, Briant made a careful list of the things it contained. These were not many. The unfortunate man had been almost destitute. What had he secured from the wreck? Nothing but odds and ends, broken spars, pieces of plank that he had made up into the pallet, the table, the box, and the benches, which formed the only furniture. Less favoured than the survivors of the schooner, he had not had a regular workshop ready at hand. A few tools, a pickaxe, an axe, two or three cooking utensils, a little cask of brandy, a hammer, two cold chisels, a saw — these were all that were found. They had been saved doubtless in the boat, the remains of which lay near the dam.

So thought Briant, and so he told his companions. And then the feeling of horror at the sight of the skeleton, and the thought that they might die abandoned in the same way, gave place to a feeling of confidence at their possession of so many things which to this man were wanting.

But who was he? Where was he born? When was he wrecked? No doubt many years had passed since his death. The state of the bones found at the foot of the tree showed that only too well! Besides, there was the rust on the pickaxe and the ring, the thicket of bushes at the entrance of the cave all tending to show that the man must have died years ago. Would any new discovery change this hypothesis into a certainty?

The search continued. A few other objects were brought to light — a second knife with the blades broken, a pair of compasses, a kettle, an iron ring, a marline- spike. But there was no nautical instrument, no telescope, no mariner’s compass, not even a musket.

As the man had to live, it seemed as though he must have snared his food instead of shot it. But an explanation of the difficulty offered itself when Wilcox exclaimed.

“What is that?”

“That?” answered Service.

“It is a game at bowls,” said Wilcox.

“A game at bowls?” asked Briant in surprise. But in a moment he recognized the use of the two round stones which Wilcox had picked up. It was one of those implements of the chase, known as the bolas, which consists of two balls tied together with a cord, and is used by the Indians of South America. When a skilful hand throws the bolas, they encircle the limbs of the animal, and for a moment paralyze it so that it falls an easy prey to the hunter.

Evidently the inhabitant of the cave had made this bolas, and also a lasso, a long loop of leather used at shorter distances.

But who was this man? Was he an officer or a common seaman who had put his reading to profit in this way? It would be very difficult to discover without further discovery.

At the head of the bed, under a rag of the clothes that Briant had thrown aside, Wilcox found a watch hung on a nail fixed in the wall.

This watch was not a common watch such as sailors usually wear, but was of finer workmanship, and had a double case of silver and a key and chain of the same metal.

“The time! See the time!” said Service.

“The time will tell you nothing,” said Briant. “The watch probably stopped days before the unfortunate man died.”

Briant opened the case, not without difficulty, for the hinges were rusty, and he saw that the hands pointed to twenty-seven minutes past three.

“But,” said Donagan, “the watch has the maker’s name. That might tell us — — ”

“You are right,” said Briant.

And looking inside the case, he managed to read these words engraved on the plate —

“*Delpeuch, Saint Malo.”*

The name of the maker and his address.

“Then he was a Frenchman!” exclaimed Briant.

There seemed little doubt that a Frenchman had lived in this cavern until death put an end to his misery.

To this proof another was soon added when Donagan, who had turned over the pallet, found a note-book with its yellow pages covered with pencil writing.

Unfortunately most of the writing was illegible. A few words could, however, be deciphered, and among others were — Francis Baudoin.

Two names, the initials of which were the same as those the man had cut on the tree. The note-book was the daily journal of his life from the day he had been cast ashore. And in the fragments of phrases that time Lad not entirely effaced Briant managed to read *Duguay- Trouin*, evidently the name of-the ship that had been lost in this distant corner of the Pacific.

At the commencement was a date, 1827 — the same as that which, had been cut under the initials on the tree.

It was, then, fifty-five years since Francois Baudoin had been thrown on this coast; and since his shipwreck he had received no help from without. If Francis Baudoin had not moved to some other place on the continent, was it because the obstacles were insurmountable?

More than ever the boys thought of the gravity of their situation. How could they do what this man had not done, a man accustomed to hard work, and broken to fatigue?

Another discovery was to show them that all attempts to leave the country would be in vain.

As Donagan turned over the note-book he found a folded paper between the leaves. It was a map, drawn in ink made probably of soot and water.

“A map!” he exclaimed.

“Which Francois Baudoin has drawn with his own hand!” said Briant.

“If that is so,” said Wilcox, “the man could not be a common sailor, but fine of the officers of the *Duguay- 1’rouin*, To make a map of this place — ”‘

“And that is what it is,” said Donagan.

There could be no mistake. At the first glance the boys recognized the bay of the wreck, the bank of reefs, the beach on which they had encamped, the lake they had skirted on the western side, the three islands in the offing, the cliff running along to the stream, and the forests covering the central region.

Beyond the opposite bank of the lake were other forests extending to another shore, and that shore the sea washed on all sides!

There was an end to all the plans of going eastward to seek safety in that direction! And so Briant was right after all, and Donagan was wrong. The sea surrounded the imaginary continent on every side. It was an island, and that was why Francois Baudoin could not leave it.

It was easy to see that the map was correct. The distances were probably mere estimates, from the times taken to traverse them, and not arrived at by triangulation; but to judge by what was already known, the errors could not be important.

It was clear that the shipwrecked man had been all over the island, that he had noted the chief geographical details, and probably the ajoupa and the causeway at the creek were of his building.

As Francis Baudoin showed it, the island was of oblong form, and resembled an enormous butterfly with open wings. In the centre of the forest was the lake, which was eighteen miles long and five wide, dimensions enough to account for the boys not being able to see its distant shores, and then mistaking it for the sea. Many streams ran out of this lake, and notably the one in front of the cave, which entered the bay close to the camp.

The only height of importance in the island was the cliff up to the Cape to the northward. The southern part was shown by the map to be arid and sandy, while beyond the stream was an immense marsh which narrowed to a point as it ran to the south. In the north-east and south-east were long lines of sandhills, which gave this part of the coast a very different aspect to that of the bay in which the schooner was wrecked.

According to the scale at the foot of the map the island was about fifty miles long from north to south, and twenty-five wide from east to west. Reckoning the irregularities of its shape, it was 150 miles in circumference. But there was no knowing to which of the Polynesian group it belonged, or if it lay by itself in the Pacific.

One thing was certain, that the boys would have to stay on it; there was no getting away. And as the cave afforded an excellent refuge, it was best to bring all their goods to it before the storms had broken up the schooner.

At present the best thing to be done was to return to the camp without delay. Gordon would be getting anxious. Three days had elapsed since Briant and his comrades left him, and he would be fearing that misfortune had happened to them.

Briant suggested that they should start that very day at eleven o'clock. There was no good in climbing the cliff, as the map showed the shortest way was to follow the right bank of the river to the bay which ran from east to west. At the most this would be about seven miles, and take but a few hours.

But before leaving, the boys paid the last mark of respect to the shipwrecked Frenchman. With the pickaxe they dug a grave at the foot of the tree on which Francois Baudoin had cut his initials, and a wooden cross marked the spot.

This pious ceremony over, they returned to the cave, and closed the entrance, so that animals could not get in. Then, having finished what was left of their provisions, they started along the right bank of the stream by the base of the cliff. In an hour they reached the spot where the high ground trended off to the northwest, Along the river the road was easy, for the bank was clear of shrubs and trees.

As they walked, Briant took careful note of the river, bearing in mind that it ran from the lake into the bay. It seemed to him that on the upper part of its course at least a boat or raft might be towed or poled along, and this would make the transport of the goods easy, particularly if advantage were taken of the tide, which ran up into the lake. In its course there were no rapids, and no narrows or shallows to make it unnavigable. For the first three miles after it left the lake, everything seemed favourable for his plan.

But about four o’clock in the afternoon the road by the bank had to be abandoned. The stream ran into a “wide marsh which could not be crossed without risk, and the boys thought it best to take to the forest.

Compass in hand, Briant led the way to the northeast, so as to gain the bay by the shortest road. But considerable delay was occasioned by the closeness of the thickets; and under the dense shade of the birches, pines, and beeches, darkness fell as the sun set.

Two miles were accomplished in this tiring manner. After getting round the marsh, which stretched a long way to the north, the best plan would undoubtedly have been to return to the river bank, but this would have added so much to the length of the journey that Briant and Donagan decided it was not worth the loss of time. So they kept on through the forest until about seven o’clock, when they discovered that they had somehow gone astray.

Would they be obliged to pass the night under the trees? They might have done this pretty comfortably had not all the provisions been exhausted.

“Come on!” said Briant. “If we keep to the west, we must reach the camp.”

“Unless the map is wrong,” said Donagan, “and that was not the stream which runs into the bay.”

“Why should the map be wrong, Donagan?”

“And why should it not be, Briant?”

Evidently Donagan had not yet digested his discomfiture, and was prepared to throw doubt on Baudoin’s statements. Why was not clear, for as far as the boys had gone the map had proved to be fairly correct.

Briant saw no advantage in disputing the matter, and strode off to the west.

At eight o’clock the night had become so dark that it was impossible to 6ee ahead of them; and the end of the forest seemed as far off as ever.”

Suddenly through a gap in the trees a bright light shot through the air.

“What is that?” asked Service.

“A meteorite probably,” said Wilcox.

“No. It was a rocket!” answered Briant.

“A rocket from the schooner.”

“And consequently a signal!” exclaimed Donagan, firing his gun in answer to Gordon.

A star was recognized ahead. From it a new departure was being taken when a second rocket sped through the darkness. Briant and his companions directed their course towards it, and three-quarters of an hour afterwards they reached the schooner.

CHAPTER X

THE RAFT

THE reception the explorers met with can be imagined. Gordon, Cross, Baxter, Garnett and Webb clasped them in their arms, while the little ones threw their arms around their necks and shouted for joy. Fan took part in the rejoicing, and barked as loudly as the youngsters cheered. It seemed so long since Briant and his companions had gone away.

“Were they lost? Had they fallen among savages? Had they been attacked by cannibals? “Such were the questions those who remained behind had asked themselves.

But Briant, Donagan, Wilcox and Service had come back again to tell them the story of their expedition. As, however, they were very tired after their long day’s work, the story was postponed till the morning.

“We are on an island!”

That was all Briant said, and that was enough to reveal the troubles in store for them, although Gordon received the news without betraying much discouragement.

“Good! I’ll wait,” he seemed to say to himself, “and not trouble myself about it till it comes.”

Next morning — the 5th of April — Gordon, Briant, Donagan, Baxter, Cross, Wilcox, Service, Webb, Garnett, and also Moko, whose advice was always valuable, gathered together in the bow of the yacht, while the others were still asleep. In turns Briant and Donagan told their comrades all that had happened. They told them how a causeway across a stream, and the remains of an ajoupa, had led them to believe that the country was inhabited. They explained how the wide sheet of water they had at first taken for the sea was nothing but a lake; how fresh traces they had come upon led them to the cave, near where the stream flowed out of the lake; how the bones of Francois Baudoin had been discovered; and how the map made by him showed that it was an island on which the schooner had been wrecked.

The story was told in full, neither Briant nor Donagan omitting the smallest detail; and now all who looked at the map understood only too well that help could come to them but from the sea.

However, if the future presented itself in the gloomiest colours, and the boys could only place their hope in God, there was one who felt much less alarmed than the others, and that was Gordon. The young American had no relatives in New Zealand. And to his practical, methodical, organizing mind, there was nothing so very difficult in the task of founding a colony. He saw the chance that offered for the exercise of his natural gift, and he did not hesitate to keep up the spirits of his comrades by promising them a supportable existence if -they would only help him.

And in the first place, as the island was of considerable size, it seemed impossible that it was not marked on the map of the Pacific near the American coast. They turned to the atlas, but no island of importance could they find outside the Archipelagoes which include the Fuegian or Magellanic Islands, and those of Desolation, Queen Adelaide, Clarence, &c. &c. If it had been in one of these Archipelagoes, and only separated from the continent by narrow channels, Baudoin would certainly have shown it on his map, and this he had not done. It must be an isolated island, and probably more to the north or the south than these Archipelagoes. But without the necessary elements or instruments it was impossible to fix its position in the Pacific.

All that could be done at present was to take up their quarters and make themselves comfortable before the wet season had made it impossible to move.

“The best thing to do,” said Briant, “is to move into the cave near the lake. It would make a capital place to live in.”

“Is it large enough to hold the lot of us?” asked Baxter.

“No,” answered Donagan, “but I think we could make it larger by digging out another cave from it. We have tools — ”

“Let us try it first as it is,” said Gordon, “and if it is too small we can — ”

“And let us get there as soon as we can,” interrupted Briant.

The matter was urgent. As Gordon had said, the schooner became less habitable every day. The late rains and the hot sun had opened up the cracks in the hull and deck considerably. The torn sails allowed the wind and water to find their way inside. The sand on which it rested had been undermined, and it had slanted further over and sunk deeper into the sand. If a storm were to come, there was every chance of the wreck going to pieces in a few hours. The sooner the boys cleared out the better, and it would be well for them to take the hull to pieces methodically, so as to secure all that would be useful, such as beams, planks, iron, copper, with a view of properly fitting up “French Den,” as the cave had been called in memory of the shipwrecked Frenchman.

“And in the meantime where shall we live?” asked Donagan.

“In a tent,” answered Gordon. “In a tent under the trees by the river-side.”

“That is the best thing,” said Briant, “and let us begin without losing an hour.”

The demolition of the yacht, the unloading of the material and provisions, the construction of a raft for the transport of the cargo, would take at least a month of hard work, and before leaving the bay it would be the first week of May, which corresponds to the first week in November in the northern hemisphere, that is to say, the beginning of winter.

Gordon had chosen the bank of the river as the site of the tent because the transport was to take place by water. No other way was more direct or convenient. To carry all that remained of the yacht through the forest or along the bank of the river would have been almost impossible; but by taking advantage of the tide, a raft could be got up the river without much trouble.

In its upper course, as Briant had discovered, the stream contained no obstacle in the way of falls, rapids, or bars. An expedition to reconnoitre its lower course from the swamp to the mouth was made in the yawl; and Briant and Moko assured themselves that the river was unnavigable in that part as well. There was thus an unbroken line of communication between the bay and French Den.

The days that followed were employed in arranging the camp at the side of the river. The lower branches of two beeches were united by long spars with the branches of a third, and were used to hold up the yacht’s spare mainsail, which fell down on each side to the ground. Into this tent, which was firmly stayed and strutted, they transported the bedding and furniture, the weapons and ammunition, and the bales of provisions. As the raft was to be built of the timbers of the yacht, they had to wait till they had demolished the wreck before they began to build it.

There was nothing to complain of in the weather, which continued dry. When there was a wind, it came from the land, and the work went on uninterruptedly.

By the 15th of April there only remained on the schooner such things as were too heavy to move until she had broken up — among them the pigs of lead used for ballast, the water-tanks in the hold, the windlass, and the galley, which were too heavy to be taken away without apparatus. The spars and rigging, shrouds, and stays of iron, chains, anchors, ropes, hawsers, lines, yarns, and such things, of which there was a great quantity on the yacht, were gradually removed to the ground near the tent.

Busy as they were with this work, the wants of each day were not neglected. Donagan, Webb, and Wilcox devoted a few hours to shooting the rock pigeons and the birds frequenting the marsh. The youngsters went searching for mollusks when the tide left the reef bare. It was pleasant to see Jenkins, Iverson, Dole, and Costar hunting about in the pools like a lot of ducklings, and sometimes getting their legs wet so as to be scolded by the severe Gordon, and excused by the gentler Briant. Jack also went out with the youngsters, but he never joined in their shouts of laughter.

Things went on satisfactorily and methodically, thanks to Gordon, whose sound common sense was seldom at fault. Evidently Donagan gave in to him when he would not give in to Briant or any one else. And harmony reigned in the little world.

But there was need of despatch. The second fortnight of April was less fine. The mean temperature sensibly fell, and many times during the early morning the thermometric column fell below freezing. The winter was coming, and with it would appear its retinue of hail and snow and storm.

The young and the old began to clothe themselves more warmly, to put on the thick jerseys and jackets. To find them was easy enough, for they were all down in Gordon's note-book, arranged in qualities and sizes. The youngest boys were Briant's especial care. He saw that they had not cold feet, and that they did not dawdle in the cold air when they were out for a swim; at the least cold in their heads he made them sleep near the fire, which he kept in night and day; and often he kept Dole and Costar in the tent, while Moko gave them gruel and physic from the schooner's medicine-chest.

When the schooner had been emptied of all it con- tamed, the hull, which had broken apart in many places, was attacked. The sheets of copper sheathing were taken off very carefully. Then the pincers, and crowbars, and hammers were brought into play to rip off the planks which the nails and trenails fastened to the frame. This was a troublesome task for inexperienced hands and not very vigorous arms. And the breaking up went on very slowly until on the 25th of April a storm came to help.

During the night, although they were already in the cold season, a thunderstorm occurred. The lightning played across the sky, and the rolling of the thunder lasted from midnight to sunrise, to the great terror of the little ones. It did not rain, fortunately, but twice or thrice it was necessary to support the tent against the fury of the wind. Owing to its being fixed to the trees it remained undamaged; not so the yacht, which lay directly exposed to the gusts from the offing and the full force of the waves.

The demolition was complete. The planks were torn off, the frame broken up, the keel smashed, and the whole thing reduced to wreckage. And there was nothing to complain of in the way it was done, for the waves as they retired carried off but a small portion of the wreck, which for the most part was kept back by the reef. The ironwork was easily picked up out of the sand, and all the boys set to work during the next day or so to collect it. The beams, planks, water-tanks, and other things which had not been swept away lay scattered on the beach, and all that had to be done was to transport them to the right bank of the stream a few yards from the tent.

It was a heavy job, but in time it was done, though not without a good deal of fatigue. It was curious to see the boys all hanging on to a heavy piece of wood, hauling it along and encouraging each other with many a shout. The heavier timbers were rolled on bits of round wood and levered along by spars. The most difficult things to move were the windlass, the galley stove, and the iron tanks, which were of considerable weight. If the boys had only had some practical man to guide them! If Briant had had his father, Garnett his, the engineer and the captain would have saved them from many mistakes they committed, and would again commit. Baxter, who was very intelligent in mechanical matters, displayed much cleverness and zeal; it was on his advice, with the concurrence of Moko, that tackles were fixed to piles driven into the sand, and thereby tenfold strength given to the boys, so as to enable them to finish their task.

In short, on the evening of the 28th, all that remained of the schooner had been taken to the place of embarkation and without doubt the worst of the enterprise was over, for the river was to take the material up to French Den.

“To-morrow,” said Gordon, “we will begin to build the raft.”

“Yes,” said Baxter; “and to save any trouble in launching it, I propose to build it in the river.”

“That will not be easy,” said Donagan.

“Never mind,” answered Gordon, “we will try. If it gives us more trouble to get together, it will not trouble us to get it afloat.”

There could be no doubt this was the best way; and next morning they began the framework of the raft, which was to be of sufficiently large dimensions to receive a heavy and crowded cargo.

The beams from the schooner, the keel broken in two pieces, the foremast, what remained of the mainmast broken three feet above the deck, the rails, and the midship beam, the bowsprit, the fore-yard, the main-boom and the gaff, had been taken to a part of the river beach which the water only covered at high tide. The boys waited till the tide rose, and then the wood was brought out into the stream. There the largest pieces were placed side by side, and bound together, with the others placed crossways.

In this way a solid framework was obtained, measuring about thirty feet long and fifteen feet wide. All day long the boys worked hard at the raft, and by nightfall the framework was complete. Briant then took care to move it to the trees on the bank, so that the rising tide could not carry it up stream, or the ebb take it out to sea. Then every one, thoroughly tired out after such a laborious day, sat down to supper with a formidable appetite, and slept soundly till the morning.

At dawn they again set to work. A platform had now to be built on the framework. The deck planks and streaks of the schooner’s hull now came into use. Nails driven in with heavy hammer-strokes, and ropes passed over and under, fastened everything firmly together.

Working at the hardest, this took three days, although there was not an hour to lose. A little ice had already appeared on the surface of the pools among the reefs and along the edge of the stream. The shelter of the tent became insufficient in spite of the fire. Sleeping close to each other, covered with the thickest wraps, Gordon and his companions found it difficult to put up with the cold. Hence the necessity of pushing on with the work for taking up their quarters in the cave, where they hoped to defy the winter, which in these latitudes is very severe.

The deck had been fixed on as firmly as possible, so that it should not be displaced on the voyage; for that meant the swallowing up of the cargo in the bed of the stream; and to save such a catastrophe it was better to delay the departure for a day.

“However,” said Briant, “we must not delay our departure beyond the 6th of May.”

“Why not?” asked Gordon.

“Because the day after to-morrow is new moon, and the tides will be higher for a few days after that. The higher they are, the easier we shall get up the river. Just think what a fix we shall be in if we have to tow this heavy raft or pole it up! We could never do it against the current!”

“You are right,” said Gordon. “‘We must be off in three days at the latest.”

And all agreed to take no rest until the work was finished.

On the 3rd of May they began to load the raft, being careful to trim it so as to keep it level. Every one was occupied in this work according to his strength. Jenkins, Iverson, Dole, and Costar took charge of the lighter things, the utensils, tools, and instruments, and laid them on the deck, where Briant and Baxter stored them under Gordon's directions. The bigger boys busied themselves about the heavier things, such as the stove, the water-tanks, the windlass, the iron-work, the sheathing, &c. the rest of the timbers of the schooner, the ribs, the planking, the deck-rails, &-c. In the same way were brought on board the bales of provisions, the casks of wine, ale, and spirits, not forgetting several sacks of salt that had been found among the rocks. To assist in the loading, Baxter had erected two spars which were kept in position by means of four stays. 'To the end of this crab was fastened a tackle working round one of the yacht's launches, so that the things could be lifted off the ground and laid on the deck gently and quietly.

All went on with so much prudence and zeal that in the afternoon of the 5th of May everything was in its place on board, and nothing remained but to cast off the raft's moorings. That would be done next morning about eight o'clock, when the tide began to rise at the mouth of the stream.

The boys doubtless imagined that their task being over they were to spend the rest of the day in taking things easy. They were destined to be disappointed, for Gordon made a proposition which gave them something else to do.

"My comrades," he said, "we are now going away from this bay, and will no more be able to look out over the sea, and if any ship comes in sight of the island, we shall not be able to signal to her. It will therefore be best, I think, to rig up a mast on the cliff, and hoist one of our flags and keep it flying. That will probably be enough to attract the attention of any ship that may pass within sight of it.”

The proposition having been adopted, the schooner’s topmast, which had not been used in the raft, was dragged to the foot of the cliff where the slope by the river-bank was not too great, and it required a good deal of effort to get it up the rugged acclivity abutting against the ridge. Success came at last, however, and the mast was firmly fixed in the ground. Then with a halliard Baxter hoisted the British flag, and the same moment Donagan saluted it by firing his gun.

“Hallo!” said Gordon to Briant. “There is Donagan taking possession of the island in the name of Great Britain!”

“I shall be much astonished if it doesn’t belong to Great Britain already,” said Briant.

Gordon’s reply was a grimace, and by his always speaking of it as “his island “it seemed as though he had claimed it for the United States.

Next morning at sunrise all were astir. The tent was taken down and the bedding carried on board the raft, with the sail put over it to protect it from the weather, which, however, promised to be favourable enough, although a change in the direction of the wind had brought a good deal of mist in from the sea.

By seven o’clock everything was ready. The raft had been so loaded that it gave accommodation for the company for two or three days, and Moko had cooked enough food to last, so that a fire would not be needed.

At half-past eight the boys all gathered on the raft. The bigger ones, armed with poles and spars, took up their plaices ready to steer it, for a rudder would have been no use in going with the stream.

A little before nine o’clock the tide began to make itself felt, and the framework began to creak and groan.

“Attention!” shouted Briant.

“Ready!” said Baxter.

These were at the hawsers which moored the raft fore and aft by the river-bank.

“We are all ready!” said Donagan, who with Wilcox was in the front of the raft.

Soon the raft was afloat.

“Cast off!” said Briant.

Away went the hawsers, and the heavily-loaded mast began to drift up stream, towing the yawl astern.

Every one was pleased when the raft began to move. If the boys had built a sea-going ship they could not have been more satisfied with themselves. And their little sentiment of vanity may be forgiven them t The right bank of the river, as we know, was bordered with trees, and higher than the left, which ran along by the marsh. Briant, Baxter. Donagan. Wilcox, and Moko used every effort to keep the raft away from the banks for it would never do to run aground, but at the same time they did not cross the stream, for the tide was stronger along the right bank, and the height of the bank gave better holding to their poles.

Two hours after their departure they had floated about a mile. They had not grounded once or run ashore. But according to Briant’s estimate the river was quite six miles long, and as they could not hope to advance more than two miles with each tide, it would take them several tides to reach their destination.

In fact, about eleven o’clock the ebb began to declare itself, and the boys had to bestir themselves to get the raft moored so that it did not drift back to the sea?

Evidently the raft would make a fresh start in the evening, but to venture with it then would be dangerous.

I think it would be unwise.” said Gordon. “We would expose the raft to the chances of collision or grounding and the shock might smash it up. I think we had better wait till to-morrow, and go on with the day tide.”

The proposition was too sensible not to meet with general approval. They might have to wait twenty-four hours, but the delay was preferable to risking the safety of the valuable cargo.

Half a day and the whole of the night were thus passed in this place.

Donagan and his sporting friends, accompanied by Fan, were soon ashore on the river-bank.

Gordon advised them not to get far away, and they adopted his advice; and as they brought back two brace of fat bustards and a string of tinamous, their vanity was satisfied. Moko took charge of the game, to keep it for the first meal — breakfast, dinner, or supper — after reaching French Den.

During the day Donagan had seen no trace of the ancient or recent presence of man in the forest. He had, however, seen some tall birds running off, which he had failed to recognize.

During the night Baxter, Webb, and Cross were on the look-out, ready if necessary to double the hawsers, or give them a little slack when the tide turned. All went well. Next morning, at a quarter to ten, the tide had risen high enough for the navigation to be resumed. The night had been cold, so was the day. The sooner the raft reached its destination the better. What would the boys do if the river froze, or if an iceberg came down from the lake to enter the bay? Here was something to think about, something they did not cease to worry over till they reached French Den.

But it was impossible to go quicker than the flood-tide, impossible to go against the stream when the tide failed, impossible to advance more than a mile in an hour and a half. They reached the half of their journey. About one o’clock in the afternoon a halt was made at the opening of the swamp which Briant had had to go round in returning to the wreck. Advantage was taken of the halt to explore the part adjoining the river. For a mile and a half Moko, Donagan, and Wilcox in the yawl rowed away to the north, and stopped only when the water became too shallow. The swamp was a prolongation of the marsh, which extended along the left bank. It seemed very rich in water-fowl, and Donagan was able to shoot a few snipe to add to the bustards and tinamous in the larder on board.

The night was very still and cold, with a quiet biting breeze that almost died away as it crossed the river-valley. Ice was formed in the stream, but only in thin flakes, which broke or melted at the least shock. In spite of every effort to keep warm, no one was comfortable on the raft. Among the youngsters, Jenkins and Iverson were in a very bad humour, and complained bitterly at having had to leave the schooner; and Briant had to take them in hand and talk them to sleep.

At length, in the afternoon of the next day, with the aid of the tide, which lasted till half-past three in the afternoon, the raft arrived in sight of the lake and was run aground in front of the entrance to French Den.

CHAPTER XI

A CAPTURE

THE landing took place amid shouts of joy from the youngsters. To them any change from the ordinary life was as good as a new game. Dole capered about on the bank; Iverson and Jenkins ran to the side of the lake; while Costar took Moko aside and said —

“Didn’t you promise us a good dinner?”

“Yes, but you will have to do without that,” said Moko.

“And why?”

“Because I shall have no time to get dinner to-day.”

“What I No dinner?”

“No, but there will be supper. And the bustards will be just as good for supper!”

And Moko grinned and showed his white teeth. The youngster gave him a punch in token of good-will, and ran off to join his friends, whom Briant had warned not to get out of sight.

“Are you not gone with them?” he asked his brother.

“No! I would rather stop here!” answered Jack.

“You had much better take a little exercise,” said Briant. “I am not at all easy about you, Jack. You have something you are hiding from me.” Are you ill? “No I There is nothing the matter with me.”

Always the same reply, which never satisfied Briant, who was resolved to have the matter cleared up some day, even at the cost of a scene with the obstinate boy.

But there was no time to lose if the night was to be spent in French Den.

At the outset the cave had to be visited by those who not know it. And as soon as the raft was securely moored to the bank in a backwater away from the current. Briant asked his friends to accompany him. Moko had provided himself with one of the ship's lamps, in which the flame, greatly increased by the power of the lenses, gave a remarkably bright light.

At first the boys had to clear away the entrance. As the branches had been placed by Briant and Donagan so were they found: and consequently no human being, no animal, had tried to enter the cave.

After the boughs were cleared away the boys glided through the narrow entrance. In the glare of the lantern the cave was much better lighted than by the resinous torches of the shipwrecked man's candles.

"Eh! we shall find this a tight fit," said Baxter, who had begun to measure the cave.

"Bah!" exclaimed Garnett. "If we put the beds one over the other, like they do on board ship — "

"Why?" asked Wilcox. "We have only got to put then side by side on the ground — "

"And then," said Webb, "we shall have no room to move about."

“Well,” said Briant, “you won’t move about, that is all. Have you a better place to offer us, Webb?”

“No — but — ”

“But,” said Service, “the important thing is to have a place to shelter us. I did not suppose that Webb imagined he would find a complete mansion — with drawing-room, dining-room, bedroom, hall, smoking-room, bath-room — ”

“No, of course not,” said Cross. “But is there any place where you can cook?”

“Yes. Outside,” said Moko.

“That will be very inconvenient in bad weather,” said Briant. “I thought we should bring the stove inside to-morrow — ”

“The cooking-stove in the cave, where we eat, where we sleep!” exclaimed Donagan in a tone of unmistakable disgust.

“Well, you can use your smelling-salts, Lord Donagan!” exclaimed Service, laughing loudly.

“If I like, t will, Mr. Cook’s Mate I said Donagan, with a frown.

“All right! all right!” said Gordon. “Whether the thing is nice or not, we shall have to decide about it at once I If the stove is used for cooking, it will also do to keep us warn. As to getting some room by digging out chambers in the rock, we shall have all the winter for the work, if it can be done. But now let us take French Den as it is, and get into it as soon as possible.”

The beds were then brought in and laid in order on the sand. Close as they were, the boys, accustomed to the small cabin of the schooner, did not find them any too close.

This occupied the rest of the day. The large table of the yacht was then placed in the middle of the cave, and Garnett and the youngsters laid the cloth.

Moko and Service had done their work well. A fireplace had been made between too large stones at the foot of the cliff, the fire being fed with dry wood gathered by Webb and Wilcox under the trees. About six o'clock the soup — that is to say, the meat biscuit which had to be boiled only for a few minutes — was giving forth a pleasing fragrance; a dozen tinamous, spitted on an iron bar, were roasting before a brisk fire over a dripping-pan, in which Costar would very much have liked to put his fingers; and while Dole and Iverson acted as turnspits, Fan followed their movements with significant interest.

Before seven o'clock the boys were gathered round the table in the cave, which was their refectory and their dormitory. The benches, folding seats, and wicker chairs of the schooner had been brought in. The meal was a substantial one: hot soup, a piece of corned beef, roast tinamous, biscuit in place of bread, fresh water, with a tenth of brandy, a little cheese, and a few glasses of sherry by way of dessert, made ample amends for the poor bill of fare they had had of late.

The day had been a tiring one. When hunger was satisfied the boys thought of little but going to sleep. But Gordon, moved by religious sentiment, proposed that they should visit the tomb of Baudoin, whose dwelling they now occupied. Night was darkening the horizon of the lake, and its waters were reflecting the last rays of the sun as they found the little mound and stood by the wooden cross.

At nine o’clock the beds were occupied, and all were asleep except Donagan and Wilcox, whose turn it was to watch, and who kept up a large fire at the mouth of the cave to scare away dangerous visitors.

The next day, the 9th of May, and the three days that followed, were spent by all hands in unloading the raft.

Already the mist piling up with the west wind announced a period of rain or snow. The temperature scarcely rose above freezing; and it was important that everything should be got into the cave as soon as possible.

For a few days, in view of the urgency of the work, the sportsmen stayed at home. In the afternoon, when Moko lighted his fire, he had the satisfaction of declaring that it worked admirably, so that even in bad weather food could be cooked.

During the following week Donagan, Webb, Wilcox, and Cross, together with Garnett and Service, had quite enough shooting to satisfy them. One day they had penetrated into the forest of birches and beeches by the side of the lake about half a mile from the cave. Here and there traces of the work of man were very evident. There were ditches dug in the ground, covered with a network of branches, and too deep for animals falling into them to escape. But the state of these ditches showed that they dated from years ago, and one of them contained the remains of an animal which they failed to identify.

“Anyhow, they are the bones of a good-sized animal,” said Wilcox, who had slipped down into the ditch, and picked up the bones that had been bleached by time.

“And it was a quadruped, for here are the bones of the four paws,” added Webb.

“Unless it was a five-footed animal,” said Service, “and then it would be a show sheep or a phenomenal calf.”‘

“Always on the joke!” said Cross.

“Well, we are not forbidden to laugh,” answered Garnett.

“It is certain,” said Donagan,” that the animal was a strong one. Look at the size of its head, and its jaw and teeth. Service may amuse himself with his show calves and exhibition sheep, but if this animal came to life, he would be in no mood to laugh.”

“Well hit,” said Cross, always ready to approve of what his cousin said.

“Do you think, then,” asked Webb of Donagan, “that the animal was a carnivore?”

“Yes, there is no doubt of it.”

“A lion? a tiger?” asked Cross, who did not seem at all easy.

“If not a tiger or a lion,” answered Donagan, “at least a jaguar or a cougar.”

‘ We must be on our guard,” said Webb.

“And not venture too far away,” said Cross.

“Do you hear, Fan?” said Service, turning toward the dog. “There are big beasts here t”

Fan gave a cheery bark which certainly betrayed no anxiety.

The boys turned back to go to the cave.

“An idea,” said Wilcox. “If you cover this ditch with new brushwood, we might catch something!”

“As you please, Wilcox,” said Donagan, “though I would rather shoot a thing in the open than massacre it at the bottom of a pit.”

Thus spoke the sportsman, but Wilcox, with his natural aptitude for devising snares, showed himself more practical than Donagan, and began to put Ms idea into execution . His companions helped him to cut some twigs from the neighbouring trees, and these were placed across the mouth of the pit so as to hide it completely. It was a rudimentary snare, no doubt, but such a one is often used with success by the trappers of the Pampas.

So as to recognize the position of the pit, Wilcox broke oft a few branches from the trees at the edge of the forest. And then they all returned to the cave.

These expeditions were not unproductive. Feathered game abounded. Besides the bustards and tinamous there were a number of those martinettes, whose feathers, dotted with white, give them the look of guinea-fowl. Wood pigeons there were in flocks, antarctic geese, making passable eating when cooking has got rid of their oily flavour. Furred game was represented by tucutucos, a kind of rodent as good as rabbit in a stew; maras, russet- grey hares, with a black moon in the tail, and having all the edible qualities of the agouti pichis, with scaly coats; a kind of tatou, whose flesh is delicious, peccaries, a kind of small hog, and guaculis, animals like deer, and just as active.

Donagan tried to stalk some of these, but as they were difficult to get at, the consumption of powder and shot was not in proportion to the results obtained, much to the disgust of the sportsman. And this waste of ammunition evoked a few remarks from Gordon, which were received by Donagan's partisans with as ill a grace as by himself.

During one of these excursions a supply was collected of two precious plants discovered by Briant on the first expedition to the lake. These were the wild celery, which grew in great abundance on the wet soil, and a cress, whose young shoots formed an excellent anti-scorbutic. These two vegetables figured at all the meals, being eaten for the sake of health.

As the cold had not yet frozen the surface of the lake and stream, a few trout were taken with the hook, besides a species of pike, very pleasant eating, providing the eater was not choked with the numerous bones. One day Iverson returned triumphant, carrying a good-sized salmon which had nearly broken his line.

Meanwhile many visits had been paid to the pit branched over by Wilcox: but no animal was taken, although a big piece of meat had been laid on it as a bait.

On the 17th of May, however, something did happen. On that day Briant and a few others bad gone off into the forest near the cliff. Their object was to see if there was any other cave close to French Den which might do as a store-house.

As they were approaching the pit, they heard a loud noise proceeding from it.

Briant struck off into the wood, and was soon joined by Donagan, who did not care to be behindhand. The others followed a few yards in the rear, with their guns at the ready, while Fan marched with her ears cocked and her tail stiff.

They were about twenty yards from the pit when the noise began again. In the middle of the branches was a hole through which some animal had fallen.

What the animal was, was not apparent. In any case the boys thought it best to be ready to defend themselves.

“Seize it. Fan, seize it!” said Donagan. And the dog ran off barking without any sign of fear.

Briant and Donagan ran towards the pit, and as soon as they had readied it they shouted out —

“Come! come!”

“It is not a jaguar?” asked Webb.

“Nor a cougar?” said Cross.

“No,” said Donagan, “it is an ostrich!”

It was indeed an ostrich, and the boys congratulated themselves that such birds frequented the forest, for their flesh is excellent — particularly in the fat part about the breast.

Although there was no doubt it was an ostrich, yet its mediocre size, its head like a goose's head, the coat of small plumes which enveloped its body like a greyish white fleece, showed that it belonged to the species of nandu, so numerous on the Pampas of South America. The nandu cannot be compared with the African ostrich, but it was an honour to the island fauna "We ought to take it alive!" said Wilcox.

"Rather!" said Service.

"That will not be easy," said Cross.

"We'll try." said Briant.

The bird could not escape, because its wings did not allow it to rise to the level of the ground, and its legs could not get a footing on the vertical walls. Wilcox was consequently obliged to slip down into the pit at the risk of receiving a few blows from the bird's beak, which might wound him severely. However, as he managed to throw his coat over the bird, so as to muffle its head, he escaped unharmed; and it was easy for him to tie its legs with two or three pocket-handkerchiefs, tied end to end, and then, with a strong pull ail together, the ostrich was hauled up to the bank.

"Now we have got it," said Webb.

"And what shall we do with it?" asked Cross.

"That is simple enough," said Service, who was never at a loss. "We will take it to the cave; we will tame it, and we'll use it to ride upon. I'll look after it like my friend Jack in ' The Swiss Family Robinson.'"

That it was possible to use the ostrich in this fashion was doubtful, notwithstanding the precedent cited by Service; but as there was no difficulty in taking it to the cave, this was done.

When Gordon saw the nandu arrive he was a little alarmed at having another mouth to feed, but bethinking himself that the bird was a vegetarian, he gave it a cordial welcome. As to the youngsters, they were delighted to be near the bird — not too near, however — after it had been tied up with a long line. And when they heard that Service intended to train it for riding, they made him promise to give them a mount.

“Yes, if you are very good, babies,” said Service, whom the youngsters already looked upon as a hero.

“We are sure to be that,” said Costar.

“What, you, Costar?” said Service, “you daring to ride this terrible animal?”

“Behind you — and holding on to you. Yes!”

“Do you remember how you felt when you were on the back of the turtle?”

“That is not the same thing,” said Costar. “This thing doesn’t go into the water.”

“But it goes into the air!” said Dole.

And the two little fellows; walked off to think about this.

As may be imagined, as soon as they had got things into order at the cave, Gordon and his comrades had organized the daily life in a regular way, giving every one something to do, and taking particular care that the little ones were not left to themselves. They, of course, asked for nothing better than to be set to work as far as their strength permitted, but why should they not continue the lessons they had begun at Charman's school?

"We have the books to help us go on with the work," said Gordon. "And what we have learnt we can teach, and it is only right we should give our little friends the benefit of it."

"*Yes,*" answered Briant, "and if we leave the island and get back to our friends, we can show them that we have not wasted any time."

It was agreed that a scheme of work should be drawn up, and that after it had been submitted for general approval, it should be scrupulously adhered to. During the winter there would be many days when some of the boys would not be able to go out, and it was desirable that they should be profitably employed. But the smallness of the cave was a great inconvenience, but it was resolved to set to work forthwith to increase its dimensions.

CHAPTER XII

THE COLONY

THE boys had often looked along the cliffs in the hope of finding another cave. If they had discovered one, they would have used it as a general store for what had now to be left out in the open. But the search had been in vain, and they had had to return to the scheme of enlarging their dwelling-place by digging into the walls.

There was no difficulty in doing this in the soft limestone, and the work would give them something to do during the winter, and could be finished by the return of the fine season if no collapse or infiltration occurred — as was not unlikely.

There was no need to take to blasting. The tools they had were sufficient for them to cut the hole for the chimney of the stove to be run out of, and Baxter had already been able, with some difficulty it is true, to enlarge the opening into the cave, so as to fit it with one of the doors from the schooner; and right and left of the door two embrasures had been cut in the wall, admitting light and air to the interior.

The bad weather had set in a week ago. Violent storms had swept across the island, but the cave had not had to face them owing to its lying north and south. The rain and snow passed away over the crest of the cliff. The sportsmen had to leave the game alone in the vicinity of the lake, and the wild ducks, snipe, lapwing, rail, coot, and white pigeon remained undisturbed. The lake and the river had not yet been frozen, but it only required a quiet night when the first dry cold would succeed the storm for them to be covered with ice.

The work of enlarging the cave could thus be conveniently begun, and a start was made on the 27th of May.

The right wall was first attacked.

“If we dig on the slant,” said Briant, “we may come out by the lake-side, and so get a second entrance. That would give us a better look-out, and if the bad weather kept us in on one side, we might get out on the other.”

This would in every way be an advantage, and there seemed to be no reason why the plan should not succeed.

Only forty or fifty feet separated the cave from the eastern face, and a gallery could easily be driven in the right direction, by compass, care being taken to avoid a fall or founder. Baxter’s plan was to begin with a narrow tunnel, and then enlarge it till it was of the required size. The two rooms of the cave could then be united by a passage, which could be closed at both ends, and one or two galleries driven right and left of it to give additional room. The plan was evidently a good one, it allowed of the rock being dug into with a due amount of precaution, so that any sudden inrush of water could be satisfactorily dealt with, and the excavation abandoned if necessary.

For three days, from the 27th to the 30th of May, the work went on favourably. The friable limestone could be cut with a knife; woodwork had to be used to support the roof of the gallery, but that was easily managed. The rubbish was taken outside, so as not to encumber the floor of the cave. There was not room enough for all hands to work at once, so the boys took it in turns. When the rain and snow ceased, Gordon and the elder boys took the raft to pieces, so that the deck and frame could be used up in another way. And they overhauled the things stowed away against the cliff which the tarpaulins did not cover satisfactorily.

The work of boring advanced gradually, not without many a stoppage to sound and make sure that progress was safe. Four or five feet had been excavated, when, in the afternoon of the 30th, something very unexpected Briant, on his knees in the hole, like a hewer in a coalmine, thought he heard a slight noise in the interior of the rock.

He stopped his picking and listened. Again the sound reached his ear.

To get out of the hole, and tell Gordon and Baxter, who were standing at the entrance, was the work of an instant.

“It is an illusion,” said Gordon. “You imagined you heard it.”

“Take my place, then put your ear to the wall and listen.”

Gordon got into the hole, and stayed there a few minutes.

“You are. right,” said he, “I hear a sort of distant growling.” .

Baxter went in, and confirmed this.

“What can it be?” he asked.

“I cannot think,” said Gordon. “We must tell Donagan and the others.”

“Not the youngsters,” said Briant, “it would give them a scare.”

But as they all came in to dinner at the moment, the secret could not be kept.

Donagan, Wilcox, Webb, and Garnett, one after the other, went into the cavity and listened. But the sound had ceased probably, for they heard nothing, and concluded that their comrades had been mistaken.

Mistake or no mistake, it was resolved to continue the work, and as soon as the meal was over, the digging recommenced. During the afternoon no noise was heard, but about nine o'clock in the evening the growling was distinctly heard through the rock.

Fan ran into the hole, and immediately came out again with unmistakable signs of irritation, her coat bristling, her lips showing her teeth, and barking loudly, as if in reply to the growling in the rock.

And then the alarm, mingled with surprise, that the smaller boys had hitherto felt, gave place to genuine fear, in vain Briant tried to soothe Dole, Costar, and even Jenkins and Iverson, until he at last got them to bed and to sleep.

Gordon and the others continued to discuss this strange phenomenon. Every now and then the growling would be heard, and Fan would reply to it with a loud bark. Fatigue at last overcame them, and they went to bed, leaving Briant and Moko to watch; and till daylight profound silence reigned in French Den.

All were up early next morning. Baxter and Donagan crawled to the end of the hole. No sound could be heard. The dog ran to and fro without showing any uneasiness, and made no attempt to dash herself against the wall as she had done the night before.

“Let us resume work,” said Briant.

“Yes,” replied Baxter. “There will always be time to leave off if we hear any suspicious noise.”

“Is it not possible,” said Donagan, “that the growling was simply a spring in the rock?”

“Then we should hear it now,” said Wilcox, “and we don’t.”

“That is so,” said Gordon. “I think it more likely to have come from the wind in some fissure leading down from the top of the cliff.”

“Let us go up on the top and see,” said Service.

The proposition was agreed to.

About fifty yards away there was a winding path, giving easy access to the summit of the hill. In a few minutes Baxter and two or three others were walking up it over French Den. Their journey was useless. The ridge was clothed with short close herbage, and no fissure was discoverable by which a current of air or a stream of water could find its way in. And when the boys got down again they knew no more about the strange phenomenon than the youngsters, who were explaining it to themselves as being supernatural.

The work of digging the hole was resumed and continued to the end of the day. There was no repetition of the noise of the evening before, but Baxter examined the wall, and found that it sounded hollow. Was the tunnel going to end in a cave? Was it in this cave that the Mysterious sound had arisen? There was nothing inadmissible in the hypothesis of a second excavation contiguous to the cavern in which they were working, and it was to be hoped that such a thing existed, as it would greatly reduce the labour of enlargement. As may be imagined, the boys worked with extraordinary ardour, and the day was one of the most tiring they had yet experienced. Nevertheless it would have passed without adventure had not Gordon noticed that the dog had disappeared.

Generally, at meal-times. Fan was to be found near her master’s seat, but now her place was empty.

They called Fan. Fan did not answer. Gordon went to the door. He called her again. Complete silence.

Donagan and Wilcox went out, one along the bank of the stream, the other along the shore of the lake — but they found no trace of the dog.

In vain was the search extended for a few hundred yards round French Den. Fan was not to be found.

It was evident that the dog was not within call, for if she had been, she would have answered. Had she strayed away? That was unlikely. Had she perished in the jaws of some wild beast? That was possible, and it was the best explanation of her disappearance that offered.

It was nine o’clock at night. Thick darkness enveloped the cliff and the lake. The search had to be given up.

The boys went back to the cave. They were uneasy, and not only uneasy, but grieved to think that the dog had vanished, perhaps for ever.

Some stretched themselves on their beds, others sat round the table, not thinking of sleep. It seemed that they were more alone than ever, more forsaken, more removed, from the country and their friends.

Suddenly in the silence the noise broke out afresh. This time there was a long howl, and a cry of pain lasting for nearly a minute.

“It is from over there, over there, that it comes!” exclaimed Briant, rushing to the tunnel.

They all rose as if waiting for an apparition. Terror had seized upon the little ones, who hid themselves under their bed-clothes.

When Briant came back he said —

“There must be a cavern beyond, the entrance to which is at the foot of the cliff.”

“And in which it is probable that animals take shelter during the night,” added Gordon.

“That is it,” said Donagan. “And to-morrow we must try and find it.”

At this moment a bark was heard, and then a howling. The sound came from the interior of the rock.

“Can Fan be there,” asked Wilcox, “and fighting with some animal?”

Briant went back into the tunnel and listened with his ear against the wall. But there was nothing more. Whether Fan was there or not, it was evident that there must be a second excavation which ought to communicate with the exterior, probably by some gap in the thicket of brushwood.

The night passed without either barking or howling being again heard.

Next morning the search was begun at break of day, but with no more result than the day before. Fan, sought for and shouted for all over the neighbourhood, did not come back.

Briant and Baxter took turns at the digging. Pickaxe and shovel were kept constantly at work. During the morning the tunnel was made two feet longer. From time to time the boys stopped to listen, but nothing could they hear.

After dinner the digging began again. Precautions were taken in case a blow of the pickaxe knocked through the wall and gave passage to an animal. The younger boys were taken out to the bank of the river. Gun in hand, Donagan, Wilcox, and Webb stood ready for anything that might happen.

About two o’clock Briant suddenly exclaimed. His pickaxe had gone through the limestone, which had fallen in and left a good-sized hole.

Immediately he returned to his comrades, who could only think —

But before they had time to open their mouths, an animal rushed down the tunnel and leapt into the cave.

It was Fan!

Yes, Fan, whose first action was to rush to a bowl of water and drink greedily. Then she wagged her tail, without showing the least anger, and began to jump about in front of Gordon. Evidently there was no danger.

Briant then took a lantern and entered the tunnel. Gordon, Donagan, Wilcox, Baxter, and Moko followed him Soon they were through the hole and in the middle of the gloomy excavation, to which no fight from the outside penetrated.

It was a second cave, with the same height and width as French Den, but longer, and the floor was covered with fine sand for an area of about fifty square yards.

As the cavity seemed to have no communication with the exterior, it was to be feared that the air was not fit to breathe. But as the lamp in the lantern burnt clearly, there must be some opening to admit the air. If not how could Fan have got in?

Wilcox suddenly kicked his foot against a body — which, feeling with his hand, he found to be cold and motionless.

Briant approached with the light.

“It is the corpse of a jackal,” said Baxter.

“Yes! A jackal that our brave Fan has killed,” said Briant.

“And that explains our difficulty,” said Gordon.

But if one or many jackals had made this their haunt, hew had they got in? The entrance could not be found.

Briant then returned into French Den, and came out and ran along the cliff by the side of the lake. As he ran he shouted, and the boys in the cave replied. In this way he found a narrow entrance among the bushes, and level with the ground, through which the jackal had found admission. But since Fan had followed him a fall had taken place, and shut up the opening. This was soon found out, and everything was explained, the howling of the jackal and the barking of the dog who for twenty- four hours had found it impossible to get out.

Great was the satisfaction at these things. Not only was Fan returned to her young masters, but labour was spared them. Here, “ready-made,” as Dole said, was a large cave of which Baudoin had never suspected the existence. By making the opening larger, they would get a second door towards the lake that would be of great convenience to them. And naturally the boys, as they stood in the new cave, indulged in a round of cheers, in winch Fan joined with a joyous bark.

Vigorously they set to work to make the tunnel a practicable gangway; to the second excavation they gave the name of the “hall,” and its dimensions justified them in doing so. It would do for the dormitory and workroom, while the first cave would serve as kitchen and refectory; but as they intended to make it a general magazine, Gordon proposed to call it the store-room, and his suggestion was adopted.

Soon they set to work to shift the beds and arrange them symmetrically on the sand of the hall, where there was plenty of room for them. Then the furniture of the schooner, the couches, arm-chairs, tables, cupboards, &c. and what was very important — the stoves from the yacht’s day and night saloons were put in position. At the same time the entrance on the lake side was cleared out and enlarged so as to fit one of the schooner’s doors — a job which cost Baxter a good deal of trouble. On each side of the door two new openings were made so as to give light, until the evening, when a lamp hung from the central illuminated the cave.

To do all this took a fortnight, and it was not finished any too soon. The weather had begun to change. It was not as yet very cold; but the storms had become so violent that outdoor excursions were not to be thought of.

In fact, such was the force of the wind that the waters of the lake were lashed into waves as if it were a sea. The waves broke angrily on the beach, and assuredly a fishing- boat or wild man’s pirogue would have sought to cross it in vain. The yawl had been dragged ashore, to save its being washed away. At times the waters of the stream were held back by the wind, and overflowed the bank3. Fortunately, neither the store-room nor the hall was directly exposed to the fury of the gale, which blew from the west; and the stoves and cooking-apparatus worked admirably, being fed with dry wood, of which ample provision had been gathered.

It was a great triumph to get everything saved from the schooner under cover. The inclemency of the weather- could not now damage the provisions. Gordon and his comrades, now imprisoned for the winter, had time to make themselves comfortable. They had enlarged the passage and dug out two deep side-chambers, one of which closed with a door, and was reserved for the ammunition, so as to avoid any danger of an explosion.

Although the gunners could not get away from the neighbourhood of French Den, yet there were enough aquatic birds close handy which filled Moko’s larder, although he did not always manage to cook them so as to get rid of their marshy taste.

When things were fairly in order Gordon proposed drawing up a programme to which all would have to submit when it had been approved by all. How long was their stay to be on this island? “When they came to leave it, would it not be a satisfaction to think that the time had not been wasted? With the books from the schooner’s library the bigger boys could increase their knowledge at the same time as they taught the younger ones. An excellent task, which would usefully and agreeably occupy the long hours of winter!

However, before the programme was finished, another measure was adopted, under the following circumstances.

On the night of June 10th, after supper, all were in the hall, seated round the stove, when conversation turned on the chance that offered to give names to the chief geographical portions of the island.

“That would be very useful,” said Briant.

“Yes, let’s have names,” said Iverson, “and let us have nice names.”

“Let us do the same as has been done by other Crusoes, real or imaginary,” said Webb.

“And in reality,” said Gordon, “we are nothing more than — ”

“A Crusoe school!” interrupted Service.

“Besides,” continued Gordon, “with names given to the bay, the stream, the forests, the lake, the cliff, the marshes and capes, we shall find it easier to identify them.”

The motion was consequently adopted at once, and there was nothing left to do but to think of suitable designations.

“We have Schooner Bay, on which the yacht was wrecked,” said Donagan, “and I think we might as well keep to the name we are used to.”

“Right you are,” said Cross.

“And in the same way we’ll keep the name of French Den for our cave, in memory of poor Baudoin whose place we have taken.”

There was no objection to this proposal, even from Donagan, although the suggestion came from Briant.

"And now," said Wilcox, "what shall we call the river which flows into Schooner Bay?"

"Zealand River," said Baxter; "the name will remind us of our country."

"Agreed! Agreed!"

Carried unanimously.

"And the lake?" asked Garnett.

"As you gave the name of Zealand to the river in memory of your country," said Donagan, "you might as well call the lake Family Lake, in memory of your relatives."

This was also agreed to without a dissentient; and in the same way the name of Auckland Hill was given to the cliff. The cape at the end whence Briant thought he had seen the sea to the eastward was called at his suggestion False Point.

The other names adopted one after the other were Trap Woods, for the part of the forest where the trap had been found; Bog Wood, for the other part between Schooner Bay and the cliff; South Moor, for the marsh covering the whole of the south of the island; Dike Creek, for the brook in which they had found the causeway; Wreck Coast, for the coast on which the yacht had come ashore; Game Terrace, for the space between the banks of the river and lake where the games on the programme were to take place.

The other parts of the island were named as they were discovered, and the names bore reference to what had happened there at the time of their discovery. It, however, seemed advisable to give names to the principal promontories marked on Baudoin's map, so that in the north of the island there was a North Cape, and in the south of the island there was a South Cape, and it was agreed to give the three western capes the names of the nations represented in the colony, which meant a British Cape, an American Cape, and a French Cape.

We said colony! Yes! The word was proposed as a reminder that the occupation was no longer provisionary; and naturally it came from Gordon, who was more interested in organizing the way to live in the new territory than to find the way out of it. The boys were no longer the castaways of the schooner; they were the colonists of an island.

But of what island? The island wanted naming in its turn.

“Here! Here! I know what to call it!” said Costar. You know, do you?” said Donagan.

“You are getting on, little Costar!” said Garnett.

“Of course you’ll call it Baby Island?” said Service.

‘ Come, don’t chaff him,” said Briant, “let us hear what he has to say.”

The little fellow did not speak.

“Speak up, Costar,” said Briant, “I am sure your idea is a good one. What is it?”

Well,’’ said Costar, “as we all come from Charman’s school, we ought to call it Charman Island!”

Than this they could not do better, and the name was received with general applause — which made Costar look quite important.

Charman Island! Really the name had the true geographical ring about it, and would not disgrace any atlas! The ceremony being at an end — to the general satisfaction — the time had come to go to bed, when Briant begged to be allowed to speak.

My friends," he said, "now that we have named our island, is it not fitting that we should choose a chief to rule it?"

"A chief?" asked Donagan.

"Yes. It seems to me that things would go better," continued Briant, "if one of us had authority over the others "What is done in every other country ought we not to do in Charman Island?"

"Yes! A chief I Let us have a chief!" said the little and the big together.

"Let us have a chief," said Donagan, "but on condition that it is only for some stated time — a year, for example."

"And who can be re-elected," added Briant. "Agreed I Who is it to be?" asked Donagan in an anxious tone.

And it seemed that the jealous lad had only one fear, that in spite of him the choice of his companions would fall on Briant. He was quickly undeceived.

"Who is it to be?" replied Briant. "Why, the wisest of us, to be sure, our friend Gordon!"

"Yes! Yes I Hurrah for Gordon!" Gordon would at first have refused the honour they would have bestowed on him, saying that he was better fitted to organize than to command. But he foresaw the trouble that the passions of these young people, now almost as ardent among them as if they had been men, might lead to in the future, and it appeared to him that his authority might not be without its value.

And that is how Gordon was proclaimed chief of the little colony of Charman Island.

CHAPTER XIII

WINTER QUARTERS

THE winter season had definitely set in on Charman Island at the beginning of May. How long would it last? Five months or less if the latitude was the same as that of New Zealand. And therefore Gordon prepared for the rigours of a long winter.

The young American made careful note of his meteorological observations. He found that as the winter did not begin until May, that is, two months before July, which answers to January in the northern hemisphere, it would probably last for two months afterwards, or about the middle of September, when the storms prevalent about the time of the equinox would follow on to prolong it. Consequently the young colonists might be kept at French Den till the early days of October before they were able to make a long excursion either across or round Charman Inland. He had thus to draw up a programme of daily work such as would be the best for the life in the cave.

And in the first place he decided to have nothing to do with faggism such as they had been used to at Charman’s school. His whole effort was directed to accustoming the boys to the idea that they were almost men, and had to act as such. There were to be no fags at French Ten, that is to say, the younger boys were not to be the servants of the elders.

The library of French Den contained only a few books of science and travel, so that the bigger boys could only pursue their studies to a limited extent. But the difficulties of existence, the constant struggle to supply their wants, the necessity of exercising the judgment or imagination in the presence of eventualities of all sorts would teach them to regard life seriously, and as they were naturally designed to be the educators of their young companions, it would be their duty to be their teachers.

In order not to overburden the youngsters with work too great for their age, every opportunity would be taken of exercising their bodies as well as their minds. When the weather permitted they would be allowed out, in suitable clothes of course, to run and enjoy themselves in the fresh air, or work at such manual labour as their strength allowed them. In short, the scheme was drawn up on the four main principles which form the basis of English education: —

“If you are frightened at a thing, do it.”

“Never lose a chance of doing your very best.”

“Never fear fatigue, for nothing you can do is useless.”

“A healthy body means a healthy mind.”

And this is what was agreed upon after discussion at a general meeting of the boys.

For two hours every morning, and two hours every evening, all would work in the hall. Taking it in turns, Briant, Donagan, Cross, and Baxter of the fifth form, and Wilcox and Webb of the fourth, would hold classes for their schoolfellows of the third, second, and first forms. They would teach them mathematics, geography, history, supplementing the knowledge they had acquired at school by that obtained from the books in the library. This would prevent their forgetting what they already knew. Twice a week, on Sunday and Thursday, there would be a debate on some subject of science, or history, or actual occurrence, in which all would take part.

Gordon, as chief of the colony, would see that the programme was carried out without modification, unless something occurred that rendered it impossible.

To begin with, an arrangement was made regarding the duration of time. They had the yacht’s almanac, but each day had to be regularly run through, and they had watches, but it was necessary for them to be regularly wound up and adjusted so as to keep exact time. Two of the bigger boys were entrusted with this duty. Wilcox had charge of the watches. Baxter had charge of the almanac. And to Webb fell the duty of daily recording the readings of the barometer and thermometer.

The next thing done was to start a log of all that happened during their stay on Charman Island. Baxter volunteered for this, and thanks to him the “Journal of French Den “was written up with minute exactitude.

A work of no less importance, and which could be no longer delayed, was the washing of the linen, for which there was no scarcity of soap; and this was lucky considering the mess into which the youngsters got when they played on the terrace or fished in the stream. In vain Gordon cautioned them, and growled at them, and threatened to punish them; dirty they would get in spite of all he could do. There was no doubt as to who would do the washing. Moko knew all about it; but as he could not manage it all, the bigger boys had to assist him, under his directions.

The day after this programme had been agreed upon was Sunday, and the way in which that day is kept in England and America is well known. In the morning the young colonists went out for a walk along the banks of Family Lake. But as it was extremely cold the boys, after an outing of a couple of hours, were glad to get back to their warm hall and a hot dinner in the store-room, carefully prepared by the clever master cook of French Den. In the evening there was a concert, in which Garnett's accordion took the place of orchestra, and the singing, more or less out of tune, was of the true Anglo-Saxon type. The only boy with a really musical voice was Jack, but in his present inexplicable humour he would take no part in his companions' occupations, and refused to sing when they asked him.

The day, which had begun with a short address by "the Reverend Gordon," as Service called him, ended with a few minutes' prayer in the hall: and by ten o'clock all the boys were asleep under the protection of Fan, to whom they could trust in the event of any suspicious approach.

During June the cold gradually increased. Webb reported that the barometer was steady at just above twenty-seven inches, and the thermometer was from eighteen to twenty degrees below freezing. As soon as the wind, which blew from the south, shifted towards the west the temperature rose a little, and the surroundings of French Den were covered with a deep snow. The snow was not unwelcome, as it afforded an opportunity for a grand snowballing match, in which a few of the boys suffered severely, notably Jack, who stood looking on. A ball thrown furiously by Cross missed its mark and hit him hard enough to make him cry.

"I did not do it on purpose," said Cross, with the usual excuse of the clumsy.

"Perhaps not," said Briant, who had noticed his brother's eye, "but you shouldn't throw so hard."

"Well, why did he get in the way?" asked Cross, "Why isn't he playing?"

"What a fuss about a little bruise," said Donagan. "Perhaps it is not very serious," answered Briant, seeing that Donagan wished to interfere in the matter; but I’ll ask Cross not to do it again.”

“How can he manage that,” asked Donagan jeeringly. if he didn’t do it on purpose?”

“I don’t know what business it is of yours, Donagan,”

said Briant; it only concerns Cross and me — ”

“And it concerns me too. Briant, if that is the tone *you* take, said Donagan.

“As you please — and when you please,’’ replied Briant. crossing his arms.

‘ Let us have it now, then,” said Donagan.

At this moment Gordon came up, just in time to prevent the quarrel ending in a fight.

He decided that Donagan was in the wrong. And Donagan had to submit, and much to his disgust went back to French Den. But it was to be feared that some other incident would soon bring the rivals to blows.

The snow continued to fall for two days. To amuse the little ones Service and Garnett made a large snow man, with a big head, and an enormous nose — a regular Croquemitaine. And it may as well be confessed that although during the day Dote and Costar were brave enough to pelt the man with snowballs, vet at night, when the darkness had made the figure look larger, they could not look at it without being frightened.

“Oh! the cowards!” said Iverson and Jenkins, who pretended to be very brave, although they were no less terrified than their young companions.

At the end of June their amusements had to be given up. The snow, piled up to three or four feet in thickness, rendered it almost impossible to get out. To venture more than a few hundred yards from French Den was to run the risk of being unable to return.

The young colonists were thus kept in for a fortnight — until the 9th of July. The work did not suffer; on the contrary, the daily programme was strictly adhered to. The discussions took place on the proper days. In them all took delight, and it is not surprising that Donagan, with his facility of speech and advanced education, held the first place. But why was he so vain of it? His vanity spoilt all his brilliant qualities.

Although the hours of recreation had to be passed in the hall, the general health did not suffer, thanks to the ventilation obtained by means of the passage. The question of hygiene was an important one. If one of the boys was to fall ill how could they give him the needful attention? Fortunately they escaped with a few colds and sore throats, which rest and warm drinks soon got rid of.

There was another question to be solved. In practice the water had been got from the stream at low tide when the brackishness had disappeared. But when the surface of the stream was frozen over this would not be possible. Gordon consulted with Baxter, his’’ engineer in ordinary, as to what was best to be done. Baxter, after consideration, proposed to run a conduit a few feet below the bank so that the water in it would not freeze on its way to the store-room. This would have been a difficult job if Baxter had not had at his disposal the leaden pipes which served the lavatory on the yacht; and so, after many attempts, the water was at last laid on into the interior of the storeroom. For lighting there was still enough oil for the lanterns,” but after the winter it would be necessary to make candles out of the fat which Moko carefully preserved.

The feeding of the little colony was another subject of more trouble during this time, for neither the shooters nor the fishermen could furnish their usual tribute. A few animals, driven by hunger, came prowling about Game Terrace; but these were the jackals that Donagan and Cros3 scared away with the report of a gun. One day they came in a troop — there were about twenty of them — and the doors of the hall and store-room had to be barricaded against them. An invasion of carnivores made fierce by hunger was a formidable affair. However, Fan gave the alarm in time, and they did not force their way into French Den.

Under these unfortunate conditions Moko was obliged to attack the provisions from the yacht, which it had been agreed to make last as long as possible. Gordon never gave his permission willingly for them to be used, and it was with disgust he saw his column of expenses lengthening while that of his receipts remained stationary. “However, as there was a large stock of ducks and bustards which had been hermetically sealed in casks after being half cooked, Moko was able to make use of them, in addition to a certain quantity of salmon preserved in brine. But it should not be forgotten that French Den had fifteen mouths to satisfy, and these with appetites of from eight to fourteen years old.

Nevertheless, during this winter, there was not an entire want of fresh meat. Wilcox, who was quite an expert in trapping, kept several “figure of 4 “traps going on the river-bank with success, and with the aid of his companions he rigged up a few vertical nets on high sticks, in the meshes of which the birds flying across the stream from South Moor were often caught; and although most of them got away, yet occasionally enough were taken to form a welcome addition to the day’s two meals.

But it was the nandu which gave the greatest trouble in the matter of food; and it must be confessed that the taming of this wild animal made no progress, although service was specially charged with his education.

“What a racer it will be!” he would repeat, although he did not yet see how he could mount it.

As the nandu did not eat flesh. Service had to go out and search for its daily provision of herbs and roots under two or three feet of snow. But what would he not have done for the nourishment of his pet? If the nandu got rather thin during this interminable winter, it was not the fault of its faithful guardian, and there was reason to hope that when the spring came it would recover its normal plumpness.

On the 9th of July, when Briant went out first thing in the morning, he found that the wind had suddenly got back to the south.

The cold had become so keen that Briant at once went into the hall, and told Gordon of the change of temperature.

“That is what I feared,” said Gordon, “and I shall not be surprised if we have to put up with several months of very severe winter.”

“That would show,” said Briant, “that the yacht drifted much farther to the south than we supposed.”

“Doubtless,” said Gordon; “but our atlas has no island like this on the boundary of the Antarctic Ocean!”

“It is inexplicable, and really I do not know where we shall go if we manage to leave Charman Island.”

“Leave our island!” exclaimed Gordon. “Are you always thinking of that?”

“Always!” said Briant. “If we could build a boat that would be seaworthy, I should not hesitate to go on a voyage of discovery.”‘

“All right!” said Gordon. “But there is no hurry. Wait a little till we have got our colony into order.”

“Eh?” said Briant. “You forget we have left behind us our fathers and mothers.”

“Of course — of course,” said Gordon. “But we are not so badly off here! We are getting on, and I am beginning to ask myself what it is we have not got.”

Many things, Gordon,” said Briant, not caring to prolong the conversation on this subject. ‘‘ For instance, we are running short of fuel.”

“Oh! all the forests in the island are not yet burnt.”

“No. But we ought to replenish our stock of wood, for it is nearly at an end.”

“We’ll see about that to-day. What does the thermometer register?”

The thermometer in the store-room showed only 41 degrees although the stove was doing its best. But when the instrument bad been taken outside, and exposed against the outer wall, it went down to zero.

This cold was intense, and it would certainly increase if the weather remained clear and dry for a few weeks. Already, notwithstanding the roaring of the stoves in the hall, and the cooking-range, the temperature sensibly decreased in the interior of French Den.

About nine o’clock, after breakfast, it was decided to be off to Trap Woods, and bring in a stock of fuel.

When the atmosphere is calm the lowest temperatures can be supported with impunity. It is during the bitter wind that hands and face are frost-bitten, and life is in danger. Fortunately, on this day the wind was extremely feeble, and the sky without a cloud, as if the air was frozen. In place of the soft snow into which the night before the legs would sink, the surface was now as hard as iron, and to avoid falling the boys had to walk as carefully as if they were on Family Lake or Zealand River, which were now entirely frozen over. With a few pairs of snow-shoes, such as are used by the natives of polar regions, or even with a sledge drawn by dogs or reindeer, the lake could have been explored front north to south in a few hours.

But no such long expedition was intended to-day. To go to the neighbouring forest to replenish the stock of fuel, that was the immediate necessity; and to bring a sufficient quantity to the cave would be arduous work, if it had to be transported in the arms or on the back.

But Moko had an idea which he proceeded to put into execution. The big table in the store-room, strongly built, and measuring twelve feet in length by four in breadth, would that not do for a sledge if the legs were turned uppermost? Why, certainly, and that is what was done; and with four of the bigger boys dragging it by cords attached to its legs, the departure was made to Trap Woods.

The little ones, with red noses and healthy cheeks, frisked along in front, and Fan set them the example. Occasionally they caught hold of the table, not without disputes and running fights, but all in fun, and at the risk only of a fall, which could do them no harm. Their shouts resounded with extraordinary clearness in the cold, dry atmosphere. And, in truth, it was quite refreshing to see all the little colony in good humour and good health.

Everything was white as far as the eye could see between Auckland Hill and Family Lake. The trees, with their rimy branches loaded with glittering crystals, rose near and far in masses, as in a faery garden. Over the surface of the lake the birds flew in flocks. Donagan and Cross had not forgotten to bring their guns with them — a wise precaution, for footprints were noticed that must have been made by other wild animals than jackals, cougars, and jaguars.

“Perhaps they are the wild cats they call ‘pajeros,’” said Gordon.

“Oh!” said Costar, shrugging his shoulders, “if they are only cats — ”

“And tigers are only cats,” said Jenkins.

“Is it true. Service,” asked Costar, “that these cats are dangerous?”

“Quite true,” said Service. “And they scare little boys as easily as they do mice.”

And the answer made Costar rather uneasy.

The half-mile between French Den and Trap Woods was soon accomplished, and the young wood-cutters got to work. The axe was only laid to such trees as were of a certain size; these were stripped of their smaller branches, so as to yield not only faggots which would blaze away in a moment, but good-sized blocks that would come in useful for the stoves and range. Then the table- sledge was heavily loaded, but it slipped along so easily that before twelve o’clock it had made two journeys.

After a meal the work went on till four o clock, when the day began to close in. It was tiring work, and, as there was no need to carry anything to excess, Gordon called the boys intending to return in the morning. And when Gordon ordered they had to obey.

Besides, as soon as they returned to French Den, they could employ themselves in sawing the blocks, splitting them, and stowing them away, and that would occupy them till it was time to go to bed.

For six days this wood-cutting went on without a break, and enough fuel was collected to last for many weeks Of course all this wood could not be stowed in the store-room; but there was no reason why the greater part should not remain in safety against the cliff near the door.

The 15th of July, according to the almanac, was St. Swithin’s Day, which in England corresponds to St. Medard’s Day in France.

“Then,” said Briant, “as it rains to-day, are we going to have forty days’ rain?”

“Well,” said Service, “I don’t see how that can matter, as we are in the winter. If it had been summer — ”

And, in fact, the inhabitants of the southern hemisphere have no occasion to bother themselves with the sinister influences of either of the wet saints, who are winter Baints in the antipodes.

But the rain did not continue, the wind returned to the south-east, and it became so cold that Gordon would not allow any of the little ones to set foot out of doors.

In the first week in August the thermometric column rank to 14° below zero, and the breath of those who for a moment exposed themselves to the air condensed into snow. The hand could not touch a piece of metal without a sharp pain as of burning. The most careful precautions had to be taken to keep the temperature indoors sufficiently high.

A most painful fortnight followed. All suffered, more or less, from the want of exercise. Briant could not see, without feeling anxious, the pale looks of the little ones, whose colour had quite disappeared. However, thanks to the hot drinks, which were always procurable, with the exception of a few colds and bronchial troubles, the young people escaped without much damage.

On the 16th of August the air underwent a change, as the wind shifted into the west, and the thermometer rose to 10°, a temperature that was supportable if the atmosphere was calm.

Donagan, Briant, Service, Wilcox, and Baxter decided to make an excursion to Schooner Bay. By starting early they could get back before night.

They wanted to find out if the coast were visited by any number of those amphibians of which they had seen a few at the time of the wreck; and at the same time they would replace the flag, of which only a few rags could remain after the storms of winter. And, at Briant’s suggestion, they could fix to the signal-mast a plate indicating the position of French Den, in case any sailors landed on the coast after seeing the flag.

Gordon gave his assent to the expedition, although he laid stress on the necessity of their getting back before night and the boys started early on the 19th, before it was daylight. The sky was clear, and the moon lighted up the landscape with the pale rays of its last quarter. Six miles to the bay was not much of a distance for the well-rested legs.

The distance was soon covered. The swamp of Bog Wood being frozen over, there was no need to go round it, and by nine o’clock Donagan and his comrades had reached the beach.

“There is a flock of birds,” said Wilcox. And he pointed to the reef, where thousands of birds, like large ducks, with their beaks elongated like a mussel-shell, were giving vent to a cry as piercing as disagreeable.

“You would say they were little soldiers, whose general was reviewing them,” said Service.

“They are only penguins,” answered Baxter, “and they are not worth a shot.”

These stupid birds, holding themselves almost upright, owing to their feet being placed so far back, did not attempt to move, and could have been knocked down with a stick. Donagan might, perhaps, have indulged in useless carnage; but Briant having had the wisdom to say nothing, the penguins were left alone. But if the birds were of no use, there were other animals whose fat would do for lighting French Den during the next winter. These were the seals, of the horn seal species, who were taking their ease on the reef, which was then covered with a thick bed of ice. But to kill any the boys would have to cut off their retreat, as when Briant and his comrades approached they took to flight with many extraordinary antics, and disappeared in the sea. Evidently an expedition for the capture of these animals would have to be organized later on.

After having lunched on the few provisions they had brought with them, the boys set to work to examine the whole stretch of the bay.

One long white sheet extended from Zealand River to False Point. Except the penguins and sea-birds, such as petrels and gulls, it seemed as though the other birds had abandoned the beach for the interior in search of food.

Two or three feet of snow lay on the beach, and all that remained of the schooner had been hidden by it. The lines of seaweed on the near side of the breakers showed that Schooner Bay had not been invaded by the high tides of the equinox.

The sea was still deserted, as far as could be seen, up to the very limit of the horizon that Briant had not looked upon for three long months. And beyond, hundreds of miles away, was this New Zealand that he did not despair of seeing again.

Baxter busied himself in hoisting the new flag which he had brought with him, and nailing to the flagstaff the plate giving the position of French Den at six miles up the course of the stream. Then, about one o’clock in the afternoon, they started homewards.

On the way Donagan shot a brace of pintail and lapwing which were skimming over the river; and towards four o’clock, as dusk was coming on, they reached the cave. Gordon was told of all that had passed, and agreed that the seals should be attacked as soon as the weather permitted.

In fact, the winter was nearly over. During the last week of August and the first week of September, the sea- breeze regained its supremacy. A series of squalls brought on a great increase of temperature. The snow began to melt, the surface of the lake began to break up with a deafening noise. The bergs that did not melt in the lake were swept into the river, and, piled one on the other, formed a barrier that did not clear away till the 10th of September.

And so the winter had passed. Owing to the precautions that had been taken, the little colony had not suffered excessively. All had kept in good health, and the studies having been attended to zealously, Gordon had had hardly one complaint to deal with.

One day, however, he had had to chastise Dole, whose conduct required an exemplary punishment.

Several times the obstinate boy had refused to do what he was told, and Gordon had reprimanded him, but he took no notice of his observations. And in the end Gordon sentenced him to be flogged.

And so Dole received a birching at the hands of Wilcox, who had been selected by lot for the post of public executioner. And the example had its effect, in preventing any recurrence of insubordination.

On September the 10th six months had elapsed since the schooner was lost on the reefs of Charman Island.

CHAPTER XIV

A JOURNEY NORTHWARDS

WITH the fine weather now in prospect the young colonists intended to put into execution several of the schemes they had thought about during the long winter.

To the west it was only too obvious that there was no land near the island. Was it the same with regard to the north and south? Did the island belong to an archipelago or group in the Pacific? It certainly did not, according to Baudoin's map. Nevertheless there might be islands in these parts, for Baudoin had no telescope or glasses, and Auckland Hill was only high enough to command a horizon of a few miles. The boys with their instruments might discover what had been beyond the powers of the survivor of the *Duguay Trouin.*

According to the map, Charman Island did not measure more than twelve miles across to the eastward of French Den. In a line with Schooner Bay the coast was deeply indented, and an exploring party might profitably be despatched in that direction.

But before going farther afield the district around Auckland Kill, Family Lake, and Trap Woods ought to be explored . What were its resources? Was it rich in trees or shrubs of which use could be made? To ascertain this an expedition was decided upon, to start early in November.

But although in an astronomical sense spring had commenced, yet the island was in so high a latitude that the vernal influence had not made itself apparent. The month of September and the first half of October were distinguished by a spell of bad weather; and there were still sharp frosts, which did not last, owing to the wind being so variable. During this equinoctial period the atmospheric troubles were very violent, as had been those which had brought the schooner across the Pacific. The heavy squalls seemed to shake the hill, and when they swept from over the South Moor, where there was no obstacle to check them, bitter was the blast they brought from the Antarctic Ocean. Twenty times the wind blew in the store-room door and penetrated down the passage to the hall; and this made things worse than they had been in the winter when the thermometer went down below zero. And it was not only the wind, but the rain and the hail with which the lads had to contend.

To make things worse, the birds seemed to have disappeared as if they had sought refuge in parts of the island less exposed to the equinoctial gales, and the fish had also gone, probably frightened away by the agitation of the waters, which roared along the shore of the lake.

The boys in French Den were not idle. The table could no longer be used as a vehicle, on account of the snow having gone, and Baxter set about making a cart, on which heavy weights could be moved.

His idea was to use two of the wheels of the schooner’s windlass; but he did not succeed without a number of trials which would have been avoided by a skilled artisan. The wheels were toothed, and after trying in vain to break the teeth, Baxter had to fill up the intervals with wedges of wood and fasten them round with an iron hoop. Then the two wheels were fixed to an iron bar, and on this axle-tree a platform of planks was laid. It was a very rudimentary vehicle, but such as it was it would come in very useful. But as there were neither horses, mules, nor donkeys in the island, the boys would have to drag it themselves.

If they could only have come across a few trained quadrupeds what trouble they would have been spared! Why was the fauna of Charman Island so much richer in birds than in ruminants? With the example of Service's ostrich, would they ever be able to train the birds to work for them?

The nandu had lost nothing of its wildness. He - would let no one approach him without defending himself with his beak and claws; he tried his utmost to break the cord which held him, and if he had done so he would soon have been lost under the trees in Trap Woods.

But Service was not discouraged. He had naturally given the nandu the name of "Hurricane," like Master Jack's ostrich in "The Swiss Family Robinson." But although he did his best to tame the restive animal, neither gentleness nor severity had any effect.

"And yet," said he one day, referring to the romance of De Wyss, which he was for ever reading, "Jack Managed to tame his ostrich in a very short time."

"Probably he did," said Gordon. But between your hero and yourself. Service, there is the same difference as between his ostrich and yours."

And what is that?"

"Simply the difference between imagination and reality."

"What does that matter?" replied Service. "I will get the better of this ostrich, or it shall tell me why."

"Very good!" said Gordon, laughing. "I shall be as much surprised to hear it tell you as to see it obey you."

In spite of the pleasantries of his schoolmates, Service had decided to mount his nandu as soon as weather permitted. In imitation of his hero he had made a sort of harness out of sail-cloth and also a cap with blinkers. Had not Jack guided his bird by dropping a blinker over the right or left eye as the case might be? And why then should not his imitator succeed as he had succeeded? Service had even made a plaited collar to fix on the neck of the animal, which would willingly have dispensed with the ornament. But as to the cap, it was almost impossible to get it on to its head.

The equinox was nearly over. The sun was gaining in power, and the sky was clearing. It was mid-October. The sun communicated its warmth to the shrubs and trees, which were beginning to become green again.

The boys could now be out of doors all day. The warm clothes, thick cloth trousers, and oilskins were beaten, repaired, folded, and carefully put away after being ticketed by Gordon. The young colonists, more at ease in their lighter garments, greeted the return of summer with gladness, and one hope never left them, that of making some discoveries that would improve their position. During the summer might not a ship visit these parts? And if she passed in sight of Charman Island, why should she not send men ashore, when she noticed the flag on the crest of Auckland Hill?

During the second fortnight in October many excursions were made within a radius of two miles round French Den. The hunters went out, and the bill of fare soon felt the effects, although powder and shot were severely economized. Wilcox went forth with his nets and snares, and caught several brace of tinamous and bustards, and even a few small hares like agouti. Several times a day he had to visit his nets, for the jackals and paperos were quite equal to being beforehand with him, and helping themselves to what he had caught.

Donagan killed a few peccaries and guaculis — pigs and deer of small stature — which have savoury flesh; but no one regretted he could not get near the nandus, as Service's success with Hurricane was not encouraging. This was clearly shown on the morning of the 26th, when the obstinate boy tried to mount his ostrich, on which not without difficulty he had got the harness.

The boys were all out on the terrace to witness the interesting experiment, the little ones regarding their schoolfellow with a certain feeling of envy mingled with anxiety. At the decisive moment they hesitated to ash Service to give them a ride. The bigger boys shook their heads, and Gordon tried to dissuade Service from attempting what seemed to him to be dangerous. But it was to no purpose, and they let him have his own way.

Garnett and Baxter held the bird, which had its eyes covered with blinkers from the cap, and Service, alter many attempts, succeeded in getting on its back. Then in a somewhat hesitating voice, he said, "Let go!"

The nandu, deprived of the use of its eyes, remained motionless with the boy clinging firmly to it with his legs. But as soon as the blinkers were lifted with the cord that served for reins, the bird gave a tremendous leap, and shot off in the direction of the forest.

Service was helpless to guide his steed, which fled with the speed of an arrow. In vain he tried to stop it by dropping the blinkers; with a knock of its head it shook off the cap, which slipped down its neck, to which Service was clinging with both arms. Then a violent shock unseated the cavalier, and he fell to the ground just as his mount was about to disappear under the trees of Trap Woods.

Service’s comrades ran up, and when they arrived the ostrich was out of sight.

Fortunately Service had rolled on to the grass and sustained no injury.

“The mad thing! the mad thing!” said he. “Ah! If I catch you — ”

“But you will never catch him,” said Donagan, laughing.

“Well,” said Webb, “your friend Jack is a better horseman than you are.”

“My nandu was not tame enough,” said Service.

“And never would be,” said Gordon. “Console yourself with thinking that you should never have had anything to do with the creature, and do not forget that in ne romance of De Wyss you must not believe all you And the adventure ended, the youngsters having no cause to regret they had not had their ostrich-ride.

In the first week of November the weather appeared favourable for an expedition of some duration to the western shore of Family Lake and thence to the northward. The sky was clear, the heat supportable, and there would be nothing imprudent in passing a few nights in the open air.

Naturally the hunters of the colony formed part of the expedition, and this time Gordon thought it best to go with them. Those who remained at French Den were left in charge of Briant and Garnett. Later on Briant, it was arranged, would lead another expedition to the lower part of the lake, coasting its shores in the boat and perhaps crossing it.

Everything being arranged, Gordon, Donagan, Baxter, Wilcox, Webb, Cross, and Service started on the 5th of November.

At French Den no change was made in the usual daily round. In the hours not consecrated to work, Iverson. Jenkins, Dole, and Costar spent their time in fishing in the river, which was their favourite recreation. Moko stayed at home; but do not think that the explorers suffered from the want of a cook. Was not Service with them? Was he not cook’s mate? and had he not instanced his capabilities in that post as a reason for accompanying the expedition, in which he might perhaps recover his ostrich?

Gordon, Donagan, and Wilcox each carried a gun and a revolver. Hunting-knives and two axes completed their equipment. Powder and shot were not to be used except in self-defence, or to bring down something to eat in case of their failing to obtain provisions in a more economical way. To this end Baxter brought his lasso and the bolas, m the use of which practice had made him expert. A very quiet boy was Baxter, but a clever one, and he had quickly made himself master of these weapons against objects at rest, but whether he would succeed with animals at full speed remained to be seen.

Gordon had brought with him the Halkett india-rubber boat, which was very portable shut up in its bag and weighing only a few pounds, and the map showed two tributaries of the lake where the boat might be of use in case there was no ford.

According to the map, of which Gordon carried a copy for consultation and verification, the western shore of Family Lake was about eighteen miles long, reckoning the ins and outs. The exploration would therefore take quite three days going and returning, if no delay were met with.

Gordon and his companions, preceded by Fan, left Trap Woods to the left, and walked at a good pace along the sandy shore. When they had gone more than two miles they were farther away than any of the excursions had been since quarters had been taken up at the cave. Hereabouts a few cortadera bushes grew in clumps, among which the tallest of the party disappeared. The advance was thus somewhat hindered, but this was not regretted, as Fan stopped and pointed before one of a group of half a dozen holes in the ground.

Evidently she had scented some animal at home that it would be easy to kill. Donagan was bringing his gun to the shoulder when Gordon stopped him.

“Spare your powder, Donagan,” said he.

“Perhaps our breakfast is there?” said the young hunter.

“And our dinner too?” said Service, kneeling down to the hole.

“If they are, we can get them out without wasting any lead,” said Wilcox.

“And how?” said Webb.

“By smoking out the hole.”

Between the clumps of cortadera the ground was covered with dry twigs, a bundle of which Wilcox soon had alight in front of one of the holes. A minute later there appeared a dozen half-suffocated rodents trying in vain to escape. They were tucutuco hares, and Service and Webb soon despatched a few with the axes, while Fan strangled three others with her teeth.

“That will make an excellent meal!” said Gordon.

“And I’ll see after them,” said Service, eager to begin his duties as master cook. “I’ll start on them at once if you like.”

“At our first halt,” answered Gordon.

It took half an hour to get through this forest in miniature of cortadera bushes. Beyond appeared the beach with a long fine of dunes, the sand of which was so fine and light as to blow up with the least breeze.

the flank of Auckland Hill was now more than two miles away to the westward, owing to the direction taken by the cliff. All this part of the island was covered with the dense forest which Briant and his companions had crossed in their first expedition, and through which ran the stream they had called Dike Creek.

According to the map, this stream flowed into the lake; and it was at its mouth that the boys arrived about eleven o’clock, having accomplished six miles since their departure. Here they halted at the foot of a superb parasol pine. A fire of wood was lighted between two large stones. In a few minutes two of the tucutucos, skinned and drawn by Service, were roasting before a crackling fire. And while Fan lay in front and sniffed the grateful perfume of the venison, the cook took care to turn the spit so that the tucutucos should not spoil.

There was not much fault to be found with Service’s first attempt. There was enough to eat, and the meat was savoury with the flavour of the aromatic herbs on which the rodents feed; and except a few biscuits in place of bread, the provisions brought in the bags were left untouched.

The meal over, a start was made across the creek, and as there was a ford, there was no need to waste time in getting out the boat.

The shore of the lake becoming marshy, obliged them to keep away to the edge of the forest. The species of trees did not change — magnificently grown beeches, birches, green oaks, and pines of different kinds fringed the way. Numbers of charming birds leapt from branch to branch, black woodpeckers with red crests, flycatchers with white tufts, wrens of the scytalop species, thousands of creepers chuckling amid the foliage, with finches, larks, and thrushes singing or whistling in full power. Afar in the sky hovered condors, urubus, and a few pairs of caracaras, the voracious eagle of South America.

Probably in remembrance of Robinson Crusoe, Service regretted that the parrot family was not represented in the island’s ornithology. If he could not tame an ostrich, he might succeed with one of those talkative birds; but not one did he see.

In short there was abundance of birds and animals for food; and Gordon could not refuse Donagan the pleasure of shooting a moderate-sized peccary, which would do for breakfast in the morning, if not for dinner that night.

There was no need to enter the forest, and the advance was comparatively easy. And they continued skirting the trees until live o’clock, when the second watercourse, which was about forty feet wide, barred the way. This was one of the outlets of the lake, and flowed round the north of Auckland Hill into the Pacific beyond Schooner Bay.

Gordon decided to camp here. Twelve miles were enough for one day. And as the stream required a name he called it Stop River, on account of the halt on its banks.

The camp was pitched under the trees nearest the lake. The birds were reserved for breakfast, and the tucutucos formed the principal dish; and again Service performed his duties satisfactorily. The want of rest soon followed on the want of food, and as the mouths had opened in hunger the eyes soon shut in sleep. A large fire was lighted, before which the boys, wrapped in their blankets, stretched themselves down. Wilcox and Donagan took it in turns to watch, but the fire's bright light kept wild animals at a distance; and there was no alarm, and at daybreak all were ready to resume the journey.

But the river had not only to be named — it had to be crossed; and as it was not fordable, the Halkett boat was brought into use. It was a frail craft — able to carry but one at a time, so that the water had to be crossed from the left bank to the right seven times, and this took an hour. But the provisions and ammunition were kept dry.

Fan did not mind wetting her feet, and, jumping in, swam across in a few moments.

The ground being no longer marshy the boys kept along by the lake, and after breakfast at ten o'clock off some grilled peccary they bore away northwards. There was nothing to show that the end of the lake was near. The eastern horizon was all the time shut in by the circular line of water and sky. It was not till noon that Donagan, looking through the glasses, exclaimed —

"There is the other bank!"

And all looked in the same direction, and saw a few tree-tops beginning to show above the water.

We must not stop," said Gordon. "Let us get there before night."

An arid plain, undulated with long sandhills, dotted with a few clumps of rushes and reeds stretched away out of sight. In this northern part it appeared as though Charman Island consisted only of vast sandy tracks, contrasting with the verdant forests of the centre; and to it Gordon appropriately gave the name of Sandy Desert.

By three o’clock the opposite bank appeared distinctly about two miles to the north-east. There seemed to be no living creature near except the sea-birds, cormorants, petrels, and grebes, which flew over on their way to the shore.

If the schooner had been wrecked in these parts the boys would have thought they were indeed on a barren island. In vain would they have sought in the desert for their comfortable dwelling at French Den. When the shelter of the schooner failed them, they would have found no other shelter here.

Need they now go further, to explore a part of the island that seemed uninhabitable? Could they not leave for another expedition the exploration of the right bank of the lake, where the forest might again be found? Assuredly. Besides, it would be on the east that they would find the American continent if Charman Island were anywhere near it. However, at Donagan’s suggestion, they resolved to gain the extremity of the lake, which could not be far off, for the double curve of its banks became sharper and sharper. And at nightfall a halt was made at a little creek which ran in at the north angle of Family Lake.

Here there was not a tree, not even a clump of grass, of moss, or dry lichen. There being no fuel, the boys had to content themselves with the provisions brought with them; and as there was no shelter, they had to sleep under the stars on the bed of sand. And nothing came to trouble the silence of the night.

CHAPTER XV

BRAVO, BAXTER!

Two hundred yards from the creek there was a hill about fifty feet high, which formed an observatory, from which Gordon and his comrades might, have an extended view of the country. And as soon as the sun rose they climbed this hill.

The glasses were immediately pointed to the north. If the sandy desert stretched away, as the map showed, it was impossible to ascertain its boundary line, for the horizon of sea would be about twelve miles to the northward, and more than seven to the eastward. There seemed to be no good in going further north.

“Then,” asked Cross, “what are we to do?”

“Go back,” said Gordon.

“Not before breakfast,” said Service.

“Get the cloth laid,” said Webb.

“If we are going back,” said Donagan, “could we not go another way?”

“We will try to do so,” said Gordon.

“It seems to me,” said Donagan, “that we should complete our exploration if we went along the other bank of the lake.”

“That would be rather long,” said Gordon. “According to the map that must be from thirty to forty miles, and it would take four or five days supposing we met with nothing to stop us! At French Den they would be in a state of great anxiety for us."

"But," said Donagan, "sooner or later it will be necessary to explore that part."

"Certainly," said Gordon; "and I intend to have an expedition over there."

‘ But," said Cross, "Donagan is right in not wanting to go back the same way."

Quite so," said Gordon, "and I propose to follow the lake shore to Stop River, and then to strike off for the cliff, and skirt it on our way to the caves."

"And why go down the river?" asked Wilcox.

"Why, indeed?" said Donagan. "Why not make a short cut across the sand to the first trees in Trap Woods, which are not more than three or four miles to the south-west?"

"Because we must cross Stop River," answered Gordon. "We know we can get across where we crossed yesterday; but farther down we might find a torrent that would give trouble. If we enter the forest on the left bank of the river, we must be all right."

"Always cautious, Gordon!" exclaimed Donagan with just a touch of irony.

"You never can be too cautious!" said Gordon.

And then they all slipped down the hill, regained their camp, ate a little biscuit and cold venison, rolled up their blankets, and started back on the road they had come along the night before.

The sky was magnificent. A light breeze barely ruffled the surface of the lake. There was every sign of a fine day. If the weather would only keep fine for thirty-six hours Gordon would be satisfied, for he counted on reaching French Den the next evening.

By eleven o’clock the boys were back-at Stop River. Nothing had occurred on the way except that Donagan had shot two splendid tufted bustards, with a plumage of black mixed with red above and white below, which put him in as good a humour as Service, who was always ready to pluck, draw, and roast any bird whatsoever.

This was the fate of the bustards an hour later, when the boys had crossed the river in the Halkett boat.

‘‘ Now we are under the trees,’’ said Gordon,’’ and I hope Baxter will have a chance of using the lasso or the bolas.”

“He hasn’t done much with them as yet,” said Donagan, who did not think much of any weapon of the chase except fire-arms.

“And what could we do with the birds?” asked Baxter.

“Birds or quadrupeds, Baxter, I don’t think much of your chance.”

‘‘ Nor I,” added Cross, always ready to support his cousin.

“You might as well wait until he has tried them before you condemn them,’’ said Gordon. “I am sure he will d o something good. When our ammunition gives out, the lasso and the bolas will not fail us.”

“But the birds will,” said Donagan.

“We will see,” said Gordon, “and now let us lunch.”

But the preparations took some time, as Service wanted his bustard cooked to a turn. The one bird was enough for the meal; it was a good-sized one, and these bustards weigh about thirty pounds, and measure nearly three feet from beak to tail, being among the largest specimens of the gallinaceous tribe. This one was eaten to the last mouthful, and even to the last bone, for Fan, to whom the carcase fell, left as little as her masters.

Lunch being over, the boys started off into the unknown part of Trap Woods traversed by Stop River on its way to the ocean. The map showed that it curved towards the north-west to get round the cliff, and that its mouth was beyond False Point; and, therefore, Gordon resolved to leave the river, which would take him in the opposite direction to French Den, his object being to take the shortest road to Auckland Hill, and then strike northwards along its base.

Compass in hand Gordon led the way to the west. The trees, wider apart than in the more southerly district, offered no obstacle, and the ground was fairly clear of bushes and underwood.

Among the birches and beeches little clearings opened now and then into which the sun-rays penetrated. Wild flowers mingled their fresh colours with the green of the foliage and the carpet of grass. In places, superb senecios bore their blooms on stems two or three feet high, and Service, Wilcox, and Webb gathered some of the flowers and stuck them in their coats.

Then it was that a discovery of great use was made by Gordon, whose botanical knowledge was often to be of use to the little colony. His attention was attracted by a very bushy shrub, with poorly developed leaves, and spiny branches, bearing a reddish fruit about the size of a pea.

“That is the trulca, if I am not mistaken,” said he. ‘‘ It is a fruit much used by the Indians.”

“If it is eatable,” said Service, “let us eat it, for it costs nothing.”

And before Gordon could stop him Service began to crack some of the fruit between his teeth. He made a horrible grimace, and his comrades roared with laughter, while he spit out the abundant salivation caused by the acidity on the papillae of his tongue.

“You told me it was eatable!” he exclaimed.

“I did not say it was eatable,” replied Gordon. “The Indians use the fruit for making a drink they obtain by fermentation. The liquor will be of great value to us when our brandy has all gone, that is, if we mind what we are doing with it, for it soon gets into the head. Fill a bag with the trulcas, and we’ll experiment with them at French Den.”

The fruit was not easy to gather from among the thousands of thorns, but by beating the branches Baxter and Webb knocked enough on to the ground to make a bagful and then the journey was resumed.

Farther on, the pods on another shrub were also gathered. They were the pods of the algarrobe, another South American native, which also by fermentation yield a strong liquor. This time Service abstained from trying them, and he did well, for although the algarrobe seems sweet at first, yet the mouth is soon affected with extreme dryness.

In the afternoon, a quarter of a mile before they reached the slope of Auckland Hill, the boys made another discovery of quite as much importance. The aspect of the forest had changed. In more sheltered position, the vegetation was more richly developed. Sixty or eighty t from the ground the trees spread their huge branches, amid which innumerable song-birds chattered. One of the finest of the trees was the antarctic beech, which keeps its tender green foliage all the year round. Not quite so high, but still magnificent, rose clumps of “winters,” with bark the flavour of cinnamon.

Near there Gordon recognized the “pernettia,” the tea- tree of the whortleberry family, met with in high latitudes, and from an infusion of its aromatic leaves yielding a very healthy drink.

“That will take the place of our tea,” said Gordon. “Take a few handfuls of the leaves, and later on we will come back and gather enough for the winter.”

It was four o’clock before Auckland Hill was reached near its northern end. Although it did not seem to be as high here as at French Den, yet it was impossible to ascend it owing to its almost perpendicular slope. This was, however, of no consequence, as it was intended to follow its base all the way to Zealand River.

Two miles farther on the boys heard the murmur of a torrent which foamed through a narrow gorge in the cliff, and which was easily forded.

“This ought to be the stream,” said Donagan, “that we discovered on our first expedition.”

“That in which was the causeway?” asked Gordon.

“Yes,” said Donagan, “and which we called Dike Creek.”

“Well, let us camp on its right bank,” said Gordon. “It is just five o’clock, and if we are to pass another night in the open air, we might as well do it here under the shelter of these big trees. To-morrow, I hope we shall sleep on our beds in the hall.”

Service busied himself preparing the second bustard for dinner. It was to be roasted like the other one; but it is not fair to find fault with Service on account of the sameness of his bill of fare.

While dinner was being got ready, Gordon and Baxter strolled off into the wood, one in search of new plants, the other with the intention of using his lasso or bolas — if it was only to put an end to the jokes of Donagan.

They had gone about a hundred yards into the thicket, when Gordon, calling Baxter by a gesture, pointed to a group of animals playing about on the grass.

“Goats?” asked Baxter, in a whisper.

“Yes, or rather animals that look like goats,” said Gordon. “Try and get one — ’

“Alive?”

“Yes, alive; it is lucky Donagan isn’t with us. He would have shot one before now, and put the others to flight! Let us get nearer quietly, and don’t let them see us.”

There were six of these goats, and they had not yet taken alarm. One of them, a mother probably, suspecting some danger, was sniffing the air and looking about, ready to clear off with the herd.

Suddenly a whistling was heard, the bolas came spinning from the hand of Baxter, who was not twenty yards away from the group. Well aimed and thrown, it wound round one of the goats, while the others disappeared in the thicket. Gordon and Baxter ran towards the goat, which was vainly trying to escape from the bolas. She was seized so that it was impossible for her to get away, and two kids, that instinct had kept near the mother, were also taken prisoners.

“Hurrah!” exclaimed Baxter, whom joy rendered demonstrative. “Hurrah! Are they goats?”

“No,” answered Gordon, “I think they are vicugnas.”

“And will they give milk?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Then hurrah for the vicugnas.”

Gordon was right. Although the vicugnas resemble goats, their paws are longer, their fleece is short and fine as silk, their head is small and has no horns. They chiefly inhabit the pampas of America, and even the country round the Straits of Magellan.

We can easily imagine how Gordon and Baxter were welcomed when they returned to the camp, one leading the vicugna by the cord of the bolas, the other carrying a kid under each arm. As their mother was still nourishing them, it was probable that the youngsters could be brought up without difficulty. They might be the nucleus of a herd that would become very useful to the colony. Donagan doubtless regretted the splendid shot he had missed; but when the game had to be taken alive, he had to admit that the bolas was better than the gun.

The boys dined or rather supped in high spirits. The vicugna, tied to a tree, did not refuse to feed, while the kids gambolled round her.

The night, however, was not so quiet as the one spent m bandy Desert. This part of the forest was visited by animals more formidable than jackals, and their cries were recognizable as being a combination of howling and barking at the same time. About three o'clock in the morning there was an alarm due to the growling close by.

Donagan, on guard near the fire with his gun in hand, did not think it worth while to wake his comrades, but the growling became so violent as of itself to wake them.

“What is the matter?” asked Wilcox.

“There are some wild beasts prowling round,” said Donagan.

“Probably jaguars or cougars!” said Gordon.

“One is as bad as the other.”

“Not quite, Donagan, the cougar is not so dangerous as the jaguar; but in a pack they are dangerous enough.”

“We are ready for them,” said Donagan. And he put himself on the defensive, while his comrades got out their revolvers.

“Don’t shoot until you can’t miss,” said Gordon. “I think the fire will keep them off.”

“They are close by,” said Cross.

And the pack was near enough, to judge by the fury of Fan, whom Gordon had some difficulty in holding back. But it was impossible to distinguish any form in the deep darkness of the forest.

Evidently the creatures were accustomed to come and drink at night in this place. Finding their haunt occupied they showed their displeasure by their frightful growls.

Suddenly, moving spots of light appeared some twenty yards away. Instantly there was the report of a gun.

Donagan had fired, and a storm of growls replied. His comrades, revolver in hand, were ready to shoot if the wild beasts rushed at the camp.

Baxter, seizing a burning brand, furled it straight at the glittering eyes; and instantly the growling stopped, and the animals, one of whom should have been hit by Donagan, were lost in the depths of Trap Woods.

“They have moved off,” said Cross.

“Good luck to them,” said Service.

“Will they come back?” asked Cross.

“That is not likely,” said Gordon; “but we will watch till daylight.”

Some wood was thrown on the fire, which was kept blazing till the day broke. The camp was struck, and the boys ran off into the thicket to see if one of the animals had not been killed.

They found the ground stained with a large patch of blood. The brute had been able to get away, and it would have been, easy to recover it if Fan had been sent in search, but Gordon did not think it worth while to go further into the forest. The question arose as to whether they were jaguars or cougars or something as dangerous, but, alter all, the important point was that the boys were all safe and sound.

At six o’clock they were off again. There was no time to lose if they were to cover during the day the nine miles between them and French Den.

Service and Webb took care of the young vicugnas, while the mother was quite satisfied to follow Baxter, who led her with the string.

There was not much variety in the road. On the left was a curtain of trees, sometimes in impenetrable masses, sometimes in scattered clumps. To the right ran the rocky wall, striped here and there with pebble bands in the limestone, and rising higher and higher as the travellers went southwards.

At eleven o’clock the first halt was made for lunch; and this time, so as to lose no time, the provisions in the bags were attacked. After the fresh start was made progress was more rapid, and nothing occurred to stop it, until about three o’clock in the afternoon the report of a gun echoed among the trees.

Donagan, Cross, and Webb, accompanied by Fan, were a hundred yards in advance, and their comrades could not see them, when they heard the shout of “Look out!”

Suddenly an animal of large size came rushing through the thicket. Baxter whirling his lasso over his head took a flying shot. The noose fell over the neck of the animal, but so powerful was it that Baxter would have been dragged away if Gordon, Wilcox and Service had not hung on to the end of the line, and whipped it round the trunk of a tree.

No sooner had they done so than Webb and Cross appeared from under the trees, followed by Donagan, who exclaimed in a tone of ill-temper, “Confound the beast! How could I have missed it?”

“Baxter didn’t miss it,” said Service, “and here we have it, all alive oh!”

“What does it matter?” asked Donagan. “You’ll have to kill it.”

“Kill it!” said Gordon. “Not at all! It is our beast of burden!”

“What, this thing?” exclaimed Service.

“It is a guanaco,” said Gordon, “and guanacos figure largely in tie studs of South America.”

Useful or not useful, Donagan was very sorry he had not shot it. But he said nothing, and went up to examine this beautiful specimen of the Charmanian fauna.

Although the guanaco is zoologically classed with the camels, it in no way resembles those animals at first glance. Its slender neck, elegant head, long, rather lanky limbs — denoting great activity — and yellow coat spotted with white, made it in no way inferior to the best horses of American descent. It could certainly be used for riding if they could tame it and break it in, as was easily done in the Argentine haciendas. It was very timid and made no attempt at escape. As soon as Baxter had loosened the slip-knot, it was easy to lead it with the lasso, which served the purpose of a halter.

The expedition to the north of Family Lake had been a profitable one for the colony. The guanaco, the vicugna and her two kids, the discovery of the tea-tree, of the trulcas and the algarrobe, ensured a hearty welcome to Gordon, and even more to Baxter, who had none of Donagan's vanity and was not at all conceited over his success.

Gordon was delighted to find that the bolas and lasso could be really useful. Donagan was a capital shot, but his skill required an expenditure of powder and lead which the colony could ill spare, and Gordon determined to encourage his comrades in practising with these weapons of the chase, of which the Indians make such profitable use.

The map showed that four miles still separated the boys from French Den, and the word was given to hurry on. It was not envy which forbade Service from bestriding the guanaco and riding home in state, but Gordon thought it was better to wait until the creature was broken in.

"I don't think he'll kick much," said he," but if he won't let you ride him, he might consent to draw the cart. Patience, Service, and don't forget the lesson you were taught by the ostrich."

About six o'clock they arrived in sight of French Den.

Young Costar, amusing himself on the terrace, announced the approach of the expedition; and Briant and the others ran out to welcome Gordon with enthusiastic cheers.

End of the First Part

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE SEAL HUNT

ALL had gone well at French Den in Gordon’s absence. Briant’s chief anxiety had been the inexplicable conduct of his brother, from whom he could still obtain no other answer than —

“There is nothing the matter with me.”

“You will not tell me, Jack? “Briant would say. “You are wrong! It would be a relief for you and for me! I can see you are getting more miserable and gloomier every day! I am your elder brother, and I have the right to know what is grieving you. What have you done?”

“What have I done? “Jack would say, as if unable to bear it any longer. “You, perhaps, might forgive me, but the others — ”

“The others? the others? What are you talking about, Jack?”

Jack would begin to cry, but all his brother could do y made him add — “Later on you will know!”

After such a reply Briant’s anxiety may be imagined. What was there so serious that Jack could have done? At all costs he would find out if he could. As soon as Gordon came back Briant spoke to him about these half-confessions wrung from his brother, and even asked him to interfere.

“What would be the use of that?” asked Gordon.

Better leave Jack to himself. What he has done is doubtless some peccadillo, the importance of which he exaggerates. Wait till he tells you himself.”

Next morning the young colonists were all at work. And to begin with, Moko called attention to the state of his larder, which, notwithstanding that the snares were all set, was running low. Of large game there was none; and the boys devoted their first attention to making traps, in which they might, capture vicugnas, peccaries, or guazulis, and waste no powder or shot. And during the whole month of November, answering to May in our latitudes» they were occupied in this work.

The guanaco and the vicugna and her little ones were being kept under the nearest trees tethered to long ropes, where they would get on very well till the winter, when a shelter of some sort would have to be contrived for them. This Gordon decided should be a shed with a high palisaded enclosure at the foot of Auckland Hill on the shore of the lake, a little beyond the door of the cave; and the work was at once put in hand.

A regular workshop was organized under Baxter’s directions. It was pleasant to see the boys more or less skilfully busy with the tools they had found in the carpenter’s chest — some with saws, some with axes, some with adzes. Although the work was at times rather irksome to them, yet they never complained. Medium-sized trees were cut down at the root, had their branches cut away, and became the uprights of an enclosure large enough to hold a dozen animals in comfort. Sunk deeply in the ground and supported by cross-pieces, they were strong enough to defy the attempts of any of the animals to escape. The shed was built of the planks of the schooner, and this saved the young carpenters the trouble of cutting planks out of trees, which would have been a very difficult job under the circumstances. The roof was made of a thick tarpaulin. A good thick litter which could be often renewed, a fresh feed of grass, or moss, or leaves, and the animals required nothing else to keep them in condition. Garnett and Service, who had the management of the cattle, were rewarded for their trouble by finding the guanaco and vicugna get tamer every, day. Soon there were other animals in the enclosure. First there came a second guanaco caught in one of the traps in the forest, then a couple of vicugnas, male and female, which Baxter had caught with the help of Wilcox, who was becoming quite adroit in the use of the bolas. By-and-by there was added a nandu, which Fan had captured; but it was obvious that this was as intractable as the first, notwithstanding all that Service could do.

Until the enclosure was completed the guanaco and vicugna had been put in the store-room at night. The howling of jackals, yelping of foxes, and growling of other wild beasts were too loud round French Den for it to be prudent to leave the cattle outside.

While Garnett and Service had special charge of the cattle, Wilcox and a few others were constantly occupied in preparing snares and nets, and daily visiting them. Iverson and Jenkins found plenty to do in another way. Ostriches, pheasant fowls, guinea-fowls, and tinamous became so numerous that a poultry-yard became necessary, and this was railed off in a corner of the enclosure, and put under the care of the two youngsters, who were most zealous in the discharge of their duties.

Moko now had at his disposal not only the milk of the vicugnas, but the eggs of the feathered prisoners, and had Gordon not cautioned him to be careful of the sugar he might have launched out extensively into sweetmeats. As it was, it was only on Sundays and holidays that such efforts appeared on the table, to the very great satisfaction of Dole and Costar in particular.

As it was impossible to make sugar, could not the boys find something as a substitute? Service — Crusoe books in hand — insisted that they had only to look to find. Gordon, therefore, sought about, and in Trap Woods he came across a group of trees which three months later, in the early days of autumn, would be covered with most beautiful purple foliage.

“They are maples,” he said, “sugar trees.”

“Trees of sugar!” exclaimed Costar.

“No, greedy,” said Gordon. “I said sugar trees, not trees of sugar; so put in your tongue.”

This was one of the most important discoveries the boys had made since their move to French Den. By making an incision in the maple trunks Gordon obtained a liquid produced by the condensation of the sap, and this sap when solidified yielded the sugary substance. Although inferior in saccharine qualities to the juice of the cane and the beet, the substance was just as valuable for cooking purposes, and it was certainly better than the similar product from the birch in the springtime.

Moko now began to experiment with the trulca and algarrobe berries. Crushing them in a tub with a heavy lump of wood, he procured from them a liquor which was found to sweeten the hot drinks fairly well and the leaves from the tea tree proved to be almost as good as those of the fragrant Chinese plant, so that the boys never failed to bring some home with them when they went into the woods.

If Charman Island did not yield its inhabitants what was superfluous, it certainly gave them what was necessary.

In one thing it did fail them, and that was in fresh vegetables, and they had to take refuge in the preserved vegetables, of which there had been a hundred boxes, which Gordon dealt out as economically as possible. Briant had even tried to cultivate the yams that had returned to a wild state, and which the French castaway had sown at the foot of the cliff, but his efforts were in vain. Fortunately the celery flourished abundantly on the shores of Family Lake, and there was no need to be sparing of it.

Meanwhile Donagan was constantly thinking of an expedition to South Moor on the other side of the Zealand River; but there was much danger attending this, for at flood-times the marshes were covered with water from both lake and sea.

Wilcox and Webb caught a number of agoutis as big as hares, whose whitish flesh, though rather dry, has a flavour between that of the rabbit and the pig. There was no running to be got out of these animals even with the assistance of Fan, but when they were found at home, all that had to be done was to whistle gently at the hole and out they would come to see what was the matter. Besides the agoutis there were caught a few gluttons, and some zorillos, somewhat like martens, with their beautiful black fur striped with white, but giving off very fetid emanations.

“How can they stand such a stink?” asked Iverson.

“Merely matter of habit!” said Service.

There were galaxias in the river, and there were very much larger ones in the lake, and with them were some curious trout that no matter how they were cooked had always a brackish flavour. Among the seaweed of the bay were shoals of hake, and when the time came for the salmon to come up the stream Moko would be able to lay in a good supply of fish, which, preserved in salt, would afford excellent eating during the winter.

At Gordon’s request Baxter busied himself in making bows out of the pliant branches of the ash, and arrows out of reeds tipped with an iron nail. With these Wilcox and Cross, who were the best marksmen after Donagan, would be able to bring down a little feathered game. Gordon continued to do all he could to discourage the waste of ammunition, but there came an occasion on which he consented to depart from his habitual parsimony.

One day — it was the 7th of December — Donagan had taken him apart, and said to him —

“We are swarming with these jackals and foxes. They come in herds at night and destroy our nets and the things we have caught in them! We really ought to stop it.”

“Cannot we set some traps for them?” asked Gordon, seeing what his companion was driving at.

“Traps!” exclaimed Donagan, who had lost none of his contempt for these vulgar engines of the chase. “Traps! The jackals might be stupid enough to be caught in them sometimes, but with the foxes it is quite a different thing. They are too sharp to be caught, in spite of all Wilcox can do. Some night or other our enclosure will be devastated, and our poultry-yard stripped!”

“Well, if it is necessary, I agree to a few dozen cartridges, but mind you are sure of your aim.”

“All right. You may depend upon that. We’ll have an ambush to-night on the track of these beasts, and will have such a massacre that they won’t trouble us again tor some time.”

The matter was urgent. The foxes of these regions seemed to be much more cunning than those of other nations, almost as cunning, in fact, as those of South America, where the haciendas are constantly being ravaged by them.

At eleven o’clock that night, Donagan, Briant, Wilcox, Baxter, Webb, Cross, and Service took up their position in a covert by the side of the lake and near Trap Woods.

Fan had not been-invited; she would probably have done harm by giving the alarm, and, besides, no finding by scent was required.

The night was very dark.

A deep silence, untroubled by the slightest breath of breeze, allowed even the gliding of the foxes over the dry herbage to be heard. A little after midnight Donagan announced the approach of a troop on their way through the covert to drink in the lake. The boys waited impatiently, while the animals, to the number of twenty or more, collected by the waterside, which they did slowly and cautiously, as if they had some suspicion of an ambush. Suddenly, at a signal from Donagan, there was a straggling volley. Five or six foxes rolled on to the ground and the others, most of them mortally wounded, fled right and left.

When day came a dozen foxes were found dead in the convert. And as the massacre was continued on three successive nights the little colony was soon delivered from the dangerous visits that imperilled the poultry-yard, and fifty fine silver-grey skins, some as carpets, some as garments, added to the comfort of French Den.

On the 15th of December there was a grand expedition to the bay. The weather was fine, and Gordon decided that all should go — very much to the satisfaction of the youngsters, who were loud in their demonstrations of delight.

The expedition had for its chief object a hunt of the seals that frequented Wreck Coast. During the long nights of the long winter the means of lighting had been almost exhausted; of the candles made by Baudoin only two or three dozen remained; the oil in the schooner’s barrels had also almost gone, and this had made Gordon anxious.

It is true that Moko had put by a certain quantity of the fat from the birds and beasts he had cooked, but this would soon be used up, Was it not possible to replace this by a substance that nature furnished ready prepared, or nearly so; in default of vegetable oil, could the little colony obtain a stock of oil from animals?

Certainly this could be done, if the boys could manage to kill a certain number of seals, those furred otaries who came to disport themselves on the reefs of Schooner Bay during the warm season. But the boys would have to make haste, for the amphibians would soon be off to the more southerly regions of the Antarctic Ocean.

The projected expedition was thus of great importance, and preparations were made in such a manner as to give the best results.

For some time Service and Garnett had been occupied, not without success, in breaking in the two guanacos as beasts of burden. Baxter had made a halter of plaited grass covered with sail-cloth, and if the guanacos could not yet be mounted; they might at least be harnessed to the chariot, and that would be better than for the boys to have to drag it along.

On the day of the expedition the chariot was loaded with stores, provisions, and utensils, among the last being a large vat, and half-a-dozen empty barrels, which were to be brought back full of seal oil, it being better to cut up the seals on the spot than to bring them to French Den, and fill the air with the unhealthy stench.

The departure took place at sunrise, and for two hours there was no obstacle on the road. If the chariot did not go very fast it was because the uneven ground along the bank of Zealand River lent itself imperfectly to traction by guanacos. But where difficulty arose was when the little troop skirted the swamp of Bog Woods, and entered the forest. Dole and Costar then complained of being tired, and Gordon, at Briant's request, allowed them to get on to the chariot, so as to have a rest as they went.

About eight o'clock, while the team was laboriously advancing by the edge of the swamp, the shouts of Webb and Cross, who were a little in front, brought up first Donagan, and then the rest.

About a hundred yards away, in the mud of Bog Woods, there wallowed an enormous animal, which Donagan recognized at once. It was a hippopotamus, fat and rosy, which — happily for it — disappeared under the thick underwood of the marsh before it was possible to fire. Though what would have been the good of firing so uselessly?

"What is that big beast?" asked Dole.

"It is a hippopotamus," said Gordon.

"A hippopotamus! What a strange name."

"That is to say, a river-horse," said Briant.

“But it is not like a horse,” said Costar.

“No,” said Service, “I fancy it ought to have been called a piggobottomus.”

The suggestion was not unreasonable, and caused a shout of laughter from the youngsters.

It was a little after ten o’clock before Gordon reached the beach at Schooner Bay. A halt was made near the river-bank, where the camp had been pitched during the demolition of the yacht.

There were about a hundred seals gambolling among the rocks, or basking in the sun; there were even some disporting themselves on the sand beyond the cordon of reefs.

These amphibians were evidently little familiar with the presence of man. Perhaps they had never seen a human being, for the Frenchman had been dead for twenty years; and although it is a measure of ordinary prudence, among those hunted in the Arctic or Antarctic seas, for the oldest of the band to stand sentinel, there was no such precaution here. But it was desirable not to alarm them, for in a few moments they might all clear away.

When they first emerged into the bay, the young colonists had looked out towards the wide horizon between American Cape and False Point.

The sea was quite deserted. Again it was clear enough that the island was not on any of the maritime highways.

It might happen, however, that a ship would pass within sight of the island, and in that case an observatory on the top of Auckland Hill, or False Point, would be better than the existing signal-mast for the purpose of attracting attention. But some one would have to be on guard there night and day, far away from the caves, and the suggestion was dismissed as impracticable. Briant, who was always thinking of getting back to New Zealand, could not but agree. It was, indeed, a pity that French Den was not situated on the bay side of Auckland Hill.

After a hasty lunch, Gordon, Briant, Donagan, Cross, Baxter, Webb, Wilcox, Garnett, and Service prepared themselves for the seal-hunt. While this was about, Iverson, Jenkins, Jack, Dole, and Costar were to remain at the camp in charge of Moko, and as it was not advisable to let Fan loose among the amphibious herd, the dog was left to keep them company. They could amuse themselves by looking after the two guanacos put out to graze under the trees.

All the fire-arms in the colony, rifles and revolvers, had been brought out with sufficient ammunition, which Gordon did not begrudge this time, as it was for the general good.

To cut off the retreat of the seals to the sea was the first thing to be done. Donagan, by general consent, led the way down the river to its mouth, keeping under shelter of the bank as he went. That done, it was easy to get out along the reefs in such a manner as to get in the rear of the seals.

This plan was executed with much care. The boys, from thirty to forty yards behind each other, had soon formed a half-circle between the beach and the sea. Then, at a signal from Donagan, they all fired; the guns rang out together, and every gun had its victim.

The seals that had not been hit stood up, wagged their tails and their fins. Then, frightened by the noise, they rushed in a bound towards the reefs. They were pursued with the revolvers. Donagan was in his element, and did wonders, while his comrades followed his example to the best of their ability.

The massacre lasted but a few minutes, until the seals had been tracked beyond the edge of the reef, where the survivors disappeared, leaving twenty killed or wounded behind.

The expedition had succeeded, and the hunters returned to the camp. The afternoon was spent in a task which was as repugnant as it could be. Gordon himself took part fn it; and as the work was indispensable, all hands went through with it resolutely. First, the seals killed among the reefs had to be dragged on the beach, and although these were but of medium size they gave a good deal of trouble.

While this was in hand Moko had set the big basin on the fire between two large stones, and put water into it. The quarters of seal, cut into five or six pieces each, were then placed in the basin, and a few minutes afterwards they were on the boil, with the clear oil oozing from them, and floating to the surface of the water, from which it was skimmed off into the casks. The place was rendered almost untenable by the disgusting odour which this caused. The boys held their noses, but they did not shut their ears, and many were the jokes about the disagreeable occupation, from which even the delicate Lord Donagan did not budge and which was resumed next morning.

By the end of the second day Moko had got many hundred gallons of oil, and at that it seemed reasonable to stop, as the lighting of French Den was assured for the whole of the coming winter.

The seals had not returned into the bay, and they were not likely to do so until time had softened the remembrance of their fright.

Next morning the camp was struck at dawn — to every one’s satisfaction, as may be supposed. The night before the chariot had been loaded with the casks, tools, and utensils. As it was much heavier than when it came, the guanacos could not draw it along very quickly, and there was an appreciable rise in the ground towards Family Lake.

At the moment of departure the air was filled with the deafening cries of a thousand birds of prey — buzzards and falcons come from the interior of the island to feed on the remains of the seals and leave no trace of them.

Then, with a last salute to the ensign on Auckland Hill, and a last look out into the Pacific, the little troop began their march up the right bank of Zealand River.

The return was uneventful. In spite of the difficulties of the road the guanacos did their work so well, and the bigger boys helped them so judiciously, that they were back at French Den by six o’clock.

The following days were occupied in the usual labours.

A trial was made of the seal oil in the lanterns, and, although the light was moderate enough, it was agreed it would answer the purpose, and there was no fear of having to spend the winter in darkness.

Christmas was coming, and Gordon wished it to be kept with some solemnity. It would be a reminder to them of their lost country, and a messenger of the heart, as it were, to their absent friends. If the children could have made themselves heard, how they would have shouted, “We are here — -all of us! all of us are living. We shall see you again. God will bring us to you!”

Yes! They still hoped that one day they would see their friends at Auckland again.

The announcement was therefore made that on the 25th and 26th of December there would be holiday at French Den. Work would be suspended for these two days. They would keep the first Christmas on Charman Island as it was kept in the old country.

The proposition was greeted with enthusiasm. On the 25th there would be a great state banquet, for which Moko promised something marvellous; and he and Service were in mysterious consultation, while Dole and Costar tried in vain to discover the secret of their deliberations.

The great day arrived. Over the door of the cave Baxter and Wilcox had artistically grouped the schooner’s flags, so as to give a festive air to French Den.

In the morning a salute from a cannon awoke the echoes of Auckland Hill. This was one of the two guns, stationed at the entrance, which Donagan had fired in honour of the occasion.

Then the youngsters went to the bigger boys, and wished them the compliments of the season. There was even an address to the chief of Charman Island, recited by Costar, who did not do so badly.

The boys wore their best clothes for the occasion. The weather was magnificent. In the afternoon there were sports on the terrace, in which all took part. On board the yacht there had been many of the needful materials for athletic games — cricket-bats and balls, footballs, bowls, and some fives balls. The little ones enjoyed themselves immensely. All went off well. There were no disputes and no quarrels. It is true that Briant devoted himself to amusing the youngsters, while Donagan and his habitual companions, Webb, Cross, and Wilcox, made up a party of their own, but that was to be expected. When the dinner was announced another gun was fired, and the boys took their seats in high expectation.

On the large table, covered with a beautiful white cloth, there was a Christmas-tree in a pot, covered with verdure and flowers. Moko had surpassed himself in the bill of fare, and very proud he was of the compliments addressed to him and his able collaborateur, the smiling Service. An agouti stewed, a salmi of tinamous, a roast hare stuffed with aromatic herbs, an ostrich with the wings expanded and the beak in the air, three tins of preserved vegetables, a pudding — and such a pudding — in which the traditional raisins of Corinth mingled with the fruits of the algarrobe. There was even tea and coffee at dessert; and, in fact, everything to help to keep a proper Christmas on Charman Island.

And then Briant cordially proposed Gordon’s health, who replied by drinking to the health of the little colony and their absent friends. And then Costar rose, and in the name of the little ones thanked Briant for the way in which he had looked after them; and there was much cheering.

CHAPTER II

ACROSS THE LAKE

EIGHT days afterwards the year 1861 began, and in the southern hemisphere New Year’s Day is at midsummer.

It was nearly ten months since the boys had been wrecked, and thrown on this island eighteen hundred leagues away from New Zealand. During this time, as we have seen, their position had gradually improved; and it seemed as though now they were at least secure of the necessaries of life.

But still they were abandoned on an unknown island! Would the help from without — the only help they could hope for — come before the end of the hot season? Would the colony have to endure the rigours of a second Antarctic winter? Hitherto there had been no illness. All, young and old, had been as well as possible. Owing to Gordon’s care — and not without an occasional grumble at his strictness — no imprudence, no excess had been committed. But if the present was prosperous enough, the future could only be contemplated with anxiety.

Briant’s constant thought was to get away from Charman island. But with the only boat they possessed, the yawl, how could they venture on a voyage that would be a long one even if the island did not belong to one of the Pacific Archipelagoes? Even if two or three of the boldest of the boys ventured in search of land to the eastward, how few were the chances that they would reach it! Could they build a boat large enough to carry them? Certainly not! That would be beyond their strength, for Briant’s only idea of a boat was one that would carry them all.

All they could do was to wait, and work to make themselves comfortable at French Den. And, if not this summer, when they had almost enough to do to prepare for the winter, at least next, they could finish the exploration of their island.

Resolutely they set to work. Experience had taught them how rigorous the winter could be. For weeks, for months even, bad weather might oblige them to remain in the hall, and they must above all things be prepared against cold and hunger, the two enemies they had most to fear.

To fight the cold in French Den was only a question of fuel; and the autumn, short as it might be, could not close until Gordon had enough wood in store to keep the stoves going night and day. But ought not something to be done for the domestic animals in the enclosure and poultry yard? To shelter them in the store-room would not be very pleasant, and would certainly be unwise from a hygienic point of view. Hence the need of making the shed more habitable, and of heating it by means of a fireplace which could always keep the air at a supportable temperature. And during the first months of the new year Baxter, Briant, Service, and Moko were busily employed in this matter.

In the equally important task of provisioning the Den for the long winter, Donagan and his companions found quite enough to do. Every day they visited the traps, snares and nets. Whatever was caught, and was not required for daily consumption, went to swell the reserves of salted or smoked meat, which Moko was preparing with much care.

But an exploring expedition was urgently called for; not to explore the whole of the unknown territories of Charman Island, but those only to the east of Family Lake. Did these consist of forest, marsh, or sand-hills? Had they any new resources which might be utilized?

One day Briant had a talk with Gordon on the subject, treating it from a new point of view.

“Although Baudoin’s map may be fairly correct,” said he, “it is desirable that we should explore the eastern side for ourselves. We have good glasses, which Baudoin did not have, and who knows if we might not see land that he could not? His map makes Charman Island a solitary one, and it may not be so.”

“Always the same idea,” said Gordon; “and you are miserable at not getting away!”

“Yes, and at heart I am sure you feel the same as I do. Ought we not to do all we can to get home again as soon as possible?”

‘‘ Well, “said Gordon,’’ we will organize an expedition.’’” An expedition in which we can all take part?”

“No. It seems to me that six or seven of us — ”

“That would be too many. If they are so numerous they would only be able to get round the lake at the north or south, and who knows what difficulties they might meet with? “.

“What then do you propose?”

“I propose to cross the lake in the yawl, and, to do that, only two or three need go.”

“And who will have charge of the yawl?”

“Moko,” said Briant. “He knows how to manage a boat, and I understand a little about it. With the sail, if the wind is fair, and with the two oars, if it is against us, we might easily manage the five or six miles across the lake and reach the watercourse, which, according to the map, runs through the eastern forest; and we could go down that to its mouth.”

“Agreed. I approve of your idea. But who will go with Moko?”

“I will, for I did not take part in the expedition to the north of the lake. It is my turn to be of use.”

“To be of use!” said Gordon. “Have you not been of great use? Have you not done more than any of the others?”

“Well, we have all done our duty,” said Briant. “So it is agreed, then?”

“Yes, it is agreed. But who is to go with you? I should not propose Donagan, for you do not get on well together.”

“Oh! I would agree to that, willingly,” said Briant.

“Donagan is not a bad-hearted fellow. He is brave, he is clever, and were it not for his envious character he would a capital companion. Besides, he will gradually reform when he sees that I really do not wish to push myself forward before any one; and we shall end, I am sure, in being the best friends in the world. But I was thinking of quite another travelling-companion — ”

“Who is that?”

“My brother Jack,” said Briant. “I get more and more anxious about him. Evidently he has done something wrong which he will not tell us. Perhaps if he finds himself alone with me on this expedition — ”

“That is so, Briant. Take Jack and begin your preparations at once.”

“They will not take long,” answered Briant. “We shall not be away more than two or three days.”

When the others heard the news of the projected expedition, Donagan was very vexed at not being allowed to take part in it, and went to Gordon, who explained that only three boys were wanted to do what was to be done, that the idea was Briant’s, whose business it was to see it through, etc.

When Moko heard that he was going to change his employment as master-cook for that of master-mariner, he made no secret of his gratification. To go with Briant was an additional pleasure. His substitute would naturally be Service, who revelled in the idea that he would be able to roast and stew as he liked without any one to overlook him. And Jack seemed not at all unhappy at having to leave French Den for a day or two with his brother.

The yawl was got ready. She was rigged with a little lateen sail, which Moko bent and furled. Two guns, three revolvers, ammunition in sufficient quantity, three travelling wraps, provisions, waterproof capes in case of rain, two oars with a pair to spare; such was the outfit required for the short trip — without forgetting the copy which had been made of Baudoin’s map, in which the new names were written as they were given.

On the 4th of February, about eight o’clock in the morning, Briant, Jack, and Moko bade good-bye to their comrades, and embarked. It was a splendid morning with a light wind from the south-west. The sail was set, and Moko took the helm, leaving Briant to look after the sheet. The surface of the lake was rippled by the intermittent breeze, and this the yawl felt more as she got further out; and in half an hour Gordon and the others soon disappeared.

Moko was seated aft, Briant more forward, and Jack at the foot of the mast. For an hour the high ridge of Auckland Hill remained above the horizon. But the opposite shore of the lake had not yet risen into view although it could not be far off. ‘ Unfortunately, as often happens when the sun gains in power, the wind showed a tendency to die away, and about noon it dropped to a few capricious flaws.

“It is a pity,” said Briant, “that the breeze has gone.”

“It would have been worse if it had headed us,” said Moko.

“You are a philosopher,” said Briant.

“I don’t know what you understand by that,” said the cabin boy; “but I certainly make the best of what comes.”

“Well, that is philosophy.”

“Then hooray for philosophy, and let us take to the oars. We must reach the shore before night if we can; and if we can’t — we can’t, that’s all.”

“That’s it, Moko. I’ll take an oar, you take another, and Jack takes the helm.”

“And if Master Jack steers well we shall make good way.”

“Tell me what to do,” said Jack, “and I’ll do my best.”

Moko took in the sail, which had even ceased to flap, for the wind had quite gone. The boys then had a morsel to eat, and then, with Moko forward and

Jack at the tiller, the boat began to move to the north-east, the course being steered by compass. She was then in the centre of the large sheet of water, and, just as if she were out at sea, the surface was circumscribed by the line of sky. Jack kept an anxious look-out for the shore opposite French Den.

About three o’clock, Moko, taking the glasses, announced that he saw indications of land. A little later, Briant agreed that he was not mistaken. At four o’clock the tops of trees showed themselves rising from a low, flat shore, which Briant had been unable to detect from False Point. So the only heights on Charman Island were those of Auckland Hill.

The boat was still from two miles and a half to three miles away from the eastern shore, Briant and Moko rowing steadily on, and getting very tired owing to the great heat. The surface of the lake was like a mirror. Every now and then the bottom could be seen twelve or down covered with aquatic plants, among which myriads of fish were swimming.

It was nearly six o’clock when the yawl neared the shore at the foot of a bank, above which spread the clustering branches of green oaks and sea-pines. The bank was too high for the boys to land, and they had to coast along for half a mile or so to the north.

“There is the river marked on the map,” said Briant, pointing to an opening in the bank, through which flowed the waters of the lake.

“Well,” said Moko, “I think we ought to give it a name.”

“All right,” said Briant, “let us call it East River, as it flows to the east.”

“That will do,” said Moko. “And now we have only to get into the stream and drift down it.”

“We will do that to-morrow, Moko. We had better camp here. We can start at dawn to-morrow and explore both banks of the river.”

“Shall we go ashore?” asked Jack.

“Oh, yes,” said Briant, “and camp under the trees.”

The boys took the boat into a little creek and scrambled out on to the bank. They moored the yawl to a stump, and took out of her the arms and provisions. A good fire of dry wood was lighted at the foot of a large green oak, and they had a meal of biscuit and cold meat, and were not at all sorry to get to sleep.

“Come, wake up; let us be moving,” said Briant, who was the first to awake at six o’clock next morning. And in a few minutes all three were back in the boat and out in the stream.

The current was rather strong — the tide had turned about half an hour before — and the oars were not needed. Briant and Jack were in the bow of the yawl, while Moko, with one of the oars out astern, kept the boat in midstream.

“It is likely,” said Moko, “that we shall get down to the sea in one tide if East River is only six miles long, as the current is much stronger than in Zealand River.”

“Let us hope so,” said Briant. “When we come back we may have to take two or three tides.”

“That may be,” said Moko, “and if you like we can start with the next tide.”

“Yes,” said Briant, “as soon as we have seen that there is no land to the eastward.”

The yawl drifted along at a rate, Moko estimated, of about a mile an hour. According to the compass East River ran in an almost straight course to the east-northeast. It was more shut in than Zealand River, and it was not so wide, being only about thirty feet across. Briant’s only fear was that there might be some rapids or whirlpools in its course, but there would be time enough to prepare for any obstacle.

The boys were in a forest, in which the vegetation was very thick, the trees being similar to those in Trap Woods, with this difference, that green oaks, cork oaks, pines and firs were in the majority.

Among others — although his knowledge of botany was much less than Gordon’s — Briant recognised a certain tree which he had seen in New Zealand. The branches of this tree spread out in umbrella-shape quite sixty feet above the ground, and bore conical fruits three or four inches long, pointed at the end, and covered with glittering scales.

That is a stone pine,” said Briant.

“If so,” said Moko, “let us stop for a minute or two. It will be worth while.”

A movement of the oar steered the yawl into the left bank. Briant and Jack jumped out. A few minutes afterwards they came back with an armful of the fruits, each of which contained a kernel of oval form, coated with a thin skin, and tasting like a hazel-nut. It was a valuable find for the gourmands of French Den, and it was also valuable — as Gordon told Briant on his return — on account of the oil that the fruits yielded.

It was important to discover if the forest had as many animals as those on the other side of the lake, and Briant kept his eyes open. He saw a lot of nandus in full flight, and a herd of vicugnas, and even a couple of guanacos ran past with incredible swiftness; and as to the birds, Donagan ought to have been there for a shot or two. But Briant resisted the temptation to waste his powder, as the yawl was amply provisioned.

Towards eleven o’clock the trees began to open out. Here and there little gaps and glades were noticed. The breeze was more and more impregnated with a saline odour, indicating the nearness of the sea. A few minutes later, beyond a clump of superb green oaks, a bluish line appeared. It was the horizon.

The yawl still drifted down with the tide, but more slowly now than at first. The ebb was hardly perceptible and East River had become nearly fifty feet wide.

They reached the rocks by the sea-shore; Moko steered the boat into the left bank, and then, carrying the grapnel to land, he stuck it firmly into the ground.

Here was quite a different state of affairs to that on the other side of the island. It was a deep bay, but instead of the wide, sandy beach and line of reefs and lofty cliffs as on Wreck Coast, there was a mass of rocks, among which, as Briant soon found, there were at least a score of caves.

This side of the island was consequently well fitted for habitation, and if the schooner had come ashore here, and it had been possible to float her afterwards, she could have; been taken into the little harbour at the mouth of the river, where, even at low tide, there was always water.

Briant looked away out to sea, to the far horizon stretching for some fifteen miles from point to point of two sandy promontories. The long bay, or gulf rather, was deserted — as it doubtless always was. Not a ship was in sight. On land or sea there was no sign of man. Moko, accustomed to recognize the vague lineaments of distant hills, moulded and marked with clouds, could discover nothing with his glasses.

Charman Island seemed to be as lonely in the east as it was in the west. And that was why Baudoin's map showed no land in that direction. And Briant contented himself with naming the gap in the coast Deception Bay.

"Come," said he, "it is not from this side we shall start when we go back."

"I think we had better have something to eat," said Moko.

"Right," said Briant, "but be quick. When can we get back up the river?"

"If you want to go by this tide, you ought to start at once."

"That is impossible. I must have a good look round the horizon from some high point."

"Then we shall have to wait for the next tide, and that means ten o'clock to-night."

"Are you afraid to travel during the night?" asked Briant.

"No," said Moko, "and there would be no danger, for we shall have the moon. Besides, the course of the river is so straight that we can steer the boat with an oar all right. And if the stream meets us we can row up, or if it is too strong we can run ashore and wait till it is day.

“Then let it be so,” said Briant; “and now we have twelve hours before us, let us make the most of them to complete an exploration.”

And the time was spent in visiting this part of the coast where the trees came down to the very edge of the rocks. The birds were as numerous as at French Den, and Briant was able to shoot a few tinamous for supper.

The main feature of the coast was the heaped-up granite masses that made the place a sort of field of Karnak, where the arrangement owed nothing to the hand of man.

In the space of half a mile Briant found a dozen halls and store-rooms that would have sufficed for the wants of the little colony.

He was naturally led to inquire why Baudoin had not taken up his quarters on this side of the island. There was no doubt he had visited it, for the main lines of the coast were accurately shown on the map. That he had left no trace behind him was probably because he had fixed his domicile at French Den, before he had explored this eastern territory, and finding the shore more exposed to the storms from the sea, had thought it best to remain where he was.

At two o’clock, when the sun had passed the zenith, the time appeared favourable for a careful examination of the offing. Briant, Jack, and Moko set to work to scale an enormous rock which in outline somewhat resembled a bear. The block was about a hundred feet away from the little harbour, and it was not without difficulty that they clambered to its top.

When there, they looked back over the island. To the west lay Family Lake, screened by a thick mass of verdure; to the south the country was seamed with yellow sandhills bordered by blackish firs as in the arid plains of the north; to the north the outline of the bay ended in a low promontory which formed the limit of an immense sandy plain stretching beyond. In short, Charman Island was only fertile in its central portions, where the sweet waters of the lake spread life around as they flowed off to the sea.

Briant then turned his glasses to the east, where the horizon was now as clear as could be. Any land within seven or eight miles would certainly have been noticeable.

There was nothing in that direction, nothing but the sea and the unbroken line of sky.

For an hour Briant, Jack, and Moko continued to look around them, and they were about to descend to the beach again when Moko suddenly stretched out his hand to the north-east, and asked —

“What is that?”

Briant brought his glasses to bear on the spot indicated.

A little above the horizon was a whitish stain that the eye might have taken for a cloud, had not the sky been quite clear at the time. Briant kept it in the field of his glasses for a long time, and announced that it remained stationary, and its form did not alter.

“I do not know what that can be,” he said, “unless it is a mountain, and a mountain would not look like that.”

A few minutes afterwards the sun had sunk more to the west, and the spot had disappeared. Was it some high peak, or a luminous reflection from the waters, as Jack and Moko suggested?

Soon all three were back at the mouth of East River, where the yawl was moored. Jack collected some dry wood from under the trees, and then he lighted the fire while Moko cooked the roast tinamous.

At seven o’clock Jack and Briant were walking along the beach, waiting for the tide to turn, and Moko had gone off up the river-bank in search of a stone pine from which he thought he would like a few fruits.

When he returned to the mouth of the river night had begun to close in. Away out at sea the waves were still lighted by the last rays of the sun, but the shore was plunged in semi-darkness.

When Moko reached the boat, Briant and his brother had not returned. As they could not be far off, he was in no way anxious about them.

But he was surprised to hear a violent sobbing, and then the sound of a loud voice. He could not be deceived; it was Briant’s.

Were the brothers in any danger? Moko did not hesitate to run off at once along the beach and round the rocks which shut in the little harbour.

Suddenly he saw something which made him halt.

Jack was on his knees before Briant! He seemed to be pleading with him, to be begging for pardon! And his were the sobs Moko had heard.

The cabin-boy would have run back, but it was too late. He had heard and understood! He knew now what Jack had done, and what he had just confessed, and why Briant was exclaiming —

“You stupid boy! It was you — you who did it! You are the cause!”

“Forgive me! forgive me!”

“That is why you keep apart from the rest! That is why you are afraid of them! May they never know! No! Not a word — not a word — to any one!”

Moko would have given much not to have known the secret. But to pretend not to know it now he was face to face with Briant would never do. And a few minutes afterwards, when he found him alone, by the boat he said to him —

“I overheard — ”

“What!” said Briant, “you know that it was Jack?”

“Yes, and you must forgive him.”

“But will the others forgive him?”

“Perhaps,” said Moko. “In any case, better they should know nothing. I’ll keep silence, you may depend.”

“Ah I poor Moko!” said Briant, clasping him by the hand.

For two hours up to the time of embarking, Briant did not say a word to Jack, who remained sitting at the foot of a rock close by, and evidently nearly broken-hearted now that he had made his confession.

About ten o’clock the flood-tide began to make itself felt, and Briant, Jack, and Moko took their seats in the boat. As soon as the grapnel was taken up she began to move with the current.

The moon had risen shortly after sunset, and made navigation practicable till half-past midnight. When the ebb set in, the oars were got out, and after an hour’s pulling not a mile up stream was gained.

Briant then prepared to anchor until daybreak, when the tide would flow again, and this was done. At six o’clock the voyage was resumed, and at nine o’clock the yawl was back in Family Lake. There Moko re-hoisted the sail, and with a fair beam wind steered straight for French Den.

About six o’clock in the evening, after a pleasant voyage, during which neither Briant nor Jack hardly spoke a word, the yawl was hailed by Garnett, who was out fishing on the bank; and a few minutes later she ran alongside, where Gordon gave her passengers a hearty welcome.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW CHIEF

Briant thought it best to say nothing of what had passed between him and his brother, even to Gordon. But the story of his trip he told to all as they sat round him that evening.

He described the eastern coast of Charman Island all round Deception Bay; he told them how East River ran through the forest, and how rich the forest was in trees of all kinds. He stated that better quarters could be found on the east than on the west, if it ever became necessary to abandon French Den. As to the sea, there was no land in sight, but he mentioned the strange white patch above the horizon which he could not explain. Probably it was merely a column of vapour, and would be explained when the next visit occurred to Deception Bay. In short, it was only too certain that Charman Island had no land near it, and doubtless many hundred miles divided it from the continent or the nearest archipelagoes.

The boys had therefore to resume their struggle for existence, awaiting some help from without, for it seemed unlikely that they would ever be able to do anything of themselves towards a rescue. They set to work vigorously preparing for the winter. Briant worked more zealously than ever; and it was noticed that he had become less communicative, and that like his brother he rather kept himself away from the rest. Gordon, in taking note of this change in his character, observed that Briant was always seeking to put Jack to the front on every occasion in which pluck had to be shown or danger run, and that Jack eagerly accepted such tasks. But as Briant had said nothing to him, and gave him no opportunity of asking, Gordon remained silent, although he suspected that an explanation had “taken place between the brothers.

The month of February was passed in various ways. Wilcox had found the salmon swimming up the river to the fresh waters of Family Lake, and many were caught in nets stretched from bank to bank. To preserve them required a large quantity of salt, and to get this a great many journeys were needed to Schooner Bay, where Baxter and Briant had established a small salt-marsh — a square pool in which the sea-water was evaporated by the sun and deposited the salt.

In the first fortnight of March three or four of the young colonists went off to explore a part of the marshy district of South Moor which lay across Zealand River This expedition was Donagan’s idea, and at his suggestion Baxter made several pairs of stilts out of the light spars. As the marsh was in places covered with a shallow sheet of water, these stilts allowed their wearers to stride along dry footed.

In the morning of April 17th, Donagan, Webb, and Wilcox crossed the river and landed on the left bank. They carried their guns slung over their shoulders, and Donagan had a duck-gun with him, from the arsenal of French Den, which he thought he would have a favourable opportunity to use.

As soon as the three reached the bank they put on their stilts and set out for the higher part of the marsh, which was dry even at high tide. Fan accompanied them. She did not want stilts, as she did not mind wetting her feet in crossing the pools.

Donagan, Wilcox, and Webb went about a mile in a south-westerly direction before they reached the dry ground, and they then took off their stilts, so as to be at their ease in pursuit of the game which swarmed over the wide extent of moor: snipe, pintail, wild duck, rail, plover, teal, and thousands of scoters, worth more for their down than their flesh, but very fine eating when properly cooked. Donagan and his comrades could shoot at hundreds of these innumerable aquatic birds without wasting a single shot; and they were not unreasonable, and contented themselves with a few dozen birds which Fan retrieved in fine style from the pools of the marsh.

Donagan was strongly tempted to bring down a few other things which could not well figure on the Den table, notwithstanding all the cabin-boy’s ability. Among these were a few thinocores belonging to the family of waders, and some herons decked with a brilliant aigrette of white plumes. To shoot them would have been mere waste of powder, and Donagan refrained from molesting them, but he could not resist temptation when he saw a flock of flamingoes with wings the colour of fire, and flesh as good as that of the partridge. The favourite haunt of these birds is among brackish waters, and here they were all in array, guarded by sentinels giving a sort of trumpet- call when they signalled danger. At the sight of these magnificent specimens of the island’s ornithology Donagan yielded without more ado, and Wilcox and Webb were no wiser, and off they started in pursuit — and in vain. They forgot that if they had approached without being seen and fired at their ease, the flamingoes would have been stupefied by the reports, and not had sense enough to run away.

In vain the three boys tried to get near these superb palmipeds, which measure more than four feet from beak to tail. The alarm had been given, and the flock disappeared in the south unhurt, although even the duck-gun was brought into action against them. Nevertheless the three spoilsmen returned with bags quite heavy enough to give no cause for regret that they had visited South Moor.

Gordon had no intention of waiting for the winter before French Den was prepared for it. There was a store of food to be got in, so that there should be enough for the enclosure as well as the cave. Many were the trips made to Bog Woods for this purpose. The chariot drawn by the two guanacos made several journeys daily for a fortnight. The winter might last more than the six months, and yet there would be enough wood and seal oil to give fire and light all through it.

These labours did not interfere with the scheme of instruction that had been drawn up. The bigger boys took it in turns to teach the little ones. Donagan continued to show off a little, as was natural to him, but it did not gain him any friends. In two months Gordon's term of office would be over, and he reckoned on succeeding him as chief of the colony. He persuaded himself that the position was his as a matter of right. Was it not unjust that he had not been elected at the first? Wilcox, Cross, and Webb unfortunately encouraged him in these ideas, and began to canvass for him, having no doubt of his success.

But Donagan, all the same, did not command a majority of the votes; nor did Gordon, who saw clearly all that was going on, and, although he was eligible for reelection, made no attempt to obtain a continuance of office. He felt that the severity he had had to show during his year of office would not gain him any votes. His practical good sense had not made him popular, and this unpopularity Donagan hoped to turn to good account. When the election came on there would probably be a somewhat interesting contest.

What the youngsters chiefly complained of was Gordon's economy in the matter of sweatmeats. And in addition to this, there was his scolding them for not taking proper care of their clothes when they came back to French Den with rags on their backs and holes in their shoes — which required constant repairs, and made the question of foot-gear a very serious one. And then for every lost button, what reprimands, and sometimes what punishments!

E And then Briant would intercede sometimes for Jenkins, sometimes for Dole — and in that way lay his road to popularity. Then the youngsters knew that the two cooks. Service and Moko, were devoted to Briant, and if ever he became chief of Charman Island, they saw a savoury future in which there would be a never-ending course of jam tarts and dainty bits!

What is the world coming to? In this very colony we have but a type of society in general. In what did these children differ from full-grown men?

Briant took little interest in these things. He worked away steadily, and keeping his brother fully employed, both of them the first and last at work as if they had some special duty to fulfil.

But the days were not entirely devoted to school work. There were hours of recreation set down in the programme. One of the conditions of remaining in health was that gymnastic exercises should be practised in which old and young took part. The boys climbed trees, getting up to the lower boughs by means of a rope wound round the trunk. They jumped with and without the pole. They swam in the lake, and those who could not swim were soon taught to do so. They ran races and swam races for prizes. They practised with the bolas and the lasso. They played cricket and rounders and quoits, and with regard to the last, a dispute occurred which had very serious consequences.

It was on the 25th of April, in the afternoon. Eight of the boys were playing, four on a side; Donagan, Webb, Wilcox, and Cross, against Briant, Baxter, Garnett, and Service.

On the level strip on the terrace the two “pins “had been driven into the ground about fifty feet apart, and it was, of course, the object of the players to throw their quoits on to them, or as near them as possible. The players were greatly excited, particularly as Donagan was opposed to Briant. Two games had been played. Briant’s side had won the first with seven points; Donagan’s had won the second with six. And now they were playing the conqueror, and there were only two quoits to throw.

“Now, Donagan! It is your turn,” said Webb. “Aim straight. It is our last chance.”

“Don’t get excited,” replied Donagan.

And with one foot in front of the other he stood, the right hand holding the quoit, the body bent forward, and in such a position as to give him the best chance of a good throw. His whole soul was in the game, his teeth were clenched, his cheeks were pale, his eyes glowed beneath the knitted brows. After a careful look, he threw the quoit straight and true — a long, low throw that only just missed ringing the pin, and struck it just at the side.

“It’s a pity you missed,” said Cross, “but it’s the best throw yet.”

“And the game is ours,” added Wilcox, “unless Briant manages to drop on to the pin. Look out!”

Briant took up his position, moving the quoit backwards and forwards once or twice, and aimed so well that, rising high in curve, it dropped right on to the pin.

“A ringer!” shouted Service triumphantly. “That makes us seven, and it is our game.”

“No!” said Donagan, stepping forward, “the game is not yours.”

“Why not?” asked Baxter.

“Because Briant cheated.”

“Cheated!” said Briant.

“Yes I Cheated!” said Donagan. “Briant was over the mark. He stepped in two feet.”

“That he didn’t,” said Service.

“No, I didn’t,” said Briant. “And even if I did, it was a mistake, and I will not stand Donagan calling me a cheat!’’

“Indeed I You won’t stand it!” said Donagan.

“No, I will not!” replied Briant, getting very angry.

And first I’ll prove that my feet were on the line.”

“You can’t!” said Webb and Cross.

“Well,” said Briant, “there are my footmarks on the sand I And as Donagan must have known that, I tell him he’s a liar!”

“A liar, am I?” said Donagan, stepping quietly towards him, jacket off, short-sleeves tucked up, all ready and anxious for a fight.

Briant had recovered his temper, and stood quietly watching him as if he were ashamed to be the first to fight one of his comrades, and set an evil example to the colony.

“You were wrong to insult me, Donagan,” he said, “and you are wrong now to challenge me.”

“Indeed!” said Donagan, in a tone of the profoundest contempt. “It is always wrong to challenge those who are afraid to defend themselves.”

“I! afraid!”

“Yes. You are a coward, and you know it!”

Again Briant forgot himself for a moment, and, clenching his fists, squared up to Donagan; but just then Gordon, who had been fetched by Dole, stepped into the ring.

“Briant! Donagan!” he said.

“He called me a liar,” said Donagan.

“He called me a cheat and a coward,” said Briant.

“Donagan,” said Gordon, “I know what sort of a fellow Briant is! He is not the cause of this quarrel! It was you that began it.”

“Indeed!” said Donagan. “And I know what sort of a fellow you are I Always ready to take sides against me!”

“Yes, when you deserve it!” said Gordon.

“All right,” said Donagan. “But whether I began it or Briant began it, if Briant refuses to fight, he is a coward.”

“And you, Donagan,” said Gordon, “are a mischievous, bad-tempered fellow, for ever setting a bad example to the others. Placed as we are here, is it right that one should always be trying to cause disunion amongst us? Surely we ought all to work together.”

“Briant,” said Donagan, “thank Gordon for his sermon; and now come on.” — .

“Not in the least,” said Gordon. “I am chief of the colony, and I am not going to stand this sort of thing! Briant, go into the store-room. And you, Donagan, go where you like, but don’t come back till you have sense enough to see that in blaming you I only did my duty!”

“Three cheers for Gordon,” said the boys, all except Webb, Wilcox, and Cross, “and three cheers for Briant!”

The only thing to be done was to obey. Briant went into the hall, and in the evening when Donagan returned it was evident that he was content for the time to say no more about the matter. But all the same he cherished a fierce rancour within him, and had no intention of forgetting the lesson which Gordon had given him.

But nothing further was said, and the work of preparing for the winter went on in peace. During the first Week in May the cold was keen enough for Gordon to give orders for the stoves to be lighted up in the cave, and kept going night and day; and soon afterwards it became necessary to warm the shed of the enclosure, which duty fell to Garnett and Service.

At the same time the birds began to depart in flocks. Whither did they go? Evidently to the northern countries of the Pacific, or the American continent, where the climate was milder than that of Charman Island.

Among these birds the chief were the swallows, those marvellous migrants flying such enormous distances. In his constant endeavour to avail himself of every means to leave the island, it occurred to Briant to use these birds as messengers. Nothing was easier than to catch a few dozens of these birds, for they had built inside the storeroom, and to their necks was tied a little linen bag, containing a letter announcing the wreck on Charman Island, with a request for the news to be sent on at once to Auckland. Then the swallows were released, and with much emotion the boys saw them depart. It was a very slender chance of safety, but it was a chance, and Briant was quite right in not neglecting it.

The snow came on the 25th of May, a few days earlier than the preceding year. Was the winter to be earlier and severer than before? It was to be feared so. Luckily warmth, light, and food were assured for many months. The winter clothing had been given out a few weeks before, and Gordon’s hygienic measures were rigorously enforced.

During this time French Den became the scene of an agitation which caused a good deal of excitement among the youngsters. The year for which Gordon had been elected chief of Charman Island expired on the 10th of June. And in consequence of this there began a series of conferences, consultations, and even intrigues that much agitated this little world. Gordon, as we have said, was quite indifferent to what was going on; and Briant, being of French descent, considered that his own chance was hopeless in a colony where English were in a majority. But Donagan was very anxious about the election, and with his more than ordinary cleverness, and his courage that nobody doubted, he would have had an excellent chance of election had he not been so haughty, domineering, and envious. He had made up his mind to be Gordon’s successor, although his vanity prevented him from canvassing for votes, and he pretended to be quite unconcerned in the matter. But what he did not do openly, his friends did for him in secret, and Wilcox, Webb, and Cross were untiring in their efforts at persuading the little ones.

The 10th of June arrived.

In the afternoon the election took place. Each boy had to write on a slip of paper the name of the candidate for whom he intended to vote. The majority of votes would decide the election. As the constituency comprised only fourteen members — for Moko as a negro did not vote — eight votes would carry the election.

At two o'clock Gordon opened the poll, and the voting was conducted with great gravity as beseemed such a serious ceremony. When the votes were counted, the following was the result: —

Briant......8

Donagan...3

Gordon.....1

Neither Gordon nor Donagan had voted, and Briant had voted for Gordon.

When the poll was declared, Donagan could not restrain his deep irritation and disgust.

Briant was surprised at receiving the majority of votes, and was on the point of declining to serve, but his eyes happened to rest on Jack, and an idea occurred to him, so that he said —

“I thank you, my friends, and I accept the position you have offered me.”

And at sunset Briant began his year of office as chief of Charman Island.

CHAPTER IV

A SKATING ADVENTURE

BRIANT’S election was chiefly owing to his constant endeavours to be of use, and the never-failing courage of which he had given so many proofs. From the day when he had, so to speak, taken the command of the schooner during her voyage from New Zealand he had never recoiled from danger or trouble. Although he was of a different nationality, all liked him, both great and little, and especially the latter, who had voted for him unanimously. Donagan, Cross, Wilcox, and Webb were alone in refusing to recognize Briant’s good qualities, but, at heart, they were well aware that they were unjust to the most deserving of their companions.

Gordon was not sparing of his congratulations to Briant, although he foresaw that the choice would widen the division that already existed, and he feared that Donagan and his companions would take some step that would leave cause for regret. But he was of too just a disposition not to approve of the choice that had been made, and he was very glad to have no more to do than to keep the accounts of French Den.

It was obvious, however, that Donagan and his three friends had resolved not to put up with the existing state of things, although Briant had no intention of giving them an excuse for violence.

Jack was quite surprised when his brother accepted his election.

“Do you want it, then?” asked he.

“Yes,” said Briant in a low voice. “Yes, so that we can do more than we have done to atone for the mistake you made.”

“Thanks,” said Jack, “and do not spare me.”

Next day there recommenced the dreary course of this existence which the long winter days were to make so monotonous.

And before the cold forbade an excursion to the bay, Briant did a very useful thing. The flagstaff, as we know, had been erected on one of the highest crests of Auckland Hill. Of the flag that had been hoisted on it only a few strips now remained, the rest having been torn and carried away by the wind. To replace it Baxter, at Briant’s suggestion, made a sort of balloon — a basket made of the plaint rushes that grew in the marsh; this was strong enough to resist any wind, for, being open, the wind would pass through it. And on the 17th of June an expedition was made to the bay, and the tattered ensign was hauled down and replaced by this ball-signal, which could be seen for many miles round.

The time was soon coming when Briant and his comrades would be imprisoned in French Den. The thermometer slowly fell, the fall being continuous, and indicating a long spell of extreme cold.

Briant brought the yawl ashore and beached her in an angle of the cliff, covering her with a thick tarpaulin, so that she should not dry and fall to pieces. Then Baxter and Wilcox stretched their nets near the enclosure, and dug new pits in Trap Woods; and nets were also fixed along the left bank of Zealand River, so as to catch in their meshes whatever sea-birds the breezes blew against them. Meanwhile, Donagan and two or three of his companions, mounted on their stilts, made excursions to South Moor, and never returned with empty bags, although Briant was as economical with his ammunition as Gordon had been.

During the first week of July the river began to freeze. A few icebergs, formed in Family Lake, floated down with the current. In a short time they became heaped together a little below French Den, and formed an ice-pack above which the smooth water soon bore a thick coat of ice. The cold continued, and the surface of the lake was frozen, and after a short spell of squalls which checked the freezing somewhat, the wind shifted round to the southwest, the sky cleared, and the temperature sunk below zero.

The last year's programme of work was adopted. Briant kept his position without any abuse of authority. The boys obeyed him cheerfully, and Gordon helped much by setting an example of obedience. Donagan and his partisans showed no signs of actual insubordination. They occupied themselves in their daily task of looking to their traps and nets and snares, and kept much to themselves, talking together in a low voice, and rarely joining in the general conversation. Were they engaged in some plot? That would be seen in time. But no complaint could at present be made of them, and Briant had no cause to interfere. He continued to treat them with justice, and took the more difficult and unpleasant tasks on himself and his brother, who now rivalled him in zeal. Gordon soon noticed the change that was taking place in Jack's character, and Moko saw with pleasure that, since his explanation with his brother, the little fellow took part more frequently in the games of his comrades.

The long hours that the cold obliged them to spend in the cave were occupied in study. Jenkins, Iverson, Dole, and Costar got on wonderfully. In teaching them the bigger boys could not help teaching themselves. During the long evenings, readings were made from books of travel, which Service, for one, did not find quite as entertaining as "Robinson Crusoe." Frequently Garnett's accordion would give forth its exasperating harmonies, as the unhappy melomaniac worked its bellows to the verge of ruin. And the boys would sing songs, and always manage to have a chorus. And then, the concert ended. all would go to bed.

Briant was still full of his thoughts of return to New Zealand, therein differing from Gordon, who only concerned himself with completing the organization of the colony on Charman Island. Briant’s term of office was to be marked by the attempts which were to be made to leave the island. Often did he think of the whitish patch he had seen in the offing of Deception Bay. Could it belong to some land near the island? If so, would it be possible to build a boat and reach that land? But when Briant spoke of this to Baxter, Baxter only shook his head, for he saw such an undertaking to be out of their power.

“Ah! “Briant would say. “Why are we only children, why are we not men?”

And that was his greatest sorrow.

During the winter nights there were several alarms at French Den. Fan would break out at times into loud barking, as the packs of wild beasts — chiefly jackals — would come prowling round the enclosure. And then Donagan and the others would run out and throw firebrands into the midst of the pack, and away would go the jackals in flight. Two or three times a few couples of jaguars and cougars put in an appearance, to be shot at and driven off. And, in short, the enclosure was only kept safe by constant watchfulness.

On the 24th of July, Moko had an opportunity of displaying his culinary talent on a new victim. Wilcox and Baxter, who was always glad to help him, were not content with devising snares and traps for birds and beasts of small size. By bending down the saplings in Trap Woods and fitting them with running nooses, they had prepared for the capture of animals of much larger growth. Usually such things are placed in the forest in the track of the deer, but it was not a deer that was caught on this occasion. It was a magnificent flamingo that had got its head into the noose, and strove in vain to slip out of it. When Wilcox visited the place in the morning he found the bird already strangled, and dangling from the tree, which, released by the trigger, had sprung up and drawn the knot tight round the prisoner’s throat. The flamingo, stuffed with aromatic herbs, and done to a turn, was pronounced excellent. On the wings and thighs there was enough meat for all, and for every one there was a little bit of the tongue, than which no greater dainty is found beneath the skies.

In the first fortnight of August there were four days of extreme cold. Briant saw with apprehension the thermometer drop to register thirty-four degrees of frost. The clearness of the air was wonderful, and, as always happens with these periods of low temperature, there was not a breath of wind. While this lasted no one could go out of French Den without being instantly chilled to the marrow, and the youngsters were forbidden to leave the cave. The elder boys only went out when obliged to keep up the fires in the stable and yard.

But this cold did not last long. On the 6th of August the wind went back to the west, and a stormy week followed, during which the temperature slowly rose to within seven degrees below freezing. The last fortnight of August was fairly pleasant. Briant resumed his work out of doors, though there could be no fishing, owing to a thick sheet of ice covering the waters of the stream and lake. Many visits were paid to the nets along the river- bank, where much game from the opposite marshes was caught, and kept the larder well supplied. And the enclosure had an increase in its tenants; there were broods of young ostriches and guinea-fowl, and the vicugna produced a litter of five, of which Service and Garnett took every care.

As the state of the ice was favourable, Briant resolved to have a skating party, and, with wooden soles and iron blades, Baxter contrived to make several pairs of skates that answered every purpose. At eleven o’clock on the 25th of August, Briant, Gordon, Donagan, Webb, Cross, Wilcox, Baxter, Garnett, Service, Jenkins, and Jack, leaving Iverson, Dole, and Costar in charge of Moko and Fan, set out from French Den in search of a wide stretch of ice suitable for skating purposes, all having breakfasted before starting, and intending to return to the cave before dinner.

They had to follow the bank for nearly three miles before they found a place that answered their requirements, the lake near French Den being encumbered with the hummocks piled up at the mouth of the river; but when opposite Trap Woods they reached a magnificent field of ice stretching right away out of sight to the eastward, and affording a superb arena for quite a skating army.

Donagan and Cross had, of course, taken their guns with them, so as to be ready for any shooting that might turn up. Briant and Gordon, who did not care for skating over-much, had come to keep the youngsters out of danger; and Briant had brought with him a horn that might come in useful to call them home.

The best skaters in the colony were Donagan, Cross, and Jack, particularly the last, who was as remarkable for the speed with which he moved as he was for the precision with which he traced the most complicated curves.

Before giving the signal to be off, Briant had called his comrades together, and made them a speech —

“I hope you will all be cautious and not be tempted into rashness by any desire to show oil. If there is little fear of the ice breaking up, there is always a risk of your breaking an arm or a leg. So be careful. Do not go out of sight. If any of you get far away, remember that Gordon and I will wait for you here. And when I give the signal, mind you all come back."

And then the skaters went on the ice, and Briant was delighted to see how well they got along. The few falls that took place produced only shouts of laughter. The best performance was Jack's. Forward and backward he flew, sometimes on one foot, sometimes on two, sometimes upright, sometimes stooping, describing circles and curves with marvellous regularity; and great was Briant's satisfaction to see his brother take part in his comrades' games.

Probably Donagan felt annoyed at the applause with which Jack was greeted, as in spite of Briant's warnings he drew farther and farther away from the rest, and made signs for Cross to follow him.

"There's a lot of wild duck over there," he said, "in the east; do you see them?"

"Yes."

"You have got your gun! I have mine! Come on!"

"But Briant says no."

"Never mind what Briant says. Come on, and be as quick as you can."

And in a minute or two Donagan and Cross were half a mile away in pursuit of the flock of ducks that were flying across the lake.

"Where are they off to?" asked Briant.

“They have seen some birds over there,” answered Gordon, “and the instinct of the sportsman — ”

“Or rather the instinct of disobedience,” interrupted Briant. “It is Donagan again — ”

“Do you think anything will happen to them?”

“Who can tell?” said Briant. “It is always dangerous to get away from the rest like that. Look how far they have gone already!”

And in their rapid rush Donagan and Cross were now merely two points on the horizon of the lake.

Even if they had time to return, for the day would last a few hours longer, it was unwise to go away so far. At this time of the year a sudden change of weather was always to be feared. A shift in the wind might at any moment mean a gale or a fog. And about two o’clock Briant saw with dismay that the horizon had disappeared in a thick bank of mist. Cross and Donagan had not reappeared, and the mist, growing thicker each moment, came up over the ice and hid the western shore.

“That is what I feared,” said Briant. “And now how will they know their way back?”

“Blow the horn! Give them a blast on the horn,” said Gordon.

Three times the horn sounded, and the brazen note rang out over the ice. Perhaps it would be replied to by a report from the guns — the only means Donagan and Cross had of making their position known.

Briant and Gordon listened. No report reached their ears.

The fog had now increased, and was within a quarter of a mile of where they stood. The lake would soon be entirely hidden by it.

Briant called to those within sight, and a few minutes afterwards they were all safe on the bank.

“What is to be done?” asked Gordon.

“Try all we can to find Cross and Donagan before they are lost in the fog. Let one of us be off in the direction they have gone and try to signal them back with the horn.”

“I’ll go,” said Baxter.

“And so will we,” said two or three others.

“No! I will go!” said Briant.

“Let me go,” said Jack. “I can soon get up to Donagan on my skates.”

“That will do,” said Briant. “Be off, Jack, and listen for the report of the guns. Take the horn, and that will tell them where you are.”

A moment afterwards Jack was invisible in the fog, which had become denser than ever, Briant, Gordon, and the others listened attentively to the notes of the horn, which soon died away in the distance.

Half an hour elapsed. There was no news of the absent, neither of Donagan and Cross, unable to find their bearings on the lake, nor of Jack who had gone to help them.

What would become of all of them if night fell before they returned?

“If we had fire-arms,” said Service, “we might — ”

“Fire-arms!” exclaimed Briant, “there are some at French Den! Let us fetch them! Don’t lose a moment!”

It was the best thing to do, for above all things it was important to let Jack and Donagan and Cross know the way back.

In about half an hour Briant and the others were at the cave. There was no thought now of economizing powder. Wilcox and Baxter loaded two muskets and fired them towards the east. There was no reply, nor the sound of gun or horn.

It was, now half-past three o’clock. The fog grew thicker as the sun sank behind Auckland Hill. The surface of the lake was invisible.

“Fire a cannon,” said Briant.

One of the little pieces from the schooner that pointed through the embrasure by the door of the hall was dragged out on to the terrace and pointed towards the north-east. It was loaded with a signal cartridge, and Baxter was about to fire it when Moko suggested that a wad of grass stuffed in above the cartridge would make the report louder. The gun was fired, and in such a calm atmosphere the report could have been heard several miles away. But there was no reply.

For an hour the cannon was fired every ten minutes. That Donagan, Cross, and Jack could misunderstand the meaning of this firing was impossible. The discharges could be heard over the whole surface of the lake, for in fog sound travels farther than in fine weather, and the denser the fog the better it travels.

At length, a little before five o'clock, two or three distant reports of a gun were heard in the north-east.

"There they are!" said Service.

And immediately Baxter fired in reply.

A few minutes afterwards two forms were seen through the mist that still lay thick on the lake, and Donagan and Cross came into view.

Jack was not with them.

Briant's anxiety may be guessed. His brother had not been able to find the two runaways, who had heard nothing of the horn. Cross and Donagan had, in fact, been coming back from the centre of the lake when Jack started eastwards, and without the firing from French Den they would have been unable to find their way.

Briant, thinking only of his brother thus lost in the fog, said not a word of reproach to Donagan, whose disobedience had caused such serious risk. If Jack had to pass the night on the lake in a temperature of thirteen below freezing, how could he survive?

"I ought to have gone in his place," said Briant, when Gordon and Baxter in vain tried to give him a little hope.

A few more cannon-shots were fired. Evidently if Jack were near French Den he would have heard them, and replied with a blast on his horn. But not a sound came in answer. And night was closing in and darkness would soon settle down on the island.

One good thing happened. The fog showed a tendency to disappear. The breeze rising as the sun set, began to blow the mist back, and now the only difficulty in getting back to French Den lay in the darkness of the night.

There was now only one thing to do — to light a large fire on the bank as a signal; and Wilcox, Baxter, and Service had begun to heap up the dry wood on the terrace when Gordon stopped them.

“Wait!” he said.

With the glass at his eyes, he was looking attentively towards the north-east.

“I think I see something,” he said, “something that moves.”

Briant had seized the glass and was looking through it.

“Heaven be praised,” he said, “it is Jack! I see him I”

And they all shouted their loudest as if they could make themselves heard at what must have been at least a mile away.

But the distance was lessening visibly. Jack with the skates on his feet came gliding on with the speed of an arrow towards French Den. In a few minutes he would be home.

“I do not think he is alone!” said Baxter, with a gesture of surprise.

The boys looked, and two other moving things could be seen behind Jack a few hundred yards away from him.

“What is that?” asked Gordon.

“Men?” asked Baxter.

“No! beasts!” said Wilcox.

“Wild beasts probably,” said Donagan.

He was not mistaken, and without a moment’s hesitation he rushed on to the lake towards Jack. In a minute he had reached the boy, and fired at the two pursuers, who turned tail and fled.

They were two bears, quite an unexpected addition to the Charmanian fauna! If they had been prowling about the island all this time how was it no trace of them had been seen? Could it be that they only inhabited the island in the winter, and that they had drifted to it on the floating ice? Did not that seem to show that a continent was not far from Charman Island? Here was food for reflection.

But Jack was saved, and his brother clasped him in his arms, and great was the general rejoicing at his return. He had blown his horn again and again without attracting the attention of his comrades, who like him were unable to fix their position in the fog until the cannon-shots were heard.

“That must be the cannon at French Den,” said he, when he heard the sound.

He was then several miles away on the north-east side of the lake, and at once he set off full speed towards the point from which the report proceeded. Suddenly as the fog began to clear he saw the two bears rushing in pursuit of him. He did not, however, lose his presence of mind, and his progress was swift enough to keep the animals at a distance; but if he had fallen he would have been lost.

While he and his brother were going back to the cave he took him aside, and said in a low voice —

“Thank you much for giving me a chance.”

Briant clasped his hand and said nothing.

As Donagan was entering the door, Briant said to him —

“I told you not to go far away, and you see how your disobedience might have caused a great disaster. But although you are much to blame, Donagan, I cannot do less than thank you for having gone to Jack’s help.”

“I only did my duty,” said Donagan coldly.

And he passed on without noticing the hand his comrade held out to him.

CHAPTER V

THE SEPARATION

Six weeks after these events, about five o’clock in the evening, four of the young colonists came to a halt at the southern extremity of Family Lake.

It was the 10th of October. The influence of the warm season was making itself felt. Beneath the trees, clothed in their fresh verdure, the ground had resumed the garb of spring. A pleasant breeze rippled the surface of the water, now lighted by the last rays of the sun which lingered on the vast plain of South Moor. A narrow beach of sand formed the border of the moor. Flocks of birds with much noise flew overhead on their way to rest for the night in the shadow of the woods or the crevices of the cliff. A few groups of evergreen trees, pines, green oaks, and a few acres of firs alone broke the monotonous barrenness of this part of Charman Island.

A fire was burning at the foot of a pine tree, and its fragrant smoke was drifting over the marsh. A couple of ducks were cooking over the fire. Supper over, the four boys had nothing to do but to wrap themselves up in their rugs, and, while one watched, three of them could sleep.

They were Donagan, Cross, Webb, and Wilcox. And the circumstances under which they had separated from their companions were these.

During the later months of the second winter, the relations between Donagan and Briant had become more strained than ever. It will not have been forgotten with what envy Donagan had seen the election of his rival.

More jealous and irritable than ever, it was with the greatest difficulty he submitted to the orders of the new chief of Charman Island. That he did not resist openly was because the majority would not support him; but on many occasions he had showed such ill-will that Briant had found it his duty to remonstrate with him. Since the skating party, when his disobedience had been so flagrant, his insubordination had gone on increasing, and the time had come when Briant would be obliged to punish him.

Gordon was very uneasy at this state of things, and had made Briant promise that he would restrain himself. But the latter felt that his patience was at an end, and that for the common interest in the preservation of order an example had become necessary. In vain Gordon had tried to bring back Donagan to a sense of his position. If he had had any influence over him in the past, he now found it had entirely disappeared. Donagan would not forgive him for having so often sided with his rival, and his efforts at reconciliation being in vain, he saw with regret the complications that were coming.

From this state of things it resulted that the harmony so indispensable to the peace of French Den was destroyed. A certain restraint was obvious which made the life in common very uncomfortable. Except at meal-times Donagan and his three partisans lived apart. When bad weather kept them indoors they would gather together in a corner of the hall, and there hold whispered conversations.

“Most certainly,” said Briant to Gordon one day, “those three are plotting something.”

“Not against you, Briant,” said Gordon. “Donagan dare not try to take your place. We are all on your side, and he knows it.”

“Perhaps they are thinking of separating from us?”

“That is more likely, and I do not see that we have the right to prevent them.”

“But to go and set up — ”

“They may not be going to do so.”

“But they sire! I saw Wilcox making a copy of Baudoin’s map, and — ”

“Did Wilcox do that?”

“Yes; and really I think it would be better for me to put an end to all this by resigning in your favour, or perhaps in Donagan’s. That would cut short all this rivalry.”

“No, Briant,” said Gordon decidedly, “you would fail in your duty towards those who have elected you.”

Amid these discussions the winter came to an end. With the first days of October the cold definitely disappeared, and the surface of the lake and river became free from ice. And on the evening of the 9th of the month Donagan announced the resolve of himself and Webb, Cross, and Wilcox to leave French Den.

“You wish to abandon us?” said Gordon.

“To abandon you? No, Gordon!” said Donagan. Only Cross, Wilcox, Webb, and I have agreed to move to another part of the island.”

“And for what reason?” asked Baxter.

“Simply because we want to live as we please, and I tell you frankly because it does not suit us to take orders from Briant.”

"What have you to complain of about me?" said Briant.

"Nothing — except your being at our head," said Donagan. "We had a Yankee as chief of the colony — now it is a French fellow who is in command! Next time I suppose we shall have a nigger fellow, Moko for instance — "

"Do you mean that?" asked Gordon.

"I do," said Donagan, "and neither I nor my friends care to serve under any but one of our own race."

"Very well," said Briant, "Wilcox, Webb, Cross, and you, Donagan, are quite at liberty to go, and take away your share of the things."

"We never supposed otherwise, Briant; and to-morrow we will clear out of French Den."

"And may you never have cause to repent of your determination," said Gordon, who saw that insistence would be in vain.

Donagan's plan was as follows. When Briant had told the story of his expedition across the lake he had stated that the little colony could take up their quarters on the eastern side of the island under very favourable conditions. Among the rocks on the shore were many caves, the river yielded fresh water in abundance. The forest extended to the beach, there was game furred and feathered in abundance, and life would be as easy there as at French Den, and much easier than at Schooner Bay. Besides, the distance between French Den and the coast was only a dozen miles, of which six were across the lake and six down the East River, so that in case of necessity communication was not difficult.

But it was not by water that Donagan proposed to reach Deception Bay. His plan was to coast along Family Lake to its southern point, and then follow the bank to East River, exploring a country up to then unknown. This was a longish journey — fifteen or sixteen miles — but he and his friends would treat the trip as a sporting expedition and get some shooting as they went. Donagan had thus no need of the yawl, and contented himself with the Halkett boat, which would suffice for the passage of East River and any other streams he might meet with.

As this expedition was merely preliminary, and had for its object the exploration of Deception Bay, with a view of selecting a permanent dwelling, Donagan took no more baggage with him than he could help. Two guns, four revolvers, two axes, sufficient ammunition, a few fishing- lines, some travelling-rugs, one of the pocket compasses, the India rubber boat, and a few preserves formed the outfit.

The expedition was expected to last about a week, and when they had selected their future home, Donagan and his friends would return to French Den and take away on the chariot their share of the articles saved from the wreck of the schooner. If Gordon or any of the rest came to visit them, they would be glad to see them, but to continue to live at French Den under the present state of things they had no intention of doing, and nothing could shake their determination to set up a little colony of their own.

At sunrise the four separatists took leave of their comrades, who were very sorry to see them go, and, maybe, Donagan and his friends were not unmoved.

They were taken across Zealand River in the yawl by Moko, and then leisurely walked off along the shore of Family Lake by the edge of the wide-stretching South Moor.

A few birds were killed as they went along by the side of the marsh, but Donagan, knowing he must be careful of his ammunition, contented himself with only shooting enough for the day’s rations. That day the boys accomplished between five and six miles, and about five o’clock in the evening, arriving at the end of the lake, they camped for the night.

The night was cold, but the fire kept them comfortable, and all four were awake at the dawn. The southern extremity of Family Lake was an acute angle formed by two high banks, the right one of which ran due north. On the east the country was still marshy, but the ground was a few feet above the level of the lake, so that it was not flooded. Here and there a few knolls dotted with undersized trees broke the monotony of the green expanse. As the country consisted chiefly of sandhills Donagan gave it the name of Dune Lands; and not wishing to plunge too far into the unknown, he decided to keep to the lake shore, and leave further exploration for a future time.

“If,” said he, “the map is right, we shall find East River about seven miles from here, and we can easily do that before night.”

“Why not strike off to the north-east, so as to get to the mouth of the river direct?” asked Wilcox.

“That would save us a third of the way,” said Webb.

“So it would,” said Donagan, “but why should we venture across this marshy country, which we do not know, and run the risk of having to come back here? If we keep along the shore of the lake, there is much less chance of our meeting with an obstacle.”

“And then,” added Cross, “it is important that we should explore the course of East River.”

“Evidently,” said Donagan, “for the stream gives us direct communication between the coast and Family Lake. Besides, as we go down it, we can explore the forest on either side.”

This point being decided, they set off at a good pace. There was a narrow path some three or four feet above the level of the lake, and along it ran the line of sandhills. As the sun rose, it became evident that in a few miles the scenery would change. And, in fact, about eleven o’clock they stopped for lunch by a little creek under the shade of some huge beech trees, whence, as far as the eye could reach towards the east, rose a confused mass of verdure to mark the horizon.

An agouti, shot by Wilcox during the morning, served for the meal, and was fairly well cooked by Cross, who was the Moko of the expedition. The meal over, Donagan and his friends were afoot again. The forest, which bordered the lake, consisted of similar trees to those in Trap Woods, but the evergreen varieties were in greater number. There were many more pines, spruces, and green oaks than birches or beeches, and all were of superb dimensions. To his great satisfaction, Donagan found that the fauna was quite as varied as that of the rest of the island. Guanacos and vicugnas were frequently seen, and a flock of nandus was observed satisfying their thirst. Hares, maras, tucutucos, peccaries, and feathered game abounded in the thickets.

About six o’clock a halt was made. The bank was cut through by a stream which ran out of the lake. This ought to have been, and was, East River. It was easily recognized, as Donagan found the traces of the fire on the spot where Briant had encamped during his expedition with Jack and Moko. To camp in the same place, light a fire on the ashes, and sleep under the same trees appeared the best thing to do, and that is what was done.

Eight months before, when Briant had stopped at the same place, he little thought that four of his companions would come here in their turn, with the intention of living by themselves in this part of Charman Island. And perhaps Cross, Wilcox, and Webb, when they found themselves far from their comfortable beds in French Den, felt more regret at being there. But their fate was now bound up with Donagan's, and Donagan was too vain to acknowledge his mistakes, too obstinate to abandon his plans, and too jealous to give in to a rival.

Next morning Donagan proposed to cross the river at once.

"Having done that," said he, "we can spend the day in getting down to the sea, which is under six miles from here."

"Yes," said Cross. "And it was on the left bank that Moko found the pine cones, and we can gather our food as we go."

The India rubber boat was then unpacked, and as soon as it was in the water Donagan worked it across to the opposite bank, towing a line behind as he did so. With a few strokes of the paddle he was soon across the forty feet of the river's width. Then, by pulling at the line, Wilcox, Webb, and Cross got the boat back while Donagan let out a line from his side, and so in four trips all were on the left bank of the river: That done, Wilcox folded up the boat as if it were a travelling-bag, and put it on his back. It would, of course, have been less fatiguing to have floated down East River in the yawl, as Briant, Jack, and Moko had done, but the India rubber boat could only take one passenger at a time, and the river voyage was not to be thought of.

It was not easy travelling. The forest was so dense, the ground bristled with thick patches of underwood, and was strewn with branches broken off in the recent storms, and many were the swamps and quagmires round which the travellers had to go. Donagan found no traces of Baudoin’s passage through the forest, such as existed in Trap Woods, but there could be no doubt he had been there, for the map indicated exactly the course of the river right down to the bay.

At noon a halt was made for luncheon, under the pine trees, where Cross gathered a quantity of the fruit, on which they regaled themselves. Then, for the next two miles, the boys had to make their way through clumps of underwood, where, occasionally, they had to cut a path with their axes, so as not to stray too far from the river. On account of the delay this caused, it was not till seven o’clock that they got out of the forest. Night was coming on, and Donagan could make out nothing of the coastline. All he could see was the long line of foam as he listened to the murmur of the sea rolling on to the beach.

It was decided to camp where they were, in the open. A few grouse were cooked for supper, and the fire that had been lighted was kept in during the night. It was Donagan’s turn to watch. Wilcox, Cross, and Webb stretched themselves under the branches of a large parasol pine and, tired out by the long day’s work, were immediately asleep.

Donagan had great difficulty in keeping awake. He succeeded, however; but when the time came for him to be relieved by one of his companions they were all so sound asleep that he could not make up his mind to wake any of them. The forest was so quiet that they were as safe as if they were at French Den. And so, having thrown a few handfuls of wood on the fire, Donagan lay down at the foot of the tree, and closed his eyes, to open them when the sun was up, lighting a wide horizon of sea.

CHAPTER VI

THE BOAT ON THE BEACH

THE first thing Donagan did was to go down to the mouth of the river. There he and his friends looked out over the sea they viewed for the first time. It was as deserted as that on the other shore.

“But,” said Donagan, “if, as we have reason to believe, Charman Island is not far from the American continent, the ships which come through the Straits of Magellan bound for the ports of Chili and Peru ought to pass us to the eastward. And that is another reason why we should take up our quarters at Deception Bay; and although Briant has so called it, I hope it will not justify its name.”

in making this remark Donagan was probably seeking an excuse, or at least a pretext, for a rupture with his comrades at French Den, but, at the same time, it was reasonable to suppose that ships bound to South American ports would appear on the eastern rather than the western side At the the river mouth, as Briant had stated, there was a the port well sheltered from the wind and sea. If the schooner had been driven on this coast, it would not have been impossible to save her, and keep her for the voyage home.

In the rear of the rocks forming the little harbour were the outermost trees of the forest, which extended not only to Family Lake, but northwards to where they shut in the horizon. Briant had not exaggerated regarding the granite masses on the shore. There were plenty to choose from. But Donagan thought it advisable not to go far away from the river, and soon hit upon a place carpeted with fine sand, in which the party could be as comfortable as at French Den. The cavern would have sufficed for the whole colony, for it comprised a series of adjoining caves, which would form distinct rooms, instead of offering only the hall and store-room.

The day was spent in exploring the coast for a couple of miles. Donagan and Cross shot a few tinamous, while Wilcox and Webb went fishing in East River, and caught half-a-dozen of the same species as in Zealand River, among them being two good-sized perch. There were millions of shell-fish in the innumerable ridges and hollows of the reefs that served as a breakwater to the harbour on the north-east; and fish there were in abundance among the seaweeds close by, so that there was no need of going four or five miles off in search of them.

It will be remembered that Briant had made the ascent of an enormous rock, which somewhat resembled a bear in shape. Donagan was also struck with the resemblance, and gave the name of Bear Rock Harbour to the sheltered inlet at its foot.

During the afternoon Donagan and Wilcox climbed Bear Rock, so as to have a good view over the bay. But neither ship nor land appeared eastward of the island. The whitish patch which had attracted Briant’s attention in the north-east they did not see; either the sun was too low on the opposite horizon, or Briant had been the dupe of an optical illusion.

In the evening Donagan and his companions had their supper under a group of superb nettle trees, whose lower branches overshadowed the stream, and discussed the advisability of at once returning to French Den, to bring the things necessary for taking up their quarters at Bear Rock Cave.

“I think,” said Webb, “that we ought not to delay, for the journey round the lake will take several days.”

“But,” said Wilcox, “when we come back, would it not be better to have the boat down East River, as Briant did?”

“That would save time,” said Webb, “and also save us a good deal of work.”

“What do you think, Donagan?” asked Cross.

“You are right, Wilcox,” he replied. “By having the yawl, which Moko could manage — ”

“But would Moko agree to that? “said Webb dubiously.

“Why should he not?” asked Donagan. “Have I not as much right to order him about as Briant? Besides, all he has to do is to pilot us across the lake.”

“He would have to obey,” said Cross. “If we are obliged to bring all our things round by land, there will be no end of work. And I don’t think the chariot could get through the forest. We must have the yawl.”

“But if they refuse to give it to us?” insisted Webb.

“Refuse!” exclaimed Donagan. “And who will refuse?”

“Briant. Is he not the chief of the colony?”

“Briant refuse!” said Donagan. “Does the boat belong to him more than to us? If Briant dares to refuse — ”

Donagan did not finish the sentence. But it was evident that in this and every other matter Donagan would not submit to take orders from his rival.

But. as Wilcox observed, there was no need to discuss the matter. In his opinion Briant would give his comrades every assistance in their removal to Bear Rock, and there was no need to get excited over the matter. The only question they need trouble themselves about was, should they go back at once to French Den?

“It seems to be absolutely necessary,” said Cross.

“Then we start to-morrow?” asked Webb.

“No,” said Donagan. “Before we start I should like to get round the end of the bay, so as to see the north part of the island. We could reach the north coast and be back again here in two days. Who can tell if there is not in that direction some land that Baudoin did not see, and so did not show on his map? It would not be reasonable to settle down here without finding this out.”

Next morning, October the 14th, Donagan and his mends were off at daybreak along the shore to the northward. For three miles or more the masses of rock lay strewn between the forest and the sea, leaving at their a sandy strip about a hundred feet wide. It was noon when the last rock was reached, and a halt made for lunch.

Close by a stream ran into the bay, but as it flowed from north-east to north-west, it appeared not to come from the lake. The waters it brought down from the northern part of the island flowed into the sea through a narrow gully, and Donagan named it North Creek, for it was not worth calling a river.

A few strokes of the paddle sent the India rubber boat across it, and then the bays continued their way along its bank. It was about three o’clock. In following the creek Donagan had been thrown back towards the northwest more than he cared for, and was about to strike off to the north, when Cross suddenly shouted —

“Look, Donagan, look!”

And with his hand he pointed to a large reddish mass that was moving under the trees between the long grass and reeds of the creek.

Donagan made a sign to Webb and Wilcox not to stir; and, accompanied by Cross, with his gun ready for action, he glided off silently in pursuit of the moving mass.

It was a large animal, which would have looked like a rhinoceros, if it had had a horn, and if its lower hp had been longer.

There was the report of a gun, followed immediately by another. Donagan and Cross had fired. Evidently at the distance, about fifty yards, the bullets had produced no effect on the thick skin of the animal, which rushed from the reeds and disappeared in the forest.

Donagan recognized it. It was an amphibian, and perfectly inoffensive, a brown-coated “anta,” otherwise one of those huge tapirs frequently met with in the neighbourhood of South American rivers. As nothing could be done with such an animal, its escape was not regretted, although the sportsmen were not particularly pleased.

In this part of the island the forest was very thick, and as the beech trees were in thousands, Donagan gave it the name of Beech Forest, which took its place on the map alongside those of Bear Rock and North Creek already given.

When evening came, nine miles had been covered. In as many more the travellers would reach the north point of the island, and that would be the work for the morrow.

As soon as the sun rose, the boys were off. There were many reasons for not wasting time. The weather gave signs of changing. The wind, which blew from the west, began to freshen. Heavy clouds were racing along in the offing, but they were high up in the sky, and it was hoped they would not bring rain. Facing the wind, even if it blew a storm, would not frighten the explorers, but a heavy squall, with its usual accompaniment of a deluge of rain, would have put an end to the expedition, and forced them to return to the shelter of Bear Rock.

They pressed on then, although the wind took them in flank. The day was a very disagreeable one, and evidently a bad night was to follow. A storm was coming on, and at five o’clock the roll of the thunder was heard amid the lightning flashes.

Donagan and his comrades did not retreat. The idea that they were near their object encouraged them. Beech Forest still lay to the left, and at any moment they could take refuge under its trees. Besides, the wind was so violent that there was no fear of rain.

About eight o’clock the hoarse murmur of the surf was heard. Evidently there was a bank of reefs off the shore of the island.

But the sky, already veiled with thick vapours, grew darker. So long as the last rays of light did not fail, it was best to push on. Beyond the edge of the trees was a beach a quarter of a mile wide, and on this the waves were rolling white with foam, after being churned among the breakers to the north.

The boys, although very tired, were still able to keep on. They wished to have at least a glimpse of this part of the Pacific while there was daylight. Was it a boundless sea, or only a narrow channel separating the island from a continent or another island?

Suddenly Wilcox, who was a little in advance, came to a halt, and pointed to a dark mass on the edge of the shore. Was it a marine animal, some huge cetacean such as a whale, wrecked on the sound? Was it not rather a boat, which had been thrown ashore after drifting through the breakers?

It was a boat” thrown on its starboard side. And beyond, near the line of seaweed rolled up by the tide, Wilcox pointed out two bodies on the beach.

Uonagan, Webb, and Cross had at first stopped; but without thinking what they were doing, they ran up to A bodies on the sand — corpses, perhaps!

And then, seized with terror, and without thinking that a spark of life might linger, and that their immediate help might be necessary, they fled for refuge under the trees. The night was growing dark, although lighted every now and then by the lightning flashes; and in the darkness the growling of the tempest grew louder, as did the roar of the raging sea. The trees were being broken on all sides, not without danger to those sheltering beneath them; but to camp on the beach was impossible, for the sand, driven by the wind, swept through the air as in volleys of grape. Throughout the night the boys remained in this place without “being able to close their eyes for an instant. The cold tortured them cruelly; they were not able to light a fire, for it would have been blown about and scattered, with the risk of burning the dead branches on the ground.

And it may have been that fear kept them awake. Whence came this boat? To what nation did these men belong? Was there any land near by from which a boat could come? Was there a ship that had foundered in the storm? All these hypotheses were admissible, and during the few lulls in the storm Donagan and Wilcox discussed them in a low voice.

At the same time they became a prey to hallucinations. They imagined they heard distant cries when the wind fell a little, and, listening, they asked if other shipwrecked men were wandering on the beach? No, they were the dupes of an illusion. No despairing appeal rose amid the storm. Then they thought they had been wrong to yield to the first moment of terror, and they would have rushed out towards the breakers, at the risk of being blown down by the storm. And in this dark night, on an open beach swept by the spray of the rising tide, how were they to find the boat or the place where the bodies lay on the sand?

But strength of mind and strength of body failed them now. Long as they had been left to themselves, long as they had begun to think themselves men, they found they had become children again in the presence of the first human beings they had met with, and which the sea had cast up as corpses. Then their composure returned to them, and they saw what their duty required them to do. In the morning, as soon as day appeared, they would go out to the edge of the beach, and bury the two shipwrecked men.

But the night seemed interminable. It seemed as though the dawn would never come to dissipate these horrors. If they could only take some note of the time by consulting their watch. But it was impossible to light a match, even under the wraps. Cross tried to do so, but had to give it up.

Then Wilcox hit upon another plan for finding out the time. It took twelve turns of the key to wind his watch up every twenty-four hours. As he had wound it up at eight o’clock in the evening, he had only to count the number of turns to ascertain the hours that had elapsed. This is what he did, and having only four turns to make, he concluded that eight hours had gone by, and that it was now four o’clock in the morning. The day would soon break.

And soon afterwards the first streaks of the dawn appeared in the east. The storm continued, and as the clouds were low over the sea, rain was to be feared before they could get back to Bear Rock Harbour.

But before they started they had to perform the last duty towards the shipwrecked men. As soon as the early morning light had penetrated the thick morning mists in the offing they went out on the beach, struggling not without difficulty against the blasts of the storm. Often they had to hold each other up to save themselves from being blown over. The boat had been left near a low ridge of sand, and they could see by the line of weed that the tide had risen and passed it.

But the two bodies were no longer there.

Donagan and Wilcox went some twenty yards on to the sand.

Nothing! Not even a trace of them had been left by the tide.

“Poor fellows!” said Wilcox, “were they then alive, that they have gone away?”

“Where are they?” asked Cross.

“Where are they?” answered Donagan, pointing to the sea, which was rolling in angrily. “There, where the outgoing tide has taken them.”

Donagan crept along to the ridge of rocks, and swept his glass over the waves. Not a corpse did he see!

He rejoined his companions, who had remained near the boat.

Perhaps a survivor of the catastrophe would be found inside her.

The boat was empty.

she was the long-boat of some merchantman, decked forward, and about thirty feet on the keel. She was no longer seaworthy; her starboard side had been stove in below the water-line when she was cast on the beach. A stump of the mast broken off at the step, a few tatters of sail caught on to the cleats at the gunwale, and a few ropes’ ends were all that remained of her rigging. Provisions, utensils, weapons, there were none either in the lockers or in the little cabin in the bow.

On the stern two names showed the ship to which she belonged, and the port of register: —

Severn — San Francisco.

San Francisco! One of the ports of the Californian coast! The ship was American.

And it was the sea that bounded the horizon.

CHAPTER VII

THE INVASION

THE circumstances under which Donagan and his companions quitted French Den will not have been forgotten. Since his departure the life of the young colonists had been of the saddest. With deep regret they had seen the separation which might have such fatal consequences in the future.

Assuredly Briant had nothing to reproach himself with, and yet he felt the separation more than the others, probably on account of his being its cause.

In vain Gordon tried to console him.

“They will come back, Briant, and much sooner than they think! Obstinate as Donagan is, circumstances will be too strong for him. Before the bad season comes I bet you we shall be all together again at French Den.”

Briant only shook his head. Circumstances might . bring back the absent, perhaps, but then the circumstances would be serious.

“Before the bad season,” Gordon said.

Were, then, the colonists to pass a third winter on Charman Island? Were they to have no help before then? Were not these parts of the Pacific visited during the summer by merchant vessels, and would they see the balloon signal on the crest of Auckland Hill?

The balloon was, it is true, hoisted only two hundred feet above the level of the island, and could not be seen over a very wide radius. And after trying in vain with Baxter to devise some sort of boat which would be seaworthy, Briant had betaken himself to thinking out some means of raising a signal to a greater height. He spoke of this often, and one day he asked Baxter if it would not be possible to use a kite for the purpose.

“We have the string and the cloth,” said he, “and if we made the kite big enough, it would fly high enough. We could let it up a thousand feet.”

“Except on the days when there is not a breath of wind,” said Baxter.

“It is very seldom that is the case,” said Briant, “and in calm weather we could bring the kite down. But once we had the end of the string fixed to a peg in the ground, the kite would follow the changes of the wind itself, and it would be no trouble to us.”

“That has to be proved,” said Baxter.

“Besides,” said Briant, “if the kite is visible during the day — say sixty miles away — we could make it visible during the night by hanging one of our lamps to its tail.”

Briant’s idea was practical enough; and there was nothing in it difficult of execution to the boys, who had often flown kites in New Zealand. When it became known, the scheme was received enthusiastically.

Jenkins, Iverson, Dole, and Costar were delighted at the thoughts of a kite far exceeding anything they had seen. How jolly it would be to hang on to the string when it was flying!

“You must have a long tail,” said one.

“And big ears,” said another.

“And paint a big Punch on it,” said another.

“And we’ll send messengers up to it,” said another.

It was delightful. The youngsters saw in the kite only a distraction, but it was a serious matter, and might yield very fortunate results.

Baxter and Briant then set to work on the next day but one after Donagan and his three companions had left French Den.

“It will make people open their eyes to see such a thing, said Service. “What a pity it is Crusoe and the Swiss Family never thought of kite-flying!”

“Will it be visible all over the island?” asked Garnett.

“Not only all over the island,” said Briant, “but for a long way round.”

“Will they see it at Auckland?” asked Dole.

“Not exactly,” said Briant, smiling at the question; “but when Donagan and the others see it, they may come back.”

All that day and the next days were occupied in making the kite, which Briant thought would be best if octagonal in shape. The frame, light and-strong, was made of a sort of very rigid reed that grew on the shore of Family Lake. On this framework Briant stretched one of the light cloths used to cover the schooner’s skylight, and which was waterproof and so impermeable that no wind could find its way through it. For a string he used the same cord as that in store for the log-line, and which was capable of standing considerable tension.

The kite had a magnificent tail to keep it in equilibrium when it lay on its bed of air, and it was so strongly made that it could without danger have taken up any of the boys. But that was not the object, and it fulfilled all the requirements if it was strong enough to stand all winds, long enough in string to rise to a good height, and large enough to be visible over a radius of from fifty to sixty miles. It was not to be held in the hand, for it was large enough to have dragged along the whole of the boys, and much faster than they would like, in anything of a breeze; and so the string was wound round one of the schooner’s winches, which was taken to the terrace and firmly fixed in the ground so as to resist every pull of the “Giant,” as the youngsters had named the kite. This was all finished by the evening of the 15th, and Briant resolved to get the “Giant “up during the following afternoon.

But a storm came, and the kite would have been smashed if it had been let up in such weather. This was the same storm which had burst on Donagan and his companions in the northern part of the island, and cast the boat and the shipwrecked Americans on the rocks to which there was afterwards given the name of Severn Reefs.

On the 16th, although the weather was not so stormy, yet the wind was too violent for the kite. But as the wind dropped in the afternoon there was good promise of an attempt being successful next day. This was the 17th of October, an important date in the annals of Charman Island.

Although it was a Friday, Briant was not superstitious enough to wait a day. Besides, the weather was most favourable, there being a gentle, steady breeze just strong enough to suit the kite. The string was so fastened to the bridle that the kite would fly at such an angle as to rise well overhead.

When evening came the string could be wound in and a lantern tied to the tail which would show a light all night.

The final preparations occupied the morning. At half- past one the kite was laid on the ground, with its long tail stretched out, and only waiting for Briant's signal to be held up and started. But the signal he did not give.

At that very moment his attention had been called off by Fan, who had rushed off into the forest, and began to bark in such a strange plaintive way that every one was surprised.

“What is the matter with Fan?” asked Briant.

“Has she scented some animal in the wood?”

“No! She wouldn't bark like that.”

“Let us go and see,” said Service.

“Not without your weapons,” said Briant.

Service and Jack ran into the cave, and came back with two loaded guns.

“Now come,” said Briant.

And the three, accompanied by Gordon, walked off towards Trap Woods in the path taken by Fan, whose barking could still be heard.

Briant and his companions had not gone fifty yards before they saw the dog standing in front of a tree, at the foot of which was a human form.

A woman lay there, still as if she were dead, a woman, whose clothes — gown of some heavy fabric, and brown linen shawl tied round her waist — seemed to be in good repair. Her face showed signs of excessive suffering, although she was of robust constitution, being from forty to fifty-five years of age. Exhausted with fatigue and perhaps hunger, she had fainted away.

Imagine what were the feelings of the young colonists in the presence of the first human being they had met since their arrival on the island.

‘‘She breathes! She breathes!” exclaimed Gordon.

Hunger, perhaps thirst — ”

Jack was off to the cave, to return with some biscuits and a flask of brandy.

Then Briant, leaning over the woman, opened her lips and poured a few drops into her mouth. She moved, and raised her eyelids. Then her look brightened as she saw the boys round her. Then Jack held out a biscuit, which she seized and ate greedily. Evidently the poor woman was dying more from want than fatigue.

But who was she? Would it be possible to exchange a few words with her, and make her understand?

Briant was soon assured of this.

The unknown raised herself a little, and said in English —

“Thanks. Thank you.”

Half an hour afterwards Briant and Baxter had brought her into the hall, and were there giving her all the attention they could.

As soon as she felt herself strong enough, she told them her story, which was as follows, and our readers can judge how much it interested the young colonists.

The woman, an American by birth, had lived for more than twenty years as confidential servant in the family of William R. Penfield, at Albany, the state capital of New York. Her name was Catherine Ready, though she was generally called Kate.

A month since, Mr. and Mrs. Penfield, wishing to go to Chili, where one of their relatives resided, had come to San Francisco, the chief seaport of California, to embark on the merchant-vessel *Severn,* commanded by Captain John F. Turner. The ship was bound to Valparaiso, and Mr. and Mrs. Penfield and Kate, who was, so to speak, one of the family, took passage in her.

The *Severn* was a good ship, and would doubtless have made an excellent passage if the eight men of the crew who had recently joined had not been scoundrels of the worst description. Nine days after sailing, one of them, Walston, helped by his companions, Brandt, Rock, Henley, Cook, Forbes, Cope, and Pike, had broken out into mutiny and killed the captain, the second mate, and Mr. and Mrs. Penfield; the object of the murderers being to seize the ship and use her in the slave-trade, which then still existed with a few provinces of South America.

Only two persons on board had been spared; these were Kate, saved by the intercession of Forbes, who was less cruel than the rest, and Evans, the first mate of the *Severn,* who was kept to navigate the ship.

This horrible affair took place on the night of the 7th of October, when the *Severn* was about two hundred miles from the Chilian coast.

On pain of death, Evans was forced to lay the course towards Cape Horn, and cross the Atlantic to the west coast of Africa. But a few days afterwards — why, no one ever knew — a lire broke out on board. In a few moments it became so fierce that Walston and his men found it hopeless to save the ship. One of the men, Henley, jumped overboard to escape the fire, and was drowned. The *Severn* had to be abandoned, the long-boat was launched, a few stores and weapons were thrown into her, and she had only just time to sheer off when the burning vessel foundered.

The position of the survivors was extremely critical, for two hundred miles separated them from the nearest land. It would only have been justice if the boat had gone down with the scoundrels in her, had not Kate and Evans been on board.

Two days after the loss of the ship a violent storm had come on, and the boat, with her sail torn to ribbons and her mast carried away, was driven on to Charman Island. And on the night of the 15th she was thrown on the beach, and her side stove in.

Walston and his companions, exhausted by their long struggle with the storm, suffered so from cold and fatigue that they were almost dead when the boat ran on to the reef; five of them were swept out of her by a wave, and a moment or so afterwards the two others were thrown on to the sand, while Kate fell on the opposite side of the boat.

The two men remained senseless for some time, as also did Kate. When she returned to consciousness she remained quiet and still, thinking that Walston and the others had perished, and waiting for daylight to begin her search for assistance in this unknown land. About three o'clock in the morning she heard footsteps near the boat.

Walston, Brandt, and Rock had not been drowned in the wave that struck the boat when she was crossing the reef. They had come along the rocks to the help of their companions, Forbes and Pike, and were now in conversation with them, while Evans remained a few hundred yards away under guard of Cope and Cook.

And this is the conversation that passed — which Kate heard distinctly.

juju Where are we?” asked Rock.

“I don’t know,” said Walston. “It doesn’t matter much! We mustn’t stop out here, we must go further in. When day comes we can look about us!”

“Have you got the fire-arms?” asked Forbes.; “Yes, and the ammunition, all right,” said Walston who took out of the locker five guns and several packets of cartridges.

“That is not much,” said Rock, “in a wild country like this.”

“Where is Evans?” asked Brandt.

“Over there,” said Walston, “watched by Cope and Cook. He’ll have to come with us, whether he likes it or not; and if he resists, I’ll settle him.”

“What has become of Kate?” asked Rock.

“Kate?” replied Walston. “There is nothing to fear from her! I saw her go overboard before the boat ran ashore, and she is at the bottom of the sea now.”

“That’s a good job,” said Rock. “She knew rather too much about us.”

“She wouldn’t have known it long,” said Walston, of whose intentions there could be no doubt.

Kate, who had heard all this, made up her mind to escape as soon as the men went away. And a few minutes afterwards Walston and his companions, helping along Forbes and Pike, whose legs were not very firm, carried off the arms and ammunition and what remained of the provisions in the long-boat’s locker — that is to say, a few pounds of salt meat, a little tobacco, and two or three bottles of gin.

As soon as they had cleared off — and they went away when the storm was at its worst — Kate got up. It was time; the tide was coming in, and a minute later she would have been carried away.

It can now be understood why Donagan, Wilcox, Webb, and Cross found the beach deserted when they returned to perform the last duty towards the shipwrecked men. Walston and his people had gone off to the east, while Kate, taking the opposite course, fled towards the northern point of Family Lake. There she arrived in the afternoon of the 16th, exhausted by hunger and fatigue. A few wild fruits were all she had had to sustain her. She had then followed the left bank, walking all through the night, and all through the morning of the 17th, when she sank to the ground, where she had been found half dead.

Such was Kate’s story — and a very serious state of affairs was revealed by it. On Charman Island, where the young colonists had hitherto lived in complete security, there had landed now seven men capable of any crime. If they discovered French Den, would they hesitate to attack it? No. They had too real an interest in seizing its stores, taking away its provisions, weapons, and particularly- its tools, without which it would be impossible for them to repair their boat so as to tit her for sea. And what resistance could Briant and his comrades offer when the eldest was only fifteen, and the youngest scarcely ten years old? Was this not an alarming state of things? If Walston remained on the island, there could be no doubt he would attack them. The interest with which Kate was listened to can be easily imagined.

Only one thing Briant thought of — that Donagan, Wilcox, Webb, and Cross were now in great peril. How could they be on their guard if they did not know of the presence of the survivors of the *Severn* in the very part of the island they were then exploring? The report of a gun tired by one of them would be enough to reveal their presence to Walston? And then the four would fall into the hands of the scoundrel, who would give them no mercy.

“We must go to their assistance,” said Briant; “and Set them know before to-morrow.”

“And bring them back to French Den,” added Gordon. “More than ever it is necessary for us to be united, so as to concert measures against an attack.”

“Yes,” said Briant; “and as it is necessary they should come back, they will come back! I will go after them”

“You. Briant!”

“Yes, I, Gordon!”

“And how?”

“I’ll go in the yawl with Moko. In a few hours we can cross the lake and go down East River, as we did before. There is every chance we shall find Donagan at its mouth.”

“When will you go?”

“This evening,” said Briant, “as soon as the darkness allows us to get across without being seen.”

“May I go with you?” asked Jack.

“No” said Briant. “It is imperative that we all come back in the boat, and we shall not have room for six.”

“That is agreed, then?” asked Gordon.

“That is agreed.”

It was in fact the best thing to do, not only for the sake of Donagan and his companions, but also for the rest.

our boys more, and those not the weakest of the party, was a reinforcement not to be despised. And there was not an hour to lose if they were all to be back at French Den within twenty-four hours.

There was now no talk of letting up the kite. That would be most imprudent. It would be a signal, not to passing ships — if any were passing — but to Walston and his accomplices. Briant even thought it best that the mast on Auckland Hill should be lowered.

Until evening came the boys remained in the hall, where Kate heard the story of their adventures. She no longer thought of herself, but of those around her. If they were to remain on Charman Island she would be their devoted servant — she would take care of them like a mother. And already to the little ones. Dole and Costar, she had given the endearing name of “papooses,” applied to babies in the western states of America.

Service, in the spirit of his favourite romances, had already proposed to call her Mrs. Friday, for it was on a Friday that Kate had arrived at French Den. And he had added, when he made the suggestion —

“These scoundrels are like Crusoe’s savages. There is always a time when the savages arrive, just as the time comes when they are beaten.”

At eight o’clock the preparations for departure were complete. Moko, whom no danger could frighten, was delighted at having to accompany Briant. The two embarked, taking with them a few provisions and a revolver and cutlass each. After bidding farewell to their comrades, who did not see them depart without a feeling of sorrow, they were soon off out of sight in the shadow on Family Lake When the sun set a gentle breeze had sprung up from the north, which, if it lasted, would suit the yawl both outwards and homewards.

The night was dark — a fortunate thing for Briant, who did not wish to be seen. Setting their course by the compass, they could reach the opposite shore, and then work up it or down it until they came to the mouth of the river.

Briant and Moko kept a good look-out ahead when they feared they should see some fire which would proclaim the presence of Walston and his companions, for Donagan was almost sure to be camped on the sea-shore.

In two hours the six miles had been sailed. The breeze had freshened, but the yawl was none the worse for it. She made the landfall close to where she had done so the first time, and about half a mile from where the stream ran out. This half-mile took some time to accomplish, for the wind was dead ahead, and the oars had to be used. Everything seemed quiet under the trees; not a yelp or a growl was heard in the forest, and not the sign of a fire was seen under the black masses of foliage.

About half-past ten Briant, who was in the stern of the boat, touched Moko’s arm. A few hundred feet away from’ East River a half-extinguished fire shed its expiring light through the darkness. Who was camped there? Walston or Donagan? It was necessary to know before entering the stream.

“Put me ashore,” said Briant.

“Shall I not come with you?” asked the negro in a whisper.

“No! It is better I should go alone, there is less chance of my being seen.”

The yawl ran alongside the bank, and Briant jumped ashore, after telling Moko to wait for him. He had his cutlass in his hand, and in his belt was the revolver, which he had resolved not to use except in the last extremity. He climbed the bank and glided under the trees.

Suddenly he stopped. About twenty yards away, in the half-fight of the fire, he saw a shadow crouching in the grass. Immediately a formidable grunt was heard, and a dark mass- leapt in front of him.

It was a jaguar of large size. Immediately there was a shout of —

“Help! Help!”

Briant recognized Donagan’s voice. It was Donagan, in fact, and his companions were asleep in camp near the river.

Knocked over by the jaguar, Donagan was struggling, unable to use his gun.

Wilcox, awakened by the shout, jumped up, and brought his gun to the shoulder, ready to fire.

Don’t fire! Don’t fire!” cried Briant. And before Wilcox could see him, he had sprung at the wild beast, which turned against him and left Donagan free to get up Luckily, Briant was able to step aside, and give it a thrust with his cutlass. The jaguar was mortally’ wounded and rolled on to the ground, as Webb and Cross rushed to Donagan’s assistance.

But the victory might have cost Briant dear, for his shoulder was ripped by the animal’s claws, and began to bleed profusely.

“How did you come here?” exclaimed Wilcox.

“That you will know soon!” said Briant. “But come with me! Come!”

“Not till I have thanked you, Briant!” said Donagan. “You have saved my life!”

“I only did what you would have done in my place.” replied Briant; “but don’t say any more about that. Come with me!”

Briant’s wound, however, was noticed. Although it was not a serious one, it had to be bound up tightly with a handkerchief, and while Wilcox was doing this Donagan was told what had taken place.

And so these men they had taken for corpses were alive! They were wandering about the island! They were scoundrels stained with murder! A woman had been wrecked with them in the boat; and this woman was now at French Den! There was now no safety on Charman Island! That was why Briant had told Wilcox not to fire at the jaguar for fear the report would be heard, and that was why Briant had trusted only to the cutlass!

“Ah, Briant, you are a better fellow than I am!” said Donagan with deep emotion “No. Donagan,” said Briant; “but now I hold your hand I will not let it go tall you have promised to come back with me”

“Yes, I must come,” said Donagan. “You can trust me. Henceforth, I shall be the first to obey orders I To-morrow at daybreak we will be off”

“No.” said Briant, “we must start at once, without the risk of being seen.”

“And how J “asked Cross.

“Moko is here in the yawl. We were going down the river when I saw the fight of your fire.”

“And you came just in time to save me.” said Donagan. “And to bring you back to French Den! “And now why was Donagan here instead of at the mouth of East River?

He had left Severn Reefs and returned to Bear Rock Harbour on the evening of the 16th, and next morning, as arranged, he had come up the left bank of East River to the lake, where he had camped on his road to French Den.

A few minutes afterwards Briant and his companions had taken their places in the yawl, and as she was rather small for six, she had to be carefully managed.

But the wind was favourable, and Moko handled her so well that the voyage was accomplished without accident.

Great was the joy of Gordon and the rest when they landed about four o’clock in the morning. Although danger threatened, the boys were all united at French Den to meet it.

CHAPTER VIII

ALL TOGETHER

THE colony was again complete, and concord reigned at French Den — concord that was to be untroubled for the future. The separation of two or three days had borne its fruit. More than once already Donagan, without saying anything to his comrades, had been led to think how stupid had been his obstinacy; and Wilcox, Cross, and Webb had had similar thoughts. After what Briant had done, Donagan's better nature had triumphed, and the change was to be lasting.

But French Den was in serious danger. It was exposed to the attack of these seven well-armed scoundrels; obviously, Walston's best course was to leave the island as soon as he could; but if he came to suspect the existence of a little colony well provided with all that he wanted, he would not refrain from an attack in which he had almost every chance of success. The boys would be obliged to be most careful not to go far from Zealand River or the lake so long as he was on the island.

Donagan was asked if he had seen any trace of the sailors on his journey back to Bear Rock.

"No," said he. "But when we went back we did not go the same way as at first."

"But we are sure that Walston went off to the eastward," said Gordon.

"Agreed," answered Donagan, "but he went along the shore, while we came through Beech Forest. If you look at the map you will see there is a very bold curve just above Deception Bay, and there is a good stretch of country there where the men could take refuge without going too far away from their boat. But perhaps Kate can tell us whereabouts Charman Island is?”

Kate had already been asked by Gordon and Briant, and could tell them nothing. After the burning of the *Severn*, Mr. Evans had laid the course of the boat straight for the American continent, and consequently Charman island could not be very far away from it. But the name °f the island on which he had been cast, he had never mentioned during the storm. The numerous archipelagoes on the coast must be within a short distance, and there were very plausible reasons for Walston to try and reach them, and in the meantime to stay on the eastern shore. If he could only get his boat into a seaworthy state, he would not have much trouble in reaching the South American coast.

“Unless,” said Briant, “he comes to the mouth of East River, and finding there traces of your camp, Donagan, resolves to search further inland.”

“But what traces?” replied Donagan. “A few cinders! what would that tell him? that the island is inhabited! and if so, the scoundrels would only think of hiding themselves.”

“Exactly,” said Briant. “Until they discovered that the population of the island consisted of a parcel of boys. We must do nothing to let him know who we are! And that reminds me, Donagan, did you fire your gun on your journey back to Deception Bay.”

“No, and that is rather strange,” said Donagan, smiling. “For I am rather inclined to burn too much powder. When we left the shore we had a good supply of game, and no shooting took place to reveal our presence. Last night Wilcox was going to fire at the jaguar, but luckily you arrived in time and saved my life at the risk of your own.”

“You need say no more about that, Donagan,” said Briant. “But don’t let us have another gun fired; let us keep away from Trap Woods, and let us five on our reserves.”

We need only just mention that since his arrival at French Den Briant had had everything necessary done to his wound, and that it had healed in a few days. There remained a certain amount of discomfort in the arm, but that soon disappeared.

October was near its end, and Walston had not been seen in the neighbourhood of Zealand River. Had he repaired his boat and left the island? It was not impossible. He had an axe — as Kate remembered — and could make use of those large knives which sailors always have in their pockets; and wood there was in abundance near Severn Reefs. But, in ignorance of what he had done, the every-day life at French Den had been entirely changed. There were no more distant excursions, except once when Baxter and Donagan went off to the crest of Auckland Hill and lowered the flag-staff.

From this elevated point Donagan examined through his glass all the masses of verdure to the eastward. And although he could see right away to the sea, not a trace of smoke rose to indicate that Walston and his companions were encamped on the island. Neither in that direction nor in the direction of Schooner Bay did Donagan see anything suspicious.

Now that all expeditions were forbidden and the guns lay idle, the sportsmen of the colony had to give up their favourite amusement. Fortunately the nets and snares set about French Den yielded game in sufficient quantity, and the tinamous and ostriches in the poultry-yard had multiplied so much that Service and Garnett were obliged to sacrifice a good many of them. As they had gathered a large crop of the leaves of the tea tree, and a good deal of the maple syrup that changes so easily into sugar, there was no necessity to go to Dike Creek to renew the stock of provisions. And even if the winter came before the boys recovered their liberty, they were sufficiently provided with oil for their lamps, and with preserved provisions for their larder. All they had to do was to get some more wood, and bring it in from Bog Woods along the bank of the river.

It was at this time that a new discovery was made, adding to the comfort of French Den. It was not made by Gordon, although he was a good botanist, but to Kate the whole credit belonged. On the edge of Bog Woods there were a certain number of trees, measuring from fifty to sixty feet high. If the axe had spared them, it was because their wood was very stringy, and promised to be but poor fuel for the fires in the ball and enclosure. The leaves were of oblong form, alternating with knots on the branches and terminated by a leathery point.

The first time Kate saw one of these trees — it was the 25th of October — she exclaimed — “Oh! why, there’s a cow tree! “Dole and Costar, who were with her, burst into a shout of laughter.

“What is a cow tree?” asked one. Do the cows eat it?” asked the other. No papooses no said Kate. “It is so called because it yields milk, and better milk than your vicugna’s.”

When she returned to French Den, Kate told Gordon of her discovery. Gordon at once called Service, and with him and Kate went to Bog Woods. After examining the tree Gordon thought it might be one of those galactendrons of which there are so many in the forests of North America, and he was not mistaken.

It was a valuable discovery. All that was needful was to make an incision in the bark, and a milky sap would flow, having the taste and nutritious properties of the milk of the cow. If left to stand, it would coagulate and form excellent cheese, and at the same time it would yield very pure wax, not unlike beeswax, of which capital candles could be made.

“Well,” said Service, “if it is a cow tree or a tree cow, we may as well milk it.”

And unknown to himself he used the very same expression as the Indians, for they “milk the tree.”

Gordon made a gash in the bark of the galactendron, and out flowed the sap; and Kate caught two good pints of it in a cup she had brought with her.

It is a whitish liquor, appetising enough to look at, and comprising the same elements as cow’s milk. At the same time it is more nourishing, thicker, and has a more agreeable savour. The cup was empty in a minute at French Den, and Costar smeared his mouth all round as if he were a young cat. At the thought of all he could do with this new substance, Moko did not conceal his satisfaction. He would have no trouble; he had hardly any distance to go to his herd of galactendrons to get his vegetable milk.

In short — and we need hardly repeat it — Charman Island would supply the wants of a large colony. The boys could certainly live there for a long time; and the arrival of Kate amongst them to look after them like a mother, and she quite inspired them with maternal affection, had done much to make their existence more comfortable.

Why had the former security been troubled? What discoveries Briant and his comrades would have made in those unknown parts of the east which they now had to consider as closed to them! Would they ever be able to resume their excursions, having nothing to fear but wild beasts, far less dangerous than the wild beasts in human form, against whom they had to be on their guard night and day?

November had begun, and there was still no trace of suspicious characters round French Den. Briant even doubted if the survivors of the *Severn* were still on the island. But had not Donagan seen with his own eyes that the boat was in a bad way, with her broken mast, tattered sails, and shattered side? It is true — and Mr. Evans would know this — if Charman Island had been near a continent or archipelago, the boat might have been sufficiently put to rights and gone to sea. It was possible for Walston to have left the island. Had he done so? That would have to be discovered before the usual round of life was resumed.

Often Briant had thought of exploring the district on the east of Family Lake. Donagan, Baxter, and Wilcox would have been only too glad to go with him. But to run the risk of falling into Walston's power, and thereby discover to him how little formidable were the adversaries with whom he had to do, would have had the most serious consequences. And so Gordon, whose advice was always listened to, persuaded Briant not to venture into Beech Forest.

Kate then made a proposition, which would avoid this danger of discovery. One evening, when all the boys were united in the hall, she asked Briant if he would allow her to leave them in the morning.

“Leave us, Kate!” said Briant.

“Yes! You cannot remain much longer in this uncertainty as to whether Walston is still on the island, and I volunteer to go to the place where the storm left me, and find out if the boat is still there. If it is there, Walston has not gone away; if it is not there you need have no further fear of him."

"That," said Donagan, "is what Briant and Baxter and Wilcox and I proposed to do ourselves."

"True, Mr. Donagan," said Kate. "But what is dangerous for you has no danger for me."

"But. Kate," said Gordon, "if you fall into Walston's bands — "

"Well," interrupted Kate, "I shall be where I was before I ran away. That is all!"

"And if this rascal makes away with you, as he very likely will?" asked Briant.

"I escaped before, and why should I not escape again, particularly as I now know the road to French Den? And if I could get away with Mr. Evans — after telling him all about you — think what a help he would be to you!"

"If Evans had a chance of escape," said Donagan, "would he not have gone already? Is there not every reason for his trying to save himself?"

Donagan is right," said Gordon. "Evans knows Walston's secret, and Walston would have no hesitation in killing him as soon as he had no need of his help to guide the boat to the continent. If Evans has not slipped away from his companions by now, it is because he is too well guarded."

"Or that he has already paid with his life for an attempt at escape," said Donagan. "And so, Kate, unless you wish to be recaptured — -"

“Do you think I would not do all I could to avoid being caught?”

“Of course you would,” said Briant. “But we will never let you run the risk. No! We must seek out some less dangerous way of discovering if Walston is still on Charman Island.”

Kate’s proposal having been rejected, there was no more to do than keep a good look-out. Evidently if Walston was able to leave the island he would do so before the wet season began, so as to reach some country where he and his companions would be welcomed, as all shipwrecked folks are welcomed, no matter whence they may come.

If Walston was in the island he seemed to have no intention of exploring the interior. Frequently, on the dark nights, Briant, Donagan, and Moko had crossed the lake in the yawl, and never had they seen a fire, either on the opposite bank or beneath the trees down East River.

Nevertheless, it was very irksome to five in this way — confined to the space between Zealand River, the lake, the forest, and the cliff. And Briant was constantly considering how he might find out if Walston had left, or where he had lighted his camp fire Perhaps he might discover this from some elevation during the night! The idea took possession of him. Unfortunately, except the cliff, which at its highest point was only two hundred feet above the sea, the island had no hills of importance. Donagan and some of the others had been to Auckland Hill, but from there they could not even see the other shore of the lake, and no smoke or glare had been seen above the horizon. It would be necessary to go a few hundred feet higher, for the range of vision to extend to the rocks of Deception Bay.

Briant then had a very hazardous idea — a mad idea it may be thought — that he would have nothing to do with at first. But it haunted him with such persistency that he eventually adopted it.

It will be remembered that the flying of the kite had been postponed. After the arrival of Kate with the news of the survivors of the *Severn* at large on the eastern shore, the project of sending up into the air something that could be seen from all points of the island had been abandoned.

But if the kite could not be used as a signal, could it not be used for the purpose of a reconnaissance so necessary to the colony’s safety?

Yes! And that is what had seized on Briant’s imagination. He remembered having read in an English paper of a lady being lifted from the ground hanging to the tail of a kite, specially made for the purpose. Well! what a lady had done surely a boy could do I That there was a certain danger in the attempt mattered little. The risk would be nothing compared to the result which might be obtained. If all precautions were taken that prudence required, was there not a chance that the operation would succeed? That is why Briant, although he was not in a position to calculate mathematically the ascensional force required by such an apparatus, convinced himself that the apparatus would do if made larger and stronger than it bad been. And then in the middle of the night he could be lifted a few hundred feet in the air, and perhaps detect the light of a fire somewhere in the district between the lake and Deception Bay.

It was the evening of the 4th of November when he asked Gordon, Donagan, Wilcox, Webb, and Baxter to come and talk over something with him.

He told them he proposed to make use of the kite What use?” asked Wilcox. “By letting it up? “Certainly,” said Briant. “It was made to be let up.”

“During the day?” asked Baxter.

“No,” said Briant, “for Walston would see it, while during the night — ”

“But if you hang a lantern to it,” said Donagan, “it will attract his attention just as much.”

But I am not going to send up the lantern.”

“Then what are you going to do?” said Gordon.

“I’m going to see if the Severn people are still on the island.”

And then Briant, not without some uneasiness, lest his plan should be received unfavourably, unfolded it in a few words.

His comrades did not laugh. Gordon asked if he was speaking seriously, and the others seemed to approve of the notion. They saw nothing impossible in a nocturnal ascent of such a character. If everything was done that could be done to ensure safety, they were willing to try it.

“But,” said Donagan, “this kite you have got is not big enough.”

“No,” said Briant, “we must make it bigger and stronger.”

“It remains to be seen,” said Wilcox, “if a kite will resist — ”

“There is no doubt about that,” said Baxter.

“Besides it has been done,” said Briant. And he told them about the lady who had made the experiment.

“All depends,” he concluded, “on the size of the kite and the force of the wind at the time of the ascent.”

“What height are you going up to?” asked Baxter.

“I think if we get up about seven hundred feet,” answered Briant, “we should see the light of a fire in any part of the island.”

“Well! Let us do it,” said Service, “and the sooner the better! I am tired of not being able to go where I like.”

“And we all want to get out and visit our traps,” said Wilcox.

“I am tired of not being able to lire a shot,” said Donagan “We’ll start on it to-morrow,” said Briant.

A few minutes afterwards he was alone with Gordon.

“Do you seriously think of going aloft in this way?” asked the latter.

“1 mean to try, Gordon!”

“It is a very dangerous performance.”

“Less than you think, perhaps.”

“And which of us is going to risk his life in the attempt?”

“You first, Gordon,” said Briant, “if the lot falls on you.”

“Then you are going to settle it by lot?”

“He who does it must do it of his own free will.”

“Then your choice is already made?”

“I think so.”

And Briant clasped Gordon’s hand.

CHAPTER IX

THE TAIL OF A KITE

NEXT day was the 25th of November, and early in the morning Briant and Baxter set to work. Before increasing the size of the kite it was thought well to ascertain what weight it would be, as it was then in this way they would be able to arrive at the area necessary to lift one hundred and twenty or one hundred and thirty pounds.

There was no need to wait for the night to make the experiment. A north-west breeze was then blowing, and Briant had only to keep the kite from going high enough to be seen across the lake. The experiment succeeded admirably, and it was found that the kite in an ordinary wind would lift a bag weighing twenty pounds.

The kite was then brought down and laid on the ground.

In the first place Baxter strengthened the frame very much by means of cords fastened to a central knot in the same way as an umbrella frame is strengthened by the radial bars. Thus the surface was increased by making the frame larger and fastening new canvas on to it. In this Kate proved to be of great use. Of needles and thread there was a good supply in the stores, and Kate was an excellent needlewoman.

Had Briant and Baxter been stronger in mechanics, they would have taken into consideration the principal “elements,” the weight, the plane surface, the centre of gravity, the centre of the wind’s pressure, which is the same as the centre of the figure, and the point to which the cord should be attached, and when these had been worked out, they could have arrived at the ascensional power of the kite and the height it would attain. And the calculation would also have told them what should be the breaking strength of the cord — a condition of the utmost importance for the safety of the observer.

Fortunately the schooner’s log-line, which was nearly two thousand feet long, came in capitally. But a kite does not pull so very much when the angle at which it is flown is properly chosen. To be used as it was going to be, the kite did not require a tail, much to the disappointment of Costar and Dole. There would be no occasion for it as the weight it would have to lift would be quite enough to keep it steady.

After several trials, Briant and Baxter found it best to attach the weight to a cross-bar fixed a third of the way up the centre. Two cords, one at each end of this, were arranged so that the weight hung some twenty feet below the kite. Twelve hundred feet of string were wound off, and this, allowing for the slope, would let the kite fly seven or eight hundred feet above the ground.

To provide against accident, it was resolved to let the kite up over the lake; the horizontal distance would then be fairly easy of accomplishment by a practised swimmer.

When the kite was finished it presented a surface of about eighty square yards in the form of an octagon four feet on the side with a radial length of about fifteen. With its strong ribs, and its impermeable covering, it could easily lift a weight of a hundred and twenty pounds.

The car in which the observer was to take up his position was one of those wicker baskets that serve so many purposes on board a yacht. It was deep enough to reach up to the armpits of an ordinary-sized boy, large enough to give him full liberty of movement, and open enough for him to get out of easily, if he wanted to do so.

As may be imagined, this was not all done in a day, nor even in two days. It was begun on the morning of the 5th, and it was finished in the afternoon of the 7th. And the trial trip was put off till the evening, when experiments would be made on its ascensional power and its degree of stability in the air.

Meanwhile nothing had happened to change the state of affairs. Many times one or other of the boys had been on the look-out on the cliff. They had seen nothing suspicious, neither to the north, between the edge of Trap Woods and French Den, nor to the south across the stream, nor to the west on Schooner Bay side, nor on the lake. No report of fire-arms was heard at Auckland Hill; and no smoke appeared on the horizon.

Were Briant and his comrades justified in hoping that Walston had left Charman Island? Was it wise for them to resume the life they had hitherto been living? The projected experiment would without doubt yield an answer to these inquiries.

But, one question more; how was the boy in the car to let them know below when he wished to come down?

Briant’s reply to Donagan and Gordon was as follows: —

“A luminous signal would never do, for it might be seen by Walston. And Baxter and I have arranged to have a string as long as the cord, one end, of which will remain on the ground and the other will be fixed to the car; on the string we are going to have a lump of lead with a-hole in the middle so that it will slide up and down; the lead will go up in the car, and whoever goes up has to let it slip along the string when he wants to come down.”

“That will do,” said Donagan.

Everything being ready, the preliminary ascent was begun. The moon would not rise till nearly two o’clock in the morning, and a good breeze was blowing from the south-west, so that the conditions were favourable.

At nine o’clock the darkness was profound, a few thick clouds drifted across a starless sky. Whatever height the kite rose, it could not be seen, even near French Den.

All the boys were out to see what was going on, and as the attempt was to be made “in blank,” so to speak, it was with more pleasure than misgiving that they took part in the proceedings.

The schooner’s winch had been fixed firmly in the ground on the terrace. The long line had been carefully wound on so as to run out easily with the signal string. In the car Briant had put a bag of mould weighing 130 pounds, which was greater than the weight of any of the boys.

Donagan, Baxter, Wilcox and Webb took up their position near the kite, which lay on the ground 100 yards from the winch. When Briant “gave the word, they would raise the kite by means of cords tied to the ribs, and as soon as the wind caught it, Briant, Gordon, Service, Cross, and Garnett would manage the winch so as to let out the cord as required.

“Are you ready?” asked Briant.

“Ready!” answered Donagan.

“Let go!”

The kite rose a little, quivered in the wind, and assumed the angle at which it was intended it should fly.

“Let out! Let out!” exclaimed Wilcox; and immediately the winch spun round under the tension of the line, while the lute and the basket slowly rose into space.

Although it was a dangerous thing to do, the boys cheered as the “Giant of the Air “left the ground. But soon it disappeared in the darkness, to the great disappointment of Iverson, Jenkins, Dole, and Costar, who did not want to lose sight of it while it flew over Family Lake, you need not make yourself miserable, my papooses.” said Kate. “Another time, when there is no danger, your Giant will go up in daylight, and you can messenger up to him if you like.”

Although it could not be seen, the boys felt that the kite was drawing steadily, showing that the wind was blowing in the higher zones, and that the kite was properly balanced.

Briant, being anxious that the experiment should be as complete as circumstances permitted, let the string run out to the end. He could then find out the degree of tension, which was nothing unusual. The winch had let out 1200 feet, and the kite was probably at a height of from seven to eight hundred feet, which it had reached in ten minutes.

The experiment having been completed, the boys seized hold of the handles of the winch, and began to wind in. This second part of the. performance took much longer than the first, and it was quite an hour before the winding in was over.

As in the case of a balloon, the bringing of the kite to the ground without a shock is the most delicate part of the manoeuvre. But the wind was so steady that it was accomplished with great success. The octagon came again into sight, and fell gently to the ground, close to the spot from which it had started. And cheers greeted its arrival as they had saluted its departure.

All that remained to be done was to keep it on the ground; and Baxter and Wilcox volunteered to keep guard over it till daylight.

Next day, the 8th of November, at the same time, the first serious attempt would be made.

The boys were only waiting for Briant's orders to go into French Den; but he said nothing, and seemed to be absorbed in thought.

What was he thinking of? Was it of the dangers that would have to be run in making such an ascent? Was it of the responsibility he was assuming in permitting a comrade to risk himself in the car?

"Let us go in," said Gordon, "it is late."

"One moment," said Briant. "Gordon, Donagan! I have a proposal to make."

"What is it?" asked Donagan.

"We have tried the kite," said Briant, "and the trial has succeeded because the circumstances were favourable, the wind being steady, and being neither too weak nor too strong. How do we know what the weather may be like to-morrow? It seems to me it would be better not to postpone an attempt!"

Nothing could be more reasonable. But no one replied. In view of running such a risk, hesitation was natural — even on the part of the boldest.

Briant asked, “Who will go up?”

“I will! “.said Jack.

And immediately, “I will!” was shouted by Donagan, Baxter, Wilcox, Cross, and Service.

Then came silence, which Briant was in no hurry to break.

Jack was the first to speak.

“Let me go, brother; it is for me to run the risk! Let me go!”

“And why you rather than I?” asked Donagan. “Why you any more than any one else?”

“Yes I Why?” asked Baxter.

“Because I ought to go,” said Jack.

“You ought to go?” asked Gordon.

“Yes.”

Gordon had caught hold of Briant’s hand as if to ask him what Jack meant, and he felt it tremble in his own, and if the night had not been so dark, he would have seen his cheeks grow pale, and the tears come into his eyes.

“Well, brother?” said Jack, in a tone surprisingly resolute for a boy of his age.

“Answer, Briant!” said Donagan. “Jack says he has a right to run the risk! But what right has he got that we have not? What does he mean?”

“For what I did,” said Jack. “For what I did — I will tell you — ”

“Jack!” said Briant, hoping to keep his brother from explaining.

“No,’’ said Jack, in a voice broken by emotion. “Let me confess! It weighs too heavily on me! Gordon, Donagan, that you are here — all of you — far from your friends, on this island — is owing to me — I alone am the cause. The schooner drifted out to sea because I imprudently — no jokingly — no, foolishly — cast off the ropes by which she was moored to the quay at Auckland. Yes! I intended it for a joke — but when I saw the yacht drifting away I lost my head — I did not call out when there was time — and an hour afterwards, in the middle of the night — we were out in the open sea. Oh! forgive me, forgive And the boy burst into tears, while Kate tried all she could to console him.

“Well, Jack,” said Briant, “you have confessed your fault, and now you would risk your life to atone for it; or rather atone for some of the evil you have done?”

“But has he not done that already?” asked Donagan, letting his natural generosity get the better of him. “Has he not often run into danger to do us a service? Oh! Briant, I understand now why you were always putting your brother forward when there was danger to be found, and why he was always so ready to go. That is why he came after Cross and me in the fog — at the risk of his life! Yes! my dear friend Jack, we’ll forgive you, and your fault wants no more atonement.”

The boys crowded up to Jack and took him in their arms, although he continued to sob bitterly. They knew now why this youngster, the liveliest in the school, and one of the sharpest, had become so gloomy, and why he had kept apart from the rest! By his brother's orders and at his own wish, too, they had seen him venture his life at every dangerous opportunity that offered! And he thought he had not done enough! He wanted to risk his life again! And as soon as he could speak, this is what he said —

"You see it is for me to go — for me alone! Is it not so, brother?"

"Well done. Jack," said Briant, taking his brother in his arms.

In face of Jack's confession, in face of the right he insisted on, it was in vain that Donagan and the others tried to interfere. All that could be done was to leave him to the mercy of the wind which was showing a certain tendency to freshen.

Jack shook hands with his friends, and then, before getting into the car, turned to his brother, who remained motionless a few paces behind the winch.

"Good-bye," said Jack.

"Yes! good-bye!" said Briant, restraining his feelings; "or, rather, it is for me to bid you good-bye, for it is for me to go."

"You!" exclaimed Jack.

"You! you!" said Donagan and Service.

"Yes! I! If Jack's folly is atoned for by himself or his brother makes little difference. Besides, when I had the first idea of this attempt, do yon think I ever thought of leaving it to another?”

“Brother,” said Jack, “I beg you.”

“No, Jack!”

“Then,” said Donagan, “I claim my turn.”

“No, Donagan!” said Briant, in a tone admitting of no reply, “I will go! It is my wish to do so.”

“As I thought, Briant!” said Gordon, clasping him by the hand.

A few minutes afterwards Briant was in the car, and as soon as he had fixed himself comfortably, he gave the order to let the kite go.

The kite rose gently at first; then Baxter, Wilcox, Cross, and Service, who were posted at the winch, let the string run out quickly, while Garnett allowed the signal- cord to run smoothly through his fingers.

In ten seconds the “Giant of the Air “had disappeared in the darkness — not amid such cheers as had greeted its last departure, but in profound silence.

The intrepid chief of this little world had vanished with it.

Regularly rose the kite. The steady breeze assured perfect stability. Briant experienced none of those oscillations which might have made his position more perilous. And he remained motionless, with his hands grasping the cords that held up the car, which swayed gently as if it were a swing.

A strange feeling had Briant at first, when he felt himself suspended in space from this huge inclined plane which rustled in the wind. It seemed as though he were being lifted by some fantastic bird of prey, or rather an enormous black bat. But, thanks to the energy of his character, he was able to keep as cool as the adventure required.

Ten minutes after the kite had left the ground a slight shock indicated that its ascensional movement was about to cease. Arrived at the end of the string, it began to rise, not without a few jerks.

Briant coolly caught hold of the string run through the ball and began his observations. Holding on with one hand to the suspension-cord, with the other he held his night-glasses.

Below him all was darkness. The lake, the forests, the cliff, formed a confused mass in which he could distinguish no detail; but he could trace the whole coastline of the island.

And if he had made this ascent in the day-time, and looked round? horizon bathed in light, he might have seen other islands, or even a continent, if any existed within a range of from forty to fifty miles, such as he could command.

In the west, and the north, and the south the sky was too misty for him to see anything; but in the east, where a little corner of the firmament was temporarily free from cloud, a few stars appeared.

And exactly in that direction a bright fight, reflecting on to the lower banks of cloud, attracted his attention.

“It is the light of a fire!” he exclaimed. “Has Walston camped over there? No I The fire is much too far away, and it is certainly beyond the island! Can it be a volcano in eruption? Is there land over there? “It occurred to

Briant's memory that on his first expedition to Deception Bay a whitish patch had appeared on the field of his glasses. "Yes," said he, "and it was over there! Can it have been a glacier? If so, land ought to be near us in the east."

Briant brought his glasses to bear on the fight, which the darkness made more apparent. There could be no doubt that it was a volcano, and that a glacier was close by which belonged either to a continent or archipelago not more than thirty miles away.

As Briant settled this in his mind he was conscious of another light, much nearer to him — five or six miles away only — and consequently on the island and among the trees.

"It is in the forest this time," he said, "and on the skirts of it, on the seashore!"

But it seemed as though the light had only appeared to disappear, for, despite all he could do, Briant could not catch sight of it again.

Yes! His heart beat so violently, and his hand trembled so, that he could not hold his glasses so as to catch it in their field!

But there could be no doubt there was a camp fire not far from the mouth of East River. Briant had seen it, and soon he recognized its reflection among the trees.

So Walston and his men were camped near Bear Rock Harbour. The mutineers of the *Severn* had not abandoned Charman Island! The colonists were exposed to their attack, and were no longer in safety at French Den!

Evidently Walston had found it impossible to repair the boat, and had given up his attempt to leave for one of the, neighbouring islands.

Briant, having finished his observations, judged it useless to prolong his aerial exploration. He prepared to descend. The wind was increasing. Already the oscillations of the car had become greater, and the car swung in a way that would make landing difficult.

Making sure that the signal-cord was clear he let go the ball, which in a few seconds slipped down into Garnett’s hand.

Immediately the winch began to wind in the string.

But as the kite went down Briant kept watching the lights he had seen. Again he saw that of the eruption and that of the camp fire.

It can be imagined with what extreme impatience, Gordon and the others had waited for the signal for descent. The twenty minutes Briant had passed in the air seemed to them interminable.

Donagan and his assistants worked away vigorously at the winch. They also had noticed that the wind had gained in strength and blew more unsteadily. They could feel the jerks on the string, and began to fear with keen anxiety that Briant would come to grief.

The winch spun round as hard as they could drive it, but to get in twelve hundred feet of cord took much time, the wind kept rising, and three-quarters of an hour after the signal had been given, it was blowing quite fresh.

The kite at the time was more than a hundred feet above the lake.

Suddenly there was a violent jerk. Wilcox, Donagan, Service, Webb, and Baxter found resistance gone, and fell forward on to the ground.

The string had broken!

And amid the cries of terror there were shouts of —

“Briant! Briant!”

A few minutes afterwards Briant gained the beach and shouted loudly.

“Brother!” said Jack, who was the first to rush to his arms.

“Walston is there!”

Those were Briant’s first words as soon as his comrades had gathered round him.

When the string broke Briant had felt himself carried away — not in a vertical fall, but obliquely and comparatively slowly, owing to the kite forming a sort of parachute above him. What he had to do was to leave the car before it touched the surface of the lake. He waited, and the instant before it struck the water he took a header, and, good swimmer as he was, he soon covered the four or five hundred feet that separated him from the shore.

And meanwhile, the kite, deprived of its weight, had disappeared in the north-east like a gigantic raft in the air.

CHAPTER X

THE ENEMY IN SIGHT

IT was late next morning before the boys were astir, and ready to discuss the state of affairs which had become so disquieting.

Walston, as Gordon remarked, had now been a fortnight on the island, and he had not repaired his boat, it was because he had not the tools to do so.

“That must be the reason,” said Donagan; “for the boat was not damaged very much. If our schooner had not suffered more, we should have had her seaworthy in much less time.”

But although Walston had not gone, it was not likely that he intended to settle on Channan Island. Had he done so, he would have made several excursions into the interior, and French Den would certainly have been visited by him.

Then Briant told the others what he had seen regarding the land, which could not be very far off to the eastward.

“You have not forgotten,” he said, “that when we went to East River I noticed a white patch a little above the horizon, which I could not at all understand.”

“Wilcox and I saw nothing like it,” said Donagan, “although we did our best — ”

“Moko saw it as distinctly as I did,” said Briant.

“Well, that may be,” said Donagan. “But what makes you think we are near a continent, or a group of islands?”

“Just this,” said Briant. “Yesterday, while I was looking at the horizon in that direction, I saw a fight a long way beyond our island, which could only come from a volcano in eruption, and I supposed that there must be some land not far off. Now, the sailors of the *Severn* must know that, and they would do all they could to get there.”

“That is true enough,” interrupted Baxter. “They won’t get much by stopping here. Evidently the only reason they have not relieved us of their presence is that they have not been able to get their boat made seaworthy.”

Briant’s news was of the greatest importance to the little colony. It showed for certain that Charman Island was not isolated in the Pacific as they had thought. But the fact that Walston had taken up his quarters at East River seriously complicated matters. He had left the place where he had come ashore, and come a dozen miles nearer the camp. He had only to ascend the river to reach the lake; and he had only to skirt the southern shore of the lake to discover French Den.

To provide against this, Briant had to take every precaution. Henceforth the boys were allowed out only when absolutely necessary. Baxter masked the palisading of the enclosure with a curtain of brushwood, and in the same way he concealed the entrances of the hall and store-room. No one was allowed to show himself in the open between the lake and Auckland Hill.

And added to these difficulties there were now other causes of anxiety. Costar was ill of a fever, and in danger of his life. Gordon had to prescribe for him from the schooner’s medicine-chest, not without some nervousness that he might make a mistake! Luckily, Kate was quite a mother to the poor, sick boy. She watched over him with a painstaking affection, which is instinctive to women, and nursed him night and day. Thanks chiefly to her, the fever left him, and he soon afterwards quite recovered.

During the first fortnight of November there were frequent showers, but on the 17th the barometer rose and steadied, and the warm season set in for good. Trees and shrubs and all the vegetation were soon covered with leaves and flowers. The customary visitors of South Moor returned in great numbers. Donagan was miserable at not being able to go out shooting across the marshes, and poor Wilcox was none the less so at not being able to spread his nets. And not only did the birds swarm on the island, but others were taken in the snares near French Den.

One day Wilcox found one of the birds of passage, that the winter had driven to the unknown countries of the north. It was a swallow, which still carried the little packet under its wing. Did the packet contain a letter addressed to the survivors of the schooner? Alas, no! The message had come back without a reply.

During these long, idle days, many were the hours now passed in the hall. Baxter, who had charge of the log, found not an incident to relate. And in less than four months the third winter would begin for the colonists of Charman Island!

The boys noticed, with deep anxiety, how discouragement was seizing upon the most energetic — with the exception of Gordon, who was always absorbed in the details of administration.

Even Briant at times despaired, although he did his best to hide it. He tried to encourage his comrades to continue their studies, to resume their debates, and their leadings aloud. He reminded them constantly of their country and their friends, averring that one day they would go back. He did all he could to keep up their spirits but with little success, and his great fear was that despair would overwhelm them.

Nothing of the sort! Events of the greatest importance were at hand which soon gave them quite sufficient excitement. — ’

It was on the 21st of November, about two o’clock in the afternoon, when Donagan was fishing in the lake, that his attention was attracted by the discordant cries of a score of birds hovering over the left bank of the stream. If the birds were not crows — which they somewhat resembled — they evidently belonged to the same voracious and cawing species.

Donagan would have taken little notice of their cries had not their behaviour been strange.

They were describing large circles, diminishing in radius as they neared the ground, until in a compact group they swooped down.

Then the noise became greater than ever, but in vain Donagan tried to catch a glimpse of the birds among the thick bushes in which they had disappeared.

The thought occurred to him that the carcase of some animal must be there. Curious to know what was the matter, he returned to French Den and asked Moko to take him over in the boat to the other side of Zealand River.

They pushed off and in ten minutes had slipped in among the vegetation on the bank. At once the birds took to flight, protesting by their screams at being disturbed at their meal.

There lay the body of a young guanaco that had evidently been dead for only a few hours, inasmuch as it was not quite cold.

Donagan and Moko not caring to burden their larder with the remains of the birds’ dinner, were about to leave it when it occurred to them to ask why the guanaco had come to die on the skirt of the marsh, so far from the eastern forest which its fellows so seldom left.

Donagan examined the body. There was a wound in the flank, a wound which could not have been given by the tooth of a jaguar, or any other beast of prey.

“This guanaco was shot!” said Donagan.

“And here is the proof!” said the cabin-boy, picking out the bullet from a wound with the point of his knife.

The bullet was more of the size carried by a ship’s rifle than by such a gun as sportsmen use. It must therefore have been fired by Walston or one of his companions.

Donagan and Moko, leaving the carcase to the birds, returned to French Den to consult with their companions.

That the guanaco had been shot by one of the *Severn* men was evident, for neither Donagan nor any one else had fired a gun for more than a month. But it was important to know when and where the guanaco had received the bullet.

Taking everything into consideration, it appeared the wound must have been given not more than five or six hours before — that being the lapse of time necessary for the animal to cross the Down Lands so as to reach the river. Consequently, one of Walston's men must that morning have been at the south point of Family Lake, and the party must have crossed East River, and be getting nearer and nearer to French Den.

Thus the position was getting more serious, although danger was not yet imminent. In the south of the island lay this vast plain, cut up by streams, patched with swamps, dotted with sandhills, where there was not enough game to furnish the party with their daily meals. It was unlikely that Walston, as yet, had ventured to cross it; no report of fire-arms had been heard, and there was reason to hope that the position of French Den had not yet been discovered.

Nevertheless, prudential means had to be enforced with renewed vigour. If there was any chance of repulsing an attack, it lay in the colonists not being caught by surprise outside the cave.

Three days afterwards a more significant event happened to increase their apprehensions, and show that their safety was more endangered than ever.

On the 24th, about nine o'clock in the morning, Briant and Gordon had gone-out across Zealand River, to see if they could throw up a sort of entrenchment across the narrow footpath which ran between the lake and the marsh. Behind this entrenchment it would be easy for Donagan, the best shot of the party, to lie in ambush if Walston's advance was discovered in time.

They had gone about three hundred yards from the river when Briant stepped on something which broke under his foot. He took no notice of this, thinking it was one of the thousands of shells rolled up by the spring tides when they covered the plain. But Gordon, who was walking behind him, stopped and exclaimed —

“Look here, Briant, look here!”

“What’s the matter?”

Gordon stopped and picked up what had been broken.

“Look!” he said “That is not a shell,” said Briant. “That is — ”

“A pipe!”

Gordon held in his hand a black pipe with the stem broken off at the bowl.

“As none of us smoke,” said he, “this pipe must have been lost — ”

“By one of the men, unless it belonged to the Frenchman who was here before us.”

No! The pipe had not belonged to Baudoin, who had died twenty years before. It had been dropped very recently, as the fragments of tobacco inside it clearly showed. A few days before, perhaps a few hours before, one of Walston’s companions or perhaps Walston himself had been on this side of the lake.

Gordon and Briant returned at once to the cave. There Kate stated that she had seen this very pipe in Walston’s possession.

There was now no doubt that the pirates had got round the south of the lake. Perhaps during the night they had reached the bank of Zealand River. And if French Den had been discovered, if Walston knew about the colony, would he not have thought that the tools, instruments, ammunition, and stores he was so much in need of were here to be had, and that seven active men would easily get the better of fifteen boys — especially if he could take them by surprise? Anyhow there was no longer room to doubt that his party was now close to them.

Under such alarming circumstances, Briant agreed with his comrades that a more active watch should be arranged. During the day an outpost was permanently stationed on Auckland Hill, so as to command the approaches from all sides. During the night two of the bigger boys mounted guard at the entrances to the cave. The doors were strengthened with supports, and in a moment it was rendered possible to barricade them with the large stones that were heaped up inside the cave. In the narrow windows driven through the rock, the two little cannons were kept ready. One defended the Zealand River side, the other the side towards the lake. Guns and revolvers were so disposed as to be ready for use at the least alarm.

It was now the 27th of November. For two days the heat had been stifling. Huge clouds passed heavily over the island, and distant thundering announced the approach of a storm. In the evening Briant and his companions had retired earlier than usual into the hall, after taking the precaution, as had been their custom the last few nights, of hauling the boat into the store-room. The doors were shut, and the only thing to be done now was to wait for bed-time, and kneel in prayer and think of home.

About half-past nine the storm was in full fury. The cave was lighted up by the vivid flashes, and the hill seemed to shake with the rolling thunder peals. It was one of those storms without wind or rain, which are the most terrible of all, for the motionless clouds discharge their electricity over the one spot, and often a whole night will go by and the storm be unexhausted.

Costar, Dole, Iverson, and Jenkins hid in their beds and jumped at every dreadful outburst that showed how near the lightning was to them. But they had nothing to fear in that cave. The flashes might strike twenty times, a hundred times, the crest of the hill. It could not penetrate the thick walls of French Den, which were as impermeable to the lightning as to the rain. From time to time Briant, Donagan, or Baxter went and held the door ajar and returned immediately half-blinded by the flashes. The firmament seemed on fire, and the lake, reverberating the figurations of the sky, seemed one huge sheet of flame.

From ten o'clock to eleven o'clock there was not a moment's peace between the lightning and the thunder. It was not till near midnight that the storm began to slacken. Longer and longer intervals separated the thunder-claps, whose violence diminished as they grew more and more distant. Then the wind rose and drove away the clouds that hung so near the earth, and the rain fell in torrents.

Then the youngsters began to be less afraid. Two or three heads hidden beneath the bed-clothes came into view, although it was time for all to be asleep. Briant and the others, having taken the usual precautions, were going to bed, when Fan gave unmistakable signs of uneasiness. She jumped up and ran to the door and gave a long continuous growl.

“Has Fan scented anything?” asked Donagan, trying to quiet the dog.

“When that intelligent animal went on like this before,” said Baxter, “she made no mistake.”

“Before we go to bed,” said Gordon, “we must ascertain what it all means.”

“Quite so,” said Briant, “but let nobody go out, and let us be ready to defend ourselves.”

Each took his»gun and revolver. Then Donagan stepped towards the door of the hall, and Moko towards the door of the store-room. They listened at the threshold, but not a sound did they hear outside, although Fan continued to growl and began to bark loudly. This was most unfortunate, and Gordon tried in vain to keep her quiet.

Suddenly there was the report of a gun. There could be no mistaking it for a thunder-clap. And the gun must have been fired within two hundred yards of French Den.

Donagan, Baxter, Wilcox, and Cross picked up their rifles and stood ready at the doors to open fire on whoever approached. The others had begun to heap up the stones and form the barricade, when a voice outside was heard shouting —

“Help! Help!”

There was a man in danger of his life undoubtedly.

“Help!” repeated the voice, this time but a few yards away.

Kate was listening near the door.

“It is him!” she said.

“Him?” exclaimed Briant.

“Open the door! Open the door!” said Kate. The door was opened, and a man dripping with water rushed in amongst them. It was Evans of the *Severn.*

CHAPTER XI

A DARING ESCAPE

AT the unexpected appearance of Evans the boys for a moment stood motionless. Then, with a common impulse, they rushed towards him, as though he had been sent to deliver them.

He was a man just under thirty, broad-shouldered and athletic, with a firm and resolute step, a keen eye, an open brow, an intelligent, sympathetic face, half hidden by the curly hair and beard that bad remained uncut since the shipwreck.

As he entered. Evans shut the door quickly, and listened. Hearing nothing without he advanced into the middle of the cave. Then he looked at the crowd that surrounded him.

“Yes,” he said, “all boys! None but boys! “Suddenly his eyes lighted up “Kate!” he exclaimed. “What! Kate alive? “And he seized her hands, as though to make sure she was really living.

“Yes! as much alive as you are, Evans Heaven saved me as you have been saved and sent to the help of these children.”

The sailor looked round at the boys, who had gathered about the hall table.

“Fifteen.” said he, “and hardly five or six able to defend themselves. Well, it doesn’t matter,”

“Are we in danger of being attacked, Mr. Evans?” asked Briant. “No, my boy; at least not for the moment.” There is no need to enlarge on the anxiety of the boys to hear the sailor’s story, particularly as to what had taken place since the boat was driven on the island. None of them could think of sleep until they had heard what was °f so much importance to them But at first it was necessary for Evans to get rid of his wet clothes and have some food. His clothes were dripping from his having swum tile river. If he was exhausted with fatigue and hunger, v-’as because he had had nothing to eat for twelve hours, and no sleep since the morning.

Briant at once took him into the store-room, where Gordon soon fitted him with a suit of clothes, and Moko meanwhile put on the table some cold venison, some biscuit, and some freshly-made tea.

A quarter of an hour afterwards Evans was seated before the table, relating what had happened since he reached the island.

“A few moments before the boat struck the beach,” said he, “five of the men — myself among them — jumped out on to the reef. None of us were seriously hurt. But it was not an easy thing in the darkness to get through the funous surf. However, we at last got through safely. Two of us were missing — Forbes and Pike — taken on in the boat, and perhaps dashed out of her. As to Kate, I thought she had been lost in the sea, and I never expected! to see her again. When we reached the beach, it took us some time to find the boat. She had come ashore about! seven, and it was nearly twelve before we found her. We! had at first gone along the coast of — ”

“Severn Shores,” said Briant. “That is the name] some of us gave it when they discovered the boat, before] even Kate had told us about the wreck.”

“Before?” said Evans, looking surprised.

“Yes, Mr. Evans,” said Donagan. “We were on the spot the very night of the wreck, while your two companions were lying on the sand. But when the daylight; came, and we went to bury them, we found they had disappeared.”

“I see how that was,” said Evans. “Forbes and Pike, whom we thought drowned — and would to Heaven they had been, and there would then be two scoundrels the less — had been thrown out some distance from the boat, j and there Walston and the others found them, and brought them back to consciousness. Happily for them — unfortunately for us — the boat lockers had not been smashed nor touched by the sea. The stores, weapons, five guns, and what remained of the provisions thrown in hurriedly when the *Severn* was afire, were taken out of the boat, which we thought would be destroyed next tide. And that done, we left the place, and journeyed eastwards along the coast. Soon one of the men — Rock, I think — remarked that we had not found Kate, and Walston replied, ‘ She has been carried away by the tide; and a good riddance too! ‘ And this made me think that if they were glad to get rid of Kate now she could be of no use to them, so would it be with me when I was of no use. But where were you, Kate?”

“I was near the boat, between it and the sea,” Kate replied, “just where I had been thrown. They could not see me, and I heard all that passed between Walston and the others. But as soon as they went, I got up, and not caring to fall again into Walston’s hands, I took flight in the opposite direction. Thirty-six hours afterwards, when I was half dead with hunger, I was found by these brave boys, and brought to French Den.”

“French Den?” repeated Evans. “That is the name we gave this cave,” said Gordon, “in memory of a shipwrecked Frenchman who had inhabited it a good many years before we did.”

“French Den? Severn Shores?” said Evans. “I see you have given names to the different parts of the island. That is capital!”‘

“Yes,” said Service, “and capital names they are. There are lots of others. There’s Family Lake, South Moor, Zealand River, Trap Woods — ”

“Good! Good! You can tell me all about that later on — to-morrow, perhaps. Now I will go on with my story. Do you hear anything outside?”

“Nothing,” said Moko, who remained on guard at the door.

“All the better,” said Evans. “Well, then, an hour after we left the boat, we reached a clump of trees, where we camped. Next day and for many days we returned to the place where the boat had been wrecked, and we tried to repair her. But we had no tools, except an axe, and with that it was impossible to replace the damaged strakes and make her seaworthy even for a little while. Besides, the place was most unsuitable for work of the sort. So we started to find another encampment in a less arid region, where we might shoot enough to feed us, and at the same time be near a river that would supply us with fresh water. After walking about a dozen miles along the coast, we reached a small river — ”

“East River,” said Service.

“East River be it,” said Evans. “There is a rood- sized bay — ” —

“Deception Bay!” said Jenkins. “Deception Bay be it!” said Evans with a smile.

“There among the rocks in a sort of harbour — ”

“Bear Rock,” said Costar.

“Well, Bear Rock then, my boy,” said Evans with a nod. There was no difficulty in finding a camping-place there. And if we could have got the boat round, we could perhaps in time have repaired her sufficiently. So off we went, and although she was more than half full of water, we managed to tow her round to the harbour, where she is now safe.”

“The boat is at Bear Rock?” asked Briant.

“Yes, my boy, and I do not think it would be impossible to repair her, if we only had the tools — ”

“But we have the tools, Mr. Evans,” said Donagan, interrupting.

“So Walston supposed, when he accidentally discovered that the island was inhabited, and who were its inhabitants.”

“How did he do that?” asked Gordon.

“Eight days ago,” said Evans, “Walston and all of us — for I was never left alone — were out exploring in the forest. After three or four hours’ walking up the bank of East River, we reached the shore of a large lake, out of which the stream flowed. And then judge of our surprise when we found a curious apparatus washed up on to the beach. It was a framework of canes, on which there was stretched — ”

“Our kite!” exclaimed Donagan.

“Our kite!” added Briant, “which fell into the lake, and which the wind took to that spot.”

“Oh, it was a kite, was it?” said Evans. “We did not think of that, and the machine bothered us a good deal, I can tell you. Anyhow, we saw it could not have made itself. There was no doubt of that. Then it must have been made on the island. There was no doubt of that. Then the island was inhabited! By whom f That was what Walston wanted to know. As for me, from that very day I resolved to escape. Who were the inhabitants of this island > Even if they were savages, they could not be worse than the murderers of the *Severn.'* From that moment, however, I was guarded night and day."

"And how was French Den discovered?" asked Baxter.

"I am coming to that," answered Evans: "but before I go on, tell me what you did with that big kite. Was it a signal?"

Gordon told the sailor what had been done. What their object had been, how Briant had risked his life for the safety of all, and found that Walston was still on the island.

"You are a brave boy," said Evans, seizing hold of Briant by the hand and giving it a hearty shake.

Then he continued —

"You will understand, then, that Walston had only one thing to trouble about after that, and that was to discover who were the inhabitants of this island. If they were natives, could he enter into communication with them? If they had been shipwrecked, had they got the tools we wanted? In that case he would not refuse their help in repairing the boat. So we began to find out — very cautiously, I need hardly say. We advanced slowly, carefully exploring the right bank of the lake till we reached the south corner. Bat not a human being did we see, not a sound did we hear."

“That,” said Briant, “was because we kept to French Den, and orders were given not to fire a gun under any circumstances.”

“Nevertheless we found you out,” said Evans; “and how could it be otherwise? It was on the night of the 23rd that one of the men arrived in sight of French Den by the south shore of the lake. Ill-luck had it that a beam of light for a moment shot out on to the cliff — probably from your lantern when the door was opened for a moment. Next morning Walston came away to reconnoitre, and during a part of the evening he remained hidden among the high grass a few yards from the stream — ”

“We knew that,” said Briant.

“How?”

“Gordon and I found the fragments of a pipe that Kate recognized as being Walston’s.”

“Right!” said the sailor; “Walston lost it while he was away, and he made a deal of fuss about it when he came back. So you see we knew of the existence of your little colony, and while he lay in the grass he saw you running about on the opposite side of the stream — a lot of boys whom seven men could easily overpower — and he came back to the camp and told his companions what he had seen. A conversation between him and Brandt I happened to overhear, and it told me what was in preparation against French Den.”

“The monsters!” exclaimed Kate, “and they had no pity for these children?”

“No, Kate, no more than they had for the captain and passengers of the *Severn.* Monsters! you may well call them monsters! And they are commanded by the cruellest of the lot, this Walston, who I hope will not escape the punishment of his crimes. Well, about twelve hours ago I took advantage of the absence of Walston and the others, who had left me in charge of Forbes and Rock, and I got away. To throw the scoundrels off the scent, or rather to have a good start, I went on some distance in advance. It was about ten o'clock when I started in earnest. They found me out almost immediately, and gave chase. They had their guns. I had only my sailor's knife. The chase lasted all day. By cutting off on the slant through the woods, I struck the left bank of the lake, so that I had to get round the south end, for I knew from what I had overheard that you had your camp on the bank of a stream flowing westward. Never had I such a run in my life. The beggars ran as fast as I did, and their bullets flew about even quicker. Sometimes they whistled past my ears. You see I knew their secret! If I escaped them, I could give the alarm. If they had not had the guns, I could have pulled up and waited for them knife in hand. Yes, I would rather have died than go back to their camp. However, I hoped the chase would end at nightfall. Nothing of the sort. I rounded the lake and came up along this shore, but I found Forbes and Rock at my heels all the time. The storm came on. It made my flight more difficult, for by the light of the lightning my pursuers could see me At length I reached the stream. If I could put it between myself and the villains, I might consider myself safe. So I ran, and I was just jumping in when a flash illumined the sky. Immediately there was the report of a gun — ”

“Which we heard,” said Donagan.

“Evidently!” said Evans. “A bullet grazed my shoulder. I jumped into the river, and in a few strokes I was on this side hidden among the bushes, while Rock and Forbes were on the other shouting to each other: ‘ Did you hit him? ‘ ‘I believe you!’ ‘Then he is at the bottom! ‘ ‘Rather, and dead as dead! ‘ ‘And a good job too I ‘ And off they went. And it is a good job. They’ll see if I am as dead as dead before long. I soon got out of the bushes, and came up towards the angle of the cliff. I heard the dog bark. I shouted — the door opened — and here I am to help you clear the scoundrels out of the island.”

And he spoke the words with such energy that the boys all stood up as if ready to follow him.

Then Evans was told what had happened during the Inst twenty months; how the schooner had left New Zealand, crossed the Pacific, got wrecked on the island, how the remains of the shipwrecked Frenchman had been found, the colony settled at French Den, the excursions during the warm season, the work during the winter, and the life free from danger until the arrival of Walston and his gang.

“And for twenty months,” said Evans, “no ship has been sighted from the island?”

“*Not* one,” answered Briant. “Have you got any signals?”

“Yes; a mast at \.he top of the cliff.”

“And it was not seen?”

“No,” said Donagan, “but then we took it down six weeks ago, so that it should not attract Walston’s attention.”

“And you did well, my boys. But now he knows where you are, and night and day you must be on your guard.”

“Why,” said Gordon, “should we have to do with such rascals instead of the honest folks we should be so glad to have come and help us? Our colony is not too strong I Henceforth a fight is in store for us, a fight for our very lives, and none can say what will be the issue.”

Heaven has protected you till now, my children,” said Kate, “and will not abandon you now. Here has this man been sent.”

“You can depend on me, my boys, and I depend on you; and I promise you we will not make a bad defence “But,” said Gordon, “is it not possible to avoid fighting altogether, if Walston would agree to leave the island?”

“What do you mean, Gordon?” asked Briant.

“I mean that he and his friends would have gone already if they had been able to use their boat! Is that not so, Mr. Evans?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, then, if you were to enter into negotiations With them, and give them the tools they want, would y accept the offer? I know it may be repugnant to you to enter into negotiations with the murderers of the Severn, but to get rid of them, to avoid an attack that may cause much bloodshed, it might be worth our while. What do you say, Mr. Evans?”

Evans had listened attentively. Gordon’s proposition showed a practical mind, and a character that could calmly look at the situation on every side. He thought — and he was not deceived — that there was the real leader of the colony, and that what he said was worth serious consideration.

“Anything you could do,” said Evans, “to get rid of these wretches would be worth doing. And if they would agree to go, it would be better to help them repair their boat than to engage in a struggle with them, of which the end must be doubtful. But is it possible to put any trust in Walston? When you were negotiating with him, would he not try to surprise French Den, and seize on what is yours? Would he not think that you had saved money from the wreck? Believe me, the scoundrels would only seek to do you harm for all the good you might do them. In such minds there is no place for gratitude! To treat with them is to give yourselves over to them.”

“No,” said Baxter and Donagan; and “No!” said Briant. “We will have nothing to do with Walston and his gang.”

“And besides,” said Evans, “it is not only tools they want, but ammunition I That they have enough to attack you is true; but to go away to other lands they would want much more. They will ask for it I They will demand it! Will you give it to them?”

“Certainly not,” said Gordon.

“Well, then, they will seek to take it by force. You will only postpone the fight, and have it with worse chances for yourselves.”

“You are right, Mr. Evans,” said Gordon. “Let us keep on the defensive, and wait.”

“That is the best thing to do. Besides, there is another reason, which affects me quite as much as the other”

“What is that?”

“Listen. Walston, you know, cannot leave the island without the boat.”

“Yes,” said Briant.

“The boat can be repaired, I am sure, and Walston has only given up repairing her for want of tools.”

“If it hadn’t been for that, he would have been far away before now,” said Baxter.

“As you say, my boy; now, if you help Walston to repair his boat, and even suppose he does not pillage French Den, he will be off without troubling about you.”

“Well, and what if he does?” asked Service.

“Why,” said Evans, “how can you do the same if the boat is no longer there?”

“What!” said Gordon. “Do you trust to the boat to take us off the island?”

“I do.”

“To regain New Zealand? To cross the Pacific?” asked Donagan.

“The Pacific? No, my boys; but to reach a place not so far off, where we could wait for a chance of getting back to Auckland.”

“Is that true?” asked Briant.

“How,” asked Baxter, “can that boat be made to carry us several hundred miles?

“Several hundred miles!” exclaimed Evans. “Only thirty, you mean!”

“Is it not the sea, then, that extends all round this island?” asked Donagan.

“On the west, yes,” said Evans; “but on the south, north, and east, only channels that you can cross in a few hours.”

“Then we were not wrong in thinking land was near us?” asked Gordon.

“No,” said Evans. “And there is a good-sized land to the east.”

“Yes!” said Briant, “In the east, where I saw the white patch, and the glare — ”

“A white patch, did you say? That was a glacier. And a glare? That was the flame of a volcano, whose position is given on the maps. You know where you are, don’t you?”

“On one of the isolated islands of the Pacific Ocean,” said Gordon.

“On an island? Yes I Isolated? No! It belongs to one of the numerous archipelagoes off the coast of South America! And as you have given names to the capes, and bays, and streams, I suppose you have named the island. What do you call it?”

“Charman Island, after the name of our school,” said Donagan.

“Charman Island!” replied Evans. “Well, then, it “as two names, for it is already called Hanover Island!”

CHAPTER XII

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

THE Straits of Magellan, discovered by the illustrious Portuguese navigator in 1520, are about three hundred] and eighty miles long. They extend from Cape Virgins, on the Atlantic, to Cape Pillar on the Pacific. They have a very varied coast-line, commanded by mountains rising three thousand feet above the sea, and broken by many. bays, with many harbours rich in springs where ships can renew their water, bordered by thick forests where game abounds, and echoing with the roar of the waterfalls that pour in thousands into their innumerable creeks. They I are chosen by ships coming eastwards or westwards, being: a shorter passage than the Straits of Lemaire between Tierra del Fuego and Staten Island.

The Spaniards, who for half a century alone visited the Magellanic district, founded on the Brunswick Peninsula | the settlement of Port Famine. The Spaniards were] succeeded by the English under Drake, Cavendish, Chidley, and Hawkins; then came the Dutch under De Weert, De Cord, De Noort, with Lemaire and Schouten, who in 1610 discovered the Strait by Staten Island. Then, between 1696 and 1712, came the French, with Degennes, Beauchesne-Gouin, and Frezier, and after them came the most celebrated navigators of the eighteenth century, Anson, Cook, Byron, and others.

From that time the Straits of Magellan became a high-l way between the oceans, particularly since the advent off steam navigation, which is independent of unfavourable! winds and contrary currents.

Such was the channel which, on the 28th of November,! Evans pointed out on the map to Briant and his companions.

Patagonia, the most southerly province of Souths America, King William Land, and the Brunswick Penin-i sola form the northern coast of the Straits. On the south! is the Magellanic Archipelago, comprising the large islands, of Tierra del Fuego, Desolation Land, Clarence Island, Hoste Island, Gordon Island, Navarin Island, Wollastonf Island, Stewart Island, and others of less importance, ex-g tending south to the Hermits, of which the outermost is I the last of the long Cordillera of the Andes, and bears I the name of Cape Horn.

On the east the Straits of Magellan open between Cape Virgins and Cape Espiritu-Santo. On the west there are innumerable channels, amid hundreds of islets, islands, and archipelagoes, and the main opening is between Cape Hilar and the southern point of Queen Adelaide Island. North of that island is a long series of archipelagoes, extending from Lord Nelson Strait up to the Chonos and Chiloe Island, on the Chilian coast.

“And now,” said Evans, “you see beyond the Straits of Magellan an island separated from Cambridge Island on the south, and Madre de Dios and Chatham on the north. That island, at the fifty-first degree of south latitude, is Hanover Island, to which you have given the name of Charman Island, and on which you have been living for the last twenty months.”

Briant, Gordon, and Donagan bent over the map, and gazed with curiosity at the island, which they had thought was so far away from any other land, and which was so near the American coast.

“What!” said Gordon, “we are only separated from Chili by that arm of the sea?”

“Yes, boys,” said Evans. “But between Hanover Island and the mainland there are only desert islands like this. And once we reached the mainland we should have to travel hundreds of miles before we reached a settlement of Chili or the Argentine Republic! And it would be a laborious journey, to say nothing of the danger from Puelche Indians, who swarm over the Pampas, and are particularly inhospitable! I think it was for the best that you did not abandon your island, where you had the means of living; but now, with God’s help, I hope we will leave it together.”

And so the different channels that surrounded Hanover island were, in certain places, not more than from fifteen to twenty miles across, and in fine weather Moko might easily have crossed them in the yawl. That Briant and the rest had not seen these islands in their excursions was because they all lie low. The white spot was a distant glacier and the mountain in eruption was one of the Magellanic volcanoes.

Besides, as Briant observed, their expeditions had led them to those parts of the coast most distant from the neighbouring islands. When Donagan reached Severn Shore he might, it is true, have seen the southern coast of Chatham Island, had it not been that the horizon was clouded by the vapour of the storm. From Deception Bay, which deeply indents Hanover Island and Bear Rock at the mouth of East River, nothing could be seen of the islet in the east, nor of Esp6rance Island twenty miles away. To sight the neighbouring land the boys would have to go to North Cape, whence the end of Chatham Island or Madre de Dios would be visible across Conception Strait, or to South Cape, whence they could see Queen Adelaide Island or Cambridge Island, or to the end of Down Lands, whence they might catch a glimpse of Owen Island and the glaciers to the south-east.

But the boys had never pushed their explorations as far as these distant points. As to Baudoin's map, Evans could not explain why these islands and lands had not been shown. It might have been that the shipwrecked Frenchman had not been able to make out exactly the configuration of Hanover Island. And perhaps the fogs and mist had limited his view.

And now, supposing they could obtain possession of the boat and repair it, where would Evans make for?

That was what Gordon wanted to know.

"I should neither go north nor east," said Evans; "with a favourable breeze we might reach a Chilian port, where we would be welcomed. But the sea is very rough on these coasts, while the channels through the archipelagoes would give us an easy passage"

"But are there any settlements in these parts? "asked Briant. "Is there any place from which we could get ' home?"

"I think so," said Evans. "Look at the map. After passing through Queen Adelaide Archipelago we should go down Smyth Channel into the Straits of Magellan. At the entrance to the Straits is Tamar Haven on the Land of Desolation, and there we should be on the road t home."

"And if we do not meet a ship, shall we have to wait j till one passes?" asked Briant.

"No. Follow me further down the Straits. You see the Brunswick Peninsula. At the bottom of Fortescue Bay, look, is Port Gallant, where ships often put in. If we go beyond that, and double Cape Froward, we have Saint Nicolas

Bay, or Bougainville Bay, where nearly all the ships put in. Further along still is Port Famine, and then Punta Arena."

The sailor was right. Once they got into the Straits, there would be many places for them to put in at. Their return home was assured. If Port Tamar, Port Gallant, and Port Famine did not yield much to support them, there was Punta Arena, where all the necessaries of life could be obtained. It is a large settlement, founded on the coast by the Chilian Government, and is now quite a town, with a beautiful church, whose spire rises among the superb trees of Brunswick Peninsula. It is in the full tide of prosperity, while Port Famine, which dates from the end of the tenth century, is now but a village in ruins.

In addition to these, then, there existed more to the south other settlements visited by scientific expeditions, such as the station of Liwya, on Navarin Island, and Ooshooia, on Beagle Channel, south of Tierra del Fuego; the last, thanks to the devotion of English missionaries, doing much towards increasing the knowledge of those distant lands.

The boys would thus be safe if they could only reach the Straits. To get there, they would have to repair the boat, and to repair it they must get possession of it — and that would only be possible after Walston and his accomplices had been settled with.

If the boat had remained where Donagan had seen it they might have tried to carry it off. Walston, fifteen miles away at East River, would know nothing of the attempt. What he had done Evans could do, that is, tow the boat, not to Bear. Rock, but to Zealand River, and even bring it up the river to French Den. Then she could be repaired under the best conditions, and, rigged and loaded, she could be off from the island before the mutineers could stop her.

Unfortunately this plan was not feasible. The question could only be solved by force, either by taking the offensive or remaining on the defensive. Nothing could be done until Walston had been defeated.

The boys felt full confidence in Evans. Kate had spoken of him in such enthusiastic terms. Now that his hair and beard were cut, he was really a bold, handsome- looking fellow. If he was energetic and brave, they felt that he was also good-natured, and of a resolute character, capable of any amount of self-sacrifice. In truth, as Kate said, “Heaven had sent a ‘ man ‘ to help the boys.”

The first thing Evans did was to take stock of the force and material under his command. Store-room and hall seemed to him to be well adapted for defence. One commanded the river, the other the lake. The embrasures allowed of the defenders firing from cover. With their eight guns the besieged could keep their assailants at a distance, and with the two little cannons they could rain bullets on them if they came closer. Revolvers, axes, cutlasses were there for all to use if it came to a hand-to- hand fight.

Inside the defenders were strong; outside they were weak. There were but six biggish boys against seven active men, accustomed to the use of arms, and desperate enough not to shrink from murder.

“You consider them desperate scoundrels?” asked Gordon.

“Yes,” said Evans, “very desperate.”

“Except one, who is not quite as bad as the rest,” said Kate. “That’s Forbes, who saved my life.”

“Forbes?” said Evans. “Well, whether he was led away by evil counsel, or by fear of his mates, he none the less took part in the massacre. It was he and Rock who came after me. He it was who shot at me as if I was a wild beast. Wasn’t he the one who was so glad I was at the bottom of the river? Eh, Kate? I don’t think he is any better than the others. He spared you because he knew you could be of use to them, and he won’t be behind when the attack comes.”

Nevertheless, several days went by. Nothing suspicious had been reported from the guard on Auckland Hill, and this much to Evans’s surprise. Knowing Walston’s plans, and the importance to him of not wasting time, he wondered why nothing had been done between the 27th and 30th of November. Then the idea occurred to him that Walston was endeavouring to get into French ~Den by strategy, and not by force.

“While we are in the cave,” said he to Briant, “Walston would have to force his way in through one of the doors, unless somebody opened them for him! He will try to get in by some dodge — ”

“How?” asked Gordon.

“This way, perhaps. You see there are only Kate and I who could denounce him as the chief of a gang of robbers seeking to capture your colony, and he fancies Kate died at the wreck. As for me, I am drowned in the river, you know. He does not know you know anything — not even that he is on the island. If he was to come as if he had been wrecked, he may think you would receive him; and once he got into the cave, he could let in his companions, when resistance would be impossible.”

“Well,” said Briant, “if Walston or any of them came asking for shelter, we would shoot — ”

“Or take our hats off? Which?” asked Gordon.

“That might be better,” said the sailor.

“Diamond cut diamond, eh? Let us talk it over.”

Next morning passed without adventure. Evans, with Donagan and Baxter, went out for half a mile, as far as Trap Woods, keeping well under the trees, at the base of Auckland Hill. They saw nothing unusual, and Fan, who accompanied them, gave no alarm.

But in the evening, just before sunset, Webb and Cross came in hurriedly from their post on the hill, and announced the approach of two men along the south side of the lake on the other side of Zealand River.

Kate and Evans, not wishing to be observed, at once hurried into the store-room, and, looking through the embrasures, soon caught sight of Rock and Forbes.

“Evidently,” said the sailor, “they are going to try treachery. They are coming as shipwrecked sailors — ”

“What shall we do?” asked Briant. f- “Take them in!” said Evans.

‘‘ Welcome those scoundrels?” said Briant. “I never I can — ”

“I can,” said Gordon.

“Well, then, do so!” said Evans. “But don’t let them have a suspicion of our presence. Kate and I will appear when it is time.”

Evans and Kate retired into the cupboard in the passage between the rooms.

A few minutes afterwards Gordon, Briant, Donagan, and Baxter ran out on to the river-bank. The two men, now close to the other side, feigned immense surprise when they saw them. And Gordon looked even more surprised.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“We have been wrecked on the south of this island in the boat of the ship *Severn.”*

“Are you English?”

“No, Americans.”

“Where are your companions?’

“All lost. We alone escaped the wreck, and we are almost done up. Who are you, please?”

“The colonists of Charman Island.”

“Perhaps the colonists, then, will take pity on us, and help us, for we have got nothing — ”

“All who are wrecked have a right to be helped,” said Gordon. “You are welcome.”

At a sign from him Moko entered the yawl, which was moored close by, and in a few strokes of the oar the two men were across the river.

Doubtless Walston had no choice, but it must be confessed that Rock’s face was not one to inspire confidence, even with boys, who are not adepts at reading physiognomies. He did his best to look like an honest man, but what could he do with his narrow forehead, his head so big behind, and his remarkable lower jaw? Forbes — in whom, according to Kate, every sentiment of humanity was not yet extinct — was a much better-looking fellow, which was probably the reason that Walston had sent him.

They played their parts well. When a more direct question than usual proved embarrassing, they pleaded that they were quite tired out, and begged that they might take a rest, and even pass the night at French Den. As they entered the cave Gordon watched them throw a searching look around, and noticed their surprise at the means of defence, particularly at the little cannon pointing out of the embrasure. It is probable that the boys would have been unable to keep up the little drama had the men not asked to be allowed to lie down, and postpone the story of their adventures until the morning.

“A bed of leaves will do for us,” said Rock, “but as we don’t wish to be in your way, if you have another room — ”

“Yes,” said Gordon, “we have one we use as a kitchen, and you can stay there till to-morrow.”

Rock and his companion passed into the store-room, which they examined with a searching glance, and noted that the door opened on to the river.

In a corner they lay themselves down. They were not alone, for Moko slept there, but they did not think much of him, as they had made up their minds to twist his neck if they found him sleeping with only one eye. At the hour agreed they could open the store-room door, and Walston, who was prowling about the neighbourhood, would soon be master of French Den.

About nine o’clock, when Rock and Forbes were seemingly sound asleep, Moko entered and threw himself down ‘ on the bed, ready to give the alarm. Briant and the others remained in the hall; the door of the passage was shut, and Evans and Kate came to them out of their | hiding-place. Things had gone exactly as the sailor had I foreseen, and he had no doubt that Walston was close at J hand, waiting the signal to break in.

“We must be on our guard,” said he. Two hours passed, and Moko was asking himself if! Rock and Forbes had not postponed their scheme for another night, when his attention was attracted by a slight noise in the corner of the cave.

By the light of the lantern, hung from the roof, he saw Rock and Forbes leave their bed and creep towards the door.

The door was buttressed by a heap of heavy stones, a regular barricade which it would not be easy to clear away.

The two men began to lift away the stones, which they laid one by one against the wall. In a few minutes the ‘ door was clear, and all they had to do was to take down the bar.

But as soon as Rock lifted the bar and opened the door, a hand was placed on his shoulder. He turned and recognized Evans.

“Evans!” he gasped. “Evans here!”

“Come along, boys!” shouted Evans.

Instantly Briant and his companions rushed in. Forbes, seized by the four strongest, was thrown down and secured.

Rock, with a rapid movement, shook himself clear of Evans, wounding him slightly with his knife, and fled through the open door. He had not gone ten yards before there was a shot. It was Evans who had fired. To all appearance the fugitive was unhurt, as no cry was heard.

“Missed him!” said the sailor. “But there’s the other. We can settle one of them.”

“And cutlass in hand he stepped up to Forbes.

“Mercy! Mercy!” said the wretch, whom the boys were holding down on the ground.

“Yes! Mercy, Evans!” said Kate, throwing herself in front of him. “Spare him, for he spared me.”

“Be it so!” said Evans. “I consent, Kate — at least for the present.”

And Forbes was bound and placed in one of the cavities in the passage.

Then the door of the store-room was shut and barricaded, and the boys remained on the alert till daybreak.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FORTUNE OF WAR

AT daylight Evans, Briant, Donagan, and Gordon went out of the cave, keeping careful watch around them. As the sun rose the morning mists condensed, and the lake appeared rippled by a gentle breeze from the eastward.

All was quiet round French Den, by the side of Zealand River as well as by Trap Woods. In the enclosure the domestic animals moved about as usual, and the dog gave no sign of disquietude.

Evans looked on the ground for footprints, and he found many, particularly near French Den. They crossed each other in many directions, and showed that during the night Walston and his mates must have reached the river bank, and waited till the cave door was opened for them. There was no trace of blood on the sand — a proof that Rock had not even been wounded.

But one question remained unanswered. Had Walston come by the south of the lake or by the north? If the latter were the case. Rock must have fled towards Trap Woods.

As it was important to clear this up, it was decided to interrogate Forbes. Would gratitude to Kate, who had saved his life, awaken any feeling of humanity within him? Would he forget that he had begged hospitality from those whom he intended to betray?

Evans went back into the cave, opened the door of the cupboard where Forbes was confined, undid his bandages, and brought him into the hall.

“Forbes,” said Evans, “your stratagem has not succeeded. It is important that I should know what are Walston’s plans as far as you know. Will you answer?”

Forbes bowed his head and lowered his eyes, not daring to look at Evans or Kate or the boys before whom he stood. And he was silent.

Kate intervened.

“Forbes,” said she, “you once showed a little pity in preventing your mates from killing me during the mutiny on the ship. Will you do nothing to save the children from a more frightful massacre?”

Forbes did not reply.

“Forbes,” said Kate, “they have given you your life when you deserved to die! All humanity is not dead within you! After doing so much evil, why not do a little good?”

A half-stifled sigh came from Forbes.

“What can I do?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“You can tell us,” said Evans, “what was to have happened last night, what is to happen now. Was Walston waiting outside till one of the doors was opened?”

“Yes,” said Forbes.

“And these children who welcomed you were to be murdered?”

Forbes bowed his head again.

“Which way did the others come here?” asked Evans. “From the north of the lake,” answered Forbes. “While Rock and you came from the south?”

“Yes.”

“Have they been in the west of the island yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Where are they now?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can tell us no more?”

“No.”

‘ But you think Walston will come back?”

“I do.”

Evidently Walston had been alarmed by the shot, and thinking that the stratagem had failed, had judged it best to clear off till a more favourable occasion.

Evans despaired of getting any more information from Forbes, and led him back to file cupboard, and locked him in.

p Matters were now serious enough. Where was Walston? Was he camped in the thickets of Trap Woods? It was necessary to know, and Evans decided to reconnoitre in that direction, although the attempt might be dangerous.

It was nearly noon when Moko took the prisoner some food. Forbes hardly touched it, so depressed did he seem to be. What was passing in his mind? Had his conscience made him a prey to remorse?

After dinner Evans told the boys of his intention to go out towards Trap Woods with a view of ascertaining if the pirates were still near French Den. The proposition having been accepted without discussion, arrangements were made to run the minimum of danger.

Walston and his companions were now only six since Forbes's capture, while the little colony numbered fifteen without counting Kate and Evans. But from the seventeen in all there had to be deducted the younger ones, who could take no direct part in the fight. It was decided, therefore, that while Iverson, Jenkins, and Dole remained in the cave, with Kate, Moko, and Jack, in charge of Baxter, the bigger boys, Briant, Gordon, Donagan, Cross, Service, Webb, Wilcox, and Garnett, should accompany Evans. Eight boys to six men did not appear to be a fair match, but each of them was armed with a gun and a revolver, while Walston only had the five guns saved from the ship; so that a long-range fight might give them a chance, particularly as Donagan, Wilcox, and Cross were much better shots than the American seamen. Besides, they had plenty of ammunition, while Walston was reduced to a few cartridges.

It was two o'clock when Evans and his troop set out. Baxter, Jack, Moko, Kate and the little ones immediately returned to the cave and shut, but did not barricade, both doors, in case the scouting party had to run for shelter. There was nothing to fear on the southern side or even on the western, for to come that way Walston would have to go to Schooner Bay before coming up the valley of Zealand River, and that would have taken too much time. Besides, after Forbes's answer that they had come down the shore of the lake, and knew nothing of the western district, Evans had no fear of an attack in the rear.

The boys advanced cautiously along the base of Auckland Hill. Beyond the enclosure the underwood and groups of trees enabled them to reach the forest without exposing themselves too much.

Evans went in front — after having to repress the ardour of Donagan, who always wanted to be first. When they had passed the little mound where reposed the remains of the Frenchman, they struck off obliquely, so as to reach the shore of the lake.

Fan, whom Gordon did his utmost to hold back, seemed to be searching for something, cocked her ears, sniffed with her nose on the ground, and had apparently struck a trail.

“Wait!” said Briant.

“Yes,” said Gordon. “It is a man’s trail. Look at the dog’s behaviour.”

“Slip along under the bushes,” said Evans; “and you, Donagan, who are such a good shot, if you get one of the beggars within range, don’t miss him.”

A few seconds afterwards they had reached the first group of trees. There, just on the skirt of the forest, were the traces of a recent camp — twigs half burnt, ashes still warm.

“Here’s where Walston passed last night,” said Gordon.

“And perhaps he was here a short time ago. I think we had better get back,” said Evans.

He had hardly finished when there was the report of a gun to the right of him. A bullet pinged past Briant's ear and lodged in a tree. Almost simultaneously there was another report, followed by a cry of agony not fifty yards away, and something fell heavily among the bushes.

Donagan had fired as soon as he saw the smoke from the first gun.

The dog rushed to the front, and Donagan in his excitement dashed after him.

"Forward!" shouted Evans. "We mustn't leave him to fight them single-handed!"

A moment afterwards they had rejoined Donagan and stood round a corpse in the grass.

"That's Pike!" said Evans. "The scoundrel is stone dead. He's one to you, Donagan."

"The others cannot be far off!" said Cross.

"No, my boy, but keep under cover I Down with you! Down!"

There was a third bang, this time from the left. Service, who had not ducked quickly enough, had his forehead grazed by the bullet.

"You are hit!" said Gordon, rushing towards him.

"It's nothing! It's nothing!" said Service. "It is only a scratch!"

It was imperative for the boys to keep together. Pike lay dead between them and Walston and the four men, who were probably posted behind the trees, and Evans and the others, crouching in the bushes, formed a compact group ready for an attack from any side.

Suddenly Garnett exclaimed —

“Where is Briant?”

“I don’t see him,” said Wilcox.

Briant had disappeared. Fan began to bark loudly, and it seemed as though the boy was struggling with one of the pirates.

“Briant! Briant!” shouted Donagan.

And away the boys all ran after the dog. Evans could not keep them back. They ran from tree to tree.

“Look out, Mr. Evans!” shouted Cross, throwing himself flat on the ground.

Instinctively the sailor stooped, as a bullet pinged past a few inches above him.

Rising instantly, he saw one of Walston’s men running off. It was Rock, whom he had missed the night before.

“There’s one for you, Rock!” he shouted. Quickly he aimed and fired, and Rock disappeared as suddenly as if the earth had opened under his feet.

“Missed again, I suppose,” said Evans.

All this took place in a few seconds. Immediately afterwards Donagan’s voice was heard.

“Hold on, Briant! Hold on!” he shouted.

Evans and the others dashed towards him, and found Briant struggling with Cope, who had thrown him down, and was going to run him through with his cutlass, when Donagan jumped to the rescue just in time to turn the thrust into his own body and fall without uttering a sound.

Cope, seeing Evans, Garnett, and Webb attempting to cut off his retreat, fled away to the north, receiving a straggling volley as he did so. He disappeared, and Fan returned without having reached him. — .

Briant rose from the ground, and lifted Donagan’s head, and tried to revive him. Evans and the others came round, after quickly loading their guns.

Donagan had been stabbed full in the chest, and, seemingly, mortally. His eyes were shut, his face was as white as wax, and he made no movement, not even when Briant called to him.

Evans stooped, opened the boy’s waistcoat, and tore open the shirt, which was wet with blood. There was a thin bleeding gash near the fourth rib, on the left side. Had the cutlass touched the heart? No, for Donagan still breathed. But it was to be feared that the lung had been pierced, for the respiration was extremely feeble.

“We must take him back to the cave!” said Gordon. “That’s the only place where we can look after him.”

“And save him!” said Briant. “Oh! my poor friend! It was for me that you risked your life!”

There seemed, to be an end to the battle, and Evans gave orders for Donagan to be taken at once to French Den. Apparently Walston had seen things going badly with him, and had retreated into the woods. But, strange to say — and this made Evans anxious — neither Walston, nor Brandt, nor Cook had been seen, and these were the most formidable of the gang.

Donagan’s state required that he should be carried without being jolted, and Service and Wilcox made a litter of boughs, on which they laid him, still unconscious. Then four of his companions gently bore it, while the others walked on either side with guns loaded and revolvers in hand.

They made straight for Auckland Hill. Better that than following the path along the lake. Nothing happened to interfere with them. Sometimes Donagan would give such a painful sigh that Gordon would signal a halt, in order to listen to the respiration, and a moment afterwards they would resume their progress.

Three-quarters of an hour had gone, and they were close to French Den although the door was hidden by a shoulder off the cliff.

Suddenly there was a shout from Zealand River, and Fan sprang off towards it.

French Den was being attacked by Walston and his two companions. While Rock, Cope, and Pike lay in ambush in Trap Woods, Walston, Brandt, and Cook had climbed Auckland Hill, up the dry bed of the torrent that fed Dike Creek. Rapidly running along the ridge, I they had descended the gorge opening on to the river near the store-room, and then, with a rush, had forced the door, which had not been barricaded. | Would Evans come up soon enough? His plan was formed instantly. Leaving Cross, Webb, and Garnett to guard Donagan, who could not be left alone, he, with Gordon, Briant, Service, and Wilcox, took the shortest cut to the cave.

In a few strides they could see the terrace, where a sight met their eyes that almost drove them to despair.

Walston was coming out of the door, dragging one of the boys towards the stream.

It was Jack. And in vain Kate strove to tear him from Walston.

A moment afterwards Brandt appeared, clutching young Costar, and bearing him off in the same direction.

Baxter threw himself upon Brandt, who, with a blow, knocked him to the ground.

The other boys were not to be seen. Had they been already dealt with in the cave?

Walston and Brandt ran quickly towards the river. And there was Cook waiting for them with the yawl, that he had dragged out of the store-room.

Once on the left bank, they would be out of reach. Before their retreat could be cut off they would have got back to Bear Rock with Jack and Costar as hostages in their hands.

Evans, Briant, Gordon, Cross, and Wilcox raced up, hoping to reach the bank before Walston’s men crossed the river. To fire at such a distance was to risk hitting the prisoners.

But Fan was quicker than the boys. Bounding on in front, she sprang full at Brandt’s throat, and gripped it like a vice. To free himself from the dog Brandt had to drop the boy, while Walston got Jack almost to the water’s edge.

Suddenly a man rushed from the hall.

It was Forbes.

Would he join his old companions now he had forced the door of his prison? Walston thought so.

“Here, Forbes I Here!” he shouted.

Evans stopped, and was going to fire, when he saw Forbes dash on to Walston, who, taken by surprise, had to drop’ Jack and defend himself, and instantly thrust his cutlass into his antagonist.

Forbes fell at his feet Walston snatched at Jack, who drew his revolver, and shot him point blank in the throat. Brandt reached the boat, and Walston had but just strength enough to follow; and Cook pushed the boat off, when there was a loud report, and a volley of shot rattled into the boat, and into the water all round.

It was the cannon, which Moko fired through the embrasure.

With the exception of the two scoundrels who had disappeared in Trap Woods, Charman Island was delivered from the mutineers.

CHAPTER XIV

AFLOAT ONCE MORE

AND now a new era began for the colonists of Charman Island.

Up to now they had had to struggle for their existence, now they were to work for their deliverance.

After the excitement caused by the incidents of the strife, a very natural reaction set in.

They were, as it were, overwhelmed with their success. The danger was over, and it appeared greater than it had ever been — much greater, in fact, than it was. After the first engagement in Trap Woods, their chances had considerably improved. But without Forbes’s intervention, Walston, Cook, and Brandt would have escaped. Moko would not have dared to fire his gun and risk killing Costar and Jack.

What would then have happened? At what price would Walston have given back his prisoners?

When Briant and his comrades coolly reviewed the situation, a sort of retrospective terror seized hold of hem. It did not last long, for until the fate of Rock and Hope was settled, life on Charman Island could not be considered absolutely safe.

The heroes of the battle were congratulated as they deserved to be. Moko for his shot with the cannon, Jack or his coolness with the revolver. Fan received her fair hare of caresses and a stock of marrow-bones, with which Moko regaled her for having so cleverly pinned that rascal Brandt.

After Moko’s shower of grape, Briant had returned to the litter. A few minutes afterwards, Donagan had been laid in the hall without having recovered consciousness, while Forbes was laid on the floor of the storeroom. All through the night Kate, Gordon, Briant, Wilcox, and Mr. Evans watched over the wounded.

That Donagan had been seriously hurt was only too violent. But as he respired regularly, it looked as though the lung had not been touched. To dress the wound, Kate had used certain leaves such as are used in Western America, which she found growing on some of the bushes at the river-side. They were leaves of the alder tree, which rubbed and made into compresses are very efficacious for checking internal suppuration, in which the chief danger consisted. But with Forbes it was different; Walston had wounded him in the stomach. He knew the thrust was mortal, and when he returned to consciousness, and saw Kate bending over him, he had murmured —

“Thank you, Kate! Thanks! It is useless! I am done for!”

And the tears welled into his eyes.

“Hope, Forbes!” said Evans. “You have atoned for your crimes. You will live.”

No! the unfortunate man was to die. In spite of all that was done, he grew hourly worse, and about four o’clock his spirit passed away.

They buried him in the morning near Baudoin, and two crosses now mark the two graves.

But the presence of Rock and Cope was dangerous; security could not be complete until they were unable to do injury. And Evans decided to have done with them before starting for Bear Rock. With Gordon, Briant, Baxter, and Wilcox, he went off that very day, fully armed, and accompanied by Fan, to whose instinct they trusted to recover the trail.

The search was neither difficult, nor long, nor dangerous. There was nothing to fear from Walston’s mates. Cope was found dead a few yards from where he had received the volley in his back. Pike was found where he had been shot at the beginning of the battle, and the mystery of Rock’s disappearance was soon solved by his being found in one of Wilcox’s traps, which soon served for the grave of all three mutineers.

When Evans returned with the news that the colony had now nothing to fear, the joy would have been complete, had not Donagan been so grievously wounded. But none could help hoping.

In the morning there was a discussion as to future plans. It was evident that the first thing to be done was to take possession of the boat. That necessitated a voyage and even a sojourn at Bear Rock, where the repairs would have to be made to get her seaworthy. And it was agreed that Evans, Briant, and Baxter should cross by way of the lake and East River, which was at once the safest and shortest way.

The yawl had been recovered in one of the backwaters of the river. The men had fallen out of her and been carried away out to sea, and she had been almost unhurt by Moko’s volley, which had passed just over her. She was brought back to French Den and loaded with tools and provisions, and with a favourable wind she was off on the 6th of December in Evans’s charge.

She was soon across the lake, and before half-past eleven, Briant pointed out the creek by which the river entered. Running down with the tide, she was soon down the river, and on the sand near Bear Rock they found the *Severn* boat high and dry.

After a careful examination, Evans reported as follows —

“We have the needful tools, but we want timber for the ribs and planking. Now at French Den you have the remains of the schooner, which would work in admirably. And if we could get the boat round to Zealand River — ”

“Which I am afraid is impossible,” said Briant.

“I don’t think so,” continued Evans. “If the boat ban be got from Severn Shore to Bear Rock, why can’t it be got from Bear Rock to Zealand River? We could do the work there so much more easily, and from French Den we could go down to Schooner Bay, and then start for the voyage home.”

If the plan could be carried out, nothing could be better. And it was decided to make the attempt next morning’s tide, the boat being towed up by the yawl. And at once Evans set to work to plug the leaks with pieces of tow that he had brought with him from French Den, which occupied him still somewhat late in the evening. I The night passed quietly enough in the cavern where Donagan and his companions had camped on their first visit to Deception Bay.

Next morning the boat was got afloat, and the yawl went ahead to tow her along. Hard work it was, and when the ebb made itself felt, the work was harder, and it was not till five o’clock that evening that they got her Into the lake.

Evans did not think it prudent to cross that night, and So he pitched his camp on the shore under a big beech tree, where all slept soundly till the morning. Then "Aboard!" was the word, and the sail was set, and with the heavy boat behind her, away went the yawl for French Den. The boat was full of water to the thwarts, and if she had sunk, would have dragged down the yawl with her, so that Evans stood ready all the time to cut the tow-rope. But, fortunately, all went well, and at five o'clock the boat and her tug were in Zealand River, moored off the pier.

While the boys had been away, Donagan had become a little better, and was now able to return the pressure of the hand that Briant gave him. His breathing came more easily, and evidently the lung was safe. Although he was kept on a low diet, his strength began to return, and under Kate's leaf compresses, which she renewed every two hours, the wound began to close. Probably his convalescence would take some time, but he had sufficient vitality to make his recovery almost a certainty.

The work was begun in earnest next morning. A long pull, and a strong pull, was required to begin with to get the boat ashore.

Evans, who was as good a carpenter as he was a sailor, could appreciate Baxter's skill. There was no scarcity of materials or tools. With the remains of the schooner's hull, they could replace the broken ribs and gaping Strakes, and old tow steeped in pine sap served to caulk every leak and make her thoroughly water-tight.

The boat, or sloop as we might well call her, had a half-deck forward, which secured a shelter against the weather, that was likely, however, to give little trouble in this second half of the summer. The passengers could stay on this deck or below it as they pleased. The topmast of the schooner did for the mainmast, and Kate, under Evans's directions, managed to cut a lug mainsail out of the spare foresail, besides a lug mizzen and a good- sized foresail. Under this lug rig the boat would be well balanced and very weatherly. The work took thirty days, and was not over before the 6th of January. In the meantime, Christmas had been kept with a certain ceremony, as also had New Year's Day of 1862, the last the colonists hoped to see on Charman Island.

Donagan's convalescence had now sufficiently advanced for him to be taken out of doors, although he was still very weak. The fresh air and more substantial food visibly improved him; and his comrades had no intention of going away before he was able to endure a voyage of some weeks without fear of a relapse.

The usual daily round had been resumed at French Den, although the lessons were rather neglected, for did not the 'youngsters consider they were entitled to a holiday? And so Wilcox and Cross and Webb went out again on their sporting excursions over South Moor and through the thickets of Trap Woods. Now they scorned traps and snares, and in spite of the advice of Gordon, who was always careful of ammunition, they blazed away to their heart's content, and Moko's larder became stocked with fresh venison, which came in handy for preserving for the voyage.

If Donagan had been able to resume his functions as hanter-in-chief to the colony, with what ardour would he have gone at all this furred and feathered game, now that he no longer had to be sparing of his powder and shot. A bitter disappointment it was to him not to be able to join his comrades. But he had to be resigned to it, and commit no imprudence.

During the last days of January, Evans began to stow his cargo. Briant and the others would have liked to take with them all that remained of the schooner; but that was impossible, and they had to make a choice.

In the first place, Gordon brought on board the money that was on the yacht, and which they might find useful in getting them back home. Moko required enough provisions for seventeen people, not only for a short passage of three weeks, but in case they were compelled by some accident to land on one of the islands of the archipelago before reaching Punta Arena, Port Gallant, or Port Tamar Then what was left of the ammunition was stowed away in the lockers, as were the guns and revolvers. And even Donagan asked that the two little cannon should not be left behind.

Briant took care that there was taken a good assortment of clothes, most of the books in the library, the principal cooking-utensils — among them one of the stoves from the store-room — and the instruments needful for navigation, the chronometers, glasses, compasses, log, lanterns, and of course the Halkett boat. Wilcox chose among his nets and lines those that would be of most use for fishing on the voyage.

The fresh water, taken from Zealand River, was put into a dozen small barrels Gordon arranged along the carline in the boat's hold. And the spirits and liqueurs were not forgotten, nor were those made from the trulcas and the algarrobes.

On the 3rd of February all the cargo was in its place, and it only remained to fix the date of sailing, if Donagan was strong enough to stand the voyage. The brave fellow answered for himself that he was. His wound had cicatrized, and his appetite had returned, and all he had to do was not to eat too much. Assisted by Briant and Kate, he now took a walk on the terrace every day.

“Let us be off,” he said, “let us be off. I long to be on the way home. The sea will soon set me up.”

The departure was fixed for the 5th of February.

The evening before, Gordon set at liberty all the domestic animals. The guanacos, vicugnas, ostriches, and all cleared off at full speed of their legs and wings, without even a “Thank you!” for the kindness that had been showered upon them. The instinct of liberty is irresistible “The ungrateful beggars!” said Garnett, “after all that we have done for them!”

“It’s the way of the world!” said Service, so solemnly that there was a general shout of laughter.

In the morning the boys embarked in the sloop with the yawl in tow. Donagan was laid aft near Evans, who took charge of the tiller In the bow Briant and Moko looked after the sails, although they trusted to the current to take them down the river.

The others, including Fan, were where fancy led them The moorings were cast off, and the sweeps struck the water Three cheers saluted the hospitable cave which for so many months had afforded the boys a shelter, and it was not without emotion that they saw Auckland Hill disappear behind the trees.

In descending the river, the sloop went no faster than the current, which was very rapid. At noon, when close to the swamp in Bog Woods, Evans anchored, for in that part of the course the river was shallow, and it was better to wait for the tide than run the risk of grounding.

During the halt the passengers indulged in a hearty meal, after which Cross and Wilcox went off snipe-shooting on the skirt of South Moor. From the stern of the sloop Donagan managed to bring down a brace of tinamous. Needless to say that after that he was quite well.

It was very late when the boat reached the river mouth, and as the darkness made the steering difficult through the reefs, Evans, cautious seaman as he was, thought he had better wait till daybreak.

The night was quiet enough. The wind dropped, and when the sea-birds had got back to their holes in the rocks, absolute silence reigned in Schooner Bay.

In the morning the land-breeze blew, and the sea was calm to the very extreme point of South Moor. At daybreak Evans made sail, and the sloop headed out of Zealand River. Every look was turned on Auckland Hill and the rocks of Schooner Bay, which disappeared as American Cape was rounded; and a cannon-shot was fired as the red ensign was run up to the mizen.

Eight hours later the sloop entered the channel bordered by the shore of Cambridge Island, doubled South Cape, and followed the coast of Queen Adelaide Island, as the last point of Charman Island disappeared on the horizon.

CHAPTER XV

HOME

WE need not give the log of the sloop’s passage through the waterways of the Magellanic Archipelago. It was marked by no adventure of importance. The weather remained fine throughout, and in these channels of six or seven miles across the sea is never very rough.

The course was deserted, and this was rather a matter for congratulation, as the natives of the islands sire not always in a hospitable humour. Once or twice during the night fires were noticed well inland, but nobody appeared on the beach.

On the 11th of February the sloop, which had been favoured with a fair wind at the time, entered the Straits of Magellan down Smyth Channel, between the west coast of Queen Adelaide Island and the heights of King William Land. To the right rose the peak of St. Anne. To the left, at the bottom of Beaufort Bay, were the ends of Some of the glaciers that Briant had seen from Hanover Island.

All went well on board. The sea air just suited Donagan, who now felt quite equal to landing again if necessary and resuming the Crusoe life.

During the 12th of February the sloop arrived in sight of Tamar Island, where the haven or creek held at the time no occupant. Without stopping, Evans doubled Tamar Cape and headed south-east into the Straits.

On one side the long Land of Desolation developed its fiat and arid shores, showing no trace of the rich vegetation of Charman Island. On the other was the capriciously indented Crocker Peninsula along which Evans intended to coast so as to get round Cape Froward, and run up the coast of the Brunswick Peninsula to Punta Arena.

It was not necessary for him to go so far.

On the morning of the 13th, Service, who was on the look-out in the bow, reported —

“Smoke on the starboard bow!”

“The smoke of a fisherman’s fire?” asked Gordon.

“No,” said Evans, “that is a steamer’s smoke.”

In that direction the land was too far off for the smoke from a camp to be seen.

Immediately Briant climbed to the masthead.

“A ship! a ship ‘ “he shouted.

The ship was soon in sight from the deck, It was a steamer of about eight hundred tons, approaching at the rate of eleven knots an hour.

There were cheers from the sloop, and some of the guns were fired. She was sighted, and ten minutes afterwards she was alongside the *Grafton,* bound to Australia.

Captain Long, of the *Grafton,* was immediately told of the wreck of the schooner the news of which had been very widely spread in England and America, and at once took the sloop’s passengers on board He even offered to take them on direct to Auckland, which would not be very far out of his road, for the *Grafton’s* destination was Melbourne, in the south of Australia.

The voyage was a quick one, and on the 25th of February the steamer cast anchor in Auckland Harbour.

Within a few days two years had elapsed since the fifteen pupils from Charman's school had been cast adrift in the Pacific.

We need not dwell on the joy of the families to whom the boys came back Of all who had been carried away that long eighteen hundred leagues from New Zealand, not one was missing When the news spread that the *Grafton* was in the harbour with the boys on board, the whole town turned out to welcome them.

And how every one longed to hear in detail all that had passed on Charman Island And curiosity was soon gratified. Donagan gave a few lectures on the subject, and the lectures were a great success; and Donagan was. very proud indeed of their success. Then the log which had been kept by Baxter — almost hour by hour, we might say — had been printed, and hundreds of copies were sold. And the newspapers "reviewed "the journal so as to give all that was interesting in it with the least trouble to themselves; and, in short, the whole of Australasia became interested in the story of the strange adventure. And Gordon's prudence, Briant's unselfishness, Donagan's intrepidity, and the true manliness of all became the themes of general admiration.

Kate and Evans had, of course, a grand reception. A public subscription was started, and a ship was bought and named the *Charman,* of which Evans was to be owner and captain, on condition that Auckland remained her head-quarters. And when she returned from her voyages, Evans always met with the warmest of welcomes from his friends the boys.

What was to be done with Kate? The Briants, the Garnetts, the Wilcoxes, and many of the others wanted to secure her services for life. Finally, she decided on entering the service of Donagan’s family, for it was his life that had been saved by her care.

And now to conclude. Never before had schoolboys passed their holidays in such a way. But — as all boys ought to know — with method and zeal and courage there is no position, however dangerous, from which there may not be an escape. Our heroes had passed through a severe apprenticeship; their characters had been strengthened by bitter experience; the little ones had become big, and the big ones had become almost men during the two years they were Adrift in the Pacific.

THE END

THE PURCHASE OF THE NORTH POLE

Anonymous translation, 1890

Also known as *Topsy Turvy*, this 1889 adventure novel features the Baltimore Gun Club, from the earlier novel *From the Earth to the Moon*, who attempt to purchase the North Pole to access large deposits of coal beneath it. Several countries attempt to buy it, but the United States proves to be the victor.

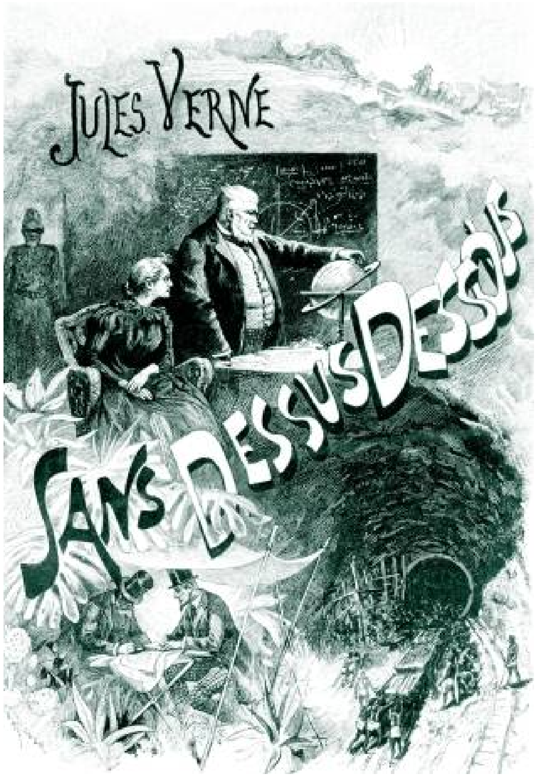
JULES VERNE
SANS DESSUS DESSOUS

An original illustration

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CHAPTER XXI.

VERY SHORT, SINCE ENOUGH HAS BEEN SAID TO MAKE THE WORLD’S POPULATION FEEL PERFECTLY SURE AGAIN.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE NORTH POLAR PRACTICAL ASSOCIATION RUSHES A DOCUMENT ACROSS TWO WORLDS

“Then Mr Maston, you pretend that a woman has never been able to make mathematical or experimental-science progress?”

“To my extreme regret, I am obliged to, Mrs. Scorbitt,” answered J.T. Maston.

“That there have been some very remarkable women in mathematics, especially in Russia, I fully and willingly agree with you. But, with her cerebral conformation, she cannot become an Archimedes, much less a Newton.”

“Oh, Mr. Maston, allow me to protest in the name of my sex.”

“A sex, Mrs. Scorbitt, much too charming to give itself up to the higher studies.”

“Well then, according to your opinion, no woman seeing an apple fall could have discovered the law of universal gravitation, so that it would have made her the most illustrious scientific person of the seventeenth century?”

“In seeing an apple fall, Mrs. Scorbitt, a woman would have but the single idea — to eat it — for example, our mother Eve.”

“Pshaw, I see very well that you deny us all aptitude for high speculations.”

“All aptitude? No, Mrs. Scorbitt, and in the meanwhile I would like to prove to you that since there are inhabitants on earth, and consequently women, there has not one feminine brain been found yet to which we owe any discoveries like those of Aristotle, Euclid, Kepler, Laplace, etc.”

“Is this a reason? And does the past always prove the future?”

“Well, a person who has done nothing in a thousand years, without a doubt, never will do anything.”

“I see now that I have to take our part, Mr. Maston, and that we are not worth much.”

“In regard to being worth something” — began Mr. Maston, with as much politeness as he could command.

But Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, who was perfectly willing to be satisfied, answered promptly: “Each one has his or her lot in this world. You may remain the extraordinary calculator which you are, give yourself up entirely to the immense work to which your friends and yourself will devote their existence. I will be the woman in the case and bring to it my pecuniary assistance.”

“And we will owe you an eternal gratitude,” answered Mr. Maston.

Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt blushed deliciously, for she felt, according to report, a singular sympathy for J.T. Maston. Besides, is not the heart of a woman an unfathomable gulf?

It was really an immense undertaking to which this rich American widow had resolved to devote large sums of money.

The scheme and its expected results, briefly outlined, were as follows:

The Arctic regions, accurately expressed, include according to Maltebrun, Roclus, Saint-Martin and other high authorities on geography:

1st. The northern Devon, including the ice-covered islands of Baffin's Sea and Lancaster Sound.

2d. The northern Georgia, made up of banks and numerous islands, such as the islands of Sabine, Byam-Martin, Griffith, Cornwallis, and Bathurst.

3d. The archipelago of Baffin-Parry, including different parts of the circumpolar continent, embracing Cumberland, Southampton, James-Sommerset, Boothia-Felix, Melville, and other parts nearly unknown. Of this great area, crossed by the 78th parallel, there are over 1,400,000 square miles of land and over 700,000 square miles of water.

Within this area intrepid modern discoverers have advanced to the 84th-degree of latitude, reaching seacoasts lost behind the high chain of icebergs which may be called the Arctic Highlands, given names to capes, to mountains, to gulfs, to bays, etc. But beyond this 84th degree is mystery. It is the terra incognita of the chart-makers, and nobody knows as yet whether behind is hidden land or water for a distance of 6 degrees over impassable heaps of ice to the North Pole.

It was in the year 189- that the Government of the United States conceived the idea of putting the as yet undiscovered countries around the North Pole up at auction sale, and an American society had just been formed with the plan of purchasing this Arctic area and has asked the concession.

For several years, it is true, the Conference at Berlin had formulated a special plan for the guidance of such of the great powers as might wish to appropriate rights under the claim of colonization or the opening of commercial markets. This code was not acceptable to all, and the Polar region had remained without inhabitants. As that which belongs to none belongs to every one, the new Society did not wish merely to occupy it, but to purchase it outright, and so avoid further claims.

There never is in the United States any project so bold as not to find people to regard it as practical and back it with large amounts of money. This was well shown a few years ago when the Gun Club of Baltimore tried to send a projectile to the moon, hoping to obtain a direct communication with our satellite. Was it not enterprising Americans who furnished funds for this undertaking? Large amounts were necessary for this interesting trial and were promptly found. And, had it been realized, would we not have to thank the members of that club who had dared to take the risk of this super-human experience?

Should a Lesseps propose to dig a channel across Europe to Asia, from the banks of the Atlantic to the waters of China; should a well-sinker offer to bore from the curb-stones to reach the beds of molten silicates, to bring a supply to your fireplaces; should an enterprising electrician want to unite the scattered currents over the surface of the globe into one inexhaustible spring of heat and light; should a bold engineer conceive the idea of putting the excess of Summer temperature into large reservoirs for use during the Winter in our then frigid zones; should an anonymous society be founded to do any of a hundred different similar things, there would be found Americans ready to head the subscription lists and a regular stream of dollars would pour into the company safes as freely as the rivers of America flow into the ocean.

It is natural to expect that opinions were very varied when the news spread that the Arctic region was going to be sold at auction for the benefit of the highest and final bidder, particularly when no public subscription list was started in view of this purchase, as the capital had all been secured beforehand.

To use the Arctic region? Why, such an idea could “only be found in the brain of a fool,” was the general verdict.

Nothing, however, was more serious than this project. A prospectus was sent to the papers of the two continents, to the European publications, to the African, Oceanic, Asiatic, and at the same time to the American journals. The American newspaper announcement read as follows:

To the Inhabitants of the Globe:

“The Arctic region situated within the eighty-fourth degree could not heretofore have been sold at auction for the very excellent reason that it had not been discovered as yet.

“The extreme points reached by navigators of different countries are the following:

“82° 45’ , reached by the English explorer, Parry, in July, 1847, on the twenty-eighth meridian, west, to the north of Spitzberg.

“83° 20’ 28” , reached by Markham, with the English expedition of Sir John Georges Nares, in May, 1867, on the fiftieth meridian, west, in the north of Grinnell Land.

“83° 35’ latitude, reached by Lockwood and Brainard, of the American expedition under Lieut. Greely, in May, 1882, on the forty-second meridian, west in the north of Nares Land.

“The property extending from the eighty-fourth parallel to the pole on a surface of six degrees must be considered an undivided domain among the different states of the globe and not liable to be transformed into private property through a public auction sale.

“No one is compelled to live in this section, and the United States, relying on this non-ownership, has resolved to provide for the settlement and use of the domain. A company has been founded at Baltimore under the name of the North Polar Practical Association, representing officially the American Union. This Company intends to purchase the said country according to the common law, which should then give them an absolute right of proprietorship to the continent, islands, inlets, waters, rivers, etc.; in fact, of everything of which the Arctic region is composed. It is well understood by the law of nations that this title of proprietorship cannot be touched under any circumstances, no matter what shall happen.

“These conditions having been laid before all the powers, the Arctic region is to be sold at public auction for the benefit of the highest and last bidder. The date of the sale is set for the 3d of December of the current year, in the Auction Hall at Baltimore, Maryland, United States of America.

“Address for information Mr. W.S. Forster, Temporary Agent for the North Polar Practical Association, 93 High Street, Baltimore.”

The reader may imagine how this communication was received by the public at large. Most people considered it as an absurd idea. Some only saw in it a sample of characteristic American humbug. Others thought that the proposition deserved to be fairly considered, and they pointed to the fact that the newly-founded company did not in any way appeal to the public for pecuniary help, but was willing to do everything with its own capital. It was with its own money that it wanted to purchase the Arctic region. The promoters did not try to put gold, silver, and bank-notes into their pockets and keep them for their own benefit. No, they only asked permission to pay for the land with their own money.

Some people who claimed to know said that the Company could have gone to work and taken possession of the country without any further ceremony, as it was their right as first occupants. But that is just where the difficulty came in, because until this time the Pole seemed to be forbidden ground to any one. Therefore, in case the United States should give possession of the country, the Company wanted a regular title to it without trouble about the matter in the future. It was unjust to blame them in any way, as in such an affair too many precautions cannot be taken. Besides, the circular had a paragraph which provided for all future chances. This paragraph was capable of so many interpretations that the exact meaning of it could not be rendered even by those who studied it closely. It was stipulated that the right of proprietorship should not depend upon any chances or changes in the country, no matter whether these changes were in the position or climate of the country.

What did this phrase mean? How could there ever be any changes in the geography or meteorology of a country like this one to be sold at auction? “Evidently,” said some shrewd ones, “there must be something behind it.”

The commentators had free swing and exercised it with a will. One paper in Philadelphia published the following pleasant notice:

“Undoubtedly the future purchasers of the Arctic region have information that a hard stone comet will strike this world under such conditions that its blow will produce geographic and meteorologic changes such as the purchasers of the Arctic region will profit by."

The idea of a blow with a hard stone planet was not accepted by serious people. In any case it was not likely that the would-be purchasers would have been informed of such a coming event.

"Perhaps," said a New Orleans newspaper, "the new Company thinks the precession of the equinox will in time favor the conditions likely to lead to the utilization of this domain."

"And why not? Because this movement modifies the direction of the axis of our spheroid," observed another correspondent.

"Really," answered the *Scientific Review*, of Paris. "As Adhemar has predicted in his book on the ocean currents, the precession of the equinox, combined with the movement of the earth's axis, will be such as to modify in a long period the average temperature of the different parts of the earth and in the quantities of ice accumulated around the two poles."

"This is not certain," replied the *Edinburgh Review*, "and, besides, supposing that this would be the case, is not a lapse of 12,000 years necessary before Vega becomes our polar star in consequence of this movement and the situation of the Arctic territory consequently changed in regard to its climate?"

"Well," said the Copenhagen *Dagblad*, "in 12,000 years it will be time to make preparations, and before that time risk nothing — not even a cent."

It was possible that the *Scientific Review* was right with Adhemar. It was also very probable that the North Polar Practical Association had never counted on this modification of climate due to the precession of the equinox. In fact, nobody had clearly discovered what this last paragraph in the circular meant nor what kind of change it had in view.

Perhaps to know it, it would suffice to write to the Secretary of the new Society, or particularly its President. But the President was unknown. Unknown as much as the Secretary and all other members of the Council. It was not even known where the document came from. It was brought to the offices of the New York newspapers by a certain William S. Forster, a codfish dealer of Baltimore, a member of the house of Ardrinell & Co. Everything was so quiet and mysterious in the matter that the best reporters could not make out what it was all about. This North Polar Association had been so anonymous that it was impossible even to give it a definite name.

If, however, the promoters of this speculation persisted in making their *personnel* an absolute mystery, their intention was clearly indicated by the document spread before the public of two worlds.

Really, after all, the question was the purchase of that part of the arctic regions bounded by the 84th degree, and of which the North Pole was the central point. Nothing very exact concerning this region was known. The modern discoverers who had been nearest to this parallel were Parry, Markham, Lockwood and Brainard. In regard to the other navigators of the northern seas they stopped far short of the above-mentioned point — such as Payez, in 1874, to 82° 15’ north of the land of Francis Joseph, of New Zemble; Leout, in 1870, to 72°74’ above Siberia; De Long in the *Jeanette* expedition, in 1879, to 78° 45’ around the islands which bear his name. Others went around New Siberia and Greenland to the end of the Cape Bismarck, but had not passed the 76th, 77th, or 78th degree of latitude. The North Polar Practical Association wanted then a country which had never been touched before by mankind or discoverers, and which was absolutely uninhabited.

The length of this portion of the globe surrounded by the 84th degree, extending from the 84th to the 90th, making six degrees, which at sixty miles each make a radius of 360 miles and a diameter of 720 miles. The circumference therefore is, 2,260 miles and the surface 407 [square] miles. This is about the tenth part of the whole of Europe. A very desirable slice of land indeed. The document, as we have seen, also stated that these regions were not yet known geographically, belonged to no one and therefore belonged to everyone. But it could be foreseen that the adjoining States at least would consider these regions as the prolongation of their own possession towards the north and would consequently claim the right of ownership. Their pretensions would have more justice than those of discoverers who operated upon the whole of the Arctic countries and made explorations only for the glory of their own nation. The Federal Government represented in the new Society intended to make their rights valuable and to indemnify them for the price of their purchase. However it was the partisans of the North Polar Practical Association did not announce; the proprietorship was clear, and nobody being compelled to live there could object to the auction sale of this vast domain.

The countries whose rights were absolutely established as much as those of any countries could be were six in number — America, England, Russia, Denmark, Sweden-Norway and Holland.

Other countries could claim discoveries made by their mariners and their travellers.

France could interfere because some of her children had taken part in the expeditions sent out to conquer the territories around the pole.

Among the others the courageous Bellot, who died in 1853, in the islands of Beechey, during the Phoenix Expedition sent in search of Sir John Franklin. Nor must one forget Dr. Octave Pavy, who died in 1884, near Cape Sabine, while the Greely Mission was at Fort Conger. And the expedition which, in 1838-39, had gone to the Sea of Spitzberg with Charles Marmier, Bravais and his courageous companions, would it not be unfair to forget them. But despite all this France did not care to interfere in this commercial rather than scientific matter, and she abandoned all her rights for a share of the polar pie. The same of Germany. It had sent since 1671 the Hamburg expedition of Frederic Martens to the Spitsbergen, and in 1869 and ‘70 the expeditions of the *Germania* and of the *Hansa*, commanded by Koldervey and Hegeman, which went as far as Cape Bismarck by going along the coast of Greenland. But even if they had made so many brilliant discoveries they did not care to add a piece of the polar empire to that of Germany. The same was true with Austria, which was already possessor of the land of Francis Joseph, situated north of Siberia.

In regard to Italy having no right to interfere, she did not interfere at all; which is as strange as it is true. Then, also, there were the Esquimaux, which are at home in those places, and the inhabitants of Greenland, of Labrador, of Baffin’s Archipelago and of the Aleutian Islands, situated between Asia and America, and also the tribe of Tchouktchis, who inhabited the old Russian Alaska and who became Americans in 1867. These people, in reality the real aborigines, had nothing at all to say about the matter. And how could these poor wretches have said anything, as they did not even have any sum of money, no matter how small, with which to pay for the land which the North Polar Practical Association was going to buy. Perhaps they could have paid a small sum by giving skins, teeth or oil, and yet the land belonged to them more than to any others, as they were the first occupants of this domain which was going to be sold on auction. But the Esquimaux, the Tchouktchis, the Samoyedes were not consulted at all. So runs the world.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE DELEGATES FROM ENGLAND, HOLLAND, SWEDEN, DENMARK AND RUSSIA ARE PRESENTED TO THE READER.

One thing was evident to the whole world at once, namely, that if the new association should succeed in buying the Arctic regions, those regions would become absolutely the property of America or rather of the United States, a country which was always trying to acquire something. This was not a pleasing prospect to rival governments, but nevertheless, as has been said, the different States of Europe and of Asia not neighboring to these regions, refused to take part in the proposed auction sale so long as its results seemed so problematical to them. Only the powers whose property touched the eighty-fourth degree resolved to make their rights valuable by the attendance of official delegates. That was all. They did not care to buy even at a relatively moderate price land the possession of which was only a possibility. In this as in all cases insatiable England gave orders to its financial agents to make an imposing showing. The cession of the polar countries did not threaten any European trouble nor any international complication. Herr von Bismarck, the grand Iron Chancellor, who was yet living, did not even knit his heavy brow. There remained only England, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Holland and Russia to be present and make their bids to the Commissioner of Baltimore, against those of the United States.

It was a difficult matter to fix prices for this polar earth cap, the business value of which was at least very problematic. Their main reason for presenting themselves at the sale was that some advantage might accrue to them. Sweden and Norway, proprietors of the North Cape, situated beyond the seventy-second parallel, did not conceal the fact that they thought they had certain rights of proprietorship on these vast lands which extended to Spitsbergen, and from there to the North Pole. Denmark said that it had already in its possession islands and fiords on the line of the polar circle where their colonies had been founded, such as Disko Island, in the Davis Channel; the settlements of Holstein, of Proven, of Godhaven, of Uppernavik, in the Baffin Sea, and on the west coast of Greenland. Besides, did not the famous navigator, Behring (of Danish origin, although he was then in the service of Russia), in the year 1728 pass over the channel which afterwards carried his name before he started again, thirteen years later, and died miserably with thirty of his men on a little island, which also carries his distinguished name.

In the year 1619 did not the navigator, Jean Munk, explore the east coast of Greenland and discover several points formerly totally unknown? Therefore, Denmark had, she thought, undisputable rights to be proprietor of these regions.

In regard to Holland, there were her sailors Barentz and Heemskerk, who had visited the Spitsbergen and the New Zealand about the end of the sixteenth century. It was by one of her children too, Jean Mayen, through whose courageous campaign against the north the island which carries his name came in their possession. It is situated below the 72d degree of latitude. Therefore Holland thought her past had given her rights of possession. In regard to Russia, with Alexis Tschirikof, having Behring under his command; with Paulutski, whose expedition advanced in 1751 beyond the limits of the ice-pack; with Capt. Martin Spangberg, and Lieut. William Walton, who dared to go into these unknown parts in 1739, she had taken a notable part in the search across the gulf which separates Asia and America.

Furthermore, the position of the Siberian territories, extending over 120 degrees to the extreme limits of Kamchatka, the length of the Asiatic coast, where the Samoyedes, Yakoutes, Tchuoktchis, and other conquered people lived, did Russia not rule half of the Northern Ocean? And then, on the 75th parallel to within less than nine hundred miles from the pole, did she not possess the islands of the new Siberia, the Archipelago of Liatkow, discovered in the beginning of the eighteenth century? And finally, since 1764, before the English, before the Americans, before the Swedes, did not the navigator Tschitschagoff search a passage in the North to shorten the route between the two continents? However, notwithstanding this, it seemed that the Americans were more anxious to become possessors of this particularly inaccessible point of the globe than anyone else.

They had often tried to obtain it by devoting themselves to the search of Sir John Franklin, with Grinnel, with Kane, with Hayes, with Greely, with De Long, and other courageous navigators. They could also plead the geographical situation of their country, which develops itself below the polar circle from the Behring Sea to Hudson’s Bay. And were not all these countries, all these islands — Wollaston, Prince Albert, Victoria, King William, Melville, Cockburne, Banks, Baffin, not counting the thousand small pieces of the archipelago — like a leaf spreading to the 90th degree? And then supposing that the North Pole should be attached by an uninterrupted line of territory to one of the large continents of the globe, would it not be more to America than to Asia or Europe? Therefore, nothing was more natural than the proposition to purchase this region by the Federal Government for the benefit of an American society.

If any power had undisputable modern rights to possess the polar domain it was certainly the United States of America. It must also be considered that the United Kingdom of Great Britain, which possessed Canada and British Columbia, numerous sailors of which had distinguished themselves in these Arctic countries, urged very good reasons for annexing this part of the globe to their vast empire. And its journals discussed the matter at great length. “Yes, without a doubt,” answered the great English geographer, Kliptringan, in an article in a London newspaper, which made a great sensation; “yes, the Danes, the Hollanders, the Russians, and the Americans, can be proud of their rights.” As for England, she did not wish to let this country escape her. Did not the northern part of the continent already belong to them? Have not these lands, these islands which composed them, been discovered and conquered by English discoverers since Willoughby, who visited Spitsbergen and New Zealand in 1739, to McClure, whose vessel made in 1853 the passage of the northwest? And then were not Frobisher, Davis, Hall, Weymouth, Hudson, Baffin, Cook, Ross, Parry, Bechey, Belcher, Franklin, Mulgrave, Scoresby, MacClinton, Kennedy, Nares, Collinson, Archer, all of Anglo-Saxon origin? And what country could make a more just claim on the portion of these Arctic regions that that which these navigators had been able to acquire? “Well,” said a California journal, “let us put the matter on its real point, and as there is a question of *amour-propre* between the United States and England, let us ask, If the English Markham of the Nares expedition had gone 83 degrees 20 minutes of latitude and the Americans, Lockwood and Brainard, of the Greely expedition, went to 83 degrees 35 minutes, to whom then does the honor belong of having come nearest to the North Pole?”

Such were the demands and explanations, but one could see that the struggle would only be active between American dollars and English pounds sterling. However, according to the proposition made by the North

Polar Practical Association all countries had to be consulted and given a chance at the auction. The sale was announced to take place Dec. 3, at Baltimore. The sum realized by the sale was to be divided among the States which were unsuccessful bidders, and they were to accept it as indemnity and renounce all their rights in the Arctic regions for the future.

The delegates, furnished with their letters of credit, left London. The Hague, Stockholm, Copenhagen, and St. Petersburg, and arrived three weeks before the day fixed for the auction sale.

Up to this time America had only been represented by Mr. W.S. Forster, of the North Polar Practical Association.

The delegates of the European powers who had been chosen were included in the following list:

For Holland — Jacques Jansen, formerly Counsellor of the Netherlandish India; fifty-three years old, stout, short, well formed, small arms, small bent legs, round and florid face, gray hair; a worthy man, only a little incredulous on the subject of an undertaking the practical consequences of which he failed to see.

For Denmark — Eric Baldenak, ex-Sub-Governor of the Greenlandish possessions; of medium height, a little bent over, large and round head, so short-sighted that the point of his nose would touch his books; not willing to listen to any claim denying the rights of his country, which he considered the legitimate proprietor of the northern region.

For the Swedish-Norwegian peninsula — Jan Harald, Professor of Cosmography in Christiania; a genuine Northern man, red-faced, beard and hair blond; he regarded it as an established fact that the Polar region, being only occupied by the Paleocristic Sea, had absolutely no value. He was, however, not much interested in the matter and went there only as a duty.

For Russia — Col. Boris Karkof, semi-military man, semi-diplomat; a stiff, stubby mustache, seeming uncomfortable in his citizen clothes and feeling absent-mindedly for his sword which he was accustomed to carry; very much puzzled to know what was hidden in the proposition of the North Polar Practical Association, and whether it would not be the cause of international difficulties.

Finally for England — Major Donellan and his secretary, Dean Toodrink. The last two named represented all the tastes and aspirations of the United Kingdom, its commercial and industrial instincts, its aptitude to consider, by a law of nature, the northern regions their own property just as any country which did not belong to anyone else.

If there ever was an Englishman it was Major Donellan, tall, meagre, bony, nervous, angular, with a little cough, a head a la Palmerston, on bending shoulders; legs well formed after his sixty years; indefatigable, a quality he had well shown when he worked on the frontiers of India. He never laughed in those days, and perhaps never had. And why should he? Did you ever see a locomotive or a steam-engine or an elevator laugh? On this point the Major was very much different from his secretary, Dean Toodrink, a talkative fellow, very pleasant, with large head, and his hair falling on his forehead, and small eyes. He became well known on account of his happy manner and his taste for fairy tales. But, even if he was cheerful, he did not seem any less personally conceited than Major Donellan when he talked about Great Britain.

These two delegates were probably going to be the most desperate opponents to the American Society. The North Pole belonged to them; it always belonged to them. It was to them as if the Lord had given the mission to the English people to keep up the rotation of the earth around its axis, and as if it was their duty to prevent it passing into strange hands. It is necessary to observe here that France did not consider it necessary to send a delegate, but an engineer, of France, was present at the sale, just for the fun of it. We shall introduce him later on. The delegates of the Northern European States had arrived in Baltimore on different steamers, to give it the appearance that they had nothing at all to do with each other. They were really rivals. Each one of them had in his pocket the necessary means to fight against the American Society. But they could not fight with equal force. One could dispose of a sum of money which amounted to nearly a million, another could pass that amount. And really to purchase a piece of our globe to reach which seemed an impossibility, this ought still appear to be dear. In reality the best provided for was the English delegate, to whose order the Government had opened a very large credit. Thanks to this credit Major Donellan would not have very hard work to conquer his adversaries of Sweden, Denmark-Holland, and Russia. In regard to America — well, that was a different thing. It would be much more difficult to win against the fusillade of dollars. At least it was very probable that the mysterious society must have enough money on hand to go on in their work. Therefore, the highest bidding, which might come to millions, was between America and England.

As soon as the European delegates had landed public opinion became more excited. The most singular stories were printed in the newspapers. False theories were established, based on the purchase of the North Pole. What was the Society going to do with it? And what could they do with it? Nothing; or perhaps it was all done to corner the iceberg market. There was even a journal in Paris, the *Figaro*, which upheld this curious idea. But for this it would be necessary to pass south of the eighty-fourth parallel.

Be it as it may, however, the delegates who had avoided each other during their passage over the Atlantic became more and more associated after having arrived in Baltimore. Here is the reason: Since his arrival each one had tried to open communications with the North Polar Practical Association separately, unknown to the other. That which they wished to know were the motives hidden at the bottom of this affair and what profit the Society hoped to make out of the sale. Now, until the present time nothing indicated that the Society had opened an office at Baltimore. No office, no employees. All that could be learned was, "For information address only William S. Forster, High Street, Baltimore." And it did not look as though the honest consignee of codfish knew any more in this respect than the lowest street porter of the city.

The delegates could, therefore, learn nothing from him. They were accordingly compelled to rely upon the more or less absurd guesses of the public at large. Was the secret of the Society going to be kept inpenetrable as long as it did not make it known itself? This was the question. Without doubt it did not seem inclined to give any information on the subject until the purchase had been made. Therefore, it came that the delegates finished by seeing and meeting each other; they made visits to each other, and finally came in close communication with each other, perhaps with the idea of making a front against the common enemy, or, otherwise, the American Company. And so it happened that one evening they were all together in the Hotel Wolesley, in the suite occupied by Major Donellan and his secretary, Dean Toodrink, holding a conference. In fact, this tendency to a common understanding was principally due to the advice of Col. Boris Karkof, the best diplomat known. At first the conversation was directed to the commercial and industrial consequences which the Society pretended to gain by purchase of the Arctic domain. Prof. Jan Harald asked if any one had been able to gain any information on that point. All finally agreed that they had tried to get information from Mr. William S. Forster, to whom all letters should be addressed.

“I have failed,” said Eric Baldenak.

“And I have not succeeded,” added Jacques Jansen.

“In regard to myself,” answered Dean Toodrink, “when I presented myself at the stores in High Street in the name of Major Donellan I found a large man in black clothes, wearing a high hat, with a white apron, which was short enough to show his high boots. When I asked him for information in the matter he informed me that the South Star had arrived with a full cargo from Newfoundland and that he was ready to furnish me with a fresh stock of codfish on account of Messrs. Ardronell & Co.”

“And,” answered the former counsellor of the Dutch Indies, always a little sceptical, “it would be much better to buy a load of codfish than to throw one’s money into the ice-water of the North.”

“This is not at all the question,” says Major Donellan, with a short and high voice. “The question is not the codfish, but the Polar region.”

“Americans ought to stand on their heads,” said Dean Toodrink, laughing at his own remark. “That will make them catch cold,” finally said Col. Karkof. “The question is not there,” said Major Donellan. “One thing only is certain, that for some reason or another America, represented by the N.P.P.A. (remark the word ‘practical’) wants to buy a surface of 407 square miles around the North Pole, a surface which is actually (remark the word ‘actually’) pierced by the eighty-fourth degree of latitude.”

“We know it, Major Donellan, and much more,” said Jan Harald. “But what we do not know is how the said company will make use of those countries or waters, if they are waters, from a commercial standpoint.”

“This is not the question,” answered for the third time Major Donellan. “A power wants to purchase with money a large part of the globe which, by its geographical situation, seems to belong especially to England” — ”to Russia,” said Col. Karkof; “to Holland,” said Jacques Jansen; “to Sweden-Norway,” said Jan Harald; “to Denmark,” said Eric Baldenak.

The five delegates jumped to their feet, and it seemed as if the Council would turn to harsh words, when Dean Toodrink tried to interfere the first time. “Gentlemen,” said he, in a tone of reconciliation, “this is not the question, following the expression of my chief,” of which he made such frequent use. “As long as it has been decided that the Northern regions are going to be sold at auction, they will naturally belong to such representative who will make the highest bid for same. As long as Sweden, Norway, Russia, Denmark, Holland, and England have given large credits to their delegates, would it not be best for these nations to form a syndicate and raise a sum of money against which America could not make a bid? The delegates looked at each other. It was possible that Dean Toodrink had found the missing link. A syndicate — at present it is heard everywhere. Everything is syndicate nowadays, what one drinks, what one eats, what one reads, what one sleeps on. Nothing is more modern, in politics as well as business, than a trust. But an objection was started, or rather an explanation was needed, and Jacques Jansen tried to find out the sentiments of his colleagues by saying, “and afterwards,” yes, after the purchase of the region by the syndicate, then what? “But it seems to me that England,” said the Major in a rough voice, “and Russia,” said the Colonel, with nostrils terribly dilated, “and Holland,” said the Counsellor; “as God has given

Denmark to the Danish," observed Eric Baldenak — "Excuse me, there is only one country," interrupted Dean Toodrink, "which has been given by our Lord, and that is the world." "And why," said the Swedish delegate? "Did not the poet say

'Deus nobis haec otia fecit,'"

said this merryman in translating according to his fashion the close of the sixth verse of the first eclogue of Virgil. All began to laugh except Major Donellan, who stopped for the second time the discussion which threatened to finish badly. Then Dean Toodrink said, "Do not quarrel, gentlemen. What good will it do us? Let us rather form a syndicate."

"And afterwards?" asked Jan Harald.

"Afterwards," answered Dean Toodrink, "nothing more simple, gentlemen. After you shall have bought the polar domain it will remain undivided among us or will be divided after a regular indemnity to one of the States which have been purchasers. But our purpose would have already been obtained, which is to save it from the representative of America."

This proposition did some good, at least for the present moment. As very soon the delegates would not fail to fight with each other, and pull each other's hair where there was any to pull, it would be at the moment when it was necessary to elect a final buyer of this immovable region, so much disputed and so useless.

"In all cases," cleverly remarked Dean Toodrink, "the United States will be entirely out of the question."

"It seems to me very sensible," said Eric Baldenak.

“Very handy,” said Col. Karkof.

“Right,” said Jan Harald.

“Mean,” said Jacques Jansen.

“Very English,” said Major Donellan.

Each one had given his opinion hoping to convince his colleagues.

“Then, gentlemen, it is perfectly understood that if we form a syndicate the rights of each State will be absolutely reserved for the future.”... It is understood. There was only to be found out what credit the different delegates had received from their governments. It was supposed that the whole when added up would represent such an enormous sum that there would not be the least doubt that the A.P.P.A. [N.P.P.A.] would fail to surpass this amount of money. This question of funds was met by Dean Toodrink.

Complete silence. Nobody would answer, show your pocketbook. Empty their pockets into the safes of a syndicate. Make known in advance how much each country would bid at the sale. No haste was shown. And if there should be a disagreement in this new-formed syndicate in the future, and circumstances should compel each one to make his own bids? And should the diplomat Karkof feel insulted at the trickery of Jacques Jansen, who would be insulted at the underhand intrigues of Jan Harald, who would refuse to support the high pretensions of Major Donellan, who, himself, would not stop to embroil each one of his associates. And now to show their credits — that was showing their play, when it was necessary to live up to it. There were really two ways only to answer the proper but indiscreet suggestion of Dean Toodrink. Either to exaggerate the credits, which would be very embarrassing, because it would then be the question of the payment, or to diminish them to such a point that they would be ridiculous and not to the purpose of the scheme. The ex-counsellor had this idea first, but it must be said to his credit, he did not seriously hold it. His colleagues, however, followed suit. “Gentlemen,” said Holland, through its mouthpiece, “I regret, but for the purpose of the Arctic regions I can only dispose of fifty riechsthaler.” “And I of thirty-five rubles,” said Russia. “And I of twenty kronors,” said Norway-Sweden. “And I of fifteen cronen,” said Denmark. “Well,” said Major Donellan, in a tone well befitting the disdainful attitude so common and natural to the English character, “then it would be better that you make the purchase, gentlemen, as England can only put up at the most one shilling and sixpence.” And with this ironical remark the conference of the delegates of old Europe was at an end.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE ARCTIC REGIONS ARE SOLD AT AUCTION TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER.

Why was this sale on the 3d of December going to be held in the regular auction hall, where usually only such objects as furniture, utensils, tools, instruments, etc. or art pieces, pictures, medals, and antique objects were sold? Why, so long as it was a piece of realty, was it not sold before a referee or a court of justice appointed for such sales? And why was the aid of a public auctioneer necessary when a part of our globe was going to be sold? How could this piece of the world be compared with any movable object when it was the most fixed thing on the face of the earth? Really, this seemed to be quite illogical, but it was not so, since the whole of the Arctic regions was to be sold in such a way that the contract would be valuable. Did this not indicate that in the opinion of the N.P.P.A. the immovable object in question contained something movable?

This singularity puzzled even the most eminently sagacious minds to be found in the United States. On the other hand, there had been such a sale in the past already. One portion of our planet had been sold in the auction-rooms with the help of a public appraiser to the highest public bidder. And this case had happened in America.

It was some years before, in San Francisco, Cal. an island of the Pacific Ocean, Spencer Island, was sold to the rich William W. Kolderup, who bid $500,000 in opposition to J.R. Taskinar, of Stockton. This island had cost $4,000,000. It is true it was an island which had inhabitants, only a few miles away from the coast, with forests, water, productive and solid, with fields and prairies, in condition to be cultivated, and not a vague wild region of water covered with eternal ice, defended by impenetrable icebergs, which very probably nobody would ever live in. It was thought, therefore, that the unknown polar region would never bring so high a price if sold at auction. Nevertheless, on the day of the sale a great many serious and curious people assembled to learn the end of the affair.

The sale could hardly fail to be interesting.

Ever since their arrival in Baltimore the European delegates had found themselves very much gazed at and always surrounded by many people. Of course they were much interviewed. In view of all this it was only natural that the public of America should have become very much excited. One manner of expressing the public excitement, very characteristic of Americans, was to make bets upon the result, an example which Europe quickly began to follow. Divided as the American citizens were into those of New England, those of the Middle States, Western States, and Eastern States, there was only one wish, and that was for the well-being of their country. But there was still a great deal of uncertainty. It was neither Russia, nor Sweden, nor Norway, nor Denmark, nor Holland, the chances of which they dreaded most. But it was England, with its territorial ambitions, with its only too well-known tendency to swallow everything, and its world-known Bank of England notes. Large sums of money were placed on the result. Bets were made on America and Great Britain, the same as on race-horses, and in almost all cases even money was put up. Some offers were made of 12 and 13½ to 1 on Denmark, Sweden, Holland and Russia, but none would take such an offer.

The sale commenced at 12 o’clock.

Since early in the morning all business had been stopped in the street on account of the large crowd. By telegraph the papers were informed that most of the bets made by Americans had been taken up by the English, and Dean Toodrink immediately posted up a notice to that effect in the auction hall. The nearer the time came the higher grew the excitement. It was reported that the Government of Great Britain had placed large sums of money at the disposition of Major Donellan. “At the office of the Admiralty,” observed one of the New York papers, “the Admirals pushed the sale as much as possible, as they hoped to figure conspicuously in the expeditions fitted out.” How much truth there was in these stories no one knew. But the most conservative people in Baltimore thought that it was hardly possible that the amount of money at the command of the N.P.P.A. could cover the amount which would be bid by England, and therefore a very strong pressure was put on the Government of the United States at Washington to protect the interests of the society. In all this excitement the new society was represented by the single person, its agent, William S. Forster, who did not seem to worry at all over all these rumors and seemed quite confident of success.

As the time for the auction drew near the crowd grew larger. Three hours before the sale it was impossible to obtain admission to the auction hall. All the space set apart for the public was so much filled that there was danger that the building would fall in. There was only a small space left empty, surrounded by a railing, which had been reserved for the European delegates. They had just space enough to follow the progress of the sale, and were not even comfortably seated.

They were Eric Baldenak, Boris Karkof Jacques Jansen, Jan Harald, Major Donellan and his secretary, Dean Toodrink. They formed a solid group, standing together like soldiers on a battle-field. And were they not really going to battle for the possession of the North Pole? On the American side apparently nobody was represented. Only the codfish dealer was present and his face had an expression of the most supreme indifference.

He seemed little concerned and appeared to be thinking of his cargo which was to arrive by the next steamer. Where were the capitalists represented by this man, who, perhaps, was going to start millions of dollars rolling? This was such a mystery as to excite public curiosity to the utmost.

No one doubted that Mr. J. T. Maston and Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had something to do with the matter, but what could one guess on? Both were there, lost in the crowd, without any special place, surrounded by some members of the Baltimore Gun Club, friends of Mr. Maston. They seemed to be the least interested spectators in the hall. Mr. William S. Forster even did not seem to recognize them.

The auctioneer began by saying that contrary to the general rule it was impossible to show the article about to be sold. He could not pass from hand to hand the North Pole. Neither could they examine it nor look at it with a magnifying glass or touch it with their fingers to see whether the plating was real or only artificial, or whether it was an antique, which it really was, he said. It was as old as stone, it was as old as the world, since it dated back to the time the world was made.

If, however, the North Pole was not on the desk of the Public Appraiser, a large chart, clear in view of all interested persons, indicated with marked lines the parts which were going to be sold at auction. Seventeen degrees below the Polar Circle was a red line, clearly seen on the 84th parallel, which marked the section on the globe put up for sale. It appeared that there was only water in this region covered with ice of considerable thickness.

But this was the risk of the purchaser. In any case he would not be disappointed in the nature of his merchandise by any misrepresentation.

At 12 o'clock exactly the public auctioneer entered by a little trap-door cut in the boards of the floor and took his place before the desk. His crier, Flint, had already arrived, and was walking up and down as agitated as a bear in a cage. Both were glad at the prospect, as they thought that the sale would run up to an enormous sum and put a large and acceptable percentage in their pockets. Of course the sale would have to be made under the regular, real American rule, "ready cash."

The amount of money, no matter how large it would be, must be raised by the delegates. At this moment a large bell ringing with vigor indicated that the bidding was going to begin. What a solemn moment! Many hearts quivered in that neighborhood. A minor riot spread among the crowd outside and reached into the hall, and Andrew R. Gilmour, the auctioneer, had to wait until quiet was restored. He got up and looked steadily at his assistants. Then he let his eyeglasses fall on his breast and said in as quiet a voice as possible: "Gentlemen, according to the plan of the Federal government, and thanks to the acquiescence given it by the European powers, we will sell a great fixed mass, situated around the North Pole, all that is within the limits of the 84th parallel, continents, waters, bays, islands, icebergs, solid parts or liquid, whatever they may be." Then, turning towards the wall, he said "Look at this chart, which has been outlined according to the latest discoveries. You will see that the surface of this lot contains 407,000 square miles. Therefore, to make the sale easier, it has been decided that the bids should be made for each square mile. Each cent bid, for instance, will be equal to 407,000 cents and each dollar 407,000 dollars on the total purchase. A little silence, please, gentlemen."

This request was not superfluous, because the impatience of the public had reached such a degree that the voice of a bidder would hardly be heard. After partial silence had been established, thanks to the industry of the crier, Flint, who roared like a foghorn, Mr. Gilmour resumed as follows: “Before beginning I will mention only one condition of the sale. No matter what changes should happen, either from a geographical or meteorological standpoint, this region after being sold to the highest bidder is absolutely his own beyond any dispute, and the other countries have no right of possession whatever as long as the territory is not outside of the limits of the 84th degree north latitude.” Again was this singular phrase mentioned at a very important moment. Some laughed at it, others considered it very seriously. “The bids are open,” said the public auctioneer in a loud voice, and while his little ivory hammer was rolling in his hand he added in an undertone: “We have offers at 10 cents the square mile. Ten cents or the tenth part of a dollar — this would make an amount of $40,700 for the whole of this immovable property.” Whether the auctioneer had had such offers or not does not matter, because the bid was covered by Eric Baldenak in the name of the Danish Government. “Twenty cents,” said he.

“Thirty cents,” said Jan Harald, for Sweden-Norway.

“Forty cents,” said Col. Boris Karkof, for Russia.

This represented already a sum of $162,800 to begin with. The representative of England had not as yet opened his mouth, not even moved his lips, which were pressed tightly together. On the other side Wm. S. Forster kept an impenetrable dumbness. Even at this moment he seemed absorbed in reading a newspaper which contained the shipping arrivals and the financial reports of the markets each day.

“Forty cents per square mile,” repeated Flint, in a voice which resembled a steam whistle, “40 cents.”

The four colleagues of Major Donellan looked at each other. Had they already exhausted the credit allowed them at the beginning of the bidding? Were they already compelled to be silent?

“Go on, gentlemen,” said the Auctioneer Gilmour, “40 cents. Who goes higher? Forty cents; why, the North Pole is worth much more than that, for it is guaranteed to be made of ice.”

The Danish delegate said 50 cents and the Hollandish delegate promptly outbid him by 10 cents.

Nobody said a word. This 60 cents represented the respectable amount of $244,200. The lift given by Holland to the sale started a murmur of satisfaction. It seemed that the persons who had nothing in their pockets and nothing to their names were the most interested of all in this contest of dollars.

At the moment Jacques Jansen made his offer Major Donellan looked at his secretary, Dean Toodrink, and, with an almost imperceptible negative sign, kept him silent. Mr. William S. Forster, seeming very much interested in his paper, made some pencil notes. Mr. J.T. Maston, only replied to the smiles of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt with a nod of the head.

“Hurry up, gentlemen; a little life. Don’t let us linger. This is very weak, very slow,” said the auctioneer. “Let me see. Nobody says more. Must I knock down the North Pole at such a price?” and as he spoke his hammer went up and down just like the cross in a priest’s hands when he wishes to bless his people.

“Seventy cents,” said Jan Harald, with a voice which trembled a little.

“Eighty,” immediately responded Col. Boris Karkof.

“Hurry up, 80 cents,” said Flint, whose eyes were burning with excitement.

A gesture of Dean Toodrink made Major Donellan jump up like a spirit. “One hundred cents,” said he with a short and sharp tone, becoming in one who represented Great Britain. That one word made England responsible for $407,000.

The friends of the bidders for the United Kingdom made a great hurrah, which was repeated like an echo by the outside crowd. The bidders for America looked at each other with disappointment; $407,000; this was already a very large figure for such a region as the North Pole; $407,000 for ice, icebergs, and icefields?

And the man of the N. P. P. A. did not say one word, did not even raise his head. Would he decide to make at last one overwhelming bid? If he wanted to wait until the Danish delegates, those of Sweden, Holland, and Russia had exhausted their credit, it would seem that the proper moment had come. Their faces plainly showed that before the “100 cents” of Major Donellan, they had decided to quit the battlefield. “One hundred cents the square mile,” said the auctioneer for the second time, “One hundred, one hundred, one hundred,” cried out Flint, making a speaking-trumpet of his half-closed hand. “Nobody goes higher?” questioned Auctioneer Gilmour. “Is it heard? Is it understood? No regrets afterwards? We will sell it now.” And he took his position and looking at his clerk, said: “once, twice” —

“One hundred and ten,” very quietly said William S. Forster, without even raising his eyes, after having turned the page of his paper.

“Hip, hip, hip,” shouted the crowd who had put most of the money on America in the bets. Major Donellan was astonished. His long neck turned in all directions and he shrugged his shoulders, while his lips worked with great excitement. He tried to crush this American representative with one look, but without success, but Mr. Forster, cool as a cucumber, did not budge.

“One hundred and forty,” said Major Donellan.

“One hundred and sixty,” said Forster.

“One hundred and eighty,” said the Major, with great excitement.

“One hundred and ninety,” said Forster.

“One hundred and ninety-nine,” roared the delegate of Great Britain. With this he crossed his arms and seemed to defy the United States of America.

One might have heard a mouse run, or a miller fly, or a worm creep. All hearts were beating. A life seemed hanging on the lips of Major Donellan. His head, generally restless, was still now. Dean Toodrink had sat down and was pulling out his hairs one by one. Auctioneer Gilmour let a few moments run by. They seemed as long as centuries. The codfish merchant continued reading his paper and making pencil figures which had evidently nothing at all to do wth [with] the question. Was he also at the end of his credit? Did he intend to make a last offer? Did this amount of 199 cents for each square mile or $793,000 for the whole of the fixture at sale seem to him to have reached the last limit of absurdity?

“One hundred and ninety-nine cents,” repeated the public auctioneer. “We will sell it,” and his hammer fell on the table before him. “One hundred and ninety-nine,” cried the helper. “Sell it! Sell it!” And every one was looking at the representative of the N.P.P.A.

That surprising gentleman was blowing his nose on a large bandanna handkerchief, which nearly covered his whole face. Mr. J. T. Maston was looking at him intently, and so was Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. It could easily be seen by their anxious faces how much they tried to supress their violent emotion. Why was Forster hesitating to outbid Major Donellan? As for the imperturbable Forster, he blew his nose a second time, then a third time, with the noise of a real foghorn. But between the second and third blow he said as quietly as possible, with a modest and sweet voice. “Two hundred cents!”

A long shudder went through the hall. Then the American backers began to make such a noise that the very windows trembled. Major Donellan, overwhelmed, ruined, disappointed, had fallen into a seat by the side of Dean Toodrink, who himself was not in a much better condition. Two thousand miles at this price made the enormous sum of $814,000 and it was apparent that the credit of England did not permit them to overreach it.

“Two hundred cents,” repeated the auctioneer. “Two hundred cents,” said Flint. “Once, twice,” said the auctioneer. “Does anybody go higher?” Major Donellan raised himself by a strong effort and looked wistfully at the other delegates. These only looked back their hope that by his bidding the Arctic region would escape the American bidder and would become the property of the European powers. But this was his last effort. The Major opened his mouth, closed it again, and in his person England sat down on itself. “Hip, hip, hurrah for the United States,” roared the winners for victorious America. And in one instant the news of the purchase ran all over Baltimore, and by telegraph all over the United States, and by cable all over the Old World. Thus it was that the N.P.P.A. through the agency of William S. Forster, became the proprietor of the Arctic domain, including everything above the eighty-fourth parallel. The next day when Mr. Forster went to make his deposit for his purchase the name he gave was Impey Barbicane and the name of the house was Barbicane & Co.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH OLD ACQUAINTANCES APPEAR TO OUR NEW READERS, AND IN WHICH A WONDERFUL MAN IS DESCRIBED.

Barbicane & Co. The president of a gunning club. And really what had gunners to do in such an operation? You will see. Is it necessary to present formally Impey Barbicane, President of the Gun Club, of Baltimore, and Capt. Nicholl, and J. T. Maston, and Tom Hunter with the wooden legs, and the lively Bilsby, and Col. Bloomsberry, and the other associates? No, if these strange persons were twenty years older than at the time when the attention of the world was upon them they had always remained the same, always as much incomplete personally, but equally noisy, equally courageous, equally confusing when it was a question of some extraordinary adventure. Time did not make an impression on these gunners; it respected them as it respects cannons no longer in use, but which decorate museums and arsenals. If the Gun Club had 1,833 members in it when it was founded, names rather than persons, for most of them had lost an arm or leg, if 30,575 corresponding members were proud to owe allegiance to the Club, these figures had not decreased. On the contrary, and even thanks to the incredible attempt which they had made to establish direct communication between earth and moon, its celebrity had grown in an enormous proportion. No one can ever forget the report on this subject which was made by this Club and which deserves a few words of mention here.

A few years after the civil war certain members of the Gun Club, tired of their idleness, proposed to send a projectile to the moon by means of a Columbiad monster. A cannon 900 feet long, nine feet broad at the bore, had been especially made at Moon City and had then been charged with 400,000 pounds of gun-cotton.

From this cannon a small cylindro-conical bomb had been flung towards the stars with a pressure of six millards pounds per square inch. After having made a grand curve it fell back to the earth only to be swallowed up by the Pacific Ocean at 27° 7’ of latitude and 41° 37’ of longitude, west. It was in this region that the frigate, Susquehanna, of the American Navy, had fished it up to the surface of the ocean, to the great comfort of its occupants. Occupants? Yes, occupants; for two members of the Gun Club — its President, Impey Barbicane, and Capt. Nicholl — accompanied by a Frenchman well known for his boldness in such cases, had been in this flying-machine. All three of them came back well and healthy from this dangerous trip. But if the two Americans were here ready to risk any similar thing, the French Michel Ardan was not. On his return to Europe he brought a fortune with him, although it astonished a good many people, and now he is planting his own cabbage in his own garden, eating them and even digesting them, if one can believe the best-informed reporters.

After this discharge of the cannon, Impey Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl had lived on their reputation in comparative quietness. As they were always anxious to do another thing like it, they dreamt and tried to find out something else. Money they had in plenty. Out of five millions and a half which had been raised for them by subscription they had nearly $200,000 left. This money was raised in the Old and New Worlds alike. Besides, all they had to do was to exhibit themselves in their projectile in America and they could always realize large amounts of money. They had earned all the glory which the most ambitious mortal would look for. Impey Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl would have been well able to keep quiet and idle if this very idleness did not torment them. And it was simply no doubt to do something that they had gone to work and bought this part of the Arctic region.

But it must not be forgotten that if the purchase cost $800,000 and more, that it was Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt who had put the necessary amount into this affair. Thanks to this generous woman Europe had been conquered by America. Since their return President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl had enjoyed a supreme celebrity. But there was another man who deserved credit in the matter. It is easy to guess that J.T. Maston was the man of whom we speak, the temporary Secretary of the Gun Club. Did we not owe to this brilliant calculator all the mathematical formulae which enabled us to tell the story of the voyage to the moon? If he did not accompany his two associates on their terrible journey it was not fear which kept him back. No, indeed, it was only the injuries he had received during the war. For really it would have made a bad impression on the inhabitants on the moon to see him in his disabled condition as a representative of our people, and the moon only our humble satellite. To his extreme regret, Mr. Maston was compelled to stay at home. Nevertheless he had not been idle. After having constructed an immense telescope, which was put on the mountain of Long’s Peak, one of the highest mountains of the Rocky range, he went up there personally, and after he had received the signal that the cannon-ball had been fired he did not once leave his post. From his place of observation he essayed the task of following his friends firing across the vast space. One might readily believe that his friends would be lost to the world; that it was very easily possible that this projectile could be compelled by the attraction of the moon to become a sub-satellite. A deviation which one might call providential had changed the direction of the projectile, and after having made one trip around the moon, in place of touching it, it was carried away in a terrible fall and returned to us with a speed of 576,000 miles a minute to the moment when it was swallowed up by the ocean. Happy it was that the great liquid mass had deadened the fall, and that the American frigate Susquehanna was present at the fall. As soon as the news reached Mr. Maston, the Secretary of the Gun Club, he rushed with all possible haste from his observation point at Long's Peak to begin operations to save his friends. Divers were sent to the place where the projectile had fallen. And Mr. Maston even did not hesitate to put on a cork jacket to save and find his friends again. It was unnecessary to go to so much trouble. The projectile was found floating on the surface of the Pacific Ocean after having made its beautiful fall. And President Barbicane with Capt. Nicholl and Michel Ardan were found playing dominoes in their floating prison on the surface of the ocean.

To return to J.T. Maston, it is proper to say that his part in the affair deserves a good deal of credit. It is certain that he was not pretty with his metallic arm. He was not young, fifty-eight years old, at the time we write this story. But the originality of his character, the vivacity of his intelligence, the vigor which animated him, the ardor which he had in all such things, had made him the ideal of Mrs. Evangeline Scorbitt. His brain carefully hidden under his cover of gutta-percha was yet untouched, and he would still pass as one of the most remarkable calculators of his age.

Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, although the least figuring gave her a headache, had yet a great liking for mathematicians, even if she had no taste for mathematics. She considered them a higher and more endowed race of human beings. Heads where the X, Y, Z were mixed up like nuts in a barrel, brains which played with signs of algebra, hands which juggled with the integral triples, these were what she liked.

Yes, these wise people seemed to her worthy of all admiration and support. She felt herself drawn strongly towards them. And J.T. Maston was exactly that kind of man and one she adored, and her happiness would be complete if they two could be made one. This was the end of her mathematics. This did not disturb the Secretary of the Gun Club, who had never found happiness in unions of this kind.

Mrs Evangelina Scorbitt was not young any more. She was forty-five years old, had her hair pasted on her temples, like something which had been dyed and re-dyed; she had a mouth full of very long teeth, with not one missing; her waist was without shape, her walk without grace; in short, she had the appearance of an old maid, although she had been married only a few years before she became a widow. She was an excellent person withal, and nothing was lacking in her cup of happiness except one thing, namely, that she wished to make her appearance in the society of Baltimore as Mrs. J.T. Maston. Her fortune was very considerable. She was not rich like the Goulds, Mackays, or Vanderbilts, whose fortunes run into the millions, and who might give alms to the Rothschilds. Neither did she possess three hundred millions like Mrs. Stewart, eighty millions like Mrs. Crocker, and two hundred millions like Mrs. Carper. Neither was she rich like Mrs. Hamersley, Mrs. Hetty Green, Mrs. Mafitt, Mrs. Marshall, Mrs. Paran Stevens, Mrs. Minturn, and many others. At any rate she had a right to take a place at that memorable feast at the Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York, where there were only admitted as guests people who had at least five millions. In brief, Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had four millions of good sound dollars, or twenty millions of francs, which came to her from John P. Scorbitt, who made his fortune both in the business of selling dry goods and salt pork. Well, this fortune this generous widow would have been glad to use for the profit of J. T. Maston, to whom she would also bring a treasure of tenderness much more inexhaustible.

Therefore when Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had heard of the requirements of Mr. Maston she had gladly agreed to put a few hundred thousand dollars in the affair of the N.P.P.A. without having the least idea of what they intended to do with it. It is true she was convinced that as long as J.T. Maston had something to do with the affair it could not help being grand, sublime, superhuman, etc. Thinking of the Secretary was for her future enough. One might think that after the auction sale, when it was declared that Barbicane & Company would be the name of the new firm, and it would be presided over by the President of the Gun Club, she would enjoy Mr. Maston's whole confidence. Was she not at the same time the largest stockholder in the affair? So it came about that Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt found herself proprietress of this polar region, all beyond the line of the eighty-fourth parallel. But what would she do with it? Or rather, what profit would the Society get out of it? This was the question; and if it interested Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt from a financial standpoint it interested the whole world, more on account of the general curiosity about the whole mystery. This excellent woman, otherwise very discreet, had often tried to get some information from Mr. Maston on this subject before putting money at the disposal of the purchasers. Without a doubt there was a grand enterprise, which, as Jean Jacques said, has never had its like before, and would never have any imitation, and which would far outshine the reputation made by the Gun Club in sending a projectile to the moon and trying to get in direct communication with our satellite. But when she persists with her queries Mr. Maston invariably replied: "Dear madame, have patience," And if Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had confidence before, what an immense joy did she feel when the triumph which the United States of America had won over the combined European powers. "But shall I not finally know the object?" asked she, smiling at the eminent calculator.

“You will soon know it,” answered Mr. Maston, shaking heartily the hand of his partner — the American lady.

This calmed for the moment the impatience of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. A few days afterwards the Old and New World were shaken up quite enough when the secret object of the company was announced, and for the realization of which the N.P.P.A. made an appeal to the public for a subscription.

The Society had purchased this portion of the circumpolar region to make use of the coal mines of the North Pole.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH THE POSSIBILITY THAT COAL MINES SURROUND THE NORTH POLE IS CONSIDERED.

Are there coal mines at the North Pole? This was the first question suggested to intelligent people. Some asked why should there be coal mines at the North Pole? Others with equal propriety asked why should there not be? It is well known that coal mines are spread all over the world. There are many in different parts of Europe. America also possesses a great many, and it is probable that the United States mines are the richest of all. There are also many in Asia, Africa, and Australia. The more our globe becomes known the more mines are discovered. We will not be in need of coal for at least hundreds of years to come. England alone produces 160,000,000 tons every year, and over the whole world it is estimated 400,000,000 tons are yearly produced. Naturally, this coal output must grow every year in proportion with the constantly increasing industries. Even if electricity takes the place of steam, it will still be necessary to use coal. We are so much in need of it that the world might be called "an animal of coal," and therefore it is necessary to take good care of it. Coal is used not only as a fuel, but also as a crude substance of which science makes great use. With the transformations to which it has been submitted in the laboratory, it is possible to paint with it, perfume with it, purify, heat, light with it, and even beautify a diamond with it. It is as useful as iron or even more so. It is fortunate that this last-mentioned metal will never be exhausted, as really the world is composed of it. The world might be considered a vast mass of iron, as other metals, and even water and stone, stand far behind it in the composition of our sphere. But if we are sure of a continuous supply for our consumption of iron, we are not so of coal. Far from it. People who are competent to speak, and who look into the future for hundreds of years, always allude to this coal famine. “But,” say the opposing party — and in the United States there are many people who like to contradict for the mere sake of argument, and who take pleasure in contradicting — ”Why should there be coal around the North Pole?”

“Why?” answered those who took the part of President Barbicane, “because, very probably at the geological formation of the world, the sun was such that the difference of temperature around the equator and the poles were not appreciable. Then immense forests covered this unknown polar region a long time before mankind appeared, and when our planet was submitted to the incessant action of heat and humidity. This theory the journals, magazines, and reviews publish in a thousand different articles either in a joking or serious way. And these large forests, which disappeared with the gigantic changes of the earth before it had taken its present form, must certainly have changed and transformed under the lapse of time and the action of internal heat and water into coal mines. Therefore nothing seemed more admissible than this theory, and that the North Pole would open a large field to those who were able to mine it. These are facts, undeniable facts. Even people who only calculated on simple probabilities could not deny them. And these facts led many people to have great faith in them.

It was on this subject that Major Donellan and his secretary were talking together one day in the most obscure corner of the “Two Friends” inn. “Well,” said Dean Toodrink, “there is a possibility that this Barbicane (who I hope may be hanged some day) is right.”

“It is probable,” said Major Donellan, “and I will almost admit that it is certain. There will be fortunes made in exploring this region around the pole. If North America possesses so many coal mines and, according to the papers, new ones are discovered quite frequently, it is not at all improbable that there are many yet to be discovered. I may add that Prof. Nordenskiol has found many kinds of different stones which contain a great variety of fossil plants in his researches in the Arctic region.”

“Higher up?” asked Dean Toodrink.

“Higher up, or rather further up, in a northerly direction,” answered the Major, “the presence of coal is practically established, and it seems as if you would only have to bend down to pick it up. Well, if coal is so plentiful on the surface of these countries, it is right to conclude that its beds must go all through the crust of the globe.” He was right. Major Donellan knew the geological formation around the North Pole well, and he was not a safe person to dispute this question with. And he might have talked about it at length if other people in the inn had not listened. But he thought it better to keep quiet after asking: “Are you not surprised at one thing? One would expect to see engineers or at least navigators figure in this matter, while there are only gunners at the head of it?”

It is not surprising that the newspapers of the civilized world soon began to discuss the question of coal discoveries at the North Pole.

“And why not,” asked the editor of an American paper who took the part of President Barbicane, “when it is remembered that Capt. Nares, in 1875 and 1876, at the eighty-second degree of latitude, discovered large flower-beds, hazel trees, poplars, beech trees, etc.?”

"And in 1881 and 1884," added a scientific publication of New York, "during the expedition of Lieut. Greely at Lady Franklin Bay, was not a layer of coal discovered by our explorers a little way from Fort Conger, near Waterhouse? And did not Dr. Pavy say that these countries are certainly full of coal, perhaps placed there to combat at some day the terrible masses of ice which are found there?"

Against such well-established facts brought out by American discoverers the enemies of President Barbicane did not know what to answer. And the people who asked why should there be coal mines began to surrender to the people who asked why should there be none. Certainly there were some, and very considerable ones, too. The circumpolar ice-cap conceals precious masses of coal contained in those regions where vegetation was formerly luxuriant. But if they could no longer dispute that there were really coal mines in this Arctic region the enemies of the association tried to get revenge in another way. "Well," said Major Donellan one day after a hard discussion which had arisen in the meeting-room of the Gun Club and during which he met President Barbicane face to face, "all right. I admit that there are coal mines; I even affirm it, there are mines in the region purchased by your society, but go and explore them — ha! ha! ha!"

"That is what we are going to do," said Impey Barbicane.

"Go over the eighty-fourth degree, beyond which no explorer as yet has been able to put his foot?"

"We will pass it — reach even the North Pole," said he. "We will reach it." And after hearing the President of the Gun Club answer with so much coolness, with so much assurance, to see his opinion so strongly, so perfectly affirmed, even the strongest opponent began to hesitate. They seemed to be in the presence of a man who had lost none of his old-time qualities, quiet, cold, and of an eminently serious mind, exact as a clock, adventurous, but carrying his practical ideas into the rashest enterprises.

Major Donellan had an ardent wish to strangle his adversary. But President Barbicane was stout and well able to stand against wind and tide, and therefore not afraid of the Major. His enemies, his friends and people who envied him knew it only too well. But there were many jealous people, and many jokes and funny stories went round in regard to the members of the Gun Club. Pictures and caricatures were made in Europe and particularly in England, where people could not get over the loss which they suffered in the matter of pounds sterling. “Ah,” said they, “this Yankee has got it in his head to reach the North Pole. He wants to put his foot where, up to the present time, no living soul has yet been. He wants to build palaces and houses and, perhaps, the White House of the United States, in a part of the world which has never yet been reached, while every other part of the world is so well known to us.” And then wild caricatures appeared in the different newspapers. In the large show-windows and news-depots, as well in small cities of Europe as in the large cities of America, there appeared drawings and cartoons showing President Barbicane in the funniest of positions trying to reach the North Pole. One audacious American cut had all the members of the Gun Club trying to make an underground tunnel beneath the terrible mass of immovable icebergs, to the eighty-fourth degree of northern latitude, each with an axe in his hand. In another, Impey Barbicane, accompanied by Mr. J.T. Maston and Capt. Nicholl, had descended from a balloon on the much-desired point, and after many unsuccessful attempts and at the peril of their lives, had captured a piece of coal weighing about half a pound. This fragment was all they discovered of the anticipated coal-fields. There were also pictures made of J. T. Maston, who was as much used for such purposes as his chief. After having tried to find the electric attraction of the North Pole, the secretary of the Gun Club became fixed to the ground by his metallic hand.

The celebrated calculator was too quick-tempered to find any pleasure in the drawings which referred to his personal conformation. He was exceedingly annoyed by them, and Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, it may be easily understood, was not slow to share his indignation. Another drawing in the Lanterne of Brussels represented the members of the Council and the members of the Gun Club tending a large number of fires. The idea was to melt the large quantities of ice by putting a whole sea of alcohol on them, which would convert the polar basin into a large quantity of punch. But of all these caricatures, that which had the largest success was that which was published by the French *Charivari*, under the signature of its designer, “Stop.” In the stomach of a whale Impey Barbicane and J. T. Maston were seated playing checkers and waiting their arrival at a good point. The new Jonah and his Secretary had got themselves swallowed by an immense fish, and it was in this way, after having gone under the icebergs, that they hoped to gain access to the North Pole. The President of this new Society did not care much about these pictures, and let them say and write and sing whatever they liked.

Immediately after the concession was made and the Society was absolute master of the northern region, appeal was made for a public subscription of $15,000,000. Shares were issued at $100, to be paid for at once, and the credit of Barbicane & Co. was such that the money ran in as fast as possible. The most of it came from the various States of the Union. “So much the better,” said the people on the part of the N.P.P.A. “The undertaking will be entirely American.”

So strong, indeed, were the foundations upon which Barbicane & Co. were established that the amount necessary to be subscribed was raised in a very short time, and even thrice the amount. Everybody was interested in the matter, and the most scientific experts did not doubt its success.

The shares were reduced one-third, and on Dec. 16 the capital of the Society was $15,000,000 in cash. This was about three times as much as the amount subscribed to the credit of the Gun Club when it was going to send a projectile from the earth to the moon.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH A TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN MRS. SCORBITT AND J.T. MASTON IS INTERRUPTED.

President Barbicane was not only convinced that he would reach his object when the amount which had been raised took another obstacle out of his way. Had he not been perfectly sure of success he would not have made an application for a public subscription. And now the time had come when the North Pole would be conquered. It was felt certain that President Barbicane and his Council of Administration had means to succeed where so many others had failed. They would do what neither Franklin, nor Kane, nor De Long, nor Nares, nor Greely had been able to accomplish. They would pass the 84th parallel, they would take possession of the vast region purchased at an auction sale, they would make this country the thirty-ninth star in the flag of the American Union. “Fake,” was all that the European delegates and their friends in the Old World could say. Nothing was more true, however, and this practical, logical means of conquering the North Pole, which was so simple that it was almost childish, was one which J.T. Maston had suggested to them. It was that brain, where ideas were constantly evolving, which had laid out this great geographical project in a way which could not but succeed.

It cannot be too often repeated that the Secretary of the Gun Club was a remarkable calculator, we might say a postgraduate calculator. But a single day was needed by him to solve the most complicated problems in mathematical science. He laughed at these difficulties whether in algebra or in plain mathematics. You should have seen him handle his figures, the signs which make up algebra, the letters in the alphabet, representing the unknown quantities, the square or crossed lines representing the way in which quantities are to be operated. All signs and lines, and radicals used in this complex language were perfectly familiar to him. And how they flew around under his pen, or rather under the piece of chalk which he attached to his iron hand, because he preferred to work on a blackboard. And this blackboard, six feet square, this was all he wanted, he was perfectly at home in his work. Nor was it figures alone which he used in his calculations. His figures were fantastic, gigantic, written with a practiced hand. His “2” and “3” were as nice and round as they could be, his 7 looked like a crutch and almost invited a person to hang on it. His 8 was as well formed as a pair of eye-glasses; and the letters with which he established his formulas, the first of the alphabet, a, b, c, which he used to represent given or known quantities, and the last, x, y, z, which he used for unknown quantities to be discovered, particularly the “z,” and those Greek letters δ, ω, α. Really an Archimedes might have been well proud of them. And those other signs, made with a clean hand and without fault, it was simply astonishing. His + showed well that this sign meant an addition of one object to the other, his — , if it was a little smaller, was also in good shape. His =, too, showed that Mr. Maston lived in a country where equality was not a vain expression, at least amongst the people of the white race. Just as well were his > and his < and his ::, used in expressing proportions. And the √ , which indicated the root of a certain number or quantity, it was to him a mark of triumph, and when he completed it with a horizontal line in this √ ¯ ¯ , it seemed as if this outline on his blackboard would compel the whole world to submit to his figuring.

But do not think that Mr. J.T. Maston’s mathematical intelligence was confined to elementary algebra! No; no matter what figuring he had to do, it was alike familiar to him, and with a practised hand he made all the signs and figures, and even did not hesitate at ∫ which looks very simple, but behind which lays a great deal of calculation. The same with the sign Σ, which represents the sum of a finished number. Also the sign ∞, by which the mathematicians designate the incomplete, and all those mysterious symbols which are used in this language and which are unknown to the common people. This astonishing man was able to do anything even in the very highest grades of mathematics. Such was J. T. Maston. And therefore it was that his associates had such perfect confidence in him when he set out to figure the most difficult problems in his audacious brain. This it was which led the Gun Club to trust him with the difficult problem of sending a projectile to the moon. And this was why Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, jealous of his fame, felt for him an admiration which ended in love. In this present case — that is, how to solve the conquering of the North Pole, J. T. Maston had but to begin to think and dream himself into the Arctic regions. To reach the solution the secretary had but to undertake certain mathematical problems, very complicated, perhaps, but over which in all cases he would come out ahead.

It was safe to trust Mr. J. T. Maston, even where the smallest and simplest mistake would have meant a loss of millions. Never, since the time his youthful brain began to think of mathematics had he committed a mistake — not even one of a thousandth of an inch — if his calculations were made up on the length of an object. If he had made a mistake of only the smallest amount he would have torn his gutta-percha cap from his head. Now let us see him while engaged in his calculations, and for this purpose we must go back a few weeks.

It was about a month before the publication of the circular addressed to the inhabitants of the Old and New Worlds that Mr. Maston had undertaken to figure out the elements of a scheme in which he had promised his associates the greatest success. For a number of years Mr. Maston had lived at No. 179 Franklin Street, one of the most quiet streets of Baltimore, far away from the centre of business, for which he did not care anything, far away from the noise of the great crowd, which disgusted him. There he occupied a modest little house known by the name of “Ballistic Cottage,” having for his income only his pension allowed to him as a retired officer of artillery and the salary which he received as Secretary of the Gun Club. He lived alone, served by his Negro “Fire-Fire.” This Negro was not an ordinary servant; he was rather an appreciative friend and treated his master as if he were his own brother. Mr. Maston was a decided bachelor, having an idea that being a bachelor was the only sensible way of living in the present world. He knew the proverb, “a woman can draw more with one hair than four oxen at the plough,” and he disproved it. If he occupied his cottage alone it was only because he wished to do so. We know that he only had to make the motion to change his solitude of one to a company of two and his small income to the income of a millionaire. He did not doubt it. Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt would have been only too happy to... But up to this time Mr. Maston had not been happy to... and it seemed certain that these two beings, so well made one for the other, at least this was the opinion of the tender widow, would never reach the transformation period. The cottage was a very simple one. A ground-floor, with a veranda and a floor over it; a small parlor and small dining-room, with a kitchen and another room in an outbuilding stand at the back of the garden. Upstairs his sleeping-room and his working-studio, looking on the garden, and where the noise of the outer world could never penetrate. Within these walls there had been made calculations which would have made Newton, Euclid, or Laplace jealous. How different was the mansion of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, situated in the richest quarter of New Park, with facade of balconies, finished in the finest architecture, half Romanesque, half Gothic, with its richly-furnished apartments, its grand halls, its picture galleries, in which French artists held the highest places; its magnificent staircase, its great number of domestics, its stables, its coach-houses, its garden, with the finest of flowers, statues, fountains, and the tower on the top of the building, on which the blue and gold coat-of-arms of the Scorbitt family was upon a glittering banner. Three miles, three long miles at least separated the Palace at New Park from the “Ballistic Cottage.” But a private telephone wire connected there, and in answer to “Hello! hello!” a conversation could be carried on between the mansion and cottage. If the persons could not look at each other they could at least hear each other. It will astonish none to hear that time upon time Mrs. Scorbitt began talking and ringing on the telephone to Mr. Maston when he was busily engaged with his figures. Then the calculator had to quit his work with some reluctance. He received a friendly “How do you do?” from Mrs. Scorbitt, which he answered with a grunt, which was sweetened into a kindly greeting by the distance over the telephone. After a conversation he was glad to go back to his figures. It was on the 3d of December, after a long and last conference, that Mr. Maston took leave of his friends and members of the Club to begin to do his share of the work. It was a very important work with which he had charged himself, for it was the question of figure mechanical appliance which would enable him to gain access to the North Pole, and which would allow him to make use of those large fields of snow now covered with impenetrable ice. He estimated that he needed at least a week to accomplish this mysterious calculation, exceedingly complicated and delicate to handle, involving several deep and important problems. Therefore, to avoid all unnecessary annoyance, it had been decided that the Secretary of the Gun Club should retire to his cottage and that he should not be disturbed by any one. This was a great disappointment for Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, but she was compelled to accept it. While President Barbicane, Capt. Nicholl and his associates, the jolly Bilsby, Col. Bloomsberry, Tom Hunter, with the wooden legs, were all saying their good-bys to him and wishing him success, Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt appeared and made her last visit to Mr. Maston.

“You will succeed, my dear,” said she at the moment of separation.

“And above all do not make a mistake,” added President Barbicane. “A mistake? He?” exclaimed Mrs. Scorbitt.

“No more than God has made a mistake in putting together this world,” modestly answered the Secretary. Then, after shaking hands all around and after several more sighs and wishes of success and suggestions not to make too severe a work of it, the calculator was left alone. The door of the Ballistic cottage was closed and Fire-Fire had orders to admit none, not even if the President of the United States should ask admission.

During his first two days of seclusion J.T. Maston thought and thought, without even touching the piece of chalk, upon the problem which he had taken on himself. He consulted certain books relative to the elements, the earth — its size, its thickness, its volume, its form, its rotation upon its axis — all elements which he had to use as the basis of his calculations.

The principles of these elements which he used, and which we put before the reader, were as follows:

Form of the earth: An ellipsis of revolution the longest radius of which is 6,377,398 metres; the shortest, 6,356,080 meters. The circumference of the earth at the equator, 40,000 kilometres. Surface of the earth, approximate estimate, 510,000,000 of square kilometers. Bulk of the earth, about 1,000 millards of cubic kilometres; that is, a cube having a metre in length, height, and thickness. Density of the earth, about five times that of the water. Time of the earth on the orbit around the sun, 365 days, 6 hours, 9 minutes, 10 seconds, 37 centimes. This gives the globe a speed of 30,400 miles travelled over by the rotation of the earth upon its axis. For a point of its surface situated at the equator, 463 meters per second. These were the principal measures of space, time, bulk, etc. which Mr. Maston used in his calculations.

It was the 5th of October, about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, it is important to mention, when this remarkable work was begun, when J. T. Maston began to work upon it. He began his calculation with a diagram representing the circumference of the earth around one of its grand circles, say the equator. The blackboard was there, in a corner of his study, upon a polished oak easel, with good light shining on it, coming by one of the windows near by. Small pieces of chalk were on the board attached to the stand. The sponge was near the hand of the calculator. His right hand, or rather his right hook, was all ready for the placing of figures which he was going to use. Standing up, Mr. Maston made a large round circle, which represented the world. The equator he marked by a straight line. Then in the right corner of the blackboard he began to put the figures which represented the circumference of the earth:

40,000,000.

This done, he began figuring on his problem. He was so much occupied by it that he had not observed the weather without. For an hour a storm had raved through the country which affected all living beings. It was a terrific storm, the rain was falling in torrents, everything seemed turned upside down in nature. Two or three times lightning had illuminated the scene around him. But the mathematician, more and more absorbed in his work, saw and heard nothing. Suddenly an electric bolt, attracted by the lightning outside, sparkled in his room, and this disturbed the calculator. “Well,” said Mr. Maston, “if unwelcome visitors cannot get in by the door they come by telephone. A nice invention for people who wish to be left alone. I will go to work and cut off the electric wire, so I will not be disturbed again while my figuring lasts.” With this he went to the telephone and said sternly: “Who wants to talk to me? Just make it short.” The reply came back: “Did you not recognize my voice, my dear Mr. Maston? It is I, Mrs. Scorbitt.” “Mrs. Scorbitt! She will never give me a moment’s rest,” uttered Mr. Maston to himself in a low voice that she could not hear. Then he thought he should at least answer her in a polite manner, and said: “Oh, is that you, Mrs. Scorbitt?”

“Yes, dear Mr. Maston.”

“And what can I do for Mrs. Scorbitt?” asked Maston.

“I want to tell you that a terrible storm and lightning is destroying a large part of our city.” “Well,” he replied, “I cannot help it.” “But I want to ask whether you have thought to close your windows?” Mrs. Scorbitt had hardly finished her sentence when a terrible thunderbolt struck the town. It struck in the neighborhood of the Ballistic cottage, and the electricity, passing along the wire with which the telephone was provided, threw the calculator to the floor with a terrible force. J.T. Maston made the best summersault he ever did in his life. His metal hook had touched the live wire and he was thrown down like a shuttlecock. The blackboard, which he had struck in his fall, was sent flying to another part of the room. Then the electricity passed into other objects and disappeared through the floor. The stupefied Mr. Maston got up and touched the different parts of his body to assure himself that he was not hurt internally. This done, he resumed his cold, calculating way. He picked everything up in his room, put it in the same place where it had been before and put his blackboard on the easel, picked up the small pieces of chalk and began again his work, which had been so suddenly interrupted. He noticed that on account of the fall the number which he had made on the right side of the blackboard was partly erased, and he was just about to replace it when his telephone again rang with a loud noise. “Again,” said J.T, Maston, and going to the telephone he exclaimed, “who is there?” “Mistress Scorbitt.” “And what does Mrs. Scorbitt want?” “Did not this terrible thunderbolt strike Ballistic cottage? I have good reason to think so. Ah, great God, the thunderbolt!”

“Don’t be alarmed, Mrs. Scorbitt.”

“You have not been injured, Mr. Maston?”

“Not at all,” he replied.

“You are sure you have no injuries whatever,” said the lady.

“I am only touched by your kindness towards me,” replied Mr. Maston, thinking it the best way to answer.

“Good evening, dear Mr. Maston.”

“Good evening, dear Mrs. Scorbitt.”

Returning to his work Mr. Maston said, sotto voce, “To the devil with her. If she had not handled the telephone at such a time I would not have run the risk of being hurt by electricity.”

Mr. Maston did not wish to be interrupted in his work again and so took down his telephone and cut the wire. Then, taking again as basis the figure which he had written, he added different formulas of it, and finally a certain formula which he had written on his left side, and then he began to figure in all the language of algebra. A week later, on the 11th of October, this magnificent calculation was finished and the Secretary of the Gun Club brought his solution of the problem with great pride and satisfaction to the members of the Gun Club, who were awaiting it with very natural impatience. This then was the practical way to get to the North Pole mathematically discovered. Here was also a society, under the name of the N.P.P.A. to which the Government of Washington had accorded a clear title of the Arctic region in case they should buy it on auction, and we have told of the purchase made in favor of American buyers and of the appeal for a subscription of $15,000,000.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH PRESIDENT BARBICANE SAYS NO MORE THAN SUITS HIS PURPOSE.

On the 22nd of December the subscribers to Barbicane & Co. were summoned to a general meeting. It is hardly necessary to say that the headquarters of the Gun Club were selected as the place of the meeting. In reality the whole block would not have been sufficient to give room to the large crowd of subscribers who assembled on that day. But a meeting in the fresh air on one of the public squares of Baltimore was not very agreeable in such cold weather. Usually the large hall of the Gun Club was decorated with models of all kinds lent by members of the Club. It was a real museum of artillery. Even the furniture, chairs and tables, sofas and divans, recalled by their strange shapes those murderous engines which had sent into a better world many brave people whose greatest wish was to die of old age.

On this meeting day all these things were taken down and out. This was not a meeting for the purpose of war, but a commercial and peaceful meeting over which Impey Barbicane was going to preside. All room possible had been made for the subscribers who arrived from all parts of the United States. In the hall as well as in the adjoining rooms the crowds were pushing and pressing each other without heeding the innumerable people who were standing on the adjoining streets. The members of the Gun Club, as first subscribers to the affair, had places reserved for them very near the desk. Among them could be found Col. Bloomsberry, more happy than ever; Tom Hunter, with his wooden legs, and the jolly Bilsby. Very snug in a comfortable armchair was Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, who should really have had a place on the right hand of the President, as she was in reality the owner of the Arctic region. Several other ladies were in the crowd. They could readily be seen by their large and much-decorated hats in many different colors. The large crowd on the outside tried to push into the hall, and one might easily have thought that all the people present were not merely helpmates of the members of the Gun Club, but rather their personal friends. The European delegates — Swedish, Norwegians, Danish, English, Dutch, and Russian — occupied reserved seats, and if they had bought any stock in this society it was only each one individually to such an extent as to justify a vote in the proceedings. After they had been so closely united in purchasing these regions they were united now only to annoy the purchasers. It may easily be imagined what intense curiosity they had to hear the important communication which the President was about to make to them. This communication undoubtedly would throw some information on the point as to how the society would proceed to reach the North Pole. Was this not a more difficult thing than merely to make use of the coal mines? If there should be any objections to make you may be assured that Major Donellan, backed up by his secretary, Dean Toodrink, would make them, and the other delegates would not be very slow in adding their word also. The Major had firmly decided to harass and annoy his rival, Impey Barbicane, as much as he possibly could.

It was 8 o’clock in the evening. The hall, the parlors, and all quarters occupied by the Gun Club blazed with lights which the Edison electroliers throw out. As soon as the doors were thrown open for the public a terrible crowd jammed into the hall. But everyone became silent as the ushers announced that the Council of Administration was coming. There, on a draped platform, with a table covered with black cloth, in full sight, President Barbicane, his Secretary, J.T. Maston, and his associates, took their places. A triple round of cheers, followed by hearty “tigers,” rang through the hall and out to the adjoining streets. Very solemnly Mr. Maston and Capt. Nicholl took their seats. Then the President, who had remained standing, opened the proceedings. He put his right hand in his trouser’s pocket and his left hand in his vest front and began as follows:

“Lady and gentlemen subscribers, the Council of Administration has called a meeting in these headquarters of the Gun Club to make an important communication to you. You have learned by the circulars and through the discussions in the papers that the object of our Club is to explore the large coal fields situated in the Arctic regions, which we have recently purchased and to which we hold a title from the American Government. The amount of money raised by public subscription will be used for these purposes. The success which will be attained by it surpasses belief and the dividends your money will bring you will be unsurpassed in the commercial or financial history of this or any other country.” Here applause was heard for the first time and for a moment the orator was interrupted. “You do not forget,” said he, “how we have proved to you that there must be vast coal fields in these regions, perhaps also fields of fossil ivory. The articles published on this subject do not allow any doubt that coal fields are there, and coal is now, you know, the basis of all our commercial industry. Without mentioning the coal which is used every year in firing and heating, we might think of coal used for many other purposes, of which I could mention a hundred different ones. It is certain that coal is the most precious substance, and will some day, on account of the large consumption of it; fail in its supply. Before 500 years have passed the coal mines which are at present in use will have stopped giving coal.”

“Three hundred years,” cried one of those present. “Two hundred years,” answered another.

“Let us say at some time sooner or later,” continued the President, calmly, “and let us suppose, too, that we will even discover new coal fields yet, whose coal will give out, say at the end of the nineteenth century.” Here he stopped to give his listeners a chance to grasp the idea. Then he began again: “Therefore, we come here, subscribers, and I ask you to rise and go with me to the North Pole immediately.” Everybody present got up and seemed about to rush away and pack their trunks, as if President Barbicane had a vessel ready to take them direct to the North Pole. But a remark made by Major Donellan in a clear and loud voice brought them back to reality and stopped them at once. “Before starting” he asked, “I would like to know by what means we can reach the North Pole?”

“Either by water, or land, or by air,” quietly answered President Barbicane.

All the people present sat down, and it may readily be understood with what a feeling of curiosity.

“In spite of all the devotion and courage of previous explorers, the eighty-fourth parallel has thus far been the northern limit reached. And it may fairly be supposed that this is as far north as anybody will ever get by the means employed at the present day. Up to the present time we have only used boats and vessels to reach the icebergs, and rafts to pass over the fields of ice. People should not adopt such rash means and face the dangers to which they are exposed through the low temperature. We must employ other means to reach the North Pole.”

It could be seen by the excitement which took hold of the auditors, that they were on the point of hearing the secret which has been so vigorously searched for by every one.

“And how will you reach it?” demanded the delegate of England.

“Before ten minutes have passed you will know it, Major Donellan,” said President Barbicane, “and I may add in addressing myself to all the stockholders, that they should have confidence in us as the promoters of this affair, for we are the same who have tried to send a projectile to the moon.”

“Yes,” cried Dean Toodrink, sarcastically, “they tried to go as far as the moon. And we can easily see that they are here yet.”

President Barbicane ignored the interruption. Shrugging his shoulders, he said in a loud voice: “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, in ten minutes you will know what we are going to do.”

A murmur, made up of many “Ahs!” and “Ohs!” followed this remark. It seemed to them as if the orator had said in ten minutes they would be at the North Pole. He then continued in the following words:

“First of all, it is a continent which forms this arctic region, or it is an ocean, and has Commander Nares been right in calling it ‘paleocrystic ocean,’ which means an ocean of old ice? To this question I must answer that I think he was not right.”

This is not sufficient,” exclaimed Eric Baldenak. “It is not the question of supposing, it is the question of being certain.”

“Well, we are certain,” came the answer to this furious inquirer. “Yes, it is a solid continent and not an ice ocean which the N.P.P.A. has purchased and which now belongs to the United States and which no European power has the right to touch.”

A little murmur came from the neighborhood of the delegates of the Old World. “Bah!” they said. “It is full of water, a regular washbasin which you will not be able to empty.” Dean Toodrink as usual made most of the remarks and met the hearty applause of his associates. “No, sir,” answered President Barbicane, quickly. “There is a regular continent, a platform which rises like the Gobi desert in Central Asia, three or four kilometres above the surface of the ocean. This is very easy to be seen from the observations made in the neighboring countries, of which the polar region is only an extension.

“After their explorations have not Nordenskiold, Perry and Maaigaard stated that Greenland gets higher and higher towards the North Pole?

“Besides, they have found birds, different products and vegetables in the northern ice — ivory teeth also — which indicate that this region must have been inhabited and that animals must have been there, and perhaps people as well. There used to be large forests there, which must have been formed into coal-fields, which we will explore. Yes, there is a continent, without a doubt, around the North Pole — a continent free from all human beings, and on which we will place the banner of the United States.”

At this remark the auditors expressed great delight. When the noise had finally subsided Major Donellan could be heard to remark: “Well, seven minutes have already gone by of the ten which, as you say, would be sufficient to reach the North Pole.”

“We shall be there in three minutes,” coolly answered President Barbicane.

“But, even if this be a continent, which constitutes your purchase, and if it is a raised country, as we may have reasons to believe, it is also obstructed by eternal ice, and in a condition which will make exploration extremely difficult,” responded the Major. “Impossible,” cried Jan Harald, who emphasized this remark with a wave of his hand. “Impossible, all right,” said Impey Barbicane. “But it is to conquer this impossibility that we have purchased this region. We will need neither vessels nor rafts to reach the North Pole; no, thanks to our operations, the ice and icebergs, new or old, will melt by themselves, and it will not cost one dollar of our capital nor one minute of our time.” At this there was absolute silence. The most important moment had come.

“Gentlemen,” said the President of the Gun Club, “Archimedes only asked for a lever to lift the world. Well, this lever we have found. We are now in a position to remove the North Pole.”

“What, remove the North Pole?” cried Eric Baldenak.

“Will you bring it to America?” asked Jan Harald. Without doubt President Barbicane did not wish to explain himself just yet, for he continued: “In regard to this point of leverage — ” “Do not tell it! do not tell it!” cried one of his associates, with a terrible voice.

“In regard to this lever — ”

“Keep the secret! keep the secret!” cried the majority of the spectators, taking up the cry.

“We will keep it,” said President Barbicane.

Naturally, the European delegates were very much vexed at this remark. This will be easily understood. In spite of all these exclamations the orator never had any intention of making his plan known. He continued to say: “We obtained our object, thanks to a mechanical device, one which has no precedent in the annals of industrial art. We will undertake it and bring it to a successful finish by means of our capital, and how I will inform you forthwith.”

“Hear! hear!” said the others present.

“First of all, the idea of our plan comes from one of the ablest, most devoted and illustrious calculators and one of our associates as well,” said President Barbicane. “One to whom we owe all the calculations which allows us to have our work in such good condition. As the exploration of the North Pole is not a piece of play the removal of the pole is a problem which could only be solved by the highest calculations. Therefore we have called the assistance of the honorable Secretary, Mr. J.T. Maston.”

“Hip, hip, hip, hurrah, for J. T. Maston,” exclaimed all the auditors, seemingly electrified by the presence of this extraordinary calculator.

Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt was deeply touched by this recognition of the celebrated mathematician, who had already entirely gained her heart. He contented himself with turning his head to the right and left, bowing and thanking his auditors.

“Already, dear subscribers,” said President Barbicane, “since the great meeting in honor of the arrival of the Frenchman, Michel Ardan, in America, some months before our departure for the moon” (and this confident Yankee spoke of the trip to the moon as quietly as if it were no more than a trip to New York), “J T. Maston had already said to himself: ‘We must invent machines to move the North Pole. We must find a point for action and put the axis of the earth in the right direction from the object.’ Well, any or all of you who listen to me find it if you can. I can only say the machines have been invented, the point of leverage has been found, and now let us pay our attention to the question of fixing, in the right way, for our end of the axis of the earth.” Here he stopped speaking, and the astonishment which was expressed on the faces of his auditors it is impossible to describe.

“What!” cried Major Donellan, “you then have the idea of putting the axis of the earth in another direction?”

“Yes, sir,” answered President Barbicane promptly. “We have the means of making a new one which will hereafter regulate the routine of day and night.”

“You want to modify the daily rotation of the earth?” repeated Col. Karkof, with fire in his eyes.

“Absolutely, but without affecting its duration,” answered President Barbicane. This operation will bring the pole at or about the sixty-seventh parallel of latitude, then the earth will be similar to the planet Jupiter, whose axis is nearly perpendicular to the plane of its orbit. Now this movement of 23 degrees 28 minutes will be sufficient to give at our North Pole such a degree of heat that it will melt in less than no time the icebergs and field which have been there for thousands of years.”

The audience was out of breath. Nobody thought of interrupting the orator, even to applaud him. All were taken in by this idea, so ingenious and simple, of modifying the axis on which this earthly spheroid is rotating. And as for the European delegates, well, they were simply stupefied, paralyzed, and crushed, they kept their mouths shut in the last stage of astonishment. But the hurrahs seemed to rend the hall asunder, when President Barbicane made the additional remark: “It is the sun which will take upon himself the melting of the icebergs and fields around the North

Pole, and thus make access to the same very easy. So, as people cannot go to the pole, the pole will come to them.”

CHAPTER VIII.

YES, JUST LIKE JUPITER.

Since that memorable meeting in honor of Michel Ardan, the Hon. J.T. Maston had talked and thought of nothing else but the “changing of the axis of the earth.” He had studied the subject as much as possible and found out all the facts and figures about it. As the problem had been solved by this eminent calculator a new axis was going to take the place of the old one upon which the earth was now turning, and the world would otherwise remain the same. In the scheme it would be possible for the climate around the North Pole to become exactly the same as that of Trondhjem, in Norway, in the Spring. Naturally, then the large amount of ice would melt under the ardent sun. At the same time the climates would be distributed over our sphere like those now on the surface of Jupiter. In other words, the new-formed society of Barbicane was going to change everything at present on the surface of the earth. And the creation of this new axis was possible, just as soon as the platform of which Archimedes had dreamed and the lever imagined by J.T. Maston were at the disposal of these courageous engineers. And as they had decided to make a secret of their invention until a future time, people could not do anything else but make their own figures. This was what all the papers did, calling on the most scientific persons and learning as well something from the most ignorant persons. If there really were people living on the surface of Jupiter, they had a good many advantages over those on the earth, advantages which had all been narrated and explained in the meeting which was held before the trip to the moon. All these advantages would come to the people living on the earth if Barbicane & Co. could accomplish what they intended to do. Twenty-four hours would then always separate two noons from each other. Twilight and dawn would always be as they are now. But the most curious thing of all would be the absence of the different seasons of the year. Now there were Summer, Winter, Fall, and Spring. The people living on Jupiter did not know these seasons at all. After this experiment people living on this globe would not know them either. As soon as the new axis would be in smooth working order there would be no more ice regions, nor torrid zones, but the whole world would have an even temperature climate.

What, after all, is the torrid zone? It is a part of the surface in which the people can see the sun twice yearly at its zenith, and the temperate zone but a part where the sun never goes to the zenith, and the icy region but a part of the world which the sun forgets entirely for a long time, and around the North Pole this extends for six months. It is simply the position of the sun which makes a country exceedingly hot or cold. Well, these things would not appear any longer on the surface of the world. The sun would be always over the equator: it would go down every twelve hours just as regularly as before. "And among the advantages of the new method," said the friends of President Barbicane, "were these, that each person could choose a climate which was best for himself and his health; no more rheumatism, no more colds, no more grippe; the variations of extreme heat would not be known any more. In short, Barbicane & Co. were going to change fixtures which had existed ever since the world was in existence. Certainly the observer would lose a few stars and things which he perhaps liked to look at now, and the poet would not have any longer his dreamy nights, etc. but what a great advantage it would be for the world at large. "And," said certain journals, "the products of the ground can be regulated so that agriculturists can give to each sort of plant life the temperature which suits it most." Other newspapers asked: "Will we no more have rain, or storms, or hail — things upon which a great deal depends in the harvest time?" "Undoubtedly," said the friends of Barbicane & Co. but these accidents will be more rare than they have been, as the temperature will be more even.

Yes, taken in all, it will be a great advantage to humanity. It will be the real millennium of the earthly globe. And Barbicane & Co. will have done a service to mankind which but for them would have remained an impossibility." "Yes," said Michel Ardan, "our hemisphere, the surface of which is always either too cold or too warm, will no longer be the place for colds and rheumatism, etc." A New York paper of Dec. 27 printed the following article: "Honor to President Barbicane! His associates and himself will not only annex a new province to our American continent, and thereby enlarge the already vast possessions of the United States, but they will make the whole world more productive and inhabitable. It will be possible then to put seed in the ground as soon as the crop had grown up and been taken out; there would be no more time lost during the Winter. And the coal mines also would make the country richer than the value of its entire present realty. Barbicane & Co. will change the whole world and put it in better condition. Thanks, then, to the people who have done this greatest of benefits to humanity."

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH APPEARS THE FRENCH GENTLEMAN TO WHOM WE REFERRED AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS TRUTHFUL STORY.

Such, then, were to be the profits due to the changes which were to be wrought by President Barbicane. The earth would continue to revolve and the course of the year would not be much altered. As the changes would concern the whole world it was natural that they became of interest to all. In regard to the new axis which was going to be used that was the secret which neither President Barbicane nor Capt. Nicholl nor J.T. Maston seemed to be willing to give to the public. Were they to reveal it before, or would none know of it until after the change had taken place? A degree of uncertainty began to fill the American mind. Criticisms very natural and to be expected were made in the papers. By what mechanical means was this project to be carried out which would bring about this change? It would necessarily demand a terrible power. One of the greatest papers at that time commented in the following article: “If the earth was not turning on its axis, perhaps a very feeble shock would be sufficient to give it such a movement as might be chosen, but otherwise it would be very difficult if not impossible to deviate it a fixed amount.” Nothing seemed more correct after having discussed the effort which the engineers of the N.P.P.A. were to make. Discussion took on the interesting turn as to whether this result would be reached insensibly or suddenly. And if the latter, would not terrible accidents happen at the moment when the change took place? This troubled scientific people as well as ignorant people. It was not agreeable to know that a blow was to be struck and not know precisely what the after effects were to be.

It seemed as if the promoters of this undertaking had not fully considered the consequences - that they would be so very dangerous to the earth, and that it would not do as much good as first thought. The European delegates, more than ever angry at the loss which they had suffered, resolved to make the most of this question and to excite the public as much as possible upon it so as to turn feeling against the members of the Gun Club.

It will not be forgotten that France had absolutely nothing to do with these delegates, as it had no intentions of buying the Arctic region. However, a Frenchman had come to Baltimore, and for his own personal benefit and information had watched with great interest the proceedings of the Gun Club. He was an engineer, not more than thirty-five years old. He had been first in the polytechnic school, and came out of it with the highest honors. He was without doubt as skilful a calculator as Mr. J.T. Maston. This engineer was a very intelligent young man, very original, always pleasant, and with most amiable manners. He always spoke very frankly and used plain language, no matter whether he was speaking in earnest or in fun. He even went so far as to use slangy expressions when they served his purpose. He could sit for hours at his table and figure and calculate, making his figures and calculations as fast as he could write with a pen. His greatest pleasure, next to these difficult mathematical efforts, was in “whist,” which he played apparently very indifferently, not forgetting to figure out all his chances. His name was Alcide Pierdeux, but he generally signed it, A. Pierd, and sometimes only A. Pie. He was very tall. His friends remarked that his height measured about the five millionth part of the quarter of the meridian, and they were not much mistaken. He had a small head, at least it looked so on his broad shoulders, but with a most lively expression on his face, and his blue eyes behind his eye-glasses twinkled merrily. This was characteristic of him, for he had one of those faces which appear merry, even when they are in sober earnest. He was at once the best scholar in his class and the best tempered. But even if his head did seem a little small on his shoulders, it is safe to say that it was filled to its highest capacity. He was a mathematician, as all his ancestors had been, but he did not study mathematics to use them in his profession, for which he never had any taste, as he disliked trade. No, he studied mathematics for themselves alone, simply to find them out more and more where there was so much unknown to man. Let us also remark that Alcide Pierdeux was a bachelor. He was as yet single, or, as he would express it, equal to one (= 1) although his greatest wish was to get married. His friends all thought that he would marry a very charming girl, gay and spirituelle. But, unhappily for him, the girl's father said that he was too smart and that he would talk to his daughter in language which she would not be able to understand. How modest and simple this father was, indeed. And for this reason the young engineer decided to place between himself and his country the broad ocean. He asked permission to go abroad for a year and obtained it. He thought that he could not make any better use of his time than to go to Baltimore and note the actions of the N.P.P.A. And this is how he came to be at this time in the United States. However, since he got to Baltimore he had cared little apparently for the great undertaking of Barbicane & Co. Whether the earth would have a change of the axis or not, what did it matter to him? He only wanted to know, and his curiosity was at the highest point to find out, by what means they were to move the earth. He thought again and again how they would do it and had several plans in his head and dismissed them only to consider the matter afresh. He concluded that they wanted probably to substitute a new axis, but he did not clearly see where their point of operations was to be. Then, again, he would say, "There is the daily movement. It is impossible to surpress it; how they will do it, is a perfect conundrum to me.” He had no idea what the plans of Barbicane and Maston were. It is to be regretted very much that their intentions were not known to him, as he would have been able to figure out the formulae in a very short time. And so it came about that on this 29th day of December, Alcide Pierdeux was walking with his hand at his brow, pondering, about the streets of Baltimore.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH A LITTLE UNEASINESS BEGINS TO SHOW ITSELF.

A month had elapsed since the meeting of the Gun Club and the stockholders of the new-formed society, and public opinion was getting much altered. The advantages of the change to be wrought in the axis of the earth were forgotten and its disadvantages began to be spoken of. It was very probable, public opinion said, that a terrible catastrophe would happen, as the change could only be brought about by a violent shock. What would this catastrophe exactly be? In regard to the change of climates, was it so desirable after all? The Esquimaux and the Laps and the Samoyeden and the Tchuktchees would benefit by it, as they had nothing to lose. The European delegates were very energetic in their talk against President Barbicane and his work. To begin with they sent information to their Government. They used the cable frequently and always sent cipher messages. They asked questions and received instructions. What, then, were these instructions, always in cipher and very guarded? “Show energy, but do not compromise our Government,” said one. “Act very considerately, but do not touch the ‘statu[s] quo,’” said another. Major Donellan and his associates did not fail to predict a terrible accident. “It is very evident that the American engineers have taken steps so as not to hurt, or at least as little as possible, the territory of the United States,” thought Col. Boris Karkof. “But how could they do it?” asked Jan Harald. “If you shake a tree do not all its branches suffer while you are shaking it?” “And if somebody hits you on the back does not your whole body feel the pain?” said Jacques Jansen. “That is, then, what this strange paragraph of the document meant,” said Dean Toodrink. “That is the reason why they mentioned certain geographical changes.”

"Yes," said Eric Baldenak, "that is what we have to fear; this change will throw the sea out of its basin, and should the ocean leave its present quarters, would not certain inhabitants of this globe find themselves so located that they could not readily communicate with their fellow-citizens?"

"It is very possible that they may be brought into such a density of surrounding medium," said Jan Harald, gravely, "that they will be unable to breathe."

"We will see London at the top of Mount Blanc," exclaimed Major Donellan. And with his legs crossed and his head thrown back this gentleman looked straight up as if the capital of his country was already lost in the clouds. In short, it became a public danger and a most annoying one. True, it was only a question of a change of 23 degrees and 28 minutes, but this change might bring about a great movement of the oceans as the new earth flattened itself around the pole. Protestations were heard from all over, and the Government of the United States was asked to interfere. "It was best not to try the operation at all." "The consequences of it might destroy this world." "God has done all things well; it was not necessary to better his work," were the comments. And yet there were people light-hearted enough to make merry at the whole matter. "Look at these Yankees," they said, "they want to turn the earth on its axis. If the earth had shown any faults in its motion it would be all right to better it, but it had gone on for millions of years and always as regularly as clockwork."

Instead of answering such questions Engineer Alcide Pierdeux tried to find which would be the countries and directions, figured out by Mathematician Maston, in which the test would take place — the exact point of the globe where the work would begin. As soon as he should know this he would be master of the situation and know exactly the place which would be in the most danger. It has been mentioned before that the countries of the old continent were probably connected with those of the new across the North Pole. Was it not possible, it was asked in Europe, that President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl and J.T. Maston had considered only how to save their own country from any ill consequences which might come from the shock? He was a Yankee — it was pointed out they were all Yankees — and particularly this man Barbicane, who had created the idea of going to the moon. In any case, it was argued, the whole new world, from the Arctic regions to the Gulf of Mexico, would not have to fear anything from the shock. It is even probable on the other hand that America would profit immensely by it and gain some territory. “Who knows what is lying in the two oceans which wash the American coast? Was it not probable that there was some valuable territory which they wished to take possession of?” asked people who never saw anything but the dark side of a question. “Is it sure that there is no danger? Suppose J.T. Maston should make a mistake in his calculations? And could not the President have made a mistake when he came to put his apparatus in working order? This might happen to the smartest people. They might not always put the bullet in the target, or they might neglect to put the cannonball into the cannon,” were the comments of these nervous folk. This uneasiness was fomented by the European delegates. Secretary Dean Toodrink published several articles in this line, and even stronger ones were put by him in the *Standard*. Jan Harald put some in the Swedish journal *Aftenbladt*, and Col. Boris Karkof in a Russian journal which had a large circulation. Even in America opinions differed. The Republicans were friends of President Barbicane, but the Democrats declared themselves against him. A part of the American press agreed with the European press. And as in the United States the papers had become great powers, paying yearly for news about twenty millions of dollars, they had great influence on the people. In vain did other journals of large circulation speak in favor of the N.P.P.A. In vain did Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt pay as high as $10 a line for articles showing the advantages of this invention. In vain did this ardent widow try to demonstrate that everything was perfectly correct, and that J.T. Maston could never commit an error in figuring. Finally America took fright in the matter and was inclined to be governed by Europe. But neither President Barbicane nor Secretary Maston of the Gun Club seemed to care what was said. They did not even take the trouble to correct the different articles. They let people say what they liked and did not try to change their minds at all. They were too much occupied in preparations for the immense undertaking. It is indeed strange that the public, who were at first so enthusiastic and so certain of success, should so suddenly turn and go against this operation.

Soon, however, in spite of the money Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt spent on the matter, the President and Secretary of the Club came to be considered dangerous characters by the people of the two worlds. The Government of the United States was asked officially by the European powers to interfere and examine the matter. The originators were to openly show their ideas and by what means they hoped to accomplish what they intended. They would have to inform the Government which parts of the world would be most in danger and, in short, tell everything which the public demanded to know. The Government at Washington was compelled to do what they were asked. The uprising of public sentiment in the Northern, Southern, and Middle States of the Union did not allow them any other course. A commission of engineers, mechanicians, mathematicians, and geographers were appointed — fifty in all, presided over by John Prestice — by the act of the 19th of February, with full power to do anything which they considered necessary in the matter. At first the President of the Society received orders to appear before this committee. President Barbicane did not respond. Agents went to his house in Baltimore, but the President was gone. Where was he? No one knew. When did he depart? Six weeks ago, on the 11th of January, he had left the city, and the State of Maryland as well, in company with Capt. Nicholl.

Where did they both go? Nobody could tell. Evidently the two members of the Gun Club went to that mysterious region where preparations were going on for the great operation. But where could this place be? It was most important to know where this place was in order to break up and destroy the plans of these engineers before they had got too far in their work.

The consternation produced by this departure of the President and his associate was enormous. It soon changed public opinion to hatred against the N.P.P.A. and its managers. But there was one man who ought to know where the President and his associate had gone. There was one man who could answer this gigantic question, which at present excited the whole world and this man was — J.T. Maston. He was ordered to appear before the Committee of Inquiry under the Presidency of John Prestice. He did not appear. Had he also left Baltimore? Had he also gone to join his associates to aid them in their work, the results of which the whole world now expected with such immense fright? No. J.T. Maston was living still in his Ballistic Cottage, at No. 179 Franklin Street, working all the time and already beginning new calculations, only interrupting his work when he wanted to spend a social evening with Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt at her magnificent residence at New Park. An agent was sent to him by the President of the Inquiry Committee with orders to bring him to their meeting. The agent arrived at the cottage, knocked at the door and introduced himself. He was harshly received by “Fire-Fire,” but much worse by the proprietor of the house. However, Mr. Maston thought it was no more than right that he should go to the meeting, and he went with the agent. As soon as he had arrived they began to question him.

The first question was, “Where is President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl at present?” He answered with a steady voice, “I know where they are, but I am not at liberty to disclose this information.” Second question: “Have he and his associates made the necessary preparations to put this operation in working order?” “This,” said Maston, “is a part of the secret which I cannot reveal.” “Would he be land enough to let this Committee examine his own work, so they would be able to judge if his Society would be in position to accomplish their intentions?” “No, most certainly I shall not allow it, never; I would rather destroy it. It is my right as a citizen of free America to refuse to communicate to any person the result of my work.”

“But,” said President Prestice in a very serious voice, “if it is your right to keep silent, it is the right of the whole United States to ask you to stop these rumors and give an explanation of the means which will be employed by your Company,” Mr. Maston did not agree that it was his right nor that it was his duty to answer further questions. In spite of their begging, threatening, etc. they could obtain nothing from this man with the iron hook. Never, never, would he say one word of it, and it was hardly possible to believe that such a strong will was concealed under that cover of “gutta-percha.” Mr. Maston went away as he had come; he was congratulated by Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, who was delighted by the courageous attitude taken by him. When the results of this last meeting of the Inquiry Committee became known public indignation really took a turn which threatened the security and safety of the calculator. The pressure of public opinion was so great that the Cabinet of the Government of the United States was compelled to give the Committee full permission to do what they thought most necessary and advisable in the matter. One evening, the 13th of March, J.T. Maston was in his study at the Ballistic Cottage, very much interested in different figures, when suddenly the telephone bell attracted his attention. “Hello! hello!” said he, annoyed by this sudden interruption, “who wants me?” “Mme. Scorbitt.” “What does Mrs. Scorbitt want?” “She wants to put you on your guard, I am informed this moment” — and she had not time to finish the phrase when Mr. Maston heard a terrible noise at the door of his house. On the stairs which led to his study there was an extraordinary racket. He could hear loud voices, many angry voices. Then the noise of a whole army of men moving towards his door. It was his servant Fire-Fire, who was trying to keep the intruders from breaking, into the house and disturbing the “home” of the master. A moment afterwards the door was violently opened and a policeman appeared, followed by several others. This policeman had a warrant to make a visit to the house and to take possession of all papers and also of J.T. Maston himself. The angry Secretary of the Gun Club reached for his revolver, and would have certainly defended himself had he not been suddenly disarmed. He was held by officers, and all his papers were put in a bundle. Suddenly he made a bold effort, freed himself, grabbed his note-book, out of which he tore the last page and began to chew it very quickly. “Now you can take it,” said he, “for it will be no good to you.” An hour afterwards he was a prisoner in the jail of Baltimore. This was undoubtedly the best that could happen to him, as it was extremely dangerous for him to be at liberty due to the then excited state of the public mind.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE NOTEBOOK OF J.T. MASTON AND WHAT IT NO LONGER CONTAINED.

The notebook, which was taken possession of by the police, had thirty pages covered with formulae and figures, including all the calculations of J.T. Maston. It was a work of the higher mathematics, which could only be appreciated by the highest mathematicians. The following formula,

$$\frac{1}{2}\left(v^2 - v_0^2\right) = gr\left\{\frac{r}{x} - 1 + \frac{m'}{m}\left(\frac{r}{d-x} - \frac{r}{d-r}\right)\right\}$$

[Equation 1]

which was also to be found in the calculation of *From the Earth to the Moon*, held a prominent place in these calculations. The majority of people could not understand anything of what was written in the notebook, but it would have given satisfaction to give out the results, which every one expected with so much curiosity. And so it was that all the newspapers, and the Inquiry Committee as well, tried to read the formulae of this celebrated calculator. In the work of Mr. Maston were found some problems correctly executed, others half solved, etc. The calculations had been made with great exactness and of course the Inquiry Committee supposed that they were absolutely correct. If the plan was carried out fully it was seen that without a doubt the earth’s axis would be greatly changed and that the terrible disasters which were predicted would take place with full force. The reports made by the Inquiry Committee to the different newspapers ran as follows:

“The idea followed by the Administrative Council of the N.P.P.A. and the object of which is to substitute a new axis for the old one is to be carried out by means of the recoil of a piece of ordnance fixed at a certain point of the earth. If the barrel of this device is immovably fixed to the ground it is not at all doubtful that it will communicate its shock over our whole planet. The engine adopted by the engineers of the Society is then nothing else but a monster cannon, the effect of shooting which would be absolutely nothing if it were pointed vertically. To produce its highest effect it is necessary to point it horizontally towards the north or south, and it is this last direction which has been chosen by Barbicane & Co. Under these conditions the recoil will produce a movement of the earth towards the north, a movement similar to that of one billiard ball touched very slightly by another.”

This was really just what the clever Alcide Pierdeux had predicted. As soon as the cannon has been fired off, the center line of the earth would be displaced in a parallel direction to that of the recoil. This would change the direction of the orbit somewhat, and consequently the duration of the year, but in such a mild way that it must be considered as absolutely free from bad results. At the same time the earth takes a new movement of rotation around an axis in the plane of the equator, and the daily rotation will then be accomplished indefinitely upon this new axis, as if no daily movement had existed previous to the shock. At present this movement is made around the lines of the poles, and in combination with the accessory force produced by the recoil there was created a new axis, the pole of which moves from the present to the amount of a quantity called “x.” In other words, if the cannon is fired at the moment when the vernal equinox — one of the intersections of the equator and the ecliptic — is at the nadir of the point of shooting, and if the recoil is sufficiently strong to displace the old pole 23 degrees, 28 minutes, the new axis becomes perpendicular to the direction of the earth’s orbit, the same as it is for the planet Jupiter.

What the consequences were expected to be we already know, as President Barbicane had indicated them at the meeting of the 22d of December. But, given the mass of the earth and the quantity of momentum, which she possesses, is it possible to conceive a piece of ordnance so strong that its recoil will be able to produce a modification in the actual direction of the real pole, and especially to the extent of 23 degrees, 28 minutes? Yes, if a cannon or a series of cannons are built with the dimensions required by the laws of mechanics, or, in lieu of these dimensions, if the inventors were in possession of an explosive strong enough to impel a projectile with the necessary velocity for such a displacement.

Now, taking as a basis model the cannon of 27 centimetres of the French Marine Corps, which throws a projectile of 180 kilograms with an initial velocity of 500 metres a second, by giving to this piece of ordnance an increased dimension of 100 times — that is, a million times in volume — it would throw a projectile of 180,000 tons: or, in other words, if the powder had strength sufficient to give to the projectile an initial velocity 5,600 times greater than that of the old black powder used for a cannon the desired result would be obtained. In fact, with a velocity of 2,800 kilometres a second, a velocity sufficient to go from Paris to St. Petersburg in one second, there was no doubt that the recoil of the projectile, acting against the earth, would put everything again in a state of quietude. Well, extraordinary as it may appear, J.T. Maston and his associates had in their possession exactly this explosive, of a nearly unlimited power, and of which the gunpowder used to throw the ball of the [C]olumbiad towards the moon gave but a faint idea. It was Capt. Nicholl who had discovered it. The substances which entered into its composition were only imperfectly entered in the notebook of Mr. Maston, and he merely named it “melimelonite.” All that was known was that it was formed by the reaction of a melimelo of organic substances and azotic acids. No matter what the explosive was, with the power which it possessed it was more than sufficient to throw a projectile weighing 180,000 tons outside of the earth’s attraction, and it was evident that the recoil which it would produce to the cannon would have the effect of changing the axis, displacing the North Pole 23 degrees and 28 minutes, bringing the new axis in the direction of the ecliptic, and, as a consequence of this, effecting all the changes so justly dreaded by the inhabitants of the earth.

However, there was one chance for humanity to escape the consequences of this trial, which was to provoke such revulsions in the geographical and climatic conditions of the globe. Was it possible to build a cannon of such dimensions that it was to be a million times greater in volume than the one of 27 centimetres? It was doubtful. That was just the point and one of the reasons for thinking the attempt of Barbicane & Co. would not succeed. But there was the other possibility, for it seemed that the Company had already begun to work on their gigantic project. Now the question arose, where was their place of operations? No one knew, and consequently it was impossible to overtake these audacious operations. It was well known that Barbicane and Nicholl had left Baltimore and America. They had gone away two months ago. Where were they? Most certainly at that unknown point of the globe where the operations were under way for their grand object. It was evident that this place was indicated on the last page of the notebook of J.T. Maston. On this point there was no doubt. But this last page had been torn out and eaten up by the accomplice of Impey Barbicane, and Maston sat imprisoned in the Baltimore City Prison and absolutely refused to speak. This was the condition of affairs. If the President succeeded in making this monster cannon and its projectile — in a word, if the operation was carried out under the above stated conditions — it would modify the earth’s axis, and within six months the earth would be subject to the consequences of this audacious attempt of Barbicane & Co. This would come on the 22d day of September, twelve hours after the passage of the sun over the meridian of the place “x.”

The facts that were known were: 1st. That the shooting would be done with a cannon a million times larger than the cannon of 27 centimetres. 2d. That the cannon would be loaded with a projectile of 180,000 tons. 3d. That the projectile would be animated with a velocity of 2,800 kilometres. 4th. That the shooting would take place on the 22d of September, twelve hours after the passage of the sun over the meridian of the place “x.” Was it possible to deduce, under these facts, where was the spot “x,” where the operation was to take place? Evidently not, said the Inquiry Committee. There was nothing by which to calculate where the point “x” was, as nothing in the calculations of Mr. Maston indicated through which point of the globe the new axis was to pass, or, in other words, on which part of the present earth the new poles would be situated. Therefore, it would be impossible to know which would be the elevated and submerged countries, due to the changed surface of the ocean, or which parts of the earth would be transformed into water, and where water would be transformed into land. It was evident that the maximum change in the ocean surface would be 8.415 metres, and that in certain points of the globe various areas would be lowered and raised to this amount. All, however, depended upon the location of the point “x,” or where the shooting was to take place. In other words, “x” was the secret of the promoter of this uncertain affair. “We have,” said the Committee, “only to mention again that the inhabitants of the world, no matter in what part of it they are living, are directly interested in knowing this secret, as they are all directly t[h]reatened by the actions of Barbicane & Co. Therefore all the inhabitants of Europe, Africa, Asia, America, and Australia are advised to watch all gun foundries, powder factories, etc. which are situated in their territory and to note the presence of all strangers whose arrival may appear suspicious, and to advise the Inquiry Committee at Baltimore by wire immediately. Heaven grant that this news may arrive before the 22d of September of the present year, as that date threatens to disturb the order established since the creation in our earthly system.

CHAPTER XII.

IN WHICH J.T. MASTON HEROICALLY CONTINUES TO BE SILENT.

According to a former story a gun was to be employed to throw the projectile from the earth to the moon; now the gun was to be employed to change the earth's axis. The cannon, always the cannon; these gunners of the Gun Club had nothing else in their heads but the cannon. They had a real craze for the cannon. Was this brutal engine again threatening the universe? Yes, we are sorry to confess it, it was a cannon which was uppermost in the mind of President Barbicane and his associates. After the Columbiad of Florida, they had gone on to the monster cannon of the place "x." We may almost hear them shout with a loud voice: "Take aim at the moon." First act, "Fire." "Change the axis of the earth." Second act, "Fire." And the wish which the whole world had for them was, "To hell." Third act, "Fire." And really their scheme justified the popular opinion.

As it was, the publication of this last report of the Committee in the newspapers produced an effect of which one can scarcely form an ideal. The operation to be tried by President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl, it was very clear, was going to bring about one of the most disastrous interruptions in the daily routine of the earth. Everybody understood what the consequences of it would be. Therefore the experiment of Barbicane & Co. was generally cursed, denounced, etc. In the Old as well as in the New World the members of the N.P.P.A. had at the time only enemies. If there were indeed a few friends left to them among their cranky American admirers, they were very few.

Regarding only their personal security, President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl had acted wisely in leaving Baltimore and America. It was safe to believe that some accident had happened to them. They could not without divine punishment threaten fourteen hundred million inhabitants by a change wrought in the habitability of the earth.

But how was it possible that the two leaders of the Gun Club had disappeared without leaving any trace behind them? How could they have sent away the material and assistants which were necessary to such an operation without any one seeing them? A hundred railroad cars, if it was by rail, a hundred vessels, if it was by water, would not have been more than sufficient to transport the loads of metal of coal, and of melimelonite. It was entirely incomprehensible how this departure could have been made incognito. However, it was done. And still more serious it appeared when it was known after inquiry that no orders had been sent to the gun foundries or powder factories, or the factories which produce chemical products in either of the two continents. How inexplicable all this was! Without doubt it would be explained some day.

At any rate, if President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl, who had mysteriously disappeared, were sheltered from any immediate danger, their colleague, Mr. Maston, was under lock and key, and had to face all the public indignation. Nothing could make him yield, however. Deep at the bottom of the cell which he occupied in the prison of Baltimore, the Secretary of the Gun Club gave himself up more and more to thinking of those distant associates whom he was not able to follow. He pictured the vision of President Barbicane and his associate, Capt. Nicholl, preparing their gigantic operation at this unknown point of the globe, with nothing in their way. He saw them build their enormous device, combining their melimelonite, moulding the projectile which the sun would so soon count as one of its small satellites. This new star was to have the charming name “Scorbetta,” in gallant acknowledgment of the love and esteem felt towards the rich capitalist widow of New Park. J.T. Maston calculated the days which would elapse before the one on which the gun would be fired.

It was already the beginning of April. In two months and a half the meridian star, after having stopped on the Tropic of Cancer, would go back towards the Tropic of Capricorn. Three months later it would traverse the equatorial line at the Fall equinox.

And then these seasons, which have appeared annually for millions of years, and which have changed so regularly, will be brought to an end. For the last time in 189 — the sphere would have submitted to this succession of days and nights. Truly, this was a magnificent work, superhuman, even divine. J.T. Maston forgot the Arctic region and the exploration of the coal mines around the pole, and he only saw, in his mind’s eye, the cosmographic consequences of the operation. The principal object of the association was now to make those changes and displacements which were to remodel the face of the earth.

But that was just the point. Did the earth wish to change her face at all? Was she not still young and charming with the one which God had given her at the first hour of her creation?

Alone and defenseless in his prison cell, nothing could induce Mr. Maston to speak about the matter, no matter what plan was tried. The members of the Inquiry Committee urged him daily to speak, and visited him daily, but they could obtain nothing. It was about this time that John Prestice had the idea of using an influence which might possibly succeed, and this was the aid of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. Every one knew what feelings the generous widow entertained for Mr. Maston, how devoted she was to him, and what unlimited interest she had in this celebrated calculator. Therefore, after deliberation of the Committee, Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt was authorized to come and go, visiting the prisoner as much as she liked.

Was she not threatened just as well as any other person on this earth by the recoil of this monster cannon? Would her palace at New Park be spared any more than the smallest hut of the Indian? Was not her very existence just as much in doubt as that of the savage living on the furthest isle of the Pacific Ocean? That is what the President of the Inquiry Committee gave her to understand, and for this reason she was begged to use her influence with the mathematician. If he would consent to speak, and would say at what place President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl were, and how many people they had with them to accomplish their ends, it would yet be time to go and stop them and put an end to their project, and thus save humanity from this most dangerous catastrophe which threatened the world.

Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt was therefore admitted to the prison whenever she wished it. She was most desirous of seeing J.T. Maston again after he had been taken from his comfortable study at Ballistic Cottage by those rough police agents. If any impolite person had on the 9th of April put his ear at the door of his cell the first time when Mrs. Scorbitt entered he would have heard the following conversation:

“Ah, at last, my dear Maston, I see you again.”

“You, Mrs. Scorbitt!”

“Yes, my dear friend, after four weeks — four long weeks of separation.”

“Exactly twenty-eight days, five hours and forty-five minutes,” answered J.T. Maston, after having consulted his watch.

“Finally we are reunited.”

“But how did it happen that they allowed you to penetrate as far as this cell to see me, dear Mrs. Scorbitt?”

“Under the condition of using all my influence over you, thanks to my affection for you, in advising you to disclose the secret of the whereabouts of President Barbicane.”

“What, Evangelina!” cried Mr. Maston, “and you have consented to give me such advice. You have entertained the thought that I could betray my associates.”

“Me, dear Maston! Do you consider me so bad? Me! To sacrifice your security for your honor. Me! To persuade you to an act which would shame a life consecrated entirely to the highest speculations of pure mathematics.”

“Bravo, Mrs. Scorbitt! I see in you once more the generous patron of our Society. No, I have never doubted your great heart.”

“Thank you, Mr. Maston.”

“In regard to myself,” continued Maston, “allow me to say, before telling the point of the earth where our great shooting will take place — sell, so to speak, the secret which I have been able to keep so well, to allow these barbarians to fly and pursue our friends, to interrupt their works, which will make our profit and glory, I would rather die.”

“Splendid, Mr. Maston!” cried Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt.

And these two beings, united by the same enthusiasm, crazed by it if you will, one as well as the other, were well matched in understanding each other perfectly.

“No, they will never know the name of the country which my calculations have designated, and the reputation of which will become immortal,” said J.T. Maston. “They can silence me if they like, but they will never have the secret from me.”

“And they can kill me with you,” said Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt; “I will also be mute.”

“It is lucky, dear Evangelina, that they are ignorant of your knowledge of the place.”

“Do you believe that I would be capable of betraying it, because I am only a woman? Betray my associates and you! No, my friend, no. If they should raise the whole city and country against you — if the whole world would come to the door of this cell to take you away, I shall be there, too, and we will at least have one consolation — we will die together.”

As if there could be any greater consolation and Mr. Maston could dream of a sweeter death than dying in the arms of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt! And so ended the conversation every time that this excellent woman visited the prisoner. And when the Inquiry Committee asked her what the result was, she would say: “Nothing as yet; perhaps with time I shall be able to reach my point.”

Ah, women, women! What are women? “In time,” she urged. But time went on with fast steps. Weeks went ‘round like days, days like hours and hours like minutes.

It was already May. Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had not been able to get any information from J.T. Maston, and where she had failed there was no hope of any other person succeeding.

Was it, then, necessary to accept this terrible shock without interfering in any way? No, no! Under such circumstances resignation was impossible. The European delegates became more and more out of spirits. There was wrangling between them every day. Even Jacques Jansen woke up out of his Dutch placidity and annoyed his colleagues greatly by his daily charges and countercharges. Col. Boris Karkof even had a duel with the Secretary of the Inquiry Committee in which he only slightly injured his adversary. And Major Donellan; well, he neither fought with firearms nor with bare fists, quite contrary to English use, and he only looked on while his Secretary, Dean Toodrink, exchanged a few blows according to prize-ring rules with William S. Forster, the phlegmatic dealer in codfish, the straw man of the N.P.P.A. who really knew absolutely nothing of the affair.

The whole world was leagued against the United States and wanted to hold the Americans responsible for the actions of one of their number — the celebrated Impey Barbicane. There was talk of recalling the ambassadors and the foreign Ministers at present accredited to this most reckless Government at Washington and of declaring war against the United States. Poor United States! It only wished to lay its hands on Barbicane & Co. In vain did the Republic reply to the Powers of Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia that they were at liberty to arrest these adventurous Americans wherever they found them. Nobody would listen patiently to such talk. And so, far away President Barbicane and his associate were occupied in preparing their great operation. As nothing could be found of them the foreign countries began to say: “You have their accomplice; now it is sure that Mr. Maston knows where these people are and what they are doing.

Make him speak, this man, Mr. Maston. Why not use hot oil, melted lead, etc.? Why not use such means as were used formerly under circumstances less grave and for cases which only interested a few private people? But it was answered that, while such means were justified in former times, they could not be used at the end of a century as far advanced as the nineteenth century was. Therefore, J.T. Maston had nothing to fear in that line; all that was left to hope was that he would finally consider the enormity of his crime and would decide to reveal his secret, or that some accident would reveal it for him.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE CLOSE OF WHICH J.T. MASTON UTTERS AN EPIGRAM.

Time went on, however, and very likely also the works of Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl who were going on also under these very surprising conditions, no one knew where.

How was it possible, it was asked, that an operation which required the establishment of a considerable iron foundry, the erection of high blast furnaces, capable of melting a mass of metal a million times as large as the marine corps cannon of 27 centimeters, and a projectile weighing 180,000 tons, all of which necessitated the employment of several thousand workmen, their transport, their management, etc. — yes, how was it possible that such an operation could go on without the interested world getting any knowledge of it. In which part of the Old or New World had Barbicane & Co. secretly established a foothold so that no hint was given to people living in the vicinity? Was it on a deserted island in the Pacific Ocean or in the Indian Ocean? But there were no more deserted islands: the English had gobbled them all up. Perhaps the new Society had discovered one for this special purpose. Perhaps, one remarked, they might be in some part of the arctic regions. No, this could not be, as it was simply because they could not be reached that the N.P.P.A. was going to remove them. Therefore, to look for President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl on one of these islands or in some inaccessible point was simply wasting time. Did not the notebook taken away from J.T. Maston state that the shooting would take place on or about the equator? And all the countries around it were inhabited by some people. It seemed impossible for them to be so secreted in any part of the habitable world without some one informing the committee at Baltimore.

Now, what did Alcide Pierdeux think of all this? He was dreaming of all kinds of consequences which this operation would have. That Capt. Nicholl had invented an explosive of such tremendous power, that he had found the melimelonite, with an expansive force three or four thousand times stronger than that of the most violent explosive known, and 5,600 times stronger than the good old black gunpowder of our ancestors, this was astonishing enough — very astonishing. But it was not impossible at all. One can hardly know what the future will bring in these days of progress when devices exist to destroy whole armies at very long distances. In any event, the change of the earth’s axis, produced by the recoil of a piece of ordnance, was not sufficiently novel to astonish the French engineer. Then, considering the plans of President Barbicane, he said: “It is evident that the earth receives daily the recoil of all the blows which are given on its surface. Hundreds of thousands of people amuse themselves daily by sending thousands of projectiles weighing a few kilograms or millions of projectiles weighing a few grammes, and even when I walk or jump, or when I stretch out my arm, all this takes place on the surface of our sphere and adds to or checks its motion. Is, then, your great machine of such a nature as to produce the recoil asked for? How in the name of candor can this recoil be sufficient to move the earth? And if the calculations of this fellow, J.T. Maston, prove it, it is easy enough to show it. Alcide Pierdeux could not but admire the ingenious calculations of the Secretary of the Gun Club, which were communicated by the members of the Inquiry Committee to those wise people who were able to understand them. And Alcide Pierdeux, who was able to read algebra like one would read a newspaper, found in this sort of reading matter an inexpressible charm. If these changes were to take place, what a terrible catastrophe it would be! Towns would be turned upside down, oceans would be thrown out of their beds, people killed by millions. It would be an earthquake of incomparable violence. If besides, said Alcide Pierdeux, this damnable powder of Capt. Nicholl were less strong, we might hope that the projectile would again strike the earth after the shooting, and after having made the trip around the globe, then everything would be replaced in a very short time and without having caused any very great destruction. But do not worry about that. Thanks to their melimelonite, the bullet will go its way and not return to the earth to beg her pardon for having deranged her by putting her back again in her place. Pierdeux finally said: "If the place of shooting were known I would soon be able to say upon which places the movement would have the least and where the greatest effect. The people might be informed in time to save themselves before their cities and houses had fallen under the blow." But how were we to know it? "I think," he said, "the consequences of the shock may be more complicated than can even be imagined. The volcanoes, profiting by this occasion, would vomit like a person who is seasick. Perhaps a part of the ocean might fall into one of their craters. It would make small difference then. It is entirely possible that we might have explosions which would make our earth jump. Ah, this Satan Maston, imagine him juggling with our earthly globe and playing with it as if he were playing billiards!"

So talked and reasoned Alcide Pierdeux. Soon these terrible hypotheses were taken up and discussed by the newspapers. The confusion which would be the result of the scheme of Barbicane & Co. could only result in terrible accidents. And so it happened that the nearer the day came the greater the fright which took possession of the bravest people. It was the same as it was in the year 1000, when all living people supposed that they would be thrown suddenly into the jaws of death. It maybe recalled what happened at this period. According to the Apocalypse the people were led to believe that the judgment day had come. In the last year of the 10th century, says H. Martin, everything was interrupted — pleasures, business, interest, all, even the public works of the country. Thinking only of the eternity which was to begin on the morrow, provision was made only for the most necessary articles for one or two days. All possessions, real estate, castles, were bequeathed to the Church, so as to acquire protection in that kingdom of heaven where all were so soon to enter. Many donations to the churches were made with these words: “As the end of the world has come, and its ruin is imminent.” When this fatal time came, all the people ran to the churches and places set apart for religious meetings, and waited to hear the seven trumpets of the seven angels of the judgment day sound and call from heaven. We know that the first day of 1,000 came and went, and nothing was changed. But this time it was not the question of a disturbance simply based upon some verse of the Bible. It was the question of removing the axis of the earth, and this was founded on very reliable calculations, and was very probable.

Under these conditions the situation of J.T. Maston became each day more and more critical. Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt trembled lest he would become the victim of a universal cry for vengeance. Perhaps she even had in her mind the idea of making him give up the information which he so heroically held to himself. But she did not dare to mention it to him and she did well. It would have been unwise for her to expose herself to the volley of rebukes he would have given her. As we may well understand, fright had taken a strong foothold in the city of Baltimore and the inhabitants became nearly unmanageable. The excitement was increased by articles appearing in the daily papers. In any case, if J.T. Maston had been found among the crowd of people, his fate would have been soon settled. He would have been given to the wild beast. But he was content and said: “I am ready for it.” No matter what happened, J.T. Maston refused to make known the situation of the “x,” knowing very well that if he should unveil the secret President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl would be unable to finish their work. It was an interesting struggle — this fight of one man against the whole world. It only made J.T. Maston a grander and better man in the eyes of Evangelina Scorbitt, and also in the opinion of his associates of the Gun Club. The Secretary of the Gun Club became such a celebrated person that he began to receive letters, as all criminals do, from people who wished to have a few lines from the hand which was going to turn the world over. But even if this was all very nice it became every day more and more dangerous for our Secretary. The population hung day and night around the prison, with great noise and great tumult. The enraged crowd wanted to lynch J.T. Maston. The police saw the moment would come when they would be unable to defend the prison and the prisoner J.T. Maston. Being desirous of giving satisfaction and information to the American people, as well as to the people of other countries, the Government at Washington decided to put J.T. Maston before a court of justice. “What other people have not been able to accomplish the Judges will not,” said Alcide Pierdeux, who had after all a kind of a friendly feeling for the unhappy calculator.

On the morning of the 5th September the President of the Commission went personally to the cell of the prisoner. Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, at her own request, had been allowed to accompany him. Perhaps at this last attempt the influence of this excellent lady would succeed and bring the hoped-for result. There was nothing to be left undone. All means possible were to be used to make this last attempt successful. If it was not — well, we will see. “Yes, we will see.” What we would see is the hanging of this brute Maston, said the people, and the event would have come off in all its horror if the people could have it their way. So it happened that at 11 o’clock J.T. Maston was ushered into the presence of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt and John Prestice, President of the Inquiry Committee.

The opening was a very simple one. The conversation consisted of the following questions and answers, very rapid on one side and very quiet on the other. And even under these circumstances the calm, quiet speaker was J.T. Maston.

“For the last time will you answer?” asked John Prestice.

“Answer what?” ironically observed the Secretary of the Gun Club.

“Answer the question, where is the place in which your associate, Barbicane, is at present.”

“I have told it to you a hundred times.”

“Repeat it for the one hundred and first time.”

“He is where the shooting will take place.”

“Where will the shooting take place?”

“Where my associate, Barbicane, is.”

“Have a care, J.T. Maston.”

“For what?”

“For the consequences of your refusal to answer, the result of which will be — ”

“To prevent you from learning that which you should not know.”

“What we have the right to know.”

“That is not my opinion.”

“We will bring you before the court.”

“Go ahead.”

“And the jury will condemn you.”

“What care I.”

“And as soon as judgment is rendered it will be executed.”

“All right.”

“Dear Maston,” ventured Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, whose heart nearly broke on account of these terrible threats.

“What! You, madam?” said J.T. Maston.

She hung her head and was silent.

“And do you want to know what this judgment will be?”

“If you wish to tell it,” said J.T. Maston.

“That you will suffer capital punishment, as you deserve.”

“Really?”

“That you will be hanged as sure, sir, as two and two make four.”

“Then, sir, I have yet a chance,” said J.T. Maston, reflectingly. “If you were a little better mathematician you would not say that two and two are four. You simply prove that all mathematicians have been fools until to-day in affirming that the sum of two numbers is equal to one of their parts; that is, two and two are exactly four."

"Sir!" cried the President, absolutely puzzled.

"Well," said J.T. Maston, "if you would say, as sure as one and one are two, all right. That is absolutely evident, because that is no longer a theorem; this is a definition."

After this lesson in simple arithmetic the President of the Committee went out, followed by Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, who had so much admiration for the calculator that she did not venture to look at him.

CHAPTER XIV.

VERY SHORT, BUT IN WHICH “X” TAKES A GEOGRAPHICAL VALUE.

Very luckily for J.T. Maston, the Federal Government received the following telegram sent by the American Consul stationed at Zanzibar:

“To John S. Wright, Minister of State, Washington, U.S.A.:

Zanzibar, Sept. 13, 5 A.M. (local time). — Great works are being executed in the Wamasai, south of the chain of Kilimanjaro. For eight months President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl have been established there with a great number of black help under the authority of Sultan Bali-Bali. This is brought to the knowledge of the Government by its devoted

“RICHARD W. TRUST, Consul”

And this was how the secret of J.T. Maston became known. And therefore, were the Secretary of the Gun Club still in prison, he could not have been hanged.

But, after all, who knows whether he would not rather have been glad to meet with death in the full glory of his life than to live on with all the chances of disappointment.

CHAPTER XV.

WHICH CONTAINS A FEW INTERESTING DETAILS FOR THE INHABITANTS OF THE EARTHLY SPHERE.

Finally the Government of Washington had found out the place where Barbicane & Co. were operating. Should they doubt the authenticity of this cable? No, that was not reasonable. The Consul at Zanzibar was a very reliable person, and his information could be accepted without doubt. It was further corroborated by later telegrams. It was really in the center of the region of Kilimanjaro in the African Wamasai, a little under the equatorial line, where the engineers of the N.P.P.A. were going to accomplish their gigantic works.

How could they have secretly reached this lost country, at the foot of the celebrated mountain, discovered in 1849 by Drs. Rebviani and Krapf, ascended by the travellers Otto Ehlers and Abbot? How were they able to establish their workshops there, erect a foundry and bring a large number of help, or at least enough to succeed? How had they been able to establish friendly relations with the dangerous tribes of the country and their sover[e]igns, as cunning as they were cruel? This we do not know. And perhaps it would never be known, as there were only a few days left before the 22d of September would arrive. J.T. Maston heard from Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt that the mystery of Kilimanjaro had been unveiled by a telegram sent from Zanzibar. “Great Scott!” he exclaimed, sawing the air with his iron hand. “Well, we do not travel by telegram yet, nor by the telephone, and in six days the matter will be finished.”

Those who saw and heard this remarkable man utter these words were astonished at the energy in the old gunner.

J.T. Maston was right. There was no time left to send agents to Wamasai with orders to arrest President Barbicane. They would even have been too late had they departed from Algiers or Egypt, even from Aden, Madagascar, or Zanzibar, as they would have met thousands of difficulties in this mountainous region, and perhaps they would have met with an army composed of followers of the Sultan, who was interested in the matter. Therefore all hope of preventing this operation had to be given up. But if prevention was impossible nothing seemed more easy than the figuring out of the terrible consequences, as the exact situation of “x” was now known.

This problem was difficult enough, but all algebraists and mathematicians of large reputation ought to be able to solve it. As the cable of the Consul of Zanzibar had been sent direct to the Minister of State at Washington, the Federal Government wanted to keep it secret at first. They wished as well that its contents were published all over the country, so that they could indicate what the results would be of this displacement of the axis and the uprising of the oceans, and thus the inhabitants of the world might learn which place of refuge was open to them according to the section of the globe in which they lived. And it is easy to understand how anxious the people were to learn their fate.

On the 14th of September the cable dispatch was sent to the office of the Observatory at Washington, with orders to figure out the final consequences upon geographical locations. Two days afterwards the problem was all worked out. The Old World was notified of the results by cable and the New World by telegram. After this calculation had been published by thousands of papers, it was the only thing talked of in the great cities and everywhere. What will happen?

This was the question which everybody was asking at every point of the globe.

The following was the notice made by the Observatory at Washington:

IMPORTANT NOTICE

The operation which is being tried by President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl is as follows:

The production of a recoil, on the 22d of September, at midnight, by means of a cannon a million times larger in volume than the cannon of twenty-seven centimetres, throwing a projectile of 180,000 tons, with a powder giving it a velocity of 2,800 kilometres.

Now, if this shooting takes place below the equatorial line, nearly on the thirty-fourth degree of latitude west of the meridian of Paris, at the foot of Kilimanjaro, and if it is directed towards the south, these are the mechanical effects which it will have on the earth's sphere: Instantly, in consequence of the shock acting with the daily movement a new axis will be formed and, as the old axis will be displaced to the amount of twenty-three degrees and twenty-eight minutes, according to the figures obtained by J.T. Maston, the new axis will be perpendicular to the direction of the ediptic.

Which point will the new axis start from? As the point of shooting is known, it has been easy to calculate this.

In the North the extremity of the new axis will be situated between Greenland and Grinnelland, exactly on that part of Baffin's Sea where it cuts the Arctic polar circle. In the South it will be on the line of the antarctic circle, a few degrees east of Adelialand. Under these conditions a new zero meridian, starting from the new North Pole, will pass through Dublin in Ireland, Paris in France, Palermo in Sicily, the Gulf of Grand Sytre on the coast of Tripoli, Obed in Darfur, the mountain chain of Kilimanjaro, Madagascar; the Kerguelen Island, in the Central Pacific; the new antarctic pole, the antipodes of Paris, Cook Island, the Island of Quadra, Vancouver, on the margin of British Columbia; across North America to Melville Island, in the neighborhood of the North Pole.

In connection with this new axis of rotation, starting from Baffins’ Bay in the north, to Adelialand in the south, a new equator will be formed above which the sun will travel without ever changing his daily course. The equinoctial line will cross the Kilimanjaro, at Wamasai, the Indian Ocean, Goa and Chicacola, a little below Calcutta in India, Mandalay in the Kingdom of Siam, Kesho in Tonquin, Hong Kong in China, Risa Island, Marshall Island, Gaspar Rico, Walker Island in the Pacific, the Cordilleras in the Argentine Republic, Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, the islands of Trinity and St. Helena in the Atlantic Ocean, St. Paul de Loando on the Congo, and finally it will meet again in the territories of Wamasai, back of Kilimanjaro. This new equator being thus determined by the creation of the new axis, it became possible to calculate the changes of the ocean tides, which was so important for the security of the inhabitants of the earth. It is just to observe that the directors of the North Polar Practical Association had taken measure to weaken the shock as much as possible. If the shooting had been towards the north the consequences of it would have been much more disastrous for the more civilized parts of the earth. On the other hand, shooting towards the south the consequences would only be felt most in parts less populated and less civilized. The careful calculations made showed how the waters would be distributed when thrown out of their beds by the flattening of the sphere around the new poles. The globe would be divided by two great circles, intersecting in a right angle at Kilimanjaro, and at its antipodes in the equinoctial ocean. This would form four sections, two in the north and two in the south, separated by the lines upon which the ocean upheaval would be zero.

In the northern hemisphere: The first section west of Kilimanjaro would take in Africa from the Congo to Egypt, Europe from Turkey to Greenland, America from English Columbia to Peru, and from Brazil as high as San Salvador, and finally the whole northern Atlantic Ocean and the largest part of the temperate Atlantic zone.

The second section, east of Kilimanjaro, would include the greater patt of Europe, from the Black Sea to Sweden, European and Asiatic Russia, Arabia, nearly the whole of India, Persia, Beloochistan, Afganistan, Turkestan, the Celestial Empire, Mongolia, Japan, Corea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, the greater part of the Pacific Ocean, the territories of Alaska in North America, and also the polar region which belonged to the American society, North Polar Practical Association.

The southern hemisphere would embrace the third section east of Kilimanjaro, which would include Madagascar, the islands of Marion, Kerguelen, Maurice, Reunion, and all the islands of the Indian Ocean, the Antarctic Ocean (as far as the new pole), half the island of Malacca, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, the islands of Sonde, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, New Caledonia, all the northern parts of the Pacific and its numerous archipelagos, nearly up to the 160th meridian.

The fourth section, west of Kilimanjaro, would comprise the southern part of Africa, from the Congo to the canal of Mozambique to the Cape of Good Hope, the southern Atlantic Ocean from Pernambuco and Lima, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uraguay, the Argentine Republic, Patagonia, the Fire Islands, the Malouine Islands, Sandwich and Shetland Islands, and the southern part of the Pacific Ocean east of the present 160th degree of latitude.

These would be the four sections, separated by the line of zero in calculating the sea-level changes. Now, the question was to indicate the effects produced on the surface of the four sections in consequence of the displacement of the oceans.

Upon each of these sections there was a central point on which the effect would be at a maximum, either by the oceans rising up or by the waters retiring entirely. The calculations of J. T. Maston had established without a doubt, that at each of these maxima points the greatest height obtained would be 8,415 metres. It was therefore certain that the consequences would be most severe against the security of those points through the operation carried out by Barbicane & Co. The two effects may be considered separate in their action.

In two of the sections situated opposite each other in the northern hemisphere and in the southern as well, the oceans would retreat and invade the two other sections, opposing each other in each of the two hemispheres.

In the first section: The Atlantic Ocean would be nearly entirely emptied and the maximum point of depression being nearly at the region of Bermuda, where the ground would appear, if the depth of the ocean was inferior at that point to 8,415 metres. Consequently between Europe and America vast territories would be discovered which the United States, England, France, Spain, and Portugal could claim according to the geographical situation, as these powers might wish to do. It must be observed that in consequence of the falling of the oceans the air will also fall equally as much. Therefore the barometric pressure of Europe and that of America will be modified to such an extent that cities, situated even 20 or 30 degrees from the maxima points would only have the quantity of air which is now actually found in a height of one league in the atmosphere. The principal cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Panama, Lisbon, Madrid, Paris, London, Edinburgh, Dublin, Cairo, Constantinople, Dantzig, Stockholm, on one side, and the cities corresponding in latitude on the other side, would keep their normal position with regard to the general level of the air. In regard to Bermuda, air would be missing there the same as it would be wanting to aeronauts who go higher than 8,000 metres. Therefore, it would be impossible to live there.

The same effect would obtain in the opposite section, which would contain the Indian Ocean, Australia, and a part of the Pacific Ocean, which would be thrown partly on the southern seacoasts of Australia.

The air into which they would be thrown would be very clear; there was no doubt on that point, but it would not be dense enough for human wants.

These in general were a part of the modifications which would take place in the two sections in which the oceans would be more or less emptied. There would undoubtedly appear new islands and mountains in such parts as the water did not entirely abandon.

But if the diminuation of the thickness of the air did not bring enough inconveniences to those parts of the new continents raised to the high zones of the atmosphere, what was to be the case of those parts which the erruption of waters put below the surface? We may still breathe under the diminished pressure of air below the atmospheric pressure. On the contrary, under a very few inches of water we cannot breathe at all, and this was the condition in which the other two sections found themselves. In the section northwest of Kilimanjaro the maximum point would be at Yakoutsk, in Siberia.

From this city submerged 8,415 metres under the water, less its present actual altitude, the liquid mass, decreasing, would extend to the neutral lines, drowning the greater part of Asiatic Russia and of India, of China, of Japan, and of American Alaska, to the Behring Sea. In regard to St. Petersburg and Moscow on one side, and Calcutta, Bangkok, Saigon, Pekin, Hong Kong and Yeddo on the other side, these cities would disappear under a cover of water sufficient to drown all Russians, Hindoos, Siamese, Cochin Chinese, Chinese and Japanese, if they did not have time to emigrate before the catastrophe.

In the section southeast of Kilimanjaro the disasters would be equally marked. This section is in a great part covered by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, the level of which would raise 8,415 metres at the Archipelagos of the Azores. All this vast area would disappear under this artificial deluge, among others the angle of Southern Africa from Guinea and Kilimanjaro to the Cape of Good Hope, and the triangle of South America formed by Peru, Central Brazil, Chili, and the Argentine Republic, as far as Terra del Fuego and Cape Horn. The Patagonians, high as they are located, would not escape this immersion, and would not even have opportunity of taking refuge on that part of the Andes, as the highest points of that range would not be visible at all in this part of the globe.

This, then, must be the result, the lowering of the upper and raising of the lower sections, and an entirely new surface to the oceans, produced by the corruscations in the surface of the earth’s sphere. Such were the happenings which would result, and against which the people of this world had no help if they could not prompdy stop Barbicane & Co. in their criminal attempt.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN WHICH A CROWD OF DISSATISFIED PEOPLE BREAK INTO THE CELL OF J. T. MASTON.

After this public notice there was nothing left but to wait for the coming danger or to run away to the neutral lines, where there would be no danger. The threatened people were, in general, divided into two classes — ”the people who would be suffocated and those who would be drowned.” This communication roused many different suggestions, which, however, all turned into the strongest and most violent protestations against the schemer and schemers. Among those who would suffocate were the Americans in the United States, the Europeans of France, England, Spain, etc. Even the prospect of annexing territories now at the bottom of the ocean was not sufficient to make them quietly accept these changes. Paris, carried towards the new pole a distance about equal to that which separates it now from the old one, would gain nothing by it. It would have a continued Spring, it is true, but it would lose considerable air. And this was not satisfactory to the Parisians, who like to have as much air as possible, and boulevard property and cafés went begging. Among those who would be drowned were the inhabitants of South America, of Australia, Canada, India, Zealand, etc. Great Britain would suffer the loss of her richest colonies, which Barbicane & Co. would take away from her through their operation. Evidently the Gulf of Mexico would constitute a vast kingdom of the Antilles, of which the Yankees and Mexicans could claim possession by the principles of the Monroe doctrine. The islands of the Philippines, Celebes and the water around them would leave vast territories of which the English and Spanish people could take possession. It is a vain compensation. It did not at all balance the loss due to the terrible flood.

If under the new oceans only Samoyedens, Lapons of Siberia, Feugans, Patogonians — even Tartars, Chinese, Japanese, or a few Argentines — would suffer and be lost, perhaps the civilized powers would have accepted this sacrifice complacently. But too many powers took part in the great catastrophe not to raise a torrent of protest.

And what especially concerned Europe was, that although the central part of it would be nearly intact, it would be raised in the west and lowered in the east, half suffocated on one side and half drowned on the other. This was not very acceptable. The Mediterranean Sea would be almost emptied, and this would not be very agreeable to the Frenchmen, Italians, Spaniards, Greeks, Turks, and Egyptians, who by their situation on the coast, had indisputable rights in ocean travel. And then, what good would be the Suez Canal, which would be saved by its position on the neutral line? But what use could be made of this immense work of Lesseps when there was no longer the Mediterranean on one side of the isthmus and the Red Sea on the other, at least, within any reasonable distance of it?

No, never, never would England consent to see Gibralter, Malta, and Cyprus transformed into mountain-tops, lost in the clouds, so that its men-of-war could no longer approach them. No, she would not be satisfied with the possession of some of the territory which would be gained from the Atlantic Ocean. Major Donellan had, however, prepared already to return to Europe to secure his rights on this new territory in case the operation of Barbicane & Co. should succeed. It is seen how protests came from all parts of the world, even from States where the changes would be imperceptible, because their people were interested in some other direction more or less.

These protestations became more and more violent after the arrival of the cablegram from Zanzibar which indicated the point of shooting, and which it was found necessary to publish the above report to explain. President Barbicane and Captain Nicholl as well as J.T. Maston, were put under the ban of humanity and declared outlaws. But what a business all this created for the newspapers. What sales they had, and how the circulations ran up; how on many occasions they were forced to print extra editions. It is perhaps the first time in journalistic history that they were all united with each other, as they generally quarrel incessantly. This was not a European or an American affair; it was an affair which concerned the whole world. It was like a bomb falling into a powder magazine.

In regard to Maston, it looked as if his last hour had come. A rabid crowd rushed into his prison on the evening of Sept. 17, with the intention of lynching him, and the jailer did not put any obstacles in their way. They rushed along the corridor but the cell of J.T. Maston was empty. Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had come to his help with a heavy purse of gold, and he had made his escape. The jailer had been bribed by an amount of money on which he could live the rest of his life without working. He remembered that Baltimore, Washington, New York, and many of the principal cities of America were on the line of those parts which would be raised, and which would still have enough air for the daily consumption of their inhabitants.

J.T. Maston had gained a quiet resting spot and a safe place from the enraged crowd of people, and so this great man owed his life to the devotion of a loving woman. There were only four days to wait, four days only before the gigantic operation of Barbicane & Co. would be accomplished. The public notice had been read far and wide and had created as much public excitement as such a momentous document only could. If there were at the beginning a few sceptics on the subject, there were none at present. The various governments had notified in haste those of their provinces which would be raised into the air and those, a much larger number, the territory of which would be overrun with water. In consequence of this advice sent by telegraph over the five continents of the world an emigration began such as had never been seen before. Every race was represented, white, black, brown, yellow, etc. in one chromatic procession. Unhappily, time was wanting for all to secure safety. The hours were now counted. A few months notice would be required for the Chinese to leave China, the Australians, Australia, the Siberians, Siberia. In some instances the danger was a local one as soon as the place of the shooting was known, so the fright became less general. Some provinces and even some States began to feel easy again. In a word, except in the regions directly threatened, there was only felt an apprehension of the terrible shock. And during all this time Alcide Pierdeux was saying to himself, "How in the wide world can President Barbicane make a cannon a million times larger than that of twenty-seven centimetre? This Maston, I would like very much to meet him — to have with him a talk upon this subject. This does not agree with anything sensible, it is too enormous and too improbable."

Be this as it may, the failure of the operation was the only hope which was left for certain parts of the world to escape more terrible destruction.

CHAPTER XVII.

WHAT HAD BEEN DONE AT KILIMANJARO DURING EIGHT MONTH OF THIS MEMORABLE YEAR.

The country of Wamasai is situated in the eastern part of Central Africa, between the coast of Zanzibar and the regions of the large lakes, where the Victoria Nyanza and the Tanganiyka form a great interior ocean. The part best known is that which has been visited by the Englishman Johnston, Count Tekeli and the German doctor Meyer. This mountainous land is under the sovereignty of Sultan Bali-Bali, whose people consist of 30,000 or 40,000 Negroes.

Three degrees below the Equator is situated the chain of Kilimanjaro, which here reaches its greatest altitude. Among other peaks is the Mount of Kibo, with an altitude of 5,704 metres. The important ruler of this region has under his domination towards the south, north, and west the vast and fertile plains of Wamasai, which stretch from the lake of Victoria Nyanza across the province of Mozambique.

A few leagues below Kilimanjaro is the small village of Kisongo, the regular residence of the Sultan. This capital is in reality only a large hamlet. It is occupied by a very intelligent and industrious people, who work themselves as industriously as their slaves under the iron rule which Bali-Bali imposes on them.

This Sultan rightly ranked as one of the most remarkable rulers of those people of Central Africa who try to escape the influence, or more correctly the domination of England. At this capital of Kisongo, President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl accompanied by six men who were devoted to them, arrived in the first week of January of the current year. On leaving the United States, whence their departure was only known to Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, and J. T. Maston, they had embarked in New York for the Cape of Good Hope, whence a vessel transported them to Zanzibar, on the island of the same name. There a bark secretly chartered by the Sultan brought them to the port of Mombas, on the African border on the other side of the channel. An escort sent by the Sultan waited for them at this port, and after a hard voyage nearly a hundred leagues across this terrible region, obstructed by forests, deep marshes, etc. they arrived at the royal residence. After knowing the calculations of J.T. Maston, President Barbicane had already put himself in communication with Bali-Bali through the help of a Swedish explorer, who had passed several years in this part of Africa. As the Sultan had become one of their most ardent admirers since their trip to the moon, a trip whose reputation had gone as far as these countries, he had a great friendship for these courageous Yankees. Without telling him for what purpose it was, Impey Barbicane had easily obtained permission from the Sultan to undertake important works at the southern foot of Kilimanjaro. In return for a large sum, estimated at $300,000, Bali-Bali had bound himself to furnish them all the workmen necessary. In other words, the captain and his friends were authorized to do at Kilimanjaro whatever they liked to do. They could dispose of the large chain of mountains according to their desires; they could tear them down if they liked, or they could take them away if they would be able to do so. In consequence of these arrangements, which the Sultan had made at his own figure, the North Polar Practical Association was as much proprietor of this country as they already were to the polar region. The reception which President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl received at Kisongo was very cordial. Bali-Bali displayed an admiration amounting to adoration for these celebrated travellers who had made this dangerous voyage to reach the country around the North Pole.

He had in short an extraordinary sympathy for the creators of these mysterious operations which were going to be accomplished in his kingdom. He also promised them absolute secrecy on his part as well as on the part of his people, whose co-operation was assured to them. Not a single Negro who worked at their shop would be allowed to leave them for a single day under pain of the most severe punishment. This is how this operation was veiled in mystery so that the most active and sharpest agents of America and Europe failed to penetrate it. If it was finally discovered it must have been that the Sultan modified his severe rules after the accomplishment of the works and that there were traitors and babblers even amongst the Negroes. In this way Richard W. Trust, consul at Zanzibar, had received wind of what was going on at Kilimanjaro. But then at that date, the 13th of September, it was too late to stop President Barbicane in the accomplishment of his design.

And now, why had Barbicane & Co. chosen the Wamasai for the theatre of their operations? First, because the country suited them in regard to its geographical situation, as it was in a very little known part of Africa, and as it was very far from the territory usually visited by travellers. Then, the mass of Kilimanjaro offered them all the qualities of solidity and material necessary for their work. And, moreover, on the surface of this country were found the raw materials which they needed in a condition very easy to handle. A few months before leaving the United States President Barbicane had learnt from the Swedish explorer that at the foot of Kilimanjaro iron and coal were plentiful on the ground. No mines to dig into, no fields to explore a thousand feet deep in the earth’s shell. Iron and coal were so plentiful even for this great undertaking that they only had to stoop down to pick it up. In other words, there existed in the neighborhood of this mountain enormous fields of nitrate of soda and of iron pyrites, which were necessary for the manufacture of melimelonite. President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl had taken with them only ten people, of whom they were absolutely sure, and no one else. These ten men had to supervise the 10,000 Negroes put at their disposal by Bali-Bali, and to them was given the task of manufacturing the monster cannon and its not less monster projectile. Two weeks after the arrival of President Barbicane and his associate at Wamasai three large workshops were established at the southern foot of Kilimanjaro, one for the cannon foundry, the second for the manufacture of the projectile, and the third for the manufacture of the melimelonite.

Now, first of all, how had Barbicane & Co. met the problem of manufacturing a cannon of such colossal dimensions? We will see and understand at the same time that the difficulty of creating such a device was not easily comprehensible by the inhabitants of the world. In reality the making of a cannon a million times larger than that of twenty-seven centimetres was a superhuman work. Already great difficulties had been met in the manufacture of pieces of forty-two centimetres long, which would throw projectiles of 780 kilos with 274 kilograms of powder. Barbicane & Co. did not think of these difficulties. It was not a cannon, not even a mortar, which they intended to make, but simply a gallery bored in the massive rock of Kilimanjaro, — a shaft of a mine, if you wish to call it so.

Evidently this shaft of a mine, this enormous elongated mine, could replace a metal cannon the fabrication of which would have been as dear as difficult and to which it would. be necessary to give an unwieldy thickness to avoid all risk of an explosion. Barbicane & Co. had always entertained the idea of operating in this manner, and if the notebook of J. T. Maston mentioned a cannon it was that of 27 centimetres which had been used in the calculations as a basis. Consequently a spot was chosen at a height of a hundred feet on the southern slope of the chain. Nothing would be in the way of the projectile when it would fly out of the mouth of this tunnel bored in the massive rock of Kilimanjaro. It was with extreme precision and not without very hard work that the men could dig this gallery. But Barbicane & Co. could readily make perforations with simple machines put in action by means of compressed air which was secured by using the powerful falls of water from the mountains. In the holes bored through the headings of the shaft were placed charges of melimelonite. And nothing more was necessary than this violent explosive to shiver the rock, extremely hard as it was.

The thousands of workmen, led by their ten co-operators under the general direction of Barbicane & Co. labored with a great deal of zeal and intelligence to bring the work to a speedy end. At the end of six months the shaft measured 27 metres in diameter and the lining of it 6 metres in thickness. As it was absolutely necessary that the projectile should glide through a bore perfectly smooth the interior of it was covered with a casting exactly prepared. In reality this part of the work was very similar to that of the celebrated Columbiad, of Moon City, which had sent the projectile to the moon. But such work as this is impossible to the ordinary engineers of this world at present.

As soon as the boring was finished the workmen pushed on with the work at the second workshop.

At the same time that this metallic lining was being made they were also employed at making the enormous projectile. For this operation it was necessary to obtain a cylindrical mass which would weigh 80,000,000 kilograms, or 180,000 tons. It must be understood that there was never any idea of melting this projectile in one single piece. It had to be manufactured in thousand-ton pieces, which would be hoisted one after the other into the shaft and put in place over the chamber where the melimelonite was stored. After having been jointed each to the other, these pieces would form a compact whole, which would fit the sides of the tubular lining. In regard to the construction of the massive furnaces to effect the melting of the metal, there was met perhaps the greatest difficulty. Ten furnaces of ten metres each in height were at the end of a month in working order and able to produce each 180 tons per day. This would be 1,800 tons for twenty-four hours — 180,000 tons after 100 work-days.

In regard to the third workshop, made for the manufacture of the melimelonite, the work was easily done, but under such secret precautions, that the composition of this explosive it has not been possible to state perfectly. Everything went along splendidly. It could not have been possible to have met with more success in any factory. One would hardly expect to escape an accident of some sort on a three-hundred-thousand franc job. It is easily understood that the Sultan was delighted. He followed the operation with indefatigable interest. And the presence of His Majesty helped greatly to make these Negroes work as hard as possible. One day Bali-Bali asked what all these operations were going on for. He received his reply from President Barbicane: “It is a work,” said he, “which will change the face of the earth — a work which will bring the greatest glory on the greatest Sultan of all the Eastern kings.”

By the 29th of August the works were entirely finished.

The shaft was bored to the wished-for point. It was provided with a smooth bore of six metres diameter. At the bottom of the shaft were placed the

2,000 tons of melimelonite; then came the projectile 105 metres long. After deducting the space occupied by the powder and projectile there remained still 492 metres before the muzzle was reached, which secured all the effect possible by the recoil produced by the expansion of the gas.

Now, the first question which might come up was, would the projectile deviate from the trajectory assigned to it by the calculations of J.T. Maston? In no way, for the calculations were absolutely correct. They indicated to what extent the projectile would deviate to the east of the meridian of Kilimanjaro because of the rotation of the earth on its axis, and what would be the form of the curve which it would describe because of its enormous initial velocity. Secondly, would it be visible during its course? No, because in going out of the shaft it would be thrown in the shadow of the earth and it could not be seen, for in consequence of its low trajectory it would have a very sharp angle of velocity compared with the earth’s course. In fact, Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl could well be proud of their work, which had so far succeeded in its every detail. Why was J.T. Maston not there to watch this great operation, founded on the figuring which he had done? And who was it that kept him so far away, so very far, when this terrible detonation would wake the echoes as far as the furthermost horizon of Africa?

Thinking of him, his two associates did not know that the Secretary had been compelled to keep away from Ballistic Cottage after having got out of prison and hidden himself in a safe place away from the savage people. They did not know to what extent indignation had been roused against the engineer of the N. P. P. A. They did not know that they, too, would have been burnt or hanged and tortured to death if it had been possible to have reached them. Really, they ought to have been glad that at the moment when the shooting would take place they would only be saluted by the cries of this Negro people of Eastern Africa, “Well, at last!” said Capt. Nicholl to

President Barbicane, when on the 22d of September they were standing before their finished work. “Yes, at last,” said Impey Barbicane. “What a chance it was that placed at our disposition this admirable melimelonite!” said Capt. Nicholl. “Which will make you the most illustrious person on the earth, Nicholl.” “Without doubt, Barbicane,” modestly answered Capt. Nicholl. “But do you know how much it would have been necessary to dig out Kilimanjaro if we only had gun-cotton equal to that which threw our projectile to the moon?”

“How much, Nicholl?”

“One hundred and eighty galleries, Barbicane.”

“Well, we would have digged them, Captain.”

“And 180 projectiles of 180,000 tons.”

“We would have melted them, Nicholl.”

“It was useless to expect reasonable conversation between two persons of this type. But after they made the trip to the moon, what would they not be capable of? On the very same evening only a few hours before the minute when the gun was to be fired, and while President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl were congratulating themselves, Alcide Pierdeux, closeted in his studio at Baltimore, uttered a cry of hurrah! as if he were crazy.

Then, suddenly getting up from the table, which was covered with figures and calculations, he cried out:

“Ah! What a fool Maston is! — what a stupid fellow! His whole problem will go in the soup! Christopher Columbus! Why did I not see this before? If I only knew where he was at this moment I would invite him to have supper with me and to sip a glass of champagne at the very moment when they are going to fire off the gun.”

And after these and many exclamations which he generally used in playing whist he said: “Oh, the old fool! Without a doubt he must have been dull when he made his calculations for this affair of Kilimanjaro. He will find it very necessary to make another. Oh, what a fool with his cannon!”

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN WHICH THE POPULATION OF WAMASAI ASSEMBLE TO HEAR PRESIDENT BARBICANE SAY “FIRE” TO CAPT. NICHOLL.

It was in the evening of the 22d of September, that memorable date which public opinion credited with an influence as unlucky as that of the 1st of January of the year 1000. Twelve hours after the sun had passed the meridian of Kilimanjaro, that is at midnight, Capt. Nicholl was to touch off the terrible cannon.

Kilimanjaro being 35 degrees east of the meridian of Paris, and Baltimore 79 degrees east of said meridian, there was a difference of 114 degrees between these two places, or 456 minutes in time, or 7 hours and 36 minutes. So the exact moment at which the shooting would take place would be 5 hours and 24 minutes post meridian in that great city of Maryland. The weather was magnificent. The sun had just gone down on the plains of Wamasai, behind a horizon of perfect purity. It was impossible to wish for a prettier night, one more calm or starry, in which to throw the projectile across space. Not a cloud would be mixed with the artificial vapors developed by the deflagration of the melimelonite.

Who knows, perhaps President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl regretted that they were not able to get into the projectile. In the first second they would have travelled 2,800 kilometres. Sultan Bali-Bali, with the great personages of his court, that is, his Finance Ministers and his Ministers of Public Works, together with the Black Brigade, who had helped in the great work, were all assembled to watch the different steps of the shooting.

But, with great precaution, they had all taken a position three kilometres from the shaft bored in the Kilimanjaro, so that they would have nothing to fear from the concussion of the air.

Several thousand natives, deputed from Kisongo and neighboring States in the south of the province, by the orders of the Sultan, were present to witness this splendid spectacle. A wire was stretched, connecting an electric battery to the touch-hole of the shaft, ready to send the current and start the deflagration of the melimelonite. As a preliminary an excellent meal had been served at the table of the Sultan for his American guests and the persons of his court, all at the expense of Bali-Bali, who did everything very grandly as long as he was reimbursed by the members of the firm of Barbicane & Co.

It was 11 o'clock when this feast, commenced at 7:30, was finished, and at the end of it the Sultan proposed a toast to the engineers of the N. P. P. A. and to the success of their great enterprise. An hour yet, and the change in the geographical and climatic conditions of the earth would be accomplished.

President Barbicane, his associate, and his ten helpers took their places around the cannon, to the interior of which ran the wire of the electric battery. Barbicane with his chronometer in his hand counted the minutes, and never in his life did they seem so long to him. The minutes seemed not merely years but centuries. At ten minutes before midnight Capt. Nicholl and Barbicane approached the key which put the electric thread in communication with the shaft of Kilimanjaro. The Sultan, his court and the crowd of natives formed an immense circle around the cannon. It was important that the shooting should take place at the exact moment indicated in the calculations of J. T. Maston — that is, at the moment when the sun would cut that equinoctial line which it would never leave again in its apparent orbit around the earth. Five minutes to twelve, four minutes, three minutes, two minutes, one minute to twelve —

President Barbicane watched the hands of his chronometer, lighted by a lantern which was held by one of his helpers, while Capt. Nicholl, his finger on the button of the apparatus, was ready to connect the circuit of electricity.

Twenty seconds, ten seconds, five seconds, one second. Not the slightest tremor could be noted in the hand of the impassive Nicholl. His partner and himself were no more excited than, at the moment when they waited, sitting in the projectile, for the Columbiad to fire them to the regions of the moon.

“Fire,” ordered President Barbicane.

At this moment Capt. Nicholl pressed the button. A terrible detonation followed, the echoes of which spread to the furthest corners of the province of Wamasai. A sharp whistle passed the crowd, a terrible rush of air, caused by the milliards of milliards of measures of gas, made by the instantaneous deflagrations of the 2,000 tons of melimelonite. It might be described as one of those meteors in which all the violence of nature is accumulated sweeping across the earth. The effect could not have been more terrible if all the cannons of the whole globe had been joined together with all the thunderbolts of heaven and all had united in one grand report.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN WHICH J.T. MASTON REGRETS THAT THE CROWD DID NOT LYNCH HIM WHEN HE WAS IN PRISON.

The capitals of two worlds, the largest cities as well as the smaller ones, stood waiting terror-stricken. Thanks to the journals which had published the news broadcast over the world, every one knew the precise hour at which the shooting would take place and the local hour which corresponded with that of Kilimanjaro, situated 35 degrees east, allowing for the difference of longitude.

A few of the principal cities, the sun travelling a degree in four minutes were as follows:

At Paris, 9:40 P.M.

At St. Petersburg, 11:31 P.M.

At London, 9:30 P.M.

At Rome, 10:20 P.M.

At Madrid, 9:15 P.M.

AtBerlin, 11:20 P.M.

At Constantinople, 11:26 P.M.

At Calcutta, 3:04 A.M.

At Nanking, 5:05 A.M.

At Baltimore, it was said, twelve hours after the passage of the sun of the meridian of Kilimanjaro, it was 5:24 P.M. It is impossible to describe the pangs which were produced at this moment. The most powerful of modern pens would be helpless at the task. The people of Baltimore stood fearing that they would be swept off the surface of the earth by the terrible mass of water which would fall on their city. They expected to see the Bay of Chesapeake empty itself upon them. Then, besides, the city, even should the waters not come upon it, would be terribly shaken up by the shock which would be produced. The monuments would be destroyed; its best quarters swallowed up at the bottom of the abysses which would open through the surface of the ground. These fears ran through the different parts of the globe which were not scheduled for submersion by the upheaval of the oceans.

Every human being felt the marrow in his bones creep and shake at this fearful moment.

Yes, all trembled, all save one person, and that one was the engineer Alcide Pierdeux. As he had not had time to make known to the public the discoveries which he had made by means of his last calculations, he drank a bumper of champagne to the health of both worlds in the café of one of the best known hotels. Just as the twenty-fourth minute after 5 o’clock, corresponding with midnight at Kilimanjaro, was reached —

At Baltimore, nothing.

At London, Paris, Constantinople, Berlin, nothing, not the least shock.

Mr. John Milne, standing in his coal mine at Shamokui with a seismometer which he had arranged there, did not note the least abnormal movement in the earth's shell in this part of the globe. In Baltimore the heavens were cloudy and it was impossible to note in the apparent movement of the stars any derangement which would have indicated the change in the earth's axis.

What a night J.T. Maston passed in his place of safety which was unknown to all save Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt! He was beside himself, this visionary engineer. He could not rest in his place of hiding. He seemed to have grown old in one day and looked sharply out to see if the daily course of the sun was modified. This would have been a certain proof of the success of his work. This change could not be seen even on the morning of the 23d of September, because at this date the star invariably rises in the east for all points of the globe. The next day the sun travelled over the horizon the same as it had always done.

The European delegates had assembled on the platform of their hotel. They had by their side instruments of extreme precision which would enable them to note if the sun took a course in the direction of the equator.

Well, nothing changed. A few minutes after the rising of the sun the great disc inclined away towards the Australian hemisphere. Nothing was changed in its apparent course.

Major Donellan and his associates saluted the heavenly torch with enthusiastic hurrahs, and gave it a reception like a favorite star in the theatre. The heavens were in superb condition, the horizon free from the vapors of the night, never did the great sun-god present a more beautiful aspect in such splendid condition before the astonished public. "And precisely at the place marked by the laws of astronomy," said Eric Baldenak.

“Yes by our old astronomy,” said Boris Karkof, “and these fools pretended to destroy it.”

“Well, they will have their expenses to pay and ridicule to endure besides,” added Jacques Jansen, by whose voice Holland seemed to speak all alone.

“And the Arctic regions will eternally stay under the ice as they have discovered,” said Prof. Jan Harald.

“Hurrah for the sun,” said Major Donellan. “Such as it is, it has been and always will be sufficient for our earth.”

“Hurrah, hurrah,” repeated in single voice the representatives of old Europe. At this moment Dean Toodrink, who had not said anything so far, made this very cautious remark:

But perhaps they did not shoot yet.

“Not shoot yet,” said the Major. “Heaven grant that they have fired off the cannon twice rather than once.”

And that was exactly what J. T. Maston and Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt were saying.

The wise and the ignorant were united this time by the logic of the situation. Even Alcide Pierdeux repeated it, and added: “Even if they did shoot, what is the difference? The earth will not stop waltzing on its old axis and turning as it used to do.”

In fact no one knew what had happened at Kilimanjaro. But at the close of the day an answer came to the question which was engrossing the attention of mankind.

A cablegram arrived in the United States, and here is what this dispatch, sent by Richard W. Trust, Consul at Zanzibar, contained:

“Zanzibar, Sept. 23, 7:25 A.M.” “To *John S. Wright, Minister of State*:

“The cannon was fired off yesterday evening at midnight exactly by the device bored in the southern part of Kilimanjaro. Passage of the projectile was accompanied with a powerful whirr and terrible detonation. Whole provinces destroyed by the concussion of the air. Ocean agitated as far as the Mozambique channel. A large number of vessels disabled and thrown on the coast. Towns and villages destroyed. Everything else is well. RICHARD W. TRUST.”

Yes, everything else went on well. Nothing had been changed in the state of worldly affairs save the terrible disasters produced in Wamasai, which was partly deluged by the artificial waterspout, and the shipwrecks which were produced by the current of air. The same thing precisely happened when the Columbiad threw its projectile to the moon. The shock to the ground of Florida, was it not felt through a radius of 100 miles? Yes, certainly, but this time the effect should have been a hundred times stronger.

Whatever had happened the dispatch gave two pieces of information to the interested people of the old and new worlds.

First — That the enormous cannon had been erected in the flank of Kilimanjaro.

Second — That the gun had been fired at the fixed hour. And now, the whole world uttered an exclamation of intense satisfaction, followed by a great burst of laughter.

The trial which Barbicane & Co. had made had entirely failed. The calculations of J.T. Maston were good only for the waste basket. The N.P.P.A. could only announce its failure. But, perhaps, it might be that the secretary of the Gun Club had made a mistake in his calculations.

“Rather would I believe that I have been mistaken in the affection which I feel for him,” said Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt.

But beyond all, the most discontented human being was J.T. Maston. When he saw that nothing had been changed in the movement of the earth, that the conditions remained precisely the same as they were since the creation, he hoped that some accident had prevented the success of Barbicane & Co. and that his associates had met with some disaster.

But there was the cablegram from Zanzibar which stated without a doubt that the operation had taken place.

Failed! ! And what of the formulas and calculations on which he had spent so much time? Is it possible that a cylinder 600 metres long, 27 metres wide, throwing a projectile of 180.000 kilograms, with the deflagration of 200 tons of melimelonite, with an initial velocity of 2,800 kilometres, would not be sufficient to move the earthly axis? It did not seem probable.

But why?

So J.T. Maston, in a state of violent excitement, declared that he would quit his retreat. Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt tried in vain to prevent it. Not that she feared for his life, as all danger of that sort had passed. But the insults which he would have to bear, the jokes which would be cracked about him, the remarks which would be made in regard to his work — she wanted to spare him from these. And then, moreover, what would his associates of the Gun Club say? Did they not have to thank this man for the want of success of their operation and for making them ridiculous? Was he not the man who had figured out the whole affair and on whose shoulders rested all the responsibility?

J.T. Maston would not listen to any one. He resisted the begging and tears of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. He went out of the house where he had kept himself hiding. He was recognized, and those who had trembled for fear of the consequences of his work now took revenge by joking and laughing at him, and this in many thousand different ways. He was forced to listen to jeering remarks, even from the street gamins. “Ah,” they shouted, “here he is who wanted to change the axis of the earth, who wanted to discover coal mines around the North Pole, who even wanted to remove it.” In short, the Secretary of the Gun Club was compelled to return to the mansion of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt, who used all her wealth of tenderness to console him. It was in vain, however. J.T. Maston could not be consoled, as his cannon had produced upon the earth’s sphere no more effect than a simple popgun would have done. A fortnight went by in this way, and the world resumed its daily routine and did not even think any longer of the projects of the N.P.P.A.

A fortnight and no news yet from President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl. Had they perished by the discharge in the land of Wamasai? Had they sacrificed their lives in the most mysterious operation of modern times? No.

After the detonation both were overthrown along with the Sultan arid his court, and a thousand natives in one grand tumble, but they all got up after a little time strong and hearty.

“Did you succeed?” asked Bali-Bali, rubbing his shoulder.

“Do you doubt it?”

“Me doubt it?”

“But when will you know?”

“In a few days,” said Barbicane.

Did he appreciate that the operation had failed? Perhaps. But he never would have acknowledged it before the Sultan at Wamasai.

Forty-eight hours later the two partners had taken leave of Wamasai, not, however, before having paid an enormous sum for the damage done to the country. As this amount of money went into the private purse of the Sultan, and as his subjects did not receive one cent of it, he had no reason to complain of the operation.

Then the two associates, followed by their ten helpers, reached Zanzibar, where they found a vessel to take them to Suez. From there under false names the steamer Morris brought them to Marseilles; then they took the train to Paris, where they arrived without having had any collision or accident, and taking the railroad to Havre they arrived in time to go to America by the Bourgogne of the Transatlantic line. In twenty-two days they made the trip from Wamasai to New York, and on the 15th day of October the two knocked at the door of the mansion of New Park, at three minutes past noon. An instant afterwards they found themselves in the presence of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt and J. T. Maston.

CHAPTER XX.

IN WHICH THIS STORY, AS TRUTHFUL AS IT IS IMPROBABLE, IS FINISHED.

“Barbicane!!! Nicholl!!”

“Maston.”

“You.”

“We.”

And in this plural pronoun, uttered simultaneously by the two associates in a single voice, might be heard a flood of irony and reproaches.

J.T. Maston pressed his iron hook on his forehead. Then, with a voice which seemed to stick in his throat, he said:

“Did your shaft at Kilimanjaro really have a diameter of twenty-seven metres?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did your projectile really weigh 180,000,000 of kilograms?”

“Yes.”

“And was the shooting really done with 2.000 pounds of melimelonite?”

“Yes.”

This thrice-repeated “yes” fell on J. T. Maston like masses of stone on his head.

“Then I can only conclude” — said he.

“What?” asked President Barbicane.

“As follows,” said J. T. Maston. “As the operation did not succeed, the powder did not give to the projectile an initial velocity of 2,800 kilometres.”

“Really?” said Capt. Nicholl, with a tone of sarcasm.

“Yes, your melimelonite is good only to charge pistols of straw.”

Capt. Nicholl sprang up at this remark, which was an outrageous insult to him.

“Maston!” said he.

“Nicholl!”

“You ought to be blown up with the melimelonite.”

“No, gun cotton; that is more sure.”

Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt had to interfere and cool these two enraged gunners down.

“Gentlemen,” said she, between associates.

“And anyhow,” President Barbicane resumed, with a very calm expression, “what is the good of criminations? It is certain that the calculations of our friend, J. T. Maston, were correct, as it is certain that the explosive of our friend Nicholl had sufficient power. Yes, we have only employed known quantities of science. We lacked experience. Why did we fail? Perhaps we may never know.”

“Well,” said the Secretary of the Gun Club, “we will commence all over again.” “And the money then which has been spent for this operation is a dead loss,” observed Capt. Nicholl.

“But public opinion,” said Evangelina Scorbitt, “would not allow you a second trial.”

“What will become of our Arctic region?” said Capt. Nicholl.” “Where will the stock of the N.P.P.A. fall to?” said President Barbicane. Well, it had already fallen so far that the stock was offered at the price of old paper.

This, then, was the result of the gigantic operation. This was the memorable fiasco to which the superhuman projects of Barbicane & Co. had led.

If ever engineers, unlucky engineers were laughed at in public, if ever the newspaper made drawings, songs, and paragraphs not at all flattering to the people mentioned in them, this occasion exceeded them all. President Barbicane, the Directors of the new Society and their associates of the Gun Club were universally sneered at. In every language they were made ridiculous, and to make it easier to the whole population of the world to read the scornful articles were printed in “Volapuk.” In Europe, especially, all the remarks and songs to make the persons of the N.P.P.A. ridiculous were spread broadcast. The greatest hit was made by a Frenchman, who composed a ballad which was sung in every concert hall of France and America. But will we never know to what the failure of this enterprise was due? Did this failure prove that the operation was impossible of realization;

that the powers at the disposal of mankind would never be sufficient to bring about a change in the earth’s movement? Did it prove that the country around the North Pole would never be removed to those regions where the sun and heat would melt the ice without human help?

Information on this subject came a few days after the return of President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl to the United States. A very simple paragraph appeared in the *Times* of the 17th of October. Here is the article:

“We all know that the result of the operation to create a new axis has been nothing. However, the calculations of J.T. Maston, founded on established facts, would have produced the desired result if through an unexplainable slip an error had not been embraced in them from the beginning. When the celebrated secretary of the Gun Club took for a basis of his calculations the circumference of the earth’s sphere, he figured it at 40,000 metres in place of 40,000,000 metres, and to which the failing of the operation is due.

“Where could such an error come from? Who could have provoked it?... How could such a remarkable calculator commit such an error?

“It is certain that had the problem of the modification of the earth’s axis been correctly figured, it would have had been exactly solved. But this forgetting of three zeros has made a change at the end of the calculation of twelve naughts.

“It is not a cannon one million times larger than that of twenty-seven centimetres, which was necessary. A trillion of these cannons throwing a trillion projectiles of 80,000 tons each would be necessary to displace the North Pole, admitting that the melimelonite had the expansive power which had been attributed to it by Capt. Nicholl.

“Therefore the whole shock under the conditions under which it was produced has displaced the North Pole only three-thousandths of a milimeter, and has only changed the level of the ocean at the most nine-thousandths of three-thousandths of a milimetre. In regard to the projectile fired, it will be a small planet, and will belong in future to the solar system, sustained by solar attraction.

ALCIDE PIERDEUX “.

So this want of attention on the part of J.T. Maston at the beginning of his calculations had produced such a humiliating result for his Company.

But even if his associates were very angry against him, if everybody laughed and joked at him, it is only fair to state in his favor that this mistake which had wrecked the operation had spared the world a terrible catastrophe.

A flood of telegrams and letters arrived from all parts of the world congratulating J.T. Maston on his mistake of three naughts. J.T. Maston, more downhearted and crushed than ever, would not listen to the hurrahs which the world now uttered for him. President Barbicane, Capt. Nicholl, Tom Hunter, with wooden legs; Col. Bloomsberry, the gay Bilsby, and his associates would never pardon him. But Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt she could not be angry with him, most excellent lady.

J.T. Maston had begun to do his calculations over again, refusing to admit that he was wrong at that point.

He was, however; the Engineer Alcide Pierdeux had not made a mistake. Having learnt his error at the last moment, when he had no time to make it known, he had remained perfectly composed among all the fright and terror of those about him. That was why he proposed a toast in champagne at the moment when the shooting was taking place in the Old World. Yes, indeed, three naughts had been forgotten in the circumference of the earth. Suddenly J.T. Maston remembered the whole matter.

It was at the beginning of his work when he had shut himself up in the “Ballistic Cottage,” and written the number 40,000, 000 on his blackboard. At that moment the electric bell began to ring with great force. J.T. Maston went to the phone. He exchanged a few words with Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. Suddenly a terrible stroke of lightning from the storm through the telephone knocked over his blackboard and himself. He got up, commenced to write over again the numbers which had been half rubbed out on his blackboard. He had just written the numbers 40,000 when the telephone rang for the second time. He went again to listen to Mme. Scorbitt, and when he did begin his work he forgot to put on the last three naughts of the earth’s circumference.

It was the fault of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. If she had not interrupted him he would not have been thrown on the floor by the shock from the telephone. He would not have noticed anything of lightning and thunder, and all his mass of figures and calculations would not have ended in a mistake.

What a terrible blow it was to this unhappy lady when J.T. Maston was compelled to tell her the circumstances which had produced the mistake! Yes, she was the cause of the disaster. It was on her account that J.T. Maston found himself dishonored through the long years which he bad yet to live, as nearly every member of the Gun Club usually lived to the age of a hundred years.

After this conversation at New Park, J. T. Maston had gone away from the mansion. He went back to his Ballistic Cottage and walked into his study muttering to himself: “Well, now I am not good for anything any more in this world.”

“Not even good enough to get married,” said a broken voice at his elbow.

It was that of Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt. Absolutely crushed and heart-broken, she had followed him.

“Dear Maston” — she began.

“Well, yes,” said he, “but only under one condition — that I shall never make any mathematical calculations.”

“My dear friend, I have a horror of them,” answered the excellent widow.

Thus it happened that the Secretary of the Gun Club made Mrs. Evangelina Scorbitt Mrs. J. T. Maston.

In regard to the article of Alcide Pierdeux, we might say that it brought him into great celebrity and reputation.

It was translated into all languages, printed in every paper, and thus his name became known all over the world. The father of his old sweetheart had refused him his daughter’s hand, after telling him that he could not give him his daughter, as he was too smart. But now, after having read this article and being unable to understand it without any help, he began to feel sorry and know better. He sent him an invitation to dine with him and his daughter.

CHAPTER XXI.

VERY SHORT, SINCE ENOUGH HAS BEEN SAID TO MAKE THE WORLD’S POPULATION FEEL PERFECTLY SURE AGAIN.

And now the inhabitants of the world could again be perfectly easy. President Barbicane and Capt. Nicholl will not again begin that enterprise so woefully miscarried, J.T. Maston will not again figure out any calculations, however free from mistakes. The article of Alcide Pierdeux has told the truth. What the law of mechanics proves to us is that to produce a displacement of the axis of 23 degrees and 28 minutes, even with the melimelonite, a trillion cannons similar to the one which had been bored into the cliff of Kilimanjaro would be necessary. But our whole sphere, bored over its whole surface, is too small to accommodate them. Therefore the inhabitants of the earth may sleep in peace. To modify the conditions in which the earth is moving is beyond the efforts of humanity. It is not meet that mere humanity should change anything in the order established by our Creator in the system of the universe.

FAMILY WITHOUT A NAME

Anonymous translation, 1889

This 1889 adventure novel concerns the life of a family in Lower Canada during the Lower Canada Rebellion of 1837 and 1838, which sought an independent and democratic republic for the country. In the narrative, the two sons of a traitor fight in the Rebellion in an attempt to make up for the crime of their father.

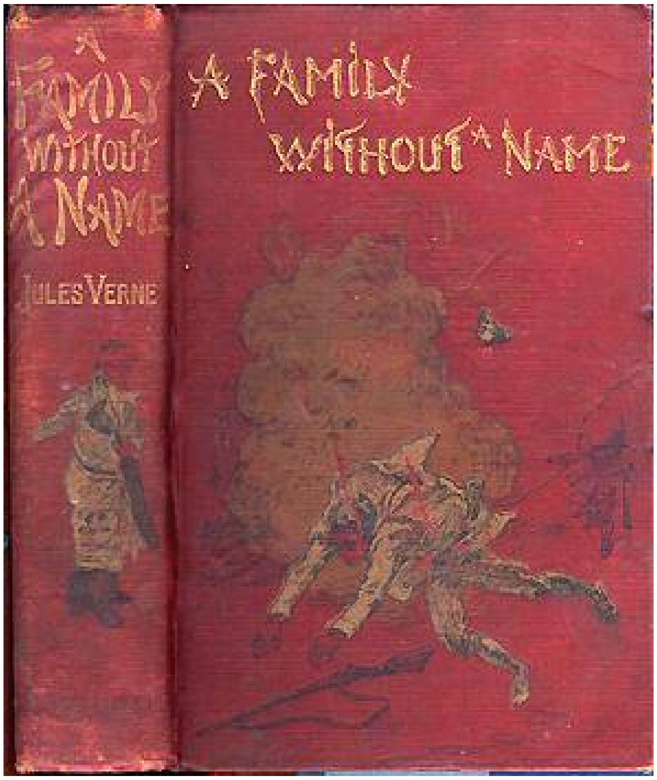
A FAMILY WITHOUT A NAME
JULES VERNE
A FAMILY WITHOUT A NAME

First UK Edition

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PART I

LEADER OF THE RESISTANCE

CHAPTER I.

A FEW FACTS AND DATES.

‘We pity the poor creatures who are flying at each other’s throats for the sake of a few acres of ice.” So said the philosophers at the end of the eighteenth century, referring to Canada, for whose possession the French and English were then at strife.

Two hundred years before that, when the Kings of Spain and Portugal claimed these American territories, Francis I had exclaimed, “I should like to see the clause in Adam’s will, in which this vast heritage was left to them!”

And the king had the more reason for asking this, when, shortly afterwards, a part of these territories took the name of New France. The French, it is true, have not been able to keep possession of this magnificent American colony; but a large proportion of its population remains of French blood, and is connected with France by those ties of blood and natural instincts which international politics have some difficulty in breaking.

The few acres of ice now form a Dominion, with an area larger than that of Europe.

In the year 1534 a Frenchman landed, and took possession of this vast territory.

Jacques Cartier, of St. Malo, boldly advanced into its interior up the river, to which he gave the name of St. Lawrence. The following year the daring Malouin, continuing the exploration further westward, reached a group of cabins — Canada in the Indian tongue — from which has now sprung Quebec, and further westward still, he reached the village of Hochelaga, which is now Montreal. Two centuries later these cities in succession assumed the title of capital, concurrently with Kingston and Toronto, until, to put an end to their political rivalry, the town of Ottawa was declared to be the scat of government of the colony, which now bears the name of the Dominion of Canada.

A few facts, a few dates, will suffice us to trace the progress of this important state from its foundation to the period between 1830 and 1840, in which the events recorded in this history took place.

Under Henry IV. in 1595, Champlain, one of the best seamen of his time, returned to Europe, after a first voyage, in which he had chosen the site of Quebec. He then took part in the expedition of De Mons, the bearer of letters patent for the exclusive trade in furs, which also gave him the right to dispose of laud in Canada. Champlain, whose adventurous character kept him from much sympathy with commerce, withdrew from his bargain, and again sailing up the St. Lawrence, built Quebec in 1606. Two years before that the English had founded their colony in Virginia. The germs of national jealousy were thus called into being, and even in those times there were manifest the beginnings of the struggle which England and France were to wage in the New World.

At the commencement the Indians necessarily took sides in the quarrel. The Algonquins and the Hurons declared for Champlain against the Iroquois, who allied themselves with the English. In 1609 a battle was fought on the shore of the lake, which still bears the name of the French sailor, in which the Iroquois were beaten.

Two other voyages — in 1613 and 1615 — led Champlain to the almost unknown regions of the West on the shore of Lake Huron. Again he left America, and again he returned, and at length, after contending with intrigues of all sorts, he received in 1620 the title of Governor of New Franco.

A company was then formed, of which the constitution was approved by Louis XIII. in 1628. This company undertook to transfer to Canada in fifteen years 4000 French Catholics. Of several vessels sent on this errand, the first fell into the hands of the English, who sailed up the St. Lawrence, and summoned Champlain to surrender. He refused, but the want of resources, and any chance of help soon led to a capitulation, which in 1629 gave Quebec to the English. In 1632 Champlain departed from Dieppe with three vessels, and resumed the possession of Canada, which had been restored to France by the treaty of the 13th of July in that year. He laid the foundations of some new towns, established, under the direction of the Jesuits, the fir.-t Canadian college, and died on Christmas Day, 1635, in the land won by his enterprise and audacity.

For some time commercial relations existed between the French colonists and those of New England. But the French had to contend with the Iroquois, who had become formidable, owing to their numbers, for the European population did not exceed 2400; and so the company, whose affairs were becoming desperate, applied to Colbert, who sent them the Marquis de Tracy, at the head of a squadron. The Iroquois were repulsed, but at once returned to the attack, and a horrible massacre of the colonists took place near Montreal.

In 1665 the area of the colony had doubled, and there were 13,000 French in Canada. But the New Englanders now amounted to 200,000. War broke out in Nova Scotia, then called Acadia, and the New Englanders even reached Quebec, from which they had to retire in 1690.

At last, by the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697, France was assured in the possession of Canada, and the unsubdued nations, such as the Iroquois and Hurons, put themselves under French protection by the convention of Montreal.

In 1703, the Marquis de Vaudreuil, son of an earlier governor of that name, was appointed Governor-General of Canada, and, by reason of the neutrality of the Iroquois, found himself in a stronger position than his predecessors.

War began in Newfoundland, which had always been English, and in Acadia, which in 1711 escaped from Vaudreuil’s hands. The Anglo-American forces were then concentrating for the conquest of Canada, when the Treaty of Utrecht confirmed the loss of Acadia, and assured a peace of thirty years with England.

During that period of repose the colony made real progress. The French built several new forts, to strengthen their hold on it. In 1721 the population was 25,000, in 1744 it was 50,000. It seemed as though the times of adversity were over. Nothing of the sort. With the war of the Austrian Succession England and France were enemies in Europe, and consequently in America. There was an alternation of reverse and success, and at length the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, in 1747, left matters as they had been at the Treaty of Utrecht.

But although Acadia was henceforth a British possession, its people continued to be very French. And the United Kingdom encouraged Anglo-Saxon immigration, so as to obtain a preponderance of that race in the conquered provinces. France tried to do the same for Canada, but with poor success, and on the Ohio the rivals found themselves face to face.

Then it was that before Fort Duquesne, recently built by the compatriots of the Marquis de Vaudreuil, Washington appeared at the head of an Anglo-American force. Had not Franklin just declared that Canada could not be suffered to belong to France?

Two fleets sailed from Europe — one from France, the other from England. After dreadful massacres in Acadia and the territories of the Ohio, war was officially declared by Great Britain on the 18th of May, 1756.

De Vaudreuil sent urgent demands for reinforcements and the Marquis de Montcalm arrived, and took command of the army. The first successes of the campaign fell to Montcalm. Fort William Henry, in the south of Lake George, a prolongation of Lake Champlain, was captured; and the Anglo-American troops were defeated at Carillon. But against these successes were to be set the surrender of Fort Duquesne by the French, the loss of Fort Niagara, and the capture of Quebec by General Wolfe in 1759. Montcalm was killed, Wolfe was killed.

Next year the French attempted to retake Quebec. They failed, and shortly afterwards had to surrender Montreal. At length, in 1763, a treaty was signed. Louis XV. renounced his pretensions on Acadia in favour of England, and gave up all Canada and its dependencies. New France existed no longer, except in the hearts of its children. But the English could not destroy a nationality when the majority of the people kept living the love of their old country; and in 1774 Great Britain restored the old French laws.

Although they had nothing further to fear from France the English soon found themselves at war with the Americans, who crossed Lake Champlain, took Carillon and Forts St. John and Frederick, and marched, under General Montgomery, to capture Montreal and be defeated before Quebec, where Montgomery was killed.

Next year — on the 4th of July, 1776 — there was proclaimed the Independence of the United States of America. The month before Montreal had been recaptured by the British.

And now came a period of great trouble for the French Canadians. The English feared that the colony would revolt and range itself under the Stars and Stripes the Americans had unfurled on the horizon.

In 1791 a new constitution divided the country into two provinces, Upper Canada in the West, Lower Canada in the East, with Quebec as its capital. Each province possessed a Legislative Council, nominated by the Crown, and an Assembly elected for four years by the freeholders of the towns. The population was then 135,000, of whom only 15,000 were of English origin.

In 1806 Le Catiadien was founded at Quebec; its motto was, “Nos institutions, notre langue et iios lois” and its object was to obtain this triple desideratum. In 1814 there was signed at Ghent the peace which ended the second American War, in which the successes and reverses were so equally shared.

Then the strife between the two races recommenced in Canada, but purely in the political field. The reforming deputies, led by the heroic Tapineau, were unceasing in their attack on the government in all matters. The governor prorogued or dissolved the Assembly, but nothing was done. The opposition let nothing discourage them. The Loyalists, as they called themselves wished to abrogate the constitution of 1791, to reunite Canada in a single province, so as to obtain more influence for the English element, and to abolish the use of the French language, which had remained the parliamentary and judicial language. Hut Papincau and his friends protested with such energy that the project was abandoned.

The discussion grew more violent. The elections brought about serious collisions. In May, 1831, a riot occurred at Montreal, which cost the lives of three French Canadians. Meetings of the people took place in the towns and villages. An active propaganda was instituted throughout the province. A manifesto was drawn up, of ninety-two resolutions, enumerating the grievances of the French against the English, and demanding the prosecution of the Governor-General, Lord Aylmer. The manifesto was adopted by the Chamber, in spite of the opposition of a few reformers, who considered it insufficient. In 1834 new elections took place. Papineau and his partisans were again elected. Faithful to the protest of the preceding Chamber, they insisted on the prosecution of the Governor-General. But the Assembly was prorogued in March, 1835, and Lord Aylmer was replaced by Lord Gosford as Commissioner, with whom were associated two other Commissioners, for the purpose of inquiring into the causes of the agitation. Lord Gosford explained the conciliatory intentions of the Crown, but the deputies refused to recognize the powers of the commission of inquiry.

But by immigration the English party were gradually reinforced — even in Lower Canada. At Montreal, at Quebec, constitutional associations were formed to put down the reformers. The governor had to dissolve these associations, which were against the law, but they remained ready for action all the same. It was obvious that the attack would be vigorous on both sides. The Anglo- American element became more audacious than ever. It was proposed to Anglicize Lower Canada by every means; and the patriots resolved on resistance, whether legal or not.

Such was the situation in Canada in the year 1837, at the commencement of this story. It is important for us to keep well in view the antagonism between the French and English elements, the vitality of the one, the tenacity of the other.

It was to concert measures rendered necessary by a probable insurrection, that the Governor, Lord Gosford, the Commander-in-Chief, Sir John Colborne, Colonel Gore, and the Chief of the Police, Gilbert Argall, met together on the evening of the 23rd of August.

The Indians designate by the word “Kebec “any narrowing of a river produced by a sudden approach of its banks. Hence the name of Quebec. The city is built on a promontory, a sort of Gibraltar, just above where the St. Lawrence opens out, like an arm of the sea. The upper town is on the steep hill which commands the river, the lower town extends along the banks, where the warehouses and docks are built, where the streets are narrow, and the footpaths paved with wood. The houses were mostly built of wood, a few unimposing buildings there were: — the Governor’s house, the English and French cathedrals, an esplanade crowded with loungers, a citadel occupied by a sufficient garrison — such was Champlain’s old city, a much more picturesque place than the modern towns of North America.

From the governor’s garden the view extended afar over the superb river, with its waters divided by Orleans Island down stream. The evening was splendid. The cool atmosphere was untroubled by the keen north-west breeze which is at all seasons so hurtful in the St. Lawrence valley. In the shade of a square, one of its faces lit by the light of the moon, rose the quadrangular pyramid raised to the memory of Wolfe and Montcalm.

For an hour the governor-general and other high personages had been conversing on the gravity of a state of affairs which kept them continually on the alert. The symptoms of an approaching revolt were only too evident. They must be prepared for every eventuality.

“How many men have you?” asked Lord Gosford of Sir John Colborne.

“Very few unfortunately,” said the general. “And yet I ought to draw off some of the troops from the country.”

“What are the numbers?”

“I cannot muster more than four battalions, and seven companies of infantry, for it is impossible to withdraw any from the garrisons of the citadels of Quebec and Montreal.”

“What artillery have you?”

“Three or four field-guns.”

“And cavalry?”

“A picquet only.”

“If you have to scatter those troops over the neighbouring counties,” said Colonel Gore, “there are not enough. It is very unfortunate that you had to dissolve the constitutional associations formed by the Loyalists We should then have had hundreds of volunteers, whose help we should not despise.”

“I could not allow those associations,” said Lord Gosford. “Their contact with the population would have led to disturbances every day. We must avoid everything that may provoke an outbreak. We are on a powder-magazine, and we must walk in list shoes.”

The governor did not exaggerate. He was a man of great ability, and conciliatory disposition. Since his arrival in the colony he had shown much kindness to the French colonists, having — as the historian Garncau remarks — " a dash of Irish gaiety, which was not out of sympathy with Canadian gaiety." If the rebellion had not yet broken out it was owing to the circumspection, the kindness, the spirit of justice which Lord Gosford had shown. By nature and -conviction he was opposed to violent measures.

"Force," he said, "may compress, but it does not suppress. In England they forget that Canada is neighbour to the United States, and that the United States ended by gaining their independence. I see that in London the ministry wants a policy of aggression. By the advice of the Commissioners the House of Lords and House of Commons have adopted a resolution to prosecute the opposition deputies, to make use of the public funds, to alter the constitution, so as to double the number of English electors. But that does not show much wisdom. There will be bloodshed on one side or the other."

There was good reason for expecting this. The measures adopted by the British Parliament had produced an agitation which only wanted an opportunity to declare itself. Secret councils, public meetings, kept opinion in a state of excitement. Revocations were being exchanged at Montreal as at Quebec between the reformers and the partisans of English domination, and the police knew that a call to arms had been distributed throughout the country. The governor-general had been hanged in effigy. All that could be done was to be prepared for the outbreak.

"Has Monsieur de Vaudreuil been seen at Montreal?" asked Lord Gosford.

"He does not seem to have left his house," said Gilbert Argall. "But his friends Farran, Clerc, Vincent Hodge, are constantly visiting him, and are in daily communication with the liberal deputies, and particularly with Gramont of Quebec."

"If an outbreak occurs, it will doubtless have been prepared by them," said Sir John Colborne.

"Then why not arrest them?" asked Colonel Gore. "Why does not your lordship destroy the plot before it is hatched?"

"If it is not hatched already!" said the governor- general, who turned to the chief of the police and continued, "Did not M. de Vaudreuil and his friends figure in the insurrections of 1832 and 1835?"

"They did," said Sir Gilbert Argall, "or rather there was good reason for supposing so; but positive proof was wanting, and it was impossible to prosecute them, just as it had been in 1825."

"That proof should be obtained at any price," said Sir John Colborne, "so that we might put a stop to the intrigues of these reformers once for all. There is nothing more hateful than civil war! But if it comes to that, we must make the work short and sharp."

To speak in this way was characteristic of the commander-in-chief of the British forces in Canada. Sir John Colborne was the man to put down a revolution with all due vigour, but to take part in secret surveillance such as falls to the lot of the police was most unpalatable to him. Owing to this it was that for many months Gilbert Argall's emissaries had had the whole task of watching the proceedings of the French Canadian party. The towns, the parishes of the St. Lawrence valley, and more especially those in the counties of Vercherts, Chambly, Laprairie, Acadie, Terrebonne, and Deux Montaignes, had swarmed with detectives. At Montreal, in place of those constitutional associations of which Colonel Gore regretted the dissolution, the Doric Club — with its members the most violent of loyalists — had taken upon itself to suppress the insurgents by the most rigorous of means. And Lord Gosford feared that at any moment, day or night, the outbreak might occur.

It can be understood, therefore, how the governor's friends urged him to support the bureaucrats — as the Crown's partisans were called — against the partisans of the national cause. Besides, Sir John Colborne was not the man for half-measures, as appeared later on, when he succeeded Lord Gosford in the government of the colony. Colonel Gore, an old soldier and Waterloo hero, was, of course, for acting vigorously, and without delay.

On the 7th of May in this year a meeting had been held at Saint Ours, a small village in Richelieu county, in which the principal reformers took part. The resolutions then agreed to became the political programme of the French opposition.

One of the resolutions was "Canada, like Ireland, should rally round a man endowed with a hatred of oppression, and a love of his country, which nothing, neither promises nor menaces, can shake."

This man was Papineau, whom popular sentiment declared to be an O'Connell.

At the same time the assembly decided to abstain as much as possible from consuming imported articles, and only to use the products of the country, so as to deprive the government of the revenue obtained from the duties on foreign merchandise.

Lord Gosford replied to these declarations on the 15th of June, by a proclamation forbidding seditious meetings, and ordering the magistrates and officers of the militia to disperse them.

But although Papineau was the ostensible leader, there was another who worked in the dark, and so mysteriously that the principal reformers had seldom seen him. Around this personage quite a legend had grown, which had given him extraordinary influence over the minds of the masses. Jean-Sans-Nom was the name under which alone he was known.

“And this Jean-Sans-Nom,” asked Sir John Colborne; “have you got on his track yet?”

“Not yet,” said the chief of police. “But I have reason to think that he has reappeared in Lower Canada, and that he has even been in Quebec.”

“And your men have not been able to put their hands on him!” exclaimed Colonel Gore.

“That is not an easy thing to do.”

“Has this man really the influence they ascribe to him?” asked Lord Gosford.

“Certainly,” said Argall, “I can assure your lordship that his influence is very great.”

“Who is he?”

“That is what they want to know,” said Sir John Golborne. “Is it not so, Argall?”

“That is so. It is not known who he is, whence he comes, or whither he goes. He has appeared in this way, almost invisibly, in all the late insurrections. There can be no doubt that Papineau, Viger, Lacoste, Vaudreuil, Farran, Gramont, all the leaders, in fact, look for him to strike in when the time comes. Jean-Sans-Nom has become a sort of supernatural being among the people in the districts of the St. Lawrence above Montreal and below Quebec. If the legend is to be believed, he has all the qualifications of a leader, extraordinary boldness, and courage above suspicion. And, above all, there is the mystery of his incognito.”

“You think he has been in Quebec?” asked Lord Gosford.

“The information I have received leads me to suppose so,” said Argall. “And I have put on his track all the smartest men I know, among them that Rip, who showed so much intelligence over the Morgaz affair.”

“Simon Morgaz,” said Sir John Colborne, “who in 1525 so conveniently handed over for a consideration his accomplices in the Chambly plot?”

“The same.”

“Do you know what has become of him?”

“Only one thing,” said Argall, “that .he was cut by all the French Canadians he betrayed, and that he disappeared. He may have left America. He may be dead.”

“But could not what succeeded with Simon Morgaz.

succeed again with these reformers?” asked Sir John Colborne.

“Don’t think that, general!” answered Lord Gosford. “They are above that sort of thing. That they are enemies of English influence, and dream of obtaining fur Canada the same independence as the United States is true. But to hope to buy them, to turn them into traitors by promises of money or honours, will never do! I don’t think you will find a single traitor amongst them.”

“They said the same of Simon Morgaz,” said Sir John Colborne ironically, “and yet he gave up his friends. And who knows if this Jean-Sans-Nom is not to be bold?”

“I don’t think so,” said the chief of the police.

“Anyhow,” said Colonel Gore, “whether he is to be sold or hanged, the first thing is to catch him, and if he has been seen at Quebec — ”

As he spoke a man appeared on one of the paths of the garden, and stopped about ten yards off.

Argall recognized the man, who, however, did not belong to the regular brigade of Comeau, who was at the head of the Canadian police.

“That is Rip, of Rip and Co.” said he, addressing Lord Gosford. “Your lordship will allow me to hear what he has to say?”

Lord Gosford nodded, and Rip approached respectfully, and waited for Argall to speak to him, which he did in these terms.

“Have you made sure that Jean-Sans-Nom has been seen in Quebec?”

“I have, your honour!”

“And why was he not arrested?” asked Lord Gosford.

“Your lordship must excuse my associates and myself,” said Rip; “but we did not receive warning in time. The day before yesterday we heard of Jean-Sans-Nom as having visited one of the houses in the Rue de Petit-Champlain, next door to the tailor’s shop. I surrounded the house, which is occupied by Sebastien Gramont, Advocate and Deputy, who is very prominent in the reformist party. But Jean-Sans-Nom was not there, although Gramont had certainly had dealings with him. And our search was useless.”

“Do you think the man is still in Quebec?” asked Sir John Colborne.

“I cannot answer in the affirmative, your excellency,” said Rip.

“You do not know him?”

“I have never seen him. And in fact there are very few that have.”

“Do you know which way he went when he left Quebec?”

“I do not.”

“And what do you think?” asked the Minister of Police.

“My idea is that he has gone towards Montreal, where the agitators seem to be concentrating. If an insurrection is being planned it is in that part of Lower Canada that it will break out. I suspect that Jean-Sans-Nom is lying close in some village on the bank of the St. Lawrence.”

“And that,” said Argall, “is where we ought to look.”

“Well, give the necessary orders,” said the governor.

“Your lordship will be satisfied. Rip, to-morrow you will leave Quebec with the best men you have. I will watch Monsieur de Vaudreuil and his friends, who are certainly in communication with Jean-Sans-Nom. Try and get on his track by any means. It is the governor- general’s special order.”

“And it will be faithfully obeyed,” said Rip. “I will go to-morrow.”

“We approve in advance,” said Gilbert Argall, “of all you think necessary to effect the capture of this dangerous partisan. We want him dead or alive, before he can raise the French by his presence. You are intelligent and zealous, Rip; you showed that a dozen years ago in the Morgaz affair. We again reckon on your zeal and intelligence. Go.”

Rip was preparing to leave, and had already taken a few steps backward when he stopped.

“May I ask your honour a question?” he asked.

“A question?” said Argall.

“Yes, your honour, for it is necessary it should be answered, in order that the books of Rip and Co. may be kept in proper form.”

“What is it?”

“Is there a price on Jean-Sans-Nom’s head?”

“Not yet!”

“There ought to be!” said Sir John Colborne.

“There is,” said Lord Gosford.

“What is the amount?” asked Rip.

“Four thousand dollars.”

“It is worth six thousand,” said Rip. “I shall have to pay travelling and other special expenses.”

“Very well,” said Lord Gosford.

“It will be money your lordship will never regret.”

“If it is gained — ” added the minister.

“It will be, your honour!”

And with this promise — a rather hazardous one, it seemed — the chief partner in Rip and Co. retired.

“This Rip seems to know what he is about,” said Colonel Gore.

“And gives us confidence in him,” said Argall. “This reward of six thousand dollars will improve his finesse and his zeal. That Chambly affair brought him something considerable, and though he is fond of his business, he is fonder still of the cash it brings him. You must take him as he is, and I know no one more likely to catch Jean-Sans-Nom, if Jean-Sans-Nom will let himself be caught!”

The general, the minister, and the colonel took leave of Lord Gosford. Then Sir John Colborne gave Colonel Gore his orders to set out immediately for Montreal, where his colleague, Colonel Wetherall, was waiting, with orders to prevent, as much as possible, the spread of the insurrectional movement in the neighbouring districts.

CHAPTER II.

TWELVE YEARS BEFORE.

Simon Morgaz! A name execrated in the humblest huts of Canada! A name devoted for long years to public execration! Simon Morgaz! The traitor who betrayed his brothers, and sold his country.

In 1825 — twelve years before the insurrection of 1837 — a few French Canadians had organized a conspiracy, with the object of withdrawing Canada from the English domination, which weighed on it so heavily. They were bold men, active, energetic, of good position, sprung, for the most part, from the early immigrants, who had founded New France. No wonder that they -could not believe that their colony had been abandoned to England for ever. And even admitting that the country could not return to the defendants of Cartier and Champlain, had they not the right to be independent? And it was to gain its independence that they risked their heads.

Amongst them was Monsieur de Vaudreuil, a descendant of the old governors of Canada under Louis XIV. — one of those families whose French names have become geographical names in Canadian cartography.

At this time M. de Vaudreuil was thirty-five years of age, having been born in 1790, in the county of Vaudreuil, situated between the St. Lawrence on the south and the River Ottawa on the north, on the confines of the province of Ontario.

M. de Vaudreuil’s friends were, like him, of French origin, although successive alliances with Anglo Americans had changed their French names. Such were Professor Robert Farran of Montreal, Franfois Clerc, a rich landowner of Chateauguay, and a few others, to whom either birth or fortune assured extensive influence over the population of the villages and country.

The real chief of the conspiracy was Walter Hodge, who was of American nationality. Although he was then sixty, age had not cooled the heat of his blood. During the War of Independence he had been one of those daring volunteers known as “skinners,” whose wild violence Washington had to tolerate, on account of the vigour with which they harassed the Royal Army. At the end of the eighteenth century, as we know, Canada had been tempted by the United States to enter the American federation; and this explains why an American like Walter Hodge should have joined this conspiracy, and even become its chief. He was one of those who had adopted as his motto the four words which comprise the Monroe doctrine, “America for the Americans.”

Walter Hodge and his companions had never ceased from protesting against the exactions of English administration, which became more and more intolerable. In 1822 their names figured in the protest against the union of Upper and Lower Canada, with those of the two brothers Sanguinct, who, eighteen years later, with so many other victims, were to pay with their lives for their attachment to the national party. They fought with pen and speech against the lands being so partitioned among the bureaucrats as to strengthen the English element. They had attacked all the governors, Sherbrooke, Richmond, Monk, and Maitland, and associated themselves in every way with the deputies of the opposition.

In 1825, however, the conspiracy had a definite object, and was organized without the participation of the Liberals of the Canadian Assembly. If Papineau and his colleagues, Cuvillier, Bedard, Viger, Quernel and others, were not admitted to its secrets, Hodge could count on them to assure its consequences if they succeeded.

At the outset it was proposed to seize on the person of Lord Dalhousie, who in 1820 had been nominated to the post of Governor-General of the English colonies in North America. On his arrival, Lord Dalhousie seemed to have resolved on a policy of concession. Thanks to him, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Quebec was officially recognized, and Montreal, Rose, and Regiopolis became the sees of three new bishops. But the British Cabinet had refused Canada the right of self-government. The members of the Legislative Council, nominated for life by the Crown, were all English by birth, and rendered quite helpless the House of Assembly elected by the people. Out of a population of 600,000 inhabitants, including 525,000 French Canadians, three-quarters of the government functionaries were of English descent. And the question had again arisen of proscribing the legal use of the French language throughout the colony.

To seize on Lord Dalhousie and the principal members of the Legislative Council, provoke a popular movement in the counties of the St. Lawrence, install a provisional government until an election had constituted a National Government, and raise the Canadian Militia against the Regular Army, such were the plans of Walter Hodge, Robert Farran, Francois Clerc, and Vaudreuil.

With Walter Hodge and his partisans there was connected a certain Simon Morgaz, whose position and origin it is needful for us to know.

In 1825 Simon Morgaz was forty-six years old. An advocate in a country where there are more advocates than clients, just as there are more doctors than patients, he lived in a struggling way at Chambly, a village on the left bank of the Richelieu, a dozen leagues from Montreal, on the other side of the St, Lawrence.

He was a resolute man, whose energy had been remarked when the reformers protested against the proceedings of the British Cabinet. His pleasant manner and prepossessing face, made him generally liked. No one imagined that the personality of a traitor would one day stand manifest from such a winning exterior.

Simon Morgaz was married. His wife was eight years younger, being then thirty-eight. She was of American origin, and was the daughter of Major Allen, whose bravery during the War of Independence may be appreciated from the fact that he was one of Washington's aide de-camps. A true type of loyalty, he would have surrendered his life to save his word with the tranquillity of a Regulus.

It was at Albany, in the State of New York, that Simon Morgjz and Bridget met and became acquainted. The young lawyer was a French Canadian, as Major Allen well knew — for he would never have given his daughter to the descendant of an English family. Although Morgaz possessed no personal fortune, yet with what came to Bridget on the death of her mother a certain comfort, if not wealth, was assured to the young couple. The marriage took place at Albany, in 1806.

Morgaz and his wife might have been happy, but they were not. Not that Morgaz ever failed in his treatment of his wife, for he always entertained for her a sincere affection, but a passion devoured him — a passion for gambling. Bridget's patrimony was dissipated in a few years, and although her husband was recognized as a talented advocate, his work did not suffice to fill up the gaps in his fortune. It was not misery but penury that his wife had to bear with. Bridget never reproached her husband; her advice had been useless; she accepted the trial with resignation and with courage, although the future was most unpromising.

It was not only for herself that Bridget had to fear. During the first years of her married life she had had two children, to whom she had given the same baptismal name, with a slight difference. The elder, Joann, was born in 1807; the younger, Jean, in 1808. Bridget devoted herself entirely to the education of her sons. Joann was of a gentle disposition; Jean of a more lively temperament, though both were energetic enough in their gentleness and vivacity. They took evidently after their mother, being serious in thought, and having a taste for work, and a straightforward way of looking at things, which was certainly wanting in Simon Morgaz. To their father they were always respectful, but there was none of that natural ease and confidence without reserve which is the very essence of blood relationship. For their mother their devotion was unbounded, their affection overflowing. Bridget and her sons were united by a double chain of filial and maternal love which nothing could ever break.

After their childhood, Joann and Jean had been sent to the school at Chambly, where they gained the reputation of being among the best pupils in the junior division. When they were twelve and thirteen they had gone to the college at Montreal, where they soon came to the front. Two years elapsed, and they had just finished their education when there occurred the events of 1825.

As a rule, Simon Morgaz and his wife resided at Montreal, where the advocate’s office was in daily danger of having to shut up, but they had managed to retain possession of a small house at Chambly. It was there that Walter Hodge and his friends met, when Morgaz had joined the plot of which the first act would be the arrest of the Governor-General, and the next the installation of a provisional government at Quebec.

Under this modest roof in the village of Chambly the conspirators fancied they were in greater safety than they would have been at Montreal, where the police surveillance was very keen. Nevertheless they acted with great prudence, so as to throw all attempts at espionage off the scent. Arms and ammunition had been stored in the house without their transport evoking the least suspicion.

But the Governor got wind of the plot, and set a special watch over the proceedings of those deputies who formed the permanent opposition. As we said before, however, Papineau and his colleagues did not know of the plans of Hodge and his associates. That the 26th of August had been fixed for the call to arms would have been a surprise to both friends and enemies.

On the evening of the 25th of August the house of Simon Morgaz was entered by the police, under the guidance of Rip, just as the conspirators had met. There was no time to destroy their secret correspondence, or burn the lists of their supporters. The police seized the arms hidden in the cellars. The plot was discovered, and there were taken to Montreal under a strong escort, Walter Hodge, Robert Farran, Francois Clerc, Simon Morgaz, Vaudreuil, and a dozen others.

What had happened was as follows: there was then at Quebec a certain Rip, who kept a private inquiry and detective office, and who was frequently employed on government business, not without a consideration. A matter of police was to him merely a matter of cash, and he passed it through his books just as he would have done a matter of commerce, charging so much for the job — so much for a search, so much for an arrest, so much for surveillance, &c. &c. He was a very shrewd man, very keen, very daring, quite a man of the world, in fact, with his hand, or rather his nose, in everybody's business; and what is more, he was quite devoid of scruples, and had not the shadow of a moral sense.

In 1825, Rip, who had just started his agency, was thirty- three years of age. Already his mobile physiognomy and cleverness in disguises, had enabled him to have a hand in several matters under different names. For some years he had known Simon Morgaz, with whom he had had business in law matters. Certain circumstances which would have appeared insignificant to every one else made him think that the advocate of Montreal was concerned in some way with the conspiracy of Chambly. He pressed him close; he pried into the secrets of his private life; he frequented the house, although Bridget took no pains to hide the antipathy she felt for him.

A letter seized at the post-office went far to prove the advocate's complicity. The minister of police, informed by Rip of the result of his inquiries, recommended him to act judiciously with Morgaz, whom he knew to be in pecuniary difficulties; and one day Rip suddenly gave the unhappy man the choice between two alternatives — to be prosecuted for treason, or to receive the enormous sum of a hundred thousand piastres, or dollars, the value being the same, and reveal the names of his accomplices and the details of the conspiracy at Chambly.

The advocate was astounded. Betray his companions! Sell them for gold! Hand them over to the scaffold! But nevertheless he succumbed; he accepted the price of his treason, he revealed the secrets of the conspirators, after receiving a promise that his infamy would never be divulged. It was even agreed that the police should arrest him at the same time as Walter

Hodge and his friends, that he should be tried by the same judges, and that he should be sentenced — and it could only be a sentence of death — and then he could escape.

This abominable scheme was concocted between the minister of police, the head partner of Rip & Co. and Simon Morgaz.

Things happened as had been arranged. On the day named by the traitor, the conspirators were surprised in the house at Chambly, and on the 25th September, 1825, they were all tried together.

The only reply the prisoners made to the charge was to attack the British ministry. To the legal arguments they answered with arguments of the purest patriotism. Did they not know that they were condemned in advance, that nothing could save them?

The trial lasted for several hours, and all would have gone as arranged, when a circumstance occurred that revealed the conduct of Simon Morgaz.

One of the witnesses, Mr. Turner, of Chambly, declared that he had frequently seen the advocate in conference with Rip. It was a flash of revelation. Walter Hodge and Vaudreuil, who for some time had been suspicious of Morgaz, owing to his strange behaviour, saw their suspicions confirmed by the evidence. The conspiracy had been conducted so secretly, and had been so easily discovered, that it was obvious some traitor had been at work. Rip was examined and plied with questions, to which he could only reply with embarrassment. Simon Morgaz tried to defend himself; but he launched forth into such improbabilities and curious explanations, that his companions and also his judges soon made up their minds. A scoundrel had betrayed his accomplices, and that traitor was Simon Morgaz.

An irresistible feeling of repulsion arose among the prisoners and the public who crowded the court.

“President of the Court,” said Walter Hodge, “we demand that Simon Morgaz be removed from this dock, which is honoured by our presence, and dishonoured by his. We do not wish to be contaminated any longer by contact with this man.”

Vaudreuil, Clerc, and Farran joined Hodge, and, unable to restrain themselves, attacked Morgaz, to whose assistance the warders had to come. The President of the Court ordered Morgaz to be taken back to prison. Howls accompanied him; the threats of which he was the object told him he was looked upon as a traitor, whose treason would cost him his life at the hands of the more ardent apostles of Canadian independence. Walter Hodge, Francis Clerc, and Robert Farran were found to be the chief of the Chambly conspiracy, and sentenced to death. On the 27th of September, after another appeal to the patriotism of their brothers, they died on the scaffold.

The other accused, among whom was M. de Vaudreuil, whether it was that they seemed to be less compromised, or that the Government wished to inflict the capital punishment only on the leaders, were allowed to escape with their lives. Sentenced to imprisonment for life, they did not receive their liberty till 1829, when a general amnesty was granted to political offenders.

What became of Simon Morgaz, after the execution? An order of release allowed him to leave the prison at Montreal, and he hastened to disappear.

But universal reprobation weighed on his name and that of those who were in no way responsible for his treason. Bridget Morjraz was brutally hunted from the house she occupied at Montreal, and from the house at Chambly, where she had gone while the proceedings were in progress. She took with her her two sons, who had been hunted from college, as their father had been hunted from the dock in the court of justice.

Where had Simon Morgaz decided to hide his unworthy existence, when his wife and children joined him a few days afterwards? In a distant village a long way from Montreal.

But Bridget did not believe that her husband was guilty, nor did Joann nor Jean. The four retired to the village of Vercheres, in the county of that name, on the bank of the St. Lawrence. They hoped that no suspicion would denounce them to public animadversion. They lived miserably on the resources which remained to them, for Simon, although he had received the reward for his treason, took care not to have recourse to it before his wife and sons. In their presence he always protested his innocence, and cursed the injustice which had fallen on his family and on him. If he had been a traitor, would he not have the price of his treason to support him? Would he be reduced to penury in this way?

And Bridget judged from this that her husband was guiltless. She rejoiced at this result, which gave the lie to his enemies. Appearances were against him. He could not explain them. He was the victim of a horrible combination of circumstances. He would justify himself some day. He was innocent!

With his two sons a difference was observable in their attitude regarding their father. The eldest, Joann, kept himself aloof, and did not dare to think of the opprobrium thus fallen on the name of Morgaz. The arguments for and against presented themselves to his mind, and he rejected them as being unable to fathom them. He would not be his father’s judge, so much did he fear that the judgment would be against him. He shut his eyes, he was silent, he kept himself apart when his mother and his brother would have reasoned with him. Evidently the unhappy boy feared to find guilty the man whose son he was.

Jean, on the contrary, behaved differently. He believed in the innocence of the accomplice of Hodge, Farran, and Clerc, although the presumptions were overwhelming. More impetuous than Joann, less master of his judgment, he allowed himself to be carried away by his instincts of filial affection. He would have defended his father publicly. When he heard people talk of Simon Morgaz, his heart leapt, and his mother had to interfere to prevent an outburst. Thus did the unfortunate family live at Vercheres under an assumed name, and the fury with which the people of the village would have risen against them, had their real name been known, can be imagined.

But the people at Vercheres soon began to be troubled about this family, whose origin they knew not, whose life was so mysterious, whose incognito was never betrayed, suspicion arose concerning them.

One night Morgaz and his family went away. They crossed the St. Lawrence, and lived for a few days in one of the villages on the left bank of the river. There attention was directed to them, and they left that village. They were now wanderers, hated by all. Vengeance, it might be said, blazing torch in hand, pursued them, as, in biblical legends, Abel’s murderer was pursued. Morgaz could settle nowhere. He crossed the counties of Assumption, Terrebonne, Deux-Montagnes, Vaudreuil, towards the cast, towards the less-inhabited parishes.

Two months after the trial, father, mother, and sons had fled beyond the territories of Ontario. At Kingston they were recognized at an inn, and had to leave it immediately. Simon had but just time to escape during the night. In vain Bridget and Jean would have defended him. They could scarcely get away from being ill-treated, and Joann might have been killed, as he protected their retreat.

They met again on the borders of a lake, a few miles beyond Kingston. They went along the southern shore, so as to enter the United States, for refuge could no longer be found in Upper Canada. Better to gain some lost country, among some Indian tribe. It was in vain. The unhappy man was repulsed everywhere. Everywhere he A-as recognized, as if he bore a mark of infamy on his forehead.

It was the end of November. It was weary travelling in this fearful weather, in the glacial breeze and rigorous cold of the winter season in the lake country. As they journeyed through the villages, the sons bought provisions, while the father kept in hiding. They slept, when they could, in abandoned huts, when they could not, in the clefts of the rocks, or under the trees of the interminable forests that covered the land.

Simon Morgaz became more and more gloomy and savage. He never ceased exculpating himself, as if some invisible accuser followed his steps, and shouted “Traitor! traitor!” And now he seemed unable to look his wife and children in the face. Bridget tried to comfort him with affectionate words, and though Joann kept silence, Jean never ceased to protest.

“Father, father!” he would say, “do not give in! Time will do justice on your calumniators. They will see that they have been deceived, that appearances were against you! You to have sold your country indeed!”

“No, no!” Simon would answer; but in so feeble a voice that it was almost inaudible.

The family, wandering from village to village, at last reached the western end of the lake, a few miles from Fort Toronto. They had got to the river Niagara, to where it enters the lake, to cross over to the American bank.

Did Morgaz wish to stop? Would it not be better to go further west, and reach a country so distant that the rumour of his infamy had not spread therein? But where was he going? His wife and sons did not know, for he always led the way, and all they had to do was to follow.

On the 3rd of December, in the evening, exhausted with fatigue and want, they had halted in a cave half hidden by brushwood and briars — doubtless some haunt of the wild beasts now abandoned. The little food that remained to them was spread on the sand. Bridget had succumbed to physical and mental lassitude. At any cost, Montcalmust find in the neighbouring village an Indian tribe who, for a few days, would grant the hospitality which Canadians never refuse.

Joann and Jean, tortured with hunger, were eating some cold venison. But neither Simon nor Bridget could eat anything.

“Father,” said Jean, “you must recruit your strength.”

Simon Montcalmade no reply.

“Father,” said Joann. and this was the first time he had spoken to him since their departure from Chambly, “we can go no further! Mother cannot stand any more fatigue. Here we are on the American frontier; are you going to cross it?”

Simon looked at his eldest son, and his eyes fell almost immediately. Joann continued, —

“Look at the state mother is in. She cannot move! This torpor will deprive her of all the energy she has left! To-morrow it will be impossible to rouse her. My brother and I can go on, doubtless! But we must know where you are going. What is it you intend to do?”

Simon Morgaz did not reply. He bowed his head, and went to the back of the cave.

Night fell. No sound troubled the solitude. Thick clouds covered the sky as though to cover all in a dense mist. Not a breath pierced the atmosphere. Heavy flakes of snow began to fall. The cold was intense. Jean gathered some dead wood and lit a fire in a corner, so that the smoke would float outwards.

Bridget, stretched on a bed of grass that Joann had gathered, lay without a movement. The little life that remained to her only betrayed itself by the painful breathing, broken by long and sorrowful sighs. While Joann held her hand, Jean fed the fire.

Simon Morgaz lay, half-crouching in the darkness, in an attitude of despair, as if he were horror-stricken at himself, when the reflection of the fire occasionally lighted up his face.

Then the firelight gradually sank, and Jean felt his eyes close in spite of all lie could do.

How long did he remain asleep? He did not know. But when he awoke, the fire was nearly out.

He rose, threw an armful of wood on the fire, which he revived by blowing, and the cave was again lighted up.

Bridget and Joann, close together, continued motionless. But Simon Morgaz was not there!

When had he left the place? When his wife and sons were sleeping?

With a fearful presentiment, Jean rushed out of the cave. As he did so, he heard the report of firearms.

Bridget and Joann leapt up suddenly. They also had heard the report, which seemed to be close by.

With a shriek of terror, Bridget staggered to her feet, and fled from the cave.

The three had not gone twenty yards when they saw a corpse on the snow.

It was the body of Simon Morgaz. He had shot himself in the heart with his pistol. He was dead.

Joann and Jean recoiled, overwhelmed. The past rose before them. Was it true that their father was guilty? Had he in a crisis of despair put an end to an existence he had found too hard to be borne?

Bridget threw herself on her husband’s body. She clasped it in her arms. She could not believe in the infamy of the man whose name she bore.

Joann raised his mother and took her back to the cave, where his brother and he brought their father’s body to the place it had occupied a few hours before. A pocket- book slipped on to the ground. Joann picked it up, and when he opened it, a roll of bank-notes fell. It was the reward for which Simon Morgaz had betrayed the leaders of the Chambly Conspiracy. The mother and the two sons could no longer doubt.

Joann and Jean knelt by Bridget’s side.

And before the corpse of the traitor who had done justice on himself, there knelt a dishonoured family, whose name must die with him who had dishonoured it.

CHAPTER III.

A HURON NOTARY.

IT was not without good reason that the Governor and Sir John Colborne, and the minister of police and Colonel Gore, had consulted together on the measures to be taken for the repression of the reformists. In fact, a formidable insurrection of the French Canadians was about to take place.

But if Lord Gosford and his staff had good reason to be busy, nothing seemed to trouble a certain young fellow, who, on the morning of the 3rd of September, was supposed to be “engrossing” in the office of Mr. Nick, in Bon Secours market-place, Montreal. “Engrossing” is not quite the word, perhaps, to apply to the absorbing occupation in which the second clerk, Lionel Restigouche, was employed at the time — nine o’clock in the morning. A column of irregular lines neatly written was stretching out at much length down a nice page of bluish paper, which in no way resembled the parchment of a deed. At times, when Lionel’s hand stopped while an idea took shape, his eves looked listlessly out of the half-opened window towards the column in Jacques Cartier Place in honour of Lord Nelson. Then his look would become animated, and his pen would resume its course, as he gently swayed his head as if beating time to some regular rhythm.

Lionel was barely seventeen. His face, almost feminine still, was French in type, and very pleasant in expression; his hair was light and rather long, perhaps, and his eyes were as blue as the water in the great lakes. Though he had neither father nor mother, Mr. Nick might be said to be both to him, for the estimable notary was as fond of him as of his own son.

Lionel was alone in the office. There was no one with him, not even one of the other clerks, who were out on business, not even a client, although Mr. Nick's office was one of the busiest in the town. And Lionel, feeling sure he would not be interrupted, was taking his ease, and had just signed his name with a wonderful flourish below the last line on his page, when he heard some one remark, — "What are you doing there, my boy? "It was Mr. Nick, who had entered without Lionel's noticing him, so absorbed had he been in his work.

Lionel's first movement was to slip the paper in question under the blotting-pad, but the notary stepped up and snatched away the suspicious document before the clerk could stop him.

"What is this, Lionel?" he asked. "An agreement? An engrossment? An office copy of — "

"Mr. Nick, believe me — "

The notary had put on his spectacles, and with knitted brows ran his eyes over the page in astonishment. "What is this?" he exclaimed. "Lines all unequal! Margin all down one side! Margin on the other! So much good ink wasted, so much good paper wasted by these useless margins!"

"Mr. Nick," answered Lionel, blushing to the ears, "that came to me — by chance — "

"What came to you — by chance?"

"The verses."

“The verses! You write your drafts in verse, do you? Is not prose enough for you to draught a deed in?”

“That is not a deed, if you please.”

“What is it, then?”

“A piece of poetry I have composed for the meeting of the Lyre-Amicale.”

“The Lyre-Amicale!” exclaimed the notary. “Do you imagine, Lionel, that it was for you to figure at the meeting of the Lyre-Amicale, or any other Parnassian association, that I took you into my office? Was it for you to abandon yourself to these versifying gymnastics that I made you my second clerk? Would it not have been better for you to be passing your time canoeing on the St. Lawrence, or showing off your dandyism in the paths of Mont Royal or the park of Sainte Helene! Indeed! A poet in a notary’s office! A clerk’s head with a halo round it! Why, it is enough to frighten clients away!”

“Do not be angry, Mr. Nick,” said Lionel in a piteous tone. “If you only knew how our melodious language lends itself to verse! It lends itself so nobly to rhythm, cadence, and harmony. Our poets Lemay, Elzear, Labelle, Franfois Mons, Chapemann, Octave Cremazie — ”

“Messieurs Cremazie, Chapemann, Mons, Labelle and Lemay do not fulfil the important functions of second clerk that I know of. They are not paid — to say nothing of board and lodging — six dollars a month, nor are they paid by me. They have not to draw up contracts of sales, nor draught bills, and they can Pindarize as they please!”

“Mr. Nick — this time — ”

“Yes, this time you wished to be the laureate of the Lyre-Amicale?”

“I did so foolishly presume — ”

“And may I ask what is the subject of this effusion? Probably some dithyrambic evocation to Tabellionope, the muse of the Perfect Notary.”

“No,” said Lionel.

“Then what do you call your rhyming machine?”

“Will-o’-the-wisp.”

“Will-o’-the-wisp!” exclaimed Mr. Nick. “Do you address verses to Will-o’-the-wisps?”

And probably the notary would have held forth on jinns elves, brownies, goblins, water-sprites, ases, cucufas, farfadets, and all the poetic figures of Scandinavian mythology, when the postman knocked at the door and appeared on the threshold.

“Ah! is that you, my friend?” said Mr. Nick. “I took you for a will-o’-the-wisp.”

“A will-o’-the-wisp, Mr. Nick?” said the postman. “Do I look like one?”

“No; you look more like a postman who has brought me a letter.”

“Here it is, Mr. Nick.”

“Thank you!”

The postman retired as the notary caught sight of the handwriting, and immediately opened the letter.

Lionel picked up his sheet of paper and put it in his pocket.

Mr. Nick read the letter very carefully; then he returned it to the envelope and looked at the postmark. The postmark was that of St. Charles, a small village in the county of Vercheres, the date was that of the 2nd of September, the day before. After thinking for a minute or so, the notary returned to his philippic against the poets.

“Ah, you worship the muses, Lionel? Well, as a punishment, you will accompany me to Laval, and you will have time on the road to improve your verses. We must be off in an hour, and if we meet any will-o’-the-wisps, you can do the polite to them.”

With that the notary passed into his private office, while Lionel prepared for the journey, which was not unpleasing to him. An excellent man was Mr. Nick, and much appreciated for the correctness of his judgment and the value of his advice. He was then aged fifty; his engaging physiognomy, his large, beaming face expanding amid a cluster of curly hair which had once been very black, but was now growing grey; his quick, cheery eyes, his splendid teeth, his laughing lips, his pleasant manners, all went to form a very pleasant companion. One thing should be noted: under Mr. Nick’s well tanned skin it could be seen that Indian blood flowed in his veins.

It was so, and the notary did not seek to hide it. lie was descended from the old natives of the country, those who possessed the soil before Europeans crossed the ocean to conquer it. At this time there were many marriages between the French and Indians. Saint Castin, Enaud, Nepisigny, Entremont, and others married squaws, and even became chiefs of Indian tribes.

Nick by descent was a Huron; that is to say, he came from one of the four chief families of the Indian branch. Although he bore the sounding name of Nicholas Sagamore, he was always known as Mr. Nick, and he was quite content to be so called.

His race was not extinct. One of his innumerable cousins was chief of the Peaux-Rouges, and reigned ever a Huron tribe in the north of Laprairie county, west of Montreal.

There is nothing strange in such a state of things in Canada. Quebec possesses an honourable tabellion, who, by birth, has a right to brandish the tomahawk, and shout the war-cry of a tribe of the Iroquois. Happily, Mr. Nick did not belong to that tribe of perfidious Indians. No! Descended from the Hurons, who were nearly always friends of the French, he had nothing to blush for. And so Lionel was proud of his master, the undoubted descendant of the great chiefs of North America, and he only waited for an opportunity to celebrate his deeds in verse.

At Montreal Mr Nick had always preserved a prudent neutrality between the two political parties. And, as both respected him, both had recourse to his services. It seemed as though hereditary tendencies had in him undergone a complete change. Never had the warlike fancies of his race awoke in him. He was only a notary — a perfect notary — placid and conciliating. And he seemed to have no desire to perpetuate the name of the Sagamores, for he had never taken a wife, and never thought of taking one.

As we said above, Mr. Nick was preparing to leave the office in company with his second clerk. He would only be away a few hours, and his old servant Dolly would keep dinner waiting for him.

The town of Montreal is built on the southern shore of one of the islands of the St. Lawrence. The island is from ten to eleven leagues long, and five or six wide, and lies in a huge estuary formed by an enlargement of the river a little below the junction of the River Ottawa. It was here that Jacques Cartier discovered the Indian village of Hochelaga, which in 1640 was granted by the King of France to the congregation of Saint Sulpice. The town took its name from Mont Royal, by which it is commanded, and was in a very favourable position for the development of trade. In 1760 it had 6000 inhabitants. It extends at the foot of a picturesque hill, which has been made into a magnificent park, and which shares with another park on the island of St. Helene, in providing attractive walks for a large number of the people of Montreal. A superb tubular bridge, nearly three miles long, which did not exist in 1837, now joins the city to the right bank of the river.

Montreal has become a great city, more modern in aspect than Quebec, and consequently less picturesque. There can be visited, not without some interest, the two cathedrals, Protestant and Catholic, the Bank, the Exchange, the General Hospital, the Theatre, the Convent of Notre Dame, the McGill University, and the Seminary of Saint Sulpice. To the west is the English or Scotch quarter; to the east is the French quarter. The two races are the less inclined to mingle from the fact that nearly all the trade is in the hands of merchants of British origin, and this was more particularly the case in 1837. The magnificent waterway of the St. Lawrence assured the prosperity of the town, which it put in communication, not only with the counties of Canada, but also with Europe.

Like the rich merchants of London, those of Montreal have their offices in a different place to their dwelling- houses. When business is over they return to the northern suburbs, to the slopes of Mont Royal, and the circular avenue surrounding its base. There rise the private houses, some of which are like palaces, and the villas draped in verdure. Beyond the opulent quarter the Irish are crowded in their Ghetto of St. Anne, at the mouth of the Lachine Channel, on the left bank of the St. Lawrence.

Mr. Nick was very well off. Like the commercial notables, he could every evening have retired to one of the aristocratic habitations of the upper town under the leafy shades of St. Antoine. But he was one of the old school of notaries, whose horizon is bounded by the four walls of their office, and who justify their name of note-watchers by watching night and day the contracts, minutes, and family papers confided to their care. The descendant of the Sagamores thus lived in the .old house in the Bon Secours market-place; and it was thence, that on the morning of the 3rd of September, he set out with his second clerk to find a vehicle to take him from the island of Montreal to the island of Jesus, which is separated from it by one of the minor branches of the St. Lawrence.

The first thing Mr. Nick did was to go to the Bank, along the wide streets bordered with rich shops and kept up with much care by the municipality. At the bank he told Lionel to wait in the vestibule while he went into the central hall to return in a quarter of an hour and go on to the coach office.

The vehicle he hailed was one of those two-horse affairs known as “buggies” by the Canadians. They are a kind of char-a banc, hung on springs, as easy as possible, but very strong, and made so as to be suitable to the hardness of the roads. They can hold half-a-dozen travellers.

“Eh! Mr. Nick!” said the driver of the buggy, as he caught sight of the notary, who was always greeted with this cordial exclamation.

“I myself, and my clerk!” said Mr. Nick, with his habitual good-humour.

“Are you all right, Mr. Nick?”

“Yes, Tom, and you ought to try and be as well as I am. You wouldn’t ruin yourself with physic — ”

“Nor with physicians,” said Tom.

“When are we off?” asked Mr. Nick.

“Now.”

“Any one going with us?”

“No one yet,” said Tom; “but some one may turn up at the last moment.”

“I hope so! I hope so, Tom! I like to talk as I travel, and when you want to talk I have noticed that it is as well not to be alone.”

Mr. Nick’s wishes were apparently not to be satisfied this time. The horses were harnessed. Tom cracked his whip, but no traveller appeared.

The notary took the end scat, and Lionel sat down beside him; Tom gave a last look round, up and down the road, and then mounted the box, gathered up the reins, whistled to his horses, and the noisy affair began to move, just as some passers-by, who knew Nick — and who did not know him, the excellent man? — wished him a pleasant journey, to which he replied by a little salute with his hand.

The buggy went away uphill, towards Mont Royal. The notary looked to the right and left with as much attention as the driver, but for a different reason.

It seemed as though no one that morning was going to the north of the island, to have a chat with Mr. Nick.

The vehicle had reached the circular promenade, and the horses were breaking into a trot, when a man came forward, and beckoned the driver to stop. He sat down on the seat, in front of Lionel, having first saluted Mr. Nick and his clerk. The buggy went off at a gentle trot, and a few minutes later, at a turning on Mont Royal, was out of sight of the galvanized iron roofs of the houses of the town, which were shining in the sun like so many silvered mirrors.

The notary had seen the newcomer enter the vehicle with the most lively satisfaction. Now he could talk for the twelve miles that separated Montreal from the upper branch of the St. Lawrence. But it did not seem as though the traveller was in a humour to indulge in conventional conversation. He had given a glance at Mr. Nick and Lionel, and then settled himself in a corner, and, with his eyes half closed, seemed to be absorbed in his reflections.

He was a young man, about twenty-nine years of age. With his slight figure, energetic face, resolute look, manly features, high forehead, and dark hair, he was a typical French Canadian. What was he? Where did he come from? Mr. Nick, who knew everybody, did not know him, and had never seen him before. Looked at closely, the young man seemed to have passed through much trouble, and to have been educated in the school of misfortune.

That the unknown belonged to the party agitating for national independence was apparent from his dress, which was almost that of a backwoodsman. For a cap he wore a blue tuque, crossed on his chest was a sort of cape, and his trousers were of some coarse grey stuff, tied up with a red Sash. All was home-made; and, as will not have been forgotten, the use of home-made fabrics alone was a political protest, owing to its excluding such manufactured products as were imported from England. It was one of the thousand ways of defying the home authorities, and the way was not without precedent. A hundred and fifty years before, the Bostonians had proscribed the usage of tea out of hatred to Great Britain. And, in imitation of them, the Canadians had proscribed the use of stuffs manufactured in the United Kingdom. As to Mr. Nick, he, as a neutral, wore trousers of Canadian make, and coat of cloth imported from England. But, in the patriotic garments of Lionel there was not a single thread that had been woven beyond the Atlantic.

The buggy rolled along over the rough ground of Montreal Island, across to the minor branch of the St. Lawrence; and long did the journey seem to Mr. Nick, who was naturally so loquacious. But, as the young man did not seem disposed to begin, Mr. Nick foil back on Lionel, in the hope that their travelling companion would end by joining in the conversation.

“Well, Lionel,” said he, “and how about this will-o’- the-wisp?”

“The will-o’-the-wisp?” asked the clerk.

“Yes! I have quite tired myself with looking, and yet I haven’t seen it on the plains.”

“There is too much daylight, perhaps,” said Lionel, keeping up the pleasantry.

“Perhaps if we sang the old song. —

‘Come along cheerily, goblin queer!

Come along cheerily, neighbour dear!’

But no — the goblin will not answer. By-the-bye, Lionel, you know how to get away from the blandishments of will-o'-the-wisps?"

"Certainly, Mr. Nick. All we have to do is to ask them what day of the month Christmas is; and, as they do not know, you have time to escape while they are looking about for an answer."

"I see you are acquainted with the tradition. Well, until one of that sort stops the road, suppose we have something to say about the one you have got in your pocket."

Lionel blushed slightly.

"You really wish it?"

"Yes, my boy! It will pas? a quarter of an hour or so."

* And the notary continued, addressing the young passenger, —

"You do not object to listen to a little versification, do you, sir?"

"Not at all," answered the passenger.

"It is a piece of poetry that my clerk has composed for the meeting of the Lyre-Amicale. These fellows fight shy of nothing! Come on, my young poet, present your piece — as they say to the gunners!"

Lionel was only too pleased to have a listener who would, perhaps, be more indulgent than Mr. Nick. And he drew forth his bluish paper, and read as follows: —

“The Will-o’-the-Wisp.

“A wayward flame that none can reach.
That doth its nightly guard deceive.
And in the darkening hours of eve.
Nor on the wave, nor on the beach.
A trace behind doth leave.

“A flame so quick to fade and flee.
In purple oft, and oft in white!
To solve this mystery of light.
The will-o’-the-wisp pursued must be.
And captured in its flight.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Nick; “captured, and put in a cage!”

Lionel continued, —

“Is it a phantom from afar?
Is it the hydrogen of the mire?

Would that its origin were higher!

Comes it not from a distant star?

Algol, or Vega of the Lyre?”

“That is for you to say, my boy!” said Mr. Nick, with a nod. “That is your business!”

Lionel continued, —

“To me, the soft and furtive breath Of sylph, or elf, or sprite, it seems.

As lightly float its fitful gleams.

When slowly wakes the plain beneath The morning’s golden beams.

Is it the glimmer of the lamp Borne by the spectre, who would rest On the roof-ridge where the wine is press’d.

When through the night-air chill and damp The moon floats manifest?

‘Is it the spirit of a fay.

That seeking, half concealed.

What peace a wicked world can yield.

Doth, like a gleaner, limp away.

Finding but nothing in the field?”

“Perfect!” said Mr. Nick. “Are you at the end of your descriptive comparisons?”

“Oh! No! Mr. Nick,” said the clerk.

And he continued: —

“Is it the image of a form That all acknowledge fair Distorted by the troubled air?

Or the last flash of the dying storm Traced by its lingering glare?

“Did it from the path escape.

Traced by a falling meteorite That in its swift Icarian flight Was luminous, had weight, and shape.

And vanish’d in the night?

“Still on its path shoots radiance forth; And pale reflections cling.

And rays of mystery fling.

Like the auroras of the north Light as a night-moth’s wing!”

“What do you think of all this troubadourish jingle?” asked Nick of his fellow-passenger.

“I think,” said the stranger, “that your clerk has imagination, and I am curious to know to what else he will compare his will-o-the-wisp.”

“Go on, Lionel, then.”

Lionel had blushed at the young man’s compliment, and with a clear voice he continued, —

“Doth it glow in that hour of sighs When the living are a-bed.

And the flutteing flag is spread.

That the Angel of the Darkness flies In memory of the dead?”

“Brrr!” said Mr. Nick.

“When night is clothed in her gloomiest robe.

And the given time is nigh.

And hush’d is every cry.

Is it the signal that the globe Sends upwards to the sky?

“And such a light as on ocean floats And, as the wandering spirits race Along their weary voyage through space.

The harbours of the universe denotes And their lone resting-place?”

“Well done, young poet!” said the stranger.

“Yes not bad! Not at all bad!” said Mr. Nick. “Where did you find all that, Lionel? That is all, I suppose?

No, Mr. Nick,” said Lionel, and in a still more marked voice he read, —

“But beware, dear maid, if in your eyes The light of love it seems!

Chase it from your dreams!

That light to flame will never rise Brightly as it gleams!”

“A trap for the girls, indeed!” said Mr. Nick. “I should have been much surprised if there had not been a little love in view in these anacreontics! After all, it is the usual thing at your age! What do you think, sir?”

“Quite so,” said the stranger; “and I fancy that — ”

The stranger stopped in the middle of the sentence at the sight of a group of men at the side of the road, one of whom hailed the driver to stop.

The horses were pulled up and the men approached the vehicle.

“Mr. Nick, I believe!” said one of the men, lifting his hat.

“And Mr. Rip!” said the notary, adding in an undertone, “We must mind what we are up to!”

Luckily neither Mr. Nick, nor his clerk, nor the detective remarked the change in the stranger’s face when Rips name was mentioned. He grew pale, not with the paleness of fear, but with that which is inspired by insurmountable horror. Evidently he would have sprung at the man. But, turning away his head, he controlled himself.

“Are you off to Laval, Mr. Notary?” asked Rip.

“As you see, Mr. Rip. Business will keep me there only an hour or two, and I hope to be back at Montreal this evening.”

“That is your affair!”

“And what are you doing with your men?” asked Mr. Nick. “Always in ambush at the government cost. Are you going to capture a scoundrel or so? There are plenty to take, for they multiply like weeds. It would be much better for them to turn honest men — ”

“That’s so, but they want the taste.”

“The taste! You are always pleasant, Mr. Rip! Are you on the track of some criminal?”

“Criminal to some; hero to others. It all depends on the point of view.”

“What do you mean?”

“The presence in the island has been reported of the famous Jean-Sans-Nom — ”

“Ah! The famous Jean-Sans-Nom! Yes! The patriots have made him a hero, and not without good motives! But her Gracious Majesty does not seem to be of the same opinion, or Gilbert Argall would not have put you on his track.”

“That’s so.”

“And you say they have seen this mysterious agitator in Montreal Island?”

“They claim to have done so,” said Rip. “But I begin to doubt it.”

“Well, if he did come here, he is almost sure to have got away by this time,” said Mr. Nick. “He’s not very long in one place. Jean-Sans-Nom is not easy to get hold of.”

“Quite a will-o’-the-wisp,” said the stranger to the young clerk.

“Good! Very good!” exclaimed Mr. Nick. “Lionel, you ought to bow! And, by-the-bye, Mr. Rip. if you meet a will-o’-the-wisp on the road, will you please catch him by the collar, and bring him to my clerk? It will please the wandering flame to hear how he has been treated by a disciple of Apollo!”

“Certainly!” said Rip. “If we are not obliged to go back to Montreal, where I expect fresh instructions.”

Turning to the stranger, Rip continued, —

“And you are accompanying Mr. Nick?”

“To Laval,” said the unknown.

“Where I’m in a hurry to go. Good-bye, Mr. Rip! If I cannot wish you good luck, for the capture of Jean- Sans-Nom would be a sad blow for the patriots, I can at least wish you good morning!”

“And I can wish you good day, Mr. Nick.”

The horses resumed their trot. Rip and his men disappeared at a turning in the road.

A few minutes afterwards, the notary said to the stranger, who had leant back in the corner.

“I hope Jean-Sans-Nom will not let them catch him. They have been looking for him so long — ”

“And they will have to look!” exclaimed Lionel. “And that confounded Rip will — ”

“Hush, hush, Lionel! That is not our business.”

‘ This Jean-Sans-Nom seems accustomed to outwit the police!” said the stranger.

“Just so, sir. If he is taken, it will be a great loss to the French-Canadians.”

“He’ll not be wanting in friends, Mr. Nick, and he is not a man to be taken.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the notary. “I have heard that it would be a great pity. After all, I don’t take such interest in politics as Lionel, and it is better not to say much.”

“But,” continued the young man, “we were interrupted when your clerk’s poetical inspiration — ”

“He has finished inspiring, I suppose?”

“No, Mr. Nick!” said Lionel, thanking the stranger with a smile.

“What, not out of breath yet?” exclaimed the notary. “Here’s a will-o’-the-wisp that was a sylph, an elf, a sprite, a spectre, a spirit, a phantom, a flash of lightning, an aerolite, a ray, a flag, a harbour-light a spark of love, and is not that enough? What else can it be?”

“I should like to know!” said the stranger.

“Then continue, Lionel, continue, and get to the end of it, if it has an end!”

Lionel, accustomed to Mr. Nick’s pleasantries, began to read, —

“Whatever thou art, whatever thy name.

I would thy hidden projects know.

And share thy very thoughts: and so.

Absorb’d in thee, mysterious flame.

With thee would ever go,

“When settling on the silent trees Your wide wings in the twilight loom; Or, in the graveyard’s darker gloom.

Softly called by the whispering breeze To guard the marble tomb.”

“That is very pathetic!” said the notary.

“Or, where the seething billon s race —

The good ship driven on her side.

And by the tempest fiercely plied —

With all a spectre seagull’s grace.

About the labouring hull to glide.

“A closer union could we claim If fate would heed the prayer I lisp.

To make us one, my will-o’-the-wisp.

To be born with you, my frolicsome flame!

To die with you, my will-o’-the-wisp!’’

“Ah! that’s very good!” said Mr. Nick. That’s the sort of ending that suits me. You might sing it, —

‘To be born with you, my frolicsome flame!

To die with you, my will-o’-the-wisp.”

What do you say, sir?”

“Sir,” said the stranger. “I hope the poet will accept all my compliments; and maybe win the prize at the meeting of the Lyre-Amicale. His verses have enabled us to pass a very pleasant time, and never did a journey seem so short to me!”

Lionel was extremely flattered, and drank to the full of the praise the stranger gave him. And Mr. Nick was not at all displeased at the eulogiums addressed to his clerk.

Meanwhile the buggy had made good progress, and eleven o’clock had but just struck when they reached the northern branch of the river.

At this time the first steam-boats had already appeared on the St. Lawrence. They were not very powerful or very swift, and resembled the present day “tugs” more than any other craft afloat.

In a few minutes the boat had taken Mr. Nick, his clerk and their fellow-passenger across the middle branch of the river, whose greenish waters were still mingling with the blackish waters of the Ottawa.

There they parted company, after many compliments and much hand-shaking.

Then, while the stranger walked straight for the streets of Laval, Mr. Nick and Lionel turned off away from the town, towards the cast of Jesus Island.

CHAPTER IV.

THE VILLA MONTCALM.

The Island of Jesus, lying between the two upper arms of the St. Lawrence, is smaller than the Island of Montreal. It comprises the county of Laval, the name of which belongs to the Catholic University of Quebec in memory of the first bishop instituted in Canada.

Laval is also the name of the chief town of the island, which is situated on its northern bank. M. de Vaudreuil's house was three miles further down the St. Lawrence.

It was a house of agreeable aspect, surrounded by a park of about fifty acres, with stretches of grass and high thickets, and having the river bank for a boundary. It was built somewhat in the French taste, and had it not been for the swift, tumultuous course of the St. Lawrence, one might have supposed that the Villa Montcalm, as it was called, was on the banks of the Loire, a few leagues from Chenonceaux or Amboix.

M. de Vaudreuil had taken part in all the later insurrections of the French Canadians. He had figured in the plot to which the treason of Simon Morgaz had given so tragic an ending. A few years later an amnesty had restored him to liberty.

His house was built on the river bank. In its ebb and flow, the tide washed the lower step of the terrace, which was sheltered by an elegant verandah running along the front of the house. Behind, under the tranquil shadows of the park, the river breeze bore an aerial freshness, which tempered the heats of the Canadian summer. People who cared for shooting or fishing, could shoot or fish from morning till night. There was game in abundance on the plains of the island; the fish were in the creeks of the St. Lawrence, which the distant undulations of the hills shut in as with a frame of verdure.

The manners were those of the seventeenth century. An English author, Russell, has very justly said, “Lower Canada is a France of the olden time, under the white flag and fleur-de-lis.” A French author, Reveillaud, has written, “It is the field of refuge of the old regime. It is a Brittany or a Vendee of sixty years ago. On the American continent the colonist has kept with jealous care the modes of thought, the childish beliefs and the superstitions of his fathers.” This was true in those days; the French race had remained very pure in Canada, and without mixture of foreign blood.

On returning to the Villa Montcalm, in 1829, M. de Vaudreuil found himself in easy circumstances. Although his fortune was not a large one, yet he could have remained in retirement had not his ever-ardent patriotism forced him into aggressive politics.

At the time our story begins, M. de Vaudreuil was forty-seven years of age; his greyish hair made him appear somewhat older; but his quick glance, keen blue eyes, tall stature, robust constitution, assuring him of health under all trials, and his sympathetic and prepossessing face, made him the perfect type of a French gentleman. He was a true descendant of the bold men who crossed the Atlantic in the eighteenth century to found the most beautiful of colonies.

He had been a widower for ten years. The death of the wife he had loved with the deepest affection had left an irreparable void in his existence. His life was now centred in his only daughter, in whom her mother lived again.

At this time, Clary de Vaudreuil was in her twentieth year. Her graceful figure, abundant dark brown hair, large gloomy eyes, rich colour, and somewhat serious expression, made her like some of Fennimore Cooper’s heroines, handsome rather than pretty, and more commanding than attractive. As a rule, she maintained a frigid reserve, or rather her whole life was concentrated in the only love she had yet felt — the love of her country.

Clary de Vaudreuil was a patriot. During the events of 1832 and 1834, she had closely studied the various phases of the insurrection. The leaders of the opposition regarded her as the bravest of the many women whose devotion they had secured. And when M. de Vaudreuil’s political friends met at the Villa, Clary took part in their conferences, s lying little, but listening, observing, and taking part in the correspondence with the committees. The French had absolute confidence in her, for she deserved it, and they had the most respectful friendship for her, and she was worthy of it.

However, in her impassioned heart another love had come of late to mingle with her love for her country — a love ideal and vague, which did not even know him who inspired it.

In 1831 and 1834, a mysterious personage had played an important part in the many attempts at rebellion. He had risked his head with an audacity, a courage, a disinterestedness, that were well calculated to impress the imagination of the sensitive. Throughout Lower Canada his name was repeated with enthusiasm — or rather the formula that served him for a name, which was none other thin Jean-Sans-Nom. In the day of battle he came to the very forefront; when the strife was over, he disappeared. But it was felt that lie was working in the dark, that his hand never ceased to prepare the future. In vain the authorities had sought to discover his retreat.

Even Kip and Co. had failed. Nothing was known of the man's origin, of his past life, or his present life. One thing only was certain, that his influence was all-powerful among the French Canadians. And a legend had risen around him, and the reformists waited to see him appear, waving the flag of independence.

Such was the anonymous hero whose deeds had made so deep an impression on Clary dc Vaudreuil. Her most secret thoughts invariably turned to him. She regarded him as a supernatural being. She lived in mystic communion with him. In loving Jean-Sans-Nom with the most ideal of loves, it seemed to her she loved her country all the more. But this sentiment she kept close in her heart. And when her father saw her wandering away in the park, and walking so pensively, he little thought she was dreaming of the young patriot who in her eyes symbolized the revolution.

Among the political friends who often met at the Villa Montcalm, there were many whose relatives had taken part with M. de Vaudreuil in the unhappy conspiracy of 1825. Among these friends we may mention Andrew Farran and William Clerc, whose brothers Robert and Francis, had been executed on the 2Sth of September, 1825; there was also Vincent Hodge, the son of Walter Hodge, who had been betrayed with his companions by Simon Morgaz. With them a Quebec advocate, the Deputy Sebastian Gramont — in whose house it had been falsely reported to Rip that Jean-Sans-Nom was a visitor — frequently shared in the hospitality of M. de Vaudreuil.

The most ardent of these was certainly Vincent Hodge, who was then a young man of thirty-two. Of American descent by his father, he was of French descent by his mother, who had died of grief a short time after her husband’s execution. Vincent Hodge had found it impossible to live near Clary, without admiring her, without loving her, and this was in no way displeasing to M. de Vaudreuil. Vincent Hodge was a distinguished-looking man, genial and pleasant in manner, though a little too much of the typical frontier Yankee. Clary could not have chosen a husband more worthy of her — brave beyond reproach, earnest in character, and true in sentiment; but she had not even noticed that she was the object of his attention. Between her and Vincent Hodge there could be only one bond — that of patriotism. She appreciated his good qualities, but she could not love him. Her life, her thoughts, her aspirations, belonged to another, to an unknown she waited for, who would one day appear.

M. de Vaudreuil and her friends observed with attention the progress of events in the Canadian provinces. Opinion was in a very excited state, but it no longer concerned itself, as in 1825, with a mere personal plot against the governor. It was rather a general conspiracy in a state of latent heat. For the rebellion to break out it only needed a chief to appeal to the people, and raise every parish in the adjoining county. And then, without a doubt, M. de Vaudreuil and his friends would take a leading part in the insurrection.

Never had circumstances been more favourable. The reformers were loud in their protests, denouncing the exactions of the Government which claimed to seize on the public revenue without the consent of the legislature. The newspapers — among them the Canadian founded in 1806, and the Vindicator of more recent origin — fulminated against the crown and its agents. They reported the speeches made in Parliament or in public meetings by Papineau, Viger, Quesnel, Saint Real, Bourdages, and many others who rivalled each other in the talent and audacity of their attacks. A spark would be enough to provoke a popular explosion. This was well known to Lord Gosford. And the partisans of the French were as well acquainted with the fact as his lordship.

Matters had reached this stage, when, in the morning of the 3rd of September, a letter arrived at the Villa Montcalm. The letter, posted the night before at Montreal, informed M. de Vaudreuil that his friends, Vincent Hodge, Andre Farran and William Clerc had been invited to visit him that evening. M. de Vaudreuil did not recognize the hand which had written the letter and signed it in these words: — A Son of Liberty.

M. de Vaudreuil was much surprised at the communication, and also at the way in which it had been made. The night before he had seen his friends at Montreal, at the house of one of them, and had left them without anything being said of a meeting on the morrow. Had Vincent Hodge, Farran, and Clerc received a similar letter? That might be so; but might it not be some plot on the part of The police? This suspicion was natural enough after the Simon Morgaz experience.

But all that could be done was to wait. When Vincent Hodge, Farran and Clerc arrived, if they came, they could perhaps explain what at present seemed inexplicable. Such was Clary’s opinion when she read the letter. Her eyes were riveted on the mysterious writing as she examined it attentively. A strange spirit was here. Where her father saw only a snare spread for himself and his political friends, she seemed, on the contrary, to believe in some powerful intervention in aid of the French cause. Was there at last to be revealed the hand that would seize the threads of a new uprising, and guide it to success. “Father,” she said, “I have confidence! “However, as the rendezvous was appointed for the evening, M. de Vaudreuil thought he would first go over to Laval. Perhaps he might learn what had happened to bring on the projected conference. He could be there to receive Vincent Hodge and his two friends when they landed on the island. But just as he was going to give the order to get ready, his servant appeared to inform him that a visitor had arrived.

“Who is he?” asked M. de Vaudreuil quickly. “Here is his card,” said the servant. M. de Vaudreuil took the card, read the name it bore, and immediately exclaimed, —

“The excellent Mr. Nick? He is always welcome, bid him come in!”

An instant later, the notary found himself in the presence of M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter. “You, Mr. Nick!” said M. de Vaudreuil. “In person, and ready to pay my respects to yourself and to Mademoiselle Clary!”

And he shook hands with M. de Vaudreuil, after having favoured his daughter with the official salute which the ancient notaries have kept to themselves from time immemorial.

“Mr. Nick,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “this is an unexpected visit, but it is a pleasant one nevertheless.”

“Very pleasant for me,” said Mr. Nick. “And how are you, M. de Vaudreuil? You both look flourishing enough. You certainly seem to live well at the Villa Montcalm! I ought to take back with me to Bon Secours a little of the air you breathe here.”

You need not do that, Mr. Nick! Come and see us oftener.:’

“And stay a few days,” said Clary.

“And my office, and my deeds!” exclaimed the loquacious notary. “They won’t leave me much time for holiday-making! To say nothing of the wills, for people live to be so old in Canada, that they will end by never dying. What with our octogenarians and centenarians, we are a long way out of the bounds of ordinary statistics. But as for the marriage settlements, they completely tire me out! By-the-bye, six weeks ago I was at Laprairie with one of my clients — one of my good clients, you understand — when I had to draw up the settlements for his nineteenth youngster!"

"That must have been Thomas Harcher, I am sure!" said M. dc Vaudreuil.

"Exactly, and it was at your farm at Chipogan that I attended."

"It is a large family, Mr. Nick."

' It is that, M. de Vaudreuil, and note that I am in no hurry to have done with the documents that concern it."

"Well, Mr. Nick," said Clary, "it is likely that we shall meet you at Chipogan. Thomas Harcher has so insisted on our being present at his daughter's wedding, that if nothing keeps us here, my father and I are going to give him the pleasure!"

"And give me the pleasure too," said Mr. Nick. "Is it not a pleasure for me to see you! I have only one complaint to make, Mademoiselle Clary."

"And what is that Mr. Nick?"

"That you always receive mc here as a friend and never as a notary."

Clary smiled at the insinuation, and almost immediately resumed her habitual gravity.

“But,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “it is not as a friend, my dear Nick, that you are here to-day, you have come as a notary!”

“So I have! So I have! But not on account of Mademoiselle Clary! But all in good time! The time will come right enough! But, M. de Vaudreuil, I beg to inform you that I have not come alone.”

“What! You have a companion? And you let him wait in the antechamber? I’ll order him in.”

“No! No! It is not worth while! It is only my second clerk — a boy who makes verses — did you ever hear of such a thing? — and who runs after will-o’-the-wisps. Figure to yourself a clerk-poet, or a poet-clerk, Mademoiselle Clary! As I wish to speak with you in private, M. de Vaudreuil, I told him to take a walk in the park.”

“You did well, M-. Nick! But we must refresh this young poet.”

“Useless! He drinks nothing but nectar, and not even that unless it is of the latest vintage.”

M. de Vaudreuil could not help laughing at the pleasantries of this excellent man, whom he had known for so many years, and whose advice had always proved so valuable in the management of his personal affairs.

“I will leave you with my father, Mr. Nick,” said Clary.

“I beg you will remain, mademoiselle! “S3id the notary. “I know I can speak in your presence, even of things that may have reference to politics — at least I suppose so, for as you know, I never meddle — ”

“Well, well, Mr. Nick,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “Clary can assist at our interview. Sit down, and then you can talk at your ease.”

The notary look one of the cane chairs that furnished the room, while M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter installed themselves on a sofa in front of him.

“And now, my dear Nick,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “what has brought you here?”

“To give you that,” said the notary.

And he drew from his pocket a bundle of bank-notes.

“Money!” said M. de Vaudreuil, who could not hide his extreme surprise.

“Yes, money, and good money, and whether it pleases you or not, a good round sum!”

“A good round sum!”

“Judge for yourself! Fifty thousand dollars in beautiful notes of legal tender!”

“And this money is intended — ”

“For you — for you alone!”

“And who sent it me?”

“Impossible for me to tell you, for the very excellent reason that I do not know!”

“What use is to be made of this money?”

“Neither do I know that.”

“And how have you been instructed to remit me such a sum?”

“Read!”

The notary handed him a letter which contained only a few lines: —

“Mr. Nick, notary at Montreal, will at once remit to the president of the committee of reformists of Laval at the Villa Montcalm, the balance standing to our account in his office books.

“J. B.J.

“September 2nd, 1837.”

M. de Vaudreuil looked at the notary, understanding as little as before of the reason of the errand.

“Mr. Nick,” said he, “where was this letter posted?”

“At Saint Charles, in the county of Vercheres.”

Clary took the letter. She examined the writing. Perhaps it was in the same hand as the letter which warned M. de Vaudreuil of the visit of his friends Hodge, Clerc. and Farran? No! Nothing of the sort. There was no resemblance in the handwriting of the two letters, as she showed her father.

“You have no suspicion, Mr. Nick,” she asked, “who can be the writer of this letter, who signs himself J. B. J.?”

“None, Mademoiselle Clary.”

“But it is not the first time you have been in communication with this person?”

“Evidently.”

“Or rather with these persons, for the letter docs not say my account, but our account, which would lead us to think that the three initials belong to three different names.”

“Quite so,” said Mr. Nick.

“I observe also,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “that as it is a question of account, you must have made certain payments before this.”

“M. de Vaudreuil,” said the notary, “I will tell you all I know, and which it seems to me you ought to know!”

And, taking time to collect his thoughts, he continued as follows: —

“In 1825, a month after the sentence which cost the lives of some of your dearest friends, and deprived you of your liberty, I received a packet containing bank notes amounting to the enormous sum of one hundred thousand dollars. The packet had been posted at Quebec, and contained a letter couched in these terms: — ’ This sum of one hundred thousand dollars is placed in the hands of Mr. Nick, notary of Montreal, for him to dispose of, according to instructions he will subsequently receive. His discretion is counted on to say nothing of the deposit entrusted to his care, nor of the use to which it may eventually be put.”‘

“And it was signed?” asked Clary.

“It was signed J. B. J.” answered Mr. Nick.

“The same initials?” said M. de Vaudreuil.

“The same?” repeated Clary.

“Yes, mademoiselle. As you may think, I could not be more surprised than I was at this mysterious deposit. But after all, as I could not send back the money to my unknown client, and as I did not care to inform the authorities, I paid in the hundred thousand dollars to the bank at Montreal, and I waited.”

Clary de Vaudreuil and her father listened to Mr. Nick with the greatest attention. Had not the notary said in his heart that the money was destined for political purposes? And, as they were soon to see, he was not deceived.

“Six years later,” he continued, “a sum of twenty- two thousand dollars was demanded by a letter signed with these enigmatic initials, to be sent to the village of Bourgade, in the county of that name.”

“To whom?” asked M. de Vaudreuil.

“To the chairman of the Reformist Committee, and a little time afterwards there broke out the revolt you remember. Four years elapsed, and in a letter signed with the same initials, I was requested to send twenty-eight thousand dollars to Sainte Martine, this time to the president of the county of Chateauguay. A month later there came that violent reaction which marked the election of 1834, and brought about the prorogation of the Chamber, and was followed by the demand to impeach the Governor Lord Aylmer!"

M. de Vaudreuil reflected a few moments on what he had heard, and then said. —

"And so, my dear Nick, you see a connection between these different demonstrations, and the sending of the money to the reformist committees."

"I, M. de Vaudreuil!" said Mr. Nick, "I see nothing! I am not a politician! I am a simple administrator! I have only to return the sums I have received on deposit, and in the way I am instructed. I tell you things as they are, and I leave you to draw your conclusions."

"Good! My prudent friend!" said M. de Vaudreuil, with a Smile. "We will not compromise you. But if you have come to-day to the Villa Montcalm — "

"It is to do for the third time what I have already done twice. This morning, the 3rd of September, I have been instructed, first, to dispose of the balance of the sum that had been remitted to me, being fifty-thousand dollars; and, secondly, to place it in the hands of the president of the committee at Laval. That is why, M. dc Vaudreuil, you being the president of the said committee, I have brought you the said sum. Now, to what use is it to be put? I do not know, and I do not wish to know. It is in the hands of the president mentioned in the letter, and if I did not send it through the post, but preferred to bring it myself, it was because it gave me an opportunity of seeing my friend, M. de Vaudreuil and Mademoiselle Clary, his daughter!"

Mr. Nick had finished his story without interruption. And then, having said what he wanted to say, he arose, went out on to the terrace, and looked at the boats, which were ascending and descending the river.

M. de Vaudreuil, deep in his reflections, kept silence. A similar train of thought was exercising the mind of his daughter. He had no doubt that this money, mysteriously deposited with Mr. Nick, was to be employed for the needs of the cause, and for an approaching insurrection. Was it not a singular coincidence that the money had come the very day that “A Son of Liberty” had called together the most intimate friends of M. de Vaudreuil?

The conversation was resumed, and continued for some time. And with the loquacious Mr. Nick how could it be otherwise? He informed M. de Vaudreuil of what M. de Vaudreuil knew far better, the political situation in Lower Canada. And these things, as he did not cease to repeat, he only spoke of with extreme reserve, having no desire to be mixed up in them. His object was to put M. de Vaudreuil on his guard, for there had certainly been an increase in the activity of the police in the county of Montreal.

And with regard to this Mr. Nick was led to say, —

“What the authorities particularly dread is that a chief should put himself at the head of a popular movement, and that this chief should be the famous Jean-Sans- Nora.”

At these words Clary rose, and went to lean on the window opening into the park.

“Do you then know this audacious agitator?” asked M. de Vaudreuil.

“I do not know him,” said the notary. “I have never seen him, and I never met anybody who knew him. But he exists, there is no doubt of that! And I imagine him to be a true hero of romance — a young man of tall stature, of noble features, and thrilling voice — unless he is some good old patriarch, bent and broken by age. With such personages you do not know what to think!"

"Whatever he may be," answered M. de Vaudreuil, "Heaven grant that the thought may come to him to put himself at our head, and we will follow him as far as he likes to lead."

"Well, M. de Vaudreuil, that will not be long first."

"You say so?" said Clary, returning quickly to the middle of the room.

"I say so, Mademoiselle Clary — or rather, I say nothing! That is wiser!"

"Speak! speak!" said the girl. "What do you know?"

"What others know doubtless," answered Mr. Nick. "That Jean-Sans-Nom has reappeared in the county of Montreal. At least, so runs the report — unfortunately — "

"Unfortunately?" said Clary.

"Yes, for if so, I fear our hero will not escape the police. This very day, as I was crossing the island of Montreal, I met the bloodhounds that Gilbert Argall had put on his track, and among them was the head of the house of Rip and Co."

"What? Rip?" said M. de Vaudreuil.

"Himself," said the notary. "He is a clever man, and should be led on by a good reward. If he catches Jean- Sans-Nom, the condemnation of the young patriot — yes, decidedly, he ought to be young — the condemnation is certain, and the national party will provide another victim."

In spite of her self-control. Clary turned pale, her eyes closed, and it was with difficulty she could restrain the beatings of her heart. M. de Vaudreuil walked hurriedly backwards and forwards in the room.

Mr. Nick, wishing to remove the painful effect produced by his last words, added, —

"After all, he is a man of uncommon audacity, this Jean-Sans-Nom. He has, up to the present, managed to escape. And if he is closely pressed, every house in the county will give him a refuge, and all doors will be open to him — even the door of Mr. Nick's office, although Mr. Nick does not meddle with politics."

Thereupon the notary took his leave of M. and Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil. He had no time to spare if he wished to return to Montreal before dinner-time — that regular and ever-welcome hour at which he completed one of the most important deeds of his existence.

M. dc Vaudreuil would have had the horses out to give him a lilt to Laval; but, like a prudent man, Mr. Nick declined. The less that was known of his visit to the Villa Montcalm the better. He had good legs, thank Heaven, and a mile more or less would not trouble one of the best walkers among Canadian notaries. And was he not of the blood of the Sagamores, the descendant of those hardy Indian people whose warriors for months used to follow the war-path, &c. &c.

In short, Mr. Nick called Lionel, who doubtless had been following the muses along the park piths, and up along the river bank the two soon struck the road to Laval.

In three-quarters of an hour they reached the quay just as Vincent Hodge, Clerc and Farran were landing from the tug on their way to the Villa Montcalm.

As they passed the notary was saluted with the inevitable “Good morning, Mr. Nick!” Crossing the river, they mounted the buggy, and returned to the house in Bon Secours market-place just as the old servant, Dolly, was placing the soup on the table.

Mr. Nick immediately sat down in his large arm-chair, and Lionel placed himself in front of him while he hummed, —

To be born with you, my frolicsome flame.

To die with you, my will-o’-the-wisp.’

And above all,” he added, “if you swallow a few verses as you cat, please take care of the bones.”

CHAPTER V.

THE UNKNOWN.

WHEN Vincent Hodge, William Clerc and Andrew Farran reached the villa, they were received by M. de Vaudreuil.

Clary had just gone to her room. By the window opening on to the park she let her looks wander over the country which the Laurentides bounded on the horizon The thought of this mysterious being, so vividly recalled to her memory, occupied her whole thoughts. He had been reported as being in the district. He was being sought for in the island of Montreal. For the island of Jesus to offer him a refuge he would only have to cross the arm of the river! Would he demand shelter at the Villa Montcalm? That he had friends there ready to welcome him he could not doubt. But to take shelter under the roof of M. de Vaudreuil, the president of one of the reformist committees, would expose him to the greatest danger. The villa would be watched, and Clary had a presentiment that Jean-Sans-Nom would come, if it were only for a day, an hour. And in her excited state, desirous to be alone, she had left the drawing-room before the friends of M. de Vaudreuil were introduced.

William Clerc and Andrew Farran — both about the same age as M. de Vaudreuil — were two old officers of the Canadian militia. Deprived of their rank after the sentence of the 25th of September which sent their brothers to the scaffold, sentenced themselves to imprisonment for life, they had only recovered their liberty on account of the amnesty to which M. de Vaudreuil owed his. The party saw in them two men of action who only asked for a second opportunity of risking their lives in an appeal to arms. They were energetic, and inured to fatigue by their hunting expeditions in the woods and plains of Three Rivers, where they owned large estates.

As soon as Vincent Hodge had clasped M. de Vaudreuil’s hand, he asked him if he knew that Farran, Clerc and himself had been each invited by letter?

“Yes,” said M. de Vaudreuil; and doubtless the letter you received, like that I had, was signed A Son of Liberty:’

“That’s it!” said Farran.

“You don’t suspect an ambush?” asked Clerc. “In arranging this rendezvous, may they not intend to catch us when we are in consultation?”

“The Legislative Council,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “has not yet deprived Canadians of the right of meeting at each other’s houses that I am aware of!”

“Perhaps not,” said Farran; “but who sent the letter, and why did he not sign his name?”

“That is certainly strange,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “and particularly as this personage, whoever he may be, does not state his intention of being present at the rendezvous. The letter I had merely informed me that you three were to meet me here this evening — ”

“And ours contained no other information,” said Clerc.

“It is difficult to understand,” said Vincent Hodge, “why the unknown should have arranged matters in this way if he did not propose to be present; and I believe he will come.”

“Well!” said Farran; “let him come. We shall see what sort of a man he is, and we will listen to what he has to say. And we can show him out, if it docs not suit us to have anything to do with him.”

“Vaudreuil?” asked Clerc. “Your daughter knows of this letter, what does she think?”

“Nothing suspicious,” said M. de Vaudreuil.

“We must wait,” said Vincent Hodge.

But if he intended to be at the rendezvous, the man who signed the letter would have to take certain precautions. It would be night before he reached the villa — at least that would only be prudent under the circumstances.

Conversation ranged over the political situation, which had become so critical. Such a state of things could not last. And as bearing on this matter, M. de Vaudreuil mentioned that as president of the county of Laval, he had received from Mr. Nick, the notary, a considerable sum which was certainly destined for the use of the cause.

While they walked in the park till dinner was ready, Vincent Hodge, Clerc and Farran confirmed what Mr. Nick had said. The police were on the alert. Not only were Rip and his men engaged, but detachments of regular police were scouring the country, doing their utmost to strike the trad of Jean-Sans-Nom. Evidently the appearance of this personage would be sufficient to provoke a rising. It was, therefore, not impossible that the unknown was to inform M. dc Vaudreuil concerning this.

About six o’clock, M. de Vaudreuil and his friends returned to the drawing-room, where they found Clary. William Clerc and Farran greeted her in the only way authorized by their age and intimacy. Vincent Hodge was more reserved. Respectfully he shook hands, and then he offered her his arm, and with her led the way to the dining-room.

The dinner was abundant, as was the case in Canada in those days in the poorest as well as the richest houses. It consisted of fish from the river, of venison from the neighbouring forests, and of vegetables and fruits gathered in the kitchen-garden of the villa.

During dinner, no mention was made of the meeting so impatiently awaited. Before the servants it was best to say nothing, although they had been in the house for years.

After dinner, the evening was so fine, the temperature was so mild, that Clary went and sat under the verandah. The St. Lawrence caressed the lower steps of the terrace, bathing them with its waters which the slack of the tide held level in the twilight. M. de Vaudreuil and his guests smoked as they leant over the balustrades, exchanging but few words, and always in a low voice.

It was just after seven o’clock. Night began to close in and hide the lower depths of the valleys, while the l6ng twilight retired across the plains to the west; the stars began to appear in the opposite zone of the sky.

Clary looked up and down the St. Lawrence. Would the unknown come by the river? It seemed so, if he wished to leave no trace of his passage. It was easy for a small boat to slip along the river among the grass and reeds of its bank. If he landed at the terrace, the mysterious personage could enter the villa without being seen, and could leave it again without any of the people in the house having the least suspicion of his presence.

As, however, it was possible that the visitor might not come by the St. Lawrence, M. de Vaudreuil had given orders to admit at once any one presenting himself at the villa. A lamp in the drawing-room showed but a little light through the curtains of the windows sheltered by the thick glass of the verandah. Outside nothing could be seen of what was passing within.

But if all was quiet on the side of the park, it was not so on the river. From time to time boats came into view, sometimes on the left bank, sometimes on the right; sometimes they met, and a few words were interchanged, and then they rowed away in different directions.

M. de Vaudreuil and his friends attentively watched these comings and goings, the object of which they fully understood.

“Those are police boats,” said Clerc, “Yes,” said Vincent Hodge, “and they are watching the river — and — ”

“Perhaps the Villa Montcalm!”

The words were spoken in a low voice, and it was neither M. de Vaudreuil nor his daughter, nor either of his guests, that uttered them.

A man, hidden among the thick grass below the balustrade, rose on the right of the steps, and at a quick step crossed the terrace. He raised his toque, and, with a slight bow, said, —

“The Son of Liberty, who wrote to you, gentlemen!”

M. dc Vaudreuil, Clary, Vincent Hodge, Clerc, and Farran, surprised by the sudden apparition, endeavoured to recognize the man who had entered the villa in so strange a fashion. His voice was as unknown as his face.

“M. de Vaudreuil,” said the man, “you must excuse my coming here in this strange way, but it was important that no one should sec me come, as it is important that no one should see me go.”

“Come in,” said M. de Vaudreuil.

Then they all entered the drawing-room, and the door was immediately closed.

The man was the young stranger in whose company Mr. Nick had travelled from Montreal. M. de Vaudreuil and his friends remarked, as the notary had done, that he was a French Canadian.

After bidding adieu to Mr. Nick at Laval he had gone to a humble tavern in the lower quarters of the town. There, in a dark corner of the room, he had waited till dinner time, glancing through the newspapers. His impassive countenance gave no sign of the sentiments aroused by what he read, although the journals were most violent in their partisanship for or against the Crown. Queen Victoria had just succeeded her uncle, William the Fourth, and in impassioned articles a discussion was carried on as to the changes which the new reign would bring about in Canada. But although it was a woman’s hand that held the sceptre of the United Kingdom, it was feared it would rest heavily on the colony.

Till six o’clock the young man had remained in the tavern where he dined, and at eight o’clock he had started.

If a spy had followed him, he would have seen him make for the river bank, and glide through the thick grass, and reach the villa, where he arrived three-quarters of an hour afterwards. The unknown had waited a little before appearing on the terrace, and we know how he had intervened in the conversation between M. de Vaudreuil and his friends.

And now, with the doors and windows shut, they could speak without fear of being overheard.

“Sir,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “you will not be surprised if I first ask you who you are?”

“I told you when I arrived, M. de Vaudreuil. I am like all of you, a Son of Liberty.”

Clary made an involuntary gesture of disappointment. Perhaps she expected another name. Would this man persist in his incognito even in the Villa Montcalm?

“Sir,” said Farran, if you arranged a meeting here between us and M. de Vaudreuil, it was doubtless in order to confer with us on matters of some importance. Before talking freely to you, it is only natural that we should like to know with whom we have to deal.”

“You would have been imprudent, gentlemen, not to have asked me that question,” said the young man. “And it would be unpardonable of me if I had refused to answer it.”

And he handed them a letter.

The letter informed M. de Vaudreuil of the visit of the unknown, in whom he might place entire confidence, even if he did not give his name. It was signed by one of the principal leaders of the Opposition in Parliament, the advocate Gramont, deputy for Quebec, and one of the political associates of M. de Vaudreuil. Gramont added that if the visitor asked M. de Vaudreuil’s hospitality for a few days, he could accord it him with every confidence that it was for the interest of the cause.

M. de Vaudreuil read this letter to his daughter and friends, and then added, —

“Sir, you can consider yourself at home here, and you can remain as long as it suits you at the Villa Montcalm.”

“Two days at the outside, M. de Vaudreuil,” replied the young man. “In four days I must have rejoined my companions at the mouth of the St. Lawrence. I thank you for your welcome. And now, gentlemen, I beg you will listen to what I have to say.”

He then spoke with precision of the state of public opinion at the moment. He showed that the country was ready to rise against the loyalists and the agents of the Crown. ‘J his he had seen himself in a reformist campaign during the last few weeks in the counties of the Upper St. Lawrence and the Ottawa. In a few days lie was to pay a last visit to the parishes in the eastern counties, so as to knit together the elements of an approaching insurrection, which would extend from the mouth of the river to the territories of Ontario. To this levy in mass neither Lord Gosford, with the representatives of authority, nor General Colborne, with a few thousand redcoats, had adequate forces to oppose, and Canada — he did not doubt — would at last throw off the yoke.”

The unknown spoke with a coolness that showed that at all times and in every place he could retain his self- control; that a fire burned within him;

and that his thoughts were inspired by the most ardent patriotism. As he gave certain details as to what he had done and what he intended to do, Clary never took her eyes off him. All that he said told her that she had before her the hero in whom, in her imagination, was incarnated the Canadian revolution.

When he had ended the account of his proceedings, he added, —

“A chief is needed by the partisans of our autonomy, and when the time comes a chief will arise to take the lead. Meanwhile a committee of action should be formed to concentrate individual efforts. Will you and your friends join this committee? All of you have already suffered in your families, in your persons, for the national cause.

This cause has cost the lives of our best patriots, of your father, Vincent Hodge, of your brothers, William Clerc and Andrew Farren — ”

“By the treason of a scoundrel!” said Vincent Hodge.

“Yes, of a scoundrel!” repeated the young man. And Clary detected a slight change in his voice, which had been so clear till then. “But,” added h”, “the man is dead.”

“Are you sure of that?” asked Clerc.

“He is dead,” replied the unknown.

“Dead! This Simon Morgaz! And it was not I that did justice on him!” exclaimed Vincent Hodge.

My friends,” said M. de Vaudreuil, let us say no more about the traitor, and allow me to reply to the proposition that has been communicated to us. Sir,” said he, turning to his guest, “what our people have already done we are prepared to do again. We will risk our lives, as they risked theirs. You can depend upon us in all things, and we will undertake to centralize at this Villa Montcalm the efforts in which you have taken the initiative. We are in daily communication with the different counties in the district, and at the first signal we will risk our lives. Your intention is, you say, to leave us in two days to visit the eastern parishes? Be it so. At your return you will find us ready to follow the chief, whoever he may be, who will unfurl the flag of independence.”

“Vaudreuil has spoken for us all,” said Vincent Hodge. “We have but one thought — to withdraw our country from oppression and assure it the right to be free.”

“And which, this time, it will conquer!” said Clary, advancing towards the young man. But at the same moment lie stepped towards the door opening on to the terrace.

“Listen, gentlemen!” he said.

A strange noise was heard in the direction of Laval; a distant clamour, of which it was difficult to recognize the nature or the cause.

“What is it?” asked William Clerc.

“Has a rising taken place already?” asked Farran.

“Heaven grant it may be nothing!” said Clary. “It would be to begin too soon.”

“Yes. too soon,” said the stranger.

“What can it be?” asked M. de Vaudreuil. “Listen! The noise approaches us.”

“It sounds like a trumpet-call,” said Farran.

Brazen notes traversing space at regular intervals became heard at the villa. Was it an armed detachment on the march for M. de Vaudreuil’s house?

M. de Vaudreuil opened the door of the room, and his friends followed him on to the terrace.

They looked towards the west, but there was no suspicious light in that direction. Evidently the noise did not come across the plains of Jesus Island. But suddenly a confused noise was heard nearer, and at the same time came a sound of trumpets.

“There it is,” said Vincent Hodge.

And he pointed with his finger to the St. Lawrence up towards Laval. In this direction a few torches were giving a light but little stronger than that reflected by the misty waters of the river.

Two or three minutes passed. A boat dropping down with the tide came near the bank a quarter of a mile up stream. The boat contained a dozen persons, whose uniform it was easy to recognize in the torchlight. It was a constable, accompanied by a detachment of police.

From time to time the boat stopped. Immediately a voice, preceded by a blast from the trumpet rose on the air, but it was impossible to hear what it said at the Villa Montcalm.

“That is a proclamation,” said William Clerc.

“And it ought to be of importance,” said Farran, “for the authorities to issue it at this hour.”

“Wait,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “and we shall soon hear — ”

“Would it not be better for us to return to the drawing- room?” said Clary, addressing the stranger.

“Why should we?” said he. “What the authorities think good to proclaim ought to be good for us to hear.”

Meanwhile, the boat, followed by a few canoes, had come opposite the terrace.

A blast was given from the trumpet. And this is what M. de Vaudreuil and his friends distinctly heard: —

“By the Governor-General of the Canadian Provinces.

“A Proclamation.

“This 3rd of September, 1837.

“A reward is hereby offered for Jean-Sans-Nom, who has reappeared in the counties of the Upper St. Lawrence. Six thousand dollars will be paid to whoever will arrest him, or cause him to be arrested.

“For Lord Gosford.

“Gilbert Argall, “Minister of Police?’

Then the boat resumed its course down stream.

M. de Vaudreuil and his friends remained motionless on the terrace, which was then enveloped in the darkness of the night. Not a movement had escaped the unknown, as the constable’s voice repeated the terms of the proclamation. The girl alone, almost unconsciously, made a step towards him.

M. de Vaudreuil was the first to speak.

“Again a reward offered to traitors!” he said. “It will be useless this time, I hope, for the fair renown of Canada!”

“It is too much to hope that they will find another Simon Morgaz!” exclaimed Vincent Hodge.

“May heaven protect Jean-Sans-Nom!” said Clary, in a voice thrilling with emotion.

There were a few moments of silence.

“Let us come in and go to our rooms,” said M. de Vaudreuil. “I will see that one is got ready for you,” said he, addressing the unknown.

“I thank you,” was the reply; “but it is impossible for me to stay longer in this house — ”

“And why?”

“When, an hour ago, I accepted the hospitality you offered me, I was not in the position that this proclamation has put me?”

“What do you mean? “That my presence can now only compromise you, for the Governor-General has put a price on my head. I am Jean-Sans-Nom!”

And Jean-Sans-Nom bowed, and was walking towards the river bank, when Clary stopped him with her hand.

“Remain here,” she said.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ST. LAWRENCE.

The valley of the St. Lawrence is probably one of the largest that geologic agencies have sculptured on the face of the globe. Humboldt gives it an area of 270,000 square leagues — an area almost equal to that of Europe. The river, in its capricious course, dotted with islands, barred with rapids, broken with falls, traverses the rich valley of Lower Canada. At the mouth of the river, in the large bay beyond the estuary, lie the Magdalen Islands, the islands of Cape Breton and Prince Edward, and the large island of Anticosti, which the very different- looking coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland shelter from the violent winds of the Northern Atlantic.

It is not till the middle of April that the breaking-up commences of the ice accumulated by the long rigorous period of winter in Canada. The St. Lawrence then becomes navigable. Ships of large tonnage can then reach the region of the great lakes, those fresh-water seas which stretch, like a string of beads, across what has been so poetically called “the land of Fennimore Cooper.” At that time the river, seived by the ebb and flow of tide, ii as animated as a roadstead when a treaty of peace has just raised the blockade. Sailing-vessels, steamers, timber- rafts, pilot-boats, coasters, fishing-boats, pleasure-boats, and canoes glide on the surface of its waters, now clear of their thick covering. It is life for half a year, after half a year of death.

On the 13th of September, about six o’clock in the morning, a cutter left the little port of St. Anne, which is situated in the mouth of the St. Lawrence, on the southern bank. She was manned with five of those fishermen who ply their profitable trade from the rapids of Montreal to the island of Anticosti; and, after casting their nets and lines where the instinct of their trade directs them, sell their salt-water and fresh-water fish from village to village, or rather from house to house — for there is almost an unbroken chain of houses along both banks to the western boundary of the province. The fisherman’s trade is, perhaps, the most honoured of all in Canada, especially along the river-side, where there are from ten to fifteen thousand fishing-boats, and more than 30,000 fishermen working on the river or its branches.

The cutter had a passenger, making six men in all on board, who was a fisherman only in his dress. But it would have been difficult to recognize in him the young man who for two days had been a guest at the Villa Montcalm.

Jt was Jean-Sans-Nom.

While he stayed at the villa he had given no explanation of the incognito under which he concealed himself and his family. Jean was the only name he had given to M. and Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil.

In the evening of the 3rd of September, when their conference was over, Vincent Hodge, William Clerc, and Farran had returned to Montreal. It was not till two days after he arrived at the villa that Jean took his leave.

During this short stay, what hours were passed in talking of the new attempt which was to free Canada from the English yoke! With what passion Clary heard the young patriot glorify the cause which was so dear to both of them! He seemed to have shaken off some of the coldness he had shown at first, and which he seemed to have put on. Perhaps he was submitting to the influence of the thrilling spirit of the girl whose patriotism agreed so well with his own.

It was on the evening of the 5th of September that Jean had left the villa to resume his wandering life, and finish the campaign of reformist propaganda in the counties of Lower Canada. No one in the house suspected that he was Jean-Sans-Nom. Rip and Co. started on a false trail, had not discovered his retreat. He had left the villa secretly as he had arrived, had crossed the St. Lawrence in the ferry-boat at the end of the island, and struck into the interior, towards the American frontier, so as to cross it if necessary. As it was in the districts on the upper river that the search was being prosecuted, and naturally so, on account of his having just been through them, he reached, without recognition or pursuit, the river St. John, which forms in part the boundary of New Brunswick. At the little port of St. Anne, his bold companions were waiting for him, and on their devotion he could reckon without misgiving.

They were five brothers — the eldest, Pierre and Remy, were twins, in their thirtieth year, the three others — Michel, Tony, and Jacques, aged twenty-nine, twenty- eight, and twenty-seven — of the numerous family of Thomas Harcher and his wife Catherine, of the farm of Chipogan, in Laprairie county.

A few years before, at the outbreak of the rising of 1831, Jean-Sans-Nom, closely pressed by the police, had found refuge in this farm, which he did not know belonged to M. de Vaudreuil. Thomas Harcher received the fugitive into his family as if he had been one of his sons. If he was not ignorant that lie had given shelter to a patriot, he certainly did not know that this patriot was Jean-Sans-Nom.

While he lived at the farm, Jean — he was known by no other name — had made close friends with Pierre and Remy. Their sentiments were the same as his. They were keen supporters of the French party, with a bitter hatred of everything that “smelt English,” as the saying then went in Lower Canada.

When Jean left Chipogan, it was on board the boat in which the five brothers cruised on the river from April to September. Ostensibly they carried on the trade of fishermen, which gave them access to all the houses on the river-side. In this way they baffled pursuit, and prepared a new insurrectional movement. Before his arrival at the Villa Montcalm, he had visited the counties of Ottawa, in the province of Ontario. Now, as he sailed up the river, he could give the last orders to the people of Lower Canada.

The cutter had just left the port of St. Anne. Although the tide had begun to run out, a fresh breeze from the eastward filled her sails, and the Champlain — such was her name — made good progress.

The climate of Canada is not so temperate as that of the United States, and is very warm in summer and very cold in winter, although the country is in the same latitude as France. This is probably because the warm current of the Gulf Stream is deflected from its coast, and does not moderate the excess of temperature.

During this first fortnight of September, the temperature was very high, and the sails of the Champlain were filled with an almost scorching wind.

“We shall have a hot passage to-day,” said Pierre, “particularly if the wind drops at noon.”

“Yes,” said Michel, “And may the sun frizzle up the gnats and the black mosquitoes! They are in thousands on this beach of St. Anne!”

“Brothers, this heat will end, and we shall soon rejoice in the mildness of the Indian summer.”

It was Jean who had given his companions the fraternal name of which they were so worthy. And he was right in boasting the beauties of the Indian summer of Canada, which occurs in the months of September and October.

“Are we to fish this morning?” asked Pierre Harcher, “or are we to go up the river?”

“Fish till ten o’clock,” said Jean; “and then we can sell our fish at Matane.”

“Then we must make a board towards Mons,” replied Pierre, who was captain of the Champlain. “The water is better there, and we can return to Matane when the tide slackens.”

The sheets were shortened in, the boat luffed, and, heeling to the breeze with the stream in her favour, she headed across for the point of Mons, on the north side of the river, which is here between nine and ten leagues wide.

After an hour’s sail the Champlain lay to, and with her jib-sheet hauled aft, and speed reduced, her crew began to fish. They were in the middle of this magnificent estuary, bordered by a zone of cultivable land extending to the north, to the foot of the first slopes of the chain of the Laurentides, and to the south to the Notre Dame mountains, whose highest peaks rise 1300 feet above the sea.

Pierre Harcher and his brothers were skilful at their trade. They had plied it in every part of the river. Amid the rapids of Montreal they had taken quantities of shad by means of fascines. About Québec they had fished for salmon or gasperaux, come up at the spawning season into the higher reaches of the river. It was seldom that their “tides” were not extremely profitable.

This morning the gasperaux were abundant. Frequently the nets were almost full enough to break. And about ten o’clock the Champlain, filling her sails, headed off” for Matanc.

It was better to make for the southern bank of the river. On the northern bank the villages are scattered, and the people few. The land is barren, being little but an accumulation of chaotic rocks. With the exception of the valley of the Saguenay, by which the overflow of Lake St. John escapes, and which is alluvial, the yield of the soil is poor, except with regard to the rich forests with which the land is widely covered.

On the south of the river, on the contrary, the land is fertile, the villages numerous, and, as we have said, it is as though a panorama of houses extended from the mouth of the river, all the way to Quebec. If tourist; are attracted by the picturesque scenery of the Saguenay valley, or that of Malbay, the Canadian and American bathers — principally those whom the burning heats of New England drive to the more bracing climate of the great river — chiefly frequent the southern bank.

It was to that side, to the market of Matane, that the Champlain brought her first load of fish. Jean, and two of the Harchers — Michel and Tony — went from door to door with the product of their toil. It might have been remarked that Jean remained in some of these houses much longer than is usually taken in traffic of this kind, and that he entered the houses and exchanged a few words, not only with the servants, but with the masters.

And it might also have been remarked that at certain humble dwellings he gave back to the buyers more money than his comrades had received.

The same proceedings went on during the following days in the villages along the river, at Rimouski, at Bic, at Trois Pistoles, at Caconna beach, one of the fashionable bathing resorts on the banks of the St. Lawrence.

At Riviere-du-Loup, a little town reached on the morning of the 17th of September, the Champlain was boarded by the men charged with watching the river. But all was well. For some years Jean had been borne on the cutter's list as if he had been one of Thomas Marcher's sons. Never would the police have supposed that under the guise o(a fisherman there was hidden the man they wanted, whose head was worth six thousand dollars to whoever would betray it.

When the police had gone, Pierre Harcher remarked, —

"It might be better for us to get to the other bank."

"So we think," said Michael.

"And why?" asked Jean. "Is it because cur boat appeared suspicious to these men? Is it because things have not gone on in the customary way? Is it that they doubt that I am one of your family?"

"As I really think you are!" said Jacques, the youngest of the five, who was of a sprightly disposition. "Our father has so many children that one more cannot embarrass him, and he might mistake you for one!"

"And," said Tony, "he loves you like a son, and we all love you as if you were of the same blood!"

“And are we not?” said Remy, “Are we not all French?”

“Certainly!” said Jean. “But I do not sec why you should be afraid of the police.”

“You can never be too prudent,” said Tony.

“Of course not,” said Jean, “and if it is only for the sake of prudence that Pierre is going to cross the river — ”

“Which it is,” said Pierre, “for the weather will soon change.”

“That is another thing,” said Jean.

“Look here,” said Pierre, “the north-east breeze will soon spring up, and I have an idea it will be rather fresh. I feel it! We must think of our boat, and I do not care to lose it on the rocks of Riviere-du-Loup or Kamouraska!”

“Be it so!” said Jean. “Let us get across to Tadoussac, if possible. We can then go up the Saguenay to Chicoutimi, and then we shall neither lose our time nor our trouble.”

“Quick, then,” said Michael, “Pierre is right This north-easter is not far off. If it catches the Champlain before we are across, we shall go a hundred times further towards Quebec than towards Tadoussac.”

And away went the Champlain to the northward, eating into the wind, which at once began to freshen.

It was eight o’clock in the evening. Pierre Harcher was not mistaken when he caught sight of the long, narrow clouds that announced the coming of the storm. There was barely time to get under the shelter of the northern coast.

Five or six leagues separate Riviere-du-Loup from the mouth of the Saguenay. It was rather rough work on the passage. The wind swooped down on the Champlain when she was but a third of the way across. Sail had to be reduced, and every reef taken in, and yet the mast bent as if it would break. The surface of the river rose in huge waves as if it had been the sea. and the waves dashed against the cutter's bow and covered it with foam. It was rather dangerous for a boat of only a dozen tons. But the crew were steady and skilful. More than once they had braved the storm in the open sea between Cape Breton and Newfoundland. And the seamanship of the crew is as worth taking into account as the seaworthiness of the ship.

But Pierre Harcher would have enough to do to reach the mouth of the Saguenay, and it would take him three more hours. When the tide ebbed it would make the sea worse, although it would keep the cutter on her course. Those who have not been caught in one of these north-east gales in the valley of the St. Lawrence, can have little idea of their violence. They are quite a scourge in the counties below Quebec.

Fortunately the Champlain found shelter under the northern bank, and as night fell, entered the mouth of the Saguenay.

The storm, lasted but a few hours. On the 19th of September, at dawn, Jean could resume his campaign up the Saguenay, which flows past the high cliffs of Capes Trinity and Eternity, which measure some eighteen hundred feet in height. In this picturesque county is some of the finest scenery in Canada, and amongst other gems is the marvellous bay of Haha. The Champlain reached Chicoutimi when Jean put himself in communication with the members of the Reformist Committee, and in the morning, taking advantage of the tide, he resumed his voyage to Quebec.

Meanwhile, Pierre and his brothers did not forget that they were fishermen by trade. Each evening they cast their net and their lines. And in the morning they landed at the villages on each bank. On the northern side, along the county of Charlevoix from Tadoussac to the Bay of St. Paul, they visited Malbay, Sainte Irenee, and Notre- Dame-des-Eboulements, whose significant name is only too well justified by its situation amid a chaos of rocks. Then there were the shores of Beaufort and Beaupre, where Jean did useful work by landing at Chateau-Richer, and then there was Orleans Island just below Quebec.

On the southern bank the Champlain put in successively at Saint Michel, at Point Levi. Certain precautions had to be taken, for the surveillance of this part of the river was very strict. It would have been better, perhaps, not to have stopped at Quebec where the cutter arrived in the evening of the 22nd of September. But Jean had an appointment with the advocate, Sebastian Gramont, one of the most ardent deputies of the Opposition.

When darkness had quite set in, Jean made his way towards the higher quarters of the town, and by the Rue du Petit-Champlain reached Gramont’s house.

For some years Jean and Gramont had been in communication with each other.

Gramont, then thirty-six years of age, had taken an active part in all the political manifestations of the later years — in that of 1835 especially — for which he had been imprisoned.

It was then that there began his connection with Jean- Sans-Nom, who had, however, told him nothing of his birth or relations. Gramont knew but one thing, that when the time came his friend would put himself at the head of the insurrection. Not having seen him since the abortive attempt of 1835, we waited for him to-night with lively impatience.

When Jean arrived he was cordially welcomed.

“I have only a few hours to give you,” he said.

“Well,” said the advocate, “let us employ them in talking of the past and of the present.”

“Of the past! No!” said Jean. “Of the present — of the future — of the future above all!”

Ever since he had known him Gramont had felt that in Jean’s life there had been some great misfortune, some great grief, and lie could not discover the cause. Even as lie stood there, he affected so much reserve that he even avoided shaking hands with him. But Gramont had not insisted on knowing his friend’s secrets. When it suited him to confide in him, he would be ready to listen.

During the few hours they passed together, they talked about the political situation. On his part, the advocate informed Jean of the state of opinion in Parliament. In return, Jean informed the advocate of the measures already taken with a view to the rising, of the formation of a Central Committee at the Villa Montcalm, and of the results of his journey through Upper and Lower Canada. He had only to traverse the Montreal district to finish his campaign.

Gramont listened with extreme attention, and saw grounds for great hope in the progress made by the cause during the last few weeks. There was not a village where money had not been distributed for the purchase of arms and ammunition.

Jean then learnt the last movements of the authorities at Quebec.

“In the first place, my dear Jean, there was a rumour that you were here a month ago. There were search warrants out for you, and even this house wis searched, it having been falsely reported that you were here. I had a visit from the detectives, and among others a certain Rip — ”

“Rip!” exclaimed Jean in a voice as though the name burnt his lips.

“Yes-the head of the firm of Rip & Co.” replied Gramont. “Remember he is a very dangerous man.”

“Dangerous!” muttered Jean.

“And it would be well for you to beware of him,” added Gramont.

“To beware of him!” said Jean. “Yes, to beware of him, as if he were a scoundrel.”

“Do you know him?”

“I know him,” said Jean, who had recovered his equanimity, but he does not know me yet!”

“That is the important point!” added Gramont, somewhat surprised at his guest’s behaviour.

Then Jean, turning the conversation to another subject, asked a question as to the proceedings in Parliament during the last few weeks.

“The opposition,” said Gramont, “is very strong. Papineau, Cuvillier, Viger, Quesnel, and Bourdage are constant in their attacks on the Government measures. Lord Gosford would prorogue the House, but he fears that it would be the signal for an uprising.”

“Would that it may not take place till we are ready!” said Jean. Do not let the Parliamentary leaders imprudently precipitate matters.”

“They shall be warned, and they will do nothing to interfere with your plans. At the same time, in view of a possible insurrection, the Governor-General has taken certain measures. Sir John Colborne has concentrated all the troops he can dispose of, so as to move them quickly to the villages on the St. Lawrence, where the outbreak is most probable.”

“There — and at twenty other places at the same time — at least I hope so. The people must all rise on the same day, at the same hour, that the bureaucrats may be overwhelmed by numbers. If the movement is only local, there is a chance of its being choked off at the beginning. It was to make it general that I have been journeying east and west, and am going through the centre. I am off this very night”

“Go, then, Jean, but do not forget that the soldiers and volunteers of Sir John Colborne are cantoned round Montreal under Colonels Gore and Withcrall. It is there we shall have the resistance.”

“We will arrange everything so as to get all the advantage of the first shot,” said Jean. “The committee at the Villa Montcalm is well placed in view of a combined rising, and I know the energy of M. de Vaudreuil, who is the leader of it. In the counties of Vercheres, St. Hyacinthe, and Laprairie, which adjoin that of Montreal, the most ardent Sons of Liberty have communicated to the towns and villages the fire of their patriotism.”

“And it has even reached the clergy!” said Gramont.

In public as in private, in sermons and interviews our priests preach against English tyranny. A few days ago, in the very Cathedral of Quebec, a young preacher dared to appeal to the national sentiment, and his words had such an effect that the minister of police would have arrested him. But Lord Gosford opposed the rigorous measure, as he thinks he can remain good friends with the Canadian clergy. All he did was to have the bishop send the preacher away from the town, and now he is continuing his mission through the counties of Montreal. He is a real tribune of the pulpit, his eloquence is most persuasive, and he is held back by no personal consideration, and he will assuredly devote to our cause the sacrifice of his liberty and his life.”

“Did you say this priest was a young man?” asked Jean.

“He is hardly thirty.”

“To what order does he belong?”

“To the Sulpiciens order.”

“And his name?”

“The Abbe Joann.”

Did the name evoke any remembrance in Jean’s mind? Gramont might well think so, for Jean remained silent for a few seconds. Then he took leave of the advocate, although he had been offered hospitality till the morning.

“I thank you, my dear Gramont,” he said. “But I must rejoin my companions before midnight. We must start with the tide.”

“Good-bye, then,” said the advocate. “Whether your enterprise succeeds or not, you will, none the less, be one of those who have done much for our country!”

The friends separated. And then Jean returned to the Champlain, and, her anchor being weighed, she started at once on her voyage up the river to Montreal.

CHAPTER VII.

FROM QUEBEC TO MONTREAL.

At midnight the cutter was several miles up the stream. During the clear moonlight night Pierre Harcher could navigate in safety, although he had to tack from one bank to the other, owing to the wind blowing freshly from the westward.

The Champlain did not stop, except for a little just before the dawn. A mist lay on the wide prairies, extending from either shore. Soon the tops of the trees in the background appeared above the mist, which the rising sun began to dissipate, and the course of the river again became visible.

A number of fishermen were already at work, towing their nets and lines behind the little boats that rarely leave the upper course of the St. Lawrence or its affluents to the right and left. The Champlain soon made one of the fleet engaged in its morning labours between the shores of the counties of Portneuf and Lotbiniere. And the brothers Harcher dropped anchor on the northern shore, and set to work with them. They wanted a few baskets of fish to sell in the villages, as soon as the tide allowed them to go up the river, in spite of the head wind.

While they were fishing, several bark canoes came alongside the Champlain, such light canoes as a man can put on his shoulder when he has to take to the portages — those parts of the river which are unnavigable, owing to the rocks that obstruct it, or the falls, or rapids, or eddies which are so frequent in Canadian rivers.

The men in the canoes were mostly of Indian race.

They came to buy the fish, and take it to the towns and villages in the interior, up the numerous streams with which the land abounds. Occasionally they were French Canadians who came alongside the Champlain, and, after a few minutes' conversation, returned to the shore to accomplish the errand on which they were sent.

Had the brothers been in search of gain or pleasure as they fished, their wish would have been amply satisfied. With net and line they did marvels. Pike, perch, maskinongis and touradis, and a quantity of white-fish, which gourmets appreciate for its excellent flesh. The crew of the Champlain would be heartily welcomed in the houses by the river-side. They were favoured by splendid weather, such as is almost peculiar to the happy and incomparable valley of the St. Lawrence. Delightful was the aspect of the neighbouring country from the banks of the river away to the Laurentides. As Fennimore Cooper poetically says, they were all the more beautiful for having assumed their autumn livery — the green and yellow livery of the last five days.

The Champlain first ran in shore on the left bank, in the county of Portneuf. In the town of this name, and in the villages of St. Anne and St. Stanislas, there was some business to transact. At certain places it is possible that the Champlain left more money than she received for her fish; but the Harchcrs made no complaint.

During the next two days Jean sailed in this way from shore to shore. In the county of Lotbiniere, on the right bank, at Lotbiniere and at St. Pierre-les-Bosquets — in the county of Champlain, on the opposite side at Batisean — then on the other side, at Gentilli, at Doucette, the principal reformists received their visits. At Nicolet, in the county of that name, M. Aubineau, a justice of the peace, and one of the most influential inhabitants, communicated with Jean. There he learnt, as he had at Quebec, that the Abbe Joann was travelling through the parishes, exciting the people by his preaching. M. Aubineau then spoke of the ammunition and weapons of which they were in need “You will soon receive,” said Jean, “a raft of timber, which ought to have left Montreal last night, and which will bring you guns, and powder and lead. You will then be armed in time. But do not rise till the signal is given. If necessary, you can enter into communication with the committee, at the Villa Montcalm, in the Island of Jesus, and correspond with its president — ”

“M. de Vaudreuil?”

“Yes.”

“Agreed.”

“Did you not tell me that the Abbe Joann had passed through Nicolet?”

“He was here six days ago.”

“Do you know where he went, when he left you?”

“Into the county of Vercheres, and, unless I am mistaken, he was going into Laprairie county.”

Thereupon Jean took leave of the justice of the peace, and returned on board the Champlain, just as the Harchers returned, after selling their fish. The river was then crossed obliquely, towards the county of St. Maurice.

At the mouth of the river of that name stands one of the most ancient towns in the country, that of Three Rivers, at the opening of a fertile valley. At this time there had just been established here a cannon foundry, managed by a French-Canadian Company, employing only French- Canadian workmen. Here was an anti-loyalist centre, which Jean could not neglect. The Champlain went a few miles up the St. Maurice river, and Jean entered into communication with the committees formed in the parishes.

The foundry, having been recently established, was not as yet in working order. A few months later it might have been able to furnish the reformists with the cannon of which they were so much in need. It was possible, however — if they worked night and day — that they could turn out the first guns in time to use them against the artillery of the royal troops. Jean had a very important interview on the subject with the heads of the committees.

If a few of the pieces could be made in time, there would be no difficulty in finding hands to use them.

After leaving Three Rivers, the Champlain coasted along the county of-Maskinongi, put in at the little town of the same name, and on the night of the 24th of September entered the widening of the St. Lawrence known as Lake St. Peter. This is a lake about five leagues long, bounded upstream by a series of islets, which extend from Berthier, a town of the county of that name, up to Sorel, in the county of Richelieu.

Here the Harchers cast their nets, or rather towed them behind, and slowly drifted upwards with the stream. Thick clouds covered the sky, and the darkness became so thick that it was impossible to see cither bank of the river.

A little after midnight, Pierre, on the look out forward, caught sight of a light farther up stream.

“That is a ship’s light, I think,” said Remy.

“Look after the nets,” said Jacques. “We have thirty fathoms out, and they will be lost if that ship comes across them.”

“Well, starboard the helm,” said Michel. “There’s room enough.”

“The wind is failing,” said Pierre. “We are drifting.”

“We had better haul in the nets,” said Jean. “That will be safer.”

“Yes, and lose no time,” said Remy.

The brothers were preparing to haul in the nets, when Jean observed, —

“Are you certain that it is a ship coming down the river?”

“I am not so sure,” said Pierre. “Anyhow, it is coming very slowly, and the light is almost on the water-line.”

“It may be a cage,” said Jacques.

“If it is a cage,” replied Remy, “the more reason for avoiding it. We must keep clear! Haul away!”

The Champlain might have lost her nets, if the brothers had not made haste without even stopping to clear away the fish in the meshes. There was not a moment to lose, for the light was only a couple of cable-lengths away.

A cage in Canada is a raft of timber, composed of from sixty to seventy “cribs “or sections, and amounting to at least a thousand cubic feet. As soon as the liver is clear for navigation, a number of these cages daily descend the river to Montreal or Quebec. They come from the immense forests of the West, which form one of the inexhaustible resources of Canada. Imagine a floating mass, five or six feet out of the water, like an enormous pontoon without a mast. Its trunks have been squared by the woodmen's axes, or cut into bundles and planks by the saw-mills near the waterfalls on the Ottawa. Thousands of these rafts come down the river from the month of April to that of October, avoiding the falls and rapids by means of slides built in narrow canals by the side of the river. Some of the cages are stopped at Montreal, and there loaded for Europe, but most of them go on to Québec.

These rafts are, as may be supposed, a great hindrance to navigation, particularly in the narrow subsidiary branches of the stream. They float down with the tide, and it is almost impossible to steer them. Ships and fishing boats have to avoid them, as they may damage them seriously. And it will be understood how eagerly the Harchcrs worked to get in their nets, which were in the way of the cage the calm prevented them avoiding.

Jacques was right. It was a cage. A light in front indicated the direction it was following. It was hardly twenty fathoms away when the Champlain had all her nets in. In the silence of the night a voice was heard singing the well-known song, the air of which is almost a national one. It was easy to recognize that the singer was a French-Canadian.

"As I came from the wedding I felt very weary.

And at the clear fountain I lay down to rest."

Doubtless Jean recognized the singer’s voice, for he came up to Pierre, who was rowing his hardest to keep the Champlain clear, and said, —

“Board him!”

“Board him?” asked Pierre.

“Yes! It is Louis Lacasse.”

“We’ll drop back with him!”

“Five minutes at the most,” said Jean. “I have only a few words to say to him.”

In a moment the helm was put down, and the Champlain ran alongside, and was moored forward.

The man on the raft stopped his song, and shouted, —

“Look out with that cutter!”

“There’s no danger, Louis Lacasse,” said Pierre Harcher. “It is the Champlain.”

Jean had jumped on the raft, and ran up to Lacasse, who as soon as he recognized him by the light of the lantern, said, —

“My respects to you, Monsieur Jean!”

“Thank you, Lacasse.”

“I thought I should meet you, but I reckoned you would come when I was moored for the flood tide. But since you are here — ”

“Is all aboard?” asked Robert.

“All is aboard, hidden under the planks and between the beams. It is well stowed, I can tell you!” added Lacasse, lighting his pipe.

“Did the custom-house officers board you?”

“Yes, at Vercheres. They stayed prying about for half an hour, but they saw nothing. It is shut up, as if it was in a box.”

“How many?” asked Jean.

“Two hundred muskets.”

“And swords?”

“Two hundred and fifty.”

“Where do they come from?”

“Vermont. Our American friends have been busy, and they have not cost us much. But we had a lot of trouble in getting them to Fort Ontario. Now there are no more difficulties.”

“And ammunition?”

“Three casks of powder, and several thousand bullets. If each one kills its man, there will soon be not a redcoat left in Canada.”

“You know where these things are to go?” asked Joan.

“All right,” said Lacasse. “Never fear! There is no danger of surprise! During the night, at low tide, I can moor my cage, and the canoes can come alongside and take their share. But I don’t go lower than Quebec, where I hand over to the Moravian, outward bound to Ham- burg.”

“It is understood,” said Jean, “that before you reach Quebec you have disposed of the last gun and last cask of powder.”

“All right.”

“You are sure of the men who are with you?”

“As yourself! And when the guns begin to talk, they will not be behind.”

Jean gave him a number of dollars which he put into his large pouch without counting them. Then there was a general hand-shaking with the cutter’s crew, and Jean returned on board the Champlain, which paid off towards the left bank. And as the cage continued to float down stream there was heard the sonorous voice of Lacasse, beginning again, —

“And at the clear fountain I lay down to rest.”

An hour afterwards the breeze returned with the flowing tide. The Champlain reached the numerous islets which bound the lake of St. Pierre, and coasted the counties of Joliette and Richelieu which lay opposite each other. Then she put in at the river-side villages of Montreal county and the county of Vercheres, where the women had fought so bravely against the Indians in the seventeenth century.

While the cutter stopped for a time, Jean visited the reformist chiefs and acquainted himself with the state of public opinion. Often they spoke to him of Jean-Sans- Nom for whom a reward had been offered. Where was he at the moment? Would he appear when the fight was over? The patriots were reckoning upon him. In spite of the Governor-General’s proclamation, he could come without fear into the county, and there for an hour, for twenty-four hours, all houses would be open to him.

Jean was much affected at these proofs of unshrinking devotion. Yes! He was waited for like a Messiah by the French-Canadians! And then he would restrain himself to answer, —

“I do not know where Jean-Sans-Nom is; but the day will come when he will be where he ought to be.”

About the middle of the night of the 26th of September, the Champlain had reached the southern branch of the St. Lawrence which separates the island of Montreal from the south bank.

The Champlain was near the end of her voyage. In a few days the brothers would lay her up for the winter when the navigation of the river was impracticable. Then Jean and his friends would go to Laprairie county, to the farm of Chipogan, where the family would all meet for the wedding.

Between the island of Montreal and the right bank, the arm of the St. Lawrence is barred by the rapids which are one of the curiosities of the country. There is also a lake like that of St. Pierre, where the Champlain had met the raft of Louis Lacasse. It is called the Saut de Saint Louis, and it is situated opposite Lachine, a small town built above Montreal, and a popular watering-place. It is like a tumultuous sea into which pour the waters of one of the branches of the Ottawa. Thick forests still clothe the right bank around a village of Christianized Iroquois, the Caughnawaga, whose little church raises its modest steeple above the mass of verdure.

In this part of the St. Lawrence, the ascent is very difficult. The descent may be much easier than is desirable, for a wrong movement of the helm might send the boat across the rapids. But the sailors, accustomed to these dangerous passes — particularly the fishermen — are very skilful in manoeuvring on the tumultuous waters. By keeping close to the southern bank and hauling on to a rope, it is not impossible to reach Laprairie, the chief town of the county of that name, where the Champlain was generally laid up for the winter.

About midday the cutter was a little below Lachine. Whence came this name, which is that of a vast Asiatic empire? Simply from the first navigators of the St. Lawrence. When they reached the neighbourhood of the country of the great lakes, they believed they were on the shore of the Pacific Ocean, and consequently not far from the Celestial Kingdom.

The captain of the Champlain steered for the right bank, and he reached it about five o’clock in the evening close to the boundary between Montreal county and Laprairie county.

Then it was Jean said to him, —

“I must go ashore now.”

“Will you not come with us to Laprairie?” asked Pierre.

“No. I must visit Chambly, and by landing at Caughnawaga I shall not have so far to go.”

“There is a great deal of risk in that,” said Pierre. “And I shall not part with you without anxiety. Why do you leave us, Jean? Stay a couple of days with us, and we can go away together as soon as the Champlain is dismantled.”

“I cannot,” said Jean; “I must be at Chambly this very night.”

,” Shall two of us go with you?” asked Pierre.

“No; I must go alone.”

“And you will remain at Chambly?”

“Only a few hours. I expect to be off again before daylight.”

As Jean did not appear desirous of explaining why he must go, Pierre did not insist, and contented himself with adding, —

“Shall we wait for you at Laprairie?

“That is useless. Do what you have to do, and do not be anxious about me.”

“Then we shall meet — ”

“At the farm of Chipogan.”

“You know we ought to be all there during the first week in October?”

“I know.”

“Don’t fail, Jean. Your absence would give much pain to my father, my mother, and all of us. We shall have a family gathering at Chipogan, and as you are a brother, you must be there to make the family complete.”

“I will be there, Pierre.”

Jean shook hands with all the brothers. Then he went into the cabin, and dressed himself as he had been on his visit to the Villa Montcalm. A minute afterwards he had jumped on to the bank, and with an “au revoir” had disappeared under the trees the thick masses of which surrounded the Indian village.

The brothers set to work, and with a great effort hauled their boat up against the stream, taking advantage of the eddies in the shelter of the promontories. At eight o’clock the Champlain was moored in a small creek at the foot of the first houses of Laprairie.

The brothers Harcher had finished their fishing season, and during the six months had sailed 200 leagues down and up the great river.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN ANNIVERSARY.

IT was five o’clock in the afternoon when Jean left the Champlain. He was about three leagues from the village of Chambly, to which he was going.

What was he to do at Chambly? Had he not already finished his propagandist work through the south-western counties before his arrival at the Villa Montcalm? Yes, certainly. But he had not yet visited this parish. Why? No one could have said; he had told no one, and he could scarcely have told himself. He went to Chambly as if he were being attracted there and repelled at the same time, and he was fully cognizant of the battle that was raging within him.

Twelve years had passed since Jean had left the village where he had been born. He had never returned to it. There was no fear of his being recognized. After so long an absence, would he himself have forgotten the street in which stood the house in which he had passed his childhood?

No! These souvenirs of early life could not be effaced from so vivacious a memory. As he came out of the riverside forest he saw himself again among the prairies which he had formerly crossed to the ferry over the St. Lawrence. It was no longer a stranger wandering in the land, but a child of the country. He showed no hesitation in crossing certain fords, in taking certain cross roads, and cutting off certain corners, to shorten his road. And when he reached Chambly he would have no hesitation in recognizing the little square in which stood the paternal house, the narrow read by which he oftenest entered it, the church to which his mother took him, the school where he had begun his studies before he had gone to finish them at Montreal.

Once again Jean wished to see the places he had kept away from for so long. When he was about to risk his head in a desperate struggle an irresistible desire had brought him back to the spot where his miserable existence had commenced. It was not Jean-Sans-Nom visiting the reformists of the county, but the boy returning, perhaps for the last time, to the village where he had been born.

Jean walked quickly, so as to reach Clambly before night and leave it before morning. Absorbed in his painful remembrances, his eyes saw nothing of what would formerly have attracted his attention, neither the elk passing in the woods, nor the birds of a thousand kinds that flitted among the branches, nor the game which ran along the furrows.

A few labourers were still at work in the fields. He turned off, so as not to have to reply to their cordial greeting, desiring to cross the country unobserved and enter Chambly without being seen.

It was seven o’clock when he saw the church-steeple rising among the trees. In little more than a mile he would be there. The sound of the bell was borne to him on the wind. And instead of exclaiming, “Yes, it is I! I, who have returned to what I once loved so well — to my nest — to my cradle!” he was silent, and asked himself in terror, “What have I come to do here?”

However, the interrupted ringing of the bell told him it could not be the Angelus that was ringing. To what service, then, were the faithful of Chambly being summoned at so late an hour?

“So much the better,” said Jean, “they will be at church. I shall not have to pass the open doors; they will not see me; they will not speak to me; and if I do not ask shelter of any one, no one will know that I have been.”

And he continued his journey. But for an instant the idea of returning came to him. No. It was an invincible force which drew him forwards.

As he approached Chambly, Jean looked about him with more attention. Notwithstanding the changes that had taken place in the twelve years, he recognized the houses, the enclosures, and the farms on the skirts of the village.

When he reached the main street he glided along by the houses, whose aspect was so French that it might have been the capital of a bailiwick in the seventeenth century. Here lived a friend of the family, with whom Jean had passed his holidays. There lived the cure of the parish, who had given him his first lessons. Were these worthy men alive? Then a higher building rose on the right. It was the school he had gone to each morning.

The road led him up to the church. The paternal house occupied a corner of the square on the left, with its back overlooking a garden, in which the trees grouped with the belt of trees that surrounded the village. The night was dark. The half-open door of the church allowed a glimpse to be seen within, where a crowd was just visible in the light of the lustre hanging from the roof.

Jean, having lost his fear of being recognized, would have mingled with this crowd. He would have entered the church and taken part in the service, and knelt on the benches where he had used to pray. But at first he felt himself drawn towards the other side of the square, and he turned to the left, and reached the corner where his father’s house used to stand.

He remembered it. All the details returned to him — the gate which shut off the little front garden, the dovecot on the gable to the right, the four windows on the ground floor, the door in the middle, the window to the left on the first floor where he had so often seen his mother among the flowers that framed it. He was fifteen when he had left Chambly for the last time. At that age things are already deeply graven on the memory. Here it was that the house ought to be which had been built by his ancestors at the beginning of the colony — but house there was none!

In its place there was nothing but ruins. Gloomy ruins, not such as time had made, but such as had been made by violence. There could be no mistake. Burnt stones, blackened walls, charred beams, heaps of ashes, white now, and telling of the time when the house had been the prey of the flames!

A horrible thought crossed Jean's mind. Who had lighted the flame? Was it the work of chance or carelessness? Was it the hand of justice?

Irresistibly he was attracted, and he glided among the ruins. He stumbled against some ashes heaped on the ground. A few owls flew off; doubtless no one came there. Why, then, in this most frequented part of the village, had these ruins been allowed to remain? Why, after the fire, had the ground not been cleared?

During the twelve years he had been away Jean had never heard that the house had been destroyed, that it was now but a pile of stones blackened by the fire.

He stood still, full at heart, and thinking of the sorrowful past and the more sorrowful present.

“Eh! What are you doing there, sir?” asked an old man, stopping on his way to church.

Jean did not hear him, and did not reply.

“Hallo!” the old man shouted. “Are you deaf? You must not stop there. If they see you there, you may hear something you won’t like.”

Jean came out of the ruins on to the road, and said to the man, —

“Were you speaking to me?”

“Yes, to you. You must not go in there.”

“And why not?”

“Because the place is accursed.”

“Accursed!” murmured Jean, but in so low a tone that the old man did not hear him.

“You are a stranger here, sir?”

“Yes,” said Jean.

“And you have not been to Chambly for many years?”

“Yes, many years.”

“Then it is not surprising that you do not know. Believe me, it is good advice I am giving you — do not go back into those ruins.”

“And why?”

“Because you can only soil yourself with the cinders. It is the house of a traitor!”

“Of a traitor?”

“Yes, of Simon Morgaz.”

Which the unhappy man knew only too well!

And so, of the house from which his father had been driven twelve years before, of the dwelling which he had wished to see for the last time, and which he thought was still standing, there remained only a few bare walls. And tradition had made the place so infamous that no one dare approach it, and none of the people of Chambly could pass it without a malediction! Twelve years had gene, and in this village, as throughout Lower Canada, there had been no diminution in the horror inspired by the name of Simon Morgaz!

Jean had lowered his eyes, his hands trembled, he felt as though he would faint. Had it not been for the darkness, the old man would have seen the blush of shame overspread his face.

“You are a French-Canadian?”

“Yes,” answered Jean.

“Then you cannot be ignorant of the crime that Simon Margaz committed?”

“Who docs not know it?”

“No one, in truth. You come from the eastern counties, doubtless?”

“Yes — from the east — from New Brunswick.”

“That is a long way off. Perhaps you did not know that the house had been destroyed?”

“No! An accident, probably?”

“Not at all, sir; not at all. It would have been better, perhaps, if it had been destroyed by the fire of Heaven 1

And that will happen some day, for God is just! But we have anticipated His justice! The day after Simon Morgaz had been hunted from Chambly, we burnt down his house. And that his memory might never perish we left the ruins in the state you see. And it is forbidden to go near them; and no one would soil himself with the dust of this house.”

Jean stood motionless, and listened. The animation with which the old man spoke showed that the feeling against all belonging to Simon Morgaz was as violent as ever. Where Jean had come for souvenirs of his family there were only souvenirs of shame.

But as the old man spoke, he drew further and further away from the ruins towards the church. The bell had just ceased its last call. The service was about to begin. The chanting could already be heard, interrupted by long pauses, and the old man said, —

“I must now leave you, sir, unless it is your intention to accompany me into the church. You will hear a sermon that will have much influence hereabouts — ”

“I cannot,” said Jean. “I must be at Laprairie before daylight.”

“Then you have no time to lose, sir. The roads are safe enough. For some time the police have been out day and night, in pursuit of Jean-Sans-Nom, whom, thanks be to Heaven, they have not caught. We think a good deal of that young hero, sir, and if I can believe what rumour says, he will here find all the gallant fellows ready to follow him.”

“As in all the county,” said Jean.

“Much more, sir. Have we not to atone for the shame of having been the neighbours of Simon Morgaz?”

The old man was fond of talking, that was evident. But at last he was really going, had turned to go, when Jean asked him, —

“My friend, perhaps you knew the family of this Simon Morgaz?”

“I did, and well. I am seventy now, and I was fifty-eight at the time of this abominable affair. What has become of him? I don’t know! Perhaps he is dead. Perhaps he has gone to a foreign land, under another name, so that they cannot throw his own in his face! But his wife, his children! Ah! how I pity the poor things! Madame Bridget I used to see so often, always good and kind, though she was not very rich! All the village loved her! What she has had to suffer, poor woman — what she must have suffered!”

How can we describe what was passing in Jean’s mind. Before the ruins of the house, where the last act of the treason had been accomplished, where the companions of Simon Morgaz had been betrayed, to hear the name of his mother, to be reminded of the misery of her life, it was almost more than human nature could bear. Jean must have been a man of extraordinary strength of will to restrain the cry of anguish which rose to his lips.

And the old man continued, —

“And I knew the two sons, sir! They took after her! Ah! the poor boys! Where are they at this moment? Every one here liked them for their frankness and good- heartedness. The elder was more serious and studious, and the younger more playful and determined, taking up the defence of the weak against the strong. His name was Jean. His brother’s was Joann, just the same as that of the young preacher who is to address us tonight.”

“The Abbe Joann?” exclaimed Jean.

“Do you know him?’’

“No. But I have heard of his sermons.”

“Well, sir, if you do not know him, you ought to make his acquaintance. He has come through the western counties, and every one has been rushing to hear him. You will see what enthusiasm he will arouse. If you can delay your departure an hour — ”

“I am with you,” said Jean.

With the old man he entered the church, where they found some trouble in finding scats.

The first prayers had been said, and the preacher had just entered the pulpit. — _

The Abbe Joann was thirty years of age. In his impassioned face, his penetrating look, his full, persuasive, voice, lie resembled his brother, being beardless, like him. In both could be traced the characteristic features of their mother. To see him, or to listen to him, it was easy to understand the influence he had over the crowd attracted by his reputation. As the mouthpiece of the Roman Catholic faith and the national faith, he was an apostle in the true sense of the word, a child of the brave race of the missionaries capable of yielding their lives for their belief.

The Abbe Joann began his sermon. All that he said for his God could, it was evident, be said for his country. His allusions to the state of affairs in Lower Canada were designed to incite his hearers, with whom patriotism only waited an opportunity for declaring itself openly. His gestures, his words, so worked on his hearers, that a murmur ran through the church when he appealed to Heaven for help against the spoilers. His thrilling voice sounded like A trumpet as his arm seemed to lift on high the flag of independence.

Jean, in the shadow, sat and listened. It seemed as though he himself were speaking through his brother's lips. The ideas were the same, the aspirations were the same. Both were working for their country, each in his own way, one with words, the other with deeds, and both ready to sacrifice their lives for the cause.

In these days the Catholic clergy possessed a real influence in Lower Canada, from both a social and intellectual point of view. The priests were looked upon as sacred persons. There was a struggle in progress between the old Catholic beliefs, implanted by the French element in the colony, and the Protestant beliefs which the English sought to introduce among all classes. The Catholics rallied round their cures, and the political movement that sought to wrest the Canadian provinces from English hands received no slight encouragement from this alliance between the clergy and their flock.

The Abbé Joann belonged to the order of Sulpicians. And this order, as the reader may not be aware, had possessed large tracts of land since the early conquest, and drew from them important revenues. Thus it followed that the Sulpicians were one of the most honoured and powerful corporations in Canada, and their priests, as the richest landowners, were the most influential of the inhabitants.

The sermon, or rather the patriotic harangue of the Abbé Joann, lasted three quarters of an hour. It aroused such enthusiasm among the congregation, that had it not been for the sanctity of the place, it would have been greeted with repeated applause. The heart-strings of the people had been stirred by the patriotic appeal. It may be thought strange that the authorities allowed a reformist propaganda to be conducted under the cloak of religion. But it would have been difficult to seize on any sentence clearly appealing for insurrection, and the pulpit enjoyed a liberty which the Government could not lightly interfere with.

The sermon over, Jean remained in a corner of the church while the crowd passed out Would he then recognize the Abbé, clasp him by the hand, exchange a few words with him, before rejoining his companions at the farm of Chipogan? Probably the two brothers had not seen each other for several months, when they had parted each to take up his own side in the work of revolution.

Jean was waiting behind the farthest pillars of the nave, when a violent tumult was heard without. It seemed as though the people were manifesting their angry feelings with extraordinary violence. At the same time there were flashes of light, which even penetrated the church.

The congregation went out, and Jean, carried with them in spite of himself, reached the middle of the square.

What was the matter?

Before the ruins of the traitor’s house a great fire had just been lighted. A few men, who were soon joined by children and some women, were feeding the fire with armfuls of dry wood.

Cries of horror and shouts of hatred rent the air.

“To the fire with the traitor! To the fire with Simon Morgaz!”

And then a figure of a man, clothed in rags, was dragged towards the flames.

Jean understood. The population of Chambly were proceeding to burn Simon in effigy, just as in London they used to burn the effigy of Guy Fawkes.

It was the 27th of September, the anniversary of the day on which Walter Hodge and his companions, Clerc and Farran, had died on the scaffold.

Seized with horror, Jean would have fled. He could not move from the ground, where his feet seemed to be fastened. He looked at his father, overwhelmed with blows and insults, dragged in the mud, a prey to a delirium of hate. And it seemed that all this opprobrium recoiled on him, Jean Morgaz.

At this moment the Abbé Joann appeared. The crowd divided to let him pass.

He also understood the meaning of the popular manifestation. And at the same instant he recognized his brother, whose livid face was lighted by the flames, as a hundred voices shouted the odious date and the infamous name.

The Abbé could not restrain himself. He stretched out his arm, and rushed towards the fire as they were going to hurl the effigy into it.

“In the name of the God of mercy,” said he, “have pity for this unhappy man’s memory! Has not God a pardon for all crimes?”

“Not for the crime of treason against your country, of treason against those who have fought for her!” replied one of the men. And in a moment the fire had devoured the effigy of Simon Morgaz, as it did at each anniversary.

The shouts redoubled, and ceased not till the fire was extinct.

In the gloom no one noticed that Jean and Joann stood hand in hand together, and bowed their heads. And then, without uttering a word, they left the horrible scene, and fled from the village to which they were never to return.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAISON-CLOSE.

Six leagues from Saint Denis lies the town of Saint Charles, on the north bank of the Richelieu in the county of Saint Hyacinthe which adjoins that of Montreal. It is in descending the Richelieu, one of the largest affluents of the St. Laurence, that we reach the little town of Sorel, where the Champlain had put in during her last fishing cruise.

At this time an isolated house stood a few hundred yards this side of the sudden bend made by the main street of Saint Charles.

It was a humble and cheerless-looking dwelling, consisting of only one floor, with a door and two windows facing the small front yard where weeds abounded. As a rule the door was shut; the windows were never open, not even behind open-panelled shutters which were closed over them. If daylight reached the interior, it was only through the two other windows which opened on the garden at the back.

This garden was but a small square patch, surrounded by high walls, festooned with much long pellitory, and having a bordered well in one of the corners. In the small space were a few vegetables, a few fruit trees, pears, nuts and apples, left to the care of nature. A small yard taken from the garden close to the house, contained five or six fowls to furnish the quantity of eggs needed by the daily consumption.

Inside, the house had but three rooms, with only such furniture as was strictly necessary. One of the rooms to the left as you entered, served as a kitchen; the others to the right were bedrooms. The narrow passage which separated them formed the communication between the front door and the garden.

The house was humble and miserable, but it was evident that it was designedly so, and that it was of their own choice that those who lived there, lived in misery and humility. If a mendicant knocked at the door of Maison- Close — as it was called in the town — never was he allowed to depart without a small gift. Maison-Close might well have been called Maison-Charitable, for charity was there to be had at all hours.

Who lived there? A woman, alone, dressed in black, and never without a long widow’s veil. She rarely left the house — once or twice a week, only when some in- indispensable errand obliged her to go, or on Sundays to attend the service. But when she went on her errand, she waited till night, or rather till evening had come, and glided through the dark streets, quickly entered the shop, spoke in a low voice but few words, paid what was asked without attempting to bargain, and returned with her head bowed, her eyes on the ground, like a poor creature who was ashamed of being seen. When she went to church it was at dawn to the first service, and she kept herself apart, in an obscure corner, kneeling as if absorbed in herself. Beneath her veil her immobility was terrible; she would have seemed to be dead if it had not been for the sighs which escaped her. Once or twice some good people would have assisted her, would have offered their services, would have interested themselves in her, would have spoken words of sympathy; but she wrapped herself more closely in her widow’s veil, and recoiled from them as if she were an object of horror.

The inhabitants of Saint Charles knew nothing of this stranger — or rather this recluse. Twelve years before she had arrived in the town to take possession of this house, which had been bought on her account at a very low price, for the people to whom it belonged had been trying to sell it for some time, and had found no applicant.

One day the inhabitants learnt that the new owner had arrived in the night, though none had seen her enter. Who had helped her to remove her scanty furniture, they knew not. Never did anybody enter her house. As she lived then so had she lived ever since her appearance at Saint Charles, in a sort of coenobitic isolation. The walls of Maison-Close were those of a cloister, and no one had been inside them.

But did not the people of the town endeavour to pry into this woman's life, to learn her secret? A first they were rather astonished, and there was some gossip about the owner of Maison-Close. It was supposed this, and it was supposed that. Then they began not to trouble about her. Within her means she seemed charitable to the poor, and that went for much in the esteem of all.

Tall, bent more by grief than age, the stranger seemed to be about fifty. Under the veil which fell almost to her waist was hidden a face which had once been beautiful, a high forehead, and large black eyes. Her hair was quite white, and her look as though it were impregnated with the ineffaceable tears which had filled her eyes for so long. The character of the face, formerly so gentle and smiling, was now one of gloomy energy and implacable will.

But had public curiosity kept careful watch on Maison- Close it would have discovered that it was not absolutely closed to visitors. Three or four times a year, invariably at night, the door was opened to one stranger, sometimes to two, who neglected no precaution in arriving and leaving unseen. Did they remain a few days in the house, or only a few hours? No one could say.

Whenever they left, it was before daylight. There could be no doubt the woman was in communication with some one outside.

It was the 30th of September, 1837, and eleven o’clock at night. The high road after crossing the county of South Hyacinthe from west to cast, passes Saint Charles and runs on.

It was then” deserted. Profound obscurity enwrapped the sleeping town. There was no one to see the two men who came along the road, glided up to the wall of Maison-Close, opened the gate, which was only fastened with a latch, and knocked at the door in a way that was evidently a preconcerted signal.

The door was opened, and shut almost instantly. The two visitors entered the first room to the right, lighted by a night-lamp giving too feeble a light to be seen outside.

The woman seemed in no way surprised at the arrival of these two men. They clasped her in her arms and kissed her forehead with quite filial affection.

They were Jean and Joann. The woman was their mother, Bridget Morgaz.

Twelve years before, after the expulsion of Simon Morgaz, driven away by the people of Chambly, no one had doubted but that the unhappy family had left Canada to expatriate themselves in some part of North or South America or in some distant corner of Europe. The money obtained by the traitor would enable him to live comfortably wherever he might go; and, taking another name, he would escape the contempt which would have pursued him round the world.

As we know, things did not happen in this way. One night Simon Morgaz shot himself, and no one knew that his body lay in some undiscoverable spot on the northern bark of Lake Ontario.

Bridget Morgaz, Jean and Joann saw all the horror of their position. Mother and sons might be innocent of the crime of her husband and their father, but prejudices were such that they would have neither pity nor pardon. In Canada their name would be an object of universal reprobation. They resolved to renounce the name without thinking of taking another. What did they want with a name, poor creatures! when the world had only disgrace for them?

The mother and her sons did not leave the country.

Before leaving Canada, they had a task to fulfil, and this task, even if they gave their lives for it, they all three resolved to accomplish.

It was to repair the wrong Simon Morgaz had done his country. Had it not been for the treason suggested by that hateful tempter, Rip, the plot of 1825 had a good chance of success. Had the Governor-General and the leaders of the British army been carried off, the troops could not have been able to resist the French- Canadians, who would have risen to a man. But an act of infamy had betrayed the secret of the conspiracy, and Canada had remained under the English yoke.

Jean and Joann would resume the work interrupted by their father’s treachery. Bridget, who boldly faced the terrible position, showed them that it ought to be the object of their existence. The brothers, who were then seventeen and eighteen, understood their duty, and devoted themselves entirely to the work of reparation.

Bridget Morgaz resolved to live only on her own private income, and would keep none of the money found in the suicide’s pocket-book. All of it ought to be used for the Reformist cause. It was secretly deposited in the hands of Mr. Nick, at Montreal, under the conditions we know. A part was kept by Jean to be distributed by him to the Reformists. It was thus that in 1851 and 1835 the committees had received the money needful for the purchase of arms and ammunition. In 1837 the balance, which was still considerable, had been sent to the committee at the Villa Montcalm and confided to M. de Vaudreuil.

Bridget had retired to the house at Saint Charles, and there her sons came secretly to see her. For the last few years each had followed a different road to arrive at the same end.

Joann, the eldest, had, under the influence of religious ideas, developed by the bitterness of his position, resolved to be a priest — but a priest militant. He had entered the congregation of the Sulpicians, with the intention of upholding the imprescriptible rights of his country. His natural eloquence, fortified by the most ardent patriotism, attracted the people to him. And in these later days his renown had increased, and he was then at the height of his power.

Jean had taken part in the revolutionary movement not so much by his words as by his deeds. Although rebellion had failed in 1831 and 1835, his reputation had not diminished. Among the masses he was looked upon as the mysterious chief of the Sons of Liberty. We know to what a high place he had risen in the Opposition councils. It seemed as though the cause of independence was in the hands of one man, and that Jean-Sans-Nom, as he called himself, was the only man from whom the patriots were waiting for the signal of a new insurrection.

The hour was at hand. Before making the attempt, Jean and Joann had met by chance at Chambly, and come to Maison-Close to see their mother, perhaps for the last time.

And now they were here with her, seated by her side. They held her lizards; they spoke to her in a low voice. Jean and Joann told her how things stood. The struggle would be terrible, like every supreme struggle.

Bridget, imbued with the sentiments with which their hearts were full, gave herself over to the hope that at last their father's crime would be atoned for by her sons.

“My Jean, my Joann,” she said, “I want to share your hopes, to believe in your success.”

Yes, mother,” said Jean, “you must believe in it. In a few days the movement will have begun — ”

“And may God give us the triumph a sacred cause deserves!” added Joann.

“May God help us!” said Bridget. “And perhaps I shall at last have the right to pray for — ”

Up to then never had a prayer escaped the lips of this unhappy woman for the soul of him who had been her husband.

“Mother,” said Joann, “mother — ”

“And you, my son,” said Bridget, “have you prayed for your father, you, a priest of the God who pardons?”

Joann bowed his head, and did not reply.

Bridget resumed, —

“My sons, up to now you have both done your duty; but do not forget that you have only done your duty. And if our country owes to you the day of its independence, the name you formerly bore, the name of Morgaz — ”

“Exists no longer!” said Jean. There is no rehabilitation possible for it. You can no more restore it to honour than you can restore to life the men whom our father’s treason sent to the scaffold. What Joann and I are doing is not that the infamy attached to our name may disappear. That is impossible! It is not a bargain of that sort we would conclude. Our efforts are to repair the wrong done to our country, not the wrong done to ourselves. Is that not so, Joann?”

“Yes,” said the young priest. “If God can pardon, I know man cannot. Our name will always be a hateful one.”

“But cannot it be forgotten?” asked Bridget, kissing her sons on their foreheads, as if she would efface the indelible stigma.”

“Forgotten!” exclaimed Jean. “Go to Chambly, and you’ll see if it is forgotten.”

“Jean,” said Joann. “Be silent!”

“No, Joann. Our mother ought to know. She has strength enough to hear all, and I would not leave her the hope that rehabilitation is possible.”

And Jean, in a low voice and in broken speech, told her what had happened at Chambly.

Bridget listened without even a tear rising to her eyes. She could not even weep.

But was it, then, true that hope there was none? Was »t possible that the remembrance of the treason was unforgettable, and that the responsibility of the crime would descend to the innocent? Was it written in the human conscience that the stain on the family name could never be effaced?

For some minutes not a word was exchanged between the mother and her sons. They did not even look at one another. Their hands parted; they suffered terribly. Everywhere, as at Chambly, they were pariahs, outlaws, repulsed by society, under the ban of humanity.

About three o’clock Jean and Joann began to think of leaving their mother. They must go without the risk of being seen. They intended to separate as they left the town. They must not be seen together on the road by which they crossed the country. No one must know that that night the door of Maison-Close had opened to the only visitors who ever crossed it.

The brothers rose. At the moment of a separation which might be eternal they felt how strong was the tie which bound them together. Fortunately, Bridget was unaware that a reward had been offered for Jean’s apprehension. Although Joann was not ignorant of this, the terrible news had not yet reached his mother’s solitude. Jean said nothing of it to his mother. What was the good of adding to her sorrows? And had not Bridget cause enough to fear that she would never see her son again?

The moment of separation had come.

“Where are you going, Joann?” asked Bridget.

“Into the southern parishes,” said the young priest. “There I will wait to rejoin my brother when he is at the head of the patriots.”

“And you, Jean?”

“I am going to the farm of Chipogan, in the county of Laprairie. There I will rejoin my companions, and concert the final measures — amid those family joys which are denied to us, mother. Those gallant fellows have received me like a son. They will give their lives for mine. But if they knew who I was, if they knew the name I bear! Ah! wretches that we are, whose contact is defilement! But they shall not know it, neither they nor any one else.”

Jean had fallen back into the chair, with his head in his hands, overwhelmed beneath the weight which every day lay more heavily on him.

“Arise!” said Joan. “That is the expiation! Be strong enough to suffer! Arise, and let us go!”

“Where shall I see you again?” asked Bridget. “Not here any more,” said Jean. “If we win, we win all three leave the country. We will go far away where no one will recognize us. If we give our country her independence, it must never be known that she owes it to the sons of Simon Morgaz.”

“And if all is lost?” asked Bridget. “Then, mother, you will not see us again, in this country or in any other. We shall be dead!”

The brothers threw themselves for the last time into Bridget’s arms. The door opened and shut again.

Jean and Joann walked for about a hundred yards together, and then they separated after a last look at Maison-Close, where the mother was praying for her sons.

CHAPTER X.

THE FARM OF CHIPOGAN

The farm of Chipogan was about seven leagues from THE town of Laprairie, in the county of that name. It occupied a gentle rise in the ground on the right bank of a small tributary of the St. Lawrence. By repute it was a fine property, extending over some four hundred acres, belonging to M. de Vaudreuil, and rented by Thomas Harcher.

In front of the house, and along the stream, lay a vast chessboard of prairie, in quite a triumph of geometrical design, squares upon squares all duly fenced, and in flourishing cultivation. The soil was a rich black mould, three or four feet thick, resting on a bed of clay, as is usually the case in the district all the way up to the slopes of the Laurentides.

In the square fields, which were in the highest state of cultivation, grew different kinds of such cereals as are common in Central Europe. Behind the house, and extending to the hilly woodland which closed the view, lay a wide stretch of rich pasture, which served as the grazing-ground of the usual domestic animals and several horses of the vigorous Canadian breed so esteemed by the Americans.

The forest once covered all the country bordering on the St. Lawrence from its estuary to the great lakes. But what vast clearings have been made in them by the hand of man! What superb trees, rising a hundred and fifty feet in the air, are still falling under the thousands of axes which trouble the silence of the mighty woods where the birds swarm in myriads! The lumbermen find profitable but regrettable work in felling the oaks, maples, ashes, chestnuts, aspens, birches, elms, walnuts, hernbeams, pines and firs, which, sawn and trimmed, go to form the strings of rafts that descend the river. If, at the end of the eighteenth century, Cooper's hero — Natty Bumppo, Hawk- eye, the Deerslayer, or the Leatherstocking — could regret the massacre of the trees, what would he have said to the pitiless destroyers who exhaust the fecundity of the soil by their reckless waste?

But this reproach could not apply to the lessee of Chipogan. Thomas Harcher knew what he was about, and his men served him well. His farm worthily bore the reputation of being a model of scientific cultivation at a time when Canadian agriculture was two centuries behind the age.

The farm of Chipogan then was one of the best in the district of Montreal. The rotation of crops saved the land from impoverishment. The fruit trees in the large kitchen garden were of the different kinds that flourish in Europe, and they were cut and pruned, and trained with care. All of them fruited well except, perhaps, the apricot and the peach, which succeed better in the south of Ontario than in the province of Quebec. But the others did honour to the grower, particularly the apples which were of the "famous "sort with red translucent flesh. With regard to the vegetables, the red cabbages, pumpkins, melons, sweet potatoes, bluets — the name given to the blackish bilberries eaten at dessert — there were gathered enough, twice a week, to supply the market at Laprairie. In short, with the hundreds of bushels of cereals, the crop of fruit and vegetables, and the thinning of the few acres of forest, the farm was a profitable investment for M. de Vaudreuil, and there was no likelihood that in Thomas Harcher's hands it would become exhausted, and sink into a mere waste of weeds and briars.

The Canadian climate is well suited for agriculture. In place of rain it has the snow which falls from the end of November to the end of March, and protects the green carpet of the fields. The keen dry cold is preferable to continual rain storms. In no part of the temperate zone is vegetation so rapid; the corn sown in March is ripe in August, and the hay is made in June and July.

The farm buildings were grouped within a fence of palisades, twelve feet high. A gate with stone pillars gave the sole means of access — an arrangement due to the time when precautions had to be taken against Indian attacks. At the time of my story the Indians were living on good terms with the colonists. And two leagues to the eastward, at the village of Walhatta, there was prospering the Huron tribe of Mahogannis, who often visited Thomas Harcher to exchange the spoils of the chase for the products of the farm.

The principal building consisted of a two-storey house, quite square, containing the number of rooms required by Harcher's family. A large room occupied the greater part of the ground floor between the kitchen and the larder on one side, and the apartment specially reserved for the farmer, his wife and younger children on the other.

In the yard in front of the house, and behind abutting on the kitchen garden, stood the outhouses extending up to the palisades. There were the stables, cattle-sheds and stores; the houses and runs of the American rabbits whose skins woven in strips yield an extremely warm fabric, and the poultry yard with the prairie hens, who multiply more abundantly in the domesticated than in the wild state.

The large room on the ground floor was simply but comfortably furnished with articles of American manufacture. It was there that the family had their meals and passed their evenings, the gathering place for the Harchers of all ages, who liked to be together when the day's work was over. We need not be astonished at finding that a library of books held the first place, and that the second was occupied by a piano, to the music of which every Sunday the boys and girls danced French waltzes and quadrilles with much enthusiasm.

The work of the farm required a large staff. But Thomas Harcher found enough hands in those of his own family, and not a single hired servant was employed.

The farmer was then in his fiftieth year. A French- Canadian by birth, he was a descendant of those hardy fishermen who had settled in Nova Scotia the century before. He was the perfect type of the Canadian settlers, who are not called peasants but “habitants” in North America. Tall, broad-shouldered, powerful in body and limbs, a strong head, greyish hair, keen-sighted, with we’ll set teeth and a large mouth, which looked as though it could deal with an ample supply of food, and a good- tempered, frank physiognomy, he had made many firm friends in the neighbouring parishes. And he was an implacable enemy of the English.

He would have sought in vain throughout the valley of the St. Lawrence for a better companion than his wife, Catherine. She was then about forty-five, as strong as her husband, and as young as he was in body and mind, a little rough, perhaps, in features and bearing, but good-natured and brave, and in fact quite the “mother “as he was the “father,” in every acceptation of the word. They were an excellent couple, and so healthy that they promised to live to a hundred, for the Canadian climate is very favourable to longevity.

One reproach, perhaps, might be levelled at Catherine Harcher, a reproach, however, that she shared with all the women of the district, who are excellent housekeepers on condition that their husbands clean the house, make the beds, lay the table, pluck the fowls, milk the rows, churn the butter, peel the potatoes, light the fire, wash the crockery, dress the children, scrub the furniture, and do the washing. However, Catherine did not push to the extreme that spirit of domination which makes the husband the; lave of the wife in most of the French-Canadian houses. To be just, it should be said that she did her share of the daily work. Nevertheless Thomas Harcher willingly submitted to her wishes and whims, and a fine family she had given him, ranging from Pierre, the first-born, down to the last baby, aged only a few weeks, who was soon to be christened. In Canada the fruitfulness of marriage is really extraordinary. Families of twelve and fifteen are quite common. Those of twenty are not rare, and even those of twenty-five are occasionally heard of. It is not so much the family as the tribe which is developed under the influence of the patriarchal customs.

If Ishmael Bush, Fennimore Cooper’s old pioneer in The Prairie, could point with pride to his seven sons, without counting his daughters, the issue of his marriage with the robust Esther, with what a feeling of superiority he would have been overwhelmed by Thomas Marcher, who was the father of twenty-six children, all very much alive at the farm of Chipogin!

fifteen sons and eleven daughters, of all ages within a few weeks of thirty. Of the fifteen sons four were married; and of the eleven girls two were married, and with the seventeen grandchildren of their marriages and their mothers and fathers, the Harcher family numbered just fifty-two in the direct line!

The five eldest we know. They formed the crew of the Cham plain, the devoted companions of Jean. We need not give the names of the other children, or say anything about their peculiarities of character. Sons, daughters, grandsons and granddaughters never left the farm. They worked at it under the direction of their chief. Some were in the fields, where work never failed them. Some were in the woods, employed as lumbermen, and they had plenty to do. Two or three went hunting in the forests near Chipogan, and furnished the game for the large family table. In these woods there still abounded elk, cariboo — a kind of large reindeer — bison, deer, roebuck, without mentioning the diversity of smaller game, furred and feathered, divers, wild geese, ducks, woodcock, snipe, partridges, quail and plover.

Pierre Harcher and his brothers, Remy, Michael, Tony and Jacques, when the cold obliged them to abandon the waters of the St. Lawrence, came to winter at the farm, and took to hunting for furs. They were among the most intrepid and indefatigable of backwoodsmen, and sent their more or less valuable furs to the markets at Montreal and Quebec. At that time, black bears, lynxes, wild cats, martens, badgers, minks, foxes, beavers, ermine”, otters, and musk rats had not gone off towards the north, and there was a good trade in furs, for it was not necessary to travel in search of them to the distant shores of Hudson’s Bay.

To lodge all this family of children and grandchildren quite a barracks was required, and the huge square building contained in addition a few spare rooms for the guests that Thomas Harcher occasionally received, county friends, farmers of the vicinity, and voyageurs who worked the rafts down the tributaries to the main river. And there were rooms reserved for M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter when he came to visit the farmer’s family.

It was on the 5th of October that M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter arrived. It was not only a business relationship which united M. de Vaudreuil and Thomas Harcher, it was a reciprocal affection of friendship on one side and devotion on the other, which had not failed for many years. And much were they bound together by their politics, for the farmer and his master were devoted body and soul to the reformist cause.

The family was now complete. Three days before Pierre and his brothers had left the cutter dismantled at the quay of Laprairie, and taken up their winter quarters at the farm. There was absent only the adopted son, who was not the least loved of the dwellers at Chipogan.

But Jean was expected during the day. If Jean did not arrive, he must have fallen into the hands of the emissaries of Rip, and the news of his arrest would soon have spread throughout the country.

The time was not far distant when the lord of the manor was the godfather of all the children of his copyholders, which might be counted by hundreds. M. de Vaudreuil had up to the present only stood for two of the farmer’s family. This time it was Clary who was to be godmother to the twenty-sixth child, and Jean was to be godfather. And the girl was pleased at this bond which united them for a few short moments.

It was not only for a christening, however, that the farm of Chipogan was to make holiday.

When Thomas Harcher received his five sons, “My boys,” he said, “you are welcome. You have come at a good time.”

“As we always do, father,” said Jacques.

“No better than always. To-day we are united for the christening of the last baby. To-morrow there is the first communion of Clement and Cecile, and the day after there is the wedding of your sister Rose with Bernard Miquelon.”

“Things are flourishing in our family!” said Tony.

“Yes, not bad, my boys,” said the farmer, “and it is not unlikely that next year I shall call you together on an exactly similar occasion.”

And Thomas Harcher laughed a sonorous laugh, while Catherine embraced the five manly boys.

The christening was to take place at three o’clock in the afternoon. As soon as Jean came they would go in procession to the parish church, rather more than half a mile away.

Thomas, his wife, his sons, his daughters, his sons-in-law, and his daughters-in-law, and his grandchildren, had all put on their best clothes for the occasion, and seemingly would not put them off again for the next three days. The daughters had white bodices and glaringly coloured skirts, with their hair floating over their shoulders. The sons had put off their working waistcoats and Norman caps, and wore their Sunday costume of black hooded cloak, parti-coloured belt, and shoes of plaited cowskin.

The evening before M. and Mdlle. de Vaudreuil had taken the boat to cross the St. Lawrence opposite Laprairie, and had been met by Thomas Harcher, who had brought them on in the buggy.

On the way M. de Vaudreuil had warned the farmer that he must be on his guard. The police were sure to know he had left the Villa Montcalm, and it was possible that he was the object of special surveillance.

“We will keep our eyes open, master,” said Harcher, in whose use of the word there was nothing servile.

“Up to the present you have seen nothing suspicious in the neighbourhood?”

“Not even a Canouache!” such being the term of contempt by which he spoke of certain Indians in the west.

“And your adopted son,” said Clary, “has he arrived at the farm?”

“Net yet; and that makes me anxious.”

“Since he left his companions at Laprairie you have had no news?”

“None.”

And since the visitors had been installed in the two best rooms of the farm, Jean had not come. However, everything had been prepared for the ceremony of baptism, and if the godfather did not arrive during the afternoon they would not know what to do.

Pierre and two or three of the others had gone a good league on the road to meet him. But Jean had not been there, and twelve o’clock was just about to strike.

Thomas and Catherine were talking together on the subject.

“What shall we do, if he docs not come before three o’clock?” asked the farmer.

“We will wait!” said Catherine.

“What will we wait for?”

“Well, not for the arrival of our twenty-seventh!” said the lady.

. “And how many more?”

“You are merry, Monsieur Harcher.”

“I am not merry! But if Jean is too late, we may have to do without him.”

“Do without him!” exclaimed Catherine. “Not at all. I told him he should be godfather to one of our children, and we will wait till he comes.”

“But if he does not come?” asked Thomas, who did not understand the christening being put off indefinitely. “If something has happened to make it impossible for him to come — ”

“No evil prophesying, Thomas,” said Catherine. “If we do not christen to-day, we can christen to-morrow, I suppose?”

“Well, to morrow is the first communion of Clement and Cecile, our sixteenth and seventeenth!”

“Well, the day after?”

“That is the wedding of Rose with Bernard Miquelon!”

“That is enough, Thomas! We can do them all at once if necessary. But when a baby has the chance of having a godfather like Jean, and a godmother like Mademoiselle Clary, we need not be in a hurry to get others in their place!”

“And the curé has been told!” said Thomas to his intractable better half.

“That is my business,” said Catherine. “Our curé is an excellent man, and he shall not lose his fee; and he would not like to disoblige clients like us!”

And in truth there were few of his parishioners who gave him so much to do as Thomas and Catherine.

As time went by the anxiety grew greater. If the Harchers did not know that their adopted son was Jean- Sans-Nom, the Vaudreuils did, and were in great (ear about him.

And they asked Pierre Harcher under what circumstances Jean had left the Champlain.

“It was at the village of Caughnawaga that we landed him,” said Pierre.

“On what day?”

“On the 26th of September, about five in the afternoon.”

“Then he has been away for nine days?” said M. de Vaudreuil.

“Yes, nine days!”

“And he did not say what he was going to do?”

“His intention,” said Pierre, “was to visit the county of Chambly, where we had not been during the whole of our fishing cruise.”

“Yes, that is a reason,” said M. de Vaudreuil. “But I am sorry he ventured alone in a place where the police are sure to be on the watch.”

“I offered to let Jacques and Tony go with him,” said Pierre; “but he refused.”

“And what is your idea about it all?” asked Clary.

“My idea is that Jean had long intended to go to Chambly, but said nothing about it to us. As we had agreed to land at Laprairie and return together to the farm, he did not tell us until we were off Caughnawaga.”

“And when he went away, did he promise to come here for the christening?”

“Yes,” said Pierre; “he knew he was to hold the baby with you, and that without him the family would not Le complete.”

After this formal promise the only thing to do was to wait.

But if the day went by and Jean did not appear, alarm would be justifiable. For a resolute man such as he was not to appear on the appointed day meant that the police had got hold of him. And then, as M. and Mdlle de Vaudreuil knew only too well, he was lost.

At this moment the gate in the fence opened, and a savage appeared.

A savage — for in Lower Canada all Indians are so called, even in official documents.

The savage was a Huron, and of pure race — as was obvious from his beardless face, his prominent cheekbones, his small sparkling eyes. His tall stature, his quick, penetrating glance, the colour of his skin, the fashion of his hair, made him an unmistakable type of the indigenous American.

The Huron was clothed almost in the Canadian manner. He belonged to the tribe of the Mahogannis, who occupied a village of fourteen or fifteen fires in the north of the county. The tribe, as we have said, had frequent dealings with the farmer of Chipogan.

“What is the matter, Huron?” asked Thomas Harcher as the Indian advanced and solemnly shook hands.

“Will Thomas Harcher reply to the question I will ask him?” replied the Huron, in the guttural tone peculiar to his race.

“And why not,” asked the farmer, “if my reply will be of interest to you?”

“Then my brother will listen, and judge what he ought to say.”

By this one form of speech, in which the savage asks in the third person, with the most dignified air, for probably some very simple reply, there can be recognized the descendant of the four great nations who formerly possessed the territory of North America. They were divided into Algonquins, Hurons, Montagnais, and Iroquois, who comprised the tribes of Mohawks, Oncidas, Onondagas, Tuscaroras, Delawares, Mohicans, which one chiefly meets with in the works of Fenimore Cooper. Really there remain but the scattered fragments of the ancient races.

After a short silence, the Indian, with an imposing gesture, resumed: —

“My brother knows the notary, Nicholas Sagamore, of Montreal?”

“I have that honour.”

“Is he not coming to the farm of Chipogan?”

“That is true.”

“Can my brother inform me if Nicholas Sagamore has arrived?”

“Not yet,” said Thomas Harcher. “We do not expect him till to-morrow to draw up the marriage settlements between my daughter Rose and Bernard

Miquelon.”

“I thank my brother for the information.”

“Have you an important communication for Mr. Nick?”

“Very important,” replied the Huron. “To-morrow the warriors of my tribe will leave our village of Walhatta and come to visit him.”

“You will be welcome at Chipogan,” said Thomas Harcher.

And thereupon the Indian stretched out his hand to the farmer and solemnly retired.

A quarter of an hour afterwards the gate was again opened. This time it was Jean, whose arrival was welcomed with shouts of joy.

Thomas and Catherine Harcher, their children and grandchildren, rushed on to him, and it took him some time to reply to the greetings of all those who were so pleased to see him again.

Time was pressing, and M. de Vaudreuil, Clary and Jean could only exchange a few words. But as they were to pass three days at the farm together, they would have leisure enough to talk over affairs later on. Thomas Harcher and his wife were in a hurry to get to the church. They did not want to keep the curé waiting. The godfather and godmother were ready, and it was time to start.

“Let us get away,” said Catherine, who had been going from one to the other, scolding and ordering them about. “Come along, my son,” she said to Jean; “give your arm to Mademoiselle Clary. And Thomas? where is Thomas? There will be no end to this! Where is Thomas?”

“Here I am, wife.”

“You have got to carry the baby.”

“All right.”

“And don’t let it fall.”

“All right. I have carried twenty-five to the curé, and now I’ve got in the way of it.”

That’ll do!” said Catherine, interrupting him. “Be The procession left the farm in the following order: — At the head was Thomas, with the baby in his arms, and Catherine close by. M. de Vaudreuil, his daughter, and Jean came next; then followed the family of three generations, in which the ages had become so intermixed that the baby just born had many nephews and nieces older than himself among the children of his brothers and sisters.

It was a bright, sunshiny day, but at this time of the year the temperature would have been rather low if the sun had been hidden by the clouds. The procession passed under the trees, along the winding footpath at the end of which rose the spire of the church. A carpet of dry leaves covered the ground. The autumnal tints were thick on the chestnuts, birches, oaks, beeches, aspens, which here and there had their branches bare, while the firs and pines still retained their foliage of green.

As the procession passed on, several friends of Thomas Harcher, farmers in the neighbourhood, joined in. And it was quite a hundred strong when it reached the church, including a few strangers who had been attracted by curiosity.

Among the strangers, Pierre Harcher noticed a man whose manner seemed suspicious. Evidently he had come from a distance. Pierre had never seen him before, and it seemed to him that the intruder was taking stock of the farmer's family.

Pierre had good reason to mistrust the man. He was one of the police-officers who had received orders to keep an eye on M. de Vaudreuil since his departure from the Villa Montcalm. Rip, engaged in searching for Jean-Sans- Nom, whom he believed to be hidden in the suburbs of Montreal, had sent off the man with orders to watch not only M. de Vaudreuil, but also the Harcher family, whose reformist opinions were known to him.

As they walked side by side, M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter and Jean talked over the reasons of Jean's delay in reaching the farm.

"I heard from Pierre," said Clary, "that you had left him to go to Chambly and the parishes in the vicinity."

"Quite so," said Jean.

"Did you come here straight from Chambly?"

"No; I had to go into the county of St. Hyacinthe, and I could not get back at once, as I had hoped. I had to go a long way round — "

"Were the police on your track?" asked M. de Vaudreuil.

"Yes," said Jean; "but I was able with a little difficulty to again escape them."

"Every hour of your life you are in danger," said Mdlle de Vaudreuil. "There is not a moment but your friends tremble for you. Since you left the

Villa Montcalm our anxiety has been unceasing.”

“That,” said Jean, “is why I am so eager to end this life which I have to fight for so unceasingly, so eager to act in broad daylight face to face with the foe! Yes! the time has come when the battle should begin! But at this moment let us forget the future for the present. This is a truce, a halt before the battle! Here, Monsieur de Vaudreuil, I am only the adopted son of this brave and honest family.”

The procession had arrived, and the little church could hardly hold the crowd.

The curé was on the threshold, near the modest stone vase which served for the baptismal ceremonies of the many new-comers of the parish.

Thomas Harcher presented, not without some pride, the twenty-sixth offspring of his marriage with the no less proud Catherine. Clary de Vaudreuil and Jean stood side by side while the curé went through the usual ceremony.

“And you name this child?” asked the curé.

“Jean, like his godfather!” said Thomas Harcher, holding out his hand to the young man.

One of the ancient customs of France still exists in the towns and villages of Lower Canada. In the rural parishes the Catholic clergy are supported by the so-called tithes, but the tithe there is the twenty-sixth of the fruit and crops of the land, and by a strange tradition this twenty- sixth is not confined to the crops alone.

And so Thomas Harcher was not astonished, when the baptism was over, to hear the curé say, in a loud voice, —

“This child belongs to the Church, Thomas Harcher. He may be the godson of the godfather and godmother you have chosen, but he is my pupil! Are not children the fruit of the family? As you have given me the twenty- sixth of your corn harvest, so is the twenty-sixth of your children given to the Church this day!”

“We recognize your right,” replied Thomas Harcher, “and my wife and I submit to it with good grace.”

The child was then taken to the vicarage, where it was received in triumph.

Henceforth, by the tradition of the tithe, little Jean belonged to the Church, and as such he would be brought up at the expense of the parish.

And when the procession was formed to return to the farm of Chipogan there was cheering again and again in honour of Thomas and Catherine Harcher.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST OF THE SAGAMORES.

Next day the ceremonies were resumed. There was another procession to the church, with a similar reception in going, and a similar gathering on the return.

Young Clement and Cecil Harcher, the one in his black coat, looking like a little man, the other in her white dress looking like a little bride, figured among the first communicants from the neighbouring farms. If the other “habitants “were not as rich in offspring as Thomas Harcher of Chipogan, yet they had a very respectable number of olive branches. The county of Laprairie was quite crowded with the blessings of the Lord, and could vie with the most prolific villages of Nova Scotia.

This day Pierre saw no more of the stranger whose presence had given him some anxiety the day before. The detective had disappeared. Had he suspected anything with regard to Jean-Sans-Nom? Had he gone to report to his chief at Montreal?

When the family returned to the farm, their chief business was to do justice to the luncheon. Everything was ready, thanks to the multiple directions Thomas Harcher had received from Catherine. He had to see after the table, the kitchen, the cellar, with the help of his sons be it understood, who had their share of the maternal scoldings.

“It is well for them to get used to it,” said Catherine. “It will come more natural to them when they have a house of their own.”

And it really was an excellent apprenticeship.

But if the luncheon of the day took a deal of seeing after, what about that of the morrow? A table to be laid for a hundred? Yes! that was the number, reckoning the friends of the bridegroom. And we must not forget Mr. Nick and his second clerk, who would attend for the signing of the settlements. An incomparable wedding in which Farmer Harcher came into rivalry with Farmer Gamache, of Cervantesque memory!

But that was to take place to-morrow. To-day all that could be done was to welcome the notary. One of the Harchers had gone off to Laprairie to bring him at three o’clock with the buggy.

Catherine remembered that Mr. Nick was a hearty eater as well as a man of taste, and she did not expect that his food would be quite to his liking.

“It will be all right,” said the farmer. “You can take things quietly, Catherine.”

“I shall not take things quietly,” said Catherine. “There is sure to be something wanting at the last moment, and I won’t hear of that if I can help it.”

Thomas Harcher went his way saying to himself, —

“Excellent woman! A little fussy undoubtedly. She won’t hear of this! And she won’t hear of that! And yet she isn’t at all deaf nevertheless!”

M. de Vaudreuil and Clary had had a long conversation with Jean regarding his journey through the counties of Lower Canada. They told Jean the state of affairs in Montcalm county since his departure. Farran, Clerc, and Hodge had frequently been to the Villa as also had the advocate Gramont, who had then gone to Quebec to interview the chief deputies of the opposition.

After luncheon M. de Vaudreuil had gone in the buggy to confer with the president of Laprairie County and return with the notary.

His daughter and Jean accompanied him along the lovely road from Chipogan, shaded with huge elms, which bordered a little stream running into the St. Lawrence. He had started before the buggy, and was not overtaken till he was half a league from the farm. He took his scat by Pierre Harcher and soon disappeared at a rapid trot.

Jean and Clary returned through the shady tranquil woods that lay beside the stream. They had a clear road among the underwood and beneath the branches, which in Canadian forests grow upwards. From time to time the axe of the lumberman resounded as it struck the tree trunks. The reports of a gun were heard in the distance, and occasionally a couple of deer would appear amid the bushes, which they would clear at a bound. But hunters and woodcutters remained hidden in the thickets, and it was through a profound solitude that Clary and Jean walked slowly towards the farm.

They were soon to separate. Where and when would they see each other again? Sore were their hearts at the thought of the coming parting.

“Do you think you will soon come back to the Villa Montcalm?” asked Clary.

“M. de Vaudreuil’s house will be carefully watched,” said Jean. “And for his sake it would be better. I should keep our friendship secret.”

“But you are not going to take refuge in Montreal?”

“No, although it would be easy to avoid pursuit in so large a town. I should be safer with Vincent Hodge, or Farran or Clerc than in the Villa Montcalm.”

“But not more welcome!”

“I know that, and I never shall never forget that during the few days I spent with you, your father and you treated me like a son, like a brother!”

“And so we ought to do,” said Clary. “To be united by the fame sentiments is to be united by the same blood. It sometimes seems to me as though you were always one of our family. And now if you are alone in the world — ”

“Alone in the world,” repeated Jean, hanging his head. “Yes — alone - alone.”

“Well, after the triumph of our cause our house will be yours! But meanwhile, I understand you require a safer retreat than the Villa Montcalm. You will find it, for where is the habitant who would shut the door against a fugitive?”

“Nowhere that I know of,” said Jean, “and there is not one who would betray me.”

“Betray you!” exclaimed Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil. “No! the time for treason has passed! In all Canada we shall never again see a Simon Morgaz!”

The name uttered with such horror made the blush rise to the young man’s forehead, and he had to turn away to hide his emotion. Clary had not noticed it; but when he returned his face betrayed such suffering that she asked anxiously, —

“What is the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” he said, “nothing. Palpitation to which I am occasionally subject! It seemed as though my heart would burst. It is now over!”

Clary looked at him as if to read his innermost thoughts.

To change the conversation, he continued, —

“The best thing for me would be to take refuge in one of the neighbouring countries where I can remain in communication with M. de Vaudreuil and his friends.”

“But without going far from Montreal?”

“No. For probably it will be in the neighbouring parishes that the insurrection will break out. Besides it does not matter much where I go.”

“Perhaps,” said Clary, “the farm of Chipogan might still be the safest place.”

“Perhaps.”

“It would be difficult to discover your retreat among the farmer’s numerous family.

“Probably, but if it were discovered, it might have serious consequences for Thomas Harcher I He does not know that I am Jean-Sans-Nom, on whose head a price has been set.”

“Do you think, then,” said Clary, “if you were to tell him that he would hesitate.”

“No, certainly not,” said Jean. “He and his sons are patriots. I have seen that clearly enough while we were engaged on our propagandist campaign together. But I would not have Thomas Harcher a victim to his affection for me. And if the police were to find me with him, they would arrest him. I would rather give myself up.”

“Give yourself up!” murmured Clary, in a voice that sorrowfully declared her anguish of mind.

Jean bowed his head. He understood only too well the nature of the feelings to which he had given way almost in spite of himself. He felt the chain that was binding him more and more closely to Chry de Vaudreul. But could he love the girl? The love of a son of Simon Morgaz! What opprobrium! And what treason, too, for he could never tell the name of the family from which he came! No! He must flee away and never see her again!

When he was himself again, he said, —

“To-morrow night I shall leave the farm of Chipogan, and I shall not appear again until the hour of the struggle. Then I shall have no need of concealment!”

His features grew animated for a moment, and then resumed their usual calm.

Clary looked at him with an indefinable expression of sorrow. She would have known something of his former life. But how could she ask him without paining him by some indiscreet question?

However, after giving him her hand, which he only just touched, she said, —

“Jean, pardon me if my sympathy for you makes me put aside a reserve I ought perhaps to retain. There is a mystery in your life — a past of misfortune! You have suffered much?”

“Much!” said Jean.

And as if the avowal had escaped him unawares, he immediately added, —

“Yes, much, because I have not been able to give my country that which she has the right to expect from me.”

“The right to expect,” said Clary, “the right to expect from you?”

“Yes, from me,” said Jean, “as from all Canadians, whose duty it is to sacrifice themselves to give their country her independence.”

Clary saw well enough that there was a load of misery hidden under this burst of patriotism. She would have known what it was to share it, to lighten it, perhaps! But how could she if Jean persisted in these evasive replies?

“Jean,” she said, “I hope the national cause will triumph! The triumph will be chiefly due to your devotion, your courage, the ardour with which you have inspired its partisans. You will have a right to their recognition.”

“Their recognition, Clary de Vaudreuil?” said Jean, starting suddenly. “No! never!”

‘“Never? If the French Canadians to whom you have given liberty demand that you remain at their head.”

“I should refuse!”

“You could not!”

“I should refuse, I tell you!” in a tone so positive that Clary remained silent. But more gently lie added, —

“Clary de Vaudreuil, we cannot read the future. I hope that events will turn to. the advantage of our cause. But it would be better for me to die in defending it.”

“To die! you!” exclaimed Clary, her eyes filling with tears, “to die, Jean! And your friends?”

“Friends? My friends? “.

And his expression was that of some miserable wretch, who throughout an opprobrious life had been put under the ban of humanity.

“Jean,” said Clary, “you have had much trouble in the past, and you are in trouble now! And what makes your position all the more sad is that you cannot, or rather will not, confide in any one, not even in me, who would so willingly share in your trouble. Well, I can wait, and I ask you only to believe in my friendship.”

“Your friendship!” murmured Jean; and he took a step backwards as if even his friendship might disgrace her.

But were not the only consolations that could help him support his horrible existence those he would find in the friendship of Clary de Vaudreuil? While he was at the Villa Montcalm he had felt his heart full of the ardent sympathy with which he had inspired her, and which he felt for her. But, no! it was impossible! Unhappy man! If ever Clary learnt whose son he was, she would repulse him with horror! A Morgaz! And as he had told his mother, if he and Joann survived this last attempt, they would disappear! Yes, once their duty was accomplished, the dishonoured family would go far away, so far away that people would never hear of them again.

Silently and sadly Clary and Jean returned together to the farm.

About four o’clock there was a great uproar at the gate. The buggy was returning, signalled from afar by the shouts of joy with which the guests welcomed the arrival of M. de Vaudreuil, Mr. Nick, and his young clerk.

What a welcome they gave to the notary!

“Mr. Nick! How do you do, Mr. Nick?” exclaimed the elders, while the younger members of the family hugged him in their arms, and the little ones jumped on his knees.

“Yes, my friends, here I am!” he said, all smiles. “It is really I, and no one else! But be calm I It is not necessary to tear my coat, I assure you.”

“Now, children, clear off,” said Catherine.

“Truly,” said the notary, “I am enchanted to see you, and to be here with my dear client, Thomas Harcher.”

“Mr. Nick,” said the farmer, “it is very kind of you to come!”

“And I would have come from much farther, if necessary from the end of the world, from the sun, from the stars, yes, Thomas, from the stars!”

That is an honour for us, Mr. Nick,” said Catherine, Signalling to her eleven daughters to drop a curtsey.

“And for me,” said Mr- Nick, “a pleasure I Ah.

Madame Catherine, you are always charming! When will you cease to grow young!”

“Never! never!” said the fifteen sons of the family. “I must have a kiss, Madame Catherine!” said Mr. Nick. “You will allow me?” he asked the farmer, after he had bestowed a loud smack on the lady’s cheek. “As often as you like,” said Thomas Harcher. “Now it is your turn, Lionel,” said the notary ‘‘Kiss Madame Catherine!”

“Willingly,” said Lionel, who received a double kiss in exchange for his own.

“And now,” said Mr. Nick, “I hope the charming Rose will have a happy wedding. I used to dance her on my knee. Where is she?”

“Here I am, Mr. Nick,” said Rose, blooming with health and good-humour.

“Yes, you are charming,” said the notary, “and so charming that I must really plant a kiss on each of those cheeks, which are worthy of the name they bear!”

And he kissed them well and truly. But this time Lionel was not invited to share in the tribute — very much to his regret.

“Where is the intended?” asked Mr. Nick. “Has he forgotten the day? where is he?”

“Here,” said Bernard Miquelon.

“Ah! He’s a fine lad, a good-natured lad!” exclaimed Mr. Nick. “I would kiss him too, to complete — ”

“Come on, Mr. Nick,” said the young man, opening his arms.

“Good! “said Mr. Nick, shaking his head. “I fancy Bernard Miquelon would rather have one kiss from Rose than two from me! And so, Rose, kiss your future husband in my place!”

Which Rose in some confusion did, amid the applause of the whole family.

“Eh!” said Catherine, “I think you must be thirsty, Mr. Nick, and your clerk also?”

“Very thirsty,” said Mr. Nick.

“Extremely thirsty,” said Lionel.

“Now, Thomas, what are you looking at? Go and get a good drink for Mr. Nick, and as good a one for his clerk? Shall I have to ask you again?”

No! once was enough, and the farmer hurried off, followed by two or three of his daughters, while Mr. Nick, who had just caught sight of Clary de Vaudreuil, went up to speak to her.

“Well, my dear young lady,” he said, “at the last visit I paid to the Villa Montcalm we made an appointment to meet at the farm of Chipogan, and I am happy — ”

He was interrupted by an exclamation from Lionel, whose surprise was very natural. Was he not face to face with the young unknown who had so sympathetically received his poetical effort a few weeks before?

“But, it is Monsieur — Monsieur — ” he repeated. M. de Vaudreuil and Clary looked at each other anxiously. How did Lionel know Jean? and if he knew him, did he know that the Harchers did not knew they had given shelter to Jean-Sans-Nom?

“Quite so,” said the notary, turning to the young man. “I recognize you, monsieur! You were our travelling companion, when my clerk and I went in the buggy to the Villa Montcalm at the beginning of September.

“That is right, Mr. Nick,” answered Jean, “and it is with much pleasure, believe me, that I find you here, accompanied by the young poet.”

“Whose poem received honourable mention at the Lyre Amicale!” said the notary. “It is evidently a nursling of the Muses that I keep in my office to draught my deeds!”

“Accept my compliments, my young friend,” said Jean, “I have not forgotten your charming

“To be born with you, my frolicsome flame.

To die with you, my will-o’-the-wisp.”

“Ah! monsieur!” said Lionel, very proud of the praise of the two lines that had lingered in the memory of so good a judge.

In listening to this exchange of compliments Clary and her father were much relieved. Mr. Nick then told them how they had met Jean on the way from Montreal to Jesus Island, and Jean was introduced to Mr. Nick and his clerk as the adopted son of the H archers. The explanations ended by a hearty shake of the hands all round.

Then Catherine’s imperious voice was heard, —

“Now then, Thomas! Come along! Will you never have done? Are you going to let Mr. Nick and Mr. Lionel die of thirst?”

“It is ready, Catherine, it is ready!” said the farmer. “Don’t be impatient!”

And he invited the notary to follow him into the dining- room.

Neither Mr. Nick nor Lionel wanted much pressing. Taking their places at a table on which were some coloured cups, and napkins of startling whiteness, they refreshed themselves with toddy, an agreeable beverage composed of gin, sugar and cinnamon, and flanked with crisp toast-a little something to enable them to wait till dinner-time without fainting.

Then all set to work on the last preparations for the grand fête of the morrow, which would doubtless be long remembered at the farm of Chipogan.

Mr. Nick strolled about from one to the other. He had a kind word for every one, while M. de Vaudreuil, Clary and Jean talked of more serious matters as they walked under the trees in the garden.

About five o’clock all the relatives and guests assembled in the larger room for the signature of the marriage contract. Mr. Nick, of course, presided at this important ceremony, and that he comported himself with all due dignity and notarial grace can be imagined.

The various wedding presents were then handed to the young couple. Not one of the brothers or brothers- in-law, not one of the sisters or sisters-in-law, but had made some purchase for Rose Harcher and Bernard Miquelon. And so numerous were the articles of ornament and use that the young couple could well have set up housekeeping on them. But when Rose had become Madame Miquelon she would still remain at Chipogan. Bernard and the children would merely be a welcome increase to the family of Thomas Harcher.

The most valuable presents were given by M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter. For Bernard Miquelon there was an excellent gun that rivalled the favourite weapon of Leatherstocking. Rose had a necklace which made her look more charming than ever. Jean gave the sister of his companions a box fitted with such a set of the needful implements for cutting, sewing and embroidery, as could but give the greatest of pleasure to a good housewife.

And at each gift there were clapping of hands and shouts of applause, which were redoubled when Mr. Nick solemnly placed on the young couple's fingers their wedding ring which he had bought from the best jeweller of Montreal, and which already bore their names.

Then the marriage contract was read, in a loud, intelligible voice in proper notarial style. There was some sign of emotion when Mr. Nick announced that M. de Vaudreuil, out of friendship to his tenant, Thomas Harcher, added a sum of five hundred dollars to the bride's dowry.

Five hundred dollars! when, half a century before, a bride with a dowry of fifty francs was considered a rich match in the Canadian provinces.

"And now, my friends," said Mr. Nick, "we will proceed to the signature of the contract. The young couple first, then the father and mother, then

Monsieur and Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil, then — ”

“We will all sign!” exclaimed all present, with a shout that deafened the notary.

And then old and young, friends and relatives, came one after the other to add their signatures to the contract which was to assure the future of the two young people.

That took some time! In fact, the passers-by now entered the farm, attracted by the joyous tumult within, and put their signatures to the deed, so that pages and pages would have to be added if the state of things were to continue. And why should not all the village and all the country crowd in when Thomas Harcher offered his visitors the choice of the most varied drinks, in addition to the whisky that flows as naturally towards Canadian throats as the St. Lawrence towards the Atlantic.

Mr. Nick inquired if the ceremony were ever to end. The worthy man beamed with joy; he was inexhaustible; he had a cheery word for all, while Lionel, passing the pen from one to another, found he would soon require a new one, as it was being used up by the interminable column of signatures that grew longer and longer.

“Is that all?” asked Mr. Nick, after an hour.

“Not yet!” said Pierre Harcher, who had gone to the door to sec if any one were on the road.

“Who is coming now?” asked Mr. Nick.

“A troop of Hurons!”

“Let them come in! let them come in!” said the notary. “Their signatures will do no dishonour to the contracting parties. What a contract it is, my friends! I have drawn up hundreds in the course of my life, but never have I seen the names of so many good people at the bottom of the last page!”

The Indians now appeared on the scene and were welcomed with loud shouts of welcome. They did not wait for an invitation, but swarmed in, fifty in number — men and women. And amongst them Thomas Harcher recognized the Huron who had presented himself the day before to ask if Mr. Nick were coming to the farm of Chipogan.

Why had the tribe of Mahogannis come from their village of Walhatta? Why had they arrived in gala costume to visit the notary of Montreal?

It was for a reason of great importance, as we shall see immediately.

The Hurons were all in their war-paint. Their heads were surmounted by feathers, their long thick hair fell on to their shoulders from which hung a multi-coloured cloak; their bodies were clothed in deerskin, their feet were shod with moccasins of elk leather; they were armed with the long rifles which for many years had replaced among the Indian tribes the bows and arrows of their ancestors. But the traditional axe, the war-tomahawk, hung from their belts.

A coat of fresh paint bedecked their faces. Azure blue, lampblack and vermilion, accentuated the astonishing relief of their aquiline noses, their large nostrils, and huge mouths furnished with a double row of curved and regular teeth, their high, square check-bones and their small, keen eyes, whose black orbits glowed like embers.

The deputation was accompanied by a few of the Walhatta women — doubtless the youngest and best- looking of the tribe. These squaws wore a bodice of embroidered stuff with the sleeves leaving the forearm bare, a petticoat of glaring colours, “mitasses “of cariboo leather, ornamented with hedgehog quills and laced on their limbs, and soft moccasins braided with glass beads imprisoned their feet whose smallness a Frenchwoman might envy.

The Indians had, if possible, doubled the gravity which was habitual to them. With much ceremony they advanced to the threshold of the large room where stood Monsieur and Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil, the notary, and Thomas and Catherine Harcher, while the rest of the party occupied the courtyard.

Then the one who seemed to be the chief, a Huron of tall stature and about fifty years of age, holding in his hand a cloak of native work, addressed the farmer solemnly as follows, —

“Is Nicholas Sagamore at the farm of Chipogan?”

“He is!” said Thomas Harcher.

“And I add that I am he,” said the notary, much surprised that he could be the object of the visit.

The Huron turned towards him, raised his head proudly, and in a more imposing tone, continued, —

“The chief of our tribe,” said he, “has been called by the great Wacondah, the Mitsimanitou of our fathers. Five moons have passed since he went to the happy hunting-grounds. His heir is now Nicholas, the last of the

Sagamores. To him henceforth belongs the right of burying the tomahawk of peace, or unearthing the tomahawk of war."

A profound silence greeted this unexpected declaration. It was well known in the country that Mr. Nick was of Huron origin, and that he was descended from the great chief of the tribe of Mahogannis; but no one had imagined, and he least of all, that the order of heredity would call him to the head of an Indian people.

And then, amid a silence that none dare disturb, the Indian resumed, —

"At what time will my brother take his scat at the fire of the Great Council of his tribe, clothed in the traditional mantle of his ancestors?"

The spokesman of the deputation never supposed that the notary would refuse, and presented him with the mantle.

And as Mr. Nick, absolutely dumbfounded, hesitated to answer, there was a shout — in which fifty others joined — of "Honour! Honour to Nicholas Sagamore!"

It was Lionel who had raised the enthusiastic shout. That he was proud of the good fortune that had come to his master, and considered that the distinction was reflected on the clerks in his office, and more especially on himself, and rejoiced at the idea of henceforth marching by the side of the great chief of the Mahogannis, we need not waste time in insisting.

De Vaudreuil and his daughter could not help smiling at the astounded look of Mr. Nick. Poor man! While the farmer and his children and friends offered him their sincere felicitations, he did not know what to reply.

Then the Indian again asked him the question from which there was no escape.

“Will Nicholas Sagamore follow his brothers to the wigwams of Walhatta?”

Mr. Nick remained silent. Be it well understood he would never consent to resign his profession to reign over a Huron tribe. But, on the other hand, he did not like to hurt by a refusal the Indians of his race who called him by the right of succession to such an honour.

“Mahogannis,” said he at last, “I did not expect this. I am indeed unworthy of it. You understand — my friends — I am only here as a notary! — ”

He stammered; he was at a loss for words; he was unable to reply.

Thomas Harcher came to his assistance. “Hurons!” said he, “Mr. Nick is Mr. Nick at least till this ceremony of marriage is completed. After that, if it pleases him, he will leave the farm of Chipogan free to return with his brothers to Walhatta!”

“Yes! After the wedding!” shouted the throng who wished to keep the notary.

The Huron shook his head, and took counsel with the deputation.

“My brother cannot hesitate,” he said. “The blood of the Mahogannis runs in his veins and imposes on him rights and duties which he will not refuse — ”

“Rights! rights! Be it so!” murmured Mr. Nick, “But duties-”

“Does he accept?” asked the Indians. “He accepts!” said Lionel, “I am sure of it! And in witness of his sentiments he should at once be clothed with the royal mantle of the Sagamores!”

“The imbecile!” said Mr. Nick between his teeth. “Why will he not be quiet!”

And with a thump the pacific notary strove to calm the stormy enthusiasm of his clerk.

Monsieur de Vaudreuil saw that Mr. Nick only wished to gain time. Addressing the Indian, he said that assuredly the descendant of the Sagamores did not think of withdrawing from the duties his descent imposed upon him. But a few days, a few weeks perhaps, were necessary for him to put matters in order at Montreal. It was necessary, therefore, to give him time to set his affairs in order.

“That is wise,” said the Indian. “And as my brother accepts, let him receive as the pledge of his acceptance the tomahawk of the great chief called by the Wacondah to the happy hunting-grounds, and let him wear it in his belt!”

Mr. Nick took the favourite weapon of the Indian tribes, and, much puzzled by not having a belt, he rested it piteously on his shoulder.

The deputation then uttered the traditional “liugh” of their race, a sort of exclamation of approval in use in the Indian languages.

Lionel could hardly restrain himself for joy, although his master appeared particularly embarrassed at a position which might make him a laughing-stock in the brotherhood of Canadian notaries. With his poetic gifts he saw that he was already called upon to celebrate the mighty deeds of the Mahogannis, and shout in lyric verse the watery of the Sagamores — though how he was to find a rhyme for tomahawk he did not quite see.

The Hurons were about to retire, regretting that Mr. Nick’s duties prevented him from accompanying them, when Catherine had an idea.

“Mahogannis,” she said, “it is a marriage feast that brings us together to day at the farm of Chipogan. Will you remain in the company of your new chief? We offer you hospitality, and to-morrow you take your places at the feast, in which Nicolas Sagamore will occupy the seat of honour.”

There were thunders of applause when Catherine Harcher had formulated her thoughtful proposition, and they rose even louder and longer when the Mahogannis accepted an invitation made with such goodwill.

Thomas Harcher had only to lay the wedding-table for fifty more — and this did not embarrass him in the least, for the room was large enough for even this increase of the party.

Mr. Nick had to resign himself to his fate — for he could not do otherwise — and he received the accolade of the warriors of his tribe, whom he would willingly have sent to perdition.

And with the merry dancing of the young folk in rounds and reels, the second day of the festivities at Chipogan came to an end.

CHAPTER XII.

TIIE DINNER.

THE great day had arrived — the last of the successive ceremonies of baptism, communion, and marriage, in which the good folks of Chipogan had taken such delight. The marriage of Rose Harcher and Bernard Miquelon had been celebrated in the morning before the State official, and would now take place at the church. Then, in the afternoon, the wedding feast would bring together the guests, whose numbers had received such a large addition. In truth it was time to finish, or the county of Laprairie and even the district of Montreal would have gathered at Thomas Harcher’s hospitable table.

On the morrow the party would break up. The De Vaudreuils would return to the Villa Montcalm. Jean would leave the farm, and would not reappear until the day he put himself at the head of the reformist party. His companions on the Champlain would continue their occupation as hunters and trappers, and wait till the time came to rejoin their adopted brother, while the family generally would return to the customary work of the farm. The Hurons would go back to the village of Walhatta, where they expected to give Nicholas Sagamore a triumphant reception when he came for the first time to smoke the calumet by the hearth of his ancestors.

But Mr. Nick had been as little pleased as possible with the homage he had received. He had no intention of giving up his office for the chieftainship of any tribe, and he had been talking the matter over with Monsieur de Vaudreuil and Thomas Harcher, and his perplexity was such that they had some difficulty in keeping from laughing at him.

“You are amusing yourselves,” he said. “It is easy to see that you have no throne ready to open at your feet.”

“My dear Nick,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “there is no need to take it seriously.”

“And how can I take it otherwise?”

“The men will not insist on it when they see you are in no hurry to betake yourself to the wigwam of the Mahogannis.”

“You do not understand them,” said Mr. Nick. “They will never leave me alone. They will follow me to Montreal! They will make demonstrations I cannot escape! They will besiege my door! And what will old Dolly say? You will see it will end by my marching forth with moccasins on my feet and feathers on my head!”

And Nick, who was always ready for a laugh, ended by sharing in the hilarity of his friends.

But it was with his clerk that he had the chief crow to pick. Lionel — out of malice — treated him already as if he had accepted the succession of the defunct Huron. He no longer called him Mr. Nick! He spoke to him only in the third person, and employed only the emphatic language of the Indians. And as it was the appropriate thing for every warrior of the prairies, he had given him a choice of surnames, such as Elkhorn or the Subtle Lizard, corresponding to those of Hawkeye or the Longue Carabine.

About eleven o’clock the procession was formed in the courtyard. It was admirably arranged, and such as would have inspired a young poet, if Lionel’s muse had not been occupied with higher themes.

At the head marched Bernard Miquelon and Rose Harcher, one holding the little finger of the other, and both of them beaming with happiness. Then came the De Vaudreuils, with Jean by their side; then the fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers of the happy pair; then Mr. Nick and his clerk, escorted by the members of the Huron deputation. The notary would have dispensed with this honour had he been able to. To Lionel's extreme regret, his master required only the native costume, the tattooing of the body and the colouring of his lace, to worthily represent the line of the Sagamores.

The ceremony was performed with all the pomp suitable to the position occupied by the Harcher family in the district. There was a great ringing of bells, a grand accompaniment of hymns and prayers, and much firing of gun?. And in this noisy concert of gun-firing the Hurons took part with a skill and precision that would have won the approval of Natty Bumppo, the celebrated friend of the Mohicans.

Then the procession returned to the farm. Rose Miquelon on her husband's arm this time, nothing having occurred to mar the proceedings in any way.

Then the party separated for a time. Mr. Nick being in no way loath to leave his Mahogannis, and breathe more at his ease in the society of his Canadian friends. And more piteously than ever he continued to say to M. de Vaudreuil, "In truth, I do not know how I shall get rid of these savages!"

Meanwhile if any man was busy, driven about, and stormed at from noon to three o'clock — the hour at which the wedding feast was to begin in accordance with ancient custom — that man was Thomas Harcher. True, Catherine and her sons and daughters did all they could to help him; but the preparation of a feast of this importance left him not a minute's respite.

It was not only the number of diners he had to satisfy, as the diversity of tastes. And the bill of fare comprised all the ordinary and extraordinary dishes known in Canadian cookery.

On the immense table — at which one hundred and fifty guests were to sit — were disposed as many spoons and forks wrapped in a white napkin and flanked by a metal cup. There were no knives, for each guest had to use his or her own. There was no bread, only the maple-sugared cake being admissible at a wedding feast. The cold meats were on the table, the hot were served in due order.

There were earthen pots of hot soup, from which perfumed vapours escaped; there were fried fish and boiled fish from the sweet waters of the St. Lawrence and the lakes, trout, salmon, eels, pike, white fish, shad, touradis and maskinongis; there were ducks, pigeons, quails, woodcock, snipe, and fricasseed squirrels; there were turkeys, geese, bustards, fattened on the farm, some of them roasted a sparkling golden brown, some of them drowned in a sea of spices; then there were hot oyster patties, forcemeat pies, huge onions, legs of mutton, chines of roast boar, maize puddings, fawn cutlets, and deer steaks; then those wonderful haunches of venison, which make Canada the envy of the epicures of the two worlds, the bison hump so much esteemed by the hunters of the prairies, cooked in its natural fur and garnished with fragrant leaves! Add to all these, the sauce-boats in which floated relishes of a score of kinds; mountains of vegetables, brought to perfection in the last days of the Indian summer; pastry of all kinds, particularly those cracknels or fritters, for the making of which Catherine Harcher’s daughters enjoyed an unequalled reputation; varieties of fruit from the orchard; and a hundred flagons of different forms of cider, beer, wine, and spirits for dessert.

The large room had been very artistically decorated in honour of Bernard and Rose Miquelon. Garlands of leaves ornamented the walls, appropriate shrubs stood in the angles, hundreds of nosegays of fragrant flowers ornamented the window bay. At the same time, guns, pistols, carbines — all the weapons of a family of many sportsmen — were arranged in glittering trophies.

The newly-married couple occupied the middle of the table, which was of horseshoe shape, like the Falls of Niagara, which, a hundred and fifty leagues to the southwest, precipitate their deafening cataracts. And they were indeed cataracts which were to be engulfed in the abysses of these French-Canadian stomachs!

On each side of the newly-married pair were the DeVaudreuils. Jean and his companions of the Champlain were opposite to them, between Thomas and Catherine Harcher. Mr. Nick was enthroned with the principal warriors of his tribe, anxious to witness, no doubt, how their new chief comported himself. And in this respect Nicholas Sagamore promised to display an appetite worthy of his lineage. Contrary to tradition, and for this special occasion, the children were admitted to the large table among their relatives and friends, and around them circulated a squad of negroes, engaged for this particular service.

By five o’clock the first assault had been delivered. At >ix there was a truce, not to carry away the dead, but to give the living time to recover their breath. Then it was that the toasts and speeches began.

Then followed happy wedding songs, according to ancient custom, for at every meeting at dinner, as at supper, the women and the men sang alternately the old songs of France.

Then Lionel recited a flattering epithalamium composed expressly for the occasion.

“Bravo, Lionel, bravo!” shouted Mr. Nick, who had drowned in the bowl the cares of his future sovereignty.

The good old fellow was very proud of his young poet’s success, and he proposed the health of the gallant laureate of the Lyre Amicale!

At this proposal the glasses were filled to the brim, and held towards Lionel, who was so happy and confused that he could think of no better reply than the toast, —

“To Nicholas Sagamore! To the last branch of the noble tree on which the Great Spirit has hung the destinies of the Huron nation!”

There were thunders of applause. The Mahogannis stood up round the table and brandished their tomahawks as if they were about to hurl themselves against the Iroquois, or Mungos, or any other tribe of their enemies.

Mr. Nick, with his placid figure, seemed much too pacific for such bellicose warriors! In truth this blockhead of a Lionel had much better have kept silence.

When the effervescence had calmed down, the second course was attacked with renewed vigour.

Amid the noisy manifestations, Jean, Clary, and Lerfillier had every facility for conversation in a low tone. In the evening they were to separate. If the De Vaudreuils did not leave till the morning, Jean had resolved to go that night so as to seek a safer retreat away from the farm of Chipogan.

“But,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “would the police think of looking for Jean-Sans-Nom among Thomas Harcher’s family?”

“Who knows if the detectives are not on my traces?” answered Jean, as if he had a presentiment of evil, “and if that should happen, when the farmer and his sons learn who I am — ”

“They will defend you,” said Clary. “They would die for you”

“I know it,” said Jean, “and then in return for the hospitality they have given me I should leave behind inc ruin and misfortune! Thomas Marcher and his children would by obliged to quit their home for having defended me! And so I am anxious to get away from the firm.”

“Why do you not return secretly to the Villa Montcalm?” said M. de Vaudreuil. “The risks which you would spare Thomas Harcher ate those to which it is my duty to expose myself, and I am ready to do so! In my house the secret of your retreat would be well kept.”

“That proposition Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil has already made to me in your name, but I have had to decline it.”

“But,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “it would be convenient for the final measures you have to devise. You could communicate with the members of the committee every day. When the rising takes place Farran, Clerc, Hodge and are ready to follow you. Is it not probable that the first outbreak will occur in Montreal county?”

“That is so,” said Jean, “or rather in one of the adjoining counties, according to the positions occupied by the royal troops.”

“Well, then,” said Clary, “why do you not accept my father’s offer? Is it your intention to again traverse the neighbouring parishes? Have you not ended your propagandist campaign?”

“It is ended,” said Jean, “and I have now only to give the signal.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” asked M. de Vaudreuil.

“I am waiting for something to complete the exasperation of the reformists,” said Jean, “and which will soon happen. In a few days the deputies of the opposition will refuse the Governor the right he assumes to dispose of the public revenues without the authority of the Chamber. Besides, I know from a sure source that the English Parliament intends to pass a law permitting Lord Gosford to suspend the constitution of 1791. The result of that will be that the French-Canadians will be without any guarantee of a share in the representative system attributed to the colony, and which as it is leaves them so little freedom of action! Our friends, and with them the liberal deputies, will resist this excess of power. Probably Lord Gosford, to put a check on the reformist demands, will dissolve or prorogue the Chamber. The day he does so the country will rise, and we shall only have to guide the revolution.”

“There is no doubt,” said M. de Vaudreuil, “that such a provocation on the part of the loyalists will bring about a general revolt. But the English Parliament will hardly dare to go so far. If this attempt against the rights of the Franco-Canadians does take place, are you sure it will be soon?”

“In a few days,” said Jean. “Sebastien Gramont told me so.”

“And till then,” asked Clary, “how are you to escape?

“I must throw the detectives off the track.”

“Have you a hiding-place in view?”

“I have.”

“Where you will be safe?”

“Safer than elsewhere.”

“Far from here?”

“At St. Charles, in the country of Verchères.”

“Be it so,” said M. de Vaudreuil. “No one can be a better judge of the matter than yourself. If you think you can keep the place of your retreat secret, we do not insist on our offer. But do not forget that at any hour of the day or night the Villa Montcalm is open to you.”

“I know it, Monsieur de Vaudreuil, and I thank you.”

Amid the incessant exclamations of the feasters, in the increasing tumult of the room, it can easily be believed that no one had heard this conversation, which was carried on in a low tone. Occasionally it was interrupted by some noisy toast or striking repartee, or rousing chorus. And it seemed about to finish when Clary asked a question that produced a very surprising reply.

What was it urged the girl to put this question? Was it a suspicion or a regret that Jean thought it his duty to still retain a certain reserve towards her?

“There is, then, somewhere a house in which you can hide that is more hospitable than ours?”

“More hospitable? No! But as hospitable,” said Jean, not without emotion.

“And which is it?”

“My mother’s.”

Jean uttered the words in such a tone of filial affection that Clary was deeply moved. It was the first time that Jean, whose past had been so mysterious, had alluded to his family. He was not then alone in the world as his friends believed. He had a mother who was living in secret in the village of Saint Charles. Doubtless Jean went to see her sometimes. The house was open to him when he required quiet and repose. And it was there lie was going to wait for the strife to begin.

Clary made no answer. Her thoughts were drawn towards this distant house. How happy she would be to know this mother! She must be a heroic woman, a patriot she would love, a patriot she loved already! Assuredly she would sec her some day. Was not her life indissolubly bound up with that of Jean-Sans-Nom, and who was it could break the bond? Yes, at the moment of separating from him, perhaps for ever, she felt the power of the attraction that drew them towards each other.

The feast was near its close, and the gaiety of the guests, excited by the frequent libations, was showing itself in many ways. Compliments to the happy couple flew in from all sides. It was an extremely good-humoured uproar, amid which could be heard ever, now and then —

“Honour and happiness to the young people.”

“Long live Bernard and Rose Miquelon.”

And there was health-drinking to Monsieur de Vaudreuil and his daughter, and to Catherine and Thomas Harcher.

Mr. Nick had given the feast a grand reception. If lie had not been able to retain the austere dignity of a Mahoganni it was because that was quite contrary to his open and communicative nature. But it is well to add that the representatives of his tribe had somewhat departed from their ancestral gravity under the influence of the good cheer and good wine.

They had filled their glasses in the French style to salute the Harcher family, whose guests they were, when Lionel, who could not keep still, went round the table with a compliment addressed to all he passed. It occurred to him to say to Mr. Nick in a very loud voice, —

“Nicholas Sagamore, will you not say a few words in the name of the tribe of Mahogannis?”

In the happy temper in which Mr. Nick found himself, lie did not receive the suggestion unkindly.

“Do you think so, Lionel?” he asked.

“I think, great chief, that the time is come for you to wish happiness to the bride and bridegroom.”

“If you think this is the time I will do so! “And the excellent man asose and claimed silence by a gesture full of Huron dignity.

There was a lull immediately.

“Young people,” he said, “an old friend of your family cannot leave you without expressing his acknowledgments for — ”

Suddenly Mr. Nick stopped. The sentence remained incomplete on his lips. His look was directed towards the door.

A man stood on the threshold, whose arrival no one- had noticed.

Mr. Nick had recognized him, and he exclaimed in a tone in which surprise mingled with uneasiness, —

“Mr. Rip I”

CHAPTER XIII.

MUSKETRY AT DESSERT.

The head of the house of Rip and Co. was not accompanied by his own men.

Behind him were a dozen of Gilbert Argall's force, in addition to forty of the volunteers, who occupied the main entrance into the courtyard. It seemed as though the house was surrounded.

Was it a simple domiciliary visit or was it an arrest with which the head of the Harcher family was threatened. In either case it must be a matter of importance to induce the minister of police to send so strong a detachment to the farm of Chipogan.

Monsieur De Vaudreuil and his daughter were terror- stricken when the notary uttered Rip's name. They knew that Jean-Sans-Nom was in the room. They knew that to Rip in particular had been entrusted the duty of tracing him. And what could they think but that he had discovered his retreat and was about to arrest him? If Jean fell into Gilbert Argall's hands he was lost.

By a supreme effort of the will, Jean had not even started when he heard the name. There was hardly a change in his colour. No movement, not even an involuntary one, betrayed him; and yet he had just recognized Rip, whom he had met the day the buggy took Nick and Lionel from Montreal to Jesus Island! Rip, who had been in pursuit of him for two months! Rip, the tempter, who had caused the infamy of his family in urging his father, Simon Morgaz, on to treachery.

And yet he remained cool and collected and showed no sign of the hatred which raged within him, while M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter trembled at his side.

But if Jean knew Rip, Rip did not know him. He did not know that the traveller he had met for a moment on the road from Montreal was the man on whose head a price had been put. What he knew was that Jean-Sans-Nom ought to be at the farm of Chipogan. And this is how he had again got on his track.

A few days before Jean had been met five or six leagues from Saint-Charles, after leaving Maison Close, and had been reported as a suspicious stranger as he left the country of Verchères. Noticing that the alarm had been given, he had fled into the interior of the county, and, not without many narrow escapes of falling into the hands of the police, he had reached Thomas Harcher’s farm.

But Rip’s men had not lost sight of him, as he thought, and they were soon almost certain that he had taken refuge at Chipogan. Rip was at once communicated with. Knowing not only that the farm belonged to M. de Vaudreuil, but that M. de Vaudreuil was there at that very time, Rip had no doubt but that the stranger was Jean-Sans-Nom; and giving orders to some of his men to mix with the guests at Harcher’s, he reported to Gilbert Argall, who put at his disposal a squad of police and a detachment of Montreal volunteers. And under such circumstances, Rip had just reached the doorway, assured that Jean-Sans-Nom was among the guests of the farmer of Chipogan.

It was five o’clock in the afternoon. The lamps were not alight, and it was still daylight in the room. In an instant Rip had looked round the company, but Jean- Sans-Nom received no more of his attention than the rest.

Thomas Harcher, seeing his courtyard invaded by a body of men, rose and said to Rip, —

“Who are you?”

“I have my orders from the minister of police.”

“What to do?”

“You will hear. Are you not Thomas Harcher of Chipogan?”

“Yes, and I demand by what right you enter my house.”

“In accordance with the duty that has been entrusted to me. I am about to make an arrest.”

“An arrest!” exclaimed the farmer — ” an arrest in my house! — and who is it to be?”

“A man for whose apprehension a reward has been offered by the Governor, and who is here!”

“His name.”

“He calls himself,” said Rip, in a loud voice, “or rather he is called, Jean-Sans-Nom!”

The reply was followed by a long murmur. What! It was Jean-Sans-Nom whom Rip had come to arrest, and whom he affirmed was at the farm of

Chipogan.

The attitude of the farmer, of his wife and his children, and all present, was so obviously that of profound astonishment, that Rip thought his men must have been on a false scent Nevertheless he reiterated his demand, and this time still more decidedly.

“Thomas Harcher,” he said, “the man I seek is here, and I summon you to deliver him up.”

At these words Thomas Harcher looked at his wife, and Catherine, seizing his arm, said, —

“Answer him.”

“Yes, Thomas,” said Mr. Nick, “answer him. It seems to me that the reply is easy enough.”

“Very easy in fact,” said the farmer, who, turning towards Rip, continued, “Jean-Sans-Nom is not at the farm of Chipogan.”

“And I say he is, Thomas Harcher!” said Rip quietly.

“No, I tell you, he is not! He has never been here! I do not even know him! But I say that if he had come to ask me for shelter I would have given it him, and if he was in this house; I would not surrender him.”

There could be no mistake about the significant demonstrations with which the farmer’s announcement was received. Thomas Harcher had expressed the sentiment of all who were with him. If Jean-Sans-Nom had taken refuge at the farm there was not one who could be base enough to betray him.

Jean, impassable all the time, heard all that passed. M. de Vaudreuil and Clary dared not even look at him for fear of drawing Rip's attention towards him.

"Thomas Harcher," continued Rip, "you are doubtless aware that by a proclamation, dated the 3rd of September, 1837, a reward of six thousand dollars is offered to whoever will arrest or cause to be arrested this Jean-Sans-Nom!"

"I know it," said the farmer, "and all in Canada know it. But there has not yet been found a Canadian scoundrel enough to commit so odious a betrayal, and he never will be found."

"Well said, Thomas!" exclaimed Catherine, and her children and friends supported her.

Rip continued unmoved, —

"Thomas Harcher," he said, "if you know of the proclamation of the 3rd September, 1837, perhaps you do not know of the new announcement which the Governor- General made yesterday, under date of the 6th October!"

"I do not know of it," said the farmer, "and if it is like the other, and offers an encouragement to traitors, you need not inform me of it."

"You shall hear it all the same," replied Rip, and unfolding a paper, he read as follows: —

"'It is required of all inhabitants of the Canadian towns and territories that they should refuse help and protection to Jean-Sans-Nom, on pain of death to all who give him shelter.

“‘ For the Governor-General.

“‘ Gilbert Argall.

Minister of Police.’”

And so the Government had gone to this length! After TART I. — M

offering a reward for Jean-Sans-Nom, they had now threatened the death penalty against whoever gave him shelter!

The act provoked the most violent protests on the part of all present. Thomas Harcher, his sons, his guests had risen from their seats to rush at Rip, and chase him from the farm with all his police and volunteers, when Mr. Nick interposed.

His look was serious. Like the rest of those in the room, he felt a very natural horror at the new announcement of Lord Gosford which Rip had just read.

“Monsieur Rip,” he said, “he whom you seek is not at the farm of Chipogan. Thomas Harcher has told you so, and I reiterate it. You have therefore nothing to do here, and you would have done better to have kept that regrettable document in your pocket. Believe me, Monsieur Rip, you would be well advised not to force your presence on us any longer.”

“Well said, Nicholas Sagamore!” said Lionel.

“Yes! Go away — at once!” said the farmer, whose voice trembled with anger. “Jean-Sans-Nom is not here! But if he comes — in spite of the governor’s menaces — I will receive him! Now, leave the house! Leave it, I say!”

“Yes! Yes! leave it!” said Lionel, whose exasperation Mr. Nick tried in vain to calm.

“Take care, Thomas Harcher!” replied Rip, “you will do no good against the law, nor against the force I have to support me. Police and volunteers, I have fifty men with me. Your house is surrounded.”

“Get out! clear out!”

And shouts arose, and threats were directed against Rip.

“I will not go until I have made sure of the identity of all those who are here! “said Rip.

At a sign from him the police from the courtyard approached the door ready to enter the room.

Through the windows Monsieur de Vaudreuil and his daughter could see the volunteers posted round the house.

In view of an imminent collision, the children and women, with the exception of Clary and Catherine, hurried into the neighbouring rooms. Pierre Marcher and his brothers and friends had taken down the weapons hung on the walls. But inferior as they were in numbers, how could they prevent Rip from doing his duty?

Monsieur de Vaudreuil went from window to window to see if Jean could escape in the rear of the farm by crossing the garden. But in this direction, as in the other=, flight was impracticable.

Amid the tumult Jean remained motionless by the side of Clary, who would not leave him.

Mr. Nick then tried a List effort at conciliation, as the police were about to enter the room.

“Mr. Rip! Mr. Rip!” he said, “you are going to cause bloodshed, and quite uselessly, I assure you! I repeat, and I give you my word, Jean-Sans-Nom is not at the farm.”

“And if he were,” said Thomas Marcher, “I repeat, I would fight for him till death!”

“Good! Good!” said Catherine, rendered enthusiastic by her husband’s attitude.

“Do not you interfere in this matter, Mr. Nick!” said Rip. “It does not concern you, and you may have to repent too late! I will do my duty whatever happens! And now, make room there! Make room there!”

A dozen police entered the room, and Thomas Harcher and his friends rushed at them to turn them out and shut the door.

And Mr. Nick shouted as a last effort, — “Jean-Sans-Nom is not here. Mr. Rip, I assure you he is not here!”

“He is here!” said a loud voice that made itself heard above the uproar.

There was silence for a moment.

Jean, motionless, with his arms crossed, looked straight at Rip and said, —

“I am Jean-Sans-Nom!”

Monsieur de Vaudreuil had seized the young man’s arm, while Thomas Harcher and the others exclaimed, —

“He! Is he Jean-Sans-Nom?”

Jean showed with a gesture that he wished to speak. There was silence again.

“I am the man you seek,” he said to Rip; “I am Jean- Sans-Nom.”

And then, turning to the farmer and his sons, he continued —

“Forgive me, Thomas Harcher, forgive me, my brave companions, if I have hidden from you who I was, and thank you for the hospitality which for five years I have received at the farm of Chipogan. But the hospitality, which I accepted so long as it caused you no danger, I can accept no longer now it means death to all who give me shelter! Yes, thanks on the part of him who was here but your adopted son, and who is Jean Sans-Nom for his country!”

An indescribable movement of enthusiasm received this declaration.

“Vive Jean-Sans-Nom! Vive Jean-Sans-Nom!” resounded on all sides.

And when the shouts had ceased, Thomas Harcher said. —

“And now, as I said we would fight for Jean-Sans-Nom, let us fight for him till death.”

In vain Jean would have interposed to stop so unequal a strife. No one would listen to him. Pierre and the elder ones threw themselves on the police who obstructed the doorway and thrust them out. The door was immediately shut and barricaded with the heavy furniture. To get into the room or even into the house, the only way was by the windows, which were a dozen feet from the ground.

An attack would have to be made, and that in the dark.

for the night had begun to fall. Rip, who was not a man to give way, took his measures for executing his warrant and launching the volunteers against the house.

Pierre Harcher, with his friends and companions, posted himself at the windows ready to fire.

“We will defend you, in spite of yourself, if necessary!” said they to Jean, who was now powerless to stop them.

The farmer had prevailed on Clary de Vaudreuil and Catherine to rejoin the other women in one of the side rooms, where they would be safe out of gunshot. Only the men were left in the room, thirty all told.

For the Mahogannis could not be reckoned among the defenders of the farm. The Indians were indifferent to all that had passed, and had maintained their habitual reserve. The matter did not concern them no more than it did Mr. Nick and his clerk, who had no side to take either for or against authority: and the notary intended to remain absolutely neutral. Resolved to receive no blow and to give none, he did not cease to appeal to Lionel, who was breathing forth fire and flame. Bah! the young clerk would hardly listen to him, so excited was he at the chance of fighting for Jean-Sans-Nom, who was not only the popular hero, but also the sympathetic listener who had so favourably received his attempts at poetry.

“For the last time,” said Mr. Nick, “I forbid you from mixing yourself up in this matter!”

“And for the last time,” said Lionel, “I am astonished that a descendant of the Sagamores refuses to follow me on the war-path!”

“I will follow no other path but that of peace, you stupid boy, and you will do me the favour of leaving the room, where you can only get some injury done you.”

“Never!” exclaimed the bellicose poet.

And from one of the Mahogannis he seized the tomahawk that hung from his belt.

Jean began to organize the resistance as soon as he saw that his companions had decided to meet force with force. During the struggle he might manage to escape, and now, whatever might happen, the farmer and his people were in open rebellion against authority, and could not be more compromised than they were already. Rip and his men must first be driven off. Then he could see what was best to be clone. If the assailants tried to break in the doors of the house, it would take time. And before reinforcements arrived from Laprairie and Montreal, the police and volunteers might be driven out of the courtyard. And so Jean resolved to make a sortie and clear the approaches.

Arrangements were made accordingly. To begin with, a score of gunshots rattled from the front windows, and Rip and his men were obliged to retreat to the palisades. Then the door was quickly opened, and Jean, followed by Monsieur de Vaudreuil, Thomas Harcher, Pierre, and his brothers and friends, rushed into the courtyard.

A few volunteers lay on the ground. Some of the defenders were also wounded, as in the semi-darkness they hurled themselves on the besiegers. A hand-to-hand struggle followed, in which Rip bravely took his share. But his men began to lose ground; if they were to be driven out of the gate and have it shut against them, they would find it very difficult to get over the high palisading.

To drive them out, Jean and his brave companions tried every effort. If he could do so, he might get away across country, and even beyond the Canadian frontier, to wait till the time came for him to reappear at the head of the insurgents.

It need not be said, that although Lionel had gallantly joined the combatants, Mr. Nick had not left the house. Resolved to maintain strict neutrality, he did no more than wish well to Jean-Sans-Nom and all the defenders, among whom he had so many personal friends.

But notwithstanding their bravery, the inhabitants of the farm could not make head against the police and volunteers, who began to get the better of them. They had to retreat little by little towards the house for shelter. The room would then be invaded. All issue would be cut off, and Jean-Sans-Nom would have to surrender.

And the forces of the besieged were sensibly diminish- in”-. Already two of the elder Harchers, Michael and Jacques, and three or four of their companions had been carried into one of the adjoining rooms, where Clary de Vaudreuil, Catherine, and the other women took care of them. And the battle would be lost if some reinforcement did not come to Jean’s rescue.

Suddenly a change occurred in the state of affairs.

Lionel had just run into the room covered with blood from a flesh wound in his shoulder.

Mr. Nick caught sight of him.

“Lionel! Lionel!” he exclaimed, “you would not listen to me, you insupportable boy!”

And seizing the young clerk in his arms lie would have dragged him into the room with the wounded.

Lionel refused.

“It is nothing! It is nothing!” said he. “But, Nicholas Sagamore will you let your friends be beaten, when your warriors are only waiting for a word from you to help them?”

“No! No!” exclaimed Mr. Nick, “I have no right to give it! To take part against the constituted authorities!”

And as one very last effort he threw himself among the combatants, to stop them by his objurgations.

And he met with no success, but was immediately surrounded by the police and dragged out into the courtyard.

This was too much for the Mahoganni warriors, whose bellicose instincts could not stand this sort of thing. What! Their great chief arrested and ill-treated! A Sagamore in the hands of his enemies, the Pale Faces!

It was too much! And the war-cry was heard above the din of battle.

“Forward! Forward, Hurons!” shouted Lionel, who was quite beside himself.

The intervention of the Indians suddenly changed the fortunes of the strife. Tomahawk in hand, they hurled themselves at their assailants, who, exhausted by the hour’s battle, began to retreat.

Jean-Sans-Nom, Thomas Harcher, and their friends felt that a well-sustained effort would drive Rip and his men out of the enclosure. They re-took the offensive. The Hurons vigorously helped them, after rescuing Mr. Nick, who was astonished to find himself encouraging them with his voice if not with his hand, which was still incapable of flourishing the tomahawk of his ancestors.

And that was how a notary of Montreal, the most pacific of men, got into trouble for defending a cause which concerned neither the Mahogannis nor their chief.

The police and volunteers were soon forced through the gate, and as the Indians pursued them for a mile beyond the neighbourhood, Chipogan was completely cleared.

It was a bad business, evidently, and would figure on the wrong side in the next profit and loss account of Messrs Rip and Co.

PART II

INTO THE ABYSS

CHAPTER I

THE OPENING SKIRMISH

The affair at Chipogan Farm had far-reaching repercussions. From Laprairie County the news quickly spread through the neighbouring provinces. Public opinion could hardly have found a more favourable opportunity for expressing itself. This was not merely a brush between the police and the French-Canadians — a brush in which the agents of the law and the loyal volunteers had come off second best. What was much more serious was the motive with which the detachment had been sent to Chipogan. Jean-Sans-Nom had reappeared. The chief of police, Gilbert Argall, had learned of his presence at the farm, and had tried to arrest him. The attempt had failed, and the man in whom the French cause was personified was free and would no doubt soon make use of his freedom.

Where had Jean-Sans-Nom taken refuge, after he left Chipogan? The most active, the most careful, the most persistent search had not disclosed his hiding-place. But, although much disappointed at his failure, Rip did not despair of success. Besides his own personal interest the reputation of his firm was at stake, and he would play out the game until he won. The government knew whom they had to deal with, and neither withdrew their confidence from him nor spared their encouragement. And now Rip, having been face to face with the young Reformist, knew him personally. He was no longer pursuing him in the dark.

Since the fiasco at Chipogan a fortnight had elapsed. The last week of October had begun, and whatever he did Rip could learn nothing.

The day after the attack, Thomas Harcher found he had to leave Chipogan. He put in order all his most pressing business and set off with his older sons across the forests of Laprairie County, to take refuge in the United States territory, impatient to see how events would turn out. St. Albans, on Lake Champlain, offered him every security. There the police agents could not reach him.

If the movement stimulated by Jean-Sans-Nom were successful, if Lower Canada recovered its autonomy and were freed from Anglo-Saxon oppression, Thomas Harcher would quietly return to Chipogan; if not, he could stay and hope that oblivion would come with time, or that an amnesty would cover the past offences and things would gradually resume their former course.

The farm was not left without a mistress. During the winter, when agricultural work was suspended, nothing would suffer under Catherine's superintendence. And Pierre and his brother could still go on with their hunting across the regions adjoining the Canadian colony. In six months there would in all probability be nothing to stop their recommencing their fishing along the St. Lawrence.

Thomas Harcher had only too good reason for getting into safety. Next day Chipogan was occupied by a detachment of regular troops from Montreal. Catherine, having nothing to fear for her husband and her older sons, those more directly compromised in the affair, made the troops welcome. The police, by the governor's orders, did nothing in the way of reprisals, and the energetic woman knew how to keep herself respected by her garrison.

As at Chipogan Farm, so at the Villa Montcalm. The authorities watched it, but did not occupy it. M. de Vaudreuil, realising that he had openly espoused the Reformist cause, took care not to return to his home. A warrant for his arrest had been issued, and had he not taken to flight he would have been imprisoned in Montreal, so that he could no longer have taken his place in the insurrection. Where did he hide? With one of his political friends, no doubt, but so secretly that it was impossible to find exactly where he had taken refuge.

Clary de Vaudreuil returned alone to the Villa Montcalm, where she kept in touch with the leading Reformists. Jean-Sans-Nom she knew to be with his mother at Saint Charles: more than once, by different hands, she had received letters from him. And if Jean spoke only of the political situation she knew full well what else was disturbing his heart.

The part that the Hurons had played in the Chipogan affair will not have been forgotten: but for their intervention the volunteers would not have been repulsed, and Jean-Sans-Nom would have fallen into the hands of Rip’s myrmidons.

But what had brought about their intervention? Was it the pacific lawyer of Montreal? Certainly not. On the contrary, all his efforts had been directed towards preventing bloodshed. He had thrown himself into the struggle only to separate the combatants. If the Walhatta warriors had taken part in the fight it was simply because Nicholas Sagamore had been seized by the attackers, and was in danger of being treated like a rebel. What was more natural than that the Indian warriors should defend their chief? None the less, their intervention had brought about the repulse and dispersal of the detachment just as it was about to capture the house. So Mr. Nick was responsible for their defeat; and not without reason Mr. Nick felt that his freedom was in danger.

Seeing himself so seriously compromised in a matter that did not really concern him, and not caring, under the circumstances, to return to Montreal until the excitement had calmed down, he had allowed himself to be carried off to Walhatta village, to his ancestral wigwam. His office had to be shut up indefinitely, his practice would suffer, and old Dolly would be in despair. But what was to be done? Better be Nicholas Sagamore among the Mahogannis than Mr. Nick in jail.

Lionel, it need hardly be said, had followed his master to the Indian village, amid the thick woods of Laprairie county. He, too, had fought against the volunteers, and he could not well escape punishment. But if Mr. Nick mourned *in petto*, Lionel rejoiced continually at the turn events had taken. He had no regret at having fought for Jean-Sans-Nom, the recognised hero of the French-Canadians. He even hoped that matters would not stop there, and that the Indians would declare in favour of the insurgents. Mr. Nick was no longer Mr. Nick; he was a Huron chief. Lionel was no longer his clerk; he was the right hand of the last of the Sagamores.

So there was some reason to fear that the Governor- General would punish the Mahogannis for their intervention at Chipogan. But prudence imposed on Lord Gosford a well-justified restraint. Reprisals would have given the Indian tribes an opportunity of coming to the aid of their brothers, and of rising in mass — a dangerous complication as matters then stood. And so Lord Gosford judged it best not to pursue either the Walhatta warriors or their new chief by right of inheritance, and Mr. Nick and Lionel went unmolested in their retreat.

Lord Gosford was carefully following the proceedings of the Reformists, who were still carrying on their agitation. The district around Montreal was especially placed under police supervision, for an insurrectional movement was expected in the adjoining parishes of Richelieu. Steps were taken to check it at the outset, if it could not be prevented, and the soldiers under Sir

John Colborne went into quarters in Montreal county and the surrounding regions. The Reformists could not conceal from themselves that the attack would be difficult to withstand, but this did not stop them. Their cause, they felt, would be supported by the whole of the French-Canadians, who only awaited the signal to rush to arms since the affair at Chipogan had revealed the presence of Jean-Sans- Nom. If the popular agitator had not yet given the signal, it was because the anti-Liberal pronouncements he expected from the English Cabinet had not yet been made.

But, concealed in the mysterious Maison-Close, where he had rejoined his mother, Jean had not ceased to watch the course of events. During the six weeks that had elapsed since his arrival at Saint Charles, the Abbé Joann had several times visited his brother at night, to give him the political news. They hoped that the suspension of the 1791 Constitution, and the dissolution or prorogation of the Canadian Assembly, in which this would result, would soon take place.

Twenty times Jean, in his ardour, was on the point of leaving Maison-Close, to traverse the country and sound the call to arms, in the hope that the people of the towns and villages would rise at his voice and make good use of the arms given out from the reformist centres during his last season’s fishing on the St. Lawrence. At the very outset, perhaps, the loyalists would be overwhelmed by numbers — and then what could the authorities do but submit? But the Abbé Joann had dissuaded him by pointing out that a first repulse would be dangerous, and would spoil all the chances that might come later. And, indeed, the troops were mustered round Montreal, and ready to advance on any points where rebellion might break out.

The Reformists had, therefore, to act with extreme circumspection, and they felt it advisable to wait until public exasperation had been raised to its height by the measures of Parliament and the exactions of the servants of the Crown.

Hence the delay which, to the extreme impatience of the Sons of Freedom, dragged on interminably.

When Jean had fled from Chipogan he had expected that October would not end before a general insurrection broke out in Lower Canada. But on the 23rd, when there had been nothing so far to indicate that the uprising was near at hand, the measures that Jean had foreseen provoked an outburst.

On the report of the three commissioners they had appointed, the British Parliament had decided that the public revenue should be expended without waiting for approval by the Canadian Assembly, that the leading Reformist Deputies should be prosecuted, that the constitution should be amended by demanding from a French elector double the qualification of an English elector, and that the Ministers should not be responsible to the Chambers.

These violent measures set the whole of Lower Canada in a ferment. They had aroused the patriotic emotions of the French-Canadians; it was more than the people could bear, and on both banks of the St. Lawrence they flocked to the public meetings.

On 15th September, at Laprairie, a meeting took place at which those present included a delegate from France under the orders of the French Government, and the Chargé-d’Affaires of the United States at Quebec.

In several of the most important towns, an immediate break was demanded with Great Britain, the Reformists were urged to pass from words to deeds, and it was decided to apply for help to the United States. A fund was started for the receipt of subscriptions, however small or large, in support of the popular cause.

Processions carried banners with slogans which evoked outbursts of cheers: ‘ Tyrants begone! The people are awake!’

‘ Union of the people; terror of the rulers.’

‘ Rather a bloody battle than the oppression of a corrupt power.’

A black flag, displaying a death’s head and cross- bones, bore the names of the most unpopular governors, and in honour of old France a white flag bore on one side an American eagle encircled with stars and on the other a Canadian eagle holding in its beak a sprig of maple with these words: — ‘ Our future! Free as the air!’

These showed how excited the people had become. Great Britain had some reason to fear that the colony would at one blow sever the bond that bound it to herself. The representatives of the authority took serious steps to cope with a supreme struggle, but all they were willing to see were the threats of a faction while they were really faced with a national awakening.

On 23rd October there was a meeting at St. Charles, the village where Jean-Sans-Nom was in hiding at his mother’s. Six counties had sent their representatives, thirteen deputies spoke, and among them was Papineau, then at the height of his popularity. More than six thousand persons, men, women and children, assembled from ten leagues round, were encamped in a large field around a column surmounted by a Cap of Liberty. And to show that the military element made common cause with the civilians, a company of the militia were brandishing their weapons at the foot of the column.

Papineau, in a speech preceded by even more fiery orators, seemed, if anything, too moderate in advising the crowd to keep within the bounds of constitutional agitation.

In reply, the chairman, amid frantic interruptions, retorted: ‘ The time has come to melt our spoons into bullets! ‘ And the representative of Acadie improved upon this by his energetic words: ‘ The time for talk is over! Now it’s lead that we must hurl against our enemies!’

Thirteen resolutions were then adopted, while the cheering was reinforced by salvoes of musketry from the militia.

The resolutions began by affirming the rights of man and the right and the need to resist a tyrannical government; they then incited the British soldiers to desert their colours, encouraged the people to refuse to submit to the magistrates and to those officers of the militia who were nominated by the government, and finally to organise themselves as the Sons of Freedom.

Then Papineau and his colleagues filed before the symbolic column, while a choir of the young people chanted a hymn at the tops of their voices.

It seemed that enthusiasm could reach no greater height than this. Yet it did, for after a few moment’s silence somebody else appeared upon the scene. This was a young man whose face showed a passionate enthusiasm: climbing on to the pedestal of the column, he raised above the heads of the thousands around him the flag of Canadian independence. Several of the people recognised him, but even before they did so, the lawyer Gramont shouted his name, and the crowd repeated it amid frantic cheers: ‘Jean-Sans-Nom! Jean-Sans-Nom! ‘ Jean had just left Maison-Close. For the first time since the last insurrection in 1836, he showed himself publicly; then, having added his name to those of the other agitators, he disappeared. But he had been seen once more and the effect was immense.

What had taken place at St. Charles was soon known all over Lower Canada, and the resulting enthusiasm may well be imagined. Further meetings were held in most of the other parishes. In vain the Bishop of Montreal, Monsignor Lartique, tried to calm the excitement by counselling evangelical moderation. The explosion was close at hand. M. de Vaudreuil, in his hiding-place, Clary at the Villa Montcalm, received two letters whose handwriting they well knew. The same information reached Thomas Harcher and his sons at St. Albans, the American village in which they were waiting to cross the frontier.

At this season of the year, the winter sets in with that suddenness peculiar to the climate of North America.

The broad plains offer no obstacle to the storms from the Polar Regions, and the Gulf Stream, swerving towards Europe, fails to heat them by its generous waters. There is no transition, so to speak, between the warmth of summer and the cold of winter. The rain falls almost incessantly, traversed occasionally by a fugitive ray of sunshine robbed of its heat. In a few days the trees, stripped bare to the tips of their branches, have strewn the ground with a shower of leaves which the snow will soon bury all over the Canadian territory. But neither the attacks of the storm nor the exacting temperature of the climate would keep the patriots from rising at the first signal.

It was under these conditions that, on 6th November, the two parties came into collision at Montreal.

On the first Monday of each month the Sons of Freedom assembled in the large towns to make a public demonstration. On this occasion the Montreal Reformists wanted to make the demonstration as large as possible, and the meeting was called in the very heart of the city, between the walls of a court leading out of the Rue Saint Jacques.

At the news of the meeting the members of the Doric Club posted up a proclamation that the time had come to crush the rebellion at its birth, and inviting the loyalists, the constitutionalists, and the bureaucrats, to meet on the Place d'Armes.

The Reformist meeting was held at the time and place indicated, and Papineau was warmly applauded, while other orators also won enthusiastic acclamations.

Suddenly a shower of stones fell into the court. The loyalists were attacking the Reformists. Armed with sticks, the latter formed themselves up in five columns, rushed out, threw themselves on the members of the Doric Club, and drove them back to the Place d'Armes. Then pistol-shots rang out here and there. One of the orators received a violent blow which stretched him on the ground, and one of the most determined Reformists had his thigh pierced by a bullet.

The members of the Doric Club, though repulsed, did not regard themselves as beaten. Knowing that the redcoats would come to their aid, they dispersed along the streets of Montreal, broke Panineau's windows, and sacked the office of the Vindicator, a Liberal newspaper, which had long supported the French-Canadian cause.

Because of this outbreak the Reformists were investigated, and warrants were issued for the arrest of the leaders, who had to take flight. Monsieur de

Vaudreuil, who had come out of hiding, was again forced to seek refuge in his hiding-place, where the police had sought for him in vain since the affair at Chipogan.

And it was then that Jean-Sans-Nom again appeared.

After the bloodshed which had occurred on 6th November, a few of the leading citizens had been arrested not far from Montreal, and on the 22nd a detachment of cavalry was escorting them to the city.

One of the boldest advocates of the national cause, ‘ the handsome Viger ‘ — as the insurgents called him — was notified of the arrest of two of his friends, though the man who brought the message was unknown to him.

‘Who are you?’ asked Viger.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ the man replied. ‘ The prisoners are in a carriage which is now approaching Longueil, and they’ve got to be rescued.

‘Are you alone?’

‘My friends are waiting for me.’

‘Where shall we join them?’

‘On the road.’

‘Come along, then!’

And off they went. Neither Viger nor his companion lacked for supporters, and they reached Longueil at the head of a number of patriots, whom they posted in front of the village. But the alarm had been given, and a detachment of loyalists ran up to reinforce the escort. The officer in command then warned the people of the village that if they joined Viger their homes would be given to the flames.

‘Nothing to be done here,’ the unknown decided when these threats were reported to him. ‘ Come on.’

‘Where to?’ asked Viger.

‘Two miles from here. Don’t let’s give the bureaucrats an excuse for any reprisals. They may come only too soon!’

‘Let’s get on! ‘ Viger agreed.

Followed by their men, they crossed the fields. Reaching Trudeau Farm, they took up their position in a nearby field. It was time. A cloud of dust, rising a quarter of a mile away, announced the approach of the prisoners and their escort.

The carriage arrived, and at once Viger went up to the officer in command.

‘Halt!’ he snapped. ‘ And hand over your prisoners in the name of the people!’

‘Look out there!’ the officer shouted to his men. ‘ Ready!’

‘Halt!’ repeated the stranger.

Suddenly someone rushed to seize him. This was one of Rip and Co.’s men — one of those who had been at Chipogan Farm.

‘Jean-Sans-Nom!’ he shouted as soon as he had confronted him.

‘Jean-Sans-Nom!’ exclaimed Viger, dashing up to his companion.

And suddenly, with irresistible enthusiasm, the cheers broke out.

As the officer was ordering his men to capture Jean- Sans-Nom, he was overthrown by a sturdy Canadian, who had jumped into the road. Meanwhile the others posted behind the hedge were awaiting orders from Viger. He gave them as loudly and confidently as if he had a hundred followers.

Meanwhile Jean had made for the carriage; he was accompanied by several comrades, as determined to defend him as they were to free the captives. But as soon as the officer had regained his feet he gave the word to fire. Six or seven shots rang out. Viger was struck by two bullets, though not mortally; one grazed his leg, the other carried away the tip of his little finger. He replied with a shot from his pistol, and wounded the leader of the escort in the knee.

Then a panic broke out among the detachment’s horses, several of which had been wounded. Thinking they had to do with a thousand men, the loyalists dispersed across the country and the carriage was left unguarded. Jean-Sans-Nom and Viger threw open its doors, and the prisoners were released, and escorted in triumph into a village nearby.

But when the affair was over, and Viger and his companions looked around for Jean, he was nowhere to be found. No doubt he had hoped to keep his incognito until the fight was over, for he had had no reason to suppose that he would meet with one of Rip’s men, and that his identity would be revealed. Now the fight was over, he had hastened to disappear without anyone’s noticing which way he had gone. And yet none of the reformists doubted but that they would see him again when the blow was to be struck which was to give Canada her independence.

CHAPTER II

ST. DENIS AND ST. CHARLES

The day could not be far distant when the people would rush to arms. Already both factions were ready. But where would be the field of battle? Evidently in the regions near Montreal, where the popular effervescence was rapidly assuming proportions disquieting to the Government; especially demanding attention were the two rich parishes traversed by the Richelieu stream and situated a few leagues apart. They were St. Denis, where the Reformists were centralised, and St. Charles, where Jean, who had returned to Maison-Close, was preparing to give the signal for the insurrection.

The Governor-General had taken all the measures that circumstances demanded. To surprise him in his Residence, to imprison him, to substitute the popular for the royal authority, was no longer to be dreamed of even by the most enthusiastic of the reformists. The attack might well come from the bureaucrats; and the Reformists had had to take up positions where resistance could be organised most favourably. To transform the defensive into the offensive, that was their aim. A victory here would mean that the people would rise on each side of the St. Lawrence, and so lead to the annihilation of Anglo-Saxon tyranny from the mouth of the river to Lake Ontario.

Lord Gosford was fully aware of this. His troops were but few, and if the revolt became general, they would be overwhelmed by numbers. Hence it was advisable to strike at the disaffection by a double blow, at St. Denis and at St. Charles. And this was what he attempted after the affair at Longueil.

Sir John Colborne, the commander-in-chief, divided his army into two columns. At the head of one was Lieutenant-Colonel Wetherall; at that of the other was Colonel Gore.

Colonel Gore's preparations were soon made, and he left Montreal on the 22nd of November. His column consisted of five companies of fusiliers and a detachment of cavalry, but his artillery was limited to one field gun. He reached Sorel on the evening of the same day. Although the weather was abominable and the road almost impracticable, he did not hesitate to get on the march in the middle of a very dark night.

His plan was to attack the insurgents at St. Charles after he had dispersed those at St. Denis, but first he meant to make certain arrests, to be carried out by the deputy-sheriff who was accompanying him. He had already left Sorel a few hours previously when Lieutenant Weir of the 32nd regiment arrived with a despatch from Sir John Colborne. The despatch being urgent, the lieutenant at once set out after him, but as he travelled across country, he reached St. Denis before the troops, and there he fell into the hands of the patriots.

Doctor Nelson, who was in charge of the defence, interrogated the young officer, and extracted the information that the troops were already on the march, and would arrive in the morning. And he then handed over the lieutenant to a few of his men to be treated with the respect due to a prisoner of war.

The preparations were hurriedly completed. Among other companies of the patriots were those who called themselves the ‘ Beavers ‘ and the ‘ Snow-shoes,’ who were skilled in the use of arms, and whose conduct was to be very brilliant in the affair that followed. Under Nelson’s orders were Papineau and a few other deputies, as well as De Vaudreuil, and his comrades. At a hint from Jean they had come to rally the Reformists, although they had not found it easy to elude the Montreal police.

Clary de Vaudreuil, too, had just arrived with her father, whom she had not seen since they left Chipogan. Because of the warrant issued against him, De Vaudreuil had been forced to cease all communication with the Villa Montcalm, and he had been very uneasy at leaving his daughter alone and exposed to so many dangers. When he decided to go to St. Denis he had sent word to ask her to join him there, and this Clary did without hesitation, never doubting a definite success, for, as she knew, Jean was about to put himself at the head of the Reformists. M. de Vaudreuil and his daughter were thus re-united in a friend’s house in the village.

A decision was then reached by the leaders, and to this Papineau had to consent, very much against his will. Dr. Nelson and a few others reminded this courageous deputy that his place was not on the battle-field, and that his life was too valuable for him to risk needlessly. So he felt it his duty to leave St. Denis for some place of safety where he could be out of reach of the police agents.

The whole night was spent in casting bullets and making cartridges. The doctor’s son, with his comrades and De Vaudreuil and his friends, had got to work without losing an instant. Unfortunately their armament left much to be desired. Their muskets were few, and were only flint-locks, which often missed fire, and whose range did not exceed a hundred yards. During his expedition on the St. Lawrence, Jean, it will be remembered, had distributed arms and ammunition. But as each county had to have its share with a view to a general rising, these weapons could not be concentrated at any one centre — this would have been desirable at St. Charles and St. Denis, where the first shock was to take place.

During that cold, dark night Colonel Gore advanced on St. Denis. Just before he reached it two French- Canadians fell into his hands, and they informed him that the insurgents would not let him enter the village and that they would fight on till death.

Colonel Gore, without giving his men any rest, harangued them, and warned them they were to expect no quarter. Then, dividing them into three detachments, he stationed one in a small wood covering the village on the east, another along the river, while the third, with its one gun, advanced along the road.

At six in the morning Dr. Nelson, Vincent Hodge and De Vaudreuil mounted their horses to reconnoitre the road from St. Ours. The darkness was still so deep that they nearly fell into the hands of the advance guard of the regulars. Retreating at once, they returned to St. Denis, and gave orders to break down the bridges, and ring an alarm from the church bell. In a few minutes the Reformists had mustered.

How many were there? From seven to eight hundred, a few armed with muskets, the others only with scythes, forks, or pikes, but all determined to die in repulsing Colonel Gore's forces.

Dr. Nelson posted sixty of those men who had muskets in the upper floor of a stone house by the roadside; among these were M. de Vaudreuil and Vincent Hodge. Twenty-five yards away, behind the walls of a distillery, were thirty of the others, including William Clerc and Farran. In a store nearby were a dozen men under the orders of the Deputy Gramont. Those who had to trust to cold steel were in ambush behind the walls of the churchyard.

After half-past nine that morning, just as the final arrangements were made, there came a tragic event which was never thoroughly cleared up, not even at the criminal investigation which took place later.

Lieutenant Weir, who was being escorted along the road, caught sight of Colonel Gore’s advance guard, and tried to escape so as to rejoin it; but he slipped, and before he could regain his feet he was killed by a sword- thrust.

The battle then began. A cannon-ball aimed at the stone house struck two men just as a third was shot at one of the windows. For a few minutes there was a brisk exchange of fire. The soldiers in the open paid dearly for the contemptuous indifference with which they exposed themselves to the fire of these ‘ peasants,’ as their leader had called them. They were decimated by the defenders in the stone house, and three of the gunners fell, fuses in hand, at the piece which they were serving.

The projectiles, however, broke down the wall, and soon the upper floor of the house no longer afforded any shelter.

‘To the ground floor!’ shouted Dr. Nelson.

‘Yes,’ added Vincent Hodge, ‘ and then we’ll be nearer the red-coats.’

They went down, and the musketry once more began with renewed violence. The reformists displayed extraordinary courage, even advancing up the road right into the open. The doctor sent his aide-de-camp to order them to retire, but the man fell dead, shot in two places.

For an hour the musketry duel continued, on the whole to the disadvantage of the assailants, who had now taken cover behind the walls and the piles of wood. Then Colonel Gore, seeing that his ammunition was running out, ordered Captain Markman to turn the position.

This Markman attempted to do, not without losing the greater part of his men. He himself was hit and thrown off his horse, so that he had to be carried to the rear by his soldiers. Things were already going badly for the royalists, when there came a loud shouting in the road, and they realised that an attempt was being made to surround them.

A man had suddenly appeared on the scene — that very man around whom the French-Canadians were used to rallying as they would round a flag.

‘Jean-Sans-Nom! Jean-Sans-Nom!’ they shouted, as they brandished their weapons.

It was Jean, at the head of a hundred insurgents from the other villages. They had crossed the Richelieu under fire, and one of the missiles had broken the oar of the boat in which Jean had been standing.

‘Forward, Snow-shoes and Beavers!’ he shouted, as he led his comrades on.

At his voice, the patriots rushed upon the royalists, while those besieged in the house, encouraged by this unexpected reinforcement, made a sortie. Colonel Gore had to beat a retreat towards Sorel, leaving a number of prisoners and his one gun in the hands of the victors. He had lost thirty killed and as many wounded, as against twelve killed and four wounded on the side of the reformists.

Such was the affair at St. Denis. In a few hours the news of the victory spread through the whole region, and even to the riverside counties of the St. Lawrence.

This was encouraging for the reformists; but it was only a beginning. And as they were waiting for orders, Jean shouted these words, as though making a rendezvous for another victory: ‘Patriots — on to St. Charles!’

He had not forgotten that the village was threatened by Colonel Wetherall.

An hour later, M. de Vaudreuil and Jean, after bidding farewell to Clary, whom they had told of their victory, had rejoined their companions on the road to St. Charles. Thence he would lead his comrades on.

There, two days later, was to be decided the fate of the 1837 insurrection.

The village, where the Reformists had concentrated their forces, had become the main centre of the rebellion, and it was on this that Colonel Wetherall was marching in considerable strength.

Here Brown and the other leaders had organised the defence. They could trust the fiery population, who had already shown their feelings by expelling one of the gentry, accused of favouring the English-Canadians; and it was round this person’s house that Brown, the insurgent leader, had formed a camp where he could concentrate all the forces he had at his disposal.

St. Denis is not more than six miles from St. Charles, where the sound of the guns had been heard during the 23rd. Before night its people had heard that the royal troops had been forced to beat a retreat towards Sorel. The impression produced by this first victory was profound: the doors of all the houses were thrown wide open, and the people swarmed out into the street, a prey to a kind of patriotic delirium.

One house alone remained shut — the Maison-Close by the turning in the main road, some distance away from the camp. Bridget’s dwelling was thus in less danger than those further in if the camp should be attacked and stormed by the royal troops.

Bridget, still as ever alone, was waiting ready to receive her sons, if circumstances should force them to seek shelter. But just then the Abbé Joann was visiting the parishes of Upper Canada and preaching insurrection; and Jean, no longer hiding himself, had reappeared at the head of the patriots. His name was now passing from mouth to mouth all along the St. Lawrence. Cut off from the world as Maison-Close was, the name had reached it, and with it the news of the victory at St. Denis, with which he was so intimately associated.

And Bridget was wondering whether Jean would not come to the camp at St. Charles, to visit his mother, to cross her threshold to tell her what he had done and what he meant to do, and to embrace her perhaps for the last time. But that depended on the course the insurrection took, and so she kept herself ready at any time of the night or day to receive her son at Maison-Close.

Hearing of the defeat at St. Denis, Lord Gosford, fearing that the victors would reinforce the patriots at St. Charles, had sent orders to Colonel Wetherall to retreat. “It was too late. The messengers despatched from Montreal by Sir John Colborne were stopped on the road, and instead of retiring the column continued its movement on St. Charles. It was now impossible for anyone to prevent the encounter between the insurgents stationed at the village and the soldiers of the regular army.

On the 24th Jean-Sans-Nom had reached the defenders of the camp at St. Charles, and with him had come De Vaudreuil, Farran, Clerc, Hodge and Gramont. Two days previously farmer Harcher and his five sons, after leaving St. Albans, had crossed the American frontier and come to St. Charles, resolved to do their duty to the end.

It must be realised that no one doubted of a final success, neither the political leaders of the opposition party, nor De Vaudreuil and his friends, nor Thomas Harcher, nor his valiant sons, nor any of the village people, who were over-excited at the thought that it had fallen to them to strike the last blow at Anglo- Saxon tyranny.

Before attacking St. Charles, Lieutenant-Colonel Wetherall had told Brown and his followers that if they would surrender they would come to no harm. This proposal was unanimously rejected: that it had been made at all showed that the royalists felt themselves unable to capture the camp. No! they must never be allowed to march on St. Denis and take sanguinary reprisals. As soon as Wetherall's column appeared, it would be repulsed, it would be dispersed. A new defeat awaited the royalists, a complete defeat, assuring a final victory. Such was the belief of the patriots.

But it would be wrong to suppose that the defenders of the camp were in great strength. They were only a handful of men, but they were the élite of the party. Leaders and rank and file numbered only a couple of hundred, armed with scythes, pikes, clubs, and fire-lock muskets, and in reply to the royal artillery they had but two guns, and these were almost unserviceable.

While they were making ready to receive him, Colonel Wetherall marched rapidly towards them, unhindered by the obstacles which winter can produce in these regions. The weather was cold, and the earth dry, so that the men could make good progress, and the guns rolled easily over the hardened ground, without having to be dragged through the snow or the swamps.

The reformists were ready for them. Enthusiastic at their previous victory, electrified by the presence of their leaders, and above all by that of Jean-Sans-Nom, the reception they gave to Colonel Wetherall’s proposals had already been described. To his demand for them to lay down their arms, they were ready to reply with musket-shots, and scythe-swings, and pike-thrusts.

However, the camp, being at the end of the town, had certain disadvantages which there was no time to remedy. It was covered on one side by a river, and defended on the other by a thick abattis of trees which surrounded the house, and it had been protected by entrenchments, but it was commanded by a hill to its rear which the insurgents were not strong enough to occupy.

If the royalists were to capture this hill, there would be no shelter, except the house, which they had pierced with loop-holes. Could it in such circumstances withstand an assault, and if they were besieged, would Brown and his comrades be in sufficient force to repulse their assailants?

About two in the afternoon, a distant noise was heard, and much disorder followed. A number of women and children, and old men, were seen hastening across the fields towards St. Charles. They were the country-people in full flight. In the distance thick clouds of smoke were rising in the air. As far as the eye could reach all the farm-houses were in flames. Wetherall’s columns were advancing through the desolation and slaughter which marked his path.

Brown succeeded in stopping such of the fugitives as were in a condition to fight; leaving the command to Marchessault, he went out to rally them. Marchessault made the final arrangements, and stationed his forces under cover of the abattis which protected the camp.

‘It is here,’ he announced, ‘that the fate of our country will be decided! It is here we must defend our country .

‘To the death!’ exclaimed Jean-Sans-Nom.

And then the sound of gun-fire was heard, and the patriots realised that right from the outset the royal troops were being handled to the best advantage.

For Wetherall to expose himself to the fire of the insurgents drawn up along the abattis would have been most injudicious. With his three or four hundred infantry and cavalry and his two guns, he could easily command the camp and wipe out the defenders. So he gave orders to skirt the entrenchments and to occupy the hill in the rear.

This movement was executed without difficulty. The two guns were dragged up into position, and the fight broke out with equal energy on both sides. And all this had taken place so quickly that Brown, still occupied in rallying the fugitives scattered over the countryside, could not get back to the camp, and had to make off to St. Denis.

Though insufficiently sheltered, the patriots defended their position with admirable courage. De Vaudreuil and the other leaders, with Harcher and his sons, all who had firearms, returned shot for shot to the besiegers’ fire. Jean-Sans-Nom encouraged them by his very presence. But what he longed for was the battle-field, the hand-to-hand struggle in which he could lead the bravest. His energy was paralysed by this long-range combat.

This nevertheless lasted as long as the entrenchments held good. If the defenders of the camp had brought down more than one red-coat, they themselves were not without serious losses, for twelve of them had fallen, some wounded, some killed. Amongst these was Remy Harcher, stretched in a pool of blood, his chest torn open by grape-shot. When his brothers lifted him to carry him into the house, life was already extinct. Farran, with his shoulder broken, had been taken there already. De Vaudreuil and Hodge, after putting him in shelter, had returned to their places in the defence.

But soon the house, their last refuge, had to be evacuated. Destroyed by the guns, the abattis no longer protected the camp, and Colonel Wetherall gave orders to carry the position at the point of the bayonet.

Many valiant patriots perished; their ammunition exhausted, they fought on with clubbed muskets. Though some, after a heroic resistance, succeeded in cutting their way through their assailants, there fell so many other Reformists that their number was never known, for the river swept away many of the bodies.

Among those persons more intimately connected with this narrative were several victims. If Jean-Sans-Nom had fought like a lion, always at the head of his men, always in the thick of the fight, openly and known to all who were for or against him, if it were only by a miracle that he escaped unhurt, it was not so with others. Some had been dangerously wounded, and had been carried to the rear by Thomas and Pierre Harcher, who thus saved them from the atrocious massacre that followed. William Clerc and Vincent Hodge as recklessly exposed themselves: a score of times they had been seen in the thick of the fight, musket and pistol in hand. At one critical moment they had followed Jean-Sans- Nom towards the battery on the hill, where he would have been killed had not Vincent Hodge turned aside the blow that one of the gunners had aimed at him.

‘Thanks!’ said Jean, ‘ but maybe you were wrong. It will soon be all over now.’

And to his mind it would have been well if the son of Simon Morgaz had fallen there where the cause of freedom was about to perish on the St. Charles battlefield.

He threw himself back into the fight, just in time to see De Vaudreuil lying on the ground, covered with blood. He had received a sabre stroke from one of Wetherall’s horsemen who were scouring the neighbourhood to scatter the insurgents.

And then a voice seemed to speak in Jean’s mind, a voice which implored: ‘Save my father!’

Concealed amid the smoke of the musketry, Jean crawled towards De Vaudreuil, who was by now unconscious and perhaps dead. He took him in his arms, and carried him along the entrenchments; and then, as the horsemen were off pursuing the rebels with unheard-of ferocity, he succeeded in reaching the upper part of St. Charles, among the burning houses. Here he took refuge in the church porch.

It was then five in the evening, and the sky would already have been dark if the flames had not been rising above the ruins of the village. The insurrection, victorious at St. Denis, had been vanquished at St. Charles, nor could it be said that the victory had compensated for the defeat. No! the defeat would have worse results for the national cause than the victory had advanced it; and it had shattered every hope of the insurgents.

Those of the combatants who had not succumbed were forced to disperse without getting any orders for rallying. William Clerc, accompanied by Andrew Farran, who had only been slightly wounded, went off across country and, after many dangers, managed to reach the frontier, not realising what had happened to De Vaudreuil and Hodge.

And now, what would become of Clary de Vaudreuil, in the house at St. Denis, where she was waiting for tidings? Would she not have everything to fear from the reprisals of the loyalists if she could not get away?

So meditated Jean, as he sat hidden in the church. De Vaudreuil had not returned to consciousness, though his heart was beating feebly. If he were seen to at once, could he possibly be saved? Where and how could this be done? There was no room for hesitation. That very night he must take him to Maison-Close.

Maison-Close was not far off — only a few hundred yards, down the main street of the village. In the darkness, as soon as Wetherall’s men had left St. Charles, or when they had settled down for the night, Jean could carry the wounded man to his mother’s home.

His mother! M. de Vaudreuil with Bridget — with the wife of Simon Morgaz! And if ever he learnt under whose roof Jean had brought him!

But had not he, the son of Simon Morgaz, been a guest at the Villa Montcalm? Had he not been De Vaudreuil’s companion-in-arms? Would it not be snatching him from death? Would it do any harm to M. de Vaudreuil to owe his life to Bridget Morgaz?

But he need never know! Nothing need betray the incognito which hid the miserable family.

Jean had his plan ready; it now only remained to put it into execution — in a few hours at the outside.

And then his thoughts returned to that house at St. Denis, where Clary de Vaudreuil would learn of the patriots' defeat. If her father did not return to her, would she not think he was dead? Would it be possible to let her know that M. de Vaudreuil had been taken to Maison-Close, and to get her away from the village, now handed over to the vengeance of its conquerors?

The anxiety told on Jean, and worse even than this was his torture at the thought of this terrible disaster for the national cause. All his hopes after the victory of St. Denis, what might have been its effects — the rising of the counties, the success of the insurrection in the valleys of the Richelieu and the St. Lawrence, the royal army rendered powerless, the gaining of independence, his reparation to his country for his father's treachery — all was lost — all!

All? Perhaps there would still be a chance of continuing the struggle? Was the cause dead in the hearts of the French-Canadians because a few hundred had fallen at St. Charles? No! Jean would set to work again. He would fight on to death.

Although night had fallen, the village was still noisy with the shouts of the soldiers and the cries of the wounded, and the streets were still alight with the flames. After destroying the camp, the fire had seized on the neighbouring houses. Where would it stop? If it were to reach the end of the village? If Maison-Close were to be destroyed? If Jean were to find neither his home nor his mother?

The thought terrified him. For himself he could always get away into the woods, and escape during the night. Before daylight he would be out of reach. But what would become of De Vaudreuil? If he fell into the hands of the royalists, he was lost, for not even the wounded had been spared in the bloody conflict.

But towards night calm seemed to return to St. Charles. Its people had either been driven out, or, after Colonel Wetherall’s forces had gone, they had sought refuge in the few houses spared by the fire. The streets were now deserted, and he must take advantage of this.

Jean went to the church door, opened it, threw a quick glance around and descended the steps. No one was there, and the place was half lighted by the reflection of the distant flames.

Jean returned to M. de Vaudreuil, who was lying at full length near a pillar. He raised him in his arms. This was a heavy burden even for a man like Jean, and he would have to carry it as far as the turning in the main road, as far as Maison-Close. He crossed the square, and made his way quickly along the neighbouring street. It was time. Scarcely had he gone twenty yards, when there came a loud noise, and the tramping of horses.

It was a detachment of cavalry returning to St. Charles. Before pursuing the fugitives, Wetherall had ordered the troops to pass the night in the village, and it was the church itself which he had decided to use as a bivouac.

Immediately afterwards, the horsemen swarmed into the nave, not forgetting to take precautions against a counter-attack. And not merely the men; they had brought their horses with them. No need to stress the profanations indulged in by the soldiery, drunk with bloodshed and alcohol, in a building consecrated to Catholic worship.

Jean made his way along the deserted street, stopping every now and then to take breath. And always that fear that when he reached Maison-Close, he would find it in ruins.

At last he reached the road, and stopped before his mother’s house. It was lost in the shadows; the fires had not yet reached it. But through the windows there came not a gleam of light.

Jean, carrying De Vaudreuil, pushed the gate open, and dragging himself to the door, he gave the agreed signal.

A moment later the two were safe in the house of Bridget Morgaz.

CHAPTER III

DE VAUDREUIL AT MAISON-CLOSE

‘Mother,’ Jean laid the wounded man on the bed used by himself or his brother whenever either of them passed the night at Maison-Close, ‘ Mother, if this man isn’t looked after he’ll lose his life.’

‘I’ll look after him, Jean!’

‘It will cost you your own life, mother, if Weatherall’s soldiers find him here.’

‘My life! Does my life count for anything, my son?’

Jean did not care to tell her that her guest was De Vaudreuil, one of Simon Morgaz’s victims. It would only have recalled painful memories. Better for Bridget not to know it. The man whom she was sheltering was a patriot. That gave him a right to her devotion.

Bridget and Jean had gone back to the door. They listened. There was a distant noise near the church, but all was quiet on the main road. The last of the reflections of the fires kindled in the upper part of the village had gradually begun to die away, as had the shouts of the loyalists. The arson and pillage had stopped. Though a score of so of houses had been reduced to ashes, Maison- Close was one of those which had escaped destruction. But Bridget and Jean had everything to fear from the victors when the morning sun should light up the ruins of St. Charles.

During the night they had had more than one alarm.

From hour to hour the soldiers and volunteers making their rounds had passed in front of Maison-Close; they were keeping an eye on the outskirts of the village as far as the turning in the main road. Now and then they had halted. Had orders to search the house been given? Were the police about to knock at the door and summon the inmates to open it? And it was not for himself that Jean trembled, but for De Vaudreuil, who would meet his fate in his mother’s house!

These fears were not to be realised, for that night at any rate. Bridget and her son sat down beside the wounded man. All they could do for him they had done. But they must get him treated — and how could they get that? They ought to have a doctor, but where should they find one to whom they could entrust not only the Reformist’s life, but the secrets of Maison-Close?

Monsieur de Vaudreuil’s chest was laid bare, and examined. A deep wound made by a sabre stroke extended across its left side. The wound did not seem deep enough to have reached any vital organ, yet the sufferer was breathing so feebly, he had lost so much blood, that he might die of exhaustion.

After washing the wound with clean water, Bridget drew the two edges together and covered it with compresses. Would De Vaudreuil recover thanks to the careful treatment which she would give him, and the quiet he was sure of at Maison-Close, if only the soldiers left the village? Jean and his mother dared not entertain such a hope.

Two hours after his arrival, although he had not yet opened his eyes, the wounded man muttered a few words. Plainly all that bound him to life was the thought of his daughter. He was calling her — perhaps for her to help him, perhaps because he was thinking of the peril that now threatened her at St. Denis.

Bridget held his hand listening, while Jean, standing by her side, tried to keep the wound from being opened by some sudden movement. He also sought to make out the words, which were interspersed with sighs. Would De Vaudreuil say something that Bridget ought not to hear?

And then they caught a name, muttered amid some incoherent phrases.

It was that of Clary.

‘The poor man has a daughter, then? ‘ Bridget looked at her son.

‘Yes, Mother, he has.’

‘And he’s asking for her! He doesn’t want to die till he’s seen her. If his daughter were near him, his mind would be easy! Where is she now? Couldn’t I find her and bring her here... in secret?’

‘Here!’ exclaimed Jean.

‘Yes! Her place is near her father, who’s calling her and who’s dying.’

Then, in a fit of delirium, the wounded man tried to sit up in bed; he gasped, in tones of anguish: ‘Clary... alone... there... at St. Denis!’

Bridget got up.

‘St. Denis?’ she said, ‘ it’s there that he’s left his daughter! Did you hear that, Jean?’

‘The loyalists — at St. Denis!’ the wounded man continued. ‘ She can’t possibly escape them! The scoundrels will take their revenge on Clary de Vaudreuil.’

‘Clary de Vaudreuil?’ repeated Bridget.

Then, lowering her head, she added: ‘Monsieur de Vaudreuil... here!’

‘Yes! It’s Monsieur de Vaudreuil,’ said Jean. ‘ And as he’s at Maison-Close, his daughter must come here!’

‘Clary de Vaudreuil,’ murmured Bridget.

Standing motionless at the side of the bed, she looked at him whose blood was flowing for the cause of independence, he who a dozen years before had nearly lost his life through the treachery of Simon Morgaz. If he knew what house was giving him shelter, what hands were fighting with death on his behalf, would he not be overwhelmed with horror, and if he had to drag himself away on his knees, would he not hasten to escape from this infamous contact with this family?

Like a long groan the name of Clary again rose to his lips.

‘He may be dying,’ said Jean, ‘ and he mustn’t die till he’s seen his daughter.’

‘I’ll go and fetch her,’ replied Bridget.

‘No! I’ll go, mother.’

‘You, whom they’re hunting for all over the whole country! You to fall before you have accomplished your work! No, Jean, I will go and look for

Clary de Vaudreuil!’

‘Mother, she’ll refuse to follow you!’

‘She won’t refuse when she knows that her father is dying, and that he’s calling for her! Where is she — at St. Denis?’

‘In the house of Judge Froment. But it’s too far for you, mother! You won’t be strong enough. There and back is twelve miles! If I start at once, I’ll have time to get to St. Denis and bring her back before daylight. No one will see me go out; no one will see me come back.’

‘No one?’ said Bridget, ‘ and the soldiers who are watching the roads — how are you going to avoid them?

And if you fall into their hands, how are you to get away? Even assuming they don’t recognise you, will they let you go? But I, an old woman, why should they stop me? Enough talk! Jean, Monsieur de Vaudreuil wants to see his daughter! He must see her, and I’m the only one who can bring her here! I shall go!’

Jean had to give in to his mother’s arguments. Although the night was very dark, for him to venture into the roads guarded by the patrols would be to risk being unable to accomplish his task. Clary de Vaudreuil would have to cross the threshold of Maison-Close before sunrise. Who knew if her father would live till then? Could he — Jean-Sans-Nom, and known as such now that he fought in the open, could he get as far as St. Denis? Could he get back with Clary de Vaudreuil? Would that make it much more likely for her to fall into the loyalists’ hands?

This last thought decided him, for he cared little for his own personal danger. He told Bridget how to find Judge Froment’s house, and gave her a letter containing only the words, ‘ Trust yourself to my mother and follow her! ‘ — that ought to give the girl confidence. Then he opened the door and shut it behind his mother and went back to sit at the bedside.

It was a little after ten when Bridget started along the deserted road. The glacial cold of the long Canadian nights had frozen the ground, and the road facilitated quick walking. The moon, now in its first quarter, had just disappeared over the horizon, leaving a few stars gleaming between the clouds.

Bridget walked quickly through the dark solitude without fear or weakness. To carry out her task she had regained her one-time energy, of which she had already given proof. The road she knew quite well, having often been along it in her youth. Her only fear was that she would fall in with some of the detachments of the soldiers.

This happened three times within two miles of St. Charles. But why should they stop this old woman? She was greeted with a few words from men more or less drunk, but that was all. Colonel Weatherall had not got as far as St. Denis. Before attacking that unfortunate village he meant to reconnoitre carefully, and to avoid imperilling his victory by a premature attack.

For the rest of her journey Bridget met with no danger. The only people she came up with and passed were fugitives from St. Charles, who were scattering over the country, homeless now that their houses had been given to pillage and the flames.

But, as was only too certain, where Bridget could move freely Jean would have found it impossible to get through. On the approach of the soldiers he would have had to leave the main road and get across the country by devious routes, which would have made it impossible for him to return to Maison-Close before daylight. And if a cavalry picket were to capture him, they would have left him only when they had landed him in jail. They might even have recognised him, and then he knew what fate awaited him.

Half an hour before midnight Bridget reached the Richlieu.

The house of Judge Froment, she knew, was situated on the bank of the river, a little out of St. Denis, so there was no need for her to cross to the far side, which she could only have done in a boat. All she had to do was to go down beside the river for a quarter of a mile to reach the door of the house.

The place was completely deserted, and a deep silence reigned all over the valley.

In the distance a few lights were gleaming in the windows of the village, which was then plunged in a peace undisturbed by any rumour.

Had the news of the defeat at St. Charles not yet reached St. Denis?

That was what Bridget surmised. Then Clary de Vaudreuil would know nothing of the disaster, and she herself would be the bringer of evil tidings.

She went up the steps, and knocked at the door.

There was no reply.

She knocked again.

Footsteps could be heard in the hall, and a feeble light appeared. Then a voice asked: ‘What do you want?’

‘To see Judge Froment.’

‘Judge Froment isn’t at St. Denis, and in his absence I can’t open the door.’

‘I’ve got important news for him,’ Bridget declared.

‘You can give it to him when he gets back.’

The speaker seemed so determined not to open the door that Bridget did not hesitate to use Clary’s name.

‘If Judge Froment isn’t at home,’ she said, ‘Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil ought to be, and I must have a word with her.’

‘Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil has gone away,’ said the voice, though not without a certain hesitation.

‘When did she go?’

‘Yesterday.’

‘Do you know where she’s gone?’

‘No doubt to meet her father.’

‘Her father?’ said Bridget. ‘ But it’s from Monsieur de Vaudreuil that I’ve come!’

‘My father?’ exclaimed Clary, who was at the back of the hall; ‘ open the door.’

‘Clary de Vaudreuil,’ Bridget lowered her voice, ‘ if I’ve come — it’s to take you to your father, and it was Jean who has sent me...’

Already the door-bolts had been drawn back when Bridget added in low tones: ‘No — don’t open! Wait!’

And she moved quietly down the steps. It was important for her not to be seen, and especially so for her not to be seen entering the house; and a number of men, women and children had now come into sight, moving towards her along the river bank.

It was the first group of fugitives, who had reached St. Denis after crossing the country to avoid the road. Among them were some of the wounded, being helped along by all that remained of their family; and a few of the patriots who had escaped unscathed from the fight and the fire. Some of them might recognise Bridget, and she did not want it to be known that she had left Maison- Close. So, hidden in the shadow of the wall, she waited for the fugitives to pass.

But during these few moments what could Clary think as she heard those cries of despair! For many hours she had been waiting for the news from St. Charles. Perhaps it would be her father, perhaps Jean himself who would bring it, if they were not marching on Montreal after another victory? No. Through the door she dared not open she could hear the sound of groans.

At last the fugitives had gone by and were making their way along the river bank until they could find some way to cross.

The road had again become quiet, although more of the cries could be heard further down the stream.

Bridget went back to the door. At her knock it opened, to shut the instant she entered.

Clary de Vaudreuil and Bridget Morgaz were face to face. They were in one of the rooms on the ground floor, lit only by a lamp whose gleam could not be seen through the tightly-closed shutters.

They looked at each other while the servant stood a little aside.

Clary was pale; she had a foreboding of some great misfortune, and she dared not speak.

‘The patriots at St. Charles?’ she ventured.

‘Defeated! ‘ Bridget replied.

‘My father?’

‘Wounded.’

‘Dying?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

Clary would have collapsed had not Bridget caught her in her arms.

‘Courage, Clary de Vaudreuil!’ she said, ‘ your father is asking for you! You must go, you must come to him, and follow me without losing a moment!’

‘Where is my father? ‘ Clary had scarcely recovered from her faintness.

‘At my home in St. Charles.’

‘Who sent you?’

I told you — Jean! — I’m his mother! *

‘You!’ exclaimed Clary.

‘Read this!’

Clary took the letter Bridget was holding out to her.

It was the writing of Jean-Sans-Nom, which she recognised at once.

‘Trust yourself to my mother,’ it said.

But how did De Vaudreuil come to be in that house? Was it Jean who had saved him, who had carried him from the battle-field at St. Charles, and taken him to Maison-Close?

‘I’m ready, madame! ‘ Clary decided.

‘Come on, then,’ replied Bridget.

Nothing more was said.

The details of this disastrous affair Clary might learn later on. She knew only too much already, her father dying, the patriots dispersed, the victory of St. Denis annihilated by the defeat of St. Charles!

She hurriedly wrapped herself in a dark cloak. The door of the hall was thrown open, and the two went out into the road.

All that Bridget said as she pointed towards St. Charles, was: ‘We’ve got six miles to go. For nobody to know we’re at Maison-Close, we have to get there before it is daybreak.’

They quickly went along the river bank so as to reach the road which went northwards across country.

The girl would have liked to go more quickly, so anxious was she to reach her father’s bedside. But she had to moderate her pace, for Bridget, although she was showing an energy beyond her years, could not keep up with her.

What was more, they met with hindrances. Occasionally they encountered groups of the fugitives. To mingle with them was to risk being dragged back towards St. Denis; so as the better to avoid them, Bridget and Clary hid in the thickets by the roadside. Here they could see and hear without being seen.

These poor people were in a wretched state. Many of them were leaving tracks of blood on the road. The women were carrying the young children in their arms. The stronger men were helping along the older people, who would have stayed behind only to lie down by the roadside to die. Then further cries were heard in the distance, and the groups disappeared into the darkness.

Were the soldiers and the volunteers in pursuit of these poor wretches, who now that their homes were destroyed were looking for shelter? Was Wetherall’s column on the march to surprise the routed patriots at daybreak?

No. These were more of the fugitives. They passed in hundreds. And how many would have died during this terrible night if a few farms had not been open to receive them?

Clary, her heart wrung with anguish, watched the horrors of the flight. Yet she would not lose hope for the cause of independence, for which her father had just been mortally wounded.

When the road was clear she and Bridget continued their journey and for an hour and a half they went on. As they approached the village the delays were less frequent; the road was clearer. All who had been able to escape were already far away towards St. Denis or were scattered about the countryside. What they had to be wary of in the vicinity of St. Charles was contact with any of the soldiery.

At three in the morning they still had two miles to cover before reaching Maison-Close. And then Bridget fell, exhausted.

Clary stooped to help her up.

‘Let me give you a hand,’ she pleaded, ‘ lean on me, we can’t be far off now.’

‘Still another hour’s walk,’ said Bridget, ‘ and I can’t...

‘Rest for a minute or two. Then we’ll start again. You must take my arm. Don’t be afraid of tiring me. I’m quite strong.’

‘Strong! Poor child, before long you’ll have to give in, too!’

Bridget rose to her knees.

‘Listen to me,’ she said, ‘ I’ll try to go a few more steps. But if I fall, you must leave me alone.’

‘Leave you alone!’ exclaimed Clary.

‘Yes! You must get to your father tonight. The road is straight on. Maison-Close is the first house to the left as you enter the village. You will knock at the door, and give your name, and Jean will open to you.’

‘I will never forsake you,’ the girl replied. ‘ I won’t go on without you.’

‘You must, Clary de Vaudreuil. And then when you are safe, my son will return for me. He’ll carry me just as he carried your father!’

‘But try to walk, please try! I beg you!’

Bridget got up, though she could hardly drag herself along. Yet they succeeded in covering another mile.

Then the horizon began to brighten in the east towards St. Charles. Was it the first gleam of dawn, and would it not be impossible to reach Maison-Close before the day?

‘Go on!’ said Bridget. ‘ Go on, Clary de Vaudreuil! Leave me!’

‘That can’t be the dawn,’ Clary assured her. ‘ It’s scarcely four o’clock. That’s the glow of a burning house...’

Clary did not finish the sentence. The same thought struck her as had struck Bridget, that it might be Maison- Close which was a prey to the flames, that De Vaudreuil’s hiding-place had been discovered, that he and Jean had become the prisoners of Wetherall, or else had died in defending it.

The fear spurred Bridget on to a renewed burst of energy. She and Clary hastened on towards St. Charles. They came to a bend in the road, beyond which was Maison-Close.

They at least reached the bend in the road.

It was not Maison-Close that was burning, but a farm to the right of the village.

‘There! It’s there! ‘ Bridget pointed to her house with a trembling hand.

In a few minutes they would be in safety. But just then they saw a group of three men coming down the road — three volunteers staggering along, drunk with brandy, and stained with blood.

Clary and Bridget tried to avoid them by going to one side. They were too late. The volunteers had seen them, and now the fugitives had everything to fear. One of the men caught hold of Clary and tried to drag her away, while the other two held Bridget back.

The women called for help. But who could hear their screams unless it were some of the other soldiers — less intoxicated perhaps, and therefore more dangerous?

Suddenly a man leapt out of a thicket by the roadside; with a vigorous blow he felled the scoundrel who was holding the girl.

‘Clary de Vaudreuil!’ he exclaimed.

‘Vincent Hodge!’

And Clary seized his arm. She had recognised him by the light of the flames.

When De Vaudreuil had fallen, Hodge had been unable to help him. Not realising that a few moments later Jean-Sans-Nom had dragged the victim out of danger, he had returned after the firing was over, and was waiting in the outskirts of the village at the risk of falling into the hands of the loyalists. When night fell he had tried to find his friend among the wounded and the dead. Having searched in vain until dawn was about to appear, he was going back along the road, when the cries for help had drawn him to the spot where Clary was struggling with a peril worse than death.

But Vincent Hodge had no time to be told that De Vaudreuil had been taken to the house a few hundred yards away. He now had to face the two scoundrels, who had released Bridget so as to attack him. Their shouts had been heard up the road, and five or six volunteers were hurrying to their help. There was only just time for Clary and Bridget to escape.

‘Get away! Get away! ‘ Vincent Hodge urged them. ‘ I’ll be able to get clear!’

Bridget and Clary ran up the road, while Hodge brought down his two half-drunken antagonists.

Then, before their comrades could rejoin them, he leapt into the thicket, followed by a shower of shots, none of which touched him.

A few moments later, Bridget knocked at the door of Maison-Close, which was at once opened. She first dragged Clary in, and then fell into her son’s arms.

CHAPTER IV

THE NEXT WEEK

Maison-Close had thus for a time afforded shelter — precarious, no doubt — to De Vaudreuil and his daughter. They were under the roof of the ‘ family without a name,’ under the same roof as the traitor’s wife and son. That they knew nothing of the ties that bound to Simon Morgaz the old woman and young man who had risked their lives in sheltering them, Bridget and Jean realised only too well.

Towards the morning of 26th November, De Vaudreuil regained a little consciousness. His daughter’s voice awoke him from his torpor and his eyes opened.

‘Clary!’ he murmured.

‘Yes, father! I’m here! ‘ Clary assured him. ‘ I’m near you! I won’t leave you.’

Jean was standing at the foot of the bed, in the shadow, as though he were anxious not to be seen. The wounded man’s glance rested on him, and he murmured: ‘Jean! Ah! I remember!’

Then seeing Bridget bending over his bed, he seemed to be asking who she was.

‘It’s my mother,’ Jean explained. ‘ You’re in my mother’s house, Monsieur de Vaudreuil. You’ll never lack for her care, nor for that of your daughter.’

‘Their care! ‘ De Vaudreuil repeated feebly. ‘ Yes — I remember — wounded — beaten — my companions in flight — dead, perhaps! Ah! my poor country, my poor country — worse enslaved than ever!’

His head fell back, and his eyes closed.

‘Father!’ said Clary, kneeling beside him. As she took his hand she felt a light pressure answering to hers.

Jean reminded her: ‘We’ll have to get a doctor to come to Maison-Close. Where shall be find one? To whom shall we apply now that the whole region is occupied by the loyalists? Perhaps at Montreal! Yes! There alone will it be possible! Tell me some doctor in whom you’ve got confidence, and I’ll go to Montreal.’

‘To Montreal!’ repeated Bridget.

‘I’ll have to, mother! For Monsieur de Vaudreuil’s life it’s worth risking my own.’

‘It isn’t for you I’m frightened, Jean. But if you go to Montreal you may be watched; and if anyone suspects Monsieur de Vaudreuil is hidden here, he’s lost.’

‘Lost!’ murmured Clary.

‘And won’t he be even more surely lost if he doesn’t get proper attention?’ asked Jean.

‘If the wound is mortal,’ Bridget reminded him, ‘ nobody can cure it. If it isn’t mortal, Heaven will give him recovery at the hands of his daughter and myself. The wound is a sabre-stroke which has only cut into the flesh. He’s weak now from the loss of blood. It should be enough, I hope, to bathe the wound, and keep on with the cold water compresses so as to make it heal. Believe me, my son, Monsieur de Vaudreuil is comparatively safe here, and if we can help it, it's better for nobody to know where he is.'

Bridget spoke with an assurance whose first effect was to give Clary a little hope. It was above all things essential that no one should be allowed into Maison- Close. The life of Jean-Sans-Nom depended on it, as did that of De Vaudreuil. At the slightest alarm, indeed, Jean might get away across the country to the American frontier, but De Vaudreuil could not.

After the first day, the wounded man's condition justified the confidence Bridget had inspired. As soon as the loss of blood was checked. De Vaudreuil was, if still as weak, at least in possession of his senses. What he wanted above all things was freedom from anxiety, and that he would have now that his daughter was by his side at Maison-Close.

Wetherall's soldiers were soon to leave St. Charles and scour the country, so that the village would be relieved of their presence.

Bridget made arrangements for more comfortably installing her guests in her tiny home. De Vaudreuil occupied the room usually reserved for Joann or Jean. The other room, Bridget's, became Clary's, and the two women took it in turns to watch by the patient's bedside.

As to Jean, there was no need to worry about him, or about his brother, if ever the Abbé Joann did venture to visit his mother after what had happened. Any corner of the house would do for them.

Besides, Jean was not thinking of staying on at St. Charles. As soon as he was assured of De Vaudreuil's safety, as soon as he had consulted with him on the possibilities he foresaw, he would again get to work. The defeat at St. Charles could not have finally assured the ruin of the patriots' cause. Jean-Sans-Nom would know how to lead them on to their revenge.

The 26th November passed quietly enough. Bridget was able, without arousing suspicion, to leave Maison Close, as was her custom, to get some extra food, as well as suitable remedies, for as soon as the troops evacuated the village many of the houses were reopened.

But what a disaster, what ruin, especially in the upper part of the town, beside the camp; after a defence pushed to the extremes of heroism, this had been burned and devastated. A hundred of the patriots had shed their blood in this tragic fight, most of them killed or mortally wounded. Another forty had been taken prisoner. And then had come the excesses committed by the maddened soldiery, whom their leader had been unable to restrain.

De Vaudreuil slept for some hours quietly enough. There was no more delirium, no more of those incoherent words with which he had called for his daughter. He realised that Clary was near him, safe from the dangers to which she would have been subjected had the soldiery re-entered St. Denis.

While he was asleep, Jean explained to Clary the events of the previous day. She learnt all that had passed since her father had left with Judge Froment to join his comrades at St. Charles; how the reformists had fought to the last man; and how he had been carried from the scene of the battle into Maison-Close.

Clary listened with her heart oppressed, her eyes full of tears, but she steeled herself against despair. Misfortunes, it seemed, were being heaped up on Jean and herself; for both of them realised how much they were to each other.

Often Jean would rise in great distress, horrified at himself, and longing to escape from this friendship, which their position made even more dangerous. After the few days he had spent with Clary at the Villa Montcalm, he had calculated on the events he was preparing to take up all his attention. And now it was these very events which had brought her to his mother's home at the same time as they had forced him to seek its shelter.

Bridget soon realised the nature of her son's feelings. The terror which she felt was not less than that of Jean. The son of Simon Morgaz! The determined woman allowed no sign of her trouble to appear, but what suffering she foresaw for the future!

In the morning De Vaudreuil was told that the soldiers had gone. Feeling himself less enfeebled, he asked Jean what would be the consequences of the defeat at St. Charles, and what had become of his companions who had fought so bravely.

The others came and sat by his bed, and Jean replied by begging him not to tire himself with too much talking.

'I'll tell you what I know about your friends,' he began. ' They fought to the last, and were only overborne by numbers. One of my brave comrades at Chipogan, poor Remy Harcher, was killed at the very outset without my being able to help him. Then Michel and Jacques were also wounded, and they had to leave the battlefield, carried off by their father and their two other brothers. Where did they go when resistance became impossible? I don't know, but I hope they reached the American frontier. Gramont was made prisoner, and should now be in prison at Montreal, and we may guess the fate in store for him. Farran and Clerc have, I think, escaped from their pursuers. Were they unhurt? I cannot say. As for Vincent Hodge, I cannot say.

‘Vincent Hodge has escaped,’ Clary told him. ‘ That night he was roaming round St. Charles, looking for you, father. Madame Bridget and I met him on our way here. Thanks to him, we escaped from some drunken soldiers, who were molesting us. Probably he’s now safe in some village in the United States.’

‘He is a noble fellow, a brave patriot,’ Jean agreed. ‘ What he did for Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil and my mother he’s already done for me in the thick of the fight. He saved my life, and perhaps it would have been better for him to leave me to die! I ought not to have survived the defeat of the Sons of Freedom!

‘Jean,’ asked Clary, ‘ do you despair of the cause?’

‘My son despair?’ exclaimed Bridget. ‘ I shall never believe it.’

‘No, mother! ‘ Jean assured her. ‘ After the victory at St. Denis, the insurrection will spread through the whole St. Lawrence valley. After the defeat at St. Charles, mastery has to be regained, and I mean to regain it. The reformists aren’t beaten yet. Already they ought to be well enough reorganised to resist Sir John Colborne. I’ve been away from them too long, and I’ll be off this very night.’

‘Where shall you go?’ asked De Vaudreuil.

‘To St. Denis to begin with. There I hope to meet the leaders, under whom we repulsed the soldiers of Colonel Gore’s troops.’

‘Go on, then! Jean? ‘ Bridget gave her son a penetrating glance. ‘ Go. Your place isn’t here. It’s there — in the forefront.’

‘Yes, Jean, you must go! ‘ Clary urged him. ‘ You must rejoin your comrades, and re-appear at their head! The loyalists must realise that Jean-Sans-Nom isn’t dead!’

She could say no more.

De Vaudreuil raised himself in bed, and took Jean’s hand.

‘Go, Jean,’ he said. ‘ Leave me to the care of your mother and my daughter! If you see my friends, tell them they’ll find me with them as soon as I’ve strength enough to leave this house. But,’ he added, in a voice which showed his extreme weakness, ‘ if you can keep us in touch with what’s going on — if you can possibly return here — ah, Jean! I want so much to know what has become of all those who are so dear to me, and whom I may never see again.’

‘You shall know it, Monsieur de Vaudreuil,’ Jean assured’ him. ‘ Take some rest now. Forget — until the time comes to fight.’

The wounded man was in such a state that all emotion ought to be avoided. He had fallen asleep, and the sleep lasted into the middle of the night. And he was still asleep when Jean left the house at eleven, after bidding farewell to Clary and embracing his mother, whose strength did not fail her even at the moment of separation from her son.

The conditions were not the same as they were when Bridget had dissuaded Jean from going to St. Denis. After Wetherall’s departure the danger was negligible. St. Denis was now as quiet as St. Charles. After defeating the reformists on the 25th, the Government were temporising. It was astounding that they were making no effort to complete their victory at St. Charles. Sir John Colborne was not the man to draw back before the reprisals which an offensive would provoke, and Colonel Gore was probably eager to avenge his defeat.

For some reason or other, at St. Charles, and consequently at Maison-Close, there was no news of such an aggression. Confidence had to some extent returned to the villagers. After their dispersal most of them had come back and set to work repairing the damage. In her occasional errands Bridget asked no questions, but she listened and reported to De Vaudreuil and his daughter. There was no serious news, no threats of an advance along the road from Montreal.

During the three days that followed, this calm was untroubled. Did the Government consider the rebellion finally crushed by the blow struck at St. Charles? It seemed so. Were they only in pursuit of the leaders of the opposition, those who had given the signal of revolt? Probably. But what no one would admit was that the reformists had given up the struggle, that they acknowledged themselves so completely defeated that they could do nothing but give in. No! And at Maison-Close, as in all Lower Canada, they were waiting for a new call to arms.

Thanks to Bridget and Clary, De Vaudreuil continued to improve. He was still very weak, but his wound began to heal. Unfortunately his recovery would be slow, and it would be long before he was able to leave his bed. At the end of the third day he was able to take a little food. The fever which had racked him had almost entirely disappeared. There was nothing serious to fear so long as no complication set in.

During these long hours Bridget and Clary sat beside his bed and told him all they knew about what was happening outside. Jean’s name occurred frequently in their conversation. Had he been able to join his companions at St. Denis? Would he leave his friends at Maison-Close without any news?

And while Clary remained silent, her eyes cast down, and her thoughts far away, her father would praise the young patriot in whom was symbolised the national cause. Yes! Madame Bridget ought to be proud of such a son.

Bridget hung her head and did not often reply, if she did, it was simply to say that Jean was only doing his duty, no more.

There was nothing surprising in Clary’s feeling a lively friendship, almost a daughter’s love, for Bridget. It seemed natural for her to call her mother] But when she took her by the hand Bridget seemed to be trying to withdraw it, and when Clary kissed her she would suddenly turn her head away. Why this was, the girl could not understand. How gladly would she have known the history of this family, which had not even a name. But Bridget remained silent on the subject. On the one side was confidence and almost filial affection; on the other was extreme reserve; and an inexplicable distance separated the old woman and the young.

In the evening of 2nd December St. Charles was alarmed by disquieting news — by news so disquieting indeed that Bridget, who had heard it in the village, did not think it wise to report it to De Vaudreuil. Clary agreed, as it was useless to trouble the rest which her father needed so badly.

The report was that the loyalists had again fought the insurgents.

The Government had in fact not been satisfied with having put down the insurrection at St. Charles. They had now to avenge the check Colonel Gore had suffered at St. Denis. If they succeeded, they would have no more to fear from the reformists, who could be hunted down by the police, as they scattered about the countryside. Then all that would remain to be done was to inflict heavy penalties on their leaders, now imprisoned in Quebec and Montreal.

Two guns, five companies of infantry, and a squadron of cavalry had been put under the orders of Colonel Gore, who had arrived at St. Denis on 1st December.

The news of this expedition, somewhat vaguely at first, reached St. Charles that very evening, and a few people returning from the fields confirmed it.

It was this which Bridget heard and which, though she told Clary, she thought it wise to withhold from De Vaudreuil. The anxiety and anguish of the two women can well be imagined.

It was at St. Denis that Jean had gone to rejoin his companions, and to reorganise the insurrection. Would they be numerous enough, and well enough armed, to withstand the loyalists?

Unfortunately it was not likely that they would. And then would not the loyalists, once embarked on reprisals, pursue them to the bitter end? Would they not make requisitions on the villages chiefly concerned, and more especially on St. Charles? Would it not be subject to police surveillance, which was bound to have serious results? Would not the mystery of Maison-Close be revealed? What would become of De Vaudreuil, confined to his bed, whom it would be impossible to take across the frontier?

In what agonies Bridget and Clary heard these rumours! Already there was news from St. Denis, and it was heart-breaking. Colonel Gore had found the village abandoned by its defenders. Before so unequal a struggle they had decided to beat a retreat. The people had left their homes, and taken refuge in the woods, crossed the river, or sought shelter in the neighbouring villages. As to what had happened when the town was handed over to the soldiery — if they did not know it, this was only too easy to imagine.

The night had come. Bridget and Clary were at De Vaudreuil's bedside. Time and again they had to explain to him why the streets of St. Charles, which had been so quiet during the last few days, were now so full of noise. Clary racked her brain to find a reason which would not alarm her father. Then her thoughts flew further, and she wondered if the cause of independence had not received a last blow, from which it would never recover; whether Jean and his comrades had been forced to cross the frontier; whether some of them had fallen into the hands of the loyalists. And Jean, had be been able to get away? Or was he trying to return to Maison- Close?

Clary had a presentiment that this was so, and then it would be impossible to conceal the defeat of the reformists from De Vaudreuil.

Perhaps Bridget feared this also? And the two women, absorbed in the same thought, understand one another without exchanging a word.

About half-past eleven there were three knocks at the door.

'It's him!' exclaimed Clary.

Bridget had recognised the signal. It was indeed one of her sons who had knocked.

She thought it might be Joann, who had not been there for two months. But Clary was not mistaken. She repeated: ‘It’s him! Jean!’

And as soon as the door was opened, Jean appeared; he entered at once.

CHAPTER V

THE INVESTIGATION

The door had hardly closed when Jean put his ear against it to listen. At the same time he gestured to his mother and Clary not to speak a word, not to make any movement.

And Bridget, who was just going to ask, ‘ Why have you come back, my son?’ kept silent.

Outside they could hear people tramping up and down the road. There was a discussion going on between half a dozen men, who had just halted in front of Maison- Close.

‘Which way has he gone?’

‘He can’t have stopped here.’

‘He’ll have gone into hiding in one of the houses higher up.’

‘But he wasn’t a hundred yards ahead of us.’

‘To have let Jean-Sans-Nom give us the slip!’

‘And those six thousand dollars on his head!’

As she heard the voice of the man who had last spoken, Bridget gave an involuntary start. She seemed to recognise the voice, without being able to remember whom it belonged to.

But Jean had recognised it, as he had the man who was on his track. It was Rip! And if he said nothing to his mother, it was because he dare not recall the horrible past which the name would bring back.

Soon, however, all was again silent. The police agents had gone up the road without suspecting that Jean had gone into hiding in Maison-Close.

Then Jean returned towards his mother and Clary, who were still standing motionless in the darkness of the passage.

Before Bridget could say anything, they heard the voice of De Vaudreuil. He had realised that Jean had come back, and was asking: ‘Jean! Is that you?’

The three at once entered the invalid’s room, and, deeply distressed, stood by the side of the bed.

‘I’ve got strong enough now to bear anything,’ he told them, ‘ and I want to know everything.’

‘So you shall,’ Jean replied; and he went on, while Clary and Bridget listened without interrupting him: ‘The other night, two hours after I left you, I reached St. Denis. There I found several of the survivors of the disaster; Vincent Hodge, Farran and Clerc were among them. They were getting ready to defend the place, and all the people wanted was to help them. But yesterday we heard that Colborne had sent from Sorel a column of regulars and volunteers to pillage and burn the town.

‘The column arrived in the evening, and it was in vain that we tried to resist it. Useless! It came right into St. Denis, and the villagers had to abandon their homes. More than fifty houses were destroyed by the flames. Then, so as not to have their throats cut by the ruffians, my comrades had to escape and make for the frontier, where Papineau and the others were waiting for them. And now the soldiers have invaded the district south of the St. Lawrence, burning and devastating, reducing the children and women to beggary, sparing them no ill-treatment or insult, and you can see their progress by the light of the fires they've raised. That's what has happened, Monsieur de Vaudreuil, and yet I don't despair. I will not despair of our cause!'

A distressed silence followed Jean's explanation, and De Vaudreuil let himself fall back on the bed.

Bridget was the first to speak. Addressing her son, and looking him straight in the face, she said: 'Then why are you here? Why aren't you with your comrades?'

'Because I've got reason to fear that the loyalists will return to St. Charles, that a house-to-house search will be made, that fire will destroy what's left of the village.'

'And can you stop it, Jean?'

'No, mother!'

'Then, I repeat, what are you doing here?'

'I'm here because I wished to see if it wouldn't be possible for Monsieur de Vaudreuil to leave Maison- Close, which will not be spared any more than the other houses.'

'It isn't possible,' said Bridget.

‘Then I’ll stay, mother, and I’ll die defending you.’

‘It’s for your country you should die, Jean, and not for us,’ De Vaudreuil pointed out. ‘ Your place is with the other patriotic leaders.’

‘That’s where your place is, too, Monsieur de Vaudreuil! Listen to me. You can’t stay in this house, where you’d soon be discovered. This very night, half a mile from St. Charles, I was chased by a squad of police. There’s no doubt they recognised me, for you heard them saying my name. They’ll ransack the town, and even if I wasn’t here, Maison-Close would not be overlooked. It’s you that the police will find, Monsieur de Vaudreuil, it’s you that they’ll arrest, and you may expect no mercy.’

‘What does that matter, Jean? ‘ De Vaudreuil replied. ‘ What does it matter so long as you’re able to rally our friends on the frontier?’

‘Listen, I’ll tell you,’ Jean insisted. ‘ All I can do for the cause I will do. But it is you who will have to be considered, Monsieur de Vaudreuil. Perhaps it may not be impossible for you to reach the United States. Once you are out of this district you’ll be safe, and it’ll only be a few miles before you’re in American territory. That you aren’t strong enough to drag yourself there, even if I’m with you to help you along, that’s true. But in a cart, lying on a bed of straw just as you are now, couldn’t you stand the journey? Well, my mother could get you this cart on some pretext or another — that of escaping like the others perhaps — or at least she can try! And when night comes, your daughter and yourself, and my mother and me, we’ll leave this house, and we can be out of reach before the troops have come to do to St. Charles what they’ve done to St. Denis!’

Jean’s scheme was worth consideration. A few miles further south, De Vaudreuil could find the safety which Maison-Close could no longer offer him, if the loyalists were to enter the village and make a house-to-house visitation. It was only too certain that Jean-Sans-Nom had been recognised by Rip's men. He had escaped them, but they would assume that he had taken refuge in one of the houses in St. Charles, and every effort would be made to capture him. The position was ominous. At all costs it was important that not only Jean, but De Vaudreuil and his daughter, should leave Maison-Close.

And flight was not impracticable if only Bridget could hire a cart, and De Vaudreuil could stand the jolting for a few hours. Even if he were too weak to reach the frontier, he could be sure of shelter at some farm in the south of the country. Anyhow, they would certainly have to leave St. Charles, for the police would search the house.

Jean had little difficulty in convincing De Vaudreuil and his daughter, and even Bridget agreed. Unfortunately, they could not start that night. Next day his mother could see about hiring the cart, and the following night they could put the plan into execution.

The day came. Bridget thought it was better to act openly. There would be nothing strange in her trying to get away from the scene of the insurrection. Many people had already done so, and her attempt would surprise nobody.

She had at first meant not to accompany De Vaudreuil with Clary and Jean. But her son easily made her understand that once her departure had been announced, if her neighbours were to see her still at St. Charles, they would suspect that the cart had been used by some other fugitive, and then the police would arrest her. In the interest of all, it was better for nothing of that sort to happen. Bridget had to give way. When the troubles were over she would return to St. Charles, and end her miserable life in the house which she had hoped never to leave.

Everything thus being decided, Bridget set about procuring the means of transport. If she could get a cart all would be well. She left the house next morning provided by De Vaudreuil with the money need to hire it — or rather to purchase it outright.

During her absence Jean and Clary did not leave the invalid’s room. Already he had regained his strength and was bracing himself for the journey; a sort of reaction had set in. Despite his weakness, which was still very great, he was ready to get up; ready to travel in the cart when the moment came to leave. He could answer for himself at least for a few hours, but after that he would be in the hands of God. Nothing else mattered, so long as he again saw his comrades and could assure his daughter’s safety, and so long as Jean-Sans-Nom was back among the French-Canadians ready for a final struggle.

Yes, their departure was essential. If De Vaudreuil did not survive his wounds, what would become of his daughter at Maison-Close, alone in the world, and with only an old woman to depend on? On the frontier he would meet his brothers-in-arms and his most devoted friends. And amongst them was one of whose feelings he approved. He knew that Vincent Hodge loved Clary, and he felt that Clary would not refuse to become the wife of him who had risked his life to save her. To what more generous, what more ardent patriot could she entrust her future? He was worthy of her, and she was worthy of him.

With God’s help he himself would have the strength to reach his goal. He would not die until he had set foot on American soil, where the survivors of the Reformist party were waiting to take up their arms once more.

Such were the thoughts of De Vaudreuil, while Jean and Clary, seated at his bedside, exchanged only a few words.

Often Jean would rise and go across to one of the windows which opened on to the road, and whose shutters were always closed. Then he listened for any further noise that he could hear outside.

Bridget returned to Maison-Close after an absence of two hours. She had been to several people to ask about the horse and cart. She had mentioned her desire to leave St. Charles, and this had surprised nobody. The owner of a neighbouring farm had agreed to let her have a cart at a reasonable price, and it should be at the door of Maison-Close at nine that evening.

When he heard of her success De Vaudreuil felt a burden lifted from him.

‘At nine o’clock we’ll set out,’ he said ‘ and I’ll get up to take my place in the cart.’

‘No, Monsieur de Vaudreuil,’ Jean protested, ‘ you mustn’t tire yourself needlessly. I’ll carry you out to the cart; we’ll spread a good thick layer of straw, and on that we’ll put one of the mattresses from your bed. Then we’ll go slowly, so as to avoid jolting, and I hope you’ll be able to bear the journey. But as the temperature is low, you must see that you’re well covered up. As to incidents on the road — have you heard anything fresh, mother?’

‘No,’ said Bridget,’ but they’re still expecting the troops.’

‘And these police agents who’ve been after me?’

‘I didn’t see them, and they may have gone off on a false trail.’

‘But they may return! ‘ Clary reminded her.

‘We’ll go as soon as the cart is at the door,’ said De Vaudreuil.

‘At nine o’clock,’ added Bridget.

‘You can trust the man who sold you the cart?’ asked Jean.

‘Yes! He’s an honest farmer, and what he undertakes to do he’ll do.’

In the meantime De Vaudreuil wished to take some nourishment, so Bridget, helped by Clary, quickly prepared a frugal lunch, which they all shared.

The hours went by without further incident. There was no noise outside. From time to time Bridget opened the door, and cast a rapid glance to right and left. The weather was fairly cold. The grey tint of the sky showed the complete calmness of the atmosphere. If the wind veered to the south-west, if the mist turned into snow, De Vaudreuil’s journey would be very painful — at least, until he got far enough away to be safe.

However, everything seemed in favour of the journey — until three in the afternoon, when another alarm took place.

Distant sounds could be heard in the upper part of the town.

Jean opened the door and listened. He could not restrain a gesture of anger.

‘Bugles!’ he exclaimed. ‘ Troops advancing on St. Charles, probably!’

‘What are we to do?’ asked Clary.

‘Wait,’ replied Bridget. ‘ The soldiers may be only passing through the village.’

Jean shook his head.

But as it was impossible for De Vaudreuil to leave during the daytime, all that could be done, as Bridget had said, was to wait, unless Jean should decide to escape by himself.

Indeed, if he were, to leave Maison-Close at once, might he not be able to reach safety, before St. Charles was occupied by the loyalists? But that would mean leaving De Vaudreuil and Clary exposed to the greatest peril. Jean never even thought of it. Yet how, if their hiding-place were discovered, was he to defend them?

The sound of bugles came nearer. Then it ceased. The troops had reached the end of the village.

‘All isn’t lost yet,’ said Bridget. ‘ The road is clear on the Laprairie side. The night will come, and we needn’t change our plans. My house is not the sort to attract robbers; it stands by itself, and quite possibly it won’t be visited.’

This was certainly to be hoped.

The preparations for departure were therefore continued. They would have to be ready for the cart as soon as it arrived. If the road were free for an hour, and the fugitives could get three miles away, De Vaudreuil could, if necessary, find shelter in one of the farmhouses.

The night arrived without any fresh alarm. A few detachments of volunteers, who had advanced along the main road, retraced their steps, but

Maison-Close did not seem to have attracted their attention. The bulk of the column was encamped around St. Charles. Thence came a deafening uproar, which foreboded no good to the villagers.

At six Bridget asked Jean and Clary to have dinner, which she had just prepared, but De Vaudreuil hardly ate anything. Over-excited at the danger of the circumstances which he had to meet, he waited impatiently for the time to start.

A little before seven there came a gentle tap at the door. Was it the farmer who had brought the cart before the appointed time? It certainly could not be an enemy's hand that knocked so gently.

Jean and Clary went into De Vaudreuil's room, leaving the door half open. Bridget went along the passage and opened the front door, having recognised the voice of the farmer who had sold her the cart.

The honest man had come to say that it was impossible for him to keep to his bargain, and he had brought back the money that had been paid him. There were troops quartered on his farm, as on all the other farms nearby. The village was surrounded, and even if Bridget had the cart, she would not be able to use it. She must wait, whether she liked it or not, until St. Charles was evacuated.

Jean and Clary, from the patient's room, had heard what the farmer had said, as had De Vaudreuil.

The farmer added that there was nothing to be afraid of at Maison-Close, as the troops had only returned to St. Charles to help the police, who were making an investigation throughout the village. And why? Because of certain rumours that Jean-Sans-Nom was in hiding there, every means was being employed for his discovery.

When she heard the farmer mention her son’s name, Bridget was careful not to make any movement that might betray her.

The farmer went away and, returning to the room, Bridget said: ‘Jean! You must go, this instant!’

‘You must! ‘ De Vaudreuil agreed.

‘Go without you?’

‘You have no right to sacrifice your life,’ Clary told him. ‘ Before us, there’s your country...’

‘I won’t go! ‘ Jean declared. ‘ I won’t leave you exposed to these scoundrels’ brutalities.’

‘And what will you do, Jean?’

‘I don’t know, but I won’t leave you.’

Jean’s decision was so positive that De Vaudreuil did not attempt to argue with him.

Besides, it was obvious that flight would now be dangerous. According to the farmer, the village was surrounded, and the roads were being watched by the infantry and the country scoured by detachments of cavalry. Jean was too well known to escape. Would it not be better for him to stop at Maison-Close?

But it was not this he had thought of in coming to his resolution. He could not abandon his mother and Clary and De Vaudreuil.

His decision being final, did the three rooms of Maison-Close or the attic over them offer any hiding- place?

Jean had no time to find out.

Almost at once there was a violent knocking, which made the outer door rattle again.

The front yard was occupied by half a dozen of the police.

‘Open!’ came a voice from outside as the knocking redoubled. ‘ Open! or we’ll break down the door!’

The door of De Vaudreuil’s room was at once shut, while Jean and Clary tip-toed into Bridget’s room, where they could hear better.

As Bridget went along the passage the door fell into fragments.

The passage was brightly lit by the torches which the police agents were carrying.

‘What do you want?’ asked Bridget.

‘To search your house!’ snapped one of the men. ‘ If Jean-Sans-Nom is here, we’ll take him first, and then it will go badly with you.’

‘Jean-sans-Nom is not here! ‘ Bridget told them calmly, ‘ and I don’t know...’

The leader of the party suddenly stepped up to her.

It was Rip — Rip whose voice she had heard when her son had entered Maison-Close — Rip who had tempted Simon Morgaz into the most abominable of crimes.

Bridget, horror-stricken, recognised him at once.

‘Eh!’ exclaimed Rip, much surprised. ‘ Why, it’s Madame Bridget! It’s the wife of the brave Simon Morgaz!’

When he heard his father’s name Jean recoiled to the end of the room.

Bridget, thunderstruck at this unexpected revelation, lacked the strength to reply.

‘ Eh? Yes? Madame Morgaz!’ Rip continued. ‘ Really, I thought you were dead! Who would have expected to have found you in this place after twelve years?’

Bridget still kept silent.

‘ Come on, my friends! ‘ Rip turned to his men. ‘ There’s nothing here! A brave woman, Bridget Morgaz! She’s not the one to hide a rebel! Come, and let’s look somewhere else. If Jean-Sans-Nom is in St. Charles, neither God nor the devil shall keep me from finding him.’

And, followed by his men, Rip had soon vanished up the road.

But the secret of Bridget and her son was now revealed! Even if De Vaudreuil had heard nothing, Clary had not lost a word.

So Jean-Sans-Nom was the son of Simon Morgaz! And with a movement of horror Clary fled from Bridget’s room into her father’s as though she were mad.

Jean and Bridget were left alone. Now Clary knew everything.

At the thought of appearing before her, before De Vaudreuil, before the friend of those patriots whom the treachery of Simon Morgaz had sent to the scaffold, Jean thought he would have gone insane.

‘Mother!’ he declared, ‘ I cannot stay here another instant. Monsieur and Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil no longer need me to defend them! They’ll be safe enough — in the house of a Morgaz! Adieu!’

‘My son — my son!’ murmured Bridget. ‘ Do you think I haven’t guessed it? You! the son of — you love Clary de Vaudreuil!’

‘ Yes, mother, but I’ll die before I ever tell her! ‘ And he rushed from the house.

CHAPTER VI

WALHATTA

After the affair at Chipogan Farm, where the police and volunteers had been defeated, Thomas Harcher and his older sons had sought refuge beyond the Canadian frontier, whence they had returned to take part in the fight at St. Charles. After that tragic failure, which had cost Remy his life, Thomas and his four other sons had rejoined the reformists on the American frontier.

Mr. Nick had been careful not to return to Montreal. How could he explain his behaviour at Chipogan? Whatever might be the respect in which he was held, the police would not have hesitated to proceed against him for rebellion against the representatives of authority. The gates of the Montreal jail would certainly have closed on him, and in his company Lionel would have had plenty of leisure to cultivate the Muses intra muros.

Mr. Nick had acted for the best in the circumstances. He had followed the Mahogannis to Walhatta, and there he was waiting under his ancestral roof for the excitement to calm down. Then he would abandon the chieftainship of his tribe, and return modestly to business at his office.

Lionel was not of the same way of thinking. The young poet hoped that the lawyer would once and for all break his bonds with his office, and perpetuate among the Hurons the illustrious name of the Sagamores.

Two leagues from Chipogan Farm was the village of Walhatta, where Mr. Nick had been installed for some weeks. This was a new life for the placid notary. That Lionel was enthusiastic at the reception which all in the village gave his master need not be insisted on, but the notary failed to look at matters in the same light. The volleys of musketry that had welcomed him, the homage accorded to him, the palavers held in his honour, the flowery speeches addressed to him, the acknowledgements he had to make in the florid phraseology of the Far West, might be all very flattering to human vanity; but none the less the worthy man bitterly regretted the unfortunate affair which he had involuntarily engaged in. And if Lionel preferred the free air of the prairies to the stuffiness of the office and the parchments, and the eloquence of the Mahoganni warriors to the technical jargon of the law, Mr. Nick in no way shared his opinion. And between the master and the clerk there went on a vast amount of discussion which certainly did not increase their friendship.

Mr. Nick’s fear was that matters could not remain as they were. He could foresee the Hurons having to take part in the struggle and throw in their lot with the patriots. And would he be able to stop them if they wanted to, if Jean-Sans-Nom called them to his side, if Thomas Harcher and his people came to Walhatta? Already he was dangerously compromised, but what would he be when he marched at the head of a savage tribe against the Anglo-Canadian authorities? How could he ever hope to take up his duties as a lawyer at Montreal?

But he comforted himself with the reflection that time is a great adjuster. Many weeks had elapsed since the outbreak at Chipogan, and if this were regarded merely as an isolated act of resistance to the police it might well be forgotten. Moreover the insurrectionist movement had not yet broken out, and nothing showed that a rising was imminent. If tranquillity continued to prevail in Canada, the authorities might show themselves tolerant and Mr. Nick might safely return to Montreal.

But this hope Lionel had no wish to see realized. To return to the office and practise engrossing for ten hours a day? Better become a backwoodsman or a bee-hunter! Let his master abandon the high position he held among the Mahogannis? Never! He was Mr. Nick no longer, he had become the legitimate descendant of the ancient race of the Sagamores! The Hurons would never permit him to exchange the tomahawk of the warrior for the quill of the lawyer.

Since he had reached Walhatta, Mr. Nick had resided in the wigwam whence his predecessor had departed to join his ancestors in the Happy-Hunting-grounds. Lionel would have given up every building in Montreal for this uncomfortable shelter where the young folks of the tribe did their best to serve his master. The Mahogannis regarded him as their chief's right hand man, and when Nicholas Sagamore had to make a speech at the council fire, Lionel could not keep from accompanying him with a wealth of impassioned gesture.

It follows that the young clerk would have been the happiest of mortals, had his master not obstinately refused to realize his dearest wish — for Mr. Nick to don the costume of the Mahogannis. Lionel desired nothing so much as to see him in full Huron attire, with moccasins on his feet, feathers on his head, and embroidered mantle on his shoulder. Many times he had broached the subject without success, but he did not despair.

'He'll come to it,' he said; ' I won't let him reign disguised as a lawyer. With his long coat, his velvet waistcoat and his white cravat, what does he look like, pray? He hasn't as yet put off the old Adam, and he must! Whenever he opens his mouth before the assembly of the notables of his tribe, I always expect him to say, ' In the presence of Mr. Nick and his colleagues.' That's not to be endured. I mean him to dress like the warriors, and when I get a chance to persuade him I shan't miss it.'

And a very simple idea occurred to him. In the conversations he had with the notables of Walhatta, he found that it was not without keen disappointment that they could see the descendant of the Sagamores clad in the European style; and at his suggestion the Mahogannis decided to proceed solemnly to the enthronisation of their new chief. Then was drawn up the programme of a ceremony to which were to be invited all the Indians in the neighbourhood. There would be shooting-matches, dances, feasts, at which Mr. Nick could not preside except in the national costume.

This resolution was definitely adopted during the last half of November, and preparations were at once begun, so that things could be done really well.

The duties Mr. Nick would have to perform when on the day fixed he received the homage of his people were kept a secret, to take him by surprise; but as he would have to dress and behave as a Huron chief the young clerk had to inform him of the fact. And this he did on 22nd November, much to Mr. Nick's displeasure.

When the lawyer heard that the tribe were preparing a festival in his honour, he promptly wished it to the devil, along with his young clerk.

'May Nicholas Sagamore deign to listen to the advice of the Paleface!' said Lionel. * Of what Paleface? ' Mr. Nick did not understand. ' Of your humble servant, great chief.'

' Well, take care I don't turn your pale face into a red one by a good slap!'

Lionel took no notice of the threat and continued cheerfully: ‘May Nicholas Sagamore never forget that I am profoundly devoted to him! If he should ever become a prisoner of the Sioux, the Oneidas, or the Iroquois, if he is ever bound to the stake, it is I who will defend him from the insults and the claws of the old women; and when he is dead, it is I who will place on his grave his calumet and his tomahawk!’

Mr. Nick decided to let him talk, but to terminate the interview in a way that would leave its mark on his clerk’s ears. He contented himself with saying: ‘And so I must yield to the wishes of the Mahogannis?’

‘ To their prayers!’

‘Well, if it comes to that I shall be present at the festival.’

‘You cannot refuse, for the blood of the Sagamores runs in your veins!’

‘The blood of the Sagamores mixed with a lawyer’s! grumbled Mr. Nick. And then Lionel approached the delicate point. ‘ It is understood,’ he said, ‘ that the great chief will preside at the ceremony. And he will present himself in the garb appropriate to his rank with a scalp-lock rising stiffly from the summit of his cranium.’

‘And why?’

‘Out of respect for tradition.’

‘What! Tradition requires it?’

‘Yes; and besides, should the chief of the Mahogannis ever fall on the war-path, is it not essential so that his enemy may brandish his head in sign of victory?’

‘Indeed!’ said Mr. Nick. ‘ My enemy must be able to brandish my head, must he? Holding it up by this scalp- lock, eh?’

‘Such is the Indian custom, and no warrior would refuse to follow it. No other style of hairdressing would be in harmony with the costume which Nicholas Sagamore will assume on the day of the ceremony.’

‘Ah! So I’m to assume...’

‘At this very moment they are at work on the festive attire. It will be magnificent. The deer-skin jacket, the elk-skin moccasins, the mantle as worn by the predecessor of Nicholas Sagamore, the facial decoration as...’

‘Facial decoration?’

‘The most accomplished artists of the tribe are now preparing for the tattooing of the arms and chests...’

‘Pray go on,’ Mr. Nick clenched his teeth. ‘ This is most interesting. The facial decoration, indeed, the scalp-lock on my head, the moccasins of elk-skin, the tattooing of my chest. You have forgotten nothing.’

‘Nothing,’ the clerk assured him. ‘ And when the great chief shows himself to his warriors draped in the garb which will show him off at his best, I do not doubt but that the Indian ladies will fight for the honour of sharing his wigwam...’

‘The Indian women will fight for the honour?’

‘For the honour of assuring a long line of descendants to the elect of the Great Spirit!’

‘And so it will be to the general satisfaction if I take a Huron squaw?’

‘And who else could it be for the future of the Mahogannis? Already have they made choice of a squaw of high degree who will devote herself to the happiness of the great chief.’

‘And may we inquire who is this red-skinned princess who is going to devote herself to me?’

‘Certainly,’ Lionel assured him; ‘ she is worthy of the lineage of the Sagamores.’

‘ And who may she be?’

‘ The widow of your predecessor.’ It was lucky for the young clerk that he was able to dodge the blow that Mr. Nick levelled at him. But he had judged his distance, and his master had to content himself with saying: ‘Listen to me, Lionel. If ever you return to the subject I’ll pull your ears until they are as long as those of David La Gamme’s donkey.’

At this comparison, which recalled one of the heroes of The Last of the Mohicans, Lionel very wisely retired. As to Mr. Nick, he was not more irritated against his clerk than against the notables of the tribe. To impose the Mahogannian costume upon him for this ceremony! To make him grow a scalp-lock, clothe himself, paint himself, tattoo himself, like his ancestors! But would he yield to the necessities of the case? Dare he present himself before his warriors in these civilian garments, the sombre attire of a lawyer, the most pacific of all the lawyers? Here was a problem that troubled him the more as the great day approached.

Fortunately — for the heir of the Sagamores — serious events created a diversion in the Mahoganni plans.

Important news reached Walhatta on the 23rd. The patriots of St. Denis had, it was reported, repulsed Colonel Gore's troops. The news provoked demonstrations of delight among the Hurons. At Chipogan Farm their sympathies had been won over for the cause of independence, and only an opportunity was needed for them to throw in their lot with the French-Canadians.

The victory — as Mr. Nick realised only too well — would not induce the warriors of his tribe to suspend the preparations for the festival in his honour. On the contrary, it would make them celebrate it with more enthusiasm, and their chief would escape none of the honours of his enthronisation. But three days later came bad news to follow the good. After the victory at St. Denis, the defeat at St. Charles.

On hearing of the bloody reprisals carried out by the loyalists, the atrocities, plunderings, burnings, murders, the destruction of both townships, the Mahogannis could hardly restrain their indignation. To rise as one man and rush to the help of the patriots was only a step, and Mr. Nick might well fear it would be taken. Was the lawyer, already somewhat compromised, to commit himself irretrievably? Would he have to put himself at the head of his warriors and make common cause with the insurrection? Anyhow, there could now be no question of ceremonies. But what was the reception he gave to Lionel when the clerk informed him that the time had come to dig up the tomahawk and to brandish it upon the war-path!

Thenceforward his one anxiety was to soothe his bellicose followers. When they came to him to be harangued, expecting him to declare himself against the oppressors, he exhausted his ingenuity in ways of saying neither yes nor no. They must be careful, he told them, not to act without careful thought, without seeing what would be the consequences of the defeat at St. Charles. Perhaps the whole region had already been invaded by the loyalists? Nothing was known of the plans of the reformists, who might be already dispersed. Where had they taken refuge? Where could they join them? Might they not have given up until a better opportunity presented itself? Were not the leaders in the power of the bureaucrats, and imprisoned at Montreal?

These were good reason enough for Mr. Nick to give his impatient Pretorian Guards, but they were not accepted without dispute. One of these days the warriors' rage might possess them and carry them away, and then their chief would naturally have to follow them. Perhaps he had some notion of giving his tribe the slip, but this would have been difficult, for they were watching him much more closely than he imagined. But where could he go? He did not care to leave Canada, where he had been born; and to hide himself in some village where the police were on the alert, would be to risk falling into their hands.

Besides, Mr. Nick did not know what had become of the leaders of the insurrection. Although some of the Mahogannis had gone up the banks of the Richelieu as far as the St. Lawrence, they had been unable to learn anything about this. Even at Chipogan Farm, Catherine Harcher knew nothing of what had happened to her husband or his sons, nothing of the De Vaudreuils, nothing of Jean-Sans-Nom, nothing of what had happened at Maison-Close after the affair at St. Charles.

All that could be done was to watch events, and this was not displeasing to Mr. Nick. To gain time, and with the time to see the excitement settle down, that was all he wanted.

But on this point there were further disputes with his clerk, who hated the loyalists. The latest news had overwhelmed Lionel. There was no longer anything here for him to make fun of. He no longer made jokes about the war-path, about digging up the tomahawk, about the blood of the Sagamores. All he could think of was the cause now so seriously compromised, what had become of the heroic Jean-Sans-Nom? Had he fallen at St. Charles? No! The news of his death would have spread abroad, and the authorities would have done their best to spread it, so that it would have been known at Chipogan as at Walhatta. But if he had survived, where was he? Lionel would have risked his life to know.

Several days elapsed, but there was no change in the situation. Were the patriots getting ready to take the offensive? Once or twice rumours of this reached the Mahogannis, but they were not confirmed. By Lord Gosford’s orders the regions round Montreal and Laprairie were being searched. Large bodies of troops were occupying both banks of the Richelieu. Incessant house-to-house searches kept the people of the farms and villages on the alert. Sir John Colborne had his columns ready to march on the flag of rebellion wherever it might be raised. If the fugitives tried to recross the American frontier, they would find themselves faced with considerable forces.

On 5th December, Lionel, who had gone out towards Chambly in search of information, learnt that martial law had been proclaimed in the district of Montreal. At the same time the Governor-General had offered a reward of four thousand dollars for the apprehension of the Deputy Papineau. Among the other rewards offered were those for De Vaudreuil and Vincent Hodge. Some of the reformists were said to be imprisoned at Montreal and Quebec, where they were to be tried by martial law, so that the political scaffold would soon be claiming further victims.

This was serious news. To the measures decreed against them would the Sons of Freedom respond by another call to arms? On the other hand, would they not be discouraged by this pitiless repression? That was Mr. Nick's opinion. He realised that if the reformists did not succeed at the outset, they had little chance of succeeding at all.

But this was not the opinion of his Mahoganni warriors, nor was it that of Lionel.

'No! 'he told the lawyer repeatedly, ' No! The cause is not lost, and so long as Jean-Sans-Nom is still alive we shall not despair of regaining our independence.'

On 7th December something occurred to thrust Mr. Nick back among the difficulties from which he fancied he had escaped, and to raise almost to madness the bellicose instincts of the Hurons.

For some days the presence of the Abbé Joann had been reported in the neighbourhood. He had traversed the Laprairie region, calling upon the French-Canadians to rise as one man. His fiery eloquence contended not without difficulty with the discouragement that had fallen upon the patriots after their defeat at St. Charles. But the Abbé Joann would never give in; he went straight ahead, he urged the people to take once again to arms as soon as their leaders reappeared in the district.

But his brother was not with him; the Abbé did not know what had become of him. Before setting out on his mission he had been to Maison-Close to embrace his mother, to have news of Jean.

Maison-Close had not been opened to him.

Joann had gone in search of his brother. He too could not think the man was dead, for the news of his death would have been reported far and wide. He told himself that Jean would reappear at the head of his comrades.

Meanwhile his efforts tended to raise the Indians, especially the Huron warriors, who were only waiting to be asked to intervene. It was in such circumstances that he arrived among the Mahogannis.

Mr. Nick could not but give him a cordial welcome; nor could he any longer resist the pressure brought to bear on him by his tribe.

‘ Well,’ he said at last with a shake of his head, ‘ nobody can escape from his destiny. I don’t know how the race of the Sagamores began, but I know only too well how it will end! It will end before a court-martial.’

The Hurons were in fact ready for the war-path, and Lionel had done not a little to rouse them.

As soon as the Abbé arrived at Walhatta, the young clerk had become one of his warmest supporters. Not only had he found in him all the ardour of his own patriotism, but he had been struck by the strange resemblance between the young priest and Jean-Sans- Nom, almost the same eyes, the same fiery look, almost the same voice and the same gestures. He thought his hero had returned disguised as a priest, he thought he could hear... Was it an illusion of his senses? He could not say.

For two days the Abbé Joann had now been among the Mahogannis, whose only demand was to join the patriots. These had concentrated their forces about fifty leagues to the south-west, at Navy Island, on the Niagara River.

Mr. Nick saw himself doomed to follow the warriors of his tribe. Their preparations were almost complete. As soon as they left the village the Mahogannis would traverse the neighbouring regions, raise the other Indians, reach the shore of Lake Ontario, and then, advancing to the Niagara, they would join the last supporters of the national cause.

On the evening of 9th December, one of the Hurons now returned from Montreal announced that Jean-Sans- Nom had been arrested by the police on the Ontario frontier, and that he was imprisoned in Fort Frontenac.

The effect of this news can be imagined. Jean-Sans- Nom in the power of the loyalists! The Mahogannis were aghast; and it is easy to imagine their emotion when the Abbé Joann, as soon as he heard of the arrest, had exclaimed: ‘ My brother! ‘ Then he added: ‘ I’ll save him from death!’

‘ Let me go with you!’ pleaded Lionel. ‘ Come, my child!’ the Abbé replied.

CHAPTER VII

FORT FRONTENAC

Jean was like a madman when he left Maison-Close. The incognito of his life so brutally torn apart; Rip's dreadful words, overheard by Clary, who now realised that it was in the home of the wife and the son of Simon Morgaz that her father had found refuge; De Vaudreuil having to be told all this if he had not already heard it in his room — it was enough to fill him with despair.

Stay in the house he could not — not even for a moment. Without asking what would become of the De Vaudreuils, without asking if his mother's infamous name could protect them further, without even remembering that Bridget would no longer be able to live in the place where she had been recognised, and from which she would undoubtedly be driven, he had fled into the forest, nor did he stop running throughout the night. He felt he could never get far enough from those to whom, for the future, he could be nothing but an object of horror and scorn.

And his work — not yet accomplished! His duty was to fight, simply because he was still alive! His duty was to get himself killed before his real name was revealed! When he was dead, when he had died for his country, if he could not gain the esteem of his fellow-countrymen, he might at least claim their pity.

At length he grew calmer, and with his self-control he regained that energy which no weakness could henceforth overcome.

As he fled he made for the frontier, to rejoin the patriots, and continue the struggle for independence.

At six in the morning Jean found he had got twelve miles from St. Charles, and near the right bank of the St. Lawrence, on the borders of Montreal County. The district was patrolled by detachments of cavalry, and it swarmed with the police agents; he would have to get away from it as soon as possible. But to strike direct for the United States seemed impracticable, and so he continued his flight obliquely through Laprairie County, which was watched as carefully as that of Montreal. The best thing he could do was to keep along the St. Lawrence to reach Lake Ontario, and then to cross the eastern territories to the nearest American village. And this is what he decided to do.

But he had to push on very carefully. The difficulties were great. To get through somehow, no matter how long it might take him, was his programme, which he could modify to suit contingencies. The loyalist volunteers were afoot. The police were making constant domiciliary visits in search of the insurgent leaders, and among them was Jean-Sans-Nom, the reward for whose apprehension he could see announced on the proclamations posted up on the walls.

It was only during the night that he could move; during the day he hid in abandoned huts, in the midst of impenetrable thickets where he found a thousand difficulties in getting food. And he would certainly have died of hunger had it not been for the charity of the local people, who gave him what he wanted without asking who he was or whence he came. But his progress was slow. It was not until he was out of Laprairie County, and in Ontario Province, that he could hope to make up for lost time.

From 4th to 8th December Jean hardly covered sixty miles. During these five days — it would be more exact to say these live nights — he had only just got away from the bank of the St. Lawrence, and reached the centre of Beauharnais county. The most difficult part of his task was over, for the western and southern parishes were much less patrolled at this distance from Montreal. Yet the dangers were thickening round him. A squad of police had come on his track on the county boundary. Once or twice his coolness managed to throw them off his trail.

During the night of 8th December, however, he realised that he was surrounded by a dozen men, with orders to take him dead or alive. After defending himself with truly terrific energy, and seriously wounding several of the police, he was captured. It was not Rip who had effected the capture, but Superintendent Comeau, so that six thousand dollars were absent from the right side on the books of the famous commercial house of Rip and Co.

The news of Jean-Sans-Nom's arrest soon spread far and wide, for the authorities had good reasons for making it known, and it reached the village of Walhatta the same day.

Fort Frontenac is situated on the north shore of Ontario, a few leagues from Kingson. It dominates the left bank of the St. Lawrence, the river which forms the frontier between Canada and the United States. The fort was then commanded by Major Sinclair, who had under his orders four officers and a hundred men of the 20th Regiment. It completed the defensive system which protected the outlying territories from Indian depredations.

It was to Fort Frontenac that Jean-Sans-Nom was taken. The Governor-General, informed of the important capture made by Comeau's detachment, did not think tit to send the prisoner to Montreal, or to any of the other important cities where his presence might provoke a popular rising. Hence the order from Quebec to take him to Fort Frontenac, and to hold the trial there. Normally Jean would have been executed within twenty- four hours, but there was a special reason for some delay in bringing him before the court-martial, convened under the presidency of Major Sinclair.

That the prisoner was the Jean-Sans-Nom, the determined agitator who had been the soul of the insurrections of 1832, 1835, and 1837 there was no doubt, but the Government wanted to know the real name of this man who concealed his identity under this pseudonym. Then they could inquire into his past life, and obtain information which might help them to unravel certain secret proceedings, and to identify his accomplices in the cause of independence. It was thus important to make out, if not the identity, at least the origin of this person, whose real name was still unknown, and which he might have some reason for keeping back. The court-martial therefore waited before proceeding to sentence, and Jean was closely interrogated. He refused point-blank to give any information, and declined even to answer any questions. So the attempt had to be given up, and on 10th December he was brought before his judges.

There was nothing to discuss. Jean declared that he had borne arms during the present as during the past revolts, and he proudly acclaimed the rights of Lower Canada, now withheld by England; he faced his accusers boldly; he spoke as if his words could cross the walls of the fort, and be heard throughout the country.

When Major Sinclair questioned him for the last time about his name, his birthplace and his family, he replied: ‘ I am Jean-Sans-Nom, a French-Canadian by birth, and that should be enough for you. It matters very little what the man is called when he is to be shot. Do you really want a name for a corpse?’

Jean was condemned to death, and Major Sinclair ordered him to be taken back to his cell. Then, in accordance with his instructions, he sent off a despatch- rider to Quebec, informing the Governor-General that he had been unable to ascertain his prisoner’s real name, and asking whether, in the circumstances, he was to proceed with his execution?

For over a fortnight Lord Gosford had been very busy prosecuting those who had taken part in the insurrections at St. Denis and St. Charles. Forty-five of the leading patriots were in Montreal jail, eleven in that of Quebec. The Law Courts were in action with their three judges, the prosecutor general and the solicitor who represented the Crown, and there was also a Court Martial presided over by a major-general and composed of fifteen of the senior officers who had dealt with the insurrection.

While waiting for sentence, which would involve the most appalling penalties, the prisoners were subjected to treatment whose severity no political feeling could excuse. The jails contained hundreds of poor wretches, who were suffering intensely from the harshness of the Canadian winter. Tortured by hunger — for their rations were barely sufficient — they longed for the verdict and for their sentence, however pitiless it might be But before bringing them to trial, Lord Gosford wanted to wait until the police had completed their enquiries, so as to get into his hands as many of the patriots as he could.

When the news of Jean’s capture reached Quebec, it was felt that the cause of independence had been struck to the heart.

It was nine in the evening when, on 12th December, Joann and Lionel came in sight of the fort. Like Jean, they had gone up the right bank of the St. Lawrence and crossed the river, at the risk of arrest at any moment. Though Lionel was in no special danger because of his behaviour at Chipogan. the

Abbé was now “wanted by the police,’ so that they had to take the needful precautions and this delayed them.

Moreover, the weather was frightful. For twenty-four hours there raged one of those snow-storms to which the meteorologists of the country give the name of blizzards. During such blizzards the temperature may sink thirty degrees, and the cold become so intense that its claims many victims.*

What did the Abbé hope for in coming to Fort Frontenac? What plan had he formed? Could he possibly get into touch with the prisoner? If he could make some prior arrangement, could he plot an escape? But it was certain that he felt it important to get into the cell that night.

Lionel, like the Abbé, was ready to lay down his life to save that of Jean-Sans-Nom. But what could they do? On coming within half a mile of the fort, they had skirted a copse which stretched down to the shore of the lake. There, through the trees, already stripped by the wintry breezes, swept the icy simoon which lifted the *In some parts of Canada, in the St. John Valley, the thermometer has been seen to fall to 40° or 45° below zero. — J.V.

waters of Lake Ontario into tumultuous whirlpools.

‘Lionel.’ the Abbé told him, ‘ you stay here, but don’t show yourself, and wait till I get back. The sentries at the gate mustn’t see you. I’ll try to get into the fort and get in touch with my brother. If I succeed, we can consider the chances of escape. If that’s impossible, we’ll discuss the possibility of an attack the reformists might make if the garrison of Frontenac isn’t too strong.’

Such an attack would take some time to prepare, and the Abbé did not then know — for the tidings had not yet spread — that Jean had been sentenced to death, and that at any moment the order for execution might arrive. But he regarded the attack only as a last resource, and his real object was to enable Jean to escape.

‘Monsieur l’Abbé,’ asked Lionel, ‘ have you any hope of seeing your brother?’

‘They cannot refuse admittance to a minister who comes to offer his services to a prisoner condemned to death.’

‘That would be unworthy even of them! ‘ Lionel agreed. ‘ They can’t refuse you. Go on, then, Monsieur l’Abbé, and I’ll wait here for you.’

The Abbé gripped the clerk’s hand, and disappeared along the edge of the wood.

In less than a quarter of an hour he had reached the gate of Fort Frontenac.

The fort was on the bank of the lake, and consisted of a central blockhouse, surrounded by high palisades. At the foot of the palisades, on the side facing the lake, was a bare, narrow beach, then hidden under a bed of snow which merged imperceptibly into the ice which covered the edge of the lake. On the other side was a village consisting of a few houses, inhabited chiefly by a population of fishermen.

Was an escape possible? Could Jean get away across the country? Could he slip out of his cell, clear the palisades, and outwit the guard? This was what must be looked into if Joann could get an interview with him. Once at liberty they could join Lionel, and make off, not towards the American frontier, but towards Niagara and Navy Island, where the patriots were rallying for a final effort.

The Abbé crossed the beach, reached the gate, and went up to the sentry, whom he asked to take him to the commanding officer.

A sergeant came out of the guard-room, accompanied by a soldier who carried a lantern, for the darkness was already deep.

‘What do you want?’ asked the sergeant.

‘I want to see the commanding officer.’

‘And who are you?’

‘A priest, come to offer his services to the prisoner, Jean-Sans-Nom.’

* You want a word with the condemned man?’

‘Sentence has been pronounced?’

‘The day before yesterday. And he’s been sentenced to death!’

Joann was sufficiently master of himself to show no sign of his emotion. He contented himself with replying: ‘That is another reason why you should not refuse.’

‘I will inform Major Sinclair, the commanding officer,’ replied the sergeant.

And he went off towards the blockhouse, after letting the Abbé into the guard-room.

Joann sat down in a dark corner, thinking over what he had just heard. If sentence had been passed, was there time for his plans to succeed? But if the sentence — pronounced over twenty-four hours ago — had not yet been executed, was that because Major Sinclair had received orders to postpone it? The Abbé hoped so. But how long was it to be postponed, and would this be long enough for the prisoner to escape? Would the major let the Abbé enter the prison? But what would happen if he refused to call him until the very moment of execution? The agonies Joann suffered when he thought he might not be given time to act will be readily understood.

The sergeant returned and said: ‘Major Sinclair will see you.’

Preceded by the sergeant, whose lantern lighted his way, Joann crossed the inner courtyard in whose centre rose the blockhouse. As well as the darkness allowed him he tried to make out the size of this courtyard, and the distance which separated the building from the gate, the only exit from the fort unless the palisades could be scaled. If Jean did not know the layout of the fort, Joann might describe it to him.

The door of the blockhouse was open. The sergeant entered, followed by the Abbé, and an orderly closed the door behind them. They climbed a narrow staircase to the floor above; and there the sergeant opened a door on the landing, and Joann found himself in the presence of Major Sinclair.

The major was a man of about fifty, typically English in his stiff manner and typically Saxon in his lack of sympathy for suffering. He might even have refused the condemned man the consolations of a priest had he not received orders too categorical to be infringed. He neither rose from his chair nor laid aside the pipe with which he was filling with tobacco smoke a room dimly lit by a small lamp.

‘ You say you’re a priest?’ he asked Joann.

‘ Yes, major.’

‘ You want to see the prisoner?’

‘ If you will permit me.’

‘ Where have you come from?’

‘ From Laprairie county.’

‘ You heard of his capture there, did you?’

‘ Yes.’

‘ And of his sentence?’

‘I learnt that only when I arrived at Fort Frontenac, and I thought that Major Sinclair would not refuse me an interview with the prisoner.’

‘ Quite so, and I’ll let you know when the time comes,’ the major replied.

‘It is never too soon,’ the Abbé reminded him, ‘ when a man is condemned to death . ..’

‘I tell you I’ll let you know when the time comes. Wait in the village, where one of my men will come to fetch you.’

‘ Excuse my insistence, major,’ the Abbé pleaded. ‘ I might be away just when the prisoner requires my services, so would you let me see him at once...’

‘ I’ve told you that I’ll let you know,’ the officer repeated. ‘ There is to be no communication with the prisoner until the time of execution. I’m expecting the order from Quebec, and when that order arrives the man will have two hours to prepare for death. Surely two hours is enough, devil take it, and you can use them in any way you think fit to save his soul. The sergeant will escort you back to the gate.’

With this answer Joann had to be content. But not to see his brother, not to be able to consult him, was to render impracticable any attempt at flight, and he was about to appeal further to the officer to alter his decision when the door opened and the sergeant appeared.

‘Sergeant,’ the major gave orders, ‘ show this priest out of the fort, and don’t admit him again until I send for him.’

‘ Very good, sir,’ the sergeant replied; ‘ but I came to tell you that an orderly has just arrived at the fort, sir.’

‘From Quebec?’

‘Yes, sir; and he has brought this letter.’

‘Give it to me.’

And he snatched, rather than took, it from the sergeant.

The Abbé had become so pale, he felt so faint, that his weakness and pallor would have been noticed had the major looked up. But he did not, his attention being directed to the letter bearing Lord Gosford’s seal, which he had torn out of the envelope.

He read it. Then he turned to the sergeant.

‘Take this priest to the cell of Jean-Sans-Nom,’ he told him. ‘ You’ll leave him alone with the condemned man, and when he wants to leave, you’ll escort him back to the gate.’

It was the order for the prisoner’s execution.

Jean-Sans-Nom had but two hours to live.

CHAPTER VIII

JOANN AND JEAN

The Abbé left Major Sinclair’s room much more fully in control of himself than when he had entered it. The thunder-clap of this news had only shaken him; God had inspired him with a plan, and the plan might succeed.

Jean knew nothing of the order which had just arrived from Montreal, and to Joann fell the sad task of telling him.

Well, he would not! He would not tell him! He would hide the terrible news that the sentence was to be carried out within two hours. If Joann’s plan were to succeed, Jean must know nothing about it.

They could no longer count on a carefully prepared escape, nor on an attack on Fort Frontenac. Jean could escape death only by immediate flight. If two hours later he were still in the cell, he would leave it only to fall before a volley at the foot of the palisades.

Was the Abbé’s plan feasible? Perhaps, if his brother would agree to it. It was certainly the only plan possible under the circumstances. But it was absolutely essential that Jean should not know that Major Sinclair had received the order for his execution.

Led by the sergeant, the Abbé descended the staircase. The prisoner’s cell was in an angle of the ground- floor of the blockhouse, at the end of a long corridor. The sergeant lit the way with his lantern, and stopped at a low door secured on the outside with two bolts. As he was about to open it, the sergeant said quietly: ‘You know that when you leave the prisoner my orders are to take you to the gate!’

‘I know!’ said the Abbé. ‘ Wait in this passage and I’ll call you!’

The door of the cell was thrown open.

In the darkness, on a rough bed, Jean was asleep. He was not aroused by the noise the sergeant made.

The sergeant advanced to touch him on the shoulder, when Joann signed to him not to do so.

Instead he put the lantern on a table, went out, and gently shut the door.

The two brothers were alone, one asleep, the other on his knees.

Then Joann arose, and looked for a moment at this other self whom their father’s crime had doomed to so miserable a life; he murmured: ‘God, grant me Thy aid.’

Time was too short for him to lose even a few minutes. He touched his brother’s shoulder.

Jean awoke, opened his eyes, sat up, and recognised him.

‘Joann!’

‘Quiet — Jean, speak quietly!’ said Joann. ‘ They can hear us.’

And with his hand he made a sign that the door was guarded on the outside, where the sergeant’s footsteps could be heard as he strode up and down the corridor.

Jean, half-dressed, under a coarse blanket that barely protected him against the chill of the cell, rose noiselessly and embraced his brother.

‘How’s mother?’ he asked.

‘She’s not at Maison-Close.’

‘Not there?’

‘No.’

‘And Monsieur de Vaudreuil and his daughter whom our house sheltered?’

‘The house was empty when I last went to St. Charles.’

‘When?’

‘A week ago.’

‘And since then you’ve had no news of mother or our friends?’

‘None.’

What had happened? Had another search ended in the arrest of Bridget and the De Vaudreuils? Or, not wanting her father to remain another day under the roof of the Morgaz family, had Clary taken her father away in spite of the danger which threatened him? And Bridget, had she fled from St. Charles when the shame of her identity had been made public?

All this passed like lightning through Jean’s mind. And he was about to tell his brother what had happened during his last visit to Maison-Close, when Joann leaned towards him and whispered in his ear.

‘Listen, Jean. It isn’t a brother who’s here, but a priest come to fulfil his duty to a condemned man. It’s in that capacity that the commander of the fort has allowed me to enter your cell. We haven’t a moment to lose. You must escape this instant.’

‘This instant? And how?

‘Take my clothes and get away disguised as a priest. We resemble each other enough for nobody to see through the trick. Besides, it’s still night, and there will hardly be any light from the lantern as you go down the passage, and across the courtyard. Your face will never be recognised under this hat. When we’ve changed clothes, I will get to the back of the cell there, and call out. As agreed, the sergeant will open the door. He has orders to escort me back to the gate. It’s you he will be escorting . .

‘Brother,’ Jean grasped Joann’s hand, ‘ you thought I’d ever consent to this sacrifice?’

‘You must, Jean. Your presence among the reformists is more necessary than ever.’

‘Haven’t they despaired of the cause after their defeat?’

‘No! They’re concentrating at Niagara, on Navy Island, ready to continue the struggle.’

‘They can do that without me, Joann. The success of our cause doesn’t depend upon any one man. I won’t let you risk your life to save mine.’

‘And isn’t it my duty, Jean? You know what our aim is? Have we attained it? No, we haven’t even known how to die to atone for the evil...’

Joann’s words moved his brother deeply, but he would not give in.

Joann continued: ‘Listen once more. You’re afraid for me, Jean; but what have I to fear? Tomorrow, when they find me in the cell, what can happen to me? Nothing. Here there’s only a poor priest instead of a condemned man, and what can they do but let him go...’

‘No! ‘ Jean was struggling with himself and against his brother’s arguments.

‘Enough talk! ‘ Joann told him. ‘ You must go, and you shall go. Do your duty as I am doing mine. You alone are popular enough to arouse a general revolt...’

‘And if they make you responsible for my escape?’

‘They won’t condemn me without a trial, without an order from Quebec, and that will take several days.’

‘Several days!’

‘During which you will have time to join your comrades on Navy Island and bring them to Fort Frontenac to rescue me.’

‘It’s sixty miles from Frontenac to Navy Island, Joann. I shan’t have time.’

‘You refuse? Well, up to now I’ve implored you, now I command you. It is no longer a brother who is speaking to you, but a priest. If you do not die fighting for our cause, you will have done nothing to accomplish the task that has been assigned to you. If you refuse, I will make my identity known, and the Abbé Joann will fall before the firing-squad side by side with Jean-Sans- Nom!’

‘Brother!’

‘Go, Jean! Go! I will have it so! Our mother will have it so! Your country will have it so!’

Overcome by Joann’s urgency, Jean could do nothing but obey. Moreover the chance of returning to Fort Frontenac in a few days with some hundreds of his followers overcame his last resistance.

‘I’m ready!’ he said.

The change of clothes did not take long. Under the Abbé’s cloak it would have been difficult to recognise that the brother had taken his place.

And then for a few moments the brothers talked of what was going on among the Reformists and their foes. Then Joann said: ‘Now I’ll call the sergeant. When he opens the door, you go out and follow him along the passage. Once out of the blockhouse, you’ve only to cross the courtyard, about fifty yards wide, and then you’ll reach the guardroom on the right hand of the palisading. Turn your head away as you pass it. The gate will be in front of you. When you get through it, keep along the shore until you reach the edge of a wood about half a mile from the fort. There you’ll find Lionel.’

‘ Lionel? The lawyer’s clerk?’

‘ Yes! He came with me and he’ll take you to Navy Island. Now, goodbye!’

‘Brother! ‘ Jean threw himself into his brother’s arms.

The moment had come. Joann called loudly and went across to the back of the cell.

The sergeant opened the door and, turning to Jean, said: ‘ You’re ready? ‘ Jean answered by a gesture. ‘ Come this way.’

The sergeant took the lantern, followed Jean oat of the cell, and shut the door.

In what agony did Joann pass the next few minutes! What would happen if Major Sinclair were in the corridor or the courtyard when Jean went by? If he stopped him; if he asked him about the prisoner? If the trick were discovered, the prisoner would at once be shot! And he knew that the preparations for execution had begun, that the garrison had received their orders, that the sergeant, thinking he was dealing with a priest, might mention this to Jean on the way out! And then Jean, learning that the execution was going to be carried out, would return; for he would never allow his brother to die in his place. With his ear at the door, the Abbé listened. His heart beat so violently that he could scarcely hear the sounds outside. At last a distant noise reached him. He fell on his knees and gave thanks to God.

The gate had just been shut.

‘Free!’ murmured Joann.

And indeed Jean had not been recognised. The sergeant, walking before him lantern in hand, had led him to the gate without saying a word. Officers and men alike were still unaware that the execution was to take place in an hour. As he passed through the gate Jean had turned aside his head, as his brother had told him.

‘Will you come back to the prisoner?’ asked the sergeant.

Jean nodded.

And a moment later he was free.

Yet he moved but slowly from the fort, as if some bond held him to the prison — a bond he dare not break. He reproached himself with having given in to his brother, in allowing him to take his place. All the perils of the substitution appeared before him with an alarming clearness. A few hours later, he thought, they'll go into the cell, at daybreak; the escape will be discovered, and Joann will be treated very harshly as he waits for the death with which they might punish his heroic sacrifice.

And then Jean felt himself seized with an irresistible desire to go back. But no! He must hurry on to join the patriots at Navy Island, to begin anew the insurrectional campaign, and to hurl himself against Fort Frontenac, to set his brother free. And for that there would not be a moment to lose.

He crossed the beach obliquely, turned along the edge of the lake, and made for the wood where Lionel ought to be waiting for him.

The blizzard was then raging in all its violence. The ice on the shore of the lake was piled up like the floes of the Arctic Ocean, and a blinding snow-storm swept along over them in furious squalls.

Jean, lost for a time in the storm and hardly knowing whether he were on the land or the lake, strove to find his way to the clump of trees he could just see in the darkness. At last he reached it, after taking nearly half an hour to cover the half-mile.

Lionel could not possibly have seen him, or he would certainly have come to meet him.

Jean went on under the trees, uneasy at not finding the young clerk at the appointed place, and not liking to shout to him for fear of running into danger if he were overheard by some belated fisherman.

Then the last two lines of the young poet’s ballad recurred to his memory, and as he went into the wood he softly repeated: ‘To be born with you, my frolicsome flame, To die with you, my will-o’-the-wisp.’

A moment afterwards Lionel emerged from a thicket and exclaimed: ‘You, Monsieur Jean, you?’

‘Yes, Lionel.’

‘And the Abbé Joann?’

‘He’s in my cell! But now for Navy Island! In forty- eight hours we must be back with our comrades at Fort Frontenac.’

Jean and Lionel left the wood, and went southwards, so as to follow the shores of the Ontario to Niagara. It was the shortest way as well as the least dangerous.

Fifteen miles off they would cross the American frontier; then, safe from any pursuit, they could hurry on to Navy Island.

But to take this direction they had to pass the fort. In this terrible night, amid the thick whirlwinds of snow, they were not likely to be seen by the sentinels, even as they went along the beach.

If the lake had been navigable, instead of being choked with the masses of ice, it would have been better for them to have appealed to some fisherman, who could soon have taken them to the mouth of the Niagara river. But that was impossible now.

Jean and Lionel went along as fast as the storm would let them. They were scarcely a hundred yards from the palisades of the fort, when the sharp crackle of musketry rent the air.

There could be no mistake. A platoon had fired a volley somewhere inside the palisade.

‘Joann!’ exclaimed Jean.

And he fell, as if he had been hit when the soldiers opened fire.

Joann had died for his brother, for his country.

Half an hour after Jean had gone, Major Sinclair had given orders to proceed with the execution in conformity with the orders he had received from Quebec.

Joann had been taken out of the cell and out into the courtyard where he was to be shot.

The major read the order aloud.

Joann did not reply. At that moment he need only have said, ‘ I am not Jean-Sans-Nom! I am the priest who took his place to save him!’

And the major would have had to suspend the execution, and to get fresh instructions from the Governor-General.

But Jean was too near Fort Frontenac. The soldiers would have started out after him. He would inevitably be retaken. He would have been shot. And

Jean-Sans-Nom must not die anywhere except on the battlefield.

Joann held his peace, and died with the thoughts in his mind of his mother, his brother, his country.

The soldiers had not recognised him when he was alive, nor did they recognise him when he was dead. They at once buried him in a grave dug just outside the palisades.

In him the Government believed they had struck down the hero of Canadian independence.

He was the first victim offered in expiation of the crime of Simon Morgaz.

CHAPTER IX

NAVY ISLAND

Navy Island is situated about three miles above Niagara Falls, and it was there that the Reformists had raised the last rampart of insurrection, at a camp midway between Canada and the United States on the Niagara River, the natural boundary between the two countries.

The leaders who, after St. Denis and St. Charles, had escaped from pursuit by the loyalists, had left Canadian territory and crossed the frontier in order to concentrate on Navy Island. If the fortune of war should betray them, if the royalists were to cross the left arm of the river and drive them from the island, they would still be able to escape to the other bank, where there were sympathisers in plenty. But doubtless those who sought shelter among the Americans would be few in number, for this last game they would play out to the end.

The Reformists, and more particularly the so-called Bonnets-bleus, occupied Navy Island, although the river no longer sufficed to protect it. For although the cold was very severe, thanks to the speed of its current the Niagara was still navigable, and communication was still possible by means of boats between Navy Island and both of the banks. The Canadians and Americans kept coming and going between the camp and the village of Schlosser, on the right bank of the Niagara; and many of these boats were carrying ammunition and arms and stores in readiness for the approaching attack by the royalists.

A citizen of the United States, named Wills, the owner of the small steamer Caroline, allowed his boat to be used for these purposes in return for a small fee.

On the opposite bank of the Niagara, and consequently facing Schlosser, the British were stationed in the village of Chippewa, under the orders of Colonel MacNab. There were quite enough of them to overwhelm the reformists on Navy Island whenever they decided to attack. A number of large boats had been collected at Chippewa with a view to this attack, which would take place as soon as Colonel MacNab had completed his preparations. The end of the struggle was thus imminent on the Canadian frontier and within view of the Americans.

It is not surprising that those who have played the chief parts in this narrative were assembled at Navy Island. Farran, recently cured of his wound, as well as William Clerc, had hastened to the camp, where Vincent Hodge soon joined them. Sebastien Gramont, then in prison at Montreal, was the only one who did not take his place among his comrades.

After making certain that thanks to his intervention Bridget and Clary de Vaudreuil had been able to reach Maison-Close, Vincent Hodge had got away from the drunken soldiers who had surrounded him and threatened to cut off his retreat. He had then taken to the woods, and by daybreak was out of danger of falling into the hands of the royalists. Forty-eight hours later he had reached St. Albans, beyond the frontier. When the camp was formed at Navy Island he had gone there, accompanied by a few Americans, who were devoted to the cause of independence.

There too were Thomas Harcher, and four of his sons, Pierre, Tony, Jacques and Michel. To return to Chipogan after the disaster of St. Charles would have been to endanger not only themselves but Catherine Harcher. They had therefore taken refuge at St. Albans, where Catherine had been able to send them news of herself and her children. During the first week of December they had come to Navy Island, ready for another struggle, and determined to avenge the death of Remy, who had fallen under the bullets of the loyalists.

As to Mr. Nick, if the most far-seeing medicine man of the Far West had ever prophesied, ‘ The day will come when you, a respectable lawyer, peaceful by character and prudent by profession, will be fighting at the head of a Huron tribe against the constituted authorities of your country!’ he would have been thought worthy of being shut up in the local lunatic asylum. But, nevertheless, there Mr. Nick was at the head of his warriors.

At a solemn palaver, the Mahogannis had decided to join the reformists, and a great chief, in whose veins flowed the blood of the Sagamores, could not remain behind. He might object, but his objections were not even listened to. And the day after Lionel and the Abbé Joann had left Walhatta, as soon as the council fire had been extinguished, Mr. Nick followed — no, preceded — by fifty warriors had set out for Lake Ontario.

It may well be imagined what a reception he met with. Thomas Harcher had gripped his hand so vigorously that for twenty-four hours afterwards Mr. Nick would have found it impossible to wield bow or tomahawk. And he was as warmly welcomed by all those who had been his friends or clients at Montreal.

‘Yes... yes...’ he stammered. ‘ I thought it my duty, or rather these brave fellows...’

‘The warriors of your tribe?’ they asked.

‘Yes — of my tribe!’ he repeated.

In short, although the excellent man looked so pitiful that Lionel was ashamed of him, it was an important development that the Hurons had lent their aid to the reformist cause. If the other Indian tribes followed their example, if their warriors, animated by the same sentiments, allied themselves with the Reformists, the authorities would no longer find it easy to cope with the insurrection. Events had, however, compelled the reformists to pass from the offensive to the defensive, and if Navy Island were to fall into the hands of Colonel MacNab, the cause of independence would be definitely lost.

The leaders of the Bonnets-bleus were busy organising resistance in every way possible. A number of entrenchments had been dug in various parts of the island, obstacles were devised against attempts at landing, and arms, ammunition, and stores were brought in from Schlosser — and all this was done hastily but with enthusiasm. It was unfortunate for the Reformists that they had to wait for an attack which they could not provoke, for they were not in a position to cross the Niagara. With their scanty equipment, how could they launch an assault on Chippewa, on a camp so strongly placed on the river bank?

And the longer this state of affairs lasted the worse it would be for them. The forces of Colonel MacNab were daily increasing, while preparations for crossing the Niagara were being actively pushed forward. Driven to the frontier, the last defenders of the insurrection had vainly endeavoured to get into touch with the people of the regions about Ontario and Quebec. Under these circumstances how could the people unite in an armed rising, and what leader would put himself at the head of the rebellion now that the royal columns had overrun the regions bordering the St. Lawrence?

Only one man could do this. Only one had influence enough to raise the people, and that was Jean-Sans-Nom. But since the disaster at St. Denis he had disappeared. It seemed probable that he had perished obscurely, for he had not appeared anywhere on the American frontier. To suppose that he had fallen into the hands of the police was impossible; such a capture would never have been kept secret by the authorities at Quebec or Montreal.

It was the same with De Vaudreuil. Neither Hodge, Farran, nor Clerc knew what had become of him. That he had been wounded at St. Charles they knew. But nobody had seen Jean carry him off the field of battle, and no news had come that he had been taken prisoner. And as for Clary de Vaudreuil, Hodge had been unable to trace her since he had saved her from the violence of those drunkards.

Imagine then their delight when, on 10th December, they saw De Vaudreuil land on Navy Island, accompanied by his daughter and by an old woman who was unknown to them.

It was Bridget.

After Jean had left them their best plan would doubtless have been to remain at Maison-Close, where De Vaudreuil was in no danger of being found. Where could his daughter find a safer hiding-place? The Villa Montcalm had been burnt by the volunteers and was now in ruins. But De Vaudreuil did not know why Rip had kept Maison-Close from being searched by the police. Clary had kept the shameful secret that had protected them, and he did not know he was the guest of — Bridget Morgaz.

Fearing the consequences of another visitation by the police, and more on account of his daughter than of himself, he had made no change in his plans. And on the following evening, as soon as he learnt that the royalists had left St. Charles, he had taken his place with Clary and Bridget in that friendly farmer's cart, and the three had gone into the south of St. Hyacinthe. Then, as soon as they heard that the patriots were concentrating on Navy Island, they had hastened across the American frontier, and after a dangerous eight days' journey they were now among their friends.

And had Bridget consented to follow Clary de Vaudreuil, who knew of her past life?

Yes! The unhappy woman had been unable to resist Clary's entreaties.

After Jean's flight, and seeing, as he did, that she could inspire nothing but horror in her guests, Bridget had retired to her room. And terrible was the night she had spent! Would Clary conceal from her father what she had just heard? No! And in the morning he would more than hasten — he would fly — from Maison-Close! Yes! Fly — at the risk of falling into the hands of the royalists, he would fly, rather than remain an hour longer beneath the roof of a Morgaz!

Moreover, Bridget could no longer stay at St. Charles. She would not wait to be driven away by public scorn.

She would go far away, and ask only that God would free her from her odious existence.

But next morning, at dawn, Bridget saw Clary enter her room. She would have hastened away to avoid meeting her had not Clary spoken to her in a voice of sorrowful affection: 'Madame Bridget, I have kept your secret from my father. He does not know, he shall not know anything of your past, and I want to forget it myself. I will only remember that you are the most unfortunate and the most honourable of women! ‘ Bridget did not raise her head. ‘ Listen to me,’ Clary pleaded. ‘ I respect as you deserve to be respected. For your misfortune you’ve all the pity and sympathy they deserve. No, you are not responsible for the crime you have so cruelly expiated. That abominable treachery has been atoned for, and more than atoned for, by your son. Justice will be done you some day; and meanwhile let me love you as if you were my own mother. Give me your hand, Madame Bridget, your hand!’

At this touching manifestation of feelings to which she was quite unaccustomed, the unhappy woman broke down completely; and she clasped the proffered hand, while her eyes flowed with tears.

‘Now,’ said Clary, ‘ as there’s an end of all that, let’s talk about the present. My father is afraid your house will not escape further investigation. He wants us to go away together — this very night if the roads are clear. You cannot stay at St. Charles; and I want you to promise to go with us. We will go to our friends, we will find your son, and I will tell him what I have told you, that I feel a truth far above all human prejudice, the truth of my own heart. Have I your promise, Madame Bridget?’

‘I will go, Clary de Vaudreuil.’

‘With my father and me?’

‘Yes, though it might be better for you to leave me to die far away in shame and misery.’

Clary stooped to raise Bridget, who knelt sobbing at her feet. And next evening all three left Maison-Close.

It was at Navy Island, twenty-four hours after their arrival, that they learnt the news so disastrous for the reformist cause, that Jean-Sans-Nom had been arrested by Commeau and taken to Fort Frontenac.

This last blow overwhelmed Bridget. What had become of Jean, she knew not. What had become of Jean she knew she was going to die.

‘But at least, may no one ever know that they are the sons of Simon Morgaz!’ she murmured.

Mademoiselle de Vaudreuil alone knew her secret. But what could she say to console Bridget? Moreover, in the grief she felt when she heard of the arrest, she knew that her love for Jean was still unchanged. All she could see in him was the ardent patriot devoted to death!

The capture of Jean-Sans-Nom spread deep discouragement throughout Navy Island; this was the result the authorities had counted on when they spread the news. As soon as it reached Chippewa Colonel MacNab had given orders that it should be proclaimed far and wide.

But how had the news crossed the frontier? No one knew. It seemed inexplicable that it could have been known at Navy Island before it was even heard of at Schlosser. But this was of little importance.

Unfortunately, it was only too true; and Jean-Sans- Nom would be missing at the very time when the fate of Canada would be in the balance on the last field of battle.

As soon as his arrest was reported on 11th December a conference took place between such leaders as Hodge, Farran and Clerc, while De Vaudreuil, who commanded the camp at Navy Island, acted as president.

Vincent Hodge opened the discussion by suggesting that some attempt should be made to rescue Jeans-Sans- Nom.

‘It’s at Frontenac that he’s in prison,’ he pointed out. ‘ The garrison is a small one, and a hundred determined men would compel its surrender. It would not be impossible for us to get there in twenty-four hours.’

‘Twenty-four hours!’ exclaimed M. de Vaudreuil. ‘ Are you forgetting that he was condemned before he was taken? It’s within twelve hours, it’s this very night that we should have to be at Frontenac.’

‘We’ll be there,’ Hodge assured him. ‘ All along the shore of Ontario there’s no obstacle to stop us until we reach the frontier at the St. Lawrence, and as the royalists haven’t had any notice of our plan they can’t offer us any resistance.’

‘Go, then,’ M. de Vaudreuil decided, ‘ but in the greatest secrecy. The spies from Chippewa Camp must know nothing of your movements.’

The expedition having been decided on, it was not difficult to collect the hundred men who were to take part in it. To save Jean-Sans-Nom from death, there was no lack of volunteers. The detachment, commanded by Vincent Hodge, went off along the right bank of the Niagara; and after crossing the United States territory obliquely, arrived at about three in the morning on the right bank of the St. Lawrence, which could easily be crossed on the ice. Fort Frontenac was not more than five leagues to the northward, and before daylight Vincent Hodge would have surprised the garrison and rescued the condemned man.

But he had been anticipated by a despatch-rider sent from Chippewa. The troops who were guarding the frontier had occupied the left bank of the river.

The attempt to cross the river had to be abandoned. The reformists would have been annihilated. The cavalry would have cut off their retreat, and not one of them would have returned to Navy Island. Vincent Hodge and his companions had to take the road back to Schlosser.

And so warning of the attempted surprise attack on Fort Frontenac had been given to the camp at Chippewa?

That the preparations necessitated by the mustering of a hundred men could not be kept quite secret, that was probable enough. But how could Colonel MacNab have heard of them? Were there spies among the Reformists, spies in touch with the camp at Chippewa? Already suspicions had been aroused that the English knew everything that took place on the island. This time there could be no doubt of it, for the troops stationed on the Canadian frontier had been warned in sufficient time to stop Vincent Hodge.

But in any case the attempt to reach Fort Frontenac would not have saved the prisoner. Vincent Hodge would have arrived too late.

The very next day, on the morning of the 12th, the news spread abroad that on the previous evening Jean- Sans-Nom had been shot.

And the loyalists were congratulating themselves at having no more to fear from the popular hero who had been the soul of the insurrection.

CHAPTER X

BRIDGET MORGAZ

Meanwhile two more blows, not one whit less terrible, fell upon the reformist party, and discouraged the last defenders of Navy Island. And, indeed, there was every chance of their being seized with despair at the series of disasters with which ill-fortune now assailed them.

In the first place, the proclamation of martial law in the district of Montreal rendered a common understanding among the parishes of the St. Lawrence almost impossible. On the one hand the French clergy, though they did not abandon their hopes for the future, advised the insurgents to submit. On the other, it was not easy to succeed without the aid of the United States; but, notwithstanding what was being done by the Americans on the frontier, it did not seem that any help was to be obtained from that quarter. The Federal Government carefully abstained from openly assisting the French. Good wishes, yes! but deeds, no! And then there were a number of Canadians who, though still protesting against manifest abuses and claiming their rights, were doing their utmost to bring about peace.

From this state of things it resulted that the insurgents in arms in this last month of 1837 did not amount to a thousand, scattered through the whole country. In place of a revolution history would only have to chronicle a revolt.

A few isolated attempts were made at Swanton. On the advice of Papineau, a small party of eighty men entered Canadian territory, reached Moore’s Corner, and came across a detachment of four hundred volunteers who had been sent to bar their way. The Reformists fought with admirable courage, but they were driven back in confusion across the frontier. And the Government, having nothing further to fear in that district, concentrated its forces in the north.

On 14th December there was a fight at St. Eustache in Deux Montagnes county. There, among his brave companions, Doctor Chenier, for whose head a reward had been offered, especially distinguished himself. Two thousand infantry sent by Sir John Colborne, nine guns, a hundred and twenty cavalry, and a company of eighty volunteers, attacked St. Eustache. The resistance of Chenier and his people was heroic: exposed to cannon-balls and bullets, they fortified themselves in the presbytery, the convent, and the church. Many of them had no fire-arms.

‘Take those of the men who are killed,’ Chenier advised them coldly.

But the circle of assailants crept closer round the village, and fire came to the aid of the royalists. Chenier realised that he had to abandon the church. A bullet struck him to the ground. He rose and fired again. A second bullet struck him in the chest. He fell. He was dead.

Seventy of his companions perished with him.

The damage done to the church is still visible, and the French still visit the spot where the brave doctor fell. In the country the saying still persists: ‘ As brave as Chenier.

After the rout of the insurgents at St. Eustache, Sir John Colborne ordered his troops to St. Benoit, where they arrived next day. It was a beautiful and wealthy village, situated a few miles to the northward in Deux Montagnes county.

This was the scene of a massacre of unarmed men who were prepared to surrender. How could they possibly defend themselves against the troops from St. Eustache and the volunteers from St. Andrew, more than six thousand in all, with the general himself at their head?

Devastation, destruction, plunder, arson, all the excesses of an infuriated soldiery, who respected neither age nor sex, profanation of the churches, the sacred vessels given to the most odious use, priestly vestments draped round the necks of the horses, such were the acts of vandalism and inhumanity of which this parish became the scene. And, it must be admitted, though these crimes were mostly committed by the volunteers, the regular forces were restrained little, or not at all, by their leaders. More than once, these gave the orders to deliver the houses of the local gentry to the flames.

When, on 16th December, these tidings reached Navy Island, they aroused great excitement. The Bonnets-bleus demanded to be led across the Niagara to the attack on MacNab’s camp, and it was with difficulty that De Vaudreuil could keep them back. But the wave of anger was soon over, and deep discouragement set in. And at last desertions began and a hundred of the insurgents fled across the American frontier.

The leaders saw their influence lessening, and they were divided amongst themselves. Vincent Hodge.

Farran, Clerc, were in frequent disagreement with the other patriots, and De Vaudreuil alone seemed to be able to moderate the rivalries produced by this desperate state of affairs. And unfortunately, although he had lost none of his old energy and strength of character, he felt that his bodily strength was diminishing from day to day, and he was only too well aware that he could never survive another defeat.

And amid his apprehensions for the future of the cause was his growing anxiety regarding the fate in store for his daughter.

Farran, Clerc, and Hodge did not cease to struggle against their companions' discouragement. If the attempt had failed this time, they repeated, they could wait till the time came to try again. After leaving behind them the leaven of a future rising, they could retire to the United States and prepare for a new struggle against the oppressors. No, there was no need to despair of the future; so even Mr. Nick thought, as he explained to De Vaudreuil: 'Though the rebellion hasn't yet succeeded, the reforms we demand will be granted through the force of circumstances. Sooner or later Canada will regain her rights; she will get her autonomy; she will be only nominally dependent on England. You will live to see it, Monsieur de Vaudreuil. We shall find ourselves together once again at the Villa Montcalm, and I shall get rid of this mantle of the Sagamores, which is so uncomfortable on my legal shoulders, and I shall return to my office in Montreal.'

When De Vaudreuil mentioned his anxiety on his daughter's account to Thomas Harcher, the farmer replied: 'If you have any fear about Mademoiselle Clary, why don't you send her to my wife Catherine? At Chipogan she'd be in perfect safety, and you could come to her there as soon as circumstances allow you.'

But M. de Vaudreuil had no illusions about himself; he knew his life was nearing its end, and he was anxious to arrange Clary's future in the way he had always desired. Knowing Hodge's love for his daughter, he had reason to believe that his love was reciprocated. He had no suspicion that Clary could be thinking of anyone else. If she were to consider the position in which the death of her father would leave her, she would feel the need of support. And where could she feel herself safer than with Vincent Hodge, to whom she was bound not only by love but by patriotism? De Vaudreuil resolved to bring about at once the realisation of his fondest hopes. He had no doubt of Hodge's feelings; he could not doubt those of Clary! He would bring them together; he would speak to them; he would join their hands; and when he died, he would only have one regret — that he had not been able to gain independence for his country.

So Vincent Hodge was invited to come on the evening of 16th December.

It was a small house on the eastern shore of the island and facing the village that De Vaudreuil occupied with his daughter. Bridget lived there too, but she never went out in the daytime. Generally the poor woman went out only at nightfall, absorbed in the memory of her two sons, of Jean, who was dead for the cause, and Joann, of whom she had heard nothing, and who was probably awaiting his death-hour in the prisons of Quebec or Montreal. Nobody ever saw her in the house where De Vaudreuil and his daughter returned the hospitality she had given them at Maison-Close. Who would have suspected that she was the wife of Simon Morgaz?

Vincent Hodge arrived at the time appointed, eight in the evening.

Bridget had already gone out, and was wandering about the island.

Hodge shook hands with De Vaudreuil, and turned towards Clary, whose hand was extended towards him.

'I have something serious to talk to you about, my dear Hodge,' said De Vaudreuil.

'I'll leave you, father,' Clary turned towards the door.

‘No, my child, stay here. What I have to say concerns both of you.’

He motioned to Vincent Hodge to be seated in front of his arm-chair, and Clary sat down by his side.

‘My friend,’ he began, ‘ I haven’t long to live. I feel I’m growing weaker from day to day. Listen to me, then, as if you were at the death-bed of a dying man, listening to his last words.’

‘My dear Vaudreuil,’ Vincent Hodge protested, ‘ you’re exaggerating!’

‘And you are making us very unhappy, father,’ Clary added.

‘It will make me even more so,’ replied De Vaudreuil, ‘ if you refuse to believe me.’

He looked at them fixedly for a moment. Then, turning towards Hodge, he said: ‘My friend, up to the present we have only spoken of the cause to which you and I have devoted our lives. On my part, nothing could be more natural, for I am of French blood, and it is for the triumph of French Canada that I have fought. You, who are not bound to our country by ties of birth, have not hesitated to put yourself in the front rank of the Reformists...’

‘And aren’t the Americans and the Canadians brothers?’ asked Vincent Hodge. ‘And who knows but that some day Canada will form part of the American Confederation?’

‘ Would that that day were come!’ sighed De Vaudreuil.

‘Yes, father,’ said Clary, ‘ it will come, and you will see it...’

‘ No, my child, I shall never see it.’

‘ Do you think our cause is lost for ever because we’ve been defeated?’ asked Hodge.

‘ A cause which is based on justice and right,’ De Vaudreuil assured him, ‘ will always conquer in the end. The time which will fail me will not fail you. Yes, Hodge, you will see the success of the cause, and at the same time you will have avenged your father who died on the scaffold through the treachery of a Morgaz.’

At this name, so unexpectedly mentioned, Clary felt struck to the heart. Did she fear that the blush which rose to her face would be visible? Apparently she did, for she rose and went to the window.

‘ What’s the matter, Clary? ‘ Vincent Hodge rose and went across to her.

‘ You’re not well?’ asked De Vaudreuil, making an effort to rise from his chair.

‘ No, father, it’s nothing! A little air will soon put me right!’

Hodge opened one of the windows and went back to De Vaudreuil.

They waited a few moments, till Clary returned to them. Then her father took one of her hands, and at the same time he said to Hodge: ‘My friend, although patriotism has filled your whole life, it has nevertheless left room in your heart for other feelings. Yes, Hodge, I know that. You love my daughter, and I also know how highly she thinks of you. I shall die more at ease if you have the right and the duty to look after her, left alone in the world after I am gone! If she consents, will you take her for your wife?’

Clary had withdrawn her hand from her father’s grasp. Looking at Vincent Hodge, she awaited his reply.

‘My dear Vaudreuil.’ he said ‘ you are offering me the realisation of the greatest happiness I could dream of. Yes, Clary, I love you, and I have loved you for a long time and with my whole heart. Before I spoke of my love, I wanted to see the triumph of our cause. But the position has become serious, and recent events have made a great difference to the Reformists. A few years may well elapse before we can continue the struggle. Will you spend these years in this America, which is almost your native land? Will you give me the right to take your father’s place, and give me the happiness of calling myself his son? Tell me, Clary, will you do this? ‘ The girl was silent.

His head lowered in response to her silence, Vincent Hodge dared not repeat his question.

‘Well, my child,’ said De Vaudreuil, ‘ you have heard me. You have heard what Hodge has said. It depends on you whether I am to be his father, and, after all the sorrows of my life, whether I shall have the supreme consolation of seeing you united to a patriot who is worthy you, and who loves you.’

Then Clary in a voice broken with emotion, gave the reply which left them no hope.

‘My father,’ she said, ‘ I have the greatest respect for you! Hodge, I have more than a high esteem for you. I feel for you as if I were your sister. But I can never be your wife.’

‘You cannot... Clary? ‘ De Vaudreuil grasped her arm.

‘No, father.’

‘And why not?’

‘Because my life belongs to another.’

‘Another! ‘ Vincent Hodge could not restrain a spasm of jealousy.

‘You must not be jealous, Hodge! ‘ Clary assured him. ‘ He whom I love, and to whom I have never spoken of my love, but who loved me and never has spoken to me of his love, is no more! Perhaps, even if he had lived, I should never have been his wife! But he is dead, dead for his country, and I shall remain faithful to his memory.’

‘It is Jean, then?’ asked De Vaudreuil.

‘Yes father, it is Jean...’

Clary was unable to complete her sentence.

‘Morgaz! Morgaz!’ such was the name which could be heard shouted in a distant tumult that was rapidly getting nearer. The uproar came from the north of the island, from the bank of the Niagara on which stood De Vaudreuil’s house.

At the sound of the name thus loudly shouted, Clary turned alarmingly pale.

‘What’s that noise?’ asked De Vaudreuil.

‘And why that name? ‘ Vincent Hodge got up and went across to the open window.

The bank was ablaze with light. A hundred and more of the reformists, carrying blazing torches, were coming towards the house.

These were men and women and children, all yelling the accursed name of Morgaz, and thronging round an old woman who could not escape from their insults, for she was hardly able to drag herself along.

It was Bridget!

Clary rushed to the window, and, seeing the victim of the demonstration, whose cause she knew only too well, she screamed: ‘Bridget!’

She ran to the door; she opened it; she rushed out, without even replying to her father, who was following her with Vincent Hodge.

The crowd was not fifty yards from the house. The uproar was increasing. Mud was being thrown at Bridget’s face; angry fists were being shaken at her; stones were being picked up to be hurled at her.

In an instant Clary de Vaudreuil was at Bridget’s side, and had covered her with her arms, while the yells resounded with greater fury: ‘It’s Bridget Morgaz! She’s the wife of Simon Morgaz! Death to her! Death to her!’

De Vaudreuil and Vincent Hodge, who were about to intervene between her and the mob, suddenly checked themselves.

Bridget, the wife of Simon Morgaz! Bridget, who bore that name — that odious name!

Clary supported the wretched woman, who otherwise would have fallen on her knees.

‘Kill me! Kill me!’ she murmured.

‘Wretches! ‘ Clary turned on those who were threatening her. ‘ Respect this woman!’

‘The wife of Morgaz, the traitor!’ repeated a hundred furious voices.

‘Yes, the wife of the traitor!’ said Clary, ‘ but the mother of him...’

She would have uttered the name of Jean — the only one, perhaps, that could give Bridget protection.

But, recovering all her strength, Bridget stood erect and whispered: ‘ No, Clary! No. Out of pity for my son — out of pity for his memory!

Then the shouts broke out with renewed violence, and with them came the threats. The crowd had increased, a prey to one of those irresistible paroxysms that lead to the most dastardly deeds.

De Vaudreuil and Hodge tried to rescue the victim, while some of their friends, attracted by the tumult, came to their help. But in vain they strove to drag away Bridget — and Clary who was clinging to her.

‘Death! Death to the wife of Simon Morgaz!’ yelled the frantic mob.

Then, tearing his way through the crowd, and hurling them aside, there suddenly came a man.

Freeing Bridget from the hands raised to deal her the death-blow, he cried: ‘Mother!’

It was Jean-Sans-Nom; it was Jean Morgaz!

CHAPTER XI

EXPIATION

These were the circumstances in which the name of Morgaz had been revealed to the defenders of Navy Island.

On several occasions the preparations made for resistance, the points which had been fortified to repulse a royalist attack, and the attempts which had been made to force the crossing of the Niagara, had all been known in the British camp. It was clear that there was a spy among the Reformists who kept the enemy informed of everything that happened on the island. In vain was a search made for this spy, so that he might be brought to summary justice. He had escaped every attempt to find him in the villages on the American side of the river.

The spy was none other than Rip.

Infuriated at his lack of success, which meant a heavy loss to his business, the head of the house of Rip and Co. was endeavouring to recover himself by a bold stroke that would fully atone for his recent failures. He had failed at Chipogan Farm, where his men had had to beat a retreat. At St. Charles he had inadvertently given Jean-Sans-Nom, then hiding in Maison-Close, his only chance of escape. And then it had not been his own men, but those of Comeau, who had captured the fugitive.

Rip, eager for revenge, gave no further thought to Jean-Sans-Nom who, he had every reason to suppose, had been executed at Fort Frontenac. He had come in disguise to Navy Island; and there, by means of a prearranged code of signals, he kept Colonel MacNab informed of the defensive works and the places at which a descent on the island was practicable.

To venture among the reformists was obviously to risk his life. If they recognised him, he could hope for no mercy: they would kill him like a dog. But a considerable sum of money would fall to him if he helped in capturing the island, inasmuch as the insurrection would end with the disappearance of its leaders. And so Rip landed on the American bank of the Niagara, and at Schlosser he took passage on the Caroline, like any ordinary visitor, and so he had crossed to Navy Island.

Thanks to his disguise, to his beard which he now sported, to the changes he had made in his gait and in the tone of his voice, the audacious detective was unrecognisable. And although he was amongst people who should have known him — such as De Vaudreuil and his daughter, Thomas Harcher and his sons, whom he had met at Chipogan, and also Mr. Nick, whom he had never expected to meet on the island — fortunately for him his disguise was so perfect that no one had any suspicion regarding him. So he could without difficulty pursue his occupation as a spy, and when necessary he could communicate with Chippewa. He it was who had warned Colonel MacNab of Hodge’s attack against Fort Frontenac.

A chance encounter might have been his ruin. During the eight days he had been on the island he had often met Thomas Harcher, Mr. Nick, and the others, but he had never met Bridget. And how could he have suspected that she was there? The wife of Simon Morgaz among the Reformists was the most unlikely thing in the world. Had he not left her at Maison-Close, after sparing her the reprisals taken against the inhabitants of St. Charles? And then for twelve years, since he had known her at Chambly, they had met only once, during the house-to- house search. So Bridget would not have recognised him any more than Mr. Nick or Thomas Harcher.

And indeed Bridget had not recognised him. He it was who betrayed himself under circumstances which he could not possibly have foreseen.

That evening — 16th December — Bridget had left the house where Vincent Hodge had been asked to meet De Vaudreuil. The darkness of night covered the whole of the Niagara valley. There was no sound, neither in the village occupied by the British troops, nor in the reformist camp. A few sentries were pacing up and down the bank and guarding the left arm of the river.

Without taking any notice of them, Bridget had reached the farthest point of the island up-stream. There, after a rest of a few seconds, she was preparing to return, when her eye was caught by a light which was moving about at the water’s edge.

Surprised and uneasy, she went down to the rocks, which here rose above the Niagara.

Here there was a man swinging a lantern, whose light could easily be seen on the Chippewa shore; and, what was more, a light from the camp at once flashed out in reply.

Bridget could not help crying aloud at seeing this exchange of suspicious signals.

On hearing her cry, the man scrambled up the rocks.

Standing before her, he held the lantern up to her face.

‘Bridget Morgaz!’ he exclaimed.

Bridget stepped back astounded that the man should know her name. But he had not taken the precaution of changing his voice, and the voice betrayed the spy.

‘Rip!’ stammered Bridget. ‘ Rip! — here!’

‘ Yes, Rip himself.’

‘ Rip... at this trade...’

‘Well, Bridget,’ Rip spoke very quietly. ‘ What I’m doing is what you’re here to do, isn’t it? Why is the wife of Simon Morgaz in this camp, if it isn’t to communicate...’

‘You scoundrel!’

‘Silence! ‘ Rip seized her roughly by the arm. ‘ Be quiet, or...’

And with one push he could have hurled her into the current of the Niagara.

‘ Kill me? ‘ Bridget took a step backwards. ‘ Not before I’ve given the alarm — not before I’ve denounced you.’ And she began shouting for help.

At once there came a sound that showed the sentries were on the alert and were running towards her.

Rip saw he would have no time to get rid of Bridget before they came up.

‘Take care, Bridget,’ he warned her. ‘ If you say who I am, I’ll say who you are.’

‘Say it, then! ‘ Not even this threat made her hesitate.

Then, even more loudly, she shouted, ‘ Help! Help!’

A dozen men had already surrounded them, and others were running up from all sides.

‘This man,’ Bridget told them,’ he’s the detective Rip, and he’s a spy in the service of the royalists.’

‘And this woman,’ Rip snarled, ‘ is the wife of the traitor Simon Morgaz.’

The effect of the detested name was immediate; it wiped out all thoughts of Rip. Shouts of ‘ Bridget Morgaz! Bridget Morgaz!’ rose above the din, and it was towards this woman that all the threats and insults were turned. Rip took advantage of this. Cool as ever, seeing that attention had been diverted from him, he disappeared. And no doubt he crossed the Niagara and took refuge in Chippewa Camp long before any search could be made for him.

And this was how Bridget, pursued by the infuriated mob, had come to De Vaudreuil’s house.

And it was just as she was about to fall under their blows that Jean had appeared, and with the one word ‘ Mother!’ had revealed the secret of his birth.

Jean-Sans-Nom was the son of Simon Morgaz.

After the sound of the firing from within Fort Frontenac, he had fainted in Lionel’s arms. He had at once realised what had happened: Joann had just died in his place. His young companion brought him to, and then having crossed the St. Lawrence on the ice, they had followed the shore of the

Ontario, and at daybreak they were far from the fort. To reach Navy Island, to rally the insurgents against the royal troops, and to die if he failed in this last effort, that was what Jean had resolved to do. As he traversed the shore of the lake, where the news of his execution had been made known, he could see for himself that the Anglo-Canadians believed they were finished with him. Very well! He would reappear at the head of the reformists, he would fall like a thunderbolt on Colborne's soldiers. Perhaps his reappearance, which might almost be thought miraculous, would spread terror in their ranks, while at the same time it would arouse irresistible enthusiasm among the Sons of Freedom.

But however anxious Jean and Lionel might be to reach the Niagara, they had to go a long way round, and this took time. The risks they ran were so great, until they reached American territory, that they could travel only by night. Hence it was not until the evening of 16th December that they reached first the village of Schlosser, and then the camp on Navy Island.

And now Jean was face to face with the howling mob, which had closed up around him. But such was the horror inspired by the name of Simon Morgaz that the shouts did not cease. They had recognised him. Yes, it was Jean-Sans-Nom, the popular hero, whom they had thought fallen under the English bullets! Yet his legend had lost its power. To the threats hurled at Bridget were added those hurled at her son.

Jean was unmoved. Supporting his mother on one arm, he kept off this enraged multitude with the other. In vain De Vaudreuil, Farran, Clerc, and Lionel tried to restrain them.

Vincent Hodge, finding himself in the presence of the son of the man who had betrayed his father, of the man he knew Clary loved, was seized with an impulse of anger and hatred, Then, overcoming his instincts of vengeance, he thought only of defending the girl against the hostile demonstrations brought upon her by her devotion to Bridget Morgaz.

And, indeed, that such feeling should be showed against the unhappy woman, that she should be held responsible for the treachery of Simon Morgaz, was a revolting injustice. But this was something the crowd had not realised: from the outset they had not stopped to think.

But that the presence of Jean-Sans-Nom should not have calmed their frenzy after what they knew of him, that went beyond all bounds.

Jean’s indignation at this abominable conduct was so great that, no longer red with shame but pale with anger, he shouted in a voice that was heard even above the uproar: ‘Yes! I am Jean Morgaz, and this is Bridget Morgaz! Strike us down, then! We care no more for your pity than for your scorn. But, mother, look up, and forgive those who would hurt you — you, the most worthy of women!’

Before his attitude the threatening arms were lowered. Then once again the shouting began: ‘Get out of this, family of the traitor! Get out of this, Morgaz!’

And the crowd pressed closer round to the victims of this hateful outburst to drive them from the island.

Clary threw herself before them.

‘You wretches!’ she cried. ‘ Before you drive out his mother and himself you must listen.’

Taken aback by the girl’s energetic protest, the crowd recoiled.

And then Jean continued, in a voice in which scorn was mingled with indignation: ‘There’s no need to dwell on what my mother has suffered on account of the infamy of the name she bears. But what she has done to atone for that infamy you ought to know. Her two sons she has brought up to become accustomed to the idea of sacrificing and renouncing every earthly happiness. Their father had betrayed the Canadian fatherland; they were to live only to restore its independence. Renouncing a name which horrified them, while one went from county to county and parish to parish, rousing support for the national cause, the other threw himself into the very front rank in every insurrection. He stands before you. The elder of the two brothers was that patriot, the Abbé Joann, who took my place in the prison of Frontenac, where he fell shot by the executioners...’

‘Joann! Joann dead!’ exclaimed Bridget.

‘Yes, mother, dead as you made us swear we should die — dead for his country!’

Bridget knelt beside Clary de Vaudreuil, who threw her arms around her, and the two mingled their tears.

From the crowd, who were touched by this moving scene, there came only a low murmur, in which, however, there could still be detected the insurmountable horror inspired by the name of Morgaz.

Jean continued in more excited tones: ‘You see what we have done; not in the hope of rehabilitating a name which is for ever disgraced, a name which you learnt by sheer accident, and which we had hoped to bury in oblivion with our accursed family! But God has willed it otherwise. And now that you know everything, will you reply by cries of hatred or words of scorn!’

Yes! Such was the horror provoked by the traitor’s memory that one of the most frantic in the crowd dared to reply: ‘Never will we suffer the wife and son of Simon Morgaz to soil with their presence our patriotic camp!

‘No! No!’ shouted his hearers, transported with fury.

‘Wretches!’ exclaimed Clary.

Bridget had risen to her feet.

‘My son!’ she said, * forgive them; all we have is the right to forgive them...’

‘Forgive them!’ exclaimed Jean, his whole being roused against this injustice. ‘ Forgive those who hold us responsible for a crime which is not ours, and in spite of all we have done to atone for it! Forgive those who would visit treachery on the wife, and on the children, of whom one had shed his blood for them, while the other asks only to do the same! No! Never! We will never remain with the patriots, who would think themselves defiled by our touch! Come, my mother, come!’

‘My son,’ Bridget replied, ‘we have to suffer! It is our lot here below. It is our expiation!’

‘Jean!’ murmured Clary.

A few more shouts were heard; then there was silence. The ranks opened before Bridget and her son, who made their way towards the shore. Bridget had hardly the strength to move. The horrible scene had exhausted her. Clary, helped by Lionel, supported but could not console her, while Vincent Hodge, Clerc, and Farran stayed among the crowd to calm them. De Vaudreuil had followed his daughter. Like her, he felt his heart revolt against this flood of injustice; against the abominable prejudices of this mob, who carried, beyond all bounds, this doctrine of human responsibility. With him, as with her, the past of the father was effaced by that of the sons. And when Bridget and Jean had reached one of the boats that was going to take them across the stream, he said: ‘Your hand, Madame Bridget! Your hand, Jean! Think no more of these wretches who have insulted you; they will soon see that you are above their insults. Some day they will come and ask you to forgive them...’

‘Never!’ said Jean, as he entered the boat.

* Where are you going?’ asked Clary.

‘Where we shall be safe from these men’s insults!’

‘Madame Bridget,’ the girl spoke in a voice that was heard by all; ‘ I respect you as if you were my own mother! Only a few minutes ago, believing that your son was dead, I swore to be faithful to the memory of him to whom I would willingly have devoted my life. Jean, I love you! Shall I come with you?’

Jean, pale with emotion, almost fell at the feet of this noble girl.

‘Clary,’ he replied, ‘ you have given me the only happiness I have ever had in my wretched existence! But as you see that nothing can lessen the horror that our name inspires, this horror I could never ask you to share.’

‘No,’ exclaimed Bridget, ‘ Clary de Vaudreuil must never become the wife of a Morgaz!’

‘ Come away, mother,’ Jean implored her. ‘ Come.’ And he helped Bridget into the boat, which left the shore while the traitor’s name still resounded amid the clamours of the mob.

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On the morrow, in a lonely hut outside the village of Schlosser, to which he had taken his mother, Jean knelt by her side, to receive her last words.

No one knew that the hut was sheltering the wife and son of Simon Morgaz. But it would not shelter them long. Bridget was dying. In a few hours she would end this existence in which there had been heaped upon her all the suffering and misery by which a human creature could be overwhelmed.

When his mother was no more, when he should have closed her eyes, when he should have seen the earth close over her poor body, Jean had made up his mind to leave the country which had thus driven him out. He would disappear; no more would be heard of him, not even after death had come to deliver him also.

But the last words of his mother led him to give up his idea of abandoning the task which had been set him, of making reparation for his father’s crime.

‘My son, your brother is dead, and after my long sufferings I am dying at last. I do not complain. God is just! This was our expiation! To make it complete, Jean, you must forget those insults. You must return to your work! You have no right to desert it. Your duty, Jean, is to sacrifice yourself for your country until you fall . .

And Bridget died with these words on her lips.

Jean kissed the dead woman and closed the eyes which had shed so many tears.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAST DAYS

The position of the reformists on Navy Island had become extremely critical, and could not possibly last. It might be only a question of days, perhaps only of hours.

Although Colonel MacNab still hesitated to attempt the crossing of the Niagara River, he began to render the camp of the besieged untenable. A battery installed on the Chippewa side had just been brought into action, and the Bonnets-bleus were unable to reply to it, as they did not possess even a solitary gun. A few hundred muskets — the only weapons they could use at a distance to hinder a landing — were helpless against the royal artillery.

Though the Americans were interested in the success of the Franco-Canadian insurrection it was deplorable that the United States Government had kept the strictest neutrality since the outbreak of the struggle. They alone could have furnished the guns which the reformists lacked; but such an action would have provoked recriminations from England at a time when the slightest incident might have brought about a rupture — as indeed happened a few months later. The means of defence of Navy Island were very limited. Even ammunition and provisions were running out. although, as far as the resources of the country permitted, food was obtainable from Schlosser, Buffalo, and Niagara Falls. There was a

continual coming and going of boats large and small, across the right arm of the river, although Colonel MacNab, so as to command this means of access obliquely, had stationed his guns both up and down stream. The little steamer Caroline still ensured speedy communication between the camp and the Schlosser bank, and she was especially patronised by the sightseers who came to visit the defenders of Navy Island.

In such circumstances it demanded an extraordinary display of energy from the leaders of this handful of men not to abandon the struggle. Unfortunately the number of the combatants was diminishing every day, large groups, now completely discouraged, went over to Schlosser never to return.

Since the lamentable scene which had resulted in Jean’s departure, De Vaudreuil had not been out of his house. He could scarcely keep alive, and his daughter did not leave him for an instant. They both felt as though they had been soiled by the filth of the insults hurled at Bridget and her son. Nobody had suffered more than they from the taunts with which their comrades had overwhelmed this unhappy family, already crushed beneath a name they had renounced. Yet when they thought of the crime of Simon Morgaz, of the heroic victims that the traitor’s work had sent to the scaffold, they bowed their heads beneath the weight of a destiny against which no justice could prevail.

In the house where De Vaudreuil’s friends met every day, no allusion was ever made to what had passed. Vincent Hodge, with a discretion worthy of his character, maintained extreme reserve, not wishing to let it be suspected that he blamed Clary in any way for expressing her sentiments. And indeed had not the brave girl been right to protest against this odious prejudice, which would extend to the innocent the responsibility of the guilty, and would transmit a heritage of shame from father to son. as if it were some physical or moral resemblance?

And when he thought of this terrible state of affairs, Jean, now quite alone in the world, felt his whole being revolt. Joann dead for his country, Bridget dead from the insults she had received, was not that enough to compensate for the past? No! And when he exclaimed, ‘ It is unjust!’ he seemed to hear the voice of conscience replying: ‘ Perhaps it is only justice!’

Then Jean remembered Clary, braving the insults of the crowd that was pursuing him. Yes! She had had the courage to defend a Morgaz! She had almost offered to link her existence with his! But he had refused her: he would always refuse her! And yet how sincerely did he love her! And he would wander along the banks of the Niagara, like Natty Bumppo of the Mohicans, who had preferred to engulf himself in its cataracts, rather than to leave Mabel Denham.

During the whole of the 18th, Jean stayed beside his mother’s body, envying the rest which she now enjoyed. His only wish was to rejoin her. But he remembered her last words: he had no right to die except at the head of the Reformists. That was his duty — he would fulfil it.

When the night came, a sombre night, hardly lighted by the * Blink ‘ of the snow — a sort of whitish reflection, which fills the sky in the polar regions — Jean left the hut where Bridget lay, and a few yards away, beneath the trees heavy with rime, he began to dig a grave with his large Canadian knife — alone. Alone, on the outskirts of the forest; lost in the darkness where no one could see him — nor did he wish to be seen. No one should ever know where Bridget Morgaz lay buried. No cross would indicate her tomb. If Joann lay in some unknown corner, at the base of Fort Frontenac, his mother at least was buried on American soil, the soil of her native country. Jean would get killed in the coming attack, and his body would disappear, borne away with many others in the rapids of the Niagara.

And then there would remain nothing, not even a memory, of what had once been the Morgaz family.

When the trench was deep enough for the corpse to be safe from the talons of the wild beasts, Jean returned to the hut; he lifted his mother's body in his arms, he carried it under the trees, he pressed a last kiss on its forehead and laid it in the grave, wrapped the cloak about it, and covered it with the soil. And then he knelt and prayed, and his last words were: 'My poor mother, rest in peace.'

And when, in spite of everything, MacNab's forces tried to land on Navy Island, Jean would be in the first line of the defenders, where he might seek his death.

He had not long to wait.

In the early hours of the morning of 19th December, it was obvious that Colonel MacNab was preparing a direct attack. Large flat-boats were drawn up along the shore below Chippewa Camp. Having no artillery, the Bonnets-bleus were without means either of destroying these boats before they moved off or of stopping them when they tried to cross. Their one resource was to withstand the attacking forces as they landed, and to concentrate at the threatened points. But what resistance could a few hundred men offer to the assailants if they attacked several points at the same time? As soon as the royalists had gained a footing, the camp would be carried and the defenders, too numerous to escape in the boats to Schlosser, would be massacred before they could take refuge on American soil.

It was these possibilities which made De Vaudreuil and his friends anxious. They fully realised the danger of the position. To escape, it is true, all they had to do was to get to Schlosser, while it was still possible to cross the Niagara. But nobody was willing to retreat without defending the camp to the last.

Perhaps after all they imagined themselves strong enough to offer serious resistance, and over-estimated the difficulties of making a landing.

But one of them was under no illusions. That was Mr. Nick. But his position at the head of the Mahoganni Indians did not allow him to say anything.

As for Lionel, his patriotism allowed of no hesitation whatever. The young clerk no longer concerned himself about the revelations which had followed the unexpected reappearance of his hero. What! Jean-Sans-Nom, the son of Simon Morgaz! The Abbé Joann the son of a traitor!

‘No matter,’ he said to himself. ‘ Are they any the less good patriots for all that? And was not Mademoiselle Clary right to stand up for Jean and his mother? Ah! the brave girl! That was splendid! That was noble! That was worthy of a Vaudreuil!’

Thus reasoned Lionel, who never spared his enthusiasm, and could not believe that Jean had left Navy Island never to return. Yes! Jean-Sans-Nom would reappear, were it only to die in defending the national cause!

And then the young clerk was led to this reflection, certainly judicious enough: ‘Why shouldn’t the children of Simon Morgaz be the most loyal of men when the last descendant of a warlike race has none of the qualities of his ancestors, when the race of the Sagamores ends in a lawyer?’

As Lionel thought of Jean-Sans-Nom, so likewise did Thomas Harcher and his sons. Had they not seen him at work for many a year? In risking his life a hundred times, had he not atoned for the crime of Simon Morgaz? Truly, if they had been present at the hateful scene they would have been unable to restrain themselves, they would have thrown themselves upon the crowd, and made them pay for so abominable an outrage. And if they knew where Jean had gone they would go and bring him back to the Bonnets-bleus and put him at their head.

And it must be added, for the honour of humanity, that since Jean and Bridget had been driven off, a change had come over the mood of the crowd. The feelings of Lionel and the Harchers were now shared by most of the patriots.

About eleven in the morning the preliminaries of the attack began. The first shots from the batteries of Chippewa came ploughing through the camp, and the shells brought destruction and fire upon the island. No shelter was possible from the projectiles on what was almost a flat plain dotted with clumps of trees, divided by narrow hedges, and having only a few earthworks along the riverside.

Colonel MacNab was striving to breach the banks before attempting to cross, but this operation was not without its difficulties in spite of the restricted number of the defenders.

These were mustered around De Vaudreuil's house, less exposed to the artillery because of its position on the right bank opposite Schlosser.

As soon as the firing began De Vaudreuil ordered all non-combatants to cross to the American territory. The wives and the children, whose presence had so far been tolerated, now had to embark, after bidding farewell to their husbands, their fathers, and their brothers. This was not without danger, for the guns above and below Chippewa menaced them with their cross-fire. A few shots even reached the United States frontier, provoking justifiable protests from the Federal Government.

De Vaudreuil urged his daughter to take refuge in Schlosser, and there to await the outcome of the attack. Clary refused to leave him.

‘Father,’ she said, ‘ I ought to stay with you, and I shall stay with you. It is my duty.’

‘And if I fall into the hands of the royalists?’

‘Well; they won’t refuse to let me share your prison.’

‘And if I should be killed, Clary?’

The girl made no reply; but De Vaudreuil could not overcome her opposition. And so she was by his side when he went to take his place among the leaders who were assembled in front of his house.

The sound of the guns was getting louder. The position of the camp was becoming untenable. But the attempt at landing had not yet been made. Otherwise the Bonnets- bleus posted behind the entrenchments would have given the alarm.

In front of the house were Vincent Hodge, Clerc and Farran, Thomas, Pierre, Michel, and Jacques Harcher.

And there too were Mr. Nick and Lionel and the Mahoganni warriors, as coldly impassive as usual.

De Vaudreuil addressed them: ‘Comrades,’ he began, ‘ we have to defend the last rampart of our independence. If MacNab gains this fight the insurrection is at an end and who knows when new leaders and new men will again begin the struggle? If we repulse the assailants, if we manage even to hold our own, help will come to us from other parts of Canada. Our partisans will again take hope, and we shall convert this island into an impregnable fortress, where the national cause will always find a stronghold. Are you determined to defend it?'

'To the death!' replied Vincent Hodge.

'To the death!' repeated his companions.

At this moment several bullets struck the ground a few yards away, and ricochetted into the distance, throwing up a cloud of snow.

Not one of the Bonnets-bleus had moved. They were awaiting their chief's orders.

'It is time to get to the river-bank,' M. de Vaudreuil continued. ' The Chippewa artillery will soon stop firing, for the royalists are going to force a landing. Scatter along the bank, take cover behind the rocks, and wait until the boats are within range — MacNab's men must not land.'

'They shall not land,' Clerc assured him, ' and if they do we'll hurl them back into the Niagara.'

'To your posts, my friends!' exclaimed Vincent Hodge.

'I shall go with you,' De Vaudreuil told them, ' although my strength is failing me...'

'Stay here, Vaudreuil,' replied Farran; ' we shall keep in touch with you...'

‘No, my friends,’ said De Vaudreuil, ‘ I shall be where I ought to be! Forward!’

‘Yes! Forward! The boats have already begun to leave the Canadian shore!’

The words were spoken in a ringing voice. The men turned towards the speaker.

It was Jean. During the previous night a boat had landed him on the island. No one had recognised him. Hidden on the shore opposite Chippewa, he had watched MacNab’s preparations, heedless of the shot that battered the ground nearby. Then seeing that the assailants were getting ready to force a landing, he had come — openly — to take his place among his former comrades.

‘I knew he would!’ exclaimed Lionel.

Clary de Vaudreuil stepped towards the young patriot just as Thomas Harcher and his sons ranged themselves around him. De Vaudreuil held out his hand but Jean did not take it.

‘Defenders of Navy Island,’ he addressed them, ‘ my mother is dead, dead under the insults to which you subjected her. Now I alone am left of this family devoted to horror and scorn. Submit to the shame of seeing a / Morgaz fight on your side, and die for the Franco- Canadian cause.’

These words evoked thunders of applause. Every hand was raised towards Jean. And again he refused to touch them.

‘Adieu, Clary de Vaudreuil!’ he said.

‘Adieu, Jean!’ the girl replied.

Then, ahead of De Vaudreuil and his companions, and all who like him were marching to their death, he led the way to the island’s left bank.

CHAPTER XIII

THE NIGHT OF THE 28th OF DECEMBER

Three o’clock was striking from the little church at Schlosser. A grey, glacial mist filled the humid valley of the Niagara. The air was very cold. The sky was covered with motionless clouds, which the least rise in the temperature would condense into snow, under the influence of the easterly wind.

The roar of the Chippewa guns was rending the air. In the intervals between the salvoes there could be distinctly heard the distant roaring of the cataract.

A quarter of an hour after they had left De Vaudreuil’s house, the Reformists, advancing among the clumps of trees and defiling along the hedges and the walls, had reached the left bank of the river.

Many had already fallen. Some, hit by shell fragments, had had to return to the rear; others were lying stretched on the snow never to rise again. Altogether twenty had been lost from the two hundred who had remained.

The guns of Chippewa had done great damage. The earthworks that were to serve as cover for the Bonnets- bleus had been almost entirely destroyed. The defenders had therefore to take up their position at the foot of the bank among the rocks around which swirled the impetuous current. It was there that Jean and his men would strive to prevent the landing until their supply of ammunition gave out.

But their movements had been seen from Chippewa. Colonel MacNab, already advised by the signals Rip had sent, and now by word of mouth —

for the spy was then in his camp — redoubled the fire, concentrating it on the fortified positions. Around Jean thirty of his comrades were struck by the fragments of rock wrenched away by the projectiles.

In spite of the shot which fell at his feet or rent the air above his head, Jean was moving about the beach observing the manoeuvres of the foe. A number of large flat-boats were being rowed out from the Canadian shore, and as a last effort to clear the ground three or four volleys were fired over them, falling upon the island to ricochet into the distance.

Jean did not move.

‘Patriots!’ he shouted, ‘ get ready!’

They waited till the boats came within range.

The attackers, lying down in the boats so as to offer the smallest possible targets, numbered from four to five hundred, half of them volunteers and half regular soldiers.

A few minutes later, and the boats had reached midstream, and were near enough to the island for the artillery to have to cease fire.

The first shots were at once fired from the shelter of the rocks. The men in the boats replied, and as they were now badly exposed to the fire from the island they plied their oars more vigorously than ever.

A few minutes were enough to bring them to the beach, and both sides prepared for a hand-to-hand conflict.

Jean took command amid a hail of bullets, which whistled around him like machine-gun fire.

‘Get into cover! ‘ Vincent Hodge told him.

‘Me? ‘ Jean replied.

Then, in a voice of thunder he shouted to the men who were about to leap from the boats: ‘I am Jean-Sans-Nom!’

The name was received with bewilderment, for the royalists believed that Jean-Sans-Nom had been shot at Fort Frontenac.

And then, hurling himself at those in the first boat, he shouted: ‘Forward, Bonnets-bleus! On to the red-coats!’

The struggle was very fierce. The first of the men who strove to land were repulsed, some falling into the water and being swept towards the cataract. The reformists, leaving the shelter of the rocks, spread along the bank, and fought with such fury that the advantage at first lay with them. There was even a moment when the boats had to recoil. But more of the boats were coming to reinforce them. Hundreds of men landed on the island, and numbers gained the advantage over valour.

Before so numerous an enemy, the defenders had to retire from the bank. Though they did not yield until they had inflicted severe losses on the assailants, they too had suffered cruelly.

Among them Thomas Harcher, Pierre and Michel had been shot, and were despatched by the volunteers, who gave no quarter. William Clerc and Andrew Farran had been wounded and were taken prisoners, and had it not been for the intervention of an officer, they would have shared the fate of the farmer and his sons. But Colonel MacNab had given orders that the leaders should be spared wherever possible, so that the Government might try them by court martial at Quebec or Montreal. It was for this reason alone that the two had escaped the general slaughter.

The Bonnets-bleus fought desperately. The Mahogannis, after defending themselves with that cool courage and contempt of death which distinguishes the Indian race, had to take cover among the trees, and were pursued from wall to wall, attacked from their flanks, and charged from the rear. It was a miracle that Lionel was not killed a score of times, and that Mr. Nick likewise escaped the carnage. How many of the Hurons would never again see their wigwams at Walhatta!

When Mr. Nick reached De Vaudreuil’s house, he tried to persuade Clary to enter one of the boats and escape to Schlosser.

‘So long as my father is on the island,’ she declared, ‘ I shall never forsake him.’

Yes! Her father, and perhaps also Jean, although she knew he had come back only to die.

At five, De Vaudreuil saw that resistance was no longer possible against the hundreds of assailants who had now mastered much of the island. If the survivors were to save their lives, they could do so only by escaping to the right bank of the river.

But he himself had scarcely strength enough to stand upright or to regain the house where his daughter was waiting for him.

Vincent Hodge tried to help him away, but at that very moment De Vaudreuil fell shot through the chest. He died murmuring: ‘My daughter! Hodge! My daughter!’

Jean-Sans-Nom had heard him.

‘Save Clary!’ he shouted to Vincent Hodge.

Then a dozen volunteers threw themselves upon him. They had recognised him. To capture the celebrated Jean-Sans-Nom, to drag him alive to the camp at Chippewa, that indeed would be a stroke of luck!

With a last effort Jean struck down two of the volunteers who were trying to seize him, and disappeared in the midst of a volley that left him unharmed.

Vincent Hodge, dangerously wounded, was taken prisoner.

Where had Jean gone? Did he then think of surviving now that the finest of his comrades had been killed or were in the hands of the royalists?

No! Had not De Vaudreuil’s last word been his daughter’s name?

Very well! As Vincent Hodge could not save her, he, Jean would save her, he would take her across to the American shore; then he would return to his comrades, who would still be fighting on.

Clary de Vaudreuil, standing alone before the house, heard the sounds of the battle, the shouts of fury, the cries of pain, the crackle of the musketry, and watched all this tumult approach her amid the flashing of the firearms. Already fifty or more of the Reformists, most of them wounded, had taken to the boats, and were on the way to Schlosser. Only the little steamboat Caroline remained, crowded with fugitives, to make the journey across the river.

Suddenly Jean appeared, covered with blood — the blood of the royalists — safe and sound, after vainly seeking that death which twenty times he had given to others.

Clary rushed towards him.

‘My father?’ she asked.

‘Dead!’

Jean answered unhesitatingly, for it was essential that Clary should be willing to leave the island.

She fainted, and he caught her in his arms just as the volunteers came running round the house to cut off his retreat. Carrying his burden, he ran to the Caroline and laid the girl on her deck; then he rose: ‘Adieu, Clary!’ he said.

As he stepped on the steamer’s rail to jump ashore, there came the crackle of musketry, and Jean, shot in two places, fell backwards, just as the Caroline put off under full steam.

But, by the light of the gun-flashes, he had been recognised by the volunteers who had pursued him across the island, and there arose a shout of: ‘Jean-Sans-Nom is dead!’

At the sound Clary recovered consciousness.

‘Dead!’ she murmured, as she dragged herself towards him.

A few minutes later the Caroline was moored alongside the quay at Schlosser. There the fugitives might deem themselves to be in safety under the protection of the American authorities.

Some landed at once, but as the only inn in the village was full and the hotels at Niagara Falls were three miles away, many of them preferred to stay on board.

It was then eight in the evening.

Jean lay on the deck; he was still breathing. Kneeling by his side, Clary raised his head and spoke to him. He did not reply. Perhaps he could not hear her.

She looked around. Where could she seek for help in this confusion, in a village crowded with fugitives, encumbered with so many wounded but without surgeons or medical supplies?

Then Clary saw all her past life return to her memory. Her father dead for the cause! The man she loved dying in her arms after fighting to the very last! Now she was alone in the world, friendless, in despair...

She covered Jean with a boat-cloth to shelter him from the cold, and tried to ascertain whether his heart was still beating, whether a sigh did not escape from his lips.

On the other side of the river the firing was nearly over, but the flashes could still be seen among the trees on Navy Island.

At last all was silent, and the whole Niagara valley seemed asleep.

The girl unconsciously murmured her father’s name, and that of Jean, saying to herself — a supreme anguish! — that the young patriot had died with the thought that the curses of mankind would pursue him even beyond the tomb! And she prayed for both of them.

Suddenly, Jean moved, his heart began to beat a little more strongly. Clary spoke to him. He did not answer.

Two hours went by. Now all was quiet aboard the Caroline. No sound either in the cabins or on the deck. Watching alone, Clary de Vaudreuil knelt, like a sister of charity, at the bedside of the dying.

The night was very dark. The clouds began to swirl down on the river — great wreaths of mist swathed the skeletons of the trees, whose branches, heavy with hoarfrost, were drooping over the river.

Nobody noticed that four boats were coming round the upstream end of the island and that they were noiselessly making for Schlosser bank.

They were manned by fifty volunteers, commanded by Lieutenant Drew of the militia. By the orders of Colonel MacNab, this officer was about to perform an act of revolting cruelty, in defiance of the law of nations. Among his men was a certain MacLeod, whose cruelties were to bring about serious international complications a few months later.

The four boats came silently across the river and ran alongside the Caroline. The men at once climbed on deck, went down into the cabin, and began a frightful slaughter. Wounded or asleep, their victims were unable to defend themselves. Their cries were heart-rending, but it was all in vain. Nothing could stop the scoundrels, among whom MacLeod, pistol in one hand and axe in the other, was howling like a cannibal Jean had not regained consciousness; so Clary, in her terror, dragged the sail-cloth over her so that it covered them both.

At last some of the victims managed to escape, either by jumping on to the quay, or by throwing themselves overboard to reach some point on the shore, where MacLeod and his cut-throats could not follow them; and the alarm had been given in the village, where the people were rushing out of their homes to the rescue.

The massacre had not lasted long, and many of the victims would have escaped, had not MacLeod been leading the assassins. He had brought a supply of inflammable materials with him, and he now piled them up on the deck and set them on fire. In a few minutes hull and rigging were ablaze. Meanwhile he had cut through the hawsers, and the steamer, thrust forcibly from the quay, had drifted out into the current.

Her position was terrible.

Three miles down stream the Niagara was engulfed in the abyss of its cataract.

It was then that five or six of the poor wretches, mad with fear, jumped into the river, but only a few of them reached the shore after struggling against the ice that floated on the water. Nor was it ever known how many victims had been suffocated or had drowned in trying to escape the flames.

The Caroline drifted away down between the river banks like a blazing fireship.

The fire spread aft and Clary, desperate with terror, stood up and shouted for help.

Jean at last heard her. He opened his eyes, he raised himself a little, he looked around.

In the light of the flames the banks of the river swept rapidly by.

Jean realised that the girl was close beside him.

‘Clary!’ he murmured.

If he had had the strength, he would have taken her in his arms; with her he would have thrown himself into the stream; he would have tried to save her. But, unable to support himself, he collapsed on the deck. The roar of the cataract could be heard less than half a mile away. It was death for her and for him, as for the other victims which the Caroline was carrying down the Niagara.

‘Jean,’ Clary told him, ‘ we are going to die — to die together! Jean, I love you. I should have been proud to bear your name! God would not have it so.’

Jean had just strength enough to clasp her hand. Then his lips repeated the last words his mother had spoken: ‘Expiation! Expiation!’

The boat sped along with frightful rapidity as she swept round Goat Island, which separates the American from the Canadian fall. And there, in the middle of the horseshoe, where the current has cleft its gorge, the Caroline leaned over the abyss and disappeared into the gulf of the cataract.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LAST PHASES OF THE INSURRECTION

This act perpetrated by the English, in violation of international law and the rights of humanity, had endless repercussions in the Old and the New Worlds alike. An enquiry was ordered by the authorities at Niagara Falls. MacLeod had been recognised by several of those who had escaped the massacre and the flames. Moreover, the wretch was not slow in boasting quite openly of having ‘ got the better of those dam’ Yankees.’

The question now arose of demanding an indemnity from England when in November 1840 MacLeod was arrested in New York.

The British representative demanded his release; the Federal Government refused to give him up. So, by Lords and Commons alike, the Minister was instructed to get him set free, as he had acted under orders from the Throne. Congress replied to this claim by publishing a claim setting out the rights of New York State. The report might have been considered as a real casus belli, and the United Kingdom took measures accordingly.

On their side, after having ordered the assassin to be brought to trial on a charge of murder, the Federal Government voted subsidies. And no doubt war would have been declared had not McLeod, under the pretext of an alibi which was barely justified but which allowed English and Americans alike to hush up the affair, put an end to the action.

It was thus that the victims of the horrible attack on the Caroline were to be avenged!

After the defeat of the insurgents at Navy Island, Lord Gosford received information that the Reformists would no longer resist the constituted authorities. Their principal leaders had been dispersed or imprisoned, and Jean-Sans-Nom was no more.

In 1838, however, a few risings took place at several points in the Canadian provinces. The first attempt occurred during March under Robert Nelson, the brother of him who had taken command at St. Denis, and it failed at the very outset. At Napierville, in a second attempt, two thousand insurgents were attacked by Sir John Colborne at the head of six hundred regulars, with five hundred Indians and four hundred volunteers, and put to flight in one day at Odeltown. In November there was a third attempt at insurrection, the reformists rising in two groups each of one hundred men. One attacked a seignorial manor, the other seized upon a steamboat at Beauharnais quay. At Chateauguay the insurgents forced the Indians to surrender their arms, and began a campaign which ended in disaster. Then came the last of these movements, which marked the end of the insurrectional period of 1837 and 1838.

Then came the reprisals, and the government acted with an energy so pitiless that it amounted to cruelty. On 4th November, Sir John Colborne, having been invested with superior authority, proclaimed martial law, and suspended the Habeas Corpus Act throughout the province. The Court Martial was set up, and over a dozen men, whose names were never to be forgotten in Franco Canadian martyrology, were sent to the scaffold. To their names must be added those which have appeared in this record, the lawyer Sebastien Gramont and Vincent Hodge, who died as his father had died, with the same courage and for the same cause.

William Clerc had succumbed to his wounds in American territory, and Andrew Farran, who also had fled to the United States, was the sole survivor of this group of comrades.

The list of exiles included fifty-eight of the foremost patriots, and many years were to elapse before they were allowed to return to their country.

The Deputy Papineau, the statesman whose personality had dominated all this period of national demands, had managed to escape. A long life enabled him to see Canada in possession, if not of her complete independence, at least of her autonomy, and he died in an honoured old age.

There remains to be told what became of Catherine Harcher. Of her five sons who had accompanied their father to St. Charles and Navy Island, only two returned to Chipogan Farm, after several years of exile, and they did not leave it again.

As to the Mahogannis, who had taken part in the climax of the insurrection, the Government wanted to forget them just as it wanted to forget that excellent man who, in spite of himself, had been forced to meddle in matters for which he cared but little. So Mr. Nick returned to Montreal and there, disgusted with the honours he had never sought, he resumed his former life. And if Lionel returned to his desk in the office on Bon Secours marketplace in the employment of a Sagamore, it was with a heart which would always remember those for whom he would gladly have sacrificed his life. Never would he forget the family of the Vaudreuils, nor that of Jean-Sans- Nom, rehabilitated by death, and now one of the legendary heroes of Canada.

The insurrection had failed, but it had sowed its seed in good ground. In course of time the seed bore fruit. It was not in vain that patriots had shed their blood in seeking to recover their rights. The governors sent to the colony gradually gave up many of the claims of the Crown. And then the Constitution of 1867 established the Canadian Confederation on a sound basis. It was at this time that the question of removing the capital to Quebec was finally settled in favour of Ottawa.

Today all control by the mother-country has virtually ceased.

Canada is now, practically speaking, a free power under the name of the Dominion of Canada, and all its inhabitants, French-Canadian and Anglo-Saxon alike, now enjoy equal rights. And of a population of five millions, about a quarter still belong to the French race.

Every year an affecting ceremony unites the patriots of Montreal at the foot of a column erected to the memory of the political victims of 1837 and 1838. There, on the day of its inauguration, an address was given by M. Euclide Roy, President of the Institute, and his closing words well sum up the moral of this narrative: ‘ To glorify self-sacrifice, is to make heroes.’

CÉSAR CASCABEL

Translated by A. Estoclet

First published in 1890, this novel tells the story of Cascabel and his family, who have made enough money to return home to France from California. Unfortunately their trip east is cut short, when all their money is stolen…

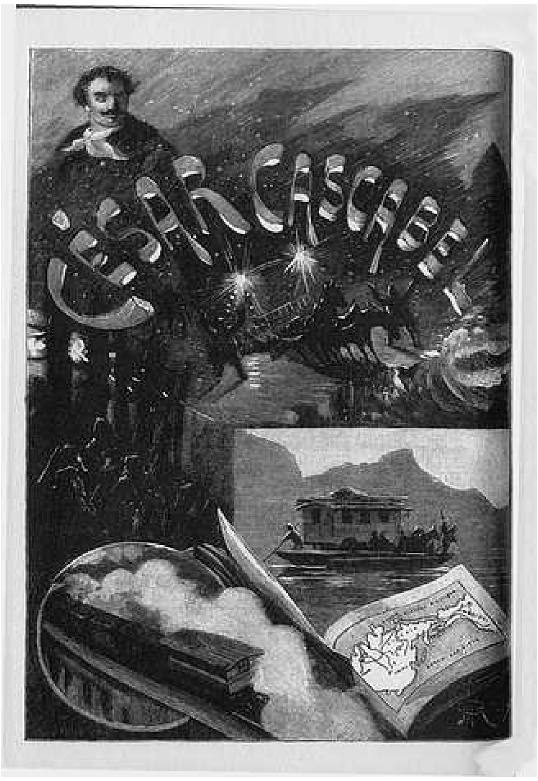
CÉSAR CASCABEL

An original illustration

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PART I

CHAPTER I.

A FORTUNE REALIZED.

“HAS nobody got any more coppers to give me? Come, children, search your pockets!”

“Here you are, father!” replied the little girl.

And she drew out of her pocket a square-cut piece of greenish paper, all crumpled and greasy.

This paper bore the almost illegible inscription “*United States Fractional Currency*,” encircling the respectable-looking head of a gentleman in a frock-coat, and likewise the figure 10 repeated six times, — which represented ten cents, say about ten French sous.

“How did you come by that?” inquired the mother.

“It’s the remnant of the takings at the last performance,” answered Napoleona.

“Gave me everything, Sander?”

“Yes, father.”

“Nothing left, John?”

“Nothing.”

“Why, how much more do you want, Cæsar?” asked Cornelia of her husband.

“Two cents is all we want to make up a round sum,” replied Cascabel.

“Here they are, boss,” said Clovy, jerking up a small copper coin that he had just worked out from the depths of his waistcoat pocket.

“Well done, Clovy!” exclaimed the little girl.

“That’s right! now we’re all square,” cried Mr. Cascabel.

And they were indeed “all square,” to use the words of the honest showman. The total in hands amounted to nearly two thousand dollars, say ten thousand francs. Ten thousand francs! Is not such a sum a fortune, when it has been earned out of the public through one’s own talents only?

Cornelia put her arms around her husband’s neck; the children embraced him in their turn.

“Now,” said Mr. Cascabel, “the question is to buy a chest, a beautiful chest with secret contrivances, to lock up our fortune in it.”

“Can’t we really do without it?” suggested Mrs. Cascabel, somewhat alarmed at this expenditure.

“Cornelia, we cannot!”

“Perhaps a little box might do us? — ”

“That’s woman all over!” sneered Mr. Cascabel. “A little box is meant for jewels! A chest, or at least a safe, that’s the thing for money! And as we have a long way to go with our ten thousand francs — ”

“Well then, go and buy your safe, but take care you get a good bargain,” interrupted Cornelia.

The “boss of the show” opened the door of that “superb and consequential” wagon, his itinerant dwelling-house; he went down the iron step fastened to the shaft, and made for the streets that converge toward the center of Sacramento.

February is a cold month in California, although this State lies in the same latitude as Spain. Still, wrapped up in his warm overcoat lined with imitation sable, and with his fur cap drawn down to his ears, Mr. Cascabel little cared about the weather, and tripped it lightly. A safe! being the owner of a safe had been his life-long dream; that dream was on the point of being realized at last!

Nineteen years before, the land now occupied by the town of Sacramento was but a vast barren plain. In the middle stood a small fort, a kind of block-house erected by the early settlers, the first traders, with a view to protect their encampments against the attacks of the Far West Indians. But since that time, after the Americans had taken California from the Mexicans, who were incapable of defending it, the aspect of the country had undergone a singular transformation. The small fort had made way for a town, — one of the most important in the United States, although fire and flood had, more than once, destroyed the rising city.

Now, in this year 1867, Mr. Cascabel had no longer to dread the raids of Indian tribes, or even the attacks of that lawless mob of cosmopolitan banditti who invaded the province in 1849 on the discovery of the gold mines which lay a little farther to the northeast, on the Grass Valley plateau, and of the famous Allison ranch mine, the quartz of which yielded twenty cents’ worth of the precious metal for every two pound weight.

Yes, those days of unheard-of strokes of fortune, of unspeakable reverses, of nameless sorrows, were over. No more gold-seekers, not even in that portion of British Columbia, the Cariboo, to which thousands of miners flocked, about 1863. No longer was Mr. Cascabel exposed, on his travels, to being robbed of that little fortune which he had earned, well might it be said, in the sweat of his body, and that he carried in the pocket of his overcoat. In truth, the purchase of a safe was not so indispensable to the security of his fortune as he claimed it to be; if he was so desirous to get one, it was with an eye to a long journey through certain Far West territories that were less safe than California, — his journey homeward toward Europe.

Thus easy in his mind, Mr. Cascabel wended his way through the wide, clean streets of the town. Here and there were splendid squares, overhung with beautiful, though still leafless, trees, hotels and private dwellings built with much elegance and comfort, public edifices in the Anglo-Saxon style of architecture, a number of monumental churches, all giving an air of grandeur to this, the capital town of California. On all sides bustled busy looking men, merchants, ship-owners, manufacturers, some awaiting the arrival of vessels that sailed up and down the river whose waters flow to the Pacific, others besieging Folsom depot, from which numerous trains steamed away to the interior of the Confederacy.

It was toward High Street that Mr. Cascabel directed his steps, whistling a French march as he went along. In this street he had already noticed the store of a rival of Fichet & Huret, the celebrated Parisian safe-makers. There did William J. Morlan sell “good and cheap,” — at least, relatively so, — considering the excessive price that is charged for everything in the United States of America.

William J. Morlan was in his store when Mr. Cascabel came in.

“Mr. Morlan,” said the latter, “your humble servant. I’d like to buy a safe.”

William J. Morlan knew Cæser Cascabel: was there a man in Sacramento who did not? Had he not been, for three weeks past, the delight of the population? So, the worthy manufacturer made answer:

“A safe, Mr. Cascabel? — Pray accept all my congratulations — ”

“What for?”

“Because buying a safe is a sure sign that a man has a few sackfuls of dollars to make safe in it.”

“Right you are, Mr. Morlan.”

“Well, take this one;” and the merchant’s finger pointed to a huge safe, worthy of a site in the offices of Rothschild Brothers or other such bankers, people who have enough and to spare.

“Come — not so fast!” said Mr. Cascabel. “I could take lodging’s in there for myself and family! — A real gem, to be sure; but for the time being, I’ve got something else to lodge in it! — Say, Mr. Morlan, how much money could be stored inside that monster?”

“Several millions in gold.”

“Several millions? — Well then — I’ll call again — some other day, when I have them! No, sir, what I want is a really strong little chest that I can carry under my arm and hide away down in my wagon when I am on the road.”

“I have just the thing, Mr. Cascabel.”

And the manufacturer exhibited a small coffer supplied with a safety lock. It was not over twenty pounds in weight, and had compartments inside, after the manner of the cash or deed boxes used in banking-houses.

“This, moreover, is fireproof,” added he, “and I warrant it as such on the receipt I give you.”

“Very good! — can’t be better!” answered Mr. Cascabel. “That will do me, so long as you guarantee the lock is all right.”

“It is a combination lock,” interrupted William J. Morlan. “Four letters — a word of four letters, to be made out of four alphabets, which gives you well-nigh four hundred thousand combinations. During the time it would take a thief to guess them, you might hang him a million times at your ease!”

“A million times, Mr. Morlan? That’s wonderful indeed! And what about the price? You’ll understand, a safe is too dear when it costs more than a man has to put in it!”

“Quite so, Mr. Cascabel. And all I’ll ask you for this one is six and a half.”

“Six and a half dollars?” rejoined Cascabel. “I don’t care for that ‘six and a half.’ Come, Mr. Morlan, we must knock the corners off that sum! Is it a bargain at five dollars straight?”

“I don’t mind, because it is you, Mr. Cascabel.”

The purchase was made, the money was paid down, and W. J. Morlan offered to the showman to have his safe brought home for him, so as not to trouble him with such a burden.

“Come, come, Mr. Morlan! A man like your humble servant who juggles with forty-pounders!”

“Say — what is the exact weight of your forty-pounders, eh?” inquired Mr. Morlan with a laugh.

“Just fifteen pounds, but — mum’s the word!”

Thereupon William J. Morlan and his customer parted, delighted with each other.

Half an hour later, the happy possessor of the safe reached Circus Place where his wagon stood, and laid down, not without a feeling of complacency, “the safe of the Cascabel firm.”

Ah! how admired was that safe in its little world! What joy and pride all felt at having it! And how the hinges were worked with the opening and the shutting of it! Young Sander would have dearly liked to dislocate himself into it — just for fun. But that was not to be thought of; it was too small for young Sander!

As to Clovy, never had he seen anything so beautiful, even in dreamland.

“I guess, that lock’s no easy job to open,” exclaimed he, “unless it’s mighty easy if it doesn’t shut right!”

“Never a truer word did you speak,” answered Mr. Cascabel.

Then, in that authoritative tone of voice that brooks no arguing, and with one of those significant gestures which forbid of any delaying:

“Now, children, off you go, the shortest cut,” said he, “and fetch us a breakfast — Ah! Here is a dollar you can spend as you like — It’s I will stand the treat to-day!”

Good soul! As though it were not he who “stood the treat” every day! But he was fond of this kind of joking, which he indulged in with a good genial chuckle.

In a trice, John, Sander, and Napoleona were off, accompanied by Clovy, who carried on his arm a large straw basket for the provisions.

“And now we are alone, Cornelia, let us have a few words,” said the boss.

“What about, Cæsar?”

“What about? Why, about the word we are going to choose for the lock of our safe. It is not that I don’t trust the children — Good Lord! They are angels! — or that poor fellow Clovy, who is honesty itself! None the less, that must be kept a secret.”

“Take what word you like,” answered the wife; “I’ll agree to anything you say.”

“You have no choice?”

“I haven’t.”

“Well, I should like it to be a proper name.”

“Yes! — I got it — your own name, Cæsar.”

“That can’t be! Mine is too long! It must be a word of four letters only.”

“Well then, take one letter off! Surely you can spell Cæser without an *r*! We are free to do as we like, I dare say!”

“Bravo, Cornelia! That’s an idea! — One of those ideas you often hit on, wifie! But if we decide on cutting one letter out of a name, I’d rather cut out four, and let it be out of yours!”

“Out of my name?”

“Yes! And we’d keep the end of it — e l i a. Indeed, I rather think it would be more select that way; so, it will be just the thing!”

“Ah! Cæsar!”

“It will please you, wont it, to have your name on the lock of our safe?”

“It will, since it is in your heart already!” answered Cornelia, with loving emphasis.

Then, her face beaming with pleasure, she gave a hearty kiss to her good-natured husband.

And that is how, in consequence of this arrangement, any one, unacquainted with the name Elia, would be baffled in his attempts to open the safe of the Cascabel family.

Half an hour after, the children were back with the provisions, ham and salt beef, cut in appetizing slices, not forgetting a few of those wonderful outgrowths of Californian vegetation, heads of cabbage grown on tree-like stalks, potatoes as large as melons, carrots half a yard long and “equaled only,” Mr. Cascabel was fond of saying, “by those leeks that you make people swallow, without having the trouble of growing them?” As to drink, the only puzzle was which to choose among the varieties that nature and art offer to American thirsty lips. On this occasion, not to mention a jugful of beer with a head on it, each one was to have his share of a good bottle of sherry, at dessert.

In the twinkling of an eye, Cornelia, aided by Clovy, her usual help, had prepared breakfast. The table was laid in the second compartment of the van, styled the family parlor, where the temperature was maintained at the right degree by the cooking-stove set up in the next room. If, on that day, — as on every day indeed, — father, mother, and children ate with remarkably keen appetite, the fact was but too easily accounted for by the circumstances.

Breakfast over, Mr. Cascabel, assuming the solemn tone that he gave to his utterances when he spoke to the public, expressed himself as follows:

“To-morrow, children, we shall have bidden farewell to this noble town of Sacramento, and to its noble citizens, with all of whom we have every reason to be satisfied, whatever be their complexion, red, black or white. But, Sacramento is in California, and California is in America, and America is not in Europe. Now, home is home, and Europe is France; and it is not a day too soon, that France should see us once more ‘within its walls,’ after a prolonged absence of many a year. Have we made a fortune? Properly speaking, we have not. Still, we have in hands a certain quantity of dollars that will look uncommonly well in our safe, when we have changed them into French gold or silver. A portion of this sum will enable us to cross the Atlantic Ocean on one of those swift vessels that fly the three-colored flag once borne by Napoleon from capital to capital. — Your health, Cornelia!”

Mrs. Cascabel acknowledged with a bow this token of good feeling which her husband often gave her, as though he meant to thank her for having presented him with Alcides and Hercules in the persons of his children.

Then, the speaker proceeded:

“I likewise drink ‘safe home’ to us all! May favorable winds swell our sails!”

He paused to pour to each one a last glass of his excellent sherry.

“But then, — Clovy may say to me, perhaps, — once our passage-money paid, there will be nothing left in the safe?”

“No such thing, boss, — unless the passage-money added on to the railway fares — ”

“Railways, railroads, as the Yankees say!” cried Mr. Cascabel. “Why, you simpleton, you thoughtless fellow, we shan’t use them! I quite intend saving the traveling expenses from Sacramento to New York by covering the distance on our own wheels! A few hundred leagues! I guess it would take more than that to frighten the Cascabel family, accustomed as it is to disport itself from one world’s end to the other!”

“Of course!” John chimed in.

“And how glad we shall be to see France again!” exclaimed Mrs. Cascabel.

“Our old France that you don’t know, my children,” continued Mr. Cascabel, “since you were born in America, our beautiful France that you shall know at last. Ah, Cornelia, what pleasure it will be for you, a child of Provence, and for me, a son of Normandy, after twenty years’ absence!”

“It will, Cæser, it will!”

“Do you know, Cornelia? If I were to be offered an engagement now, even at Barnum’s theater, I should say no! Putting off our journey home, never! I’d rather go on all fours! — It’s homesick we are, and what’s needed for that ailment is a trip home! — I know of no other cure!”

Cæsar Cascabel spoke truly. His wife and he no longer cherished but one thought: returning to France; and what bliss it was to be able to do so, now that there was no lack of money!

“So then, we start to-morrow!” said Mr. Cascabel.

“And it may be our last trip!” remarked Cornelia.

“Cornelia,” her husband said with dignity, “the only last trip I know of is the one for which God issues no return ticket!”

“Just so, Cæsar, but before that one, shan’t we have a rest, when we have made our fortune?”

“A rest, Cornelia? Never! I don’t want any of your fortune, if fortune means doing nothing! Do you think you have a right to lay those talents idly by, that nature has so freely lavished on you? Do you imagine I could live with folded arms and run the risk of letting my joints grow stiff? Do you see John giving up his work as an equilibrist, Napoleona ceasing to dance on the tight rope with or without a pole, Sander standing no more on top of the human pyramid, and Clovy himself no longer receiving his half-dozen dozen slaps on his cheeks per minute, to the great gratification of the public? No, Cornelia! Tell me that the sun’s light will be put out by the rain, that the sea will be drunk by the fishes, but do not tell me that the hour of rest will ever strike for the Cascabel family!”

And now, there was nothing more to do but to make the final arrangements for setting out, next morning, as soon as the sun would peep over the horizon of Sacramento.

This was done in the course of the afternoon.

Needless to say the safe was placed out of the way, in the furthest compartment of the wagon.

“In this room,” said Mr. Cascabel, “we shall be able to watch it night and day!”

“Really, Cæsar, I think that was a good idea of yours,” remarked Cornelia, “and I don’t begrudge the money we spent on the safe.”

“It may be rather small, perhaps, wifie, but we shall buy a bigger one, if our treasure takes larger proportions!”

CHAPTER II.

THE CASCABEL FAMILY.

CASCABEL! — A name, you might say, “pealed and chimed on all the tongues of fame,” throughout the five parts of the globe, and “other localities,” proudly added the man who bore that patronymic so honorably.

Cæsar Cascabel, a native of Pontorson, right in the heart of Normandy, was a master in all the dodges, knacks, and trickeries of Norman folks. But, sharp and knowing as he was, he had remained an honest man, and it were not right to confound him with the too often suspicious members of the juggling confraternity; in him, humbleness of birth and professional irregularities were fully redeemed by the private virtues of the head of the family circle.

At this period, Mr. Cascabel looked his age, forty-five, not a day more or less. A child of the road in the full acceptation of the word, his only cradle had been the pack that his father shouldered as he tramped along from fairs to markets throughout Normandy. His mother having died shortly after his coming into the world, he had been very opportunely adopted by a traveling troupe on the death of his father, a few years after. With them he spent his youth in tumbles, contortions and somersaults, his head down and his feet in the air. Then he became in turn a clown, a gymnast, an acrobat, a Hercules at country fairs, — until the time when, the father of three children, he appointed himself manager of the little family he had brought out conjointly with Mrs. Cascabel, *nee* Cornelia Vadarasse, all the way from Martigues in Provence (France).

An intelligent and ingenious man, if on the one hand his muscle and his skill were above the common, his moral worth was in no way inferior to his physical abilities. True, a rolling stone gathers no moss; but, at least, it rubs against the rough knobs on the road, it gets polished, its angles are smoothed off, it grows round and shiny. Even so, in the course of the twenty-five years that he had been rolling along, Cæser Cascabel had rubbed so hard, had got so thoroughly polished and rounded off, that he knew about all that can be known of life, felt surprised at nothing, wondered at nothing. By dint of roughing it through Europe from fair to fair, and acclimatizing himself quite as readily in America as in the Dutch or the Spanish Colonies, he wellnigh understood all languages, and spoke them more or less accurately, "even those he did not know," as he used to say, for it was no trouble to him to express his meaning by gestures whenever his power of speech failed him.

Cæser Cascabel was a trifle above the middle height; his body was muscular; his limbs were "well oiled"; his lower jaw, somewhat protruding, indicated energy; his head was large, and shagged over with bushy hair, his skin marbled by the sun of every clime, tanned by the squalls of every sea; he wore a mustache cut short at the ends, and half-length whiskers shaded his ruddy cheeks; his nose was rather full; he had blue eyes glowing with life and very keen, with a look of kindness in them; his mouth would have boasted thirty-three teeth still, had he got one put in, Before the public, he was a real Frederic Lemaitre, a tragedian with grand gestures, affected poses, and oratorical sentences, but in private, a very simple, very natural man, who doted on his wife and children.

Blessed with a constitution that could stand anything, although his advancing years now forbade him all acrobatic performances, he was still wonderful in those displays of strength that "require biceps." He was possessed, moreover, of extraordinary talent in that branch of the showman's profession, the science of the engastrimuth or ventriloquism, a science which goes back a good many centuries if, as Bishop Eustachius asserts, the pythoness of Edon was nothing more than a ventriloquist. At his will his vocal apparatus slipped down from his throat to his stomach. You wonder if he could have sung a duet, all by himself? Well, you had better not have challenged him to!

To give one last stroke to this picture, let us notice that Cæser Cascabel had a weakness for the great conquerors of history in general, and for Napoleon in particular. Yes! He did love the hero of the first Empire just as much as he hated his "tormentors," those sons of Hudson Lowe, those abominable John Bulls. Napoleon! That was "the man for him!" Wherefore he had never consented to perform before the Queen of England, "although she had requested him to do so through her first Steward of the Household," a statement he had made so earnestly and so repeatedly that he had eventually acquired a belief in it, himself.

And still, Mr. Cascabel was no circus manager; no Franconi was he with a troupe of horsemen and women, of clowns and jugglers. By no means. He was merely a showman, performing on the public commons in the open air when the weather was fine, and under a tent when it rained. At this business, of which he had known the ups and downs for a quarter of a century, he had earned, as we know, the goodly lump sum just now put away in the safe with the combination lock.

What labor, what toils, what misery at times, had gone to the making up of this sum! The hardest was now over. The Cascabels were preparing to return to Europe. After they had crossed the United States, they would take passage on a French or an American vessel, — an English one — no, never!

As to that, Cæser Cascabel never let himself be beaten by anything. Obstacles were a myth for him. Difficulties, at most, did turn up on his path; but, extricating, disentangling himself through life was his speciality. He had gladly repeated the words of the Duke of Dantzic, one of the marshals of his great man:

“You make a hole for me, and I’ll make my way through it.”

And many indeed were the holes he had wriggled through!

“Mrs. Cascabel, *née* Cornelia Vadarasse, a genuine native of Provence, the unequaled clairvoyant of things to come, the queen of electrical women, adorned with all the charms of her sex, graced with all the virtues that are a mother’s pride, the champion of the great female tournaments to which Chicago challenged the ‘first athletes of the universe.’”

Such were the terms in which Mr. Cascabel usually introduced his wife to the public. Twenty years before, he had married her in New York. Had he taken his father’s advice in the matter? He had not! Firstly, he said, because his father had not consulted him in reference to his own wedding, and, secondly, because the worthy man was no longer on this planet. And the thing had been done in a very simple way, I can tell you, and without any of those preliminary formalities which, in Europe, prove such drawbacks to the speedy union of two beings predestined for one another.

One evening, at Barnum’s theater in Broadway, where he was one of the spectators, Cæsar Cascabel was dazzled by the charms, the agility and the strength shown in horizontal bar exercises by a young French acrobat, Mlle. Cornelia Vadarasse.

Associating his own talents with those of this graceful performer, of their two lives making but one, foreseeing yonder in the future a family of little Cascabels worthy of their father and mother, all this appeared as if mapped out before the honest showman’s eye. Rushing behind the scenes between two acts, introducing himself to Cornelia Vadarasse with the fairest proposals in view of the wedding of a Frenchman and a Frenchwoman; then, eyeing a respectable clergyman in the audience, hauling him off to the green-room and asking him to bless the union of so well-matched a couple, that is all that was needed in that happy land of the United States of America. Do those life-contracts, sealed with full steam on, turn out the worse for it? Be the answer what it may, the union of Cascabel and Cornelia Vadarasse was to be one of the happiest ever celebrated in this nether world.

At the time when our story begins, Mrs. Cascabel was forty years old. She had a fine figure, rather stoutish perhaps, dark hair, dark eyes, a smiling mouth, and, like her husband, a good show of teeth. As to her uncommon muscular strength, she had proved it in those memorable Chicago encounters, where she had won a “Chignon of honor” as a prize. Let us add that Cornelia still loved her husband as she did on the first day, feeling as she did an unshakable trust, an absolute faith in the genius of this extraordinary man, one of the most remarkable beings ever produced by Normandy.

The first-born of our itinerant performers was a boy, John, now nineteen years old. If he did not take after his parents with regard to muscle or to the performances of a gymnast, an acrobat or a clown, he showed his true blood by a wonderfully dexterous hand and an eye ever sure of its aim, two gifts that made him a graceful, elegant juggler. Nor was his success marred with self-conscious pride. He was a gentle, thoughtful youth with blue eyes, and dark-complexioned like his mother. Studious and reserved, he sought to improve himself wherever and whenever he could. Though not ashamed of his parents' profession, he felt there was something better to do than performing in public, and he looked forward to giving up the craft as soon as he would be in France. At the same time his genuine love for his father and his mother prompted him to keep extremely reserved on this subject; indeed, besides, what prospects had he of making another position for himself in the world?

Then, there was the second boy, the last but one of the children, the contortionist of the troupe. He was really the logical joint-product of the Cascabel couple. Twelve years old, as nimble as a cat, as handy as a monkey, as lively as an eel, a little three-foot-six clown who had tumbled into this world heels over head, so his father said, a real *gamin* as ready-witted as full of fun and frolic, and a good heart withal, sometimes deserving of a thump on his head, but taking it with a grin, for it was never a very hard one.

It was stated above that the eldest scion of the Cascabels was called John. Whence came this name? The mother had insisted upon it in memory of one of her grand-uncles, Jean Vadarasse, a sailor from Marseilles, who had been eaten by the Caribbean islanders, an exploit she was proud of. To be sure, the father who had the good luck to have been christened Cæser, would have preferred another name, one better known in history and more in accordance with his secret admiration for warriors. But he was unwilling to thwart his wife's wishes on the advent of their first-born, and he had accepted the name John, promising himself to make up for it, should a second heir be born to him.

This event came to pass, and the second son was called Alexander, after having a narrow escape of being named Hamilcar, Attila, or Hannibal. For shortness sake, however, he was familiarly known as Sander.

After the first and the second boy, the family circle was joined by a little girl who received the name of Napoleona, in honor of the martyr at St. Helena, although Mrs. Cascabel would have loved to call her Hersilla.

Napoleona was now eight years old. She was a pretty child, with every promise of growing to be a handsome girl, and a handsome girl she did become. Fair and rosy, with a bright, animated countenance, graceful and clever, she had mastered the art of tight-rope walking; her tiny feet seemed to glide along the wire for play, as though the little sylph had had wings to bear her up.

It were idle to say Napoleona was the spoilt child of the family. She was worshipped by all, and she was fit to be. Her mother fondly cherished the thought that she would make a grand match some day. Is not that one of the contingencies of these people’s nomadic life? Why might not Napoleona, grown up into a handsome young girl, come across a prince who would fall in love with her, and marry her?

“Just as in fairytales?” Mr. Cascabel would suggest, his turn of mind being more practical than his wife’s.

“No, Cæser, just as in real life.”

“Alas, Cornelia, the time is gone when kings married shepherdesses, and, my word! in these days of ours, I have yet to know that shepherdesses would consent to marry kings!”

Such was the Cascabel family, father, mother and three children. It might have been better perhaps, if a fourth olive branch had increased the number, seeing there are certain human-pyramid exercises in which the artists climb on top of each other in even numbers. But this fourth member did not appear.

Luckily, Clovy was there, the very man to lend a hand on extraordinary occasions.

In truth, Clovy was the complement of the Cascabels. He was not one of the show, he was one of the family; and he had every claim to the membership, an American though he was by birth. He was one of those poor wretches, one of those “nobody’s children,” born Heaven knows where, — they hardly know it themselves, — brought up by charity, fed as luck will have it, and taking the right road in life, if they happen to be rightly inclined, if their innate sense of what is good enables them to resist the evil examples and the evil promptings of their miserable surroundings. And should we not feel some pity for these unfortunates if, in the majority of cases, they are led to evil deeds, and come to an evil end?

Such was not the case with Ned Harley, on whom Mr. Cascabel had thought it funny to bestow the name of Clovy. And why? First, because he had as much spare fat about him as a dried clove; second, because he was engaged to receive, during the “parades,” a greater number of five-fingered stingers than any cruciferous shrub could produce of cloves in a year!

Two years before, when Mr. Cascabel lighted upon him, in his round through the States, the unfortunate man was at death’s door through starvation. The troupe of acrobats, to which he belonged, had just broken up, the manager having run away. With them, he was in the “minstrels,” a sad business, even when it manages to pay, or nearly so, for the food of the wretch who plies it! Daubing your face with boot-blacking, “niggering” yourself, as they say; putting on a black coat and pants, a white vest and necktie; then singing stupid songs whilst scraping on a ludicrous fiddle in company with four or live outcasts of your kin, what a position that is in society! Well, Ned Harley had just lost that social position; and he was but too happy to meet Providence on his path, in the person of Mr. Cascabel.

It happened just then that the latter had lately dismissed the artist who generally played the clown in the parade scenes. Will it ever be believed? This clown had passed himself off as an American, and was in reality of English origin! A John Bull in the troupe! A countryman of those heartless tormentors who — The rest of the story is known. One day, by mere chance, Mr. Cascabel heard of the intruder's nationality.

"Mr. Waldurton," said he to him, "since you are an Englishman, you'll take yourself off this very moment, or else it's not my hand on your face you shall get, a clown though you be!"

And a clown though he was, it is the tip of a boot he would have felt if he had not disappeared instantly.

It was then that Clovy stepped into the vacant berth. The late "minstrel" now engaged himself as a "man of all work"; he would perform on the boards, groom the horses, or, just as readily, do the kitchen work, whenever the mistress needed a helping hand. Naturally, he spoke French, but with a very strong accent.

He still was, on the whole, a simple-minded fellow, though now five-and-thirty years of age, as full of mirth when he gratified the public with his drolleries as he was melancholy in private life. He was rather inclined to view things on their dark side; and, to be candid, that was not to be wondered at, for it would have been hard for him to look upon himself as one of the favored ones here below. With his tapering head, his long-drawn face, his yellowish hair, his round, sheepish eyes, his phenomenal nose on which he was able to place half a dozen pairs of spectacles, a great source of laughter, — his flabby ears, his long neck like a stork’s, his thin body stuck up on skeleton legs, he looked indeed a strange being. Still, he was not a man to complain, unless — this was his favorite way of qualifying a statement, — unless ill-luck gave him cause to complain. In addition, ever since his joining the Cascabels, he had become greatly attached to the good people, and they, on their part, could not have done without their Clovy.

Such was, if it may be put thus, the human element in this itinerant troupe.

As to the animal element, it was represented by two fine dogs, a spaniel — a first-rate hunter and a reliable watch-dog for the house on wheels — and a clever, intelligent poodle, sure to become a member of the “Institute,” whenever the intellectual powers of the canine race are rewarded in France on a par with those of men.

Next to the two dogs, it is right we should introduce to the public a little ape that proved a worthy rival of Clovy himself when they vied with one another in distorting their faces, and puzzled the spectators as to who should carry off the palm. Then, there was a parrot, Jako, a native of Java, who talked and prattled and sang and jabbered ten hours out of twelve, thanks to the teaching of his friend Sander. Lastly two horses, two good old horses, drew the wagon, and God knows if their legs, somewhat stiffened with years, had been stretched out over the miles and miles they had measured across country.

And, should you care to know the names of these two good steeds? One was called Vermont like Mr. Delamarre’s winning horse, the other Gladiator like Count de Lagrange’s.

Yes, they bore those names so famous on the French turf; yet they never had a thought of getting themselves entered for the Paris Grand Prix.

As to the dogs, they were called: the spaniel, Wagram, the poodle, Marengo; and, no need to tell who the godfather was to whom they were indebted for those renowned historical names.

The ape — why, he had been christened John Bull, for the simple reason that he was ugly.

What can be done? We must overlook this mania of Mr. Cascabel’s, proceeding as it did, after all, from a patriotic sentiment which is very pardonable — even though at an epoch when such strong feelings are but little justified.

“Were it possible,” he would say sometimes, “not to worship the man who exclaimed under a shower of bullets: ‘Follow the white feather on my hat; you will ever find it, etc?’”

And, when he would be reminded that it was Henry IV who had uttered those beautiful words:

“That may be,” he would reply; “but Napoleon could have said as much!”

CHAPTER III.

THE SIERRA NEVADA.

HOW many people have had dreams, at one time or other, of a journey performed in a movable house, after gypsy fashion! of a journey exempt of all worry concerning hotels, and inns, and unreliable beds, and still more unreliable cooks, when the country to be traversed is no more than besprinkled with hamlets or villages! That which wealthy amateurs do daily on board their pleasure yachts, surrounded by all the comfort of their transplanted home, few are the people who have done it by means of a vehicle *ad hoc*. And still, is not a carriage a movable house? Why do gypsies enjoy a monopoly of the pleasures of “yachting on terra firma?”

In reality, the showman’s wagon constitutes a complete flat, with its various rooms and furniture; it is “home” on wheels; and Cæser Cascabel’s was beautifully adapted to the requirements of his gypsy life.

The *Fair Rambler* was the name they had given it, as though it were a Norman schooner; and that name was justified after so many peregrinations through the length and breadth of the United States. They had bought it three years ago, with the first money they had saved, as a substitute for the old primitive van, just covered over with an awning and unsupported by a single spring, that had nestled them so long. Now, as it was over twenty years since Mr. Cascabel had begun visiting the fairs and markets of the United States, it is needless to say his wagon was of American manufacture.

The *Fair Rambler* rested on four wheels. Supplied with good steel springs, it combined lightness with strength. Well looked after, scrubbed and washed with soap, it shone in all the glow of its brightly-painted panels on which gold yellow blended harmoniously with cochineal red, and displayed to the public gaze the already famous trade name and mark:

THE CÆSAR CASCABEL FAMILY.

As to length, it would have been a match for those wagons that still ply the prairies of the Far West, in parts where the Great Trunk Railroad has not hitherto pushed its way. It is evident that two horses could only walk with so heavy a vehicle. In truth the load was no light one. Not to speak of its inhabitants, did not the *Fair Rambler* convey, on its roof, the canvas for the tent, and the poles, and the ropes, and, underneath between the fore and the hind wheels, a swinging board laden with various articles, a large drum and a smaller one, a horn, a trombone and other utensils and accessories, the real tools of the showman? Let us put on record likewise the costumes of a noted pantomine, "The Brigands of the Black Forest," on the repertory of the Cascabel family.

The internal arrangements were well devised, and we need not add that scrupulous cleanliness, Flemish cleanliness, reigned supreme, thanks to Cornelia, who could stand no trifling in this respect.

In the fore part, closing by means of a sliding glass-door, was the first compartment heated by the cooking-stove. Next came a drawing or dining-room, where the fortune-teller gave her consultations; then a bed-room with bunks, superposed on each other as on board ship, which, with a curtain for a division, afforded sleeping accommodation, on the right to the two brothers, and on the left to their little sister; lastly at the further end, Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel's room. Here, a bed with thick mattresses and a patchwork quilt, near which the famous safe had been deposited. All the recesses were taken up with little boards on hinges, which might be used as tables or toilet-stands, or with narrow cupboards where the costumes, the wigs and the false beards for the pantomine, were put by. The whole was lighted by two paraffine lamps, veritable ship lamps that swung to and fro with the motion of the vehicle when the roads were unlevel; moreover, so as to allow the light of day to penetrate the various compartments, half a dozen little windows, with lead-cased panes, light muslin curtains and colored bands, gave to the *Fair Rambler* the appearance of the saloon on a Dutch galliot.

Clovy, naturally easy to please, slept in the first compartment, on a hammock that he hung up at night and took down at day-break next morning.

We have yet to mention that the two dogs, Wagram and Marengo, in consequence of their being on night-duty, slept among the baggage under the wagon, where they tolerated the company of John Bull, the ape, in spite of his restlessness and his propensity for playing tricks, and that Jako, the parrot, was housed in a cage hooked on to the ceiling in the second compartment.

As to the horses, Gladiator and Vermont, they were quite free to graze round about the *Fair Rambler* nor was there any necessity to fetter them. And when they had done cropping the grass of those vast prairies where their table was ever laid, and their bed, or rather their litter ever ready, they had only to pick out a spot whereon to lay themselves to sleep, on the very ground that had supplied them with food.

One thing certain is, that, when night had closed around, what with the guns and the revolvers of its occupants, what with the two dogs that kept watch over it, the *Fair Rambler* was in perfect safety.

Such was this family coach. How many a mile it had rambled along for the past three years through the States, from New York to Albany, from Niagara to Buffalo, to St. Louis, to Philadelphia, to Boston, to Washington, down the Mississippi to New Orleans, all along the Great Trunk, up to the Rocky Mountains, to the Mormon district, to the furthermost ends of California! A healthy mode of traveling, if ever there was one, seeing that not one member of the little troupe had ever been ill, save and except John Bull, whose fits of indigestion were anything but few, his instinctive knavery making it easy for him to satisfy his inconceivable gluttony.

And how glad they would be to bring back the *Fair Rambler* to Europe, to drive it along on the highways of the old continent! What sympathetic curiosity it would awaken as it went through France, through the village homesteads of Normandy! Ah! seeing France again, “seeing his Normandie once more” as in Berat’s well-known song, such was the aim of all Cæsar Cascabel’s thoughts, the goal of all his aspirations.

Once in New York, the wagon was to be taken to pieces, packed up and put on board ship for Havre, where it would only need to be set up on its wheels again, to ramble away toward the French capital.

How Mr. Cascabel, his wife and children, longed to be off! and so, doubtless, did their companions, their four-footed friends we might say. That is why, at day-break, on the 15th of February, they left Circus Place in Sacramento, some on foot, others riding, each one to his fancy.

The temperature was very cool still, but it was fine weather. It may be surmised the anchor was not weighed without a due supply of biscuits on board, or if you like, without various preserves of meat and vegetables. As to that, it was an easy matter to renew the stocks in the towns and villages. And then, was not the country swarming with game, buffaloes, deer, hares and partridges? And would John be sparing of his gun or his shot when shooting was subject to no restriction, when no European gun license was demanded in those boundless wilds of the Far West? And a dead shot was John, I tell you; and Wagram, the spaniel, showed hunting qualities of no mean standard, if Marengo the poodle was deficient in that respect.

On leaving Sacramento, the *Fair Rambler* took a north-east course. The object was to reach the frontier by the shortest road, and to cross the Sierra Nevada, say, to travel a distance of about six hundred miles to the Sonora Pass, which opens on to the endless plains of the East.

This was not the Far West, properly so-called, yet, where villages are only to be found at long intervals; it was not the prairie with its far-distant horizon, its immense waste, its wandering Indians gradually driven back toward the less frequented parts of North America. Almost as soon as you were out of Sacramento, the land already began to rise. You already perceived the ramifications of the Sierra which so nobly enclasps old California within the dark frame of its pine-covered mountains, overtopped here and there with peaks 15,000 feet high. It is a barrier of verdure thrown up by nature around that country on which she had lavished such wealth of gold, now carried away by the rapacity of man.

Along the road followed by the *Fair Rambler* there was no lack of important towns: Jackson, Mokelumne, Placerville, the world-known outposts of the Eldorado, and the Calaveras. But Mr. Cascabel halted in these places barely long enough to make a few purchases, or to have a specially good night’s rest, when needed. He longed to get to the other side of the Nevada, the Great Salt Lake district, and the huge rampart of the Rocky Mountains, where his horses would have many a hard tug to give. Then as far as the Erie or Ontario region, all they need do would be to follow, through the prairies, the trails already beaten by the feet of the horses and furrowed by the wagons of preceding caravans.

Still, progress was slow through these hilly districts. Unavoidable detours increased the length of the journey. And again, although the country lay in the thirty-eighth parallel, which, in Europe, is the latitude of Sicily and Spain, the last lingering chill of winter had lost none of its sting. In consequence, as the reader knows, of the deviation of the Gulf Stream — that warm current which, when leaving the Gulf of Mexico, winds obliquely toward Europe, — the climate of North America is much colder, on the same latitudes, than that of the old Continent. But, a few weeks more, and once again California would be the land exuberant among all others, that fruitful land, where cereals multiply a hundredfold, where the most varied productions, both of the tropics and of the temperate zone, luxuriate side by side, sugar cane, rice, tobacco, oranges, lemons, olives, pineapples, bananas. The wealth of the Californian soil is not the gold it contains, it is the marvelous vegetation it brings forth.

“We shall be sorry to leave this country,” said Cornelia, who did not look with an indifferent eye on the good things of the table.

“You glutton!” her husband would answer.

“Oh, it is not for myself I speak, it is for the children!”

Several days were spent journeying along the edge of the forests, through prairies gradually resuming their fresh tint of green. Despite their numbers, the ruminants fed by these prairies are unable to wear out the carpet of grass that nature keeps on renewing for ever under their feet. Too great emphasis could not be laid on the vegetative power of that Californian soil, to which no other can be compared. It is the granary of the Pacific, and the merchant navy, that takes its produce away, cannot exhaust it. The *Fair Rambler* went on its way, at its usual speed, a daily average of eighteen or twenty miles — not more. It is at this rate it had already conveyed its freight throughout all the States, where the name of the Cascabels was so favorably known, from the mouth of the Mississippi to New England. True, they then stopped in every town of the Confederacy to increase the amount of their takings; while in this journey, from west to east, there was no thought of dazzling the populations. No artistic tour was this; this time, it was the journey home toward old Europe, with the Norman farms away in perspective.

A merry journey it was, too! How many sedentary dwellings would have envied the happiness of this house on wheels? There was laughing, and singing, and joking; and at times the horn, on which young Sander exhibited all his skill, would set the birds to flight, just as noisy a tribe as our frolicsome troupe.

All this was very fine, but days spent traveling need not, of necessity, be schoolboys' holidays.

“My children,” Mr. Cascabel would often say, “we must not get rusty for all this!”

And so, during the halts, if the horses took a rest, the family did not do so. More than once did the Indians eagerly watch John going over his juggling, Napoleona rehearsing a few graceful steps, Sander dislocating himself as though his limbs were India-rubber, Mrs. Cascabel indulging in muscular exercises, and Mr. Cascabel in ventriloquial effects, not to forget Jako prattling in its cage, the two dogs performing together, and John Bull exhausting himself in contortions.

Let it be noticed, however, that John did not neglect his studying by the roadside. Over and over again did he read the few books that made up the little library of the *Fair Rambler*, a small geography, a small arithmetic, and various volumes of travels; he it was, moreover, who wrote up the log-book, in which were pleasantly recorded the incidents of the cruise.

“You will know too much!” his father sometimes said to him. “Still, if your taste runs that way, — ”

And far was it from Mr. Cascabel to thwart the literary instincts of his first-born. As a fact, his wife and himself were very proud to have a “scholar” in the family.

One afternoon, about the 27th of February, the *Fair Rambler* reached the foot of the Sierra Nevada gorges. For four or five days to come, this rugged pass through the chain would cause them much toil and labor. It would be no light task, for man or beast, to climb half-way up the mountain. The men would have to put their shoulders to the wheels along the narrow paths which skirt the giant’s sides. Although the weather continued to grow milder, thanks to the early influence of Californian spring, the climate would still be inclement at certain latitudes. Nothing is to be dreaded more than the floods of rain, the fearful snowdrifts, the bewildering squalls you encounter at the turns of those gorges in which the wind gets imprisoned as in a gulf. Besides, the upper portion of the passes rises above the zone of the permanent snow, and you must ascend to a height of at least six thousand feet before reaching the downward slope toward the Mormon district.

Mr. Cascabel proposed to do as he had already done on similar occasions: he would hire extra horses in the villages or the farms on the mountain, as well as men, Indians or Americans, to drive them. It would be an additional expense, of course, but a necessary one, if they cared not to break down their own horses.

On the evening of the 27th, the entrance into the Sonora Pass was reached. The valleys they had hitherto followed presented but a slight gradient; Vermont and Gladiator had walked them up with comparative ease. But farther up they could not have gone, even with the help of every member of the troupe.

A halt was made within a short distance of a hamlet that lay in a gorge of the Sierra. Just a few houses, and, at a couple of gunshots' distance, a farm to which Mr. Cascabel determined to repair that very evening. There he would engage, for the following morning, some extra horses that Vermont and Gladiator would gladly welcome.

First, the necessary measures had to be taken for spending the night in this spot.

As soon as the camp was organized in the usual manner, the inhabitants of the hamlet were communicated with and readily consented to supply fresh food for the masters, and forage for the horses.

On this evening, the rehearsing of exercises was out of the question. All were worn out with fatigue. It had been a heavy day: for, in order to lighten the load, they had had to go on foot a great part of the journey. Manager Cascabel therefore granted absolute rest on this and every other night while they crossed the Sierra.

After the "master's searching eye" had been cast over the encampment, Cascabel took Clovy, and, leaving the *Fair Rambler* to the charge of his wife and children, made his way toward the farm over which ringlets of smoke were seen curling up through the trees.

This farm was kept by a Californian and his family by whom the showman was well received. The farmer undertook to supply him with three horses and two drivers. The latter were to pilot the *Fair Rambler* as far as where the eastward declivity begins, and then return with the extra horses. But, that would cost a deal of money.

Mr. Cascabel bargained like a man who is anxious not to throw his money away, and, eventually, a sum was agreed on, which did not exceed the subsidy allowed on the budget for this portion of the trip.

The next morning, at six o’clock, the two men arrived; their three horses were put to, in front of Vermont and Gladiator, and the *Fair Rambler* began climbing up a narrow gorge thickly wooded on each side. About eight o’clock, at one of the turnings of the pass, that marvelous land of California, which our travelers were not leaving without a pang, had entirely disappeared behind the Sierra.

The farmer’s three steeds were fine animals, which could be relied upon in every way. Could the same be said of the drivers? The thing seemed, to say the least, doubtful.

Both were strong fellows, half-breeds, half Indian, half English. Ah! had Mr. Cascabel known it, how soon he had parted company with them!

Cornelia was anything but prepossessed by their looks on the whole. John held the same views as his mother, and these views were shared by Clovy. It did not seem as though Mr. Cascabel had made a good hit. After all, these men were but two, and they would find their match, should they harbor any evil design.

As to dangerous encounters in the Sierra, they were not to be dreaded. The roads should be safe by this time. The days were gone when Californian miners, the “loafers” and the “rowdies” as they were styled, joined the ranks of the criminals who had thronged here from every quarter of the globe, to become the plague of respectable people. Lynch law had succeeded in bringing them to reason.

However, as a prudent man, Mr. Cascabel determined to keep on the alert.

The men hired at the farm were skillful drivers; that could not be denied. The first day passed by without any accident: that was something to be thankful for, first of all. A wheel giving way, an axle tree in halves, and the occupants of the *Fair Rambler*, away from all human dwellings, without any means of repairing the damage, would have been in a sorry plight.

The pass now wore the wildest aspect. Nothing but black-looking pine trees, no vegetation but the moss hugging the soil. Here and there, enormous heaps of piled-up rocks necessitated many a detour, especially along one of the affluents of the Walkner, which came out of the lake of that name and bellowed its mad career into the precipices below. Far away, lost in the clouds, Castle Peak pointed to the skies, and looked down on the other spurs picturesquely shot upwards by the Sierra.

About five o’clock, when the shades of evening were already creeping up from the depths of the narrow gorges, they came to a sudden turn of the road. The gradient in this spot was so steep that it was found necessary to unload a portion of the freight and leave behind, for a time, most of the articles laid on the top of the wagon, as well as those underneath it.

Every one worked with a will, and, it must be confessed, the two drivers gave proofs of zeal in this circumstance.

Mr. Cascabel and his people had their first impression of those men slightly modified. Besides, in another couple of days, the highest point of the pass would be attained; their downhill journey would commence; and all that belonged to the farm would return thereto.

When the halting station had been agreed upon, whilst the drivers looked after the horses, Mr. Cascabel, his two sons and Clovy, walked back a few hundred paces for the things that had been left behind.

A good supper terminated the day, and nobody thought of aught else but a sound rest.

The "boss" offered to the drivers to make room for them in one of the compartments of the *Fair Rambler*; but they declined, assuring him that the shelter of the trees was all that they needed. There, well wrapped in thick rugs, they could watch all the better after their master's horses.

A few moments more, and the encampment was buried in sleep.

The following morning, all were on foot at the first dawn of day.

Mr. Cascabel, John and Clovy, the earliest risers in the *Fair Rambler*, went to the spot where Vermont and Gladiator had been penned up, the night before.

Both were there, but the three horses of the farmer had disappeared.

As they could not be very far off, John was about telling the drivers to go look for them; neither was to be seen about the camping-ground.

"Where are they?" said he.

“Very likely,” answered his father, “they are running after the horses.”

“Hallo! Hallo!” shouted Clovy in a tone of voice that should be heard a considerable distance away.

No answer came.

New cries were uttered, as loud as the force of human lungs would permit, by Mr. Cascabel and by John, who went a little way down the track.

No sign of the missing drivers.

“Could it be that their appearance only told too plainly what they were?”

“Why would they have run away?” asked John.

“Because they’ll have done something wrong.”

“What?”

“What? Wait a bit! — We shall soon know!”

And, with John and Clovy on his heels, he ran toward the *Fair Rambler*.

Jumping up the wagon step, opening the door, two strides through the compartments and on to the end room where the precious safe had been laid, all that was the work of an instant, and Mr. Cascabel reappeared, shouting:

“Stolen!”

“What, the safe?” said Cornelia.

“Yes, stolen by those ruffians!”

CHAPTER IV.

A GREAT RESOLUTION.

RUFFIANS!

This was indeed the only name suitable to such wretches. The robbery, however, was none the less an accomplished fact.

Each evening Mr. Cascabel had been in the habit of seeing whether the safe lay still in its nook. Now, the day before, well he remembered it, worn out with the hardships of the day and overpowered with sleep, he had omitted his habitual inspection. No doubt, while John, Sander and Clovy had gone down with him for the articles that had been left at the turning of the pass, the two drivers had made their way unnoticed into the inner compartment, removed the safe, and hidden it among the brushwood around the camping-ground. That was the reason why they had declined to sleep inside the *Fair Rambler*. They had afterward waited until everybody was asleep, and had then run away with the farmer’s horses.

Out of all the savings of the little troupe, there was nothing left now but a few dollars that Mr. Cascabel had in his pocket. And was it not lucky that the rascals had not taken Vermont and Gladiator away as well!

The dogs, already grown accustomed to the presence of the two men for the past twenty-four hours, had not even given the alarm, and the evil deed had been done without any difficulty.

Where were the thieves to be caught, now that they had made for the Sierra? Where was the money to be recovered? And without the money, how was the Atlantic to be crossed?

The poor people gave vent to their grief, some with tears, others with outbursts of indignation. At the very first, Mr. Cascabel was a prey to a real fit of rage, and his wife and children found it very difficult to calm him down. But, after having thus given way to his passion, he recovered possession of himself, as a man who has no time to waste in vain recriminations.

“Accursed safe!” burst from Cornelia’s lips in the midst of her tears.

“Sure enough!” said John, “if we had had no safe, our money — ”

“Yes! — A brilliant idea I hatched that day, to go buy that devil of a chest!” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel. “I guess the best thing to do when you have a safe is to put nothing in it! A great boon, to be sure, that it was proof against fire, as the shopman told me, when it was not proof against thieves!”

It must be admitted, the blow was a hard one for the poor people, and it is no wonder they felt utterly crushed by it. Robbed of two thousand dollars that had been earned at the cost of so much toil!

“What shall we do now?” inquired John.

“Do?” replied Mr. Cascabel, whose gnashing teeth seemed to grind his words as he spoke. “It is very simple! — Nay, it is most uncommonly simple! Without extra horses we can’t possibly go on climbing up the pass. Well, I vote we go back to the farm! It may be, those ruffians are there!”

“Unless they did not go back!” suggested Clovy.

And, truly, this was more than likely. However, as Mr. Cascabel said once more, the only course open to them was returning on their steps, since going ahead was out of the question.

Thereupon Vermont and Gladiator were put to, and the wagon began its journey down through the pass of the Sierra.

This was but too easy a task alas! You can put on speed when you go downhill; but it was with heads hanging down and without a word our folks jogged down, save and except when a volley of curses broke forth from Cascabel.

At twelve o’clock in the day the *Fair Rambler* stopped in front of the farm. The two thieves had not returned. On hearing what had taken place the farmer flew into a passion in which sympathy for the show-people played not the slightest part. If they had lost their money, he had been robbed of his three horses, he had! Once away in the mountain, the thieves must have cut across to the other side of the pass. A nice race he might have after them now! And the farmer, beside himself with excitement, had wellnigh held Mr. Cascabel responsible for the loss of his horses!

“That’s a rich idea!” said the latter. “Why do you keep such scoundrels in your service, and why do you hire them to respectable people?”

“How did I know?” the farmer replied. “Not a word of complaint had I ever against them!”

In any case the robbery had been perpetrated, and the situation was heart-breaking.

But, if Mrs. Cascabel found it hard to master her own feelings, her husband with that solid foundation of gypsy philosophy so peculiarly his own, succeeded in recovering his coolness.

And when they were assembled together in the *Fair Rambler*, a conversation was engaged among all the members of the family, — a most important conversation, “out of which was to come forth a great resolution,” so said Mr. Cascabel, strongly rolling his *r*’s as he spoke:

“Children, there are circumstances in life, when a strong-willed man must be able to make up his mind on the spur of the moment. Indeed I have observed that those circumstances are generally unpleasant ones. Witness those in which we now are, thanks to those rascals. Well, this is no time to hesitate to the right or to the left, the more so as we have not half a dozen roads before us. We have but one, and that’s the road we shall take immediately.”

“Which?” asked Sander.

“I am going to tell you what I have in my head,” answered Mr. Cascabel. “But, to know if my idea is practicable, John must fetch his book with the maps in it.”

“My atlas?” said John.

“Yes, your atlas. You must be a good fellow at geography! Run for your atlas.”

“Straight off, father.”

And when the atlas had been laid on the table, the father continued as follows:

“It is an understood thing, my children, that, although those ruffians have stolen our safe — why did I ever think of buying a safe! — it is an understood thing, I say, that we don’t give up our idea of going back to Europe.”

“Give it up? — never!” exclaimed Mrs. Cascabel.

“A good answer, Cornelia! We want to go back to Europe, and go back we shall! We want to see France again, and see her again we shall! It is not because we have been robbed by scoundrels that — I, for one, must breathe my native air once more, or I am a dead man.”

“And you shan’t die, Cæsar! We have made our start for Europe, we shall get there, no matter what — ”

“And how shall we?” reiterated John. “How? I should like to know.”

“How, that’s the question,” answered Mr. Cascabel, scratching his forehead. “Of course, by giving performances along the road, we shall be able to get day by day what will land the *Fair Rambler* in New York. But, when there, no money left to pay for our passage, no boat to take us across! And without a boat, no possibility of crossing the sea except we swim! Now, I fancy that will be rather hard.”

“Very hard, boss,” replied Clovy, “unless we had fins.”

“Have you any?”

“Not that I know of.”

“If so, hold your peace, and listen.”

Then addressing his eldest son:

“John, open your atlas, and show us the exact spot where we are!”

John found out the map of North America, and laid it under his father’s eyes. All eagerly looked whilst he pointed with his finger to a spot in the Sierra Nevada a little to the east of Sacramento.

“This is it!” he said.

“Very well,” answered Mr. Cascabel. “And so, if we were on the other side of the range, we should have the whole territory of the United States to cross, right through to New York?”

“We should, father.”

“And how many miles might that be?”

“Somewhere about four thousand miles.”

“Very good; then we should have the ocean to cross?”

“Of course.”

“And how many miles to the other side of that ocean?”

“Three thousand or thereabouts.”

“And once on French soil, we may say we are in Normandy?”

“We may.”

“And all that, put together, gives a total of — ”

“Seven thousand miles!” cried out little Napoleona, who had been reckoning it to herself.

“See, the little one!” said Mr. Cascabel. “Isn’t she quick at figures! So, we say seven thousand miles?”

“About that, father,” answered John, “and I think I’m allowing good measure.”

“Well, children, that little strip of ribbon would be nothing for the *Fair Rambler*, if there was not a sea between America and Europe, an unfortunate sea blocking up the road for the wagon! And that sea can’t be got over without money, that is, without a boat — ”

“Or without fins!” repeated Clovy.

“Clovy has got fins on the brain!” said Mr. Cascabel with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Well then, it is beyond all evidence,” remarked John, “that we can’t go home by the east!”

“Can’t is the word, my son, as you say; the thing can’t possibly be done. But, who knows if by the west?”

“By the west?” exclaimed John, looking up at his father.

“Yes! Look it up, will you? And show me what track we should follow by the west?”

“First, we should go up through California, Oregon and Washington Territory up to the Northern frontier of the United States.”

“And from there?”

“From that time, we should be in British Columbia.”

“Pugh!” said Mr. Cascabel. “And could we not avoid that Columbia by any means?”

“No, father.”

“Well, go on! And after that?”

“After we had reached the frontier to the north of Columbia, we should find the province of Alaska.”

“Which is English?”

“No, Russian — at least up to the present, for there is talk of its being annexed — ”

“To England?”

“No! To the United States.”

“That’s right! And after Alaska, where are we?”

“In the Behring Strait, which separates the two continents, America and Asia.”

“And how many miles to this strait?”

“Three thousand three hundred, father.”

“Keep that in your head, Napoleona; you’ll add it all up by and by.”

“And so shall I?” asked Sander.

“And you too.”

“Now, your strait, John, how wide might it be?”

“Maybe sixty miles, father.”

“What! sixty miles!” remarked Mrs. Cascabel.

“A mere stream, Cornelia; we may as well call it a stream.”

“How’s that? — A stream?”

“Of course! Is not your Behring Strait frozen over in winter, John?”

“It is, father! For four or five months, it is one solid mass.”

“Bravo! and at that time people might walk across it on the ice?”

“People can and do so.”

“That’s what I call an excellent strait!”

“But, after that,” inquired Cornelia, “will there be no more seas to cross?”

“No! After that, we have the continent of Asia, which stretches along as far as Russia in Europe.”

“Show us that, John.”

And John took, in the atlas, the general map of Asia, which Mr. Cascabel examined attentively.

“Well! There is everything shaping itself as if to order,” said he; “so long as there are not too many wild countries in your Asia?”

“Not too many, father.”

“And Europe, where is it?”

“There,” replied John, laying the tip of his finger on the Oural.

“And what is the distance from this strait — this little stream called Behring — to Russia in Europe?”

“They reckon nearly five thousand miles.”

“And from that to France?”

“About eighteen hundred.”

“And all that makes up, from Sacramento?”

“Ten thousand one hundred and sixty,” cried at the same time Sander and Napoleona.

“You’ll both get the prize!” said Mr. Cascabel. “So then, by the east we have about seven thousand miles?”

“Yes, father.”

“And by the west, roughly speaking, ten thousand?”

“Yes, say a difference of three thousand miles.”

“Three thousand miles more on the western route, but no sea on the road! Well, then, children, since we can’t go one way, we must needs go the other, and that’s what I vote we do, as any donkey would.”

“A funny thing! Walking home backwards!” cried Sander.

"No, not backwards! It is going home by an opposite direction!"

"Quite so, father," replied John. "Still, I would have you bear in mind that, seeing the enormous distance, we shall never reach France this year, if we go by the west!"

"Why so?"

"Because, three thousand miles in the difference is something for the *Fair Rambler*, — and for its team!"

"Well, children, if we are not in Europe this year, we shall be next year! And, now I think of it, as we shall have to go through Russia, where are held the fairs of Perm, Kazan and Nijni, that I so often hear of, we shall stop in those places, and I promise you the famous Cascabel family will gather fresh laurels there, and a fresh supply of cash, too!"

What objections can you make to a man when he has his answer for everything?

In truth, it is with the human soul as with iron. Under repeated blows, its molecules get more firmly kneaded together, it becomes thoroughly wrought, it acquires a greater power of resistance. And that was exactly the effect now being produced on these honest show-people. In the course of their laborious, adventurous, nomadic life in which they had had so many trials to bear, they surely never had been in such a sorry plight, with all their savings lost, and their return home by the usual means a matter of impossibility. Yet this last blow of the sledge hammer of ill-luck had so mercilessly battered them that they now felt a match for anything the future might have in store for them.

Mrs. Cascabel, her two sons and her daughter all joined in unanimous applause of the father’s proposal. And still, could anything seem more unreasonable? Mr. Cascabel must indeed have “lost his head” in his desire to return to Europe, to think of carrying such a plan into execution. Pshaw! What was it, to have to rough it across the West of America and the whole of Siberia, so long as it was in the direction of France!

“Bravo! Bravo!” exclaimed Napoleona.

“Encore! Encore!” added Sander, who could find no more suitable words to express his enthusiasm.

“Say, father,” asked Napoleona, “shall we see the Emperor of Russia?”

“Of course we shall, if his Majesty the Czar is in the habit of coming to the Nijni fair to enjoy himself.”

“And we shall perform before him?”

“No doubt! — if he will express the least desire to see us!”

“Oh, how I should love to kiss him on both cheeks!”

“You may have to be satisfied with one cheek, my little girlie!” answered Mr. Cascabel. “But, if you do kiss him, take good care you don’t spoil his crown!”

As to Clovy, the feeling he experienced toward his master was nothing short of admiration.

And so, the itinerary being now regularly planned out, the *Fair Rambler* was to trail it up through California, Oregon and Washington Territory to the Anglo-American frontier. They had some fifty dollars left, — the pocket-money which, luckily, had not been put up in the safe. However, as so trifling a sum could not suffice to the daily wants of such a journey, it was agreed that the little troupe would give performances in the towns and villages. There was no regret to be felt, either, at the delay occasioned by these halts. Had they not to wait until the strait should be entirely frozen over and afford safe passage to the wagon? Now, this could not come to pass before seven or eight months.

“And, to wind up, it will be ill-luck with a vengeance,” said Mr. Cascabel, “if we don’t get a few good takings before we reach the end of America!”

In truth, throughout the whole of Alaska, “making money” among wandering tribes of Indians, was very problematical. But, as far as the western frontier of the United States, in that portion of the new continent hitherto unvisited by the Cascabel family, there was no doubt but the public, on the mere faith of its reputation, should gladly give its members the welcome they deserved.

Beyond that point, our travelers would be in British Columbia, and although, there, the towns were numerous, never, no, never would Mr, Cascabel stoop so low as to open his hands for English shillings or pence. It was bad enough already, it was too bad, that the *Fair Rambler* and its occupants should be compelled to journey a distance of over six hundred miles on the soil of a British colony!

As to Siberia, with its long desert steppes, all they would meet there would be perhaps some of those Samoyedes or Tchuktchis who seldom leave the coast. There, no takings in perspective; that was a foregone conclusion; proof evident thereof would be forthcoming in due time.

All being agreed upon, Mr. Cascabel decided that the *Fair Rambler* would start off next morning at daybreak. Meanwhile, there was supper wanted. Away Cornelia set to work with her usual heartiness, and while she was at her cooking-stove, with her kitchen-help Clovy:

“All the same,” said she, “that’s a grand idea of Mr. Cascabel’s.”

“I believe you, mistress, a grand idea like all those that simmer in his pot, — I mean, that gallop through his brain.”

“And then, Clovy, no sea to cross on this road, and no sea-sickness.”

“Unless — the ice should heave up and down in the strait!”

“That’s enough, Clovy, and no ill omens!”

Meanwhile, Sander was doing a few somersaults, with which his father was delighted. Napoleona, on her side, was executing some graceful steps, while the dogs frisked about her. Nor was it needless now to keep in good form, since the performances were going to be resumed.

Suddenly, Sander called out:

“Why, the animals of the troupe! Nobody thought of asking *their* opinion about our great journey!”

And running to Vermont:

“Well, my old fellow, what do you think of it, eh? A little nine thousand miles of a jog?”

Then, turning toward Gladiator:

“What will *your* old legs say about it?”

Both horses neighed at the same time as if in token of cheerful assent.

It was now the turn of the dogs.

“Here, Wagram! here, Marengo, what jolly old capers you are going to cut, eh?”

A merry bark and a gambol seemed to supply the desired reply. It was plain that Wagram and Marengo were ready to go the wide world over at the beck of their master.

The ape was next called upon to speak his mind.

“Come, John Bull!” exclaimed Sander, “don’t put on such a long face! You’ll see lots of countries, my old boy! And, if you are cold, we’ll put your warm jacket on you! And those funny faces of yours? I do hope you have not forgotten how to make them, have you?”

No! John Bull had not forgotten any such thing, and the antics he made there and then excited the laughter of all around him.

Remained the parrot.

Sander took it out of its cage. The bird strutted about, nodding its head and “squaring itself” on its legs.

“Well, Jako,” asked Sander, “you say nothing? Have you lost your tongue? — We are going on such a glorious journey! Are you pleased, Jako?”

Jako drew from the depths of its throat a series of articulate sounds in which the *r*’s rolled as if they had come out of Mr. Cascabel’s powerful larynx.

“Bravo!” cried Sander. “He is quite satisfied — Jako approves the motion! Jako votes with the ayes!”

And the young lad, his hands on the ground, and his feet up in the air, began a series of somersaults and contortions which gained him the applause of his father

Just then, Cornelia appeared.

“Supper is laid,” she cried.

One moment later, all the guests were sitting down in the dining-room, and the meal was consumed to the last crumb of bread.

It would have seemed as though everything was forgotten already, when Clovy brought the conversation back to the famous safe:

“Why, the thought now strikes me, boss. What a sell for those two scoundrels!”

“How’s that?” inquired John.

“As they haven’t the word for the lock, they’ll never be able to open the safe.”

“And that’s why I feel sure they’ll bring it back!” answered Mr. Cascabel with an outburst of laughter.

And this extraordinary man, wholly absorbed by his new project, had already forgotten both the theft and the thieves!

CHAPTER V.

ON THE ROAD.

YES! on the road to Europe, but this time, according to an itinerary which is adopted by few only and which can hardly be recommended to travelers who are hardpressed.

“And, still, we are so,” thought Mr. Cascabel to himself, “especially hard pressed for money!”

The start took place in the morning of the 2d of March. At early morn, Vermont and Gladiator were put to the *Fair Rambler*. Mrs. Cascabel took her place in the wagon with Napoleona, leaving her husband and her two sons to go on foot, whilst Clovy held the reins. As to John Bull, he had perched himself on the railing, and the two dogs were already running ahead.

It was beautiful weather. The new sap of spring swelled the early buds on the shrubs. Nature was beginning to unbosom those charms that she eventually unfolds in such profusion under Californian skies. The birds warbled in the foliage of the evergreen trees, the green oaks, and the white oaks, and the pine-trees whose slender trunks swung to and fro over huge sheaves of heather. Here and there clumps of dwarf chestnut-trees, and here and there one of those apple-trees, the fruit of which, under the name of manzanilla, is used for the making of Indian cider.

Whilst checking the adopted route on his map as he went along, John did not forget that it was his especial duty likewise to supply the kitchen with fresh game. Indeed, in case of need, Marengo would have given him a reminder. A good huntsman and a good dog are made for each other. And they are never in closer sympathy than where there is abundance of game, which was the case in the present instance. Rarely it was that Mrs. Cascabel had not to display her skill on a hare, a crested partridge, a heath-cock, or a few of those mountain quails with pretty little egrets, the sweet-scented flesh of which is such delicate eating. If game proved so plentiful all the way to Behring's Strait, right through the plains of Alaska, our traveling family would have but little expense to incur for their daily food. Beyond that, perhaps, on the continent of Asia, they might not be so well supplied. But they would see about it, when the *Fair Rambler* had entered the endless steppes of the Tchuktchis.

Everything was therefore going on for the best. Mr. Cascabel was not a man to neglect the favorable circumstances that the weather and the temperature afforded him just then. The utmost speed was made, compatible with the horses' powers of endurance, and every advantage taken of the roads that the summer rains would render impracticable a few months later. This resulted in an average of twenty to twenty-five miles per twenty-four hours, with a halt in the middle of the day for a meal and a rest, and a halt at six in the evening for the night encampment. The country was not as solitary as might be imagined. The field labors of spring-time called out the farmers, to whom this rich and generous soil procures a life of comfort which they would be envied in any other part of the globe. Frequently, besides, they came across farms, hamlets, villages and even towns, especially when the *Fair Rambler* followed the left bank of the Sacramento, through that region which once was pre-eminently the gold country and still continues to bear the significant name of Eldorado.

In conformity with the programme made out by the leader, the troupe gave performances wherever an opportunity presented itself for the display of its talents. It had not been heard of yet in this part of California; and do you not find everywhere people who ask nothing better than to enjoy themselves? At Placerville, at Auburn, at Marysville, at Tehama, and other more or less important cities, somewhat weary of the ever-recurring American circus which visits them at periodical intervals, the Cascabels received an equal proportion of applause and of cents, the latter mounting up to a few dozen dollars. Napoleona's gracefulness and courage, Sander's extraordinary suppleness, John's marvelous skill as a juggler, not to forget Clovy's drolleries and tricks, were appreciated by good judges as they deserved to be. The very dogs did wonders in company with John Bull. As to Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel, they proved themselves worthy of their fair fame, the former in muscular exercises, the latter in open-hand wrestling encounters in which she brought to the ground such amateurs as ventured to meet her.

By the 12th of March, the *Fair Rambler* had reached the little town of Shasta, on which the mountain of the same name looks down from a height of fourteen thousand feet. Toward the west could be noticed the ill-defined outline of the Coast Ranges, which, luckily, had not to be crossed to reach the frontier of Oregon. But the country was very hilly; the route lay between the whimsical easterly offshootings of the mountain, and along those scarce-trodden roads the wagon proceeded but slowly. Moreover, the villages were becoming few and far between. Naturally it would have been better to journey along through the territories close to the coast where natural obstacles were less numerous, but these lie on the other side of the Coast Ranges, and the passes of the latter are so to say impracticable. It therefore appeared a wiser plan to travel northward, and only to touch the very edges of the Ranges, at the frontier of Oregon.

Such was the advice given by John, the geographer of the troupe, and it was deemed prudent to adopt it.

On the 19th of March, when Fort Jones had been left behind, the *Fair Rambler* halted in view of the little town of Yreka. Here, a warm welcome, and not a few dollars. It was the first appearance of a French troupe in this part. Every one to his taste! In those far away districts of America, the children of France excite none but friendly feelings. They are always received with open arms, and a great deal better, most assuredly, than they would be by certain of their European neighbors.

In this locality they were able to hire, at a moderate price, a few horses that proved a help to Vermont and Gladiator. Thus the *Fair Rambler* was enabled to cross the chain at the foot of its northern extremity, and this time without being pillaged by its drivers.

Although not exempt from obstacles and delays, this part of the journey was accomplished without any accidents, thanks to the measures of precaution that were adopted.

At last, on the 27th of March, at a distance of some three hundred miles from the Sierra Nevada, the *Fair Rambler* crossed the frontier of the Oregon Territory. The valley was bounded to the east by Mount Pitt, standing up like a style on the surface of a sun-dial.

Horses and men had worked hard. A little rest was needed at Jacksonville. Then the Rogue river having been crossed, the caravan followed a track that meandered as far as the eye could reach along the sea-coast toward the north.

The country was rich, hilly still, and very favorable to agriculture. On all sides, meadows and woods; practically a continuation of the Californian region. Here and there were bands of Shastas and Umpqua Indians, roving about the country. There was nothing to be feared at their hands.

It was at this time that John, who kept on reading the books of travels of his little library, — for he was determined to turn his studies to profit — thought fit to give his people a warning which it was deemed opportune to heed.

They were a few miles to the north of Jacksonville, in the middle of a district covered with immense forests and protected by Fort Lane which stands on a hill at a height of two thousand feet.

“We shall have to be very careful,” said John, “for this country swarms with serpents.”

“Serpents!” screamed Napoleona with affright, “serpents! Let us go away, father!”

“Don’t be uneasy, child!” answered Mr. Cascabel. “We shall get on all right, if we only take some precautions.”

“Are those nasty things dangerous?” inquired Cornelia.

“Very dangerous, mother,” replied John. “They are rattlesnakes, the most dangerous of serpents. If you avoid them, they do not attack you; but if you touch them, if you knock against them unintentionally, they stand up, swoop down on you and bite you; and their bites are almost always fatal.”

“Where do they lie?” asked Sander.

“Under dry leaves where they are not easily noticed,” replied John. “Still, as they make a rattling sound by shaking the rings on their tail, you have time to avoid them.”

“If so, then,” said Mr. Cascabel, “let us mind our p’s and q’s (the serpent’s q’s, of course) and keep our ears open!”

John had been quite right to draw attention to this fact; serpents were very numerous in Western America. Not alone did the Crotalidæ abound, but the Tarentulæ likewise, the latter almost as dangerous as the former.

Needless to add that the utmost caution was used, and each one looked on the ground as he walked. There was an eye to be kept, moreover, to the horses and the other animals of the troupe, no less exposed than their masters to the attacks of the insects and the reptiles.

Besides, John had thought it his duty to add that these dreaded snakes had a deplorable habit of creeping their way into houses, and, doubtless, were equally disrespectful of carriages. A possibility of their paying an unpleasant visit to the *Fair Rambler* was therefore to be feared.

And so, when the evening had come, how carefully they looked under the beds, under the furniture, in every nook and corner! And what screams Napoleona would utter when she fancied she saw one of those ugly reptiles and mistook some coil of rope or other for a crotalus, deprived though it was of a triangular head! And the fits of terror she had when, in semi-wakefulness, she imagined she heard the noise of a rattle at the other end of the compartment! It must be said that Cornelia was hardly braver than her daughter.

“Look here,” exclaimed her husband, losing patience one day, “the devil take both the snakes that frighten the women, and the women that are afraid of snakes! Mother Eve was not such a coward, and many a chat she had with them!”

“Oh! — that was in the earthly paradise!” said the little girl.

“And that was not the best thing she ever did, either!” added Mrs. Cascabel.

This state of things kept Clovy busy every night. At first, he had hit upon the plan of lighting large fires, for which the forest supplied the necessary fuel; but John suggested to him that if the light of the fire was able to keep the serpents away, it was likely to attract the tarentulæ.

On the whole, our travelers felt really easy in their minds only in the villages where now and then the *Fair Rambler* halted to spend a night; there, danger was infinitely less.

Nor were these villages very far apart from each other; witness Cannonville on the Cow Creek, Roseburg, Rochester, Yoculla where Mr. Cascabel pocketed more dollars. All things considered, as he earned more than he spent, the prairies supplying him with grass for his horses, the forest with game for his kitchen, the streams with fish for his table, the journey really cost nothing. And the produce of the performances kept on heaping up. But, alas! how far they were from the two thousand dollars, stolen in the Sierra Nevada Pass!

However, if the little troupe eventually escaped the bites of the snakes and of the tarentulæ, they were to be visited in a different way. And it happened just a few days later; so numerous and manifold are the means devised by nature to test the patience of poor mortals here below!

The wagon, ever rumbling up through the Oregon district, had just passed Eugene City. This name had proved a source of genuine pleasure, pointing out, as it did, the French origin of the settlement. Mr. Cascabel would have been glad to know that countryman of his, that Eugene who was doubtless one of the founders of the said town. He must have been a worthy man, and, if his name does not appear among the modern names of French kings, the Charles, the Louis, the Francis, the Henrys, the Philippes, — and the Napoleons, it is French none the less, thoroughly French!

After a halt in the towns of Harrisburg, Albany and Jefferson, the *Fair Rambler* “dropped anchor” before Salem, a rather important city, the capital of Oregon, built on one of the banks of the Villamette.

It was the 3d of April.

There, Mr. Cascabel allowed twenty-four hours’ rest to his staff, — at least in so far as they were travelers; for the public square of the town was turned to advantage by the artists, and a round sum rewarded their exertions.

During their leisure moments John and Sander, hearing that the river was looked upon as abounding in fish, had gone and enjoyed the pleasure of angling.

But, the following night, behold father, mother, children all suffering such tortures, from a feeling of itching right over the body, as to suggest the possibility of their being the victims of one of those old practical jokes still played at country weddings.

And great was their wonderment, on the next morning, when they looked at each other!

“Why, I am as red as a Far West Indian!” exclaimed Cornelia.

“And I am swelled out like a gold beater’s skin,” cried Napoleona.

“And I am one mass of blisters from head to foot!” said Clovy.

“What does it all mean?” asked Mr. Cascabel. “Have they got the plague in these parts?”

“I think I know what it is,” answered John, as he examined his arms, speckled with reddish spots.

“What?”

“We have caught the *yedra*, as it is called here.”

“The devil take your *yedra*! Come, John, will you tell us the meaning of it?”

“The *yedra*, father, is a plant which you have only to smell, to touch, or even, so they say, to look at, to suffer from its evil power. It poisons you at a distance.”

“How is that? We are poisoned,” asked Mrs. Cascabel, “poisoned!”

“Don’t be afraid, mother,” John hastened to reply. “We shall get over it with a little itching and perhaps a little fever: that will be all.”

The explanation was the correct one. This *yedra* is a dangerous, an extremely venomous plant. When the wind is loaded with the almost impalpable pollen of this shrub, if the skin be but touched by it, it reddens, gets covered with pimples, and becomes marbled with blotches. Probably, while crossing the woods in the neighborhood of Salem, Mr. Cascabel and his people had happened to be in a current of *yedra*. On the whole, the pustular eruption they suffered from hardly lasted twenty-four hours, during which time, it is true, there was such general scratching and rubbing as to excite the jealousy of John Bull, on whose favorite and continual occupation, this seemed an encroachment on the part of mankind.

On the 5th of April, the *Fair Rambler* left Salem, bringing away a very lively remembrance of the few hours spent in the forests of the Villamette, — a pretty name for a river, for all that, and one with a pleasant sound for French ears.

By the 7th of April, after calling at Fairfield, at Clackamas, Oregon City, Portland, towns already grown into importance, the troupe reached without any other accident, the banks of the Columbia River, on the frontier of that state of Oregon, three hundred and fifty miles of which they had just traveled over.

To the north stretched out Washington Territory.

It is mountainous in that portion lying east of the route followed by the *Fair Rambler* in its endeavors to reach Behring Strait. Here are developed the ramifications of the Cascade Ranges, with peaks such as St. Helens, nine thousand seven hundred feet in height, those of Mt. Baker and Mt. Rainier eleven thousand feet high. It seems as though nature, having spent herself in endless plains ever since she left the coast of the Atlantic, had preserved all her upheaving power to throw up the mountains with which the west of the new continent bristles. If we were to look upon these countries as a sea, we might say that this sea, still, unruffled, almost asleep on the one side, is stormy and angry on the other, and that the crests of its waves are mountain peaks.

This was John’s remark, and the father was greatly pleased with the comparison.

“That’s right, that’s quite right!” he answered. “After the sun comes the storm! Pshaw, our *Fair Rambler* is not weak about the knees! She’ll weather the storm, she will! All sails up, lads, all sails up!”

And the sails were set, and the *Rambler* continued her cruise through these billowy regions. In truth, — to keep up the simile, — the sea was beginning to calm down, and, thanks to the exertions of the crew, the fair ship of the Cascabels pulled through the worst passes unhurt. If, at times, speed had to be slackened, they succeeded, at least, in avoiding the reefs.

Then, a warm and sympathetic welcome always awaited them in the little townships, at Kalama, at Monticello, as well as at the forts, which are, strictly speaking, nothing else but military stations. In vain would you look for ramparts there, a paling at most; still the little garrisons occupying these posts are sufficient to keep in due awe the wandering Indians who roam about through the country.

That is why the *Fair Rambler* was threatened neither by the Chinooks nor by the Nesquallys when it ventured into the Walla-Walla country. When the shades of evening fell and these Indians collected around the encampment, they never showed any evil disposition. By far the greatest source of surprise for them was John Bull, whose ludicrous faces excited their laughter. They had never seen an ape, and doubtless they took this one for one of the members of the family.

“Why, of course! He is a little brother of mine!” Sander would say to them, in spite of Mrs. Cascabel’s most indignant protestations.

At last they arrived in Olympia, the capital town of Washington Territory, and there “by general desire” was given the last performance of the French troupe in the United States. Now, the road would lie along the coast of the Pacific, or rather those numerous sounds, those capricious and manifold straits sheltered by the large islands of Vancouver and Queen Charlotte.

After a call at Steilacoom, they had to wind round Puget Sound, in order to reach Fort Bellingham, situated near the strait which separates the islands from the mainland.

Then came Whatcom station, with Mt. Baker pointing upward through the clouds at the horizon, and Simiamoo station, at the mouth of Georgia Strait.

At length, on the 27th of April, after a trip of over a thousand miles from Sacramento, the *Fair Rambler* reached the frontier line which was adopted by the 1847 treaty and still marks the limit of British Columbia.

CHAPTER VI.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUED.

FOR the first time, Mr. Cascabel, the natural, the implacable enemy of England, was about setting his foot on an English possession. For the first time the sole of his shoe would tread on British soil and be defiled with Anglo-Saxon dust. Let the reader forgive us such very strong language; most undoubtedly such was the somewhat ludicrous form of expression under which the thought presented itself to our showman’s mind, so tenacious in its now unjustifiable patriotic hatred.

And still, Columbia was not in Europe. It was no portion of that group formed by England, Scotland and Wales and bearing the special name of Great Britain. But it was none the less British, just as India, Australia, New Zealand; and, as such, it was repulsive to Cæsar Cascabel.

British Columbia is a part of New Britain, one of the most important colonies of the United Kingdom, comprising as it does Nova Scotia, Upper and Lower Canada, as well as the immense territories ceded to the Hudson Bay Company. In width, it stretches from one ocean to the other, from the coasts of the Pacific to those of the Atlantic. To the south it is bounded by the frontier of the United States, a line running from Washington Territory to the coast in the State of Maine.

Columbia was therefore, on all counts, English soil, and the necessities of the journey left our travelers no chance of avoiding it. When all was added up, it was only a matter of six hundred miles to the southern extremity of Alaska, that is to say to the Russian possessions in Western America. Still, a trip of six hundred miles on “that hated soil,” although a mere nothing for the *Fair Rambler* with its record of untold mileage, was six hundred times too much, and Mr. Cascabel was determined to clear that distance in the shortest possible time.

Henceforth, no halting save for meals. No exercising for the equilibrist or the gymnast, no more dancing, no more wrestling. The Anglo-Saxons would have to go without it. The Cascabels felt nothing but contempt for any coin bearing the effigy of the queen. Better a paper dollar than a silver crown or a gold sovereign!

Under these conditions, it will be understood that the *Fair Rambler* carefully kept away from the villages and gave a wide berth to the towns. If the game by the roadside could supply the wants of the troupe, it would save them from aiding the home trade of this abominable country.

Let it not be imagined that this attitude was but a kind of theatrical pose on the part of Mr. Cascabel. No! It was natural with him. This same philosopher, who had so stoically borne the blow of his late misfortune, who had so quickly recovered his usual merry temper after the robbery in the Sierra Nevada, became gloomy and speechless as soon as he stepped into New Britain. He trudged along with downcast eyes and a scowling look, his cap drawn down to his ears; and wicked were the glances he cast on the inoffensive travelers who happened to cross his path. That he was in no mood for jokes was plainly shown one day when Sander drew on himself a severe rebuke for his ill-timed mirth.

That day, sure enough, behold the youngster taking it into his head to walk a good quarter of a mile, backwards, in front of the horses, with a thousand and one contortions and grimaces.

On his father’s inquiring the reason of this mode of locomotion, which should be, to say the least, very fatiguing:

“Why, father! Aren’t we going home backwards?” he replied with a wink of his eye.

And all burst out with laughter — even Clovy, who thought the answer was very funny, — unless it should turn out to be very silly.

“Sander,” said Mr. Cascabel angrily, and with his stagey air, “if ever again you indulge in such frolic at a time when we are so little inclined to merriment, I’ll pull your ears for you, and stretch them to your very heels!”

“Well now, father — ”

“Silence under arms! I forbid you to laugh in this Englishmen’s land!”

And no one now thought of smiling or showing his teeth in the presence of the terrible boss, although his anti-Saxon ideas were far from being shared to that extent.

That portion of British Columbia which lies next to the coast of the Pacific is very uneven. It is enclosed, to the east, by the Rocky Mountains, which almost stretch to the polar region; and the deep indentations of the Bute coast, to the west, give it the appearance of a Norwegian coast with its numerous fiords over which a range of mountains raises its picturesque summits. There stand peaks unparalleled in Europe, even in the middle of the Alpine region, glaciers the depth and extent of which surpass all the glories of Switzerland. Such are Mt. Hooker, with an altitude of seventeen thousand four hundred feet, — say three thousand feet higher than the loftiest plateau on Mt. Blanc — and Mt. Brown, higher likewise than the giant of the Alps.

Along the itinerary of the *Fair Rambler* between the eastern and the western ranges, lay a wide and fertile valley with a succession of open plains and magnificent forests. The water-course of this valley gave passage to the Fraser, an important stream, which, after a run of some three hundred miles from south to north, flows into a narrow arm of the sea, bounded by the coast of Bute, Vancouver's Island, and the archipelago it commands.

This Vancouver's Island is two hundred and fifty miles long and seventy-three wide. Originally purchased by the Portuguese, it was seized upon by tho Spaniards, and passed into their hands in 1789. Three times recognized by Vancouver at a time when it was still called Noutka, it bore both the name of the English navigator and that of Captain Quadra, and eventually became the property of Great Britain toward the end of the eighteenth century.

Its present capital is Victoria, its chief town Nanaimo. Its rich coal mines, at first worked by agents of the Hudson Bay Company, constituted one of the most active branches of the trade of San Francisco with the various ports along the western coast.

A little to the north of Vancouver, the mainland is sheltered by Queen Charlotte Island, the most important of the archipelago of that name, and the last of the British possessions in this part of the Pacific.

It will be readily guessed that Mr. Cascabel had no more a thought of visiting this capital than he dreamt of calling at Adelaide or Melbourne in Australia, at Madras or Calcutta in India. His only care was going up the valley of the Fraser as swiftly as his horses could go, holding intercourse, meanwhile, with none but Indian natives.

Indeed on their journey northward through the valley, our travelers easily found the game necessary to their sustenance. There was an abundance of deer, hares and partridges, and “on this occasion at least,” Mr. Cascabel would say, “it was respectable people were fed by the game so surely and safely brought down by the gun of his eldest son. That game had no Anglo-Saxon blood in its veins; a Frenchman might partake of it without remorse!”

After passing Fort Langley, the wagon had already sunk deeply in the valley of the Fraser. It had been vain to look for a carriage road on this soil which man seemed to leave almost entirely to itself. Along the right bank of the river, stretched out wide pasture lands extending to the forests in the west, and enclosed far away with a horizon of mountains the summits of which stood out in bold relief on an ever gray sky.

It should be mentioned that, near Westminster, one of the chief towns along the coast of Bute, almost at the mouth of the Fraser, John had taken care to bring the *Fair Rambler* across the river, on the ferry that plies there between the two banks. And an excellent precaution it was; now, after going up the river to its spring, the party would only have to bear somewhat to the west. It was the shortest, the most practical way to reach that portion of Alaska which is adjacent to the Columbian frontier.

Over and above this, Mr. Cascabel had had the good luck to meet with an Indian who had offered to guide him to the Russian possessions, and the trust he had placed in this native was not to prove unmerited. Of course this was additional expense; but it was best not to look at a few dollars more or less, when the security of the travelers and the rapidity of the journey were in question.

This guide was called Ro-No. He belonged to one of those tribes whose *tyhis*, or chiefs, have frequent intercourse with Europeans. These Indians are in every way different from the Chilicots, a deceitful, cunning, savage tribe, against whom travelers should be on their guard in the northwest of America. A few years before, in 1864, these savages had had their share in the slaughter of a whole company of men who had been sent to the coast of Bute for the laying down of a road. Was it not under their blows that Engineer Waddington had fallen, whose death was so universally regretted throughout the colony? Was it not said that, at that very time, these Chilicots had torn out the heart of one of their victims, and had devoured it, like so many Australian cannibals?

John, who had read the tale of this frightful tragedy in Frederick Whymper's travels through North America, had thought it his duty to warn his father of the danger of an encounter with the Chilicots; but naturally no mention of it had been made to the other members of the family, whom it was needless to frighten. Indeed, since this shocking event, these redskins had kept prudently out of the way, awed as they had been by the hanging of a few of their number, who had been more directly implicated in the affair. This belief was corroborated by guide Ro-No, who impressed it on the travelers that they had no cause for anxiety while going through British Columbia.

The weather continued to keep fair. Already indeed the heat began to be severely felt for a couple of hours in the middle of the day. The buds commenced to expand along the branches swollen with sap; leaves and flowers soon blended their vernal tints.

The country presented that aspect so characteristic of northern zones. The valley of the Fraser was encased in the midst of forests abounding with the scented trees of the north, cedars and firs, and likewise those Douglas pines whose trunks measure forty-five feet in circumference and whose tops rise to a height of over a hundred feet above the ground. Both the woods and the valley were plentifully stocked with game, and, without going much out of his way, John easily supplied the daily requirements of the kitchen.

Nor did the district in any way bear the look of a desert. Here and there were villages in which the Indians seemed to live in comparative amity with the Anglo-Saxon administration. Up and down the river glided little flotillas of canoes made of cedar wood, borne down by the current itself, or propelled against it with paddle and sail.

Frequently, too, they fell in with bands of redskins, on the tramp southward. Wrapped in their white woolen cloaks, they would exchange a few words with Mr. Cascabel, who managed, somehow, to make out something of what they said; for they used a singular dialect, the Chinook, a mixture of French, English, and the native language.

“There!” he would exclaim, “who would have thought I knew Chinook! Another language I can talk without ever having learnt it!”

Chinook is, indeed, — so Ro-No said, — the name given to that language throughout Western America, and it is used by the various tribes in those parts, right into the Alaskan provinces.

By this time, the warm season having thus far advanced, it is needless to say that the snows of winter had completely disappeared, although they sometimes keep on to the last days of April. And so the journey was progressing under favorable circumstances.

Short of overtiring them, Mr. Cascabel urged on his horses as much as he prudently could, so desirous was he of leaving Columbian territory. The temperature was rising gradually, a fact that would have been evident, were it but by the number of mosquitoes, which soon became unbearable. It was very hard to keep them out of the *Fair Rambler*, even with the precautionary measure of having no lights after darkness had fallen.

“You villainous creatures!” cried Mr. Cascabel one day, after an unsuccessful chase with these exasperating insects.

“I should like to know what use are those horrible flies?” asked Sander.

“They are of use, — to eat us up,” replied Clovy.

“And especially to eat the English residents of Columbia,” added Mr. Cascabel. “So, children, I positively forbid you to kill a single one of them! There will never be too many for my English lords, and that’s a consolation for me!”

During this portion of the journey our marksman’s gun was more productive than ever. The game often “rose” of themselves, and more especially the deer, which came from the forests to the plain to quench their thirst in the cool waters of the Fraser. With Wagram forever at his heels, John was able to bring down a few without having to go farther out of his road than might have been prudent, — which would have been a source of anxiety to his mother. Sander would sometimes go with him, happy to try his first shots under his big brother; and it would not have been easy to tell which was the fleeter or the longer-winded runner, the young hunter or his spaniel.

However, John had had but a few deer on his record, when he was lucky enough, one day, to kill a bison. On that occasion, it is true, he ran real danger; for the animal, merely wounded by his first shot, made a dart toward him, and he barely had time to spot him with a second bullet in the head, ere he himself would have been knocked to the ground and torn to pieces by the brute. As may be imagined, he refrained from giving any details of this adventure. But the exploit having been accomplished within a few hundred paces of the Fraser, the horses had to be taken down to the spot, to drag home the enormous buffalo, whose bushy mane gave it the appearance of a lion.

The reader knows how useful this ruminant is to the prairie Indian, who never hesitates to attack it with his spear or his arrows. His hide is the bed of the wigwam, the clothing of the family; some of those “garments” there are which will fetch twenty piastres. As to the flesh, the natives dry it in the sun and then cut it in long slices: a precious reserve for times of famine.

If, generally speaking, Europeans eat only the tongue of the bison, — and, in truth, it is an exquisite tid-bit, — the staff of the little troupe exhibited much less epicurean taste. Nothing was thought fit to be despised for those young digestive organs. Besides, served up in Cornelia’s happy style, the bison’s flesh, whether toasted, roasted, or boiled, was pronounced excellent, and was sufficient for a number of meals. Of the animal’s tongue, each one could have but a small morsel, and it was unanimously agreed nothing choicer had ever been tasted.

During the first fortnight of the journey through Columbia no other incident worthy of notice occurred. However, there were signs of a coming change in the weather, and the time was not far distant when downpours of torrents of rain would, if not check, at least delay, any advance northward.

There was also to be dreaded a possibility of the swollen Fraser overflowing its banks. Now, such an overflow would have placed the *Fair Rambler* in the greatest dilemma, not to say the greatest danger.

Fortunately, although, when the rain fell, the Fraser did swell with great rapidity, it only rose to the level of its banks. Thus the plains escaped being flooded right to the edge of the forests that begin rising, in terrace fashion, from the first upheaving of the valley. Of course, the wagon proceeded now but very slowly, its wheels sinking into the softened ground, but under its strong and taut roof, the Cascabels continued to find that safe shelter it had already afforded them so often against the gale and the storm.

CHAPTER VII.

THROUGH CARIBOO.

GOOD honest Cascabel, why had you not come a few years sooner, and visited then the country you are about to travel through in this part of British Columbia? Why had not the ups and downs of your nomadic life brought you here when gold lay on the ground, and all that was needed was to stoop and pick it up! Why should the tale, told by John to his father, concerning that extraordinary period, be the story of the past, not the history of the present!

“This, now, is the Cariboo, father,” said John, that day; “but you may not know, perhaps, what the Cariboo is?”

“Not the slightest idea,” answered Mr. Cascabel. “Is it a biped, or a four-footed animal?”

“An animal?” exclaimed Napoleona. “Is it a large one? And is it very cruel? And does it bite?”

“Cariboo is indeed the name of an animal,” replied John; “but in this instance it is simply a district bearing that name; it is the gold country, the Eldorado of Columbia. What wealth it contained once! And how many people it has enriched!”

“And how many it has beggared at the same time, I guess!” added Mr. Cascabel.

“No doubt, father, and, we may be sure, that was the majority. Still, there were miners’ associations whose takings went up to two thousand marks a day. In a certain valley of this Cariboo, William Creek valley, gold was picked up in handfuls.”

And yet, considerable as was the yielding of this auriferous valley, too many people had come to work it. And so, owing to the accumulation of gold-seekers and the mob they attract along with them, life soon became a matter of difficulty there, not to speak of the prodigious rise in the price of everything. Food was priceless; bread was a dollar a pound. Contagious diseases broke out in the midst of these unhealthy surroundings. Finally came misery, and, in its train, death, for the greater number of those who had flocked to this spot. Was this not a repetition of what had taken place, a few years before, in Australia and in California?

“Father,” said Napoleona, “all the same it would be nice to find a big lump of gold on our road!”

“And what would you do with it, pet?”

“What would she do with it?” Cornelia replied. “She would bring it to dear little mother and she, I guess, would very soon have it exchanged for its value in current money!”

“Well, let us have an eye open,” said Clovy, “and for sure, we can’t but find something, unless — ”

“Unless we find nothing, you were going to say,” said John. “And that is just what will happen, my poor Clovy; the gold box has been emptied, — regularly emptied clean out.”

“Well! — Well!” replied Sander, “we shall see!”

“That’s enough, children!” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel, in his most imperative tone of voice. “I forbid any of you to enrich himself in that manner. Gold picked up on English soil! Fie! Let us pass on, — let us pass on, I say, without stopping, without stooping to pick up a nugget, even if it were the size of Clovy’s head! And when we get to the frontier, should there be no card stuck up, with the words ‘Please wipe your feet,’ we shall give ours a good wiping, my children, so as to take away no part or parcel of this Columbian soil with us!”

Always the same Cæser Cascabel! But let him be easy in his mind! It is probable that not one member of his family will have the least chance of picking up the smallest particle of gold.

For all that, and notwithstanding Mr. Cascabel’s prohibition, many a side glance was cast on the ground, along the road. A pebble of any sort seemed to Napoleona, and especially to Sander, as though it should be worth its weight in gold. And why not? In the list of auriferous countries, does not North America hold the foremost rank? Australia, Russia, Venezuela, China, are only next to her.

Meanwhile, the rainy season had set in. Every day heavy showers came down, and progress became the more arduous.

The Indian guide spurred the horses onward. He feared lest the rios or creeks, affluents of the Fraser, hitherto almost dry, should suddenly fill up; and, how would they be crossed over if no fords could be found? The *Fair Rambler* would run the risk of standing still, in distress, for the several weeks that the rainy season lasts. All speed then should be made to get out of the valley of the Fraser.

We said the natives in these parts were no longer to be dreaded since the Chilicots were driven to the east. This was quite true; but there were certain formidable animals — bears amongst others — an encounter with which would have proved really dangerous.

This fact Sander learned by experience, on an occasion when he well-nigh paid dearly the fault he had committed of disobeying his father.

It was on the afternoon of the 17th of May. A halt had been made some fifty paces beyond a creek that the party had just crossed dry-footed. This creek, deeply buried as it was, would have proved an insurmountable obstacle, if perchance a sudden rise of the waters had transformed it into a torrent.

The halt was to be of a couple of hours' duration. John went ahead in search of game; and Sander, although ordered not to leave the encampment, crossed back the creek unnoticed and went back along the road, carrying nothing with him but a rope, about a dozen feet long, coiled around his waist.

The lad had an idea in his head: he had noticed, by the roadside, a beautiful bird with many-colored plumage; he meant to chase it home so as to find out its nest; then with the help of the rope, he would have little trouble in climbing up any tree to possess himself of it.

In thus betaking himself away Sander committed an error all the greater as the weather was threatening. A dark cloud was gathering overhead. But what will stop a lad running after a bird?

In a few moments Sander was rushing down a thick forest, the first trees of which bordered the left bank of the creek. The bird fluttering, from branch to branch, seemed to take a delight in enticing him along.

Sander, his mind full of his chase, was forgetting that the *Fair Rambler* should start off again in two hours' time; and, within twenty minutes of his leaving the camp, he had dived a couple of miles into the depths of the forest. Here no roads, nothing more than narrow paths, netted over with brushwood, at the foot of the cedars and the pine trees.

The bird, with many a merry twitter, winged it lightly from tree to tree, and Sander ran and leaped like a young wild-cat. Such efforts, however, were doomed to be fruitless: the bird eventually disappeared in the undergrowth.

"Well, go to Jericho!" exclaimed Sander, as he stopped short, annoyed at his failure.

Then, only, through the foliage, he noticed the cloudy sky above. Sheets of light fitfully brightened the darkened verdure around.

They were the first flashes of lightning, quickly followed by long peals of thunder.

"It is high time to go home," the young lad thought to himself, "and what will father say?"

Just then his attention was attracted by a singular-looking object, a peculiarly shaped stone, of the size of a pine-cone, and bristling with metallic points.

Of course, in our youth's mind, this was a nugget, forgotten by somebody in this part of Cariboo. And with a cry of joy, he stoops for it, weighs it in his hand, and consigns it to his pocket, promising himself not to breathe a word about it to anybody.

“We shall see what they will say about it some day, when I have changed it for fine gold coins!”

Sander had scarcely pocketed his precious stone, when the storm burst with a terrific thunderclap. And its last echoes still lingered in the air, when a wild roar was heard.

At a distance of twenty paces, in the middle of the thicket, stood up a huge grizzly bear.

Full of courage as he was, Sander took to flight with all his might, in the direction of the creek. Instantly, the bear was after him.

If Sander could only reach the bed of the stream, get to the other side and away to the camp, he was saved. His people would be well able to keep the grizzly at a respectful distance on the left bank of the creek, or perhaps to level him to the ground and make a bed-room rug of him.

But the rain now fell in torrents, the flashes of lightning were more frequent, and the heavens shook with the roars of thunder. Sander, drenched to his skin, hindered in his flight by his wet garments, was in danger of stumbling at every step, and a fall would have left him at the mercy of the brute. Still he managed to keep his distance, and in less than a quarter of an hour he was on the bank of the creek.

Here he now faced an insurmountable obstacle. The creek, transformed into a veritable torrent, whirled along stones, trunks and stumps of trees torn away by the violence of the flood. The waters had risen to the level of the banks. Plunging into this whirlpool was rushing to death without a chance of escape.

To return on his steps, Sander dared not venture. He felt the bear on his heels, ready to take him in his grasp. And the *Fair Rambler* was hardly visible, yonder under the trees; letting its occupants know of his presence here was out of the question.

Almost without a thought on his part, instinct suggested to him the only thing that might save him perhaps.

A tree stood there, within five paces of him, a cedar, the lowest branches of which overhung the creek.

Making a dart for it, clasping its trunk in his arms, hoisting himself up to the fork with the help of the bumps on the bark, and gliding along through the inferior horizontal branches, all this was for the lad the work of an instant. An ape would not have been more clever or more supple. Nor was this surprising on the part of a little clown; and now, he could think himself safe.

Alas, it was not for long. The bear, who had taken up a position at the foot of the tree, was preparing to climb up, so that it would be very hard to escape him, even by taking refuge among the highest branches.

Sander lost none of his presence of mind. Was he not the worthy son of the famous Cascabel, with whom getting safe and sound through the hardest passes had grown into a habit?

Leave the tree, he should, of necessity; but how? And afterward, get across the torrent; but in what way? Thanks to the rise occasioned by the deluge of rain, the creek was now overflowing, and its waters spread over the right bank in the direction of the camp.

Calling for help? — His cries could not possibly be heard in the deafening crash of the furious storm. Besides, supposing that Mr. Cascabel, John or Clovy had set out in search of the missing youth, they must have gone on ahead along the road. How could they have guessed that Sander had gone back across the creek?

Meanwhile the bear was climbing up — slowly; still he was gradually coming up, and he soon would reach the fork of the cedar whilst the boy endeavored to make his way to the top.

It is at this moment an idea struck the lad. Seeing that some of the branches stretched for a distance of some ten feet over the creek, he quickly got out the rope he had brought around his waist, and, with a loop at the end of it, skillfully lassoed the extremity of one of these horizontal branches; the latter he bent upward by hauling the rope toward himself and maintained it in this vertical position.

All this had been done cleverly, quickly and with the utmost coolness.

There was no time, indeed, to be lost. The bear was hugging the fork and thence smelling his way among the boughs.

But just then, firmly grasping the top of the strained branch, Sander let it go back like a spring, and he himself was hurled over the creek like a stone shot by a catapult. Then, turning a splendid somersault, he landed himself on the edge of the right bank of the creek, while the bear, in silly amazement, looked at his prey escaping him in mid-air.

“You rascally boy!” It was thus Mr. Cascabel greeted the thoughtless youth on his “landing,” just as he himself arrived at the creek with John and Clovy, after looking in vain for the lad round about the camp.

“You rascal!” he repeated. “How anxious you made us!”

“Well, father, do pull my ears!” answered Sander. “I have deserved it richly!”

But instead of settling accounts with his ears, Mr. Cascabel could not resist kissing both his cheeks, saying:

“Well, don’t do it again, or, if you do — ”

“You’ll kiss me again!” said Sander, giving a hearty kiss to his father.

Then he added:

“I say! — What a sell for the bear! Doesn’t he look sheepish, eh? — for all the world as if he came out of the damaged goods department of a grizzly store!”

John would have dearly liked to have a shot at the bear, who had climbed down and was now skulking away; but going after him was not to be thought of. The flood was still rising; there was nothing more urgent than to avoid it; and all four returned to the *Fair Rambler*.

CHAPTER VIII.

KNAVES’ VILLAGE.

A WEEK after, on the 26th of May, our party had reached the springs of the Fraser. Night and day the rain had kept coming down, but this bad weather should soon come to a stop, so said the Indian guide.

A *détour* round the springs of the river, through a somewhat hilly country, and the *Fair Rambler* now turned due west.

A few days more and Mr. Cascabel would be at the Alaska frontier.

For a week past, not a village, not a hamlet had been seen along the track selected by Ro-No. Indeed they had every reason to prize the services of this native; he knew the country thoroughly.

On that day, the guide informed Mr. Cascabel that he might, if he chose, halt at a village, a short distance off, where twenty-four hours’ rest would not be thrown away on his horses, overworked as they had been.

“What is this village?” inquired Mr. Cascabel, always distrustful when the Columbian population was in question.

“Kokwin village,” replied the guide.

“Kokwin?” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel. “That, in French, would be *Knaves’ Village*.”

“Yes,” said John, “such is the name given in the map; it must be the name of some Indian tribe.”

“Very well! very well! Not so many explanations,” answered Mr. Cascabel. “A most suitable name it is for that village, if it is inhabited by English people, were it but by a half dozen of them!”

In the course of the evening, the *Fair Rambler* did halt at the entrance into the village. Three days at most now separated it from the geographical frontier between Alaska and Columbia.

Thenceforth Mr. Cascabel would speedily recover that happy temper of his, so severely tried on the territory of her Britannic Majesty.

Knaves’ Village was occupied by Indians; but there were not a few Englishmen, professional huntsmen or mere amateurs, who stayed here only during the hunting season.

Among the officers of the Victoria garrison, who happened to be there, was a baronet, Sir Edward Turner by name, a haughty personage and a bully, infatuated with the magical power of his nationality, — one of those “gentlemen” who imagine anything is lawful for them, because of their being Englishmen. Needless to say he hated the French quite as much as Mr. Cascabel hated his countrymen. These two were a match, it is evident.

Now the very evening on which the halt took place, while John, Sander, and Clovy were gone in search of provisions, it happened that the baronet’s dogs fell in with Wagram and Marengo in the vicinity of the *Fair Rambler* and it was apparent that the two French bow-wows shared the national antipathies of their master.

Hence a disagreement between the spaniel and the poodle on one hand, and the pointers on the other; hence a good deal of barking and snarling, then a regular fight, and finally the intervention of the respective owners.

On hearing the noise, Sir Edward had rushed out of the house which he tenanted on the outskirt of the village, and threatened Mr. Cascabel’s dogs with his whip.

The latter immediately found a protector in their master, who made straightway for the baronet.

Sir Edward Turner — he spoke very good French — soon found out the kind of a man he had to deal with, and breaking open the flood-gates of his arrogance, began to treat, *à la* British, our showman in particular and his countrymen in general.

Mr. Cascabel’s feelings, on hearing such language, may easily be imagined. However, as he had no wish — especially in an English country — to get into difficulties which might delay his journey, he bit his lips and said in a tone of voice in no way objectionable:

“It was your dogs, sir, that began to attack mine!”

“Your dogs!” sneered the baronet. “A showman’s curs! — What are they good for but to be snarled at by my pointers or cut by my whip!”

“I’ll pray you to observe,” said Mr. Cascabel, warming up despite his intention to keep cool, “that what you say there is unworthy of a gentleman!”

“Still, what I say is the only answer that one of your sort deserves.”

“I speak politely, sir, — you prove yourself but a cad.”

“I advise you to take care, you who bandy words with Sir Edward Turner.”

Mr. Cascabel filled with passion; with blanched cheeks, eyes aglow, and clenched fists, he was stepping up to the baronet, when Napoleona stood by him:

“Father, do come!” said she. “Mamma wants you!”

Cornelia had sent her daughter to fetch Mr. Cascabel home to the *Fair Rambler*.

“Presently!” replied the father. “Tell mamma to wait till I have done with this *gentleman*, Napoleona!”

At the mention of this name, the baronet indulged in a sarcastic peal of laughter,

“Napoleona!” he repeated, “Napoleona! — That little lass is called after the monster who — ”

This was more than Mr. Cascabel could bear. He stepped forward until his folded arms grazed the baronet’s chest.

“You insult me!” cried he.

“I insult you, — you?”

“Yes, me, as well as the great man who would have made but one mouthful of your island if he had only landed there!”

“Indeed?”

“Yes, would have gobbled it up like an oyster!”

“Contemptible clown!” exclaimed the baronet.

And he had moved one step back in the attitude of the boxer who stands on the defensive.

“Yes, you do insult me, Mr. Baronet, and you shall give me an account of it.”

“Settle accounts with a showman!”

“When you insulted the showman, you made him your equal, sir. And fight we shall, with the sword or the pistol, anything you like, — even with our fists!”

“Why not with bladders like the clowns on your trestles?”

“Ready, sir — ”

“Can I have a fight with a tramp?”

“Yes!” shouted Cascabel, beside himself with rage, “yes! a fight — or a sound drubbing!”

And without minding that he was likely to have heavy odds against him in a boxing encounter with his “gentlemanly” opponent, he was about to dash at him, when Cornelia herself intervened.

At the same time appeared some officers of Sir Edward Turner’s regiment, his hunting companions; they naturally sided with the baronet, determined as they were not to permit im to measure himself with a fellow of that “tribe,” and heaped their insults on the Cascabel family. Indeed these insults were powerless to move the self-composed Cornelia — at least outwardly. She contented herself with throwing on Sir Edward Turner a glance that was anything but reassuring for the man who had insulted her husband.

John, Clovy, and Sander had also appeared on the scene, and the dispute would have degenerated into a general battle, when Mrs. Cascabel cried out:

“Come, Cæser; come along, children! — Now then, all of us to the *Fair Rambler*, and quicker than that!”

There was such an imperative ring in the tone of her voice, that no one thought of disobeying the order.

What an evening Mr. Cascabel spent! His anger could not cool down! He, touched in his honor, touched in the person of his hero! Insulted by an Englishman! He *would* go to him, he would fight him, he *would* fight all his companions, and all the knaves of Knaves’ Village! And his children were but too ready to go and back him. Clovy himself talked of nothing short of eating an Englishman’s nose, — unless it were his ear!

In truth, Cornelia found it no easy task to calm down all her enraged folks. In her heart, she knew that all the wrong was on Sir Edward Turner’s side; she could not deny that her husband first, and every member of the family after him, had received such treatment as showmen of the lowest type would not give each other at a fair!

Still, as she would not let matters grow worse, she would not give in; she showed a bold front to the storm, and when he expressed what she thought would be his final determination to go and give the baronet such a drubbing as would, — she said to him:

“Cæser, I forbid you!”

And Mr. Cascabel, gnawing his heart, had to yield to his wife’s command.

How Cornelia longed to see the dawn of the next day, when they would leave the unlucky village! She would not feel easy until her family would be a few miles farther to the north. And, so as to be sure that nobody would leave the wagon during the night, not only did she carefully lock the door of the *Fair Rambler* but she mounted guard outside, herself.

The next day, the 27th of May, at three in the morning, Cornelia awoke the whole troupe. By way of greater safety, she was anxious to be off before dawn, when all the villagers, Indians or Englishmen, would still be sleeping. This was the best way to prevent a fresh resuming of hostilities. Even at that early hour — a detail worth noticing — the good woman seemed in a singular hurry to raise the camp. All agitation, with anxious features and beaming eyes, prying to the right and to the left, she urged, harassed, and scolded her husband, her children, and Clovy, who were not half quick enough to please her.

“In how many days shall we have crossed the frontier?” she asked of the guide.

“In three days,” replied Ro-No, “if we have no hindrance on the road.”

“Now then, forward, march!” she cried. “And above all, let no one see us going away!”

It should not be imagined that Mr. Cascabel had swallowed the insults thrust down his throat the previous night. Leaving this village without squaring up that little account with the baronet was indeed hard for a Norman, and a patriotic Frenchman, to boot.

“That’s what it is,” he kept on repeating, “to set your foot in one of John Bull’s possessions.”

Still, longing as he was to run down to the village in the hope of coming across Sir Edward Turner, many though the glances were that he cast toward the closed shutters of the house inhabited by that gentleman, he dared not go away from the terrible Cornelia. Not an instant did she leave his side.

“Where are you going, Cæser? — Cæser, stay where you are! — I forbid you stirring, Cæser!”

Mr. Cascabel heard nothing else. Never had he been so completely under the control of his excellent and self-willed wife.

Fortunately, thanks to oft-repeated injunctions, all preparations were soon completed, and the horses stood ready in the shafts. By four o’clock, the dogs, the monkey and the parrot, the husband, the sons and the daughter, were all secured inside the *Fair Rambler*, and Cornelia took a seat by the front railing. Then, as soon as Clovy and the guide were ready at the horses’ heads, the signal was given for the start.

A quarter of an hour later Knaves’ Village had disappeared behind the curtain of tall trees with which it was encircled. It was scarcely daylight. All was silence. Not a living soul was to be seen along the vast plain that stretched forth toward the North.

At last, when it was evident that the departure had been accomplished without attracting the attention of any one in the village, when Cornelia felt perfectly satisfied that neither the Indians nor the English thought of preventing their escape, she heaved a deep sigh of relief, at which her husband felt somewhat hurt.

“How greatly frightened you seemed of those people, Cornelia!” he remarked.

“Yes, greatly,” was her simple reply.

The next three days passed by without any incident, and, as the guide had said, the extreme end of Columbia was reached.

And having safely crossed the Alaska frontier, the *Fair Rambler* was now at liberty to rest.

Once there, the travelers had only to pay off the Indian, who had proved as zealous as faithful, and to thank him for his services. Then Ro-No took leave of the family, after explaining the course they should follow to reach Sitka, the capital of the Russian possessions, as speedily as possible.

Now that he was on English soil no longer, Mr. Cascabel should have breathed more freely! Well, it was not so! At the end of three days, he was still under the influence of the exciting scene at Knaves’ Village. It still weighed heavily on his chest:

“Look here,” he could not refrain from saying to Cornelia, “you should indeed have let me go back and settle accounts with my English lord — ”

“They had been settled before we left, Cæsar!” simply answered Mrs. Cascabel.

And settled they had been, in truth, — settled and squared right even!

During the ensuing night, whilst all her people were asleep at the camp, Cornelia had gone for a stroll round the baronet’s house, and perceiving him on his way to the woods to lie in wait for game, she had followed him a few hundred paces. Then, once under cover of the forest, “the champion of the Chicago female encounters” had administered him one of those “floorers” that leave a man sprawling on the ground. Sir Edward Turner, well thrashed and sore, had got on his legs the next morning only, and must have felt for a long time after, unpleasant reminders of his meeting with this amiable woman.

“Oh, Cornelia! Cornelia!” exclaimed her husband, as he pressed her in his arms, “you have avenged my honor. You were worthy, indeed, to be a Cascabel!”

CHAPTER IX.

CAN’T PASS THROUGH!

ALASKA is that portion of the continent comprised, to the northwest of North America, between the fifty-second and the seventy-second degree of latitude. It is transversely cut by the line of the Arctic polar circle which curves through Behring Strait.

Look at the map with a little attention, and you will recognize without much trouble the outline of a head, of the Israelite type. The forehead is developed between Cape Lisbon and Barrow Point; the orbit of the eye is Kotzebue Sound; the nose is Cape Prince of Wales; the mouth is Norton Bay; and the traditional beard is the Alaska peninsula, continued on by that sprinkling of Aleutian Islands which dots the Pacific Ocean. As to the head, it ends with the termination of the ranges, the last slopes of which die off into the Ice Sea.

Such is the country about to be crossed obliquely by the *Fair Rambler* over a distance of eighteen hundred miles.

Of course, John had carefully studied the map, its mountains, its water-courses, the shape of the coast line, in fine the whole itinerary to be followed. He even had delivered a little lecture on the subject, a lecture listened to with the utmost interest by the whole family.

Thanks to him, everybody — not forgetting Clovy — knew that this country, the northwestern extremity of the American continent, had first been visited by the Russians, then by the Frenchman Lapérouse and by the Englishman Vancouver, and lastly by the American McClure, at the time of his expedition in search of Sir John Franklin.

In reality, the district had already been known — though partly only — thanks to the explorations of Sir Frederick Whymper and of Colonel Bulkley, in 1865, when there had been a question of laying a submarine cable between the old and the new worlds through Behring Strait. Up to this time, the interior of Alaska had hardly been journeyed through except by the travelers of houses in the fur and hide trade.

It was then that Monroe's famous doctrine made its reappearance in international politics, a doctrine in accordance with which America should be the exclusive property of Americans. If the colonies of Great Britain, Columbia, and the Dominion, were fated to remain non-American for a more or less lengthened period, Russia, perhaps, might be induced to cede Alaska to the Union, say a hundred and thirty-five thousand square feet of territory. And with this object in view, correspondence was entered into with the Muscovite government.

No little sneering was raised at first, in the United States, when Secretary of State Seward proposed the purchase of this "Walrus Sea," which seemed likely to prove a white elephant for the Republic. Still, Seward plodded on, with Yankee obstinacy, and in 1867 things had made considerable progress. Indeed it may be said that, if the convention between America and Russia was not signed, it was expected to be from one day to another.

It was on the evening of the 31st of May that the Cascabels had halted at the frontier, under a grove of tall trees. In this spot, the *Fair Rambler* stood on Alaskan territory, fully under Russian dominion, and no longer on the soil of British Columbia. Mr. Cascabel might be free from all uneasiness on this score.

And his good-humor had returned, and in so contagious a manner that it was shared by all his people. Now, all along as far as the boundary of Russia in Europe, the road should lie unceasingly on Muscovite territory. Be they called Alaska, or Siberia, did not these immense countries belong to the Czar?

Supper was unusually gay. John had killed a fine hare, fat and plump, that Wagram had raised in the thicket; a real Russian hare, if you please!

“And we shall drink a good bottle!” said Mr. Cascabel. “On my honor, I fancy my lungs breathe better this side of that frontier! It looks to me like a mixture of Russian and American air! Breathe the full of your chests, my children! Don’t stint yourselves! There is enough for everybody — even Clovy, in spite of that thirty-six-inch nose of his! Why, I have been stifling these five weeks past, coming through that cursed Columbia!”

Supper over, and the last drop of the good bottle gone, each one repaired to his bunk and his little bed. The night was spent in the greatest calm. It was disturbed neither by the approach of dangerous animals nor by the apparition of wandering Indians. Next morning, horses and dogs had completely recovered from their fatigue.

The camp was raised at early morn, and the guests of hospitable Russia, “that sister of France,” as Mr. Cascabel said, prepared for their journey. Nor was much time needed. A little before six in the morning, the *Fair Rambler* was making headway, northwest, toward Simpson River, which it would be easy to ferry across.

This spur, which Alaska shoots forth toward the south, is a narrow strip, known under the general name of Thlinkilthen, and flanked, to the west, by a certain number of islands and archipelagos, such as the isles of the Prince of Wales, of Crooze, of Kuju, of Baranoff, of Sitka, etc. It is in the latter island that the capital of American Russia is situated, called likewise New Archangel. As soon as the *Fair Rambler* had arrived at Sitka, Mr. Cascabel intended halting for a few days, first of all to take some rest, and secondly to prepare for the completion of that first portion of his journey which was to bring him to Behring Strait.

This itinerary obliged them to follow a strip of land which skirted in capricious zigzags the mountains of the coast line.

Mr. Cascabel started then; but he had not advanced a step on Alaskan soil, when he was stopped short by an obstacle which had every appearance of proving insurmountable.

Friendly Russia, the sister of France, did not seem disposed to extend her hospitality to those French brethren who constituted the Cascabel family.

For, Russia suddenly stood before them under the shape and form of three frontier guards, muscular fellows, with thick beard, large heads, “tip-tilted” noses, a decidedly Kalmuk look about them, wearing the dark uniform of the Muscovite official, and that flat cap which strikes wholesome fear into the hearts of so many millions of human beings.

At a signal from the chief of these guards the *Fair Rambler* stood still, and Clovy, who drove the horses, called to his master.

Mr. Cascabel appeared at the door of the first compartment and was joined by his sons and his wife. And, somewhat uneasy at the sight of these uniforms, all alighted.

“Your passports!” demanded the officer in Russian — a language Mr. Cascabel understood but too well on this occasion.

“Passports?” he repeated.

“Yes, there is no entering the possessions of the Czar without passports.”

“Why, we have none, dear sir,” politely answered Mr. Cascabel.

“Then, you’ll stay where you are!”

This was clear and to the point, just like a door slammed in an intruder’s face.

Mr. Cascabel winced. He knew how severe are the regulations of the Muscovite administration; and a friendly compromise was a very doubtful eventuality. In truth, it was incredible ill-luck to have come across these guards at the very moment when the *Fair Rambler* had crossed the frontier.

Cornelia and John, in great anxiety, were awaiting the result of the conversation, on which depended the accomplishment of their journey.

“Brave Muscovites,” Mr. Cascabel began, bringing out the full power of his voice and the eloquence of his gestures to give more emphasis to his usual oratory, “we are French people, traveling for our pleasure, and, I presume to say, for the pleasure of others, more especially that of the noble Bojars, when they condescend to honor us with their presence! We had imagined that papers could be dispensed with in the case of the dominions of His Majesty the Czar, Emperor of all the Russias.”

“Entering the Czar’s territory without a special permit,” was the answer, “such a thing was never seen, — never!”

“Might it not be seen once, — just on one little occasion?” suggested Mr. Cascabel in his most insinuating manner.

“No,” replied the agent, stiff and dry. “And so, back you go, and no comments!”

“Still, may I ask where passports may be had?” inquired Mr. Cascabel.

“That’s your business!”

“Let us pass on, as far as Sitka, and there, through the intervention of the consul of France — ”

“There is no French consul at Sitka! And besides, where do you come from?”

“From Sacramento.”

“Well, you should have supplied yourselves with passports at Sacramento! Now, it is no use saying any more.”

“It is very great use, on the contrary,” replied Cascabel, “as we are on our way home to Europe.”

“To Europe! — and by what road?”

Mr. Cascabel felt that his remark was likely to arouse suspicions about him, for, returning to Europe by this route was rather extraordinary.

“Quite so,” he added. “Certain circumstances have compelled us to come this round.”

“After all, that is beside the question,” remarked the officer. “Russian territories are closed to travelers without passports!”

“If the only thing needful is the payment of certain dues,” continued Mr. Cascabel, “we might come to an understanding perhaps.”

And a knowing wink accompanied this gentle hint.

But an understanding was not to be arrived at, even on these conditions.

“Brave Muscovites,” reiterated Cascabel, as a drowning man who clutches at a straw, “have you never heard of the Cascabel family?”

And he spoke the words as though the Cascabel family were on a foot of equality with the Romanoff House!

The hit proved as utter a failure as the rest. They had to turn the horses round and retrace their steps. The guards even carried their strict orders out to the extent of accompanying the *Fair Rambler* to the other side of the frontier, with a distinct injunction to the travelers never to cross it again. And the consequence was that Mr. Cascabel found himself once more, with a very long face, on the territory of British Columbia.

It will be confessed this was an unpleasant position, nay, a most alarming one. All the plans were now upset. The itinerary, adopted with such enthusiasm, should now be laid aside. The journey home through the west, the return to Europe by Siberia, became an impossibility for want of passports. Going back to New York through the Far West could be done in the usual way. But how was the Atlantic Ocean to be crossed without a boat, and where was the boat to be had without money to pay the passage fare?

As to earning, along the road, a sum sufficient to cover that amount, it would have been unwise to expect it. Besides, how long would it have taken them to save it up? The Cascabel family — why not hit the nail on the head? — must be well-nigh overdone by this time in the United States. For the past twenty years there was hardly a town or a village that; the Cascabels had not “worked” all along the Great Trunk. They would not now take in as many cents as they formerly took dollars. No, the eastern route was beset with endless delays; years perhaps would roll by before they could take ship for Europe. At any cost, combinations should be found which would enable the *Fair Rambler* to reach Sitka. Such were the thoughts, such was the language, of the members of this interesting family when they were left to their painful meditations.

“Well, here we are in a pretty pass!” said Cornelia, with a shake of her head.

“It is not a pass at all,” retorted her husband, “you can’t pass through, it’s a blind alley!”

Now then, old wrestler, you the Hercules of the popular arena, will you lack the means to get the better of your evil fortune? Will you let yourself be nonplussed by ill-luck? You have all the showman’s tricks and dodges at your fingers’ ends, will you not succeed in juggling yourself out of this difficulty? Is your bag of tricks really emptied out? Can it be that your imagination, so fruitful in expedients, will not carry off the victory in this struggle?

“Cæsar,” said Cornelia, “since those wretched guards happened to be on our path just in time to prevent us stepping into the country, let us apply to their superior officer!”

“Their superior officer!” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel. “No doubt, that is the Governor of Alaska, some Russian colonel, as unmanageable as his men, and who will send us to the devil!”

“Besides, his residence must be at Sitka, and Sitka is the very place they wont let us go to.”

“Who knows,” suggested Clovy with no little judgment, “perhaps these frontier-men might not object to bring one of us to the Governor.”

“Why, Clovy is right,” answered Mr. Cascabel. “That’s a good idea!”

“Unless it’s not worth a clove,” added the clown with his luibitual qualifying clause.

“It is worth trying before we retrace our steps,” replied John, “and, if you like, father, I shall go — ”

“No, I had better go,” said Mr. Cascabel. “Is it a far cry to Sitka?”

“Some three hundred miles.”

“Well, in the course of nine or ten days I can be back here again. Let us have a sleep over it, and to-morrow we shall make the venture!”

Next morning, at break of day, Mr. Cascabel went out in search of the guards. His search proved neither hard nor of long duration, for they had remained on the look-out in the vicinity of the *Fair Rambler*.

“Why, there you are again?” they cried to him in a threatening tone of voice.

“Here I am again,” he replied, trying the effect of his most bewitching smile.

And with a running accompaniment of compliments to the Russian authorities, he expressed his wish to be brought to the presence of His Excellency the Governor of Alaska. He offered to pay all the traveling expenses of the “honorable officer” who would be kind enough to accompany him, and even hinted at a handsome remuneration in hard cash for the generous and noble-hearted man who would, — etc.

The proposal fell through. Even the perspective of the handsome remuneration proved of no avail. It is probable that the guards, as obstinate as custom-officers, and stubborn as tax-gatherers, were beginning to look upon this persistent desire to cross the Alaskan frontier as extremely suspicious. In truth, one of them cut matters short by ordering Cascabel to return to where he came from, forthwith, and added:

“If we ever find you again on Russian territory, it is not to Sitka we shall bring you, but to the nearest fort. And once you get in there, you never know how or when you will get out.”

Mr. Cascabel, not without being somewhat roughly handled, was immediately conducted back to the *Fair Rambler*, where his disappointed look told the tale of his failure.

Had the day really come when the home on wheels of the Cascabels was about to be transformed into a sedentary dwelling? Was the skiff, that carried the showman and his fortune, to remain stranded on the Columbo-Alaskan frontier like a boat that the outgoing tide leaves high and dry on the rocks? To all appearance, there was but too much fear of it.

How sad and gloomy the first day that was spent in these conditions, how sad the days that wore their weary length away, ere the wanderers could resolve on a new course!

Luckily, there was no lack of food; of the provisions that they expected to renew at Sitka a sufficient stock still remained. Besides, it was surprising to see the abundance of game in the neighborhood. Only, John and Wagram took good care not to venture out of the Columbian territory. It would have meant much more for the youth than the confiscation of his gun and a fine to the benefit of the Muscovite treasury.

Meanwhile, grief “clawed in its chilly clutch” the hearts of our friends. The very animals themselves seemed to feel their share of sorrow. Jako jabbered less than usual. The dogs indulged in dismal fits of howling. John Bull was forgetting his antics and grimaces. Vermont and Gladiator alone seemed to accept their situation without a murmur, having nothing to do but graze the rich, fresh grass supplied to them by the surrounding plain.

“For all that, and all that, we must make up our minds one way or the other!” Mr. Cascabel would often say, folding his arms across his chest.

That was evident, but which way? — which way? This should not have puzzled Mr. Cascabel; for, in truth, he had no choice in the matter. Seeing that he was forbidden going on ahead, the only alternative was moving back and giving up that trip westward that he had so courageously undertaken. Return he should on that hated soil of British Columbia, thence away through the prairies of the Far West, and on to the coast of the Atlantic! Once in New York, what would they do? Perhaps a subscription might be set on foot by some charitable souls, to enable them to pay their voyage home? How humiliating for these brave-hearted folks, who had always lived by their labor and never held out a begging hand, to come down so low as to be the recipients of charity! What wretches they were who had robbed them of their little all, in the passes of the Sierra!

“If they don’t get hanged in America, garroted in Spain, guillotined in France, or impaled in Turkey,” Mr. Cascabel used to say, “justice has fled this nether world.”

And at length his mind was made up.

“We shall be off to-morrow!” he said during the evening of the 4th of June. “We shall go back to Sacramento, and then — ”

He said no more. In Sacramento, they would see. As to setting off, everything was ready. There was nothing to do but putting the horses to the wagon and turning their heads to the south.

This last evening on the frontier of Alaska was still sadder than the rest. Each one sat in his corner, without a word. Outside, darkness was intense. Heavy clouds hovered to and fro through the sky like icebergs sent adrift by the gale toward the east.

In vain would the eye seek a single star, and the crescent of the new moon had just disappeared behind the lofty mountains at the horizon.

It may have been nine o’clock when Mr. Cascabel gave the order to go to bed. Next morning they should start before daybreak. The *Fair Rambler* would resume the track it had followed from Sacramento, and even without a guide, it would not be a difficult matter to get along. Once at the springs of the Fraser, the valley would bring them straight on to the frontier of Washington Territory.

And accordingly Clovy was preparing to lock the door of the outer compartment, after saying good-night to the two dogs, when a sudden report was heard within a short distance.

“That sounded uncommonly like a shot!” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel.

“Yes, it was a shot,” answered John.

“Some sportsman, no doubt!” said Cornelia.

“A sportsman — this dark night?” observed John. “That’s hardly likely!”

Just then, a second report broke the stillness of the night, and cries were heard.

CHAPTER X.

KAYETTE.

ON hearing the cries, Mr. Cascabel, John, Sander, and Clovy rushed out of the wagon.

“It is this way,” said John, pointing to the edge of the forest which bordered the frontier line.

“Let us listen again!” said Mr. Cascabel.

This was useless. No other cry was uttered, no other detonation followed the first two that had been heard.

“Might it be an accident?” suggested Sander.

“In any case,” answered John, “one thing certain is, that the cries we heard were cries of distress, and that, somewhere about here, there is somebody in danger.”

“You must go and bring help!” said Cornelia.

“Yes, lads, come along,” answered Mr. Cascabel, “and let us be well armed!”

After all, it might not be an accident. A traveler might have been the victim of a murderous assault on the Alaskan frontier. Hence it was prudent that they should be prepared to defend themselves as well as to defend others.

Almost without losing an instant, Mr. Cascabel and John, each supplied with a gun, and Sander and Clovy, with a revolver, left the *Fair Rambler* to the keeping of Cornelia and the two dogs.

For five or six minutes they followed the edge of the wood. Now and then they stopped to listen: no noise disturbed the silence of the forest. They felt sure, none the less, that the cries had come from this direction, and from no great distance.

“Unless we were the dupes of an illusion?” hinted Mr. Cascabel.

“No, father,” replied John, “that could not be! Hark! — do you hear?”

This time, there was indeed a call for help; it was not the voice of a man, as in the first instance, but that of a woman or a child.

The night was still very dark, and, under the canopy of the trees, nothing could be discerned beyond a few yards.

Clovy had at first suggested taking one of the wagon lamps with him; but Mr. Cascabel had objected to it on the score of prudence, and, on the whole, it was better for them not to be seen going along.

Besides, the cries were now getting very frequent, and sufficiently distinct to guide our relief party.

Indeed it seemed likely that there would be no necessity for going very deep into the woods.

Sure enough, five minutes later, Mr. Cascabel and his three companions had come to a little clearing in the forest. There, two men lay on the ground. A woman, kneeling near one of them, held up his head between her arms.

This was the woman whose cries had last been heard, and, in the Chinook dialect, of which Cascabel had a smattering, she called out:

“Come! — Come! — They have killed them!”

John drew near to the scared woman all besprinkled with the blood flowing from the breast of the unfortunate man that she endeavored to bring back to life.

“This one breathes still!” said John.

“And the other?” inquired Mr. Cascabel.

“The other — I don’t know about him!” replied Sander.

Mr. Cascabel stooped to see if the throbbing of the heart or the breathing through the lips betrayed the least remnant of life in the man.

“He is quite dead!” he said.

And it was but too true; a bullet had struck him in the temple; his death must have been instantaneous.

And now, what was this woman, whose language proclaimed her Indian origin? Was she young or old? This could not be seen in the dark, under the hood drawn over her head. But, it would be ascertained later on; she would tell whence she came, as well as the circumstances under which this two-fold murder had been committed. The first thing to be done was to convey to the camp the man who was still breathing and to give him such immediate tending as might perchance save his life. As to his dead companion, they would come and pay the last duties to him on the following day.

With the aid of John, Mr. Cascabel raised the wounded man by his shoulders, whilst Sander and Clovy took him up by his feet. Then turning to the woman:

“Follow us,” said he to her.

And the latter, without any hesitation, walked by the side of the body, stanching with a kerchief the blood still flowing from the wound.

Progress was slow. The man was heavy; and above all, care should be taken to avoid jolting him, It was a living man Mr. Cascabel meant to bring to the *Fair Rambler*, not a corpse.

At last, at the end of twenty minutes, the whole party reached the wagon without any mishap.

Cornelia and little Napoleona, thinking they might have been attacked, were awaiting their return in deep anxiety.

“Quick, Cornelia!” cried Mr. Cascabel, “some water, some linen, everything that is wanted to stop a hemorrhage or else this unfortunate man will lose all consciousness.”

“All right, all right,” replied Cornelia. “You know I am good at that, Cæser. Not so much talking, and leave him to me!”

She was good at it, was Cornelia; and many were the wounds she had dressed, in the course of her professional career.

Clovy spread out, in the first compartment, a mattress on which the body was laid, the head slightly raised with a bolster. By the light of the lamp in the ceiling, they were then able to see the man’s face, already blanched by approaching death, and likewise the features of the Indian woman who was kneeling by his side.

She was a young girl; she did not seem over fifteen or sixteen years of age.

“Who is this child?” asked Cornelia.

“It is she we heard calling for help,” replied John; “she was near the wounded man.”

The latter might be forty-five years old; his beard and hair were turning gray; he was above the middle height, of a sympathetic cast of features, and the firmness of his character could be read even through his closed eyelids, despite the deathly pallor of his face. From time to time, a sigh broke through his lips, but not a word escaped him that would denote his nationality.

When his chest was laid bare, Cornelia was able to see that it had been transpierced by a poniard between the third and fourth ribs. Was the wound a fatal one? A surgeon alone could have said so. What was beyond a doubt was its severity.

However, as the attendance of a surgeon was out of the question under existing circumstances, they should remain satisfied with such attentions as lay in Cornelia’s power and such drugs as were contained in their little traveling pharmacy.

This was done, and the hemorrhage, from which death would have quickly followed, was effectually stopped. Later on they would see if, absolutely prostrated as he was, this man might be conveyed to the nearest village or not. And this time, Mr. Cascabel would not trouble to inquire whether it was Anglo-Saxon or not.

After carefully washing the lips of the wound with cold water, Cornelia laid on it some strips of linen steeped in arnica; and this dressing proved sufficient to stop the blood, which the wounded man had lost in such quantity from the time of the attempted murder to his arrival at the camp.

“And now, Cornelia,” inquired Mr. Cascabel, “what can we do?”

“Well, we shall lay this poor man on our bed,” replied Cornelia, “and I shall keep watch over him, to renew the dressing when needs be.”

“We shall all watch him,” said John. “Could we go asleep, do you think? Besides, we must keep on the lookout! There are murderers about!”

Mr. Cascabel, John, and Clovy took the man and laid him on the bed in the inner room.

And while Cornelia stood by the bedside, spying a word that was not spoken, the young Indian, whose dialect Mr. Cascabel did his best to interpret, related her history.

She was, as had been surmised, a native, belonging to one of the independent tribes of Alaska. In this province, to the north and to the south of the big river Yukon which waters it from east to west, you come across numerous tribes, some wandering, others sedentary, and, among them, the Co-Yukons, the chief and the most cruel perhaps, then the Newicarguts, the Tanands, the Kotch-a-Koutchins, and also, more especially near the mouth of the river, the Pastoliks, the Kaveaks, the Primosks, the Malemutes, and the Ingeletes.

It was to this last tribe that the young Indian woman belonged, and her name was Kayette.

Kayette had lost her father and her mother, and had not one relative left. Nor do families alone thus utterly disappear among the natives; whole tribes do so, no trace of which is to be found afterwards in the territory of Alaska.

Such the Midland tribe, which formerly occupied the north of the Yukon.

Kayette, thus left an orphan, had started off toward the south, through those countries of which she had a certain knowledge thanks to her previously visiting them with the wandering Indians. Her intention was to go to Sitka, where she hoped to be engaged as a servant by some Russian official. And surely she ought to have been engaged on the mere recommendation of her gentle, pleasing, honest countenance. She was very handsome, with the least tinge of red in her complexion, dark eyes with long lashes, and a luxuriance of dark hair held up in the hood of fur that she wore over her head.

Of middle height, she seemed graceful and light in spite of her heavy cloak.

Among these Indian races of North America, as is known, the bright and merry-tempered children grow up quickly. At ten years of age, the boys can use the gun and the hatchet skillfully. At fifteen, young girls marry, and, even at that age, prove devoted mothers. And so Kayette was more sober, stronger-willed likewise, than her age would imply; and the long journey she had just undertaken was very evident proof of her strength of character. For a month already she had been on the tramp toward the southwest of Alaska; and she had reached the narrow strip of land, close to the island in which the capital is situated, when, journeying along the edge of the forest, she had heard two reports of fire-arms, followed by cries of despair, at a distance of a few hundred paces.

These were the cries that had reached the ears of the occupants of the *Fair Rambler*.

Instantly Kayette had courageously plunged into the wood.

And no doubt her approach must have given the alarm, for she barely had time to get a glimpse of two men running away through the thicket. But evidently the wretches would have noticed very soon that they had been scared by a child; and, as a matter of fact, they were already returning to the clearing to rob their victims, when the coming of Mr. Cascabel and his party had frightened them — and, this time, frightened them right away.

In the presence of these two men lying on the ground, one a corpse, the other still breathing, young Kayette had called for help, and the reader knows what had taken place subsequently. The first cries heard by Mr. Cascabel were those of the assaulted travelers, the second had been uttered by the young Indian woman.

The night passed by. Our friends had no occasion to repel an attack on the part of the murderers; they, doubtless, had hastened to leave the scene of their crime.

Next morning, Cornelia could report no change in the state of the wounded man, no cause for less anxiety.

It was now that Kayette proved of great utility by going and gathering certain herbs of which she knew the antiseptic properties. She made an infusion of these, and, steeped in this liquid, the dressing did not allow one drop of blood to ooze through.

In the course of the morning, it was noticed that the wounded man was commencing to breathe more freely; but, as yet, they were only sighs — not even broken words — that escaped his lips. And so, it was impossible to learn who he was, whence he came, where he was going, what his business was on the Alaskan frontier, under what circumstances his companion and he were attacked, and who their aggressors were.

In any case, if money had been the motive of their crime, the scoundrels, in their hurried flight on the approach of the young Indian, had missed a fortune the like of which they would hardly ever find again in these solitary parts.

For, Mr. Cascabel having undressed the wounded man, had found, in a leather belt closely fitted around his waist, a quantity of gold coins of American and of Russian currency. The whole amounted to about fifteen thousand francs. This sum was carefully put aside, to be restored to its owner as soon as possible.

As to papers, there were none, save a pocket-book with a few notes, some scribbled in Russian, some in French. Nothing there was, that would help to ascertain the identity of the stranger.

That morning, about nine o’clock, John said:

“Father, we have a last duty to perform toward that unburied corpse.”

“You are right, John, come on. Maybe we shall find on him some writing that may help us. You, Clovy, you had better come, too. Bring a pick and a shovel with you."

Supplied with these tools, and careful to take their firearms with them, the three men left the wagon, and made their way along that same edge of the wood that they had followed the previous night.

In a few minutes' time, they had reached the spot where the murder had been committed.

What seemed to permit of little doubt was that the two wayfarers had encamped there for the night. There were still the signs of a halt, the remnants of a fire, the ashes of which were still alive. At the foot of a huge fir-tree a quantity of grass had been heaped up, so that the two travelers might have a soft bed to lie on, and indeed they may have been asleep when they were attacked.

As to the dead man, the *rigor mortis* had already set in.

To judge by his dress, his features, his hard hands, it was easy to see that this man — he might have been thirty at most — was the other's servant.

John searched his pockets. He found no paper. No money was there either. From his belt hung a revolver, of American make, that the poor fellow had not had time to use.

Evidently the attack had been sudden and unforeseen, and the two victims had fallen at the same time.

At this hour, round about the neighborhood of the clearing, the forest was undisturbed by a living soul. After a short exploration, John returned without seeing anybody. It was plain the murderers had not come back, for they surely would have taken the garments of their victim, or at the very least the revolver still hanging on his belt.

Meanwhile, Clovy had dug a grave deep enough to prevent the wild animals clawing out the corpse. The dead man was lowered into it, and John said a few words of a prayer when the clay had been shoveled back over him.

Whereupon Mr. Cascabel, his son, and Clovy returned to the camp. There, while Kayette remained by the wounded man, John, his father, and his mother held a consultation among themselves.

“It is certain,” began Mr. Cascabel, “that if we turn our steps toward California, our man will never get there alive. We have hundreds upon hundreds of miles to get over. The best thing would be to make a shot for Sitka, if those hangable police-folk did not forbid us to set our foot on their territory!”

“And do what they like, to Sitka it is that we must go,” answered Cornelia resolutely, “and to Sitka we will go!”

“And how can we? We wont have gone a mile of ground before we are arrested.”

“No matter, Cæsar! Go we must, and with a bold face! If we meet the guards, we shall tell them what has happened, and surely they could not refuse to this unfortunate man what they did refuse us!”

Mr. Cascabel shook his head with an air of doubt.

“Mother is right,” said John. “Let us endeavor to push on to Sitka, even without seeking at the hands of the officials a permit that they will not give us. It would be a loss of time. Besides, it is just possible that they think we are on the way to Sacramento and that they have gone about their business. For the last twenty-four hours we have not seen one of them.”

“That is right,” answered Mr. Cascabel, “I should not be surprised if they were gone.”

“Unless — ” remarked Clovy, who had just joined the discussion.

“Yes — unless — We know the rest!” replied Mr. Cascabel.

John’s remark was quite correct, and there was perhaps nothing better to do than take the road to Sitka.

A quarter of an hour after, Vermont and Gladiator were in harness.

After their good rest during this prolonged halt at the frontier, they could measure a fair extent of ground for their first day’s work. The *Fair Rambler* started, and it was with undisguised pleasure that Mr. Cascabel left Columbian territory.

“Children,” said he, “let us keep our eye open, and let it be our weather eye. As to you, John, silence your gun! It is quite needless to proclaim our passage.”

“As to that, the kitchen has no chance of running short!” added Mrs. Cascabel.

The country north of Columbia, though rather uneven, is easy for a vehicle, even when you follow the numerous channels which separate the archipelagos on the edge of the continent. No mountains in view, to the furthest limits of the horizon. Now and then, but very seldom, a solitary farm, to which our party carefully refrained from paying a visit. Having studied the map of the country thoroughly, John found out his way easily, and he was in hopes of reaching Sitka without needing the services of a guide.

What was of the utmost importance was to avoid a meeting with any officials whether frontier guards or inland police. Now, along the first stages of the journey, the *Fair Rambler* seemed to be left entirely free to ramble away as it chose. This was a remarkable thing. And Mr. Cascabel's surprise was only equaled by his satisfaction.

Cornelia put down the gratifying fact to the credit of Providence, and her husband was inclined to do the same. As to John, he was under the impression that some circumstance or other must have altered the proceedings of the Muscovite administration.

Things went on in this way throughout the length of the 6th and of the 7th of June. They were drawing near to Sitka. The *Fair Rambler* might have made greater speed perhaps, but Cornelia dreaded the jolting for her invalid, whom Kayette and herself continued to tend, one as a mother, the other as a daughter. If, on the one hand, he had not grown worse, it could not be said either that he was much better. The scanty resources of the little pharmacy, the trifle that the two women were able to do for so serious a case and when the aid of a medical man would have been a necessity, all that could hardly be sufficient. Tender care could not prove a substitute for science, — and alas that it should be so! for never did sisters of charity display greater self-denial. Indeed, the young Indian's zeal and intelligence had been appreciated by all. She looked as though she were already a member of the family. She was, in a sort of way, a second daughter that heaven had sent to Mrs. Cascabel.

On the 7th, in the afternoon, the *Fair Rambler* forded across Stekine River, a little stream which flows into one of the narrow passes between the mainland and the Isle of Baranoff, a few leagues only from Sitka.

In the evening, the wounded man was able to utter a few words:

“My father — yonder — see him again!” he murmured.

These words were said in Russian; Mr. Cascabel had understood them clearly.

There was likewise a name that was repeated several times: “Ivan — Ivan — ”

No doubt this was the name of the luckless servant who had been murdered by the side of his master. It was very probable that both of them were of Russian origin.

However that might be, as the wounded man was now recovering both his power of speech and his memory, it would not be long ere the Cascabels knew his history.

On that day, the *Fair Rambler* had gone as far as the banks of the narrow channel that must be crossed to reach the Isle of Baranoff. And accordingly it became a necessity to have recourse to the boatmen who ply ferries across these numerous straits. Now, Mr. Cascabel could never hope of opening negotiations with the natives of the country without betraying his nationality. It was to be feared that the awkward question of passports should crop up once more.

“Well,” said he, “in any case our Russian will have come to Sitka. If the police send us back to the frontier, they surely will keep their own countryman, and since we began his recovery, it will be the devil if they can't manage to set him right on his feet."

All this sounded very reasonable; still our travelers were anything but free from anxiety concerning the welcome that was awaiting them. It would be such a cruel blow, now they were in Sitka, to have to turn round and face the road to New York.

Meanwhile, whilst the wagon stood waiting on the bank of the canal, John had gone to make the necessary inquiries about the ferry and the boatmen.

Just then, Kayette came and told Mr. Cascabel that his wife wanted him, and he hastened toward her.

"Our invalid has quite recovered consciousness," said Cornelia. "He talks, Cæsar, and you must try and understand what he says!"

As a matter of fact, the Russian had opened his eyes and surveyed with an inquiring look the people he saw for the first time about him. Now and then, incoherent words fell from his lips.

And then, in a tone of voice so weak as to be scarcely audible, he called his servant Ivan.

"Sir," said Cascabel, "your servant-man is not here, but we are — "

At these words, spoken in French, the wounded man replied in the same language:

"Where am I?"

"With people who have taken care of you, sir."

"But in what country?"

"In a country where you have nothing to fear, if you are a Russian."

"A Russian — yes — a Russian!"

"Well, you are in the province of Alaska, within a short distance of the capital."

"Alaska!" murmured the stranger.

And you would have fancied that a feeling of terror had overclouded his features.

"The Russian possessions!" he repeated.

"No! An American possession now!" cried John as he entered the room.

And, through the little open window of the *Fair Rambler*, he showed the American stars and stripes waving from the flag-post on the coast.

Sure enough, the province of Alaska had ceased to be Russian three days before.

Three days previous, the treaty by which it was ceded to the United States had been signed. Henceforth the Cascabels had nothing more to apprehend at the hands of Russian officials. They were on American ground!

CHAPTER XI.

SITKA.

SITKA, or New Archangel, situated on Baranoff Island, in the middle of the archipelagos of the western coast, is not only the capital of the island, it is likewise the capital of the whole province which had just been ceded to the Federal government. There was no city of greater importance in this region, where the traveler finds but few towns, mere villages indeed, scantily sprinkled at long intervals. It would be even more accurate to designate these villages as settlements or trading stations. For the most part they belong to American companies; a few are the property of the English Hudson Bay Company. It is then easily understood that the means of communication between these stations are very difficult, especially during the bad season, in the midst of all the hardships of the Alaskan winter.

A few years ago, Sitka was still but an unfrequented commercial center, where the Russo-American Company kept its stores of furs and hides.

But thanks to the discoveries made in that province, which is contiguous to the polar regions, Sitka very soon underwent a considerable development; and, under its new administration, it will become an opulent city, worthy of this new State of the Confederacy.

At this time already, Sitka possessed all those edifices which constitute what is called a “town,” a Lutheran church, a very simple edifice whose architectural style does not lack grandeur; a Greek church with one of those cupolas that are so little in harmony with a fog-laden sky, so different from the Eastern skies; a club, the Club Gardens, a sort of Parisian Tivoli where the habitual visitor and the traveler find restaurants, cafes, bars, and amusements of all kinds; a club-house, the doors of which are open to single men only; a school, a hospital, with fine houses, villas, and cottages picturesquely grouped on the surrounding hillocks. This landscape is horizoned by a vast forest of resinous trees which encase it in their eternal verdure, and beyond, a ridge of lofty mountains, the summits of which are lost in the clouds, and, lording it over all of them, Mt. Edgecumb, the giant of Crooze Island, to the north of Baranoff Island, the peak of which rises to a height of eight thousand feet above the level of the sea.

On the whole, if the climate of Sitka is not very severe, if the thermometer hardly ever goes below seven or eight degrees centigrade — although the town be crossed by the fifty-sixth parallel — it would deserve to be called the “watering town” *par excellence*. In truth, on Baranoff Island, it always rains, you may say, unless it snows. Let it surprise no one, therefore, if after crossing the canal in a ferry with all its household and belongings, the *Fair Rambler* entered Sitka under a torrent of rain. And still Mr. Cascabel had no thought of complaining, since he had reached the town at the very time of a transaction which enabled him to enter it without a passport. “Many a bit of good luck I have had in my day, but never such luck as this!” he went on repeating. “We were just at the gate, unable to get in, and slambang goes the door, of itself, just in time, before us!”

The treaty of the cession of Alaska had been signed opportunely, indeed, to enable the *Fair Rambler* to cross the frontier. And on this soil, now American, none of those unmanageable officials, none of those formalities in regard to which the Russian administration shows such severity.

And now it would have been the simplest thing on earth to bring our Russian either to the Sitka hospital where all due care would have been bestowed upon him, or to a hotel where he might have the attendance of a doctor. Still, when Mr. Cascabel proposed the matter to him:

“I feel better, my friend,” he replied, “and if I am not in your way — ”

“In our way, sir!” exclaimed Cornelia. “And what do you mean by being in our way?”

“You are at home here,” added Mr. Cascabel, “and if you think — ”

“Well, I think it is best for me not to leave those who have picked me up — who have devoted themselves — ”

“All right, sir, all right!” answered Cascabel. “Still you must lose no time in seeing a medical man.”

“Might I not see him here?”

“By all means, and I am off, myself, to fetch you the best in the town.”

The *Fair Rambler* had stopped at the entrance into the town, at one end of an avenue planted with trees which stretches on to the forest. There Doctor Harry, who had been named to Mr. Cascabel, came and visited the Russian.

After a careful examination of the wound the doctor declared it was in no way dangerous, the poniard having glanced off on a rib. No important organ had been touched, and thanks to the cold-water dressing, thanks to the juice of the herbs gathered by the young Indian, the healing process, already commenced, would soon be sufficiently advanced to allow the patient to get up in a few days. He was therefore progressing as favorably as possible, and he might, from now, begin to take some food. But most assuredly, had not Kayette tended him, had not the hemorrhage been stopped by Mrs. Cascabel, he would have been a dead man a few hours after the attack of which he had been the victim.

Dr. Harry then added that, in his opinion, the murder must have been the deed of some members of Karnof’s gang, if not that of Karnof himself, whose presence had been reported in the eastern part of the province. This Karnof was a criminal, of Russian or rather Siberian origin, who had under his orders a gang of those deserters from the Czar’s army, so numerous in the Russian possessions of Asia and America. In vain had the police sent its best “ferrets” after him. In vain had rewards been offered for the capture of the band. These ruffians, as dreaded as they deserved to be, had hitherto escaped punishment. And still, frequent crimes, thefts, and murders had spread terror around, especially in the southern portion of the territory. The safety of the travelers, the traders, the agents of fur companies, was in continual jeopardy; and undoubtedly this new crime should be attributed to Karnof’s gang.

On withdrawing. Dr. Harry left the family quite free from anxiety concerning their guest.

Whilst on his way to Sitka, Mr. Cascabel had always intended taking a few days’ rest there, a rest his troupe was well entitled to, after a journey of almost two thousand one hundred miles since the time of leaving the Sierra Nevada. Besides he expected to increase his exchequer by two or three good performances in this town.

“Lads, we are no longer in England here,” he would say, “we are in America, and before Americans we are quite at liberty to work!”

Mr. Cascabel felt sure, moreover, that the name of his family was a household word among the Alaskan population, and that the cry was going round Sitka:

“The Cascabels are within our walls!”

However, after a conversation which took place a couple of days after between the Russian and his host, these plans were slightly modified, except in so far as they concerned the few days' rest, an absolute necessity after the hardships of the journey. This Russian — in Cornelia's mind he could be no other than a prince — now knew what the good people were who had saved him, poor itinerant artists traveling through America. All the members of the family had been presented to him, including the young Indian to whom he was indebted for his being now alive.

One evening, as they were all sitting round together, he told them his history, or at least such portion of it as interested them. He spoke French very fluently, as if that language had been his own, with the only peculiarity that he rolled his *r*'s a little, which gives to the Muscovite tongue an inflexion at the same time soft and manly in which the ear finds a great charm.

Besides, what he related was extremely simple. Nothing very adventurous, nothing romantic either.

His name was Sergius Wassiliowitch — and from that day, with his permission, he went by no other name than "Mr. Sergius" among the Cascabels. Of all his relatives, his father alone was still alive, and resided on a domain situated in the Government of Perm, within a short distance of the town of that name. Mr. Sergius, actuated by his traveling instincts, and his taste for geographical discoveries and researches, had left Russia three years before. He had visited the Hudson Bay territories and was preparing an exploring tour through Alaska, from the course of the Yukon to the Arctic Sea, when he was attacked under the following circumstances:

His servant Ivan and he had just settled their little encampment on the frontier, on the evening of the 4th of June, when they were suddenly fallen upon, during their first sleep. Two men were upon them. They awoke, stood up, and meant to defend themselves. It was useless: almost instantly poor Ivan fell dead, struck by a bullet through his head.

“He was a brave fellow, a faithful servant!” said Mr. Sergius. “We had lived together for ten years! He would have done anything for me; I mourn him not as a servant, but a friend!”

And so saying, Mr. Sergius made no effort to conceal his emotion, and every time he spoke of Ivan, his tearful eye showed how sincere was his grief for his loss.

Then he added that, being stabbed in the chest himself, he had lost consciousness, and no longer remembered anything, until, coming back to life but unable to express his gratitude, he had understood that he was with kind-hearted people who were nursing him.

When Mr. Cascabel told him that the deed was attributed to Karnof or to some of his accomplices, Mr. Sergius did not feel surprised, for he had been informed that the gang was haunting the frontier.

“You see,” said he, in the end, “my history is not very entertaining, yours must be more so. My campaign was to end with the exploration of Alaska. Thence, I was to return to Russia, go home to my father, and leave him no more. Now let us talk about you, and first, let me ask how and why French people, like you, find themselves so far away from home in this part of America?”

“Do not showmen ramble the wide world over, Mr. Sergius?” Cascabel replied.

“Quite so, but none the less I may feel somewhat surprised to see you at such a distance from France.”

“John,” said Mr. Cascabel, turning to his eldest son, “tell Mr. Sergius how it is that we are here, and by what route we are returning to Europe.”

John related everything that had happened the occupants of the *Fair Rambler* since they had left Sacramento, and, so as to be understood by Kayette, he told his tale in English, Mr. Sergius giving supplementary explanations in the Chinook dialect. The young Indian woman listened with the greatest attention. In this way she learnt what was this Cascabel family to which she had become so fondly attached. She heard how the show people had been robbed of all they possessed as they were crossing the pass of the Sierra Nevada on their way to the coast of the Atlantic, and how, for want of money, compelled to alter their plans, they had attempted by a westward road what they were unable to do by the east. After having faced their house on wheels toward the setting sun, they had traversed the State of California, Oregon, Washington Territory, Columbia, and had stopped on the frontier of Alaska. There they had found it impossible to move farther, thanks to the strict orders of the Muscovite administration — a fortunate draw-back, after all, since it had given them an opportunity to come to Mr. Sergius’s help. And that was how a troupe of artists, French by birth, and Norman by their leader, were now in Sitka, the annexation of Alaska to the United States having opened wide, for them, the gates of the new American possession.

Mr. Sergius had listened to the young man’s story with the keenest interest, and when he heard that Mr. Cascabel intended reaching Europe through

Siberia, a little movement of surprise escaped him which, indeed, no one could have understood at the time.

“And so, my friends,” said he, when John had finished, “your intention, on leaving Sitka, is to make for Behring Strait?”

“It is, Mr. Sergius,” replied John, “and to ride over the strait when it will be frozen.”

“The journey you undertake there is a long and laborious one, Mr. Cascabel.”

“A long one, it is, Mr. Sergius! A laborious one, it shall be, no doubt. But what can be done? We have no choice in the matter. Besides, itinerant artists trouble themselves but little about the labor, and we have got accustomed to roving.”

“I suppose that, under these conditions, you have no expectation of reaching Russia this year?”

“No,” said John, “for the strait will not be frozen over before the beginning of October.”

“In any case,” repeated Mr. Sergius, “it is a bold and venturous scheme.”

“That may be,” replied Mr. Cascabel, “but there is no other way out of the difficulty. Mr. Sergius, we are homesick! We long to go back to France, and go home we must! And since we shall be going through Perm and Nijni at the time of the fairs, — well, the Cascabel family will do its best not to disgrace itself.”

“Very well, but what are your resources?”

“A little money we made, coming along, and the takings of two or three performances that I propose to give in Sitka. As it happens, there are public rejoicings over the annexation, and I imagine the Sitkans will take an interest in the exercises of the Cascabel family.”

“My friends,” said Mr. Sergius, “how pleased I should have been to share my purse with you, if I had not been robbed.”

“Why, you have not been robbed, Mr. Sergius,” exclaimed Cornelia.

“Not to the extent of half a rouble!” added Cascabel.

And he brought the belt in which Mr. Sergius’s money had remained untouched.

“Then, my friends, you will be good enough to accept — ”

“No such thing, Mr. Sergius!” answered Mr. Cascabel. “I’ll not have you run the risk of getting into difficulties by trying to get us out of our own.”

“You decline to share with me?”

“Most positively!”

“Well, well, those French people!” said Mr. Sergius, stretching his hand to him.

“Long live Russia!” cried out young Sander.

“And long live France!” responded Mr. Sergius.

It was the first time, no doubt, that those cries were interchanged in those distant lands of America!

“And now, that’s enough talking for once, Mr. Sergius,” said Cornelia. “The doctor has recommended that you should keep very quiet, and patients must always obey their medical advisers.”

“Your obedient servant then, Madame Cascabel,” replied Mr. Sergius. “Still, I have one more question to ask you, or rather a request to make.”

“At your service, sir.”

“Indeed it is a favor I am expecting at your hands.”

“A favor?”

“Since you are bent on going to Behring Strait, will you permit me to accompany you thus far?”

“Accompany us?”

“Yes! this will complete my exploration of Alaska in the West.”

“And our answer to that request is: With the greatest pleasure, Mr. Sergius!” exclaimed Cascabel.

“On one condition,” added Cornelia.

“What condition?”

“That you wall do everything that will be necessary to your recovery, — without a single word.”

“And on condition, too, that as I am your fellow-traveler I shall contribute toward the expenses of the journey?”

“That’s as you like, Mr. Sergius!” answered Cascabel.

Everything was now settled to the satisfaction of all parties. However, the “manager” of the troupe did not think he should give up his idea of having two or three performances on the principal square in Sitka — performances from which he was to derive both glory and profit. Fetes were held throughout the province anent the annexation, and the *Fair Rambler* could not have appeared on the scene at a more opportune moment.

Of course Mr. Cascabel had communicated to the authorities the murderous attack of which his guest had been the victim, and orders had been issued for a more active chase after Karnof’s band along the Alaskan frontier.

On the 17th of June, Mr. Sergius was able to go into the open air for the first time. He felt much better, and his wound was quite healed, thanks to Dr. Harry’s attentions.

It was then he made acquaintance with the animal portion of the troupe: the two dogs came and rubbed against his legs, Jako greeted him with a “You’re better, Mr. Sergius?” that Sander had taught him, and John Bull presented him with his choicest grimaces. The two good old horses themselves, Vermont and Gladiator, joyfully neighed their thanks to him for the lumps of sugar he gave them. Mr. Sergius was now a member of the family, just as Kayette was. He had already noticed that serious turn of mind, that love of study, that yearning upwards which characterized the eldest son. Sander and Napoleona charmed him with their graceful playfulness. Clovy amused him with his harmless nonsense. As to Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel, he had, long since, appreciated their domestic virtues.

Truly noble-hearted people were those among whom he had fallen.

However, they were actively pushing on the preparations for their forthcoming departure. Nothing was to be omitted that could insure the success of those fifteen hundred miles of a journey from Sitka to Behring Strait. This almost unknown country did not threaten them with any great dangers, it is true, either on the part of wild beasts, or at the hands of the Indians, whether wandering or sedentary; and nothing would be easier than to halt at the trading stations occupied by the agents of fur companies. What was of importance, was to minister to the daily necessities of life in a country whose resources, with the exception of the game, were likely to be null.

It followed, therefore, that all these questions had to be discussed with Mr. Sergius.

“First of all,” said Cascabel, “we must take this into consideration, that we shall not have to travel during the bad season.”

“That is fortunate,” answered Mr. Sergius, “for they are indeed cruel, those Alaskan winters on the verge of the polar circle.”

“And then, we shall not grope along like blind people,” added John. “Mr. Sergius must be a learned geographer.”

“Oh,” replied Mr. Sergius, “in a country that he is not acquainted with, a geographer is often puzzled to find out his road. But, with his maps, my friend John has been able to make his way hitherto, and if we put our two heads together I am in hopes we shall get on all right. Besides, I have an idea, which I shall tell you about one day.”

If Mr. Sergius had an idea, it could not fail being an excellent one, and so they allowed him all the time necessary to ripen it before carrying it into execution.

There being no lack of money, Mr. Cascabel renewed his stock of flour, grease, rice, tobacco, and especially tea, a very large consumption of which is made throughout Alaska; he likewise took in hams, corned beef, biscuits, and a certain quantity of preserved ptarmigan from the Russo-American Company’s store. They would not run short of water along the affluents of the Yukon, but the water could not but be improved by the addition of a little sugar and cognac, or rather “vodka,” a sort of brandy highly appreciated by the Russians; and accordingly a purchase was made of sufficient quantities of sugar and vodka. As to the fuel, although the forests might be depended upon, the *Fair Rambler* stowed in a ton of good Vancouver coal, a ton and no more, for the wagon should not be loaded to excess.

In the meantime, an additional bunk had been fitted into the second compartment, which Mr. Sergius declared quite sufficient for him, and which was comfortably supplied with bedding. Blankets were not forgotten, nor yet those hareskins so generally used by the Indians during winter. Finally, in the event of their having to make any purchases along the road, Mr. Sergius supplied himself with those glass trinkets, strips of cotton stuff, cheap knives and scissors, that constitute the usual currency between traders and natives.

As game might be relied upon, both large and small, since the deer and the hares, heathcocks, geese, and partridges abound in those parts, a proportionate stock of powder and shot was bought. Mr. Sergius even succeeded in finding two guns and a carbine, which completed the arsenal of the *Fair Rambler*. He was a good shot, and would delight in going out in search of game with his friend John.

It was not to be forgotten, either, that Karnof’s gang might be roaming about Sitka perhaps, that they should be on the watch for a possible attack on their part, and, should the opportunity present itself, receive them as they deserved.

“Now,” remarked Mr. Cascabel, “to the requests of such intruders I know of no better answer than a bullet, fair in the chest.”

“Unless it be one fair in the head!” added Clovy, not unreasonably.

In a word, thanks to the trade carried on by the capital of Alaska with the various towns in Columbia and the ports of the Pacific, Mr. Sergius and his companions were able to purchase, without paying exorbitant prices, all that they thought necessary for their long journey through a desert country.

These arrangements were not completed before the last week but one in June, and it was decided they should start on the 26th. As they could not dream of crossing Behring Strait before it was completely frozen, they had ample time before them. Still, possible delays, unforeseen obstacles, were to be taken into account, and it would be better to arrive too soon than too late. At Port Clarence, on the very coast of the strait, they should rest and await the right moment for crossing over to the Asiatic shore.

Meanwhile, what was the young Indian girl doing? Nothing but what was very simple. She aided Mrs. Cascabel, with a deal of intelligence, in all the preparations for the journey. The good woman loved her with a mother’s love: she loved her as she did Napoleona, and every day she grew more and more attached to her second daughter. Every one, indeed, was really fond of Kayette, and, no doubt, the poor girl enjoyed a happiness she had never tasted among the nomadic tribes, under the tents of the Indians. Sad did each one feel at the thought that the time was drawing near when Kayette would part with the family. But, alone as she now was in the world, should she not remain in Sitka, since she had left her people for the very purpose of coming here and entering service, even though under wretched conditions perhaps?

“Still and all,” Mr. Cascabel would sometimes Say, “if that pretty Kayette — *my* little Kayette, I was going to say — had a taste for dancing, who knows but we might make her an offer? What a handsome dancer she would make, eh? And what a graceful rider, if she cared to make her *début* in a circus! I bet you, she would ride like a centaur!”

It was one of Mr. Cascabel’s articles of faith that the centaurs were excellent riders, and it would have been dangerous to cross words with him on this subject.

Seeing how John shook his head, when his father spoke thus, Mr. Sergius understood plainly that the steady, reserved lad was far from sharing the paternal view of acrobatic performances or of the other practices of an itinerant artist’s life.

In short, a great deal of thinking was bestowed on Kayette, on what would become of her, on the life that was awaiting her at Sitka, — and that thinking was not of the pleasantest kind, — when, the day before the departure, Mr. Sergius took her by the hand and presented her to the whole assembled family, saying:

“My friends, I had no daughter; now I have one, an adopted daughter! Kayette agrees to look upon me as her father, and I ask you for a little room for her in the *Fair Rambler*!”

Cries of joy greeted Mr. Sergius, and the fondest of caresses were lavished on “little Kayette.” The happiness with which she, on her side, had accepted the proposal, is not to be told.

“You are a good heart, Mr. Sergius!” cried out Cascabel, not without emotion.

“Why so, my friend? Have you forgotten what Kayette has done for me? Is it not natural she should become my child, when I owe my life to her?”

“Well then, let us have a share!” said Cascabel. “Since you are her father, Mr. Sergius, I want to be her uncle!”

CHAPTER XII.

FROM SITKA TO FORT YUKON.

ON the 26th of June, at daybreak, the “Cascabel chariot raised anchor,” to use one of the favorite metaphors of the captain. It remained to be seen, — in order to complete the metaphor with the immortal Prudhomme’s figure of speech, — if the skiff was not going to cruise on a volcano. There was nothing impossible in that — figuratively, first, for the difficulties of the journey would not be trifling, — physically, moreover, for there is no lack of volcanoes, extinct or otherwise, on the northern coast of Behring Sea.

The *Fair Rambler*, then, left the Alaskan capital, in the midst of the many and noisy good wishes for a safe journey that accompanied its departure. They came from the numerous friends whose applause and roubles the Cascabels had received during the few days they had spent at the gates of Sitka.

The word “gates” is more accurate than might be thought. For the town is surrounded with a palisade of stout build and with very few openings, which it would be hard to get over by force.

The reason of it is that the Russian authorities had had occasion to protect themselves against the influx of Kalosch Indians, who usually come and squat between the Stekine and the Chilcat rivers in the vicinity of New Archangel. There stand scattered their very primitive-looking huts; a low door opens into a circular room, sometimes divided into two compartments; and one hole, made overhead, allows the light to come in and the smoke of the fire to go out. The aggregation of these huts constitutes a suburb, a suburb *extra muros*, to the town of Sitka. After sunset, no Indian may remain in the town; a restriction not without a just motive, one necessitated, indeed, by the frequently unpleasant relations existing between the redskins and the palefaces.

Beyond Sitka, the *Fair Rambler* had at first to cross a number of narrow passes, by means of ferries ad hoc, so as to reach the furthest extremity of a sinuous gulf, terminated in a point, called Lynn canal.

Thenceforth, the road lay on terra firma.

The plan of the journey, or rather the itinerary, had been carefully studied by Mr. Sergius and John on large scale maps which they had easily procured at the Gardens Club. Kayette's knowledge of the country had been called into requisition in this circumstance; and her bright intelligence had enabled her to understand the indications of the map that was laid under her eyes. She expressed herself half in Indian, half in Russian, and her remarks were very useful in the discussion. The question was to find, if not the shortest, at least the easiest road to Port Clarence, situated on the east shore of the strait. It was therefore agreed that the *Fair Rambler* should make straight for the great Yukon River, at the height of the fort that has taken its name from this important stream. This was a point about midway along the itinerary, say seven hundred and fifty miles from Sitka. They would thereby avoid the difficulties that would be encountered along the coast line where not a few mountains are to be met. On the contrary, the Yukon valley stretches, wide and clear, between the intricate chains of the West and the Rocky mountains, which separate Alaska from the valley of the Mackenzie and the territory of New Britain.

It follows, therefore, that a few days after setting out, the Cascabels had seen, away to the southwest, the last outline of the uneven coast over which stand, at an immense height. Mount Fairweather and Mount Elias.

The carefully preconcerted division of time, for labor and for rest, was strictly adhered to. There was no occasion for increased speed toward Behring Strait, and it was better to go *piano* in order to be sure to go *sano*. The important point was to spare the horses, who could not be replaced, except by reindeer, if ever they broke down, an eventuality that should be warded off at any cost. Accordingly, each morning the start was made about six o'clock, then a two hours' halt at noon, another spur onward till six, and then rest for the whole night; which gave an average of fifteen or eighteen miles per day.

Had it been necessary to travel at night, nothing could have been easier, for, according to Mr. Cascabel's way of putting it, the Alaskan sun was not overfond of his bed.

"He has hardly gone to bed when he gets up again!" he used to say. "Twenty-three hours' continuous light, and no extra charge!"

Sure enough, at this time of the year, that is, about the summer solstice, and in this high latitude, the sun disappeared at seventeen minutes past eleven at night and reappeared at forty-nine minutes past eleven — let us say after thirty-two minutes' eclipse beneath the horizon. And the twilight that was left after its disappearance blended its light tints, without a break, with those of the succeeding dawn.

As to the temperature, it was hot, at times stifling. Under such conditions, it would have been more than imprudent not to suspend work during the heat of noontide. Both man and beast suffered intensely from this excessively high temperature. Who could believe that, on the edge of the polar circle, the thermometer registers thirty degrees centigrade above zero? Still, such is the simple truth!

Nevertheless, if the journey was progressing safely and without any great difficulties, Cornelia, severely tried by the unbearable temperature, complained not without cause.

“You will soon regret what you now think so hard to bear!” said Mr. Sergius to her one day.

“Regret such heat? Never!” she replied.

“Quite so, mother,” added John; “you will suffer very differently from the cold, the other side of Behring Strait, when we shall be going through the steppes of Siberia.”

“I believe you, Mr. Sergius,” Cascabel would answer. “But if there is no help against the heat, you can fight against the cold with the aid of fire.”

“No doubt, my friend, that is what you will have to do in a few months, for the cold will be terrific, bear it in mind!”

Meanwhile, by the 3d of July, after meandering through the narrow gorges, the canons, whimsically carved among hillocks of medium height, the *Fair Rambler* saw nothing on its road but a perspective of ever-lengthening plains between the scanty woods of this territory.

On that day, they had to follow the bank of a little lake, from which sprang the Rio Lewis, one of the chief tributaries of the lower Yukon.

Kayette recognized it and said:

“Yes, that is the Cargut, that flows into our big river!”

She had told John that in the Alaskan dialect this word “cargut” was the very word for “little river.”

And, during this journey, free from obstacles and exempt of fatigue, did the artists of the Cascabel troupe neglect rehearsing their exercises, keeping up the strength of their muscles, the suppleness of their limbs, the agility of their fingers? No, assuredly; and unless the heat would forbid it, each evening the camping ground was transformed into an arena whose only spectators were Mr. Sergius and Kayette. Both admired the achievements of the hard-working people — the Indian girl, not without some astonishment; Mr. Sergius with kindly interest.

One after the other, Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel lifted heavy weights with outstretched arms and juggled with dumb-bells; Sander practised the dislocations and contortions that were his specialty; Napoleona ventured on a rope stretched between two trestles and showed her dancing skill and grace, while Clovy went through his parade buffoonery before a purely imaginary public.

Surely, John would have preferred remaining with his books, improving himself by conversing with Mr. Sergius, and giving lessons to Kayette, who, thanks to him, was rapidly getting acquainted with the French language; but his father insisted on his losing nothing of his remarkable skill as an equilibrist, and, for obedience sake, he twirled through the air his glasses, his rings, his balls, his knives, and his sticks — with his mind engaged on very different thoughts, poor lad!

One thing that had given him great satisfaction, was that his father had had to abandon his idea of making an “artist” of Kayette. From the day when she had been adopted by Mr. Sergius, a wealthy, educated man, who belonged to the best society, her future prospects had been assured, and that, under the most favorable conditions. Yes, he felt happy to think of it, good honest John did, although he experienced a pang of real sorrow at the thought that Kayette would leave them when they reached Behring Strait. And leave them she would not have had to, if she had joined the troupe as a dancer!

For all that, John felt too genuine a friendship for her, not to rejoice at the fact that she was the adopted child of Mr. Sergius. Did he not long most ardently, himself, to change his position? Under the impulse of his loftier instincts, he felt himself unfit for the showman's life he led, and how many a time, on the public square, he had felt ashamed of the applause lavished on him for his uncommonly clever performances!

One evening, walking alone with Mr. Sergius, he opened his heart to him, laid bare before him his intimate yearnings and regrets, told him what he fain would have been, what he thought he might fairly aspire to. Perhaps by dint of roaming the world over, exhibiting themselves before popular gatherings, keeping up their calling as gymnasts and acrobats, securing the aid of jugglers and clowns, his parents might, in the end, reach a certain ease and comfort, he himself might eventually acquire a little fortune. But, it would be too late, then, to engage in a more honorable career.

"I do not feel ashamed of my father and mother, sir," he added. "By no means! I should be an ungrateful son, if I did! Within the limits of their ability, they have done everything! They have been good indeed to their children! Still, I feel I have in me the making of a man, and I am fated to be but a poor showman!"

"My friend," Mr. Sergius said to him, "I understand you. But let me tell you that, whatever a man's trade may be, it is no trifle to have carried it on honestly! Are you acquainted with more respectable people than your father and mother?”

“I am not, Mr. Sergius!”

“Well, continue to esteem them as I esteem them myself. Your desire to rise out of your present sphere is evidence of noble instincts. Who knows what the future may have in store for you? Be brave-hearted, my child, and rely on me to help you. I shall never forget what your people have done for me, no, I never shall! And some day, if I can — ”

And as he spoke, John observed that his brow darkened, that his voice faltered. He seemed to look anxiously to the future. A momentary silence followed, which the lad interrupted, saying:

“When we are at Port Clarence, Mr. Sergius, why would you not continue the journey with us? Since your intention is to return to Russia, to your father — ”

“That is out of the question, John,” replied Mr. Sergius. “I have not completed the work of exploration I began in the territories of West America.”

“And Kayette will remain with you?” inquired John, almost in a whisper.

There was so much sadness in the whispered inquiry, that Mr. Sergius could not hear it without being deeply moved.

“Must she not come with me,” he replied, “now that I have taken her into my charge?”

“She would not leave you, then, sir; and when in your country — ”

“My child,” was the answer, “my plans are not definitely settled yet. That is all I can say to you for the present. When we are at Port Clarence, we shall see. Perhaps I may then make a certain proposal to your father, and on his answer will depend, no doubt, — ”

John noticed once more the hesitation he had already observed in his companion’s way of speaking. This time he refrained from further comment, feeling that an extreme reserve was a duty for him. But, ever since this conversation, there was a more intimate sympathy between them. Mr. Sergius had ascertained all that there was of good, of trustworthy, of noble in that young man so upright, so openhearted. He therefore applied himself to instruct him, to guide him in those studies for which he was inclined. As to Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel, it was with a grateful heart they watched what their guest was doing for their son.

Nor did John neglect his duties as purveyor. Very fond of hunting, Mr. Sergius accompanied him most of the time, and, between two shots, how many things can be said! Indeed there was an abundance of game in these plains. Of hares there were enough to feed a whole caravan. And it was not as eatables only that they proved useful.

“Those things you see skipping about here are not only dainty bits and ragouts, they are cloaks too, and muffs, and boas, and blankets!” said Mr. Cascabel one day.

“You are right, friend,” Mr. Sergius made answer, “and after they have appeared in one character, in your meat safe, they will play quite as useful a part in your wardrobe. We could not be too plentifully supplied against the hardships of the Siberian climate!”

And accordingly they gathered quite a stock of the skins, and spared the preserved meat for such time as winter would drive the game away from the polar regions.

As for that, if perchance the sportsmen brought home neither partridge nor hare, Cornelia did not disdain putting a raven or a crow into the pot, after Indian fashion, and the soup was none the less excellent.

At other times, it might happen that Mr. Sergius and John drew forth from their bag a magnificent heathcock, and the reader will readily imagine how well the roasted bird looked on the table.

There was no fear of starvation, in fine, on board the *Fair Rambler*; true it is, she still was in the smoothest part of her adventurous voyage.

One annoyance, it must be said, — indeed, a source of pain and suffering, — was the continual worrying of the mosquitoes. Now that Mr. Cascabel was no longer on British soil, he found them unpleasant. Doubtless, they would have increased and multiplied beyond measure, had not the swallows made an extraordinary consumption of them. But, yet a little while, and the swallows would migrate toward the south; for, short indeed is their lingering about the limit of the polar circle!

On the 9th of July, the *Fair Rambler* reached the confluence of two streams, the one a tributary to the other. It was the Lewis River, flowing into the Yukon through a large widening of its left bank. As Kayette remarked, this river, in the upper portion of its course, also bears the name of Pelly River. From the mouth of the Lewis it takes a direction due northwest, and then curves to the west to go and pour its waters into a vast estuary of the sea of Behring.

At the confluence of the Lewis stands a military post, Fort Selkirk, less important than Fort Yukon, which is situated some three hundred miles up the river on its right bank.

Since they had left Sitka, the young Indian woman had rendered the little troupe valuable services by guiding them with marvelous accuracy. Once already during her nomadic life, she had traveled these plains watered by the great Alaskan river. Questioned by Mr. Sergius on the way her childhood had been spent, she had related the hardships of her life, when the Ingelete tribes migrated from one point to another in the valley of the Yukon, and how her tribe had been scattered, and how her parents and relatives disappeared. And, again, she told how, left alone in the world, she had seen herself reduced to seek an engagement as a servant to some official or agent in Sitka. More than once had John made her go over her sad history, and each time he had heard it with the same thrill of emotion.

It was in the neighborhood of Fort Selkirk that they fell in with some of those Indians who roam along the banks of the Yukon, and particularly the Birchmen, a tribe whose name was more fully developed in Kayette’s language: “the rovers by the birch trees.” As a matter of fact, the birch tree is very common among the firs, the Douglas pines, and the maple trees with which the center of the province of Alaska is besprinkled.

Fort Selkirk, occupied by some agents of the Russo-American Company, is, in reality, but a fur and peltry store where the traders along the coast come and make their purchases at certain seasons of the year.

These agents, delighted with a visit which varied the monotony of their lives, gave a hearty welcome to the occupants of the *Fair Rambler*. And in consequence Mr. Cascabel decided to take a rest here for twenty-four hours.

However, it was arranged that the wagon would cross the Yukon River at this spot, so as not to have to do so farther on, and perhaps under less favorable circumstances. Sure enough, its bed grew wider and its stream more swift in proportion as it flowed westward.

This advice was given by Mr. Sergius himself after he had studied on the map the course of the Yukon, which cut across their route some six hundred miles ahead of Port Clarence.

The *Fair Rambler* was therefore ferried to the right bank with the aid of the agents and that of the Indians who encamp round about Fort Selkirk, and seek an easy prey in the waters of the river.

Indeed, the advent of the troupe did not prove useless, and, in return for the services of the natives, they were enabled to render them one, the full importance of which was duly appreciated.

The chief of the tribe was then grievously ill — at least he might have been thought so. Now, he had no other physician or other remedies than the traditional magician and the magical incantations in use among native tribes. Accordingly, for some time past, the chief had lain in the open air, in the center of the village, with a huge fire burning night and day by his side. The Indians gathered around him sang in a chorus an invocation to the great Manitou, whilst the magician tried all his best charms to drive away the evil spirit that had taken up his abode in the body of the sick man. And, the better to succeed, he endeavored to introduce the said spirit into his own person; but the latter, a stubborn spirit, would not move an inch.

Fortunately, Mr. Sergius had a smattering of the medical art, and was able to give the Indian chief such a remedy as his condition required.

On examination, he had no difficulty in finding out the ailment of the august patient; and calling the little pharmacy into requisition, he administered to him a violent emetic, for which all the magician's incantations could not have proved a substitute.

The truth is that the chief suffered from a frightful fit of over-feeding, and the pints of tea he had been swallowing for the past two days were powerless in such a state of things.

And so, the chief did not die, to the great joy of his tribe — which deprived the Cascabels of an opportunity to witness the ceremonies attendant on the burial of a sovereign. Burial is not the right word, perhaps, when Indian funerals are in question. For the corpse is not interred, but suspended in mid-air, a few feet over the ground. There, at the bottom of his coffin, and intended for his use in the other world, are laid his pipe, his bow, his arrows, his snow-shoes, and the more or less valuable furs he wore in winter. And there, as a child in his cradle, he is rocked by the breeze during that sleep from which there is no awakening.

After twenty-four hours spent at Fort Selkirk, the Cascabels took leave of the Indians and the agents, and brought away pleasant recollections of this first halt on the bank of the river. They had to toil up the Pelly River along a somewhat rugged track, which was the cause of no little fatigue to the horses. At length, on the 27th of July, seventeen days after leaving Fort Selkirk, the *Fair Rambler* arrived at Fort Yukon.

CHAPTER XIII.

CORNELIA CASCABEL HAS AN IDEA.

IT was along the right bank of the river that the *Fair Rambler* had accomplished that portion of the journey which lay between Fort Selkirk and Fort Yukon. It had kept at a shorter or a longer distance from it so as to avoid the many detours the course of the river would have necessitated, cut into, as it is, by innumerable clefts, and rendered inaccessible at times by marshy lagoons. Things were so, at least, on this side; for, on the left, a few low hills encase the valley and stretch to the northwest. It might have been difficult to get over certain small affluents of the Yukon, among others the Stewart, which has not a single ferry, if, during the warm season, it had not been possible to ford it, with water half-way up to the knee only. And even then, Mr. Cascabel and family would have been sorely puzzled but for Kayette who, knowing the valley well, was able to guide them to the exact spots.

It was indeed a piece of good fortune for them to have the young Indian girl for a guide. She was so happy, too, to oblige her new friends, so pleased to find herself in a new home, so grateful for those caresses of a mother, that she had thought she would never more enjoy!

The country was pretty woody in its central part, with here and there a rise, swelling the surface of the ground; but it already bore a different aspect from that of the neighborhood of Sitka.

As a fact, the severity of a climate subjected to eight months of Arctic winter is an absolute check to vegetation. Hence, with the exception of a few poplars, the tops of which curve down in the shape of a bow, the only families of fragrant trees to be met with in these parts are the firs and the birches. Beyond these you see nothing but a few clumps of those melancholy, stunted, and colorless willows that the breeze from the Ice Sea very quickly strips of their leaves.

During the trip from Fort Selkirk to Fort Yukon, our sportsmen having been rather fortunate, it had not been necessary to draw on the reserve stock for the daily requirements. Hares there were, as many as could be wished for, and, if the truth must be told, the guests at our table were almost beginning to have too much of one good thing. True, the bill of fare had been varied with roast geese and wild ducks, not to mention the eggs of those birds whose nests Sander and Napoleona were so clever at finding, deeply buried in holes. And Cornelia had so many recipes for cooking eggs — she prided herself on it too — that it was a succession of ever new treats.

“Well, on my word, this is a country where living is good!” exclaimed Clovy one day, as he finished picking the backbone of a splendid goose. “It is a pity it is not situated in the center of Europe or of America!”

“If it were in the center of thickly populated countries,” answered Mr. Sergius, “it is probable that game would not be so plentiful.”

“Unless — ” began Clovy.

But a look from his master closed his lips and spared him the nonsensical remark he was certainly going to make.

If the plain swarmed with game, it must be noted likewise that the creeks, the rios, the tributaries of the Yukon supplied excellent fish, which Sander and Clovy caught with their rods, and more especially magnificent pikes. The only trouble, or rather pleasure, they need give themselves was to freely indulge their taste for fishing, for not a sou or a cent had they ever to spend.

Spending, indeed! that would have weighed very little on Master Sander's mind! Were not the Cascabels sure to pass their old age in comfort and luxury, thanks to him? Had he not his famous nugget in his possession? Had he not concealed, in a corner of the wagon, unknown to all but himself, the precious stone he had found in the Cariboo forest? He had; and to this day, the youngster had had sufficient control over himself to say nothing about it to anybody, patiently waiting for the day when he could turn his nugget into current gold. And then, would he not be proud to show off his fortune! Not indeed, gracious heavens! that the selfish thought had entered his head to keep the money for himself! His father and mother it was, for whom he kept it; and with that, they would be largely compensated for the robbery committed on them in the Sierra Nevada!

When the *Fair Rambler* reached Fort Yukon, after several hot days, all the travelers were really tired. It was therefore agreed that they would stay here for a whole week.

“You can do so all the more unbegrudgingly,” remarked Mr. Sergius, “as we are only six hundred miles from Port Clarence. Now to-day is the 27th of July, and we cannot possibly cross the strait on the ice before two months', perhaps three months' time.”

“That is a settled matter,” said Mr. Cascabel; “since we can afford the time, halt!”

This command was greeted with equal satisfaction by the whole troupe, the professional bipeds as well as the four-footed staff of the *Fair Rambler*.

The foundation of Fort Yukon goes back to the year 1847. This, the most westerly post in the possession of the Hudson Bay Company, is situated almost on the limit of the polar circle. But as it stands on Alaskan territory this Company is obliged to pay a yearly indemnity to its rival, the Russo-American Company.

In 1864 only were the present buildings and their belt of palisades commenced, and they had been but lately completed when the Cascabel family halted at the fort for a few days' stay.

The agents readily offered them hospitality within the precincts of the fort. There was no lack of room in the yards and under the sheds. Mr. Cascabel, however, poured forth his thanks in a few pompous sentences: he preferred not to leave the roof of his comfortable *Fair Rambler*.

In reality if the garrison of the fort consisted only of a score of agents, mostly Americans, with a few Indian servants, the natives round about the Yukon were reckoned by hundreds.

For as a matter of fact, it is in this central point of Alaska that the most largely frequented market is held for the traffic in furs and hides. Thither flocked the various tribes of the province, the Kotch-a-Kutchins, the An-Kutchins, the Tatanchoks, and, foremost among them all, the Co-Yukons, who dwell by the banks of the big river.

The truth is, that the situation of the fort is most advantageous for the exchange of goods, standing as it does at the angle formed by the Yukon at the confluent of the Porcupine. Here the river divides into five streams, which enables traders to penetrate more easily into the interior and to barter goods even with the Eskimos by the Mackenzie River.

This network of streams is, accordingly, furrowed with skiffs, gliding up or down, and especially with numbers of those “baidarras,” light boat-frames covered with oiled skins, the seams of which are greased, so as to render them more water-tight. On board these frail boats the Indians do not hesitate to venture on long voyages, thinking nothing of carrying them on their shoulders when rapids or natural dams happen to impede their progress. However, these skiffs cannot be used more than three months at most. For the rest of the year the waters are imprisoned under a thick covering of ice. The baidarra then changes its name and becomes a sleigh. This vehicle, whose curved extremity, recalling the prow of a boat, is held in position by strips of leather from the hide of the moose, is drawn by dogs or reindeer, and travels quickly. As to foot-travelers, with their long snow-shoes, they move along more swiftly still. Always in luck, was our Cæser Cascabel! He could not have reached Fort Yukon at a better moment. The fur and hide fair was at its highest; several hundreds of Indians had already pitched their tents near the trading station.

“Hang me,” he exclaimed, “if we don’t make something by it! This is a regular fair, and we must not forget that we are *fair* artists! Is not this the time, if ever, to display our talents? You see no objection to it, Mr. Sergius?”

“None, my friend,” replied the latter, “but I see no great chance of heavy takings!”

“Why, they’ll surely cover our expenses, seeing we have none!”

“Quite true. But, let me ask you, in what way do you hope these good natives will pay you for their seats, since they have no American money, no Russian money.”

“Well, they’ll give me muskrats’ skins, beavers’ skins, anything they like! In any case, the immediate result of these performances will be to unbend our muscles, for I am always afraid our joints will get stiff. And, you know, we have a name to keep up at Perm, at Nijni, and I would not for the world expose my troupe to a fiasco when we make our first appearance on your native soil. It would be the death of me, Mr. Sergius, — yes, it would be my death!”

Fort Yukon, the most important in these regions, occupies a pretty large site on the right bank of the river. It is a sort of oblong quadrilateral construction, strengthened at each corner with square towerets not unlike those windmills resting on a pivot that are to be seen in the north of Europe. Inside are several buildings, for the lodging of the agents of the company and their families, and two vast inclosed sheds, where a considerable stock is kept of sable furs and beavers’ skins, and black and silver-gray foxes’ skins, not to speak of less valuable goods.

A monotonous life, a painful life too, is the life of these agents. The flesh of the reindeer sometimes, but more frequently that of the moose, toasted, boiled, or roasted, is their main article of food. As to other kinds of victuals, they must be fetched from the trading-station at York, in the region of Hudson Bay, that is to say from a distance of some two thousand miles; and, of necessity, the arrival of such supplies is an unfrequent occurrence.

In the course of the afternoon, after having arranged their encampment, Mr. Cascabel and family went and paid a visit to the natives who had squatted between the banks of the Yukon and the Porcupine.

What a variety in those temporary dwellings according to the tribe to which they belonged! Huts of hides and barks of trees, held up on poles and covered over with foliage, tents made of the cotton stuff manufactured by the natives, wooden cabins that can be taken down or set up according to requirements.

And what quaint mixture of colors in the dresses! Some wore fur clothing, others cotton garments; all had a garland of leaves around their heads to preserve themselves against the bite of the mosquito. The women wear square-cut petticoats, and adorn their faces with shells. The men wear shoulder clasps and use them, in winter, to hold up their long robe of moose’s skin, the fur of which is on the inside. Both sexes, moreover, make a great show of fringes of false pearls, the size of which is the only standard by which they are valued. Among these various tribes, were distinguished the Tananas, easily known by the bright colors painted on their faces, the feathers on their headdress, the little pieces of red clay stuck on their egrettes,their leather vests, their pants of reindeer skin, their long flint guns, and their powder pouches carved with extreme delicacy.

By way of coin, these Indians use the shells of the *dentalium*, which are found even among the natives of the Vancouver Archipelago; they hang them on the cartilage of their noses, and take them down when they want to pay for anything.

“That is a handy way to carry your money,” said Cornelia. “No fear of losing your purse.”

“Unless your nose drops off!” justly remarked Clovy.

“And that might easily come to pass in such severe winters!” added Mr. Cascabel.

On the whole, this gathering of natives offered a curious spectacle.

Of course, Mr. Cascabel had entered into conversation with several of the Indians, by means of the Chinook tongue with which he was slightly acquainted, whilst Mr. Sergius questioned and answered them in Russian.

For several days, a brisk trade was carried on between the natives and the representatives of the Company, but hitherto the Cascabels had not availed themselves of their talents for a public performance.

Meanwhile, however, the Indians soon became aware that the troupe was of French origin, that its various members enjoyed a wide reputation as athletes, acrobats, and jugglers. Each evening they flocked, in wondering crowds, around the *Fair Rambler*. They had never seen such a vehicle, one with such gaudy coloring above all. They chiefly praised it because it moved about easily, — a peculiarly pleasing feature in the eyes of nomadic people. Who knows if, at some future time, Indian tents mounted on wheels will not be a common sight? After houses on wheels, we may have villages on wheels, — why not?

It was a natural consequence of such a state of things that an extraordinary performance should be given by the new-comers. And accordingly the giving of such a performance was resolved upon “at the general requests of the Indians of Fort Yukon.”

The native with whom Mr. Cascabel had made acquaintance very soon after his arrival was a “tyhi,” that is to say the chief of a tribe. A fine fellow, some fifty years old, he seemed full of intelligence; nay, there was a very “knowing” look about him. Several times he had visited the *Fair Rambler*, and had given to understand how glad the natives would be to witness the exercises of the troupe.

This tyhi was mostly accompanied by an Indian, some thirty years of age, named Fir-Fu, a graceful type of the more refined native, who was the magician of the tribe and a remarkable juggler, well known as such throughout the Yukon province.

“He is a colleague of ours then?” said Mr. Cascabel the first time that he was presented to him by the tyhi.

And all three, having drunk together some of the liqueurs of the country, had smoked the calumet of peace.

As the outcome of these conversations, in the course of which the tyhi had pressed Mr. Cascabel for a performance, the latter was appointed to take place on the 3d of August. It was agreed that the Indians would lend their aid, for they would not be thought inferior to Europeans in strength, skill, or agility.

This indeed is not surprising; in the Far West, as in the province of Alaska, the Indians are very fond of gymnastic and acrobatic displays, and with these they intermix comedies and masquerades, at which they are great adepts.

And accordingly, on the appointed date, when a large audience had been gathered together, you could have seen a group of half a dozen Indians whose faces were hid under large wooden masks of unspeakable hideousness. After the fashion of the “big heads” at pantomimes, the mouth and eyes of these masks were set in motion by means of strings, — which gave an appearance of life to these horrible faces, most of which ended in birds’ beaks. It were difficult to imagine what a degree of perfection they had attained in the art of making grimaces, and John Bull (the ape of course) might have taken some good lessons from them.

Needless to say that Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel, John, Sander, Napoleona, and Clovy had all donned their gala dresses for this occasion.

The spot selected was an immense meadow surrounded by trees, of which the *Fair Rambler* occupied the background, as though a part of a stage scenery. The front rows had been reserved for the agents of Fort Yukon with their wives and children. On the sides several hundreds of Indians, men and women, formed a semi-circle, and smoked the time away, waiting for the performance.

The masked natives who were to join in it stood by themselves, somewhat out of the way.

Punctual to the time, Clovy appeared on the platform of the wagon, and proceeded to deliver his usual address:

“Indian gentlemen and Indian ladies, you are about to see what you shall see!” — etc. etc.

But as Chinook “was to him unknown,” it is very probable that his witticisms were all thrown away on the audience.

What they did understand was the traditional shower of blows leveled at him by his boss, and the kicks he received from behind with all the resignation of a clown who is paid for that very purpose.

The prologue over:

“Now, for the quadrupeds!” said Mr. Cascabel, bowing to the audience.

Wagram and Marengo were trotted out to the open space that had been reserved in front of the *Fair Rambler* and astonished the natives, little accustomed as they were to any labor that brings out the intelligence of animals. Then, when John Bull came and went through his vaulting exercises over the spaniel and the poodle, he did so with such nimbleness, and such droll attitudes, as to unwrinkle the grave-faced Indians.

Meanwhile, Sander did not cease blowing into the horn with all the might of his lungs, and Cornelia and Clovy kept beating their respective drums. If, after that, the Alaskans did not appreciate all the effect that can be produced by a European orchestra, the fact can only be explained by their lacking all sense of what is artistic.

Until now, the masked group had been motionless, deeming, no doubt, that the time for action had not come yet: they were keeping themselves in reserve.

“Mademoiselle Napoleona, the high rope dancer!” shouted Clovy through a speaking-trumpet.

And the lassie, presented by her father, made her appearance before the public.

First she danced with such grace as brought her warm applause, not expressed, indeed, by shouts or the clapping of hands, but by simple nods of the head which were not less significant. And these signs of gratification were renewed when she was seen to dart up on a rope, stretched between two trestles, and there, walk, run, and skip about, with an ease which was particularly admired by the Indian women.

“Now is my turn!” exclaimed young Sander.

And behold him coming forward, saluting the public with a tap on his nape, then twirling, twisting, dislocating himself, reversing his joints in all kinds of manner, transforming his legs into his arms, and his arms into his legs, now walking like a lizard, then hopping like a frog, and eventually terminating the whole with a double somersault.

He, too, received his meed of applause; but he had scarcely bowed his thanks by bringing his head on a level with his feet when an Indian, of his own age, stepping out of the group of native performers came forward in the ring, and took off his mask.

Every exercise executed by Sander, the young native then went through with such suppleness in his joints, such accuracy in his movements as to leave nothing to be desired from the acrobatic point of view. If he was less graceful than the younger of Cascabel's sons, he was not less astonishing than he. And his exploits accordingly excited among the natives the most enthusiastic nods.

Needless to say that the staff of the *Fair Rambler* had the good taste to add their applause to that of the public. But, unwilling to be beaten, Mr. Cascabel beckoned to John to proceed with his juggling, an art in which he considered him as having no equal.

John felt he had the honor of the family to keep up. Encouraged by a gesture from Mr. Sergius, and a smile from Kayette, he took up, in turn, his bottles, his plates, his balls, his knives, his disks, and his sticks, and it may be said he surpassed himself.

Mr. Cascabel could not help casting upon the Indians a look of proud complacency in which could be seen something like a challenge. He seemed to be saying to the members of the masked group:

“Well, you fellows, beat that if you can!”

His thought was, no doubt, understood; for, at a beck of the tyhi’s, another Indian, pulling off his mask, walked out of the group.

This was the magician Fir-Fu; he, too, had his reputation to keep up, on behalf of the native race.

Then, seizing, one after the other, the various articles used by John, he repeated each and every one of his rival’s exercises, crossing the knives and the bottles, the disks and the rings, the balls and the sticks, and all this, it must be confessed, with as graceful an attitude, as unerring a hand, as John Cascabel’s.

Clovy, accustomed to admire no one but his master and his family, was literally bewildered.

This time Cascabel applauded merely as a matter of courtesy and with the tips of his fingers.

“My word!” he murmured. “They are no joke, those redskins aren’t! People without schooling, too! Well! We shall teach them a thing or two!”

On the whole, he was not a little disappointed to have found rivals where he had expected admirers only. And what rivals? Simple natives of Alaska, — savages, you might say. His pride as an artist was stung to the quick. After all! you are a showman, or you are not!

“Now then, children,” he thundered, “now for the human pyramid!”

And all rushed toward him, as if to the assault. He had taken a firm stand, his legs wide open, his hips bulging out well, his bust fully developed. On his right shoulder John had lightly stepped, holding out a hand to Clovy, who stood on Cascabel’s left shoulder. In his turn, Sander had taken up his stand on his father’s head, and, above him, Napoleona crowned the edifice, circling her two arms to send kisses to the audience.

The French pyramid had scarcely been up when another, the native one, rose beside it. Without even removing their masks, the Indians had stood on each other, not five, but seven deep; their structure overtopped the other by one man. Pyramid vied against pyramid.

Shouts and hurrahs were now uttered by the Indian spectators in honor of their tribes. Old Europe was beaten by young America, and what America? — The America of the Co-Yukons, of the Tananas, and the Tatanchoks!

Mr. Cascabel, full of shame and confusion, made a wrong movement and well-nigh hurled his co-workers to the ground.

“Ah! That’s the way, is it?” he grumbled, after ridding himself of his human load.

“Be calm, my friend,” said Mr. Sergius to him. “It is really not worth while to — ”

“Not worth while, indeed! It is easily seen you are not an artist, Mr. Sergius!”

Then, turning to his wife:

“Come, Cornelia, an open-hand wrestling match!” he cried. “We shall see which of these savages will dare to face the ‘Chicago champion’!”

Mrs. Cascabel did not move.

“Well, Cornelia?”

“No, Cæser.”

“How? No? You won’t wrestle with those apes, and rescue the honor of the family?”

“I *shall* rescue it,” simply replied Cornelia. “Leave it to me. I have an idea!”

And when this wonderful woman had an idea, it was best to let her carry it out as she pleased. She felt quite as much humiliated as her husband by the success of the Indians, and it was probable she was about paying them off in her own coin.

She had returned to the *Fair Rambler*, leaving her husband somewhat uneasy, despite all the reliance he placed in the resources of her intelligence and imagination.

Two minutes later, Mrs. Cascabel reappeared and stood before the group of the Indian performers who gathered around her.

Then addressing the principal agent of the fort, she prayed him to kindly repeat to the natives what she was going to say.

And this is what was translated by him, word for word, in the vernacular tongue of the province of Alaska:

“Indians, you have exhibited, in these displays of muscle and of skill, talents that are worthy of a reward. That reward, I bring it to you.”

The audience listened with breathless attention.

“You see my hands?” continued Cornelia. “More than once they have been pressed by the most august personages of the old world. You see my cheeks? Many a time and oft they have received the kisses of the mightiest sovereigns of Europe! Well! these hands, these cheeks, they are yours! American Indians, come and kiss these cheeks, come and press these hands!”

And, in very truth, the natives did not wait to be asked twice. Never again would they have the like opportunity with so fine a woman!

One of them, a good-looking Tanana, came forth and seized the hand that she held out to him —

What a yell burst from his lips when he felt a shock that made him wriggle in a thousand contortions.

“Ah, Cornelia!” whispered Mr. Cascabel, “Cornelia, I understand you, and I admire you.”

And Mr. Sergius, John, Sander, Napoleona, and Clovy were in convulsions of laughter at the trick played on the natives by this extraordinary woman.

“Another!” she called, her arms stretched toward the audience, — ”another!”

The Indians hesitated; something supernatural must have happened there, they thought.

However, the tyhi seemed to be making up his mind; he walked slowly up toward Cornelia, stood still a couple of steps away from her imposing person, and surveyed her with a look that bespoke anything but a fearless heart within.

“Now then, old fellow!” cried Cascabel to him. “Now then, a little courage! — Kiss the lady! It’s the easiest thing out, and it’s so sweet!”

The tyhi, stretching out his hand, barely touched the European belle with his finger.

A second shock, a second series of screams, uttered this time by the chief, who well-nigh measured his length backwards on the ground, and awful stupefaction of the public. If people were so roughly handled for merely touching Mrs. Cascabel’s hand, what would come to pass if they ventured to embrace this astonishing creature, whose cheeks “had received the kisses of the mightiest sovereigns of Europe?” Well! there was one bold man, venturesome enough to run the risk. That man was the magician Fir-Fu. He, at least, should believe himself proof against all malefices! And so, he planted himself in front of Cornelia. Then, having walked right round her, and encouraged by the incentives of his countrymen, he took her in his two arms and gave her a formidable kiss, full on her cheek.

What followed this time was not a shock, but a series of leaps and jumps. The juggler had suddenly become an acrobat! And after two somersaults, as wonderfully per formed as they were involuntary, he dropped into the midst of his amazed companions.

To produce this effect on the magician, as well as on the other natives, Cornelia had merely to press the knob of a little electric pile she had in her pocket. Yes! — a little pocket pile with which she acted “the electrical woman!”

“Ah! wifie! — wifie!” exclaimed her husband, as he pressed her in his arms with impunity before the stupefied Indians. “Is she clever, eh? Is she clever?”

“As clever as electrical!” added Mr. Sergius.

In truth, what could the natives think, if not that this supernatural woman disposed of the thunder at her will? How was it that, for merely touching her hand, you were knocked to the ground? Surely, she could be no one else but the wife of the Great Spirit, who had condescended to come down on earth and take Cascabel for her second husband!

CHAPTER XIV.

FROM FORT YUKON TO PORT CLARENCE.

THAT same evening, in the course of a conversation at which the whole family circle was present, it was decided they would resume their journey two days after this memorable performance.

Evidently, — this was Mr. Cascabel’s own judicious remark, — had he been desirous to add recruits to his troupe, his only trouble would have been the abundance of the materials at his disposal. Though not without a sting for his personal pride, he was forced to acknowledge that these Indians had a wonderful aptitude for acrobatic exercises. As gymnasts, clowns, jugglers, or equilibrists, they would have met with immense success in any country. No doubt, practice was a great element in their talent, but they had to thank nature even more for making them muscular, supple, and nimble. Denying their having proved themselves equal to the Cascabels had been an injustice. Fortunately, the honor of the day had been saved for the troupe by the presence of mind of the “Queen of electrical women”!

It must be said that the agents at the fort — poor fellows without any education, most of them — had been no less astounded than the natives at what had taken place before them. It was agreed, however, that they should not be told the secret of the phenomenon, in order to leave with Cornelia the laurels she had won. The next morning, accordingly, when they came to pay their usual visit, they were afraid to draw too close to the “thunderbolt woman,” although she greeted them with a world of smiles. They hesitated somewhat before they took her proffered hand, and so did the tyhi and the magician, who would fain have known the mystery, — useful as it would have proved to them, to increase their prestige with the native tribes.

The preparations for the departure being completed, Mr. Cascabel and his people took leave of their hosts in the forenoon of the 6th of August, and the horses now well rested, started down the river-side, following the direction of the stream toward the west.

Mr. Sergius and John had carefully studied the map, availing themselves of the accurate indications given to them by the young Indian. Kayette knew most of the villages they would have to cross, and, from what she said, there were no streams ahead that would be a serious hindrance to the progress of the *Fair Rambler*.

Besides, there was no question, as yet, of leaving the Yukon valley. After following the right bank of the river as far as the station at Nelu, they would call at Nuclukayette village, and thence to Nulato Fort would be about two hundred and forty miles. The wagon would then leave the Yukon, and journey due west.

The season still kept favorable; the days were pretty warm, whilst the nights gave unmistakable signs of a falling in the temperature. So, barring unforeseen obstacles, Mr. Cascabel felt sure of reaching Port Clarence before winter had heaped insurmountable obstacles on his path.

Surprise may be felt at the comparative ease with which such a journey could be accomplished. But is not this the case in flat countries, when the fine season, the length of the days, the mildness of the climate are in the traveler’s favor? Things would be altogether different, on the other side of Behring Strait, when the Siberian steppes would stretch away to the horizon, when they would be buried under the winter snow as far as the eye could reach, and when gusts of the winter blast would plow their surface.

One evening, as they were chatting of dangers to come:

“Well, well,” said the sanguine Cascabel, “we shall manage to pull through, never mind!”

“I hope so,” answered Mr. Sergius. “But as soon as you set foot on the Siberian coast, I advise you to make for the southwest of the province immediately. In the more southerly parts, you will suffer less from the cold.”

“That is what we mean to do, Mr. Sergius,” answered John.

“And with all the more reason, my friends, as you have nothing to fear from the Siberians, unless — as Clovy would say — unless you ventured among the tribes on the northern coast. In truth your greatest enemy will be the cold.”

“We are prepared against it,” said Mr. Cascabel, “and we shall get on all right; our only regret being that you will not continue the journey with us, Mr. Sergius.”

“Our only regret, but a very keen one,” added John.

Mr. Sergius felt to what an extent these people had grown attached to him, and how fond he himself had become of them. Sure enough, as one day after another was spent in the intimacy we have described, the bonds of friendship grew closer and closer between them and him. The parting would be painful; and would they ever meet again, throughout the haphazard eventualities of two courses of life so different from each other? And then, Mr. Sergius would bring Kayette away with him, and he had already noticed that John’s friendship for the young Indian girl was deserving of another name. Had Mr. Cascabel remarked what was going on in the heart of his son? Mr. Sergius did not feel sure of it. As to Cornelia, as the good woman had never opened her mind on the subject, he had thought it his duty to keep equally reserved. Of what use would an explanation have been? Quite a different future was in store for Mr. Sergius's adopted daughter; and poor John was now indulging in hopes that could not be realized.

In fine, the journey was proceeding without too many obstacles, without too much toiling. Port Clarence would be reached before Behring Strait had been frozen into a roadway, and there, very probably, they would have to make a stay of several weeks. No necessity, therefore, to overwork men or beasts.

Still, they were always at the mercy of a possible accident. One of the horses hurt or sick, a broken wheel, and the *Fair Rambler* would have been in an alarming position. The observance of the greatest caution was therefore obligatory.

For the first three days, the route continued to follow the course of the river, which flowed toward the west, as we have said; but the Yukon began to bend southward, and it was thought right to keep along the line of the seventy-fifth parallel.

About this spot, the river was very sinuous, and the valley became visibly narrower, ensconced by hills of medium height, which the map designates under the name of "ramparts" on account of their bastion-faced appearance.

Some difficulty was experienced in getting out of this maze, and all sorts of precautions were taken to save the wagon from accident. They took a portion of the load down when the road was too steep, and frequently put their shoulders to the wheels, the more so, according to Mr. Cascabel's expression, "as wheelwrights seemed rather scarce in these parts!"

There were likewise not a few creeks to cross, among others the Nocotocargut, the Shetehaut, the Klakinicot. Fortunately, at this season, these streams were shallow, and it was easy to find available fords.

As to the Indians, there were few or none at all in this part of the province, once occupied by the tribes of the Midland Men, tribes now almost extinct. From time to time, a family, at most, passed by, on their way to the southwest coast for the autumn fishing season.

At other times, likewise, traders met our friends from the opposite direction, coming from the mouth of the Yukon, and pushing on toward the various stations of the Russo-American Company. They contemplated, not without some surprise, both the gayly painted wagon and the freight it carried. Then, with a “Safe home!” they continued their tramp eastward.

On the 13th of August, the *Fair Rambler* arrived at the village of Nuclakayette, three hundred and sixty miles from Fort Yukon. It is in reality but another fur-trade station, the furthest station frequented by Russian agents. Starting from different points in Russia in Asia, and in Alaska, they meet here to set up a competition with the buyers of the Hudson Bay Company.

Hence Nuclakayette was a center to which the natives converged with the furs they had been able to gather during the winter season.

Having deviated from the river in order to avoid its numerous bends, Mr. Cascabel had met it again in the latitude of this village, which was pleasantly nestled among low hills within a gay curtain of green trees. A few wooden huts clustered around the palisade with which the fort was protected. Brooklets murmured through the grassy plain. Two or three skiffs lay by the bank of the Yukon. The whole landscape was gratifying to the eye and suggestive of rest. As to the Indians who frequented the neighborhood, they were Tananas, belonging, as was remarked above, to the finest type of the native in northern Alaska.

Enticing as this spot looked, the *Fair Rambler* only stopped twenty-four hours here. The rest seemed sufficient for the horses, seeing the care that was taken of them. Mr. Cascabel proposed to make a longer stay at Nulato, a more important and better-stocked fort, where various purchases would be made in view of the journey through Siberia.

Needless to say that Mr. Sergius and John, accompanied sometimes by young Sander, made good use of their guns, along the road. By way of heavy game, there were the reindeer and the moose which ran across the plains and sought the shelter of the forests, or rather the clumps of trees with which the country is rather sparingly dotted. In the marshy parts, the geese, the woodcocks, the snipes, and the wild ducks afforded many a good shot; and our sportsmen had even an opportunity of bringing down a couple of herons, little appreciated though these be from the eatable point of view.

And still, from what Kayette stated, the heron is greatly prized by the Indians as an article of food — especially when they have nothing else. A trial of these birds was made at breakfast, on the 13th of August. Despite all Cornelia’s talent, — and that talent was marvelous, — the flesh of the heron seemed tough and leathery, and by none was it accepted without a protest but by Wagram and Marengo, who left not a bone.

It is true that, in times of dearth, the natives are glad of owls, falcons, and even of martens; but the reason of it is, it must be confessed, that they cannot help it.

On the 14th of August, the *Fair Rambler* had to slip through the windings of a narrow gorge between very steep hillocks by the bank of the river. This time, so steep was the pass, so rugged the track, as though it had been the ravine-bed of a torrent, that, despite all precautions, an accident happened. Luckily, it was not one of the wheels that was broken, but one of the shafts. The repairs took but little time, and a few pieces of rope set matters right again.

After passing, on one bank of the river, the village of Suquonyilla, and, on the other, the village of Newi-cargut, on the creek of the same name, the journey went on without any hindrance. Not a hill was to be seen. One immense plain spread out farther than the eye could reach. Three or four rios intersected it; at this season, when rain is scarce, their beds were quite dried up. At the times of storms and snow, it would have been impossible to keep up the itinerary in these parts.

When crossing one of these creeks, the Milo-cargut, in which there was barely a foot of water, Mr. Cascabel remarked that there was a dam across it.

“Well!” said he, “when they went to the trouble of damming this creek, they might as well have made a bridge over it! It would have been more useful in times of flood!”

“No doubt, father,” answered John. “But the engineers who built this dam would not have been capable of constructing a bridge!”

“Why so?”

“Because they are four-footed engineers, otherwise called beavers.”

John was not mistaken, and they were able to admire the work of these industrious animals, who take care to build their dam in conformity with the current and to regulate its height according to the usual low-water level of the creek. The very slope given to the sides of the dam had been calculated in view of a greater power of resistance to the force of the waters.

“And still,” cried Sander, “these beavers never went to school to learn lessons.”

“They had no need of going,” answered Mr. Sergius. “Of what use is science, which is sometimes at fault, when you have instinct, which is always right? This dam, my child, the beavers have constructed it, just as ants make their nests, just as spiders weave their webs, just as bees contrive the combs in their hives, in fine just as trees and shrubs bring forth fruits and flowers. No fumbling about, on their part; no improving either. Indeed there are no improvements to make here. The beaver of our day is as perfect in his work as the first beaver that appeared on this globe. The power of improving does not belong to animals, it is man’s own; he alone can rise from one improvement to another in the domain of art, of industry, and of sciences. Let us give free scope to our admiration for this marvelous instinct of animals, which nables them to create such things. But let us consider such accomplishments only as the work of nature!”

“Quite so, Mr. Sergius,” said John, “I fully understand your remark. Therein lies the difference between instinct and reason. On the whole, reason is superior to instinct, although it be likely to err.”

“Most undoubtedly, my friend,” replied Mr. Sergius, “and the errings of reason, successively recognized and repaired, constitute but so much headway on the path of progress.”

“In any case,” repeated Sander, “I keep to what I said! Animals can do without going to school.”

“Right, but men are only animals when they have not gone to school!” retorted Mr. Sergius.

“Very well, very well!” exclaimed Cornelia, always very practical in household matters. “Are your beavers good to eat?”

“Of course,” said Kayette.

“I even read,” added John, “that the tail of the animal is excellent!”

They were unable to verify the statement, for there were no beavers in the creek, or if there were any, they were not to be caught.

After leaving the bed of the Milo-cargut, the *Fair Rambler* went through Sachertelontin village, in the very heart of the Co-Yukon district. On Kayette’s recommendation, certain precautions had to be taken by our friends in their intercourse with the natives owing to the thieving propensities of the latter. As they surrounded the vehicle rather closely, care had to be taken that they should not enter it. Besides, a few glass baubles, liberally offered to the principal chiefs of the tribe, produced a salutary effect, and the episode passed off without any unpleasantness.

The itinerary, however, became once more complicated with a certain amount of difficulties, skirting as it did the narrow base of the “ramparts”; but it had been impossible to avoid them without venturing into a more mountainous country.

The speed of the journey was affected thereby, and still it was now advisable not to tarry. The temperature began to feel coldish, if not during the day, at least at night — quite a normal occurrence at this season, since the region lay within a few degrees only of the polar circle.

The Cascabels had now reached a point where the river describes a rather sudden angle toward the north. They had to follow it up to the confluent of the Co-Yukuk, which joins it by means of two tortuous streams. One whole day was spent in finding a fordable spot, nor did Kayette make it out without trouble, as the level of the stream had already risen.

Once on the other side of this affluent, the *Fair Rambler* resumed its southerly course, and went down through a somewhat uneven district, to Nulato fort.

This post, the commercial importance of which is considerable, belongs to the Russo-American Company. It is the most northerly trading station in Western America, being situated, according to Sir Frederick Whymper's observations, in latitude 60°42' and longitude 155°36'.

And yet, in this part of the Alaskan province, it would have been difficult to believe one's self in such high latitude. The soil was unquestionably more fertile than in the neighborhood of Fort Yukon. Everywhere trees of fair growth could be seen, everywhere pasture lands carpeted with green grass, not to speak of vast plains that might be profitably tilled, for the clayey soil is covered over with a thick layer of humus. The land is, moreover, abundantly watered, thanks to the meanderings of the river Nulato, whose general direction is southwest, and to the network of creeks or "carguts" stretching out toward the northeast. However, the only signs of vegetable production are a few bushes laden with wild berries, and utterly abandoned to the whims of nature.

The laying out of Fort Nulato is as follows: around the buildings, a belt of palisades, protected by two towerets, which Indians are forbidden to enter at night, and even during the day, when there are many of them together; within the precincts, huts, sheds, and wooden stores, with windows where the skin of the seal’s bladder is a substitute for glass. Nothing more rudimentary, the reader will perceive, than these stations in far-away America.

There, Mr. Cascabel and his friends received a warm welcome. In those out-of-the-way spots on the new continent, outside the tracks of regular intercommunications, is not the advent of a few visitors always a relief to monotony, a real source of enjoyment, and are they not always welcome for the news they bring from such distances?

Fort Nulato was inhabited by a score of employes, of Russian or American origin, who placed themselves at the disposal of the Cascabels, to supply them with anything they might need. Not only do they receive regular supplies from the Company, but they are in a position to add to their resources during the fine season, either hunting the reindeer and the moose, or fishing in the waters of the Yukon. There they find abundance of certain fish, particularly of “nalima,” a fish more generally used for the feeding of the dogs, but one the liver of which is rather valued by those who are accustomed to eat it.

Naturally the inhabitants of Nulato were somewhat surprised when they descried the *Fair Rambler*, and not less so, when Mr. Cascabel told them of his intention to return to Europe by way of Siberia. Really, those French folks doubt of nothing! As to the first portion of the journey, as far as Port Clarence, they stated their belief that there would be no obstacles to it, and that it would be completed before the plains of Alaska were gripped by the first chill of winter.

On the advice of Mr. Sergius, they resolved to purchase some of the articles necessary to the trip across the steppes. And first of all, it was advisable to get a few pair of those spectacles that are indispensable over immense tracts whitened with winter rime and snow. The Indians bartered a dozen of them against a few glass trinkets. They were only wooden spectacles without any glass, or rather they were a sort of winkers covering up the eye in such a way as to allow it to see but through a narrow chink. This is sufficient to enable you to get along without too much trouble, and saves you from the ophthalmia which would be a necessary consequence of the reflection from the snow. The whole staff made a trial of the winkers, and declared they could easily get accustomed to them.

Next to this sight-saving apparatus, a covering for the feet had to be thought of, for you do not promenade in thin boots or shoes through steppes subjected to the hardships of Siberian winters.

The Nulato stores supplied them with several pair of boots made of seal-skins — of those best suited to long journeys over an ice-bound soil, and rendered waterproof by a coating of grease.

This led Mr. Cascabel to make, in his sententious style, this very just remark:

“It is always advantageous to clothe yourself in the same way as the animals of the country you go through! Since Siberia is the land of seals, let us dress like seals.”

“Seals with spectacles on!” added Sander, whose sally received the father’s approbation.

Two days were spent by our party at Fort Nulato, a sufficient rest for spirited steeds. Port Clarence was eagerly wished for. On the 21st of August, the *Fair Rambler* started onward, and from this moment, finally withdrew from the right bank of the big river.

As a matter of fact, the Yukon was now flowing straight for the southwest, to empty itself into Norton Bay. If they had kept on with it in this new direction, they would have needlessly lengthened their journey, since the mouth of the river lies below Behring Strait. From there, they would have been obliged to turn up toward Port Clarence along a coast indented with fiords, bays, and creeks, where Gladiator and Vermont would needlessly have worn themselves out.

The cold was becoming more biting. If the very oblique rays of the sun still gave a great light, they gave very little heat. Thick clouds, gathering in a grayish mass, threatened to fall in a shower of snow. Small game was growing scarce, and the migratory birds were commencing their flight southward in search of milder winter quarters.

To this day, — a blessing to be thankful for — Mr. Cascabel and his party had not been too severely tried by the fatigues of the journey. In truth, they must have had iron constitutions, — the result, evidently, of their nomadic life, the habit of acclimatizing themselves under any and every sky, and the muscular training of their bodily exercises. There was then every hope that they all should reach Port Clarence safe and sound.

And it came to pass thus, on the 5th of September, after a trip of fifteen hundred miles from Sitka, and almost three thousand three hundred from

Sacramento, say after a journey of over five thousand miles in seven months through western America.

CHAPTER XV.

PORT CLARENCE.

PORT CLARENCE is the most northwesterly port of northern America on Behring Strait. Lying to the south of Cape Prince of Wales, it is deeply sunk into that portion of the coast which forms the nose in the face profiled by the configuration of Alaska. This port affords very safe anchorage, and is therefore duly appreciated by seamen, especially by the whalers whose boats seek their fortune in the Arctic seas.

The *Fair Rambler* had taken up its camping ground near the inner shore of the harbor, close to the mouth of a small river, under shelter of tall rocks crowned with a cluster of stunted birch trees. There, the longest halt of the whole journey was to be made. There, the little troupe would take a lengthy rest, — a rest enforced by the condition of the strait, the surface of which had not become solid yet, at this time of the year.

Needless to say that the *Fair Rambler* could not possibly have crossed it on board the Port Clarence ferry-boats, mere fishing canoes of very small tonnage. It was then obligatory to adhere to the plan of getting over to the Asiatic side when the sea would be transformed into an immense ice-field.

This long halt was not to be regretted, previous to undertaking the second portion of the journey that would witness the commencement of the real physical difficulties, the struggle against the cold, the battling with the snowstorms — at least for so long as the *Fair Rambler* would not have reached the more accessible territories of southern Siberia. Until then some weeks, some months perhaps, of hardships would have to be passed, and it should be a cause of rejoicing to have plenty of time to complete the preparations for so severe an ordeal. For, if the Indians at Fort Nulato had been able to supply certain articles, there were others wanting still, which Mr. Cascabel expected to purchase either from the traders, or from the natives at Port Clarence.

The consequence was that his staff experienced a feeling of genuine satisfaction when he gave out his well-known word of command:

“Stand at ease!”

And this order, always welcomed on the march or in military maneuvers, was immediately followed by another, loudly called by young Sander:

“Dismiss!”

And the troupe did dismiss, you may believe it.

As may be imagined, the arrival of the *Fair Rambler* at Port Clarence had not escaped notice. Never had such a perambulating machine ventured so far, since it had now reached the very utmost confines of northern America. For the first time did French showmen appear to the wondering eyes of the natives.

There were then at Port Clarence, over and above its usual population of Eskimos and traders, not a few Russian officials. They were men who, consequent upon the annexation of Alaska to the United States, were under orders to cross the strait and repair either to the Tchuktchi peninsula on the coast of Asia, or to Petropaulovski, the capital of Kamtchatka. These officials joined the whole population in the hearty welcome they gave to the Cascabel family, and it is worthy of notice that the Eskimos’ greeting, in particular, was most cordial.

They were the same Eskimos who were to be met in these parts, twelve years later, by the famous navigator Nordenskiold, at the time of that bold expedition in which he discovered the northeast passage. Even now, some of these natives were armed with revolvers and repeating guns, the first gifts of American civilization.

The summer season being scarcely over, the natives at Port Clarence had not returned to their winter dwellings yet. They were encamped under small tents, pitched not without elegance, made of thick, brightly variegated cotton cloth and strengthened with straw matting. Inside might be seen a number of utensils manufactured with cocoanut shells.

And when Clovy saw these utensils for the first time, he exclaimed:

“I say! — And cocoanuts grow here, then? in the Eskimos’ forests?”

“Unless,” answered Mr. Sergius, — ”unless these nuts be brought here from the islands of the Pacific, and given in payment by the whalers who call at Port Clarence.”

And Mr. Sergius was right. Indeed, the relations between the Americans and the natives were already progressing rapidly at this time, and a fusion was taking place between them, entirely to the advantage of the development of the Eskimo race.

In this connection, we may draw attention to the fact, which will be noticed hereafter, that there exists no conformity of type or manners between the Eskimos of American origin and the natives of Siberia in Asia. The Alaskan tribes do not even understand the language which is spoken west of Behring Strait. But their dialect having a very considerable admixture of English and

Russian words, it was no very hard task to carry on a conversation with them.

It therefore follows that, immediately on their being settled, the Cascabels endeavored to hold intercourse with the natives scattered around Port Clarence. As they were hospitably received in the tents of these good people, they felt no hesitation in opening for them the doors of the *Fair Rambler*, — and neither party had cause to repent this interchange of friendly relations.

These Eskimos, besides, are much more civilized than is generally believed. They are popularly looked upon as a sort of speech-endowed seals, human-faced amphibious creatures, judging of them by the clothing they are in the habit of wearing, especially in winter time. But this is in no way concurrent with facts. At Port Clarence, the representatives of the Eskimo race are neither repulsive to behold nor unpleasant to associate with. Some of them even carry their regard for fashion to the extent of dressing almost after European style. Most of them obey a certain code of coquetry, which regulates the making of a gannent in reindeer or in sealskin, the “pask” in marmot’s fur, the tattooing of the face, that is, a few lines slightly drawn on the skin. The scanty beard of the men is cut short; at each corner of their lips three holes, skillfully drilled, enable them to hang thereby small carved-bone rings, and the cartilage of their noses receives likewise certain ornaments of the same kind.

In a word, the Eskimos, who came and paid their duties to the Cascabel family, wore by no means an objectionable appearance, — the appearance, for instance, but too often presented by the Samoyedes or the other natives of the Asiatic coast. The young girls wore strings of pearls in their ears, and, on their arms, iron or brass bracelets of very fair workmanship.

It should also be noted that they were honest people, full of good faith in their transactions, though they be given to bargaining and haggling to excess. Forsooth, upbraiding the natives of the Arctic regions for such a fault would be severe indeed.

The most perfect equality reigns among them. Their clans have even no chieftains. As to their religion, it is paganism. By way of divinities, they worship wooden posts, with carved faces painted red, which represent various sorts of birds whose wings are stretched out to their full, like so many fans. Their morals are pure; their sense of home duties highly developed; they respect their parents, love their children, and revere the dead. The remains of the latter are exposed in the open air, dressed in holiday attire, with their weapons and cayak lying by their side.

The Cascabels took great pleasure in their daily walks round about Port Clarence. Not unfrequently, likewise, they paid a visit to an old oil-factory, of American foundation, which was still working at this season.

The country is not without trees, nor does the appearance of the vegetating soil differ much from that which is presented by the peninsula of the Tchuktchis on the other side of the strait. This is due to the fact that along the coast of the New Continent there flows a warm current from the burning seas of the Pacific, whereas the cold current that bathes the Siberian coast comes from the basin of the boreal seas.

As a matter of course the thought of giving a performance to the natives at Port Clarence did not enter Mr. Cascabel’s mind. He now felt misgivings on that point, and he had cause to. What if among them were acrobats, and jugglers, and clowns as expert in their art as those of the Indian tribes at Fort Yukon!

Better not run the risk of compromising the honor of the family once more!

Meanwhile the days passed by, and, in reality, the little troupe had a longer rest than it needed. No doubt but one week's rest at Port Clarence would have enabled them to attack the fatigues of their journey through Siberian wastes.

But the *Fair Rambler* was still forbidden the strait. By the end of September, and at this latitude, even though the mean temperature was already below zero, the arm of the sea which separates Asia from America was not frozen yet. True, numerous icebergs passed by, accumulated in the open sea on the verge of the basin of Behring, and were drifted northward along the Alaskan coast by the current from the Pacific. But these icebergs had to cohere into one solid mass ere they offered the gigantic, firm, and steady ice-field we spoke of, a veritable "carriage-drive" between the two continents.

It was evident that on this sheet of ice with a power of resistance sufficient to bear a train of artillery, the *Fair Rambler* and its occupants would run no risk. The strait, indeed, measured but some sixty miles across its narrowest width, from Cape Prince of Wales, somewhat above Port Clarence, to the little port of Numana, on the Siberian coast. "Verily, verily," said Mr Cascabel, "it is a great pity the Americans did not run up a bridge here."

"Sixty miles of a bridge!" exclaimed Sander.

"Why not?" remarked John. "It might be supported, in the middle of the strait, by the Isle of Diomede."

"The feat would not be impossible," rejoined Mr. Sergius; "and one may indulge the belief that it will be done some day, like everything that the intelligence of man can achieve.”

“Why! They are even now talking of bridging the British Channel over,” said John.

“You are right, my friend,” said Mr. Sergius. “Still, let us own it, a bridge across Behring Strait would not prove so useful as one from Calais to Dover. Positively, the former would not cover its expenses!”

“Although it were but of little use for the generality of travelers,” suggested Cornelia, “to us at least it would be a boon.”

“Why! Now that I think of it,” answered Mr. Cascabel, “the bridge here does exist for two-thirds of the year, an ice bridge, as strong as any bridge made of iron or stone! Dame Nature it is who builds it every year when the ice breaks up at the pole, and she charges no toll on it!”

With his habit of taking things by their best side, Mr. Cascabel was quite right. What was the use of spending millions on a bridge, when both foot travelers and carriages need only await the favorable moment to obtain a safe thoroughfare?

And sure enough the thing would shortly come to pass now. A little more patience was all that was needed.

About the 7th of October it became apparent that winter had set in, in downright earnest. Snow showers were frequent. All trace of vegetation had disappeared. The few trees along the shore, spoiled of their last leaves, were covered with rime. Not one of those sickly-looking plants of the Boreal regions could be seen, so closely allied to those of Scandinavia; not one of those *linnearia* which make up the greatest part of the Arctic flora.

However, if the blocks of ice still floated through the strait, thanks to the swiftness of the current, they increased in breadth and thickness. Even as a good blast of heat is sufficient to solder metals, even so a good blast of cold was all that was now needed to solder together the pieces of the icefield. This blast might be expected from one day to another.

At the same time, if the Cascabels longed to be able to avail themselves of the strait and to leave Port Clarence, if it was a joy for them to think of setting their feet once again on the Old Continent, that joy was not unmingled with bitterness. That hour would be the hour of parting. They would leave Alaska, no doubt, but Mr. Sergius would remain in the country, since there was no question of his going further westward. And, winter over, he would resume his excursions through that portion of America of which he desired to complete the exploration and visit the districts lying north of the Yukon and beyond the mountains.

A cruel parting it would be for all; for, all were now bound, not by the bonds of sympathy alone but by a very close friendship!

The most aggrieved, it will be guessed, was John. Could he forget that Mr. Sergius would take Kayette away with him? And, still, was it not to the young girl’s interest that her future prospects should be in the hands of her new father? With whom could they be in better keeping than with Mr. Sergius? He had made her his adopted daughter, he would bring her to Europe, he would get her educated, and would assure her a position that she would never have found in the home of a poor showman. In the face of such advantages, were it possible to hesitate? No, assuredly! and John was the first to acknowledge it. Still he none the less experienced a feeling of sorrow which his ever increasing sadness betrayed but too plainly. How could he have mastered his feelings? Part with Kayette, see her no more, see her no more even when she would be so far from him physically and morally, when she would have taken her place in the family circle of Mr. Sergius; give up the pleasant habit they had grown into of chatting together, working together, being always near one another, all this was heartbreaking. John loved Kayette; he loved her with a real love, a love he had revealed in the attentions he paid her, in the trembling of his voice when he spoke to her. That love was requited, perhaps, even unknown to the young girl! All that would be broken when they should part, part perhaps forever.

On the other hand, if John felt very wretched, his father and his mother, his brother and his sister, deeply attached to Kayette, could not grow accustomed to the thought of parting with her, or with Mr. Sergius either. They would have given “a big sum,” as Mr. Cascabel put it, for Mr. Sergius to accompany them to the end of their journey. They would have a few months more, at least, to spend with him, and then — why, then — they would see.

We have mentioned above that the inhabitants of Port Clarence had taken a great liking for the Cascabels, and no little apprehension was felt on their behalf as the time drew near when they would venture among the too real dangers of their journey. But, interested as they were in these French people who had come from such a distance and were going so far away, some of the Russians, recently arrived at the strait, were inclined to observe the individual members of the party, and more especially Mr. Sergius, with a very different kind of interest.

The reader will not have forgotten that there sojourned, then, at Port Clarence, a certain number of officials recalled on Siberian territory, owing to the annexation of Alaska.

Among them were two agents entrusted with a very special supervision on the American territories subjected to the Muscovite administration. It was their mission to watch the political refugees to whom New Britain offered an asylum, and who might be tempted to cross the Alaskan frontier. Now, this Russian, who had become the guest and companion of a showman’s troupe, this Mr. Sergius whose journey happened to terminate just at the very limit of the Czar’s empire, had somewhat aroused their suspicions, and they watched him accordingly, but with sufficient caution to escape notice.

Little did Mr. Sergius dream of his being the object of suspicious watching. He, too, had his mind full of the approaching parting. Was he wavering between his project to resume his excursions through Western America, and the thought of giving it up, so as to follow his new friends to Europe? It would have been hard to say. However, seeing him very pensive, Mr. Cascabel determined to bring him to an explanation on this subject.

One evening, the 11th of October, after supper, turning to Mr. Sergius, as though he spoke of quite a new thing:

“By the way, Mr. Sergius,” said he, “you know we shall soon start for your country?”

“Of course, my friends. That’s agreed on.”

“Yes! We are going to Russia; and, as luck would have it, we shall pass through Perm, where your father lives, if I mistake not.”

“Quite so, and your departure excites both my regret and my envy!”

“Mr. Sergius,” inquired Cornelia, “do you propose to stay much longer in America?”

“Much longer? I hardly know.”

“And when you come back to Europe, which way will you come?”

“I shall return by the Far West, as my explorations will naturally bring me back toward New York, and it is there I shall take ship, with Kayette.”

“With Kayette!” murmured John, as he looked toward the girl, who hung down her head.

A few moments’ silence followed. Then Mr. Cascabel began again, hesitatingly:

“Now, Mr. Sergius, I am going to beg leave to make a proposal to you. Of course I am aware that it will be very hard to pull thorough that devilish Siberia! But with a good heart and a will — ”

“My friend,” replied Mr. Sergius, “be persuaded that I am frightened neither by the dangers nor by the fatigues, and I would share them with you willingly, if — ”

“Why not complete our journey together?” asked Cornelia.

“It would be so nice!” added Sander.

“And I would give you such a kiss if you said yes!” exclaimed Napoleona.

John and Kayette had breathed not a word, but their hearts beat violently.

“My dear Cascabel,” said Mr. Sergius, after a few moments’ reflection, “I should like to have a chat with yourself and your wife.”

“At your service, sir, this very moment.”

"No, to-morrow," answered Mr. Sergius.

Thereupon, each one retired to his little bed, both very uneasy and singularly puzzled.

What motive had Mr. Sergius for this private conversation? Had he made up his mind to alter his plans, or, on the contrary, did he simply mean to enable the Cascabels to accomplish their journey under better conditions by making them accept some money?

Be that as it might, neither John nor Kayette had one hour's sleep that night.

Next day, in the course of the morning, the conversation did take place. Not through any distrust of the children, but for fear of being overheard by the natives or other people who continually passed by, Mr. Sergius asked Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel to accompany him a certain distance away from the encampment. Doubtless, what he had to say was important, and it was advisable to keep it secret.

All three walked up the beach in the direction of the oil factory, and this is how the conversation began:

"My friends," said Mr. Sergius, "listen to me, and ponder well ere you give your answer to the proposal I am about making to you. Of your good heart I have no doubt, and you have shown me to what extent your devotion can go. But, before you take one final resolution, you must know who I am."

"Who you are? Why, you are an honest man, of course!" cried Cascabel.

"Well, be it so, an honest man," repeated Mr. Sergius; "but an honest man who is desirous not to add, by his presence, to the dangers of your journey through Siberia."

"Your presence a danger, Mr. Sergius?" said Cornelia.

"Quite so, for my name is Count Sergius Narkine. I am a political outlaw!"

And Mr. Sergius briefly related his history.

Count Sergius Narkine belonged to an opulent family in the Government of Perm. As he had stated previously, he had quite a passion for geographical sciences and discoveries, and he had spent his youth in travels and voyages in every part of the world.

Unfortunately, he had not confined himself to those bold undertakings where he might have acquired great celebrity. He had mixed himself up with politics, and, in 1857, had been compromised in a secret society which he had been led to join. In short, the members of this society were arrested, tried with all the severity peculiar to the Russian government, and, for the most part, sentenced to transportation for life in Siberia.

Count Sergius Narkine was among the majority. He had to start for Iakoutsk, the locality assigned to him, and part with his only surviving relative, his father. Prince Wassili Narkine, now an octogenarian, who resided on his estate at Walska, near Perm.

After spending five years at Iakoutsk, the prisoner had succeeded in making his escape to Okhotsk on the coast of the sea of that name. There he had been able to take passage on board a ship sailing for one of the Californian ports; and it was thus that, for seven years past, Count Sergius Narkine had lived either in the United States or in New England, always endeavoring to get nearer to Alaska and to enter it as soon as it should become American. Yes! his heart's fond hope was to return to Europe by way of Siberia, — the very thing projected, and now being carried out, by Cascabel. His feelings may be imagined, the first time he heard that the people to whom he owed his life were on their way to Behring Strait for the very purpose of passing into Asia.

Naturally he would have wished for nothing more than to accompany them. But, could he expose them to the reprisals of the Russian government? If it became known that they had “aided and abetted” the return of a political exile to the Muscovite empire, what would happen? And yet, his poor old father! how glad he would be to see him once more!

“Well then, come, Mr. Sergius, come along with us!” exclaimed Cornelia.

“Your liberty, my friends, your lives perhaps, will be at stake, if it is known that — ”

“And what matter, Mr. Sergius?” said Cascabel. “We all have an account open, there above, haven’t we? Well, let us try to get as many good actions as we can on the credit side! They’ll balance the bad ones!”

“Do bear in mind, my dear Cascabel — ”

“Besides, you’ll never be known, Mr. Sergius! We know a trick or two, we do; and hang me if we aren’t a match for all the agents of the Russian police.”

“Still — ” continued the Count.

“And then, why — if needs be — you might dress like ourselves; unless you were ashamed.”

“Oh! my friend!”

“And who would ever get it into his head that Count Narkine was a member of the Cascabel troupe?”

“Well, I accept, my friends! Yes! I accept! And I thank you.”

“That will do, — that will do,” said the showman. “Do you think we haven’t as many thanks to offer you, ourselves! And so then. Count Narkine — ”

“Do not call me Count Narkine. I must continue to be simpy Mr. Sergius for everybody, even for your children.”

“You are right. It is needless they should know. That’s a settled thing! You come with us, Mr. Sergius. And I, Cæser Cascabel, undertake to bring you to Perm, or — may I lose my name! — which would be an irretrievable loss for art, you will confess.”

As to the welcome accorded to Mr. Sergius on his return to the *Fair Rambler* when John, Kayette, Sander, Napoleona, and Clovy heard that he would accompany them to Europe, it will be readily imagined without any need of description.

CHAPTER XVI.

FAREWELL TO THE NEW CONTINENT.

AND now, the only thing was to carry out the prearranged journey toward Europe.

All being well considered, the plan showed fair chances of success. Since the checkered course of their gypsy lives brought the Cascabels through Russia, nay more, through the very Government of Perm, the best thing Count Sergius Narkine could really do was to join them for the rest of the journey. How could it be suspected that the political prisoner who had made his escape from Siberia was among the artists of a showman’s caravan? If no indiscretion was committed, success was sure; and, once in Perm, after he had seen Prince Wassili Narkine, the Count would shape his course to the best of his interests. Having crossed Asia without leaving behind him any clue that the police might get hold of, he would make up his mind according to circumstances.

On the other hand, it is true, if he were recognized along the road, unlikely as it seemed, it might have terrible consequences for him, and for the Cascabels too. But neither Mr. Cascabel nor his wife would take that danger into account, and, had they consulted their children on the subject, the latter would have approved of their conduct. Still Count Narkine’s secret should be strictly kept; their traveling companion would continue to be Mr. Sergius.

Later on, Count Narkine would be in a position to acknowledge the devotion of these good French people, although Mr. Cascabel would hear of no other reward than the pleasure of obliging him, while, at the same time, outwitting the Russian police.

Unfortunately, — an event which neither of them could anticipate, — their plans were about being seriously compromised, at the very start.

At their landing on the opposite shore, they would straight away be exposed to the greatest dangers, and, doubtless, arrested by the Russian agents in Siberia.

Sure enough, the very day after the conclusion of this new arrangement, two men were talking, up and down one end of the harbor, where no one could hear their conversation.

They were the two agents we have already named, and who had been surprised and puzzled by the presence of Mr. Sergius among the occupants of the *Fair Rambler*.

Residing at Sitka for several years past, and intrusted with the political surveillance of the province, it was their duty (it has been said) to spy the doings of the refugees in the neighborhood of the Columbian frontier, to report them to the Governor of Alaska, and to arrest any of them who should attempt to cross the border.

Now a serious matter it was, that, if they had no personal knowledge of Count Narkine, they had been given his description at the time of his escape from the Iakoutsk citadel. On the arrival of the Cascabel family at Port Clarence, they were astonished at the sight of this Russian, who had neither the gait nor the manners of an itinerant artist. How did he happen to be among these show people, who, coming from Sacramento, followed so strange a route to return to Europe?

Their suspicions once aroused, they had made inquiries, had taken observations, cleverly enough not to excite attention, and after comparison of Mr. Sergius with the description they had in hand of Count Narkine, their doubts had given place to a feeling of certainty.

“Yes, this is indeed Count Narkine!” said one of the agents. “No doubt he was roaming about the frontiers of Alaska until the province would be annexed, when he fell in with those gypsies, who came to his help, and now he is preparing to cross over to Siberia with them!”

Nothing more accurate; and if, at first, Mr. Sergius had had no thought of venturing beyond Port Clarence, the two agents felt no surprise whatever when they heard that he had resolved to follow the *Fair Rambler* beyond the strait.

“That is a good windfall for us!” answered the second agent. “Had the Count remained here, on American soil, we dared not have arrested him,”

“While, now, as soon as he sets his foot on the other side of the strait,” continued the former, “he will be on Russian territory, and he cannot escape us if we be there to receive him in our arms!”

“That’s an arrest that will be to our greater glory — and profit! what a master-stroke for our coming home! But how shall we go about it?”

“It’s very simple! The Cascabels will start off presently; and as they will take the shortest cut, there is no doubt but they will make for the port of Numana. Well, if we get there before, or even at the same time as Count Narkine, we shall have nothing to do but collar him!”

“Quite so, but I would rather be at Numana before him, so as to warn the coast police, who might lend us a hand in case of need!”

“That’s what we shall do, if possible. These showmen will be obliged to wait until the ice is strong enough to bear their wagon, and we can easily get ahead of them. Let us stay here then, in the meantime, and keep our eye on Count Narkine without letting him know. Even though he must mistrust Russian officials on their way home from Alaska, he cannot possibly guess that we have recognized him. And so, he will surely make a start; we shall arrest him at Numana, and then conduct him, under safe escort, to Petropaulovski or to Iakoutsk.”

“And if his acrobats wanted to defend him.”

“Well, they will pay dearly for having helped a political exile to return to Russia!”

So simple a plan was fated to succeed, since the Count was utterly unaware of his having been recognized, since the Cascabels had no idea that they were the object of special surveillance. And so the journey, so auspiciously commenced, ran the risk of having a sad termination for Mr. Sergius and his companions.

And, while this plot was being devised, they were all enjoying the prospective happiness of remaining together, of starting together for Russia. What joy it was for John and Kayette especially!

Needless to say that the two police agents had kept to themselves the secret they were going to work out. And no one at Port Clarence could have imagined that so important a personage as Count Sergius Narkine was under the roof of the *Fair Rambler*.

Meanwhile, it had not been found possible, yet, to fix a day for the departure. They watched with the greatest impatience every change in the temperature, — a truly anomalous temperature, — and never in his life had Mr. Cascabel so ardently wished for such a frost “as the rocks themselves could not stand.”

Still, it was of importance that they should be on the other side of the strait ere winter had taken complete possession of those regions. As it would attain its greatest severity only during the first weeks of November, the *Fair Rambler* would have time to reach the southern regions of Siberia. There, in some village or other, they would wait for the favorable season to push on to the Ural mountains.

Under these conditions, Vermont and Gladiator could traverse the steppes without too much fatigue. The Cascabel family would reach Perm just in time for the fair, that is, by the month of July of the following year.

And those icebergs kept on forever drifting north, carried on by the warm current of the Pacific! That ever restless flotilla of ice kept on shifting about in the strait instead of the long-looked-for compact and steady mass!

On the 13th of October, however, the drifting seemed to slacken. To the north, to all appearance, a blockade stopped the way. And sure enough, far away in the horizon, you could see a continuous line of white peaks, a sure sign that the Arctic Sea was now wholly frozen. The white glare reflected by the ice filled the sky; the entire solidification could not tarry long.

Now and again Mr. Sergius and John would consult the fishermen at Port Clarence. Several times already both had thought that the crossing might be attempted; but the seamen, who “knew every inch of the strait,” had advised them to wait.

“Don’t be in a hurry,” they would say. “Let the frost do its work! It hasn’t been hard enough yet! And then, even if the water was all frozen on this side of the strait, there is nothing to show that it is so on the other, especially in the neighborhood of the Isle of Diomede.”

And the advice was a wise one.

“Winter is not very forward, this year!” said Mr. Sergius to a fisherman, one day.

“No,” the man replied, “it is rather late. And that’s another reason why you should not hurry before you are sure that you can get across. And then again, your wagon is heavier than a man on foot; it needs greater strength under it. Wait till a good fall of snow brings all the icebergs to a level, and then you can fire away, the same as on a highroad! Besides, you’ll soon make up for lost time, and you won’t have run the risk of remaining in distress, fair in the middle of the strait!”

Such reasoning should needs be heeded, coming as it did from practical men. And so, Mr. Sergius did his utmost to calm his friend Cascabel, who proved the most impatient of the party. The chief point was to endanger, by no imprudent act, either the success of the journey or the safety of the travelers.

“Come,” he would say to him, “be calm and reasonable! your *Fair Rambler* is not a boat, and if it got caught between two ill-joined blocks of ice, it would not be long going to the bottom. The Cascabel family has no need of increasing its celebrity by seeking a watery grave in the strait of Behring!”

“And would it be increased thereby?” replied the vain Cæsar, with a smile.

In any case Cornelia intervened and distinctly stated she would allow no imprudence to be committed.

“Why, it’s on your account, Mr. Sergius, that we are in such a hurry!” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel.

“Well, I, my friend, am in no hurry concerning you!” Count Narkine replied.

In spite of the general feeling of impatience, John and Kayette did not feel the time weigh heavily on their hands.

He continued to be her teacher. Already she was beginning to talk and understand French fairly well. Between them there was now no difficulty to understand one another. And then Kayette was so happy in this home, so happy near John, who was all attention to her! In very truth, Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel should have been blind not to see what kind of a feeling she had awakened in their son. Indeed they were growing uneasy about it. They knew what Mr. Sergius was, and what Kayette would be one day. She was no longer the poor Indian girl, on her way to beg a situation as a servant at Sitka; she was the adopted daughter of Count Narkine. And John was preparing a world of bitter disappointment for himself in the future.

“After all,” Mr. Cascabel would say, “Mr. Sergius has eyes to see with; he is very well aware of what is going on! Well, Cornelia, if he says nothing, we have nothing to say, either!”

One day, John asked the young girl:

“Are you pleased, little Kayette, to be going to Europe?”

“To Europe? Yes!” replied she. “But I should be better pleased still to be going to France!”

“You are right. A fine country, and a good country is ours! If ever it could become yours, you would like it.”

“I would like any country where your people would be, John, and my greatest desire is to leave you no more!”

“Dear little Kayette!”

“It is very far to France?”

“Any country is far away, Kayette, when you long to be there? But we shall arrive — too soon perhaps — ”

“Why so, John?”

“Because you shall stay in Russia with Mr. Sergius! If we do not part here, we shall have to part there! Mr. Sergius will keep you, little Kayette! He will make a fine young lady of you; and we shall never see you again!”

“Why talk like that, John? Mr. Sergius is good and grateful. It was not I that saved his life, it was you, yes, it was you! If you had not been there, what could I have done for him? If he is alive now, it is to your mother, it is to you all that he owes it! Do you think Mr. Sergius can forget it? If we do part, John, why do you say it will be for ever?”

“I do not say so, little Kayette!” answered John, who could no longer contain his emotion. “But, — I fear so! Never see you again, Kayette! If you knew how unhappy I should be! And then, it is not merely to see you I should have wished. Look, since you are alone in the world, why cannot our home be enough for you! My father and mother love you so.”

“Not more than I love them, John!”

“‘And my brother and sister too! I had cherished the hope that they would have been a sister and a brother for you!”

“So they will always be. And you, John?”

“I — I should be — a brother too, little Kayette, — but more devoted — more loving!”

And John went no farther. He had seized Kayette’s hand, he pressed it in his. Then he went away, unwilling to say more. Kayette, full of emotion, felt her heart throbbing violently, and a tear dropped from her eye.

On the 15th of October, the seamen about Port Clarence informed Mr. Sergius that he might get ready to go. The cold had become more intense for the last few days. The mean temperature did not now rise to ten degrees Centigrade below zero. The ice-field appeared absolutely motionless. They no longer could hear even those significant crackling sounds that can be noticed before the blocks of ice are completely cemented together.

It was probable they would presently witness the arrival of some of those natives of Asia, who cross the strait during the winter and carry on a certain amount of trading between Numana and Port Clarence. This roadway indeed, is rather largely frequented at times. It is no unusual thing for sleighs, drawn by dogs or by reindeer, to go from one continent to the other, covering in two or three days the sixty miles that separate the two nearest points of the respective shores. This spot affords, then, a natural thoroughfare, opened at the beginning and closed at the end of winter, say, practically, for over six months. But care must be taken not to start either too soon or too late, so as to avoid the frightful catastrophes that would result from a breaking up of the ice.

In view of the journey through Siberia until the day when the *Fair Rambler* would halt to take up its winter quarters, Mr. Sergius had purchased, at Port Clarence, various articles of absolute necessity on a journey accomplished in such climes, among others several pair of those snow-shoes which the Indians put on like skates, and which enable them to skim swiftly over a vast extent of frozen ground. Itinerant “artists” needed no very long apprenticeship to become familiar with them. Within a few days, John and Sander had become expert “snow-racers” by practicing on the frozen creeks along the shore.

Mr. Sergius had also completed the stock of furs bought at Fort Yukon. It was not sufficient for the travelers to wrap themselves up in those warm furs to preserve themselves against the cold, they should likewise pad the compartments of the *Fair Rambler* with them, cover the beds, the partitions, and the floor with them, so as to keep up the heat generated by the kitchen stove. Besides, — too great emphasis could not be laid on it, — the strait once traveled over, Mr. Cascabel’s intention was to spend the hardest months of winter in one of the villages that are to be found in the southern districts of lower Siberia.

At last, the departure was fixed for the 21st of October. For forty-eight hours a misty sky had been melting into snow. An immense white sheet gave the vast ice-field a uniform surface. The fishermen affirmed their belief that the strait was one mass of ice from shore to shore.

Indeed evident proofs of the fact were soon forthcoming. Several traders arrived from Numana port, and their journey across had been effected without obstacles or dangers.

Moreover, on the 19th, Mr. Sergius was told that two of the Russian agents who were at Port Clarence would not wait any longer to go to the Siberian shore, and had started that very morning, intending to halt at the Isle of Diomede and pursue their journey the following day.

Which led to this remark of Cascabel’s:

“Here are two fellows who were in a greater hurry than we are! Why, they might, surely, have waited for us! We’d have kept each other company on the road!”

Then he said to himself, that, very likely, the officials had been afraid to be delayed, if they kept on with the *Fair Rambler*, for she could not sail many knots an hour on that layer of snow.

As a matter of fact, although Vermont and Gladiator had been rough-shod, it would take the wagon several days to reach the opposite shore, taking into account the rest at the central island.

In reality, if the agents had preferred to start before Count Narkine, it was, of course, to be able to take all the necessary measures for his arrest.

It had been decided they would start at sunrise. The few hours of light that the sun still gave should be availed of. In six weeks’ time, about the time of the solstice of the 21st of December, continual night would spread over the countries crossed by the polar circle.

On the eve of the departure, a “tea,” offered by Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel, gathered together, under a shed appropriated to the occasion, the notables of Port Clarence, both officials and fishermen, as well as several Eskimo chiefs who had shown some interest in the travelers. The meeting passed off merrily, and Clovy “obliged” with the funniest songs in his repertory. Cornelia had brewed a bowl of burning punch in which, if she had spared the sugar, she had not spared the brandy. This beverage was all the more appreciated by the guests, as, on their way home, they were going to be exposed to a biting cold, — one of those freezing chills which, during certain winter-nights, seem to come from the utmost ends of the star-spangled sky.

The Americans drank to France, the French people drank to America. Then the guests parted after any number of shake-hands with the Cascabels.

Next day, the two horses were harnessed at eight o’clock in the morning. The ape, John Bull, had ensconced himself in the awning, his nose barely visible through an opening in his fur covering, whilst Wagram and Marengo gamboled around the *Fair Rambler*. Inside, Cornelia, Napoleona, and Kayette had shut themselves up hermetically to look after their daily work: the “house” to be cleaned up, the stove to be seen to, the meals to be prepared. Mr. Sergius, and Mr. Cascabel, John, Sander, and Clovy, some at the horses’ heads, others going ahead as scouts, were to see to the safety of the wagon, by avoiding the bad places on the “road.”

At length the signal was given for the start, and simultaneously the hurrahs of the population of Port Clarence broke forth.

The next moment, the wheels of the *Fair Rambler* made the crispy surface of the ice-field crackle.

Mr. Sergius and the Cascabel family had finally left the land of America.

PART II

CHAPTER I.

BEHRING STRAIT.

A SOMEWHAT narrow pass is this Behring Strait, through which the sea of the same name communicates with the Arctic Ocean. It recalls the Strait of Dover between the British Channel and the North Sea; it lies in the same direction, but is three times as wide. Whereas it is only about twenty miles from Cape Gris-Nez on the French coast to South Foreland on the English side, a distance of sixty miles separates Numana from Port Clarence.

It was, therefore, toward the port of Numana, the nearest point on the Asiatic coast, that the *Fair Rambler* directed its course on leaving its last halting place in America.

Naturally, by cutting obliquely across Behring Sea, Cæser Cascabel would have traveled on a lower parallel and one considerably below the polar circle. In that case, his course would have brought him southwest, toward the island of St. Lawrence, a rather important island, inhabited by numerous tribes of Eskimos, no less hospitable than the natives of Port Clarence; then, on the other side of the Gulf of Anadyr, the little troupe would have landed at Cape Navare and thence plunged into the territories of Southern Siberia. But this would have been lengthening the sea portion, or rather the ice-field portion of the journey, and therefore exposing the party for a longer period to the dangers of those fields of ice. It may be surmised that the Cascabels longed to be on land again; it would have been inopportune, therefore, to alter in any way their first intention of going straight toward Numana, barely halting in the middle of the strait at the isle of Diomede, a spot as firm on its rocky foundations as any part of the continent.

If Mr. Sergius had been in charge of a vessel, with the little caravan and its material aboard, he would have adopted quite another tack. On leaving Port Clarence, he would have sailed more to the south of Behring Island, which is greatly frequented for winter-quartering by seals and other sea mammifers; thence he would have reached one of the ports of Kamtchatka, perhaps even Petropaulovski, the capital of this government. But, for want of a ship, the best thing to do was to take the shortest cut, the sooner to set foot on the Asiatic continent.

The Strait of Behring is of no very great depth. As a consequence of the rising of the sea bottom, which has been observed since the ice period, it might even come to pass in the distant future that Asia and America should become surface-joined in this spot. This would be the bridge of Mr. Cascabel's dreams, or, more correctly, a causeway available for travelers. But, however useful to the latter, it would be a great bane to seafaring people, and especially to whalers, as it would shut them out of the Arctic Seas. Some future De Lesseps would then have to come and cut through this isthmus and re-establish things in the original condition. It will be for the descendants of our great- grandchildren to think about such an eventuality.

The soundings of hydrographers in various portions of the strait have brought out the fact that the deepest chan- nel is that which runs along the coast of Asia, near the Tchuktchi peninsula. There does the cold current from the north flow, whilst the warm current goes up the shallower half of the strait, next to the American coast.

To the north of this peninsula, near the island of Koliutchin in the bay of that name, Nordenskjold's ship, *La Vega,* was to be ice-bound, twelve years later, for a space of nine months (September 26, 1878, to July 15, 1879), after he had discovered the northeast passage.

Well, then, the Cascabels had started on the 21st of October, under fair conditions. It was cold and dry. The snowstorm had calmed down, the wind had slacked and shifted slightly to the north. The sky bore one uniform gray tint. Hardly could the sun be felt from behind that veil of mist which its rays, weakened by their obliquity, could not succeed in piercing. At noon, when at its maximum height, it barely rose a few degrees above the horizon in the south.

A very wise measure had been unanimously agreed on before leaving Port Clarence: they should not journey when it was dark. Here and there the ice-field presented large crevices, and, as it was impossible to avoid them in the darkness, a catastrophe might have been the result. It was therefore resolved that as soon as they could see no farther than a hundred paces ahead, the *Fair Rambler* would halt. Better spend a fortnight covering the sixty miles than grope along blindly when daylight would no longer be sufficient.

The snow had not ceased falling for twenty-four hours, and had formed a pretty thick carpet, which had become quite crystallized by the cold. This layer rendered locomotion less difficult on the surface of the ice-field. Should they have no more snow while they crossed the strait, they would be all right. However, it was to be feared that where the cold and the warm currents met, flowing in opposite directions, the bergs thus disturbed in their drifting course might have got heaped up on each other, and our travelers might see their road lengthened by various detours.

We have already said that Cornelia, Kayette, and Napoleona had taken their places inside the wagon. In order to lighten the load as much as possible, the men were to go on foot.

In accordance with the prearranged marching order, John scouted, ahead of the party, to reconnoiter the state of the ice-field; he might be relied upon. He had a compass with him, and although very accurate landmarks were a matter of considerable difficulty, he made for the west with sufficient precision.

At the head of the horses stood Clovy, ready to hold up or to pick up Vermont and Gladiator in the event of their stumbling; but they were rough-shod and steady on their legs. Besides, the surface was so level that there was noth- ing they could stumble against.

Close to the wagon Mr. Sergius and Cæsar Cascabel, with their wooden winkers before their eyes, and fur-clad from head to foot like all their companions, walked and chatted along.

As to young Sander, it would have been hard to assign any one place to him, or at least to keep him there. He went and came, and ran and gamboled like the two dogs, and now and again indulged in a good old slide. Still there was something wanting to his happiness: his father would not give him leave to put on his racket-shoes.

“With those skates on,” he would say, “I should run across the strait in a few hours!”

“And what would be the use of that?” Mr. Cascabel would reply, “since our horses don’t know how to skate!”

“I must teach them, some day!” answered the youngster, accompanying his remark with a somersault.

Meanwhile, Cornelia, Kayette, and Napoleona were busy in the kitchen, and a tiny streak of smoke, of good omen, came out of the little chimney-pot. Although they did not suffer from the cold, hermetically closed as were their apartments, they should think of those who were outside. And they did so; for they kept always in readiness for them a few cups of warm tea, strengthened with a little of that Russian “water of life,” that vodka, which would bring a dead man back to life again.

As to the horses, they had sufficient food to bring them to the other side of the strait, thanks to the bundles of dried grass supplied by the Eskimos of Port Clarence.

Wagram and Marengo seemed quite pleased with the flesh of the elk, and of that they could have plenty.

Besides, the ice-field was not so bare of game as might be thought. In their running hither and thither, the two dogs raised thousands of ptarmigans, guillemots, and other birds peculiar to the polar regions. These birds, dressed with care, and rid of their oily taste, are very acceptable eating. But as nothing could have been more useless than shooting them, since Cornelia’s pantry was amply supplied, it was agreed that the two sportsmen’s guns should lie quiet during the journey from Port Clarence to Numana.

Of amphibious animals, seals, and other mammifers so numerous in these seas, not one was seen during the first twenty-four hours of the journey.

Bright and cheerful as the first start had been, it was not long ere Mr. Cascabel and his companions began to feel that undefinable impression of sadness which seems begotten by those interminable plains, those endless tracts of whiteness where the weary eye seeks in vain for the horizon.

By eleven o’clock they were already unable to see the highest rocks of Port Clarence; even the lofty head of Cape Prince of Wales was lost in the gray of the distant mist. No object was visible more than a mile and a half away, and, as a consequence, it would be long ere they could perceive the summit of East Cape on the Choukotsky peninsula. Still, this height would have been an excellent landmark for them and would have enabled them to direct their course accurately.

The Isle of Diomede, lying about midway across the strait, is marked by no rocky uprisings. As its mass is hardly raised above the level of the sea, our travelers would not recognize it until the wheels would crackle by crushing the layer of snow on its stony soil.

On the whole, with his compass in his hand, John guided the *Fair Rambler* without too much trouble, and they proceeded, if not swiftly, at least safely.

While going along, Mr. Sergius and Cæsar Cascabel would talk of their present situation. This crossing of the strait, which before starting had seemed so simple a thing and would appear simpler still when accomplished, forcibly struck them as very dangerous, now that they had set about it.

“All the same, it’s a hard job we have attempted!” Mr. Cascabel would say.

“No doubt,” answered Mr. Sergius. “Crossing Behring Strait with a heavy wagon is an idea that would not have struck everybody!”

“I believe you, Mr. Sergius. Well, what can be done? When a man has got it into his head to go home, nothing can stop him! Ah, if it was only a question of going a few hundred miles through the Far West or through Siberia, I would not cast a second thought on it. There you walk on firm ground! There is no chance of the soil gaping under your feet. While sixty miles on a frozen sea, with a wagon and horses, a good load and all the rest of it! — My word! I wish we were the other side! The hardest part, or at least the most dangerous part of our journey would be over!”

“Quite so, my dear Cascabel, especially if the *Fair Rambler*, on the other side of the strait, can get quickly to the south of Siberia. An attempt to follow the coast line, in the heart of winter, would be too imprudent. So, as soon as we reach Numana, we must cut toward the southwest and pick out a good little village for our winter-quarter.”

“So we shall. You must be acquainted with the country, Mr. Sergius?”

“Only with that part of it between Yakoutsk and Okhotsk, which I crossed after my escape. As to the road leading from Europe to Yakoutsk, all I remember is the horrible sufferings undergone day and night by the prisoners on their journey. What sufferings! — I would not wish them to my deadliest enemy!”

“Mr. Sergius, have you given up all hope of returning to your country, I mean as a free man? Will your government never allow you to return?”

“Not unless the Czar proclaimed an amnesty applying to Count Narkine and all the patriots sentenced along with him. Will political circumstances occur that would render such an eventuality possible? Who knows, my dear Cascabel?”

“Well, it must be a sad thing, living in exile! Just as if a man had been turned out of his own house!”

"Yes, far from all the loved ones! — And my father, now so old, that I would love to see again — "

"You shall see him again, Mr. Sergius! Take the word of an old showman who has often foretold events when telling people their fortunes. You will make your entry into Perm along with us! Aren't you one of the Cascabel artists? By the way, I must teach you a legerdemain trick or two; it might be useful some day; not to speak of the trick we shall play the Russian police, the day we enter the country under their very noses!"

And Cæsar Cascabel could not keep from bursting with laughter. Only fancy! Count Narkine, a great Russian nobleman, lifting weights, juggling with bottles, giving the answers to clowns, and taking in coppers for it!

About three in the afternoon, the *Fair Rambler* had to stop. Although night had not come yet, a thick mist considerably shortened the distance that the eye could reach. John returned from his scouting and suggested a halt. Directing one's self under these conditions was a matter of great uncertainty.

Besides, as had been foreseen by Mr. Sergius, in this part of the strait, furrowed by the channel of the eastern current, the unevenness of the ice-field, the unequal levels of the iceblocks were felt through the snow. The wagon jolted violently; the horses stumbled almost at every step; half a day's journey had been sufficient to wear them out with fatigue.

Six miles, at very most, had our party been able to cover during this first stage of theirs.

As soon as the horses had come to a stand-still, Cornelia and Napoleona had alighted, carefully wrapped up from head to foot on account of the sudden transition from an indoor temperature of ten degrees above zero to an open-air temperature of ten degrees below. As to Kayette, accustomed to the severity of the Alaskan winter, she little thought of putting her warm furs on.

“You must cover yourself warmer than that, Kayette,” said John to her; “you run a chance of catching cold.”

“Oh,” said she, “I am not afraid of cold! We know all about it in the valley of the Yukon.”

“No matter, Kayette.”

“John is quite right,” said Mr. Cascabel, intervening. “Run in, and put on something warm, my little Kayette. Besides, I warn you that if you catch cold, it is I will doctor you up, and that will be terrible. I’ll go the length, if necessary, of cutting your head off to make you stop sneezing!”

In the face of such a threat, there was nothing for the young girl to do but obey, and she did so.

Then all set about organizing the camping. In truth, it was very simple this time. No wood to cut in the forest for want of a forest; no fire to light, for want of fuel; no grass even to gather for the horses’ food. The *Fair Rambler* stood there, offering to its guests its usual comfort, its good temperature, its little couches ready prepared, its table ready laid, its never-failing hospitality.

All that was required was to provide for Vermont’s and Gladiator’s meal with a portion of the grass brought from Port Clarence. This done, the two horses were wrapped up in thick blankets, and could now enjoy a long rest till the following day.

Nor did they forget the parrot in his cage, the ape in his nest, or the two dogs, who seemed so fond of their dried meat and ate it voraciously.

“Well now, well now!” exclaimed Cascabel, “this may be the first time that Frenchmen sat down to such a nice supper, in the middle of Behring Strait!”

“That’s probable,” answered Mr. Sergius. “But, before three or four days, I hope we shall sit at our meals on firm ground.”

“At Numana?” inquired Cornelia.

“Not yet; on Diomede Island, where we shall make a stay of a day or two. We get on so slowly, it will take us a week, at least, to reach the coast of Asia.”

When meal was over, although it was only five o’clock in the evening, nobody declined to retire to rest. A whole night of a stretch on one’s back, under warm covering, and on a soft mattress, was not to be despised after the hardships of a tramp on an ice-field. Mr. Cascabel did not even think it necessary to see to the security of the little camp. There were no awkward encounters to be dreaded in such a desert. Besides, the dogs would be a reliable watch, and would announce the approach of the rovers, should there be any, who would come near the *Fair Rambler*.

None the less, Mr. Sergius got up two or three times to observe the state of the ice-field; a sudden change in the temperature might modify it at any moment; this was, perhaps, his greatest anxiety.

There was no change, however, in the appearance of the weather, and a little northeasterly breeze glided on the surface of the strait.

The next day, the journey proceeded under the same conditions; no difficulties to overcome, properly speaking, but any amount of fatigue to undergo. Six miles had been traveled over when they halted and made the same arrangements for the night as on the preceding evening.

The following day, October 25, it was not possible to start before nine in the morning, and, even at that hour, it was barely daylight.

Mr. Sergius noticed that the cold was less piercing. Clouds were gathering in disorderly masses on the horizon, toward the southeast. The thermometer showed a tendency to rise; weaker atmospherical pressures were beginning to be felt.

“This is what I don’t care for, John!” said Mr. Sergius. “So long as we are on the ice-field, we must not complain if the cold becomes more intense. Unfortunately, the barometer is going down and the wind is shifting to the west. The worst thing we have to dread is a rise in the temperature. Watch the condition of the ice-field carefully, John; do not overlook the slightest sign, and come back immediately to put us on our guard.”

“Rely on me, Mr. Sergius.”

Of course, from and after the following month on to the middle of April, the changes of which Mr. Sergius was afraid could not take place; the winter would then be permanently set in. But as the season had been late this year, its first period was marked by alternate fits of frost and of thaw which might cause a partial dislocation of the icefield. Better would it have been to undergo a temperature of twenty-five to thirty degrees below zero the whole length of the journey across the strait.

They started, then, with a kind of half daylight. The weak rays of the sun were unable to pierce the thick layer of mist, in their oblique projection. Moreover, the sky was beginning to get streaked with low and long clouds that the wind drove swiftly toward the north.

John, right ahead of the party, watched carefully the layer of snow, which had grown softer since the day before, and gave way at every step under the feet of the horses. Still, they were able to cover six miles more in this stage, and the night passed off without any incident.

The next morning, the 24th, starting time was ten o'clock. Great was Mr. Sergius's anxiety when he found a further rise in the temperature, — quite an anomalous phenomenon at this time of the year and under this latitude.

It being less cold, Cornelia, Napoleona, and Kayette wished to follow on foot, and with their Eskimo boots they tramped along with comparative ease. All had their eyes protected with the Indian spectacles already mentioned, and were getting accustomed to look through the narrow slit. These winkers always excited Sander's mirth: he, young rascal, little thought of the fatigue and skipped about like a kid in a meadow.

Truly, the wagon made but slow progress. Its wheels sank into the snow and made it heavier still for the horses to draw; and when their felly knocked against an accidental protrusion or the rough crest of an ice-block, severe shocks, which it was impossible to avoid, were the consequences. At times also, huge blocks, heaped up on each other, absolutely barred the way, and circuitous detours had to be made to get round them. This was. after all, only a lengthening of the road, and it was preferable it should be intercepted with mounds rather than with fissures. Thus, at least, the solidification of the ice-field was not compromised.

Meanwhile the thermometer kept on rising and the barometer falling, slowly but steadily. Mr. Sergius felt more and more anxious.

A little before noon the women had to return indoors. The snow began to fall abundantly, in tiny, transparent flakes that looked as if they would resolve into water. You would have thought it was a shower of light white featherlets that thousands of birds might have shaken off throughout the space.

Cæsar Cascabel suggested that Mr. Sergius should seek shelter in the *Fair Rambler*; the latter declined; could he not put up with what his companions endured?

As a matter of fact, this fall of snow alarmed him to the greatest extent; melting as it did, it would eventually unsolder the ice-field. It was a necessity to seek a refuge as fast as possible on the unshakable foundations of Diomede Island.

And yet, prudence made it imperative to proceed with the utmost caution. So, Mr. Sergius determined to scout ahead with John, whilst Mr. Cascabel and Clovy walked by the horses' heads; the poor brutes missed their footing every moment, and, should an accident happen to the wagon, there would be no alternative but to abandon it in the middle of the frozen sea, — which would have been an irretrievable loss.

While plodding onward with John, Mr. Sergius did his utmost with his glass to pierce the western horizon rendered a still more confused mass by the snow-storm. The eye could reach but a very short distance; their guiding was now mere guess-work, and Mr. Sergius would certainly have ordered a halt if the solidity of the field had not seemed to him very seriously endangered.

“At any cost,” said he, “we must reach Diomede Isle this day, even though we had to stop there till the cold sets in again.”

“How far do you think we are still?” asked John.

“Four or five miles, John. As we have another couple of hours’ daylight, or at least that kind of half-light which enables us to see where we are going, let us do all we can to arrive before it is quite dark.”

“Mr. Sergius, would you like me to go on ahead and reconnoiter the situation of the island?”

“No, John, by no means! You would run the chance of losing your way in the storm, and that would be quite another complication! Let us try to go by the compass, for, should we pass above or below the island, I know not what would become of us.”

“Hark, sir, do you hear?” cried John, who had been stooping.

Mr. Sergius did the same and was able to observe that indistinct crackling sounds, like those of glass which is being chipped, were running through the ice-field. Was this the sign of at least a partial disintegration, if not of the complete breaking up of the ice? As yet no crevice starred the surface as far as the eye could see.

The situation had become extremely dangerous. Spending the night in these conditions, our travelers might be the victims of a catastrophe. Diomede

Island was the only refuge held out to them, and they should reach it at any price.

How Mr. Sergius must have regretted he had not waited a few days longer, patiently, at Port Clarence!

John and he came back to the wagon, and Mr. Cascabel was acquainted with the state of things. There was no occasion to tell the women about it; they would have been needlessly frightened. It was therefore agreed they should be left inside the vehicle, and the men began to tug at the wheels to help the broken-down horses; they scarce could stand on their lamed feet; their coats reeked with sweat under the frozen breeze.

About two o’clock, the downpour of snow lessened sensibly, and was shortly reduced to a few scattered flakes that the wind whirled about in the air. It then became less difficult to keep in the right direction. The horses were urged on vigorously, determined as Mr. Sergius was that there should be no halting until the *Fair Rambler* stood on the rocks of Diomede Island.

From his calculations, it should now be no farther than a mile or two away, and by making one last effort they might get there perhaps within an hour’s time.

Unfortunately, the light, already so uncertain, soon grew weaker and weaker, and became at last nothing more than a faint reverberation. Were they on the right track or on the wrong? Might they go on in the same direction? How could they tell?

Just then the two dogs barked loudly. Was this the approach of a danger? Had the dogs scented a band of Eskimos or of Tchuktchis on the tramp across the strait? Should it be so, Mr. Sergius would not hesitate to ask their aid, or, at least, he would try to ascertain from them the exact position of the island.

Meanwhile, one of the little windows of the wagon had been opened, and Cornelia was heard inquiring why Wagram and Marengo were barking in that manner.

She was told that they did not know yet, but that there was no cause for alarm.

“Must we get out?” she added.

“No, Cornelia,” answered Mr. Cascabel. “You and the lassies are comfortable where you are. Stay there!”

“But if the dogs have scented some animal or another, a bear for instance, — ”

“Well, they will let us know! As to that, have the guns ready. But meanwhile, no getting out without leave!”

“Close your window, Mrs. Cascabel,” said Mr. Sergius. “We have not one minute to lose. We are off again this very moment.”

And the horses, that had been stopped at the first barking of the dogs, resumed their laborious toiling onward.

For half an hour the *Fair Rambler* was able to move somewhat quicker, the surface of the ice-field being less rough. The worn-out steeds, with downcast heads and trembling legs, still pulled away with noble spirit. But this was evidently a supreme effort on their part, and they would surely break down if it had to be kept up much longer.

It was almost night. The remnant of light diffused through space seemed to come rather from the surface of the field than from the brightness of the upper zones.

And the two dogs still kept on their barking, running forward, standing still with their noses up in the air and every muscle in their bodies stiffened, then returning to their masters.

“There is surely something extraordinary!” observed Mr. Cascabel.

“There is the Isle of Diomede!” exclaimed John.

And so saying, he pointed to a heap of rocks, the round back of which could be seen confusedly a few hundred paces away to the west.

What gave some likelihood to John’s guess was that the rocky mass seemed marked with black spots, the color of which came out in relief on the whiteness of the ice.

“Yes, it must be the island,” said Mr, Sergius.

“Why! don’t I see those black spots moving?” cried Mr. Cascabel.

“Moving?”

“Of course.”

“That must be just a few thousand seals that have sought a refuge on the island — ”

“A few thousand seals!” repeated Cascabel.

“Goodness gracious, boss!” exclaimed Clovy, “if we could only catch them and show them at the fair!”

“And if they could all say *papa*!” added Sander.

Was not this the heart’s cry of a young showman!

CHAPTER II.

BETWEEN TWO CURRENTS.

AT last the *Fair Rambler* was on firm ground; no breaking up of the ice-field need longer be apprehended under its wheels; it is easy to surmise how much this boon was appreciated by the Cascabels.

It was quite dark by this time. The same arrangements were made as the preceding night for the camping, a few hundred paces inside the island; then both the “intellectual people and the others,” as Cæser Cascabel used to say, were duly looked after.

Indeed, relatively speaking, it was not cold. The thermometer recorded no more than four degrees below zero. It little mattered, besides. As long as they remained here they had nothing to fear from a rise in the temperature. Should it occur, they would wait until a more considerable fall had thoroughly set the ice-field. Winter in all its severity could not be far off.

There being no light, Mr. Sergius put off to the following day the exploration he wished to make of the island. The chief object they first gave their best attention to was the night encampment of the horses, who needed a good supper and a good rest, for they were literally worn out. Then, when the table was laid, the meal was hastily dispatched, eager as each one was to seek the comfort of his couch after such a hard day’s toil.

The consequence was that the *Fair Rambler* was soon buried in sleep, and, that night, Cornelia dreamed neither of a sudden thaw nor yet of yawning gulfs swallowing up her home on wheels.

The next morning, the 25th of October, as soon as daylight was sufficient, Mr. Sergius, Cæsar Cascabel. and his two sons went and reconnoitered the state of the island.

What surprised them from the first was the incredible number of otaries that had taken refuge on it.

As a matter of fact, it is in this portion of Behring Sea, bounded to the south by the fiftieth degree of northerly latitude, that these animals are found in largest quantities.

On examining the map one cannot but be struck with the outline presented by the coast of America and by that of Asia, and especially with the resemblance they bear each other. On both sides the same figure is pretty clearly defined: Cape Prince of Wales is the counterpart of the Tchutchki peninsula, Norton Bay corresponds to the gulf of Anadyr, the extremity of the Alaskan peninsula is curved in the same way as the peninsula of Kamtchatka, and the whole is inclosed by the chainlet of the Aleutian Islands. It cannot, however, be concluded therefrom that America was abruptly severed from Asia, and Behring Strait opened by some terrestrial convulsion in prehistoric times, for the salient angles of one coast do not correspond with the internal angles of the other.

Numerous islands, too, in these parts: the Isle of St. Lawrence, already named; Nunivak Island, on the American coast; Karaghinski, on the Asiatic side; Behring Island with Copper Isle by its side, and, within a short distance of the Alaskan shore, Pribylov Islands. The resemblance of the coasts is then increased by the identical arrangement of the archipelago.

Now, these Pribylov Islands and Behring Island are in a special manner the favorite residences of the colonies of seals that frequent these seas. They could be reckoned by millions here; and, naturally, it is here that professional hunters come, not only for the otaries but for the sea loutra so common less than fifty years ago and now made scarce by wholesale destruction.

As to the otaries, — a generic name comprising the sealions, the sea-cows, the sea-bears, — they collect here in numberless flocks, and their race seems inexhaustible.

And still what a relentless hunt is carried on after them as long as the warm seasons last! Without respite, without mercy, the fishermen pursue them into their very “rookeries,” kinds of parks where the families gather together. It is the full-grown otaries especially that are pitilessly tracked, and these animals would eventually disappear, were it not for their extraordinary fecundity.

As a fact, from the year 1867 to the year 1880, 388,982 otaries were destroyed in the reserved parks of Behring Island alone. On Pribylov Islands, in the course of a century, no fewer than 3,500,000 skins have been got together by the Alaskan fishermen, and at the present time they do not supply less than a hundred thousand a year to the trade.

And how many there are on the other islands of Behring Sea, Mr. Sergius and his companions were in a position to estimate from what they saw on Diomede Island. The soil disappeared from view under a swarm of seals packed together in close groups, and nothing could be seen of the carpet of snow on which they lay so securely.

Meanwhile, if they were the object of a curious survey, they, too, examined the visitors of the island. Without stirring, but apparently uneasy, annoyed, perhaps, at this taking of possession of their domain, they made no attempt at running away, and sometimes uttered a kind of prolonged bellowing in which a note of anger was clearly discernible. Then standing erect, they would give their paws, or rather their fins, spread out like so many fans, a violent shaking to and fro.

Ah! if these thousands of seals had been endowed with the gift of speech, according to young Sander's wish, what a thunder of "papas" would have come out of their mouths!

Needless to say that neither Mr. Sergius nor John thought of firing on this legion of animals. Yet, there was a fortune of "peltry on foot" there before them, as Cascabel put it. But it would have been a useless, as well as a dangerous slaughter. Formidable as they were by their number alone, the seals might have greatly endangered the position of the *Fair Rambler*; hence Mr. Sergius recommended the greatest caution.

And now, was not the presence of these seals on Diomede Island a sign which it was right not to neglect? Were it not prudent to consider why they had thus sought a refuge on this heap of rocks, which offered them no resources?

This was the subject of a very serious discussion, in which Mr. Sergius, Cæsar Cascabel, and his eldest son took part. They had walked on toward the central part of the island, while the women looked after household matters, and Clovy and Sander were busy with the "animal element" of the troupe.

Mr. Sergius was the first to broach the question:

"My friends," said he, "we must consider whether it would not be better to leave Diomede Island, as soon as the horses are rested, than to prolong our stay.”

“Mr. Sergius,” eagerly replied Cascabel, “I am of opinion we should not tarry here, playing the ‘Swiss Robinson family’ on this rock! I confess it, I am longing to feel a bit of the Siberian coast under my heel.”

“I understand that, father,” answered John, “and yet, it would not be right to go and expose ourselves again as we did when we so impatiently started across the strait. But for this island, what would have become of us? Numana is still some thirty miles away from us — ”

“Well, John, with a good pull and a strong pull, we might cover that distance in two or three stages, perhaps.”

“It would be hard to do so, even if the state of the icefield permitted it.”

“I think John is right,” observed Mr. Sergius. “That we should be in a hurry to be on the other side of the strait is but natural. But seeing how much milder the temperature has become, it seems to me it would hardly be prudent to leave *terra firma*. We left Port Clarence too soon; let us try and not leave this island too hastily. What we may be sure of is that the strait is not completely frozen over its whole surface.”

“Where do those crackling sounds come from, which I heard even as late as yesterday?” added John. “Evidently they are due to the insufficient cohesion of the iceblocks.”

“That is one proof,” rejoined Mr. Sergius; “and there is one other.”

“Which?” inquired John.

“One which seems to me of equal importance: it is the presence of these thousands of seals that have instinctively invaded this island. No doubt, after leaving the upper regions of the sea, these animals were making their way toward Behring Island or the Aleutian Islands, when they foresaw some imminent atmospheric disturbance, and felt they should not remain on the ice-field. Are we on the eve of a breaking up of the ice-field under the influence of the temperature or through some submarine phenomenon? I know not. But, if we are in a hurry to reach the Siberian coast, these creatures are not less anxious to reach their rookeries on Behring Island or Pribylov Islands, and as they halted here, they must have had very good reasons for doing so.”

“Well then, what do you advise, Mr. Sergius?” asked Mr. Cascabel.

“My advice is that we should stay here until the seals show us, by starting off themselves, that we may resume our journey without danger.”

“That’s awkward, and no mistake!”

“It is not as bad as it might be, father,” said John; “may we never have worse to put up with!”

“Besides, this cannot last very long,” continued Mr. Sergius. “Let the winter be ever so late this year, here is the end of October coming on, and although the thermometer, at this very moment, is only at zero, it may fall some twenty degrees from one day to another. If the wind happens to shift to the north, the ice-field will be as solid as a continent. I propose then, after due consideration, that we wait, if nothing compels us to go.”

This was prudent, to say the least. And so it was agreed that the *Fair Rambler* should stay on Diomede Island, as long as the safety of her journey across would not be assured by an intense frost.

Throughout this day, Mr. Sergius and John partly surveyed the granite rock that offered them such security. The islet measured less than three miles in circumference. Even in summer it must have been literally barren. A heap of rocks, nothing more. None the less, it would have been able to support the pier of the famous Behring bridge, wished for by Mrs. Cascabel, in the event of the Russian and American engineers ever thinking of joining two continents, — contrary to what Mr. Lesseps is so fond of doing.

In the course of their ramble, the visitors took good care not to frighten the seals. And still, it was evident that the presence of human beings kept these animals in a singular state of excitement. There were huge males, whose hoarse cries sounded like an alarm for the members of their families, and in a moment one sire would be seen surrounded by forty or fifty of his full-grown offspring.

These unfriendly dispositions could not but cause some anxiety to Mr. Sergius, especially when he noticed a certain tendency on the part of the seals to move nearer and nearer toward the encampment. Taken individually they were not formidable, of course; but it would be difficulty, nay impossible, to resist such enormous masses if they ever resolved on driving off the intruders, who did not leave them the sole and exclusive possession of Diomede Island. John, too, was greatly struck with this peculiarity, and both Mr. Sergius and he came home somewhat alarmed.

The day passed off without incidents, save that the breeze, which blew from the southeast, turned to squalls. Evidently some big storm was brewing, one of those Arctic tempests, perhaps, which last for several days; an extraordinary fall of the barometer left no doubt on this point; it had gone down seventy-two centimeters.

The approach of the night was full of ill-omens therefore. And, to add further to them, as soon as the travelers had taken their places inside the *Fair Rambler*, howls, on the nature of which there was no mistake to make, increased the roar of the elements. The seals had shuffled their way close to the vehicle; presently it would be overborne by them. The horses neighed with fright, dreading an attack from this unknown foe, against which Wagram and Marengo barked in vain. The men had to get out of bed, rush out and bring Vermont and Gladiator nearer to the wagon, to watch over them. The revolvers and the guns were loaded. However, Mr. Sergius recommended that they should not be used till the very last extremity.

The night was dark. As nothing could be distinguished in the intense obscurity, torches had to be lit. Their fitful rays enabled them to see thousands of seals arrayed around the *Fair Rambler* and doubtless only waiting for daylight to attack it.

“If they attack us, resistance will be a matter of impossibility,” said Mr. Sergius, “and we should run the risk of being overwhelmed!”

“What are we to do then?” asked John.

“We must start off!”

“When?” inquired Cascabel.

“This very moment!”

Was Mr. Sergius right in his resolve to leave the island, great though the danger was which gloomed ahead? Surely, it was the only thing to be done. Very probably the only object the seals had in view was to drive away the intruders who had invaded their domain, and they would not trouble to pursue them beyond its limits on to the field of ice. As to scattering these animals by force, an attempt would have been more than imprudent. What could guns and revolvers do against their thousands?

The horses were put to, the women re-entered their apartments, the men, ready on the defensive, stood by each side of the wagon, and the journey westward was resumed.

So foggy was the night that the torches cast their light scarcely twenty paces ahead. At the same time the storm broke out with greater fury. It did not snow; the flakes fluttering in the air were those that the wind lashed off the surface of the ice-field.

With all this, had the solidification but been complete! Unfortunately, it was far from it. You could feel the blocks getting severed from each other with long, crackling sounds. Now and again fissures would gape and send up sheaves of sea water.

Mr. Sergius and his companions went on thus for an hour, afraid every moment to see the ice-field breaking up under their feet. Keeping in one direction became impracticable, and yet John endeavored to guide himself somehow on the needle of the compass. Luckily, this tramp toward the west differed from their journeying toward Diomede Island, which they might easily have passed by, either too far south or too far north, without recognizing it; the Siberian coast lay for a distance of some thirty miles on three-fourths of the horizon, and they could not miss it.

But they should manage to get there first, and the chief condition of their doing so was that the *Fair Rambler* should not go to the bottom of Behring Sea.

Meanwhile, if this danger was the most formidable, it was not the only one. At every moment, caught on the flank by the southeasterly wind, the wagon ran the risk of being upset. By way of precaution, Cornelia, Napoleona, and Kayette had been made to alight, and it required all the efforts of Mr. Sergius, Cascabel, John, Sander, and Clovy, tugging at the wheels, to keep the *Fair Rambler* erect against the blast. Needless to tell what little headway was made by the horses under these conditions, when they felt the ground continually yielding under their feet.

About half-past five o'clock in the morning, — the 26th of October, — in the midst of the very deepest obscurity, the vehicle was compelled to stop; the horses could not go a step further. The surface of the field, upheaved by the swell driven by the squall from the lower regions of Behring Sea, now presented a series of various levels.

"What are we to do?" said John.

"We must go back to the island!" exclaimed Cornelia, who was unable to appease Napoleona's terror.

"That's out of the question now!" replied Mr. Sergius.

"Why so?" inquired Mr. Cascabel. "Of the two I would still rather fight seals than — "

"I tell you again we must not think of returning to the island!" repeated Mr. Sergius. "We should have to go against the squall, and the wagon could not stand it. It would be smashed to pieces, if, indeed, it did not run away before the wind."

"So long as we are not obliged to abandon it!" sighed John.

“Abandon it!” cried Cascabel. “And what would become of us without our *Fair Rambler*?”

“We shall do our very utmost not to be reduced in that extremity,” answered Mr. Sergius; “we shall! That wagon is our plank of salvation, and we shall endeavor to keep it at any price.”

“So, it is not possible to go back?” urged Cascabel.

“It is absolutely impossible; and we must keep on going ahead!” was the reply. “Let us be brave-hearted, keep a cool head, and surely we shall reach Numana!”

These words seemed to brace up the travelers. It was but too evident that the wind forbade their returning to Diomede Island. It blew from the southeast with such violence that neither cattle nor men could have walked against it. The *Fair Rambler* itself could no longer remain stationary. The merest attempt to make it resist the displacement of the air would have toppled it over.

About ten o’clock, daylight became half apparent, — a pale, misty light. The clouds, low and ragged, seemed to drag shreds of vapor after them and madly lash them about, across the strait. In the whirlwind of snow, small chips of ice, dashed off the field by the blast, flew by like a veritable volley of small shot. In such circumstances, one hour and a half was spent in covering little more than a mile, for they had, in addition, to avoid the pools of water and turn round the mounds of ice heaped upon their way. Underneath, the swell from the high sea caused sudden oscillations and a kind of billowy motion, accompanied by continuous crackling noises.

Suddenly, about a quarter to one o’clock, a violent shock was felt. A network of fissures radiated over the field around the vehicle. A crevice, measuring thirty feet in diameter, had just yawned beneath the feet of the horses.

At a shout from Mr. Sergius, his companions stopped short within a few paces of the abyss.

“Our horses! Our horses!” cried John. “Father, let us save the horses!”

It was too late. The ice had given way. The two unfortunate steeds had just disappeared. Had not the traces snapped, the *Fair Rambler* too would have been drawn into the depths of the sea.

“Our poor horses!” cried Cascabel, in despair.

Alas! those old friends of the showman’s, who had gone the world over with him, those faithful companions, who had so long shared his roaming life, were buried in the deep. Big tears burst from the eyes of Mr. Cascabel, his wife, and his children.

“Back! Quick, back with it!” Mr. Sergius called out.

And by dint of pushing and striving, they succeeded, not without trouble, in moving the wagon away from the crevice, which was getting wider as the oscillations of the ice-field increased; and they let it stand some twenty feet inside the circle of dislocation.

The situation was none the less greatly compromised. What were they to do now? Abandon the *Fair Rambler* in the middle of the strait, then come back and fetch it with a team of reindeer from Numana? It seemed as though there was no other course to follow.

Suddenly John cried out:

“Mr. Sergius! Mr. Sergius! Look, sir! — We are drifting! — ”

“Drifting?”

It was but too true! Not a doubt of it now; a general breaking up had just set all the ice in motion between the two banks of the strait.

The repeated shocks of the storm, added to the rise in the temperature, had split up the field insufficiently cemented in its middle part. Wide gaps had been opened in the north by the displacing of the blocks, some of which had slid up on the ice-field and others underneath it. This enabled the floating ice-island which bore the vehicle to drift at the will of the hurricane. A few bergs had remained stationary, and Mr. Sergius, using them as landmarks, was able to make out the direction of the drift.

The reader sees how alarming the situation now was, jeopardized as it had already been by the loss of the horses. There was now no possibility of reaching Numana, even after abandoning the wagon. They would now be confronted no longer by crevices that they might avoid by a detour, but by numerous gaps, which there was no means of getting over, and the direction of which shifted about according to the caprice of the swell. And as to the block that conveyed the *Fair Rambler*, and whose course could not possibly be controlled, how long would it withstand the shock of the billows that dashed against its sides?

No! There was nothing to be done! To dream of directing the floating berg, so as to bring it on to the Siberian coast, were above the power of man. Move about thus it would until some obstacle would stop it; and who knows if that obstacle would not be the frozen shore of the polar sea!

About two o’clock in the afternoon, thanks to the increased darkness caused by the spreading fog, the eye was already unable to pierce beyond a very short radius.

Sheltered as best they could, and turned toward the north, Mr. Sergius and his companions stood in mournful silence. What could they have said, since there was nothing to be even attempted? Cornelia, Kayette, and Napoleona, wrapped in blankets, kept closely pressed against each other. Young Sander, more surprised than alarmed. whistled a tune. Clovy busied himself tidying up the various things that had been knocked out of place in the wagon by the shock it had received.

If Mr. Sergius and John had kept cool-headed, the same could not be said of Mr. Cascabel, who blamed himself for having brought all his people into this frightful adventure.

However, it was of importance, first of all, to have a right idea of the situation.

It has not been forgotten that two currents cross each other in Behring Strait. One comes down to the south, the other flows up toward the north. The former is the Kamtchatka current, the latter the Behring. If the berg loaded with the staff and the material of the *Fair Rambler* got into the first current, it would of necessity retrace its course, and there were chances of its landing on the Siberian coast. If, on the contrary, it was drawn into the second, it would float in the direction of the Ice Sea, where no continent or group of islands could stop it.

Unfortunately, as the hurricane grew wilder, it shifted nearer and nearer to the south. Into the depths of that funnel formed by the strait the air was engulfed with a violence which can hardly be imagined, and little by little the wind altered its first direction.

This Mr. Sergius and John had been able to ascertain, and they saw they were losing all chance of being caught by the Kamtchatka current. Checked with the compass, the drift was found to incline toward the north. Might they hope that the berg would be carried to the peninsula of the Prince of Wales on the Alaskan coast, in sight of Port Clarence? This would have been a truly providential termination of the eventualities of this helpless drift. But the strait widens at so great an angle between East Cape and Cape Prince of Wales that no prudent man would have indulged such a hope.

Meanwhile, the state of things on the surface of the iceberg was becoming almost unbearable; no one could keep on his feet, so wildly did the storm rage. John would fain go and examine the sea from the fore part of the block, and was thrown down; indeed, but for Mr. Sergius, he would have been hurled into the waves.

What a night was spent by these ill-fated people, — these shipwrecked wanderers, we may say, for there they were, like the survivors of a wreck. What continual anguish! Huge icebergs would come sometimes and knock against their floating islet with such crashes and shocks as to threaten its smashing to pieces. Then heavy seas would roll over its surface and submerge it as though it were doomed to be swallowed up in the abyss. They were all soaked with those cold douches which the wind pulverized over their heads. The only way to avoid them would have been to get back into the wagon; but it shook so under the blast that neither Mr. Sergius nor Cascabel dared advise their companions to shelter themselves in it.

Endless hours passed by thus. The gaps became wider and wider, the drifting was more free, the shocks were less frequent. Had the block got into the narrow portion of the strait that opens out, several miles farther, into the ice sea? Had it reached the regions lying above the polar circle? Had the Behring current finally overcome the Kamtchatka current? In that case, if the American coast did not stop the berg, was there no cause to fear that it would be carried on and on, to the Arctic ice-field?

How slow was the daylight in coming! — that light which would enable them to ascertain their position. The poor women prayed. Their deliverance could now come but from God.

Daylight appeared at last; it was the 27th of October. No sign of a calm in the atmospherical disturbances; the fury of the storm seemed even to increase with the rising of the sun.

Mr. Sergius and John, compass in hand, searched the horizon. In vain did they endeavor to descry some high land toward the east and the west.

It was but too evident, their iceberg was following a northerly course under the impulse of the Behring current.

As may be imagined, this storm had caused the greatest anxiety to the inhabitants of Port Clarence concerning the fate of the Cascabels. But how could they have brought help to them, since the breaking up of the ice stopped all communication between the two shores of the strait?

There was anxiety, too, at Numana, where the two Russian agents had announced the departure of the *Fair Rambler*, although the feelings they experienced for its occupants did not spring from sympathy. They had been awaiting Count Narkine on the Siberian coast, as we have said, in the well-grounded hope of capturing him; and now there was every appearance of his having perished in this disaster, along with the whole Cascabel family.

There was no doubt left in their minds about this when, three days later, the corpses of two horses were washed ashore by the current, in a little creek on the coast. They were those of Vermont and Gladiator, the only horses possessed by the show people.

“‘Pon my word,” said one of the agents, “it was a good thing we came across before our friends!”

“Yes,” replied the other, “but the sad part of it is to have missed such a splendid job!”

CHAPTER III.

ADRIFT.

THE reader now knows what the position of our shipwrecked party was on the date of the 27th of October. Could they have deluded themselves respecting their fate or preserved the faintest hope? Adrift through Behring Strait, their last chance had been to get into the southern current and be brought to the Asiatic coast; and it was the northern stream that was bearing them away to the open.

When shifting about in the Polar Sea, what would become of their berg, on the supposition that it would not dissolve, that it would resist all the shocks it would receive? Would it get aground on some Arctic land? Driven for a few hundred leagues by the east winds that were then predominant, would it not be cast on the shores of Spitzberg or Nova Zembla? In this case, even though at the price of untold fatigues, would the wanderers succeed in reaching the continent?

Mr. Sergius was weighing the consequences of this last hypothesis, and talked about it with Mr. Cascabel and John while scanning the fog-shrouded horizon.

“My friends,” he said, “we are evidently in a great peril, since this berg may break up at any moment; and on the other hand there is no possibility of our leaving it.”

“Is that the greatest danger we are threatened with?” asked Mr. Cascabel.

“For the time being, it is. But when the weather gets cold again, this danger will diminish and eventually disappear, even. Now, at this time of the year and in this latitude, the present rise in the temperature cannot possibly last beyond a few days.”

“You are right, Mr. Sergius.” said John. “But in the event of this ice-block keeping intact, where will it go?”

“In my opinion, it cannot go very far, and it will soon adhere to some icefield. Then, as soon as the sea is thoroughly frozen over, we shall try to get back to the continent and resume our old itinerary.”

“And what shall we do, now that our horses are gone?” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel. “Ah, my poor horses! my poor horses! — Mr. Sergius, those noble things! they were like two of our own selves! and it is all through my fault!”

Cascabel could not be consoled. His heart overflowed. He blamed himself for being the cause of this catastrophe. Horses crossing a sea on foot! Who had ever heard of such an idea? — And he thought more of the old steeds than of the inconvenience their loss would entail.

“Yes, in the conditions we are in, owing to this thaw, that is an irretrievable misfortune,” said Mr. Sergius. “That we men should put up with the privations and the fatigues resulting from this loss, goes for nothing. But what will Mrs. Cascabel do, what will Kayette and Napoleona do, who are but children yet, when we have abandoned the *Fair Rambler* — ”

“Abandon it!” exclaimed Cascabel.

“We shall have to do so, father!”

“Verily,” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel, threatening himself with his own fist, “it was tempting Providence to undertake such a journey! — Following such a road to return to Europe!”

“Do not break down in such a way, my friend,” replied Mr. Sergius. “Let us face danger without flinching. It is the surest way to overcome it!”

“Come, father,” John added, “what is done cannot be undone, and we all agreed that it should be done. Do not blame yourself alone, then, for lack of caution, and recover your old pluck!”

But despite all these encouragements Mr. Cascabel felt crushed; his self-reliance, his innate philosophy, had received a severe blow.

Meanwhile Mr. Sergius used all the means at his disposal, his mariner’s compass, certain landmarks he fancied he had fixed, and what not, so as to ascertain the direction of the current. Indeed it was at these observations that he spent the few hours during which daylight somewhat brightens up the horizon in this latitude. Nor was it an easy task when the landmarks were forever changing.

Beyond the strait the sea seemed to be free for a considerable distance. Evidently, with this anomalous temperature, the Arctic ice-field had never been completely formed. If it had appeared to be so for a few days, it is because the blocks of ice traveling north or south under the influence of the two currents had met together in this narrow portion of the sea between the two continents.

As the result of his manifold calculations, Mr. Sergius thought himself justified in stating that the course they were following was sensibly northwest. This was doubtless due to the fact that the Behring current, hugging the Siberian coast after having repelled the Kamtchatka current, was describing, as it got out of Behring Strait, a wide curve, subtended by the parallel of the polar circle.

At the same time, Mr. Sergius was able to ascertain that the wind, still very violent, blew straight from the southeast. Just for a moment it had veered to the south; that was due to the lay of the coasts on each side; now in the open sea, it had resumed its former direction.

As soon as this state of things had been discovered, Mr. Sergius returned to Cæser Cascabel and straightway told him that under the circumstances nothing more fortunate could have happened. This good item of news restored a little peace of mind to the head of the family.

“Yes,” he said, “it is a lucky thing we are going in the very direction we wanted to go! — But, what a round we shall have made! Gracious goodness, what a round!”

Thereupon our friends set about making the best possible arrangements, as if their stay on the drifting islet was to be of long duration. First of all, it was decided they should continue to dwell inside the *Fair Rambler*, less exposed as it now was to be thrown on its side, since they were traveling with the wind.

Cornelia, Kayette, and Napoleona could now return to their household work, and see to the *cuisine*, which had been absolutely neglected for the past twenty-four hours. The meal was soon prepared, they sat to table, and if this dinner was not seasoned with the gay conversation of former days, it at least revived the guests who had been so sorely tried since their departure from Diomede Island.

The day closed in these conditions. The squalls kept up with unabated violence. The air now swarmed with birds, petrels, ptarmigans, and others, so justly named the harbingers of storms.

The next day and the subsequent days, the 28th, 29th, 30th, and 31st of October, brought no change in the situation. The wind, keeping steadily in the east, did not modify the state of the atmosphere.

Mr. Sergius had carefully taken the shape and dimensions of the iceberg. It was a sort of irregular trapezium, from three hundred and fifty to four hundred feet long and about a hundred wide. This trapezium, a good half-fathom above the water at its borders, swelled up slightly toward its center. No fissure was visible on its surface, although dull, crackling sounds sometimes ran through its mass. It seemed, therefore, as if, until now at least, the billows and the blast had been powerless against it.

Not without great efforts, the *Fair Rambler* had been drawn to the center. There the ropes and poles belonging to the tent used for the performances held it down so tight that there was no chance of its being knocked over.

What was most alarming was the shocks they received every time they knocked against enormous icebergs, which moved about at unequal speed, according as they obeyed the impulse of the currents or turned round on their own axes in the middle of whirlpools. Some of them, measuring at times fifteen or twenty feet in height, came straight toward them as though going to board an enemy’s ship.

They were perceived from a distance, they were seen drawing near — but how could their assault be possibly avoided? There were some that tipped over with a loud clash when the displacing of their center of gravity disturbed their equilibrium; but when collisions took place they were terrible indeed. The shock was often such that, but for timely precautions, everything would have been smashed inside the wagon. They were continually threatened with a possible and sudden dislocation. Hence as soon as the approach of a large block was announced, Mr. Sergius and his companions gathered around the *Fair Rambler* and clung to each other. John always tried to get near Kayette. Of all dangers, the most frightful for them would have been to be carried away separately on different broken pieces of the berg; and naturally they were safer on its central part, where it was thickest, than along its borders.

At night, Mr. Sergius and Cascabel, John and Clow, mounted guard in turns, and strained every nerve to watch over their wreck in the midst of that profound darkness, haunted by huge white figures that glided about like gigantic specters.

Although the air was still full of the mist that was swept about by the never-relenting gale, the moon, which was very low in the horizon, permeated it with its pale rays, and the icebergs could be perceived at a certain distance. On the first cry of whoever was on guard, everybody was on foot, and awaited the result of the meeting. Frequently the direction of the approaching enemy would change and it would float clear away; but sometimes a clash would occur, and the shock snapped the ropes and pulled up the stakes that held the *Fair Rambler*. It looked as though everything should come to pieces; surviving the collision was something to be thankful for.

Meanwhile, the temperature kept on contrary to all records. This sea, not frozen yet in the first week of November. These regions still navigable a few degrees above the polar circles! All this, surely, was extraordinary ill-luck! With all this, if some belated whaler had passed by within sight, they would have made signals to him, they would have attracted his attention by firing a few shots. After picking up the shipwrecked party, he might have brought them to some port on the American coast, to Victoria, San Francisco, San Diego, or on the Siberian coast, to Petropaulovski or Okhotsk. But no, not a sail! Nothing but floating icebergs! Nothing but the immense, solitary sea, bounded to the north by an impassable barrier of ice! Very fortunately, unless in the event of a most unlikely continuance of this anomalous condition of the temperature, there was no anxiety to be felt concerning the question of food, even though they kept adrift for several weeks. In view of a lengthy journey through Asiatic regions, where it would not be easy to procure victuals, they had made ample provisions of preserves, flour, rice, grease, etc. They had no longer, either, to trouble themselves about food for the horses, alas!

In truth, if Vermont and Gladiator had been spared until now, how would it be possible to provide for them?

On the 2d, 3d, 4th, 5th, and 6th of November, nothing new happened save that the wind showed a tendency to fall, and shifted somewhat to the north. Scarcely did daylight last for a couple of hours, — which added still to the horror of the situation.

In spite of Mr. Sergius's incessant observations, it became very difficult to judge of the course of the drift; and, unable as they were to dot it on the map, they no longer knew where they were. However, on the 7th, a landmark was discovered, recognized, and fixed with a certain amount of accuracy.

On that day, about eleven o'clock, just as the vague rays of dawn whitened the space, Mr, Sergius and John, accompanied by Kayette, had just gone to the fore part of the iceberg. There happened to be, in the showman's material, a pretty good telescope with which Clovy used to show country people the equator, — represented by a thread stretched across the object-glass, — and the inhabitants of the moon, personified by insects which he had previously introduced inside the tube. Having carefully cleaned this telescope, John had taken it with him, and endeavored with its help to discover some land away in the open.

For a few moments he had been examining the horizon very carefully, when Kayette, pointing toward the north, said:

“I fancy, Mr. Sergius, that I perceive something yonder! — Why, isn’t it a mountain I see?”

“A mountain?” replied John. “No, it is probably nothing more than an iceberg!”

And he turned his telescope in the direction shown by the young girl.

“Kayette is right!” he said, almost immediately.

And he gave the instrument to Mr. Sergius, who pointed it, in his turn, in the same direction.

“Quite right,” said he, “it is even a pretty high mountain. Kayette was not mistaken.”

On further observation, it was found that there should be land to the northward, at a distance of some sixteen or eighteen miles.

That was a fact of the utmost importance.

“To be o’ertopped by so great an elevation, a piece of land must be of considerable extent,” remarked John.

“It must, John,” answered Mr. Sergius; “and when we go back to the *Fair Rambler*, we must try and find it out on the map. That will enable us to ascertain our own situation.”

“John, it seems to me as if there was smoke coming out of the mountain,” suggested Kayette.

“It would be a volcano then!” said Mr. Sergius.

“It is so, quite so,” added John, who was again peering through his glass. “The smoke can be seen distinctly.”

But daylight was already dying away, and even with the magnifying power of the instrument, they were soon unable to perceive the outline of the mountain.

One hour later, however, when it was almost quite dark, vivid flashes of light appeared in the direction which had been recorded by means of a line traced on the surface of the berg.

“Now let us go and consult the map,” said Mr. Sergius.

And all three returned to the encampment.

John looked in the atlas for the general map of the boreal regions beyond Behring Strait, and this is what was calculated.

As Mr. Sergius had already ascertained, on one hand, that the current, after flowing north, curved toward the northwest about one hundred and fifty miles outside the strait, and, on the other hand, that their ice-raft had been following that direction for several days, what they had to find out was whether there were lands ahead to the northwest.

And sure enough, at a distance of some twenty leagues from the continent, the map showed a large island to which geographers have given the name of Wrangell, and the outline of which, on its northern side, is but vaguely defined. It was very probable, indeed, that the iceberg would not come in contact with it, if the current continued to carry it through the wide arm of the sea which separates the island from the coast of Siberia.

Mr. Sergius felt no doubt on the identity of Wrangell Island. Between the two capes on its southern coast. Cape Hawan and Cape Thomas, it is surmounted by a live volcano, which is marked on the recent maps. This could be no other than the volcano that Kayette had discovered, and the glare of which had been distinctly perceived at the fall of day.

Now it was an easy matter to make out the course followed by the berg since it had come out of Behring Strait. After having turned round with the coast, it had doubled Cape Serdze-Kamen, Koliutchin Bay, Wankarem Promontory, Cape North, then it had entered Long Strait, which separates Wrangell Island from the coast of the Tchutki province.

To what regions would the iceberg be borne away when it had cleared Long Strait, it was impossible to foresee. What was of a nature to alarm Mr. Sergius the more was, that, to the northward, the map showed no other land; ice alone spread over that immense space, the center of which is the pole itself.

The only hope to which they could cling now was that the sea might get entirely frozen up under the action of a more intense cold, — an eventuality which could not be delayed much longer; one which should have come to pass several weeks since. Our rovers should then get stranded on to the ice-field, and by directing their steps toward the south, they might try to reach the Siberian continent. True, they would be under the necessity of abandoning the *Fair Rambler* for want of a team; and what would they do, if they had a long distance to cover?

Meanwhile the wind kept blowing violently from the east, though no longer in the hurricane fashion of the preceding days. Such are these horrible seas, huge waves would unfurl with a loud roar and come dashing against the crest of the floating block; then rebounding off, they would sweep right over its surface, and give it such shocks that it trembled to its very center, as though it would burst open.

Besides, those giant waves, hurled on as far as the wagon, threatened to wash away any one who was not inside it. Hence measures of precaution were taken, on the advice of Mr. Sergius.

As there had been an abundant fall of snow during the first week in November, it was easy to construct a kind of rampart, aft of the iceberg, to protect it against the waves, which, most frequently struck it from behind. Everybody set to work; and when the snow, duly trodden and beaten, had been heaped to a height and thickness of four or five feet, and had become quite hard, it presented an obstacle to the fury of the billows, the spray alone oversprinkling its summit. It was like a sort of barricade erected astern of a disabled vessel.

While this work was going on, Sander and Napoleona could not refrain from throwing an occasional snow-ball at each other, and aiming not a few at Clovy’s back. And although the present was not exactly the time for play, Mr. Cascabel did not scold too severely, except on one occasion when a ball, missing its aim, fell full on Mr. Sergius's hat.

"Who is the good-for-nothing — ?" He had not time to finish.

"It was I, father," cried little Napoleona, quite confused.

"You good-for-nothing child!" exclaimed Cascabel. "You will excuse her, will you, Mr. Sergius?"

"Leave the child alone, friend Cascabel," replied the latter. "Let her come and give me a kiss; and it will be all over."

And it was done accordingly.

Not only was a bank erected on the back part of the iceberg, but soon the *Fair Rambler* itself was surrounded with a kind of rampart of ice, so as to protect it more efficiently still, whilst its wheels, being packed up with ice, right up to the axle, made the wagon absolutely steady. Inside this rampart, which went up to the height of the gallery, a narrow space had been left which permitted to circulate all around the vehicle. You might have fancied it was a ship wintering in the midst of icebergs, with its hull protected by a cuirass of snow against the cold and the squalls. If the block itself did not give way, our shipwrecked party had nothing more to apprehend from the billows, and, in these conditions, they might perhaps find it possible to wait until the Arctic winter had taken entire possession of these hyperborean regions.

But then, when that time had come, they would have to start off for the continent! They would have to leave the home on wheels that had conveyed them through the length and breadth of the New World, and in which they had found so comfortable and so safe a shelter! Abandoned among the bergs of the Polar Sea, the *Fair Rambler* would disappear at the breaking up of the ice when the warm weather came.

And when Cascabel thought over all that, he who was always so ready to look at things on their bright side, he raised his hands to heaven, he cursed his ill luck, and blamed himself for all these disasters, forgetting that they were due to the ruffians who had robbed him in the gorges of the Sierra Nevada, and who were entirely responsible for the present state of things.

In vain did good Cornelia endeavor to drive his gloomy thoughts away, at first by gentle words and afterwards by stinging reproaches. In vain did his children and Clovy himself claim their share in the consequences of the fatal resolutions that had been adopted. In vain did they assert over and over again that this route had been unanimously agreed upon by the family. In vain did Mr. Sergius and "little Kayette" try to console the inconsolable Cæser. He would heed nothing.

"You are no longer a man, then, aren't you?" said Cornelia to him one day, giving him a good shaking.

"Not so much as you are, wifey!" he replied, as he tried to recover his equilibrium, that had been slightly disturbed by his wife's muscular admonition.

In reality, Mrs. Cascabel was full of anxiety for the future. And still, she felt the necessity of reacting against the dejection of her husband, hitherto so unyielding to the blows of evil fortune.

And now the question of food was beginning to trouble Mr. Sergius. It was of the greatest importance that the provisions should last, not only till such time as they would set out on the ice-field, but right up to the day when they would reach Siberia. Needless to rely on their guns at a time of the year when sea-birds would be seen but seldom flying across the mist. Prudence, therefore, made it obligatory to cut down the rations in view of a journey that might last a long time.

It was under these conditions that the iceberg, irresistibly drawn along by the currents, reached the latitude of the Aion Islands, situated to the north of the Asiatic coast.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE 16TH OF NOVEMBER TO THE 2D OF DECEMBER.

IT was with the help of a great deal of guessing that Mr. Sergius came to believe he had recognized this group of islands. As far as possible, when he took down his observations, he had made allowance for the drift, which he calculated at an average of some forty-five miles in twenty-four hours.

This archipelago, which indeed he was unable to see, lies, according to the maps, in long. 150 and lat. 75, say about three hundred miles from the continent.

Mr. Sergius was right: by the 16th of November the iceberg was to the south of this group of islands. But at what distance? Even by using the instruments habitually employed by navigators, that distance could not have been estimated in an approximate way. As the disk of the sun showed itself but for a few minutes through the mist of the horizon, the observation would have given no result. They had definitely entered the long night of the polar regions.

By this time the weather was horrible, although it had a tendency to get colder. The thermometer wavered a little below zero, centigrade. Now this temperature was not low enough yet to bring about the cohesion of the icebergs scattered on the surface of the Arctic basin; in consequence no obstacle could hinder the drifting of the floe.

Meanwhile, in the indentations along its margin could be noticed the formation of what polar navigators in winter quarters call bay-ice, when it occurs inside the narrow creeks of a coast. Mr. Sergius and John attentively watched these formations, which would, ere long, spread over the whole sea. The ice season would then be “full on,” and the situation of the wanderers would be changed for the better, — at least they hoped so.

During the first fortnight in November the snow did not cease falling in extraordinary abundance. Swept along horizontally by the blast, it accumulated in thick masses against the rampart erected around the *Fair Rambler*, and in a short time made it considerably higher.

On the whole, this accumulation of snow presented no danger; nay, it was an advantage in this way, that the Cascabels would be the better protected against the cold. Cornelia would thus be able to spare the paraffine oil and use it exclusively for kitchen purposes, — a question to be taken into serious consideration, for, when this oil became exhausted, how would they replace it?

Fortunately, besides, the temperature remained bearable inside the apartments, — three or four degrees above zero. It even went up when the *Fair Rambler* was buried in the snow; and now, it was not the heat that was likely to run short, but rather the air, to which all access was closed.

It then became necessary to remove the snow, and every one had his share in this toilsome task.

And first of all, Mr. Sergius had the little corridor cleared out that had been contrived inside the rampart. Then a passage was cut through, so as to make sure of a free exit, and due care was taken, of course, that this passage should face the west. Without this precaution, it would have been obstructed by the snow that the wind drove from the east.

All danger was not warded off, however, as will be seen presently.

Needless to say that they left their rooms neither night nor day. There they found a safe shelter against the storm as well as against the cold, which was increasing, as shown by the slow and steady fall of the thermometer. None the less, Mr. Sergius and John did not fail to make their daily observations whilst a vague glimmer of light tinted yonder horizon, beneath which the sun would continue to decline until the solstice of the 21st of December. And day by day they were disappointed in that faint hope of perceiving some whaler wintering in the vicinity, or endeavoring to make his way to some port on Behring Strait; always and ever disappointed in the hope of finding the block adhering to some ice-field adjacent, perchance, to the Siberian coast! Then both, returning to the encampment, would try to reproduce on the map the supposed course of the drift.

It has been mentioned already that fresh game had ceased to put in an appearance in the kitchen of the *Fair Rambler* since its departure from Port Clarence. As a fact, what could Cornelia have done with those sea-birds which it is so hard to rid of their oily taste? In spite of her culinary talents, ptarmigans, and petrels would have been ill-received by her guests. So John refrained from wasting his powder and shot on these birds of too Arctic an origin.

However, whenever he was on guard outside, he never went without his gun, and one afternoon, the 26th of November, he had an opportunity to make use of it.

Suddenly a shot was heard, and immediately after John called loudly for help.

The feeling of surprise caused by the unusual occurrence was not unmingled with a certain amount of anxiety. Out rushed Mr. Sergius, Cascabel, Sander, and Clovy, followed by the two dogs.

“Come here! Come here!” John cried.

And so saying, he ran backward and forward, as though he tried to cut off the retreat of some animal.

“What is it?” inquired Mr. Cascabel.

“I have wounded a seal, and it will escape us if we let it reach the sea.”

It was a fine animal. It had been wounded in the chest, and a streak of blood reddened the snow; still it would have managed to escape, had not Mr. Sergius and his companions come to the spot.

With a first blow of its tail, it knocked young Sander to the ground, but Clovy threw himself bravely on it, kept it down not without difficulty, and John finished it with a shot in the head.

If this was not a very dainty bit of venison for Cornelia’s daily boarders, it was no trifling stock of meat for Wagram and Marengo. No doubt, had they been able to speak, they would have thanked John heartily for this lucky windfall.

“And, by the way, why don’t animals talk?” said Mr. Cascabel, when they were all seated in front of the stove in the kitchen.

“For the very simple reason that they are not intelligent enough to talk,” replied Mr. Sergius.

“Are you of opinion, then,” asked John, “that the absence of speech is due to a lack of intelligence?”

“Most assuredly, my dear John, at least among the superior animals. Thus, the larynx of the dog is identical with that of man. A dog could talk, then; and if it does not do so, it is because its intelligence is not sufficiently developed to enable it to communicate its impressions by speech.”

This theory was, to say the least, open to discussion, but modern physiologists admit it.

It is worth nothing that a change was gradually taking place in Mr. Cascabel’s mind. Although he still continued to hold himself responsible for the present situation, his philosophy was reassuming its former sway. With his life-long habit of weathering all storms, he could not believe that his good star had set. No, its light had been clouded; that was all. Hitherto, indeed, the family had not been too severely tried with physical suffering. True, if dangers increased, as there was reason to fear they would, the moral power of endurance of the troupe might be severely taxed.

Hence, with an eye to the future, Mr. Sergius did not cease encouraging all the little world around him. During the long idle hours, seated at the table by the light of the lamp, he would chat with them, would tell them the various adventures of his travels through Europe and America. John and Kayette, sitting near each other, listened to him with great profit, and to their questions he always gave some instructive reply. Then, availing himself of his experience, he ended by saying:

“Do you see, my friends, there is no reason to despair. The block we are on is sound and hard, and now that the cold weather is set, it will not come to pieces. Notice, moreover, that it is drifting in the very direction we wished to go, and that we are going on without fatigue, as if we were on a ship. A little patience and we shall get into port safe and sound.”

“And which of us is despairing, if you please?” said Mr. Cascabel to him, one day. “Who takes the liberty to despair, Mr. Sergius? Whoever despairs without my permission shall be put on bread and water!”

“There is no bread!” cried young Sander, with a grin.

“Well then, on dry biscuit, and he shall be kept indoors!”

“We can’t go outside!” remarked Clovy.

“That’s enough!... Those are my orders!”

During the last week in November, the snowfall took extraordinary proportions. The flakes fell so thick that they had to give up all thought of walking one step out of doors, and a veritable catastrophe well-nigh ensued.

On the 30th, at break of day, as he awoke, Clovy was surprised at the difficulty he experienced in breathing, as though the air hindered the proper action of the lungs.

The others were sleeping still in their “apartments” with a heavy, painful sleep that gave one the idea that they were undergoing gradual asphyxia.

Clovy tried to open the door in the forepart of the wagon, to renew the air. He was unable to do so.

“Hallo, boss!” he called out in so powerful a tone of voice that he awoke all the guests of the *Fair Rambler*.

Mr. Sergius, Cascabel, and his two sons were up in a moment, and John exclaimed:

“Why, we are smothering here! We must open the door!”

“Just what I can’t do!” replied Clovy:

“The windows, then?”

But as the windows opened outward, it was found equally impossible to open them.

In a few minutes the door was unscrewed down, and they understood why they had not been able to slide it as usual.

The corridor, left inside the rampart all round the vehicle, was filled up with a quantity of snow driven into it by the squall, nor was the corridor alone thus crammed up, but likewise the passage outward through the ice wall.

“Could the wind have changed?” suggested Mr. Cascabel.

“That is not likely,” answered Mr. Sergius. “So much snow would not have fallen if the wind had shifted westward.”

“Our iceberg must have turned round on itself,” observed John.

“Yes, that must be so,” replied Mr. Sergius. “But, let us see, first, to what is most urgent. We must not let ourselves be stifled for want of breathable air.”

And immediately, John and Clovy, with pickaxe and shovel, set about clearing the corridor. A laborious task in truth; the hardened snow filled it to its highest, and there was reason to believe it even covered up the wagon.

To get on the quicker, they had to relieve each other in turn. Naturally it was impossible to shovel the snow out; so they had to throw it into the first compartment of the wagon, where, under the action of the internal temperature it resolved itself into water almost immediately, and flowed out.

At the end of one hour, the pickaxe had not yet pierced its way through the compact mass jammed in the corridor. It was impossible to get out, impossible to renew the air inside the *Fair Rambler*, and respiration became more and more difficult through lack of oxygen and excess of carbonic acid.

All were panting, and sought in vain for a little pure air in this vitiated atmosphere. Kayette and Napoleona experienced a sensation of choking. There was no concealing the fact that Mrs. Cascabel was most affected by this state of things. Kayette, overcoming her own sufferings, endeavored to give her some relief. What would have been needed was to open the windows so as to renew the air, and we have seen that they were externally blocked up with the snow, as the door had been.

“Let’s work with a will!” Mr. Sergius would go on repeating. “Here we have dug six feet through this block. It cannot be much thicker now!”

No, it should not be much thicker, if the snow had ceased falling. But perhaps it was falling still, even now.

John, at this time, hit on the idea of making a hole through the layer of snow that formed the roof of the corridor, — a layer that should be thinner than the rest presumably, and probably less hard.

Sure enough, this task was performed successfully and under more favorable conditions; and half an hour later, — it was not one minute too soon, — the hole gave access to the outer air.

This proved an immediate relief for all the occupants of the *Fair Rambler*.

“Oh, how good that is!” exclaimed little Napoleona, opening her mouth wide, the better to fill her lungs.

“Fine!” added Sander, as he passed his tongue over his lips. “I’d rather have it than jam, just now.”

It was some time before Cornelia quite recovered from that fit of incipient asphyxia, under which she had become almost unconscious.

The hole having now been made wider, the men hoisted themselves up to the crest of the ice rampart. Everything was white to the utmost limits that the eye could reach. The wagon had entirely disappeared under an accumulation of snow which formed a huge mound in the center of the floating block.

By consulting the compass, Mr. Sergius was able to ascertain that the wind still blew from the east, and that the iceberg had wheeled round half a turn on itself, — which had made its aspect exactly the reverse of what it originally was, — and by turning the opening of the passage to the windward had caused the latter to be blocked up with snow.

In the open air, the thermometer recorded only six degrees below zero, and the sea was free, so far as could be judged in the midst of almost complete darkness. It must be observed, moreover, that in spite of the rotatory movement which the berg had made upon itself, — owing, no doubt, to its being temporarily caught in some whirlpool, — it had none the less continued to drift toward the west.

With a view to anticipate the recurrence of a similar accident, which might be attended with such deplorable consequences, Mr, Sergius thought it wise to take an additional measure of precaution. On his recommendation they dug through the rampart a second passage opposite to the first; and now, whatever might be the aspect of the berg, they would always be sure of some means of communication with the outside. Henceforth, no more fear of a deficiency of pure air inside the wagon.

“All the same,” said Mr. Cascabel, “for a God-forsaken spot, this is a God-forsaken spot, and no mistake! I am not quite sure that it is good enough for seals, and it’s nothing to the climate of old Normandy!”

“I quite agree with you,” replied Mr. Sergius. “Still, we must take it as it is.”

“Don’t I take it? by Jove! Of course I take it, Mr. Sergius, — in abomination, I do!”

No, good Cascabel, this is not the climate of Normandy, not even that of Sweden, Norway, or Finland during their winter season! It is the climate of the North pole, with its four months of darkness, its roaring squalls, its continual fall of dust-like snow, and the thick veil of mist which does away with the possibility of what we Southerners call a horizon.

And what a gloomy mental perspective loomed in the distance! When this helpless drifting had come to an end, when the berg lay stranded and still, and the sea was no longer but an immense ice-field, what course would they adopt? Abandoning the wagon, journeying without it, a distance of several hundred leagues to the coast of Siberia, — the mere thought of it was truly frightful. Hence, Mr. Sergius would ask himself whether it might not be best to winter at the very spot where the floating berg would stop and to enjoy, until the fine season returned, the hospitality of that *Fair Rambler* whose rambles were all over, no doubt! Yes, at the worst, spending the period of intense cold in these conditions would not have been an impossibility. But, before the temperature would rise, before the Arctic Sea would break up, they should have left their winter-quarters and crossed the ice-field, which would dissolve very quickly when it once began to do so.

As to that, the wanderers were in no hurry yet, and it would be time enough to consider this question when winter was over. They should then have to take into account the distance; that would separate them from the continent of Asia, always under the supposition of their having some means of calculating it. Mr. Sergius was in hopes that the distance would not be considerable, seeing that the iceberg had been floating uniformly toward the west after doubling Capes Kekournoi, Chelagskoi, and Baranov, and cleared Long Strait and Kolima Bay.

Why had it not stopped at the mouth of this latter bay? From there, it would have been relatively easy to reach the province of the Ioukaghirs, in which Kabatchkova, Nijneikolymsk, and other villages, would have offered them safe winter quarters. A team of reindeer might have been sent to the ice-field for the *Fair Rambler* and would have brought it on to the continent. But Mr. Sergius felt convinced that this bay must have been left behind, as well as the mouths of the Tchukotski and Alazeia rivers, being given the speed of the drift. To check this drift, nothing now appeared on the map, save the line of those archipelagoes known by the names of Anjou Islands, Liakhov, and Long Islands, and on these islands, uninhabited for the most part, how would they find the resources necessary to the home-journey of the staff and material? Still, even this would be better than a helpless, aimless drifting about the furthest limits of the polar regions!

The month of November had just ended. Thirty-nine days had come and gone since the Cascabels had left Port Clarence to venture across Behring Strait. But for the loosening of the ice-field, they would have landed at Numana quite five weeks ago; and now, having pushed their way to the southern provinces of Siberia and settled down in some village, they would have nothing more to dread from the Arctic winter.

Now, the drift could not keep on much longer. The cold was gradually increasing and the thermometer steadily falling. On examining his ice island, Mr. Sergius found that its area was enlarging daily, owing to the various blocks it "annexed," as it shifted its way among them; indeed, it had grown, superficially, one-third larger than it was at first.

During the night from the 30th of November to the 1st of December, an enormous block came and adhered to the aft portion of the float; and, as the base of this block went down rather deep into the water and it was thereby drawn with greater speed by the current, it soon whirled the islet half a turn round and dragged it on ahead just like a steam tug towing a barge along.

At the same time, as the cold had grown more intense and drier, the sky had quite brightened up again. The wind now blew from the northeast, — a fortunate circumstance, since it bore to the Siberian coast. The sparkling Stars of the Arctic firmament lit up the long polar nights, and frequently an aurora borealis would flood the space with its luminous jets, springing up from the horizon like the leaflets of a fan. Away, away the eye could travel, until, yonder on the very utmost limits of its range, it discerned the first bank of the polar ice. On the background of the now clearer horizon, this chain of eternal icebergs came out in relief with its sharp crests, its rounded-off ridges, its forest of peaks and offshoots. It was a marvelous sight, and our friends would temporarily forget their sad situation, gazing in admiration at those cosmic phenomena, peculiar to hyperborean regions.

The speed of the drift had slackened since the wind had changed, the current being now the sole cause of it. It was therefore probable that the iceberg would not be carried much farther westward, for the sea was beginning to freeze in the interstices between the slowly gliding blocks. Up to the present, it is true, this “young ice,” as whalers call it, yielded to the least shock. The blocks, scattered about on the open, being separated but by narrow channels, the iceberg would sometimes knock against considerable masses; it would remain still for a few hours, and eventually would resume its course. Nevertheless, there was every reason to look forward to an imminent halt, and this time it would be for the whole duration of winter.

On the 3d of December, about noon, Mr. Sergius and John had gone right to the bow of their disabled ship. Kayette, Napoleona, and Sander had followed them, well wrapped up in furs, for it was bitter cold. Away to the south, the faintest glimmer of light showed that the sun was crossing the meridian. The doubtful whiteness that pervaded the space was doubtless due to some distant aurora borealis.

All their attention was drawn to the various motions of the icebergs, their strange shapes, the shocks they gave each other, the “somersaults” executed by those whose equilibrium would happen to be displaced by the wearing out or the breaking off of their submerged base.

Suddenly, the block that had towed the raft for the past few days seemed to shiver all over, toppled into the sea, and in its fall broke off the edge of the iceberg, a huge wave flooding the latter at the same time.

All rushed back with all possible speed, but almost immediately cries were heard:

“Help! Help! John!”

It was Kayette’s voice. The portion of the berg on which she stood had been snapped off by the shock and was drifting away with her.

“Kayette!” cried John. “Kayette!”

But, caught by a side current, the broken block was being carried away from the berg, which then happened to be held back by a whirlpool. Yet a little while, and Kayette would have disappeared in the middle of the drifting ice.

“Kayette! Kayette!” John called.

“John! John!” repeated the young girl, one last time.

On hearing the cries, Mr. Cascabel and Cornelia had come running to the spot. There they stood, horror-stricken, near Mr. Sergius, who was at utter loss to know what to do to save the unfortunate child.

Just then, the broken block having come within five or six feet of where they were, John sprang off with one bound before they could hold him back and fell by the side of Kayette.

“My son! My son!” sobbed Mrs. Cascabel.

Saving them was now out of the question. By the impulse of his fall, John had pushed the block far away. Both were soon out of sight among the icebergs, and even their cries, lost through the space, ceased to be heard.

After two hours’ anxious watching, night came: Mr. Sergius, Cascabel, Cornelia, all were compelled to return to the encampment.

What a night the poor people spent pacing to and fro around the *Fair Rambler* amid the piteous howlings of the dogs! John and Kayette carried away! Without shelter, without food, — lost! Cornelia wept; Sander and Napoleona mingled their tears with hers. Cascabel, utterly crushed by this new blow, no longer uttered but incoherent words, the general purport of which was that all the misfortunes that had befallen his home were his own doing. As to Mr. Sergius, what consolation could he have offered them, when he, himself, was inconsolable?

The next day, the 4th of December, about eight o’clock in the morning, the iceberg had begun to move forward again, having at last cleared the whirlpool by which it had been detained all night. Its course was the same as that followed by John and Kayette, but as they were eighteen hours ahead, all hope of overtaking them or finding them again should be given up. They were beset by too many dangers, besides, to escape them safe and sound, what with the cold, which was becoming excessively keen, with the pangs of hunger that they would be unable to appease, and the incessant collisions with icebergs, the smallest of which could have crushed them on its way!

Better not attempt to depict the grief of the Cascabels! In spite of the fall in the temperature, not one of them would consent to go indoors, and they kept on calling John, calling Kayette, neither of whom could hear their heart-rending cries.

The day wore itself out, and the situation was still unchanged. Night came, and Mr. Sergius ordered father mother, and children, to seek the shelter of the *Fair Rambler*, although nobody could sleep for one single moment.

Suddenly, about three in the morning, a frightful shock was felt, and so violent was it that the wagon was well-nigh upset. Whence came this shock? Had some enormous iceberg collided with the raft, and perchance broken it?

Out rushed Mr. Sergius.

An aurora borealis cast its reflection through the space; it was possible to discern objects within a radius of half a league around the encampment.

Mr. Sergius’s first thought was to cast his searching eye in every direction.

No sign of John or Kayette.

As to the shock, it had been caused by the knocking of the berg against the ice-field. Thanks to a further fall in the temperature, — which had gone down to twenty degrees below zero, centigrade, — the surface of the sea was now completely solidified. There, where all was unrest yesterday, everything was now still and steady. All drifting was permanently at an end.

Mr. Sergius hastened back and announced to his friends the final halt of their floating berg.

“So, the sea is all set ahead of us?” inquired the bereaved father.

“Ahead of us, and behind, and all around us,” replied Mr. Sergius.

“Well, let us go look for John and Kayette! There is not one minute to lose.”

“Let us be off!”

Cornelia and Napoleona would not remain with the *Fair Rambler*; it was accordingly left in Clovy’s charge and all started off, the two dogs scouting ahead, and scenting all over the ice-field as they went.

They walked at a good speed on the ice, which was as hard as granite, and naturally they made for the west, where, if Wagram and Marengo ever fell on the track of their young master, they would soon recognize it. At the end of half an hour, however, they had found nothing yet, and they had to halt, for one quickly got out of breath with a temperature so low that the air seemed frozen.

The ice-field, which spread out of sight, north, south and east, seemed bounded on the west by certain heights which did not present the usual appearance of icebergs. They might be the outline of a continent or of an island.

Just at this moment, the dogs, with loud barks, made a rush for a whitish mound on which a certain number of black specks could be perceived.

They at once resumed their tramp onward, and presently Sander remarked that two of those black specks were making signs to them.

“John! — Kayette!” he cried, rushing on ahead after Wagram and Marengo.

They were, indeed, Kayette and John, safe and sound.

But they were not alone. A group of natives surrounded them; and these were the inhabitants of Liakhov Islands.

CHAPTER V.

LIAKHOV ISLANDS.

THERE are, in this part of the Arctic Sea, three archipelagos, designated under the general name of New Siberia, and conaprising Long Islands, Anjou Islands, and Liakhov Islands. The latter, the nearest to the continent of Asia, consist of a group of islands lying between the 73d and the 75th degrees of latitude north, and the 35th and 140th of longitude east, on a surface of some forty thousand square miles. Among the principal ones may be named the isles of Kotelnoi, Blinoi, Maloi, and Belkov.

Barren lands these are; no trees, no product out of the soil; barely some signs of a rudimentary kind of vegetation during the few weeks of summer; nothing but bones of cetacea and of mammoths, accumulated here ever since the period of geological formation; fossil wood in very large quantities; such are the archipelagos of New Siberia.

Liakhov Islands were discovered in the early years of the eighteenth century.

It was on Kotelnoi, the most important and the most southerly of the group, some three hundred miles from the continent, that the staff of the *Fair Rambler* had landed, after a drift of forty days over a space of six or seven hundred leagues. To the southwest, on the coast of Siberia, lies the vast bay of the Lena, a wide opening through which the river of that name, one of the most important in northern Asia, pours out its waters into the Arctic Sea.

Evidently then, this Liakhov archipelago is the *ultima* thule *of the polar regions in this longitude. Beyond it,* right on to the insurmountable barrier of the polar ice, no land has been descried by navigators. Fifteen degrees higher is the North pole.

Our wanderers had therefore been cast ashore at the very world’s end, although at a lower latitude than the latitude of Spitzbergen or that of the northern parts of America.

On the whole, granting that the Cascabels had journeyed farther north than they had originally intended to do, still they had constantly drawn nearer and nearer to Russia in Europe. The hundreds of leagues they had covered since leaving Port Clarence had caused them less fatigue than exposure to danger. Drifting away, under these conditions, was so much land journey saved through countries that are almost untravelable during winter. And there would have been, perhaps, no reason for complaining, if, by a last stroke of ill luck, Mr. Sergius and his companions had not fallen into the hands of the natives of Liakhov. Would they obtain their liberty or could they ever recover it by flight? It seemed doubtful. In any case, they would know all about it ere long; and when they were fixed on that point, it would be time enough to adopt a line of action, according to circumstances.

Kotelnoi Island is inhabited by a Finnish tribe, reckoning from three hundred and fifty to four hundred souls, men, women, and children. These repulsive-looking natives are among the least civilized of those who inhabit these parts, be they Tchuktchis, Ioukaghirs, or Samoyedes. Their idolatry is beyond belief, despite the noble efforts of the Moravian Brothers, who have never been able to conquer the superstitious spirit of these Neo-Siberians or their innate thieving and pillaging propensities.

The principal industry of the Liakhov archipelago consists in the catching of cetacea, great numbers of which frequent this part of the Arctic Sea, and likewise in seal hunting, these animals being as plentiful here as in Behring Island during the warm season.

Winter is very severe in this latitude of New Siberia. The natives live, or rather earth themselves, in the depths of dark holes, dug under heaps of snow. These holes are sometimes divided into rooms, where it is not difficult to maintain a pretty high temperature. What they burn is that fossil wood, not unlike peat, of which (as was already said) these islands contain considerable strata, not to mention the bones of cetacea, which are also used as fuel.

An opening, made by these Northern Troglodytes in the ceiling of their caves, supplies a means of exit for the smoke of their very primitive hearths. Hence, at first sight, the soil seems to emit vapors similar to those which come out of sulphur mines.

As to their food, the flesh of the reindeer constitutes its chief basis. These ruminants are parked on the islets and islands of the archipelago in large flocks. Their “table” is, moreover, provisioned with the flesh of the elk and with dried fish, large quantities of which are stored up before winter. It follows therefrom that the Neo-Siberians need have no fears on the score of famine.

One chief was at this time reigning over the Liakhov group. His name was Tchou-Tchouk, and he wielded an uncontested authority over his subjects. In their abject submission to the regime of absolute monarchy, these natives are the very antithesis of the Eskimos of Russian America, who live in a kind of republican equality. And with respect to social well-being, they differ even more from them, thanks to their savage manners and inhospitable ways, which are the source of frequent complaints on the part of whalers. Alas for the good-hearted natives of Port Clarence! How they would be regretted, ere long!

Certain it is that the Cascabels could not have fared worse! After the catastrophe in Behring Strait, coming to land just on the Liakhov archipelago, and falling among such unsociable creatures, was indeed outstripping all the bounds of ill luck.

Nor did Mr. Cascabel conceal his disappointment when he saw himself surrounded with some hundred natives, howling, gesticulating, and threatening the castaways whom the vicissitudes of this luckless journey had thrown into their power.

“Well, well, who are these apes after?” he exclaimed, after pushing away those who were closing too near him.

“After us, father!” said John.

“A funny way they have of bidding visitors welcome! Are they thinking of eating us up?”

“No, but very probably they intend keeping us prisoners on their island!”

“Prisoners? — ”

“Yes, as they have done already with two sailors who arrived here before us.”

John had no opportunity to give more complete details. The new-comers had just been seized by a dozen natives, and, whether they willed it or not, they had of necessity to follow their captors to Tourkef village, the capital of the archipelago.

Meanwhile, a score of other savages started in the direction of the "Fair Rambler", which could be perceived away in the east, thanks to the little streak of smoke issuing from its funnel.

A quarter of an hour later the prisoners had reached Tourkef, and were led into a pretty large cave dug under the snow.

"This is the jail of the locality, no doubt!" remarked Mr. Cascabel, as soon as they were left alone around a fire, lighted in the center of the hovel.

But first of all John and Kayette had to tell the tale of their adventures.

The block of ice on which they were had followed a westerly course after it had been lost to sight behind the drifting bergs. John held the young girl in his arms lest she should be knocked off by the continual shocks they received. They had no provisions; they were fated to be without a shelter for long hours to come; but at least they were together. Keeping close against each other, they would not feel hungry or cold, perhaps.

Night came on. Even though they could not see, they could hear each other. The hours passed on in the midst of continual anguish and with the never-ceasing dread of being thrown into the abyss beneath them. At last the pale rays of dawn appeared, and just then their float was locked to the ice-field.

Away John and Kayette ventured over the immense waste; they walked on and on, and at last reached Kolelnoi Island, where they naturally fell into the hands of the natives.

"And you say, John, that there are other shipwrecked prisoners?" inquired Mr. Sergius.

"There are, sir."

“You have seen them?”

“Mr. Sergius,” said Kayette, “I have been able to understand these people, for they talk Russian; and they spoke of two sailors who are kept prisoners in the village.”

As a matter of fact, the language of the northern tribes of Siberia closely resembles Russian, and Mr. Sergius would be in a position to explain himself with the inhabitants of these isles. But what was there to expect from these plunderers who, driven away from the more populous provinces near the mouths of the rivers, have sought in the far away archipelagos of New Siberia a den of safety, where they have nothing to fear from the Russian authorities.

However, Mr. Cascabel’s ill temper knew no bounds since he had been denied the liberty of going and coming where he willed. He repeated to himself, and not without good grounds, that the *Fair Rambler* would be descried, pillaged, destroyed, perhaps, by these ruffians. In truth, it was not worth while having escaped out of the cataclysm in the Strait of Behring, to come headlong into the claws of this “polar vermin.”

“Come, Cæsar,” Cornelia would say to him, “compose yourself. What use is there in flying into a passion! After all, much worse than all this might have befallen us!”

“Worse, Cornelia?”

“Why, of course, Cæsar! What would you say if we had not found John and Kayette? Well, there they are, both of them, and we are alive, all of us! Just think of the dangers we have run, and escaped! Why, it is nothing short of a miracle, and my opinion is that instead of raving like a madman, you ought to be thanking Providence — ”

“So I do, Cornelia, thank Providence from the bottom of my heart. All the same, surely it’s no harm if I curse the devil for having pitchforked us into the clutches of those monsters! Why, they are more like brutes than like human creatures!”

And Cascabel was right, but Cornelia was not wrong. Not one of the guests of the *Fair Rambler* was missing. Such as they had left Port Clarence, such they had met together again in this Tourkef village.

“Yes, we are all together again, inside a mole-hill, or a polecat’s hole, if you choose,” grumbled Cascabel; “a den that an ill-licked bear would not consent to lie in!”

“By Jove! — What about Clovy?” exclaimed Sander.

And, forsooth, what had become of the poor fellow who had been left in charge of the wagon? Had he, at the risk of his life, attempted to defend his master’s property? Was he now in the power of the savages?

And now that Sander had recalled Clovy to the members of the family then present:

“And what about Jako!” said Cornelia.

“And John Bull!” said Napoleona.

“And our dogs!” added John.

Needless to say that all the sympathy was for Clovy, The ape, the parrot, Wagram and Marengo were, of course, a question of very secondary consideration.

At this moment a loud noise was heard outside. There was a veritable storm of indignant recriminations, and to the general confusion was superadded the barking of the two dogs. Almost immediately, the orifice used to gain access to the den was flung open; in bounded Wagram and Marengo, and after them appeared Clovy.

“Here I am, boss!” cried the poor fellow, “unless, maybe, it’s not myself! For I really don’t know what’s become of me!”

“That’s exactly how we feel, too!” replied the boss, as he stretched out his hand to him.

“And our *Fair Rambler*?” inquired Cornelia tremblingly.

“The *Fair Rambler*?” answered Clovy. “Why, those gentlemen outside ferreted it out under the snow; they yoked themselves to it like so many heads of cattle and brought it here to this village.”

“And Jako?” said Cornelia.

“And Jako, too.”

“And John Bull?” added Napoleona.

“And John Bull, likewise.”

Everything considered, since the Cascabels were detained at Tourkef, it was better their wagon should be there too. although running the risk of being ransacked.

Meanwhile hunger began to make itself felt, and there was no visible sign of the natives concerning themselves about the feeding of their prisoners. Very fortunately, the prudent Clovy had taken the precaution of cramming his pockets, and out of their depths he drew several tins of preserves, which would be sufficient for the first meals. Then, all wrapped themselves up in their furs and slept as well as they could in an atmosphere rendered almost unbreathable by the smoke from the peat fire.

Next morning, the 4th of December, Mr. Sergius and his companions were led out of their hovel; and with unspeakable relief they slowly inhaled the outer air, although the cold was intense and keen.

They were brought to the presence of Tchou-Tchouk.

This cunning-faced personage, whose general appearance was the reverse of attractive, occupied a sort of subterraneous dwelling, larger and more comfortable than the dens of his subjects. It had been dug at the foot of a huge, gloomy, snow-capped rock, the summit of which was not unlike the head of a bear.

Tchou-Tchouk might have been fifty years of age. His smooth face, lit with a pair of small eyes which glistened like live coals, was animalized, if I may apply the word to the facial aspect of the lower animals, by the sharp tusks that came out between his lips. Seated on a heap of furs, clad in reindeer skins, his legs buried in sealskin bouts and his “upper end” duly protected by a fur hood, he lazily nodded his head backward and forward.

“What an astute old scoundrel he looks!” murmured Mr. Cascabel.

By his side stood two or three notables of the tribe. Outside lounged a half hundred natives, clad much in the same way as their chief; whether men or women the prisoners could not tell, Neo-Siberian fashion in dress being no “respecter” of sexes.

And first of all, Tchou-Tchouk, addressing Mr, Sergius, whose nationality he doubtless had guessed, said to him in very intelligible Russian:

“Who are you?”

“A subject of the Czar!” replied Mr. Sergius, thinking that the imperial title might perchance awe this petty sovereign of an archipelago.

“And those?” continued Tchou-Tchouk, pointing to the members of the Cascabel family.

“French people.”

“French?” repeated the chief.

And it seemed as though he had never heard of a people or a tribe of that name.

“Why, of course, French! — French people from France, you old wretch!” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel.

But this was said in the most vernacular French, and with all the freedom of speech of a man who feels sure and certain that he will not be understood.

“And she?” inquired the monarch, turning to Kayette; for it had not escaped his notice that the young girl should be of a different race.

“An Indian,” answered Mr. Sergius.

Whereupon a somewhat lively conversation ensued between him and Tchou-Tchouk, the principal passages of which he translated for his friends.

The outcome of the whole discussion was that the party should consider themselves prisoners, and that they should remain on Kotelnoi Island so long as they would not have paid down, in good Russian money, a ransom of 3000 roubles.

“And where does this son of *Ursa Major* think we shall get them?” cried Cascabel. “No doubt, by this time his ruffians have stolen what remained of your money, Mr. Sergius!”

The king made a sign, and the prisoners were shown out. They were allowed to go about in the village on condition that they would not leave it; and, from the very first day, they could notice they were closely watched. At this season, indeed, in the heart of winter, it would have been impossible for them to run away with a view to reach the continent.

Straightway the whole troupe had made for the *Fair Rambler*. A great number of natives had crowded around it, in ecstasy before John Bull, who gratified them with his choicest grimaces. They had never seen an ape before, and imagined, very probably, that this red-haired quadruman belonged to the human species.

“Why, they belong to it themselves!” remarked Cornelia.

“They do, but they are a disgrace to it,” added her husband.

Then, on second thought:

“And, my word!” said he, “I made a big mistake in calling those savages ‘apes’! They are not up to them in any respect, and I offer you my best apologies for what I said, my little John Bull!”

And by way of answering, John Bull turned heels over head. But, one of the natives having tried to get hold of his hand, he bit his finger so deep as to make the blood flow.

“That’s it, John Bull! Bite them! Bite them hard!” called Sander.

This, however, might have ended unpleasantly for the little ape, and he might have paid a dear price for his bite, if the attention of the natives had not been drawn away by the apparition of Jako; his cage had just been opened, and he was coming out for a walk with the leisurely strut of an Eastern potentate.

Parrots were not known any more than monkeys in these archipelagos of New Siberia. No one had ever seen a bird of this kind, with such bright colors on its feathers, with two round eyes that looked like the glasses of a pair of specticles, and a beak curved round like a hook.

But who will describe the sensation Jako created when out of its beak came forth clearly articulated words! One followed another until the whole repertory of the loquacious bird had been poured out, to the utter amazement of the natives. A bird that spoke! And the superstitious creatures would throw themselves on the ground as if words had been uttered by the mouths of their divinities. Nor did Mr. Cascabel fail to excite his parrot the more:

“Go on, Jako!” he would say, teasing him the while. “Go on! Say all you like to them! Tell the fools to go to Jericho!”

And Jako would bid them “Go to Jericho,” one of his favorite expressions. And the bidding came out with such trumpet-like sound that the natives took to their heels, with all the outward signs of the greatest terror.

And, in spite of all their anxiety, the ill-fated troupe enjoyed “a hearty old chuckle,” as their illustrious head would have put it.

“Well, well,” he said, as he recovered a little of his old good temper, “it will be the very devil, surely, if we can’t manage to get the better of this flock of two-footed cattle!”

The prisoners were left to themselves; and as it appeared that Tchou-Tchouk allowed the *Fair Rambler* to remain at their disposal, they had nothing better to do than re-enter their old home. No doubt the Neo-Siberians thought it inferior to their holes under the snow.

Truth to say, the wagon had been stripped only of a few unimportant articles, but what remained of Mr. Sergius’s money had been taken away. This, however, Cæsar Cascabel had quite made up his mind that he would not leave behind, not even as a ransom.

Meanwhile, it was a stroke of good fortune that they should be once more in their little parlor, their dining-room, the little compartments inside the *Fair Rambler*, rather than live in the loathsome dens of Tourkef. There was scarcely anything missing. The bedding, the utensils, the tins of preserves had apparently failed to “tickle the fancy of the ladies and gentlemen of the locality.” And so, if they had to wait for months, watching their opportunity to escape from Kotelnoi Island, — well, they would winter where they were.

In the mean time, since they were left quite free to come and go as they chose, Mr. Sergius and his companions resolved to put themselves in communication with the two sailors who, — it was probable, — had been shipwrecked and cast on this island. They might, perhaps, act in concert with them and devise some plan to cheat Tchou-Tchouk's watchfulness and make their escape when circumstances would be favorable.

The remainder of the day was spent setting things in order inside the little home. No light task was it, either! And how Cornelia grumbled, she who was so very careful in her household work. It kept Kayette, Napoleona, and Clovy as busy as bees right away till bedtime.

It should be recorded, by the way, that from the time he had determined to play some huge trick on His Majesty Tchou-Tchouk, Mr. Cascabel seemed to have recovered from the recent blows he had received. "Richard was himself again."

The following day Mr. Sergius and he went in search of the two sailors, who were very likely to enjoy the same liberty as they did. Sure enough, they were not kept in a prison; the meeting took place at the door of the den which they occupied at the other end of the village, and no objection whatever was made on the part of the native warders.

These sailors were of Russian origin; one was thirty-five years of age, the other forty. Cold, want, and hunger had furrowed their long-drawn cheeks; their sailors' clothes were covered with rags of fur; under their thick head of hair and their overgrown beard, their features could scarce be distinguished. They were the very picture of misery. Still, they were strongly built, muscular fellows, who would be well able to give a helping hand, should an opportunity present itself. For all that, it did not seem as though they were very desirous of getting intimate with these strangers, whose arrival on the island had already been announced to them.

The identity of their position, a common desire to get out of it by aiding each other, ought surely to have drawn the two parties together.

Mr. Sergius questioned the two men in Russian. The elder gave his name as Ortik, the younger as Kirschef; and, not without a certain amount of hesitation, they consented to tell their history.

“We are sailors belonging to the port of Riga,” said Ortik. “A year ago we embarked on board the whaler *Seraski*, for a season in the Arctic Sea. When it was over, we were unlucky enough not to reach Behring Strait in time; our boat was caught between icebergs, north of the Liakhov Islands, and was crushed to pieces. All the crew perished except Kirschef and myself. We set out together in a small boat; a storm drove us on to these islands, and we fell into the hands of the natives.”

“When was that?” asked Mr. Sergius.

“Two months ago.”

“How did they receive you here?”

“Like yourselves, most likely,” replied Ortik. “We are Tchou-Tchouk’s prisoners; and let us off he won’t, except for a ransom.”

“Where shall we get it?” interrupted Kirschef.

“Unless,” continued the other, in a blurting sort of a way, “unless, may be, you have money for yourselves and for us; for we are countrymen, I think — ”

“We are,” answered Mr. Sergius; “but the money we possessed has been stolen by the natives, and we are quite as destitute as you can possibly be yourselves.”

“Worse luck!” growled Ortik.

Both, then, gave a few details on the way they lived. It was that narrow, dark cave they used for a dwelling-place; and, while watching them continually, their captors allowed them a certain degree of liberty. Their clothes were in rags, they had nothing to eat but the usual food of the natives, and that in barely sufficient quantity. They thought, moreover, that when the fine season drew near, they would be more closely guarded, and all attempt at an evasion would become impossible.

“Seeing that all we’d have to do would be to get hold of a fishing canoe, to get across to the continent, you may be sure that the natives will look after us, and perhaps shut us up!”

“But the mild season will not return for four or five months,” said Mr. Sergius, “and, remaining prisoners until then — ”

“Why, you have a way to get off, then?” asked Ortik, interrupting him.

“We have not, at present. Meanwhile, it is quite natural that we should try and help each other mutually. You seem to have suffered a great deal, my friends, and if we can be of any assistance to you — ”

The two sailors thanked Mr. Sergius, but there was a visible lack of candor in their thanks. If, from time to time, he would procure them some better food than what they had, they would feel grateful to him. That is all they cared for, unless he could, perhaps, oblige them with some covering. As to living together, they would rather not. They preferred staying in their hole, but promised to call on their visitors.

Mr. Sergius and Cascabel, the latter of whom had understood a few words of this conversation, took leave of the two sailors.

Although these men’s appearance was all but sympathetic, this was no reason for refusing to help them. Shipwrecked people owe aid and assistance to each other. They would come to the relief of the sailors, therefore, within the limits of their means; and, should a chance of escaping offer itself, Mr. Sergius would not forget them. They were countrymen of his, after all; and they were men like him.

A fortnight elapsed, and they gradually fell in with the shortcomings of their new situation. Each morning they were compelled to appear before the native sovereign and to listen to his pressing demands about their ransom. He flew into fits of passion, would use threats and swear by his idols! It was not for himself, it was for them he claimed the tribute of deliverance.

“You old swindler!” Mr. Cascabel would say. “Commence by giving us back our money! We shall see afterwards!”

On the whole, future prospects were anything but bright with hopes. There was cause to fear that from one day to another Tchou-Tchouk might carry his threats into effect.

And day after day, Cascabel puzzled his brains to find out some means of playing “Cheek-cheek” a trick worthy of him. It was all to no purpose; and the poor artist began to wonder if his bag of tricks was not empty, and by his bag of tricks he meant his brain-box. Indeed, the man who had indulged that grand idea, — as bold as it was now to be regretted, — of returning from America to Europe by way of Asia, seemed but too fully justified in saying to himself that he was nothing more than a “regular fool.”

“No, Cæsar, you are not a fool!” Cornelia would say. “You will hit upon something choice in the end! It will strike you when you think of it least!”

“You think so, wifey?”

“I am sure of it!”

Was it not touching to see Cornelia’s unshakable confidence in the genius of her husband, in spite of the unlucky plan he had conceived with regard to this journey?

Of course Mr. Sergius was ever there, ready to encourage everybody. And yet, the efforts he made to induce Tchou-Tchouk to give up his claims were absolutely fruitless. And even though the savage chief had consented to restore them their liberty, the Cascabels could not have left Kotelnoi Island in the middle of winter, with a temperature wavering between thirty and forty degrees below zero.

The 25th of December being at hand, Cornelia decided that Christmas should be celebrated with some *éclat*. The said *éclat* would simply consist in offering her guests a more carefully prepared dinner, one more plentiful than usual, although its various courses would be composed exclusively of preserves. Moreover as there was no lack of flour, rice, and sugar, the good housewife displayed all her skill in the making of a gigantic cake, the success of which was, beforehand, a certainty.

The two Russian sailors were invited to this meal, and accepted the invitation. It was the first time they had ever come inside the *Fair Rambler*.

No sooner had one of them, — the younger, called Kirschef, — opened is lips than the sound of his voice struck Kayette. She seemed to think that voice was not unknown to her; but where she could have heard it, she was unable to guess.

In truth, neither Cornelia, her little daughter, or even Clovy, felt any sympathetic attraction toward these two men, who seemed ill at ease in the presence of their own fellow-creatures.

As the banquet was drawing to an end, Mr. Sergius, at Ortik's request, was led to relate the adventures of the Cascabels in the province of Alaska. He added how he had been picked up half dead by them, after an attempt at murder committed on his person by some of Karkof's men.

Had their faces been fully in the light, these two men might have been seen exchanging a singular glance when the crime came to be mentioned. But this passed off unnoticed, and after taking their good share of the cake, which had been liberally soaked with vodka, Ortik and Kirschef left the *Fair Rambler*.

They were scarce outside when one of them said:

"There is a meeting that wasn't on the card! Why, that's the Russian we attacked just at the frontier; and that Indian is the cursed girl that prevented us finishing him off!"

"And clearing out his belt!" added the other.

"Yes! Those thousands of roubles would not be in Tchou-Tchouk's clutches now!"

And so, these two would-be sailors were really outlaws belonging to that Karkof gang, whose deeds had spread terror over western America. After their unsuccessful assault on Mr. Sergius, whose features they had been unable to notice in the darkness, they had succeeded in making their way to Port Clarence. There, a few days later, they had stolen a boat and had endeavored to cross Behring Strait; but, dragged away by the currents and a hundred times well-nigh hurled into the jaws of death, they had ultimately been cast on the chief island of the Liakhov Archipelago, where they had been made prisoners by the natives.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WINTER QUARTERS.

SUCH was the situation of Mr. Sergius and his companions on January the 1st, 1868.

Alarming as it was already, through their being prisoners of the Neo-Siberians of the Liakhov Islands, it was now complicated by the presence of Ortik and Kirschef. Who knows if the two scoundrels would not endeavor to turn so unexpected a meeting to profit? Luckily, they were ignorant of the fact that the traveler attacked by them on the Alaskan frontier was Count Narkine, a political prisoner escaped from the Iakoutsk fortress, seeking to re-enter Russia by joining an itinerant showman’s troupe.

Had they known it, they surely would have felt no hesitation in making use of the secret, levying blackmail on the Count, or in handing him over to the Russian authorities, in exchange for a reprieve or a pecuniary reward for themselves.

But was there not a possible danger of a mere accident betraying the secret to them, although Cascabel and his wife alone were now acquainted with it?

Meanwhile, Ortik and Kirschef continued to live apart from the troupe, determined though they were to join them, whenever an opportunity to regain their liberty should present itself.

For the present, indeed, and so long as the wintry period of the polar year would last, it was but too evident there was nothing to be attempted. The cold had become so excessive that the damp air exhaled by the lungs turned into snow. Sometimes the thermometer went down as low as forty degrees below zero, centigrade. Even in calm weather it would have been impossible to bear such a temperature. Cornelia and Napoleona never dared venture out of the *Fair Rambler*; indeed, they would have been prevented if they had. How endless they thought those sunless days, or rather those nights, of almost twenty-four hours' duration!

Kayette alone, accustomed to North American winters, was bold enough to face the cold out of doors; and in this she was imitated by the native women. They were seen going about their daily work, clad in reindeer-skin dresses, two hides thick, wrapped up in fur palsks, their feet incased in sealskin boots, and their heads covered with a cap of dogskin. Not even the tips of their noses could be seen, — which was not much to be regretted, it seems.

Mr. Sergius, Cascabel, his two sons, and Clovy, carefully protected by their furs, paid their obligatory visit to Tchou-Tchouk every day; and so did the two Russian sailors, who had been supplied with warm covering.

As to the male population of New Siberia, they boldly sally forth in any weather. They go hunting on the surface of their wide plains, hardened with frost; they quench their thirst with snow, and feed on the flesh of the animals they kill on the way. Their sleds are very light; they are made with the bones, ribs, and jaws of whales, and are set up on sliders on which they get a coating of ice by simply watering them just before starting off. To draw them along they use the reindeer, an animal which is of the greatest service to them in many ways. Their dogs are the Samoyede breed, closely resembling the wolf species, and quite as ferocious as the latter, with long legs and a thick coat of hair, dotted black and white or yellow and brown.

When the Neo-Siberians travel on foot, they put on their long snow-shoes, "or *skis*," as they call them, and with these they swiftly skim over considerable distances, along the straits which separate the various islands of the archipelago, “tracking it” on the tundras or strips of alluvial soil usually formed on the edge of Arctic shores.

The natives of the Liakhov group are very inferior to the Eskimos of Northern America in the art of manufacturing weapons. Bows and arrows alone constitute their whole offensive and defensive arsenal. As to fishing implements, they have harpoons with which they attack the whale, and nets which they spread under the *grundis*, a kind of bottom ice on which seals may be caught.

They likewise use lances and knives when they attack the seals, a mode of warfare attended with no little danger, for these animals are formidable.

But the wild animal which they most dread to meet, or to be attacked by, is the white bear, which the intense-cold of winter and the necessity of getting some kind of food after long days of enforced fasting sometimes drive into the very villages of the archipelago. It must be acknowledged that the savages display real pluck on such occasions; they are never known to run away before the powerful brute, maddened as it is by hunger; they throw themselves upon him, knife in hand, and most of the time they come off victorious.

On several occasions, the Cascabels witnessed encounters of this kind, in which the polar bear, after grievously wounding several men, had to yield to the numerical strength of his foes. The whole tribe then came forth and the village kept a merry holiday. And what a windfall was this stock of bear’s meat, so relished, it would seem, by Siberian stomachs! The best joints naturally found their way to Tchou-Tchouk’s table and into his wooden bowl. As to his very humble subjects, each of them had a small share of what he condescended to leave them. Thence an opportunity to indulge in copious libations and eventually the general intoxication of the villagers, — ”on what?” you will say: well, on a liquor made with the young shoots of the salix and the rhodiola, and the juice of the red whortleberry and the yellow marsh berries, a large supply of which they gather during the few weeks that the mild season lasts.

On the whole, not only is bear-hunting dangerous sport under such circumstances, but the game is scarce; the reindeer’s flesh is the mainstay of the native *cuisine*, and with its blood a soup is made which, it must be confessed, never excited but loathing on the part of our artists.

Should it now be asked how the reindeer manage to live during the winter, it will be sufficient to say that these animals are at no trouble to find vegetable food, even under the thick layer of snow which covers the ground. Besides, enormous provisions of fodder are stored up before the cold sets in, and this alone would be enough for the feeding of the thousands of ruminants contained in the territories of New Siberia.

“Thousands!... And to think that just a score of them would be such a boon to us!” Mr. Cascabel would go on repeating to himself, and he wondered how he would ever replace his lost team.

It seems now opportune to emphasize the fact that the inhabitants of the Liakhov archipelago are not idolatrous only, but extremely superstitious; that they attribute everything to the divinities they have wrought with their own hands, and obey them with the blindest servility. This idolatry is beyond all belief, and the mighty chief Tchou-Tchouk practised his religion with a fanaticism which had no equal but that of his subjects.

Each and every day, Tchou-Tchouk repaired to a sort of temple, or rather sacred place, named the Vorspük, which means the “prayer-grotto.” The divinities, represented by simple wooden posts, gaudily painted over, stood in a row in the inmost recess of a rocky cavern, and before them the natives came and knelt, one after the other. No spirit of intolerance ever prompted them to close the Vorspük to their foreign prisoners; on the contrary, the latter were invited to it; and thus it was that Mr. Sergius and his companions could satisfy their curiosity and examine the gods of these forsaken regions.

On the summit of each post was stuck up the head of some hideous bird, with round, red eyes, formidable, wide-open beaks, and bony crests curved round like horns. The faithful prostrated themselves at the feet of these posts, applied their ears against them, muttered their prayers, and although the gods had never vouched an answer, they retired, fully convinced they had heard the reply from above, — a reply generally in accordance with the secret wish of the petitioner.

When Tchou-Tchouk thought of laying some new tax on his subjects, the cunning chieftain never failed to obtain the celestial approbation; and where was the man among his subjects who would have dared deny what the gods willed?

One day in each week there was a religious ceremony more important than the others, — in this way, that the natives displayed more than ordinary pomp. Let the cold be never so intense, let snow-drifts whiz along the surface of the ground like so many sweeps of a mower’s scythe, no one would stay indoors when Tchou-Tchouk headed the procession to the Vorspük. And will anybody guess how both men and women accoutered themselves for these grand solemnities since the capture of the new prisoners? Why, with the gala dresses of the troupe, of course. The many-colored tights so nobly worn by Mr. Cascabel; Cornelia’s robes, which had once been new; the children’s stage dresses; Clovy’s helmet, with its gorgeous plume; all these were donned by the Siberian worshipers outside their ordinary wearing apparel. Nor had they forgotten the French horn, into which one of them blew as though it were for dear life; the trombone, out of which another drew impossible noises; nor yet the drum or the tambourine; in fact, all the musical apparatus of the showman’s stock added its deafening din to the *éclat* of the ceremony.

It was then Mr. Cascabel thundered against the thieves, the ruffians, who took such liberties with his property, to the great danger of breaking the springs of his trombone, straining his horn, or bursting his drum.

“The wretches! — The wretches!” he would say; and Mr. Sergius himself was powerless to calm him down.

After all, it must be owned, the situation was of a nature to sour one’s temper, so slowly, so wearily did the days and the weeks draw along. And then, what would be the end of this adventure, if it did come to an end?

Still, the time that could not now be devoted to rehearsals, — and heaven knows if Mr. Cascabel expected his artists would be rusty when they reached Perm, — that time was not permitted to slip by unemployed and profitless.

With a view to cause a reaction against low spirits, Mr. Sergius continually strove to interest his friends with his tales or his lessons. As a return, Cascabel had undertaken to teach him a few tricks of legerdemain, “for his own pleasure,” he said; but, in reality, a little proficiency in that way might be of use to Mr. Sergius if he ever had to play the showman’s part in actual practice, the better to deceive the Russian police. As for John, he was busy completing the young Indian’s course of instruction; and she, on her part, strained every nerve to learn to read and write under the guidance of her teacher.

Let them not be charged with egotism, if both accepted the situation without too much grumbling, absorbed as they were in a feeling which leaves room for no other. Mr. Sergius was not an unobservant witness of the intimacy which grew between John and his adopted daughter. Kayette had such a bright intelligence, and John displayed such zeal in developing it. Had fate decreed, then, that this honest fellow, so fond of study, so highly gifted by nature, should never be aught but an itinerant showman, should never rise above the sphere in which he was born? That was the secret of the future; and what future dared they now look forward to, prisoners as they were in the hands of a savage tribe on the utmost confines of the known world?

No sign was there of any change in Tchou-Tchouk’s intentions; a ransom he should have ere he released his captives; and there seemed no likelihood of relief from the outside world. As to the money demanded by the greedy chief, how could they ever manage to get it?

True, the Cascabels possessed a treasure, unknown to themselves. It was young Sander’s nugget, his famous nugget, a priceless treasure in its finder’s eyes. When there was nobody by, he would draw it out of its hiding-place; and how he would gaze on it, and rub it and polish it! Willingly, of course, he would have parted with it to buy off the troupe out of Tchou-Tchouk’s hands, but the latter would never have accepted as ready money a lump of gold under the shape and form of a stone. So, Sander kept to his first idea of waiting till they reached Europe, feeling sure that there he would have no trouble in converting his stone into coin, and compensate his father for the two thousand dollars that had been stolen from him in America!

Nothing could be better, if the journey to Europe could only be accomplished! Unfortunately, even a start was, for the present, out of the question. And this preyed also on the minds of the two miscreants whom ill-luck had thrown in the way of the Cascabels.

One day, — the 23d of January, — Ortik went to the *Fair Rambler* for the very purpose of having "a talk on the matter" with the wagon people, and, above all, ascertaining what they intended doing, in the event of Tchou-Tchouk permitting them to leave Kotelnoi Island.

"Mr. Sergius," he began, "when you left Port Clarence, your intention was to pass the winter in Siberia?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Sergius, "it was agreed we should try to reach some good village and stay there till spring-time. Why do you ask that question, Ortik?"

"Because I should like to know if you still think of taking up the same track, supposing, of course, these cursed savages let us go."

"Not at all; that would be lengthening needlessly a journey which is long enough of itself. It would be better, I think, to make straight for the Russian frontier, and find out one of the passes in the Ural mountains."

"In the northern part of the chain then?"

"Quite so, it being the nearest to where we are now."

"And the wagon," continued Ortik; "would you leave it here?"

Mr. Cascabel had evidently understood that part of the conversation.

“Leave the *Fair Rambler* here!” he exclaimed. “Not a bit of it, if I only can get a team! And I trust, before long — ”

“What, you have an idea?” inquired Mr. Sergius.

“Not the shadow of one, yet! But Cornelia keeps telling me I’ll hit on one, and Cornelia’s word was never belied. An A 1 woman she is, sir, and she knows me, I tell you!”

Cascabel was his own old self again, brimful of trust in his lucky star, and refusing to believe that four Frenchmen and three Russians could not manage to get the better of a Tchou-Tchouk.

Mr. Cascabel’s intention with regard to the *Fair Rambler* was communicated to Ortik.

“But, to take your wagon with you,” said the sailor, who showed great concern on this point, “you must have a set of reindeer.”

“We must.”

“And do you think Tchou-Tchouk will supply you with them?”

“What I think is that Mr. Cascabel will find some plan to make him do so.”

“Then, you will try to make your way to the coast of Siberia across the ice-field?”

“Just so.”

“Well, in that case, sir, you must be away before the ice begins to break, that is, before three months’ time.”

"I am aware of that."

"But, can you do it?"

"Perhaps the natives will consent, in the long run, to let us off."

"I don't believe they will, Mr. Sergius, so long as you have no ransom to give them."

"Unless the fools are compelled to do so!" exclaimed Mr. Cascabel, to whom this conversation had just been translated.

"Compelled! By whom?" inquired John.

"By circumstances!"

"Circumstances, father?"

"Yes, circumstances," replied the veteran showman; "circumstances, you see, that's everything!"

And he scratched his head, and almost tore his hair off, but "not a shadow of an idea," to use his own words, came out of his skull.

"Come, my friends," said Mr. Sergius, "it is essential we should prepare for the event of the natives refusing to restore our liberty. Should we not make an effort to do without their consent, if they will not give it?"

"We shall, sir," answered John. "But then, we must leave the *Fair Rambler* behind."

"Don't talk like that!" sobbed Cascabel. "Don't talk like that! You break my heart!"

“Just think, father!”

“No, I won’t! The *Fair Rambler* is our home! It is the roof under which you might have been born, John! And you would have me leave it at the mercy of those amphibious creatures, those walruses!”

“My dear Cascabel,” said Mr. Sergius, “we shall do all that can be done to induce the natives to set us free. But, as there seems to be every probability of their refusal, running away is our only resource; and if ever we succeed in eluding the watchfulness of our guardians, we can do so only at the loss of — ”

“The home of the Cascabel family!” cried Cascabel. And if those words had contained as many a’s as they had consonants, they could not have passed with greater forte through his trembling lips.

“Father,” suggested John, “there might be one other way, perhaps — ”

“What is it?”

“Why might not one of us try to make his escape to the continent, and tell the Russian authorities? I am willing to start right away, Mr. Sergius.”

“No such thing,” interrupted Cascabel.

“No, don’t do that!” added Ortik, in a hesitating way, when he was told John’s proposal.

Mr. Cascabel and the sailor happened to agree on this point; but if the former thought of nothing but the danger Count Narkine would run, should he have any dealings with the Russian police, it was for his own sake the latter was desirous not to find himself in the presence of the authorities.

As to Mr. Sergius, he took another view of John's suggestion and said:

"Well do I recognize you by your acts, my brave-hearted fellow, and I thank you for thus offering to devote yourself for us, but your devotion would be fruitless. At the present time, in the middle of this Arctic winter, venturing across the ice-field to cover the three hundred miles which separate this island from the continent would be folly! You would inevitably perish in the attempt, my poor John! No, my friends, let us not part from each other; and if, in some way or another, we manage to get away from the Liakhovs, let us go all together!"

"That's what I call sensible advice!" added Cascabel; "and John must promise me to do nothing in that way without my permission."

"I promise you, father."

"And when I say we shall go all together," continued Mr. Sergius, turning to Ortik, "I mean that Kirschef and you will both follow us. We shall not leave you in the hands of the natives."

"I thank you, sir," answered Ortik. "Kirschef and I will be of some use to you during the journey through Siberia. If, for the present, there is nothing to be done, we must make sure and be ready before the ice breaks up, as soon as the great cold ceases."

This last reminder having been given, Ortik withdrew.

"Yes," Mr. Sergius continued, "we must be ready — "

"Be ready we shall," interrupted Cascabel; "but how? May the wolf gobble me up if I know!"

And, sure enough, how to take leave of Tchou-Tchouk, with or without his consent, that was the all-absorbing question on the order of the day. Eluding the vigilance of the natives seemed, to say the least, very difficult. Coaxing the chief to better terms could hardly be thought of. There was then but one alternative: duping him. Cæsar Cascabel said so twenty times a day; not a moment did he cease puzzling his brain in that direction; he would often “take his head to pieces,” as he said, and examine every nook and corner of it; and still, the end of January came and his search had yielded nothing yet.

CHAPTER VII.

A GOOD TRICK OF MR. CASCABEL'S.

TERRIBLE indeed was the beginning of February, a month when the mercury frequently freezes in the thermometer. Of course, it was nothing yet like the temperature of the interstellar space, like those two hundred and seventy-three degrees below zero, which immobilize the molecules of bodies and constitute the absolute solid state.

Still, one might readily have imagined that the molecules in the air no longer glided over each other, that the atmosphere was solidified: the air they breathed burnt like fire. The fall of the thermometrical column was such that the occupants of the *Fair Rambler* were compelled to remain indoors permanently. The sky was spotless; so bright and clear the constellations shone, it seemed as though the eye pierced through the farthest depths of the celestial canopy. As to the light of day, about noon-time it was but a palish mingling of the morning and the evening twilight.

This notwithstanding, the natives still braved the weather in the open air. But what precautions they took to save their feet, their hands, their noses, from sudden freezing! They were veritable perambulating bundles of furs. And what necessity drove them out of their dens under such climatic conditions? The will of their sovereign. Was it not imperative to see that the prisoners, who could not now pay him their daily visit, did not leave his domain?

To any ordinary creature this would have seemed altogether superfluous in such weather.

“Good-evening to you, you amphibious brutes!” Mr. Cascabel would say to them, as he looked at them through his little panes of glass, after removing the icicles from their internal surface. Then he would add: “Really, those things must have walrus blood in their veins!... Why, there they come and go where respectable people would be frozen stark and stiff in five minutes!”

Within the *Fair Rambler*, which was hermetically closed, the temperature was maintained at a bearable degree. The heat from the kitchen stove, — in which they burnt fossil wood, so as to spare their stock of paraffine oil — permeated all the little rooms. These, indeed, had to be ventilated from time to time. But scarcely was the front door opened when every liquid substance inside the wagon froze instantaneously. There was not less than forty degrees’ difference between the inside and the outside temperature, — a fact that Mr. Sergius could have ascertained, had not the thermometers been stolen by the natives.

By the end of the second week in February the temperature showed a slight tendency to rise. The wind having turned to the south, the snow again began to drift over this part of New Siberia with unequaled fury. Had not the *Fair Rambler* been sheltered by high mounds, it could not have withstood the squall; buried, however, as it was, deeper than the height of its wheels in the snow, it was now in perfect safety.

True, there were a few fitful returns of cold, which caused sudden changes in the state of the atmosphere; still, about the middle of the month the average thermometric record had gone up to some twenty degrees below zero centigrade.

Mr. Sergius, Mr. Cascabel, John, Sander and Clovy ventured accordingly to take a little outing, while using the utmost caution to anticipate the evil effects of too abrupt a transition. From the hygienic point of view, this was the greatest danger they were exposed to.

All the surroundings of the encampment had entirely disappeared under one uniform white carpet, and it was impossible to recognize any of the inequalities of the ground; nor was this for want of light, for, during two hours, the southern horizon was brightened up with a kind of pale light which was, henceforth, going to increase as the spring solstice would draw nearer. It then became possible to enjoy a few walks, and from the very first, by special command of Tchou-Tchouk, a visit had to be paid him.

There was no change in the intentions of the stubborn native. On the contrary, the prisoners were now warned that they should procure a ransom of three thousand roubles within the shortest possible delay, or Tchou-Tchouk would see what was best to be done.

“You abominable wretch!” said Cascabel to him in that pure French vernacular that his majesty did not understand. “You treble brute! — You king of fools!”

All these epithets, however applicable to the sovereign of the Liakhovs, did not improve the state of things. And a very serious feature in the case was that Tchou-Tchouk now threatened vigorous measures.

It was at this time that, under the sway of pent-up rage, Mr. Cascabel was struck with a truly splendid idea.

“By all the walruses of the Liakhovs!” he exclaimed, one fine morning, “if that trick, that jolly old trick, could only succeed! — and why wouldn’t it? — with such fools!”

But although these words had escaped his lips, Mr. Cascabel deemed it advisable to keep his secret to himself. Not a word of it did he tell anybody, not even Mr. Sergius, not even Cornelia.

It appears, however, that one of the conditions essential to the success of his project was his being able to speak distinctly the Russian dialect used by the tribes of northern Siberia. So that, while Kayette was improving her acquaintance with French under the teaching of her friend John, Mr. Cascabel suddenly undertook to improve his smattering of Russian under the direction of his friend Sergius. And where could he have found a more devoted teacher?

And so, on the 16th of February, whilst taking an airing round the *Fair Rambler*, he acquainted the latter with his desire to learn the language more thoroughly.

“You see,” he said, “as we are going to Russia, it may be very useful to me to speak Russian; and I shall feel quite at home while we stay at Perm and Nijni.”

“Quite so, my dear Cascabel,” replied Mr. Sergius. “Still, with what you already know of our language, you could almost get along, even now.”

“No, Mr. Sergius, not at all. If I manage to make out what is said to me at present, I am utterly unable to make myself understood, and that is just what I should like to get at.”

“As you like.”

“And, besides, Mr. Sergius, it will kill time for you.”

On the whole, there was nothing to wonder at in Cascabel's proposal, and no one did wonder at it.

And behold him plowing away at his Russian with Mr. Sergius, keeping at it several hours a day, less, it would seem, with regard to the grammar of the language than its pronunciation. This was apparently what he specially aimed at.

Now, if Russians learn to speak French with great ease, and without keeping any of their own accent, it is much harder for French people to speak the Russian language. Hence it were difficult to realize all the care Mr. Cascabel bestowed on his study, all the efforts of articulation he made, and the powerful utterances with which he made the *Fair Rambler* resound, in order to acquire a perfect pronunciation of every word he learnt.

And really, thanks to his natural aptitude for languages, he made such remarkable progress as to astonish even his staff.

When the lesson was over, away he went on the beach, and there, where he was sure not to be heard by anybody, he practised a certain number of sentences in a stentorian tone of voice, uttering them on different keys, and rolling his *r*'s after Russian style. And God knows if, in the course of his nomadic career, he had got into the habit of this full-mouthed oratory.

Sometimes he would meet Ortik and Kirschef, and as neither of them knew a word of French, he conversed with them in their own tongue, thus ascertaining that he was beginning to make himself understood.

These men now came to the *Fair Rambler* more frequently; and Kayette, who was always startled by the sound of Kirschef's voice, sought in vain to recollect on what occasion she could have heard it.

Between Ortik and Mr. Sergius the conversation, which Cascabel was now able to join, turned invariably on the possibility of leaving the island, and nothing practical could be devised.

“There may be one opportunity that we have not thought of yet, and that may present itself,” said Ortik one day.

“What is it?” inquired Mr. Sergius.

“When the polar sea opens again,” said the sailor, “it sometimes happens that whalers pass within sight of the Liakhov archipelago. If such luck happened us, might we not make signals to them and induce them to come along shore?”

“That would be exposing the crew to become Tchou-Tchouk’s prisoners, like ourselves, and would not in any way help us to escape,” answered Mr. Sergius; “for the crew would not be numerous enough and would certainly fall a prey to the natives.”

“Besides,” added Cascabel, “the sea will not be free for three or four months more, and I’ll never have patience till then!”

Then he added, after a moment’s thought:

“And again, if ever we could get on board a whaler, even with that good old Tchou-Tchouk’s consent, we should leave the *Fair Rambler* behind.”

“That is a parting we shall probably find it difficult to avoid,” observed Mr. Sergius.

“Probably?” said Cascabel. “Nonsense!”

"Could it be you have found something?"

"Well, well — "

And Mr. Cascabel said no more. But what a smile wandered on his lips! What a flash of light brightened up his countenance!

Cornelia no sooner heard of her husband's enigmatic reply than she said:

"Cæsar has undoubtedly made out something. What it is I don't know. But I am sure he has. After all, from such a man, it is no wonder!"

"Father has got more brains than Mr. Tchou-Tchouk!" added little Napoleona.

"Did you notice," observed Sander, "that father has lately got into the habit of calling him 'good old fellow'? Quite a little pet name — "

"Unless it be just the opposite!" suggested Clovy.

And in the mean time, Mr. Cascabel — like Demosthenes haranguing the Grecian billows — trained his vocal organs against the roar of the elements on the shore of the frozen sea.

During the second fortnight in February the temperature continued to rise uniformly; the wind kept in the south; the currents spreading through the atmosphere were sensibly less cold. There was therefore no time to be lost.

After having to battle with the breaking up of the Behring ice-field, thanks to the late coming of winter, it would be incredible ill-luck to be now exposed to similar dangers through the early advent of spring.

In a word, if Cascabel had made a hit, if he did induce Tchou-Tchouk to let him go with his staff and material, this should take place while the ice-field was still one solid mass between the archipelago and the coast of Siberia. The ice-field being crossed, the *Fair Rambler* could then, with a good team of reindeer, cover the first part of her journey with comparative ease, and no possible breaking up of frozen seas would now trouble the travelers.

“Say, my dear Cascabel,” Mr. Sergius asked, one day. “you really do hope that your old rascally Tchou-Tchouk will supply you with the reindeer you need to draw the wagon to the continent?”

“Mr. Sergius,” said Cascabel with a very serious look, “Tchou-Tchouk is not an old rascal! He is, in truth, a good fellow, an excellent fellow. Now, if he allows us to depart, he will permit us to take the *Fair Rambler* with us, and if he shows us such kindness, he cannot do less than offering us a score of reindeer, fifty, a hundred, a thousand reindeer, if I demand them!”

“You have a hold of him, then?”

“Have I? — Just as if I held the tip of his nose between my fingers, Mr. Sergius! And when I catch hold, I catch hold, I do!”

Cæser’s attitude was that of a man who is sure of himself, his smile that of self-satisfaction. On this occasion, he even went so far as placing the tip of his right hand to his lips and sending a flying kiss in the direction of Tchou-Tchouk’s residence. But, feeling that he wished to keep his own counsels in this matter, Mr. Sergius had sufficient tact and good taste not to inquire further.

And now, owing to the return of a milder temperature, Tchou-Tchouk’s subjects were resuming their habitual occupations, their bird catching and seal hunting. At the same time, the religious ceremonies, momentarily suspended during the period of intense cold, brought back the faithful to the grotto of the idols.

It was on the Friday in each week that the tribe assembled in largest number and with greatest pomp. Friday, it seems, is the Neo-Siberian Sunday. Now, on this Friday, the 29th, — 1868 was leap-year, — a general procession of all the natives was to take place.

The previous evening, at bed-time, Mr. Cascabel simply said:

“To-morrow, let everybody be ready for the Vorspük ceremony; we shall all accompany our friend Tchou-Tchouk.”

“What, Cæsar,” said Cornelia, “you want us to — ”

“I do!”

What could be the meaning of so imperative a recommendation? Did Cascabel hope to win the good graces of the sovereign of these isles by taking part in his superstitious worship? No doubt Tchou-Tchouk would have been pleased to see his prisoners paying their homage to the divinities of the country. But adoring them, embracing the religion of the natives, was quite another thing, and it was most unlikely that Mr. Cascabel would go the length of apostacy for the sake of alluring His Neo-Siberian Majesty. Fie on the very thought!

Be that as it might, next morning at break of day the whole tribe was on foot. Glorious weather; a temperature marking barely ten degrees below zero; and as much as four to five hours’ daylight in perspective, with a little foretaste of sunlight peeping yonder over the horizon.

The inhabitants had come out of their mole-hills. Men, women, children, old people had put on their Friday-best sealskin cloaks and reindeer palsks. They presented an unequaled show of white and black furs, of hats embroidered with imitation pearls, of variegated breastplates, of leather strips fastened tight around their heads, ear-rings, bracelets, walrus-bone jewels hanging from their noses, etc.

Nor had all this appeared sufficient for so solemn an occasion. For some of the notables of the tribe had thought fit to adorn themselves with greater splendor still, i.e. with the various objects stolen out of the *Fair Rambler*.

And, sure enough, not to speak of the showman’s tinsel trumpery that they had decked themselves with, of the clown’s hats and the dime-museum helmets they had put on their heads, some wore on a string slung over their shoulders the steel rings used for juggling exercises, others had hung on their belts a row of wooden balls and dumb-bells, finally the great chief Tchou-Tchouk displayed a barometer on his chest as though it were the insignia of a new order, created by the sovereigns of New Siberia.

Needless to say the full orchestra of the troupe was there, the horn vying with the trombone, the tambourine endeavoring to drown the big drum, all mingling in frightful discord.

Cornelia was no less enraged than her children at the deafening concert of these artists, to whom “walruses could have given points,” as Clovy said.

Well, incredible as it may seem, Mr. Cascabel positively smiled at the barbarians; he complimented them, hurrahed and clapped his hands, shouted “Bravo! bravo!” and would keep on repeating:

“Really, these people surprise me! They are particularly gifted for music! If they’ll only accept engagements in my troupe I guarantee them enormous success at the Perm fair and at St. Cloud afterwards.”

Meanwhile, in the middle of this tumult, the procession was going through the village on its way to the sacred place, where the idols awaited the homage of their faithful ones. Tchou-Tchouk walked at their head. Immediately behind him came Mr. Sergius and Mr. Cascabel, then the latter’s family and the two Russian sailors, escorted by the whole population of Tourkef.

The cortege soon stopped before the rocky den in which stood the gods, wrapped up in gorgeous furs and adorned with paintings that had been newly “touched up” for the occasion.

Then Tchou-Tchouk entered the Vorspük, his hands raised heavenward, and after bowing his head three times, he squatted on a carpet of reindeer skins, spread on the ground. Such was the way to kneel down in that country.

Mr. Sergius and his companions hastened to imitate the sovereign, and the whole crowd fell to the ground behind them.

After all had become silent, Tchou-Tchouk drawled out a few words half chanted, half spoken, to the three idols.

Suddenly a voice is heard in answer to his invocation, a distinct, powerful voice, coming from the inner part of the cavern.

Wonder of wonders! The voice comes out of the beak of one of the divinities, and this is what it says in Russian:

“Ani sviati, êti innostrantzi, katori ote zapada prichli! Zatchéme ti ikhe podirjaïche?”

Which means:

“These strangers, who have come from the West, are sacred! Why do you detain them?”

At these words, distinctly heard by all the worshipers, there was general stupefaction.

It was the first time that the gods of New Siberia condescended to speak to their faithful.

Then, a second voice, in a tone of command, issues from the beak of the idol on the left, and thunders out:

“Ja tibié prikajou élote arrestantof otpoustite. Tvoïe narode doljne dlia ikhe same balchoïe vajestvo imiète i nime addate vcié vieschtchi katori ou ikhe bouili vziati. Ja tibié prikajou ou siberskoïé beregou ikhe liokschè vosvratitcia.”

Three sentences addressed to Tchou-Tchouk, and which may be translated:

“You are commanded to set these prisoners free! Your subjects are commanded to show them every kindness and to restore to them all the objects that have been stolen from them. All are ordered to help them to reach the coast of Siberia!”

This time the stupefaction of the audience turned to terror. Tchou-Tchouk had half-risen on his trembling knees, his eyes gazing fixedly before him, his mouth gaping, the fingers of his hands stretched widely apart, in a paroxysm of fright. The natives, who had also assumed a semi-standing position, hesitated between kissing mother earth once more and taking to their heels.

At last, the third divinity, who stood in the middle, begins to speak in its turn. But lo, how terrible, how wrathful and threatening is its voice!

Its words also are aimed directly at His Neo-Siberian Majesty:

“Jesle ti take niè sdièlèle élote toje same diène, kakda èti sviati tchéloviéki boudoute jelaïte tchorte s’tvoié oblacte!”

That is to say:

“If this be not done on the day when these sacred people will desire it, let your tribe be vowed to celestial wrath!”

By this time, both the king and his subjects were panting with affright, and lay almost motionless on the soil, while Mr. Cascabel, raising his two arms toward the idols in token of gratitude, thanked them loudly for their divine intervention on his behalf.

And meanwhile his companions made all possible efforts to refrain from bursting out with laughter.

A simple trick of ventriloquism was the means devised by our genius, our truly unsurpassed artist, to bring his “good, honest fellow” Tchou-Tchouk, to reason.

What more was needed to dupe the superstitious natives?

“The strangers who have come from the West,” — (what a happy expression Mr. Cascabel had hit upon), — ”the strangers who have come from the West are sacred! Why does Tchou-Tchouk detain them?”

He surely would do so no longer! He would let them go as soon as they liked, and the natives would show all sorts of kindness to travelers so visibly protected by heaven!

And while Ortik and Kirschef, who knew nothing of Mr. Cascabel’s talents as a ventriloquist, did not conceal their real bewilderment, Clovy repeated:

“What a genius my boss is! What brains he has got! What a man, unless — ”

“Unless he be a god!” exclaimed Cornelia, bowing low before her husband.

The trick had been played, and it proved a thorough success, thanks to the unheard-of credulity of the Neo-Siberian tribes. This credulity had been judiciously observed by Cascabel, and that was what had suggested to him the thought of turning his ventriloquial powers to profit for the general cause.

It is useless to add that his companions and he were all led back to their encampment with all the honors due to “sacred” men. Tchou-Tchouk, half through fear, half through respect, was at a loss to know what salutations to make to them, what compliments to pay them. The Cascabels and the Kotelnoi idols were well-nigh being merged into one in his mind.

And, in truth, how could these Tourkef people, sunk in such ignorance as they were, have imagined they were the dupes of a juggler? Not a doubt of it, it was the divinities in the Vorspük that had sent forth those dreadful utterances.

It was out of their beaks, hitherto silent, that those injunctions in very plain Russian had come. And, besides, had there not been a precedent? Had not Jako, the parrot, spoken too? Had not the natives heard in amazement the words that escaped from his beak? Well, what a bird had done, why might not bird-headed gods do it also?

From this day forward, Mr. Sergius, Cæsar Cascabel, and his family, not to forget the two sailors who were claimed as countrymen, could consider themselves as free. The winter season was now far advanced and the temperature was gradually becoming bearable. It was therefore resolved that no time should be lost in leaving the Liakhov Islands. Not that there was any reason to fear a change in the intentions of the natives. They were too thoroughly “bewitched” for that.

Mr. Cascabel was now on the best terms with his “friend Chicky-Chicky,” who would willingly have blacked his boots for him, if he had been asked. Of course “the good honest fellow” had seen to the immediate restitution of all the things stolen out of the *Fair Rambler*. He himself, on bended knees, had returned to Cæsar Cascabel the barometer he wore around his neck, and the “sacred man” had vouched to hold his hand for the religious kiss that Tchou-Tchouk deposited on it. Did he not consider that hand capable of hurling forth thunder and lightning and letting loose the billows and the winds?

In short, by the 8th of March, the preparations for the departure of the whilom prisoners were completed. Mr. Cascabel having asked for twenty reindeer, Tchou-Tchouk had straightway offered him a hundred, which his new friend declined with thanks, while adhering to his first request. All he asked for, in addition, was a stock of fodder sufficient for his team until they had crossed the ice-field.

Early on that day, the “sacred people” took leave of the natives of Tourkef. The whole tribe had collected to be present at their departure and wish them a safe journey.

“Dear Chicky-Chicky” was there, in the foremost rank, trembling with genuine excitement. Mr. Cascabel advanced toward him and giving him a gentle tap on his chest, simply said to him in French:

“Ta-ta, old brute!”

That familiar tap was destined to raise His Majesty still higher in the estimation of his subjects.

Ten days later, on the 18th of March, after journeying without danger or fatigue over the ice-field which joined Liakhov Archipelago to the Siberian coast, the occupants of the *Fair Rambler* reached the continent, at the mouth of the Lena.

After so many incidents and accidents, so many dangers and adventures since their departure from Port Clarence, Mr. Sergius and his friends had at last set foot on the mainland of Asia.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COUNTRY OF THE IAKOUTS.

THE original itinerary, such as it was to be followed from the Behring Strait to the European frontier, had been necessarily modified by the long drift and the subsequent landing at the archipelago of New Siberia.

Crossing Asiatic Russia in its southern part was now out of the question. Besides, the fine season would presently improve the condition of the climate, and there would be no need for the projected winter quarters in a Siberian village. Indeed, it may be said that the issue of the recent events had been as favorable as wonderful.

Now the problem to be studied was the direction to be taken, so as to reach the Ural frontier between Russia in Europe and Russia in Asia, in the shortest possible time. And that question Mr. Sergius had determined to solve before leaving the encampment they had just made on the coast.

The weather was cahn and clear. Now that the solistitial period was at its full, daylight lasted for more than eleven hours, and was, in a kind of way, still further prolonged by the twilight, which keeps on for a considerable time in the seventieth parallel.

The little caravan was now composed of ten persons. Kirschef and Ortik having joined it, as has been remarked. Although there was no very intimate sympathy between them and their companions, the two Russian sailors were among the proteges of the *Fair Rambler*; they had their place around the common table; it was even agreed they should sleep inside the wagon so long as the temperature would not permit them to sleep in the open air.

For the mean temperature still kept within a few degrees below zero, — a fact it was easy to ascertain since the “amiable Chicky-Chicky” had restored the thermometer to its legitimate owner. The ground, as far as the eye could reach, was entirely buried under an immense winding-sheet, and would remain so until the April sun would shine upon it. On this hardened snow, as well as on the grassy plains of the steppes, the team of reindeer would be well able to draw the heavy wagon along.

Thus far the provision of fodder so graciously supplied by the Kotelnoi natives had been amply sufficient for the cattle; henceforth, what with the moss that they root out from under the snow, what with the leaves of the shrubs scattered here and there on the soil of Siberia, they would provide their own food themselves. Nor should we omit to put it on record, that during the trip across the ice-field. the new team had shown great docility, and Clovy had experienced no difficulty in driving them.

The travelers’ food was equally assured, thanks to the stock of preserves, flour, grease, rice, tea, biscuits, and brandy, which was still safe in the *Fair Rambler*. Cornelia had, moreover, at her disposal, a certain quantity of native-made butter, packed in small boxes of birch-wood, which friend Chicky-Chicky had presented to friend Cascabel; all they needed to renew was their provision of paraffine oil, and that could be done at the first village they came to. Besides, fresh game would soon rise on their track, and many a time would Mr. Sergius and John have an opportunity to utilize their skill, to the profit of the kitchen.

The help of the two Russian sailors was also to be taken into account. They had stated that the northern regions of Siberia were partly familiar to them, and there was every appearance of their proving useful guides.

This, indeed, was the subject of the conversation which was held in the encampment at the above date.

“As you have gone through this country before,” said Mr. Sergius to Ortik, “you are going to direct us — ”

“It is the least I might do,” hastily replied Ortik; “seeing that it is thanks to Mr. Cascabel we are free men again.”

“Thanks to me?” exclaimed Cascabel. “Not a bit, but thanks to nature enabling my vocal apparatus to take excursion trips up and down my internal organization.”

“Ortik,” continued Mr. Sergius, “what direction do you advise us to take when we leave the bay of the Lena?”

“The shortest cut, if you please, Mr. Sergius. If it is a disadvantage to give a wide berth to the large towns in the more southerly districts, we shall feel at least that we are making straight for the Ural chain. Besides, there are any number of villages on the way in which you can renew your provisions, or even make a stay, if that is necessary.”

“What would be the use of that?” asked Cascabel. “We have no business stopping in villages. The great point is to lose no time and push on ahead as fast as we can. The country is not a dangerous one to go through, I guess?”

“Not at all,” answered Ortik.

“Besides, we are in sufficient force, and woe betide the wretches who would attack our *Fair Rambler*! They would have cause to be sorry for it!”

“Be easy about that, Mr. Cascabel,” remarked Kirschef. “There is nothing to be feared.”

It may have been noticed that this Kirschef spoke but seldom. An unsociable fellow, sullen and taciturn, he usually let his companion “do the talking business.” Ortik was evidently gifted with more intelligence than he, indeed with more real intelligence, as Mr. Sergius had remarked on several occasions.

On the whole, the itinerary proposed by Ortik was such as to suit everybody. Avoiding the important towns, where they might fall in with military posts, was a suggestion which recommended itself to Count Narkine, at the same time as it was particularly agreeable to the two would-be sailors.

The general plan once adopted in principle, they had only to examine the various provinces through which they should strike obliquely, between the Lena and the Urals.

John, therefore, produced the map of Northern Siberia; Mr. Sergius made a careful study of those parts where the Siberian rivers are rather an obstacle than a help to travelers westward; and this is what was agreed upon:

To cross the Iakout district, where villages are few and far between, in a southwesterly direction.

To pass thus from the basin of the Lena to that of the Anabara, and thence to those of the Khatanga, the Ienisei, and the Obi, say a distance of some two thousand two hundred miles.

To journey on through the basin of the Obi to the Ural Mountains, the natural frontier of Russia in Europe, a shorter trip of less than four hundred miles.

Lastly, to continue southwest for another three hundred miles, and thus reach Perm.

This meant, in round numbers, three thousand miles.

Should they experience no delay along the road, should there be no obligatory stay in any of the villages, this distance could be covered under four months. From twenty to twenty-five miles a day was not too much to expect from the team, and under such conditions, the *Fair Rambler* would be at Perm, and afterwards at Nijni, by the middle of July, just at the time when the famous fair would be at its highest.

“Will you come with us right up to Perm?” asked Mr. Sergius, turning to Ortik.

“It is not likely,” answered the sailor. “After crossing the frontier, my idea would be to strike out for St. Petersburg, and from there make my way to Riga.”

“That’s all right,” remarked Mr. Cascabel. “But let us get to the frontier first.”

It had been previously resolved that they would halt for “a good twenty-four hours,” as soon as they set foot on the continent. Such a halt was fully justified by their rapid transit across the ice-field, and so the whole of that day was given to rest.

The Lena throws itself into the gulf of that name through a zig-zag network of mouths, separated by a multitude of channels and creeks.

The waters poured into the Arctic Sea by this beautiful river have been gathered from a number of tributaries over a distance of 4500 miles. Its basin is considered as measuring no less than a hundred and five millions of hectares.

The map having been thoroughly examined, Mr. Sergius deemed it best that they should follow, at first, the coast line of the bay, so as to avoid the many channel-mouths of the Lena. Alihough the waters were still frozen, it would have been unwise to venture in such a maze. A chaos of huge blocks had been accumulated there by winter, and picturesque as were the veritable icebergs with which they were overtopped, they would have been none the less difficult to journey through.

Beyond the bay, on the contrary, lay the boundless steppe, hardly relieved here and there by the merest rise on its surface; here, the journey would be accomplished with ease.

No doubt of it, Ortik and Kirschef must have been frequently through these countries before. Their companions had remarked it more than once since they had left their prison quarters. These two sailors were quite expert hands at organizing an encampment, and at constructing a good ice-hut in case of need. They knew, as well as the native fishermen along the coast, how to cause the absorption of the dampness contained in their clothing by burying them under the snow; they were never at loss to distinguish between the blocks produced by the freezing of salt water and those due to the congealing of soft water; in fine, they seemed to have on their fingers’ ends all those “tips and points” familiar to Arctic travelers.

That evening, after supper, the conversation, bearing not unnaturally on the geography of the north of Siberia, led Ortik to relate how himself and Kirschef had come through these parts.

“How is it,” asked Mr. Sergius, “that you sailors should have tramped through this country?”

“Mr. Sergius,” he replied, “two years ago, Kirschef. half a score of sailors, and myself, were at Arkhangel, waiting to get aboard some whaler, when we were hired to go to the relief of a ship that was in distress among the icebergs, north of the mouth of the Lena. Well, it is on our way from Arkhangel to this bay that we followed the northern coast of Siberia. When we reached the *Seraski*, we managed to set her afloat again, and we remained aboard for the fishing season. But, as I told you, she was wrecked that same season, and out of the whole crew, Kirschef and I were the only survivors. It was then we were driven by the storm on to the Liakhov Islands, where you found us.”

“And you were never in the Alaskan provinces?” inquired Kayette, who, it will be remembered, spoke and understood Russian.

“Alaska?” said Ortik. “That’s a country in America, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Sergius. “It lies in the northwest of the New World, it is Kayette’s native country. Did your fishing excursions ever take you in that direction?”

“Don’t know that part at all,” replied Ortik, in the most natural tone of voice.

“We never went beyond the Strait of Behring,” added Kirschef.

Once again the latter’s voice produced its usual effect on the young woman, though she was utterly unable to recollect where she could have heard it. In any case, it could only have been in Alaska, since she had never been out of the country before.

However, after so explicit a reply from Ortik and Kirschef, Kayette, with that reserve natural to those of her race, asked no other question. But none the less, a prejudice — nay, an instinctive mistrust, toward the two sailors — remained fixed in her mind.

During this twenty-four hours’ halt, the reindeer had been able to take all the rest they needed. Fettered though they were, they could go about, in the neighborhood of the encampment, and had been busy nibbling the shrubs and unearthing the mosses.

On the 20th of March, the little caravan set out at eight o’clock in the morning. The weather was bright and clear, the wind blowing from the northeast. The reindeer had been yoked four abreast, by means of a well-devised system of traces. They thus proceeded in four rows, guided on one side by Ortik and on the other by Clovy.

For six days they journeyed on without any occurrence worthy of mention. The most of the time, Mr. Sergius and Cascabel, John and Sander, went on foot throughout the whole day, and, now and then, Cornelia, Napoleona, and Kayette joined them, when no home duty kept them indoors.

Each forenoon, the *Fair Rambler* covered a *koes*, a Siberian measure of distance equivalent to twenty versts, say about eight miles. In the afternoon, its record was about the same, which made up five good leagues per day.

The 29th, after crossing on the ice the little river Olenck, Mr. Sergius and his companions reached the village of Maksimova, forty-two leagues southwest of the gulf of Lena.

There was no harm in Mr. Sergius stopping in this village, away in the extreme corner of the northern steppe. There was no Captain-Governor, no military post occupied by Cossacks; no cause of fear for Count Narkine's safety.

They were in the heart of the Iakout country, and the Cascabel party met with a kindly welcome at the hands of the inhabitants of Maksimova.

This country, hilly and wooded in the east and south. offers in the north nothing but vast level plains, enlivened here and there by a few clumps of trees, whose green foliage would soon be developed by the warm season. The plains produce an enormous quantity of hay, this being due to the fact that, while winter is very cold in hyperborean Siberia, the temperature is excessive during the summer months.

Here thrives a population of a hundred thousand Iakouts, who keep up the practices of the Russian rite. A religious, hospitable, moral people, they are grateful to Providence for the gifts they receive from her, and full of resignation when her hand weighs heavy upon them.

Along the road from Lena Bay to this village, a certain number of Siberian nomads had been met. They were strongly built men, of average height, flat-faced, dark-eyed, with thick heads of hair and no beard. The same types were found at Maksimova; their intelligence, their peaceful, sociable habits, and their industry, struck the visitors.

Those of the Iakouts who lead a nomadic life, always on horseback and always fully armed, are the owners of the numerous flocks scattered over the steppe. Those who live in the sedentary homes of the hamlets and villages are particularly given to fishing, and “make a living” out of the well-stocked waters of the thousand streams that the big river absorbs on its way to the sea.

However, gifted though they be with so many public and private virtues, they are too ready, it must be confessed, to make an excessive use of tobacco, and — what is of more consequence — of brandy and other spirituous liquors.

“To a certain extent they are excusable,” observed John. “For three whole months they have nothing but water to drink, and the bark of the pine tree to eat.”

While the nomads inhabit “yourts,” a kind of cone-shaped tent, made of some white woven stuff, the sedentary tribes occupy wooden houses, constructed according to the taste and the requirements of each one. These houses are kept with care; the slope of the roofs is very steep, and thus aids the melting of the snow under the rays of the April sun.

Hence, this village of Maksimova has quite a smiling appearance. The men are of a pleasant type; their countenance is open, they look straight in one’s eyes, and their physiognomy is not devoid of a certain air of pride. The women seem graceful and rather pretty, though tattooed. Very reserved in their ways and habits, they would never let themselves be seen bareheaded or barefooted.

The party was cordially received by the Iakout chiefs, the *kinoes*, as they are styled, and by the elders, or *starsynas*, that is, the notables of the place.

Each of them would fain have given the newcomers free board and lodging; but, while thanking them for their kindness, Cornelia would hear of no other than money transactions, and among other things she gladly purchased a provision of oil, her stock of which was no longer equal to the possible demands of her culinary department.

On this occasion, of course, as on every other, the *Fair Rambler* had produced its usual effect. Never had a showman's wagon been seen in this country. Many were the visits paid to it by natives of both sexes, and there was no cause to regret having granted them the privilege. In this province, indeed, thieving is very uncommon, even from strangers. And should it occur, immediate punishment overtakes the offender. As soon as convicted, he is scourged before the public; then after the physical chastisement comes the moral punishment; branded for the remainder of his life with the stain of his guilt, the culprit is deprived of all civil rights and can never again recover the title of "honest man."

On the 3d of April, our travelers stood on the banks of the Oden, a small river which throws itself into the Gulf of Anabara after a course of a hundred and fifty miles.

The weather, hitherto very favorable, began to show signs of a change. Presently, a heavy fall of rain occurred. The first effect of which was to begin the melting of the snow. It lasted for a whole week, during which the wagon had to sludge its way through mire and dangerous swamps whenever it had to pass through marshy localities. Thus did spring herald itself in this high latitude, with a temperature averaging two or three degrees above zero.

This stage occasioned great fatigue to our wayfarers. But they had every reason to congratulate themselves on the co-operation of the two Russian sailors, who proved as devoted as truly useful.

On the 8th following, the *Fair Rambler* had reached the right bank of the river Anabara, some forty leagues from Maksimova.

They were still in time to cross the stream on the ice, although the field had commenced to break lower down. They could even from this place hear the noise of the blocks rumbling away toward the gulf; one week later, they would have had to seek a practicable ford, — which would have been no easy task, for the waters rise very rapidly with the melting of the snows.

Already the steppe, grown green once more, was getting carpeted with a crop of fresh grass very welcome to the team. The shrubs were budding. Before three weeks, the first leaflets would have burst out of their little cradles, along the stems. Nature was restoring new life, too, to the poor skeletons of the trees, that had been reduced to the state of dried wood by the cold of winter. Here and there, a few groves of birches and larch trees bowed their heads more readily under the softened breath of the breeze. All this hyperborean vegetation was reviving in the heat of the sun.

The provinces of Siberia in Asia are all the less desert, according as they are farther removed from the coast. Sometimes our troupe would meet a collector, on his way to gather the tax from village to village. They would stop and exchange a few words with the itinerant government official. He generally was not slow to accept the glass of vodka that was offered him; and then, with a hearty “safe home!” each party would go on its way.

One particular day the *Fair Rambler* fell in with a “convoy” of prisoners. The unfortunate wretches, sentenced to the salt-boiling establishments, were being led to the eastern confines of Siberia, and their Cossack escort spared them no evil treatment. Needless to say that Mr. Sergius’s presence gave rise to no comment on the part of the commander of the escort; but

Kayette, always suspicious of the Russian sailors, thought she noticed that they were anxious not to attract the attention of the Cossacks.

On the 19th of April, the wagon halted on the right bank of the Khatanga, which throws itself into the gulf of the same name. No more ice-bridge this time, no means of walking dry-footed to the opposite shore. A few drifting blocks were the last remnants of the breaking up of the ice. A fordable spot should needs be found, and a considerable delay might have ensued, had not Ortik discovered one about half a verst up stream. Nor was the river crossed without difficulty, the wagon being sunk into the water up to the axle-trees; this done, however, another stage of some seventy-five miles brought the *Fair Rambler* to the Lake Iege.

What a contrast, here, with the monotonous aspect of the steppe! It looked like an oasis in the middle of the sands of Sahara. Let a sheet of limpid water be imagined, with a girdle of evergreen trees, of pines and fir trees, clumps of shrubs in all the brightness of their fresh verdure, purple whortleberries, black "camarines," red currant trees, and briers just crowned by spring with budding flowers.

Under the cover of the thickish underwood, clustering yonder on the east and west of the lake, Wagrani and Marengo will surely be at no loss to raise some game, be it a quadruped or a fowl, if Mr. Cascabel will only let them ferret about for a couple of hours.

And besides, on the surface of the lake, geese, ducks, and swans are swimming in numerous bands. Overhead, couples of cranes and storks swoop through the air, on their way from the central parts of Asia. The beholder would well-nigh clap his hands with delight, at a sight so full of charms.

On the proposal of Mr. Sergius, it was agreed they should make a two days' halt amid this landscape. The encampment was pitched at the head of the lake, under shelter of some tall pine-trees, the tops of which arched over the water's edge.

Then the sportsmen of the troupe, followed by Wagram, "took their guns and away," after promising not to go too far. A quarter of an hour had scarce elapsed when their gun-shots commenced to be heard.

In the mean time, Mr. Cascabel and Sander, Ortik and Kirschef, resolved to try what a little fishing would bring along the bank of the lake. Their implements consisted merely of a few lines supplied with hooks, which they had bought from the natives at Port Clarence; but what more was required by fishermen worthy of the great art, and endowed with sufficient intelligence to cope with the cunning of a fish, and with patience enough to wait until he condescends to bite at their bait.

In reality, this last accomplishment was hardly necessary on the day in question; scarcely had the hooks reached a suitable depth when the floats at once began to bob at the surface of the water. So abundant was the fish that enough could have been caught in half a day to replace the meat on one's table from one end of Lent to the other. Young Sander was beside himself with delight; so much so, indeed, that when Napoleona came over and asked him to let her have the rod in her turn, he would not grant her request. This led to an argument and subsequently to the intervention of Cornelia. The latter, considering the fishing pastime had lasted long enough, ordered both the children and their father to gather up their tackle, and when Cornelia gave an order no time should be lost in complying with it.

Two hours later, Mr. Sergius and his friend John returned with their dog, who seemed to cast a wistful look of regret behind him at the half-explored thickets.

The sportsmen had not been less fortunate than the fishermen. For several days to come, the bill of fare would be as varied as excellent, what with the fish of Lake Iege and especially the splendid game indigenous to those territories of upper Siberia.

Among others, the sportsmen had brought home a number of those “karallys,” which move about in companies, and a few couples of those silly little birds called “dikoutas,” that are smaller than the wood-hen, but whose flesh is exquisite.

It is easy to imagine what a sumptuous dinner was prepared that day. The table had been laid under the trees, but none of the guests noticed that it was somewhat cool to banquet in the open air. Cornelia had surpassed herself with her grilled fish and roasted game. And as the supply of flour had been renewed at the last village, as well as the provision of Iakout butter, no wonder if the cake of former days, with its golden brown crust, made its appearance at dessert-time. Each one had a few good sips of brandy-wine, thanks to certain flasks that the villagers of Maksimova had consented to part with, and the day came to a close without any cloud darkening its restful peace.

One would readily have believed that the period of trials was over, and that the famous journey would be accomplished to the greater honor and profit of the Cascabel family!

Next day was another day of rest, which the reindeer most religiously observed by incessant feeding.

On the 24th of April, at six in the morning. the *Fair Rambler* was under way again, and four days after, the western confines of the Iakout district had been reached.

CHAPTER IX.

RIGHT ON TO THE OBI.

IT is useful to revert to the situation of the two Russians that some evil genius had thrown in the path of the Cascabel family.

It might be thought that, grateful for the welcome they had met with, Ortik and Kirschef had returned to better sentiments. No such thing had come to pass. After the many crimes they had already committed under Karnof, the wretches thought of nothing but fresh atrocities.

Their immediate aim was to get possession of the *Fair Rambler* and of the money restored by Tchou-Tchouk; then, having re-entered Russian soil under the disguise of showmen, they would resume their horrible life.

Now to carry out these plans, they should first “get rid” of their traveling companions, of the kind-hearted people to whom they were indebted for their liberty; this they would feel no hesitation about. But they would be unable to execute their designs without help; this is why they were making directly for one of the Ural passes frequented by the former accomplices of their evil deeds; there they would find as many lawless recruits as they needed to overpower the entire staff of the *Fair Rambler*.

Meanwhile, who could have suspected them of harboring such abominable intentions? They showed the utmost readiness to make themselves useful, and not a word of complaint had ever been uttered against them. While inspiring no sympathy, they aroused at least no feeling of mistrust, — save in the mind of Kayette, who could not overcome the first impression they had made upon her. Just for a moment the thought had flashed across her brain that it was on the night when Mr. Sergius had been assaulted on the

Alaskan frontier that she had heard Kirschef's voice. But how could she believe that the murderers were the very two sailors they had afterwards found, nearly four thousand miles away from the spot, on one of the islands of the Liakhov Archipelago? So, while watching them closely, Kayette took good care to communicate her suspicions, in appearance so unlikely, to no one.

And now it is not amiss to mention, likewise, that if Ortik and Kirschef were suspicious in the eyes of the young girl, they, too, had their mischief-brooding instincts of curiosity aroused by Mr. Sergius's presence in the caravan. That a traveler, dangerously wounded on the frontier of Alaska, should have been picked up, nursed, and conveyed to Sitka by the Cascabels, was very natural. But, after his recovery, why had he not remained at Sitka? Why had he followed the showman's troupe to Port Clarence? Why was he even now accompanying them right across Siberia? The presence of a Russian in the ranks of itinerant artists was, to say the least, a strange occurrence.

And, one day, Ortik had whispered to Kirschef:

"Say, might not this fellow, Sergius, be trying to get back to Russia unknown to anybody? What do you say? May be there'd be something to be got out of that! I vote we keep our weather eye open on him."

And without suspecting it. Count Narkine was being spied by Ortik with a view to find his secret out.

On the 23d of April, the travelers left the Iakout district and entered the territory of the Ostiaks. A miserable, half-civilized tribe these are, though this part of Siberia contains several rich tracts, — among others that of Berezov. As they passed through the villages of this region, they could perceive how different they were from the attractive picturesqueness of the Iakout hamlets. Repulsive dens, hardly fit for cattle, where it were scarce possible to breathe, — and what an atmosphere!

Where else, indeed, could more loathsome beings be found than these natives, the following description of whom was read by John out of his “General Geography”:

“The Ostiaks of upper Siberia wear a double garment to preserve themselves against the cold: it consists of a thick layer of greasy dirt on their skin and the hide of a reindeer over it.”

As to their food, it is composed almost exclusively of half-raw fish and of meat which never undergoes any cooking process whatever.

Fortunately, the habits of the nomads — whose flocks are, here, also, scattered about over the steppe — do not exist in the same degree among the inhabitants of the chief villages. Thus at Starokhantaskii, our party found a population that was somewhat more presentable, though inhospitable and ill-disposed toward strangers.

The women, tattooed with bluish designs, wore the *vakocham*, a kind of red veil with blue stripes, a gaudily colored skirt, a lighter-shaded corset, whose defective make deforms their figure, and beneath it a wide belt, ornamented with round bells, which jingle at every movement they make, like the bells on the harness of a Spanish mule.

As to the men, during the winter season — and some of them still wore the winter fashions — they positively look like wild beasts, entirely wrapped up as they are in hides, the hair of which is turned outward. Their heads are covered over with the hood of the *maltza* and the *parka*, in which mere slits have been made for the eyes, the mouth, and the ears. Impossible to see one feature of their faces, however easily one might bear the privation.

Several times, along the road, our party met some of those sleds locally styled *narkes*, and usually drawn by three reindeer which, unencumbered by any other bar than a simple leather trace, which is passed under their chest, and a single rein fastened to their horns, can run on for twenty or twenty-five miles without taking breath.

Such performances were not to be expected from the team of the *Fair Rambler*; and in truth there was no cause to complain of their services, which were really valuable.

Commenting upon them, Mr. Sergius happened to remark, one day, that it might be prudent, perhaps, to substitute horses for them, as soon as they could get them:

“What, put horses in their place!” answered Mr. Cascabel. “Why so? Do you not think these animals will be able to bring us all the way to Russia?”

“If we were going to the north of Russia,” replied Mr. Sergius, “I should feel no anxiety; bui central Russia is very different. These reindeer support heat with great difficulty; it seems to overwhelm them and to render them unfit for any labor. And, as a proof, about the end of April, you see numerous flocks of them making their way toward the northern territories, and more especially the upper plateaux of the Ural, which are always covered with snow.”

“Well, we shall see when we reach the frontier. My word, it will cost me something to part with them! Just imagine the effect, if I entered the Perm fair with twenty reindeer yoked to the chariot of the Cascabel family! What an impression it would create! What a glowing advertisement!"

"Evidently, it would be splendid," said Mr. Sergius with a smile.

"Triumphal, sir! Triumphal is the word! and, while we are on the subject, it is quite understood, of course, that Count Narkine is a member of my troupe, and that, an opportunity offering, he will have no objection to perform before the public?"

"That's understood."

"Then you must not neglect your legerdemain lessons, Mr. Sergius. As you are supposed to be practising for your own pleasure, neither my children nor the two sailors can feel surprised at it. And, do you know, you are getting on wonderfully quick!"

"How could I help it with such a teacher as I have, friend Cascabel?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Sergius, but I give you my word you possess very remarkable natural dispositions for the art. With a little practice, you would become a first-class juggler, and make money at it, too!"

On May the 6th, the Ienisei was sighted, some three hundred miles from lake Iege.

The Ienisei is one of the chief rivers of the Siberian continent, and throws itself into the Arctic Sea on the gulf of the same name, under the seventieth parallel.

By this time, not one iceberg was left on the surface of the wide river. A large ferry, for the use of vehicles as well as passengers, from one bank to the other, enabled the little caravan to cross the stream with its full complement of men and cattle, but at the cost of a rather heavy toll.

On the other side, the steppe again with its endless horizons. Not unfrequently, groups of Ostiaks might be seen performing their religious duties. Although most of them have been baptized, the Christian religion seems to have no very strong hold on them, and they still continue to kneel before the heathenish idols of the Shaitans. These are human-faced idols, hewn in large blocks of wood, a small model of which, ornamented with a brass cross, is to be found in every house, nay, in every cabin.

It would appear that the Ostiak priests, the *Schamans*, as they are called, derive a good living out of this double-sided religion, not to speak of the great influence they wield over these fanatics, at the same time Christians and idolaters. None but an eye-witness could beheve the earnestness with which these unfortunates wriggle and struggle, like people in epileptic fits, in the presence of their idols.

The first time young Sander saw a half-dozen of those possessed beings, he of course proceeded at once to imitate them, walking on his hands, disjointing his hips, bending backward, capering heels over head like a clown, and winding up his performance with a series of frog-leaps.

“I see, my child,” said the father, who had instantly turned his critical eye on the exercises, “that you have lost none of your suppleness. That’s right, that’s right! We must not get rusty! Think of the Perm fair! The honor of the Cascabel family is at stake!”

On the whole, the journey had proceeded without too much fatigue since the *Fair Rambler* had left the mouth of the Lena. Sometimes a detour had to be made round thick forests of pines and birch trees, which varied the monotony of the plains, but through which there was no beaten track.

Indeed, the country was almost desert. Miles of ground were traversed without meeting a hamlet or even a farm. The population is extremely scarce, and the Berezov district, which is the richest, does not contain more than 15,000 inhabitants on an area of 3000 kilometers. By way of compensation, and probably for that very reason, the region swarms with game.

Mr. Sergius and John could, therefore, indulge their sporting tastes to their hearts' content, at the same time as they stocked up Mrs. Cascabel's larder. Most part of the time they were accompanied by Ortik, who gave proofs of remarkable skill. It is by thousands that the hares scour the plains, not to mention the feathered tribe, the numbers of which are countless. Elks, too, there were, and deer and wild reindeer, and even huge-sized boars, formidable brutes, which our gunmen prudently abstained from disturbing.

As to birds, there were ducks and plungeons, geese, thrushes, heath-hens and hazel-hens, storks, and white partridges. Quite a variety, as may be seen! Hence, whenever a shot had been wasted on a slightly inferior game, Cornelia did not hesitate to throw it to the dogs, who gladly received their mistress's gift.

This abundance of fresh game naturally resulted in good living; such good living indeed that Mr. Cascabel was inclined to preach sobriety to his artists.

"Children, take care you don't get fat," he would repeat to them. "Fat is the ruin of your joints. It is the bane of the acrobat! You eat too much! Come, moderate your appetite! Sander, I do believe you are getting stout! Stout at your age, for shame!”

“Father, I assure you!”

“None of your protestations. I have a great mind to measure you around the body every evening, and if I find any sign of embonpoint, I’ll take the fat out of you! — It’s just like that fellow Clovy! A blind man would see the fat accumulating on him!”

“On me, boss?”

“Yes, on you! And a clown has no business to get fat, especially when he rejoices in the name of Clovy! Why, in no time you’ll be as round as a beer-barrel!”

“Unless, in my old days, I turn to a plantation pole!” replied Clovy, as he tightened his belt one hole higher.

The *Fair Rambler* had soon to get over the Taz, which pours out its waters into the gulf of Ienisei, just about the point where our itinerary cut the Arctic polar circle to enter the temperate zone. It may be seen thereby how obliquely it had leaned to the southwest since the Liakhov Islands had been left behind.

In this connection, Mr. Sergius, who always found an appreciative audience, thought it right to explain what this polar circle was, beyond which, during summer, the sun never rises more than twenty-three degrees above the horizon.

John, who already possessed certain notions of cosmography, understood the explanation. But despite all the efforts of his intellectual powers, Mr.

Cascabel was unable to get that polar circle into his brain.

“In the way of circles,” he said, “those I know best are the hoops that the riders jump through, round the ring! After all, that is no reason why we should not drink the very good health of this one!”

And accordingly, the toast of the polar circle was honored with a good bottle of brandy-wine, just as the line is feted when ships cross from one hemisphere to the other.

The Taz was not crossed without some difficulty. No ferry plied across this little river and a fordable spot had to be found, — which required several hours. Again did the two Russians display the greatest zeal; and on several occasions, the wheels of the wagon having sunk into the soft bed of the stream, they readily set to work, with water up to their waist.

Less trouble was experienced, on the 16th of May, to get to the other bank of the Pour, a narrow river with a shallow bed and a slow current.

By the beginning of June the heat had become excessive, a fact which always seems anomalous in countries belonging to so high a latitude. During the last fortnight of the month, the thermometer marked from twenty-five to thirty degrees. As there was no shade whatever along the steppe. Mr. Sergius and his companions were severely taxed by this temperature. Even the night did not temper the sultriness of the day, for, at that period, the sun hardly disappeared beneath the horizon of these immense plains. After a slight dip to the north, its disk, like a ball of iron at white heat, at once rises again to resume its daily course.

“That nasty sun!” Cornelia went on repeating, as she wiped the perspiration from her face. “What an oven we are in! If we only could have had this in winter!”

“Then, winter would have been summer,” remarked Mr. Sergius.

“Just so!” said Cascabel. “But what strikes me as bad management is, that we have not one single lump of ice to cool ourselves with, after having had considerably more than we needed, for whole months together.”

“Come, friend Cascabel, if we had ice, it would be a sign that the weather was cold, and if it was cold — ”

“It would not be hot! You are always right, Mr. Sergius!”

“Unless it was half and half!” Clovy deemed it right to add.

“That would be better still!” continued Mr. Cascabel “All the same, it’s powerfully hot!”

It must not be supposed that the sportsmen had laid up their guns, for all that. The only difference was that they started very early in the morning, and a capital plan they found it. Indeed, they were rewarded, one day, with a splendid capture, all the honor of which fell to John. So large was this game that they had some trouble to fetch it home. Its coat was short; in the front part of the body, the hair was reddish and looked as if it had been gray during the winter months; along its back ran a yellow streak; its long horns curved gracefully over its head.

“What a beautiful reindeer!” exclaimed Sander.

“Oh, John!” said Napoleona, with a tinge of reproach in her voice, “why did you kill a reindeer?”

"To eat it, my little pet."

"And I am so fond of them."

"Why," rejoined Sander, "since you are so fond of them you can eat as much of this one as you like; there will be enough for everybody!"

"Don't fret about it, my darling," said Mr. Sergius. "That animal is not a reindeer!"

"What is it, then?" asked the child.

"It is an argali."

Mr. Sergius spoke true. These animals, which inhabit the mountains during winter and the plains in summer, are, strictly speaking, overgrown sheep.

"Very well," observed Mr. Cascabel, "since it is a sheep, Cornelia, we shall have mutton chops on the gridiron, if you please."

And it was done accordingly. And as the flesh of the argali is extremely savory, it is probable that the manager of the troupe may have acquired, on that day, a little more embonpoint than was in accordance with the exigencies of his profession.

From this point forward, the track of the *Fair Rambler* toward the Obi lay through an almost barren country. The Ostiak villages became scarcer and scarcer; seldom did they meet, here and there, a few groups of nomads migrating toward the Eastern provinces. Nor was it without good reasons that Mr. Sergius sought in preference the least populated parts of this district; and it was important to avoid the large town of Berezov, situated a little beyond the Obi. Incased within a magnificent forest of cedars spread out in terrace fashion on the flank of a steep hill, surmounted by the steeple of its two churches, watered by the Sosva, on which incessantly ply the numerous vessels of the trading community, this city, with its two hundred houses, is the center of a largely frequented market, to which are conveyed the products of northern Siberia.

It was evident that the arrival of the *Fair Rambler* at Berezov would of necessity attract the curiosity of the public, and the police would not have failed to scrutinize rather closely the individual members of the Cascabel family. Better keep away from Berezov and even from the district of that name. Policemen are policemen; and, especially when they are Cossacks, it is more prudent to have no dealings with them.

This disinclination, however, on the part of Mr. Sergius, to pass by Berezov did not escape the notice of Ortik and Kirschef, and confirmed their suspicions that he was a Russian trying to re-enter Russia secretly.

The first week of the month of June had gone by when a slight modification was made in the itinerary, in order to cut to the north of Berezov. It was, at most, a detour of some thirty miles; and, on the 16th of the month, after having for some time followed the stream of a large river, the little caravan encamped on its right bank.

This river was the Obi.

The *Fair Rambler* had covered close on five hundred and fifty miles since it had left the basin of the Pour. A distance of barely three hundred miles now separated it from the European frontier. The chain of the Urals, the partition line between these two parts of the world, would soon terminate the horizon.

CHAPTER X.

FROM THE OBI TO THE URAL MOUNTAINS.

THE Obi, fed by the waters of the Ural on the west, and by numerous tributaries on the east, spreads over a distance of 4500 kilometers, and its basin does not contain less than 330,000,000 hectares.

Geographically speaking, this river might have served as a natural boundary line between Asia and Europe, if the Urals had not stood a little to the west of its course. From the sixtieth degree of latitude the river and the mountain run almost parallel. And whilst the Obi goes and throws itself into the vast gulf of that name, the extreme ramifications of the Ural are sunk deep beneath the Sea of Kara.

Mr. Sergius and his companions, standing on its right bank, contemplated the course of the river and the many willow-tufted islets with which it is dotted. Close to the river bank, aquatic plants waved to and fro their sharp-edged blades, now bright with fresh blooms. Up and down the stream, numbers of vessels glided along the cool and limpid waters, purified by their passage through the filter of the mountains, where they have their springs.

The boat service was regularly organized on this important artery, and, in consequence, the *Fair Rambler* was able to reach Mouji village, on the opposite bank, easily.

It is, in truth, but a small village, and as such was safe for Count Narkine, not being used as a military post. It was, however, becoming urgent to obtain duly legalized documents; for, the foot of the mountains was now within short distance, and the Russian authorities insisted on seeing the papers of every traveler who presented himself at the frontier. Mr. Cascabel, accordingly, resolved to get his papers duly “regularized” by the Mayor of Mouji: This formality having been fulfilled, Mr. Sergius, being comprised among the artists of the troupe, would succeed in entering the territory of the Russian empire without arousing the suspicions of the police.

Why should a deplorable misadventure have compromised a plan that seemed so easy of execution? Why were Ortik and Kirschef there, determined to mar its success? Why were they on the eve of bringing the *Fair Rambler* through one of the most dangerous passes of the Ural, where they would surely fall in with whole bands of malefactors?

And, meanwhile, Mr. Cascabel, who little dreamt of such a *denouement*, and could not therefore do anything to prevent it, congratulated himself on the successful prospects of his bold undertaking. After making his way through Western America and the whole of Northern Asia, here he was within 300 miles of the European frontier! His wife and his children, in perfect health, showed no signs of the fatigues of so long a journey. True, he had felt his courage fail at the time of the catastrophe in Behring Strait and during the drift on the Polar Sea; but he had proved himself more than a match for the “fools” on Liakhov Islands, and had made them enable the *Fair Rambler* to continue its journey through the continent.

“Verily, God does well what he does!” he would often say to himself.

A stay of twenty-four hours in this village of Mouji had been agreed upon. The inhabitants gave a cordial greeting to the new-comers, and Mr. Cascabel received, in its time, the visit of the *gorodintschy*, or mayor of the locality.

This official personage, somewhat distrustful of strangers, deemed it his duty to ask a few questions of the head of the family. The latter at once produced his “census paper,” on which Mr. Sergius was entered as one of the troupe.

The worthy mayor was not without a little feeling of surprise at seeing a countryman of his among French performers; for he had not failed to remark that Mr. Sergius was a Russian, and he drew Cascabel’s attention to the fact.

The latter begged of him to observe that if there was a Russian among them, there was likewise an American in the person of Clovy, and an Indian in the person of Kayette. He was never concerned with the nationality of his artists; the all-important question with him was their talents. And he immediately added that the said artists would be but too happy if His Worship the Mayor, — this sounded better on Cæser Cascabel’s lips than gorodintschy, — His Worship the Mayor would kindly permit them to perform in his presence!

His Worship was highly gratified by the proposal, which he straightway accepted, and promised to sign the papers after the performance.

As to Ortik and Kirschef, as they were entered on the list as shipwrecked Russian sailors on their way home, no difficulty was made about them.

Accordingly, in the course of the same evening, the whole troupe repaired to the residence of the gorodintschy.

It was a pretty large house, with a fine coat of yellow paint, in remembrance of Alexander I, who was particularly fond of that color. On the wall of the drawing-room hung an image of the Virgin Mary, accompanied by the portraits of some Russian saints, looking their best in their silvered frames. Benches and stools had been placed in readiness for the mayor, his wife, and his three daughters. Half a dozen notables of the locality had been invited to share the enjoyment of this soiree, while the simple ratepayers of Mouji, huddled around the house, had the privilege of peeping in through the windows.

The Cascabel family was greeted with much sympathy. The exercises were commenced, and no one would have thought that the performers had neglected their rehearsals for several weeks. Young Sander's dislocations were highly appreciated, as was Napoleona's gracefulness; she had no tight rope at her disposal, and executed a *step de circonstance*, to the delight of the spectators. With his bottle juggling, his plates, his rings, and his balls, John astonished the beholders. After which, Mr. Cascabel's exhibition of muscular power proved him the worthy husband of Cornelia, who, on this occasion, carried two of the Mouji notables on her outstretched arms.

As to Mr. Sergius, he very cleverly went through several legerdemain tricks which his eminent professor had taught him, — not uselessly, as it now appeared. No doubt could now exist in His Worship's mind regarding the genuineness of this Russian's engagement in the itinerant troupe.

Jams, currant cakes, and excellent tea were then served all round. Then, the soirée having come to an end, the mayor signed without hesitation all the papers that Cascabel presented to him. The *Fair Rambler* was now legally in a position to face the Russian authorities.

It is worthy of notice, moreover, that the good mayor, a man in easy circumstances, felt bound to offer Mr. Cascabel a score of roubles in return for his performance.

Mr. Cascabel felt inclined, at first, to decline any renumeration; but, on the part of an itinerant showman, this might have seemed a strange proceeding.

“After all,” he said to himself, “twenty roubles is twenty roubles!”

And with a “world of thanks” he pocketed the sum.

The following day was devoted to rest. There were a few purchases to make, of flour, rice, butter, and various drinks, which Cornelia was able to obtain at reasonable prices. She would not think of renewing her stock of preserves in this poor village; but game was likely to be plentiful between the Obi and the European frontier.

By twelve o’clock, all the “shopping” had been done. Dinner-time came, and around the festive board there were two very sad hearts. Did not John and Kayette see the time draw near when they should part?

What would Mr. Sergius do when he had seen his father, Prince Narkine? It being impossible for him to remain in Russia, would he set out again for America, or would he stay in Europe? All this, it may be surmised, gave Cascabel great food for reflection. He would fain have his mind fixed on the subject, and accordingly, that same day after dinner, he asked Mr. Sergius if he would care to “come out for a stroll.”

The latter, feeling that his friend wished to have a private talk with him, readily acceded to the proposal.

Just then the two sailors were bidding good-by to the family, intending, they said, to wind up the day at some tavern or another in the village.

And so, Mr. Sergius and Mr. Cascabel left the *Fair Rambler*, walked a few hundred paces out of the village and sat down by the edge of a small wood.

“Mr. Sergius,” said Cæser, “if I have asked you to take a little ramble, it is because I would like to have a few words with you, by ourselves, concerning your situation — ”

“My situation, my friend!”

“Or rather what your situation will compel you to do when you are in Russia.”

“In Russia?”

“Well, I am not wrong, — am I? — in reckoning that we shall be on the other side of the Urals in about ten days, and that we shall reach Perm in a week’s time after that.”

“That’s very probable, if there is no obstacle in the way.”

“Obstacles! Not one obstacle will there be!” replied Cascabel. “You will cross the frontier without the shadow of a difficulty! Our papers are in due form, you belong to my troupe, and who would ever dream that Count Narkine is one of my artists?”

“Nobody, of course, since the secret has been told to no living soul but Mrs. Cascabel and yourself, and that it has been kept — ”

“As sacred as if she and I had carried it to our graves,” interrupted the showman, with much genuine dignity. “And now, Mr. Sergius, would it be an indiscretion on my part to ask you what you propose doing when the *Fair Rambler* halts in the streets of Perm?”

“I shall make all haste to the chateau of Walska, to see my father!” burst from the lips of Mr. Sergius. “It will be a great joy for him, a very unexpected joy, for it is now thirteen months since he has heard from me; thirteen long months since I had my last opportunity of writing to him! What must be his thoughts!”

“Do you intend making a pretty long stay with Prince Narkine?”

“That depends on circumstances that I cannot foresee. If my presence at home is suspected, I may see myself compelled to leave my father! — And still, — at his age — ”

“Mr. Sergius, it is not for me to give you any advice. Better than any one else you know how you should act. But, let me beg of you to observe that you will be exposed to very great dangers if you remain in Russia! Should you ever be discovered, your very life would be at stake!”

“I know that, friend, just as I know the dangers that would threaten you and yours if ever the police came to know that you have aided my return on Russian soil!”

“As to that, my folks and myself are out of consideration in this matter.”

“Not at all, my dear Cascabel, and I shall never forget what all of you have done for me!”

“That is all right and square, Mr. Sergius; we did not come here to exchange protestations of friendship. Come! We must have an understanding about what you mean to do at Perm.”

“Nothing simpler! Since I am one of your troupe, I shall stay with you so as to arouse no suspicion.”

“But Prince Narkine — ?”

“Walska is but six versts out of town, and each evening, when the performance is over, I can easily make my way there, without being noticed. Our servants would let themselves be killed before they would betray or compromise their master. Thus I can spend a few hours with my father and return to Perm before daybreak.”

“That’s settled, Mr. Sergius, and so long as we stay in Perm things will get on smoothly, I hope. But when the fair comes to a close, and when the *Fair Rambler* will depart for Nijni, and then for France — ”

That, evidently, was the knotty point. What would Count Narkine determine to do after the Cascabels had left Perm? Would he remain concealed at the chateau of Walska? Would he still keep on Russian territory, at the risk of being discovered? Mr. Cascabel’s inquiry was definite.

“My dear friend,” replied Mr. Sergius to him, “many a time and oft have I asked myself that question: ‘What shall I do?’ and to this day I am utterly unable to answer it; that is all I can say to you. My conduct will be dictated by circumstances.”

“Well then,” continued Mr. Cascabel, “suppose you were obliged to leave Walska, suppose you could not remain in Russia, where your liberty, your very life would be in danger, do let me ask you, Mr. Sergius, if you would think of returning to America.”

“I have formed no plan whatever in that direction,” was the count’s reply.

“Pray, Mr. Sergius, excuse me if I insist. Why might you not come to France with us? By continuing in my troupe, you could pass the western frontier without danger. Would not this be the safest plan? And then, in that way. we would have you a little longer with us, and our dear little Kayette, too! — Not that I would take her from you. the poor child! She is, and she will be, your adopted daughter, sir; and that is rather better than being a sister to John, Sander, and Napoleona, the children of a showman!”

“My friend,” replied Mr. Sergius, “let us not speak of what the future may have in store for us. Who knows if it will not grant to each of us the wish of his own heart? Let us now see to the present, that is the essential point! What I can say to you with certainty — but pray breathe not a word of it to any one — is, that in the event of my being compelled to leave Russia, I should be very happy to retire to France, and there wait until some political event might, perchance, alter my position. And then, as it is home you are now going — ”

“That’s it! That’s it! You’ll come home with me!” burst out Cæsar Cascabel, and he had clutched the exile’s hand, and hugged it, and pressed it, as though he would fain rivet it to his own.

At length they returned to the encampment, where the two sailors did not put in an appearance till the next day.

Off went the team at early morn and struck for the west.

For the several days that followed, the heat was very great. Already the first undulations of the Ural chain began to be felt, and the gradual rising of the ground told severely on the reindeer, already oppressed by the temperature.

On the 28th of June, over two hundred miles from the Obi, the *Fair Rambler* entered the little village of Verniky. Here a peremptory demand for the papers was followed by their immediate production, to the complete satisfaction of the authorities. Then the wagon resumed its course toward the chain of the Ural, two peaks of which, the Telpoes and the Nintchour, rose over yonder horizon to a height of from four to five thousand feet.

No great speed was made; yet there was no time to be lost, so as to be in Perm for the best part of the fair.

In view, indeed, of the performances to be given there, Mr. Cascabel now insisted on everybody rehearsing his exercises. It was their duty to keep intact the fame of French acrobats, artists, gymnasts, equilibrists, and clowns in general and the reputation of the Cascabel family in particular. And hence, the artists had now to get into training during the evening halts. Mr. Sergius himself toiled and moiled toward perfection in those card-tricks and sleights of hand for which his teacher had discovered in him such a wonderful natural aptitude.

“What an artist you would have made!” he would continually say to him.

On the 3d of July, the troupe encamped in a clearing encircled with birch trees, pines, and larch trees, overtopped by the alpine-like crests of the Ural.

It was on the following day that they were to venture into one of the passes of the chain under the guidance of Ortik and Kirschef, and they foresaw if not serious fatigues at least very uphill work, in more senses than one, until the highest level of the gorge had been attained.

As this part of the frontier, usually frequented by smugglers and deserters, was not very safe, they would do well to keep continually on the defensive; and certain measures were adopted with an eye thereto.

In the course of the evening the conversation fell on the difficulties that might have to be encountered during the crossing of the mountain. Ortik loudly stated that the pass he had indicated, a pass named the Petchora, was one of the most practicable along the whole chain. He knew it for having gone through it when Kirschef and he were on their way from Arkhangel to the Baltic Sea, going to the relief of the *Seraski*.

While Mr. Sergius and Ortik were engaged on this subject, Cornelia, Napoleona, and Kayette were busy with the supper. An appetizing quarter of a deer was roasting before a fire that had been lit under the trees, and a rice pudding was acquiring its due golden-brown tint in a tin laid on a heap of live coals.

“I do hope there will be no complaints about the bill of fare to-night!” said the good housewife.

“Unless the roast and the pudding get burnt!” Clovy felt bound to suggest.

“And why should they get burnt, Mr. Clovy?” asked Cornelia, “if you only take care to keep on turning the spit of the one and stirring the tin of the other!”

Clovy took the hint, and began mounting his guard. Wagram and Marengo kept him company by the fire, and John Bull, too, squatted hard by, licking his lips in anticipation of his share of the banquet.

In due time supper was laid and gave rise to a veritable concert of praise, which Cornelia and her help received with genuine satisfaction.

When bedtime came, as the temperature had risen still higher, Mr. Sergius, Cæsar Cascabel and his two sons, Clovy and the two sailors said they would sleep out in the clearing under shelter of the trees. It would, besides, be easier for them to watch over the *Fair Rambler*.

Cornelia, Kayette, and Napoleona alone sought the comfort of their little couches indoors.

With a July twilight, the duration of which seems indefinite in this seventieth parallel, it was after eleven o’clock when the night had about fallen, — a moonless night, besprinkled with stars, drowned, so to say, in the mists of the upper zones.

Stretched on the grass, and wrapped up in blankets, Mr. Sergius and his companions felt their eyelids close in their first sleep when the two dogs began to give various tokens of agitation. They would sniff the air repeatedly, and would growl in that peculiar way so expressive of extreme uneasiness.

John stood up first and cast a look around the clearing.

The fire was dying away and profound darkness reigned under the thick canopy of the trees. John made a closer survey and thought he saw luminous dots moving about, like so many red coals, in the dark. Wagram and Marengo were now barking loudly.

“Danger!” cried out John. “Danger!”

In a moment the sleepers were on their feet.

“What is it?” asked his father.

“Look there, father!” said John, pointing to the shining spots, now still and motionless in the dark background of the thicket.

“What can those be?”

“Wolves’ eyes!”

“Yes, they are wolves!” said Ortik.

“And a whole band of them!” added Mr. Sergius.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Mr. Cascabel.

“By Jove!” was an inadequate expression to convey the full gravity of the situation. There might be hundreds of wolves all around the clearing; and these animals are truly formidable when they are in large numbers.

Just then Cornelia, Kayette, and Napoleona appeared at the door of the *Fair Rambler*.

“Well, father?” inquired the little girl.

“It’s nothing, only wolves having a little stroll by moonlight! Stay where you are, and just hand us our guns to keep them at a safe distance.”

Immediately guns and revolvers were cocked.

“Call back the dogs!” said Mr. Sergius.

Wagram and Marengo, who had ventured toward the edge of the wood, came back at John’s bidding, a prey tea terror which it was hard to control.

A general volley was fired in the direction of the luminous points, and frightful howls showed that most of the shots had hit their marks.

But the number of wolves must have been considerable, for the circle seemed to close around, and a half hundred of them invaded the clearing.

“Quick! Back to the wagon!” exclaimed Mr. Sergius.

“They are coming down upon us! There alone can we defend ourselves!”

“What about the reindeer?” remarked John.

“We can do nothing to save them!”

And sure enough, it was now too late. Already some of the animals, had been devoured, whilst the others had broken their fetters and run away into the depths of the wood.

On Mr. Sergius’s order, all retired inside the *Fair Rambler* with the two dogs, and the front door was closed.

It was high time! In the glimmer of the twilight the wolves could be seen bounding against the vehicle and leaping up to the height of the windows.

“What will become of us now, without a team?” Cornelia could not help saying.

“Let us get rid of this legion, first!” replied Mr. Sergius.

“Surely we’ll manage to do that, somehow; come!” exclaimed her husband.

“Yes, if there are not too many of them,” remarked Ortik.

“And suppose we don’t run short of powder,” added Kirschef.

“In the mean time, fire!” ordered Mr. Sergius.

And a murderous discharge flew through the half-opened windows. By the light of the shots fired from the two sides and the back of the wagon, they saw a score of wolves lying on the ground, either mortally or grievously wounded. But nothing seemed to check the rage of the brutes; their number appeared in no way lessened, and several hundreds of them by this time crowded the clearing, now alive with their restless silhouettes.

Some had crept under the wagon and endeavored to claw the panels out. Others had leaped on the front platform and would have burst the door open, had it not been barricaded from the inside just in time. Others again had even climbed on to the roof, leaned over the ledge down to the windows, struck at them with their paws, and persisted in their mad attempt until a bullet brought them to the ground.

Napoleona, greatly frightened, could not be kept from crying aloud. The fear of the wolf, so intense among children, was, in her case, but too fully justified in the present instance. Kayette, who was cool and composed, in vain endeavored to calm her little friend. Nor did Mrs. Cascabel herself, it must be confessed, feel very sanguine on the issue of this veritable battle.

As a matter of fact, should the assault continue much longer, the situation would become more and more dangerous. How could the *Fair Rambler* withstand the efforts of these numberless wolves? And, should it ever be upset, would not the horrible mangling of all its occupants be the inevitable consequence? Now the “engagement” had lasted for about half an hour when Kirschef suddenly growled:

“There’ll be no more ammunition, presently!”

Some twenty cartridges were all that remained for the supply of the rifles and the revolvers.

“We must not fire, now,” said Mr. Cascabel, “except when we are sure of our mark.”

Sure of their mark?... Did not every shot hit its mark in this mass of assailants? Unfortunately the wolves were far more numerous than the bullets; their numbers kept on increasing while the firearms would soon be reduced to silence. What would be done then? Wait for daylight? And what if the light of day did not put the wolves to flight?

It was then that Mr. Cascabel, brandishing his revolver, so soon fated to be useless, cried out:

“I have an idea!”

“An idea?” inquired Mr. Sergius.

“Yes, and a good one! The only thing is to capture one or two of those devils.”

“How will you do that?” asked Cornelia.

“We shall just half-open the door with great caution and seize on the first two that will try to force their way in.”

“Do you really mean it, Cascabel?”

“What risk do we run, Mr. Sergius? A few bites? Well, I’d rather be bitten than torn to pieces.”

“Very well; then let it be done quickly!” said Mr. Sergius, though he did not exactly know what Cascabel was about.

The latter, with Ortik, Clovy and Kirschef behind him, posted himself in the first compartment while John and Sander kept back the dogs in the innermost one, where the women had been ordered to stay.

The articles of furniture, used to bar the door, were removed, and Mr. Cascabel opened it in such a way as to be able to shut it again quickly.

At that very moment a dozen wolves, crowding the platform and hanging on to the steps, were positively storming the forepart of the wagon.

No sooner was the door ajar than one of them rushed in headlong. Kirschef closed it again immediately.

In a trice Mr. Cascabel had overpowered the animal, with Ortik's help, and thrown over his head a piece of cloth he had provided himself with, and which he fastened tightly round its neck.

The door was opened a second time; and a second wolf underwent the same treatment as the first.

It needed the united efforts of Clovy, Ortik, and Kirschef to keep the raging brutes under control.

"Above all, don't kill them," Mr. Cascabel would say to them; "and hold them tight!"

Not kill them?... What on earth did he mean to do with them? Give them an engagement in his troupe for the Perm fair?

What he meant to do, what he did do with them, his companions were not long to know.

The next moment a flame of fire lit up the compartment, which was filled, at the same time, with frantic howls of pain; one of the windows was thrown wide open, and away the two wolves were hurled through the air.

The effect produced by their appearance among the besiegers could be seen all the better as the clearing now gradually filled with moving torches.

Cascabel had thoroughly soaked the two wolves with paraffine and then set them ablaze; and it was in that state they had joined their companions.

Well, that idea of Mr. Cascabel's had been a grand idea, like all those that came out of his wonderful head. The wolves, maddened with terror, were all taking to flight. away from the two burning animals. And what yells they uttered now, far more terrible than those which had been heard at the beginning of the attack! In vain did the two paraffined brutes struggle to extinguish their blazing fur, blinded as they were by the hood tied over their heads. In vain they rolled themselves on the ground and leaped about in the middle of the band; the fire was unquenchable.

At last, the whole panic-stricken legion quitted the encampment, rushed out of the clearing, and disappeared in the depths of the wood.

The howls became fewer, and finally silence reigned all round the *Fair Rambler*.

By way of precaution, Mr. Sergius recommended his friends to wait till daylight before venturing forth to reconnoiter. But, in reality, no new attack was to be dreaded. The enemy had dispersed, and was fleeing as fast as their legs could run.

"Ah, Cæsar!" sobbed Cornelia, as she threw herself in her husband's arms.

“Ah, my friend!” said Mr. Sergius.

“Ah, father!” exclaimed the children.

“Ah, boss!” blubbered Clovy.

“Well, well, what’s it all about?” quietly replied Cascabel. “If a man had no more brains than wolves, what would be the use of being a man?”

CHAPTER XI.

THE URAL MOUNTAINS.

THE chain of the Ural is deserving of the tourist’s visit, quite as much, at least, as are the Pyrenees and the Alps. In the language of the Tartars, the word “Ural” signifies “belt,” and here we have, in very truth, a belt stretching from the Caspian to the Arctic Sea over a distance of 2900 kilometers, — a belt ornamented with precious stones, enriched with fine metals, gold, silver and platinum, — a belt girt around the loins of the old continent, between Asia and Europe. A vast orographic system, it pours its waters through the beds of the Ural River, the Kara, the Petchora, the Kama, and a number of tributaries fed by the melting of the snows. A superb barrier of granite and quartz, it shoots up its needles and peaks to an average height of 2300 yards above the level of the ocean.

To our travelers, the Urals were suggestive of other thoughts besides.

And, first of all, while crossing the chain they would find it difficult to avoid those villages, those *zavodys*, those numerous hamlets, the population of which owes its origin to the former workmen employed in the mines. On the other hand, on its way through these grand defiles, Mr. Cascabel’s troupe need have no fear of military posts, since their papers were duly legalized. And even though they had struck the range in its central part, they would have had no hesitation to follow the beautiful Ekaterinburg road, one of the most frequented in that region, so as to emerge from the mountain on the territory of the government of that name. But, since Ortik’s itinerary had brought them farther north, it was better to enter the pass of the Petchora, and go down, afterwards, as far as Perm.

That is what they proposed doing on the very next morning.

When daylight came, they were able to ascertain how considerable the number of their assailants had been. Should they have succeeded in forcing their way into the *Fair Rambler*, not one of its occupants would have survived the carnage.

Two or three scores of wolves lay dead on the ground, — of those large-sized wolves, so formidable to the wayfarers across the steppe. The main body had fled as if the devil was after them; and even he could hardly have “made it hotter” for them. As to the two paraffined animals, their charred remains were discovered a few hundred paces away from the clearing.

And now, one question had to be solved: at this end of the Petchora pass, the *Fair Rambler* was at a considerable distance from the nearest zavody, for there are few of them on the eastern side of the Ural.

“How shall we manage?” asked John. “Our reindeer have run away — ”

“If they had only run away,” answered Mr. Cascabel, “we might perhaps get them back again; but it is very probable the poor things were devoured last night!”

“Yes, the poor things!” repeated Napoleona. “I was so fond of them; just as fond as I was of Vermont and Gladiator.”

“And they would have been food for the wolves, if they had not drowned,” said Sander.

“Just what would have happened them!” added Cæser Cascabel, heaving a deep sigh. “But how are we to replace our deer?”

“I shall start off at once to the nearest village,” said Mr. Sergius, “and get horses at any price. If Ortik can show me the way — ”

“Ready to go when you like, sir,” replied Ortik.

“Evidently,” added Cascabel, “that is the only thing to be done!”

And it would have been done, that same morning, if, to the astonishment of all, two of the reindeer had not been seen coming back across the clearing about eight o’clock.

Sander was the first to perceive them.

“Father!” he cried, “father! Here they are! They are coming home!”

“What, alive?”

“Well, these two don’t look as if they had been entirely devoured, since they walk — ”

“Unless the wolves had left them their legs!” suggested Clovy.

“Oh, the good creatures!” exclaimed Napoleona. “I must go and give them a kiss!”

And running to her two lost pets, she threw her arms around their necks and embraced them heartily.

But, alas, two of them could not have drawn the *Fair Rambler*. Luckily, several others presently began to appear by the edge of the wood, and, within an hour, fourteen had mustered back out of the twenty that had come from Tourkeff.

“Hurrah for the reindeer!” shouted young Sander. “Only, it’s a pity they don’t know what I’m crying out!”

The six animals, now missing, had been devoured by the wolves ere they had time to snap their fetters off, and their carcasses were afterwards found in the vicinity. The fourteen others had run away, on the approach of the wild beasts, and instinct now brought them back to the camp.

No need to tell how the good creatures were welcomed home. With them, the wagon could now resume its journey on through the defile of the Ural. Every one would put his shoulder to the wheel in the more difficult passes, and Mr. Cascabel would be able to make his triumphal entry into Perm.

What troubled him, however, was that the *Fair Rambler* had lost something of its splendor of former days, with its sides belabored with the teeth of the wolves, its panels scratched and clawed. Even before this recent siege, the billows and the squalls had played havoc with the harmony of its coats of paint and the relief of its gilt borders. The snow-drifts had half slashed away the escutcheon of the Cascabels. What time and skill it would now take the artist to restore its ancient luster! For, in truth, the combined efforts of Cornelia and Clovy were now powerless.

By ten o’clock the reindeer were harnessed, and a start was made, the men going on foot, as the ground was rising sensibly.

The weather was fine and the heat bearable in this upper region of the chain. But how often they had to help the willing team, and clear out the wheels of the wagon from the ruts into which they would sink axle-deep. At every sharp angle of the pass it became necessary to lay all hands on the *Fair Rambler*, lest it should knock, fore or aft, against the edges of the rocks.

These defiles in the Urals are not the work of man. Nature alone has wrought a passage for the outpourings of the chains through these meanderous clifts. A small river, an affluent of the Sosva, came down, right here, toward the west. Sometimes its bed became so wide as to leave the wayfarer barely a narrow zigzag path. Here, its banks, standing almost perpendicular, were covered with the merest layer of moss and rocky plants. There, their gentle slope bristled with trees, with firs and pines, birches and larch-trees and other indigenous growths of Northern Europe. And far away, lost in the clouds, were the profiles of the snow-capped crests that fed the torrents of this orographic system.

During this first day's march, the little troupe met not a soul along this evidently unfrequented pass. Ortik and Kirschef seemed pretty well acquainted with it. Two or three times, however, they appeared to hesitate, in places where several tracks presented themselves. They would then stop, and converse together in a low tone, — which could surprise nobody, since there was no motive for suspecting their good faith.

Still Kayette never ceased to watch them, unknown to them. Those secret conversations, the glances they exchanged, excited her distrust more and more. They, on their part, were far from dreaming that the young woman felt the least misgiving toward them.

At the fall of day, Mr. Sergius selected a halting place by the bank of the little river, and when supper was over, Mr. Cascabel, Kirschef, and Clovy undertook the task of mounting guard as a measure of precaution, one after the other. It must be confessed, they deserved no little credit, either, for not falling asleep at their post, after the fatigues of the day and their want of sleep during the preceding night.

Next day, another stage up the defile, which was becoming narrower as it ascended higher, — a stage as laborious as the previous one, and at the end of which an advance of five or six miles had been made in twenty-four hours. This, however, had been foreseen, and reckoned among the delays of the journey.

More than once Mr, Sergius and his friend John were greatly tempted to pursue some fine head of game through the wooded gorges, right and left of their track. In the occasional clearings, whole flocks of elks, deer, and hares were seen to scamper. And Cornelia would gladly have accepted a little fresh venison. But, if game was plentiful, the ammunition, it will be remembered, had been quite exhausted during the engagement with the wolves, and it could not now be renewed before the next village had been reached. And so the guns hung useless on the rack, and Wagram would often stare at his master and positively looked as if he uttered the words:

“Say, boss, you’ve given up shooting altogether, have you?”

Still one circumstance there was, in which the intervention of firearms would have been fully justified.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon; the *Fair Rambler* was coming along a rocky bank, when a bear, whose presence had been announced by the barking of the dogs, appeared on the other side of the stream.

It was an enormous brute; and there he sat on his hind quarters, swinging his huge head to and fro, and shaking his thick brown fur, as the little caravan was advancing toward him.

Did he think of pouncing upon them? Was it a look of curiosity or one of envy he cast on the team and their drivers?

John had silenced Wagram, wisely deeming it useless to excite this formidable animal, as they were unarmed. Why run the risk of changing his may-be friendly or careless humor into hostile disposition, when it was quite possible for him to simply cross from one bank of the little river to the other?

And that is why it came to pass that both parties stood looking at each other quietly, like two travelers crossing each other on the highway, while Mr. Cascabel muttered; “What a pity we can’t capture this magnificent Bruin! — *A genuine Bruin from the Ural mountains, ladies and gentlemen!* — What a sensation he would make!”

It would have been hard, however, to induce him to join the troupe; he evidently preferred the wilds of his forest home to the glories of the showman’s career, for he presently raised himself lazily on all fours, gave a last swing to his big head, and half-trotted himself out of sight.

A return of civilities being always *de rigiieur*, the bear’s parting nod was acknowledged by the polite raising of Sander’s hat. John would much rather have raised his gun for him to the level of his shoulder; but what could he do?

At six in the evening, another halt in very analogous conditions to those of the previous evening. Next morning another start at five o’clock and another day’s painful progress. Always plenty of toiling, but thus far no accident.

And now the worst of the journey was over, since the *Fair Rambler* had now reached the culminating point of the pass, the very apex of the defile. There was nothing left now but to go down the western slopes of the mountain toward Europe.

That evening, the 6th of July, the worn-out team stopped at the entrance into a sinuous gorge, flanked on the right by a thick wood.

The heat had been stifling all the day. To the east, heavy clouds stood out in bold relief against the pale vapors of the horizon, thanks to the long well-marked streak that formed their basis.

“There is a storm coming on,” said John.

“Worse luck!” replied Ortik. “In the Urals, storms are terrible sometimes!”

“Well, we shall get under shelter,” rejoined Mr. Cascabel. “I’d rather have the storms than the wolves!”

“Kayette,” said Napoleona to the young Indian girl, “are you afraid of thunder?”

“Not at all, my pet,” replied Kayette.

“You are quite right too, little Kayette,” remarked John “You must not be afraid!”

“That’s all very fine!” answered his sister. “But when you can’t help yourself!”

“Oh, the little coward!” cried Sander. “Why, you silly girl, thunder is only a game of skittles with very big bowls.”

“Yes, bowls of fire that come down on your head, sometimes!” retorted the little girl, just as a sudden flash of lightning made her close her eyelids.

They hastened to organize the encampment so that every one might get under cover before the storm came on. Then, after supper, it was arranged that the men would keep watch as during the preceding nights.

Mr. Sergius was going to offer his services when Ortik anticipated him, saying:

“Would you like Kirschef and me to take the first watch to-night?”

“As you like,” answered Mr. Sergius. “At midnight, John and I will come and relieve you.”

“That’s settled, Mr. Sergius!” said Ortik.

Natural as this proposal was, it drew Kayette’s attention, and vaguely, almost without a thought, she felt a presentiment of something wrong being in contemplation.

Just now, the storm burst out with great violence. Flashes of lightning cast their fitful rays through the summits of the trees and the roll of the thunder traversing the space was over and over re-echoed through the mountains.

Napoleona, the better to shut her eyes and her ears, had covered herself up in her little bed. She soon had imitators. though not through the same cause, and by nine o’clock, all inside the *Fair Rambler* were fast asleep despite the roar of thunder and the hissing of the gale.

Kayette alone was not sleeping. She had not undressed, and though almost exhausted with fatigue, she could not rest for a moment. She shuddered with anguish when she thought that the safety of all those dear ones was intrusted to the keeping of the two Russian sailors. And so, after a long hour had passed, she should ascertain what they were doing: she raised the curtain of the little window above her couch, and peeped out.

Ortik and Kirschef had just interrupted the conversation they were having together, and were moving toward the opening of the gorge, where a man had suddenly appeared.

Ortik immediately beckoned to the latter not to come nearer for fear of the dogs; indeed, under ordinary circumstances, Wagram and Marengo would already have announced his approach, but, owing to the stifling temperature, they had sought a shelter under the *Fair Rambler*.

Ortik and Kirschef went over to the man, a few words were exchanged, and by the light of a flash, Kayette saw that the sailors followed him under the trees.

Who was he, why had the sailors communicated with him, were things that should be found out at once.

Slowly, softly, Kayette slipped out without disturbing a single one of her companions. As she passed by John, she heard him pronouncing her name —

Had he seen her?

No! John was dreaming, dreaming of her!

Noiselessly she opened the door and slid it back again, and when she found herself outside:

“Now!” she whispered to herself.

No fear, no hesitation even, was there in the young woman’s breast. Still, it was her life she risked if ever she was discovered.

Kayette plunged into the forest, the underwood of which flared up as if with the glare of a huge conflagration whenever a flash of lightning rent the clouds above. Creeping along the thicket, in the middle of tall grass, she reached the trunk of an enormous larch tree. A whisper she heard some twenty paces beyond, caused her to stop where she was.

Seven men were there; Ortik and Kirschef had joined them; they were all under a tree, and this is what Kayette overheard of the conversation, carried on in Russian.

“Devilish lucky,” said Ortik, “that I took the Petchora pass! A fellow is always sure to meet old chums this way! Am I right, Rostof?”

Rostof was the man that Ortik and Kirschef had perceived by the edge of the wood.

“We have been following that wagon these two days,” said he; “on the quiet, of course. As we had recognized your two faces in there, we thought there might be a good job on, perhaps.”

“A good job, or may-be two,” answered Ortik.

“But where do you come from?” inquired Rostof.

“Right away from America, where we had joined the Karnof fellows.”

“And these people you are with, what are they?”

“French show people, of the name of Cascabel, coming home to Europe. We have a long tale of traveling adventures to tell you some other time. Let me come to the chief thing — ”

“Ortik,” interrupted one of the men, “is there any coin in that wagon?”

“A remnant of two or three thousand roubles.”

“And you have not taken French leave of those French people yet?” asked Rostof with a sneer.

“No, there is a bigger haul to make than a paltry thing like that; and we wanted more hands.”

“What is it?”

“Well, listen here. If Kirschef and I have managed to come all the way through Siberia, without any risk and cross the frontier, it’s thanks to these Cascabels. But what we have done, there is another man that has done it, too, in the hope that no one would go ferret him out among a lot of acrobats. He is a Russian, who has no more right than we have to set his foot in Russia, although the charges against him aren’t the same color as ours. He is a political convict, a man of what they call noble birth, and as much fortune as you like. Now, his secret is known to nobody but the said Cascabel and his wife — ”

“How did you come to know it?”

“By a conversation we overheard the other day at Mouji between the showman and his Russian friend.”

“And his name is — ?”

“For the world at large, his name is Sergius; but in reality it is Count Narkine; and it’s as much as his life is worth, if ever he is caught on Russian ground.”

“Wait till I think,” said Rostof. “Count Narkine — Isn’t that the son of Prince Narkine, the same that was transported to Siberia, and they made such fuss about him when he escaped out of it, a few years ago?”

“That’s the man!” answered Ortik. “Well, Count Narkine has millions of roubles, and I reckon he won’t fight shy of giving us one, — if we threaten to give him up to the police!”

“That’s a mighty good idea, Ortik! But what’s the use of us in that concern?”

“Because it must not look as if Kirschef and me had anything to do with this first job, so that if it turned out no good, we might fall back on the other. For this card to turn up trump, we two must remain for the present as we are, the two shipwrecked Russian mariners, saved and brought home by the Cascabels. By and by, when we have got rid of them, we can roam over the whole country, and the police will never dream of suspecting us when we’ve got our tights on.”

“Say, Ortik, shall we attack you to-night, and pounce on Count Narkine, and let him know our price for keeping mum?”

“Not yet, not yet!” said the sailor. “As the count means to push on as far as Perm to see his old father, better let him go all the way. When he is there, one fine morning, he’ll get a note requesting him to come to a certain rendezvous — for a very urgent affair — and then you can have the pleasure of making his acquaintance.”

“Just now, there is nothing to be done, then?”

“Nothing at all, but try and get on ahead of us, and be in Perm a little before our caravan.”

“Right you are!” answered Rostof.

And the wretches parted, without the least suspicion of having been watched.

Ortik and Kirschef returned to the encampment a few moments after Kayette, and concluded from the general stillness that their absence had passed off unnoticed.

And now Kayette was in possession of the plan of these monsters. She had learnt, moreover, that Mr. Sergius was Count Narkine, and that his very life was threatened, as well as that of her French friends. The secret that had hitherto sheltered him was going to be betrayed, if he did not consent to part with a portion of his fortune!

Terrified at her discovery, she felt for a few moments crushed under its blow, but her resolute determination to foil Ortik’s designs soon overcame all other feelings, and she strove to think out the means of doing so. What a night she spent! What anxious hours she lay there thinking, and thinking.

Might not all this have been a horrible dream?

No, it was indeed a reality.

And poor Kayette could entertain no doubt about it, when, next morning, she heard Ortik say to her good Mr. Cascabel:

“You know we intended, Kirschef and myself, to leave you when we got over the mountain, and make our way to Riga. Well, we have been thinking we had better go with you to Perm and ask the governor, there, to send us home. Would it be the same to you to let us go on with you?”

“Why, of course, my friends!” answered Cascabel. “When people have come such a distance together, they should keep together to the last. Parting always comes too soon.”

CHAPTER XII.

A JOURNEY’S END WHICH IS NOT THE END.

SUCH was, then, the abominable plot now in course of execution against Count Narkine and the Cascabel family! And that, at the very moment when, after so much toil and so many dangers, the journey was drawing so near to a successful termination! Two or three days more, the chain of the Ural would be left behind, and 300 miles to the southwest would bring them to Perm.

It will be remembered that Cæsar Cascabel had made up his mind to sojourn for some time in that town, so that Mr. Sergius might have every facility to repair to Walska every night, and without exposing himself. After which, according to circumstances, the count would remain in his ancestral home, or would come with him to Nijni, — perhaps to France even!

Quite so! But in the event of Mr. Sergius not leaving Perm, they should have to part with Kayette, who would, of course, remain with him!

That is what John went on repeating to himself, what unmanned him, what broke his heart. And John’s grief, so true, so deep, was shared by his father and his mother, his brother and his little sister. None of them could resign themselves to the thought of seeing Kayette no more!

That morning, John, more sad at heart than ever, came to the young girl and observed her pale, drawn features, her eyes red for want of sleep:

“Little Kayette,” said he, “what is wrong?”

“Nothing wrong with me, John!”

“Yes, there is! You are ill! You did not sleep. Why, you really look as if you had cried!”

“It is last night’s storm! I could not close my eyes all the night.”

“That long journey has told greatly on you, has it not?”

“Not in the least, John. I am strong. Have I not been used to all sorts of hardships? I shall soon get over that.”

“Then, what is wrong with you, Kayette? Do tell me, I beseech you!”

“Indeed, I am all right, John.”

And John insisted no further.

Seeing the poor fellow so unhappy, Kayette had been well-nigh telling him everything. It pained her to have a secret from him! But knowing his strength of feeling, she said to herself he might not contain himself perhaps in the presence of Kirschef and Ortik. His indignation might get the better of him — the least act of imprudence might cost Count Narkine his life; and Kayette had kept silent.

After long consideration, she determined to communicate all she had heard to Mr. Cascabel. But she should have an opportunity of being alone with him, and during the crossing of the Ural this would be a difficult matter, for it was important that the two sailors should suspect nothing.

As to that, there was plenty of time yet, since the miscreants were to make no move till the troupe reached Perm.

So long as Mr. Cascabel and his people would continue to be the same as they now were toward the sailors, the suspicions of the latter would not be aroused; and it may be mentioned, in this connection, that, on hearing that Ortik and Kirschef intended remaining with the troupe as far as Perm, Mr. Sergius had readily expressed his satisfaction thereat.

At six in the morning on the 7th of July, the *Fair Rambler* resumed its journey. One hour later, they were at the first springs of the River Petchora, after which the pass is named. Beyond the mountain range, this river becomes one of the most important in northern Russia, and after a course of 1350 kilometers throws itself into the Arctic Sea.

At this elevation in the pass, the Petchora was yet but a torrent, rushing through a ravined and sinuous bed, at the foot of tall groves of firs and pine trees. Its left bank would prove a safe track right on to the mouth of the pass, and, with some caution in the steeper parts, the descent would be accomplished rapidly.

Throughout this day Kayette could not find an opportune moment for her private talk with Mr. Cascabel. Nor did she fail to observe that there were now no private whisperings between the two Russians, either; no more lurking away on their part at halting time, — what could have been their motive for such maneuvering now? Their accomplices had gone ahead, for a certainty, and not before reaching Perm did the sailors expect to meet them again.

The following day yielded a good day’s work. The defile, now wider, afforded a better road for the wagon. They could hear the Petchora, deeply incased between its banks, rumbling over its rocky bed. As the pass assumed a less wild aspect, it also became more frequented. Traders were now met, with a bundle on their shoulders and an iron-tipped stick in their hand, tramping their way from Europe to Asia. Bands of miners, on their journey to or from the mines, exchanged a word or two with our party. On coming out of the gorges, a few farms or small villages would now greet the sight. Away to the south, the Denejkin and the Kontchakov overtopped this part of the Urals.

After a night's rest, the little caravan reached the extremity of the Petchora pass, about twelve o'clock. It had at last crossed the entire width of the chain and had set foot on European soil.

Another stage of 350 versts, and Perm would reckon "one more house and one more family within its walls," as Mr. Cascabel used to put it.

"Well, my word!" he would add. "A nice old ramble we have had, my friends!... Say, was I not right!... There are more ways to get home than one! Instead of coming into Russia by one side, we came by the other! Well, what's the difference, so long as France is over there?"

And, had he been urged on, ever so little, the good man would have stated his belief that he already recognized the air of Normandy, wafted eastward across the whole of Europe, and that he could swear to it by the little sniff of sea breeze that was in it.

Just outside the defile was a zavody, consisting of some fifty houses and a few hundred inhabitants.

It was decided that they would halt here till the following day to renew certain provisions, and among others, the stock of flour, tea, and sugar.

At the same time Mr. Sergius and John were able to get powder and shot and replenish their exhausted ammunition stores.

They had no sooner returned than Mr. Sergius called out:

“And now, come along, friend John! Shoulder your gun, and we shall not return with an empty bag.”

“As you like, sir,” replied John, more through courtesy than for his own pleasure.

Poor fellow! The thought of the now imminent parting made him careless of everything.

“Will you come with us, Ortik?” asked Mr. Sergius.

“With pleasure, sir.”

“Try to bring me home some choice game,” recommended Mrs. Cascabel, “and I promise you a good supper.”

As it was only two in the afternoon, the sportsmen had ample time to search the woods in the neighborhood, even if the thickets had not swarmed with game as they did.

Mr. Sergius, John, and Ortik started off accordingly, while Kirschef and Clovy looked after the reindeer, and prepared a park for them under the trees in the corner of a meadow, where they could graze and ruminate at ease.

Meanwhile, Cornelia was returning to the *Fair Rambler*, where there was plenty of work to be done:

“Now then, Napoleona!”

“Here I am, mother!”

“And Kayette?”

“Going at once, madame!”

But this was the very opportunity Kayette had watched for, so anxiously, to be alone with the head of the family.

“Mr. Cascabel,” she said, going over to him.

“Well, my pet?”

“I should like to speak to you.”

“To speak to me?”

“Yes, privately.”

“Privately?”

Then, mentally, he asked himself:

“What can my little Kayette want to see me for? — Might it be about my poor John?”

And both walked a short distance away, to the left of the zavody.

“Well, my dear child,” asked Cascabel, after a while, “what is your wish? What is this private talk about?”

“Mr, Cascabel, these three days I have been longing to speak to you, without anybody hearing us or even seeing us.”

“Why, it must be a, very serious matter, my darling.”

“Mr. Cascabel, I know that Mr. Sergius is Count Narkine?”

“Eh? — Count Narkine?” stammered Cascabel. “You know? — And how did you come to know that?”

“Through those who were listening to you while you spoke with Mr. Sergius, the other evening at Mouji.”

“Can that be?”

“And, in my turn, I overheard them conversing about Count Narkine and about you, unknown to them.”

“Who are they?”

“Ortik and Kirschef.”

“What! — They know?”

“Yes, sir, and they know, besides, that Mr. Sergius is a political convict who is returning to Russia to see his father, Prince Narkine.”

Cæser Cascabel, stupefied at what he had heard, stood for a moment, dazed, his arms hanging helplessly, his mouth gaping. Then, collecting his ideas:

“I am sorry,” he said, “that Ortik and Kirschef should know the secret; but since, by an unfortunate accident, they have come to hear of it, I am sure they won’t betray it!”

“It is not by accident, and they *will* betray it.”

“What, honest sailors as they are!”

“Mr. Cascabel, listen: Count Narkine runs the greatest danger.”

“Eh?”

“Ortik and Kirschef are two criminals who belonged to Karnof’s band. They are the men who attacked Count Narkine on the Alaskan frontier. After embarking at Port Clarence to get across to Siberia, they were cast on the Liakhov Islands, where we found them. As they know that the Count’s life is in danger if he is recognized on Russian territory, they will demand a large portion of his fortune from him, and if he refuses, they will denounce him to the police, — And then, Mr. Sergius is done for, and so are you, perhaps!”

While Gascabel, crushed by this revelation, listened in silence, Kayette explained to him how the two sailors had always excited her suspicions. It was but too true that she had heard Kirschef’s voice before. Now, she fully remembered it! It was on that frightful night when the two ruffians had attacked Count Narkine. And now, a few nights ago, while they were on guard together, she had seen them going away from the encampment with a man who had come for them; she had followed them, and she had been the unsuspected witness, of a conversation between them and seven or eight of their old accomplices — All Ortik’s plans were now unveiled. After bringing the “Fair Rambler” round by the Petchora pass, where he was sure to meet numbers of malefactors, he had at first thought of murdering Mr. Sergius and the whole of the little caravan; but, hearing that Mr. Sergius was Count Narkine, he had said to himself that it was better to extort an enormous sum of money from him under threat of being handed over to the Russian authorities... They would wait till all had reached Perm. Neither of the two sailors would appear in this business, in order to keep their position with the troupe, in the event of a failure. It was their associates who would communicate with Mr. Sergius by a letter, asking him for an interview, etc. etc.

It was with the utmost difficulty Cascabel could control his rage while Kayette told her tale of horrors. Such monsters! To whom he had rendered so many services, whom he had delivered from prison, whom he had fed and brought back to their country! — Well, a nice present, a precious restitution he was making to the empire of the Czar! The fiends! The —

“And now, Mr. Cascabel,” asked Kayette, “what are you going to do?”

“What am I going to do, pet? Why, it’s very simple; I am going to denounce Ortik and Kirschef to the very first post of Cossacks we meet, and they’ll swing for it!”

“Think, sir,” replied the young girl, “you can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because the first thing the two men will do will be to betray Count Narkine, and, along with him, those who have been the means of his returning to Russia.”

“Devil may care for what concerns me!” exclaimed Cascabel. “If I was the only one in question — But Mr. Sergius is another thing! You are right, Kayette; I must think it over.”

So saying, he moved on a few paces, a prey to the wildest agitation, striking his head with his fist as though in the hope of knocking an idea out of it. Then, retracing his steps toward the young girl:

“You tell me distinctly,” he asked, “that it is Ortik’s intention to wait till we reach Perm before setting his accomplices to work?”

“Yes, Mr. Cascabel; and he recommended them, above all, to make no move whatever until then. So, I should think we must have patience and continue the journey to the end.”

“That’s hard!” interrupted Cascabel, “very hard! — Keep them with us, bring them along with us to Perm. shaking hands with them at night, showing them a friendly face — By the blood of my fathers, I don’t know what keeps me from going at them this minute, and wringing their necks like so — just like — so — ”

And in a paroxysm of rage, Cæser Cascabel worked the muscles of his sinewy hands as if he had been in reality making Ortik and Kirschef pay the penalty of their many crimes.

“You know you must control yourself, Mr. Cascabel,” said Kayette. “You are supposed to know nothing — ”

“You are quite right, my child.”

“I’ll only ask you if you would think well of warning Mr. Sergius?”

“No — the more I think of it — no! It seems to me wiser not to tell him. What could he do? — Nothing — I am there to watch over him — and I will! Besides I know him well! Rather than expose us to any danger, he might give a good tug to the left while we’d be pulling to the right. No — for a certainty, no! I’ll say nothing to him.”

“And will you say nothing to John?”

“To John, little Kayette? Not a word! He is a passionate youth! He could not keep quiet in the face of those abominable creatures! He can’t control himself like his father! I know he would burst out! No, not a word to John any more than to Mr. Sergius!”

“And Madame Cascabel, won’t you tell her?”

“Ah, Madame Cascabel — that’s another question. She is a superior woman, you know, able to give an advice — and a helping hand, too! I never had a secret from her, and beside she knows all about Count Narkine — yes, I will tell her! That woman, you could give her State secrets to keep — rather than betray them she’d let her tongue be cut out; what more could you expect from a woman? — Yes, I will tell her!”

“Now, ought we not go back to the *Fair Rambler*?” suggested the young girl; “for our absence must not be remarked.”

“You are right, little Kayette, always right.”

“Above all, control yourself, won’t you, Mr. Cascabel, when you see those two men before you?”

“It will be hard, my child, but never fear, I’ll have a smile for them — the wretches! To think that we soiled ourselves with their contact. And that’s the reason, is it? — why they told me they would not go directly to Riga! They would honor us with their company right in to Perm! The scoundrels! The ruffians! The devils!”

And Mr. Cascabel exhausted on them all the most formidable epithets in his vocabulary.

“If that is the way you are going to contain yourself — ”

"No, little Kayette, never fear! I am relieved now! You see it was choking me, strangling me! I'll be cool now. I am so, already! Let us go back to the *Fair Rambler*. What fiends!"

And both returned toward the zavody. Neither of them spoke now. They were absorbed in their thoughts. So marvelous a trip, but yesterday on the eve of completion, and now on the brink of so fatal an issue through this odious plot!

As they neared home, Mr. Cascabel stopped:

"Little Kayette?" he said.

"Well, sir?"

"On the whole, I have made up my mind not to say anything to Cornelia!"

"Why so?"

"Because, you see — generally speaking I have noticed that a woman keeps a secret all the better as she knows nothing about it. That's why this secret in particular shall remain with both of us!"

One moment later Kayette had returned to her household duties; and as he passed by him. Mr. Cascabel had made a friendly gesture to that "honest Kirschef," while he muttered between his teeth:

"Hasn't he the face of a devil!"

And two hours after, when the sportsmen came home. Ortik was warmly congratulated by the boss on the magnificent deer he brought on his shoulders. On their part, Mr. Sergius and John had shot two hares and a few brace of partridges, so that Cornelia was able to offer her famished guests a sumptuous supper, of which Mr. Cascabel took a large share. Truly, our actor was “splendid”! Not a trace of his anxious thoughts could be detected on his countenance. No one could have supposed that the man was aware there were two murderers at his table, whose ultimate designs were nothing short of the slaughter of himself and family. He was literally in a charming mood, full of fun and communicative mirth, and when Clovy had fetched out one of the “good bottles,” he drank to their return to Europe, their return to Russia, their return to France!

The next day, July the 10th, the team struck directly for Perm. The defile being now cleared, the journey was likely to be accomplished without difficulty, nay, without any incident. The *Fair Rambler* was following the right bank of the Vichera, which skirts the foot of the Ural. Small towns, villages, and farms now dotted the road; hospitable country people, abundant game, and a warm greeting everywhere. The weather, though very hot, was cooled by a little northeast breeze. The reindeer journeyed bravely on, and shook their pretty heads as they went along. Mr. Sergius had gratified them with the help of two horses, which he had bought at the last zavody, and they could now cover up to thirty miles a day.

Truly, this was a glorious *début* for the little troupe on the soil of old Europe! And their manager would have been a happy man indeed, if he had not cause to continually repeat to himself that he had two scoundrels among them:

“And to say that their band has been tracking us like a pack of jackals scenting a caravan! Come, Cæsar Cascabel, you must think of some trick to play those gallows-birds!”

How unlucky that a grand scheme, so skilfully combined, should be disturbed by this fiendish complication. The papers of the Cascabels fulfilled all the necessary formalities; the Russian authorities let Mr. Sergius pass freely as a member of the troupe; and when they arrived at Perm, he could have gone to and fro on his daily visits to Walska, with all possible ease. After seeing his father and staying for some time with him, he could have traversed Russia under his disguise as an "artist" and made his way to France, where he would be in complete safety. And then, no more parting! — Kayette and he would both be of the family! — And later on, who knows if that poor John — really, really, the gallows was not enough for those demons. And Mr. Cascabel, in spite of himself, would burst out into sudden and apparently groundless fits of passion.

And when Cornelia would inquire:

"Cæsar, what can be the matter with you?"

"With me? Nothing!" he would answer.

"Then why do you rage so?"

"I rage, Cornelia, because if I did not rage I should go mad!"

And the good woman was at a loss to find the clue of the enigmatic reply.

Four days passed by in these conditions. Then, some sixty leagues southwest of the Urals, the *Fair Rambler* reached the little town of Solikamsk.

No doubt Ortik's associates could not be far ahead now; but, as a measure of prudence, neither Kirschef nor he made any effort to ascertain the point.

As a matter of fact, Rostof and his companions were there, and would start, that same night, for Perm, just a hundred and fifty miles away to the west. Nothing could now hinder their abominable project.

Next morning, at daybreak, under date of the 17th of July, the Koswa was crossed in a ferry. Three or four days more, and the famous series of performances "by the artists of the Cascabel family, on their way to the Nijni fair," would be commenced at Perm. Such, at least, was the program of the tour.

As to Mr. Sergius, he would at once make the necessary plans for his nightly calls at Walska.

Let his feeling of impatience be imagined, if possible, as well as the anxiety he betrayed when conversing about all this with his friend Cascabel. Ever since he had made his escape, and during the thirteen months of this extraordinary trip from the Alaskan frontier to Europe, he had been without a word from Prince Narkine. Considering the age his father was, even then — was he quite sure he would find him at the chateau still?

"Nonsense, nonsense, Mr. Sergius!" Cæser Cascabel would say. "The prince is in as good health as you or I, and even better! You know I was born for a fortune-teller, and I read the future as easily as the past. Well, I tell you Prince Narkine is now waiting for you, hale and strong, and you shall see him in a few days!"

And Cascabel would have had no hesitation to swear to his prophecy were it not for that cursed Ortik.

"I am not bad-hearted, not I," he would mutter to himself; "but, if I could gnaw his neck off with my teeth, I would — yes, I would, and think he got off cheap!”

Kayette, meanwhile, grew more and more alarmed as they approached nearer to Perm. What decision would Mr. Cascabel take? How would he defeat Ortik’s plans without compromising Mr. Sergius’s safety? It seemed to her almost impossible. And so she found it very hard to conceal her anxiety, and John, ignorant of the cause, suffered cruel tortures, seeing her so uneasy, so downcast at times.

In the forenoon of the 20th of July, the Kama was crossed, and, about five in the evening Mr. Sergius and his companions were already engaged in making their preparations, on the chief square of Perm, for a stay of several days.

One hour had not elapsed before Ortik had communicated with his accomplices, and Rostof was penning a note, which was to reach Mr. Sergius the same day, and in which a rendezvous was given him in one of the taverns of the town, for very urgent business. Should he fail to come, they would see about securing his person, should they even capture him at night on the road to Walska.

At nightfall, when this note was brought by Rostof, Mr. Sergius had already set out for his father’s chateau. Mr. Cascabel, who was by himself just then, gave every token of great surprise on being handed this message. He took it, however, undertaking to deliver it safely, and meanwhile said nothing about it to anybody.

Mr. Sergius’s absence annoyed Ortik. He would rather the attempt at blackmail had been made before the interview between the prince and the count. He concealed his vexed feelings, however, and remarked, as he sat to supper, in the most unconcerned fashion:

“Mr. Sergius is not with us this evening?”

“No,” answered Mr. Cascabel. “He is gone out. Those formalities with the authorities in this country are such a plague!”

“When will he be back?”

“Some time in the evening, I guess.”

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ENDLESS DAY.

THE government of Perm looks as if astride on the back of the Ural, one foot in Asia, the other in Europe. Its boundaries are: the government of Vologdia to the north-west, that of Tobolsk to the east, Viatka to the west, and Orenburg to the south. And accordingly, thanks to this dual situation, its population is a strange mixture of Asiatic and of European types.

Perm, its capital, is a town of 6000 inhabitants, situated on the Kama, and an important center for the metal trade. Previous to the eighteenth century, it was merely a village. But, having been enriched by the discovery of a copper mine in 1723, the village was declared a town in 1781.

Is the latter denomination justified even now? Scarcely, in truth! Monuments, there are none; the streets are for the most part narrow and dirty, the houses destitute of comfort, and the hotels such that no traveler has ever yet taken it into his head to say a word in their favor.

Of course, the Cascabels were but little concerned with the town architect’s business. Did they not prefer their own “home on wheels” to any other? Would they have exchanged it for the New York “St. Nicholas” or the “Grand Hotel” in Paris?

“Just think, will you?” repeated its proud owner. “The *Fair Rambler* has come from Sacramento to Perm! — Only that little trip, that’s all! — Just show me one of your hotels in Paris, London, Vienna, or New York that has ever done as much!”

What answers could be given to arguments of this kind?

On that day, then, Perm had been increased by one house, standing in the very middle of its principal “square,” with the authorization of the civil governor of the place. Nor had the slightest contraction of the official’s brow accompanied his perusal of the artists’ papers.

Immediately on the arrival of the *Fair Rambler*, public curiosity had been on tiptoe: French showmen, just arrived from the depths of America, with a wagon drawn by a team of reindeer! — The profit to be derived from such a bait none knew so well as the eminent manager of the troupe.

As luck would have it, the fair was at its full, and would last a few days longer; some good takings in perspective, therefore! At the same time, not a day was to be lost, for, Perm first, and Nijni after, should yield the wherewith to accomplish the remainder of the journey to France. Beyond that — well, they would trust to Providence, and thus far the Cascabels had not a little to be thankful for.

The consequence of all this was that all hands were at work at early morn. John, Sander, Clovy, and the two Russian sailors vied with each other in their eagerness to prepare all that was necessary for the performance. As to Mr. Sergius, he had not returned as he had promised, — a source of considerable vexation to Ortik, and of some uneasiness to Mr. Cascabel.

Meanwhile, at the earliest moment, a huge bill had been posted up, written in Russian, of course, and in large characters, under the dictation of their absent friend, before his departure.

It read as follows:

THE CASCABEL FAMILY.

French Troupe Returning from America.

Gymnastics, Juggling, Equilibrism, Displays of Muscle and Skill, Dances, Graceful Arts.

Mr. Cascabel, first Hercules in any and every style.

Mme. Cascabel, first wrestler in any and every style, champion of the Chicago International Matches.

Mr. John, first equilibrist in any and every style.

Mr. Sander, clown in any and every style.

Mlle. Napoleona, dancer in any and every style.

Mr. Clovy, pantaloon in any and every style.

Jako, parrot in any and every style.

John Bull, ape in any and every style.

Wagram and Marengo, dogs in any and every style.

GREAT ATTRACTION!

THE BRIGANDS OF THE BLACK FOREST.

A pantomime or dumb show, with a grand wedding and wonderful dénouement. Immense success through three thousand one hundred and seventy-seven performances in France and foreign parts.

N.B. — Needless to say that this being a speechless play and the spoken language being replaced by gestures of all kinds, this masterpiece of the dramatic art can be understood by all, even by those persons afflicted with that much-to-be-regretted ailment, deafness.

For the convenience of the public, admission will be free. The seats will be paid for only when they have been occupied.

Price: 40 Kopecks, *without any distinction.*

Generally, Mr. Cascabel gave his unique performances in the open air, merely describing a circle in front of the *Fair Rambler* with stout posts and fastening canvas thereon; but the grand square in Perm happened to be possessed of a wooden circus for the exercises of the equestrian troupes who might pass that way; and dilapidated as it was, and proof against neither wind nor rain, it was still strong enough, and might accommodate two hundred or two hundred and fifty spectators.

In any case, even in its present state, the "circus" was better than Cascabel's canvas. He had asked the mayor's permission to make use of it during his stay in the town, and this personage had graciously given his consent.

Not to flatter them, these Russians were really good fellows, — although there were Ortiks and beings of that ilk among them. But in what country are they not to be found! As to the circus of the town of Perm, it would not be disgraced by the doings of the Cascabel troup! There was but one thing to be regretted: it was that His Majesty Czar Alexander II did not happen to be passing through this locality. As he was then at St. Petersburg, however, it would have been hard for him to be present at this inaugural performance.

One other trouble for Cæsar Cascabel, was the fear that his staff might have got somewhat rusty in the matter of somersaults, dances, and other practices. The rehearsals, which had been suspended as soon as the *Fair*

Rambler had entered the pass of the Ural, had not been resumed during the remainder of the journey. Pshaw, genuine artists would always be ready to shine in the noble art!

As to the play, it was useless to rehearse it! It had been gone through so often, and without a prompter, that no uneasiness need be had on that score.

And now Ortik found it difficult not to betray the annoyance he felt at Mr. Sergius's prolonged absence. The projected interview not having taken place the night before, he had been obliged to send word to his accomplices that the affair was postponed for twenty-four hours. And meanwhile he kept wondering why Mr. Sergius had not returned, seeing that Mr. Cascabel was distinctly expecting him back in the course of the evening. Had he been detained at the chateau? It was likely; for, there was no doubt as to his having gone there. Ortik should therefore have been less impatient. But it was stronger than himself, and he could not refrain from asking Cascabel if he had heard from the absentee.

“Not a word!” the latter replied.

“I thought you expected him last night?”

“Quite so! Something unforeseen must have happened. It would be a great pity if he could not see our performance. It will be simply marvelous! Wait till you see, Ortik, my friend!”

And Cæsar Cascabel spoke in his jolliest tone of voice; but at heart he was now truly anxious.

The previous day, after promising to be back before day-break, Mr. Sergius had started for Walska. Six versts there, six versts back, a mere nothing.

Now, as there was no sign of him, three suppositions presented themselves to the showman's mind: either he had been arrested before he reached Walska, or he had safely got home but was detained by his father's state of health, or again, he had been captured on his way back during the night. As to supposing that Ortik's companions had drawn him into some ambush, that was out of the question; and to Kayette's suggestion in that direction he unhesitatingly replied:

"No, Kayette, no! That ruffian Ortik would not be so uneasy as he has every appearance of being. He would hardly have inquired as he did after Mr. Sergius if his mates had held him in their clutches. The rascal! So long as I don't see him grinning at the end of a stout rope, there will be something wanting to my happiness here below, Kayette!"

Nor was it to Kayette alone Mr. Cascabel's anxiety was apparent. How often Cornelia would say to him:

"Come, Cæsar, try and be calm. You overexcite yourself! You should be reasonable!"

"Cornelia, 'reasonable' is all very fine! But a man must have grounds for being reasonable. Now, there is no denying the fact that our friend should have been here long since, and that we know absolutely nothing about him."

"Very good, Cæsar; but, since nobody can even suspect that he is Count Narkine."

"No, nobody, unless — "

"What do you mean? '*Unless* — ' Is Clovy's crank '*unless*' your latest fad? What do you mean, I say? You and I are the only two who know Mr. Sergius's secret. Do you imagine, by any chance, that I have let it out?"

"You, Cornelia, fiddlesticks! Nor I, either!"

"Well, then?"

"Well, there are, here in Perm, people who have had dealings with Count Narkine, years ago, and who might very well recognize him. It must seem strange, at first sight, that we should have a Russian amongst us! Then again, Cornelia, it may be that I exaggerate things; but you know, I am so fond of that man, I can't help myself; I must stir about, I must!"

"Cæsar, be careful that you don't excite suspicions with your stirring about! And above all, don't go compromise yourself asking people questions just at the wrong moment. Like yourself, I think this delay very unfortunate, and I do wish Mr. Sergius were here! Still, I don't put the very worst aspect on things; and I am of opinion that he has simply been detained by his father at Walska. Now, during daylight, he is afraid to set out, that's easy to understand, but he will come back after nightfall. So, Cæsar, no nonsense! A little cold blood, if you please, and bear in mind that to-night you are to play *Fracassar*, one of the greatest successes of your professional career."

No sounder reasoning could have been poured into Cascabel's ear, and it may seem strange that he still kept the truth from his sensible wife. Still, after all, he may not have been wrong. Who knows if the impulsive Cornelia would not have broken loose the seal on her lips at the sight of Ortik and Kirschef, when she would know what they were and what they meant to do?

Mr. Cascabel, therefore, held his tongue, and soon left the wagon to go and superintend his installation at the circus. Cornelia, on her part, had not too much of Kayette's and Napoleona's help to examine all the costumes and wigs and accessories for the evening's performance.

The two Russians, too, were busy (so they said) with the many formalities to be fulfilled so as to obtain their being sent home as shipwrecked sailors, — which necessitated numerous calls, and solicitations, and runs hither and thither.

While Mr. Cascabel and Clovy plied the brush and the broom, cleaning the dusty seats of the amphitheater, sweeping the ring, etc. John and Sander brought out and arranged the various objects and utensils indispensable to the several items on the program. This done, they would have to see to what the *impresario* described as "those brand-new sceneries," in which his inimitable artists would play that beautiful pantomimic drama, "The Brigands of the Black Forest."

John was more sad at heart than ever. He, of course, was unaware that Mr. Sergius, in reality a political convict of the name of Count Narkine, could not remain in his country, even if he willed. In his eyes, Mr. Sergius was a wealthy, landed estate owner, returning to his domains, there to settle with his adopted daughter. What a relief to his sorrowing heart, if he had known that a residence in Russia was an impossibility for his respected friend, and that he would leave the country again as soon as he had seen his father; if he could have cherished even a hope that Mr. Sergius would seek a refuge in France, and that Kayette would come with him. In such a case, the parting would have been postponed for a few weeks. It would have been a few weeks more for them to live near each other.

“Yes,” John sighed to himself. “Mr. Sergius is going to stay here, and Kayette will remain with him! In a few days we shall be off, and then — I shall see her no more. Dear little Kayette! She will be happy in Mr. Sergius’s grand house — and still!”

And the poor fellow’s heart sank within him as he thought over all these things.

It was now nine o’clock; Mr. Sergius had given no sign of life yet. What Cornelia had said was turning out true: he should not be expected now before night time, or at least before it was so late that he would not run the risk of being recognized on the road.

“If that be so,” soliloquized Mr. Cascabel, “he will not even be in time for the performance. Well, so much the better! I won’t be sorry for it! A pretty turnout it will be for the first appearance of the Cascabel family on the boards of the Perm circus! With all this worry, I shall be a complete failure in Fracassar, after the glorious figure I have cut, up to this, in that good man’s skin. Cornelia, let her deny it as she will, will be on thorns and needles all the time. Then there is John, who’ll think of nothing but his little Kayette. Sander and Napoleona are ready to blubber out even now at the thought of her going away — what a fiasco! Clovy, my old fellow, the honor of the Cascabels depends on you this night!”

And as the disheartened manager could not keep still in any one place, the idea struck him to go news-hunting. In a town like Perm, news travels fast! The Narkines were well known and equally loved. In the event of the Count having fallen into the hands of the police, the rumor of his arrest would have spread like wildfire; it would be the topic of every conversation; nay, the prisoner would already be awaiting his sentence under lock and key in the fortress of Perm, by this time.

So, Clovy was left to finish the preparations of the circus, and his “boss” set off on his ramble through the town, along the riverside, where the watermen and their kin mostly congregate, away in the upper town, down in the lower districts; nowhere did the population seem in any way disturbed from its daily humdrum life. He joined the groups of gossipers here and there; he listened without appearing to do so. — Nothing! — Not a word that could have a reference to Count Narkine.

Not satisfied even with this, he strolled away along the road to Walska, by which the police would have brought back Mr. Sergius if they had taken him prisoner. Whenever he saw a group of wayfarers at a distance, he imagined it was a platoon of Cossacks escorting his friend.

In the chaotic state of his brains, Mr. Cascabel had almost ceased to think of his wife, his children, or himself, terribly compromised though he would be in the event of Count Narkine’s arrest. For it would have been the easiest thing for the authorities to ascertain by what means he had succeeded in re-entering the Russian Empire, and who the good people were who had aided and abetted him. And the Cascabels might have to pay a dear price for their kind-heartedness.

Of all this going and coming on the part of Mr. Cascabel, and of his long watching on the Walska road, the result was that he was not at the circus when a man called and asked to see him at about ten o’clock in the morning.

Clovy was the sole tenant of the place at the time, and was working away in the middle of a cloud of dust that rose from the circus track. Out of this cloud he emerged on perceiving the visitor, who turned out to be a simple *moujik*; and both stood facing each other. Clovy being just as ignorant of the language of the said moujik as the said moujik was unacquainted with Clovy's, the conversation presented insurmountable difficulties. Not a syllable did Clovy understand when the man told him he wished to see his master, and that he had come to look for him at the circus before going to the *Fair Rambler*. All this was Greek to poor Clovy, the which the moujik perceiving, he ended as he should have begun, and presented him a letter directed to Monsieur Cascabel.

This time Clovy was up to the emergency. A letter bearing the famous name of the Cascabels could only be for the head of the family — unless it were for Mrs. Cornelia, or Mr. John, or Master Sander, or Missie Napoleona.

Clovy took it, and, by means of those cosmopolitan gesticulations, intelligible, it would seem, to mankind at large, he gave the moujik to understand that it was O.K. and that the letter would reach its destination safely, thanks to himself; whereupon he showed him to the door with any amount of bowing and scraping, but without having been able to gather the smallest conception of where he came from or who had sent him.

A quarter of an hour later, Clovy was preparing to return to the wagon, when Mr. Cascabel, more broken-down, more careworn than ever, appeared at the entrance of the circus,

"Here you are, sir!" he called.

"Well?"

"I've a letter here!"

"A letter?"

"Yes, a letter that has just been brought."

“For me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“By whom?”

“What they call a *moujik* here.”

“A moujik?”

“Yes — unless it’s something else!”

During this purportless preamble, Mr. Cascabel had seized the letter, and on recognizing Mr. Sergius’s hand-writing, he had grown so pale that his faithful attendant startled:

“What’s up now, boss?”

“Nothing.”

Nothing, indeed! And yet our strong-nerved man was well-nigh fainting in Clovy’s arms.

What did Mr. Sergius say in that letter? Why did he write to Mr. Cascabel? Evidently to explain the cause of his absence. Could it be that he was arrested?

Mr. Cascabel tore open the letter, rubbed his right eye, then his left eye, and then ran right through the contents.

What a cry he uttered! — some such cry as escapes out of a strangled throat! His face convulsed, his eyes colorless, his features paralyzed by a nervous contraction, he strove to speak, but could not articulate a single sound.

Clovy thought his boss was going to be choked out of existence, and set about undoing his neck-cloth.

Be it the dread lest Clovy should call for help, be it that even this terrific emotion had to yield to the iron will of our hero, he seemed suddenly to recover himself by a superhuman effort, and assuming a mysterious look:

“Clovy,” he said, “you are a discreet fellow?”

“I guess I am, boss. Did I ever let the cat out of the bag, unless — ”

“That’s enough; listen! You see this letter?”

“The moujik’s letter?”

“That very same! Well, should you ever tell anybody I have received it — ”

“Yes!”

“Should you ever tell John, or Sander, or Napoleona — ”

“Right you are!”

“Or above all, Cornelia, my wife, I swear I’ll get you stuffed for a freak!”

“Alive?”

“Yes, alive, so that you may feel it, you fool!”

And before such an awful threat, Clovy trembled from head to foot.

Then, his master, taking him by the shoulder, whispered in his ear with an air of princely complacency:

“She is tremendously jealous — is Cornelia! You see, Clovy, my boy, a man is a good-looking fellow, or he is not! A lovely woman — a Russian princess! — you understand — This is a note from her to me. Now that’ll never fall to your lot, with such a nose as that!”

“Never,” re-echoed Clovy, “unless — ”

But, what that restriction could mean in Clovy’s mind was never ascertained!

CHAPTER XIV.

A DENOUEMENT WARMLY APPLAUDED BY THE SPECTATORS.

THE play, which bore the equally new and attractive title, “The Brigands of the Black Forest,” was a remarkable work of art. Composed in strict accordance with the ancient precepts of dramaturgy, it was based on the unity of time, action, and place. Its introduction neatly defined the characters of the various personages, the plot worked them well into a powerful imbroglio, the *dénouement* cleverly disentangled the plot; and, though foreseen, the issue produced, none the less, a very great effect. Nor did it lack even the sensational scene so loudly insisted upon by our modern critics, and that scene was a success.

For the rest, the public should have been ill-advised to expect from the Cascabel family one of those modern-taste plays, where all the details of private life are laid in the nude on the stage; where, if crime does not actually triumph, virtue is at times but sparingly rewarded. No, at the closing scene of the “Brigands of the Black Forest,” innocence was acknowledged according to the rule, and wickedness met with due punishment under the most convenient form. The police suddenly appeared, just as all seemed hopelessly lost, and when they laid hand on the brigand, the hall broke out with loud cheers.

No doubt about it, the piece would have been written in a simple, powerful, personal style, respectful of grammar, and free from those pretentious neologisms, those documentary expressions and realistic terms of the new school, — if it had been written. But it was not written any more than spoken, and hence it could be played on all the stages, as on all the trestles, of the two worlds. An immense advantage this is for dumb shows, not to speak of the many errors of grammar and of orthoepy, which are entirely avoided in this kind of literature.

A remark has been made above anent the style of drama that should not be expected from the Cascabel family. The simple fact is that Cæser Cascabel himself was the composer of the particular masterpiece in question. “Masterpiece” is the word, since, adding up the old world with the new, it had been played three thousand one hundred and seventy-seven times! And he had so contrived it as to bring out in striking relief the special talents of the individual members of his troupe, talents so varied and so real that no such galaxy of artists had ever been presented to the public by the manager of any company, whether stationary or itinerant.

The masters of the contemporaneous drama have very justly laid down the principle: “On the stage you must always make your audience laugh or cry, or else they will yawn.” Well, if all the dramatist’s art is contained in that axiom, “The Brigands of the Black Forest” deserves to be styled a masterpiece a hundred times over. The spectators laugh even to tears, and weep — to tears likewise. There is not a scene, nor part of a scene, where the most heedless looker-on experiences the desire to open his mouth to yawn; and should that sensation, perchance, force itself upon him as the result of a dyspeptic affection, the incipient awn would surely be turned to a sob or a chuckle.

Like all well-planned dramas, this one was clear, rapid, simple in its evolution as in its conception. The facts followed each other in such logical succession as to suggest the probability of their having happened in the real world.

Let the reader judge of it by the following necessarily succinct account.

It was the story of two lovers who worshiped each other, — and for convenience sake, let it be stated, right here, that Napoleona was the fair loved one, and Sander was the young swain. But alas, Sander is poor, and Napoleona's mother, the haughty Cornelia, will not hear of the match!

The particularly new point in the plot is that "the course of true love" is, in addition, prevented from "running smooth" by the presence of a long, lanky suitor, Clovy, with pockets as full of gold as his skull is void of brain; and that the mother — here perhaps the author's inventive genius shines forth with more *eclat* still — the mother, who has an eye to the gold, does not ask better than to give him her daughter.

It would be really difficult to weave a plot more dexterously or to render it more interesting. Needless to say that silly Clovy never opens his lips, but the audience expects him to drop some absurd saying or another. He is ridiculous in his person, ridiculous in his disjointed gait, and has a habit of poking his overgrown nasal appendix everywhere. And when he stalks forward with his two wedding presents, John Bull, the ape, grinning from ear to ear, and Jako, the parrot (the only one of all the artists who speaks in this piece), the effect is side-splitting.

The boisterous laughter soon subsides, however, before the profound grief of the two young people, who can see each other only by stealth.

And now the fatal day has come for the sealing of the union, forced by Cornelia upon her daughter. Napoleona has been decked in the most charming style, but her tearful face is the picture of despair. And truly, it is a crime to give away the pretty little dove to that ugly-looking stork.

All this takes place on the village green in front of the church. The bell rings; the doors are thrown open; the bridal cortege has but to enter. Sander is there kneeling on the marble steps; they will have to trample him under foot. It is heartrending.

Suddenly, a young warrior appears, and the canvas walls tremble at his presence. It is John, the brother of the broken-hearted bride. He is returning from the wars, after conquering all his enemies, — whose names may vary according to the country in which the play is acted, Englishmen in America, Russians in Turkey, Frenchmen in Germany, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

The brave and affectionate John arrives in the nick of time, and will very quickly settle matters his own way. He has heard that Sander dotes on Napoleona, and that she is equally enamoured of him. Straightway, having spun Clovy around with a twist of his powerful arm, he challenges him to fight, and the half-witted fellow is seized with such a fright that he gladly gives up all claims to his bride.

This will be readily acknowledged to be a well-filled drama, and a lively succession of events. But the end has not come yet.

The repentant bridegroom turns toward Cornelia to release her of her promise. Cornelia has disappeared. There is a general rush in search of her — She is nowhere to be seen!

Presently cries are heard from the depths of the neighboring forest. Sander recognizes the voice of Cornelia, and although his future mother-in-law is in question, he does not hesitate — he flies to her help. Evidently, the proud lady has been kidnapped by Fracassar’s band, perhaps by Fracassar himself, the famous brigand chief of the Black Forest.

As a matter of fact, that is precisely what has happened. While John keeps close to his sister to protect her in case of need, Clovy tugs at the church bell and alarms the villagers. A shot is heard — The public pants for breath. It would be hard for the stage to tax the fibers of the human heart farther.

It is at this moment that Mr. Cascabel, in the full Calabrian costume of the terrible Fracassar, appears on the scene at the head of his men, carrying off Cornelia in spite of her masculine resistance. But the heroic youth returns with a brigade of policemen, booted right up to the hip. His mother-in-law is delivered, the brigands are captured, and the happy Sander marries his beloved Napoleona.

It is but right to add that, owing to the small number of the performers, the main body of the brigands never appears on the scene, nor does the full platoon of policemen. On Clovy devolves the task of imitating their various cries and shouts behind the scenes, and he does it so perfectly as to deceive the hearers. As to the captain of the brigands, he has to put the handcuffs on his own hands for want of available supernumeraries. Withal, it could not be repeated too emphatically, the effect of this finale — thanks to its eloquent rendering — is extraordinary.

Such then was the offspring of Cæser Cascabel’s mighty brain, which was about being played at the circus of Perm. Certain it was of its usual success, provided the interpreters should be up to the standard of the piece.

Generally speaking, they were so: Mr. Cascabel was as terrible as any bandit could look; Cornelia was infatuated with her noble birth and fortune; John, a true knight (old style), Sander very sympathetic, Napoleona such as would move the heart of a stone.

But, it must be confessed, the Cascabel family was not up to its habitual merry pitch on this occasion. Sad looks and sad hearts were the order of the day; and on the "histrionic boards," what would become of the necessary spirit? The play of the features would be uncertain, the gesture-replies would not be given with the required clearness. Perhaps the tearful episodes might be more life-like since everybody felt inclined to weep; but whenever fun and frolic held their court, the piece was likely to prove, as its author had said, a painful fiasco.

The noon-day meal was laid on the table. At the sight of the still vacant chair, — bitter foretaste of the approaching parting, — the general gloom became more intense, if possible. Nobody was hungry, nobody was thirsty. There was more than enough to exasperate the meekest of managers. Cascabel could not stand it, and he would not if he could. He had eaten as much as four navvies and drank in proportion. Why should others act differently?

"Now then!" he exclaimed. "Is this going to last much longer? I see nothing but faces as long as my arm, all around the table; to begin with you, Cornelia, and end with you, Napoleona. Why, Clovy is the only one whose face is about half admissible! Now I won't have that, I say I won't have it, at all! I must have cheerful people about me! To-night everybody must act his part with a smile on his face, and put plenty of 'go' into it, and bring down the house! I say everybody must — or, by the blood of my fathers — !"

This was the *ne plus ultra* of Cascabel's wrath, and whenever he uttered the fearful threat, the hearers knew there was nothing left them but to obey.

This terrific explosion, however, had in no way interfered with the bringing forth of a new idea in the fruitful brain of the said Cascabel, an event of habitual occurrence in all critical circumstances.

He had resolved on complementing his play, or rather in adding to the strength of his mise en schie; in what manner will be known forthwith.

It has been said that, hitherto, for lack of hands, the brigands and their pursuers were wisely kept out of sight. The brigand Fracassar-Cascabel was a host in himself. Still, he thought very judiciously that the piece would be more effective if there was a general muster of all the actors in the drama, in the final scene.

He should see to recruiting a few supers for this occasion. And, as good luck would have it, had he not Ortik and Kirschef just at hand? Why should these two "honest sailors" decline to play the part of highwaymen?

Before he left the stormy dinner-table, he explained the situation to the former, and added:

"How would you two like to take a part in the performance as robbers? You would render me a real service, friends!"

"Why, of course!" said Ortik. "I don't ask better, nor Kirschef, either; do you, mate?"

Kirschef assented at once, it being naturally the interest of the two ruffians to be on the best terms with their hosts.

"That's all right, then, my friends," continued Mr. Cascabel. "Besides, you will only have to come on with me when I appear on the scene, just at the winding up, and you'll have to do just like me: roll your eyes around, throw your arms and legs about, and roar with rage. You'll see: it's the easiest thing out! I'll bet a hundred to one you'll make a prodigious hit!"

Then, after a moment’s thought:

“By the way, the two of you will only make two brigands. That’s not enough. No, for Fracassar had a whole gang under his orders. If I could get five or six more men, the effect would be grander! Mightn’t you find me, round about the town, a few ‘disengaged gentlemen’ who would not say ‘no’ to a good bottle of vodka and a half rouble?”

Ortik cast a furtive glance toward Kirschef.

“Most likely we might, Mr. Cascabel. Last night, at the tavern, we met half a dozen fellows.”

“Bring them, Ortik; fetch them here this evening, and my *dénouement* is A 1!”

“That’s a bargain, sir.”

“Very good, my friends! — What a performance this is going to be! What a sensation for the public!”

And when the two sailors had got quite out of sight, Mr. Cascabel was seized with such a fit of irrepressible laughter that several of his vest-buttons were shot about in the little room.

Cornelia feared he might go into convulsions.

“Cæsar, you should really not laugh in that way so soon after eating!” she said to him.

“Cornelia, my dear — did your husband smile? Why, I am in no mood for doing any such thing! — If I did, it was unknown to myself. At heart I am truly grieved! Just think of it! Here it is, one o’clock! And our good Mr. Sergius is not back yet! And he won’t be in time to make his *début* as the prestidigitateur of the troupe, either! Could anything be more unlucky!”

And while Cornelia returned to her dresses, he walked out, merely remarking he had some few indispensable errands to go on.

The performance was to commence at four o’clock, — a saving of artificial light, the apparatus for which was sadly deficient at the Perm circus! In any case, was not the bloom on Napoleona’s cheeks fresh enough, and her mother’s handsome features sufficiently well-preserved to make them boldly face the glare of broad noonday?

It would be difficult to realize the effect produced in the little town by Cæsar Cascabel’s wonder-telling bill, not to speak of Clovy’s big drum, which for a whole hour had filled the streets with its unearthly rattle. All the Russias of the Czar must have been roused from their slumber!

The result was that, at the aforesaid hour, quite a crowd besieged the circus: the governor of Perm, with his wife and children; a certain number of his subordinates, and several officers of the citadel could be seen waiting for the eventful moment, as well as a quantity of small traders, brought to town by the fair; in a word, an enormous concourse of people.

At the door the musical element of the troupe was in full force and vigor: Sander, Napoleona, and Clovy were there, with French horn, trombone and tambourine; and Cornelia, in flesh-color tights and pink skirt, presided at the drum. The discordant pandemonium was only fit for moujiks’ ears!

Nor should Cæsar Cascabel’s powerful voice be forgotten, calling out in good and intelligible Russian:

“Take your seats! Take your seats, ladies and gentlemen! It is forty kopecks per seat — without any distinction! Now is the time to go in!”

And as soon as the ladies and gentlemen had taken their seats on the benches of the circus, there was an eclipse of the orchestra, the members of which had now to take their several parts in the evening’s program.

The first part was gone through without a hitch. Little Napoleona on the tight-rope, young Sander in his contortions, the clever dogs, the ape and the parrot in their drolleries, Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel in their displays of strength and of skill, obtained a real success. Of the warm applause bestowed on such deserving artists John also had his share. With his mind elsewhere, his hand may not perhaps have done full justice to his talent as an equilibrist. But this was detected by none but the master’s eye, and the public never dreamt that the poor fellow was far from being heart and soul in his work.

As to the human pyramid, which preceded the interlude, it was unanimously encored.

In truth, Mr. Cascabel’s verve and humor in presenting his artists, and looking around for the ever-ready applause they merited so well, had been astounding. Never had this superior man shown to a greater extent how far a determined nature can master its own self down. The honor of the Cascabel family was safe! Its name would be handed down among the Muscovites with every token of admiration and respect.

But, if the spectators had followed the first half of the program with interest, how impatiently they looked forward to the second! Nothing else was spoken of, the whole length of the *entr’acte*.

It lasted for ten minutes, — ample time to take a mouthful of fresh air out-of-doors, — then the crowd flowed in again, and not a vacant seat was left.

Ortik and Kirschef had returned, a full hour since, with a half dozen supers, who — the reader has guessed — were, of course, the former companions they had met in the Ural pass.

Mr. Cascabel made a careful survey of his new force.

“Good heads!” he remarked. “Good faces! Well built frames! Too candid a look, perhaps, for highwaymen! Well, with wigs *à la* hedgehog style and beards to match, I’ll make something of them!”

And as he did not come forward till the very end of the piece, he had all the time necessary to do up his recruits, rig them up, dress their hair, — in a word, turn them out as presentable brigands.

And now, Clovy gave the three knocks.

At this moment, in a properly fitted theater, the curtain rises as the last note of the orchestra dies away. If it did not rise this time, it is because it is in the nature of circus rings not to have a curtain, even when they are transformed into stages.

At the same time, let it not be imagined that there were no “properties,” at least in appearance. On the left, a large cupboard, with a cross painted on its door, represented the church, or if you like the chapel, the steeple of which was naturally somewhere behind the scenery! In the center lay the village green, portrayed to life by the sandy ring! To the right, a few shrubs in wooden boxes, skilfully displayed, gave a sufficient idea of the whereabouts of the Black Forest.

The piece opened amid the deepest silence. How pretty Napoleona looked, with her little striped skirt, slightly aged, her “love of a hat” laid just like a flower on her fair head of hair, and above all, her eye so innocent and soft. The first lover, Sander, in a tight-fitting orange-colored vest, considerably faded in the creases of the sleeves, told her his tale of love with such affectionate looks that no spoken language could have been more eloquent.

But, how to describe, in a fitting manner, the apparition of Clovy, with his absurd wig of fiery-red hair, stalking in, and pointing his legs like stilts, first one here and then the other there; his brainless though pretentious look; his nose foredoomed to carry goggles; and the grimacing ape and the loquacious parrot that followed in his wake!

And now comes Cornelia, a woman who will make a formidable mother-in-law! She pitilessly dismisses Sander, and yet it is easy to feel that under her faded costume there throbs a heart worthy of a matron of the olden days.

Great success for John, when he appears dressed as an Italian carabineer. He is very sad, poor fellow. He looks as if his thoughts were bent on other things beside his part. How much he would prefer to play Sander’s, with Kayette for his lady-love, and to have nothing more to do than lead lier to the altar. And what a waste of time all this was, when they had so few hours to be together now!

However, so powerful was the dramatic situation, that it carried away the actor. How could it be otherwise, when we think on it! A brother returning from the wars, dressed as a carabineer, and taking the defense of his sister against the haughty prejudices of a mother and the ludicrous aspirations of a fool!

Superbly grand the scene between John and Clovy. The latter trembles with terror, and to such an extent that his teeth are heard to chatter, and his nose grows visibly longer and longer, until it suggests the idea of the point of a sword, that would have entered by the back of his head and would make its way out in the middle of his face.

Just then, cries, loud and repeated, are heard behind the scenes. Young Sander, carried away by his bravery, or perhaps bent on suicide, — for life is now a burden for him, — plunges into the thick of the forest of stage shrubs. The wild echoes of a violent struggle reach the audience, then the report of a gun.

And Fracassar, the leader of the brigands, bounds upon the scene. He is truly terrific, with his pink lights almost turned white, and his black beard well-nigh grown red. His fiendish gang follow in his footsteps. In their midst are Ortik and Kirschef, whom no one could know under their wigs and make-up. Cornelia is seized by the terrible chief. Sander rushes to defend her as usual, — and here it seems as though the customary *dénouement* will be spoilt on this occasion, for the situation has assumed a different aspect.

Hitherto, when Mr. Cascabel represented the whole band, — single-handed, — John, Sander, their mother, their sister, and Clovy himself, were in a position to keep him in check, waiting for the police, who were “pointed to” as coming in the distance behind the “properties.” But, here was Fracassar, supported by eight real, flesh and bone, visible-to-the-naked-eye ruffians, whom it would be very hard to overpower. And there was every reason to ask how the whole thing would end, so as to keep within the limits of naturalness.

Suddenly, a platoon of Cossacks invade the circus ring. Who could have expected so providential an issue!

The truth was, that manager Cascabel had spared no trouble to give his performance the most extraordinary *eclat*, and the *dramatis personae* were all there to a man. Policemen or Cossacks were all one, as a matter of course. In the glance of an eye, Ortik, Kirschef, and all their companions are thrown to the ground and firmly pinioned, — this, the more easily, as it was their part to let themselves be captured after a mere show of resistance.

And now a voice is heard above the din:

“Not me, thank you, my brave Cossacks! These fellows, as long as you like; but I am not in that swim, — not I — only for fun!”

Whose voice is that? Why, it is that of Fracassar, or rather Mr. Cascabel, who now stands up, a free man, while his men, duly handcuffed, are in the power of the authorities.

And was this a reality? — It was; and this had been the latest of Cæsar Cascabel’s grand ideas. After engaging Ortik and his associates in his troupe, he had communicated with the Perm police and had told them of a splendid haul to make. This explains the opportune appearance of the Cossacks, just as the *dénouement* of the piece required their presence; the masterly stroke had been a complete success; the whole band of malefactors were wriggling in vain in the net of their captors.

But presently Ortik was on his feet, and pointing Mr. Cascabel to the captain of the Cossacks:

“I denounce that man to you,” he cried. “He has brought back a political convict to Russia! Ah, you have betrayed me, you cursed rope-dancer; well, I betray you in my turn!”

“Betray away, my friend!” quietly replied Cascabel, with a knowing wink.

“And the convict he brought back is a runaway from Iakoutsk fortress; his name is Count Narkine!”

“Quite true, Ortik!”

Cornelia, her children, and Kayette, who have gathered around, stand speechless with terror.

At this moment one of the spectators rises from his seat — it is Count Narkine.

“There he is!” yells Ortik.

“That is so! I am Count Narkine!” answers Mr. Sergius, unmoved.

“Yes, but Count Narkine amnestied and free!” exclaims Mr. Cascabel, with a heroic peal of laughter.

What an effect on the public! The strongest minds might well be unhinged by all this reality mingled with the fiction of the play! Indeed, a portion of the beholders may have gone home with a confused idea that the “Brigands of the Black Forest” had never wound up in any other way.

A few words will suffice to explain.

Since the time when Count Narkine had been picked up by the Cascabels on the Alaskan frontier, thirteen months had elapsed, during which he had had no news from Russia. How could it have reached him among the Yukon Indians or the natives of Liakhov? He was, therefore, unaware that six months ago a ukase of Czar Alexander II had amnestied all the political convicts in the same category as Count Narkine. The prince, his father, had written to him in America that he might now return home in safety; but the count had already left the country and the letter had been returned to the sender. The anxiety of Prince Narkine, when he ceased to hear from his son, can well be imagined. He lost all hope, thought him dead, perhaps, in exile. His health declined and he was in a critical state, when one night Mr. Sergius arrived at the chateau. What untold bliss it was for the prince to see his son again, and announce to him that he was a free man once more!

The count, naturally unwilling to leave his father after a few hours' interview, had sent a letter to Cascabel, telling him that everything was now all right, and that he would not fail to be at the circus for the second part, at least, of the performance.

It was then Mr. Cascabel had conceived the glorious idea that the reader knows, and had taken measures to "net" Ortik and his whole gang.

On hearing the explanation of the final scene, the spectators grew wild with delight. Vociferous hurrahs burst out on all sides, and a storm of indignant curses accompanied the brigands on their way out under the safe escort of their captors.

Mr. Sergius, too, needed to be told the secret of this capture: how Kayette had discovered the hideous plot against him and the Cascabels; how the young woman had risked her life in following the two sailors into the wood on the night of the 6th of July; how she had told all to Mr. Cascabel, and how the latter would not breathe a word of it to Count Narkine or to his own wife.

“A secret from me, Cæsar; a secret?” asked Cornelia, in a would-be reproachful tone.

“The first and the last, wifey!”

She, of course, had forgiven him already.

“You know I did not say it through selfishness. Excuse the word, won’t you. Count Narkine?”

“Don’t say ‘Count Narkine.’ Let me always be Mr. Sergius for you, my friends, always Mr. Sergius, — and for you too, my child,” he added, clasping Kayette in his arms.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

CÆSER Cascabel’s journey has at last come to an end! The *Fair Rambler* has now only to cross Russia and Germany to get on French soil, and the north of France, to be in Normandy. A pretty long trip, no doubt; but as compared with the ten or eleven thousand miles it has just covered, it is but a trifle, just “a ride you could have in a hackney coach,” as Mr. Cascabel used to say.

Yes, it has come to an end, and a better end than might have been expected after so many adventures! Never was there a happier termination, — even in that admirable piece “The Brigands of the Black Forest,” the issue of which gave the greatest satisfaction to all parties concerned, save Ortik and Kirschef, who were hanged a few weeks later; and save, likewise, their companions, who were sent off to Siberia for the remainder of their days.

The question of the separation now forced itself on all our friends with all the gloom of its hopeless perspective. How would it be solved?

Well, in a very simple manner.

The very night of the memorable performance, when all the artists had met together in the *Fair Rambler*, Count Narkine said:

“My friends, I am conscious of all that I owe you, and I should be an ungrateful being if I ever forgot it. What can I do for you? My heart bleeds at the thought of parting with you! Now, come, how would it suit you to remain in Russia, to settle and live here on my father’s domain?”

Mr. Cascabel, who did not expect such a proposal, thought for an instant:

“Count Narkine — ”

“Do call me Mr. Sergius, never any other name — to please me!”

“Well, Mr. Sergius, we are greatly touched. Your offer shows all your kindly feeling for myself and mine. We thank you from our hearts. But, you know, home is home.”

“I understand you,” interrupted the count. “Yes, I quite feel with you. Well, since you insist on returning to France, to your dear Normandy, I should be very happy to know that you are snug and comfortable in a nice little country house, with a farm, and a few acres of land around you. There you might rest after your long traveling.”

“Don’t imagine we are fatigued, Mr. Sergius!” exclaimed Cæser Cascabel.

“Come, my friend, speak to me openly. Do you care very much to keep to your profession?”

“Of course, since it is our bread-earner.”

“You will not understand me,” continued Count Narkine, “and you pain me thereby! Will you deny me the satisfaction of doing something for you?”

“Never forget us, Mr. Sergius,” said Cornelia; “that is all we ask of you; for we, on our part, will never forget you, — nor Kayette!”

“Oh, mother!” cried the young woman.

“I can’t be your mother, dear child!”

“Why not, Madame Cascabel?” asked Mr. Sergius.

"How could I, now?"

"By giving her to your son as a wife!"

All the effects produced by Manager Cascabel in the course of his glorious career were nothing to that produced by these words of Count Narkine.

John was beside himself with joy, and kissed over and over the hand of Mr. Sergius, who pressed Kayette against his breast. Yes, she should be John's wife, while continuing to be the count's adopted daughter! And John would stay with him as his private secretary. Could Mr. and Mrs. Cascabel ever have dreamt a better position for their son? As to accepting from Count Narkine anything more than the assurance of his continued friendship, they would not hear of it. They had a good trade, they would go on with it!

It is then that young Sander pushed his way to the front, and with faltering voice but beaming eyes, said:

"Why should you go on with it, father? We are rich! We don't want to work for our bread!"

And so saying, he drew out of his coat pocket the nugget he had picked up in the forests of Cariboo.

"Where did you make that out?" asked his father, seizing the precious stone between his fingers.

Sander related how he came by it.

"And you never told us about it?" exclaimed Cornelia. "You have been able to keep such a secret all this time!"

“Yes, mother, although it often teased me. I wished to give you a surprise, you see, and say nothing till we had got home!”

“You are a darling boy!” said Cascabel. “Well, Mr. Sergius, here’s a windfall just at the right moment! Look at it, sir! It’s a nugget! Real gold. Nothing to do but change it!”

Count Narkine examined the stone attentively, and weighed it up and down in his hand to estimate its value.

“Yes,” he said, “it is real gold! It weighs at least ten pounds.”

“And that’s worth?” inquired Cascabel.

“It’s worth twenty thousand roubles!”

“Twenty thousand roubles!”

“That’s so! And as to changing it, it is the simplest thing in the world. You see, ladies and gentlemen, one, two, three!”

And, prestissimo! the worthy pupil of Cæsar Cascabel had substituted for the nugget a well-filled pocket-book, which passed into Sander’s hand like a flash of lightning.

“That’s splendidly done!” exclaimed the professor. “Had I not told you, sir, you had a wonderful natural aptitude for the art?”

“What is there in your portfolio?” asked Cornelia of the youngster.

“The value of the nugget,” replied Mr. Sergius, “nothing more, nothing less!”

And, sure enough, it was found to contain a check for twenty thousand roubles on Rothschild Brothers of Paris.

What was the intrinsic value of the nugget? Was it a lump of gold or a vulgar stone that young Sander had so conscientiously brought home all the way from the Columbian Eldorado? This will never be known. The Cascabels were, of course, obliged to take Count Narkine’s word for it, and trust to the friendship of Mr. Sergius, which, in their eyes, was a more precious treasure than the wealth of His Majesty the Czar.

The Cascabel family remained in Russia for one month longer. The Perm fair and the Nijni fair were now laid aside; but could father, mother, brother, and sister have taken their departure before witnessing the wedding ceremony of John and Kayette! It was celebrated in great pomp at the chateau of Walska, and never was a young couple united midst a concourse of happier people.

“Eh, Cæser? What, do you think?” said Cornelia, nudging her husband as they came out of the manorial chapel.

“Just what I said all through!” he replied.

A week later, both of them, with Sander, Napoleona, and Clovy, — who must not be forgotten, for he was really one of the family, — took leave of Count Narkine, and started for France with the *Fair Rambler*, but by rail this time, and by fast train, if you please!

Mr. Cascabel’s return to Normandy was an event. Cornelia and he became big *propriétaires* in the neighborhood of Pontorson, and were known to have a nice lump sum laid up for Sander and Napoleona.

Count Narkine, John, his secretary, and Kayette, the happiest of wives, came to see them every year; and of their welcome it were idle to speak.

Such is the faithful tale of this journey, which might be reckoned one of the most surprising in the series of “Extraordinary Travels.” Of course all “ends well” and “all is well.” What else could have been expected when that good Cascabel family was in question?

THE END.

MISTRESS BRANICAN

Translated by A. Estoclet

This 1891 adventure novel features Dolly Branican, who goes mad, after her husband John has gone to sea and she loses her only child. When she recovers, she discovers that her husband’s ship was lost at sea. As heir to a substantial fortune during her madness, Dolly uses these resources to finance the discovery of the whereabouts of her husband’s ship, the Franklin because she doesn’t believe he is dead.

66
CARJAT, Phot.

Verne, close to the time of publication

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PART I

CHAPTER I

THE “FRANKLIN.”

There are two chances of never again seeing the friends we part with when starting on a long voyage; those we leave may not be here on our return, and those who go may never come back. But little heed of these eventualities was taken by the sailors who were preparing for departure on board the Franklin in the morning of the 15th of March, 1875.

On that day the Franklin, Captain John Branican, was about to quit the port of San Diego, in California. on a voyage across the Northern Pacific, A fine vessel of nine hundred tons was this Franklin — a barquentine fully canvassed with gaff sails, jibs and staysails, and with topmast and top-gallant-mast on the fore.

Long and narrow in the bow, finely modelled in the quick-works, and with a good clean run, her masts gently raking and strictly parallel, her standing rigging of galvanized wire as stiff as iron bars, she was of the most modern type of those elegant clippers which the North Americans find so well adapted for their ocean trade and which compete in speed with the best steamers of their mercantile marine, The Franklin was so well built and efficiently commanded that not a man of her crew would have shipped on another vessel — even with the assurance of obtaining higher pay. All were preparing to start content in their double confidence in a good ship and a good captain.

The Franklin was to make her first voyage on behalf of William H. Andrew, and Co. of San Diego. She was bound to Calcutta by way of Singapore with a cargo of American goods to return with Indian products to one of the Californian ports.

Captain John Branican was a young man of nine and twenty, with an attractive but resolute face, his features telling of unusual energy; he possessed in the highest degree that moral courage so superior to physical courage — that “two o’clock in the morning courage,” as Napoleon called it. — that is to say, the kind that faces the unexpected and is ready for action at any moment. His head had more character than beauty, with his rough hair, his eyes animated with a keen, frank look which flashed like a dart from their black pupils. It would be difficult to imagine a man of his age more robust in body or constitution. That was clear enough in the vigour of his handshakings which indicated the ardour of his blood and the strength of his muscles. But what we have particularly to note is that the spirit contained in this body of iron was a good and noble spirit, ready to sacrifice its life for its kind. John Branican was of the character of those rescuers whose coolness enables them to perform heroic acts without hesitation. He had given proof of this early in life. One day, among the broken ice of the bay on a capsized boat, he had saved children like himself; and later on he had not belied the instincts of self-sacrifice which had marked his youth.

A few years after John Branican had lost his father and his mother, he had married Dolly Starter, an orphan, belonging to one of the best families of San Diego. The girl’s dowry was a modest one, and suitable for the position, equally modest, of the young sailor, then a mate on a merchant vessel. But there was reason to think that Dolly would one day be the heiress of a very rich uncle, Edward Starter, who lived a farmer’s life in the wildest and most out-of-the-way part of Tennessee. Meanwhile it would have to be enough to live on for two, or even for three, for little Walter — Wat, by abbreviation — came into the world in the first year of the marriage. Thus John Branican — and his wife understood it — could not dream of abandoning his profession as a sailor. In the future he would see what he could do, when the fortune came by inheritance, or by his enriching himself in Andrews’ service.

Besides this, the young sailor’s promotion had been unusually rapid. He had advanced quickly, and he had advanced straight. He was a captain at an age when most of his colleagues were only mates. If his abilities justified this promotion, his advance was explained by certain circumstances which had properly drawn attention to him.

In fact, John Branican was popular at San Diego, and at the different ports on the Californian coast.- His acts of self-sacrifice had been noted with applause, not only by sailors, but by the merchants and shipowners of the Union.

A few years before, a Peruvian schooner, the Sonora, had come ashore at the entrance to Coronado Beach, and the crew would have been lost if communication had not been established between the ship and the shore. But to take a rope out through the breakers was to risk one’s life a hundred times. John Branican did not hesitate. He threw himself amid the waves which came rolling in with extreme violence on to the reefs and then came beating on to the beach in a terrible surf. In sight of the death which he would have faced without thinking of the danger, the people would have held him back. He resisted; he hurried himself towards the schooner; he succeeded in reaching her, and, thanks to his bravery, the Sonora’s crew were saved.

About a year afterwards, during a storm which broke some five hundred miles out in the Pacific, John Branican had another opportunity of showing what might be expected from him. He was mate on the Washington when the captain was washed overboard by a wave at the same time as half the crew. Remaining on board a disabled ship with half a dozen seamen, most of them injured, he took the command, and although the vessel had lost her rudder, he managed to handle her, and brought her into San Diego under jury masts. This almost unmanageable hulk contained a cargo worth five hundred thousand dollars, and belonged to Andrews.

Great was the young sailor’s reception when the Washington was moored in the port of San Diego. As the chances of the sea had made him captain, there was not a voice among the whole population against confirming him in his rank.

It was under these circumstances that Andrews built the Franklin and offered him the command. He accepted it, for he felt himself equal to the post, and could pick and choose his crew, for people had confidence in him. And that is how it came about that the Franklin was beginning her first voyage under the orders of John Branican.

The departure was an event for the whole town. Andrew’s was justly considered one of the most honourable firms in San Diego. Of the highest character for the security of his business relationships and the strength of his credit was Mr. William Andrew, who directed its affairs with a sure hand. This worthy ship-owner was not only esteemed, he was loved. And his behaviour towards John Branican was unanimously applauded.

There was thus nothing to be astonished at if during this morning of the 15th of March, a numerous gathering of spectators — in other words a crowd of friends, known and unknown, of the young captain — appeared on the quays of the Pacific Coast Steamship Company to greet him with a last cheer at his departure.

The crew of the Franklin consisted of twelve men including the boatswain, all, however, good sailors belonging to San Diego and happy to serve under the orders of John Branican. The mate was an excellent officer, named Harry Felton. Although he was five, or six years older than his captain he was in no way offended at having to serve under him, nor was he in any way jealous of the position his captain held. He considered that. John Branican deserved his position, he had sailed with him before and they mutually appreciated each other. Besides, what Mr. William Andrew did must be well done. Harry Felton and his men were devoted to him body and soul. Most of them had already sailed in some of his ships. It was, as it were, a family of officers and sailors — a numerous family devoted to its chief, which constituted its maritime staff and did not cease to increase with the prosperity of the house.

And it was without apprehension, or rather with ardour, that the crew of the Franklin were entering on this new campaign. Fathers, mothers, relatives, were there to say farewell, but to say it to those whom they would soon see again. “Good-bye, and see you again soon, shall we not?” It was only a six months’ voyage, a simple passage during the fine season between California and India, there and back between San Diego and California, and not one of those expeditions of commerce or discovery which keep a” ship for long years on the most dangerous seas of the two hemispheres. The sailors had been many other such voyages, and their families had been present at many more disquieting departures.

The-preparations would soon be complete. The Franklin at her anchor in the middle of the harbour was already clear of the other vessels, whose number bore witness to the importance of San Diego as a port. From the. place she occupied she would have no need of a tug to take her out to sea. As soon as her anchor was short apeak, it would be enough for her to fill her sails, and a beautiful breeze would take her rapidly out of the bay without her having to go about Captain John Branican could not have wished for better weather, nor a more favourable wind, over the sea which glittered under the rays of the sun around the Coronado islands in the offing.

At this time — six o’clock in the morning — it need scarcely be said that all the crew were on board. None of the sailors could return to the shore, and as far as they were concerned the voyage had already begun. A few of the harbour boats were at the starboard gangway waiting for the people who were bidding the last good-bye to their friends and relatives. These boats would take them to the quay as soon as the Franklin hoisted her jibs. Although the tides are not strong in the Pacific, it was quite as well to go out with the ebb which would soon begin.

Among the visitors we must particularly notice Mr. William Andrew and Mrs. Branican, accompanied by the nurse carrying little Wat; they were accompanied by Mr. Len Burker and his wife, Jane Burker, Dolly’s cousin-german. Harry Felton, the mate, having no family, had no one to bid him good-bye. The good wishes of Mr. William Andrew were not wanting on the occasion, and he asked no more than that those of John’s wife should be added to them — of which he was assured in advance.

Harry Felton was on the forecastle where half a dozen of the men were shortening in the cable at the capstan amid the metallic clatter of the pawls. The Franklin had already begun to move as the chain came grinding in through the hawse-hole. The house flag with Andrew’s initials floated at the main-mast head, while the American flag fluttered in the breeze from the peak, and displayed the Stars and Stripes. The square sails were all ready for setting as soon as the ship was under way under jibs and staysails.

On the front of the poop so as to lose nothing of what was being done, John Branican received the final instructions from Mr. William Andrew relative to the manifest, that is, the detailed statement of the goods which constituted the Franklin's cargo. Then the ship-owner gave the young captain the papers, and added, —

"If circumstances oblige you to change your course do the best you can for our interests, and send me news from the first land you touch at. The Franklin may perhaps put in at one of the Philippines, for you have doubtless no intention of going through Torres Straits?"

"No, Mr. Andrew," said John, "I should not think of taking the Franklin into the dangerous seas to the north of Australia. My road should be to Hawaii, the Ladrones, Mindanao of the Philippines, Celebes, and the Strait of Macassar, so as to reach Singapore by the Java Sea. From there to Calcutta the road is clear enough. I do not think the route will have to be changed on account of the winds we shall meet with in the Western Pacific. If you have anything of importance to telegraph to me send it to Mindanao, where I shall probably put in, or to Singapore, where I certainly shall."

"That is agreed. On your part let me know as soon as you can the state of the market at Calcutta. It is possible that it may oblige me to change my intentions regarding the return cargo."

"I shall not fail to do so, Mr. Andrew," said John Branican.

At this moment Harry Felton approached, and said, —

"The anchor is apeak, sir."

"And the ebb?"

"Is just beginning to be felt."

“Hold on.”

Then addressing Mr. William Andrew, the captain, full of gratitude, repeated, —

“Once more, Mr. Andrew, I thank you for having given me the command of the Franklin. I hope I shall justify your confidence.”

“I have no doubt of it whatever,” said Mr. Andrew; “and I could not leave the business of my house in better hands.”

The ship-owner shook hands with him heartily and moved towards the stern.

Mrs, Branican, followed by the nurse and the baby, rejoined her husband with Mr. and Mrs. Burker. The moment of separation had come. Captain Branican had now but to receive the last farewells of his wife and family.

Dolly, as we know, had not been married two years, and her child was hardly nine months old. Although the separation caused her profound grief, yet she would not let anything of it be seen, and restrained the beating of her heart while her cousin Jane, of weak nature and without energy, could not conceal her emotion. She was very fond of Dolly, and in being near her had often found some alleviation of the sorrows caused by the imperious and violent character of her husband. But if Dolly concealed her anxieties, Jane was none the less aware of what she felt in all its reality. Doubtless Captain Branican would be back before six months, but at least it was a separation — the first since their marriage — and if she was strong enough to restrain her tears it could well be said that Jane wept for her. As to Len Burker, the man whose look no tender emotion had ever softened, his eyes were dry, and with his hands in his pockets he moved about inattentive to what was going on, and thinking of one knows not what. Evidently he had no ideas in common with the visitors whom sentiments of affection had brought on board the ship at her departure.

Captain John took his wife's two hands between his, and drawing her towards him said, in a gentle voice, —

"Dear Dolly, I must go. I shall not be long away. In a few months you will see me again. I will find you again, Dolly, never fear. On my ship with my crew, what have we to fear from the dangers of the sea? Be strong as a sailor's wife should be. When I come back our little Wat will be fifteen months old. He will be a big boy. He will be able to talk, and the first word I hear on my return — "

"Will be your name, John!" said Dolly. "Your name shall be the first he will learn." We will both talk of you and always! Dear John, do write to me at every opportunity. And tell me all you have done, and all you think of doing. Let me feel that thoughts of me are!n all your thoughts."

"Yes, dear Dolly, I will write to you. I will keep you posted- up in the events of our voyage. My letters shall be like a log, with all my tenderness to the good!"

"All! John. I am so jealous of this sea which n taking you away so far. How much I envy those who love and whom nothing in life can separate! But no; I am wrong to think of that."

"Dear wife, say to yourself that it is for our child that I go — for you also, to give both of you comfort and happiness. If our hopes of the future are one day realized, we shall never again separate."

Here Len Burker and Jane came near. Captain John turned towards them.

“My dear Len,” he said, “I leave you my wife; I leave you my son. I entrust them to you as being the only relations they have in San Diego.”

“You can depend on us, John,” said Len Burker, endeavouring to soften the harshness of his voice. “Jane and I are here, and we will take care of Dolly.”

“And we will console her,” said Mrs. Burker. “You know how much I love you, my dear Dolly! I will see you often.’ Every day I will spend a few hours with you. We will talk about John.”

“Yes, Jane,” answered Mrs. Branican, “for I shall not cease to think about him.”

Harry Felton again came to interrupt the conversation.

“Captain,” said he, “it will be time — ”

“All right, Harry,” said John. “Up with the inner jib and mizen.”

The mate went off to execute the orders, which meant an immediate departure.

“Mr. Andrew,” said the captain to the owner, “the boat will take you back to the quay with my wife and her relations as soon as you like.”

“Now, John,” answered Mr. Andrew, “and once more — a pleasant voyage!”

“Yes! a pleasant voyage!” said the other visitors as they went down into the boats on the starboard side of the Franklin.”

“Good-bye, Len! Good-bye, Jane!” said John, clasping their hands in his.

“Good-bye! good-bye!” said Mrs. Burker.

“And you, my Dolly, you must go,” added John; “the sails are filling.”

And in fact the sails were giving a slight heel to the Franklin, while the sailors sang, —

“Here goes one,

A bouncing one,

One will go,

She will, oh!

But two come home, they will, oh!

Here goes two, A bouncing two,

Two will go, ihey will, oh!

But three come home, they will, oh!

Here goes three — ”

And so on.

During this the captain had led his wife to the gangway, and as she put her foot on the ladder, feeling “himself as incapable of speaking to her as she was of speaking to him, he could only clasp her tightly in his arms.

And then the baby, which Dolly had just taken from the nurse, stretched out its arms towards its father, shook its little hands as it smiled, and this word escaped from its lips, —

“Pa — pa! Pa — pa!”

“My John,” exclaimed Dolly, “you have heard his first word before separating from him.”Self-controlled as was the young captain, he could not restrain the tear which rolled down on to little Wat’s cheek.

“Dolly!” he murmured, “Good-bye! good-bye!”

Then, —

“Are you clear?” he called in a loud voice, to put an end to this painful scene.

A moment afterwards the boat was off and heading for the wharf where its passengers would immediately land.

Captain Branican was busy getting under way. The anchor began to mount towards the hawse-hole. The Franklin, free from her last fetter, already felt the breeze on her sails, which were shaking violently. The big jib was almost close home, and the guyed mizen caused the ship to huff a little so that she could pass clear of a few vessels moored at the entrance of the bay.

At a new order from Captain Branican the mainsail and foresail went up together with a simultaneous precision that did honour to the arms of the crew. Then the Franklin, coining round on the port tack, stood off out to sea.

From the wharf the numerous spectators could admire these different manoeuvres. Nothing could be more graceful than this elegantly shaped vessel when she heeled to the capricious gusts of the wind. During the evolution she approached the end of «the wharf where Mr. William Andrew, Dolly, Len and Jane Burker stood within less* than half a cable length; and consequently the young captain again had a glimpse of his wife and her relations and friends.

They all replied to his voice which was clearly heard, and to his hand which he stretched out towards those from whom he was going away.

“Good-bye! Good-bye!” said he.

“Hurrah!” shouted the crowd of spectators, while the handkerchiefs waved in hundreds.

Liked by all was Captain John Branican 1 Was he not the townsman of whom the town was most justifiably proud? Yes! they all would be there on his return when he appeared outside the bay.

The Franklin, which was already at the mouth, had to huff to avoid a long mail boat just coming in. The two ships saluted by dipping their American ensigns.

On the wharf Mrs. Branican stood motionless gazing at the Franklin rapidly sailing away under the fresh breeze from the north-east. She would follow her with heir eyes as long as her masts were visible over Island Point.

But the Franklin was soon round the Coronado Islands outside the .bay. For a moment the house flag at the masthead was visible through a gap in the cliffs. Then she disappeared. — -

“Good bye, John. Good-bye!” murmured Dolly. And why was it that an inexplicable presentiment prevented her from adding, “Au revoir?”

CHAPTER II.

FAMILY MATTERS.

It is necessary to speak in more detail of Mrs. Branican, whom the different events of this history will bring into fuller light. At this time, Dolly — an abbreviation for Dorothy — was one and twenty. She was of American birth. But without going very far back in her pedigree, there could be found the generation which allied her to the Spanish or rather Mexican race, from which the chief families of this country are descended. Her mother, in fact, was born at San Diego, and San Diego was already founded while Lower California still belonged to Mexico. The vast bay discovered about three and a half centuries before by the Spanish navigator, Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, was at first named after San Miguel, but received its new name in 1602. In 1846 the province changed its tri- coloured flag for the Stars and Stripes and since then it has formed one of the States of the Union.

Of middle height, with a face lighted up by eyes large and deep and black, a warm complexion, abundant hair of rich dark brown, with hands and feet rather strongly made, as is generally the case in the Spanish type, a walk firm and graceful, a physiognomy denoting energy of character and goodness of heart — such was Mrs. Branican. She was one of those women who cannot be looked upon with indifference, and before her marriage Dolly had the reputation among the girls of San Diego — where beauty is not at all rare — of being the one most worthy of attention. She was of a serious, reflective turn of mind, in its larger sense, and was of enlightened views, gifts which marriage would assuredly develop in her.

Yes! under whatever circumstances, grave as they might be, Dolly, now Mrs. Branican, would know how to do her duty. Having frankly looked straight at life and not through the deceitful surfaces of a prism, she possessed a noble spirit and a strong will. The love with which her husband had inspired her rendered her more resolute to accomplish her task. If the case required it — and this is not an empty phrase when applied to Mrs. Branican — she would give her life for John, as John would give his for her, and as both would give for the child born to them in the first year of their union. They adored this baby, which had just lisped the word “papa” at the moment the young captain was separated from him and his mother. The resemblance which little Wat bore to his father was striking — in the features at least, for he had the warm complexion of Dolly. Of vigorous constitution he had nothing to fear from childish ailments. Besides, he was so carefully looked after. Ah! what dreams of the future, the paternal and maternal imagination had already dreamt for this little being whose life had barely begun.

Assuredly Mrs. Branican would have been the happiest of women, if John’s position had allowed him to abandon his trade as a sailor, of which the least of the drawbacks was this necessity of separation from each other. But when the command of the Franklin had been offered to him, how could she even think of keeping him from it? And besides, had she not to think of the necessities of housekeeping, and providing for a family which might not always consist of this one child? Dolly’s dowry was hardly enough for the needs of the house as it was. Evidently John Branican might reckon on the fortune which the uncle would leave to his niece, and very unlikely things would have to occur for this fortune to escape him, for Mr. Edward Starter was almost a sexagenarian and had no other heiress than Dolly. In fact, her cousin, Jane Burker, belonged to the maternal branch of the family, and was in no way related to her uncle. Dolly would be rich — but ten years, twenty years might pass before she came into her inheritance. And so John Branican was obliged to. work at present, if he had no reason to be anxious about the future; and he had done well in continuing in Andrews’ service, in addition to the interest which had been given him in the results of the Franklin’s voyages. And as besides being a sailor he was a merchant well acquainted with trading affairs, there was every chance of his acquiring by his work a certain degree of comfort while waiting for the heritage of Mr. Edward Starter.

One word concerning this American — whose “Americanism” was quite original. He was the brother of Dolly’s father and consequently her uncle. It was her father, the elder by five or six years, who had so to speak brought up the younger, for both were orphans; and the younger Starter had always retained for him a lively affection augmented by gratitude. Circumstances favouring the elder he had followed the steady road to fortune, while the younger brother had wandered along the crossroads which rarely lead to anything. He had gone off to engage in lucky speculations in buying and clearing vast extents of land, in the State of Tennessee, but he had never broken off communications with his brother, whom business kept in the State of New York. When he had become a widower he had settled at San Diego, the native place of his wife, where he died just after the marriage of Dolly with John Branican had been decided on. The marriage took place when the mourning was over, and the young couple’s entire fortune was the very modest heritage left by Starter senior.

A short time afterwards there had arrived at San Diego a letter addressed to Dolly Branican by Starter junior. It was the first he had written to his niece, and it was to be the last.

In substance this letter said, in a form as concise as it was to the point: although Starter junior was a long way away from her, and although he had never seen her, yet he did not forget that he had a niece, his own brother’s daughter. If he had never seen her it was because Starter senior and Starter junior had never met since Starter senior had taken to himself a wife, and because Starter junior lived near Nashville In the remotest part of Tennessee while she dwelt at San Diego. Between Tennessee, and California there were several hundred miles which it was in no way convenient for Starter junior to travel, and if Starter junior found the journey too fatiguing for him to go and see his niece, he thought it would be no less fatiguing for his niece to come and see him, and he begged her not to think of taking any trouble in the matter.

In reality Starter junior was a regular bear — not one of those American grizzlies with claws and fur, but one of those human bears who are specially fitted to live outside all social relationships. But that was no concern c-f Dolly's. She was the niece of a bear — be it so! But this bear possessed an uncle's heart. He did not forget what was due from Starter junior to the brother's daughter who would inherit his fortune.

Starter junior said that this fortune was already worth having. It was then worth 500,000 dollars, and could not but increase, for clearing speculations were prospering in the State of Tennessee. As it consisted of land and cattle it would be easy to realize at good prices, and there would be no difficulty in finding buyers.

If this was said in that positive and somewhat brutal fashion which is peculiar to Americans of the old type, it was said all the same. The fortune of Starter junior would go entirely to Mrs. Branican and her children; but in the event of the death of Mrs. Branican, without descendants, this fortune would revert to the State, which would be very happy to accept it.

Two things more.

1, Starter junior was a bachelor. He would remain a bachelor: “the folly he had avoided between the years of twenty and thirty he would avoid at sixty,” so his letter said. There was nothing then to turn aside this fortune, as he desired formally to impress upon her, and she would have it for her household use as certainly as the Mississippi flows into the Gulf of Mexico.

2. Starter junior would use every effort — superhuman, indeed — to enrich his niece at the most distant date possible. He had no intention of dying till he was at least a centenarian, and would use all the obstinacy of which he was capable to prolong his life to the utmost possible limit.

Finally, Starter junior begged Mrs. Branican, and even ordered her, not to reply. There was but little communication between the towns and the forest region in the depths of Tennessee. And for his part he would not write again unless it was to announce his death, when the letter would not be in his own hand.

Such was the singular letter received by Mrs. Branican. That she would be the heiress, the universal legatee of her Uncle Starter, there could be no doubt. She would one day possess a fortune of 500,000 dollars, which would probably be greatly increased by the work of this clever clearer of forests. But as Starter junior clearly expressed his intention of living till he was a hundred — and one knows how tenacious these Americans are — John Branican had wisely decided not to abandon the sea. His intelligence, his courage, and his determination would probably help him to acquire a certain affluence for his wife and child long before Uncle Starter had started for another world.

Such was the position of the household when the Franklin sailed for the Western Pacific, and which it was necessary to explain in order that what follows may be understood. And now for the only relations of Dolly Branican at San Diego, Mr. and Mrs. Burker.

Len Burker, an American by birth, was then in his thirty-second year, and had only during the last few years \

settled in the capital of Lower California. This New England Yankee, cold in face, hard in feature, strong in body, was very determined, very active, and very close, allowing nothing to be known of his thoughts, and saying nothing of his actions. His was one of those natures which resemble closed houses, the door of which is opened to nobody. However, at San Diego there had been no unfavourable rumours concerning this uncommunicative man, whose marriage with Jane Burker had made him John Branican's cousin. There is nothing surprising in John's having entrusted Dolly and his child to the Burkers, for he had no other relations; but in reality it was .more particularly to Jane that he entrusted them, knowing that the two cousins had a profound affection for each other.

And it would have been different had John known the truth about Len Burker, if he had known the knavery which he dissimulated behind the impenetrable mask of his physiognomy, or the unceremoniousness with which he treated the social proprieties, respect for himself and the rights of others. Deceived by his somewhat seductive exterior, by a sort of dominating fascination he exercised over her, Jane had married him five months before at Boston, where she was living with her mother, who died a little time after the marriage, the consequences of which were to become so regrettable. Jane's dowry, and the maternal inheritance, would have sufficed for the young couple to live upon if Len Burker had been a man to follow the usual road and not the by-paths. But he did nothing of the sort. After having run through his wife's fortune, Len Burker had been bankrupt at

Boston, and had to leave that city. On the other side of America, where his dubious reputation had not followed him, the new countries offered him chances he could not have in New England.

Jane, who now knew her husband, readily seconded this plan of departure, happy to get away from Boston, where Len Burker's position, led to disagreeable comments, and glad also to be with the only relative she had left to her. They had come to San Diego where Dolly and Jane became friends again. For three years they had lived in the town, and Len Burker had given rise to no suspicions, owing to his hiding his difficulties with so much ability. Such were the circumstances which had again brought together the two cousins at the time when Dolly was not yet Mrs. Branican. The young wife and the girl became close friends.. Although it would seem that Jane should have influenced Dolly, the contrary was the case. Dolly was strong, Jane was weak, and the girl soon became the wife's support. When the union of John Branican and Dolly was decided on, Jane showed herself very pleased at the match — a marriage which in no way promised to resemble hers! And in the intimacy of this young household what consolation she might not have found if she had told the secret of her troubles. But subdued under her husband's domination, she had never dared to say a word.

But Len Burker's position was becoming more and more serious. The little that remained to him of his wife's fortune when he left Boston had almost entirely gone. This gambler, or rather this reckless speculator, was one of those people who leave everything to chance, and await the event. Such a character, incapable of listening to reason, could not but bring about deplorable results.

On his arrival at San Diego, Len Burker had opened an office in Fleet Street — one of those offices like dens from which every idea, good or bad, is made a starting-point for business. Clever in putting the best appearance on everything, quite unscrupulous as to the means he employed, an adept at treating quibbles as arguments, much inclined to look on the property of others as his own, he launched out into a score of speculations which would gradually end in disaster, but not without leaving him a few pickings. At the opening of this history Len Burker was reduced to many shifts, and discomfort was in his house; but he still enjoyed a certain amount of credit, owing to his keeping his affairs quiet, and this he employed in making new dupes. The position, however, could only end in a catastrophe. The hour could not be distant when the claims would come in. Perhaps this adventurous Yankee, transplanted to Western America, would have no other resource but to leave San Diego as he had left Boston, although in a time of such enlightenment and such powerful commercial activity, the progress of which increased from year to year, an honest and intelligent man would have found a hundred opportunities of success. But Len Burker had neither honourable feelings, just ideas, nor honest intentions.

But it must be understood that neither John Branican nor William Andrew had any suspicion concerning the affairs of Len Burker. In the world of industry and commerce no one knew that this adventurer — and would to heaven he merited that name only — was approaching a disastrous end. And even when the catastrophe came about the world might see in him merely a man little favoured by fortune, and not one of those persons without morality, to whom every way of making money must be right. And so, without having taken a great liking to him, John Branican had conceived no mistrust towards him; and it was in all good faith that he reckoned on the kindness of the Burkers to his wife. If anything happened to make Dolly have recourse to them she would not go in vain. Their house was open to her, and she would there find a welcome due not only to a friend but to a sister.

In this respect there was no cause to suspect the sentiments of Jane Burker. The affection she entertained towards her cousin was without restraint or calculation. Far from blaming the sincere friendship which united these two young women, Len Burker had encouraged it, on the contrary, doubtless with a confused notion of the future, and the advantages which this connection might bring. He knew, too, that Jane would never say a word she ought not to say, and that she would maintain a, prudent reserve regarding her personal position that she was ignorant of the blameworthy undertakings on which he had entered, of the difficulties amid which his housekeeping had to struggle on. And Jane was silent, and not a word of recrimination escaped her. She was completely overawed by her husband, and submissive to his absolute influence, although she knew him to be a man without conscience, destitute of any moral sense, and capable of committing the most unpardonable acts. After so many disillusions how could she retain the least respect for him? But — and this is the essential point — she feared him, she was like a child in his hands, and at a sign from him she would follow him, if his safety obliged him to fly to no matter what part of the world. But for her own self-respect she allowed no one to know her misery, not even her cousin Dolly, who perhaps suspected it without being taken into her confidence.

The relative positions of John and Dolly Branican on the one hand, and that of Len and Jane Burker on the other, is thus sufficiently clear for the understanding of the occurrences that followed. In what way would this position be altered by the unexpected which was so soon and so suddenly to happen? No one could have foreseen.

CHAPTER III.

PROSPECT HOUSE.

Thirty years ago Lower California — about a third of the State of California — contained only about thirty-five thousand inhabitants. To-day its population is one hundred and fifty thousand. At that time the land of the province was almost uncultivated and was deemed only fit for cattle-raising. Who would have divined what the future had in reserve for a region then so abandoned that the only means of communication by land was the roads rutted with cart-wheels, and by sea a solitary line of packet-boats calling at every port on the coast?

But ever since 1769 the embryo of a town existed a few miles in the interior to the north of the Bay of San Diego, which town has the historical claim of being the most ancient settlement on Californian soil.

When the new continent, attached to old Europe by the simple colonial ties which the United Kingdom thought to tighten, had been given a violent shock, these ties were broken, and the union of the States of North America was founded under the flag of independence; but in those days California belonged to the Mexicans, and it continued in their possession until 1846. In that year, after receiving its freedom, the municipality of San Diego, formed eleven years before, became what it should always be — American.

The bay of San Diego is magnificent. It has been compared with the bay of Naples, but the comparison would be more exact if made with the bays of Vigo or Rio Janeiro. Twelve miles long and two miles wide it gives enough space for the anchorage of a merchant fleet as well as for the manoeuvres of a squadron, for San Diego is considered to be a military port. Forming a kind of oval, opening to the westward by a narrow mouth between Island Point and Loma or Coronado Point, it is sheltered on all sides. The winds from the open sea respect it, the swell from the Pacific hardly troubles its surface, ships get away from it without difficulty, and come alongside the quays in a minimum of twenty-three feet of water. It is the only port, safe, practicable, suitable for putting in at, south of San Francisco and north of San Quentin.

With so many natural advantages, it was evident that the old town would soon be found too small as at first laid out. Already barracks had been built for the installation of a detachment of cavalry on some adjoining ground which was covered with brushwood. Owing to Mr. Horton’s initiative a suburb to this was begun, and this has now become the city which now stands on the ridges at the north of the bay. The expansion took place with that celerity so familiar to Americans. A million of dollars sown on the ground germinated as private houses, public buildings, offices and villas. In 1885 San Diego contained fifteen thousand inhabitants, to-day it has thirty-five thousand. Its first railroad dates from 1881. At present the Atlantic and Pacific, the Southern California, and the Southern Pacific put it in communication with the continental network, and the Pacific Coast Steamship Company gives it constant intercourse with San Francisco.

It is a handsome, comfortable town, airy and healthy, with a climate beyond eulogy. In the vicinity the country is of incomparable fertility. The vine, the olive, the orange, the citron grow side by side with the fruits and vegetables of northern climes. We might call it a Normandy combined with a Provence.

The town itself is built with that picturesque freedom of position and private fancy which is conducive to health when there is plenty of space. If progress under all its forms is not to be met with in a modern city, more especially when this city is American, where should we look for it? Gas, telegraph, telephone — the inhabitants have but to make a sign to be lighted, to exchange messages, to speak in each other’s ears between one quarter of the town and another. There are even masts a hundred and fifty feet high which shed the electric light over the streets of the town. If the milk is not yet distributed under pressure by the General Milk Company, if moving footpaths running four miles an hour are not yet working at San Diego, this will certainly be done — eventually.

To these advantages we must add the different institutions in which is controlled the vital movement of these great agglomerations — a custom house, the importance of which increases daily, two banks, a chamber of commerce, an emigration society, vast offices, numerous counting houses, in which an enormous trade is carried on in timber and flour; churches for different denominations, three markets, a theatre, a gymnasium; three large schools for poor children, the Russ House, the Masonic and the Odd Fellows’; a number of establishments in which studies are carried on for the gaining of university diplomas — and we can imagine what will be the future of a city, still young and compulsorily careful of its moral and material interests, within which are accumulated so many elements of prosperity. Are newspapers unknown to it? No! It possesses three daily sheets, among others the Herald, and these papers have each a weekly edition. Is there any fear of tourists being unable to find comfortable quarters? Without counting the hotels of inferior order, are there not at their choice the three magnificent establishments — the Horton House, the Florence Hotel, and the Gerard Hotel with its hundred rooms, and on the opposite side of the bay, overlooking the beach at Coronado Point, on an admirable site amid charming villas, a new hotel which has not cost less than five million dollars’?

From all the countries of the old continent and from all points of the new, come tourists to visit this young and lively capital of Lower California, where they are hospitably welcomed by its generous inhabitants, and in no way regret the voyage — unless it be that they thought it too short.

San Diego is a town full of animation and well organized in all. the confusion of its business like the majority of American cities. If life is shown by movement, one can say its people live in the most intense sense of the word. They have scarcely time enough for their commercial transactions. But if that is so for the people whose instincts and habits throw them into the whirlpool, it is no longer true of those whose existence drags on in interminable leisure. When the movement stops the hours cannot go too slowly!

And thus did Mrs. Branican feel after the departure of the Franklin. Since her marriage she had helped her husband in his work. Although he did not go to sea, his business with Andrews' gave John “a good deal to do. Besides the commercial transactions in which he took part, he had had to superintend the building of the ship to which he was to be appointed. With what zeal, we might almost say with what love, did he look after the smallest details. He gave it all the incessant care of a man building the house in which he is to pass his life. And more so, for the ship is not only a house, or a mere instrument of fortune, but an assemblage of wood and iron to which is confided the lives of so many men. Is it not as it were a detached fragment of the native soil to which it returns to leave it again, and which unfortunately destiny often forbids from finishing its maritime career in the port in which it was born?

Frequently would Dolly accompany Captain John to the shipyard. This framework, which rose on the sloping keel, the curves arranged like the ribs of a gigantic mammifer, the planking which was to go on; this hull of complex form, this deck with the large openings in it destined for loading and unloading the cargo; the masts laid on the ground until they are in place, the poop and its cabins, could not all this interest her? It was John's life and that of his companions that the Franklin would defend from the surges of the Pacific. Could there be a plank, therefore, to which Dolly did not in her thought attach some chance of safety, a hammer stroke, amid the noise of the shipyard, which did not echo in her heart? John explained everything to her, told her the destination of each piece of wood or metal, and showed her how the progress accorded with the working drawings. She loved this ship of which John was to be the soul, the master, after God! And sometimes she would ask, when she did not go with John, why he did not take her with him, why she did not share with him the perils of the journey, why the Franklin did not take her as well as him from San Diego? Yes! She wished never to be separated from her husband. And had not seafaring households, afloat for many years, existed for a long time among the people of the north?

But there was Wat, the baby, and could Dolly abandon him to the cares of a nurse far away from maternal caresses? No! Could she take him to sea, exposing him to the eventualities of a voyage so dangerous for such little creatures? - Not at all. Therefore she must stop at San Diego with the child, to preserve the life that had been given him, without leaving him for an instant; surrounding him with affection and tenderness in order that as he blossomed forth in health he might smile when his father returned. And the captain would not be away more than six months. After taking in a new cargo at Calcutta the Franklin would return to her port of registry. And, besides, was it not advisable for a sailor's wife to become accustomed to these inevitable separations?

It was necessary to become resigned to it, and Dolly did resign herself to it. But after John's departure, as soon as the movement which was life to her had ceased around her, how vacant, monotonous and desolate her life would have been if she had not been absorbed in her child, if she had not concentrated on him all her love.

John Branican's house was on one of the upper levels of the heights which surround the shore of the bay. It was a sort of chalet, standing in a little garden, planted with orange trees and olive trees, enclosed with a wooden fence. A ground floor with a path along the front, on to which opened the door and the windows of the drawing and dining rooms, a first floor with a balcony the whole length, and above it the graceful gables of the roof — such was this very simple and attractive dwelling. On the ground floor were the drawing and dining rooms, modestly furnished. On the first floor were two rooms occupied by Mrs. Branican and the child, behind the house a small annexe for the kitchen and offices; that was the interior plan of the chalet. Prospect House rejoiced in an exceptionally fine position owing to its southern aspect. The view extended over the entire town, and across the bay to the buildings on Loma Point. It was rather too far away from the business quarter undoubtedly; but this slight disadvantage was amply compensated for by the chalet's position in a good atmosphere, exposed to the southerly breezes, laden with the saline odours of the Pacific.

It was in this house that the-long hours of absence for Dolly were to be passed. The baby's nurse and a domestic were the only servants. The only persons who visited it were Mr. and Mrs. Burker — Len rarely, Jane frequently. Mr. William Andrew, according to his promise, often called on the young wife to acquaint her with all the news of the Franklin which might reach him directly or indirectly. Before any letters could come the maritime journals would record the vessels spoken with, their arrival in port, and the different shipping news of interest to shipowners. Dolly would thus be kept up to date. As to the people around and her neighbours, she was accustomed to the isolation of Prospect House and had never sought acquaintanceship. One thought occupied her life, and even if visitors had crowded to the chalet, it would have seemed empty to her, for John was not there, and it would remain empty until his return.

The first few days were very sad for her. Dolly never went out of the house when Jane Burker came to see her.

They Spent their time with little Wat and in speaking of Captain John. Generally, when she was alone, Dolly would spend a part of the day on the balcony, looking out beyond the bay, beyond Island Point, beyond the Coronado Islands, beyond the horizon. The Franklin was far away, but in thought she was on board of her and near her husband. And when a ship came into view and sought the harbour she would say to herself that one day the Franklin would also appear, and grow larger as she neared the land, that John would be on board.

But little Wat’s health would not be improved by rigid seclusion within Prospect House. In the second week after the departure the weather had become very fine and the breezes tempered the growing heat. So Mrs. Branican deemed it necessary to go out. She took with her the nurse to carry the baby. They went for a walk as far as the outskirts of San Diego, as far as the houses of the Old Town. That was of great benefit to the child, who was fresh and rosy, and when the nurse stopped he clapped his little hands and smiled at his mother. Once or twice, for longer excursions a pretty chaise, hired in the neighbourhood, took out the three, or rather the four, for Mrs. Burker formed one of the party. One day they went as far as Knob Hill, which rises near the Florence Hotel, from which the view extends beyond the islands to the west. Another day the drive extended to Coronado Beach, on which the furious sea beat like thunder. Then they visited the Mussel Beds, where the high tide covers the superb rocks with its spray. Dolly touched with her foot this ocean, which bore as it were an echo from the distant regions where John was then sailing — this ocean, the waves of which were perhaps dashing against the Franklin thousands of miles away. And she stood there motionless, seeing the young captain's ship in the flight of her imagination, and murmuring the name of John.

On the 30th of March Mrs. Branican was on the balcony when she perceived Mrs. Burker coming towards Prospect House. Jane was hurrying along, and signalled joyfully with her hand, a proof that she brought no bad news. Dolly immediately went downstairs to meet her at the door.

"What is the matter, Jane?" «he asked.

"Dear Dolly," replied Mrs. Burker, "I have something to tell you which will please you. I have come from Mr. William Andrew to tell you that the Boundary came in this morning and has spoken the Franklin."

"The Franklin?"

"Yes! Mr. William Andrew had just heard it when he met me in Fleet Street, and as he could not come on here until the afternoon, I hurried on in his place to tell you."

"And is there any news of John?"

"Yes, Dolly."

"What? Tell me."

“Eight days ago the Franklin and the Boundary passed each other on the sea and communicated with each other.”

“Was all well on board?”

“Yes, dear Dolly. The two captains were near enough to shout to each other, and the last word heard on the Boundary was your name.”

“My poor John!” exclaimed Mrs. Branican, with tears of love in her eyes.

“I am so glad, Dolly,” said Mrs. Burker, “to have been the first to bring you the news.”

“And I thank you!” said Mrs. Branican. “If you only knew how happy you have made me! Ah! If every day I could hear of my John — my dear John! The captain of the Boundary has seen you. John has spoken to him — it is like another good-bye he has sent me!”

“Yes, dear Dolly, and I tell you again that all was well on board the Franklin!’

“Jane,” said Mrs. Branican, “I must see this captain of the Boundary. He will tell me more in detail. When did the meeting take place?”

“That I do not know,” said Jane, “but the log book would tell us, and the captain of the Boundary will give you full information.”

“Well, Jane, let me put on my things and we will go off together at once.”

“No. Not to-day, Dolly,” said Mrs. Burker; “we cannot go on board the Boundary.”

“And why not?”

“Because she only arrived this morning, and she is in quarantine.”

“For how long?”

“Oh! For twenty-four hours only. It is merely a matter of form, but no one can — ”

“And how did Mr. William Andrew come to know about this meeting?”

“Through a message sent through the custom house by the captain. Dear Dolly, be easy. There is no doubt at all about what I have told you, and you can have the confirmation of it to-morrow. I only ask a day’s patience.”

“Well, Jane, to-morrow,” replied Mrs. Branican. “Tomorrow I will be y t your house at nine o’clock in the morning. You will then come with me on to the Boundary?”

“Willingly, dear Dolly. I will go with you to-morrow, and then, as the quarantine will have been raised, we can be received by the captain.”

“Is not Captain Ellis a friend of John’s?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“Yes, Dolly, and the Boundary belongs to Andrews’.”

“Then it is agreed, Jane. I shall be with you at the time named. But the day will be very long for me. Will you have luncheon with me?”

“If you like, my dear Dolly. Mr. Burker is away until this evening, and we can spend the afternoon.”

“Yes, dear John, and we will talk about John — always about him — always!”

“And little Wat? How is the baby?” asked Mrs. Burker.

“He is very well!” said Dolly. “He is as happy as a bird. How glad his father will be to see him again! Jane, I have a great mind to take him and his nurse with us to-morrow! You know I don’t like to be separate from my child even for a few hours. I should never be easy if he were out of my sight — if I did not have him with me.”

“You are right, Dolly,” said Mrs. Burker, “it is a good idea. Little Wat will be all the better for the outing. It is fine weather, the bay is calm. It will be his first sea voyage, the dear child! Is it agreed?”

“It is agreed!” said Mrs. Branican.

Jane remained at Prospect House until five o’clock in the afternoon. Then, as she left her cousin, she repeated that she would expect her at nine o’clock next morning to accompany her on board the Boundary.

CHAPTER IV.

ON BOARD THE “BOUNDARY.”

In the morning they were up early at Prospect House. The weather was superb. The breeze off the land blew the last mists of the night away out to sea. The nurse dressed little Wat, while Mrs. Branican was busy at her toilette. It had been agreed that she would lunch with Mrs. Burker; and so she contented herself with a light meal which would last her till noon, for very probably the visit to Captain Ellis would take two good hours. Everything the brave captain told her would be so interesting.

Mrs. Branican, and the nurse with the child in her arms, left the chalet as the clocks of San Diego were chiming half-past eight. The wide streets of the upper town, bordered with villas and gardens, were descended at a good pace, and Dolly reached the narrower streets more crowded with houses, which form the business quarter. Len Burker lived in Fleet Street, not far from the wharf belonging to the Pacific Coast Steamship Company. In short, Mrs. Branican had made a good passage, for she had come right through the city, and it was just nine o’clock when she entered Jane’s house.

It was a small house and of rather melancholy aspect, with its Venetian shutters generally closed. Len Burker’s friends were almost always men of business, as he had no acquaintances with his neighbours. Little was known of him even in Fleet Street, and his business frequently kept him away from morning till night. Often, too, he went on journeys, and most frequently to San Francisco, on matters of which he never spoke to his wife. This morning he was not in the office when Mrs. Branican arrived. Jane Burker made an excuse for her husband not being able to accompany them in their visit to the Boundary, adding that he would certainly be back to lunch.

“I am ready, my dear Dolly,” said she, after kissing the baby. “You do not want to wait?”

“I am not tired,” said Mrs. Branican.

“You do not want anything?”

“No, Jane. I am anxious to see Captain Ellis. Let us be off at once, please.”

Mrs. Burker had but one servant — an old woman, a mulatto whom her husband had brought from New York when he had come to San Diego. This mulatto, whose name was No, had been Len Burker’s nurse. Having always lived in his family, she was entirely devoted to him, and still talked to him as if he were a child. This uncouth, imperious creature was the only one who had ever exercised any influence over Len Burker, who had completely handed over to her the management of his house. Often Jane had had to put up with a domination almost exceeding bounds, “and of which her husband entirely approved. But she submitted to the domination of the mulatto as she did to that of her husband. In her resignation, which was nothing but feebleness, she left matters to themselves, and Nô consulted her in nothing as to the management of the household.

Just as Jane was going away the mulatto advised her to be back before noon, for Len Burker would return for lunch, and certainly would not wait for her. Besides he wished to see Mrs. Branican on important business — so said No.

“What is it about?” asked Dolly of her cousin.

“And how should I know?” answered Mrs. Burker. “Come, Dolly, come!”

Mrs. Branican and Jane Burker, accompanied by the nurse and the child, left the house and walked towards the wharf, where they arrived in a few minutes.

The Boundary, whose quarantine had just been raised, had not yet come alongside the berth reserved for Andrews' ships. She was moored in the bay about a cable's length from Point Loma. It was thus necessary to cross the bay to get on board the vessel, which would not move up for two hours. This meant a passage of about two miles, which the steam launches started on every half hour.

As soon as they arrived Dolly and Jane took their places in the steam launch with about a dozen other passengers. Most of them were friends or relatives of the crew of the Boundary, who were taking advantage of the first opportunity to visit them on board the vessel. The launch let go her painter, sheered off from the wharf, and under the impulse of her screw headed obliquely across the bay, puffing at every stroke.

In the limpid clearness of the weather, the bay was visible all round, with the amphitheatre of the houses of San Diego, the hill dominating the Old Town, the mouth open between Island Point and Loma Point, the immense Coronado hotel of grandiose architecture, and the lighthouse which rayed forth its light over the sea after the setting of the sun.

There were several ships moored here and there, which the launch avoided cleverly, as she did also the boats coming in the opposite direction, and the fishing boats going close-hauled so as to fetch the point in one tack.

Mr. Branican sat near Jane on one of the seats aft. The nurse, near them, held the child in her arms. The baby did not sleep, and his eyes filled with the light which the breeze seemed to brighten with its breath. He jumped when a couple of gulls passed over the launch, uttering their sharp cry. He was blooming with health, with his fresh cheeks and his rosy lips, still humid with the milk he had drawn from the bosom of his nurse before he had left the Burkers. His mother regarded him with emotion, bending over him to kiss him, while he smiled in return.

But Dolly’s attention was soon attracted by the sight of the Boundary. Lying apart now from the other vessels, the three-master, clearly outlined at the end of the bay, was flying her flags against the sunny sky. She was swinging with the tide, her bow to the westward at the extremity of her straining cable, on which the last undulations of the surge were breaking.

All Dolly’s life was in her look. She thought of John, carried away on a ship the sister of this one, so much were they alike. And were they not both children of the house of Andrew? Were they not both of the same port? Were they not both built in the same yard?

Dolly, beset by the charm of the illusion, her imagination stimulated by the remembrance, abandoned herself to the idea that John was there on board, that he was waiting for her, that he would stretch out his hand to her when he saw her, that she would be able to jump into his arms. His name rose to her lips, she called him, and he answered by uttering her name.

Then a gentle cry from her child recalled her from sentiment to reality. It was the Boundary towards which she was going, and not the Franklin, which was far, far away, thousands of leagues from the American shore.

“She will be there — one day — in that very place!” she murmured, looking at Mrs. Burker.

“Yes, dear Dolly,” answered Jane. “And it will be John who will welcome us on board.”

She was conscious that a vague uneasiness was wringing the heart of the young wife when she asked about the future.

However, the steam launch had in a quarter of an hour covered the two miles which separate the San Diego wharf from Point Loma. The passengers landed on the pier at the beach, and had then to return towards the Boundary a little more than a cable’s length away.

At the foot of the pier in charge of two sailors was a boat plying to and from the three-master. Mrs. Branican hailed it, and the men put it at her disposal to take her to the Boundary as soon as she was assured that Captain Ellis was then on board.

A few strokes of the oars were enough, and Captain Ellis having recognized Mrs. Branican, came to the side as she was coming up the ladder, followed by Jane, not without having cautioned the nurse to hold on tight to the baby. The captain took them to the poop, while the mate began the preparations to take the ship alongside the wharf at San Diego.

“Mr. ‘Ellis,” said Mrs. Branican at once, “I hear you met the Franklin?”

“Yes, madam,” said the captain, “and I can assure you she was in good condition, as I have already reported to Mr./William Andrew.”

“You have seen — John?”

“The Franklin and the Boundary passed so close on different tacks that Captain Branican and I were able to exchange a few words.”

“Yes! You saw him!” repeated Mrs. Branican, as if she were talking to herself and seeking a reflection of the sight of the Franklin in the captain’s eyes.

Mrs. Burker then asked several questions, to which Dolly listened attentively, although her eyes were turned towards the horizon of sea.

“On that occasion,” said Captain Ellis, “the weather was very favourable and the Franklin was running free under all plain canvas. Captain Branican was on the poop, his telescope in his hand. He had bluffed a point so as to approach the Boundary, for I had not been able to change my course, being as close to the wind as I could haul without shivering my sails.”

Mrs. Branican doubtless did not understand the full meaning of Captain Ellis’s terms, but what she remembered was that he had spoken with John, who had exchanged a few words with him.

“When we were alongside each other,” added he, “your husband, Mrs. Branican, waved me a salute with his hand and shouted: ‘All’s right with us, Ellis! As soon as you get to San Diego give news of me to my wife, to my dear Dolly!’ And then the two vessels parted, and in a few minutes were a long way from each other.”

“And what day was it that you met the Franklin?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“On the 23rd of March,” answered Captain Ellis, “at 11.25. a m.”

It was then better to go into detail, and the captain pointed out on the chart the exact point at which the ships had crossed. It was in 14S deg. of longitude and 20 deg. of latitude that the Boundary had met the Franklin, that is to say, at seventeen hundred miles from San Diego. If the weather continued favourable — and there was a chance that it would with the fine season now becoming established — Captain John would make a quick and fortunate passage across the North Pacific. And as he would find a cargo as soon as he arrived at Calcutta, he would stay but a short time in the capital of India, and his return for America would promptly take place. The Franklin's absence would thus be limited to five or six months, as foreseen and expected by her owners.

While Captain Ellis answered sometimes Mrs. Burker, sometimes Mrs. Branican, Dolly, carried away by her imagination, figured to herself that she was on board the ‘Franklin. It was not Ellis — it was John who was telling her these things. It was his voice she was listening to.

At this moment the mate mounted the poop and told the captain that the preparations were almost complete. The sailors on the forecastle were only waiting for the order to weigh the anchor.

Captain Ellis then offered to set Mrs. Branican ashore, unless she preferred to remain on board, in which case she could cross the bay on the Boundary and land when she was alongside the wharf, which would be in about two hours.

Mrs. Branican would have very willingly accepted the captain's offer; but she was expected to lunch at noon, when Len Burker would have returned. She knew that Jane, after what the mulatto had said, would rather be at home at the same time as her husband. She therefore asked Captain Ellis to put her ashore at the pier, where she could get away in the first launch.

Orders were given in consequence. Mrs. Branican and Mrs. Burker took leave of the captain, after he had kissed little Wat's cheeks. Then the two cousins, preceding the nurse, descended into one of the ship’s boats, and in a few minutes reached the pier.

While waiting for the steam launch which had just left San Diego, Mrs. Branican observed the manoeuvres of the Boundary. To the rugged song of the boatswain, the sailors shortened in the cable and the three-master came up to her anchor, while the mate hoisted the jib, the forestay- sail and the mizen. Under this canvas she would easily move up to her station with the incoming tide.

Soon the launch came in. Then she gave a few puffs of the whistle to call the passengers, and two or three dilatory ones had to hurry coming over the point in front of the Coronado Hotel. The launch waited only five minutes. Mrs. Branican, Jane Burker, and the nurse took their seats on the bench on the starboard side, while the other passengers — about twenty in number — moved about from the front to the after-part of the vessel. There was a final whistle, the screw was put in movement, and the launch left the shore It was but half-past eleven. Mrs. Branican would thus be back at the house in Fleet Street in time, for the crossing of the bay only took a quarter of an hour. As the launch moved away her eyes were fixed on the Boundary. The anchor was apeak, the sails had caught the wind, and the vessel had begun to leave her anchorage. When she was moored at the wharf Dolly could visit Captain Ellis as often as she liked.

The steam launch sped along swiftly. The houses of the town grew larger on the picturesque amphitheatre which they occupied at different levels. It was only a quarter of a mile now to the landing-place.

“Look out! Look out!” shouted one of the sailors posted in the bow.

And he turned to the man at the helm who stood on a little bridge in front of the funnel.

Hearing the shout, Mrs. Branican looked away to port where something was taking place which also attracted the attention of the other passengers, most of whom had gone to the bow of the launch.

A large brigantine was coming out from the line of vessels along the quays with her bow directed towards Island Point. She was being assisted by a tug which would take her out to sea, and was already moving at some speed.

At the moment the brigantine was just in the course of the steam launch and so near that it was necessary for the launch to pass under her stern. It was this which caused the sailor to shout to the man at the helm.

A certain anxiety seized upon the passengers — an anxiety all the more justifiable as the harbour was crowded with ships moored here and there at their anchors. And by a very natural movement they drew back towards the stern.

It was clear what ought to be done. The launch ought to stop and give way to the tug and brigantine, and resume its progress when the course was clear. A few fishing boats running before the wind made this course more difficult as they crossed in front of the wharves of San Diego.

“Look out!” said the sailor at the bow.

“All right!” said the man at the helm. “There is nothing to fear. I have room enough!”

But embarrassed by the sudden apparition of a large steamer coming in, the tug made an unexpected movement, and fell away to port.

There were loud shouts, to which were added those of the brigantine’s crew, endeavouring to help the tug by steering in the same direction.

There was hardly twenty feet between the tug and the steam launch.

Jane, very frightened, had stood up. Mrs. Branican, by an instinctive impulse, took little Wat from his nurse’s arms and clasped him in hers.

“Port! Port!” shouted the captain of the tug to the helmsman of the launch, motioning with his hand the direction he should take.

The man had not lost his coolness, and suddenly put down the helm with all his might, so as to get out of the way of the tug, which could not stop, owing to the brigantine having begun to yaw and give signs of sidling on to her.

At the lift of the helm, which was very powerful, the launch shot over sharply to port, and, as frequently happens, the passengers losing their equilibrium were all thrown to the same side.

There was another shouting, this time a shout of terror, for it looked as though the launch was about to capsize.

At this moment Mrs. Branican, who was standing near the rail, could not recover her footing, was hurled overboard and disappeared with her child.

The brigantine was then almost grazing the launch as she passed, and all danger of collision was over.

“Dolly! Dolly!” screamed Jane, whom one of the passengers caught as she was falling.

Suddenly a sailor from the steam launch jumped over the rail on the side where Mrs. Branican and the child had just disappeared.

Dolly, kept up by her clothes, was floating at the surface of the water with little Wat, whom she held in her arms, when the sailor came near her.

The launch having stopped, it would not be difficult for the sailor, a strong man and good swimmer, to get back with Mrs. Branican. Unfortunately, as he was seizing her by the waist, the arms of the unfortunate woman opened while she struggled, half suffocated; and the baby rolled out of them and sank.

When Mrs. Branican was lifted on to the launch and laid on the deck she had quite lost consciousness.

Again the brave sailor — a man of about thirty, named Zach Fren — threw himself into the sea, dived several times, and searched in the water about where the launch lay. It was in vain; he could not find the child, which had been borne away by an undercurrent.

Meanwhile the passengers were giving Mrs. Branican all the attention her state required. Jane, distracted, the nurse, frantic, endeavoured to bring her to consciousness. The steam launch, motionless, waited until Zach Fren had given up all hope of recovering little Wat.

At length Dolly began to recover her senses; she murmured the name of Wat, her eyes opened, and her first cry was, —

“My child!”

Zach Fren came on board for the last time. Wat was not in his arms: “My child!” again cried Dolly. Then she rose, and pushing aside those who surrounded her, ran towards the stern.

And if she had not been stopped, she would have thrown herself overboard; and they had to hold her while the steam launch resumed its journey towards the wharf.

With her face convulsed, and her hands clenched, she had fallen on the deck. A few minutes afterwards the launch had reached the landing-place, and Mrs. Branican was taken to Jane’s house. Len Burker, who had just come in, sent the mulatto out for a doctor.

The doctor came almost immediately, and it was not without trouble that Dolly again came to.

And then looking with a fixed stare she said, —

“What is the matter? What has happened? Ah! I know!”

Then with a smile —

“It is my John! He returns! He returns!” she cried. “He has come back to his wife and child! John I There is my John!”

Mrs. Branican had lost her reason.

CHAPTER V.

THREE MONTHS ELAPSE.

HOW can we describe the effect produced in San Diego by this double catastrophe of the death of the child and the madness of the mother? We know the people’s sympathy with the Branicans, the interest they took in the young captain of the Franklin. He had been gone scarcely a fortnight, and he was no longer a father. His wife was mad. On his return, in his empty house, he would find neither the smiles of his little Wat nor the tendernesses of Dolly, who would not even recognize him. The day the Franklin returned to port he would not be saluted by the cheers of the town.’

But it was not necessary to wait for John Branican’s return to inform him of the horrible misfortune that had just occurred to him. Mr. William Andrew could not leave Captain John in ignorance of what had passed, and at the mercy of some fortuitous circumstance to hear of the terrible catastrophe. He would immediately send off a letter to one of his correspondents at Singapore. In this way John would know the awful truth before reaching India.

But Mr. William Andrew wished to delay the sending of this message. Perhaps Dolly’s reason was not irremediably lost? Perhaps the care with which she was being nursed would restore her to her senses? Why strike John a double blow, in telling him of the death of his child and the madness of his wife, if this madness was to be only short-lived?

After talking the matter over with Len and Jane Burker, Mr. William Andrew resolved to wait until the doctors had pronounced a definite opinion as to Dolly’s mental state. In these cases of sudden .alienation was there not more hope of cure than in those due to a slow disorganization of the intellectual life? Yes; and it would be better to wait a few days, or even a few weeks.

The town, however, was plunged in consternation. Crowds came to the house in Fleet Street for news of Mrs. Branican. Meanwhile the minutest search had been made in the bay to recover the body of the child, but without success. Apparently it had been borne away on the flood, and then taken out to sea by the ebb. The poor little child would not even have a grave, at which his mother could pray if she recovered her. reason.

At first the doctors reported that Dolly's madness was of the form of a gentle melancholy. There were no nervous crises, none of those unconscious outbreaks of violence, which compel us to put the afflicted under restraint, and render all movement impossible. There seemed, therefore, no necessity to take precautions against the excesses which mad people frequently commit on others or on themselves. Dolly was merely a body without a mind, an intelligence in which there remained no remembrance of the horrible misfortune. Her eyes were dry, her look lifeless. She seemed not to see; she seemed not to hear. She was. not of this world. She lived only the material life.

Such was Mrs. Branican's state during the first, month after-the accident. There had been a consultation as to the advisability of putting her in an asylum where special attention would be given her. This was the suggestion of Mr. William Andrew, and it would have been acted on had it not been for a proposal made by Len Burker.

One day Len Burker went to call on Mr. William Andrew, and spoke to him as follows: "We are now pertain that Dolly's madness is not of a dangerous character necessitating her being put under restraint, and as we are her only relatives, we wish to keep her with us. Dolly is very fond of my wife, and

Jane’s nursing might probably be of greater effect than that of a stranger? If a crisis occurs later on, we can then consider the matter, and take our measures accordingly. What do you think, Mr. Andrew?”

The worthy ship-owner did not reply without a certain amount of hesitation, for he had no confidence in Len Burker, although he knew nothing of his precarious position and had no suspicion of his honesty. After all, the friendship between Dolly and Jane was real, and as Mrs. Burker was her only relative, it evidently seemed better that Dolly should be entrusted to her care. The main point was that the unhappy woman should be constantly and effectually Looked after in the way her state required.

“If you arc willing to take this trouble,” said Mr. William Andrew, “I see nothing, Mr. Burker, against Dolly being entrusted to her cousin, of whose affection there is no doubt.”

“An affection which will never fail!” said Len Burker. But he said it in a cold, positive, displeasing tone which he could not throw off.

“I approve of your offer,” said Mr. William Andrew. “But there is one thing I must say. I am not certain that in your house in Fleet Street, in the noisy business quarter of the town, poor Dolly would find herself under favourable circumstances for her return to health. She wants quiet,- good air.”

“Quite so,” answered Len Burker. “Our intention is to take her to Prospect House and there live with her. The chetlet is familiar to her, and the sight of objects to which she is accustomed may perhaps exercise a salutary influence on her mind. There she will be away from all worry. The country is at her door. Jane can take her out for walks in the neighbourhood, which she knows and which she used to take with her child. Would not John approve of this proposition were he here? And what will he think when he comes back if he finds his wife in a lunatic asylum entrusted to mercenary hands? Mr. Andrew, we should neglect nothing which might be of a nature to exercise an influence on the mind of our unfortunate relative.”

This reply was evidently dictated by good feeling. But why did this man’s words always appear to inspire distrust? Nevertheless his proposal, in the way it was offered, was deserving of acceptance, and Mr. William Andrew could only thank him for it, adding that Captain John would be deeply grateful to him.

On the 27th of April, Mrs. Branican was taken to Prospect House, where Jane and Len Burker installed themselves the same day. The course received general approval.

Len Burker’s motive can be guessed. The very day of the catastrophe he had, it will be remembered, intended to consult Dolly on certain business. This business was simply to borrow some money from her. But since then the situation had changed. It was probable that Len Burker would be appointed her trustee, and in that way would become possessed of resources, illicit no doubt, which would enable him to gain time. This was exactly what Jane had feared, and although she was happy at being able to devote herself entirely to Dolly, she trembled at the suspicion of the plan her husband proposed under cover of a feeling of humanity.

Life, then, began under new conditions at Prospect House. Dolly was installed in the same room from which she had gone forth to meet with her dreadful misfortune. It was no longer the mother that returned, but a being deprived of reason. This chalet so loved, this drawing- room in which a few photographs recalled the memory of the absent one, this garden in which the two had passed so many happy hours, told her nothing of the past. Jane occupied the next room to Mrs. Branican, and Len Burker had taken possession of the room on the ground floor, which had been John's work-room.

From this day Len Burker resumed his usual occupations. Every morning he went down into San Diego, to his office in Fleet Street, where he continued to carry on his business. But it was noticeable that he never failed to return in the evening to Prospect House, and only went out of the town on short absences.

The mulatto woman had of course followed her master to his new dwelling, where she was what she had been everywhere and always, a person on whose entire devotion he could count. Little Wat's nurse had been discharged, although she had offered to stay and look after Mrs. Branican. As to the servant, she was temporarily continued on at the chalet so as to help No, who was not quite equal to all the work of the household.

No one could have been more assiduous than Jane in her affectionate care of Dolly. Her friendship was increased, if possible, since the death of the child, of which she accused herself as being the primary cause. If she had, not come to Dolly at Prospect House, if she had not suggested the idea of the visit to the captain of the Boundary, the baby would still be with his mother and consoling her during the long hours of absence; and Dolly would not have lost her reason.

It doubtless entered into Len Burker's calculations that Jane's attention should appear sufficient to those who were interested in Mrs. Branican's position. . Even Mr. William Andrew acknowledged that the unfortunate woman could not be in better hands. In the course of his visits his first care was to discover if Dolly's state showed any tendency towards amelioration, wishing still to hope that the first message sent to the captain at Singapore or Calcutta would not announce the double misfortune of his child dead — his wife — And was it not as if she were dead, she also? Well, no! He could not believe that Dolly, in the strength of her youth, with her enlightened mind and energetic character, had been irretrievably deprived of her intelligence! Was it not only a fire hidden in ashes? Surely some spark would one day kindle again? But five weeks had now gone by and no flash of reason had dissipated the darkness. In a case like this of calm, reserved, languishing madness, with no physiological excitement, the doctors seemed to have but the very slightest hope, and they soon began to leave off their visits. Soon even Mr. William Andrew, despairing of cure, began to come less frequently to Prospect House, it being painful to him to find himself in the presence of this unfortunate woman, who was unable even to recognize him.

When Len Burker was obliged for one reason or another to be away for a day, the mulatto was ordered to keep a careful eye on Mrs. Branican. Without seeking to interfere with Jane in any way, she rarely left her alone, and faithfully reported to her master all she had remarked in Dolly’s condition. She exercised her ingenuity in getting rid of the few people who called in search of news at the chalet. It was contrary to the doctor’s orders, she said. Absolute quiet was necessary. These interruptions might occasion serious consequences. And Mrs. Burker herself sided with Nô when she got rid of visitors and nuisances who had no business at Prospect House. And so Mrs. Branican became isolated.

“Poor Dolly!” thought Jane. “If her state gets worse, if her mania becomes violent — they will take her away — they will shut her up in an asylum, and I may very likely see her no more. No! Heaven leave her to me. Who would look after her as lovingly as I do?”

During the third week of May, Jane tried a few walk; in the neighbourhood, thinking it would do her cousin a little good. Len Burker made no objection, but on condition that Nô should accompany them. This, however, was only prudent. The walk, the fresh air, might have an effect on Dolly and suggest to her mind the idea of flight; and Jane would not be strong enough to prevent her. Everything was to be feared from a madness which might even end in self-destruction. It would not do to expose her to another misfortune; Many times Mrs. Branican went out leaning on Jane's arm. She allowed herself to be led as if, she were a passive being, and took no interest in anything.

From the commencement of these walks, if nothing else happened, at least the mulatto woman noticed a change for the better in Dolly's state. Her habitual calm gave place to a certain exaltation which might have serious consequences. Several times the sight of children she met made her utter a nervous cry. Was this in remembrance of him she had lost? Did little Wat return to her thoughts? Whatever it might be, even admitting that it was a favourable symptom, there followed- a cerebral agitation of a disquieting nature.

One day Mrs. Burker and the mulatto had taken Mrs. Branican to the heights of Knob Hill. Dolly had turned towards the horizon, but it seemed that her brain was as void of thought as her eves were vacant in look. Suddenly her face lighted up, a shudder shook her, her eye gave a strange glance, and with a trembling hand she pointed to a spot shining out at sea.

“There! there! “She exclaimed.

It was a sail clearly distinguished against the sky, on which the sun's rays fell.

“There! there!” repeated Dolly.

And her voice was quite changed and did not seem to belong to a human creature.

While Jane regarded her with anxiety, the mulatto shook her head in sign of dissatisfaction. Seizing Dolly’s arm, she said, —

“Come! — come!”

Dolly did not hear her.

“Come, Dolly, come!” said Jane.

And she endeavoured to draw her away, to distract her attention from the sail moving on the horizon.

Dolly resisted.

“No, no!” she cried.

And she repulsed the mulatto with a strength of which she did not believe her capable.

Mrs. Burker and Nô became very anxious. They saw that Dolly might escape from them”. If she were irresistibly attracted by this disturbing vision, in which John’s memory predominated, might she not descend the slopes of Knob Hill and rush towards the beach which was swept by the waves?

But, suddenly, the excitement calmed down. The sun had just vanished behind a cloud, and the sail no longer appeared on the face of the ocean.

Dolly again became inert, her look became vacant and she was no longer conscious of what was going on. The sobs which had convulsively shaken her chest had ceased, as if life had departed from her. Then Jane took her by the hand, and she allowed her to lead her away without resistance, and peacefully went back into Prospect House.

From that day Len Burker decided that Dolly should take her walks only within the Prospect House enclosure, and Jane had to conform to this injunction.

It was at this time that Mr. William Andrew made up his mind to inform Captain John that the mental state of Mrs. Branican left little hope of improvement. It was not to Singapore, which the Franklin ought already to have left, but to Calcutta that the message was sent for John to receive as soon as he arrived in India.

But although Mr. William Andrew had no hope concerning Dolly, the doctors thought some change might still be produced in her mental state if she experienced some violent shock — for instance, when her husband reappeared before her eyes. This chance was, it is true, the only one left, but, feeble as it was, Mr. William Andrew took it into account. ‘ And in his message he had begged John not to abandon himself to despair, but to hand over the command of the Franklin to,the mate, Harry Felton, and come home by the quickest route. If it had been necessary, this excellent man would have sacrificed his dearest interests to try this last experiment, and he asked the young captain to telegraph back to him on this subject.

When Len Burker heard of this message, which Mr.

William Andrew had thought it right to communicate to him, he approved of it, though he expressed his fear that John’s return would be powerless to produce a shock from which any salutary effect could be gained. But Jane held to the hope that the sight of John might bring Dolly back to reason, and Len Burker promised to write to him to this effect, in order that there might be no delay in his return to San Diego — a promise, however, he did not keep.

During the following weeks there was no change in Mrs. Branican's stats. If her physical life was in no way troubled, if her health left nothing to be desired, the alteration in her face was only too apparent. Although she had not yet reached her twenty-first year, her features were ageing and the warm colour of her complexion was fading, as if the fire of life were dying out within her. And it was only seldom she could be seen, unless in the chalet garden, seated on some bench, with Jane walking near and looking after her with indefatigable devotion.

At the beginning of the month of June the Franklin had been gone from San Diego two months and a half. Since her meeting with the Boundary there had been no news of her. By this, after putting in at Singapore, she ought, barring accidents, to be on the point of arrival at Calcutta. No exceptionally stormy weather had been reported in the North Pacific or Indian Ocean which would delay a well- equipped sailing-ship.

But Mr. William Andrew could not help being surprised at this want of news. He did not understand why his correspondent had not informed him of the arrival of the Franklin at Singapore. To suppose that she had not put in there was impossible, for Captain John had had precise orders to do so. But at any rate they would know in a day or two, when he arrived at Calcutta.

A week went by. The 15th of June came and there was no news. A message was then sent to the correspondent asking for an immediate reply regarding

John Branican and the Franklin.

The reply arrived two days afterwards. Nothing was known of the Franklin at Calcutta. The American barquentine had not been spoken up to then either in the Indian Ocean or in the Gulf of Bengal.

Mr. William Andrew’s surprise became changed to anxiety, and as it was impossible to keep the telegram secret, the report soon spread that the Franklin had not yet arrived at either Calcutta or Singapore. Was the Branican family to be struck with another disaster — a disaster which would also fall on the San Diego families to whom the crew of the Franklin belonged?

Len Burker did not show much concern when he learnt these alarming news. However, his affection for Captain John had never been very demonstrative, and he was not the man to be troubled by the misfortunes of others, even those of his own family. But it was evident that from the day people began to be seriously uneasy as to the fate of the Franklin, he appeared more gloomy than usual, more careworn, more reserved to all his friends — even in business. He was rarely seen in the streets of San Diego, at his office in Fleet Street, and he kept within the enclosure at Prospect House. As to Jane, her pale cheeks, her eyes red with tears, her deeply dispirited face showed that she was in great trouble.

Just about this time a change took place in the staff of the chalet. Without any apparent motive Len Burker sent away the servant he had kept to help No, and who had given no cause for complaint. The mulatto remained in sole charge of the house. With the exception of her and Jane, no one had access to Mrs. Branican. As to Mr. William Andrew, his health having suffered from these strokes of ill fortune, he had left off visiting Prospect House. In the event of the probable loss of the Franklin what could he say, what could he do? Besides, now that the walks had been stopped, he knew that Dolly had recovered all her quiet, and that her nervous troubles had disappeared. She lived, or rather she vegetated, in a state of unconscious tranquillity, which was the true character of her affliction, and her health required no special care.

At the end of June Mr. William Andrew received another message from Calcutta. The maritime agencies had had no report of the Franklin from any of the points she ought to have passed, among the Philippines, Celebes, the Java Sea, and the Indian Ocean; and as the vessel had left San Diego three months before, it was to be supposed that she had been totally lost, either by collision or shipwreck, before even reaching Singapore.

CHAPTER VI.

THE END OF A SORROWFUL YEAR.

The concurrence of serious events of which the Branican family had become the victim afforded Len Burker an opportunity to which our careful consideration should be directed.

It will not have been forgotten, that if the pecuniary position of Mrs. Branican was very modest, she would yet be the sole heiress of her uncle, Edward Starter. In retreat in his vast forest domain, banished, so to speak, in the most inaccessible part of the state of Tennessee, this eccentric man had absolutely refrained from sending any news of himself. As he was still but fifty-nine his fortune might be a long time coming.

Perhaps even Edward Starter would have changed his intentions had he known that Mrs. Branican, his only direct relative, had been struck with mental alienation after the death of her child. But he knew not of this double misfortune, he would not even hear of it, having always refused to receive letters as well as to write them. Evidently Len Burker could have broken this prohibition had he chosen to do so, in consideration of the changes that had come over Dolly’s existence, and Jane had given him to understand that it was his duty to communicate with Edward Starter; but he had imposed silence on his wife and kept his own counsel.

It was his interest to be silent, and between his interest and his duty he was not the man to hesitate for an instant. His affairs daily took too .serious an aspect for him to sacrifice the sole chance of fortune the future offered.

The position was indeed a simple one: if Mrs. Branican died without children, her cousin Jane was the only- relative who could inherit her property; so that by the death of little Wat Len Burker had certainly seen an improvement in the chances of his wife's coming into possession of Edward Starter's fortune; and his wife's chances were his own.

And were not events all tending to bring him this fortune? Not only was the child dead, not only was Dolly deranged, but according to the opinion of the doctors the only thing that could change her mental state was John's return.

And the fate of the Franklin was the cause of the liveliest anxiety. If news failed to come during the next few weeks, if John Branican were not met with on the sea, if Andrews did not learn that their ship had put in at some port, it would mean that neither Franklin, nor crew would ever again return to San Diego. Then there would only be Dolly, deprived of reason, between the fortune and Len Burker. And when driven desperate, what might not tempt this man without a conscience, when the death of Edward Starter would put Dolly in possession of her rich inheritance.

But evidently Mrs. Branican could only inherit the property on condition of surviving her uncle. It was Len Burker's interest to keep her alive until Edward Starter's fortune had come to her. There were at present but two chances against him: either Mrs. Branican's death might occur too soon, or Captain John might return after being shipwrecked on some unknown island. But this last eventuality was a very unlikely one, and the total loss of the Franklin might already be considered as certain.

Such was Len Burker's position, such was the future he had in view, and that at the moment he was reduced to the last expedients. In fact, if justice intervened in his affairs he would have to meet a charge of embezzlement. Part of the money entrusted to him by imprudent investors, or which he had obtained the use of by his manoeuvres, was no longer within his reach; the claims would inevitably have to be met in the long run, although some of his new liabilities had been incurred in paying off old debts. Ruin was approaching, and worse than ruin, dishonour, and what particularly appealed to him, his arrest on serious charges.

Mrs. Burker doubtless suspected that her husband’s position was much threatened, but she had no idea that the end would be in the intervention of the law. Besides, no sign of pecuniary embarrassment had yet been visible at Prospect House.

And for this reason.

Since Dolly had gone out of her mind a trustee had had to be appointed for her in the absence of her husband. Len Burker had been clearly pointed out as the man for the post owing to his relationship to Mrs. Branican, and to him had been entrusted the administration of her property. The money left by John for household expenses was at his disposition, and he had used it for his personal needs. It was not much, certainly, for the Franklin’s voyage was not expected to last more than six months; but this patrimony which Dolly had brought at her marriage, although it consisted of some two or three thousand dollars, would help Len Burker to meet pressing claims, and gain time — which was of the utmost importance to him.

And this dishonest man did not hesitate to abuse his position as trustee. He misappropriated the securities in his charge, and owing to these illicit resources was able to obtain a little respite and plunge into new speculations. Having entered on the road leading to crime, Len Burker would, if needful, follow it to the end.

The captain’s return was less and less to be feared. The weeks rolled by, and Andrews’ received no news of the Franklin, whose presence had nowhere been reported for six months. August and September passed. Neither at

Calcutta nor at Singapore had the correspondents received the least information relative to the American three- master. She was now looked upon as lost, and there was public mourning at San Diego. How had she perished? There was little difference of opinion, for all was conjecture. Since she had sailed several trading vessels bound to the same ports had taken the course she should have taken; and as they had found no trace of her, the only likely hypothesis was that she had been caught in one of those terrible storms, those irresistible tornadoes which are the scourge of the Celebes Sea and the Java Sea, and had gone down with all on board. Not a man probably had survived the disaster. On the 15th of October, 1875, the Franklin had been gone from San Diego seven months, and there was every reason to believe she v/ould never return.

The town had become so convinced of this that a subscription list had been opened in favour of the families so unfortunately smitten by this catastrophe. The crew of the. Franklin, both officers and seamen, belonged to San Diego, and had left behind them wives, children and relatives who needed assistance.

The initiative in this subscription was taken by Andrews, who headed the list with a large amount. As he was interested in the matter, and for prudential reasons, Len Barker also contributed to this charitable work. The other firms in the town, the landowners, the retail dealers, followed the example; and the result was that the families of the lost crew were to a large extent assisted, and the consequences of this maritime disaster considerably alleviated.

On his part, Mr. William Andrew looked upon it as a duty that Mrs. Branican should have enough to live upon. He knew that Captain John had at his departure left enough for her requirements calculated on an absence of six or seven months. But thinking that the resources were coming to an end, and not wishing that Dolly should be a burden to her relatives, he resolved to consult with Len Burker on the subject.

On the 17th of October, in the afternoon, although his health was not completely re-established, the ship-owner set out for Prospect House, and after reaching the high part of the town, appeared before the chalet.

Outside there was no change, except that the shutters on the ground floor and first floor were closed. It looked like an inhabited house, but silent and mysterious.

Mr. William Andrew rang at the gate in the fence. No one came. It seemed as though the visitor had neither been seen nor heard.

Was there anyone at home? He rang a second time, and then followed the noise of a door opening at the side.

The mulatto appeared, and as soon as she recognized Mr. William Andrew she could not restrain a gesture of vexation, which, however, he did not notice.

No came towards him, and before the gate was opened he spoke to her over the fence.

“Is not Mrs. Branican at home?” he asked.

“No, Mr. Andrew,” answered No, with a peculiar hesitation visibly mingled with fear.

“Where is she, then?” asked Mr. William Andrew.

“She is out for a walk with Mrs. Burker.”

“I thought they had given Up their walks, which excited her, and might bring on a crisis?”

“Yes, doubtless,” said No. “But for some days Mrs. Branican has gone out. It seems to be doing her good — ”

‘‘ I am sorry you did not let me know,” replied Mr. William Andrew. “Is Mr. Burker at home?”

“I do not know.”

“Then see; and if he is, tell him I wish to speak with him.”

Before the mulatto could reply — and probably she would have been much embarrassed for a reply — the door on the ground floor opened. Len Burker appeared on the steps, crossed the garden, and advancing, said, —

“Please come in, Mr. Andrew. In the absence of Jane, who has gone out with Dolly, allow me to receive you.”

And this was not said in the hard tone so habitual to Len Burker, but in a voice that was evidently slightly troubled.

As it was especially to see Len Burker that Mr. William Andrew had come to Prospect House, he entered the gate. Then, without accepting the offer made to him to go into the drawing-room on the ground floor, he sat down on one of the seats in the garden.

Len Burker, beginning the conversation, confirmed what the mulatto had just said: for some days Mrs. Branican had resumed her walks in the neighbourhood of Prospect House with great advantage to her health.

“Will not Dolly be back soon?” asked Mr. William Andrew.

“I do not think Jane will bring her home before dinner,” answered Len Burker.

Mr. William Andrew looked much disappointed, for he had to return to his office before post time; and Len Burker gave him no invitation to wait for Mrs. Branican’s return.

“And you have not yet noticed any improvement in Dolly’s condition?” he asked.

“No, unfortunately, Mr. Andrew. It is to be feared we are dealing with the sort of derangement that neither care nor time can cure.”

“Who knows, Mr. Burker? That which hardly seems possible to men is always possible to God!”

Len Burker shook his head like a man who scarcely admitted Divine intervention in the things of this world.

“The worst of it is,” said Mr. William Andrew, “that we can no longer look forward to the captain’s return. We must give up the hope of the change that the return might have had on poor Dolly’s mental state. You are aware, Mr. Burker we have given up all hope of again seeing the Franklin?”

“I am quite aware of it, Mr. Andrew, and it is one more misfortune on the top of the others. But — even though Providence may not interfere — ” said he in an ironical tone, very much out of place at the moment, “there would be nothing extraordinary in John’s coming back after all.”

“Now that seven months have gone by without news of the Franklin” said Mr. William Andrew, “and the inquiries I have made have had no result?”

“But there is nothing to prove that the Franklin has gone down at sea,” replied Len Burker. “Can she not have been wrecked on one of the numerous reefs in the sea she was to cross? Who knows if John and the sailors have not taken refuge on a desert island? “And if so, these resolute and energetic men will know how to get back to their country. Can they not build a boat with the remains of their ship? Can their signals not be seen by a vessel passing in sight of the island? Evidently a certain time is necessary for these things to happen. No, I do not despair of John’s return — in a few months, if not in a few weeks. There are a number of examples of shipwrecked people who have been thought inevitably lost, and who have returned to port.”

Len Burker had spoken with a volubility which was not usual with him. His face so impassive, was now animated. It seemed as. though in expressing himself in this way, in adducing more or less specious reasons regarding the safety of the shipwrecked, it was not to Mr. William Andrew he was replying, but to himself, to his own anxieties, to the fear he would experience if although the Franklin might not reappear off San Diego, another ship might come in, bringing Captain John and his crew. That would mean the collapse of the system on which he had built his future.

“Yes,” said Mr. William Andrew, “I know there have been almost miraculous escapes. All that you say, Mr. Burker, I have said to myself, but it is impossible for me to retain the least hope. In any case — and this is what I have come to see you about to-day — I desire that Dolly should not be any expense to you — ”

“Oh! Mr. Andrew — ”

“No, Mr. Burker; and you will allow me to see that the salary of the captain shall be at his wife’s disposal as long as she lives.”

“On her behalf I thank you,” said Len Burker. “This generosity — ”

“I think it is only my duty,” said Mr. William Andrew. “And as I suppose that the money left by John before his departure must in a great measure have been spent — ”

“Undoubtedly, Mr. Andrew,” replied Len Burker. “But Dolly is not without relations whose duty it also is to come to her help — and was it not from affection — ”

“Yes; I know I can reckon on Mrs. Burker’s devotion. Nevertheless, allow me to interfere in a certain measure to assure John’s wife — perhaps his widow — ;the comfort and the care which I am certain will never be wanting on your part.”

“That is as you please, Mr. Andrew.”

“I have brought you, Mr. Burker, what I look upon as legitimately due to Captain Branican- since the departure of the Franklin, and in your position as trustee you can draw every month what I have to-his credit.”

“As you wish,” said Len Burker.

“Perhaps you will give me - a receipt for the money I have brought?”

“Willingly, Mr. Andrew.”

And Len Burker went to his desk to write the receipt in question.

When he returned to the garden, Mr. William Andrew, who much regretted not having met Dolly and not being able to wait for her return, thanked him for the interest he and his wife were taking in their unfortunate relative. It Was to be understood that the least change in her state was to be reported by Len Burker to Mr. William Andrew, who then took his leave, waiting for a moment at the gate to see if he could see Dolly returning to Prospect House in Jane's company, and then he went down into San Diego.

As soon as he Was out of sight Len Burker called the mulatto to him.

“Does Jane know that Mr. Andrew has just been?”

“Very likely, Len. She saw him come and she saw him go.”

“If he should come here — and he is not likely to do so for Some time — lie must not see Jane, nor particularly Dolly. You understand, no?”

“I will take care, Len.”

“And if Jane insists — ”

“Oh, when you have said, I will not have it,” said No, “it is not Jane who will defy you.”

“Be it so, but we must guard against a surprise! Chance may bring about a meeting — and — -at this moment — that would be to risk losing everything.”

“I am here,” said the mulatto, “and you need fear nothing, Len! No one shall enter Prospect House as long — as long as it docs not suit you.”

And, as a matter of fact, during the two months that followed, the house remained more shut up than ever. Jane and Dolly no longer showed themselves in the little garden. They were not seen either under the verandah or at the windows of the first-floor rooms which were invariably closed. The mulatto only went out on household matters for the shortest time possible, and never in the absence of Len Burker, so that Dolly was never left alone with Jane. It was also noticed during the last months of the year that Len Burker went but very seldom to his office in Fleet Street. Even weeks went by without his appearing there, as if he were endeavouring to withdraw from business while preparing for some new venture.

And it was under these conditions that, thus ended the year 1875, which had been so disastrous for the Branican family — John lost at sea, Dolly deprived of reason, and their child drowned in the depths of San Diego bay.

CHAPTER VII.

VARIOUS MATTERS.

There was no news of the Franklin during the early months of 1876. There was no trace of her presence in the seas of the Philippines, of Celebes, or of Java; neither was there in the neighbourhood of Northern Australia, but how could it be supposed that Captain John would have ventured through Torres Straits! Once only to’ the north of the Sunda Islands, thirty miles from Batavia, a piece of wreckage was picked up by an American schooner and brought to San Diego under the impression that it belonged to the vanished ship. But after careful examination, it was shown that the wreckage was of much older wood than the materials employed by the builders of the Franklin.

Besides, the fragment could only have been knocked off if the ship had been thrown on some reef or collided at sea. In the latter case the secret of the collision could hardly have been so well kept for no news to come regarding it — at least, unless the vessels had both foundered. But as there had been no report of the disappearance of another ship during the twelve months, the idea of a collision had to be abandoned, as also the supposition of a wreck on the coast, to return to the simplest explanation that the Franklin had gone down in one of the tornadoes which are frequent in the seas of Malaysia, and which no sailing vessel can resist when caught within their sphere of activity.

A year had elapsed since the Franklin’s departure, and she was definitely classed among the vessels lost, or supposed to be lost, which figure in such large numbers in the annals of maritime disasters.

This winter — that of 1875-76 — was very severe even in the fortunate region of Lower California, where the climate is generally moderate. With the excessive cold that prevailed up to the end of February, no one could be astonished that Mrs. Branican had not left Prospect House, even to take the air in the little garden.

But if this seclusion were prolonged it might become suspicious to the people, who lived in the neighbourhood, although it might be asked if Mrs. Branican's malady had not become worse rather than supposed that Len Burker had any interest in keeping Dolly out of sight. Mr. William Andrew was confined to his room during a. great part of the winter, but impatient to see for himself in what state Dolly was, he made up his mind to go to Prospect House as soon as he could get out.

In the first week of March Mrs. Branican resumed her walks in the environs of Prospect House accompanied by Jane and the mulatto. A few days afterwards, in a visit to the chalet, Mr. William Andrew saw for himself that the young woman's health gave no cause for anxiety. Physically her state was as satisfactory as possible; mentally there had been no amelioration — she ‘was unconscious of what was going on around her, and had neither memory nor intelligence as is usual in these cases of mental degeneracy. During the walks abroad which might have recalled certain remembrances, in the presence of the children she met on the way, before- the sea and the distant sails, Mrs. Branican did not even betray the emotion which had formerly so deeply troubled her. She no longer tried to get away, and could now be left in Jane's charge. All idea of resistance, all desire of reaction being extinct, she lived in the most absolute resignation added to the completest indifference, and when Mi. William Andrew saw her again he thought her madness incurable.

By this time Len Burker’s position had become quite hopeless. Mrs. Branican’s patrimony, which he had applied to his own uses had been insufficient to fill the abyss opened under his feet. His last struggle was at the point of ending with his last resources. A few months yet, a few weeks perhaps, and he would be wanted by the police, and his only safety lay in his leaving San Diego.

Only One thing could save him, but that did not seem likely to happen — at least in time to be of use to him. In fact, if Mrs. Branican was alive, her uncle, Edward Starter, was also alive, and very healthy as well. With infinite precaution, lest the source of the inquiry should be recognized, Len Burker had obtained news of this Yankee from the depths of Tennessee.

Robust and vigorous, in the plenitude of his mental and physical faculties, and just upon sixty, Edward Starter spent his life in the open air and the forests and prairies of this immense territory, hunting and shooting over the land well stocked with game, fishing in the numerous rivers that water it, rushing about on foot and on horseback, managing his vast estate all by himself. Evidently he was one of those rough North-American farmers who die centenarians, and for whose death at all there never seems to be a reason.

It was only too clear that an early arrival of the inheritance was not to be counted on; and there was every chance that the uncle would survive the niece. Len Burker’s hopes on that head were clearly vain, and before him rose the inevitable catastrophe from which Edward Starter’s death could alone have saved him.

Two months went by — two months, during which his position went from bad to worse. Disquieting rumours concerning him began to be current at San Diego. Letters with threats of legal proceedings were received by him from people who could obtain nothing from him. For the first time Mr. William Andrew heard of the state of his affairs, and, in great alarm for the position of Mrs. Branican, he resolved to call on her trustee to produce his accounts. If necessary, Dolly's interest could be transferred to some representative more worthy of confidence, although this in no way reflected on Jane Burker, who was deeply devoted to her cousin.

At this time, two-thirds of Mrs. Branican's patrimony had been devoured, and of her whole fortune all that remained in Len Burker's hands was a few hundred dollars. Amid the claims pressing him on all sides, this was as a mere drop of water in San Diego bay; but that which was insufficient for him to meet his obligations with was enough if he made up his mind to disappear to put him safe beyond pursuit. But there was only just time.

In fact, proceedings had already been begun against Len Burker, proceedings charging him with swindling and abuse of trust. Soon a warrant was issued against him; but when the police presented themselves at his office, in Fleet Street, he had not been seen there since the day before.

The . police then went to Prospect House. Len Burker had left the. chalet in the middle of the night. Whether she liked it or not, his wife had been compelled to accompany him. Only the mulatto woman remained in charge of Mrs. Branican.

An active search was immediately ordered in San Diego, then at San Francisco, and at different places in the State of California, in the hope of getting on his track; but these had no result.

As soon as the rumour of his disappearance had spread in the town, an outcry was raised against this worthless man of business, whose defalcations it was soon apparent would amount to a considerable sum.

On that day, the 17th of May, very early in the morning, Mr. William Andrew had been to Prospect House, and discovered that none of Mrs. Branican's securities were left. Dolly was absolutely without resources. Her faithless trustee had not left her the wherewithal for her urgent needs.

Mr. William Andrew immediately did the only thing he could. He took Mrs. Branican to an asylum where she would be safe, and dismissed No, whom he seriously mistrusted. If Len Burker, had hoped that the mulatto would remain near Dolly, and keep him informed of any change in her health or fortune, he was in this way checkmated.

No, being under orders to leave Prospect House, went away that very day. Her idea was, doubtless, to rejoin the Burkers, and the police kept her under observation for some time. But she was very cautious and artful, and managed to outwit them by soon disappearing without their knowing what had become of her. And now it was empty, this house in which John and Dolly had lived so happily, and where they had had so many dreams for their child's happiness.

It was in Dr. Brumley's asylum that Mrs. Branican had been placed by Mr. William Andrew. Would her mental state take notice of the change which had occurred in her life? It was vain to hope so. She remained as indifferent as she had been at Prospect House. The only symptoms worth notice seemed to be a sort of natural instinct which supported her amid the wreck of her reason. Now and then she would murmur a little baby song as if she were hushing to sleep a child in her arms. But the name of little Wat never escaped her lips.

During the year 1876 there was no news of John Branican. The few persons who still hoped that if the Franklin did not come back her captain and crew might nevertheless do so, had had to give up even this hope. Confidence could not indefinitely resist the destructive action of time; and now the chance of recovering the shipwrecked crew grew feebler from day to day, and was reduced to nothing when the year 1877 neared its end and eighteen months had gone by without anything being heard relative to the vanished ship.

It was the same with regard to the Burkers, the search continued to be useless. It was not known to what country they had gone or in what place they were hiding, doubtless, under a false name. And Len Burker must have bewailed his ill luck when, two years after his disappearance, the hope on which he had built his plan became realized; he had, so to speak, foundered in sight of port.

About the middle of the month of June, 1878, Mr. William Andrew received a letter addressed to Dolly Branican. This letter informed her of the unexpected death of Edward Starter. The Yankee had been killed accidentally. A bullet fired by one of his hunting companions had ricocheted, struck him full in the chest, and killed him on the spot.

When his will was opened it was found that he had left the whole of his fortune to his niece, Dolly Starter, the wife of Captain Branican. The condition in which the heiress was, in no way altered his intentions, for he knew nothing of her attack of madness, as he knew nothing of Captain John’s disappearance. No such news had penetrated into Tennessee, into that wild and inaccessible region where, in accordance with Edward Starter’s wish, neither letters nor newspapers came.

In farms and forests, in cattle, in industrial property of various kinds, the testator’s fortune was estimated to amount to 2,000,000 dollars.

Such was the heritage which the accidental death of Edward Starter had just passed on to his niece. With what joy would San Diego have applauded this enrichment of the Branican family if Dolly had still been a wife and a mother in full possession of her intelligence, if John had been there to share this wealth with her. What use the charitable woman would have made of it! What misfortunes they would not have alleviated 1 But no! The revenues of this fortune would be put aside and accumulate without profit to any one. In the unknown retreat in which he had taken refuge did Len Burker know of Edward Starter's death, and of the considerable wealth he had left behind him? It is impossible to say. Mr. William Andrew, acting as Dolly's trustee, resolved to sell the lands in Tennessee, farms, forests, and prairies, which would have been difficult to have managed at such a distance. A number of buyers presented themselves, and the sales were effected under advantageous conditions. The amounts produced, converted into first-class securities, added to those which formed an important part of Edward Starter's bequest, were deposited in the strong room of the Consolidated National Bank at San Diego. The maintenance of Mrs. Branican at Dr. Brumley's could absorb but a small part of the dividends which would be annually credited to her, and their accumulation would end in forming one of the largest fortunes in Lower California; but, notwithstanding this improvement in her position, there was no question of removing Mrs. Branican from Dr. Brumley's care. Mr. William Andrew did not consider it necessary. The house afforded her all the comfort and care her relatives could have wished for. There, then, she would remain, and there, probably, she would end her miserable, her useless existence, from which it seemed the future withheld every chance of happiness.

But if time went on, the remembrance of the misfortunes which had overwhelmed the Branican family was always vivid at San Diego, and the sympathy for Dolly was as sincere, as profound as on the first day.

The year 1879 began, and those who thought it was going to roll by like the others, without bringing any change in the position were completely deceived.

During the early months of the new year, the doctor and his assistant were greatly struck by the changes evidently taking place in the mental state of Mrs. Branican. That dispiriting calm, that apathetic indifference to the details of existence were gradually giving place to characteristic agitation. These were not crises followed by reaction in which the intelligence was more deeply shattered than before. No! It seemed as though Dolly was beginning to want to return to her intellectual life, and her mind was seeking to break the bonds which prevented it from expanding to the surface. Children brought before her received a look, almost a smile. It will not have been- forgotten that at Prospect House, during the first period of her madness, she had had these outbursts of instinct which vanished at the crisis. Now, on the contrary, the impressions had a tendency to persist. It seemed as though Dolly were in the position of a person questioning himself and seeking in his mind for distant recollections.

Was Mrs. Branican about to recover her reason? Had a work of regeneration begun within her? Was the fullness of her mental life to be restored to her? Alas! At present, when she had neither child nor husband, was it to be wished that this cure, we might say this miracle, should manifest itself when it could only make her more miserable!

Whether it were desirable or not, the doctors were prepared for the possibility of obtaining this result. Measures were taken for producing on the mind and heart of Mrs. Branican a series of durable and salutary shocks. It was even thought desirable to take her away from Dr. Brumley’s, to bring her into the garden at Prospect House, to again let her occupy her room in the chalet. And when that was done she was certainly conscious ‘of the change in her way of living, and appeared to take some interest in finding herself amid these new surroundings.

With the first days of spring — it was then April — walks were recommenced in the neighbourhood. Mrs. Branican was many times taken to the beach at Island Point. The few ships passing out at sea she followed with her look and with her hand stretched out towards the horizon. But she did not try to run away, as she formerly did, to escape from Dr. Brumley who accompanied her. She was not excited by the noise of the tumultuous waves covering the beach with their spray. Was there any reason for thinking that her imagination was bearing her along the route followed by the Franklin in leaving the port of San Diego, at the moment the upper sails disappeared behind the, heights of the cliff? Yes! Perhaps! And her lips, one day, distinctly murmured the name of John!

It was obvious that Mrs. Branican’s malady was entering on a period the different phases of which would have to be carefully studied. Gradually as she became accustomed to live at the chalet she was recognizing the objects which had been dear to her. Her memory was being built up amid the surroundings which had been hers so long. A portrait of Captain John, hung on the wall of the room, began to fix her attention. Every day she looked at it more persistently, and a tear still unconscious occasionally escaped from her eyes.

Yes! If there had been a doubt as to the Franklin’s loss, if John were just coming home, if he were to appear suddenly, Dolly, perhaps, might recover her reason! But John’s return could not be reckoned on.

And so Dr. Brumley decided to give the poor woman a shock which was not without danger. He wished to act before the improvement observed in her mental state began to subside, before she again fell into that indifference which had been characteristic of her madness for the last four years. As it seemed that her mind was still vibrating at the breath of memory, it would be well to give it a vibration intense enough to permit of the former Dolly again entering into this comparatively lifeless being.

This was also Mr. William Andrew’s opinion, and he encouraged Dr. Brumley to make the experiment. On the 27th of May they both went to call on Mrs. Branican at Prospect House. A carriage waiting at the gate took them through the streets of San Diego down to the wharves, and they stopped at the landing place from which the steam launch started for Loma Point.

Doctor Brumley’s intention was not only to reproduce the scene of the catastrophe, but to put Mrs. Branican in a position exactly similar to that when she had so suddenly lost her reason.

As she stopped at the landing stage Dolly’s looks began to brighten up wonderfully. She was evidently strangely agitated. Her. whole being seemed astir.

Doctor Brumley and Mr. William Andrew led her to the launch, and hardly had she stepped on the deck than they were still more surprised at her behaviour. Instinctively she went to the very place she had occupied at the corner of the starboard seat when she held her child in her arms. Then she looked out into the bay, away towards Loma Point, as if she were seeking the Boundary at her moorings.

The passengers on the launch had recognized Mrs. Branican, and Mr. William Andrew had informed them of what it was proposed to do, so that all were under the influence of excitement. Were they to be the witnesses of a resurrection — not the resurrection of a body, but the resurrection of a mind?

It need not be said that every precaution was taken in case, in a paroxysm of madness, Dolly attempted to throw herself overboard.

The launch had already gone half a mile, and Dolly had not yet lowered her eyes to the surface of the bay. All the time she looked towards Point Loma, and when she turned aside it was to observe the manoeuvres of a trading vessel in full sail which had appeared at the entrance of the mouth to take up her station in quarantine.

Dolly’s face was as if transformed. She rose, she looked at the ship.

It was not the Franklin, and she did not mistake it for her. But shacking her head, she said, —

“John! My John! You also will come back soon! And I will be there to welcome you.”

Suddenly her looks seemed to search, in the waters of this bay she had just recognized. She gave a heartrending shriek, and said, turning to Mr. William Andrew, —

“Mr. Andrew — you — and him — my little Wat — my child — my poor child! There! There! I remember! I remember!”

And she fell on her knees on the deck, her eyes drowned in tears.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DIFFICULT POSITION.

MRS. BRANICAN restored to reason was like a dead woman restored to life. Seeing that she had stood the test of this remembrance, of this evocation of the past, seeing that the flash of memory had not injured her, could it be hoped that her recovery would take place? Was her intelligence to succumb a second time when she learnt that there had been no news of the Franklin for four years, and that it was believed the ship had gone down with all on board, and that she would never again see her husband?

Dolly, completely prostrated by the shock, had been taken back immediately to Prospect House. Neither Mr. William Andrew nor Doctor Brumley would leave her, and from the women in the latter's service she received all the care her state required.

But the shock had been so severe that an intense fever came on. She was even for a few days in a state of delirium, which gave the doctors much uneasiness, although she recovered the fullness of her intellectual faculties. It is true that when the time came to acquaint her with ':he whole extent of her misfortune, many precautions would have to be taken.

To begin with, Dolly asked how long she had been deprived of reason.

"Two months," replied Dr. Brumley, who was prepared for the question.

"Two months only!" she murmured.

And It seemed as though a century had passed over her head!

“Two months!” she added. “John could not have come back yet, for It is only two months since he went away. Does he know that our poor little child — ”

“Mr. Andrew has written,” replied Doctor Brumley without hesitation.

“And is there any news of the Franklin? “‘

The reply was that Captain Branican was to write from Singapore, but the letters had not come to hand. But at the same time, according to the shipping intelligence, the Franklin would soon reach the Indies, and telegrams would shortly be received.

When Dolly asked why Jane Burker was not with her, the doctor answered that Mr. and Mrs. Burker were away travelling, and had not yet announced the date of their return.

It was left to Mr. William Andrew to tell Mrs. Branican the fate of the Franklin. But it was agreed to say nothing until her reason had been sufficiently re-established to support the blow, and to be careful in revealing the facts little by little, in order that she might gradually be led to conclude that no survivor of the wreck remained.

The news of the inheritance which had come to her, through the death of Edward Starter, was also kept back. Mrs. Branican would know soon enough that she possessed this fortune, which her husband could no longer share with her.

During the fortnight which followed, Mrs. Branican had no communication with the outside world. Mr. William Andrew and Dr. Brumley alone had access to her. The fever, which was very high to begin with, began to diminish, and would soon, doubtless, disappear. As much from the point of view of her health, as from that of not having to reply to definite and embarrassing questions, the doctor had forbidden the patient from talking. And every allusion to the past was avoided, as was everything that could lead her to suspect that four years had elapsed since the death of her child and the departure of her husband. For some time yet it was advisable that the year 1879 should be for her only 1875.

But Dolly had only one desire, or rather a very natural impatience, and that was to receive a first letter from John. She calculated that the Franklin being at the point of arrival at Calcutta, if she were not there already, Andrews' ought soon to hear of her by telegraph. Then she herself, as soon as she had strength, would write to John. Alas! what would she say in her letter — the first she would write to him since their marriage, for they had never been separated until the departure of the Franklin? Yes! What sad things this first letter would tell!

And then thinking of the past, Dolly reproached herself for having been the cause of her child's death! That unhappy day of the 31st March returned to her memory! If she had left little Wat at Prospect House he would still be alive! Why had she taken him out to the Boundary? Why had she refused the offer of Captain Ellis, who had proposed her staying on board until the ship's arrival at the wharf of San Diego? The terrible misfortune would not have occurred! And why also had she in a thoughtless moment taken the child from the nurse's arms at the moment the launch was suddenly checked to avoid a collision! She had fallen, and little Wat was no longer in her arms! Poor child, who had not even a grave over which his mother could go and weep!

These fancies, too vividly called up in her mind, caused Dolly to lose the calmness which was so necessary to her. Several times a violent delirium, due to the increase of the fever, made Dr. Brumley extremely uneasy. Fortunately these crises grew less acute, less frequent, and finally disappeared. There was now no fear for the mental state of Mrs. Branican. The moment was approaching when Mr. William Andrew might tell her all.

As soon as Dolly had unmistakably entered upon the period of her convalescence she obtained permission to leave her bed. She was placed in a long chair at her bedroom window, whence she could look out over the Bay of San Diego, and even far out beyond Loma Point to the very horizon. There she remained motionless for many long hours.

Then Dolly wished to write to John; she wanted to tell him of their child he would never see again, and she poured out her grief in a letter John never would receive.

Mr. William Andrew took this letter, promising to send it with his mail to the Indies, and that done, Mrs. Branican became calm again, living only in the hope of receiving news of the Franklin directly or indirectly.

However, this state of things could not last. Evidently Dolly would learn sooner or later what they were hiding from her — by excess of prudence, perhaps. The more she concentrated herself in the hope that she would soon receive a letter from John, that with each day his return grew nearer, the more, terrible would be the blew.

And that appeared but too evident after an interview which Mrs. Branican had with Mr. William Andrew on the 19th of June.

For the first time Dolly had gone down into the little garden of Prospect House, where Mr. William Andrew found her seated on a bench before the steps of the chalet. He went and sat down close to her, and taking her hands, clasped them affectionately.

In this last period of convalescence Mrs. Branican had begun to feel quite strong again. Her face had resumed its former warm colour, although her eyes were always humid with tears.

“I see your recovery makes rapid progress, my dear Dolly,” said Mr. William Andrew. “You are getting on well.”

“Certainly, Mr. Andrew,” replied Dolly, “but it seems to me that I have aged considerably during the two months! How much my poor John will find me changed when he comes back! And I am waiting for him alone! He will only find me — ”

“Courage, dear Dolly, courage! I forbid you to be so depressed. I am now your father. Yes, your father! and I insist on your obeying me!”

“Dear Mr. Andrew!”

“Be it so.”

“The letter I wrote to John has gone, has it not?” asked Dolly.

“Doubtless — and you must wait for his reply with patience! Sometimes there are long delays in the Indian mails! You are still crying! I beseech you not to cry any more!”

“I cannot help it, Mr. Andrew, when I think. And am I not the cause? — I — ”

“No, poor mother, no. Providence has struck you cruelly, but all grief has an end.”

“Providence!” murmured Mrs. Branican; “Providence will bring me back my John!”

“My dear Dolly, have you. seen the doctor to-day?” asked Mr. William Andrew.

“Yes, and he thought me better! I am getting back my strength, and I shall soon be able to go out.”

“Not before he says you may.”

“No, Mr. Andrew. I promise to do nothing imprudent.”

“And I reckon on your promise.”

“You have not yet received anything relative to the Franklin, Mr. Andrew?”

“No, and I am not surprised. Ships take some time occasionally to get to the Indies.”

“It seems to me John might have written from Singapore? Did he not call there?”

“Very probably, Dolly! But if he missed the mail by a “few hours it would make a delay of a fortnight in his letters.”

“And so you are not at all surprised that John has not yet sent you a letter?”

“Not at all,” answered Mr. William Andrew, who felt the conversation becoming embarrassing.

“And have not the shipping journals noticed his voyage?” asked Dolly.

“No. Since he spoke the Boundary — it is about — ”

“Yes; about two months. And why should he have spoken her? I should not have gone on board the Boundary, and my child — ”

Mrs. Branican’s look suddenly changed, and tears rolled down from her eyes.

“Dolly — my dear Dolly,” answered Mr. William Andrew. “Do not cry. I beg you, do not cry!”

“Ah! Mr. Andrew. I do not know — a presentiment sometimes comes to me. It is inexplicable. It seems to me that a new misfortune — I am uneasy about John!”

“There is no need to be, Dolly! There is no reason for being anxious — ”

“Mr. Andrew,” asked Mrs. Branican, “could you not send me a few newspapers with shipping intelligence in them? I should like to read them.”

“Certainly, my dear Dolly; I will do so. But if anything were known concerning the Franklin, if she had been met with on the sea, if her approaching arrival in India had been reported, I should be the first to hear of it, and immediately.”

But it was advisable to give another turn to the interview. Mrs. Branican would notice the hesitation with which Mr. Andrew replied, and the way in which his look sank before hers when she questioned him more directly. And so the worthy ship-owner began to speak for the first time of the death of Edward Starter, and the considerable fortune which had fallen to his niece. And then Dolly asked, —

“Jane Burker and her husband are on a voyage, they tell me; have they been away long from San Diego?”

“No. Two or three weeks.”

“And ought they not soon to be back.”

“I do not know,” replied Mr. Andrew. “We have received no news — ”

“Does nobody know where they have gone?”

“Nobody knows, my dear Dolly. Len Burner has been engaged in very important — very adventurous — matters, he has been called away — very far away.”

“And Jane?”

“Mrs. Burker had to accompany her husband — and I do not know how to tell you what happened — ”

“Poor Jane!” said Mrs. Branican. “I had a great affection for her, and I should be glad to see her again. Is she not the only relation I have left!”

She did not give a thought to Edward Starter, nor of the family tie which united them.

“How is it that Jane has not once written to me?” she asked.

“My dear Dolly, you were very ill when Mr. Burker and his wife left San Diego.”

“Just so, Mr. Andrew, and why write to one who could not understand? Dear Jane, she is to be pitied! Life will be hard for her! I was always afraid that Len Burker would launch into some speculation which would turn out badly! Perhaps John thought so too!”

“But,” said Mr. William Andrew, “no one expected such a regrettable ending.”

“Was it then on account of some bad business that Len Burker left San Diego?” asked Dolly quickly.

And she looked at Mr. Andrew, whose embarrassment was only too visible.

“Mr. Andrew,” she continued, “speak! Do not leave me in ignorance! I desire to know all!”

“Well, Dolly, I do not wish to hide from you a misfortune you are sure soon to know! Yes! In the end Len Burker’s affairs became very bad. He could not meet his engagements. Claims came in; and, threatened with arrest, he had to take safety in flight.”

“And Jane went with him?”

“He certainly had to compel her to do so, and you know she had no will of her own where he was concerned.”

“Poor Jane! Poor Jane!” murmured Mrs. Branican.

“I pity her, and if I had been well I should have helped her — ”

“You could have done it!” said Mr. Andrew. “Yes — you could have saved Len Burker, if not for himself, who deserves no sympathy, at least for his wife.”

“And John would have approved, I am sure, of the use I would have made of our humble fortune.”

Mr. William Andrew carefully abstained from saying that Mrs. Branican’s patrimony had been devoured by Len Burker. That would have been to have shown that he had been her trustee, and she might have asked how so much could have happened in the short time of two months.

And so Mr. Andrew at once answered, —

“Say no more about your humble position, my dear Dolly; that is all altered now.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Andrew?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“I mean that you are rich, extremely rich!’

“I?”

“Your Uncle Edward Starter is dead.”

“Dead? He is dead! And since when?”

“Since — ”

Mr. William Andrew was on the point of betraying himself by giving the exact date of Edward Starter’s decease, nearly two years before, which would have revealed the whole truth. But Dolly’s only thought was that the death of her uncle and the disappearance of her cousin left her without relations. And when she learnt that owing to the relative she had hardly known, whose wealth she and John had not expected to inherit until a remote future, her fortune now amounted to two millions of dollars, her only thought was what good she could do with it.

“Yes, Mr. Andrew,” she said, “I ought to go to Jane’s help! I ought to save her from ruin and disgrace! Where is she? Where can she be? What has become of her?”

Mr. William Andrew had to say that the efforts to discover Len Burker had had no result. He had either taken refuge in some distant part of the United States, or else had left America, but it was impossible to say.

“But if it is only a few weeks since Jane and he disappeared from San Diego,” said Mrs. Branican, “we may learn — ”

“Yes — a few weeks!” said Mr. William Andrew hastily.

But at this moment Mrs. Branican could think of nothing else than that, thanks to Edward Starter, John need no longer be a sailor. He could now leave the sea. This voyage in the Franklin for Andrews would be his last. And was it not his last, since he would never come back?

“No, Mr. Andrew,” exclaimed Dolly. “Once John comes back, he will never go to sea again! His taste for sea life he will give up for my sake. We will live together — always together! Nothing shall separate us again.”

At the thought that this happiness would be shattered at a word — a word that soon would have to be uttered — Mr. William Andrew could hardly control himself. He hastened to bring the interview to a close, but before taking his leave he obtained Mrs. Branican’s promise that she would commit no imprudence, that she would not run the risk of going out, that she would not resume her customary life until the doctor had given her permission. On his part he repeated that if directly or indirectly he received any news of the Franklin he would immediately send it on to Prospect House.

When Mr. William Andrew reported this conversation to Doctor Brumley, the doctor made no secret of his fear that some indiscretion would put Mrs. Branican in possession of the truth. That her madness had lasted for years, that for four years no one had known what had become of the Franklin, that she would never again see John — Yes; it would be best for her to learn this either from Mr. William Andrew or from himself after taking all possible precaution.

It was therefore decided that in a week, when there could be no longer a plausible motive for preventing Mrs Branican from leaving the chalet, she should be told everything.

“And may Heaven give her strength to bear the trial,” said Mr. William Andrew.

During the last week of June Mrs. Branican’s life at Prospect House continued to be what it always had been. Thanks to careful nursing she recovered both physical strength and mental energy. And Mr. William Andrew found it more and more embarrassing when Dolly pressed him with questions to which he could not reply.

In the afternoon of the 23rd he came to see her, in order to put at her disposal an important sum of money, and account to her for her fortune which had been deposited in reliable securities in the Consolidated Bank at San Diego.

Mrs. Branican paid very little attention to the subject of Mr. William Andrew’s conversation, and hardly listened to him. She could only talk about John, she could only think of him. What! Not a letter yet! That was most disquieting! How came it that Andrews’ had not even received the telegram announcing the arrival of the Franklin in India?

The ship-owner tried to calm Dolly by telling her he had just telegraphed to Calcutta and would receive a reply in a day or two. But if he succeeded in diverting her thoughts he was considerably troubled when she asked, “Mr. Andrew, there is a man of whom I have never spoken until now — that is the man who saved my life and could not save my child’s. That sailor — ”

“That sailor?” said Mr. William Andrew, with visible hesitation.

“Yes; that courageous man — to whom I owe my life. Has he been rewarded?”

“Certainly, Dolly.”

And he really had been.

“Is he at San Diego, Mr. Andrew?”

“No, my dear Dolly — no! I heard he had gone to sea.”

Which was true.

After leaving the bay the sailor had gone on several trading voyages, and now was away at sea.

“Hut at least you can tell me his name?” asked Mr.5. Branican.

“His name is Zach Fren.”

“Zach Fren? Good! I thank you, Mr. Andrew,” said Dolly.

And she said no more about the sailor whose name she had just ascertained.

Hut from that day Zach Fren never ceased to occupy Dolly’s thoughts. Henceforth he was indissolubly bound up in her mind with the remembrance of the catastrophe of which San Diego bay had been the theatre. She would find out Zach Fren at the end of his voyage. He was in a San Diego ship, without doubt. The ship would return in six months — in a year — and then — assuredly the Franklin would be back before he was. She and John would be of one mind as to rewarding him — as to paying him their debt of gratitude. Yes! John would not delay in bringing back the Franklin and he would resign the command of her. They would never again separate from each other.

“And that day,” she thought, “why should our kisses be mingled with tears!”

CHAPTER IX.

REVELATIONS.

But Mr. William Andrew desired and feared this interview in which Mrs. Branican would learn of the disappearance of the Franklin and the loss of her crew and her captain — a loss of which no one doubted at San Diego. Could her reason, which had once succumbed, be equal to this last blow? Although more than four years had gone by since John’s departure, it would seem as though his death had occurred but yesterday. Time which had passed over so many human sorrows had not moved on in her case!

While Mrs. Branican remained at Prospect House they could hope that no indiscretion would be prematurely committed. Mr. William Andrew and Dr. Brumley had taken their precautions, and prevented any newspapers or letters arriving at the chalet. But Dolly felt strong enough to go out, and although the doctor had not given her permission to do so, could she not leave Prospect House without saying anything about it? And so they resolved to hesitate no longer, and Dolly would soon be told that she could no longer reckon on the return of the Franklin.

But after the conversation she had had with Mr. William Andrew, Mrs. Branican had made up her mind to go out without telling her maids, who would have done their utmost to dissuade her. And if this expedition were free from danger in the actual state of her health, it might nevertheless bring about deplorable results in the event of some accident acquainting her with the truth without previous precaution.

In leaving Prospect House, Mrs. Branican proposed to make some inquiries regarding Zach Fren. Now that she knew the sailor’s name, only one thought possessed her.

“They have seen about him,” she said. “Yes! a little money has been given him, without my having anything to say in the matter. Zach Fren has been away about five or six weeks. But perhaps he has a family, a wife, children — poor people, undoubtedly! It is my duty to go and visit them, to minister to their wants, to assure them of comfort! I will see them, and will do what I ought to do for them!”

And if Mrs. Branican had consulted Mr. William Andrew in the matter, how could he have dissuaded her from this act of gratitude and charity?

On the 21st of June, Dolly went out of the enclosure about nine o’clock in the morning without being noticed. She was dressed in mourning — mourning for her child, whose death she thought had taken place but two months before. It was not without deep emotion that she went out of the gate of the little garden — alone for the first time.

The weather was fine, and the heat already great in these first weeks of the Californian summer, although it was tempered by the sea breeze.

She went along among the houses and gardens of the upper town. Absorbed in thought of what she was going to do, she did not notice the changes which had taken place in the neighbourhood, the new buildings which ought to have attracted her attention; or at least she had but a vague perception of them. Besides, these changes were not important enough to interfere with her finding her way along the roads down to the bay. She did riot notice two or three people who recognized her and looked at her with a certain amount of astonishment.

In passing a Catholic chapel not far from Prospect House, of which she had been one of the most assiduous frequenters, she felt an irresistible desire to enter. The officiating priest had begun the mass as she knelt on a low chair in a dark corner. There she poured out her soul in prayer for her child, her husband — for all those she loved. The few faithful who attended the mass had not noticed her, and when she retired they had already left the chapel.

It was there that she noticed something which could not but surprise her. It seemed that the altar was no longer that before which she was accustomed to pray. This altar was richer, and of a new kind, and stood in front of an apse which appeared to be of recent construction. Had the chapel been made larger?

But this was only a fugitive impression which fled as soon as Mrs. Branican began to descend the streets towards the business quarter in which the animation was great. But at any moment the truth might break on her — a poster with a date — a railway time-table — a steamboat notice — the announcement of a fete or an entertainment bearing the date 1879; and then Dolly would suddenly learn that Mr. William Andrew and Doctor Brumley had deceived her, and that her insanity had lasted four years, and not a few weeks; and that in consequence it was not two months, but four years, since the' Franklin had left San Diego. And if they had hidden it from her that John had not come back — it was because he would never come back!

Mrs. Branican was hurrying towards the wharves when the idea occurred to her of passing Len Burker's house, which would only take her a little out of her way.

"Poor Jane I" she murmured.

When she arrived in front of the office in Fleet Street she could hardly recognize it, and this caused her more than a gesture of surprise, a vague and disturbing uneasiness.

Instead of the narrow, gloomy house she knew, there was an important building of Anglo-Saxon architecture, of many storeys, with high windows, and iron bars on the ground floor. On the roof was a lantern, from which floated a flag, bearing the initials H. W. Near the door was a plate, on which could be read these words, in golden letters, —

“Harris, Wadanton and Co.”

Dolly at first thought she was mistaken; she looked to the right, to the left. No! it was here, at the angle of Fleet Street, that the house stood to which she came to see Jane Burker.

She put her hands to her eyes. An inexplicable presentiment chilled her heart. She could not account for what she felt.

Mr. William Andrew’s house of business was not far off. Dolly, hurrying along, saw it at a turning out of the road. At first she thought of going there. No — she would go there as she came back — when she had seen Zach Fren’s family. She intended to get the sailor’s address at the steam launch office, near the landing-stage.

With her mind bewildered, her eyes irresolute, her heart palpitating, Dolly continued her walk. She now looked closely at the people she met. She felt an irresistible want to go to these people to interrogate them, to ask them — what? They would have taken her for a lunatic — but was she sure that her reason had not left her for a second time? Were there not gaps in her memory? Was she completely in possession of herself?

Mrs. Branican reached the wharf. Beyond, the bay lay revealed throughout its extent. A few ships were gently rolling at their anchorage. Others were preparing to depart. What memories this life in the harbour’ recalled! Two months ago she was at the end of this wharf; it was from this spot that she had seen the Franklin go about for the last time to leave .the bay; it was there she had received John’s last adieu; there the vessel had doubled Island Point, the upper sails had for a moment been seen above the cliff, and the Franklin had vanished into the distances of the high seas.

A few more steps, and Dolly found herself at the steam launch office near the landing-stage. One of the boats was going away at the moment, heading for Loma Point.

Dolly followed it with her eyes, listening to the noise of the steam which panted from the end of the black tube.

To what sorrowful remembrance did she then abandon herself? The remembrance of her child, whose little body the waters had not even yielded up, which attracted her — fascinated her. She felt herself fainting, as if the ground were failing her. Her head turned. She was on the point of falling.

A moment afterwards Mrs. Branican entered the steam launch office.

As he caught sight of this woman with her features drawn, and her face bloodless, the clerk who was sitting at a table arose, handed her a chair, and said, —

“You are ill, madam?”

“It is nothing, sir,” said Dolly. “A moment of weakness. I feel better.”

“Will you sit down and wait for the next launch? In ten minutes at most — ”

“Thank you, sir,” said Mrs. Branican. “I have only come to ask you for some information. Can you give it me?”

“What is it?”

Dolly sat down, and, putting her hand to her forehead to collect her ideas, —

“Sir,” she said, “you had in your service a sailor named Zach Fren?”

“Yes,” said the clerk, “he was not with us long, but I remember him perfectly.”

“He it was, was it not, who risked his life to save a woman — an unhappy mother?”

“I remember her — Mrs. Branican — yes! that was the man.”

“And now he is at sea?”

“At sea.” .

“On what ship is he?”

“The Californian.”

“Of San Diego?”

“No, of San Francisco.”

“Where is he bound for?”

“For Europe.”

Mrs. Branican, more fatigued than she believed herself to be, was silent for some seconds, and the clerk waited for her to ask him some more questions. When she had recovered a little, she said, —

“Does Zach Fren belong to San Diego?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me where his. family lives?”

“I have always understood that Zach Fren was alone in the world. I do not think he has any relations, cither at San Diego or elsewhere.”

“He was not married?”

“No.”

There was no reason for doubting the reply of this clerk, to whom Zach Fren was well known.

Nothing, therefore, could be done, for the sailor had no family, and Mrs. Branican would have to wait .until the Californian returned from Europe.

“Is it known how long Zach Fren’s voyage will last?” she asked.

“I cannot tell you that, for the Californian is on a very long cruise.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Mrs. Branican. “I should have had great satisfaction in meeting Zach Fren, but some time will elapse, doubtless.”

“Yes.”

“But it is possible that there will be news of the Californian in a few months, a few weeks?”

“News?” said the clerk. “But the San Francisco house to whom she belongs has already had news of her several times.”

“Already?”

“Yes.”

“And several times?”

And as she repeated the words-Mrs. Branican rose, and looked at the clerk as if she had not understood him.

“Look, madam,” he replied, handing her a newspaper. “Here is the Shipping Gazette. It says the Californian left Liverpool eight days ago.”

“Eight days!” murmured Mrs. Branican, taking the newspaper and trembling.

Then, in a voice so completely broken that the clerk could hardly hear her, —

“How long is it since Zach Fren went away?” she asked.

“Nearly eighteen months.”

“Eighteen months!”

Dolly supported herself against the angle of the desk. Her heart ceased to beat during some seconds.

Suddenly her looks were caught by a bill hung against the wall, and which gave the times of the steam launches for the summer season.

At the head of the bill were the word and the figures-

“March, 1879.”

March, 1879! They had deceived her! Her child had been dead for years — four years since John had left San Diego! She had been mad these four years! Yes! And if Mr. William Andrew, if Doctor Brumley had allowed her to believe that her madness had only lasted two months, it was because they wished to hide from her the truth about the Franklin. It was four years since there had been any news of John and his ship.

To the great alarm of the clerk, Mrs. Branican was seized with a violent spasm; but with a supreme effort she controlled it, and, rushing from the office, walked quickly through the streets of the lower town.

Those who saw this woman pass, with her pale face and haggard eyes, may have thought she was mad. And if she were not, was she not going to be so?

Where was she going? Towards Andrews’, where she arrived almost unconsciously in a few minutes. She went through the offices, she passed among the clerks who had not time to stop her, and she pushed open the door of the private office where she found the ship-owner.

At first Mr. William Andrew was thunderstruck at seeing Mrs. Branican enter, and terrified at her agitated features and her frightful pallor.

But before he could say a word, —

“I know — I know! “she exclaimed. “You have deceived me. I have been mad for four years.”

“My dear Dolly — be calm!”

“Answer! The Franklin? She has been gone four years, has she not?”

Mr. William Andrew bowed his head.

“You have had no news — for four years — for four years?”

Mr. William Andrew remained silent.

“You think the Franklin is lost! None of her crew will return — and I shall never see John again!”

Tears were Mr. William Andrew’s only reply.

Mrs. Branican fell suddenly into an arm-chair. She had fainted.

Mr. William Andrew called one of the women of the house, who did all she could to bring Dolly round, while one of the clerks was hurried off to Doctor Brumley, who lived not far off and made haste to come.

Mr. William Andrew told him what had happened. By some indiscretion or accident, he did not know which, Mrs. Branican had just learnt everything. Whether at Prospect House, or in the streets of San Diego, did not matter. She knew now! She knew that four years had elapsed since her child’s death, that for four years she had been deprived of reason, that four years had passed without receiving any news of the Franklin.

It was not without difficulty that Doctor Brumley succeeded in bringing back Dolly to life, while he asked himself if her intelligence had resisted this last blow, the most terrible of those with which she had been struck.

When Mrs. Branican returned to her senses she knew all that had been revealed to her. She returned to life with all her reason. And through her tears her look interrogated Mr. William Andrew, who held her hands, and knelt close to her.

“Speak — speak — Mr. Andrew!” were the only words that escaped her lips.

Then, in a voice broken with sobs, Mr. William Andrew told her of the anxiety that had at first been caused by the failure of news as to the Franklin. Letters and telegrams had been sent to Singapore and the Indies, where the vessel had never arrived. An inquiry had taken place with regard to the Franklin’s course; but no trace of her wreck had been found.

Motionless Mrs. Branican heard with her mouth silent, her look fixed. And when Mr. William Andrew had finished his recital, —

“My child dead — my husband dead,” she murmured. “Ah! why did not Zach Fren let me die!”

Then’ her face suddenly became animated, and her natural energy manifested itself with so much power that Doctor Brumley was alarmed.

“Since the last search,” she said in a resolute voice, “nothing has been heard of the Franklin?”

“Nothing!” replied Mr. William Andrew.

“And you consider her as lost?”

“Yes! Lost!”

“And of John and his crew you can obtain no news?”

“None, my poor Dolly, and now we have no hope.”

“No .hope!” said Mrs. Branican in a tone almost ironical.

She rose and stretched out her hand towards one of the windows through which she could see the horizon of sea.

Mr. William Andrew and Doctor Brumley looked at her with dismay, fearing for her mental state.

But Dolly was in full possession of her faculties, and with glowing look, she said, —

“No hope! You say no hope! Mr. Andrew, if John is lost for you, he is not lost for me! This fortune which belongs to me, I care not for it without him! I will devote it to searching for John and his companions of the Franklin. And by Heaven’s aid I will find them] Yes! I will find them I”

CHAPTER X.

PREPARATIONS.

A new life was about to commence for Mrs. Branican. If she had absolute certainty of the death of her child, it was not so regarding John. John and his companions might have survived their wreck on one of the numerous islands of the seas of the Philippines, Celebes or Java. Was it impossible that they were held prisoners by some native race, and that it was impossible for them to escape? It was to this hope that Mrs. Branican clung from the outset, and with a tenacity so extraordinary that she soon provoked a change in the public opinion of San Diego on the subject of the Franklin. No! She would not believe, she could not* believe that John and his crew had perished, and it may be that to the persistence of this idea she owed the keeping of her reason. At least, as some were inclined to think, it was a species of monomania, a sort of madness which is called “the madness of desperate hope.” But this was not the case, as we shall soon see. Mrs. Branican had resumed full possession of her intelligence, and had recovered that sureness of judgment which had always characterized her. One object she had for life, to find John, and she pursued it with an energy which circumstances occurred to stimulate. As Heaven had permitted Zach Fren to save her from the first catastrophe, and reason had been returned to her when she had at her disposal all the means of action fortune gives, if John were alive he should be saved by her. This fortune she would employ in incessant searches, she’ would squander it in rewards, she would spend it in expeditions. There was not an island, not an islet, in the localities traversed by the young captain which should not be reconnoitred, visited, searched. “What Lady Franklin had done for John Franklin Mrs. Branican could do for John Branican, and she would succeed where the widow of the illustrious admiral had failed.

From this day Dolly’s friends were those who could help her in this new period of her existence, encourage her in her investigations, and join their efforts to hers. And one of them was Mr. William Andrew, although he had but little hope of a happy result of these attempts to discover the survivors of his wrecked ship, and he became the most ardent adviser of Mrs. Branican, supported by the captain of the Boundary, whose ship was then at San Diego dismantled. Captain Ellis, a resolute man on whom they could depend, and a devoted friend of John, received an invitation to confer with Mrs. Branican and Mr. William Andrew.

There were frequent interviews at Prospect House. Rich as she now was, Mrs. Branican had no wish to leave the modest chalet. It was there John had left her when he started, it was there he should find her when he came back. Nothing should be changed in her mode of life until her husband returned to San Diego. She would live the same life with the same simplicity, spending nothing more than usual except for the expenses of her searches and her charities.

This was soon known in the town; and in consequence there was a redoubling of sympathy for this valiant woman who would not be John Branican’s widow. Without any mistrust they became enthusiastic about her; they admired her, they even venerated her, for her misfortunes justified their going as far as veneration. Not only did a number of people pray that she might succeed, but they believed in her eventual success. When Dolly came down into the lower town to visit Andrews’ or Captain Ellis, when she was seen serious and sombre, clad in her mourning garb, looking ten years older than she was, and she was then scarcely five-and-twenty, hats were raised in respect and people bowed as she passed. But she saw nothing of these deferences which were addressed to her.

During the interviews between Mrs. Branican, Mr. William Andrew and Captain Ellis, the first consideration bore on the course the Franklin should have followed. It was at the outset important to fix this with rigorous exactitude.

Andrews’ had sent the ship to Calcutta with a call at Singapore, and it was in this port she had to discharge a portion of the cargo before proceeding to India. Thus, in sailing from the west coast of the American continent the probabilities were that Captain John would sight the Hawaiian or Sandwich archipelago. After traversing the zones of Micronesia, the Franklin would pass near the Mariannes and the Philippines; then by the Sea of Celebes and the Strait of Macassar she would gain the Sea of Java, bounded on the north by the Sunda islands, and thus reach Singapore. At the western extremity of the Straits of Malacca, formed by the peninsula of that name and the Island of Java, lies the Gulf of Bengal, in which, beyond the Nicobar islands and the Andaman islands, there was no refuge for shipwrecked men. Besides, it was beyond a doubt that John Branican had never appeared in the Gulf of Bengal; for as he had failed to reach Singapore it was evident he had not got beyond the Java sea and the Sunda islands.

No sailor would admit that the Franklin, instead of taking the Malaysia route, had endeavoured to reach India through the difficult channels of Torres strait and along the coast of the north of the Australian continent. Captain Ellis affirmed that John Branican would never commit such a useless imprudence as to risk his ship amid the dangers of this strait. This hypothesis was absolutely put aside; it was only in Malaysia that search should be made.

In fact, in the seas of the Carolines, of Celebes and of Java islands and islets can be counted in thousands, and it was there only, if they had survived an accident on the sea, that the crew of the Franklin could be abandoned or detained by some tribe, without means of returning home.

These different points established, it was decided that an expedition should be sent into the seas of Malaysia, and Mrs. Branican made a proposition to which she attached great importance. She asked Captain Ellis, if it suited him, to take command of the expedition.

Captain Ellis was then free, because the Boundary had been dismantled by her owners, and although he was surprised by the unexpectedness of the proposal, he did not hesitate to put himself at Mrs. Branican’s disposal, with the acquiescence of Mr. William Andrew, who thanked him cordially.

“I am only doing my duty,” he said, “and all that I can do to find the survivors of the Franklin, I will do. If Captain John is alive — ”

“John is alive!” said Mrs. Branican, in so affirmative a tone that the most incredulous dared not contradict her.

Captain Ellis then entered into discussion on different points which ought to be settled. To engage a crew worthy of seconding his effort was not difficult. But there was the question of the ship. Evidently there could be no thought of using the Boundary for an expedition of this nature. It was not a sailing vessel that could carry out such a campaign, but a steam vessel.

There were then in the harbour of San Diego a certain number of steamers well suited for the purpose. Mrs. Branican instructed Captain Ellis to buy the fastest of these steamers, and put the necessary funds for the purchase at his disposal. A few days afterwards the affair was concluded, and Mrs. Branican was the owner of the Davit, the name of which was changed to Dolly Hope of happy augury.

She was a screw steamer of nine hundred tons, designed to carry a large quantity of coal in her bunkers, so that she could take long voyages without having to fill up often with fuel. Rigged as a three-masted schooner, provided with a considerable sail spread, her engines were of 1200 horse-power, and drove her at an average of 15 knots an hour. In these conditions of speed and tonnage the Dolly Hope, handy and seaworthy, would answer all the requirements of a voyage through narrow seas strewn with islands, islets and reefs; and it would have been difficult to have made a more appropriate choice for this expedition.

It only took three weeks to get the Dolly Hope ready for sea, to inspect her boilers, test her engines, repair her rigging and sails, adjust her compasses, take in her coal, and lay in provisions for a voyage which might last a year. Captain Ellis had resolved not to abandon the region in which the Franklin might have been lost without exploring every part of it. He had given his word as a seaman, and he was a man who kept his engagements.

To give a good ship a good crew was to increase the chances of success, and Captain Ellis could only congratulate himself on the crowd of the maritime population of San Diego, from which he had to choose. The best sailors offered to serve under his orders; and there was quite a dispute among those who were anxious to go in search of the victims, who all belonged to the families of the port.

The Dolly Hope had two mates and a boatswain, a quartermaster and twenty-five men, including engineers and stokers. Captain Ellis was certain of obtaining all he wished from the devoted mariners, no matter how long or difficult the voyage in the seas of Malaysia. It need not be said that during these preparations Mrs. Branican did not remain inactive. She assisted Captain Ellis by her constant intervention, solving all difficulties with money, and seeing that nothing was neglected to insure the success of the expedition. . In the meanwhile this charitable woman had not forgotten the families which the disappearance of the ship had left in poverty or misery, although in that she had only to complete the measures already taken by Andrews' and supported by public subscription. Henceforth the subsistence of these families was sufficiently cared for, until the attempt of Mrs. Branican had given, them back the men wrecked in the Franklin.

What Dolly had done for the families so cruelly tried by disaster, would she not also do for Jane Burker? She now knew how good Jane had been to her during her illness. She knew that Jane had never left her for an instant. And at this moment she would still be at Prospect House sharing in her hopes, if the deplorable affairs of her husband had not obliged her to leave San Diego, and doubtless the United States. Whatever reproaches Len Burker deserved, it was certain that Jane's conduct had been that of a relation, whose affection extended to entire devotedness. Dolly had thus retained for her a profound friendship, and in thinking of her miserable position her keenest regret was in not being able to show her gratitude by going to her aid. But in spite of all Mr. William Andrew's diligence, it was impossible to discover what had become of the Burkers. It is true that if the place of their retreat had been known, Mrs. Branican could not have summoned them back to San Diego, for Len Burker was under the most overwhelming charges of embezzlement, but she could have hastened to convey to Jane the help of which the unfortunate woman stood in need.

On the 27th of July the Dolly Hope was ready to start. Mrs. Branican went on board in the morning, so as to beg Captain Ellis for the last time to omit nothing that might discover traces of the Franklin. She had, however, no doubt that he would succeed. They would bring back John; they would bring back the crew. She repeated these words with such conviction that the sailors clapped their hands. All shared in her faith, as did their friends _ and relatives, who had come to see the departure of the Dolly Hope.

Captain Ellis then addressed Mrs. Branican at the same time as he spoke to Mr. William Andrew, who had accompanied her on board.

“Before you, madam,” he said, “before Mr. William Andrew, in the name of my officers and my crew, I swear, yes! I swear to recoil from nothing either in danger or fatigue to discover Captain John and the men of the Franklin. The ship you have fitted out is now called the Dolly Hope, and she shall justify her name.”

“By the aid of God, and the devotion of those who put their trust in Him!” said Mrs. Branican.

“Hurrah! hurrah! for John and Dolly Branican!”

The shouts were repeated by the whole crowd who thronged the wharves.

Her hawsers were cast off, and the Dolly Hope, obedient to the first revolutions of the screw, moved out to leave the bay. As soon as she was through the strait her head was laid south-west, and under the action of her powerful engines she was soon out of sight of the American coast.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FIRST CRUISE IN MALAYSIA.

ON the 27th of July, after a run of two thousand two hundred miles, the Dolly Hope sighted the mountain of Mouna-Kea, which towers for fifteen thousand feet above the island of Hawaii, which is the most southerly of the Sandwich group. Independently of the five large and three small islands, the group includes a certain number of islets on which there was no need to search for traces of the Franklin. It was evident that the wreck would long ago have been known if it had taken place on any of the reefs of this archipelago, even those of Medo-Manu, although they are only frequented by innumerable sea birds. In fact, the Sandwich islands are well populated — there are over a hundred thousand inhabitants in Hawaii alone — and through the missionaries the news of the disaster would soon have reached the Calilornian ports.

Besides, four years before when Captain Ellis had met the Franklin, the two ships were already beyond the Sandwich group. The Dolly Hope therefore continued her course to the south-west across that admirable Pacific Ocean which well merits its name during the few months of the warm season.

Six days later the speedy steamer had crossed the conventional line which geographers have traced from south to north between Polynesia and Micronesia. In this eastern part of the Polynesian seas, Captain Ellis had no investigation to make. But beyond, the Micronesian seas swarm with islands, islets and reefs, where the Dolly Hope would have the dangerous task of discovering some indications of the wreck.

On the 22nd of August the Dolly Hope dropped anchor at Otia, the most important of the Marshall group, visited by Kotzebue and the Russians in

1817. This group extends about thirty miles from east to west, and thirteen miles from north to south, and includes about 65 islets or atolls.

The Dolly Hope,-which, could have replenished her water tanks in a few hours, remained here five days, while Captain Ellis in the steam launch was able to assure himself that no wreck had occurred on the reefs within the last four years. He found a little floating timber along the Mulgrave islets, but this consisted of trunks of pines, palm trees, and bamboos brought by the currents from the north or the south, and which the natives used to build their canoes with. Captain Ellis also learnt from the chief of Otia Island that, since 1872, there had been only one vessel wrecked on the eastern atolls, and. that was an English brig, the crew of which was eventually taken home.

After leaving the Marshall archipelago the Dolly Hope shaped her course for the Carolines. Captain Ellis went in the launch to Olan island as he passed it, but the exploration yielded no result. On the 3rd of September he entered the vast archipelago which extends between the twelfth degree of north latitude and the third degree of south latitude, in one part or another,: between the hundred and twenty-ninth degree of east longitude, and the hundred and seventieth degree of west longitude, or two hundred and twenty-five leagues from north to south on both sides of the equator, and about a thousand leagues from east to west.

The Dolly Hope remained for about three months among the Carolines, which are sufficiently well known through the works of Lutke, the bold Russian navigator, added to those of the Frenchmen Duperrey and Dumont D’Urville. No less time was required for visiting the principal groups which form this archipelago, those of the Pelews, the Dangerous Sailors, the

Martyrs, the Saavcdras, the Sonsorols, the Marieras, the Annas, the Lord Norths, etc.

Captain Ellis chose for the centre of his operations Yap or Gouap, which belongs to the Carolines proper, which consist of five hundred islands. It was from here that the steamer pursued her investigations to the further points. Of how many shipwrecks has this archipelago been the theatre, among others those of the Antelope in 1793, and the American, Captain Barnard, on the Morty and Lord North islands in 1832?

During this period the way in which the men of the Dolly Hope did their work was beyond praise. None of them took notice of the dangers or fatigues occasioned by this navigation amid innumerable reefs and through narrow channels, whose beds bristled with coral. And the bad season had begun to trouble these regions, in which the winds are unloosed with frightful impetuosity, and in which disasters are still so numerous.

Every day the ship's boats explored the creeks where wreckage might be deposited by currents. When the sailors landed they were well armed, for these were not such explorations as were carried on in the desert countries of the Arctic regions by Admiral Franklin. These islands were for the most part inhabited, and Captain Ellis's task consisted in manoeuvring like Entrecasteaux when he explored the atolls, where it was thought La Perouse had been lost. It was necessary for him to put himself in communication with the natives. The crew of the Dolly Hope were often received by hostile demonstrations among some of the natives, who are anything but hospitable to strangers. There were attacks which it was necessary to repel by force. Two or three sailors were even wounded, but fortunately not seriously.

It was from this archipelago of the Carolines that Captain Ellis's first letters could be sent to Mrs. Branican by ships bound to the American coast. But they contained nothing relative to traces of the Franklin or her crew. The attempts which had failed in the Carolines were to be resumed in the west, and comprise the vast system of Malaysia. There in reality were better chances of discovering the survivors of the catastrophe, perhaps on one of the numerous islets, the existence of which is not yet recorded in hydrographical books, even after the three expeditions which have been at work on this part of the Pacific Ocean.

Seven hundred miles more to the west of the Carolines, on the 2nd of December, the Dolly Hope reached one of the large islands of the Philippines, the most important group of the Malay archipelagos, and also the most considerable of those the position of which has been fixed by geographers in Malaysian hydrography, and even in the whole of Oceania. This group, discovered by Magellan in 1521, extends from the fifth to the twenty-first degree of north latitude, and from the hundred and fourteenth to the hundred and twenty-third degree of east longitude.

The Dolly Hope did not go to the large island of Luzon, also called Manilla. It was not likely that the Franklin had got up so high as the China seas on her way to Singapore. For this reason Captain Ellis preferred to make his centre Mindanao in the south of the archipelago, that is to say on the same line as John Branican would certainly have followed to reach the Java sea.

At this date the Dolly Hope was moored off the southwest coast in the port of Zamboanga, the residence of the governor in charge of the three alcaldes of the island.

Mindanao is in two divisions, one Spanish, the other independent under the rule of a Sultan, who has his residence at Selangan.

Captain Ellis made his first inquiries of the governor and alcaldes with regard to the wreck of which the coast of Mindanao might have been the site. The authorities very obligingly put themselves at his disposal; but in the Spanish region of Mindanao, more or less, there had been no maritime disaster for five years.

On the coast of the independent portion of the island inhabited by Mindanais, Caragos, Loutas, Soubanis, and a few other savage races, very justly suspected of cannibalism, disasters might occur and never be heard of, for the people had every reason to say nothing about them! There are even a number of Malays who get their living as pirates. With their light vessels they give chase to merchant vessels, driven by the westerly winds on their coast, and when they capture them they destroy them. Such might have been the Franklin’s fate, and assuredly it would not have been reported to the government. The only information he could give relative to the portion of the island under his authority was thus judged insufficient.

And so the Dolly Hope had to leave these dangerous seas during the winter season. Many times she sent her boats to different parts of the coast, and the sailors ventured into the forests of tamarinds, bamboos, mangroves, black ebonies, wild acacias and iron woods, which form part of the wealth of the Philippines. Amid these fertile regions, where the products of the temperate zone mingle with those of the tropics, Captain Ellis and his men visited certain villages, where they hoped to find some indication, some fragments of wreckage, some prisoners detained by the Malay tribes; but their operations were fruitless, and the steamer had to return to Zamboanga much tried by the bad weather, and only by a miracle having escaped the submarine reefs in these seas.

The exploration of the Philippine archipelago lasted two months and a half. More than a hundred islands had to be visited, among them the chief, after Luzon and Mindanao being Mindoro, Leyte, Samar, Panay, Negros, Zebu, Marshate, Palawan, Catanduanes, &c.

After exploring the group of Basilan, by the south of Zamboanga/ - Captain. Ellis steered for the Sooloo archipelago, where he arrived about the 25 th of February, 1880.

This was a veritable nest of pirates, in which the natives swarm among the numerous islets which are covered with a network of jungle, and extend from the southern point of Mindanao to the northern point of Borneo, There is but one port which is occasionally frequented by ships crossing the China seas, and the Malaysian waters, the port of Basilan, situated on the principal island which has given its name to the group.

It was at Basilan that the Dolly Hope put in. There communications were established with the Sultan and the datous, who govern a population of six or seven thousand inhabitants. Captain Ellis was not sparing of presents either:n money or kind. The natives put themselves on the track of the different shipwrecks of which these islands, defended by their girdles of coral, had been the site. But amongst the wreckage that was collected nothing was recognized as having belonged to the Franklin; and either the men had died or gone home.

The Dolly Hope, which had filled up her coal bunkers at Mindanao, was already running short at the end of this cruise among the meanderings of the Sooloo group. Enough remained, however, to take her through the Sea of Celebes, towards the Marantonba Islands, and down to Bandjer Massing, which is situated in the south of Borneo.

Captain Ellis proceeded down this sea which is shut in like a lake between the large Malaysian islands, but it is badly sheltered, and in spite of the natural obstacles against the fury of the storms, it is desolated by the typhoons which cast a shadow over the lovely picture of the splendour of the waters which swarm with zoophytes of startling colours, and molluscs of a thousand species, making the sea a bed of liquid flowers.

Of its stormy nature the Dolly Hope had an experience on the night of the 28th and 29th of February. During the day the wind had gradually freshened, and although it had dropped a little towards evening, enormous clouds of livid hue were piled up on the horizon and betokened a troubled night.

The storm broke out with great violence about eleven o’clock, and the sea rose in a few minutes with an impetuosity quite extraordinary.

Captain Ellis, justly alarmed for the Dolly Hopes engines, and careful to prevent any accident which might endanger his cruise, lay to so as to require of the screw only enough speed to give the vessel steerage way.

Notwithstanding these precautions the tornado broke with such violence, and the waves beat with such fury round the Dolly Hope that several formidable seas boarded her. In some of them quite a hundred tons of water were hurled on to her deck, staving in the skylights and accumulating in the hold. But the strong bulkheads stood the pressure and kept it out from the boiler room and engine room; which was fortunate, for if the fires had been extinguished the Dolly Hope would have been left defenceless to the strife of the elements, and, being unable to steer, would have rolled in the hollows of the waves until she was lost.

The crew showed as much coolness as courage in these critical circumstances, and valiantly assisted their commander and officers, and proved themselves worthy of the captain who had chosen them from among the best of the sailors of San Diego. The ship was saved by the skill and precision with which it was handled.

After fifteen terrible hours the sea calmed down, falling almost suddenly as they approached the large Island of Borneo, and in the morning of the 2nd of March the Dolly Hope sighted the Maratouba islands.

These islands, which geographically belong to Borneo, became the object of minute exploration during the first fortnight of March. Encouraged by the gifts which were not spared, the chiefs did their best to aid in the search, but it was impossible to procure the least information relative to the disappearance of the Franklin, and as these regions of Malaysia are frequently infested by pirates it was to be feared that John Branican and his crew had been massacred to the last man.

One day Captain Ellis, talking over these things with the mate, said, — “It is quite possible that the loss of the Franklin was due to an attack of that nature. That would explain why we have not as yet discovered any trace of the wreck. Pirates do not boast of their exploits. When a ship disappears the catastrophe is credited to a typhoon, and there is an end of the matter.”

“That is only too true, captain,” said the mate. “Pirates are plentiful enough in these seas, and we shall have to keep a sharp look out as we go down the Straits of Macassar.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Captain Ellis, “but we are in a better position than John Branican to escape the rascals. With irregular and shifty winds a sailing vessel cannot be worked as you please; but so long as the engines work no Malay boat can get at us. Nevertheless, we must keep a good look out.”

The Dolly Hope entered the Straits of Macassar which separate Borneo from the capricious coast of Celebes. During two months, from the 15th of March to the 15th of May, after coaling at Damaring, Captain Ellis explored all the .eastern creeks.

This Island of Celebes, which was discovered by Magellan, is not less than ninety-two leagues long and twenty- five wide. It is of such a shape that geographers have compared it to a tarantula whose enormous legs are represented by the peninsula. The beauty of its landscapes, the richness of its products, the convenient arrangement of its mountains make it equal to superb Borneo. But its numerous gulfs and creeks offer so many refuges to pirates that the navigation of the strait is really dangerous.

Nevertheless Captain Ellis accomplished his work with all desirable precision. With his boilers always under pressure he visited the creeks in his boats ready to return to the ship at the least appearance of danger.

As she neared the southern extremity of the strait the Dolly Hope could proceed under less alarming conditions. In fact, that part of the Island of Celebes is under Dutch rule. The capital of these possessions is Macassar, formerly Wlaardingen, which is defended by the fort of Rotterdam. It was there that Captain Ellis dropped anchor on the 17th of May to give his crew a little rest and to fill up with coal. If he had discovered nothing that could put him on the track of John Branican, he learnt in this port some very important news regarding the course taken by the Franklin, for on the 3rd of May, 1875, the ship had been signalled ten miles off Macassar heading towards the Java sea. It was therefore certain that she had not perished in the dangerous waters of Malaysia. It was beyond Celebes and Borneo, that is to say in the Sea of Java, that he must renew his investigations and continue them on to Singapore.

In a letter which he addressed to Mr-s. Branican from this extreme point of the Island of Celebes, Captain Ellis informed her of this circumstance, and renewed his promise to keep her acquainted with his investigations, which would now be localized between the Sea of Java and the Sunda islands.

In fact, the Dolly Hope would not pass the meridian of Singapore, which would be the limit of her cruise to the westward. She would complete her cruise by returning along the southern coast of the Java sea and visiting the chaplet of islands that border it; and then by the way of the Moluccas she would regain the Pacific and return to America.

The Dolly Hope left Macassar on the 23rd of July, crossed the narrow strait which separates the island of Celebes from the island of Borneo, and put in at Bandjer Massing-. At this port resides the governor of Borneo, or rather Kalematan, to give it its true geographical name. There the shipping records were minutely searched, but no mention could be found of the Franklin having been seen in those parts; but that could be explained by supposing she had kept well out in the Java sea.

Ten days afterwards, Captain Ellis, having steered southwest, dropped anchor at Batavia, at the end of the large Island of Java, which is essentially of volcanic origin, and is nearly always overhung by the flames from its crate-s.

A few days were enough for the crew to revictual in this great city, which is the capital of the Dutch possessions in Oceania. The governor-general, whom the shipping news had made acquainted with the efforts of Mrs. Branican to discover the castaways, received Captain Ellis with cordiality.

Unfortunately he could give no intelligence as to the fate of the Franklin. The opinion of the Dutch sailors was that the American vessel had foundered with all on board in some tornado. During the first six months, of 1875 they mentioned several vessels which had not been heard of, and which had vanished in the same way without the least trace of them being thrown on the coast.

After leaving Batavia the Dolly Hope, leaving on the port hand the Strait of Sunda, which affords the communication between the Sea of Java and the Sea of Timor, stood off for the islands of Billiton and Banca. Formerly the approaches to these islands were infested by pirates, and the vessels which came for cargoes of iron and tin only avoided attack with difficulty. But the maritime police had effectually cleared the sea of them, and there was no reason to think that the Franklin and her crew had been the victim of their aggressions.

Continuing to the north-west, visiting the islands on the coast of Sumatra, the Dolly Hope doubled the extremity of the peninsula of Malacca and reached Singapore in the morning of the 29th o£ June, after a passage much retarded.

Repairs to the engines obliged Captain Ellis to remain a fortnight in this port, which is situated to the north of the island. Of little extent — some two hundred and seventy square miles only — this possession, which is of such importance in the trade between Europe and America, has become one of the richest in the east since the day the English founded their first house there in 1818.

It was at Singapore, as we know, that the Franklin had to deliver a part of her cargo on account of Andrews', before she proceeded to Calcutta; and we also know that the American vessel had never appeared there. At the same time Captain Ellis resolved to put the delay to good use by obtaining all the information he could regarding the disasters in the Java sea during the last few years.

The Franklin had on the one hand, been reported at Macassar; on the other, she had not arrived at Singapore; consequently she must have been wrecked somewhere between these points; that is, unless Captain Branican had left the Java sea through one of the straits which separate the Sunda islands and entered the Sea of Timor. But why should he do this if his destination were Singapore? It was inexplicable, it was inadmissible.

The inquiry regarding the disasters in the Java sea during the previous five or six years having given but negative results, Captain Ellis could only take his leave of the governor of Singapore, and begin his return to America.

On the 25th of August he started in very stormy weather. The heat was excessive, as it generally is in the month of August in this part of the torrid zone, which is only a few degrees below the equator. The Dolly Hope experienced very rough weather during the last week of the month; but in cruising past the Sunda islands not a place was left unexplored. One after the other, Madura island, one of the twenty regencies of Java, Bali, one of the busiest of these possessions, Lombok, and Sumbava, with its volcano then threatening the island with an eruption as disastrous as that of 1815, were visited. Between these different islands opened many straits, giving access to the Timor sea, and the Dolly Hope had to be carefully handled to avoid the powerful currents, which are of such impetuosity as to bear away the vessels, even in the teeth of the western monsoon. It will be understood from this, how full of danger navigation is in these seas, particularly for sailing vessels, which have no power of locomotion in themselves, and hence the maritime disasters so frequent within the Malaysian zone.

Leaving the Island of Floris, Captain Ellis followed the thain of the other islands to the south of the sea of the Moluccas, but in vain. After so many failures, it is not to be wondered that the crew was discouraged. But there was no reason for giving up all hope of discovering the Franklin until the exploration had been finished. It was possible that Captain Branican, instead of descending the Strait of Macassar, had crossed the archipelago and Sea of the Moluccas, to reach the Java sea, and thus had appeared off Celebes.

But time, went on, and the log continued to be silent regarding the fate of the Franklin. Neither at Timor, nor in the three groups which constitute the Moluccan archipelago, the group of Amboyna, the residence of the governor-general, which includes Ceram and Bouro, the Banda group, nor the Gilolo group, could any information be obtained regarding a vessel that should have been lost among these islands in the spring of 1875. From the 23rd of September, the date of the Dolly Hope’s arrival at Timor, to the 27th of December, the date of her arrival at Gilolo, three months were occupied in investigations which the Dutch assisted to the best of their ability, and nothing was discovered to throw light on the disaster.

The Dolly Hope had finished her cruise. At this island of Gilolo, which is the most important of the Moluccas, terminated the circle which Captain Ellis had undertaken to follow round the Malaysian region; the crew then had a few days’ rest to which they were well entitled. And if any new clue had been discovered, what would not these brave men have attempted, even at the cost of greater dangers!

Ternate, the capital of Gilolo, which commands the Moluccan seas, and which is the headquarters of the Dutch . Resident, furnished the Dolly Hope with all that was necessary in the way of provisions and coal for the return voyage. There ended the year 1881, the sixth which had elapsed since the disappearance of the Franklin.

Captain Ellis weighed anchor in the morning of the 9th of January, and steamed off to the north-east.

It was then the bad season. The crossing was not easy, and unfavourable winds occasioned long delays. It was not until the 23rd of February that the Dolly Hope was signalled by the semaphores of San Diego.

This cruise in Malaysia had lasted nineteen months. In spite of the efforts of Captain Ellis, in spite of the devotion of his crew, the secret of the Franklin remained buried in the mysterious depths of the sea.

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER YEAR.

The letters which Mrs. Branican had received in the course of the expedition made her doubt that the attempt would be crowned with success. And so after the arrival of the last, she retained but little hope regarding the search of Captain Ellis in the Moluccan archipelago.

As soon as she learnt that the Dolly Hope was in sight of San Diego, Mrs. Branican, accompanied by Mr. William Andrew, went down to the harbour, and as soon as the steamer came to an anchor they went on board.

The looks of Captain Ellis and his crew said clearly enough, that the second half of the cruise had been no more successful than the first.

Mrs. Branican, after shaking hands with the captain, stepped up to the men so severely tried by the fatigues of the voyage, and said in a firm voice, —

“I thank you, Captain Ellis, and I thank you, my friends 1 You have done all I could expect from your devotion! You have not succeeded, and perhaps you despair at success? I do not despair! No! I do not despair of again seeing John and his companions of the Franklin / My hope is in God — and God will realize it!” These words were uttered with such extraordinary assurance, they testified to such rare energy, they said so resolutely that Mrs. Branican would never give in, that her confidence should have been communicated to all hearts. But if the men listened with the respect that her attitude commanded, there was not one who doubted but that the Franklin and her crew were inevitably lost.

But could they have done better than yield to that special intuition with which .a woman is naturally endowed? When a man clings only to the direct observation of facts and their consequences, it is certain that woman has occasionally a juster prevision of the future, thanks to her intuitive qualities. A kind of instinct of genius guides her and gives her a certain prescience. Who knows if Mrs. Branican would not one day be justified in her opposition to the general opinion?

Mrs. Branican and Mr. William Andrew then passed into the Dolly Hope’s cabin, where Captain Ellis gave them a detailed account of the expedition. The charts of Polynesia and Malaysia were spread upon the table and permitted them to follow the course of the steamer, her anchorages at the numerous points explored, the observations collected in the principal ports and native villages, the searches instituted among the islands and islets with minute patience and indefatigable zeal.

In conclusion, said Captain Ellis, —

“Allow me to call your attention specially to this: The Franklin was seen for the last time at the southern end of Celebes on the 3rd of May, 1875, about seven weeks after she left San Diego, and from that day she has never been met with. As she never arrived at Singapore it is beyond doubt that the disaster occurred in the Java Sea. How? There are only two hypotheses: The first is that the Franklin went down under all sail or perished in a collision without a trace of her being left; the second is that she was dashed to pieces on the rocks, or destroyed by Malay pirates, and in either ease it would have been possible to find some wreckage. But in spite of all our efforts we have found no material proof of the Franklin’s destruction.”

The conclusion derivable from their argument was that it was more logical to admit the first hypothesis — that which attributed the Franklin’s loss to one of the tornadoes so frequent in Malaysian waters. In fact, for the second supposition, that of the collision, it was so seldom that one of the two ships continued to keep the sea, that the secret of the meeting would have been known sooner or later; and therefore, no hope remained.

This is what Mr. William Andrew understood, and he sadly bowed his head before Mrs. Branican, who did not cease to question him. “Well, no!” she said, “no! the Franklin has not foundered! No! John and his crew have not perished!”

And the interview continuing at Dolly’s request, it became necessary for Captain Ellis to make his report in most circumstantial detail. She returned to the matter again and again, questioning and discussing without yielding in her opinion in any way.

This conversation lasted for three hours, and when Mrs. Branican was about to go, Captain Ellis asked if it was her intention for the Dolly Hope to be laid up.

“No, captain,” she answered, “I should be sorry to see your crew and yourself dismissed. There may be something new arrive. which will make another expedition necessary; if then you consent to retain the command of Dolly Hope’.’

“That I would do willingly,” answered Captain Ellis, “but I belong to Andrews’, Mrs. Branican, and they may require my services.”

“Do not let that stop you, my dear Ellis,” said Mr. William Andrew, “I shall be happy for you to remain at Dolly’s orders if she wishes it.”

“I am at your orders, Mr. Andrew. My crew and myself will not leave the Dolly Hope.”

“And I beg, captain,” said Mrs. Branican, “that you will take care the ship is always ready for sea.”

And in giving his consent, the ship-owner had had no other thought than to defer to Dolly’s wishes. But neither he nor Captain Ellis doubted that she would give up a second campaign after the useless results of the first. If time had not weakened in her the memory of the catastrophe, it would at least end in destroying the hope that remained.

And so, in conformity with Mrs. Branican’s desires, the Dolly Hope was not dismantled. Captain Ellis and his men continued to figure on her books and receive their wages as if they were at sea. There were important repairs to make after nineteen months in the trying seas of Malaysia; the hull required careening, the rigging required partial renewal, the boilers had to be replaced, and several parts of the engine required changing; and when the work was done, the Dolly Hope shipped her provisions, filled up with coal, and was ready for sea when ordered.

Mrs. Branican had resumed her habitual life at Prospect House, where, with the exception of Mr. William Andrew and Captain Ellis, no one was admitted to her friendship. She lived only in remembrances and hopes, having always present in her thoughts the double misfortune which had fallen on her. Little Wat would have been seven years old at this time — the age when the first rays of reason illuminate impressionable young brains — and little Wat was no more. Then Dolly’s thoughts returned to him who had risked his life to save hers, to Zach Fren, whom she wished to know and who had not yet returned to San Francisco. . But that would soon happen. Many times the shipping intelligence had contained news of the

Californian, and the year 1881 would probably not finish before he came back to his native place. As soon as he arrived, Mrs. Branican would call him to her and pay him her debt of gratitude, which would assure his future.

Meanwhile Mrs. Branican did not cease to help the ‘ families suffering from the loss of the Franklin. It was only to visit their humble homes, to soothe their cares, and do some work of charity that she left Prospect House and went down into the lower town. Her generosity showed itself in all forms, and extended to the mental requirements as well as the material wants of her friends; and it was in the earlier months of this year that she consulted Mr. William Andrew regarding a project she was eager to put into execution.

She desired to found a hospital to receive children that had been abandoned, or orphans having neither father nor mother.

“Mr. Andrew,” said she to the ship-owner, “it is in memory of our child that I wish to found this institution, and endow it with the resources necessary for its maintenance. John will no doubt approve of what I do when he returns. And what better use could I make of our fortune?”

Mr. William Andrew, having no objection to make, put himself at Mrs. Branican’s disposal with regard to the preliminaries that were required in the creation of an establishment of this nature. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars were devoted to it, first for the acquisition of a convenient building, and then for the payment of its annual expenses.

The affair was very quickly concluded, owing to the assistance given to Mrs. Branican by the municipality. No buildings were necessary. A vast edifice situated in a good atmosphere, on one of the slopes of San Diego, near the Old Town, was secured. Ail able architect adapted the edifice to its new purpose, and altered it so as to provide a home for fifty children, with a staff sufficient to educate and look after them. -Surrounded by a large garden, shaded by beautiful trees, watered by running streams, and including all the sanitary systems approved by experience, it had everything to make it healthy.

On the 19th of May this hospital — which received the name of Wat House — was inaugurated amid the applause of the whole town, which on this occasion sought to shower on Mrs. Branican the most striking testimonies of its sympathy. But the charitable woman did not appear at the ceremony, as she did not care to leave her chalet. As soon however, as a certain number of children had been received at Wat House, she went every day to visit them as if she had been their mother. The children could remain in the hospital until they were twelve years old. As soon as they were old enough they were taught to read and write, and received a moral and religious education at the same time as they were taught a trade according to their abilities. Some of them belonged to families of sailors and showed a taste for the sea, and these were destined to be shipped as cabin boys or apprentices. And in truth it seemed that Dolly felt more personal affection for them than for the rest — doubtless in remembrance of Captain John.

At the end of 1881 no news of the Franklin had been received at San Diego or elsewhere. Although a considerable reward was offered to whoever brought the least clue, it had not been possible to send the Dolly Hope on a second cruise. But still Mrs. Branican did not despair. That which 1881 had not given, 1882 might give.

What had become of Mr. and Mrs. Burker? Where had Len Burker taken refuge to escape the pursuit ordered against him? The Federal police had given up all inquiry in the matter, and Mrs. Branican had to abandon all thoughts of knowing what had become of Jane.

But this was a deep affliction for her who was so much distressed at the position of her unfortunate relative. She was astonished at never having received a letter from Jane — a letter which she might have written without in any way endangering her husband's safety. Were they both unaware that Dolly, restored to reason, had sent a ship in search of the Franklin, and that the expedition had had no result? It was inadmissible. Had not the newspapers of both worlds followed the different phases of the enterprise, and could it be imagined that Len and Jane Burker had not heard of it? They could not even be ignorant that Mrs. Branican had become rich by the death of her uncle Edward Starter, and that she was in a position to come to their assistance. But, all the same, neither one nor the other tried to enter into correspondence with her, although their position must have been very f precarious.

January, February, March passed, and it seemed as though the year 1882 would bring no change in the state of things, when something happened that appeared to throw some light on the fate of the Franklin.

On the 27th of March, the steamer Californian, on board of which was Zach Fren, came to an anchor in the bay of San Francisco, after a cruise of several years in the seas of Europe.

As soon as Mrs. Branican heard of the ship's return she wrote to Zach Fren, who was then boatswain on board the Californian, and invited him to come immediately to her at San Diego.

As Zach Fren had intended to return to his native town to take a few months' rest, he replied that as soon as . he could get ashore he would come to San Diego, and his first visit would be to Prospect House. This was a matter of a few days.

But at the same time a rumour spread which would make considerable noise in the States if it proved to be true.

It was said that the Californian had brought home some wreckage which appeared to belong to the Franklin. One of the San Francisco papers added that the Californian had found the wreckage off the north of Australia, in the region between the Timor Sea and the Arafura Sea near Melville Island, west of Torres Island.

As soon as this news arrived at San Diego, Mr. William Andrew and Captain Ellis, who had had the news by telegram, hurried to Prospect House.

At the first Word they said on the subject, Mrs. Branican became very pale. But her tone denoted absolute conviction as far as she was concerned.

“After the wreckage they will find the Franklin,” said she, “and after the Franklin they will find John and his companions.”

The discovery of this piece of wreck was a fact of importance.

It was the first time that any relic of the lost ship had been met with. For a search for the site of the disaster Mrs. Branican now possessed a link in the chain which bound her to the past.

Immediately she had brought a map of Oceania. Then Mr. William Andrew and Captain Ellis could study the question of another cruise, for she wished a decision in the matter to be come to on the spot.

“And so the Franklin did not go straight to Singapore on her way through the Philippines and Malaysia,” said Mr. William Andrew.

“But that is improbable; it is impossible,” said Captain Ellis.

“But,” continued the ship-owner, “if she had followed that course, how could this wreckage have been found in the Arafura’ Sea to the north of Melville Island?”

“That I cannot explain and cannot understand, Mr. Andrew,” replied Captain Ellis. “All I know is that the Franklin was seen south-west of Celebes after leaving the Straits of Macassar; and if she came down those straits she must have come from the south and not from the east. She was therefore unable to come through Torres Strait.”

The question was discussed for some time, and it had to be admitted that Captain Ellis was right Mrs. Branican listened to the objections and replies without making any observation. But a vertical fold in her forehead indicated with what tenacity and obstinacy she refused to admit the loss of John and his companions. No! She would not believe it until some proof of their death was forthcoming.

“Agreed!” said Mr. William Andrew. “I think as you do, my dear Ellis, that the Franklin crossed the Sea of Java on her way to Singapore.”

“Some part of it, at least, Mr. Andrew, for it was between Singapore and Celebes that the wreck took place.”

“Be it as you say. But how could the wreck be drifting off Australia, if the Franklin was lost on some reef in the Sea of Java?”

“That can only be explained in one way,” said Captain Ellis, “by admitting that the wreck drifted through the Straits of Sunda, or one of the other channels leading into the Timor and Arafura seas.”

“Would the currents take it in that direction?”

“Yes, Mr. Andrew, and I may add that if the Franklin had been disabled in a storm, she might be carried down one of the straits, to be finally lost on the reefs of the Australian coast.”

“Quite so, my dear Ellis,”, said Mr. William Andrew, “and that is the only plausible explanation, and in that case if a wreck has been met with off Melville Island six years after the disaster, it is because it has been recently detached from the reefs on which the Franklin was lost.”

This hypothesis no sailor would have contested.

Mrs. Branican, whose look was never taken off the map that lay before her, then said, —

“If the Franklin were really lost on the coast of Australia, and the survivors of the wreck have not reappeared, it is because they were taken prisoners by the natives.”

“That, Dolly, is not impossible — but — ” said Mr. William Andrew.

Mrs. Branican was about to protest with energy against the doubt implied in Mr. William Andrew’s reply, when Captain Ellis intervened with, —

“It remains to be seen if the wreckage fished up by the Californian really belonged to the Franklin”

“And do you doubt it?” asked Dolly.

“We shall soon know,” said Mr. William Andrew, “for I have given orders for it to be sent on.”

“And I,” said Mrs. Branican, “give orders that the Dolly Hope is got ready to sail.”

Three days after this interview, the boatswain, Zach Fren, who had just arrived at San Diego, presented himself at Prospect House.

At this time he was about thirty-seven years of age, strong and resolute in appearance, with his face tanned by the wind and sea, frank and cheery in look. He was one of those sailors who inspire confidence in others because they have confidence in themselves, and who always go straight to the point.

The welcome he received from Mrs. Branican was so full of gratitude that he did not know what to say.

“My friend,” said she to him, after giving utterance to the first outpourings of her heart, “it is you — you who saved my life, you who did all you could to save my poor child. What can I do for you?”

The boatswain said that he only did his duty. That a sailor who did not act as he had done would not be a sailor — he would only be a soldier. His only regret was that he had not been able to restore the baby to its mother. But he did not deserve anything at all. He thanked Mrs. Branican for her good intentions regarding him; and if she would allow him, he would call and see her whenever he came ashore.

“For years, Zach Fren,” said Mrs. Branican, “I have been waiting for. your return, and I hope you will be near me on the day Captain John returns.”

“The day Captain John returns!”

“Zach Fren, can you believe — ”

“That Captain John has perished? No, I do not!” said the boatswain.

“Yes! You have hope?”

“I have more than hope, Mrs. Branican; I am sure of it.- Is a captain like Captain John to be lost like a cap in a puff of wind? Not likely! I never saw anything like it!”

So said Zach Fren, and in terms which testified to his absolute faith and made Mrs. Branican’s heart leap. She was not the only one, then, to believe in John’s return”! Another shared her conviction — and the other was the man who had saved her. It seemed to her an indication of Providence.

“Thank you, Zach Fren,” said she, “thank you! You don’t know the good you have done me! Tell me again — tell me again that Captain John survived the wreck — ”

“He did! he did! Mrs. Branican. And the proof that he survived it is that one day or another he will be found! And if that is not a proof — ”

And then Zach Fren gave a number of details as to the circumstances under which the wreckage had been fished up by the Californian. At last Mrs. Branican said to him, — “Zach Fren, I have decided to begin a new search immediately.”“Well — and it will succeed this time — and I will go with it, if you will allow me.”

“Will you agree to serve under Captain Ellis?”

“Willingly.”

“Thank you, Zach Fren! It seems to me that with you on board the Dolly Hope there will be one chance more.”

“I believe so, Mrs. Branican!” said the boatswain, winking his eye. “Yes! I believe so — and I am ready to start.”

Dolly took Zach Fren’s hand, she pressed it as if it were a friend’s. Her imagination led her away, led her astray, perhaps, but it seemed as though this boatswain would succeed where others had failed.

However, as Captain Ellis bad observed — and although Mrs. Branican was convinced on the subject — it was necessary to make sure that the wreckage brought home by the Californian really did belong to the Franklin.

Ordered on by Mr. William Andrew, it soon arrived by railroad at San Diego, and was immediately taken to the shipyard. There it was submitted to the examination of the men who had built the Franklin.

The fragment met with by the crew of the Californian m off! the little island a dozen miles from the shore, was a piece of the stem, or rather of that carved cutwater which usually figures at the prow of sailing vessels. The fragment of wood had been much damaged, not by a long sojourn in the water, but by exposure to the weather. Hence the conclusion that it had remained for a long time on the reefs, against which the ship had been thrown, and then Been detached by some cause — perhaps by the action of a current, and drifted for many months or many weeks before it was noticed by the sailors of the Californian. But did it belong to Captain John's ship? Yes, for what remained of the carving resembled that which had ornamented the prows of the Franklin.

This was clearly made out at San Diego; the shipwrights had no doubt of it. The teak wood used for the prow had come out of the timber stores of the yard. They even found the traces of the iron band which fastened the cutwater of the stem, and the remains of a coat of red paint and a gold stripe on the foliage which had ornamented the bow.

And so this piece of wreck, brought home by the Californian, undoubtedly belonged to the ship which had been searched for in vain in the seas of Malaysia.

That point being settled, there had to be admitted the reasonableness of Captain Ellis's explanation, that as the Franklin had been sighted in the Java Sea south-west of Celebes, it followed that a few days later she had been driven through the Straits of Sunda, or some other channel opening into the Timor or Arafura seas, and had been wrecked on one of the reefs of the Australian coast.

The despatch of a vessel with orders to explore the seas between the Sunda Islands and the north coast of Australia was thus completely justified. Would this cruise succeed any better than that among the Philippines, Celebes and the Moluccas? There was reason to hope so.

This time Mrs. Branican thought of going out with the Dolly Hope. But Mr. William Andrew and Captain Ellis, as well as Zach Fren, dissuaded her, not without difficulty, from doing so. A cruise of this kind might be very long, and might be endangered by the presence of a woman on board.

We need not say that Zach Fren was engaged as boatswain of the Dolly Hope, and that Captain Ellis prepared his ship for sea with the least possible delay.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CRUISE IN THE TIMOR SEA.

THE Dolly Hope left the port of San Diego at ten o’clock in the morning of the 3rd of April, 1882. As soon as she was out of sight of the American coast, Captain Ellis steered south-west in a direction just a little lower than on his first cruise. In fact, he wished to take the shortest cut to the Arafura Sea through Torres Straits, beyond which the wreckage from the Franklin’s bow had been picked up.

On the 26th of April they sighted the Gilbert Islands, widely scattered in these regions, where the calms, of the Pacific at this time of the year make navigation so slow and difficult for sailing vessels. Leaving to the northward the Scarborough and Kingsmill groups, which make up this archipelago, situated about eight hundred leagues from the Californian coast to the south-east of the Carolines, Captain Ellis crossed the Vanikoro group, distinguishable fifteen leagues off by the lofty Mount Kapongo.

These green and fertile islands, covered throughout their extent by impenetrable forests, belong to the Fiji archipelago. They are surrounded by coral reefs which make approach to them very dangerous. It was on them that Dumont D’Urville and Dillon found the remains of the ships of La Perouse, the Recherche and Esperance, which left Brest in 1791, and, driven on the reefs of Vanikoro, lever returned.

In sight of this island, so sadly celebrated, a very natural feeling affected the crew of the Dolly Hope. Had the Franklin met with the fate of La Perouse’s ships? And as it had happened to Dumont D’Urville and Dillon, would it happen to Captain Ellis to find only the remains of the lost ship? And if he did not discover the place of the catastrophe, would the fate of John Branican and his companions remain in a state of mystery?

Two hundred miles further the Dolly Hope crossed obliquely through the Solomon Islands, formerly called New Georgia. This archipelago comprises a dozen large islands, dispersed over an area of two hundred leagues in length and forty in width. Amongst them are the Carteret Islands, formerly called the Massacre Islands, the name sufficiently indicating the sanguinary scenes of which they had been the site.

Captain Ellis had no information to seek from the natives of this group and no investigation to make in the vicinity. He did not stop, and steamed on towards Torres Strait, no less impatient than Zach Fren to reach that part of the Arafura Sea where the wreckage had been recovered. It would be there that the search would be conducted with a minute care and indefatigable perseverance that perhaps might meet with success.

The shores of New Guinea were not far off. A few days after leaving the Solomon Islands the Dolly Hope sighted the Louisiade archipelago. They passed in the offing the islands of Rossel, of Entrecasteaux, Trobriand and a large number of islets covered with magnificent domes of cocoanut trees.

At length, after a passage of three weeks, the look-outs recognized on the horizon the high lands of New Guinea, and the peaks of Cape York projecting from the Australian coast which bound Torres Strait to the north and south.

This strait is extremely dangerous. Captains always avoid it if they can; and it seems that even marine assurance companies decline to guarantee against sea risks within it. A careful-note has to be taken of the currents which flow incessantly from the east to the west and bear the Pacific waters into the

Indian Ocean. The shoals make navigation extremely perilous, and it can only be attempted during certain hours of the day when the position of the sun enables the breakers to be seen in the track of the surge.

It was when in sight of Torres Strait that Captain Ellis, in conversation with the mate and Zach Fren, asked the boatswain, —

“Is it the fact that it was in the latitude of Melville Island that the Californian picked up the wreckage of the Franklin?”

“Exactly,” said Zach Fren.

“Then we must reckon nearly five hundred miles across the Arafura Sea after leaving the Strait?”

“That is so, captain, and I understand your difficulty. Given the regular currents which flow from east to west, it seems that if this piece of wreck was picked up off Melville Island, the Franklin must have been lost at the entrance of Torres Strait.”

“Undoubtedly, Zach Fren, and we might reason that John Branican had been obliged to choose the dangerous road to Singapore; but I do not think so. Until I know more I shall persist in believing he crossed Malaysia, as we found in our first voyage, on account of his having been seen for the last time south of the island of Celebes.”

“And as there is no doubt about that,” said the mate, “it follows that Captain Branican entered Timor Sea down one of the straits dividing the Sunda Islands.”

“That is incontestable,” said Captain Ellis, “and I cannot understand how the Franklin got so far. Either she was disabled or she was not. If she was disabled it must have been from hundreds of miles west of Torres Strait that the currents bore her. If not, why should she return to this place when Singapore is in the opposite direction?"

"I do not know," said the mate. "If the wreckage had been found in the Indian Ocean it might be explained by a wreck having occurred either on the Sunda Islands or on the west coast of Australia."

"But," replied Captain Ellis, "as it has been recovered in the latitude of Melville Island, it shows that the Franklin was wrecked in that part of the Arafura Sea adjoining Torres Strait, or even in the Strait."

"Perhaps," said Zach Fren, "there are counter-currents along the Australian coast which floated the wreckage back. In that case the wreck might have taken place in the west of the Arafura Sea."

"We shall see," said Captain Ellis, "but in the meantime let us act as though the Franklin had been destroyed on the reefs of Torres Strait."

"And if we act wisely," repeated Zach Fren, "we shall find Captain John."

In short, this was the best thing to do, and it was done.

The width of Torres Strait is estimated at thirty miles. It would be difficult to imagine the swarm of islets and reefs, the position of which is hardly known to the best of hydrographers. There are at least some hundred of them at the level of the water for the most part, and the largest of them measuring no more than from three to four miles in circumference. They are inhabited by tribes of Andamans, who are much to be feared by the crews falling into their hands, as is shown by the massacre of the sailors of the Chesterfield and Hormuzier. By passing from one to the other in their light canoes, or flying proahs of Malay build, these natives can voyage without difficulty from New Guinea to Australia and from Australia to New Guinea. If Captain John and his companions had taken refuge on one of these islands it would have been easy for them to reach the Australian coast, then gain some settlement in the Gulf of Carpentaria or the Cape York peninsula, and thus return home without difficulty. But as none of them had reappeared, the only hypothesis admissible was that they had fallen into the hands of the natives, who were not the sort of savages to have respect for them; they would kill them without pity and devour them, and how could any trace be found of such a catastrophe?

So said Captain Ellis, and so said the sailors of the Dolly Hope. Such ought to have been the fate of the survivors of the Franklin if she had been lost in Torres Strait There remained, it is true, the chance that she had not entered the strait. But then how could they explain the fact of this fragment of cutwater having been met with off Melville Island?

Captain Ellis boldly entered among these dangerous channels, taking every measure that prudence required. With a good steamer, vigilant officers and brave crew, he might well reckon on traversing this labyrinth of reefs and keeping off the natives who might attempt to attack him.

When, for one reason or another, vessels enter Torres Strait, the mouth of which is furrowed with coral banks on the Pacific side, they generally keep along the Australian coast. But to the south of Papua there exists a rather large island, Murray Island, which had to be examined with some care.

The Dolly Hope, then, went on between two dangerous reefs, known as Eastern Fields and Boot Reef. And on the last, owing to the arrangement of the rocks having at a distance the appearance of a wrecked ship, it seemed as though the remains of the Franklin had been found, and in consequence there was some excitement, that did not last long owing to the steam launch soon discovering that there was nothing but a strange piling up of coral rocks.

Several canoes, mere trunks of trees hollowed out by fire or by the axe, and fitted with outriggers to give them stability, paddled by five or six natives, were perceived on approaching Murray Island. These natives contented themselves with shouting, or rather howling, like wild beasts. At half-steam the Dolly Hope made the round of the island without having to repel any attack. Nowhere did they see any trace of a wreck. On these islands and islets there was nothing but black natives of athletic build, with woolly hair, reddish in hue, shining skin, and with large, but not flat noses. By way of showing their hostile intentions they shook their spears, their bows, their arrows, as they gathered under the cocoanut trees which grow in thousands in the neighbourhood of the strait.

For a month, up to the 10th of June, after renewing his coals at Somerset, one of the ports of Northern Australia, Captain Ellis minutely examined the shores between the Gulf of Carpentaria and New Guinea. He put in at Millgrave Island, Banks Island, Horn Island, Albany Island, and Booby Island, which is hollowed out in dark caverns, in one of which is the letter-box of Torres Strait. But sailors are not content with -depositing their letters in the box, the collection of which is not very regular, be it understood. A sort of international convention obliges the sailors of different countries to leave a store of coal and provisions on this Booby Island, and there is no fear of these being stolen by the natives, owing to the strength of the currents not permitting their frail vessels to land there.

Now and then, by pleasing them with presents of little value, it was possible to communicate with the mados or chiefs of these islands. In return they offered “kaiso,” or tortoise-shell, and “incras,” threaded shells which serve them for money. As they could not make themselves understood, and their language was unknown to those on the Dolly Hope, it was impossible to discover if they had any remembrance of a wreck taking place about the date of the Franklin’s disappearance. In any case it did not seem as though they had in their possession any objects, arms, or tools of American make. No ironwork or pieces of carpentry, or masts, or spars were found which could point to the demolition of a ship. And when Captain Ellis left these natives of Torres Strait, if he could not affirm that the Franklin had not been wrecked on the reefs, at least he had found no trace of her.

The next work was the exploration of the Arafura Sea, leading on to the Timor Sea, between the group of small Sunda Islands to the north and the Australian coast to the south. As to the Gulf of Carpentaria, Captain Ellis did not propose to visit it, for if a wreck took place on its coasts it would not remain unknown to the colonists in the neighbourhood. It was, on the contrary, on the coast of Arnheim Land that he first intended to explore. Then on the return, he would explore the northern part of the Timor Sea and the numerous channels of access to it between the islands.

This cruise along Arnheim Land, swarming with islands and reefs, did not take less than a month. It was accomplished with a zeal and a boldness nothing could discourage. But everywhere, from the western point of the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Gulf of Van Diemen, no information could be got. Nowhere could the crew of the Dolly Hope come across the remains of a wrecked. ship. Neither the Australian natives nor. the Chinese, who carry on the trcpang trade in these seas, could throw any light whatever on the matter. But if the, survivors of the Franklin had been made prisoners by the Australian tribes of the region, tribes which are addicted to cannibalism, not one of them could have been spared except by a miracle.

On the 11th of July, on reaching the hundred and thirtieth degree of longitude. Captain Ellis began the exploration of Melville Island and Bathurst Island, which are separated from each other by only a narrow strait. Ten miles to the north of this group the wreckage of the Franklin had been recovered. As it had not been carried further west, it followed that it had not been taken from the reef until a short time be/ore the arrival of the Californian. It was thus possible that the site of the catastrophe was not very far away.

The exploration lasted nearly four months, for it included not only the surroundings of these two islands, but also the neighbouring coast line of Arnheim Land up to Queen’s Channel, and even the mouth of the Victoria River.

It was very difficult to continue the investigations inland, which would have risked much without any chance of success. The tribes inhabiting the northern territories of the Australian continent are very formidable. Recently, as Captain Ellis heard at one of the ports he put in at, there had been fresh acts of cannibalism in these parts. The crew of a Dutch vessel, the Groningen, deceived by the false signals of the natives of Bathurst Island, had been massacred and devoured by these wild beasts — is not that the only name they deserve? . Whoever became their prisoner might, perhaps, consider himself as destined to the most frightful of deaths.

But if Captain Ellis would have to give up all hope of knowing when and where the crew of the Franklin fell into the hands of these natives, it might still be possible for him to discover some trace of the wreck; and there was all the more reason for hoping that, as eight months had not elapsed since the Californian had found the fragment to the north of Melville Island.

Captain Ellis and his crew accordingly set to work to search the gulfs and creeks of the reefs on the coast, without troubling themselves about the fatigues or dangers to which they were exposed. This accounts for the duration of the exploration; it was very long, because it required to be very minute. Several times the Dolly Hope was in danger of running on the little-known breakers of these seas. Many times, too, she was on the point of being captured by the natives, who had to be driven off in their proahs by musketry when they were at a distance, and by axes when they tried to board.

But neither on Melville and Bathurst Islands, nor in Arnheim Land up to the mouth of the Victoria, nor in Torres Strait did the search yield anything. Nothing was discovered of the remains of a wreck, and no fragment of wreck was met with afloat by the Dolly Hope.

That was the position of affairs on the 3rd of November. What would Captain Ellis now do? Would he consider that his mission was ended — at least as far as the Australian coast was concerned, and the islands and inlets in its neighbourhood? Would he think of returning after exploring the small Sunda Islands in the north of the Timor Sea? In a word, did he think he had done all it was humanly possible to do?

The brave seaman hesitated, it will be understood, to look upon his task as ended, even after continuing it up to the Australian coast.

An, incident put an end to his hesitation. On the morning of the 4th of September he was walking with Zach Fren on the after part of the steamer, when the boatswain pointed out a few objects floating about half a mile from the Dolly Hope. These were not pieces of wood, fragments of planks, or trunks of trees, but huge clumps of vegetable matter, a sort of yellowish sargasso, torn from the ocean depths, and which followed the outline of the higher ground.

“That is curious,” said Zach Fren. “May I lose my name if those weeds are not going west, even south-west! There must be a current taking them towards the Straits!”

“That’s it!” said Captain Ellis, “and it ought to be a local current, unless it is the tide.”

“I do not think so,” said Zach Fren, “for at dawn I remember I saw a quantity of weeds drifting up the stream.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“As certain as I am that we shall end by finding Captain John.”

“Well, if the current exists,” said Captain Ellis, “it may be that the wreckage of the Franklin came from the west, along the Australian coast.”

“That is exactly as I look at it,” said Zach Fren.

“Then we need not hesitate. We must continue our exploration across the Timor Sea, up to the extremity of Western Australia.”

“Never was I more sure of anything, Captain Ellis, for it is beyond doubt that there is a current on this coast, the direction of which is very clear up to Melville Island. By supposing that Captain Branican was not wrecked west of this, we could explain how the piece of his vessel was brought where we picked it up on board the Californian.”

Captain Ellis called the mate, and consulted with him as to the advisability of continuing the cruise more to the westward.

The mate was of opinion that the local current should be examined up to the point from which it started.

“We will go on to the west,” answered Captain Ellis. “It is not doubt but certainty we must take back to San Diego — the certainty that nothing remains of the Franklin if she perished on the Australian coast.”

In consequence of this determination, which was fully justified, the Dolly Hope went off to Timor to coal. After a stay in port of forty-eight hours, she came down towards Cape Londonderry at the angle of Western Australia.

Leaving Queen’s Channel, Captain Ellis endeavoured to follow the outline of the continent from Turtle Point, where the current clearly showed that its direction was from west to east. It was not one of those effects of the tide which change with the ebb and flow, but a steady movement of the waters in this southern portion of Timor Sea. It was therefore necessary to steam up it, searching the creeks and reefs until the Dolly Hope found herself out in the Indian Ocean.

Arrived at the entrance of Cambridge Gulf, which washes the base of Mount Cockburn, Captain Ellis considered that it would be imprudent to venture with his vessel through this long strip of water bristling with reefs, and with its banks frequented by formidable natives. And so the steam launch, with a well-armed crew of six, was put under the orders of Zach Fren to explore the interior of the gulf.

“Evidently,” said Captain Ellis to him, “if John Branican has fallen into the power of the natives in this part of the continent, it is not to be supposed that he and his crew have survived. But what we have to do is to find out if there still exist any remains of the Franklin, in case the Australians have wrecked her in Cambridge Gulf.”

“And that would not astonish me with regard to these scoundrels!” said Zach Fren.

The boatswain’s task was clearly stated, and he accomplished it conscientiously, being always on the alert. He took the launch to Adolphus Island, almost at the end of the gulf, and went round it, and discovered nothing that encouraged him to push his investigations any further.

The Dolly Hope then resumed her course beyond Cambridge Gulf, rounded Dussejour Cape, and went away to the north-west, along the coast which belongs to Western Australia. The islands were numerous, and the creeks cut into the shore capriciously, but neither at Cape Rhuliers nor Cape Londonderry did anything result to repay the crew for so many fatigues so gallantly undertaken.

The fatigues and dangers of this navigation became serious enough when the Dolly Hope had rounded - Cape Londonderry. On this crest, which is directly assailed by the great surges of the Indian Ocean, there exist few practicable refuges in which a disabled vessel could take shelter. And a steamer is always at the mercy of its engines, which may fail her in the violent pitching and rolling due to a boisterous sea. From this cape to Collier Bay in York Sound, and in Brunswick Bay there was nothing to be seen but a medley of islands, a labyrinth of shoals and reefs like those that swarm in Torres Strait. At Capes Talbot and Bougainville the coast is defended by such a tremendous surf that its vicinity is only practicable to the native boats, which are rendered almost uncapsizable by their outriggers. Admiralty Bay, opening between Cape Bougainville and Cape

Voltaire, is so strewn with rocks that the steam launch was more than once in danger of being lost. But nothing could stop the ardour of the crew, and the bold sailors disputed among themselves as to who should take part in the perilous adventure.

Beyond Collier Bay Captain Ellis entered Buccaneer Archipelago, his intention being not to go beyond Cape Leveque at the end of King Sound to the north-west.

This was not on account of anxiety at the state of the weather, which tended to improve daily. In this part of the Indian Ocean, situated in the southern hemisphere, the months of October and November correspond to those of April and May in the northern. But Ellis could not keep on indefinitely, and his furthest point would be reached as soon as the shore current running east, and bringing the wreckage towards Melville Island, had ceased to make itself felt.

This was at last discovered towards the end of January, 1883, when the Dolly Hope had completed — unsuccessfully — the exploration of the large estuary of King Sound, into the extremity of which flows the Fitzroy River.

At the mouth of this important stream the steam launch was furiously attacked by the natives, and two men were wounded in the encounter, slightly, it is true; and it was only owing to Captain Ellis's coolness that this last attempt did not degenerate into disaster.

As soon as the Dolly Hope was out of King Sound, she stopped off Cape Leveque. Captain Ellis then held a consultation with the mate and -boatswain. After the charts had been carefully examined it was decided that the expedition should end here on the eighteenth parallel of northern latitude. Beyond King Sound the coast is clear, there are only a few islands, and that portion of Tasman Land which bounds the Indian Ocean still appears blank in the recently published atlas. There was no reason for going south-west, nor for visiting the neighbourhood of the Dampier Archipelago.

Besides, there only remained in the Dolly Hope a small quantity of coal, and the best thing to do was to make direct for Batavia, and fill up the bunkers. Then going cast, she could regain the Pacific through Timor Sea, along the Sunda Islands.

The course was thus laid to the northward, and soon the Dolly Hope was out of sight of the Australian coast.

CHAPTER XIV.

BROWSE ISLAND.

THE region between the north-west coast of Australia and the western part of the Timor Sea contains no islands of importance. With difficulty geographers have noted a few islets. What is met with consists principally of curious shallow coral formations, known as banks and rocks and reefs and shoals — such as Lynher Reef, Scott’s Reef, Seringapatam Reef, Korallen Reef, Courtier Shoal, Rowley Shoal, Hibernia Shoal, Sahul Bank, Echo Rock, etc. The position of these dangers is determined exactly for the most part, approximately in some instances. It is even possible that there remain to be discovered a certain number of those dangerous reefs which are at sea level. And so the navigation is not easy, and requires constant attention in these regions, which are often traversed by vessels coming from the Indian seas.

The weather was fine, the sea calm enough outside the breakers. The excellent engines of the Dolly Hope had in no way failed since the departure from San Diego, and her boilers worked splendidly. All the circumstances of weather and sea promised a favourable passage between Cape Leveque and Java. But this was the way home, and the only delays would be the stoppages Captain Ellis might make in exploring the small Sunda Islands.

For the first few days, after leaving Cape Leveque, nothing occurred worth mention. The most rigorous vigilance was imposed on the look-outs. Stationed in the foretop, they had to report as far off as possible the shoals and the reefs, which rarely rose above the water level.

On the 7th of February, about nine o’clock in the morning, one of the men in the foretop shouted, —

“Reef on the port bow!”

As this reef was not yet visible to the men on deck, Zach Fren went up the shrouds to reconnoitre its position for himself.

When he reached the top, the boatswain saw distinctly enough a rocky plateau about six miles off in the direction indicated. In reality it was neither a rock nor a shoal, but an islet in the shape of a saddleback, away to the north-west. Considering the distance, it was even possible that this islet was an island of some extent, if it was then visible end on.

A few minutes afterwards Zach Fren came down from aloft, and made his report to Captain Ellis, who gave the order to huff, so as to approach the said islet.

At noon, after taking the altitude, and finding his position, the captain had noted in the log-book that the Dolly Hope was in 14° 7’ south latitude, and 133° 13’ east longitude. This position being marked on the chart, coincided very nearly with the position of a certain island named Browse Island by modern geographers, situated about two hundred and fifty miles from York Sound, on the Australian coast.

As this island was not much out of his way, the captain resolved to coast along it, without any intention of stopping at it.

About one o’clock in the afternoon Browse Island was not more than a mile from the Dolly Hope. The sea, somewhat rough, broke noisily, and covered with spray a cape stretching out towards the north-east. The size of the island was not apparent, as it was being looked at obliquely. In any case, it looked like an undulating plateau, with no particular hill dominating its surface.

However, as there was no time to lose, Captain Ellis, after slowing a little, was about to give the order to go ahead full speed, when Zach Fren attracted his attention by saying, —

“Captain! Look there! Is that a spar on that cape?”

And the boatswain stretched out his hand in the direction of the cape, which ended abruptly: a rocky ridge.

“A spar! No! It looks to me like the trunk of a tree!” said Captain Ellis.

And taking his glasses, he looked at the object with more attention.

“You are right, boatswain,” he said; “it is a spar, and I think I see a bit of bunting fluttered into tatters by the wind. Yes! yes! It ought to be a signal!”

“Then we bad better go and see!” said the boatswain.

“So I think,” said Captain Ellis. And he gave the order to bear down on Browse Island carefully and at half-speed.

The order was instantly executed. The Dolly Hope began to approach the reefs which surrounded the island at a distance of a few hundred feet. The sea beat on them violently, not that the wind was strong, but that the current took the surge towards them.

Soon the details of the coast were apparent to the naked eye. The shore looked wild, arid, desolate, without a patch of verdure, with great gaping caverns in which the surf beat with the noise of thunder. At intervals a bit of yellowish beach broke the line of rocks, above which flew flocks of seabirds. But there was nothing to be seen of a wreck, neither fragments of spars nor vestiges of a hull. The spar at the extreme end seemed to be a portion of the bowsprit; but of this discoloured flag flying in rags in the wind it was impossible to recognize the colour.

“There have been shipwrecked people there!” said Zach Fren.

“Yes, there must have been!” said the mate.

“Undoubtedly,” said Captain Ellis, “a vessel has been cast on that island.”

“And what is none the less certain,” said the mate, “is that the shipwrecked crew took refuge there, for they raised that signal mast, and perhaps they are there still, for it is rare for vessels bound to Australia or the Indies to pass in sight of Browse Island.”

“I suppose, captain, you intend to go ashore here?”

“I do, if we can, but I have not yet seen a place to land. Let us begin by going round it before coming to a decision. If it is still inhabited by unfortunate shipwrecked people it is impossible for us not to be seen; and they may signal to us — ”

“And if we see nobody, what is your plan?” asked Zach Fren.

“We will try and land as soon as landing is practicable,” said Captain Ellis. “If it is not inhabited, the island may have some traces of a wreck, and that will be of more interest for us.”

“And who knows?” murmured Zach Fren.

“Who knows? Do you mean that the Franklin may have been cast on Browse Island, quite out of the course she ought have followed?”

“Why not, captain?”

“Because it is quite unlikely,” said Captain Ellis? “But although we ought not to stop for unlikelihoods, we will attempt a landing.”

The plan of steaming round Browse Island was immediately put into execution.

Prudently keeping a cable length off the reefs, the Dolly Hope was soon round the different capes thrown out by the island towards the north. There was no change in the aspect of the shore, the rocks lay as if they had been crystallized in almost identical shapes, ridges roughly beaten by the surge, reefs covered with spray, and landing impracticable. In the background a few clumps of cocoa-nut trees rose on a rocky plateau, on which appeared no trace of cultivation. Of inhabitants there were none; of habitations there were none. Not a boat, not a fishing cane?. A desert sea, a desert island. A few flocks of gulls flew from one point to another, and gave the only life to this sad solitude.

If it was not the wished-for island of the castaway, in which the wants of existence were assured, it could at least offer a refuge to the survivors of a wreck.

Browse Island measures about six or seven miles round, as was discovered when the Dolly Hope reached the southern shore. In vain did the crew endeavour to discover a harbour, or in default of a harbour a creek among the rocks in which the steamer could be put in shelter for a few hours. It was soon seen that a landing could only be effected by means of the boats, and that a passage that would permit them to land was still to be found.

Soon the Dolly Hope was to leeward of the island. As the breeze then blew from the north-west, the surge beat less violently on the rocks. The shore describing a large hollow, formed a vast roadstead in which a vessel might anchor without risk until a change in the wind. It was decided that the Dolly Hope should remain there, if not at anchor, at least under half-steam, while the launch went ashore. There remained to be discovered a place where the men could set foot among the reefs which lay white in the long line of surf.

Searching the beach with his glasses, Captain Ellis finished by discovering a depression in the plateau, a sort of gap in the mass of the island, through which a brook rippled towards the sea.

After looking at it in his turn, Zach Fren affirmed that a landing could be effected at the foot of this gap. The coast seemed to be less steep there, and its profile was broken by rather a sharp angle. There was also visible a narrow passage through the reef on which the sea did not break.

Captain Ellis ordered out the launch, which in half an hour was under steam. He embarked in her with Zach Fren, a steersman”, a man in the bow, the stoker and the engineer. As a matter of prudence two guns, two axes, and a few revolvers were put on board. During the captain’s absence, the mate could handle the Dolly Hope in this open roadstead and attend to all the signals that might be made.

At half-past one the boat went off towards the shore, distant a good mile, and entered the channel, while thousands of gulls flew around, uttering deafening, strident cries. A few minutes afterwards she ran gently up to a sandy beach. Captain Ellis, Zach Fren and the two sailors jumped ashore, leaving the engineer and stoker in charge of the launch, which was to be kept under steam. Going up the gap through which the brook ran into the sea, all four stood on the crest of the plateau.

A few hundred yards off was a sort of rocky mound of curious form, the summit of which was a hundred feet above the beach.

Captain Ellis and his companions went towards the mound; they climbed it not without difficulty, and from the top could see over the whole island.

It was a broad oval, resembling a tortoise with the cape for the tail. In places a little vegetable soil covered the rock, which was of madreporic formation, like the atolls of Malaysia and the coral groups of Torres Strait. Here and there patches of verdure appeared, but there were more mosses than herbs, more stones than roots, more undergrowth than shrubs. Whence came the creek, the bed of which, visible for a part of its course, wound through the slopes of the plateau? Was it fed by some inland spring? That was not easy to discover, although the view extended up to the signal mast.

Standing on the top of the mound, Captain Ellis and his men looked around in every direction. No smoke rose in the air, no human being appeared. It followed, therefore, that if Browse Island had been inhabited — and there was no doubt of that — it was not likely to be so now.

“A miserable shelter for castaways,” said Captain Ellis. “If their stay was a long one, I wonder how they managed to live.”

“Yes,” said Zach Fren. “It is almost a bare plateau.

Here and there only are a few clumps of trees. The rock is hardly covered with vegetable soil. But all the same, one is not too particular when shipwrecked! A bit of rock under your feet is always better than a hole with the sea over your head!”

“At first, yes,” said Captain Ellis; “but afterwards?”

“Besides,” said Zach Fren, “it is possible the castaways who took refuge on the island may have been promptly taken off by some vessel — ”

“As it is equally possible that they succumbed to privations.”

“And what makes you think that, captain?”

“That if they had left the island in some way they would have taken the precaution to strike the signal mast. It is, therefore, to be feared that the last of these unfortunates died before help arrived. But let us go up to the mast. We may perhaps find some trace of the nationality of the ship which was lost here.”

Captain Ellis, Zach Fren and. the two sailors descended the mound and walked towards the promontory projecting towards the north. But they had scarcely taken a hundred steps before one of the men stopped to pick up something his foot had kicked against.

“Hallo! What is this?” he said.

“Give it to me,” said Zach Fren.

It was a cutlass-blade like those which sailors carry in their belts in a leather scabbard. Broken at the handle, and full of dents, the blade had evidently been thrown away as useless.

“Well, boatswain?” said Captain Ellis.

“I am looking for some mark to show where this blade came from,” replied Zach Fren.

It was possible it did bear a maker’s name. But it was so rusted that it had first to be scraped. When Zach Fren had done this, he made out, not without difficulty, the words “Sheffield — England” inscribed on the steel.

The cutlass was thus of English origin. But to assert from that that the castaways on Browse Island were English was to be too positive. Why could not this weapon belong to a sailor of different nationality, since the manufactures of Sheffield arc spread over the whole world? If some other object were found, would this hypothesis be changed into certainty?

Captain Ellis and his companions continued on their way to the promontory. As there was no footpath, the walk was rather laborious. If it had been trodden by the feet of men, it must have been at a period too remote to be recognizable, for all trace had disappeared beneath the grass and moss.

After a walk of about two miles Captain Ellis halted near a clump of cocoa trees of anything but vigorous growth, and the nuts of which had fallen for some time, and were now nothing but dust and rottenness.

Up to there no other object had been found; but a few yards from the clump of trees, on the slope of a slight ‘ undulation it was easy to recognize traces of cultivation amid the scattered shrubs. What remained were a few yams and batatas almost returned to their wild state. A pickaxe lay under some thick briars, where one of the sailors discovered it accidentally. It seemed to be of American manufacture from the way it was hafted, and it was deeply eaten into by rust.

“What do you think of it, Captain Ellis?” asked the boatswain.

“I think,” said the captain, “that we have not yet had enough to say anything about.”

“Then, forward!” replied Zach Fren, motioning the men to follow him.

After descending the slopes of the plateau they reached the edge to which the northern promontory joined on. In this place a narrow sinuosity was cut back into the ridge, giving an easy access to the little sandy beach. This beach measured about an acre, and was enclosed by rocks of a beautiful red colour, on which the surf beat without cessation.

On the sand several objects were scattered about, showing that human beings had made a long stay at this point of the island, pieces of glass and crockery, iron bolts, preserve tins, the American origin of which was clear enough this time, and other things used at sea, a few fragments of chain, broken rings, ends of galvanized iron rigging, a fluke of a grapnel, several sheaves of blocks, a bent ring, a pump handle, bits of spars and yards, pieces of sheet iron, as to the origin of which the Californian sailors could make no mistake.

“It was no English ship that went down off here,” said Captain Ellis. “It was an American.”

“And you might say it was built in one of the Pacific ports,” said Zach Fren, whose opinion was shared in by the two sailors.

But at the same time there was nothing to show that it was the Franklin.

And the question remained; what was” this ship which had sunk, and of which nothing of the frame or planking had yet been found? Had the crew reached .Browse Island in her boats?

No! And Captain Ellis soon had proof enough that the wreck had occurred on the reefs.

A hundred yards from the beach, amid a pile of pointed rocks and reefs at the water level, lay the melancholy ruin of a ship as thrown ashore and broken up by the sea, when the waves have beaten over it with the violence of a flood and in an instant, wood or iron, all is gashed to pieces, demolished, shattered and dispersed and carried by the surf among the rocks.

Captain Ellis, Zach Fren, and the two sailors, stood looking, not without deep emotion, at what the rocks still kept of the disaster. Of the hull there remained only a few misshapen curves, jagged timbers bristling with broken bolts, bent rails, a bit of the rudder, a few strakes of the deck, but nothing of the exterior upper works, nothing of the masts which had either been cut away by the sea, or since the wreck had been used for the camp on the island. There was not a piece of the frame intact, not a piece of the keel entire. Amid the rocks with their sharp edges like chevaux de frise the vessel had evidently been ground up until its remains could not be used.

“Let us look,” said Captain Ellis, “and we may, perhaps, find a name, a letter, a mark which will tell us the nationality of this vessel.”

“Yes 1 and pray God that it may not be the Franklin reduced to a state like that!” said Zach Fren.

But was there any such indication as the captain expected? Even supposing that the surf had left a part of the stern or of the bow, where the name of the ship is usually found, would not the weather and the spray have effaced it?

And nothing of it was left. The search was fruitless. And if some of the tilings on the beach were of American make, there was nothing to show that they belonged to the Franklin.

But if some of the castaways had taken refuge on Browse Island — and the signal mast at the end of the promontory showed that unmistakably — if, during a period, the length of which it was impossible to say, they had lived on this island, they had certainty taken shelter in some cave, probably near the beach, so as to be able to make use of the wreckage among the rocks.

One of the sailors very soon discovered the cave which had been occupied by the survivors of the wreck. It was in a huge mass of rock formed at the angle of the plateau and the beach.

Captain Ellis and Zach Fren ran up to the sailor who called them. Perhaps this cave contained the secret of the disaster? Perhaps it would reveal the name of the ship?

The only way in was through a narrow opening, very low, near which were the cinders of a fire outside, the smoke of which had blackened the rocky wall.

Inside the cave was about ten feet high, twenty feet deep and fifteen feet wide, large enough to hold twelve men. The only furniture was a bed of dry herbage, covered with a sail in tatters, a bench made of pieces of plank, two,stools of the same kind, and a rickety table. For utensils, there were a few plates and dishes of iron, three forks, two spoons, a knife, and three pannikins, all of them rusty. In a corner was a keg on the ground, evidently used for water from the creek.

On the table was a ship’s lamp, dented and rusty, and’ much too damaged for use. Here and there were a few cooking utensils, and more clothes in rags thrown on the bed.

“Poor creatures!” said Zach Fren. “To what an end they must have been reduced during their stay on this island.”

“They had scarcely saved anything from the ship,” said Captain Ellis, “and that shows with what violence she was thrown ashore! Everything had been broken, everything! How could they have got food? Doubtless from the little corn they saved, and salt beef, and the preserves they emptied to the last box! But what an existence, and how they must have suffered!”

Yes! and if we add what they might get by fishing, we shall have all the castaways could have procured for their wants. As to their being now on the island there seemed to be no chance. And if they had succumbed, it was probable that .the remains of him who died last would be found, although the closest search inside and outside yielded no result.

“It seems to me,” said Zach Fren, “that these shipwrecked folks were taken off home.”

“And why?” asked Captain Ellis. “Could they have built a boat big enough to go to sea out of the remains of the ship!”

No, captain, and they would not have had enough to make a canoe; but I rather think their signals must have been seen by some ship.”

“And I cannot agree- to that.”

“And why not?”

w Because if a ship had taken them off, the news would have spread all over the world, at least unless the ship that rescued them went down with all hands — and that is hot likely.”

“Perhaps so!” said Zach Fren, who did not give in easily. “But if it was impossible for them to build a boat, there is nothing to prove that all the boats on board perished in the wreck and in that case — ”

“Well, in that case,” replied Captain Ellis, “as nothing was heard of a crew having been picked up somewhere near Western Australia, I think that the boat would have perished on the voyage from Browse Island!”

It would have been difficult to reply to this reasoning, as Zach Fren well knew, but not wishing to give up all hope he continued, —

“I suppose you intend to visit the other parts of the island?”

“Yes, to clear our conscience,” said Captain Ellis, “and in the first place let us strike that signal mast so that ships need not be stopped, now that there is not a man to save.”

The captain with Zach Fren and the sailors, came out of the cave and gave a last look round the beach; then again walking up the creek to the plateau, they went off towards the head of the promontory.

After turning aside a little, so as to skirt a sort of stony pool formed of rain-water, they went straight ahead.

Suddenly Captain Ellis stopped. At this point the ground .showed four undulations side by side. Probably this arrangement would not have attracted attention if a half rotten cross of wood had not been at the end of each little mound. These were graves, and this was the cemetery of the castaways.

“At last,” said Captain Ellis, “shall we be able to learn?”

It would not be out of any want of respect due to the dead if they were to search these graves, and exhume the bodies they contained, and see the state in which they were, and search in the grave for some indication of their nationality.

The two sailors set to work, and digging into the ground with their knives, threw it up on each side. But a number of years must have elapsed since the corpses had been buried for the ground contained only bones. Captain Ellis had them covered up again and the crosses were replaced on the graves.

But it was necessary that the mystery of this wreck should be cleared up. If four human beings had been buried here, what had become of those who had rendered them the last duty? And when death had struck them in their turn, would not a skeleton be found on some other point of the island?

Captain Ellis had no hope in the matter.

“We shall not, then,” he said, “learn the name of the ship lost on Browse island! We shall return to San Diego without having discovered the remains of the Franklin without knowing what has become of John Branican and his crew.”

“Why should not this be the Franklin?” said one of the sailors.

“And why should it be?” asked Zach Fren. There was nothing in fact to show that it was the Franklin whose wreckage covered the reefs of Browse

Island, and it seemed as though this second expedition of the Dolly Hope would no more succeed than the first had done.

Captain Ellis had remained silent with his looks cast on the ground where the poor castaways had found the end of their miseries, only with the end of their lives! Were they Americans as he was? Were they those of whom the Dolly Hope had come in search?

“To the flagstaff,” he said.

Zach Fren and his men followed him as he descended the long rocky slope by which the promontory joined on to the island.

It took twenty minutes to walk the half mile which separated them from the flagstaff, for the ground was encumbered with stones and brambles.

When Captain Ellis and his men had reached the mast, they saw that it had been sunk deep in a rocky excavation, which explained how it was that it had resisted the storms for so long; and as had been seen with the glasses, this mast — the end of a bowsprit — had come from some ship.

The rag nailed to its summit was merely a bit of sailcloth torn in the breeze, without any indication of nationality.

At Captain Ellis’ orders, the sailors were preparing to lower the mast when Zach Fren exclaimed, —

“Captain! Look there!”

“What is it?”

“That bell!”

On a still solid framework there was a bell with the clapper much rusted.

And so the castaways had not been contented with setting up the mast and fixing to it the flag, but had taken to it the bell, which they hoped could be heard by any ship passing in sight of the island. But did not this bell bear the name of the ship to which it belonged, according to the custom of all maritime nations?

Captain Ellis was walking towards the framework when he stopped.

At the foot of it lay the remains of a skeleton, or rather a mass of bones lay on the ground with a few rags among it.

There were, then, five survivors who had taken refuge on Browse Island. Four had died, and the fifth had remained alone.

Then one day he had left the cave, he had dragged himself to the end of the promontory, he had rung the bell to make it heard by a ship in the offing, and he had fallen at this spot never to rise again..

After giving orders to the two sailors to dig a grave for the bones, Captain Ellis made a sign to Zach Fren to follow him and examine the bell.

On the bronze, there were this name and number, deeply engraved and still legible —

FRANKLIN.

1875.

CHAPTER XV.

LIVING WRECKAGE.

WHILE the Dolly Hope was carrying on this second campaign in the Timor Sea, and ending it in the way we know, Mrs. Branican and her friends and the families of the missing crew were sharing in all the anxieties of the attempt. What hopes attached to this little bit of wood picked up by the Californian, and belonging, without question, to the Franklin! Would Captain Ellis find the wreck of the ship on one of the islands, or on some point of the Australian continent? Would he find John Branican, Harry Felton, and the twelve sailors embarked under his orders? Would he bring back to San Diego one or many survivors of this catastrophe?

Two letters from Captain Ellis had arrived since the departure of the Dolly Hope. The first announced the useless result of the exploration among the channels of Torres Strait up to the Arafura Sea. The second announced that Melville and Bathurst Islands had been visited without finding any trace of the Franklin. Mrs. Branican was then informed that the search was to be continued along the Sea of Timor up to Western Australia, and among the numerous archipelagos bordering on Tasman Land. The Dolly Hope would then return, after searching the small Sunda Islands, and when no hope was left of finding any trace.

After this last letter there came a break. Several months elapsed, and now people were waiting from day to day for the Dolly Hope to be signalled by the semaphores of San Diego.

However, the year 1882 went by, and although Mrs. Branican had received no news of Captain Ellis, there was nothing surprising in that, for postal communications are slow and irregular across the Pacific Ocean, so that there was no reason for being anxious about the Dolly Hope, although they might be impatient to see her.

At the end of February, however, Mr. William Andrew began to think that the cruise of the Dolly Hope was unduly prolonged. Every day a certain number of people would go to Island Point, in the hope that the ship would be sighted in the Offing. And, far enough out as she might-be, and even though she might not make her number, the sailors of San Diego would recognize her from her look — just as they could tell a Frenchman from a German or a Yankee from a Britisher.

The Dolly Hope appeared at length in the morning of the 27th of March, nine miles off, coming along at full speed, under a fresh breeze from the north-west. In less than an hour she had entered the harbour, and dropped her anchor in the bay of San Diego.

The news Soon spread in the town, and the populace crowded on the quays, and on Island Point and Point Loma.

Mrs. Branican and Mir. William Andrew and a few other friends, hastening to enter into communication with the Dolly Hope, embarked on a tug to go out and meet her. The crowd, was possessed by some mysterious anxiety, and when the tug breasted the last wharf, on her way to the ship, there was not a sound. It seemed that if Captain Ellis had succeeded in this second attempt, the news would already have spread round the world.

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Branican, Mr. William Andrew and their companions were alongside the Dolly Hope.

A few minutes later they knew the result of the expedition It was oh the western boundary of the Timor Sea, on Browse Island, that the Franklin had been lost. It was there that the survivors of the wreck had taken refuge. It was there they had died.

“All?” said Mrs. Branican.

“All!” replied Captain Ellis.

The consternation was general when the Dolly Hope anchored in the middle of the bay with her flag a waft in sign of mourning, mourning for the crew of the Franklin.

The Dolly Hope had left San Diego on the 3rd of April, 1882, and returned on the 27th of March, 1883. Her cruise had lasted nearly twelve months, a cruise in which devotion never failed; but the only result had been to destroy the last hopes.

During the few minutes Mrs. Branican and Mr. William Andrew were on board, Captain Ellis had briefly informed them of the facts relative to the wreck of the Franklin on the reefs of Browse Island.

Although she now learnt that there existed no doubt as to the fate of Captain John and his companions, Mrs. Branican showed no change whatever Not a tear escaped from her eyes. She asked no questions. As the remains of the Franklin had been found on the island, as there remained none of the crew who had taken refuge there, what more could she ask at that time? The story of the expedition she could hear later. And so, having shaken hands with Captain Ellis and Zach Fren, she had sat down in the stern of the Dolly Hope, deep in her thoughts, and, in spite of so many irrefragable proofs, determined not to believe that she was yet “the widow of John Branican.’”

When the Dolly Hope cast anchor, Dolly returned to the front of the poop and asked Mr. William Andrew, Captain Ellis, and Zach Fren, to call on her that very day at Prospect House. She would expect them in the afternoon, so as to learn in detail all that had happened during the cruise in Torres Strait, the Arafura. Sea, and the Sea of Timor.

A boat took Mrs. Branican ashore. The crowd parted respectfully as she crossed the quay, and she directed her steps towards the upper quarter of San Diego.

About three o’clock in the afternoon Mr. William Andrew, Captain Ellis, and the boatswain presented themselves at the chalet, where they were immediately ushered into the drawing-room on the ground floor, in which Mrs. Branican was waiting for them.

When they had taken their places round a table on which was spread a chart of the northern Australian seas, “Captain Ellis,” said Dolly, “will you tell me the story of your cruise?”

And then Captain Ellis spoke as if he had his eyes on the log-book, omitting no particular, forgetting no incident, and referring every now and then to Zach Fren for corroboration. He even told in due order of the operations in Torres Strait, in the Arafura Sea, at Melville and Bathurst Islands, among the archipelagos of Tasman Land, although they had been useless. But Mrs. Branican was interested in these details, and listened in silence, and fixed on the captain a look which her eyelids did not veil for an instant.

When the recital reached the episodes on Browse Island, it had to account for every hour and every minute after the Dolly Hope had seen the flagstaff on the cape. Mrs. Branican, without moving, but with just a slight trembling of the hands, saw in these different incidents, as if they were reproduced before her eyes, the landing of Captain Ellis and his men at the mouth “of the creek, the ascent of the knoll, the blade of the cutlass picked up off the ground, the traces of cultivation, the abandoned pickaxe, the beach with the fragments of wreckage, the remains of the Franklin among the heap of rocks where it could only have been driven by the most violent of storms, the cave which the survivors had inhabited, the discovery of the four graves, the skeleton of the last of the survivors at the foot of the flagstaff near the alarm bell. At this moment Dolly rose as though she heard the sound of the bell amid the solitudes of Prospect House.’

And then Captain Ellis, drawing from his pocket a locket rusted with being in the water, presented it to her.

It was Dolly’s portrait, a half-faded photograph she had given to John at the Franklin’s departure, and which a fresh search had discovered in a dark corner of the cave.’

And if this locket showed that Captain John was one of the five survivors, was it not to be concluded that he was one of those who had succumbed to the long misery of destitution and abandonment?

The chart of the Australian seas was spread out on the table, the chart on which for seven years Dolly had so often. evoked the memory of John. She asked the Captain to show her Browse Island, that point hardly perceptible, lost in the regions swept by the typhoons of the Indian Ocean.

“If we had arrived there a few years earlier,” added Captain Ellis, “we might have found them still alive — John — his companions.”

“Yes, maybe;” said Mr. William Andrew, “and the Dolly Hope should have gone there on - her first cruise. But who would have thought that the

Franklin had been lost on an island in the Indian Ocean?”

“No one,” said Captain Ellis, “considering the course he should have followed, and which he did follow, since the Franklin was seen- to the south of Celebes. Captain Branican must have lost control of his ship, which must have been borne through one of the Sunda Straits into the Timor Sea and driven on Browse Island.”‘

“There is no doubt,” said Zach Fren, “that that is what happened.”

“Captain Ellis,” said Mrs. Branican, “in looking for the Franklin in the seas of Malaysia you did what you ought to have done. But it was to Browse Island that you should have gone first. Yes, it was there!”“ — ’’’

Then taking part in the conversation, as if she wished to draw some hope from the figures, she said, —

“On board the Franklin there were Captain John; the mate Harry Felton, and twelve “sailors. You found on the island the remains of four men who had been buried, and the last died at the foot of’ the flagstaff; What do yon think had become of the nine others?”

“We do not know,” said Captain Ellis; “Yes, I know,” said Mrs. Branican; “but what do you think became of them?”

“Perhaps they perished when the Franklin struck on the reefs of the island.”

“You admit, then, that only five survived the wreck?”

“That, unfortunately, is the most probable explanation,’ added Mr. William Andrew.

“That is not my opinion,” said Mrs. Branican. “Why should not John, Felton, and twelve men have reached Browse Island safe and sound? Why should not nine of them have left it afterwards?”

“And how, Mrs. Branican?” said Captain Ellis.

“In a sloop built from the remains of the ship.”

“Mrs. Branican,” said Captain Ellis, “Zach Fren will tell you, as I do, that in the state in which we found those remains, it appeared to us to be impossible.”

“But, one of their boats?”

“The boats of the Franklin, even supposing they were not all broken, could never have ventured a passage to the Australian coast or to the Sunda Inlands.”

“And, besides,” said Mr. William Andrew, “if nine of the men left the island, why did the five remain behind?”

“I add,” said Captain Ellis, “that if they had any boat at all at their disposal, those who went away in her perished at sea or were the victims of the Australian aborigines, for they have never been heard of.”

Then Mrs.’ Branican, without showing a symptom of weakness, asked the boatswain, — ” Zach Fren,” said she, “do you think as Captain Ellis thinks?”

“I think,” said Zach Fren, shaking his head, “that though it is possible for things to have been as he says, it is also possible for them to have been otherwise.”

“And,” said Mrs. Branican, “my opinion is that we have no absolute certainty as to what has become of the nine men whose remains were not found on the island. You and your crew, Captain Ellis, have done all that the most intrepid devotion could do.”

“I should have liked to have done more, Mrs. Branican.”‘

“We will now leave you,” said Mr. William Andrew, thinking the interview had lasted long enough.

“Yes, my friend,” said Mrs. Branican, “I want to be alone. But whenever Captain Ellis, likes to come to Prospect House, I shall be happy to have a talk with him about John and his companions.”

“I am. always at your orders,” said the captain.

“And you also, Zach Fren,” added Mrs. Branican; “do not forget that my house is yours.”

“Mine?” said the boatswain, “but what will become of the Dolly Hope?”

“The Dolly Hope?” said Mrs. Branican, as if this question was of no importance.

“Your idea, my dear Dolly,” said Mr. William Andrew, “is that, If an opportunity offers, of selling her?”

“Selling her?” answered Mrs. Branican, sharply, “selling her? No, Mr. Andrew, never.”

Mrs. Branican and Zach Fren had exchanged looks; they understood each other.

From this day forwards Dolly lived in great retirement at Prospect House, where she had had brought the few things collected on Browse Island — the ship’s lamp, the utensils, the fragment of canvas nailed to the flagstaff, the bell of the Franklin, &c.

The Dolly Hope was taken to the end of the harbour and laid up in charge of Zach Fren. The crew, well paid, were beyond reach of want for the future; but if ever the Dolly Hope went to sea on another expedition, they might be reckoned on.

Zach Fren did not forget to go often to Prospect House. Mrs”. Branican was pleased to see him, to talk with him, to hear in detail all the incidents of his last cruise. Besides, the same way of looking at things made them understand one another better day by day; they did not believe that the last word had been said concerning the wreck of the Franklin, and Dolly would say to the boatswain, —

“Zach Fren, neither John nor his companions are dead.”

“The eight? — that I don’t know,” the boatswain would answer, “but certainly Captain John is living!”

“Yes! Living! And where shall we go and look for him, Zach Fren? Where is he, my poor John?”

“He is where he is, and nowhere else, Mrs. Branican; and if we do not go there, we shall get news of him. I do not say it will be by post and a prepaid letter; but we shall receive it all right.”

“John is living, Zach Fren!”

“If he were not, Mrs. Branican, should I ever have been able to save you? Would Heaven have permitted it? No. That would have been too bad.”

And Zach Fren, with his manner of saying things and Mrs. Branican, with the obstinacy of her character, agreed to encourage a hope that neither Mr. William Andrew, nor Captain Ellis, nor any of their friends could continue to hold.

During 1883 nothing happened to direct public attention to the matter of the Franklin. Captain Ellis, in command of one of Andrews’ ships, was again at sea. Mr. William Andrew and Zach Fren were the only visitors received at the chalet, and Mrs. Branican devoted herself entirely to her work at Wat House.

Now, about fifty poor children, some of them quite young, were being brought up in this asylum, which Mrs. Branican visited every day, looking after their health, their instruction, and their future.’ The ample funds at the disposal of Wat House allowed of the children being as happy and comfortable as children could be who had lost father and mother. When they reached an age at which they could be apprenticed, Dolly placed them in the workshops and business houses of San Diego, where she continued to watch over them. This year, three or four sons of sailors had gone to sea under honest captains. Beginning as cabin boys, they would become apprentices between thirteen and eighteen years of age, then seamen, then boatswains, and, in this way, would be assured of a good trade for their manhood and a retreat in their old age. And thus the Asylum of Wat House was destined to become the nursery of the sailors who are an honour to the population of San Diego and the other ports of California.

In addition to these occupations, Mrs. Branican did not cease from being the benefactress of the poor. No one knocked in vain at the door of Prospect

House. With the considerable income from her fortune, as controlled by Mr. William Andrew, she engaged in every good work, in which the families of the sailors of the Franklin had the greatest share. And did she not hope that these absent ones would one day return?

This was the one subject of her interviews with Zach Fren. What had become of the castaways of whom there was no trace on Browse Island? Why could not they have left it in a boat of their own making, although Captain Ellis thought otherwise? But so many years had since elapsed that it was madness to hope.

At night, in sleep troubled by strange dreams, Dolly would again and again see John appear to her. He had been saved from shipwreck and picked up in distant seas. The ship that was bringing him home was in the offing. John was on his way back to San Diego; and what was most extraordinary was that these illusions would persist, after she awoke, with such intensity that Dolly looked upon them as realities.

And, in the same way, Zach Fren continued obstinate. It might be thought that these ideas had been driven into his brain with a mallet as trenails are driven into a ship's frame. He also repeated that they had found five castaways instead of fourteen, that the nine had left Browse Island, and that no one could say it was impossible to build a boat out of the remains of the Franklin. But what had become of them after so long a time? Zach Fren could not say, and it was not without alarm that Mr. William Andrew saw him encouraging Dolly in these illusions. Was It not to be feared that this excitement was dangerous for a brain already smitten with madness? But when Mr. William Andrew took the boatswain to task cm the subject, he only persisted in his ideas and said, —

“I will only swing to one anchor while its flukes are strong and its hold good.”

Several years went by. In 1890, fourteen years had elapsed since Captain Branican and his Franklin had left the port of San Diego. Mrs. Branican was then aged thirty-seven. If her hair was going grey, if her warm colour was beginning to fade, her eyes were animated with the, same fire as before. It seemed she had lost nothing of her bodily and mental strength, of the energy which distinguished her, and she was only waiting for an opportunity of giving fresh proofs of it.

It was just as possible for her . as for Lady Franklin to organize expedition after expedition to spend her entire fortune in seeking to recover John and his companions. But where could she look for them? Was it not the general opinion that the maritime drama had had the same ending as the expedition of the illustrious British admiral? Had not the sailors of the Franklin succumbed on Browse Island as had the sailors of the Erebus and Terror in the ice of the Arctic seas?

During the long years which had brought no unravelling of the. mysterious catastrophe, Mrs. Branican had not ceased in her inquiries as to what had become of Len and Jane Burker. On this point also there was absolutely no proof. No letter had come to San Diego. Everything seemed to show that Len Burker had left America and was living under an assumed name in some foreign .country. To Mrs. Branican this was a very great sorrow added to so many others. This unfortunate woman, of whom she was so fond, how happy would she be to have her near her. Jane had been a devoted companion; but she was far away and none the less lost to Dolly than was Captain John.

The first six months of the year 1890 had gone by when San Diego newspaper reproduced in its number for the 26th of July an item of news of which the effect ought to have been, and was, immense, we may say, in both continents.

This news was quoted from the Sydney Morning Herald\ and the extract was as follows: —

"It will be remembered that the last researches made seven years ago by the Dolly Hope, with the object of rescuing the survivors of the Franklin, ended in failure. Since then it has been supposed that the shipwrecked crew had succumbed to the last man, either before reaching Browse Island or after leaving it. The mystery is, however, far from being solved. In fact, one of the officers of the Franklin has just arrived in Sydney. This is Harry Felton, the mate. He was met with on the banks of the Parru, one of the affluents of the Darling, almost on the frontier between New South Wales and Queensland, and he has been brought to Sydney. But he is in so weak a state that no information can be obtained from him, and it is feared that his death may take place at any moment. We give this information for the Denefit of those interested in the fate of the Franklin"

On the 27th of July, as soon as Mr. William Andrew heard the news, which reached San Diego by telegraph, he went to Prospect House, where Zach Fren happened to be at the time.

Mrs. Branican was at once shown the paper, and the only reply she made was, — "I start for Sydney."

"For Sydney?" said Mr. William Andrew. "Yes," answered Dolly, and turning to the boatswain, she said, —

“Will you accompany me, Zach Fren?”

“Wherever you go, Mrs. Branican.”

“Is the Dolly Hope ready for sea?”

“No,” said Mr. William Andrew, “and it will take three weeks to fit her out.”

“Before three weeks I must be in Sydney,” said Mrs. Branican. “Is there a mail boat due out to Australia?”

“The Oregon ought to leave San Francisco to-night.”

“Zach Fren and I will be at San Francisco this evening.”

“My dear Dolly,” said Mr. William Andrew, “may Heaven give you back your husband!”

“It will give him back to me.”

That night, at eleven o’clock, a special train, ordered by her, landed Mrs. Branican and Zach Fren in the capital of California.

At one o’clock in the morning the Oregon left San Francisco bound for Sydney.

CHAPTER XVI.

HARRY FELTON.

The steamer Oregon attained a mean speed of seventeen knots during her passage, which was favoured with superb weather — the usual weather in this part of the Pacific at this period of the year. The gallant ship shared in the impatience of Mrs. Branican, as Zach Fren said. We need scarcely say that the officers, passengers, and crew showed the brave woman that respectful sympathy of which her misfortunes, and the energy with which she bore them, made her so worthy.

When the Oregon was in 330 51’ south latitude, and 148° 40’ east longitude, the look-outs reported land. On the 15th of August, after a voyage of seven thousand miles, made in nineteen days, the steamer entered Port Jackson, between the high schistose cliffs forming the great gate opening on to the Pacific.

Leaving to the right and left the little bays dotted with villas and cottages, which bear the names of Watson, Vaucluse, Rose, Double, Elizabeth, the Oregon passed Sydney Cove and entered Darling Harbour, which is the port of Sydney, and ran alongside the quay.

To the first person who came on board — one of the custom-house officers — Mrs. Branican said, —

“Harry Felton?”

“He is alive,” answered the officer, who had recognized Mrs. Branican.

Did not all Sydney know she was on board the Oregon, and was not she expected with the greatest impatience?

“Where is Harry Felton?” she asked.

“At the Marine Hospital.”

Mrs. Branican, followed by Zach Fren, at once went ashore. The crowd received her with the same deference with which she was greeted at San Diego, and which she met with everywhere.

A carriage took them to the Marine Hospital, where they were received by the doctor on duty.

“Can Harry Felton speak? Is he conscious?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“No, madam,” said the doctor. “The unfortunate man has not yet recognized any one. It seems that he cannot speak. Death may intervene at any time.”

“Harry Felton must not die!” said Mrs. Branican. “He alone knows if Captain John or any of his companions are still alive. He alone knows where they are! I have come to see Harry Felton.”

“I will take you to him at once,” said the doctor.

A few moments afterwards Mrs. Branican and Zach Fren were in the room occupied by Harry Felton.

Six weeks before, some travellers were crossing the country of Ularara in New South Wales, on the lower boundary of Queensland. Reaching the left bank of the Parru River, they saw a man lying at the foot of a tree. Covered with clothes in rags, exhausted by privations, broken down by fatigue, this man could not be brought back to consciousness, and if his certificate as officer of the mercantile marine had not been found in one of his pockets, it would probably never have been known who he was.

It was Harry Felton, the mate of the Franklin. Where did he come from? From what distant and unknown part of the Australian continent had he set out? How long had he been wandering in the dreadful deserts of the centre of Australia? Had he been a prisoner of the natives, and had he escaped? If any of his companions remained, where had he left them? Was he the sole survivor of a disaster now fourteen years old? All these questions had, up to the present, remained without reply.

But it was a matter of considerable interest to know where Harry Felton came from, what his life had been since the wreck of the Franklin on the reefs of Browse Island — to know, in fact, the last word of this catastrophe.

Harry Felton was taken to the nearest station, that or Oxley, from which the railway brought him to Sydney. The Sydney Morning Herald, having the first news of his arrival, made it the subject of the paragraph we know, adding that the mate of the Franklin had not up to then been able to reply to the questions put to him.

And now Mrs. Branican was before Harry Felton, whom she would not have recognized. He was but forty-six years of age then, and he looked quite sixty. And this was the only man — almost a corpse — who could say what had become of Captain John and his crew.

The most assiduous care had been unable to ameliorate Harry Felton’s condition — a condition evidently due to the terrible fatigues he had suffered during the weeks, during the months, perhaps, that his journey across Central Australia had lasted. The breath of life which still remained to him a fainting fit might deprive him of at any moment. Since he had been in the hospital he had hardly opened his eyes, and it was doubtful if he knew what was going on around him. He was supported by a little food, and this he did not even seem to notice. It was to be feared that excessive suffering might have annihilated his intellectual faculties, and destroyed in him the working of his memory, on which, perhaps, the safety of the castaways depended.

Mrs. Branican sat down at his bedside, watching his look, for a movement of his eyelids, the murmur of his voice, or the least indication it would be possible to seize. Zach Fren stood near her, alert for any spark of intelligence, like a sailor looking for a light through the mist on the horizon.

But the light did not shine neither that day nor the fol1owirg day. Harry Felton’s eyelids remained obstinately closed, and when Dolly lifted them she found only a look of unconsciousness.

But she did not despair, neither did Zach Fren, who said to her, —

“If Harry Felton recognizes his captain’s wife, he will know how to make her understand, even though he may not speak.”

Yes! It was important that he should recognize Mrs. Branican, and that, perhaps, might have a good effect on him. And things would have to be managed with great prudence while he was becoming accustomed to Dolly’s presence. Little by little the recollection of the Franklin would return to his memory. He might express in signs what he could not say.

Although she was advised not to remain shut up in Harry Felton’s room, Mrs. Branican refused to take an hour’s rest or even go out for a breath of fresh air. She would not leave his bedside.

“Harry Felton may die, and if the only word I am waiting for escapes with his last breath, I must be here to hear it. I will not leave him.”

Towards the evening a slight improvement seemed to take place. His eyes opened several times, but they did not look towards Mrs. Branican. And yet she leant over him and called him by his name, and repeated the name of John — of the captain of the Franklin — of San Diego! How was it these names did not recall to him the recollection of his companions? A word, he was only asked for one word — Living? Were they alive?

And all that Harry Felton had had to suffer before coming there, Dolly said to herself, that John had suffered also. Then the thought came to her that John had fallen on the way. But, no. John had not followed Harry Felton. He remained there with the others. Where? Was it with a tribe of the Australian coast? What was this tribe? Harry Felton alone could say, and it seemed that his intelligence was annihilated, that his lips had forgotten how to speak.

During the night his weakness increased. His eyes did not open again, his hand grew cold as if the little life that remained to him had retreated towards his heart. Was he, then, going to die without saying a word? And it entered Dolly’s mind that she also had lost her memory and her reason for several years. As nothing could be obtained from her then, nothing could be obtained from this man — nothing of what he alone knew.

The day came. The doctor, very uneasy at the state of prostration, tried the most powerful remedies, which produced no effect. Harry Felton would die, and then Mrs. Branican would see, lost in the void, the hopes that his return had led her to “conceive. To the light he might have brought, there would succeed a darkness nothing could dissipate! And then all would be ended!

At Dolly’s request the principal doctors of the city were gathered in consultation. But after examining the patient they declared themselves powerless.

“You can do nothing for this unhappy man?”

“Nothing,” said one of the doctors.

“Not even a minute of intelligence, a minute of memory?”

And for that minute Mrs. Branican would have paid her whole fortune.

But what is not in the power of man is always in the power of God. It is to Him man should go when human resources fail.

As soon as the doctors had gone Dolly knelt, and when Zach Fren returned he found her in prayer by the side of the dying man.

Suddenly Zach Fren, who had bent over him to see if a breath escaped from his lips, exclaimed, —

“Look!”

Dolly, thinking the boatswain had found that life had gone, rose and murmured, — Dead?”

“No, not Look. His eyes are open. He is looking at us,”

Under the raised eyelids Harry Felton’s eyes were shining with extraordinary brightness. His face had slightly regained its colour, and his hands moved. He seemed to have come out of the torpor in which he had been plunged for so long. And as he looked at Mrs. Branican, a sort of smile played round his lips.

“He has recognized me!” exclaimed Dolly.

“Yes!” said Zach Fren. “His captain’s wife is near him, and he knows it. He is going to speak!”

“And if he cannot, may God grant he may make himself understood.”

And taking his hand, which feebly returned her pressure, Dolly went near to him.

“John? John?” she said.

A movement of the eyes indicated that Harry Felton had heard her and understood.

“Living?” she asked.

“Yes!”

And this “Yes,” so feebly uttered, Dolly had heard distinctly.

CHAPTER XVII.

BY “YES “AND “NO.”

Mrs. Branican at once called the doctor, who saw well enough that, in spite of the change in the patient’s state of intelligence, it was only a last manifestation of life, and that death was near.

But the dying man seemed only to see Mrs. Branican. Neither Zach Fren nor the doctor attracted his attention. All that remained of the strength of his intellect was concentrated on his captain’s wife.

“Harry Felton,” asked Mrs. Branican, “if John is alive where did you leave him? Where is he?”

Harry Felton did not reply.

“He cannot speak,” said the doctor, “but he might answer by a sign.”

“If even by a look I would understand him,” said Mrs. Branican.

“Listen!” said Zach Fren; “the questions ought to be put to him in a certain way, and, as we understand each other as sailors, let me put them. Let Mrs. Branican hold Felton’s hand and not take her eyes off his. I will ask him. We will see ‘ yes’ or ‘ no’ by his eyes, and that will do.”

Mrs. Branican leant over Harry Felton and took his hand.

If Zach Fren had, at the outset, asked him where Captain John was to be found, it would have been impossible to obtain a satisfactory reply, as that would have obliged Harry Felton to mention the name of a country, a county, or a town, which he probably could not do. Better to arrive gradually at the information by taking up the history of the Franklin from the day she had been last seen until the day Harry Felton had become separated from John Branican.

“Felton,” said Zach Fren, in a clear voice, “you have near you Mrs. Branican, the wife of John Branican, the captain of the Franklin. You have recognized her?”

Felton’s lips did not move, but a movement of his eyebrows, a feeble pressure of the hand, replied affirmatively.

“The Franklin” said Zach Fren, “was last reported south of the island of Celebes. You understand me. You understand me, Felton, do you not?”

Another look of affirmation.

“Well,” continued Zach Fren, “listen to me, and, according as you open or shut your eyes, I shall know if what I am saying is right or wrong.”

There was no doubt that Felton understood what Zach Fren said.

“When he left the Sea of Java, Captain John went into the Timor Sea?”

“Yes.”

“By the Straits of Sunda?”

“Yes.”

“Of his own free will?”

This question was followed by a negative sign of which there could be no doubt.

“No,” said Zach Fren.

And this was what Captain Ellis had always thought. For the Franklin to leave the Java Sea for the Timor Sea she must have been obliged to do so.

“It was in a storm?” asked Zach Fren.

“Yes.”

“A violent tornado caught you in .the Java Sea?”

“Yes.”

“And drove you through the Straits of Sunda?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps the Franklin was disabled and dismasted, her rudder gone?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Branican, with her eyes fixed on Harry Felton, looked at him without saying a word.

Zach Fren, wishing to run through the different phases of the catastrophe, continued in these terms: —

“Captain John having been unable to take an observation for some days, did not know his position?”

“Yes.”

“And after being swept for some days to the westward in Timor Sea, he was lost on the reefs of Browse Island?”

A slight movement showed the surprise of Harry Felton, who evidently did not know the name of the island on which the Franklin had been wrecked, and which no observation had enabled him to fix the position of in the Timor Sea.

Zach Fren continued, —

“When you left San Diego you had Captain John, yourself, and twelve men, fourteen in all. Were you fourteen after the wreck?”

“Yes.”

“Some of the men perished, then, when the ship was cast on the rocks?”

“Yes.”

“One? — two?”

An affirmative sign approved of this last number. So two sailors were missing when the men set foot on Browse Island.

At this moment, at the doctor’s advice, a little rest was given Harry Felton, whom the interrogation was visibly tiring.

Then the questions having been resumed a few minutes afterwards, Zach Fren obtained information as to the way in which the twelve survivors had provided for the means of their subsistence. Without a part of the cargo, consisting of preserves and flour, which had been washed ashore, and without fishing, which became one of their chief resources, the castaways would have died of hunger. They had only very rarely seen ships pass out a t sea off the island. Their flag on the mast was never noticed, and they had no other chance of safety beyond this of a vessel taking them off.

When Zach Fren asked, —

“How long did you live on Browse Island? One year? — two years? — three years? — six years?”

It was to the last that Felton answered “yes “with a look.

And so from 1875 to 1881 Captain John and his companions had lived on this island. But how did they manage to leave it? That was one of the most interesting points which Zach Fren entered upon when he asked, —

“Did you build a boat with the remains of the ship?”

“No.”

This is what Captain Ellis and the boatswain had agreed when they were exploring the site of the shipwreck. * It would not have been possible to build even a canoe with such fragments.

Arrived at this point, Zach Fren was rather embarrassed as to the questions he should ask as to the way the men had left Browse Island.

“You say,” he said, “that no ship answered your signals?”

“No.”

“Did a Malay proah, or a native Australian boat, come to the island?”

“No.”

“Then a ship’s boat came to the island?”

“Yes.”

“Was the boat adrift?”

“Yes.”

This point was cleared up at last, It was easy for Zach Fren to deduce the natural consequences.

“Did you make the boat seaworthy?”

“Yes.”

“And Captain John used it to reach the nearest coast to leeward?”

“Yes.”

But why had not the captain and all his companions embarked in this boat? That was what it was important to know.

“Doubtless the boat was too small to take twelve passengers?” asked Zach Fren.

“Yes.”

“And seven of you went away — Captain John, you, and five men?”

“Yes.”

And then they could clearly read in the dying man’s look that he thought they could still save those who remained on Browse Island.

But, at a sign from Dolly, Zach Fren abstained from saying that the five sailors had succumbed after the captain’s departure.

A few minutes’ rest was given to Harry Felton, whose eyes remained closed, while his hand continued to clasp Mrs. Branican’s.

And then her thoughts carried her to Browse Island, and she took part in these scenes. She saw John trying even the impossible for the safety of his companions. She heard him, he spoke to her, she encouraged him, she took passage with him. Where had this boat come ashore?

Harry Felton’s eyes opened again, and Zach Fren began to question him.

“Then Captain John, you, and five men left Browse Island?”

“Yes.”

“And the boat headed eastwards for the nearest land to the island?”

“Yes.”

“The land was Australia?”

“Yes.”

“Was she driven ashore by a storm during the voyage?”

“No.”

“You landed in one of the creeks on the Australian coast?”

“Yes.”

“In the neighbourhood of Cape Leveque?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps in York Sound?”

“Yes.”

“As you landed did you fall into the hands of the natives?”

“Yes.”

“And they took you away with them?”

“Yes.”

“All?”

“No.”

“Some of you perished as you landed?”

“Yes.”

“Massacred by the aborigines?”

“Yes.”

“One? — two? — three? — four?”

“Yes.”

“There were only three, then, that the Australians took into the interior?”

“Yes.”

“Captain John, you, and one of the sailors?”

“Yes.”

“And this sailor, is he still with the captain?”

“No.”

“He died before you left?”

“Yes.”

“A long time ago?”

“Yes.”

And so Captain John and Harry Felton were actually the only survivors of the Franklin, and now one of these had but a few hours to live.

It was not easy to obtain from Harry Felton information concerning Captain John, information it was desirable to have with extreme precision. More than once Zach Fren had to pause in his examination 5 then, when he resumed it, Mrs. Branican asked questions on questions, so as to know what had passed during the nine years, that is to say, since the day Captain John and Harry Felton had been carried off by the aborigines of the coast. In this way they learnt what the Australian nomads were doing. The prisoners had had to accompany them during their incessant peregrinations through the regions of Tasman Land, while leading a most miserable existence. Why had they been spared? Was it to obtain some services from them, or, if occasion offered, to obtain a high ransom for them from the English authorities? Yes, and this last important fact was definitely confirmed by Harry Felton. It was only an affair of ransom if they could reach the natives.

A few other questions gave them to understand that Captain John and Harry Felton had been so Well watched during the nine years that they had not had a single opportunity for flight.’

At last a chance presented itself. A place had been chosen where the two prisoners could meet and escape together; but some circumstance, unknown to. Harry Felton, had prevented Captain John from coming to the rendezvous. Harry Felton had waited several days; .not wishing to escape alone, he had sought to rejoin the tribe, but it had moved off; then, resolved to deliver his captain if he could reach one of the villages of the interior, he had set out across the central regions, hiding to avoid falling again into the hands of the blacks, exhausted by the heat, dying of hunger and fatigue. For six months he had wandered until he had fallen unconscious on the banks of the Parru.

There, as we know, he was recognized by the paper she had on him; from there he had been brought to Sydney, where his life had been prolonged as if by a miracle, so that he might tell them what, for so many years, they had in vain sought to know.

And so Captain John still lived; but he was a prisoner of a nomad tribe which wandered in the deserts of Tasman Land.

And when Zach Fren had mentioned the different names of the tribes which frequent these territories, it was the Indas to which Harry Felton replied by the affirmative sign. Zach Fren even managed to learn that in the winter this tribe usually camped on the banks of the Fitzroy River, one of the streams running into Leveque Gulf, on the north-west of the Australian continent.

“There we will go and look for John!” exclaimed Mrs. Branican, “and there we shall find him.”

And Harry Felton understood her, for his look grew animated at the thought that his captain would at last be saved — saved by her.

Harry Felton had now accomplished his mission. Mrs. Branican knew to what part of the Australian continent her investigation’s should be directed. And he closed his eyes, having no more to say.

And that was the state to which had been reduced this man, so courageous and robust, by fatigue and privation, and chiefly by the terrible influence of the Australian climate, and, for having braved it, he was about to succumb when his miseries were near their end. Did not this await Captain John if he attempted to escape across the solitudes of Central Australia? And did not the same dangers menace those who went in search of this tribe of the Indas?

But this thought never occurred to the mind of Mrs. Branican. While the Oregon bore her towards the Australian continent she had conceived and organized the project of a new campaign; she would now put it into execution.

Harry Felton died at nine o’clock that night. For the last time Dolly had called him by his name. For the last time he had understood her. His eyes opened and this name escaped his lips — ”John! John!”

Then the rattle came in his throat, and his heart ceased to beat.

That night as Mrs. Branican left the hospital she was spoken to by a boy who was waiting at the door.

He was an apprentice in the merchant service, employed on the Brisbane, one of the mail boats running between Sydney and Adelaide.

“Mrs. Branican!” said he, in a troubled voice.

“What do you want, my child?” answered Dolly.

‘“Is Harry Felton dead?”

“He is dead.”

“And Captain John?”

“He is alive; yes, alive!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Branican,” said the apprentice.

Dolly hardly noticed the features of the boy, who went off without saying who he was or why he asked the question.

Next day Harry Felton was buried, and the sailors of the port and a part of the population of Sydney attended the funeral.

Mrs. Branican took her place behind the coffin, and followed to the grave him who had been the devoted companion and faithful friend of Captain John; and near her walked the young apprentice, whom she did not recognize among the crowd who had come to render the last honours to the mate of the Franklin.

PART II

CHAPTER I.

ON THE VOYAGE.

From the day M. de Lesseps severed the Isthmus of Suez it may be said that he made an island of the African continent. When the Panama Canal is finished, it will be quite as correct to say the same of North and South America. In fact, these immense territories are surrounded by water; but as they retain the name of continent, owing to their extent, it is logical to apply the description to Australia, or New Holland, which is similarly circumstanced.

Australia measures three thousand nine hundred kilometres in its greatest length from east to west, and three thousand two hundred in its greatest width from north to south. The product of these two dimensions yields an area of about four million eight hundred and thirty thousand square kilometres — about seven-ninths of the area of Europe.

The Australian continent is divided by the compilers of the most recent atlases into seven provinces, separated by arbitrary lines cutting each other at right angles, and taking no notice whatever of orographic or hydrographic conditions.

On the east, in the most populated part, are Queensland with its capital at Brisbane, New South Wales with its capital at Sydney, Victoria with its capital at Melbourne.

In the middle are Northern Australia and Alexandra Land, without capitals, and Southern Australia with its capital at Adelaide.

On the west is Western Australia, extending from north to south, with its capital at Perth.

It will soon be seen in what provinces, the most dangerous and least known of any on the continent, Mrs. Branican was about to adventure with that hope so vague, that thought almost unrealizable, of finding Captain John and rescuing him from the tribe who had kept him prisoner for nine years. And besides, was there not good reason to ask if the Indas had respected his life after the escape of Harry Felton?

Mrs. Branican's plan was to leave Sydney as soon as possible. She could reckon on the boundless devotion of Zach Fren, on the solid practical intelligence which characterized this confident, resolute man.. In a long interview, with the map of Australia before them, they had discussed the promptest and most efficient measures to be taken to assure the success of this new attempt. The choice of the point of departure was, it will be understood, of extreme importance, and this is what was finally decided upon: —

1. — A caravan provided with the best means of search and defence, and with everything required for a journey across the deserts of Central Australia, would be organized at the cost and by the effort of Mrs. Branican.

2. — The expedition should start as soon as possible, and to enable this to be done it was advisable to take it by the quickest roads, either on land or sea, to the terminus of the existing communications between the coast and the interior of the continent.

In the first place, the question of reaching the northwest coast, that is, the part of Tasman Land where the Franklin's men had landed, was submitted and debated. But this roundabout way would have occasioned loss of time, and caused certain serious difficulties for the staff and material — and the staff would be numerous and the material considerable. -In short, there was nothing to show that in attacking the Australian continent on the west the expedition would more surely and more promptly meet with the tribe which held Captain John Branican prisoner; for the nomad aborigines wander in Alexandra Land as they do in the districts of Western Australia. And consequently the question was replied to in the negative.

In the second place they discussed the direction it was advisable to take at the outset of the campaign; this was evidently that which Harry Felton had had to follow during his crossing of central Australia. Though this direction was not known exactly, it was at least indicated by the point where the mate of the Franklin had been discovered, that is to say, on the banks of the Parru at the boundary between Queensland and New South Wales, and in the north-west of the latter province.

Since 1770 — the period at which Captain Cook explored- New South Wales and took possession, in the name of the King of England, of the continent already discovered by the Portuguese Manuel Godenbho and the Dutchmen Verschoor, Hartog, Carpenter and Tasman — its eastern part has been largely colonized, developed, civilized. It was in 1787 that, when Pitt was prime minister, Commodore Phillip founded the convict settlement of Botany Bay, from which in less than a century there was to come a nation of more than three millions of people. Of all that goes to form the greatness and wealth of a country nothing is missing in that part of the continent; there are roads, canals, railways, connecting the innumerable districts of Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia; and lines of steamboats ply from port to port on the coast.

Mrs. Branican was in Sydney, and this rich and populous capital would have afforded her all the resources required for the organization of the caravan, particularly as before leaving San “Diego she: had opened an account through Mr. William Andrew with the Central Australian Bank. She could easily have obtained the men, vehicles, saddle-horses, draught horses, and pack-horses required by an Australian expedition, even for one right across from east to west, a journey of two thousand two hundred miles. But ought Sydney to be the point of departure?

All things considered, and chiefly at the advice of the American consul, who was well up to date in Australian geography, Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, appeared more suitable as the base of operations. Following the telegraph line, which extends from Adelaide to the gulf of Van Diemen, that is to say, from south to north, close along the hundred and thirty-ninth meridian, the engineers had laid the first part of a railway which extends beyond the latitude reached by Harry Felton. This railway would permit of the expedition penetrating further and more quickly into those regions of Alexandra Land and Western Australia which few travellers had yet reached.

And so this third expedition in search of Captain John would be organized at Adelaide and taken as far as the railway ran, about four hundred miles to the northward.

And now in what way should Mrs. Branican travel from Sydney to Adelaide? If there had been a railroad without a break between the two capitals, there would have been no reason for hesitation. . A railroad does exist crossing the Murray on the Victorian frontier at Albury, and continuing by Benalla and Kilmore to Melbourne, and then on towards

Adelaide; but it stops at Horsham, and beyond that the break in the line would have caused long delays.

And so Mrs. Branican decided to go to Adelaide by sea. This was a four days' voyage, and, adding forty-eight hours for the stoppage the boats make at Melbourne, she would reach the capital of South Australia after a six days journey along the coast. It is true that it was now August, which corresponds to February in the northern hemisphere. But the weather was calm and the wind in the north-west, so that the steamer would be under the shelter of the coast as soon as she was through Bass's Straits, And besides, as she had come from San Francisco to Sydney, Mrs. Branican had nothing to be uneasy about in a trip from Sydney to Adelaide.

The steamer Brisbane started next day at eleven in the morning. After stopping at Melbourne she would reach Adelaide on the morning of the 27th of August. Two cabins were engaged, and Mrs. Branican took the necessary steps for the transfer of the credit with the Sydney bank to the bank at Adelaide. The directors obligingly consented, and the transfer was effected without difficulty.

When she left the Marine Hospital, Mrs. Branican had gone to a hotel where she had taken rooms until her departure. Her thoughts were summed up in the one thought, "John is alive!" With her eyes obstinately fixed on the map of the Australian continent, her look lost amid the immense solitudes of the centre and north-west, a prey to the delirium of her imagination, she sought him, she found him, she saved him.

After their interview that day Zach Fren, understanding she would rather be alone, had gone for a walk in the streets of Sydney, which were unknown to him, And to begin with — as was not unnatural for a sailor — he had gone to look at the Brisbane, so as to make sure Mrs. Branican would be comfortable. The ship appeared to be comfortably fitted for a coasting voyage. Then he asked to see the cabins engaged for the lady. A boy took him to the cabin, where he made several changes with a view to make it more comfortable. Excellent Zach Fren! One would imagine he was preparing it for a long voyage!

As he was about to leave, the boy kept him back, and in rather an agitated voice asked, —

“Then it is quite certain that Mrs. Branican will go tomorrow to Adelaide?”

“Yes, to-morrow!” replied Zach Fren.

“On the Brisbane?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“I hope she may succeed in her endeavour and find Captain John!”

“We will do our best, you may be sure.”

“I do not doubt it.”

“Are you one of the Brisbane’s crew?”

“Yes!”

“Well, then, good-bye until to-morrow.”

During the last few hours he spent in Sydney Zach Fren went for a stroll along Pitt Street and York Street, which are bordered by fine buildings in reddish grey stone, and then he went into Victoria Park and Hyde Park, where stands the Cook monument. He visited the Botanic Gardens, a lovely promenade situated by the side of the sea, where are gathered together the different trees of warm and temperate climes, oaks and araucarias, cactuses and mangosteens, palms and olives. In short, Sydney is well worthy of its reputation. It is the oldest of the Australian capitals, and if it is less regularly built than its juniors of Adelaide and Melbourne, it is richer in unexpected beauties and picturesque sites.

Next evening Mrs. Branican and Zach Fren went on board the steamboat. At eleven o’clock the Brisbane left the wharf and crossed the bay of Port Jackson. After doubling the Inner South Head she turned off to the south and kept along a few miles from the coast. During the first hour Dolly remained on deck, seated aft, looking at the shore, which appeared as confused masses through the mist. This was the continent into which she was about to penetrate, as if into an immense prison from which John had not yet emerged. For fourteen years they had been separated from each other.

“Fourteen years!” she murmured.

When the Brisbane had passed Botany Bay and Jervis Bay Mrs. Branican went below to rest. But next morning she was on deck with the dawn, just as Mount Dromedary, and a little behind it Mount Kosciusko, which belong to the system of the Australian Alps, appeared on the horizon.

Zach Fren had joined Dolly on the spar deck, and together they talked of the one thing in which they were both interested.

At this moment a sailor boy, hesitating and trembling, approached Mrs. Branican and asked her, on the captain’s behalf, if there was anything she required.

“No, my child!” said Dolly.

“Ah!” said Zach Fren, “it is the brave lad I saw yesterday when I came on board the Brisbane.”

“Yes,” said the boy.

“And what is your name?”

“Godfrey.”

“Well, Godfrey, you see for certain that Mrs. Branican is on board your-steamboat and you are satisfied, I imagine?”

“Yes, and we are all on board. Yes! We all hope that Mrs. Branican’s attempt will succeed, and that she will” rescue Captain John.”

And as he spoke Godfrey looked at her with so much respect and enthusiasm that Dolly was greatly agitated. And then the boy’s voice struck her. That voice she had already heard, and the remembrance of it returned to her.

“My child,” said she, “did you not speak to me at the door of the hospital in Sydney?”

“I did.”

“You asked me if Captain John was still alive?”

“I did!”

“You belong to the Brisbane?”

“ Yes — for the last year,” said Godfrey. “But if it please God, I shall soon leave her.”

Then, probably not wishing or daring to say more, Godfrey retired to take Mrs. Branican’s message to the captain.

“That is a boy who has the blood of a sailor in his veins!” said Zach Fren. “You have only to look at him to see that. He has a frank, clear, decided look. His voice is at the same time firm and gentle — ”

“His voice!” murmured Dolly.

And by what illusion of the senses did she fancy she had just heard John speaking in the gentler tones of a voice not yet quite set by age!

And another remark she made — a remark still more significant. Probably she was mistaken, but the boy’s features reminded her of John — of John, who was no more than thirty when the Franklin had taken him away from her for so long.

“You see, Mrs. Branican,” said Zach Fren, rubbing his fine large hands, “English or Americans, every one sympathizes with you! In Australia you find the same attentions as in America! It will be in Adelaide as in San Diego! All wish you the same as this young Englishman.”

“Is he an Englishman?” asked Mrs. Branican, deeply impressed.

The voyage was very enjoyable during this first day. The sea was remarkably smooth, with the wind in the north-west blowing off the land. The Brisbane found it no rougher when she doubled Cape Howe at the angle of the Australian continent on her way to Bass’s Straits.

Dolly spent the day almost entirely on the spar deck. The passengers showed her extreme deference, and also extreme eagerness to keep her company. They were anxious to see this woman whose misfortunes were so widely known, and who did not hesitate to brave so many perils and face so many fatigues in the hope of rescuing her husband, if Providence willed he still was living. In her presence no one dared to express a doubt on the subject. How could they do otherwise than share her confidence when they heard her inspired by such manly resolution and telling them all she was about to undertake? Unconsciously they followed her in imagination into the depths of Central Australia. And, in fact, more than one of them would have agreed to follow her otherwise than in thought.

But, as she replied to them, Dolly often interrupted herself, and her look assumed a singular expression, her eyes grew brighter, and Zach Fren was the only one who knew what was passing in her mind.

This happened whenever she saw Godfrey. The boy’s bearing, his attitude, his gestures, the persistence with which he devoured her with his eyes, that sort of instinct which seemed to draw her towards him — all this took possession of her, agitated her, and so moved her that John and Godfrey became somehow mixed up together in her mind.

Dolly could not hide from Zach Fren that she noticed a striking resemblance between John and Godfrey. And Zach Fren did not see without anxiety Mrs. Branican abandon herself to an impression due to a purely fortuitous circumstance. He feared, not without reason, that this companion might recall too vividly the remembrance of the child she had lost. It was truly regrettable that Dolly should become so excited in the presence of this boy 1

However, Godfrey had not come to her again. His duty did not call him to the after part of the steamer, which was exclusively reserved for first-class passengers. But from afar their looks often crossed, and Dolly had been on the point of calling him to her — yes! and at a sign Godfrey would have run to her. But Dolly did not make this sign, and Godfrey did not come.

That evening, as Zach Fren was escorting her to her cabin, she said, —

"Zach, I must find out who this boy is — to what family he belongs — the place of his birth. He may perhaps not be an Englishman."

"That is possible," said Zach Fren. "He may even be an American. And if you wish it I will go and ask the captain of the Brisbane — "

"No, Zach, no, I will ask Godfrey himself," said Mrs. Branican.

And Zach heard her say to herself in an undertone, —

"My child, my poor little Wat, would have been about his age now.""That is what I feared!" said Zach Fren to himself, as he went to his cabin.

"The next day, the 22nd of August, the Brisbane, which had passed Cape Howe during the night, continued the voyage under excellent conditions. The coast of Gipps Land, one of the chief provinces of the colony of Victoria, after curving to the south-east is terminated by Cape Wilson, the most southerly promontory of the continent. This coast is less rich in bays, ports, inlets, capes, geographically named, than the straighter section between Sydney and Cape Howe; and along it the plains stretch back out of sight to the line of mountains, which are too distant to be seen from the sea.

Mrs. Branican, having left her cabin in the- first rays of the morning, had resumed her place on the after part of the spar deck. Zach Fren had joined her almost immediately afterwards and noticed a very obvious change in her manner. The land, which extended towards the north-west, no longer attracted her attention. Absorbed in her thoughts, she hardly replied to Zach Fren when he asked her how she had passed the night.

Zach Fren said no more. The essential point was that Dolly had forgotten the singular resemblance between Godfrey and Captain John, and no longer thought of seeing him and questioning him. It was possible that she had changed her mind, and, in fact, she did not ask Zach Fren to bring her the boy, whose duty kept him in the steamer’s bow.

After breakfast Mrs. Branican returned to her cabin, and did not appear on deck again until three or four o’clock in the afternoon.

At this time the Brisbane was running at full speed into Bass’s Straits, which separate Australia from Tasmania, or Van Diemen’s Land.

Nothing can be more indisputable than that the discovery of the Dutchman, Janssen Tasman, has been profitable to the English, and that this island, a natural dependency of the continent, has been a gain to the Anglo-Saxon race. Since 1642, the date of the discovery of the island, which is two hundred and eighty kilometres long, the soil of which is extremely fertile, the forests of which are enriched by superb trees, it is certain that colonization has advanced with rapid strides. From the earlier years of this century the English have ruled it, as they rule, obstinately, without the slightest thought for the native races. They have divided the island into districts, they have founded important towns, the capital Hobart, Georgetown, and many others; they have utilized the innumerable indentations of the cost for the .establishment of ports, at which their ships call in hundreds. All that is good. But of the black population which originally occupied this country, what remains? Doubtless these poor people were hardly civilized; they were even looked upon as the stupidest specimens of the human race; they were placed below the African negroes, below the Fuegians of Tierra del Fuego. If the annihilation of a race is the last word of colonial progress, the English colonists may boast of having brought their work to a good end. But, at the approaching universal exhibition at Hobart, if they wish to exhibit a few Tasmanians — there is not one left at this end of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER II.

GODFREY.

The Brisbane passed through Bass's Straits during the evening. In this latitude the day closes in about five o'clock during the month of August. The moon entering her first quarter soon disappeared amid the mists of the horizon, and the coast scenery was veiled in deep obscurity.

That the steamer was passing through the straits was only apparent on board by the splashing of the short, choppy waves; currents and counter-currents striving impetuously with each other in this narrow channel, which is open to the waters of the Pacific.

Next morning, that of the 23rd of August, the Brisbane at dawn was off Port Phillip bay. Once in this bay shipping have no fear of bad weather, but the entrance requires careful and skilful manoeuvring, especially in rounding the long sandy point of Nepean on the one side, and that of Queenscliff on the other. The bay, which is well shut in, is cut up into several harbours, where ships of large tonnage find excellent anchorage — Geelong, Sandridge, Williamstown — the last two forming the port of Melbourne. The aspect of the coast is gloomy, monotonous, unattractive. There is little vegetation on the banks, and the shore looks like a newly dried-up marsh, which, in place of lagoons or ponds, has patches of hard, cracked mud. To the future the task is left of improving the surface of these plains, by replacing the few skeletons of trees by plantations, which the Australian climate will soon develop into superb forests.

The Brisbane ran alongside one of the Williamstown quays to disembark some of her passengers.

As she was going to stop there thirty-six hours, Mrs. Branican decided to spend the time in Melbourne. Not that she had business in the town, for it was at Adelaide only that she would be occupied in the preparations for an expedition which might perhaps reach the farthest limits of Western Australia; and having made up her mind to this, why did she leave the Brisbane? Was she afraid of being the object of too many and too frequent visits? But to escape these would it not have been enough for her to remain .in her cabin? Besides, to go down to one of the town hotels, where her presence would be immediately known, was not that to expose herself to the most persistent interviews, the most inevitable importunities?

Zach Fren could not understand Mrs. Branican's resolution. He saw that her manner was very different to what it had been at Sydney. There she had been most affable, now she. was much less communicative. Was it, as the boatswain thought, that the presence of Godfrey had too vividly reminded her of her child? Yes, and Zach Fren was not mistaken. The sight of the boy had troubled her so deeply that she felt the need of being alone. Did it not enter more into her thoughts to question him? Perhaps; although she had not done so the night before, notwithstanding she had expressed a-wish to do so. But now, if she wished to land at Melbourne, to spend the day there, it was not to avoid the inconveniences of a notoriety unhappily too real, but to escape — there is no other word for it — to escape from this fourteen-year-old boy to whom she was attracted by some instinctive force. Why, then, did she hesitate to speak to him, to ask what interested her concerning his nationality, his birth, his family? Did she fear that his replies — as was only too likely — would result in definitely destroying her imprudent illusions, a chimerical hope, to which she had abandoned herself in imagination, and which her agitation had revealed to Zach Fren?

Mrs. Branican, accompanied by the boatswain, landed during the first hour. As soon as she had set foot on the landing-stage she turned to come back.

Godfrey was leaning on the rail of the Brisbanes bow. Seeing her going away his face became so sad, he made such an expressive gesture, he seemed to wish her so imperiously to return on board, that Dolly was on the point of returning to Say to him, “No! I will not go!” But she controlled herself, made a sign to Zach Fren to follow her, and went off to the railway station, which puts the harbour in communication with the town.

Melbourne, in fact, is situated away from the sea shore, on the left bank of the river Yarra-Yarra, at a distance of two kilometres — a distance accomplished by the trains in a quarter of an hour. There stands this city, with its population of three hundred thousand inhabitants, the capital of the magnificent colony of Victoria, which holds nearly a million, and on which, since 1851, it may be said that Mount Alexander has poured all the gold from its beds.

Mrs. Branican, although she went to one of the least frequented hotels of the town, could not escape the curiosity — entirely sympathetic — which her presence everywhere aroused. And so she preferred to be in the company of Zach Fren to walk about the streets of the town, of which, owing to her strange pre-occupation, she saw nothing.

An American could not help being astonished or pleased in visiting an absolutely modern city. Although younger by a dozen years than San Francisco in California, Melbourne is like it, “only more so,” as has been said. Wide streets crossing at right angles, squares without lawns or trees, banks in hundreds, offices where enormous business is done, a district in which the retail trade is concentrated, public buildings, churches, temples, university, museum, art gallery, library, hospital, town hall, schools which are palaces, palaces which, in some cases, would not be large enough for schools, a monument to Burke and Wills, who died in endeavouring to cross the continent from south to north; then along the roads and boulevards beyond the business quarter, a few passers-by, a certain number of strangers, chiefly Jews and Germans, who sell money as others self cattle or linen, and at a good price — to the joy of the heart of Israel.

But in business Melbourne, business men live as little as possible. It is in the suburbs, in the environs of the town, that the villas and cottages, and even princely dwellings, swarm, at St. Kilda, at Hoam, at Emerald Hill, at Brighton — and it is this, says M. D. Charnay, one of the most intelligent travellers who have visited the country, which gives Melbourne the advantage over San Francisco. And already the trees of different kinds have grown large; sumptuous parks are covered with shade; and the running streams assure a healthy freshness for many months, so that there are few towns placed amid a more admirable frame of verdure.

Mrs. Branican gave but little attention to these magnificences, even when Zach Fren took her out of the town into the open country. Nothing indicated that this grand situation, with its distant views, had interested her. It seemed always as though she was possessed by some fixed idea, and was on the point of asking Zach Fren something she dared not put into words.

They returned to the hotel in the evening. Dolly had her dinner served in her room, and hardly touched it. Then she lay down, and slept but a half sleep, haunted by the images of her husband and her child. In the morning she remained in her apartment until the moment of departure. She wrote along letter to Mr. William Andrew, acquainting him with the departure from Sydney, a\id her approaching arrival in the capital of South Australia. She told him again of her hopes relative to the result of the expedition. And when he received this letter, to his great surprise and also anxiety, he would notice that, if Dolly spoke of John as if she were sure to find him alive, she also spoke of little Wat as if he were not dead. The excellent man would certainly ask himself if he had not again cause to fear for the sanity of this much-tried woman.

The passengers the Brisbane was to take to Adelaide had nearly all embarked when Mrs. Branican and Zach Fren returned on board. Godfrey was waiting for her return, and when he saw her coming his face lighted up with a smile. He rushed to the landing-stage, and was there when she set foot on the gangway.

Zach Fren was much annoyed, and his thick eyebrows were knitted in a frown. What would he not have given if the boy had left the steamer, or at least that he had not again met Dolly, in whom his presence revived the saddest of memories.

Mrs. Branican noticed Godfrey. She stopped for an instant and looked at him keenly; but she did not speak, and bowing her head, she went to shut herself up in her cabin.

At three o’clock in the afternoon the Brisbane cast off her warps, and started out to sea, rounding Queenscliff and steering for Adelaide, keeping out about three miles from the coast of Victoria.

The passengers who had come on board at Melbourne numbered about a hundred. For the most part they were inhabitants of South Australia returning home. There were a few strangers among them — one of them a Chinaman, aged from thirty to thirty-five, looking as sleepy as a mole, yellow as a lemon, round as a post, and as fat as a mandarin of three buttons. But he was not a mandarin. No! he was merely a servant in the employ of a personage who deserves to be described somewhat precisely.

Imagine a son of Albion, as “Britannic” as one can be, tall, thin, bony, a regular piece of osteology, all neck, all bust, all legs. This typical Anglo-Saxon, of from forty- five to fifty years of age, stood about six feet above seq-

level. A fair beard, which he wore uncut, and also fair hair, in which were a few streaks of yellowish gold; little ferret eyes, a nose pinched in at the nostrils, curved like the beak of a pelican or a heron, and of a length uncommon; a head on which the slightest observer of phrenology would easily have discovered the bumps of monomania and tenacity — made up altogether one of those heads which attract attention and provoke a smile when they are drawn by a clever artist.

This Englishman was clothed- in the traditional costume — a cap with a double peak, a waistcoat buttoned to the chin, a coat with twenty pockets, trousers of chequered cloth, high gaiters with nickel buttons, nailed shoes, and a check overcoat, which the wind wrapped round his body, revealing the thinness as of a skeleton.

Who was this original? No one knew, and on the Australian steamboats no one takes advantage of the familiarities of the voyage to ask who people are or whence they come. They are passengers, and as such they pass. No more. But the stewards could have told us that the Englishman had taken his cabin under the name of Joshua Meritt — shortly, Jos Meritt — of Liverpool (United Kingdom), accompanied by his servant Gin-Ghi, of Hong Kong (Celestial Empire).

For the rest, once he was on board, Jos Meritt went and sat down on one of the benches of the promenade deck, and did not leave it until lunch time.

He returned in about half an hour, left again at seven for dinner, reappeared at eight, looking all the time like a lay figure, with his two hands open on his knees, turning his head neither to the right nor the left, with his eyes looking straight in front, their gaze lost in the mists of the evening. Then at ten o’clock he regained his cabin at a geometrical pace, which the irregularities of the vessel’s roll were unable to trouble.

During a part of the night Mrs. Branican, who had gone on deck about nine o’clock, remained in the after part of the Brisbane, although the temperature was rather low.

With her mind possessed, envisioned even (to employ the more exact expression), she could not sleep. Confined in her cabin she had need of a breath of fresh air, impregnated now and then by the penetrating odours of the Acacia flagrant, which distinguishes the Australian coast fifty miles out at sea. Was she thinking of meeting the sailor boy, speaking to him, questioning him, ascertaining from him — what? Godfrey having finished his watch at ten o’clock, would not come on duty again till two o’clock in the morning; and Dolly, much fatigued by a certain shock to her mind, regained her cabin.

In the middle of the night the Brisbane doubled Cape Otway at the extremity of the district of Polwarth. From this point she had to head N.W. to Discovery Bay, at the end of the conventional line traced on the hundred and forty-first meridian — the line which separates the colonies of Victoria and New South Wales from South Australia.

In the morning Jos Meritt was again to be seen on the bench on the spar deck, his customary place, in the same attitude, and just as if he had not left it the previous evening. As to Gin-Ghi he was sleeping in some corner.

Zach Fren was accustomed to the peculiarities Of his compatriots, for there is no lack of originals in the forty- two federated states included’ under the formula U.S.A. However, he could not regard without a certain astonishment this successful type of human mechanism.

And what was his surprise when, approaching this long and motionless gentleman, he heard himself spoken to in rather a shrill voice.

“Boatswain Zach Fren, I believe?”

“The same,” said Zach Fren.

“The companion of Mrs. Branican?”

“In person. I see you know — ”

“I know — in search of her husband — lost for fourteen years. Good! Oh, very good!”

“What is very good?”

“Yes! Mrs. Branican! Very good! I also — I am on a search — ”

“Your wife?”

“Oh! I am not married! Very good! If I had lost my wife I should not seek her!”

“Then it is for — ”

“For finding — a hat.”

“Your hat? You have lost your hat?”

“My hat? No! It is the hat I mean. Present my respects to Mrs. Branican. Good! Oh, very good!”

The lips of Jos Meritt closed and did not utter another syllable.

“He must be a lunatic,” said Zach Fren to himself.

And it seemed to him to be loss of time talking to this gentleman.

When Dolly came on deck, the boatswain went to meet her, and they sat down almost in front of the Englishman, who moved no more than if he had been the god Terminus. Having asked Zach Freu to present his respects to Mrs. Branican, he apparently thought there was no necessity for his presenting them in person.

And besides, Dolly had not-remarked the presence of this curious passenger. She spoke for some time with her companion regarding the preparations for the journey, which were to be commenced as soon as they reached Adelaide.. Not a day, not an hour, was to be lost. It was important that the expedition should reach, and pass if possible, the central regions before they were parched by the intolerable heats of the torrid zone.

Among the dangers of different kinds, inherent to a search undertaken under such conditions, the most terrible would be probably due to the rigour of the climate, and. all precautions, should be taken to guard against it. . Dolly spoke much of Captain John, his robust temperament, his indomitable energy, which had permitted him — she did not doubt — to survive when others less vigorous, and not so hardy, had succumbed. But she made no allusion to Godfrey, and Zach Fren- was hoping she was no longer thinking of the boy, when she suddenly said, “I have not yet seen that boy to-day? Have you seen him, Zach?”

“No, madam,” said the boatswain, whom the question evidently displeased.

“Perhaps I might do something for that child,” continued Dolly.

And she affected to speak of him in a tone of indifference, which Zach Fren was not deceived by.

“This boy?” said he. “Oh! He has a good trade. He will get on. I see him a quartermaster in a few years. With zeal and good conduct — ”

“That does not matter,” said Dolly. “He interests me in one way. Look, Zach, at the extraordinary resemblance between him and my poor John. And then, Wat — my child — ought to be about his age.”

And as she said this she became quite pale; and the look she gave Zach Fren was so questioning that he lowered his eyes. Then she added, —

“You will send him to me this afternoon, Zach. Do not forget. I wish to speak with him. This voyage will end to-morrow. We may never see each other again, and before I leave the Brisbane I wish to know — yes, to know — ”

Zach Fren promised to bring Godfrey to her, and she retired.

The boatswain, in a state of great anxiety and even alarm, continued to pace the spar deck, until the steward rang the second breakfast bell. Zach then happened to run against the Englishman, who seemed to regulate his steps by the stroke of the bell, as he made towards the companion.

“Good! Oh, very good!” said Jos Meritt. “You have at my request conveyed my respects? Her lost husband — Good! Oh, very good!”

And he disappeared to reach the place he had taken at the dining-room table, the best be it understood, and the one nearest the kitchen, so that he could be served the first, and have the best choice.

At three o’clock the Brisbane was off Portland, the chief port of the Normanby district, where the Melbourne railway ends; then, rounding Cape Nelson, she crossed Discovery Bay, and steered almost due north along the coast of South Australia.

It was at this time that Zach Fren went to tell Godfrey Mrs. Branican desired to speak to him.

“Speak to me?” exclaimed the boy. And his heart - beat so furiously that he would have fallen had he not caught hold of the rail.

Godfrey followed the boatswain to the cabin where Mrs. Branican was waiting for him.

Dolly looked at him for some time as he stood upright with his cap in his hand. She was seated on a couch. Zach Fren, leaning near the door, watched both of them anxiously. He knew what Dolly was going to ask Godfrey, but he did not know what would be his replies.

“My child,” said Mrs. Branican, “I want to know something about you, about the family to which you belong. If I ask, it is because I am interested in you — in your position. Will you answer my questions?”

“Willingly,” said Godfrey, his voice trembling with emotion.

"How old are you?" asked Dolly.

"I do not know exactly, but I ought to be from fourteen to fifteen."

"Yes! - From fourteen to fifteen! And since when have you been at sea?"

"I went to sea when I was eight years old as a cabin boy; and for two years I have been an apprentice."

"Have you been any long voyage?"

"Yes, madam, across the Pacific to Asia — and across the Atlantic to Europe."

"You are not an Englishman?"

"No, madam, I am an American."

"But yet you are on an English steamer?"

"The ship on which I was apprentice was sold at Sydney. Finding myself without a ship, I came on the Brisbane, awaiting an opportunity to again get on an American ship."

"Good, my child," said Dolly, beckoning Godfrey to come nearer to her.

"And now," she asked, "I want to know where you were born?"

"At San Diego, madam."

"Yes! at San Diego!" repeated Dolly, without appearing surprised, as if she had expected the answer.

Zach Fren was much impressed with what he had just heard.

“Yes, madam, at San Diego,” continued Godfrey. “Oh! I know you well! Yes, I know you. When I learnt you had come to Sydney I was very pleased. If you knew, madam, how much I am interested in all that concerns Captain John Branican —

Dolly took the boy’s hand and held it for a few seconds without saying a word. Then in a voice which betrayed the wandering of her imagination, —

“Your name?” she asked.

“Godfrey.”

“Godfrey is your baptismal name. But what is your family name?”

“I have no other name, madam.”

“Your parents? “-

“I have no parents.”

“No parents!” said Mrs. Branican. “Have you then been brought up — ”

.”At Wat House,” replied Godfrey. “Yes! madam, and by your care. Oh! I have often seen you when you came to visit the children. You did not see me among all the little ones, but I saw you, and I wished J could kiss you. Then, as I had a taste for the sea, when I was old enough I became a cabin boy. And others of the Wat House orphans have gone on ships, and we will never forget what we owe to Mrs. Branican — to our mother!”

“Your mother!” exclaimed Dolly, who started as if the name had resounded deep within her.

She drew Godfrey to her — she covered him with kisses — he kissed her again — he wept.

And in his corner Zach Fren, frightened at what he understood of the feelings he saw taking root in Dolly's heart, murmured, —

Poor woman! Poor woman! Where will she let herself be led?"

Mrs. Branican rose and said, —

"Go, Godfrey 1 Go, my child! I will sec you again! I want to be alone!"

The boy looked at her for a last time and slowly withdrew.

Zach Fren was preparing to follow him, when Dolly stopped him by a gesture — " Remain, Zach!" Then, "Zach," said she, in a short, spasmodic way, which denoted the extraordinary agitation of her mind, "Zach, that child has been brought up with the children at Wat House. He was born at San Diego. He is from fourteen to fifteen years old. He resembles John feature for feature. He has his frank face, his resolute attitude. He has a taste for the sea like him. He is the son of a sailor. He is John's son. He is mine! We believed that the bay of San Diego never gave back the poor little creature. But he still lived; and he was rescued. Those who saved him did not know his mother. And his mother was I — I — then deprived of my reason. This child is not Godfrey, as he says, but Wat, my son! God has given him back to me before giving me back his father."

Zach Fren had listened to Mrs. Branican without daring to interrupt her. He understood that the unhappy woman could not speak differently. All the appearances compelled her to do so. She reasoned with the irrefutable logic of a mother. And the brave sailor felt his heart breaking, for these illusions it was his duty to destroy.

He must stop Dolly on this incline, which might lead her into a new abyss.

He did it without hesitating — almost brutally.

“Mrs. Branican,” he said, “you are mistaken. I will not, I ought not to let you believe such things. The resemblance is but a chance. Your little Wat is dead. Yes, dead! He perished in the accident, and Godfrey is not your son.”

“Wat is dead?” exclaimed Mrs. Branican. “And how do you know that? Who can prove it?”

“I can, madam!”

“You?”

“A week after the accident in the bay, the body of a child was thrown on the beach at Loma Point. I found it there. . I told Mr. William Andrew. Little Wat was recognized by him, and buried in the cemetery at San Diego, where we have often placed flowers on his grave.”

“Wat! My little Wat — there — in the cemetery! And they never told me of it!” murmured Mrs. Branican.

“No, madam, no!” replied Zach Fren. “You were then out of your mind, and when you recovered your reason, four years afterwards, we feared — Mr. William Andrew feared — to renew your sorrows, and he was silent. But your child is dead, and Godfrey cannot be — he is not your son!”

Dolly fell back on the sofa. Her eyes were shut as if shadow had suddenly succeeded intense light.

At a sign she made, Zach Fren left her alone deep in her sorrows and remembrances.

On the morning of the next day, the 26th of August, Mrs. Branican had not yet quitted her cabin when the Brisbane, after running through Backstairs Passage, between Kangaroo Island and Jervis promontory, entered the Gulf of St. Vincent and cast anchor in Adelaide harbour.

CHAPTER III.

A HISTORIC HAT.

Of the three capitals of Australia, Sydney is the eldest, Melbourne the junior, and Adelaide the youngest. But if the last is the youngest, it can also be said to be the most beautiful. It was born in 1853, of a mother — South Australia — which had no political existence before 1837, and the officially recognized independence of which only dates from 1856. It is even probable that the youth of Adelaide will be indefinitely prolonged under an unrivalled climate, the healthiest on the continent, amidst a region which knows neither consumption nor endemic fevers, nor any kind of contagious epidemic. People die there occasionally, however; but, as has been wittily observed by M. D. Charnay, “that is the exception.”

If the soil of South Australia differs from that of the neighbouring province in that it docs not contain auriferous deposits, it is rich in copper ore. The mines of Kapunda, Burra-Burra, Wallaroo and Moonta, discovered forty years ago, after attracting emigrants in thousands have made the fortune of the colony.

Adelaide does not stand on the shore of St. Vincent Gulf. Like Melbourne, it is situated a dozen kilometres inland, and a railway puts it in communication with the harbour. Its botanic garden rivals that of its second sister. Created by Schomburg, it possesses greenhouses which have no equal in the whole world, parterres of roses which are veritable parks, magnificent shades under the shelter of the most beautiful trees of the temperate and semi-tropical zones.

Neither Sydney nor Melbourne can enter into comparison with Adelaide for elegance. Its streets are wide, agreeably distributed, carefully kept. Some possess veritable monuments along their borders, such as King William Street. The post-office and the town-hall are worthy of notice from an architectural point of view. In the business quarter, Hindley and Glenell Streets are noisily animated with the throng of busy traders. And thereabouts gather a number of business men who seem to show only that satisfaction derived from business wisely conducted, abundant, and easy without any of the cares it usually brings.

Mrs. Branican went to a hotel in King William Street, whither Zach Fren accompanied her. The mother, in her had just been cruelly tried by the annihilation of her last illusions. It seemed to be so likely that Godfrey was her son that she had naturally abandoned herself to the idea. The deception could still be read on her face, paler than usual, in her eyes, red with weeping. But, from the moment her hope had been so completely broken, she had not endeavoured to see the boy again, and had said no more about him to Zach Fren. There only remained the remembrance of the surprising resemblance to John.

And now Dolly was to set to work to begin without delay her preparations for her expedition. She was to appeal to all for help and devotedness. She would spend, if need be, her whole future in these new searches, in stimulating by considerable rewards the zeal of those who would unite their efforts to hers in a supreme attempt.

There was no lack of zeal in her cause. This colony of South Australia is essentially the country of bold explorers. Thence the most celebrated pioneers have started across the unknown territories of the interior. From there went Warburton, John Forrest, Giles, Sturt, whose routes intercross on the maps of this vast continent — routes which Mrs. Branican would cut obliquely with her own. It was thus that Colonel Warburton, in 1874, traversed Australia in its entire width from east to north-west at Nicholson Bay — that John Forrest, the same year, crossed it in an opposite direction, from Perth to Port Augusta — that Giles, in 1876, set out from Perth to Spencer Gulf, on the 25th degree of south latitude.

It had been agreed that the different elements of the expedition should be mustered, not at Adelaide, but at the terminus of the railway which runs northward, up to the latitude of Lake Eyre. Five degrees crossed in this way would be a gain of time and a saving of fatigue. Amid the districts furrowed by the orographic system of the Flinders Ranges, they could muster the number of vehicles and animals necessary for this campaign, the horses of the escort, the cattle for the transport of the victuals and camp effects. On these interminable deserts, these immense steppes of sand, deprived of vegetation, almost without water, provision had to be made for the wants of a caravan, which would comprise forty persons, counting the servants and the little escort for assuring safety to the travellers.

Her preparations Dolly made in Adelaide. She found a constant and firm friend in the governor of South Australia, who put himself entirely at her disposal. Thanks to him, thirty men well mounted, well armed, some of them natives, some chosen among the European colonists; accepted service under Mrs. Branican. She guaranteed them, very high pay for the whole campaign, and a bonus of-a hundred pounds apiece when it was over, no matter what the result might be. They were commanded by an old officer of the colonial police — Tom Marix, a robust and resolute fellow, aged about forty, whom the governor unhesitatingly recommended. Tom Marix had chosen his men with care, from among the strongest and most trustworthy of those who volunteered in great numbers. There was every reason, therefore, to trust to the devotedness of this escort, which was recruited under the best conditions.

The working staff of the expedition would be eventually under the orders of Zach Fren, and it would not be his fault if “men and beasts did not march squarely and roundly,” as he said.

Above Tom Marix and Zach Fren, the true chief was Mrs. Branican, the soul of the expedition.

By means of the correspondents of Mr. William Andrew, a considerable credit had been opened for Mrs. Branican, at the Bank of Adelaide, and she could draw on it as she pleased.

The preparations being completed, it was agreed that Zach Fren should set out on the 30th at latest, for the station at Farina Town, where Mrs. Branican would rejoin him with the staff when her presence was no longer necessary at Adelaide.

“Zach,” said she, “you will see that our caravan is ready to start at the end of the first week in September. Pay for everything, no matter at what cost. The provisions you can send on from here by railway, and we can put them on the drays at Farina Town. We must neglect nothing to ensure the success of our campaign.”

“All shall be ready Mrs. Branican,” said the boatswain. “When you arrive, all you will have to do will be to give the signal of departure.”

One can easily imagine that Zach Fren did not fail in his task during the last few days he passed at Adelaide. In sailor style he worked away with such activity that on the 29th he’ could take his ticket for Farina Town. Twelve hours afterwards, when the railway had deposited him at this terminal station of the line, he informed Mrs. Branican, by telegram, that a part of the stores of the expedition had already been collected.

Dolly, aided by Tom Marix, took as her share of the work all that concerned the escort, its armament, and its clothing. It was important for its horses to be carefully chosen, and the Australian breed furnished excellent animals, broken to fatigue, inured to climate, and of remarkable docility. While they were crossing the forests and the plains, there was no reason to trouble about their food, grass and water being available for them. But beyond, across the sandy deserts, they would have to be replaced by camels, and this would be done as soon as they reached Alice Spring. From that point onwards, Mrs. Branican and her companions would learn to struggle against the material obstacles which render the exploration of Central Australia so formidable.

The occupations to which this energetic woman had devoted herself, had rather distracted her attention from the later incidents of the voyage on the Brisbane. She was so absorbed in this display of activity, that she had not an hour of leisure. Of that illusion to which her imagination had for an instant abandoned her, of that ephemeral hope which the intervention of Zach Fren had broken in one word, there remained only the remembrance. Now she knew that her child slept in a corner of the cemetery of San Diego, and she could go and weep over his grave. But yet that boy’s resemblance — and the images of John and Godfrey seemed to run together in her mind.

But since the arrival of the steamer, Mrs. Branican had not thought of the boy. If he had endeavoured to meet with her during the first days Which followed her landing, she knew it not. In any case it did not seem that Godfrey had presented himself at the hotel in King William Street, and why should he have done so? After her last interview with him, Dolly had shut herself up in her cabin, and had not sent for him again. Besides, Dolly knew that the Brisbane had gone back to Melbourne, and that, when she returned to Adelaide, the expedition would have started.

While Mrs. Branican was urging on her preparations, another personage was no less steadily busy in preparing for a similar journey. He had put up at a hotel in Hindley Street. An apartment in the front of the hotel, a bedroom looking on the interior court, united under one roof those singular representatives of the Aryan race and the Yellow race — the Englishman, Jos Meritt, and the Chinaman, Gin-Ghi.

Whence came these two types, one from furthest Asia, the other from furthest Europe? Where were they going? What did they do at Melbourne, and what were they going to do at Adelaide? In short, under what circumstances were this master and servant associated, to run about the world together? Let us be present at a conversation in which Jos Meritt and Gin-Ghi took part in the evening of the 5th of September, a conversation which will complete our brief explanation.

And, to begin with, if a few traits of character, a few eccentricities, the singularity of his attitudes, the way in which he expressed himself, have permitted us to glance at the profile of the Anglo-Saxon, it is as well to know also this Celestial in his service, who had retained the traditional vestments of the Chinese country, the shirt “han chaol,” the tunic “ma coual,” the gown “haol,” buttoned on the flank, and the baggy trousers with the stuff belt. If he was called Gin-Ghi, he deserved the name, which properly means “lazy man.” And he was a lazy man, to a rare degree, in work as well as in danger. He would not take ten steps to execute an order, and he would not take twenty to avoid a peril. It follows that Jos Meritt had an unusual dose of patience for him to keep such a servant. It is true it was a matter of habit, for they had travelled together for five or six years. They had met each other at San Francisco, where the Chinese swarm, and Jos Meritt had made the Chinaman his servant only “on trial,” as he said — a trial which would doubtless last until the final separation. It should be mentioned that Gin-Ghi was brought up at Hong-Kong, and spoke English like a native of Manchester.

And Jos Meritt hardly ever lost his temper, being of a phlegmatic temperament. If he threatened Gin-Ghi with the most frightful tortures in use in the Celestial Empire, where the Minister of Justice is literally called the Minister of Executions, he never gave him a slap. When his orders were not executed, he executed them himself. That simplified the situation. Perhaps the. day was not far distant when he would wait on his servant Probably the Chinaman thought so, and from his point of view that would only be equitable. It is true that while he was waiting for this agreeable reverse of fortune, Gin-Ghi was compelled to follow his master wherever his vagabond fancy might take him. On that point, Jos Meritt would stand no nonsense. He had carried on his shoulders Gin-Ghi's portmanteau rather than leave Gin-Ghi behind when the train or steamer was ready to start. Whether he liked it or not, the "lazy man "had to hurry up and be ready to sleep on the road with the most perfect laziness. In this way one had accompanied the other along thousands and thousands of miles, over the new and old continents; and it was in consequence of this system of continuous locomotion that they now found themselves in the capital of South Australia.

"Good! oh, very good!" Jos Meritt had said on this occasion. "I think our arrangements have all been made?" *

And we can hardly explain why he questioned Gin- Ghi in this way, for he had had to do everything with his own hands. But he never failed to do so, on principle.

“Ten thousand times finished,” replied the Chinaman, who had not been able to drop the roundabout expressions held in honour by the inhabitants of the Celestial Empire.

“Our portmanteaux?”

“Are strapped.” — ; “Our arms?”

“Are ready.”

“Our boxes of provisions?”

“You yourself, Master Jos, took them to the railway station. And besides, what is the use of taking food when any day we may be eaten ourselves?”

“Be eaten, Gin-Ghi? Good! oh! very good 1 You arc always thinking of being eaten!”

“That will happen sooner or later, and it would not take much for us in the next six months to end our travelling in some cannibal’s inside — me in particular!”

“You, Gin-Ghi!”

“Yes, for the excellent .reason that I am fat, while you, Master Jos, are lean; those fellows would always give me the preference.’’

“The preference? Good! oh! very good!”

“And the Australian natives have a particular liking for the yellow flesh of the Chinese, which is all the more delicate owing to their feeding on rice and vegetables.”

“That is why I have always advised you to smoke, Gin-Ghi,” quietly replied Jos Meritt. “You know that cannibals do not like the flesh of smokers.”

And this the prudent Celestial did, smoking not opium, but the tobacco with which Jos Meritt supplied him in abundance. The Australians, it seems, as well as their cannibalistic brothers of other countries, have an invincible repugnance to human flesh when it is impregnated with nicotine. That is why Gin-Ghi worked so conscientiously to make himself uneatable.

But was it true that he and his master were destined to figure at a cannibal banquet, and not in the position of guests? Yes, on certain parts of the African coast, Jos Meritt and his servant had nearly ended their adventurous existence in this fashion. Ten months before, in Queensland, west of Rockhampton and Gracemere, a few hundred miles from Brisbane, their peregrinations had taken them among the most ferocious of the native tribes. There, cannibalism is, so to speak, endemic. And so Jos Meritt and Gin-Ghi, fallen into the hands of the blacks, would certainly have perished had it not been for the intervention of the colonial police. Rescued in time, they had been able to regain the capital of Queensland, and then Sydney, whence the steamer had just brought them to Adelaide. And as that had not put a stop to this propensity of the Englishman to run the risk of being eaten together with Gin-Ghi, they were now preparing to visit the centre of the Australian continent.

“And all that for a hat!” said the Chinaman. “Ay ya! Ay ya! When I think of that, my tears fall like drops of rain on the yellow chrysanthemums.”

“When you have finished dropping, Gin-Ghi,” said Jos Meritt, frowning with his Britannic brows.

“But this hat, if you ever find it, Master Jos, will be only a rag.”

“Enough, Gin-Ghi! Too much! I forbid your talking in that way of this hat and every other hat! You understand? Good 1 oh! very good! If you begin again, I shall have to administer forty or fifty cuts with the cane on the soles of your feet.”

“We are not in China,” retorted Gin-Ghi, impudently.

“I will stop your food!”

“That will make me thin.”

“I will cut your pigtail off close to your crown.”

“Cut off my pigtail?”

“I will put you on a tobacco diet.”

“The god Fo protect me!”

“He will not protect you!”

And at this last threat Gin-Ghi became submissive and respectful.

But what was this hat they were talking about, and why did Jos Meritt spend his life running about after a hat?

This eccentric individual was, as we have said, an Englishman, of Liverpool, one of those inoffensive maniacs who do not only belong to the United Kingdom. They are met with on the banks of the Loire, the Elbe, the Danube and the Scheldt as well as in the regions watered by the Thames, the Clyde and the Tweed. Jos Meritt was very rich and well known in Lancashire and the neighbouring counties as an eccentric collector. It was not pictures, nor books, nor objects of art, nor nick-knacks, that, he collected at great effort and great cost. No! it was hats — a collection of historic head gear — men’s hats, women’s hats, four-cornered, three-cornered, two- cornered, petases, calashes, slouches, cocks, operas, helmets, floppeties, sailors, cardinals, burgundians, skulls, turbans, toques, caroches, caps, fezzes, shakoes, kepis, cidares, busbies, tiaras, mitres, tarbouches, schapskas, ottomans, mortar boards, Inca llantus, Mediaeval hermins, Sacerdotal infulas, Oriental smokers, Venetian doges, Baptismal chrisms, &c. &c. in hundreds, and more or less dilapidated, tattered, crownless and brimlcss. As may be imagined, he possessed many precious historical curiosities — the helmet of Patroclus when that hero was killed by Hector at the siege of Troy, the bonnet worn by Themis-tocles at the battle of Salamis, the caps of Galen and Hippocrates, the hat which the wind blew off Caesars head as he crossed the Rubicon, the head-gear of Lucrezia Borgia at each of her three marriages with Sforza Alphonso d’Este and Alfonso of Aragon, the hat of Tamerlane when he crossed the Sind, that of Genghis Khan, when he destroyed Bokhara and Samarcand, the cap of Elizabeth at her coronation, that of Marie Stuart when she escaped from Loch Leven, that of Catherine, when she was anointed at Moscow, the suroct of Peter the Great, when he worked in the shipyard at Saardam”, the cocked hat worn by Marlborough at the battle of Ramillies, that of Olaus, King of Denmark, who was killed at Sticklestad, Gessler’s cap to which William Tell refused to bow, the toque of William Pitt, when he entered the twenty-third year of his ministry, the cocked hat of Napoleon the First at the battle of Wagram, and a hundred others not less authentic. His greatest grief was at not having discovered the cap worn by Noah on the day the ark grounded on the summit of Mount Ararat, and the bonnet worn by Abraham, when the patriarch was about to sacrifice his son Isaac. But Jos Meritt did not despair of finding them some day. As to the headgear worn by Adam and Eve, when they were driven out of Eden, he had given up seeking for them, as historians worthy of credit had proved that the first man and woman went about bare-headed.

It will be seen from this brief description of the curiosities in Jos Meritt’s museum in what utterly childish occupations he spent his life.. In no way doubting of the authenticity of his finds, he had travelled in every country, visited the towns and villages, ransacked every store and shop, interviewed the marine-store dealers and rag-men, and spent both time and money. The whole world he requisitioned to put his hand on some undiscoverable object, and after exhausting the stocks of Europe, Africa, Asia, America, and Oceania by himself, his correspondents, his agents, his commercial travellers, he had arrived here to explore the most inaccessible retreats of the Australian continent.

He had a reason for that — a reason which others might have considered insufficient, but which appeared serious enough for him. Having been informed that the nomads of Australia wore hats — in what a state of dilapidation we may imagine — ’knowing from another source that cargoes of this old rubbish were regularly exported to the coast- towns, he had concluded that he might perhaps get “a good thing or two,” in the language of antiquarian collectors. He was in fact a prey to a fixed idea, tormented by the desire which possessed him, which threatened to drive him quite mad, for he was half mad already. This time he was after a hat which he believed would be the gem of his collection.

What was this marvel? By what ancient or modern maker had this hat been turned out? On what head of royalty, nobility, bourgeoisie, or commonalty had it been placed and under what circumstances? Whatever it was, owing to valuable information, and by following the trail with the ardour of a

Chingachgook or a Renard Subtil, he had arrived at the conviction that the said hat, after a long series of vicissitudes, ought to be ending its career on the cranium of some notable of an Australian tribe in doubly justifying his title of “cover chief.” If he succeeded in discovering it, Jos Meritt would pay whatever was asked for it, or he would steal it if he could not purchase it. It would be the trophy of the campaign which would take him to the north-east of the continent; and not having succeeded in his first attempt, he was prepared to brave the very real dangers of an expedition into Central Australia. That is why Gin-Ghi was again about to risk finishing his life in the jaws of cannibals — and what cannibals! The most ferocious of those whose teeth he had hitherto braved! But it is as well to note that the servant was so attached to his master — the attachment of two mandarin ducks — as much by interest as affection, that he would not leave him.

“To-morrow morning we leave Adelaide by the express,” said Jos Meritt.

“At the second watch?” replied Gin-Ghi.

“At the second watch, if you like; and see that everything is ready for our departure.”

“I will do my best, Master Jos; but I beg you to observe that I have not ten thousand hands like the goddess Kwanin!”

“I do not know if the goddess Kwan-in has ten thousand hands,” replied Jos Meritt; “but I know that you have two, and I desire you to use them in my service.”

“Until I am eaten!”

“Good! Oh! Very good!”

And doubtless Gin-Ghi did not use his hands more actively than usual, preferring to leave the work to his master; and on the morrow the two oddities left Adelaide, and the train took them full speed towards the unknown, where Jos Meritt hoped to discover the hat which he required for his collection.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAIN TO ADELAIDE.

A FEW days later Mrs. Branican also left the capital of South Australia. Tom Marix had just completed the escort, which consisted of fifteen white men who had been in the local militia, and fifteen natives who had been in the service of the colony in the governor’s police. This escort was intended for the protection of the caravan against the nomads, and not for fighting the tribe of the Indas. It would not do to forget what Harry Felton said: it was better to rescue Captain John at the cost of a ransom than to take him by force from the natives who held him prisoner.

Provisions in sufficient quantity for the victualling of forty persons for a year filled two of the trucks unloaded at Farina Town. Every day a letter from Zach Fren, dated from the station kept Dolly informed of all that passed. The cattle and horses bought by him were mustered there under the charge of the drivers. The vehicles which were at the railway station were ready to receive the boxes of provisions, the bales of clothing, the utensils, ammunition, tents, in a word all that composed the baggage of the expedition. Two days after the arrival of the train the caravan could begin its march.

Mrs. Branican had fixed her departure from Adelaide for the 9th of September. In a last interview she had with the governor of the colony he had not hidden from the intrepid woman the dangers she was about to face.

“The dangers are of two kinds, Mrs. Branican,” he said, “those that come from the ferocious tribes in the regions over which we have no control, and those resulting from the very nature of those regions. Denuded of all resources, notably deficient of water, for the rivers and wells are already dry from the drought, terrible sufferings are in store for you. On this account it might have been better had you started six months later at the end of the hot season — ”

“I know that,” said Mrs. Branican, “and I am prepared for all. Since my departure from San Diego, I have studied the Australian continent, reading again and again the narratives of travellers who have been through it; Burke, Stuart, Giles, Forrest, Sturt, Gregory, Warburton. I have been able to get the account of the intrepid David Lindsay, who from September, 1887, to September, 1888, crossed Australia from Port Darwin in the north to Adelaide in the south. No! I am fully aware of the dangers of the enterprise. But I must go where duty calls me.”

“The explorer David Lindsay,” replied the governor, “only journeyed through regions that were known, for the telegraph line crosses them. And he only took with him a young native and four pack horses. You, on the contrary, Mrs. Branican, are in search of nomad tribes, and will be obliged to take your caravan away from the line, to venture into the north-west of the continent as far as the deserts of Tasman Land or De Witt Land — ”

“I will go wherever it may be necessary,” said Mrs. Branican. “What David Lindsay and his predecessors have done was in the interest of civilization, of science, or of trade. What I will do is to rescue my husband, now the only survivor of the Franklin. After his disappearance, and against the opinion of everyone, I maintained that John Branican was alive, and I was right. For six months, for a year if necessary, I will travel in these territories, convinced that I shall find him, and I shall again be right. I trust to the zeal of my companions, and our motto will be, ‘Never behind!’”

“That is the Douglas motto, and I have no doubt it will lead you to the same end — ”

“Yes! With the help of God!”

Mrs. Branican took leave of the” governor, after thanking him for the assistance he had rendered her since her arrival at Adelaide, That evening — the 9th of September — she left the capital of South Australia.

The railways of Australia are welt managed; comfortable carriages run without jolting, and the permanent way is firm and level. The train consisted of six carriages, including the two baggage trucks. Mrs. Branican occupied a reserved compartment with a woman named Harriett, half English half native, whom she had taken into her service. Tom Marix and the men of the escort occupied the other compartment.

The train only stopped to take in water and coals, and made but short stoppages at the principal stations. The duration of the journey was thus shortened by about a quarter.

Beyond Adelaide the train steamed towards Gawler through the district of the same name. On the right of the line rose a few wooded heights which dominate this part of the colony. The mountains of Australia are not distinguished by their altitude, which rarely exceeds two thousand metres, and they are generally situated on the edge of the continent. A very old geological origin is attributed to them, their composition consisting chiefly of granite and the Silurian rocks.

This part of the country is very varied and cut into by gorges, obliging the railroad to make numerous curves, sometimes along narrow valleys, sometimes through thick forests where the multiplication of the eucalyptus is truly exuberant. A few degrees further on, when it enters the central plains, the railway continues in the imperturbable straight line .which is the characteristic of the modern iron road.

Beyond Gawler, where a branch runs off to Great Bend, the great river Murray describes a sudden curve towards the south. The train, after leaving and skirting the boundary of the Light district, reaches the Stanley district in the thirty-fourth degree of latitude. If it had not been night, a view might have been had of the top of Mount Bryant, the highest of the orographic cluster extending along the east of the line. From that point the elevations of the ground are more to the west, and the line skirts the irregular base of the chain, the principal summits of which are Mounts Bluff, Remarkable, Brown and Ardon. Their extreme ramifications die out oh the shores of Lake Torrens, a vast sheet of water doubtless in communication with Spencer Gulf which deeply indents the Australian coast.

Next morning at sunrise the train passed in sight of the Flinders Ranges, of which Mount Serle forms the farthest projection of any importance. Through the windows of her carriage Mrs. Branican looked out over these regions so new to her. This, then, was Australia which has so justly been called the Land of Paradoxes, whose centre is a vast depression below the level of the ocean, where the streams for the most part rise in sands and are lost before they reach the sea, where the humidity is as absent in the air as in the soil, where multiply the strangest animals the world knows, where wander the ferocious tribes which frequent the centre and the west. There to the north and west extend the interminable deserts of Alexandra Land and Western Australia, amid which the expedition was to search for traces of Captain John. What clue would she find to guide her when she had advanced beyond the towns and villages and was reduced to the vague indications obtained by the bedside of Harry Felton?

And with regard to this a difficulty had been suggested to Mrs. Branican. Was it likely that Captain John during the nine years he had been held prisoner by the Australian blacks had never found an opportunity of escape? To this objection Mrs. Branican had but one reply; that, according to Harry Felton, he and his companion had only had one chance of escape during this long period — the chance of which John had been unable to avail himself. With regard to the argument based on the statement that it was not the custom of the natives to respect the lives of their prisoners, it was clear that they had done so in the case of the survivors of the Franklin, and Harry Felton had proved it. Besides, was there not a precedent in the case of the explorer, William Classen, who had disappeared for thirty-eight years, and who was still believed to be with one of the tribes in Northern Australia? Well! was not that exactly the fate of Captain John, inasmuch as in addition to mere hypothesis, there was the formal declaration of Harry Felton? There were other travellers, too, who had never reappeared, though there was nothing to show they had succumbed. Who knows if these mysteries would not some day be cleared up?

However, the train ran along rapidly, without stopping at the smaller stations. If the railroad had curved a little more towards the west it would have skirted the shore of Lake Torrens, which is in the form of a bow — a long narrow lake near which begin the first undulations of the Flinders Ranges. The weather was warm. The temperature was the same as in the northern hemisphere in the month of March in the countries along the thirtieth parallel, such as Algeria, Mexico, or Cochin China. There was to be feared a heavy rain or even one of those violent storms the caravan would pray for in vain when it was well out on the plains of the interior. This was the state of the weather when Mrs. Branican, at three o’clock in the afternoon, reached the station at Farina Town.

There the railroad stops, and the Australian engineers are busy carrying it further northwards in the direction of the Overland Telegraph Line which extends to the shore of the Arafura Sea. If the railroad continues to follow it, it will have to bend off towards the west so as to pass between Lake Torrens and Lake Eyre. On the contrary, it will have to keep to the east of the lakes if it does not leave the meridian which passes through Adelaide.

Zach Fren and his men were mustered at the railway station when Mrs. Branican descended from her carriage. They welcomed her with much sympathy and respectful cordiality. The brave boatswain was deeply affected. Twelve days, twelve long days! without having seen the widow of Captain John, such a thing had not happened since the last return of the Dolly Hope to San Diego. Dolly was very happy to again find her companion, her friend, Zach Fren, whose devotion to the very last she could reckon upon. She smiled as she pressed his’-hand — and she did not often smile.

This station of Farina Town is of recent origin. Even on modern maps it does not appear. One recognizes in it the embryo of one of those towns which English’ or American railways produce on their passage as trees produce fruits; but they ripen -quickly, these fruits, thanks to the ready practical genius of the Saxon race. And-such of these stations as are still but villages show in their general plan in the arrangement of their squares, and roads, and boulevards that they will become towns in a very short time.

Such was Farina Town, forming at this time the terminus of the Adelaide Railway.

Mrs. Branican had no occasion to remain long at the station. Zach Fren had shown himself as intelligent as he was active. The material of the expedition which he had mustered comprised four bullock drays and their drivers, and two buggies, drawn by a pair of good horses, with their drivers. The drays had already received many of the camp fittings which had been sent on from Adelaide. When the railway trucks had disgorged their contents they would be ready to start, and this would be an affair of twenty four or thirty-six hours.

From the very first Mrs. Branican examined this material in detail. Tom Marix approved the measures' taken by Zach Fren. With such an outfit they would easily reach the extreme boundary of the region where the; horses and cattle find the pasture necessary for their food, and above all things water, which is rarely met with in the deserts of the centre.

"Mrs. Branican," said Tom Marix, "while we follow the: telegraph line the country will give us food, and our animals will not have much to endure. But, beyond, when the caravan turns to the westward, we shall have to replace the horses and bullocks by pack and riding camels. These animals alone can stand the burning regions and find enough in the wells, which are often several days' march apart."

"I know it, Tom Marix," said Dolly, "and will trust to your experience. We will reorganize the caravan as soon as we reach Alice Spring, where I hope to be as soon as possible."

"The camel drivers have been gone four days with the drove of camels," added Zach Fren, "and they will be waiting for us at the station."

"And then," said Tom Marix, "the real difficulties of the expedition will begin."

"We shall know how. to overcome them," said Mrs. Branican.

And so, in conformity with the plan carefully decided upon, the first part of the voyage, consisting of about three hundred and fifty mile?, would be accomplished with horses, buggies and bullock drays. Of the thirty men of the escort the whites, to the number of fifteen, would be mounted; but these thick forests, these capriciously hilly regions, not, allowing of long stages, the blacks would without difficulty be able to follow the caravan on foot. When the. new start was made from Alice Spring, the camels would be reserved for the whites on duty as scouts, collecting information from the wandering tribes or discovering the wells scattered over the face of the desert.

It should be mentioned here that explorations undertaken across the Australian continent have been managed in this way ever since camels have been so advantageously introduced into Australia. Travellers of the time of Burke, Stuart, and Giles would have had much less to undergo had they had these animals at their disposal. It was in 1866 that Mr. Elder imported from India a sufficiently large number, with their equipment of Afghan camel drivers; and the breed has prospered. Thanks to their employment, Colonel Warburton was able to bring to a satisfactory conclusion his bold expedition which set out from Alice Spring and reached Rockburn, on the coast of De Witt Land. If David Lindsay had afterwards succeeded in crossing the continent from north to south with pack-horses, it was because he had only occasionally left the district through which the telegraph line runs and found the water and grass which so frequently fail in the Australian solitudes.

And with regard to these hardy explorers who did not hesitate to brave every sort of peril and fatigue, Zach Fren was led to say, —

"You know, Mrs. Branican, we are anticipated in our advance on Alice Spring?"

"Anticipated, Zach?"

"Yes, madam. Do you not remember that Englishman and his Chinese servant, who were on the Brisbane from Melbourne to Adelaide?"

"I do," said Dolly. "But did not they land at Adelaide? Did they not stop there?"

"No, madam; three days ago, Jos Merritt — that is his name — arrived at Farina Town by railway. He even asked me for information concerning our expedition, as to the road we were going to take, and contented himself with replying, 'Good! Oh, very good!' while his Chinaman shook his head and seemed to say,' Bad! Oh, very bad!' and next morning they left Farina Town, going northwards."

"And how did they travel?" asked Dolly. "They travelled on horseback, but when they reached Alice Spring they were going to change their means of transport."

"Is the Englishman an explorer?"

"He does not look it; I thought the gentleman was crazy."

"And did he not say why he was venturing into the Australian desert?"

"No, madam. But alone with his Chinaman I do not suppose he" intends to risk much danger beyond the inhabited portion of the province. We shall probably find him at Alice Spring!"

Next day, the nth of September, at five o’clock in the afternoon, the last preparations were completed. The drays had received their load of provisions in sufficient quantity for the necessities of the long journey. This consisted of preserved meats and vegetables of the best American brands, flour, tea, sugar, salt, and the contents of the medicine chest. The reserve of whiskey, gin and brandy filled a certain number of kegs, which would later on be placed on the backs of the camels.

A large stock of tobacco figured among the articles of consumption — a stock all the more indispensable as it was required not only for the staff, but as a medium of exchange with the natives, among whom it is used as currency. With tobacco and brandy whole tribes in Western Australia could be bought. A large reserve of this tobacco, a few rolls of printed calico, a number of objects of Birmingham manufacture formed the ransom destined for the purpose of the freedom of Captain John.

As to the camp necessities, the tents, the coverings, the boxes containing the clothes and linen, all that belonged to Mrs. Branican and the woman Harriett, the. belongings of Zach Fren and the captain of the escort, the utensils required for the preparation of the food, the paraffin used for cooking, the ammunition, consisting of ball cartridges and shot cartridges for the guns carried by Tom Marix and his men, all this found its “place on the bullock drays.

The preparations being over, nothing remained but to give the signal of departure. Mrs. Branican, impatient to be off, fixed the departure for the morning. It was decided that at daybreak the caravans would leave Farina Town, and go along the route of the telegraph line. The drivers and escort made up a force of forty men, enrolled under the command of Zach Fren and Tom Marix; and all were told to be ready first thing in the morning.

That evening, about nine o’clock, Dolly and the woman Harriett with Zach Fren had just gone into the house they occupied near the railway station. The door was shut, and they were about to retire to their rooms when a gentle knock was heard.

Zach Fren returned to the door, opened it, and could not restrain an exclamation of surprise.

Before him, with a little bundle under his arm and his cap in his hand, stood the boy from the Brisbane.

In truth, it seemed that Mrs. Branican had guessed who it was. Yes! And how can we explain it? Although she had no expectation of seeing this boy, had she remembered that he wished to be near her? Anyhow, his name escaped instinctively from her lips, —

“Godfrey!”

Godfrey had arrived about half-an-hour before by the train from Adelaide.

A few days before the departure of the mail boat he had asked the captain of the Brisbane to pay him his wages and had left the ship.

Once on shore, he had made no attempt to present himself at the hotel in King William Street, where Mrs. Branican was staying. But how many times had he seen her! How many times he had followed her, without her seeing him, without his seeking to speak to her!

Hearing all about the preparations, he knew that Zach Fren had gone on to Farina Town to organize a caravan; and, as soon as he learned that Mrs. Branican had left Adelaide, he took the train and resolved to find her.

What, then, did Godfrey want, and what was the object of this proceeding?.

What he wanted Dolly soon ascertained.

Godfrey, admitted into the house, found himself in Mr:. Branican’s presence.

“Is it you, my child! You, Godfrey!” she said, taking his hand.

“It is he, and what does he want?” growled Zach Fren, with very obvious vexation, for the boy’s presence seemed to him extremely regrettable.

“What do I want?” said Godfrey. “I want to go with you, madam; to go with you as far as you go, and never to leave you! I want to go in search of Captain Branican, to find him, to bring him back to San Diego, to his friends, to his country.”

Dolly could only restrain herself with difficulty. The child’s features, his voice, were all John — her well-beloved John!

Godfrey fell on his knees, and stretched out his hands to her, and beseechingly said, —

“Take me, madam, take me!”

“Come, my child, come!” said Dolly, clasping him to her breast.

CHAPTER V.

ACROSS SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

The departure of the caravan took place on the 12th of September in the early morning.

The weather was fine, the heat being tempered by a gentle breeze. A few light clouds moderated the ardour of the solar rays. In this thirty-first degree of latitude at this time of the year, the warm season had fairly set in on the Australian continent. The explorers knew only too well how formidable was its intensity when there was neither rain nor shade to cool the central plains.

It was regrettable that circumstances had not allowed Mrs. Branican to undertake her expedition five or six months later. During the winter the ordeal of such a journey would have been more supportable. The cold season, during which the thermometer sometimes goes down to freezing-point, is less to be feared than the hot one, which raises the mercurial column above forty degrees centigrade. Previously to the month of May the vapours dissolve into abundant showers, the creeks revive, the wells fill. There is no need of travelling for days in search of brackish water under a burning sky. The Australian desert is more fatal to caravans than the desert of Africa; the Sahara has its oases, the Australian desert has none.

But Mrs. Branican had no choice of place or time. She went because she had to go; she would risk these terrible chances of climate because she had to risk them. The finding of Captain John and his rescue from the natives admitted of no delay, even if she were to succumb in the endeavour as Harry Felton had succumbed. It Is true that the privations which this unfortunate man had borne were not in store for this expedition, which was organized in such a way as to overcome all difficulties, at least such as were probable.

We know the composition of the caravan, which, since Godfrey had joined it, consisted of forty-one persons. The following was the order of march adopted north of Farina Town, through the bush and along the creeks, where there was no obstacle to bar the progress.

At the head went the fifteen Australians, clothed in trousers and shirt of striped cotton, wearing straw hats, and with naked feet as usual. Armed each of them with a gun and revolver, and with a cartridge belt round their waist, they formed the vanguard under the leadership of a white man who acted as scout.

After them in a buggy drawn by two horses, driven by a native coachman, went Mrs. Branican and the woman Harriett. A hood fitted to the light vehicle, so as to be raised or lowered, afforded shelter from rain or storm.

In a second buggy were Zach Fren and Godfrey. However much Zach had resented the boy’s arrival, he had soon taken a great liking to him when he saw how fond he was of Mrs. Branican.

The four bullock drays came next, driven by the four teamsters, and the progress of the caravan was regulated by the pace of these animals, whose introduction into Australia is of recent date, and which are valuable auxiliaries in matters of transport and agriculture.

On the flanks and in the rear of the little troop rode Tom Marix’s men, dressed like their leader, with their trousers tucked into their boots, a linen jacket and belt, a white-cloth cap, a light mackintosh slung over their shoulders, and armed like their native companions. These men, being mounted, were to be of service in reconnoitring the road, choosing the halting places at noon, or for the camp at night when the second stage of the day's work neared its end.

In this way the caravan was in a position to travel twelve or thirteen miles a day over rough ground, occasionally through patches of thick forest where the drays could only get along slowly. In the evening the task of pitching the camp fell to Tom Marix, who was accustomed to that sort of thing. Then all would rest during the night and start at sunrise.

The journey between Farina Town and Alice Spring, about three hundred and fifty miles, promised to be fre2 from serious danger or fatigue, and would probably occupy thirty days. The station where the caravan would have to be remodelled, in view of the exploration of the western desert, would thus be reached during the first third of the month of October.

On leaving Farina Town the expedition for a certain number of miles followed the works in progress for the prolongation of the railway, and then to the westward entered the Willouran Ranges, taking the direction already staked out by the posts of the Overland Telegraph Line.

On the road Mrs. Branican asked Tom Marix, who was riding near the buggy, for a few particulars regarding this line.

"It was 1870," said Tom Marix, "sixteen years after the declaration of the independence of South Australia, that the colonists had the idea of making this line between Port Adelaide and Port Darwin, from the south to the north of the continent. The works were carried on with such activity that they were finished by the middle of 1872."

“But,” said Mrs. Branican, “had not the continent to be explored right through?”

“Just so,” said Tom Marix, “and ten years before, in 1860 and 1861, Stuart, one of our most intrepid explorers; had crossed it, and pushed out reconnaissances east and west.”

“And who was the originator of this line?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“An engine;:- as bold as he is intelligent, Mr. Todd, the

director of posts and telegraphs, one of our fellow-citizens whom Australia honours as he deserves.”

“Did they find the material here for the work?”

“No,” said Tom Marix; “they had to bring from Europe the insulators, the wire, and even the posts for the line. The colony ought really to be in a position to furnish the material for any industrial enterprise.”

“Did the natives let the works go on without interfering with them?”

“At first they did rather more than interfere with it, Mrs. Branican. They destroyed the stores, taking the wire for the sake of the iron, and using the posts for making axes out of. Along eighteen hundred and fifty miles there were constant encounters with the Australians, although they were always beaten off. They returned to the charge again and again, and I think the affair would have had to be given up if Mr. Todd had not had an idea, not only ingenious, but of genius. He seized a few chiefs of the tribes and gave them a few electric shocks, and this so frightened them that neither they nor their comrades ever dared go near the thing again. The line was then finished and is now at regular work.”

“Is it not guarded?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“Yes, by the black police as we call them in this country.”

“And does not this police ever go into the central or western regions?”

“Never, or at least very seldom. There are so many scoundrels, bushrangers and others to look after in the inhabited districts.”

“But why have they not thought of putting the black police on the track of the Indas, when they know that Captain Branican has been their prisoner for fifteen years?”

“You forget, madam, that we did not know it, and that you yourself only knew it from Harry Felton a few weeks ago.”

“That is so,” said Dolly, “a few weeks ago!”

“Besides,” said Tom Marix, “I know that the black police have had orders to explore in Tasman Land, and that a strong detachment is to be sent there, but I am afraid — ”

Tom Marix stopped. Mrs. Branican did not notice his hesitation.

Resolved as he was to fulfil to the end the duties he had undertaken, he had, it should be said, very great doubts as to the result of the expedition. He knew how difficult these wandering tribes of Australia are to get hold of, and had no share in Mrs. Branican’s ardent faith, nor Zach Fren’s conviction, nor Godfrey’s instinctive confidence. However, we may repeat, he would do his duty. On the evening of the 15th at. the turn of the Deroy Hills the caravan camped at the town of Boorloo. To the north rose the summit of Mount Attraction, beyond which extend the Illusion Plains. From this connection of - names it may be thought that while the mountain attracts the plain deceives. Anyway, Australian cartography offers many of these designations, which are at the same time physical and moral.

It is at Boorloo that the telegraph line runs off at almost a right angle towards the west. Twelve miles away it crosses Cabanna creek. But what is a simple matter for aerial lines stretched from post to post, is more difficult for a body of travellers on foot and horseback. It was necessary to find a ford. The boy would not leave to others the task of discovering it. Throwing himself resolutely into the rapid, tumultuous river, he found a shallow place by which the drays and carriages could reach the left bank without getting over their axles.

On the 17th the caravan camped on the last spurs of Mount North-West, which rises about twelve miles to the south.

The country being inhabited, Mrs. Branican and her companions received a cordial welcome at one of the large farms, which had several thousand acres under tillage. The raising of sheep in considerable flocks, the growing of corn on the wide, treeless plains, the cultivation on a large scale of sorghum and millet, immense fallows ready for sowing during the coming season, practical forestry, plantations of olive trees and other species suitable for these warm latitudes, many hundreds of beasts of labour and draught, the staff required for such enterprises, a staff submitted to quasi-military discipline which reduces men almost to a state of slavery — all this can be met with on these estates, which yield the wealth of the colonics of the Australian continent. If Mrs. Branican's caravan had not been amply provisioned at the start, she would here have obtained everything she wanted, thanks to the generosity of the rich farmers, of the free-selectors, the proprietors of these agricultural stations.

These large industrial establishments are increasing. Immense tracts, which the absence of water rendered unproductive, are being brought into cultivation, and the ground then being crossed by the caravan a dozen miles south of Lake Eyre was intersected by liquid streams from the newly dug artesian wells, which yield three hundred thousand gallons a day.

On the 18th of September, Tom Marix camped for the night on the southern point of South Lake Eyre, a considerable sheet of water joining North Lake Eyre. On its wooded banks was a flock of those curious water-fowl of which the jabiru is the most remarkable specimen, and a few flocks of black swans, with a few cormorants, pelicans, and herons.

A curious geographical arrangement is that of these lakes. They extend from the south northward — Lake Torrens, the curve of which is followed by the railway, Little Lake Eyre, Great Lake Eyre, Lakes Frane, Blanche, Amadeus — and are sheets of salt water, the old natural basins in which linger the remains of an inland sea. t In fact, geologists are inclined to admit that the Australian continent was formerly divided into two islands, at a period not very remote. It has been observed that the coast of the continent has a tendency to rise above sea-level, and there seems to be no reason for supposing that the centre is not subject, to a similar continuous elevation. The old basin will thus close in time, and bring about the disappearance of these lakes, which lie between the hundred and thirtieth and hundred and fortieth degrees of latitude.

From the point of South Lake Eyre to the station of Emerald Spring, where they arrived in the evening of the 20th of September, the caravan advanced about seventeen miles across a country of magnificent forest, the trees of which reached two hundred feet in height.

Accustomed as Dolly was to the forest marvels of California, amongst others its gigantic sequoias, she could not but have admired this astonishing vegetation if her thoughts had not been far away in the north and west, among the arid deserts, where the sandy hills barely support a few miserable shrubs. She saw nothing of those giant ferns of which Australia possesses the most remarkable species, nothing of those enormous masses of eucalyptus, with weeping foliage, grouped on the gentle undulations of the ground.

It is a curious fact that brushwood is absent from the foot of these trees; the ground is clear of briars and thorns, and their lower branches are not thrown out below twelve or fifteen feet from the ground. All that remains is a golden-yellow grass, which is never dried up. Animals have destroyed the young shoots, and fires lighted by the squatters have cleared away the bushes. Consequently, although there are no roads cut through these vast forests — so different to the African forests, in which you can travel for six months without reaching the end — there is no difficulty in moving about. The buggies and drays passed easily between the trees and under the high roof of their foliage.

Besides, Tom Marix knew the country, having several times crossed it when in command of the Adelaide colonial police. Mrs. Branican could not have trusted to a safer or more devoted guide. No leader of an escort could have joined so much zeal to so much intelligence.

And, to help him, Tom Marix found an auxiliary, young, active, determined, in the lad who had so ardently attached himself to Dolly; and it is not to be wondered at that he shared in the ardour of this boy of fourteen years. Godfrey talked of going alone, if necessary, into the interior. If any traces of Captain John were discovered, it would be difficult, even impossible, to keep him back. Everything about him — his enthusiasm when he spoke of the captain, his assiduity in consulting the maps of Central Australia, in taking notes, in gaining information during the halts, instead of giving himself over to rest after the fatigue of the day — all denoted in this impassioned soul an effervescence which nothing could temper. Very strong for his age, hardened already to the hardest trials of a sailor's life, he was often ahead of the caravan and out of sight. If he remained in his place it was only at Dolly's precise orders. Neither Zach Fren nor Tom Marix, although Godfrey showed much friendship for them, could get from him what she got by a look. Abandoning herself to her instinctive feelings in the presence of this child, who was John's physical and mental portrait she felt for him the affection of a mother. If Godfrey was not her son, if he was not so according to the laws of nature, he could at least be so by adoption. Godfrey should not leave her again. John would love him as she loved him, and with the same love.

One day, after an absence during which he had been some miles in advance of the caravan, —

"My child," she said, "I want you to promise me not to go so far away without my consent. When I see you go I am quite uneasy until you come back. You leave us for hours without any news of you."

"It is necessary I should collect information," said the boy. "There was a report of a tribe of wandering natives encamped on Warmer Creek. I wanted to see the chief of the tribe, to question him." .

"And what did he say?" asked Dolly.

"He had heard of a white man coming from the west and making for Queensland."

"Who was he?"

"I understood at last that he was talking of Harry Felton, and not of Captain Branican. But we shall find him — yes, we shall find him! Ah! I love him as I love you, who are a mother to me!"

"A mother!" murmured Mrs. Branican.

"But I know you, while Captain John I have never seen; and without that photograph you gave me, which I always carry about with me — the portrait which speaks to me, which seems to answer me — "

"You will know him one day, my child," said Dolly, "and he will love thee as I love thee."

On the 24th September, after having camped at Strangway Spring, beyond Warmer Creek, the expedition halted at William Spring, forty-two miles to the north of Emerald Station. It will be seen from this qualification of "spring "that the water system is of great importance in the districts crossed by the telegraph line. The hot season was already far enough advanced for these springs to be drying up, and it was not difficult to find fords by which the creeks could be crossed with the teams.

At the same time, the strong vegetation gave no signs of decreasing. If the villages were only met with at longer intervals, the farms still succeeded each other from stage to stage. Hedges of spiny acacia, which scented the air, mingled with a few sweetbriars, formed the impenetrable enclosures. In the forests, now more scattered, European trees, such as the oak, the plane, the willow, the poplar, the tamarind, were taking the place of the eucalyptus and the gum-trees which are called "spotted gums" by the Australians.

“What sort of a tree is that?” asked Zach Fren the first time he saw some fifty of these gums in a clump. “It looks as if their trunks were painted in all the colours of the rainbow.”

“What you take for a coat of paint,” said Tom Marix, “is the natural colour. The bark of those trees colours according to whether the vegetation is early or late.- Some are white, some are pink, some are red. Look! there is one with the trunk striped with blue, another with’ yellow plates.”

“One more drollery to distinguish your continent, Tom Marix.”

“Drollery, if you like; but believe me, Zach, you arc paying my countrymen a compliment in repeating that their country resembles no other. And it will not be perfect — ”

“Until there remains not a single native; that is understood!” replied Zach Fren.

It was equally noticeable that, in spite of the insufficient shelter of these trees, the birds gathered there in great numbers. There were magpies, parrots, cockatoos of startling whiteness, laughing birds (which, according to M. D. Chamay, would be more appropriately called sobbing birds), red-necked tandalas, whose cackle is inexhaustible, flying squirrels (amongst others the polatouche, which sportsmen” attract by imitating the cry of nocturnal birds), birds of paradise, and especially the rifle bird, of velvet plumage, which is held to be the finest specimen of Australian ornithology; and, finally, on the surface of the lagoons or swampy places, pairs of cranes, and lotus birds the conformation of whose feet permits of their running on the leaves of the water-lily.

In addition, there was an abundance of hares, and there was no harm in knocking them over, to say nothing of partridges and wild ducks, which enabled Tom Marix to economize with the provisions of the expedition. This game was plainly grilled or roasted every evening at the camp- fire. Occasionally, too, iguana eggs were dug up, which are excellent, and better than the iguana with which the blacks of the expedition regaled themselves.

The creeks still yielded perch, a few long-nosed pike, and a number of those mullets so active as to jump over the fisherman's head, and in addition to these were myriads of cols. At the same time, a constant look-out had to be kept for crocodiles, which arc very dangerous in their aquatic surroundings.- From all of which it follows that lines or nets are articles with which the traveller in Australia should be furnished, in accordance with the expressed recommendation of Colonel Warburton.

On the morning of the 29th the caravan left Umburn Station and entered on hilly ground, very rough for the Walkers. Forty-eight hours afterwards, to the west of Denison Ranges, it-reached the Peak Station, recently established for the requirements of the telegraphic service.

From a detailed account of the journeys of Stuart, given by Tom Marix, Mrs. Branican learnt that it was from this point that the explorer had started for the north, through country almost unknown before.

After this station, for a distance of some sixty miles, the caravan had a foretaste of the fatigues in store for them in the Australian desert. Very arid ground had to be traversed up to the banks of the Macumba River, and beyond, for about the same distance, a no less wearisome stretch to Lady Charlotte Station.

On these vast undulating plains, varied here and there by a few clumps of trees with discoloured foliage, game, if it can all be called so, did not fail. There leapt the kangaroo, of a small species known as the wallaby, which escaped at many an enormous bound. There ran the opossums of the bandicoot and dyasuran varieties, which nestle — that is the word — at the top of the gum trees. Several pairs of cassowaries were seen with as proud and defiant a look as an eagle, but with the advantage over the king of birds, that their flesh is fat and nourishing and Very like beef. The trees were bunga-bungas, a kind of araucaria, which in the western regions of Queensland attain a height of two hundred and fifty feet. These pines, which are trees of more moderate height, yield a large nutritious kernel, which is eaten by the Australians.

Tom Marix warned his, companions against a possible meeting with some of the bears which take up their abode in the hollow trunk of the gum trees. And this did happen, but these plantigrades, called by the name of "potorous," were no more formidable than the long" clawed marsupials.

As to the natives, the caravan had hardly met with any up to then. In fact, it is to the north, and cast, and west of the Overland Telegraph Line, that the tribes wander from camp to camp.

In traversing these more and more barren countries, Tom Marix would have to profit by the peculiar instinct of the bullocks yoked to the drays. This instinct, which seems to have become developed in the breed since its introduction to the Australian continent, causes these animals to move towards the creeks in which they can satisfy their thirst. It is seldom that they are deceived, and the men have only to follow them. And their instinct in another matter is under certain circumstances of great value.

In fact, on the morning of the 7th of October, the bullocks of the leading dray suddenly stopped, and were immediately imitated by the other teams. The drivers prodded them with their goads, but could not make them advance a step.

Tom Marix noticing this, at once rode up to Mrs. Branican’s buggy.

“I know what it is,” he said; “if we have not yet met with blacks on our road, we are now crossing one of the tracks they arc accustomed to take, and our bullocks have scented the trail and refuse to go beyond.”

“And why?” asked Dolly.

“The reason we do not really know,” said Tom Marix, “but the fact is no less indisputable. What I believe is, that the first cattle imported into Australia were badly treated by the natives, and recollection of the ill-treatment has been retained and transmitted from generation to generation.”

Whether this peculiarity of atavism, pointed out by the chief of the escort, was or was not the reason of their mistrust, it is certain that the cattle could not be prevailed upon to continue their advance. They had to be unyoked and turned round, and then, with blows of the whip and goad, backed for about twenty yards, so as to cross the path contaminated by the passage of the blacks. And when they were again yoked up the drays resumed their journey to the north.

When the caravan arrived on the borders “of the Macumba River, everyone found plenty to slake his thirst with. It is true the water was already low, owing to the great heat. But where there was not water enough to float a skiff, there was enough to satisfy forty men and twenty cattle.

On the 6th the expedition crossed Hamilton Creek on the half-covered stones which strewed its bed; on the 8th, Mount Hammersley was left to the east; on the 10th, in the morning, a halt was made at the station of Charlotte- town, after accomplishing three hundred and twenty miles since leaving Farina Town.

Mrs. Branican then found herself on the border between South Australia and Alexandra Land, also called the Northern Territory. This is the country discovered by the explorer Stuart in 1860, when he followed the hundred and thirty-first meridian up to the twenty-first degree of latitude.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

Tom Marix had asked Mrs. Branican for a rest of twenty-four hours at Lady Charlotte Station. Although the journey had been accomplished without obstacles, the heat had fatigued the cattle. The journey to Alice Spring was a long one, and it was important that the drays should be certain of reaching its end.

Dolly gave in to the reason advanced by the chief of the escort, and the best arrangements possible were made. A few shanties form the station, the population of which was tripled for a day by the caravan's arrival. It was therefore necessary to camp. But the squatter, who owned a large farm in the neighbourhood, came to offer Mrs. Branican more comfortable hospitality, and he was so pressing that she accepted his invitation to. Waldek Hill, where very suitable lodgings were placed at her disposal.

This squatter was only the tenant of one of those vast domains called "runs" in Australia. These runs comprise no less than six hundred thousand hectares, and even more, particularly in the colony of Victoria. Although that at Waldek Hill was not quite as large as this, yet it was of considerable, size. .Surrounded by paddocks, or enclosures, it was specially devoted to the raising of sheep — requiring a certain number of men, shepherds employed in looking after the flocks, and savage dogs whose barking resembled that of the wolf.

The nature of the ground determines the choice of the station when a run is to be formed, the preference being given to the plains in which the salt-bush grows. These bushes with nutritive juices, in some ways resembling the asparagus, in others the aniseed, are greedily sought after by the sheep, who belong to the pig-face variety. As soon as the land has been found fit for pasture, it is put under grass. Then cattle are put on it to take the first growth, while the sheep, which are more difficult to feed, take the second growth.

It will not be forgotten that it is to the wool produced by the sheep that the great wealth of the Australian colonies is due; and there are no less than one hundred millions of these representatives of the ovine race.

On the run at Waldek Hill, around the- principal house and the huts of the men, were large ponds well supplied with water from a creek, and used for the washing of the sheep before shearing. In front of these were the sheds in which the squatter stored the woolpacks before sending them off to Adelaide.

At the time the operation of shearing was in full swing. For some days a gang of wandering shearers had, according to custom, come to work at this lucrative trade.

When Mrs. Branican, accompanied by Zach Fren, had passed the barriers, she was struck with the astonishing animation that reigned within the enclosure. The men at piece work did not lose a moment, and, as the most skilful could shear a hundred fleeces a day, they were sure of earning a sovereign in that time. The snipping of the large shears in the hands of the shearer, the bleating of the sheep when they received some ill-directed blow, the shouting of the men one to another, the coming and going of those engaged in carrying the wool to the sheds, made up a curious scene. And above this tumult rose the shouts of the little boys, “Tar! tar!” as they carried the bowls of tar with which to wash the wounds made by the unskilful shearers.

Over all this there have to be overseers to ensure the work being properly done. And some of these were at Waldek Hill, independently of those engaged in keeping the accounts, that is to say, a dozen men and women who thus obtained their living.

And what was Mrs. Branican's surprise — more than surprise, stupefaction — when she heard her name pronounced a few yards behind her.

A woman had just run up. She had thrown herself on her knees, with her hands stretched out, and looking appealingly, —

It was Jane Burker — Jane, aged less by years than by trouble, grey-haired, pale of face, almost unrecognizable, but whom Dolly recognized.

"Jane!" she exclaimed.

She had risen, and the two cousins were in each other's arms.

What then had been the life of the Burkers for the last twelve years? A miserable life — and even a criminal life, at least so far as regards the husband of the unfortunate Jane.

When he left San Diego in-a hurry to escape from the pursuit of his creditors, Len Burker had taken refuge at Mazatlan, one of the ports on the west coast of Mexico. As will he remembered, he left at Prospect House the mulatto No, with orders to watch over Dolly Branican, who had not at that time recovered her reason. But shortly afterwards, when the unhappy maniac had been placed in the asylum of Doctor Brumley, owing to the influence of Mr. William Andrew, the mulatto having no more occasion to remain at the chalet, had escaped to rejoin her master, whose retreat she knew.

It was under an assumed name that Len Burker had been in hiding at Mazatlan, where the Californian police had been unable to find him, for he had only remained a few weeks in that town. Two or three thousand piastres — all that remained of what he had run through, and all that remained of the little fortune of Mrs. Branican — was all that he possessed. To begin business again in the United States was no longer possible, and he resolved to leave America. Australia appeared to offer an opportunity of again tempting fortune before he was reduced to his last dollar.

Jane, always under the complete dominion of her husband, had not strength of mind enough to resist him. Mrs. Branican, her only relative, was now deprived of reason. As far as Captain John was concerned, there was no longer any doubt as to his fate. The Franklin had perished with all hands. John would never return to San Diego. Nothing could henceforth save Jane from the destiny to which Len Burker was dragging her, and under these conditions she accompanied him to the Australian continent.

Len Burker had landed at Sydney. There he spent all he had in launching forth into new speculations, in which he made fresh dupes, and displayed more ability than he had done at San Diego. And then he ventured on other speculations, in which he lost the few profits he made at the outset.

Eighteen months after he had taken refuge in Australia, Len Burker had had to leave Sydney. A prey to poverty bordering on destitution, he was compelled to seek his fortune elsewhere. But matters were no more favourable to him at Brisbane, whence he soon escaped to take refuge in the most out-of-the-way districts of Queensland.

Jane followed him. Resigned to her fate, she was even reduced to work with her hands for money to assist in the payment of the household expenses. Harshly treated by the mulatto, who continued to be Len Burker's evil genius, she had many times thought of running away from this miserable life, and putting an end to its vexations and humiliations! But that was beyond her weak, indecisive character. The poor dog is beaten, and yet dare not leave its master's house!

At this time Len Burker had learnt from the newspapers of the attempts that were being made to discover the survivors of the Franklin. The two expeditions of the Dolly Hope, undertaken by Mrs. Branican, had informed him of the new state of affairs: 1:Dolly had recovered her reason after a period of four years, during which she had remained in Doctor Brumley's asylum; 2. During that period her uncle Edward Starter had died in Tennessee, and the enormous fortune she had inherited from him had enabled her to organize these two expeditions in the seas of Malaysia and on the coasts of Northern Australia. As to their definitive result, it had been settled that the remains of the Franklin had been found on Browse Island, and the last survivor of the crew had died on that island.

Between Dolly's fortune and Jane, her sole heiress, there now remained but a mother who had lost her child, a wife who had lost her husband, and whom a combination of misfortunes had shaken in her sanity. So said Len Burker to himself. To resume family intercourse with Mrs. Branican was impossible. To ask for assistance through the mediation of Jane he was afraid, for he was still wanted by the police, and at the mercy of an extradition treaty which would have handed him over to punishment. But if Dolly died, by what means could he prevent her fortune failing to reach Jane, that is to say, himself?

It will not have been forgotten that about seven years had elapsed between the return of the Dolly Hope, after her second expedition, up to the meeting with Harry Felton, which had revived the question of the Franklin disaster.

During this period Len Burker's life had become more miserable than ever. From the illegal acts he had committed without remorse, he had glided down the slope of criminality. He had now no fixed home, and Jane had been compelled to submit to her wandering life.

The mulatto, Nô, was dead; but Mrs. Burker received no benefit from the death of the woman whose influence had been so fatal to her husband. As the companion of a criminal, she was obliged to follow him over these vast territories, where so many crimes remain unpunished. After the exhaustion of the gold-mines of the colony of Victoria, and the-dispersal of thousands of diggers, who found themselves without work, the country was invaded by a population little accustomed to submission and respect for the law on the diggings; and now there was a formidable class of the unclassed, of people without standing, known in the districts of South Australia under the name of "larrikins." These scoured the country, indulging their criminal propensities, and driven from the towns by the police.

Such were the companions,with whom Len Burker associated when his notoriety forbade him access to the towns. Then, as he was gradually driven out into the less protected regions, he associated with the gangs of wandering scoundrel', among others with the ferocious bushrangers, who date from the early years of colonization, and whose race is not yet extinct.

To that step in the social ladder Len Burker had descended. During the last few years, in how many cases he had taken part in robbing farms, in highway robbery, in all the crimes that justice was impotent to repress, he alone could tell. Yes, he alone; for Jane, almost always abandoned in some village, was not admitted into the. secret of his abominable actions. And perhaps blood had been shed by the hand of the man she no longer respected, but whom she would never betray.

Twelve years had elapsed when the reappearance of Harry Felton renewed the public excitement. The news was spread by the newspapers, and notably by the numerous journals of Australia. Len Burker learnt it as he read a number of the Sydney Morning Herald in a little village in Queensland, where he had then taken refuge after a matter of pillage and incendiarism which, thanks to the intervention of the police, had not turned out precisely to the advantage of the bushrangers.

At the same time as he learnt the facts regarding Harry Felton, Len Burker learnt that Mrs. Branican had left San Diego to come to Sydney and put herself in communication with the mate of the Franklin. Almost immediately came the rumour that Harry Felton had died after giving certain indications relative to Captain John. Then, a few days later, Len Burker was informed that Mrs. Branican had landed at Adelaide, with the object of organizing an expedition, in which she would take part, and which had for its object the visiting of the deserts of the centre and northwest of Australia.

When Jane heard of her cousin’s arrival on the continent her first feeling was to run away and seek a refuge with her. But Len Burker had guessed her intentions, and, owing to his threats, she dare not carry out her plan.

Then it was that the scoundrel, without hesitating, resolved to make the best of the position. The hour was decisive. To meet Mrs. Branican on the road, to again ingratiate himself with her by means of calculated hypocrisy, to accompany her amid the Australian solitudes, nothing could be less difficult, or tend more surely to his object. It was hardly probable that

Captain John, even admitting that he still lived, would be discovered among the wandering natives, and it was possible that Dolly would succumb in the course of this dangerous campaign. All her fortune would then revert to Jane, her only relative. Who knows? There are such profitable opportunities when one has the talent for originating them.

Be it understood Len Burker was careful not to tell Jane of his intention to renew his relations with Mrs. Branican. He separated from the bushrangers, though prepared to call on them for their good offices later on, if he had need of them. Accompanied by Jane, he left Queensland, making for Lady Charlotte station, which is only about a hundred miles away, and through which the caravan must necessarily pass on its way to Alice Spring.

And that is why," for the last three weeks, Len Burker had been at Waldek Hill, where he fulfilled the duties of overseer. There he was waiting for Dolly with his mind fully made up to shrink from no crime in his attempt to get possession of her fortune.

On her arrival at Lady Charlotte station Jane suspected nothing. And what were her feelings in the irresistible and thoughtless movement to which she yielded, when she found herself in the presence of Mrs. Branican, and thus helped on Len Burker's plans far more than he had ever hoped.

Len Burker was then forty-five years of age. Having aged but little, he was still erect and vigorous, and still had the fugitive, false look, and the features stamped with dissimulation, which inspired distrust in him. Jane appeared to be quite ten years older, her colour all faded, her hair white at the temples, her body crushed down. But her look, almost extinguished by misery, lighted up when she saw Dolly.

After clasping her in her arms Mrs. Branican had taken Jane into one of the rooms put at her disposal by the squatter of Waldek Hill. There the two women could abandon themselves to their feelings. Dolly only remembered the cares with which Jane had surrounded her at the chalet of Prospect House. She had nothing to reproach her with, and she was ready to pardon her husband if he would consent to separate them from one another no ranger.

They talked for some time. Jane only told her what she could of her past life without compromising Len Burker, find Mrs. Branican was very reserved in questioning her on the subject. She felt how much the poor creature had suffered and was still suffering. Was not that enough to render her worthy of all her pity, of all her affection? The position of Captain John, the unshakable assurance that she would soon recover him, the efforts she was making to succeed in doing so, that is what she spoke of above everything, and then of the child she had lost — of little Wat. And when she recalled the remembrance always, living in her, Jane became so pale, her face underwent such an alteration, that Dolly believed the unfortunate woman was about to faint.

Jane managed to recover herself, and then had to tell of her life since the fatal day on which her cousin had gone toad up to the time when Len Burker was compelled to leave San Diego.

“Is it possible, my poor Jane,” said Dolly, “is it possible that during these fourteen months, when you were taking such care of me, that there came a lucid interval to my mind? Is it possible that I had no recollection of my poor John? Is it possible that I never pronounced his name, nor that of our dear little Wat?”

“Never, Dolly, never!” murmured Jane, who could not restrain her tears.

“And you, Jane, you my friend, you who are of my blood, you never read my mind? You never noticed neither in my words nor my looks that I was conscious of the past?”

“No, Dolly!”

“Well, Jane, I am going to tell you what I have told nobody else. Yes — when I returned to sanity — yes — I had a presentiment that John was alive, that I was .not a widow, and it seemed to also — ”

“Also?” said Jane.

Her eyes filled with inexplicable terror, her looks wild with fright; she waited, for what Dolly was about to say.

“Yes, Jane,” continued Dolly, “I had the feeling that I was still a mother!”

Jane rose, her hands beat the air as though she would chase away some horrible image, her lips worked without her being able to articulate a word. Dolly, absorbed in her own thoughts, did not observe this agitation, and Jane had begun to resume her self-possession when her husband appeared at the door of the room.

Len Burker remained in the doorway looking at his wife, and seeming to say to her, — “What have you been saying?”

Jane fell back utterly powerless before this man — the invincible domination of a strong spirit over a weak one. Jane was annihilated under Len Burker’s look. Mrs. Branican understood. The sight of Len Burker recalled the past, and reminded her of what Jane must have endured from him. But this revolt of her heart lasted but a moment. Dolly was resolved to sacrifice her recrimination, to overcome her repulsion, in order to be no more separated from the unfortunate Jane.

“Len Burker,” she said, “you know why I have come to Australia. It is a duty to which I shall devote myself until I see John, for John is alive. As chance has placed you in my road, as I have again found Jane, the only relative left to me, leave her to me and allow her to come with me, as she desires.”

Len Burker did not at once reply. Knowing what there was against him, he wished Mrs. Branican to complete her proposal by asking him to join the caravan. But, as Dolly remained silent, he had to take the initiative.

“Dolly,” said he, “I will answer without circumlocution to your offer, and I will add that I expected it. I will not refuse, and I willingly consent that my wife should remain with you. Ah! life has been hard for both of us since mischance forced me to leave San Diego. We have suffered much during the fourteen years which have elapsed, and you see fortune has not favoured me on Australian soil, as I am reduced to work for my bread from day to day. When the shearing is over at Waldek Hill I do not know where I shall get other work. And, as also it will be painful for me to part with Jane, I, in my turn, ask you to permit me to take an active part in your expedition. I know the natives of the interior, with whom I have had some experience, and I can be of some use to you. Do not doubt it, Dolly, I shall be happy to join my efforts to those of your companions, and help you to deliver John Branican.”

Dolly saw that this was the condition on which Len Burker would consent to leave her Jane. There was no disputing with such a man; besides, if he really meant what he said, his presence would not be useless, inasmuch as. for a number of years, his wandering life had led him through the central regions of the continent. Mrs. Branican thus had to reply, but coldly enough, —

“That is agreed, Len Burker; you shall be one of us, and get ready to start, for we leave Lady Charlotte station first thing to-morrow morning.”

“I will be ready,” said Len Burker, who retired without having dared to offer his hand to Mrs. Branican.

When Zach Fren learnt that Len Burker was to join the expedition he showed very little satisfaction. He knew the man, he knew from Mr. William Andrew how this solemn personage had abused his functions in dissipating Dolly’s patrimony. He knew under what conditions this faithless trustee, this broken broker, had had to leave San Diego; he had no doubt whatever but that his life had been suspicious during the fourteen years he had been in Australia. But, at the same time, he said nothing, looking upon it as a fortunate circumstance that Jane was near Dolly. But in his heart he resolved to keep a good lookout on Len Burker.

The day ended without other incident. Len Burker was not again seen, but was busy in his preparation for departure after arranging with the. squatter of Waldek Hill. The arrangement gave rise to no difficulty, and the squatter even undertook to provide him with a horse, so that he might be in a state to follow the caravan to Alice Spring, where the re-organization was to take place.

Dolly and Jane remained together during the afternoon and evening at Waldek Hill. Dolly avoided speaking of Len Burker, and made no allusion to what he had been doing since his departure from San Diego, feeling that he had done things Jane could not mention.

During this evening neither Tom Marix nor Godfrey, who were collecting information among the natives whose huts were in the neighbourhood, came to Waldek Hill. It was early in the morning that Mrs. Branican had an opportunity of introducing Godfrey to Jane, telling her he was her adopted son.

Jane was extraordinarily struck with the resemblance which existed between Captain John and the boy. Her impression was, indeed, so profound that she scarcely dared to look at him. And how can we express what she felt when Dolly told her all about Godfrey, how she had met him on the Brisbane, how he was a child found in the streets of San Diego, how he had been brought up at Wat House, how he was about fourteen years old.

Jane sat listening to this story motionless and dumb, pale as death, her heart scarcely beating in the intensity of her anguish.

And when Dolly left her alone, she fell on her knees and clasped her hands. Then the life came back to her features, and her face was as if transfigured.

“Him! him!” she screamed, “him! Near her! God, then, has willed it so!”

A moment afterwards Jane had left the house at Waldek Hill, and, crossing the interior yard, was rushing towards the hut where she lived, to tell her husband everything.

Len Burker was there packing a portmanteau with the few articles of clothing and other objects he was going to take on his journey. Jane’s arrival in this extraordinary state of trouble made him jump back.

“What is the matter?” he said, sharply. “Speak! Will you speak? What is the matter?”

“He is alive!” said Jane. “He is here! Near his mother — him we thought — ”

“Near his mother — alive — him?” said Len Burker, who was thunderstruck at the revelation.

lie understood too well to whom this word “him” applied.

“Him!” said Jane, “him! The second child of John and Dolly Branican \”

A short explanation will be sufficient to relate what had taken place fifteen years before at Prospect House.

A few months after taking up their abode at the chalet, Mr. and Mrs. Burker had noticed that Dolly, then for some weeks out,of her mind, was in a situation of which she herself was ignorant. Narrowly watched by the mulatto, No, and in spite of Jane’s supplications, Dolly was, so to speak, sequestered, withdrawn from the sight of her friends and neighbours under the pretext of her malady. Seven months later, while still insane and without even a trace of memory, she had brought into the world a second child. At this time, when Captain John’s death was generally admitted, the birth of this child interfered with Len Burker’s plans regarding Dolly’s future fortune. He had, therefore, resolved to keep the birth secret. It was in view of this eventuality that for several months the servants had been sent away from the chalet, and visitors refused admittance, which Jane, compelled to yield to her husband, was unable to prevent. The child, when only a few hours old, had been abandoned by No on the highway, where it was fortunately found by a passer-by, who took it to a hospital. Later on, after the opening of Wat House, it was taken there, and thence at eight years it came out to go to sea as a cabin boy. And now all is explained, the resemblance of Godfrey to Captain John, his father, the instinctive feelings continually experienced by Dolly — Dolly a mother without knowing it!

“Yes, Len,” said Jane. “It is his son! . And we must confess everything —”

But at the thought of a recognition which would endanger the plan on which his future reposed, Len Burker made a threatening gesture, and oaths escaped from his lips. Seizing the unfortunate Jane by the hand, and looking into her eyes, he said in a low voice, —

“For Dolly’s sake as well as for Godfrey’s sake, I advise you, Jane,-to be silent.”

CHAPTER VII.

NORTHWARDS.

There could be no mistake; Godfrey was, indeed, the second child of John and Dolly Branican. The affection Dolly felt for him was merely the mother’s instinct. But she did not know that the boy was her son, and how could she ever discover it, if Jane, afraid of the threats of Len Burker, were compelled to remain silent in order to assure Godfrey’s safety? To speak was to put the boy at the mercy of Len Burker, and the scoundrel who had once before abandoned him, would know how to get rid of him during this perilous expedition. It was therefore necessary that the mother and son should continue to be ignorant of the tie which attached them to each other.

When he saw Godfrey, and compared the facts relative to his early life, and assured himself of the striking resemblance the boy bore to John, Len Burker had no doubt as to his identity. And thus, when he had made up his mind that John Branican was irretrievably lost, this is what had come about. Well! Woe to Godfrey if Jane spoke! But Len Burker was not uneasy. Jane would not speak.

On the 11th of October, the caravan resumed its journey after a day’s rest. Jane took her place in the buggy occupied by Mrs. Branican. Len Burker moved about on rather a good horse, sometimes in front, sometimes behind, talking with Tom Marix about the districts through which he had travelled along the telegraph line. He did not” seek the company of Zach Fren, who showed a marked dislike to him. And he avoided Godfrey, the sight of whom annoyed him. When the boy came to take part in the conversation between Dolly and Jane, Len Burker retired so as to have nothing to do with him.

As the expedition advanced, the aspect of the country gradually changed. Here and there were a few farms devoted entirely to the raising of sheep, extensive prairies stretching away out of sight, groups of trees, gum trees or eucalyptus, forming a few isolated clumps in no way resembling the forests of South Australia.

On the 12th of October, at six o'clock in the evening, after a long stage which the heat rendered very tiring, Tom Marix pitched the camp on the bank of Finke River, not far from Mount Daniel, whose summit rose to the westward.

Geographers are now agreed in considering this river Finke — called the Larra-Larra by the natives — as the principal stream in the centre of Australia. During the evening Tom Marix called Mrs. Branican's attention to this subject, while Zach Fren, Len and Jane Burker were in her company under one of the tents.

"The question is," said Tom Marix, "if Finke River pours its waters into the vast Lake Eyre, which we left beyond Farina Town. To settle this question the explorer David Lindsay devoted the end of the year 1885. After reaching the station of The Peak, which we passed, he followed the river to the place where it is lost in the sands to the north-east of Dalhousie. But he was led to believe that in the floods of the rainy season its waters ran into Lake Eyre."

"And how long is Finke River?" asked Mrs. Branican.

"It is estimated as not being less than nine hundred miles," replied Tom Marix.

"Shall we follow it far?"

“Only for a few days, for it makes several bends and turns off westward through the James Ranges.”

“But I knew this David Lindsay you are speaking of,” said Len Burker.

“You knew him?” said Zach Fren, in a tone which denoted a certain amount of incredulity.

“And what is there astonishing in that?” said Len Burker. “I met Lindsay just as he reached Dalhousie. station. He was on the West Queensland frontier, which I was visiting on account of a Brisbane house.”

“That,” said Tom Marix, “is the way he went. Then having reached Alice Spring and rounded the MacDonnell Ranges, he made a complete exploration of the, Herbert River, and struck up towards the Gulf of Carpentaria, where he finished his second voyage from south to. north across the Australian continent.”

“I will add,” said Len Burker, “that David Lindsay was accompanied by a German botanist of the name of Dietrich. Their caravan consisted of a few camels for. transport purposes. That, Dolly, I believe, is how you are going to have yours beyond Alice Spring, and I am sure you will succeed as David Lindsay succeeded.”

“Yes, we will succeed, Len,” said Mrs. Branican.

“No one doubts that!” added Zach Fren.

In short it appeared to be true that Len Burker had met David Lindsay under- the circumstances he said, and, besides, Jane corroborated him. But if Dolly had asked him for what Brisbane house he was then travelling, he would have been rather embarrassed.

During the few hours that Mrs. Branican and her companions passed on the banks of Finke River, they indirectly had news of the Englishman Jos Meritt and Gin Ghi, his Chinese servant. Both were then about a dozen stages ahead of the caravan, and they were gradually gaining on them along the same road.

It was from the natives that the news came regarding this famous collector of hats. Three days before Jos Meritt and his servant had stopped in the village of Kilna, a mile from the station.

Kilna contains many hundred blacks, men, women and children, who live in shapeless bark huts. These huts are called “villums “in the Australian language, and it is worth while to note the singular resemblance of this native word to the words villa and villages of Latin derivation.

These natives were worth looking at. Some of them were tall, well-built fellows, lithe and strong, and of indefatigable constitution. For the most part they are characterized by the peculiar depressed facial angle common to savage races; the eyebrows are very prominent, the hair is waved rather than woolly, with a narrow forehead retreating under its locks, the nose is flat, the nostrils large, the mouth is enormous and the teeth like those of wild animals. The usual large bodies and thin legs were not noticed among these men, making them quite exceptional among Australian negroes.

Where did the natives of this fifth part of the world come from? Did there formerly exist, as some learned men — too learned, perhaps — have stated, a Pacific continent, of which there remain only the summits in the form of islands scattered over the surface of that vast ocean? Are these Australians the descendants of the numerous races who peopled this continent at a remote epoch? Such theories are likely enough as mere hypotheses. But if the explanation is correct, it must be admitted that the aboriginal race has considerably degenerated, mentally and physically. The Australian has remained a savage in manners and tastes, and with his ineradicable habits of cannibalism — at least among certain tribes — he is on the lowest step of the human ladder, and hardly above the carnivora. In a country where there are no lions or tigers or panthers, it can be claimed that he replaces them in a man-eating point of view. The ground these Australians leave uncultivated; they barely clothe themselves with a rag; they have not the simplest culinary utensils; their weapons are the most rudimentary, their spears being of wood hardened at the point; their axes are of stone, and they have the nolla-nolla, a kind of mace of very hard wood, and the famous boomerang of the helicoidal form, which makes it return to the thrower after it has been hurled forward by a vigorous hand. The Australian black, we repeat, is a savage in every sense of the word.

To such beings nature has given the woman most suitable to them — the “lubra “ — strong enough to stand the fatigue of the wandering life; submit to the most laborious work, and carry the younger children and the materials for the camp. These unfortunate creatures are old at twenty-five years of age, and not only old but hideous, chewing the leaves of the pituri, which over-excite them during their interminable marches, and help them to Support the long abstinences from food.

And, will it be believed? Those who have dealings with the European colonists in the towns are beginning to follow the European fashions. Yes! They must have gowns and trains to their gowns; they must have hats and feathers in their hats. The men even cannot do without European headgear, and gratify their tastes by ransacking the shops of the sellers of old clothes.

Doubtless Jos Meritt had heard of the remarkable voyage made by Carl Lumholtz in Australia; and probably remembered this paragraph from the hardy Norwegian who stayed for six months among the wild cannibals of the north-east: —

“I met the two natives half-way. They had made themselves look very fine; one of them strutted about in a shirt, the other wore a woman’s’ hat. These things were thought a great deal of by the Australian negroes, and had passed from one tribe to another, from the more civilized, who live in the neighbourhood of the colonists, to those who have never had any intercourse with the whites. Many of my men used to borrow the hat, and were quite proud of taking their turn in wearing- it. One of them who walked in front of me hi puris naturalibus, sweating under the weight of my gun, was really an absurd sight in this hat, which he wore crossways. What travels this hat had made during its long voyage from the country of the whites to the mountains of the blacks!”

Jos Meritt must have known of this, and perhaps it would be among some Australian tribe, on the head of some chief of the northern or north-western territories, that he would find this remarkable hat>‘the search for which had sent him, at the risk of his life, among the cannibals of the Australian continent. But it should be noted that, if he had not succeeded among the natives of Queensland, he might meet with more success among the natives of Kilria, and so had resumed his adventurous peregrinations into the central desert.

On the 13th of October Tom Marix gave the signal to start at sunrise. The caravan resumed its usual order of march. It was a great satisfaction for Dolly to have Jane near her. The buggy, which carried them, and in which they could be alone, permitted of their exchanging their thoughts and confidences. Why should Jane have to journey to the end without daring to speak? Occasionally, when she saw the mutual affection, maternal and filial, which manifested itself every moment, by a look, a question, a word, between- Dolly and Godfrey, it seemed to her that her secret was about to escape her. But Len Burker's threats returned to her mind, and from fear of losing the boy, she even affected a certain quasi-indifference towards him which Mrs. Branican did not notice without vexation.

We can easily imagine how she felt when Dolly said to her one day, —

"You can understand, Jane, that with this very striking resemblance, and the instincts I felt so persistent within me, I had believed that my child had escaped death without Mr. Andrew or any of his friends knowing of it; and, hence, I thought that Godfrey was our son, John's son and my son. But no! Poor little Wat now lies in the cemetery at San Diego."

"Yes, it was there we laid him, dear Dolly," said Jane. "There is his grave among the flowers."

"Jane, Jane," exclaimed Dolly, "if God did not give me back my child He will give me back his father; He will give me back John."

On the 15th of October, at six o'clock in the evening, after leaving Mount Humphries behind, the caravan halted on the bank of Palmer Creek, one of the affluents of the Finke River. This creek was then almost dry, it being fed, like most of the streams in these regions, solely by the rains. It was thus very easy to cross, as was also Hughes' Creek, three days afterwards, thirty-four miles to the northward.

In that direction the Overland Telegraph Line stretches it: aerial wires — the threads of Ariadne, which lead from station to station. Occasionally a few groups of houses were met with, and more rarely farms, where Tom Marix, by paying well, could procure fresh meat. Godfrey and Zach Fren went out in search of news. The squatters were only too glad to give news concerning the wandering tribes that frequent these territories. Had they ever heard of a white man kept as a prisoner among the Indas to the northward or westward? Did they know if any travellers had recently ventured across these distant regions? The replies were in the negative. No trace, not the vaguest, could be discovered to put them on the track of Captain John. And hence the need of haste to reach Alice Spring, from which the caravan was still eighty miles away at least.

After leaving Hughes’ Creek progress became more difficult. The country was very mountainous, the road lay through narrow gorges, one after the other, cut through by hardly practicable ravines, which wound among the ramifications of the Water House ranges. Tom Marix and Godfrey were ahead, seeking out the best passes. The travellers on foot and horseback easily found a passage, even the buggies were drawn through without difficulty by the horses, and there was no need to be anxious about them; but the heavily laden drays could only be dragged along by the bullocks at the cost of extreme fatigue. The main thing was to avoid accidents, such as the breakage of wheels or axle-trees, which would take a long time to repair, if they did not necessitate the abandonment of the vehicle.

It was in the morning of the 19th of October that the caravan entered these territories, where the telegraph wires could no longer retain their rectilinear direction. The character of the ground had already caused them to incline towards the West, and this direction Tom Marix took.

But if the region offered a capriciously irregular surface, unfitted for a quick and steady advance, it had again become thickly wooded owing to the vicinity of the mountain masses. These “brigalow scrubs “had continually to be skirted, being impenetrable thickets consisting, for the most part, of the prolific family of acacias. On the banks of the streams were clumps of casuarinas as stripped of leaves as if the winter wind had shaken their branches. At the mouth of the gorges were a few of those calabash trees the trunks of which thick n out in the form of a bottle, and which the Australians call bottle-trees. In the same way as the eucalyptus, which empties a well when the roots reach into it, the calabash tree pumps up all the humidity from the ground, and its spongy wood is so impregnated with it that the starch it contains can be used for the nourishment of cattle.

Marsupials live in great numbers under the brigalow shrubs, among others the wallabies, which are so swift in their flight that often the natives, when they wish to catch them, are obliged to surround them with a circle of flame by setting light to the grass. In certain places were swarms of kangaroo rats, and those giant kangaroos which the whites hunt only for the pleasure of hunting, inasmuch as you must be a negro, and an Australian negro, to care to be fed on their coriaceous flesh. Once or twice Tom Marix and Godfrey managed to shoot two or three couples of these animals, the speed of which is that of a horse at a gallop. It need not be said the tail of these kangaroos makes excellent soup, which everyone enjoyed at the evening meal.

That night there was an alarm. The camp was troubled by one of those invasions of rats common in Australia at the time these rodents migrate. No one could sleep without risking being bitten, and no one did sleep.

Mrs. Branican and her companions departed in the morning, that of October 22. At sundown the caravan, had reached the last spurs of the MacDonnell ranges. Henceforward the travelling conditions would be much more favourable. Forty miles more, and the first part of the campaign would end at Alice Spring.

The expedition resumed its march at dawn on the 23rd. Immense plains extended up to the horizon. A few undulations varied the view. Clumps of trees relieved the monotonous aspect. The drays could easily follow the narrow road traced at the foot of the telegraph poles, which runs from station to station, situated at long distances apart. It is almost incredible that the line, which is very slightly guarded in these desert countries, could be respected by the natives. And to the observations made with regard to this, Tom Marix replied, —

“These nomads, I have said, were electrically punished by our engineer, and they believe that the thunder runs along the wires, and take care not to touch them. They even believe that the two ends are attached to the sun and the moon, and that those big balls would fall on their heads if they tried to drag them down.”

At eleven o’clock, according to custom, the first stage of the journey came to an end. The caravan stopped near a clump of eucalyptus, the leaves of which, falling like the crystal pendants of a lustre, gave hardly any shadow. A creek flowed by, or rather a thread of water, hardly enough to wet the pebbles in its bed. On the opposite bank the ground rose abruptly and barred the surface of the plain for a length of many miles from east to west. Behind these could still be seen the distant profile of the MacDonnell ranges-above the horizon.

The midday halt generally lasted till two o’clock. In this way there was avoided the necessity of journeying during the warmest part of the year. Properly speaking, it was a halt,-not an encampment. All that Tom Marix did was to unyoke the bullocks and unsaddle the horses. These animals fed on the spot. No tents were pitched; no fires lighted. Cold venison or tinned meat served for the second meal, which had been preceded by the breakfast at sunrise.

Everyone had come,- as usual, to sit or lie on the grass with which the hillside was covered. After the first half hour, the drivers and the men of the escort, white and black, had satisfied their hunger and were asleep until the time of departure.

Mrs. Branican, Jane, and Godfrey, formed a group apart. The native servant, Harriett had brought them a basket containing a few provisions. As they were eating they were talking of their arrival at Alice Spring. The hope which had never abandoned Dolly the boy shared to the full, and, even if there had been no room for hope, nothing could have shaken their convictions. Both were full of faith in the success of the campaign, their fixed resolution being not to leave Australian soil until they had satisfied themselves of the fate of Captain John.

Len Burker, pretending to cherish the same ideas was not unsparing of his encouragements when he had the opportunity. - That entered into his game, for it was his interest that Mrs. Branican should not return to America while he was forbidden to go there. Dolly, suspecting nothing of his odious plots, was very grateful for his support During the halt, Zach Fren and Tom Marix had a talk with regard to the new formation of the caravan after leaving Alice Spring. A serious question this. Was it not then that there-would commence the real difficulties of an expedition across Central Australia?

It was about half-past one when a dull noise was heard to the northward. It seemed liked a prolonged uproar, a continuous roll borne from the distance up to the encampment.

Mrs. Branican, Jane, and Godfrey, who had stood up, began to listen.

Tom Marix and Zach Fren had just come near them and were also listening.

What is the meaning of that noise?” asked Dolly.

“A storm, doubtless,” said the boatswain.

“It is more like the beating of the waves on the beach,’ said Godfrey.

However, there was no sign of a storm, and the atmosphere disclosed no electric intensity. As to any outburst of furious waters, that could only be produced by a sudden inundation due to the creeks being too full. But when Zach Fren would have explained the phenomenon in this way, Tom Marix replied, —

“An inundation in this part of the continent, at this time, after such a drought? Be assured, it is impossible!”

And he was right.

After violent storms, there occasionally come floods caused by the excessive abundance of the pluvial waters, and the liquid sheets will spread themselves over the low lands, and they often do in the wet seasons; but at the end of October this hypothesis was inadmissible.

Tom Marix, Zach Fren, and Godfrey climbed the slope of the hill and looked away northward and eastward.

There was nothing in view over the immense extent of gloomy desert plain; but, just above the horizon, there was a cloud of strange shape, which could not be confused with the mists the long heat had accumulated on the peripheric line between the earth and sky. It was not a cloud of mist in the vesicular state, it was rather an agglomeration of those outlined volutes caused by the discharges of artillery. As to the noise which came from the cloud of dust — and how could they doubt it was a cloud of dust? — it increased rapidly, and seemed to have a regular beat, a sort of colossal gallop echoed by the elastic ground of the immense prairie. Whence did it come?

“I know — I have seen it before — it’s sheep!” said Tom Marix.

“Sheep?” replied Godfrey, laughing. “If those are only sheep — ”

“Do not laugh, Godfrey!” said the chief of the escort; “there are, perhaps, thousands and thousands of sheep who are seized with panic. If I am not mistaken, they will pass us like an avalanche and destroy everything on their passage.”

Tom Marix did not exaggerate. When these animals go mad from some cause or other, which occasionally happens in these runs, nothing can stop them; they destroy the fences and escape. An old proverb says, “The king’s carriage stops before the sheep,” and it is the case that a flock of these stupid beasts will be annihilated rather than give way; but, if they are annihilated, they also annihilate when they precipitate themselves on anything in their enormous masses. And this was what had happened.

The cloud of dust covered a space of between two and three leagues, and there could not be less than a hundred thousand sheep, which a blind panic was hurling down the caravan road. Coming from north to south they were opening out like a flood on the surface of the plain, and would not stop until they fell exhausted by their madness.

“What is. to be done?” asked Zach Fren.

“To get into shelter as well as we can along the foot of the hill,” said Tom Marix.

There was nothing else to do, and the three went down. Insufficient as were the precautions indicated by Tom Marix, they were at once put into execution. The avalanche of sheep was but two miles from the encampment. The cloud rose in great spirals into the air, and from the cloud came a tumult of formidable bleatings.

The drays were run into shelter against the slope. The horses and cattle were compelled by their riders and drivers to lie on the ground so as to better resist the assault which might pass over without reaching them. The men leant against the slope. Godfrey placed himself near Dolly so as to protect her more efficaciously, and they waited.

Tom Marix went up the edge of the hill to look out over the plain, which was rolling like the sea under a strong breeze. The flock came along with a great noise and at great speed, and stretched over a third of the horizon.

As Tom Marix had said, the sheep could be counted by hundreds of thousands. In less than two minutes they would be in the encampment.

“Look out!” said Tom Marix.

And he slipped rapidly down the hill to where Mrs. Branican, Jane, Godfrey, and Zach Fren were huddled together.

Almost immediately the first line of sheep appeared on the crest. They did not stop, they could not stop. The animals at the head fell — some hundreds — in a heap, when the ground failed them. To the bleatings were added the neighing of the. horses, the bellowing of bullocks now terror-stricken. Everything' was effaced amid a thick cloud of dust, while the avalanche poured over the hill in irresistible impulse — a regular torrent of sheep.

It lasted five minutes. The first who got up were Tom Marix, Godfrey, and Zach Fren and they saw the frightened mass with the last lines undulating towards the south.

“Up, up!” exclaimed the chief of the escort.

Everyone arose. A few contusions, a little confusion in the drays — that was all the damage amounted to, thanks to the shelter of the slope.

Tom Marix, Godfrey, and Zach Fren at once climbed the hill again.

To the south the flying flock was disappearing behind a curtain of sand. To the north extended the plains with footprints all over its surface.

Suddenly Godfrey exclaimed, “There, there! look!”

Fifty yards from the hill two bodies lay on the ground — two natives, doubtless, carried away, thrown down, and probably killed by this flight of sheep.

Tom Marix and Godfrey ran towards these bodies.

What was their surprise! Jos Meritt and his servant, Gin-Ghi, were there, motionless, unconscious.

But they still breathed, and with a little attention soon recovered from this rough assault. They had scarcely opened their eyes than they got on their feet, although covered with bruises.

“Good! Oil, very good!” said Jos Meritt. Then he turned round. “And Gin-Ghi?” he asked.

“Gin-Ghi is here — or rather what remains of him!” replied the Chinaman, rubbing his back. “Decidedly too many sheep, my master Jos, a thousand and ten thousand times too many!”

“Never too many legs, never too many chops, Gin-Ghi; then never too many sheep!” said the gentleman. “It is a pity we did not catch one as they went by — ”

“Console yourself, Mr. Meritt,” said Zach Fren; “at the foot of the slope there are a few hundred at your service.”

“Very good! Oh, very good!” concluded the phlegmatic personage solemnly.

Then he addressed his servant, who after rubbing his back was now rubbing his shoulders, — “Gin-Ghi!”

“Master Jos!”

“Two chops for this evening,” he said; “two chops — underdone!”

Jos Meritt and Gin-Ghi then related what had passed. They were travelling about three miles in advance of the caravan when they were surprised by this charge of sheep. Their horses took flight and they could not stop them. Thrown off and trodden on, it was a miracle they were not killed, and it was a lucky chance al.-o that Mrs. Branican and her companions arrived in time to help them.

And so, after having escaped this very serious danger, a start was made, and at six o’clock in the evening the caravan reached Alice Spring.

CHAPTER VIII.

BEYOND ALICE SPRING.

Next day was October 24, and Mrs. Branican was busy in rearranging the expedition in view of a campaign that would probably be long, difficult, and dangerous, inasmuch as it would be in the almost unknown regions of Central Australia.

Alice Spring is but a station on the Overland Telegraph Line, consisting of some twenty houses and hardly worth the name of a village.

In the first place Mrs. Branican went in search of the head of the station, Mr. Flint. He might, perhaps, have some information regarding the Indas. Did this tribe of Western Australia, among whom Captain John was kept prisoner, ever come down into these central regions?

Mr. Flint had no information on the subject except that the Indas occasionally moved about in the west of Alexandra Land. He had never heard of John Branican. As to Harry Felton, all that he knew was that he had been found about eighty miles east of the telegraph line on the Queensland frontier. According to him, the best thing to do was to follow the instructions the unfortunate man had given just before he died, and take the expedition obliquely across the regions of Western Australia. He hoped that it would end favourably, and that Mrs. Branican would succeed where he, Flint, had failed six years before in searching for Leichardt — a project which the inter-tribal wars of the natives had soon compelled him' to abandon, he put himself at Mrs. Branican's disposal to provide her with all the resources of Alice Spring, and that, he added, was what he had done for David Lindsay when that traveller stopped there in 1886, before starting for Lake Nash and the eastern spurs of the MacDonnell ranges.

At this period the part of the Australian continent which the expedition was preparing to explore on the way north-westwards was as follows: —

At two hundred and sixty miles. from the station of Alice Spring, on the hundred and twenty-seventh meridian, runs the rectilinear frontier which from south to north separates South Australia, Alexandra Land, and Northern Australia, from that colony known as Western Australia, of which Perth is the capital. It is the largest, the least known, and the least populated of the seven great divisions of the continent. In reality, it is only geographically surveyed along the coasts, which comprise Nuyts Land, Leeuwin Land, Vlaming Land, Eendraght Land, De Witt Land, and Tasman Land..

Modern cartographers indicate in the interior of this territory, the distant solitudes of which the wandering natives are the only people to traverse, three distinct deserts.

1. — To the south the desert comprised between the thirtieth and twenty-eighth degree of latitude, explored by Forrest, in 1869, from the coast up to the twenty-third meridian, and which Giles traversed in its entirety in 1875.

2. — The Gibson Desert, between the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth degrees, the immense plains of which were crossed by Giles during the year 1876.

3. — The Great Sandy Desert, comprised between the twenty-third degree and the northern coast, which Colonel Warburton crossed from east to north-west in 1873, at the cost of the dangers we know of.

It was through this region that Mrs. Branican’s expedition was to carry on its search. Colonel Warburton’s itinerary was the one it was best to follow after the information given by Harry Felton. From the station at Alice Spring to the shore of the Indian Ocean, the journey of this bold explorer had occupied not less than four months out of the fifteen between September, 1872, and January, 1874. How much time would the one take which Mrs. Branican and her companions were about to attempt?

Dolly requested Zach Fren and Tom Marix not to lose a day, and, very actively helped by Mr. Flint, they were enabled to obey her orders.

Under the guidance of the Afghan drivers, the camels, to the number of thirty, had been at Alice Spring for a fortnight after having been bought at a high price on account of Mrs. Branican.

The introduction of camels into Australia dates only from the last thirty-two years. It was in 1860 that Mr. Elder imported a few from India. These useful animals are abstemious and robust, and of very rough appearance, but arc capable of bearing a load of one hundred and fifty kilogrammes and travelling forty kilometres in twenty- four hours “at their own pace.” Besides, they can remain a week without eating, and without drinking for six days in winter and three days in summer. They have consequently been called upon to render the same services in this arid continent as in the burning regions of Africa. There as here they endure almost with impunity the privations due to want of water or to excessive heat. The Desert of the Sahara and the Great Sandy Desert, are they not traversed by the corresponding parallels of the two hemispheres?

Mrs. Branican had thirty camels, twenty for riding and ten for the packs. There were more males than females, most of them being young and in good condition as regards strength and health. Just as the escort had Tom Marix for its chief, so the animals had for chief the oldest male camel, whom the others willingly obeyed. He directed them, mustered them at the halts, and prevented them running off with the females. With him dead or ill the troop was in danger of disbandment, and the drivers would be powerless to keep good order. It was therefore natural that this valuable animal should be assigned to Tom Marix, and these two chiefs — the one carrying the other — had their place assigned to them at the head of the caravan.

It goes without saying that the horses and bullocks which had brought the expedition from Farina Town to Alice Spring had to be left with Mr. Flint, with whom they will be found with the buggies and drays on the return. There was every likelihood that the expedition would return to Adelaide along the road marked by the posts of the Overland Telegraph Line.

Dolly and Jane were to occupy a “kihitka,” a sort of tent almost identical with that of the Arabs, and which was borne by one of the strongest camels. They could find, shelter from the rays of the sun behind the thick curtains, and even obtain protection against the rains which the violent storms discharge — too rarely, it is true — on to the central plains of the continent.

Harriett, the. waiting woman to Mrs. Branican, accustomed to the long journey of the nomads, preferred to follow on foot. These huge beasts, with two humps, seemed rather more adapted for carrying packages than human creatures.

Three saddled camels were reserved for Len Burker, Godfrey, and Zach Fren, who would soon learn to accustom themselves to their rough jolting gait. Besides, there was no question of adopting another rate of travel, as a portion of the expedition was to be unmounted. The trot would only become necessary when it was required to advance in front of the caravan to discover some well or spring during the crossing of the Great Sandy Desert.

As to the whites of the escort, it was for them that the other fifteen saddle camels were required. The blacks destined to lead the ten pack camels would journey on foot the twelve or fourteen miles of which the two daily stages would consist; that would not be too much for them.

In this way the caravan was reorganized in view of the inherent difficulties of this second period of the voyage. All had been arranged, with Mrs. Branican's approval, to be equal to the exigencies of the campaign, long as it might be, with due consideration for the beasts and the men. Better provided with the means of transport, better furnished with victuals and camp effects, working under conditions more favourable than had ever been those of the Australian explorers, there was some ground for hoping that it would attain its object.

It remains to be said what was to become of Jos Meritt. Was that gentleman, with his servant Gin-Ghi, to remain at Alice Spring? If he left it, would it be to continue along the telegraph line northwards? Would he not rather go to the east or the west in search of the native tribes? That was when the collector would have a chance of discovering the undiscoverable hat, the track of which he had been on for so long. But now that he was deprived of his mount, dispossessed of his baggage, denuded of his provisions, how could he continue his journey?

On many occasions Zach Fren had questioned Gin-Ghi about this. But the Celestial had replied that he never knew what his master would do, and that even his master did not know himself. It was certain, however, that Jos Meritt would not consent to remain behind so long as his monomania remained unsatisfied, and he, Gin-Ghi, native of Hong-Kong, was no nearer seeing the country "where the young Chinamen, clothed in silk, gather with their pointed fingers the flower of the water-lily."

It was now, however, the eve of departure, and Jos Meritt had said nothing of his plans, when Mrs. Branican was informed by Gin-Ghi that the gentleman requested the favour of a private interview.

Mrs. Branican, glad to be of as much service to this eccentric individual as possible, replied that she begged he would come to Mr. Flint’s house, where she had stayed since her arrival at the station.

Jos Meritt went there immediately — it was in the afternoon of October 25 — and as soon as he had sat himself down in front of Dolly, began as follows, —

“Mrs. Branican! Good! Oh, very good! I have no doubt — no — I do not doubt for a moment that you will find Captain John, and I am just as certain of putting my hand on the hat to the discovery of which I have devoted all the efforts of a very active life. Good! Oh, very good! You of course know why I have come to ransack the most secret regions of Australia?”

“I do know, Mr. Meritt,” replied Mrs. Branican, “and on my part I do not doubt that some day you will be repaid for so much perseverance.”

“Perseverance? Good! Oh, very good! The reason is that the hat, you see, is the only one in the world!”

“And you want it in your collection?”

“Regrettably, and I would give my head to be able to put it on!”

“Is it a man’s hat?” asked Dolly, who was interested, more out of kindness than curiosity .in the innocent hobby of this maniac.

"No, madam, no. A woman's hat. But what woman's! You will excuse me if I keep the secret of her name and position, for fear of exciting competition. Think, madam, if anybody else — "

"Then you have some clue?"

"Clue? Good! Oh, very good!, I have ascertained from much correspondence, inquiry, and peregrinations, that this hat has emigrated to Australia, after exciting vicissitudes, and that, descended from high places — yes, very high places! it now graces the head of the sovereign of a native tribe."

"But this tribe?"

"One of those wandering in the north or west of the continent. Good! Oh, very good! If necessary, I will visit them all, I will ransack them all. And as it is of no consequence which I begin with, I ask your permission to follow your caravan to the Indas."

"Willingly, Mr. Meritt," replied Dolly, "and I will give orders, if possible, two extra camels shall be procured."

"One will do, one for my servant and myself; that will be quite enough. I will ride the animal, and Gin-Ghi can walk,"

"You know we start to-morrow morning, Mr. Meritt?"

"To-morrow? Good! Oh, very good! I am not the man to delay you, Mrs. Branican. But it is understood, is it not, that I have nothing to do with anything concerning Captain John? That is your business. My business is my hat."

“Your hat, it is understood, Mr. Meritt!” replied Dolly.

Thereupon Jos Meritt retired, declaring that this intelligent, energetic, and generous woman deserved to discover her husband as much at least as he himself deserved to set hands on the jewel whose conquest would complete his collection of historic head-gear.

Gin-Ghi received orders to be in readiness for the morning, and had to be busy in packing up the few things which had escaped disaster after the affair of the sheep. As to the animal which the gentleman was to share with his servant, in the manner stated above, Mr. Flint managed to procure it, and that was worth a “Good! Oh, very good!” on the part of the very grateful Jos Meritt.

On the morning of the 26th of October, the signal for departure was given, after Mrs. Branican had taken leave of the chief of the station. Tom Marix and Godfrey took the head of the whites of the escort, who were mounted. Dolly and Jane took their seats in the kibitka, having Len Burker on one side, Zach Fren on the other. Then came, majestically astride between the two humps of his camel, Jos Meritt, followed by Gin-Ghi. Following these were the pack-camels and the blacks forming the second half of the escort.

At six o’clock in the morning the expedition, leaving the Overland Telegraph Line and Alice Spring to the west, disappeared behind one of the outliers of the MacDonnell Ranges.

In Australia during the month of October the heat is excessive; and consequently Tom Marix had .decided to travel only during the early hours of the day — from four to nine o’clock in the morning — and during the afternoon from four to eight o’clock. Even the nights began to be suffocating, and long halts were needful to acclimatize the caravan to the fatigues of the central regions.

They were not yet in the desert, with the aridity of its interminable plains, its creeks entirely dry, its wells containing only brackish water when the dryness of the soil has not completely exhausted them. At the base of the mountains extends that varied region where the ramifications of the MacDonnell and Strangways Ranges rise in an entanglement, and across which runs the telegraph line curving to the north-west. This direction the caravan had to abandon, so as to bear more to the westward, almost along the parallel of the tropic of Capricorn. This was almost the same route Giles had followed in 1872, and it cut that of Stuart twenty-five miles northward of Alice Spring.

The camels went very slowly over this hilly country. A few threads of creeks watered it here and there. Under the shelter of the trees running water could be found, fairly fresh, of which the animals drank sufficient to last them for many hours.

Skirting the scattered thickets, the sportsmen of the caravan, whose duty it was to provide the venison, were able to bring down several kinds of game — rabbits among others.

It will be remembered that the rabbit of Australia is what the locust is to Africa. These too prolific rodents will finish by eating up everything if care is not taken. Up to then the men of the caravan had rather despised them from an alimentary point of view, as real game abounds in the plains and forests of South Australia! There would be time enough to take to this rather insipid meat when the hares, the partridges, the bustards, the ducks, the pigeons and other fur and feather gave out. But on this river in the region of the MacDonnell Ranges they had to be content with what they could get, and that meant these rabbits, which were in swarms.

And in the evening of the 31st of October when Godfrey, Jos Meritt and Zach Fren were together, conversation worked round to these animals, the destruction of which cannot come too soon. And Godfrey having asked if there had always been rabbits in Australia, Tom Marix said, —

“No, my boy. They Were imported about thirty years ago. That was a nice present they made us! The animals have so multiplied as to devastate the country. Certain districts are so infested that neither sheep nor cattle can be raised on them. The fields are riddled with their holes like a colander, and the grass is eaten off down to the roots. It is absolute ruin, and I am ready to believe that it will not be the colonists who will eat the rabbits, but the rabbits who will eat the colonists.”

“Have they not used any strong measure to get rid of them?” said Zach Fren.

“Useless measures,” said Tom Marix, “for the numbers increase instead of diminishing. I know a man who spent forty thousand pounds in the destruction of the rabbits that ravaged his run. The Government has put a price on their head as they have done with tigers and serpents in British India. Bah! It is like a hydra; the heads spring up as fast as you cut them down, and even in greater numbers. Strychnine has been used, which has poisoned them in thousands, and nearly started a plague in the country. Nothing has succeeded.”

“Have I not heard,” said Godfrey, “that a French scientist, Monsieur Pasteur, proposed to destroy these rodents by giving them a disease?”

“Yes, and the means might have been efficacious. But it failed — to be used, although a reward of twenty thousand pounds was offered with that object in view. Queensland and New South Wales have just set up a wire fence eight hundred miles long to protect the east of the continent against the invasion of the rabbits. The rabbit is really a calamity!”

“Good! Oh, very good! Quite a calamity!” said Jos Meritt,” like the Yellow race, which will end by invading the five parts of the world. The Chinese are the rabbits of the future.”

Luckily Gin-Ghi was not there, for he would not have allowed to pass, without protest, this offensive comparison to the Celestials. Or rather, he would have shrugged his shoulders and laughed the peculiar laugh of his race, which is merely a long, noisy inspiration.

“And so,” said Zach Fren, “the Australians have given up the battle?”

“And in what way can they continue it?” asked Tom Marix.

“It seems to me,” said Jos Meritt, “that there is one sure way of getting rid of these rabbits.”

“And what is that?” asked Godfrey.

“To get the British Parliament to pass an Act that only beaver hats should be used in the United Kingdom and its dependencies. Then, as beaver hats are always made of rabbit skin — good! Oh, very good!”

And in that way Jos Meritt finished the sentence with his usual exclamation.

Meanwhile, until the British Parliament passed the Act, the best to be done was to feed on the rabbits shot on the journey. There would be so many fewer in Australia, and there could be no harm in knocking them over.

The other animals were of no use for food; but a few were seen of a peculiar species of great interest to naturalists. The one was an echidna of the monotreme family — an animal with a snout in the form of a beak, with horny lips, a body bristling with quills like a hedgehog, whose chief food consists of the insects it catches with its threadlike tongue stretched out of its burrow. The other was an ornithorhyncus, with the mandibles of a duck, and fur of a ruddy brown, covering a small body measuring a foot in length. The animals of both these species have the peculiarity of being ovoviviparous; they are hatched from eggs, and when they come out of the eggs they are fed from the breast.

One day Godfrey, who distinguished himself among the sportsmen, was lucky enough to sight and shoot an “ilrri,” a sort of kangaroo, which being only wounded, managed to get away among the neighbouring thickets. The boy had little to be sorry for, as, if Tom Marix was to be believed, the marsupial has no value beyond that due to the | difficulty of getting near him. It was not the same with a “bungari,” an animal of large size, with a blackish coat, who was climbing among the higher branches in marsupial fashion, hanging on with his cat-like claws and swinging his long tail. This animal is essentially nocturnal and hides himself so artfully among the branches that it is difficult to see him.

Tom Marix observed that the bungari is excellent game, the meat being very much superior to that of kangaroo when grilled over the embers. Unfortunately there were no means of testing this, and it was probable that bungaris would become rarer and rarer as they approached the desert. Evidently, as they advanced westwards, the caravan would be reduced to live entirely on its own resources.

However, in spite of the difficulties of the ground, Tom Marix managed to maintain the required rate of from twelve to fourteen miles a day — the rate on which the advance of the expedition was based. Although the heat was already very great — thirty to thirty-five degrees centigrade in the shade — the expedition bore it very comfortably. During the day, it is true, there were still occasional groups of trees under which they encamped under acceptable conditions. And there was no lack of water, although there was little more than a streamlet in the bed of the creeks. The halts regularly took place from nine o'clock till four o'clock in the afternoon, giving sufficient rest to the men and animals after the fatigue of the journey.

The country was uninhabited. The last runs had been left behind. There were no more paddocks, no more enclosures, no more of those numerous sheep, which the short, dry grass could not feed. And only a few natives were met with on their way to the stations of the Overland Telegraph Line.

On the 7th of November, in the afternoon, Godfrey, who was about half a mile in advance, signalled the presence of a horseman. This horseman was following a narrow path at the foot of the MacDonnell Ranges, whose base consists of quartz and metamorphic grit. Noticing the caravan, he put his spurs to his horse and came up to it at a gallop.

The camp had just been pitched under some slender eucalyptus trees, a group of two or three, giving but little shade. A little creek Went curving by, fed by springs in the central chain, and the roots of the eucalyptus had drunk up all the water.

Godfrey brought the man into the presence of Mrs. Branican. She began by offering him a bumper of whiskey, for which he seemed very grateful.

He was an Australian white, aged about thirty-five, one of those splendid horsemen, accustomed to the rain, which glides off their shining skin as if off a waterproof, accustomed to the sun, which has no more to brown on their thoroughly browned faces. He was a travelling postman, and fulfilled his duties with zeal and good humour, traversing the districts of the colony, distributing the letters, carrying the news from station to station, and to the villages scattered east and west of the telegraph line. He was then returning from Emu Spring, a station on the southern slope of the Bluff Ranges, after crossing the region extending up to the MacDonnell hills.

The postman, who belonged to the class of “rough men,” might be compared to the typical .good fellow, such as the old postillion in France. He knew how to endure hunger and thirst. Sure of a cordial welcome wherever he stopped, even when he had no letter to draw from his bag, resolute, brave, strong, his revolver in his belt, his gun slung on his shoulder, mounted on a swift, powerful horse, he travelled night and day with no fear of misadventure.

Mrs. Branican took pleasure in talking to him, in asking him fur information concerning the native tribes with whom he had come in contact.

The postman replied simply and obligingly. He had heard — like everybody else — of the wreck of the Franklin; but he did not know that an expedition, organized by John Branican’s wife, had left Adelaide to explore the central regions of the Australian continent. Mrs. Branican told him that, according to the revelations of Harry Felton, it was among the people of the tribe of the Indas that Captain John had been kept as prisoner for fourteen years.

“And in your journeys,” she asked, “did you ever come into contact with natives of that tribe?”

“No, madam, although the Indas have occasionally come near Alexandra Land,” replied the postman, “and I have often heard of them.”

“Perhaps you can tell us where they are now?” asked Zach Fren.

“With the wandering tribes that is difficult. One season they arc here, another there — ”

“But where were they last?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“I can tell you,” said the postman, “that six months ago the Indas were in the north-west of Western Australia, on the banks of the Fitzroy River. The natives of Tasnian Land are often in those regions. You know what it means to get there; you will have to cross the deserts of the centre and the west, and I need not tell you what risks you run. After all, with courage and energy, one can go far. Then be prepared for it, and a pleasant journey to you, Mrs. Branican!”

The postman accepted another large glass of whiskey, and even a few tins of provisions he slipped into his holsters. Then, mounting his horse, he disappeared round the last spur of the MacDonnell Ranges.

Two days afterwards the caravan passed the last outlier of the chain dominated by the summit of Mount Liebig. It was now on the edge of the desert, one hundred and thirty miles north-west of Alice Spring.

CHAPTER IX.

MRS. BRANICAN’S JOURNAL.

The word “desert” recalls to the mind the Sahara, with its immense sandy plains dotted with fresh and green oases. However, the central regions of the Australian continent have nothing in common with the northern regions of Africa, unless it is the rarity of water. “The water is in the shadow,” say the natives, and the traveller is reduced to run from spring to spring, often situated at considerable distances from each other. However, although the sand, whether extending in immense plains or relieved by hills, covers a large part of the Australian soil, this soil is not absolutely barren. Shrubs adorned with little flowers, a few scattered trees, gum trees, acacias or eucalyptus, make it look rather more cheerful than the nakedness of the Sahara. But these trees, these shrubs, yield neither edible fruits nor leaves for the caravans, which are obliged to carry their victuals with them; and animal life is but poorly represented in these solitudes by the flight of birds of pas-age.

Mrs. Branican kept with perfect regularity and exactitude her journal of the journey. A few extracts from this journal will inform us more clearly than a simple narrative, regarding the incidents of this toilsome journey. They will reveal also Dolly’s ardent soul, her firmness under trial, her unshakable and never-despairing tenacity, even at the moment when the greater part of her companions despaired around her. And from them we shall see of what a woman is capable when she devotes herself to the accomplishment of a duty.

“10th November. — We left our camp at Mount Liebig at. four o’clock in the morning. The postman gave us valuable information. It agreed with that of poor Felton. Yes, it is in the north-west and more specially on the banks of the Fitzroy River that we must look for the tribe of the Indas. Nearly eight hundred miles to cross! We will cross them. I will get there, even if I get there alone, even if I become the prisoner of this tribe. At least, I shall be with John!

“We will go north-west, almost on Colonel Warburton’s track. Our road will be almost the same as his up to Fitzroy River. May we not have to undergo the trials he underwent, nor leave behind us any of our companions dead of exhaustion! Unfortunately, the circumstances are not favourable. It was in the month of April that Colonel Warburton had left Alice Spring, which answers to the month of October in North America, that is to say, towards the end of the warm season. Our caravan, on the contrary, started from Alice Spring at the end of October, and we are in November, that is to say, at the beginning of the Australian summer. The heat is already excessive, being nearly thirty-five degrees centigrade in the shade. And for that all we can do is to wait for a cloud to pass over the sky or for some shelter under a group of trees.

“The order of march adopted by Tom Marix is very practical. The duration and the times of the stages arc well proportioned. Between four and eight o’clock in the morning we do our first stage; the second stage lasts from four o’clock to eight o’clock in the evening, and we rest during the night. In this way we avoid travelling during the burning noon. But what time is lost, what delay! Even supposing we meet with no obstacle, it will take us quite three months to reach the Fitzroy River.

“I am well satisfied with Tom Marix. Zach Fren and he are two resolute men on whom I can depend in all circumstances.

“Godfrey frightens me with his impassioned nature. He is always in front and often out of sight. I can scarcely keep him with me, and yet this boy loves me as if he were my son. Tom Marix has been lecturing him on his temerity. I hope he will benefit by it.

“Len Burker is almost always in the rear of the caravan, and seems to seek the company of the blacks of the escort rather than that of the whites. He has been long acquainted with their tastes, their instincts, their customs. When we meet with natives he is very useful, for he speaks their language well enough to understand them and be understood. Would that my poor Jane’s husband had seriously reformed, but I am afraid he has not! His look has not changed; he has one of those looks without frankness, which turn away from you.”

“13tk November. — There is nothing new during the last three days. What a comfort and consolation it is to have Jane near me! What a deal we have to say to each other in the kibitka when we are both shut in. I have made Jane share in my conviction; she no longer doubts that I shall find John. But the poor woman is always sorrowful. I have not said anything to her regarding the time when Len Burker forced her to follow him to Australia. Can quite see she could not tell me everything. It seems sometimes as though she was about to tell me something, but Len Burker watches her, and when she sees him, when he approaches, her manner changes and her face becomes uneasy. She is afraid of him. It is certain that this man is her master, and at a gesture from him she would follow him to the end of the world.

“Jane appears to have a great affection for Godfrey, and when the dear boy comes near our kibitka to talk to us she dare not say a word to him; not even to answer him. Her eyes turn away from him, she lowers her head. One would say she is in pain in his presence.

“To-day we crossed a long, marshy plain during the morning stage. We met with a few pools of water, brackish water, almost salt. Tom Marix told us these marshes are the remains of ancient lakes which were formerly connected with Lake Eyre and Lake Torrens, forming a sea which divided the continent. Fortunately we had some fresh water at our camp last night, and our camels quenched their thirst abundantly.

“It appears that many of these lagoons are found, not only in the low ground, but also in the more elevated regions.

“The ground is damp; the feet of the camels leave a sticky mud after treading in the saline crust which covers the pools. Sometimes the crust resists the pressure, and when the foot comes down roughly and breaks through there is a splash of liquid slime.

“We had great trouble in getting across the marshes, which extend for twelve miles towards the north-west.

“We have met with snakes since our departure from Adelaide. They are widely spread in Australia, and are in great numbers on the surface of these lagoons, which are dotted with dwarf trees and shrubs. One of the men of our escort was even bitten by one of these venomous reptiles, which are about three feet long, brown in colour and hair. I am told the scientific name is Trimesurus ikaheca. Tom Marix at once cauterized the wound with a pinch of powder dropped on the man’s arm and lighted. The man, who was a white, did not even utter a cry. I held his arm during the operation. He thanked me. I gave him an extra glass of whiskey. We have reason to believe the wound will not end fatally.

“We must take care where we tread. Even on a camel one is not completely out of the reach of these snakes. I am always afraid that Godfrey will commit some imprudence, and I tremble when I hear the blacks shouting ‘ Vin’dohe!’ which is the word for snake in the native language.

“This evening, while pitching tents for the night, two of our natives killed a reptile of large size. Tom Marix said that if two-thirds of the snakes which swarm in Australia are venomous, there are only five species whose venom is dangerous to man. The snake they have just killed measures twelve feet long; it is a sort of boa. Our Australians wished to cook it for supper. And we had to let them.

“This is what they did.

“They dug a trough in the sand and a native put into it a lot of stones he had previously warmed up in a fire, and then they strewed fragrant leaves. The snake, with its head and tail cut off, was laid, in this trough and covered with similar leaves, the heat being given by the hot stones. The earth is covered in and beaten down thick enough to prevent the steam of the cooking from escaping.

“We watched this culinary operation not without disgust; but, when the snake was cooked and taken out of this improvised oven, we agreed that its flesh exhaled a delicious odour. Neither Jane nor I cared to taste it, although Tom Marix assured us that, though the white flesh of these reptiles is a little insipid, their liver is a very savoury morsel.

“‘It has been compared,’ he said, ‘to the finest among the game birds, particularly the hazel grouse.’

“‘ The hazel grouse! Good! Oh, very good! Delicious, the hazel grouse 1So said Jos Meritt.

“And after being served with a little piece of the liver, he returned for a larger one, and he would have ended by eating the lot. What would you have?

“There was no need to ask Gin-Ghi. A good slice of smoking snake flesh, which he ate like an epicure, put him in the best of humours.

‘“Ai ya!’ he exclaimed with a long sigh of regret, ‘ with a few Ning Po oysters and Tao Ching wine one would think we were in Tie-Coung-Yuan.’

“Godfrey and Zach Fren, mastering their repugnance, took a few slices of snake. They thought it rather nice; I preferred to trust to their word.

“The reptile was devoured to the last bit by the natives of the escort. They did not even leave the few drops of grease the animal had yielded while it was being cooked.

“During the night our sleep was troubled by a dreadful howling from some distance off. It was a pack of dingoes. -

The dingo might be called the Australian jackal, for he is half dog and half wolf. He has a yellowish or reddish brown fur, and a long ornamental tail.’ Fortunately these dingoes kept to howling and did not attack the encampment. In a very large number they might be dangerous.”

“19th November. — The heat is becoming more and more overwhelming, and the creeks we meet with arc almost entirely dry. We have to dig down into their beds if we want a little water to fill our kegs. Before long we shall have to trust entirely to the springs, for the creeks will have disappeared.

“I am obliged to notice that there exists a truly inexplicable antipathy, almost instinctive, between Len Burker and Godfrey. Never do they address a word to each other. It is certain they avoid each other as much as possible.

“I was talking about this to Godfrey one day.

“‘You do not like Len Burker?’ I said.

“‘ No,” said he,” and do not ask me to like him.’

“‘But he is a connection of mine,’ I said; ‘he is my relative, Godfrey, and if you were to like me — ’

“‘ Mrs. Branican, I like you, but I shall never like him.’

“Dear Godfrey! what is then the presentiment, the secret reason which makes him speak thus?”

“27th November. — To-day we have seen a large stretch, an immense monotonous steppe, covered with spinifex. This is a spring herb appropriately called the vegetable porcupine. We have had to get through the clumps, which are sometimes five feet high, and the sharp thorns might have wounded our camels. The spinifex is already of a yellow colour and unfit for the animals to feed on. When they are young and green, camels do not refuse to eat them. But that is not the case now, and our only anxiety was to get along without being pricked by the bushes.

“Under these circumstances our progress was very painful. We must get accustomed to it though, for we have hundreds of miles to go over these spinifex plains. It is the shrub of the desert, the only one that will grow on the barren lands of the centre of Australia.

“The heat is gradually increasing, and there is no shade. Our men on foot are visibly suffering from this excessive temperature. And will it be believed that, five months later, according to Colonel Warburton, the thermometer may sink below freezing point, and the creeks will be covered with ice an inch thick?

“Then the creeks are numerous; now, however deep the bed may be, we cannot find a drop of water.

“Tom Marix has given orders to the mounted men to give up their mounts occasionally to their companions on foot. This measure has been taken with the object of satisfying the complaints of the blacks. I see with regret that Len Burker was their spokesman in this matter. Certainly the men had cause to complain; to march on foot among tufts of spinifex in a temperature hardly supportable in cither evening or morning is extremely fatiguing. But in any case it was not for Len Burker to excite their jealousy against the squadron of whites. He interfered with what did not concern him, and I told him so..

‘ What I did, Dolly,’ he replied, ‘was in the interest of all.’

“‘ That I wish to believe,’ I replied.

“‘The burden should be justly shared — ’

“‘ Leave that to me, Mr. Burker,’ said Tom Marix, who intervened in the discussion. ‘ I will take what measures I think necessary.’

“I saw that Len Burker went off with ill-disguised vexation and gave us an evil look. Jane noticed it, but her husband’s eyes fixed on hers, and the poor woman turned away her head.

“Tom Marix promised me to do all he could to save the men of the escort, white and black, from having to complain again.”

“5th December. — During our halts we are much tormented by white ants. These insects swarm in myriads. They are invisible under the fine sand, and it requires the pressure of the foot to make them appear on the surface.

‘“My skin is hard and horny,’ said Zach Fren, ‘a regular shark skin, but these ants make nothing of it.’

“The truth is that the skin of animals is not thick enough to resist the bite of their mandibles. We cannot lie down without being immediately attacked. To escape these insects we must get out in the rays of the sun, and they are so hot we can hardly support them, so that it is only changing one evil for another.

“The one who seems less ill-treated than any of us by these insects is the Chinaman. Is he too indolent for their importunate stings to triumph over his indolence? I do not know; but, while we are fidgeting and writhing about half mad, the privileged Gin-Ghi, stretched in the shade of a spinifex bush, never moves, and sleeps peacefully as if these wretched insects respected his yellow skin.

“Jos Meritt is just as patient, although his long body offers his assailants a huge field to devour. He never complains. Automatically and regularly his two lips open and shut again, and mechanically slaughter thousands of ants, and he is content to say, looking at his servant quite free from any bite, —

“‘ These Chinese are really exceptionally favoured by nature. Gin-Ghi!’

“‘ Sir!’

“‘ We shall have to change skins.’

“‘ Certainly,’ said the Celestial, ‘ if we change places at the same time.’

“‘ Good! Oh, very good! But to begin the change of skin, one of us must be skinned first, and I will begin on you.’

“‘ Ah, we will talk of that at the third moon,’ said Gin- Ghi.

“And he resumed his sleep at the fifth watch, to use his poetic language; that is to say, at the moment the caravan was about to resume its journey.”

“10th December. — This torment only cases when Tom Marix gives the signal for departure. It is lucky that the ants do not think of climbing up the legs of the camels. Our walkers are never free from these insupportable insects.

“Besides, during the march, we are almost devoured by enemies of another kind and no less disagreeable. These are the mosquitoes, which constitute one of the most formidable plagues of Australia. At their sting, particularly during the rainy season, cattle, as if they were struck by an epidemic, grow thin, waste away,, and even die, without it being possible to save them.

“But what would we give to be here in the rainy season. It is nothing, this plague of ants or mosquitoes, after the tortures of thirst caused by the heats of our Australian November. The want of water brings about the annihilation of all the intellectual faculties and all the physical strength. And our reserves are being exhausted and our kegs sound empty. We filled them at the last creek, and what they contain now is but a warm liquid, thick and shaken about, and it does not quench the thirst. Our position will soon be that of the Arab stokers on board the steamers in the Red Sea, the miserable men who fall half-fainting in front of the boiler fires.

“What is no less alarming is that our camels begin to crawl instead of keeping up their usual pace. Their necks are stretched out towards the horizon around the long, wide, level plain broken by no undulation or variation of the ground. Always the vast steppe covered by arid spinifex growing from its roots deep down in the sand. There is not a tree in sight, not a trace by which we can discover the presence of a well or a spring.”

“16th December. — In two stages our caravan has not moved nine miles to-day. For some days I have-noticed that our day’s work has become less and less. Notwithstanding their strength, our camels advance but wearily, particularly those carrying the packs.

“Tom Marix is in a rage when he sees the men stop before he has given the signal to halt. He goes up to the pack camels and hits them with his whip, the lash of which has but little effect on the skin of these rugged animals.

“Jos Meritt, with that dryness which never leaves him, said with regard to this, —

“‘ Good! Oh, very good. Mr. Marix! But I will give you a bit of advice; it is not the camel you should whip, but its rider.’

“And certainly Tom Marix would not have been displeased to follow the advice if I had not interfered. To the fatigues our men have to undergo we must have the prudence at least not to give them ill-treatment. Some of them might desert. I am afraid that that will happen, particularly if the idea occurs to any of the blacks; but Tom Marix assures me there is no danger.”

“From the 17th 1o the 27th December. — The journey continues under these conditions. During the first dais of the week the weather changed with the wind, which blew briskly. A few clouds came up from the north in the form of rounded volutes, as if they were huge bombs which a spark had exploded. That day, the 23rd, the spark came. A flash cleft the sky. Noisy claps of thunder of rare intensity were heard without the prolonged roll which the “echoes give out in mountainous countries. At the same time the atmospheric currents were set free with such violence that we could not keep on the camels. We had to get down and even to lie on the ground. Zach Fren, Godfrey, Tom Marix, and Len Burker had much difficulty in saving our kibitka from being blown away. As to camping under these circumstances or raising our tents among the tufts of spinifex, it was Impossible to think of it. In an instant all the things would have been scattered, torn, and rendered useless.

“‘ This is nothing,’ said Zach Fren, rubbing his hands; a storm is soon over.’

“‘Hurrah for the storm if it brings us water!’ said Godfrey.

“Godfrey was right. ‘Water, water!’ Is our cry. But will it rain? That is the question.

“Yes, that is all the question, for an abundant rain would be for us like the manna of the desert. Unfortunately, the air is so dry — as we can see by the curious sharpness of the thunder-claps — that the water of the clouds might remain in a state of vapour and not dissolve in rain. But It would have been difficult to imagine a more violent storm or a more deafening exchange of flashes and thunderings.

“I have been able to observe what I had heard regarding the Australian aborigines during these storms. They had no fear of being struck, they did not shut their eyes at the lightning, nor did they tremble at the thunder. In fact, the blacks of our escort uttered exclamations of joy. They were in no way affected like every other living creature when the air is charged with electricity at the moment when this electricity is manifested by the tearing asunder of the clouds in the heights of the sky.

“Assuredly, the nervous organization of these primitive beings cannot be very sensitive. Perhaps, after all, they greeted in the storm the flood it might send them. And in truth, the waiting for this was quite a Tantalus’ task.

“‘ It is really water,’ said Godfrey to me, ‘ good, pure water, the water of the sky, which is hanging over our heads! There is the lightning cleaving the clouds, and yet nothing falls.’

“‘ A little patience, my child,’ I replied; ‘ let us not despair.’

“‘ That is it,’ said Zach Fren. ‘ The clouds are thickening, and coming down at the same time. Ah! If the wind would only drop, this poise would soon end in cataracts!’

“It was to be feared that the storm would sweep away the mass of vapour towards the south without giving us a drop of water.

“About three o’clock in the afternoon it seemed that the northern horizon had begun to clear, and that the storm would soon end. This would be a cruel deception.

“‘ Good! Oh, very good!’

“Jos Meritt had uttered his usual exclamation. Never was this phrase of approval more appropriate. The Englishman had stretched out his hand and found it moistened with a few large drops.

“We had not to wait long for the deluge. We had to be quick in getting into our mackintoshes. Then without losing a minute we were ready to receive the beneficent shower. Everything was laid out on the ground, even blankets, towels and sheets, from which we could squeeze the water when they were soaked — the water for the camels to drink.

“But the camels were soon able to quench the thirst which tortured them. Streamlet and pools were quickly formed between the tufts of spinifex. The plain threatened to be transformed into a vast marsh. There was water for everybody. We were at first delighted at this abundant flood, which the dried ground absorbed like a sponge, and the first drops of which the sun, which had reappeared on the horizon, turned into vapour.

“Our reserve was assured for many days. There was a possibility of resuming our daily stages, with the men revived in body and. soul, and the animals firmly set on their feet again. The kegs were filled to the bung. Everything that could hold anything was used as a recipient. The camels did not neglect to fill the interior pouch, with which nature has provided them, and in which they can provision themselves with water for some time. And surprising as it may be, this pouch contains about fifteen gallons.

“Unfortunately these storms are rare, at least at this period of the year when the summer heat is at its greatest.

It is, therefore, a fortunate chance on which it would be imprudent to reckon for the future. The storm hardly lasted three hours, and the burning beds of the creeks soon absorbed the waters of the sky that had been poured into them. The springs, it is true, derived more benefit from the storm, and we shall have to congratulate ourselves if it has not been merely local. Let us hope it has refreshed the Australian plain for hundreds of miles round.”

“29th December. — Following almost the same route as Colonel Warburton, we have now reached Waterloo Spring, one hundred and forty miles from Mount Liebig. Our expedition has now reached the hundred and twenty- sixth degree of longitude. It has just covered the conventional straight line running from, south to north which divides the neighbouring colony from that vast portion of the continent called Western Australia.”

CHAPTER X.

A FEW MOKE EXTRACTS.

Waterloo Spring is not a town; it is not even a village. A few native huts, abandoned at this time, and that is all. The wandering natives only stop while the rainy season feeds the watercourses of this region — so that they stay there for a certain time. Waterloo in no way justifies the addition of the word ‘Spring,’ which is common to all the stations in the desert. No spring flows up from the ground, and if, as we have said, we meet “in the Sahara with fresh oases sheltered by trees, and watered by running streams, it is in vain we seek such things in the Australian desert.”

Such is the observation entered in Mrs. Branican’s journal, from which we will make a few more extracts. Better than more precise description, they are of a nature to make the country known, and show in all their horror the trials in store for the daring explorers who venture into it. They will, also help us to appreciate the mental strength and indomitable energy of their author, her unshakable resolution to attain her object at the cost of no matter what sacrifice.

30th December. — We have to stay a day at Waterloo Spring. These delays make me miserable, when I think of the distance which still separates us from the valley in which flows the Fitzroy. And “who knows if we may not have to seek beyond this valley for the tribe of Indas. Since Harry Felton left him, what has been the existence of my poor John? Did the natives avenge on him the flight of his companion? It will never do to think of that. The thought would kill me.

“Zach Fren tries to reassure me.

“‘Inasmuch,’ he says, ‘as Captain John and Harry Felton were the prisoners of these Indas for so many years, they must have some interest in keeping them, as Harry Felton led you to think. These natives must have recognized in the captain a white chief of great value, and they are waiting for an opportunity of surrendering him for a ransom in proportion to his importance. In my opinion the flight of his companion would not have made the position of Captain John any worse.’

“Would to God it is so!

“Today ends the year 1890. Fifteen years ago the Franklin left San Diego. Fifteen years! And it is four ‘ months and five days only since our caravan left Adelaide! This year, which begins for us in the desert, how will it end?

“My companions would not allow the day to pass without offering me their good wishes for the new year. My dear Jane embraced me, a prey to the keenest emotion, and for a long time I held her in my arms. Zach Fren and Tom Marix came to shake hands with me. I know that I have in them two friends who would die for me. Our people all surrounded me, tendering their affectionate felicitations. I say all, to the exclusion, however, of the blacks of the escort, whose discontent is shown on every occasion. It is clear that Tom Marix only keeps them in order with great trouble.

“Len Burker spoke to me with his habitual coolness, assuring me of the success of our enterprise. He had no doubt that we should attain our object. At the same time he asked if we were doing well in making for the Fitzroy River. The Indas, as far as his knowledge goes, are nomads, who are most frequently met with in the regions neighbouring on Queensland, that is to say in the east of the continent. It is true, he added, we are going where Harry Felton left his captain, but how were we to know that the Indas had not moved off, etc. etc.

All this is said in a tone which inspires no confidence, the tone certain people adopt when, they speak without looking at you.

But it was Godfrey whose greeting most affected me, He had made a nosegay of the little wild flowers that grow among the tufts of spinifex. He offered it me with such good grace, and said such loving things to me, that the tears came into my eyes. As I embraced him, and as his kisses replied to mine, why did the thought occur to me that my little Wat would be just his age, that he would be just like him.

Jane was there, she was so affected, and became so pale in Godfrey’s presence that I thought she was going to faint. But she recovered and her husband took her away; I dared not keep her.

We resumed our journey to-day at four o’clock in the afternoon, the sky being overcast. The heat is a little more bearable. The saddle: camels and pack camels, sufficiently rested from their fatigue, are going better. We even have had to check them so that the men on foot can follow them.

15th January. — For some days we have kept on at this increased speed. Two or three times the rain has fallen rather abundantly. We have not had to suffer thirst, and our reserve has been completely replenished. The most serious of all questions is this of water, and it is also the most alarming when we are travelling across these deserts. It means constant anxiety. In fact the springs appear to be few on the road we are following. Colonel Warburton noticed this on his journey which ended on the west coast of Tasman Land.

We are now living on our provisions, and on them only. It is not worth reckoning on what we can shoot, for the game has all fled from these miserable solitudes. A few flocks of pigeons are all we see, and these we cannot get near. They only rest among the tufts of spinifex after a long flight when their wings can no longer support them. Nevertheless our food is assured for many months, and on that point I am at ease. Zach Fren carefully sees that the food, the preserves, the flour, tea, coffee, etc. are distributed with method and regularity. We ourselves have to share with the rest; there are no exceptions. The blacks of the escort cannot complain that we are treated better than they are.

Here and there flit about a few sparrows dispersed over these regions, but they are not worth the trouble and fatigue of going after.

All the time there are these myriads of white ants, making our halting hours miserable; as to mosquitoes, the country is too dry for them to annoy us. We shall find them in the damp places, as Tom Marix observes. Well, we had better have their bites; and we shall not pay too dearly for the water which attracts them in thousands.

We reached Mary Spring, ninety miles from Waterloo, on the 23rd of January.

A group of slender trees rises in this place, a few eucalyptuses, which have exhausted the water in the ground and are evidently suffering.

“Their foliage hangs like tongues dry with thirst,” said Godfrey.

And the comparison was very good.

I notice that this young-, ardent and “resolute boy has lost nothing of the gaiety of his age. His health is not affected as I feared it would be, for he is just at the age when a lad begins to shape into a man. And this incredible likeness which troubles me. It is the same look when his eyes are fixed on mine, the same intonations when he speaks to me. And he has a way of saying things, of expressing his thoughts, which reminds me so of my poor John.

One day I drew Len Burker’s attention to this peculiarity.

“No, Dolly,” he replied, “it is a pure illusion on your part. I confess I am in no way struck with this resemblance. In my opinion it only exists in your imagination. It matters little, after all, and if it is for that reason you take so much interest in this boy — ”

“No, Len,” I replied, “if I feel such a lively affection for Godfrey, it is that I have seen his enthusiasm in what is the only object of my life, the finding and rescuing of John. He begged me to take him with me, and, touched by his persistence, I consented. And besides, he is one of my San Diego children, one of those poor boys without father or mother who have been brought up at Wat House. Godfrey is like a brother of my little Wat.”

“I know, I know, Dolly,” Len Burker replied, “and to a certain extent I understand you. May Heaven grant you will not have cause to repent of an act in which your sentiment has had more share than your reason.”

“I do not like to hear you talk like that, Len Burker,” I replied with vivacity. “Such observations wound me. What have you to complain of about Godfrey?”

"Oh! nothing, nothing as yet. But who knows? later on, perhaps, he will abuse the affection which is a little too pronounced regarding him. A child is picked up, no one knows whence he comes or who he is, what blood runs in his veins — "

"It is the blood of brave and honest men, I will answer for it!" I exclaimed. "On board the Brisbane he was liked by all, by his masters and his comrades, and the captain himself told me Godfrey had never had to be spoken to. Zach Fren, who knows him well, appreciates him as much as I do. Tell me, Len Burker, why you do not like this boy?"

"I — Dolly? I do not like him or dislike him; I am quite indifferent to him, that is all. My friendship I do not give to the first comer, and I think only of John and his rescue from the natives."

If Len Burker wished to give me a lesson, I did not accept it, for he aimed badly. I do not forget my husband for this child, but I am happy in thinking that Godfrey joins his efforts to mine. I am sure that John would approve of what I have done, and what I intend to do in the future for this boy.

When I told Jane of this conversation the poor woman bowed her head and said nothing.

For the future I shall say nothing. Jane will not and cannot say Len Burker is in the wrong. I understand this reserve; it is her duty.

29th January. — We have reached the shore of a small lake, a kind of lagoon, which Tom Marix believes to be White Lake. It justifies its name of White Lake, for in place of the water, which has evaporated, a layer of salt occupies the bed. Again a remnant of that interior sea which once separated Australia into two large islands.

Zach Fren made up our stock of salt, but we should have preferred drinking water.

There are in these parts a large number of rats, smaller than the ordinary rats. We have to provide against their attacks during our halts. They are so voracious that they gnaw everything within range.

But the blacks in no way despise them as food. They caught a few dozen of them, prepared them, cooked them, and regaled themselves with the objectionable meat. We shall have to run very short of provisions before we have recourse to that food. Heaven grant we may never be reduced to that!

We are now on the borders of the desert known as the Great Sandy Desert.

During the last twenty miles the ground has been gradually changing. The tufts of spinifex are fewer and this meagre vegetation is disappearing. Is the soil so barren that it cannot support this not very exacting, vegetation? Who would not believe it if he saw the immense plain undulating with a few hillocks of red sand, and without any trace of the bed of a creek? One would suppose it never rained on these territories devoured by the sun, not even in the winter.

Amid this mournful aridity, this disquieting dryness, there is not one of us who has not been seized with the most mournful presentiments. Tom Marix shows me these desolate solitudes on the map; it is nearly a blank space crossed by the routes of Giles and Gibson. Towards the north, that of Colonel Warburton shows clearly the uncertainties of his march by the numerous turns and zigzags necessitated by his search for springs Here his men were ill, exhausted, and almost dead; there his camels were decimated, his son dying. Better not read the account of his journey if we wish to follow him — the bravest recoiled. But I have read it and I will read it again. I must not let myself be frightened. What this explorer did for the study of the unknown regions of the Australian continent, I will do to find John. The only object of my life is that, and I will accomplish it!

yd February. — For the last five days we have had to shorten our-stages. So much more time lost on the long road we are travelling. It is extremely regrettable. Our caravan, retarded by hilly ground, is incapable of following the straight line. The ground is very hilly and oblige us to ascend and descend some very steep slopes. In many places it is cut up into sand-hills round which the camels have to work, as they cannot climb them. There are also some sandy hills a hundred feet high, at intervals of six or seven hundred feet; the men on foot sink into the sand, and the advance becomes more and more laborious.

The heat is overwhelming. It is impossible to imagine the intensity with which the sun darts down its rays. They are arrows of fire which pierce you in a thousand places. Jane and I can hardly remain under the shelter of our kibitka. What must our companions endure during the morning and evening stages? Zach Fren, strong as he is, buffers much from these fatigues, but he does not complain; he has lost nothing of his good humour, this devoted friend whose existence is bound up with mine!

Jos Meritt bears up with a quiet courage, a resistance to privation, one is tempted to envy. Gin-Ghi, less patient, complains without its having any effect on his master. And when one thinks that this eccentric man is suffering all this for the sake of a hat!

“Good! Oh! very good!” he replies, when anything is said about this. “But also what a rarity of a hat!”

“Some old mountebank’s rag!” said Zach Fren, shrugging his shoulders.

“Some old .rubbish you would hot even wear on your feet!” retorted Gin-Ghi.

Between eight o’clock and four o’clock it would be impossible to move a step. We camp anywhere; we put up two or three tents. The men of the escort, black and white, stretch themselves where they can in the shade of the camels. The worst of it is that the water is beginning to fail. What will become of us if we meet with only dry springs? I know Tom Marix is very uneasy, although he tries to hide his uneasiness. He is wrong, he would do better to tell me everything, I could bear everything, and I should not be afraid.

14th February. — Eleven days have passed during which we have had but two hours’ rain. We could hardly replenish our kegs after the men had had enough to satisfy their thirst, and the animals had taken enough for their store. Under these circumstances we have reached Emily Spring, which is quite dry. Our camels are exhausted; Jos Meritt docs not know what to do to get his earner along. He will not strike it, however, and merely appeals to its feelings. I heard him say, —

“Look here, you poor brute, if you arc in pain, at least you have no grief!”

But the poor brute did not seem to understand the distinction.

We will resume our journey more uneasy than we have ever been.

Two camels arc sick. “They are crawling along, and will not be able to last. The provisions carried by the pack camel have been shifted on to a saddle camel.

Luckily the male camel, ridden by Tom Marix, has kept its strength up to now. Without him, the others, more particularly the females, would disband, and nothing would stop them.

We have found it necessary to leave behind the two which fell sick. To leave them to die of hunger and thirst, a prey to a long agony, would have been more inhuman than to end their misery at a blow.

The caravan journeys on and turns round a sand-hill. There are two reports. Tom Marix returns to rejoin us, and the journey continues.

What is more alarming is that the health of two of our people gives us much uneasiness. They have been seized with fever, and we have dosed them well with sulphate of quinine, with which the medicine-chest is well supplied. But a burning thirst devours them. Our store of water is exhausted, and nothing indicates that we are in the proximity of a spring.

The invalids are on their backs on two camels which their companions lead by the hand. Man cannot be left behind like camels. We must look after them; it is our duty, and we will not fail in it. But this pitiless temperature is gradually devouring them.

Those of us who stand fatigue best, who can bear excessive heat without suffering, are the blacks of our escort.

But though they have less to bear, their discontent increases daily. In vain Tom Marix busies himself in tranquillizing them. The most excited keep apart when we halt, and talk together, and the signs of an approaching revolt are only too evident.

During the 21st, all, with one accord, refused to continue the journey to the north-west, giving as a reason that they were dying of thirst. The reason was only too well founded. For twelve hours there had not been a single drop-of water in our kegs. We are reduced to alcoholic drinks, the effect of which is deplorable, as they get into cur heads.

I had to personally intervene among these obstinate natives. I had to make them understand that to stop under such conditions was not the way to put an end to their sufferings.

“What we want,” said one of them, ““is to go back.”

“Back? Whereto?”

“To Mary Spring.”

“To Mary Spring! “I answered, “there is no water there, and you know it.”

“If there is no water at Mary Spring,” replied the black, “we may find it a little further up, near Mount Wilson, in the direction of Sturt Creek.”

I looked at Tom Marix. He went to look at the special map of the Great Sandy Desert. We consulted it. In fact, north of Mary Spring there is a somewhat important watercourse which might not perhaps be entirely dry. But how could the native have known of the existence of this watercourse? I interrogated him on the subject. He hesitated at first, and at last told me

Mr. Burker had spoken to him about it. It was from him that the proposition of heading for Sturt Creek had come.

I am much annoyed that Len Burker has had the imprudence — was it only imprudence? — to instigate a part <. f the escort to return towards the east. It will riot only lead to delay, but to a serious modification of our route, which will take us a long way from Fitzroy River.

I told him what I thought rather strongly.

“What would you have, Dolly?” he replied. “Better submit to delays and go a little way round, than to obstinately follow a road where there arc no wells.”

“In that case, Mr. Burker,” said Zach Fren, sharply, “you should have spoken to Mrs. Branican, and not to the blacks.”

“You are carrying on with the blacks in such a way,” said Tom Marix, “that I have no control over them. Are you in command of them. Mr. Burker.’ or am I?”

“I think that observation is rather unseemly, Tom Marix,” said Len Burker.

“Unseemly or not, it is justified by your proceedings, sir, and you would do well to think over it.”

“I take orders from nobody here but from Mrs. Branican — ”

“Be it so, Len Burker,” I replied; “but for the future, if you have any observations to make, I’ beg you will make them to me and not to others.”

“Mrs. Branican,” said Godfrey, “shall I go on in advance of the caravan in search of a well? I am sure to find one.”

“A well without water!” muttered Len Burker, shrugging his shoulders.

I can easily imagine what Jane must have suffered as she heard this discussion. Her husband’s conduct, which was so prejudicial to the good feeling which ought to exist among our people might be the cause of serious difficulty. I had to support Tom Marix in obtaining the consent of the blacks not to persevere in their intention of returning to the rear. We succeeded after considerable difficulty. But they declared that if we did not find water in twenty- four hours, they would return to Mary Spring in order to reach Sturt Creek.

2nd February — What terrible sufferings we have had during the two days which followed. The state of our two sick companions has become worse. Three camels fell, never to rise again, their heads stretched out on the ground, their bodies swollen, and incapable of making any movement. We had to shoot them. Two of these were saddle animals and one was a pack camel. Now four of the whites of the escort have to travel on foot.

And there is not a human creature in this Great Sandy Desert, not an Australian in these regions of Tasman Land to give us any information as to the position of the wells. Evidently our caravan has diverged from Colonel Warburton’s route, for the colonel never had such long stages without being able to replenish his store of water. Often, it is true, the springs were half-dry and contained only a muddy, warm and barely drinkable liquid. But we must be content.

To-day, at last, at the end of our first stage, we were able to slake our thirst. It was Godfrey who discovered a spring near Emily Spring.

In the morning of the 23rd the brave boy went off some miles in advance, and two hours afterwards we saw him returning in all haste.

“A well! a well!” he shouted, as far off as we could hear him.

At this cry our little world received new life. The camels hurried on. It seemed as though our Godfrey had said to them, —

“Water! water!”

An hour afterwards the caravan halted under a group of trees with dried foliage which shaded the well. Luckily they were gum trees and not eucalyptuses, which would have dried it up to the last drop.

But such wells a very few men would empty in an instant. The water is not abundant and soon loses itself in the sands. The wells have not been made by the hands of man, they are merely natural cavities formed during the rainy season. Rarely are they more than five or six feet deep — just enough for the water, shaded from the solar rays, to escape evaporation and remain during the long heats of summer.

Sometimes these wells are without the group of trees to distinguish them, and then it is only too easy to pass near them without noticing them. A careful look-out has consequently to be kept, as Colonel Warburton very justly observes. This we remembered.

This time Godfrey had made a fortunate find. The well, at which we encamped at eleven o’clock in the morning, contained more water than was required for our camels and our reserve. The water was limpid, for it was filtered through the sand, and it had retained its freshness owing to the cavity being at the foot of a sand-hill and shaded from the direct rays of the sun.

It was with delight that we refreshed ourselves, and we had to warn our companions to drink with moderation, lest they should make themselves ill.

One cannot imagine the beneficent effect of water after a long torture from thirst. The result is immediate, the most exhausted are revived, strength returns instantly, and courage with the strength. It is more than to live again, it is to be born again.

Next day, at four o’clock in the morning, we resumed our journey, and travelled north-west so as to reach Joanna Spring, about one hundred and ninety miles from Mary Spring.

These few notes extracted from Mrs. Branican’s journal are enough to show that her energy had not abandoned her for an instant. We must now resume the account of this journey, for which the future had in reserve such eventualities impossible to foresee, and so serious in their consequences.

CHAPTER XI.

INDICATIONS AND INCIDENTS.

As we have seen from the last lines of Mrs. Branican’s journal, courage and confidence had returned to the men of the caravan. Never had they been short of food, and the provisions would last for many months. Water alone had been wanting for a few stages; but the well discovered by Godfrey had yielded more than they wanted, and they started from it in good spirits.

It is true they always had to face an overwhelming heat, to breathe the fiery air of the surface of these interminable plains, without trees and without shade. And the travellers who can bear this excessive temperature are not very numerous, particularly if they are not natives of Australia. Where the native resists, the foreigner succumbs. The man has to be made to suit this murderous climate.

The hills of red sand, with their long undulations and symmetrical ripples, continued. The ground was so hot that the whites could not walk on it with naked feet. The blacks were accustomed to it, and should have had no reason to complain of it; but they did complain, and their ill-will showed itself every day more clearly. If Tom Marix had not had to keep the escort at its full strength, in ease he had to defend the caravan against some wandering tribe, he would have “assuredly asked Mrs. Branican to dismiss the blacks from her service.

Every day he saw the difficulties inherent to such an expedition increasing, and when he said to himself that these fatigues were undergone and these dangers faced for nothing, it was only natural that he could not completely hide his thoughts. Zach Fren, however, was the only one to discover this.

“Truly, Tom,” said he one day, “I should not have thought you were the man to be discouraged.”

“Me discouraged! You are mistaken, Zach, at least in the sense that I shall fail in the courage that will make me fulfil my undertaking. It is not crossing the desert I am afraid of, but, after we have crossed it, to have to cross it back again without having succeeded.”

“Do you think, Tom, that Captain John has died since Harry Felton left him?”

“I know nothing about it, Zach, and you know no more.”

‘ I know it as well as I know that a ship goes to starboard when you put her helm to port.”

“There, Zach, you talk like Mrs. Branican and Godfrey. You take your hopes for certainties. I hope you are right. But if Captain John is alive, he is in the power of the Indas, and where are the Indas?”

“They are where they are, Tom, and that is where the caravan will go if we box the compass for the next six months. If we cannot find them on one tack, we will try them on the other; but we will get them at last.”

“If we were at sea, yes; but then we should know the port to which we were bound. But in these regions who knows where they will go?”

“We shall not know by despairing.”

“I am not despairing, Zach.”

“Perhaps not, Tom; but, worse than that, you will soon lead people to suppose so. The man who does not hide his anxiety makes a bad captain and discourages his crew. Take care of you face, Tom, not for Mrs. Branican’s sake, for nothing can shake her, but for the whites of our escort. If they are going to make common cause with the blacks — ”

“I will answer for them as I answer for myself — ”

“And I will answer for you, Tom! But don’t let us talk of hauling down the flag while the masts are standing.”

“Who is going to talk of that, unless it is Len Burker?”

“Oh, ah, Tom! If I had been captain he would have been down in the hold long ago with a shot at each foot J But as it is, look after him; I have got my eye upon him.”

Zach Fren was right in keeping an eye on Len Burker. If the expedition broke up, he would be the cause of it. He it was who excited to disorder the blacks of the escort on whom Tom Marix had thought he could trust. This was one of the things which might imperil the success of the campaign. But, even if it had not existed, Tom Marix retained hardly the trace of an illusion as to the possibility, of meeting with the Indas and rescuing Captain John.

But if the caravan did not go quite at a venture in making for the Fitzroy River, there was one circumstance which might compel the Indas to leave Tasman Land, and that was the chance of war. It is seldom that there is peace between the tribes, which number from two hundred and fifty to three hundred souls. There are inveterate hatreds, blood rivalries, and these are kept alive with all the more passion owing to war among cannibals being a sort of hunting enterprise. The enemy is not only the enemy, he is edible game, and the victor eats the vanquished. Hence, battles, pursuits, retreats, which may take the natives long distances. It was, therefore, of importance to know if the Indas had left their territories, and the only way to do this was to catch an Australian coming from the north-west.

This was the great object of Tom Marix, assiduously assisted by Godfrey, who, in spite of the recommendations and even the injunctions of Mrs. Branican, was often out scouting for miles. When he was not looking for some well he was looking for some blacks, but as yet without success. The country was deserted, and, in fact, what human being, however degraded he might be, would be able to exist without the mere necessities of existence; To venture beyond the telegraph line was to expose himself to the terrible experiences we have described.

At last, on the 9th of March, at half-past nine in the morning, there was heard a call in the distance — a call consisting of these two syllables, Coo-cch!

“There are blacks somewhere about,” said Tom Marix.

“Blacks!” said Dolly.

“Yes, madam, that is the way they call to each other.”

“Let us get up with them,” said Zach Fren.

The caravan advanced a hundred yards, and Godfrey signalled two blacks among the sand-hills. To get hold of them was not easy, for the Australians run away from the whites as soon as they see them. These tried to hide themselves among some tufts of spinifex. But the escort managed to surround them, and they were brought before Mrs. Branican.

The one was about fifty; the other was his son, aged twenty. Both were on their way to Lake Woods station on the telegraph line. A few presents of cloth and some cakes of tobacco soon pacified them, and they were quite ready to answer the questions put to them by Tom Marix, their replies being at once translated for the benefit of Mrs. Branican, Godfrey, Zach Fren, and their companions.

‘The Australians were at first asked where their were going, which was not of much interest But Tom Marix asked them where they came from, and this deserved serious attention.

“We come from there — far — very far,” answered the father, pointing to the north-west.

“From the coast?”

“No. From the interior.”

“From Tasman Land?”

“Yes. From Fitzroy River.”

It was to this river, as we know, that the caravan was bound.

“Of what tribe are you?” asked Tom Marix.

“Of the tribe of the Goursis.”

“Is that a wandering tribe?”

The native did not understand what that meant.

“Does your tribe go from camp to camp,” asked Tom, “or does it live in a village?”

“It lives in the village of Goursi,” said the son, who seemed fairly intelligent.

“Is this village near the Fitzroy?”

“Yes. Ten long days “from where it enters the sea.”

This was in King’s Sound into which the Fitzroy flows,, and it was there that the voyage of the Dolly Hope had ended in 1883. The ten days showed that the village of Goursi was about a hundred miles from the coast.

This was at once pointed out by Godfrey on the map of Western Australia — a map which showed the course of the Fitzroy for two hundred miles from its source in the interior of Tasman Land.

“Do you know the tribe of the Indas?” asked Tom Marix.

The looks of father and son kindled at the name.

“Evidently these tribes are enemies; they are at war with each other,” said Tom Marix to Mrs. Branican.

“That is very likely,” said Dolly, “and perhaps these Goursis can tell us where the Indas are now. Ask them, Tom Marix and get a reply as precise as possible. On that reply the success of our efforts may depend.”

Tom Marix put the question, and the elder of the blacks replied without hesitation that the tribe of the Indas was then on the upper course of the Fitzroy.

“How far are they from the village of Goursi?” asked Tom Marix.

“Twenty days towards the rising sun,” said the younger.

This distance, on reference to the map, put the camp of the Indas about two hundred and eighty miles from the place then reached by the caravan. And the information agreed with that previously given by Harry Felton.

“Your tribe is often at war with the Indas?” asked Tom Marix.

“Always!,” replied the son.

And his emphasis and gesture indicated the strength of their cannibal hatreds.

“And we will pursue them,” added the father, “and they will be beaten when the white chief is no longer there to give them his advice.”

We can imagine what were the feelings of Mrs. Branican and her companions when Tom Marix translated this reply. This white chief, for so many years a prisoner of the Indas — who could doubt that it was Captain John?

And at Dolly’s suggestion Tom Marix questioned the two natives closely. They could give but very little precise information regarding this white chief. But they were able to say that three months ago, during the last terrible fight between the Goursis and the Indas, he was in the power of the latter.

“And without him,” said the young Australian, “the Indas would be only women.”

That this was an exaggeration on the part of the natives it mattered little. All that was wanted was known. John Branican and the Indas were less than three hundred miles away to the north-west. They would be met with on the banks of the Fitzroy.

As the camp was about to break up Jos Meritt detained for a moment the two men whom Mrs. Branican was about to send away with “more presents. And then the Englishman begged Tom Marix to ask them a question relative to the hat of ceremony worn by the chief of the tribe of the Goursis and the chief of the tribe of the Indas.

In truth, as he awaited their reply, Jos Meritt was no less excited than Dolly had been during the examination of the natives.

He had reason to be satisfied, had the worthy collector, and the “Good! Oh, very good!” flashed from his lips when he learnt that hats of foreign manufacture were not uncommon among the peoples of the North-West. These hats were habitually worn by the principal Australian chiefs when they took part in grand ceremonies.

“You understand, Mrs. Branican,” said Jos Meritt, “that to find Captain John is all very well, but to set hands on the historic treasure I have been hunting for through the five quarters of the globe is still better — ”

“Evidently!” replied Mrs. Branican.

“You heard, Gin-Ghi?’’ added Jos Meritt, turning to his servant.

“I heard,” said the Chinaman, “and when we have found this hat — ”

“We will return to England, we will return to Liverpool, and then, Gin-Ghi, with a lovely black hat on your head, and a red silk robe, draped with a macoual of yellow silk, you will have nothing else to do than to show my collection. Are you satisfied?”

“As the haitang flower which opens in the breeze when the rabbit of Jade descends towards the west,” replied Gin-Ghi, poetically.

But at the same time he shook his head as if as little convinced of his future happiness as if his master had told him he would become a Mandarin of Seven Buttons.

Len Burker had been present at the conversation between Tom Marix and the two natives, whose language he understood; but he had taken no part in it. Not a question relative to Captain John had come from him. He listened attentively, noting in his memory the information regarding the present position of the Indas. He saw on the map the spot the tribe probably occupied on the upper course of the Fitzroy river; he calculated the distance the caravan would have to travel to get there, and the time it would take.

It would be a matter of some weeks if no obstacle arose, if the means of locomotion did not fail, if the fatigues of the journey and the sufferings due to the heat of the climate were happily surmounted. And so Len Burker, feeling that the preciousness of this information would give courage to all, was in a terrible rage. What! The deliverance of Captain John was to be accomplished, and, thanks to the ransom she was bringing, Dolly would rescue him from the Indas?

While Len Burker was reflecting on this chain of events, Jane saw his brow become clouded, his eyes grow bloodshot, and his whole physiognomy betray the detestable thoughts which agitated him. She was terrified, she had a presentiment of an approaching catastrophe, and at a moment when her husband’s eyes were fixed on hers she felt herself fainting.

The unhappy woman had divined what was passing in the mind of this man, who was capable of every crime to make sure of the fortune of Mrs. Branican.

Len Burker said to himself that, if John and Dolly met, his whole future was ruined. It would mean, sooner or later, the discovery of Godfrey's relationship to them. The secret would end by escaping from his wife, unless he made it impossible for her to speak; but it was necessary Jane should be alive for the fortune to reach her after Mrs. Branican's death.

It was thus necessary to separate Jane and Dolly, and, with the object of making away with John Branican, reach the Indas before the caravan.

With an unscrupulous and resolute man like Len Burker this plan was quite possible, and besides, circumstances soon helped him.

That day, at four o'clock in the afternoon, Tom Marix gave the signal of departure, and the expedition resumed its march in the usual order. The past fatigues were forgotten. Dolly had communicated to her companions the energy which animated her. They were nearing their object. Success appeared beyond doubt. The blacks of the escort seemed to obey willingly, and probably Tom Marix would have been able to reckon on their help to the end if Len Burker had not been there to incite the spirit of treason and revolt.

The caravan, at a good rate of advance, had almost resumed the route of Colonel Warburton The heat increased and the nights were stifling. On. this plain, without a single clump of trees, no shade could be found but in the shelter of the sand-hills, and this shade was very narrow owing to the almost verticality of the solar rays.

And yet in this lower latitude than the tropical line, that is to say, well within the torrid zone, it was not so much the excesses of the Australian climate the men had to suffer most from, but there was the more serious question of water, which was daily present. Wells had to besought for at great distances, and that interfered with the route, which was lengthened by a thousand deviations. Oftenest it was Godfrey, always ready — sometimes it was Tom Marix, always indefatigable — who took this duty. Mrs. Branican never saw them ride off without a sinking at the heart. But nothing could be hoped for from the storms which are extremely rare at this time of the year. On the sky, which was clear from one horizon to the other, there was not the sign of a cloud. Water could only come from the ground.

When Tom Marix and Godfrey had discovered a well if. was towards it that the caravan went. The stage was resumed, the animals, were urged on by this goad of thirst; and what was it that they oftenest found? A muddy liquid at the bottom of a cavity swarming with rats. If the blacks and the whites of the escort did not hesitate to drink, Dolly, Jane, Godfrey, Zach Fren, and Len Burker had the prudence to wait until Tom Marix had cleared out the well, thrown away the dirt on the top, and dug in the sands for less impure water. Then they drank; and then the kegs were filled which were to yield enough to last till the next well was reached.

So the journey went on for eight days, from the 10th to the 17th of March, without any incident, but with an increase of fatigue which could not last much longer. The state of the two sick men did not improve, and a fatal issue was feared. With five camels short, Tom Marix was embarrassed by his transport difficulties.

He began to be very uneasy, and Mrs. Branican was quite as much so, although she let nothing appear. The first on the march, the last to halt, she afforded an example of the most extraordinary courage joined to a confidence nothing could shake.

And what sacrifices would she not have made to avoid these incessant delays, to shorten this interminable journey!

One day she asked Tom Marix why he did not make direct for the upper course of the Fitzroy, where the information given by the blacks placed the last encampment of the Indas.

“I thought of that,’’ said Tom Marix, “but it is always this question of water which stops me and troubles me, Mrs. Branican. In going towards Joanna Spring we are sure of meeting a certain number of the wells reported by Colonel Warburton.’’

“And are there not any in the regions to the north?”

“It is possible, but I am not certain; and besides, we must admit the possibility that these wells may now be dry, while, by continuing to the west, we are sure of reaching Oakover River, where Colonel Warburton halted. This river is a running stream, and we shall be sure of renewing our supplies at it before reaching the valley of the Fitzroy.”

“Quite so, Tom Marix,” said Mrs. Branican, “and as we can do no better, let us make for Joanna Spring.”

This was done, and the fatigues of this part of the journey exceeded anything the caravan had had to bear up to then. Although the summer season was still in its third month, the temperature maintained an intolerable average of forty degrees centigrade in the shade, and by this the shade of the night must be understood. In fact, a cloud would have been sought for in vain in the higher zones of the sky, just as a tree would have been vainly sought for on the surface of this plain. The advance was through an atmosphere that suffocated; the wells did not contain enough water for the needs of the expedition; not a dozen miles were traversed at a stage; the men on foot crawled along; the attention that Dolly, assisted by Jane and the woman Harriett, although weak themselves, gave to the sick men, did them good. What ought to be done was to stop, encamp in some village, take a long rest, wait till the. temperature became more clement. And nothing of that sort was possible.

In the afternoon of the 17th of March two more pack camels were lost, one of them laden with the articles of barter intended for the Indas. Tom Marix had to transfer these loads to saddle camels, and this necessitated dismounting two more whites of the escort. These brave fellows did not complain, and accepted without a word this increase of fatigue. How different to the blacks, who complained unceasingly and caused Tom Marix the most serious uneasiness! Was it not to be feared that some day these blacks would be tempted to abandon the caravan, probably after pillaging it?

At last, in the evening of the 19th of March, near a well the water of which was six feet under the sand, the caravan stopped about five miles from Joanna Spring. It had been impossible to continue the stage beyond this.

The air was of extraordinary heaviness; it burnt the lungs as if it came from a furnace. The sky was very clear and of a hard blue, such as it is in certain Mediterranean regions when the mistral is about to burst, and its aspect was strange and threatening.

Tom Marix regarded this state of the atmosphere with an anxiety that did not escape Zach Fren.

“You scent something,” said the boatswain, “and something you don’t like?”

“Yes, Zach,” replied Tom Marix, “I expect a simoom like those which ravage the deserts of Africa.”

“Well, wind will bring wet, I suppose?” said Zach Fren.

“Not at all, Zach; it will bring a dryness worse than now, and in the centre of Australia no one knows of what a wind like that is capable.”

This observation, coming from so experienced a man, was enough to give great anxiety to Mrs. Branican and her companions.

Precautions were then taken in view of the threatening tempest. It was nine o’clock in the evening. The tent had not been pitched, being useless in these burning night amid the sand-hills of the plain. After quenching their thirst from the kegs, the people took their share of provisions which Tom Marix had just distributed. Scarcely any thought of satisfying their hunger; what they wanted was fresh air, and the stomach suffered less the organs of respiration. A few hours sleep would have done them more good than many mouthfuls of food; was it possible to sleep amid an atmosphere so stifled that it seemed to be rarefied?

Up to midnight nothing unusual took place. Tom Marix, Zach Fren, and Godfrey took it in turns to mount guard. Sometimes one, sometimes the other, got up to look at the horizon towards the north. This horizon was of a clearness, and even of a purity, that boded ill. The moon, setting at the same time as the sun, had disappeared behind the hills. Hundreds of stars shone around Southern Cross which glitters at the Antarctic pole of world.

About three hours after midnight this illumination the firmament was blotted out. A sudden darkness enveloped the plain from one horizon to the other.

“Look out! look out!” shouted Tom Marix.

“What is the matter?” asked Mrs. Branican getting up suddenly.

Near her, Jane and the woman Harriett, Godfrey,; Zach Fren tried to look through the darkness, camels stretched on the ground raised their heads and uttered hoarse cries of terror.

“But what is it?” asked Mrs. Branican.

“The simoom!” replied Tom Marix.

And those were the last words that were heard. Space was filled with such a tumult that the ear could no more perceive a sound than the eyes could see a ray of light amid the thick darkness.

It was indeed the simoom, as Tom Marix had said, one of those sudden storms which devastate the Australian deserts. An enormous cloud had risen in the south and swooped down on to the plain, a cloud formed not only of sand, but of cinders whirled up from the ground calcined by heat.

Around the encampment, the sand-hills were in motion like the surge of the sea, and broke, not in liquid spray, but in impalpable dust which blinded, deafened and stifled. It seemed as though the plain would be levelled by the storm which had broken on the surface. If the tents had been up, not a rag of them would have been left.

Everyone felt the irresistible torrent of air and sand which passed them like a hail of musketry. Godfrey held on to Dolly by both hands, not wishing to be separated from her if this formidable attack swept the caravan towards the north.

And this was what in- fact happened, and no resistance was possible.

During this hour's torment — an hour which sufficed to change the aspect of the country, by displacing the hills and changing the general level of the soil — Mrs. Branican and her companions, including the two invalids of the escort, were driven along for a space of four or five miles, rising only to fall again, and sometimes spun round like straws in a whirlwind. They could neither see nor hear, and risked being lost for ever. And in this way they reached the neighbourhood of Joanna Spring, near the banks of Oakover Creek, at the moment when, clearing from the last mists, the day had begun to break under the rays of the rising sun.

All were present to the roll-call? All?

No.

Mrs. Branican, the woman Harriett, Godfrey, Jos Meritt, Gin-Ghi, Zach Fren, Tom Marix, the whites remaining at their post were there, and with them four saddle camels; but the blacks had disappeared — disappeared with the twenty other camels, those that carried the provisions and those that carried Captain John's ransom.

And when Dolly called Jane, Jane did not answer.

Len and Jane Burherwere not there.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST EFFORTS.

THIS disappearance of the blacks, with the saddle cars and the pack camels, made the situation nearly desperate for Mrs. Branican and those who remained faithful to her.

“Treason “was the word pronounced first by Zach Fren; the word repeated by Godfrey. Treason was only evident under the circumstances. Such was the opinion of Tom Marix, who did not forget the malign influence exercised by Len Burker over the natives of the escort. Dolly would still have doubted. She could not believe in so much duplicity, in so much infamy.

“Len Burker could not have been swept away as it were?”

“Swept away with the blacks,’’ said Zach Fren, “at same time as the camels with our provisions!”

“And my poor Jane!” murmured Dolly, “separated from me without my noticing it.”

“Len Burker would not even let her remain with you,” said Zach Fren, “the scoundrel!”

“Scoundrel! Good! oh! very good!” said Jos. “If all that is not treachery I will give up the search — the historic hat which — ” and he turned to Gin-Ghi. “What do you think, Gin-Ghi?”

“Ai ya, Master Jos! I think I would rather a thousand and ten thousand times never have set foot in so comfortless a country!”

“Perhaps so!” replied Jos Meritt.

Treachery was so obvious, in short, that Mrs. Branican had to give in.

“But why have deceived me?” she asked; “what have I done to Len Burker? Did I not forget the past? Did I not receive them like my relations, him and his unhappy wife? And he abandons us, he leaves us without resources, he has stolen from me the price of John’s freedom! But why?”

No one knew Len Burker’s secret, and no one could answer Mrs. Branican. Jane alone could have revealed what she knew of her husband’s abominable plans, and Jane was not there.

It was only too true, however, that Len Burker had just put in execution a plan he had long prepared, a plan which seemed to have every chance of success. Under promise of being well paid, the blacks of the escort had easily listened to him. At the height of the storm, while two of the natives had dragged off Jane without its being possible to hear her screams, the others had pushed northwards with the camels around the encampment.

No one had seen them amid the profound obscurity, deepened by the whirlwinds of dust, and before the day Len Burker and his accomplices were several miles to the east of Joanna Spring.

Jane being separated from Dolly, her husband had no further .fear that, tortured by remorse, she would betray the secret of Godfrey’s birth. Besides, deprived of provisions and the means of transport, there was reason to believe that Mrs. Branican and her companions would perish in the solitudes of the Great Sandy Desert.

In fact, at Joanna Spring the caravan was still three hundred miles from the Fitzroy. In the course of this long journey how could Tom Marix provide for the wants of the expedition reduced as it now was?

Oakover Creek is one of the chief affluents of Grey River, which flows into the Indian Ocean by one of the estuaries in De Wilt Land.

On the banks of this river, which the excessive heat never dries up, Tom Marix would find the same shade, the same country which Colonel Warburton eulogizes with such a burst of joy.

There verdure and running waters take the place of t interminable plains of sand-hills and spinifex! But Colonel Warburton, arrived at this point, was almost sure of attaining his object, for he had only to descend to the creek to the settlement of Rockborne on the coast, it was not so with Mrs. Branican. The situation would, on the contrary, become worse on traversing the arid region which separate the Oakover from the Fitzroy.

The caravan now only consisted of twenty-two persons out of the forty-three which left Alice Spring — Dolly and the native woman Harriett, Zach Fren, Tom Mari Godfrey, Jos Meritt, Gin-Ghi, and with them; the fifteen whites of the escort, of whom two were seriously ill. There were only four camels, the others having been carried off by Len Burker, including the male which served as guide, and the one that carried the kibitka. The brute whose good qualities Jos Meritt appreciated so much had also disappeared, and this obliged the Englishman to travel on foot like his servant. In the matter of provisions there remained a very few tins of preserves found in a box, which one of the camels had let fall. There was no flour, nor coffee, nor tea, nor sugar, nor salt; no alcoholic drink no medicines; and how could Dolly attend to them who were suffering from the fever? It was absolute destitution in a country in which no supplies could be had.

At once Mrs. Branican called the men together. The valiant woman had lost nothing of her energy, which was really superhuman, and by her encouraging words managed to raise the spirits of her companions. What she pointed out to them was their nearness to the object of the expedition.

The journey was resumed and under such painful conditions that the most confident of the men could not hope it would end well. Of the four camels that remained, two had been reserved for the sick, whom they could not abandon at Joanna Spring, one of those uninhabited stations of which Colonel Warburton found so many in his journey. But would these poor fellows be strong enough to bear being taken to the Fitzroy, whence it might be possible to send them down to some settlement on the coast? This was doubtful, and Mrs. Branican's heart almost broke at the idea that two more victims would be added to those already due to the loss of the Franklin. But Dolly did not give up her plans. No; she would not even delay her search. Nothing would stop her in the accomplishment of her duty, even if she alone remained.

Leaving the right bank of Oakover Creek, the bed of which was crossed at a ford about a mile above Joanna Spring, the caravan went north-north-east. In taking this direction Tom Marix hoped to strike the Fitzroy at the nearest bend it makes before running into King's Sound. —

The heat was more bearable. It required the most urgent persuasion, almost the command, on the part of Tom Marix and Zach Fren, before Dolly would ride one of the camels. Godfrey and Zach Fren walked along at a good pace; so did Jos Meritt, whose long (legs were as' rigid as a pair of stilts, and when Dolly offered him her mount he declined, saying, —

“Good! Oh! very good! An Englishman is an Englishman, madam, but a Chinaman is a Chinaman, and I do not sec why you should not make the same offer to Gin-Ghi — only I forbid him to accept it.”

And so Gin-Ghi went on foot, not without grumbling, thinking of the distant delights of Sou-Teheow, the city of the flower-boats,, the town adored by the Celestials.

The fourth camel was used by Tom Marix or Godfrey when they went ahead reconnoitring. The water taken from Oakover Creek would soon be consumed, and then the well question would again become serious.

Leaving the banks of the creek, the journey continued towards the north over a gently undulating plain furrows by sand-hills, extending to the extreme limits of the horizon. The tufts of spinifex were in closer clumps, and different shrubs, made yellow by autumn, gave the region a monotonous aspect. An opportunity might occur of shooting some game. Tom Marix, Godfrey, and Zack Fren, who never laid aside their weapons, had fortunately kept their guns and revolvers, and would know how to use them. It is true there was very little ammunition and it would have to be used with great care.

The advance continued for some hours; a morning stage and an afternoon stage. The bed of the crops which furrowed this territory were only strewn with calcined pebbles among the vegetation discoloured by drought. The sand showed not the least trace of humidity. It was thus necessary to find a well, and to find one within twenty-four hours, as Tom Marix had no more water at his disposal.

And so Godfrey went off right and left of the route in search of one.

“My child,” said Mrs. Branican, “be careful! Do not run into danger.”

“Run into danger!” said Godfrey, “when it concerns you and Captain John!”

Owing to his devotion, and owing also to a certain instinct which guided him, a few wells were discovered when occasionally exploring several miles from the track.

Thus if sufferings from thirst were not quite spared, then at least they were not excessive in this part of Tasman Land between Oakover Creek and Fitzroy River. What added to their fatigues were the insufficient means of transport, and the meagre rations now reduced to a few preserves, the want of tea and coffee, the want of tobacco so painful to the men of the escort, the impossibility of adding a few drops of alcohol to the brackish water. After two hours on the road the strongest were attacked by lassitude, exhaustion, and misery.

And then the camels found scarcely anything to drink among the brushwood which yielded no edible twig or leaf. There were none of those dwarf acacias, the gum of which is nutritious and sought for by the natives during these periods of drought. Nothing but the thorns of the slender mimosas and the tufts of spinifex. The camels, with their heads thrust forward, their bodies limp, dragged their feet along, and fell on their knees, and it was only by great efforts they could be kept on their legs.

On the 25th, in the afternoon, Tom Marix, Godfrey, and Zach Fren managed to obtain a little fresh food; some migrating pigeons flew by in flocks. Very wild and very quick in escaping from among the mimosa clumps, they were not easy of approach. But a few were shot. They could not but be excellent, and they were so in reality, and the famished travellers appreciated them as if they were the most savoury game. They were grilled in front of a fire of dry roots, and for a few hours Tom Marix was able to save the preserves.

But what was food for the man was not food for the camels. And in the morning of the 26th, the one that carried the sick, men fell heavily to the ground and had to be abandoned, as nothing could get him to resume the journey.

To Tom Marix fell the task of finishing him by a bullet in the head. Then, not wishing to lose the flesh, which represented food for some days, although the animal was very much emaciated by privation, he set to work to cut him up in Australian fashion. Tom Marix was not unaware that every part of the camel could be used as food. With the bones and some of the skin which they boiled in the only pot they had left, they obtained a soup which was well received by the famished stomachs; the brains, the tongue, the cheeks, properly cooked, afforded more substantial nourishment. Even the flesh cut into thin strips and quickly dried in the sun was kept, as were also the feet which are the best part of the animal. It was a pity there was no salt, for the salted flesh would have kept better.

The journey was continued under these conditions at the rate of a few miles a day. Unfortunately the sick men grew no better, more owing to the want of remedies than the want of attention. All would not reach the spot to which every effort of Mrs. Branican was directed, to this Fitzroy River where the misery would in a certain degree be relieved.

And in fact, on the 26th of March and the following day the two men succumbed to their prolonged exhaustion. They were natives of Adelaide, one being only twenty-five years of age, the other being fifteen years older, and death had struck them both on this journey through the Australian desert.

Poor fellows! They were the first that perished at this work, and their companions were very painfully affected. Was not the same fate awaiting all, since Len Burker's treachery, abandoned amid these regions, where even the animals could not find means of subsistence?

And what could Zach Fren reply when Tom Marix said to him, —

“Two men dead to save one, without reckoning those who are still to go!”

Mrs. Branican gave free vent to her grief, in which everyone shared. She prayed for these two victims, and their grave was marked by a little cross which the heat of the climate would soon reduce to dust.

The caravan resumed its journey.

The three camels that remained would mount the most tired of the men in turn, so as not to delay their companions, and Mrs. Branican refused to reserve one of the animals for her own use. During the halts the camels were used in searching for wells, sometimes by Godfrey, sometimes by Tom Marix, for not a solitary native was met with from whom information could be obtained. This appeared to indicate that the tribes had moved into the north-east of Tasman Land. In that case the Indas would have to be followed down the valley of the Fitzroy, a very serious matter, inasmuch as it would add several hundred miles to the length of the journey.

In the beginning of April Tom Marix noticed that the provisions were nearly exhausted. It consequently became necessary to sacrifice one of the three camels. A few days' food being assured, they would doubtless be able to reach Fitzroy River, from which the caravan could not be more than fifteen stages away.

The sacrifice being indispensable, they had to resign themselves to it. The animal least fit for service was chosen. It was killed, cut up, and reduced to strips which, dried in the sun, possessed fairly nutritive properties after being cooked for some time. The other parts of the animal, including the heart and the liver, were carefully put by.

Meanwhile Godfrey managed to kill several brace of pigeons — a poor addition, it is true, to the food of twenty- people. Tom Marix also noticed that clumps of acacia began to reappear on the plain, and it was possible to use the seeds as food if they were first roasted on the fire.

Yes! It was time they were at the Fitzroy River, to find there the supplies they had vainly demanded from this accursed country. A delay of a few days, and the majority of the expedition would not have strength to reach it.

On the 5th of April there remained none of the provisions, and none of the camel meat. Mrs. Branican and her companions were reduced to a few acacia seeds.

In fact Tom Marix hesitated to sacrifice the two last camels. In consideration of the distance he had still to traverse he could not make up his mind to kill them. But he would have to do so that very evening, for nobody had had anything to cat for fifteen hours. . But just as they stopped one of the men ran up shouting, —

“Tom Marix! Tom Marix! the two camels have just fallen.”

“Try to get them up.”

“It is impossible.”

“Then we must kill them at once.”

“Kill them?” answered the man. “But they are dying if they arc not already dead.”

“Dead!” exclaimed Tom Marix. And he could not restrain a gesture of despair, for the flesh of these animals is intractable unless they are killed.

Followed by Mrs. Branican, Zach Fren, Godfrey Jos Meritt, Tom Marix went to the spot where the animals had just fallen.

There, stretched on the ground, they were shaking convulsively, foaming at the mouth, their limbs contracting, their stomachs panting. They were about to die, and not of a natural death.

“What has happened to them?” asked Dolly. “This not fatigue: that is not exhaustion.”

“No,” replied Tom Marix, “I fear it is the effect of some noxious plant.”

“Good! Oh! very good! I know what it is,” Jos Meritt; “I have seen it in the eastern colonies... Queensland. These camels have been poisoned.”

“Poisoned?” repeated Dolly.

“Yes,” said Tom Marix, “poisoned.”

“Well,” continued Jos Meritt, “since we have no more supplies, we must follow the example of the camels, unless we die of hunger. What would you have? The country has its usages, and the best thing is to conform to them.”

The gentleman said these words in such a tone of irony that with his eyes enlarged by hunger, and his lips thinner than ever, he was quite alarming to look at.

Thus the two camels were dying of poison, and that poison — for Jos Meritt was right — was due to a spray of poisonous nettles, somewhat rare on the plains of the north-west; this is the Moroides laporlea, producing a scent like raspberry, with the leaves bristling with sharp edges. Even their contact causes intense and lasting pain; fruit is a deadly poison, if not treated with the juice of Colocaria macrorhisa, another plant generally grown in the same localities as the Moroides.

The instinct which prevents animals from touching hurtful substances had been this time overcome, and the two animals had not been able to resist feeding on these nettles, and were dying in horribie suffering.

How the two following days passed neither Mrs. Branican nor any of her companions can remember. They had to abandon the two dead animals, for an hour afterwards they were in a state of complete decomposition, so rapid is the effect of the vegetable poison. Then the caravan, crawling along towards the Fitzroy, tried to make out the country that surrounds the valley. Would they all reach it? No, and some were asking to be killed on the spot, so as to be spared the most frightful agony.

Mrs. Branican went from one to the other. She tried to cheer them up. She begged them to make a last effort. The end was not far off. A few more marches. Beyond was safety. But what could she get from these unfortunates?

On the 8th of April, in the evening, no one had strength enough to pitch the camp. The unfortunates crept to the foot of the spinifex to chew the dusty leaves. They could not speak — they could not go beyond. They had fallen at this last halt.

Mrs. Branican still refused to give way. Kneeling near her, Godfrey fixed his eyes on hers. He called her “mother I mother!” like a child begging of her who bore him not to let him die.

And Dolly standing amid her companions swept the horizon with a look, and shouted, “John! John!”

As if it was from Captain John that the last help could come.

CHAPTER XIII.

AMONG THE INDAS.

The tribe of the Indas, composed of several hundreds of natives, men, women and children, at this time occupied the banks of the Fitzroy River, about one hundred and forty miles from its mouth. These natives had returned from the regions of Tasman Land which are watered by the upper course of the river. For some days the chances of their wandering life had brought them within five-and- twenty miles of that part of the Great Sandy Desert, where the caravan had reached its last halt, after a chain of misery exceeding the power of man to bear.

It was among these Indas that Captain John and his mate, Harry Felton, had lived for nine years. With the aid of the events which arc to follow, we are able to narrate their history during this long period, and complete the story told by Harry Felton on his death-bed.

Between the years 1875 and 1881 — it will not have been forgotten — the crew of the Franklin had taken refuge on an island in the Indian Ocean, Browse Island, situated about two hundred and fifty miles from York Sound, the nearest point on the coast which rounds off the Australian Continent on the north-west. Two of the sailors had been lost during the storm, and the shipwrecked men, to the number of twelve, had lived for six years on this island, without any means of leaving it, when a boat drifted on to the shore.

Captain John, wishing to use this boat for the common Safety, put it in a state to reach the Australian mainland, and prepared it for a voyage of some weeks. But as the boat could only hold seven passengers, Captain John and Harry Felton embarked in it with five of their companions, leaving five others on Browse Island, to wait until a ship was sent to them. We know how these unfortunates died before they were rescued, and under what circumstances Captain Ellis discovered their remains during the second cruise of the Dolly Hope in 1883.

After a dangerous passage through these detestable regions of the Indian Ocean, the boat reached the continent in the latitude of Cape Leveque, and entered the gulf into which flows the Fitzroy. But misfortune willed it that Captain John should be attacked by the natives, an attack in which four of his men were killed in defending themselves.

These natives, belonging to the tribe of the Indas, dragged away into the interior Captain John, Harry Felton and the sailor who escaped the massacre. The sailor, who was wounded, could not be cured of his wounds. A few weeks later, John Branican and Harry Felton were the only survivors of the wreck of the Franklin.

Then commenced for them an existence which at first was seriously menaced. . As we have said, these Indas, like all the sedentary or wandering tribes of Northern Australia, are fierce and sanguinary. The prisoners made in their incessant tribal wars are pitilessly killed and eaten. There is no more inveterate custom than cannibalism among these aborigines, who are veritable wild beasts.

Why were Captain John and Harry Felton spared? That depended on the circumstances.

We are not unaware that among the natives of the interior and the coast, a state of war is perpetuated from generation to generation. The sedentaries attack village after village, destroying and taking prisoners. So it is with the nomads; they pursue their enemies from camp to camp, and their battles always end with the most frightful scenes of cannibalism. These massacres will inevitably bring about the destruction of the Australian race as surely as the proceedings of the Anglo-Saxons, which, under certain circumstances, have been of unavoidable barbarity. How can we describe such acts? Blacks chased by the whites as if they were game, with all the refined emotions derivable from this kind of sport, fires widely spread so that the inhabitants would no longer be spared their bark “gunyos” which serve them for dwellings. The conquerors have even gone almost as far as poisoning them with strychnine, so as to destroy them more rapidly. We have only to quote this sentence from the pen of an Australian colonist; “All the men I meet on my pasturages I shoot, because they are cattle-slayers; all the women because they bring cattle-slayers into the world, and all the children because they will become cattle-slayers!”

We can thus understand the hatred the Australians have vowed against their executioners, a hatred which is hereditary. It is seldom that the whites who fall into their hands are not massacred without mercy. Why then had the survivors of the Franklin been spared by the Indas?

If the sailor had not died soon after he was taken prisoner, he would very probably have suffered the usual fate. But the chief of the tribe, a native named Willi, had had dealings with the colonists on the coast, and knew enough to notice that Captain Branican and Harry Felton were two officers, out of whom he might make something in two ways. As a warrior, Willi could make use of their talents in his contests with his rivals; and as a trader, who knew how to trade, he saw the possibility of a lucrative speculation in the shape of a substantial ransom for the two prisoners, who consequently had their lives respected, although they had to submit to a wandering existence, which was all the more painful from the constant watch the Indas kept over them. Never out of sight day or night, never allowed far away from the camp, they had tried now and then to escape at the risk of their lives, but all in vain.

In the meantime their advice was asked with regard to the frequent tribal encounters, and their advice was valuable to Willi, who derived much advantage from it, owing to its always assuring him the victory. Thanks to his successes, his tribe had become one of the most powerful in the country of Western Australia.

These natives of the north-west are apparently a cross between the Australians and the Papuans. Like the recongeners, the Indas have long and curly hair; their colour is not so dark as that of the natives of the southern districts, who seem to be a more vigorous race; their height is not so great, and rarely exceeds fifty-two inches. The men are more strongly built than the women; if their forehead is somewhat retreating, their superciliary arches are rather prominent — which, if ethnologists are to be believed, is a sign of intelligence; their eyes, the iris of which is dark are remarkably brilliant in the pupil; their hair, very brown in colour, is not woolly like that of the African negroes; their skulls are not large, and nature has not given them too much in the way of brains. They are called blacks, although they have nothing of the Nubian black in them; they are chocolate, if we may coin a word which exactly describes their general colour.

The Australian negro is gifted with an extraordinary keenness of scent, which rivals that of the best dogs of the chase. They will recognize the traces of a human being or any animal by the mere smell of the ground or of the vegetation. Their auditory nerve is also of extreme sensibility, and they can even distinguish, it would appear, the sound of ants working in the interior of an ant-hill. There would be a certain amount of justice in classifying these natives among the order of climbers, for there is no gum tree too high or too smooth for them to climb by means of a reed of flexible rattan, to which they give the name of “kamin,” and by the prehensile conformation of their great toes.

As we have already noted with regard to the natives of Finke River, the Australian woman is short-lived, and rarely reaches forty years of age; the men attaining about twelve more in certain districts of Queensland. These unfortunate creatures have as their share the roughest work of the household; they are slaves, under the yoke of their pitiless masters, compelled to carry the bundles, the utensils, the weapons, and to seek for the edible roots, and lizards, worms and snakes which form the food of the tribe. But it is as well to mention that they take affectionate care of their children, whom the fathers hardly trouble themselves about, for the child is a burden to the mother, who is thereby prevented from giving her exclusive attention to the cares of this nomad existence; hence among some tribes the blacks have cut off the woman’s breasts in order to make it impossible for them to give their children nourishment. And yet, horrible as the custom may be, and discordant as it may appear with the precautions taken to diminish the numbers — these little beings in time of famine are eaten in certain tribes where cannibalism is still carried to excess.

Among the Australian blacks, who are scarcely worthy of being called human, life is concentrated as one sole object. “Ammeri! arnmeri!” recurs incessantly in the native speech, the word meaning “hungry.” The most frequent gesture of these savages consists in slapping the stomach, which is only too often empty. In these lands, without game and without cultivation, the people eat at all hours of the day and night, when an opportunity offers, on account of this constant fear of a near and lengthy fast. And, after all, what food is there for these aborigines — the most miserable, assuredly, of all those whom nature has scattered over the globe? A sort of coarse cake called “damper,” made of a little flour Without yeast, and cooked, not in an oven, but under glowing embers — honey, which they sometimes collect by felling the tree, at the summit of which the bees have established their hives — ” kadjerah,” a kind of white porridge, made by the” pounding of poisonous palm-roots, from which the poison has been extracted by delicate manipulation — eggs of the jungle birds laid in the ground — which the heat hatches artificially — and of the pigeons, peculiar to Australia, which hang their nests from the end of the tree branches — and, finally, certain kinds of the larvae of beetles, some gathered among the boughs of the acacia trees, others dug up from the rotten deposits about the roots of the thickets. And that is all.

In this hourly struggle for existence, we have the explanation of cannibalism, with all its horrible monstrosities. It is not a sign of natural ferocity, but the. consequence of the commanding necessity to which the Australian is given to escape dying Of hunger.

At the lower course of the Murray, and among the tribes of the north, it is the custom to kill the children, and feed on them, and to the mother is given the joint of a finger of each child she is forced to hand over to these cannibal feasts. It is dreadful to think that when the mother has nothing else to eat, she has to devour her own child, and yet travellers have heard these miserable women talk of this abomination as if it were a most natural act.

But at the same time it is not hunger alone which forces the Australian to cannibalism; they have a decided taste for human flesh, the flesh they call “talgoro,”

“the meat that speaks,” according to one of their horribly realistic expressions. If they do not gratify this taste on the people of their own tribe, they none the less do it by man- hunting. Their incessant wars had no other object than talgoro, which they eat fresh; as well as preserve for future use. It is stated by Dr. Carl Lumholtz, that during his daring journey across the North-Eastern Provinces, the blacks were continually discussing this food question, saying that "for Australians there was nothing like human flesh," but this was not so much the flesh of the white man, which had a saltish after-taste that was very disagreeable.

There is another motive which predisposes these tribes to exterminate each other. The Australians are extraordinarily credulous. They are terrified at the voice of the "Kvin'gan," an evil spirit which haunts the fields and the gorges of the mountainous districts, although this voice is merely the melancholy call of a charming bird, one of the most curious in Australian ornithology. But if they believe in the existence of a superior and wicked being, according to the best authorities, no native ever says a prayer, and not a trace can be found of religious practices.

In reality they are very superstitious, and as they firmly believe their enemies can kill them by witchcraft, they are eager to destroy them; and this, added to the habit of cannibalism, exposes these countries to constant depopulation.

It may as well be noted, in passing, that some of the Australians respect their dead; they wrap the body in strips of foliage or bark, and deposit it in a shallow grave, with the feet towards the east, unless they bury it upright, as they do among certain tribes. The grave of a chief is then covered by a hut, the entrance to which is towards the rising sun. It should also be said that among certain tribes the strange belief prevails that blacks are re-incarnated as whites, and, according to the observations of Carl Lumholtz, the language of the country has the same word for the spirit of a man, and a man of white colour. According to another native superstition, the animals have formerly been human creatures — which is metempsychosis the wrong way round.

Such are the tribes of the Australian continent destined evidently to disappear, as have also the natives of Tasmania. Such were the Indas, into whose hands had fallen John Branican and Harry Felton.

After the sailor's death, John Branican and Harry Felton had had to follow the Indas in their continual peregrinations in the central and north-western regions. Sometimes attacking hostile tribes, sometimes attacked by them, they obtained an incontestable superiority over them, thanks to the advice of their prisoners, by which Willi profited. Hundreds of miles were traversed from King's Sound to Van Diemen's Gulf, between the Fitzroy Valley and that of the Victoria, and even on the plains of Alexandra Land. In this way Captain John and his mate travelled across countries unknown to geographers, which are left blank on modern maps, east of Tasman Land, and Arnheim Land and the' confines of the Great Sandy Desert.

Although these interminable journeyings appeared extremely laborious to them, the Indas made nothing of it. This was their usual mode of life, taking no notice of either distance or time, of which they have hardly a notion. In fact an event which could only take place within five or six months would be described by a native in all good faith as taking place in two or three days, or the next week. They have no notion of age; and know of no time but the hour that exists. It would seem as though the Australian belongs to a special division in the scale of beings — as do certain animals of the country.

In these customs John Branican and Harry Felton were obliged to conform. To these fatigues due to the daily movements, they had to submit. With this food, often so insufficient, and always so repugnant, they had to be contented. To say nothing of those frightful scenes of cannibalism, the horrors of which they never could mitigate, after the battles in which the enemies fell in hundreds.

And in thus submitting, the intention of Captain John and Harry Felton was to lull the vigilance of the tribe to sleep until an opportunity for flight presented itself. That an escape into the deserts of the north-west had its chances we have seen in the case of the mate of the Franklin. But the two prisoners were watched so closely that opportunities of flight were extremely rare, and hardly one presented itself during the nine years. Once only — the very year preceding Mrs. Branican's expedition — escape might have succeeded, and that under these circumstances.

After a series of battles with the tribes of the interior, the Indas were in camp on the shores of Lake Amadeus, in the south-west of Alexandra Land. It was not often they advanced so far into the centre of the continent. Captain John and Harry Felton, knowing they were within three hundred miles of the Overland Telegraph Line, thought the opportunity was favourable, and resolved to take advantage of it. After reflection it seemed best to escape separately, and meet a few miles from the camp. Outwitting the vigilance of the aborigines, Harry Felton was fortunate in gaining the spot where he was to wait for his companion. Unfortunately John had been summoned to Willi, who required him to attend to a wound he had received in the last engagement. John could not get away, and Harry Felton waited for him in vain for some days. Then, thinking he might reach one of the villages in the interior, or on the coast, and there organize an expedition for the deliverance of his captain, Felton set off towards the south-west. But such were the fatigues, privations and misery he had to undergo, that four months after his departure he fell dying on the banks of the Parroo, in the Ulakara district of New South Wales. Taken to the hospital at Sydney, he had lingered for some weeks and then died, after being able to tell Mrs. Branican what he knew concerning Captain John.

It was a terrible trial for John to be without his companion, and his energy of mind had to equal his physical energy, or he would have given way to despair. To whom now could he talk of what had been so dear to him — his country, San Diego, the loved creatures he had left there, his courageous wife, his son Wat growing up far from him, and whom he would never probably know, Mr. William Andrew, and all his friends, in fact? For nine years John had been the prisoner of the Indas; and how many years would roll by before his liberty was restored to him? However, he never lost hope, being sustained by the hope that he would succeed in reaching one of the towns of the Australian coast, and that Harry Felton would do all that was humanly possible to rescue his captain.

During the early period of his captivity John had learnt to speak the native language, which by the logic of its grammar, the precision of its terms, the delicacy of its expressions, seemed to show that the Australian aborigines must at one time have enjoyed a certain amount of civilization. He had often spoken to Willi of the advantages he would gain by leaving his prisoners free to return to Queensland or South Australia, where he would be in a position to send him any ransom that might be required. But Willi was not of a trusting nature, and would not entertain the idea. If the ransom arrived he would give John and his mate their liberty. As to trusting to their promises, judging probably that others were like himself, he would never consent to it.

It naturally followed that Harry Felton’s escape, which made him furiously angry, rendered Willi more severe towards Captain John. He stopped him from moving about during the halts or marches, and put him under the guard of a native, who had to answer for him with his life.

Long months elapsed, and the “prisoner had received no news from his companion. Was there not every probability that Harry Felton had died on the journey? If the fugitive had succeeded in reaching Queensland or Adelaide, would he not have already made some attempt to rescue him from the Indas?

During the first three months of the year 1891 — that is to say at the beginning of the Australian summer — the tribe had returned to the Fitzroy Valley, where Willi generally passed the hottest period of the summer season, and where he found the requisite resources for his tribe.

The Indas were there in the first days of April, and their camp occupied a bend of the river, into which flowed a small affluent from the northern plains.

Since the tribe had taken up their quarters here, Captain John, knowing they were near the coast had thought of reaching it. If he could do so, it would not perhaps be impossible for him to take refuge in one of the stations more to the south, where Colonel Warburton had ended his journey.

John had resolved to risk everything to put an end to this hateful life, even if he died in the attempt.

Unfortunately a change in the plans of the Indas nipped in the bud the prisoner’s hopes. During the first fortnight in April it was evident that Willi was preparing to depart so as to fix his winter encampment on the upper part of the river.

What had happened, and to what was to be attributed this change in the habits of the tribe?

Captain John managed to learn, but not without some trouble: the tribe was to move further east, because the black police had been reported on the lower course of the Fitzroy.

It will not have been forgotten that Tom Marix had spoken about these black police, who, since Harry Felton's revelations, had been ordered into the north-west territories.

These police are much feared by the natives, and display a keenness of which we can have no idea when they are in pursuit of them. They are commanded by a captain called a "mani," having under his orders a sergeant, thirty white men and eighty blacks mounted on good horses, and armed with guns, swords and pistols. Known under the name of the native police, they are sufficiently strong to guarantee the security of the inhabitants of the regions they visit at different times. Pitiless in their repression of the aborigines, they are blamed by some in the name of humanity, and approved by others in the name of public safety. They are most active in their movements, and journey from place to place with incredible rapidity. The natives fear to meet them, and that is why Willi, when he learnt they were in his neighbourhood, was preparing to ascend the course of the Fitzroy.

But what was a danger for the Indas might be the safety of Captain Branican. If he could join a detachment of this police, his deliverance was assured and his return home certain. When the camp was being struck could he not find it possible to elude the vigilance of the natives?

Willi, it would seem, had some suspicion of the prisoner’s plans, for on the morning of. the 20th of April the door of the hut in which John was confined was not opened at the usual hour. A native was on guard close to the hut. To the questions John put to him he made no reply. When he asked to be taken to Willi they refused to comply with his request, and the chief did not even come to visit him.

What had happened? Were the Indas hastening their preparations- to leave their encampment? It was probable, and John heard them rushing about in front of the hut, where Willi had sent him some food.

A whole day went by, then another. No change took place in his position. The prisoner was narrowly watched all the time. But during the night of the 22nd and 23rd of April he noticed that the noise outside had ceased, and he wondered if the Indas had definitely abandoned their project of camping on Fitzroy River.

At daybreak next morning the door of the hut suddenly opened.

A man — a white — appeared before Captain John.

It was Len Burker.

CHAPTER XIV.

LEN BURKER’S GAME.

Thirty-two days had passed since the night of the 22nd of March, when Len Burker had separated from Mrs. Branican and her companions. The simoom so fatal to the caravan, had given him an opportunity of executing his plans. Dragging away Jane, and followed by the blacks of the escort, he had driven in front of him the healthy camels, and among them those which carried Captain John’s ransom.

Len Burker found himself in more favourable circumstances than Dolly for meeting the Indas in the valley watered by the Fitzroy. Already during his wandering life he had had frequent intercourse with the Australian nomads, with whose language and customs he was acquainted. The ransom he had stolen assured him a warm welcome from Willi, and Captain John, once rescued, would be in his power, and then —

On abandoning the caravan Len Burker had hastened north-west, and at sunrise he and his companions were many miles away.

Jane implored her husband, and begged of him not to abandon Dolly and her people in the desert; she reminded him it was another crime added to that committed at Godfrey’s birth, and besought him to atone for his abominable conduct in taking the child from its mother by joining his efforts to those being made for the rescue of Captain John.

Jane gained nothing. It was in vain. To prevent Len Burker from advancing towards his object was in no one’s power. A few days more and he would have reached it. Dolly and Godfrey dead of privation and misery, John Branican disappeared, Edward Starter’s inheritance would pass into the hands of Jane, that is to say into his own, and he would know how to use those millions well.

Nothing was to be expected from this rascal. He ordered his wife to be silent, and she had to yield, knowing well that if he had not need of her to enter into possession of Dolly’s fortune, he would have abandoned her long ago, and perhaps worse. As to getting away and attempting to reach the caravan, how could she think of it? What would have become of her, all alone? Besides, two of the blacks had orders not to leave her for an instant.

We need not dwell on the incidents which Len Burker met with on his journey. Neither camels nor provisions failed him. In this way he was able to make long stages as he approached the Fitzroy with men accustomed to the life, and who had suffered less than the whites since the departure from Adelaide.

In seventeen days, on the 8th of April, Len Burker had reached the left bank of the river, on the very day that Mrs. Branican and her companions made their last halt.

On the river bank Len Burker met with a few natives, and obtained information from them regarding the position of the Indas.

Learning that the tribe had followed the valley more to the westward, he resolved to go down it so as to enter into communication with Willi.

The task was not difficult. During the month of April, in this part of Northern Australia, the climate is less excessive, however low it may be in latitude. It was evident that if Mrs. Branican’s caravan could reach the Fitzroy its miseries would be at an end in a few days. She could enter into communication with the Indas, for scarcely eighty-five miles then separated John and Dolly from each other.

When Len Burker was certain that he had only two or three days more to travel he stopped. To take Jane with him among the Indas, to bring her face to face with Captain John, to run the risk of being denounced by her, did not at all suit him. By his orders a halt was organized on the left bank, and, in spite of her supplications, there the unfortunate woman was left in charge of the two blacks.

When that was done, Len Burker and his companions continued their journey towards the west, with the saddle camels and the two beasts laden with the articles of barter.

It was on the 20th of April that Len Burker met the tribe who were then in a state of alarm at the neighbourhood of the black police, whose presence had been reported a dozen miles down the river. Willi was already preparing to leave his camp to seek refuge in the upper- regions of Arnheim Land, which belongs to the province of Northern Australia. -

At this moment, by Willi’s orders, and with a view to prevent any attempt at escape on his part, John was shut up in a hut, so that he could learn nothing of the communications entered into between Len Burker and the chief of the Indas.

These communications occasioned no difficulty. Len Burker had had previous acquaintance with these natives. He knew their chief, and had only to treat concerning the amount of Captain John’s ransom.

Willi was disposed to surrender the prisoner for a ransom. The display of what Len Burker had brought in fabrics, toys, and, above all, in the stock of tobacco that was offered, favourably impressed him. But, like an experienced merchant, he required a higher price, as he could not separate without regret from a man of as much importance as Captain John, who for so many years had lived with the tribe and rendered it such valuable services, etc. etc. Besides, he knew that the Captain was an American, and he was not ignorant that an expedition had been formed with a view of obtaining his deliverance — which Len Burker confirmed by observing that he was the chief of the expedition. Then, when he learned that Willi was easy at the presence of the black police on the lower arse of the Fitzroy, he took advantage of the circumstance to urge him to complete the bargain without ay. In fact, for his own interest it was necessary that Captain Branican's rescue should remain secret, and if he t him away from the Indas there was every probability his actions remaining unknown. The final disappearance of John Branican could not be imputed to him, and;he men of his escort could not keep silent on the matter would know how to make sure of their silence. It follows that as the ransom was accepted by Willi the bargain was concluded on the 22nd of April. That very evening the Indas abandoned their camp and went away the Fitzroy River.

That is what Len Burker had done, that was how he had attained his object, and now we have to see how he drifted by it.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning when the or of the hut opened and John Branican found himself Len Burker's presence.

Fourteen years had elapsed since the day when the Captain had given him the last shake of the hand at the departure of the Franklin from San Diego bay. He did t recognize him, but Len Burker was struck with the le change that had taken place in him. He had, of course, aged — he was then forty-three — but less than could believed after so long a stay among the natives; he J the same well-marked features, the same resolute look,; fire of which was not at all dulled, and his hair was as thick, although it had whitened. He had remained strong and robust, and better, perhaps, than Harry Felton lid have borne the fatigues of a journey across the Australian desert — fatigues to which his companion had succumbed.

When he saw Len Burker, Captain John stepped back.

It was the first time he had found himself face to face with a white since he had been the prisoner of the Indas. It was the first time a stranger had come to say a word to him.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“An American of San Diego.”

“Of San Diego?”

“I am Len Burker.”

“You!”

Captain John threw himself on Len Burker. He took him by the hands, he clasped him in his arms. What! This man was Len Burker. No! It was impossible. It was only an appearance. John had not clearly heard. He was under the influence of some hallucination.” Len Burker — Jane’s husband —

And at that moment John hardly thought of the antipathy with which Len Burker had formerly inspired him, of the man whom he had so justly suspected.

“Len Burker?” he repeated.

“Myself, John.”

“Here — in these parts! Ah, you also, Len — you have been taken prisoner.”

How could John in any other way explain the presence of Len Burker in a camp of the Indas?

“No!” quickly replied Len Burker. “No, John, I came here to ransom you from the chief of this tribe — to rescue you — ”

“To rescue me!”

Captain John could only control himself by a violent effort. It seemed that he had. gone mad, that his reason was at the point of leaving him.

Then when he had become master of himself he thought of darting out of the hut. He dared not. Len Burker had spoken of his deliverance. But was he free? And Willi? And the Indas?

“Speak, Len, speak!” said he, crossing his arms as if he would keep his chest down.

Then Len Burker, faithful to the plan he had formed to tell him only a part of the story, and attribute to himself all the merit of this campaign, began to relate the facts in his way, when John, in a voice strangled by emotion, cried, —

“And Dolly? Dolly?”

“She is living, John.”

“And Wat, my child?”

“Living — both of them — at San Diego.”

“My wife — my son!” murmured John, his eyes filling with tears.

Then he added, —

“Now speak — Len — speak! I have strength to listen to you.”

And Len Burker, coolly looking him in the face all the time, said, —

“A few years ago, John, when no one had any further doubt about the loss of the Franklin my wife and I had to leave San Diego and America. Business matters called me to Australia, and I came to Sydney, where I started an office. Since our departure Jane and Dolly never ceased their correspondence, for you know the affection they bore each other, an affection which neither time nor distance could weaken.

“Yes! I know!” replied John. “Dolly and Jane were friends, and the separation must have been cruel to them.”

“Very cruel, John,” said Len Burker, “but after some years the day came when this separation was about to end. About eleven months ago we were preparing to leave Australia for San Diego, when an unexpected piece of news put an end to our plans of departure. We then learnt what had become of the Franklin, in what parts she had been lost, and at the same time the rumour spread that the sole survivor of the wreck was the prisoner of the Australian tribe, and that was you, John.”

“But how did you know that, Len? Was it through Harry Felton?”

“Yes, the news was brought by Harry Felton.

Almost at the end of his journey your companion had been met with on the banks of the Parroo, in the south of Queensland, and brought to Sydney — ”

“Harry — my brave Harry!” exclaimed Captain John. “Ah! I knew well he would never forget me! As soon as he got to Sydney he organized an expedition — ”

“He is dead!” said Len Burker; “dead of the fatigues he had endured.”

“Dead!” said John. “My God — dead! Harry Felton — Harry!”

And the tears flowed from his eyes.

“But before he died,” continued Len Burker, “Harry Felton related all that occurred after the wreck of the Franklin, the wreck on Browse Island, your reaching the west of the continent. It was at his bedside that I — I learnt this from his lips — all. And’ as his eyes closed, John, he uttered your name.”

“Harry, my poor Harry!” murmured John, as he thought of the terrible miseries to which the faithful companion had succumbed, whom he would never see again.

“John,” continued Len Burker, “the loss of the Franklin, of which there had been no news for fourteen years, made a considerable sensation. You may judge of the effect produced by the news that you were alive, and that Harry Felton had left you a few months before a prisoner with a northern tribe. I immediately telegraphed to Dolly, informing her that I was getting ready to rescue you from the hands of the Indas, for it could only be a question, of ransom after what Harry Felton had said. Then, having organized a caravan, of which I took the command, Jane and I left Sydney. That was seven months ago. It has taken us all that time to teach the Fitzroy. At last here we arc at the camp of the Indas.”

“Thanks, Len, thanks!” said Captain John. “What you have done for me — ”

“You would have done for me under similar circumstances,” replied Len Burker.

“Certainly! And your wife, Len, this courageous Jane, who has not feared to face such fatigue — where is she?”

“Three days’ march up the river with two of my men,” replied Len Burker.

“I will go and see her.”

“Yes, John, and if she is not here it is because I did not wish her to accompany me, not knowing what sort of welcome the natives would give our little caravan — ”

“But you did not come alone?” asked John.

“No; I had my escort, composed of a dozen blacks. We arrived in the valley two days ago — ”

“Two days?”

“Yes, and I have spent them in concluding my bargain. The Willi thought much of you, my dear John. He knew your importance, or rather your value.

It took a lot of talking to obtain your liberty in exchange for the ransom —”

“Then I am free?”

“As free as I am.”

“But the natives?”

“They have all gone off with their chief, and art no longer in the camp.”

“Gone?” exclaimed John.

“Look!”

Captain Branican bounded out of the hut. On the bank of the river there were only the blacks of Len Burker’s escort: the Indas were there no longer.

It will be seen what was true and what was false in Len Burker’s story. Of Mrs. Branican’s madness he had said nothing. Of the fortune which had fallen to Dolly through Edward Starter’s death he had said nothing; nothing .of the voyages of the Dolly Hope in the sea of the Philippines and Torres Straits during the years 1879 and 1882; nothing of what had passed between Mrs. Branican and Harry Felton on his deathbed; nothing of the expedition organized by this intrepid woman, now abandoned in the Great Sandy Desert, the whole credit of which the .unworthy Len Burker had taken to himself.

It was he who had done all, he who, at the risk of his life, had delivered Captain John!

And why should John doubt the truth of the story? Why should he not thank with effusion him who after so many perils had just snatched him from the Indas, and who was going to take him home to his wife and child?

This he did, and in terms which would have touched a less hardened being. But remorse had never troubled Len Burker's conscience, and nothing would hinder him from carrying out his criminal projects. Now John Branican would go with him to the camp where Jane was waiting for him. Why should he hesitate? And during this journey Len Burker would find an opportunity of getting rid of him, without being suspected by the blacks of his escort, who could not afterwards bear witness against him.

Captain John was impatient to set out, and it was agreed that the departure would take place that very day. His great wish was to see Jane, the devoted friend of his wife, to talk to her about Dolly and his son, about Mr. William Andrew, and all those he would meet again at San Diego.

They started during the afternoon of the 23rd of April. Len Burker had provisions for several days. During the journey the Fitzroy would yield the water necessary for the little caravan. The camels on which John and Len Burker were mounted would permit them to get several stages in advance of their escort. That would facilitate Len Burker's designs. It would not do for Captain John to reach the camp, and he would not reach it.

At eight o'clock in the evening Len Burker pitched his . camp on the left bank of the river for the night. He was still too far off to put into execution his plan of getting on in advance of his escort, amid regions where dangers were always to be feared.

At daybreak the march was resumed.

The following day was divided into two stages, divided by a halt of two hours. It was not always easy to follow the course of the Fitzroy, the banks of which were often cut into by deep ravines, and sometimes barred by inextricable masses of gum trees and eucalyptus, obliging the caravan to go round them.

It was a hard day’s march, and after their meal the blacks went to sleep.

A few moments later Captain John was plunged in a deep slumber.

Here was an opportunity of which Len Burker might take advantage, for he was not asleep. To kill John, drag his body about twenty yards, and throw it into the river — it seemed as though circumstances had united to facilitate the perpetration of the crime. Then in the morning Captain Branican would be sought for in vain.

About two o’clock Len Burker got up noiselessly, and crept towards his victim, knife in hand. He was just about to strike when John awoke.

“I thought you called me,” said Len Burker.

“No, my dear Len,” replied John, “just as I awoke I was dreaming of my dear Dolly and our child.”

At six o’clock John and Len Burker resumed their journey along the Fitzroy.

During the midday halt Len Burker resolved to accomplish his purpose, for they would reach the camp that night He proposed to John to ride on in advance of the escort.

John agreed, for he was anxious to get to Jane and be able to speak to her more intimately than he had done to Len Burker.

The two were starting when one of the blacks descried a white advancing with a certain amount of precaution, about a hundred yards off.

An exclamation escaped Len Burker.

He had recognized Godfrey.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST ENCAMPMENT.

IMPELLED by a sort of instinct, and almost unconscious of what he did, Captain John had rushed up to the boy.

Len Burker had remained immovable, as if his feet were nailed to the ground.

Godfrey was face to face with him — Godfrey, the son of Dolly and of John! Then Mrs. Branican's caravan had not succumbed P She was, then, a few miles away — a few yards away, perhaps — unless Godfrey was the sole survivor of those the scoundrel had abandoned?

In any case, this meeting, so unexpected, must shatter Len Burker's plan. If the boy spoke, he would say that Mrs. Branican was at the head of this expedition. He would say that Dolly had dared a thousand fatigues, a thousand dangers, amid the Australian deserts to bring help to her husband. He would say that she was there — that she was following him up the course of the Fitzroy.

And she was there.

On the morning of the 22nd of March, after Len Burker had abandoned her, the little caravan had resumed its march towards the north-west. On the 8th of April, as we know, the poor people, exhausted from hunger and tortured by thirst, had fallen half dead.

Sustained by her superior strength, Mrs. Branican had endeavoured to revive her companions, imploring them to continue their advance, to make a last effort to reach the river, where they might obtain relief. It was as if she were speaking to corpses, and even Godfrey was unconscious.

But the soul of the expedition survived in Dolly, and Dolly did what her companions could not do. Towards the north-west was their course; it was towards the northwest that Tom Marix and Zach Fren had stretched their sinking arms. Dolly set off in that direction.

Across the plain, which stretched away out of sight towards the west, without food, without the means of transport, what could this energetic woman hope? Was her object to reach the Fitzroy, to seek assistance among the whites of the coast, or among the wandering natives? She did not know, but she struggled on for some miles — twenty in three days. Then her strength failed her; she fell, and she would have died if help had not arrived providentially, as one may say.

At this time the black police were out on the boundary of the Great Sandy Desert. Leaving thirty of them near the Fitzroy, their chief, the mani, had started off on a reconnaissance into these parts with sixty of his men.

He it was who fell in with Mrs. Branican. As soon as she recovered consciousness she was able to tell him where her companions were, and she took him to them. The mani and his men revived the poor fellows, whom they would not have found alive twenty-four hours later.

Tom Marix, who had known the mani in Queensland, told him what had happened since they left Adelaide. The officer was acquainted with the object of the expedition in these distant countries of the north-west, and, as Providence had brought him to its help, he offered to join it. When Tom Marix asked him about the Indas, he replied that they were then on the banks of the Fitzroy, about sixty miles off.

There was no time to lose if they wished to spoil Len Burker's plans, whom the mani was already after for some bush ranging crime in Queensland. He did not doubt that if Len Burker succeeded in rescuing Captain John, who had no reason to mistrust him, it would be impossible to get on his track.

Mrs, Branican might reckon on the mani and his men, who shared their provisions with her companions and lent them their horses. The party set off that evening, and in the afternoon of the 2ist of April were in sight of the heights of the valley, near the seventeenth parallel of latitude.

Here the mani picked up his men who had been on the watch along the Fitzroy. They told him that the Indas were then in camp a hundred miles further up the river. It was important to come up with them as soon as possible, although Mrs. Branican had no objects of exchange with which to ransom her husband. But the mani, reinforced by his whole detachment, assisted by Torn Marix, Zach Fren, Godfrey, Jos Meritt, and their companions, would not hesitate to employ force to rescue Captain John from the Indas. But when they reached the native camp it had been abandoned. The mani followed up the natives, halt by halt, and it was in this way that, on the 25th of April, Godfrey, who had gone on half a mile in advance, found himself suddenly in Captain John's presence.

Len Burker had begun to recover himself, looking at Godfrey without uttering a word, waiting for what the boy was going to do or say.

Godfrey had not even seen him. He could not take his eyes off the captain. Although he had never seen him, he knew his features from the photograph Mrs. Branican had given him. No doubt was possible. This man was Captain John.

On his part, John looked at Godfrey with an emotion none the less extraordinary. Although he could not imagine who the boy was, he devoured him with his eyes, he held out hands to him, he called him with a trembling voice — yes, he called him as if he were his son.

Godfrey threw himself into his arms, exclaiming, —

“Captain John!”

“Yes, I; it is I!” said Captain John. “But you, my child, who are you? Willie do you come from? How come you know my name?”

Godfrey could not reply. He became frightfully pale as he caught sight of Len Burker, and could not conceal the horror he felt at seeing the scoundrel.

“Len Burker!” he exclaimed.

Len Burker, after reflecting on the consequences of this meeting, could not but congratulate himself. Was not this a lucky chance which had given him over both Godfrey and John? Was it not incredible luck to have at his mercy both father and child? Turning to the blacks, he made a sign to them to separate John and Godfrey, and seize them.

“Len Burker!” repeated Godfrey.

“Yes, my boy,” answered John. “It is Len Burker, who has saved me — ”

“Saved!” said Godfrey, “No, Captain John, no. Len Burker has not saved you! He wants to destroy you, he ran away from us, he stole your ransom from Mrs. Branican — ”

At this name John answered with a cry, and, seizing Godfrey’s hand, said, “Dolly? Dolly?”

“Yes. Mrs. Branican, Captain John — your wife, who is close by here!”

“Dolly?” said John.

“This boy is mad!” said Len Burker, approaching Godfrey.

“Yes! mad!” murmured Captain John. “The poor child is mad!”

“Len Burker!” said Godfrey, trembling with passion, “you “are a traitor; you are a murderer! And this murderer is here, Captain John, to make away with you after abandoning Mrs. Branican and her companions.”

“Dolly! Dolly!” exclaimed Captain John. “No — you are not mad, my boy! I believe you! I believe you! Come! come!”

Len Burker and his men threw themselves on John and Godfrey, who, taking a revolver from his belt, shot one of the blacks in the chest. But John and he were seized, and the blacks were dragging them towards the river.

Fortunately the report was heard. Shouts came in reply from a few hundred yards down stream, and almost immediately the mani and his men, Tom Marix and his companions, Mrs. Branican, Zach Fren, Jos Meritt and Gin-Ghi came running up.

Len Burker and his blacks were not strong enough to make any resistance, and a moment afterwards John was in Dolly’s arms.

The game was up for Len Burker. If they captured him he could expect no mercy; and, followed by his blacks, he fled up the river.

The mani, Zach Fren, Tom Marix, Jos Meritt and twelve of the police went off in pursuit.

How can we paint the feelings, how can we describe the emotion which overflowed in the hearts of Dolly and John? They wept, and Godfrey shared in their embraces, their kisses, and their tears.

So great was Dolly's joy and so much had she suffered, that her strength abandoned her and she fainted away.

Godfrey knelt near her and helped Harriett to revive her. John did not know it, but they knew that once before Dolly had lost her reason through excess of grief. Would she now lose it under excess of joy?

"Dolly! Dolly!" said John.

And Godfrey, taking her hands, called, "Mother! mother!"

Dolly's eyes opened. Her hand clasped that of her husband, whose joy was overflowing, and who held out his arms to Godfrey, saying, —

"Come, Wat! Come, my son!"

But Dolly could not have him thus mistaken in believing that Godfrey was his child.

"No, John!" said she, "no, Godfrey is not our son. Our poor little Wat is dead — dead soon after you left us."

"Dead!" exclaimed John, still keeping his eyes on Godfrey.

Dolly was about to tell him of the misfortune which had befallen fifteen years before, when there was the sound of a shot in the direction taken by the mani in pursuit of Len Burker.

Had justice been done on the rascal, or had he added another to his long list of crimes?

Almost immediately they all came into view on the bank of the Fitzroy. Two of the police were holding up a woman from whom the blood was flowing from a large wound and reddening the ground.

It was Jane.

What had happened was this.

Notwithstanding the swiftness of his flight, the pursuers had not lost sight of Len Burker, and a few hundred yards only separated them from him when he stopped as he caught sight of Jane.

During the evening before this wretched woman had managed to escape, and she had fled along the Fitzroy. She went as chance led her, and when the first shot was heard she was not a quarter of a mile from the spot where John and Godfrey had just met. She hastened her pace and immediately found herself in presence of her husband, who was running towards her.

Len Burker, seizing her by the arms, would have dragged her away with him. At the thought that Jane would again meet Dolly, and reveal the secret of Godfrey's birth, his anger reached its height. And as Jane resisted he stabbed her.

The next moment there was the report of a gun, accompanied by these words — appropriate enough on this occasion, —

"Good! Oh! very good!"

It was Jos Meritt, who had coolly aimed at Len Burker and” rolled him over into the water of the Fitzroy.

And that was the scoundrel’s end, shot dead in the heart by the hand of the gentleman.

Tom Marix ran towards Jane, who still breathed, but feebly. Two of the police took the unhappy woman between them and brought her to Mrs. Branican.

Seeing Jane in this state, Dolly uttered a heartrending shriek. Leaning over the dying woman, she tried to listen to the beating of her heart, to feel the breath escaping from her mouth. But Jane’s wound was mortal, the knife had been driven into her lungs.

“Jane! Jane!” said Dolly, loudly.

At this voice, which recalled the only love she had ever known, Jane opened her eyes, looked at Dolly, and smiled as she murmured, —

.”Dolly! dear Dolly!”

Suddenly life came into her look. She had just seen Captain John.

“John — you — John!” she said, but so feebly they could hardly hear her.

“Yes, Jane!” said the captain, “it is I — I, whom Dolly has come to save.”

“John — John is there!” murmured she.

“Yes — with us, Jane,” said Dolly. “He will leave us no more. We will take him back with you, with you — there — ”

Jane heard no longer. Her eyes seemed to be looking for someone, and she uttered the name, —

“Godfrey! Godfrey!”

And anguish was depicted on her features, already drawn with agony.

Mrs. Branican made a sign to Godfrey, who came near.

“Him! Him! At last!” said Jane, rising with a last effort.

Seizing Dolly’s hand, —

“Come near, Dolly! come near!” she said. “John and you listen to what I have still to tell you.”

And they leant over her so as not to lose any of her words.

“John, Dolly,” she said, “Godfrey — Godfrey who is there — Godfrey is your child.”

“Our child!” murmured Dolly. And she became as pale as if she were dying, the blood having violently flowed back to her heart.

“We have a son no longer,” said John, “he’s dead.”

“Yes!” said Jane, “little Wat — over there — in San Diego Bay. But you had a second child, and that child is Godfrey.”

In a few sentences, broken by the gaspings of death, she told them what had happened after John’s departure; of Godfrey’s birth at Prospect House, of Dolly deprived of reason, a mother without knowing it, of the little child abandoned by Len Burker’s orders, found a few hours afterwards, brought up afterwards at Wat House under the name of Godfrey.

And Jane added, —

“If I am guilty of not having had the courage to tell you all, Dolly, forgive me — forgive me, John!”

‘ Do you need forgiveness, Jane — you, who have just given us back our child?”

“Yes — your child!” said Jane. “Before God — John, Dolly, I swear it — Godfrey is your child.”

And seeing them both clasp Godfrey in their arms, Jane smiled with happiness, and the smile died away with her last breath.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE END.

We need not linger over the Incidents with which this adventurous journey across the Australian continent came to an end, nor dwell on the different conditions which marked the return to Adelaide.

At the outset the question was discussed: Should they make for the Settlements on the coast by going down the Fitzroy — among others that of Rockbourne — or should they go to Prince Frederick harbour in York Sound? But some time might elapse before a ship visited the coast, and it seemed preferable to return by the route they had come. Escorted by the black police, abundantly supplied with provisions by the mani, having at its disposal the saddle and pack camels recovered from Len Burker, the caravan had nothing to fear from anything it might meet.

Before they started, the body of Jane Burker was laid in a grave dug at the foot of a group of gum trees. Dolly knelt at the grave and prayed for the poor woman’s soul.

Captain John, his wife, and their companions left the camp on the Fitzroy on the 25th of April, under the direction of the mani, who offered to accompany them as far as the nearest station of the Overland Telegraph line.

Everyone was so happy that none felt the fatigues of the journey, and Zach Fren, in his joy, said to Tom Marix, — “Well, Tom, we have found the captain!”

“Yes, Zach, but to what was it due?”

“To Providence having put the helm down, and we should always reckon on Providence.”

However, there was a black spot on Jos Meritt’s horizon. If Mrs. Branican had found Captain John, the famous collector had not found the hat, the search after which had cost him so much trouble and sacrifice. To be just within range of the Indas, and not enter into communication with this Willi, who was perhaps wearing the historic head-gear-what misfortune! Jos Meritt found some consolation, it is true, in hearing from the mani that the fashion of European head-coverings had not extended to the people of the north-west, contrary to what Jos Meritt had already observed among the natives of the north-east. Thus his desideratum could not be realized among the tribes of Northern Australia. On the other hand, he could congratulate himself on the splendid shot with which he had disembarrassed the Branican family of “that abominable Len Burker,” as Zach Fren called him.

The return was made as rapidly as possible. The caravan had no more to suffer from thirst, for the wells were already replenished by the heavy showers of autumn, and the heat was not insupportable. Acting on the mani’s advice, they headed direct for the regions crossed by the telegraph line, where there was no scarcity of well- provisioned stations nor of means of communication with the capital of South Australia. Thanks to the telegraph, it was soon known all over the world that Mrs. Branican had brought her daring expedition to a successful end.

It was in the latitude of Lake Wood that Dolly and her companions reached a station on the Overland Telegraph line. There the mani and the black police took leave of John and Dolly Branican. They did not depart without having received the cordial thanks they deserved, to be followed by the reward the captain would send them as soon as he reached Adelaide. There was now no more to do than to pass south through Alexandra Land to Alice Spring, where the caravan arrived on the 19th of June, after a seven weeks' journey.

There, under the care of Mr. Flint, the chief of the station, Tom Marix recovered the means of transport he had left behind, the cattle, the drays, the buggies, the horses for the distance remaining to be traversed. And on the 3rd of July the expedition reached the railway at Farina Town, and the next day arrived in Adelaide.

What a welcome awaited Captain John and his courageous wife! The whole town turned out to receive them, and when Captain John Branican appeared between his wife and child on the balcony of the hotel in King William Street„the cheers were so terrific that, according to Gin-Ghi, they might have been heard at the other end of the Celestial Empire.

The stay at Adelaide was not of long duration. John and Dolly were eager to return to San Diego, to see their friends and take up their abode at Prospect House, where happiness awaited them. They parted from Tom Marix and his men, who were liberally rewarded, and whose services could never be forgotten.

Neither did they forget that character, Jos Meritt, who also resolved to leave Australia with his faithful domestic.

But how about the hat he had not found? Did he find it? Where? In a royal palace, where it was kept with all the respect which was its due. Yes! Jos Meritt, led astray on a false scent, had been running about the five parts of the world in vain to find a hat which was all the time in Windsor Castle, as he learned six months later. It was the hat worn by Her Gracious Majesty at the visit of King Louis Philippe in 1845, and he must have been mad at the very least, to have supposed that this masterpiece of a Parisian milliner would have finished its career on the woolly cranium of an Australian savage!

The peregrinations of Jos Meritt consequently ceased, to the extreme joy of Gin-Ghi, but to the extreme displeasure of the celebrated curio-hunter, who returned to Liverpool, much amazed that he had not been able to complete his collection by the acquisition of the only hat of its kind in the world. Three weeks after leaving Adelaide, where they embarked on the Abraham Lincoln, John, Dolly, and Godfrey Branican, accompanied by Zach Fren and the woman Harriett, arrived at San Diego.

There Mr. William Andrew and Captain Ellis received them amid the inhabitants of that generous city, proud of having recovered Captain John, and. welcoming in him one of the most glorious of its children.

THE END

THE CARPATHIAN CASTLE

Anonymous translation, 1883

First published in 1893, this novel is set in the village of Werst in the Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania, where mysterious happenings are occurring and the villagers believe that the devil occupies the castle.

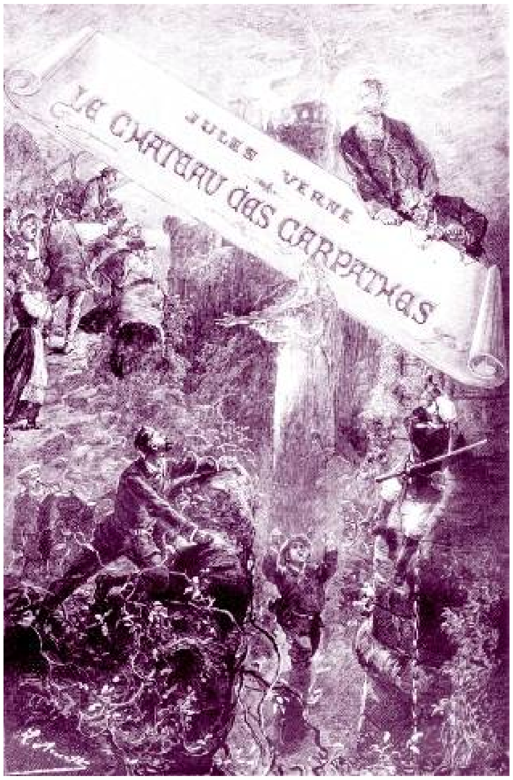
JULES VERNE
LE CHATEAU DES CARPATHES

The original frontispiece

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CHAPTER I.

This story is not fantastic; it is merely romantic. Are we to conclude that it is not true, its unreality being granted? That would be a mistake. We live in times when everything can happen — we might almost say everything has happened. If our story does not seem to be true to-day, it may seem so to-morrow, thanks to the resources of science, which are the wealth of the future. No one would think of classing it as legendary. Besides, one does not invent legends at the close of this practical and positive nineteenth century; neither in Brittany, the country of the ferocious Korrigans; nor in Scotland, the land of the brownies and gnomes; nor in Norway, the land of ases, elfs, sylphs, and valkyries; nor even in Transylvania, where the Carpathian scenery lends itself so naturally to every psychagogic evocation. But at the same time it is as well to note that Transylvania is still much attached to the superstitions of the early ages.

“These provinces of furthest Europe, M. de Gerando has described them, M. Elisee Reclus has visited them. Neither have said anything of the strange story on which this romance is founded. Did they know of it? Perhaps; but they did not wish to add to the belief in it. We are sorry for it; for if they had related it, one would have done so with the precision of an annalist, and the other with that instinctive poetry with which all his tales of travels are imbued. But as neither of them has told it, I will try to do so for them.

On the 29th of May a shepherd was watching his flock on the edge of a green plateau at the foot of Retyezat, which dominates a fertile valley, thickly wooded with straight-stemmed trees, and enriched with cultivation. This elevated plateau, open, unsheltered, the north-west winds sweep during the winter as closely as the barber’s razor. It is said in the country that they shave it — and they do so, almost.

This shepherd had nothing arcadian in his costume, nor bucolic in his attitude. He was neither Daphnis, nor Amyntas, nor Tityrus, nor Lycidas, nor Melibceus. The Lignon did not murmur at his feet, which were encased in thick wooden shoes; it was only the Wallachian Syl whose clear, pastoral waters were worthy of flowing through the meanderings of the romance of Astrea.

Frik, Frik of the village of Werst — such was the name of this rustic shepherd — was as roughly clothed as his sheep, but quite well enough for the hole, at the entrance of the village, where sheep and pigs lived in a state of revolting filth.

The immanum pecus fed then under the care of the said Frik — immanior ipse. Stretched on a hillock carpeted with grass, he slept with one eye open, his big pipe in his mouth; and now and then he gave a shrill whistle to his dogs when some sheep strayed away from the pasturage, or else-he gave a more powerful blast which awoke the multiple echoes of the mountain.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon. The sun was sinking towards the horizon. A few summits whose bases were bathed in floating mist were standing out clear in the east. Towards the south-west two breaks in the chain allowed a slanting column of rays to enter the ring like a luminous jet passing through a half open door.

This orographic system belongs to the wildest part of Transylvania, known as the county of Klausenburg, or Kolosvar.

A curious fragment of the Austrian Empire is this Transylvania, “Erdely,” in Magyar, which means the country of forests. It is bounded by Hungary on the north, Wallachia on the south, Moldavia on the west. Extending over sixty thousand square kilometres, about six millions of hectares, nearly the ninth of France, it is a kind of Switzerland, but half as large again, and no more populous. With its table-lands under cultivation, its luxuriant pasturages, its capriciously carved valleys, its frowning summits, Transylvania, streaked by the plutonic ramifications of the Carpathians, is furrowed by numerous watercourses flowing to swell the Theiss and superb Danube, the Iron Gates of which, a few miles to the south, close the defile of the Balkan chain on the frontier of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire.

Such is this ancient country of Dacia, conquered by Trajan in the first century of the Christian Era. The independence it enjoyed under Jean Zapoly and his successors up to 1699, ended with Leopold the First, who annexed it to Austria. But such was its political constitution that it remained the common abode of the races which elbow each other but never mingle — Wallachians, or Roumans, Hungarians, Tsiganes, Szeklers of Moldavian origin, and also Saxons, whom time and circumstances will end by Magyarizing to the advantage of Transylvanian unity.

To which of these types did the shepherd Frik belong? Was he a degenerate descendant of the ancient Dacians? He would not have found it easy to say so, to judge by his tumbled hair, his begrimed face, his bristly beard, his thick eyebrows, like two red-haired brushes, his bluish eyes, bluish or greenish, the humid corners of which were marked with the wrinkles of old age. He must have been sixty-five — you would never have guessed him less. But he was big, hardy, upright under his yellowish cloak, which was not as shaggy as his chest; and a painter would not have lost the chance of sketching him, when he was wearing his grass hat, a true wisp of straw, and resting on his crook as motionless as a rock.

Just as the rays penetrated through the break in the west, Frik turned over. His half-closed hand he made into a telescope, as he had already made it into a speaking-

trumpet, to make his voice heard at a distance, and he looked through it attentively.

In the clear of the horizon, a good mile away, lay a group of buildings, with their outlines much softened by the distance. This old castle occupied on an isolated shoulder of the Vulkan range the upper part of a tableland called the Orgall Plateau. In the bright light the Castle stood out with the clearness displayed in stereoscopic views. But, nevertheless, the shepherd’s eye must have been endowed with great power of vision to be able to make out any detail in that distant mass.

Suddenly he exclaimed, as he shook his head, —

Old castle! Old castle! You may well stand firm on your foundation. Three years more and you will have ceased to exist, for your beech-tree has only three branches left.”

This beech-tree, planted at the extremity of one of the bastions of the enclosure, stood out black against the sky, and would have been almost invisible at that distance to any one else than Frik. The explanation of the shepherd’s words, which were caused by a legend relative to the castle, we will give in due time.

“Yes,” he repeated, “three branches. There were four yesterday, but the fourth has fallen during the night. I can only count three at the fork. No more than three, old castle — no more than three!”

If we attack a shepherd on his ideal side, the imagination readily takes him for a dreamy, contemplative being: he converses with the planets, he confers with the stars, he reads in the skies. In reality he is generally a stupid, ignorant brute. But public credulity easily credits him with supernatural gifts he practises sorcery; according to his humour he can call up good fortune or bad, and scatter it among man and beast — or, what comes to the same thing, he sells sympathetic powder and you can buy from him philtres and formulas. Can he not make the furrows barren by throwing into them enchanted stones? Can he not make sheep sterile by merely casting on them the evil eye? These superstitions are of all times and all countries. Even in the most civilized lands, one will never meet a shepherd without giving him some friendly word, some significant greeting, saluting him by the name of "pastor" to which he clings. A touch of the hat affords an escape from malign influences, and on the roads of Transylvania it is no more omitted than elsewhere.

Frik, then, was regarded as a sorcerer, a caller-up of apparitions. According to him the vampires and stryges obeyed him: if you were to believe him, these were to be met with at the setting of the moon, as on dark nights in other countries you see the great bissext astride on the arms of the mill talking with the wolves or dreaming in the starlight.

Frik profited by all this He sold charms and counter charms. But, be it noted, he was as credulous as his believers; and if he did not believe in his own witchcraft, he believed in the legends of his country.

There is nothing surprising therefore in his prophecy regarding the approaching disappearance of the old castle, now that the beech was reduced to three branches, or in his at once setting out to bear the news to Werst.

After mustering his flock by bellowing loudly through a long trumpet of white wood, he took the road to the village. His dogs followed him, hurrying on the sheep as they did so — two mongrel demi-griffins, snarling and ferocious, who seemed fitter to eat the sheep than to guard them. He had a hundred rams and ewes, a dozen yearlings, the rest three and four years old.

The flock belonged to the judge of Werst, the biro Koltz, who paid the commune a large sum for pasturage, and who thought a good deal of his shepherd Frik, knowing him to be a skilful shearer and well acquainted with the treatment of such maladies as thrush, giddiness, fluke, rot, foot rot, and other cattle ailments.

The flock moved in a compact mass, the bell-wether at the head, making the bell heard above the bleating.

As he left the pasture Frik took a wide footpath bordered by spacious fields, in which waved magnificent ears of corn, very long in the straw and high on the stalk; and several plantations of koukouroutz, which is the maize of the country. The road led to the edge of a forest of firs and spruces, fresh and gloomy beneath their branches. Lower down the Syl flowed along its luminous course, filtering through the pebbles in its bed, and bearing the logs of wood from the sawmills up stream.

Dogs and sheep stopped on the right bank of the river and began to drink greedily, pushing the reeds aside to do so.

Werst was not more than three gunshots away, beyond a thick plantation of willows formed of well-grown trees, and not of stunted pollards which only grow bushy for a few feet above their roots. These willows stretched away up to Vulkan Hill, of which the village of the same name occupied a projection on the southern slope of the Plesa range.

The fields were now deserted. It is only at nightfall that the labourers return home, and Frik as he went along had no traditional “good night” to exchange. When his flock had satisfied their thirst, he was about to enter the fold of the valley when a man appeared at the bend of the Syl, some fifty yards down stream.

“Hallo, friend!” said he to the shepherd.

He was one of those pedlars who travel from market to market in the district. They are to be met with in the towns and all the villages. In making themselves understood they have no difficulty, for they speak all languages. Was this one an Italian, a Saxon, or a Wallachian? No one could say, but he was unmistakably a Jew — tall, thin, hook-nosed, with a pointed beard, a prominent forehead, and keen, glittering eyes.

This pedlar dealt in telescopes, thermometers, barometers, and small clocks. What he did not carry in the bag strongly strapped over his shoulder, he hung from his neck and his belt, so that he .was quite a travelling stall.

Probably this Jew had the usual respect for shepherds and the salutary fear they inspire. He shook Frik by the hand. Then in the Rouman language, which is a mixture of Latin and Sclave, he said with a foreign accent, — “Are you getting on all right, friend?”

“Yes — considering the weather,” replied Frik. “Then you must be doing well to-day, for the weather is beautiful.”

“And I shall not be doing well to-morrow, for it will rain.”

“It will ram?” said the pedlar. “Then it rains without clouds in your country?”

“The clouds will come to-night — and from yonder, the bad side of the mountain.”

“How do you know that?”

“By the wool of my sheep, which is harsh and dry as tanned leather.”

“Then it will be all the worse for those who are on a long journey.”

“And all the better for those who stay near home.

“Then you have a home, shepherd?

“Have you any children?” said Frik.

“No.”

“Are yon married?”

“No.”

And Frik asked this because In this country it is the custom to do so of those you meet. He continued, —

“Where do you come from, pedlar?”

“From Hermanstadt.”

Hermanstadt is one of the principal villages of Transylvania. On leaving it you find the valley of the Hungarian Syl, which flows down to the town of Petroseny.

“And you are going?”

“To Kolosvar.”

To reach Kolosvar you have to ascend the valley of the Maros, and then by Karlsburg along the lower slopes of the Bihar mountains you reach the capital of the country. It is a walk of twenty miles only.

These vendors of thermometers, barometers, and cheap jewellery always seem to be a peculiar people and somewhat Hoffmanesque in their bearing. It is part of their trade. They sell time and weather in all forms — the time which flies, the weather which is, and the weather which will be — just as other packmen sell baskets and drapery. They are commercial travellers for the house of Saturn & Co. of the sign of the Golden Shoe. And doubtless this was the effect the Jew produced on Frik, who gazed not without astonishment at this display of things which were new to him, the use of which he did not know.

“I say, pedlar,” said he, stretching out his arm, “what is the use of all this trumpery which rattles at your belt like a lot of old bones?”

“These things are valuable,” said the pedlar; “they are of use to everybody.”

“To everybody?” said Frik, winking his eye, “even to shepherds?”

“Even to shepherds.”

. “What is the use of this machine?”

“This machine,” answered the Jew, putting a thermometer Into his hands, “will tell you if it is hot or cold.”

“Ah, friend ‘ I can tell that when I am sweating under my tunic, or shivering under my overcoat.”

Evidently that was enough for a shepherd who did not trouble himself about the wherefore of science.

“And this big watch with a needle?” continued he, pointing to an aneroid.

“That is not a watch, but an instrument which will tell you if it will be fine to-morrow or if it will rain.”

“Really?”

“Really”

“Good,” said Frik. “I don’t want that even if it only costs a kreutzer. I have only to look at the clouds trailing along the mountains or racing over the higher peaks, and I can tell you what the weather will be a day in advance. Look, do you see that mist which seems to rise from the ground? Well, I tell you it means water for to-morrow!”

And in fact the shepherd, who was a great observer of the weather, could do very well without a barometer.

“I will not ask you if you want a clock,” continued the pedlar.

“A clock! I have one which goes by itself and hangs over my head. That is the sun up there. Look you, friend, when it is over the peak of Roduk it is noon; when it looks at me across the gap of Egelt it is six o’clock. My sheep know it as well as I do, and my dogs know it as well as my sheep. You can keep your clocks.”

“Then,” said the pedlar, “if my only customers were shepherds, I should have hard work to make a fortune. And so you want nothing?”

“Nothing at all”

Besides which all these low-priced goods were of very poor workmanship: the barometers never agreed as to its being changeable weather or fair, the clock-hands made the hours too long or the minutes too short — in fact they were pure rubbish. The shepherd suspected this, perhaps, and did not care to become a buyer. But just as he was taking up his stick again, he caught sight of a sort of tube hanging from the pedlar’s strap.

“What do you do with that tube?”

“That tube is not a tube.”

“Is it a blunderbuss?”

“No,” said the Jew, “it is a telescope.’’

It was one of those common telescopes which magnify the objects five or six times, or bring them as near, which produces the same result.

Frik unhooked the instrument, he looked at it, he handled it, and opened and shut it.

Then he shook his head “A telescope?” he asked.

“Yes, shepherd, and a good one, and one that will make you see a long way off.”

“Oh! I have good eyes, my friend. When the air is clear I can see the rocks on the top of Retyezat and the farthest trees in the Vulkan valleys.”

“Without winking?”

“Without winking. It is the dew which makes me do that, and my sleeping from night to morning under the star-lit sky. That is the sort of thing to keep your pupils clean.”

“What — the dew?” said the pedlar. “It might perhaps make the blind — ”

“Not the shepherds.”

“Quite so! But if you have good eyes, mine are better when I get them at the end of that telescope.”

“That remains to be seen.”

“Put yours to it now!”

“Mine?”

“Try.”

“Will that cost me anything?” asked Frik suspiciously.

“Nothing at all, unless you buy the machine.”

Being reassured on this point, Frik took the telescope, the tubes of which were adjusted by the pedlar. Shutting his left eye as directed, he applied his right eye to the eyepiece.

At first he looked towards Vulkan Hill and then up towards Plesa. That done, he lowered the instrument and brought it to bear on the village of Werst.

u Ah! ah!” he said. “Perhaps you are right. It does carry farther than my eyes. There is the main road. I recognize the people. There is Nic Deck, the forester, coming home with his haversack on his back and his gun over his shoulder.”

“I told you so,” said the pedlar.

“Yes, yes, that is really Nic!” said the shepherd. “And who is the girl who is coming out of Koltz’s house, with the red petticoat and the black bodice, as if to get in front of him?”

“Keep on looking, shepherd. You will soon recognize the girl, as you did the young man.”

“Ah! yes! It is Miriota — the lovely Miriota! Ah! the lovers, the lovers! This time I have got them at the end of my tube, and I shall not lose one of their little goings on! “ —

“What do you say to the telescope?”

“Eh? It does make you see far!”

As Frik was looking through a telescope for the first time, it follows that Werst was one of the most backward villages of the country of Klausenburg; and that this was so we shall soon see.

“Come, shepherd,” continued the pedlar, “look again; look farther than Werst. The village is too near us. Look beyond, farther beyond, I tell you!”

“Shall I have to pay any more?”

“No more.”

“Good! I will look towards the Hungarian Syl! Yes. There is the clock-tower at Livadzel. I recognize it by the cross which has lost one arm. And, beyond, in the valley, among the pines, I see the spire of Petroseny with its weathercock of zinc with the open beak as if it were calling its chickens; and, beyond, there is that tower pointing up amid the trees. But I suppose, pedlar, it is all at the same price?”

“All the same price, shepherd.”

Frik turned the telescope towards the plateau of Orgall; then with it he followed the curtain of forests darkening the slopes of Plesa, and the field of the objective framed the distant outline of the village.

“Yes!” he exclaimed, “the fourth branch is on the ground. I had seen aright. And no one will get it to make a torch of it for the night of St. John. Nobody, not even me! It would be to risk both body and soul. But do not trouble yourself about it. There is one who knows how to gather it to-night for his infernal fire — and that is the Chort!”

The Chort being the devil when he is invoked in the language of the country.

Perhaps the Jew might have demanded an explanation of these incomprehensible words, as he was not a native of the village of Werst or its environs, had not Frik exclaimed in a voice of terror mingled with surprise, —

“What is that mist escaping from the donjon? Is it a mist? No! One would say it was a smoke! It is not possible. For hundreds and hundreds of years no smoke has come from the chimneys of the castle!”

“If you see a smoke over there, shepherd, there is a smoke.”

“No, pedlar, no. It is the glass of your machine which is misty.”

“Clean it.”

“And when I have cleaned it — ”

Frik shifted the telescope, and, having rubbed the glasses, he replaced it at his eye.

It was undoubtedly a smoke streaming from the upper part of the donjon. It mounted high in the air and mingled with the higher vapours.

Frik remained motionless and silent. All his attention was concentrated on the castle, from which the rising shadow began to touch the level of the plateau of Orgall.

Suddenly he lowered the telescope, and, thrusting his hand into the pouch he wore under his frock, he said, —

“How much do you want for your tube?”

“A florin and a half!” said the pedlar.

And he would have sold the telescope for a florin if Frik had shown any desire to bargain for it. But the shepherd said not a word. Evidently under the influence of an astonishment as sudden as it was inexplicable, he plunged his hand to the bottom of his wallet and drew out the money.

“Are you buying the telescope for yourself?” asked the pedlar.

“No; for my master.”

“And he will pay you back?”

“Yes the two florins it costs me.”

“What! The two florins?”

“Eh! Certainly! That and no less. Good evening, my friend!”

“Good evening, shepherd.”

And Frik, whistling his dogs and urging on his flock, struck off rapidly in the direction of Werst.

The Jew, looking at him as he went, shook his head, as if he had been doing a trade with a madman.

“If I had known that,” he murmured, “I should have charged him more for that telescope.”

Then he adjusted his burden on his belt and shoulders and resumed his journey to Karlsburg along the right bank of the Syl.

Where did he go? It matters little. He passed out of this story. We shall meet with him no more.

CHAPTER II.

It matters not whether we are dealing with native rocks piled up by natural means in distant geological epochs, or with constructions due to the hand of man over which the breath of time has passed, the effect is much the same when viewed from a few miles off. Unworked stone and worked stone may easily be confounded. From afar, the same colour, the same lineaments, the same deviations of line in the perspective, the same uniformity of tint under the grey patina of centuries.

And so it was with this castle, otherwise known as the Castle of the Carpathians. To distinguish the indefinite outlines of this structure on the plateau of Orgall, which crowns the left of Vulkan Hill, was impossible. It did not stand out in relief from the background of mountains. What might have been taken as a donjon was only a stony mound; what might be supposed to be a curtain with its battlements might be only a rocky crest. The mass was vague, floating, uncertain. And in the opinion of many tourists the Cattle of the Carpathians existed only in the imagination of the country people.

Evidently the simplest means of assuring yourself as to Its existence would have been to have bargained with a guide from Vulkan or Werst, to have gone up the valley, scaled the ridge, and visited the buildings. But a guide would have been as difficult to find as the road leading to the castle. In the valley of both Syls no one would have agreed to be guide to a traveller, for no matter what remuneration, to the Castle of the Carpathians.

What they would have seen of this ancient habitation in the field of a telescope more powerful and better focussed than the trumpery thing bought by the shepherd Frik on account of his master Koltz, was this: —

Some 800 or 900 feet in the rear of Vulkan Hill lay a grey enclosure, covered with a mass of wall plants, and extending for from 400 to 500 feet along the irregularities of the plateau; at each end were two angular bastions, in the right of which grew the famous beech close by a slender watch-tower or look-out with a pointed roof; on the left a few patches of wall, strengthened by flying buttresses, supporting the tower of a chapel, the cracked bell of which was often sounded in high winds to the great alarm of the district; in the midst, crowned by its crenellated platform, a heavy, formidable donjon, with three rows of leaded windows, the first storey f which . as surrounded by a circular terrace; on the platform a long metal spire, ornamented with a feudal virolet weathercock, stationary with rust, which a last puff of the north-west wind had set pointing to the south-east.

As to what was contained in this enclosure, if there was any habitable building within, if a drawbridge or a postern gave admittance to it, had been unknown for a number of years. In fact, although the Castle of the Carpathians was in better preservation than it seemed to be, an infectious terror, doubled by superstition, protected it as much as it had formerly been by its basilisks, its grasshoppers, its bombards, its culverins, its thunderers, and other engines of mediaeval artillery.

But, nevertheless, the Castle of the Carpathians was Well worth visiting by tourists and antiquaries. Its situation on the crest of the Orgall plateau was exceptionally fine. From the upper platform of the keep, or donjon, the view extended to the farthest point of the mountains. In the rear undulated the lofty chain, so capriciously spurred, which serves as the frontier of Wallachia. In front lay the sinuous defile of the Vulkan, the only practicable route between the frontier provinces. Beyond the valley of the two Syls lay the towns of Livadzel, Lonyai, Petroseny, and Petrilla, grouped at the mouths of the shafts by which this rich coal-basin is worked. In the distance lay an admirable series of ridges, wooded to their bases, green on their flanks, barren on their summits, commanded by the rugged peaks of Retyezat and Paring. Far away beyond the valley of the Hatszeg and the course of the Maros, appeared the distant mist-clad outlines of the Alps of Central Transylvania.

Hereabouts the depression of the ground formerly formed a lake into which the two Syls flowed before they found a passage through the chain. Nowadays this depression is a coal-field with its advantages and inconveniences: the tall brick chimneys rise amid the poplars, pines, and beeches, and black fumes poison the air which once was saturated with the perfumes of fruit-trees and flowers. But at the time of our story, although industry was holding the mining district under its iron hand, nothing had been lost of the country’s wild character which was its by nature.

The Castle of the Carpathians dated from the twelfth or thirteenth century. In those days, under the rule of the chiefs or voivodes, monasteries, churches, palaces, castles were fortified with as much care as the towns and villages. Lords and peasants had to secure themselves against aggression of all kinds. This state of affairs explains why the old fortifications of the castle, its bastions and its keep, gave it the appearance of a feudal building. What architect would have built on this plateau at this height? We know not, and the bold builder is unknown, unless it was the Rouman Manoli, so gloriously sung of in Wallachian legend, and who built at Curte d’Argis the celebrated castle of Rodolphe the Black.

Whatever doubts there might be as to the architect, there were none as to the family who owned the castle. The barons of Gortz had been lords of the country from time immemorial. They were mixed up in all the wars which ensanguined the Transylvanian fields; they fought against the Hungarians, the Saxons, the Szeklers; their name figures in the “cantices “and “domes,” in which is perpetuated the memory of these disastrous times. For their motto they had the famous Wallachian proverb, Dape maorte, “Give unto death and they gave; they poured out their blood for the cause of independence, the blood which came to them from the Romans their ancestors.

As we know, all their efforts of devotedness and sacrifice ended only in reducing the descendants of this valiant race to the most unworthy oppression. It no longer exists politically. Three heels have crushed it. But these Wallachians of Transylvania have not despaired, of shaking off the yoke. The future belongs to them, and it is with unshakable confidence that they repeat these words in which are concentrated all their aspirations: “Roman no pere!” (the Rouman does not know how to perish).

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century the last representative of the lords of Gortz was Baron Rodolphe. Born at the Castle of the Carpathians, he had seen the family die away around him in the early years of his youth. When he was twenty-two years old he found himself alone in the world. His people had fallen off year by year, like the branches of the old beech-tree with which popular superstition associated the very existence of the castle. Without relatives, we might even say without friends, what could Baron Rodolphe do to occupy the leisure of this monotonous solitude that death had made around him? What were his tastes, his instincts, hi? aptitudes? It would not have been easy to discover any beyond an irresistible passion for music, particularly for the singing of the great artistes of the period. And so, after having entrusted the castle, then much dilapidated, to the care of a few old servants, he one day disappeared.

And, as was discovered later on, he had devoted his wealth, which was considerable, to visiting the chief lyrical centres of Europe, the theatres of Germany, France, and Italy, where he could indulge himself in his insatiable dilettante fancies. Was he an oddity, or a madman? The Strangeness of his life led people to suppose so.

But the remembrance of his country was deeply engraven on the heart of the young lord of Gortz. In his distant wanderings he had not forgotten his Transylvanian birthplace. And he had returned to take part in one “of the sanguinary revolts of the Roumanian peasantry against Hungarian oppression.

The descendants of the ancient Dacians were conquered, and their territory shared among the conquerors.

It was in consequence of this defeat that Baron Rodolphe finally left the Castle of the Carpathians, certain parts of which had already fallen into ruin. Death soon deprived the castle of its last servants and it was totally deserted. As to the Baron de Gortz, the report went that he had patriotically associated himself with the famous Rosza Sandor, an old highwayman, whom the war of independence had made a dramatic hero. Happily for him, at the close of the struggle Rodolphe de Gortz had separated from the band of the “betyar,” and he had done wisely, for the old brigand had again become a robber, and ended by falling into the hands of the police, who shut him up in the prison of Szamos-Uyvar.

Nevertheless, another version was generally believed in the country, to the effect that Baron Rodolphe had been killed during an encounter between Rosza Sandor and the custom-house officers on the frontier. This was not so, although the Baron de Gortz had never appeared at the castle since that time, and his death was generally taken for granted. But it is wise not to accept without considerable reserve the gossip of this credulous people.

A castle deserted, haunted, and mysterious. A vivid and ardent imagination had soon peopled it with phantoms; ghosts appeared in it, and spirits returned to it at all hours of the night. Such opinions are still common in certain superstitious countries of Europe, and Transylvania is one of the most superstitious.

Besides, how could the village of Werst put off its belief in the supernatural? The pope and the schoolmaster, the one charged with the education of the faithful, the other charged with the education of the children, taught their fables as openly as if they believed in them thoroughly. They affirmed, and even produced “corroborative evidence” that were-wolves prowled about the country; that vampires known as stryges, because they shrieked like stryges, quenched their thirst on human blood; that “staffii” lurked about ruins and became vindictive if something to eat and drink were not left for them every night. There were fairies, “babes” who should not be met with on Thursdays or Fridays, the two worst days in the week. In the depths of the forests; those enchanted forests, there wandered the “balauri,” those gigantic dragons whose jaws gape up to the clouds, the “zmei” with vast wings, who carry away the daughters of the royal blood, and even those of meaner lineage when they are pretty! Here, it would seem, were a number of formidable monsters, and what is the good genius opposed to them in the popular imagination? Simply the “serpi de casa,” the snake of the fireside, which lives at the back of the hearth, and whose healthy influence the peasant purchases by feeding him with the best milk.

If ever a castle was a fitting refuge for the creatures of this Roumanian mythology, was it not. the Castle of the Carpathians? On that isolated plateau, inaccessible except from the left of Vulkan Hill, there could be no doubt that there lived dragons and fairies and stryges, and probably a few ghosts of the family of the barons of Gortz. And so it had an evil reputation, which it deserved, as they said. No one dared to visit it. It spread around it a terrible epidemic as an unhealthy marsh gives forth its pestilential emanations. Nothing could approach it within a quarter of a mile without risking its life in this world and its salvation in the next. At least so it was taught in the school of Magister Hermod.

But at the same time this state of things was to end eventually, and that as soon as no stone remained of the ancient stronghold of the barons of Gortz. And here it was that the legend came in.

If we were to believe the authorities of the village of Werst, the existence of the castle was bound up with that of the old beech-tree which grew in the bastion to the right of the enclosure. Since the departure of Rodolphe de Gortz, the people of the village, and more especially the shepherd Frik, had observed it — this beech-tree had lost one of its main branches every year. There were eighteen from the first fork when Baron Rodolphe was seen for the last time on the platform of the keep, and now the tree had only three. Consequently every branch that fell meant a year less in the castle’s life. The fall of the last would mean the final dissolution; and then on the plateau of Orgall the remains of the Castle of the Carpathians would be sought in vain.

Evidently this was but one of those legends which spring up so readily in Roumanian imagination. In the first place it remained to be proved that this beech-tree did really lose one of its branches a year, although Frik did not hesitate to assert that it did, he who never lost sight of it while his flock pastured in the meadows of the Syl. Nevertheless, from the highest to the lowest of the people of Werst, none doubted that the castle had but three years to live, for only three branches could now be counted on the tutelary tree.

Thus it was that the shepherd had started on his return, to the village with the important news when there occurred the incident of the telescope.

Important news, very important news in fact! Smoke had appeared above the donjon! That which his eyes alone had not been able to notice, Frik had distinctly seen with the pedlar’s telescope. It was no vapour but real smoke which had risen into the clouds! And yet the castle was deserted. For a long time no one had entered the gate, which was doubtless shut, nor crossed the drawbridge, which was doubtless up. If it were inhabited it could only be by supernatural beings. But what use could spirits have for a fire in the rooms of the keep? Was it a fire in a room? Was it a kitchen fire? Really it was inexplicable.

Frik hurried his sheep along the road; at his voice the dogs urged the flock up the rising track, the dust of which had been laid by the evening moisture.

A few peasants, delayed in the fields, greeted him as he passed, and he scarcely replied to them. And consequently there was much uneasiness, for if you would avoid evil influences, it is not enough to say “Good evening” to a shepherd, but the shepherd must say it to you. And Frik did not appear much inclined to do so, as he hurried on with his haggard eyes, his curious gait, and his excited gestures. The wolves and the bears might have walked off with half his flock without his noticing it.

The first who learnt the news was judge Koltz. From afar Frik saw him and shouted, —

“There is a fire at the castle, master!”

“What do you say?”

“I say what there is.”

“Have you gone mad?”

And how could a fire break out in such a heap of old stones? As well assert that Negoi, the highest peak of the Carpathians, had been devoured by flames. It would have been no more absurd.

“You suppose that the castle is on fire?” asked Master Koltz.

“If it is not on fire, it smokes.”

“It is some vapour.”

“No; it is smoke. Come and see!”

And they went into the middle of the main road of the village, near the terrace, from which the castle could be observed.

. When they got there Frik held out the telescope to Master Koltz.

Evidently the use of this instrument was no more known to him than it had been to his shepherd.

“What is that?” he said.

“A machine I bought for you for two florins, master, and it is well worth four.”

“Of whom?”

“A pedlar.”

“And what is it to do?”

“Put it to your eye, look straight at the castle, and you will see.”

The judge levelled the telescope at the castle and looked through it for some time.

Yes! There was certainly smoke rising from one of the chimneys of the donjon. At this moment it was being blown away by the breeze and floating up the flank of the mountain.

“Smoke!” said Master Koltz, astonished. But now he and Frik had been joined by Miriota and the forester, Nic Deck, who had been indoors for some time.

“What is the use of this?” asked the young man, taking the telescope.

“To see with afar off,” said the shepherd.

“Are you joking?”

“Joking? Hardly an hour ago I saw you coming down the road into Werst. You and — ”

He did not finish his sentence. Miriota had blushed and jowered her pretty eyes. After all, there was no harm in an honest young girl going to meet her betrothed.

Both of them took the famous telescope, and looked through it at the castle.

Meanwhile half a dozen neighbours had arrived on the terrace, and, after many questions as to what it all meant, took a look through the telescope in turn.

“A smoke! A smoke at the castle!” said one.

“Perhaps the lightning has struck the donjon!” said another.

“Has there been any thunder?” asked Master Koltz, addressing Frik.

“Not a sound for a week,” said the shepherd.

And the good folks could not have been more startled if a crater had opened on the summit of Retyezat to give passage to the subterranean vapours.

CHAPTER III

The village of Werst is of so little importance that most maps do not indicate its position. In administrative rank it is even below its neighbour called Vulkan, from the name of that portion of the Plesa range on which both are picturesquely situated.

At the present time, when the opening up of the coalfield has increased the importance of the towns of Petroseny, Livadzel, and others, a few miles off, neither Vulkan nor Werst has received the least advantage from their proximity to a great industrial centre. What the villages were fifty years ago — what they will doubtless be half a century hence — they are still; and, according to Elisee Reclus, a good half of the Vulkan population consists of “people engaged in watching the frontier — customhouse officers, gendarmes, revenue officers, and quarantine attendants.” Omit the gendarmes and the revenue officers, add a larger proportion of agriculturists, and you will have the population of Werst, consisting of a few hundred inhabitants.

It is a street, this village, nothing but a wide street, the uphill nature of which makes the ascent and descent laborious enough along the road. It serves as the natural thoroughfare between the Wallachian and Transylvanian frontier. Through it pass the cattle and sheep and pigs, the dealers in fresh provisions, fruits, and cereals, the few travellers who venture through the defile instead of taking the Kolosvar and Maros valley railways.

Nature has assuredly generously endowed the district between the mountains of Bihar, Retyezat, and Paring. Rich in the fertility of its soil, it is also rich in its underground wealth. There are salt-mines at Thorda with an annual output of more than twenty thousand tons: Mount Parajd, measuring seven kilometres in circumference at its dome, is entirely formed of chloride of sodium; the mines of Torotzko yield lead, galena, mercury, and especially iron, the beds of which were worked in the tenth century; at Vayda Hunyad are mines whose products can be turned into steel of superior quality; there are coalmines easily worked in the upper strata of the lacustrine valleys of the districts of Hatszeg, Livadzel, and Petroseny, a vast deposit, estimated to contain two hundred and fifty million tons; and, finally, there are gold-mines at Offenbanya, at Topanfalva, the region of the gold-seekers, where thousands of primitive mills are working the sands of Veres-Patak, "The Transylvaniari Pactolus," and exporting every year about two million francs' worth of the precious metal.

Here is a district that would seem to be greatly favoured by nature, and yet its wealth is of very little profit to its population. If the more important centres, like Torotzko.

Petroseny, and Lonyai, possess a few establishments suited to the comfortable conditions of modern industrial life; if they have regular buildings laid out with rule and line, and outhouses and shops, real workmen's towns in fact; if they have a certain number of houses with balconies and verandahs, that is not the case at Vulkan or at Werst Some sixty houses, irregularly clustering along the only street, capped with a fanciful roof, the ridge overhanging the mud wall, the front towards the garden, an attic with a skylight as a top storey, a dilapidated barn as an annexe: a stable all awry, covered with straw; here and there a well surmounted by a beam from which hangs a bucket; two or three ponds which run over during a storm; streams, of which the tortuous ruts indicate the course; such is the village of Werst, built on both sides of the road between the slanting slopes of the hill. But it is all very fresh and attractive;

there are flowers at the doors and windows; curtains of verdure screening the walls; plants in disorder mingling with the old gold of the thatch; poplars, elms, beeches, pines, maples, climbing above the houses as high as they can. Beyond are the zigzagged flanks of the hills, and in the background the tops of the mountains, blue in the distance, and mingling their blue with the sky.

Neither German nor Hungarian is spoken at Werst, nor in any of this part of Transylvania; the people speak Roumanian — even the gipsies do so, of whom a few families are established rather than camped in the different villages of the country. These strangers adopt the language of the country as they adopt the religion. Those of Werst form a sort of little clan, under the authority of a voivode, with their huts, their “barakas “with pointed roofs, their legions of children, so different in the manners and regularity of their life from those of their congeners who wander about Europe. They even belong to the Greek Church, and conform to the religion of the Christians among whom they have settled As religious head Werst has a pope, who resides at Vulkan, and superintends the two villages, which are only half a mile apart.

Civilization is like air or water. Wherever there is a passage, be it only a fissure, it will penetrate and modify the conditions of a country. But it must be admitted that no fissure has yet been found through this southern portion of the Carpathians. Vulkan, as Elisee Reclus says, is “the last post of civilization in the valley of the Wallachian Syl, and we need not be astonished at Werst being one of the most backward villages of the county of Kolosvar. And how could it be otherwise in these places, where every one is born and lives and dies without ever leaving them?

But perhaps you will say there is a schoolmaster and a judge at Werst? Yes, without doubt. But Magister Hermod was only able to teach what he knew — that is, to read a little, to write a little, to reckon a little. His personal instruction did not go beyond that. Of science, history, geography, literature, he knew nothing beyond the popular songs and legends of the surrounding country. In that respect his memory was richly stored. He was strong in matters of romance, and the few scholars of the village gained great profit from his lessons.

As to the judge, we may as well say something concerning this chief magistrate of Werst.

The biro, Master Koltz, was a little man, of from fifty-five to sixty years old, a Roumanian by birth, his hair close cut and grey, his moustache still black, his eyes more gentle than fiery. Solidly built, like a mountaineer, he wore the large felt hat. on his head, the high belt with ornamental buckle round his waist, the sleeveless vest, and the short baggy breeches tucked into his high leather boots. As much mayor as judge, for his functions obliged him to intervene in the many disputes between neighbour and neighbour, he was chiefly occupied in administering his village with a great show of authority, and not without some benefit to his purse. In fact, all transactions, purchases or sales, were subject to a tax for his benefit, to say nothing of the tolls with which travellers for pleasure or trade filled his pocket.

This lucrative position kept Master Koltz in easy circumstances. If most of the peasants of the country were ground down by the usury of the Israelitish money-lenders, who were the real proprietors of the soil, the biro had managed to escape. His goods were free from hypothecations, “intabulations,” as they are called in the country; and he owed nothing. He would rather have lent than borrowed, and would certainly have done so without fleecing the poor people. He owned several pasturages, good grazing grounds for his flocks; lands under fair cultivation, although he would have nothing to do with the new methods; vineyards which flattered his vanity when he walked down the lines of stocks covered with the grapes he sold at a goodly profit, although he retained a fair proportion for his private consumption.

It need not be said that the house of Master Koitz was the best in the village, at the angle of the terrace which crossed the long road as it ascended. A stone house, if you please, with its facade continued round on to the garden; its door between the third and fourth windows, with the festoons of verdure bordering the gutter with their slender branchlets; with the two great beech-trees spreading their boughs above the flowery thatch. Behind lay a fine orchard, with its beds of vegetables like a chessboard, and its rows of fruit-trees skirting the slope of the hill. Inside the house were fine clean rooms, some to dine in, some to sleep in, with their painted furniture, tables beds, benches and stools, their sideboards, on which shone the pots and dishes; the beams of the ceiling, from which hung vases decorated with ribbons and gaily-coloured stuffs; the heavy coffers, covered with cloths and quilts, which served as chests and cupboards, the white walls, the highly-coloured portraits of Roumanian patriots — amongst others the popular hero of the fifteenth century, the voivode Vayda-Hunyad.

It was a charming house, which would have been too large for a man by himself. But Master Koltz was not alone. A widower for twelve years, he had a daughter, the lovely Miriota, who was much admired from Werst to Vulkan, and even beyond. She might have been called by one of those strange Pagan names, Florica, Dalfna.

Danritia, which are much in honour in Wallachian families. But no! she was Miriota; that is to say, the little sheep. But she had grown, this little sheep, and was now a graceful girl of twenty, fair, with brown eyes, a gentle look, charming features, and a pleasing figure. In truth, she could not look other than attractive, with her chemisette embroidered with red thread up to the collar and on the wrists and on the shoulders, her petticoat clasped by a belt with silver buckles, her "catrinza," or double apron, with red and blue stripes, knotted to her waist, her little boots of yellow leather, the light handkerchief on her head, her long hair floating behind her, the plait of which was ornamented with a ribbon or a metal clasp.

Yes! a handsome girl was Miriota Koltz, and — no harm to her — she was rich, that is, for this village lost in the depths of the Carpathians. A good manager? Undoubtedly; for she managed her father's house in intelligent fashion. Was she educated? Yes; at Magister Hermod's school she had learnt to read, to write, to cipher, and she ciphered, wrote, and read correctly; but she had not been pushed very far — and there were reasons for it On the other hand, she knew about as much as was to be known of the Transylvanian traditions and sagas. She knew as much as her master. She knew the legend of Leany-Ko, the Rock of the Virgin, in which a rather fanciful princess escapes from the pursuit of the Tartars; the legend of the Dragon's Cave in the Valley of the King's Stairs; the legend of the fortress of Deva, which was built in the "days of the Fairies; "the legend of the Detunata, the "Thunderclap," that famous basaltic mountain like a gigantic stone fiddle, on which the devil plays on stormy nights; the legend of Retyezat, with its summit cut down by a witch; the legend of the Valley of Thorda, which was cleft by the stroke of the sword of Saint Ladislas. We must confess that Miriota believed in all these mythological fictions; but she was none the less a charming and amiable girl.

A good many young men of the district found her so, even without considering that she was the only heiress of the biro, Master Koltz, the first magistrate of Werst. But there was no use in paying her attentions. Was she not already engaged to Nicolas Deck?

A handsome type of Roumanian was this Nicolas, or, rather, Nic Deck, twenty-five years of age, tall, strong in constitution, head well set on his shoulders hair black, covered by the white kolpak, look clear and frank, bearing himself well under his vest of lambskin embroidered with needlework, well set on his slender legs, legs as of a deer, and an air of determination in his gait and gestures. He was a forester by trade; that is to say, almost as much a soldier as a civilian. As he owned a little land under cultivation in the environs of Werst he was approved of by the father, and as he was a good-looking, well-made fellow he was approved of by the daughter, with whom he was deeply in love. He would not allow any one to attempt to rival him, nor to look at her too closely — and no one thought of doing so.

The marriage of Nic Deck and Miriota Koltz was to take place in a fortnight, towards the middle of the approaching month. On that occasion the village would hold a general holiday. Master Koitz would do the thing properly. Pie was no miser. If he liked getting money, he did not refuse to spend it when opportunity offered. When the ceremony was over Nic Deck would take up his residence in the house which would be his when the biro was gone; and when Miriota knew he was near her, perhaps she would cease to fear, as she heard the creak of a door or the rattling of a window in the long winter nights, that some phantom escaped from her favourite legends was about to put in an appearance.

To complete the list of the notables of Werst, we must mention two more, and these not the least important, the schoolmaster and the doctor.

Magister Hermod was a big man in spectacles, about forty-five years old, having always between his lips the curved stem of his pipe with the porcelain bowl, his hair thin and disordered on a flattish head, his face hairless, with a twitching in the left cheek. His great occupation was cutting the pens of his pupils, whom he forbade to use steel pens on principle. But how he lengthened the nibs with his old pointed pocket-knife! With what precision and winking of his eyes did he give the final touch by cutting the point! Above everything good handwriting — to that all his efforts were directed; it was to that that a schoolmaster careful of his mission should urge his pupils. Instruction was of secondary importance — and we know what Magister Hermod taught and what the generations of boys and girls learnt on the benches of his school.

And now for the turn of Doctor Patak. What! a doctor at Werst, and yet the village still believed in the supernatural?

Yes; but we may as well be clear as to the title borne by Doctor Patak as we had to be regarding that borne by Judge Koltz.

Patak was a little man with a prominent corporation, short and fat, aged about forty-five, ostensibly acting as medical adviser in Werst and its neighbourhood. With his imperturbable self-confidence, his deafening loquacity, he inspired no less confidence than the shepherd Frik — and that is not saying little. He dealt in consultations and drugs; but so harmless were they that they made no worse the petty ailments of his patients, who would have got well had they been left to themselves. People aie healthy enough in these parts; the air is of the first quality, epidemic maladies are there unknown; if people die it is because they must, even in this privileged corner of Transylvania. As to Doctor Patak — yes, they called him doctor! — although he was accepted as such, he had had no education either in medicine or in pharmacy or in anything. He was merely an old quarantine attendant, whose occupation consisted in looking after the travellers detained on the frontier for health purposes. Nothing more. That, it speared, was enough for the easy-going people of Werst. It could be added — and there is nothing surprising in it — that Doctor Patak was a wide awake fellow, as is usually the case with one who has to look after other people. And he believed in none of the superstitions current in the Carpathian district, not even in those that were cherished in the village. He laughed at them, he made fun of them. And when he was told that no one had dared to approach the castle from time immemorial, he would say, — “You must not dare me to visit the old hovel! “But as they did not dare him, as they carefully kept from daring him, Doctor Patak had never been there, a fid with the help of credulity the Castle of the Carpathians remained enveloped in impenetrable mystery.

CHAPTER IV.

In a few minutes the news brought by the shepherd had spread in the village. Master Koltz, carrying the precious telescope, went back into his house, followed by Nic Deck and Miriota. There now remained on the terrace only Frik surrounded by about twenty men, women, and children, among whom were a few Tsiganes, who were not the least excited among the Werst population. They surrounded Frik, they bombarded him with questions, and the shepherd replied with the superb importance of a man who had just seen something quite extraordinary.

“Yes!” he repeated, “the castle was smoking, it still smokes, and it will smoke until not one stone of it remains on another.’

“But who could have lighted the fire?” asked an old woman with her hands clasped.

“The Chort!” said Frik, giving the devil the name he is known by in the district. “And he is the rascal who knows how to light a fire much better than how to put it out!”

And at that reply every one looked to try and find the smoke on the top of the donjon. In the end most of them.

affirmed they could distinguish it perfectly, although it was quite invisible at that distance.

The effect produced by this singular phenomenon exceeded everything imaginable. It is necessary to insist on this point. The reader must put himself in the place of the people of Werst and he will not be astonished at what follows. I do not ask him to believe in the supernatural, but to understand that this ignorant people believed in it without reservation. To the mistrust inspired by the Castle of the Carpathians, which up to then was supposed to be deserted, was to be added the terror that it now seemed to be inhabited, and by such beings! Good heavens!

There was at Werst a meeting-place frequented by drinkers, and even beloved by those who, without drinking, delighted in talking over matters at the close of the day — the latter in small numbers, be it understood. This place, open to all, was the chief, or rather the only, inn in the village.

Who was the proprietor of this inn? A Jew of the name of Jonas, a fine fellow of about sixty, of pleasing physiognomy, although rather Semitic, with black eyes, hook nose, long lip, smooth hair, and the traditional beard. Obsequious and obliging, he willingly lent little sums to one or the other without being too particular as to security nor too usurious as regards interest, although he expected to be paid on the dates named by the borrower. Would to heaven that the Jews in Transylvania were always as accommodating as the innkeeper of Werst!

Unfortunately this excellent Jonas was an exception. His fellows in religion, his brethren by profession — for they are all innkeepers, selling drinks and groceries — carry on the trade of money-lenders with a bitterness that is not promising for the future of the Roumanian peasant. Gradually the land is passing from the native to the foreigner. In default of being repaid their advances, the Jews are becoming the proprietors of the finest farms mortgaged to their advantage; and if the Promised Land is not to be that of Israel, it may one day make its appearance on the maps of Transylvanian geography.

The inn of the “King Mathias” — such is its name occupies one of the corners of the terrace which crosses the main street of Werst, and is immediately opposite the biro’s house. It is an old structure, half wood, half stone, much patched in places, but a good deal covered with verdure, and of very attractive appearance. It consists only of the ground floor, with a glass door giving access to the terrace. Inside one first entered a large room furnished with tables for the glasses and benches for the drinkers, with a sideboard in varnished oak on which gleamed the dishes, pots, and bottles, and a counter of black wood, behind which Jonas stood ready for his -customers.

Light was obtained from two windows which were in the wall facing the terrace, and two others opposite each other in the outer walls. Of these, one was veiled by a thick curtain of climbing and hanging plants, which screened the outer view and only allowed a little light to pass, while the other when opened gave an extensive view over the lower valley of the Vulkan. A few feet below it rolled the tumultuous waters of the Nyad torrent. On one side the torrent descended the slopes of the range from its rise on the plateau of Orgall, which was crowned by the castle buildings; on the other, abundantly fed by the mountain streams, even during summer time it flowed along to the Wallachian Syl, which absorbed it in its course.

On the right, adjoining the large room, a half-dozen of small rooms were enough to accommodate the few travellers who before crossing the frontier desired to rest at the “King Mathias.” They were sure of a good welcome at moderate charges, from an attentive and obliging landlord, who was always well provided with good tobacco, which he bought in the best “trafiks “of the neighbourhood. As for Jonas himself, he occupied a narrow attic, the old-fashioned window of which patched the thatch with flowers, and looked out on to the terrace.

In this inn, on this very night of the 29th of May, there were gathered all the wise-heads of Werst — Master Koltz, Magister Hermod, the forester Nic Deck, a dozen of the chief inhabitants, and also the shepherd Frik, who was not the least important of these personages. Doctor Patak was absent from this meeting of notables. Sent for in all haste by one of his old patients who was only waiting for him in order to pass away into another world, he had agreed to come to the inn as soon as his attentions were no longer necessary to the defunct.

While waiting for the doctor the company talked about the serious event of the day, but they did not talk without eating or drinking. To the hungry Jonas offered that kind of hasty pudding or maize pudding known under the name of “mamaliga,” which is not at all disagreeable when _ taken with new milk. To the others he offered many a small glass of those strong liqueurs which roll like pure water down Roumanian throats, or “schnapps,” costing about a farthing a glass, and more particularly “rakiou,” a strong spirit from plums, of which the consumption is considerable among the Carpathians.

It should be mentioned that the landlord Jonas — it was the custom of the inn — only served the customers when they were sitting down, as he had observed that seated consumers consume more copiously than consumers on their feet. This evening matters looked promising, for all the seats were full; and Jonas was going from one table to another, jug in hand, filling up the glasses which were . constantly empty.

It was half-past eight in the evening. They had been talking since dusk without deciding what they should do. But they were agreed on one point, and that was that if the Castle of the Carpathians was inhabited by the unknown, it had become as dangerous to Werst as a powder-magazine would be at the gate of a town.

“It is a serious affair,” said Master Koltz.

“Very serious,” said the Magister, between two puffs of his inseparable pipe.

“Very serious,” said the company.

“There is no doubt,” said Jonas, “that the evil repute of the castle does much harm to the country round about — ”

“And now,” said Magister Hermod, “there is this thing also — ”

“Strangers do not come here often,” said Master Koltz with a sigh “And now they will not come at all!” added Jonas, sighing in unison with the biro.

“Some of the people will be going away,” said one of the drinkers. —

“I shall go first of all,” said a peasant from the outskirts; “and I will go as soon as I can sell my vines.”

“For which you will find no buyers, old man,” said the tavern-keeper.

One can see what these worthies were driving at in their talk. Amid the personal terrors occasioned them by the Castle of the Carpathians, rose the anxiety for their interests so regrettably injured. If there were no more travellers, Jonas would suffer in the revenue of his inn. If there were no more strangers, Master Koltz would suffer in the receipt of the tolls, which gradually grew less. If there were no more buyers, the owners could not sell their lands even at a low price. That would last for years, and the situation, already very unsatisfactory, would become worse In fact, if it had been so while the spirits of the castle had kept out of sight, what would it be now that they manifested their presence by material acts?

Then the shepherd Frik thought he ought thing, but in a hesitating sort of way, —

“Perhaps we may have to — ”

“What?” asked Master Koltz.

“Go there, master, and see.’’

The company looked at each other, and then lowered -their eyes, and the question remained without reply.

Then Jonas, addressing Master Koltz, took up the word in a firm voice.

“Your shepherd,” he said, u has just pointed out the only thing we can do.”

“Go to the castle?”

“Yes, my good friends,” said the innkeeper. “If there is a smoke from the donjon chimney, it is because there is a fire, and if there is a fire it must have been lighted by a hand — ”

“A hand! — at least a claw!” said an old peasant, shaking his head.

“Hand or claw,” said the innkeeper, “what does it matter? We must know what it means. It is the first time that smoke has come out of the castle chimneys since Baron Rodolphe of Gortz left it.”

“But there might have been smoke without anybody noticing it,” said Master Koltz.

“That I will never admit!” said Magister Hermod suddenly.

“But it might be,” replied the biro, “if we had not got the telescope to watch what was happening at the castle.”

It was well said. The phenomenon might have happened frequently and escaped even the shepherd Frik, good as were his eyes. But anyhow, whether the said phenomenon were recent or not, it was certain that human beings were actually living at the Castle of the Carpathians; and this fact constituted an extremely disturbing state of things for the inhabitants of Vulkan and Werst.

Then Magister Hermod made this remark in support of his belief, —

“Human beings, my friends? You will allow me not to believe it. Why should human beings think of taking refuge in the castle? for what reason? and how did they get there?”

“What do you think these intruders are, then?” exclaimed Master Koltz.

“Supernatural beings!” said Magister Hermod in an imposing voice. “Why should they not be spirits, goblins, perhaps even those dangerous lamias which present themselves under the form of beautiful women?”

During this enumeration every look was directed towards the door, towards the windows, or towards the chimney of the big saloon of the “King Mathias.” And in truth the company asked themselves if they were not about to see one or other of these phantoms successively evoked by the schoolmaster.

“However, my good friends,” said Jonas, “if these beings are of that kind, I don’t understand why they should have lighted a fire, for they have no cooking to do — ”

“And their sorceries?” said the shepherd. “Do you forget that they want a fire for their sorceries?”

“Evidently!” said the Magister in a tone which admitted of no reply.

The reply was accepted without protest, and in the opinion of all there could be no doubt that it must be supernatural and not human beings who had chosen the Castle of the Carpathians as the scene of their operations.

Up to this point Nic Deck had taken no part in the conversation. He had been content to listen attentively to what was said by one and the other. The old castle with its mysterious walls, its ancient origin, its feudal appearance, had always inspired him with as much curiosity as respect. And being very brave, although he was as credulous as any inhabitant of Werst, he had more than once even manifested a desire to enter the old stronghold.

As may be imagined, Miriota had obstinately set her face against so adventurous a project. He might have such ideas when he was free to do as he liked, but an engaged man was no longer his own master, and to embark in such adventures was the act of a madman, not of a lover. But notwithstanding her prayers, the lovely girl was always afraid that the forester would make some such attempt. What reassured her a little was that Nic Deck had not formally declared that he would go to the castle, for no one had sufficient influence over him to stop him — not even herself. She knew him to be an obstinate, resolute man, who would never go back on his promise. If he said a thing, the thing was as good as done. And Miriota would have been all anxiety had she suspected what the young man was thinking about.

However, as Nic Deck said nothing, the shepherd’s proposition received no reply. Visit the Castle of the Carpathians now that it was haunted? Who would be mad enough to do that? And all those present discovered the best reasons for not doing anything. The biro was no longer of an age to venture over so rough a road. The magister had to look after his school. Jonas had to look after his inn. Frik had his sheep to attend to; and the other peasants had to busy themselves with their cattle and their pastures.

No! not one would venture, all of them saying to themselves, —

“He who dares go to the castle may never come back!”

At this moment the door suddenly opened to the great alarm of the company.

It was only Doctor Patak, and it would have been difficult to mistake him for one of those bewitching lamias of whom Magister Hermod had been speaking.

His patient being dead — which did honour to his medical acumen, if not to his talent — Doctor Patak had hurried on to the meeting at the “King Mathias”

“Here he is at last!” said Master Koltz.

Doctor Patak hastily shook hands with everybody, much as if he were distributing drugs, and, in a somewhat ironical tone, remarked, —

“Then, my friends, it is the castle, the Castle of the Chort, you are busy about! Oh! you cowards. But if the old castle wants to smoke, let it smoke! Does not our learned Hermod smoke, and smoke all day? Really, the whole country is in a state of terror! I have heard of nothing else during my visits. Somebody has returned and made a fire over there! And why not, if they have got a cold in the head? It would seem that it freezes in the month of May in the rooms of the donjon, unless there is some bread cooking for the other world. I suppose they want food in that place — that is if they come to life again? Perhaps they are some of the heavenly bakers who hare come to start their oven.”

And so on in a series of jests that were much to the distaste of the Werst people, who made no attempt to stop him.

At last the biro asked, —

“And so, doctor, you attach no importance to what is taking place at the castle?”

“None, Master Koltz.”

“Have you never said you are ready to go there — if any one dared you to do so?”

“I?” answered the doctor, with a certain look of annoyance at any one reminding him of his words.

“Yes. Have you not said so more than once?” asked the magister.

“I have said so, certainly, and there is no need to repeat it.”

“But there is need to do it!” said Hermod.

“To do it?”

“Yes; and instead o* daring you, we are content to ask you to do it,” added Master Koltz.

“You understand — my friends, certainly — such a proposal — ”

“Well, since you hesitate,” said the innkeeper, we will not ask you — we dare you!”

“Dare me?’’

“Yes, doctor.”

“Jonas,” said the biro, “you are going too far. There is no need to dare Patak. We know he is a man of his word. What he has said he will do — if only to render a -service to the village and to the whole country.”

“But is this serious? You want me to go to the Castle of the Carpathians?” said the doctor, whose red face had become quite pale.

“You cannot get out of it,” said Master Koltz.

“I beg you, my good friends — I beg you to be reasonable, if you please.”

“We are reasonable,” said Jonas.

“Be just, then. What is the use of my going there? What shall I find? A few good fellows have taken refuge in the castle, who are doing no harm to any one — ”

“Well,” replied Magister Hermod, “if they are good fellows you have nothing to fear from them, and it will be an opportunity for you to offer them your services.”

“If they need them,” said Doctor Patak, “if they send for me, I should not hesitate to go to the castle. But I do not go without an invitation, and I do not pay visits for nothing.”

“We will pay you,” said Master Koltz, “and at so much an hour.”

“Who will pay me?”

“I will — we will — at any rate you like!” replied the majority of Jonas’s customers.’

Evidently, in spite of his bluster, the doctor was as big a coward as the rest of Werst. But after having posed as a superior person, after having ridiculed the popular legends, he found it difficult to refuse the service he was asked to render. But to go to the Castle of the Carpathians”, even if he were paid for his journey, was in no way agreeable to him. He therefore endeavoured to show that the visit would produce no result, that the village was covering itself with ridicule in sending him to explore the castle — but his arguments hung fire.

“Look here, doctor,” said Magister Hermod, “it seems to me you have absolutely nothing to fear. You do not believe in spirits?”

“No; I do not believe in them.”

“Well, then, if they are not spirits who have returned to the castle, they are human beings who have taken up their quarters there, and you can get on all right with them.”

The schoolmaster’s reasoning was logical enough; it was difficult to get out of it.

“Agreed, Hermod,” said the doctor; “but I might be detained at the castle.”

“Then you will be welcomed there,” said Jonas. “Certainly; but if my absence is prolonged, and if some one in the village wants me — ”

“We are all wonderfully well,” said Master Koltz, “and there is not a single invalid in Werst now your last patient has taken his departure for the other world.”

“Speak frankly,” said the innkeeper. “Will you go?’’” No, I will not!” said the doctor. “Oh! it is not because I am afraid. You know I have no faith in these sorceries. The truth is, it seems to me absurd, and, I repeat, ridiculous. Because a smoke has appeared at the donjon chimney — a smoke which may not be a smoke — certainly not! I will not go to the Castle of the Carpathians.”

“I will go!”

It was the forester Nic Deck who had suddenly joined in the conversation.

“You, Nic?” exclaimed Master Koltz.

“I — but on condition that Patak goes with me.”

This was a direct thrust for the doctor, who gave a jump as if to avoid it.

“You think that, forester?” said he, “I — to go with you? Certainly. It will be a pleasant expedition for both of us, if it is of any use. Look here, Nic, you know well enough there is no road to the castle. We shall not get there.”

“I have said I will go to the castle,” replied Nic Deck, “and as I have said so I will go.”

“But I have not said so!” exclaimed the doctor, struggling as if some one had gripped him by the collar.

“But you have!” said Jonas.

“Yes! yes!” replied the company unanimously.

The doctor, pressed on all sides, did not know how to escape. Ah! how much he regretted that he had so imprudently committed himself by his rodomontades. Never had he imagined they would have been taken seriously, or that he would have to account for them in person. And now there was no chance of escape without becoming the laughing-stock of Werst; and in all the Vulkan district they would badger him unmercifully. He decided to accept the inevitable with a good grace.

“Well, since you wish it,” he said, “I will go with Nic Deck, although it will be useless.”

“Well done, Patak!” shouted all the company at the “King Mathias.”

“And when shall we start, forester?” asked Doctor Patak, affecting to speak in a tone of indifference which poorly disguised his poltroonery.

“To-morrow morning,” said Nic Deck.

These last words were followed by a long silence which showed how real were the feelings of Master Koltz and the others. The glasses were empty, so were the pots, but no one rose, no one thought of leaving the place although it was late, nor of returning home. It occurred to Jonas that there was a good opportunity for serving another round of schnapps and rakiou.

Suddenly a voice was heard distinctly amid the general silence, and these words were slowly pronounced, —

“Nicolas Deck, do not go to the castle to-morrow! Do not go there, or misfortune will happen to you.”

Who was it said this? Whence came the voice which no one knew, and which seemed to come from an invisible mouth? It could not be a voice from a phantom, a supernatural voice, a voice from another world.

Terror was at its height. The men dared not look at one another; they dared not even utter a word.

The bravest — and that evidently was Nic Deck —

endeavoured to discover what it all meant. It was evident that the words had been uttered in the room. The forester went up to the box and opened it.

Nobody.

He then looked into the rooms which opened into the saloon.

Nobody.

He opened the door, went outside, ran along the terrace to the main street of Werst.

Nobody.

A few minutes afterwards Master Koltz, Magister Hermod, Doctor Patak, Nic Deck, Shepherd Frik, and the others had left the inn and its keeper Jonas, who hastened to double-lock the door.

That night, as if they had been menaced by some apparition, the inhabitants of Werst strongly barricaded themselves in their houses.

Terror reigned in the village.

CHAPTER V.

In the morning Nic Deck and Doctor Patak prepared to start at nine o’clock. The forester’s intention was to ascend the Vulkan and take the shortest way to - the suspicious castle.

After the phenomenon of the smoke on the donjon, after the phenomenon of the voice heard in the saloon of the “King Mathias,” we need not be astonished at the people being as if deranged. Some of the Tsiganes already spoke of leaving the district. During the night nothing else had been spoken of at home — and in a low voice. Could there be any doubt that it was the Chort who had spoken in so threatening a way to the young forester? At Jonas’s inn there had been about fifty people, and these the most worthy of belief, who had all heard the strange words. To suppose that they had all been duped by some illusion of the senses was inadmissible. There could be no doubt that Nic Deck had been formally warned that misfortune would overtake him if he persisted in his intention of visiting the Castle of the Carpathians.

And yet the young forester was preparing to leave Werst, and without being forced to do so. In fact, whatever advantage Master Koltz might gain in clearing up the mystery of the castle, whatever interest the village might have in knowing what was taking place, a powerful effort had been made to get Nic Deck to go back on his word. Weeping and in despair, with her beautiful eyes wet with tears, Miriota had besought him not to persist in this adventure. After the warning given by the voice it was a serious matter; it was a mad adventure. On the eve of his marriage Nic Deck was about to risk his life in the attempt, and his betrothed clung to his knees to prevent him, but all in vain.

Neither the objurgations of his friends, nor the tears of Miriota had any effect on the young forester.

And no one was surprised at it. They knew his indomitable character, his tenacity, his obstinacy, if you will. He had said he would go to the Castle of the Carpathians, and nothing would stop him; not even the threat which had been addressed straight to him. Yes! he would go to the castle even if he never returned.

When the hour of parting came, Nic Deck pressed Miriota for the last time to his heart, while the poor girl made the sign of the thumb and two first fingers, according to Roumanian custom, which is an emblem of the Holy Trinity.

And Doctor Patak? Well, Doctor Patak had tried to get out of it, but without success. All that could be said he had said. All the objections imaginable he had mentioned. He tried to entrench himself behind the formal injunction not to go to the castle, which had been so distinctly heard.

“That menace only concerns me,” said Nic Deck. n But if anything happens to you, forester,” said Doctor Patak, “shall I get away without injury?”

“Injury or not, you have promised to come with me to the castle, and you will come because I am going.”

Seeing that nothing would prevent his keeping his promise, the people of Werst had resolved to help the forester. It was better that Nic Deck should not enter alone on this affair. And, much to his disgust, the doctor, feeling that he could not go back, that it would compromise his position in the village, that it would be a disgrace for him to go back after all his boastings, resigned himself to the adventure with terror in his soul, and fully resolved to profit by the least obstacle on the road to make his companion turn back.

Nic Deck and Doctor Patak set out, and Master Koltz, Magister Hermod, Frik, and Jonas accompanied them up to a turning out of the main road, where they stopped.

Here Master Koltz for the last time brought his telescope — which he was never without — to bear on the castle. There was now no smoke from the donjon chimney, and it would have been easy to see it on the clear horizon of a beautiful spring morning. Were they to conclude that the guests, natural or supernatural, of the caste had vanished on finding that the forester took no heed of their threats? Some of them thought so, and therein appeared a decisive reason for bringing the adventure to a satisfactory termination. And so they all shook hands, and Nic Deck, dragging the doctor away with him, disappeared round the hill.

The young forester was in full visiting costume, laced cap with large peak, belted vest with a cutlass in its sheath, baggy trousers, iron-shod boots, cartridge-belt at his waist, and long gun on his shoulder. He had the deserved reputation of being a first-rate shot, and in default of ghosts it was as well to be prepared for robbers, or even bears with evil intentions.

The doctor had armed himself with an old flint pistol, which missed fire three times out of five. He also carried a hatchet which his companion had given him in case it was necessary to cut a way through the thick underwoods of Plesa. He wore a large country hat, and was buttoned up in a thick travelling cape, and shod with big iron-soled boots; but this heavy costume would not have stopped him from running away if opportunity presented itself.

Both he and Nic Deck carried a few provisions in their wallets, so as to prolong the exploration if necessary.

After leaving the by-road, Nic Deck and the doctor went along the right bank of the Nyad for a few hundred yards. Had they followed the road which winds through the valleys, they would have gone too far to the westward. It was a pity they could not follow the river and thereby reduce their distance by a third, for the Nyad rises in the folds of the Orgall plateau. But though it was practicable at first, the bank became eventually so deeply cut into by ravines and barred with rocks that progress along it was impossible even to pedestrians. They had therefore to bear away obliquely to the left, so as to return to the castle after traversing the lower belt of the Plesa forests.

And this was the only side on which the castle was approachable from where they were. When it had been inhabited by Count Rodolphe de Gortz, the communication between the village of Werst, the Vulkan Hill, and the valley of the Syl had been through a gap which had been opened in this direction. But abandoned for twenty years to the invasions of vegetation, it had become obstructed by an inextricable thicket of underwood, and the trace of a footpath or a passage would be sought for in vain.

When they left the deep bed of the Nyad, which was filled with roaring water, Nic Deck stopped to take his bearings. The castle was no longer visible. It would only appear again beyond the curtain of forests which stood in rows one above the other on the lower slopes of the mountain, an arrangement common to the whole orographic system of the Carpathians. As there was no landmark the direction was not easily made out. It could only be arrived at from the position of the sun, whose rays were lighting up the distant crests in the southwest.

“You see, forester,” said the doctor, “you see there is not even a road, or, rather, no more road.”

“There will be one,” said Nic Deck.

“That is easy to say, Nic.”

“And easy to do, Patak.”

“You are resolved, then?”

The forester was content to reply by an affirmative gesture, and started off towards the trees.

The doctor had a strong inclination to retrace his steps, but his companion, happening to turn round, gave him such a determined look that he thought it better not to remain behind.

Doctor Patak then conceived another hope: Nic Deck might get lost amid this labyrinth of woods, where his duties had not yet called him. But he reckoned without that marvello is scent, that professional instinct, that animal aptitude, so to speak, which takes notice of the least indications, projections of branches in such and such directions, irregularities of the ground, colours of the bark, hues of the mosses as they are exposed to different winds. Nic Deck was a perfect master of his trade, and practised it with too much sagacity to go astray even in localities unknown to him. He was worthy to be ranked with Leatherstocking or Chingachgook in the land of Cooper.

But the crossing of this zone of trees was not free from real difficulties. Elms, beeches, a few of those maples known as false planes, mighty oaks, occupied the first line up to the line of the birches, pines, and spruces, massed on the higher shoulders of the col to the left. Magnificent were these trees with their powerful stems, their boughs warm with the new sap, their thick leafage intermingling to form a roof of verdure which the sun’s rays could not pierce.

By stooping beneath their lower branches a passage was relatively easy; but many were the obstacles on the surface of the ground, and much work was needed to clear them away, to get through the nettles and briars, to avoid the thousands of thorns that clung to them at the least touch. Nic Deck was not a man to become anxious about these matters; and, providing he got through the wood, he did not worry himself about a few scratches. The advance, however, under such conditions was necessarily slow, and that was regrettable, for Nic Deck and Doctor Patak wished to reach the castle in the afternoon, in order that they might return to Werst before night.

Hatchet in hand, the forester worked at clearing a passage through these thick thorn-bushes, bristling with vegetable bayonets, in which the foot met a rugged soil, hummocky, broken, with roots or stumps to stumble over when it did not sink in a swampy bed of dead leaves which the wind had never swept away. Myriads of pods shot off like fulminating peas to the great alarm of the doctor, who started back at the crackle, and came again when some twig would catch on to his vest like a claw that wished to keep him. No! poor man, he was not at all comfortable.’ But now he dared not return alone, and he had to make an effort to keep up with his intractable companion.

Occasionally capricious clearings appeared in the forest. A shower of light would penetrate it. A couple of black storks, disturbed in their solitude, escaped from the higher branches and flew off with powerful strokes of the wing. The crossing of these clearings made the advance still more fatiguing.

In them were piled up enormous masses of trees blown down by the storm or fallen from old age, as if the axe of the woodman had given them their death-stroke. There lay enormous trunks eaten into with decay, which no tool would ever cut into billets, and no waggon would ever carry to the bed of the Wallachian Syl. Faced by these obstacles, which were difficult to clear and at times impossible to turn, Nic Deck and his companion had no easy time of it. If the young forester, active, supple, vigorous, managed well, the doctor with his short legs, his large corporation, breathless and exhausted, could not save himself from occasional falls, and Nic had to come to his assistance.

“You will see, Nic, that I shall end by breaking one of my limbs!” he said.

“You will soon patch it up, if you do.”

“Come, forester, be reasonable; we need not strive against the impossible!”

But Nic Deck was already on in front, and the doctor, obtaining no reply, hastened to rejoin him.

Were they in the right direction to come out in front of the castle? They would have been puzzled to prove it. But as the ground was on the rise all the time, they must be reaching the edge of the forest; and they arrived there at three o’clock in the afternoon.

Beyond, up to the plateau of Orgall extended the curtain of green trees, much more scattered the farther they were up the mountain.

The Nyad appeared among the rocks, either because it had curved to the north-west, or because Nic Deck had struck off obliquely towards it. The young forester was thus assured he had made a good course, for the brook took its rise in the Orgall plateau.

Nic Deck could not refuse the doctor an hour’s rest on the bank of the torrent. Besides, the stomach claimed its due as well as the limbs. The wallets were well furnished; rakiou filled the doctor’s flask as well as Nic’s. Besides, water, fresh and limpid, filtered amid the pebbles below, and flowed a few paces off. What more could they desire? They had lost much; they must repair the loss.

Since their departure the doctor had scarcely had the leisure to talk with Nic Deck, who had been in front of him all the time. But he made up for lost time when they were seated on the bank of the Nyad. If one was not talkative, the other fully made up for it; and we need not be astonished if the questions were prolix and the answers brief.

“Let us talk a little, forester, and talk seriously,” said the doctor.

“I am listening to you,” replied Nic Deck.

“I think we halted here to recover our strength “Nothing could be more correct.”

“Before returning to Werst?”

“No; before going to the castle.”

“But, Nic, we have been walking for six hours, and we are hardly halfway.”

“That shows we have no time to lose.”

“But we shall not reach the castle before night, and as I imagine, forester, you will not be mad enough to run any risks until you have had a clear view of it, we shall have to wait for daylight.”

“We will wait for daylight.”

“And so you will not give up this project, which has no common sense in it?”

“No.”

w What! Here we are exhausted, wanting a good table in a good room, and a good bed in a good room, and you are going to pass the night in the open air?”

“Yes. if any obstacle prevents us from penetrating into the castle.”

“And if there is no obstacle?”

“We will sleep in the rooms in the donjon.”

“The rooms in the donjon!” exclaimed Doctor Patak. “Do you think, forester, that I shall ever consent to spend a whole night inside that cursed castle?”

“Certainly, unless you prefer to stay outside alone.”

“Alone, forester! That was not in the bargain; and if we are to separate, I would rather start at once and go back to the village.”

“It was in the bargain that you would follow me into the castle.”

“In the day, yes! In the night, no!”

“Well, you can go if you like; but take care you do not get lost in the thickets.”

Lost! That was what troubled the doctor. Abandoned to himself, unaccustomed to these interminable circuits in the Plesa forests, he felt he was incapable of finding the way back to Werst. Besides, to be alone when night fell — a very dark night, perhaps — to descend the slopes of the hill, at the risk of collapsing in the bottom of a ravine, that certainly was not agreeable to him. He was freed from having to enter the castle when the sun was down, and if the forester persisted, he had better follow him up to the enclosure. But the doctor made a last effort to stop his companion.

“You know, well, my dear Nic,” he continued, “that I will never consent to separate from you. If you persist in going to the castle, I will not allow you to go there alone.”

Well spoken, Doctor Patak, and I think you ought to stick to that.”

“No! One word more, Nic. If it is night when we arrive, promise me not to try and enter the castle.”

“What I promise you, doctor, is not to go back one footstep until I have discovered what is going on there.”

“What is going on there, forester!” said Doctor Patak, shrugging his shoulders. “But what do you want to go on there?”

“I know nothing, and as I have made up my mind to know, I will know.”

“But shall we ever reach this devil’s castle?” asked the doctor, whose arguments were exhausted. “To judge by the difficulty we have had up to now, and the time it has taken us to get through the Plesa forests, the day will end before we are in sight of the wall.”

“I do not think so,” said Nic Deck. “In the higher ranges the pines have no such thickets as do the elms or maples or beeches.”

“But the ground is rough.”

“What does that matter, if it is not impracticable?”

“But I believe that bears-are met with on the outskirts of the plateau.”

“I have my gun, and you have your pistol to defend yourself with, doctor.”

“But if night falls we may be lost in the darkness”

“No; for we now have a guide, which guide will, I hope, not leave us any more.”

“A guide?” exclaimed the doctor. And he rose abruptly to cast an anxious look around him.

“Yes,” said Nic, “and this guide is the Nyad. We have only to go up the right bank to reach the very crest of the plateau where it takes its source. I think we shall be at the castle gate in two hours, if we get on the road without delay.”

“In two hours if not in six!” replied the doctor.

“Are you ready?”

“Already? Nic, already? Why, our halt has only lasted a few minutes — ”

“A few minutes which make a good half-hour. For the last time, are you ready?”

“Ready — when my legs are like lumps of lead? You know well enough, Nic Deck, my legs are not forester’s legs. My feet are swollen in my boots, and it is cruel to make me follow you — ”

“Ah! You annoy me, Patak! You can go back alone if you like! Pleasant journey to you!”

And Nic rose.

“For the love of God, forester,” cried Doctor Patak, “listen to me.”

“Listen to your foolery?”

“It is already late, why not remain here? why not encamp under the shelter of these trees? We can start at daylight, and have all the morning to reach the plateau.”

“Doctor,” replied Nic Deck, “I tell you again it is my intention to spend the night in the castle.”

“No!” cried the doctor; “no, you shall not do it, Nic! I will stop you — ”

“You?”

“I will cling to you! I will drag you back! I will thrash you, if necessary!”

The unfortunate doctor did not know what he was saying.

As to Nic Deck, he did not even reply. Putting his arm through the gun-strap, he started to go up the Nyad.

“Wait — wait!” cried the doctor piteously. “What a fiend of a man! One moment! My limbs are stiff, my joints will not work.”

But they soon had to work, for the doctor had to trot along on his little legs to catch up the forester, who never looked back.

It was four o’clock. The solar rays just tipped the crest of Plesa, which intercepted them, and by an oblique reflection lighted up the higher branches of the pine-forest, Nic Deck had cause to hurry, for the woods below were growing dark at the decline of day.

Of a different character were the higher forests, which consisted mainly of the commoner Alpine species. Instead of being deformed and twisted and gnarled, the stems were straight and upright and far apart, and bare of branches for fifty or sixty feet from their roots, and then their evergreen verdure spread out like a roof. There was little brushwood or entanglement at their base; but the long roots crept along the ground as if they were snakes grown torpid with the cold. The ground was carpeted with close yellowish moss, scattered over with dry twigs, and dotted with cones which crackled under the feet. The slope was rough and furrowed with crystalline rocks, the sharp edges of which made themselves felt through the thickest leather. For a quarter of a mile the passage through the pine-wood was difficult. To climb these blocks required a suppleness, a vigour, and a sureness of foot which Doctor Patak could no longer claim. Nic Deck would have got through in an hour if he had been alone but it took him three with the hindrance of his companion, whom he had to stop to attend to, and to help over rocks too high for his little legs The doctor had but one fear — a terrible fear — that of being left alone in these gloomy solitudes.

However, if the slopes became more painful to climb, the trees began to get thinner and thinner on the Plesa ridge. They were now in isolated clumps and of small size. Between these clumps could be seen the ranges of mountains in the background, with their outline still traceable in the evening mist.

The torrent of the Nyad, which the forester had continued to follow, was now not larger than a brook, and rose not so very far off. A few hundred feet above the last folds of the ground lay the rounded plateau of Orgall, crowned by the castle buildings.

Nic Deck at length reached the plateau after a final effort which reduced the doctor to the state of an inert mass. The poor man had not strength to drag himself twenty yards farther, and he fell like the ox before the axe of the butcher.

Nic Deck hardly felt the fatigue of this painful ascent. Erect, motionless, he devoured with his gaze this Castle of the Carpathians he had never before been so near.

Before his eyes lay a crenellated wall defended by a deep ditch, the only drawbridge of which was drawn up against a gate surrounded by a ring of stone.

Around the wall, on the plateau, all was bare and silent.

In the twilight the mass of castle buildings was confusedly distinguishable. There was no one visible on either wall or donjon, nor on the circular terrace. Not a trace of smoke curled round the vane.

“Well, forester,” said Doctor Patak, “are you convinced that it is possible to cross the ditch, lower the drawbridge, and open the gate?”

Nic Deck did not reply. He saw that it would be necessary to halt before the castle walls. Amid the darkness, how could he descend into the ditch and climb the slope so as to enter the wall? Evidently the best thing to do was to wait for the coming dawn, and work in broad daylight.

And that was what it was decided to do, to the great annoyance of the forester and the extreme satisfaction of the doctor.

CHAPTER VI

The thin crescent of the moon, like a silver sickle, disappeared almost as soon as the sun set. A few clouds rising in the west, soon extinguished the last gleams of twilight Darkness gradually rose from below and covered all. The ring of mountains was blotted out in obscurity, and the castle soon disappeared beneath the pall of night.

If the night promised to be very dark, there was nothing to indicate that it would be troubled by any atmospheric disturbance, rain or storm; and this was fortunate for Nic Deck and his companion, who were about to encamp in the open air.

There was no clump of trees on this barren plateau of Orgall. Here and there were a few shrubs, which afforded no shelter against the nocturnal cold There were rocks in plenty, some half-buried in the ground, others in such a state of equilibrium that the slightest push would have sent them rolling down into the fir-woods.

The only plant that grew in profusion on the rocky soil was the thistle known as Russian thorn, whose seeds, says Elisee Reclus, were carried in their coats by the Muscovite horses — ” a present of cheerful conquest which the Russians gave the Transylvanians.”

A search was made for a more comfortable place in which to pass the night, and which would afford some shelter against the fall in temperature which is remarkable in these altitudes.

“We have more than chances enough — to be miserable!” murmured Doctor Patak.

“Are you not satisfied, then?” asked Nic Deck.

“Certainly not! What a splendid place to catch a good cold or the rheumatism, which I do not know how I shall ever get cured of!”

A very artless confession on the part of the old quarantine officer. How he regretted his comfortable little house at Werst, with its room so snug and its bed so well furnished with pillows and counterpane!

Among the stones on the Orgail plateau one had to be selected whose position offered the best shelter against the south-west wind, which was beginning to freshen. This was what Nic Deck did, and soon the doctor joined him behind a large rock which was as flat as a table on its upper surface.

This stone was one of those stone benches amid the scabiouses and saxifrages which are frequently met with at the turnings of the road in Wallachia While the traveller sits on them he can quench his thirst with the water contained in a vase placed on them, and which is every day renewed by the country people. When Baron Rodolphe de Gortz lived at the castle, this bench bore a bowl which the family servants never left empty. But now it was dirty and worn and covered with green mosses, and the last shock would have reduced it to dust.

At the end of the seat rose a granite shaft, the remains of an ancient cross, nothing being left of the arms, although a half-effaced groove showed where they had been.

Doctor Patak, being a strong-minded man, was unable to admit that this cross could protect him against supernatural apparitions. But by an anomaly common to a good many of the incredulous, although he did not believe in

God, he was not very far from believing in the devil. In his heart he believed the Chort was not far off; he it was that haunted the castle, and neither the closed gate, the raised drawbridge, the lofty wail, nor the deep ditch would keep him from coming out, if the fancy took him, to come and twist both their necks.

And when the doctor saw that he had to spend a whole night under these conditions, he shuddered with terror. No! It was too much to require of a human creature, and it would be more than the most energetic of characters could bear.

And then an idea came to him tardily — an idea he had not thought of before he left Werst. It was Thursday evening, and on that day the people of the district, the country people, were careful not to go out after sundown. Thursday they knew to be a day of evil deeds. Their legends told them that if they ventured abroad on that day, they ran the risk of meeting with some evil spirit. And so no one moved about on the roads and by-ways after nightfall.

And here was Doctor Patak not only away from home, but close to a haunted castle, two or three miles from the village. And here he would have to stop until the dawn came — if it ever came again! In truth, this was simply tempting the devil!

Deep in these thoughts, the doctor saw the forester carefully take out of his bag a piece of cold meat, after having a good drink from his flask. The best thing, it occurred to him, was to do likewise, and he did so. A leg of a goose, a thick slice of bread, the whole well moistened with rakiou, was the least he could take to revive his strength. But if that calmed his hunger, it did not calm his fears.

“Now let us sleep,” said Nic Deck, as soon as he had put his bag at the foot of the stone.

“Sleep, forester?”

“Good-night, doctor.”

“Good-night — that is easy to wish, but I am afraid it will not end well.”

Nic Deck, being in no humour for conversation, made no reply. Accustomed by his vocation to sleep amid the woods, he threw himself down close to the stone seat and was soon in a deep sleep. And the doctor could but grumble between his teeth when he heard his companion breathing at regular intervals. .

As for him, it was impossible for him for some minutes to deaden his senses of hearing and seeing. In spite of his fatigue he continued to see and to listen. His brain was a prey to those extravagant visions which are due to the troubles of insomnia.

What was he looking for in the depths of darkness? — the hazy shapes of the objects which surrounded him, the scattered clouds across the sky, the almost imperceptible mass of the castle? The rocks on the Orgall plateau seemed to be moving in a sort of infernal saraband. And if they were to crumble on their bases, slip down the slope, roll on to the two adventurers, and crush them at the castle gate to which admission was denied them!

The unhappy doctor got up; he listened to the noises which are ever present on lofty table-lands — those disquieting murmurs which seem to whisper and groan and sigh. He heard the nyctalops fanning the rocks with frenzied wing, the stryges in their nocturnal flight, and two or three pairs of funereal owls whose hooting echoed like a cry of pain. Then his muscles contracted all at once, and his body trembled, bathed in icy perspiration.

In this way the long hours went by until midnight. If the doctor had been able to talk, to exchange but a few words now and then, to give free course to his recriminations, he would have been less afraid. But Nic Deck slept and slept in a deep slumber.

Midnight — that terrible hour for all, the hour of apparitions, the hour of evil deeds!

What could it be?

The doctor had just got up again. He was asking himself if he were awake, or if he were suffering from a nightmare.

Overhead he thought he saw — no! he really did see — the strangest of shapes, lighted by a spectral light, pass from one horizon to the other, rise, fall, and drift down with the clouds. They looked like monsters, dragons with serpents' tails, hippogryphs with huge wings, gigantic krakens, enormous vampires, fighting to seize him in their claws or swallow him in their jaws.

Then everything appeared to be in motion, on the Orgall plateau — the rocks, the trees at its edge. And very distinctly a clanging at short intervals reached his ear.

“The bell!” he murmured, “the castle bell!”

Yes! It was indeed the bell of the old chapel, and not that of the church at Vulkan, which the wind would have borne in the opposite direction.

And now the strokes became more hurried. The hand that struck no longer tolled a funeral knell. No! It was an alarm, whose urgent strokes were awaking the echoes of the Transylvanian frontier.

As he listened to these dismal vibrations, Doctor Patak was seized with a convulsive fear, an insurmountable anguish, an irresistible terror which thrilled his whole body with cold shudderings.

But the forester had been awakened by the alarming clanging of the bell. He rose while Doctor Patak seemed as if beside himself.

Nic Deck listened, and his eyes tried to pierce the deep darkness which overhung the castle.

“That bell! That bell!” repeated Doctor Patak. “It is the Chort that is ringing it!”

Decidedly the poor terrified doctor was thinking more than, ever of the devil The forester remained motionless, and did not reply.

Suddenly a series of roars as if from some huge animal at a harbour’s mouth broke forth in tumultuous undulations.

For a long distance around the air resounded with this deafening growl.

Then a light darted from the centre of the donjon, an intense light, from which rapt flashes of penetrating clearness and blinding coruscations. From what could come this powerful light, the irradiations of which spread in long sheets over the Orgall plateau? From what furnace came this photogenic stream, which seemed to embrace the rocks at the same time as it bathed them with a strange lividity?

“Nic — Nic!” exclaimed the doctor. “Look at me! Am I a corpse like you?”

In fact they had both assumed a corpse-like look. Their faces were pallid, their eyes seemed to have gone, the orbits being apparently empty; their checks were greyish green, like the mosses which the legend says grow on the heads of those that are hanged.

Nic Deck was astounded at what he saw, at what he heard. Doctor Patak was in the last stage of fright; his muscles retracted, his skin bristled, his pupils dilated, his body was seized with tetanic rigidity. As the poet of the “Contemplations “remarks, he breathed in terror.”

A minute — a minute or more — lasted this terrifying phenomenon. Then the strange light gradually went out, the groaning ceased, and the Orgall plateau resumed its silence and obscurity.

Neither of the men thought any more of sleep. The doctor overwhelmed with stupor, the forester’ upright against the stone seat, awaited the return of the dawn.

What did Nic Deck think of these things, which were evidently so supernatural to his eyes? Were they not enough to shake his resolution? Did he still intend to pursue this reckless adventure?

Certainly he had said that he would enter the castle, that he would explore the donjon. But was it not enough for him to have come to its insurmountable wall, to have evoked the anger of its guardian spirits, and provoked this trouble of the elements? Would he be reproached with not having kept to his promise if he returned to the village without having urged his folly to the end in entering this diabolic castle?

Suddenly the doctor threw himself upon him, seized him by the hand, and strove to drag him away, saying in a hoarse voice, “Come! come “No!” said Nic Deck.

And in turn he caught hold of Doctor Patak, who fell at this last effort.

At last the night ended, and such was their mental state that neither forester nor doctor knew the time that elapsed until daybreak. They remembered nothing of the hours which preceded the first rays of the morning.

At that moment a rosy streak appeared on the crest of Paring, on the eastern horizon, on the other side of the valley of the two Syls. The faint white rays of dawn dispersed over the depth of the sky, and striped it as if it were a zebra-skin.

Nic Deck turned towards the castle. He saw it grow clearer and clearer: the donjon revealed itself from the high mists which came floating down the Vulkan slope; the chapel, the galleries, the outer walls emerged from the nocturnal mists; and there on the corner bastion appeared the beech-tree, with its leaves rustling in the easterly breeze.

There was no change in the ordinary aspect of the castle. The bell was as motionless as the old feudal weather-vane. No smoke arose from the donjon chimneys, and the barred windows remained obstinately closed.

Above the platform, in the higher zones of the sky, a few birds were flying and gently calling to each other.

Nic Deck turned to look at the principal entrance to the castle. The drawbridge up against the bay closed the postern between the two stone pillars which bore the arms of the barons of Gortz.

Had the forester resolved to continue this adventurous expedition to the end? Yes; and his resolution had not been shaken by the events of the night. A thing said was a thing done — that was his motto as we know. Neither the mysterious voice which had threatened him personally in<.the saloon of the “King Mathias,” nor the inexplicable phenomenon of sound and light he had just witnessed, would stop him from entering the castle. An hour would be enough for him to hurry through the galleries, visit the keep, and then, having fulfilled his promise, he would return to Werst, where he would arrive during the morning.

As to Doctor Patak, he was now only an inert machine, without either the strength to resist or to insist. He would go where he was driven. If he fell, it would be impossible to lift him again. The terrors of the night had reduced him to complete imbecility, and he made no observation when the forester pointed to the castle and said, “Come on!”

And yet the day had returned, and the doctor could have got back to Werst without fear of losing himself in the Plesa forests. He had no reason to wish to remain with Nic Deck, and if he did not abandon his companion to return to the village, it was that he was no longer conscious of the state of affairs, and was merely a body without a mind. And so when the forester dragged him towards the slope of the counterscarp he made no resistance.

But was it possible to enter the castle otherwise than by the gate? That was what Nic Deck endeavoured to discover.

The wall showed no breach, no falling in, no excavation, giving access to the interior. It was indeed surprising that these old walls were in such a state of preservation, but this was doubtless due to their thickness. To climb to the line of crenellations which crowned them appeared to be impracticable, as they rose some forty feet above the ditch. And it seemed as though Nic

Deck, at the very moment of reaching the Castle of the Carpathians, was to fail owing to insurmountable obstacles.

Fortunately — or very unfortunately for him — there stood above the postern a sort of loophole, or rather an embrasure, through which formerly pointed the muzzle of a culverin. By making use of one of the chains of the drawbridge which hung down to the ground, it would not be very difficult for an active, vigorous man to hoist himself up to this embrasure. Its width was sufficient to allow of a man to pass, unless it was barred on the inside, and Nic Deck could probably manage to get through it within the castle wall.

The forester saw at once that this was the only way open to him, and that is why, followed by the unconscious doctor, he went obliquely down the inner slope of the counterscarp.

They were soon at the bottom of the ditch, which was strewn with stones amid the thickets of wild plants. They could hardly find a place to step, and they were not sure that myriads of venomous beasts did not swarm in the herbage of this humid excavation.

In the middle of the ditch, and parallel to the wall, was the ancient trench, now nearly dry, which they could just stride across.

Nic Deck, having lost nothing of his mental or bodily energy, went on coolly and quietly, while the doctor followed him mechanically, like an animal at the end of a string.

After crossing the trench, the forester went along the base of the curtain for some twenty yards, and stopped underneath the gate close to one end of the chain of the drawbridge. By the help of his hands and feet he could thence easily reach the line of stonework that jutted out just below the embrasure.

Evidently Nic did not intend to compel the doctor to take part with him in this escalade. So heavy a man could not have done so. He therefore contented himself with giving him a vigorous shake to make him understand, and then advised him to wait without moving at the bottom of the ditch.

Then Nic Deck commenced to climb the chain; and this was merely child's play for his mountaineer's muscles.

But when the doctor found himself alone, the true position of things, to a certain extent, recurred to him. He understood, he looked, he saw his companion already suspended a dozen feet from the ground, and in a voice choking with the bitterness of fear, he cried, —

"Stop — Nic — stop!"

The forester heard him not.

"Come — come — or I will go away!" cried the doctor.

"Go, then," said Nic.

And he continued to raise himself along the chain of the drawbridge.

Doctor Patak, in a paroxysm of terror, would have gone back again up the slope of the counterscarp, so as to reach the crest of the Orgall plateau and return full speed to Werst But — prodigy to which the wonders of the preceding night were as nothing — he could not move. His feet were held fast as if they had been seized in the jaws of a vice. Could he place one before the other? No. They stuck by the heels and soles of his boots. Had the doctor been taken in a trap? He was too much frightened to look, but it seemed as though he was held by the nails in his boots.

Whatever it was, the poor man was immovable. He was fixed to the ground. Not having strength to cry out, he stretched out his hands in despair. It looked as though he sought to be rescued from the embrace of some tarask hidden in the bowels of the earth.

Meanwhile Nic Deck had got as high as the postern, and was placing his hand on the ironwork in which the hinges of the drawbridge were embedded.

A cry of pain escaped him; then throwing himself back, as if he had been struck by lightning, he slipped along the chain, which a final instinct made him clutch, and rolled to the bottom of the ditch.

“The voice truly said that mi fortune would come to me,” he murmured, and then he lost consciousness.

CHAPTER VII.

How can we describe the anxiety to which the village of Werst had been a prey since the departure of the young forester and Doctor Patak? And it had constantly increased as the hours elapsed, and seemed interminable.

Master Koltz, the innkeeper Jonas, Magister Hermod, and a few others had remained all the time on the terrace, each of them keeping a constant watch on the distant castle to see if any wreath of smoke appeared over the donjon. No smoke showed itself — as was ascertained by means of the telescope, which was incessantly brought to bear in that direction, Assuredly the two florins sunk in the acquisition of that instrument had been well invested. Never had the biro, although so much interested in the matter, betrayed the slightest regret at so opportune an expenditure.

At half-past twelve, when the shepherd Frik returned from the pasture, he was eagerly interrogated. Was there anything new, anything extraordinary, anything supernatural?

Frik replied that he had just come along the valley of the Wallachian Syl without seeing anything suspicious.

After dinner, about two o’clock, the people went back to their post of observation. No one dreamt of remaining at home, and no one would certainly have dreamt of setting foot within the grand saloon of the “King Mathias,” where comminatory voices made themselves heard. That walls have ears is all very well, it is a popular proverb — but a mouth!

And so the worthy innkeeper might well fear that his inn had been put into quarantine, and consequently his anxiety was extreme. Would he have to shut up shop, and drink his own stock for want of customers? And with a view of restoring confidence among the people of Werst, he had undertaken a lengthy search throughout the “King Mathias he had searched the rooms, under the beds, explored the cupboards and the sideboard, and every corner of the large saloon, the cellar, and the store-room, from which any ill-disposed practical joker might have worked the mystification.

Nothing could he find, not even along the side of the house overlooking the Nyad. The windows were too high for it to be possible for any one to climb to them along a perpendicular wall, the foundation of which went sheer down into the impetuous torrent It mattered not! Fear does not reason, and considerable time would doubtless elapse before Jonas’s habitual guests would return to their confidence in his inn, his schnapps, and his rakiou.

Considerable time? That is a mistake, and, as we shall see, this gloomy prognostic was never realized.

In fact, a few days later, in a quite unexpected way, the village notables were to resume their daily conferences, varied with refreshments, in the saloon of the “King Mathias.”

But we must first return to the young forester and his companion, Doctor Patak.

It will be remembered that when he left Werst, Nic Deck had promised the disconsolate Miriota that he would make his visit to the Cattle of the Carpathians as brief as possible. If no harm happened to him, if the threats fulminated against him were not realized, he expected to get back early in the evening. He was therefore waited for, and with what impatience! Neither the girl, nor her father, nor the schoolmaster could foresee that the difficulties of the road would prevent the forester from reaching the crest of the Orgall plateau before nightfall.

And, in consequence, the anxiety, which had been intense during the day, exceeded all bounds when eight o’clock struck in the Vulkan clock, which could be heard distinctly at Werst. What could have happened to prevent both Nic and the doctor from returning after a day’s absence? Nobody thought of going home before they came back. Every minute they were seen in imagination coming round some turning in the road or along some gap in the hills.

Master Koltz and his daughter had gone to the end of the road, where the shepherd had been placed on the lookout. Many times they thought they saw somebody in the distance through the clearings among the trees. A pure illusion! The hillside was deserted, as usual, for it was not often that the frontier folk ventured there at night. And it was Thursday evening — the Thursday of evil spirits — and on that day the Transylvanian never willingly stirs, abroad after sundown. It seemed that Nic Deck must have been mad to have chosen such a day for his visit to the castle; the truth being that the young forester had hot given it a thought, as indeed had no one else in the village.

But Miriota was thinking a good deal about it now. And what terrible imaginings occurred to her! In imagination she had followed her lover hour by hour, through the thick forests of the Plesa as he made his way up to the Orgall plateau. And now that night had come she seemed to see him within the wall, endeavouring to escape from the spirits which haunted the Castle of the Carpathians. He had become the sport of their malevolence. He was the victim devoted to their vengeance. He was imprisoned in the depths of some subterranean gaol — dead, perhaps.

Poor girl, what would she not have given to throw herself on his track! And as she could not do that, at least she could wait all night in this place. But her father insisted on her going home, and, leaving the shepherd on the watch, returned with her to his house.

As soon as she was in her little room Miriota abandoned herself to tears. She loved him with all her heart, this brave Nic, and with a love all the more grateful owing to the young forester not having sought her under the conditions on which marriages are generally arranged in these Transylvanian countries.

Every year, at the feast of St. Peter, there opens “the fair of the betrothed.” On that day all the marriageable girls of the district are assembled. They come in their best carriages drawn by their best horses; they bring with them their dowry, that is to say, the clothes they nave spun, and sewn, and embroidered with their hands, and these are all packed in gaudily coloured boxes; their relatives and women friends and neighbours accompanying them. And then the young men arrive dressed in their best clothes and girt with silken sashes; proudly they strut through the fair; they choose the girl they take a fancy to, they give her a ring and a handkerchief in token of betrothal, and the marriages take place at the close of the fair.

But it was not in one or these marriage fairs that Nic Deck had met Miriota Their acquaintanceship had not come about by chance. They had known each other from childhood; they had loved as soon as they were old enough to love. The young forester had not had to seek her out at a sale. But why was Nic Deck of so resolute a character? why was he so obstinate in keeping an imprudent promise? And yet he loved her, although she had not enough influence over him to stop his going to this wretched castle.

What a night the sorrowful Miriota had amid her terrors and her tears! She could not sleep. Stooping at her window, looking out on the rising road, she seemed to hear a voice that whispered, —

“Nicolas Deck has defied the warning. Miriota has no longer a lover.”

But that was but a mistake of her troubled senses. No voice came across the silence of the night. The phenomenon of the saloon of the “King Mathias “was not reproduced in the house of Master Koltz.

At dawn next morning the population of Werst were astir. From the terrace to the rise of the hill, some went one way, some another, along the main road — some asking for news, some giving it. They said that Frik the shepherd had gone off about a quarter of a mile from the village, not to enter the forest, but to skirt it, and that he had some reason for doing so.

The people were waiting for him, and in order to communicate more promptly with him, Master Koltz, Miriota, and Jonas went to the end of the village.

Half an hour afterwards Frik was observed a few hundred yards away up the rising road.

As he did not appear to be in a hurry, good news was not expected.

“Well, Frik,” said Master Koltz as soon as the shepherd came up, “what have you discovered?”

“I have seen nothing and discovered nothing,” said Frik.

“Nothing!” murmured the girl, whose eyes filled with tears.

“At daybreak,” continued the shepherd, “I saw two men about half a mile away. At first I thought it was Nic Deck accompanied by the doctor, but it was not.”

“Do you know who the men were?” asked Jonas.

“Two travellers who had crossed the frontier in the morning.”

“You spoke to them?”

“Yes.”

“Were they coming towards the village?

“No; they were going towards Retyezat, bound for the summit.”

“Two tourists?”

“They looked like it, Master Koltz.”

“And as they crossed the Vulkan during the night, they saw nothing near the castle?”

“No — for they were then on the other side of the frontier,” replied Frik.

“Have you no news of Nic Deck?”

“None.”

There was a sigh from poor Miriota.

“Besides,” said Frik, “you can have a talk to these travellers in a day or two, for they are thinking of staying at Werst before setting out for Kolosvar.”

“Provided some one does not speak evil of my inn!” thought Jonas. “They would never care to stay there!”

For the last thirty-six hours the excellent landlord had been possessed by this fear that no traveller dare henceforth eat and sleep at the “King Mathias.”

In short, these questions and answers between the shepherd and his master had in no way cleared matters up. And as neither the young forester nor Doctor Patak had reappeared by eight o’clock in the morning, could it be reasonably hoped that they would ever reappear? The Castle of the Carpathians was not to be approached with impunity.

Crushed by the emotions of that sleepless night, Miriota could bear up no longer. She almost fainted away, and hardly had strength to walk. Her father took her home. There her tears redoubled. She called Nic in a heartrending voice. She would have gone out to find him. And all pitied her and feared she was going to have a serious illness.

However, it was necessary and urgent to do something. Some one ought to go to the help of the forester and the doctor without losing a moment. That he would have to run into danger, in exposing himself to the attack of the beings, human or otherwise, who occupied the castle, mattered little. The important thing was to know what had become of Nic and the doctor. This duty fell not only to their friends, but to every inhabitant of the village. The bravest could not refuse to cross the Plesa forests and ascend to the Castle of the Carpathians.

That was decided after many discussions. The bravest were found to consist of three: these were Master Koltz, the shepherd Frik, and the innkeeper Jonas — not one more. As for Magister Hermod he was suddenly seized with gout in the leg, and had to stretch himself out on two chairs while he taught in his school.

About nine o’clock Master Koltz and his companions, well armed in case of eventualities, took the road to the Vulkan. And at the very turning where Nic Deck had left it, they left it to plunge into the woods.

In fact they said to themselves, not without reason, that if the young forester and the doctor were on their way back to the village, this was the road by which they would come; and it would be easy to get on their track once the three were through the outer line of trees.

We will leave them, to relate what happened at Werst as soon as they were out of sight. If it had appeared indispensable that volunteers should go off to the rescue of Nic Deck and Patak, it was considered to be unreasonably imprudent now that they were gone. It would be a fine conclusion if the first catastrophe were to be doubled by a second! That the forester and the doctor had been the victims of their attempt, no one doubted; and what was the use of Master Koltz and Frik and Jonas exposing themselves to another disaster? They would indeed be getting on when the girl had to weep for her father as she had to weep for her betrothed; when the friends of the shepherd and the innkeeper had to reproach themselves with their loss!

The grief became general at Werst, and there was no sign that it would soon end. Even supposing that no harm happened to them, the return of Master Koltz and his two companions could not be reckoned upon before night had fallen on the heights of the Plesa.

What, then, was the surprise when they were sighted about two o’clock in the afternoon some distance along the road! With what eagerness did Miriota, who was at once told of their approach, run to meet them!

There were not three, there were four; and the fourth appeared in the shape of the doctor.

“Nic — my poor Nic!” exclaimed the girl, “Nic is not there?”

Yes — Nic Deck was there, stretched on a litter of boughs, which Jonas and the shepherd bore with difficulty.

Miriota rushed towards her betrothed, she stooped over him, she clasped him in her arms.

“He is dead!” she exclaimed, “he is dead!”

“No, he is not dead,” replied Doctor Patak, “but he deserves to be — and so do I!”

The truth is, the forester was unconscious. His limbs were stiff, his face bloodless, his respiration hardly moved his chest. As for the doctor, his face was not as colourless as his companion’s, owing to the walk having restored his usual brick-red tint.

Miriota’s voice, so tender, so heartrending, could not awake Nic Deck from the torpor in which he was plunged. When he had been brought into the village and laid in a room in Master Koltz’s house, he had not uttered a word. A few moments afterwards, however, his eyes opened, and when he saw the girl stooping over him, a smile played on his lips; but when he tried to raise himself he could not. A part of his body was paralyzed as if he had been struck with hemiplegia. At the same time, wishing to comfort Miriota, he said to her — in a very feeble voice, it is true, —

“It will be nothing, it will be nothing.”

“Nic — my poor Nic!” said the girl.

“A little over-fatigue, dear Miriota, and a little excitement. It will be over soon, with your nursing.” . But. the patient required calm and repose; and so Master Koltz went away, leaving Miriota near the young forester, who could not have wished for a more attentive nurse, and soon fell asleep.

Meanwhile, the innkeeper Jonas related to a numerous audience, and in a loud voice so as to be heard by all, what had happened after their departure.

Master Koltz, the shepherd, and himself, after finding the footpath cut by Nic Deck and the doctor, had gone on towards the Castle of the Carpathians. For two hours they made their way up the Plesa slopes, and the edge of the forest was not more than half a mile off, when two men appeared. These were the doctor and the forester, one quite helpless in his legs, the other just about to fall at the foot of a tree, owing to exhaustion.

To run to the doctor, to interrogate him, but without being able to obtain a single word, for he was too stupefied to reply; to make a litter with the branches, to lay Nic Deck on it, to put Patak on his feet, — did not take very long. Then Master Koltz and the shepherd, who relieved Jonas from time to time, resumed the road to Werst.

As to saying why Nic Deck was in such a state, and if he had entered the ruins of the castle, the innkeeper knew no more than Master Koltz or the shepherd Frik, and the doctor had not yet sufficiently recovered his spirits to satisfy their curiosity.

But if Patak had not yet spoken, it was necessary for him to speak now. He was in safety in the village, surrounded by his friends, and in the midst of his patients. He had nothing to fear from the things at the castle. And even if they had wrung from him an oath to be silent, to say nothing of what he had seen at the Castle of the Carpathians, the public interest required that he should ignore that oath.

“Compose yourself, doctor,” said Master Koltz, “and try and remember.”

“You wish me to speak?”

“In the name of the inhabitants of Werst, and for the sake of the safety of the village, I order you to do so.”

A large glass of rakiou, brought in by Jonas, had the effect of restoring to the doctor the use of his tongue, and in broken sentences he expressed himself in these terms: —

“We went off, both of us, Nic and I. Fools, fools! It took nearly all day to get through those wretched forests. We did not get up to the castle before it was getting dark. I still tremble at it — I will tremble at it all my life. Nic wanted to go in. Yes! He wanted to spend the night in the donjon, as much as to say to sleep in the bedroom of Beelzebub.”

Doctor Patak said these things in a voice so cavernous that all who heard him shuddered.

“I did not consent!” he continued; “no, I did not consent. And what would have happened if I had yielded to Nic Deck’s desires? My hair stands on end to think of it.”

And if the doctor’s hair did not stand on end, it was because his hand wandered mechanically over his poll.

“Nic accordingly resigned himself to camping on the Orgall plateau. What a night! my friends, what a night! Try to rest when the spirits will not let you sleep an hour — no, not even one hour. Suddenly fiery monsters appeared in the clouds, regular balauris! They hurled themselves on to the plateau to devour us.”

Every look was turned towards the sky, to make sure that a few spectres were not there in full gallop.

“And a few moments after,” continued the doctor, “the chapel bell began to clang!”

Every ear was stretched towards the horizon, and more than one of the crowd believed they could hear the distant ringing in the direction of the castle, so much had the doctor’s recital impressed his audience.

“Suddenly,” he went on, “fearful bellowings filled the air, or rather the roaring of wild beasts. Then a bright light darted from the windows of the donjon. An infernal flame illumined all the plateau up to the fir forest. Nic Deck and I looked at one another. Ah! the terrible vision! We were like two corpses — two corpses which the lurid light set making horrible grimaces at each other.”

And to look at Doctor Patak, with his convulsed face and his wild eyes, there really would have been some excuse for asking if he had not returned from that other world whither he had already sent so many of his kind.

He had to be left to recover his breath, for he was incapable of continuing his story. This cost Jonas a second glass of rakiou, which appeared to bring back to the doctor some portion of the senses which the other spirits had made him lose.

“But what happened to poor Nic Deck?” asked Master Koltz.

And, not without reason, the biro attached extreme importance to the doctor's reply, for it was the young forester who had been personally threatened by the voice of the spirits in the saloon of the "King Mathias."

"As far as I remember," continued the doctor, "the daylight returned I besought Nic Deck to abandon his projects. But you know him — he could not be more obstinate if he would. He went down into the ditch, and I was forced to follow him, for he dragged me along with him. Besides, I really do not know what I did. Nic went on up to the gate. He caught hold of the chain of the drawbridge, with which he pulled himself up the wall. At this moment the sense of our position occurred. There was still time to stop him, that rash — I say more — that sacrilegious young man. For the last time I ordered him to come down, to come back on the road to Werst. 'No!' he shouted to me. I would have run away — yes, my friends, I confess it — I would have fled, and there is not one of you who would not have had the same thought in my place! But it was in vain I tried to move from the ground. My feet were nailed, screwed, rooted. I tried to free them — it was impossible. I tried to struggle — it was useless!"

And Doctor Patak imitated the desperate movements of a man held by the legs, as a fox is held in a trap. Then, resuming his story, he said, —

"At this moment there was a cry — and such a cry! It was Nic Deck who uttered it. His hands had let go the chain, and he fell to the bottom of the ditch as if he had been struck by an invisible hand."

The doctor, it is clear, had told what had happened, and his imagination had added nothing, excited though it might be. Just as he had described them, so had the prodigies appeared of which the Orgall plateau had been the scene during the preceding night.

What had happened after Nic Deck's fall was as follows — The forester had fainted, and Doctor Patak was incapable of helping him, for his boots were stuck to the ground, and he could not get his swollen feet out of them. Suddenly the invisible force that detained him vanished. His legs were free. He rushed towards his companion, and, what must be considered a noble act of courage, he bathed Nic Deck's face with his handkerchief, which he dipped in the water of the stream. The forester recovered consciousness, but his left arm and a part of his body were helpless after the frightful shock he had had. However, with the doctor's aid he managed to get up and climb the slope of the counterscarp and regain the plateau. Then he set out for the village. After an hour's progress the pain in his arm and side became so violent that he had to stop. And it was just as the doctor was about to start off alone in search of help from Werst, that Master Koltz and Jonas and Frik arrived most opportunely.

The doctor carefully avoided saying that the young forester had been seriously hurt, although he was generally very positive when consulted on medical matters.

"When the ailment is a natural ailment," he said in a dogmatic tone, "it is serious. But when we have to deal with a supernatural ailment sent by the Chort, it is only the Chort who can cure it."

In default of a diagnosis it cannot be said that this prognosis was reassuring for Nic Deck. There have, however, been many physicians since Hippocrates and Galen who have made mistakes, and these have been far better men than Doctor Patak. The young forester was a healthy lad; with his vigorous constitution there was reason to hope that without any diabolic intervention he would recover, on condition that he was not too careful to accept the advice of the old quarantine officer.

CHAPTER VIII.

SUCH things were not calculated to calm the terrors of the people of Werst. There could now be no doubt that the threats uttered by the “mouth of darkness,” as the poet said in the “King Mathias,” were to be taken seriously. Nic Deck, struck in this inexplicable manner, had been punished for his disobedience and temerity Was not this a warning to all those who might be tempted to follow his example? Here, clearly enough, was a formal prohibition against entering the Castle of the Carpathians. Whoever tried it would risk his life. Most certainly if the forester had got within the wall he would never have returned to the village.

And so the fright was more complete than ever at Werst, and even at Vulkan, and also throughout the valley of the two Syls. Nothing less was spoken of than leaving the district, and a few gipsy families moved off rather than live in the vicinity of the castle. That it should be a refuge for supernatural and maleficent beings was more than the popular feeling could put up with. The only thing to do was to go into some other part of the country, unless the Hungarian Government decided to destroy this inaccessible haunt. But was the Castle of the Carpathians destructible by the only means man had at his disposal?

During the first week of June no one would venture out of the village, not even to work in the fields. Might not the least stroke of a spade provoke the apparition of some phantom buried in the ground? The coulter of the plough as it cut the furrow, might it not set in flight a flock of staffii or stryges? Where the seed of corn was sown, might not the seed of demons spring up?

“That could not fail to happen!” said the shepherd Frik in a tone of conviction.

And, as far as he was concerned, he took good care not to return with his sheep to the pastures of the Syl.

And so the village was in a state of terror. No one went to work in the fields. Every one remained at home with doors and windows closed. Master Koltz did not know what to do to restore confidence among those under his rule. Evidently the only way was to go to Kolosvar and invoke the intervention of the authorities.

And had the smoke reappeared at the top of the donjon chimney? Yes; many times the telescope had made it visible among the mists which swept the Orgall plateau.

And when night came, had the clouds assumed a rosy hue as if from the reflection of a fire? Yes; and it was said that fiery plumes could be seen curling and whirling over the castle.

And that roaring which had frightened Doctor Patak, was it heard from among the woods of Plesa, to the terror of the people of Werst? Yes; or at least, notwithstanding the distance, the north-west wind brought along fearful growlings which were augmented by the echoes of the hills.

According to some of the more terror-stricken, the ground was shaken by subterranean tremblings as if some ancient volcano had become active again in the Carpathian chain But possibly there was a good deal of exaggeration in what the Werstians thought they saw and heard and felt. Under any circumstances there were positive, tangible reasons, it will be admitted, why living in such a strangely troubled country was no longer possible.

The King Mathias “remained deserted in consequence. A lazaretto in an epidemic could not have been more shunned. No one had the audacity to cross the threshold, and Jonas was asking himself if for want of customers he would not have to retire from trade, when the arrival of two travellers altered matters considerably.

In the evening of the month of June, about eight o’clock, the latch of the door was lifted from the outside; but the door, being bolted inside, could not be opened.

Jonas, who had already retired to his attic, hastily came down. To the hope of finding himself face to face with a customer was added the fear that the customer might be some evil-looking ghost, to whom he would be only too ready to refuse board and lodging.

Jonas proceeded to hold a parley through the door without opening it.

“Who is there?” he asked.

“Two travellers.”

“Alive?”

“Very much alive.”

“Are you sure of it?”

“As much alive as we can be, Mr. Innkeeper; but we shall die of hunger if you keep us outside.”

Jonas decided to draw back the bolts, and two men entered the room.

As soon as they were in, their first demand was for a room each, as they intended to stay a day at Werst.

By the light of the lamp Jonas examined the newcomers with great attention, and made sure that he had really to deal with human beings. How fortunate for the “King Mathias “!

The younger of the travellers might be about thirty-two years old, of tall stature, with a noble, handsome face, black eyes, dark-brown hair, a well-cut brown beard, a somewhat sad but proud look about him — in fact he was a gentleman, and an experienced innkeeper like Jonas could not be mistaken in such a matter.

Besides, when he asked what names he was to enter ill his visitors’ book, the younger man replied, —

“The Count Franz de Télek and his man Rotzko.”

“Of what place?”

“Krajowa.”

Krajowa is one of the chief towns of the State of Roumania, which borders the Transylvanian provinces south of the Carpathian chain.

Franz de Télek was thus of Roumanian nationality, as Jonas had seen from the very first.

Rotzko was a man of about forty, solidly built and strong, with a thick moustache, bristly hair, and quite a military bearing. He carried a soldier’s knapsack strapped to his shoulders, and a valise small enough to be carried in his hand.

That was all the baggage of the young count, who travelled generally on foot, as could be seen from his costume — a cloak in a roll over his shoulder, a light cap on his head, a short jacket with a belt, from which hung the leather sheath of the Wallachian knife, and he wore the gaiters strapped down to the broad, thick-soled shoes.

These travellers were the two whom the shepherd Frik had met twelve days before on the road to the hills, when they were going to Retyezat. After seeing the country up to Maros, and making the ascent of the mountain, they had come for a little rest to Werst before exploring the valley of the two Syls.

“You have two rooms we can have?” asked Franz de Télek.

“Two — three — four — as many as the count pleases,” said Jonas.

“Two will do,” said Rotzko, “but they must be near each other.”

“Will these suit you?” asked Jonas, opening two doors at the end of the large saloon.

“Very well indeed” said Franz de Télek.

Evidently Jonas had nothing to fear from his new customers. These were no supernatural beings, no phantoms who had assumed the shape of men. No! This gentleman was one of those personages of distinction whom an innkeeper is always honoured in welcoming, and who might perhaps bring the “King Mathias “into fashion again.

“How far are we from Kolosvar?” asked the count “About fifty miles, if you go by the road, through Petroseny and Karlsburg,” replied Jonas.

“Is it a tiring sort of walk?”

“Yes, very tiring for walkers; and if I may be permitted to say so, the count would seem to require a rest of a few days before undertaking it — ”

“Can we have anything to eat?” asked Franz de Télek, cutting short the innkeeper’s remarks.

“In half an hour’s time I shall have the honour of offering the count a repast worthy of him.”

“Bread, wine, eggs, and cold meat will be enough for to-night.”

“I will go and see about them.”

“As soon as possible.”

“This moment.”

And Jonas was hurrying off to the kitchen when a question stopped him, —

“You do not seem to have many people at your inn?” said Franz de Télek.

“No — not just at the moment, sir.”

“Is not this the time for people to come and have a drink and smoke a pipe?”

“It is too late now, sir. They go to bed with the chickens in the village of Werst.”

Never would he have said why the “King Mathias “was without a customer.

“Are there not three or four hundred people in this village?”

“About that, sir.”

“Why did we not meet a living soul as we came down the main street?”

“That is because — to-day — well, it is Saturday, you see — and the day before Sunday is — ”

Franz de Télek did not persist, luckily for Jonas, who did not know what to reply. Nothing in the world would have induced him to reveal the true state of affairs. Strangers would learn that only too soon, and who could tell if they would not hasten to leave a village so deservedly suspected?

“It is to be hoped that that voice will not begin to chatter in the big room while they are at supper!” thought Jonas as he laid the table.

A few minutes afterwards the very simple meal ordered by the young count was neatly served on a clean white cloth. Franz de Télek sat down, and Rotzko seated himself facing him, as they usually did on their travels. Both of them ate with a good appetite; and when the repast was over they retired to their rooms.

As the young count and Rotzko had hardly spoken ten words during their meal, Jonas had not been able to take part in their conversation — to his great displeasure. Besides, Franz de Télek did not seem to be communicative. As to Rotzko, the innkeeper, after due survey, gathered that he would not be able to get anything out of him regarding his master’s family.

Jonas had, therefore, to content himself with bidding his visitors good-night. Before he went up to his attic he gave a good look around the room, and lent an anxious ear to the least noises within and without, saying to himself, —

“May that abominable voice not awake them from their sleep!”

The night passed tranquilly.

At daybreak next morning the news began to spread in the village that two travellers had arrived at the “King Mathias,” and a number of people gathered in front of the inn.

Franz de Télek and Rotzko were still sleeping, tired after their excursion the day before. There was little likelihood of their rising before seven or eight o’clock. And consequently there was great impatience among the spectators, who had none of them the courage to enter the room before the travellers.

At eight o’clock they came in together. Nothing regrettable had happened. They could be seen walking about in the inn. Then they sat down to breakfast. All of which was particularly reassuring.

Jonas stood at the front door and smiled amiably, inviting his old customers to give him another trial. The traveller who honoured the “King Mathias “with his presence was a gentleman — a Roumanian gentleman, if you please, and of one of the oldest Roumanian families — what was to be feared in such noble company?

In short, it happened that Master Koltz, thinking it his duty to set an example, took the risk of the first step.

About nine o’clock the biro entered the room in rather a hesitating way. Almost immediately he was followed by Magister Hermod and three or four other customers, as well as the shepherd Frik. As to Doctor Patak, it had been impossible to persuade him to accompany them.

“Set foot again in Jonas’s!” he said, “Never, until he pays me two florins a visit.”

We may here remark, as it is a matter of some importance, that if Master Koltz had consented to return to the “King Mathias,” it was not solely with a view of satisfying his curiosity, nor with the intention of making the acquaintance of Count Franz de Télek. No! self-interest was his chief motive.

As a traveller the young count had become liable for a tax on self and man, and it must not be forgotten that these tares went direct into the pocket of the chief magistrate of Werst.

The biro at once went forward and politely stated his demand, and Franz de Télek, although taken somewhat by surprise, immediately settled the claim.

He even begged the biro and the schoolmaster to be seated for a moment at his table, and the offer was so politely made that they could not refuse.

Jonas hastened to serve them with drinks, the best he had in his cellar, and then a few of the natives of Werst asked for a drink on their own account, and it seemed as though the old customers, for a moment dispersed, would soon be as plentiful as ever in the “King Mathias.”

Having paid the traveller’s tax, Franz de Télek wished to know if it was productive.

“Not as much as we wish,” replied Master Koltz.

“Do strangers only come here occasionally, then?”

“Very occasionally,” said the biro, “and yet the country is worth a visit.”

“So I think,” said the count. “What I have seen appeared to me to be well worth a traveller’s attention. From the top of the Retyezat I much admired the valley of the Syls, the villages away to the east, and the range of mountains which closes in the view.”

“It is very fine, sir, very fine!” said Magister Hermod; “and to complete your tour you should make the ascent of Paring.”

“I am afraid I shall not have the necessary time,” said the count.

“One day would be enough.”

“Probably; but I am going to Karlsburg, and I must start to-morrow morning.”

“What!” said Jonas with his most amiable air. “Does the count think of leaving us so soon?”

And he would not have been sorry if the visitors could have stayed s. me time at the ‘ King Mathias.”

“It must be so,” said the Count de Télek, “Besides, what would be the use of my making a longer stay at Werst?”

“Believe me, our village is well worth a tourist’s making some stay at,” said Master Koltz.

“But it does not seem to be much frequented,” said the count, “and that is probably because its neighbourhood has nothing remarkable about it.”

"Quite so — nothing remarkable," said the biro, thinking of the castle.

"No — nothing remarkable," said the schoolmaster.

"Oh! ah!" said the shepherd Frik, the exclamation escaping involuntarily.

What looks he received from Master Koltz and the others, particularly from the innkeeper!

Was it then advisable to let the stranger into the secrets of the district? Should they reveal to him what had passed on the plateau of Orgall, and direct his attention to the Castle of the Carpathians? Would that not frighten him and make him anxious to leave the village? And in the future what travellers would come by the Vulkan road into Transylvania?

Truly the shepherd had shown no more intelligence than if he were one of his own sheep.

"Be quiet, you imbecile, be quiet!" said Master Koltz to him in a whisper.

But as the young count's curiosity had been awakened, he addressed himself directly to Frik, and asked him what he meant by his "Oh! ah!"

The shepherd was not a man to retreat, and perhaps really thought that Franz de Télek might give some advice which the village might profitably adopt.

"I said, 'Oh, ah!'" replied the shepherd, "and I will not go back on my word."

"Is there any marvel, then, to visit in the neighbourhood of Werst?"

“Any marvel?” replied Master Koltz.

“No! no!” exclaimed the bystanders. And they were already in fear at the thought lest a fresh attempt at entering the castle would bring fresh misfortunes on them.

Franz de Télek, not without some surprise, took notice of those people whose faces were expressive of alarm in all sorts of ways, but all equally unmistakable.

“What is this all about?” he asked.

“What is it, sir?” replied Rotzko. “Well, it seems there is the Castle of the Carpathians.”

“The Castle of the Carpathians?”

“Yes! That is the name this shepherd has just whispered in my ear.”

And as he spoke Rotzko pointed to Frik, who nodded his head without daring to look at his master.

But a breach was now made in the wall of the private life of the superstitious village, and all its history could not help going forth through this breach.

In fact, Master Koltz, who had made up his mind how to act, resolved to explain matters himself to the count,, and told him all he knew about the Castle of the Carpathians.

Naturally Franz de Télek could not hide the astonishment the story caused him, nor the feelings it suggested to him. Although he knew little of scientific matters, like other young people of his class who live in their castles in these Wallachian byways, he was a sensible man. He believed but little in apparitions and laughed at legend. A castle haunted by spirits merely excited his incredulity. In his opinion, in all that Master Koltz had told him there was nothing of the marvellous, but only a few facts, more or less proved, to which the people of Werst attributed a supernatural origin. The smoke from the donjon, the bell ringing violently, could be very easily explained, and the lightnings and roarings from within the wall might be purely imaginary.

Franz de Télek did not hesitate to say so, and to joke about it, to the great scandal of his listeners.

“But, count, there is something else,” said Master Koltz.

“What is that?”

“Well, it is impossible to get into this Castle of the Carpathians.”

“Indeed?”

“Our forester and our doctor tried to get in a few days ago, for the benefit of the village, and they paid dearly for their attempt.”

“What happened to them?” asked Franz de Télek, somewhat ironically.

Master Koltz related in detail the adventures of Nic Deck and Doctor Patak.

“And so,” said the count, “when the doctor wanted to get out of the ditch his feet were so stuck to the ground that he could not take a step forward?”

“Neither a step forward nor a step behind,” added Magister Hermod.

“Your doctor thought so,” replied Franz de Télek. “But it was fear which stuck him by the heels.”

“Be it so,” replied Master Koltz. “But Nic Deck received a frightful shock when he put his hand on the ironwork of the drawbridge.”

“A terrible shock — ”

“So terrible,” replied the biro, “that he has been in bed ever since.”

“Not in danger of his life, I hope?” said the count.

“No, fortunately.”

That was a fact, an undeniable fact, and Master Koltz waited for the explanation Franz de Télek would give.

“In all I have just heard there is nothing, I repeat, but what is very simple. I have no doubt but what somebody is now living in the castle — who, I know not. Anyhow, they are not spirits, but people who wish to lie hidden there after taking refuge there — criminals probably.

“Criminals!” exclaimed Master Koltz.

“Probably; and as they do not want any one to hunt them out, they wish it to be believed that the castle is haunted by supernatural beings.”

“What!” said Magister Hermod. “You think — ”

“I think you are very superstitious in these parts, that the people in the castle know it, and that they wish to keep off visitors in that way.”

That this was the true explanation was not unlikely, but we need not be astonished if nobody at Werst would admit it.

The young count saw that he had in no way convinced an audience who did not wish to be convinced, and so he contented himself with adding, —

“If you do not care to agree with me, gentlemen, you can continue to think what you please about the Castle of the Carpathians.”

“We believe what we have seen,” replied Master Koltz.

“And what is — ” said the magister.

“Well. Really, I am sorry I have not a day to spare, for Rotzko and I would have paid a visit to your famous castle, and I assure you we would soon have found out — ”

“Visit the castle!” exclaimed Master Koltz.

“Without hesitation, and the devil himself would not have stopped us from getting in.”

On listening to Franz de Télek express himself so positively, so ironically even, the villagers were seized with terror. In treating the spirits of the castle with such indifference, would he not bring some disaster on the village? Did not these spirits hear all that passed in the inn of the “King Mathias”? Would the voice be heard a second time in this room?

And thereupon Master Koltz told the young count of the circumstances under which the forester had been personally threatened when he decided on entering the Castle of the Carpathians. Franz de Télek simply shrugged his shoulders; then he rose, saying that no voice had ever been heard in the room as they pretended. Whereupon some of the company made for the door, not caring to remain any longer in a place where a young sceptic dared say such things.

But Franz de Télek stopped them with a gesture.

“Assuredly, gentlemen,” he said. “I see that the village of Werst is under the empire of fear.”

“And not without reason,” replied Master Koltz.

“Well, there is a very simple way of putting a stop to the performances which according to you are going on at the Castle of the Carpathians. After to-morrow I shall be at Karlsburg, and if you like I will tell the town authorities. They will send you a few police, and I will answer for it that these brave fellows will know how to get into the castle and clear out the jokers who arc practising on your credulity, or arrest the scoundrels, who are perhaps preparing for some new iniquity.”

Nothing could be more acceptable than this proposal, but yet it was not to the taste of the notables of Werst. In their opinion neither the police nor the army itself would succeed against these superhuman beings, who would know how to defend themselves by supernatural means.

“But I believe,” continued the young count, “that you have not yet told me to whom this Castle of the Carpathians belongs or belonged?”

“To an old country family, the family of the Barons of Gortz,” said Master Koltz.

“The family of Gortz!” exclaimed Franz de Télek.

“The same.”

“Is that the family to which Baron Rodolphe belonged?”

“Yes.”

“And do you know what has become of him?”

“No; for the baron has not come back to the castle for years.”

Franz de Télek had become quite pale, and mechanically in an altered voice he repeated the name, —

“Rodolphe de Gortz!”

CHAPTER IX

The family of the Counts of Télek was one of the most ancient and illustrious in Roumania, having been of considerable importance there before the country conquered its independence in the beginning of the sixteenth century. With all the political movements which abound in the history of these provinces the name of the family is gloriously connected.

Less favoured than the famous beech of the Castle of the Carpathians, which still possessed three branches, the house of Télek was now reduced to one, that of Télek of Krajowa, whose last offspring was the young gentleman who had just, arrived at the village of Werst.

During his infancy he had never left the patrimonial castle where the Count and Countess of Télek lived. The descendants of the family were held in great esteem in the country, where they spent their wealth generously. Living the liberal, easy life of the country nobility, it was seldom that they left their estate at Krajowa more than once a year, and that when business took them to the town of that name, which was only a few miles away.

This kind of life had of necessity an influence on the education of their only son, and for long afterwards Franz felt the effects of the surroundings amid which his childhood was passed. His only tutor was an old Italian priest, who could only teach him what he knew, and he did not know much. And so when the boy had become a young man he had but a very inadequate knowledge of science or art or contemporary literature. To be an enthusiastic sportsman, afoot night and day through the forests and on the plains, hunting the stag and the wild bear, and attacking the wild beasts of the mountains, knife in hand, such were the ordinary pastimes of the young count, who, being very brave and very resolute, accomplished wonders in these rough occupations.

The Countess of Télek died when her son was scarcely fifteen, and he was only one-and-twenty when his father died in a hunting accident.

The grief of young Franz was extreme. As he had wept for his mother he wept for his father, who had just been taken from him, one after the other, within these few years. All his tender feelings, all the affectionate impulses of his heart, were then centred in this filial love which had been sufficient for him during his childhood and youth. But when this love failed him, having no friends and his tutor being dead, he found himself alone in the world.

For three years the young count remained at the Castle of Krajowa. He could not make up his mind to leave it. He lived there without seeking to make any acquaintances outside. Once or twice he had been to Bucharest, but that was because certain matters obliged him to go there; and these were but short absences, for he was in haste to return to his domain.

This life could not, however, last for ever, and Franz began to feel the want of enlarging the horizon which was so restricted by the Roumanian mountains; and he wished to fly beyond it.

The young count was about twenty-three years old when he made up his mind to travel. His wealth enabled him to fully gratify his wishes. One day he left the Castle of Krajowa to his old servants and left the Wallachian country. He took with him Rotzko, an old Roumanian soldier, who had been for ten years in the family, and who had been the young count's companion in all his hunting expeditions. He was a man of courage and resolution, entirely devoted to his master. t The young count's intention was to visit

Europe and to stay a few months in the capitals and important towns of the Continent. He considered, not without cause, that his education, which had been only begun at the Castle of Krajowa, might be completed by what he learnt on a carefully planned tour.

It was to Italy that Franz de Télek wished to go first, for he could speak Italian fairly well, the old priest having taught him. The attraction of this country, so rich in memories, was such that he stayed there four years. He only left Venice to go to Florence, he left Rome but to go to Naples,, constantly returning to these artistic centres, from which he could not tear himself away. France, Germany, Spain, Russia, England, he would see later on; he would even study them to better advantage — so it seemed to him — when age had matured his ideas. On the other hand, he must be in all the effervescence of youth to enjoy the charms of the great Italian cities.

Franz de Télek was twenty-seven when he went to Naples for the last time. He intended to spend only a few hours there before leaving for Sicily. By the exploration of the ancient Trinacria he purposed to end his tour, and then return to his Castle of Krajowa and have a year’s rest.

An unexpected circumstance not only changed his plans, but decided his life and changed its course.

During the few years he had lived in Italy the young count had not learned much of the sciences, for which he felt no aptitude, but the sense of the beautiful had been revealed to him like light to a blind man. With his mind widely opened to the splendours of art, he had become enthusiastic over the masterpieces of painting, in visiting the galleries of Naples, Rome, and Florence. At the same time the theatres had made him acquainted with the lyric works of the time, and he became powerfully interested in their interpretation by the great artistes.

It was during his last stay at Naples, and under circumstances we are about to relate, that a sentiment of a more personal character, of more intensive penetration, took possession of his heart.

There was then at the theatre of San Carlo a celebrated singer whose pure voice, finished method, and dramatic ability had won the admiration of all the dilettanti. Up to then La Stilla had never sought the applause of foreigners, and had never sung any other music than Italian, which then held the first place in the art of composition. The Carignan Theatre at Turin, the Scala at Milan, the Fenice, at Venice, the Alfieri at Florence, the Apolio at Rome, the San Carlo at Naples, introduced her in turn, and her triumphs left her no room for regret that she had not appeared at the other theatres of Europe.

La Stilla, then aged five-and-twenty, was a woman of ideal beauty, with her long golden hair, the ardour of her deep-black eyes, the purity of her complexion, and a figure which the chisel of a Praxiteles could not have made more perfect. And this woman had become a sublime artiste, another Malibran, of whom Musset could also say, —

“And thy songs in the skies bore away sorrow.”

But this voice which the most adored of poets has celebrated in his immortal stanzas, “that voice of the heart which only finds the heart,” that voice was La Stilla’s in all its inexpressible magnificence.

However, this incomparable prima-donna, who reproduced with such perfection the accents of tenderness, the fury of the passions, the most powerful feelings of the soul, had never, so they said, experienced their effect. Never had she loved, never had her eyes responded to the thousand looks which were concentrated on her on the stage.

It seemed that she lived but for her art and only for her art.

The first time he saw La Stilla, Franz experienced that irresistible ardour which is the essence of a first love. And he gave up his plan of leaving Italy, after visiting Sicily, and resolved to remain at Naples until the close of the season. As if some invisible bond he could not break had attached him to the singer, he was at all the performances, which the enthusiasm of the public converted into veritable triumphs. Many times, incapable of mastering his passion, he had tried to obtain access to her house; but La Stilla's door remained as pitilessly closed against him as against so many other fanatic admirers.

And so it came about that the young count became the most to be pitied of men. Always in sight of his love, thinking only of the great artiste, living but to see her and hear her, he sought no longer to make friends in the world to which his name and fortune called him.

Soon this excitement so increased with Franz that his health was in danger. We can imagine what he might have suffered if he had had to bear the tortures of jealousy, if La Stilla's heart had belonged to another. But the young count had no rival, as he knew, and none could give him umbrage — not even a certain peculiar personage, of whose appearance and character our story requires more notice.

He was a man between fifty and fifty-five at the time Franz de Télek last went to Naples. This incommunicative individual apparently strove to live outside the social conventionalities that prevail in the higher circles. Nothing was known of his family, his position, his past life. He was met with to-day at Rome, to-morrow at Florence, provided that La Stilla was at Florence or at Rome. In fact, he lived but to listen to the renowned singer, who then occupied the foremost place in the art of song.

If Franz de Télek had lived only in the delirium of his idolatry for La Stilla since the day he had applauded her or rather had seen her on the stage at Naples, this eccentric dilettante had been following her about for six years. But he was not like the young count; in his case it was not the woman but the voice which had become so necessary to his life as the air he breathed. Never had he sought to see her except on the stage, never had he called at her house or attempted to write to her. But every time La Stilla appeared, in no matter what theatre of Italy, there passed in among the audience a man of tall stature, wrapped in a long dark overcoat, and wearing a large hat which hid his face. This man would hurry to his seat in a private box previously engaged for him, and there he would remain, silent and motionless, throughout the performance. But as soon as La Stilla had finished her last air, he would go away furtively, and no other singer would detain him — he had not even heard them.

Who was this spectator, so strangely assiduous at these performances? La Stilla had in vain sought to know; and, being of a very impressionable nature, she had become quite frightened at this curious man — an unreasonable terror, but still a very real one. Although she could not see him in the back of his box, she knew he was there, she felt his look imperiously fixed on her, and, greatly troubled by his presence, she no longer heard the cheers with which the public welcomed her appearance on the scene.

We have said that this personage had never approached La Stilla. Nothing could be truer. But if he had not tried to make her acquaintance — and we must particularly insist on this point — all that could remind him of the artiste had been the object of his constant attention. Thus he possessed the finest of the portraits which the great painter, Michel Gregorio, had made of the singer. This was, indeed, La Stilla impassioned, vibrating, sublime, incarnate in one of her finest characters, and the portrait acquired for its price in gold was well worth the price her wealthy admirer had paid for it.

If this eccentric individual was invariably alone when he occupied his box during La Stilla’s performances, if he never went out of his rooms but to go to the theatre, it must not be supposed that he lived in absolute isolation. No; a companion no less eccentric shared his existence.

This individual was known as Orfanik. How old was he? whence came he? where was he born? No one could have answered those three questions. To listen to him — for he was only too glad to talk — he was one of those unrecognized geniuses who have taken an aversion to the world; and it was supposed, and not without reason, that he was some poor devil of an inventor who was chiefly supported by the purse of his protector.

Orfanik was of middle height, thin, sickly, consumptive, and pale. He was remarkable for a black patch over his right eye, which he had lost in some experiment; and on his nose was a pair of spectacles, the only lens being that over his left eye, which glowed with a greenish look. During his solitary walks, he gesticulated as if he were talking to some invisible being who listened without ever answering.

These two characters, the strange melomaniac and the no less strange Orfanik, were known, at least as much as they wished to be, in all the towns of Italy to which the theatrical season regularly took them. They had the privilege of exciting public curiosity; and although the admirer of La Stilla had always repulsed the reporters and their indiscreet interviews, they had at last discovered his name and nationality. He was of Roumanian birth, and the first time Franz de Télek asked who he was, they told him, —

"The Baron Rodolphe de Gortz."

Such was the state of affairs when the young count arrived at Naples. For two months the theatre of San Carlo had been full, and the success of La Stilla grew greater every evening. Never had she done herself more justice in her different characters, never had she called forth more enthusiastic ovations.

At each performance, while Franz occupied his orchestra stall, the Baron de Gortz sat at the back of his box, absorbed in this ideal song, impregnated with this divine voice, without which it seemed he could not live.

It was then that a rumour spread at Naples — a rumour the public refused to believe, but which eventually alarmed the dilettanti.

It was said that at the close of the season La Stilla was going to retire from the stage. What! In all the possession of her talent, in all the plenitude of her beauty, in the apogee of her artistic career, was it possible she thought of retiring?

Unlikely as it seemed, it was true, and undoubtedly the Baron de Gortz had something to do with her resolve.

This spectator with his mysterious proceedings, always there, although invisible behind the railing of his box, had at length provoked in La Stilla a nervous, persistent emotion which she could not overcome. Whenever she came on the stage she felt an influence come over her, and the excitement, which was apparent enough to the public, had gradually injured her health.

To leave Naples, to fly to Rome, to Venice, or to some other town of the peninsula, would not, she knew, deliver her from the presence of Baron de Gortz. She would not even escape him by abandoning Italy for Germany, Russia, or France. He would follow her wherever she made herself heard; and to deliver herself from this besetting importunity, her only chance was to abandon the stage.

Two months before the rumour of her retirement had been heard, Franz de Télek had taken a step with regard to the singer, the consequences of which were to be an irreparable catastrophe.

Free to do as he liked, and master of an immense fortune, he had succeeded in obtaining admission to La Stilla’s house, and had made her the offer of becoming Countess of Télek.

La Stilla had long known of the feelings with which she had inspired the young count. She had said to herself that he was a gentleman to whom any woman, even of the highest rank, would be happy to trust her life and happiness. And in the state of mind she then was, when Franz de Télek offered her his name, she received the offer with a sympathy she took no pains to hide. She felt herself loved in such a way that she consented to become the wife of Count Télek, and without regret abandon her dramatic career.

The news was then true; La Stilla would not appear again on any stage, as soon as the San Carlo season came to an end. In fact, her marriage, of which there had been some suspicions, was announced as certain.

This, as may be imagined, caused considerable excitement not only in the professional world, but in the fashionable world of Italy. After refusing to believe in the realization of this project, they had to admit it. Hatred and jealousy arose against the young count who was to take her away from her art, her success, the idolatry of the dilettanti, the greatest singer of her age. Even personal threats were directed against Franz de Télek — which threats in no way troubled him.

But if it was thus with the public, we can imagine what Rodolphe de Gortz felt at the thought of losing La Stilla, and that he would lose with her all that was life to him. There was a rumour that he was about to commit suicide.

t was certain that from this day Orfanik was not seen on the streets of Naples. He never left Baron Rodolphe. Many times he was with him in the box which the baron occupied at every performance — and that he had never done before, being, like other learned men, absolutely refractory to the sensual charm of music.

The days, however, went by; the excitement did not subside, and it was at its height the last time La Stilla was to appear on the stage. It was in the superb character of Angelica in “Orlando,” the masterpiece of Arconati, that she was to bid her farewell to the public.

That night San Carlo was but a tenth large enough to hold the people who crowded at its doors and for the most part remained outside. It was feared that there would be a manifestation against Count de Télek, if not while La Stilla was on the stage, at least when the curtain fell on the last act.

The Baron de Gortz had taken his place in his box, and this time Orfanik was again with him.

La Stilla appeared, more agitated than she had ever been. She recovered herself, however; she abandoned herself to her inspiration, and sang with such perfection, such ineffable talent, that the indescribable enthusiasm she excited among the audience rose almost to delirium.

During the performance the young count waited at the wing, impatient, nervous, feverish, cursing the length of the scenes, and angry at the delays provoked by the applause and recalls. Ah! how they hindered him from carrying off from this theatre her who was to be the Countess of Télek; the adored woman he would take far, far away, so far that she would belong but to him, to him alone.

At last came the final most dramatic scene, in which the heroine of Orlando dies. Never had the admirable music of Arconati appeared more impressive, never had La Stilla interpreted it with more impassioned emphasis. All her soul seemed to distil itself through her lips. And yet one would have said that this voice was about to break, for it was to be no longer heard.

At this moment the railing of the Baron de Gortz's box was lowered. Over it there appeared that strange head with the long grizzly hair and the eyes of flame. It showed itself, that ecstatic face, frightful in its pallor, and from the wing Franz saw it in the light for the first time.

La Stilla was then revelling in the full power of that ravishing stretto of the final air, She had just repeated that phrase with the sublime sentiment, —

“Inamorata, mio cuore tremante Vogiio morire.”

Suddenly she stopped.

Baron de Gortz’s face terrified her. An inexplicable terror paralyzed her. She put her hand to her mouth; it reddened with blood. She staggered; she fell —

The audience rose, trembling, bewildered, distracted.

A cry escaped from Baron de Gortz’s box.

Franz rushed on to the stage; he took La Stilla in his arms; he lifted her, he looked at her, he called her.

“Dead I dead!” he cried. She is dead!”

Yes! La Stilla was dead. A blood-vessel had broken. Her song died with her last sigh.

The young count was taken back to his hotel in such a state that his reason was despaired of. He was unable to be present at La Stilla’s funeral, which took place amid an immense crowd of the Neapolitan population.

It was at the cemetery of Campo Santo Nuovo that the singer was buried, and all that could be read on the marble was — ”Stilla.”

The night of the funeral a man went to the Campo Santo Nuovo. There with haggard eyes, bowed head, and lips clenched as if they had been sealed by death, he looked for a long time at the spot where La Stilla lay; and he seemed to listen as if the voice of the great artiste was to be heard for the last time from her grave It was Rodolphe de Gortz.

That very night the Baron de Gortz, accompanied by Orfanik, left Naples, and no one knew what became of him. But the next morning a letter was received by the young count. The letter contained but these words: —

“It is you who have killed her. Woe to you, Count de Télek!

“Rodolphe de Gortz.”

CHAPTER X

SUCH had been this lamentable history.

For a month Franz de Télek's life was in danger. He recognized nobody — not even his man Rotzko. In the height of his fever but one name escaped his lips, which were ready to part with their last breath: it was that of La Stilla.

The young count did not die. The skill of the doctors, the incessant care of Rotzko, together with his own youth and constitution, saved Franz de Télek. His reason emerged uninjured from this terrible struggle. But when memory returned to him, when he recalled the final tragic scene in "Orlando" in which the soul of the artiste had left her, —

"Stilla! my Stilla!" he cried, stretching out his hands as if he were applauding.

As soon as his master could leave his bed, Rotzko persuaded him to leave this accursed town, and allow himself to be carried home to the Castle of Krajowa. But before he left Naples the young count wished to go and pray over the grave of the dead, and bid her a last and eternal farewell.

Rotzko accompanied him to Campo Santo Nuovo.

There Franz threw himself on the cruel ground — he would have torn it up with his finger-nails to bury himself by her side. Rotzko at last managed to get him away from the grave, where he had left all his life and ail his happiness.

A few days afterward, Franz de Télek had return d to Krajowa, to his old family estate. Here he lived for four years in absolute retirement, never leaving the castle. Neither time nor distance could alleviate his grief. He would have forgotten, but it was impossible. The remembrance of La Stilla, vivid as on the first day was bound up with his life, and the wound would close only with death.

At the time our story begins the young count had left the castle for some weeks. What long and pressing arguments Rotzko had had to prevail on his master to abandon the solitude in which he was wasting away! Consolation might be impossible, but an attempt at distraction might at least be made.

A plan of a tour was then decided on, which consisted in first visiting the Transylvanian provinces. Later, Rotzko hoped that the young count would agree to resume the European journey which had been interrupted by the sad events at Naples Franz de Télek had set out for only a short exploration. He and Rotzko had crossed the Wallachian plains up to the imposing mass of the Carpathians; they had been among the Vulkan defiles, and after an ascent of Retyezat and an excursion across the valley of the Maros, they had come for a rest to the village of Werst, to the "King Mathias "inn.

We know the state of affairs when Franz de Télek Arrived, and how he had been informed of the incomprehensible occurrences of which the castle had been the scene. We also know how he had ascertained that the castle belonged to Baron Rodolphe de Gortz.

The effect produced by this name was too apparent for Master Koltz and the other notables not to notice it. And Rotzko would have cheerfully sent to the devil this Master Koltz, who had so inopportunely uttered it, and his stupid stories. Why should some ill-chance have brought Franz de Télek to this very village of Werst, in the neighbourhood of the Castle of the Carpathians!

The young count had become silent. His look, wandering from one to the other, only too clearly indicated the deep trouble of his mind, which he was seeking in vain to calm.

Master Koltz and his friends understood that some mysterious tie must exist between the Count de Télek and the Baron de Gortz; but, inquisitive as they were, they maintained a seemly reserve, and did not seek to take an advantage. Later on they would see what they could do.

A few minutes afterwards every one had left the “King Mathias,” much perplexed at this extraordinary chain of adventures, which foreboded no good to the village.

And now that the young count knew to whom the Castle of the Carpathians belonged, would he keep his promise? If he went to Karlsburg, would he report the matter to the authorities and demand their intervention? That was what the biro, the schoolmaster, Doctor Patak, and others were asking. If he did not do so, Master Koltz had resolved to do so. The police being informed of what had occurred, they would visit the castle, they would see if it were haunted by spirits or inhabited by criminals, for the village could remain no longer under such a state of affairs.

This would, it is true, be quite useless in the opinion of most of the inhabitants. To attack the spirits! The swords of the gendarmes would be broken like glass, and their guns would miss fire each time.

Franz de Télek, left alone in the large room of the “King Mathias,” abandoned himself to the recollections which the name of Baron de Gortz had so unhappily evoked.

After remaining in an armchair for an hour, as if he were quite exhausted, he rose, left the saloon, and went out to the end of the terrace and looked away in the distance.

On the Plesa ridge, bounded by the Orgall plateau, rose the Castle of the Carpathians.

There had lived that strange personage, the frequenter of San Carlo, the man who had inspired such insurmountable terror in the unfortunate La Stilla. But at present the castle was deserted, and Baron de Gortz had not returned to it since he had fled from Naples. None knew what had become of him, and it was possible he had put an end to his existence after the death of the great artiste.

Franz wandered in this way across the field of supposition, knowing not where to stop. On the other hand, the adventure of the forester Nic Deck to a certain extent troubled him, and he would have liked to have unravelled the mystery, if it were only to reassure the people of Werst.

Added to this, the young count had no doubt that it was a band of thieves who had taken refuge in the castle, and he had resolved to keep his promise, and put a stop to the manoeuvres of these sham ghosts by giving information to the police at Karlsburg.

But before taking steps in the matter, Franz resolved to have the most circumstantial details of the affair. For this object the best thing to do was to apply to the young forester in person; and about three o’clock in the afternoon, before returning to the inn, he presented himself at the biro’s house.

Master Koltz showed that ne was much honoured to receive a gentleman like the Count de Télek, this descendant of a noble Roumanian race, to whom the village of Werst would be indebted for the recovery of its peace and prosperity, for then travellers would return to visit the country, and pay the customary tolls, without having to fear the malevolent spirits of the Castle of the Carpathians, etc. etc.

Franz de Télek thanked Master Koltz for his compliments, and asked to be allowed to see Nic Deck if there were no objection.

“None at all, count,” replied the biro. “The gallant Nic is going on as well as possible, and will soon return to his work.”

And turning to his daughter, who had just entered the room, he said, —

“Is that not true, Miriota?”

“May Heaven grant it so, my father!” replied Miriota in an agitated voice.

Franz was charmed by the girl’s graceful greeting. And seeing she was still anxious regarding the state of her betrothed, he hastened to ask her for some explanation on the subject “From what I have heard,” he said, “Nic Deck has not been seriously hurt.”

“No, count,” said Miriota, “and Heaven be praised for it.”

“You have a physician at Werst?”

“Hum!” said Master Koltz in a tone that was not very flattering to the old quarantine man.

“We have Doctor Patak,” replied Miriota.

“He who accompanied Nic Deck to the Castle of the Carpathians?”

“Yes.”

“I should like to see your betrothed for his own sake, and obtain the most precise details of this adventure.”

“He will be glad to give you them, even though it may fatigue him a little.”

“Oh! I will not abuse the opportunity, and I will do nothing that can injure Nic Deck,”

“I know that.”

“When is your marriage to take place?”

“Ina fortnight,” said the biro.

“Then I shall have the pleasure of being present, if Master Koltz will give me an invitation — ”

“Such an honour, count — ”

“In a fortnight, then, it is understood; and I am sure that Nic Deck will be well again as soon as he can take a walk with his good-looking betrothed.”

“God protect him!” replied the girl as she blushed.

And her charming face betrayed such apparent anxiety that Franz asked her the reason.

“Yes, may God protect him!” replied Miriota; “for in endeavouring to enter the castle in spite of the prohibition, Nic has defied the spirits. And who knows if they may not set themselves to injure him all his life — ”

“Oh! as for that,” replied Franz, “we will have it all put straight, I promise you.”

“Nothing will happen to my poor Nic?”

“Nothing; and, thanks to the police, you will be able to visit the castle in a few days, and be quite as safe as in the street at Werst.”

The young count, thinking it inopportune to discuss the question of the supernatural, asked Miriota to show him the way to the forester’s room.

This the girl hastened to do, and then she left him alone with her betrothed.

Nic Deck had been informed of the arrival of the two travellers at the “King Mathias “inn. Seated in an old armchair as large as a sentry-box, he rose to receive his visitor. As he now suffered but little from the paralysis with which he had been momentarily struck, he was sufficiently well to reply to the count’s questions.

“Nic Deck,” said Franz, after a friendly shake of the hand, “I would first ask you if you really believe in the presence of evil spirits at the Castle of the Carpathians?”

“I am compelled to believe it,” replied Nic Deck.

“And it was they who kept you from getting over the castle wall?”

“I have no doubt of it.”

“And why, if you please?”

“Because if they were not spirits, what happened to me would be inexplicable.”

“Will you have the goodness to tell me, without omitting anything, what really did happen?”

“Willingly.”

Nic Deck told his story item by item. He could only confirm the facts which Franz had heard in his conversation with the guests at the “King Mathias “ — facts on which, as we know, the young count put a purely natural interpretation.

In short, the occurrences of this night of adventure could be easily explained if human beings, criminal or otherwise, occupied the castle, and had the machinery capable of producing these phantasmal effects. As to Doctor Patak’s peculiar assertion that he was chained to the ground by some force, it could only be supposed that he had been the sport of some illusion. What was most likely was that his limbs had failed him simply because he was mad with terror, and that Franz declared to the young forester.

“What!” said Nic Deck, “would it be at the moment he wanted to run that his legs would fail the coward? That is hardly likely, you must admit.”

“Well,” continued Franz, “let us admit that his legs were caught in some trap, probably hidden under the grass at the bottom of the ditch.”

“When a trap closes,” said the forester, “it hurts you cruelly, it tears your flesh, and Doctor Patak’s legs have no trace of a wound.”

“Your observation is correct, Nic Deck; but if it be true that the doctor could not get away, it must be that his legs were caught in some snare.”

“Then I will ask you how this snare could open of itself to set the doctor at liberty?”

Franz was too much puzzled to reply.

“But, count, I leave to you all that concerns Doctor Patak. After all, I can only speak of what I know of myself.”

“Yes, let us leave the doctor, and speak of what happened to you, Nic Deck.”

“What happened to me was clear enough. There is no doubt I received a terrible shock, and that in a way that is unnatural.”

“There is no appearance of a wound on your body?” asked Franz.

“None; and yet I was struck with terrible violence.”

“Was it just when you put your hand on the ironwork of the drawbridge?”

“Yes; just as I touched it, I seemed as if I were paralyzed. Fortunately my hand which held the chain did not leave go, and I slipped down into the bottom of the ditch, where the doctor found me senseless.”

Franz shook his head with the air of a man whom these explanations left incredulous.

“You see,” continued Nic Deck, “what I have told you is no dream; and if for eight days I remained full length on the bed, without the use of arms or legs, it is not reasonable to say I must have imagined it all.”

“I do not attempt to do that,” said the count; “it is only too certain you received a brutal shock.”

“Brutal and diabolic,”

“No — and in that we differ, Nic Deck. You believe you were struck by some supernatural being, and I do not believe there are supernatural beings, either good or evil — ”

“Will you then explain what happened to me?”

“I cannot do that yet, Nic Deck; but rest assured all will be explained, and in a most simple manner.”

“May God grant it so!”

“Tell me,” said Franz, “has this castle belonged all along to the Gortz family?”

“Yes; and it belongs to it now, although the last descendant of the family, Baron Rodolphe, disappeared and no one has heard of him since.”

“When did he disappear?”

“About twenty years ago.”

“Twenty years?”

“Yes. One day Baron Rodolphe left the castle, of which the last servant died a few months after his departure; and no one has seen him since.”

“And since then no one has set foot in the castle?”

“No one.”

“And what is thought about him in the neighbourhood?”

“It is supposed that Baron Rodolphe died abroad a short time after he disappeared.”

“Then it is supposed wrong, Nic Deck. The baron is still alive — at least he was so five years ago.”

“He is alive?”

“Yes, in Italy — at Naples.”

“You have seen him?”

“I have seen him?”

“And during the five years?”

“I have heard nothing about him.”

The young forester thought for a moment or so. An idea had occurred to him, an idea he hesitated to formulate. At length he made up his mind, and, raising his head and knitting his brow, he said, —

“It is not supposable that Baron de Gortz has returned to the country with the intention of shutting himself up in the castle?”

“No — it is not supposable, Nic Deck.”

“What object would he have in hiding himself, in never letting anybody come near him?”

“None,” replied Franz de Télek.

And yet this was the thought which had begun to take shape in the mind of the young count. Was it not possible that this personage, whose existence had always been so enigmatic, had taken refuge in the castle after he left Naples? There, thanks to superstitious beliefs skilfully acted upon, would it not be easy for him to live in isolation, to defend himself against every unwelcome search, it being understood that he knew the state of mind that prevailed in the surrounding country?

But yet Franz thought it useless to launch the Werstians on this hypothesis. It would have been necessary to have put them in possession of facts which were too personal to him. Besides, he would have convinced nobody, and that he saw clearly enough when Nic Deck added, —

“If it is Baron Rodolphe who is in the castle, we shall have to believe that Baron Rodolphe is the Chort, for only the Chort could have treated me in that way.”Desirous of not returning over the same ground, Franz changed the course of the conversation. After employing every means to reassure the young forester as to the consequences of his attempt, he made him promise not to renew it. That was not his affair, it was the business of the authorities, and the Karlsburg police would know how to discover the mystery of the Castle of the Carpathians.

The young count then took leave of Nic Deck, recommending him to get well as quickly as possible, so as not to delay his marriage with the fair Miriota, at which he promised to be present.

Absorbed in his reflections, Franz returned to the “King Mathias “and did not go out again that day.

At six o’clock Jonas served his dinner in the large room, when by a praiseworthy feeling of reserve neither Master Koltz nor any of the villagers came to trouble his solitude.

About eight o’clock Rotzko said to the young count, —

“You have no further need of me, master?”

“No, Rotzko.”

“Then I will go and smoke my pipe on the terrace.”“Go, Rotzko, go.”

Lounging in an armchair, Franz again began to think of all that had passed. He was at Naples during the last performance at the San Carlo Theatre. He saw the Baron de Gortz at the moment when, for the first time, this man appeared to him, his head out of the box, his look ardently fixed on the artiste as if he would fascinate her.

Then his thoughts recurred to the letter signed by this strange personage, which accused him, Franz de Télek, of having killed La Stilla.

Lost in his recollections. Franz felt sleep come over him little by little. But he was still in that transition state when one can perceive the least noise, when a surprising phenomenon took place.

It seemed that a voice sweet and modulated made itself heard in this room where Franz was alone, quite alone.

Without knowing whether he dreamt or not, Franz rose and listened.

Yes! It seemed as though a mouth came close to his ear, and invisible lips gave forth the expressive melody of Stefano inspired by these words, —

“Nel giardino de’ mille fiori Andiamo, mio cuore...”

This romance Franz knew. This romance of ineffable sweetness La Stilla had sung in the concert she had given at the San Carlo Theatre before her farewell performance.

Unconsciously Franz abandoned himself to the charm of hearing it once again.

Then the phrase ended, and the voice, gradually growing fainter, died away with the last vibrations of the air.

But Franz roused himself from his torpor. He straightened himself up abruptly. He held his breath to seize some distant echo of this voice which went to his heart.

All was silent within and without. “Her voice!” he murmured. “Yes! it was really her voice — the voice I loved so much.”

Then returning to himself he said, —

“I was asleep, and I dreamed,”

CHAPTER XI

The count awoke at dawn, his mind still troubled with the visions of the night.

In the morning he was to leave the village of Werst on the road to Kolosvar.

After visiting the manufacturing towns of Petroseny and Livadzel, Franz's intention was to stay an entire day at Karlsburg, before stopping some time in the capital of Transylvania. From there the railway would take him across the provinces of Central Hungary, where his journey would end Franz had left the inn, and, walking on the terrace with his field-glass at his eyes, he was examining with deep emotion the outlines of the castle, which the sun was showing up so clearly on the Orgall plateau.

And his reflections bore on this point: — When he reached Karlsburg, would he keep the promise he had made to the people of Werst? Would he inform the police of what had happened at the Castle of the Carpathians?

When the young count had undertaken to restore peace to the village, he had no doubt but that the castle was the refuge of some gang of criminals, or, at least, of people of doubtful repute, who having some interest in not being sought after, had taken steps to prevent any one approaching them.

But since the previous day Franz had been thinking the matter over. A change had come over his thoughts, and he now hesitated.

For five years the last descendant of the family of Gortz, Baron Rodolphe, had disappeared, and what had become of him no one knew. Doubtless rumour had said he was dead, a short time after his departure from Naples. But was that true? What proof had they of his death? Perhaps the Baron de

Gortz was alive; and if he lived, why should he not have returned to the castle of his ancestors? Why should not Orfanik, his only familiar friend, have accompanied him, and why should not this strange physician be the author and manager of these phenomena which caused such terror in the country?

It will be admitted that this hypothesis appeared somewhat plausible; and if Baron Rodolphe de Gortz and Orfanik had taken refuge in the castle, it was natural that they would try and make it unapproachable, so as to live that life of isolation which was in accordance with their habits and characters.

If this were the case, what ought the count to do? Was it desirable that he should interfere in the private affairs of the Baron de Gortz? This he was asking himself, weighing the pros and cons of the question, when Rotzko came to rejoin him on the terrace.

When he bad told him of what he had been thinking, —

“Master,” replied Rotzko, “it is possible that this may be the Baron de Goltz who is giving himself over to every diabolic imagination. Well, if that is so, my advice is not to mix ourselves up with his affairs. The poltroons of Werst will get out of their difficulty in their own way — that is their business, and we have no reason for troubling ourselves about bringing peace to this village.”

“Quite so,” said Franz; “and all things considered, I think you are right, my brave Rotzko.”

“I think so,” said Rotzko simply.

“As to Master Koltz and the others, they now know what to do to finish up with the pretended spirits at the castle.”

“Undoubtedly. All they have to do is to tell the Karlsburg police.”

“We will start after breakfast.”

“All will be ready.”

“But before we return down the valley of the Syl, we will go round towards Plesa.”

“And why?”

“I wish to see this Castle of the Carpathians a little nearer, if possible.”

“For what purpose?”

“Fancy, Rotzko; a mere fancy, which will not delay us half a day.”

Rotzko was much annoyed at this decision, which he looked upon as useless. All it could do would be to recall the memory of the past, which he tried his best to avoid. This time he tried in vain, and he had to yield to his master’s inflexible resolution.

Franz, as if he had become subject to some irresistible influence, felt himself drawn towards the castle. Without his being aware of it, this attraction might be due to the dream in which he had heard the voice of La Stilla murmur the plaintive melody of Stefano.

But had he been dreaming? Yes, that is what he was asking himself now that he remembered that in this same room of the “King Mathias “a voice had already made itself heard — that voice which Nic Deck had so imprudently defied. In the count’s mental condition there was nothing surprising in his forming the plan of going to the castle, to the foot of its wall, without any thought of entering.

Franz de Télek had, of course, no intention of telling the inhabitants of Werst of his journey. These people would doubtless have joined Rotzko in dissuading him from approaching the castle, and he had ordered his man to be silent regarding it. When they saw him descending the village towards the valley of the Syl, everybody imagined they were on their way to Karlsburg. But from the terrace he had remarked that another road skirted the base of Retyezat up to the Vulkan. It would thus be possible to climb the ridge of Plesa towards the castle without passing again through the village, and consequently without being seen by Master Koltz or the others.

About noon, having settled without discussion the somewhat inflated bill which Jonas presented to the accompaniment of his best smile, Franz prepared to leave Werst.

Master Koltz, the fair Miriota, Magister Hermod.

Doctor Patak, the shepherd Frik, and a number of the other inhabitants had come to bid him farewell.

The young forester had even left his room, and it was clear enough would soon be on his legs again — for which the doctor took all the honour to himself.

“I congratulate you, Nic Deck,” said Franz to him, “both you and your betrothed.”

“We are much obliged to you,” said the girl, radiant with happiness.

“May your journey be fortunate!” added the forester.

“Yes — may it be so!” replied Franz, though his forehead was a little clouded.

“Monsieur le Comte,” said Master Koltz, “we beg that you will not forget the information you promised to give at Karlsburg.”

“I will not forget it, Master Koltz,” replied Franz; “but should I be delayed on my journey, you know the very simple means of disembarrassing yourselves of your troublesome neighbours, and the castle will soon inspire no fear among the brave people of Werst.”

“That is easily said,” murmured the magister.

“And easily done,” replied Franz. “Before forty-eight hours, if you like, the police will have settled up with whoever is hiding in the castle.”

“Except in the very probable case that they are spirits,” said the shepherd Frik.

“Even then,” said Franz, slightly shrugging his shoulders.

“Monsieur le Comte,” said Doctor Patak, “if you had accompanied me and Nic Deck, you might not talk about them as you do!”

“I should be astonished if I did not,” replied Franz, “even if, like you, I had been so strangely detained by the feet in the castle ditch.” .

“By the feet — yes, count, or rather by the boots! Unless you suppose that in my state of mind I dreamt — ”

“I suppose nothing,” said Franz, “and will not try to explain what appears inexplicable. But be assured that if the gendarmes come to visit the Caste of the Carpathians, their boots, which are accustomed to discipline, will not take root like yours.”

And with that parting shot at the doctor the count received for the last time the respects of the innkeeper of the “King Mathias “ — so honoured to have had the honour of the honourable Franz de Télek, etc. After a salute to Master Koltz, Nic Deck, his betrothed, and the inhabitants in the road, he made a sign to Rotzko, and both set out at a good pace down the road.

In less than an hour Franz and his man had reached the right bank of the river which flowed round the southern base of Retyezat.

Rotzko had made up his mind to make no observation to his master; it would have been useless to have done so. Accustomed to obey him in military style, if the young count met with some perilous adventure he would know how to get him out of it.

After two hours’ walking Franz and Rotzko stopped for a short rest.

At this place the Wallachian Syl, which had been curving gently towards the right, approached the road by rather a sharp turn. On the other side was the Plesa and the Orgall plateau, at the distance of about a league. Franz then had to leave the Syl if he wished to cross the hill in the direction of the castle.

Evidently this roundabout way, chosen for the purpose of avoiding a return through Werst, must have doubled the distance which separated the castle from the village. Nevertheless it was still broad daylight when Franz and Rotzko reached the crest of the Orgall plateau. The young count would thus have time to see the castle from the outside. Then he could wait until evening before going back towards Werst, and it would be easy to follow the road without being seen. Franz's intention was to pass the night at Livadzel, a little town situated at the confluence of the Syls, and to resume the road to Karlsburg in the morning.

The halt lasted half an hour. Franz, deep in his remembrances, much agitated at the thought that Baron de Gortz had perhaps concealed his existence in this castle, said not a word.

And Rotzko had to make a great effort to keep from saying to him, —

"It is useless to go further, master! Turn your back on this cursed castle and let us be off."

They began to follow the thalweg of the valley; but first they had to cross a thicket in which there was no footpath. Patches of the ground had been deeply cut into, for in the rainy season the Syl frequently overflows, and flows in tumultuous torrents over the ground, which it converts into marsh. This caused some difficulty in the advance, and consequently some delay; and it took an hour to get back on the Vulkan road, which was reached about five o'clock.

The right flank of Plesa is not covered with the forest such as Nic Deck had to cut his way through with an axe; but its difficulties were of another kind. There were heaps of moraines, among which they could not venture without caution; sudden changes of level, deep excavations, great blocks dangerously unsettled on their bases and standing up like the seracs of Alpine regions, all the confusion of the piles of enormous stones which avalanches had precipitated from the summit of the mountain — in fact, a veritable chaos in all its horror.

To climb a slope like this took a good hour’s hard work. It seemed indeed that the Castle of the Carpathians was sufficiently defended by the impracticability of its approaches. And perhaps Rotzko hoped that there would be obstacles it would be impossible to surmount, although there were none.

Beyond the zone of blocks and hollows, the outer crest of the Orgall plateau was eventually reached. From there the outline of the castle was clear enough in the midst of this mournful desert, from which for so many years fear had kept away the natives of the district.

It should be noticed that Franz and Rotzko had approached the castle on its northern face; Nic Deck and Doctor Patak had attacked it on the east by taking the left of the Plesa and leaving the torrent of Nyad to the right. The two directions formed a somewhat wide angle, of which the apex was the central donjon. On the northern side it was impossible to obtain admittance, for there was neither gate nor drawbridge, and the wall, in following the irregularities of the plateau, ran to a considerable height.

But it mattered little that access was impossible on this side, for the young count had no intention of entering within the walls.

It was half-past seven when Franz de Télek and Rotzko stopped at the extreme end of the Orgall plateau. Before them rose this barbaric pile of buildings spread out in the gloom, and of much the same colour as that of the Plesa rocks. To the left, the wall made a sudden bend, flanked by the bastion at the angle. There, on the platform above the crenellated parapet, stood the beech whose twisted branches bore witness to the violent south-westerly breezes at this height.

The shepherd Frik was not deceived; the legend gave but three more years of life to the old castle of the Barons of Gortz.

Franz in silence looked at the mass of buildings dominated by the stumpy donjon in the centre. There, without doubt, under that confused mass, were still hidden vaulted chambers long and sonorous, long daedalian corridors, and redoubts concealed in the ground such as the old Magyar fortresses still possess. No dwelling could have been more fit for the last descendant of the family of Gortz to bury himself in oblivion, of which none knew the secret. And the more the young count thought, the more he clung to the idea that Rodolphe de Gortz had taken refuge in the isolation of his Castle of the Carpathians.

But there was nothing to show that the donjon was inhabited. No smoke rose from its chimneys, no sound came from its closed windows. Nothing — not even the cry of a bird — troubled the silence of the gloomy dwelling.

For some minutes Franz eagerly-gazed at this ring of wall, which once was full of the tumult of festival and the clash of arms. But he said nothing, for his mind was laden with oppressive thoughts and his heart with remembrances.

Rotzko, who respected the young count’s mournful silence, took care to keep away from him, and did not interrupt him by a single remark. But when the sun went down behind the shoulder of the Plesa, and the valley of the two Syls began to be bathed in shadow, he did not hesitate to approach him.

“Master,” he said, “the evening has come. It will soon be eight o’clock.”

Franz did not appear to hear.

a It is time to start, “said Rotzko, “if we are to reach Livadzel before the inns close.”

“Rotzko — in a minute — yes — in a minute I will go with you,” said Franz.

“It will take us quite an hour, master, to return to the hill road, and as the night will then have fallen, we shall run no risk of being seen.”

“A few minutes more,” said Franz, “and we will go down towards the village.”

The count had not moved from the spot he had stopped at when he reached the plateau.

“Do not forget, master,” continued Rotzko, “that in the dark it will be difficult to pass among those rocks. We could hardly do it in broad daylight. You must excuse me if I insist — ”

“Yes — we will go, Rotzko. I am with you,”

And it seemed as though Franz was helplessly detained before the castle, perhaps by one of those secret presentiments which the heart cannot account for. Was he, then, chained to the ground like Doctor Patak said he had been in the ditch at the foot of the curtain? No; his feet were free from every fetter. He could move about on the plateau as he chose, and, if he wished, nothing could have prevented him from going round the walls, skirting the edge of the counterscarp.

Perhaps he would do so?

So thought Rotzko, who said for. the last time, —

“Are you coming, master?”

“Yes, yes!” replied Franz.

And he remained motionless.

The Orgall plateau was already in darkness. The shadow of the hills had spread over the buildings, whose outlines were all vague and misty. Soon nothing would be visible if no light shone from the windows of the donjon.

“Come, master, come!” said Rotzko. And Franz was about to follow him, when on the platform of the bastion, where stood the legendary beech, there appeared an indistinct shape.

Franz stopped, looking at the shape, whose outline gradually became clearer.

It was a woman with her hair undone, her hands stretched out, enveloped in a long white robe.

But this costume, was it not that which La Stilla wore in that final scene in “Orlando “in which Frans de Télek had seen her for the last time?

Yes! And it was La Stilla; motionless, with her arms stretched out towards the young count, her penetrating gaze fixed on him.

“She!” he cried.

And rushing towards the ditch he would have rolled to the foot of the wall if Rotzko had not stopped him.

But the apparition suddenly faded, and La Stilla was hardly visible for a minute.

Little did it matter. A second would have sufficed for Franz to recognize her, and these words escaped him: “She! and alive!”

CHAPTER XII

Was it possible? La Stilla, whom Franz de Télek thought never to see again, had just appeared on the platform of the bastion! He had not been the sport of an illusion, and Rotzko had seen her as he had done! It was indeed the great artiste in her costume of Angelica, such as she had worn in public at her last performance at San Carlo The terrible truth flashed across the young count. This adored woman, who was to have been the Countess of Télek, had been shut up for five years in this castle amid the Transylvanian mountains! She whom Franz had seen fall dead on the stage had survived! While he had been carried almost dying to the hotel, the Baron Rodolphe must have found her and carried her off to the Castle of the Carpathians; and it was an empty coffin that the whole population had followed to the Santo Campo Nuovo of Naples!

It all appeared incredible, inadmissible, contrary to probability; and Franz said so to himself over and over again. Yes! But one thing was indubitable: La Stilla must have been carried off by the Baron de Gortz, for she was in the castle! She was alive, for she had just appeared above the wall! That was an absolute fact.

The young count endeavoured to collect his thoughts, which were centred on one single object: to rescue from Rodolphe de Gortz La Stilla, who for five years had been a prisoner in the Castle of the Carpathians.

“Rotzko,” said Franz in a breathless voice, “listen to me. Understand me at least; it seems as though my brain were going, —

“My master — my dear master!”

“At all costs I must enter this castle this very night.”

“No; to-morrow.”

“This night, I tell you! She is there. She has seen me as I saw her. She is waiting for me —

“Well, I will follow you.”

“No. I will go alone.”

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“But how can you get into the castle when Nic Deck was not able to?”

“I will go in, I tell you.”

“The gate is shut.”

“It will not be so for me. I will seek for and I will find a breach. I will get through it.”

“You do not wish me to accompany you, master? You do not wish it?”

“No! We will separate; and it is by leaving me that you will serve me.”

“Shall I wait for you here?”

“No, Rotzko.”

“Where shall I go, then?”

“To Werst — or rather — no — not to Werst,” replied Franz. “There would be no use in those people knowing. Go down to Vulkan and stay the night there. If you do not see me, leave Vulkan in the morning — that is to say — no — wait a few hours. Then go to Karlsburg. There go to the chief of the police. Tell him all that has happened. Then return with his men. If necessary, storm the castle. Deliver her! Ah! She — alive — in the power of Rodolphe de Gortz!”

And as the young count uttered these broken sentences Rotzko noticed that his excitement increased, and manifested itself in the disordered ideas of one who was no longer master of himself.

“Go, Rotzko!” he cried for the last time.

“You wish me to?”

“I do.”

At this formal injunction Rotzko could but obey; particularly as Franz had begun to leave him, and the darkness hid him, from view.

Rotzko remained a few moments where he was, unable to decide on going away. Then the idea occurred to him that the count’s efforts would be in vain; that he would not be able to enter the castle, nor even to get through the outer wall; that he would be compelled to return to the village of Vulkan — perhaps next morning, perhaps that night. The two of them would then go to Karlsburg, and what neither of them could do alone would be done by the police. They would settle with this Baron de Gortz; they would rescue the unfortunate La Stilla; they would search this Castle of the Carpathians; they would not leave one stone upon another, if necessary, even if all the fiends imaginable united to defend it.

And Rotzko descended the slopes of the Orgall plateau, so as to return to the Vulkan road.

Following the edge of the counterscarp, Franz had already gone round the bastion which flanked, it on the left.

A thousand thoughts crowded in his mind. There was now no doubt about the presence of the Baron de Gortz in the castle, for La Stilla was a prisoner therein. It could only be the baron. La Stilla alive! But how could Franz get to her? How could he get her out of the castle? He did not know, but it must be done — and it would be done. The obstacles which Nic Deck could not overcome he would overcome. It was not curiosity which had brought him among these ruins, it was love for the woman he had found alive, yes, alive! After believing her to be dead, he would rescue her from Rodolphe de Gortz!

Doubtless Franz had said to himself that he could only obtain admission to the interior by means of the south curtain, in which the gate opened opposite the drawbridge; and seeing that it was impossible for him to scale the high walls, he continued to skirt the crest of the Orgall plateau, as soon as he had turned the angle at the bastion.

In broad daylight there would not have been much difficulty in this. At night — the moon was not yet up —

a night all the darker from the mists which thicken on the mountains, it was more dangerous. To the danger of a false step, to the danger of a fall to the bottom of the ditch, was added that of stumbling against the rocks, and perhaps causing them to fall over him.

Franz went on, however, keeping as near as possible to the zigzags of the counterscarp, feeling his way hand and foot, to make sure he was not going astray. Sustained by superhuman strength, he also felt himself guided by an extraordinary instinct that could not deceive him.

Beyond the bastion stretched the south wall, that with which the drawbridge established communication when it was not raised against the gate.

When the bastion was passed, obstacles appeared to multiply. Among the huge rocks which covered the plateau, to follow the counterscarp was impossible, and he had to leave it. Figure a man endeavouring to traverse a field of Carnac in which the dolmens and menhirs were on no plan whatever; and not a mark to guide him, not a ray of light in the dark night.

Franz kept on, here climbing over a rock which barred his way, there creeping among the rocks, his hands torn with the thistles and brushwood, his head skimmed by the pairs of ospreys disturbed in their resting-places and flying off, uttering their horrible scream.

Ah! why did not the chapel bell clang as it had clanged for Nic Deck and the doctor? Why did not the intense light which had enveloped them stream up from between the battlements of the donjon? He would have headed towards the sound, he would have made towards the light, as the sailor towards the siren’s whistle or the lighthouse rays.

No! nothing but deep night bordered his view a few yards away.

This lasted for nearly an hour. When the ground began to slope to the left, Franz felt he was going wrong. Perhaps he had gone lower than the gate? Perhaps he was beyond the drawbridge?

He stopped, stamping his foot and wringing his hand. Which way should he go? Ah! how angry he was when he thought he would have to wait for the daylight! But then he would be seen by the people in the castle, he could not take them by surprise. Rodolphe de Gortz would be on his guard.

It was in the night-time that he must get into the enclosure, and Franz could not find his way in this darkness!

A cry escaped him — a cry of despair: “Stilla!” he cried, “my Stilla!”

Did he think that the prisoner could hear him, that she could reply to him?

And yet a score of times he shouted the name, and the echoes of Plesa repeated it.

Suddenly Franz’s eyes were on the alert. A ray of light pierced the darkness — a dazzling ray, and its source was at a considerable elevation.

“There is the castle — there!” he said, and from its position the light could only come from the central donjon.

In his mental excitement Franz did not hesitate to believe that it was La Stilla who showed him this light. There could be no doubt she had recognized him at the moment he had perceived her through the battlements of the bastion. And now she it was who had given the signal and showed him the road to follow to reach the gate.

Franz went towards the light, which increased with every step he took. As he had gone too far to the left on the plateau, he had to go back about twenty yards to the right, and after a few trials he regained the edge of the counterscarp.

The light shone in his face, and its height showed that it came from one of the windows of the donjon.

Franz was about to find himself faced by the last obstacles — insurmountable, perhaps.

In fact, if the gate were shut, the drawbridge raised, he would have to go down to the foot of the wall, and what would he do then, where it was fifty feet high in front of him?

Franz went on towards the place where the drawbridge would rest if the gate were open.

The drawbridge was down.

Without even stopping to think, Franz rushed on to the bridge and laid his hand on the gate.

The gate opened.

Franz rushed under the dark arch. But before he had taken a dozen steps the drawbridge was raised with a clatter against the gate.

Count Franz de Télek was a prisoner in the Castle of the Carpathians.

CHAPTER XIII.

The country people and travellers who passed backwards or forwards over the Vulkan hill knew only the Castle of the Carpathians from its exterior aspect. At the respectful distance at which fear kept the bravest of Werst and its environs, it presented to the eye but an enormous mass of rocks which they might take to be ruins.

But within the enclosure was the castle as dilapidated as they supposed? No; and within the shelter of its solid walls and buildings, the old feudal fortress could have accommodated quite a garrison.

Vast vaulted halls, deep excavations, innumerable corridors, courts of which the stonework was hidden beneath the lofty fence of herbage, subterranean redoubts to which the light of day never penetrated, narrow staircases contrived in the thickness of the walls, casemates lighted by narrow loopholes in the external wall, a central donjon with three floors of apartments sufficiently habitable, crowned by a crenellated platform; and among the other buildings of the enclosure, interminable corridors capriciously entangled, mounting to the platform of the bastions, diving to the depths of the lower structure, with a few cisterns in which the rain-water was caught, the overflow feeding the torrent of the Nyad, and then long tunnels, not stopped up as was believed, but giving access to the Vulkan road — such was the state of the Castle of the Carpathians, the geometrical plan of which was as complicated as that of the labyrinths of Porsena, of Lemnos, or of Crete.

As Theseus was led on by his love for the daughter of Minos, so was it the power of love, more intense and more irresistible, which had led the count within the intricacies of the castle. Would he find an Ariadne's thread to guide him, as the Greek hero had done?

Franz had had but one thought — to get within the enclosure, and he had got there. But one thing might have struck him, and that was that the drawbridge, which had always been raised, seemed to have been expressly lowered to admit him. Perhaps he might have been uneasy when the gate shut suddenly behind him? But he gave no thought to these things. He was at last in the castle where Rodolphe de Gortz was keeping La Stilla, and he would sacrifice his life to reach her.

The gallery into which Franz had advanced was wide, lofty, and with a vaulted roof, and it was quite dark, and its pavement was broken up, so that it had to be trodden carefully.

Franz took to the left wall, and kept to it, feeling his way along the facing, the efflorescent surface of which rubbed off on his hands. He heard no sound except that of his steps, which echoed in the distance. A draught of warm air with an ancient, frowsy smell swept gently past him, as if there were an opening at the other end of the gallery After passing a stone pillar which served as a buttress in the last angle to the left, Franz found himself in a much narrower corridor. He had only to open his arms to touch the walls.

He went on in this way, his body bent forward, feeling with hands and feet, and endeavouring to discover if the passage were a straight one.

Two hundred yards after passing the buttress Franz felt the wall curving off to the left, to take the exactly opposite direction fifty paces farther on. Did it return to the outer wall, or did it lead to the foot of the donjon?

Franz endeavoured to quicken his advance, but every moment he was hindered by a rise in the ground, against which he stumbled, or by some sharp angle which changed his direction. From time to time he would reach some opening in the wall leading off to lateral ramifications. But all was dark, unfathomable, and it was in vain he sought to make out where he was in this maze in a molehill.

He had to retrace his steps several times on ascertaining that he had gone where there was no thoroughfare. One thing he had to fear was that some badly-fastened trapdoor would give way under his feet and drop him into some underground cell from which he could not escape. And so whenever he touched a piece that sounded hollow he took care to cling to the walls, though he went forward with an ardour that hardly left him time for reflection.

At the same time, as he had neither gone upwards nor downwards, the floor was clearly on the level of the inner courts arranged among the different buildings within the enclosure, and it was possible that the passages ended in the central donjon, perhaps at the foot of the staircase.

Certainly there ought to exist a more direct means of communication between the gate and the central buildings. When the Gortz family had lived there it had not been necessary to enter these interminable passages. A second gate, which faced the gate opposite the first gallery, opened on to the place of arms, in the centre of which rose the keep; but it had been stopped up, and Franz had not been able to see where it had been.

For an hour the young count continued his advance at a venture, listening if he could hear any distant sound, and not daring to shout for La Stilla lest the echoes should carry it to the upper floors of the donjon. He was in no way discouraged, and would go on until strength failed him, or some impassable obstacle compelled him to stop.

But although he took no notice of it, Franz was already nearly exhausted. Since he left Werst he had eaten nothing. He suffered from hunger and thirst. His step was net sure, his legs were failing him. In this warm, humid air his respiration had become irregular, and his heart beat violently.

It was nearly nine o’clock when Franz, putting out his left foot, found no ground to tread upon.

He stooped down and felt there was a step, and then another below it.

It was a staircase.

Did these stairs go down to the foundations of the castle, with no way of exit?

Franz did not hesitate to go down them, and he counted the steps, which went off obliquely from the passage.

Seventy-seven steps were thus descended to the level of a second passage which led to many gloomy windings.

Franz went along these for half an hour, and, tired out, had just stopped when a luminous point appeared several hundred feet in advance.

Whence came this light? Was it merely a natural phenomenon, the hydrogen of some will-o’-the-wisp that had lighted itself at this depth? Was it a lantern carried by one of the inhabitants of the castle?

“Can it be La Stilla?” murmured Franz. And the thought occurred to him that a light had already appeared as if to show him the way into the castle when he was wandering among the rocks on the Orgall plateau. If it had been La Stilla who had shown this light at one of the windows of the donjon, was it not La Stilla who was now trying to guide him amid the sinuosities of these subterranean passages?

Hardly master of himself, Franz bent down and looked ahead without moving. It was more a diffused effulgence than a luminous point that seemed to fill a sort of vault at the end of the passage.

Franz crawled towards it, for his limbs could scarcely support him, and passing through a narrow entrance he fell on the threshold of a crypt.

This crypt was in a good state of preservation, about twelve feet high, and circular in shape. The arches of the vault sprang from the capitals of eight dwarf columns, and met in a hanging boss, in the centre of which was a glass vase filled with a yellowish light.

Facing the entrance, between two of the columns, was another door which was closed, and the large rounded bolts showed where the outer ironwork of the hinges was fastened.

Franz dragged himself up to this second door and tried to move it.

His efforts were in vain.

Some old furniture was in the crypt; there was a bed, or rather a bench, in old heart-of-oak, on which were a few bedclothes; there was a stool with twisted feet; there was a table fixed to the wall with iron tenons. On the table were a large jug full of water, a dish with a piece of cold venison, a thick piece of bread like a sea-biscuit. In a corner murmured a fountain fed by a narrow stream, the overflow of which passed away at the base of one of the columns.

Did not these arrangements show that some guest was expected in this crypt, or rather a prisoner in this prison? Was this prisoner Franz? and had he been lured by a stratagem into the interior of the castle?

In the trouble of his thoughts Franz had no suspicion of this. Exhausted by want and fatigue, he dashed at the food on the table, quenched his thirst with the contents of the jug, and then fell on the rough bed, where a sleep of a few minutes might recruit his strength.

But when he tried to collect his thoughts it seemed as though they escaped like the water he might try to hold in his hand.

Would he then have to wait for daylight to recommence his search? Had his will so far forsaken him that he was no longer master of his acts?

“No,” said he, “I will not wait! To the donjon! I must reach the donjon to-night.”

Suddenly the light in the vase went out, and the crypt was plunged in complete darkness.

Franz would have risen. He could not do so, and his thoughts went to sleep, or rather stopped suddenly, like the hand of a clock when the spring breaks. It was a strange sleep, or rather an overpowering torpor, an absolute annihilation of being, which did not proceed from the soothing of the mind.

How long the sleep lasted Franz did not know. His watch had run down and did not show the time. But the crypt was again bathed in artificial light.

Franz jumped off the bed, and stepped towards the first door, which was open all the time, then towards the second, which was still closed.

He began to reflect, and found he could not do so without difficulty.

If his body had recovered from the fatigues of the night before, he felt his head empty and heavy.

“How long have I slept?” he asked. “Is it night or is it day?”

Within the crypt nothing had changed, except that the light had been renewed, the food replaced, and the jug filled with clear water.

Some one, then, must have been there while Franz was deep in this overpowering slumber? It was known that he was in the depths of the castle! He was in the power of Baron Rodolphe de Gortz! Was he doomed to have no further communication with his fellow-men?

That was not possible, and, besides, he would escape, for he could do so; he would re-traverse the gallery that led to the gate, he would leave the castle.

Leave? He then remembered that the gate was closed behind him.

Well! He would try to reach the outer wall, and by one of the embrasures he would try to slip down into the ditch. Cost what it might, in an hour he would have escaped from the castle.

But La Stilla? Would he give up reaching her? Would he go away without rescuing her from Rodolphe de Gortz?

Yes! And what he could not do single-handed he would do with the help of the police, which Rotzko would bring from Karlsburg to the village of

Werst. They would rush to the assault of the old stronghold, they would search the castle from top to bottom.

Having come to this determination, he decided to put it into execution without losing an instant.

Franz rose, and was walking towards the passage by which he had come, when he heard a noise behind the other door.

It was certainly the sound of footsteps approaching very slowly.

Franz put his ear against the door and, holding his breath, he listened intently.

The steps seemed to come at regular intervals, as if they were going upstairs. No doubt there was a second staircase which connected the crypt with the interior courts.

In readiness for whatever might happen, Franz drew from the sheath his hunting-knife, which he wore at his belt, and gripped it firmly.

If it were to be one of the Baron de Gortz's servants who entered, he would throw himself on him, take away the keys, and make it impossible for him to follow him. And then Franz would rush along this new road and try to reach the donjon.

If it were the Baron de Gortz — and he would recognize him, although he had only seen him once, at the moment La Stilla fell on the stage of San Carlo — he would attack him without mercy.

However, the footsteps stopped on the landing which formed the outer threshold.

Franz did not move, but waited until the door was opened.

It did not open, but a voice of infinite sweetness was heard by the young count.

It was the voice of La Stilla — yes! — her voice a little weakened, her voice which had lost nothing of its inflections, of its inexpressible charm, of its caressing modulations, that admirable instrument of its marvellous art, which seemed to have died with the artiste.

And La Stilla repeated the plaintive melody which he had heard in his dream when he slept in the saloon of the inn at Werst:-

“Nel giardino de mille fiori Andiamo, mio cuore. . .”

The song entered into Franz to the depths of his soul. He breathed it, he drank it like a divine liquor, while La Stilla seemed to invite him to follow her, repeating, —

“Andiamo, mio cuore... andiamo.”

But why did not the door open to let him through? Could he not reach her, clasp her in his arms, take her with him out of the castle?

“Stilla — my Stilla!” he shouted, and he threw himself against the door, which stood firm against his efforts.

Already the song seemed to grow fainter, the footsteps were heard going away.

Franz knelt down, trying to shake the planks, tearing his hands with the ironwork, calling all the time to La Stilla, whose voice had died away in the distance.

It was then that a terrible thought flashed through his mind, “Mad!” he exclaimed. “She is mad, for she did not recognize me and did not reply to me. For five years she has been shut up in this castle, in the power of this man — my poor Stilla — her reason has left her!”

Then he rose, his eyes haggard, his head as if on fire. “I also — I feel that I am going mad!” he repeated; “J am going mad — mad like her!”

He strode backwards and forwards across the crypt like a wild beast in its cage.

“No!” he repeated. “No! I must not go mad. I must get out of this castle. I will go!”

And he went towards the first door. It had just shut silently.

Franz had not noticed it while he was listening to the voice of La Stilla.

He had been imprisoned within the enclosure, and now he was a prisoner within the crypt.

CHAPTER XIV.

FRANZ was thoroughly astounded. As he had feared, the faculty of thinking, of comprehending matters, the intelligence necessary for him to reason on them, was gradually leaving him. The only feeling that remained was the remembrance of La Stilla, the impression of the song he had just heard, and which the echoes of this gloomy crypt no longer repeated.

Had he been the sport of an illusion? No, a thousand times no! It was indeed La Stilla he had just heard, it was indeed her he had seen on the castle bastion.

Then the thought returned to him, the thought that she was deprived of reason, and this horrible blow struck him as if he were about to go out of his mind a second time.

“Mad!” he repeated. “Yes! Mad — for she did not recognize my voice — mad — mad!”

And that seemed to be only too likely. Ah! if he could only rescue her from this place, take her to his Castle of Krajowa, devote himself entirely to her, his care and love would soon restore her to sanity.

So said Franz, a prey to a terrible delirium, and many hours went by before he was himself again.

Then he tried to reason coolly, to collect himself amid the chaos of his thoughts.

“I must get away from here,” he said. “How? As soon as they reopen that door! Yes! During my sleep they come and renew this food. I will wait — I will pretend to sleep.”

A suspicion occurred to him. The water in the jug must contain some soporific substance. If he had been plunged in this heavy sleep, in this complete unconsciousness, the duration of which he did not know, it was because he had drunk this water. Well, he would drink no more of it. He would not even touch the food on the table. Somebody would come soon and then —

Then! What did he know of it? At this moment was the sun mounting towards the zenith or sinking on the horizon? Was it day or night?

Then Franz listened for the sound of footsteps at either door. But no sound reached him. He crept along the walls of the crypt, his head burning, his eyes glaring, his ears throbbing, his breath panting amid this heavy atmosphere, which was only just renewed through the chink around the doors.

Suddenly near the angle of one of the columns on the right he felt a fresher breath than usual reach his lips.

Was there an opening here through which air came in from the outside?

Yes; there was a passage he had not noticed in the shade of the column.

To glide between the wails, to make for an indistinct clearness which seemed to come from above, was what Franz did in an instant.

There was a small court five or six yards across, with the walls a hundred feet high. It seemed to be a well which served as an outer court for this subterranean cell, and gave it a little air and light.

Franz could see it was still day. At the top of the well was a small angle of light which just shone on the upper margin.

The sun had accomplished at least half its diurnal course, for this luminous angle was slowly decreasing.

It must be about five o’clock in the afternoon.

Consequently Franz must have slept for at least forty hours, and he had no doubt this must have been due to a soporific draught. As he and Rotzko had left Werst on the nth of June, this must be the 13th which was about to finish in a few hours.

So humid was the air at the bottom of this court, that Franz breathed it deeply and felt all the better for it. But if he had hoped that an escape was possible up this long stone, tube he was soon undeceived. To try and climb that smooth, lofty wall, was impracticable.

Franz returned to the interior of the crypt. As he could only get out through one of the doorways, he came to see what state they were in.

The first door — that by which he had come — was very solid and very thick, and was kept in its place on the other side by bolts working into iron staples; it was, therefore, useless to try and force it.

The second door — behind which he had heard La Stilla’s voice — did not seem to be so well preserved. The boards were rotten in places, and it might be possible to clear a way through them.

“Yes — this is the way!” said Franz, who had recovered his coolness; “this is the way!”

But he had no time to lose, as it was probable some one would enter the crypt as soon as he was supposed to be asleep under the influence of the soporific draught.

The work went on more quickly than he had expected, The moisture had eaten into the wood around the metal clasp which held the bolts against the embrasure. With his knife Franz managed to get the round part off, working noiselessly, and stopping now and then to listen and make sure that nothing was moving on the other side.

Three hours afterwards the bolts were free and the door opened with a scroop on its hinges.

Franz then returned to the little court so as to breathe a less stifling air.

At this moment the sun no longer shone across the opening of the well, and consequently must have sunk behind Retyezat. The court was in complete darkness. A few stars gleamed above, as if they were seen through the tube of a long telescope. A few small clouds drifted along in the intermittent breath of the night breeze. A peculiar haze in the atmosphere showed that the moon must have risen above the eastern mountains. It was evidently about nine o’clock at night.

Franz went back to the crypt, where he ate some of the food and quenched his thirst from the spring, after throwing away the liquid in the jug. Then, with his knife at his belt, he went out by the door, which he shut behind him.

Arid now would he meet the unfortunate La Stilla wandering in these subterranean galleries? At the thought his heart beat almost ready to burst.

As soon as he had made a few steps he stumbled. As he had thought, there was a flight of stairs, of which he counted the steps; sixty only instead of the seventy-seven he had come down to the threshold of the crypt Consequently he was about eight feet below the level of the ground.

Having nothing better to do than to follow the dark corridor, the sides of which he could touch with his outstretched hands, he hurried on in that direction.

And he went on for half an hour without being stopped by door or railing. But the large number of turns had prevented him from knowing in what direction he was going with regard to the wall which faced the Orgall plateau.

After halting a few minutes to get his breath, Franz continued his advance, and it seemed as though the corridor were to be interminable, when an obstacle stopped him.

This was a wall of bricks.

Tapping it at different heights, he could find no sign of an opening.

This was the only way out from the corridor.

Franz could not help exclaiming. All his hopes were shattered against this obstacle. His knees bent, his legs gave way, and he fell at the foot of the wall.

But just on the ground the wall had a narrow crack in it, and the bricks, being rather loose, shook as he touched them.

“That is the way!” said Franz. “Yes! that is the way!”

And he began to pull out the bricks one by one, when there was a noise of something metallic on the other side.

Franz stopped.

The noise had not ceased, and at the same time a ray of light swept across the hole.

Franz looked through.

It was the old chapel that he saw. To what a lamentable state of dilapidation time and neglect had reduced it! — the roof half fallen in, a few only of the ribs perfect on their swelling columns, two or three pointed arches threatening to fall, a window-frame with flamboyant mullions thrust out of place; here and there a dusty tomb beneath which slept some ancestor of the family of Gortz, and at the end a fragment of an altar with the reredos still showing traces of sculpture; then the remains of the roof still over the apse which had been spared by the storms, and then over the ridge above the entrance the shaking belfry from which hung a rope to the ground — the rope of the bell which occasionally rang to the terror of the people of Werst.

Into this chapel, deserted for so long, open to all the rigours of the Carpathian climate, a man had just entered, holding in his hand a lantern, the brilliant light of which shone full on his face.

Franz instantly recognized him. It was Orfanik, that eccentric individual whom the baron had made his only companion during his sojourn in the large Italian towns, that oddity he had seen along the streets gesticulating and talking to himself, that incomprehensible scientist, that inventor ever in search of some chimera, and who doubtless put all his inventions at the service of Rodolphe de Gortz.

If Franz had retained any doubt as to the presence of the baron at the Castle of the Carpathians, even after the apparition of La Stilla, this doubt was changed to certainty when he saw Orfanik.

What was he going to do in this ruined chapel at this advanced hour of the night?

Franz tried to discover, and this is what he saw.

Orfanik, stooping over the ground, was lifting up a few iron cylinders to which he was attaching a line, which he unrolled from a reel placed in one of the corners of the chapel. And such was the attention he gave to his work, that he would not even have seen the young count if he had been able to get near him.

Ah! why was not the hole Franz had begun to enlarge sufficient to let him pass? He would have entered the chapel, he would have hurled himself on Orfanik, he would have compelled him to lead him to the donjon.

But perhaps it was as well that he could not do so, for if the attempt failed, the Baron de Gortz would have doubtless made him pay with his life for the secrets he had discovered.

A few minutes after the arrival of Orfanik another man entered the chapel.

It was Baron Rodolphe de Gortz. The never-to-be-forgotten physiognomy of this personage had not changed. He did not even seem to have aged, with his pale, long face, which the lantern illuminated from top to bottom, his long grey hair thrown back behind his ears, and his look glittering from the depths of his black orbits.

Rodolphe de Gortz went near to examine the work on which Orfanik was engaged.

And this was the conversation exchanged between the men in short, sharp tones.

CHAPTER XV.

“Is the connection with the chapel finished, Orfanik?”

“I have just done it.”

“Every thing is ready in the casemates of the bastions?”

“Everything.”

“The bastions and chapel are in direct connection with the donjon?”

“They are.”

“And after the instrument has made the current, we shall have time to get away?”

“We shall.”

“Have you made sure that the tunnel on to the Vulkan is clear?”

“It is.”

They were silent for a few minutes while Orfanik took up his lantern and directed its light into the corners of the chapel.

“Ah! my old castle!” exclaimed the baron. “You will cost them dear who would storm your walls.”

And Rodolphe de Gortz pronounced these words in a tone which made the count shudder.

“You have heard what they say at Werst?” the baron asked Orfanik.

“Fifty minutes ago I heard on the wire what they were talking about at the King Mathias.’”

“Is the attack to be to-night?”

“No, not until daybreak.’’

“When did this Rotzko return to Werst?”

“Two hours ago, with the police he brought from Karlsburg.”

“Well! as the castle cannot defend itself,” said the baron, “at least it can crush under its ruins this Franz de Télek and ail his people with him.”

Then, after a few moments he continued, — “And this wire, Orfanik? Will they ever know that it put the castle in communication with the village of Werst?”

“I will destroy it, and they will know nothing about it.”

And now the hour would seem to have come to explain certain phenomena which have occurred in the course of our story, the origin of which ought no longer to be concealed.

At this period — it must be remembered that these events happened in one of the closing years of the nineteenth century — the use of electricity, which has justly been called the soul of the universe, had been brought to its highest perfection. The illustrious Edison and his disciples had finished their work.

Among other electrical instruments, the telephone then worked with such wonderful’ precision that the sounds collected by the diaphragms could be freely heard without the aid of ear-trumpets. What was said, what was sung, what was even whispered, could be heard at any distance, and two persons separated by thousands of leagues could converse as easily as if they were side by side.

For some years Orfanik, the baron's inseparable companion, had been in all that concerns the practical application of electricity an inventor of the first order. But, as we know, his admirable discoveries had not been welcomed as they deserved. The learned world had taken him for a madman, whereas he was a man of genius; and hence the inappeasable hatred which the despised inventor bore to his fellow-men.

It was under these circumstances that Baron de Gortz had met Orfanik, who was then in the depths of misery. He encouraged him in his work, he helped him with money, and finally he engaged him to be his companion on condition that he alone should profit by his inventions.

In fact, these two eccentric personages were made to understand one another, and since their meeting they had never separated, not even when the Baron de Gortz was following La Stilla from town to town in Italy.

While the melomaniac was intoxicating himself with the singing of the incomparable artiste, Orfanik was busy in completing the discoveries made by electricians during these later years, perfecting their adaptations and obtaining the most extraordinary results from them.

After the events which terminated the dramatic career of La Stilla, the baron had disappeared without any one knowing what had become of him. When he left Naples ft was in the Castle of the Carpathians that he had taken refuge, accompanied by Orfanik, who had no hesitation in shutting himself up with him.

When he resolved to bury his existence in this old castle, the baron’s intention was that no inhabitant of the district should suspect his return, and no one try to visit him. We need not say that Orfanik and he had the means of providing liberally for their daily wants; in fact, a secret communication existed with the road over the Vulkan, and by this road an old servant of the baron’s, whom nobody knew, brought in all that was necessary for the existence of Baron Rodolphe and his companion.

In reality what remained of the castle — and particularly the central donjon — was less dilapidated than was believed, and even more habitable than its inmates required. Orfanik, provided with all he wanted for his experiments, busied himself with immense researches in physics and chemistry, and of these he proposed to avail himself in his attempt to keep off unwelcome visitors.

The Baron de Gortz received the propositions with eagerness, and Orfanik built special machinery for spreading terror in the country by producing phenomena which could only be ascribed to diabolic agencies.

But in the first place it was necessary for the Baron de Gortz to be kept informed of what was passing in the nearest village. Was there any means of hearing what its people were talking about without their suspecting anything? Yes, if a telephone communication could be established between the castle and the large saloon of the “King Mathias,” where the notables of Werst were accustomed to meet every evening.

Orfanik managed this very skilfully and very secretly, and in the most simple manner. A copper wire covered with an insulating sheath had one end fastened on the first floor of the donjon and was then laid under the waters of the Nyad up to the village of Werst. This part of the work being accomplished, Orfanik, going himself out as a tourist, came to spend a night at the “King Mathias”, and there connect the wire with the inn saloon. It was easy for him to bring up the end from the bed of the torrent to the height of the back window, which was never opened. He then fixed a telephonic instrument, which was hidden by the thick foliage, and with that connected the cable. As the instrument was ingeniously adapted to emit as well as to receive sound, Baron de Gortz could hear all that was said at the “King Mathias,” and make himself heard whenever he chose.

During the first years the tranquillity of the castle was not troubled. The evil reputation it enjoyed was enough to keep the people of Werst away from it. But one day, that on which our story began, the purchase of the telescope led to the smoke being noticed escaping from the donjon chimney. From that moment interest was reawakened, and we know what happened.

It was then that the telephonic communication proved useful, for the baron and Orfanik could keep themselves posted up in what was passing in the village. It was by the wire that they knew that Nic Deck had undertaken to visit the castle, and by the wire the threatening voice entered the room to endeavour to keep him away. When the young forester persisted in his determination in spite of the menace, the baron resolved to give him such a lesson that he would have no desire to try it again. That night, Orfanik’s machinery, which was always in working order, produced a series of purely physical phenomena intended to carry terror throughout the district; the bell was rung in the old chapel, intense flames were shot forth mingled with sea-salt, giving a spectral appearance to everything; powerful sirens were worked from which the compressed air escaped in terrible groans; diagram outlines of monsters were projected on to the clouds by means of huge reflectors; iron plates were laid about the ditch in communication with electric batteries, and one of these plates caught the doctor by his iron-shod boots, while another had given the forester a shock at the moment he laid his hand on the drawbridge.

And so the baron thought that after the apparition of these prodigies, after the attempt of Nic Deck which had ended so badly, terror would reach its height in the district, and that neither for gold nor silver would any one approach even within two good miles of this Castle of the Carpathians, evidently haunted by supernatural beings.

Rodolphe de Gortz thought himself safe from all unwelcome curiosity when Franz de Télek arrived in the village of Werst.

All that passed between him and Jonas and Master Koltz and the others was immediately known to him along the wire in the Nyad. The baron's hatred of the young count was rekindled by the memory of the events which had occurred at Naples. And not only was Franz de Télek in the village, a few miles from the castle, but there before the notables he was deriding their absurd superstitions, and demolishing that fantastic reputation which protected the Castle of the Carpathians; and he was even undertaking to warn the Karlsburg authorities, so that the police might come and scatter the legends to the winds!

And so the Baron de Gortz resolved to allure Franz de Télek to the castle, and we know by what means he had succeeded. The voice of La Stilla, sent into the inn saloon by means of the telephone, had led the young Count to turn aside from his road to visit the castle; the apparition of the singer on the platform of the bastion had given him an irresistible desire to enter; a light shown at one of the windows of the donjon had guided him to the gate, which was opened to let him in. In this crypt, lighted electrically, in which he had again heard that wonderful voice, and where food was brought him while he was in a lethargic sleep; in that crypt in the depths of the castle, the door of which was closed on him, Franz de Télek was in the power of the Baron de Gortz, and the Baron de Gortz intended he should never get out of it.

Such were the results obtained by this mysterious collaboration between Rodolphe de Gortz and his accomplice Orfanik. But to his extreme disgust, the baron knew that the alarm had been given by Rotzko, who not having followed his master into the castle, had warned the authorities at Karlsburg. A detachment of police had arrived at the village of Werst, and the Baron de Gortz would have a strong force to contend with. How could he and Orfanik defend themselves against a numerous party? The means employed against Nic Deck and Doctor Patak would not be enough, for the police do not believe in diabolic intervention. And so they had resolved to destroy the castle completely, and were only waiting for the moment to act. An electric current had been prepared for firing the charges of dynamite which had been buried in the donjon,- the bastions, and the old chapel, and the arrangement would allow of the baron and his accomplice having time to escape by the tunnel on to the Vulkan road. After the explosion, of which the count and a number of those who had scaled the castle wall would be the victims, the two would get so far away that no trace of them would be discoverable.

What he had just heard had given Franz the explanation of many things that had happened. He now knew that telephonic communication existed between the Castle of the Carpathians and the village of Werst. He also knew that the castle was about to be destroyed in an explosion which would cost him his life and be fatal to the police brought by Rotzko. He knew that the Baron de Gortz and Orfanik would have time to get away, dragging with them the unconscious La Stilla.

Ah! why could not Franz rush into the chapel and throw himself on these men? He would have knocked them down, he would have stopped their injuring any one, he would have prevented the catastrophe.

But what was impossible at the moment might not be so after the baron's departure. When the two had left the chapel Franz would throw himself on their track, pursue them to the castle, and with God's help would settle with them.

The baron and Orfanik were already in the apse. Franz had not lost sight of them. Which way were they going out? Was there a door opening on to the enclosure? or was there some corridor connecting the chapel with the donjon? for it seemed as though all the castle buildings were in communication with each other. It mattered little if the count did not meet with an obstacle he could not surmount.

At this moment a few words were interchanged between Baron de Gortz and Orfanik: —

"There is nothing more to do here?"

"Nothing."

"Then we can leave each other."

"You still intend that I should leave you alone in the castle?"

"Yes, Orfanik; and you get off at once by the tunnel on to the Vulkan road."

"But you?"

"I shall not leave the castle until the last moment."

“It is understood that I am to wait for you at Bistritz?”

“At Bistritz.”

“Remain here, Baron Rodolphe, and remain alone, if that is your wish.”

“Yes — for I wish to hear her — to hear her once again during this last night I shall pass in the Castle of the Carpathians.”

A few moments afterwards the Baron de Gortz and Orfanik had left the chapel.

Although La Stilla’s name had not been mentioned in this conversation, Franz understood; it was of her that Rodolphe de Gortz had just spoken.

CHAPTER XVI.

The catastrophe was imminent. Franz could only prevent it by rendering the baron incapable of executing his plan.

It was then eleven o’clock at night. With no further fear of being discovered, Franz resumed his work. The bricks were easily taken out of the wall, but its thickness was such that half an hour elapsed before the opening was large enough to admit him through.

As soon as he set foot in this chapel, open to all the winds that blew, he felt himself refreshed by the night air. Through the gaps in the roof and window-frames the sky could be seen, with the light clouds driving before the breeze. Here and there were a few stars, which were growing pale in the light of the moon now rising on the horizon.

Franz’s object was to find the door which opened at the end of the chapel, by which the Baron de Gortz and Orfanik had gone out; and, crossing the nave obliquely, he advanced towards the apse.

This was in the darkness where none of the moonlight penetrated, and his foot stumbled against the ruins of the tombs and the fragments fallen from the roof.

At last, at the very end of the apse, behind the reredos, in a dark corner Franz felt a mouldy door yield before his hand.

This door opened on a gallery which apparently traversed the outer wall.

By it the baron and Orfanik had entered the chapel, and by it they had just departed.

As soon as Franz was in the gallery, he again found himself in complete darkness. After winding about a good deal without either a rise or a fall, he was certain that he was now on a level with the interior courts.

Half an hour later the darkness did not seem to be so deep; a kind of half-light glided through several lateral openings in the gallery.

Franz was able to walk faster, and reached a large casemate contrived under the platform of the bastion which flanked the left angle of the outer wall.

This casemate was pierced with narrow loopholes, through which streamed the rays of the moon.

In the opposite wall was an open door.

Franz's first care was to place himself at one of the joopholes so as to breathe the fresh night breeze for a few seconds.

But just as he was moving away he thought he saw two or three shadowy shapes moving at the lower end of the Orgall plateau, which was now full in the moonlight up to the sombre masses of the pine-forest Franz looked again.

A few men were moving about on the plateau just in front of the trees — doubtless the Karlsburg police brought by Rotzko. Had they, then, decided to attack that night in the hope of surprising the occupants of the castle, or were they waiting for daybreak?

It required considerable effort on Franz's part not to shout and call Rotzko, who would have heard and recognized his voice. But the shout might reach the donjon, and before the police had scaled the wall Rodolphe de Gortz would have had time to put his device in action and escape by way of the tunnel.

Franz succeeded in restraining himself and moved away from the loophole. Crossing the casemate, he went out at the other door and continued along the gallery.

Five hundred yards farther on he arrived at the foot of a staircase which rose in the thickness of the walls.

Had he, then, at last arrived at the donjon, in the centre of the place of arms? It seemed so.

But this staircase might not be the principal one giving access to the different floors. It was composed of a series of circular steps, arranged like the thread of a screw, within a dark, narrow cage.

Franz went up quietly, listening but hearing nothing, and after twenty steps reached a landing.

There a door opened on to the terrace which surrounded the donjon at the height of the first floor.

Franz glided along this terrace, and, taking care to keep in shelter behind the parapet, looked out over the Orgall plateau.

Several men were still on the edge of the fir-wood, and there was no sign of their coming nearer the castle.

Resolved to meet the baron before he fled through the tunnel, Franz went round the terrace, and reached another door where the staircase resumed its upward course.

He put his foot on the first step, rested both his hands against the wall, and began to ascend.

All was silent.

The room on the first floor was not inhabited.

Franz hurried on up to the landings which gave access to the higher floors.

When he reached the third landing his foot found no further steps. There the staircase ended at the highest floor of the donjon, that which was crowned by the crenellated parapet from which formerly floated the standard of the Barons of Gortz.

In the wall to the left of the landing there was a door which was shut.

Through the keyhole filtered a ray of light.

Franz listened and heard no sound inside the apartment.

Looking through the keyhole he could see only the left side of the room, which was in a bright light, the rest being in darkness.

Franz gently opened the door.

A spacious apartment occupied the whole of this upper floor. On its circular walls rested a panelled roof, the ribs of which met in a heavy boss in the centre. Thick tapestry with figure subjects covered the walls. Some old furniture, cupboards, sideboards, armchairs, and stools, were scattered about in artistic disorder. At the windows hung thick curtains which prevented any of the light within from shining without. On the floor was a thick woollen carpet on which no footstep made a sound.

The arrangement of the room was at least peculiar, and as he entered it Franz was struck with the contrast between its light and dark portions.

To the right of the door its end was invisible in the deep gloom.

To the left, on the contrary, was a sort of platform, the black draping of which received a powerful light, due to some apparatus of concentration so placed in front of it as to be unseen.

About twelve feet from this platform, from which it was separated by a screen about breast-high, was an ancient, long-backed armchair, which the screen kept in a half-light.

Near the chair was a little table with a cloth on it, and on this was a rectangular box.

This box was about twelve or fifteen inches long and five or six wide, and the cover, encrusted with jewels, was raised, showing that it contained a metallic cylinder.

As he entered the room Franz saw that the armchair was occupied.

Its occupant did not move, but sat with his head leant against the back of the chair, his eyes closed, his right arm extended on the table, his hand resting against the box.

It was Rodolphe de Gortz.

Was it to abandon himself to sleep for a few hours that the baron desired to pass this last night on the upper floor of the donjon?

No; that could not be after what Franz had heard him say to Orfanik.

The Baron de Gortz was alone in this room, and, conformably to the orders he had received, there could be no doubt that Orfanik had already escaped along the tunnel.

And La Stilla? Had not Rodolphe de Gortz said that he would hear her for a last time in this Castle of the Carpathians before it was destroyed by the explosion? And for what other reason would he have come back to this room, where doubtless she came each evening to fascinate him with her song?

Where, then, was La Stilla?

Franz saw her not, heard her not.

After all, what did it matter, now that Rodolphe de Gortz was at his mercy? Franz restrained himself from speaking. But in his present state of excitement, would he not throw himself on this man he hated as he was hated, this man who had carried off La Stilla — La Stilla living and mad — mad for him? Would he not kill him?

Franz stole up stealthily to the armchair. He had but to make a step to seize the baron, and he had already raised his hand —

Suddenly La Stilla appeared.

Franz let his knife fall on the .carpet.

La Stilla was standing on the platform in the full blaze of the light, her hair undone, her arms stretched out, supremely lovely in the white costume of Angelica in “Orlando,” just as she had appeared on the bastion of the castle. Her eyes, fixed on the young count, gazed to the very depths of his soul.

It was impossible that Franz could not be seen by her, and yet she made no gesture to call him to her, she opened not her lips to speak to him. Alas! she was mad.

Franz was about to rush on to the stage, to seize her in his arms, to carry her off.

La Stilla had begun to sing. Without stirring from his chair, Baron de Gortz had leant forward to listen. In the paroxysm of ecstasy, the dilettante breathed her voice as if it were a perfume. Such as he had been at the performances in the theatres of Italy, so was he now in this room, in infinite solitude, at the summit of this donjon which towered over Transylvania!

Yes, La Stilla sang! She sang for him — only for him! It was as though a breath exhaled from her lips, which seemed to remain without a movement But if reason had left her, at least her artist soul remained in its plenitude.

Franz also stood intoxicated with the charm of this voice he had not heard for five long years. He was absorbed in the ardent contemplation of this woman he had thought he should never see again, and who was there, alive, as if some miracle had resuscitated her before his eyes!

And the song she sang, was it not one of those which.

would ever make his heart-strings vibrate? Yes! It was the finale of the tragic scene in “Orlando,” the finale in which the singer’s heart breaks in the final phrase, —

“Inamorata, mio cuore tremante Voglio morire.”

This ineffable phrase. Franz followed note by note And he said to himself that it would not be interrupted as it had been at the San Carlo Theatre! No! It would not die between La Stilla’s lips as it had done at her farewell.

Franz hardly breathed. His whole life was bound up in the music.

A few measures more and it would end in all its incomparable purity.

But the voice began to fail. It seemed as though La Stilla hesitated as she repeated the words of poignant grief, —

“Voglio morire.”

Would she fall on this stage as she had done on the other?

She did not fall, but her song fell silent on the very same note it had done at San Carlo. She uttered a cry, and it was the same cry Franz had heard on that night.

And yet La Stilla still stood there, with her adored look, the look that awoke all the deepest feelings of the young man’s heart.

Franz leapt towards her. He would carry her away from this room, away from this castle.

And he found himself face to face with the baron, who had just risen.

“Franz de Télek!” exclaimed Rodolphe de Gortz. “Franz de Télek, escaped — ”

But Franz did not answer, and, running towards the stage, he cried, —

“Stilla, my dear Stilla! Here I find you — alive!”

“Alive! La Stilla alive!” exclaimed Baron de Gortz.

And the ironical phrase ended in a shout of laughter in which was apparent all the fury of revenge.

“Alive!” continued Rodolphe de Gortz. “Well, then, Franz de Télek, try and take her away from me!”

Franz stretched out his arms to her, whose eyes were ardently fixed on his.

At the same instant Rodolphe stooped, picked up the knife that Franz had let fall, and rushed at the motionless figure.

Franz threw himself on him to turn away the blow with which she was threatened.

He was too late, and the knife struck her to the heart.

And as the blow was given there was a crash of breaking glass, and with the fragments which flew to all parts of the room, La Stilla vanished.

Franz remained as if lifeless. He could not understand. Had he also gone mad?

And then Rodolphe de Gortz cried, —

“La Stilla again escapes, Franz de Télek! But her voice — her voice remains to me! Her voice is mine, mine alone, and will never belong to another.”

Franz would have thrown himself on the baron, but his strength failed him, and he fell unconscious at the foot of the stage.

Rodolphe de Gortz did not even notice the young count. He took the box from the table, he rushed from the room down to the first terrace of the donjon, and was running round it to gain the other door when there was the report of a gun.

It was Rotzko who, from the slope of the counterscarp, had just shot at the Baron de Gortz.

The baron was unhurt, but the bullet shattered the box he held in his arms.

He uttered a terrible cry.

“Her voice — her voice!” he repeated. “Her soul — La Stilla’s soul — it is ruined — ruined — ruined!”

And then with his hair bristling and his hands clenched, he was seen to run along the terrace, shouting, —

“Her voice — her voice! They have taken away from me her voice! Curse them!”

And he disappeared through the door at the moment Rotzko and Nic Deck were, without waiting for the police, striving to scale the wall.

Almost immediately a tremendous explosion shook the whole extent of Plesa. Sheaves of flame sprang to the clouds, and an avalanche of stones fell on the Vulkan road.

Bastions, curtain, donjon, chapel, were nothing but a pile of ruins scattered over the Orgall plateau.

CHAPTER XVII.

IT will not have been forgotten that according to the conversation between the baron and Orfanik, the explosion should only have destroyed the castle after the departure of Rodolphe de Gortz. But at the time the explosion took place it was impossible for the baron to have had time to escape through the tunnel. In the transport of grief, in the folly of despair, unconscious of what he did, had then Rodolphe de Gortz brought on an immediate catastrophe of which he could but be the first victim? After the incomprehensible words which had escaped him when Rotzko's bullet had broken the box he carried, had he intended to bury himself beneath the ruins of the castle?

In any case it was very fortunate that the police, surprised by Rotzko's shot, were at a considerable distance when the explosion shook the ground. Only a few of them were struck by the fragments which fell over the plateau. Rotzko and the forester were alone at the base of the curtain, and it was indeed a miracle that they were not killed by the shower of stones.

The explosion had done its work when Rotzko, Nic Deck, and the police entered the enclosure over the ditch, which had been nearly filled up by the fall of the walls.

Fifty yards within the wall, at the base of the donjon, a body was found among the ruins.

It was that of Rodolphe de Gortz. A few old people of the district — among others Master Koltz — recognized him perfectly.

Rotzko and Nic Deck sought only to discover the young count. As Franz had not appeared in the time arranged with his man, it followed that he had been unable to escape from the castle.

But could Rotzko hope that he had survived, that he was not one of the victims of the catastrophe? And so he cried, and Nic Deck did not know what to do to soothe him.

However, in about half an hour the young count was found on the first floor of the donjon, beneath one of the buttresses, which had saved him from being crushed.

“My master — my poor master!”

“Count — ”

Such were the first words uttered by Rotzko and Nic Deck as they bent over Franz. They believed him dead; he had only fainted.

Franz opened his eyes, but his wandering look did not seem to recognize Rotzko, nor did he hear him.

Nic Deck, who had raised the young count in his arms, spoke to him again, but he made no reply.

The last words of La Stilla’s song alone escaped from his lips, —

“Inamorata — voglio morire.”

Franz de Télek was mad!

CHAPTER XVIII.

As the young count had gone mad, no one would probably have ever heard an explanation of the events of which the Castle of the Carpathians had been the theatre, if it had not been for the revelations which came about in this manner: —

For four days Orfanik had waited as agreed for the baron to meet him at the town of Bistritz. But as he did not appear, he began to wonder if he had perished in the explosion. Urged as much by curiosity as anxiety, he had left the town, gone back towards Werst, and was prowling about the ruins of the castle, when he was arrested by the police, who knew him from the description given by Rotzko.

Once in the chief town of the district, in the presence of the magistrates before whom he had been taken, Orfanik made no difficulty about replying to the questions put to him in the course of the inquiry ordered into the circumstances of this catastrophe.

But it must be confessed that the sad end of the Baron de Gortz seemed in no way to affect this learned egotist and maniac, whose heart was entirely in his inventions.

In the first place, on the urgent demand of Rotzko, Orfanik stated that La Stilla was dead, really dead and — such was his expression — buried, and well buried, for more than five years in the cemetery of Santo Nuovo Campo at Naples.

This statement was not ‘the least astonishing of those provoked by this curious adventure.

If La Stilla were dead, how came it that Franz could hear her voice in the saloon of the inn, see her on the bastion, and listen to her song when he was in the crypt? And how could he have found her alive in the donjon?

The explanation of this apparently inexplicable phenomena was as follows: —

It will be remembered how deep was the baron's despair when the rumour spread that La Stilla had resolved to retire from the stage and become Countess of Télek. The artiste's admirable talent and all his dilettante gratifications would thus escape him. Then it was that Orfanik suggested that by means of the phonograph he should collect the principal airs from the operas she would appear in during her farewell performances at San Carlo. This instrument had reached a high state of perfection at this period, and Orfanik had so improved it that the human voice underwent no change, and lost none of its charm or purity.

The baron accepted Orfanik's offer. Phonographs were successively and secretly introduced into the private box at the theatre during the last weeks of the season; and in this way their cylinders received the cavatinas and romances from the operas and concerts, including the melody from "San Stefano," and the final air from "Orlando," which was interrupted by La Stilla's death.

These were the circumstances under which the baron had shut himself up in the Castle of the Carpathians, and there, each night, he listened to the music given out by the phonograph. And not only did he hear La Stilla as if he were in his box, but — and that would appear absolutely incomprehensible — he saw her as if she were alive, before his eyes.

It was a simple optical illusion.

It will be remembered that Baron de Gortz had obtained a magnificent portrait of the singer. This portrait represented her in the white costume of Angelica in “Orlando,” her magnificent hair in disorder, her arms extended. By means of glasses inclined at a certain angle calculated by Orfanik, when a light was thrown on the portrait placed in front of a glass, La Stilla appeared by reflection as real as if she were alive, and in all the splendour of her beauty. It was by means of this apparatus, taken for the night to the bastion platform, that Rodolphe de Gortz had made her appear when he wished to lure Franz de Télek’s into the castle; and by its means the young count had seen her in the room of the donjon, while her fanatic admirer was in full enjoyment of the voice reproduced by the phonograph.

Such very briefly were the explanations given in much detail, by Orfanik during his examination. And it was with infinite pride that he declared himself the author of these ingenious inventions, which he had brought to the highest pitch of perfection.

But if Orfanik had explained these phenomena, he did not explain why it was that the Baron de Gortz had not had time to escape by the tunnel on to the Vulkan road. When, however, he heard that a bullet had shattered the object Rodolphe de Gortz bore in his hands, he understood how it had happened. This box was the phonographic apparatus containing La Stilla’s last song, that which the baron had wished to hear for the last time in the donjon before destroying it. With its destruction his life was destroyed, and, mad with despair, he had resolved to bury himself under the ruins of his castle.

Baron Rodolphe was buried in the graveyard at Werst with the honours due to the ancient family that ended with him.

The young Count Franz de Télek was taken by Rotzko to the Castle of Krajowa, and there he devoted himself entirely to watching over his master. Orfanik had willingly handed over the phonographs containing the other songs of La Stilla, and when Franz heard the voice of the great artiste, he seemed to listen to them and recover a little of his old intelligence, and it seemed as though his mind were struggling to revive in the memories of the unforgettable past.

In fact, a few months later he recovered his reason, and through him became known what had passed during the last night in the Castle of the Carpathians.

The marriage of the charming Miriota and Nic Deck took place during the week following the catastrophe. After receiving the benediction from the pope of the village of Vulkan, they returned to Werst, where Master Koltz had reserved for them the best room in his house.

But although these different phenomena have been explained in so natural a manner, it must not be imagined that Miriota ceased to believe in their supernatural nature. Nic Deck found reasoning in vain — so did Jonas, who had as many customers as ever at the "King Mathias " — she would not be convinced. And neither would Master Koltz, nor the shepherd Frik, nor Magister Hermod, nor the other inhabitants of Werst; and many years will elapse before they will renounce their superstitious beliefs.

Doctor Patak, who has resumed his customary swagger, is often heard to say, —

"Well, did I not tell you so? Spirits in the castle! Just as if there ever were any spirits!"

But no one listens to him, and he is invariably asked to be silent when his facetiousness exceeds due bounds.

And Magister Hermod continues to base the lessons he gives to the young folk of Werst on the study of the Transylvanian legends; and for many years yet the villagers will believe that spirits from the other world haunt the ruins of the Castle of the Carpathians.

THE END

CLAUDIUS BOMBARNAC

Anonymous translation, 1894

This 1893 adventure novel concerns Claudius Bombarnac, a reporter, who is assigned by the Twentieth Century to cover the travels of the Grand Transasiatic Railway which runs between Uzun Ada, Turkestan and Peking, China. Accompanying him on this journey is an interesting collection of characters, including one who is trying to beat the round the world record and another who is a stowaway.

LE XXe SIÈCLE
CLAUDIUS
BOMBARNAC
PAR
JULES VERNE

An original illustration

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CHAPTER I.

CLAUDIUS BOMBARNAC,

Special Correspondent,

“*Twentieth Century.*”

Tiflis, Transcaucasia.

Such is the address of the telegram I found on the 13th of May when I arrived at Tiflis.

This is what the telegram said:

“As the matters in hand will terminate on the 15th instant Claudius Bombarnac will repair to Uzun Ada, a port on the east coast of the Caspian. There he will take the train by the direct Grand Transasiatic between the European frontier and the capital of the Celestial Empire. He will transmit his impressions in the way of news, interviewing remarkable people on the road, and report the most trivial incidents by letter or telegram as necessity dictates. The *Twentieth Century* trusts to the zeal, intelligence, activity and tact of its correspondent, who can draw on its bankers to any extent he may deem necessary.”

It was the very morning I had arrived at Tiflis with the intention of spending three weeks there in a visit to the Georgian provinces for the benefit of my newspaper, and also, I hoped, for that of its readers.

Here was the unexpected, indeed; the uncertainty of a special correspondent’s life.

At this time the Russian railways had been connected with the line between Poti, Tiflis and Baku. After a long and increasing run through the Southern Russian provinces I had crossed the Caucasus, and imagined I was to have a little rest in the capital of Transcaucasia. And here was the imperious administration of the *Twentieth Century* giving me only half a day’s halt in this town! I had hardly arrived before I was obliged to be off again without unstrapping my portmanteau! But what would you have? We must bow to the exigencies of special correspondence and the modern interview!

But all the same I had been carefully studying this Transcaucasian district, and was well provided with geographic and ethnologic memoranda. Perhaps it may be as well for you to know that the fur cap, in the shape of a turban, which forms the headgear of the mountaineers and cossacks is called a “papakha,” that the overcoat gathered in at the waist, over which the cartridge belt is hung, is called a “tcherkeska” by some and “bechmet” by others! Be prepared to assert that the Georgians and Armenians wear a sugar-loaf hat, that the merchants wear a “touloupa,” a sort of sheepskin cape, that the Kurd and Parsee still wear the “bourka,” a cloak in a material something like plush which is always waterproofed.

And of the headgear of the Georgian ladies, the “tassakravi,” composed of a light ribbon, a woolen veil, or piece of muslin round such lovely faces; and their gowns of startling colors, with the wide open sleeves, their under skirts fitted to the figure, their winter cloak of velvet, trimmed with fur and silver gimp, their summer mantle of white cotton, the “tchadre,” which they tie tight on the neck — all those fashions in fact so carefully entered in my notebook, what shall I say of them?

Learn, then, that their national orchestras are composed of “zournas,” which are shrill flutes; “salamouris,” which are squeaky clarinets; mandolines, with copper strings, twanged with a feather; “tchianouris,” violins, which are played upright; “dimplipitos,” a kind of cymbals which rattle like hail on a window pane.

Know that the “schaska” is a sword hung from a bandolier trimmed with studs and silver embroidery, that the “kindjall” or “kandijar” is a dagger worn in the belt, that the armament of the soldiers of the Caucasus is completed by a long Damascus gun ornamented with bands of chiseled metal.

Know that the “tarantass” is a sort of berline hung on five pieces of rather elastic wood between wheels placed rather wide apart and of moderate height; that this carriage is driven by a “yemtchik,” on the front seat, who has three horses, to whom is added a postilion, the “falétre,” when it is necessary to hire a fourth horse from the “smatritel,” who is the postmaster on the Caucasian roads.

Know, then, that the verst is two-thirds of a mile, that the different nomadic people of the governments of Transcaucasia are composed of Kalmucks, descendants of the Eleuthes, fifteen thousand, Kirghizes of Mussulman origin eight thousand, Koundrof Tartars eleven hundred, Sartof Tartars a hundred and twelve, Nogais eight thousand five hundred, Turkomans nearly four thousand.

And thus, after having so minutely absorbed my Georgia, here was this ukase obliging me to abandon it! And I should not even have time to visit Mount Ararat or publish my impressions of a journey in Transcaucasia, losing a thousand lines of copy at the least, and for which I had at my disposal the 32,000 words of my language actually recognized by the French Academy.

It was hard, but there was no way out of it. And to begin with, at what o’clock did the train for Tiflis start from the Caspian?

The station at Tiflis is the junction of three lines of railway: the western line ending at Poti on the Black Sea, where the passengers land coming from Europe, the eastern line which ends at Baku, where the passengers embark to cross the Caspian, and the line which the Russians have just made for a length of about a hundred miles between Ciscaucasia and Transcaucasia, from Vladikarkaz to Tiflis, crossing the Arkhot range at a height of four thousand five hundred feet, and which connects the Georgian capital with the railways of Southern Russia.

I went to the railway station at a run, and rushed into the departure office.

“When is there a train for Baku?” I asked.

“You are going to Baku?” answered the clerk.

And from his trap-door he gave me one of those looks more military than civil, which are invariably found under the peak of a Muscovite cap.

“I think so,” said I, perhaps a little sharply, “that is, if it is not forbidden to go to Baku.”

“No,” he replied, dryly, “that is, if you are provided with a proper passport.”

“I will have a proper passport,” I replied to this ferocious functionary, who, like all the others in Holy Russia, seemed to me an intensified gendarme.

Then I again asked what time the train left for Baku.

“Six o’clock to-night.”

“And when does it get there?”

“Seven o’clock in the morning.”

“Is that in time to catch the boat for Uzun Ada?”

“In time.”

And the man at the trap-door replied to my salute by a salute of mechanical precision.

The question of passport did not trouble me. The French consul would know how to give me all the references required by the Russian administration.

Six o’clock to-night, and it is already nine o’clock in the morning! Bah! When certain guide books tell you how to explore Paris in two days, Rome in three days, and London in four days, it would be rather curious if I could not do Tiflis in a half day. Either one is a correspondent or one is not!

It goes without saying that my newspaper would not have sent me to Russia, if I could not speak fluently in Russian, English and German. To require a newspaper man to know the few thousand languages which are used to express thought in the five parts of the world would be too much; but with the three languages above named, and French added, one can go far across the two continents. It is true, there is Turkish of which I had picked up a few phrases, and there is Chinese of which I did not understand a single word. But I had no fear of remaining dumb in Turkestan and the

Celestial Empire. There would be interpreters on the road, and I did not expect to lose a detail of my run on the Grand Transasiatic. I knew how to see, and see I would. Why should I hide it from myself? I am one of those who think that everything here below can serve as copy for a newspaper man; that the earth, the moon, the sky, the universe were only made as fitting subjects for newspaper articles, and that my pen was in no fear of a holiday on the road.

Before starting off round Tiflis let us have done with this passport business. Fortunately I had no need for a “poderojnaia,” which was formerly indispensable to whoever traveled in Russia. That was in the time of the couriers, of the post horses, and thanks to its powers that official exeat cleared away all difficulties, assured the most rapid relays, the most amiable civilities from the postilions, the greatest rapidity of transport, and that to such a pitch that a well-recommended traveler could traverse in eight days five hours the two thousand seven hundred versts which separate Tiflis from Petersburg. But what difficulties there were in procuring that passport!

A mere permission to move about would do for to-day, a certificate attesting in a certain way that you are not a murderer or even a political criminal, that you are what is called an honest man, in a civilized country. Thanks to the assistance I received from our consul at Tiflis, I was soon all in due order with the Muscovite authorities.

It was an affair of two hours and two roubles. I then devoted myself entirely, eyes, ears, legs, to the exploration of the Georgian capital, without taking a guide, for guides are a horror to me. It is true that I should have been capable of guiding no matter what stranger, through the mazes of this capital which I had so carefully studied beforehand. That is a natural gift.

Here is what I recognized as I wandered about haphazard: first, there was the “douma,” which is the town hall, where the “golova,” or mayor, resides; if you had done me the honor to accompany me, I would have taken you to the promenade of Krasnoia-Gora on the left bank of the Koura, the Champs Elysées of the place, something like the Tivoli of Copenhagen, or the fair of the Belleville boulevard with its “Katchélis,” delightful seesaws, the artfully managed undulations of which will make you seasick. And everywhere amid the confusion of market booths, the women in holiday costume, moving about with faces uncovered, both Georgians and Armenians, thereby showing that they are Christians.

As to the men, they are Apollos of the Belvedere, not so simply clothed, having the air of princes, and I should like to know if they are not so. Are they not descended from them? But I will genealogize later on. Let us continue our exploration at full stride. A minute lost is ten lines of correspondence, and ten lines of correspondence is — that depends on the generosity of the newspaper and its managers.

Quick to the grand caravanserai. There you will find the caravans from all points of the Asiatic continent. Here is one just coming in, composed of Armenian merchants. There is one going out, formed of traders in Persia and Russian Turkestan. I should like to arrive with one and depart with the other. That is not possible, and I am sorry for it. Since the establishment of the Transasiatic railways, it is not often that you can meet with those interminable and picturesque lines of horsemen, pedestrians, horses, camels, asses, carts. Bah! I have no fear that my journey across Central Asia will fail for want of interest. A special correspondent of the *Twentieth Century* will know how to make it interesting.

Here now are the bazaars with the thousand products of Persia, China, Turkey, Siberia, Mongolia. There is a profusion of the fabrics of Teheran, Shiraz, Kandahar, Kabul, carpets marvelous in weaving and colors, silks, which are not worth as much as those of Lyons.

Will I buy any? No; to embarrass oneself with packages on a trip from the Caspian to the Celestial Empire, never! The little portmanteau I can carry in my hand, the bag slung across my shoulders, and a traveling suit will be enough for me. Linen? I will get it on the road, in English fashion.

Let us stop in front of the famous baths of Tiflis, the thermal waters of which attain a temperature of 60 degrees centigrade. There you will find in use the highest development of massage, the suppling of the spine, the cracking of the joints. I remember what was said by our great Dumas whose peregrinations were never devoid of incidents; he invented them when he wanted them, that genial precursor of high-pressure correspondence! But I have no time to be shampooed, or to be cracked or suppled.

Stop! The Hôtel de France. Where is there not a Hôtel de France? I enter, I order breakfast — a Georgian breakfast watered with a certain Kachelie wine, which is said to never make you drunk, that is, if you do not sniff up as much as you drink in using the large-necked bottles into which you dip your nose before your lips. At least that is the proceeding dear to the natives of Transcaucasia. As to the Russians, who are generally sober, the infusion of tea is enough for them, not without a certain addition of vodka, which is the Muscovite brandy.

I, a Frenchman, and even a Gascon, am content to drink my bottle of Kachelie, as we drank our Château Laffite, in those regretted days, when the sun still distilled it on the hillsides of Pauillac. In truth this Caucasian wine, although rather sour, accompanied by the boiled fowl, known as pilau — has rather a pleasant taste about it.

It is over and paid for. Let us mingle with the sixteen thousand inhabitants of the Georgian capital. Let us lose ourselves in the labyrinth of its streets, among its cosmopolitan population. Many Jews who button their coats from left to right, as they write — the contrary way to the other Aryan peoples. Perhaps the sons of Israel are not masters in this country, as in so many others? That is so, undoubtedly; a local proverb says it takes six Jews to outwit an Armenian, and Armenians are plentiful in these Transcaucasian provinces.

I reach a sandy square, where camels, with their heads out straight, and their feet bent under in front, are sitting in hundreds. They used to be here in thousands, but since the opening of the Transcaspian railway some years ago now, the number of these humped beasts of burden has sensibly diminished. Just compare one of these beasts with a goods truck or a luggage van!

Following the slope of the streets, I come out on the quays by the Koura, the bed of which divides the town into two unequal parts. On each side rise the houses, one above the other, each one looking over the roof of its neighbors. In the neighborhood of the river there is a good deal of trade. There you will find much moving about of vendors of wine, with their goatskins bellying out like balloons, and vendors of water with their buffalo skins, fitted with pipes looking like elephants’ trunks.

Here am I wandering at a venture; but to wander is human, says the collegians of Bordeaux, as they muse on the quays of the Gironde.

“Sir,” says a good little Jew to me, showing me a certain habitation which seems a very ordinary one, “you are a stranger?”

“Quite.”

“Then do not pass this house without stopping a moment to admire it.”

“And why?”

“There lived the famous tenor Satar, who sang the *contre-fa* from his chest. And they paid him for it!”

I told the worthy patriarch that I hoped he would be able to sing a *contre-sol* even better paid for; and I went up the hill to the right of the Koura, so as to have a view of the whole town.

At the top of the hill, on a little open space where a reciter is declaiming with vigorous gestures the verses of Saadi, the adorable Persian poet, I abandon myself to the contemplation of the Transcaucasian capital. What I am doing here, I propose to do again in a fortnight at Pekin. But the pagodas and yamens of the Celestial Empire can wait awhile, here is Tiflis before my eyes; walls of the citadels, belfries of the temples belonging to the different religions, a metropolitan church with its double cross, houses of Russian, Persian, or Armenian construction; a few roofs, but many terraces; a few ornamental frontages, but many balconies and verandas; then two well-marked zones, the lower zone remaining Georgian, the higher zone, more modern, traversed by a long boulevard planted with fine trees, among which is seen the palace of Prince Bariatinsky, a capricious, unexpected marvel of irregularity, which the horizon borders with its grand frontier of mountains.

It is now five o’clock. I have no time to deliver myself in a remunerative torrent of descriptive phrases. Let us hurry off to the railway station.

There is a crowd of Armenians, Georgians, Mingrelians, Tartars, Kurds, Israelites, Russians, from the shores of the Caspian, some taking their tickets — Oh! the Oriental color — direct for Baku, some for intermediate stations.

This time I was completely in order. Neither the clerk with the gendarme’s face, nor the gendarmes themselves could hinder my departure.

I take a ticket for Baku, first class. I go down on the platform to the carriages. According to my custom, I install myself in a comfortable corner. A few travelers follow me while the cosmopolitan populace invade the second and third-class carriages. The doors are shut after the visit of the ticket inspector. A last scream of the whistle announces that the train is about to start.

Suddenly there is a shout — a shout in which anger is mingled with despair, and I catch these words in German:

“Stop! Stop!”

I put down the window and look out.

A fat man, bag in hand, traveling cap on head, his legs embarrassed in the skirts of a huge overcoat, short and breathless. He is late.

The porters try to stop him. Try to stop a bomb in the middle of its trajectory! Once again has right to give place to might.

The Teuton bomb describes a well-calculated curve, and has just fallen into the compartment next to ours, through the door a traveler had obligingly left open.

The train begins to move at the same instant, the engine wheels begin to slip on the rails, then the speed increases.

We are off.

CHAPTER II.

We were three minutes late in starting; it is well to be precise. A special correspondent who is not precise is a geometer who neglects to run out his calculations to the tenth decimal. This delay of three minutes made the German our traveling companion. I have an idea that this good man will furnish me with some copy, but it is only a presentiment.

It is still daylight at six o’clock in the evening in this latitude. I have bought a time-table and I consult it. The map which accompanies it shows me station by station the course of the line between Tiflis and Baku. Not to know the direction taken by the engine, to be ignorant if the train is going northeast or southeast, would be insupportable to me, all the more as when night comes, I shall see nothing, for I cannot see in the dark as if I were an owl or a cat.

My time-table shows me that the railway skirts for a little distance the carriage road between Tiflis and the Caspian, running through Saganlong, Poily, Elisabethpol, Karascal, Aliat, to Baku, along the valley of the Koura. We cannot tolerate a railway which winds about; it must keep to a straight line as much as possible. And that is what the Transgeorgian does.

Among the stations there is one I would have gladly stopped at if I had had time, Elisabethpol. Before I received the telegram from the *Twentieth Century*, I had intended to stay there a week. I had read such attractive descriptions of it, and I had but a five minutes’ stop there, and that between two and three o’clock in the morning! Instead of a town resplendent in the rays of the sun, I could only obtain a view of a vague mass confusedly discoverable in the pale beams of the moon!

Having ended my careful examination of the time-table, I began to examine my traveling companions. There were four of us, and I need scarcely say that we occupied the four corners of the compartment. I had taken the farthest corner facing the engine. At the two opposite angles two travelers were seated facing each other. As soon as they got in they had pulled their caps down on their eyes and wrapped themselves up in their cloaks — evidently they were Georgians as far as I could see. But they belonged to that special and privileged race who sleep on the railway, and they did not wake up until we reached Baku. There was nothing to be got out of those people; the carriage is not a carriage for them, it is a bed.

In front of me was quite a different type with nothing of the Oriental about it; thirty-two to thirty-five years old, face with a reddish beard, very much alive in look, nose like that of a dog standing at point, mouth only too glad to talk, hands free and easy, ready for a shake with anybody; a tall, vigorous, broad-shouldered, powerful man. By the way in which he settled himself and put down his bag, and unrolled his traveling rug of bright-hued tartan, I had recognized the Anglo-Saxon traveler, more accustomed to long journeys by land and sea than to the comforts of his home, if he had a home. He looked like a commercial traveler. I noticed that his jewelry was in profusion; rings on his fingers, pin in his scarf, studs on his cuffs, with photographic views in them, showy trinkets hanging from the watch-chain across his waistcoat. Although he had no earrings and did not wear a ring at his nose I should not have been surprised if he turned out to be an American — probably a Yankee.

That is my business. To find out who are my traveling companions, whence they come, where they go, is that not the duty of a special correspondent in search of interviews? I will begin with my neighbor in front of me. That will not be difficult, I imagine. He is not dreaming or sleeping, or looking out on the landscape lighted by the last rays of the sun. If I am not mistaken he will be just as glad to speak to me as I am to speak to him — and reciprocally.

I will see. But a fear restrains me. Suppose this American — and I am sure he is one — should also be a special, perhaps for the *World* or the *New York Herald*, and suppose he has also been ordered off to do this Grand Asiatic. That would be most annoying! He would be a rival!

My hesitation is prolonged. Shall I speak, shall I not speak? Already night has begun to fall. At last I was about to open my mouth when my companion prevented me.

“You are a Frenchman?” he said in my native tongue.

“Yes, sir,” I replied in his.

Evidently we could understand each other.

The ice was broken, and then question followed on question rather rapidly between us. You know the Oriental proverb:

“A fool asks more questions in an hour than a wise man in a year.”

But as neither my companion nor myself had any pretensions to wisdom we asked away merrily.

“*Wait a bit*,” said my American.

I italicize this phrase because it will recur frequently, like the pull of the rope which gives the impetus to the swing.

“*Wait a bit*! I’ll lay ten to one that you are a reporter!”

“And you would win! Yes. I am a reporter sent by the *Twentieth Century* to do this journey.”

“Going all the way to Pekin?”

“To Pekin.”

“So am I,” replied the Yankee.

And that was what I was afraid of.

“Same trade?” said I indifferently.

“No. You need not excite yourself. We don’t sell the same stuff, sir.”

“Claudius Bombarnac, of Bordeaux, is delighted to be on the same road as — ”

“Fulk Ephrinell, of the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York City, New York, U.S.A.”

And he really added U.S.A.

We were mutually introduced. I a traveler in news, and he a traveler in — In what? That I had to find out.

The conversation continues. Ephrinell, as may be supposed, has been everywhere — and even farther, as he observes. He knows both Americas and almost all Europe. But this is the first time he has set foot in Asia. He talks and talks, and always jerks in *Wait a bit*, with inexhaustible loquacity. Has the Hunson the same properties as the Garonne?

I listen to him for two hours. I have hardly heard the names of the stations yelled out at each stop, Saganlong, Poily, and the others. And I really should have liked to examine the landscape in the soft light of the moon, and made a few notes on the road.

Fortunately my fellow traveler had already crossed these eastern parts of Georgia. He pointed out the spots of interest, the villages, the watercourses, the mountains on the horizon. But I hardly saw them. Confound these railways! You start, you arrive, and you have seen nothing on the road!

“No!” I exclaim, “there is none of the charm about it as there is in traveling by post, in troika, tarantass, with the surprises of the road, the originality of the inns, the confusion when you change horses, the glass of vodka of the yemtchiks — and occasionally the meeting with those honest brigands whose race is nearly extinct.”

“Mr. Bombarnac,” said Ephrinell to me, “are you serious in regretting all those fine things?”

“Quite serious,” I reply. “With the advantages of the straight line of railway we lose the picturesqueness of the curved line, or the broken line of the highways of the past. And, Monsieur Ephrinell, when you read of traveling in Transcaucasia forty years ago, do you not regret it? Shall I see one of those villages inhabited by Cossacks who are soldiers and farmers at one and the same time? Shall I be present at one of those merry-makings which charm the tourist? those djiquitovkas with the men upright on their horses, throwing their swords, discharging their pistols, and escorting you if you are in the company of some high functionary, or a colonel of the Staniza.”

“Undoubtedly we have lost all those fine things,” replies my Yankee. “But, thanks to these iron ribbons which will eventually encircle our globe like a hogshead of cider or a bale of cotton, we can go in thirteen days from Tiflis to Pekin. That is why, if you expect any incidents, to enliven you — ”

“Certainly, Monsieur Ephrinell.”

“Illusions, Mr. Bombarnac! Nothing will happen either to you or me. Wait a bit, I promise you a journey, the most prosaic, the most homely, the flattest — flat as the steppes of Kara Koum, which the Grand Transasiatic traverses in Turkestan, and the plains of the desert of Gobi it crosses in China — ”

“Well, we shall see, for I travel for the pleasure of my readers.”

“And I travel merely for my own business.”

And at this reply the idea recurred to me that Ephrinell would not be quite the traveling companion I had dreamed of. He had goods to sell, I had none to buy. I foresaw that our meeting would not lead to a sufficient intimacy during our long journey. He was one of those Yankees who, as they say, hold a dollar between their teeth, which it is impossible to get away from them, and I should get nothing out of him that was worth having.

And although I knew that he traveled for Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York, I had never heard of the firm. To listen to their representative, it would appear that Strong, Bulbul & Co. ought to be known throughout the world.

But then, how was it that they were unknown to me, a pupil of Chincholle, our master in everything! I was quite at a loss because I had never heard of the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co.

I was about to interrogate Ephrinell on this point, when he said to me:

“Have you ever been in the United States, Mr. Bombarnac?”

“No, Monsieur Ephrinell.”

“You will come to our country some day?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then you will not forget to explore the establishment of Strong, Bulbul & Co.?”

“Explore it?”

“That is the proper word.”

“Good! I shall not fail to do so.”

“You will see one of the most remarkable industrial establishments of the New Continent.”

“I have no doubt of it; but how am I to know it?”

“Wait a bit, Mr. Bombarnac. Imagine a colossal workshop, immense buildings for the mounting and adjusting of the pieces, a steam engine of fifteen hundred horse-power, ventilators making six hundred revolutions a minute, boilers consuming a hundred tons of coals a day, a chimney stack four hundred and fifty feet high, vast outhouses for the storage of our goods, which we send to the five parts of the world, a general manager, two sub-managers, four secretaries, eight under-secretaries, a staff of five hundred clerks and nine hundred workmen, a whole regiment of travelers like your servant, working in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, Australasia, in short, a turnover exceeding annually one hundred million dollars! And all that, Mr. Bombarnac, for making millions of — yes, I said millions — ”

At this moment the train commenced to slow under the action of its automatic brakes, and he stopped.

“Elisabethpol! Elisabethpol!” shout the guard and the porters on the station.

Our conversation is interrupted. I lower the window on my side, and open the door, being desirous of stretching my legs.

Ephrinell did not get out.

Here was I striding along the platform of a very poorly lighted station. A dozen travelers had already left the train. Five or six Georgians were crowding on the steps of the compartments. Ten minutes at Elisabethpol; the timetable allowed us no more.

As soon as the bell begins to ring I return to our carriage, and when I have shut the door I notice that my place is taken. Yes! Facing the American, a lady has installed herself with that Anglo-Saxon coolness which is as unlimited as the infinite. Is she young? Is she old? Is she pretty? Is she plain? The obscurity does not allow me to judge. In any case, my French gallantry prevents me from claiming my corner, and I sit down beside this person who makes no attempt at apology.

Ephrinell seems to be asleep, and that stops my knowing what it is that Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York, manufacture by the million.

The train has started. We have left Elisabethpol behind. What have I seen of this charming town of twenty thousand inhabitants, built on the Gandja-tchaï, a tributary of the Koura, which I had specially worked up before my arrival? Nothing of its brick houses hidden under verdure, nothing of its curious ruins, nothing of its superb mosque built at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Of its admirable plane trees, so sought after by crows and blackbirds, and which maintain a supportable temperature during the excessive heats of summer, I had scarcely seen the higher branches with the moon shining on them. And on the banks of the stream which bears its silvery murmuring waters along the principal street, I had only seen a few houses in little gardens, like small crenelated fortresses. All that remained in my memory would be an indecisive outline, seized in flight from between the steam puffs of our engine. And why are these houses always in a state of defence? Because Elisabethpol is a fortified town exposed to the frequent attacks of the Lesghians of Chirvan, and these mountaineers, according to the best-informed historians, are directly descended from Attila's hordes.

It was nearly midnight. Weariness invited me to sleep, and yet, like a good reporter, I must sleep with one eye and one ear open.

I fall into that sort of slumber provoked by the regular trepidations of a train on the road, mingled with ear-splitting whistles and the grind of the brakes as the speed is slowed, and tumultuous roars as passing trains are met with, besides the names of the stations shouted out during the short stoppages, and the banging of the doors which are opened or shut with metallic sonority.

In this way I heard the shouts of Geran, Varvara, Oudjarry, Kiourdamir, Klourdane, then Karasoul, Navagi. I sat up, but as I no longer occupied the corner from which I had been so cavalierly evicted, it was impossible for me to look through the window.

And then I began to ask what is hidden beneath this mass of veils and wraps and petticoats, which has usurped my place. Is this lady going to be my companion all the way to the terminus of the Grand Transasiatic? Shall I exchange a sympathetic salute with her in the streets of Pekin? And from her my thoughts wander to my companion who is snoring in the corner in a way that would make all the ventilators of Strong, Bulbul & Co. quite jealous. And what is it these big people make? Is it iron bridges, or locomotives, or armor plates, or steam boilers, or mining pumps? From what my American told me, I might find a rival to Creusot or Cokerill or Essen in this formidable establishment in the United States of America. At least unless he has been taking a rise out of me, for he does not seem to be "green," as they say in his country, which means to say that he does not look very much like an idiot, this Ephrinell!

And yet it seems that I must gradually have fallen sound asleep. Withdrawn from exterior influences, I did not even hear the stentorian respiration of the Yankee. The train arrived at Aliat, and stayed there ten minutes without my being aware of it. I am sorry for it, for Aliat is a little seaport, and I should like to have had a first glimpse of the Caspian, and of the countries ravaged by Peter the Great. Two columns of the historico-fantastic might have been made out of that, with the aid of Bouillet and Larousse.

"Baku! Baku!"

The word repeated as the train stopped awoke me.

It was seven o'clock in the morning.

CHAPTER III.

The boat did not start until three o’clock in the afternoon. Those of my companions who intended to cross the Caspian hurried off to the harbor; it being necessary to engage a cabin, or to mark one’s place in the steamer’s saloon.

Ephrinell precipitately left me with these words:

“I have not an instant to lose. I must see about the transport of my baggage.”

“Have you much?”

“Forty-two cases.”

“Forty-two cases!” I exclaimed.

“And I am sorry I have not double as many. Allow me — ”

If he had had a voyage of eight days, instead of one of twenty-four hours, and had to cross the Atlantic instead of the Caspian, he could not have been in a greater hurry.

As you may imagine, the Yankee did not for a moment think of offering his hand to assist our companion in descending from the carriage. I took his place. The lady leaned on my arm and jumped — no, gently put her foot on the ground. My reward was a *thank you, sir*, uttered in a hard, dry, unmistakably British voice.

Thackeray has said somewhere that a well-brought-up Englishwoman is the completest of the works of God on this earth. My only wish is to verify this gallant affirmation in the case of my companion. She has put back her veil. Is she a young woman or an old girl? With these Englishwomen one never knows! Twenty-five years is apparently about her age, she has an Albionesque complexion, a jerky walk, a high dress like an equinoctial tide, no spectacles, although she has eyes of the intense blue which are generally short-sighted. While I bend my back as I bow, she honors me with a nod, which only brings into play the vertebrae of her long neck, and she walks off straight toward the way out.

Probably I shall meet this person again on the steamboat. For my part, I shall not go down to the harbor until it is time to start. I am at Baku: I have half a day to see Baku, and I shall not lose an hour, now that the chances of my wanderings have brought me to Baku.

It is possible that the name may in no way excite the reader's curiosity. But perhaps it may inflame his imagination if I tell him that Baku is the town of the Guebres, the city of the Parsees, the metropolis of the fire-worshippers.

Encircled by a triple girdle of black battlemented walls, the town is built near Cape Apcheron, on the extreme spur of the Caucasian range. But am I in Persia or in Russia? In Russia undoubtedly, for Georgia is a Russian province; but we can still believe we are in Persia, for Baku has retained its Persian physiognomy. I visit a palace of the khans, a pure product of the architecture of the time of Schahriar and Scheherazade, "daughter of the moon," his gifted romancer, a palace in which the delicate sculpture is as fresh as it came from the chisel. Further on rise some slender minarets, and not the bulbous roofs of Moscow the Holy, at the angles of an old mosque, into which one can enter without taking off one's boots. True, the muezzin no longer declaims from it some sonorous verse of the Koran at the hour of prayer. And yet Baku has portions of it which are real Russian in manners and aspect, with their wooden houses without a trace of Oriental color, a railway station of imposing aspect, worthy of a great city in Europe or America, and at the end of one of the roads, a modern harbor, the atmosphere of which is foul with the coal smoke vomited from the steamer funnels.

And, in truth, one asks what they are doing with coal in this town of naphtha. What is the good of coal when the bare and arid soil of Apcheron, which grows only the Pontic absinthium, is so rich in mineral oil? At eighty francs the hundred kilos, it yields naphtha, black or white, which the exigencies of supply will not exhaust for centuries.

A marvelous phenomenon indeed! Do you want a light or a fire? Nothing can be simpler; make a hole in the ground, the gas escapes, and you apply a match. That is a natural gasometer within the reach of all purses.

I should have liked to visit the famous sanctuary of Atesh Gah; but it is twenty-two versts from the town, and time failed me. There burns the eternal fire, kept up for centuries by the Parsee priests from India, who never touch animal food.

This reminds me that I have not yet breakfasted, and as eleven o’clock strikes, I make my way to the restaurant at the railway, where I have no intention of conforming myself to the alimentary code of the Parsees of Atesh Gah.

As I am entering, Ephrinell rushes out.

“Breakfast?” say I.

“I have had it,” he replies.

“And your cases?”

“I have still twenty-nine to get down to the steamer. But, pardon, I have not a moment to lose. When a man represents the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co. who send out every week five thousand cases of their goods — — ”

“Go, go, Monsieur Ephrinell, we will meet on board. By the by, you have not met our traveling companion?”

“What traveling companion?”

“The young lady who took my place in the carriage.”

“Was there a young lady with us?”

“Of course.”

“Well you are the first to tell me so, Mr. Bombarnac. You are the first to tell me so.”

And thereupon the American goes out of the door and disappears. It is to be hoped I shall know before we get to Pekin what it is that Strong, Bulbul & Co. send out in such quantities. Five thousand cases a week — what an output, and what a turnover!

I had soon finished my breakfast and was off again. During my walk I was able to admire a few magnificent Lesghians; these wore the grayish tcherkesse, with the cartridge belts on the chest, the bechmet of bright red silk, the gaiters embroidered with silver, the boots flat, without a heel, the white papak on the head, the long gun on the shoulders, the schaska and kandijar at the belt — in short men of the arsenal as there are men of the orchestra, but of superb aspect and who ought to have a marvelous effect in the processions of the Russian emperor.

It is already two o’clock, and I think I had better get down to the boat. I must call at the railway station, where I have left my light luggage at the cloakroom.

Soon I am off again, bag in one hand, stick in the other, hastening down one of the roads leading to the harbor.

At the break in the wall where access is obtained to the quay, my attention is, I do not know why, attracted by two people walking along together. The man is from thirty to thirty-five years old, the woman from twenty-five to thirty, the man already a grayish brown, with mobile face, lively look, easy walk with a certain swinging of the hips. The woman still a pretty blonde, blue eyes, a rather fresh complexion, her hair frizzed under a cap, a traveling costume which is in good taste neither in its unfashionable cut nor in its glaring color. Evidently a married couple come in the train from Tiflis, and unless I am mistaken they are French.

But although I look at them with curiosity, they take no notice of me. They are too much occupied to see me. In their hands, on their shoulders, they have bags and cushions and wraps and sticks and sunshades and umbrellas. They are carrying every kind of little package you can think of which they do not care to put with the luggage on the steamer. I have a good mind to go and help them. Is it not a happy chance — and a rare one — to meet with French people away from France?

Just as I am walking up to them, Ephrinell appears, drags me away, and I leave the couple behind. It is only a postponement. I will meet them again on the steamboat and make their acquaintance on the voyage.

“Well,” said I to the Yankee, “how are you getting on with your cargo?”

“At this moment, sir, the thirty-seventh case is on the road.”

“And no accident up to now?

“No accident.”

“And what may be in those cases, if you please?

“In those cases? Ah! There is the thirty-seventh!” he exclaimed, and he ran out to meet a truck which had just come onto the quay.

There was a good deal of bustle about, and all the animation of departures and arrivals. Baku is the most frequented and the safest port on the Caspian. Derbent, situated more to the north, cannot keep up with it, and it absorbs almost the entire maritime traffic of this sea, or rather this great lake which has no communication with the neighboring seas. The establishment of Uzun Ada on the opposite coast has doubled the trade which used to pass through Baku. The Transcaspian now open for passengers and goods is the chief commercial route between Europe and Turkestan.

In the near future there will perhaps be a second route along the Persian frontier connecting the South Russian railways with those of British India, and that will save travelers the navigation of the Caspian. And when this vast basin has dried up through evaporation, why should not a railroad be run across its sandy bed, so that trains can run through without transhipment at Baku and Uzun Ada?

While we are waiting for the realization of this desideratum, it is necessary to take the steamboat, and that I am preparing to do in company with many others.

Our steamer is called the *Astara*, of the Caucasus and Mercury Company. She is a big paddle steamer, making three trips a week from coast to coast. She is a very roomy boat, designed to carry a large cargo, and the builders have thought considerably more of the cargo than of the passengers. After all, there is not much to make a fuss about in a day's voyage.

There is a noisy crowd on the quay of people who are going off, and people who have come to see them off, recruited from the cosmopolitan population of Baku. I notice that the travelers are mostly Turkomans, with about a score of Europeans of different nationalities, a few Persians, and two representatives of the Celestial Empire. Evidently their destination is China.
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The *Astara* is loaded up. The hold is not big enough, and a good deal of the cargo has overflowed onto the deck. The stern is reserved for passengers, but from the bridge forward to the topgallant forecastle, there is a heap of cases covered with tarpaulins to protect them from the sea.

There Ephrinell's cases have been put. He has lent a hand with Yankee energy, determined not to lose sight of his valuable property, which is in cubical cases, about two feet on the side, covered with patent leather, carefully strapped, and on which can be read the stenciled words, "Strong, Bulbul & Co. Now York."

"Are all your goods on board?" I asked the American.

"There is the forty-second case just coming," he replied.

And there was the said case on the back of a porter already coming along the gangway.

It seemed to me that the porter was rather tottery, owing perhaps to a lengthy absorption of vodka.

“Wait a bit!” shouted Ephrinell. Then in good Russian, so as to be better understood, he shouted:

“Look out! Look out!”

It is good advice, but it is too late. The porter has just made a false step. The case slips from his shoulders, falls — luckily over the rail of the *Astara* — breaks in two, and a quantity of little packets of paper scatter their contents on the deck.

What a shout of indignation did Ephrinell raise! What a whack with his fist did he administer to the unfortunate porter as he repeated in a voice of despair: “My teeth, my poor teeth!”

And he went down on his knees to gather up his little bits of artificial ivory that were scattered all about, while I could hardly keep from laughing.

Yes! It was teeth which Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York made! It was for manufacturing five thousand cases a week for the five parts of the world that this huge concern existed! It was for supplying the dentists of the old and new worlds; it was for sending teeth as far as China, that their factory required fifteen hundred horse power, and burned a hundred tons of coal a day! That is quite American!

After all, the population of the globe is fourteen hundred million, and as there are thirty-two teeth per inhabitant, that makes forty-five thousand millions; so that if it ever became necessary to replace all the true teeth by false ones, the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co. would not be able to supply them.

But we must leave Ephrinell gathering up the odontological treasures of the forty-second case. The bell is ringing for the last time. All the passengers are aboard. The *Astara* is casting off her warps.

Suddenly there are shouts from the quay. I recognize them as being in German, the same as I had heard at Tiflis when the train was starting for Baku.

It is the same man. He is panting, he runs, he cannot run much farther. The gangway has been drawn ashore, and the steamer is already moving off. How will this late comer get on board?

Luckily there is a rope out astern which still keeps the *Astara* near the quay. The German appears just as two sailors are manoeuvring with the fender. They each give him a hand and help him on board.

Evidently this fat man is an old hand at this sort of thing, and I should not be surprised if he did not arrive at his destination.

However, the *Astara* is under way, her powerful paddles are at work, and we are soon out of the harbor.

About a quarter of a mile out there is a sort of boiling, agitating the surface of the sea, and showing some deep trouble in the waters. I was then near the rail on the starboard quarter, and, smoking my cigar, was looking at the harbor disappearing behind the point round Cape Apcheron, while the range of the Caucasus ran up into the western horizon.

Of my cigar there remained only the end between my lips, and taking a last whiff, I threw it overboard.

In an instant a sheet of flame burst out all round the steamer The boiling came from a submarine spring of naphtha, and the cigar end had set it alight.

Screams arise. The *Astara* rolls amid sheaves of flame; but a movement of the helm steers us away from the flaming spring, and we are out of danger.

The captain comes aft and says to me in a frigid tone:

“That was a foolish thing to do.”

And I reply, as I usually reply under such circumstances:

“Really, captain, I did not know — ”

“You ought always to know, sir!

These words are uttered in a dry, cantankerous tone a few feet away from me.

I turn to see who it is.

It is the Englishwoman who has read me this little lesson.

CHAPTER IV.

I am always suspicious of a traveler’s “impressions.” These impressions are subjective — a word I use because it is the fashion, although I am not quite sure what it means. A cheerful man looks at things cheerfully, a sorrowful man looks at them sorrowfully. Democritus would have found something enchanting about the banks of the Jordan and the shores of the Dead Sea. Heraclitus would have found something disagreeable about the Bay of Naples and the beach of the Bosphorus. I am of a happy nature — you must really pardon me if I am rather egotistic in this history, for it is so seldom that an author’s personality is so mixed up with what he is writing about — like Hugo, Dumas, Lamartine, and so many others. Shakespeare is an exception, and I am not Shakespeare — and, as far as that goes, I am not Lamartine, nor Dumas, nor Hugo.

However, opposed as I am to the doctrines of Schopenhauer and Leopardi, I will admit that the shores of the Caspian did seem rather gloomy and dispiriting. There seemed to be nothing alive on the coast; no vegetation, no birds. There was nothing to make you think you were on a great sea. True, the Caspian is only a lake about eighty feet below the level of the Mediterranean, but this lake is often troubled by violent storms. A ship cannot “get away,” as sailors say: it is only about a hundred leagues wide. The coast is quickly reached eastward or westward, and harbors of refuge are not numerous on either the Asiatic or the European side.

There are a hundred passengers on board the *Astara* — a large number of them Caucasians trading with Turkestan, and who will be with us all the way to the eastern provinces of the Celestial Empire.

For some years now the Transcaspian has been running between Uzun Ada and the Chinese frontier. Even between this part and Samarkand it has no less than sixty-three stations; and it is in this section of the line that most of the passengers will alight. I need not worry about them, and I will lose no time in studying them. Suppose one of them proves interesting, I may pump him and peg away at him, and just at the critical moment he will get out.

No! All my attention I must devote to those who are going through with me. I have already secured Ephrinell, and perhaps that charming Englishwoman, who seems to me to be going to Pekin. I shall meet with other traveling companions at Uzun Ada. With regard to the French couple, there is nothing more at present, but the passage of the Caspian will not be accomplished before I know something about them. There are also these two Chinamen who are evidently going to China. If I only knew a hundred words of the “Kouan-hoa,” which is the language spoken in the Celestial Empire, I might perhaps make something out of these curious guys. What I really want is some personage with a story, some mysterious hero traveling *incognito*, a lord or a bandit. I must not forget my trade as a reporter of occurrences and an interviewer of mankind — at so much a line and well selected. He who makes a good choice has a good chance.

I go down the stairs to the saloon aft. There is not a place vacant. The cabins are already occupied by the passengers who are afraid of the pitching and rolling. They went to bed as soon as they came on board, and they will not get up until the boat is alongside the wharf at Uzun Ada. The cabins being full, other travelers have installed themselves on the couches, amid a lot of little packages, and they will not move from there.

As I am going to pass the night on deck, I return up the cabin stairs. The American is there, just finishing the repacking of his case.

“Would you believe it!” he exclaims, “that that drunken moujik actually asked me for something to drink?”

“I hope you have lost nothing, Monsieur Ephrinell?” I reply.

“No; fortunately.”

“May I ask how many teeth you are importing into China in those cases?”

“Eighteen hundred thousand, without counting the wisdom teeth!”

And Ephrinell began to laugh at this little joke, which he fired off on several other occasions during the voyage. I left him and went onto the bridge between the paddle boxes.

It is a beautiful night, with the northerly wind beginning to freshen. In the offing, long, greenish streaks are sweeping over the surface of the sea. It is possible that the night may be rougher than we expect. In the forepart of the steamer are many passengers, Turkomans in rags, Kirghizes wrapped up to the eyes, moujiks in emigrant costume — poor fellows, in fact, stretched on the spare spars, against the sides, and along the tarpaulins. They are almost all smoking or nibbling at the provisions they have brought for the voyage. The others are trying to sleep and forget their fatigue, and perhaps their hunger.

It occurs to me to take a stroll among these groups. I am like a hunter beating the brushwood before getting into the hiding place. And I go among this heap of packages, looking them over as if I were a custom house officer.

A rather large deal case, covered with a tarpaulin, attracts my attention. It measures about a yard and a half in height, and a yard in width and depth. It has been placed here with the care required by these words in Russian, written on the side, “Glass — Fragile — Keep from damp,” and then directions, “Top — Bottom,” which have been respected. And then there is the address, “Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, Petchili, China.”

This Zinca Klork — her name showed it — ought to be a Roumanian, and she was taking advantage of this through train on the Grand Transasiatic to get her glass forwarded. Was this an article in request at the shops of the Middle Kingdom? How otherwise could the fair Celestials admire their almond eyes and their elaborate hair?

The bell rang and announced the six-o’clock dinner. The dining-room is forward. I went down to it, and found it already occupied by some forty people.

Ephrinell had installed himself nearly in the middle. There was a vacant seat near him; he beckoned to me to occupy it, and I hastened to take possession.

Was it by chance? I know not; but the Englishwoman was seated on Ephrinell’s left and talking to him. He introduced me.

“Miss Horatia Bluett,” he said.

Opposite I saw the French couple conscientiously studying the bill of fare.

At the other end of the table, close to where the food came from — and where the people got served first — was the German passenger, a man strongly built and with a ruddy face, fair hair, reddish beard, clumsy hands, and a very long nose which reminded one of the proboscidean feature of the plantigrades. He had that peculiar look of the officers of the Landsturm threatened with premature obesity.

“He is not late this time,” said I to Ephrinell.

“The dinner hour is never forgotten in the German Empire!” replied the American.

“Do you know that German’s name?”

“Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer.”

“And with that name is he going to Pekin?”

“To Pekin, like that Russian major who is sitting near the captain of the *Astara*.”

I looked at the man indicated. He was about fifty years of age, of true Muscovite type, beard and hair turning gray, face prepossessing. I knew Russian: he ought to know French. Perhaps he was the fellow traveler of whom I had dreamed.

“You said he was a major, Mr. Ephrinell?”

“Yes, a doctor in the Russian army, and they call him Major Noltitz.”

Evidently the American was some distance ahead of me, and yet he was not a reporter by profession.

As the rolling was not yet very great, we could dine in comfort. Ephrinell chatted with Miss Horatia Bluett, and I understood that there was an understanding between these two perfectly Anglo-Saxon natures.

In fact, one was a traveler in teeth and the other was a traveler in hair. Miss Horatia Bluett represented an important firm in London, Messrs. Holmes-Holme, to whom the Celestial Empire annually exports two millions of female heads of hair. She was going to Pekin on account of the said firm, to open an office as a center for the collection of the Chinese hair crop. It seemed a promising enterprise, as the secret society of the Blue Lotus was agitating for the abolition of the pigtail, which is the emblem of the servitude of the Chinese to the Manchu Tartars. “Come,” thought I, “if China sends her hair to England, America sends her teeth: that is a capital exchange, and everything is for the best.”

We had been at the table for a quarter of an hour, and nothing had happened. The traveler with the smooth complexion and his blonde companion seemed to listen to us when we spoke in French. It evidently pleased them, and they were already showing an inclination to join in our talk. I was not mistaken, then; they are compatriots, but of what class?

At this moment the *Astara* gave a lurch. The plates rattled on the table; the covers slipped; the glasses upset some of their contents; the hanging lamps swung out of the vertical — or rather our seats and the table moved in accordance with the roll of the ship. It is a curious effect, when one is sailor enough to bear it without alarm.

“Eh!” said the American; “here is the good old Caspian shaking her skin.”

“Are you subject to seasickness?” I asked.

“No more than a porpoise,” said he. “Are you ever seasick?” he continued to his neighbor.

“Never,” said Miss Horatia Bluett.

On the other side of the table there was an interchange of a few words in French.

“You are not unwell, Madame Caterna?”

“No, Adolphe, not yet; but if this continues, I am afraid — ”

“Well, Caroline, we had better go on deck. The wind has hauled a point to the eastward, and the *Astara* will soon be sticking her nose in the feathers.”

His way of expressing himself shows that “Monsieur Caterna” — if that was his name — was a sailor, or ought to have been one. That explains the way he rolls his hips as he walks.

The pitching now becomes very violent. The majority of the company cannot stand it. About thirty of the passengers have left the table for the deck. I hope the fresh air will do them good. We are now only a dozen in the dining room, including the captain, with whom Major Noltitz is quietly conversing. Ephrinell and Miss Bluett seem to be thoroughly accustomed to these inevitable incidents of navigation. The German baron drinks and eats as if he had taken up his quarters in some bier-halle at Munich, or Frankfort, holding his knife in his right hand, his fork in his left, and making up little heaps of meat, which he salts and peppers and covers with sauce, and then inserts under his hairy lip on the point of his knife. Fie! What behavior! And yet he gets on splendidly, and neither rolling nor pitching makes him lose a mouthful of food or drink.

A little way off are the two Celestials, whom I watch with curiosity.

One is a young man of distinguished bearing, about twenty-five years old, of pleasant physiognomy, in spite of his yellow skin and his narrow eyes. A few years spent in Europe have evidently Europeanized his manners and even his dress. His mustache is silky, his eye is intelligent his hair is much more French than Chinese. He seems to me a nice fellow, of a cheerful temperament, who would not ascend the “Tower of Regret,” as the Chinese have it, oftener than he could help.

His companion, on the contrary, whom he always appears to be making fun of, is of the type of the true porcelain doll, with the moving head; he is from fifty to fifty-five years old, like a monkey in the face, the top of his head half shaven, the pigtail down his back, the traditional costume, frock, vest, belt, baggy trousers, many-colored slippers; a China vase of the Green family. He, however, could hold out no longer, and after a tremendous pitch, accompanied by a long rattle of the crockery, he got up and hurried on deck. And as he did so, the younger Chinaman shouted after him, “Cornaro! Cornaro!” at the same time holding out a little volume he had left on the table.

What was the meaning of this Italian word in an Oriental mouth? Did the Chinaman speak the language of Boccaccio? The *Twentieth Century* ought to know, and it would know.

Madame Caterna arose, very pale, and Monsieur Caterna, a model husband, followed her on deck.

The dinner over, leaving Ephrinell and Miss Bluett to talk of brokerages and prices current, I went for a stroll on the poop of the *Astara*. Night had nearly closed in. The hurrying clouds, driven from the eastward, draped in deep folds the higher zones of the sky, with here and there a few stars peeping through. The wind was rising. The white light of the steamer clicked as it swung on the foremast. The red and green lights rolled with the ship, and projected their long colored rays onto the troubled waters.

I met Ephrinell, Miss Horatia Bluett having retired to her cabin; he was going down into the saloon to find a comfortable corner on one of the couches. I wished him good night, and he left me after gratifying me with a similar wish.

As for me, I will wrap myself in my rug and lie down in a corner of the deck, and sleep like a sailor during his watch below.

It is only eight o’clock. I light my cigar, and with my legs wide apart, to assure my stability as the ship rolled, I begin to walk up and down the deck. The deck is already abandoned by the first-class passengers, and I am almost alone. On the bridge is the mate, pacing backward and forward, and watching the course he has given to the man at the wheel, who is close to him. The paddles are impetuously beating into the sea, and now and then breaking into thunder, as one or the other of the wheels runs wild, as the rolling lifts it clear of the water. A thick smoke rises from the funnel, which occasionally belches forth a shower of sparks.

At nine o’clock the night is very dark. I try to make out some steamer’s lights in the distance, but in vain, for the Caspian has not many ships on it. I can hear only the cry of the sea birds, gulls and scoters, who are abandoning themselves to the caprices of the wind.

During my promenade, one thought besets me: is the voyage to end without my getting anything out of it as copy for my journal? My instructions made me responsible for producing something, and surely not without reason. What? Not an adventure from Tiflis to Pekin? Evidently that could only be my fault! And I resolved to do everything to avoid such a misfortune.

It is half-past ten when I sit down on one of the seats in the stern of the *Astara*. But with this increasing wind it is impossible for me to remain there. I rise, therefore, and make my way forward. Under the bridge, between the paddle boxes, the wind is so strong that I seek shelter among the packages covered by the tarpaulin. Stretched on one of the boxes, wrapped in my rug, with my head resting against the tarpaulin, I shall soon be asleep.

After some time, I do not exactly know how much, I am awakened by a curious noise. Whence comes this noise? I listen more attentively. It seems as though some one is snoring close to my ear.

“That is some steerage passenger,” I think. “He has got under the tarpaulin between the cases, and he will not do so badly in his improvised cabin.”

By the light which filters down from the lower part of the binnacle, I see nothing.

I listen again. The noise has ceased.

I look about. There is no one on this part of the deck, for the second-class passengers are all forward.

Then I must have been dreaming, and I resume my position and try again to sleep.

This time there is no mistake. The snoring has begun again, and I am sure it is coming from the case against which I am leaning my head.

“Goodness!” I say. “There must be an animal in here!”

An animal? What? A dog? A cat? Why have they hidden a domestic animal in this case? Is it a wild animal? A panther, a tiger, a lion?

Now I am off on the trail! It must be a wild animal on its way from some menagerie to some sultan of Central Asia. This case is a cage, and if the cage opens, if the animal springs out onto the deck — here is an incident, here is something worth chronicling; and here I am with my professional enthusiasm running mad. I must know at all costs to whom this wild beast is being sent; is it going to Uzon Ada, or is it going to China? The address ought to be on the case.

I light a wax vesta, and as I am sheltered from the wind, the flame keeps upright.

By its light what do I read?

The case containing the wild beast is the very one with the address:

“*Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, China.*”

Fragile, my wild beast! *Keep from damp*, my lion! Quite so! But for what does Miss Zinca Klork, this pretty — for the Roumanian ought to be pretty, and she is certainly a Roumanian — for what does she want a wild beast sent in this way?

Let us think about it and be reasonable. This animal, whatever it may be, must eat and drink. From the time it starts from Uzon Ada it will take eleven days to cross Asia, and reach the capital of the Celestial Empire. Well, what do they give it to drink, what do they give it to eat, if he is not going to get out of his cage, if he is going to be shut up during the whole of the journey? The officials of the Grand Transasiatic will be no more careful in their attentions to the said wild beast than if he were a glass, for he is described as such; and he will die of inanition!

All these things sent my brain whirling. My thoughts bewildered me. “Is it a lovely dream that dazes me, or am I awake?” as Margaret says in Faust, more lyrically than dramatically. To resist is impossible. I have a two-pound weight on each eyelid. I lay down along by the tarpaulin; my rug wraps me more closely, and I fall into a deep sleep.

How long have I slept? Perhaps for three or four hours. One thing is certain, and that is that it is not yet daylight when I awake.

I rub my eyes, I rise, I go and lean against the rail.

The *Astara* is not so lively, for the wind has shifted to the northeast.

The night is cold. I warm myself by walking about briskly for half an hour. I think no more of my wild beast. Suddenly remembrance returns to me. Should I not call the attention of the stationmaster to this disquieting case? But that is no business of mine. We shall see before we start.

I look at my watch. It is only three o’clock in the morning. I will go back to my place. And I do so with my head against the side of the case. I shut my eyes.

Suddenly there is a new sound. This time I am not mistaken. A half-stifled sneeze shakes the side of the case. Never did an animal sneeze like that!

Is it possible? A human being is hidden in this case and is being fraudulently carried by the Grand Transasiatic to the pretty Roumanian! But is it a man or a woman? It seems as though the sneeze had a masculine sound about it.

It is impossible to sleep now. How long the day is coming! How eager I am to examine this box! I wanted incidents — well! and here is one, and if I do not get five lines out of this — —

The eastern horizon grows brighter. The clouds in the zenith are the first to color. The sun appears at last all watery with the mists of the sea.

I look; it is indeed the case addressed to Pekin. I notice that certain holes are pierced here and there, by which the air inside can be renewed. Perhaps two eyes are looking through these holes, watching what is going on outside? Do not be indiscreet!

At breakfast gather all the passengers whom the sea has not affected: the young Chinaman, Major Noltitz, Ephrinell, Miss Bluett, Monsieur Caterna, the Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer, and seven or eight other passengers. I am careful not to let the American into the secret of the case. He would be guilty of some indiscretion, and then good-by to my news par!

About noon the land is reported to the eastward, a low, yellowish land, with no rocky margin, but a few sandhills in the neighborhood of Krasnovodsk.

In an hour we are in sight of Uzun Ada, and twenty-seven minutes afterward we set foot in Asia.

CHAPTER V.

Travelers used to land at Mikhailov, a little port at the end of the Transcaspian line; but ships of moderate tonnage hardly had water enough there to come alongside. On this account, General Annenkof, the creator of the new railway, the eminent engineer whose name will frequently recur in my narrative, was led to found Uzun Ada, and thereby considerably shorten the crossing of the Caspian. The station was built in three months, and it was opened on the 8th of May, 1886.

Fortunately I had read the account given by Boulangier, the engineer, relating to the prodigious work of General Annenkof, so that I shall not be so very much abroad during the railway journey between Uzun Ada and Samarkand, and, besides, I trust to Major Noltitz, who knows all about the matter. I have a presentiment that we shall become good friends, and in spite of the proverb which says, “Though your friend be of honey do not lick him!” I intend to “lick” my companion often enough for the benefit of my readers.

We often hear of the extraordinary rapidity with which the Americans have thrown their railroads across the plains of the Far West. But the Russians are in no whit behind them, if even they have not surpassed them in rapidity as well as in industrial audacity.

People are fully acquainted with the adventurous campaign of General Skobeleff against the Turkomans, a campaign of which the building of the railway assured the definite success. Since then the political state of Central Asia has been entirely changed, and Turkestan is merely a province of Asiatic Russia, extending to the frontiers of the Chinese Empire. And already Chinese Turkestan is very visibly submitting to the Muscovite influence which the vertiginous heights of the Pamir plateau have not been able to check in its civilizing march.

I was about to cross the countries which were formerly ravaged by Tamerlane and Genghis Khan, those fabulous countries of which the Russians in 1886 possessed six hundred and fifteen thousand square kilometres, with thirteen hundred thousand inhabitants. The southern part of this region now forms the Transcaspian province, divided into six districts, Fort Alexandrovski, Krasnovodsk, Askhabad, Karibent, Merv, Pendjeh, governed by Muscovite colonels or lieutenant-colonels.

As may be imagined, it hardly takes an hour to see Uzun Ada, the name of which means Long Island. It is almost a town, but a modern town, traced with a square, drawn with a line or a large carpet of yellow sand. No monuments, no memories, bridges of planks, houses of wood, to which comfort is beginning to add a few mansions in stone. One can see what this, first station of the Transcaspian will be like in fifty years; a great city after having been a great railway station.

Do not think that there are no hotels. Among others there is the Hôtel du Czar, which has a good table, good rooms and good beds. But the question of beds has no interest for me. As the train starts at four o'clock this afternoon, to begin with, I must telegraph to the *Twentieth Century,* by the Caspian cable, that I am at my post at the Uzun Ada station. That done, I can see if I can pick up anything worth reporting.

Nothing is more simple. It consists in opening an account with those of my companions with whom I may have to do during the journey. That is my custom, I always find it answers, and while waiting for the unknown, I write down the known in my pocketbook, with a number to distinguish each:

1. Fulk Ephrinell, American.

2. Miss Horatia Bluett, English.

3. Major Noltitz, Russian.

4. Monsieur Caterna, French.

5. Madame Caterna, French.

6. Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer, German.

As to the Chinese, they will have a number later on, when I have made up my mind about them. As to the individual in the box, I intend to enter into communication with him, or her, and to be of assistance in that quarter if I can do so without betraying the secret.

The train is already marshaled in the station. It is composed of first and second-class cars, a restaurant car and two baggage vans. These cars are painted of a light color, an excellent precaution against the heat and against the cold. For in the Central Asian provinces the temperature ranges between fifty degrees centigrade above zero and twenty below, and in a range of seventy degrees it is only prudent to minimize the effects.

These cars are in a convenient manner joined together by gangways, on the American plan. Instead of being shut up in a compartment, the traveler strolls about along the whole length of the train. There is room to pass between the stuffed seats, and in the front and rear of each car are the platforms united by the gangways. This facility of communication assures the security of the train.

Our engine has a bogie on four small wheels, and is thus able to negotiate the sharpest curves; a tender with water and fuel; then come a front van, three first-class cars with twenty-four places each, a restaurant car with pantry and kitchen, four second-class cars and a rear van; in all twelve vehicles, counting in the locomotive and tender. The first class cars are provided with dressing rooms, and their seats, by very simple mechanism, are convertible into beds, which, in fact, are indispensable for long journeys. The second-class travelers are not so comfortably treated, and besides, they have to bring their victuals with them, unless they prefer to take their meals at the stations. There are not many, however, who travel the complete journey between the Caspian and the eastern provinces of China — that is to say about six thousand kilometres. Most of them go to the principal towns and villages of Russian Turkestan, which have been reached by the Transcaspian Railway for some years, and which up to the Chinese frontier has a length of over 1,360 miles.

This Grand Transasiatic has only been open six weeks and the company is as yet only running two trains a week. All has gone well up to the present; but I ought to add the significant detail that the railway men carry a supply of revolvers to arm the passengers with if necessary. This is a wise precaution in crossing the Chinese deserts, where an attack on the train is not improbable.

I believe the company are doing their best to ensure the punctuality of their trains; but the Chinese section is managed by Celestials, and who knows what has been the past life of those people? Will they not be more intent on the security of their dividends than of their passengers?

As I wait for the departure I stroll about on the platform, looking through the windows of the cars, which have no doors along the sides, the entrances being at the ends.

Everything is new; the engine is as bright as it can be, the carriages are brilliant in their new paint, their springs have not begun to give with wear, and their wheels run true on the rails. Then there is the rolling stock with which we are going to cross a continent. There is no railway as long as this — not even in America. The Canadian line measures five thousand kilometres, the Central Union, five thousand two hundred and sixty, the Santa Fe line, four thousand eight hundred and seventy-five, the Atlantic Pacific, five thousand six hundred and thirty, the Northern Pacific, six thousand two hundred and fifty. There is only one line which will be longer when it is finished, and that is the Grand Transsiberian, from the Urals to Vladivostock, which will measure six thousand five hundred kilometres.

Between Tiflis and Pekin our journey will not last more than thirteen days, from Uzun Ada it will only last eleven. The train will only stop at the smaller stations to take in fuel and water. At the chief towns like Merv, Bokhara, Samarkand, Tashkend, Kachgar, Kokhand, Sou Tcheou, Lan Tcheou, Tai Youan, it will stop a few hours — and that will enable me to do these towns in reporter style.

Of course, the same driver and stoker will not take us through. They will be relieved every six hours. Russians will take us up to the frontier of Turkestan, and Chinese will take us on through China.

But there is one representative of the company who will not leave his post, and that is Popof, our head guard, a true Russian of soldierly bearing, hairy and bearded, with a folded overcoat and a Muscovite cap. I intend to talk a good deal with this gallant fellow, although he is not very talkative. If he does not despise a glass of vodka, opportunity offered, he may have a good deal to say to me; for ten years he has been on the Transcaspian between

Uzun Ada and the Pamirs, and during the last month he has been all along the line to Pekin.

I call him No. 7 in my notebook, and I hope he will give me information enough. I only want a few incidents of the journey, just a few little incidents worthy of the *Twentieth Century.*

Among the passengers I see on the platform are a few Jews, recognizable more by their faces than their attire. Formerly, in Central Asia, they could only wear the "toppe," a sort of round cap, and a plain rope belt, without any silk ornamentation — under pain of death. And I am told that they could ride on asses in certain towns and walk on foot in others. Now they wear the oriental turban and roll in their carriages if their purse allows of it. Who would hinder them now they are subjects of the White Czar, Russian citizens, rejoicing in civil and political rights equal to those of their Turkoman compatriots?

There are a few Tadjiks of Persian origin, the handsomest men you can imagine. They have booked for Merv, or Bokhara, or Samarkand, or Tachkend, or Kokhand, and will not pass the Russo-Chinese frontier. As a rule they are second-class passengers. Among the first-class passengers I noticed a few Usbegs of the ordinary type, with retreating foreheads and prominent cheek bones, and brown complexions, who were the lords of the country, and from whose families come the emirs and khans of Central Asia.

But are there not any Europeans in this Grand Transasiatic train? It must be confessed that I can only count five or six. There are a few commercial travelers from South Russia, and one of those inevitable gentlemen from the United Kingdom, who are inevitably to be found on the railways and steamboats. It is still necessary to obtain permission to travel on the

Transcaspian, permission which the Russian administration does not willingly accord to an Englishman; but this man has apparently been able to get one.

And he seems to me to be worth notice. He is tall and thin, and looks quite the fifty years that his gray hairs proclaim him to be. His characteristic expression is one of haughtiness, or rather disdain, composed in equal parts of love of all things English and contempt for all things that are not. This type is occasionally so insupportable, even to his compatriots, that Dickens, Thackeray and others have often made fun of it. How he turned up his nose at the station at Uzun Ada, at the train, at the men, at the car in which he had secured a seat by placing in it his traveling bag! Let us call him No. 8 in my pocketbook.

There seem to be no personages of importance. That is a pity. If only the Emperor of Russia, on one side, or the Son of Heaven, on the other, were to enter the train to meet officially on the frontier of the two empires, what festivities there would be, what grandeur, what descriptions, what copy for letters and telegrams!

It occurs to me to have a look at the mysterious box. Has it not a right to be so called? Yes, certainly. I must really find out where it has been put and how to get at it easily.

The front van is already full of Ephrinell’s baggage. It does not open at the side, but in front and behind, like the cars. It is also furnished with a platform and a gangway. An interior passage allows the guard to go through it to reach the tender and locomotive if necessary. Popof’s little cabin is on the platform of the first car, in the left-hand corner. At night it will be easy for me to visit the van, for it is only shut in by the doors at the ends of the passage arranged between the packages. If this van is reserved for luggage registered through to China, the luggage for the Turkestan stations ought to be in the van at the rear.

When I arrived the famous box was still on the platform.

In looking at it closely I observe that airholes have been bored on each of its sides, and that on one side it has two panels, one of which can be made to slide on the other from the inside. And I am led to think that the prisoner has had it made so in order that he can, if necessary, leave his prison — probably during the night.

Just now the porters are beginning to lift the box. I have the satisfaction of seeing that they attend to the directions inscribed on it. It is placed, with great care, near the entrance to the van, on the left, the side with the panels outward, as if it were the door of a cupboard. And is not the box a cupboard? A cupboard I propose to open?

It remains to be seen if the guard in charge of the luggage is to remain in this van. No. I find that his post is just outside it.

“There it is, all right!” said one of the porters, looking to see that the case was as it should be, top where top should be, and so on.

“There is no fear of its moving,” said another porter; “the glass will reach Pekin all right, unless the train runs off the metals.”

“Or it does not run into anything,” said the other; “and that remains to be seen.”

They were right — these good fellows — it remained to be seen — and it would be seen.

The American came up to me and took a last look at his stock of incisors, molars and canines, with a repetition of his invariable “Wait a bit.”

“You know, Monsieur Bombarnac,” he said to me, “that the passengers are going to dine at the Hôtel du Czar before the departure of the train. It is time now. Will you come with me?”

“I follow you.”

And we entered the dining room. All my numbers are there: 1, Ephrinell, taking his place as usual by the side of 2, Miss Horatia Bluett. The French couple, 4 and 5, are also side by side. Number 3, that is Major Noltitz, is seated in front of numbers 9 and 10, the two Chinese to whom I have just given numbers in my notebook. As to the fat German, number 6, he has already got his long nose into his soup plate. I see also that the Guard Popol, number 7, has his place at the foot of the table. The other passengers, Europeans and Asiatics, are installed, *passim* with the evident intention of doing justice to the repast.

Ah! I forgot my number 8, the disdainful gentleman whose name I don’t yet know, and who seems determined to find the Russian cookery inferior to the English.

I also notice with what attention Monsieur Caterna looks after his wife, and encourages her to make up for the time lost when she was unwell on board the *Astara*. He keeps her glass filled, he chooses the best pieces for her, etc.

“What a good thing it is,” I hear him say, “that we are not to leeward of the Teuton, for there would be nothing left for us!”

He is to windward of him — that is to say, the dishes reach him before they get to the baron, which, however, does not prevent his clearing them without shame.

The observation, in sea language, made me smile, and Caterna, noticing it, gave me a wink with a slight movement of the shoulder toward the baron.

It is evident that these French people are not of high distinction, they do not belong to the upper circles; but they are good people, I will answer for it, and when we have to rub shoulders with compatriots, we must not be too particular in Turkestan.

The dinner ends ten minutes before the time fixed for our departure. The bell rings and we all make a move for the train, the engine of which is blowing off steam.

Mentally, I offer a last prayer to the God of reporters and ask him not to spare me adventures. Then, after satisfying myself that all my numbers are in the first-class cars, so that I can keep an eye on them, I take my place.

The Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer — what an interminable name — is not behindhand this time. On the contrary, it is the train this time which is five minutes late in starting; and the German has begun to complain, to chafe and to swear, and threatens to sue the company for damages. Ten thousand roubles — not a penny less! — if it causes him to fail. Fail in what, considering that he is going to Pekin?

At length the last shriek of the whistle cleaves the air, the cars begin to move, and a loud cheer salutes the departure of the Grand Transasiatic express.

CHAPTER VI.

The ideas of a man on horseback are different to those which occur to him when he is on foot. The difference is even more noticeable when he is on the railway. The association of his thoughts, the character of his reflections are all affected by the speed of the train. They “roll” in his head, as he rolls in his car. And so it comes about that I am in a particularly lively mood, desirous of observing, greedy of instruction, and that at a speed of thirty-one miles an hour. That is the rate at which we are to travel through Turkestan, and when we reach the Celestial Empire we shall have to be content with eighteen.

That is what I have just ascertained by consulting my time-table, which I bought at the station. It is accompanied by a long slip map, folded and refolded on itself, which shows the whole length of the line between the Caspian and the eastern coast of China. I study, then, my Transasiatic, on leaving Uzun Ada, just as I studied my Transgeorgian when I left Tiflis.

The gauge of the line is about sixty-three inches — as is usual on the Russian lines, which are thus about four inches wider than those of other European countries. It is said, with regard to this, that the Germans have made a great number of axles of this length, in case they have to invade Russia. I should like to think that the Russians have taken the same precautions in the no less probable event of their having to invade Germany.

On either side of the line are long sandhills, between which the train runs out from Uzun Ada; when it reaches the arm of the sea which separates Long Island from the continent, it crosses an embankment about 1,200 yards long, edged with masses of rock to protect it against the violence of the waves.

We have already passed several stations without stopping, among others Mikhailov, a league from Uzun Ada. Now they are from ten to eleven miles apart. Those I have seen, as yet, look like villas, with balustrades and Italian roofs, which has a curious effect in Turkestan and the neighborhood of Persia. The desert extends up to the neighborhood of Uzun Ada, and the railway stations form so many little oases, made by the hand of man. It is man, in fact, who has planted these slender, sea-green poplars, which give so little shade; it is man who, at great expense, has brought here the water whose refreshing jets fall back into an elegant vase. Without these hydraulic works there would not be a tree, not a corner of green in these oases. They are the nurses of the line, and dry-nurses are of no use to locomotives.

The truth is that I have never seen such a bare, arid country, so clear of vegetation; and it extends for one hundred and fifty miles from Uzun Ada. When General Annenkof commenced his works at Mikhailov, he was obliged to distil the water from the Caspian Sea, as if he were on board ship. But if water is necessary to produce steam, coal is necessary to vaporize the water. The readers of the *Twentieth Century* will ask how are the furnaces fed in a country in which there is neither coal nor wood? Are there stores of these things at the principal stations of the Transcaspian? Not at all. They have simply put in practice an idea which occurred to our great chemist, Sainte-Claire Deville, when first petroleum was used in France. The furnaces are fed, by the aid of a pulverizing apparatus, with the residue produced from the distillation of the naphtha, which Baku and Derbent produce in such inexhaustible quantities. At certain stations on the line there are vast reservoirs of this combustible mineral, from which the tenders are filled, and it is burned in specially adapted fireboxes. In a similar way naphtha is used on the steamboats on the Volga and the other affluents of the Caspian.

I repeat, the country is not particularly varied. The ground is nearly flat in the sandy districts, and quite flat in the alluvial plains, where the brackish water stagnates in pools. Nothing could be better for a line of railway. There are no cuttings, no embankments, no viaducts, no works of art — to use a term dear to engineers, very "dear," I should say. Here and there are a few wooden bridges from two hundred to three hundred feet long. Under such circumstances the cost per kilometre of the Transcaspian did not exceed seventy-five thousand francs.

The monotony of the journey would only be broken on the vast oases of Merv, Bokhara and Samarkand.

But let us busy ourselves with the passengers, as we can do all the more easily from our being able to walk from one end to the other of the train. With a little imagination we can make ourselves believe we are in a sort of traveling village, and I am just going to take a run down main street.

Remember that the engine and tender are followed by the van at the angle of which is placed the mysterious case, and that Popof's compartment is in the left-hand corner of the platform of the first car.

Inside this car I notice a few Sarthes of tall figure and haughty face, draped in their long robes of bright colors, from beneath which appear the braided leather boots. They have splendid eyes, a superb beard, arched nose, and you would take them for real lords, provided we ignore the word Sarthe, which means a pedlar, and these were going evidently to Tachkend, where these pedlars swarm.

In this car the two Chinese have taken their places, opposite each other. The young Celestial looks out of window. The old one — Ta-lao-ye, that is to say, a person well advanced in years — is incessantly turning over the pages of his book. This volume, a small 32mo, looks like our *Annuaire du Bureau des Longitudes,* and is covered in plush, like a breviary, and when it is shut its covers are kept in place by an elastic band. What astonishes me is that the proprietor of this little book does not seem to read it from right to left. Is it not written in Chinese characters? We must see into this!

On two adjoining seats are Ephrinell and Miss Horatia Bluett. Their talk is of nothing but figures. I don’t know if the practical American murmurs at the ear of the practical Englishwoman the adorable verse which made the heart of Lydia palpitate:

“Nee tecum possum vivere sine te,”

but I do know that Ephrinell can very well live without me. I have been quite right in not reckoning on his company to charm away the tedium of the journey. The Yankee has completely “left” me — that is the word — for this angular daughter of Albion.

I reach the platform. I cross the gangway and I am at the door of the second car.

In the right-hand corner is Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer. His long nose — this Teuton is as short-sighted as a mole — rubs the lines of the book he reads. The book is the timetable. The impatient traveler is ascertaining if the train passes the stations at the stated time. Whenever it is behind there are new recriminations and menaces against the Grand Transasiatic Company.

In this car there are also the Caternas, who have made themselves quite comfortable. In his cheery way, the husband is talking with a good deal of gesticulation, sometimes touching his wife’s hands, sometimes putting his arms round her waist; and then he turns his head toward the platform and says something aside. Madame Caterna leans toward him, makes little confused grimaces, and then leans back into the corner and seems to reply to her husband, who in turn replies to her. And as I leave I hear the chorus of an operetta in the deep voice of Monsieur Caterna.

In the third car, occupied by many Turkomans and three or four Russians, I perceive Major Noltitz. He is talking with one of his countrymen. I will willingly join in their conversation if they make me any advances, but I had better maintain a certain reserve; the journey has only begun.

I then visit the dining car. It is a third longer than the other cars, a regular dining room, with one long table. At the back is a pantry on one side, a kitchen on the other, where the cook and steward are at work, both of them Russians. This dining car appears to me capitally arranged. Passing through it, I reach the second part of the train, where the second-class passengers are installed. Kirghizes who do not look very intelligent with their depressed heads, their prognathous jaws stuck well out in front, their little beards, flat Cossack noses and very brown skins. These wretched fellows are Mahometans and belong either to the Grand Horde wandering on the frontier between China and Siberia, or to the Little Horde between the Ural Mountains and the Aral Sea. A second-class car, or even a third-class car, is a palace for these people, accustomed to the encampments on the Steppes, to the miserable “iourts” of villages. Neither their beds nor their seats are as good as the stuffed benches on which they have seated themselves with true Asiatic gravity.

With them are two or three Nogais going to Eastern Turkestan. Of a higher race than the Kirghizes, being Tartars, it is from them that come the learned men and professors who have made illustrious the opulent cities of Bokhara and Samarkand. But science and its teaching do not yield much of a livelihood, even when reduced to the mere necessaries of life, in these provinces of Central Asia. And so these Nogais take employment as interpreters. Unfortunately, since the diffusion of the Russian language, their trade is not very remunerative.

Now I know the places of my numbers, and I know where to find them when I want them. As to those going through to Pekin, I have no doubt of Ephrinell and Miss Horatia Bluett nor the German baron, nor the two Chinese, nor Major Noltitz, nor the Caternas, nor even for the haughty gentleman whose bony outline I perceive in the corner of the second car.

As to these travelers who are not going across the frontier, they are of most perfect insignificance in my eyes. But among my companions I have not yet found the hero of my chronicle! let us hope he will declare himself as we proceed.

My intention is to take notes hour by hour — what did I say? To “minute” my journey. Before the night closes in I go out on the platform of the car to have a last look at the surrounding country. An hour with my cigar will take me to Kizil Arvat, where the train has to stop for some time. In going from the second to the first car I meet Major Noltitz. I step aside to let him pass. He salutes me with that grace which distinguishes well-bred Russians. I return his salute. Our meeting is restricted to this exchange of politeness, but the first step is taken.

Popof is not just now in his seat. The door of the luggage van being open, I conclude that the guard has gone to talk with the driver. On the left of the van the mysterious box is in its place. It is only half-past six as yet, and there is too much daylight for me to risk the gratification of my curiosity.

The train advances through the open desert. This is the Kara Koum, the Black Desert. It extends from Khiva over all Turkestan comprised between the Persian frontier and the course of the Amou Daria. In reality the sands of the Kara Koum are no more black than the waters of the Black Sea or than those of the White Sea are white, those of the Red Sea red, or those of the Yellow River yellow. But I like these colored distinctions, however erroneous they may be. In landscapes the eye is caught by colors. And is there not a good deal of landscape about geography?

It appears that this desert was formerly occupied by a huge central basin. It has dried up, as the Caspian will dry up, and this evaporation is explained by the powerful concentration of the solar rays on the surface of the territories between the Sea of Aral and the Plateau of the Pamir.

The Kara Koum is formed of low sandy hills which the high winds are constantly shifting and forming. These “barkans,” as the Russians call them, vary in height from thirty to ninety feet. They expose a wide surface to the northern hurricanes which drive them gradually southward. And on this account there is a well-justified fear for the safety of the Transcaspian. It had to be protected in some efficacious way, and General Annenkof would have been much embarrassed if provident Nature had not, at the same time as she gave the land favorable for the railway to be laid along, given the means of stopping the shifting of the barkanes.

Behind these sand hills grow a number of spring shrubs, clumps of tamarisk, star thistles, and that *Haloxylon ammodendron* which Russians call, not so scientifically, “saksaoul.” Its deep, strong roots are as well adapted for binding together the ground as those of *Hippophaë rhamnoides,* an arbutus of the Eleagnaceous family, which is used for binding together the sands in southern Europe.

To these plantations of saksaouls the engineers of the line have added in different places a series of slopes of worked clay, and in the most dangerous places a line of palisades.

These precautions are doubtless of use; but if the road is protected, the passengers are hardly so, when the sand flies like a bullet hail, and the wind sweeps up from the plain the whitish efflorescences of salt. It is a good thing for us that we are not in the height of the hot season; and it is not in June or July or August that I would advise you to take a trip on the Grand Transasiatic.

I am sorry that Major Noltitz does not think of coming out on the gangway to breathe the fresh air of the Kara Koum. I would offer him one of those choice regalias with which my case is well provided. He would tell me if these stations I see on my time-table, Balla-Ischem, Aïdine, Pereval, Kansandjik, Ouchak, are of any interest — which they do not seem to be. But it would not do for me to disturb his siesta. And yet his conversation ought to be interesting, for as a surgeon in the Russian army he took part in the campaigns of Generals Skobeleff and Annenkof. When our train ran through the little stations that it honors only with a whistle, he could tell me if this one or that one had been the scene of any incident of the war. As a Frenchman I am justified in questioning him about the Russian expedition across Turkestan, and I have no doubt that my fellow passenger will be pleased to gratify me. He is the only one I can really trust besides Popof.

But why is Popof not in his seat? He also is not insensible to the charms of a cigar. It would seem that his conversation with the engineer has not finished yet.

Ah! Here he is coming from the front of the luggage van. He comes out of it and shuts the door; he remains for a moment and is about to take a seat. A hand which holds a cigar, is stretched out toward him. Popof smiles and soon his perfumed puffs are mingling voluptuously with mine.

For fifteen years I think I said our guard had been in the Transcaspian service. He knows the country up to the Chinese frontier, and five or six times already he has been over the whole line known as the Grand Transasiatic.

Popof was on duty on the section between Mikhailov and Kizil Arvat when the line opened — a section which was begun in the December of 1880 and finished in ten months, in November, 1881. Five years later the locomotive entered Merv, on the 14th July, 1886, and eighteen months later it was welcomed at Samarkand. Now the road through Turkestan joins the road through the Celestial Empire, and the ribbon of iron extends without interruption from the Caspian Sea to Pekin.

When Popof had given me this information, I asked if he knew anything of our fellow travelers, I meant those who were going through to China. And in the first place of Major Noltitz?

“The major,” said Popof, “has lived a long time in the Turkestan provinces, and he is going to Pekin to organize the staff of a hospital for our compatriots, with the permission of the Czar, of course.”

“I like this Major Noltitz,” I said, “and I hope to make his acquaintance very soon.”

“He would be equally pleased to make yours,” replied Popof.

“And these two Chinese, do you know them?”

“Not in the least, Monsieur Bombarnac; all I know is the name on the luggage.”

“What is that?”

“The younger man’s name is Pan-Chao, the elder’s is Tio-King. Probably they have been traveling in Europe for some years. As to saying where they come from, I cannot. I imagine that Pan-Chao belongs to some rich family, for he is accompanied by his doctor.”

“This Tio-King?”

“Yes, Doctor Tio-King.”

“And do they only speak Chinese?”

“Probably; I have not heard them speak any other language together.”

On this information from Popof, I will keep to the number nine I have given to young Pan-Chao, and to the ten with which I have labelled Doctor Tio-King.

“The American,” began Popof.

“Ephrinell?” I exclaimed, “and Miss Horatia Bluett, the Englishwoman? Oh! You can tell me nothing about them I don’t know.”

“Shall I tell you what I think about that couple, Monsieur Bombarnac?”

“What do you think?”

“That as soon as they reach Pekin, Miss Bluett will become Mrs. Ephrinell.”

“And may Heaven bless their union, Popof, for they are really made for each other.”

I saw that on this subject Popof and I held similar ideas.

“And the two French people, that couple so affectionate.” I asked, “who are they?”

“Have they not told you?”

“No, Popof.”

“You need not be anxious, Monsieur Bombarnac. Besides, if you wish to know their profession, it is written at full length on all their luggage.

“And that is?”

“Stage people who are going to a theater in China.”

Stage people! If that explains the attitudes, and mobile physiognomy, and demonstrative gestures of Caterna, it does not explain his maritime allusions.

“And do you know what line these players are in?”

“The husband is comic lead.”

“And the wife?”

“She is leading lady.”

“And where are these lyrical people going?”

“To Shanghai, where they have an engagement at the French theater.”

That is capital. I will talk about the theater, and behind the scenes, and such matters, and, as Popof said, I shall soon make the acquaintance of the cheery comedian and his charming wife. But it is not in their company that I shall discover the hero of romance who is the object of my desire.

As to the scornful gentleman, our guide knew nothing beyond that his luggage bore the address in full: Sir Francis Trevellyan, Trevellyan Hall, Trevellyanshire.

“A gentleman who does not answer when he is spoken to!” added Popof.

Well, my number eight will have to be dumb man, and that will do very well.

“Now we get to the German,” said I.

“Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer?”

“He is going to Pekin, I think.”

“To Pekin and beyond.”

“Beyond?”

“Yes; he is on a trip round the world.”

“A trip round the world?”

“In thirty-nine days.”

And so after Mrs. Bisland who did the famous tour in seventy-three days, and Train who did it in seventy, this German was attempting to do it in thirty-nine?

True, the means of communication are more rapid the line is more direct, and by using the Grand Transasiatic which puts Pekin within a fortnight of the Prussian capital, the baron might halve the old time by Suez and Singapore — but —

“He will never do it!” I exclaimed.

“Why not?” asked Popof.

“Because he is always late. He nearly missed the train at Tiflis, he nearly missed the boat at Baku — ”

“But he did not miss the start from Uzun Ada.”

“It doesn’t matter, Popof. I shall be much surprised if this German beats an American at globe trotting.”

CHAPTER VII.

The train arrived at Kizil Arvat, two hundred and forty-two versts from the Caspian, at thirteen minutes past seven in the evening instead of seven o’clock. This slight delay provoked thirteen objurgations from the baron, one for each minute.

We have two hours to wait at Kizil Arvat. Although the day is closing in, I could not employ my time better than in visiting this little town, which contains more than two thousand inhabitants, Russians, Persians and Turkomans. There is not much to see, however, either within it or around it; there are no trees — not even a palm tree — only pasturages and fields of cereals, watered by a narrow stream. My good fortune furnished me with a companion, or I should rather say a guide, in Major Noltitz.

Our acquaintance was made very simply. The major came up to me, and I went up to him as soon as we set foot on the platform of the railway station.

“Sir,” said I, “I am a Frenchman, Claudius Bombarnac, special correspondent of the *Twentieth Century*, and you are Major Noltitz of the Russian army. You are going to Pekin, so am I. I can speak your language, and it is very likely that you can speak mine.”

The major made a sign of assent.

“Well, Major Noltitz, instead of remaining strangers to each other during the long transit of Central Asia, would it please you for us to become more than mere traveling companions? You know all about this country that I do not know, and it would be a pleasure for me to learn from you.”

“Monsieur Bombarnac,” replied the major in French, without a trace of accent, “I quite agree with you.”

Then he added with a smile:

“As to learning from me, one of your most eminent critics, if I remember rightly, has said that the French only like to learn what they know.”

“I see that you have read Sainte Beuve, Major Noltitz; perhaps this sceptical academician was right in a general way. But for my part, I am an exception to the rule, and I wish to learn what I do not know. And in all that concerns Russian Turkestan, I am in a state of ignorance.”

“I am entirely at your disposal,” said the major, “and I will be happy to tell you all about General Annenkof, for I was all through the work with him.”

“I thank you, Major Noltitz. I expected no less than the courtesy of a Russian towards a Frenchman.”

“And,” said the major, “if you will allow me to quote that celebrated sentence in the *Danicheffs*, ‘It will be always thus so long as there are Frenchmen and Russians.’”

“The younger Dumas after Sainte Beuve?” I exclaimed. “I see, major, that I am talking to a Parisian — ”

“Of Petersburg, Monsieur Bombarnac.”

And we cordially shook hands. A minute afterwards, we were on our way through the town, and this is what Major Noltitz told me:

It was towards the end of 1885 that General Annenkof finished, at Kizil Arvat, the first portion of this railway measuring about 140 miles, of which 90 were through a desert which did not yield a single drop of water. But before telling me how this extraordinary work was accomplished, Major Noltitz reminded me of the facts which had gradually prepared the conquest of Turkestan and its definite incorporation with the Russian Empire.

As far back as 1854 the Russians had imposed a treaty of alliance on the Khan of Khiva. Some years afterwards, eager to pursue their march towards the east, the campaigns of 1860 and 1864 had given them the Khanats of Kokhand and Bokhara. Two years later, Samarkand passed under their dominion after the battles of Irdjar and Zera-Buleh.

There remained to be conquered the southern portion of Turkestan, and chiefly the oasis of Akhal Tekke, which is contiguous to Persia. Generals Sourakine and Lazareff attempted this in their expeditions of 1878 and 1879. Their plans failed, and it was to the celebrated Skobeleff, the hero of Plevna, that the czar confided the task of subduing the valiant Turkoman tribes.

Skobeleff landed at the port of Mikhailov — the port of Uzun Ada was not then in existence — and it was in view of facilitating his march across the desert that his second in command, Annenkof, constructed the strategic railway which in ten months reached Kizil Arvat.

This is how the Russians built the line with a rapidity superior, as I have said, to that of the Americans in the far west, a line that was to be of use for commerce and for war.

To begin with, the general got together a construction train consisting of thirty-four wagons. Four of these were two-decked for the officers, twenty more had two decks and were used by the workmen and soldiers; one wagon served as a dining room, four as kitchens, one as an ambulance, one as a telegraph office, one as a forge, one as a provision store, and one was held in reserve. These were his traveling workshops and also his barracks in which fifteen hundred workmen, soldiers and otherwise, found their board and lodging. The train advanced as the rails were laid. The workmen were divided into two brigades; they each worked six hours a day, with the assistance of the country people who lived in tents and numbered about fifteen thousand. A telegraph wire united the works with Mikhailov, and from there a little Decauville engine worked the trains which brought along the rails and sleepers.

In this way, helped by the horizontality of the ground, a day's work yielded nearly five miles of track, whereas in the plains of the United States only about half that rate was accomplished. Labor cost little; forty-five francs a month for the men from the oasis, fifty centimes a day for those who came from Bokhara.

It was in this way that Skobeleff's soldiers were taken to Kizil Arvat, and then eighty-four miles beyond to Gheok Tepe. This town did not surrender until after the destruction of its ramparts and the massacre of twelve thousand of its defenders; but the oasis of Akhal Tekke was in the power of the Russians. The inhabitants of the Atek oasis were only too ready to submit, and that all the more willingly as they had implored the help of the czar in their struggle with Kouli Khan, the chief of the Mervians. These latter to the number of two hundred and fifty thousand, followed their example, and the first locomotive entered Merv station in July, 1886.

“And the English?” I asked Major Noltitz. “In what way have they looked upon the progress of the Russians through Central Asia?”

“Jealously, of course. Think for a moment what it means when the Russian railways are united with the Chinese, instead of the Indian. The Transcaspian in connection with the line between Herat and Delhi! And consider that the English have not been as fortunate in Afghanistan as we have been in Turkestan. You have noticed the gentleman in our train?”

“I have. He is Sir Francis Trevellyan of Trevellyan Hall, Trevellyanshire.”

“Well, Sir Francis Trevellyan has nothing but looks of contempt and shrugs of the shoulder for all we have done. His nation’s jealousy is incarnate in him, and England will never be content that our railways should go from Europe to the Pacific Ocean, while the British railways end at the Indian Ocean.”

This interesting conversation had lasted for the hour and a half during which we walked about the streets of Kizil Arvat. It was time to return to the station, and we did so.

Of course, matters did not end here. It was agreed that the major should leave his seat in the third car and occupy that next to mine in the first. We had already been two inhabitants of the same town; well, we would become two neighbors in the house, or, rather, two friends in the same room.

At nine o’clock the signal to start was given. The train leaving Kizil Arvat went off in a southwesterly direction towards Askhabad, along the Persian frontier.

For another half hour the major and I continued to talk of one thing or another. He told me that if the sun had not set, I should have been able to see the summits of the Great and Little Balkans of Asia which rise above the bay of Krasnovodsk.

Already most of our companions had taken up their quarters for the night on their seats, which by an ingenious mechanism could be transformed into beds, on which you could stretch yourself at full length, lay your head on a pillow, wrap yourself in rugs, and if you didn’t sleep well it would be on account of a troubled conscience.

Major Noltitz had nothing to reproach himself with apparently, for a few minutes after he had said good night he was deep in the sleep of the just.

As for me, if I remained awake it was because I was troubled in my mind. I was thinking of my famous packing case, of the man it contained, and this very night I had resolved to enter into communication with him. I thought of the people who had done this sort of thing before. In 1889, 1891, and 1892, an Austrian tailor, Hermann Zeitung, had come from Vienna to Paris, from Amsterdam to Brussels, from Antwerp to Christiania in a box, and two sweethearts of Barcelona, Erres and Flora Anglora, had shared a box between them from Spain into France.

But I must wait until Popof had retired to rest. The train would not stop until it reached Gheok Tepe at one o’clock in the morning. During the run from Kizil Arvat to Gheok Tepe I reckoned that Popof would have a good sleep, and then, or never, I would put my plan into execution.

Hold! an idea! Suppose it is Zeitung who makes a trade of this sort of thing and manages to make a little money out of public generosity? It ought to be Zeitung, it must be! Confound it! he is not at all interesting! And here was I reckoning on this fellow. Well, we shall see. I shall know him by his photographs, and perhaps I may make use of him.

Half an hour went by, and the noise of a door shutting on the platform of the car told me that our guard had just entered his little box. In spite of my desire to visit the baggage car I waited patiently, for it was possible that Popof was not yet sound asleep.

Within, all is quiet under the veiled light of the lamps.

Without, the night is very dark, and the rattle of the train mingles with the whistling of the rather high wind.

I rise. I draw aside the curtain of one of the lamps. I look at my watch.

It is a few minutes past eleven. Still two hours to Gheok Tepe.

The moment has come. I glide between the seats to the door of the car. I open it gently and shut it after me without being heard by my companions, without waking any one.

Here I am on the platform, which shakes as the train travels. Amid the unfathomable darkness which envelops the Kara Koum, I experience the feeling of a night at sea when on shipboard.

A feeble light filters through the blind of the guard's box. Shall I wait till it is extinct, or, as is very probable, will it not last till the morning?

Anyhow, Popof is not asleep, as I discover by the noise he makes in turning over. I keep quiet, leaning against the balustrade of the platform.

Leaning forward my looks are attracted by the luminous ray thrown forward by the headlight of the engine. It seems as though we are running on a road of fire. Above me the clouds are racing across with great rapidity, and a few constellations glitter through their rifts, Cassiopeia, the Little Bear, in the north, and in the zenith Vega of Lyra.

At length absolute silence reigns on the platforms. Popof, who is in charge of the train, has his eyes closed in sleep. Assured of safety I cross the gangway and am in front of the baggage van.

The door is only fastened with a bar which is hung between two staples.

I open it and shut it behind me.

I do this without noise, for if I do not want to attract Popof's attention, I do not want as yet to attract the attention of the man in the packing case.

Although the darkness is deep in the van, although there is no side window, I know my position. I know where the case is placed; it is in the left corner as I enter. The thing is not to knock against any other case — not against one of those belonging to Ephrinell, for what a row there would be if I set all those artificial teeth chattering!

Carefully feeling with feet and hands, I reach the case. No cat could have been more gentle or more silent as I felt its edges.

I leaned over and placed my ear timidly against the outer panel.

There was no sound of breathing.

The products of the house of Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York, could not be more noiseless in their boxes.

A fear seizes upon me — the fear of seeing all my reporter's hopes vanish. Was I deceived on board the *Astara*? That respiration, that sneeze; had I dreamed it all? Was there no one in the case, not even Zeitung? Were these really glass goods exported to Miss Zinca Klork, Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, China?

No! Feeble as it is, I detect a movement inside the case! It becomes more distinct, and I ask if the panel is going to slide, if the prisoner is coming out of his prison to breathe the fresh air?

What I had better do to see and not to be seen is to hide between two cases. Thanks to the darkness there is nothing to fear.

Suddenly a slight cracking greets my ear. I am not the sport of an illusion; it is the crack of a match being lighted.

Almost immediately a few feeble rays pierce the ventilation holes of the case.

If I had had any doubts as to the position held by the prisoner in the scale of being, I have none now. At the least it must be an ape who knows the use of fire, and also the handling of matches. Travelers tell us that such animals exist, but we have to take the statement on trust.

Why should I not confess it? A certain emotion came over me and I had to take care I did not run away.

A minute elapsed. Nothing shows that the panel has been moved, nothing gives me reason to suppose that the unknown is coming out.

Cautiously I wait. Then I have an idea to make something out of this light. The case is lighted within; if I were to peep through those holes?

I creep toward the case. A single apprehension chills my brain. If the light were suddenly extinguished!

I am against the panel, which I take care not to touch, and I put my eyes close to one of the holes.

There is a man in the box, and it is not the Austrian tailor, Zeitung! Thank Heaven! I will soon make him my No. 11.

The man’s features I can make out clearly. He is from twenty-five to twenty-six years of age. He does not shave, and his beard is brown. He is of the true Roumanian type, and that confirms me in my notion regarding his Roumanian correspondent. He is good-looking, although his face denotes great energy of character, and he must be energetic to have shut himself up in a box like this for such a long journey. But if he has nothing of the malefactor about him, I must confess that he does not look like the hero I am in search of as the chief personage in my story.

After all, they were not heroes, that Austrian and that Spaniard who traveled in their packing cases. They were young men, very simple, very ordinary, and yet they yielded columns of copy. And so this brave No. 11, with amplifications, antonyms, diaphoreses, epitases, tropes, metaphors, and other figures of that sort, I will beat out, I will enlarge, I will develop — as they develop a photographic negative.

Besides to travel in a box from Tiflis to Pekin is quite another affair than traveling from Vienna or Barcelona to Paris, as was done by Zeitung, Erres and Flora Anglora.

I add that I will not betray my Roumanian; I will report him to no one. He may rely on my discretion; he may reckon on my good offices if I can be of use to him when he is found out.

But what is he doing now? Well, he is seated on the bottom of his case and placidly eating his supper by the light of a little lamp. A box of preserves is on his knee, biscuit is not wanting, and in a little cupboard I notice some full bottles, besides a rug and overcoat hooked up on the wall.

Evidently No. 11 is quite at home. He is there in his cell like a snail in his shell. His house goes with him; and he saves the thousand francs it would have cost him to journey from Tiflis to Pekin, second-class. I know he is committing a fraud, and that the law punishes such fraud. He can come out of his box when he likes and take a walk in the van, or even at night venture on the platform. No! I do not blame him, and when I think of his being sent to the pretty Roumanian, I would willingly take his place.

An idea occurs to me which may not perhaps be as good as it seems. That is to rap lightly on the box so as to enter into communication with my new companion, and learn who he is, and whence he comes, for I know whither he goes. An ardent curiosity devours me, I must gratify it. There are moments when a special correspondent is metamorphosed into a daughter of Eve.

But how will the poor fellow take it? Very well, I am sure. I will tell him that I am a Frenchman, and a Roumanian knows he can always trust a Frenchman. I will offer him my services. I will propose to soften the rigors of his imprisonment by my interviews, and to make up the scarcity of his meals by little odds and ends. He will have nothing to fear from my imprudences.

I rap the panel.

The light suddenly goes out.

The prisoner has suspended his respiration.

I must reassure him.

“Open!” I say to him gently in Russian.

“Open — — — ”

I cannot finish the sentence; for the train gives a sudden jump and slackens speed.

But we cannot yet have reached Gheok Tepe?

There is a noise outside.

I rush out of the van and shut the door behind me.

It was time.

I have scarcely reached the platform before Popofs door opens, and without seeing me he hurries through the van on to the engine.

Almost immediately the train resumes its normal speed and Popof reappears a minute afterwards.

“What is the matter, Popof?”

“What is often the matter, Monsieur Bombarnac. We have smashed a dromedary.”

“Poor brute!”

“Poor brute? He might have thrown us off the line!”

“Stupid brute, then!”

CHAPTER VIII.

Before the train reaches Gheok Tepe I am back in the car. Confound this dromedary! If he had not managed to get smashed so clumsily No. 11 would no longer be unknown to me. He would have opened his panel, we would have talked in a friendly way, and separated with a friendly shake of the hand. Now he will be full of anxiety, he knows his fraud is discovered, that there is some one who has reason to suspect his intentions, some one who may not hesitate to betray his secret. And then, after being taken out of his case, he will be put under guard at the next station, and it will be useless for Mademoiselle Zinca Klork to expect him in the capital of the Chinese Empire!

Yes! It would be better for me to relieve his anxiety this very night. That is impossible, for the train will soon stop at Gheok Tepe, and then at Askhabad which it will leave in the first hour of daylight. I can no longer trust to Popof's going to sleep.

I am absorbed in these reflections, when the locomotive stops in Gheok Tepe station at one o'clock in the morning. None of my companions have left their beds.

I get out on to the platform and prowl around the van. It would be too risky to try and get inside. I should have been glad to visit the town, but the darkness prevents me from seeing anything. According to what Major Noltitz says it still retains the traces of Skobeleffs terrible assault in 1880 — dismantled walls, bastions in ruins. I must content myself with having seen all that with the major's eyes.

The train starts at two o'clock in the morning, after having been joined by a few passengers who Popof tells me are Turkomans. I will have a look at them when daylight comes.

For ten minutes I remained on the car platform and watched the heights of the Persian frontier on the extreme limit of the horizon. Beyond the stretch of verdant oasis watered by a number of creeks, we crossed wide cultivated plains through which the line made frequent diversions.

Having discovered that Popof did not intend to go to sleep again, I went back to my corner.

At three o’clock there was another stop. The name of Askhabad was shouted along the platform. As I could not remain still I got out, leaving my companions sound asleep, and I ventured into the town.

Askhabad is the headquarters of the Transcaspian, and I opportunely remembered what Boulangier, the engineer, had said about it in the course of that interesting journey he had made to Merv. All that I saw on the left as I went out of the station, was the gloomy outline of the Turkoman Fort, dominating the new town, the population of which has doubled since 1887. It forms a confused mass behind a thick curtain of trees.

When I returned at half-past three, Popof was going through the luggage van, I know not why. What must be the Roumanian’s anxiety during this movement to and fro in front of his box!

As soon as Popof reappeared I said to him: “Anything fresh?”

“Nothing, except the morning breeze!” said he.

“Very fresh!” said I. “Is there a refreshment bar in the station?”

“There is one for the convenience of the passengers.”

“And for the convenience of the guards, I suppose? Come along, Popof.”

And Popof did not want asking twice.

The bar was open, but there did not seem to be much to choose from. The only liquor was “Koumiss,” which is fermented mare’s milk, and is the color of faded ink, very nourishing, although very liquid. You must be a Tartar to appreciate this koumiss. At least that is the effect it produced on me. But Popof thought it excellent, and that was the important point.

Most of the Sarthes and Kirghizes who got out at Askhabad, have been replaced by other second-class passengers, Afghan merchants and smugglers, the latter particularly clever in their line of business. All the green tea consumed in Central Asia is brought by them from China through India, and although the transport is much longer, they sell it at a much lower price than the Russian tea. I need not say that their luggage was examined with Muscovite minuteness.

The train started again at four o’clock. Our car was still a sleeper. I envied the sleep of my companions, and as that was all I could do, I returned to the platform.

The dawn was appearing in the east. Here and there were the ruins of the ancient city, a citadel girdled with high ramparts and a succession of long porticos extending over fifteen hundred yards. Running over a few embankments, necessitated by the inequalities of the sandy ground, the train reaches the horizontal steppe.

We are running at a speed of thirty miles an hour in a southwesterly direction, along the Persian frontier. It is only beyond Douchak that the line begins to leave it. During this three hours’ run the two stations at which the train stops are Gheours, the junction for the road to Mesched, whence the heights of the Iran plateau are visible, and Artyk where water is abundant although slightly brackish.

The train then traverses the oasis of the Atek, which is an important tributary of the Caspian. Verdure and trees are everywhere. This oasis justifies its name, and would not disgrace the Sahara. It extends to the station of Douchak at the six hundred and sixtieth verst, which we reach at six o'clock in the morning.

We stop here two hours, that is to say, there are two hours for us to walk about. I am off to look at Douchak with Major Noltitz as my cicerone.

A traveler precedes us out of the railway station; I recognize Sir Francis Trevellyan. The major makes me notice that this gentleman's face is more sullen than usual, his lip more scornful, his attitude more Anglo-Saxon.

“And do you know why, Monsieur Bombarnac? Because this station at Douchak might be the terminus of a line from British India through the Afghan frontier, Kandahar, the Bolan Pass and the Pendjeh oasis, that would unite the two systems.”

“And how long would the line be?”

“About six hundred miles. But the English will not meet the Russians in a friendly way. But if we could put Calcutta within twelve days of London, what an advantage that would be for their trade!”

Talking in this way the major and I “did” Douchak. Some years ago it was foreseen how important this village would be. A branch line unites it with Teheran in Persia, while there has, as yet, been no survey for a line to India.

While gentlemen cast in the mould of Sir Francis Trevellyan are in the majority in the United Kingdom, the Asiatic network of railways will never be complete.

I was led to question the major regarding the safety of the Grand Transasiatic across the provinces of Central Asia.

In Turkestan, he told me, the safety is well assured. The Russian police keep constant watch over it; there is a regular police force at the stations, and as the stations are not far apart, I don’t think the travelers have much to fear from the nomad tribes. Besides, the Turkomans are kept in their place by the Russian administration. During the years the Transcaspian has been at work, there has been no attack to hinder the train service.

“That is comforting, Major Noltitz. And as to the section between the frontier and Pekin?”

“That is another matter,” replied the major. “Over the Pamir plateau, up to Kachgar, the road is carefully guarded; but beyond that, the Grand Transasiatic is under Chinese control, and I have not much confidence in that.”

“Are the stations very far from each other?” I asked.

“Very far, sometimes.”

“And the Russians in charge of the train are replaced by Chinese, are they not?”

“Yes, with the exception of Popof, who goes through with us.”

“So that we shall have Chinese engine drivers and stokers? Well, major, that seems rather alarming, and the safety of the travelers — ”

“Let me undeceive you, Monsieur Bombarnac. These Chinese are just as clever as we are. They are excellent mechanics, and it is the same with the engineers who laid out the line through the Celestial Empire. They are certainly a very intelligent race, and very fit for industrial progress.”

“I think, major, that they will one day become masters of the world — after the Slavs, of course!”

“I do not know what the future may have in store,” said Major Noltitz, with a smile. “But, returning to the Chinese, I say that they are of quick comprehension, with an astonishing facility of assimilation. I have seen them at work, and I speak from experience.”

“Agreed,” said I; “but if there is no danger under this head, are there not a lot of scoundrels prowling about Mongolia and Northern China?”

“And you think these scoundrels will be daring enough to attack the train?”

“Exactly, major, and that is what makes me feel easy.”

“What? Makes you feel easy?”

“Quite so, for my sole anxiety is that our journey may not be devoid of incident.”

“Really, Mr. Special Correspondent, I admire you. You must have incidents — ”

“As a doctor must have patients. Now a real good adventure — ”

“Well, Monsieur Bombarnac, I am afraid you will be disappointed, as I have heard that the company has treated several chiefs of the robber bands — ”

“As the Greek Government treated Hadji Stavros in About’s romance.”

“Precisely; and who knows that if in their wisdom — ”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Why not? It would be quite in the modern style, this way of assuring the safety of the trains during the run through the Celestial Empire. Anyhow, there is one of these highwaymen, who has retained his independence and liberty of action, a certain Ki-Tsang.”

“Who is he?”

“A bold bandit chief, half-Chinaman, half-Mongol. Having for some time been a terror to Yunnan, he was being too closely pursued, and has now moved into the northern provinces. His presence has ever been reported in that part of Mongolia served by the Grand Transasiatic.”

“Well, he ought to furnish a few paragraphs.”

“The paragraphs Ki-Tsang will furnish you with may cost you too dearly.”

“Bah! major, the *Twentieth Century* is quite rich enough to pay for its glory.”

“To pay with its money, perhaps, but we may have to pay with our lives! Luckily our companions have not heard you talk in this way, or they might come in a body and demand your expulsion from the train. So be careful, and keep a guard on your desires as a newspaper man in quest of adventures. Above all, don’t have anything to do with this Ki-Tsang. It would be all the better in the interest of the passengers.”

“But not of the passage, major.”

We returned towards the station. The stoppage at Douchak had another half hour to last. As I walked on the quay, I observed something going on which would change the make-up of our train.

Another van had arrived from Teheran by the branch line to Mesphed, which puts the Persian capital in communication with the Transcaspian.

This van was bolted and barred, and accompanied by a squad of Persian police, whose orders seemed to be not to lose sight of it.

I don’t know what made me think so, but it seemed as though this van had something mysterious about it, and as the major had left me, I went and spoke to Popof, who was watching over the proceedings.

“Popof, where is that van going?”

“To Pekin.”

“And what has it got in it?”

“What has it got in it? An exalted personage.”

“An exalted personage?”

“Are you surprised?”

“I am. In this van?”

"It is his own idea."

"Well, Popof, when this exalted personage gets out perhaps you will let me know?"

"He Will not get out."

"Why not?"

"Because he is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, and it is his body they are taking to Pekin, where he will be interred with all the honors due to him."

So that we were to have an important personage in our train — in the shape of a corpse, it is true. Never mind! I asked Popof to discover the name of the defunct. He ought to be some mandarin of mark. As soon as I knew it I would send a telegram to the *Twentieth Century*.

While I was looking at this van, a new passenger came up and examined it with no less curiosity than I did.

This traveler was a fine-looking man of about forty, wearing gracefully the costume of the richer Mongols, a tall fellow, with rather a gloomy look, a military moustache, tawny complexion, and eyes that never shut.

"Here is a splendid fellow," I said to myself. "I don't know if he will turn out the hero of the drama I am in search of, but, anyhow, I will number him twelve in my traveling troupe."

This leading star, I soon learned from Popof, bore the name of Faruskiar. He was accompanied by another Mongol, of inferior rank, of about the same age, whose name was Ghangir. As they looked at the van being attached to the tail of the train in front of the luggage van, they exchanged a few words. As soon as the arrangements were complete the Persians took their places in the second-class car, which preceded the mortuary van, so as to have the precious corpse always under their surveillance.

At this moment there was a shout on the station platform I recognized the voice. It was the Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer shouting:

“Stop! stop!”

This time it was not a train on the start, but a hat in distress. A sudden gust had swept through the station and borne off the baron’s hat — a helmet-shaped hat of a bluish color. It rolled on the platform, it rolled on the rails, it skimmed the enclosure and went out over the wall, and its owner ran his hardest to stop it.

At the sight of this wild pursuit the Caternas held their sides, the young Chinaman, Pan Chao, shouted with laughter, while Dr. Tio-King remained imperturbably serious.

The German purple, puffling and panting, could do no more. Twice he had got his hand on his hat, and twice it had escaped him, and now suddenly he fell full length with his head lost under the folds of his overcoat; whereupon Caterna began to sing the celebrated air from “Miss Helyett”:

“Ah! the superb point of view — ew — ew — ew!

Ah! the view unexpected by you — you — you — you!”

I know nothing more annoying than a hat carried away by the wind, which bounds hither and thither, and spins and jumps, and glides, and slides, and darts off just as you think you are going to catch it. And if that should happen to me I will forgive those who laugh at the comic endeavor.

But the baron was in no mood for forgiveness. He bounded here, and bounded there, he jumped on to the line. They shouted to him, “Look out! look out!” for the Merv was coming in at some speed. It brought death to the hat, the engine smashed it pitilessly, and it was only a torn rag when it was handed to the baron. And then began again a series of imprecations on the Grand Transasiatic.

The signal is given. The passengers, old and new, hurry to their places. Among the new ones I notice three Mongols, of forbidding appearance, who get into the second-class car.

As I put my foot on the platform I hear the young Chinese say to his companion:

“Well, Dr. Tio-King, did you see the German with his performing hat? How I laughed!”

And so Pan Chao speaks French. What do I say? Better than French — he speaks Persian! Most extraordinary! I must have a talk with him.

CHAPTER IX.

We started to time. The baron could not complain this time. After all, I understood his impatience; a minute's delay might cause him to lose the mail boat from Tien Tsin to Japan.

The day looked promising, that is to say, there might have been a wind strong enough to put out the sun as if it were a candle, such a hurricane as sometimes stops the locomotives of the Grand Transasiatic, but to-day it is blowing from the west, and will be supportable, as it blows the train along. We can remain out on the platforms.

I want to enter into conversation with Pan Chao. Popof was right; he must be the son of some family of distinction who has been spending some years in Paris for education and amusement. He ought to be one of the most regular visitors at the *Twentieth Century* "five o'clocks."

Meanwhile I will attend to other business. There is that man in the case. A whole day will elapse before I can relieve his anxiety. In what a state he must be! But as it would be unwise for me to enter the van during the day, I must wait until night.

I must not forget that an interview with the Caternas is included in the programme. There will be no difficulty in that, apparently.

What will not be so easy is to get into conversation with my No. 12, his superb lordship Faruskiar. He seems rather stiff, does this Oriental.

Ah! There is a name I must know as soon as possible, that of the mandarin returning to China in the form of a mortuary parcel. With a little ingenuity Popof may manage to ascertain it from one of the Persians in charge of his

Excellency. If it would only be that of some grand functionary, the Pao-Wang, or the Ko-Wang, or the viceroy of the two Kiangs, the Prince King in person!

For an hour the train is running through the oasis. We shall soon be in the open desert. The soil is formed of alluvial beds extending up to the environs of Merv. I must get accustomed to this monotony of the journey which will last up to the frontier of Turkestan. Oasis and desert, desert and oasis. As we approach the Pamir the scenery will change a little. There are picturesque bits of landscape in that orographic knot which the Russians have had to cut as Alexander cut the gordian knot that was worth something to the Macedonian conqueror of Asia. Here is a good augury for the Russian conquest.

But I must wait for this crossing of the Pamir and its varied scenery. Beyond lay the interminable plains of Chinese Turkestan, the immense sandy desert of Gobi, where the monotony of the journey will begin again.

It is half-past ten. Breakfast will soon be served in the dining car. Let us take a walk through the length of the train.

Where is Ephrinell? I do not see him at his post by the side of Miss Horatia Bluett, whom I questioned on the subject after saluting her politely.

“Mr. Ephrinell has gone to give an eye to his cases,” she replies.

In the rear of the second car Faruskiar and Ghangir have installed themselves; they are alone at this moment, and are talking together in a low tone.

As I return I meet Ephrinell, who is coming back to his traveling companion. He shakes my hand Yankee fashion. I tell him that Miss Horatia Bluett has given me news of him.

“Oh!” says he, “what a woman yonder! What a splendid saleswoman! One of those English — ”

“Who are good enough to be Americans!” I add.

“Wait a bit!” he replies, with a significant smile.

As I am going put, I notice that the two Chinamen are already in the dining car, and that Dr. Tio-King’s little book is on the table.

I do not consider it too much of a liberty for a reporter to pick up this little book, to open it and to read the title, which is as follows:

The temperate and regular life,

Or the art of living long in perfect health.

Translated from the Italian of

Louis Cornaro, a Venetian noble.

To which is added the way of correcting a bad constitution,

and enjoying perfect felicity to the most advanced years.

and to die only from the using up of the original humidity

in extreme old age.

Salerno,

1782.

And this is the favorite reading of Dr. Tio-King! And that is why his disrespectful pupil occasionally gives him the nickname of Cornaro!

I have not time to see anything else in this volume than *Abstinentia adjicit vitam*; but this motto of the noble Venetian I have no intention of putting in practice, at least at breakfast time.

There is no change in the order in which we sit down to table. I find myself close to Major Noltitz, who is looking attentively at Faruskiar and his companion, placed at the extremity of the table. We are asking ourselves who this haughty Mongol could be.

“Ah!” said I, laughing at the thought which crossed my mind, “if that is —”

“Who?” asked the major.

“The chief of the brigands, the famous Ki-Tsang.”

“Have your joke, Monsieur Bombarnac, but under your breath, I advise you!”

“You see, major, he would then be an interesting personage and worth a long interview!”

We enjoyed our meal as we talked. The breakfast was excellent, the provisions having come freshly on board at Askhabad and Douchak. For drink we had tea, and Crimean wine, and Kazan beer; for meat we had mutton cutlets and excellent preserves; for dessert a melon with pears and grapes of the best quality.

After breakfast I went to smoke my cigar on the platform behind the dining car. Caterna almost immediately joins me. Evidently the estimable comedian has seized the opportunity to enter into conversation with me.

His intelligent eyes, his smooth face, his cheeks accustomed to false whiskers, his lips accustomed to false moustaches, his head accustomed to wigs red, black, or gray, bald or hairy, according to his part, everything denoted the actor made for the life of the boards. But he had such an open, cheery face, such an honest look, so frank an attitude, that he was evidently a really good fellow.

“Sir,” said he to me, “are two Frenchmen going all the way from Baku to Pekin without making each other’s acquaintance?”

“Sir,” I replied, “when I meet a compatriot — ”

“Who is a Parisian — ”

“And consequently a Frenchman twice over,” I added, “I am only too glad to shake hands with him! And so, Monsieur Caterna — ”

“You know my name?”

“As you know mine, I am sure.”

“Of course, Monsieur Claudius Bombarnac, correspondent of the *Twentieth Century*.”

“At your service, believe me.”

“A thousand thanks, Monsieur Bombarnac, and even ten thousand, as they say in China, whither Madame Caterna and I are bound.”

“To appear at Shanghai in the French troupe at the residency as — ”

“You know all that, then?”

“A reporter!”

“Quite so.”

“I may add, from sundry nautical phrases I have noticed, that you have been to sea.”

“I believe you, sir. Formerly coxswain of Admiral de Boissondy’s launch on board the *Redoubtable*.”

“Then I beg to ask why you, a sailor, did not go by way of the sea?”

“Ah, there it is, Monsieur Bombarnac. Know that Madame Caterna, who is incontestably the first leading lady of the provinces, and there is not one to beat her as a waiting maid or in a man’s part, cannot stand the sea. And when I heard of the Grand Transasiatic, I said to her, ‘Be easy, Caroline! Do not worry yourself about the perfidious element. We will cross Russia, Turkestan, and China, without leaving *terra firma*!’ And that pleased her, the little darling, so brave and so devoted, so — I am at a loss for a word — well, a lady who will play the duenna in case of need, rather than leave the manager in a mess! An artiste, a true artiste!”

It was a pleasure to listen to Caterna; he was in steam, as the engineer says, and the only thing to do was to let him blow off. Surprising as it may seem, he adored his wife, and I believe she was equally fond of him. A well-matched couple, evidently, from what I learned from my comedian, never embarrassed, very wide awake, content with his lot, liking nothing so much as the theater — above all the provincial theater — where he and his wife had played in drama, vaudeville, comedy, operetta, opera comique, opera, spectacle, pantomime, happy in the entertainment which began at five o'clock in the afternoon and ended at one o'clock in the morning, in the grand theaters of the chief cities, in the saloon of the mayor, in the barn of the village, without boots, without patches, without orchestra, sometimes even without spectators — thus saving the return of the money — professionals fit for anything, no matter what.

As a Parisian, Caterna must have been the wag of the forecastle when he was at sea. As clever with his instrument of brass or wood, he possessed a most varied and complete assortment of jokes, songs, monologues, and dialogues. This he told me with an immense amount of attitude and gesture, now here, now there, legs, arms, hands, and feet all going together. I should never feel dull in the company of such a merry companion.

“And where were you before you left France?” I asked.

“At La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, where Madame Caterna achieved a genuine success as Elsa in ‘Lohengrin,’ which we played without music. But it is an interesting piece, and it was well done.”

“You must have been a good deal about the world, Monsieur Caterna?”

“I believe you; Russia, England, both Americas. Ah! Monsieur Claudius.”

He already called me Claudius.

“Ah! Monsieur Claudius, there was a time when I was the idol of Buenos Ayres, and the pet of Rio Janeiro! Do not think I would tell you an untruth! No! I know myself. Bad at Paris, I am excellent in the provinces. In Paris you play for yourself; in the provinces you play for the others! And then what a repertory!"

"My compliments, my dear compatriot!"

"I accept them, Monsieur Claudius, for I like my trade. What would you haye? All the world cannot expect to be a senator or — a special correspondent."

"There, that is wicked, Monsieur Caterna," said I, with a laugh.

"No; it is the last word."

And while the unwearied actor ran on in this way, stations appeared one after the other between the shrieks of the whistle, Kulka, Nisachurch, Kulla Minor and others, not particularly cheerful to look at; then Bairam Ali at the seven hundred and ninety-fifth verst and Kourlan Kala at the eight hundred and fifteenth.

"And to tell you the truth," continued Caterna, "we have made a little money by going about from town to town. At the bottom of our boxes are a few Northern debentures, of which I think a good deal, and take much care, and they have been honestly got, Monsieur Claudius. Although we live under a democratic government, the rule of equality, the time is still far off when you will see the noble father dining beside the prefect at the table of the judge of appeal, and the actress open the ball with the prefect at the house of the general-in-chief! Well! We can dine and dance among ourselves — "

"And be just as happy, Monsieur Caterna."

“Certainly no less, Monsieur Claudius,” replied the future premier comic of Shanghai, shaking an imaginary frill with the graceful ease of one of Louis XV.’s noblemen.

At this point, Madame Caterna came up. She was in every way worthy of her husband, sent into the world to reply to him in life as on the stage, one of those genial theater folks, born one knows not where or how, but thoroughly genuine and good-natured.

“I beg to introduce you to Caroline Caterna,” said the actor, in much the same tone as he would have introduced me to Patti or Sarah Bernhardt.

“Having shaken hands with your husband,” said I, “I shall be happy to shake hands with you, Madame Caterna.”

“There you are, then,” said the actress, “and without ceremony, foot to the front, and no prompting.”

“As you see, no nonsense about her, and the best of wives — ”

“As he is the best of husbands.”

“I believe I am, Monsieur Claudius,” said the actor, “and why? Because I believe that marriage consists entirely in the precept to which husbands should always conform, and that is, that what the wife likes the husband should eat often.”

It will be understood that it was touching to see this honest give-and-take, so different from the dry business style of the two commercials who were in conversation in the adjoining car.

But here is Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer, wearing a traveling cap, coming out of the dining car, where I imagine he has not spent his time consulting the time-table.

“The good man of the hat trick!” said Caterna, after the baron went back into the car without favoring us with a salute.

“He is quite German enough!” said Madame Caterna.

“And to think that Henry Heine called those people sentimental oaks!” I added.

“Then he could not have known that one!” said Caterna. “Oak, I admit, but sentimental — “

“Do you know why the baron has patronized the Grand Transasiatic?” I asked.

“To eat sauerkraut at Pekin!” said Caterna.

“Not at all. To rival Miss Nelly Bly. He is trying to get around the world in thirty-nine days.”

“Thirty-nine days!” exclaimed Gaterna. “You should say a hundred and thirty-nine!”

And in a voice like a husky clarinet the actor struck up the well-known air from the Cloches de Corneville:

“I thrice have been around the world.”

Adding, for the baron’s benefit:

“He will not do the half.”

CHAPTER X.

At a quarter-past twelve our train passed the station of Kari Bata, which resembles one of the stations on the line from Naples to Sorrento, with its Italian roofs. I noticed a vast Asiatico-Russian camp, the flags waving in the fresh breeze. We have entered the Mervian oasis, eighty miles long and eight wide, and containing about six hundred thousand hectares — there is nothing like being precise at the finish. Right and left are cultivated fields, clumps of fine trees, an uninterrupted succession of villages, huts among the thickets, fruit gardens between the houses, flocks of sheep and herds of cattle among the pastures. All this rich country is watered by the Mourgab — the White Water — or its tributaries, and pheasants swarm like crows on the plains of Normandy. At one o'clock in the afternoon the train stopped at Merv Station, over five hundred miles from Uzun Ada.

The town has been often destroyed and rebuilt. The wars of Turkestan have not spared it. Formerly, it seems, it was a haunt of robbers and bandits, and it is a pity that the renowned Ki-Tsang did not live in those days. Perhaps he would have become a Genghis Khan?

Major Noltitz told me of a Turkoman saying to the following effect: "If you meet a Mervian and a viper, begin by killing the Mervian and leave the viper till afterwards."

I fancy it would be better to begin with killing the viper now that the Mervian has become a Russian.

We have seven hours to stop at Merv. I shall have time to visit this curious town. Its physical and moral transformation has been profound, owing to the somewhat arbitrary proceedings of the Russian administration. It is fortunate that its fortress, five miles round, built by Nour Verdy in 1873, was not strong enough to prevent its capture by the czar, so that the old nest of malefactors has become one of the most important cities of the Transcaspian.

I said to Major Noltitz:

“If it is not trespassing on your kindness, may I ask you to go with me?”

“Willingly,” he answered; “and as far as I am concerned, I shall be very pleased to see Merv again.”

We set out at a good pace.

“I ought to tell you,” said the major, “that it is the new town we are going to see.”

“And why not the old one first? That would be more logical and more chronological.”

“Because old Merv is eighteen miles away, and you will hardly see it as you pass. So you must refer to the accurate description given of it by your great geographer Elisée Reclus.”

And certainly readers will not lose anything by the change.

The distance from the station to new Merv is not great. But what an abominable dust! The commercial town is built on the left of the river — a town in the American style, which would please Ephrinell, wide streets straight as a line crossing at right angles; straight boulevards with rows of trees; much bustle and movement among the merchants in Oriental costume, in Jewish costume, merchants of every kind; a number of camels and dromedaries, the latter much in request for their powers of withstanding fatigue and which differ in their hinder parts from their African congeners. Not many women along the sunny roads which seem white hot. Some of the feminine types are, however, sufficiently remarkable, dressed out in a quasi-military costume, wearing soft boots and a cartouche belt in the Circassian style. You must take care of the stray dogs, hungry brutes with long hair and disquieting fangs, of a breed reminding one of the dogs of the Caucasus, and these animals — according to Boulangier the engineer — have eaten a Russian general.

“Not entirely,” replies the major, confirming the statement. “They left his boots.”

In the commercial quarter, in the depths of the gloomy ground floors, inhabited by the Persians and the Jews, within the miserable shops are sold carpets of incredible fineness, and colors artistically combined, woven mostly by old women without any Jacquard cards.

On both banks of the Mourgab the Russians have their military establishment. There parade the Turkoman soldiers in the service of the czar. They wear the blue cap and the white epaulettes with their ordinary uniform, and drill under the orders of Russian officers.

A wooden bridge, fifty yards long, crosses the river. It is practicable not only for foot-passengers, but for trains, and telegraph wires are stretched above its parapets.

On the opposite bank is the administrative town, which contains a considerable number of civil servants, wearing the usual Russian cap.

In reality the most interesting place to see is a sort of annexe, a Tekke village, in the middle of Merv, whose inhabitants have retained the villainous characteristics of this decaying race, the muscular bodies, large ears, thick lips, black beard. And this gives the last bit of local color to be found in the new town.

At a turning in the commercial quarter we met the commercials, American and English.

“Mr. Ephrinell,” I said, “there is nothing curious in this modern Merv.”

“On the contrary, Mr. Bombarnac, the town is almost Yankee, and it will soon see the day when the Russians will give it tramways and gaslights!”

“That will come!”

“I hope it will, and then Merv will have a right to call itself a city.”

“For my part, I should have preferred a visit to the old town, with its mosque, its fortress, and its palace. But that is a little too far off, and the train does not stop there, which I regret.”

“Pooh!” said the Yankee. “What I regret is, that there is no business to be done in these Turkoman countries! The men all have teeth — ”

“And the women all have hair,” added Horatia Bluett.

“Well, miss, buy their hair, and you will not lose your time.”

“That is exactly what Holmes-Holme of London will do as soon as we have exhausted the capillary stock of the Celestial Empire.”

And thereupon the pair left us.

I then suggested to Major Noltitz — it was six o'clock — to dine at Merv, before the departure of the train. He consented, but he was wrong to consent. An ill-fortune took us to the Hotel Slav, which is very inferior to our dining car — at least as regards its bill of fare. It contained, in particular, a national soup called "borchtch," prepared with sour milk, which I would carefully refrain from recommending to the gourmets of the *Twentieth Century*.

With regard to my newspaper, and that telegram relative to the mandarin our train is "conveying" in the funereal acceptation of the word? Has Popof obtained from the mutes who are on guard the name of this high personage?

Yes, at last! And hardly are we within the station than he runs up to me, saying:

"I know the name."

"And it is?"

"Yen Lou, the great mandarin Yen Lou of Pekin."

"Thank you, Popof."

I rush to the telegraph office, and from there I send a telegram to the *Twentieth Century*.

"Merv, 16th May, 7 p.m.

"Train, Grand Transasiatic, just leaving Merv. Took from Douchak the body of the great mandarin Yen Lou coming from Persia to Pekin."

It cost a good deal, did this telegram, but you will admit it was well worth its price.

The name of Yen Lou was immediately communicated to our fellow travelers, and it seemed to me that my lord Faruskiar smiled when he heard it.

We left the station at eight o’clock precisely. Forty minutes afterwards we passed near old Merv, and the night being dark I could see nothing of it. There was, however, a fortress with square towers and a wall of some burned bricks, and ruined tombs, and a palace and remains of mosques, and a collection of archaeological things, which would have run to quite two hundred lines of small text.

“Console yourself,” said Major Noltitz. “Your satisfaction could not be complete, for old Merv has been rebuilt four times. If you had seen the fourth town, Bairam Ali of the Persian period, you would not have seen the third, which was Mongol, still less the Musalman village of the second epoch, which was called Sultan Sandjar Kala, and still less the town of the first epoch. That was called by some Iskander Kala, in honor of Alexander the Macedonian, and by others Ghiaour Kala, attributing its foundation to Zoroaster, the founder of the Magian religion, a thousand years before Christ. So I should advise you to put your regrets in the waste-paper basket.”

And that is what I did, as I could do no better with them.

Our train is running northeast. The stations are twenty or thirty versts apart. The names are not shouted, as we make no stop, and I have to discover them on my time-table. Such are Keltchi, Ravina — why this Italian name in this Turkoman province? — Peski, Repetek, etc. We cross the desert, the real desert without a thread of water, where artesian wells have to be sunk to supply the reservoirs along the line.

The major tells me that the engineers experienced immense difficulty in fixing the sandhills on this part of the railway. If the palisades had not been sloped obliquely, like the barbs of a feather, the line would have been covered by the sand to such an extent as to stop the running of the trains. As soon as this region of sandhills had been passed we were again on the level plain on which the rails had been laid so easily.

Gradually my companions go to sleep, and our carriage is transformed into a sleeping car.

I then return to my Roumanian. Ought I to attempt to see him to-night? Undoubtedly; and not only to satisfy a very natural curiosity, but also to calm his anxiety. In fact, knowing his secret is known to the person who spoke to him through the panel of his case, suppose the idea occurred to him to get out at one of the stations, give up his journey, and abandon his attempt to rejoin Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, so as to escape the company's pursuit? That is possible, after all, and my intervention may have done the poor fellow harm — to say nothing of my losing No. 11, one of the most valuable in my collection.

I am resolved to visit him before the coming dawn. But, in order to be as careful as possible, I will wait until the train has passed Tchardjoui, where it ought to arrive at twenty-seven past two in the morning. There we shall stop a quarter of an hour before proceeding towards the Amu-Daria. Popof will then retire to his den, and I shall be able to slip into the van, without fear of being seen.

How long the hours appear! Several times I have almost fallen asleep, and twice or thrice I have had to go out into the fresh air on the platform.

The train enters Tchardjoui Station to the minute. It is an important town of the Khanate of Bokhara, which the Transcaspian reached towards the end of 1886, seventeen months after the first sleeper was laid. We are not more than twelve versts from the Amu-Daria, and beyond that river I shall enter on my adventure.

I have said that the stop at Tchardjoui ought to last a quarter of an hour. A few travelers alight, for they have booked to this town which contains about thirty thousand inhabitants. Others get in to proceed to Bokhara and Samarkand, but these are only second-class passengers. This produces a certain amount of bustle on the platform.

I also get out and take a walk up and down by the side of the front van, and I notice the door silently open and shut. A man creeps out on to the platform and slips away through the station, which is dimly lighted by a few petroleum lamps.

It is my Roumanian. It can be no one else. He has not been seen, and there he is, lost among the other travelers. Why this escape? Is it to renew his provisions at the refreshment bar? On the contrary, is not his intention, as I am afraid it is, to get away from us?

Shall I stop him? I will make myself known to him; promise to help him. I will speak to him in French, in English, in German, in Russian — as he pleases. I will say to him: “My friend, trust to my discretion; I will not betray you. Provisions? I will bring them to you during the night. Encouragements? I will heap them on you as I will the refreshments. Do not forget that Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, evidently the most lovely of Roumanians, is expecting you at Pekin, etc.”

Behold me then following him without appearing to do so. Amid all this hurry to and fro he is in little danger of being noticed. Neither Popof nor any of the company’s servants would suspect him to be a swindler. Is he going towards the gate to escape me?

No! He only wants to stretch his legs better than he can do in the van. After an imprisonment which has lasted since he left Baku — that is to say, about sixty hours — he has earned ten minutes of freedom.

He is a man of middle height, lithe in his movements, and with a gliding kind of walk. He could roll himself up like a cat and find quite room enough in his case. He wears an old vest, his trousers are held up by a belt, and his cap is a fur one — all of dark color.

I am at ease regarding his intentions. He returns towards the van, mounts the platform, and shuts the door gently behind him. As soon as the train is on the move I will knock at the panel, and this time —

More of the unexpected. Instead of waiting at Tchardjoui one-quarter of an hour we have to wait three. A slight injury to one of the brakes of the engine has had to be repaired, and, notwithstanding the German baron’s remonstrances, we do not leave the station before half-past three, as the day is beginning to dawn.

It follows from this that if I cannot visit the van I shall at least see the Amou-Daria.

The Amou-Daria is the Oxus of the Ancients, the rival of the Indus and the Ganges. It used to be a tributary of the Caspian, as shown on the maps, but now it flows into the Sea of Aral. Fed by the snows and rains of the Pamir plateau, its sluggish waters flow between low clay cliffs and banks of sand. It is the River-Sea in the Turkoman tongue, and it is about two thousand five hundred kilometres long.

The train crosses it by a bridge a league long, the line being a hundred feet and more above its surface at low water, and the roadway trembles on the thousand piles which support it, grouped in fives between each of the spans, which are thirty feet wide.

In ten months, at a cost of thirty-five thousand roubles, General Annenkof built this bridge, the most important one on the Grand Transasiatic.

The river is of a dull-yellow color. A few islands emerge from the current here and there, as far as one can see.

Popof pointed out the stations for the guards on the parapet of the bridge.

“What are they for?” I asked.

“For the accommodation of a special staff, whose duty it is to give the alarm in case of fire, and who are provided with fire-extinguishers.”

This is a wise precaution. Not only have sparks from the engines set it on fire in several places, but there are other disasters possible. A large number of boats, for the most part laden with petroleum, pass up and down the Amou-Daria, and it frequently happens that these become fire-ships. A constant watch is thus only too well justified, for if the bridge were destroyed, its reconstruction would take a year, during which the transport of passengers from one bank to the other would not be without its difficulties.

At last the train is going slowly across the bridge. It is broad daylight. The desert begins again at the second station, that of Karakoul. Beyond can be seen the windings of an affluent of the Amou-Daria, the Zarafchane, “the river that rolls with gold,” the course of which extends up to the valley of the Sogd, in that fertile oasis on which stands the city of Samarkand.

At five o’clock in the morning the train stops at the capital of the Khanate of Bokhara, eleven hundred and seven versts from Uzun Ada.

CHAPTER XI.

The Khanates of Bokhara and Samarkand used to form Sogdiana, a Persian satrapy inhabited by the Tadjiks and afterwards by the Usbegs, who invaded the country at the close of the fifteenth century. But another invasion, much more modern, is to be feared, that of the sands, now that the saksaouls intended to bring the sandhills to a standstill, have almost completely disappeared.

Bokhara, the capital of the Khanate, is the Rome of Islam, the Noble City, the City of Temples, the revered centre of the Mahometan religion. It was the town with the seven gates, which an immense wall surrounded in the days of its splendor, and its trade with China has always been considerable. Today it contains eighty thousand inhabitants.

I was told this by Major Noltitz, who advised me to visit the town in which he had lived several times. He could not accompany me, having several visits to pay. We were to start again at eleven o’clock in the morning. Five hours only to wait and the town some distance from the railway station! If the one were not connected with the other by a Decauville — a French name that sounds well in Sogdiana — time would fail for having even a slight glimpse of Bokhara.

It is agreed that the major will accompany me on the Decauville; and when we reach our destination he will leave me to attend to his private affairs. I cannot reckon on him. Is it possible that I shall have to do without the company of any of my numbers?

Let us recapitulate. My Lord Faruskiar? Surely he will not have to worry himself about the mandarin Yen Lou, shut up in this traveling catafalque! Fulk Ephrinell and Miss Horatia Bluett? Useless to think of them when we are talking about palaces, minarets, mosques and other archaeological inutilities. The actor and the actress? Impossible, for Madame Caterna is tired, and Monsieur Caterna will consider it his duty to stay with her. The two Celestials? They have already left the railway station. Ah! Sir Francis Trevellyan. Why not? I am not a Russian, and it is the Russians he cannot stand. I am not the man who conquered Central Asia. I will try and open this closely shut gentleman.

I approach him; I bow; I am about to speak. He gives me a slight inclination and turns on his heel and walks off! The animal!

But the Decauville gives its last whistle. The major and I occupy one of the open carriages. Half an hour afterwards we are through the Dervaze gate, the major leaves me, and here am I, wandering through the streets of Bokhara.

If I told the readers of the *Twentieth Century* that I visited the hundred schools of the town, its three hundred mosques — almost as many mosques as there are churches in Rome, they would not believe me, in spite of the confidence that reporters invariably receive. And so I will confine myself to the strict truth.

As I passed along the dusty roads of the city, I entered at a venture any of the buildings I found open. Here it was a bazaar where they sold cotton materials of alternate colors called “al adjas,” handkerchiefs as fine as spider webs, leather marvelously worked, silks the rustle of which is called “tchakhtchukh,” in Bokhariot, a name that Meilhac and Halevy did wisely in not adopting for their celebrated heroine. There it was a shop where you could buy sixteen sorts of tea, eleven of which are green, that being the only kind used in the interior of China and Central Asia, and among these the most sought after, the “louka,” one leaf of which will perfume a whole teapot.

Farther on I emerged on the quay of the Divanbeghi, reservoirs, bordering one side of a square planted with elms. Not far off is the Arche, which is the fortified palace of the emir and has a modern clock over the door. Arminius Vambery thought the palace had a gloomy look, and so do I, although the bronze cannon which defend the entrance appear more artistic than destructive. Do not forget that the Bokhariot soldiers, who perambulate the streets in white breeches, black tunics, astrakan caps, and enormous boots, are commanded by Russian officers freely decorated with golden embroidery.

Near the palace to the right is the largest mosque of the town, the mosque of Mesjidi Kelan, which was built by Abdallah Khan Sheibani. It is a world of cupolas, clock towers, and minarets, which the storks appear to make their home, and there are thousands of these birds in the town.

Rambling on at a venture I reach the shores of the Zarafchane on the northeast of the town. Its fresh limpid waters fill its bed once or twice a fortnight. Excellent this for health! When the waters appear men, women, children, dogs, bipeds, quadrupeds, bathe together in tumultuous promiscuousness, of which I can give no idea, nor recommend as an example.

Going northwest towards the centre of the city, I came across groups of dervishes with pointed hats, a big stick in their hands, their hair straggling in the breeze, stopping occasionally to take their part in a dance which would not have disgraced the fanatics of the Elysée Montmartre during a chant, literally vociferated, and accentuated by the most characteristic steps.

Let us not forget that I went through the book market. There are no less than twenty-six shops where printed books and manuscripts are sold, not by weight like tea or by the box like vegetables, but in the ordinary way. As to the numerous "medresses," the colleges which have given Bokhara its renown as a university — I must confess that I did not visit one. Weary and worn I sat down under the elms of the Divanbeghi quay. There, enormous samovars are continually on the boil, and for a "tenghe," or six pence three farthings, I refreshed myself with "shivin," a tea of superior quality which only in the slightest degree resembles that we consume in Europe, which has already been used, so they say, to clean the carpets in the Celestial Empire.

That is the only remembrance I retain of the Rome of Turkestan. Besides, as I was not able to stay a month there, it was as well to stay there only a few hours.

At half-past ten, accompanied by Major Noltitz, whom I found at the terminus of the Decauville, I alighted at the railway station, the warehouses of which are crowded with bales of Bokhariot cotton, and packs of Mervian wool.

I see at a glance that all my numbers are on the platform, including my German baron. In the rear of the train the Persians are keeping faithful guard round the mandarin Yen Lou. It seems that three of our traveling companions are observing them with persistent curiosity; these are the suspicious-looking Mongols we picked up at Douchak. As I pass near them I fancy that Faruskiar makes a signal to them, which I do not understand. Does he know them? Anyhow, this circumstance rather puzzles me.

The train is no sooner off than the passengers go to the dining car. The places next to mine and the major's, which had been occupied since the start, are now vacant, and the young Chinaman, followed by Dr. Tio-King, take advantage of it to come near us. Pan Chao knows I am on the staff of the *Twentieth Century*, and he is apparently as desirous of talking to me as I am of talking to him.

I am not mistaken. He is a true Parisian of the boulevard, in the clothes of a Celestial. He has spent three years in the world where people amuse themselves, and also in the world where they learn. The only son of a rich merchant in Pekin, he has traveled under the wing of this Tio-King, a doctor of some sort, who is really the most stupid of baboons, and of whom his pupil makes a good deal of fun.

Dr. Tio-King, since he discovered Cornaro's little book on the quays of the Seine, has been seeking to make his existence conform to the "art of living long in perfect health." This credulous Chinaman of the Chinese had become thoroughly absorbed in the study of the precepts so magisterially laid down by the noble Venetian. And Pan Chao is always chaffing him thereupon, though the good man takes no notice.

We were not long before we had a few specimens of his monomania, for the doctor, like his pupil, spoke very good French.

"Before we begin," said Pan Chao, "tell me, doctor, how many fundamental rules there are for finding the correct amounts of food and drink?"

"Seven, my young friend," replied Tio-King with the greatest seriousness. "The first is to take only just so much nourishment as to enable you to perform the purely spiritual functions."

"And the second?"

“The second is to take only such an amount of nourishment as will not cause you to feel any dullness, or heaviness, or bodily lassitude. The third — — ”

“Ah! We will wait there, to-day, if you don’t mind, doctor,” replied Pan Chao. “Here is a certain maintuy, which seems rather good, and — — ”

“Take care, my dear pupil! That is a sort of pudding made of hashed meat mixed with fat and spices. I fear it may be heavy — — ”

“Then, doctor, I would advise you not to eat it. For my part, I will follow these gentlemen.”

And Pan Chao did — and rightly so, for the maintuy was delicious — while Doctor Tio-King contented himself with the lightest dish on the bill of fare. It appeared from what Major Noltitz said that these maintuys fried in fat are even more savory. And why should they not be, considering that they take the name of “zenbusis,” which signifies “women’s kisses?”

When Caterna heard this flattering phrase, he expressed his regret that zenbusis did not figure on the breakfast table. To which his wife replied by so tender a look that I ventured to say to him:

“You can find zenbusis elsewhere than in Central Asia, it seems to me.”

“Yes,” he replied, “they are to be met with wherever there are lovable women to make them.”

And Pan Chao added, with a laugh:

“And it is again at Paris that they make them the best.”

He spoke like a man of experience, did my young Celestial.

I looked at Pan Chao; I admired him.

How he eats! What an appetite! Not of much use to him are the observations of the doctor on the immoderate consumption of his radical humidity.

The breakfast continued pleasantly. Conversation turned on the work of the Russians in Asia. Pan Chao seemed to me well posted up in their progress. Not only have they made the Transcaspian, but the Transsiberian, surveyed in 1888, is being made, and is already considerably advanced. For the first route through Iscim, Omsk, Tomsk, Krasnojarsk, Nijni-Ufimsk, and Irkutsk, a second route has been substituted more to the south, passing by Orenburg, Akmolinsk, Minoussinsk, Abatoni and Vladivostock. When these six thousand kilometres of rails are laid, Petersburg will be within six days of the Japan Sea. And this Transsiberian, which will exceed in length the Transcontinental of the United States, will cost no more than seven hundred and fifty millions.

It will be easily imagined that this conversation on the Russian enterprise is not very pleasing to Sir Francis Trevellyan. Although he says not a word and does not lift his eyes from the plate, his long face flushes a little.

“Well, gentlemen,” said I, “what we see is nothing to what our nephews will see. We are traveling to-day on the Grand Transasiatic. But what will it be when the Grand Transasiatic is in connection with the Grand Transafrican.”

“And how is Asia to be united by railway with Africa?” asked Major Noltitz.

“Through Russia, Turkey, Italy, France and Spain. Travelers will go from Pekin to the Cape of Good Hope without change of carriage.”

“And the Straits of Gibraltar?” asked Pan Chao.

At this Sir Francis Trevellyan raised his ears.

“Yes, Gibraltar?” said the major.

“Go under it!” said I. “A tunnel fifteen kilometres long is a mere nothing! There will be no English Parliament to oppose it as there is to oppose that between Dover and Calais! It will all be done some day, all — and that will justify the vein:

“*Omnia jam fieri quae posse negabam*.”

My sample of Latin erudition was only understood by Major Noltitz, and I heard Caterna say to his wife:

“That is volapuk.”

“There is no doubt,” said Pan Chap, “that the Emperor of China has been well advised in giving his hand to the Russians instead of the English. Instead of building strategic railways in Manchouria, which would never have had the approbation of the czar, the Son of Heaven has preferred to continue the Transcaspian across China and Chinese Turkestan.”

“And he has done wisely,” said the major. “With the English it is only the trade of India that goes to Europe, with the Russians it is that of the whole Asiatic continent.”

I look at Sir Francis Trevellyan. The color heightens on his cheeks, but he makes no movement. I ask if these attacks in a language he understands perfectly will not oblige him to speak out. And yet I should have been very much embarrassed if I had had to bet on or against it.

Major Noltitz then resumed the conversation by pointing out the incontestable advantages of the Transasiatic with regard to the trade between Grand Asia and Europe in the security and rapidity of its communications. The old hatreds will gradually disappear under European influence, and in that respect alone Russia deserves the approbation of every civilized nation. Is there not a justification for those fine words of Skobeleff after the capture of Gheok Tepe, when the conquered feared reprisals from the victors: “In Central Asian politics we know no outcasts?”

“And in that policy,” said the major, “lies our superiority over England.”

“No one can be superior to the English.”

Such was the phrase I expected from Sir Francis Trevellyan — the phrase I understand English gentlemen always use when traveling about the world. But he said nothing. But when I rose to propose a toast to the Emperor of Russia and the Russians, and the Emperor of China and the Chinese, Sir Francis Trevellyan abruptly left the table. Assuredly I was not to have the pleasure of hearing his voice to-day.

I need not say that during all this talk the Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer was fully occupied in clearing dish after dish, to the extreme amazement of Doctor Tio-King. Here was a German who had never read the precepts of Cornaro, or, if he had read them, transgressed them in the most outrageous fashion.

For the same reason, I suppose, neither Faruskiar nor Ghangir took part in it, for they only exchanged a few words in Chinese.

But I noted rather a strange circumstance which did not escape the major.

We were talking about the safety of the Grand Transasiatic across Central Asia, and Pan Chao had said that the road was not so safe as it might be beyond the Turkestan frontier, as, in fact, Major Noltitz had told me. I was then led to ask if he had ever heard of the famous Ki Tsang before his departure from Europe.

“Often,” he said, “for Ki Tsang was then in the Yunnan provinces. I hope we shall not meet him on our road.”

My pronunciation of the name of the famous bandit was evidently incorrect, for I hardly understood Pan Chao when he repeated it with the accent of his native tongue.

But one thing I can say, and that is that when he uttered the name of Ki Tsang, Faruskiar knitted his brows and his eyes flashed. Then, with a look at his companion, he resumed his habitual indifference to all that was being said around him.

Assuredly I shall have some difficulty in making the acquaintance of this man. These Mongols are as close as a safe, and when you have not the word it is difficult to open them.

The train is running at high speed. In the ordinary service, when it stops at the eleven stations between Bokhara and Samarkand, it takes a whole day over the distance. This time it took but three hours to cover the two hundred kilometres which separate the two towns, and at two o’clock in the afternoon it entered the illustrious city of Tamerlane.

CHAPTER XII.

Samarkand is situated in the rich oasis watered by the Zarafchane in the valley of Sogd. A small pamphlet I bought at the railway station informs me that this great city is one of the four sites in which geographers “agree” to place the terrestrial paradise. I leave this discussion to the exegetists of the profession.

Burned by the armies of Cyrus in B.C. 329, Samarkand was in part destroyed by Genghis Khan, about 1219. When it had become the capital of Tamerlane, its position, which certainly could not be improved upon, did not prevent its being ravaged by the nomads of the eighteenth century. Such alternations of grandeur and ruin have been the fate of all the important towns of Central Asia.

We had five hours to stop at Samarkand during the day, and that promised something pleasant and several pages of copy. But there was no time to lose. As usual, the town is double; one half, built by the Russians, is quite modern, with its verdant parks, its avenues of birches, its palaces, its cottages; the other is the old town, still rich in magnificent remains of its splendor, and requiring many weeks to be conscientiously studied.

This time I shall not be alone. Major Noltitz is free; he will accompany me. We had already left the station when the Caternas presented themselves.

“Are you going for a run round the town, Monsieur Claudius?” asked the actor, with a comprehensive gesture to show the vast surroundings of Samarkand.

“Such is our intention.”

“Will Major Noltitz and you allow me to join you?”

“How so?”

“With Madame Caterna, for I do nothing without her.”

“Our explorations will be so much the more agreeable,” said the major, with a bow to the charming actress.

“And,” I added, with a view to save fatigue and gain time, “my dear friends, allow me to offer you an arba.”

“An arba!” exclaimed Caterna, with a swing of his hips. “What may that be, an arba?”

“One of the local vehicles.”

“Let us have an arba.”

We entered one of the boxes on wheels which were on the rank in front of the railway station. Under promise of a good “silao,” that is to say, something to drink, the yemtchik or coachman undertook to give wings to his two doves, otherwise his two little horses, and we went off at a good pace.

On the left we leave the Russian town, arranged like a fan, the governor’s house, surrounded by beautiful gardens, the public park and its shady walks, then the house of the chief of the district which is just on the boundary of the old town.

As we passed, the major showed us the fortress, round which our arba turned. There are the graves of the Russian soldiers who died in the attack in 1868, near the ancient palace of the Emir of Bokhara.

From this point, by a straight narrow road, our arba reached the Righistan square, which, as my pamphlet says, “must not be confounded with the square of the same name at Bokhara.”

It is a fine quadrilateral, perhaps a little spoiled by the fact that the Russians have paved it and ornamented it with lamps — which would certainly, please Ephrinell, if he decides upon visiting Samarkand. On three sides of the square are the well-preserved ruins of three medresses, where the mollahs give children a good education. These medresses — there are seventeen of these colleges at Samarkand, besides eighty-five mosques — are called Tilla-Kari, Chir Dar and Oulong Beg.

In a general way they resemble each other; a portico in the middle leading to interior courts, built of enameled brick, tinted pale blue or pale yellow, arabesques designed in gold lines on a ground of turquoise blue, the dominant color; leaning minarets threatening to fall and never falling, luckily for their coating of enamel, which the intrepid traveller Madame De Ujfalvy-Bourdon, declares to be much superior to the finest of our crackle enamels — and these are not vases to put on a mantelpiece or on a stand, but minarets of good height.

These marvels are still in the state described by Marco Polo, the Venetian traveler of the thirteenth century.

“Well, Monsieur Bombarnac,” asked the major, “do you not admire the square?”

“It is superb,” I say.

“Yes,” says the actor, “what a splendid scene it would make for a ballet, Caroline! That mosque, with a garden alongside, and that other one with a court — — ”

“You are right, Adolphe,” said his wife; “but we would have to put those towers up straight and have a few luminous fountains.”

“Excellent notion, Caroline! Write us a drama, Monsieur Claudius, a spectacle piece, with a third act in this square. As for the title — ”

“Tamerlane is at once suggested!” I reply. The actor made a significant grimace. The conqueror of Asia seemed to him to be wanting in actuality. And leaning toward his wife, Caterna hastened to say:

“As a scene, I have seen a better at the Porte-Saint Martin, in the *Fils de la Nuit* — ”

“And I have at the Châtelet in *Michael Strogoff*.”

We cannot do better than leave our comedians alone. They look at everything from the theatrical point of view. They prefer the air gauze and the sky-blue foliage, the branches of the stage trees, the agitated canvas of the ocean waves, the prospectives of the drop scene, to the sites the curtain represents, a set scene by Cambon or Rubé or Jambon to no matter what landscape; in short, they would rather have art than nature. And I am not the man to try and change their opinions on the subject.

As I have mentioned the name of Tamerlane, I asked Major Noltitz if we were going to visit the tomb of the famous Tartar. The major replied that we would see it as we returned; and our itinerary brought us in front of the Samarkand bazaar.

The arba stopped at one of the entrances to this vast rotunda, after taking us in and out through the old town, the houses of which consist of only one story, and seem very comfortless.

Here is the bazaar in which are accumulated enormous quantities of woollen stuffs, velvet-pile carpets in the brightest of colors, shawls of graceful patterns, all thrown anyhow on the counters of the shops. Before these samples the sellers and buyers stand, noisily arriving at the lowest price. Among the fabrics is a silk tissue known as Kanaous, which is held in high esteem by the Samarkand ladies, although they are very far from appreciating the similar product of Lyons manufacture, which it excels neither in quality nor appearance.

Madame Caterna appeared extraordinarily tempted, as if she were among the counters of the *Bon Marché* or the *Louvre*.

“That stuff would do well for my costume in the *Grande Duchesse*!” she said.

“And those slippers would suit me down to the ground as Ali Bajou in the *Caid*!” said Caterna.

And while the actress was investing in a remnant of Kanaous, the actor paid for a pair of those green slippers which the Turkomans wear when they enter a mosque. But this was not without recourse to the kindness of the major, who acted as interpreter between the Caternas and the merchant, whose “Yoks! Yoks!” sounded like a lot of crackers in his large mouth.

The arba started again and went off toward the square of Ribi-Khanym, where stands the mosque of that name which was that of one of Tamerlane’s wives. If the square is not as regular as that of Righistan, it is in my opinion rather more picturesque. There are strangely grouped ruins, the remains of arcades, half-unroofed cupolas, columns without capitals, the shafts of which have retained all the brightness of their enamelling; then a long row of elliptical porticoes closing in one side of the vast quadrilateral. The effect is really grand, for these old monuments of the splendor of Samarkand stand out from a background of sky and verdure that you would seek in vain, even at the Grand Opera, if our actor does not object. But I must confess we experienced a deeper impression when, toward the northeast of the town, our arba deposited us in front of the finest of the mosques of Central Asia, which dates from the year 795 of the Hegira (1392 of our era).

I cannot, writing straight away, give you an idea of this marvel. If I were to thread the words, mosaics, pediments, spandrels, bas-reliefs, niches, enamels, corbels, all on a string in a sentence, the picture would still be incomplete. It is strokes of the brush that are wanted, not strokes of the pen. Imagination remains abashed at the remains of the most splendid architecture left us by Asiatic genius.

It is in the farthest depths of this mosque that the faithful go to worship at the tomb of Kassimben-Abbas, a venerated Mussulman saint, and we are told that if we open the tomb a living man will come forth from it in all his glory. But the experiment has not been made as yet, and we prefer to believe in the legend.

We had to make an effort to throw off our contemplative mood; and fortunately the Caternas did not trouble our ecstasy by evoking any of their recollections of the theater. Doubtless they had shared in our impressions.

We resumed our seats in the arba, and the yemtchik took us at the gallop of his doves along shady roads which the Russian administration keeps up with care.

Along these roads we met and passed many figures worthy of notice. Their costumes were varied enough, “Khalats,” in startling colors, and their heads enturbaned most coquettishly. In a population of forty thousand there was, of course, a great mingling of races. Most of them seemed to be Tadjiks of Iranian origin. They are fine strong fellows, whose white skin has disappeared beneath the tan of the open air and the unclouded sun. Here is what Madame de Ujfalvy-Bourdon says of them in her interesting book: “Their hair is generally black, as is also their beard, which is very abundant. Their eyes are never turned up at the corners, and are almost always brown. The nose is very handsome, the lips are not thick, the teeth are small. The forehead is high, broad, and the general shape of the face is oval.”

And I cannot refrain from mentioning a note of approval from Caterna when he saw one of these Tadjiks superbly draped in his many-colored Khalat.

“What a splendid lead! What an admirable Melingue! You can see him in Richepins’s *Nana Sahib* or Meurice’s *Schamyl*.”

“He would make a lot of money! replied Madame Caterna.

“He just would — I believe you, Caroline!” replied the enthusiastic actor.

And for him, as for all other theatrical folks, is not the money the most serious and the least disputable manifestation of the dramatic art?

It was already five o clock, and in this incomparable city of Samarkand scene succeeded scene. There! I am getting into that way of looking at it now. Certainly the spectacle should finish before midnight. But as we start at eight o’clock, we shall have to lose the end of the piece. But as I considered that, for the honor of special correspondents in general, it would never do to have been at Samarkand without seeing Tamerlane’s tomb, our arba returned to the southwest, and drew up near the mosque of Gour Emir, close to the Russian town. What a sordid neighborhood, what a heap of mud huts and straw huts, what an agglomeration of miserable hovels we have just been through!

The mosque has a grand appearance. It is crowned with its dome, in which the raw blue of the turquoise is the chief color, and which looks like a Persian cap; and on its only minaret, which has now lost its head, there glitter the enamelled arabesques which have retained their ancient purity.

We visited the central hall beneath the cupola. There stands the tomb of the lame Timour the Conqueror. Surrounded by the four tombs of his sons and his patron saint, beneath a stone of black jade covered with inscriptions, whiten the bones of Tamerlane, in whose name is gathered the whole fourteenth century of Asiatic history. The walls of the hall are covered with slabs of jade, on which are engraven innumerable scrolls of foliage, and in the southwest stands a little column marking the direction of Mecca. Madame De Ujfalvy-Bourdon has justly compared this part of the mosque of Gour Emir to a sanctuary, and we had the same impression. This impression took a still more religious tone when, by a dark and narrow stairway, we descended to the crypt in which are the tombs of Tamerlane’s wives and daughters.

“But who was this Tamerlane?” asked Caterna. “This Tamerlane everybody is talking about.”

“Tamerlane,” replied Major Noltitz, “was one of the greatest conquerors of the world, perhaps the greatest, if you measure greatness by the extent of the conquests. Asia to the east of the Caspian Sea, Persia and the provinces to the north of it, Russia to the Sea of Azof, India, Syria, Asia Minor, China, on which he threw two hundred thousand men — he had a whole continent as the theater of his wars.”

“And he was lame!” said Madame Caterna.

“Yes, madame, like Genseric, like Shakespeare, like Byron, like Walter Scott, like Talleyrand, but that did not hinder his getting along in the world. But how fanatic and bloodthirsty he was! History affirms that at Delhi he massacred a hundred thousand captives, and at Bagdad he erected an obelisk of eighty thousand heads.”

“I like the one in the Place de la Concorde better,” said Caterna, “and that is only in one piece.”

At this observation we left the mosque of Gour Emir, and as it was time to “hurry up,” as our actor said, the arba was driven briskly toward the station.

For my part, in spite of the observations of the Caternas, I was fully in tone with the local color due to the marvels of Samarkand, when I was roughly shaken back into modern reality.

In the streets — yes — in the streets near the railway station, in the very center of Tamerlane’s capital, I passed two bicyclists.

“Ah!” exclaimed Caterna. “Messrs. Wheeler!”

And they were Turkomans!

After that nothing more could be done than leave a town so dishonored by the masterpiece of mechanical locomotion, and that was what we did at eight o’clock.

CHAPTER XIII.

We dined an hour after the train left. In the dining car were several newcomers, among others two negroes whom Caterna began to speak of as darkies.

None of these travelers, Popof told me, would cross the Russo-Chinese frontier, so that they interested me little or not at all.

During dinner, at which all my numbers were present — I have twelve now, and I do not suppose I shall go beyond that — I noticed that Major Noltitz continued to keep his eye on his lordship Faruskiar. Had he begun to suspect him? Was it of any importance in his opinion that this Mongol seemed to know, without appearing to do so, the three second-class travelers, who were also Mongols? Was his imagination working with the same activity as mine, and was he taking seriously what was only a joke on my part? That I, a man of letters, a chronicler in search of scenes and incidents, should be pleased to see in his personage a rival of the famous Ki Tsang, or Ki Tsang himself, could be understood; but that he, a serious man, doctor in the Russian army, should abandon himself to such speculations no one would believe. Never mind now, we shall have something more to say about it by and by.

As for me, I had soon forgotten all about the Mongol for the man in the case. Tired as I am after that long run through Samarkand, if I get a chance to visit him to-night I will.

Dinner being over, we all begin to make ourselves comfortable for the night, with the intention of sleeping till we reach Tachkend.

The distance from Samarkand to Tachkend is three hundred kilometres. The train will not get in there before seven o’clock in the morning. It will stop three times at small stations for water and fuel — circumstances favorable to the success of my project. I add that the night is dark, the sky overcast, no moon, no stars. It threatens rain; the wind is freshening. It is no time for walking on platforms, and nobody walks there. It is important to choose the moment when Popof is sound asleep.

It is not necessary for the interview to be a long one. That the gallant fellow should be reassured — that is the essential point — and he will be, as soon as I have made his acquaintance. A little information concerning him, concerning Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, whence he comes, why he is going to Pekin, why he chose such a mode of transport, his provisions for the journey, how he gets into the case, his age, his trade, his birthplace, what he has done in the past, what he hopes to do in the future, etc. etc. and I have done all that a conscientious reporter can do. That is what I want to know; that is what I will ask him. It is not so very much.

And in the first place let us wait until the car is asleep. That will not be long, for my companions are more or less fatigued by the hours they have spent in Samarkand. The beds were ready immediately after dinner. A few of the passengers tried a smoke on the platform, but the gust drove them in very quickly. They have all taken up their places under the curtained lamps, and toward half-past ten the respiration of some and the snoring of others are blended with the continued grinding of the train on the steel rails.

I remained outside last of all, and Popof exchanged a few words with me.

“We shall not be disturbed to-night,” he said to me, “and I would advise you to make the most of it. To-morrow night we shall be running through the defiles of the Pamir, and we shall not travel so quietly, I am afraid.”

“Thanks, Popof, I will take your advice, and sleep like a marmot.”

Popof wished me good night and went into his cabin.

I saw no use in going back into the car, and remained on the platform. It was impossible to see anything either to the left or right of the line. The oasis of Samarkand had already been passed, and the rails were now laid across a long horizontal plain. Many hours would elapse before the train reached the Syr Daria, over which the line passes by a bridge like that over the Amou-Daria, but of less importance.

It was about half-past eleven when I decided to open the door of the van, which I shut behind me.

I knew that the young Roumanian was not always shut up in his box, and the fancy might just have taken him to stretch his limbs by walking from one end to the other of the van.

The darkness is complete. No jet of light filters through the holes of the case. That seems all the better for me. It is as well that my No. 11 should not be surprised by too sudden an apparition. He is doubtless asleep. I will give two little knocks on the panel, I will awake him, and we will explain matters before he can move.

I feel as I go. My hand touches the case; I place my ear against the panel and I listen.

There is not a stir, not a breath! Is my man not here? Has he got away? Has he slipped out at one of the stations without my seeing him? Has my news gone with him? Really, I am most uneasy; I listen attentively.

No! He has not gone. He is in the case. I hear distinctly his regular and prolonged respiration. He sleeps. He sleeps the sleep of the innocent, to which he has no right, for he ought to sleep the sleep of the swindler of the Grand Transasiatic.

I am just going to knock when the locomotive’s whistle emits its strident crow, as we pass through a station. But the train is not going to stop, I know, and I wait until the whistling has ceased.

I then give a gentle knock on the panel.

There is no reply.

However, the sound of breathing is not so marked as before.

I knock more loudly.

This time it is followed by an involuntary movement of surprise and fright.

“Open, open!” I say in Russian.

There is no reply.

“Open!” I say again. “It is a friend who speaks. You have nothing to fear!”

If the panel is not lowered, as I had hoped, there is the crack of a match being lighted and a feeble light appears in the case.

I look at the prisoner through the holes in the side.

There is a look of alarm on his face; his eyes are haggard. He does not know whether he is asleep or awake.

“Open, my friend, I say, open and have confidence. I have discovered your secret. I shall say nothing about it. On the other hand, I may be of use to you.”

The poor man looks more at ease, although he does not move.

“You are a Roumanian, I think,” I add, “and I am a Frenchman.”

“Frenchman? You are a Frenchman?”

And this reply was given in my own language, with a foreign accent.

One more bond between us.

The panel slips along its groove, and by the light of a little lamp I can examine my No. 11, to whom I shall be able to give a less arithmetical designation.

“No one can see us, nor hear us?” he asked in a half-stifled voice.

“No one.”

“The guard?”

“Asleep.”

My new friend takes my hands, he clasps them. I feel that he seeks a support. He understands he can depend on me. And he murmurs:

“Do not betray me — do not betray me.”

“Betray you, my boy? Did not the French newspapers sympathize with that little Austrian tailor, with those two Spanish sweethearts, who sent themselves by train in the way you are doing? Were not subscriptions opened in their favor? And can you believe that I, a journalist — — ”

“You are a journalist?”

“Claudius Bombarnac, special correspondent of the *Twentieth Century.”*

“A French journal — — ”

“Yes, I tell you.”

“And you are going to Pekin?”

“Through to Pekin.”

“Ah! Monsieur Bombarnac, Providence has sent you onto my road.”

“No, it was the managers of my journal, and they delegated to me the powers they hold from Providence, courage and confidence. Anything I can do for you I will.”

“Thanks, thanks.”

“What is your name?”

“Kinko.”

“Kinko? Excellent name!”

“Excellent?”

“For my articles! You are a Roumanian, are you not?”

“Roumanian of Bucharest.”

“But you have lived in France?”

“Four years in Paris, where I was apprentice to an upholsterer in the Faubourg Saint Antoine.”

“And you went back to Bucharest?”

“Yes, to work at my trade there until the day came when it was impossible for me to resist the desire to leave — ”

“To leave? Why?”

“To marry!”

“To marry — Mademoiselle Zinca — ”

“Zinca?”

“Yes, Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, China!”

“You know?”

“Certainly. The address is on the box.”

“True.”

“As to Mademoiselle Zinca Klork — ”

“She is a young Roumanian. I knew her in Paris, where she was learning the trade of a milliner. Oh, charming — ”

“I am sure upon it. You need not dwell on that.”

“She also returned to Bucharest, until she was invited to take the management of a dressmaker’s at Pekin. We loved, monsieur; she went — and we were separated for a year. Three weeks ago she wrote to me. She was getting on over there. If I could go out to her, I would do well. We should get married without delay. She had saved something. I would soon earn as much as she had. And here I am on the road — in my turn — for China.”

“In this box?”

“What would you have, Monsieur Bombarnac?” asked Kinko, reddening. “I had only money enough to buy a packing case, a few provisions, and get myself sent off by an obliging friend. It costs a thousand francs to go from Tiflis to Pekin. But as soon as I have gained them, the company will be repaid, I assure you.”

“I believe you, Kinko, I believe you; and on your arrival at Pekin?”

“Zinca has been informed. The box will be taken to Avenue Cha-Coua, and she — ”

“Will pay the carriage?”

“Yes.”

“And with pleasure, I will answer for it.”

“You may be sure of it, for we love each other so much.”

“And besides, Kinko, what would one not do for a sweetheart who consents to shut himself up in a box for a fortnight, and arrives labelled ‘Glass,’ ‘Fragile,’ ‘Beware of damp — ’”

“Ah, you are making fun of a poor fellow.”

“Not at all; and you may rest assured I will neglect nothing which will enable you to arrive dry and in one piece at Mademoiselle Zinca Klork’s — in short, in a perfect state of preservation!”

“Again I thank you,” said Kinko, pressing my hands. “Believe me, you will not find me ungrateful.”

“Ah! friend Kinko, I shall be paid, and more than paid!”

“And how?”

“By relating, as soon as I can do so without danger to you, the particulars of your journey from Tiflis to Pekin. Think now — what a heading for a column:

‘A LOVER IN A BOX!

ZINCA AND KINKO! !

1,500 LEAGUES THROUGH CENTRAL ASIA IN A

LUGGAGE VAN! ! !’”

The young Roumanian could not help smiling.

“You need not be in too much of a hurry!” he said.

“Never fear! Prudence and discretion, as they say at the matrimonial agencies.”

Then I went to the door of the van to see that we were in no danger of surprise, and then the conversation was resumed. Naturally, Kinko asked me how I had discovered his secret. I told him all that had passed on the steamer during the voyage across the Caspian. His breathing had betrayed him. The idea that at first I took him for a wild beast seemed to amuse him. A wild beast! A faithful poodle, rather! Then with a sneeze he went up the animal scale to human rank.

“But,” said he to me, lowering his voice, “two nights ago I thought all was lost. The van was closed. I had just lighted my little lamp, and had begun my supper when a knock came against the panel — — ”

“I did that, Kinko, I did that. And that night we should have become acquainted if the train had not run into a dromedary.”

“It was you! I breathe again!” said Kinko. “In what dreams I have lived! It was known that some one was hidden in this box. I saw myself discovered, handed over to the police, taken to prison at Merv or Bokhara, and my little Zinca waiting for me in vain; and never should I see her again, unless I resumed the journey on foot. Well, I would have resumed, yes, I would.”

And he said it with such an air of resolution that it was impossible not to see that the young Roumanian had unusual spirit.

“Brave Kinko!” I answered. “I am awfully sorry to have caused you such apprehensions. Now you are at ease again, and I fancy your chances have improved now we have made friends.”

I then asked Kinko to show me how he managed in his box.

Nothing could be simpler or better arranged. At the bottom was a seat on which he sat with the necessary space for him to stretch his legs when he placed them obliquely; under the seat, shut in by a lid, were a few provisions, and table utensils reduced to a simple pocket knife and metal mug; an overcoat and a rug hung from a nail, and the little lamp he used at nighttime was hooked onto one of the walls.

The sliding panel allowed the prisoner to leave his prison occasionally. But if the case had been placed among other packages, if the porters had not deposited it with the precautions due to its fragility, he would not have been able to work the panel, and would have had to make a friend somehow before the end of the journey. Fortunately, there is a special Providence for lovers, and divine intervention in favor of Kinko and Zinca Klork was manifested in all its plenitude. He told me that very night he had taken a walk either in the van or else on the station platform where the train had stopped.

“I know that, Kinko. That was at Bokhara. I saw you!”

“You saw me?”

“Yes, and I thought you were trying to get away. But if I saw you, it was because I knew of your presence in the van, and I was there watching you, no one else having an idea of spying on you. Nevertheless, it was dangerous; do not do it again; let me replenish your larder when I get an opportunity.”

“Thank you, Monsieur Bombarnac, thank you! I do not believe I am in danger of being discovered, unless at the Chinese frontier — or rather at Kachgar.”

“And why?”

“The custom house is very keen on goods going into China. I am afraid they will come round the packages, and that my box — ”

“In fact, Kinko,” I replied, “there are a few difficult hours for you.”

“If they find me out?”

“I shall be there, and I will do all I can to prevent anything unpleasant happening.”

“Ah! Monsieur Bombarnac!” exclaimed Kinko, in a burst of gratitude. “How can I repay you?”

“Very easily, Kinko.”

“And in what way?”

“Ask me to your marriage with the lovely Zinca.”

“I will! And Zinca will embrace you.”

“She will be only doing her duty, friend Kinko, and I shall be only doing mine in returning two kisses for one.”

We exchanged a last grip of the hand; and, really, I think there were tears in the good fellow’s eyes when I left him. He put out his lamp, he pushed back the panel, then through the case I heard one more “thanks” and an “*au revoir*.”

I came out of the van, I shut the door, I assured myself that Popof was still asleep. In a few minutes, after a breath or two of the night air, I go into my place near Major Noltitz.

And before I close my eyes my last thought is that, thanks to the appearance of the episodic Kinko, the journey of their energetic “Special” will not be displeasing to my readers.

CHAPTER XIV.

In 1870 the Russians endeavored without success to establish a fair at Tachkend which would rival that at Nijni-Novgorod. Some twenty years later the attempt would have succeeded, and as a matter of fact the fair now exists, owing to the making of the Transcaspian to unite Samarkand and Tachkend.

And now not only do merchants with their merchandise crowd into this town, but pilgrims with their pilgrimage outfits. And there will be quite a procession, or rather an exodus, when the time comes for the Mussulman faithful to ride to Mecca by railway.

Meanwhile we are at Tachkend, and the time-table shows that we stop here two hours and a half.

Of course I shall not have time to visit the town, which would be worth my while to do. But I must confess that these cities of Turkestan are very much alike, and to have seen one is to have seen another, unless we can go into details.

Crossing a fertile region where poplars like distaffs rise gracefully erect, skirting fields bristling with vines, running by gardens where fruit trees abound, our train stops at the new town.

As is inevitable since the Russian conquest, there are two towns side by side at Tachkend as at Samarkand, as at Bokhara, as at Merv. Here the old town has tortuous streets, houses of mud and clay, bazaars of poor appearance, caravanserais built of bricks dried in the sun, a few mosques, and schools as numerous as if the czar had decreed by ukase that everything

French should be imitated. It is true that the scholars are wanting, but there is no want of schools.

The population of Tachkend does not differ very much from that met with in other parts of Turkestan. It comprises Sarthes, Usbegs, Tadjiks, Khirgizes, Nogais, Israelites, a few Afghans and Hindoos and — as may be naturally supposed — a fair supply of Russians.

It is perhaps at Tachkend that the Jews are gathered in the greatest numbers. And from the day that the town passed under Russian administration their situation has considerably improved. From that epoch dates the complete civil and political liberty they now enjoy.

I have only two hours to spare in visiting the town, and I do my work in true reporter style. You should have seen me dashing through the grand bazaar, a mere wooden building, which is crammed with Oriental stuffs, silk goods, metal ware, specimens of Chinese manufacture, including some very fine examples of porcelain.

In the streets of old Tachkend a certain number of women are to be met with. I need hardly say that there are no slaves in this country, much to the displeasure of the Mussulmans. Nowadays woman is free — even in her household.

“An old Turkoman,” said Major Noltitz, “once told me that a husband’s power is at an end now that he cannot thrash his wife without being threatened with an appeal to the czar; and that marriage is at an end!”

I do not know if the fair sex is still beaten, but the husbands know what they may expect if they knock their wives about. Will it be believed that these peculiar Orientals can see no progress in this prohibition to beat their wives? Perhaps they remember that the Terrestrial Paradise is not far off — a beautiful garden between the Tigris and Euphrates, unless it was between the Amou and the Syr-Daria. Perhaps they have not forgotten that mother Eve lived in this preadamite garden, and that if she had been thrashed a little before her first fault, she would probably not have committed it. But we need not enlarge on that.

I did not hear, as Madam Ujfalvy-Bourdon did, the band playing the *Pompiers de Nanterre* in the governor-general’s garden. No! On this occasion they were playing *Le Pere la Victoire*, and if these are not national airs they are none the less agreeable to French ears.

We left Tachkend at precisely eleven o’clock in the morning. The country through which the Grand Transasiatic is now running is not so monotonous. The plain begins to undulate, for we are approaching the outer ramifications of the eastern orographic system. We are nearing the tableland of the Pamirs. At the same time we continue at normal speed along this section of a hundred and fifty kilometres which separates us from Khodjend.

As soon as we are on the move I begin to think of Kinko. His little love romance has touched me to the heart. This sweetheart who sent himself off — this other sweetheart who is going to pay the expenses — I am sure Major Noltitz would be interested in these two turtle doves, one of which is in a cage; he would not be too hard on this defrauder of the company, he would be incapable of betraying him. Consequently I have a great desire to tell him of my expedition into the baggage van. But the secret is not mine. I must do nothing that might get Kinko into trouble.

And so I am silent, and to-night I will, if possible, take a few provisions to my packing case — to my snail in his shell, let us say. And is not the young Roumanian like a snail in his shell, for it is as much as he can do to get out of it?

We reach Khodjend about three in the afternoon. The country is fertile, green, carefully cultivated. It is a succession of kitchen gardens, which seem to be well-kept immense fields sown with clover, which yield four or five crops a year. The roads near the town are bordered with long rows of mulberry trees, which diversify the view with eccentric branches.

Again, this pair of cities, old and new. Both of them had only thirty thousand inhabitants in 1868 and they have from forty-five to fifty thousand now. Is it the influence of the surroundings which produces the increase of the birth rate? Is the province affected by the prolific example of the Celestial Empire? No! It is the progress of trade, the concentration of merchants of all nations onto these new markets.

Our halt at Khodjend has lasted three hours. I have made my professional visit and walked on the banks of the Syr-Dana. This river, which bathes the foot of the high mountains of Mogol-Taou, is crossed by a bridge, the middle section of which gives passage to ships of moderate tonnage.

The weather is very warm. The town being protected by its shelter of mountains, the breezes of the steppe cannot reach it, and it is one of the hottest places in Turkestan.

I met the Caternas, delighted with their excursion. The actor said to me in a tone of the best humor:

“Never shall I forget Khodjend, Monsieur Claudius.”

“And why will you never forget Khodjend, Monsieur Caterna?”

“Do you see these peaches?” he asked, showing me the fruit he was carrying.

“They are magnificent — ”

“And not dear! A kilo for four kopeks — that is to say, twelve centimes!”

“Eh!” I answer. “That shows that peaches are rather common in this country. That is the Asiatic apple and it was one of those apples that Mrs. Adam took a bite at — ”

“Then I excuse her!” said Madame Caterna, munching away at one of these delicious peaches.

After leaving Tachkend the railway had curved toward the south, so as to reach Khodjend; but after leaving town it curved to the east in the direction of Kokhan. It is at Tachkend that it is nearest to the Transsiberian, and a branch line is being made to Semipalatinsk to unite the railway systems of Central and Northern Asia.

Beyond we shall run due east, and by Marghelan and Och pass through the gorges of the Pamirs so as to reach the Turkesto-Chinese frontier.

The train had only just started when the travelers took their seats at the table, where I failed to notice any fresh arrival. We shall not pick up any more until we reach Kachgar. There the Russian cookery will give place to the Chinese, and although the name does not recall the nectar and ambrosia of Olympus, it is probable that we shall not lose by the change.

Ephrinell is in his usual place. Without going as far as familiarity, it is obvious that a close intimacy, founded on a similarity in tastes and aptitudes exists between Miss Horatia Bluett and the Yankee. There is no doubt, in our opinion, but what it will end in a wedding as soon as the train arrives. Both will have their romance of the rail. Frankly, I like that of Kinko and Zinca Klork much better. It is true the pretty Roumanian is not here!

We are all very friendly, and by "we" I mean my most sympathetic numbers, the major, the Caternas, young Pan Chao, who replies with very Parisian pleasantries to the actor's fooleries.

The dinner is a pleasant one and a good one. We learn what is the fourth rule formulated by Cornaco, that Venetian noble, and with the object of determining the right amount for drinking and eating. Pan Chao pressed the doctor on this subject, and Tio-King replied, with a seriousness truly buddhic:

"The rule is founded on the quantity of nourishment proportionate for each temperament as regards the difference of ages, and the strength and the food of various kinds."

"And for your temperament, doctor?" asked Caterna, "what is the right quantity?"

"Fourteen ounces of solid or liquid — — "

"An hour?"

"No, sir, a day," replied Tio-King. "And it was in this manner that the illustrious Cornaro lived from the age of thirty-six, so as to leave himself enough strength of body and mind to write his fourth treatise when he was eighty-five, and to live to a hundred and two."

"In that case, give me my fifth cutlet," said Pan Ghao, with a burst of laughter.

There is nothing more agreeable than to talk before a well-served table; but I must not forget to complete my notes regarding Kokham. We were not due there till nine o'clock, and that would be in the nighttime. And so I asked the major to give me some information regarding this town, which is the last of any importance in Russian Turkestan.

“I know it all the better,” said the major, “from having been in garrison there for fifteen months. It is a pity you have not time to visit it, for it remains very Asiatic, and there has not been time yet for it to grow a modern town. There is a square there unrivalled in Asia, a palace in great style, that of the old Khan of Khondajar, situated on a mound about a hundred yards high, and in which the governor has left his Sarthe artillery. It is considered wonderful, and there is good reason for it. You will lose by not going there a rare opportunity of bringing in the high-flown words of your language in description: the reception hall transformed into a Russian church, a labyrinth of rooms with the floors of the precious Karagatch wood, the rose pavilion, in which visitors receive a truly Oriental hospitality, the interior court of Moorish decoration recalling the adorable architectural fancies of the Alhambra, the terraces with their splendid views, the harem where the thousand wives of the Sultan — a hundred more than Solomon — live in peace together, the lacework of the fronts, the gardens with their shady walks under the ancient vines — that is what you would have seen — — ”

“And which I have already seen with your eyes, dear major,” said I. “My readers will not complain. Pray tell me if there are any bazaars in .”

“A Turkestan town without bazaars would be like London without its docks.”

“And Paris without its theaters!” said the actor.

“Yes; there are bazaars at Kokhan, one of them on the Sokh bridge, the two arms of which traverse the town and in it the finest fabrics of Asia are sold for tillahs of gold, which are worth three roubles and sixty kopeks of our money.”

“I am sure, major, that you are going to mention mosques after bazaars.”

“Certainly.”

“And medresses?”

“Certainly; but you must understand that some of them are as good as the mosques and medresses of Samarkand of Bokhara.”

I took advantage of the kindness of Major Noltitz and thanks to him, the readers of the *Twentieth Century* need not spend a night in Kokhan. I will leave my pen inundated with the solar rays of this city of which I could only see a vague outline.

The dinner lasted till rather late, and terminated in an unexpected manner by an offer from Caterna to recite a monologue.

I need scarcely say that the offer was gladly accepted.

Our train more and more resembled a small rolling town It had even its casino, this dining-car in which we were gathered at the moment. And it was thus in the eastern part of Turkestan, four hundred kilometres from the Pamir plateau, at dessert after our excellent dinner served in a saloon of the Grand Transasiatic, that the *Obsession* was given with remarkable talent by

Monsieur Caterna, grand premier comique, engaged at Shanghai theater for the approaching season.

“Monsieur,” said Pan Chao, “my sincere compliments. I have heard young Coquelin — — ”

“A master, monsieur; a master!” said Caterna.

“Whom you approach — — ”

“Respectfully — very respectfully!”

The bravos lavished on Caterna had no effect on Sir Francis Trevellyan, who had been occupying himself with onomatopic exclamations regarding the dinner, which he considered execrable. He was not amused — not even sadly, as his countrymen have been for four hundred years, according to Froissart. And yet nobody took any notice of this grumbling gentleman’s recriminations.

Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer had not understood a single word of this little masterpiece, and had he understood it, he would not have been able to appreciate this sample of Parisian monologomania.

As to my lord Faruskiar and his inseparable Ghangir, it seemed that in spite of their traditional reserve, the surprising grimaces, the significant gestures, the comical intonations, had interested them to a certain extent.

The actor had noticed it, and appreciated this silent admiration.

As he rose from the table he said to me:

“He is magnificent, this seigneur! What dignity! What a presence! What a type of the farthest East! I like his companion less — a third-rate fellow at the outside! But this superb Mongol! Caroline, cannot you imagine him as ‘Morales’ in the *Pirates of the Savannah*?”

“Not in that costume, at any rate,” said I.

“Why not, Monsieur Claudius? One day at Perpignan I played ‘Colonel de Montéclin’ in the *Closerie des Genets* in the costume of a Japanese officer — — ”

“And he was applauded!” added Madame Caterna.

During dinner the train had passed Kastakos station, situated in the center of a mountainous region. The road curved a good deal, and ran over viaducts and through tunnels — as we could tell by the noise.

A little time afterward Popof told us that we were in the territory of Ferganah, the name of the ancient khanate of Kokhan, which was annexed by Russia in 1876, with the seven districts that compose it. These districts, in which Sarthes are in the majority, are administered by prefects, sub-prefects, and mayors. Come, then, to Ferganah, to find all the machinery of the constitution of the year VIII.

Beyond there is an immense steppe, extending before our train. Madame de Ujfalvy-Bourdon has justly compared it to a billiard table, so perfect in its horizontality. Only it is not an ivory ball which is rolling over its surface, but an express of the Grand Transasiatic running at sixty kilometres an hour.

Leaving the station of Tchontchai behind, we enter station at nine o’clock in the evening. The stoppage is to last two hours. We get out onto the platform.

As we are leaving the car I am near Major Noltitz, who asks young Pan Chao:

“Have you ever heard of this mandarin Yen Lou, whose body is being taken to Pekin?”

“Never, major.”

“But he ought to be a personage of consideration, to be treated with the honor he gets.”

“That is possible,” said Pan Chao; “but we have so many personages of consideration in the Celestial Empire.”

“And so, this mandarin, Yen Lou?”

“I never heard him mentioned.”

Why did Major Noltitz ask the Chinaman this question? What was he thinking about?

CHAPTER XV.

Kokhan, two hours to stop. It is night. The majority of the travelers have already taken up their sleeping quarters in the car, and do not care to alight.

Here am I on the platform, walking the deck as I smoke. This is rather an important station, and from the engine house comes a more powerful locomotive than those which have brought the train along since we left Uzun Ada. These early engines were all very well as long as the line lay over an almost horizontal plain. But now we are among the gorges of the Pamir plateau, there are gradients of such steepness as to require more engine power.

I watch the proceedings, and when the locomotive has been detached with its tender, the baggage van — with Kinko in — is at the head of the train.

The idea occurs to me that the young Roumanian may perhaps venture out on the platform. It would be an imprudence for he runs the risk of being seen by the police, the “gardovois,” who move about taking a good look at the passengers. What my No. 11 had better do is to remain in his box, or at least in his van. I will go and get a few provisions, liquid and solid, and take them to him, even before the departure of the train, if it is possible to do so without fear of being noticed.

The refreshment room at the station is open, and Popof is not there. If he was to see me making purchases he would be astonished, as the dining car contains everything we might want.

At the bar I get a little cold meat, some bread, and a bottle of vodka.

The station is not well lighted. A few lamps give only a feeble light. Popof is busy with one of the railway men. The new engine has not yet been attached to the train. The moment seems favorable. It is useless to wait until we have left. If I can reach Kinko I shall be able to sleep through the night — and that will be welcome, I admit.

I step onto the train, and after assuring myself that no one is watching me, I enter the baggage van, saying as I do so:

“It is I.”

In fact it is as well to warn Kinko in case he is out of his box.

But he had not thought of getting out, and I advise him to be very careful.

He is very pleased at the provisions, for they are a change to his usual diet.

“I do not know how to thank you, Monsieur Bombarnac,” he says to me.

“If you do not know, friend Kinko,” I reply, “do not do it; that is very simple.”

“How long do we stop at ?”

“Two hours.”

“And when shall we be at the frontier?”

“To-morrow, about one in the afternoon.”

“And at Kachgar?”

“Fifteen hours afterward, in the night of the nineteenth.”

“There the danger is, Monsieur Bombarnac.”

“Yes, Kinko; for if it is difficult to enter the Russian possessions, it is no less difficult to get out of them, when the Chinese are at the gates. Their officials will give us a good look over before they will let us pass. At the same time they examine the passengers much more closely than they do their baggage. And as this van is reserved for the luggage going through to Pekin, I do not think you have much to fear. So good night. As a matter of precaution, I would rather not prolong my visit.”

“Good night, Monsieur Bombarnac, good night.”

I have come out, I have regained my couch, and I really did not hear the starting signal when the train began to move.

The only station of any importance which the railway passed before sunrise, was that of Marghelan, where the stoppage was a short one.

Marghelan, a populous town — sixty thousand inhabitants — is the real capital of Ferganah. That is owing to the fact that does not enjoy a good reputation for salubrity. It is of course, a double town, one town Russian, the other Turkoman. The latter has no ancient monuments, and no curiosities, and my readers must pardon my not having interrupted my sleep to give them a glance at it.

Following the valley of Schakhimardan, the train has reached a sort of steppe and been able to resume its normal speed.

At three o’clock in the morning we halt for forty-five minutes at Och station.

There I failed in my duty as a reporter, and I saw nothing. My excuse is that there was nothing to see.

Beyond this station the road reaches the frontier which divides Russian Turkestan from the Pamir plateau and the vast territory of the Kara-Khirghizes.

This part of Central Asia is continually being troubled by Plutonian disturbances beneath its surface. Northern Turkestan has frequently suffered from earthquake — the terrible experience of 1887 will not have been forgotten — and at Tachkend, as at Samarkand, I saw the traces of these commotions. In fact, minor oscillations are continually being observed, and this volcanic action takes place all along the fault, where lay the stores of petroleum and naphtha, from the Caspian Sea to the Pamir plateau.

In short, this region is one of the most interesting parts of Central Asia that a tourist can visit. If Major Noltitz had never been beyond Och station, at the foot of the plateau, he knew the district from having studied it on the modern maps and in the most recent books of travels. Among these I would mention those of Capus and Bonvalot — again two French names I am happy to salute out of France. The major is, nevertheless, anxious to see the country for himself, and although it is not yet six o’clock in the morning, we are both out on the gangway, glasses in hand, maps under our eyes.

The Pamir, or Bam-i-Douniah, is commonly called the “Roof of the World.” From it radiate the mighty chains of the Thian Shan, of the Kuen Lun, of the Kara Korum, of the Himalaya, of the Hindoo Koosh. This orographic system, four hundred kilometres across, which remained for so many years an impassable barrier, has been surmounted by Russian tenacity. The Sclav race and the Yellow race have come into contact.

We may as well have a little book learning on the subject; but it is not I that speak, but Major Noltitz.

The travelers of the Aryan people have all attempted to explore the plateau of the Pamir. Without going back to Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, what do we find? The English with Forsyth, Douglas, Biddulph, Younghusband, and the celebrated Gordon who died on the Upper Nile; the Russians with Fendchenko, Skobeleff, Prjevalsky, Grombtchevsky, General Pevtzoff, Prince Galitzin, the brothers Groum-Grjimailo; the French with Auvergne, Bonvalot, Capus, Papin, Breteuil, Blanc, Ridgway, O'Connor, Dutreuil de Rhins, Joseph Martin, Grenard, Edouard Blanc; the Swedes with Doctor Swen-Hedin.

This Roof of the World, one would say that some devil on two sticks had lifted it up in his magic hand to let us see its mysteries. We know now that it consists of an inextricable entanglement of valleys, the mean altitude of which exceeds three thousand metres; we know that it is dominated by the peaks of Gouroumdi and Kauffmann, twenty-two thousand feet high, and the peak of Tagarma, which is twenty-seven thousand feet; we know that it sends off to the west the Oxus and the Amou Daria, and to the east the Tarim; we know that it chiefly consists of primary rocks, in which are patches of schist and quartz, red sands of secondary age, and the clayey, sandy loess of the quaternary period which is so abundant in Central Asia.

The difficulties the Grand Transasiatic had in crossing this plateau were extraordinary. It was a challenge from the genius of man to nature, and the victory remained with genius. Through the gently sloping passes which the Kirghizes call "bels," viaducts, bridges, embankments, cuttings, tunnels had to be made to carry the line. Here are sharp curves, gradients which require the most powerful locomotives, here and there stationary engines to haul up the train with cables, in a word, a herculean labor, superior to the works of the American engineers in the defiles of the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains.

The desolate aspect of these territories makes a deep impression on the imagination. As the train gains the higher altitudes, this impression is all the more vivid. There are no towns, no villages — nothing but a few scattered huts, in which the Pamirian lives a solitary existence with his family, his horses, his herds of yaks, or “koutars,” which are cattle with horses’ tails, his diminutive sheep, his thick-haired goats. The moulting of these animals, if we may so phrase it, is a natural consequence of the climate, and they change the dressing gown of winter for the white fur coat of summer. It is the same with the dog, whose coat becomes whiter in the hot season.

As the passes are ascended, wide breaks in the ranges yield frequent glimpses of the more distant portions of the plateau. In many places are clumps of birches and junipers, which are the principal trees of the Pamir, and on the undulating plains grow tamarisks and sedges and mugwort, and a sort of reed very abundant by the sides of the saline pools, and a dwarf labiate called “terskenne” by the Kirghizes.

The major mentioned certain animals which constitute a somewhat varied fauna on the heights of the Pamir. It is even necessary to keep an eye on the platforms of the cars in case a stray panther or bear might seek a ride without any right to travel either first or second class. During the day our companions were on the lookout from both ends of the cars. What shouts arose when plantigrades or felines capered along the line with intentions that certainly seemed suspicious! A few revolver shots were discharged, without much necessity perhaps, but they amused as well as reassured the travelers. In the afternoon we were witnesses of a magnificent shot, which killed instantly an enormous panther just as he was landing on the side step of the third carriage.

“It is thine, Marguerite!” exclaimed Caterna. And could he have better expressed his admiration than in appropriating the celebrated reply of Buridan to the Dauphine’s wife — and not the queen of France, as is wrongly stated in the famous drama of the *Tour de Nesle*?

It was our superb Mongol to whom we were indebted for this marksman’s masterpiece.

“What a hand and what an eye!” said I to the major, who continued to look on Faruskiar with suspicion.

Among the other animals of the Pamirian fauna appeared wolves and foxes, and flocks of those large wild sheep with gnarled and gracefully curved horns, which are known to the natives as arkars. High in the sky flew the vultures, bearded and unbearded, and amid the clouds of white vapor we left behind us were many crows and pigeons and turtledoves and wagtails.

The day passed without adventure. At six o’clock in the evening we crossed the frontier, after a run of nearly two thousand three hundred kilometres, accomplished in four days since leaving Uzun Ada. Two hundred and fifty kilometres beyond we shall be at Kachgar. Although we are now in Chinese Turkestan, it will not be till we reach that town that we shall have our first experience of Chinese administration.

Dinner over about nine o’clock, we stretched ourselves on our beds, in the hope, or rather the conviction, that the night will be as calm as the preceding one.

It was not to be so.

At first the train was running down the slopes of the Pamir at great speed. Then it resumed its normal rate along the level.

It was about one in the morning when I was suddenly awakened.

At the same time Major Noltitz and most of our companions jumped up.

There were loud shouts in the rear of the train.

What had happened?

Anxiety seized upon the travelers — that confused, unreasonable anxiety caused by the slightest incident on a railroad.

“What is the matter? What is the matter?”

These words were uttered in alarm from all sides and in different languages.

My first thought was that we were attacked. I thought of the famous Ki-Tsang, the Mongol pirate, whose help I had so imprudently called upon — for my chronicle.

In a moment the train began to slow, evidently preparing to stop.

Popof came into the van, and I asked him what had happened.

“An accident,” he replied.

“Serious?”

“No, a coupling has broken, and the two last vans are left behind.”

As soon as the train pulls up, a dozen travelers, of whom I am one, get out onto the track.

By the light of the lantern it is easy to see that the breakage is not due to malevolence. But it is none the less true that the two last vans, the mortuary van and the rear van occupied by the goods guard, are missing. How far off are they? Nobody knows.

You should have heard the shouts of the Persian guards engaged in escorting the remains of Yen Lou, for which they were responsible! The travelers in their van, like themselves, had not noticed when the coupling broke. It might be an hour, two hours, since the accident.

What ought to be done was clear enough. The train must be run backward and pick up the lost vans.

Nothing could be more simple. But — and this surprised me — the behavior of my lord Faruskiar seemed very strange. He insisted in the most pressing manner that not a moment should be lost. He spoke to Popof, to the driver, to the stoker, and for the first time I discovered that he spoke Russian remarkably well.

There was no room for discussion. We were all agreed on the necessity of a retrograde movement.

Only the German baron protested. More delays! A waste of time for the sake of a mandarin — and a dead mandarin!

He had to walk about and bear it. As to Sir Francis Trevellyan, he merely shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say: “What management! What couplings! We should not get this sort of thing on an Anglo-Indian line!”

Major Noltitz was as much struck as I was at the behavior of my lord Faruskiar. This Mongol, usually so calm, so impassible, with his cool look beneath his motionless eyelid, had become a prey to a sort of furious anxiety which he appeared incapable of controlling. His companion was as excited as he was. But what was there in these two missing vans which could be of interest to them? They had not even any luggage in the rear van! Was it the mandarin, Yen Lou? Was it for that reason that at Donchak they had so carefully watched the van which contained the corpse? I could see clearly enough that the major thought it all very suspicious.

The train began to run back as soon as we had taken our places. The German baron attempted to curse, but Faruskiar gave him such a look that he did not care to get another, and stowed himself away in the corner.

Dawn appeared in the east when the two wagons were found a kilometre off, and the train gently slowed up to them after an hour’s run.

Faruskiar and Ghangir went to help in coupling on the vans, which was done as firmly as possible. Major Noltitz and I noticed that they exchanged a few words with the other Mongols. After all, there was nothing astonishing in that, for they were countrymen of theirs.

We resume our seats in the train, and the engineer tries to make up for lost time.

Nevertheless, the train does not arrive at Kachgar without a long delay, and it is half-past four in the morning when we enter the capital of Chinese Turkestan.

CHAPTER XVI.

Kachgaria is Oriental Turkestan which is gradually being metamorphosed into Russian Turkestan.

The writers in the *New Review* have said: “Central Asia will only be a great country when the Muscovite administration have laid hands on Tibet, or when the Russians lord it at Kachgar.”

Well, that is a thing half done! The piercing of the Pamir has joined the Russian railway with the Chinese line which runs from one frontier of the Celestial Empire to the other. The capital of Kachgaria is now as much Russian as Chinese. The Sclav race and the Yellow race have rubbed elbows and live in peace. How long will it last? To others leave the future; I am content with the present.

We arrive at half-past four; we leave at eleven. The Grand Transasiatic shows itself generous. I shall have time to see Kachgar, on condition of allowing myself an hour less than the time stated.

For what was not done at the frontier has to be done at Kachgar. Russians and Chinese are one as bad as the other when there are vexing formalities; papers to verify, passports to sign, etc. etc. It is the same sort of meddling, minute and over-fastidious, and we must put up with it. We must not forget the terrible threat of the formula the functionary of the Celestial Empire affixes to his acts — ”Tremble and obey!” I am disposed to obey, and I am prepared to appear before the authorities of the frontier. I remember the fears of Kinko, and it is with regard to him that the trembling is to be done, if the examination of the travelers extends to their packages and luggage.

Before we reached Kachgar, Major Noltitz said to me:

“Do not imagine that Chinese Turkestan differs very much from Russian Turkestan. We are not in the land of pagodas, junks, flower boats, yamens, hongs and porcelain towers. Like Bokhara, Merv and Samarkand, Kachgar is a double town. It is with the Central Asian cities as it is with certain stars, only they do not revolve round one another.”

The major’s remark was very true. It was not so long ago since emirs reigned over Kachgaria, since the monarchy of Mohammed Yakoub extended over the whole of Turkestan, since the Chinese who wished to live here had to adjure the religion of Buddha and Confucius and become converts to Mahometanism, that is, if they wished to be respectable. What would you have? In these days we are always too late, and those marvels of the Oriental cosmorama, those curious manners, those masterpieces of Asiatic art, are either memories or ruins. The railways will end by bringing the countries they traverse down to the same level, to a mutual resemblance which will certainly be equality and may be fraternity. In truth, Kachgar is no longer the capital of Kachgaria; it is a station on the Grand Transasiatic, the junction between the Russian and Chinese lines, and the strip of iron which stretches for three thousand kilometres from the Caspian to this city runs on for nearly four thousand more to the capital of the Celestial Empire.

I return to the double town. The new one is Yangi-Chahr: the old one, three and a half miles off, is Kachgar. I have seen both, and I will tell you what they are like.

In the first place, both the old and the new towns are surrounded with a villainous earthen wall that does not predispose you in their favor. Secondly, it is in vain that you seek for any monument whatever, for the materials of construction are identical for houses as for palaces. Nothing but earth, and not even baked earth. It is not with mud dried in the sun that you can obtain regular lines, clean profiles and finely worked sculptures. Your architecture must be in stone or marble, and that is precisely what you do not get in Chinese Turkestan.

A small carriage quickly took the major and myself to Kachgar, which is three miles round. The Kizil-Sou, that is to say the Red River, which is really yellow, as a Chinese river ought to be, clasps it between its two arms, which are united by two bridges. If you wish to see a few ruins of some interest, you must go a short distance beyond the town, where there are the remains of fortifications dating from five hundred or two thousand years ago, according to the imagination of the archaeologist. What is certain is that Kachgar submitted to the furious assault of Tamerlane, and we will agree that without the exploits of this terrible cripple the history of Central Asia would be singularly monotonous. Since his time there have been fierce sultans, it is true — among others that Ouali-Khan-Toulla, who, in 1857, strangled Schlagintweit, one of the most learned and most daring explorers of the Asiatic continent. Two tablets of bronze, presented by the Geographical Societies of Paris and Petersburg, ornament his commemorative monument.

Kachgar is an important centre of trade, which is almost entirely in Russian hands. Khotan silks, cotton, felt, woolen carpets, cloth, are the principal articles in the markets, and these are exported beyond the frontier between Tachkend and Koulja, to the north of Oriental Turkestan.

Here, as the major told me, Sir Francis Trevellyan should have special cause for manifesting his ill humor. In fact, an English embassy under Chapman and Gordon in 1873 and 1874 had been sent from Kashmir to Kachgar by way of Kothan and Yarkand. At this time the English had reason to hope that commercial relations could be established to their advantage. But instead of being in communication with the Indian railways, the Russian railways are in communication with the Chinese, and the result of this junction has been that English influence has had to give place to Russian.

The population of Kachgar is Turkoman, with a considerable mixture of Chinese, who willingly fulfil the duties of domestics, artisans or porters. Less fortunate than Chapman and Gordon, Major Noltitz and I were not able to see the Kachgarian capital when the armies of the tumultuous emir filled its streets. There were none of those Djiguit foot soldiers who were mounted, nor of those Sarbaz who were not. Vanished had those magnificent bodies of Taifourchis, armed and disciplined in the Chinese manner, those superb lancers, those Kalmuck archers, bending bows five feet high, those "tigers" with their daubed shields and their matchlocks. All have disappeared, the picturesque warriors of Kachgaria and the emir with them.

At nine o'clock we are on our return to Yangi-Chahr. There, at the end of the streets near the citadel, what do we see? The Caternas in ecstatic admiration before a troop of musical dervishes.

Who says dervish says beggar, and who says beggar evokes the completest type of filth and laziness. But with what an extraordinary combination of gestures, with what attitudes in the management of the long-stringed guitar, with what acrobatic swingings of the body do they accompany their singing of their legends and poetry which could not be more profane. The instinct of the old actor was awakened in Caterna. He could not keep still; it was too much for him.

And so these gestures, these attitudes, these swingings he imitated there with the vigor of an old topman joined to that of a leading premier, and I saw him as he was figuring in this quadrille of dancing dervishes.

“Eh! Monsieur Claudius!” he said, “it is not difficult to copy the exercises of these gallant fellows! Make me a Turkestan operetta, let me act a dervish, and you will see if I don’t do it to the very life.”

“I do not doubt it, my dear Caterna,” I replied; “but before you do that, come into the restaurant at the railway station and bid farewell to Turkestan cookery, for we shall soon be reduced to Chinese.”

The offer is accepted all the more willingly, for the reputation of the Kachgarian cooks is well justified, as the major made us remark.

In fact, the Caternas, the major, young Pan Chao and I were astonished and enchanted at the quantity of dishes that were served us, as well as at their quality. Sweets alternated capriciously with roasts and grills. And as the Caternas could never forget — any more than they could forget the famous peaches of Khodjend — there are a few of these dishes which the English embassy wished to retain in remembrance, for they have given the composition in the story of their journey: pigs’ feet dusted with sugar and browned in fat with a dash of pickles; kidneys fried with sweet sauce and served with fritters.

Caterna asked for the first twice, and for the other three times.

“I take my precautions,” said he. “Who knows what the dining-car kitchen will give us on the Chinese railways? Let us beware of shark fins, which may perhaps be rather horny, and of swallows’ nests which may not be quite fresh!”

It is ten o’clock when a stroke of the gong announces that the police formalities are about to begin. We leave the table after a parting glass of Choa-Hing wine, and a few minutes afterward are in the waiting room.

All my numbers are present, with the exception, of course, of Kinko, who would have done honor to our breakfast if it had been possible for him to take part in it. There was Doctor Tio-King, his *Cornaro* under his arm; Fulk Ephrinell and Miss Horatia Bluett, mingling their teeth and hair, figuratively, be it understood; Sir Francis Trevellyan, motionless and silent, intractable and stiff, smoking his cigar on the threshold; Faruskiar, accompanied by Ghangir; Russian, Turkoman, Chinese travelers — in all from sixty to eighty persons. Every one had in his turn to present himself at the table, which was occupied by two Celestials in uniform; a functionary speaking Russian fluently, an interpreter for German, French and English.

The Chinese was a man about fifty, with a bald head, a thick moustache, a long pigtail, and spectacles on his nose. Wrapped in a flowery robe, fat as if he belonged to the most distinguished people in the country, he had not a prepossessing face. After all, it was only a verification of our papers, and as ours were in order it did not much matter how repulsive he looked.

“What an air he has!” murmured Madame Caterna.

“The air of a Chinaman!” said her husband, “and frankly I do not want to have one like it.”

I am one of the first to present my passport, which bears the visas of the consul at Tiflis and the Russian authorities at Uzun-Ada. The functionary looks at it attentively. When you are dealing with a mandarin, you should always be on the lookout. Nevertheless, the examination raises no difficulty, and the seal of the green dragon declares me all in order.

The same result with regard to the actor and actress. Nevertheless it was worth while looking at Caterna while his papers were being examined. He assumed the attitude of a criminal endeavoring to mollify a magistrate, he made the sheepiest of eyes, and smiled the most deprecating of smiles, and seemed to implore a grace or rather a favor, and yet the most obdurate of the Chinamen had not a word to say to him.

“Correct,” said the interpreter.

“Thank you, my prince!” replied Caterna, with the accent of a Paris street boy.

As to Ephrinell and Miss Bluett, they went through like a posted letter. If an American commercial and an English ditto were not in order, who would be? Uncle Sam and John Bull are one as far as that goes.

The other travelers, Russian and Turkoman, underwent examination without any difficulty arising. Whether they were first-class or second-class, they had fulfilled the conditions required by the Chinese administration, which levies a rather heavy fee for each visa, payable in roubles, taels or sapeks.

Among the travelers I noticed an American clergyman bound to Pekin. This was the Reverend Nathaniel Morse, of Boston, one of those honest Bible distributors, a Yankee missionary, in the garb of a merchant, and very keen in business matters. At a venture I make him No. 13 in my notebook.

The verification of the papers of young Pan Chao and Doctor Tio-King gave rise to no difficulty, and on leaving they exchanged “ten thousand good mornings” with the more amiable of the Chinese representatives.

When it came to the turn of Major Noltitz, a slight incident occurred. Sir Francis Trevellyan, who came to the table at the same moment, did not seem inclined to give way. However, nothing resulted but haughty and provoking looks. The gentleman did not even take the trouble to open his mouth. It is evidently written above that I am not to hear the sound of his voice! The Russian and the Englishman each received the regulation visa, and the affair went no further.

My lord Faruskiar, followed by Ghangir, then arrived before the man in spectacles, who looked at him with a certain amount of attention. Major Noltitz and I watched him. How would he submit to this examination? Perhaps we were to be undeceived regarding him.

But what was our surprise and even our stupefaction at the dramatic outburst which at once took place!

After throwing a glance at the papers presented to him by Ghangir, the Chinese functionary rose and bowed respectfully to Faruskiar, saying:

“May the General Manager of the Grand Transasiatic deign to receive my ten thousand respects!”

General Manager, that is what he is, this lord Faruskiar! All is explained. During our crossing of Russian Turkestan he had maintained his *incognito* like a great personage in a foreign country; but now on the Chinese railways he resumed the rank which belonged to him.

And I — in a joke, it is true — had permitted myself to identify him with the pirate Ki-Tsang. And Major Noltitz, who had spent his time suspecting him! At last I have some one of note in our train — I have him, this somebody, I will make his acquaintance, I will cultivate it like a rare plant, and if he will only speak Russian I will interview him down to his boots!

Good! I am completely upset, and I could not help shrugging my shoulders, when the major whispers to me:

“Perhaps one of the bandit chiefs with whom the Grand Transasiatic had to make terms!”

“Come, major, be serious.”

The visit was nearing its end when Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer appeared.

He is preoccupied, he is troubled, he is anxious, he is confused, he is fidgety. Why is he shaking, and bending, and diving into his pockets like a man who has lost something valuable?

“Your papers!” demands the interpreter in German.

“My papers!” replies the baron, “I am looking for them. I have not got them; they were in my letter case.”

And he dived again into his trousers pockets, his waistcoat pockets, his coat pockets, his great-coat pockets — there were twenty of them at the least — and he found nothing.

“Be quick — be quick!” said the interpreter. “The train cannot wait!”

“I object to its going without me!” exclaimed the baron. “These papers — how have they gone astray? I must have let them drop out of my case. They should have given them back to me — ”

At this moment the gong awoke the echoes of the interior of the railway station.

“Wait! wait! Donner vetter! Can’t you wait a few moments for a man who is going round the world in thirty-nine days — ”

“The Grand Transasiatic does not wait,” says the interpreter.

Without waiting for any more, Major Noltitz and I reach the platform, while the baron continues to struggle in the presence of the impassible Chinese functionaries.

I examine the train and see that its composition has been modified on account of there being fewer travelers between Kachgar and Pekin. Instead of twelve carriages, there are now only ten, placed in the following order: engine, tender, front van, two first-class cars, dining car, two second-class cars, the van with the defunct mandarin, rear van.

The Russian locomotives, which have brought us from Uzun-Ada, have been replaced by a Chinese locomotive, burning not naphtha but coal, of which there are large deposits in Turkestan, and stores at the chief stations along the line.

My first care is to look in at the front van. The custom-house officers are about to visit it, and I tremble for poor Kinko.

It is evident that the fraud has not been discovered yet, for there would have been a great stir at the news. Suppose the case is passed? Will its position be shifted? Will it be put hind side before or upside down? Kinko will not then be able to get out, and that would be a complication.

The Chinese officers have come out of the van and shut the door, so that I cannot give a glance into it. The essential point is that Kinko has not been caught in the act. As soon as possible I will enter the van, and as bankers say, “verify the state of the safe.”

Before getting into our car, Major Noltitz asks me to follow him to the rear of the train.

The scene we witness is not devoid of interest; it is the giving over of the corpse of the mandarin Yen Lou by the Persian guards to a detachment of soldiers of the Green Standard, who form the Chinese gendarmerie. The defunct passes into the care of twenty Celestials, who are to occupy the second-class car in front of the mortuary van. They are armed with guns and revolvers, and commanded by an officer.

“Well,” said I to the major, “this mandarin must be some very exalted personage if the Son of Heaven sends him a guard of honor — ”

“Or of defence,” replies the major.

Faruskiar and Ghangir assist at these proceedings, in which there is nothing surprising. Surely the general manager of the line ought to keep an eye on the illustrious defunct, entrusted to the care of the Grand Transasiatic?

The gong was struck for the last time; we hasten into our cars.

And the baron, what has become of him?

Here he comes out on to the platform like a whirlwind. He has found his papers at the bottom of his nineteenth pocket. He has obtained the necessary visa — and it was time.

“Passengers for Pekin, take your seats!” shouts Popof in a sonorous voice.

The train trembles, it starts, it has gone.

CHAPTER XVII.

We are off on a Chinese railway, single line, the train drawn by a Chinese engine, driven by a Chinese driver. Let us hope we shall not be telescoped on the road, for among the passengers is one of the chief functionaries of the company in the person of Faruskiar.

After all, if an accident should happen it will break the monotony of the journey, and furnish me with an episode. I am forced to admit that up to the present my personages have not behaved as I expected. The drama does not run well, the action languishes. We want something startling to bring all the actors on — what Caterna would call “a good fourth act.”

But then Ephrinell and Miss Bluett are all the time absorbed in their commercial tête-à-tête. Pan Chao and the doctor amused me for a time, but they are not equal to it now. The actor and the actress are of no use without opportunity. Kinko, Kinko himself, on whom I had built such hopes, has passed the frontier without difficulty, he will reach Pekin, he will marry Zinca Klork. Decidedly there is a want of excitement. I cannot get anything out of the corpse of Yen Lou! and the readers of the *Twentieth Century* who looked to me for something sensational and thrilling.

Must I have recourse to the German baron? No! he is merely ridiculous, stupidly ridiculous, and he has no interest for me.

I return to my idea: I want a hero, and up to the present no hero has appeared on the scene.

Evidently the moment has come to enter into more intimate relations with Faruskiar. Perhaps he will not now be so close in his incognito. We are under his orders, so to say. He is the mayor of our rolling town, and a mayor owes something to those he governs. Besides, in the event of Kinko’s fraud being discovered I may as well secure the protection of this high functionary.

Our train runs at only moderate speed since we left Kachgar. On the opposite horizon we can see the high lands of the Pamir; to the southwest rises the Bolor, the Kachgarian belt from which towers the summit of Tagharma lost among the clouds.

I do not know how to spend my time. Major Noltitz has never visited the territories crossed by the Grand Transasiatic, and I am deprived of the pleasure of taking notes from his dictation. Dr. Tio-King does not lift his nose from his Cornaro, and Pan Chao reminds me more of Paris and France than of Pekin and China; besides, when he came to Europe he came by Suez, and he knows no more of Oriental Turkestan than he does of Kamtschatka. All the same, we talk. He is a pleasant companion, but a little less amiability and a little more originality would suit me better.

I am reduced to strolling from one car to another, lounging on the platforms, interrogating the horizon, which obstinately refuses to reply, listening on all sides.

Hello! there are the actor and his wife apparently in animated conversation. I approach. They sing in an undertone. I listen.

“I’m fond of my turkeys — eys — eys,” says Madame Caterna.

“I’m fond of my wethers — ers — ers,” says Monsieur Caterna, in any number of baritones.

It is the everlasting duet between Pipo and Bettina; and they are rehearsing for Shanghai. Happy Shanghai! They do not yet know the *Mascotte*!

Ephrinell and Miss Bluett are talking away with unusual animation, and I catch the end of the dialogue.

“I am afraid,” said she, “that hair will be rising in Pekin — ”

“And I,” said he, “that teeth will be down. Ah! If a good war would only break out in which the Russians would give the Chinaman a smack on the jaw.”

There now! Smack them on the jaw, in order that Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York, might have a chance of doing a trade!

Really I do not know what to do, and we have a week’s journey before us. To Jericho with the Grand Transasiatic and its monotonous security! The Great Trunk from New York to San Francisco has more life in it! At least, the redskins do sometimes attack the trains, and the chance of a scalping on the road cannot but add to the charm of the voyage!

But what is that I hear being recited, or rather intoned at the end of our compartment?

“There is no man, whoever he may be, who cannot prevent himself from eating too much, and avoid the evils due to repletion. On those who are intrusted with the direction of public affairs this is more incumbent than on others — ”

It is Dr. Tio-King reading Cornaro aloud, in order that he may remember his principles better. Eh! after all, this principle is not to be despised. Shall I send it by telegram to our cabinet ministers? They might, perhaps, dine with more discretion after it.

During this afternoon I find by the guide-book that we shall cross the Yamanyar over a wooden bridge. This stream descends from the mountains to the west, which are at least twenty-five thousand feet high, and its rapidity is increased by the melting of the snows. Sometimes the train runs through thick jungles, amid which Popof assures me tigers are numerous. Numerous they may be, but I have not seen one. And yet in default of redskins we might get some excitement out of tiger-skins. What a heading for a newspaper, and what a stroke of luck for a journalist! TERRIBLE CATASTROPHE. A GRAND TRANSASIATIC EXPRESS ATTACKED BY TIGERS. FIFTY VICTIMS. AN INFANT DEVOURED BEFORE ITS MOTHER’S EYES — the whole thickly leaded and appropriately displayed.

Well, no! The Turkoman felidae did not give me even that satisfaction! And I treat them — as I treat any other harmless cats.

The two principal stations have been Yanghi-Hissar, where the train stops ten minutes, and Kizil, where it stops a quarter of an hour. Several blast furnaces are at work here, the soil being ferruginous, as is shown by the word “Kizil,” which means red.

The country is fertile and well cultivated, growing wheat, maize, rice, barley and flax, in its eastern districts. Everywhere are great masses of trees, willows, mulberries, poplars. As far as the eye can reach are fields under culture, irrigated by numerous canals, also green fields in which are flocks of sheep; a country half Normandy, half Provence, were it not for the mountains of the Pamir on the horizon. But this portion of Kachgaria was terribly ravaged by war when its people were struggling for independence.

The land flowed with blood, and along by the railway the ground is dotted with tumuli beneath which are buried the victims of their patriotism. But I did not come to Central Asia to travel as if I were in France! Novelty! Novelty! The unforeseen! The appalling!

It was without the shadow of an accident, and after a particularly fine run, that we entered Yarkand station at four o'clock in the afternoon.

If Yarkand is not the administrative capital of eastern Turkestan, it is certainly the most important commercial city of the province.

"Again two towns together," said I to Major Noltitz. "That I have from Popof."

"But this time," said the major, "it was not the Russians who built the new one."

"New or old," I added, "I am afraid is like the others we have seen, a wall of earth, a few dozen gateways cut in the wall, no monuments or buildings of note, and the eternal bazaars of the East."

I was not mistaken, and it did not take four hours to visit both Yarkands, the newer of which is called Yanji-Shahr.

Fortunately, the Yarkand women are not forbidden to appear in the streets, which are bordered by simple mud huts, as they were at the time of the "dadkwahs," or governors of the province. They can give themselves the pleasure of seeing and being seen, and this pleasure is shared in by the farangis — as they call foreigners, no matter to what nation they may belong. They are very pretty, these Asiatics, with their long tresses, their transversely striped bodices, their skirts of bright colors, relieved by

Chinese designs in Kothan silk, their high-heeled embroidered boots, their turbans of coquettish pattern, beneath which appear their black hair and their eyebrows united by a bar.

A few Chinese passengers alighted at Yarkand, and gave place to others exactly like them — among others a score of coolies — and we started again at eight o’clock in the evening.

During the night we ran the three hundred and fifty kilometres which separate Yarkand from Kothan.

A visit I paid to the front van showed me that the box was still in the same place. A certain snoring proved that Kinko was inside as usual, and sleeping peacefully. I did not care to wake him, and I left him to dream of his adorable Roumanian.

In the morning Popof told me that the train, which was now traveling about as fast as an omnibus, had passed Kargalik, the junction for the Kilian and Tong branches. The night had been cold, for we are still at an altitude of twelve hundred metres. Leaving Guma station, the line runs due east and west, following the thirty-seventh parallel, the same which traverses in Europe, Seville, Syracuse and Athens.

We sighted only one stream of importance, the Kara-kash, on which appeared a few drifting rafts, and files of horses and asses at the fords between the pebbly banks. The railroad crosses it about a hundred kilometres from Khotan, where we arrived at eight o’clock in the morning.

Two hours to stop, and as the town may give me a foretaste of the cities of China, I resolve to take a run through it.

It seems to be a Turkoman town built by the Chinese, or perhaps a Chinese town built by Turkomans. Monuments and inhabitants betray their double origin. The mosques look like pagodas, the pagodas look like mosques.

And I was not astonished when the Caternas, who would not miss this opportunity of setting foot in China, were rather disappointed.

“Monsieur Claudius,” said the actor to me, “there is not a single scene here that would suit the *Prise de Pékin!*”

“But we are not at Pekin, my dear Caterna.”

“That is true, and it has to be remembered, if we are to be thankful for little.”

“‘Thankful for very little,’ as the Italians say.”

“Well, if they say that, they are no fools.”

As we were about to board the car again, I saw Popof running toward me, shouting:

“Monsieur Bombarnac!”

“What is the matter, Popof?”

“A telegraph messenger asked me if there was any one belonging to the *Twentieth Century* in the train.”

“A telegraph messenger?”

“Yes, on my replying in the affirmative, he gave me this telegram for you.”

“Give it me! give it me!”

I seize the telegram, which has been waiting for me for some days. Is it a reply to my wire sent from Merv, relative to the mandarin Yen Lou?

I open it. I read it. And it falls from my hand.

This is what it said:

“Claudius Bombarnac,

“Correspondent,

“*Twentieth Century.*

“Khotan, Chinese Turkestan.

“It is not the corpse of a mandarin that the train is taking to Pekin, but the imperial treasure, value fifteen millions, sent from Persia to China, as announced in the Paris newspapers eight days ago; endeavor to be better informed for the future.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

“Millions — there are millions in that pretended mortuary van!”

In spite of myself, this imprudent phrase had escaped me in such a way that the secret of the imperial treasure was instantly known to all, to the railway men as well as to the passengers. And so, for greater security, the Persian government, in agreement with the Chinese government, has allowed it to be believed that we were carrying the corpse of a mandarin, when we were really taking to Pekin a treasure worth fifteen million of francs.

Heaven pardon me, what a howler — pardonable assuredly — but what a howler I had been guilty of! But why should I have doubted what Popof told me, and why should Popof have suspected what the Persians had told him regarding this Yen Lou? There was no reason for our doubting their veracity.

I am none the less deeply humiliated in my self-esteem as a journalist, and I am much annoyed at the call to order which I have brought upon myself. I shall take very good care not to breathe a word of my misadventure, even to the major. Is it credible? In Paris the *Twentieth Century* is better informed of what concerns the Grand Transasiatic than I am! They knew that an imperial treasure is in the van, and I did not! Oh! the mistakes of special correspondents!

Now the secret is divulged, and we know that this treasure, composed of gold and precious stones, formerly deposited in the hands of the Shah of Persia, is being sent to its legitimate owner, the Son of Heaven.

That is why my lord Faruskiar, who was aware of it in consequence of his position as general manager of the company, had joined the train at

Douchak so as to accompany the treasure to its destination. That is why he and Ghangir — and the three other Mongols — had so carefully watched this precious van, and why they had shown themselves so anxious when it had been left behind by the breakage of the coupling, and why they were so eager for its recovery. Yes, all is explained!

That is also why a detachment of Chinese soldiers has taken over the van at Kachgar, in relief of the Persians! That is why Pan-Chao never heard of Yen Lou, nor of any exalted personage of that name existing in the Celestial Empire!

We started to time, and, as may be supposed, our traveling companions could talk of nothing else but the millions which were enough to enrich every one in the train.

“This pretended mortuary van has always been suspicious to me,” said Major Noltitz. “And that was why I questioned Pan-Chao regarding the dead mandarin.”

“I remember,” I said; “and I could not quite understand the motive of your question. It is certain now that we have got a treasure in tow.”

“And I add,” said the major, “that the Chinese government has done wisely in sending an escort of twenty well-armed men. From Kothan to Lan Teheou the trains will have two thousand kilometres to traverse through the desert, and the safety of the line is not as great as it might be across the Gobi.”

“All the more so, major, as the redoubtable Ki-Tsang has been reported in the northern provinces.”

“Quite so, and a haul of fifteen millions is worth having by a bandit chief.”

“But how could the chief be informed of the treasure being sent?”

“That sort of people always know what it is their interest to know.”

“Yes,” thought I, “although they do not read the *Twentieth Century.*”

Meanwhile different opinions were being exchanged on the gangways. Some would rather travel with the millions than carry a corpse along with them, even though it was that of a first-class mandarin. Others considered the carrying of the treasure a danger to the passengers. And that was the opinion of Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer in a furious attack on Popof.

“You ought to have told us about it, sir, you ought to have told us about it! Those millions are known to be in the train, and they will tempt people to attack us. And an attack, even if repulsed, will mean delay, and delay I will not submit to! No, sir, I will not!”

“No one will attack us,” replied Popof. “No one will dream of doing it!”

“And how do you know that? how do you know that?”

“Be calm, pray.”

“I will not be calm; and if there is a delay, I will hold the company responsible!”

That is understood; a hundred thousand florins damages to Monsieur le Baron Tour de Monde.

Let us pass to the other passengers.

Ephrinell looked at the matter, of course, from a very practical point of view.

“There can be no doubt that our risks have been greatly increased by this treasure, and in case of accident on account of it, the *Life Travelers’ Society*, in which I am insured, will, I expect, refuse to pay, so that the Grand Transasiatic Company will have all the responsibility.”

“Of course,” said Miss Bluett; “and if they had not found the missing van the company would have been in a serious difficulty with China. Would it not, Fulk?”

“Exactly, Horatia!”

Horatia and Fulk — nothing less.

The Anglo-American couple were right, the enormous loss would have had to be borne by the Grand Transasiatic, for the company must have known they were carrying a treasure and not a corpse — and thereby they were responsible.

As to the Caternas, the millions rolling behind did not seem to trouble them. The only reflection they inspired was, “Ah! Caroline, what a splendid theater we might build with all that money!”

But the best thing was said by the Reverend Nathaniel Morse, who had joined the train at Kachgar.

“It is never comfortable to be dragging a powder magazine after one!”

Nothing could be truer, and this van with its imperial treasure was a powder magazine that might blow up our train.

The first railway was opened in China about 1877 and ran from Shanghai to Fou-Tcheou. The Grand Transasiatic followed very closely the Russian road proposed in 1874 by Tachkend, Kouldja, Kami, Lan Tcheou, Singan and Shanghai. This railway did not run through the populous central provinces which can be compared to vast and humming hives of bees — and extaordinarily prolific bees. As before curving off to Lan Tcheou; it reaches the great cities by the branches it gives out to the south and southeast. Among others, one of these branches, that from Tai Youan to Nanking, should have put these two towns of the Chan-Si and Chen-Toong provinces into communication. But at present the branch is not ready for opening, owing to an important viaduct not having finished building.

The completed portion gives me direct communication across Central Asia. That is the main line of the Transasiatic. The engineers did not find it so difficult of construction as General Annenkof did the Transcaspian. The deserts of Kara Koum and Gobi are very much alike; the same dead level, the same absence of elevations and depressions, the same suitability for the iron road. If the engineers had had to attack the enormous chain of the Kuen Lun, Nan Chan, Amie, Gangar Oola, which forms the frontier of Tibet, the obstacles would have been such that it would have taken a century to surmount them. But on a flat, sandy plain the railway could be rapidly pushed on up to Lan Tcheou, like a long Decauville of three thousand kilometres.

It is only in the vicinity of this city that the art of the engineer has had a serious struggle with nature in the costly and troublesome road through the provinces of Kan-Sou, Chan-Si and Petchili.

As we go along I must mention a few of the principal stations at which the train stops to take in coal and water. On the right-hand side the eye never tires of the distant horizon of mountains which bounds the tableland of Tibet to the north. On the left the view is over the interminable steppes of the Gobi. The combination of these territories constitutes the Chinese Empire if not China proper, and we shall only reach that when we are in the neighborhood of Lan Tcheou.

It would seem, therefore, as though the second part of the journey would be rather uninteresting, unless we are favored with a few startling incidents. But it seems to me that we are certainly in the possession of the elements out of which something journalistic can be made.

At eleven o’clock the train left Kothan station, and it was nearly two o’clock in the afternoon when it reached Keria, having left behind the small stations of Urang, Langar, Pola and Tschiria.

In 1889-90 this road was followed by Pevtsoff from Kothan to Lob-Nor at the foot of the Kuen Lun, which divides Chinese Turkestan from Tibet. The Russian traveler went by Keria, Nia, Tchertchen, as we are doing so easily, but then his caravan had to contend with much danger and difficulty — which did not prevent his reporting ten thousand kilometres of surveys, without reckoning altitude and longitude observations of the geographical points. It is an honor for the Russian government to have thus continued the work of Prjevalsky.

From Keria station you can see to the southwest the heights of Kara Korum and the peak of Dapsang, to which different geographers assign a height of eight thousand metres. At its foot extends the province of Kachmir. There the Indus rises in a number of inconsiderable sources which feed one of the greatest rivers of the Peninsula. Thence from the Pamir tableland extends the mighty range of the Himalaya, where rise the highest summits on the face of the globe.

Since we left Kothan we have covered a hundred and fifty kilometres in four hours. It is not a high rate of speed, but we cannot expect on this part of the Transasiatic the same rate of traveling we experienced on the Transcaspian. Either the Chinese engines are not so fast, or, thanks to their natural indolence, the engine drivers imagine that from thirty to forty miles an hour is the maximum that can be obtained on the railways of the Celestial Empire.

At five o'clock in the afternoon we were at another station, Nia, where General Pevtsoff established a meterological observatory. Here we stopped only twenty minutes. I had time to lay in a few provisions at the bar. For whom they were intended you can imagine.

The passengers we picked up were only Chinese, men and women. There were only a few for the first class, and these only went short journeys.

We had not started a quarter of an hour when Ephrinell, with the sferious manner of a merchant intent on some business, came up to me on the gangway.

“Monsieur Bombarnac,” he said, “I have to ask a favor of you.”

Eh! I thought, this Yankee knows where to find me when he wants me.

“Only too happy, I can assure you,” said I. “What is it about?”

“I want you to be a witness — ”

“An affair of honor? And with whom, if you please?”

“Miss Horatia Bluett.”

“You are going to fight Miss Bluett!” I exclaimed, with a laugh.

“Not yet. I am going to marry her.”

“Marry her?”

“Yes! a treasure of a woman, well acquainted with business matters, holding a splendid commission — ”

“My compliments, Mr. Ephrinell! You can count on me — ”

“And probably on M. Caterna?”

“He would like nothing better, and if there is a wedding breakfast he will sing at your dessert — ”

“As much as he pleases,” replied the American. “And now for Miss Bluett’s witnesses.”

“Quite so.”

“Do you think Major Noltitz would consent?”

“A Russian is too gallant to refuse. I will ask him, if you like.”

“Thank you in advance. As to the second witness, I am rather in a difficulty. This Englishman, Sir Francis Trevellyan — ”

“A shake of the head is all you will get from him.”

“Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer?”

“Ask that of a man who is doing a tour of the globe, and who would never get through a signature of a name of that length!”

“Then I can only think of Pan-Chao, unless we try Popof — ”

“Either would do it with pleasure. But there is no hurry, Mr. Ephrinell, and when you get to Pekin you will have no difficulty in finding a fourth witness.”

“What! to Pekin? It is not at Pekin that I hope to marry Miss Bluett!”

“Where, then? At Sou Tcheou or Lan Tcheou, while we stop a few hours?”

“Wait a bit, Monsieur Bombarnac! Can a Yankee wait?”

“Then it is to be — ”

“Here.”

“In the train?”

“In the train.”

“Then it is for me to say, Wait a bit!”

“Not twenty-four hours.”

“But to be married you require — ”

“An American minister, and we have the Reverend Nathaniel Morse.”

“He consents?”

“As if he would not! He would marry the whole train if it asked him!”

“Bravo, Mr. Ephrinell! A wedding in a train will be delightful.”

"We should never put off until to-morrow what we can do to-day."

"Yes, I know, time is money."

"No! Time is time, simply, and I do not care to lose a minute of it."

Ephrinell clasped my hand, and as I had promised, I went to take the necessary steps regarding the witnesses necessary for the nuptial ceremonial.

It needs not be said that the commercials were of full age and free to dispose of themselves, to enter into marriage before a clergyman, as is done in America, and without any of the fastidious preliminaries required in France and other formalistic countries. Is this an advantage or otherwise? The Americans think it is for the best, and, as Cooper says, the best at home is the best everywhere.

I first asked Major Noltitz, who willingly agreed to be Miss Bluett's witness.

"These Yankees are astonishing," he said to me.

"Precisely because they are astonished at nothing, major."

I made a similar proposition to Pan-Chao.

"Delighted, Monsieur Bombarnac," he replied. "I will be the witness of this adorable and adored Miss Bluett! If a wedding between an Englishwoman and an American, with French, Russian and Chinese witnesses, does not offer every guarantee of happiness, where are we likely to meet with it?"

And now for Caterna.

The actor would have consented for any number of weddings.

“What a notion for a vaudeville or an operetta!” he exclaimed. “We have the *Mariage au tambour*, the *Mariage aux olives*, the *Mariage aux lanternes* — well, this will be the *Mariage en railway*, or the Marriage by Steam! Good titles, all those, Monsieur Claudius! Your Yankee can reckon on me! Witness old or young, noble father or first lover, marquis or peasant, as you like, I am equal to it — — ”

“Be natural, please,” said I. “It will have a good effect, considering the scenery.”

“Is Madame Caterna to come to the wedding?”

“Why not — -as bridesmaid!”

In all that concerns the traditional functions we must have no difficulties on the Grand Transasiatic.

It is too late for the ceremony to take place to-day. Ephrinell understood that certain conventionalities must be complied with. The celebration could take place in the morning. The passengers could all be invited, and Faruskiar might be prevailed on to honor the affair with his presence.

During dinner we talked of nothing else. After congratulating the happy couple, who replied with true Anglo-Saxon grace, we all promised to sign the marriage contract.

“And we will do honor to your signatures,” said Ephrinell, in the tone of a tradesman accepting a bill.

The night came, and we retired, to dream of the marriage festivities of the morrow. I took my usual stroll into the car occupied by the Chinese soldiers, and found the treasure of the Son of Heaven faithfully guarded. Half the detachment were awake and half were asleep.

About one o'clock in the morning I visited Kinko, and handed him over my purchases at Nia. The young Roumanian was in high spirits. He anticipated no further obstacles, he would reach port safely, after all.

"I am getting quite fat in this box," he told me.

I told him about the Ephrinell-Bluett marriage, and how the union was to be celebrated next morning with great pomp.

"Ah!" said he, with a sigh. "They are not obliged to wait until they reach Pekin!"

"Quite so, Kinko; but it seems to me that a marriage under such conditions is not likely to be lasting! But after all, that is the couple's lookout."

At three o'clock in the morning we stopped forty minutes at Tchertchen, almost at the foot of the ramifications of the Kuen Lun. None of us had seen this miserable, desolate country, treeless and verdureless, which the railway was now crossing on its road to the northeast.

Day came; our train ran the four hundred kilometres between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk, while the sun caressed with its rays the immense plain, glittering in its saline efflorescences.

CHAPTER XIX.

When I awoke I seemed to have had an unpleasant dream. A dream in no way like those we interpret by the *Clef d'Or*. No! Nothing could be clearer. The bandit chief Ki Tsang had prepared a scheme for the seizure of the Chinese treasure; he had attacked the train in the plains of Gobi; the car is assaulted, pillaged, ransacked; the gold and precious stones, to the value of fifteen millions, are torn from the grasp of the Celestials, who yield after a courageous defence. As to the passengers, another two minutes of sleep would have settled their fate — and mine.

But all that disappeared with the vapors of the night. Dreams are not fixed photographs; they fade in the sun, and end by effacing themselves.

In taking my stroll through the train as a good townsman takes his stroll through the town, I am joined by Major Noltitz. After shaking hands, he showed me a Mongol in the second-class car, and said to me, “That is not one of those we picked up at Douchak when we picked up Faruskiar and Ghangir.”

“That is so,” said I; “I never saw that face in the train before.”

Popof, to whom I applied for information, told me that the Mongol had got in at Tchertchen. “When he arrived,” he said, “the manager spoke to him for a minute, from which I concluded that he also was one of the staff of the Grand Transasiatic.”

I had not noticed Faruskiar during my walk. Had he alighted at one of the small stations between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk, where we ought to have been about one o'clock in the afternoon?

No, he and Ghangir were on the gangway in front of our car. They seemed to be in animated conversation, and only stopped to take a good look toward the northeastern horizon. Had the Mongol brought some news which had made them throw off their usual reserve and gravity? And I abandoned myself to my imagination, foreseeing adventures, attacks of bandits, and so on, according to my dream.

I was recalled to reality by the Reverend Nathaniel Morse, who said to me, “It is fixed for to-day, at nine o’clock; do not forget.”

That meant the marriage of Fulk Ephrinell and Horatia Bluett. Really, I was not thinking of it. It is time for me to go and dress for the occasion. All I can do will be to change my shirt. It is enough that one of the husband’s witnesses should be presentable; the other, Caterna, will be sure to be magnificent!

In fact, the actor had gone into the luggage van — how I trembled for Kinko! — and there, with Popof’s assistance, had got out of one of his boxes a somewhat free-and-easy costume, but one certain of success at a wedding: A primrose coat with metal buttons, and a buttonhole, a sham diamond pin in the cravat, poppy-colored breeches, copper buckles, flowered waistcoat, clouded stockings, thread gloves, black pumps, and white beaver hat. What a number of bridegrooms and uncles of bridegrooms our friend had been in this traditional attire! He looked superb, with his beaming face, his close-shaven chin, and blue cheeks, and his laughing eyes and rosy lips.

Madame Caterna was quite as glorious in her array. She had easily discovered a bridesmaid’s costume in her wardrobe, bodice with intercrossing stripes, short petticoat in green woolen, mauve stockings, straw hat with artificial flowers, a suspicion of black on the eyelids and of rouge on the cheeks. There you have the provincial stage beauty, and if she and her husband like to play a village piece after the breakfast, I can promise them bravos enough.

It was at nine o’clock that this marriage was to take place, announced by the bell of the tender, which was to sound full clang as if it were a chapel bell. With a little imagination, we could believe we were in a village. But whither did this bell invite the witnesses and guests? Into the dining car, which had been conveniently arranged for the ceremony, as I had taken good care.

It was no longer a dining car; it was a hall car, if the expression is admissible. The big table had been taken away, and replaced by a small table which served as a desk. A few flowers bought at Tchertchen had been arranged in the corners of the car, which was large enough to hold nearly all who wished to be present — and those who could not get inside could look on from the gangways.

That all the passengers might know what was going on, we had put up a notice at the doors of the first and second-class cars, couched in the following terms:

“Mr. Fulk Ephrinell, of the firm of Messrs. Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York City, has the honor to invite you to his wedding with Miss Horatia Bluett, of the firm of Messrs. Holmes-Holme, London, which will take place in the dining car on this the 22d of May, at nine o’clock precisely. The Reverend Nathaniel Morse, of Boston, U.S.A. will officiate.

“Miss Horatia Bluett, of the firm of Messrs. Holmes-Holme, of London, has the honor to invite you to her wedding with Mr. Fulk Ephrinell, of the firm of Messrs. Strong, Bulbul & Co. of New York City, etc. etc.”

If I do not make half a dozen pars out of all this I am no newspaper man!

Meanwhile I learn from Popof the precise spot where the ceremony will take place.

Popof points it out on the map. It is a hundred and fifty kilometres from Tcharkalyk station, in the middle of the desert, amid the plains which are traversed by a little stream which flows into the Lob Nor. For twenty leagues there is no station, and the ceremony is not likely to be interrupted by any stoppage.

It need hardly be said that at half-past eight I and Caterna were ready for the call.

Major Noltitz and Pan-Chao had got themselves up in all due form for the solemnity. The major looked as serious as a surgeon who was going to cut off a leg. The Chinaman looked as gay as a Parisian at a village bridal.

Doctor Tio-King and Cornaro, one carrying the other, were to be at this little festivity. The noble Venetian was a bachelor, if I am not mistaken, but I do not think he gives any opinion on marriage, at least I have no recollection of its being in the chapter headed “Safe and easy means of promptly remedying the different accidents that threaten life.”

“And,” added Pan-Chao, who has just quoted this Cornarian phrase, “I suppose marriage ought to be included among those accidents!”

A quarter to nine. No one has yet seen the happy couple. Miss Bluett is in one of the toilet cabinets in the first van, where she is probably preparing herself. Fulk Ephrinell is perhaps struggling with his cravat and giving a last polish to his portable jewelry. I am not anxious. We shall see them as soon as the bell rings.

I have but one regret, and that is that Faruskiar and Ghangir should be too busy to join us. Why do they continue to look out over the immense desert? Before their eyes there stretches not the cultivated steppe of the Lob Nor region, but the Gobi, which is barren, desolate and gloomy, according to the reports of Grjimailo, Blanc and Martin. It may be asked why these people are keeping such an obstinate lookout.

“If my presentiments do not deceive me,” said Major Noltitz, “there is some reason for it.”

What does he mean? But the bell of the tender, the tender bell, begins its joyous appeal. Nine o’clock; it is time to go into the dining car.

Caterna comes near me, and I hear him singing:

“It is the turret bell,

Which sud-denly is sounding.”

While Madame Caterna replies to the trio of the *Dame Blanche* by the refrain of the *Dragons de Villars*:

“And it sounds, sounds, sounds,

It sounds and resounds — — ”

The passengers move in a procession, the four witnesses first, then the guests from the end of the village — I mean of the train; Chinese, Turkomans, Tartars, men and women, all curious to assist at the ceremony.

The four Mongols remain on the last gangway near the treasure which the Chinese soldiers do not leave for an instant.

We reach the dining car.

The clergyman is seated at the little table, on which is the certificate of marriage he has prepared according to the customary form. He looks as though he was accustomed to this sort of thing, which is as much commercial as matrimonial.

The bride and bridegroom have not appeared.

“Ah!” said I to the actor, “perhaps they have changed their minds.”

“If they have,” said Caterna, laughing, “the reverend gentleman can marry me and my wife over again. We are in wedding garments, and it is a pity to have had all this fuss for nothing, isn’t it, Caroline?”

“Yes, Adolphe — — ”

But this pleasing second edition of the wedding of the Caternas did not come off. Here is Mr. Fulk Ephrinell, dressed this morning just as he was dressed yesterday — and — detail to note — with a pencil behind the lobe of his left ear, for he has just been making out an account for his New York house.

Here is Miss Horatia Bluett, as thin, as dry, as plain as ever, her dust cloak over her traveling gown, and in place of jewelry a noisy bunch of keys, which hangs from her belt.

The company politely rise as the bride and bridegroom enter. They “mark time,” as Caterna says. Then they advance toward the clergyman, who is standing with his hand resting on a Bible, open probably at the place where Isaac, the son of Abraham, espouses Rebecca, the daughter of Rachel.

We might fancy we were in a chapel if we only had a harmonium.

And the music is here! If it is not a harmonium, it is the next thing to it. An accordion makes itself heard in Caterna's hands. As an ancient mariner, he knows how to manipulate this instrument of torture, and here he is swinging out the andante from *Norma* with the most accordionesque expression.

It seems to give great pleasure to the natives of Central Asia. Never have their ears been charmed by the antiquated melody that the pneumatic apparatus was rendering so expressively.

But everything must end in this world, even the andante from *Norma*. and the Reverend Nathaniel Morse began to favor the young couple with the speech which had clone duty many times before under similar circumstances. "The two souls that blend together — Flesh of my flesh — Increase and multiply — — "

In my opinion he had much better have got to work like a notary: "Before us, there has been drawn up a deed of arrangement regarding Messrs. Ephrinell, Bluett & Co. — — "

My thought remained unfinished. There are shouts from the engine. The brakes are suddenly applied with a scream and a grind. Successive shocks accompany the stoppage of the train. Then, with a violent bump, the cars pull up in a cloud of sand.

What an interruption to the nuptial ceremony!

Everything is upset in the dining car, men, furniture, bride, bridegroom and witnesses. Not one kept his equilibrium. It is an indescribable pell-mell, with cries of terror and prolonged groans. But I hasten to point out that there was nothing serious, for the stoppage was not all at once.

“Quick!” said the major. “Out of the train!”

CHAPTER XX.

In a moment the passengers, more or less bruised and alarmed, were out on the track. Nothing but complaints and questions uttered in three or four different languages, amid general bewilderment.

Faruskiar, Ghangir and the four Mongols were the first to jump off the cars. They are out on the line, kandijar in one hand, revolver in the other. No doubt an attack has been organized to pillage the train.

The rails have been taken up for about a hundred yards, and the engine, after bumping over the sleepers, has come to a standstill in a sandhill.

“What! The railroad not finished — and they sold me a through ticket from Tiflis to Pekin? And I came by this Transasiatic to save nine days in my trip round the world!”

In these phrases, in German, hurled at Popof, I recognized the voice of the irascible baron. But this time he should have addressed his reproaches not to the engineers of the company, but to others.

We spoke to Popof, while Major Noltitz continued to watch Faruskiar and the Mongols.

“The baron is mistaken,” said Popof, “the railway is completed, and if a hundred yards of rails have been lifted here, it has been with some criminal intention.”

“To stop the train!” I exclaim.

“And steal the treasure they are sending to Pekin!” says Caterna.

“There is no doubt about that,” says Popof. “Be ready to repulse an attack.”

“Is it Ki-Tsang and his gang that we have to do with?” I asked.

Ki-Tsang! The name spread among the passengers and caused inexpressible terror.

The major said to me in a low voice: “Why Ki-Tsang? Why not my lord Faruskiar?”

“He — the manager of the Transasiatic?”

“If it is true that the company had to take several of these robber chiefs into its confidence to assure the safety of the trains — ”

“I will never believe that, major.”

“As you please, Monsieur Bombarnac. But assuredly Faruskiar knew that this pretended mortuary van contained millions.”

“Come, major, this is no time for joking.”

No, it was the time for defending, and defending one’s self courageously.

The Chinese officer has placed his men around the treasure van. They are twenty in number, and the rest of the passengers, not counting the women, amount to thirty. Popof distributes the weapons which are carried in case of attack. Major Noltitz, Caterna, Pan-Chao, Ephrinell, driver and stoker, passengers, Asiatic and European, all resolve to fight for the common safety.

On the right of the line, about a hundred yards away, stretches a deep, gloomy thicket, a sort of jungle, in which doubtless are hidden the robbers, awaiting the signal to pounce upon us.

Suddenly there is a burst of shouting, the thicket has given passage to the gang in ambush — some sixty Mongols, nomads of the Gobi. If these rascals beat us, the train will be pillaged, the treasure of the Son of Heaven will be stolen, and, what concerns us more intimately, the passengers will be massacred without mercy.

And Faruskiar, whom Major Noltitz so unjustly suspected? I look at him. His face is no longer the same; his fine features have become pale, his height has increased, there is lightning in his eyes.

Well! If I was mistaken about the mandarin Yen Lou, at least I had not mistaken the general manager of the Transasiatic or the famous bandit of Yunnan.

However, as soon as the Mongols appeared, Popof hurried Madame Caterna, Miss Horatia Bluett, and the other women into the cars. We took every means for putting them in safety.

My only weapon was a six-shot revolver, and I knew how to use it.

Ah! I wanted incidents and accidents, and impressions of the journey! Well, the chronicler will not fail to chronicle, on condition that he emerges safe and sound from the fray, for the honor of reporting in general and the glory of the *Twentieth Century* in particular.

But is it not possible to spread trouble among the assailants, by beginning with blowing out Ki-Tsang’s brains, if Ki-Tsang is the author of this ambuscade? That would bring matters to a crisis.

The bandits fire a volley, and begin brandishing their arms and shouting. Faruskiar, pistol in one hand, kandijar in the other, has rushed onto them, his eyes gleaming, his lips covered with a slight foam. Ghangir is at his side, followed by four Mongols whom he is exciting by word and gesture.

Major Noltitz and I throw ourselves into the midst of our assailants. Caterna is in front of us, his mouth open, his white teeth ready to bite, his eyes blinking, his revolver flourishing about. The actor has given place to the old sailor who has reappeared for the occasion.

“These beggars want to board us!” said he. “Forward, forward, for the honor of the flag! To port, there, fire! To starboard, there, fire! All together, fire!”

And it was with no property daggers he was armed, nor dummy pistols loaded with Edouard Philippe’s inoffensive powder. No! A revolver in each hand, he was bounding along, firing, as he said, right and left and everywhere.

Pan-Chao also exposed himself bravely, a smile on his lips, gallantly leading on the other Chinese passengers. Popof and the railwaymen did their duty bravely. Sir Francis Trevellyan, of Trevellyan Hall, took matters very coolly, but Ephrinell abandoned himself to true Yankee fury, being no less irritated at the interruption to his marriage as to the danger run by his forty-two packages of artificial teeth.

And in short, the band of robbers met with a much more serious resistance than they expected.

And Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer? Well, he is one of the most furious of us all. He sweats blood and water, his fury carries him away at the risk of his being massacred. Many times we have to rescue him. These rails lifted, this train stopped, this attack in the open Gobi desert, the delays that it will all occasion, the mailboat lost at Tientsin, the voyage round the world spoiled, his plan come to grief before he had half accomplished it! What a shock to his German self-esteem!

Faruskiar, my hero — I cannot call him anything else — displays extraordinary intrepidity, bearing himself the boldest in the struggle, and when he had exhausted his revolver, using his kandijar like a man who had often faced death and never feared it.

Already there were a few wounded on both sides, perhaps a few dead among the passengers who lay on the line. I have had my shoulder grazed by a bullet, a simple scratch I have hardly noticed. The Reverend Nathaniel Morse does not think that his sacred character compels him to cross his arms, and, from the way he works, one would not imagine that it was the first time he has handled firearms. Caterna has his hat shot through, and it will be remembered that it is his village bridegroom's hat, the gray beaver, with the long fur. He utters a gigantic maritime oath, something about thunder and portholes, and then, taking a most deliberate aim, quietly shoots stone dead the ruffian who has taken such a liberty with his best headgear.

For ten minutes or so the battle continues with most alarming alternations. The number of wounded on both sides increases, and the issue is still doubtful. Faruskiar and Ghangir and the Mongols have been driven back toward the precious van, which the Chinese guard have not left for an instant. But two or three of them have been mortally wounded, and their officer has just been killed by a bullet in the head. And my hero does all that the most ardent courage can do for the defence of the treasure of the Son of Heaven.

I am getting uneasy at the prolongation of the combat. It will continue evidently as long as the chief of the band — a tall man with a black beard — urges on his accomplices to the attack on the train. Up till now he has escaped unhurt, and, in spite of all we can do, he is gaining ground. Shall we be obliged to take refuge in the vans, as behind the walls of a fortress, to entrench ourselves, to fight until the last has succumbed? And that will not be long, if we cannot stop the retrograde movement which is beginning on our side.

To the reports of the guns there are now added the cries of the women, who in their terror are running about the gangways, although Miss Bluett and Madame Caterna are trying to keep them inside the cars. A few bullets have gone through the panels, and I am wondering if any of them have hit Kinko.

Major Noltitz comes near me and says: “This is not going well.”

“No, it is not going well,” I reply, “and I am afraid the ammunition will give out. We must settle their commander-in-chief. Come, major — ”

But what we are about to do was done by another at that very instant.

This other was Faruskiar. Bursting through the ranks of the assailants, he cleared them off the line, in spite of the blows they aimed at him. He is in front of the bandit chief, he raises his arm, he stabs him full in the chest.

Instantly the thieves beat a retreat, without even carrying off their dead and wounded. Some run across the plain, some disappear in the thickets. Why pursue them, now that the battle has ended in our favor? And I must say that without the admirable valor of Faruskiar, I do not expect any of us would have lived to tell the story.

But the chief of the bandits is not dead, although the blood flows abundantly from his chest.

He has fallen with one knee on the ground, one hand up, with the other he is supporting himself.

Faruskiar stands over him, towering above him.

Suddenly he rises in a last effort, his arm threatens his adversary, he looks at him.

A last thrust of the kandijar is driven into his heart.

Faruskiar returns, and in Russian, with perfect calmness, remarks:

“Ki-Tsang is dead! So perish all who bear weapons against the Son of Heaven!”

CHAPTER XXI.

And so it was Ki-Tsang who had just attacked the Grand Transasiatic on the plains of Gobi. The pirate of Vunnan had learned that a van containing gold and precious stones of enormous value had formed part of this train! And was there anything astonishing in that, considering that the newspapers, even those of Paris, had published the fact many days before? So Ki-Tsang had had time to prepare his attempt, and had lifted a portion of the rails, and would probably have succeeded in carrying off the treasure if Faruskiar had not brought him to his feet. That is why our hero had been so uneasy all the morning; if he had been looking out over the desert so persistently, it was because he had been warned of Ki-Tsang's plans by the last Mongol who had joined the train at Tchertchen! Under any circumstances we had now nothing to fear from Ki-Tsang. The manager of the company had done justice on the bandit — speedy justice, I admit. But we are in the midst of the deserts of Mongolia, where there are no juries as yet, which is a good thing for the Mongols.

"Well," said I to the major, "I hope you have abandoned your suspicions with regard to my lord Faruskiar?"

"To a certain extent, Monsieur Bombarnac!" Only to a certain extent? Evidently Major Noltitz is difficult to please.

But let us hasten on and count our victims. On our side there are three dead, including the Chinese officer, and more than twelve wounded, four of them seriously, the rest slightly, so that they can continue their journey to Pekin. Popof escaped without a scratch, Caterna with a slight graze which his wife insists on bathing.

The major has the wounded brought into the cars and does the best for them under the circumstances. Doctor Tio-King offers his services, but they seem to prefer the Russian army surgeon, and that I understand. As to those who have fallen it is best for us to take them on to the next station and there render them the last services.

The thieves had abandoned their dead. We covered them over with a little sand, and that is all we need say.

The place where we had been stopped was halfway between Tcharkalyk and Tchertchen, the only two stations from which we could procure help. Unfortunately they were no longer in telegraphic communication, Ki-Tsang having knocked down the posts at the same time as he lifted the rails.

Hence a discussion as to what was the best thing to be done, which was not of long duration.

As the engine had run off the rails, the very first thing to do was evidently to get it onto them again; then as there was a gap in the line, the simplest thing to do was to run back to Tchertchen, and wait there until the company’s workmen had repaired the damage, which they could easily do in a couple of days.

We set to work without losing a moment. The passengers were only too glad to help Popof and the officials who had at their disposal a few tools, including jacks, levers and hammers, and in three hours the engine and tender were again on the line.

The most difficult business is over. With the engine behind we can proceed at slow speed to Tchertchen. But what lost time! What delays! And what recriminations from our German baron, what donnervetters and teufels and other German expletives!

I have omitted to say that immediately after the dispersal of the bandits we had in a body thanked Faruskiar. The hero received our thanks with all the dignity of an Oriental.

“I only did my duty as general manager of the company,” he replied, with a truly noble modesty.

And then at his orders the Mongols had set to work, and I noticed that they displayed indefatigable ardor, for which they earned our sincere felicitations.

Meanwhile Faruskiar and Ghangir were often talking together in a whisper, and from these interviews arose a proposition which none of us expected.

“Guard,” said Faruskiar, addressing Popof, “it is my opinion that we had much better run on to Tcharkalyk than go back; it would suit the passengers much better.”

“Certainly, sir, it would be preferable,” said Popof; “but the line is broken between here and Tcharkalyk, and we cannot get through.”

“Not at present, but we could get the cars through if we could temporarily repair the line.”

That was a proposal worth consideration, and we assembled to consider it, Major Noltitz, Pan-Chao, Fulk Ephrinell, Caterna, the clergyman, Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer, and a dozen others — all who understood Russian.

Faruskiar spoke as follows:

“I have been looking at the portion of the line damaged by the band of Ki-Tsang. Most of the sleepers are still in place. As to the rails, the scoundrels have simply thrown them onto the sand, and by replacing them end to end it would be easy to get the train over to the uninjured track. It would not take a day to do this, and five hours afterward we should be at Tcharkalyk.”

Excellent notion, at once approved of by Popof, the driver, the passengers, and particularly by the baron. The plan was possible, and if there were a few rails useless, we could bring to the front those we had already run over, and in this way get over the difficulty.

Evidently this Faruskiar is a man, he is our true chief, he is the personage I was in want of, and I will sound his name over the entire universe in all the trumpets of my chronicle!

And yet Major Noltitz is mistaken enough to see in him only a rival to this Ki-Tsang, whose crimes have just received their final punishment from his hand!

We set to work to replace the sleepers that had been shifted aside from where they had left their mark, and we continued our task without intermission.

Having no fear of being noticed amid the confusion which followed the attack, I went into the luggage van to assure myself that Kinko was safe and sound, to tell him what had passed, to caution him on no account to come put of his box. He promised me, and I was at ease regarding him.

It was nearly three o’clock when we began work. The rails had been shifted for about a hundred yards. As Faruskiar remarked, it was not necessary for us to fix them permanently. That would be the task of the workmen the company would send from Tcharkalyk when we reached that station, which is one of the most important on the line.

As the rails were heavy we divided ourselves into detachments. First-class and second-class, all worked together with good will. The baron displayed tremendous ardor. Ephrinell, who thought no more of his marriage than if he had never thought about it, devoted strict attention to business. Pan-Chao was second to nobody, and even Doctor Tio-King strove to make himself useful — in the fashion of the celebrated Auguste, the fly on the chariot wheel.

“It is hot, this Gobi sun!” said Caterna.

Alone sat Sir Francis Trevellyan of Trevellyanshire, calm and impassive in his car, utterly regardless of our efforts.

At seven o’clock thirty yards of the line had been repaired. The night was closing in. It was decided to wait until the morning. In half a day we could finish the work, and in the afternoon we could be off again.

We were in great want of food and sleep. After so rude a task, how rude the appetite! We met in the dining car without distinction of classes. There was no scarcity of provisions, and a large breach was made in the reserves. Never mind! We can fill up again at Tcharkalyk.

Caterna is particularly cheery, talkative, facetious, communicative, overflowing. At dessert he and his wife sang the air — appropriate to the occasion — from the *Voyage en Chine*, which we caught up with more power than precision:

“China is a charming land

Which surely ought to please you.”

Oh! Labiche, could you ever have imagined that this adorable composition would one day charm passengers in distress on the Grand Transasiatic? And then our actor — a little fresh, I admit — had an idea. And such an idea! Why not resume the marriage ceremony interrupted by the attack on the train?

“What marriage?” asked Ephrinell.

“Yours, sir, yours,” replied Caterna. “Have you forgotten it? That is rather too good!”

The fact is that Fulk Ephrinell, on the one part, and Horatia Bluett, on the other part, seemed to have forgotten that had it not been for the attack of Ki-Tsang and his band they would now have been united in the gentle bonds of matrimony.

But we were all too tired. The Reverend Nathaniel Morse was unequal to the task; he would not have strength enough to bless the pair, and the pair would not have strength enough to support his blessing. The ceremony could be resumed on the day after to-morrow. Between Tcharkalyk and Lan Tcheou there was a run of nine hundred kilometres, and that was quite long enough for this Anglo-American couple to be linked together in.

And so we all went to our couches or benches for a little refreshing sleep. But at the same time the requirements of prudence were not neglected.

Although it appeared improbable, now that their chief had succumbed, the bandits might still make a nocturnal attack. There were always these cursed millions of the Son of Heaven to excite their covetousness, and if we are not on our guard —

But we feel safe. Faruskiar in person arranges for the surveillance of the train. Since the death of the officer he has taken command of the Chinese detachment. He and Ghangir are on guard over the imperial treasure, and according to Caterna, who is never in want of a quotation from some comic opera:

“This night the maids of honor will be guarded well.”

And, in fact, the imperial treasure was much better guarded than the beautiful Athenais de Solange between the first and second acts of the *Mousquetaires de la Reine*.

At daybreak next morning we are at work. The weather is superb. The day will be warm. Out in the Asian desert on the 24th of May the temperature is such that you can cook eggs if you only cover them with a little sand.

Zeal was not wanting, and the passengers worked as hard as they had done the night before. The line was gradually completed. One by one the sleepers were replaced, the rails were laid end to end, and about four o’clock in the afternoon the gap was bridged.

At once the engine began to advance slowly, the cars following until they were over the temporary track and safe again. Now the road is clear to Tcharkalyk; what do I say? to Pekin.

We resume our places. Popof gives the signal for departure as Caterna trolls out the chorus of victory of the admiral’s sailors in *Haydee*.

A thousand cheers reply to him. At ten o’clock in the evening the train enters Tcharkalyk station.

We are exactly thirty hours behind time. But is not thirty hours enough to make Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer lose the mail from Tient-Tsin to Yokohama?

CHAPTER XXII.

I, who wanted an incident, have had one to perfection. I am thankful enough not to have been one of the victims. I have emerged from the fray safe and sound. All my numbers are intact, barring two or three insignificant scratches. Only No. 4 has been traversed by a bullet clean through — his hat.

At present I have nothing in view beyond the Bluett-Ephrinell marriage and the termination of the Kinko affair. I do not suppose that Faruskiar can afford us any further surprises. I can reckon on the casual, of course, for the journey has another five days to run. Taking into account the delay occasioned by the Ki-Tsang affair that will make thirteen days from the start from Uzun Ada.

Thirteen days! Heavens! And there are the thirteen numbers in my notebook! Supposing I were superstitious?

We remained three hours at Tcharkalyk. Most of the passengers did not leave their beds. We were occupied with declarations relative to the attack on the train, to the dead which the Chinese authorities were to bury, to the wounded who were to be left at Tcharkalyk, where they would be properly looked after. Pan-Chao told me it was a populous town, and I regret I was unable to visit it.

The company sent off immediately a gang of workmen to repair the line and set up the telegraph posts; and in a day everything would be clear again.

I need scarcely say that Faruskiar, with all the authority of the company's general manager, took part in the different formalities that were needed at Tcharkalyk. I do not know how to praise him sufficiently. Besides, he was repaid for his good offices by the deference shown him by the staff at the railway station.

At three in the morning we arrived at Kara Bouran, where the train stopped but a few minutes. Here the railway crosses the route of Gabriel Bonvalot and Prince Henri of Orleans across Tibet in 1889-90, a much more complete journey than ours, a circular trip from Paris to Paris, by Berlin, Petersburg, Moscow, Nijni, Perm, Tobolsk, Omsk, Semipalatinsk, Kouldja, Tcharkalyk, Batong, Yunnan, Hanoi, Saigon, Singapore, Ceylon, Aden, Suez, Marseilles, the tour of Asia, and the tour of Europe.

The train halts at Lob Nor at four o’clock and departs at six. This lake, the banks of which were visited by General Povtzoff in 1889, when he returned from his expedition to Tibet, is an extensive marsh with a few sandy islands, surrounded by two or three feet of water. The country through which the Tarim slowly flows had already been visited by Fathers Hue and Gabet, the explorers Prjevalski and Carey up to the Davana pass, situated a hundred and fifty kilometres to the south. But from that pass Gabriel Bonvalot and Prince Henri of Orleans, camping sometimes at fifteen thousand feet of altitude, had ventured across virgin territories to the foot of the superb Himalayan chain.

Our itinerary lay eastwards toward Kara Nor, skirting the base of the Nan Chan mountains, behind which lies the region of Tsaidam. The railway dare not venture among the mountainous countries of the Kou-Kou-Nor, and we were on our way to the great city of Lan Tcheou along, the base of the hills.

Gloomy though the country might be, there was no reason for the passengers to be so. This glorious sun, with its rays gilding the sands of the Gobi as far as we could see, announced a perfect holiday. From Lob Nor to Kara Nor there are three hundred and fifty kilometres to run, and between the lakes we will resume the interrupted marriage of Fulk Ephrinell and Horatia Bluett, if nothing occurs to again delay their happiness.

The dining car has been again arranged for the ceremony, the witnesses are ready to resume their parts, and the happy pair cannot well be otherwise than of the same mind.

The Reverend Nathaniel Morse, in announcing that the marriage will take place at nine o’clock, presents the compliments of Mr. Ephrinell and Miss Bluett.

Major Noltitz and I, Caterna and Pan-Chao are under arms at the time stated.

Caterna did not think it his duty to resume his costume, nor did his wife. They were dressed merely for the grand dinner party which took place at eight o’clock in the evening — the dinner given by Ephrinell to his witnesses and to the chief first-class passengers. Our actor, puffing out his left cheek, informed me that he had a surprise for us at dessert. What? I thought it wise not to ask.

A little before nine o’clock the bell of the tender begins to ring. Be assured it does not announce an accident. Its joyous tinkling calls us to the dining car, and we march in procession toward the place of sacrifice.

Ephrinell and Miss Bluett are already seated at the little table in front of the worthy clergyman, and we take our places around them.

On the platforms are grouped the spectators, anxious to lose nothing of the nuptial ceremony.

My lord Faruskiar and Ghangir, who had been the object of a personal invitation, had just arrived. The assembly respectfully rises to receive them. They will sign the deed of marriage. It is a great honor, and if it were my marriage I should be proud to see the illustrious name of Faruskiar figure among the signatures to the deed.

The ceremony begins, and this time the Reverend Nathaniel Morse was able to finish his speech, so regrettably interrupted on the former occasion.

The young people rise, mud the clergyman asks them if they are mutually agreed as to marriage.

Before replying, Miss Bluett turns to Ephrinell, and says:

“It is understood that Holmes-Holme will have twenty-five per cent. of the profits of our partnership.”

“Fifteen,” said Ephrinell, “only fifteen.”

“That is not fair, for I agree to thirty per cent, from Strong, Bulbul & Co.”

“Well, let us say twenty per cent. Miss Bluett.”

“Be it so, Mr. Ephrinell.”

“But that is a good deal for you!” whispered Caterna in my ear.

The marriage for a moment was in check for five per cent!

But all is arranged. The interests of the two houses have been safeguarded. The Reverend Nathaniel Morse repeats the question.

A dry “yes” from Horatia Bluett, a short “yes” from Fulk Ephrinell, and the two are declared to be united in the bonds of matrimony.

The deed is then signed, first by them, then by the witnesses, then by Faruskiar, and the other signatures follow. At length the clergyman adds his name and flourish, and that closes the series of formalities according to rule.

“There they are, riveted for life,” said the actor to me, with a little lift of his shoulder.

“For life — like two bullfinches,” said the actress, who had not forgotten that these birds are noted for the fidelity of their armours.

“In China,” said Pan-Chao, “it is not the bullfinch but the mandarin duck that symbolizes fidelity in marriage.”

“Ducks or bullfinches, it is all one,” said Caterna philosophically.

The ceremony is over. We compliment the newly married pair. We return to our occupation, Ephrinell to his accounts, Mrs. Ephrinell to her work. Nothing is changed in the train. There are only two more married people.

Major Noltitz, Pan-Chao and I go out and smoke on one of the platforms, leaving to their preparations the Caternas, who seem to be having a sort of rehearsal in their corner. Probably it is the surprise for the evening.

There is not much variety in the landscape. All along is this monotonous desert of Gobi with the heights of the Humboldt mountains on the right reaching on to the ranges of Nan Chan. The stations are few and far between, and consist merely of an agglomeration of huts, with the signal cabin standing up among them like a monument. Here the tender fills up with water and coal. Beyond the Kara Nor, where a few towns appear, the approach to China Proper, populous and laborious, becomes more evident.

This part of the desert of Gobi has little resemblance to the regions of Eastern Turkestan we crossed on leaving Kachgar. These regions are as new to Pan-Chao and Doctor Tio-King as to us Europeans.

I should say that Faruskiar no longer disdains to mingle in our conversation. He is a charming man, well informed and witty, with whom I shall become better acquainted when we reach Pekin. He has already invited me to visit him at his yamen, and I will then have an opportunity of putting him to the question — that is, to the interview. He has traveled a good deal, and seems to have an especially good opinion of French journalists. He will not refuse to subscribe to the *Twentieth Century.* I am sure — Paris, 48 francs, Departments, 56, Foreign, 76.

While the train is running at full speed we talk of one thing and another. With regard to Kachgaria, which had been mentioned, Faruskiar gave us a few very interesting details regarding the province, which had been so greatly troubled by insurrectionary movements. It was at this epoch that the capital, holding out against Chinese covetousness, had not yet submitted to Russian domination. Many times numbers of Celestials had been massacred in the revolts of the Turkestan chiefs, and the garrison had taken refuge in the fortress of Yanghi-Hissar.

Among these insurgent chiefs there was one, a certain Ouali-Khan-Toulla, whom I have mentioned with regard to the murder of Schlagintweit, and who for a time had become master of Kachgaria. He was a man of great intelligence, but of uncommon ferocity. And Faruskiar told us an anecdote giving us an idea of these pitiless Orientals.

“There was at Kachgar,” he said, “an armorer of repute, who, wishing to secure the favors of Ouali-Khan-Toulla, made a costly sword. When he had finished his work he sent his son, a boy of ten, to present the sword, hoping to receive some recompense from the royal hand. He received it. The Khan admired the sword, and asked if the blade was of the first quality. ‘Yes,’ said the boy. ‘Then approach!’ said the Khan, and at one blow he smote off the head, which he sent back to the father with the price of the blade he had thus proved to be of excellent quality.”

This story he told really well. Had Caterna heard it, he would have asked for a Turkestan opera on the subject.

The day passed without incident. The train kept on at its moderate speed of forty kilometres an hour, an average that would have been raised to eighty had they listened to Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer. The truth is that the Chinese driver had no notion of making up the time lost between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk.

At seven in the evening we reach Kara Nor, to stay there fifty minutes. This lake, which is not as extensive as Lob Nor, absorbs the waters of the Soule Ho, coming down from the Nan Chan mountains. Our eyes are charmed with the masses of verdure that clothe its southern bank, alive with the flight of numerous birds. At eight o’clock, when we left the station, the sun had set behind the sandhills, and a sort of mirage produced by the warming of the lower zones of the atmosphere prolonged the twilight above the horizon.

The dining car has resumed its restaurant appearance, and here is the wedding banquet, instead of the usual fare. Twenty guests have been invited to this railway love feast, and, first of them, my lord Faruskiar. But for some reason or other he has declined Ephrinell’s invitation.

I am sorry for it, for I hoped that good luck would place me near him.

It occurred to me then that this illustrious name was worth sending to the office of the *Twentieth Century*, this name and also a few lines relative to the attack on the train and the details of the defense. Never was information better worth sending by telegram, however much it might cost. This time there is no risk of my bringing a lecture down on myself. There is no mistake possible, as in the case of that pretended mandarin, Yen-Lou, which I shall never forget — but then, it was in the country of the false Smerdis and that must be my excuse.

It is agreed that as soon as we arrive at Sou-Tcheou, the telegraph being repaired at the same time as the line, I will send off a despatch, which will reveal to the admiration of Europe the brilliant name of Faruskiar.

We are seated at the table. Ephrinell has done the thing as well as circumstances permit. In view of the feast, provisions were taken in at Tcharkalyk. It is not Russian cookery, but Chinese, and by a Chinese chef to which we do honor. Luckily we are not condemned to eat it with chopsticks, for forks are not prohibited at the Grand Transasiatic table.

I am placed to the left of Mrs. Ephrinell, Major Noltitz to the right of her husband. The other guests are seated as they please. The German baron, who is not the man to refuse a good dinner, is one of the guests. Sir Francis Trevellyan did not even make a sign in answer to the invitation that was tendered him.

To begin with, we had chicken soup and plovers' eggs, then swallows' nests cut in threads, stewed spawn of crab, sparrow gizzards, roast pig's feet and sauce, mutton marrow, fried sea slug, shark's fin — very gelatinous;

finally bamboo shoots in syrup, and water lily roots in sugar, all the most out-of-the-way dishes, watered by Chao Hing wine, served warm in metal tea urns.

The feast is very jolly and — what shall I say? — very confidential, except that the husband takes no notice of the wife, and reciprocally.

What an indefatigable humorist is our actor? What a continuous stream of wheezes, unintelligible for the most part, of antediluvian puns, of pure nonsense at which he laughs so heartily that it is difficult not to laugh with him. He wanted to learn a few words of Chinese, and Pan-Chao having told him that “tching-tching” means thanks, he has been tching-tchinging at every opportunity, with burlesque intonation.

Then we have French songs, Russian songs, Chinese songs — among others the “Shiang-Touo-Tching,” the *Chanson de la Reverie*, in which our young Celestial repeats that the flowers of the peach tree are of finest fragrance at the third moon, and those of the red pomegranate at the fifth.

The dinner lasts till ten o’clock. At this moment the actor and actress, who had retired during dessert, made their entry, one in a coachman’s overcoat, the other in a nurse’s jacket, and they gave us the *Sonnettes* with an energy, a go, a dash — well, it would only be fair to them if Claretie, on the recommendation of Meilhac and Halevy, offers to put them on the pension list of the Comédie Française.

At midnight the festival is over. We all retire to our sleeping places. We do not even hear them shouting the names of the stations before we come to Kan-Tcheou, and it is between four and five o’clock in the morning that a halt of forty minutes retains us at the station of that town.

The country is changing as the railway runs south of the fortieth degree, so as to skirt the eastern base of the Nan Shan mountains. The desert gradually disappears, villages are not so few, the density of the population increases. Instead of sandy flats, we get verdant plains, and even rice fields, for the neighboring mountains spread their abundant streams over these high regions of the Celestial Empire. We do not complain of this change after the dreariness of the Kara-Koum and the solitude of Gobi. Since we left the Caspian, deserts have succeeded deserts, except when crossing the Pamir. From here to Pekin picturesque sites, mountain horizons, and deep valleys will not be wanting along the Grand Transasiatic.

We shall enter China, the real China, that of folding screens and porcelain, in the territory of the vast province of Kin-Sou. In three days we shall be at the end of our journey, and it is not I, a mere special correspondent, vowed to perpetual movement, who will complain of its length. Good for Kinko, shut up in his box, and for pretty Zinca Klork, devoured by anxiety in her house in the Avenue Cha-Coua!

We halt two hours at Sou-Tcheou. The first thing I do is to run to the telegraph office. The complaisant Pan-Chao offers to be my interpreter. The clerk tells us that the posts are all up again, and that messages can be sent through to Europe.

At once I favor the *Twentieth Century* with the following telegram:

“Sou-Tcheou, 25th May, 2:25 P.M.

“Train attacked between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk by the gang of the celebrated Ki-Tsang; travelers repulsed the attack and saved the Chinese treasure; dead and wounded on both sides; chief killed by the heroic

Mongol grandee Faruskiar, general manager of the company, whose name should be the object of universal admiration.”

If this telegram does not gratify the editor of my newspaper, well — —

Two hours to visit Sou-Tcheou, that is not much.

In Turkestan we have seen two towns side by side, an ancient one and a modern one. Here, in China, as Pan-Chao points out, we have two and even three or four, as at Pekin, enclosed one within the other.

Here Tai-Tchen is the outer town, and Le-Tchen the inner one. It strikes us at first glance that both look desolate. Everywhere are traces of fire, here and there pagodas or houses half destroyed, a mass of ruins, not the work of time, but the work of war. This shows that Sou-Tcheou, taken by the Mussulmans and retaken by the Chinese, has undergone the horrors of those barbarous contests which end in the destruction of buildings and the massacre of their inhabitants of every age and sex.

It is true that population rapidly increases in the Celestial Empire; more rapidly than monuments are raised from their ruins. And so Sou-Tcheou has become populous again within its double wall as in the suburbs around. Trade is flourishing, and as we walked through the principal streets we noticed the well-stocked shops, to say nothing of the perambulating pedlars.

Here, for the first time, the Caternas saw pass along between the inhabitants, who stood at attention more from fear than respect, a mandarin on horseback, preceded by a servant carrying a fringed parasol, the mark of his master’s dignity.

But there is one curiosity for which Sou-Tcheou is worth a visit. It is there that the Great Wall of China ends.

After descending to the southeast toward Lan-Tcheou, the wall runs to the northeast, covering the provinces of Kian-Sou, Chan-si, and Petchili to the north of Pekin. Here it is little more than an embankment with a tower here and there, mostly in ruins. I should have failed in my duty as a chronicler if I had not noticed this gigantic work at its beginning, for it far surpasses the works of our modern fortifications.

“Is it of any real use, this wall of China?” asked Major Noltitz.

“To the Chinese, I do not know,” said I; “but certainly it is to our political orators for purposes of comparison, when discussing treaties of commerce. Without it, what would become of the eloquence of our legislators?”

CHAPTER XXIII.

I have not seen Kinko for two days, and the last was only to exchange a few words with him to relieve his anxiety.

To-night I will try and visit him. I have taken care to lay in a few provisions at Sou-Tcheou.

We started at three o’clock. We have got a more powerful engine on. Across this undulating country the gradients are occasionally rather steep. Seven hundred kilometres separate us from the important city of Lan-Tcheou, where we ought to arrive to-morrow morning, running thirty miles an hour.

I remarked to Pan-Chao that this average was not a high one.

“What would you have?” he replied, crunching the watermelon seeds. “You will not change, and nothing will change the temperament of the Celestials. As they are conservatives in all things, so will they be conservative in this matter of speed, no matter how the engine may be improved. And, besides, Monsieur Bombarnac, that there are railways at all in the Middle Kingdom is a wonder to me.”

“I agree with you, but where you have a railway you might as well get all the advantage out of it that you can.”

“Bah!” said Pan-Chao carelessly.

“Speed,” said I, “is a gain of time — and to gain time — ”

“Time does not exist in China, Monsieur Bombarnac, and it cannot exist for a population of four hundred millions. There would not be enough for everybody. And so we do not count by days and hours, but always by moons and watches."

"Which is more poetical than practical," I remark.

"Practical, Mr. Reporter? You Westerners are never without that word in your mouth. To be practical is to be the slave of time, work, money, business, the world, everybody else, and one's self included. I confess that during my stay in Europe — you can ask Doctor Tio-King — I have not been very practical, and now I return to Asia I shall be less so. I shall let myself live, that is all, as the cloud floats in the breeze, the straw on the stream, as the thought is borne away by the imagination."

"I see," said I, "we must take China as it is."

"And as it will probably always be, Monsieur Bombarnac. Ah! if you knew how easy the life is — an adorable *dolce far niente* between folding screens in the quietude of the yamens. The cares of business trouble us little; the cares of politics trouble us less. Think! Since Fou Hi, the first emperor in 2950, a contemporary of Noah, we are in the twenty-third dynasty. Now it is Manchoo; what it is to be next what matters? Either we have a government or we have not; and which of its sons Heaven has chosen for the happiness of four hundred million subjects we hardly know, and we hardly care to know."

It is evident that the young Celestial is a thousand and ten times wrong, to use the numerative formula; but it is not for me to tell him so.

At dinner Mr. and Mrs. Ephrinell, sitting side by side, hardly exchanged a word. Their intimacy seems to have decreased since they were married. Perhaps they are absorbed in the calculation of their reciprocal interests, which are not yet perfectly amalgamated. Ah! they do not count by moons and watches, these Anglo-Saxons! They are practical, too practical!

We have had a bad night. The sky of purple sulphury tint became stormy toward evening, the atmosphere became stifling, the electrical tension excessive. It meant a “highly successful” storm, to quote Caterna, who assured me he had never seen a better one except perhaps in the second act of *Freyschütz*. In truth the train ran through a zone, so to speak, of vivid lightning and rolling thunder, which the echoes of the mountains prolonged indefinitely. I think there must have been several lightning strokes, but the rails acted as conductors, and preserved the cars from injury. It was a fine spectacle, a little alarming, these fires in the sky that the heavy rain could not put out — these continuous discharges from the clouds, in which were mingled the strident whistlings of our locomotive as we passed through the stations of Yanlu, Youn Tcheng, Houlan-Sien and Da-Tsching.

By favor of this troubled night I was able to communicate with Kinko, to take him some provisions and to have a few minutes’ conversation with him.

“Is it the day after to-morrow,” he asked, “that we arrive at Pekin?”

“Yes, the day after to-morrow, if the train is not delayed.”

“Oh, I am not afraid of delays! But when my box is in the railway station at Pekin, I have still to get to the Avenue Cha-Coua — — ”

“What does it matter, will not the fair Zinca Klork come and call for it?”

“No. I advised her not to do so.”

“And why?”

“Women are so impressionable! She would want to see the van in-which I had come, she would claim the box with such excitement that suspicions would be aroused. In short, she would run the risk of betraying me.”

“You are right, Kinko.”

“Besides, we shall reach the station in the afternoon, very late in the afternoon perhaps, and the unloading of the packages will not take place until next morning — — ”

“Probably.”

“Well, Monsieur Bombarnac, if I am not taking too great a liberty, may I ask a favor of you?”

“What is it?”

“That you will be present at the departure of the case, so as to avoid any mistake.”

“I will be there, Kinko, I will be there. Glass fragile, I will see that they don’t handle it too roughly. And if you like I will accompany the case to Avenue Cha-Coua — — ”

“I hardly like to ask you to do that — — ”

“You are wrong, Kinko. You should not stand on ceremony with a friend, and I am yours, Kinko. Besides, it will be a pleasure to me to make the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Zinca Klork. I will be there when they deliver the box, the precious box. I will help her to get the nails out of it — — ”

“The nails out of it, Monsieur Bombarnac? My panel? Ah, I will jump through my panel!”

A terrible clap of thunder interrupted our conversation. I thought the train had been thrown off the line by the commotion of the air. I left the young Roumanian and regained my place within the car.

In the morning — 26th of May, 7 A.M. — we arrived at Lan-Tcheou. Three hours to stop, three hours only.

“Come, Major Noltitz, come, Pan-Chao, come, Caterna, we have not a minute to spare.”

But as we are leaving the station we are stopped by the appearance of a tall, fat, gray, solemn personage. It is the governor of the town in a double robe of white and yellow silk, fan in hand, buckled belt, and a mantilla — a black mantilla which would have looked much better on the shoulders of a manola. He is accompanied by a certain number of globular mandarins, and the Celestials salute him by holding out their two fists, which they move up and down as they nod their heads.

“Ah! What is this gentleman going to do? Is it some Chinese formality? A visit to the passengers and their baggage? And Kinko, what about him?”

Nothing alarming, after all. It is only about the treasure of the Son of Heaven. The governor and his suite have stopped before the precious van, bolted and sealed, and are looking at it with that respectful admiration which is experienced even in China before a box containing many millions.

I ask Popof what is meant by the governor’s presence, has it anything to do with us?

“Not at all,” says Popof; “the order has come from Pekin to telegraph the arrival of the treasure. The governor has done so, and he is awaiting a reply as to whether he is to send it on to Pekin or keep it provisionally at Lan-Tcheou.”

“That will not delay us?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then come on,” said I to my companions. But if the imperial treasure was a matter of indifference to us, it did not seem to be so to Faruskiar. But whether this van started or did not start, whether it was attached to our train or left behind, what could it matter to him? Nevertheless, he and Ghangir seemed to be much put about regarding it, although they tried to hide their anxiety, while the Mongols, talking together in a low tone, gave the governor anything but friendly glances.

Meanwhile the governor had just heard of the attack on the train and of the part that our hero had taken in defence of the treasure, with what courage he had fought, and how he had delivered the country from the terrible Ki-Tsang. And then in laudatory terms, which Pan-Chao translated to us, he thanked Faruskiar, complimented him, and gave him to understand that the Son of Heaven would reward him for his services.

The manager of the Grand Transasiatic listened with that tranquil air that distinguished him, not without impatience, as, I could clearly see. Perhaps he felt himself superior to praises as well as recompenses, no matter from how great a height they might come. In that I recognized all the Mongol pride.

But we need not wait. The treasure van may remain here or go on to Pekin, but it makes no difference to us! Our business is to visit Lan-Tcheou.

What we did briefly I will more briefly tell.

There is an outer town and an inner one. No ruins this time. A very lively city, population swarming like ants and very active, familiarized by the railway with the presence of strangers whom they do not follow about with indiscreet curiosity as they used to do. Huge quarters occupy the right of the Hoang Ho, two kilometres wide. This Hoang Ho is the yellow river, the famous yellow river, which, after a course of four thousand four hundred kilometres, pours its muddy waters into the Gulf of Petchili.

“Is not its mouth near Tien Tsin, where the baron thinks of catching the mail for Yokohama?” asks the major.

“That is so,” I reply.

“He will miss it,” says the actor.

“Unless he trots, our globe-trotter.”

“A donkey’s trot does not last long,” says Caterna, “and he will not catch the boat.”

“He will catch it if the train is no later,” said the major. “We shall be at Tien Tsin on the 23d at six o’clock in the morning, and the steamer leaves at eleven.”

“Whether he misses the boat or not, my friends, do not let us miss our walk.”

A bridge of boats crosses the river, and the stream is so swift that the footway rises and falls like the waves of the sea. Madame Caterna, who had ventured on it, began to turn pale.

“Caroline, Caroline,” said her husband, “you will be seasick! Pull yourself together; pull yourself together!”

She “pulled herself together,” and we went up towards a pagoda which rises over the town.

Like all the monuments of this kind, the pagoda resembles a pile of dessert dishes placed one on the other, but the dishes are of graceful form, and if they are in Chinese porcelain it is not astonishing.

We get an outside view of a cannon foundry, a rifle factory, the workmen being natives. Through a fine garden we reach the governor’s house, with a capricious assemblage of bridges, kiosks, fountains and doors like vases. There are more pavilions and upturned roofs than there are trees and shady walks. Then there are paths paved with bricks, among them the remains of the base of the Great Wall.

It is ten minutes to ten when we return to the station, absolutely tired out; for the walk has been a rough one, and almost suffocating, for the heat is very great.

My first care is to look after the van with the millions. It is there as usual behind the train under the Chinese guard.

The message expected by the governor has arrived; the order to forward on the van to Pekin, where the treasure is to be handed over to the finance minister.

Where is Faruskiar? I do not see him. Has he given us the slip?

No! There he is on one of the platforms, and the Mongols are back in the car.

Ephrinell has been off to do a round of calls — with his samples, no doubt — and Mrs. Ephrinell has also been out on business, for a deal in hair probably. Here they come, and without seeming to notice one another they take their seats.

The other passengers are only Celestials. Some are going to Pekin; some have taken their tickets for intermediate stations like Si-Ngan, Ho Nan. Lou-Ngan, Tai-Youan. There are a hundred passengers in the train. All my numbers are on board. There is not one missing. Thirteen, always thirteen!

We were still on the platform, just after the signal of departure had been given, when Caterna asked his wife what was the most curious thing she had seen at Lan-Tcheou.

“The most curious thing, Adolphe? Those big cages, hung on to the walls and trees, which held such curious birds — — ”

“Very curious, Madame Caterna,” said Pan-Chao. “Birds that talk — — ”

“What — parrots?”

“No; criminals’ heads.”

“Horrible!” said the actress, with a most expressive grimace.

“What would you have, Caroline?” said Caterna. “It is the custom of the country.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

On leaving Lan-Tcheou, the railway crosses a well-cultivated country, watered by numerous streams, and hilly enough to necessitate frequent curves. There is a good deal of engineering work; mostly bridges, viaducts on wooden trestles of somewhat doubtful solidity, and the traveler is not particularly comfortable when he finds them bending under the weight of the train. It is true we are in the Celestial Empire, and a few thousand victims of a railway accident is hardly anything among a population of four hundred millions.

“Besides,” said Pan-Chao, “the Son of Heaven never travels by railway.”

So much the better.

At six o’clock in the evening we are at King-Tcheou, after skirting for some time the capricious meanderings of the Great Wall. Of this immense artificial frontier built between Mongolia and China, there remain only the blocks of granite and red quartzite which served as its base, its terrace of bricks with the parapets of unequal heights, a few old cannons eaten into with rust and hidden under a thick veil of lichens, and then the square towers with their ruined battlements. The interminable wall rises, falls, bends, bends back again, and is lost to sight on the undulations of the ground.

At six o’clock we halt for half an hour at King-Tcheou, of which I only saw a few pagodas, and about ten o’clock there is a halt of three-quarters of an hour at Si-Ngan, of which I did not even see the outline.

All night was spent in running the three hundred kilometres which separate this town from Ho Nan, where we had an hour to stop.

I fancy the Londoners might easily imagine that this town of Ho Nan was London, and perhaps Mrs. Ephrinell did so. Not because there was a Strand with its extraordinary traffic, nor a Thames with its prodigious movement of barges and steamboats. No! But because we were in a fog so thick that it was impossible to see either houses or pagodas.

The fog lasted all day, and this hindered the progress of the train. These Chinese engine-drivers are really very skilful and attentive and intelligent.

We were not fortunate in our last day’s journey before reaching Tien Tsin! What a loss of copy! What paragraphs were melted away in these unfathomable vapors! I saw nothing of the gorges and ravines, through which runs the Grand Transasiatic; nothing of the valley of Lou-Ngan, where we stopped at eleven o’clock; nothing of the two hundred and thirty kilometres which we accomplished amid the wreaths of a sort of yellow steam, worthy of a yellow country, until we stopped about ten o’clock at night at Tai-Youan.

Ah! the disagreeable day.

Luckily the fog rose early in the evening. Now it is night — and a very dark night, too.

I go to the refreshment bar and buy a few cakes and a bottle of wine. My intention is to pay a last visit to Kinko. We will drink to his health, to his approaching marriage with the fair Roumanian. He has traveled by fraud, I know, and if the Grand Transasiatic only knew! But the Grand Transasiatic will not know.

During the stoppage Faruskiar and Ghangir are walking on the platform and looking at the train. But it is not the van at the rear that is attracting their attention, but the van in front, and they seem to be much interested in it.

Are they suspicious of Kinko? No! the hypothesis is unlikely. The driver and stoker seem to be the object of their very particular attention. They are two brave Chinamen who have just come on duty, and perhaps Faruskiar is not sorry to see men in whom he can trust, with this imperial treasure and a hundred passengers behind them!

The hour for departure strikes, and at midnight the engine begins to move, emitting two or three loud whistles.

As I have said, the night is very dark, without moon, without stars. Long clouds are creeping across the lower zones of the atmosphere. It will be easy for me to enter the van without being noticed. And I have not been too liberal in my visits to Kinko during these twelve days on the road.

At this moment Popof says to me:

“Are you not going to sleep to-night, Monsieur Bombarnac?”

“I am in no hurry,” I reply; “after this foggy day, spent inside the car, I am glad of a breath of fresh air. Where does the train stop next?”

“At Fuen-Choo, when it has passed the junction with the Nanking line.”

“Good night, Popof.”

“Good night, Monsieur Bombarnac.”

I am alone.

The idea occurs to me to walk to the rear of the train, and I stop for an instant on the gangway in front of the treasure van.

The passengers, with the exception of the Chinese guard, are all sleeping their last sleep — their last, be it understood, on the Grand Transasiatic.

Returning to the front of the train, I approach Popof's box, and find him sound asleep.

I then open the door of the van, shut it behind me, and signal my presence to Kinko.

The panel is lowered, the little lamp is lighted. In exchange for the cakes and wine I receive the brave fellow's thanks, and we drink to the health of Zinca Klork, whose acquaintance I am to make on the morrow.

It is ten minutes to one. In twelve minutes, so Popof says, we shall pass the junction with the Nanking branch. This branch is only completed for five or six kilometres, and leads to the viaduct over the Tjon valley. This viaduct is a great work — I have the details from Pan-Chao — and the engineers have as yet only got in the piers, which rise for a hundred feet above the ground.

As I know we are to halt at Fuen-Choo, I shake hands with Kinko, and rise to take my leave.

At this moment I seem to hear some one on the platform in the rear of the van.

"Look out, Kinko!" I say in a whisper.

The lamp is instantly extinguished, and we remain quite still.

I am not mistaken. Some one is opening the door of the van.

“Your panel,” I whisper.

The panel is raised, the car is shut, and I am alone in the dark.

Evidently it must be Popof who has come in. What will he think to find me here? The first time I came to visit the young Roumanian I hid among the packages. Well, I will hide a second time. If I get behind Ephrinell’s boxes it is not likely that Popof will see me, even by the light of his lantern.

I do so; and I watch.

It is not Popof, for he would have brought his lantern.

I try to recognize the people who have just entered. It is difficult. They have glided between the packages, and after opening the further door, they have gone out and shut it behind them.

They are some of the passengers, evidently; but why here — at this hour?

I must know. I have a presentiment that something is in the wind

Perhaps by listening?

I approach the front door of the van, and in spite of the rumbling of the train I hear them distinctly enough.

Thousand and ten thousand devils! I am not mistaken! It is the voice of my lord Faruskiar. He is talking with Ghangir in Russian. It is indeed Faruskiar. The four Mongols have accompanied him. But what are they doing there? For what motive are they on the platform which is just behind the tender? And what are they saying?

What they are saying is this.

Of these questions and answers exchanged between my lord Faruskiar and his companions, I do not lose a word.

“When shall we be at the junction?”

“In a few minutes.”

“Are you sure that Kardek is at the points?”

“Yes; that has been arranged.”

What had been arranged? And who is this Kardek they are talking about?

The conversation continues.

“We must wait until we get the signal,” says Faruskiar.

“Is that a green light?” asks Ghangir.

“Yes — it will show that the switch is over.”

I do not know if I am in my right senses. The switch over? What switch?

A half minute elapses. Ought I not to tell Popof? Yes — I ought.

I was turning to go out of the van, when an exclamation kept me back.

“The signal — there is the signal!” says Ghangir.

“And now the train is on the Nanking branch!” replies Faruskiar.

The Nanking branch? But then we are lost. At five kilometres from here is the Tjon viaduct in course of construction, and the train is being precipitated towards an abyss.

Evidently Major Noltitz was not mistaken regarding my lord Faruskiar. I understand the scheme of the scoundrels. The manager of the Grand Transasiatic is a scoundrel of the deepest dye. He has entered the service of the company to await his opportunity for some extensive haul. The opportunity has come with the millions of the Son of Heaven I Yes! The whole abominable scheme is clear enough to me. Faruskiar has defended the imperial treasure against Ki-Tsang to keep it from the chief of the bandits who stopped the train, whose attack would have interfered with his criminal projects! That is why he had fought so bravely. That is why he had risked his life and behaved like a hero. And thou, poor beast of a Claudius, how thou hast been sold! Another howler! Think of that, my friend!

But somehow we ought to prevent this rascal from accomplishing his work. We ought to save the train which is running full speed towards the unfinished viaduct, we ought to save the passengers from a frightful catastrophe. As to the treasure Faruskiar and his accomplices are after, I care no more than for yesterday’s news! But the passengers — and myself — that is another affair altogether.

I will go back to Popof. Impossible. I seem to be nailed to the floor of the van. My head swims — —

Is it true we are running towards the abyss? No! I am mad. Faruskiar and his accomplices would be hurled over as well. They would share our fate. They would perish with us!

But there are shouts in front of the train. The screams of people being killed. There is no doubt now. The driver and the stoker are being strangled. I feel the speed of the train begin to slacken.

I understand. One of the ruffians knows how to work the train, and he is slowing it to enable them to jump off and avoid the catastrophe.

I begin to master my torpor. Staggering like a drunken man, I crawl to Kinko’s case. There, in a few words, I tell him what has passed, and I exclaim:

“We are lost!”

“No — perhaps” he replies.

Before I can move, Kinko is out of his box. He rushes towards the front door; he climbs on to the tender.

“Come along! Come along!” he shouts.

I do not know how I have done it, but here I am at his side, on the foot-plate, my feet in the blood of the driver and stoker, who have been thrown off on to the line.

Faruskiar and his accomplices are no longer here.

But before they went one of them has taken off the brakes, jammed down the regulator to full speed, thrown fresh coals into the fire-box, and the train is running with frightful velocity.

In a few minutes we shall reach the Tjon viaduct.

Kinko, energetic and resolute, is as cool as a cucumber. But in vain he tries to move the regulator, to shut off the steam, to put on the brake. These valves and levers, what shall we do with them?

“I must tell Popof!” I shout.

“And what can he do? No; there is only one way — — ”

“And what is that?”

“Rouse up the fire,” says Kinko, calmly; “shut down the safety valves, and blow up the engine.”

And was that the only way — a desperate way — of stopping the train before it reached the viaduct?

Kinko scattered the coal on to the fire bars. He turned on the greatest possible draught, the air roared across the furnace, the pressure goes up, up, amid the heaving of the motion, the bellowings of the boiler, the beating of the pistons. We are going a hundred kilometres an hour.

“Get back!” shouts Kinko above the roar. “Get back into the van.”

“And you, Kinko?”

“Get back, I tell you.”

I see him hang on to the valves, and put his whole weight on the levers.

“Go!” he shouts.

I am off over the tender. I am through the van. I awake Popof, shouting with all my strength:

“Get back! Get back!”

A few passengers suddenly waking from sleep begin to run from the front car.

Suddenly there is an explosion and a shock. The train at first jumps back. Then it continues to move for about half a kilometre.

It stops.

Popof, the major, Caterna, most of the passengers are out on the line in an instant.

A network of scaffolding appears confusedly in the darkness, above the piers which were to carry the viaduct across the Tjon valley.

Two hundred yards further the train would have been lost in the abyss.

CHAPTER XXV.

And I, who wanted “incident,” who feared the weariness of a monotonous voyage of six thousand kilometres, in the course of which I should not meet with an impression or emotion worth clothing in type!

I have made another muddle of it, I admit! My lord Faruskiar, of whom I had made a hero — by telegraph — for the readers of the *Twentieth. Century*. Decidedly my good intentions ought certainly to qualify me as one of the best paviers of a road to a certain place you have doubtless heard of.

We are, as I have said, two hundred yards from the valley of the Tjon, so deep and wide as to require a viaduct from three hundred and fifty to four hundred feet long. The floor of the valley is scattered over with rocks, and a hundred feet down. If the train had been hurled to the bottom of that chasm, not one of us would have escaped alive. This memorable catastrophe — most interesting from a reporter’s point of view — would have claimed a hundred victims. But thanks to the coolness, energy and devotion of the young Roumanian, we have escaped this terrible disaster.

All? No! Kinko has paid with his life for the safety of his fellow passengers.

Amid the confusion my first care was to visit the luggage van, which had remained uninjured. Evidently if Kinko had survived the explosion he would have got back into his box and waited till I put myself in communication with him.

Alas! The coffer is empty — empty as that of a company which has suspended payment. Kinko has been the victim of his sacrifice.

And so there has been a hero among our traveling companions, and he was not this Faruskiar, this abominable bandit hidden beneath the skin of a manager, whose name I have so stupidly published over the four corners of the globe! It was this Roumanian, this humble, this little, this poor fellow, whose sweetheart will wait for him in vain, and whom she will never again see! Well, I will do him justice! I will tell what he has done. As to his secret, I shall be sorry if I keep it. If he defrauded the Grand Transasiatic, it is thanks to that fraud that a whole train has been saved. We were lost, we should have perished in the most horrible of deaths if Kinko had not been there!

I went back on to the line, my heart heavy, my eyes full of tears.

Assuredly Faruskiar’s scheme — in the execution of which he had executed his rival Ki-Tsang — had been cleverly contrived in utilizing this branch line leading to the unfinished viaduct. Nothing was easier than to switch off the train if an accomplice was at the points. And as soon as the signal was given that we were on the branch, all he had to do was to gain the foot-plate, kill the driver and stoker, slow the train and get off, leaving the steam on full to work up to full speed.

And now there could be no doubt that the scoundrels worthy of the most refined tortures that Chinese practice could devise were hastening down into the Tjon valley. There, amid the wreck of the train, they expected to find the fifteen millions of gold and precious stones, and this treasure they could carry off without fear of surprise when the night enabled them to consummate this fearful crime. Well! They have been robbed, these robbers, and I hope that they will pay for their crime with their lives, at the least. I alone know what has passed, but I will tell the story, for poor Kinko is no more.

Yes! My mind is made up. I will speak as soon as I have seen Zinca Klork. The poor girl must be told with consideration. The death of her betrothed must not come upon her like a thunderclap. Yes! To-morrow, as soon as we are at Pekin.

After all, if I do not say anything about Kinko, I may at least denounce Faruskiar and Ghangir and the four Mongols. I can say that I saw them go through the van, that I followed them, that I found they were talking on the gangway, that I heard the screams of the driver and stoker as they were strangled on the foot-plate, and that I then returned to the cars shouting: “Back! Back!” or whatever it was.

Besides, as will be seen immediately, there was somebody else whose just suspicions had been changed into certainty, who only awaited his opportunity to denounce Faruskiar.

We are now standing at the head of the train, Major Noltitz, the German baron, Caterna, Ephrinell, Pan-Chao, Popof, about twenty travelers in all. The Chinese guard, faithful to their trust, are still near the treasure which not one of them has abandoned. The rear guard has brought along the tail lamps, and by their powerful light we can see in what a state the engine is.

If the train, which was then running at enormous velocity, had not stopped suddenly — and thus brought about its destruction — it was because the boiler had exploded at the top and on the side. The wheels being undamaged, the engine had run far enough to come gradually to a standstill of itself, and thus the passengers had been saved a violent shock.

Of the boiler and its accessories only a few shapeless fragments remained. The funnel had gone, the dome, the steam chest; there was nothing but torn plates, broken, twisted tubes, split cylinders, and loose connecting rods — gaping wounds in the corpse of steel.

And not only had the engine been destroyed, but the tender had been rendered useless. Its tank had been cracked, and its load of coals scattered over the line. The luggage-van, curious to relate, had miraculously escaped without injury.

And looking at the terrible effects of the explosion, I could see that the Roumanian had had no chance of escape, and had probably been blown to fragments.

Going a hundred yards down the line I could find no trace of him — which was not to be wondered at.

At first we looked on at the disaster in silence; but eventually conversation began.

“It is only too evident,” said one of the passengers, “that our driver and stoker have perished in the explosion.”

“Poor fellows!” said Popof. “But I wonder how the train could have got on the Nanking branch without being noticed?”

“The night was very dark,” said Ephrinell, “and the driver could not see the points.”

“That is the only explanation possible,” said Popof, “for he would have tried to stop the train, and, on the contrary, we were traveling at tremendous speed.”

“But,” said Pan-Chao, “how does it happen the Nanking branch was open when the Tjon viaduct is not finished? Had the switch been interfered with?”

“Undoubtedly,” said Popof, “and probably out of carelessness.”

“No,” said Ephrinell, deliberately. “There has been a crime — a crime intended to bring about the destruction of the train and passengers — — ”

“And with what object?” asked Popof.

“The object of stealing the imperial treasure,” said Ephrinell. “Do you forget that those millions would be a temptation to scoundrels? Was it not for the purpose of robbing the train that we were attacked between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk?”

The American could not have been nearer the truth.

“And so,” said Popof, “after Ki-Tsang’s attempt, you think that other bandits — — ”

Up to now Major Noltitz had taken no part in the discussion. Now he interrupted Popof, and in a voice heard by all he asked:

“Where is Faruskiar?”

They all looked about and tried to discover what had become of the manager of the Transasiatic.

“And where is his friend Ghangir?” asked the major.

There was no reply.

“And where are the four Mongols who were in the rear van?” asked Major Noltitz.

And none of them presented themselves.

They called my lord Faruskiar a second time.

Faruskiar made no response.

Popof entered the car where this personage was generally to be found.

It was empty.

Empty? No. Sir Francis Trevellyan was calmly seated in his place, utterly indifferent to all that happened. Was it any business of his? Not at all. Was he not entitled to consider that the Russo-Chinese railways were the very apex of absurdity and disorder? A switch opened, nobody knew by whom! A train on the wrong line! Could anything be more ridiculous than this Russian mismanagement?

“Well, then!” said Major Noltitz, “the rascal who sent us on to the Nanking line, who would have hurled us into the Tjon valley, to walk off with the imperial treasure, is Faruskiar.”

“Faruskiar!” the passengers exclaimed. And most of them refused to believe it.

“What!” said Popof. “The manager of the company who so courageously drove off the bandits and killed their chief Ki-Tsang with his own hand?”

Then I entered on the scene.

“The major is not mistaken. It was Faruskiar who laid this fine trap for us.”

And amid the general stupefaction I told them what I knew, and what good fortune had enabled me to ascertain. I told them how I had overheard the plan of Faruskiar and his Mongols, when it was too late to stop it, but I was silent regarding the intervention of Kinko. The moment had not come, and I would do him justice in due time.

To my words there succeeded a chorus of maledictions and menaces.

What! This seigneur Faruskiar, this superb Mongol, this functionary we had seen at work! No! It was impossible.

But they had to give in to the evidence. I had seen; I had heard; I affirmed that Faruskiar was the author of this catastrophe in which all our train might have perished, was the most consummate bandit who had ever disgraced Central Asia!

“You see, Monsieur Bombarnac,” said Major Noltitz, “that I was not mistaken in my first suspicion.”

“It is only too true,” I replied, without any false modesty, “that I was taken in by the grand manners of the abominable rascal.”

“Monsieur Claudius,” said Caterna, “put that into a romance, and see if anybody believes it likely.”

Caterna was right; but unlikely as it may seem, it was. And, besides, I alone knew Kinko’s secret. It certainly did seem as though it was miraculous for the locomotive to explode just on the verge of the abyss.

Now that all danger had disappeared we must take immediate measures for running back the cars on to the Pekin line.

“The best thing to do is for one of us to volunteer — — ”

“I will do that,” said Caterna.

“What is he to do?” I asked.

“Go to the nearest station, that of Fuen Choo, and telegraph to Tai-Youan for them to send on a relief engine.”

“How far is it to Fuen Choo?” asked Ephrinell.

“About six kilometres to Nanking junction, and about five kilometres beyond that.”

“Eleven kilometres,” said the major; “that is a matter of an hour and a half for good walkers. Before three o’clock the engine from Tai-Youan ought to be here. I am ready to start.”

“So am I,” said Popof! “I think several of us ought to go. Who knows if we may not meet Faruskiar and his Mongols on the road?”

“You are right, Popof,” said Major Noltitz, “and we should be armed.”

This was only prudent, for the bandits who ought to be on their way to the Tjon viaduct could not be very far off. Of course, as soon as they found that their attempt had failed, they would hasten to get away. How would they dare — six strong — to attack a hundred passengers, including the Chinese guard?

Twelve of us, including Pan-Chao, Caterna, and myself, volunteered to accompany Major Noltitz. But by common accord we advised Popof not to abandon the train, assuring him that we would do all that was necessary at Fuen Choo.

Then, armed with daggers and revolvers — it was one o’clock in the morning — we went along the line to the junction, walking as fast as the very dark night permitted.

In less than two hours we arrived at Fuen Choo station without adventure. Evidently Faruskiar had cleared off. The Chinese police would have to deal with the bandit and his accomplices. Would they catch him? I hoped so, but I doubted.

At the station Pan-Chao explained matters to the stationmaster, who telegraphed for an engine to be sent from Tai-Youan to the Nanking line.

At three o’clock, just at daybreak, we returned to wait for the engine at the junction. Three-quarters of an hour afterwards its whistle announced its approach, and it stopped at the bifurcation of the lines. We climbed up on to the tender, and half an hour later had rejoined the train.

The dawn had come on sufficiently for us to be able to see over a considerable distance. Without saying anything to anybody, I went in search of the body of my poor Kinko. And I could not find it among the wreck.

As the engine could not reach the front of the train, owing to their being only a single line, and no turning-table, it was decided to couple it on in the rear and run backwards to the junction. In this way the box, alas! without the Roumanian in it, was in the last carriage.

We started, and in half an hour we were on the main line again.

Fortunately it was not necessary for us to return to Tai-Youan, and we thus saved a delay of an hour and a half. At the junction the engine was detached and run for a few yards towards Pekin, then the vans and cars, one by one, were pushed on to the main line, and then the engine backed and the train proceeded, made up as before the accident. By five o'clock we were on our way across Petchili as if nothing had happened.

I have nothing to say regarding this latter half of the journey, during which the Chinese driver — to do him justice — in no way endeavored to make up for lost time. But if a few hours more or less were of no importance to us, it was otherwise with Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer, who wanted to catch the Yokohama boat at Tien Tsin.

When we arrived there at noon the steamer had been gone for three-quarters of an hour; and when the German globetrotter, the rival of Bly and Bisland, rushed on to the platform, it was to learn that the said steamer was then going out of the mouths of the Pei-Ho into the open sea.

Unfortunate traveler! We were not astonished when, as Gaterna said, the baron "let go both broadsides" of Teutonic maledictions. And really he had cause to curse in his native tongue.

We remained but a quarter of an hour at Tien Tsin. My readers must pardon me for not having visited this city of five hundred thousand inhabitants, the Chinese town with its temples, the European quarter in which the trade is concentrated, the Pei-Ho quays where hundreds of junks load and unload. It was all Faruskiar's fault, and were it only for having wrecked my reportorial endeavors he ought to be hanged by the most fantastic executioner in China.

Nothing happened for the rest of our run. I was very sorry at the thought that I was not bringing Kinko along with me, and that his box was empty. And he had asked me to accompany him to Mademoiselle Zinca Klork! How could I tell this unfortunate girl that her sweetheart would never reach Pekin station?

Everything ends in this world below, even a voyage of six thousand kilometres on the Grand Transasiatic; and after a run of thirteen days, hour after hour, our train stopped at the gates of the capital of the Celestial Empire.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“Pekin!” shouted Popof. “All change here.”

And Caterna replied with truly Parisian unction:

“I believe you, my boy!”

And we all changed.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon. For people fatigued with three hundred and twelve hours of traveling, it was no time for running about the town — what do I say? — the four towns inclosed one within the other. Besides, I had plenty of time. I was going to stop some weeks in this capital.

The important thing was to find a hotel in which one could live passably. From information received I was led to believe that the hotel of *Ten Thousand Dreams*, near the railway station, might be sufficiently in accord with Western notions.

As to Mademoiselle Klork, I will postpone my visit till tomorrow. I will call on her before the box arrives, and even then I shall be too soon, for I shall take her the news of Kinko’s death.

Major Noltitz will remain in the same hotel as I do. I have not to bid him farewell, nor have I to part with the Caternas, who are going to stay a fortnight before starting for Shanghai. As to Pan-Chao and Dr. Tio-King, a carriage is waiting to take them to the yamen in which the young Chinaman’s family live. But we shall see each other again. Friends do not separate at a simple good-by, and the grip of the hand I gave him as he left the car will not be the last.

Mr. and Mrs. Ephrinell lose no time in leaving the station on business, which obliges them to find a hotel in the commercial quarter of the Chinese town. But they do not leave without receiving my compliments. Major Noltitz and I go up to this amiable couple, and the conventional politenesses are reciprocally exchanged.

“At last,” said I to Ephrinell, “the forty-two packages of Strong, Bulbul & Co. have come into port. But it is a wonder the explosion of our engine did not smash your artificial teeth.”

“Just so,” said the American, “my teeth had a narrow escape. What adventures they have had since we left Tiflis? Decidedly this journey has been less monotonous than I expected.”

“And,” added the major, “you were married on the way — unless I am mistaken!”

“Wait a bit!” replied the Yankee in a peculiar tone. “Excuse me; we are in a hurry.”

“We will not keep you, Mr. Ephrinell,” I replied, “and to Mrs. Ephrinell and yourself allow us to say au revoir!”

“Au revoir!” replied the Americanized lady, rather more dryly at her arrival than at her departure.

Then, turning, she said:

“I have no time to wait, Mr. Ephrinell.”

“Nor have I, Mrs. Ephrinell,” replied the Yankee.

Mr! Mrs! And not so long ago they were calling each other Fulk and Horatia.

And then, without taking each other’s arm, they walked out of the station. I believe he turned to the right and she to the left; but that is their affair.

There remains my No. 8, Sir Francis Trevellyan, the silent personage, who has not said a word all through the piece — I mean all through the journey. I wanted to hear his voice, if it was only for one second.

Eh! If I am not mistaken, here is the opportunity at last.

There is the phlegmatic gentleman contemptuously looking up and down the cars. He has just taken a cigar from his yellow morocco case, but when he looks at his match-box he finds it empty.

My cigar — a particularly good one — is alight, and I am smoking it with the blessed satisfaction of one who enjoys it, and regretting that there is not a man in all China who has its equal.

Sir Francis Trevellyan has seen the light burning at the end of my cigar, and he comes towards me.

I think he is going to ask me for a light. He stretches out his hand, and I present him with my cigar.

He takes it between his thumb and forefinger, knocks off the white ash, lights up, and then, if I had not heard him ask for a light, I at least expected him to say, “Thank you, sir!”

Not at all! Sir Francis Trevellyan takes a few puffs at his own cigar, and then nonchalantly throws mine on to the platform. And then without even a bow, he walks leisurely off out of the railway station.

Did you say nothing? No, I remained astounded. He gave me neither a word nor a gesture. I was completely dumfounded at this ultra-Britannic rudeness, while Major Noltitz could not restrain a loud outburst of laughter.

Ah! If I should see this gentleman again. But never did I see again Sir Francis Trevellyan of Trevellyan Hall, Trevellyanshire.

Half an hour afterwards we are installed at the Hotel of *Ten Thousand Dreams*. There we are served with a dinner in Chinese style. The repast being over — towards the second watch — we lay ourselves on beds that are too narrow in rooms with little comfort, and sleep not the sleep of the just, but the sleep of the exhausted — and that is just as good.

I did not wake before ten o’clock, and I might have slept all the morning if the thought had not occurred to me that I had a duty to fulfil. And what a duty! To call in the Avenue Cha Coua before the delivery of the unhappy case to Mademoiselle Zinca Klork.

I arise. Ah! If Kinko had not succumbed, I should have returned to the railway station — I should have assisted, as I had promised, in the unloading of the precious package. I would have watched it on to the cart, and I would have accompanied it to the Avenue Cha Coua, I would even have helped in carrying him up to Mademoiselle Zinca Klork! And what a double explosion of joy there would have been when Kinko jumped through the panel to fall into the arms of the fair Roumanian!

But no! When the box arrives it will be empty — empty as a heart from which all the blood has escaped.

I leave the Hotel of *Ten Thousand Dreams* about eleven o’clock, I call one of those Chinese carriages, which look like palanquins on wheels, I give the address of Mademoiselle Klork, and I am on the way.

You know, that among the eighteen provinces of China Petchili occupies the most northerly position. Formed of nine departments, it has for its capital Pekin, otherwise known as Chim-Kin-Fo, an appellation which means a “town of the first order, obedient to Heaven.”

I do not know if this town is really obedient to Heaven, but it is obedient to the laws of rectilineal geometry. There are four towns, square or rectangular, one within the other. The Chinese town, which contains the Tartar town, which contains the yellow town, or Houng Tching, which contains the Red Town, or Tsen-Kai-Tching, that is to say, “the forbidden town.” And within this symmetrical circuit of six leagues there are more than two millions of those inhabitants, Tartars or Chinese, who are called the Germans of the East, without mentioning several thousands of Mongols and Tibetans. That there is much bustle in the streets, I can see by the obstacles my vehicle encounters at every step, itinerating peddlers, carts heavily laden, mandarins and their noisy following. I say nothing of those abominable wandering dogs, half jackals, half wolves, hairless and mangy, with deceitful eyes, threatening jaws, and having no other food than the filthy rubbish which foreigners detest. Fortunately I am not on foot, and I have no business in the Red Town, admittance to which is denied, nor in the yellow town nor even in the Tartar town.

The Chinese town forms, a rectangular parallelogram, divided north and south by the Grand Avenue leading from the Houn Ting gate to the Tien gate, and crossed east and west by the Avenue Cha-Coua, which runs from the gate of that name to the Cpuan-Tsa gate. With this indication nothing could be easier than to find the dwelling of Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, but nothing more difficult to reach, considering the block in the roads in this outer ring.

A little before twelve I arrived at my destination. My vehicle had stopped before a house of modest appearance, occupied by artisans as lodgings, and as the signboard said more particularly by strangers.

It was on the first floor, the window of which opened on to the avenue, that the young Roumanian lived, and where, having learned her trade as a milliner in Paris, she was engaged in it at Pekin.

I go up to the first floor. I read the name of Madame Zinca Klork on a door. I knock. The door is opened.

I am in the presence of a young lady who is perfectly charming, as Kinko said. She is a blonde of from twenty-two to twenty-three years old, with the black eyes of the Roumanian type, an agreeable figure, a pleasant, smiling face. In fact, has she not been informed that the Grand Transasiatic train has been in the station ever since last evening, in spite of the circumstances of the journey, and is she not awaiting her betrothed from one moment to another?

And I, with a word, am about to extinguish this joy. I am to wither that smile.

Mademoiselle Klork is evidently much surprised at seeing a stranger in her doorway. As she has lived several years in France, she does not hesitate to recognize me as a Frenchman, and asks to what she is indebted for my visit.

I must take care of my words, for I may kill her, poor child.

“Mademoiselle Zinca — — ” I say.

“You know my name?” she exclaims.

“Yes, mademoiselle. I arrived yesterday by the Grand Transasiatic.”

The girl turned pale; her eyes became troubled. It was evident that she feared something. Had Kinko been found in his box? Had the fraud been discovered? Was he arrested? Was he in prison?

I hastened to add:

“Mademoiselle Zinca — certain circumstances have brought to my knowledge — the journey of a young Roumanian — — ”

“Kinko — my poor Kinko — they have found him?” she asks in a trembling voice.

“No — no — — ” say I, hesitating. “No one knows — except myself. I often visited him in the luggage-van at night; we were companions, friends. I took him a few provisions — — ”

“Oh! thank you, sir!” says the lady, taking me by the hands. “With a Frenchman Kinko was sure of not being betrayed, and even of receiving help! Thank you, thank you!”

I am more than ever afraid of the mission on which I have come.

“And no one suspected the presence of my dear Kinko?” she asks.

“No one.”

“What would you have had us do, sir? We are not rich. Kinko was without money over there at Tiflis, and I had not enough to send him his fare. But he is here at last. He will get work, for he is a good workman, and as soon as we can we will pay the company — — ”

“Yes; I know, I know.”

“And then we are going to get married, monsieur. He loves me so much, and I love him. We met one another in Paris. He was so kind to me. Then when he went back to Tiflis I asked him to come to me in that box. Is the poor fellow ill?”

“No, Mademoiselle Zinca, no.”

“Ah! I shall be happy to pay the carriage of my dear Kinko.”

“Yes — pay the carriage — — ”

“It will not be long now?”

“No; this afternoon probably.”

I do not know what to say.

“Monsieur,” says mademoiselle, “we are going to get married as soon as the formalities are complied with; and if it is not abusing your confidence, will you do us the honor and pleasure of being present?”

“At your marriage — certainly. I promised my friend Kinko I would.”

Poor girl! I cannot leave her like this. I must tell her everything.

“Mademoiselle Zinca — Kinko — — ”

“He asked you to come and tell me he had arrived?”

“Yes — but — you understand — he is very tired after so long a journey — — ”

“Tired?”

“Oh! do not be alarmed — — ”

“Is he ill?”

“Yes — rather — rather ill — — ”

“Then I will go — I must see him — I pray you, sir, come with me to the station — — ”

“No; that would be an imprudence — remain here — remain — — ”

Zinca Klork looked at me fixedly.

“The truth, monsieur, the truth! Hide nothing from me — Kinko — — ”

“Yes — I have sad news — to give you.” She is fainting. Her lips tremble. She can hardly speak.

“He has been discovered!” she says. “His fraud is known — they have arrested him — — ”

“Would to heaven it was no worse. We have had accidents on the road. The train was nearly annihilated — a frightful catastrophe — ”

“He is dead! Kinko is dead!”

The unhappy Zinca falls on to a chair — and to employ the imaginative phraseology of the Chinese — her tears roll down like rain on an autumn night. Never have I seen anything so lamentable. But it will not do to leave her in this state, poor girl! She is becoming unconscious. I do not know where I am. I take her hands. I repeat:

“Mademoiselle Zinca! Mademoiselle Zinca!”

Suddenly there is a great noise in front of the house. Shouts are heard. There is a tremendous to do, and amid the tumult I hear a voice.

Good Heavens! I cannot be mistaken. That is Kinko’s voice!

I recognize it. Am I in my right senses?

Zinca jumps up, springs to the window, opens it, and we look out.

There is a cart at the door. There is the case, with all its inscriptions: *This side up, this side down, fragile, glass, beware of damp,* etc. etc. It is there — half smashed. There has been a collision. The cart has been run into by a carriage, as the case was being got down. The case has slipped on to the ground. It has been knocked in. And Kinko has jumped out like a jack-in-the-box — but alive, very much alive!

I can hardly believe my eyes! What, my young Roumanian did not perish in the explosion? No! As I shall soon hear from his own mouth, he was thrown on to the line when the boiler went up, remained there inert for a time, found himself uninjured — miraculously — kept away till he could slip into the van unperceived. I had just left the van after looking for him in vain, and supposing that he had been the first victim of the catastrophe.

Then — oh! the irony of fate! — after accomplishing a journey of six thousand kilometres on the Grand Transasiatic, shut up in a box among the baggage, after escaping so many dangers, attack by bandits, explosion of engine, he was here, by the mere colliding of a cart and a carriage in a Pekin Street, deprived of all the good of his journey — fraudulent it may be — but really if — I know of no epithet worthy of this climax.

The carter gave a yell at the sight of a human being who had just appeared. In an instant the crowd had gathered, the fraud was discovered, the police had run up. And what could this young Roumanian do who did not know a word of Chinese, but explain matters in the sign language? And if he could not be understood, what explanation could he give?

Zinca and I ran down to him.

“My Zinca — my dear Zinca!” he exclaims, pressing the girl to his heart.

“My Kinko — my dear Kinko!” she replies, while her tears mingle with his.

“Monsieur Bombarnac!” says the poor fellow, appealing for my intervention.

“Kinko,” I reply, “take it coolly, and depend on me. You are alive, and we thought you were dead.”

“But I am not much better off!” he murmurs.

Mistake! Anything is better than being dead — even when one is menaced by prison, be it a Chinese prison. And that is what happens, in spite of the girl’s supplications and my entreaties. And Kinko is dragged off by the police, amid the laughter and howls of the crowd.

But I will not abandon him! No, if I move heaven and earth, I will not abandon him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

If ever the expression, “sinking in sight of port,” could be used in its precise meaning, it evidently can in this case. And I must beg you to excuse me. But although a ship may sink by the side of the jetty, we must not conclude that she is lost. That Kinko’s liberty is in danger, providing the intervention of myself and fellow passengers is of no avail, agreed. But he is alive, and that is the essential point.

But we must not waste an hour, for if the police is not perfect in China, it is at least prompt and expeditious. Soon caught, soon hanged — and it will not do for them to hang Kinko, even metaphorically.

I offer my arm to Mademoiselle Zinca, and I lead her to my carriage, and we return rapidly towards the *Hotel of the Ten Thousand Dreams*.

There I find Major Noltitz and the Caternas, and by a lucky chance young Pan-Chao, without Dr. Tio-King. Pan-Chao would like nothing better than to be our interpreter before the Chinese authorities.

And then, before the weeping Zinca, I told my companions all about Kinko, how he had traveled, how I had made his acquaintance on the journey. I told them that if he had defrauded the Transasiatic Company it was thanks to this fraud that he was able to get on to the train at Uzun Ada. And if he had not been in the train we should all have been engulfed in the abyss of the Tjon valley.

And I enlarged on the facts which I alone knew. I had surprised Faruskiar at the very moment he was about to accomplish his crime, but it was Kinko who, at the peril of his life, with coolness and courage superhuman, had thrown on the coals, hung on to the lever of the safety valves, and stopped the train by blowing up the engine.

What an explosion there was of exclamatory ohs and ahs when I had finished my recital, and in a burst of gratitude, somewhat of the theatrical sort, our actor shouted:

“Hurrah for Kinko! He ought to have a medal!”

Until the Son of Heaven accorded this hero a green dragon of some sort, Madame Caterna took Zinca’s hand, drew her to her heart and embraced her — embraced her without being able to restrain her tears. Just think of a love story interrupted at the last chapter!

But we must hasten, and as Caterna says, “all on the scene for the fifth” — the fifth act, in which dramas generally clear themselves up.

“We must not let this brave fellow suffer!” said Major Noltitz; “we must see the Grand Transasiatic people, and when they learn the facts they will be the first to stop the prosecution.”

“Doubtless,” I said, “for it cannot be denied that Kinko saved the train and its passengers.”

“To say nothing of the imperial treasure,” added Caterna, “the millions of his majesty!”

“Nothing could be truer,” said Pan-Chao. “Unfortunately Kinko has fallen into the hands of the police, and they have taken him to prison, and it is not easy to get out of a Chinese prison.”

“Let us be off,” I replied, “and see the company.”

“See here,” said Madame Caterna, “is there any need of a subscription to defray the cost of the affair?”

“The proposal does you honor, Caroline,” said the actor, putting his hand in his pocket.

“Gentlemen,” said pretty Zinca Klork, her eyes bathed in tears, “do save him before he is sentenced — — ”

“Yes, my darling,” said Madame Caterna, “yes, my heart, we will save your sweetheart for you, and if a benefit performance — — ”

“Bravo, Caroline, bravo!” exclaimed Caterna, applauding with the vigor of the sub-chief of the claque.

We left the young Roumanian to the caresses, as exaggerated as they were sincere, of the worthy actress. Madame Caterna would not leave her, declaring that she looked upon her as her daughter, that she would protect her like a mother. Then Pan-Chao, Major Noltitz, Caterna, and I went off to the company’s offices at the station.

The manager was in his office, and we were admitted.

He was a Chinese in every acceptation of the word, and capable of every administrative Chinesery — a functionary who functioned in a way that would have moved his colleagues in old Europe to envy.

Pan-Chao told the story, and, as he understood Russian, the major and I took part in the discussion.

Yes! There was a discussion. This unmistakable Chinaman did not hesitate to contend that Kinko’s case was a most serious one. A fraud undertaken on such conditions, a fraud extending over six thousand kilometres, a fraud of a thousand francs on the Grand Transasiatic Company and its agents.

We replied to this Chinesing Chinee that it was all very true, but that the damage had been inconsiderable, that if the defrauder had not been in the train he could not have saved it at the risk of his life, and at the same time he could not have saved the lives of the passengers.

Well, would you believe it? This living China figure gave us to understand that from a certain point of view it would have been better to regret the deaths of a hundred victims — —

Yes! We knew that! Perish the colonies and all the passengers rather than a principle!

In short, we got nothing. Justice must take its course against the fraudulent Kinko.

We retired while Caterna poured out all the locutions in his marine and theatrical vocabulary.

What was to be done?

“Gentlemen,” said Pan-Chao, “I know how things are managed in Pekin and the Celestial Empire. Two hours will not elapse from the time Kinko is arrested to the time he is brought before the judge charged with this sort of crime. He will not only be sent to prison, but the bastinado — — ”

“The bastinado — like that idiot Zizel in *Si j’etais Roi?*” asked the actor.

“Precisely,” replied Pan-Chao.

“We must stop that abomination,” said Major Noltitz.

“We can try at the least,” said Pan-Chao. “I propose we go before the court when I will try and defend the sweetheart of this charming Roumanian, and may I lose my face if I do not get him off.”

That was the best, the only thing to do. We left the station, invaded a vehicle, and arrived in twenty minutes before a shabby-looking shanty, where the court was held.

There was a crowd. The affair had got abroad. It was known that a swindler had come in a box in a Grand Transasiatic van free, gratis, and for nothing from Tiflis to Pekin. Every one wished to see him; every one wanted to recognize the features of this genius — it was not yet known that he was a hero.

There he is, our brave companion, between two rascally looking policemen, yellow as quinces. These fellows are ready to walk him off to prison at the judge’s order, and to give him a few dozen strokes on the soles of his feet if he is condemned to that punishment.

Kinko is thoroughly disheartened, which astonishes me on the part of one I know to be so energetic. But as soon as he sees us his face betrays a ray of hope.

At this moment the carter, brought forward by the police, relates the affair to a good sort of fellow in spectacles, who shakes his head in anything but a hopeful way for the prisoner, who, even if he were as innocent as a new-born child, could not defend himself, inasmuch as he did not know Chinese.

Then it is that Pan-Chao presents himself. The judge recognized him and smiled. In fact, our companion was the son of a rich merchant in Pekin, a tea merchant in the Toung-Tien and Soung-Fong-Cao trade. And these nods of the judge’s head became more sympathetically significant.

Our young advocate was really pathetic and amusing. He interested the judge, he excited the audience with the story of the journey, he told them all about it, and finally he offered to pay the company what was due to them.

Unfortunately the judge could not consent. There had been material damages, moral damages, etc. etc.

Thereupon Pan-Chao became animated, and although we understood nothing he said, we guessed that he was speaking of the courage of Kinko, of the sacrifice he had made for the safety of the travelers, and finally, as a supreme argument, he pleaded that his client had saved the imperial treasure.

Useless eloquence? Arguments were of no avail with this pitiless magistrate, who had not acquitted ten prisoners in is life. He spared the delinquent the bastinado; but he gave him six months in prison, and condemned him in damages against the Grand Transasiatic Company. And then at a sign from this condemning machine poor Kinko was taken away.

Let not my readers pity Kinko’s fate. I may as well say at once that everything was arranged satisfactorily.

Next morning Kinko made a triumphal entry into the house in the Avenue Cha-Coua, where we were assembled, while Madame Caterna was showering her maternal consolations on the unhappy Zinca Klork.

The newspapers had got wind of the affair. The *Chi Bao* of Pekin and the *Chinese Times* of Tien-Tsin had demanded mercy for the young Roumanian. These cries for mercy had reached the feet of the Son of Heaven — the very spot where the imperial ears are placed. Besides, Pan-Chao had sent to his majesty a petition relating the incidents of the journey, and insisting on the point that had it not been for Kinko's devotion, the gold and precious stones would be in the hands of Faruskiar and his bandits. And, by Buddha! that was worth something else than six months in prison.

Yes! It was worth 15,000 taels, that is to say, more than 100,000 francs, and in a fit of generosity the Son of Heaven remitted these to Kinko with the remittal of his sentence.

I decline to depict the joy, the happiness, the intoxication which this news brought by Kinko in person, gave to all his friends, and particularly to the fair Zinca Klork. These things are expressible in no language — not even in Chinese, which lends itself so generously to the metaphorical.

And now my readers must permit me to finish with my traveling companions whose numbers have figured in my note-book.

Nos. 1 and 2, Fulk Ephrinell and Miss Horatia Bluett: not being able to agree regarding the various items stipulated in their matrimonial contract, they were divorced three days after their arrival in Pekin. Things were as though the marriage had never been celebrated on the Grand Transasiatic, and Miss Horatia Bluett remained Miss Horatia Bluett. May she gather cargoes of heads of hair from Chinese polls; and may he furnish with artificial teeth every jaw in the Celestial Empire!

No. 3, Major Noltitz: he is busy at the hospital he has come to establish at Pekin on behalf of the Russian government, and when the hour for separation strikes, I feel that I shall leave a true friend behind me in these distant lands.

Nos. 4 and 5, the Caternas: after a stay of three weeks in the capital of the Celestial Empire, the charming actor and actress set out for Shanghai, where they are now the great attraction at the French Residency.

No. 6, Baron Weissschnitzerdörfer, whose incommensurable name I write for the last time: well, not only did the globe-trotter miss the steamer at Tien-Tsin, but a month later he missed it at Yokohama; six weeks after that he was shipwrecked on the coast of British Columbia, and then, after being thrown off the line between San Francisco and New York, he managed to complete his round of the world in a hundred and eighty-seven days instead of thirty-nine.

Nos. 9 and 10, Pan-Chao and Dr. Tio-King: what can I say except that Pan-Chao is always the Parisian you know, and that if he comes to France we shall meet at dinner at Durand’s or Marguery’s. As to the doctor, he has got down to eating only the yolk of an egg a day, like his master, Cornaro, and he hopes to live to a hundred and two as did the noble Venetian.

No. 8, Sir Francis Trevellyan, and No. 12, Seigneur Faruskiar: I have never heard of the one who owes me an apology and a cigar, nor have I heard that the other has been hanged. Doubtless, the illustrious bandit, having sent in his resignation of the general managership of the Grand Transasiatic, continues his lucrative career in the depths of the Mongol provinces.

Now for Kinko, my No. 11: I need hardly say that my No. 11 was married to Zinca Klork with great ceremony. We were all at the wedding, and if the Son of Heaven had richly endowed the young Roumanian, his wife received a magnificent present in the name of the passengers of the train he had saved.

That is the faithful story of this journey. I have done my best to do my duty as special correspondent all down the line, and perhaps my editors may be satisfied, notwithstanding the slip or two you have heard about.

As to me, after spending three weeks in Pekin, I returned to France by sea.

And now I have to make a confession, which is very painful to my self-esteem. The morning after I arrived in the Chinese capital I received a telegram thus worded, in reply to the one I had sent from Lan-Tcheou:

Claudius Bombarnac,

Pekin, China.

Twentieth Century requests its correspondent, Claudius Bombarnac, to present its compliments and respects to the heroic Seigneur Faruskiar.

But I always say that this telegram never reached him, so that he has been spared the unpleasantness of having to reply to it.

THE END.

FOUNDLING MICK

Anonymous translation, 1894

Also known as *A Lad of Grit*, this novel was first published in 1893. Foundling Mick is an orphan growing up in Ireland. Overcoming a number of obstacles, he and his friend Dick start a small business that proves profitable for the pair. Seeking larger opportunities, they move to Dublin, where Foundling Mick’s keen sense of business wins them great fortune.

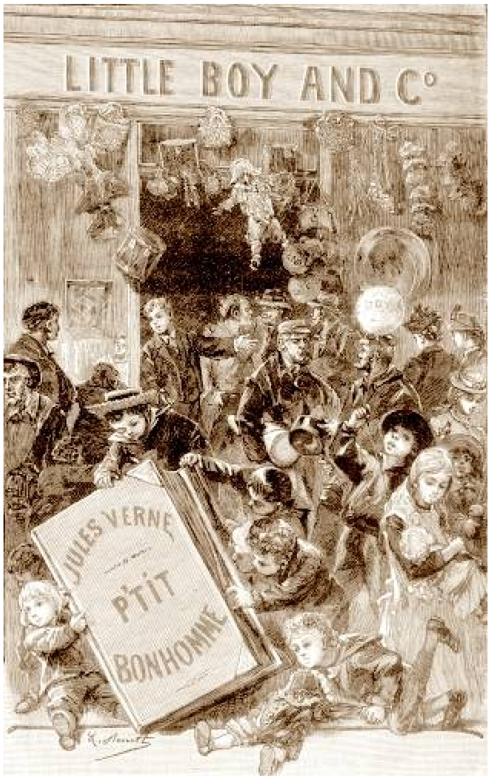
LITTLE BOY AND Cº
BOY
JULES VERNE
P'TIT
BONHOMME

The original frontispiece

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PART I

CHAPTER 1

IN FAR CONNAUGHT

Ireland, which has an area of31,759 square miles, or 20,326,209 acres, formerly formed a part of the insular tract of land now called the United Kingdom. This we learn from the geologists; but it is history and fact that the islands are now two, and more widely divided by moral discord than by physical barriers. The Irish, who are friends of France, are, as they always have been, enemies of England.

A fair country for tourists is Ireland, but a sad one for the dwellers in it. They cannot fertilise it, and it cannot feed them, especially in some of the northern districts. But although the motherland has no flowing breast to give to her children, she is passionately loved by them. They call her by the sweetest of names; she is ‘Green Erin’, — and indeed her verdure is unequalled — she is ‘The Land of Song’; she is ‘The Island of Saints’; she is ‘The Emerald Gem of the Western World’; she is ‘First flower of the earth, and first gem of the sea’. Poor Ireland! She ought to be called ‘The Isle of Poverty’, for that name has befitted her for many centuries. In 1845 the population of ‘the most distressful country that ever yet was seen’ reached its highest point, 8,295,061; in 1891 when the last Census was taken, it had fallen to 4,706,162, and the terrible preponderance of indigence is maintained at the old figures, 3 to 8.

The island is hollowed out like a basin, in which there is no lack of water, for the chief feature of the country is the beautiful series of lakes (Hibernice loughs). Lough Neagh alone — the lakes of the drowned towns and round towers — covers a surface of 98,255 acres. The harbours of Ireland are some of the finest in the world, and the Shannon is renowned among rivers.

The town of Westport, in the province of Connaught, is situated on Clew Bay, which resembles Morbihan on the coast of Brittany in the number of islets (365) which dot the surface of its waters. This bay is one of the most beautiful along the entire seaboard of Ireland; its capes, promontories, and points are ranged like so many sharks' teeth which bite the incoming rollers. Connaught — the birthplace of the MacMahons — produces those special Celtic types which are preserved in the families of the persecuted people of past generations, the original owners of the soil. The country is very poor and wretched; to behold it is to have the interpretation of the old saying: 'To Hell or Connaught!'

It is at Westport that we are to find little Mick in the dawn of his life's story; we shall see where, when, and how that story comes to its end.

The great majority of the population of Westport are Catholics. On Sunday, the 17th of June, 1875, most of the inhabitants were at Mass, and a large number of the congregation had come barefoot, carrying their shoes in their hands almost to the church door, partly to economise those articles of attire, although few of them were in good case, and partly because they walked more freely without the restraint of shoe-leather.

For the moment there was only one person in the main street of Westport, a man who was pushing from the back a queerly shaped vehicle drawn by a small and manifestly ill-used pony, and shouting, with wasted energy in the vacant space: 'Puppets! Puppets!'

This travelling showman had come from Castlebar in County Mayo. He had not journeyed by the railroad which places Westport in communication with Dublin; he had not conveyed his luggage by any of the carts or cars which traverse the country; he had 'footed it' like a stroller, 'crying' his puppets everywhere, and urging on his wretched pony with blows, and loud cracking of his whip, which was occasionally accompanied by a sort of prolonged moan from the interior of the vehicle. And then, after the man had sworn at the miserable beast, he would seem to address some other lower animal, saying, with a hideous prefix, ‘You — will you hold your tongue?’

The moaning would cease, and the — shall we say covered cart? — would rumble on.

The man’s name was Hornpipe. It matters little what was his birthplace; enough that he was one of those Anglo — Saxons, too frequendy to be met with among the lowest classes in the British Isles, who have no more feeling than a wild beast, no more heart than a granite rock. The showman had passed through the outskirts of the town, and was now going along the principal street, which was lined with fairly good houses, and shops displaying pompous signs, but where customers would not find much to buy. Out of this street ran several dirty lanes, and the cobblestones with which it was paved bumped and rattled Hornpipe’s cart, doubtless to the detriment of the puppets destined to afford a mild diversion to the people of the province of Connaught.

As the public still declined to put in an appearance, Hornpipe trudged along dejectedly, until he reached the entrance to the Mall which is crossed by the street, between a double row of elms. Beyond the Mall stretches a park, with well-kept, sanded paths, which lead to the port on Clew Bay. This park is open to the public by permission of the Marquis of Sligo, and gives access to the port at the distance of a mile from the town.

Town, port, park, streets, river, bridges, churches, houses, hovels, in a word, the whole place, belongs to the Marquis of Sligo, one of those wealthy landlords, owners of the soil over almost the whole of Ireland. The Marquis is of old nobility, and is not a bad landlord.

Every few yards Hornpipe stopped his cart, looked about him, and shouted, in a voice which resembled the creaking of an ill-greased machine, —

‘Puppets! Royal puppets!’

Nobody opened the closed doors of the shops, not a head was put out of window. Here and there a bundle of rags would appear at the top of a lane, and out of the bundle would peer a hungry, hollow, red-eyed face. After a while a group of half-naked children appeared from somewhere, and five or six of the urchins ventured up to the cart when it was halted on the ‘broad walk’ of the Mall, and began to whine, — ’Giv’ us a ha’penny,’ in chorus. The poor brats addressed their pitiful prayer to a man much more disposed to ask than to give alms, and they scurried away from his threatening hands and feet, and put a safe distance between their ragged bodies and his whip. No responsible spectator responded to the blandishments of the showman, and the cart, wearily dragged by the half-starved pony, resumed its rumbling way, and soon reached the park, which was as empty of people as the Mall. That Hornpipe should have come there at the hour of divine service to seek spectators among Catholics, was sufficient to prove that he did not belong to that part of the country. Perhaps he might have a better chance in the afternoon. At any rate there was no harm in trying the port, and thither he proceeded, grumbling and swearing.

The harbour of Westport is but little frequented, although it is the largest and most sheltered on this coast, and no foreign ships put into it. Some trading craft and fishing boats were lying there at low tide. The ships, which had come from the west of Scotland, freighted with grain — the great scarcity in Connaught — would sail away to the east, having landed their cargoes. To see large ships in Irish ports, one must go to Dublin, Belfast, Londonderry and Cork, where the transatlantic steamers of the Liverpool and London lines call.

Evidently it was not from the pockets of the fishermen and sailors who were lounging and smoking on the quay that Hornpipe could extract the few shillings he was seeking, so he stopped his cart, and allowed the pony to slumber, with hanging head, between the shafts, while he took a parcel from under the dirty carpet-covering of the vehicle, and complacently surveyed its contents — a lump of bread, some cold potatoes, and a salt herring. Of these choice viands he disposed with the appetite of a man who is breaking a rather long fast. A slight movement in the interior of the cart attracted his attention, and he raised the covering which hid the box of puppets (having looked cautiously around to make sure that he was not observed) and slipped into it a piece of bread, saying in a fierce tone, —

‘If you don’t hold your tongue — ’

He was answered by a sound of ravenous mastication, as though a famished animal, dying of hunger, were crouching inside the box. He returned to his breakfast; the fluid portion of the meal consisted of buttermilk, carried in a tin can.

Presently the bell of the Catholic Church announced that Mass was over. Hornpipe roused the pony by an application of his whip, and set off briskly towards the Mall, in order to catch the congregation on coming out of the church. There would be a good half hour to spare before dinner-time, and he might pick up, not shillings, but a few pence in that interval, and give a second entertainment under better auspices in the afternoon. He recommenced his cry, —

‘Puppets! Royal puppets!’

In a few minutes Hornpipe was surrounded by a crowd of perhaps twenty persons; not the most important among the inhabitants of Westport indeed, but still typical of the place. The children were in the majority; the men and women for the most part carried their shoes in their hands, as we have already stated, chiefly because it was so much easier to walk barefooted, according to their usual custom.

There were certain exceptions to this rule, in the persons of a few of the trades people of Westport; for instance, the baker, who paused to look on at the spectacle with his wife and their two children. It is true that his coat was already of a respectable age, and that in rainy Ireland years count double in the case of garments; nevertheless, the worthy man was quite presentable. Was it not due to the pompous signboard of his shop, ‘Central Public Bakery’, that he should be so? And indeed so central was his bakery that there was not another in Westport. The druggist also was in the little crowd; he insisted on the title of ‘apothecary’, although his shelves were destitute of very ordinary drugs, but then his shopfront bore the inscription ‘Medical Hall’ in such resplendent letters that the mere sight of them might have cured his customers.

A priest also had joined the group in front of Hornpipe’s cart. He wore the ordinary ecclesiastical dress, a plain black coat, single-breasted, with a high-buttoned waistcoat and Roman collar. He was the parish priest, and many and various are the functions of such an individual in Ireland, outside of the services of the Catholic Church and the administration of its sacraments. He is the adviser of his parishioners in their business and family affairs, their friend and helper in trouble and sickness, and as he is neither appointed nor paid by the state, he acts with complete independence.

His ‘dues’, voluntarily subscribed by his flock, certain tributes in kind, and the fees which are paid on all occasions of religious ceremonial — what is called ‘casualty’ in other countries, secure to him a modest but easy livelihood. He is the natural administrator of the schools and charitable institutions belonging to his creed, and an active party to the public amusements of the place when the regatta or the steeplechase is ‘to the fore’. He holds a foremost place in the family life of his ‘people’; he is respected because he deserves respect, although there is not a trace of the puritan about him. Against the purity of his life no whisper of doubt has ever been uttered. Why, indeed, should not the influence of the priest be powerful in a country so deeply imbued with Catholicism that an Irish peasant dreads nothing that can possibly happen to him so much as he fears being refused the sacraments?

Hornpipe then had a public, and one possibly more productive than he had hoped. His show might even be a success, for Westport had not previously been favoured with one of a similar kind. So the showman again uttered his cry: ‘Great attraction! Royal puppets! Puppets!’

CHAPTER 2

LITTLE MICK

Hornpipe’s Thespian cart was very simply constructed; it consisted merely of a pair of shafts, a quadrangular box, or body, placed upon two wheels, and a couple of projections at the back which admitted of its being pushed uphill; the body, was sheltered from the chary sunshine, and also, but imperfecdy, from the liberal rain of the west of Ireland, by a canvas awning stretched on four upright iron rods. The whole thing resembled the barrel organs which travel through towns and villages uttering their strident sounds, but Hornpipe’s machine was not a barrel organ, although, as we shall presently see, music of a sort had a share in the matter.

The body had a lid which fitted over one-fourth of its depth from the top. This cover being lifted off and turned down along the side, forming a kind of tablet, the public were admitted to the following spectacle, after a preliminary announcement from Hornpipe in the following words: —

‘Ladies and gentlemen! You are about to see the Great Hall in the Queen’s palace of Osborne, in the Isle of Wight.’ And, in fact, the reversed cover presented a saloon in miniature, contained between the four sides of the square lid, on which draped doors and windows were painted; here and there articles of furniture of the highest style in cardboard were pinned down upon a strip of crimson baize, the tables, chairs, and sofas being so arranged as not to interfere with the free circulation of the princes, princesses, dukes, marquises, earls and baronets, who, with their noble spouses, formed the guests at this great Court function.

‘At the end,’ continued Hornpipe, ‘you will remark the throne of Queen Victoria, with the canopy of crimson velvet spangled with gold, the exact model of that on which her Majesty takes her place during the Court ceremonies.'

The throne in question is three or four inches high, the velvet is flock paper, the spangles are spots of yellow paint, but the whole is quite satisfactory to the simple people who have never beheld the real and essentially monarchical article.

'On the throne,' resumes the showman, 'contemplate the Queen — a perfect likeness — in her robes of state, the royal mantle attached to her shoulders, the crown on her head, and the sceptre in her hand.'

His audience, entirely relying upon the statement of the speaker, were delighted with the royal image, especially with the sceptre, which was modelled upon the trident of Neptune!

'On the right of the Queen, I call the attention of the spectators to their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales, as they appeared on their last visit to Ireland.'

No deception in this! There was the Prince of Wales in the costume of a Field Marshal of the British Army, and the daughter of the King of Denmark, clad in a superb lace gown cut out of the silvered paper with which the contents of sweetmeat boxes are covered. On the other side are the Dukes of Edinburgh, Connaught and Albany, Princess Mary of Teck, and in short, the whole royal family, ranged in a semicircle round the throne. In a second group are the great officers of the Crown, and Hornpipe points out each of them with his wand, to the admiration of the little crowd, adding that each of these noble personages is placed according to his rank. These gentlemen are regarded with only a mild interest, but there is more than curiosity in the stir excited by the showman's indication of a figure to the right in the vicinity of the prime minister, for the figure is that of Mr Gladstone, even then an illustrious ‘Grand old man’.

And then occurs an extraordinary anachronism, for Hornpipe, swelling out his gruff voice into a stentorian roar, shouts: ‘I present to you, ladies and gentlemen, your celebrated patriot O’Connell, whose name will always find an echo in every Irish heart!’

Yes, there was O’Connell, at a Court ceremony in England, in 1874, although he had then been dead for six-and-twenty years. A number of other celebrities were included, starred and gartered, His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge in a *tete-a-tete* with the Iron Duke, the late Lord Palmerston smiling on the late Mr Pitt, members of the Upper and Lower Houses, and behind them a line of Horse Guards in full uniform on horseback in the middle of the Hall — a rare spectacle even at a royal *fete* at Osborne. Not only was the military, political and official life of Great Britain represented by this motley collection of painted dolls, but the English fleet was not forgotten. The *Victoria and Alberf was* not there under steam indeed, but several vessels were painted on the glass of the windows, from whence the harbour of Cowes was supposed to be visible.

It must be acknowledged that Hornpipe had not deceived his public in declaring his exhibition to be unique. Great was the astonishment which it produced, not only among the assembled urchins, but among the older spectators, whose world did not extend beyond the province of Connaught, or, perhaps, even the confines of Westport.

‘Well, ladies and gentlemen, that is nothing to what you are going to see,’ resumed Hornpipe. ‘You suppose, no doubt, that these royal and other personages can make neither movements nor gestures; but they are alive, I tell you, like you and me, and you shall see that it is so. First, I will take the liberty of walking round, trusting to the generosity of you all.'

This 'walking round' is the critical moment for the showman of all kinds of curiosities; when the wooden platter begins to circulate. As a general rule the spectators of strolling shows may be divided into two classes; those who go away to avoid putting their hands into their pockets, and those who stay on with the intention of amusing themselves gratis — the latter are much the more numerous. A third category does exist, but it is so limited as to be hardly worth mentioning, and therefore, on the present occasion, Hornpipe 'walked round', with a smile on his bulldog face, which he endeavoured to render amiable, but which was merely fierce, with evil eyes and a mouth that looked as though it were always ready to bite. Among the ragged crowd there was nothing to get. A few of the spectators, who had been attracted by the showman's harangue, merely turned away their heads. Hornpipe's receipts, extracted from a few of his decently clothed auditors, amounted to one shilling and threepence. He looked at the coins with a scornful grimace; but it could not be helped. Perhaps there might be more people about later in the day, now he must make the best of the position, and go on with his programme. Thereupon the admiration became demonstrative, and amid stamping of feet and clapping of hands Hornpipe struck a blow with his wand under the body of the cart, to which a moan, unheard by any but himself, responded, and a sudden animation pervaded the mimic scene.

The puppets, moved by an interior mechanism, seemed to be endowed with real life. Queen Victoria did not indeed descend from her throne, for that would have been contrary to etiquette, she did not even rise, but she moved her head, wagged her crowned cap, and waved her sceptre after the fashion of the conductor of an orchestra ruling the waves of sound with his baton.

The members of the royal family turned stiffly round, solemnly exchanging bows, while the dukes, marquises, earls and other personages passed before them with great demonstrations of respect. The prime minister bent towards Mr Gladstone, and Mr Gladstone bent towards the prime minister. The other figures moved about in their turn, and the horses pranced and flourished their tails.

The whole of this ‘business’ was accomplished to the accompaniment of the shrill and rasping sounds of a bird-organ minus several of its notes. Certainly, it was all very fine, and the audience, who were not familiar with European drama, were quite excusably delighted.

‘I would like to know what it is that sets them going,’ said the baker.

‘Sure, it’s the divil himself,’ replied an old fisherman.

‘Is it, then?’ muttered a woman, turning her head towards the priest, who was looking on thoughtfully.

‘Ah, then, how could the divil fit into that box?’ demanded a young shop-boy, who was a well-known simpleton. ‘The divil’s a good size, ye know.’

‘Well, as he isn’t inside, he’s outside!’ retorted one of the old women. ‘It’s himself that’s showin’ it, anyhow.’

This remark passed unchallenged; the unfavourable impression produced by Hornpipe’s personal appearance was general.

Whether witchcraft were in question or not, it had to be admitted that something inside the box was moving the puppets, and yet no one had seen Hornpipe turn a handle or touch a spring. And yet — a peculiarity which had not escaped the notice of the priest — no sooner did the motion of the little crowd slacken than it was quickened by a slash of the showman’s whip against the bottom of the box. For whom was this slash, always followed by a moan, intended?

The priest meant to know, and said to Hornpipe, ‘You have a dog in the bottom of that box?’

The man, who seemed to resent the question, looked frowningly at the speaker.

‘No matter what I have there. That’s my business; I’m not bound to tell it to you.’

‘You are not bound,’ answered the priest, ‘but we have a right to suppose it is a dog that works your show.’

‘Well, then, it is a dog,’ growled Hornpipe, ‘a dog in a turning cage. It took a lot of time and patience to train him. And what do I get for my trouble? Not half as much as you’d get for a Mass!’

At the moment when Hornpipe uttered these insolent words the mechanism came to a dead stop, to the vexation of the spectators, whose curiosity was not half satisfied. And, as the showman was about to replace the lid of his box, announcing that the performance was over, the druggist inquired whether he intended to give a second.

‘No,’ replied Hornpipe roughly. He perceived that he was regarded with suspicion.

‘Not even if you are sure of getting at least two shillings?’

‘Neither for two nor for three.’

His only object now was to get away, but the little crowd did not seem disposed to make way for him. He had begun to drag the wretched pony off the ground when a prolonged sobbing wail issued from the show-box.

Then Hornpipe, in a fury, shouted, —

‘Hold your noise, you cursed whelp!’

‘That is not a dog inside there,’ said the priest, laying hold of the cart.

‘Yes, it is,’ growled Hornpipe.

‘No, it is a child!’

‘A child! A child!’ echoed the crowd.

The feelings of the spectators had undergone a sudden revulsion. It was no longer curiosity, but pity that actuated them. A child, shut up in the interior of that box, where he could hardly breathe, and lashed with a whip when he ceased to turn the wheel, having no longer strength to move in his cage!

‘The child! The child!’ was the angry demand of the incensed people.

The popular sentiment was too strong for Hornpipe. Nevertheless he tried to resist, and pushed the cart from behind in vain. The baker seized it on one side, the druggist on the other, and it was well shaken between them. Never had the Court been placed in such a predicament. Hornpipe was quickly reduced to submission, although he fought fiercely. Everybody joined in. The cart was searched; the druggist slipped between the wheels and lifted a child out of the show-box.

Yes! a little creature of three years old, pale, sickly, wretched-looking, with legs covered with weals from the lash, and hardly able to breathe.

No one in Westport recognised the child.

Such was the entry upon the scene of Foundling Mick, the hero of this veracious history. How he had fallen into the hands of the brutal showman, who was not his father, is easily told. Hornpipe had picked him up nine months previously by a roadside in Donegal, and we know to what purpose he had put the unhappy foundling.

A good woman took him in her arms, and tried to revive him. All the people pressed around him. He had an intelligent and gentle little face, this poor human squirrel, condemned to keep his cage turning under the box of puppets, to earn his livelihood. To earn his livelihood — at that age! At length he opened his eyes, and shrank back at the approach of Hornpipe, who called out angrily, ‘Give him back to me!’

‘Are you his father?’ asked the priest.

‘Yes,’ answered Hornpipe.

‘No, he is not my daddy!’ cried the child, clinging to the woman who held him in her arms.

‘He is not yours!’ exclaimed the druggist.

‘He has been stolen!’ added the baker.

‘And we will not give him back to you!’ said the priest.

Hornpipe made a rush forward, his face was scarlet and his eyes blazed with rage. But two strong fellows flung themselves upon him and overpowered him.

‘Hunt him! Hunt him!’ cried the women.

‘Be off, you vagabond!’ shouted the druggist.

‘And don’t let us see you hereabouts again,’ said the priest with a threatening gesture.

Hornpipe gave a savage slash of the whip to the starved pony, and the cart rattled along the principal street of Westport.

‘What a wretch!’ said the druggist. ‘He’ll come to be hanged, sure enough!’

‘What is your name, my child?’ asked the priest of the trembling child.

‘Mick,’ was the answer. He had no other name.

CHAPTER 3

THE POOR SCHOOL

And No. 13, what has he got?’

‘The fever.’

‘And No. 9?’

‘The whooping cough.’

‘And No. 17?’

‘He’s got the whooping cough too.’ ‘And No. 23?’

‘I think it’s goin’ to be scarlatina.’

As each of these answers was made to his questions, Mr Mulvany inscribed them upon an admirably kept register under the heading of the respective numbers. There was a column devoted to the name of the malady, the hour of the doctor’s visit, the nature of the remedies prescribed and the manner of their administration after the patients should have been taken to the hospital. The entries were made in a remarkably fine and legible hand, and the register was a model of accurate book-keeping.

‘Some of these children are rather seriously ill,’ added the doctor. ‘Give directions for care to be taken that they don’t get cold in the removal.’

‘Yes, yes,’ answered Mr Mulvany carelessly. ‘Once they’re out of this, they’re no more business of mine, and so long as my books are posted —

‘And then, if they are carried off by one thing or another,’ interrupted the doctor, as he took up his hat, ‘it will be no great loss, I suppose?’

‘In that case,’ said Mulvany, ‘I shall enter them in the death column, and their account will be balanced. Now, when an account is balanced, it seems to me that nobody has anything to complain of.’

Then the worthy pair shook hands and the doctor went his way.

Mr Mulvany was the schoolmaster of the poor school of Galway, a small town on the coast of Galway Bay. He was a stout, fat man, one of those elderly bachelors who have never been young, and who will never be quite old, who have no life-troubles or family cares, are not moved by any sentiments of love, sympathy, or compassion, and possess just enough heart to enable them to live. He was one of those beings who pass through life doing neither good nor harm, and are never unhappy — not even in the unhappiness of others.

Such was Mulvany, and he was the right man in the right place as the master of a poor school. The establishment indeed merited the epithet ragged school, which was in use twenty or thirty years ago, but has now ceased to be employed. He kept its books with great accuracy, but his solicitude was confined to that branch of his business. His charges were indeed a ‘ragged regiment’. He was assisted by an old woman called Chris, who was seldom seen without a black pipe in her mouth, and a former pupil, a boy of sixteen, named Grip. The latter was a cheerful, even merry fellow, with a good face, bright eyes, and a turned-up nose. The school was a sort of refuge for the destitute; the scholars were the poorest of the poor, many of them forsaken children of nameless parents; the funds were precarious, and the condition of the school was wretched.

Of the forlorn dwellers in Mr Mulvany’s gaunt and comfortless abode Foundling Mick was the youngest. He was under five years of age, and so far he seemed to be set apart for misfortune. After he had been treated as we have seen by Hornpipe, then rescued from his tormentor through the compassion of some good souls in Westport, he was now an object of charity in the Galway poor school. When he must leave that dismal refuge, what was to become of him?

The parish priest who had rescued him from the showman had vainly endeavoured to discover the child’s previous history. Foundling Mick was unable to furnish him with any clue to it. He remembered only that he had lived somewhere with an unkind woman, a little girl who kissed him sometimes, and another child who died. Where had this happened? He did not know. No one could tell whether he had been a lost child or one forsaken by his parents.

At Westport, he had been taken care of by first one person, then another. Women pitied him, and lamented over his wretched fate. The name of Foundling Mick remained with him. He lived for a week here, for a fortnight there; but the priest and his people were poor; there was no orphanage in which to place the little boy, and so he drifted into the poor school, where he had now been living for nine months among a pack of young ragamuffins, confided to the tender mercies of old Chris, Grip the good-natured, and Mr Mulvany, a human machine. He had not yet figured on Mr Mulvany’s list among the cases of scarlatina or whooping cough, or his account would soon have been settled — at the bottom of a pauper’s grave in the churchyard. But, although he had not suffered in bodily health, of what was the moral atmosphere composed in which the poor little boy lived? For the most part it was deplorable. There was in the school a boy named Carker, whose mother was ‘doing’ a long term of penal servitude, whose father had been hanged for murder, and whose own character and conduct indicated the probability of his following in the footsteps of his parents. He was only twelve years old, but his perversity was already remarkable; he was a ringleader in every kind of mischief and ill doing, and was, naturally, a person of consideration among the ragged crew of juvenile flatterers and followers.

This boy was Foundling Mick’s special aversion, detested and feared by him, and yet regarded with constant wonder! A boy whose father had been hanged! Just think of it!

The school bore no resemblance to modern educational establishments, where cubic feet of air are mathematically distributed. The scholars had to breathe in the allotted space as best they could, and to be satisfied with straw to sleep on, and scanty food, rarely more choice than bread and potatoes, to eat. As for the instruction given in the place, Mr Mulvany was supposed to dispense that article to the poor scholars of Galway. His duty was to teach the three Rs, but as he did not compel any of his pupils to learn, it would have been difficult to find two of the number who could have read off a poster at sight after two or three years of education. Little Mick, although he was so young, offered a contrast to his schoolfellows by evincing a desire for instruction, and thereby laid himself open to much ridicule. The only part of the school-house which approached to being clean was Mr Mulvany’s own room; this was not accessible to any other person. He was best pleased with his pupils when they were out of doors, ranging the countryside at their own sweet will, and when the pressing need of food and sleep brought the vagabond band back to their wretched headquarters, their return always took place too early for him.

The intelligence and the good instincts of Foundling Mick exposed him not only to the senseless ridicule of Carker and five or six others who followed his lead, but to rough treatment at their hands as well. He did not complain, but oh, how he longed to be strong enough to enforce respect, to be able to give blow for blow, kick for kick, and how fiercely the fire of anger burned in the heart of the litde creature who was too weak to defend himself! Mick would remain in a corner of the sordid schoolroom when the others were away on their excursions of vagabondage and depredation, to enjoy the quietness, and to be with Grip.

‘You don’t go out?’ said the latter to him.

‘No, Grip.’

‘Carker will give you a licking if you haven’t brought home something this evening.’

‘I would rather be licked.’

Grip reciprocated Micky’s affection. He was not without intelligence, and he could read and write; so he tried to teach the child the little he himself had learned, and Foundling Mick began very quickly to do honour to his instructor, at least in the matter of reading. Grip was also a capital storyteller, and he would entertain his little pupil for hours together, while Foundling Mick’s laughter cheered and brightened the dismal schoolroom. Presently, the others included Grip in their spite and malice, to the great distress of Micky, but Grip regarded this development with philosophical resignation.

‘Grip,’ said Micky.

‘Yes; what is it?’

‘Carker is very bad-natured?’

‘Indeed he is — very.’

‘Why don’t you lick him?’

‘What for?’

‘Aye, and the others too.’

Grip shrugged his shoulders.

Aren’t you strong, Grip?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘But you have big arms and legs.’

Grip was tall, and as thin as a ramrod.

‘Well, then, Grip, why don’t you beat them, the brutes?’

‘Cos it isn’t worth while.’

‘Ah! if I only had had your arms and legs — ’

‘It would be far better, my little chap,’ answered Grip, ‘to use them for working with.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Certain sure.’

‘Well, then, we will work together; we will try. Shall we, Grip?’

Grip gave a ready assent.

Sometimes Grip would take the child out with him when he was sent on an errand. The two were on a par in point of clothing; their garments were mere rags. This did not so much matter in fine weather, but under the rain and the snow, their pinched blue faces, red eyes, and shivering forms were pitiable to behold, as hand in hand they walked or ran to warm themselves, along the streets of the little town. Foundling Mick would have dearly liked to see what was inside the houses. To him they represented untold splendours. And the hotels at which the travellers alighted, what a pleasure it would be to see the fine rooms, especially those of the Royal Hotel! But the servants would have driven them away like dogs, or rather like beggars, for dogs do get a friendly pat sometimes. And the shabby shops, with the poor displays in their windows, what wonders did they present to the hapless boys! A grand display of clothing, to them, who were in tatters; an array of boots and shoes, to them, who were barefooted! Was it ever to be the lot of either to have a new coat made for his own self, a new pair of shoes, for which he had been measured? No, doubtless, never, any more than so many other poor creatures condemned to live on the leavings of the more fortunate. What pangs of longing assailed the half-starved pair, as they looked upon the big joints of meat on the butcher’s stall, and inhaled the odour of hot bread and delicious cakes which pervaded the neighbourhood of the baker’s and confectioner’s shops!

‘How good cakes must be,’ said Foundling Mick.

‘They just are!’ responded Grip.

‘Did you ever eat any?’

‘I did once.’

‘Ah!’ sighed little Mick.

One day a lady, taking pity on his pale face, gave him a cake.

‘I would rather have a loaf, ma’am,’ said he.

‘Why, my child?’

‘Because it would be bigger.’

Once, however, Grip, having earned a few pence by an errand, bought a week-old cake and gave it to Mick.

‘It is good?’ he asked.

‘Oh! — it is, just as if it had sugar in it.’

‘So it has,’ said Grip, ‘and good sugar too.’

On occasions, Grip and Foundling Mick went as far as Salthill, from whence the whole spectacle of the bay of Galway is visible, with the Aran Islands, the Burren, and the Cliffs of Moher. Then they would return towards the port, along the quays, and the docks which were begun at a period when it was contemplated to make Galway the point of departure of a line of transatlantic steamers. They always lingered to gaze at the few vessels in the bay or moored at the entrance of the port. These objects had an irresistible attraction for the two boys, who, no doubt, had a vague notion that the sea is less cruel than the land to poor people, that it promises them a more secure existence, that life is better in the fresh, free air of the ocean, far from the ill-smelling dens of towns, in which the toilers are packed, that the sea is of all sources of health and sustenance the best for the youth and the man.

‘It must be fine, Grip, to go on those boats, with their great sails,’ said Mick.

‘If you only knew how I’ve been tempted,’ answered Grip, nodding his head.

‘Then why aren’t you a sailor on the sea?’

‘You’re right. Why ain’t I a sailor?’

‘You would go far — far away.’

Perhaps it may come to that,’ said Grip.

On their way back to the school, they had to pass through narrow streets and a squalid quarter of the town. Their way lay in the midst of ruins, but not such ruins as possess interest, being the work of time. These produced only a mournful and wearisome impression, for they were but the ruins of half- or quarter-built houses, left unfinished for want of money, roofless and rotting.

There was, however, something worse than the poor part of Galway, more repulsive than the last straggling hovels of its outlying quarter; the wretched place that represented all those two disinherited ones knew of home; and Grip and Micky were in no hurry to re-enter the poor school.

CHAPTER 4

CONCERNING A SEAGULL

Did Foundling Mick, in the midst of his sordid existence, ponder at times upon his past and strive to call it up before his dim vision? A happy child, living amid plenty, care, and affection, may naturally be altogether given up to the mere happiness of living, without a thought of what may come, but it is not so with one whose past has been all suffering. To such a child the future is a pressing care, an ever-present terror; he has to look forward, having to look back.

In Mick’s retrospect there was always Hornpipe’s figure; the brutal, pitiless rascal whom he sometimes dreaded to meet at a street-corner, with his big, hard, cruel hands ready to clutch him. Then he would be visited by a vague, terrifying recollection of the woman who had ill-treated him, but also by a gleam of remembrance of the girl who had been so tender to him in his pain.

‘I can remember now,’ he said one day to his companion, ‘she was called Cissy.’

‘A pretty name,’ replied Grip, who rather thought, however, that the said Cissy was a figment of Foundling Mick’s fancy, for nothing had ever been ascertained concerning her. But, when he had seemed to cast a doubt upon her existence, Mick had grown angry. Yes, he could see her in his thoughts. Should he not find her again one day? What had become of her? Was she still with that hateful hag? He loved her and she loved him. This was the first affection he had ever felt before he met Grip, and he talked of Cissy as though she were a big girl. She was kind and gentle, she caressed him, she dried his tears, she gave him kisses, she shared her potatoes with him.

‘I would have liked to defend her when the old woman beat her,’ said Foundling Mick.

‘So should I,’ answered Grip, to please the child, ‘and I think I’d have hit hard.’

And indeed, if this fellow did not defend himself when he was attacked, he could defend others at need, and he had given proof of his prowess in the case of Mick and his persecutors.

One Sunday, soon after he had been sent to the poor school, Foundling Mick, being attracted by the sound of the church bells, found his way into the Catholic cathedral of Galway. The child was timid, and ashamed of his rags, when he saw how large and grand the building was; but he forgot his shyness in the delight of the organ music, the singing voices, the golden vestments of the priest at the altar, and the lights that burned in the sanctuary. He had not forgotten that the good parish priest of Westport had told him about God — God who is the Father of all; but neither had he forgotten that when Hornpipe uttered the name of God it was to garnish his vile oaths, and this recollection disturbed his thoughts in the midst of the religious ceremonies. Hidden behind a pillar, he looked at the priests with the same sort of curiosity as soldiers inspired. Then, when the whole congregation knelt, at the tinkling of the bell for the Elevation, he stole away unperceived, as noiselessly as a mouse goes back into its hole.

When Foundling Mick rejoined Grip in the school-house he said nothing about the church, and indeed Grip had but vague notions of the meaning of Mass and vespers; but, some time afterwards, having made a second visit to the cathedral, and finding himself alone with Chris, he asked her *what* was God?

‘God?’ replied the old woman, suspending the activity of her pipe for a moment.

‘Yes, God?’

‘God is the devil’s brother,’ said she, ‘and he sends him all the bad children to be burned in his fire in hell.’

Foundling Micky turned pale on hearing this, and although he wanted very much to know the whereabouts of this hell filled with flames and children, he did not venture to cross-question Chris on the subject. However, he thought a great deal about God, whose sole occupation seemed to be the punishing of babies in so horrible a fashion, if Chris were to be believed, and one day, being very anxious, he began to talk to his friend Grip.

‘Grip,’ said he, earnestly, ‘have you ever heard tell of hell?’

‘Sometimes, Micky.’

‘Where is it?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘But listen — if children who are wicked are burned there, they will burn Carker?’

‘Yes, and in a big fire too!’

‘Grip — there’s me — I’m not bad, am I?’

‘You bad? No. I should think not, indeed!’

‘Then I shall not be burned?’

‘Not a hair of you.’

‘Nor you, Grip?’

‘Nor I — you may be sure of that, Micky.’

This was all that Foundling Mick knew about God, the whole of his catechism; and yet he knew, in a confused way, the difference between right and wrong, good and evil.

Mr Mulvany was not pleased with him, and if he were safe from the penalties described by Chris, he was by no means secure from those entailed by the schoolmaster’s private code. Foundling Mick figured in the books of Mr Mulvany on the wrong side, in the columns of expenses, not in those of receipts. Here was a brat costing — not much.

Mr Mulvany — and producing nothing! One day the schoolmaster called him up and severely rebuked him.

‘You won’t do anything, then?’ he concluded, impatiently.

‘Yes, I will, sir,’ answered the child, while he bravely repressed his tears. ‘Tell me what you wish me to do.’

‘Something that will pay what you cost.’

‘I wish I could, but I don’t know how.’

‘You can follow people in the street, and ask for errands.’

‘I am too little, they won’t have me.’

‘Indeed! Have you hands?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you legs?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, then, run after the cars, and pick up ha’pence, since you can’t do anything else!’

‘Beg for ha’pence. Oh, Mr Mulvany, I could not do that!’

‘Ah! You couldn’t?’

‘No, sir.’

‘And can you live without eating? No. I thought not. Well, I give you notice that one day or another I will make you try, if you don’t find out some way of earning your living. Be off with you!’

Earning his living! And he was not five years old! He shrank away into a corner and hung his head. When these little creatures are not utterly stupefied by misery in their infancy, no one can imagine what they suffer, and they can never be sufficiently pitied.

After the admonition of Mulvany came the incitements of the scamps of the school, who were enraged by the better feelings and conduct of the little boy. They delighted in urging him to evil, and did so, not by wicked counsel alone, but by blows. Carker was his most active persecutor, and brought to the task an amount of zeal only to be explained by his own depravity.

‘You won’t ask charity, then?’ he said one day.

‘No,’ replied Foundling Mick, firmly.

‘Well, then, you stupid fool, you need not ask — take!’

‘Take?’

‘Yes. This is the way of it. When you see a well-dressed gentleman with the end of his handkerchief sticking out of his pocket, you pull the handkerchief and out it comes.’

‘Let me alone, Carker!’

‘And sometimes a purse comes out with the pocket handkerchief.’

‘That’s stealing!’

‘And it is not ha’pence that’s in rich people’s purses; it’s shillings, and half-crowns, and pound notes, and sovereigns, and then you share them with your comrades, you little sneak!’

‘Yes,’ said another, ‘and you run away and laugh at the policeman.’

‘And besides,’ added Carker, ‘suppose you do go to prison — what harm’s that? It’s just as good as here, and better. You get soup and bread, and potatoes, and eat as much as you like.’

‘I won’t! I won’t!’ cried the child, as he struggled to get away from the young ruffians, who were knocking him from one to the other like a ball.

Grip, who had just entered the schoolroom, tore him from them.

‘You let that child alone, d’ye hear?’ cried he, doubling his fists. This time Grip was angry in good earnest.

‘You know, I’m not fond of hitting,’ he said to Carker, ‘and I don’t hit often, but when I begin — ’

The young rascals drew off from their victim, but threw him parting glances, which promised that they would begin again when Grip should not be available for his protection, and settle their little account with him ‘between themselves’.

‘Sure, you’ll be burned, Carker,’ said the child, with a comical air of commiseration.

‘Burned?’

‘Yes — in hell; if you go on being so wicked.’

At this the whole band of miscreants set up a shout of ridicule; but this did not affect the fixed idea of the roasting of Carker which had taken possession of Foundling Mick.

The intervention of Grip in his favour was not likely to produce good results to little Mick. Carker and the others were bent upon vengeance on Grip and his favourite. Of this Grip was well aware, and he vigilantly mounted guard over Micky, keeping him under his own eye as much as possible all day, and at night sharing with him the garret which he occupied under the roof. This was a cold and miserable retreat, but it protected Foundling Mick from evil counsels and ill treatment.

One day Grip and he had walked out to the beach at Salthill, where they occasionally bathed. Grip, who was a good swimmer, gave Mick lessons in natation, and the little fellow loved to plunge into the limpid water on which floated the beautiful ships which he saw afar off.

They were in the midst of the long waves that broke upon the beach, and Grip, holding Mick by the shoulders, was showing him the first movements, when a band of the schoolboys appeared at the side of the rocks, howling like jackals. There were a dozen of them, the worst of the whole lot, and Carker was the ringleader.

The cause of their vociferations was their having caught sight of a seagull with a disabled wing, which was trying to fly away, and might have succeeded had not Carker struck it with a stone.

Foundling Mick uttered such a cry that it might have been thought he had received the blow.

‘Poor gull! Poor gull!’ he moaned.

Sudden anger seized upon Grip, and he would probably have inflicted upon Carker a chastisement that he would have remembered, but that he saw the little boy rush up the beach into the midst of the group, imploring pity for the seagull.

‘Carker! Carker!’ he cried, ‘I beg of you — beat me, beat me, but don’t hurt the bird!’

A roar of ridicule greeted him as he came along the sand, naked, with his delicate limbs, and his thin ribs showing under the skin. And still he cried, ‘Carker! Carker! Don’t hurt the bird!’

No one listened to him; they all mocked at his entreaties, and pursued the wretched bird, as it strove to rise from the earth, hopping lamely from one foot to the other, and seeking a shelter amid the rocks. Vain were its efforts.

‘Cowards! Cowards!’ cried Foundling Mick, with streaming tears.

Carker had seized the seagull by one wing, and now whirled it about in the air; it fell on the sand; another of the band picked it up and dashed it on the pebbles.

‘Grip! Grip!’ shrieked Mick, ‘save it! save it!’

Grip rushed upon the boys, but he was too late. Carker had crushed the seagull’s head under his heel, and his companions greeted the exploit with shouts of laughter. Foundling Mick was incensed. Blind rage took possession of him; he picked up a large pebble and flung it with all his strength at Carker, whom it hit full in the chest.

‘Ah! You shall pay for this,’ shouted Carker, and, before Grip could prevent it, he seized hold of Mick, dragged him to the edge of the water, and struck him repeatedly. Then, while the others held Grip by the arms, he pushed the little boy’s head under the incoming wave and kept it there at the imminent risk of suffocating him.

Grip set himself free from the detaining grasp of the young ruffians who held him, by dint of kicks and cuffs, and ran towards Carker, who fled with his rabble rout. The wave would have carried Foundling Mick with it in its ebb, had not Grip laid hold of him and dragged him back, half-fainting. Then Grip rubbed him vigorously, and having brought him to, re-dressed him in his tattered clothes, and taking him by the hand, said, ‘Come away.’

Foundling Mick found the dead bird among the stones, and making a hole in the sand, he buried it therein.

CHAPTER 5

MORE OF THE POOR SCHOOL

On his return to the school, Grip thought it right to inform Mr Mulvany of the conduct of Carker and the other boys. It was not that he cared to tell of the tricks they were in the habit of playing on him, for these he hardly noticed. Foundling Mick was in question now, and the ill treatment to which he was exposed was quite otherwise serious. This time persecution had been carried so far that but for Grip's interference the corpse of a child would have been carried in by the waves upon the beach of Salthill.

Mr Mulvany's sole answer to the complaint of Grip was a surly nod of the head. Grip ought to have known that such things did not concern him. He had to keep his books, and he could not have one column for cuffs and another for kicks. So Mr Mulvany merely sent the superintendent about his business. Upon this, Grip resolved from that day forth never to leave his poor little friend alone in the schoolroom, and when he went out he locked him into the garret, where the child was at least in safety.

The summer was ended, September had come,- and September is almost winter in Galway. With the last days of that month winter came in earnest that year.

The dwellers on the coast of the bay had a hard time of it. The days were short and the nights were long in the hovels where both coal and turf were sadly scarce. In the poor school the temperature was low in every room except Mr Mulvany's own. Now or never was the time to roam through the streets and along the roads, picking up everything that could be used as fuel, the fallen branches of trees, the bits of coal spilled at back doors or around cellar-gratings, the fragments for which the poor clamoured at the unlading of the lighters at the quay. The school children were employed in this humble harvest field, where the gleaners were so many.

Foundling Mick took his share in the hard task, and every day he brought home a little combustible matter. This was not begging, and, at any rate, there was some warmth on the hearth, and therewithal he had to be content. The whole school, shivering in their rags, crowded about the fireplace — the big ones got the best places, needless to say — while their supper was being prepared. What a supper! When it did not consist simply of ‘stirabout’ (oatmeal porridge), it was composed of crusts, potatoes, and scraps of coarse meat made into an unappetising Irish stew, with plenty of grease in the gravy, and a very slender allowance of the mess was given to each of the hungry crowd. The bigger boys, of course, fared the best; for Foundling Mick there was neither a place by the fire nor a bowl of stew as a matter of right or custom, but Grip would take the child into his own den and share his own portion of the meagre daily meal with him. There was no fire up there, but by cowering under the straw and huddling close together they managed to defeat the cold, and to go asleep. Perhaps they were warm in their sleep; we may hope so.

One day Grip had a real turn of luck. He was strolling along the principal street, when a traveller who was going into the Royal Hotel asked him to take a letter to the post office. Grip gladly executed the commission, and received a shilling for his trouble. A whole, bright, new shilling! The employment of his capital was indicated easily — much should be placed in the stomach of Foundling Mick, a little in Grip’s own. He bought a goodly supply of cold boiled beef, which lasted for three days, and was safely consumed without the knowledge of Carker and the others. Naturally, Grip had no notion of sharing with those who never shared with him.

Moreover, the worthy gentleman so fortunately encountered close to the Royal Hotel observed the wretched clothing of his messenger, and presented Grip with a knitted jersey of his own in good condition. Grip did not dream of keeping this adventitious garment for his personal use. Oh, no! It would be ‘splendid’ for Mick to wear under his rags. ‘He’ll be like a sheep in its wool in the likes of that,’ said the good fellow to himself, exultingly.

But the sheep did not wish Grip to give up his wool to him, and a dispute arose between them, which was ultimately arranged to their common satisfaction. The gentleman was tall, and the jersey would have covered little Micky from head to foot. It was not impossible to divide the ample garment between the two friends. They might as well have asked the drunken old woman, Chris, to give up her pipe as to unmake and remake the jersey, so Grip, shutting himself up in his garret, applied himself to the task, bringing all his intelligence to bear upon it, and so skilfully did he execute it that Micky had a warm body-covering out of the stranger’s charitable gift, and Grip himself had a short sleeveless vest, which, after all, was something.

Of course, the child was carefully instructed to conceal the addition to his wardrobe from the others, who would have torn it to shreds rather than leave him in possession of it. He contrived to hide his treasure successfully, and we may guess how highly he appreciated it during the long and bitter winter which brought privation of many kinds upon the district, and in particular to the poor school.

The parish did what it could for the poor, but the demands of several charitable institutions had to be considered and met to some extent before those of the destitute children in that chill shelter could be entertained.

There was nothing for it but that the children should beg from door to door, and beg they did.

Foundling Mick had to follow the example of his companions, but he departed from their methods, for it had seemed to him the first time he lifted a door-knocker to ask for alms, that the blow had fallen upon his own breast. Instead of holding out his childish hand he falteringly asked — could they give him something to do? Such a question from an urchin of five years old was easily answered; he was given a hunch of bread, and ate it with tears. What would you have? He was hungry.

At last the hard winter of 1876 came to a close. The spring of 1877 was mild, and summer came early. It was very warm from the beginning of June. On the 17th of August Foundling Mick, who was then five years and a half old, had an adventure which brought about most unexpected consequences. He was returning to the school at seven o'clock in the evening in a melancholy mood, for he knew he should be ill received as he was coming back empty-handed. Unless Grip chanced to have some odd crust or other in reserve, there would be no supper for the little fellow that evening. He was within a few yards of the door when he stumbled and fell at full length, but without hurting himself. He got up and looked around him for the object which had caused his tumble; it proved to be an earthenware gallon jar, lying unbroken on its side in a soft mud puddle. The cork had been drawn, but replaced, and the jar had probably rolled off the sloping back of one of the low cars of the locality, unnoticed by its proprietor, who had made himself too familiarly acquainted with its contents. Micky set the jar up on end, and twitched out the cork. He did not know many of the good things of this world by sight, but he did know whiskey when he smelt it, and this was whiskey. Nearly a gallon too! What a welcome he should have now! All the ragamuffins might have their fill of Foundling Mick's find.

Nobody was in the street, nobody had seen him, and he was close to the school.

But then certain ideas occurred to Micky — ideas which would not have come to Carker or the others. This jar did not belong to him, it was somebody’s property and had evidently been lost. It might be difficult to discover the rightful owner; but no matter, his conscience told Micky that he must not dispose of other people’s goods. He knew this by instinct only, for neither Hornpipe nor Mulvany had ever taught him the difference between right and wrong. Happily, there are children in whose hearts that lesson is inscribed by a Divine hand.

Micky, much disconcerted by his find, resolved to consult Grip, who would surely be able to return the jar to its owner. The great thing was to get the awkward receptacle up to the garret without its being seen by the young scamps, who would not trouble themselves about its proprietor. If it got into their hands, there would not be a drop in the jar by nightfall; but Micky could answer for Grip as he could for himself. He would not touch the jar, he would hide it under the straw, and tomorrow he would find out who had lost it, or if he could not do that, the two of them would go from house to house and inquire — they would not be begging this time. So Foundling Mick approached the school, laboriously endeavouring to hide the big jar with his tattered clothes.

Unfortunately, just as he reached the door, Carker came rudely out and bumped against him. The bully had seen the child coming, and thought it a fine opportunity for paying him off for the interference of Grip upon the beach at Salthill. He seized hold of Micky, felt the jar, and snatched it from him.

‘Ha! What’s this?’ he cried.

‘That! It’s none of yours.’

Then it’s yours?’

‘No, it’s not mine!’

Micky tried to push past Carker, but he, with a savage kick, sent him reeling against the doorpost, and rushed back into the schoolroom, whither Micky limped after him, crying with anger.

He tried again to protest, but as Grip was not there to protect him, he was pushed, struck, and kicked. Chris joined in the fun so soon as she saw the jar.

‘Whiskey!’ she exclaimed, ‘and enough for every one of uz!’

What could the little fellow do? To go to Mr Mulvany and tell him what was taking place would have been to ensure a warm reception for himself. And as for the jar, what would have happened to it? Mr Mulvany would have sent for the jar, and nothing drinkable that went into the schoolmaster’s room ever came out of it.

Micky could do nothing else but hasten up to Grip’s garret and tell him what had occurred.

‘So it’s Carker that took it from you, is it?’ said Grip, threateningly, when his little friend had told the tale. ‘We will go down, and I’ll soon see who’ll keep it!’

But when Grip got to the door he found it bolted on the outside. He shook the door vigorously, but it resisted all his efforts, to the great joy of the rabble rout below, who shouted, —

‘Ha, ha, Grip!’

‘Ho, ho! Foundling Mick.’

‘We’re drinking yer good health.’

Grip, finding that he could not burst open the door, resigned himself to facts, according to his custom, and endeavoured to quiet his angry companion.

‘Let them alone,’ he said, ‘never mind the fools.’

‘Oh, if we were only the strongest!’

‘Yes! but we’re not, you see. And what good would it do? Look here, Mick, I’ve kept some potatoes for you. Come and eat them.’

‘I’m not hungry, Grip!’

‘Never mind, eat all the same, and then we’ll get into the straw and go to sleep.’

The very best thing to be done after such a supper.

Carker had bolted the door of the garret, because he did not mean to be disturbed that evening. With Grip securely shut in, the boys could drain the stone jar at their ease. Chris would not interfere, provided she had her share of the whiskey. So the liquor, which the young wretches sipped raw out of mugs, went round merrily, and as none except perhaps Carker were accustomed to the taste of spirits, they rapidly became intoxicated; in fact the jar was still more than half full when the whole company was drunk, some noisily, some stupidly. The noise did not arouse Mulvany from his usual indifference. He cared nothing for what might be going on downstairs, provided he were left undisturbed.

Nevertheless, he was about to be routed out of his den in a very summary manner, not without damage to his cherished account books.

The greater number of the young scamps had succumbed to their potations, and were lying about the schoolroom; there they would have fallen asleep had it not occurred to Carker that it would be great fun to set fire to some whiskey and drink it burning. This device, he thought, would ‘finish’ Chris, and two or three others who were not yet quite drunk; accordingly, he poured a good deal of the spirit into a saucepan — the only one at Chris’s disposal — lighted a match, and set fire to it. The room was illuminated by the ghastly blue flame, the ragamuffins — such of them as were able to stand — took hands and danced round the blazing saucepan. Had there been any passers-by they would have thought a legion of devils had invaded the school; but the place was lonely at night.

Suddenly a great light appeared in the interior of the house. One of the dancers had tripped, and kicked over the saucepan; the blazing spirit, spilt upon the straw, instantly ignited, and the flames spread to the farthest corners of the room. The fire was everywhere in a moment. Those who were not quite drunk, and those who were startled out of their stupor by the glare and the crackling of the flames, had barely time to open the door and rush into the street, dragging old Chris with them.

At that moment Grip and Foundling Mick, who had just awoke, were endeavouring to get out of the garret, which was filled with suffocating smoke.

The flames had already been perceived, and some inhabitants of the quarter ran to the spot, bringing buckets and ladders. Fortunately, the poor school was a detached building, and as the wind was blowing from the opposite quarter the houses in front of it were not in danger. There was little hope of saving the school; it was on those who were shut up in it, and whose egress was barred by the flames, that attention was turned. Then a window on the first floor was opened; it was that of Mr Mulvany's own room, and the fire was approaching it. The schoolmaster appeared, staggering with terror and gesticulating wildly.

'My books! My books!' he cried, and tried to get down the stairs, but was driven back by the dense smoke. Shouts from the street warned him that he had not a moment to lose; he hastily collected his cherished registers and account books, and threw them out of the window. Those treasures fell into the street, were promptly trampled on by the men who were placing a ladder, by which Mr Mulvany was to be rescued, against the wall, pounced upon by the urchins outside, and torn to atoms, most of which the wind carried away and dispersed far and wide, to the high glee of the perpetrators of this act of mischief.

Mr Mulvany had been able to get out, not so Grip and Foundling Mick. The garret was lighted by a small window in the roof, and the staircase leading to it was already a prey to the flames. Presently the school-house would be merely a big bonfire. Then Grip's cries rose above the noise of the conflagration.

'There is some one in that attic!' exclaimed a person who had just arrived at the scene of the catastrophe. The newcomer was a lady, dressed in travelling costume; she had left her carriage at the end of the street, and was looking on at the fire. Her maid stood, pale and frightened, at her side. By this time the fire had spread so widely that it could not be subdued, and, the schoolmaster having been rescued, no farther effort was made to save the house, which was supposed to be empty.

‘Help! Help, for those who are there!’ cried the lady, throwing her arms up with a grand dramatic gesture. ‘Ladders, ladders, my good people, and to the rescue!’

‘Who is in the attic?’ asked some one of Mr Mulvany, who was stooping over the poor remains of his books.

‘Who? I don’t know,’ he answered in a bewildered voice; he was conscious only of his own disaster.

Then, with sudden recollection, he added, —

‘Ah, yes! Two boys — Grip and Foundling Mick.’

‘Poor creatures!’ exclaimed the lady. ‘My money, my jewels, all I have shall be theirs who save those lives!’

It was, however, no longer possible to get into the school-house, the walls were wrapped in flames, and the interior was burning fiercely.

Suddenly the thatched roof gave way at the side of the little window. Grip had contrived to tear away a rafter at the moment when the fire had reached the floor of the garret. He squeezed himself through the hole thus made, dragging the half-suffocated child after him, and crept along the sloping thatch to the edge of the side wall of the house. There he steadied himself against the abutment and looked down, holding Mick in his arms. At this moment a jet of flame burst upwards from the roof, carrying fragments of the thatch with it, which were dispersed around in glittering sparks.

‘Save him!’ cried Grip, ‘save him!’ and he threw the child from him on the street-side, where, happily, he was caught in a man’s arms before he reached the ground. Then Grip flung himself down, and rolled, almost stifled, to the foot of a wall which immediately afterwards came down in a heap.

The stranger-lady advanced to the man who held Foundling Mick, and asked him in a voice which trembled with emotion, —

‘To whom does that innocent creature belong?’

‘To nobody. He is only a foundling,’ was the man’s reply.

‘Then he is mine! Mine!’ and she took the child and pressed him to her bosom.

‘Madam! Madam!’ said the maid, in a tone of remonstrance.

‘Silence, Eliza! Silence, I say. Heaven has sent me an angel.’

As the angel had neither parents, relatives, nor friends, it was just as well to leave him in the hands of this lovely lady, who had so generous a heart, and she was heartily cheered by the crowd as she carried off her prize at the very moment when the last remnants of the poor school crumbled to the earth in a swirl of flame.

CHAPTER 6

LIMERICK

The charitable lady who had come upon the stage of our story in rather melodramatic fashion, but had played her part with so much scenic earnestness that nobody was surprised by her performance, could hardly have treated Foundling Mick with greater tenderness had he really been her own child. She carried him to her carriage in her arms, although the maid requested permission to relieve her of the precious charge.

‘No, no, Eliza,’ said she, in a tone vibrating with emotion. ‘He is mine. Heaven has permitted me to snatch him from the ruins of that burning house. Thank God! Thank God! Ah! the darling! the darling!’

The darling was half-stifled, his eyes were closed, his mouth was open, his breath was coming in gasps. Plenty of space and fresh air would have been better for him than the tumultuous tenderness of his benefactress.

‘Quick! to the station,’ she cried to the driver when she was seated in the vehicle — a sufficiently shabby cab — ’double fare if you don’t miss the nine forty-seven train.’

And now, who was this providential traveller? Had Foundling Mick fallen into hands which would not let him go?

Miss Anna Watson, the leading lady of an important London theatre, was on tour just then, and engaged to appear at Limerick, after a short trip for recreation to Co. Galway, which she had just made, accompanied by her maid, a staid person named Elizabeth Corbett. The actress, a good-hearted, impulsive woman, who was always acting off as well as on the stage, open-handed, generous, but very vain and sensitive on every point where her self-appreciation was concerned, was on her way to take the train for Limerick, where she was to appear on the following day, when cries of distress and a volume of smoke and flame attracted her attention. The poor school was on fire.

What a chance! To see a real conflagration, so different from the stage mimicry! Notwithstanding the observations of Eliza, Miss Watson persisted in forcing her way to the front row of the spectators, with the result which has already been narrated.

The spectacle had not lacked interest, and the ‘situation’ had been admirably worked up. Two human beings shut up in a garret, a staircase in flames, and no outlet! Two boys — one big, one little (a little girl would have been more scenic, perhaps) — but it all did very well. And the cries which Miss Watson had uttered — how heart-rending, how ear-piercing! She would have rushed to the rescue in person only that her dust cloak might have fed the flame anew. And besides, the roof had already been rent asunder. The two poor boys had appeared in the midst of the smoke, the big one carrying the little one! Ah, what a hero was that big boy! How artistic was his attitude! What skill of gesture, what truth of expression! Poor Grip little thought he had produced so much effect. As for the other, the nice little boy, how pretty he looked! ‘Like an angel coming through the flames of a hell,’ said the complacently retrospective Miss Watson to herself. And this was the very first occasion in his life on which any cherubic or celestial idea had been associated with Foundling Mick. Miss Watson’s quick eye had caught the stage effect in every particular. She had cried, as she would have cried on the boards: ‘My money, my jewels, all that I have to him who saves them!’ but nobody could have scaled the tottering walls to reach the crumbling roof. The cherub had been received into arms that were opportunely there to receive him, and had passed from those to Miss Watson’s. And, now, Foundling Mick possessed a mother; nay, it was even rumoured among the crowd that Miss Watson was a great lady who had recognised her son in the midst of the fire at the poor school.

It is characteristic of actresses to imagine themselves always on the stage; for them the most ordinary circumstances of life are ‘situations.’

When Miss Watson found herself comfortably installed in a first-class compartment in the train which the driver had caught without any trouble, with her maid and her newly acquired treasure, she indulged in all the transports of a real mother on a similar (stage) occasion.

‘He is my child... my blood... my life!’ she exclaimed. ‘None shall tear him from me!’

‘We shall see how long this will last,’ said Eliza to herself.

For some time after the train started, Foundling Mick remained in a state of stupor, notwithstanding the efforts of Miss Watson to arouse him, and her outpouring of the traditional phrases of endearment. With the calm and deliberate assistance of the unemotional Eliza, the child was undressed to his woollen vest, the only article on his body that was not ragged, and provisionally attired in a warm dressing-jacket taken from Miss Watson’s travelling bag, and a thick shawl. But he did not seem conscious of the process of getting rid of his smoke-tainted clothing, or that he was wrapped in warm garments and cradled in soft arms.

At length a junction was reached, and there was a short delay.

‘Eliza,’ said Miss Watson, ‘you must see whether there is a doctor in the train.’

Eliza made inquiry; there was not a doctor.

‘Just like the wretches,’ said Miss Watson; ‘they are never at hand when they’re wanted.’

‘I assure you, ma’am,’ said Eliza, ‘there is nothing the matter with the child. He will come round at once if you will only not smother him.’

‘Do you really think so, Eliza? Ah, the darling! I am so inexperienced about children. Do as you think best, Eliza, for the sweet, sweet baby.’

Eliza released the child from Miss Watson’s arms, and deposited him comfortably on the well-cushioned seat; then, after looking at him attentively, she replied to her mistress’s anxious observations upon his long-enduring quiescence.

‘May I tell you my opinion, ma’am?’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Well, then, I believe he is asleep.’

Not only was this the case, but Foundling Mick and Miss Watson also slept soundly all through the remainder of the journey. At five o’clock in the morning the train ran into the station at Limerick, and Foundling Mick, awakened from his restorative slumber, sat up and gazed with great eyes filled with wonder upon the lady who was gazing at him. Then she kissed him repeatedly, exclaiming, ‘He lives! He lives! God, who gave him to me, has not been so cruel as to take him away again.’

Eliza assented to this remark, and so it was that our poor little boy passed, without any intermediate experience, from the garret in the Galway poor school to the fine rooms occupied by Miss Watson at the Royal George Hotel, Limerick.

The fair and fashionable actress, who was not averse to being talked about, certainly had no reason for desiring to conceal the leading incident of her tour in Galway. Discretion was not enjoined upon or practised by any of the people of the hotel or the theatre, and the day after her first appearance all Limerick had heard of the romantic adventure of the poor school and the rescued foundling. The story ran that the heroine of so many dramas had rushed into the flames to save the little fellow, and Miss Watson did not contradict this improved version.

It was, at least, indisputable that she had brought with her to the Royal George Hotel a child whom she meant to adopt, an orphan to whom she would give her name, since he did not possess one, for ‘Foundling Mick’, that by which he called himself, could hardly rank as serious. In the meantime, she called him by all sorts of caressing baby-names, not at all appropriate to the poor child who had already served so rude an apprenticeship to life; but it must be remembered that Miss Watson knew nothing about this, and also that Foundling Mick was a very little fellow.

He was profoundly puzzled by his novel existence; he understood not at all the objects that surrounded him, or the ways of his new friends. He submitted to everything; he was not used to caresses, and he was caressed; or to kisses, and he was kissed; he was not used to fine clothes, and he was well dressed and well shod, moreover, his hair was curled. Besides all this startling novelty, he was fed like a prince, and given dainties in profusion.

The actress’s friends of both sexes flocked to her rooms at the Royal George Hotel. What compliments she received, and how graciously she accepted them! The story of the fire at the poor school assumed such dimensions that it was only a wonder the whole of Galway had not been burned down before the subject was exhausted.

Of course, the child was not forgotten during these visits, and Miss Watson ‘trotted him out’ with rare dexterity. Nevertheless, his memory was at work; he remembered that if he had never before been petted he had at least been loved. And one day he asked suddenly, —

‘Where is Grip?’

‘Who is Grip, my baby?’ said Miss Watson.

He made her understand not only *whom* but *what* Grip was. But for him, Foundling Mick must certainly have perished in the flames; but for Grip, only the corpse of a child would have been found amid the ashes of the school-house. This was very well indeed on the part of Grip, but his heroism — the word was accepted — could not at all diminish Miss Watson’s share in the rescue. Supposing that admirable woman had not providentially appeared on the scene of the conflagration, where would Foundling Mick have been now? Who would have taken him? In what wretched hovel would he have found shelter with the other houseless outcasts, his former companions?

The truth was that nobody had inquired about Grip. Nobody either knew or wanted to know what had become of him. Foundling Mick would forget him, at last he would leave off talking of him. This was a mistake; the image of him who had fed and protected the helpless foundling would never be effaced from his heart.

And yet the life of the adopted child might well have diverted his mind. He accompanied Miss Watson when she went out in her carriage at the fashionable hour, and showed herself in the fair city of Limerick. Never was a more beribboned, a more dressed-up, a more decorative child offered to the public gaze. He had as many costumes as an actor; and as he had replaced Miss Watson's late spiteful little lapdog, no doubt she would have put him into her muff, with his curly head protruding, if he had been of a convenient size. Everybody looked at the little figure seated by the side of the actress, now attired in a Scotch costume, again as a Court page, and sometimes as a sailor-boy after stage fashion, and everybody spoke of him as 'the angel saved from the flames'.

Now and again he was taken to the theatre, where he was a sight to behold, in a velvet tunic and white gloves! — sitting up primly in a box under the stern eye of Eliza, hardly daring to move, and striving to keep awake until the end of the play. He did not understand a great deal that he saw, but he thought it was all real. When Miss Watson appeared in the costume of a queen with a crown and a royal mantle, and afterwards as a 'woman of the people' in cap and apron, or as a poor person in ragged garments, he could not believe that it was she whom he should presently find at the hotel. Hence the profound disturbance of his childish imagination; he knew not what to think. He dreamed of the plays at night, as though the sombre drama were continued; with it were mingled the puppets and the showman, Carker and the other wicked schoolboys, and he would wake in terror, but not daring to call anyone to him.

A few days after her arrival at Limerick Miss Watson had a grand opportunity of exhibiting Foundling Mick at the races, a favourite institution of the place. He was more gorgeously dressed than ever, her affection was more lavishly displayed; the ‘angel’ and his ‘saviour’ enjoyed a complete triumph.

Well, we must accept Miss Watson for what she was; a little extravagant, a litde ‘cracked’, but kind and compassionate when she could be so with the accompaniment of display. The attention she paid to the child was visibly theatrical, the kisses she showered on him were the conventional kisses of the stage, but Foundling Mick was not capable of discerning the difference. And yet he did not feel himself loved as he would fain have been, and perhaps he said to himself unconsciously what Eliza oftentimes repeated to herself, —

‘We shall see how long all this will last — supposing it to last at all.’

CHAPTER 7

ROCKS AHEAD

Six weeks elapsed, and it was not surprising that Foundling Mick became accustomed to his pleasant life. Poverty grows easy, or at least endurable, why not wealth? As yet things were taking their usual course, but was it not probable that Miss Watson would tire of her own exaggeration of sentiment and prodigality of petting? To use a phrase of her own, she had had a ‘craze’ for the child, who served her as a pastime, a plaything, and an advertisement, and although she continued to take excellent care of him, her caresses fell off in number and effusiveness. At first she had the ‘cherub’ brought to her room before she rose; she played with him, acting the part of the young mother, and acting it very well. Then, as this pretty performance curtailed the hours of sleep, an indulgence very dear to Miss Anna Watson, she discontinued it, sending for her live plaything at the luncheon-hour only. She was quite pleased and amused to see him seated on a tall chair which had been bought expressly for him, and eating with a fine appetite.

‘Ha! That’s good, isn’t it?’ she would say. The first time she put the question to him he replied, —

‘Oh, yes, ma’am, it is good, like what we get to eat at the hospital when we are sick.’

Foundling Mick had not been taught manners, as may be supposed — it was not from Hornpipe or Mr Mulvany that he would have learned them — but he was by nature reserved, discreet, and of a gentle and affectionate disposition, very different from the scamps of the poor school. He was, in fact, superior to his condition, just as he was beyond his years in his feelings and his ways. Flighty and futile as she was, Miss Watson had not failed to remark this. She knew nothing of his history beyond what he had been able to tell her of his little life with the puppet-show man. He was really and truly a foundling. Miss Watson longed to prove him what she persisted in declaring his ‘natural distinction’ gave her reason to believe he was, namely, the son of some great lady whose social position had obliged her to desert him after the fashion of the current drama. Thereupon she constructed a whole romance, not remarkable for its novelty, imagining ‘situations’ which might be ‘adapted’ for the stage, and composing in her imagination a fine ‘piece’ with ‘tearful effects’ in it. She would bring out the piece, play the chief part, and make it the most brilliant success of her dramatic career. In it she would be overwhelming, and why not sublime?

Then, having reached these heights of fancy, she would seize the child and strain him to her heart as though she were embracing him on the stage, amid the applause of a crowded audience.

One day, Foundling Mick, who was disturbed by these demonstrative proceedings, said to her, —

‘Miss Anna!’

‘Yes, darling, what do you want?’

‘I want to ask you something.’

‘Ask it, my pet, ask it.’

‘You won’t scold me?’

‘Scold you? No!’

‘Everybody has had a mamma, haven’t they?’

‘Yes, dear; everybody has had a mamma.’

Then why don’t I know mine?’

‘Why? Because — ’ Miss Watson was somewhat embarrassed — ‘because — there are reasons. But a day will come — yes! I believe you will see her.’

‘I have heard you say — isn’t it true? — that she must be a lady?’

‘Yes, to be sure, a beautiful lady.’

‘And why must she be a beautiful lady?’

‘Because your face, your air — ah, what queer questions the darling asks! — Then the situation, the situation in the piece requires her to be a beautiful lady, a great lady. You cannot understand.’

‘No, I do not understand,’ answered Foundling Mick, very sadly, ‘and sometimes I think my mamma must be dead.’

‘Dead? Oh, no. You must not think such a thing. If she were dead, there would be no piece.’

‘What piece?’

Miss Watson gave him no answer beyond a kiss.

‘But if she’s not dead,’ persisted Mick, with the logical tenacity of his age, ‘if she is a beautiful lady, why has she gone away from me?’

‘She must have been forced to do it, my pet, against her will. But, at the end — ’

‘Miss Anna!’

‘Well, what do you want now?’

‘My mamma — is — not you?’

‘I? Your mamma?’

‘Since you — call me your child?’

‘That is what everyone says to little people of your age. Poor little fellow! So he actually thought — No! I am not your mother! If I had been, I would not have deserted you. I would not have doomed you to poverty! Oh, no, no!’

And Miss Watson, who was much moved, ended the conversation by another stage embrace of Mick, who went away downcast.

Poor child! Whether he belonged to a rich or to a poor family, he was no more likely to learn anything about his origin than many another waif picked up at a street-corner.

One day, Miss Watson, who perceived that Foundling Mick’s intelligence was developing itself rather rapidly, conceived the notion that it would soon become necessary to have him taught something. She began dimly to see that she had undertaken a future charge by her impulsive adoption of the child, who would grow up in time and have to be provided for. What was to become of him? He could not be taken in her train from town to town, from theatre to theatre, especially on the foreign tours which she intended to make. She would be obliged to place him at a boarding school. Of course it should be a very good boarding school, first-rate in fact. The only thing certain was that she never would desert him.

One day she said to Eliza, —

‘He grows more and more charming; his nature is so affectionate. He will well repay me for what I shall have done for him. And then, he is so precocious, he likes to know things; indeed, I think he is even too thoughtful for his age. And to fancy that he was my child! Poor little fellow! I do not imagine I am like the mother he once had. She must have been a grave, serious sort of person. We must think well, Eliza.’

‘About what, ma’am?’

‘About what we shall make of him.’

‘Now?’

‘No, not now. Now, we have only to let him grow like a plant. But later on — when he is seven or eight years old. Don’t children usually go to school at that age?’

Eliza was about to suggest that as the little boy was already used to school life — (we know, although Eliza did not, what sort of life he had found it) — the best plan would be to send him back to it, under far different condiuons, of course; but Miss Watson did not give her time to reply.

‘Tell me, Eliza,’ she resumed, ‘don’t you think he ought to have a turn for the stage?’ ‘He?’

‘Yes. Just look at him! He will be very handsome, he has magnificent eyes and a fine carriage. I am sure he would make a first-rate stage lover.’

‘Dear bless us, ma’am; there you are, off again!’

‘Not at all! I am quite in earnest. I will teach him to act. The pupil of Miss Anna Watson. You perceive the effect?’

‘In fifteen years.’

‘In fifteen years, Eliza, if you like; but I tell you again he will be the most charming young man that can be imagined. All the women will be-’

‘Jealous! Ah, yes! I know that old tune. May I tell you what I really think, ma’am?’

‘Yes. Tell me.’

‘Well, then, I think that child will never let you make an actor of him.’

‘And why?’

‘Because he is too serious.’

‘Perhaps that is true,’ said Miss Watson; ‘however, we shall see.’

‘We have plenty of time, ma’am.’

Eliza was right; they had plenty of time, and if Foundling Mick would but manifest an inclination for the stage, all would be well.

In the meantime a splendid idea occurred to Miss Watson, one of those brilliant ideas which were hers alone; it was to bring Foundling Mick out at once at the Limerick theatre.

She must have been mad! will be the natural exclamation of the reader; but she was not mad in the ordinary sense of the word, and under the circumstances. Miss Watson was just then rehearsing a machine-made play of a kind which is not rare on the English stage. It was a drama, or rather a melodrama, entitled *A Mother's Remorse* and it had already drawn copious tears from the eyes of a whole generation of playgoers.

In this work there was, of course, a part for a child, — the child whom the mother could not keep, whom she was forced to desert a year after its birth, whom she finds in a wretched state, and who is the object of a secret enmity, and in danger of being again torn from her, etc. etc. etc.

The part was a 'dumb' one, of course. The little person who was to play it would merely have to allow himself to be embraced, pressed to the maternal bosom, wept over and pulled from one side to the other, without uttering a word.

Evidently Foundling Mick was cut out for the part. He was of the right age and size, he still had a pale face and eyes that were used to weeping. What an effect he would produce when he should 'come on', with his mother by adoption! With what force and fire would Miss Watson carry off Act 3 Scene 5, the great scene, in which she defends her son at the moment when he is about to be torn from her arms. Would not the imaginary situation be doubled in intensity by the real situation? Would not the cries of the persecuted mother be genuinely inspired cries, and her tears real tears? Here was a sure success for Miss Watson, perhaps the most brilliant of her dramatic career.

She set to work at once, and Foundling Mick was taken to the last rehearsals.

During the first he was much astonished by everything that he saw and heard. Miss Watson called him 'my child', in speaking her lines, but it seemed to him that she did not press him very closely to her breast, and that she did not cry over him at all. In truth, it is quite unnecessary to weep at rehearsals. Tears ought to be stricdy reserved for the public.

The little boy was a good deal disturbed. The ‘behind the scenes’ aspect of the place, the gloom and vagueness overhead, the crowd of objects which he could not make out, the spacious, empty house, the grey light filtered through the distant windows of the far-off corridors, made him uneasy. Nevertheless, Harry — he was Harry in the piece — did what was required of him, and Miss Watson confidently foretold a great success for him, and for herself.

Miss Watson’s confidence was not shared by the company generally. Among her fellow actors and actresses some were envious of her, and she also gave a good deal of offence by her somewhat aggressive personality, and her incessant parade of her ‘leading’ position. And now she made herself more than usually obnoxious, by asserting, with her customary exaggeration, that under *her* training this child would one day excel Kean, Macready, and every leading actor on the modern stage.

This was, really, going a good deal too far.

At last the great day arrived. It was Thursday, the 19th of October. Needless to say that Miss Watson was in a state of excusable nervous excitement. Now she would lay hold of’Harry’ and kiss him repeatedly, with a good deal of shaking thrown in, again he would irritate her by his mere presence, she would send him away, and the child understood nothing at all about the matter.

A good ‘house’ might fairly have been expected, but as a matter of fact the doors of the theatre were besieged, so widely was the story of the rescued foundling known, and so attractive was the announcement of —

‘A MOTHER’S REMORSE.’

A thrilling drama by the celebrated John Smith.

The Duchess of Kendal — Miss Anna Watson. Harry —

‘Foundling Mick’, aged five years and a half.

Our little lad would have been proud had he stopped before the big poster. He knew how to read, and there was his own name — such as it was — in great red letters on a white ground.

Unfortunately, his pride was very soon hurt; real trouble was awaiting him in Miss Anna Watson’s dressing room.

Until that evening he had not rehearsed in costume, and indeed it would hardly have been worthwhile. He had come to the theatre in his ordinary handsome attire. But now, in the dressing room where the rich toilet of the Duchess of Kendal was performed, lo! here was Eliza proceeding to dress him in a whole suit of shabby clothes. Mere rags were these, clean underneath it is true, but on the outside soiled, torn, and patched. In the thrilling drama, Harry is a deserted child whom his mother finds in his wretched livery of poverty; his mother, a duchess, a beautiful lady in silk, velvet and lace.

At sight of these garments, the idea occurred to Foundling Mick that he was about to be sent back to the Galway school.

‘Miss Anna! Miss Anna!’ he cried.

‘What’s the matter?’ she answered.

‘Don’t send me back! Oh, don’t send me back!’

‘Send you back? What for?’

‘These ugly clothes — ’

‘Why — he actually imagines — ’

‘No, no, you little fool! Keep still,’ said Eliza, giving him a by no means gentle shake.

‘Ah, the darling!’ exclaimed Miss Watson, in a fit of tenderness, as she daintily arched her eyebrows by the aid of a camel’s-hair brush.

‘The dear angel — if they only knew that in front!’

And then she put some rouge on her cheeks.

‘But it shall be known, Eliza. It shall be in the papers tomorrow. He actually thought — ’

She paused, and passed the ‘white’ puff over her shapely shoulder.

‘No, no, you extraordinary little darling! Those ugly things are only for fun.’

‘For fun, Miss Anna?’

‘Yes, and you must not cry.’

She would have cried herself, had she not been afraid of damaging her artificial complexion.

Eliza shook her head, and obstinately repeated, —

‘You see, ma’am, that we shall never make an actor of him.’

Meanwhile, Foundling Mick, in growing trouble, with a beating heart and tearful eyes, had his fine clothes taken off, and was arrayed in ‘Harry’s’ tatters. Then it came into Miss Watson’s head to console him with the gift of a new sovereign. The coin should be his ‘handsel’ she said, and in fact it did console Mick, who took the piece of gold with evident satisfaction and pushed it well down into his pocket after he had minutely inspected it.

This done, Miss Watson gave him a last kiss and went down to the green-room, having charged Eliza to keep Mick in the dressing room, as he had not to ‘go on’ until the third act The first act went off well. Miss Watson was warmly applauded, and she deserved it. She played with great fire and spirit, and created a strong impression upon the audience.

After the first act the Duchess of Kendal returned to her dressing room, and, to the great surprise of’Harry’, she took off her grand dress of silk and velvet, and assumed the plain attire of a servant. It is unnecessary to explain the dramatic complications which made this transformation imperative. Foundling Mick contemplated the velvet woman who turned into a woman of serge, with great uneasiness, and a sense of confusion, as though some fairy had wrought the fantastic transformation before his eyes.

When the call-boy’s stentorian voice summoned Miss Watson, it made Mick start. The ‘servant’ made him a sign with her hand, saying, —

‘Wait, my little fellow, it will be your turn soon.’ Then she disappeared for the second time.

In the second act the servant had a success equal to that of the duchess in the first, and the act-drop descended amid loud applause.

Clearly, no opportunity of being disagreeable was open to the good friends of Miss Watson and their allies in the ‘house’.

On reaching her dressing room she threw herself on a sofa, a litde tired, although she had reserved her great dramatic effort for the third act.

Once more she changes her costume. This time she is not a servant, but a lady, a lady in mourning, not so young as formerly, for five years have elapsed between the second act and the third.

Foundling Mick sat still in a corner of the room, with wide open, wondering eyes, not venturing to move or speak. Miss Watson paid no attention to him until she was completely dressed. Then she said, —

‘Now, child, it’s going to be all for you.’

‘For me, Miss Anna?’

‘And remember that your name is Harry.’

‘Harry? Yes!’

‘Eliza, you must keep reminding him that his name is Harry, until you leave him with the stage-manager close to the door.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘And take care he does not miss his entrance.’ No, he should not miss it, even if she had to help him with a good slap.

‘You know,’ added Miss Watson, shaking her finger at the child, ‘your sovereign might be taken from you if you are not good. So beware the fine!’

‘And prison too!’ added Eliza, making a face at him which he knew well.

‘Harry’ felt for his sovereign at the bottom of his pocket, and resolved that it should not be taken from him.

The moment had come. Eliza took Harry by the hand and led him downstairs to the back of the stage. He was dazzled by the flaring gas-jets, and the great circles of light overhead, and confused and frightened by the coming and going of actors, supers, and scene-shifters, all of whom looked at him and laughed.

No wonder! He was a shameful object in those ragged clothes of a beggar boy!

The bell rang, and ‘Harry’ started at the sound.

The curtain rose, and the Duchess of Kendal was ‘discovered’, alone, in a cottage interior, soliloquising. Presently the door at the back would open, a child would come in, advance towards her, and hold out his hand to beg, and that child would be hers.

p It must be noted here, that at the rehearsals Foundling Mick had been much annoyed by finding himself reduced to the necessity of asking alms. We remember his repugnance on a former and real occasion. Miss Watson had told him that it was ‘not in earnest’, but still he did not like it at all. In his innocent ignorance, he took things seriously, and ended by believing he was really the unfortunate little Harry.

While waiting for his entrance — the stage-manager holding his little hand — the child had been peeping through the doorway. He regarded with bewilderment the vast space filled with people, the clusters of lights over the boxes, the enormous lustre like a fire-balloon suspended in the air. It was all so different from what he had seen when he had sat in the front of a box, looking on at a play.

‘Attention, Harry!’ said the stage-manager.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You know what you have to do. Go straight before you to your mamma, and take care you don’t fall.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And hold your hand out well.’

‘Yes, sir, like that.’

And he showed a shut hand.

‘No, you dunce! That’s a fist! Stretch out an open hand; you are begging.’

‘Yes, sir,’

‘And, above all, do not say one single word — remember, not one.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The cottage door opened, and the stage-manager pushed ‘Harry’ in at the cue.

Foundling Mick had made his *debut* in the dramatic profession! Ah, how loudly his heart beat!

A murmur ran all round the house, a touching murmur of sympathy, while Harry, with faltering steps, downcast eyes and outstretched trembling hand, advanced towards the lady in mourning. It was easy to see that he had been accustomed to wear rags, and was not ill at ease in his tattered garments.

Suddenly the duchess rises, she looks around, she throws herself back, then she opens her arms.

What a cry she utters! One of those traditional cries which tear the chest.

‘It is he! It is he! I recognise him! It is Harry! It is my son!’

And she catches him to her heart, she covers him with kisses, he quietly submits. She weeps, real tears this time, and cries, —

‘My child, it is my child — this wretched creature, who begs from me!’

Poor Harry is stirred up by this, and forgets that he has been ordered not to speak.

‘Your child, ma’am?’ he says.

‘Hush! hold your tongue!’ mutters Miss Watson, under her breath.

Then she continues: ‘Heaven took him from me to punish me, and today brings him back to me.’

She devours Harry with kisses, she bathes him with tears, her words are interrupted by sobs.

Never, never had Foundling Mick been so fondly caressed, never had he felt himself so maternally loved!

The duchess rises, as though a sound from the outside had starded her.

‘Harry!’ she cries, you will not leave me!’

‘No, Miss Anna!’

‘Hold your tongue! Hold your tongue!’ she whispers, at the risk of being heard by the audience.

The cottage door is pushed open, and two men appear upon the threshold.

One is the husband of the lady in mourning, the other is a police officer.

‘Seize that child! He belongs to me!’

‘No, he is not your son!’ replies the duchess, drawing Harry away.

‘You are not my father!’ exclaims Foundling Mick.

Miss Watson’s fingers nip his arm so sharply that he can hardly restrain a cry. After all, what he has said fits into the piece; there is no harm done.

Now it is a mother who holds him with fierce tenacity. None shall tear him from her. The lioness is defending her cub.

And in fact the cub, who takes the scene seriously, is very well able to resist. The duke lays hold of him, but he struggles manfully, escapes from his Grace, and, running to the duchess, he cries, —

‘Ah, Miss Anna, why did you say you were not my mamma?’

‘Will you hold your tongue, you little wretch? Will you be silent?’ she whispers, while the duke and the police officer are manifestly disconcerted by these unexpected ‘lines’.

‘Yes, yes,’ says Harry, you are mamma. I told you so, Miss Anna, my real mamma!’

The audience begin to see that all this is ‘not in the piece’. Whispers and jests go round. Some of the spectators applaud ironically. In truth, they ought to weep, for there is pathos in that improvised ‘situation’, a drama within the play upon the stage.

Nonetheless the piece was ruined! If for any reason laughter be heard where tears ought to be seen, the play and the players are done for.

Miss Watson keenly felt all the absurdity of the position. Some cutting remarks reached her from the actors standing about at the sides.

Bewildered and overcome, she was filled with sudden fury. She would gladly have killed the little wretch who had done the mischief; but her strength failed her, she fell on the stage in a dead faint, and the green curtain was lowered amid the laughter of the entire audience.

That same night, Miss Watson left the town with Eliza Corbett. She refused to give the performances announced for the week, preferring to pay forfeit. Never again would she appear at the Theatre Royal, Limerick.

As for Foundling Mick, she did not trouble herself about him. She left him there as she might have left any object that had ceased to please and become odious in her sight. There is no affection that can stand before injured self-love.

Foundling Mick had been pushed aside in the confusion, and left alone, understanding not at all what had happened, but feeling that he had been somehow the cause of a misfortune. He got out of the theatre unperceived by anybody, and roamed about the streets of Limerick until at length he found himself in a churchyard, and close to a huge building which was very dark at the side on which the moonlight did not fall. That building was St Mary's Church, and the weary child crouched down upon a flat gravestone in the shadow, trembling at the slightest sound, and wondering whether that wicked man the Duke of Kendal was searching for him, to take him away to a place where 'wild beasts' were. And there was no Miss Anna to defend him! He should see his mamma no more.

Shortly after it was light in the morning Foundling Mick heard a voice calling to him.

A man and a woman were standing near him. In crossing the road they had perceived the child, and paused to ascertain what he was doing there. The kindly couple were on their way to the coach-office, intending to take places in the public conveyance which plied between Limerick and the southern part of the county.

'What are you doing there, my boy?' asked the farmer.

Foundling Mick answered by sobs only.

'Come, tell me! What are you doing there?' said the farmer's wife.

Foundling Mick did not speak.

‘Where’s your father?’ she continued.

‘I have no father,’ stammered the child.

‘And your mother?’

‘I have not got one any more.’ And he stretched his arms towards the farmer’s wife.

‘He is a deserted child,’ said the man.

If Foundling Mick had been dressed in his fine clothes, the farmer would have inferred that he was a strayed child, and taken steps to restore him to his people; but in ‘Harry’s’ costume, the poor little fellow could only be taken for one of those unfortunates whom ‘nobody owns’.

‘Come along, then,’ said the farmer, taking the child by the hand, and then placing him in the woman’s arms.

‘A little mite like that won’t make much difference at the farm, will he, Mary?’

‘No, indeed, Murtagh,’ replied the good woman with hearty assent, and she instantly dried Mick’s tears with motherly kisses.

CHAPTER 8

KIRWAN’S FARM

The experiences of Foundling Mick in Ulster and Connaught had not been very pleasant, as we have seen. He was now destined to an entirely new scene of existence, for his new-found benefactors conveyed him to the County Kerry, at the south-west of Ireland. This time he had fallen into good hands; would he be allowed to remain in them?

Kirwan’s Farm lies within twelve miles of the town of Tralee, and in a district of the country which is almost exclusively held by ‘foreigners’ that is to say, by landlords who are not Irish, but English and Scotch men. ‘Ireland for the Irish’ has little meaning in any part of the ‘distressful country’, in Kerry it is a vain saying indeed. Nor were these stranger landlords ever resident; they expended the large sums which their agents extracted from the tenant-farmers in the English capital, and in foreign places of resort, on their families and their pleasures, and furnished striking examples of the absenteeism which is the great grievance of Ireland, leaving the people whose labour produced their wealth to the tender mercies of the agent or ‘middleman’ who is her curse.

Kirwan’s Farm, with several others, was the property of the Earl of C — , a Scottish peer, who had not even once taken the trouble to visit the estate since it had come into his possession, and his lordship’s tenantry were metaphorically ground into fine dust by Mr John Eldon, his agent.

Kirwan’s Farm was a small place, only 100 acres in extent, and the land was stiff and difficult of cultivation. It was by severe toil alone that the farmer forced the soil to yield sufficient produce to pay the heavy rent of one pound an acre.

There are good landlords in Ireland, no doubt, men with consciences, who make themselves acquainted with the fellow men who earn the gold of which the toiler’s share is so small; but these good landlords form a meagre minority, and for the most part the people are in the hands of persons who, as a class — in their case also exceptions must be admitted — are hard and pitiless.

Murtagh MacCarthy, the tenant of Kirwan’s Farm, was one of the best, and most hardworking of the farmers on Lord C — ’s estate. He was a naturally intelligent man, he had received a good education for his station in life, he thoroughly understood the business of agriculture, and he had managed, being well seconded by his stricdy brought-up sons, to lay by a little money, notwithstanding the heavy charges that fall upon the budget of an Irish peasant. His wife, whose name was Mary, was an excellent housewife, and as active at 50 as she had been at 20 years of age. She was a dexterous spinner, and the hum of her spinning wheel might be heard in the cottage sitting room all through the winter months.

The MacCarthy family consisted, first and foremost in every sense, of the farmer’s mother, a venerable woman of 75, whose husband had formerly farmed the land. ‘Granny had no other occupation now than spinning, in her daughter-in-law’s company, and no other desire than to be of as little cost as possible to her children.

The eldest son, Murdoch, was 27, and still better educated than his father. He was deeply interested in the questions which always have interested and will ever continue to interest Ireland, and his parents felt considerable anxiety at times lest he should get into some trouble by his devotion to the party of Home Rule. Murdoch, who was a strong, good-looking young man of a rather silent and reserved disposition, had recently married the daughter of a neighbouring farmer. His young wife was a beautiful woman, such as may frequently be seen among persons of her class in Ireland. Her features were regular, her face was singularly proud and calm, her complexion was like milk and roses, her eyes were of the deepest blue, with long, black lashes, and her ‘ravens-wing’ hair lay in shining masses upon her well-formed head. Her carriage was noble and distinguished, and she walked with the free, unembarrassed tread which has come down with the Spanish strain in them to the women of many families in the south of Ireland. Kitty MacCarthy loved her husband devoudy, after the fashion of her countrywomen, and Murdoch, albeit not given much to smiling, would smile when he turned his dark, serious eyes on her. Kitty had a salutary influence over her husband, and she employed it by restraining him from unwise action each time that the emissaries of political agitation came into the district, to proclaim that a good understanding between landlord and tenant was impossible.

Murdoch attended the meetings, and Kitty’s heart sank when she saw him setting out for Tralee, or some small town in the nearer neighbourhood. On these occasions he would speak with the eloquence so often found among the better educated of his class, and on his return, Kitty could read the thoughts by which he was pervaded, in his troubled face. To her exhortation to patience and resignation, most gently urged, he would reply: ‘Patience — when time is passing, and nothing is done! By dint of patience and resignation, Kitty, people come to putting up with everything, to losing all sense of their rights, and putting their necks under the yoke. That I will never do! Never!’

MacCarthy had two other sons, Patrick and Peter, aged respectively 25 and 19 years. Patrick, or Pat, as he was more generally called, was a sailor on board of a Liverpool trading vessel. Peter, like Murdoch, had never quitted the farm, and the two rendered their father most valuable assistance. A perfectly good understanding existed between the brothers, although they differed widely in disposition and temperament. Peter was a jovial, happy-minded fellow, full of fun and frolic, the life and soul of the house, and his quick, though sunny temper contrasted with the more sombre nature of his brother Murdoch.

Such was the family into whose bosom Foundling Mick was about to be taken. What a difference between Kirwan’s Farm and the poor school in Galway! Would not the contrast strike the child’s precocious imagination forcibly? No doubt it would. It is true that our hero had passed a few weeks in bodily comfort with the capricious Miss Watson, but he had not enjoyed real affection; her theatrical caresses had brought him no conviction that he was loved, they were as uncertain, fugitive, and ephemeral as the stage-scenes themselves.

The dwelling-house of the MacCarthys was small; it consisted of two ‘floors’ only. The ground floor consisted of a large room which was at once kitchen and family sitting-room, and three sleeping-rooms, appropriated respectively to ‘Granny’, to MacCarthy and his wife, and to their son and daughter-in-law. Above, was a spacious garret, and a bedroom, occupied by Peter, and shared by Pat in the intervals of his voyages.

On one side of the house were the farm buildings, heavily thatched, and much in need both of substantial and ornamental repair. Capacious pigsties, a duck-pond, a big manure-heap, a haggard with two large haystacks, well protected from weather, a poultry-yard, and a fruit and vegetable garden, divided by a hedge from the farm land proper, formed the chief points in the aspect of Kirwan’s Farm, which was anything but picturesque. Of course the potato was cultivated on a large scale, also turnips and huge cabbages.

The potato, as everybody knows, is the basis of food in Ireland, especially in those parts of the island where the land is poor and hard to cultivate. We may well ask on what the rural population lived before Parmentier had made known his precious edible tuber? It may be that he rendered the cultivator imprudent by accustoming him to count upon that product, but at least it saved him from famine, unless all the chances were against him.

Murtagh MacCarthy owned four cart and plough horses and a strong, well-fed ass, at no loss for thistles; in that respect at least Kirwan's farm was productive. Half-a-dozen milch cows, about a hundred sheep, a few goats, and a dozen pigs, kept chiefly for consumption by the family, as MacCarthy did not care to enter upon the bacon business, complete the list of the livestock, without reckoning the noisy tenants of the poultry-yard.

Fowls, geese, ducks and eggs found a ready sale at the Tralee market, but turkeys and pigeons were not reared on Kirwan's farm. These are but rarely found in the poultry-farms in Ireland. A Scotch collie, kept as a sheepdog, was a great pet at the farm. No sporting-dog was to be seen there. Sport is a pleasure for the landlords and their agents exclusively.

Kirwan's farm was not the worst on the estate of the Earl of C — , but it was of only middling quality. Indeed, the whole county of Kerry, with its superb scenery in places, its renowned lakes of Killarney, and its beautiful expanses of richly-timbered country, is a stern land to the farmer, and he who has to extract his livelihood from it after the terrible exactions of the lords of the soil have been satisfied must be prepared to work hard, and to live frugally.

CHAPTER 9

FOUNDLING MICK’S INSTALLATION

On the 20th of October, at about three o’clock in the afternoon, a joyful stir was manifest about the farmhouse.

‘Here they come!’ cried Kitty and Peter, who espied Murtagh and Mary MacCarthy from the turn of the road.

The farmer and his wife had left Limerick by that primitive vehicle known as ‘the long car’, and as they had 30 miles to travel and the weather was cold, they were glad to arrive at their journey’s end, to see and smell the cheerful turf fire which had been maintained at the point of perfection to greet them. The ‘long car’ having set down its passengers at the corner, went on its way to Tralee.

While the four were exchanging greetings in the porch, Murdoch came in from the back of the house.

‘You have done well, father?’ asked Kitty, after she had embraced her mother-in-law, ‘Did you get the cabbage-plants in Limerick market?’ said Murdoch.

‘Yes. They will be sent to us tomorrow.’

‘And the turnip-seed?’

‘Yes, of the best sort.’

‘That’s right, father.’

‘And a new kind of grain, Murdoch; a good sort too, I think. Look at it.

Murdoch and his brother stared at the child, half-hidden in Mary’s skirts, to which he was clinging.

‘Here’s a fine boy,’ Murtagh went on, jocosely ‘while we’re waiting for Kitty’s.’

‘The little fellow is frozen,’ said Kitty.

‘I had him well wrapped up in the shawl,’ replied Mary, ‘but the drive was cold.’

‘Put him before the fire and warm him well,’ said MacCarthy, ‘and the mother and I’ll go see Granny.’

Kitty took charge of Foundling Mick and in a short time the whole family was assembled in the common sitting room where Granny’s old armchair with cushions occupied the warmest corner of the fireplace.

The child was presented to her. She took him in her arms and set him on her knees. He made no resistance, but turned his eyes solemnly first upon one then upon another of the little group. He did not understand what was going on. Today was not like yesterday. Was this a son of dream? He saw kind faces, young and old, around him. Since his waking he had heard none but kind words. He had been amused by the drive in the car which carried him quickly through the country, and the sweet morning air, laden with the scent of shrubs and flowers, expanded his chest. He had been given a good meal before the car started, and Mary MacCarthy had supplemented it with biscuits on the way, while he told her all he knew how to tell of his life — his existence in the poor school, the kindness of Grip, whose name recurred frequently in the narrative, then Miss Anna, who had called him her son and who was not his mamma; a gentleman in a passion, who was called ‘the duke’, and wanted to take him away — he could not remember the duke’s name — lastly, his being forsaken, and how he had wandered all alone into the churchyard at Limerick. Mr and Mrs MacCarthy did not make much out of his story beyond the facts that he had neither parents nor friends, and was a deserted child whom Providence had confided to their care.

Granny, who was much moved, kissed the poor little waif, and he was caressed by all in turn.

‘And what is his name?’ asked Granny.

‘He can tell us of no other name than Foundling Mick,’ answered Mary.

‘He does not want any other,’ said Murtagh; ‘and we will continue to call him by the name he knows.’

Such was the welcome accorded to our hero on his arrival at the farm. The old clothes in which he had been dressed for the part of ‘Harry’ were taken off, and clean, warm garments were substituted for them. These were not new, indeed they were the last that Pat had worn at little Mick’s age, and had been carefully preserved by his loving mother. Then he had his supper at the table of these good people, seated in a high chair too, and all the time he wondered whether everything were not going once more to vanish!

What a feast that homely supper was, where none but pleasant faces were seen around the table, except, perhaps, that of the elder brother, always serious, even sad. And yet, all of a sudden Foundling Mick’s eyes were suffused, and tears ran down his cheeks.

‘What ails you, Mick?’ asked Kitty.

‘You mustn’t cry, my child,’ said Granny. ‘We will all be good to you here.’

‘And I’ll make playthings for you,’ said Peter.

‘Come, come,’ said Murtagh, good-humouredly, ‘that’s all very well for once, my boy, but you must know that nobody’s let to cry here.’

‘I won’t cry any more, sir,’ said Foundling Mick, and he drew closer to Granny’s side.

Murtagh and Mary were tired; besides, bedtime came early at the farm, where all the family rose with the sun.

‘Where’s the child to sleep?’ asked the farmer.

‘In my room, and I will give him the half of my bed,’ said Peter.

‘No, no,’ said Granny; ‘make a bed for him near mine; he will not disturb me, and I’ll like to see him sleeping.’

No wish of Granny’s was ever contested. A bed was arranged for the little waif alongside of hers, and he was soon fast asleep, peaceful and happy in the shelter which Providence had provided for him.

The cold season had come, harvest time was over. There was not much to be done on the land, but no one at the farm led an idle life, as Foundling Mick soon found out. From the first, the little fellow tried to make himself useful. Early in the morning he went to the farmyard, thinking he might find something to do. Why not? At the end of the year he would be six years old, and at six a little chap can keep geese, cows, even sheep, with the aid of a good dog.

Then, after having had a good look round, he went into the house at breakfast-time, and being seated in front of a plate of stirabout and a mug of milk, he gravely requested to be allowed ‘to begin’.

‘Very well, my boy,’ replied Murtagh; ‘you want to work, and you are right. Everybody ought to learn to earn a living.’

‘And I will, sir.’

‘He’s very young,’ said Granny.

‘Never mind that, ma’am,’ said Mick, firmly.

‘Call me Granny, child, like the rest.’

‘I will. Never mind about my youngness, Granny. I shall be so glad to work — ’

‘And you shall work,’ said Murtagh, wondering at the sense and intelligence of the child, who had known only the most wretched kind of existence.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I will teach you to take care of the horses,’ said Murdoch, ‘and to ride them if you are not afraid.’

‘I’d like that.’

‘And I’ll teach you to mind the cows,’ said Mary, ‘and to milk them, if you are not afraid of their horns.’

‘I’d like that well, ma’am.’

‘And I’ll show you how to mind the sheep in the fields,’ said Patrick.

‘That’ll be grand,’ said Micky, with beaming eyes.

‘Can you read?’ asked the farmer.

‘A little, and write large hand.’

‘And reckon?’

‘Oh, yes! up to a hundred, sir.’

‘Good!’ said Kitty, with a smile. ‘I’ll teach you to reckon up to a thousand, and write small hand.’

‘I’ll like that, ma’am.’

He was quite serious about it all. To be the little servant of the farm was the height of his ambition.

Murtagh laughed heartily.

‘You’re going to be a broth of a boy, entirely, Micky,’ said he. ‘Horses, cows, sheep, if you mind all those there will be nothing left for us to do. Tell me, now, how much wages will you ask?’

‘Wages?’

‘Yes, wages. You’re not going to work for nothing, I suppose.’

‘Oh, no, sir.’

‘What!’ exclaimed Mary; ‘he is to be fed, lodged, and clothed, and he wants to be paid as well?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

They looked at the child, seemingly a little shocked.

Murdoch, observing him attentively, said, —

‘Let him tell us what he means.’

‘Yes,’ said Granny; ‘tell us what you wish to have. Is it money?’

Foundling Mick shook his head.

‘Come! Is it five shillings a day?’ asked Kitty.

‘Oh! Ma’am!’

‘A month?’ said Mary.

‘A year, perhaps,’ suggested Peter, laughing. ‘Five shillings a year.’

‘Well, now, what is it you do want?’ inquired Murdoch, gravely. ‘I see, you have the idea of earning your living, as we all have. However little you get, it will teach you to count. What do you want? A penny a day?’

‘No, Mr Murdoch.’

‘Then tell us.’

‘Well, Mr MacCarthy, I want you to give me a little stone every evening.’

‘A little stone?’ cried Peter. ‘Is it with little stones you’ll make your fortune?’

‘No; but I would like the master would give them to me all the same, and afterwards, when I’ll be big, if you have always been pleased with me — ’

‘I see, I see,’ said MacCarthy; ‘we’ll change your little stones into shillings and pence.’

Everybody complimented Foundling Mick on his excellent idea, and that very evening MacCarthy gave him a little pebble from the river’s bed, where they lay in millions. Micky deposited it carefully in an old delft jug which Granny gave him to serve the purpose of a money-box.

‘A queer child!’ observed Murdoch to his father.

Yes, he was a queer child, and his good disposition had not been spoiled by either the ill-treatment of Hornpipe, or the evil communications of the poor school. Day by day, as time went on, the family at the farm found out more and more good in the foundling, who was not wanting even in that lightness of heart which lies at the bottom of the national Irish temperament, and exists in the poorest sons and daughters of poor Ireland. He was of a thoughtful and inquiring turn of mind; he sought into ‘the whys and wherefores’ of things, questioned everybody intelligently concerning the particular business of each, and delighted in gaining knowledge. His eyes were ferrets — nothing could escape them. He never let anything be lost or mislaid, were it of ever so little value; he would pick up a pin or a shilling with equal care. He took great care of his clothes, and was exceedingly orderly in all his ways, keeping everything that belonged to him, and the simple articles of his toilet, neatly arranged. Order was innate in him. He replied politely when he was addressed, and did not hesitate to press for farther explanation when he had not fully understood the answers made to his questions. It was plain that his progress in writing would be rapid, and he learned figures with ease. More than by these evidences of capacity, Murdoch was surprised and interested by the reasoning power which seemed to direct all the little boy's actions. Before long he was thoroughly instructed in the Catholic religion, so deeply rooted in the hearts of the Irish nation. This he owed chiefly to the zealous care of Granny.

The winter came, very hard and cruel. The farmhouse and the outbuildings were woefully out of repair, but John Eldon, the agent, would do nothing in that matter; to make and keep them habitable was for the overtaxed farmer alone, and he and his sons worked at the task almost incessantly.

During this time the women were variously employed; Granny spinning at the fireside, Mary and Kitty attending to the cows and the poultry, helped to the best of his ability by Foundling Mick. He kept accurate account of everything relating to the house and the farm. He was too young to be allowed to look after the horses, and so he formed a close friendship with the ass, an excellent, willing and indefatigable animal, who returned his affection in dumb but eloquent fashion.

He wished his donkey to be as clean as himself, and this pleased Mary greatly. He would have had the pigs equally natty, but in that direction he was forced to confine his efforts to very elementary principles. After he had reckoned the sheep over and over again he entered the total of their numbers in an old pocketbook which had been presented to him by Kitty, and his taste for figures and methodical account-keeping developed gradually, until he might have done credit to the lessons of Mr Mulvany, had he ever received any.

One day, Mrs MacCarthy brought a dozen eggs out of the place where they were stored for winter consumption, into the kitchen.

‘Not those, not those, ma’am!’ cried Foundling Mick.

‘And why, Micky?’

‘Because they’re not in rotation.’

‘What rotation? Aren’t all the eggs alike?’

‘Of course not, ma’am. You have taken the forty-eighth; it’s the thirty-seventh you ought to have begun with. Look!’

Mary looked, and found on every shell a number written in ink by Micky. She ought to have taken the eggs according to their numbering — from 37 to 48 and not from 48 to 59. She immediately rectified her mistake, and praised the little fellow for his good sense.

When Mrs MacCarthy told the story at dinner, Murdoch said, —

‘It is to be hoped, Micky, you have reckoned the hens and chickens in the hen-house?’

‘Certainly.’ He took out his pocketbook. ‘There are 43 hens and 69 chickens.’

Thereupon Peter remarked, —

‘You ought to reckon the grains of wheat in every sack — ’

‘Don’t joke him, boys,’ said MacCarthy. ‘If he’s orderly in little things, he’ll be the same in big things, and in life.’ Then addressing the little boy, he said, —

‘And your pebbles, the little stones I give you every evening — ’

‘I put them away in my jug, sir. I have 57, already.’

He had been 57 days at Kirwan’s Farm.

‘Ha!’ said Granny, ‘that makes fifty-seven pence at a penny a pebble.’

‘What a lot of cakes you can buy for all that,’ said Peter.

‘Cakes, Peter? No, no. Copybooks. That’s what I want to buy.’

The year was drawing to a close, and the weather was very cold. This was no novelty to Foundling Mick, he had seen harder winters than this one in Galway. At that miserable period of his life he had run barefoot in the snow, and the cold wind had penetrated his wretched clothing. And when he returned to the poor school, there was no place for the little waif by the fireside. How well off was Foundling Mick now! How pleasant it was to live with people who loved him! It seemed to him that their affection warmed him more thoroughly than the clothes which kept him from the wind, the wholesome food he ate, and the cheerful fire that burned upon the hearth. And it was better still, now that he was beginning to make himself useful, to feel that kind hearts were all around him. He was truly one of the family. He had a grandmother, a mother, brothers, kinsmen, and it would be among them, never leaving them, that his life should be passed. There he should earn his livelihood, as Murdoch had said to him one day. To do this, was his constant thought and desire.

Christmas came, a great event for Foundling Mick, who was, indeed, not ignorant of the meaning of the season, but had never shared in the ‘keeping’ of the day as a family festival. Great was his pleasure when his particular friend, Peter, presented him with a many-bladed knife as his first ‘Christmas-box’, and he ate plum pudding for the first time in his life.

CHAPTER 10

WHAT HAPPENED IN DONEGAL

Murtagh MacCarthy had made some attempts to discover the birthplace and parentage of his adopted child. The only clue he possessed was Mick’s vague recollection that he had lived with an old woman and two little girls in a village in Donegal, and on following this up he ascertained that a child, eighteen months old, had been found on a doorstep in a small town, taken to the workhouse, and afterwards placed with a woman of the class now known as baby-farmers, in the outskirts of the town, which we shall denote by the letter R — and which was chiefly supported by the manufacture of linen. We are in a position to supplement the scanty information obtained by the farmer, and can give our readers a brief sketch of the history of the poor deserted infant, between the period of his being found by a policeman at R — , and his falling into the cruel hands of Hornpipe.

The woman to whose tender mercies the child was committed, at a time when there was much less care bestowed on such arrangements, and when inspection was very rare and superficial, if indeed it was exercised at all, was a bad specimen of a bad class. Her name was Murphy, she passed for a widow, but she was not a native of the place, and her previous history was unknown. Her neighbours described her as ‘a hard sort of a woman’, and her features justified the definition. She was an ill-looking hag, between 40 and 50, tall, thin, and big-boned; her small eyes were half-hidden under bristling red eyebrows; her big hands had fingers like claws, her nose resembled the beak of a bird of prey, and she invariably exhaled an odour of whiskey.

With this female dragon the poor little workhouse waif was destined to remain until he should be five or six years old, when he would be taken back to the prison of the poor, until he might be put out in the world in some self-supporting way. We have seen that the official programme was not carried out in the case of Foundling Mick; a simple incident prevented its fulfilment.

Mrs Murphy was in no dread of the visits of inspectors; no such impertinent intruders had darkened her door since she had added the profession of’caretaker’ to the industry by which she had previously lived, that of flax spinning. Neither had she to fear the interference of her neighbours on behalf of her unhappy ‘boarders’; the district was very poor, and its inhabitants were immersed in and hardened by their own struggle for a bare existence. The hag had two little girls in her charge when Foundling Mick was sent to her. One of these children was four, the other was six years old. We need not dwell on the former, she was soon to die; the latter, who was called Cissy, was a pretty, fair-haired child, with large blue eyes, soft and intelligent, but already dimmed by tears, while her features were pinched, her chest was hollow, and her limbs were emaciated. To such a condition had she been reduced by ill-treatment. Cissy was a gentle, patient, resigned little creature; she accepted the life to which she was condemned without a notion that it might have been otherwise. Where, indeed, could she have learned that children existed who were petted by their mothers, cherished with care and caresses, to whom good clothes, good food, and good kisses were never denied? Assuredly not at the workhouse, where children like herself were treated no better than the young of the beasts of the field.

Foundling Mick — this name had been given him in the workhouse nursery, and it had stuck to him — the youngest of the ‘boarders’, was a dark-complexioned child, with bright eyes which promised intelligence and energy some day, if death did not close them prematurely, a constitution which would become robust if the bad air of the hag’s hovel and insufficient food did not stunt his growth. The boy possessed strong vitality, and no ordinary endurance. He was always hungry, and weighed half what he ought to have weighed at his age. He was half-naked and barefooted, but he stood stoutly on his chilblained feet, and his legs were straight and sturdy.

A word will suffice in the case of the younger of the two little girls. She was consumed by a slow fever; her life was ebbing away like water out of a cracked jar. She ought to have had medicines, but medicines cost money; she ought to have been visited by a doctor, but a doctor has to be paid. So, the ‘hard sort of a woman’ did not go out of her way to provide either for her little boarder. After all, when the child should be dead, the workhouse would send her another; she would be no loser by the event.

Whiskey and porter cost money even in the little town of R — , and the drinking propensities of Mrs Murphy laid a heavy tax on the pitiful sum which was paid to her for the maintenance of the children. At that moment only a few shillings of the pittance remained, and although she need not suffer from thirst, seeing that there were some hidden bottles still in reserve, it was certain that the boarders would have to suffer from hunger. Such was the situation upon which the hag was musing, in so far as her half-drunken condition permitted her to reflect upon anything. Should she ask for an advance from the workhouse? No, it would be refused. Should she restore the children to the care of the legal guardians of the poor? No, she would lose her little income. And yet the children had not been fed since yesterday.

As the result of these reflections, Mrs Murphy took to one of the hidden bottles, and then she beat the starving children, being disturbed by their moans.

It was October, and the hovel was very cold; the wind whistled through the chinks in the walls, and the rain dripped from holes in the roof. The meagre turf fire did not suffice to warm the chilled limbs of Cissy and Foundling Mick, who sat in a corner on the floor, huddled together and shivering. The sick child lay on a truss of straw, burning with fever; the hag was staggering to and fro, holding on by the wall now and then, and muttering to herself as she cast angry glances towards the hearth. There was no pot upon the turf sods, and for a good reason, there was nothing to put in it.

A grunt was heard outside, and the door was pushed open by the intruding snout of a pig. Mrs Murphy looked stupidly at the animal as it began to root in the corners, grunting, but made no attempt to turn it out. Cissy and Foundling Mick stood up to avoid the pig, and the animal made for the hearth, where it routed out a big potato from beneath the turf ashes, turned it over with its snout, and took it in its mouth. Foundling Mick sprang at the pig, tore the potato out of its jaws at the risk of being bitten and knocked down, and, calling Cissy, he and she devoured the choice morsel between them. The drunken woman then seemed to awaken to what was happening; she seized a ragged old broom, and chased the pig, not without hitting poor Micky a hard blow in the process.

As the angry animal bolted out of the door, a man who had just reached it, narrowly escaped being thrown down, and Mrs Murphy was partly sobered by her surprise and alarm on perceiving that a stranger proposed to enter her abode. Whom could this intruder be? She had no visitors, her habits were to the last degree, and for sound reasons, unsocial. What if this person should be the inspector from the workhouse, and the children should betray their famished state to him. She made a stealthy threatening motion with her hand to Cissy and Foundling Mick, and planting herself in the doorway addressed the stranger abruptly —

‘What do you want? Who are you?’

He was one of those persons who travel through the towns and villages in England and Ireland, getting insurances upon the lives of children, in other words ensuring their death.[1] The monthly payments of a few pence secured to the parents, guardians, or kinsmen, or to horrible creatures like Mrs Murphy, a sum of three or four pounds on the death of the children insured by companies who employed these agents. A notable amelioration in this system has been produced by the law of 1889, and the creation of ‘The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children’, is a decided step in the right direction. But, how sad it is to think that a law should be required in a case where the natural instincts alone ought to suffice!

The agent who had called on Mrs Murphy was a man between 45 and 50, smooth-faced, smooth-tongued, of sly and hypocritical demeanour. His business was to inveigle this hag into becoming a customer, by affecting not to perceive the neglected and abject condition of the children, and pretending to believe that they were treated with affection and solicituOde.

‘My good lady,’ he resumed, ‘if it’s not troubling you too much, will you step outside for a few minutes?’

‘Do you want to speak to me?’ said the hag, who was always suspicious of a stranger.

CHAPTER 11

LIFE INSURANCE

‘I am an agent, my good lady,’ replied the man, in an insinuating tone.

An agent! Whose? From whence? What did he mean. Had he come to report on the children sent to the country in the R — district? Impossible to tell, so Mrs Murphy proceeded to overwhelm her visitor with her volubility.

‘Excuse me, sir, excuse me. I am just cleaning up, after the children’s dinner. You can see how well they look; the boy and this little girl, I mean, for the other is sick. Yes, indeed, she has a fever that can’t be stopped. I’m just going to the town for a doctor. The darlints! I just doat on them.’ All this, while she looked like a tigress trying to pass for a tame cat.

‘Mr Inspector,’ she went on, ‘if the guardians would allow me some money for medicine — we have only just enough for their keep — ’

‘I am not an inspector, my good lady!’

‘Who are you, then?’

‘An insurance agent.’

‘I do, ma’am. I want to speak to you about these three children, and I can’t very well speak before them.’

She went out, closing the door of the hovel, and the two walked a few paces in silence. Then the man began, —

‘You have three children?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are they your own?’

‘No.’

‘Are you any relation to them?

‘No.’

‘Then they have been sent to you from the workhouse in Donegal?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m sure they could not be in better hands. And yet, in spite of the best of care, these little creatures sometimes fall sick. Children are delicate, and I notice that one of your little girls — ’

‘I do the best I can, sir. I mind them day and night. I often go hungry myself that they may have full and plenty. I’m badly paid for them — three pounds a year, sir, only three pounds a year.’

‘It’s not enough, ma’am; it’s not near enough. You must be the kindest of women to mind these dear children at such a loss. You have now two girsheens and a little boy in your care, I think?’

‘Yes.’

‘Orphans, no doubt?’

‘I believe so.’

‘I’m so accustomed to seeing children that I guess the age of the little girls at four and six years; and the boy’s at two and a half.’

‘Why are you asking me these questions?’

‘I’m going to tell you.’

Mrs Murphy looked askance at the insurance agent, who continued, —

‘The air is good hereabouts; it’s a healthy place, but the children are sickly, in spite of all your care, and it might happen you to lose one of them. You ought to insure their lives.’

‘Insure their lives?’

‘Yes; for your own advantage. It is easy to understand that.’ He noted the gleam of greed that came into the woman’s eyes. ‘By paying a few pence monthly to my company, you would secure a sum of from two to three pounds if one of the children were to die.’

‘Two to three pounds!’

The agent perceived that the job was nearly done.

‘It is generally done, ma’am, I assure you. We have several hundred children insured in Donegal, and although nothing can be a consolation for the loss of an object of so much care and affection, still there is a compensation — of course only a slight one — in having a snug sum to take from our company.’

‘And can it be got — without difficulty?’ asked the hag, casting a stealthy look around her.

‘Without any difficulty, ma’am. As soon as the death is certified, there’s nothing to do but to apply to our representative.’

Here he produced a folded paper, saying, —

‘I have some policies all ready, and if you consent to put your signature to them you will be more easy in your mind for the future. And in case one of these children was to die — a thing that may happen any time, the money would help you to keep the others.’

‘What would it cost?’

‘Threepence a month for each child. Ninepence in all.’

‘You would even insure the youngest girl?’

‘Certainly; although she seems to me to be very ill. If your good care does not save her after all, it will be two pounds. Listen to that now! Two pounds! And mark this, ma’am, what our company does is for the good of the children. It is our interest that they should live, for they bring us in money? We are very sorry when a child dies.’

No, the insurance company was not sorry on such occasions, provided that the mortality did not go beyond a certain point. In offering to take the dying child, the agent was actually doing good business. Had not a director who knew what he was talking about, stated that ‘the day after the interment of an insured child they took more “lives” than ever’?

This was true, and it was also true that wretches existed who did not hesitate to resort to crime in order to obtain the insurance money; these, it must be freely admitted, were very few.

‘Come,’ said the agent, in an insinuating tone, ‘don’t you see where your interest lies?’

Nevertheless the woman hesitated to give the ninepence, even with the prospect of her gain by the little girl’s death to encourage her. She tried to bargain, to get a reduction.

‘It cannot be done,’ said the agent. ‘Just think, ma’am, that in spite of all your care, this child may die tomorrow, or indeed, today, and our company have to pay your two pounds. Come, now, sign your name. Be advised by me.’

He produced pen and ink, the woman signed the paper, and reluctantly placed in the agent’s hand ninepence out of the little hoard in her pocket. While the man walked away from the cabin, Mrs Murphy stood near its door, motionless, for some minutes. The children had not ventured to come out. Until now she had thought only of the few pounds which their existence was worth to her each year, but their death would bring her in more than that. Did it not depend upon herself whether she should have to pay any more ninepences?

The hag flung the look of a poising hawk at the bird in the grass at the unhappy children, when she re-entered the hovel. It seemed as though Cissy and Foundling Mick had understood! They shrank from her instinctively, as from hands extended to strangle them.

Still, she felt that she must act prudently. Three dead children might arouse suspicion. She would expend a little of her remaining money in feeding them; she knew how to make a little go a long way. Three or four weeks longer; that would surely be enough; but then the agent must come once more for his ninepence. She had abandoned the idea of taking the children back to the workhouse.

It was the morning of the 6th of October. Mrs Murphy, having gone out to drink, had left the children in the cabin, and the door was shut. The sick child was sinking rapidly; she could not swallow, and Cissy could only wet her lips with water. Her eyes were wide open, and she seemed to ask, —

‘Why was I born? Why?’

Foundling Mick, huddled up in a corner, looked at her as he might have looked at a cage which was about to open and let out a bird.

Presently the little sufferer moaned, and he asked, —

‘Is she going to die?’ But he did not know what the word meant.

‘Yes,’ answered Cissy, ‘and she will go to Heaven.’

‘Can’t we go to Heaven without dying?’

‘No — we can’t.’

A few minutes later a brief convulsion shook the frail little body, and then with one sigh the child’s spirit departed.

Cissy fell on her knees terrified. Foundling Mick, to imitate her, knelt also by the side of the motionless form.

An hour later, Mrs Murphy came in, screamed ‘Dead! dead!’ and rushed out to proclaim her grief among her neighbours, who paid very little attention to her.

Mrs Murphy had two pieces of pressing business on hand: one was to get a doctor’s certificate of the death of the child, who would be buried by the parish; the other was to get the insurance money, after as brief delay as possible. No doctor had been sent for to attend the child, but that circumstance would not hinder the dispensary practitioner from doing the needful in the case, and she must set about the matter at once. The dispensary was three miles away, and it would take her a long time to go and return, for she would be sure to stop on the way wherever drink was to be had. She set out as speedily as possible, having ordered Cissy to look after the dead child, and given herself no trouble at all about Foundling Mick; but she locked the cabin door and took the key with her.

Cissy immediately busied herself with the poor little corpse, bestowing more care upon it than the living child had ever enjoyed. She washed the face, smoothed the hair, removed the ragged chemise, and replaced it by a towel that had been hung upon a nail to dry, and would serve as a shroud for the destitute litde orphan. When she had done these things in her careful, unchildlike way, so little suitable to her tender years, Cissy kissed her poor little companion on both cheeks, and Foundling Mick, who had remained in his corner, afraid to move, would have done likewise, but he was seized with terror, and dared not.

‘Come! Come!’ he cried out to Cissy.

‘Where?’

‘Outside! Come! Come!’

‘No, no; we must stay here.’

And Cissy tried to quiet him. She told him also that the door was locked. But all was in vain; he continued to scream that he must get out.

‘She is cold, and I am cold!’ he cried. ‘Come, Cissy, or she will take us with her!’

The child was wild with terror; he felt that he must die also, if he did not get away.

It was growing dusk. Cissy lighted a bit of candle which was stuck in the neck of a bottle; but then Foundling Mick was more frightened still, for shadows came, and things seemed to move about him. He loved Cissy; she was the only person who had ever caressed him in his little life; but he could not stay there — no, he could not stay.

There was a hole in the earthen floor under the broken door, and it had been roughly filled up with stones to keep out small dogs, and cats, which would otherwise have made themselves free of the cabin; to this Mick applied himself with the strange strength lent by fear to his half-starved but sturdy little frame, tearing out the stones with his hands, and scratching up the clay under them with an old shovel, in frantic haste. When the hole was empty, he called once more to Cissy, who could not have crept under the door in any case: ‘Come! Come!’

‘No!’ said Cissy, ‘I will not. She would be alone.’

Foundling Mick ran to her, put his arms round her neck and kissed her, and then, laying himself flat on the floor, wriggled through the hole, and disappeared on the outside of the door. Cissy, who concluded that he would make his way to the nearest dwelling, and thought only of the severe punishment which he would be certain to receive on Mrs Murphy’s return, sat quietly by the side of the dead child.

We know what really did befall Foundling Mick, who had strayed into the country, knowing nothing of neighbours, and how he had been picked up by the itinerant showman.

CHAPTER 12

THE RETURN

Foundling Mick was happy, and did not imagine that it was possible to be more happy. He lived entirely in the present, and thought nothing at all about the future.

His memory occasionally brought back to him pictures from the past. He remembered the little girl who had lived with him at the wicked woman’s house. Cissy would be eleven years old now; what had become of her? Had not death set her free also as it had delivered the other child? If not, then he should find her again some day. He owed her much gratitude for her affection and care, and he would have regarded her as a sister, in his great need of attaching himself to any who had loved him.

Then there was Grip, to whom he was as grateful as to Cissy. Six months had elapsed since the burning of the poor school at Galway, six months during which he had undergone such strange vicissitudes!

What had become of Grip? Surely, he too could not be dead? It would be so much better that people like Hornpipe and Mrs Murphy should go. No one would be the worse, and there would be none to miss them. But such brutes are long-lived!

Thus argued Foundling Mick, and we may be sure he talked of his former friends to the good people at Kirwan’s Farm, who were all interested in the subject.

Thereupon Murtagh MacCarthy had made inquiry, but, as we already know, he had been unable to discover anything relating to Cissy; the little girl had disappeared from R — .

An answer had been received from Galway respecting Grip. The poor lad, scarcely recovered from the injury he had received at the fire, and having no employment, had left the town, and was no doubt on the tramp in search of work. Foundling Mick felt as though it were wrong for him to be so well off when Grip was probably in a very different case. MacCarthy took an interest in Grip and would have been glad to give him work on the farm, but no one knew what had become of him.

The MacCarthy family led an industrious and regular life at Kirwan’s Farm. They had few neighbours, the nearest were three miles away, and the farm was twelve miles from Tralee. MacCarthy and Murdoch visited the town on market days occasionally, but not more frequently than was necessary for their affairs.

The farm was in the parish of S — , and Kitty seldom left home except on Sundays and holy-days, when the family, with the exception of Granny, who was dispensed from the obligatory attendance at Mass by reason of her age and infirmity, went in their best attire to the parish church. These were great occasions for Foundling Mick, who presented a far different appearance from that of the ragged urchin who had hidden behind a pillar of the church in Galway lest he should be driven out. Now, he had nothing to fear; he occupied his own appointed place between Mary and Kitty, listened with delight to the singing, and followed the service with his own prayer book, a present from Granny. He was a boy to be proud of, in his neat tweed suit, which was always scrupulously brushed. Care of his clothes and person continued to be a marked characteristic of Foundling Mick.

The season was advancing. February was cold, and March was wet. The winter had not been severe, and did not seem likely to be prolonged. The sowing would be done under favourable conditions, and the tenants might hope to be able to meet the exactions of the landlords when the terrible ‘rent day’ should arrive, without having the penalty of eviction, entailed by a bad harvest, suspended over their heads.

This was all well; nevertheless, there was a black spot on the horizon of Kirwan’s Farm.

Two years previously, the second son, Pat, had gone to sea in the trading ship *Guardian,* belonging to a mercantile firm in Liverpool. Two letters from Pat had been received at the farm, after his voyage across the southern seas, but ten months had elapsed since the arrival of the second, and no farther news of him had reached his parents. The inquiries made by MacCarthy at Liverpool had not produced a satisfactory result; he learned only that Messrs Maxwell were uneasy respecting the fate of the *Guardian.* Naturally, the chief topic of conversation at the farm was Pat, and the post-cart was looked for with eager expectation, fully shared by Foundling Mick, who kept watch at the gate every day for its passage. The whole family was disquieted, but Granny talked more of her fears than the others. Pat was her favourite grandchild, her ‘white-headed boy’. She was very old — should she live to see him again? The old woman would confide her fears to Mick, and he would try to console her.

‘He will come back,’ he said. ‘I don’t know him; and I must know him, since he is one of the family.’

‘And he will be as fond of you as the rest of us are.’

‘It’s a grand thing to be a sailor, Granny; only it’s a pity to have to go away, and stay away so long! Couldn’t a whole family go on the big sea, all together?’

‘No, Micky, no. When Pat went, it fretted me greatly. It’s well for them that need never part! The boy might have stayed on the farm and worked with the rest. Then we wouldn’t have been fretted this way. But he couldn’t content himself, he had to go. God send him safe back. Don’t forget to pray for him.’

‘No, Granny, I won’t. I always pray for him, and for you all!’

The beginning of April saw great activity at the farm, and Foundling Mick was as busy as the best, making himself useful in every department of labour that was at all within his strength, and developing especial ability as a shepherd. After a short time the sheep were left to his proud charge, and he and Ranger, the sheepdog, were firm friends and allies.

The little boy was much more given to observe the practical than the curious side of things. He did not inquire how it was that a whole ear came from a grain, but how many grains of corn or barley the ear would produce. And he formed the intention of counting them at harvest time, and writing down the result in his cherished pocketbook. This was his nature. He would have been more ready to count the stars than to admire them.

Foundling Mick was usually alone on the pastureland with his sheep for the greater part of the day. Occasionally, however, Murdoch or Peter would stop, on their way to some other portion of the farm, not to look after the ‘herd’, for he might be fully trusted, but for a short talk with him.

‘Well, Micky,’ one of them would say, ‘is your flock all right and the grass thick?’

‘Very thick, Mr Murdoch.’

‘And are your sheep good?’

‘Very good, Peter. Ask Ranger — he never has to bite them.’

Ranger was not a handsome dog, but he was very intelligent and hard-working, and he had become a faithful companion to Mick. The two talked together for hours at a time, saying the most interesting things to each other. When the boy looked the dog in the face while speaking to him, Ranger seemed to drink in his words, and his long nose quivered; his tail waved, like the ‘portable semaphore’, to which an expressive canine tail has been aptly likened. The friends were of about the same age, and a perfect understanding existed between them.

Foundling Mick had his little troubles, nevertheless. In the first place were his enemies, with whom he had to reckon, the marauding birds which swarm in Ireland. He did not mind the swallows, they lived on insects only during their brief sojourn, but the impudent and greedy sparrows, the mice of the air, these attacked the grain crops, and then, the rooks and the crows, how he raged against them! He would try to chase the clouds of rooks that would settle on the newly sown fields, and set Ranger to bark at them with all the power of his lungs, but of what avail were their puny efforts? The birds would merely rise in the air, make a mocking circle, and sweep down again out of his reach as before.

And then, the scarecrows were not of the smallest use! Peter had fabricated awful figures with outstretched arms and ragged garments fluttering in the wind. Children would certainly have been frightened by them, but the birds, not in the very least! Perhaps he might contrive something more startling and less silent. After long cogitation, he hit upon a promising idea. Peter’s scarecrow moved its arms when the wind was strong, it is true, but it did not speak, it did not creak. It must be made to make a noise. So Foundling Mick got Peter to fasten a rattle which the wind would turn on the head of each scarecrow, and awaited the result with joyful expectation.

The rooks and the crows arrived as usual, and on the first and second day they evinced some surprise, and even a little distress and disquiet, but on the third they took no more notice of the scarecrow with the rattle than they had taken of that futile device without it, but perched comfortably on the outstretched arms of the fluttering figure, and out-cawed the harmless clash.

Then Foundling Mick, vexed and defeated, bethought himself that something is wanting to the perfection of this lower world.

These annoyances apart, things were going well at Kirwan’s Farm, and Mick was as happy there as possible. During the winter his education in ‘the three Rs’ had made serious progress, and now he put his accounts in order every evening. His lists comprised the eggs and chickens, the little piglings, and the large families of rabbits. All these were duly entered, with correct dates. MacCarthy observed the boy’s orderly ways with pleased interest, and regularly every evening gave him the stipulated little stone, which was duly deposited in the earthenware jug. These stones had all the value of shillings to Foundling Mick. The jug contained also the golden sovereign which had been the reward of his memorable sole appearance upon the boards at Limerick, and of which he had made no mention at the farm, from some unexplained instinct. Besides, as he had no use for this coin, wanting nothing, he attributed less value to it than to the little stones which bore witness to his zeal and his good conduct.

The season had been favourable, and harvest work began earlier than usual. All the hands on the farm were fully employed, and perhaps Foundling Mick neglected his flock just a little in his ardour to assist in the delightful task of binding, stacking, and carrying. He was so proud of helping Mary and Kitty, and of being ‘wanted’ everywhere! Surely the happiest and most grateful of hearts was that which beat in the bosom of the once deserted, nameless boy.

That year was one of the most prosperous that Murtagh MacCarthy had passed on Kirwan’s Farm. It would have been completely happy had any news of Pat reached the family. It seemed as though the presence of Foundling Mick had brought good luck to his benefactors. The rent was paid in full, all other charges were met. The following winter, which was not a cold one, was succeeded by an early spring, so that the farmers had reasonable hope of an equally good harvest to come.

Foundling Mick had resumed his long days with Ranger and his sheep. Again he saw the fields decked in their emerald green, and heard the little noises which the corn and the barley make when the ear is swelling. He liked to see ‘the plumed and bearded barley’ swaying to the touch of the light wind’s breath. And then, there was talk of a newcomer at the farm, one eagerly looked for, who would be warmly welcomed. Granny was very happy and smiling over the expected arrival of the child of Murdoch and Kitty in three months’ time.

During the heaviest press of the harvest work in August, one of the farm labourers fell sick and was unable to continue his labour. It was necessary to find a reaper out of work somewhere in the neighbourhood, if possible, but as all the farmers were equally busy, this was not by any means sure of accomplishment, and to procure a substitute for the disabled man, MacCarthy would have to sacrifice half a day in going to S — and returning. The latter was a serious inconvenience, and Foundling Mick, who understood the difficulty, prompdy offered to go to S — in the farmer’s stead. MacCarthy gladly consented; he knew that Mick might safely be trusted to carry a note to the right person, and that five miles of road with which he was familiar would not trouble the boy. By leaving the farm early in the morning, he could get back by noon.

Foundling Mick started in the morning, at a deliberate pace, and with a purposeful demeanour, having in his pocket the farmer’s letter to an innkeeper at S — , and a tidy little packet of bacon-sandwiches for his refreshment on the way.

The weather was fine, a light wind was blowing, and the boy’s heart and step for the first three miles were as light as the breeze. Presently Foundling Mick turned into a little wood, or ‘plantation’ as the country people called it, in order to take a short cut which would lead him out on the high road beyond, and after he had gone about a hundred yards he stood stock-still at the sight of a man stretched on the ground at the foot of a tree.

The boy looked for a few moments at this unaccustomed object, wondering whether anything ailed the man, or whether he had merely lain down to rest at so odd a place and hour.

The man remained motionless, and Mick drew near to him. He was fast asleep, his arms were crossed, his hat was pulled down to shade his eyes. He appeared to be young, and his dust-covered clothes and clay-stained boots told of a long tramp, probably from Tralee.

Mick’s attention, however, was specially attracted by the fact that the sleeper was evidently a sailor. Yes, he could tell that by his costume and by the bag that lay beside him, for it was made of tarred sailcloth. There was an address upon it, too, and the boy read it at a glance.

‘Pat,’ he cried, ‘it is Pat!’

Yes, it was Pat, and he might have been recognised by his likeness to Murdoch and Peter. Pat, who had not been heard of for so long, and was so longed for!

Foundling Mick was on the point of awakening the sleeper, when an idea arrested him. If Pat were to turn up quite suddenly at the farm, his mother, and especially his Granny, might get such a shock as would make them ill. He had better run back and prepare Mr MacCarthy, who would arrange everything nicely. Pat's father would prepare the women for the arrival of their son and grandson. As for the message to the innkeeper at S — , no matter about that; he could take it tomorrow. Why, here was Pat, one of themselves, might not he replace the sick reaper, and no stranger at all be wanted? Of course he might! And then, the young sailor was weary (as a matter of fact he had walked on from Tralee in the night, and was tired after his railway journey), he would come on to the farm quickly when he had his sleep out. The important thing was for Foundling Mick to get there first, and to bring Pat's father and brothers out to meet him.

But why should the weary sailor have to carry his bag for the last three miles? It would be much better for Mick, who was not at all tired, and quite strong enough to carry it on his back, to take charge of it for him. Besides, it would give him so much pleasure to carry a sailors bag! A bag that had sailed the big sea! Only think!

He took up the bag by the loop of the rope which fastened it, hitched it up on his back, and set off at full speed in the direction of the farm. He had barely regained the high road, which lay in front of him perfectly straight for half a mile, before he heard shouts behind him; but he did not slacken his pace; he was more than ever anxious to get on. The person who was shouting was, however, also running.

Pat, on waking, had missed his bag, and starting up in a fury, he caught sight of the boy just as he turned into the high road.

‘Stop, stop, you young thief!’ he cried; but on and on ran Foundling Mick, unheeding. It was, however, vain for him to hope that he could escape from the young sailor, especially weighted as he was with the bag; so, when the shouting pursuer was only a few yards behind him, Mick suddenly dropped his load, without turning his head, and scampered off with surprising velocity.

Pat picked up the bag and continued his pursuit. The farm came in view at the same moment when he came up with Mick, and caught him by the collar of his jacket.

MacCarthy, Murdoch, and Peter were in the yard unloading bundles of forage, and each uttered a cry of astonishment.

‘Pat, my son!’

‘Brother!’

In a few moments the sailor had received the fond embrace of welcome from Granny, Mary and Kitty.

Foundling Mick stood by, his eyes beaming with joy, wondering when he should be noticed.

‘Ah, my robber!’ exclaimed Pat.

All was explained in a few words, and Mick ran to Pat and clasped him round the neck, as though the sailor had been a mast and he was clinging to it.

Great joy reigned at the farm in those days. Pat was at home again, the family circle was once more unbroken, and times were good with them.

The crops were abundant, especially fine was the promise of potatoes, the ready-made bread of the Irish people.

‘Have you come back to us for a whole year, Pat?’ asked his mother.

‘No, mother, only for six weeks. I don’t want to give up the sea, it’s a good life. In six weeks I must go back to Liverpool, and ship again on the *Guardian,* but as mate this time.’

‘That’s grand, Pat,’ said Murdoch, and he clapped his brother on the back approvingly.

‘While I’m at home,’ said the young sailor, you must let me work for you, father.’

MacCarthy accepted the offer.

Pat was especially pleased to make acquaintance with his brother’s wife, whom he rightly judged to be a worthy and amiable young woman. Murdoch’s marriage had taken place during Pat’s absence. Foundling Mick had his share in the rejoicing. His story was told to Pat, who was touched by it, and from that moment the two became great friends.

To Mick, Pat was quite a wonderful and important personage. A sailor — that meant something altogether out of the common. No wonder that Granny kept her hand on his sleeve while he was talking, lest he should go off again to the sea. Pat’s story was speedily told; his explanation of the long time that had gone by without his having sent his parents any news of him was simple enough. The *Guardian* had run aground on one of the small islands in the Indian Ocean, and for thirteen months her crew had lived upon a desert island, without any communication with the rest of the world. At length by dint of incessant labour they had succeeded in floating the ship. Vessel and cargo were all saved, and Pat had distinguished himself so much by his zeal and courage, that, on the recommendation of the captain, Messrs Maxwell, of Liverpool, the owners, had re-engaged him as mate for an approaching voyage to Liverpool.

CHAPTER 13

CHANGE

The next day the MacCarthy household resumed its customary routine, and Kirwan’s Farm had gained a sturdy workman to replace the disabled labourer.

The state of things was, then, fairly prosperous, but not all his toil and frugality could avail to enable MacCarthy to accumulate any savings, or permit him to contemplate the possibility of even one bad harvest without grave alarm. He lived on his earnings at the present, but what of the future? Ah, that future of the Irish tenant farmer, always at the mercy of the climate! On this Murdoch’s thoughts were constantly fixed, and his brooding made him hate more and more deeply a social condition which could have no solution except in the abolition of landlordism, and the restoration of the soil to the cultivators by means of payments at stated intervals.

In September Kitty’s baby, a girl, was born. The newcomer was welcomed warmly by every member of the family, and Foundling Mick’s happiness when he was permitted to kiss the infant was supreme. The christening was fixed for an early day, and a ‘party’ was arranged for the occasion. Pat would be able to be present, as his ship was not to sail until late in the month. The baby was to be named Jane, Granny was to be godmother, for the good old lady’s pleasure only, as it was not to be supposed the child would ever profit by her vicarious care, temporal or spiritual, and it was Granny that made the startling proposal that Foundling Mick should be godfather. What! The orphan child, the foundling? Yes, Granny considered that to constitute a ‘spiritual affinity’ would be the very best way to consolidate the tie between Mick and his benefactors, and Granny's wish was law. To be sure he was very young, not eight years old 'all out', and might be regarded as hardly admissible, but Granny disposed of this objection, timidly offered by Kitty, by an ingenious argument. If the godfather were too young, she said, the godmother's years would make up for that; their united ages came to 84, they would divide the number, and each claim 42, surely a discreet and proper time of life! Everything else was in the boy's favour; he was hard-working, honest, devoted, loved, esteemed, appreciated by all at the farm.

On the 26th of September the whole party repaired to the parish church, which Granny had not entered for a considerable time. The women were taken there in the farm-cart; the men went on foot. On their arrival the parish priest raised an unexpected difficulty.

'Who's the godfather?' he asked.

'Foundling Mick,' replied Murdoch.

'What's his age?'

'Seven and a half,'

'That's rather young; but it is not forbidden. He has some other name beside Foundling Mick, I suppose?'

'We don't know whether he has or not, father,' answered Granny.

Turning to the boy, the priest said, —

'You must have a Christian name of your own.'

‘I have not, sir.’

‘Can it be that he is unbaptised?’

On this point Foundling Mick was entirely ignorant. It would seem surprising that MacCarthy and his wife, who were such good, pious, practical Catholics, had not thought about this matter; but the fact is, it had never entered their minds that anybody could be unbaptised. No one could answer, and Mick was put to confusion. Would this doubt which no one could solve be an insurmountable objection to his becoming godfather to little Jane? Then came Murdoch to the rescue with a timely suggestion.

‘Well, if he hasn’t been christened, father, can’t your reverence christen him now?’

‘But if he has been christened?’ said Granny.

‘Never mind,’ interrupted Peter, ‘he’ll only be a Christian twice over. Christen him first.’

‘I can do that,’ said the priest, smiling at this novel experience, ‘but he will want a godfather and godmother on his own account.’

‘I will stand for him,’ said MacCarthy.

‘And so will I,’ said Mary.

‘What shall his name be?’ asked his reverence.

After a few minutes’ consultation it was agreed that that name of the archangel which had been given by chance to the child should be retained, and he was promptly baptised ‘Michael’. He then proudly officiated, by the side of Granny, as godfather to little Jane, and the family returned to the farm, where the day was kept as a holiday, and several neighbours came to partake of the homely but plentiful dinner which was provided on the occasion. This family festival afforded Mick his first glimpse of social amenities.

And now we have to pass away from these pleasant scenes and prosperous days, and, with a brief mention of the extreme severity of the ensuing winter, in which disastrous floods occurred in the province of Munster and did great damage in Co. Kerry in particular, take up the fortunes of the MacCarthy family at a later period. Those fortunes were at a low ebb at the beginning of the winter of 1881, as will be evident from a brief review of the disasters in which the occupants of Kirwan’s Farm, in common with all the other tenants on the estate of the Earl of C — , were involved in the interval which we have allowed to elapse.

Weather of such severity as had not been known in Ireland within a generation. Floods which had destroyed crops, farm buildings and stock, and so damaged the dwelling-house that MacCarthy had been obliged to expend the little money which he gathered together for the working of the farm in the spring, on repairs, to keep it habitable, without receiving any assistance or even the smallest abatement of rent from Mr Eldon, the agent, who acted for the absentee Scotch landlord, had been succeeded by the last worst trouble that can come to the Irish agriculturist. The harvest had proved hopelessly deficient, and now the potato crop was utterly ruined! What was to become of the small farmers? Where were they to find means for the payment of the next gale of rent and the next instalment of the heavy taxation imposed upon their unfortunate class in Ireland? We have seen that MacCarthy, although in better times he had lived decently, and honestly discharged all his obligations, however unreasonable and tyrannical these were held to be by his son Murdoch, and by the farmer himself in his soul's conscience, had been inevitably unable to accumulate any savings. Now he was face to face with ruin, and want stared the industrious, frugal, pious family in the face. What was to be done? The misfortune that had fallen on the country ought to have been regarded and treated as a common misfortune, but well the tenants knew this would not be so; they, and they only, would have to pay the penalty of'the dispensation of God'; those who could not satisfy the collector when he should come round, must prepare for eviction and starvation.

Where were the happy days of Foundling Mick's remembrance now? Where were the animals for him to tend, the busy population of the poultry-yard for him to reckon? There was but little work for the men to do now, and less for him, and during those long days the family watched the gradual but certain fading away of the loved and revered grandmother.

The disasters that had befallen the district had reawakened the ever-smouldering agrarian discontent. Boycotting was rife in the district — a useless proceeding which proved ruinous to both farmers and landlords. Agitation was rife in Kerry, and Murdoch MacCarthy threw himself headlong into the movement. None so violent as he in his denunciation of land-grabbers: he was perpetually travelling about the country to prevent the hiring of evicted farms. His father and Peter vainly endeavoured to restrain him. And indeed, their efforts were prompted by apprehension for his safety, for how could they fail to approve of his purpose, they who had toiled so hard and so long only to fall into the depths of poverty at last, and who had now to expect eviction from Kirwan's Farm, on which their family had lived so long?

The government, ‘the Castle’, as that obnoxious administration was then and is still called, knowing that the cultivators of the soil would be easily ‘raised’, after so ruinous a year, had taken its precautions. Already bodies of mounted constabulary patrolled the country, ready to lend armed aid to the process-servers and ‘emergency men’, to disperse the meetings, by force, if necessary, and to arrest the most zealous of the fanatics who were made known to the police. Evidently Murdoch would soon be of that number, if, indeed, he were not already a marked man. What could the Irish do against a system which rests upon 30,000 soldiers ‘encamped’ — that is the word in use — in Ireland?

The anxiety and terror in which Murdoch’s parents lived may readily be imagined. A step on the road would turn Mary’s face pale, Kitty’s eyes would tell of fear, and Granny would lift her head, then let it droop again upon her breast. Was that the tread of the police coming to the farm to arrest Murdoch, and perhaps his father and brother as well? Arrests had been made in the towns, why not in country places also? Mary had besought her son, when the agitation became very marked, to elude the measures with which the chief agents of the Land League were threatened, but where could Murdoch have hidden himself? And supposing he could have found safety in the North, where the police were not so watchful, how could he have earned a livelihood for Kitty, himself, and their child, among strangers? He remained at the farm, trusting to be able to escape if the police should come thither in search of him. A watch was kept on all comers and goers on the road. Foundling Mick and Ranger were always on the alert; no one could have approached within half a mile of the farm unperceived.

And now MacCarthy was awaiting the inevitable visit of the rent-collector, coming to demand the ‘gale’ due at Christmas.

The Scotch peer who was MacCarthy’s landlord had never even seen his Irish estates. Even supposing this personage to have meant well towards his tenants, he did not know them, he could not take any interest in them, nor could they have recourse to him. The estate agent, Mr Eldon, who had the management of the property, lived in Dublin, and left the task of exacting the revenues at the appointed periods to his subagent, a man named Herbert, who presented himself at Kirwan’s Farm twice a year. Herbert was a hard-natured, bitter-minded person, inaccessible to the emotions of pity and sympathy. He had already given a large taste of his quality in other parts of the county, mercilessly driving families from their poor homes in the bitter weather, refusing to allow time for payment when a short delay could have saved the situation. It is true that he ‘had his orders’, but he took a savage pleasure in carrying them out with the utmost rigour.

Great was the suspense and apprehension with which Herbert’s appearance was looked for at Kirwan’s Farm.

Early in the day, on the 29th of December, Foundling Mick, who has espied him from afar, ran to the house, and gave notice of Herbert’s coming. The whole family, even to the infant who was in Kitty’s arms, was assembled in the large room on the ground floor.

The subagent pushed the gate open, strode up to the house with a determined step — the step of a master — opened the room door — the outer door of the house was rarely shut, even in winter — and without removing his hat, or uttering a word of greeting, seated himself on a chair in front of the table, like a man much more at home than those whose dwelling he invades, took some papers out of his leather bag, and said roughly, —

‘It’s a hundred pounds for the two half years. I suppose we’re agreed upon that, MacCarthy?’

‘Yes, Mr Herbert,’ replied the farmer in a slightly uncertain voice. ‘It is a hundred pounds. But I have to ask for some delay. You have given it to me — ’

‘Delay! Oh, delay indeed!’ cried Herbert, interrupting him. “What does that mean? I hear nothing but the one tune everywhere. Is it with delays that Mr Eldon is going to satisfy his lordship?’

‘It has been a bad year for us all, Mr Herbert, and you may be sure my farm came off no better than the rest.’

That’s no business of mine, MacCarthy, and I can’t give you any delay.’

Foundling Mick stood in a dark corner, his arms crossed, his big eyes wide open, listening.

Mr Herbert,’ said the farmer, mildly, ‘you might take compassion on us. We only ask for a little time. Half the winter is over, and it has not been too hard. We’ll recover ourselves in the season that’s coming.’

‘Will you pay, or won’t you, MacCarthy?’

‘We would if we could, Mr Herbert. Do listen to me. I assure you it is impossible for us to do it.’

‘Impossible!’ repeated the subagent. ‘Very well, then, sell your stock and get the money.’

‘We have done so, all that was left after the floods. The furniture would not bring five pounds.’

‘And now that you won’t be able to carry on the farm at all, you reckon on paying the rent out of the next harvest? Is it a fool you take me for, MacCarthy?’

‘No, Mr Herbert, God forbid. But, for God’s sake, don’t take our last hope from us!’

Murdoch and his brother, motionless and silent, could hardly restrain their indignation on seeing their father standing humbly before this man.

At that moment, Granny, half-raising herself in her armchair, said in distinct, grave tones, —

‘Mr Herbert, I am 77 years old, and I have been on this farm for 67 years. My father had it before my husband and my son. Until now we have always paid our rent, and for the first time we ask for one year’s grace. I do not believe that Lord C — wants to hunt us off the land.’

‘It has nothing to do with Lord C — ,’ replied Herbert, roughly. ‘He does not even know you. But Mr Eldon knows you, and he has given me strict orders. If you don’t pay me, out of Kirwan’s Farm you shall go.’

‘Leave the farm!’ murmured Mary, who was as white as a sheet.

‘In a week.’

‘And where shall we find shelter?’

‘Where you please.’

Foundling Mick had seen many sad sights in his short life; he had suffered much misery himself, and yet it seemed to him that never had he beheld such a thing as this. Here was no scene of tears or cries, but it was nonetheless terrible.

Herbert now rose from his seat, and pausing before he replaced the papers in his bag, he said, —

‘For the last time, will you pay?’

‘And with what?’

It was Murdoch who broke in with these words, in a loud and angry voice.

Herbert knew Murdoch of old. He was aware that the young man was an active adherent of the Land League, and no doubt regarded the present as a favourable opportunity for ridding the country of him. So, as he did not think it necessary to handle Murdoch gently, he answered with a shrug of his shoulders, —

‘What with? Not with what you’ll make by attending meetings, mixing yourself up with rebels, and boycotting the landlords. It’s by working — ’

‘Working!’ said Murdoch, stretching out his toil-hardened hands. ‘Have those hands done no work? Have my father, my brothers, and my mother sat down idle all these years in the farm? Don’t say such things, Mr Herbert, for I won’t hear them.’

He finished his sentence with a gesture from which the subagent drew back, and then, giving vent to all the wrath that social injustice had kindled and kept burning in his honest and manly breast, he poured out a torrent of accusation and recrimination.

A dead silence, which MacCarthy, who had listened with head bowed down to Murdoch's violent words, did not break, succeeded to this outburst. Herbert regarded the stricken group with a gaze of arrogant contempt. Then Mary rose and addressed the subagent.

'Sir,' she said, 'it is I who implore you to grant us a delay. It will enable us to pay you — a few months only. Sir, I beg you on my knees, have pity on us.'

And the poor woman sank on her knees before the man whose mere attitude was an insult.

'No more of this,' cried Murdoch sternly, as he obliged his mother to rise. 'We have borne too much. Prayers are not the answer due to such wretches as he.'

'No,' said Herbert, 'and I don't want any more of your talk. The money, the money, down on the nail, or before a week is out you'll be hunted off the farm.'

'Very well; before a week is out, so be it,' said Murdoch, 'but before another minute I'm going to fling you out of the door of this house, which is still ours.'

Then, rushing at the man, he seized him round the body, dragged him to the outer door, and thrust him forth headlong.

'Oh, Murdoch, what have you done?' cried MacCarthy.

'I've done what every Irishman ought to do to the landlords,' answered Murdoch, 'turn them out of Ireland as I have turned their agent out of this farm!’

CHAPTER 14

CATASTROPHE

The situation described in the foregoing chapter was that of the MacCarthy family in the beginning of 1882. Foundling Mick was then ten years old; a short life if measured by years only, but already long if tested by its trials. Only three happy years, those which he passed at the farm, were to be counted in its sum.

And now, the poverty that he had formerly known had fallen upon the beings whom he loved, the family that had become his own. Misfortune was about roughly to sever the links that united the mother, the brother, and the children. They would be forced to separate, to disperse, perhaps even to leave Ireland. This had happened to many other families of the agricultural class, why should it not be their lot also?

Emigration was in fact the destined lot of the MacCarthy family, and it was to be of speedy fulfilment. Nothing but danger to himself could come of Murdoch’s proceedings, the police were everywhere, and authority, on the side of the wealthy, and deaf to the protestations of the poor, supported the merciless exactions of the landlords, while it repressed with a strong hand the demonstrations of popular feeling. It would have been prudent for Murdoch to have remained quiet under a condition of things so hopeless for the cause which he espoused, and for his own interests, but he could not be induced to take any such reasonable course, and the violence with which he had recently spoken at a meeting, appealing to the people to rise against their oppressors, had so seriously compromised him and his, that MacCarthy feared a descent upon the place by the police at any minute. And now the terrible threat of eviction had come as the culminating blow, and it was evident that the end of the beloved grandmother was approaching. During the week of perplexity and suspense which followed Herbert's visit to the farm, she became more weak hour by hour, and did not leave her bed. Foundling Mick was constantly with her, and little Jane, now two years and a half old, would sit on his knees and gaze solemnly at the aged and sunken face. How sad were Granny's thoughts concerning the future of the unconscious child! One day she said to Mick, —

'You are very fond of little Jane, aren't you?'

'Yes, Granny.'

You will never forsake her?'

'Never.'

'You're her godfather, remember that; and you will be quite a man while she is still only a little girl. If her father and mother were gone — '

'Oh, Granny, you must not think of such things. We'll not always be so ill off. You'll get better, and sit in your big chair again, and little Jane will play about you.'

But while Mick talked in this way, his heart was heavy, and tears stood in his eyes, for he knew that Granny was very, very ill. But he must not let the tears fall, lest she should see them. And not only did he grieve for his dear old friend, but he was in constant fear of the arrival of Herbert to carry out his threat.

The dispensary doctor from S — had visited Granny some weeks previously, and had spoken to MacCarthy about the improbability of his mother's life being prolonged to the end of the winter; he had prescribed medicine for her, which Foundling Mick had fetched from the dispensary at S — , but he had also advised that his patient should have a glass of good port wine daily. The latter counsel was beyond MacCarthy's means to follow. There was no wine in the house, and no money to buy so expensive a luxury. Granny protested strongly against the mere idea of such an extravagance; her cup of tea had sufficed for her always, and she wanted no other refreshment. But Foundling Mick, being stricken to the heart by the conviction that Granny was going from them, conceived the idea that she might be kept with them a little longer if some wine could be procured for her, and formed a bold plan for getting it.

He had seen port wine at Miss Watson's table; he remembered its rich red colour, and the care with which the hotel waiter poured it into the glasses of the lady and her guests. He had gained fair ideas of the price of most things in the last three years, but he had no knowledge of the cost of wine. No matter; there lay at the bottom of the jug that held his little store of pebbles the golden coin which Miss Watson had given him, and which he had never mentioned to anybody at the farm. He could surely get a big bottle of the rich red wine for his golden coin, a bottle that would hold a good many glasses? Yes, but where? They did not sell such grand drinks at S — , he was sure of that; for did not Mr MacCarthy or Murdoch go all the way to Tralee when they wanted to get really good things for farm use or house use? Therefore, to Tralee Foundling Mick would go, without saying anything to anybody, and the big bottle of port wine Granny should have. He would not say a word about it, but just slip away in the night. Twelve miles to Tralee and twelve miles back again would be a good long tramp for a little fellow like him, but Mick did not give a thought to that part of the matter.

He could not possibly get back until late in the following day, but he did not think he would be missed; at all events, he should be very soon able to account for himself. Any uneasiness that might be felt would be explained after a short delay, and he was generally either with Granny, or on the outskirts of the farm on the watch for Mr Herbert and his myrmidons, so that he might not be missed at all. This would mean his having remarkably good luck; but he was well aware, without being at all affected on his own account by the knowledge, that the attention of the family was now so much absorbed by the terrible condition of affairs at the farm, that it had become impossible for him to attract so much of it to himself as he had done in better days. The cold wind of neglect never blew upon Foundling Mick, but he was so truly, so essentially one of themselves that he came and went unnoticed, in the sense of being specially considered, at this crisis of their fate.

On the 7th of January, at two o’clock in the morning, Foundling Mick stole into the old woman’s room noiselessly as a mouse, and kissed her sleeping face. Then he let himself out at the front door, with a loving goodbye pat to Ranger, who asked him very plainly in dog’s language, ‘Am I not to come too?’ In a few minutes he was on the high road to Tralee. It was still black night, and half his journey would have to be made in the dark, but Foundling Mick was not afraid. He had started at two o’clock a m. and he hoped to get back before dark. At Tralee he would take a rest, and break his fast at a public house, at the cost of a few pence. Then he would buy the big bottle of wine and start on his homeward journey.

The night was fine, the sky was clear, and Foundling Mick, who was very strong and active, did the first six miles in two hours. It was then four o’clock in the morning. The darkness, very deep towards the west, was already traversed by light streaks of pale colour, and the late stars were beginning to wane; but the sun would not be above the horizon for three hours yet. Foundling Mick sat down on the stump of a tree by the wayside, and ate a cold roasted potato, which he carried in his pocket, with appetite. The road was completely empty. Foundling Mick would not have cared to meet pedestrians, but the sight of a cart faring towards Tralee, with an obliging driver of whom he might have begged a lift, would not have been unwelcome. However, there was no such thing, and he must rely solely upon his own sturdy little legs.

At half-past seven he was within two miles of Tralee, and the pale wintry dawn was extending over the landscape. At the top of the road stretching before him Foundling Mick perceived a group of men coming from the direction of the town. His first impulse was to hide himself — and yet, what should these men have to do with a child like him? All the same, he crouched behind a hedge and watched their approach unseen.

The group was composed of police; this he recognised at a glance, and it cannot be said that he was surprised to see them. But he could hardly refrain from a cry when he recognised Herbert in the midst of them, accompanied by two or three of the assistants whose faces were only too familiar at evictions.

The boy’s heart sank. Was the subagent going to the farm, and were the policemen there for the purpose of arresting Murdoch? Mick could not remain still and think of this. He started again so soon as the group had passed him; and, now running, now walking, he reached Tralee shortly after eight o’clock.

Having carefully selected the grandest-looking wine merchant’s shop in the town, Mick walked boldly in, asked for a big bottle of ‘the best’ port, and tendered his precious sovereign, his entire fortune, in payment. The bottle, carefully wrapped in paper, was handed to him, with fifteen shillings, and he left the shop, a proud and happy boy, Herbert and the police notwithstanding, to go in search of a humble breakfast of bread and milk. This he easily obtained, and by ten o’clock he was out of the town of Tralee and on his way to Kirwan’s Farm.

He walked steadily and at a good pace; for although he was tired, his spirits had risen with the acquisition of the wine, and the sense of success in the accomplishment of his purpose. At two o’clock in the afternoon the footsore boy was near enough to his destination to see the roof of the farmhouse and the outline of the farm buildings in the hollow below the road. There was no wind, and the wintry day was bright with cold sunshine. Mick was surprised to perceive that no smoke from the kitchen chimney rose into the air, and he ran on as quickly as his feet would carry him until he arrived at the gate of the farm.

It was broken! All the space between the gate and the house was trodden by numerous footsteps. The haggard, the stable, the cow-house, were unroofed; the thatch had been torn off, and tumbled on the ground, only a few bare gaunt rafters remained. The door had been beaten in; the window frames had been torn out. The house had been rendered uninhabitable, so that it should no longer afford shelter to human beings! Their ‘voluntary ruin’ had been effected by the hand of man!

Foundling Mick stopped short, petrified by terror. He dared not enter the yard; he dared not enter the house. And yet he must do both, for if the farmer or any of his family were still there, he must know it.

He forced himself to approach the gaping door, and called aloud to Murdoch. There was no answer. Then he sank down on the threshold and began to cry.

The scene that had taken place during Foundling Mick’s absence was only one among many of those abominable spectacles which have disgraced Ireland in instances beyond counting, scenes that have ended in the abandonment of not only farms but whole villages by their inhabitants. These poor people, driven from the place of their birth and their life-toil, where they had hoped to die, might they not, perhaps, try to get back to them, to force the doors, to find a refuge there that they could not get elsewhere? Certainly they might and would, so an easy method of preventing them from doing this has been resorted to. The house is simply rendered uninhabitable. A battering-ram — the latest improvement on this instrument of savage social war, is due to the scientific ingenuity of a distinguished statesman, and known as ‘Balfour’s Maiden’ — is reared against the house, and quickly demolishes everything. The roof is stripped off, the chimney is dragged down, the hearth-place is demolished, the doors are broken, the window-frames are forced out, nothing remains but the walls. And from the moment that all the breezes blow through this ruin, that it is flooded by the rain, and the snow lies in heaps in it, the landlord and his agent may rest easy; the destitute and shelterless family cannot crouch within it any more.

After the sight of such ferocious deeds, what wonder is it that deadly hatred of the doers of them dwells in the heart of the Irish peasant?

At Kirwan’s Farm, the eviction had been carried out under still more atrocious conditions, for revenge had had its share in the work of inhumanity. Herbert, who wanted to pay Murdoch for his violent conduct, had not been satisfied with merely having recourse to the usual proceedings on behalf of the agent, he had denounced the young man to the authorities, and arrived at the farm with constables armed with a warrant for his arrest.

MacCarthy, his wife, Peter, Kitty and her child were turned out of the house, while it was ransacked from top to bottom by the police. The poor old grandmother, who had been dragged out of her bed into the yard, had raised herself up from the ground for a moment to curse her own and her country's assassins, and then fallen back — dead.

At that moment, Murdoch, who might have had time to fly, flung himself upon these wretches. Mad with rage, he brandished an axe, and his father and brother also strove, like him, to defend their home. Numbers were against them; strength was on the side of the law, if that name can be given to such an outrage on all justice and humanity.

MacCarthy and his younger son were arrested together with Murdoch; their resistance to the police was undeniable. In consequence, they were deprived of the benefit of the law of 1870.

The body of the poor old woman was placed in a cart and removed, with the prisoners, under the escort of the police, and the miserable procession was closed by Mary and Kitty, the latter carrying her frightened child in her arms.

Could a more sad and ghastly spectacle be witnessed than that funereal train, composed of a captive family and the corpse of an aged woman, which took its way towards S — , followed by the gloomy looks and muttered curses of the few spectators whom it encountered on the road!

Foundling Mick, when his first thrill of terror had subsided, rushed through the dismantled ruin, calling, calling; but there was no answer.

Then he bethought him of his treasure, of the little stones which marked the number of days since he had arrived at Kirwan's Farm, and he looked about for the earthenware jug, which he found in a corner, intact, with its contents — 1,540 pebbles.

And now, he must say goodbye to the place of his abode during four years and eighty days, and endeavour to rejoin the family that had been his. But first, he searches among the heap of smashed furniture for the little chest of drawers in which his small stock of linen was kept, and he fortunately found it, broken indeed; but his own particular drawer had not been pillaged. He made up the contents, to which he added the bottle of port, into a bundle, and slung it upon his shoulders. Then he scooped a hole at the foot of a tree, and buried the earthenware jug with his pebbles in it, and forgetful of his stiffness and footsoreness in the tumultuous trouble of his mind, he fled from the ruins of his home into the high road on which the shadow of the coming evening was already falling.

PART II

CHAPTER 15

TRELINGAR CASTLE

The Marquis of Trelingar was a great personage in fact, but a much greater in fiction, the fiction of his own conceit. Unfortunately, the fact of his importance had a wide-spreading and sinister influence upon the fate of a large number of honest and industrious persons, his tenants and others, who were more or less at the mercy of his pride and inhumanity. The Marquis was English, the Marchioness was Scotch; they enjoyed large possessions in Ireland, and not only were they entirely unsympathetic with the people whose toil supplied the luxury in which they lived, but they regarded them with antagonism composed partly of dislike and partly of disdain. The Marquis was 50 years old, and his family had been noble for centuries. He was a much esteemed member of the Upper House, where he was an unvarying and implacable opponent of every measure whereby any class or interests except his own might hope to be benefited. His pride was almost maniacal; he was sincerely convinced that a great wrong had been done to the aristocracy (and none but aristocrats had a right to consideration) by the abolition of the extremest privileges of the feudal times; that he ought still to hold the position of a high justiciary, dispensing life and death at his good will and pleasure, and receiving the slavish homage of the lieges. He recognised no rank beneath his own as rank at all; the inferior orders of persons possessing minor titles and the undistinguished gentry were all ‘common people’ to this absurd and contemptible peer, whose follies were, unhappily, sources of misery to people far superior in the hierarchy of humanity. In person, he belonged to a type which is becoming rare, ortunately for the future of British aristocracy; he was tall, thin, stiff, with a parchment-coloured complexion, a flabby, high-featured face, dull eyes, and thin hair; his manner was pompous, self-conscious and awkward, his speech was hesitating and formal; in short, his physical attributes corresponded with his poor and ignorant mental condition. His marriage had been an admirable arrangement. The Marchioness was a woman ‘made for him’, his match in pride, in narrowness, in lack of heart, and scantness of intelligence. Harmoniously the two led together their life of grand parade; in the amity of two selfish natures they sat aloft upon their perch, resolved never to descend from it. No doubt this lord and his lady believed that they would be received with distinguished honours in the Court of Heaven, having got in by the privileged *entree*.

The Marquis of Trelingar was not in a fuss; so plebeian a manifestation as fidgety discomposure would have belied the first principles of his manner of existence. He was seated in front of a writing table in his elaborately furnished library, but his lordship’s attitude was not reposeful, he moved the papers before and at both sides of him, looked under them, searched the pockets of his morning coat, and finally touched the electric bell at his elbow, and frowningly waited a response to the summons. Almost immediately a footman appeared and stood motionless at the door.

‘See whether my letter-case has fallen under the table,’ said the Marquis.

John advanced, stooped, inspected the carpet, and rose with empty hands.

His lordship frowned.

‘Where is her ladyship?’ he asked.

‘Her ladyship is in her room, my lord.’

‘Where is Lord Ashton?’

‘His lordship is in the park, my lord.’

‘Let her ladyship know that I wish to see her as soon as possible.’

John turned round, all of a piece, and walked away to execute his lordship’s orders. After the lapse of a few minutes the library door was again opened, and the Marchioness advanced into the room with a slow and stately step. She was a heaven-sent match for her husband, 40 years old, tall, thin, scraggy, angular, aquiline-nosed, low-shouldered, flat-chested; she never could have been good looking, even in her youth, but she was aristocratic in her carriage and manners, and equalled, if she did not surpass, her husband, in her lofty notions of the privileges and traditions of their ‘Order’.

John placed a chair for her ladyship, and withdrew. The Marquis then solemnly addressed her.

‘You will excuse me, I hope, for disturbing you and asking you to come here — ’

‘I am quite at liberty,’ returned Lady Trelingar. (These personages never departed from the most formal courtesy in their interviews.) ‘What do you wish to say to me?’

‘I wish to ask you to recall everything that occurred yesterday, as accurately as possible. You remember that we left the castle yesterday, at about three o’clock in the afternoon, for the purpose of calling on Mr Laird, at N — ?’

‘Yes, certainly.’

‘Ashton was with us.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the men?’

As usual.’

‘You will remember that I had with me a letter-case containing the papers relating to the lawsuit with which we are threatened by the parish authorities — ’

‘A gross injustice and unheard-of insolence!’ said Lady Trelingar, with a significant emphasis upon the last word.

‘There was a bank-note for one hundred pounds in the letter-case, in addition to the papers; but you will remember that Laird said he preferred that I should hold over both until the proper time for acting in opposition to the parish claim should have arrived, that I did not leave the letter-case or its contents at his office, and that we got back to the Casde at about seven, when it was growing dark.’

‘I remember all that,’ said the Marchioness, rather wondering what her pompous lord was driving at.

‘Well, then,’ he resumed, ‘that letter-case, which I replaced in the left pocket of my overcoat, is not to be found!’

‘Have you searched among the things on the table for it?’

‘Yes, I have turned over all the papers, and looked everywhere.’ i ‘Nobody has been in the room since yesterday,’ said Lady Trelingar, ,”*except* the housemaids and John. It is not likely any servant would take it; although people of that class are rarely to be trusted.’

‘It is just possible it might have slipped behind the carriage cushions,’ suggested the Marquis.

‘They would have found it in that case. The papers are of great importance?’

‘Of the greatest. If I cannot produce them we shall inevitably lose our cause.’

‘That would be an abominable shame!’

‘Abominable indeed, like everything else that threatens the sanctity of property in Ireland.’

His lordship was checked at the beginning of his harangue by the entrance of a third person. This was a youth of about fifteen years old, at sight of whom the Marquis exclaimed, ‘Ha, Ashton, here you are!’

Lord Ashton had regular features, but a wholly insignificant face; time could not endow it with vivacity or intelligence. The instinct of race manifested itself in his carriage and demeanour; he was of gentlemanly bearing, although he had been spoilt by his mother and indulged in every caprice by the subservient dependants in the castle. In reality, he possessed none of the qualities of his age; he had neither the good impulses, the warm heart nor the natural enthusiasm of youth. He was, in fact, a sprig of effete nobility, the product to be expected from the union of two such individuals as his parents; brought up to regard all who approached him as inferiors, without pity for the poor; learned enough in matters of sport, racing, hunting, tennis and croquet, but almost entirely ignorant of all besides, notwithstanding the succession of tutors who had vainly undertaken the task of his education.

Lord Ashton was a prime specimen of the young gentlemen of high birth who are destined to become complete imbeciles, while retaining the distinction that marks their class. The number of these peculiarly English types is diminishing, but it is still considerable.

The matter in question was explained to him, and he recalled to mind that he had seen his father place the letter-case behind his back on one of the carriage cushions on leaving N — .

Are you sure, Ashton?’ asked his mother.

‘Quite sure, and I don’t think it could have fallen out of the carriage.’

‘Then it must have been in the carriage when we returned to the Castle,’ remarked Lady Trelingar, ‘and we can only conclude that one of the servants has taken it.’

Lord Ashton was entirely of his mother’s opinion. He had not the slightest confidence in these fellows, who are always spies even when they are not thieves, but are generally both, and with whom people of the Trelingar quality ought to be empowered to deal summarily, and would be, were it not for the detestable modern spirit. For his part, he only wished he had a footman ‘all to himself, or a little groom at least; he would soon let him know what a master meant!

After some edifying talk in this tone, the worthy trio arrived at the conclusion that the letter-case had been stolen, that the thief could be none other than one of the servants, and that an inquiry must be instituted, and those upon whom suspicion should light be handed over at once to police custody.

Thereupon Lord Ashton summoned John, and a few minutes later the steward, Mr Scarlett, stood in the august presence of his employer.

Mr Scarlett was a plausible and cunning person, who successfully assumed an air of benevolence, while he ill-treated everybody over whom his power extended. He was cordially detested by all the household of Trelingar Castle; for, under cover of a mild manner and gentle tones, he exercised a grinding tyranny, without anger, without arrogance, caressing while he scratched.

The story of the letter-case was told to Scarlett. The article had undoubtedly been placed on the carriage cushion, and ought to have been found in that place. Such was the opinion of Lord and Lady Trelingar, and therefore it became the conviction of Mr Scarlett. To suggest that the letter-case might have fallen out on the road would have been disrespectful to the Marquis, and the steward did not make any suggestion of the kind; he merely ventured to 'suppose' that the papers contained in the case were of great value. Indeed, how could they be otherwise, seeing that they belonged to his lordship?

'Yes, there has been theft — theft,' repeated the Marquis, 'and the papers, to say nothing of the money, are most important. They establish my rights in the matter of this claim made by the parish.'

The attitude of the steward was a complete model of indignation, zeal, fand servility, as he stood, with downcast eyes and raised hands which trembled at the mere mention of such iniquity as that implied by a parish claim against the noble lord of the soil!

'The theft can only have been committed — ' he began, softly, and with hesitation.

'By one of our people,' interrupted Lord Ashton, shaking the riding-whip he carried in a truly feudal fashion.

‘You will set an inquiry on foot at once,’ commanded the Marquis in his most pompous tones, ‘so as to discover the guilty party or parties, and you will send for a constable on the spot.’

‘If the inquiry should not be successful?’ asked the steward in a timid and deprecatory manner.

‘The entire household shall be dismissed, Scarlett; every one of them,’ was Lord Trelingar’s reply.

That the letter-case had fallen out of the carriage Mr Scarlett did not entertain the smallest doubt, but this consideration did not weigh with him. A theft had to be established in order that the judgement of the Marquis might be confirmed; it was for him to establish the theft and to find the thief. After a few more words, he left the room and was about to proceed to the nearest police station, in order to secure the services of a constable (for he by no means intended to charge the servants indiscriminately with theft, unsupported by the potent symbol of the law, after the high and mighty fashion dictated by the Marquis), when his purpose was frustrated by an unexpected incident. He was crossing the yard to order a horse to be saddled for his use, when a bell in the wall was rung, the latch of a side door was lifted, and a boy, standing in the aperture, took off his cap deferentially to the steward.

The boy was Foundling Mick.

CHAPTER 16

IN SERVICE

Nearly four months had elapsed since the never-to-be-forgotten day on which the adopted child of the MacCarthys had quitted Kirwan’s Farm. All that had happened to Foundling Mick during that period may be related in a brief space.

It was already growing dark when Mick turned his back forever on the ruins of his home. Having failed to come up with the MacCarthys and the others on the road to Tralee, he thought at first of bending his steps towards Limerick, whither the constables had, he concluded, been ordered to conduct their prisoners. To find the family, and to rejoin them and share their fate, whatever that might be, was Mick’s clearly indicated object. He was too young to work for them at present, in the sense of earning money to assist them, but later on he might hope to find profitable employment, and still later, when he should have made his fortune, for he would do that, he would restore them to the welfare and comfort which he had enjoyed at the farm.

In the meantime, on that lonely road, in a region waste and desolated by poverty, forsaken by the miserable creatures whom it could not feed, with the cold, dark night coming on apace, Mick had never before felt so solitary. It is rarely that children of his age are not bound by some tie, if not to a family home, at least to a charitable establishment where they are sheltered and brought up; but what was he any more than a leaf plucked from a tree and flung down upon the roadway? There was no one to take pity on him; if he should not succeed in finding the MacCarthys, what was to become of him? And if he did, and that they were not to be imprisoned, but should make up their minds, like so many others, to immigrate to the New World, what was he to do then?

Our little lad resolved to journey on in the direction of Limerick. He was unacquainted with the road, and the evening was very cold, although calm. He trudged on for two miles without meeting a living soul, and then the previous fatigue of his walk to Tralee told suddenly upon him; his knees bent under him, his feet stumbled in the ruts, his sight grew dim. But Mick would not give in; he struggled along somehow for half a mile, and then coming to a cross-road, and not knowing which direction to take, his heart and his strength failed him simultaneously, and he sank down with a pitiful moan on a patch of grass by the wayside. Almost immediately afterwards the distant barking of a dog caught his dull ear, then the sound came nearer, and presently a dog ran round the turn of the road, his nose in the searching position, his tongue protruding, and his eyes shining like a cat’s. With three or four bounds, the dog was upon the boy, but not to devour, only to caress him, and make him warm by lying down at his side.

Foundling Mick soon recovered his senses. He opened his eyes, felt that a warm tongue was licking his ice-cold hands, and murmured, ‘Ranger! Ranger!’

How eagerly did Mick return the joyful greeting of his faithful companion at Kirwan’s Farm, while his shivering body regained warmth from the welcome contact of his four-footed friend! He felt and said to himself that he was no longer alone in the world. He and Ranger together would seek the MacCarthys. He had no doubt that Ranger had wanted to accompany them after the eviction; but why had he returned? No doubt because the land agent and the myrmidons of the law had driven him away with stones and blows. In fact this was exactly what had occurred, and Ranger, thus roughly repulsed, had returned towards the farm. Now Mick would be able to follow the track of the police; he might safely trust to the dog’s instinct for rejoining the evicted family.

He began to talk with Ranger as he had been in the habit of doing during their long hours on the pastureland at Kirwan’s Farm. Ranger answered him in his own fashion, uttering short barks easy to interpret.

‘Come on, my doggie, come on,’ said Micky, ‘let us go.’

Ranger darted off with a bound in front of his young master on one of the two roads.

But the dog, remembering the ill-treatment he had received from the escort of the prisoners and the others, had no desire to take the road to Limerick; accordingly, he selected that which lies alongside the boundary of County Kerry, and leads to one of the townlets of County Cork. Foundling Mick was unconsciously increasing the distance between himself and the MacCarthys, and when day dawned, he stopped, worn out with fatigue and half dead with hunger, to ask for food and shelter at a public house a dozen miles south-east of the farm. He had just fifteen shillings in his pocket, a sum on which one cannot do much travelling, even with great economy, when there are two to be fed, and Foundling Mick was forced by his exhausted condition to remain 24 hours in the garret which was his sleeping-place and Ranger’s.

In answer to his questions the publican said he knew nothing about the MacCarthys, and, indeed, evictions had been so numerous during that winter that no attention had been paid to the proceedings at Kirwan’s Farm.

When Mick resumed his journey he still followed Ranger along the road to N — , in a bewildered kind of way, and did not discover his mistake until his little store was so much diminished that he knew he should have to beg his way to Limerick, and this he was resolved he would not do. He was a smart little fellow, but he was only a child, after all; in the few days that elapsed while he wandered ignorantly farther and farther from his goal, he lost the sense of time and the power of hope. To get to a town, a real town, where he might learn something of his lost friends, where, if going farther should be impossible for want of money, he might get some trifling occupation, became his only distinct idea. As he painfully toiled along the dreary high road, his great fear was that notice might be taken of his solitary condition and his tender age, that he might be questioned, stopped, and taken to a workhouse or a poor school. Any and every hardship of a wandering life rather than either of these degrading alternatives for Foundling Mick! Besides, either would mean his being separated from Ranger, and that — never, never!

‘No, no!’ he said, pulling the dog’s big head down upon his knees. ‘We could not live without each other; could we, Ranger?’

As plainly as ever such a sentiment was expressed Ranger replied, with eyes and tail and dog-talk, that the thing was morally and absolutely impossible. It would be tedious and monotonous to dwell on the boy’s wanderings, and on the sinking of his hopes. With his arrival at N — the vision of rejoining the MacCarthys faded from his fancy, to return no more. He had just sixpence in the world; he was once more ‘lost’. We may pass over the long weeks of his sojourn there, and resume his history in the spring. He managed to live, by selling matches in the street, sometimes, and by the doing of odd jobs in the small farms and stable yards of the place. He was not molested, he even found a few friends, as humble and almost as poor as himself.

If any one of that small number had been in a position to observe the boy closely on the 16th of April, he might have been struck by the change in his countenance and manner since the preceding day. Foundling Mick’s face was overcast with anxiety, and he looked about him furtively, as though he were beset by a fear that he was watched, as he started from his poor lodging in a loft over a little chandler’s shop, early in the morning, and took the road that led to Cork.

He walked as quickly as he could, and with an impatient gait as though he would fain have run, and went straight on, eyes front, heeding nothing external to his concentrated thoughts. Of course he was accompanied by Ranger, but this time the dog did not lead his young master, at whom he occasionally glanced with wistful and glistening eyes.

It was nearly noon when Foundling Mick rang the bell at the door in the wall of the stable yard at Trelingar Castle.

Scarlett was just preparing to start on his errand to K — . In the yard were Lord Ashton’s dogs, and those animals, apparently displeased by the aspect of Foundling Mick, barked at him furiously.

Mick, who was afraid lest a battle, in which Ranger would be at a disadvantage, should ensue on this hostile manifestation, made a sign to that obedient animal, and Ranger trotted back and retired behind some bushes in the vicinity of the open gate.

On catching sight of the boy, Scarlett called to him to come near.

‘What do you want?’ he asked, harshly. Mr Scarlett, who could be all amiability to grown-up persons who were not afraid of him, made it a point to be rough with children.

But a loud voice did not frighten our little lad. He had been used to such voices when he was with Mrs Murphy, with Hornpipe, and at the poor school. He took off his cap respectfully, but before he could answer Mr Scarlett’s question he was shouted at again.

‘Will you tell me what it is you want here? If it’s to beg you’re come, just be off with yourself.’

While Scarlett was speaking the dogs continued to bark, and Foundling Mick had some difficulty in keeping clear of the horse’s heels.

‘I have not come to beg, sir,’ answered the boy, ‘I never have begged, and — ’

‘I suppose you would not take anything if you got the offer,’ said Scarlett, ironically.

‘No! Not from anybody.’

‘Then what brings you here?’

‘I have come to speak to Lord Trelingar.’

‘To his lordship?’

‘Yes, to his lordship.’

‘And you imagine that he will see you?’

‘I do, because it is important.’

‘Important!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘What is it, then?’

‘I cannot tell that to anybody except Lord Trelingar.’

‘Then you may be off, his lordship is not at home.’

‘I will wait.’

‘You won’t wait here, anyway.’

‘I will come back.’

‘You can’t speak to his lordship,’ growled the steward. ‘I’m the person to be spoken to, and if you don’t tell me what you’ve got to say — ’

‘I can’t, sir, indeed I can’t. I can only tell it to Lord Trelingar, and I beg — ’

‘Get out, you vagabond!’ shouted the steward, threatening the boy with his whip. ‘Off with you, or I’ll set the dogs on you!’

At the raised voice of the steward, the dogs began to approach, to the terror of Mick, lest Ranger should abandon his shelter and come to the rescue, thus complicating the position.

At this moment Lord Ashton appeared at the far end of the yard, and, coming up to the group, asked what was to do there.

‘It’s a boy, begging, my lord,’ answered Scarlett.

‘I am not begging!’ repeated Mick.

A tramp.’

‘Be off, you scoundrel,’ cried Lord Ashton, ‘or I will set my dogs on you!’

At that moment the Marquis appeared on the scene, and perceiving that Mr Scarlett had not yet set out for K — , he inquired into the cause of this delay, and of the noise that had assailed his aristocratic ears.

‘I beg pardon, my lord,’ began the steward, ‘this young vagabond, a beggar, insists — ’

‘I tell you again, sir,’ persisted Mick, ‘that I am not a beggar.’

‘What does the boy want?’ asked the Marquis.

‘To speak to your lordship.’

Lord Trelingar stepped back, struck a feudal attitude, and drawing himself up, said haughtily, —

‘You want to speak to me. Speak, then.’

‘My lord, you went yesterday to N — ’

‘Yes.’

In the afternoon?’

‘Yes.’

The steward was utterly astonished. Here was the ‘tramp’ questioning the Marquis, and his lordship actually answering the tramp.

My lord,’ said the boy, ‘have you not lost a letter-case?’

‘Yes, that is the fact. Well?’

‘I found it on the N — road, and I have brought it back to you.’

With this he held out to Lord Trelingar the article which had been the cause of so much trouble by its disappearance, and the origin of so much unfounded suspicion of innocent persons. Thus, at no matter what cost to his dignity and self-esteem, the Marquis was proved to be in fault, the accusation against the servants was brought to nought, and, to Mr Scarlett’s profound disgust, his expedition to K — became unnecessary.

Lord Trelingar took the letter-case, which had his name and address printed inside, from the hand of Foundling Mick, and proceeded to examine its contents. Having ascertained that the papers and the bank-note were intact, he addressed the boy.

‘It was you who picked up the letter-case?’

‘Yes, my lord.’

‘And you opened it, no doubt?’

‘I did, my lord, to see who it belonged to.’

‘You saw that there was a bank-note in it, but perhaps you did not know its value?’

‘It is a bank-note for a hundred pounds,’ answered Foundling Mick without hesitation.

‘Ah! you know that, but you did not think of keeping it for yourself?’

‘I am not a thief, my lord, any more than I am a beggar,’ replied Mick proudly.

Lord Trelingar had closed the letter-case, and carefully transferred the bank-note to his breast pocket. The boy bowed and made a few steps backward, before his lordship, who had shown no sense of the propriety of Mick’s conduct, said, —

‘What reward do you ask for having brought back this letter-case?’

‘Give him a few shillings,’ said Lord Ashton.

‘Or a few pence; it’s as much as his trouble’s worth,’ added the steward, quickly.

Foundling Mick, indignant at such bargaining for a reward he had not demanded, remarked, —

‘Neither shillings nor pence are due to me,’ and walked away.

‘Stop!’ Lord Trelingar called after him, and the boy paused, but did not re-approach the speaker.

‘How old are you?’

‘Ten and a half.’

‘And your father and mother?’

‘I have neither father nor mother.’

‘Your relations?’

‘I have no relations.’

‘Where do you come from?’

‘From Kirwan’s Farm, where I lived for four years until four months ago.’

‘Why did you leave it?’

‘Because the farmer was hunted out by the police.’

‘Is not that one of Lord C — ’s farms?’ asked the Marquis, turning to Scarlett.

‘Yes, my lord,’ replied the steward.

‘And what are you going to do now?’ inquired his lordship.

‘I am going back to N — where I earn my living.’

‘If you like to remain at the Castle, some kind of work can be found for you.’

This was a charitable offer; yet it was the pride and not the heart of Lord Trelingar that suggested it. Foundling Mick understood this perfecdy, and instead of replying at once, he paused to reflect. He was not at all attracted by either the Marquis or his son, and the rough reception he had had from Scarlett made the latter odious to him.

Then there was Ranger. They might take him into their service, but they would not have Ranger, and he could not make up his mind to part with the comrade of his good and evil days.

And yet, was not the proposal of the Marquis a stroke of luck for the poor boy who had no certainty of being able to make a livelihood of the humblest description? His reason told him that he ought to close with it, and that if he returned to N — he might repent his decision.

True, the dog was embarrassing, but he should find an opportunity of speaking on that matter. They would surely let Ranger in, if only as a watch dog, a capacity in which the faithful animal was eminently admirable. And then, he would not be employed at the Castle without some pay, and by economising —

‘Well, have you made up your mind?’ growled the steward, who would gladly have seen him sent off about his business without more ado.

‘How much should I be paid?’ asked Mick, boldly, the practical side of him coming uppermost.

‘Two pounds a month,’ answered the Marquis.

Two pounds a month! This seemed an immense sum to Mick, and indeed it was large wages for a child of his age.

‘I thank your lordship,’ said the boy, with all his native courtesy; ‘I accept your lordship’s offer, and will do my best to please you.’

And thus it was that Foundling Mick took his place on that very day among the servants in the Castle, with the assent of the Marchioness, and a week later was raised to the rank and dignity of groom or little ‘tiger’ to Lord Ashton.

And Ranger? what had become of him during that week? Had his master ventured to present him at the Casde? No, he would have been too ill received. The fact was that Lord Ashton possessed three dogs, and loved them almost as well as he loved himself. To live with them satisfied alike his tastes and his intelligence. The dogs were highly bred Scotch terriers, and excessively ill tempered; they tolerated no intruders, and their instinct towards their own kind was aggressive and combative. Therefore Ranger hung about the place at a more than respectful distance, and Mick brought him food at night, saved from his own allowance. Both the dog and his master grew thin under this arrangement; but, no matter, they were not quite parted, and better days, in which they should grow fat together, might be in store for the faithful pair.

From this time a different life began for the young hero of this melancholy history. We need not refer to the years passed with Mrs Murphy and at the poor school, but only draw the comparison with his existence at Kirwan’s Farm. There he was one of the MacCarthy family; the yoke of servitude did not gall him; but here, at the Castle, he was regarded with the most complete indifference. The Marquis looked upon him in the light of one of the ‘poor’s boxes’ into which he dropped an alms at stated periods; the Marchioness regarded him as no more than an additional animal in the place, but not at all as a pet one; and to Lord Ashton he represented a toy which had been given to him without any caution against breaking it. Scarlett formed an exception to this negative rule; he had resolved to testify his antipathy to Foundling Mick by incessandy molesting him, and he found plenty of opportunity. As for the English servants, they looked on the foundling whom his lordship had brought into the Castle as entirely beneath them, and declined to associate, beyond the inevitable meals in common, with such ‘scum’; making him feel their contempt in every small detail of his service. Foundling Mick made no complaint, returned no answer, but performed his tasks to the very best of his ability. But oh! how thankful he was when night came, and after he had executed his master’s last orders, he took refuge in the little room which he had all to himself.

Nevertheless, in the midst of all this ill-will and indifference, there was one woman who took an interest in Foundling Mick. She was only a laundress in the service of the Castle, named Kate Brady. Kate was 50 years of age, and had always lived on the domain; she would probably end her days there, unless Mr Scarlett should turn her out. This he had already attempted to do, for Irish Kate was not so fortunate as to please him. To this good woman Mick would sometimes confide his trouble when he had suffered any special slight or spite from the servants.

‘Patience, patience!’ Kate would say to him. ‘Don’t mind what they say. The best among them is no great things, and I don’t know one that would have brought back the letter-case.’

Very likely the laundress was right, and these persons looked upon Foundling Mick as a fool for his honesty.

Fortified by his one friend, Mick was not unhappy, although he had to comply with every caprice of his young master. This state of things would last so long as the plaything had not ceased to please; but the young gentleman was so spoilt, selfish, and whimsical that it was hard to tell for how long that condition would hold good. Children always tire of their playthings, and throw them away, even if they do not break them. Foundling Mick, however, had no notion of allowing himself to be smashed. He regarded his situation at Trelingar only as a temporary expedient; he had accepted it in lieu of something better, hoping that a farther opportunity of gaining his livelihood would soon occur. His youthful ambition rose above the functions of a ‘tiger’. His pride rebelled against servitude, and was humiliated by the effacement of himself in the presence of Lord Ashton, whose superior he felt himself to be. Yes, his superior, although Lord Ashton had lessons in Latin history and other things. Professors came to instruct him, trying to fill him with knowledge as a jug might be filled with water. Foundling Mick knew nothing about these fine things, but he knew how to reflect. At ten years old he was a thinker. He appraised this young sprig of nobility at his true value, and sometimes blushed at the service he was bound to do for him. How deeply he regretted the salutary and invigorating labour of the farm, and his life with the MacCarthys, of whom he could hear nothing.

An opportunity soon arose for putting the friendship of the laundress, Kate Brady, to the test.

It is well to mention here that the dispute between the parish and Lord Trelingar had been settled in favour of the latter, owing to the production of the paper which had been restored by Foundling Mick; but the boy’s action seemed to be quite forgotten now, and, indeed, why should any gratitude be felt towards him?

May, June and July had passed away, and Ranger had been fed somehow; he had also shown great prudence in keeping clear of the dangers of the park. Foundling Mick had carefully stored up, and with equal care inscribed in his pocketbook, the large sum of six pounds sterling, his wages for three months.

During those three months the Marquis and Marchioness of Trelingar had been occupied in receiving and returning the visits of the great folk of the county. A portion of the summer had gone by, and the period had arrived at which the Marquis usually visited Scodand and his wife’s family. This year, however, the noble family contemplated an excursion to the celebrated Lakes of Killarney, as a preliminary to the autumnal tour, and their departure was fixed for the 3rd of August.

If Foundling Mick hoped that he was to be left at the Castle, for a short spell of leisure and peace, he deceived himself. Lord Ashton would by no means dispense with the services of his litde groom. Then arose a grave consideration for poor Mick. What would become of Ranger? Who would take care of him? Who would feed him?

He decided on taking Kate Brady into his confidence, and the good woman at once settled the matter for him by promising to take charge of Ranger, unknown to anybody.

‘Don’t be uneasy, my child,’ said Kate, ‘I’m a’most as fond of your dog as you are yourself, and nothing shall happen to him while you are away.’

Thereupon Foundling Mick kissed Kate Brady with fervent gratitude, and on the evening before his departure he placed Ranger in her charge, and bade farewell to the faithful animal with a comparatively light heart.

CHAPTER 17

A YOUNG ENGLISH NOBLEMAN

Our readers will readily excuse a hiatus in the narrative of Foundling Mick's adventures at the point which that narrative has reached. The district of Killarney and its famous lakes are too well known to require, or indeed to bear, description, and a record of the tour of the noble travellers in the picturesque region to which some of the most poetic legends and the most harrowing facts in Irish history, both ancient and modern, are attached, would be only a tedious interruption of a story which boasts of only a humble hero. The travellers did not leave their several natures behind them at Trelingar Castle; their respective characteristics were freely displayed everywhere they went, and thoroughly appreciated by the intelligent people, who were quite capable of 'taking the length of the foot' of the Marquis, the Marchioness, and the lordling. Of course they were received everywhere with well-simulated respect, which was in many instances even servile, but only the few persons of rank approaching to theirs failed to note the emptiness of their heads, the coldness of their hearts, the narrowness of their minds, and the arrogance of their pretensions as those qualities deserved. They had one recommendation only; they could, and did, spend money in the places through which they passed; for their own gratification, it is true, but still the money was actually put in circulation, and that was a good thing! As for themselves, the scenes of beauty, whether mournful or majestic, the interesting people, the suggestive spectacle of the lavish loveliness of nature in sad contrast with the poverty and suffering of humanity, said nothing to these soulless personages, who visited Killarney because it was 'the thing' to do so. If the truth concerning this expedition is to be told, as it may be told in a few words, the one individual of the party who saw, admired, understood, and enjoyed the objects which it disclosed to eyes endowed with the true faculty of seeing, was poor Foundling Mick. To the nameless deserted child, the ill-used waif, the twice-orphaned exile from Kirwan's Farm, the little victim of the capricious tyranny and bullying of the ill-conditioned cub who was heir to all the Trelingar greatness, the voice of Nature spoke, on him she smiled, and to her his seared and timid heart was opened.

We pass over the incidents of the excursion, and take up the thread of our little lad's story on the auspicious day that witnessed the return of the Marquis and Marchioness with their hopeful son and heir to Trelingar Castle.

They were very glad to be done with the traditional excursion to the Lakes of Killarney and the mountainous regions of Kerry.

'It wasn't worth the trouble and fatigue,' said her ladyship, and his lordship echoed the sentiment.

As for Foundling Mick, he returned with his head full of pictures and of remembrance. His first care was to inquire of Kate Brady for news of Ranger.

Ranger was well. He came punctually every evening to the appointed place, where the kind-hearted laundress waited for him with his food. That same evening the boy and his canine friend met again; the interview was most affectionate on both sides, and they parted with poignant regret. Prudence was necessary. Ranger had been seen more than once in the neighbourhood of the Castle, and the dogs had signified the presence of an intruder on those occasions.

The Castle resumed its usual course of existence — the vegetative existence which suited such exalted personages as its owners. Lord and Lady Trelingar were to go to Scotland in September, and to London for the winter. The monotonous routine of visits began again. Foundling Mick, who had nothing to do with that side of life at the Castle, found his own little share of another side of it anything but pleasant. He was continually exposed to the malicious devices of Scarlett, who found a ready-to-hand victim in the friendless boy. On the other hand he had no respite from the whims of Lord Ashton, and he was laughed at by all the servants, indoor and outdoor, when they saw him treated like a toy jerked by wires, perpetually called, dismissed, commanded and countermanded. All this humiliated the boy profoundly. At night, when he was at last safe in his little room, he gave himself up to reflecting upon the position into which his extreme poverty had forced him. What would his post as 'tiger' to Lord Ashton lead to? Nothing. He was made for something better. To be only a servant, a machine made to obey, was unspeakably repugnant to his independent spirit; it hampered the ambition that he felt within himself. At least, when he lived at the farm, it was on the footing of equality. He was regarded as the child of the house. Where were now Granny's caresses, the affection of Mary and Kitty, the encouraging kindness of MacCarthy and his sons? He prized far more the pebbles he had received each night, and had buried amid the ruins of the farm, than the sovereigns with which his slavery was now paid by the month. While he lived at Kirwan's Farm he was learning, he was working; he was gaining the means of making a livelihood for himself one day. Here, nothing but a distasteful task without an outlook; of submission to the whims of a vainglorious, spoilt, selfish, ignorant youth. He was constantly occupied in putting in order — not the books, there were none — but everything in the young lord's disorderly rooms.

And then, the young lord’s cabriolet was Mick’s despair! Oh, that cabriolet! At the risk of overturning the vehicle into a ditch, Lord Ashton seemed to take delight in driving recklessly on the worst roads in the county in order to swing the little groom, holding on by the straps at the back, from side to side more violently. The dog-cart was less of an instrument of torture to Mick; in it he could sit bolt upright and steady, in the regulation attitude with his arms crossed.

There was, however, hardly a day on which the cabriolet experience had not to be gone through. In the long drives in the Trelingar district, the dashing vehicle with its smart attendant would pass by groups of ragged children, running barefooted on the stony highway, with outstretched hands, and the too familiar beggar’s whine: ‘Give us a ha’penny!’ At the sight Foundling Mick’s heart swelled; he had known such misery himself. Lord Ashton replied to the entreaties of the poor creatures by jeering at them, and threatening them with his whip, while his ‘boy’ longed to throw a few of the coveted ha’pence among them. But this he was too much afraid of his heartless young master to do.

Once, however, the temptation proved too strong for him. A little girl, with fair curls and blue eyes, a pretty child despite her rags and her lean, half-starved body, looked piteously at him as the dog-cart passed her, and he threw her a penny from his seat at the back. The child picked up the coin with a cry of joy, and Lord Ashton heard that unusual sound. He had caught his groom *in flagrante delicto* of charity!

‘How dared you do that, boy?’ he asked, angrily.

‘My lord, the little girl — she was so glad — it was only a penny.’

‘Just what you had thrown to yourself, when you ran the roads, eh?’

‘No, never,’ protested Foundling Mick, revolting against this reiterated charge of mendicancy.

‘Why did you give that beggar a penny?’

‘She looked at me — I looked at her.’

‘I forbid you to look at the beggar children on the roads. Mind that, now.’

And Foundling Mick had to obey, but he was exasperated by the hardness of heart of this scion of a noble house. He did not again venture to give a penny to any poor creature in passing, but early in September an incident occurred which caused him to depart from the wholesome path of caution.

On that particular day, Lord Ashton had ordered his dog-cart to go to K — . As usual, Foundling Mick accompanied him, sitting back-to-back with his lordship, with folded arms, and motionless as a statue. The dog-cart reached the little town without accident; and the driver made the horse prance and foam at the mouth, much to the admiration of the idle spectators. Lord Ashton got out and went into two or three shops, while Mick stood right in front of the horses head, to the wonder of the gaping street boys, whose envy was excited by the young groom in his trim livery.

When Lord Ashton had sufficiently displayed his equipage and himself in the town, he took the homeward road, making the horse go at a foot-pace, with all sorts of equine airs and graces. At a short distance the dog-cart encountered a tribe of beggar children who went through the usual routine of useless supplication, but on this occasion, being encouraged by the slow movement, they followed closely behind the dog-cart. Being presently deterred by the backward sweep of Lord Ashton’s ever ready and merciless whip, however, all but one dropped off and stood in the road disconsolate.

That one persisted. He was a little boy of seven, full of intelligence and high spirits, truly Irish in that particular. Slow as the pace of the horse was, the little fellow had to run over the stones, which cut his bare feet, in order to keep up with the dog-cart. Still he persisted, braving the menace of the whip, and offering a bunch of heather for the sorely needed ha’penny.

Foundling Mick, in alarm lest the child should be hurt, made urgent signs to him to desist, but in vain; the little boy still ran after the dog-cart. Lord Ashton had, of course, ordered him off several times, but he persisted, and ran along so close to the wheels that he was in danger of being crushed.

A touch of the reins would have started the horse at the trot, but that did not suit Lord Ashton’s humour, he chose to go at a walking-pace, and at a walking-pace he went. At last he grew weary of the child’s importunity, and struck at him with the whip. The long lash, ill-directed, caught round the neck of the little boy, who was dragged along, half-strangled for a few seconds; then with a pull the lash was loosed and he fell back upon the road.

Foundling Mick jumped off the dog-cart and ran to the child, who was screaming with pain. A red line encircled his neck. Our little lad’s heart swelled with indignation; he would have felt a fierce joy in flinging himself upon Lord Ashton, who might have paid dearly for his cruelty, although he was five years older than his groom.

‘Come here, boy!’ he shouted. He had stopped his horse.

‘The child, my lord?’

‘Come here, this instant!’ he shouted again, and flourished his whip. ‘Come! or I’ll flog you too!’

It was fortunate that he did not put his threat into execution, for there is no saying what might have happened had he done so. Foundling Mick had sufficient self-control to master his feelings, and having pushed a few pence into the pocket of the little fellow’s ragged jacket, he got up behind the dog-cart.

‘The first time you presume to get down without orders,’ said Lord Ashton, ‘I shall first give you a good horsewhipping, and then turn you away!’

Mick’s eyes flashed, but he made no reply. The dog-cart rolled rapidly out of sight, leaving the little boy on the roadside, quite consoled, and jingling his pennies in his hand.

From that day forward Lord Ashton’s evil instincts prompted him to make his groom’s life as hard as possible. Every vexation and exaction was heaped on Mick; no humiliation was spared him. All that he had formerly had to suffer physically he now had to suffer morally, and as a matter of fact, he was no less miserable than he had formerly been in Mrs Murphy’s cabin, or under Hornpipe’s tyranny. He constantly thought of leaving Trelingar Castle, but whither was he to go? He had heard nothing of the MacCarthys, and even if he could rejoin them what would they be able to do for him, homeless and destitute as they were? Nevertheless, he was resolved not to remain in the service of Lord Ashton.

Mick had another pressing cause of anxiety. The family at the Castle would soon be leaving Trelingar for Scotland, and ultimately England; if he should be taken with them, he must relinquish all hope of finding the MacCarthys. Then, again, there was Ranger. What would become of him?

‘I will keep him,’ said Kate Brady, one day, ‘and take good care of him.’

‘I know you would, for you are kind,’ answered Mick. ‘I could trust him to you, and I would pay for his food.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Kate, ‘I did not mean that. I’m very fond of the dog.’

‘No matter, he must not cost you anything; but, if I go away, I shall not see him again for the whole winter or, perhaps, ever.’

‘Why, my dear? When you come back — ’

‘When I come back, Kate? How do I know I’ll ever come back? How do I know they won’t send me away, over there, where they’re going, or maybe I’ll go away of my own accord — ’

‘Go away?’

‘Yes — on chance — straight before me, as I have always done.’

‘Poor boy! Poor boy!’

‘I wonder, Kate, whether it wouldn’t be the best thing I could do, if I set off out of this at once with Ranger, and looked for work among the farmers, in a village or near a town, not too far off, on the sea coast?’

‘Why, child, you’re not eleven!’

‘No, Kate, not quite eleven yet. Ah, if I was only twelve or thirteen, I should be big, I’d have strong arms, I’d soon find work to do. How long of coming the years are when one is poor!’

‘And long of going, too,’ might have been Kate Brady’s answer.

Such was the tone of Mick’s reflections, and he knew not what course to take. A fortuitous circumstance speedily put an end to his uncertainty.

The 13th of September arrived, and Lord and Lady Trelingar were to leave the Castle within a fortnight. Preparations for the departure had already begun, and Foundling Mick was anxious to discover whether Scarlett was to remain in charge of the Casde during the winter. He soon learned that the steward would be left there, and immediately came to the conclusion that poor Ranger’s presence in the vicinity would be revealed, and Kate Brady would be forbidden to keep him in her quarters. She would have to feed him in secret, as she had hitherto done. Ah! had Mr Scarlett only known that the stray dog he had noticed once or twice, belonged to the little groom, with what glee he would have told Lord Ashton, and with what relish that worthy young aristocrat would have put a bullet into Ranger.

On this unlucky day Ranger had strayed into the neighbourhood of the Castle, contrary to his custom, and in the afternoon, by an evil chance, one of Lord Ashton’s dogs espied him at some distance. Immediately on perceiving each other, the two dogs manifested their hostile sentiments by growling. There was a racial feud between them, the lordly dog could not but entertain a deep disdain of the peasant dog; but, being of an evil nature, the former was the more aggressive of the two. No sooner had he observed Ranger standing motionless on the edge of a clump of trees than he dashed down upon him, with distended jaws and fangs ready for use.

Ranger let the terrier get within half a length of him, watching him askance so as not to be taken by surprise, tail down, and planted firmly on his legs. Suddenly, after two or three more barks, the lordly dog flung himself on Ranger and bit him in the thigh, whereupon Ranger sprang at his enemy’s throat and bowled him over in an instant. This skirmish was not effected without ear-piercing howls. The two other dogs shut up in the yard joined in the concert, and Lord Ashton came running out of the yard gate, accompanied by Scarlett, to behold the terrier choking in the hold of Ranger’s terrible teeth. He could only scream and stamp with rage; he dared not go to the aid of his dog lest the victor should turn on him. Ranger saw the young lord, finished the terrier with one more snap of his jaw, took his teeth out of the dog’s neck, and scampered off through the trees. Then Lord Ashton and Scarlett advanced, but when they reached the scene of the crime the lordly terrier was dead.

‘Scarlett, Scarlett! My dog is dead!’ cried Lord Ashton. ‘That brute has choked my dog! Where is he? Come! We shall find him, and I will kill him!’

The steward was not by any means disposed to pursue the slayer of the terrier; nor did he find it at all difficult to restrain the ardour of that defunct animal’s master, who was, as a matter of fact, terrified at the idea that Ranger might return in an offensive mood.

‘Take care, my lord, take care!’ said Scarlett. ‘Don’t attempt to go after that fierce brute. The men will catch him some other day, never fear.’

‘Whose dog is he?’

‘Nobody’s. There are lots of those curs going about.’

‘Then he’ll escape.’

‘Not likely, my lord. That dog has been lurking about the Castle for weeks past.’

‘For weeks, Scarlett! And I have not been told, and he has not been got rid of! And now, you see, he has killed my terrier!’

It must be admitted that there was just a streak of good in the nature of this selfish and unfeeling lad; he cared for his dogs, and especially for his favourite, Rangers victim, as he did not and could not care for any human creature. It was in a whirl of mingled grief and fury that Lord Ashton returned to the courtyard of the Castle and gave orders for the dead terrier to be brought thither. Fortunately, his lordships ‘tiger’ had not witnessed this scene; for he might have allowed the secret of his intimacy with the assassin to escape him, and Ranger, on seeing Mick, might have run to him and made a compromising demonstration. But it was not long before he learned what had happened, for Lord Ashton filled Trelingar Castle with his lamentations. The Marquis and the Marchioness offered him their best ‘compliments of condolence’, but he refused to be comforted, and vowed a cruel vengeance upon the vile brute to whose base-born audacity he owed his bereavement. The obsequies of the terrier were performed with an absurd exaggeration of respect, and when the last spadeful of earth had been replaced upon the dog’s grave in a shady corner of the park, Lord Ashton re-entered the house with a dark scowl upon his face and shut himself up in his room for the whole evening.

It is easy to imagine the uneasiness and the forebodings of Foundling Mick. Before he went to bed, he contrived to see Kate Brady (who fully shared his anxiety for the fate of Ranger) in secret.

‘You must be on your guard, my boy,’ she said earnesdy, ‘and above all take care that they don’t find out that he is your dog. It would all come down upon you, and I don’t know what might happen.’

Foundling Mick thought little enough about the possibility of his being held responsible for the death of the terrier. He was thinking only that now it would be very hard, if not impossible, for him to continue to take care of Ranger. The steward would keep a look out for him in the neighbourhood of the Castle, and even though the sagacious creature was to keep out of sight successfully, how should he get to Kate at night, and how could she contrive to feed him secretly?

Our lad passed a wakeful night; he was far more anxious about Ranger than on his own account, and the course of his reflections led him to consider whether he had not better leave Lord Ashton's service on the morrow. After his thoughtful fashion he examined the matter coolly, weighing the for and against, and finally decided on putting the project that had occupied his mind for some weeks into execution.

He did not fall asleep until three o'clock in the morning. On awaking, he jumped out of bed in great surprise that he had not been aroused by the imperious summons of his master's bell, and instantly took up the thread of his thoughts. Looked at by daylight his decision remained unaltered. He would leave the Castle that very day, assigning as his reason that he felt himself unsuited to the occupation of a groom. No one had the right to prevent his departure, and he resigned himself beforehand to any insult that his demand might provoke. Then, in the prevision of a rough and immediate expulsion, Foundling Mick carefully dressed himself in the clothes he had worn at the farm, for he had preserved them, and although a good deal the worse for wear, the garments were clean and decent. He put into his pocket the accumulated wages of his three months' service; but it was his purpose, after he had respectfully informed Lord Trelingar of his intention of leaving the Castle, to ask his lordship for the fortnight's pay then due to him. He would try to see Kate Brady, and bid her farewell without getting her into trouble, and then, when he should have picked up Ranger at one or other of the poor animal’s haunts, the two friends would turn their backs on Trelingar Castle with common and uncommon satisfaction.

It was nearly nine o’clock when Mick went down to the stable yard, and great was his astonishment to learn that Lord Ashton had gone out an hour earlier. Generally, the boy had to attend at his master’s toilet, and he dreaded no duty of the day more, or with greater reason, for the young gentleman delighted in taunting, ridiculing, and abusing him during its fulfilment.

Mick’s surprise was quickly followed by well-founded apprehension when he perceived that Bill (one of the stablemen) and the surviving terriers were not in their respective places. At this moment Kate appeared at the door of the laundry, made a sign to him to draw near, and said in a low voice, ‘Lord Ashton has gone out with Bill and the two dogs. They are going to hunt Ranger.’

Mick could not answer, he was choked with grief and anger.

‘Take care, my boy; here comes the steward, and you must not — ’

‘Ranger must not be killed,’ said the boy, impetuously, ‘and I shall — ’

Scarlett, who had overheard this colloquy, came up to the speakers and called out to Mick roughly, —

‘What’s that you’re saying, boy, and what are you doing there?’

Mick, not wishing to enter into a discussion with the steward, answered simply, —

‘I wish to speak to Lord Ashton.’

‘You can speak to him when he returns,’ replied Scarlett, ‘after he has caught that brute of a dog.’

‘He will not catch him,’ said Mick, with forced calmness.

‘Indeed!’

‘No, Mr Scarlett, and if he does catch him, I tell you he will not kill him.’

‘And why?’

‘Because I’ll prevent him. I, Mr Scarlett. The dog is mine, and I shall not let him be killed.’

And Mick, leaving the steward confounded by this answer, rushed out of the yard, and sped away towards the plantation with incredible swiftness. For half an hour he vainly searched for any trace of Lord Ashton, hearing no sound to guide him. At length the barking of dogs became audible, but at a distance. He ran with all his speed in the direction of the sounds (he had recognised the ‘tongue’ of the terriers), and presendy came to a thick grove of coniferous trees which extended all along the edge of a great pond, one of the features of the domains of Trelingar. No doubt they were hunting Ranger in that direction. Presently, Mick could distinguish the words of the unseen speakers; the dogs were silent.

‘Attention, my lord! We have him now.’

‘Yes, yes, Bill! here! here!’

The dogs again barked furiously, and, as Mick ran into the grove towards the voices, he was startled by a shot.

‘Missed! missed!’ cried Lord Ashton. ‘Your turn now, Bill; mind *you* don’t miss!’

A second shot was fired near enough for Mick to see the flash through the foliage.

‘He’s got it this time,’ cried Bill, while Lord Ashton’s dogs barked furiously.

Foundling Mick’s legs gave way as though the bullet had struck himself, and he was falling, when the branches within about six feet of him were moved with a slight noise, and through a gap in the paling a dog appeared. The animal’s coat was wet, and he foamed at the mouth. It was Ranger, who had been hit in the side by Bill’s bullet, and had jumped into the pond.

Ranger recognised his master, who instantly caught him by the muzzle, and held his mouth firmly shut while he dragged him into a thicket, trembling lest the pursuers should come again upon the victim. But this did not happen. The boy and the dog lay safely hidden amid the underwood, while their enemies, tired by the cruel sport of the morning, passed so near them that Mick heard Lord Ashton say to Bill, in a tone of gloomy suggestiveness, —

‘I wish I had caught him alive!’

CHAPTER 18

EIGHTEEN YEARS BETWEEN THEM

Foundling Mick drew a deeper breath than he had ever before drawn in his life, so soon as Lord Ashton, Bill and the dogs had disappeared. And we may be sure Ranger did the same when after a time Mick ventured to let go his hold of the dog’s jaws, saying to him, —

‘Don’t bark, Ranger; don’t bark!’

Ranger did not bark.

It was fortunate that Foundling Mick, having thoroughly made up his mind that morning to leave Trelingar, had dressed himself in his old clothes, tied up his little bundle, and put his purse in his pocket. This spared him the unpleasant necessity of re-entering the Castle, where Lord Ashton would very soon learn who was the owner of the slayer of his favourite dog. What sort of reception Mick would have met with from him may easily be guessed.

It is true that by not reappearing he sacrificed the wages due to him, and which he intended to claim, but he resigned himself to that necessity. He was out of Trelingar Casde; he had escaped from Lord Ashton and Scarlett, and that was all he and his dog desired. His only thought now was to get as far off as possible in the shortest time; at the pond side he was only two miles away from the Castle gates; there must be no lingering so near his late detested prison. He had mechanically carried his little bundle under his arm when hurrying out of the stable yard after his rash speech to the steward, and it had fallen on the ground when he used his two hands to prevent Ranger from barking. With a warning gesture well understood by the dog, Mick left him, retraced his steps to the spot at which he had appeared after his plunge into the pond, and picked up the small roll of linen that constituted his wardrobe. Then, after a cursory examination of Ranger's wound, a very slight one, for Bill's bullet had merely grazed the dog's skin, he and his companion made their way out of the plantation and started off at a great pace on the high road, where neither pedestrian nor vehicle was visible. Ranger was not too much hurt to be in good spirits, and he expressed his joy in dog fashion, but Foundling Mick, although he exulted in his emancipation, was anxious about the future.

This time, however, he knew where he was going, and it was intentionally that he took a southern direction, for it was his purpose to make for Cork. From thence ships sail — merchant ships — large ones, real ones, not small coasting vessels or mere fishing-boats such as he was familiar with at Westport or Galway. Our lad found a great attraction in the idea of these ships; things commercial had an irresistible attraction for him.

The chief matter was to get to Cork; the journey on foot would take time, and must cost some money; but not much, for Mick would try to earn something by the way, as he had done before. The weather was fine, the road was good; there was neither mud nor dust; excellent conditions for a long walk.

Let us briefly record that the tired boy and dog found themselves two days later within three miles of Woodside, where Mick proposed to remain and rest for a night before entering upon the serious task of seeking employment in the fair city of Cork. They were walking along a path by the side of a little river, an affluent of the far-famed Lee, when Ranger suddenly stopped, and uttered a low growl.

Foundling Mick stopped also, and looked forwards and backwards along the road. There was nothing to be seen.

‘What’s the matter, Ranger?’

Ranger barked this time, and then bounded away to the brink of the river.

‘He’s thirsty,’ said Mick to himself, ‘and for that matter, so am I.’ Then he too turned off the raised path towards the river; but he had taken only two steps, when the dog, with a loud bark, sprang into the water.

Mick ran forward, reached the edge, and was about to recall the dog, when he perceived the cause of Ranger’s action. This was a drowning child, whom the dog had seized by his clothes, or rather by his rags, and was striving to drag to the bank. But the current was running strongly, and Ranger had a tough job to effect his feat of salvage. Mick could swim; it will be remembered that Grip had taught him; he promptly pulled off his jacket, and was kicking off his shoes, preparatory to joining Ranger in the river, when the dog deposited the child on the slope at Mick’s feet. Mick seized the unconscious form, and carried it to a safe place. The rescued child was a little boy, seven years old at the most; his eyes were shut, and his head hung helplessly over Mick’s arm. What was the surprise of the older lad to recognise in the pale face from which he cleared away the wet hair, that of the little boy whom Lord Ashton had slashed with his driving whip on the road to Trelingar.

The child must have been wandering ever since upon the roads! His haggard face, his thin, light body, told of all that he had suffered, of fatigue, cold and hunger. Mick put his hand on the child's stomach; it was as flat as an empty bag. He employed all his little skill to restore the poor human waif to consciousness, an operation closely observed by Ranger, and after some time he succeeded. The child breathed, opened his eyes, and said, feebly, —

'I'm hungry.'

Foundling Mick still had in his bundle some of the provisions for the day's tramp, consisting of a few slices of cold bacon, a hunch of bread, a piece of cheese, and some cold potatoes. He put a mouthful of the bread between the child's lips, and he swallowed it eagerly. After a few minutes Mick fed him very moderately, and he regained some strength. Then he fixed his eyes on Mick, and said, —

'You! you!'

'Yes. You remember me?'

'On the road — I don't know when — '

'But I know,' said Mick, soothingly.

'Oh! don't leave me!'

'No, no! I'll take care of you. Where were you going?'

'Nowhere.'

'Where do you live?'

'I don't know. Nowhere.'

‘How did you fall into the river? Were you getting a drink?’

‘No; I fell in — on purpose.’

‘On purpose?’

‘Yes, yes. But I don’t want to do it now — if you stay with me.’

‘I’ll stay; never fear.’

Foundling Mick’s eyes filled with tears at the terrible idea of this child of seven, driven to seek death by the despair that comes of destitution, abandonment, hunger!

The little boy again closed his eyes, and Mick asked him no more questions. There would be time enough for them afterwards. And besides, did he not know the story? Was it not that of all poor forsaken creatures? Was it not the story of Foundling Mick himself, except that he, being gifted with exceptional strength of mind, would not ever have thought of taking that way out of his troubles.

What was to be done? The child could not possibly walk to Woodside, nor could Mick carry him thither. Night was approaching, and it was essential to find a shelter. Neither a farmhouse, a cabin nor a public house was within sight. On the left of the road was a large plantation of fine umbrageous trees; the wanderers might pass the night in its shelter at the foot of one of those forest-lords, on a grassy bed, by the side of a fire of sticks. At sunrise, when the child should have regained his strength, the two would be able to reach Woodside, and perhaps, even Cork. There was enough food remaining to afford them a frugal supper, and a morsel to spare for breakfast in the morning. Having arranged this plan in his mind in a few seconds, Mick took up the sleeping boy in his arms, crossed the road, and entered the plantation on the other side.

Within a few feet of the edge the plantation was almost dark, and Mick made his way with some little difficulty towards a group of majestic trees where the space was more open. There it was his good fortune to find a stump, about three feet high, the remains of a giant elm which had been blown down. The whole depth of the stump, which was five feet in diameter, and had wide-spreading roots, was filled with leaves, and as no rain had fallen for some days, these were dry; before the searcher's eyes was a bed ready prepared for his *protege* — Foundling Mick's *protege!* — one in which he too might lie down, if he did not mind a tight fit. Mick undressed the sleeping child, rubbed his body as nearly dry as possible, and placed him deep among the leaves, with a wisp of grass for a pillow, and then set to work to gather materials for a fire. He did not forget that the light might be seen and might attract attention to his act of 'trespass', but he was indifferent to this contingency. If anyone should think it worthwhile to investigate the origin of the light in the wayside wood, that individual could hardly be so formidable as Mr Scarlett; it was not likely his destiny had conducted Mick to a second Trelingar. He soon collected a little heap of twigs, bits of timber and dry leaves, and kindled a fire by the aid of the matches which he had prudently included in his small purchases on the day before. This done, he carefully dried the little boy's ragged clothes, and hung them on a neighbouring branch. And now it was time to think of supper. Ranger at least was decidedly of that opinion, and his master adjudged to him the larger portion of the meal. When the two had eaten, Mick wrapped up the remnants, with a view to breakfast, and confiding his bundle and the child's clothes to Ranger with unhesitating confidence, he climbed into the hollow tree-trunk, clasped its occupant in his arms, and before long was sleeping soundly, while Ranger kept unwinking watch upon the wanderers.

In the morning, the little waif awoke first, much surprised to find himself in so good a bed. Ranger saluted him with a soft-toned protecting bark. Was he not to some extent his preserver? Mick opened his eyes almost immediately, and the child put his arms round his neck and kissed him.

‘What is your name?’ he asked.

‘Foundling Mick. What’s yours?’

‘Dick.’

‘All right, Dick. Come and dress yourself.’

Dick did as he was desired, promptly. He was in the best of spirits; he hardly remembered that only yesterday he had wanted to drown himself. He had got a big brother now, one who had consoled him, and given him pennies, on the road to Trelingar Castle. He gave himself up at once to that youthful confidence with its characteristic natural familiarity, which is remarkable in Irish children. As for Foundling Mick, his feelings towards Dick were almost fatherly. Conscientiousness was very strong in the nameless boy, and his meeting with Dick had invested him with a whole set of new duties.

And was not Dick pleased when he had on a clean shirt of Mick’s underneath his dry clothes? Did he not open his eyes, as well as his mouth, at sight of a slice of bread, a bit of cheese, and a big potato, warmed in the ashes? Was not that breakfast the best he had ever eaten in his life?

Dick had not known his father, but, more favoured by fate in that one respect than Foundling Mick, he had known his mother, who had died of want, two, or three, years? (Dick did not know exacdy) previously. Then he had been taken into a refuge somewhere — he did not know the name of the place — but soon there was no more money, and the refuge was closed. Dick found himself in the street; he did not know why. Dick did not know anything! He had lived on the roads, sleeping where he could sleep, eating whatever he could get to eat. He did the best he could, poor little Dick! until the day came when, after fasting for forty-eight hours, he thought the best he could do was to die.

Such was his history, as he related it, while he ate his big potato, and in it there was nothing new or startling to the former pauper 'boarder' of Mrs Murphy, pauper handle-turner to Hornpipe's puppets, pauper pupil at the Galway poor school!

But suddenly, in the current of his talk, the child's intelligent countenance changed, he turned pale.

'What's the matter?' asked Mick.

'You're not going to leave me alone?'

'No, Dick.'

'You'll take me with you?'

'Yes, where I am going,'

Where was that? Dick did not ask, or care to know, provided Mick took him 'there' also.

‘But your mammy and your daddy?’

‘I have no mammy and no daddy.’

‘Ah!’ cried Dick, ‘I’ll love you.’

‘And I’ll love you, Dick, and we’ll try to get on somehow together.’

‘Ah, you’ll see how I can run after cars,’ said Dick, all elate again, ‘and the ha’pence I pick up I’ll give to you.’ The little fellow had no notion of any other profession than the beggar’s.

‘No, Dick, you must not run after the cars any more.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is not right to beg.’

‘Ah!’ said Dick, and relapsed into thought.

‘Tell me, have you good legs?’

‘Yes, but they’re little.’

‘Well, we are going to have a long trot today, to get to Cork this evening.’

‘To Cork?’

‘Yes. It is a fine town, beyond there — with boats — ’

‘Boats. Yes, I know.’

‘And the sea. Have you ever seen it?’

‘No.’

‘You will see it, then. It goes ever, ever so far! And now we must be off.’

The wanderers, attended by Ranger, returned to the edge of the plantation, and took to the high road, which presently turned away from the bank of the little river and bordered the ‘silver Lee’. After a time they passed, or were passed by, several vehicles, and Dick, yielding to the influence of habit, started off to pursue one of these with the old cry, ‘Gi’ me a ha’penny’, but Foundling Mick caught hold of him.

I told you, you weren’t to do that any more,’ he said sternly.

‘But why?’

‘Because it is not right to beg.’

‘Not even when you’re hungry?’

Mick did not answer, and Dick felt uneasy about the prospects of dinner, until he found himself sitting at a table in a decent little tavern, where the big brother, the little brother and the dog had a good meal.

Dick could not believe his eyes. Mick actually had a purse, and the purse had silver shillings in it, even after the score was paid.

‘How did you get those shillings?’ asked Dick, wondering.

‘I earned them, Dick, by working.’

‘By working! I’d like to work too, but I don’t know how.’

‘I’ll teach you, Dick.’

‘Now?’

No, not now, but when we get to Cork.’

‘How soon will that be?’

‘This evening, if you’re not too tired.’

‘No, no, no. I can go on!’

And, after a good rest, they resumed their way. At six o’clock in the evening, they reached one of the suburbs of the great southern city, and found a humble lodging for the night.

CHAPTER 19

SEVEN MONTHS IN CORK

Foundling Mick had wanted to come to Cork, and he had come thither, under conditions, it is true, not precisely favourable to the realisation of his plans for the future. Formerly when he had roamed about the sea-beach at Galway, and when he had listened to Pat MacCarthys tales of his voyages, the boy’s young imagination employed itself extensively with commercial matters. To buy cargoes in other countries and sell them again in his own — what a dream! But he had reflected a good deal since his departure from Trelingar Casde, and he knew that a long course of training, beginning at the low estate of cabin boy, must lie between himself in his present state of wandering and poverty and the captain of a good ship, sailing from one continent to another. And now that he had Dick and Ranger to provide for, how could he think of going to sea? If he were to forsake these two, what would become of them? Since he had saved Dick’s life, with Ranger’s assistance, it was his duty to furnish him with a livelihood.

Next day Foundling Mick bargained with the keeper of the lodging-house for the use of a garret and a humble bed, and felt that he had taken a great step in advance. The rent of the garret was twopence per day, payable each morning. As for meals, Dick, Ranger and Mick would take those where they could find them. Early in the morning the three sallied forth.

‘What about the ships?’ said Dick.

‘What ships?’

‘The ships you promised I was to see.’

‘Wait until we get to the bank of the river.’

They pursued their course in the desired direction through a long and squalid suburb, and on the way Foundling Mick bought a loaf at a small baker’s shop. He cut up their frugal breakfast with the knife which had been given to him at the farm, and the boys trudged on, well content, eating the bread as they went, and in due time they reached the quays of the River Lee, where they saw several small craft, but no vessels capable of crossing St George’s Channel first and after that the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, the real port is Queenstown (formerly Cobh), and swift river steamers called ferry boats carry passengers down the estuary of the Lee to the sea. Dick was not to be deceived by the very moderately marine aspect of the quays, and began to question Foundling Mick, as he had done in the matter of the ships.

‘What about the sea?’ said he.

‘The sea! oh, it is farther off, Dick; but we shall end by getting to it, I think.’

And, in fact, Dick’s big brother speedily discovered the river-steamer service, and that for a few pence they might be taken to Queenstown, where there was real sea. He could afford this expenditure, just for once on their first day in Cork, especially as Ranger would travel free of charge. The river voyage was quite entrancing pleasure to the boys; they stood in the bow of the boat, and gazed with delight upon the panorama of the banks, with the buildings of various kinds which seemed to glide away from their sight.

At length they reached the fine harbour of Queenstown, and Dick asked his companion, —

‘Is *this* the sea?’

‘No, only a little bit of it.’

‘Is it much bigger?’

‘Yes! you can’t see where it leaves off.’

But the ferry boat did not go beyond Queenstown, and Dick did not see what he so much longed to behold, the ‘wide open sea’. He saw any number of ships, however, more than he could ever have believed to exist, and indeed Foundling Mick was equally astonished. There the vessels were in scores, some anchored or moored, some coming in, others going out, and while Dick gazed with widely opened eyes upon all this animation in the bay, Foundling Mick was thinking of the commercial aspect of the scene, of the cargoes, the bales of wool and cotton, the barrels of wine, the cases of sugar, and saying to himself that these were bought and sold, and that all this meant trade.

They returned on a ferry boat to Cork, feeling almost bewildered by what they had seen. The excursion had been delightful, but it had cost a good deal, for they had been obliged to eat during the day. On the morrow they would need to look out for means of earning more than they would be obliged to expend; if they could not do this, the precious sovereigns must melt like ice in a warm hand. In the meantime the best place for them was the flock-bed in the garret, and thither they repaired.

It is unnecessary to enter into details of the existence of Foundling Mick and his little friend, Dick, during the six months which ensued upon their arrival at Cork. The winter, which was long and hard, would probably have been fatal to children less accustomed to cold and hunger. Necessity made a man of the little lad of eleven; he managed to live, and Dick with him, but many a night they lay down to rest hungry, even for them. Yet never did they ask alms. Dick had been made to understand that to beg was disgraceful. But they were incessantly on the look out for jobs of every kind; horses to hold, cabs to call, bags and parcels to — sometimes tolerably heavy ones — for railway travellers, etc. etc. Foundling Mick meant to make the remnant of the wages he had earned at Trelingar Castle last as long as possible. On his arrival at Cork, he had been obliged to expend a portion of his little store on clothes and shoes for Dick, whose pride and joy in the possession of a full suit, brand new, 'at thirteen shillings', surpassed description. How could Dick be allowed to go barefoot and in rags while his big brother was decently clad? But after this inevitable expense had been incurred, they would do their best to live on the day's earnings. They stuck to their rule, although many a time when their stomachs were empty they envied Ranger, who contrived somehow to pick up his living to his own satisfaction in the streets.

The rent of the garret was not in arrear at any time, and the lodging-house keeper, who took an interest in this strange pair of children, occasionally gave them a hot meal; which they did not hesitate to accept.

Foundling Mick was resolved to keep his two pounds intact, because he was watching his opportunity to 'go into business' with the money. This was the phrase he used, and when Dick heard him employ it he would open his eyes widely. Then Mick explained that 'going into business' meant buying things and selling them again for more than they had cost.

'Things to eat?' asked Dick.

'Things to eat, or other things, as may be.'

‘I would rather have the things to eat.’

‘Why, Dick?’

‘Because, if any of them weren’t sold, we could eat them ourselves!’

‘I see you know something about business already, Dick! The important part is to choose what one buys well, and then one can always sell at a profit.’

Foundling Mick was constantly thinking on this matter, and he made some encouraging attempts. With letter-paper, pencils and matches he did not do well, there was too much competition in merchandise of that kind; but he succeeded better in selling newspapers in the neighbourhood of the railway station. There was something interesting and attractive about the boys’ looks, their cleanliness, and their good manners, and after a while they got steady custom for their humble wares, daily papers, railway guides, and little books of various sorts. In a month after they had begun this kind of trade Mick and Dick each had a flat basket suspended from his shoulders by a strap; on this papers and books were ranged in order, with the tides and illustrations skilfully displayed, and change always ready for the buyers. Of course, Ranger never left his master, and he soon learned to take a newspaper in his mouth and offer it to a passer-by with an insinuating frisk of his tail, generally successful. As Ranger took very kindly to his share of the business, Foundling Mick presently equipped him with a light basket strapped to his back in which the day’s newspapers were carefully arranged, with a waterproof cover in case of rain, and a little money-box hung from his collar for the reception of the purchasers’ pence. This bright idea of Mick’s was very successful; everybody talked of the little newsboys near the station and their four-footed assistant, and Ranger had more custom for his ‘news tray’ than the boys had for theirs.

Presently, Foundling Mick ventured on an extension of his business; he added smart boxes of cigar lights, cheap cigars, screws of snuff, etc. to his stock, and Ranger had his share of these also to dispose of. What a good supper, and what plentiful patting the dear dog came in for at night, when the three friends were snug in their garret and the day’s work was done!

Foundling Mick had soon discovered that Dick was very sharp and intelligent. The little fellow of seven was of a less practical turn of mind than the older lad but of a more gleeful disposition, and he loved to indulge his high spirits. He could not either read, write or cipher, so Foundling Mick had at once set about teaching him his alphabet. Was it not necessary that he should be able to distinguish the titles of the newspapers that he had to sell? Dick took to learning, and his application was equal to his teacher’s patience. He soon passed on from the big letters of the headings to the small ones of the columns. Then he began to learn writing and arithmetic, and found those arts more difficult. Yet, he got on very well, and, assisted by his lively imagination, he fancied himself managing Foundling Mick’s shop in the handsomest street in Cork, with a superb shop-front and a grand bookseller’s sign. Foundling Mick gave the little fellow a small percentage on their sales, and Dick had always a few well-earned pence in his pocket, so that he could occasionally give the often-asked-for ‘ha’penny’ to the little beggar children who held out their hands to him. Did he not remember well the time when he ‘ran the roads’ behind the cars?

It will readily be believed that Foundling Mick, acting upon a special instinct, kept his accounts with great regularity; so much for the rent of the garret, so much for meals, washing, fire and light. Each morning he wrote down in his notebook the sum required for the purchase of goods, and in the evening he balanced his expenditure with his receipts. He knew how to buy, he knew how to sell, and all was profit. At the end of that year (1882) he would have put ten pounds in his cash-box, had he possessed such an article. But, although he had no cash-box, he had a friend, a bookseller in the town, who had taken an interest in him from the first, and this kind man allowed him to deposit his weekly gains with him, and paid him a trifle of interest on the little sums, just to give the boy ‘more heart’.

With the success that he was achieving by dint of economy and intelligence, ambition also came to Foundling Mick, the reasonable and legitimate ambition to augment his business. Perhaps he might have done so, in time, by settling himself finally in Cork. But his thoughts were turned towards a more important city, even Dublin, the capital. It was very far off to be sure, but it was not impossible. Take care, Foundling Mick. May not your practical mind be led astray? Remember the story of the substance and the shadow! Well, well, after all there is no harm in a boy’s dream.

The winter was not hard, and Foundling Mick and Dick did not suffer too severely from being exposed to the weather from morning until night. Nevertheless, it was hard work, and they hailed Sunday as a blessed day of rest and recreation. In the morning the two boys cleaned up their garret, put on their well-brushed Sunday jackets, and after a better breakfast than they allowed themselves on weekdays, they attended Mass. On the conclusion of the service they returned to the lodging-house to release Ranger, and the three would then repair to the quay, and take the ferry-boat for Queenstown; two honest little citizens, out for a holiday after their week’s work.

One day they treated themselves to a boating trip round the bay, and Dick got his first sight of the sea out of bounds.

And farther off,’ he asked, ‘going on and on upon the water — always — what would we find?’

‘A very big country, Dick.’

‘Bigger than ours?’

‘Thousands of times bigger, Dick, and it takes those big steamships that you see a fortnight to get to it.’

‘And are there newspapers in that country?’

‘Newspapers, Dick? Why, yes, hundreds of them; newspapers that sell as high as sixpence.’

Are you sure of that?’

‘Quite sure. It would take months and months to read the whole of them.’

Dick looked with great admiration at this wonderful Foundling Mick who was capable of being certain of such a thing. As for the big ships, those great steamers that put in at Queenstown, his fondest wish was to get on the deck of one of them and climb into the rigging, while Foundling Mick would have preferred to inspect the hold and the cargo.

Hitherto, however, neither one nor the other had ventured to embark without the authorisation of the captain — a personage whom they held in great awe. As for asking leave, their courage would not have extended to that by a long way. Just think of it; ‘the master after God’, as Foundling Mick had heard said, and repeated it to Dick. Thus the great desire of the lads remained as yet unrealised. Perhaps it may be gratified some day, and others which were awakening in them also.

CHAPTER 20

THE FIRST FIREMAN ON THE *VULCAN*

The year 1882, which had brought to Foundling Mick so much good and evil fortune, in the ruin and dispersion of the MacCarthy family, of whom he had not since heard, the three months at Trelingar Castle, his meeting with Dick, his taking up his abode at Cork and his prospering there, was now at an end. During the first quarter of the new year, if the boys' trade did not slacken, it seemed to have reached its maximum. Foundling Mick, feeling sure that it would not increase, was haunted by the idea of going to Dublin. If only an opportunity would offer! January, February, and March passed away. The lads lived as sparingly as possible, putting by penny after penny, and Foundling Mick was lucky enough to get a commission for the sale of a certain political pamphlet by Mr Parnell, which proved very profitable.

At the beginning of April, their friend had thirty pounds in his keeping, and eighteen shillings and sixpence to boot. The boys, who had never been so rich, held long conferences on the question of whether they should or should not venture to rent a little shop in the vicinity of the railway station. It would be so delightful to have a place of their own! Dick was for the shop. We can imagine it, with its display of newspapers and cheap bookseller's and stationer's wares; its shopkeeper of eleven, and its shopman of eight! Surely these children, so well worthy of interest and patronage, would not have lacked customers!

Patiently and gravely Mick revolved in his mind the for and against, feeling all the time that he was urged by some presentiment of his fate to dwell upon his idea of transporting himself and his commerce to Dublin. He was hesitating, resisting the entreaties of Dick, when an incident occurred which decided the matter.

It was Sunday, the 8th of April, and the two boys had agreed to pass the day at Queenstown. They started early, neatly dressed, with their shoes well polished, and Ranger, also brushed-up for the occasion, accompanied them. They enjoyed the ‘run’ on the steamboat even more than usual, because the weather was fine, and landed on the quay in high good-humour. The first thing to be thought of was a good meal, and this they proposed to procure at a neighbouring eating-house, from whence they would have a fine view of the big ships in the port. Mick and Dick were about to enter the tavern when their attention was attracted by a large vessel which had come into harbour on the previous evening and was being ‘dressed’ for Sunday. On questioning an old sailor in a yellow cap, they learned that it was the *Vulcan,* a steamer of nine hundred tons, coming from America, and bound on the morrow for Dublin. The boys were standing on the edge of the quay, eagerly observing the proceedings on board the *Vulcan,* when a tall young fellow, with black hands and a face smeared with coal dust, approached Foundling Mick, looked at him, shut his eyes, opened his big mouth, and exclaimed, —

‘It’s you; it’s really you!’

Foundling Mick was taken aback, much more so was Dick. Here was a stranger, and a black one, addressing him. There must be a mistake! But the Negro, wagging his head gleefully, became still more demonstrative.

‘It’s myself,’ he said. ‘Don’t you know me? Its me, the poor school — Grip!’

‘Grip!’ cried Foundling Mick, and rushed into the tall young fellow’s arms with such precipitation that he came out of them nearly as black as Grip himself. What a joyful meeting that was! The former superintendent of Mr Mulvany’s scholastic establishment was now a vigorous, active, well set-up young man of twenty, bearing no resemblance to the ragged lad of the Galway poor school, with the exception that he still had the same pleasant countenance.

Mick could not leave off exclaiming, ‘Grip! Grip! it is you; it is really you!’

‘Yes, it’s me, and I’ve never forgotten you, my boy!’

‘And you are a sailor?’

‘No, I’m a fireman on board the *Vulcan.’*

Thereupon he had to explain the duties of a fireman to Dick, who had been hastily presented to Mick’s former protector at the poor school.

‘He’s a sort of brother,’ said Mick. ‘I picked him up on the road. He knows you well, Grip, I’ve often told him about us two. Oh, Grip, what a lot of things you have to tell me! It’s six years since we parted.’

‘And yourself, Mick?’

‘Oh, yes, I’ve a lot to tell you. Come and breakfast with us, we were just going in there.’ He pointed to the eating-house.

‘No, no,’ said Grip. ‘It’s you that must breakfast with me; but come on board first.’

‘On board the *Vulcan?*

‘Yes.’

On board — both of them? Dick and Mick could hardly believe their ears. It was as though Grip had quietly proposed to take them into paradise.

‘But our dog?’

‘What dog?’

‘Ranger. Look, he’s making friends with you.’

‘So he’s your dog,’ and with this Grip gave a cordial pat to the delighted animal.

‘And our friend, a friend of your own sort, Grip.’

‘The captain?’ suggested Mick, with some natural hesitation.

‘The captain’s ashore, and the boatswain’s mate will make you as welcome as a couple of lords. Besides, I must clean myself up a bit now that I’m off duty.’

‘And are you free for the whole day?’

‘Yes, for the whole day.’

‘It’s a lucky thing we came to Queenstown, Dick.’

‘It’s just that, Mick.’

‘And I’ve blackened you as well, so you’ll want a wash, Foundling Mick, — is it that you’re called still?’

‘It is, Grip.’

‘I’m glad of it. Come along.’

In two minutes the three friends were on board the *Vulcan*, and the first fireman, who had received a friendly nod from the second mate in passing, took his guests down to the scene of his labours, and to his narrow sleeping quarters, where they found a basin and fresh water, and Grip proceeded to wash and dress himself. During this process he briefly related his own history since the hurried and unconscious parting between Foundling Mick and himself.

He had been taken to the hospital after the fire at the school, and was found to be severely hurt. There he remained for six weeks, when he was dismissed in good health, but entirely destitute. The poor school was in process of rebuilding, but Grip felt that he could not return to his former life there. No, that was impossible, now that Foundling Mick was gone. Grip knew that he had been taken away by a grand lady, but whither? This he did not know, and all his efforts to discover the truth after he came out of the hospital proved unsuccessful. So then, Grip left Galway, and took to a wandering life in the adjacent country places. Sometimes he got work at the farms, but no certain employment, and this troubled him sorely. A year later he had made his way to Dublin, with the notion of going to sea. But as he was too old at eighteen to become a cabin boy, and knew nothing of the work of a sailor, he resolved to embark as a fireman, and soon found employment on board the *Vulcan.* His post was not one of ideal felicity, but Grip was resolute, patient and industrious. He soon became accustomed to the discipline of the ship, never incurred a reprimand, and by his zeal and sobriety aroused the interest of the officers, who inquired into the story of the lad who had neither home nor kin. The *Vulcan* made voyages from Dublin to New York or other ports on the eastern seaboard of America. Grip crossed the ocean several times in two years, being charged with the filling of the bunkers and the supply of fuel. Then, becoming ambitious, he applied for the post of fireman under the orders of the engineers. He was taken on trial and proved so satisfactory, that, on the termination of his apprenticeship he was promoted to the post of first fireman, and in this distinguished position did Foundling Mick find his former school companion on the quay at Queenstown.

Grip had no taste for the coarse dissipation in which too many sailors indulge when ashore, and therefore he was able to save a little fund out of his wages, and to this he added something regularly every month. He already possessed sixty pounds at the present time, and it had never occurred to him to do anything with it except save it. To put it out at interest was an idea that never could have suggested itself to Grip.

Such was the story that Grip told in his light-hearted way. Mick followed with a narrative of his own experiences, which were of so different a kind, and these inspired Grip with profound astonishment. When it came to Dick’s turn there was very little to be told. Merely that he had no life story at all; for his real history began on the day of his rescue from drowning by Ranger and Mick. Ranger’s history was that of his master.

Grip would have carried his friends off to the eating-house where he proposed to give them a sumptuous meal, immediately after his toilet was finished, but they were eager to go over the *Vulcan* in the first instance, and the first fireman good-humouredly yielded the point. Nothing could exceed the pleasure which this exploration afforded the two boys, but in a different measure. The commercial side of all that they saw appealed to the deep-rooted trading instincts of Foundling Mick, the nautical and unknown to the careless and happy nature of Dick.

The good meal at the eating-house, of which the three companions disposed with the appetite of their respective ages, did not interrupt their conversation, and the interchange of reminiscences between Grip and Foundling Mick was brisk and continuous. Of course, the incidents of the seagull, and the gift of the jersey were not omitted, nor were the abominable deeds of Carker.

‘What has become of the wretch?’ asked Grip.

‘I don’t know, and I don’t want to know,’ answered Foundling Mick. ‘The worst thing that could happen to me would be to meet him.’

‘Never mind, that will never happen; but as you sell newspapers, I advise you to read them sometimes.’

‘So I do.’

‘Well then, one of these fine days you’ll read that Carker is dead of hemp-fever.’

‘Hanged! Oh, Grip!’

‘Yes, hanged! And serve him right!’

Then they talked of the fire at the school-house, when Grip had saved the little boy at the peril of his own life. This was the first chance Foundling Mick had had of thanking Grip for the deed, and close was the handgrip with which he emphasised his gratitude.

Grip was then questioned concerning his travels in America. He told of the great cities of the United States, their industries and their commerce, and Foundling Mick listened so eagerly that he forgot to eat.

‘And then,’ Grip went on to say, ‘there are big towns in England also, and if you ever go to London, to Liverpool, to Glasgow — ’

‘Yes, Grip, I know. I have read of them in newspapers; trading towns; but so far off.’

‘Not at all far.’

‘Not for sailors who go there in ships, but for others — ’

Well then, there’s Dublin, isn’t there?’ cried Grip. ‘It’s not so very far. The trains take you there in a day, and there’s no sea to cross.’

‘Ah! Dublin!’ said Mick, musingly. And he remained silent and thoughtful while Grip continued, —

It’s a very fine place, and there’s thousands of businesses doing there. It’s just as good as Cork for ships.’

Foundling Mick heard, and his mind travelled far.

‘You ought to go and set up in Dublin,’ said Grip. ‘I’m sure you’d get on better than here, and if you wanted a trifle of money — ’

Dick and I have some saved,’ replied Mick.

Yes, indeed,’ said Dick, proudly, producing from his pocket one shilling and sixpence.

So have I,’ said Grip, ‘and I don’t know what place to put it in for safety.’

‘Why don’t you put it in a bank somewhere?’

‘I don’t trust banks.’

‘But then you are losing the interest it would bring in.’

‘That’s better than losing all one has, Micky! But you see, if I haven’t confidence in other people I should have confidence in you, my boy, and if you were in Dublin, where the *Vulcan* goes to constantly, we could see each other often! That would be delightful, and I tell you again, if you want a little money to take up a trade, I’ll give you all I have with a heart and a half.’

The good fellow would have done this on the spot, so happy was he to get his little Micky back again. Surely the bond that united those two would never again be broken.

‘Come to Dublin,’ repeated Grip. ‘Shall I tell you what I think?’

‘Yes, do.’

‘Well, it’s this. I have always had the notion that you would make a fortune — ’

‘And I too! I have always had the same idea,’ said Mick, simply, while his eyes shone with a singular light.

‘Yes, Micky. Some day I shall see you rich, very rich. But you will not make much money at Cork. Reflect on what I am saying to you now, for you must not act without reflection.’

‘Of course not, Grip.’

‘And now let us go for a walk.’

They set out, and many were the projects formed by the three friends while they strolled about the streets and quays of Queenstown, escorted by Ranger.

At last the moment of parting came, and Grip went with the two boys to the ferry.

‘We shall meet again,’ he said cheerily. ‘We have not come across each other for only this meeting.’

‘Yes, Grip, at Cork, the first time the *Vulcan* puts in there.’

‘Why not in Dublin, for she stays there for weeks sometimes. Yes, in Dublin, if you decide.’

‘Goodbye, Grip.’

Hearty farewells, in which Ranger had his share, were exchanged, and Grip gazed for a long time after the river steamboat.

CHAPTER 21

ON THE WAY TO DUBLIN

A few days later, Foundling Mick, Dick and Ranger had taken leave of the fair city of Cork, and were wending their way towards the Irish capital. Grip's representations had had the desired effect; they had induced Foundling Mick to yield to the promptings of his own inclination, to which he had begun to listen before his meeting with the first fireman of the *Vulcan,* and to abandon the secure for the uncertain. But the young trader had considered the matter very carefully. At Cork, there was no progress, no expansion for him; Dublin, on the contrary, offered an extensive field for his activity. Dick, it is needless to say, was all for starting at once so soon as his young 'principal' broached the idea to him. Foundling Mick then withdrew his little capital from the care of the friendly publisher, who regarded the boy's resolution with serious misgiving, but could not induce him to forego it, and laid out his plan for the journey.

The shortest way to reach Dublin was, of course, to take the train to Limerick and thence to the capital city; but this mode of locomotion was open to the objection that it cost money, and Mick wanted to stick to his money. The season was fine for a journey on foot and time was of little consequence. What an advantage it would be, to begin with, if, instead of costing money, the journey could be made to earn some! Supposing, instead of paying travelling expenses, the juvenile itinerants were to carry on their trade on the way, selling newspapers, pamphlets, stationery, in short all their stock-in-trade in the villages and small towns which lie between Cork and Dublin. What would be needed for this novel kind of peddling? Only a light little hand-cart such as Mick could draw, while Dick pushed it from behind when necessary — (was there a vague remembrance of the Hornpipe time in this notion?) — to carry their wares and their changes of clothing, with a waterproof covering to protect the whole from rain and dust. The country was peaceful and honest; the boys had nothing to fear, and Ranger would be a guard as well as a companion. They would take the coast road, because it leads to Waterford, Wexford, Wicklow, and other seaside health resorts and bathing places much frequented at that time of year. The journey would be long, but what matter, if they could but sell and renew their humble wares on the way, and live on their slender gains.

This programme — an adventurous one, it will be admitted, involving no small amount of self-confidence, and capacity of endurance, on the part of the leader of the expedition, and great trust, docility, and good will on that of Dick — was fully and faithfully carried out. Foundling Mick had a stroke of luck at the beginning of the enterprise; he got a light hand-cart, second-hand, from a grocer in the town, for a very small price. The little vehicle held his slender stock of merchandise conveniendy, and from the first the trifling articles, all very cheap but sold at a good profit, found a ready sale. In some places they passed through the two boys created a general feeling of interest; the one as serious as any old-established shopkeeper, the other so light-hearted and childish that it was not possible to refuse to buy of him. The little party of three was kindly treated at the places where it halted for the night, and Mick did not exact too much of his companions. The boys and the dog enjoyed sundry good spells of rest. We shall not follow them step by step in the ey At Youghal they laid in an entirely new stock of commodities, so well had they prospered since their start, and at Dungarvan a happy idea occurred to Foundling Mick. This was, to purchase some woollen articles at a very low price, which he might sell in the small villages where his other goods would not be in so much demand. It is sufficient to say that his litde venture out of the usual course of his business proved successful. So they went on, and the day came on which Foundling Mick, having reached the boundary of Munster, was to pass out of the province within which he had known so much vicissitude. But he had already forgotten all those old troubles; he allowed his mind to dwell only on his three happy years at Kirwan’s Farm; he thought only of the MacCarthys. Where were those good friends? He regretted them, as one regrets home and kin.

‘Dick,’ said he, ‘did I not promise you that we would take a good rest at Waterford?’

‘I think you did,’ said Dick, ‘but I am not tired, and if you wish to get on — ’

‘No. We will stay here for a few days.’

‘Doing nothing?’

‘There is always something to do, Dick.’

And, indeed, Foundling Mick found something very interesting to do, in studying the pleasant city and the busy port. The boys chose their lodging at a decent inn, saw their cart safely disposed of, and set out for a long stroll along the quays. What endless interest and amusement was provided for them by the vessels coming and going out! How could anybody ever tire of such a spectacle?

Ha!’ said Dick, ‘supposing Grip should just chance to come upon us now?’

No, Dick, that could not happen,’ answered Mick. ‘The *Vulcan* does not put in at Waterford, and I have reckoned that he must be far away now — over in America.’

Over there?’ said Dick, stretching out his arm towards the horizon bounded by the sea and sky.

Yes, in that direction. I think he will be back by the time we get to Dublin.’

‘How nice it will be to see Grip again! Will he be black this time?’

‘Very likely.’

‘Anyhow, that does not prevent us from caring for him.’

‘No, indeed, Dick, for he cared for me when I was so wretched.’

‘Yes, as you did for me!’ answered the little fellow, whose eyes sparkled with gratitude.

Three days later they were at Wexford; their little cart was amply supplied, and they pushed along cheerily, by way of Arklow and Wicklow, and so, by the beautiful road which borders the coastline to Bray, where they did some profitable business on the strand. Their cart was empty when they sought a night’s rest in the fashionable seaside town, and after a long sleep, and a look round at the Wicklow hills, the shining sea, and Howth in the distance, they started in the morning for the unknown goal of their hopes — Dublin.

CHAPTER 22

DUBLIN

Again we spare our reader the details of the last stage of the journey of our two lads; nor shall we dwell upon their first sight of the Irish capital, for they reached the city footsore and weary, and having found a decent lodging in Patrick Street, and seen their hand-cart securely sheltered in an outhouse, they retired to much needed rest, promising themselves an early start on a tour of investigation in the morning.

The boys were, in fact, afoot early, much to the contrary of the generality of the dwellers in Patrick Street, and they set out, pretty much at random, accompanied by Ranger, resolved to have a good look at everything on their way, but to make for the riverside and landing-stage as directly as observation and inquiry would enable them. The poplin factories, the distilleries, the vast breweries of Guinness and Co. and D’Arcy and Sons, the public buildings, railway stations, etc. should all have their turn in due time, but the first, the chief object, the prime necessity, was to discover whether the *Vulcan* had arrived, and they might have the felicity of finding her first fireman at leisure to welcome them to this strange place whither he had, in a measure, guided them. No doubt the boys went a good deal astray, and probably doubled the distance, but they passed through a fine quarter of the city, and saw some grand sights, between the poor neighbourhood in which their lodging was situated, and Carlisle Bridge, with its noble view of the quays on either side. Many were the expressions of astonishment and admiration which they interchanged, but they made no pause, pressing steadily on until the forest of masts in the distance below Carlisle Bridge came into view, and their goal was near. Was the *Vulcan* among those ships? They would know her again most certainly. Who ever fails to recognise a ship he has gone all over from stem to stern, — especially with such a guide as Grip?

The *Vulcan* was not alongside the quays of the Liffey; possibly she had not yet arrived; or she might be in the dock, or under repair.

Foundling Mick and Dick followed the quay, going down the river on the left bank. Dick was too much taken up with the notion of the *Vulcan* to pay any attention to the Custom House, a magnificent structure, but strangely dull and inanimate as a centre of business. Foundling Mick paused for a moment to contemplate it. Should he ever have important transactions with that great place? What could be more enviable than to have to pay duties on cargoes brought from distant lands? Was such a satisfaction ever to be his?

The boys arrived at the Victoria Docks. What a number of ships, loading and unloading, the great basin, which forms the heart of the trading city, contained!

‘There she is!’ cried Dick, ‘the *Vulcanl* There! There!’ He was right. The *Vulcan* was at the quay, taking in her cargo.

A few minutes later, Grip, who was off duty, stepped ashore and joined his two friends.

‘At last, here you are!’ he repeated, with a cordial grasp of the hand for each.

Then the three friends strolled back along the quay towards the point at which the Royal Canal debouches on the Liffey. This was a quiet spot and they could talk at their ease. Grip wanted to hear all about their proceedings from the time of his departure from Queenstown to the moment of this happy meeting, and he listened with both wonder and interest to Foundling Mick's narrative of their long but lucrative tramp, while he had been crossing the Atlantic Ocean twice. He was eager to learn particulars; the boys had to recall everything that had happened to them, and every impression they had formed of the country and the people He regarded Foundling Mick with unconcealed admiration. What an instinct the boy had for commercial affairs! What a genius for buying and selling! Why, he knew at least as much about figures as Mr Mulvany! And when Foundling Mick told him that his capital now amounted to one hundred and fifty pounds — safely bestowed about his person — Grip exclaimed, —

'Then you are as rich as myself, my boy, only what it took me six years to earn you have made in six months! I say again what I said before, you'll do well in your business; you'll make a fortune.'

'Where?' asked Mick.

'Everywhere. Anywhere you may go. In Dublin, if you stay here; somewhere else if you don't.'

'And what about me?' said Dick.

'You'll do right well also,' said Grip, encouragingly, 'so as you never do anything without consulting the boss.'

'Who? The boss?'

'Why, Mick, of course. Don't you think he looks like a boss?'

'We will talk about that,' said Mick.

‘Yes, after breakfast,’ replied Grip. ‘I am free all day. I know the town as well as I know the *Vulcan’s* furnaces. I must pilot you, and we’ll see Dublin together. Then you will know what it will be best for you to do.’

The three friends procured a good meal at a tavern much frequented by sailors, and while they sat at table Grip related his last two ocean trips, to the great contentment of Dick. Foundling Mick listened in thoughtful silence. He was much older than his years by the development of his intelligence, the gravity of his ideas, and the permanent tension of his mind. He might have been twenty years old at his birth and thirty now!

Grip took the boys to the centre of the city, the rich quarter which contrasts so strongly with the poor, for there is but little transition in the capital of Ireland. He showed them the fine bridges and Sackville Street3, with its statues, Nelson’s pillar, the vast post office, its handsome houses and fine shops. Alas! also its poor and shabby pedestrians, and many signs, impossible of concealment, of the poverty that abounds in Dublin, and which no authority or watchfulness can hinder from obtruding itself upon the sight of the well-to-do inhabitants. Foundling Mick took particular notice of the great number of young boys who are employed in selling papers, the leading journals, both Catholic and Protestant, Conservative and Nationalist, having their respective offices in the streets on either side of Nelson’s pillar.

‘Ha!’ said Grip, looking about him, ‘what a number of newspaper boys there are hereabouts, and it’s just the same down on the quays and at the railway stations.’

‘No business to be done in that way,’ said Foundling Mick, nodding his head decisively. ‘It succeeded in Cork, but it won’t do here.’

They continued their walk, and Grip pointed out the principal buildings, the post office, which would be the depository of a vast correspondence in the future, he persisted in saying, between Mr Foundling Mick, Merchant, and all the big commercial towns at home and abroad. Then came the Four Courts, and Grip told Mick he might admire the building, but avoid it when he should have money to lose, for it was a greater consumer of hard-earned wealth than the *Vulcan* was of coals. Before a superb edifice, of aspect at once classic and palatial, Grip paused, and gravely saluted it.

‘The Bank of Ireland, once the Parliament House, and will be again, please God! Dick, there’s cellars full of gold as big as houses inside there, my boy. And it’s there Mick will be putting his money for safety some day.’

And so he went on with his merry exaggerations, all coming from his heart. Mick only half heard him, so fixed was his attention upon this spacious edifice wherein so many accumulated fortunes formed ‘heaps of thousands on top of each other’, according to the fireman of the *Vulcan.* After they had explored the principal streets, and made the circuit of St Stephen’s Green, the three friends got into a tramcar and were conveyed to the entrance of the Phoenix Park. We need not expatiate upon their delight with the great expanse, the noble trees, and the various uses of this unequalled public resort. After they had gazed at the Viceregal Lodge, and speculated on their chances of getting a glimpse of the Lord Lieutenant — a stroke of luck which was withheld — it was time for them to part, so they returned by the tram to Carlisle Bridge, Grip turned off along the quay, and the two boys, once more thoroughly tired out, made their way to Patrick Street. It had been arranged that they should see Grip every day until the sailing of the *Vulcan.* But before they parted the following colloquy had taken place between Grip and Foundling Mick.

‘Well, Mick,’ asked Grip, ‘has any good idea come into your head today?’

‘About what I’ll do, is it?’

‘Yes, have you made your mind up to anything?’

‘No, I haven’t, Grip, but I’ve made it up against something, I’ll not try newspaper-selling here. There’s too many in the trade.’

‘That’s what I think too, Mick.’

And as for hawking things in the street in the cart, I don’t know. What is there to sell in that way? Besides there are a great many at that trade, too, I am sure. No — perhaps,’ he went on, in an anxious, hesitating tone, ‘it would be the best plan to set up for myself, to rent a little shop — ’

‘Just the very thing, my boy!’

‘A shop in a part of the town where there’s a good deal of traffic, not rich people, you know, but people that want cheap things, and are constantly coming and going. Some place in the Liberties, now.’

‘You could not do better.’

‘But what should we sell?’ asked Dick.

‘Useful things,’ replied Foundling Mick, ‘things that are most generally wanted.’

‘Things to eat, then, cakes?’

‘You greedy litde chap!’ exclaimed Grip, ‘cakes aren’t useful.’

‘Yes, they are — for they’re good — ’

‘That is not enough,’ said Mick, ‘our wares must be necessary above all. However, we shall see. I will go about in that quarter and see into things. There are second-hand places where there’s a look of good business. I think a sort of bazaar — ’

‘A bazaar! That’s it!’ cried Grip, whose mind’s eye already beheld Foundling Mick’s shop with a gaily painted front, and a sign with his name in gold letters.

‘I’ll think of it, Grip. We must not be too impatient. We must think well before we decide.’

‘And don’t forget, Mick, that all my money is at your service. I don’t know what to do with it, and it is a great bother to have it always about me.’

‘Always about you?’

‘In my belt, Mick.’

‘Why don’t you put it out?’

‘Well, I will, with you. Will you have it?’

‘We’ll see, later on, if our trade does well. It is not the money we’re short of, it’s the way to use it, with profit and without too much risk.’

‘Don’t be afraid, my boy. I tell you again, you will make a fortune. That’s sure and certain. I can see you with hundreds and thousands of pounds.’

‘When does the *Vulcan* start, Grip?’

‘In a week.’

‘And when does she come back?’

‘Not for two months, for we have to go to Boston, to Baltimore, and I don’t know where else; anywhere that we get a cargo to take.’

‘And another to bring back!’ said Foundling Mick, with a sigh.

CHAPTER 23

THE BOYS BAZAAR

Our hero was at this time eleven and a half years old; Dick was eight, — their combined ages falling short of one legal majority. The idea of Foundling Mick starting in business, founding a commercial house! Could there be anyone but Grip, that is to say a person who loved him with a blind, unreasoning affection, to believe that he would succeed from the beginning, that his trade would become extended, and that he would make a fortune?

Nevertheless, it is a fact that two months after the arrival of the boys in Dublin, Bedford Street boasted a bazaar, which had the privilege of attracting attention, and also customers, in that humble but busy quarter of the town. The commercial experience of the young shopkeeper, gained at Cork, and during his long tramp with his hand-cart, had convinced him that purchasers can always We have not space to follow day by day the progress of the Boys' Bazaar in the esteem and also in the confidence of the public. Suffice it to say that the unique establishment was a success from the first. Mr O'Brien was astonished at Foundling Mick's capacity for business. To buy and to sell is well, but to know how to buy and sell is better, it is all. Mr O'Brien had done these good things in his own time, but he had begun at 25 years of age, not at twelve; hence he shared the ideas of Grip, and confidently expected that Foundling Mick would make a fortune. But he would sometimes say: 'Don't go too fast, my boy!'

'No, sir,' Mick would answer, 'I will go slowly and carefully, for there's a long road to travel, and I must spare my legs.'

It must be observed, in order to explain its phenomenal prosperity, that the fame of the Boys' Bazaar had spread rapidly in Dublin. A shop set up and kept by two boys, the older of the two at the age when boys are at school, the younger in the toy period of life, was the sort of thing to attract attention, bring customers, and make the concern fashionable. Foundling Mick had gone to the expense of a few advertisements in the daily papers at so much a line, but the *Freeman's Journal* and the *Irish Times* gave him gratuitous paragraphs, which did the Boys' Bazaar solid service. Real ladies actually took the trouble of coming from the genteel quarters of the town, and were waited upon by Foundling Mick with the most scrupulous politeness, while Dick pleased them by his lively ways, his quick intelligence, his bright eyes and his curly head. Then the toy-shelves were emptied in no time, the carts, the boats, and the sand-buckets and spades were carried off by the dozen, and children were brought to buy their own toys from a little shopkeeper of their own age.

Whether this happy state of things would last was a question, but in any case, Foundling Mick devoted himself to his business with indomitable industry and keen intelligence.

As a matter of course, Grip's first thought on the arrival of the *Vulcan* at Dublin, was to visit his friends. To describe him as 'astonished' is insufficient, he was transfixed with wonder and admiration. Never had he seen anything like the shop in Bedford Street, and, according to him, since it boasted the Boys' Bazaar, Bedford Street itself might have challenged comparison with Sackville Street in Dublin, the Strand in London, Broadway in New York, and the *Boulevard des Italiens* in Paris. At each visit he regarded it as an obligation that he should buy one thing or another 'to keep trade going'. Today it would be a pocketbook to replace one which he had never had; tomorrow it would be a pretty painted boat, that he wanted to give to the children of one of his comrades on the *Vulcan* who was not a father. His grandest purchase was a mock meerschaum pipe with an amber mouthpiece of yellow glass. And he would repeat to Foundling Mick, to whom he insisted on handing the price of his purchases, —

‘Ha! my boy, you’re getting on! Look at yourself, now, there you are, skipper of the Boys’ Bazaar, and you have only to keep your steam up! It’s a long day to the time when we were ragged boys in the Galway school and shivered with cold and hunger in the garret! By-the-bye, that ruffian, Carker, has he been hanged?’

‘Not yet, that I know of, Grip.’

‘It will come! It will come, I tell you, and you must be sure to send me a paper with a report of the performance.’

Then Grip returned on board, the *Vulcan* steamed out of port again, and after a few weeks the fireman reappeared at the Boy’s Bazaar and began to ruin himself in superfluous purchases as before.

One day Foundling Mick said to him, —

‘You still believe, Grip, that I shall make a fortune?’

‘Believe it, my boy! Just as sure as I believe that Carker will swing at the end of a rope.’

This was Grip’s notion of the most forcible asseveration of certitude here below.

‘Well, my dear Grip, don’t you think at all of the future for yourself?’

‘I? Why should I think about it? Haven’t I an employment I would not change for anything?’

‘A hard one, and ill paid.’

What? Four pounds a month, and fed, and lodged, and warmed — indeed roasted sometimes?’

And in a ship!’ put in Dick, who remained constant to his earliest ideal of bliss.

No matter, Grip,’ resumed Mick, ‘a fireman has never yet made a fortune, and we are intended by God to make our fortunes in this world.’

‘Are you so sure of that?’ asked Grip, with a dubious shake of the head. ‘Is it in His commandments?’

‘Yes,’ answered Mick, prompdy. ‘He desires that we should grow rich, not only to be happy ourselves, but to make those happy who deserve to be so, yet are not.’ And then the boy’s mind wandered afar; to Cissy, his companion in Mrs Murphy’s cabin, and to the MacCarthys, of whom he could get no tidings, to litde Jenny — all poor and suffering, no doubt, while he...

‘Stay, Grip,’ he said, ‘think well what you will answer to this. Why should you not remain on land?’

‘Leave the *Vulcan?’*

‘Yes — leave the *Vulcan* and be our partner. You know — Mick, Dick and Co.? Well, Co. is not sufficiently represented, and if you would join us — ’

‘Do, Grip, do, dear Grip!’ entreated Dick. ‘It would make us both so happy if you would.’

‘Me, too,’ said Grip, who was touched by this proposal, ‘but there’s something I must say — ’

‘Say it, Grip.’

‘Well, then, I’m too tall!’

‘Too tall?’

‘Yes. If a long lath of a fellow like me made his appearance in the shop it wouldn’t be the same thing at all. It wouldn’t be the Boys’ Bazaar. Mick, Dick and Co. must be little fellows if they’re to draw customers. I should injure the firm, I should do you a wrong. It’s because you’re children that you’re doing so well.’

‘Perhaps you’re right, Grip,’ said Foundling Mick, regretfully, ‘but we shall grow.’

‘We are growing!’ added Dick, raising himself on tiptoe.

‘Of course you are, and take care you don’t grow too quick.’

‘We can’t help that, Grip.’

‘No, you can’t. That’s why you must try to make sure of all you can while you are boys. Now, I am five feet six and a little over, and in your line nothing over five feet is any use! However, if I cannot be your partner, Mick, you know my money is yours all the same.’

‘I don’t want it.’

‘Well, well, just as you like; but if you take it into your head to extend your trade...’

‘We could not do it with only us two.’

‘Well, then, why don’t you hire a woman to do your housework?’

‘I had thought of that, Grip, and Mr O’Brien advised me to do it.’

‘He is right — bravo, Mr O’Brien. You don’t know any good servant whom you could trust?

‘No, Grip.’

‘Look about you; you’ll find one, never fear.’

‘Wait a minute, I’ve thought of some one — an old friend — Kate Brady!’

At the sound of this name Ranger intervened with a joyous bark, and wagged his tail hilariously.

‘Ah, you remember her, Ranger!’ said his young master, fondly caressing the dog. ‘Kate! Our good Kate!’

Ranger bounded towards the door as though he awaited only an order from his master to rush away at the top of his speed to Trelingar Castle and bring Kate to the Boys’ Bazaar.

Grip was then told all about Kate, and was immediately convinced that nothing could be better than to send for her and to install her at once in the kitchen. Fortunately, the upper floor of the house was to let; a room might be rented for the occupation of the partners, and a corner of the kitchen screened off for Kate. She need not show at all; her grown-up-ness would not be detrimental to the firm of Mick, Dick and Co.

But was she still at Trelingar Casde? Was she still living?

Foundling Mick wrote by the same day's post, and the next day but one he received a letter, written in a large legible hand. Forty-eight hours later, Kate arrived at the Kingsbridge Station.

She was warmly welcomed by her former *protege,* who hugged her fervendy, and by Ranger, who jumped at her and laid his paws on her shoulders. She could respond to this welcome only by tears, and when she was installed in her kitchen, and had been introduced to Dick, she wept afresh for joy.

On that day Grip had the honour and happiness of partaking with his young friends of the first dinner cooked by their own housekeeper in their own house. On the morrow the *Vulcan* set out to sea, and the happiest fireman afloat was in her engine room.

It may be asked whether Kate was to have wages? She would have been content with board and lodging only, these being given her by her dear child'; but such was not Foundling Mick's notion of the right method of doing things. She was not to be worse off, instead of better, for serving him whose existence at Trelingar Castle she only had made endurable. Wages she should have, and all the care and comfort that the boys in their small way could give her.

Very soon Foundling Mick discovered the economical value of the bold step he had taken. Kate kept the shop and the rooms in perfect order; cleanliness reigned in that little domain; their clothes and the scanty household linen were washed and mended; their food was purchased with judgement and admirably cooked, at less cost than the comfordess meals at a small eating-house in the neighbourhood on which they had hitherto subsisted. Kate was in short a model servant, her capacity was equal to her honesty — that great quality which had exposed her to the ridicule of the servants at Trelingar Casde. But why should we waste time by recalling to mind the Trelingar people in gilded saloon or servants’ hall? Let the marquis and his happily adapted consort vegetate in their pompous uselessness, and let us trouble ourselves no more with those samples of the great.

It is really important, on the other hand, to mention that the year 1883 ended in a very respectable balance to the credit of Mick, Dick and Co. The resources of the Boys’ Bazaar hardly sufficed for the demands of Christmas and the New Year. The toys-shelves were cleared twenty times over. To say nothing of other toys, Dick sold every kind of craft, even to clockwork steamboats, by scores, and all the boy- partners’ wares were disposed of in proportion. Foundling Mick had no cause to repent of having left Cork and renounced the sale of newspapers. Mr O’Brien continued to take a lively interest in the young head partner in this unique firm, and to give Foundling Mick wise counsel, which was respectfully accepted; not so the aid in money, which he had also offered when he had tested the feasibility of the enterprise and the worth and ability of his young friend. Foundling Mick would not borrow, would not incur responsibility; would not share either loss or gain. In the case of Mr O’Brien, as in that of Grip, he respectfully declined a loan.

In short, at the end of six months, Foundling Mick had a very good right to be satisfied; he had trebled his capital since his arrival in Dublin.

CHAPTER 24

FOUND

‘Any persons who may be possessed of information of any kind respecting the family of Murtagh MacCarthy, formerly the tenant of Kirwan’s Farm, in the parish of S — , County of Kerry, are earnestly requested to transmit the same to Mick, Dick and Co. the Boys’ Bazaar, Bedford Street, Dublin.’

The above advertisement was inserted in several of the Irish papers at the beginning of the New Year, and Mick had neither compunction nor regret in expending the money which this proceeding cost. Could the adopted child forget his best friends, especially when fortune was smiling on his modest efforts? It was his bounden duty to endeavour by every means in his power to find them, and come to their assistance. What would be his joy and thankfulness if he could ever repay to them any part of all their care and affection!

Whither had these good people gone in search of shelter after the destruction of the farm? Had they remained in Ireland, earning hard their daily bread? Had they exiled themselves, for the sake of Murdoch’s safety, in some far-distant land, in Australia or America? Was Pat still traversing the sea? The thought that his benefactor and his family were in want was a constant and sore grief to Foundling Mick.

No result was attained by the advertisement. Had Murdoch been in a prison in Ireland news of him would have been received. The conclusion to be drawn was that the whole family had emigrated. Whither? How was Mick to solve that question? Would they succeed in making a new country for themselves in the far colony? Had they forsaken the old land for good and all?

Mr O’Brien applied himself to the solution of the matter that was troubling the spirit of his young friend, and discovered, through one of his correspondents in Belfast, that six members of the MacCarthy family had sailed for Melbourne two years previously. He had no means of tracing them farther. Then Foundling Mick applied to Messrs Maxwell for information respecting Pat, but there also failure awaited him. He received for answer that Pat had quitted the service of the firm fifteen months before, and no one knew on what ship he had embarked. One chance remained. Pat might return to one of the Irish ports and learn there that inquiry was being made respecting his family. This was a slender chance, it must be admitted, but Mick clung to it nevertheless, and his good friend O’Brien also tried to cheer him up.

‘I should not be surprised,’ he said to the boy one day, ‘if you were to see all the MacCarthys again.’

‘See them — in Australia — thousands of miles away! Oh, no, Mr O’Brien.’

‘Why should you talk in that way, my boy? Is not Australia next door to us? There is no distance nowadays. Steam has suppressed it. They will come back to this country, I am sure. Irish people do not abandon Ireland, and, if they have succeeded over there — ’

‘Is it reasonable to hope, Mr O’Brien?’

‘Certainly it is; if they are hard-working and intelligent as you say.’

‘Industry and intelligence are not always enough, sir. Luck is wanted too, and the MacCarthys never had any luck.’

‘What they had not formerly they may yet have, Mick. Do you suppose that I have always been lucky? No, I had many ups and downs, affairs that I could not manage, reverses of fortune, until the day that saw me master of the situation. And look at yourself, Mick, are you not an example? Did not you begin by being the sport of poverty and wretchedness, and how is it with you now?’

‘What you say is true, Mr O’Brien, and sometimes I wonder whether it is not all a dream.

‘No, Mick, it is sound, solid reality. It is very extraordinary, for you have gone far beyond what could have been expected from a mere child, as you actually are. A little lad of twelve! But reason is not always to be measured by age, and by reason you have been continually guided.’

‘By reason? Yes, perhaps — and yet, when I think of my present situation, it seems to me that chance has something to do with it.’

‘There is less of chance in life than you think, and things are more closely linked together than is generally supposed. You will observe that a piece of ill, rarely fails to be accompanied by a piece of good, fortune.’

‘Do you think so, Mr O’Brien?’

‘Yes, and I believe it all the more that there is no doubt of it in your own case, my boy. This reflection occurs to me whenever I think of what your existence has been. You were sent to Mrs Murphy; that was evil fortune —’

‘And good fortune that I knew Cissy there, and the first kindness I ever received was from her. What has become of her, my little companion, and shall I ever see her again? Yes, that was good fortune.’

‘And it was well also that Mrs Murphy was an abominable old hag, for otherwise you would have been left with her until the time came for your being taken back to the workhouse. Then you ran away, and this threw you into the hands of the puppet-showman — ’

Oh! the monster!’

It was well he was such a wretch, for otherwise you would still have been in his service, tramping the country with him and his puppets. Then you were put into the poor school at Galway — ’

Where I met Grip, who has been so good to me; who saved my life at the risk of his own.’

‘And this led to your being taken up by that foolish actress. Quite another existence, I acknowledge, but it would not have resulted in any honourable and worthy career, and I regard it as fortunate that after having amused herself with you, one fine day she forsook you.’

‘I don’t resent it to her, Mr O’Brien. After all, she did take pity on me, she was good to me — and, since then, I have come to understand many things. So then, following out your reasoning, it is due to her forsaking me that I was received into the MacCarthy family at Kirwan’s Farm — ’

‘Just so, and there again — ’

‘Oh, Mr O’Brien, you can never persuade me that the ruin of those good people could possibly be a fortunate circumstance.’

‘Yes, and no,’ said Mr O’Brien gravely.

‘No, Mr O’Brien, no! And though I may be a successful man some day, I shall always regret that the starting-point of my good fortune should have been MacCarthy’s ruin. I would willingly have passed my whole life at the farm as a son of the house — ’

‘I understand your feelings perfectly; but for all that it is no less true that this series of circumstances will enable you, I hope, one day to recompense those good people for what they did for you.’

‘But it would be so much better if they had not required assistance from anyone.’

‘Well, well, I will not insist, and I respect your feelings. But let us go on arguing and come to Trelingar Castle.’

‘Ah! those horrid people, the lord, and the lady, and their odious son! What humiliation I had to endure there. That was the worst part of my existence.’

‘And, according to my line of reasoning, it is well that it was so. If you had been well treated at Trelingar Casde, you would probably be there still.’

‘In the position of a groom! No, no, Mr O’Brien, never. I was only waiting while there — so soon as I had saved something, I — ’

‘Ah! by-the-bye,’ interposed Mr O’Brien, ‘Kate must be enchanted that an accident brought you into the Castle.’

‘Yes, the dear woman.’

‘And Dick must be enchanted that an accident took you out of it, for otherwise you would not have met him on the high road, you would not have saved his life, you would not have brought him to Cork, where you both worked so bravely, and where you found Grip. And at this moment, you would not be in Dublin —

‘Talking with the best of men, who has become our friend,’ answered Foundling Mick eagerly, and he clasped the good man’s hand with fervent gratitude.

‘And who will not spare you his advice when he sees you need it.’

‘Thank you, Mr O’Brien. Yes, you are right, and your experience cannot err. The things of life are linked together! God grant that I may yet be useful to all those whom I love and who have loved me!’

The business of the Boys’ Bazaar continued to prosper. Public favour was not capricious in its regard, and before long Mr O’Brien had a second shop to let which adjoined the Boys’ Bazaar, and Foundling Mick took it for his new enterprise. What was that? A grocery business, no less, and soon a flourishing one. All the neighbours bought their groceries at the, extended Boys’ Bazaar, and Kate had a hand in the sale now, she was not out of place among the serious articles of household consumption, while the partners attended most to the fancy goods, and Dick in particular presided with even increased zeal over the toys. The whole of the floor above the first shop now belonged to the firm, the boys had a comfortable sitting-room as well as their neat bedroom, and Kate no longer had to be ‘screened off’ in a corner of the kitchen. A more orderly and respectable little household could not have been found. And how hard they worked, those two! The day was hardly long enough for their commerce, and when the evening came there were the books — Foundling Mick’s unfailing joy — to be made up, and the receipts to be verified. Dick’s education was progressing also, and the visits of Grip were punctual and regular. Let us pass over an interval of monotonous occupation and steadily augmenting prosperity, but which was not marked by any incident more special than Foundling Mick's success in persuading Grip to transfer his savings from his belt to the Post Office Savings' Bank; and take up the fortunes of the Boys' Bazaar at a more advanced point.

In January 1885 Foundling Mick had entered his fourteenth year, and Dick was nine and a half. The two boys were in perfect health, well grown for their respective ages, and strong. The ills of their early years had left no traces upon them. The bazaar was in the full tide of prosperity, and the firm actually found it necessary to procure assistance in keeping their books. Mr Simpson, a trustworthy young man, recommended by Mr O'Brien, had been engaged in the capacity of book-keeper. Foundling Mick had money in the Bank of Ireland by this time, and was unmistakably on the road to fortune. He had not relinquished his efforts to discover the fate of the MacCarthys, but he was still unsuccessful, and this failure was the black spot on his horizon. The agent in Melbourne whom he had employed failed to trace the emigrants beyond that city. Nothing had been heard of Pat after he left Messrs Maxwell's service, and it was not impossible that he was with his parents in Australia.

Foundling Mick did not allow his thoughts to dwell on any of those whom he had known, except the MacCarthys and Cissy. As for Mrs Murphy, Hornpipe, Mr Mulvany, and the august house of Trelingar, he put them as far from his mind as though they never had existed.

And Carker? Has he been hanged?'

This was Grip's invariable question each time that he turned up at the Boys' Bazaar on landing from the *Vulcan.* The invariable reply was that nothing had been heard of Carker. Then Grip would look over the police reports in the newspapers accumulated since his last departure, and having failed to discover any reference to his former schoolfellow, he would say, —

‘Let us wait! We must have patience!’

‘But why may not this Carker have become an estimable person?’ asked Mr O’Brien one day, in a remonstrating mood.

‘He!’ cried Grip, ‘he, that rascal! Why, it would turn one against good behaviour!’

Kate, who knew the story of the Galway school and its pupils, was entirely of Grip’s opinion.

It was November and winter had set in severely. The weather was such as might fairly predispose anybody to remain indoors, nevertheless, Foundling Mick started by an early train for Belfast. The occasion for his forsaking the Boys’ Bazaar for even a short time was a misunderstanding with a wholesale firm in Belfast, with whom the lad had recently had certain dealings, and Mr O’Brien, who deprecated very strongly anything that might possibly involve a lawsuit, had advised his young friend to settle the matter in person. Mick acted on this prudent counsel, and duly arrived at Belfast, without the slightest prevision that the day would be one to be marked henceforth in his life for remembrance. He looked about him on his arrival at the important commercial city of the north of Ireland, with the intelligent interest which such a seat of industry could not fail to inspire in a mind of the cast of Foundling Mick’s, and promised himself an inspection of the main points of interest after he should have finished his business with Messrs MacMullen, to whose warehouse he repaired forthwith. Mick was conducted after a short delay to the private room of the head of the firm, and received politely, but with unconcealed surprise, by Mr Alexander

MacMullen. The interview was a satisfactory one, the misunderstanding was easily removed, the relations between the Belfast merchant and his young customer (whose intelligence and smartness in the discussion of the matter in question astonished that astute person equally with his youth and self-possession) were placed upon a sure footing, and Foundling Mick found himself free to see a good deal of the city before dark. He had heard, and read in the newspapers, much about the division between classes and creeds in Belfast; he knew that capital and labour were upon terms anything but friendly there, and that in the northern capital the hardships which the Irish poor have to endure everywhere, have the aggravation of detestation of their religion, and a bitter persecuting spirit on the part of the wealthy and powerful classes; but he also knew that the Irish faith has never been shaken, and that no efforts to impose an alien creed upon the Irish race has succeeded; so that the strife rages always without result. But these things concerned Foundling Mick not at all; he was interested in the trade of Belfast, not in its factions, and he walked briskly through the town, not failing to observe all its features, and to admire the evidences of its industry and prosperity, but not loitering, for the day was very cold, and he wanted to see as much as possible before he should have to return to the station, where he intended to dine before starting for Dublin. He was turning his steps in the direction of the station, and having taken what his accurate eye told him was a short cut through a narrow street — for Foundling Mick possessed the bump of locality — had emerged upon a broad thoroughfare, when he found himself in front of a great factory. An angry crowd was assembled before the doors of the building, and the concourse blocked the street. Foundling Mick had to get through the mass somehow, and in doing this he learned the cause of the tumult. It was pay-day, and a number of male and female ‘hands’, already discontent, had come to protest against a decrease of their wages which had been announced for the next week.

These poor people had been refused a hearing, and their anger was thoroughly roused. Muttered threats had been followed by shouts, and the doors and windows of the factory were assailed by showers of stones. At the moment when Mick had all but wormed his way to the edge of the crowd on the factory side of the street, a body of police rushed upon the malcontents with intent to disperse the assemblage, and arrest the ringleaders.

Foundling Mick, fearing lest he should have no time for his dinner at the station, tried to get away, but could not succeed, and only escaped from being trodden down in the charge, by forcing himself into a doorway, just as five or six workmen, brutally struck by the truncheons of the police, fell down alongside the factory wall.

Close to him, just beyond the doorstep, lay a young girl — a factory hand, pale, thin and sickly looking — who was eighteen years old, but might have been twelve from her appearance. She had been dashed down and lay there moaning, and feebly imploring help. Foundling Mick started at the sound of her voice. It reached him like a far-off remembrance. His heart beat quickly; he could not speak, and he was unable to move near to the prostrate figure. In a few minutes the crush was lessened, the crowd was giving way before authority (supported by truncheons), and the way was cleared in front of the doorway in which he stood. He bent over the girl; she was insensible. He raised her head, turned her face so that a gleam from a gas lamp was thrown upon it, and murmured, ‘Cissy! Cissy!’ It was Cissy, but she did not hear him.

Without a moment’s hesitation he procured assistance, had the fainting girl placed in a cab, and conveyed her to the railway station. She recovered sufficiently before they arrived there to be able to walk along the platform without attracting attention from either busy officials or self-engrossed travellers, and when the train started she was comfortably ensconced in a corner seat of a first class carriage, without any other passengers, and Foundling Mick was kneeling by her side, holding her hands in his, and speaking to her in words of consolation and endearment which she was still unable to comprehend.

In such fashion was accomplished the abduction of Cissy by Foundling Mick; and who had so good a right to carry her away from her misery as he whom she had so often defended against ill-treatment in Mrs Murphy’s wretched cabin?

CHAPTER 25

A CHANGE OF COLOUR AND CONDITION

A happier little party than that which was assembled in the Boys’ Bazaar on the following day could not have been discovered in all Ireland, or for that matter in all Europe, or perhaps anywhere short of Paradise. Cissy had been installed in the best room, and Foundling Mick was by her bedside at every spare moment. She had come to herself completely, recollected what had happened, and recognised in the vigorous and well-grown youth who had rescued her, the little child who had escaped from Mrs Murphy’s den through a mousehole, so to speak.

And she, who was but seven years old then, and was now eighteen, worn out by toil and want, could she ever become the handsome young woman she might have been had she not lived in the vitiated atmosphere of factories?

It was ten years since they had met, and yet Foundling Mick had recognised Cissy by her voice, more surely than he would have known her by her face. Cissy, for her part, had not forgotten any of the incidents of their woeful childhood. It was of these that they talked, holding each others hands, looking together into that miserable past as into a mirror.

As for Kate Brady, she could not hide her emotion. Dicks joy found utterance in the strangest exclamations addressed to Ranger, who responded with short barks of sympathy. Mr O’Brien, who had called early at the Bazaar to learn how Foundling Mick had fared in his mission, was much touched by the simple story. They had all heard of Cissy; it was not like the arrival of a stranger, however interesting; it was the coming home of Foundling Mick’s elder sister.

Grip’s presence only was wanted to complete the content of the little party, and no doubt he would have recognised his ‘boy’s’ Cissy at the first glance. But the *Vulcan* was expected to arrive very shortly, and then all would be right.

Cissy’s history may be told in a few lines; it is that of too many of the Irish children. Six months after the disappearance of Foundling Mick, Mrs Murphy died in a drunken fit, and Cissy was taken back to the workhouse at R — , where she remained for two years. She was then sent to a linen factory in Belfast, where she earned a few pence a day in the midst of the unwholesome flax dust, pushed about and beaten, having none to defend her, but always gentle, nevertheless, amiable, docile and seemingly inured to the hardships of existence.

Cissy did not contemplate any possible amelioration of this state of things. And, at the moment when she felt most sure that it was destined to remain always the same, it was suddenly changed by the touch of a hand — the hand of a child who had received from her the first caress he had ever known, and who was now at the head of a prosperous house of business. Yes! he had taken her away from her hateful life at Belfast, and here she was, in his house, and about to be the mistress of it! Yes! the mistress, he told her over and over again; not the servant.

Cissy a servant! Would Kate Brady hear of such a thing? Or Dick? Or Foundling Mick permit it?

So you wish to keep me with you?’ she said.

‘Wish it, Cissy!’

‘But at least I may work, so as not to be a burthen to you?’

‘Yes, Cissy.’

‘Then what shall I do?’

‘Nothing, Cissy.’

And to this he adhered. Nevertheless, a week later, in the full exercise of her own sweet will, Cissy was installed behind the counter, having been instructed in the duties of a saleswoman. And the Boys’ Bazaar was all the more frequented on account of her presence there; for the new and happy life to which she was introduced soon told on her, and she became as pretty as she was amiable and intelligent.

Cissy’s greatest wish was for the arrival of the first fireman of the *Vulcan.* She knew all about Grip’s conduct during the wretched years of the poor school; that he had succeeded her as Foundling Mick’s protector, and that but for him Mick must have perished in the fire. The first fireman might reckon on a warm welcome on his return, but that happy event was unexpectedly deferred. Owing to certain commercial necessities, the year 1886 came to a close before the *Vulcan* appeared once more in the Irish Sea.

On the last day of that year Mr O’Brien had the pleasure of congratulating his young friend on the fact that the capital of the Boys’ Bazaar had reached a sum of over £4,000 free of all debts. He expressed his gratification in the kindest manner, and at the same time recommended Mick to act with great prudence.

‘It is often more difficult to keep one’s gains,’ he said, ‘than to acquire them.’

‘I know you are right, sir,’ replied Foundling Mick, ‘and I shall not let myself be led away. But I do wish the money in the Bank was doing something more profitable. It is money that’s asleep, and sleepers are not workers. Now, Mr O’Brien, if some good opportunity were to arise?’

‘It would not be enough for it to be good, Mick, it would have to be excellent.’

‘In that case, then, I am sure you would be the first to advise me — ’

‘To profit by it? Certainly, provided you did so in your own line of business.’

‘That is just what I mean, Mr O’Brien. I should never think of running risks in operations that I know nothing about. But one may endeavour to extend one’s trade while acting with prudence.’

‘On those conditions it would be hard if I didn’t approve, my boy, and if I hear of anything that would be perfectly safe, — well — we shall see!’

Mr O’Brien was as cautious as he was sagacious, and did not think proper to pledge himself any farther.

The 23rd of February was a date to be marked with a red cross in the calendar of the Boys’ Bazaar, for, on that day, Dick having mounted a step-ladder in the shop in order to get at the topmost toy-shelf, very nearly tumbled off on being hailed from below.

‘Ahoy, there, parrot-perch! ahoy!’

‘Grip!’ cried Dick, and slid down the ladder, as a boy slips down a stair-rail.

‘It’s myself, Dick! How’s Mick, my lad? And Kate? And Mr O’Brien? I don’t think I’ve left out anyone, eh?’

‘Not anyone? Not me, Grip?’

Who said these words? A young girl who came from the back of the shop, and held out her two hands to the first fireman of the *Vulcan.*

‘Beg pardon, miss,’ said Grip, in some confusion. ‘I — I don’t — ’

‘Why, it’s Cissy, Grip! Cissy! Cissy!’ repeated Dick, with shouts of laughter.

Those were pleasant days that followed the completion of the little company at the Boys’ Bazaar. It might truly have been called a ‘family’ party, although not one of its members was related to any of the others, and all belonged to the class of the ‘disinherited’. Whenever he was free from his fireman’s duties, Grip was to be found at the Boys’ Bazaar, and it was not long before Foundling Mick became aware (but prior to Grip’s making the discovery) that there was an attraction at the shop counter, which had exerted its charm from the first, was growing stronger every day, and from which the first fireman of the *Vulcan* had neither the power nor the desire to escape. What would you have? It is the common lot!

Is not my big sister a pretty girl?’ was the ingenuous question put to Grip by Foundling Mick one day.

Your big sister, my boy! But if she wasn’t, she would be, all the same! If she was ugly, she wouldn’t be, all the same!’

‘Grip! What do you mean?’

Oh, I’m talking stupidness, I know; but I can’t express myself, that’s the reason. If I could express myself — ’

On the contrary, he expressed himself very well, in Kate Brady’s opinion at least, and in less than in three weeks after Grip’s appearance on the scene she said to Foundling Mick, —

‘Our Grip is changing his skin. He used to be black, and now he’s getting back to his own white colour. I don’t think he will be on the *Vulcan* much longer!’

This was the opinion of Mr O’Brien also. Nevertheless, on the 15th of March, when the *Vulcan* steamed out of port, bound for New York, her first fireman was on board, having been accompanied to the water’s edge by the whole family.

He returned on the 15 th of May, and it seemed that the change in his colour was more distinct. He was received with the usual warmth, but he was not so demonstrative on his own part, and his demeanour towards Cissy bordered on the ceremonious. She was more serious and reserved than before, especially when by any chance she found herself alone with Grip. Somehow, the evenings did not pass so pleasantly as before, and when the hour came for Grip’s withdrawal, Foundling Mick would say, —

‘Tomorrow, old fellow?’

‘No, not tomorrow, Mick. There’s too much to be done. I can’t possibly come.’

The next day Grip would arrive exactly as he had done the day before, or perhaps an hour earlier, and most certainly his skin became whiter each time.

It will be evident to the reader that Grip was in a psychological condition favourable to his acceptance of Foundling Mick's proposal that he should relinquish his employment on board the *Vulcan,* and become a partner in the house of Mick, Dick & Co. Foundling Mick was aware of this, but he took good care not to sound Grip on the subject. He judged it better to let the advance be made by Grip himself.

About the beginning of June the advance was made in the following fashion.

'Business is brisk, Mick, isn't it?' asked Grip.

'You can judge for yourself. The shops are pretty full.'

'Yes; there are a lot of customers.'

'Yes, indeed, Grip; especially since Cissy's been at the counter.'

'That's not surprising. I can't think why in all Dublin, or even in all Ireland, any one should want to buy anything unless she sells it!'

'Well, it certainly would be hard to find a nicer girl.'

'Or more — more — ' replied Grip, who was quite unequal to finding a comparative worthy of Cissy.

'And so intelligent,' added Mick.

'So, then, things are all right?'

'I've told you so.'

‘And Mr Simpson?’

‘He’s very well.’

‘I was not asking for him,’ said Grip, with some irritation. ‘What do I care about Mr Simpson’s health?’

‘But I do, Grip. He is very useful to us. He’s an excellent book-keeper.’

And understands his business?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘I think he is rather old.’

‘No — he does not look so.’

‘Hm!’

The conversation stopped there, and when Foundling Mick repeated it to Mr O’Brien and Kate Brady, each of them listened with a smile.

Even that rogue of a Dick let himself into the joke, and a few days afterwards said to Grip, —

‘Is not the *Vulcan* starting soon?’

‘So they say,’ answered Grip, and his countenance fell perceptibly.

‘And then,’ resumed Dick, you will light the furnace by only looking at it.’

As a fact the remarkably fine eyes of the first fireman were sparkling at the moment, but no doubt that was because Cissy was going about the shop, in her pleasant, smiling way, and presently she paused to say, —

Grip, would you reach up to that box of chocolate? I am not tall enough.’

Grip reached up to the box.

Would you just hand down that sugar-loaf? I am not strong enough.’

Grip handed down the sugar-loaf.

Will your trip be a long one?’ inquired Dick, whose roguish tone and laughing eyes seemed to mock poor Grip.

‘Very long, I think,’ said the fireman, shaking his head. ‘At least five weeks.’

‘Five weeks! Why, that’s nothing! I thought you were going to say five months!’

‘Five months? Why not five years?’ exclaimed Grip, in the tone of a poor wretch who has been sentenced to imprisonment.

‘Then you are very happy, Grip?’

‘And why not? Of course I am.’

‘You’re a big fool!’ said Dick, and he ran away with a grin on his roguish face.

The fact was, that Grip’s life was not exactly lively since he chose to pass it mostly with his head in an angle of the wall. It was therefore just as well that he should go, since he could not make up his mind to stay, and accordingly he did go, on the 22nd of June.

During Grip's absence on this occasion, Mick, Dick & Co. did a very successful stroke of business, with the approval of Mr O'Brien. This was the purchase of the patent of a rather expensive mechanical toy from the inventor, a person known to Mr O'Brien. The novel article of commerce took the fancy of the customers at once, and the receipts of the Boys' Bazaar were raised both directly and indirectly by its vogue. Numbers of children of the 'gentry' wanted the toy, numbers of mothers bought it for them, and rarely failed to discover that other purchases might be made on Foundling Mick's premises with an advantage over the shops in a more fashionable quarter. So well were things looking that Mick indulged in the calculation of how much he might be able to give Cissy for her 'fortune', when Grip should be induced to have his mind made up for him on the important point of matrimony. That Cissy would have Grip if he could summon up courage to ask her, Mick was quite certain, in fact everybody in the house knew that. And why not? Grip was a fine, handsome young man, and Cissy was well aware of all his good qualities. Of course, she believed that her feelings were unsuspected by anybody.

It ensued from this condition of things, that on the return of the *Vulcan*, on the 29th of July, the first fireman was more awkward, embarrassed and moody — in short, more unhappy — than before. His ship was to start again on the 15th of September. Would he go with her this time?

Foundling Mick had made up his mind on one point. His sister Cissy should not marry a fireman. He intended to impose, as a first condition, that Grip should relinquish his post on the *Vulcan,* and enter the firm in the character of a partner. If he would not do this, then no Cissy for Grip.

One day when the disconsolate one was hanging about the kitchen where Kate Brady was at work — he was more at ease with that good woman

— Kate said to him with apparent carelessness, —

‘Haven’t you remarked, Grip, that our Cissy grows prettier and prettier?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ replied Grip, ‘I haven’t remarked it. Why should I remark it? I don’t look — ’

‘Ah! you don’t look? Well, then, open your eyes, and you will see what a pretty girl our girl is. Do you know that she is close on nineteen?’

‘What, already?’ — Grip knew Cissy’s age accurately — ‘You must be mistaken, Kate.’

‘I’m not in the least mistaken; she’s just nineteen, and she ought to be getting married. Mick must look out for a good, honest boy for her, about 26 or 27, just like yourself, you know. Someone we could all trust with her; not a sailor, though, not a sailor! People that go to sea, no, no! Sea-faring folks needn’t be coming this way. And Mr Mick will give her a snug little fortune, I’m thinking — ’

‘She doesn’t want it.’

‘That’s true, Grip, but a little money’s a good thing in setting-up house. Our young master has someone in his eye, I think.’

‘Is it someone that comes to the Bazaar often?’

‘Yes, pretty often.’

‘Do I know him?’

‘No, it seems you don’t know him,’ answered Kate, looking at Grip, who looked away from her.

‘And — does Cissy like him?’ asked Grip, as though the words stuck in his throat.

Well, — we’re not altogether sure. When people can’t make up their minds to speak — ’

What stupid fools some people are!’ said Grip.

‘That’s just what I think,’ rejoined Kate, readily.

In spite of this very broad hint, the first fireman embarked on the *Vulcan* a week later; but when he returned on the 29th of October, it was evident that he had formed a great resolution. He did not, however, speak at once. The ship was to be laid up for repairs, and Grip had two months before him.

He had walked into the Bazaar immediately after his arrival, and finding Kate Brady dusting the shop, had asked her point blank, —

‘Is Cissy married?’

‘No,’ replied Kate, ‘but she soon will be. It’s coming.’

As the *Vulcan* was in the repairing dock, Grip had nothing to do on board, and so he was much with his friends. Indeed, short of living there altogether, he could hardly have been more constant to the Boys’ Bazaar. And yet, things did not progress. In fact the *Vulcan* had been repaired, was in process of lading, and within a week of putting to sea, and that unbearable Grip had not yet opened his handsome mouth, when an unexpected occurrence that had a reflex action upon the lagging swain took place.

A letter arrived from Australia, addressed to Mr O'Brien, and containing the following news: —

Mr and Mrs MacCarthy, Murdoch, his wife and their little girl, with Peter and Pat, who had rejoined them, had just sailed from the port of Melbourne for Ireland. Fortune had not smiled upon them, and they were returning to their own country well nigh as poor as when they left its shores. They were on board the *Queensland,* a sailing ship; the voyage would no doubt be slow and difficult, and their arrival could not be anticipated for nearly three months from the date of their departure.

Foundling Mick was greatly relieved by the arrival of this letter. To have any news at all of his friends was a boon of price, but the nature of the news grieved him sorely. However, he would be able to help them. How ardently did he long to be tenfold more prosperous, so that they might have tenfold the aid he could now offer them.

Foundling Mick requested Mr O'Brien to let him have this letter, and Mr O'Brien consented to do so. Mick locked it up in his safe, and, strange to say, did not allude to it after that day. Indeed, after the receipt of the letter, he seemed to avoid any mention of the former occupants of Kirwan's Farm.

Grip took the news very seriously. It had an aspect personal to himself of which he entirely disapproved. These MacCarthys, these two brothers.

Peter and Pat, were coming back; no doubt they were very fine fellows, and Foundling Mick was greatly attached to them. What if Cissy should think one of them a specially fine fellow, and Foundling Mick discover that he would be the best of husbands for the girl whom Mick regarded as an elder sister? In short, Grip became frightfully jealous, and on a certain day in December he made up his mind that there must be an end to this state of things. He had only just reached that conclusion when Foundling Mick took him aside, and asked him to come into his private room, as he had something to say to him.

The stricken Grip followed Mick, with a pale face and a sinking heart.

When they were seated face to face, Foundling Mick said, in a business-like tone, —

‘I am probably going to undertake a rather important affair, and I shall want your money.’

‘At last!’ said Grip, you haven’t been too quick about it. How much do you want?’

‘All you have in the Savings’ Bank.’

‘Take what you want, then.’

‘Here’s your book. Sign, please, so that I may draw out the money today.’

Grip opened the book and signed.

‘As for the interest,’ said Mick, ‘I shan’t say anything — ’

‘That does not matter.’

‘Because — from this day forth you are in the “house” of Mick, Dick & Co.’

‘As what?’

‘As a partner.’

‘But — my ship?’

‘You will give up your berth.’

‘And — my business?’

‘You will leave it.’

‘Why should I leave it?’

‘Because you’re going to marry Cissy.’

I m going — to marry — Cissy!’ repeated Grip in bewilderment.

‘Yes; she wishes it.’

‘Ah! It is she — ’

‘Yes! And as you wish it also — ’

‘I? I wish it — ’

Grip did not know what he was saying, or understand a word of the farther discourse of Foundling Mick. He took up his hat, put it on his head, took it off, placed it on a chair, and sat down upon it without perceiving that it was there.

‘No matter,’ said Foundling Mick. ‘Any way, you’ll have to buy a new one for the wedding.’

No doubt he did buy a new hat for the occasion, but he never had any clear idea of how his marriage was brought about. Even Cissy herself could not extricate him from the confusion and bewilderment in which he passed the intervening days. It came to pass, however, that on the 24th of December, Christmas Eve, Grip put on a black coat, as though he were going to a funeral, and Cissy arrayed herself in a white gown, as though she were going to a party, Mr O’Brien, Foundling Mick, and Dick assumed their best clothes, and Kate Brady made a noble appearance in a black silk gown and a shawl of many colours, the gift of her young master. Thus festively attired, the whole party proceeded in two cabs to the nearest Catholic Church, and when Grip and Cissy came out, leading the way, half-an-hour later, they were safely and certainly man and wife.

CHAPTER 26

THE VOYAGE OF THE DORIS

On the 15th of March, nearly three months after the marriage of Grip and Cissy, the schooner *Doris* cleared out of the port of Londonderry, and put to sea with a north-easterly wind. The vessel calls for our attention simply because she carries Caesar and his fortunes, in other words, Foundling Mick and a mixed cargo which is the property of Mick, Dick & Co.

How has all this happened? Briefly, thus: — After the marriage of Grip and Cissy, the business of the Boys' Bazaar became very brisk, and there was a great to-do in enlarging the shop, putting up new shelves and various fittings: in these operations Grip, who had hardly yet realised the fact that he was actually Cissy's husband and his 'boys' partner, displayed the utmost activity and handiness. Everything was in perfect order for the New Year, and with that season of beginning again the custom of the Bazaar notably increased. At the opening of 1887, Foundling Mick would have had nothing to desire but for the anxiety concerning the MacCarthys which continually oppressed him. His mind was full of his projects for their future security and welfare. But what of the *Queensland*? Tedious as the voyage must needs be, it was full time, and more, for news of the ship. At length Foundling Mick, who read the announcements in the *Shipping Gazette* assiduously, learned, on the 14th of March, that the steamer *Burnside* had passed the sailingship *Queensland* on the 3rd. The *Queensland-was* then in the Adantic, and might be expected to reach Queenstown in three weeks. Until then there was nothing for it but patience.

A few days later Foundling Mick's attention was attracted by an announcement in a daily paper among the items of commercial news to the effect that on the fifteenth of the current month, the cargo of the schooner *Doris* from Hamburg would be sold under a decree of the Court of Bankruptcy for the creditors by public auction at Londonderry; the said cargo consisting of one hundred and fifty tons of various merchandise.

Foundling Mick thought deeply over this announcement. The idea had occurred to him that he might conduct a profitable operation in the matter. Under the circumstances the cargo of the *Doris* would certainly be sold at a low price. He immediately consulted Mr O'Brien concerning this bold project, and his steady-going old friend, having read the notice and reflected upon it with the gravity of a man who does nothing lightly, replied as follows: —

'Yes, there's good business to be done in this. All these goods, if they go cheap, can be sold at a large profit, but on two conditions; that they are of excellent quality, and that they can be bought fifty per cent, under the market price.'

'That's what I was thinking, Mr O'Brien,' answered Foundling Mick, 'and the only way to know about the cargo of the *Doris* is to see it. I shall start for Londonderry this evening.'

'You are right, my boy, and I will go with you,' said Mr O'Brien.

Foundling Mick endeavoured to express his gratitude for such a proof of Mr O'Brien's regard, but the worthy gentleman stopped him by saying simply, —

'Let us try to turn this opportunity to good account — that is all I ask.'

Foundling Mick then informed Grip and Cissy that he was going to Londonderry by the evening train, on business which had the full approbation of Mr O'Brien. Almost the whole of his capital would be involved in the contemplated operation, but with a secure result, and his adviser and friend would be with him. He confided the Boys' Bazaar to the care of the newly married couple during his absence of 48 hours.

Mr O'Brien and Foundling Mick left Dublin that evening. Short as the separation was to be, Dick regarded it ruefully. He had not been parted from Foundling Mick for a day, since the auspicious occasion on which the latter had aided Ranger in his gallant act of salvage, and he would dearly have liked to accompany the senior partner.

The cargo of the *Doris* was closely examined by Mr O'Brien, who pronounced it to be suited in kind and quality to the requirements of Mick, Dick & Co. If he should be able to buy it at a low price he would realise a large profit, even to the quadrupling of his capital. Mr O'Brien would not have hesitated to make the purchase on his own account. He advised Foundling Mick to anticipate the sale by auction, by making a private offer to the creditors, Messrs Harrington.

This was good advice, and Foundling Mick acted on it, with success. He came to an advantageous agreement with Messrs Harrington, and obtained the cargo at a rate all the more advantageous that he offered to pay ready money. If Messrs Harrington were astonished at the youth of the purchaser, they were still more surprised by the intelligence with which he discussed this important transaction. Mr O'Brien offered his security, and the affair was settled on the spot by a draft on the Bank of Ireland.

Three thousand five hundred pounds, almost all Foundling Mick's capital, was the price at which he became the owner of the cargo of the *Doris*. It was not surprising that after the completion of the transaction he experienced an emotion which he did not try to restrain.

The simplest method of conveying the cargo to Dublin was to employ the *Doris* for that purpose. The skipper asked nothing better, and with a fair wind the passage would occupy only two days.

Having settled this point, Mr O’Brien and his young companion had only to take the evening train. Then an idea occurred to Foundling Mick: he proposed to Mr O’Brien that they should return to Dublin on the *Doris*. Mr O’Brien, who had the best reasons for disliking a sea passage, however brief, declined, but was quite content that Mick should make the little trip.

‘It tempts me, Mr O’Brien,’ said Mick. ‘It is a short run, and I would rather not lose sight of my cargo.’

Mr O’Brien returned alone to Dublin, where he arrived at early dawn, and precisely at the same moment the *Doris* put to sea.

The wind, coming from the north-west, was favourable. If it did not change, the passage would be excellent. But it was the month of March, and nearing the equinox the weather is apt to be treacherous in the Irish Sea. The *Doris* was commanded by a coasting captain named Cleary, and its crew consisted of eight sailors. They were all old hands, and familiar with the coast of Ireland.

The first day’s voyage promised favourably, and Foundling Mick greatly enjoyed the entirely novel sensation of being at sea. He was no more seasick than a cabin boy. Nevertheless, the thought of that precious cargo in the hold of the vessel, and of the abyss which had but to open to swallow up all his fortune, would occur to him.

He wished Dick were on board. He would have been so pleased to make a voyage ‘in earnest’ this time, not only on a *Vulcan* moored to the quay in Cork or in Dublin. If Foundling Mick had foreseen that he was to return to Dublin by sea, he would certainly have taken Dick to Belfast with him and treated him to the trip, and then Dick would have had no wish ungratified.

The north-east wind continued to favour the schooner’s course until the afternoon. Foundling Mick remained on the deck all day, had his meals there, and resolved to stay until the cold of night should oblige him to resort to the captain’s cabin. Decidedly, his first maritime excursion would leave none but the pleasantest impressions, and he congratulated himself upon having thought of escorting his cargo in person. He should feel proud on entering the port of Dublin with the *Doris,* and he was sure that Grip and Cissy and Dick would be at the quay to meet him.

Between four and five the weather changed; great masses of vapour piled themselves up in the east, and the sky became murky and threatening. Foundling Mick turned away from the bulwarks and observed the captain’s face. It had changed with the weather, and was overcast and anxious.

‘Well, captain?’ said Mick, in surprise.

‘I don’t like it,’ was the answer, and Captain Cleary returned to his lookout to the west.

The wind had fallen off, the sails began to flap against the masts, and the *Doris* rolled heavily under the influence of a long swell which stretched over the sea. The captain suggested that Foundling Mick should go below; but the swell did not affect him, and he remained on deck. From that moment the signs of tempest increased, and night fell upon the *Doris* batding with a storm which only those who have witnessed such scenes of atmospheric strife could have believed to be possible in so short a time. All space seemed filled with piercing, whistling sounds, before which the sea-birds flew in terror towards the land. Then in an instant the schooner was struck, and shivered from her keel to her topmast-head. The wildest confusion reigned, everything that could roll rolled and tumbled about, and it became very difficult to remain on deck.

‘Go below, sir,’ said Captain Cleary to Mick.

‘Captain, let me — ’

‘No — go below, I tell you, or you will be swept overboard by a sea.’

Foundling Mick obeyed. He carried a heavy heart with him to the cabin; but his trouble was not so great on his own account as on that of the cargo in peril. His whole fortune was on board, and might be lost — all the good he hoped to do might be rendered impossible.

An hour later the mainmast fell with a terrific crash, the ship heeled over to starboard, and as the cargo was displaced in the hold, being unable to right herself, she was in danger of filling over the bulwarks.

Foundling Mick, who had been thrown against the bulkhead of the cabin, scrambled up on his hands and knees, and strove to ascertain the meaning of the tumult on deck. Was the ship actually going down?

No; but the captain, finding it impossible to right her, and fearing that she must founder, was making preparations to abandon the schooner. Notwithstanding the inclination of the vessel, which rendered the operation very dangerous, the long boat had been launched, and all hands were about to get into it.

Foundling Mick understood the position when he heard the captain shouting to him to come on deck.

What! leave the ship and all she contained in her hold? No, that could not be! Were there but one solitary chance of saving her, Foundling Mick would run that chance, even at the peril of his life. He knew the maritime law; if the sea did not swallow it up, an abandoned ship belongs to the first person who boards her.

The cries were repeated; the captain shouted to Mick again and again, but there was no reply.

‘Where can he be?’ asked the captain.

‘We are sinking!’ shouted the sailors.

‘The boy! the boy!’

‘We cannot wait.’

‘I must find him.’

The captain hurried down into the cabin, but Foundling Mick was not there. Again he shouted, but in vain.

‘Where is he? Where is he?’ demanded the unfortunate and bewildered captain.

‘He may have come on deck,’ said a sailor.

‘He has gone overboard,’ said another.

‘We are sinking — we are sinking!’ cried the whole crew in chorus.

All this passed amid a scene of the wildest tumult, with the *Doris* rolling fearfully, so that every moment she seemed to be about to turn keel upwards.

The captain returned to the deck. Foundling Mick must have ventured on deck in the terrible darkness, and been swept into the sea! At the moment of the captain's reappearance the schooner plunged more deeply into the hollow between two mountain-like waves, and then rose for a brief space, which enabled him with the crew to get into the long boat, at the imminent risk of being swamped, and pull away from the side before, as they believed, she must go down.

The *Doris* was without captain and crew, but she was not an abandoned ship, she was not derelict, for Foundling Mick had not forsaken her.

He was alone, every moment he was menaced with death; the next might see him swallowed up by the seething sea; but he did not despair. He was sustained by an extraordinary presentiment which inspired him with confidence. He managed to regain the deck, and crawled to the bulwarks under the wind at a place where the sea was not coming in. What a multitude of thoughts came crowding upon him. This was, perhaps, the last time he should think of those whom he loved, of the MacCarthys, of Grip, Cissy, Dick, Kate and Mr O'Brien, and he implored the aid of God, beseeching Him to spare his life for their sake also.

The night came to an end. The tempest abated with the first rays of the sun. Still the sea continued to heave under the influence of a persistent swell. Foundling Mick turned his eyes in the direction of the land, but there was no coasdine to be discerned, and seaward not a sail, not even a fishing boat. Indeed, if there had been, it could hardly have perceived the dismasted wreck, half-hidden between the crests of the waves as it rolled in their trough.

And yet, the only chance of safety was being seen by a craft of some kind, for if the *Doris* continued to drive towards the west, she must inevitably be lost with all she carried, on the reefs which lay along the seaboard.

Foundling Mick was entirely helpless; by no effort of his could he direct the motion of the unwieldy, disabled vessel towards the fishing-grounds, and he had tried in vain to fix a piece of canvas to a still standing spar, to serve as a signal. He was in the hands of God only.

The day wore on without any aggravation of danger to the ship. She still drifted at the same inclination, but the sea was falling, and the wind was abating hour by hour. Foundling Mick ate food in order to preserve his strength, and not for an instant — we insist on this point — not for an instant, having retained the clearness of his intelligence, did he allow despair to lay hold on him. He kept one thing steadily before him, he was defending his right.

At four o'clock he saw smoke to eastward, and half an hour later a large steamer came distinctly into sight, going north, and at a distance of five or six miles from the *Doris*. Foundling Mick made signals with a flag attached to a boat hook, but they were not seen, and the big ship vanished from his sight.

Even then, such was the extraordinary courage of the boy, he did not despond. Darkness was coming on and he could not count on meeting any other craft that day. There was nothing to indicate that he was approaching the shore. There would be no moonlight, and the darkening sky was cloud-laden. The wind, however, was moderate, and the sea much less tumultuous.

As the temperature was low, it was better for the solitary navigator to go below when the night fell, for it would be impossible to distinguish any object at even half a cables length. Foundling Mick was greatly fatigued and unable to keep awake. He wrapped himself in a blanket, lay down on the planks alongside the bulkhead of the cabin and fell into a sound sleep.

At dawn of day he was awakened by loud sounds from without, and sat up, listening. Was the *Doris* drifting on to the shore, or had a vessel met her at sunrise?

‘We are first,’ shouted some men’s voices.

‘No, no, we are!’ answered others.

Foundling Mick at once understood what had happened. No doubt the *Doris* had been sighted from early dawn; two boats’ crews had hurried to get alongside her, and were now disputing which of the two she should belong to. The rival parties had boarded the wreck, and were now attacking each other.

Foundling Mick would only have to show himself to put an end to the conflict, but he took good care not to do so. These men might turn against him, and might not hesitate to toss him overboard, so as to avoid any ulterior claim. Without losing a moment, he must hide himself. He promptly crept into the hold and crouched down between the bales of goods. After a while, the tumult ceased, peace had been made. The belligerents had agreed to sell the cargo and divide the proceeds, after they should have taken the abandoned ship into port.

The crews were those of two fishing-smacks which had set out from Dublin Bay at sunrise, and sighted the wreck of the schooner four or five miles out. They then raced for the prize, but both arrived at the same time, hence a quarrel, blows and finally a bargain over the booty. Ah! these fishers would have made a good haul that morning.

Foundling Mick was barely stowed away safely in the hold, when the respective owners of the two smacks came tumbling down into the cabin, and we may judge how much pleased he was to be out of their sight when he heard one say to the other, —

‘It’s a good job there’s not a single soul on the schooner.’

The other made answer, — ’If there was, itself, he wouldn’t be long there.’ Half an hour later the hull of the *Doris* was in tow to the two smacks, which were urged by sail and oar as rapidly as possible towards Dublin Bay. As it was low tide, the smacks made for Kingstown, and on their arrival at the landing-place, the salvage men found a crowd assembled. The arrival of the *Doris* had been signalled, and Mr O’Brien, Grip, Cissy and Dick were in the front rank of the assemblage. They had been informed of the salvage.

What was their grief on learning that the fishing boats had brought back only an abandoned hull. Foundling Mick was not on board — Foundling Mick had perished! The little group was overwhelmed by the dreadful news.

At this moment a harbour official, whose duty it was to conduct the inquiry respecting the salvage, and who was empowered to deliver up the ship to its lawful claimants, arrived on the scene. What a stroke of luck for the salvage men!

But, on a sudden, a head appeared above the cabin stairs followed by the figure of a stalwart youth. What a cry of joy was uttered by Foundling Mick's 'own', and by what a shout of rage did the fishermen answer it!

In jn instant Foundling Mick was on the quay, and clasped in Cissy's arms. He greeted the others with a grasp of their hands, and then advanced towards the official.

'The *Doris* has never been abandoned,' he said, in a clear, firm voice, 'and all that it contains is mine.'

All discussion was useless. Foundling Mick's presence on board had saved that rich cargo, which remained his property, as the *Doris* remained the property of Captain Cleary and his men, who had been picked up at sea on the previous day. The fishermen had to rest satisfied with the reward to which they were legitimately entitled.

An hour later the Boys' Bazaar was the scene of a most happy reunion, in which Kate Brady and Ranger had their full share of recognition and pleasure. Foundling Mick's first experience of the sea had been singularly perilous; nevertheless, Dick presently sidled up to him and said, —

'Ah! if I could have been with you on board!'

'All the same, Dick?'

'All the same!'

CHAPTER 27

THE WAGES OF FOUNDLING MICK

The young senior partner in the firm of Mick, Dick & Co. was clearly on the high road to fortune, thanks to his intelligence, and, let it be said, to his courage also. His conduct in the matter of the *Doris* bore ample testimony to both.

One thing was still wanting to his happiness; the MacCarthys had not yet arrived. He had arranged with Mr Bennett, an agent at Queenstown, that he was to be informed by telegraph of the signalling of the *Queensland*, but the notice of that event tarried, and although Foundling Mick was not alarmed, he found it difficult to be patient.

Meanwhile, the Boys' Bazaar had become doubly fashionable, for the fame of Foundling Mick's exploit had spread in the city and in the suburbs, and his customers of all classes were very numerous. Mr O'Briens expectation that the capital engaged in the purchase of the cargo of the *Doris* would be quadrupled, was in a fair way to be not only realised but surpassed. The Bazaar was extended on both sides, and a shopman was added to Foundling Mick's staff. The toy department had ceased to be of the foremost importance, and Dick was now able to help Mick in the heavier part of their business. The hand of a woman of intelligence and taste was recognised in all the arrangements over which Cissy presided, and she herself was highly ornamental at the counter, where she was ably seconded by Grip, who had by this time thoroughly mastered the truth that his marriage was a fact, not a dream. The first fireman of the *Vulcan* was turned into the best and most loving of husbands, and there was every reason to believe that he would one day have an opportunity of developing and displaying the parental virtues also.

At length, on the 5th of April, a telegram was delivered at the Boys' Bazaar in the morning. Dick received it, and immediately shouted, from the shop, —

'News! News!'

Foundling Mick came running in at the sound, and snatched the welcome mustard-coloured envelope from Dick's outstretched hand. Cissy and Grip, followed by Mr O'Brien, joined him while he was devouring with his eyes the following message: —

Queenstown, 5th April, 9.25 a m. To Foundling Mick, Boys' Bazaar, Bedford St, Dublin. *Queensland* just come into dock. MacCarthy family on board. We await your orders.

BENNETT

Foundling Mick was almost choked with emotion. His heart stopped beating, and a burst of tears relieved him after a moment. He then merely said, —

That is well,' and went away to his own room. When he returned, he said nothing about the telegram, or the MacCarthys, much to the surprise of Mr and Mrs Grip, Dick and Kate. He went about his business as usual, and only 'troubled' Mr Simpson for a cheque for one hundred pounds, concerning which, or its destination, he said nothing whatever.

Four days elapsed, and Holy Saturday came. Easter Day fell, that year, on the 10th of April.

In the morning, Foundling Mick collected all his staff and said to them, —

‘The Bazaar will be closed until Wednesday morning.’

On this intimation, Mr Simpson and the shopman withdrew, and then Mick asked Grip, Cissy and Dick whether they would not like to make a little excursion during the three days of vacation.

‘I would for one,’ cried Dick. ‘Where are we going to?’

‘Into the County Kerry,’ answered Mick. ‘I wish to see it again.’

Cissy looked at him.

‘You really wish us to go with you?’ she asked.

‘Indeed I do.’

‘Then I’m to be of the party?’ said Grip.

‘Certainly.’

‘And Ranger?’ asked Dick.

‘Ranger also.’

It was arranged that Kate Brady should be left in charge of the Bazaar, and that the excursionists should leave Dublin by the four o’clock train for Tralee, where they were to sleep. On the following day Foundling Mick promised that he would explain the rest of the programme. They then dispersed, each to make preparations respectively for an absence of three days.

At four o’clock the travellers were at the railway station. Grip and Dick were in the highest spirits; but Cissy, who was of a less expansive disposition, was quietly observant of Foundling Mick, who remained impenetrable.

‘Tralee,’ said Mrs Grip to herself, ‘Kirwan’s Farm is not very far from Tralee. Is he going back there?’

Ranger was placed in the guard’s van with a special recommendation, backed by a bright shilling, to the care of that official, and then Foundling Mick and his companions took their seats — in a first-class carriage, if you please!

Foundling Mick, who knew Tralee, took his friends to the best hotel on their arrival at that town; they had an excellent though unusually late supper, and slept soundly in their strange quarters.

The following morning, Easter Sunday, while Dick was opening his eyes and stretching himself, and Cissy was at her toilet, assiduously waited upon by Grip, Foundling Mick was out walking about the town. He recognised the inn to which Mr MacCarthy used to go and he with him, the marketplace which had first inspired him with a taste for trade, the wine merchant’s shop where he had bought the bottle of port for Granny. He returned early to the hotel for breakfast, and at eight o’clock a smart jaunting-car with a capital horse was brought to the door, and the party started for S — , where Foundling Mick proposed that they should hear the Easter Day mass. The bell was ringing when they arrived at the church at ten o’clock. Foundling Mick entered the sacred edifice with a pale face and a beating heart. Here the double baptism of himself and his godchild had been celebrated. Ranger was left in the porch, and Cissy walked by Mick’s side; there was no one in the church to recognise Murtagh

MacCarthy’s adopted child in the well-grown, well-looking, well-dressed youth who bore himself during the service with unaffected reverence and de otion.

After Mass came a good luncheon at the one good inn which S — boasted, and again the jaunting-car was put in requisition to convey the excursionists to Kirwan’s Farm. So much Foundling Mick had told them, but they all felt that there was something kept back, something that moved their young benefactor profoundly.

Foundling Mick’s eyes were wet with tears as the swift wheels bore him along the road he had so often trodden with MacCarthy and Mary, with Kitty, and even Granny when she was able to go out. How mournful the place looked. It was easy to see that the country was abandoned. Ruins everywhere! and such ruins! — made to force the evicted people to quit their last shelter. In many places notices were affixed to the walls, indicating that such and such a farm, or field, was to be let or sold. And who would have ventured to buy or rent these, since their only harvest was poverty!

At length, at a turn of the road, Kirwan’s Farm came in sight, and a sob escaped from Foundling Mick’s breast.

‘It was there — ’ he murmured.

The farm was in a wretched state. The hedges were destroyed, the central door had been smashed to pieces, the outbuildings were half pulled down, the farmyard was overgrown with thistles and weeds, the house was roofless, the windows were smashed, the walls were full of holes. For five years, the rain, the snow, the wind and even the sun had done their worst with it. Nothing could be more lamentable than those empty rooms, open to all the blasts. A sad sight was the place where Foundling Mick had slept beside Granny's bed.

'Yes, it is the farm!' he repeated, and it seemed as though he dared not enter.

Dick, Grip, and Cissy kept back a little behind him, in silence. Ranger came and went uneasily, sniffing the ground; no doubt he too was picking up his old recollection. Of a sudden the dog stopped, his eyes sparkled, his tail quivered.

A group of persons had appeared before the yard gate, — four men, two women, and a little girl. These people were poorly dressed, and seemed to have suffered. The oldest of them stepped out from the group and came towards Grip, whose age indicated him as the chief personage among those strangers.

'Sir,' said he, 'an appointment has been made with us at this place — by you, no doubt?'

'By me?' replied Grip, looking at him in surprise.

'Yes; when we landed at Queenstown a sum of one hundred pounds was given to us by the shipowners, who had been directed to send us on to Tralee — '

At this moment Ranger barked wildly with joy, and fawned upon the older of the two women with the most significant demonstrations of affection.

'Ah!' she exclaimed, 'it is Ranger! our dog Ranger! I know him!'

'And do you not know me too, mother? Do you not know me?' cried Mick.

‘Is it he? It is our child!’

How shall the inexpressible be expressed? How shall the scene that ensued be depicted? Not at all; it may be imagined by all humane, tender, grateful hearts, and best by those to whom sorrow and suffering are familiar; but it cannot be described.

When something like calmness had been restored, and Foundling Mick had almost devoured his god-daughter with kisses, the reunited friends seated themselves on a pile of stones in the yard and began to talk. The lamentable story of the MacCarthys may be related here in a few lines although it was made long in the telling by Foundling Mick’s eager and impatient questioning. After the eviction, and Granny’s death, they had been taken to Limerick, where Murdoch was imprisoned for some months. When he was set free, the family went to Belfast and embarked on an emigrant ship for Melbourne in Australia. Soon after their arrival in the colony, they were joined by Pat. And then began a weary succession of efforts and failures: sometimes they got work together, at others they were separated. At last, after five years, they had left the country in which they had not been able at any time to do more than earn the humblest subsistence, to try whether their native land, for which they pined as only Irish hearts can pine, would be always so pitiless to them. Times, they had heard, were not quite so bad for the poor ‘at home’ as they had been. The laws had been ameliorated in certain respects, and the landlords’ claws cut to some extent. English public opinion was growing enlightened, and being brought to bear upon the condition of the Irish race. At all events the MacCarthys *must* go ‘home’; let their fate be what it might, they would meet it in their own country. And so they had come ‘home’.

Foundling Mick listened, and looked at these poor people, with profound emotion. MacCarthy was much aged, Murdoch was grave and sombre as he had been in the old time, Pat and Peter were weather-beaten and dejected, Mrs MacCarthy had lost the briskness and spirit of the busy farmer’s wife of other days. What had become of Kitty’s grand and gentle beauty? she looked fever-stricken, and Jenny was not so strong and rosy as she ought to be at her happy age. The boy’s heart was rent at the spectacle.

Cissy, who was seated between Mrs MacCarthy and her daughter- in-law, said, in a soft, low tone to the former, —

‘Take comfort, ma’am. Your troubles are over — over like ours — thanks to your adopted child.’

‘To him! What can he do for us?’

‘You — my boy?’ repeated MacCarthy.

Foundling Mick was incapable of answering him.

‘Why have you brought us back to this place, which recalls our miserable past?’ asked Murdoch. ‘Foundling Mick, what made you wish to put us face to face with these recollections?’

The same question was on the lips of all the others. Not one of them but wondered what could have been Mick’s intention in bringing the MacCarthys to meet him at Kirwan’s Farm.

‘Come!’ he answered, when he had mastered himself with difficulty. ‘Come, my father, my mother, my brothers, come with me!’

They followed him to the middle of the farmyard, where, in the midst of weeds and coarse grass, there still stood a small green fir-tree.

‘Jenny,’ said he, addressing the little girl. ‘You see that tree? I planted it the day you were born. It is eight years old, like you!’

Kitty, to whom his words recalled the time when she was happy, and hoped that her happiness might be lasting, burst into tears.

‘Jenny, my darling — ’ resumed Mick, ‘you see this knife; it was Granny’s first gift to me, your great-grandmother, I mean, but you hardly knew her.’

At that name, evoked in the midst of these ruins, MacCarthy and his wife quivered with the pain of remembrance.

‘Jenny,’ continued Mick, ‘take this knife, and dig up the clay at the foot of the tree.’

Jenny knelt down, without understanding him, put aside the grass, and made a hole in the spot to which he pointed. Presently the knife struck upon something hard. It was an earthenware jug, which had remained unharmed in the clay.

‘Take out the jug, Jenny, and empty it.’

The litde girl obeyed, and all the others looked on in profound silence. The jug was found to contain a number of little pebbles, like those to be found in the bed of the adjacent river.

‘Mr MacCarthy,’ said Foundling Mick, ‘do you remember that every evening, when you were pleased with me, you gave me a little stone?’

‘Yes, my boy, I do remember, and there was not one single day but you deserved to have one.’

‘They represent the time that I passed at Kirwan’s Farm. Very well, count them, Jenny. You know how to reckon, don’t you?’

‘Oh, yes!’ replied the little girl. And she began to count the stones, making little piles of them by the hundred.

‘Fifteen hundred and forty,’ she said.

‘That is right,’ answered Foundling Mick. ‘That makes more than four years I lived in your family, my Jenny; your family which had become mine.’

‘And those stones,’ said Mr MacCarthy, hanging down his head, ‘are the only wages you ever received from me; these stones that I hoped to change into shillings.’

‘And which are going to change into sovereigns for you, my father,’ said Foundling Mick, solemnly.

Neither Mr MacCarthy nor any of his family could believe, could comprehend that they heard. Such a fortune as that? Was Foundling Mick mad?

Cissy guessed their thoughts, and said, —

‘No, no, dear friends; his heart is as sane as his mind, and it is his heart that speaks!’

‘Yes, father, mother, you my brothers, Murdoch, Pat, and Peter, and you, Kitty, and you, my godchild, yes, I have the happiness of giving you back a part of what you gave me. This farm is for sale. You shall buy it. You shall rebuild the old house. Money shall not be wanting, and you will have no more Herberts to fear. You shall be your own masters, in your own home!’

And then Foundling Mick told the story of his life since the day he had left Kirwan’s Farm, and explained his present position. Fifteen hundred and forty pounds, which he placed at the disposal of MacCarthy, was a large fortune for an Irish farmer. And on that soil which had been watered by so many tears of sorrow, those of joy and gratitude fell fast.

The MacCarthy family remained for the three Easter days with Foundling Mick and his friends at S — ; then the latter returned to Dublin, and on the Wednesday the Bazaar re-opened its doors.

A year elapsed — the year 1887, which must be reckoned one of the happiest in the lives of the humble folk of our veracious history. The young senior partner was full sixteen years old. His fortune was made. It is true that a part of that fortune belonged to Mr and Mrs Grip, and to Dick; but the fact was of no importance, seeing that those three persons formed with himself one and the same harmonious family, to whom a division of interests was simply inconceivable.

The MacCarthys, having purchased two hundred acres of land on favourable terms, have rebuilt the farmhouse, renewed the farming materials, and bought new stock. Health and strength have been restored to them at the same time with happiness and ease. Just think of it; mere Irish tenants who had long suffered under the lash of landlordism, now in their own home, no longer slaving to pay an impossible rent to pitiless masters!

Foundling Mick does not forget, he never will forget, that he is their adopted child, and one day he may be united to them by a closer tie. Jenny is nearly ten years old, and promises to be a handsome girl. To be sure she is Foundling Mick’s god-daughter, but in due time a dispensation may settle that difficulty of spiritual affinity, and then, why not? Why not indeed? Ranger, an old dog now, would probably think the earlier it is settled the better.

THE END.

THE WONDERFUL ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN ANTIFER

Anonymous translation, 1895

This adventure novel was first published in 1894. The narrative concerns how Captain Antifer expects to receive the legacy of wealthy Egyptian, Kamylk Pasha, who his father helped many years before. To receive this legacy, first Antifer must await receiving the longitude that accompanies the latitude that he already possesses.

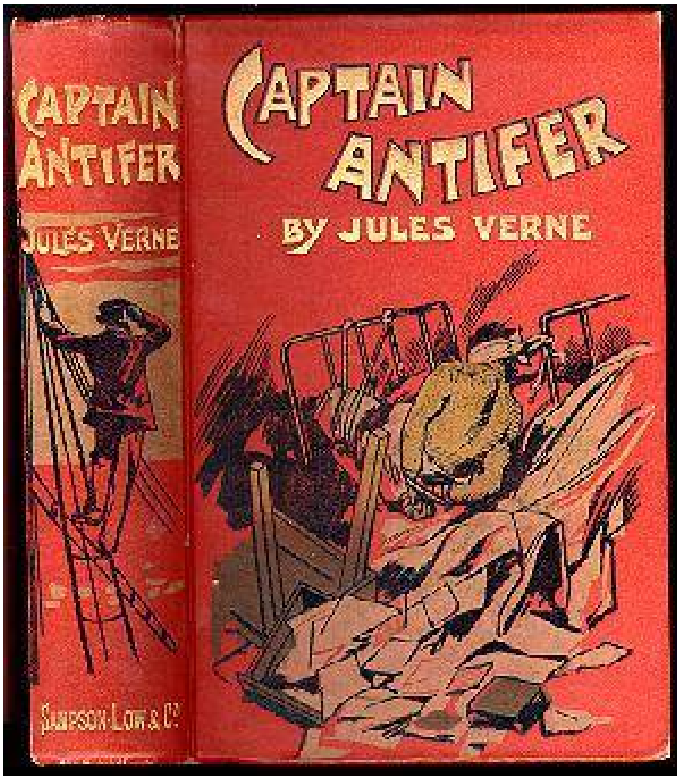
CAPTAIN ANTIFER
JULES VERNE
SAMPSON LOW & Co
CAPTAIN ANTIFER
BY JULES VERNE

The first edition in English

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CHAPTER I.

It is September 9th, 1831. The captain left his cabin at six o’clock. The sun is rising, or to speak more exactly, its light is illuminating the lower clouds in the east, for its disk is still below the horizon. A long luminous effluence plays over the surface of the sea, which is broken into gentle waves by the morning breeze.

After a calm night there is every promise of a fine day - one of those September days in which the temperate zone occasionally rejoices at the decline of the hot season.

The captain rests against the skylight on the poop, places the telescope to his right eye, and sweeps the horizon.

Lowering the telescope he approaches the man at the wheel - a grey-bearded, keen-sighted old man - who blinks as he looks at him.

“When did you come on duty?”

“At four o’clock, sir.”

The two men speak a language that no European would understand unless he had sailed in the Levant. It is a dialect of Turkish and Syriac.

“Nothing new?”

“Nothing, sir.”‘

“And you have sighted no ship since the morning?”

“Only one - a large three-master, which would have crossed us on the opposite tack, and I luffed a point so as to leave her as far off as possible.”

“You did well. And now?”

The captain looked searchingly round the horizon.

“Ready about,” he shouted loudly.

The men on watch ran to their stations. The helm was put down, the sheets were shortened in, the ship came up in the wind and went off on the opposite tack towards the north-west.

She was a brigantine of four hundred tons, a merchant vessel used as a yacht. The captain had under his orders a mate and fifteen men, whose jacket and cap and wide trousers and sea-boots were those of the mariners of Eastern Europe.

There was no name on the brigantine, either under the counter or at the bow. There was no flag. To avoid any salute the brigantine changed her course whenever the look-out reported a sail in sight.

Was she then a pirate - for pirates were not unknown in those days in these parts - which fearer! pursuit? No. A search for arms on board would have been in vain. And it was not with so small a crew that a vessel would run the risk of so dangerous a trade.

‘ Was she a smuggler working along the coast or from one island to another? By no means. The keenest customhouse officer might have gone down into her hold, overhauled her cargo, dived into her packages, ransacked her cases, without discovering any dutiable merchandise. To tell the truth she had no cargo at all. She carried provisions for several years in her hold, and in the lazarette there were three oak casks, strongly hooped with iron; the rest was mere ballast, heavy ballast to enable her to Carry so large a spread of canvas.

Perhaps you may think that these three barrels contained powder or some other explosive?

Evidently not, for none of the indispensable precautions were taken in entering the store-room in which they were kept.

Besides, not one of the sailors could have given you any information on the subject - neither on the brigantine’s destination, nor on the motives which made her change her course whenever a ship appeared in sight, nor on the goings to and fro during the fifteen months she had been at sea, nor even on her position at the present moment, sometimes under full sail, sometimes under hardly any at all, sometimes on an inland sea, sometimes on a boundless ocean. During this inexplicable voyage what high lands had been sighted which the captain had immediately steered away from! What islands had been discovered, which the helm had at once been shifted to avoid! Locking at the log-book, you would have found the strangest changes of course which neither the caprices of the wind nor the appearances of the sky could possibly explain. That was a secret between the captain - a grizzly man of forty-six - and a personage of lofty mien, who at the moment appeared at the companion -

“Nothing?” he asked.

“Nothing, your Excellency,” was the reply. A shrug of the shoulders betraying some annoyance terminated this conversation our words. Then the personage went down the steps and regained his cabin. There he stretched himself on a couch and abandoned himself to a kind of torpor. He could not have been more motionless if sleep had taken possession of him, and yet he was not asleep. He seemed to be under the influence of some fixed idea.

He might be fifty years old. His tall stature, his powerful head, his abundant hair, with the grey showing in it, his large beard spreading over his chest, his black eyes with their keen glances, his proud but evidently gloomy physiognomy, the dignity of his bearing, indicated a man of noble birth. A large burnous braided at the sleeves fringed with many-coloured scales, enveloped him from shoulders to feet, and on his head he wore a greenish cap with a black tassel.

Two hours later his breakfast was brought in to him by a boy; it was laid on a rolling table fixed to the floor of the cabin, which was covered with a thick carpet diapered with raised flowers. He scarcely touched the dainty dishes, but devoted his chief attention to the hot and perfumed coffee, served in two small finely chased silver cups. Then a narghili was placed before him crowned with scented fumes, and with the amber mouthpiece between his lips he resumed his reverie amid the fragrant vapours of latakia.

Part of the day was thus passed, while the brigantine, gently cradled on the billows, continued her uncertain course over the sea.

About four o’clock his Excellency arose, took a few turns backwards and forwards, stopped before the light ports open to the breeze, looked away to the horizon, and stood before a sort of trap-door which was covered by a piece of carpet. This door swung open by pressing the foot on one of the angles, and disclosed the way down into the store-room beneath the cabin-floor.

There lay side by side the three casks we have spoken of. The distinguished personage stooped over the trap and remained in that attitude for some seconds, as if the sight of the casks had hypnotized him. Then he stood upright.

“No,” he murmured,” no hesitation! If I cannot find an unknown island where I can bury them in secret, it would be better to throw them into the sea!”

He shut down the trap-door and replaced the carpet; then he went to the companion stairs and mounted to the poop.

It was five o’clock in the afternoon. There was no change in the weather. The sky was dappled with white clouds. Barely heeling to the gentle breeze, the vessel glided along on the port tack, leaving a light lacework of foam to vanish in her wake.

His Excellency slowly looked round the clear horizon. Afar off, at a distance of from fourteen to fifteen miles, he could see moderately high land; but there was no sharp ridge to break the line of sea and sky.

The captain walking towards him was received by the inevitable -

“Nothing?”

Which provoked the inevitable reply, - -

“Nothing, your Excellency.”

The personage remained silent for a few minutes. Then he went off and sat down on one of the seats, while the captain walked to windward; and in an excited way he worked about with the telescope.

“Captain?” he said at last.

“What does your Excellency desire?”

“To know where we are exactly.”

The captain took a large scale chart and opened it out on the deck.

“Here,” he answered, pointing with his pencil to where a line of latitude crossed a meridian.

“At what distance from that island to the east?

“Twenty-two miles.”

“And from that land?”

“About twenty-six.”

“No one on board knows where we are just now?”

“No one, save you and I, your Excellency.”

“Not even on what sea we are?”

“We have been sailing so many different courses for so long that the best of seamen could not tell you.”

“Ah! Why has ill-fortune prevented us from reaching some island that has escaped the search of other navigators, or if not an island, an islet, or even a rock of which I alone should know the position? There would I bury this treasure, and in a voyage of a few days I could recover it, if ever the time came for me to return I”

And so saying he lapsed into silence. With a long look down over the taffrail into the water, which was so transparent that he could see quite eighty feet beneath him, he returned to the captain, and with a certain vehemence exclaimed, -

“I will throw my riches into the sea.”

“It will never give them up again, your Excellency.”

“Let them perish rather than fall into the hands of my enemies or those who are unworthy of them.”

“As you please.”

“If before to-night we have not discovered some unknown island, those three casks shall be thrown into the sea.”

“Ay, ay, your Excellency!” replied the captain, who at once gave orders to haul a little closer to windward.

His Excellency returned to the stern and, sitting down on the deck, resumed the dreamy state which was habitual to him.

The sun was sinking rapidly. At this time of year, a fortnight before the equinox, it would set but a few degrees from the west. That is to say in exactly the direction the captain was looking. Was there in this direction any high promontory on the shore of the continent or on some island? Impossible, for the chart showed no island within a radius of from fifteen to twenty miles, and this on a sea well known to navigators. Was this then a solitary rock, a reef rising but a few yards above the surface of the waves, which would serve as the spot which up to then his Excellency had sought in vain as a deposit for his treasure. There was nothing answering to it on the very careful charts of this portion of the:sea. An island with the breakers around it, girdled with mist and spray, was not likely to have escaped a sailor’s notice. The charts should have shown its true position; and according to the chart he had, the captain could declare that there was not even a reef marked anywhere within sight.

It is an illusion!” he thought, when he had again brought his telescope to bear on the suspected spot, although he picked it up immediately.

In fact there was nothing so indistinct within the telescope’s field of view.

At this moment - a few minutes after six - the solar disk was just on the horizon, and “hissing at the touch of the sea,” if we believe what the Iberians used’ to say. At his setting, as at his rising, refraction still showed his position when he was below the horizon. The luminous rays obliquely projected on the surface of the waves extended as in a long diameter from west to east. The last ripples like rays of fire gleamed beneath the dying breeze. This light suddenly went out as the upper edge of the disk touched the line of water, and shot forth its green ray. The hull of the brigantine became dark while the upper canvas shone purple in the last of the light.

As the shades of twilight began to fall a voice was heard from the bows, -

“Ho, there!”

“What is the matter?” asked the captain.

“Land on the starboard bow!”

Land, and in the direction the captain had been watching the misty outline a few minutes before. He had not been mistaken then.

At the shout of the look-out the men on watch had rushed to the bulwarks and were looking away to the west. The captain, with his telescope slung behind him, grasped the main shrouds, and slowly mounted the ratlines to reach the crosstrees and there sit astride on them; with his glass at his eye he looked at the land in sight.

The look-out was not mistaken. Six or seven miles away was a small island, its lineaments standing out black against the sky. You would have said it was a reef of moderate height, crowned with a cloud of sulphurous vapour. Fifty years later a sailor would have said it was the smoke of a large steamer passing in the offing; but in 1831 no one imagined that the ocean would one day be; ploughed by these monsters of navigation.

The captain had little time to look at it or think about it The island was almost immediately hidden behind the evening mist. No matter, he had seen it, and seen it well. There was no doubt of that.

The captain descended to the poop, and the distinguished personage, whom this incident had awakened from his reverie, made a sign for him to approach.

“Well?”

“Yes, your Excellency.”

“Land insight?”

“An islet at least.”

“At what distance?”

“About six miles to the westward.”

“And the chart shows nothing in that direction?”

“Nothing.”

“You are sure about that?”

“Sure.”

“It must be an unknown island, then?

“I think so.”

“Is that possible?”

“Yes, your Excellency, if the islet be of recent formation.”

“Recent?”

“I am inclined to think so, for it appeared to me to be wrapped in vapour. In these parts the plutonic forces are often in action, and manifest themselves by submarine upheavals.”

“I hope what you say is true. I could not wish for anything better than that one of these masses should suddenly rise from the sea! It does not belong to anybody -”

“Or rather, your Excellency, it belongs to the first occupant.”

“That would be to me, then?”

“Yes, to you.”

“Steer straight for that island.”

“Straight, but carefully,” replied the captain. “Our brigantine would be in danger of being dashed to pieces if the reefs extend far out. I propose to wait for daylight, to make out the position, and then land on the islet.”

“Wait, then.

This was only acting like a seaman. It would never do to risk a ship in shoals that were unknown. In approaching an unknown coast, the night must be avoided and the lead used.

His Excellency went back to his cabin; if he slept at all the cabin-boy would have no occasion to call him at dawn; he would be on deck before sunrise.

The captain would not leave his post, but preferred to watch through the night, which slowly passed. The horizon became more and more obscure. Overhead the clouds became invisible as the diffused light left them. About one o’clock the breeze increased slightly. Only sufficient sail was set to keep the vessel under the control of her helm.

The firmament became lighted by the early constellations. In the north Polaris gazed gently with a motionless eye, while Arcturus shone brightly to continue the curve of the Great Bear. On the other side of the pole Cassiopeia traced her sparkling W. Below, Capella appeared where she had appeared the day before and would appear on the morrow, allowing for the four minutes of advance with which her sidereal day begins. On the surface of the sea reigned that inexplicable torpor due to the fall of the night.

The captain, resting on his elbow in the bow, never moved from the windlass against which he leant. Motionless, he thought only of the spot he could see through the gloom. He doubted still, and the darkness made the doubts more serious. Was he the sport of an illusion? Was this really a new islet risen from the sea? Yes, certainly. He knew these parts; he had been here a hundred times before. He had fixed his position within a mile, and eight or ten leagues were between him and the nearest land. But if he was not mistaken, if in this spot an island had risen from the sea, would it not be already taken possession of? Had not some navigator hoisted his flag on it? Was there no gleam of a fire indicating that the place was inhabited? It was possible that this mass of rocks had been here for some weeks; and how could it have escaped a sailor's notice?

Hence the captain's uneasiness and his impatience for the daylight. He saw nothing to indicate the islet's position, not even the reflection of the vapours which seemed to envelop it, and which might have thrown a fuliginous hue on the darkness. Everywhere the air and the water were mingled in the same obscurity.

The hours rolled by. The circumpolar constellations had described a quarter circle around the axis of the firmament. About four o'clock the sky began to brighten in the east-north-east, and a few clouds came into view overhead. Two hours and more were still to run before the sun rose, but in such a light an experienced mariner could find the reported island, if it existed.

At this moment the distinguished personage came on deck and approached the captain.

"Well, this islet?" he asked.

"There it is, your Excellency," replied the captain, pointing to a heap of rocks less than two miles away.

"Let us land there."

“As you wish.”

CHAPTER II.

The reader will hardly be astonished at Mehemet AH entering on the scene at the beginning of this chapter. Whatever may have been the importance of the illustrious Pasha in the history of the Levant, he must inevitably have appeared in this story on account of the unpleasant experiences the owner of the brigantine had had with the founder of modern Egypt.

At this epoch Mehemet AH had not begun, with the army of his son Ibrahim, the conquest of Palestine and Syria, which belonged to Sultan Mahmoud, the sovereign of Turkey in Europe and Turkey in Asia. On the contrary, the Sultan and the Pasha were good friends, the Pasha having helped the Sultan successfully to reduce the Morea and overcome the attempt at independence of the little kingdom of Greece.

For some years Mehemet AH and Ibrahim remained quietly in their pachalik. But undoubtedly this state of vassalage, which made them mere subjects of the Porte, lay heavy on their ambition, and they were only waiting an opportunity for breaking the bonds which had existed for centuries.

There then lived in Egypt a personage whose fortune, accumulated for many generations, made him one of the most important men in the country. He lived at Cairo, his name was Kamylk Pasha, and he it was whom the captain of the brigantine addressed as Excellency.

He was an educated man, well versed in the mathematical sciences, and in their practical or even fanciful application. But above all things, he was steeped deep in Orientalism, and an Ottoman at heart although an Egyptian by birth. Having persuaded himself that the resistance to the attempts of Western Europe to reduce the people of the Levant to subjection would be more stubborn under Sultan Mahmoud than under Mehemet Alii he had thrown himself heart and soul into the contest. Born in 1780 of a family of soldiers, he was scarcely twenty years of age when he had joined the army of Djezzar, where he soon attained by his courage the title and rank of Pasha. In 1799 he many times risked his liberty, his fortune, and his life in fighting against the French under Bonaparte. At the battle of El-Arish he was made prisoner with the Turks, and would have been set at liberty if he had signed an undertaking not to bear arms again against the French. But resolved to struggle to the end, and reckoning on an unlikely change of fortune, obstinate in his deeds as he was in his ideas, he refused to give his parole. He succeeded in escaping, and became more energetic than ever in the various encounters which distinguished the conflict of the two races.

At the surrender of Jaffa on the 6th of March, he was among those given up under the capitulation on condition that their lives were saved. When these prisoners - to the number of four thousand, for the most part Albanians or Arnauts - were brought before Bonaparte, the conqueror was much disturbed at the capture. We, fearing that these redoubtable soldiers would go to reinforce the Pasha’s garrison at Acre. And even in those days showing that he was one of those conquerors who stick at nothing, he gave orders that the prisoners should be shot.

This time there was no offer as to the prisoners of El- Arish, to set them at liberty on condition of their not serving again. No, they were condemned to die. They fell on the beach, and those whom the bullets had not struck, believing that mercy had been shown them, were shot down as they ran along the shore.

It was not in this place nor in this way that Kamylk Pasha was to perish. He met with some men - French men be it said to their honour - who were disgusted at this frightful massacre, necessitated perhaps by the exigencies of war. These brave fellows managed to save several of the prisoners. One of them, a merchant seaman, was prowling at night round the reefs on which several of the victims were lying, when he found Kamylk, seriously wounded. He carried him away to a place of safety, took care of him and restored him to health. Would Kamylk ever forget such a service? No. How he rewarded it, it is the object of this curious story to tell. Briefly then, Kamylk Pasha was on his feet again in three months. Bonaparte's campaign had ended in the failure before Acre. Under the command of Abdallah, Pasha of Damascus, the Turkish army had crossed the Jordan on the 4th of April, and the British fleet under Sidney Smith was cruising off the coast of Syria. Bonaparte had hurried up Kleber's division with Junot, and had himself taken the command, and routed the Turks at the battle of Mount Tabor, but he was too late when he returned to threaten Acre. A reinforcement had arrived, the plague appeared, and on the 20th of May he decided to raise the siege.

Kamylk thought he might venture to return to Syria. To return to Egypt, which was much disturbed at the time, would have been the height of imprudence. It was better to wait, and Kamylk waited for five years. Thanks to his wealth, he was able to live in easy circumstances in the provinces beyond the reach of Egyptian covetousness. ‘ These years were marked by the entry on the scene of a mere son of an aga, whose bravery had been remarkable at the battle of Aboukir in 1799. Mehemet Ali already enjoyed such influence that he was able to persuade the Mamelukes to revolt against the governor Khosrew Pasha, to excite them against their chief, to depose Khourschid, Khosrew's successor, and finally in 1806 to proclaim him- self Viceroy, with the consent of the Sublime Porte.

Two years before, Djezzar the protector of KamylkPasha had died. Finding himself alone, he thought there would be no danger in his returning to Cairo.

He was then twenty-seven, and new inheritances had made him one of the richest men in Egypt. Having no wish to marry, being of a very uncommunicative nature, preferring a retired life, he had retained a strong liking for the profession of arms; and until an opportunity came for him to exercise his skill, he would find an outlet for the activity so natural to his age in long and distant voyages.

But if Kamylk Pasha was not to have any direct heir for his enormous fortune, were there not collaterals ready to receive it?

A certain Mourad, born in 1786, six years younger than he was, was his cousin. Differing in their political opinions, they never saw each other, although they both lived at Cairo. Kamylk was devoted to the Turkish interest, and as we have seen had proved his devotion to the cause. Mourad opposed the Ottoman influence by his words and actions, and became the most ardent adviser of Mehemet Ali in his enterprizes against Sultan Mahmoud.

This Mourad, the only relative of Kamylk Pasha, as poor as the other was rich, could not depend on his cousin’s fortune unless a reconciliation took place. This was not likely. On the contrary, animosity, violent hate even, had made the abyss deeper between the only two members of this family.

Eighteen years elapsed, from 1806 to 1824, during which the reign of Mehemet Ali was untroubled by foreign war. He had however to struggle against the increasing j influence and formidable agitation of the Mamelukes, his . accomplices, to whom he owed his throne. A general ‘

massacre throughout Egypt in 1811 delivered him from this troublesome militia. Thenceforth long years of tranquillity were assured to the subjects of the Viceroy, whose relations with the Divan continued excellent - in appearance at least, for the Sultan distrusted his vassal, and not without reason.

Efif Kamylk was often the mark of Mourad’s ill-will. Mourad, taking advantage of the testimonies of sympathy he received from the Viceroy, was continually inciting his master against the rich Egyptian. He reminded him that he was a partisan of Mahmoud, a friend of the Turks, and that he had shed his blood for them. According to his account he was a dangerous personage, a man to be watched - perhaps a spy. This enormous fortune in one man’s hand was a danger. In short he said all he could to awaken the greed of a potentate without principle and without scruple.

Kamylk would have taken no notice of this. At Cairo he lived alone, and it would have been difficult to devise a plot to catch him. When he left Egypt it was on a long voyage. Then, on a ship that belonged to him, commanded by Captain Zo - five years his junior, and entirely devoted to him - he cruised on the seas of Asia, Africa and Europe, his life without an object, and marked by a haughty indifference to humanity.

We may even ask if he had forgotten the sailor to whom he owed his escape from the fusillades of Bonaparte? Certainly not. Such services he did not forget. But had these services received their reward? That was not likely. Would it enter the thoughts of Kamylk Pasha to recognize them later on, waiting an opportunity of doing so until one of his maritime expeditions took him into French waters? Who could tell?

In process of time the rich Egyptian could not hide from himself that he was narrowly watched during his stay in Cairo. Several journeys he wished to undertake were forbidden by order of the Viceroy. Owing to the incessant suggestions of his cousin, his liberty was in danger.

In 1823, Mourad, at the age of thirty-seven, married, in a way that did not promise to improve his position in the world. He had espoused a young fellah, almost a slave. There is no room for astonishment then that he continued the tortuous proceedings by which he hoped to ruin Kamylk, by means of the influence he possessed with Mehemet Ali and his son Ibrahim.

Egypt, however, was about to begin a period of military activity in which its arms were to have brilliant success. In 1824, Greece was against Mahmoud, who called on his vassal to aid him in putting down the rebellion. Ibrahim, at the head of a hundred and twenty sail, started for the Morea, and landed there.

The opportunity had come for Kamylk to have an object in life; to venture in the perilous enterprises which for twenty years he had abandoned, and with all the more ardour as it was to maintain the rights of the Porte, menaced by the rising in the Peloponnesus. He would have joined Ibrahim’s army; he was refused. He would have served as an officer in the Sultan’s troops; he was again refused. Was this not in consequence of the ill-omened influence of those whose interest it was not to lose sight of their millionaire relative?

The struggle of the Greeks for independence was to end in the victory of that heroic nation. After three years, during which they were inhumanly treated by Ibrahim’s troops, the combined action of the allied fleets destroyed the Ottoman navy at the battle of Navarino in 1827, and obliged the Viceroy to recall his vessels and army to Egypt. Ibrahim then returned to Cairo, followed by Mourad, who had been through the Peloponnesian campaign.

From that day Kamylk's position grew worse. Mourad's hatred became all the more violent in 1829 owing to his having a son born of his marriage with the young fellah. His family was increasing and not his fortune. Evidently his cousin's fortune must find its way into his hands. The Viceroy would not refuse to sanction this spoliation. Such readiness to oblige is not unknown in Egypt nor in other less oriental civilized countries.

Saouk, it may be as well to remember, was the name of Mourad's child.

Under these circumstances, Kamylk saw that there was only one thing to do; to get his fortune together, the greater part of it being in diamonds and precious stones, and depart with it out of Egypt. This he did with as much prudence as ability, thanks to the assistance of some foreigners at Alexandria, in whom the Egyptian did not hesitate to trust. His confidence was well placed, and the operation was accomplished in the utmost secrecy. Who were these foreigners, to what nation did they belong? Kamylk Pasha alone knew.

Three casks of double staves hooped with iron, similar to those in which Spanish wines are put, sufficed to contain all his wealth. They were secretly placed on board a Neapolitan speronare, and their owner, accompanied by Captain Zo, went with them as a passenger, not without escaping many dangers, for he had been followed from Cairo to Alexandria, and kept under observation all the time he was in that town.

Five days afterwards the speronare landed him at Latakia, and thence he gained Aleppo, which he had chosen for his new residence. Now he was in Syria, what had he to fear from Mourad under the protection of his old general, Abdallah, now Pasha of Acre? Would Mehemet AH, however daring he might be, venture to seize him in a province over which the Sublime Porte extended its all- powerful jurisdiction?

And yet this was possible.

In fact, this very year, 1830, Mehemet AH broke off his relations with the Sultan. To break the bond of vassalage which attached him to Mahmoud, to add Syria to his Egyptian possessions, perhaps to become sovereign of the Ottoman empire, were ideas not too high for the Viceroy’s ambition. The pretext was not difficult to find Fellahs, ill-treated by the agents of Mehemet AH, had sought refuge in Syria, under Abdallah’s protection. The Viceroy demanded the extradition of these peasants. The Pasha of Acre refused. Mehemet AH requested the Sultan’s permission to reduce Abdallah by force of arms. Mahmoud replied at first that the fellahs being Turkish subjects he had no intention of handing them over to the Viceroy of Egypt. But a little time after, desirous of securing the aid of Mehemet Ali, or at least his neutrality, at the outbreak of the revolt of the Pasha of Scutari, he gave the required permission.

Several events - among others, the appearance of the cholera in the ports of the Levant - delayed the departure of Ibrahim at the head of thirty-two thousand men and twenty-two ships of war. Kamylk had time to think of the danger to him of a landing of Egyptians in Syria.

He was then fifty-one, and fifty-one years of a life troubled as his had been brings a man almost to the threshold of old age. Wearied, discouraged, his illusions dispelled, longing only for the rest he had hoped to find in this quiet town of Aleppo, here had events again turned against him.

Was it prudent for him to remain at Aleppo, while Ibrahim was preparing to invade Syria? Admittedly his business was only with the Pasha of Acre, but after he had turned out Abdallah, would the Viceroy halt his victorious army? Would his ambition be satisfied with a mere chastisement of the guilty? Would he not take advantage of the opportunity to attempt the conquest of this Syria, which had been the constant object of his desires? And after Acre, would not Damascus, and Sidon, and Aleppo, be threatened by the soldiers of Ibrahim? It was at least to be feared so.

Kamylk Pasha took a final resolution this time. They did not want him, but the fortune coveted by Mourad, and of this his relative would deprive him at the cost of handing over the greater part to the Viceroy. Well, he would make away with this fortune, and hide it in some secret place where no one would discover it. Then he would see how matters turned out. Later on, if Kamylk decided to leave these oriental countries, to which he was so much attached, or if Syria became safe enough for him to live there in security, he could bring back his treasure from its hiding-place.

Captain Zo approved Kamylk's plans, and offered to carry them out in such a way that the secret would never be discovered. A brigantine was bought. A crew was formed of sailors having no bond between them, not even the bond of nationality. The casks were put on board without anyone suspecting what they contained. On the 13th April, the vessel on which Kamylk embarked as a passenger at the port of Latakia, put to sea.

His object, as we know, was to discover an island, the position of which should only be known to himself and the captain. It was therefore necessary for the crew to be so mystified, that they could not guess the direction followed by the brigantine. For fifteen months Captain Zo acted with this object in view, and changed his course in every possible way. Did he come out of the Mediterranean, and if he did, did he go back into it? Did he not cross the other seas of the old continent? Was he even in Europe when he sighted this unknown island? Certain it is that the brigantine had been in very different climates one after the other, in very different zones, and that the best sailor on board could not say where they actually were. Provisioned for several years, they had never touched land but when they wanted water, and the watering places were only known to Captain Zo.

The voyage was long. Kamylk had grown so hopeless of discovering his island, that he was about to throw his diamonds into the sea, when the unexpected at last appeared.

Such were the events relating to the history of Egypt and Syria, which it was necessary to mention. They will not trouble us again. Our story will have a more romantic voyage than this grave beginning might lead the reader to expect. But it had to rest on a solid basis, and this the Author has given it, or at least he has attempted to do so.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN Zo gave his orders to the man at the helm, and reduced the canvas till it was but just enough to keep steerage way on the vessel. A gentle morning breeze was blowing from the north-east. The brigantine neared the island under jib, fore-topsail and mainsail, the other sails being furled. If the sea rose she would find shelter at the very foot of the island.

While Kamylk rested on his elbows on the poop, the captain took up his position forward, and acted as a prudent mariner does when approaching a coast of whose bearings his charts give no indications.

There was the danger in fact. Under these calm waters it is difficult to recognize where the rocks may be almost at the water level. There was nothing to show the channel to be followed. The vicinity was apparently very open. There was no appearance of a reef. The boatswain who was working the lead found no sudden shoaling of the sea.

The islet was seen from about a mile off at this hour. The sun was lighting it up obliquely from east to west after clearing it of the mists with which it had been bathed at daybreak.

It was an islet, and nothing but an islet, which no State would have claimed as a possession, for it would not have been worth while. Speaking generally, it was a plateau measuring some six hundred yards round an irregular oval, about three hundred yards in length, and from a hundred and twenty to a hundred and sixty wide. It was not an agglomeration of rocks, heaped up in disorder one on the other in seeming defiance of the laws of equilibrium, but was evidently caused by a quiet and slow uprising of the earth’s crust. The edges were not cut up into creeks or indentations. It did not resemble one of those shells in which capricious Nature revels in a thousand fancies, but rather had the regularity of the upper valve of an I oyster or the carapace of a turtle. This carapace rose towards the centre in such a way that its highest point was a hundred and fifty feet above the level of the sea.

Were there any trees on its surface? Not one. Any traces of vegetation? None. Any vestiges of exploration? Nowhere. The islet then had never been inhabited - there was no doubt about that - and it could not be. Considering that its bearings had never been noted, and its utter barrenness, his Excellency could not have wished for a better as a secret deposit for the treasure he was about to confide to the interior of the earth.

“It would seem as though Nature had made it expressly,” said Captain Zo.

Slowly the brigantine approached it, gradually reducing sail as she did so. When she was within a cable’s length of the shore, the order was given to let go the anchor. The anchor dropped from the cathead, and dragging the chain after it through the hawse-hole, struck ground at twenty- eight fathoms.

The slope of the shore was thus very sudden, on this side at all events. A ship could come close up without risk of grounding, although it would be safer for her to remain at a distance.

As the brigantine swung to her anchor, the boatswain furled the last sail, and Captain Zo mounted the poop.

“Shall I man the large boat, your Excellency?”

“No, the yawl. I would rather we two went alone.”

A minute afterwards the captain, with two light oars in his hands, was seated in the bow of the yawl, the Pasha being in the stern. In a few moments the boat had . reached the shore, where landing was easy. The grapnel was firmly fixed in a crack of the ruck, and his Excellency took possession of the islet.

No flag was run up; no gun was fired.

It was not a State taking possession of it, but an individual, who landed with the intention of leaving it in a few hours.

Kamylk and Captain Zo remarked, to begin with, that the flanks of the island had no sandy base to rest on, but rose direct from the sea at an inclination of from fifty to sixty degrees. Hence, doubtless, its formation was due to an elevation of the bed of the sea.

They commenced their explorations by going round the islet, walking over a sort of crystallized quartz, bare of all footprints. Nowhere did the shore appear to be worn by the action of the waves. On the dry and crystallized surface the only liquid was water, left in crevices and depressions here and there by the last rains. There was not a trace of vegetation, not even a lichen or a marine moss, or any of those hardy plants sturdy enough to thrive among the rocks, where the wind may have scattered their germs. There were no mollusks, either living or dead, an anomaly truly inexplicable. Here and there were a few traces of birds, which could be accounted for by the presence of a few gulls, the sole representatives of animal life in its vicinity.

When the circuit of the islet was completed, Kamylk and the captain walked towards the rounded elevation in the centre. Nowhere was there a trace of a recent visitor otherwise; everywhere there was the same crystalline freedom from spot or stain.

When his Excellency and the captain reached the centre of the carapace they were about a hundred and fifty feet above the sea. Sitting down, they carefully looked round the horizon.

Over the vast surface of waves reflecting the solar rays, there was no sign of land. The islet thus belonged to no group of cyclades, no archipelago, however small. Captain Zo, telescope in hand, searched in vain for a sail in sight. The sea was deserted, and the brigantine ran no risk of being seen during the few hours she would remain at her moorings.

“You are certain of our position on this 9th of September?” asked the Pasha.

“I am certain, your Excellency, and to leave no doubt I will take the position again.”

“That is important. But how do you account for this islet not appearing on the chart?”

“Because in my opinion it is of very recent formation. In any case it ought to be all the better for you that it is not on the chart, and that we are sure of finding it when you wish to return -”

“Yes; when these troublous times are over. What does it matter if these millions remain buried among these rocks for long, long years. Will they not be safer here than in my house at Aleppo? It is not here that the Viceroy or his son Ibrahim, or that rascally Mourad, would come to steal them! I eave this fortune to Mourad? I would rather leave it at the bottom of the sea!”

“That would be a pity,” said Captain Zo; “the sea never gives back what you entrust to its depths. It is lucky that we found this islet. It at least will guard your riches, and faithfully restore them.”

“Come,” said Kamylk Pasha, rising,” we must be quick at what we are about; and it would be better if our ship were not seen.”

“I am ready.”

“No one on board knows where we are?”

“No one, your Excellency.”

“Not even in what sea of the Old or New World! We have been sailing the ocean for fifteen months, and in fifteen months a ship can travel great distances between the continents without her whereabouts being known.”

The Pasha and the captain returned to the yawl.

As they embarked the captain said - “When we have finished our work here, is it the intention of your Excellency to steer straight for Syria?”

“That is not my intention. Before I return to Aleppo, I will wait until the soldiers of Ibrahim have evacuated the province, and the country recovered its tranquillity -under Mahmoud.”

“You do not think that it will ever form part of the possessions of the Viceroy?”

“No! by the Prophet, no!” exclaimed Kamylk, firing up at the suggestion. “For a period, of which I hope to see the end, Syria may possibly be annexed to the domains of Mehemet AH, for the ways of Allah are inscrutable. But that it should not return eventually to the rule of the Sultan, Allah would never permit!”

“Where is your Excellency going to reside when you leave these seas?”

“Nowhere. When my riches are safe among the rocks of this island, there they will remain. We will continue to cruise about the world as we have done during the many years we have been together.”

“As you please.”

And a few minutes afterwards the Pasha and his companion had returned on board.

About nine o’clock the captain took a first observation of the sun with a view of obtaining his longitude, that is to say the time of the place, an observation which would be completed at noon w hen the sun passed the meridian, and when he would obtain his latitude. He brought out his sextant and took the altitude, and, as he had promised the Pasha, he fixed the position as accurately as possible.

Meanwhile he had given orders for the boat to be prepared. His men had to take with them the three casks from the lazarette, as well as the tools, picks and shovels, and the cement necessary for the burial of the treasure.

Before ten o’clock everything was ready. Six sailors tinder the boatswain’s orders occupied the boat. They had no suspicions of what the casks contained, nor why they were going to bury them. It was none of their business, and they did not trouble about it in the least They were sailors, accustomed to obey, mere machines as it were, working without asking the why and the wherefore.

Kamylk and the captain took their seats in the stern, and reached the island in a few strokes of the oars.

The first thing to be done was to choose a suitable spot for the excavation; not too near the shore, within reach of the waves on stormy days, nor too high up to be subject to the risks of a landslip. A suitable place was found at the base of a steep rock on one of the south-eastern capes of the islet.

At the captain’s orders, the men landed the casks and tools, and began the attack on the ground at this spot.

It was heavy work. As the pieces of crystallized quartz were chipped out they were carefully put into position, so as to be used for filling in the hole where the casks were buried. No less than two hours were spent in digging a hole some five or six feet wide and long.

Kamylk remained at a distance, pensive and sad. Perhaps he was pondering if it would be better for him to sleep for ever by the side of his treasure? And where else could he have found a safer shelter from the injustice and perfidy of man?

When the casks were lowered into the excavation, the Pasha took a last look at them. Then it was that the captain imagined from the Pasha’s behaviour that he was about to countermand the order, renounce his intentions, and return to sea with his wealth.

But no! With a gesture the command was given to continue the work. The captain steadied the casks together with lumps of quartz, and covered them with hydraulic cement, so that they became one solid mass, as compact as the rock of the islet itself. Then the outer pieces were put back in their places, and cemented, so as to fill up the cavity to the level of the soil. When the rain and storm had swept the surface for a little it would be impossible to discover the place where the treasure was buried.

It was necessary, however, that some mark should be made - an ineffaceable mark - in order that some day the seeker might find it. On the vertical face of the rock which rose behind the excavation the boatswain carved out with a chisel a monogram of the two K's of the name of Kamylk, placed back to back, which was the Egyptian's usual signature.

There was no need to prolong the stay on the islet. The treasure was safe in its grave. Who would discover it here? who would carry it off from its unknown resting- place? Here it was secure, and if Kamylk and the captain took the secret to their graves with them, the end of the world might come without anybody finding where the millions were hid.

The boatswain ordered the men into the boat, while his Excellency and the captain remained on a rock by the shore. A few minutes afterwards the boat came to fetch them, and brought them on board the brigantine, which had remained at anchor.

It was a quarter to twelve. The weather was magnificent. There was not a cloud in the sky. In a quarter of an hour the sun would have reached the meridian. The captain went in search of his sextant, and prepared to take his meridian altitude. When lie had taken it, he found from it the latitude, and then with the longitude, obtained by calculating the horary angle after the nine o'clock observation, he obtained the position of the islet within half a mile or less.

He had finished this, and was preparing to go on deck, when his cabin door opened.

Kamylk appeared.

"Have you got your position?" he asked.

“Yes, your Excellency.”

“Give it to me.”

The captain held out the sheet of paper on which was the working.

Kamylk looked it through attentively, as if he would fix the position of the islet in his memory.

“You will keep this paper,” he said. “And as to the log-book you have been keeping for the last fifteen months in which you have recorded our course -”

“No one will ever have that, your Excellency.”

“To be quite certain of that, destroy it at once.”

“As you please.”

The captain took the book in which were registered the directions taken by the brigantine during her lengthy cruise on so many different seas; and he tore out the leaves and burnt them in the flame of a lantern.

Some hours were spent at anchor. About five o’clock clouds began to appear on the western horizon; and through their narrow intervals the setting sun shot his streams of rays, which strewed the sea with scales of gold.

The captain shook his head, like a sailor whom the appearance of the weather did not please.

“Your Excellency,” he said,” there is a strong breeze in those heavy clouds, perhaps a storm to-night! This islet affords no shelter, and before it is too dark, I should like to get a dozen miles to windward.”

“And there is nothing to keep us here!” said the Pasha.

“We will go, then.”

“For the last time there is no need for you to verify your observations for latitude or longitude?”

“No, your Excellency; I am as sure of my position as I am of being my mother’s child.”

“Get under way, then.”

The preparations did not take long. The anchor left the ground, and was hauled up to the cathead; the sails were set, and the vessel headed north-west.

Kamylk watched the unknown islet as they left it until it disappeared in the shades of the night. But the rich Egyptian could find it again when he pleased, and with it the treasure he had buried in it, a treasure worth four millions sterling in gold, and diamonds, and precious stones.

CHAPTER IV.

Every Saturday about eight o’clock in the evening Captain Antifer would smoke his pipe - a regular furnace, very short in the stem - and plunge into a blue rage, from which he would emerge quite red, an hour afterwards, when he had relieved himself at the expense of his neighbour and friend Gildas Tregomain. And what caused this rage? Simply his not being able to find what he wanted on one of the maps in an old atlas!

“Confound this latitude!” he would exclaim. “If it even ran through the furnace of Beelzebub, I should have to follow it from one end to the other!”

And until he put this plan into execution Captain Antifer dug his nails into the said latitude, and punctured it with pencil-points and compass-prods, until it was as full of holes as a coffee-strainer.

The latitude which brought down Antifer’s objurgations was written at the end of a piece of parchment which was almost as yellow as an old Spanish flag: Twenty-four degrees fifty-nine minutes north.

Above this, in a corner of the parchment, were these words in red ink - “Let my boy never forget this.”

And Captain Antifer would exclaim: “Never fear, my good old father, I have not forgotten it, nor will I ever forget it. But may the three patron saints of my baptism bless me if I know what use it can ever be!”

It is the 23rd of February 1862, and this evening Captain Antifer is behaving himself as usual. He is in a howling rage; he is swearing like a topman when a rope slips through his hands; he is grinding away at the pebble which he has in his mouth. He is pulling away at his pipe, which has gone out twenty times, and which he has lighted again and again from a box of matches; he has thrown his atlas into one corner, his chair into another; he has smashed a big shell on the mantelpiece; he has stamped so as to shake down flakes of whitewash from the ceiling; and in a voice accustomed to be heard above a roaring gale he shouts: “Nanon! Enogate!” making a speaking-trumpet out of a roll of cardboard.

Enogate and Nanon, the one busy knitting, the other in front of the kitchen stove, judged it time to put a stop to their troubled domestic elements.

One of the good old houses of St. Malo, built of granite, facing the Rue des Hautes Salles; a ground-floor and two storeys, each containing two rooms, and the upper one, at the back, overlooking the road round the ramparts. There you could see its walls of granite, thick enough to defy the projectiles of the olden days, the narrow windows with the iron bars, the massive gate of heart of oak, ornamented with iron fastenings, and furnished with a knocker you could hear at Saint Servan when Captain Antifer had it in hand: its slate roof pierced with dormer windows, from which the old sailor’s telescope was occasionally visible. This house - half a casemate, half a fortress - adjoining an angle of the ramparts which surround the town, has a superb view; to the right, Grand- Be, a corner of Cezembre, the Pointe du Decolle, and Cape Frehel; to the left, the jetty and the mole, the mouth of the Ranee, the beach of Prieure, near Dinard, and the grey dome of Saint Servan.

Formerly St. Malo was an island, and perhaps Captain Antifer regretted the time when he would have been called an islander. But the ancient Aaron has become a peninsula, and he has to make the best of it. Besides, one has a right to be proud at being a child of this Breton city which has given so many great men to France - among others, Duguay-Trouin, whose statue our worthy mariner saluted every time he crossed the square, Lamennais, although this writer in no way interested him, and Chateaubriand, whose best work he did not know, and whose proud and modest tomb on the little island of Grand- Be” we cannot pass without mention.

Captain Antifer (Pierre Servan Malo) was then forty- six years old. Eighteen months before, he had retired from the sea with a certain independence which sufficed for himself and his people. A few thousand francs in the funds had resulted from his service on the two or three ships he had commanded, which had always hailed from St. Malo. These ships belonged to Le Baillif and Co. and traded in the Channel, in the North Sea, in the Baltic, and even in the Mediterranean. Before attaining this lofty position. Captain Antifer had been about the world a good deal. A good seaman, very enterprising, hard master to himself and others, never sparing himself, his courage beyond reproach, his obstinacy unyielding, the obstinacy of a true Breton. Did he regret the sea? No, for he had left it in the prime of life. Had his health anything to do with this resolve? No, for he was built of the pure granite of the Breton Coast.

It was quite enough to look at him, to hear him, to receive one of the grips of his hand, of which he was not sparing. Figure a sturdy man of medium height and thickish neck. Here is his description in detail - a woollen cap; hair bristling like the quills of a porcupine; face tanned, cooked and re-cooked by sea water, and bronzed by the sun of southern latitudes; beard like a lichen on the rocks, with the grey hairs bristling all round it: bright eyes, veritable carbuncles beneath the arched eyebrows, with the pupils black as jet and gleaming like a cat’s; nose big at the end, and long enough to carry the spectacles, and with two wrinkles at the base near the eyes; teeth complete, sound and healthy, clicking with the convulsions of the jaw, particularly as their owner always had a pebble in his mouth; ears hairy, tip erect, lobe pendent, one of them with a appearing, on which an anchor was engraved; body rather thin, set on nervous legs firm enough on their strong supports, and straddling at the most appropriate angle for dealing with the rolling and pitching of a ship at sea. Evidently a man of unusual strength, due to the muscles massed together like the rods in a Roman lictor's bundle; a man, drinking well and eating well, who would have a clean bill of health for many a long day. But of what irritability, nervousness and impetuosity was the individual capable who forty-six years before had been entered in the parish register under the name of Pierre Servan Malo Antifer!

And this evening, he stormed and raved, and the house shook, so that you would think that there was beating round its foundations one of those equinoctial tides which rise for fifty feet and cover half the town with spray.

Nanon, the widow of La Goat, forty-eight years of age, was the sister of this noisy sailor. Her husband, a clerk in Le Baillifs, had died young, leaving her a daughter, Enogate, who had been brought up by Uncle Antifer, who fulfilled his functions as a guardian with conscientiousness and discipline. Nanon was a worthy woman, loving her brother, trembling before him, and bending when he stormed. Enogate, charming with her golden hair, her blue eyes, her fresh carnation colour, her intelligent face, her natural grace, more resolute than her mother, and sometimes standing up to her terrible guardian, who adored her and did his best to make her the happiest of the girls of Saint Malo, as she was one of the prettiest. But perhaps his idea of happiness was not quite the same as that of his niece and ward.

The two women appeared at the door of his room, the one with her long knitting- needles, the other with the flat- iron she had just taken from the front of the fire.

“What is the matter?” asked Nanon.

“Only my latitude; my confounded latitude!” answered Captain Antifer; and he gave himself a knock on the head which would have cracked any other crown than that which Nature had fortunately given him.

“Uncle,” said Enogate, “the latitude that troubles you is no reason for you putting your room into disorder.”

And she picked up the atlas, while Nation gathered together the pieces of shell that had been scattered about as if it had gone off like a bomb.

“Did you break that?”

“Yes, I did, and if anyone else had done it, he would have had a bad quarter of an hour -”

“Why did you throw it down?”

“Because my hand itched.”

“This shell was a present from our brother,” said Nanon,” and you are to blame -”

“Well? If you were to keep on repeating until tomorrow that I am to blame, will that put it back again?”

“What will my cousin Juhel say?” asked Enogate.

“He will say nothing, and he had better say nothing!” replied Antifer, regretting that he had only got the two women before him, on whom he could not reasonably gratify his anger.

“And by-the-bye,” he added, “where is Juhel?”

“You know, uncle, that he has gone to Nantes,” replied Enogate. “Nantes! that is something new! What is he going to do at Nantes?”

“Uncle, you yourself sent him there - you know, his examination for his certificate as long-voyage captain -”

“Long-voyage captain - long-voyage captain!” growled Antifer; “why could not he be content to be a coasting- captain like me?”

“Brother,” said Nanon, timidly, “he only took your advice - you wished -”

“Well - because I wished it - that is a fine reason! And if I had not wished it, would he not have gone all the same! Besides, he will fail.”

“No, uncle.”

“But he will! and if he does I will give him a reception - a regular whirlwind! “You see there was no way of reasoning with this man.

On the one hand he did not want Juhel to go up for the examination, and on the other, if he failed, the said pupil would catch it, as would “those asses of examiners, those pedlars in hydrography.”

But Enogate had evidently a presentiment that the young man would not be rejected, first of all because he was her cousin, then because he was an intelligent, studious young man, and then because he loved her and she loved him, and they were engaged to be married. And can you imagine three better reasons than those?

We may add that Juhel was a nephew of Captain Antifer, who had acted as guardian to him until he became of age. He had been left an orphan at an early age by the death of his mother, who had died at his birth, and by the death of his father, a naval lieutenant, whose death took place a few years afterwards. We need not be astonished that it was written above that he should be a sailor. That he would obtain his captain’s certificate Enogate did not doubt, nor did his uncle, for that matter, although he was too bad-tempered to say so.

And this was of all the more importance to the girl as her marriage was to take place when he passed his examination. The two young people really loved each other, and would probably be happy for the rest of their lives. Nanon was delighted to see the day coming of this wedding, which was approved of by all the family. What obstacle could there he if the all-powerful head gave his consent - or rather, refrained from giving it until Juhel had won his captaincy? Juhel had served a complete apprenticeship to his trade, first on vessels belonging to Le Baillifs, then in government vessels, and then as mate for three years in the mercantile marine. He knew his trade in practice and theory. And Captain Antifer was really proud of his nephew. But perhaps he had dreamt of a richer alliance for him, because he was a lad of real merit; perhaps he had even wished for a better husband for his niece, than whom there was no better-looking girl in the whole district. And if a million had fallen into his hands - and he was as happy with his five thousand pounds in the funds - it is not impossible that he would have lost his head and indulged in some such senseless dream.

Enogate and Nanon soon introduced a little order into the room of this terrible man, if not into his brain. Antifer strode about rubbing his eyes, in which the lightning still lurked - a sign that the storm was not yet over and a flash might come at any minute. And when he looked at his barometer hung on the wall, his anger awoke again because the scrupulous and faithful instrument remained at fine weather.

“And so Juhel has not come back?” he asked, turning towards Enogate.

“No, uncle.”

“And it is ten o’clock!”

“No, uncle.”

“You will see he will miss the train.”

“No, uncle.”

“Ah! Are you going to do nothing but contradict me?”

“No, uncle.”

Nanon might gesticulate in vain, for evidently the young Breton was resolved to defend her cousin against the unjust accusation of her boisterous uncle.

Evidently the thunder-clap was not far off. But was there not a lightning-conductor to take off the whole of the electricity accumulated in Captain Antifer’s reservoirs?

Perhaps so. That was why Nanon and her daughter hastened to obey him when he yelled in the voice of a stentor,” Send Tregomain here!”

They rushed from the room, opened the street door and ran out in search of Tregomain.

“It is to be hoped he is at home!” they said to each other.

He was, and five minutes afterwards he was in the presence of Captain Antifer.

Gildas Tregomain, fifty-one. Points of resemblance with his neighbour - a bachelor as he was, had navigated as he had, no longer navigated as he no longer navigated, had retired as he had, was a native of Saint Malo as he was. There the resemblance ended. Gildas Tregomain was as calm as Antifer was stormy, as philosophical as Antifer was the reverse, as accommodating as Antifer was difficult to get on with. Physically the friends were even more unlike if possible. They were close friends, but the friendship of Antifer for Tregomain was far more intelligible than that of Tregomain for Antifer. To be the friend of such a man was not without its drawbacks.

We have said that Tregomain had "navigated," but there are navigators and navigators. Antifer had visited the principal seas of the globe, not so his neighbour.

Tregomain, being the son of a widow, had been exempt from serving the State, and he had never been on the sea.

Never! He had seen the Channel from the heights of Cancale and even from Cape Frehel, but he had never ventured on it. He had been born in the painted cabin of a canal barge, and in a barge he had spent his life. First as a "hand," then as "captain "of the Chamante Amelie, he had been up and down the Ranee from Dinard to Dinan, from Dinan to Plumaugat, to return with a load of wood, of wine, of coal, according to the trade. He hardly knew of any other river. He was a fresh-water sailor no more and no less, while Antifer was the saltest of salts - a mere boatman by the side of a coaster captain; and so he lowered his flag in the presence of his neighbour and friend, who had no difficulty in keeping him at a distance.

Tregomain lived in a pretty little house, about a hundred yards away from” Antifer’s, at the end of the Rue de Toulouse, near the ramparts. One view looked out to sea, the other over the mouth of the Ranee. He was a powerful man, of extraordinary breadth of shoulder - nearly a yard - five feet six inches high, a body like a box, invariably wearing a huge waistcoat with two rows of bonebuttons, a brown jacket, always very clean, with great folds in the back and at the armholes. From this trunk came two huge arms big enough for the thighs of an ordinary man, terminated by enormous hands, big enough for the feet of a grenadier of the Old Guard. With such limbs and muscles, Tregomain could not be otherwise than of enormous strength. But he was a gentle Hercules. Never had he abused his strength, and never did he shake hands but with his thumb and index finger, for fear of smashing your fingers. Strength was latent in him. It never went was far as blows, but manifested itself without effort.

To compare him with machines, he was less of the sledge-hammer than of the hydraulic press. That came from the circulation of his blood, great and generous, slow and insensible.

From his shoulders rose a big head, wearing a high hat with a broad brim. His hair was flat, his whiskers mutton- chop, his nose curved, his mouth smiling, his lower lip projecting, his chin double and even treble, his teeth white, one incisor in the top row missing - teeth which had never been stained with the smoke of a pipe - eyes limpid and kind, under thick brows, colour brick-red, due to the breezes of the Ranee, and not to the stormy gales of the ocean.

Such was Gildas Tregomain, one of those obliging men to whom you can say, Come at twelve o’clock, come at two o’clock, and they will always be there.

He was also a sort of unshakable rock, against which the surges of Captain Antifer beat in vain. When his neighbour was in one of his whirlwind moods he was sent for, and he came to placidly take all the buffetings of this tumultuous personage.

And so the ex-captain of the Charmanle Amelie was adored in the house - by Nanon to whom he served as a rampart, by Juhel who had vowed eternal friendship for him, by Enogate who did not hesitate to kiss his rounded cheeks and his wrinkleless forehead, that incontestable sign of a calm and conciliating temperament, according to the physiognomists.

As the boatman mounted the wooden staircase that led to the first floor, the steps groaned under the heavy weight. Pushing open the door, he found himself in the presence of Captain Antifer.

SECTION 9

CHAPTER V.

"So you have come at last?"

"I came as soon as you sent for me, my friend."

"Not without taking your time!'

"The time to come here -"

"Indeed! One would think you had taken your passage on the Clamante Amelie!"

Tregomain took no notice of this allusion to the slow progress of canal-boats compared with that of sea-going ships. He saw that his neighbour was in a bad temper, in which there was nothing astonishing, and he made up his mind to put up with it, as was his custom.

Antifer stretched out a finger, which he gently squeezed between his thumb and index of his large hand.

"Eh! Not so strong! You always squeeze too tight!"

"Excuse me. I took particular care -"

"Well, you could not have made a worse mess of it."

And with a gesture Captain Antifer invited Tregomain to sit down at the table in the middle of the room.

The boatman obeyed, and sat himself in a chair, his legs wide apart, his feet placed firmly in shoes without heels, his huge handkerchief spread on his knees - a cotton handkerchief with blue and red flowers, ornamented with an anchor at each corner.

This handkerchief always made Antifer shrug his shoulders. An anchor for a bargeman! Why not a foremast or a mainmast or a mizen on a barge!

“You will take some brandy,” said he, bringing out two glasses and a bottle. “You know, my friend, that I never take anything.”

This did not prevent Antifer from filling two glasses. According to a custom now ten years old, he first drank his own brandy, and then drank Tregomain’s. “And now let us talk.”

“Of what?” asked the bargeman, who knew exactly what was coming. “Of what? Of what would you like us to talk, if not of -?”

“That is true. Have you found the spot that interests you on this famous latitude?”

“Found it? And how would you like me to find it? By listening to the chatter of the two females who were here just now?”

“The good Nanon and my pretty Enogate!”

“Oh! I know - you are always ready to take their part against me. But that has nothing to do with it. Here has my father been dead for eight years, and for eight years this latitude question has not advanced a step. It is time it should finish.”

“I,” said the bargeman, winking,” would soon finish it, by not bothering any more about it.”

“Indeed. And my father’s command on his death-bed, what would you do with that? That sort of thing is sacred I believe.”

“It is a pity,” said Tregomain, “that the worthy man- did not say a little more.”

“If he did not say a little more it was because he did not know a little more! Am I, too, to see my last day without knowing any more?”

Tregomain was about to answer that it was very likely - and even desirable. He refrained, however, so as not to excite his excitable friend.

What had happened a few days before Antifer died was as follows: - It was in the year 1854 - a year which the old sailor was not to see out in this world. Feeling himself very ill, he thought he would tell his son a story, the mystery of which he had been unable to penetrate.

Fifty-five years before - in 1799 - while he was trading in the Levant, Thomas Antifer was cruising off the coast of Palestine, the very day that Bonaparte was massacring the prisoners of Jaffa. One of these unfortunates, who had taken refuge on a rock, where he was awaiting inevitable death, had been taken away by the French sailor during the night, embarked on his ship, had his wounds dressed, and finally recovered, after two months of good treatment.

This prisoner told his rescuer who he was. He said he was Kamylk Pasha, a native of Egypt, and when he took his leave, he assured the gallant sailor that he would not forget him. When the time came he would receive a proof of his gratitude.

Thomas Antifer pursued his voyages, thinking more or less of the promises that had been made to him, and made up his mind to think no more of them, as it did not seem that they would ever be realized.

In his old age he retired to Saint Malo, devoting himself to the maritime education of his son, and he was seventy- seven years old when a letter reached him, in June, 1842.

Whence came this letter, written in French? From Egypt evidently, from the postmark. What did it contain? Simply this: -

“Captain Thomas Antifer is requested to note in his pocket-book this latitude, 24 degrees 59 minutes north, which will be completed by a longitude that will eventually be communicated to him. He will do well not to forget this, and to keep it secret. It is of considerable importance to him. The enormous sum in gold, diamonds and precious stones that this latitude and longitude will one day be worth to him, will only be the just recompense for the services he formerly rendered to the prisoner of Jaffa.”

And this letter was signed with a double K, in the form of a monogram.

This is what it was that fired the imagination of the worthy man - the worthy father of his son. And so after forty-three years Kamylk Pasha had remembered him I He had taken his time about it! But probably obstacles of all kinds had delayed him, in this country of Syria, the political position of which was only definitely settled in 1840 by the treaty of London, signed on the I5th of July, and to the advantage of the Sultan.

Now Thomas Antifer was the possessor of a latitude which passed through a certain point of the earth where Kamylk Pasha had buried a fortune. And what fortune? In his opinion nothing less than millions. In any case he had been required to keep the matter secret, until the arrival of a messenger, who would some day bring him the promised longitude. And so he spoke to no one about it - not even to his son.

He waited. He waited for twelve years, and if he had had a sister Anne on a tower, sister Anne would have seen nothing. But was it reasonable that he should carry the secret to the tomb with him, that he should reach the end of his life without having to open his door to the envoy of the Pasha? No! he could not believe it. He said to himself that this secret ought to be entrusted to him who would stand in his place, his son Pierre. And in 1854 the old sailor, then aged eighty-one, thinking that he had only a few days to live, told his son and heir of Kamylk's intentions. He made him promise - as he himself had done - never to forget the figures of this latitude, to carefully preserve the letter signed with the double K, and to await in all confidence the appearance of the messenger.

Then the worthy man, wept for by his family, lamented by all those who knew him, was buried in the family grave.

We know Captain Antifer, and we can easily imagine with what intensity such a revelation worked on his mind, and on his inflammable imagination: the millions his father had imagined, he multiplied by ten. Of Kamylk Pasha he made a sort of nabob of the Arabian Nights. He dreamt only of gold and precious stones buried in an All Baba's cave. But with his natural impatience, his characteristic nervousness, it was impossible for him to show the same reserve as his father. To remain a dozen years without saying a word, without confiding to anybody, without doing anything to discover what had become of the signatory of the letter with the double K - the father might be able to do this, but not the son. And so in 1855, during one of his voyages in the Mediterranean, having put in at Alexandria, he judiciously obtained as much information as he could concerning Kamylk Pacha.

Had he existed? There was no doubt as to this, for the old sailor possessed a letter in his handwriting. Did he still exist? This was a serious question, to which Captain Antifer attached particular importance. The information was disconcerting. Kamylk Pasha had disappeared for twenty years, and no one knew what had become of him.

Here was an obstacle for Captain Antifer to run into; but he did not sink, all the same. He might be without news of Kamylk, but there was no doubt Kamylk was living in 1842, the famous letter proved it. Probably he had had to leave the country, for reasons he was not obliged to reveal. When the time came, his messenger, the bearer of the interesting longitude, would present himself, and as the father was no longer in the world, it would be his son who would receive him, and give him a warm welcome, you may be sure.

Captain Antifer returned then to St. Malo, and said nothing to anybody, much as it might cost him. He continued at sea until his retirement in 1857, and since then he had lived in the midst of his family.

But what an enervating existence! Occupationless, unemployed, always possessed with one fixed idea! These twenty four degrees and these fifty-nine minutes flew about his brain like so many tormenting flies. He could keep his tongue still no longer; he confided his secret to his sister, to his niece, to his nephew, to Gildas Tregomain. And soon the secret - in part at least - was known all over the town, and even beyond Saint Servan and Dinard. It was known that an enormous fortune was to fall some day into the hands of Captain Antifer, and that it could not fail to come to him. And there never came a knock at his door without his expecting to be greeted with the words, -

“Here is the longitude you have been waiting for.” Years went by. The messenger of Kamylk gave no sign of life. No stranger had crossed the threshold of the house. Hence continual excitement on the part of Captain Antifer. His family had given up believing in the fortune, and the letter seemed to them merely a mystification. Tregomain, without letting it appear, looked upon his friend as a simpleton of the first water. But Antifer never faltered. Nothing could shake his conviction. This fortune was as surely his as if he had received it; and those who would say otherwise did so at the peril of a storm.

And so the bargeman, when he found himself in his presence seated before the table, was firmly resolved not to provoke an explosion.

“Look here,” said Captain Antifer, looking him in the face, “answer me without prevarication, for you always appear as though you did not understand me. After all the skipper of the Chamante Amelie never had occasion to fix his position. It is not between the banks of Ranee - a mere rivulet - that it is necessary to take altitudes, observe the sun, the moon, the stars -”

And in this pleasant way we may be sure it was Antifer’s intention to show the immense difference between a coaster-skipper and a bargee.

The excellent Tregomain smiled, and looked at the many-coloured rays of the handkerchief on his knee.

“Are you listening I”

“Yes, my friend.”

“Well, once for all, do you know exactly what a latitude is?”

“Very nearly.”

“Do you know that it is a circle parallel to the Equator; that it is divided into three hundred and sixty degrees, which means 2160 minutes, or 129,600 seconds?”

“Why should I not know it?” replied the smiling Tregomain.

“And do you know that an arc of fifteen degrees corresponds to an hour of time, and an arc of fifteen minutes to a minute of time, and an arc of fifteen seconds to a second of time?”

“Would you like me to repeat it?”

“No, that would be useless. Well, I have this latitude of 24 degrees 59 minutes north of the Equator. Well, in this parallel, which contains three hundred and sixty degrees - three hundred and sixty, you understand - there are three hundred and fifty- nine which are of no more use to me than an anchor without flukes. But there is one, and only one, which I do not know, and never shall know until I have bean told the longitude that crosses it, and there, at that very spot, there are millions - Don’t smile “I am not smiling, my friend.”

“Yes, millions which are mine, which I have the right to dig up, the day I find the place where they are buried -”

“Well,” replied the bargeman sweetly,” you must wait patiently until the messenger comes with the good news.”

“Patiently - patiently. What is there that flows in your veins?”

“Syrup, I imagine - nothing but syrup!” replied Tregomain.

“And in mine it is quicksilver; there is saltpetre dissolved in my blood - I cannot rest -1 eat myself, I devour myself -”

“Really you should take it calmly.”

“Calmly I Do you forget that we are in ‘62; that my father died in ‘54; that he had possessed this secret ever since ‘42; and that for twenty years we have been waiting for the word of this confounded charade -”

“Twenty years!” murmured Tregomain, “how the time passes! Twenty years ago I was still in command of the Chamante Amelie.”

Who is talking about the Chamante Amelie?” asked Antifer. “Are we talking about the Charmante Ameliet or the latitude in this letter?”

And beneath the bargeman’s blinking eyes he tossed the famous letter, all old and yellow, on which figured the monogram of Kamylk Pasha. “Yes, this letter, this confounded letter,” he continued,” this diabolical letter, which I have sometimes been tempted to tear up. to reduce to cinders -”

“And that might perhaps be wise!” ventured the bargeman.

“See here, Tregomain,” said Antifer, his eyes flashing, his voice ringing,” mind you never answer me like that again.”

“Never.”

“And if ever, in a moment of madness, I wish to destroy this letter, which is as good as a title-deed to me - if ever I am unreasonable enough to forget what I owe to myself and mine, and you do not prevent me -”

“I will prevent you, my friend; I will prevent you,” Tregomain hastened to reply.

Antifer in great excitement seized his glass of brandy, chinked it against that of the bargeman and said, -

“To your health, Captain!”

“To yours!” replied Tregomain, lifting his glass up to his eyes, and then setting it back again on the table.

Antifer became thoughtful, running his feverish hand through his hair, muttering to himself, and grinding the pebble between his teeth. Suddenly he crossed his arms and looked at his friend.

“Do you know where this wretched latitude goes?”

“How could I not do so?” asked the bargeman, who had submitted a hundred times to this lesson in geography.

“Never mind! There are some things we cannot know too well.” And, opening the atlas at the map of the world, - “Look!” he said in a tone that admitted of neither hesitation nor reply.

Tregomain looked.

“You see St. Malo, don’t you?”

“Yes, and there is the Ranee.”

“Never mind the Ranee! You will make me curse the Ranee! Get on to the meridian of Paris, and run down to the twenty-fourth parallel.”

“I run down.”

“Traverse France, Spain. Enter Africa; cross Algeria; reach the Tropic of Cancer. There, above Timbuctoo -”

“I am there.”

“Well now, we are on this famous latitude.”

“Yes, here we are.”

“Now run along to the east. Cross Africa, walk over the Red Sea, stride through Arabia. Take your hat off to the Sultan of Muscat, jump into India, leaving Bombay and Calcutta to starboard, skirt the base of China, run across Formosa, the Pacific, the Sandwich Islands - do you follow me?”

“I am following you,” replied Tregomain, wiping his head with his huge handkerchief.

“Well, here we are in America, in Mexico, then in the Gulf, then near Cuba. You jump the Straits of Florida, cross the Atlantic, skirt the Canaries, reach Africa, come up the Paris meridian and return to St. Malo after having made the tour of the globe on the twenty-fourth parallel.”

“Yes!” said the complaisant bargeman.

“And now,” continued Antifer,” we have traversed the two continents, the Atlantic, the Pacific, the Indian oceans, in which islands and islets are in thousands, and can you tell me where my millions are hidden?”

“That is what we do not know.”

“That is what we shall know.”

Yes - that is what we shall know when the messenger -”

Antifer took the second glass of brandy, which had not been sipped by his friend.

“To your health!” he said.

“To yours!” said Tregomain, clinking the empty glass against the full one which was once his.

Ten o’clock struck. A loud knock shook the street door.

“If that is the man with the longitude!” exclaimed Antifer.

“Oh!” said his friend, who could not restrain this gentle exclamation of doubt “And why not?” said Antifer, his cheeks flushing purple.

“Just so! Why not?” replied the conciliating bargeman, thinking of the beginning of a salute for the bearer of good news.

Suddenly shouts were heard on the ground-floor - shouts of joy, it is true, which, coming from Nanon and Enogate. could not be addressed to an envoy of Kamylk Pasha.

“It is he! It is he!” repeated the two women.

“He? he?” said Captain Antifer, and he was walking towards the stairs when the door of his room opened.

“Good evening, uncle, good evening!”

This was said in a cheery, satisfied voice, which had the effect of exasperating the uncle in question.

“He!” was Juhel. He had just arrived. He had not failed in catching the train from Nantes, nor in passing his examination, for he shouted, -

“Passed, uncle, passed!”

“Passed!” repeated the woman and the girl.

“Passed - what?” replied Captain Antifer.

“Passed as long-voyage captain, with the maximum of marks!”

And as his uncle did not open his arms to him he fell into those of Tregomain, who hugged him to his heart in a way that nearly squeezed the breath out of him.

“You are suffocating him, Gildas!” said Nanon.

“I only just touched him!” replied the smiling barge- man.

Juhel panted a little, and recovered himself, and then turning to Antifer, who was walking about feverishly, said, -

“And now, uncle, when shall the wedding be?”

“What wedding?”

“My wedding with my dear Enogate,” replied Juhel;” was it not agreed upon?”

“Yes, agreed upon,” said Nanon.

“At least, unless Enogate does not care for me now I am a captain.”

“Oh! Juhel!” answered the girl, holding out a hand in which the worthy Tregomain - so he pretended - thought he saw her put her heart.

Antifer did not reply, but seemed to be trying to find out which way the wind blew.

“Come, uncle,” said the young man, and he stood there, his face radiant, his eyes bright with happiness.

“Uncle,” said he, “did you not say that the wedding should take place when I passed, and that we would fix the day as soon as I came back?”

“I believe you did say so, my friend,” ventured the bargeman.

“Well, I have passed,” said Juhel; “and here I have come back, and if it is not inconvenient, uncle, we will fix it for the first week in April -”

Antifer started.

“In eight weeks? Why not in eight days, in eight hours, in eight minutes?

“Well, I should not object, uncle.”

“Oh! we must have a little time,” said Nanon,” there are preparations, purchases to make -”

“Yes, I have to get a new coat built,” said Tregomain, the future best man.

“Then - shall we say the 5th of April?” asked Juhel.

“Be it so,” said Antifer, who found himself driven behind his last entrenchments.

“Ah! my good uncle,” said the girl, leaping on to his neck.

“Ah! my dear uncle,” said the young man.

And as he embraced him on one side, while Enogate embraced him on the other, it is not impossible that their cheeks met “That is agreed,” continued the uncle; “the 5th of April, but on one condition.”

“Oh, no condition!”

“A condition?” exclaimed Tregomain, who feared some further device on the part of his friend.

“Yes, one condition.”

“And what is that?” asked Juhel, beginning to frown.

“If my longitude does not reach me before then.”

They all breathed again.

“Yes! yes!” they replied with one voice.

And really it would have been cruel to refuse this satisfaction to Captain Antifer. Besides, what likelihood was there that the messenger of Kamylk Pasha, whom they had been expecting for twenty years, would make his appearance before the date fixed for the wedding of Juhel and Enogate?

CHAPTER VI.

A WEEK went by. Of a messenger there was not even a shadow. Gildas Tregomain said he would be just as much astonished to see the prophet Elijah return from the sky. But he took care not to express his opinion in this biblical form before Captain Antifer.

As to Enogate and Juhel, they hardly gave a thought to the messenger of Kamylk Pasha, who, as far as they were concerned, was a purely imaginary being. No! They were busy with their preparations for that charming land of matrimony, of which the young man knew the longitude, and the girl the latitude, and which it would be easy to reach by combining these two geographical elements. They might rest assured that the combination would take place on the 5th of April, the date fixed.

As to Captain Antifer he had become more unsociable, more unapproachable than ever. The date of the ceremony was a day nearer every twenty-four hours. A few weeks only, and the young couple would be united. A fine result, truly! In his heart their uncle had been dreaming of superb alliances for them when he became a rich man. And if he made so much of these millions, these undiscoverable millions which belonged to him, it was not with the idea of enjoying them himself, of living a grand life, of dwelling in a palace, riding in a carriage, dining off gold plates, wearing diamond studs - No! He was thinking of wedding Juhel to a princess, and Enogate to a prince! That was his whim, his monomania. And here was his heart’s desire in jeopardy owing to a messenger not arriving at a proper time; and for want of a few figures which, combined with others he already possessed, Kamylk’s hiding-place would not yield up its treasures until too late!

Antifer stormed no more. He could not remain inside the house, and it was all the better for the peace of the household that he was outside. They saw him only at mealtimes, and his meals he got through at double the usual rate. Whenever there was an opportunity, Tregomain offered his cheek to the smiter in the hope of provoking an explosion, which would relieve his friend who sent him to Jericho. In short it was to be feared that he was going to be ill. His only occupation was to stride about the railway station, watching the arrival of the trains, and about the Sillon quays, watching the arrival of the boats, endeavouring to discover among the passengers some exotic figure which might belong to the envoy of Kamylk, an Egyptian, without doubt, perhaps an Armenian, certainly a foreign personage recognizable by his appearance, his accent, his clothes, and who would ask for the address of Pierre Servan Malo Antifer.

And there was nobody of this sort! Normans, Bretons, English, Scandinavians, there were many, but travellers from Eastern Europe, Maltese, or Levantines, there were none.

On the 9th of February, after a breakfast, at which he had not opened his lips - except to eat and drink - Captain Antifer went forth for his usual walk, like another Diogenes in search of a man.

He went along the narrow streets of the town, bordered by their tall granite houses, and paved with pebbles. He descended the Rue du Bey towards Duguay-Trouin Square, looked at the time on the dial at the Sous-Prefecture, hurried towards the Place Chateaubriand, turned round by the kiosk under its canopy of leafless planes, passed through the gate in the curtain of the rampart, and found himself on the quay.

He looked to the right, to the left, in front of him. behind him, puffing jerkingly and furiously at his pipe. Every now and then he had to return a salute, for he was one of the notables of St. Malo, a man of consideration. But many were the salutes he did not return, owing to his not noticing that they were addressed to him.

In the harbour were a number of ships, sailing-vessels, and steamers, brigs, schooners, luggers, chasse-marees. The tide was then low, two or three hours having to elapse before the ships reported by the semaphore to be in the offing, could enter.

Antifer thought it would be wisest to go off to the railway-station, and await the arrival of the express. Would he be more fortunate on this occasion, than he had been during so many weeks?

How easily the human machine can go wrong! Antifer, occupied in watching the passers-by, did not notice that for twenty minutes he had been followed by somebody well worth his attention.

Here was a foreigner - a foreigner with a red fez and a black tassel, wearing a long, loose coat, fastened with a long single row of buttons right up to the neck, with a pair of baggy trousers, below which was a pair of big shoes like Turkish slippers. He was anything but young, perhaps sixty, perhaps sixty-five, stooping rather, and holding his long, bony fingers spread across his chest. If this good man were not the expected Levantine, there could be no doubt that he came from some land bordered by the Eastern Mediterranean - an Egyptian, an Armenian, a Syrian, an Ottoman.

In short, the stranger followed Captain Antifer in a hesitating way, sometimes on the point of accosting him, sometimes stopping for fear of making a mistake. At length at the corner of the quay he quickened his step, caught up Antifer, and then turned so suddenly as to run against him.

“Confound you, you clumsy brute!” exclaimed the captain, shaken by the collision.

Then, rubbing his eyes, and holding his hand to his eye-brows to shade his sight, he exclaimed, -

“Eh! Ah! Oh! He! Can it be? This must be the messenger of the double K.”

If it were the said envoy he certainly did not look promising, with his smooth face, his fat cheeks, his pointed nose, his big ears, his thin lips, his huge chin, his furtive eyes - anything but a physiognomy that inspired confidence.

“Have I not the honour of addressing Captain Antifer, as an obliging sailor has just told me?” said the stranger, in a most deplorable accent “Antifer, Pierre Servan Malol” was the reply; “and you?”

“Ben Omar.”

“An Egyptian?”

“Notary at Alexandria, just come from the Hotel de l’Union, Rue de la Poissonneau.”

A notary with a red hat I Evidently notaries in Oriental countries were not of the French type, with white cravat, black clothes, and gold spectacles; and it was just as astonishing to find that there were notaries at all in the country of the Pharaohs.

Antifer no longer doubted that he had before him the mysterious messenger, the bearer of the famous longitude announced twenty years before in Kamylk’s letter. But instead of giving himself away, as might be supposed,, instead of asking Omar questions, he had sufficient control over himself to await events, for the duplicity betrayed on the visage of the living mummy warned him to be circumspect. Never would Tregomain have believed his excitable friend capable of such prudence.

“Well, what do you want with me, Mr. Ben Omar? he asked, noticing that the Egyptian looked embarrassed.

“A few minutes’ conversation, Mr. Antifer.”

“Do you mean at my house?”

“No - and it would be better to be somewhere where no one can overhear us.”

“It is a secret then?”

“Yes and no - or rather a bargain.

Antifer started at this. Evidently if this individual had brought the longitude he had no intention of delivering it gratis, and yet the letter signed with the double K said nothing about a bargain.

“Take care of the helm,” he said to himself,” and keep an eye on the way the wind blows!”

Then addressing himself to his interviewer, and pointing to a lonely corner at the end of the harbour, he said, -

“Come there! we shall be quite enough alone to talk of secret matters. But let us make haste, for it is cold enough to cut you through.”

They had not more than twenty yards to go. No one was on the vessels moored to the quay. The custom-house officer on duty was half a cable-length away. In a minute or so they were at the spot, and seated on the end of a spar. “Will this place suit you, Mr. Ben Omar?” asked Antifer. “Oh, very well.”

“Then speak out, and speak clearly, and not like your sphinx, which amuses itself by offering conundrums to the poor world.”

“There will be no concealment, and I will speak frankly,” replied Ben Omar, in a tone which had little appearance of frankness. He coughed two or three times, and said, - “You had a father?”

“Yes, as is customary in our country. Well?”

“I hear that he is dead?”

“Eight years ago. Well?”

“He had made several voyages?”

“I believe so, considering that he was a sailor. Well?”

“In several seas?”

“In all. Well?”

“He once happened to go into the Levant?”

“Yes. Well?”

“During these voyages,” continued the notary, to whom these brief replies gave no loophole,” during these voyages, he was about sixty years ago on the coast of Syria.”

“Perhaps so; perhaps not. Well?”

These “wells “were as so many digs in the ribs to Ben Omar. “You will have to try another tack, my good man,” said Antifer to himself,” if you want me to pilot you.”

The notary saw that he would have to attack him more straight-forwardly. “Have you any knowledge,” said he, “that your father had occasion to render a service, an immense service - to some one - on the coast of Syria?”

“I cannot say that I have. Well?”

“Ah!” said Ben Omar, much astonished at the reply. “And you do not know that he received a letter from a certain Kamylk Pasha?”

“A Pasha?”

“Yes.”

“Of how many tails?”

“It does not matter, Mr. Antifer. The point is, Did your father receive a letter containing information of great value?”

“I know nothing of it. Well?”

“Have you not looked over his papers? It is not possible that such a letter would have been destroyed. It contained, I repeat, information of extreme importance.”

“To you, Mr. Ben Omar?”

“To you also, Mr. Antifer, for - in short, it is that letter I am commissioned to get back again, and which might be the object of our bargain.”

In an instant it became clear to Antifer that the people who had sent Ben Omar wanted to get hold of the longitude, to find the place where the millions were concealed.

“The rascals!” he muttered to himself, “they want to get my secret, to buy my letter, and then go and unearth my cash-box!” And perhaps he was not far out.

At this stage of their interview they heard the steps of a man who was coming round the corner in the direction of the railway-station. The notary stopped in the middle of a sentence. It seemed as though the man gave Omar a side look as he passed, or made a sign of denial, at which the Egyptian appeared much disconcerted. The man passed on, and disappeared.

He was a stranger, about thirty years old, in Egyptian costume, of sallow complexion, black gleaming eyes, stature above the medium height, strongly built, determined looking, with anything but a pleasant expression about him. Did he and the notary know one another? Possibly. Were they not anxious that this should not be known just then? There was no doubt about that.

Anyhow, Antifer did not notice this little bit of bye- play - a look, a gesture, nothing more - and he continued the interview.

“Now, Mr. Ben Omar,” said he,” will you kindly explain why you want so much to get this letter, to know what it contains, so much so that you are willing to buy it from me if I happen to have it?”

“Mr. Antifer,” replied the notary, with some embarrassment,” I have had a certain Kamylk Pasha among my clients. On his behalf -”

“You have had, did you say?”

“Yes, and as the representative of his heirs -”

“His heirs!” exclaimed Antifer, with a movement of surprise that could not but astonish the notary. “He is dead, then?”

“He is dead.”

“Steady!” muttered Antifer, grinding the pebble within his teeth. “Kamylk is dead. That is worth remembering, and if they are up to any games -”

“And so, Mr. Antifer,” asked Ben Omar, giving him a side look,” you have not got this letter?”

“No.”

“That is a pity, for the heirs of Kamylk Pasha, who wish to collect everything that can recall the remembrance of their beloved relative -”

“Ah! a matter of remembrance only. Dear, kind hearts!”

“Simply so, Mr. Antifer, and these dear, kind hearts, as you say, would not have hesitated to have offered you a considerable sum to obtain possession of this letter.”

“How much would they have given?”

“What does that matter if you have not got it?”

“You might as well say.”

“Oh! a few hundred francs.”

“Pheugh!” said Captain Antifer. “Perhaps even a few thousand.”

“Ha!” said Captain Antifer, whose patience was exhausted. And he gripped Ben Omar by the throat, dragged him towards him, and rolled out these words into his ear, with a shake between each: “I have your letter!”

“You have it!”

“Your letter with the double K!”

“Yes, the double K - that was my client’s signature.”

“I have it. I have read it and read it again. And I know, or rather I guess, why you want to possess it!”

“Sir?”

“And you are not going to get it!”

“Do you refuse?”

“Yes, I do. Unless you buy it from me?”

“How much?” asked the notary, digging his hand into his pocket to pick out his purse.

“How much? Fifty millions of francs!”

What a jump Ben Omar gave as Antifer, with his mouth open, his lips up, his teeth showing, looked at him as he had never been looked at before.

And then he drily added, -

“You can have it or leave it, as you please.”

“Fifty millions!” repeated the gasping notary.

“There is no bargaining, Mr. Ben Omar. You will get no discount out of me.”

“Fifty millions?”

“That is the price, and they can be in cash or in no, or in a cheque on the Bank of France.”

The notary, abashed for an instant, gradually recovered his coolness. Evidently this confounded sailor knew of what importance this letter was to the heirs of Kamylk. In fact, did it not contain the information necessary in the search for the treasure? The scheme for getting possession of it had failed. Antifer was on his guard. The letter must be bought, or rather the latitude which would Complete the longitude, which Ben Omar knew.

But, it may be asked, how did Ben Omar know that Antifer had the letter? Was he the former notary / the rich Egyptian? Was he the messenger instructed V y the last wishes of Kamylk to bring Antifer the longitude in question? That we shall soon see.

In any case, whether Ben Omar was or was not acting under the orders of the Pasha’s heirs, he clearly understood that the letter would not be handed over without its price in gold.

But fifty millions!

Assuming a sly, coaxing air, he said,” I think you said fifty millions?”

“I did.”

“That is one of the funniest things I ever heard in all my life.”

“Mr. Ben Omar, would you like to hear a funnier?”

“Gladly.”

“Ah! Well then, you are an old thief, an old scoundrel from Egypt, an old crocodile of the Nile -”

“Sir!”

“There, I will stop. You are an old fisher in troubled waters, wanting to get at my secret instead of telling me yours, which is the only mission you were entrusted with -’’

“You suppose so.”

“I suppose what is.”

“No. What it pleases you to imagine.”

“Enough, you consummate fool I”

“Sir!”

“I withdraw the consummate - out of deference. And shall I tell you what you really want to know about the letter?”

Did the notary imagine that Antifer was going to commit himself? Anyhow, his two little eyes glowed like carbuncles as he waited.

“What you want to know, Ben Omar, is not what the letter says regarding the services rendered by my father. No! You want the four figures - you understand me well enough, the four figures -”

“The four figures?” murmured Ben Omar.

“Yes, the four figures it contains, and which I shall not hand over for less than twelve and a half millions each! That is all. We have said enough! Good morning!”

And sticking his hands into his pockets, Captain Antifer strode off, whistling a favourite air, of which nobody, not even himself, knew the origin, and which was more like the howling of a dog than any of the melodies of Auber.

Ben Omar, petrified, seemed to have taken root on the spot, as if he were a bollard or a mile-post. He who had reckoned twirling this sailor round his finger as if he were a fellah - and Mahomet knows how he had dealt with the unfortunate peasants whose ill-fortune had led them to his office, one of the best in Alexandria!

He saw, with haggard eye, the sailor going farther and farther away from him, swinging his hips, hoisting his shoulders, first one and then the other, and gesticulating as if his friend Tregomain was with him under the usual fire.

Suddenly Antifer stopped. Had he encountered an obstacle? Yes! This obstacle was an idea that had just occurred to him. He had forgotten something.

He returned to the notary, who still was as motionless as Daphne when she was turned into a laurel-bush, to the great disappointment of Apollo.

“Mr. Ben Omar?” he said.

“What is it you want?”

“There is one thing I forgot to shout in your ear.”

“What?”

11 The number -”

“Ah! The number?”

“Yes! The number of my house - 3, Rue des Hautes Salles. You may as well have my address, and know that you will have a friendly reception when you come -”

‘When I come?”

“With the fifty millions in your pocket!”

And Antifer went off again, while the notary sank and called on Allah and his Prophet.

CHAPTER VII.

DURING the night of the 9th of February the travellers at the Hotel de l’Union would have run some risk of being troubled in their sleep if the door of Room No. 17 had not been shut, and draped with a heavy curtain, which prevented any noise from being heard outside.

In fact two men, or rather one of the two therein, spent the night in recriminations and menaces that bore witness to extreme irritation, while the other tried in vain to calm him, with supplications engendered by fear.

It is not likely that anybody would have understood what this stormy conversation was about, for it was held in Turkish, which is not a familiar language to the natives of the West.

A large wood fire blazed in the grate, and a candle on the table threw its light on to certain papers half-hidden within the pockets of a portfolio much worn by use.

One of these men was Ben Omar, who, in a helpless way, looked at the flames in the fire-place, which were far less ardent than those that blazed in the eyes of his companion.

This companion was the unprepossessing foreigner, to whom the notary had given the almost imperceptible signal, while he and Antifer were talking at the end of the harbour.

For the twentieth time this personage remarked, - “And so you have failed?”

“Yes, Excellency, and Allah is my witness -”

“I have nothing to do with the evidence of Allah or of anybody else! There is the fact - you failed.”

“To my great regret.”

“This Antifer refused to give up the letter?

“He did.”

“And he refused to sell it?”

“To sell it! He consented -

“And you did not buy it, you dunderhead! Is it not in your possession? You came here without bringing it?”

“Do you know what he asked?”

“What does that matter?”

“Fifty millions of francs!”

“Fifty millions -” And there was a volley of oaths.

“And so, you imbecile, this sailor knows of what importance this might be to him?”

“There is no doubt of it.”

“May Mahomet strangle me - and you, too!” exclaimed the irascible personage, striding about the room; “or, rather, that is my business as far as you are concerned, for I hold you responsible for all the misfortunes that may happen -”

‘ But it is not my fault, Excellency! I was not in the secrets of Kamylk Pasha.”

“You ought to have been, then; you ought to have found them out when he was alive; you were his notary I”

And then came another broadside of oaths.

This terrible man was Saouk, the son of Mourad, the cousin of Kamylk. He was then thirty-one. His father being dead, he found himself the direct heir of his rich uncle, and would have inherited an immense fortune if this fortune had not been put out of reach of his covetousness in the way we know.

What had happened after Kamylk had left Aleppo, taking his treasure with him, to bury it on some unknown island, was briefly this: -

In October, 1831, Ibrahim, with twenty-two ships of war and thirty thousand men, had captured Gazza, Jaffa, Caiffa, and Acre had fallen into his hands the year following, on the 27th of March. 1832.

It seemed as though the territories of Palestine and Syria were to be finally severed from the Sublime Porte, when the intervention of the European powers stopped the son of Mehemet AH in his career of conquest. In 1833 the treaty of Kataya was imposed on the Sultaa and the Viceroy, and things remained as they had been.

Fortunately for his safety during this much-troubled period, Kamylk had placed his riches in the cavity sealed by the double K, and had continued his voyages. Whither went the brigantine under the command of Captain Zo? In what parts, far or near, did he plough the seas? Did he visit farthest Asia or farthest Europe? No one knew save his captain and himself, for none of the crew were allowed to land, and none of them knew whether they were in the west or the east, the north or the south, for such was their master's whim.

But after their many peregrinations Kamylk was imprudent enough to return to the Levant. The treaty of Kataya having stopped the ambitious march of Ibrahim, the northern part of Syria having submitted to the Sultan, the rich Egyptian had good reason to suppose that there was no danger in his returning to Aleppo.

As ill-luck would have it, however, in the middle of the year 1834 his vessel was driven by bad weather into Acre. Ibrahim's fleet was then cruising off the coast, and Mourad, invested with official functions by Mehemet Ali, was on board one of the ships of war.

The brigantine was flying Turkish colours. Was it known that she belonged to Kamylk Pasha! It matters little. She was chased, caught, carried by boarding, after a stout defence, which meant the massacre of the crew, the destruction of the ship and the capture of her owner and captain.

Kamylk was at once recognized by Mourad. A few weeks later he and Captain Zo were secretly carried to Egypt, and imprisoned in the fortress of Cairo.

But even if Kamylk had returned to his house at Aleppo it is probable that he would not have found the safety on which he reckoned. That part of Syria under Egyptian administration groaned under an odious yoke. This lasted until 1839, when the excesses of Ibrahim's agents were such that the

Sultan withdrew the concessions to which he had been forced to yield. The result of this was a new campaign on the part of Mehemet AH, whose troops I gained the victory of Nezib; whereupon Mahmoud began! to fear for the safety of the capital of Turkey in Europe; and England, Russia and Austria had to intervene to stay the march of the conqueror, and assure him hereditary possession of Egypt, and the governorship for life of Palestine west of the Jordan.

It is true that the Viceroy, intoxicated with victory, and encouraged by French diplomacy, refused the offer of the Allied Powers. But their fleets were sent against him. Sir Charles Napier captured Beyrouth and then Sidon, and then bombarded and captured Acre, so that Mehemet AH had to yield, and recall his son to Egypt, leaving Syria entirely to Sultan Mahmoud.

Kamylk Pasha had been too hasty in his endeavour to return to the country of his choice, where he thought of peacefully ending his troubled life. There he intended to remove his treasure, and with some portion of it pay his debts of gratitude - debts perhaps forgotten by those who had helped him. And instead of Aleppo it was Cairo that he found, thrown into a prison, where he was at the mercy of his pitiless enemies.

Kamylk understood that he was lost. The idea of regaining his liberty at the cost of his fortune did not occur to him - or rather such was the force of his character, and his indomitable determination never to abandon his wealth to the Viceroy or Mourad, that he contented himself with an obstinacy that can only be ascribed to Ottoman fatalism.

The years he passed in solitary confinement, separated from Captain Zo, whose discretion he never doubted, were anything but pleasant to him. In 1842, in the eighth year of his imprisonment, he managed, through the connivance of a gaoler, to send away a few letters, one of them to Captain Thomas Antifer of St. Malo. An envelope containing his will also reached the hands of Ben Omar, who had formerly been his notary at Alexandria.

Three years afterwards Captain Zo died, and Kamylk remained the only one who knew where the treasure had been buried. But his health declined visibly, and the severity of his imprisonment could not but shorten a life which would have lasted for years beyond the walls of his cell. At length in 1852 he died, forgotten by those who had known him, without either menaces or ill-treatment forcing him to reveal his secret.

Next year his unworthy cousin followed him to the grave, without having enjoyed the immense riches he coveted, and which had led him to such criminal devices.

But Mourad left a son, Saouk, who inherited all his father’s evil instincts. Although he was then but twenty-three, he had lived a violent, unscrupulous life among the political and other bandits who then swarmed in Egypt. As the only heir of Kamylk Pasha, it was to him that the inheritance would have come had it not been put beyond his reach, and consequently his anger knew no bounds when - as he thought - the secret of the whereabouts of this immense fortune disappeared with the death of the Pasha.

Ten years went by, and Saouk had given up all hopes of ever ascertaining what had become of the lost treasure.

Judge then of the effect on him of a letter received early in 1862, inviting him to visit the office of the notary Ben Omar on important business.

Saouk knew this notary: timid to excess, an arrant poltroon, with whom a determined man like himself could do anything he pleased. So he went to

Alexandria, and unceremoniously asked Ben Omar for what reason he wished to see him.

Ben Omar was most obsequious in his reception of this client whom he believed capable of everything, even of strangling him straightaway. He apologized for having put him to inconvenience, and said to him in his sweetest tone, -

“But is it not the sole heir of Kamylk Pasha that I have the honour of addressing?

“Just so, the sole heir,” said Saouk, “for I am the son of Mourad, who was his cousin.”

“Are you sure that there is no other relative in the line of succession than you?”

“None. Kamylk Pasha has no heir but me. Only, where is the inheritance?”

“Here - at your Excellency’s disposal.”

Saouk grasped at the envelope handed him by the notary.

“What is in this envelope?” he asked.

“The will of Kamylk Pasha.”

“And how did it get into your hands?”

“It reached me a few years after he was imprisoned in the fortress at Cairo.”

“How long ago?”

"Twenty years."

"Twenty years!" exclaimed Saouk. "And he has teen dead ten years now - and you have waited -"

"Read, Excellency."

Saouk read the writing on the envelope. It said that this will was not to be opened until ten years after the testator's death.

"Kamylk Pasha died in 1852," said the notary. "It is -now 1862, and that is why I sent for your Excellency."

"Cursed formalist!" exclaimed Saouk. "For ten years I ought to have been in possession."

If the will is in your favour?" suggested the notary.

In my favour. Who else can there be? I will soon know -"

And he was about to break the seal when Ben Omar stopped him.

"In your own interest, Excellency, it had better be done In the proper form, in the presence of witnesses." And opening the door Ben Omar introduced two merchants of the neighbourhood, whom he had asked to- attend. These were to testify that the envelope was intact, and that it had been opened in their presence.

The will was not very long, it was in French and as follows: -

"I appoint as my executor Ben Omar, notary of Alexandria, to whom I leave a commission of one per centum on my fortune in gold, diamonds and precious stones, of the estimated value of four million pounds sterling. In the month of September, 1831, three casks containing this treasure were buried in a hole du at the southern point of a certain islet. Of this islet it will be easy to discover the position by combining the longitude of fifty-four degrees fifty-seven minutes east, with a latitude secretly sent in 1842 to Thomas Antifer, of St. Malo, in France. Ben Omar in person is to take this longitude of fifty-four degrees fifty-seven minutes east to the said Thomas Antifer, or his nearest heir. But he is to accompany the said heir in the search for the discovery of the treasure, which is buried at the base of a rock marked with the double K of my name. To the exclusion of my unworthy cousin Mourad, and his still more unworthy son Saouk, Ben Omar will hasten to put himself in communication with Thomas Antifer, or his direct heirs, and with, him follow the formal instructions that will be found in the course of the said search. Such is my last will, and I desire that it shall be respected in all its bearings and consequences.

“Written this 9th of February, 1842, in the prison at Cairo, by my own hand.

“Kamylk Pasha.”

We need not dwell on the reception given by Saouk to this curious will, nor to the agreeable surprise manifested by Ben Omar at the one per cent, on four millions which was to come to him on handing over the treasure. But the treasure had to be found, and the only way to discover the position of the islet was by combining the longitude given in the will with the latitude known only to Thomas Antifer.

Saouk immediately devised a scheme, and Ben Omar, under terrible threats, became his accomplice in it. They soon discovered that Thomas Antifer had died in 1854, leaving an only son. To this son they would go, and by skilful management obtain from him the secret of the latitude and then they would take possession of the fortune,-and Ben Omar should have his commission.

This scheme Saouk and the notary set about without delay. They left Alexandria, landed at Marseilles, took the Paris express, and then went on to St. Malo, where they had arrived that morning.

Neither Saouk nor Ben Omar expected that there would be any difficulty in obtaining from Antifer the letter, of which they knew the value, and which contained the precious latitude - and they were prepared to buy it if necessary. We know how the attempt had failed. We shall not be astonished, therefore, at the irritation which his Excellency displayed, at his endeavouring to hold Ben Omar responsible for his ill-success, and at the noisy’’ scene in the hotel, from which the unfortunate notary feared he would never emerge alive.

“Yes,” said Saouk, “it is your bungling that has caused it all! You did not know what you were about! You let yourself be played with by this sailor, you, a notary! But do not forget what I told you! Woe to you if Kamylk’s millions escape me!”

“I swear to you, Excellency -”

“And I swear to you, that if I do not attain my object you shall pay for it, and pay well!”

And Ben Omar knew only too well that Saouk was the man to keep his word. “You must remember, Excellency, that this sailor is not one of those miserable fellahs, easily deceived and easily frightened”

“No matter.”

“No! He is a violent man, who will listen to nothing -”

He might have added, “a man like you,” but he took care not to complete the sentence in that fashion.

“I think,” he continued,” we shall have to give up -”

“Give up!” exclaimed Saouk, slapping the table,” give up four millions?”

“No, your Excellency; give up - let the Breton know - the longitude the will orders us to give him.”

“For him to take advantage of it, imbecile; for him to unearth the millions!” Anger is a bad councillor, and this Saouk, who was not destitute of intelligence or astuteness, finally came to think. He calmed down as much as he could, and thought of the- proposal submitted by Ben Omar. It was certain that nothing would be got from Antifer by stratagem, and that some other scheme must be thought of.

The plan agreed upon was this. His Excellency and his very humble servant would call in the morning on Captain Antifer, give him the longitude and learn from him in exchange what was the latitude. When the information was obtained Saouk would endeavour to forestall the sailor, and if he could not do this he would accompany Antifer during the search and endeavour to carry off the treasure. If, as was probable, the islet was situated in some distant part of the world, the plan had many chances of success, and the affair would end to Saouk’s advantage.

When this plan had been definitely agreed upon Saouk added, - “I rely on you, Ben Omar, to be straightforward; if not -”

“You can rely on me, your Excellency; but you promised me my commission.”

“Yes, for according to the will the commission is due to you - on the express condition that you do not leave Antifer for an instant during the journey.”

“I will not leave him I”

“Nor will I! I will accompany him!”

“In what capacity? Under what name?”

“As the chief clerk of Ben Omar, and under the name of Nazim!”

“You?” And this “you “was said in a tone of despair that indicated only too clearly what violence and misery Ben Omar anticipated.

CHAPTER VIII.

When Captain Antifer reached the door of his house he opened it, entered the dining-room, and sitting down at the corner of the fireplace, began to warm his feet, without saying a word.

Enogate and Juhel were talking near the window, but he took no notice of their presence. Nanon was busy cooking in the kitchen, and he did not worry as usual by asking a dozen times," if it would soon be ready?"

Evidently Antifer was deep in thought; but it would not do to tell his sister, and his nephew and niece, what had happened at his interview with Ben Omar, the notary of Kamylk Pasha. During the meal he said nothing. He even refrained from any second helpings, and contented himself with prolonging his dessert by mechanically disposing of several dozen periwinkles, which he extracted from their greenish shells by means of a long copper-headed pin.

Several times Juhel spoke to him; but he answered not a word.

Enogate asked him what was the matter, as he did not seem to hear.

"Brother, what ails you?" asked Nanon, as he rose to retire to his room.

"I have got a wisdom tooth coming through!" he replied.

And each of them thought that it would not be too late if it could make him wise in his old age.

Then, without lighting his pipe, which he was so fond of smoking night and morning on the rampart, he went up- - stairs without saying good-night to anybody.

“Uncle is troubling about something,” remarked Enogate.

“Has he had any news?” said Nanon, as she cleared the table.

“Perhaps we had better send for Tregomain?” replied Juhel.

The truth is that Captain Antifer was more uneasy and anxious than he had ever been since he had been expecting the indispensable messenger. Had he not failed in presence of mind, in acuteness, during his interview with Ben Omar? Had he done right in being so categorical and reserved with this fellow, instead of winning him over, of discussing the main points of the business, of trying to bargain with him? Had he done wisely in calling him a rascal, a crocodile, and so on? Would it not have been better, without showing so much caution as to his own interests, to have temporized, to have appeared disposed to hand over the letter, to have pretended to have been ignorant of its importance, instead of asking fifty million francs for it? Of course, it was worth it; there was no doubt about that, but it would have been wise to have acted more circumspectly. And if the notary declined to submit to a similar reception? If he strapped up his portmanteau, left St. Malo and returned to Alexandria, how would the problem be solved? Would Captain Antifer have to go to Egypt after his longitude?

And so when he went to bed, he administered to himself quite a shower of hard knocks. He did not close his eyes during the night. The next morning he had firmly resolved to go in search of Ben Omar, to apologize for his rudeness, to enter into an arrangement at the expense of a few slight concessions.

But as he was reflecting on all this, and dressing himself, about eight o’clock, the bargeman gently pushed open the door of his room.

Nanon had sent for him, and he had come, the excellent man, to offer himself to his neighbour’s blows.

What brings you here?”

“The flood, friend,” said Tregomain, hoping that this maritime locution would provoke a smile.

“The flood!” replied Antifer, sternly. “Well, the ebb is just taking me out.”

“You arc getting ready to go out?”

“Yes, with or without your permission.”

“Where are you going?”

“Where it suits me to go.”

“Nowhere else, of course, but you do not wish me to know what you are going to do?”

“I am going to repair a mistake.”

“And to make it worse, perhaps?”

This reply, although given as a general observation, made Antifer uneasy. And so he decided to let his friend know what had happened. Continuing his dressing, he told him of his meeting with Ben Omar, of the notary’s attempts to gain possession of the latitude, and his offer to sell the letter for fifty millions of francs.

“He should have made you an offer,” observed Tregomain.

“He had no time, for I turned my back on him - in which I was wrong.”

“That is my opinion. And so this notary came expressly to St. Malo to try and get this letter from you?”

“Instead of giving me the communication he ought to have done. This Ben Omar is the messenger spoken of by Kamylk Pasha, and expected for the last twenty years “Ah, then this matter is serious after all,” Tregomain could not help saying.

The remark brought him such a terrible look and such a contemptuous epithet from Antifer, that he lowered his eyes and twiddled his thumbs after crossing his hands over the vast rotundity of his corporation.

A moment afterwards Antifer had finished dressing, and was picking up his hat when the door opened.

Nanon appeared.

What is the matter now?” asked her brother.

“There is a stranger downstairs. He wants to speak to you.”

“His name?”

“Here it is.”

And she produced a card on which were these words: Ben Omar, Notary, Alexandria.

“The man!” exclaimed Antifer.

“Who?” asked Tregomain.

“The Omar in question. Ah I like that! That he has come back is a good sign! Show him up, Nanon.”

“But he is not alone -”

“Not alone?” exclaimed Antifer. “And who then is with him?”

“A younger man whom I don’t know, and who looks like a foreigner.”

“Ah! There are two of them? Well, we shall be two to receive them! Stop here, Tregomain.”

“Do you wish it?”

An imperious gesture kept the worthy neighbour in his place. Another gesture indicated to Nanon that she was to show the visitors upstairs.

A minute afterwards they had been ushered into the room, the door of which was carefully shut. If the secrets that were to be revealed were to escape it would have to be through the keyhole.

“Ah! It is you, Mr. Ben Omar!” said Antifer, in a careless and haughty tone, very different to what he would have adopted had he gone to make the first advances at the hotel.

“Myself, Mr. Antifer.”

“And the person who accompanies you?

“My head clerk.”

Antifer and Saouk, who was introduced under the name of Nazim, exchanged a look of indifference.

“Your clerk is acquainted with this business?” asked Antifer.

“He is, and his assistance is indispensable to me throughout this matter.”

“Be it so, Mr. Ben Omar. May I ask to what I owe the honour of this visit?”

“Another interview I wish to have with you, Mr. Antifer, with you alone,” he added, casting a side look at Tregomain, whose thumbs continued their twiddling.

“Gildas Tregomain, my friend,” replied Antifer,” late captain of the barge Chamante Amelie, who is also acquainted with this business, and whose assistance is no less indispensable than that of your clerk Nazim.”

It was impossible for Ben Omar to object. Immediately the four sat down round the table, on which the notary placed his portfolio. Then a certain silence reigned in the room until it pleased one or the other to speak.

Antifer broke the silence by addressing Ben Omar: “Your clerk speaks French, I suppose?”

“No,” replied the notary.

“But he understands it?”

“Not much.”

This had been agreed between Saouk and Ben Omar, in the hope that Antifer, having no fear of being understood by the false Nazim, might let fall a few words of which advantage might be taken.

“And now, proceed, Mr. Ben Omar,” said Antifer, carelessly. “Your intention is to resume the conversation that ended abruptly yesterday?”

“Certainly.”

“Then you have brought me the fifty millions?

“Let us be serious, sir -”

“Yes, let us be serious, Mr. Ben Omar; my friend Tregomain is not one of those who will consent to lose time in useless pleasantries. That is so, Tregomain?”

Never had the bargeman a more serious countenance, a more composed demeanour; and when he enveloped his nasal appendage in the folds of his flag - we mean handkerchief- never had he produced more magisterial trumpetings.

“Mr. Ben Omar, I am afraid there has been some misunderstanding between us. It is better it should end, or no good will come of this. You know who I am, and I know who you are -”

“A notary.”

“A notary, who is also the messenger of the deceased Kamylk Pasha, whom my family have been expecting for the last twenty years.”

“You will excuse me, Mr. Antifer, but in admitting that that is so I may say that I was not allowed to come sooner.”

“And why?”

“Because it is only a fortnight ago, that by the opening of the will, I ascertained under what conditions your father had received this letter.”

“Ah, the letter with the double K! We return to that, Mr. Ben Omar?”

“Yes, and my only idea in coming to St. Malo was to put myself in communication with you.”

“That is the only object of your journey? “The only one.”

During this exchange of question and answer Saouk remained impassible, and did not seem to understand a word that was said. He played his game so naturally that Tregomain, who was quietly watching him, saw nothing suspicious in his behaviour.

“Then, Mr. Ben Omar,” said Antifer. “I have for you the most profound respect, and as you know, I would not say an unkind word to you -”

Really this was sublime - what about” rascal,”

“mummy,”

“crocodile,” etc. etc.? “But,” he continued,” I cannot help observing that you just lied -”

“Sir!”

“Yes, lied like a steward’s mate, when you asserted that your journey had no other object than to know what was in my letter!”

“I swear - “said the notary, lifting his hand.

“Keep your hand down, old Omar!” said Antifer, waking up in spite of his good resolutions. “I know perfectly well why you have come -” Believe me -”

“And on whose behalf you have come - “Nobody, I assure you -”

“So - on behalf of the deceased Kamylk Pasha - “He died ten years ago.”

“Never mind. It is in execution of his last wishes that you are here to-day with Pierre Servan Malo, son of Thomas Antifer, and your orders are not to demand the letter in question but to give him certain figures -”

“Certain figures?”

“Yes, the figures of a longitude he requires for the completion of a latitude Kamylk Pasha gave twenty years ago to his good father.”

“Well hit!” said Tregomain, tranquilly shaking his handkerchief as if he were signalling to the semaphores on the coast.

But the so-called clerk remained impassible, although he knew now that Antifer quite understood the position.

“And you, Mr. Ben Omar, have changed your errand, and have been trying to steal my latitude.”

Steal?”

“Yes, steal! And probably to make use of it in a way that only I ought to do -”

“Mr. Antifer,” replied Omar, much disconcerted,” believe me, as soon as you give me this letter I will give you the figures -”

“Then you admit that you have them?”

The notary was fairly caught. Practised as he was at evasion, he saw that his adversary had him at his mercy, and that the best thing for him to do was to submit, as had been agreed the night before between him and Saouk. And now Antifer said -

“Come, play fairly, Mr. Ben Omar! You have been long enough on that tack - try another.”

“I will,” he replied.

He opened his portfolio, and drew from it a sheet of parchment streaked with lines of large handwriting.

This was Kamylk Pasha’s will, and he handed it to Antifer, who, as it was written in French, readily understood it. He read it through in a loud voice, so that Tregomain did not lose a word of what the will contained, and then drew his note-book from his pocket, so as to inscribe therein the figures indicating the longitude of the islet - those four figures for each of which he would have given one of the fingers of his right hand, and Tregomain also brought out a note-book and wrote down the figures - 54 57” east.

The will was then returned to the notary, who put it into his portfolio, which was passed under the arm of Nazim, who remained seemingly indifferent to all that was going on, although the interview had now reached a point of considerable interest for him and Ben Omar. Antifer, knowing both the meridian and the parallel of the island, had only to cross these two lines to find the position. And this he was very naturally somewhat eager to do.

But as he rose, there could be no mistake as to the meaning of the bow he made his visitors, and the gesture with which he indicated the stairs. Evidently Saouk and Ben Omar were invited to depart.

The bargeman quietly watched the proceedings with considerable amusement. Nevertheless, neither the notary nor Nazim seemed disposed to rise. It was clear that their host would put them out, but either they did not understand or did not wish to understand. Ben Omar, who was much embarrassed, felt that Saouk was, by a look, giving him express orders to ask a final question.

He obeyed, and said, -

“Now that I have fulfilled the mission entrusted to me by the will of Kamylk Pasha ii “We have only to take leave of each other politely,” said Antifer, “and the first train being at 10.37-”

“10.23, since yesterday!’ corrected Tregomain.

“Yes, 10.23, and I would not, my dear Mr. Ben Omar, make you or your clerk Nazim miss this express.”

Saouk’s feet began to beat a double shuffle on the floor, and as he looked at his watch, it seemed as though he was anxious to be off.

“If you have any luggage to register,” continued Antifer,” there is barely time.”

“All the more so,” added the bargeman,” as there is no end of it at this station.”

Ben Omar saw that he must say something further, and half rising, he remarked, lowering his eyes, -

“Pardon me, but it seems to me that we have not said all we have to say.”

“Quite the contrary, Mr. Ben Omar; as far as I am concerned I have nothing more to ask you.”

“But I have a question to ask, Mr. Antifer.”

“I am surprised, Mr. Ben Omar; but if you think so, what is it?”

“I have given you the figures of the longitude indicated in the will of Kamylk Pasha “You have, and my friend Tregomain and I have entered them in our note-books.”

“And now you have to give me those of the latitude indicated in the letter.”

“The letter addressed to my father?”

“The same.”

“Pardon. Mr. Ben Omar!” replied Antifer, frowning. “Did you not have orders to bring me the longitude in question?”

“Yes, and those orders I have fulfilled.”

“With as much kindness as zeal, I admit. But, as far as I am concerned, I have nowhere seen either in the will or in the letter that I should reveal to you the figures of the latitude sent to my father.”

“However -”

“However, if you have any orders concerning this, we might perhaps discuss them.”

“It seems to me,” replied the notary,” that between gentlemen who esteem each other-”

“It seems wrong then, Mr. Ben Omar. Esteem has nothing to do with it, however much we may have for each other.” Evidently the irritation which was taking the place of impatience with Captain Antifer would not be long in showing itself. And so, in his anxiety to avoid an explosion, Tregomain went to open the door so as to facilitate the departure of the visitors. Saouk never budded. It was, however, not his business as clerk and a foreigner ignorant of the language, to move before his master gave him the order.

Ben Omar quitted his chair, rubbed his head, adjusted his spectacles upon his nose, and, in the tone of a man who does the best with what he cannot prevent, remarked, -

“Excuse me, Mr. Antifer, you have made up your mind not to trust me.”

“The more so, Mr. Ben Omar, because Kamylk Pasha’s letter required my father to keep it a profound secret, and that this secret my father also required me to keep.”

“Well, Mr. Antifer,” said Ben Omar,” will you accept good advice?”

“What is it?”

“To take no further steps in this matter.”

“And why?”

“Because you may meet on the way a certain person who may make you repent it.”

“And who is that?”

“Saouk. the son of Kamylk Pasha’s cousin, disinherited to your advantage, and who is not at all the man -”

“Do you know this son, Mr. Ben Omar?”

“No,” replied the notary, “but I know that he is a formidable adversary -”

“Well, if you ever meet this Saouk, tell him I don’t care a snap for him, nor for all the Saoukery of Egypt!”

Nazim did not move a muscle. And then Antifer went out on the landing. “Nanon!” he shouted.

The notary moved towards the door, and this time Saouk, clumsily upsetting his chair, followed him, not without a furious desire to kick him downstairs.

But as he was at the door, Ben Omar suddenly stopped, and said to Antifer,” you have not forgotten one of the clauses in Kamylk Pasha’s will?”

“Which is that, Mr. Ben Omar?”

“That which compels me to accompany you until you have taken possession of your legacy, of being present when the three casks are exhumed.”

“Well, you shall accompany me, Mr. Ben Omar.”

“Then I must know where you are going.”

"You will know when we are there."

"But if it is at the other end of the world?"

"It will be at the other end of the world."

"But remember that I cannot do without my head clerk."

"That is as you please, and I shall be no less honoured by his presence than by yours."

Leaning over the balusters, he shouted in a voice that showed he considered the interview at an end -

"Nanon!"

Nanon appeared.

"Show these gentlemen a light!"

"Good!" said Nanon; "it is broad daylight.

"Show them a light all the same."

And thus it was that Saouk and Ben Omar were shown out of this inhospitable house, the door of which was slammed behind them.

Then Captain Antifer was seized with such an attack of delirious delight as had seldom come to him before. But if he was not joyful on that occasion, when should he have been?

He had it, this famous longitude so impatiently expected. He had the power to change into reality what had hitherto been but a dream. The possession of this immense fortune depended only on the haste with which he went in search of the islet where it awaited him.

“Four millions - four millions!” he repeated.

“That is to say a thousand times a hundred thousand francs!” added the bargeman.

And then Antifer hopped on one leg, then on the other, then stooped and rose, and swung his hips and spun round like a gyroscope, and finally completed his performance with a furious hornpipe. Then he seized Tregomain, and setting that massive form in motion, he worked up the dance to such impetuosity, that the house shook to its foundations as he broke out in a voice that made the windows rattle, -

“I have my Ion - Ion - gi - f .

I have my gi - gi - tude; My ton, my gi, my tude -I have my longitude!”

CHAPTER IX.

WHILE Antifer was performing in this quartette party Enogate and Juhel had gone off to the mairie and the church. At the mairie the clerk of the marriage department- a leather-faced old fellow, engaged in the manufacture of honeymoons - had shown them the notice of their banns stuck up among the other notices. At the Cathedral the vicar promised them a choral service, address, organ and bells complete.

How happy they were? With what impatience - ill- disguised on the part of Juhel, more reserved on the part of Enogate - did they wait for the 5th of April, the date that had been won from their uncle's hesitations! How busy they were with their preparations, their wardrobe, their furniture for the pretty room on the first floor, which the generous Tregomain embellished every day with odds and ends that during many years he had collected among the shorefolk of the Ranee. Was he not their confidant, and could they have found a better, a safer depository of their hopes and future projects? And twenty times a day would the old bargeman repeat, - "I would give a lot for the marriage to be over."

"And why, my good Gildas?" the girl would ask, a little uneasy. "Friend Antifer is so singular when he gets astride of his hobby, and goes prancing among his millions I"

That, too, was Juhel's opinion. When you depend on an uncle, an excellent man but somewhat unsettled, you are sure of nothing until the "Yes" has been uttered before the maire.

And as is usual among sailor families there was no time to lose. Either they would have to remain unmarried, or be married as soon as possible. Juhel was under orders to sail as first mate of one of Le Baillif's largest ships.

And then for what months, for what years even, he might be on the seas, thousands of miles from his wife and children, if God blessed their union. As a sailor’s daughter Enogate had reconciled herself to long voyages taking her husband away from her, never imagining it could be otherwise; and therefore all the more reason for not losing a day, as their lives would consist of so many during which they would be separated.

It was of their future that they were talking when they returned from their walk. To their surprise they saw two strangers come out of the house in the Rue des Hautes Salles, and move off, gesticulating furiously. Had these people been to call on Captain Antifer? Juhel had a presentiment that something unusual had occurred.

And any doubt as to this was removed when he and Enogate heard the noise overhead and the improvised song, the last line of which could be heard at the further end of the ramparts.

Had their uncle gone out of his mind? “What is the matter, aunt?” asked Juhel. “Your uncle is dancing, my children,” said Nanon. “But he could not shake the house like this?”

“No, that is Tregomain.”

“What! Is Tregomain dancing too?”

“Probably not to annoy uncle!” said Enogate.

The three went upstairs, and very naturally supposed that Antifer had gone mad, when they saw him capering about and yelling at the top of his voice, - “I have my Ion - Ion - gi -

I have my gi - gi - tude.” And then Tregomain, joining in, puffing as if he were in danger of a stroke of apoplexy, - “Oh yes, his gi, his longitude!

A revelation suddenly enlightened Juhel. Those two strangers who had just left the house! Was this the un- toward messenger of Kamylk Pasha who had arrived at last ?

The young man turned pale, and stopping Antifer in the middle of a step, - “What, uncle’ he said,” have you got it?”

“I have it.”

“He has it!” murmured Tregomain. And he sank on to a chair, which being unable to oppose an impossible resistance, broke to pieces beneath him.

As soon as their uncle had recovered his breath, Enogate and Juhel were told what had happened the day before, - the arrival of Ben Omar and his clerk, the attempt at extortion relative to Kamylk’s letter, the contents of the will, the exact longitude of the island where the treasure was buried - Captain Antifer had only to stoop to pick it up.

“Well, uncle, now that these two individuals know where the nest is, they can get it before you can!”

“Wait a minute!” exclaimed Antifer, shrugging up his shoulders. “Do you think I was fool enough to give them the key of the strong-box?”

And Tregomain emphasized the question by solemnly shaking his head.

“A strong-box which holds four millions!”

And the word millions appeared to swell in Antifer’s mouth as if it would choke him.

If he expected that this declaration would be welcomed with shouts of enthusiasm, he was promptly undeceived. What! a shower of gold of which Danae would have been jealous, a torrent of diamonds and precious stones pouring on to this humble house, and not a hand held out for them, not one to tear off the roof so as not to lose a drop of the rain of wealth.

Yet so it was. A glacial silence received the phrase stuffed with millions so triumphantly declaimed by the author.

“Ah, that is it!” he said, looking at one after the other his sister, his nephew, his niece, his friend. “I tell you I am as rich as Croesus, that I return from Eldorado laden with gold enough to sink me, and you do not even fall on my neck and wish me joy!

There was no reply. Nothing but eyes cast down and faces turned away.

“Well, Nanon?”

“Yes, brother,” replied Nanon,” it is a nice little fortune.”

“A nice little fortune! More than three hundred thousand francs to eat every day of the year . And you, Enogate, do you also think it is a nice little fortune?”

“Uncle!” said the girl,” it is not necessary to be as rich as that -”

“Yes. I know. I know the rest! Money does not make happiness! Is that your opinion, Mr. Captain?” asked the uncle of his nephew.

“My opinion,” replied Juhel, “is that this Egyptian ought to have thrown the title of Pasha into the bargain, for so much money and no title -”

“Ha, ha! Antifer Pasha!” said the bargeman with a chuckle.

“Steady there!” in a tone of command! “Steady there, ex-captain of the Chamante Amelie, are you trying to make fun of me?”

“I, my worthy friend!” replied Tregomain - “certainly not. And if you are so pleased with your millions, I offer you a hundred million compliments.”

But why was it that the family received the exultations of its chief so coldly? He might perhaps think no more of his plan of superb alliances for his niece and nephew; perhaps he would give up his idea of breaking off or at least delaying the marriage of Juhel and Enogate, although his longitude had arrived before the 6th of April. But there was a doubt as to this, and hence the anxiety of Enogate and Juhel, Nanon, and Gildas Tregomain.

Tregomain resolved to give his friend an opportunity of explaining. Better to know at once what was going to happen. At least they could discuss the matter, and let this terrible uncle hear reason.

“Look here, my friend,” said Tregomain, rounding his back, “suppose you have these millions -”

“Suppose? Why suppose?”

“Well, let us say you have them - a good fellow like you accustomed to live in a humble way, what are you going to do?”

“What I please,” replied Antifer, drily. “You are not going to buy all St. Malo, I imagine -”

“All St. Malo, all St. Servan, and all Dinard, if it suits me, and even that ridiculous brook the Ranee, which has no other water than what the tide chooses to bring it.”

He knew that in insulting the Ranee he was stinging to the quick one who had been up and down this charming river for twenty years of his life.

“That may be,” said Tregomain, biting his lip;” but you cannot eat a morsel more, or drink a glass more, unless you buy a supplementary stomach -”

“I will buy what I like, Mr. Freshwater Sailor, and if any one says no to me, if I find any opposition among my own people -” This was addressed to the lovers.

“I will eat my millions. I will dissipate them, I will turn them into smoke, into dust, and Juhel and Enogate shall have none of the two each I intend one day to leave them -”

“Better say the four to both, my friend.”

“Why?”

“Because they are going to get married.” This touched the burning question.

“Hold there, bargeman,” said Antifer, in the voice of a stentor. “Up you go to the main-royal, and take a look around.” This was his way of sending Tregomain about his business - figuratively be it understood, for to hoist such a mass to the top of any mast whatever would have been impossible without the aid of a capstan.

Neither Nanon, nor Juhel, nor Enogate, dare interfere in the conversation. The young captain got so white that he was evidently hardly able to master his indignation.

But the bargeman was not one to desert anybody in the open sea. Approaching his friend he said, -

“However, you made a promise -”

“What promise?”

“To consent to their marriage.”

“Yes - if the longitude did not come, and as the longitude has come -”

“All the more reason for assuring their happiness -”

“Exactly. And therefore Enogate shall marry a prince -”

“If she can find one.”

“And Juhel a princess.”

“There are none to marry!” replied Tregomain, who could argue no more.

“You can always find one when you have a dowry of two millions to offer.”

“Then you had better search -”

“I will search and I will find - and in the Almanack de Gothow too.”

He meant to say the Almanack de Gotha, this obstinate intractable coaster, possessed with the idea of mingling the blood of potentates with the blood of the Antifers.

But not wishing to prolong a conversation which might end badly, resolved to yield in no respect on this marriage question, he let it be understood - very clearly - that he wished to be left alone in his room, and not to be disturbed by anybody before dinner.

Tregomain judged it prudent not to withstand him, and all four went downstairs. They were all in despair, and the girl was crying. This was almost more than Tregomain could bear.

“I don’t like people to cry,” he said,” not even when sorrow comes to them, my little one.”

“But,” said she, “all is lost. Uncle will never give in. This enormous fortune has turned his head.”

“Yes,” said Nanon;” and when my brother gets an idea into his head -”

Juhel did not speak. He strode about the room crossing and uncrossing his arms, opening and shutting his hands. Suddenly he exclaimed, -

“After all he is not master! I have no need of his permission to marry. I am of age-

“But Enogate is not,” said the bargeman. “And as her guardian he can object.”

“Yes, and we are all dependent on him,” added Nanon, bowing her head.

“My advice,” said Tregomain,” is not to oppose him directly. It is not impossible that this mania will pass away, particularly if we seem to give in to him.”

“You ought to be right,” said Enogate. “We shall gain more by gentleness than violence, at least I hope so.”

“Besides,” said the bargeman, “he has not got the millions yet.”

“No,” said Juhel; “and in spite of his latitude and his longitude, he may come to grief before he lays his hands on them. It will take a good deal of time.”

“A good deal!” murmured the girl.

“Yes, dear Enogate, and there may be delays! Ah! the confounded uncle.”

“And the confounded brutes who have come from the confounded Pasha!” growled Nanon. “I should have welcomed them with the broomstick.”

“They would have managed to see him, all the same,” said Juhel, “and this Ben Omar, who has a commission on the business, would never have left him alone.”

“Then uncle is going away?” asked Enogate. “Probably,” said Tregomain,” now he knows where the island is.”

“I will accompany him,” said Juhel.

“You, Juhel?” exclaimed the girl.

“Yes, it must be so; I should like to be there to prevent his committing some stupidity, to bring him back if he stays away too long.”

“Well thought of, my boy,” said the bargeman.

“Who knows where he may be dragged, running after this treasure, and to what dangers he may be exposed.”

Enogate felt as sad as ever, but she understood him. Juhel’s resolve was dictated by good sense; perhaps the length of the voyage might be shortened by it.

The young captain did his best to console her. He would write to her often; he would tell her all that happened; Nanon would not leave her, nor would Tregomain, who would see her every day, who would teach her resignation.

“Depend on me, my girl,” said the bargeman, much moved. “I will teach you not to dwell on it too much. You don’t know the adventures of the Chamante Amelie!”

No, Enogate did not know them, for he had not yet dared to recount them for fear of Captain Antifer.

“Well. I will tell you them. They are very interesting. The time will pass. Some day we shall see our friend return with his millions under his arm - or the bag empty - and our brave Juhel, who will take but one jump from the house to the Cathedral. I will not stop you. If you like, I will have my new coat made while they are away, and wear it every morning.”

“Below there! Bargeman!”

The well-known voice made the whole company start “He calls me,” said Tregomain.

“What does he want with you?” asked Nanon.

“That is not the way he speaks when he is angry,” suggested Enogate.

“No,” said Jahel. “There is more impatience than anger in the tone.”

“Tregomain - will you come?”

“I am coming,” said Tregomain. And the stairs began to groan as the bargeman went up them.

A minute afterwards Antifer had pushed him across the room, and locked the door. Then drawing him before the table on which the atlas was open, he held a pair of compasses out to him.

“Take this!” he said.

“These compasses?”

“Yes,” said Antifer sharply; “this island - this island with the millions in it -I have been trying to find its place on the map -”

“And it is not there?” exclaimed Tregomain, in a tone that betrayed less surprise than satisfaction.

“Who says so?” replied Antifer. “And why is this island not on the map?”

“Then it is?”

“If it is. I believe that it is; but I am so nervous, my hand shakes, the compasses burn my fingers, I cannot touch the map with them.”

“And you want me to do it?’

“If you are able to.”

“Oh!” said Tregomain.

“Well, try and we shall see. Hold the compasses and run the point along the fifty- fourth meridian, or rather the fifty-fifth, for the islet is fifty-four degrees, fifty-seven minutes -”

The figures began to trouble the worthy man’s head.

“Fifty-seven degrees, fifty-four minutes?” he repeated, blinking his eyes.

“No - animal!” exclaimed Antifer. ‘It is the contrary. Go on.”

Tregomain put the compasses on the western side of the map.

“No!” roared his friend. “Not west! East, understand, you duffer! East, east, east!”

Tregomain, deafened by these recriminations and objurgations, was incapable of doing the work properly. His eyes became veiled in a mist, drops of perspiration rolled down his forehead, and the compasses shook like the clapper of an electric bell.

“Touch the fifty-fifth meridian,” vociferated Antifer “Begin at the top of the map, and move down till you cut the twenty-fourth parallel!”

“The twenty-fourth parallel!” stammered Tregomain.

“Yes! the idiot! Yes, and the point where they cross is the position of the island.”

“The position -”

“Well. Go on down.”

“I am going down!”

“Oh! the noodle! You are going up!” The truth is that the bargeman did not know where he was, and was no fitter than his friend to solve the problem.

Both of them were greatly agitated, and their nerves were vibrating like the strings of a double bass in the finale of an overture.

Captain Antifer thought he was going mad. And so doing the only thing he could, he shouted for Juhel in a voice that sounded as if it came through a speaking- trumpet.

The young captain appeared almost immediately.

“What do you want, uncle?”

“Juhel - where is Kamylk Pasha’s island?”

“Where the longitude crosses the latitude.”

“Well, look for it.”

That was enough for Juhel. His uncle’s agitation told him what had happened. Taking the compasses in a hand which did not tremble, he placed the point where the fifty fifth meridian started from the north of the map and followed it down.

“Tell me where it passes!” commanded Captain Antifer.

“Yes, uncle,” said Juhel.

And thus it was he continued, -

“Franz Josef Land, in the Arctic Sea.”

"Good."

"Barents Sea."

"Well."

"Novaia Zemlia."

"After?"

"Kara Sea."

"And then?"

"The north of Asiatic Russia."

"What towns does it run through? "First, Ekaterinburg."

"Then?"

"Sea of Aral."

"Go on."

"Khiva in Turkestan."

"Are we getting near?"

"Very soon! Herat in Persia." Is that it?"

"Muscat, at the south-east end of Arabia.'" Muscat!" exclaimed Antifer, leaning over the map.

In fact the fifty-fifth meridian and the twenty-fourth parallel crossed on the territory of the Sultan of Muscat, in that part of the Gulf of Oman above the Persian Gulf, separating Arabia from Persia.

“Muscat!” repeated Captain Antifer. “Mascotte?” asked Tregomain.

“Not Mascotte, but Muscat, you bargee!” roared his friend, shrugging his shoulders up to his ears.

But this was only approximate, for they had as yet taken no account of the minutes. “You are sure it is Muscat?”

“Yes, uncle, within seventy miles of it.”

“Can you get any nearer?”

“Yes.”

“Then go on, goon - don’t you see. I am bursting with impatience.” And a boiler worked up as he was, would have been on the point of explosion. Juhel picked up the compasses again, and taking account of the minutes in the longitude and latitude, he obtained the position so exactly that he could only be a mile or two out “Well?” asked Antifer.

“Well, uncle, it is not on the territory of the Sultan of Muscat, but a little to the east of it, in the Gulf of Oman.”

“To be sure I”

“Why to be sure?” asked Tregomain.

“Because if it is an island, it could not be on a continent, you bargeman! This was said in a tone impossible to describe.

“To-morrow,” added Antifer,” we will begin our preparations for departure.”

“You are right!” said Juhel, resolved not to withstand his uncle. “We will see if there is a ship in the harbour bound for Port Said.”

“That will be the best, for we have not a day to lose.”

“No! They shall not steal my island from me.”

“Oh, it will take a famous thief to do it!” answered Tregomain. And Antifer shrugged his shoulders again.

“You will accompany me, Juhel.”

“Yes, uncle,” said Juhel. “And you too, Mr. Bargeman.”

“Me!”

“Yes. You!”

These two words were uttered in such a commanding tone, that the worthy man’s head could do nothing but bow in sign of consent.

And yet he had reckoned on Antifer’s absence to be able to console Enogate, by recounting the adventures of the Chamante Amelie on the fresh waters of the Ranee.

CHAPTER X.

On the 21st of February the steamer Steersman left St. Malo at the morning tide. She was a collier of 900 tons, running direct between Newcastle and Port Said, but on this occasion a slight accident to her engine had made it necessary for her to put into port. Instead of going to Cherbourg, her captain had brought her on to St. Malo in the hope that he might see an old friend. Two days afterwards the steamer was at sea again, and had put Cape Frehel thirty miles behind when we call the reader’s attention to her.

And why should we call attention to this collier more than to another, considering that hundreds of colliers pass down channel, and that the United Kingdom sends its coal to every part of the world? Why? Because Captain Antifer was on board, and with him his nephew Juhel, and with them their friend Tregomain. And why were they on an English steamer instead of in a railway carriage? When a man is interested in four millions, surely he would take his ease and think nothing of the expense . And this Antifer would have done had not an opportunity offered of travelling under pleasant conditions.

Captain Chip, who commanded the Steersman, was an old acquaintance of Antifer’s. When the Englishman put in at St. Malo he did not fail to look up his old friend, and was warmly welcomed. When he learnt that Antifer was about to start for Port Said, he offered him a passage on the Steersman on reasonable terms. She was a good ship, capable of nine knots an hour in a calm sea, and taking a fortnight or thereabouts on the voyage to the far end of the Mediterranean. The Steersman, it is true, was not designed for passengers; but sailors are not very difficult to please. There was at least a comfortable cabin for them, and they would not have to change vessels on the voyage - which was not without its advantages.

And it is easy to understand why Antifer had preferred it. To be shut up in a railway carriage for so long a journey was not to his taste. Far better in his opinion to spend two weeks on a good ship amid the fresh sea breezes, than six days in a rolling box breathing smoke and dust. This was also the opinion of Juhel, if not that of the bargeman, whose field of navigation had been bordered by the banks of the Ranee. He had hoped to accomplish most of the journey by railway, but his friend had decided otherwise. They were in no hurry for a day or so. If they arrived in a month or two the island would still be where it had been, and where it was no one knew but Antifer, Juhel, and Tregomain. The treasure which had been buried for thirty-one years under the seal of the double K was in no danger for a few weeks more. Consequently Antifer, eager as he might be, had accepted Captain Chip's proposal, and that is why the reader's attention has been called to the Steersman.

Captain Antifer, his nephew, his friend Tregomain - provided with a good sum in gold, which the bargeman wore in his belt, and taking with them an excellent chronometer, a sextant, a nautical almanac, besides a spade and pickaxe - took their passage on the collier. The bargeman had to overcome his repugnance at venturing on a sea voyage, to brave the anger of Neptune, although he had hither to only replied to the enchanting smiles of the river nymphs; and when Antifer ordered him to pack his portmanteau and deposit himself on board the Steersman, he obeyed without a murmur. Touching farewells were exchanged, Enogate was tenderly pressed to Juhel's heart. Nanon shared her embraces between her brother and her nephew, and Tregomain took particular care not to squeeze too tight those who had the courage to come to his arms.

Promises were made that they would not be long away, and that in six weeks they would be back again at SL Malo; and then, millionaire or not, Antifer would be persuaded to approve of the marriage so unluckily interrupted. And then the steamer went to the westward, and the girl followed it with her eyes until its masts disappeared below the horizon.

But had the Steersman forgotten the two personages - who are not of minor importance - whose duty it was to follow the legatee of Kamylk Pasha? Ben Omar and Saouk were not on board; had they missed the boat?

By no means. The fact is that it had been found impossible to persuade the Egyptian notary to embark on the steamer. On the voyage between Alexandria and Marseilles he had been as ill as even a notary could be; and now that he was doomed to go to Suez - and he knew not where - he had resolved to journey on land so long as he could avoid the sea. Saouk had not the least objection to this. Antifer was anything but eager to secure them as travelling companions, and had made an appointment to meet them at the end of the month at Suez, without saying that thence they would have to go on to Muscat, when the notary would have to brave the horrors of the perfidious element.

Antifer had even added: “As your client has ordered you to be present at the digging up of the legacy, you shall be there. But if circumstances oblige us to travel together, let us keep to ourselves, for I have no desire to be on intimate terms with either you or your clerk.”

In consequence of this, Ben Omar and Saouk had left St. Malo before the departure of the Steersman and no one regretted them. The notary was not likely to miss the appointment; on the one hand he was urged by the fear of losing his commission, and on the other he was dominated by Saouk’s implacable will. He would be at Suez first, and there he would await Antifer’s arrival with impatience.

The Steersman ran down along the French coast, sheltered by it from the southerly winds. Tregomain could but congratulate himself. He had resolved to make the best of the voyage by studying the manners and customs of the different countries he would be obliged to visit. But as it was the first time in his life that he had been on the sea, he was afraid of being sick; and it was with a curious and anxious eye that he gazed at the horizon where the sea met the sky. He did not try to play at being a sailor, the worthy man, nor at braving the movement of the vessel by walking about the deck. In fact his feet, accustomed to the level deck of his barge, seemed to fail him, and he sat in the stern on a bench grasping one of the stanchions, and submitting with resignation to the pitiless pleasantries of Captain Antifer.

“Well, bargeman, how are you?”

“Up to the present I have had nothing much the matter with me.”

“Ah! This is only fresh-water sailing as yet; we are coasting the land, and you might suppose you were on your barge on the Ranee. But we shall get a northerly wind soon, and then the sea will shake its fleas, and give you no time to scratch for yours.”

“Friend, I have no fleas.”

“It is a way of speaking. Wait till we get out of the channel.”

“You think I shall be sick?”

“Badly; I am sure you will.”

Antifer’s way of consoling his friends was peculiar. Juhel tried to remove the depressing effect of his prognostics by observing, -

“My uncle exaggerates. You will be no more sick than -”

“Than a porpoise? That is all I wish ‘‘ replied the bargeman, pointing to two or three of those clowns of the sea tumbling in the vessel’s wake.

In the evening the steamer rounded the furthest points of Brittany. As she was in the Straits of Four under shelter of the heights of Ouessant, the sea was not rough although there was a head wind. The passengers went to bed between eight and nine o’clock, leaving the vessel to pass Cape St. Matthieu, the Gulf of Brest, Douarnenez Bay, the race of the Sein, and head south-westwards across the Iroise.

The bargeman dreamed that he was sick unto death; but fortunately it was only a dream. When the morning came, although the ship was rolling from side to side, diving into the hollows of the waves, and rising on their crests to dive again, he did not hesitate to go on deck. If destiny intended to close his career as a mariner by a sea voyage, the least he could do was to fix the various events in his memory.

Behold him appearing on the deck. What does he see, extended on a grating, pale as death, and rolling from side to side like an empty barrel? Antifer himself, as much upset as any gentle lady crossing from Folkestone to Boulogne.

And what a string of oaths, terrestrial and maritime! And how the captain swore high and low when he beheld the tranquil, fresh-coloured face of his companion, betraying not the least sign of discomfort!

“A thousand thunders!” he exclaimed, “Would you believe it. Here am I, a coasting captain, yet not having set foot on a boat for ten years, much more sick than a bargeman.”

“But I am not sick at all,” said Tregomain, favouring him with one of his sweetest smiles.

“You are not? And why are you not?”

“I am surprised at it”

“But the Ranee is not like this Iroise.”

“Not at all.”

And you do not seem to be in the least upset”

Ha “I am sorry for it, if it annoys you,” said Tregomain. But this illness of Captain Antifer did not last long. Before the Steersman had sighted Cape Ortegal, at the northwest corner of Spain, while she was still in the Gulf of Gascony, so terribly lashed by the Atlantic surges, Antifer had regained both his sea-legs and his sailor’s stomach. What had happened to him happens to many others - even to the most experienced sailors, when they have been away from the sea for a time. His mortification was none the less extreme, and his self-conceit considerably cooled, at finding that this mere fresh-water sailor had remained unaffected while he had been almost turned inside out It was a rough night, during which the Steersman passed off Ferrol, and Captain Chip would have lain to, had not Antifer persuaded him to drive ahead. Long delays would cause anxiety as to catching the mail-boat at Suez, which only starts once a month for the Persian Gulf. The equinox was near, and there was always a chance of bad weather; so it was better to drive on as long as there was no obvious danger in continuing the voyage.

The Steersman gave a wide berth to the reefs along the coast of Spain. Vigo Bay and the three sugar-loaves at its entrance were left on the port hand, as was also the coast of Portugal. The day afterwards, the Berlings were left to starboard, those islands formed by Providence for the site of the lighthouses which mark the proximity of the Continent for ships coming from seaward.

You may easily imagine that during these long hours, our friends were talking about this extraordinary voyage and its certain results. Antifer had recovered completely With his legs wide apart, he looked defiantly at the horizon, striding about the deck, and watching the cheery face of the bargeman for some symptom of the sickness which obstinately refused to appear.

“What do you think of the ocean?”

“There is a good deal of water in it”“Yes, rather more than in the Ranee?”

“Undoubtedly, but we need not scoff at a river which has its charm.”

“I do not scoff at it, I despise it, bargeman.”

“Uncle,” said Juhel, “you should not despise anyone; a river may have its value -”

“As well as an island!” added Tregomain. And at the word, Antifer raised his ear, for he was hit in a sensitive place.

“Certainly,” he said,” there are islands worth putting in the first class - mine, for example!”

The pronoun showed what had been working in the Breton’s brain. This island in the Gulf of Oman belonged to him by inheritance.

“With regard to this island, Juhel. Are you verifying your chronometer every day?”

“Certainly, and I have seldom seen a more perfect instrument.”

“And your sextant?”

“It is as good as the chronometer.”

“Thank goodness; they cost enough.”

“If they are going to bring us four millions,” judiciously insinuated Tregomain,” we can hardly look at their price.”

“Quite so, Mr. Bargeman.”

But if Captain Antifer and his two companions had reason to place implicit confidence in their instruments, they mistrusted - and very justly mistrusted - Ben Omar. They were often talking about this, and one day the uncle said to his nephew, -

“I do not like the looks of this Ben Omar at all; and I shall keep a very close watch on him.”

“Who knows if we shall meet him at Suez?” asked the bargeman, in a dubious tone.

“‘Oh!” said Antifer, “he will wait for us for weeks if need be. Did not the scoundrel come to St. Malo solely to steal my latitude?”

“I think, uncle,” said Juhel,” that you will not be far wrong in keeping an eye on these Egyptians. I don’t think much of the notary, and I think still less of his clerk.”

I agree with you, Juhel," added the bargeman. "This Nazim is no more like a clerk than I am."

"It is a pity he does not speak French," said Antifer. "We might pump him."

"Pump him!" said Juhel. "If you have not got much out of the master, you are not likely to get more out of the clerk. I fancy you had much better give a thought to this Saouk -"

"What Saouk?"

"The son of Mourad, the cousin of Kamylk Pasha, the man who was disinherited in favour of you."

"I will know how to deal with him when I come across him. Was not the will in proper form? What can he do then, this descendant of pashas, whose tails I may have to cut?"

"However, uncle -"

"I care no more for him than I do for Ben Omar - and if this manufacturer of contracts does not walk straight -"

"Take care, my friend," said Tregomain. "You cannot get rid of the notary. It is his right and his duty to accompany you, to follow you to the island -"

"My island."

"Yes, your island! The will expressly says so; and he has a commission of one per cent. that is forty thousand pounds -"

“Forty thousand kicks!” said Antifer, whose irascibility was increasing at the thought of the enormous amount to which Ben Omar was entitled.

During the night the Steersman sighted the lights of Cadiz and passed the Bay of Trafalgar, and during the morning she entered the Straits of Gibraltar.

It was delightful travelling, and the passengers could not be insensible to its inexpressible charm, when the ship that carried them passed in sight of the African coast Nothing could be more picturesque, nothing more varied than this panorama, with its mountains in the background, the many indentations of the coast, the seaside towns rising unexpectedly from around the lofty cliffs in their frame of verdure. Did the bargeman appreciate these natural beauties as he should have done, and did he compare them with those of his dearly loved Ranee, between Dinard and Dinan? What did he think when he saw Oran, dominated by the cone with the fort clinging to it, Algiers terraced on its casbah; Stora, lost amid the mighty rocks; Bougie, Philippeville, Bone, half modern, half antique, hiding at the end of its bay? In a word, what was in the mind of Tregomain in the presence of this superb coast unrolling before his eyes?

The weather continued favourable. A squall occasionally, and then a calm, leaving a wide horizon clear. Under such conditions Pantellaria showed its slender summit - an old volcano, now asleep, which will some day awake. The bed of the sea hereabouts from Cape Bon to the Greek Archipelago is all volcanic. Islands appeared, such as Santorin and others, which may one day form a new archipelago.

Juhel had therefore some justification for saying to his uncle, -

“It is fortunate that Kamylk Pasha did not choose an island in these parts to bury his fortune in.’

“It is fortunate - very fortunate,” said Antifer.

And his face grew quite pale at the thought that his islet might have emerged from a sea incessantly troubled by subterranean forces. Fortunately, the Gulf of Oman is guaranteed against eventualities of this sort; such commotions were unknown to it; and whatever the islet might be, it would be found in its place.

Passing Gzo and Malta, the Steersman headed straight for the Egyptian coast- Captain Chip made the land at Alexandria, and coasting along the network of mouths of the Nile, spreading out like a fan between Rosetta and Damietta, he was signalled off Port Said in the morning of the 7th of March.

The Suez Canal was then under construction; it was not opened until 1869; the steamer had consequently to stop at Port Said. Antifer and his companions left Captain Chip, with many expressions of gratitude for the way in which they had been treated on board, and next day started by train to Suez- It was a pity that the Canal was not finished, as a trip along it would have much interested Juhel. and Tregomain might have fancied himself between the banks of the Ranee; although the aspect of the Bitter Lakes and Ismailia is not as western as Dinan, and certainly more oriental than that of Dinard.

Would Antifer have taken much notice of these marvels? No; neither of those due to nature nor of those due to the genius of man. For him there existed in the whole world but one point, the island in the Gulf of Oman, his island, which like a bright metal button hypnotized his whole being.

And he would have taken as little notice of Suez, a town occupying so important a position in geographical nomenclature, had he not seen as he came out of the railway station a group of two men, one of whom greeted him with excessive salutes, while the other departed not from his oriental gravity. They were Ben Omar and Nazim.

CHAPTER XI.

BEN OMAR and his clerk had kept the appointment. They had taken very good care not to miss it. For some days they had been at Suez, and the impatience with which they had expected Antifer may be guessed.

At a sign from Antifer, neither Juhel nor Tregomain took the slightest notice of them. The three continued their conversation as if nothing could distract their attention.

Ben Omar came forward in the obsequious attitude which was customary with him.

They seemed to be unconscious of his presence.

“At last, sir -” he ventured to say, in the most amiable tone he could manage.

Captain Antifer turned his head, looked at him, and positively did not seem to recognize him.

“Sir - it is I - it is I -” the notary repeated, as he bowed.

Who - you?”

And this as much as to say,” Whatever can this escape from a mummy-box want with me?”

“But - it is I - Ben Omar - notary of Alexandria - do you not recollect?”

“Do we know this gentleman?” asked Antifer, winking at his companions, as he shifted the pebble from his right cheek to his left.

“I think I do,” said Tregomain, taking pity on the notary’s embarrassment. “It is Mr. Ben Omar, we once had the pleasure of meeting.”

“So it is - so it is - “replied Antifer, as if he had a distant recollection of him, a very distant recollection. “I remember, Ben Omar - Ben Omar I”

“That is it.”

“Ah! Well, what are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? But I have been waiting for you, Mr. Antifer.”

“Waiting for me?”

“Certainly. Have you forgotten? The appointment for us to meet at Suez?”

“Appointment? - and what for?” asked Antifer, in such a tone of surprise that the notary was completely taken aback.

“What for? Why, the will of Kamylk Pasha - the millions he left you - the island “You meant to say my island, I believe!”

“Yes, your island. I see you are beginning to remember - and as the will imposed on me the obligation of -”

“I understand, Mr. Ben Omar. Good morning - good morning!”

And without another word, he shrugged his shoulders as an intimation for Juhel and the bargeman to follow him.

But as they were going away from the station the notary stopped them.

“Where are you going to stay at Suez?” he asked.

“In some hotel, I suppose,” replied Antifer.

“Will the hotel suit you where my clerk and I have put up?”

“Either that one or another: it does not matter! For the forty-eight hours we have to stay here -”

“Forty-eight hours?” asked Ben Omar, in a tone of evident uneasiness. “Have you not reached the end of your voyage?”

“Not the least in the world!” replied Antifer. “We have got another sea passage -

“A sea passage!” exclaimed the notary, turning as pale as if a ship’s deck were oscillating beneath his feet.

“A sea passage, which, if you please, we will take on board the Oxus, which runs to Bombay -”

“Bombay!”

“And which starts from Suez the day after to-morrow. I advise you to take your passage in her, as your company is forced upon us -”

“Where then is this island?” asked the notary, with a gesture of despair.

“It is where it is, Mr. Ben Omar.”

And thereupon Antifer, followed by Juhel and Tregomain, walked into the nearest hotel, where their luggage - which was not extensive - was soon brought to them.

A minute afterwards, Ben Omar had rejoined Nazim, and an observer could not fail to have noticed that the so-called clerk gave him anything but a respectful welcome. Ah! If it had not been for that one per cent on those millions, and for the fear with which Saouk inspired him, how gladly he would have been quit of this legatee, and this will, and this island, in search of which he was to be trotted over land and sea.

Antifer was told that Suez was formerly called Soueys by the Arabs and Cleopatris by the Egyptians, but his only reply was, “As far as I am concerned, it makes no difference.”

It hardly occurred to this impatient personage to visit a few mosques - old buildings without anything special about them - two or three places, the most curious of which is the grain market, or to look at the house facing the sea where General Bonaparte lodged. But Juhel thought that the two days could not be better spent than in exploring this town of fifteen thousand inhabitants, the irregular wall of which is so miserably kept up. He and Tregomain spent their time in wandering about the streets and lanes, and exploring the roadstead, where five hundred ships can find good anchorage in from eight to ten fathoms, well sheltered from the north-north-west winds, which prevail all the year round.

Suez had a certain amount of oversea trade, even before the Canal was projected, thanks to the railway running to Cairo and Alexandria. By its position at the end of the Gulf which bears its name, it commands the Red Sea; and although its growth may be slow, its future is assured.

But this did not trouble Captain Antifer. While his two companions went cruising about the town he hardly left the superb beach, which has been transformed into a promenade. He knew he was watched, it is true. Sometimes it was Nazim, sometimes it was Ben Omar, who never lost sight of him, while keeping at a distance. He pretended to take no notice of this. Taking his ease on a seat, absorbed, meditative, he gazed at the horizon out in the Red Sea. And occasionally, so much was he possessed with the one fixed idea, he would fancy he saw the island, his island, emerge from the mists of the south - by an effect of mirage which is frequently produced on the extremities of these sandy beaches, a marvellous phenomenon by which the eye is always deceived.

On the morning of the nth of March, the ‘mail-steamer Oxus had finished its preparations for departure, and taken in the coal necessary (or the voyage across the Indian Ocean, and the stoppages at the regulation ports. We need not be surprised to find that Antifer, Tregomain and Juhel were on board at daybreak, and that Ben Omar and Saouk had taken passage with them. The large steamer was really a cargo-boat, but she had accommodation for a few passengers, most of them bound to Bombay, some of them to Aden and Muscat.

The Oxus was under way at eleven o’clock. A fresh breeze was blowing from the north-north-west with a tendency to work round to the westward. As the voyage would last a fortnight, owing to the numerous stoppages, Juhel had secured a cabin with three berths, which could be arranged either for the day’s siesta or the night’s repose. Saouk and Ben Omar occupied another cabin, from which the notary would probably make but few and short appearances. Antifer, determined to have as little intercourse as possible with them, had begun by saying to the unfortunate notary, with the delicacy of a sea-bear which characterized him, -

“Mr. Ben Omar, we have to travel together it is true, but let us keep our places. I will go my way, you will go yours. It will be enough for you to be present to witness my taking possession, and when that matter is over, I hope we shall have the pleasure of never meeting again either in this world or the next.”

As long as the Oxus was running down the Gulf, sheltered by the heights of the Isthmus, the navigation was as tranquil as if on the surface of a lake. But when they got out into the Red Sea, the fresh breezes from the plains of Arabia gave her a roughish reception. The consequence was a good deal of heavy rolling, which many of the passengers found discomforting. Nazim did not mind it much - neither did Antifer, nor his nephew, nor Tregomain, freshwater sailor though he might be. But the notary’s condition it is impossible to describe. He never appeared either on deck or in the saloon, or in the dining- room. In the depths of his cabin his groans were heard throughout the voyage. Better for him if he could have travelled as a mummy! The worthy bargeman, taking pity on the poor fellow, visited him several times, as might be expected from his good nature; but when he tried to get Antifer to sympathize with him, all he received was a shrug of the shoulders. Antifer could never forgive Ben Omar for having attempted to steal his latitude.

“Well, bargeman,” he would say, “Mr. Omar is empty? eh?”

“Almost.”

“My compliments.”

“My friend, will you not go and see him, if it were only once?”

“Yes, bargeman, yes! I will go, when there is nothing left of him but his skin.”

What could be said to a man who answered like that, with a burst of laughter at his own wit?

But if Antifer suffered no annoyance from the notary during the voyage, his clerk Nazim was several times the cause of his almost justifiable irritation. It was not that Nazim thrust his presence on him. No! Besides, what could he do, for as they did not speak the same language, conversation was impossible. But the so-called clerk was always there, keeping close watch on Antifer, as if he had received orders to do so from his master. Great would have been Antifer's delight at pitching him over- board, supposing that the Egyptian had been the man to submit to such treatment.

The descent of the Red Sea was anything but pleasant, although it was not made during the intolerable heat of summer. Then it is that the care of the boilers can only be entrusted to Arab stokers, for they alone will not cook where eggs will cook in a few minutes.

On the 15th of March, the Oxus was running through the narrowest portion of the Straits of Babel-Mandeb. Leaving Perim on the left, and Obock, on the African coast, on the right, the steamer entered the Gulf of Aden, and headed for the port of that name, where several of her passengers were to be landed.

Aden, yet another key of the Red Sea, hanging from the belt of Great Britain - that good housekeeper, always at work! With the Isle of Perim, of which she has made another Gibraltar, she holds the entrance of this corridor, eighteen hundred miles long, opening out into the Indian Ocean. The port of Aden may be partially silted up, but it at least possesses a vast and commodious anchorage to the east, and in the west a harbour where quite a fleet might find shelter. The English have been installed there since 1823. The town itself, which was a flourishing one in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, was evidently designed as the emporium of commerce with the furthest east.

Captain Antifer did not think it worth while to go ashore, but spent the time railing at the delay, one of the most serious inconveniences of which was to permit the notary to appear on deck. But in what a state! He had hardly strength enough to drag himself along.

“Eh! Mr. Ben Omar, is that you,” asked Antifer ironically. “Really I should never have recognized you! You will never get to the end of the voyage! If I were in your place, I should remain at Aden.”

“I should like to,” replied the notary, in a voice that was hardly above a whisper.

A few days might pull me round, and if you could manage to wait for the next steamer.

“I am sorry, Mr. Ben Omar. I am in such a hurry to pour into your hands the splendid commission that is to come to you, that I cannot possibly stop on the way!”

“Is it much farther?”

“More than farther!” answered Antifer, sweeping his hand round so as to indicate a curve of enormous diameter. And thereupon Ben Omar regained his cabin, dragging himself along like a lobster, and having derived but little comfort from this brief conversation.

The following afternoon the Oxus was off again, and found the Indian Amphitrite anything but kind. The goddess was ill-tempered, capricious, nervous, as those on board could testify. Better not seek to know what happened in Ben Omar’s cabin. He might have been brought up on deck in a cloth and dropped into the bosom of the above-mentioned goddess with a round shot at his feet, and he would not have had strength to protest against the funeral ceremony.

The bad weather lasted until the third day, when the wind hauled to the north-eastward, so as to bring the steamer under the shelter of the coast of Hadramaut.

Saouk might stand the ups and downs of the voyage without being inconvenienced; but if his body did not suffer, his mind could not help doing so. To be at the mercy of this abominable Frenchman, to be unable to get out of him the mystery of this island, to be compelled to follow him to - to where? to Muscat, to Surat, to Bombay, at all of which the Oxus was to call. Would they have to land at Muscat and cross the Straits of Ormuz? Was it on one of the hundreds of islands in the Persian Gulf that Kamylk had buried his treasure?

This ignorance, this uncertainty, kept Saouk in a state of perpetual exasperation. He would have dragged the seen t from Antifer’s very vitals - if he could. Often would he catch a few words exchanged between Antifer and his companions! As he was supposed not to know French, there was no reason for their being careful when he was by. But it had all ended in nothing. The pretended clerk was justly regarded with suspicion, even with aversion. It was with repulsion that he inspired them; and the instinctive, unreasonable sentiment was felt as much by his companions as by Antifer himself. When Saouk came near them they moved away, and this he noticed only too well.

On the 18th of March the Oxus stopped for twelve hours at Birbat, on the Arab coast. From this point she continued along the coast of Oman so as to get up to Muscat. Two days afterwards she had doubled Cape Razel-Had. Twenty-four hours later she had reached the capital of the sultanate. Captain Antifer seemed to be nearing the end of his voyage.

And it was time. The nearer he drew towards his goal the more nervous, the more unsociable he became. All his life was centred in this island, this mine of gold and diamonds which belonged to him. To him it was an Ali Baba's cave which had been transferred to him by law in the very country of the Arabian Nights, whither Kamylk Pasha's fancy had led him.

"Do you know," said he one day to his companions, "that if the fortune of this worthy Egyptian had been in ingots of gold, I should have had a good deal of trouble in getting it to St. Malo?"

"So I should think," said Juhel.

"But," returned Tregomain," if we filled our bags, our pockets, and our hat-case ii "There's a bargeman's notion for you. He fancies he can put a million into his pocket I""I fancy, my friend -"

"But you have never seen a million in gold?"

"Never. Not even in a dream!"

"Do you know what it weighs?"

"I know nothing about it."

"Well, I do, for I have had the curiosity to calculate!"

"Tell us."

“An ingot of gold worth a million would weigh about seventeen thousand seven hundred and seventy-five pounds avoirdupois; and four millions would consequently weigh over seventy-one thousand pounds.”

“Ah!” said the bargeman,” you must have made it too much!”

“Do you know how many men it would take to carry those four millions?”

“How many?”

“Why, three hundred and twenty-three, and as we are but three, you can see what our embarrassment would be when we reached my island? Fortunately my treasure is chiefly composed of diamonds and precious stones -”

“Uncle is right,” said Juhel.

“And I may add,” said Tregomain, “that this excellent Pasha could not have arranged matters more conveniently.”

“Oh! these diamonds!” exclaimed Antifer - “these diamonds are easily sold among the Paris and London jewellers. What a sale, my friends, what a sale! Not all, though, not all -”

“You will only sell a part of them?”

“Yes, bargeman, yes I” replied Antifer, his face convulsed, his eyes glowing like fire. “Yes; and first, I will keep one for myself, a diamond worth forty or fifty thousand pounds say, and I will wear it in my shirt.”

“In your shirt, friend?” said Tregomain. “You will be simply dazzling! No one will be able to look you in the face -”“And Enogate shall have another,” added Antifer;” that is a little gem to make her pretty -”

“No prettier than she is now!” Juhel hastened to remark.

“Quite so, quite so. And there shall be a third diamond for my sister!”

“Ah! Good Nanon!” said Tregomain. “Do you want somebody to come and propose for her?”

Antifer shrugged his shoulders.

“And there shall be a fourth diamond for you, Juhel, a fine stone you can wear as a pin -”

“Thank you, uncle.”

“And you shall have a fifth, old man.”

“Me? If it had been to put on the figurehead of the Chamante Amelie -”

“No, bargeman, on your finger - a ring - a signet ring -”

“A diamond - on my great red hands - that would suit me as well as socks would a Franciscan!” replied the bargeman, extending an enormous hand much more suited to haul a hawser than to display diamond rings.

“Never mind. It is not impossible that you might find some woman who would -”

“Whom would you suggest? There is a fine fat widow who keeps a grocer’s shop at Saint Servan -”

“Grocer - grocer!” exclaimed Antifer. “What a figure your grocer would make in our family when Enogate has married her prince and Juhel his princess!”

There the conversation ended, and the young captain could not stifle a sigh at the thought that his uncle still encouraged these absurd dreams. What would bring him back to sanity, if misfortune - yes, misfortune - willed it that he should become possessed of these millions of the island!

“Positively he will go out of his mind if this lasts much longer!’’ said Tregomain to Juhel, when they were alone.

“lam afraid so!” said Juhel, looking at his uncle, who was talking to himself.

Two days afterwards the Oxus arrived at Muscat, and three sailors extracted Ben Omar from the depths of his cabin. But in what a state! He was reduced to a skeleton, or rather to a mummy, for the skin still hung on the bones of the unfortunate notary.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Tregomain asked Juhel to point out on the map the precise point where Muscat was situated, he could not believe his eyes. The ex-captain of the Ranee barge transported to this place, so far, so very far, to the seas of the Asiatic continent!

“And so, Juhel, we are at the end of Arabia?” he asked, adjusting his eye-glasses.

“Yes, at the south-east extremity.”

“And what is that gulf there finishing like a funnel?”

“That is the Gulf of Oman.”

“And this other which looks like the leg of a salt marsh?”

“That is the Persian Gulf.”

“And the strait that unites them?

“Those are the Straits of Ormuz.”

“And our friend’s island?”

“Ought to be somewhere in the Gulf of Oman.”

“If it is there!” replied the bargeman, taking care that Antifer was not within earshot.

The Sultanate of Muscat, lying between the fifty-third and fifty-seventh meridians, and the twenty-second and twenty-seventh parallels, extends to about 350 miles in length, and 180 in breadth. To this should be added a stretch of the Persian coast from Laristan to Moghistan, another stretch of coast from Ormuz to Kistrim, and certain settlements on the coast of Africa. With the addition of these its area is about the same as that of France, and it has ten millions of inhabitants, Arabs, Persians, Hindoos, Jews, and a large number of negroes. The Sultan is consequently a sovereign of a certain amount of importance.

In ascending the Gulf of Oman, the Oxus had coasted a desolate, sterile shore, bordered with high perpendicular cliffs. Behind them rose a few hills about fifteen hundred feet high, the outlying spurs of the range of Ghebel Achdan, which runs up to three thousand feet. It is not to be wondered at that the country is barren, for it is watered by no river of real importance; although the environs of the capital yield enough to support a population of sixteen thousand. There is plenty of fruit, grapes, mangoes, peaches, figs, pomegranates, water-melons, citrons and lemons, and dates are in profusion. The date-tree is the chief tree of the district. By it the value of property is estimated, and people talk of an estate of three or four thousand date-trees, as we do of one of two or three hundred acres. There is all the more trade in the Sultanate owing to the Sultan being not only the chief of the state and the high-priest of religion, but the chief merchant of the district. Under his flag are two thousand ships, whose total tonnage exceeds thirty seven thousand; and he has a navy of a hundred vessels armed with several hundred guns. His army consists of twenty-five thousand men, and his revenue almost amounts to a million pounds.

His power is absolute in the country which was conquered by Albuquerque in 1507 and afterwards threw off the Portuguese yoke. Having recovered its independence a century ago, it has been supported by the English, who probably hope after the Gibraltar of Spain, the Gibraltar of Aden, the

Gibraltar of Perim, to form the Gibraltar of the Persian Gulf, and finish by Gibraltarizing all the straits of the globe.

Had Captain Antifer and his companions any political object in coming to Muscat?

Not the least Were they interested in the country?

Not at all, for their attention was concentrated on one of the islands in the gulf.

But had they no opportunity of studying the state of affairs in the Sultanate?

Yes, for their intention was to enter into communication with the representative of France in this corner of Arabia.

Antifer thought it advisable to call on the agent at once. The police of the country, who are well organized, would probably have their suspicions regarding the arrival of three strangers at Muscat, unless some plausible reason could be given for the voyage. But it would never do to give the real reason.

The Oxus was due to start for Bombay within forty- eight hours. Antifer, Tregomain and Juhel landed immediately. They did not trouble themselves about Ben Omar and Nazim, but left them to find out their movements, and accompany them when they began their search in the gulf.

Our three friends followed a guide to an English hotel across the squares and streets of this modern Babylon. Their luggage followed. How carefully they carried the sextant and the chronometer bought at St. Malo - particularly the chronometer, which Antifer would entrust to no one but himself. By its aid the longitude of the famous island was to be determined.

With what punctuality he had wound it up every day! What precautions he had taken to save it from the shocks that might interfere with its regularity 1

When the travellers had taken their rooms they went off to interview the consular agent, who was much surprised to see three Frenchmen appear at his door.

He was a Provincial, of some fifty years of age, his name being Joseph Bard. His business was in white and manufactured cottons, in Indian shawls, in Chinese silks, in gold and silver embroideries, all of them articles in much request among the wealthy Orientals.

Among Frenchmen, particularly when one of them is a native of Provence, acquaintance is soon made. Antifer introduced himself and his companions. After shaking hands and offering refreshments, the agent asked his visitors the object of their voyage.

“I do not often receive a visit from my countrymen,” he said,” and it is a pleasure to welcome you. Anything I can do for you I will.”

“We are much obliged to you,” answered Antifer,” for you can be very useful to us in giving us some information regarding the country.”

“Is this merely a pleasure trip?”

“Yes and no. We are all of us sailors, my nephew, long- voyage captain, Gildas Tregomain, an old commander of the Chamante Amelie - “And this time, to his friend’s extreme satisfaction, he spoke of the barge as if it were a frigate - “and I am a coasting captain,” he added; “we have been sent out by an important house at St. Malo to open a branch establishment either at Muscat or at one of the ports in the Gulf of Oman, or in the Persian Gulf.”

“Sir,” said Bard, only too glad to have something to say about a matter which would certainly add to his profits,” I can but approve of your plans, and offer you my services towards making them successful.”

“In that case,” said Juhel, “we would ask if our branch had better be opened at Muscat, or at some other town on the coast.”

“At Muscat, by preference,” said Bard.” The place is daily increasing in importance by its communications with Persia, India, Mauritius, Reunion, Zanzibar, and the coast of Africa.”

“And what are its exports?” asked Tregomain.

“Dates, raisins, sulphur, fish, copal, gum arabic, shells, rhinoceros horn, oil, cocoanuts, rice, millet, coffee, and sweets.”

“Sweets?” asked the bargeman, licking his lips with the tip of his tongue.

“Yes, sir,” replied Bard. “Sweets they call hulwah in this country, which are made of honey, sugar, gluten, and almonds.”

“We will taste them.”

“As much as you like,” said Antifer,” but let us return to the question. It was not to eat sweets that we came to Muscat. Monsieur Bard has kindly told us the chief articles of commerce.”

“To which I should add the pearl fishery in the Persian Gulf,” said the agent, “which fishery is of the annual value of $320,000.”

You should have seen the disdainful pout with which Antifer greeted this. Pearls to the value of $320,000 was but a trifle to a man who possessed

$4,000000 in precious stones.

“True,” said Bard, “the pearl trade is in the hands of Hindoo merchants, who will admit of no competition.”

“Not even from Muscat?” asked Juhel.

“Not even from Muscat, where the merchants are not particularly pleased at seeing strangers establish themselves.”

Juhel took advantage of this remark to give the conversation another turn.

As Muscat is in 50 20’ east, and 23 28’ north, it followed that the island they were in search of was beyond it. Evidently they must leave Muscat on pretence of d s- covering a favourable place for this imaginary branch establishment, and what Juhel did was to remark that it would be wise to visit the other towns in the Sultanate before settling on Muscat, and he then asked what thee towns were.

“There is Oman,” said Bard.

“To the north of Muscat?”

“No, to the south-east.”

“And in the north or north-east?”

“The most considerable town is Rostak.”

“On the gulf?”

“No, in the interior.”

And on the gulf?”

There is Sohar.”

How far is that from here?

“About a hundred and twenty-five miles.”

A wink from Juhel made his uncle understand the importance of this reply.

“Is there much trade at Sohar?”

“A good deal. The Sultan often resides there when such is the fancy of his Highness ii “His Highness!” exclaimed Tregomain. Evidently the title sounded agreeably in the bargeman’s ears. Perhaps it ought properly to be reserved for the Grand Turk, but Bard thought otherwise.

“His Highness is at Muscat,” he added, “and when you have decided on a town for your offices, you will have to apply for his permission.”

“Which his Highness will not, I hope, refuse us?” asked Antifer.

“On the contrary,” replied the agent,” he will be most happy, provided you pay the fees.”

Antifer indicated by a gesture that he was prepared to pay for the privilege right royally.

“And how do you get to Sohar?” asked Juhel.

“By caravan.”

“By caravan!” ejaculated the bargeman, evidently uneasy.

“Well,” said Bard, “we have no railways or tramways in the Sultanate. You can go in a cart or on a mule, unless you prefer to walk -”

“These caravans only start at long intervals, I suppose?” said Juhel.

“Pardon,” said the agent,” there is a very active trade between Muscat and Sohar. One starts to-morrow -”

“To-morrow?” said Antifer, “that will suit us splendidly: to-morrow we will caravan it!”

The prospect of having to “caravan” it was evidently not pleasant to Tregomain to judge by the grimace he made. But he had not come to Muscat for the purpose of throwing obstacles in the way, and he had to resign himself to travelling under such painful conditions.

“But I do not see,” said the bargeman,” why we cannot go by water to Sohar. A hundred and twenty miles in a boat -”

“Why not?” said Antifer,” Tregomain is right. We should gain time -”

“Undoubtedly,” said Bard; “and I should be the first to advise you to go by sea if there were not certain dangers.”

“What dangers?” asked Juhel.

“The Gulf of Oman, gentlemen, is not safe. As a trading vessel with a large crew there might not be much to fear -”

“Fear?” said Antifer. “Fear a few squalls?”

“No - pirates, who are rather plentiful in the Straits of Ormuz.”

“Confound it!” said Antifer.

But to do him justice, he was only thinking of what he should do on his return with the treasure.

In short our travellers resolved not to return by sea, and thought it useless to go to Sohar by sea under the circumstances. They would go with one caravan, and return with another, and thus travel in safety.

Here the interview ended, the travellers promising to call on their return, and report the results of their inquiries, in the hope of profiting by his advice; Antifer even having the audacity to remark that the establishment of their branch would bring in important business by which the agency would profit. Before they went away Bard renewed his offer to introduce them to his Highness, and undertook to obtain an audience for such distinguished foreigners. And then the said distinguished foreigners departed for their hotel.

Meantime in a room of the same hotel Ben Omar and Nazim were conferring together. They had arrived at Muscat, but they were still unaware if Muscat were the end of the voyage.

Was Antifer going farther? It was for Ben Omar to know this, he had a right to know it, but he knew no more about it than Saouk.

“That is the consequence of having been so beastly ill!’ said he; “why could you not have been well?”

“May your Excellency be calm,” said Ben Omar. “This very day I will see Mr. Antifer - and I will learn - providing he is not going on board again.”

Surely Antifer would not refuse to give a direct answer as to the whereabouts of this island, for the will distinctly stated that the executor must be present when the legacy was dug up. But when the island was reached and the three precious barrels handed over, how was Saouk to obtain possession of them? Several times the notary had asked this without receiving an answer, for the very good reason that Saouk did not know what to say. It was clear enough that he would stick at nothing in seizing on a fortune which he looked upon as his, and of which Kamylk had deprived him to a stranger's advantage. And this was what frightened the inoffensive, conciliatory notary, who hated nothing so much as force, knowing that his Excellency thought no more of a man's life than of a dry fig. In any case, it was essential to follow the three Frenchmen, keep them in sight during their investigations, and assist at the exhumation of the treasure, and when they had got the treasure to act according to circumstances.

This being agreed upon, his Excellency went out, giving the notary orders to watch for Antifer's return to the hotel. This return did not take place until late in the evening. Tregomain and Juhel went for a stroll in the streets of Muscat, while Antifer - in imaginations-went for a walk a hundred miles or so away, to the east 6f Sohar, on the shore of his island. It would have been useless to have asked him for his impressions of Muscat; he noticed nothing, while Juhel and the bargeman were interested in everything they saw in this very Oriental town. They stopped in front of the shops and gazed at the heaps of merchandise of all sorts, the turbans, the belts, the woollen cloaks, the cotton cloths, and the mertaban jars resplendent with coloured enamel. At the sight of these fine things, Juhel thought of the pleasure his beloved Enogate would have in possessing them. What a reminder it would be of this inconvenient voyage! And these jewels, curiously worked, these articles of artistic value, would she not be all the more pleased at receiving them from the hands of her betrothed? Yes, far more so than with the diamonds promised her by her uncle.

This was Tregomain’s idea, and he said to his young friend, -

“We will buy that necklace for the little one, and you can give it to her when you get back.”

“When we get back!” said Juhel, sighing.

“And that pretty ring, let us have ten rings; one for each of her fingers.”

“Of what is my Enogate thinking?” murmured Juhel.

“Thinking?” said the bargeman, “why, thinking of you, of course!”

“And we are separated by hundreds and hundreds of leagues.”

“Ah!” interrupted the bargeman,” don’t forget to buy a pot of those sweets the agent boasted about.”

“Had we better not try them before we buy?”

“No, my boy, no,” replied Tregomain. “I intend Enogate to have first taste.”

“And if she does not like them?”

“She will think them delicious, because it is you who have brought them from such a distance.”

How well the excellent man knew a girl’s heart, although no girl, either at St. Malo or St. Servan or Dinard, had ever thought of becoming Madame Tregomain!

In short, neither of them regretted their walk through the capital of the Sultanate, the appearance and cleanliness of which many a European city might envy - with the exception, of course, of the birthplace of Antifer, which he considered one of the first cities of the world.

Juhel noticed, however, that there were a large number of police about who seemed to be very suspicious, and that they carefully watched these new arrivals at Muscat, who had given no account of what brought them there. Unlike the meddlesome police of certain European states, who require passports, and require answers to untimely questions, these police confined themselves to following the strangers at a distance; and the strangers would never be allowed to leave the Sultan's territory without the Sultan knowing why they had come there.

Fortunately, Captain Antifer had no suspicions of what was going on, for he would have been in a terrible state of fear for the success of his adventure. To take several millions away from an island in the Gulf of Oman was what his Highness would never permit. In Europe the State takes half of all treasure trove; in Asia, the sovereign, who is the State, does not hesitate to take the whole.

When Antifer returned to the hotel he was visited by Ben Omar. Opening the door just a little way, the notary put in his head, and in his most insinuating tone "May I know?"

"What?"

"May I know, Mr. Antifer, in what direction we are going?"

"First to the right, second to the left, and then straight on." And thereupon Captain Antifer shut the door with a bang.

CHAPTER XIII.

At dawn on the 23rd of March a caravan left the capital of the Sultanate along the road by the shore.

It was a regular caravan, such as the bargeman had never seen across the lands of Ille-et-Vilaine. So he told Juhel, and Juhel was in no way surprised at it In the caravan were a hundred Arabs and Hindoos, and about as many beasts of burden. With numbers such as these the perils of the journey were reduced to a minimum; no cause remaining for anxiety regarding land pirates, which under any circumstances would have been less dangerous than pirates of the sea.

Among the natives were two or three financiers or merchants mentioned by the French agent. There was no ostentation about them, and they had no thought for anything but the business which took them to Sohar.

The foreign element was represented by the three Frenchmen and the two Egyptians. The Egyptians had taken good care not to miss the departure of the caravan. Antifer had let them know that he was going to start in the morning, and they had made their preparations accordingly. Antifer, it need scarcely be said, did not trouble himself about Ben Omar and his clerk; it was their business to follow him and not his to take care of them. He had made up his mind to appear as though he did not know them.

When he saw them in the caravan be did not even honour them with a salute, and under his menacing look the bargeman dared not turn his head towards them.

The baggage animals were camels, mules, and asses. No vehicle was possible over this rough ground, where there was no definite road, and which was here and there a stretch of marsh.

Two sturdy mules carried the uncle and his nephew. These had been obtained from the Muscat Jews, at a good price, of course; but for no price had it been found possible to find a mule that would carry such a weight as Gildas Tregomain, and an animal of more strength and resistance had to be provided.

“Do you know that you are rather a nuisance?” said Captain Antifer, politely, as mule after mule was tried in vain.

“What would you have, my friend? I am not obliged to accompany you. Leave me at Muscat, where I will wait -”

“Never!”

“I cannot let myself be carried in several pieces!”

“Have you any objection to try a camel?” asked Juhel. ‘ “None at all, if you can find a camel that will carry me.”

“That is an idea,” said Antifer. “He would do very well on one of those camels.”

“So justly called ships of the desert!” added Juhel.

“Then let me have a ship of the desert,” said the accommodating bargeman.

And thus it came about that Tregomain appeared on this occasion perched on the top of a colossal specimen of one of these ruminants. This in no way displeased him. In his place anybody else would have been as proud. If he had any feeling of this sort he did not show it, keeping himself busy in guiding his ship aright and saving himself from as many useless lurches as possible. When the speed of the caravan increased the animal’s gait would probably become rather trying, but the bargeman was so well developed in the critical points as to be proof against discomfort of this nature.

In the rear of the caravan rode Saouk on a quiet mule. Near him, and doing his best to keep up with him, was Ben Omar on a donkey so small that his feet almost touched the ground. Never would the notary have consented to bestride a mule. There was such a risk of his falling too far. Besides, these Arab mules are high- spirited and capricious, and require a strong hand to keep them under control.

The caravan would accomplish its thirty-six miles a day, with a rest of a couple of hours at noon; in four days it would reach Sohar if nothing occurred to delay it A journey of four days appeared interminable to Captain Antifer, spurred on with the desire to reach his island. But there his adventurous journey would be at an end. And yet why did he become more nervous and more anxious as he approached the decisive moment. His companions could not get a word out of him and were reduced to talking between themselves.

From the top of his camel, swaying from one hump to the other, the bargeman remarked to Juhel, -

“Between you and me, do you believe in this treasure of Kamylk Pasha?”

“Hum I” replied Juhel,” it certainly seems to me rather fantastic.”

“Suppose there isn’t an island?”

If there isn’t an island, there won’t be a treasure, and my uncle will be like that famous Marseillaise captain who set out for Bourbon, and as he could not find Bourbon returned to Marseilles.”

“It will be a terrible blow, Juhel, and I am not sure that his brain will stand it” But the bargeman and his young friend did not talk like this in Antifer’s hearing. What would have been the use of it? Nothing would have shaken the convictions of this obstinate man. Never did it enter his mind to doubt that there were diamonds and other jewels of enormous value buried by Kamylk Pasha in the island of whose exact position he had been informed. All his anxiety was with regard to the difficulties he might meet with in bringing his campaign to a successful close.

The outward journey was relatively easy. Once at Sohar they would procure a boat, discover the island, and dig up the three casks. There was nothing in that to trouble a resolute man like Antifer. What could be easier than to travel in this caravan; and what could be easier than to bring the treasure from the islet to Sohar? But to return to Muscat, these barrels of gold and precious stones- would have to be carried on camel-back like all the other goods along the coast. And how was this to be done without attracting the attention of the custom-house, without having to pay enormous duties? Who could say but what the Sultan might seize upon them and declare himself absolute proprietor of all the treasures discovered on his territories? Captain Antifer called it his island, but the island did not belong to him. Kamylk had not given it to him, and undoubtedly the island belonged to the Sultanate of Muscat.

Here were reasons enough for perplexity, to say nothing of the difficulties of transport on the return, the shipping of the goods on the mail-boat for Suez. What an absurd idea for the rich Egyptian to have buried his riches in an island in the Gulf of Oman! Were there not hundreds more, thousands more, scattered over the seas, amid, for instance, the innumerable islands of the Pacific, which were quite away from observation, which belonged to no one, where the legatee could have entered into possession without awaking any suspicion?

But so it was, and it was impossible to change it. There was the island in the Gulf of Oman; what a pity it was they could not tow it to St. Malo! That would have simplified matters considerably.

Captain Antifer, then, was naturally anxious, and his anxiety showed itself by paroxysms of internal rage; and a deplorable travelling companion he was, always muttering to himself, riding apart and giving his mule many an unmerited cut with his whip. To speak the truth it was a wonder that the too-patient animal did not kick and throw his rider. Juhel guessed what was troubling his uncle but dared not say anything. Tregomain, from the height of his two- humped camel, was also aware of what was passing in his friend’s mind. To reason with him was out of the question; all that could be done was to look at him and nod at each other significantly.

The first day’s journey was not productive of extreme fatigue. The temperature was, however, high. The climate of Southern Arabia, just on the Tropic of Cancer, is very trying to Europeans. A burning wind, generally from the mountains, blew across a fiery sky. The sea- freeze is powerless to overcome it. The heights of Ghebel Achdan rise in the west like a screen, and appear to reflect the solar rays as if they were an immense receiver. And when the hot season is at its height the nights are suffocating and sleep impossible.

But the chief reason why there was not so much to endure in the first two days was that the caravan journeyed across the wooded plains that border the coast. There is nothing of the aridity of the desert about the environs of Muscat. Vegetation exists there in abundance. Fields of millet are under cultivation when the ground is dry, and fields of rice when the water-pools ramify their liquid veins over the surface. And there is no lack of shade under the forest of banyans, and among the mimosas which produce gum-arabic, the exportation of which is on a large scale.

In the evening the camp was pitched on the bank of a small river, fed by the mountains to the westward. The animals were unharnessed and left to graze as they pleased, without even being hobbled, so accustomed are they to these regular halts. To mention only the personages in this story, the uncle and nephew left their mules grazing on the common pasture, where Saouk left his as soon as foe arrived. The bargeman’s camel knelt like a Mussulman at the hour of prayer, and Tregomain alighted, giving his mount a caress on the muzzle as he did so. Ben Omar’s donkey pulled up suddenly, and, as the notary did not move as quickly as he might, it gave a jump and a kick and sent him flying off over its tail. The notary fell full length with his face towards Mecca, but probably thought more of cursing his donkey than praying to Allah and his prophet.

An uneventful night was passed on the usual halting- ground of the caravans. A start was made as soon as it was light in the morning, and the advance towards Sohar resumed. The country became more open. Away to the horizon stretched vast plains, where sand began to replace the herbage. It seemed like the Sahara, with all its inconveniences, scarcity of water, absence of shade, fatiguing travelling. For the Arabs, accustomed to these caravan marches, it was but an ordinary journey. They accomplish long distances in the very height of the summer, during the most overwhelming temperatures, but how would the Europeans support this trial?

We hasten to say that they did so without damage; even the bargeman, whose mass would have melted a few weeks later in the heat of the tropical sun. Rocked by the regular swing and elastic step of his camel, he slept in peace between the humps. Firmly seated, he seemed to be so like an integral part of the animal that there was no fear of his falling. He had now discovered that his obliging mount knew the difficulties of the road better than he did, and had given up attempting to guide it. The Chamante Amelie did not travel more safely at the end of a tow-rope along the Ranee.

Although Juhel was on the road from Muscat to Sohar. his thoughts were far away in the Breton town, in the house where Enogate was expecting him. The famous princess his uncle wished him to marry did not trouble him in the least. Never would he have another woman than his pretty cousin. Was there in all the world a duchess who could compare with her; even of the blood royal? No, and Kamylk's millions could not alter this, even supposing that this adventure was not an Arabian Night's dream.

Antifer was more anxious on the second day than on the first, and probably would be worse on the morrow. Me was thinking all the time how he could get the casks away, and the more he thought of it the less he liked it. And what -would have been his apprehensions if he had known that in this very caravan he was being watched? Yes, there was a native there, aged about forty, with a handsome face, who without awaking his suspicions was keeping him under close scrutiny.

The Suez steamer did not call once a fortnight at Muscat without the police taking a special interest in the event. Besides the tax he took on foreigners landing in- his dominions, the Sultan indulged in quite an Oriental curiosity with regard to Europeans who came to visit him. Nothing could be more natural than for him to find out the object of their presence in the country, and if they intended to stay. When therefore the three Frenchmen appeared on the quay, and took up their quarters in the English hotel, the chief of the police did not hesitate to take them under his wise protection. The Muscat police are admirably organized as regards the safety of the streets, and none the less so with regard to the surveillance of travellers by sea or land. They never ask if their papers are in order, for every scoundrel is sure to have them all right. Nor do they ask questions to which answers would be easy. But they never lose sight of the new-comers; they keep them under observation, they shadow them with a discretion, a reserve, and a tact which do justice to the intelligence of these Orientals.

Hence it came about that Antifer was under the eye of an emissary of the police, whose order was to follow him wherever he went. Without ever asking a question this policeman would succeed in finding out what these Europeans were doing in the Sultanate. If they found themselves in difficulties among a people whose language they did not know he would offer his services. And furnished with the information he obtained, the Sultan would prevent the departure of the them, as nothing could be gained by keeping them any longer. This arrangement would seriously interfere with Captain Antifer’s plan. To unearth a treasure of such value, to bring it to Muscat, to ship it for Suez, was difficult enough, but if his Highness was to know all about it the difficulty would be insurmountable.

Fortunately Antifer did not know of this complication ahead. The present burden of his cares was almost too much for him. Never did he suspect that a policeman had his eye on him; neither had his companions noticed among; the caravan this quiet, discreet Arab who watched them without saying a word to them.

But if this manoeuvre had escaped them it had not escaped Saouk. The so-called clerk of Ben Omar spoke Arabic, and had entered into conversation with several of the merchants going to Sohar. These people to whom the policeman was not unknown, made no mystery about him. Saouk suspected that the man was watching Antifer, and this made him uneasy. If he did not want Kamylk's millions to go to Antifer, he certainly did not want them to fall into the hands of the Sultan of Muscat. It is worth noting that the detective had no suspicion of the two Egyptians, and never supposed that they were bound on the same errand as the three Europeans. Travellers of their nationality often came to Muscat; and there was nothing to be feared from them, which shows that the police are not perfect, even in the Sultanate of his Highness.

After a fatiguing day, broken by the midday halt, the caravan encamped a little before sunset by the side of a half-dry lagoon, one of the natural curiosities of these parts. Here was a tree under which the whole caravan could take shelter, a shelter that would have been much appreciated during the rest at noon. The rays of the sun could not have pierced the dome of these immense masses of foliage, extending like a veil, fifteen feet above the ground.

“A tree such as I have never seen before,” said Juhel, when his mule stopped of itself under the first branches.

“And such as you will probably never see again!” said the bargeman, rising between the humps of his camel, which had just knelt down.

“What do you say, uncle?” asked Juhel.

The uncle said nothing, for the reason that he had seen nothing of that which had excited his nephew's surprise.

“I fancy,” said Tregomain, “that at Saint Polde Leon, in a corner of Brittany, we have a phenomenal vine which has some celebrity”

“Quite so; but it cannot be compared with this tree.”

No! and the vine of Saint Pol de Leon, extraordinary as it might be, would have been a mere shrub by the side of this vegetable giant.

It was a banyan - a fig-tree if you would rather call it so - with a trunk that was at least a hundred feet in circumference. From this trunk, like a tower, rose an enormous tenfold ramification, the branches of which crossed and intercrossed, and forked and developed, until they covered more than an acre. An immense parasol against the solar rays, an immense umbrella against the showers, impenetrable to the fires as to the waters of the sky.

If the bargeman had had the time - for he had the -patience - he would have given himself the satisfaction of counting the branches of this banyan. How many were there? This could not but pique his curiosity. It was satisfied, and in this way.

As he was examining the lower branches of the banyan, and counting on his fingers, he heard behind him, -

“Ten thousand.”

The words were pronounced with a strong Oriental accent.

Juhel knew English, and entered into conversation with the Arab who had given the information. The Arab was no other than the detective.

Finding a good opportunity for entering into communication with them he had taken advantage of it In the course of conversation he informed Juhel that he was employed as interpreter to the British Legation at Muscat,, and obligingly offered his services to the three Europeans.

Juhel thanked the native, and informed his uncle of this fortunate circumstance for their negotiations at Sohar.

“Good, good,” said Antifer. “Arrange with the man, and tell him we will pay him handsomely.”

“On condition, that we find something to pay bin with!” murmured the incredulous Tregomain.

But if Juhel congratulated himself on this meeting, Saouk probably thought otherwise. To see the detective in communication with the Frenchmen was to inspire him. with a surfeit of anxiety, and he decided to watch the proceedings of this native very closely. And then if Ben Omar could find out whither they were going - if the voyage was near its end? Was the island in the Gulf of Oman, the Straits of Ormuz, or the Persian Gulf? Were they to seek for it along the Arabian coast, or on the Persian side ? How were they to begin operations, and how long would these last? Was Antifer going to embark again at Sohar? As he had not done so at Muscat, it seemed as though the island must be beyond the Straits, of Ormuz? Unless, by caravan, the journey was to be continued towards Chardja, towards El Kalif, perhaps to Korenc at the top of the Persian Gulf? Cruel uncertainties, bewildering hypotheses which ceaselessly excited Saouk, and invariably reacted on the notary.

“Is it my fault,” he would repeat,” if Mr. Antifer is so obstinate as to treat me like a stranger?”

Like a stranger? No I worse than that, like an intruder whose presence had been imposed on him by the testator t Ah! without that one per cent! But was that one per cent, worth all these experiences? And when were they to end?

Next day the caravan crossed an interminable plain, a sort of desert without an oasis. The fatigue was extreme during this day, and the two that followed - fatigue due. mainly to heat. The bargeman thought he was going to dissolve like one of those icebergs that drift from the northern seas to southerly latitudes. Without exaggeration he lost a tenth of his weight, to the evident satisfaction of his two-humped mount During these days the Arab, whose name was Selik, became more closely acquainted with Juhel; but we may be sure that the young captain maintained a prudent reserve, and did not betray any of the secrets of his uncle. The search for a town on the coast favourable for the establishment of a branch business - that is to say, the fable already imagined for the benefit of the French agent. at Muscat - did duty again for the pretended interpreter.

The caravan entered Sohar during the afternoon of the 37th of March, after a journey of four days and a half.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was fortunate that our three Europeans had come to Sohar on business and not on pleasure. The town is not worth a tourist’s attention, and the visit is not worth the voyage. The streets are clean enough; the squares are sunny enough; there is a watercourse that just about supplies the wants of the few thousand inhabitants when their throats are parched by the ardour of the dog-days; there are a few houses scattered about, which are lighted from an interior court in the Oriental way; and there is a good-sized building of no particular style with which the Sultan has to content himself when he takes his two or three weeks’ holiday in the north of his kingdom.

However unimportant it may be, Sohar none the less exists on the shore of the Gulf of Oman, and the best proof that can be given of this is that its geographical position has been determined with all the desirable precision. It is in longitude 54 29’ E. and in latitude 24 37’ N. Hence, according to the information given by Kamylk Pasha, the island had to be sought for in twenty- eight minutes of arc to the east and twenty-two to the north of Sohar.

Hotels are not numerous at Sohar. There is only a sort of caravanserai in which a few rooms, or rather cells, arranged in a circle are each furnished with a bed; and there it was that the interpreter Selik, always so useful took Captain Antifer and his two companions.

It need hardly be said that, fatigued by their day’s journey, Juhel and Tregomain’s only wish was for a good supper and twelve hours’ sleep to follow; but it was not easy to get Antifer to join them, reasonable as the suggestion might be. More and more excited by his near approach to his island, he would hear of no delay, but wished to charter a boat at once. To rest when he had but a stride to take - a stride of a dozen leagues it is true - to put his foot on this corner of the globe where Kamylk had buried his barrels!

There was an exciting scene before he calmed down sufficiently to agree to take a few precautions. Too much haste would make the Sohar police suspicious The treasure was not likely to be stolen during the next twenty-four hours.

“Would it were!” said Tregomain. “My poor friend will go mad if it is not there, and if it is there!”

And these fears were in a certain measure justified.

But if Captain Antifer, deceived in his hopes, was in danger of going mad, a similar deception might affect Saouk so as to produce no less terrible consequences. The false Nazim might indulge in excesses of violence from which Ben Omar would not escape without damage. His impatience was as feverish as that of Antifer, and it may be safely affirmed that there were at least two travellers that night who knew no sleep in the cells of the caravanserai. They were advancing towards the same object by different roads. One was waiting for daylight to find a boat; the oilier was thinking of securing a score of resolute scoundrels, who, for a good price, could be hired to carry off the treasure during the return from Sohar.

Day came at last, this memorable day, the 28th of March.

To take advantage of Selik’s offers was evidently the best thing to do, and to Juhel it fell to make the best terms he could with this obliging Arab, who, more suspicious than ever, had passed the night in the court of the caravanserai..

Juhel was in some difficulty in explaining his wants to Selik. Here were three strangers, three Europeans, who had arrived the night before, and were in a hurry to obtain a boat. What they wanted was a sail - what other pretext could be given? - a sail on the Gulf of Oman, which would last at least twenty-four hours! Was not that a curious arrangement, and even more than curious! Perhaps Juhel was mistaken in his surmises as to what the interpreter would think of it.

Anyhow the difficulty had to be faced; and as soon as he met the Arab, Juhel asked him to find them a boat that could remain at sea for a couple of day?.

“Are you going to cross the Gulf,” asked Selik, M and land on the Persian coast?

An idea occurred to Juhel to elude this question by a very natural reply, which might allay any suspicion, even on the part of the authorities of Sohar.

“No,” he said,” it is a geographical exploration. We want to determine the position of the principal islands in the Gulf. There are a few oft Sohar, are there not?”

“Yes, there are a few,” said Selik,” but they are none of any importance.”

“It does not matter,” said Juhel; “before we establish ourselves on the coast, we wish to visit the Gulf.”

“As you please’’

Selik said no more, although the young captain’s reply seemed suspicious. He was aware of what had been told the French -agent with regard to the establishment of a branch office in one of the coast towns, and he might well think that this hardly agreed with an exploration of the Gulf of Oman. And consequently Antifer and his companions were more seriously suspected than ever, and were more strictly watched.

A regrettable complication this, which rendered the success of the operation very problematical. If the treasure were found on the island, his Highness would probably be immediately informed of it. And his Highness, who was as unscrupulous as he was powerful, might make away with Kamylk s legatee, to save any future claim.

Selik undertook to find the boat required for the exploration of the Gulf, and promised that it should be manned by a crew who could be thoroughly trusted. Provisions would have to be taken for two or three days. During the uncertain equinoctial weather, preparations were necessary for delays which if not probable were at least possible.

Juhel thanked the interpreter, and assured him that his services would be handsomely rewarded. Selik appeared most grateful for the promise, and added, -

“Perhaps it would be better for me to accompany you during this excursion? In your ignorance of Arabic you might have some difficulty in dealing with the captain of the boat and his men.”

“You are right,” replied Juhel; “remain in our service while we are at Sohar, and, I repeat, you will not waste your time.”

They separated. Juhel went to rejoin his uncle, who was walking on the beach with Tregomain, and reported what he had done. The bargeman was delighted to have as guide and interpreter the young Arab, whom he considered not without reason to have such a very intelligent face.

Captain Antifer signified his approval by a mere nod of the head. Then he suddenly observed, -

“And this vessel?”

“Our interpreter is seeing about it, and also about the provisions.”

“It seems to me that one of these boats in the harbour might be got ready in an hour or two. We are not going for a trip round the world.”

“No, my friend,” replied the bargeman,” but we must give the people a little time. Do not be so impatient, pray.”

“And if I choose to be impatient, what then?” retorted Antifer, with a furious look at Tregomain.

“Then be impatient!” said the worthy bargeman, with a deferential bow.

However, the day was getting on, and Juhel had heard no more of the Arab. It can easily be imagined how Captain Antifer’s irritation increased. Already he began to talk of sending Selik to the bottom of the Gulf. In vain Juhel tried to defend him. As to Tregomain, he was told to shut up as soon as he began to praise Selik’s intelligence.

“A beggar,” shouted Antifer, “a rascal, your interpreter; a scoundrel in whom I have no confidence, and who has only one idea, to rob us of our money.”

“I have given him none, uncle.”

“Then you ought to have done so. If you had given him something good on account “You would have said he wanted to rob us.”

“It does not matter.”

Neither Juhel nor Tregomain attempted to combat these contradictory ideas. The best thing to do was to keep Antifer quiet, and prevent him from committing some imprudence which would give rise to suspicions. Would they succeed with a man who would listen to nothing? Were there no fishing-boats in the harbour? Would it not be enough to take one, to agree with the crew, to go on board, to set sail, to steer to the north-east?

“But how could we understand these people?” said Juhel,” seeing that we do not understand a word of Arabic?”

“And that they do not know a word of French!” added the bargeman.

“Why don’t they know it?” retorted Antifer furiously.

“They are in the wrong, quite in the wrong!” replied Tregomain, anxious to appease his friend by this concession.

“It is all your fault, Juhel!”

“No, uncle. I have acted for the best; and our interpreter will soon come back. After all, if you don’t trust him, why not make use of Ben Omar and his clerk, who speak Arabic. There they are on the quay -”

“. Never! That would be too much, it is already too much to have them always in tow.”

“Ben Omar seems to wish to speak to us,” said Tregomain.

“Let him do it, and I will give him a broadside that will sink him.”

In fact Saouk and the notary were manoeuvring in Antifer’s wake. When he left the caravanserai they had followed him. Their duty was to keep him in sight, their right was to be present at the conclusion of this financial enterprise, which threatened to develop into a drama.

Saouk was urging Ben Omar to enter into conversation with the terrible Antifer. But the notary did not care to face him in his present state of fury. Saouk would have willingly assumed the place of this cowardly notary, and was sorry to have feigned ignorance of the language, which prevented his intervening directly in the matter.

Juhel could not but see that his uncle’s treatment of Ben Omar made things worse. Once more he tried to make him understand this. The occasion seemed to be favourable, as the notary had evidently come to say something to him.

“Listen to me, uncle, whether you are angry or not. Let us reason a little, as we are reasonable beings -”

“It remains to be seen, Juhel, if what you understand by reason is not unreason. What is it you want?”

“To ask if, now we are nearing the end, you still persist in not recognizing Ben Omar.”

“Certainly I persist. The scoundrel tried to steal my secret when his duty was to hand me over his. He is a rascal.”

“I know that, and I do not wish to defend him. But whether or no, his presence is imposed on you by a clause in the will of Kamylk Pasha.”

"Yes."

"Has he not to be on the island when you dig up the three casks?"

"Yes."

"And has he not the right to value them, by the very fact that he is entitled to a commission of so much per cent, on their value?"

"Yes."

"Well, if he has to be present at the operation, ought he not to know where you are going and what you are going to do?"

"Yes."

"And if by your fault or any other circumstance he is not able to assist as executor, might not the succession be contested, and would not that be a matter for a law-suit which you would certainly lose?"

"Yes."

"Then have you to submit to the company of Ben Omar during your excursion in the Gulf?"

"Yes."

"Will you, then, tell him that he is to get ready to go with you?"

"No," replied Antifer.

And the "no "was uttered in so formidable a voice that it struck the notary full in the chest like a bullet.

“You see,” said Tregomain; “you will not listen to reason, and you are wrong. Why do you struggle against wind and tide? Nothing could be more sensible than to listen to Juhel; nothing more reasonable than to follow his advice. Ben Omar is no more to me than he is to you; but do not lose your head about him.”

It was rare for Tregomain to indulge in so long a monologue, and still rarer for his friend to let him finish.

“Have you finished?” asked Captain Antifer. “Yes,” replied Tregomain, giving a glance of triumph at Juhel. “And you too, Juhel?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“Well, then, you can both go to Jericho! You can talk to the notary if you like. As for me, I will not have a word to say to the rascal. You can do just as you please.”

And thereupon he swore a terrible oath, put up his helm, and ran off before the wind.

Nevertheless, Juhel had got what he wanted. His uncle, seeing that he was compelled to do so, had not forbidden him to let the notary know his intentions.

And as Ben Omar, urged on by Saouk, approached with more courage now that Antifer had gone, only a few words were required.

“Sir,” said Ben Omar, bowing low to atone by the humility of his attitude for the audacity of his proceedings, “will you pardon me if I permit myself -”

“Come to the point,” said Juhel. “What do you want?”

“To know if we are at the end of our journey.”

“Almost.”

“Where is the island we are in search of?”

“About twelve leagues off Sohar.”

“What!” exclaimed Ben Omar; “must we go on the sea again?”

“Apparently.”

“And that does not seem to suit you,” said the bargeman, taking pity on the poor man, who was almost fainting, as if his heart was already failing him.

Saouk looked on, affecting the most complete indifference - the indifference of one who did not understand a word of the language.

“Cheer up,” said Tregomain; “two or three days at sea will soon be over. You may get your sea-legs at last - with a little practice.”

The notary shook his head, and wiped his forehead, which was wet with cold perspiration. Then, in a mournful voice, he said, -

“And where do you start from?”

“From here.”

“When?”

“As soon as our boat is ready.”

“And when will that be?”

“This evening perhaps, or certainly to-morrow morning. You had better be ready to start, with your clerk Nazim, if you cannot do without him.”

“I will -1 will,” replied Ben Omar.

“And may Allah help you!” added the bargeman, giving free vent to his natural kindness in the absence of Captain Antifer.

Ben Omar and Saouk had nothing more to learn except the position of the famous island. But as the young captain had not given it them, they retired.

When Juhel said that the boat would be ready that evening or next morning, was he not rather premature? So Tregomain remarked. In fact, it was three o’clock in the afternoon, and there was no sign of the interpreter. Juhel and Tregomain were getting anxious. If they had to dispense with his services, what difficulty there would be in dealing with the Sohar fishermen and having to make themselves understood by gestures. How could they manage in such a manner with regard to the cargo, the object of the expedition, the direction in which they were to go! As a last resource, it is true, Ben Omar and Nazim knew Arabic, but to call in their assistance was hardly desirable.

Fortunately Selik kept his promise. About five o’clock, as the bargeman and Juhel were returning to the caravanserai, he appeared on the scene.

“At last!” exclaimed Juhel.

Selik apologized for the delay. It was not without difficulty that he had found a boat, and he had to promise high terms for it.

“It does not matter,” said Juhel. “Can we go to sea this evening?”

“No,” said Selik,” the crew will not be complete until too late.”

“Then we start -”

“At daybreak.”

“Agreed.”

“I will come for you to the caravanserai,” added Selik and we will go out with the tide.”

“And if the breeze lasts, we shall make a good course of it,” said Tregomain.

A good course, indeed, for the wind was blowing from the west, and it was in the east that Captain Antifer had to look for his island.

CHAPTER XV.

In the morning, before the Gulf had been gilded by the sun’s first rays, Selik knocked at the door of the rooms in the caravanserai. Captain Antifer, who had not slept an hour, was on foot in a moment, and Juhel was with him almost immediately.

“The boat is ready!” announced Selik.

“We follow you,” said Juhel.

“And the bargeman?” exclaimed Antifer. “You see he sleeps like a porpoise between two waters! I will go and give him a shake that will wake him!”

And off he went to the resting-place of the said porpoise, who was snoring, with both hands closed. But the shake from that vigorous arm soon opened his hands and his eyes also.

Meanwhile Juhel, as had been agreed, went to inform the notary and Nazim. They were both ready; Nazim having some difficulty in restraining his impatience, Ben Omar very pale and very unsteady on his feet.

When Selik saw the two Egyptians appear on the scene, he could not restrain a movement of surprise, which did not escape the young captain. And was not this astonishment justified? Here were these people, of such different nationalities, not only knowing each other, but going to embark together for an exploration of the Gulf? Surely that was enough to provoke the detective’s surprise!

“Do these two strangers intend to come with you?” he asked Juhel.

“Yes,” replied Juhel, with some embarrassment,” they are travelling companions. We were on the same steamer from Suez to Muscat.”

“And you are acquainted with them?”

“Certainly. That they have kept apart from us is due to my uncle being in such a bad temper.”

Evidently Juhel was making matters worse by his explanations. After all, he was not obliged to say anything to Selik. The Egyptians came because he chose they should come.

Selik said no more, although the matter seemed more mysterious than ever, but he decided to keep as close a watch on the Egyptians as on the Frenchmen.

Captain Antifer now appeared, towing along the bargeman, like a tug bringing out a merchantman. And we might continue the metaphor by describing him as a merchantman just beginning to set sail, for he was still half asleep. We need scarcely say that Antifer would take no notice of Ben Omar or Nazim. He hurried along, with Selik at his side, the others following him, towards the harbour.

At the end of the jetty lay a “perm,” a two-masted vessel, moored bow and stern, her mainsail in the brails - all that was wanted was to set it, ease away the sheet and the mizen sheet, and bi off to sea.

This perm, the Berbera, had a crew of twenty men - a much more numerous crew than was required to handle a vessel of fifty tons. Juhel noticed this, but took care to say nothing: and he soon noticed that of these twenty men only half appeared to be sailors. In fact these were Sohar police, embarked under Selik’s orders. Under such circumstances no man of sense would have given half-a-crown for the four millions of Kamylk’s legatee - that is, if he found them on the island.

Three of the passengers jumped on board the Berbera with the agility of sailors; but to tell the truth the perm gave a sensible list to port under the weight of the bargeman. There would have been some difficulty in getting the notary on board, for his heart failed him, and Nazim had to catch him round the body and hoist him in. As soon as the rolling began Ben Omar fled to the house in the stern, and there began to weep and groan. The instruments were embarked, with many precautions; particularly the chronometer, which Tregomain carried in a handkerchief, of which he held the four corners.

The captain of the perm, an old. rough-looking Arab, slackened off the hawsers, set sail, and at Juhel’s orders, interpreted by Selik, headed off to the north-east.

They were now on the direct road to the island. With the wind in the west they ought to be there in twenty-four hours. But nature delights in troubling men. The breeze was favourable, but overhead the clouds were driving across the sky. Something else was required than to run to the north-eastward; the island had to be reached; and to do this two observations of latitude and longitude were necessary, the first in the forenoon, the second when the sun passed the meridian. To take the altitude the solar disk must deign to show itself, and on this occasion the capricious luminary obstinately refused to appear.

Captain Antifer strode up and down the deck of the Berbera in a desperate state of feverish agitation, watching the sky much more than he did the sea.

It was not an island he was looking for on the horizon, hut the sun amid the mists of the east.

Seated near the taffrail, the bargeman shook his head in token of disappointment. Juhel, leaning on the right of him, betrayed his disgust by a significant pout. Delays, still delays I Would this journey never end? And hundreds and hundreds of leagues away in the little house at St. Malo he thought he could see his dear Enogate, expecting a letter which could not yet have reached her.

“But suppose the sun does net appear?” asked the bargeman.

“It will be impossible for me to do anything,” said Juhel.

“But if there is no sun, cannot you calculate our position by the moon and stars?”

“Of course; but the moon is new, and as to the stars, I am afraid that the night will be as cloudy as the day. And besides, they are rather complicated observations, and not easily made on a lively vessel like this perm.”

The wind began to freshen. Large wreaths of cloud I accumulated in the west, as if the mists had been vomited . forth from some inexhaustible volcano.

The bargeman found matters rather dull. He clasped on his knees the chronometer confided to his charge, while Juhel waited in vain to use the sextant he held in his hand. And in the bow of the perm were heard inarticulate cries and incessant objurgations. These were due to Captain Antifer, who varied the proceedings by actually shaking his fist at the sun, as if that could do any good.

The sun, however, did appear. Now and then a ray would shoot between, through a rift in the clouds; but the rift closed almost instantly, and there was no means of keeping the sun long enough in view to obtain its altitude. Juhel tried again and again, but the sextant fell back without being used.

The Arabs are not very familiar with the use of nautical instruments. The men in the perm could not make out what the young captain was trying at. Selik. who was rather better educated than the others, did not trouble himself as much as he might about the importance Juhel evidently attached to this observation of the sun. Everyone could see that the passengers were much disturbed. Antifer strode about like the maniac he threatened to become, and when Tregomain and Juhel invited him to breakfast, he abruptly refused, and, contenting himself with a piece of bread, went to the mainmast, and forbade anybody to speak to him.

The afternoon brought no change in the state of the atmosphere. To leeward the clouds remained banked up. The sea was rough, and seemed “to smell something,” as sailors say. What it smelt was a storm; one of those south-west storms which so often devastate the Gulf of Oman.

The storm swooped fiercely down on the Berbera. With her sails reefed down, she could not keep her course; her freeboard was low, and the huge waves threatened to swamp her every minute. There was only one thing to do: run to the north-east. Juhel noticed, as Antifer might have done had he been paying attention to what went on, that the captain of the perm handled her carefully and skilfully. His crew displayed the coolness and courage of tried sailors. It was not for the first time that these brave fellows were struggling against a storm in the Gulf. But it was only part of the crew who seemed to be accustomed to these furious tempests; the rest were extended on the deck, and showed themselves very uncomfortable at the behaviour of the perm. Evidently these men had never been to sea before; and the idea occurred to Juhel that the police were following his uncle; that Selik perhaps - decidedly matters looked bad for the legatee of Kamylk Pasha.

Saouk could not be otherwise than furious with this bad weather. If the storm lasted some days, no observation would be possible, and how could they determine the position of the island? Finding it useless to remain on deck, he took refuge in the cabin, where Ben Omar was being rolled from side to side like a cask which had broken its seizings.

After a refusal from Captain Antifer, whom they had asked to come with them, Juhel and the bargeman resolved to abandon the foot of the mast, where they were sheltered by a tarpaulin, and went to lie down on the crew’s benches.

“Our expedition seems to be turning out badly,” murmured Tregomain.

“That is my opinion,” said Juhel.

“Let us hope that the weather will improve to-morrow, and that you can get an altitude.”

“Let us hope so.”

And he did not add that it was not only the state of the atmosphere he was anxious about. The sun would shine some day, even on the Gulf of Oman. They would find the island if it existed. But how about these suspicious fellows on board the Berber a ?

The night was dark and misty, and the little vessel was in great danger; not so much from her buoyancy, which kept her rising to the waves, and escaping their foaming crests, as from the sudden bursts of wind, which would often have capsized her had it not been for the seaman- like ability of her old captain.

After midnight the wind began to moderate, owing to a persistent fall of rain. Perhaps a change of weather was preparing for the morning? No; and when the day returned, although the clouds were not so stormy as before, and the atmosphere was not disturbed by violent squalls, the sky was none the less veiled with vapour. To the abundant showers of the night succeeded the fine rain of low clouds, which, having no time to form itself into large drops, pours down in sheets of mist.

When Juhel arrived on deck he could not restrain a gesture of disappointment With the sky in this state,, an observation was hopeless. Where could the perm be now, after the changes of course, and the uncertainties as. to direction to which they had been subjected during the night? The captain knew the Gulf of Oman well, but where he was he could not tell. There was no land in sight. Had they passed the island? Not unlikely; and it might be that the Berbera had been driven eastwards much further than was desirable.

Antifer had left his tarpaulin, and posted himself in the bow. How he fumed again and gesticulated when he had looked round the horizon! But he said not a word to his nephew, and remained standing near the starboard-cathead.

But if Juhel took care to say nothing to his uncle, he had to submit to several questions from Selik, to which he could only reply evasively.

The interpreter approaching him, said, -

“The day promises badly, sir.”

“Very badly.”

“You cannot use your instrument for looking at the sun?

“I am afraid not.”

“What will you do, then?”

“I will wait.”

“I would remind you that the perm only carries provisions for three days, and if the bad weather continues we shall have to return to Sohar.”

“Exactly.”

“In that case, will you give up your project of exploring the Gulf of Oman?”

“Probably - or at least we will put it off till a better season.”

“Will you wait at Sohar?”

“At Sohar or at Muscat, it does not matter which.”

The young captain maintained a well-justified reserve now that he suspected Selik, who failed to obtain the information he wanted.

The bargeman appeared on deck, almost at the same time as Saouk. One made a pout of disappointment, the other a gesture of anger, at seeing the mists that formed the horizon two or three cable-lengths from the Berbera.

“Nothing moving?” askedTregomain, shaking Juhel’s hand.

“Nothing.”

“And our friend?”

“He is over there; forward.”

“If he has not taken a header overboard!” murmured Tregomain. And it was always his fear that Antifer would end in this way.

The morning passed under such conditions as these. The sextant remained in its box as useless as if it had been a lady’s necklace in its case. Not a solar ray pierced the thick curtain of mist. At noon the chronometer, which Tregomain had brought up, for conscience ake, could not fix the longitude by showing the differ ence of time. The afternoon was just as unfavourable, and although an account was kept of the course, the whereabouts of the Berbera were but imperfectly known. That this was so, appeared from a remark made by the captain of the perm to Selik, that if the weather did not change in the morning he would steer westward for the land. Where would he meet with it? At Sohar, at Muscat, or further to the north, towards the Straits of Ormuz, or further south, near Raz-el-Had?

Selik thought it his duty to let Juhel know the captain’s intentions.

“Be it so,” said Juhel.

And that was his only reply.

Nothing occurred up to nightfall. When the sun sank below the mists in the west not a ray pierced them. But the rain gradually became lighter until it was as fine as spindrift. This was probably an indication of some change in the weather. The wind went down, until it became but gentle, intermittent puffs. During these intermittences the bargeman, wetting his hand and exposing it to the air, thought he felt a light breeze rising in the east.

“Ah,” said he, “if I was only on the Chamante Amelie between the delightful banks of the Ranee, I should know what to do.”

But the Chamante Amelie had been sold as firewood years before, and it was not between the delightful banks of the Ranee that the perm was sailing.

Juhel made the same observation as Tregomain. Besides it seemed to him as though when the sun sunk below the horizon it shot up one ray through the clouds, as it through a crack in a door. Probably Antifer had noticed this ray, for his eye brightened, and replied to the solar ray by a ray of fury.

The night came, and at supper the provisions were served sparingly. It was reported that only enough remained for twenty-four hours. Hence the necessity of regaining the land next day, or at least making sure that the Berbera was not very far away from it.

The night was calm. The sea rapidly grew smoother, as generally happens in narrow gulfs. Gradually the wind hauled to the east, and the perm had to be put on the starboard tack; but owing to the uncertainty as to the vessel’s position, the captain, at Juhel’s advice, decided to lay to until daylight.

About three o’clock in the morning the sky, completely cleared of the mist overhead, became brilliant with its last constellations. Everything promised a good observation. The sun rose from the horizon in full splendour, and Tregomain politely took off his hat to it by way of salute.

It can easily be imagined what a pleasant change this meant for all. With what impatience all, passengers and sailors, waited for the hour when the observation would be made. The Arabs now knew that the Europeans had the means of determining the ship’s position exactly, although no land was in sight; and they were anxious to know if the Berbera was still in the Gulf, or had been driven past Cape Raz-el-Had.

The sun rose on a sky of admirable clearness. Nothing to fear, not a cloud to veil it, when the young captain judged the moment had come to obtain the meridianal height A little before noon Juhel made his preparations.

Antifer placed himself by his side, his lips closed, his eyes burning, without saying a word. The bargeman stood on the right, nodding his big red head. Saouk was behind, Selik was to the left, ready to follow the details of the operation.

Juhel, quite equal to the occasion, with his legs firmly apart, seized the sextant in his left hand, and directed the glass towards the horizon.

The perm rose gently to the undulations of a gentle swell.

As soon as the altitude was taken, -

“It is done,” said Juhel.

And reading the figures on the graduated limb, he descended to the cabin to make his calculations.

Twenty minutes afterwards he returned to the deck and reported the result of his observation.

The perm was in latitude 25 2’ north.

She was consequently three minutes further to the south than the latitude of the island.

To complete the operation, it was necessary to measure the horary angle. Never had the hours appeared longer to Captain Antifer, to Juhel, to the bargeman, to Saouk. It seemed as though the much-desired moment would never come.

Meanwhile the Berbera was given a more southerly course, at Juhel's request.

At half-past two the young sailor took a series of altitudes, while the bargeman noted the time of the chronometer. The calculations gave the longitude as 54 28'.

The perm was a minute too far to the east for the long- sought island.

Almost immediately there was a shout One of the Arabs pointed to a blackish mound about two miles to the west.

"My islet!" exclaimed Antifer.

And it could only be the islet, for there was no other land in sight.

And Antifer began to twitch and jump as if he had St. Vitus's dance, so that Tregomain had to interfere and hold him in his powerful arms.

Immediately the perm was steered straight for the island. The slight breeze from the east took her there in half an hour. Reckoning the distance run since the observation, Juhel satisfied himself that the island agreed with the position given by Kamylk Pasha. The latitude bequeathed by Thomas Antifer to his son was 24 59' north, the longitude brought to St. Malo by Ben Omar was 54 57' east.

And as far as the eye could range there was no other land in sight.

CHAPTER XVI.

THERE it was then, this island, which Antifer valued at four millions or more. And he would not have taken sixpence off, even if the Rothschilds had proposed to buy it of him.

To look at it was but a naked, barren mass, without verdure, without culture. A rocky heap, oblong in form, and about two thousand yards in circumference. Its shore was capriciously indented. Here capes, there creeks, of no great depth. Nevertheless the perm found shelter in one of the creeks, which opened to the west, and was sheltered from the wind. The water was very clear. The bottom could be seen twenty feet down; a floor of sand, strewn with submarine plants. When the Berbera was moored, the very gentle undulation of the surge hardly moved her. But little as it was, it was too much for the notary to wish to remain a minute more on board. He had dragged himself along the deck, he had gained the bulwarks, and was just about to jump ashore when Captain Antifer seized him by the shoulder, and roared in a voice of thunder, -

“Stop there, Mr. Ben Omar 11 go first, if you please.”

And, whether he liked it or not, he had to wait until the intractable captain had taken possession of his island, which he did by forcibly impressing on the sand the sole of his sea-boots.

Ben Omar was then allowed to join him; and what a long sigh of satisfaction he gave when he felt the ground firm once more! Tregomain, Juhel and Saouk were soon at his side.

All this time Selik was looking about him, wondering what the strangers were going to do on this islet. Why such a long voyage, why so much expense and fatigue? To make out the position of this heap of rocks could hardly be the reason, unless these people were fools. And although Antifer seemed somewhat of a madman, Juhel and the bargeman were evidently in the full enjoyment of their reason! And yet they were assisting in this exploration! And then the two Egyptians mixed up in such an adventure 1

Selik had more reason than ever for suspecting the proceedings of these strangers, and he was preparing to leave the vessel and follow them on to the island, when Antifer made a sign that was understood by Juhel, who said to Selik -

“There is no need for you to come with us. We have no need of an interpreter here. Ben Omar speaks French as if he were a native of France.”

“It is well,” was Selik’s reply.

Annoyed though he was, the detective did not enter into any discussion on the point. He had entered Captain Antifer’s service, and it was his business to obey orders. And this he resigned himself to, resolving to intervene with his men if, on their return from their exploration, the strangers brought anything on board the perm with them.

It was about half-past three in the afternoon. There was plenty of time to take possession of the three casks, if they were in the indicated place, which Antifer did not doubt.

It was agreed that the Berbera should remain in the creek. At the same time the captain, through Selik, informed Juhel that he could not stay more than six hours. The provisions were nearly exhausted. It was urgent to take advantage of the easterly wind, so as to reach Sohar at daybreak. Antifer made no objection; a few hours would be sufficient for him to bring his operations to a close.

What had he to do? Not even to search over this very small island, yard by yard. According to the letter, the precise spot where the treasure was deposited was on one of the southern promontories, at the base of a rock, recognizable by the monogram of the double 1C. The pickaxe would soon reveal the three barrels, that he could roll on board the perm. He had arranged to work without witnesses, save the indispensable Ben Omar, whose presence was imposed upon him, and his clerk Nazim. As the crew of the Berbera would have nothing to be anxious about as to what the barrels contained, the return to Muscat by caravan was the only thing that presented any difficulty. But that could be dealt with later on.

Captain Antifer, Tregomain and Juhel in one group, and Ben Omar and Nazim in another, began to climb the slopes of the island, whose mean altitude measured a hundred and fifty feet above the level of the sea. A few flocks of sea-ducks flew off at their approach, quacking out their protests against the intruders who were violating their home. Probably no human being had set foot on the island since the visit of Kamylk Pasha. Antifer carried his pickaxe on his shoulder; he would not give it up to anyone. The bargeman carried the mattock; Juhel indicated the course, compass in hand.

The notary had some difficulty in keeping in front of Saouk. His legs still shook, although he no longer had the perm’s deck under his feet. But we need not be astonished at finding that he had recovered his intelligence, forgotten the trials of the voyage, and thought not of those of the return.

The ground was pebbly; its surface was not easy walking. In working round some of the hillocks that were difficult to cross, the centre of the islet was reached. When the group had attained this culminating point, they sighted the perm, with her flag fluttering in the breeze.

From this point the outline of the island was easily visible. Here and there were a few promontories, and among them was the cape with the millions in it. There could be no mistake, for the will indicated that it ran southwards.

Juhel recognized it immediately by the aid of the compass.

It was a long, barren tongue, beaten by the light foam of the surf.

And once more the thought occurred to the young captain, that the riches buried under the rocks were about to rise as an insurmountable obstacle between his betrothed and himself. Never would they triumph over their uncle’s obstinacy! And envy - a cruel envy, which however he overcame - tempted him to send his companions astray.

The bargeman was in agony between two opposing feelings - the fear that Juhel and Enogate would never be married, and the fear that his friend Antifer would go mad if he did not lay hands on the legacy of Kamyl Pasha. And in a sort of frenzy he struck the ground so violently with his mattock, that splinters of rock began to fly around him.

“Hallo, bargeman,” exclaimed Antifer,” what fly is biting you?”

“None, none!” replied Tregomain.

“Then keep your pickings for the right place, if you please.”

“I will keep them, my friend.”

Then the group went southwards towards the promontory, which was not six hundred yards away.

Antifer, Ben Omar and Saouk, now in front, hurried along attracted as by a magnet - the magnet of gold, all- powerful among men. They panted as they went. They seemed to smell the treasure at a distance - they breathed it in, and breathed it out; they were filled with an atmosphere of millions, and would fall asphyxiated if that atmosphere left them.

In ten minutes they had reached the point which ran out into the sea; and it was at its end that Kamylk had marked the rock with a double K.

Antifer's excitement was such that he fainted. If Tregomain had not caught him in his arms, he would have fallen in a heap. The only signs of life were a few spasmodic starts.

"Uncle! uncle!" cried Juhel.

"My friend!" cried the bargeman.

Saouk's expression no one could mistake. It said as clearly as possible, -

"May this Christian dog die, and I shall again become the sole heir of Kamylk Pasha!"

Ben Omar's physiognomy appeared to say just the contrary, -

"If this man dies, and he alone knows where the treasure is, away goes my commission!"

But the accident had no such sorrowful result. By the bargeman's vigorous rubbing-, Antifer regained consciousness, and seized hold of the pickaxe he had dropped. And then the exploration began at the beginning of the promontory.

There was a narrow causeway, sufficiently raised for the high tide not to cover it, even during south-west winds. It would have been difficult to have found a better place in which to bury the millions. To recognize the place was not difficult, providing that the storms of the Gulf of Oman had not in a quarter of a century weathered away the monogram.

Antifer would have searched all over this promontory if necessary. He would throw over the rocks one after the other, and spend weeks, even months, at his task. He would let the perm go back to Sohar for provisions. He would not abandon the islet until he had torn from it the riches of which he was the legitimate possessor.

And Saouk was of the same opinion.

And now they were all at work, searching, foraging under the clumps of algae, between the interstices of the rocks coated with seaweed. Antifer tapped about with his pickaxe on the loose stones. The bargeman attacked them with his mattock. Ben Omar crawled on all-fours like a crab among the shingle. The others, Juhel and Saouk, were quite as busy. Not a word was spoken. The operation was conducted in silence. It could not have been more silent if it had been a funeral ceremony.

And was it not a cemetery, this islet lost in the gulf; and was it not a tomb they were seeking - a tomb from which they longed to disinter the millions of the Egyptian?

In half an hour they had found nothing. But they did not despair. That they were on Kamylk’s island, and that his barrels were buried on this promontory, they had no doubt.

The sun blazed down on them. Sweat poured down their faces. They knew no feeling of fatigue. They worked with the ardour of ants in an ant-hill - all, even the barpeman in the grip of the demon of greed, all but Juhel.

At last a shout of joy - or rather the roar of a wild beast - suddenly resounded.

It was Captain Antifer who had uttered it. Upright, with his hat off, his hand stretched out, he pointed to a rock rising like a stela.

“There! there!” he shouted.

And if he had prostrated himself before the stela like a Transteverin before the niche of a madonna, not one of his companions would have been surprised. He was soon joined by them in common adoration.

Juhel and the bargeman, Saouk and Ben Omar, gathered round Antifer, who had just knelt down. They knelt near him.

What was there on this rock?

There was what the eye could see and the hands could touch. There was the famous monogram of Kamylk Pasha, the double K, rather eaten away at its edges, but still visible.

“There! there!” repeated Captain Antifer.

And he pointed to the base of the rock - to the place where the treasure buried thirty-two years ago slept in its coffer of stone.

Immediately the pick came down on the rock and the splinters flew. Then Tregomain's mattock knocked off chips of rock and chips of concrete. The hole began to get bigger, to deepen. Chests panted, hearts beat ready to break, in expectation of the last blow, which would cause the millions to burst like a spring from the entrails of the ground.

And still they dug, but the barrels did not appear. Evidently Kamylk had dug a very deep trench. He was not wrong, after all, and what did it matter if it took a little time and a little fatigue to unearth them?

Suddenly a metallic sound was heard. Doubtless the pickaxe hid encountered some sonorous object.

Antifer knelt over the hole. His head disappeared in it, while his hands dug into it greedily.

He rose.

He held in his hand a metal box, not above four inches in cube.

They all looked at him, unable to hide their feeling that they had been deceived. And doubtless Tregomain expressed the thoughts of all when he exclaimed, -

"If there are four millions in that, may the -"

"Silence!" vociferated Captain Antifer.

And again he felt about in the excavation, picking out the last fragments of rock, seeking to meet with the casks.

Labour in vain! There was nothing here - nothing but the iron box, on the side of which there stood in relief the double K of the Egyptian.

Had then Captain Antifer undergone such fatigues for nothing? Had they come all this way to be the sport of a mystificator?

Juhel would have smiled, if his uncle's face had not frightened him. His eyes were as those of a madman, his mouth was contracted in a horrible grin; inarticulate sounds escaped from his throat Tregomain declared afterwards that at this moment he had expected to see him fall stone-dead.

Suddenly Antifer rose: he seized his pickaxe, brandished it, and in a frightful access of rage, struck a violent blow which shattered the box. A paper fell out of it.

It was a piece of parchment, yellow with age, on which were a few lines written in French, and still legible.

Antifer seized this paper. Forgetting that Ben Omar and Saouk might hear and learn from him a secret it was his interest to keep, he began to read in a trembling voice the first lines: -

"This document contains the longitude of a second island which Thomas Antifer, or, in default, his direct heir, is to bring to the knowledge of the banker Zambuco, residing at -"

Antifer stopped his mouth by putting his fist into it.

Saouk was sufficiently master of himself to let nothing appear of what he had just ascertained. A few words more, and he would have learnt what was the longitude of the second island, of which Zambuco had the latitude, and at the same time where the banker lived.

The notary, no less disappointed, stood there, his lips open, his tongue hanging out, like a dog dying of thirst just dragged from his saucer.

But a moment after that sentence had been cut off short by the fist in the mouth, Ben Omar, who had a right to know Kamylk's intentions, rose, and asked, -

"Well - this banker, Zambuco - where does he live?"

"At home!" replied Captain Antifer.

And folding the paper, he thrust it into his pocket, leaving Ben Omar to stretch his despairing hands to the sky.

The treasure was not on this island in the Gulf of Oman.

The only object of the journey was to invite Captain Antifer to put himself in communication with a fresh personage, the banker Zambuco! Was this personage a second legatee whom Kamylk desired to reward for services rendered? Was he going to share the treasure with Captain Antifer? It looked like it. Whence the logical consequence that instead of four millions, only two would go into the pocket of Captain Antifer.

Juhel bowed his head at the thought that this was still too much to make his uncle modify his opinion relative to his marriage with his dear Enogate.

And, in fact, Juhel had divined what was passing in Antifer's mind. For what Antifer remarked by way of conclusion was, "Well, Enogate will have to marry a duke instead of a prince, and Juhel will have to marry a duchess instead of a princess."

CHAPTER XVII.

Dreary had been the house at St. Malo since Captain Antifer had left it, and the days and nights had been spent in anxiety by mother and daughter. Juhel’s empty room made all the house empty, at least so thought Enogate. And then her uncle was not there, nor was his friend Tregomain.

It was the 29th of April. Two months had elapsed since the Steersman had left with three travellers on their adventurous campaign in quest of the treasure. How had the voyage ended? Where were they then? Had they attained their object?

“Mother, mother,” said the girl,” they will never come back again.”

“Yes, my child, they will; have confidence, they will come back,” the old Breton would answer. “But all the same they would have done better not to have left us.”.

“Yes,” murmured Enogate,” and just as I was going to be his wife.”

Captain Antifer’s departure had created an immense sensation in the town. People had been so accustomed to see him strolling, pipe in mouth, along the streets and on the ramparts! And then there was Gildas Tregomain walking at his side, but just a little behind him, his legs bowed, his loose coat always in creases at the armpits, his face always placid and beaming with kindness I And Juhel, the young captain, whose native town was as proud of him as he was of Enogate! Where had the three gone to? No one had any idea. They all knew that the Steersman had taken them to Port Said, but only Enogate and Nanon were aware that they were going down the Red Sea to venture into the northern boundaries of the Indian Ocean. Antifer had wisely kept his secret, for he did not want Ben Omar to get wind of the position of the famous island.

But if he had not let them know where he had gone, he had been too loquacious, too exuberant, too communicative with regard to his plans. At St. Malo, as at Saint Servan and Dinard, everybody knew the story of Kamylk Pasha, and how Thomas Antifer had received a letter, and how the messenger had arrived, and how the longitude and latitude had given the position of an island containing millions of treasure - millions of millions, according to those who knew best. With what impatience then did they await the news of the discovery, and the return of the captain, transformed into a nabob, bringing into the port a cargo of diamonds and precious stones!

Enogate did not ask for so much as this. If her betrothed, her uncle, her friend, returned even with empty pockets she would be satisfied, she would give thanks to God, and her deep distress would change into gladness. She had not been without hearing from Juhel. A first letter, dated from Suez, had informed her of the details of the voyage since their separation, and mentioned how nervous her uncle was becoming and how Ben Omar and his clerk had been welcomed. A second letter, dated from Muscat, narrated the incidents of the voyage across the Indian Ocean to the capital of the Sultanate, and told her in what a state of excitement, bordering on madness, Captain Antifer then was, and how they had decided to push on to Sohar.

And again and again did she read these letters, which did not confine themselves to relating the impressions of the voyage, or reporting her uncle’s excited state, but expressed all the annoyance of her betrothed at being separated from her on the eve of their marriage, at being so far away from her, and told of his hope of an early return, to gain her uncle’s consent, even if he came back with his hands full of millions I Over and over again did Nanon and Enogate read these letters, to which they could not reply - that consolation being denied them - and indulged in all the comments they suggested. They counted on their fingers the days during which the absent ones would have to remain in those distant seas. They crossed out day after day on the almanac hanging on the wall; and after the receipt of the second letter they abandoned themselves to the hope that the second half of the voyage would be devoted to the return.

A third letter arrived on the 2gfh of April, about two months after Juhel's departure. Seeing that it bore the post-mark of Tunis, Enogate felt her heart beat with happiness. The travellers, then, had left Muscat; they had returned to European seas; they were nearing France. In three days they might be at Marseilles. Three days at the outside; and to reach St. Malo by express - twenty-six hours!

Mother and daughter were seated in one of the rooms on the ground floor, after shutting the door on the postman. No one could disturb them. They could give free vent to their feelings. As soon as they had wiped away the tears that rose in their eyes, Enogate opened the envelope, drew forth the letter, and read in a loud voice, pausing between each sentence for it to be understood, as follows: - "La Goulette, Regency of Tunis, "22nd April, 1862. "My Dear Enogate, -

"I embrace you for your mother first of all, then for yourself, and then for myself. But we are far away from one another, and when this interminable voyage will end I know not. I have already written twice to you, and you should have had my letters. This is the third, more important than the others; in the first place, because it will tell you that the treasure business has had an unexpected change come over it, much to my uncle's annoy-

Enogate uttered a little cry of joy, and clapping her hands, exclaimed, - “They have found nothing, mother, and I shall not have to marry a prince.”

“Go on!” replied Nanon.

Enogate finished the sentence which she had interrupted: -

“And also because I am sorry to have to tell you that we are obliged to continue our search much farther away.”

The letter shook between Enogate’s fingers.

“Search farther away!” she murmured. “They are not coming back, mother, they are not coming back!”

“Courage, my daughter, and go on,” said Nanon.

Enogate, with her lovely eyes full of tears, resumed the reading of the letter. Juhel briefly related what had happened on the island in the Gulf of Oman; how, instead of the treasure, they had found a document, and in this document the mention of a new longitude. Then Juhel added: -

“Judge, my dear Enogate, of my uncle’s disappointment, of the rage he was in, and also of my disgust - not that we had not taken possession of the treasure, but that our departure for St. Malo was further delayed. I thought my heart would have broken -”

Enogate had much trouble in restraining the beatings of her own, and by her own feelings understood what Juhel had had to suffer.

“Poor Juhel!” she murmured.

“And poor you!” murmured Nanon. Go on.”

Enogate continued, in a voice changed by emotion, -

“In fact, this confounded longitude Kamylk Pasha requested us to bring to the knowledge of a certain Zambuco, a banker at Tunis, who was in possession of a certain latitude. Evidently it is in another island that the treasure has been buried. Probably the Pasha had also contracted a debt of gratitude towards this personage, who had formerly helped him, as had grandfather Antifer, The legacy has to be shared between two legatees, which reduces the share of each to a half, and on this account arose the extravagant anger, you may imagine. Not four millions, but two! Well, I shall be only too pleased if those to whom the generous Egyptian owed debts of gratitude become so numerous, that so little comes to uncle that he will have nothing to say against our marriage.”

Enogate continued, -

“When our uncle read the document he was so astounded that the figures of the new longitude and the address of him with whom he had to communicate for discovering the position of the island, almost escaped him. Fortunately, he restrained himself in time. Our friend, Tregomain, with whom I often talk about you, my dear Enogate, accomplished a most remarkable grimace when he learnt that he had to go in search of a second island. ‘ My poor Juhel,’ he said, ‘ is this pasho-pashee- pasha having a lark with us? Is he going to send us to the world’s end? ‘ Will it be at the world’s end? That is what we want to know at the moment of writing.

“In fact, if our uncle has kept from us the information contained in the document, it is because he mistrusts Ben Omar. Ever since this rascal endeavoured to get the secret out of him at St. Malo, he has held him in suspicion. Perhaps he has not been wrong, and as far as I am concerned, his clerk, Nazim, seems to be as doubtful. I do not like this Nazim, neither does Tregomain. I can assure you that our notary, Calloch, would not have him in his office. I am convinced that if he or Ben Omar knew the address of this Zambuco, they would endeavour to be before us. But uncle has not breathed a word. Ben Omar and Nazim do not even know that we are going to Tunis, and in leaving Muscat we are asking where the Pasha's humour is going to send us next."

Enogate stopped for a moment Juhel then related the incidents which had marked the return - the departure from the island, the obvious disappointment of the interpreter, Selik, at finding the strangers return with empty hands, confirming him in his opinion that there was something more in the wind than a mere tourists' trip; then the wearisome return by caravan to Muscat, and the waiting there during two days for the mail-boat from Bombay.

“And,” continued Juhel,” if I did not write to you a second time from Muscat, it was because I hoped to have something to tell you. But all I can say even now is that we are returning to Suez, and thence going on to Tunis.”

Enogate stopped reading, and looked at Nanon, who shook her head, and muttered.

“It is to be hoped they are not going to the end of the world. There is everything to be afraid of amongst these Infidels.”

The excellent woman spoke of these Orientals as they spoke of them in the days of the Crusades. And with the scruples of the pious Breton, the millions coming from such a source had an evil odour. But let her express such ideas before Captain Antifer!

Juhel then gave an account of the voyage from Muscat to Suez, the crossing of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea - Ben Omar sick beyond all recognition.

“So much the better,” said Nanon.

And during the whole voyage Antifer had not said a word.

“I do not know, dear Enogate, what will happen if uncle is deceived in his hopes; or rather I know too well, he will go mad. Who would have believed that of a man so wise in his conduct, so modest in his tastes? The prospect of being a millionaire - but how many heads would be able to resist it? Yes, we two, of course, but that is because our life is centred in our hearts.

“From Suez we reached Port Said, where we had to wait for the departure of a trading steamer for Tunis, where lives this banker Zambuco, to whom uncle has to communicate this exasperating document. But when the latitude of the one and the longitude of the other have determined the position of the new island, where are we to look for it? That is the question, and in my opinion it is a serious one, for on it depends our return to France - and you -”

Enogate let fall the letter, which her mother picked up. She could read no more. She saw the absent ones carried thousands of leagues away, exposed to great perils in terrible countries, perhaps never returning at all, and this cry escaped her, -

“Oh! uncle, uncle, what misery you bring to those who love you so much!”

“Forgive him, my daughter,” replied Nanon,” and pray God to protect him.”

There were a few minutes of silence, during which the women united in the same prayer.

Then Enogate resumed: -

“We left Port Said on the i6th of April. We were bound direct for Tunis. At first we kept near the Egyptian coast, and what a look Ben Omar gave as we sighted the harbour of Alexandria. I thought he would have gone ashore, and resigned all claim to his commission. But his clerk intervened, and in their language, of which we did not understand a word, he made him listen to reason - somewhat roughly it seemed to me. It is clear that Ben Omar is in fear of this Nazim, and I am wondering if this Egyptian is really the man he says he is; he is so much like a bandit. Whoever he may be, I am going to keep a good watch on him.

“Leaving Alexandria behind, we made for Cape Bon, leaving to the south the gulfs of Tripoli and Gabes. Then the wild slopes of the Tunisian mountains appeared on the horizon, with the abandoned fortresses on their crests, and one or two marabouts between the curtains of verdure. In the evening of the 2ist of April, we reached the roadstead of Tunis, and next day our vessel anchored before the moles of La Goulette.

“My dear Enogate, if at Tunis I am nearer you than I was in the Gulf of Oman, I am still far away, and who knows what ill-fortune may not take us further? It is true that it is quite as miserable whether we are five leagues away or five thousand. But do not despair, and remember that whatever may be the end of the voyage, it cannot be very long.

“I have written this letter as we came along, so as to be able to post it as soon as we land at La Goulette. It will reach you in a few days. It will not tell you what I do not know, and what is so important for us to know -

namely, where we are going to. But uncle himself does not know that, and it can only be determined by an interchange of communications with the banker, whose rest we have probably come to trouble; for when he learns of this enormous legacy, the half of which belongs to him, Zambuco will certainly form one of the party, and become probably as excited as uncle is.

“As soon as I ascertain the situation of island number two I will let you know. It is then probable that a fourth letter will succeed the third at a few days’ interval.

“As for the present it carries with it, for both you and your mother, Tregomain’s kind regards and my love, and also uncle’s, although he seems to have lost all remembrance of St. Malo, and of the old house, and of those who live in it. Dearest Enogate, I send you all my love, as I know you send me yours, although I cannot have a letter from you. Believe me, for life.

“Your faithful and affectionate “Juhel Antifer.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN you arrive in the roadstead of Tunis, you are not at Tunis. To get there you have to avail yourself of one of the local boats called “mahonnes,” and land at La Goulette. The port, in fact, is not a port at all in the sense that vessels of ordinary tonnage can come alongside the wharves, for only small coasters and fishing-boats can do that. Other ships, sailing and steam, have to remain outside at anchor, and though the hills may shelter them from the easterly winds, they are at the mercy of the squalls that come from the east and north. A harbour there is absolutely necessary, accessible for all ships, even ships of war, and this can be made either by enlarging that of Bizerta, on the northern coast of the Regency, or by making a channel through Lake Bahira.

And when Captain Antifer and his companions had reached La Goulette they were still not at Tunis. They had to go by the Rubattino railway, belonging to an Italian company, which runs by the side of Lake Bahira, passing at the foot of the little hill of Carthage, on which rises the chapel of St. Louis.

When our travellers had left the quay, they found a sort of town, through which ran a wide road, with governor’s house, Catholic church, cafes, private houses - in fact everything European in character; and they had to go as far as the palace on the shore, which are formerly occupied during the bathing season, to discover the first indication of Oriental colour.

But the Oriental colour did not trouble Captain Antifer nor did the legends of Regulus, Scipio, Caesar, Cato, Marius or Hannibal! Did he even know the names of these great personages? He had heard of them, probably, as the good Tregomain had heard of the glories of his native town, and that was enough for his self-esteem. Juhel alone could have abandoned himself to these historic souvenirs if he had not had quite enough to think about in the present. It was with him as they say in the Levant it was of the absent-minded man - “He is looking for his son, whom he is carrying on his shoulders.” What he was looking for was Enogate, from whom he was, to his annoyance, going farther away.

After passing through La Goulette, Captain Antifer, the bargeman, and Juhel, bag in hand - they expected to renew the contents at Tunis - went to catch the first train at the station. Ben Omar and Nazim followed them at a distance. As Antifer had not opened his mouth they knew nothing of this banker Zambuco, whom the caprice of Kamylk Pasha wished them to become acquainted with, much to the disgust - not so much of the notary, who would have the same commission providing he did not retire from the search - as of Saouk, who now had to deal with two legatees instead of one.

After waiting half an hour the travellers took their seats in the train. They waited a few minutes at the station, whence they could see the slope of the Carthage hill, and the monastery, renowned for its archaeological museum, and in forty minutes they reached Tunis. They went to the Hotel de France, in the European quarter, and took three rooms, rather bare of furniture, very lofty, and with mosquito- curtains round the beds. The restaurant on the ground floor would provide them with breakfast and dinner at whatever hour might be convenient to them, in a very comfortable room. But, after all, it did not matter, as they were not going to stay there long.

Captain Antifer did not even give himself time to go up to his room.

“I will find you here when I come back,” he said to his companions.

“Go, friend,” said Tregomain,” and carry your ship by boarding.”

It was this very boarding that Juhel's uncle was anxious about. He had no intention of trying to cheat his co- legatee, as Ben Omar had tried to cheat him. He was an honest man, and perfectly straightforward, notwithstanding his originality, and he had decided not to beat about the bush at all. He would go straight to the banker and say to him, -

“Here is what I bring you. Let us have what you have to offer in exchange, and off we go together.”

According to the document found on the island this Zambuco must have been informed that a certain Antifer was going to bring him the longitude necessary for him to fix the position of an island in which the treasure was buried, and the banker would not be surprised at this visit.

But Antifer had one fear, the fear that Zambuco did not speak French. If he knew English, Juhel could act as interpreter. But if he knew neither of these languages they would have to call in another interpreter; and then they would be at the mercy of a third party with regard to this secret worth four millions -

On leaving the hotel, Captain Antifer, without saying where he was going, had asked for a guide. And he and his guide disappeared at the turning of one of the streets which open on to the Place de la Marine.

“As he does not want us -” said the bargeman, as he moved off.

“Let us go for a walk, and begin by posting my letter,” said Juhel.

And these two, after leaving the post-office, which is next to the hotel, went down towards Bab-el-Bahar, so as to walk round the city by the crenellated wall, which is two good leagues in length.

A hundred yards from the hotel, Captain Antifer said to his guide and interpreter, -

“You know Zambuco, the banker?

“Everybody knows him here.”

“And he lives -”

“In the lower town; in the Maltese quarter.”

“That is where I want you to take me.”

“As you wish, Excellency!”

In these Oriental countries they call you Excellency as if it were “Sir.”

Antifer hurried towards the lower town. Rest assured that he took not the slightest notice of the curiosities of the road; here one of those mosques that are in hundreds at Tunis, which is dominated by their elegant minarets; there some Roman or Saracen ruin; there a picturesque square sheltered by the foliage of fig-trees or palms; then narrow streets with the houses looking into each other, rising, falling, bordered by gloomy shops where laces, and drapery, and odds and ends are heaped together anyhow. No! Antifer only thought of this visit imposed on him by Kamylk Pasha, and the reception he was about to have, he had little doubt of that. When you bring a man two millions of money you need have but little fear that you will not be well received.

After half an hour’s walk the Maltese quarter was reached. It was not the cleanest part of this town of a hundred and fifty thousand souls, which does not shine by excess of cleanliness, particularly in its old portions.

At the end of a street or rather a lane of this commercial quarter the guide stopped before a house of mediocre appearance. Built on the model of all Tunisian habitations, it was a big square block, with a terrace, without external windows, and a courtyard- one of those “patios “in Arab fashion from which the rooms were lighted.

The aspect of this house did not give Captain Antifer the idea that its owner was swimming - as he expressed it - in opulence. And he thought that this was all the better for the success of his plans.

“Is this where Zambuco the banker lives?”

“This is his house.”

And is this his banking-house?

It is.”

“Has he any other house?

“No, Excellency.”

“Is he supposed to be rich?”

“He is worth many millions.”

“Pheugh!” went Captain Antifer.

“And as greedy as he is rich!” added the guide.

“Pheugh - Pheugh!” went Captain Antifer.

And thereupon he sent back the guide to the hotel.

We need hardly say that Saouk had followed them, taking care not to be seen. Now he knew where Zambuco lived. Could he get any advantage out of this banker? Was there an opportunity for arriving at an understanding with him in order to oust Captain Antifer? If he could bring about a disagreement between the co-legatees 01 Kamylk Pasha could he not use him for his own purposes? It was certainly unlucky that when they were on island number one Antifer had not let slip the figures of the new longitude. If Saouk had known them he might have got to Tunis first and gained over the banker - at a price - if not got the secret out of him for nothing. But then he remembered that it must be Antifer and no other who according to the document must take the longitude. Well! Saouk would stick to his programme - he would execute it pitilessly, and when the Maltese and the Malouin were in possession of the legacy he would rob them both.

Antifer entered the banker’s house, and Saouk waited outside.

The buildings on the left of the entrance served as the office. In the courtyard there was no one; it seemed as abandoned as if the bank had closed that morning through cessation of payments. But rest assured that Zambuco was not the sort of banker to fail.

He was a man of middle height, about sixty years old, thin and nervous; bright, keen eyes with a shifty look in them, close shaven face, complexion like parchment, hair grizzly and matted like a cap stuck on to his head, back slightly bowed, hands wrinkled, fingers long and hooked. Although he was not much of an observer, Antifer felt that this Zambuco was not an attractive man, and said to himself that he would never have much pleasure in his acquaintance. In fact, the banker was merely a sort of usurer, lending on pledges, who ought to have been born a Jew, and who was of Maltese origin. Of these Maltese there are from five to six thousand in Tunis.

Zambuco was reported to have amassed a large fortune in all the devious ways of banking - those which are practised with birdlime on the fingers. Rich he was, and he was proud of it. But be it understood you are never rich when you get no advantage from it. He was said to be many times a millionaire, and he was, notwithstanding the humble and miserable appearance of his house - which had misled Captain Antifer - showing a prodigious parsimony in all that concerned the necessities of existence. Was it then that he had no wants? Very few, and he took care not to increase them, thanks to his hoarding instincts. To fill up bags upon bags of money, and put his hand upon everything that represented any value whatever, he had made the sole business of his life. Hence the many millions in his coffers, lying there without his thinking it worth while to render them productive.

It seemed unlikely, contradictory even, that such a man should have remained a bachelor. But if there must be old bachelors, is it not as well that they should be of this type? Zambuco had never thought of marrying," and so much the better for his wife,' as the wits of the Maltese quarter used to say. Brothers, cousins, relatives of all sorts he had none, except one sister. The preceding generations of his family were united in him. He lived alone in his house, talking of his office, talking of his money-chests; having in his service but an old Tunisian woman, who cost little in food or wages.

This was the rival Antifer had to deal with, and it may well be asked what kind of service this unsympathetic personage had rendered Kamylk Pasha to deserve such a token of gratitude. It can be explained in a few words.

When he was but twenty-seven years old, he was living in Alexandria. There he carried on with indefatigable sagacity and perseverance the varied occupations of a broker - securing his commissions from buyer and seller, acting for the would-be buyer before he sold to him, and dealing in money, the most profitable of all trades known to human intelligence.

It was in 1829, it will be remembered, that the idea occurred to Kamylk Pasha, who was then anxious for the safety of his fortune - coveted by his cousin Mourad, and by the imperious Mehemet Ali - to realize his riches and take them to Syria, where they would be safer than in any town of Egypt.

To carry out this operation several agents were necessary. Those he applied to were all foreigners worthy of his confidence. They risked much, and at least their liberty in supporting the rich Egyptian against the Viceroy. Young Zambuco was of the number. He did his work zealously, and was rewarded handsomely; he made several voyages to Aleppo, and in fact contributed largely towards the realization of his client’s fortune and its transport to a safe place.

This was not without difficulties or perils, and after the departure of Kamylk Pasha, some of the agents he had employed, among them this Zambuco, discovered by the suspicious police of Mehemet Ali, were imprisoned. For want of sufficient proof they were released, but they had none the less been punished for their devotion. And as Thomas Antifer had rendered Kamylk a service in 1799, when he picked him up half dead on the rocks of Jaiia, so thirty years afterwards, Zambuco had acquired a right to the Pasha’s gratitude. Kamylk did not forget. And this brief survey explains why, in 1842, Thomas Antifer and Zambuco, one at St. Malo and the other at Tunis, had each received a letter informing them that they would one day have a share in a treasure worth four millions of pounds, deposited in an island, each of them having the latitude, while the longitude was to be sent them in due time.

If this information had produced the effect we know on Thomas Antifer, on his son after him, it may be imagined that the effect was no less powerful on a personage like Zambuco. Of course, he said not a word about the letter to anyone. He shut up the figures of his latitude in one of the most secret drawers of his strong-box, and ever afterwards expected every minute to behold the appearance of the Antifer announced in Kamylk Pasha's letter. In vain he endeavoured to learn the fate of the Egyptian. He had heard nothing of the captain of the brigantine in 1834, nor of the taking to Cairo, nor of the imprisonment in the fortress for eighteen years, nor of the death in 1852.

It was now 1862. Twenty years had elapsed since 1842. Antifer had not appeared, and the longitude had not been added to the latitude. The position of the island remained unknown. Zambuco, however, had not lost confidence. That Kamylk Pasha's intention would be realized sooner or later he did not doubt. In his opinion the said Antifer was as safe to appear on the horizon of the Maltese quarter, as a comet announced by the observatories appears in the sky. His only regret - a regret very natural with such a man - was that he had to share the legacy with another. But he could not alter any of the dispositions made by the grateful Egyptian. But to share four millions appeared to him to be monstrous. That is why for years he had been heaping reflections on reflections, and imagining thousands of combinations, having for their object the placing of the whole sum in his hands. Would he succeed? All that we can say is that he was well prepared to receive Antifer when he came with the promised longitude.

It is needless to add that Zambuco, although he knew little about navigation, had ascertained why it was that the union of a latitude and a longitude would give the position of a point on the earth's surface; and that he also fully understood that the two legatees must be united, and that if he could do nothing without Antifer, Antifer could do nothing without him.

CHAPTER XIX.

“CAN I see Zambuco the banker?”

“Yes, if it is on business.”

“It is on business.”

“What name?”

“Say a stranger, that will be enough.”

It was Captain Antifer who asked, and the replies were from a peevish old native, seated at the bottom of a narrow office divided into two parts by a partition with a barred window.

Antifer had thought it better not to give his name, as he was anxious to see the effect produced on the banker, when he said to him point-blank, -

“I am Antifer, son of Thomas Antifer, of St. Malo.”

A minute afterwards he was introduced to the interior of a room without any curtains, the walls whitewashed, the ceiling black with lamp-smoke, the only furniture a safe in one corner, a writing-table in another, and a table and two stools.

Before this table was seated the banker. The two legatees of Kamylk Pasha were face to face.

Without rising, Zambuco adjusted with his finger and thumb the large round spectacles resting on his nose, and only just lifting his head, said, with an accent that would have done credit to any native of Languedoc or Proven9e, -

“To whom have I the honour of speaking?”

“To Captain Antifer.” replied that personage, expecting that these three words would provoke a shout from Zambuco, a leap from the chair, and the brief reply, -

“You - at last!” But the banker did not leap, nor did he shout. The expected reply did not come from his lips. But an attentive observer would have noticed a sudden gleam in his eyes which instantly were hid by the falling eyelids.

“I tell you that I am Captain Antifer.”

“I heard you.”

“Pierre Servan Malo Antifer, son of Thomas Antifer, of St. Malo, Ille-et-Vilaine, Brittany, France.”

“You have a letter of credit on me?” asked the banker, without the slightest alteration in his voice.

“A letter of credit? Yes,” replied Antifer, quite disconcerted at the coolness of his reception, “a letter of credit for the amount of four millions.”

“All right. Hand it over,” replied Zambuco, as indifferently as if it related to only a shilling or so.

Antifer simply collapsed. What! For twenty years this phlegmatic banker had known that he was to have a share of this enormous treasure the day a certain Antifer came to bring it him, so to speak, and he did not even flinch before this messenger of Kamylk Pasha. Not a sign of surprise, not a gleam of satisfaction. Was there a mistake in this document from island number one? Was it somebody else that was meant?

Was this the man who had the latitude of island number two, or was it somebody else ?

The disappointed co-legatee shuddered from head to foot. The blood rushed to his heart, and he had barely time to sink on to one of the stools.

The banker, without the slightest effort to help him, looked at him through his spectacles with just the slightest suspicion of a smile at the corners of his mouth. And it seemed as though these words would have escaped him, if he had not been careful to restrain them, -

“That sailor is not strong.”

Meaning “not difficult to manage.”

Antifer recovered himself Wiping his face with his pocket-handkerchief, he rose.

“You are really Zambuco the banker?” he asked, slap ping his big hand on the table.

“Yes; the only one of the name in Tunis.”

“And you were not expecting me?”

“No.”

“My arrival has not been announced to you?”

“And how should it have been?”

“By the letter of a certain pasha.”

“A pasha? But I receive hundreds of letters from pashas.”

“Kamylk Pasha, of Cairo?”

“I don’t remember him.”

Zambuco’s object was to get Antifer to give himself away completely, so that he would offer to sell the longitude without being told the latitude.

At the name of Kamylk, he looked as though the name was not quite unknown to him. He seemed to be trying to remember.

“Let me see,” he said, adjusting his spectacles. 41 Kamylk Pasha, of Cairo?”

“Yes,” replied Antifer, “A sort of Egyptian Rothschild, who possessed an enormous fortune in gold, diamonds, and precious stones.”

“Ah, I remember.”

“And who informed you that the half of his fortune would come to you.”

“You are right, Mr. Antifer, and I ought to have the letter somewhere.”

“What? Somewhere l Do you not know where it is?”

“Oh, nothing is lost here. I will find it.”

And at this reply, the attitude of Captain Antifer, the gesture of his two hands stretched out like claws, indicated pretty clearly that he would twist the banker’s neck if the letter could not be found.

“You see, Mr. Zambuco,” he continued, endeavouring to control himself. “Your coolness is embarrassing. You peak of this matter with an indifference.”“Pheugh!” said the banker.

“Why - why pheugh? when it is about four millions of money.”

Zambuco’s lips gave a disdainful pout. He seemed to think of a million as he might of an orange-skin.

“Ah! the brute! He must be a hundred times a millionaire!” thought Captain Antifer.

But here the banker turned the conversation on another track, with the object of learning what he did not yet know, the chain of events which had led to this visit, and so, in a doubting sort of way, he wiped his spectacles with the corner of his handkerchief, and said, -

“Do you really believe in this story of the treasure?”

“Do I believe in it! I should think I did!”

And then he related how in 1799 his father had saved the Pasha’s life, how in 1842 a mysterious letter had arrived at St. Malo announcing the deposit of the treasure on an island that had to be searched for; how he, Antifer, had received from his dying father the secret known to him alone; how for twenty years he had waited for the messenger with the longitude; how Ben Omar had brought him the will which enabled him to discover the island in the Gulf of Oman; how he and his nephew Juhel and his friend Tregomain, with Ben Omar and his clerk, had found the island off Sohar; and how instead of the treasure they had there found a box in which was a document giving the longitude of a second island which Antifer was to communicate to Zambuco the banker of Tunis, who possessed the latitude which would enable them to determine the position of this new island.

However indifferent he might seem, the banker had listened to this recital with extreme attention. A slight trembling of his long fingers indicated his excitement. When Antifer, who was breathing with great gulps, had finished, the banker simply remarked, -

“Yes, quite so, there seems to be no doubt as to the existence of this treasure. But what object had Kamylk Fasha in acting in this way?”

And indeed the object was not very clear.

“You might imagine,” said Antifer,” that - but first, Mr. Zambuco, did you have any dealings with the Pasha? Did you ever render him any service?”

“Certainly; a very great service.”

And when?”

“When he thought of realizing his fortune. He then lived at Cairo, where I then resided.”

“Well then, it is clear. He wished to associate in the discovery of the treasure the two persons to whom he desired to show his gratitude - you, and me in the place of my father.”

“And why no others?” suggested the banker.

“Ah! Do not say that l “exclaimed Antifer, bringing his fist down on to the table. “There are enough already; two are too many.”

“Just so,” replied Zambuco. “But one more explanation. Why does this Alexandrian notary accompany you on your search?”

“A clause in the will gives him a commission on condition that he assists in person at the handing over of the legacy when it is taken out of the ground.”

“And what is this commission?”

“One per cent.”

“One per cent! Ah l the rascal!”

“The rascal, that is exactly the word for him!” exclaimed Antifer. “And, believe me, I have let him know it.”

On this point the co-legatees were quite agreed.

“Now,” said Antifer,” that you know the whole story, there is no reason, I suppose, why we should not be frank with one another.”

The banker remained impassible.

“I have got the new longitude found on island number one,” continued Antifer;” and you ought to have the latitude of island number two.”

“Yes,” replied Zambuco, with a certain hesitation.

“Then why did you pretend, when I told you my name, that you knew nothing about this story?”

“Because I did not wish to give myself away to the first who came. You might be an intruder, Mr. Antifer, and I wished to be sure you were not. As you have the document which instructs you to put yourself in communication with me-”

“I have it.”

“Let me see it”

“One moment, Mr. Zambuco. Give and take. You have Kamylk Pasha’s letter?”

“I have.”

“Well - the letter for the document Let the exchange be made in order and reciprocally.”

“Quite so l” replied the banker. And rising, he walked to the safe, and turned over the papers in the drawers, with a deliberation that made Antifer furious.

Why these inexplicable proceedings? Did Zambuco wish to imitate Ben Omar at St. Malo and endeavour to get Antifer’s secret out of him?

Not so, for that was impossible with a man so resolved not to part with the goods without cash down. But the banker had a plan, a plan long and carefully thought out, which, in the event of success, would retain Kimylk’s millions in his family, a plan that required as an indispensable condition that his co-legatee was a widower or a bachelor.

Clicking the lock of his safe he turned round for a moment and asked in a voice that trembled a little, -

“Are you a married man?”

“No, Mr. Zambuco, and that is a social condition on which I congratulate myself morning and evening.”

The last part of the reply provoked a frown from the banker, who resumed the search among the papers.

Had Zambuco a family, then? No, his only relative was the sister we have mentioned. Talisma Zambuco lived very quietly at Malta on an allowance from her brother. She was then forty-seven years of age, and had never had an opportunity of being married, first because her beauty, intelligence and fortune left something to be desired, and secondly, because her brother had not- found a husband for her in default of any suitor putting in an appearance on his own account But Zambuco had made up his mind that his sister should marry some day. And whom? Why, this very Antifer whom he had been expecting for twenty years, and who would do very well for a husband, provided that he was a widower or a bachelor. Once the marriage had taken place the millions would remain in the family, and Talisma Zambuco would lose nothing by having waited. She was entirely dependent upon her brother, and any husband offered by him would be received by her with closed eyes.

But would Antifer consent to close his and marry this ancient Maltese? The banker did not doubt that he would, for he thought he was in a position to impose any conditions he pleased on his co-legatee. Besides, sailors are not very difficult to manage - at least, he thought BO.

Ah! unhappy Antifer, in what a galley you have embarked, and how much better would be a trip on the Ranee, even on board the Charmante Amelie, if she still existed.

We now know the banker’s game. Nothing could be simpler or better devised. He would only give up his latitude in exchange for Antifer’s life - that is, his life in chains by indissoluble marriage with Talisma Zambuco.

Before taking Kamylk Pasha’s letter out of the drawer, he seemed to think of something, and returned to sit down at the table.

Antifer’s eyes flashed as if in a thunderstorm.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked.

“I was thinking about something,” replied the banker.

“About what, if you please?”

“Are you of opinion that in this matter our rights are absolutely equal?”

“Certainly they are!”

“Well, I don’t think so.”

“And why?”

“Because it was your father who rendered this service to the Pasha and not you, while it was I who — ”

Antifer burst out, -

“What! Mr. Zambuco, are you trying to play the fool with an old sailor? Are not my father’s rights mine, when I am his sole heir? Yes or no, will you obey the wishes of the testator?”

“I will do as I choose!” replied the banker, sharply and drily.

Antifer clutched the table to prevent himself jumping up.

“You know you can do nothing without me?” said the Maltese.

“Nor you without me,” said Antifer. The discussion became heated. One was scarlet with fury, the other paler than usual, but quite collected.

“Will you give me your latitude?” asked Antifer furiously.

“Begin by giving me your longitude,” replied the banker.

“Never.”

“Very well.”

“Here is my document,” roared Antifer, taking out his pocket-book.

“Keep it. I don’t want it.”

“You do not want it I Do you forget that it means lour millions?”

“Four millions, yes.”

“And that they will be lost if we don’t find out the island where they are buried?”

“Pheugh!” whistled the banker. And he made a disdainful grimace which drove Antifer so mad that he tucked up his sleeves preparatory to clutching at the banker’s throat. Rut the banker, seeing he had gone too far for his personal comfort, suddenly toned down and remarked, -

“But I think we can arrange this.”

Antifer dug his hands into his pockets so as to be lest tempted to use them.

“Sir,” continued the banker, “I am rich, I have very simple tastes, and neither two millions nor four would change my mode of life. But I have a passion for accumulating money, and I admit that Kamylk Pasha’s treasure would look well in my coffers. Well, ever since I knew of the existence of this treasure, I have had no other thought than to obtain entire possession of it -”

“Indeed!”

“Wait a little.”

“And my share?”

“Your share! You can have it only in such a way that it will remain in my family.”

“Then it would be no longer mine,”

“You can take it or leave it”

“Explain yourself.”

“I have a sister, Talisma.”

“My compliments!”

“She lives in Malta.”

“So much the better for her if the climate suits her.”

“She is forty-seven years old and by no means bad- looking for her age.”

“That I am not astonished at if she is like you.”

“Well, as you are a bachelor, will you marry my sister?”

“Marry your sister?” yelled Antifer, his face a vivid scarlet with congestion.

“Yes, marry her,” continued the banker, in a decided tone that admitted of no reply. “By that union your two millions on one side, and my two millions on the other would remain in my family.”

“Mr. Zambuco!” answered Antifer.

“Mr. Antifer.”

“Is this proposal serious?”

“Nothing could be more serious, and if you decline to marry my sister, everything is at an end between us and you can return to France.”

A dull rattling was heard. Antifer was choking. He tore off his cravat, he clutched his hat, he rushed across the courtyard, he ran down the street, gesticulating and behaving himself like a madman.

Saouk, who had been waiting all this time, followed him, very much disturbed at his proceedings.

Antifer reached the hotel and flung himself into the vestibule. Seeing his friend and his nephew in the little room adjoining the dining-room he rushed up to them and roared, -

“The wretch I Do you know what he wants?”

“To kill you?” asked Tregomain.

“Worse l To marry me to his sister l

CHAPTER XX.

ACCUSTOMED as they were to complications, ft may be safely affirmed that neither the bargeman nor Juhel expected this one. Captain Antifer, the hardened bachelor, to be thus left at the foot of the wall - and what wall? The wall of marriage, which he was obliged to cross unless he was prepared to lose his share in this enormous legacy.

Juhel begged his uncle to give them the details of what had occurred. And he told the story amid broadsides of explosive exclamations, which unfortunately could not reach Zambuco, under shelter of his house in the Maltese quarter.

Here was this old boy of forty-six to be married to a girl of forty-seven, and become a species of Oriental, a sort of Antifer Pasha!

Tregomain and Juhel were absolutely dumbfounded, and looked at each other in silence; but the same thought, doubtless, occurred to both.

“Away with the millions!” said the bargeman to himself.

“Away with the obstacle to my marriage with Enogate I” said Juhel to himself.

That Captain Antifer would agree to Zambuco’s demands, that he would consent to become the banker’s brother-in-law was quite inadmissible. He would never submit to this absurdity even for a million millions.

Nevertheless Antifer strode backwards and forwards from one end of the room to the other. Then he stopped, sat down, looked at his nephew and his friend in the face, and then turned his eyes away. It was painful to see him; and if ever Tregomain thought he was going out of his mind it was then. He and Juhel tacitly resolved to do nothing to irritate him, whatever he might say.

At length he spoke, furiously and jerkily: “Four millions - lost by this rascal’s obstinacy - he deserves to be guillotined - hanged - shot - stabbed - poisoned - impaled, all at the same time. He refuses to give me his latitude if I don’t marry - marry this monkey- faced Maltese. Would you see me the husband of this Talisma!”

Certainly not! His friends would not see him - and the introduction of such a sister-in-law and aunt into the bosom of the honourable family of Antifer would be one of the most unlikely events anyone could imagine.

“Tell me, bargeman?”

“My friend.”

“Has any one the right to leave four millions hidden in a hole when he has only to take one step to pick them out?”

“I am not prepared to answer that question,” replied Tregomain evasively.

“Ah! You are not prepared!” shouted Antifer, throwing his hat into a corner. “Well, are you prepared to answer this one?”

“What?”

“If an individual loads a boat - say a barge - a Chamante Amelie if you will -”

Tregomain felt that the Chamante Amelie was going to have a bad time of it.

“If he loads that old carcase with four millions in gold, and if he publicly announces that he is going to scuttle her in the open sea, so as to sink those millions, do you think the Government would let him do so? Come now t Speak!”

“I do not think so.”

“Yet that is what this master Zambuco has got into his head. He has but to say one word to save his millions and mine, and he is obstinately silent.”

“Never heard of a more abominable rascal l” said Tregomain, in a tone of anger.

“Look here - Juhel?”

“Uncle?”

“If we report him to the authorities -

“We might do that as a last resource.”

“Yes, for the authorities can do what a private individual cannot do. They might torture him - put him on the rack - roast his feet at the fire - and that would bring him to reason -”

“/ hat is not a bad idea, uncle.”

“Excellent, Juhel, and to pay this fellow out, I would give up my share, and hand it over to the public.”

“That,” said the bargeman,” would be fine, noble, generous! worthy of a Frenchman! worthy of a real Antifer -”

In making the proposal, Juhel’s uncle had probably gone further than he intended, for he gave Tregomain such a terrible look that the bargeman stopped short in his outburst of admiration.

“Four millions! Four millions!” repeated Captain . Antifer. “I will kill this Zambuco.”

“Uncle!”

“My friend!”

And really in his state of exasperation, it was to be feared that Antifer would attempt some unfortunate violence - for which he would not be responsible owing to an attack of mental alienation.

But when Tregomain and Juhel tried to calm him, he repulsed them fiercely, accusing them of conspiring with his enemies, of helping Zambuco, of not wishing to smash him, like a sneak of a steward.”

“Leave me alone!” he growled,” leave me alone.”

And picking up his hat, he jerked open the door, and rushed out of the room.

The others, thinking he was off to the banker’s, ran after him to prevent a disaster, but were much relieved to see him hurrying up the grand staircase, to his bedroom, where he locked himself in.

“That is the best thing he could do,” said Tregomain, nodding his head.

“Yes, poor uncle!” replied Juhel.

After such a scene they had very little appetite for dinner.

When it was over, they left the hotel, to breathe a little fresh air on the banks of the Bahira. As they went out they met Ben Omar, accompanied by Nazim. Was there any objection to their telling the notary what had happened? Certainly not. And when he heard of the conditions the banker required, Ben Omar's remark was, -

"He ought to marry Miss Zambuco. He has no right to refuse. No! He has no right to!"

This was also the opinion of Saouk, who would not have hesitated to contract any marriage whatever, if the marriage would bring him such a dowry.

Tregomain and Juhel turned their backs on them, and went down the nearest street.

A fine evening, with a fresh sea-breeze, had brought the people of Tunis out to take the air.

Juhel and his companion walked towards the wall, went through the gate, and along the lake for a hundred yards or so, and sat down at a table at the Cafe Wina, where they discussed a flask of Manouba and talked matters over. Nothing could be simpler as far as they were concerned. Captain Antifer would never consent to- Zambuco's terms. Consequently he would have to give up all thoughts of discovering island number two. Consequently they would leave Tunis by the next mail- steamer. Consequently, immense satisfaction at returning to France by the shortest road.

This was evidently the only possible solution. They would be none the worse for returning to St. Malo without Kamylk Pasha's big bag. Then what was the good of his Excellency’s ingenuities 1

About nine o’clock, Tregomain and Juhel returned to the hotel. As they went to their rooms, they stopped for SI moment before Antifer’s room. He was not asleep. He had not even gone to bed. He was walking about talking to himself, and could be heard gasping, -

“Millions - millions - millions.”

Tregomain made a sign, to show that he must have gone wrong in his head. And then wishing one another goodnight, they separated, very uneasy.

In the morning they were up early, It was only their 3uty to go and see how Antifer was, to ask him what he intended to do. Surely he could only intend to pack his portmanteau and clear out from Tunis? Juhel had ascertained that the steamer which had put in at La Goulette . as going to start that evening for Marseilles. What Juhel would have given to have had his uncle safe on hoard shut up in his cabin, and twenty miles away from the African coast!

He and Tregomain went along the passage to Antifer’s room.

They knocked at the door.

There was no reply.

Juhel knocked more loudly.

The same silence.

Was his uncle sleeping the sleep of a sailor whom not even the reports of twenty-four pounders can waken? Or rather had he in a moment of despair

-?

Juhel ran downstairs to the porter’s lodge four steps at a time. Tregomain clung to the rail to save himself from rolling to the bottom.

“Captain Antifer?”

“He went out early,” replied the porter to Juhel’s question.

“And he did not say where he was going?

“He did not.”

“Has he gone to that scoundrel Zambuco?” asked Juhel, dragging Tregomain out.

“But if he has - it is because he consents - “murmured the bargeman, raising his hands to the sky.

“It is not possible!” said Juhel.

“No, it is not possible! Fancy him returning to St. Malo, to his house in the Rue des Haut; s-Salies, wi. h Talisma Zambuco on his arm! Bringing little Enogate a Maltese aunt I”

“A monkey, as my uncle called her! “And, as anxious as they could be, they sat down at a café facing the hotel, where they could watch for his return.

It is said that the night brings counsel, but it is nit said that the counsel is necessarily good. It was only too true that Antifer had gone out very early in the morning, hurried to the Maltese quarter, and reached the banker’s house as quickly as if he had a pack of hounds at his heels.

Zambuco was accustomed to rise with the sun, and go to bed when it set. Consequently lie was in his armchair, with the table in front of him and the safe behind him, when Antifer was introduced to his presence.

“Good-morning!” he said, adjusting his spectacles, so a? to get his visitor well in the middle of the glasses.

“Is that your last word?” asked Antifer, by way of beginning the interview.

“My last.”

“You refuse to give me Kamylk Pasha’s letter unless I marry your sister?”

“I refuse.”

“Then I will marry her.”

“I knew that! A woman who brings you two millions as a dowry! Why, a Rothschild’s son would be only too happy to become the husband of Talisma.”

“Well, I shall be only too happy,” said Antifer, with a grimace he took no pains to hide.

“Come then, brother-in-law,” said Zambuco. And he rose as if he were going to fetch her.

“Is she here?” asked Antifer.

His face was like that of a condemned man on the morning of his execution when the jailor says to him, “Now then, courage, please. To-day is the day.”

“Calm your impatience,” replied the banker. “Do you forget that Talisma is at Malta?”

“Where are we going then?” asked Antifer, with a sigh of relief.

“To the telegraph-office.”

“So as to send her the news.”

“Yes. And to receive her reply.”

“Send her the news if you like, but I may as well tell you that I have no intention of awaiting my intended at Tunis.”

“And why not?”

“Because you and I have no time to lose. The first thing for us to do is to go in search of the island, when we know where it is.”

“What does it matter whether we are a week early or late?”

“But it does matter, and you ought to be quite as eager as I am to enter into possession of Kamylk Pasha’s legacy.”

Yes, quite as eager, for the banker - avaricious and rapacious, although he tried to hide his impatience under affected indifference - was burning with desire to get hold of his share of the millions.

“Be it so,” he said,” I agree with you. I will not send for my sister until our return. But I must let her know the happiness which awaits her.”

“Yes, which awaits her l” replied Antifer, without thinking of the kind of happiness that was reserved for her who had waited so many years for the husband of her dreams.

“Only,” continued Zambuco,” we must have a regular engagement.”

“Write it out, and I will sign it.”

“With a forfeit for non-completion?”

“Agreed. How much the forfeit?”

“Let us say the two millions which will be your share.”

“All right, be quick with it!” replied Antifer, resigned to becoming Talisma’s husband, as he could not escape that happiness.

The banker took a sheet of white paper, and in his large handwriting drew out a contract to marry in all due form- It was stipulated that the share received by Captain Antifer as legatee of Kamylk Pasha should be handed over in its- entirety to Talisma Zambuco in the event of his refusing to marry her within a fortnight of the discovery of the treasure.

And with a furious flourish Antifer signed this contract which the banker placed in one of the drawers of his safe.

At the same time he took out a faded yellow paper - the letter he had received from Kamylk twenty years before.

Antifer had taken out of his pocket-book another paper quite as faded and yellow. This was the document found on island number one.

What a scene for a painter! The two legatees looking at each other, like duellists about to cross swords, their arms stretched out just a little, their fingers trembling at the contact of these papers they turned to hand over with regret.

“Your letter?” said Antifer.

“Your document?” said Zambuco.

The exchange was made. It was time. The two men’s hearts were beating so violently that they had nearly broken.

The document indicating that it was to be taken by a certain Antifer of St. Malo to a certain Zambuco of Tunis bore the longitude of 7 23’ east.

The letter announcing that the said Zambuco, of Tunis, would one day receive a visit from the said Antifer, of St. Malo, bore the latitude of 3 17’ south.

All that was wanted was to cross these two lines on a map to discover the position of island number two.

“You have, doubtless, an atlas?” asked the banker.

“An atlas and a nephew,” replied Antifer.

“A nephew?”

“Yes, a sea-captain, who will take charge of this matter, for us.”

u Where is this nephew? “At the H3tel de France.”

“Come along then, brother-in-law,” said Zambuco, putting on a broad-brimmed hat.

“Come along,” said Antifer.

Off they went to the hotel. As they passed the post- office, Zambuco said he would go in and send a telegram to Malta.

Antifer made no objection. The least he could do was to let the lady know that her hand had been solicited by an “officer of the French marine,” and with her brother’s consent, under most acceptable conditions as to fortune and family.

The telegram having been paid for, the two legatees came out into the street, when Tregomain and Juhel caught sight of them, and hurried to meet them.

When he noticed them, Antifer’s first movement was to turn away his head. But mastering this inopportune weakness, he introduced his companion in an imperious voice: “The banker, Zambuco.”

The banker gave his future brother-in-law’s companions anything but an agreeable look.

Then Antifer added, -

“Juhel, my nephew; Tregomain, my friend.”

Then, at a sign, they all moved towards the hotel, avoiding as they passed Ben Omar and Nazim, whom they did not seem to know, mounted the stairs, and entered Antifer’s room, and locked the door.

Antifer took out of his bag the atlas he had brought from St. Malo. He opened it at the map of the world, and handing it to Juhel, said, -

-” Seven degrees twenty-three minutes east, and three degrees seventeen minutes south.”

Juhel could not help a gesture of annoyance. Latitude south! Kamylk Pasha was going to send them across the line? Ah! his poor little Enogate! Tregomain hardly ‘. dared to look at him.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” asked his uncle, in a tone which the young captain could only obey.

He took the compasses, and following the seventh meridian, with the twenty-three minutes added on, he ran down to the Equator.

Running along the parallel of 3 if, he stopped where it intersected the meridian. “Well,” said Antifer,” whereabouts are we?”

“In the Gulf of Guinea.”

“And more exactly?”

“In Ma-Yumba bay.”

“To-morrow morning,” said Antifer, “we will take the diligence for Bone, and at Bone we will take the train to Oran.”

This was said in the tone of a man-o’-war captain, ordering to beat to quarters, when the enemy is in sight.

Turning to the banker, he said, - “You will accompany us, of course? “Of course.”

“To the Gulf of Guinea?”

“To the end of the world, if necessary.”

“Well, be ready to start.”

“I shall be ready, brother-in-law.”

Tregomain uttered an involuntary “Ah!” At this qualification, so new to his ears, he was so astounded that he was unable to reply to the ironical salute with which the banker honoured him as he retired.

When the three were alone, -

“And so, you have consented?” said Tregomain.

“Yes, bargeman. What then?”

What then? No one could say anything, and that was why Tregomain and Juhel thought it best to keep silent.

Two hours later the banker received a telegram from Malta.

Talisma Zambuco informed him that she was the happiest of sisters, and expected to be the happiest of wives!

CHAPTER XXI

Antifer and his companions left Tunis at break of day. The banker was with them, and so was Ben Omar and his clerk - a veritable caravan of six persons, knowing now where this irresistible appetite for millions was taking them. There was no need now to make any mystery of the matter with Ben Omar, and consequently Saouk was not unaware that island number two was in the Gulf of Guinea.

“A long way this time,” said Juhel to Ben Omar, “and if you are afraid of the fatigues of the voyage, you are quite at liberty to give it up.”

And really it is a good many hundreds of miles by sea from Algiers to Loango.

Ben Omar, however, had no hesitation about going, for Saouk would have permitted none. And besides, there was the magnificent commission glittering before his eyes.

Thus on this 24th of April, Antifer dragging with him Tregomain and Juhel, and Saouk dragging with him Ben Omar, and Zanibuco dragging himself, occupied their places in the coach or diligence which runs between Tunis and Bone. Perhaps they might not exchange a word, but at least they would travel together.

Let it not be forgotten that the evening before Juhel had written another letter to Enogate. In a few days the girl and her mother would know for what part of the globe Antifer was bound in search of his famous legacy, now reduced by fifty per cent It was net too much to reckonthat this second voyage would last a month, and that Enogate would see her lover again in the middle of May. How Enogate would despair when she received this letter! If she could only have hoped that at Juhel's return all the difficulties would be smoothed over, and her wedding take place without delay l But what could she expect with such an uncle!

Tregomain, then, was destined to cross the line. He, the bargeman of the Ranee, was to sail in the southern hemisphere! What would you have? Life is made up of such unlikely things that the excellent man would be astonished at nothing, not even at being at the indicated spot and digging out of island number two the three famous barrels of Kamylk Pasha!

These considerations did not, however, hinder him from casting a look of curiosity over the country through which the diligence was passing, which only slightly resembled the plains of Brittany, even those that are hilly. But probably he was the only traveller of the six who thought of retaining some remembrance of the appearance of the country.

The vehicle was not comfortable, and did not travel fast. From one stage to another the three horses trotted along up hill and down hill, with many a sudden turn, amid the Alpine scenery - especially in this wonderful Medjerdah valley - dashing over torrents, which had no bridges, with the water often up to the axle-trees.

The weather was beautiful, the sky of a deep blue, or rather a ripe blue, as if browned slightly by the intense heat of the sun.

The Bardo, the Bey's palace, which they saw on the left shore - so brilliantly white, that it would have been prudent to look at only through smoked glasses. So it was with the other palaces embowered in thick fig-trees and pear- trees, like weeping willows, with their branches drooping to the ground. Here and there were groups of tents of striped cloth, under which appeared the heads of Arab women of serious countenance, and the brown faces of children no less grave than their mothers. Afar in the fields, on the slopes, amid the rocky steeps, were herds of sheep, and goats as black as crows.

Now and then birds would fly around the diligence, and then the whip would crack in the air. Among these birds parro’s were numerous, and distinguishable by their vivid colours. They were in thousands, and if nature had taught them to sing, man had not yet taught them to talk. And so the diligence travelled.

The horses were changed frequently. Tregomain and Juhel never omitted to get out and stretch their legs. Zambuco alighted occasionally, but never spoke to his companions.

“There is a man,” said the bargeman,” who seems as greedy of the Pasha’s millions as our friend Antifer.”

“Quite so, Tregomain, and the two legatees are worthy of each other.”

Whenever he alighted Saouk tried to overhear what was being said. Ben Omar remained quietly in his corner, engrossed in the thought that he would soon have to go to sea again, and that alter the choppy waves of the Mediterranean he would have to brave the long rollers of the Atlantic.

Antifer also never moved; he sat with his thoughts concentrated on this island number two - this rock lost amid the burning African waters!

Before sunset there appeared a group of mosques, marabouts, white domes, slender minarets; this was Tabourka, encircled by a frame of verdure, and which retains intact its aspect as a Tunisian town.

The diligence stopped here for some hours. The travellers alighted at a hotel, or rather an inn, where they were served with a not particularly appetizing repast. As to visiting the town it was not to be thought of. Of the six, there was only the bargeman - and perhaps Juhel, if he asked him - who would have had such an idea. Besides, Captain Antifer ordered them, once for all, not to go far away, for fear of occasioning delay - and they took care to do as they were told.

At nine o’clock the journey was resumed; the night fine and starlight. But it is not without danger that vehicles venture across these deserted districts between sunset and sunrise - for there are dangers from the bad state of the roads, dangers from robbers, Kroumirs and others, dangers from attack by wild beasts. Occasionally, from amid the tranquil gloom along the edge of the thick woods skirted by the diligence could be heard the roaring of lions and the growling of leopards. At this the horses shied, and it took all the driver’s skill to master them. The cries of the hyaenas were heard unheeded.

The zenith grew paler towards four o’clock in the morning, and the diffused light grew strong enough for the details of the landscape to be gradually visible. But the horizon was not extensive, only the grey hills in long undulations thrown on the ground like an Arab cloak. The valley of the Medjerdah lay curving at their feet, with its yellow river, sometimes a smooth stream, sometimes a troubled torrent, flowing among the oleanders and flowering eucalyptus.

The country is varied and mountainous in this part of the Regency bordering on Kroumiria. If the bargeman had travelled in the Tyrol, he might have thought himself among the wilder portions of the Alps, if it had not been for the lesser height of the hills. But he was not in the Tyrol nor in Europe, from which he was daily going farther.

And then the corners of his mouth would rise - which rendered his physiognomy more pensive - and his thick eyebrows would fall, which made him look more uneasy.

Now and then he and Juhel would look at each other, and these looks were quite a silent conversation.

In the morning Antifer asked his nephew, -

“Where shall we get to before night?”

“Gardimaou.”

“And when shall we be at Bene?”

“To morrow evening.”

The gloomy Antifer resumed his habitual silence, or rather his thoughts were lost in that uninterrupted dream which led him from the Gulf of Oman to the Gulf of Guinea; and rested on the only point of the terrestrial spheroid which could interest him. And then he thought to himself that other eyes besides his own were fixed on this point, those of the banker Zambuco. In truth, these two beings, of races so different, of habits so opposite, who ought never to have met in this world, seemed to have become of one mind, as if they had been linked together like galley-slaves with the same chain; only the chain was of gold.

The forests of fig-trees became thicker and thicker. Now and then Arab villages emerged from the glaucous greenery with which the castor-oil trees tint their flowers and leaves. Sometimes there appeared a “dreche” or two on the sloping sides of the mountains. Here tents arose, and sheep fed on the banks of a torrent. Then the station for changing horses would appear -

generally some miserable stable where men and beasts lived together promiscuously.

In the evening they reached Gardimaou, or rather the wooden cabin surrounded by a few others which twenty years afterwards was to form one of the stations on the railway from B6ne to Tunis. After a halt of two hours - too long for the rudimentary dinner furnished by the inn - the diligence resumed its journey along the windings of the valley, sometimes skirting the Medjerdah, sometimes crossing the brooks, of which the waters often rose over the travellers’ feet as they sat in the coach, toiling up hills so steep that the horses could hardly draw the load, dashing down slopes with a rapidity that the brake could hardly check.

The country was magnificent, particularly in the environs of Moughtars. But no one could see anything in the very dark, misty night. And everyone was being overcome by the longing for sleep, after forty-three hours of such jolting.

The dawn had appeared when Antifer and his companions arrived at Soukharas, at the end of a tiresome winding on the flank of the hill, which united the town to the road along the valley.

A comfortable hotel welcomed the weary travellers. This time the three hours they rested did not appear too long, and certainly would have appeared too short if they had wanted to visit the picturesque town. Antifer and Zambuco, of course, protested against the time lost at this halting-place; but the coach was not due to start until six o’clock in the morning.

“Calm yourself,” said Tregomain to his irritable companion. ‘‘We shall be at Bene in time to catch the train to-morrow morning -”

“And why not, with a little more haste, catch it tonight?” retorted Antifer.

“There is not one,” said Juhel.

“Suppose there is not, is that any reason for us remaining in this hole?”

“Here, my friend,” said the bargeman,” here is a pebble I picked up for you. Yours ought to be nearly worn out by this time.”

And Tregomain handed him a charming specimen of Medjerdah gravel, the size of a green-pea, which was soon being ground between the Malouin’s teeth.

The bargeman then asked him to accompany them only to the principal square. He refused point-blank; and drawing the atlas out of his bag, he opened it at the map of Africa, and plunged into the waters of the Gulf of Guinea at the risk of drowning his reason.

Tregomain and Juhel went for a stroll on the Place I Thagaste, a vast quadrilateral planted with a few trees, bordered with houses of very Oriental aspect, with cafe’s, already open at that early hour, and which were crowded with natives. At the first rays of the sun the mists dispersed, and a fine day, warm and bright, announced itself.

As he walked, the bargeman was all eyes and ears. He tried to hear all that was going on, although he understood nothing, he strove to see what was happening in the interior of the cafe’s, and in the shops, although he bought nothing and drank nothing. As wayward fortune had sent him on this unlooked-for voyage, the least he could do was to bring away a few lasting impressions. And thus he spoke: “No, Juhel, we cannot keep on travelling as we are doing. We stop nowhere. Three hours at Soukharas; one night at

Bone; two days on the railway, with short stoppages at the stations! What have I seen of Tunis; what shall I see of Algeria?”

“I admit it. It is only common sense. But say that to my uncle, and see what he will say to you. This is not a pleasure journey, but a business one; and who knows how it will end?”

“In a hoax, I think.”

“Yes,” continued Juhel, “why should not island number two contain a document referring us to island number three?”

“And so on to island four, and island five, and all the islands in the sea!” said Tregomain, nodding his big head. “And you will follow my uncle -”

“I?”

“Yes, you; you cannot refuse him anything.”

“That is true. The poor man troubles me much, and I am afraid his head -”

“Well, Tregomain, as far as I am concerned, I draw the line at island number two. Does Enogate want to marry a prince; do I want to marry a princess?”

“Certainly not! Besides, now we have to share the treasure with this crocodile of a Zambuco, it is only a question of a duke for her, and a duchess for you -”

“Do not laugh, Tregomain l”

“I was wrong, my boy; it is no laughing matter. And if we have to prolong this search -”

“Prolong?” asked Juhel. “No! We go to the Gulf of Loango - but beyond - never 11 shall know how to make my uncle return to St. Malo!”

“And if he refuses?”

“If he refuse. I will leave him there and then. I will return to Enogate, and, as she will be of age in a few months, I shall marry her in spite of wind and tide.”

“Do not be obstinate, my dear boy, and have patience. All will come right, I hope. It will end with your marrying my little Enogate, and I will dance at your wedding. But do not let us miss the diligence. Let us return to the hotel. If it is not asking too much I would rather reach Bone before night, so as to see a little of the town. As to Constantine, Philippeville and all those other queer places, what shall we see of them? If it is not possible, I shall have to be contented with Algiers, where we shall stay a few days, I suppose.”

“He is not likely to find a vessel ready to start immediately for the West Coast of Africa, and he will have to wait for one.”

“We will wait!” replied the bargeman, smiling at the thought of visiting the marvels of the Algerian capital. “You know Algiers, Juhel?”

“Yes, Tregomain.”

“I have heard sailors say that it is very fine - the town in a semicircle, its wharves, squares, arsenal, garden, its Moustapha, its Casbah - its Casbah particularly.”

“Very fine, Tregomain,” interrupted Juhel;” but I know something finer. There is St. Malo -”

“And the house in the Rue des Hautes Salles - and the little room on the first floor - and the little girl who lives therein! eh? I am of your opinion, my boy! But as we have to pass by Algiers let me hope that I may visit Algiers.”

And abandoning himself to this hope, the bargeman, followed by his young friend, turned towards the hotel. It was time. The horses were being put to. Captain Antifer was striding to and fro growling at all late comers, although they were not late.

Tregomain bowed his head beneath the stormy look his friend launched at him. In a few minutes they were all seated, and the diligence was descending the rugged slopes of Soukharas.

It was really a pity that the bargeman was not allowed to explore this Tunisian territory. Nothing could be more picturesque - hills which are almost mountains, wooded ravines, which forced the future railway to take many a roundabout route across the opulent verdure, large rocks rising from the ground, here and there douars swarming with natives and with big fires round them at night, as a defence against wild beasts.

Tregomain would relate what the driver had told him, for he talked with him whenever he had an opportunity.

In a year forty lions at least are killed among the brushwood, and the leopards killed amount to several hundreds, to say nothing of the crowds of howling jackals. Antifer cared nothing for Tunisian leopards and lions. If there had been millions of them on island number two he would not retreat an inch from his purpose. But the banker on one side, and the notary on the other, listened to Tregomain’s tales with interest. Zambuco would often take a sly glance out of the window, and Ben Omar would lean back in his corner, and start and turn pale whenever a growl was heard from the thickets along the road.

“I have heard,” said Tregomain, “that the diligence has been attacked before now, and firearms had to be used to drive the beasts off. Last night even, the coach had to be burnt to drive off a lot of leopards by the glare of the flames.”

“And the travellers?” asked Ben Omar.

“The travellers had to journey on foot to one of the places where they change horses.”

“On foot!” exclaimed the notary, in a trembling voice; “I could never -”

“Well, you could have remained behind, Mr. Omar; we should not have waited for you, you may be sure.”

It can be guessed that this observation came from Captain Antifer. He did not again join in the conversation, and Ben Omar had to recognize that he was not born to be a traveller either on land or sea.

The day went by without the wild beasts manifesting their presence except by distant growls. But, to his great disgust, Tregomain had to make up his mind that it would be night before the diligence reached Bene.

It was seven o’clock in the evening when they passed Hippo, a locality that is famous as being linked with the imperishable name of St. Augustine, and curious on account of its deep reservoir, where the old Arabs indulge in their incantations and sorceries. Twenty years later they would have seen the founding of the basilica and the hospital - which have risen from the ground under the powerful hand of Cardinal de Lavigerie.

As they entered Bone a deep darkness enveloped its promenade along the shore, its harbour terminating in the sandy point to the westward, the clumps of trees which shade the quay, the modern city with its large square, its Casbah, which might have given the bargeman a foretaste of the Casbah of Algiers.

The travellers chose a hotel in the chief square, had their supper, and went to bed at ten o’clock, ready for the journey next morning. And that night (thoroughly tired out by sixty hours in the diligence) they all slept - even the terrible Antifer.

CHAPTER XXII.

CAPTAIN Antifer thought he would find a railway between Bone and Algiers, but he had arrived twenty years too soon. The reply he received early next morning when he asked the hotel-keeper, proved a puzzler to him.

“What!” he said with a start,” is there no railway from Bone to Algiers?”

“No, sir,” said the facetious hotel-keeper, “but there will be one in a few years’ time if you like to wait.”

Doubtless Ben Omar would have asked nothing better, for it would probably become necessary to go by sea to avoid delay.

But Antifer had no intention of waiting.

“Is there no boat announced to sail?” he asked in an imperious voice.

“Yes; this morning.”

“Let us go on board.”

And at six o’clock Antifer left Bone on a steamer with the two companions of his choice and the three necessity had imposed on him.

We need not dwell on the incidents of this short voyage of a few hundred miles.

Tregomain would have preferred to have performed this navigation in a carriage, so as to have been able to see these territories which the remarkable railway was to traverse a few years later. But he reckoned on making up for his disappointment at Algiers. If Antifer imagined that as soon as he arrived he would find a vessel starting for the West Coast of Africa, he would be deceived, and would have to exercise a little patience. Meanwhile what delightful walks Tregomain would have in the environs, perhaps even to Blidah or the Monkey Brook! That the bargeman would gain nothing by the discovery of the treasure might be true, but at least he would gather a rich collection of memories of the journey to the Algerian capital.

It was eight o’clock in the evening when the steamer which made a quick passage, dropped anchor in the harbour of Algiers. The night in these latitudes was then dark, even in the last week of March, although the sky was glittering with stars. The confused mass of the town rose gloomily towards the north, rounded by the Casbah - this Casbah so greatly desired. All that Tregomain could see in leaving the landing-place was that he had to climb a lot of steps abutting on a quay supported by monumental arcades, and that he had to go along this quay, leaving to the left a square brilliant with lights, in which he would not have been displeased to stop, then a block of high houses comprising the Hotel de l’Europe, in which Captain Antifer and his party were hospitably received.

They were shown to their rooms - Tregomain’s adjoining Juhel’s - they had their luggage brought up, and they went down to dine. That occupied them until nine o’clock, and as there was plenty of time to wait for the departure of the steamer, the best thing for them to do was to go to bed and rest, so as to be in a fit condition next morning to begin a series of walks through the town.

But before taking the rest justified by this long journey Juhel wrote to Enogate. He did this as soon as he regained his room. The letter would go in the morning, and in three days it would reach her. There was nothing very interesting in the letter, except that Juhel was almost mad at the delay, and that he loved her with all his heart - in which there was nothing new.

But while Ben Omar and Saouk went to their room and Tregomain and Juhel went to theirs, Antifer and Zambuco, the two brothers-in-law - as it is surely permissible to describe them after the signing and sealing of their contract-disappeared from the hotel after dinner, without assigning any reason. This rather surprised the bargeman and the young captain, and perhaps made Saouk and Ben Omar uneasy; but it was not likely that Antifer would have answered any questions on this subject.

Where did the legatees go? To stroll along the picturesque quarters of Algiers? Probably not.

It was noticed that during the latter part of the journey Antifer had occasionally conversed in a low tone with the banker, and that Zambuco had appeared to approve of his companion’s suggestions. What had they been talking about? Was this going out late part of a pre-arranged plan? What plan? What strange combinations were possible with two men of this kind!

After shaking hands with Juhel the bargeman went into his room. Before undressing, he opened the window wide to breathe a little of this delightful Algerian air. In the pale starlight he looked over the wide expanse, all the roadstead up to Cape Matifou, over which glittered the lights of the vessels, many of them at anchor, many of them coming in with the night breeze, while the coast was aglow with the torches used by the fishermen. Closer in were the steamers getting under weigh, their large funnels belching forth showers of sparks. Beyond Cape Matifou was the open sea, bounded by a horizon on which the splendid constellations were rising like displays of fireworks.

The next day would be magnificent, if it fulfilled the promises of the night The sun would rise radiantly and outshine the last stars of the morning.

“How pleasant,” thought Tregomain, “will it be to visit this noble town of Algiers, to have a few days’ rest after this diabolical rush from Muscat, and before being hoaxed again at island number two! I have heard of Moise’s restaurant at Pointe Pescade? Why should we not go to-morrow and have a good dinner at this Moise’s? “At this moment came a loud knock at the door, just as ten o’clock was about to strike.

“Is that you, Juhel?” asked Tregomain.

“No, it is Antifer.”

“I will open the door, my friend.”

“Useless. Dress and pack up.”

“My portmanteau?”

“We start in forty minutes.”

“In forty minutes?”

“And mind you are not late, for the steamers don’t wait as a rule. I am going to tell Juhel.”

Overwhelmed with surprise, the bargeman thought he must be dreaming. No! He heard the knock on Juhel’s door, and Antifer’s voice telling him to get up. Then he heard the departing footsteps descending the stairs.

Juhel, who was writing, added a line to his letter, telling Enogate that they were all going to leave Algiers that very evening. That, then, was why Zambuco and Antifer had gone out: it was to inquire if any ship was sailing for the coast of Africa. By unhoped-for good fortune they had found the said steamer preparing to start, they had secured the berths, and then, without troubling himself about ceremony, Antifer had returned to tell Tregomain and Juhel, while -the banker warned Ben Omar and Nazim.

The bargeman was inexpressibly disappointed as he packed up. But nothing was to be said. The chief had spoken: he must obey. Almost immediately Juhel came into the room.

“You are not going to stop?” he said.

“No, my boy, although I ought to do so for your uncle’s sake! And I who promised myself at least two days in Algiers. And the harbour. And the gardens. And the Casbah l”

“But what could you expect, Tregomain? It is most unfortunate that my uncle has found a ship ready for sea.”

“Yes, but I shall strike before it is over l” said the bargeman with a gesture of anger.

“No, Tregomain, you will never strike. If you were to attempt such a thing, my uncle would only have to look at you in a certain way and you would have to give in.”

“You are right, Juhel,” replied Tregomain, lowering his head;” I would obey. You know me well. It is a nuisance all the same, and this fine dinner I was thinking of giving you at Moise’s at Pointe Pescade!”

Vain regrets! The poor man heaved a sigh and completed his preparations. Ten minutes afterwards Juhel and he had found Antifer, Zambuco, and the others in the vestibule of the hotel.

If they had been welcomed on their arrival they were not allowed to depart so cheerfully. They had to pay for their rooms as if they had occupied them for a day. Juhel put his letter in the box, and then they all descended the stairs leading to the harbour, while Tregomain took a last look at Government Square.

Half a cable's length away a steamer was moored with her steam up. Black smoke rose from her funnel to the sky. Her whistle was already announcing that she would soon be off.

A boat at the quay steps was waiting to bring the passengers on board. Antifer and his companions took their places in her. In a few strokes of the oars they were alongside. Before even Tregomain could make out where he was, he was conducted to the cabin he was to share with Juhel; Antifer and Zambuco occupied a second; the notary and Saouk a third.

The steamer was the Catalan, belonging to a Marseilles company. Employed in the regular service of the West Coast of Africa to St. Louis and Dakar, she called in at intermediate ports when necessary to receive or discharge passengers or goods.

A quarter of an hour after Antifer had arrived, a final scream of the whistle rent the air. Then her hawsers were slackened off and the Catalan began to tremble, her screw spun round violently, beating up a streak of foam on the surface of the sea, and she glided round the vessels at anchor, took the channel between the arsenal and the jetty, and headed to the westward.

A vague mass of white houses greeted the bargeman’s eyes: this was the Casbah, of which he could only make out the general outline. A cape jutted out from the coast; this was Pointe Pescade, the point on which was the restaurant of Moise who made those succulent bouillabaisses. And that was all Tregomain brought away with him to remind him of his stay in Algiers.

We need hardly mention that as soon as the harbour was left, Ben Omar, extended on the couch in his cabin, began again to taste the delights of sea-sickness. And when he thought of his voyage to the Gulf of Guinea he also thought of his return. Fortunately that would be his last passace. On this island number two he was certain of getting his promised commission! But if some of the others had also been ill, it would have been more soothing to him. And not one of them felt the slightest nausea. He was the only one to suffer. He did not even have the very natural consolation of seeing one of his kind share his sufferings.

The passengers on the Catalan were mostly sailors returning to the ports on the coast, a few Senegalese, and a certain number of soldiers of the marine infantry, accustomed to the eventualities of navigation. They were all bound for Dakar, where the steamer was to land her cargo. She was not going to stop anywhere on the road, and Antifer could but congratulate himself on having precipitated himself on board. It is true that when he got to Dakar he would not be at the end of his journey: and to this Zambuco called his attention.

“Agreed,” he said;” but I never expected to find a steamer going from Algiers to Loango, and when we are at Dakar we will see about matters.”

In fact it would have been difficult to have done otherwise. The difficulty would be with the last part of the voyage, and therein was a subject for serious anxiety on the part of the expectant brothers-in-law.

During the night the Catalan kept along at some two or three miles from the coast The lights of Tenez were observed, and the sombre mass of Cape Flanc could just be distinguished. In the morning the heights of Oran were sighted, and an hour afterwards the steamer doubled the promontory, on the other side of which is the roadstead of Mers-el-Kebir.

Further on, the coast of Morocco developed on the port side, with its distant profile of mountains dominating the Riff country, where game is so plentiful. On the horizon appeared Tetuan, quite striking under the solar rays; then at a few miles to the west, Ceuta planted on its rock, between two creeks, like a fort commanding one of the swing-doors of the Mediterranean, the key of the other swing-door being kept by Great Britain. And beyond in the offing through the Straits appeared the immense Atlantic. The wooded slopes of the coast of Morocco could be plainly made out Tangiers was passed hidden in the curve of its gulf, its villas amid the green trees, many marabouts here and there gleaming white in the sun. The sea was dotted with numerous sailing vessels waiting for a wind to take them through the Straits of Gibraltar.

The Catalan had no delays to fear. Neither the breeze nor the current, recognizable by a peculiar rippling in the vicinity of the Straits, could contend against her powerful screw, and towards nine o'clock in the evening she was beating with its triple blade the wide Atlantic.

The bargeman and Juhel were talking on the poop before retiring for a few hours' rest. Naturally the same thought occurred to them as the Catalan, steering southwest, doubled the extreme point of Africa - a thought of regret.

“Yes, my boy,” said Tregomain,” it would have been preferable if, on coming out of the Straits, we had gone to starboard instead of port. At least we should not have turned our heels on France.”

“And to go, whither?”

“To the devil, I am afraid! But you must endure evil with patience, Juhel. You can return from everywhere, even from the devil. In a few days we shall be at Dakar, and from Dakar to the Gulf of Guinea -”

“Who- knows if we shall find any means of transport from Dakar? There is no regular service beyond. We may be kept there for weeks, and if my uncle imagines -

It “He does imagine, never doubt it.”

“That it will be easy for him to reach island number two, he is mistaken. Do you know what I think, Tregomain?”

“No, my boy; but if you like to tell me -”

“Well, I think that my grandfather, Thomas Antifer, ought to have left this confounded Kamylk on the rocks of Jaffa -”

“But, Juhel, the poor man -”

“If he had left him there, this Egyptian could not have left his millions to his rescuer, and if he had not left his millions, my uncle could not have run after them, and Enogate would be my wife.”

“That is all very true. But if you had been there, Juhel, you would have saved the life of this unfortunate Pasha as your grandfather did! What is that?” he added, to turn the conversation. “What is that light?” showing a bright light on the port bow.

“That is the lighthouse at Cape Spartel,” replied Juhel.

In fact it was the lighthouse placed at the western extremity of the African continent and maintained at the expense of the States of Europe, the most advanced of those that project their rays over the surface of the African seas.

The voyage of the Catalan need not be related in detail. The steamer was favoured. She picked up the land breeze in these parts and could keep at a short distance from the coast. The sea was agitated merely by the long, rolling swell coming in from the westward; and it required the most susceptible of Omars to be ill in such weather.

The shore remained in view: the heights of Mekinez, of Mogador; Mount Thesat, which dominates this region from a height of about 3000 feet; Tarudant and Cape Juby, where the frontier of Morocco ends.

Tregomain did not have the satisfaction of seeing the Canary Isles, as the Catalan passed some fifty miles to the eastward of Fuerteventura, the nearest of the group; but he was able to salute Cape Bojador before crossing the Tropic of Cancer. Cape Blanco was passed in the afternoon of the 2nd of May; next morning they ereoffPortendik, and then the country of the Senegal lay spread before the travellers’ eyes.

As all the passengers were bound to Dakar, the Catalan had no occasion to put in at St. Louis, which is the capital of this French colony. Dakar seems to be of more maritime importance than St. Louis, and Antifer would probably find it easier there to obtain some means of transport to the Loango.

At length, on the 5th, about four in the morning, the Catalan doubled the famous Cape Verde, situated in the same latitude as the islands of this name. She rounded the triangular peninsula which hangs like a flag on the edge of the African continent, and the port of Dakar appeared on the lower angle of the peninsula, after a voyage of eight hundred leagues from Algiers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

NEVER had Tregomain imagined that a day would come when he would be walking with Juhel on the quays of Dakar, the ancient capital of the Gorean Republic. And yet that is what he did on this particular day, visiting the port, protected by its double jetty of granite rocks, while Antifer and Zambuco, as inseparable as Ben Omar and Saouk, went up to the French agency.

A day is amply sufficient for seeing the town. There is nothing very interesting about it - a rather good public garden, a citadel affording quarters for the garrison, and Bel-Air Point, on which is an establishment to which are sent those suffering from yellow fever. If our travellers were to remain many days in this country, which has Goree for its capital and Dakar for its chief town, the lapse of time would appear interminable.

But it is as well to keep a good heart against ill-fortune, as Tregomain and Juhel said to one another; and meanwhile they strolled along the wharves, and up and down the sunny streets, which are kept in good order by convicts, under the supervision of a few warders.

The only things that interested them were the ships - these bits of herself which France sent from Bordeaux to Rio de Janeiro - these steamers of the Messageries Imperiales, as the line was called in 1862. Dakar was not then the important station it has become to-day. It possessed but nine thousand inhabitants, with a tendency to increase its population, owing to the important works in progress for the improvement of the port.

If the bargeman had never made acquaintance with the M’Bambaras negroes, he had now an easy opportunity of doing so, as these natives swarmed in Dakar. Thanks to their dry, nervous temperament, their thick skulls, their woolly hair, they were able to support with impunity the fierceness of the Senegalian sun. Tregomain had hung his square handkerchief behind his head as the best substitute he could find for a sunshade.

“Good gracious, it is hot!” he exclaimed. “I really was not made to live in the tropics.”

“This is nothing, Tregomain,” replied Juhel. “When we are in the Gulf of Guinea a few degrees below the Equator -”

“I shall melt, for a certainty,” replied the bargeman; “and I shall take nothing back to my country but skin and bones. And,” said he with the sweetest of smiles, as he mopped his face, “it would be difficult to take home less.”

“You are much thinner than you were.”

“Think so? Bah! I have a margin yet before I am reduced to a skeleton. In my opinion it is better to be thin in countries where the people feed on human flesh. Are there any cannibals on the Guinea Coast?”

“Not many; at least I hope not.”

“Well, my boy, do not tempt the natives by being too fat. Who knows if after island number two, we have to be off to number three, in countries where people feed on each other,” -

“As in the islands of the Pacific?”

“Yes! There the inhabitants are anthropophagous!”

He meant to say philanthropophagous, if he had been capable of inventing the word, for in these countries it is out of pure gourmandizing that the natives eat their kind.

But to think that Captain Antifer would be so obstinate as to let his madness for the millions drive him to such distant spots, was not admissible. Certainly his nephew and his friend would never follow him there, and would prevent him from entering on such a campaign, even if it meant having him shut up in a lunatic asylum.

When Tregomain and Juhel returned to the hotel they found Antifer and the banker.

The French agent had received them cordially, but when they asked for a vessel bound for a Loango port, his answer was not encouraging. The steamers engaged in this trade are very irregular, and under any circumstances do not call at Dakar more than once a month. There was a weekly service between Sierra Leone and Grand Bassam, but from there to Loango was a long way farther. The first steamer was not due at Dakar for a week. How unfortunate! A whole week for him to spend in this town chafing at his bit! And it would have to be of well-tempered steel, this bit, to resist the teeth of Captain Antifer, who was now chewing down a pebble a day. It is true that there is no want of pebbles on the African beach, so that Antifer would have no difficulty in supplying his wants.

We cannot avoid remarking that the week at Dakar was long, very long. The walks about the harbour, the excursions to the brook at the east of the town, had very soon exhausted their charms. Such patience was required as only an easy philosophy could give. But with the exception of Tregomain, who was remarkably gifted in this respect, Antifer and his companions were neither patient nor philosophical. If they blessed Kamylk Pasha for having chosen them for his heirs, they cursed him for the caprice by which he had buried the heritage so far away. It was really too much, to send them to the Gulf of Oman, and now they had to go to the Gulf of Guinea. Why could not the Egyptian have found a quiet little island in European seas? Was there not one in the Mediterranean, in the Baltic, in the Black Sea, in the North Sea, with every convenience for the stowage of three casks? Really the Pasha had indulged in quite a plethora of precautions! But so it was, and if you liked to abandon this treasure quest - Abandon it? See what a reception you would have had from Antifer and Zambuco and even the notary held in the grip of the violent Saouk.

The bonds which attached these companions to each other were being visibly relaxed. There were three distinct groups, Antifer and Zambuco, Omar and Saouk, Juhel and Tregomain. They lived apart, meeting each other only at meal-times; avoiding each other during their walks, they sorted themselves out into twos, and seemed as though they never would combine in the final sextette, which could only result in abominable cacophony.

As regards the Juhel and Tregomain group. We know the usual subject of their conversation; the indefinite prolongation of the voyage, the gradual widening of the separation between the lovers, the fear that so many researches and fatigues could only end in a hoax, the state of Antifer’s sanity - all of them causes of regret for the bargeman and Juhel, who had made up their minds not to withstand him, and to follow him to the end.

As regards the Antifer and Zambuco group. What a curious study these two future brothers-in-law would have made for a moralist! One, up to then of simple tastes, living a quiet life in a quiet town with that philosophy natural to a retired sailor, now a prey to the lust for gold, his mind deranged by this mirage of millions gleaming under his eyes. The other, already so rich, but having no other care than to heap riches on riches, exposing himself to so many fatigues, to so many dangers even, in the endeavour to increase the heap.

“A week to get rusty at the bottom of this hole,” said Captain Antifer,” and who knows if this wretched steamer will not be late?”

“And then,” said the banker,” our ill-fortune makes us land at Loango, and thence go up fifty leagues to Ma- Yumba Bay!”

“I am uneasy about the end of this road,” said the irascible Antifer.

“Enough to make you uneasy,” observed the banker.

“It is no good anchoring till we reach the roadsteads. Let us get to Loango and then we will see.”

“We might persuade the captain of the steamer to put in at Ma-Yumba. It would not take him far out of his way.”

“I do not suppose he would consent, as he is not likely to be allowed to do so.”

“. If we were to offer him an indemnity, he might,” suggested the banker.

“We will see, Zambuco, but you are always thinking of what never occurs to me. The essential is to arrive at Loango, and from there we can get to Ma-Yumba. At least we have legs, and if necessary, and there is no other way of leaving Dakar, I should not hesitate at going round by the coast.”

“On foot?”

“Yes, on foot.”

He spoke quite airily. But the dangers, the obstacles the impossibilities of such a journey! He might think himself lucky to be able to find a steamer, and thus avoid the perils of the journey! Not one of those who accompanied him on such an expedition would have returned. And Talisma Zambuco would have waited in vain at home in Malta for the return of her too audacious husband that was to be.

And so they had to resign themselves to the steamboat, which could not arrive for a week. But how long seemed the hours spent at Dakar?

Quite different was the conversation of Saouk and Ben Omar. Not that the son of Mourad was less impatient to reach the island and carry off the treasure of Kamylk Pasha. His thoughts were concentrated on the way in which he could best rob the legatees. He had intended to carry this out on the return from Sohar to Muscat, now he would attempt it on the return from Ma-Yumba to Loango. Certainly his chances had improved. Among the natives and interlopers he ought to find a few fellows capable of anything, even of shedding blood, if necessary who would manage this matter for him. And the prospect of this terrified the pusillanimous Ben Omar, less from delicacy of feeling than from fear, at being mixed up in such an affair.

He made a few timid suggestions: He remarked that Captain Antifer and his companions were men who would sell their lives dearly. He insisted on the point that no matter how much Saouk paid them, the scoundrels he employed would talk about it sooner or later, and that the truth is always found out at last regarding the massacre of explorers in any part of Africa. His arguments were directed, in fact, not against the criminality of the attempt, but arose from fear of being found out - the only reason which could stop such a man as Saouk.

But they had no effect on him. Giving the notary one of those looks which chilled the very marrow in his bones, he said, -

“I only know of one imbecile who is capable of betraying me!”

“And who is that?”“You, Ben Omar!”“Me?”

“Yes, and take care, for I know how to make people hold their tongues.” Ben Omar, trembling in all his limbs, bowed his head. One corpse more or less on the road from Ma-Yumba to Loango would not embarrass Saouk, as he well knew.

The expected steamer dropped anchor at Dakar in the morning of the I2th of May. This was the Cintra, a Portuguese vessel, bound with passengers and goods to San Paul de Loanda, the important Lusitanian colony of tropical Africa. She regularly stopped at Loango and as she started early next morning, Antifer and his companions at once booked their berths. As her speed was only from nine to ten knots, the voyage would last a week during which Ben Omar would suffer as usual.

Having dropped a few passengers at Dakar, the Cintra started next morning in fine weather, with the breeze blowing off the land. Antifer and the banker headed an immense sigh of satisfaction, as if their lungs had not been working for a week. This was the last stage before setting foot on island number two, and putting their hand on the treasure it was guarding so carefully. The attraction the island exercised on them seemed to become more powerful as they approached it, conformably to natural laws, increasing inversely as the square of the distance. And at every turn of the screw of the Cintra the distance decreased.

And for Juhel it increased. He went farther and farther away from France, from Brittany, where Enogate sat in sorrow. He had written to her from Dakar, as soon as he arrived, and the poor girl would soon learn that her lover was farther away from her than ever, and could fix no date as to his probable return.

Saouk tried to find out what passengers were to be landed at Loango. Among these adventurers, with consciences untroubled by scruples or remorse, who were in search of fortune in these distant lands, were there any who knew the country, and were likely to become his accomplices? His Excellency could not find any. He would have to choose his rascals when he reached Loango. Unfortunately he could not speak Portuguese, neither could Ben Omar. This was embarrassing, as he had to treat of delicate matters, and express himself quite clearly. Antifer, Zambuco, Tregomain, and Juhel were reduced to talking among themselves, for no one on board spoke French.

There was one whose surprise was equal to his satisfaction, Ben Omar to wit. To say that he felt no discomfort during this voyage of the Cintra would be untrue. But at the same time the intense suffering he had formerly experienced was now spared him. The Cintra kept within two or three miles of the coast: the sea was calm, and she felt very little of the swell of the open sea. This continued after she had doubled Cape Palmas, the extreme point of the Gulf of Guinea. As often happens, the breeze followed the line of Coast and the Gulf was as smooth as the ocean. But the Cintra had to lose sight of the land when her course was laid for Loango. The travellers saw nothing of Ashanti Land, nor of Dahomey, nor even of the summit of

Mount Cameroon, which rises for some twelve thousand feet, beyond Fernando Po, on the confines of Upper Guinea.

In the afternoon of the 19th of May, Tregomain became somewhat excited. Juhel told him he was about to cross the Equator. For the first time, for the last no doubt, the bargeman was about to enter the southern hemisphere. What an adventure for him, the mariner of the Ranee! And it was without regret that, following the example of the other passenger?, he gave the crew of the Cintra his piastre in recognition of the honour of crossing the line.

At sunrise next morning the Cintra was in the latitude of Ma-Yumba, but about a hundred miles to the west of it If the captain of the steamer had agreed to put in at the port which belongs to the State of Loango what fatigues, what dangers perhaps, might have been spared Captain Antifer! Such a call would have saved him an extremely difficult journey along the coast.

Urged by his uncle, Juhel tried to argue the matter with the captain of the Cintra. The Portuguese knew a few words of English - as what sailor does not? - and Juhel, as we know, spoke this language fluently. He introduced the proposal to stop at Ma-Yumba. It would take the steamer only two days out of her way, the expenses would be paid for the delay, the coal, the provisions, the indemnity to the owners of the Cintra, etc.

Did the captain understand Juhel’s proposal? Certainly, when it was explained on a chart of the Gulf of Guinea. Sailors soon understand each other in such matters. Nothing was easier than to steer eastwards so as to land this half-dozen passengers at Ma-Yumba, provided the passengers were willing to pay.

But the Captain refused. He was freighted for Loango - he would go to Loango. From Loango he was bound to San Paulde Loanda. and to San Paulde Loanda he would go, and nowhere else, even if they bought the ship for her weight in gold. Such were the expressions he used, which June! clearly understood, and translated to his uncle.

Terrible was Antifer’s anger, and fearful the broadside of oaths he let fly at the captain. If it had not been for the intervention of Tregomain and Juhel, Antifer, in a state of mutiny, would have been sent as a prisoner to the hold for the rest of the voyage.

Two days after wards, in the evening of the 2ist of May, the Cintra stopped before the long sand-bank which defends the coast of Loango, and landed with her launch the passengers in question. A few hours afterwards she was off again on her way to San Paul, the capital of the Portuguese colony.

CHAPTER XXIV:

Next day, beneath a baobab-tree, which sheltered them from the fiery rays of the sun, two men were in conversation. As they had come up the principal street of Loango, where they had met by the greatest chance, they had recognized each other, with many gestures of surprise.

One had said, -

You - here?”

Yes - here!” the other had replied. And at a sign from the first, who was Saouk, the second, a Portuguese named Barroso, had followed him out of the town.

Although Saouk did not speak the language of Barroso, Barroso spoke the language of his Excellency, for he had lived for some time in Egypt. Two old acquaintances these. Barroso was one of the band of adventurers under Saouk when he was engaged in every kind of depredation, without being troubled by the agtnts of the Viceroy, thanks to the influence of Mourad, his father, the cousin of Kamylk Pasha. When the band had been broken up, after two or three outrages too bad to be overlooked, Barroso had disappeared. Returning to Portugal, where there was no scope for his peculiar abilities he had left Lisbon to work in a factory at Loango. At this period the trade of the colony, almost ruined by the abolition of the slave trade, was reduced to the export of ivory, palm- oil, ground-nuts and mahogany.

At the moment this Portuguese, who had been a sailor, and was then about fifty, commanded a small vessel named the Portalegre, engaged in the coasting trade.

Barroso was possessed of a conscience so-utterly devoid of scruples, and an audacity acquired in his old trade that made him just the man Saouk wanted for his criminal machinations. When they reached the foot of this baobab - which the arms of twenty men could not have encircled, though it was nothing compared with the banyan at Muscat - they could talk without fear of being overheard, of anything they pleased that threatened the safety of Antifer and his companions.

To begin with, they told each other how they had spent their lives since the Portuguese had left Egypt, and then Saouk came to business without beating about the bush. Although he took good care not to let Barroso know the immense amount of treasure lie was anxious to get hold of, he did not fail to tempt his cupidity with the bait of a considerable sum to be gained.

“But,” added he,” to help me, I want a man, resolute, courageous -”

“You know me, Excellency,” replied the Portuguese, “and you know that I will stop at nothing.”

“If you have not changed.”

“I have not changed.”

“Know then that there are four men we must get rid of, and perhaps a fifth, if I find it necessary to disembarrass myself of a certain Ben Omar, whose clerk I am supposed to be, under the name of Nazim.”

“One more makes little difference.”

“In this case certainly, as he will give you no trouble.”

“What are you going to do?”

“This is my plan,” replied Saouk, after looking about to see that he would not be overheard;” three of these men are Frenchmen, a certain Captain Antifer, his friend, and his nephew, and a Tunisian banker named Zambuco, just landed at Loango, to take possession of a treasure deposited on one of the islands in the Gulf of Guinea.”

“Whereabouts?”

“Near Ma-Yumba Bay,” replied the Egyptian. “Their intention is to travel up the coast to that town, and I think it will be easy to attack them as they are returning with their treasure to wait for the steamer from San Paul to Dakar.”

“Nothing easier,” said Barroso, “I can find a dozen trusty fellows, always ready for business, who would be glad to assist you for an agreed sum.”

“I was sure of it, Barroso, and in these desert places, we would be certain to succeed.”

“Of course. But I have a better plan to propose.”

What is that?”

I am in command of a vessel of a hundred and fifty tons, taking goods from one port to another along the coast. My ship is going to start in a couple of days for Baracka, on the Gaboon, a little to the north of Ma- Yumba.”

“Ah! we might take advantage of that Antifer would be only too pleased to take passage in her to avoid the fatigues and dangers of a land journey. You can land us at Ma-Yumba, deliver your goods at the Gaboon, and return to pick us up. And while we are on the passage to Loan go -”

“That is understood.”

“How many men have you on board?

“Twelve.”

“You can trust them?

“As myself.”

“And what are you taking to the Gaboon?

“A cargo of ground-nuts, and six elephants bought by a house at Baracka, which are to be sent on to a menagerie in Holland.”

“You do not speak French?

“No.”

“Do not forget that I am not supposed to speak it or to understand it. I will tell Ben Omar to make the proposal to you, and Antifer will not hesitate to accept it.”

There could be no doubt of this, and there was every reason to fear that the two legatees would disappear with their companions during the return voyage across the Gulf of Guinea. And who could hinder the crime? And who would find out the authors?

Loanjo is not under Portuguese rule, like Angola and Benguela. It is one of the independent kingdoms of the Congo, bounded by the Gaboon on the north, and the Zaire on the south. But at this period, from Cape Lopez to the Zaire, the native kings recognized the sovereign of Loango, and Paid him tribute, generally in slaves; such were Cassange, Tomba Libolo, and other vassals reigning over the much-divided smaller territories. Society is - regularly constituted among these negroes; at the head the king and his family, then the princes - that is the sons of a princess, who alone can transmit nobility - then the husbands of the princesses, who are suzerains, then the priests, the fetishes, or “yangas,” of whom the chief is Chitome, by divine right; then the courtiers, the merchants, the retainers, that is to say the people. As to slaves, there are many, there are too many. They are no longer sold to foreigners it is true, owing to the consequences of European intervention in abolishing the trade.

But although the king of Loango is the monarch of a country that rejoices in independence, it does not follow that its roads are sufficiently guarded, and that travellers are free from peril; and so it would have been difficult to find a territory more favourable, or a sea more suitable for a foul action.

This it was that made Juhel so anxious - at least with regard to the land journey. If his uncle thought little about it, upset as he was, the young captain could not contemplate without serious alarm this land journey of a hundred and twenty miles along the coast to Ma-Yumba Bay. He thought it his duty to tell the bargeman of this.

“What would you do, my boy?” replied Tregomain; the cork is drawn, and we must drink the wine.”

“In fact,” continued Juhel,” it was only a promenade between Muscat and Sohar, and then we were in good company.”

“Could we not make up a caravan of natives at Loango?”

“I would no more trust these niggers than I would the hyaenas and leopards and lions of the district.”

“Ah! are there plenty of those beasts?”

“Plenty of them, to say nothing of lentas, which are venomous vipers, of cobras which spit their foam at your face, of pythons thirty feet long.”

“A nice place, my boy! Really this excellent Pasha could not have chosen a more convenient one! And you think that these natives -”

“Are not particularly intelligent, being like all the Congolese; but they are intelligent enough to rob and massacre the fools who venture in this abominable country.”

This fragment of dialogue gives a fair sample of the anxieties that Juhel shared with Tregomain. And consequently they were both greatly relieved when Saouk, by means of Ben Omar, introduced the Portuguese Barroso to Captain Antifer and the Tunisian banker. No long stages across these dangerous countries, no fatigues in this excessive climate during so long a journey. As Saouk had said nothing of his previous connection with Barroso, and as Juhel could have no suspicion that these two scoundrels had formerly known one another his suspicions were not aroused. The voyage was to be by sea to Ma-Yumba Bay. The weather was fine. They would be there in two days. The vessel would land the passengers, go on to Baracka, embark them on her return, and they would all get back to Loango for the next steamer to take them to Marseilles. Never had chance declared itself so clearly in favour of Captain Antifer. Of course, he would have to pay well for his passage. But what mattered the cost?

There were two days to wait at Loango, until the half- dozen elephants sent up from the interior were shipped on board the Portalegre. And so Tregomain and Juhel - the former always anxious to learn - amused themselves by strolling through the town, the “banza” as it is called in Congoese.

Loango, or Bouala, the old city, measuring about two miles and a half in circumference, is built in the midst of a palm forest. It is composed of a collection of factories, surrounded by huts built of raphia twigs, and covered with papyrus leaves. The traders are Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, Dutch, and German; quite a mixture, as you see. But how new everything seemed to the bargeman! The Bretons on the banks of the Ranee are not in the least like these half-naked natives, armed with bows and wooden swords and rounded axes. The King of Loango, dressed up in a ridiculous old uniform, was not in the least like the Prefect of Ille-et-Vilaine; the villages between St. Malo and Dinan had no such huts sheltered by huge cocoanut trees. And the people of St. Malo are not polygamous, like the idle Congoese, who leave all the heavy work to their wives, and go to bed when their wives are ill. But the land in Brittany is not as fertile as the land in Loango. Here it is only necessary to scratch the ground to obtain superb crops - of “manfrigo,” or millet, with ears weighing half a pound, of “holcus “which grows without culture, of” luco “which is used for bread, of maize giving three crops a year, of rice, yams, manioc, tamba, lentils, tobacco, sugar-cane in the marshy districts, vines in the neighbourhood of the Zaire, imported from Canary and Madeira, figs, bananas, oranges, called “mambrochas” lemons, pomegranates,” coudes “- fruit in the shape of pine-cones, containing a floury melting substance - “neu- banzams,” a kind of nut much liked by the negroes, and pine-apples, that grow naturally on the desert spots.

And then what huge trees - mangroves, sandalwoods, cedars, tamarinds, palms, and a number of those baobabs, from which is extracted a vegetable soap, and a residuum much appreciated by the natives.

And what a crowd of animals - pigs, boars, zebras, buffaloes, deer, gazelles, antelopes, elephants, jackals, porcupines, flying squirrels, wild cats, to say nothing of the innumerable varieties of monkeys, chimpanzees, ostriches, peacocks, thrushes, partridges, red and grey, edible locusts, bees, mosquitoes, canzos, satoles, and cousins more numerous than desirable! A wonderful country, whose wonders Tregomain would have exhausted if he had had time to study its natural history.

Neither Antifer nor Zambuco could have told you if Loango was peopled by whites or blacks. No! their eyes looked elsewhere. They were searching far away more to the north, for an imperceptible point, a point unique in this world, a sort of enormous diamond with fascinating scintillations, weighing thousands of carats, and worth millions of pounds. Ah! How impatient they were to set foot on island number two, and reach the end of their adventurous campaign.

On the 22nd of May, at sunrise, the vessel was ready to sail. The six elephants had arrived the night before, and been embarked, with the necessary precautions. They were magnificent animals that would not have disgraced Sam Lockhart’s circus. It need scarcely be said that they were stowed in the hold. Maybe it was not very prudent to load a vessel of a hundred and fifty tons with such masses, which might interfere with its equilibrium. Juhel mentioned this to the bargeman. The vessel was, however, rather beamy and drew very little water, so as to enable her to come close in over the shallows. She had two masts, rather far apart, and was of square rig; for a vessel of this kind only sails well before the wind, and if she is not very speedy she can at least be safely worked within sight of the coast.

Besides, the wind was favourable. At Loango, as in all the countries of the Gulf, the rainy season, which begins in September, ends in May, under the influence of winds coming from the north-west. On the other hand, though it may be fine from May to September, how insupportable is the heat, which is only tempered a little by the abundant dew of the nights. Since they had landed, our travellers had melted and grown thinner visibly. More than ninety- three degrees in the shade! In this country - if we are to believe certain explorers, little worthy of faith, who ought to have been born in Bouches-du-Rhone or Gascony - the dogs are obliged to be continually on the move to prevent them from burning their paws on the incandescent soil, and wild boars are found actually cooked in their skins! Tregomain was almost inclined to believe these stones.

The Portalegre set sail at eight o’clock in the morning. The passengers were all on board, men and elephants. The groups were as usual. Captain Antifer and Zambuco, more hypnotised than ever by this island number two - and what a weight would be lifted from them when the look-out sighted it on the horizon! Tregomain and Juhel, one forgetting the seas of Africa for the channel and the harbour of St. Malo, the other thinking of nothing but breathing the refreshing breeze. Saouk and Barroso, talking together - and what was there to be astonished at, as they spoke the same language, and it was owing to their meeting that Antifer had obtained a passage on the vessel?

The crew consisted of a dozen sturdy fellows, mostly Portuguese, and of very unprepossessing appearance. The uncle was absorbed in his thoughts, and did not notice this; but the nephew remarked it, and communicated his impressions to the bargeman, who replied that in such temperatures it is hazardous to judge of people by their looks, and that one must not be too particular with regard to the crew of an African vessel.

With the prevailing wind, the voyage up the coast promised to be delightful. Portentosa Africa! Tregomain would have said if he had known the pompous epithet with which the Romans greeted this continent. In truth, if their thoughts had not been elsewhere, Captain Antifer and his companions, in passing the factory of Chillu, would have abandoned themselves to the just admiration which the natural beauties of the coast deserved. Akme among them the bargeman gazed at it all like a man who wished to carry away with him some remembrance of his journey. And what could he have more splendid than this succession of green forests covering the hill sides, dominatedhere and there by the heights of the Strauch mountain bathed with hot mists in their deep ravines. From mile to mile the beach ran back to give passage to the watercourses coming from the thick woods, which the tropical heats could not dry up. It is true that all this water did not reach the sea. Flocks of birds were gathered to drink of it - peacocks, ostriches, pelicans, divers, animated the landscape with the beatings of their wings. Herds of graceful antelopes, troops of “empolangas,” or elands of the Cape - huge mammals capable of drinking a ton of this limpid water as easily as the bargeman would have tossed off a glass - herds of hippopotamuses, looking at a distance like pink pigs, whose flesh, it seems, is not despised by the natives.

Tregomain, finding himself near Antifer, in the bows, took occasion to remark, -

“Eh! my friend. Hippopotamus feet, a la Ste. Menehould - will that do for you ?”

Antifer merely shrugged his shoulders, and gave the bargeman one of those weary, vague looks which look at nothing.

“He no longer understands what is said to him “murmured Tregomain, using his handkerchief as a fan.

On the edge of the shore were troops of monkeys, leaping from one tree to another, howling and grimacing when, by a movement of the rudder, the Portalegre approached the beach.

The birds, the hippopotamuses and monkeys would have done no harm to our travellers if they had had to walk from Loango to Ma-Yumba. No, what would have been a more serious danger was the presence of leopards and lions, which were seen bounding about the underwood, wonderfully supple brutes, anything but safe to meet with. When the night came, there were gruff howlings and lugubrious bayings to break the impressive silence which followed the fall of night. This concert reached the vessel like the moaning that precedes a storm. Troubled and excited, the elephants became restive in the hold, replying by savage grunts, and shaking so as to make the vessel’s timbers groan. Decidedly the cargo was likely to cause uneasiness to the passengers.

Four days elapsed. Nothing occurred to break the monotony of the voyage. The fine weather continued. The sea was a deal calm, and Ben Omar felt no discomfort.

There was no pitching, no rolling; and, although the Portalegre was heavily laden, she was almost insensible to the long undulations of the surge, which died out in a light surf on the beach.

For his part, the bargeman never imagined that a voyage at sea could be so quiet.

“One would think we were on the Chamante Amelie, between the banks of the Ranee,” he said to his young friend.

“Yes,” objected Juhel; “with this difference - that there was not on the Chamante Amelie a captain like this Barroso, and a passenger like this Nazim, whose intimacy with the Portuguese seems to me more and more suspicious.”

“And what do you think they are meditating, my boy?” replied Tregomain. “It will be too late, for we ought to be near our goal.”

In fact, at sunrise on the 27th of May, after doubling Cape Banda, the Portalegre was within twenty miles of Ma-Yumba. This Juhel ascertained from Ben Omar, who at his request asked Saouk, who asked Barroso.

They would arrive, then, that very evening at this little port of the Loango country. Already the coast began to curve in behind Point Matooti, describing a large bay, at the end of which the town was hidden. If island number two existed, if it occupied the place indicated in the document, it ought to be somewhere in this bay; and consequently Antifer and Zambuco kept their eyes at the telescope, the glass of which they rubbed again and again.

Unfortunately the wind was light, the breeze almost gone. The Portalegre was hardly making two knots an hour.

About one o’clock she rounded Point Matooti. There was a shout of joy on board. The future brothers-in-law had simultaneously sighted a series of islets in the bay. Assuredly the one they were in search of was one of the series? But which? That they would find out next day, when they observed the sun.

Five or six miles to the east, Ma-Yiimba appeared on a spit of sand between the sea and the Banya brook, with its factories, its houses luminous among the trees. In front of the beach were a few fishing-boats, like large white birds.

How calm was the surface of the bay! A canoe could not have been more tranquil on the surface of a lake - what shall we say - on the surface of a pond, or even on a large bowl of oil. The rays of the sun poured vertically down; Tregomain streamed like a fountain in a park on a festival day.

The Portalegre drew nearer, thanks to a few intermittent puffs from the west The islands in the bay became more distinct. There were six or seven of them, like baskets of verdure.

At six o’clock in the evening the vessel was abreast of this archipelago. Antifer and Zambuco remained standing in the bows. Saouk, forgetting himself a little, could not hide his impatience, and justified by his manner the suspicions of Juhel. These three men devoured with their eyes the first of these islands. Did they expect to see it spout up a shower of millions from its flanks as from a crater of gold?

If they had known that the island in which Kamylk Pasha had buried his treasure was composed only of sterile rocks and bare stones, without a tree, without a shrub, no doubt they would have cried in despair, -

“No! It is not that one yet!”

But since 1831 there had been thirty-one years in which Nature had had time to cover the island with masses of verdure.

The Portalegre approached it slowly, so as to round its northern point, her sails barely filled with the dying evening breeze. If the wind fell altogether, they would have to anchor and wait for the daylight.

But, suddenly, a lamentable groaning was heard at the bargeman’s side. He turned to see what it was.

It was Ben Omar. The notary was pale, he was livid; his heart was in his lips; he was sea-sick.

What! In such calm weather, in this sleepy bay, with- out a furrow on its surface?

Yes! And there was nothing surprising in the poor man being fearfully sick, for the vess-1 had begun to roll in a most absurd and inexplicable manner. She rolled to port, then to starboard, in a most violent fashion. The crew rushed forward and rushed aft Captain Barroso also ran.

“What is it? “asked Juhel.

“What is the matter?” asked Tregomain.

Was it some submarine eruption, the shocks of which threatened to sink the Portalegre?

Neither Antifer, nor Zambuco, nor Saouk, seemed to notice what was happening.

“Ah!” exclaimed Juhel. “The elephants!”

Yes, it was the elephants who were making the ship roll. Under the influence of some inexplicable caprice, the idea had occurred to them to bear all together alternately on their hind feet and their fore feet. They made the vessel rock, and it seemed to please them, as it pleases the squirrel in his gyratory course in his revolving cage. But what squirrels, these huge pachyderms!

The rolling increased, the taffrails nearly touched the water; the vessel was in danger of filling first on one side then on the other.

Barroso and a few of the crew hurried down into the hold. They tried to calm the monstrous animals. There were shouts and blows, but no result. The elephants, brandishing their trunks, raising their ears, wagging their tails, got more excited; and more and more the Portalegre rolled, rolled, rolled, until the water came pouring into her.

It did not take long. In ten seconds the sea had reached the hold, and down she went, while the screams ol the foolish elephants were drowned in the abyss.

CHAPTER XXV.

“At last I have been shipwrecked!” said Tregomain, next morning.

When the Portalegre had gone down, in fifteen or twenty fathoms, the islet in Ma- Yumba Bay, towards which she was nearest, became the refuge of those she carried. Nobody had perished in this extraordinary catastrophe. No one was missing from the roll-call among her passengers or her crew. They had all helped each other j Antifer had held up Zambuco, Saouk had held up Ben Omar. They had only a few strokes to make to reach the rocks of the islet. Only the elephants had disappeared amid the element for which Nature had not created them. They were drowned. After all, it was their fault. It does not do to make a boat into a seesaw.

Antifer’s first remark on landing had been, - “And our instruments? And our charts? “Unfortunately - and the loss was irreparable - neither the sextant, nor the atlas, nor the nautical almanac had been saved, the disaster taking place in a few seconds.

Fortunately, the banker and the notary and the bargeman carried in their belts the money required for the voyage, and there would be no difficulty in this respect Neither had Tregomain had any difficulty in supporting himself in the water, the weight of the liquid displaced by his volume being greater than that of his body, and he had tranquilly drifted ashore on the surge like a cetacean.

R a It was easy to get dry. The clothes had only to b laid out in the sun for half-an-hour to become as dry as a bone. But there was rather a disagreeable night to be passed undt-r the trees, every man abandoning himself to his own reflections. That they had arrived in the neighbourhood of island number two there could be no doubt. But how were they to determine the exact spot where 3 17’ south latitude crossed 7 23’ east longitude, nowr that Juhel had no sextant or chronometer, and could not take an altitude?

And so each of them according to his character and aspirations remarked to himself.

Zambuco - “This is sinking in sight of port.”

Antifer - “I shall not go away till I have ransacked every island in this bay, if it takes me ten years to do it.”

Saouk - “My well-laid scheme has failed, owing to this absurd shipwreck.”

Barroso - “And those elephants were not insured.”

Ben Omar - “Allah protect us, my commission will have cost me dear, if I ever get it!”

Juhel - “There is nothing now to prevent me going back to Europe, to Enogate.”

Tregomain -” Moral! Never go to sea on a ship with a cargo of facetious elephants.”

Nobody slept very much that night. The shipwrecked ones might not suffer from cold, in what way would they next morning at breakfast time reply to the cravings of their hungry stomachs? At least unless the trees were cocoanut trees laden with fruit, with which, for want of something better, they might support themselves until they reached Ma-Yumba. But how were they to reach this town, which was five or six miles off? Make signals? Would they be seen? Swim five or six miles? Was there one of the crew who could do that? Anyhow, when daylight came the matter would have to be considered.

There was no appearance that this island was inhabited - by human creatures, be it understood. But there was no want of other living things - noisy, inconvenient, dangerous perhaps by their numbers. Tregomain had a notion that all the monkeys in creation had m; t on the island. Perhaps he had landed in the capital of the kingdom of Jocko - or Jockolia?

And though the atmosphere was calm, and the surf hardly rippling on the beach, there was not an hour of peace to be enjoyed on the island. The silence was continuously troubled, and it had been impossible to sleep.

There was a curious uproar among the trees. It seemed as though a troop of Congoese were playing on tom-toms. There was much running backwards and forwards under the branches and among the branches, with guttural cries from husky sentinels; the darkness of the night preventing anything being seen.

When daylight came, the mystery was revealed. The island served as a refuge for a tribe of chimpanzees; and although they had troubled his sleep, Tregomain could not but admire these magnificent specimens of the anthropoid family. These were the very Jockos of Buffon, able to do many things ordinarily reserved for human hands and intelligence, tall, strong, vigorous, the prognathism of the face little marked, the ridges of the eyebrows almost normal. It was by distending their stomachs, and rubbing them vigorously that they produced the drumming noise.

There were about fifty of these chimpanzees who had taken up their abode on the island, but how they had got there from the mainland, how they found sufficient food there, we leave to others to explain. Juhel was not slow to discover that the island - measuring about two miles long and a mile wide - was covered with trees of the different kinds common in tropical latitudes. No doubt these trees produced edible fruit, which gave the chimpanzees their means of existence. Rut the fruits, the roots, the vegetables, on which the chimpanzees fed, man could feed on also. Of this Juhel, the bargeman, and the sailors at once took advantage. After a shipwreck, after a night without food, it is pardonable to be hungry and to seek for something to eat.

The ground produced, in their wild state, a quantity of these fruits and roots. To eat them raw, however, is not very satisfying, unless you have the stomach of a chimpanzee; but you are not forbidden to cook them if you have the means of doing so. When you have a few matches that is possible, if not easy. Fortunately, Nazim had renewed his supplies at Loango, and the brass box in which he kept them had not got wet inside; and consequently almost as soon as the day broke, a wood fire was crackling under the trees of the encampment.

The company were gathered round this fire. Antifer and Zambuco were as angry as ever. Doubtless anger is nourishing, for they refused to share in the rudimentary breakfast, to which were added a few handfuls of the nuts the Guineans think so much of.

The chimpanzees also regaled themselves, and probably did not look kindly on these invaders of their island, these strangers who were attacking their reserves. Soon they began to draw in, and some of them capering about, the others at rest, but all grimacing violently, formed a circle round Captain Antifer and his companions.

“We must be on our guard,” said Juhel to his uncle. “These chimpanzees are powerful fellows, ten times more numerous than we are, and we are without arms -”

Antifer was not likely to care much about chimpanzees 1

“You are right, my boy,” said the bargeman. “These fellows do not seem o be acquainted with the laws of hospitality, and their attitude is threatening -”

“Is there any danger?” asked Ben Omar.

“The danger of being knocked to pieces,” replied Juhel seriously.

At this reply the notary would have fled - but it was impossible.

Barroso, however, placed his men so as to repel any attack. Then Saouk and he began to talk privately, while Juhel watched them.

The subject of their conversation may be guessed. Saouk could not disguise his irritation at the thought of this unexpected shipwreck having wrecked his plan. Another must be devised. As they had arrived in the vicinity of island number two, no doubt the - treasure of Kamylk Pasha would be found on one of the islands in Ma-Yumba Bay, either this or another one. But nothing could be done as yet. This was clear enough to the two scoundrels, so worthy of understanding each other. Of course Barroso would be well paid by his accomplice for the losses he had undergone, and the value of the vessel, her cargo, and the elephants would be restored to him.

The main point was to get to Ma-Yumba as soon as possible. A few fishing-boats had just come away from the coast. They could easily be distinguished. The nearest was being sailed within three miles of the island. The wind was light, and she would not be in sight of the encampment for three or four hours, when they could signal to her. Before the day was over they could all be installed in one of the factories of the town, where they could but receive a hearty welcome and liberal hospitality.

“Juhel! Juhel!”

This appeal suddenly interrupted the conversation between Saouk and the Portuguese.

It was Captain Antifer who had made it, and it was followed by another, -

“Gildas! Gildas!”

Juhel and the bargeman, who had gone to the beach to watch the manoeuvres of the fishing-boats, returned in reply to Antifer.

Zambuco was with him, and Ben Omar at a sign approached.

Leaving Barroso to return to his men, Saouk came gradually nearer the group, so as to hear what was being said. As he had been careful to let it be supposed that he did not understand French, nobody took much notice of his presence.

Juhel,” said Captain Antifer, “listen; for the time has arrived to come to a decision.”

He spoke in a harsh jerky voice, like a man in a paroxysm of irritability.

“The last document tells us that island number two is situated in Ma-YumbaBay. Now, we are in Ma-Yumba Bay, are we not?”

“There is no doubt of it.”

“But we have no longer our sextant and chronometer; for this clumsy Tregomain, to whom I was fool enough to trust them and so lost them -”

“My friend - “said the bargeman.

“I would rather have gut drowned than lost them!” replied Antifer, harshly.

“And so would I,” added the banker.

“Indeed, Mr. ZambucoPl retorted Tregomain, with a gesture of indignation.

“Well, they are lost,” continued Captain Antifer; “and for want of the instruments it will be impossible, Juhel, to determine the position of island number two -”

“Impossible, uncle; and in my opinion the only wise thing to do, is to go to Ma- Yumba in one of those boats, return to Loango by land, and embark on the first steamer that puts in.”

“That - “replied Antifer-” Never!”

And the banker like a faithful echo repeated, -

“Never!”

Ben Omar, looking from one to the other, shook his head, as idiots do, and Saouk listened without seeming to understand.

“Yes, Juhel, we will go to Ma-Yumba; but we will stay there instead of returning to Loango. We will stay there as long as it is necessary - understand me well - to visit the islands in the bay - every one of them.”

“What?”

“There are not many of them, five or six, and if there were a hundred or a thousand I would search them one after the other.”

“Uncle, that is not reasonable.”

“Most reasonable, Juhel; one of them contains the treasure. The document indicates the position of the point where it was buried by Kamylk Pasha -”

“Confound the fellow!” murmured Tregomain.

“With the will and the patience,” continued Antifer,” we shall end by discovering the spot marked by the double K.”

“And if we do not find it?” asked Juhel.

“Do not say that, Juhel!” exclaimed Antifer;” for the sake of heaven do not say that!”

And in a paroxysm of indescribable fury his teeth ground the pebble between his jaws. Never had he been nearer an attack of congestion of the brain.

Juhel did not think it worth while to say any more, in face of such obstinacy. The search, which he thought would end in nothing, could not take much more than a fortnight. When Antifer had convinced himself that there was nothing to hope, he would, whether he liked it or not, have to return to Europe. So he replied, -

“Let us be ready to embark in that fishing-boat as soon as it comes ashore.”

“Not without searching this island!” replied Antifer. Why should we not begin with this one?”

The observation was logical. Who knew if the treasure- seekers had not reached their goal without the aid of sextant and chronometer? Not very likely, you say? Perhaps so! But considering all the disappointments, and fatigues, and perils, why should not the goddess of Fortune have shown herself propitious to her adorers?

Juhel did not venture an objection. The best thing to do was to lose no time. The island might be searched before the fishing-boat reached them. As soon as she came near the rocks, it was to be feared that the crew of the Portalegre would want to go on board, in their haste to get a substantial meal in the factories of Ma-Yumba. Why should they compel these men to submit to a delay, the cause of which could not be explained to them? To inform them of the existence of the treasure would be to put them in possession of the secret of Kamylk Pasha!

Nothing could be more reasonable; but when Antifer and Zambuco, accompanied by Juhel and Tregomain, the notary and Nazim, were leaving the camp, would not Barroso and his men be rather surprised, and would they not be tempted to follow them?

This was a serious difficulty. In case the treasure was discovered, what would this crew do at the exhumation of the casks, containing millions in gold, diamonds and other precious stones? Might it not lead to scenes of violence and robbery, with this mob of adventurers, not one of whom was worth the rope to hang him? Double as numerous as Antifer and his companions, they could soon overpower them, knock them about and murder them. Certainly their captain would not try to restrain them. He would be more likely to lead them on, and claim the lion’s share in the business.

But to oblige Captain Antifer to act only with extreme prudence, to make him understand it would be better to wait a few days, to first reach Ma-Yumba with the shipwrecked crew, and to return next day with a boat specially engaged for the trip, after getting rid of these suspicious fellows, was anything but easy. Juhel's uncle would refuse to listen to reason. Never would they get him away until he had ransacked the island. No consideration would stop him.

The bargeman was promptly sent to the right-about when he offered these very just observations to his intractable friend, the only reception he got being a broadside in two words.

"Come on."

"I entreat you -

"Remain, if you like. I can do without you,"

"A little prudence -"

"Come, Juhel."

And he had to obey.

Antifer and Zambuco left the camp. Tregomain and Juhel followed them. The men made no attempt to move. Barroso did not seem to take any interest in the reason for the passengers walking off.

How was this?

It was because Saouk had heard all that passed, and having no wish to delay or hinder the search, had simply given the Portuguese the word.

Barroso turned to his crew, and ordered them to wait at the point for the fishing- boats, and not move away from the camp. And when that was done, Ben Omar, at a sign from Saouk, started after Antifer, who was not surprised at seeing the notary flanked by his clerk Nazim.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IT was about eight o’clock in the morning, to judge by the height of the sun above the horizon - an “alout” with which we must be contented, owing to the watches having stopped on account of the immersion.

If Barroso’s men had not followed the explorers, it was not so with the chimpanzees. A dozen of them left the troop with the evident intention of escorting the intruders; the others remained around the encampment.

As he walked, the bargeman looked sideways at this savage bodyguard, who answered him with abominable grimaces and threatening gestures and gruff exclamations.

“Evidently,” he thought,” these brutes are talking amongst themselves. I am sorry I cannot understand them. It would be a pleasure to converse in their language!”

An excellent opportunity this to make philological observations, and ascertain if, as Garner the American says, the higher apes have vocal sounds expressive of their different ideas - such as *wliouw* for food, *cheny* for drink, *iegk* for take care, in fact, if in the Simian tongue *a* and *o* are missing, *i* is rare, *e* little used, and *u* and *ou* are the fundamental vowels.

It will not have been forgotten that the document found on the island in the Gulf of Oman gave the particulars of the island in Ma-Yumba Bay, and mentioned the position in which the sign of the double *K* marked the site of the treasure.

On the first island it was on a promontory to the south that the search had to be made and was made. On the second island, on the contrary, it was on one of the northern capes that one of the rocks bore the monogram.

It was on the southern side that the shipwreck had occurred; consequently the exploring party had to march northward a distance of about a couple of miles.

There was nothing surprising in the two legatees being in advance of the group. They walked quickly, without exchanging a word, and would have allowed none of their companions to get in front of them.

Every now and then the notary gave an uneasy look at Saouk. He had no doubt but that he had arranged some villainy with the Portuguese captain. There was one thought he could not get rid of, that if Antifer lost the treasure his commission would probably go the same way. Once or twice he tried to talk to Saouk; but aouk, with gloomy eye and angry look, feeling himself perhaps watched by Juhel, did not reply.

In fact Juhel's mistrust was greatly increased when he noticed how Ben Omar treated Nazim. Even in an Alexandrian office it is not customary for the clerk to command and the notary obey, and there could be no doubt that it was so with these two personages.

The bargeman thought of nothing but the chimpanzees. Now and then his good- looking face would respond to their grimaces, his eye would close, his nose turn up, his lips protrude. Nanon and Enogate would certainly not have recognized him when he abandoned himself to these Simian distortions.

Enogate! Ah! poor child! Assuredly at this moment she was thinking of Juhel, for she was always thinking of him! But that this very day he had been shipwrecked, and was marching amid an escort of chimpanzees - never, no, never, could she have imagined that.

In this latitude at this time of year the sun describes a semicircle from east to west as it passes near the zenith. Consequently the rays it projects on these countries are not oblique but perpendicular. The Torrid Zone is well named, for the zone is literally torrefied from dawn to eve.

“And these jokers do not seem to be warm,” said the bargeman looking at the chimpanzees;” it is enough to make you wish you were an ape.”

To avoid the solar rays, it might have been worth while to advance under the trees. But their trunks began to branch so low down that the forest seemed impenetrable. Unless you were an ape - as Tregomain wished to be - and could travel among the branches, it would have been impossible to have found a passage. And so it was along the shore that Antifer went, skirting the creeks, avoiding the high rocks rising here and there like menhirs, and stumbling over the stones when he could not find any of the sandy beach clear of the rising tide. Is it not a difficult road, hard to the feet, and rough to travel, which leads to fortune? He might sweat blood and water if necessary, but it would not be too much if he was to be eventually paid at the rate of a thousand pounds for every step he took in approaching his goal.

An hour after they left the camp they had only gone a mile, that is half as far as they wanted. From this place the northern points of the island were visible. Three or four ran out from the rest. Which was the right one? Unless they were exceptionally fortunate they would probably have to search them all under the terrific meridian heat.

The bargeman was quite done up.

“Let us rest a moment!” he entreated.

“Not a moment!” replied Captain Antifer.

“But uncle,” said Juhel,” Tregomain is visibly melting.”

“Let him melt!”

“Thank you, my friend!”

And at this reply Tregomain, who did not want to remain behind, resumed his march.

It took another half-hour before they reached the place where the four points branched out. The difficulties of the road increased; some of the obstacles appeared insurmountable. What an indescribable chaos of shingle and ridges of quartz. Really the place had been well chosen, and Kamylk had had a happy knack of hiding treasure which might have been envied by the monarchs of Bassora, Bagdad and Samarkand 1

Here ended the wooded part of the island. Evidently the chimpanzees had no intention of going further. They do not willingly leave the shelter of trees, and the sound of the roaring waves has no attraction for them.

When the escort stopped at the edge of the trees it was not without manifesting intentions that were anything but conciliatory with regard to the strangers who were pursuing their explorations towards the extremity of the island. What howls they uttered! One of them picked up some stones and threw at them, and as the others followed his example, there was some danger of Antifer and his companions being stoned to death. And this is probably what would have happened if they had been imprudent enough to reply, as they were not equal to their aggressors either in strength or number.

“Do not reply - do not reply!” shouted Juhel, seeing Tregomain and Saouk picking up some stones.

“Nevertheless - “said the bargeman, whose hat had been knocked off by a stone.

“No, Tregomain, no; come further away, and we shall be safe. They will not come any further after us.”

This was the best thing to do. Fifty yards more and they would be out of range of the stones.

It was then half-past ten. To the north three points ran out into the sea for a hundred and fifty or two hundred yards. It was the longest one, to the north-west, that Antifer and Zambuco decided to visit first.

Nothing could be more barren than this mass of rocks, some of them firmly buried in the sand, others scattered and rolled about by the sea during the bad weather. No trace of vegetation; not even of lichens coating the humid blocks, not even a scrap of seaweed, so abundant on the shores of the temperate zones. There was nothing to fear with regard to the monogram of Kamylk Pasha. If it had been inscribed on one of these rocks thirty-one years before it would certainly be found intact.

Our explorers began their search exactly as they had done that on the island in the Gulf of Oman. It may hardly be believed but the two legatees were so possessed by their passion that they seemed to suffer no fatigue from their trying march under the burning sun. And Saouk, in the interest of his master

- for who would have imagined it was for his own sake? - set to work with indefatigable zeal. The notary sat between two rocks, and neither moved nor spoke. If they discovered the treasure, there would be time enough for him to intervene and claim the commission to which, being present, he was entitled by the provisions of the will. And he certainly would not be overpaid considering the tribulations he had undergone during three long months.

We need hardly say that by Captain Antifer's orders Juhel remained near him, and began a methodical examination of every foot of the ground.

"It is not very likely," he said to himself, "that we shall find the millions here. First, it is necessary that the treasure is buried on this island and not on one of the other islands in the bay. Secondly, it must be buried on this point. Thirdly we have got to find among this mass of rocks one that bears the double K. But if all these circumstances combine, if it is not a hoax on the part of this abominable Pasha, if I put my hand on the monogram, would it not be better to say nothing about it? My uncle would then give up this deplorable idea of marrying me to a duchess, and Enogate to a duke? Well, no! my uncle would never recover from such a blow. He would go out of his mind. My conscience would tell me I had acted dishonourably. I must go on with this thing!"

And while Juhel was indulging in these reflections, the bargeman was seated on a piece of rock with his arms swaying, his legs hanging down, his cheeks streaming, puffing like a seal come to the surface after prolonged immersion.

The investigations proceeded without result. Antifer, Zambuco, Juhel and Saouk, hunted about, patting all the rocks which by their position might bear the precious monogram. In vain were two wearisome hours devoted to this operation, up to the very end of the point. Nothing - nothing! And, indeed, was it likely that a place would have been chosen exposed to the beating of the surf and the violence of the waves? No! After the search was over on this promontory, would they resume it on the others? Yes; they would resume them next day, and Antifer would recommence his work on another island if he failed on this one.

Having found no trace, the group returned from the point, examining the rocks on the sand as they came. But there was nothing.

At present the only thing to do was to get back to the camp, embark on one of the boats, and cross to Ma- Yumba.

As Antifer, Zambuco, Juhel and Saouk came back from their search, they saw the bargeman and the notary still where they had left them.

Antifer and Zambuco, without uttering a word, went towards the edge of the forest, where the chimpanzees were waiting for them.

Juhel looked at Tregomain.

“Well?” asked the bargeman.

“Not a sign of a double or even of a single K!

“Then we must get back?”

“Just so, get up, and let us be off to the camp.”

“Get up? Yes, if I can! Come! give me a hand, my boy!”

And with a vigorous haul from Juhel, Tregomain rose to his feet Ben Omar was already upright near Saouk.

Antifer and Zambuco were twenty yards in front.

From gestures and clamours the chimpanzees took action. A number of stones were thrown, and it became necessary to stand on the defensive.

Evidently these wretched chimpanzees intended to prevent Antifer and his companions rejoining Barroso and hi3 men at the camp.

Suddenly a shout was heard. It came from Ben Omar. Had the notary been hit by a stone in some sensitive part of his person?

No! It was not a cry of grief that had escaped him. It was a cry of surprise - almost a cry of joy.

They all stopped. The notary, with his mouth open and his eyes shut, stretched out his hand at Tregomain.

“There!” he said,” there!”

“What do you mean?” asked Juhel. “Have you gone mad, Ben Omar?”

“No! There! The K! The double K!” replied the notary, in a voice choked with emotion.

“The K; the double K?” they exclaimed.

“Yes!”

“Where?”

And they looked at the rock towards which Ben Omar seemed to be pointing. Hut they saw nothing.

“But where, you animal?” asked Antifer, in a voice of fury.

“There!” replied the notary.

And his hand pointed at the bargeman, who turned and shrugged his shoulders.

“See it,” said Ben Omar - “on his back!”

In fact, on Tregomain’s jacket, there was clearly enough an impression of a double K. Probably the rock against which he had been leaning bore the monogram, of which the worthy man had taken an impression on his back.

Antifer gave a great leap, seized the bargeman by his arm, and ordered him to return to the place where he had been sitting.

The rest followed, and in less than a minute they were in front of a block of stone, on which the much-sought-for monogram was perfectly legible.

Not only had Tregomain sat with his back up against the rock, but he had sat right down on the place where the treasure was hidden.

No one spoke a word. They set to work. For want of tools the task would be difficult. Could they clear away these rocks with their pocket-knives?

Fortunately the stones, eroded by the weather, could be pulled asunder without much difficulty. In an hour they might have the barrels in sight; then they would only have to take them to the camp, and then to Ma-Yumba. This transport might probably be difficult, and how could it be carried out without awakening suspicion?

Bah! Who was going to think about that? The treasure first; the treasure from the tomb where it had been buried for the third of a century! They could see about the other things afterwards.

Antifer worked till his hands bled. He would not abandon to another the delirious joy of feeling, of patting the precious casks.

“At last!” he cried, as his knife snapped against a metallic surface.

And then, what a yell there was I Good heavens! Not joy, but stupefaction, disappointment, did his white face show.

Instead of the barrels mentioned in Kamylk Pasha’s will, there was an iron box - a box like that found on island number one, with the monogram as usual.

“Again!” Juhel could not help exclaiming.

“It must be a hoax!” murmured Tregomain.

The box was pulled out of the hole, and Antifer opened it savagely.

A document appeared, an old parchment, yellow with age, on which were traced these lines, which Captain Antifer read in a loud voice: -

“Longitude of island number three, fifteen degrees eleven minutes east. After being noted by the co-legatees Antifer and Zambuco, this longitude is to be taken and communicated, in the presence of the notary Ben Omar, to Mr. Tyrcomel, of Edinburgh, Scotland, who possesses the latitude of the third island.”

Then it was not in Ma-Yumba Bay that the treasure was buried I They would have to search elsewhere on the globe by combining this new longitude with the latitude of the said Tyrcomel of Edinburgh! And there were not two to share Kamylk Pasha’s legacy but three!

“And why,” exclaimed Juhel, “should we not be sent from this third island to twenty others, to a hundred others? Come uncle, are you so obstinate, so foolish as to run about all over the world?”

“Without reckoning,” said Tregomain, “that if Kamylk Pasha has made legatees by the hundred, his legacy will not be worth troubling about!”

Antifer looked down on his friend and his nephew, gave his pebble a grind with his jaw, and replied, -

“Silence in the ranks. We have not got to the end yet.”

And straightening out the document, he read as follows: -

“Up to the present, as some compensation for their trouble and expenses, the co- legatees are to each take one of the two diamonds deposited in this box, the value of which is insignificant compared with that of the other precious stones they are asked to search for.”

Zambuco threw himself on the box, which he snatched from Antifer’s hand.

“Diamonds!” he shouted.

And there were in fact, two magnificent diamonds, worth - so the banker said - four thousand pounds the pair.

“It is quite that,” said he, taking one of the diamonds and handing the other to his co-legatee.

“A drop of water in the ocean!” said Antifer, slipping the diamond into one pocket and the document into another.

“Ahem!” said the bargeman, shaking his head, “this is becoming more serious than I thought! We shall see! We shall see!”

But Juhel merely shrugged his shoulders. And Saouk clenched his hands at the thought that never again would he have such a favourable opportunity.

As to Ben Omar, who had not had the smallest brilliant for his share, in spite of the obligation laid on him by this third document, he stood there with his features drawn, his arms limp, his knees shaking just like a half empty sack about to flatten out on the ground.

It is true that Saouk and he were not in the same position as they were when they left St. Malo, ignorant that they were going to Muscat, or when they had left Muscat ignorant that they were going to Loango. Carried away by regrettable excitement, Antifer had let slip the secret he should have rigorously concealed. They had all heard the new longitude, fifteen degrees eleven minutes east; and they all had heard the name of Mr. Tyrcomel, residing at Edinburgh in Scotland.

We may be certain that if Ben Omar had not done so, Saouk had already engraven these figures and this address in his memory until he could write them in his pocket- book; and Antifer anc” the banker would have to be careful not to lose sight of the notary, or his clerk with the moustaches, if they did not want them to outstrip them on their journey to Edinburgh. There might be some reason for thinking that Nazim had not understood, as he did not understand French, but there was no doubt that Ben Omar would reveal the secret to him. And besides, Juhel had noticed that Nazim had not concealed a feeling of satisfied curiosity, when the figures of the longitude and the name of Tyrcomel had so imprudently escaped the lips of Captain Antifer.

After all, what did it matter? In his opinion, it would be madness to submit again for the third time to the posthumous fancies of Kamylk Pasha. What ought to be done was to return to Loango, and take the first steamer on their way to the good town of St. Malo.

Such was the wise and logical proposition that Juhel made to his uncle.

“Never I” replied Captain Antifer. “The Pasha sends us to Scotland; we will go to Scotland, and if I devote the rest of my life to this search -”

“My sister Talisma,” added the banker, “loves you too well not to wait for you, even for ten years!”

“Goodness!” thought Tregomain, “the young lady will then be nearly sixty!”

Observations were useless. Antifer had made up his mind. He would continue in pursuit of the treasure, although the legacy was reduced to a third by the participation of Mr. Tyrcome.

Well, Enogate would have to be content to marry an earl, and Juhel a countess.

CHAPTER XXVII.

“The possession of wealth leads almost inevitably to its abuse. It is the chief, if not the only cause of all the evils which desolate this world below. The thirst for gold is responsible for the most regrettable lapses into sin. Imagine a society in which there were neither rich nor poor. What evils, afflictions, sorrows, disorders, catastrophes, disasters, tribulations, misfortunes, agonies, calamities, despair, desolation and ruin would be unknown to man I”

It was the 25th of June; the church was in Edinburgh; the preacher was the Reverend Mr. Tyrcomel. His eloquent address had lasted for an hour, and the attention of his congregation gave no signs of failing. “The Gospel tells us,” he continued, “that blessed are the poor in spirit A profound axiom that the ignorant and irreligious have in vain sought to misunderstand. It does not say those who are poor in spirit, imbeciles in a word, but those who are poor in spirit, and despise those abominable riches, which are the source of evil in modern society. The Gospel tells us to despise wealth, and if unfortunately we are afflicted with a superfluity of wealth, if silver is stored in your treasure-chests, if gold flows in unto you, if diamonds and precious stones cling to your necks, your arms, your fingers, like an unhealthy eruption, if you are among those whom men call happy in this world, although I think you are thereby unhappy -

I say to you, that your malady requires instant and energetic treatment, if ‘ you wish to be saved.”

And the preacher, continuing, told his hearers that their only chance of safety lay in giving their riches over to destruction. He did not say,” Distribute your wealth among the poor, give it to those who have none.”

No! what he preached was the destruction of this gold and these diamonds and title-deeds and bonds and shares, either by burning them in the fire, or casting them into the water. In short the Rev. Mr. Tyrcomel would have no compromise with the habits and customs of the world in which he lived.

In appearance he was a man of about fifty, tall, thin, smooth-faced, with piercing eyes and a voice as penetrating as that of a preaching friar. Throughout the city he was well known; there were some who thought he was inspired. The people crowded to his sermons; hearers he had many, proselytes he had none; they listened, but they acted not.

Among his listeners on this occasion were five strangers who knew nothing of English and would have known nothing of his discourse if a sixth stranger had not explained it to them. The six were of course, Captain Antifer and Zambuco, Ben Omar and Saouk, Tregomain and Juhel.

We left them on the island in Ma-Yumba Bay, on the 28th of May; we meet with them again here at Edinburgh on the 25th of June.

What has happened between these dates?

After the discovery of the second document, all that could be done was to abandon the island to the chimpanzees, to avail themselves of the boat which had been attracted by the signals of the shipwrecked crew. Captain Antifer and his companions had returned along the shore, escorted by the chimpanzees, more demonstrative than . ever, howling, growling and grimacing, and every now and then assailing the explorers with volleys of tones.

The camp was reached at last. A word or two from Saouk to Barroso told him that the plot had failed. It was impossible to steal treasure from those who had no treasure to steal.

The boat moored in a little creek near the camp, took on board all the survivors of the Portalegre. Two hours later she dropped anchor off the sandy spit on which stands Ma-Yumba. Our travellers, without distinction of nationality, were hospitably received at a French factory. They at once set about arranging! for their return to Loango. Joining a party of Europeans on their way thither, they had nothing to fear from the wild beasts or the natives; but the heat was almost unbearable! When they arrived, the bargeman said that he was reduced to a skeleton. It was an exaggeration, of course, but it was not far from the truth.

Luckily Captain Antifer and his companions did not have to remain at Loango very long. A Spanish steamer from San Paul dc Loanda bound for Marseilles happened to put in two days afterwards for repairs, which were effected in a day. Berths were booked on this steamer, with some of the money saved from the wreck; and on the 25th of June Captain Antifer and his companions left the West Coast of Africa, where they had found two valuable diamonds, anew document and a new disappointment. As to Captain Karroso, Saouk undertook to pay him later on, when he had got hold of the Pasha’s millions - and the Portuguese had to be content with the promise.

Juhel made no attempt to argue with his uncle, although he Cully expected that the campaign would end in some gigantic mystification. A change, however, began to come over the bargeman’s opinion. Those two diamonds, contained in the box on island number two, had given him something to think about.

“If the Pasha,” he said to himself,” has made us a present of these two diamonds, why should we not find some more on island number three?”

And when he talked to Juhel in this way, Juhel would shrug his shoulders, and say.

“Well, we shall see; we shall see.”

This was Antifer’s opinion. As the third legatee, the possessor of the latitude of the third island, lived in Edinburgh; to Edinburgh he would go; and he had no intention of letting himself be outstripped in the race thither by either Zambuco or Ben Omar, who knew the longitude (15 n’ east) which was to be communicated to Mr. Tyrcomel. He would not part company with them; they would go together to Edinburgh by the quickest possible way, and Mr. Tyrcomel would be visited by the whole of them. Of course this resolve was not satisfactory to Saouk. He was now in possession of the secret, and he would much rather have acted alone, found the man mentioned in the document, obtained the position of the third island, gone there and dug up the riches of Kamylk Pasha. But he could not get away without awakening suspicion, and he knew that he was being watched by Juhel. Besides, the only way he could go was by Marseilles, and as Antifer was going to Edinburgh by the shortest way, and in the shortest time, by travelling on the railways of France and England, Saouk could not hope to get there before him. He had therefore to resign himself to the inevitable. Once matters had been cleared up with this Mr. Tyrcomel, perhaps the attempt, which had failed at Loango and Muscat, might succeed at Edinburgh.

The passage was fairly quick, as the steamer made no calls at the by-ports. It was rough certainly, and of course Ben Omar was landed like a package on the quay of La Joliette.

Juhel had written a long letter to Enogate. He told her all that had happened at Loango. He informed her of the new campaign on which their uncle’s obstinacy was sending them, and who could say where the caprice of the Pasha might send them in the future! He added that as far as he could see, Captain Antifer was quite equal to running about the world like the wandering Jew, and that he would not stop until he was raving mad - which would assuredly happen before all was over.

Juhel had only just time to slip this letter into the post. Antifer was off in the fast train from Marseilles to Paris, then by the express from Paris to Calais, then by boat to Dover, then from Dover to London, and then by the Flying Scotchman from London to Edinburgh. As soon as they had secured their rooms at Gibb’s Royal Hotel, they started out in search of Mr. Tyrcomel, and to their great surprise Mr. Tyrcomel turned out to be a minister. They found his address, and then found that he was at the church; and to the church they went.

Their intention was to introduce themselves to him when the sermon was over, to tell him their story. A man to whom they were bringing a million or so was not likely to complain at being intruded upon.

At the same time it all seemed rather strange. What connection could have existed between Kamylk Pasha and this Scottish minister? Antifer’s father had saved the Egyptian’s life - well. Zambuco had saved his riches - well. Hence the feeling of gratitude he had shown towards these two. Were they to conclude that Mr. Tyrcomel possessed a similar right to recognition? Evidently. But under what peculiar circumstances could a minister have helped Kamylk Pasha in any way? It must be so, however, for this minister was the depositary of the third latitude necessary for the discovery of the third island.

But when the treasure-seekers saw the minister in the pulpit it was evident that some other explanation would have to be sought for. He could not have been more than twenty-two when Kamylk was thrown into prison at Cairo, by order of Mehemet Ali, and it was not likely that he could have rendered him any service before that. Was it his father, or his grandfather, or uncle, who had put the Egyptian under an obligation ?

However, it was of no importance. The point was that this minister possessed the precious latitude, and that before the day was out they would know all about it.

The sermon continued. The same thesis, with the same impassioned eloquence. An invitation to kings to throw their civil-lists into the sea, an invitation to queens to throw their diamonds into the flames, an invitation to the rich to destroy every scrap of their wealth.

Juhel sat astounded, muttering to himself.

Here is another complication! Decidedly uncle will have no chance with this man! Can this be the sort of man the Pasha knew? Is it from this excited minister that we are to ask the means of discovering a treasure? This man would be only too eager to destroy it, if it ever fell into his hands! Here is an obstacle we never expected - an insurmountable obstacle, which will bring our proceedings to a close. We shall get a peremptory refusal, a refusal to which we cannot reply, a refusal which will bring the reverend gentleman immense popularity. That will settle my uncle, and his mind will give way. Zambuco and he, and perhaps this Nazim, will do all they dare to get the secret of the minister. They are capable of everything. But if he keeps the secret? I do not know if, as he says, millions do not bring happiness, but running after those of the Egyptian certainly delayed mine! And if Mr. Tyrcomel refuses to cross his latitude with our longitude, which we have conquered at so much trouble, we can do nothing else than retire tranquilly to France, and -”

“When God commands we must obey!” said the preacher at this moment. “That is my opinion,” thought Juhel,” and my uncle will have to submit” But the sermon did not end, and there seemed no reason why it should not last until eternity. Antifer and the banker began to give visible marks of impatience. Saouk bit his moustache. The notary, so long as he was not on shipboard, did not worry himself about anything Tregomain with his mouth open, his head nodding, his ears pricked up, tried to catch a word here and there, which he vainly endeavoured to translate.

“If,” said Antifer, “he only knew the news I am bringing him, this preacher would soon get out of his pulpit -”

“Would he?” asked Juhel, in a tone so singular that Antifer frowned at him in a terrible way.

But all things must end in this world - even a Scottish sermon. It became evident that Mr. Tyrcomel had reached his peroration. His delivery became more laboured, his gestures more violent, his metaphors more audacious, his objurgations more menacing. One more blow against the fortune-holders, the possessors of the vile metal, with an injunction to throw it into the furnace of this world if they would avoid being hurled into that of the next; and then a supreme effort, to the effect that when they were weighed in the balance the weight of their gold would sink them to perdition - the sermon was over, and the preacher had suddenly disappeared.

Captain Antifer, Zambuco and Saouk had intended to interview him as he came out of church. Would they have to wait until the morning? Were they to pass the night in the tortures of curiosity? No! They would rush to the central porch.

Juhel and the notary, and Tregomain followed them. But their endeavour was in vain. Evidently Mr. Tyrcomel, to avoid an ovation, had escaped by a side door.

“To 17, North Bridge Street!” said Captain Antifer.

“But, uncle -”

“Before he goes to bed we must see him,” said the banker.

“But Mr. Zambuco -”

“No remarks, if you please.”

“There is only one thing -

“What is that?” asked Antifer angrily.

“What he has been preaching about -”

“What has that to do with us?”

“A good deal.”

“You are making fun of us.”

“I am quite serious, and I say that nothing could be more unfortunate for you -”

“For me?”

Yes! listen I”

And in a few words Juhel explained what had been the purport of the sermon, that all the millions in the world ought to be thrown into the sea.

The banker was aghast And so was Saouk, although he pretended not to understand. As for Tregomain, he indulged in a huge grimace of disappointment.

Antifer alone remained unshaken. In a tone of bitter irony he remarked, -

“Fool! The only people who preach like that are those who have not a halfpenny to lose! We have only got to talk about the millions that are coming, and you will see if this Tyrcomel will throw them into the sea.”

Evidently this reply betrayed a profound knowledge of human nature. But it was decided to give up the idea of visiting the reverend gentleman that evening, and the six travellers returned to Gibb’s Royal Hotel

CHAPTER XXVIII.

The house in which Mr. Tyrcomel lodged was in the neighbourhood of the Canon- gate, the windows looking out on to the valley in which runs the railway. It was a gloomy, uncomfortable house up one of those sordid, insanitary alleys known as closes, running out of this historic thoroughfare, which, under different names, extends from the Palace of Holyrood to the Castle of Edinburgh - one of the four Scottish fortresses which by the articles of the treaty of Union have always to be kept in repair.

It was at the door of this house, that on the morning of the 26th of June, Captain Antifer and the banker Zambuco accompanied by Juhel, arrived, just as eight o'clock was striking from the neighbouring church. Ben Omar had not been asked to join them, his presence being useless at this first interview, and consequently, much to his disgust, Saouk was also absent. If the minister divulged the secret of the latitude he would not be there to hear it, and it would therefore be impossible for him to outstrip Antifer in the search for island number three.

As to the bargeman, he remained at the hotel, and, while awaiting the return of the visitors, amused himself by contemplating the marvels of Princes Street, and the pretentious elegancies of the Scott monument. As far as Juhel was concerned, it had not been possible to dispense with him, as his uncle required his services as interpreter. It can be imagined how eager they were to find where island number three was situated.

Saouk, it may be observed, was furious when he found himself left behind, and as usual vented his anger on Ben Omar.

“Yes! It is your fault,” he shouted, knocking over some of the furniture,” and I have a great mind to pay you out with a good thrashing!”

“Excellency, I did all I could -”

“No, you did not do all you could. You should have forced yourself on this rascally sailor, and told him that your presence was necessary, and that you would be there. You would then have found out and told me about this new island, and I might have perhaps got there before the others. My plans were spoilt at Muscat, they were spoilt again at Ma-Yumba; do you think they are going to fail again because you remain stuck there on your feet like an old ibis stuffed with straw?”

“I beg-”

“And I swear, that if I fail, it is your skin that will pay for it.”

The scene continued in this way, and became so violent that the bargeman heard the noise. He went to the door of the room, and it was lucky for Saouk that he was speaking in Egyptian. If he had assailed Ben Omar in French, Tregomain would have discovered his abominable schemes, and learnt who the so-called Nazim really was, and treated that personage as he deserved.

But although this was not revealed to him, he was thoroughly surprised at the violence with which Ben Omar was treated by his clerk, and saw that the young captain’s suspicions were fully justified.

Entering the minister’s house, Captain Antifer, Zambuco and Juhel began to ascend a wooden staircase with the aid of the greasy rope hanging on the wall. Never would the bargeman, thin as he might have become, have been able to make his way up these dark, narrow stairs.

The visitors reached the landing on the third floor, the last on this side of the house. In front of them was a small door in a recess, on which was the name Tyrcomel. Antifer uttered a vigorous grunt of satisfaction, and knocked.

The reply was a long time coming. Was not the minister at home? Why not? A man to whom you are bringing a million or so -

A second knock, rather louder than the first.

This time there was a slight noise in the interior of the room. It was not the door that opened, but a little hole just above the name.

Through this hole appeared a head, that of the minister.

“What do you want?” asked the minister, in a tone that showed he was not over-pleased at being disturbed.

“We wish to speak to you for a few minutes,” said Juhel.

“What about?”

“A matter of important business.”

“I have no business - important or otherwise.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Antifer, annoyed at so much delay. “Is he going to let us in?”

But as soon as the minister heard him speak in French, he answered as if it were his native tongue.

“Are you Frenchmen, then?”

“Frenchmen,” replied Juhel.

And imagining that it might facilitate their introduction into the minister’s room, he added,” Frenchmen, who heard your sermon yesterday.”

“And who think of becoming converts to my teaching?” asked the minister.

Perhaps.”

“On the contrary,” said Antifer,” he must be converted to ours, unless he chooses to give up his share -”

The door was opened, and the three visitors found themselves in the minister’s presence.

It was one room, lighted at the end by the window looking out over the ravine. In one corner was an iron bedstead, with a straw mattress and a counterpane; in another corner was a table with a few toilet utensils. There was a bench for a seat. There was a cupboard in which the minister kept his clothes. On a shelf were a few books and writing materials. There were no curtains. and the walls were bare. There was a table with a reading lamp, the shade of which was very low. It was a bedroom and a study, in which there was nothing that was not strictly necessary.

The minister, who was all in black except his collar and tie, did not ask his visitors to sit down, as he had but one seat to one of them. In truth, if ever millions would be welcome anywhere, it ought to be in this cell, the whole contents of which were not worth thirty shillings.

Captain Antifer and Zambuco looked at one another. How were they to open fire? As soon as their co-legatee began to speak French, Juhel’s intervention was unnecessary, and he became merely a spectator. He preferred to be so, and it was not without a certain feeling of curiosity that he awaited the encounter. Who would be the conqueror?

At the outset Captain Antifer felt more embarrassed than he ever expected to be. After what he knew of this revolutionary minister, of his opinions regarding this world’s goods, he judged it advisable to proceed with caution, to feel his way, to break the news gently, so as to persuade the minister to hand over the letter of Kamylk Pasha, which ought to be in his possession, and which there could be no doubt contained the figures of the new and - let us hope - the last latitude.

But Antifer had no chance of beginning. While his three visitors were forming a group in the back of the room, the minister placed himself in front of them in the attitude of a preacher.

Persuaded that these men had come of their own free will to accept his teaching, his only thought was to enlarge on his principles with as much eloquence as he could muster.

“My brethren,” he said, clasping his hands in an outburst of gratitude, “I thank the Author of all things for not having refused me that gift of persuasion, which has enabled me to instil into your hearts that contempt of wealth -”

Imagine the faces of the two legatees at this exordium!

“By destroying the wealth you possess -” continued the minister, -

“Which we do not yet possess “- Antifer could not help saying.

“You will give an admirable example, which will be followed by all those whose minds are capable of rising above the materialities of life.”

Antifer, by a sudden movement of his jaw, jerked the pebble from one side of his mouth to the other, while Zambuco whispered, -

“Are you not going to explain the object of our visit?”

An affirmative sign was Antifer’s reply, while he muttered to himself,” I must not let him give us his yesterday’s sermon over again.”

The minister, opening his arms as if to receive repentant sinners, said in a voice full of unction, -

“Your names, my brethren, in order that -”

“Our names, Mr. Tyrcomel,” interrupted Captain Antifer,” are these. I am Pierre Servan Malo Antifer, retired coasting captain; this is Juhel Antifer, my nephew, master mariner; this is Mr. Zambuco, banker of Tunis.”

The clergyman stepped to the table in order to write down these names.

“And doubtless you bring me your worldly wealth, thousands perhaps?”

“Well, Mr. Tyrcomel we have come about millions, and when you have got your share you can destroy it as you please. But as far as we are concerned, that is another matter.”

Antifer was off’ on the wrong tack. Juhel and Zambuco saw this at once by the change which took place in the minister’s face. His forehead wrinkled, his eyes half turned, his arms, which he had opened wide, fell on his chest as if they were shutting the door of a safe.

“What, then, is all this about, gentlemen?” he asked, stepping back.

“What is it all about?” asked Antifer. “Come, Juhel, unroll the thing, for I should not be able to measure my words.”

And Juhel “unrolled “the thing without reticence. He related all that he knew about Kamylk Pasha, the services rendered by his great-uncle Thomas Antifer, the obligations contracted with the banker Zambuco, the visit to St. Malo of Ben Omar, notary of Alexandria, the voyage to the Gulf of Oman, where lay island number one, followed by the voyage to Ma-Yumba Bay, where lay island number two, the discovery of the second document which sent the two co-legatees to a third legatee, who was no other than the reverend gentleman to whom he was speaking.

While Juhel spoke, the clergyman listened, without making a movement, without permitting his eyes to brighten or his muscles to twitch. A statue of marble or bronze could not have been more motionless. And when the young captain finished his story, and asked him if he had ever had any business with Kamylk Pasha, the minister simply replied, -

“No.”

“But your father?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe is not an answer,” observed Juhel, calming his uncle, who was turning about as if he had been stung by a tarantula.

“It is the only answer I think it necessary to give,” replied the minister, drily.

“Insist, Mr. Juhel, insist,” said the banker.

“In every possible way, Mr. Zambuco,” replied Juhel.

And addressing the minister, who evidently intended to maintain extreme reserve.

“May I ask you one question,” he said - “only one?”

“Yes, and I can answer it or not as I please.”

“Is it within your knowledge that your father was ever in Egypt”?”

“No.”

“But if it was not Egypt, it might be Syria, or to be more precise, Aleppo?”

It will not be forgotten that it was in this town that Kamylk Pasha had resided for some years before he returned to Cairo.

After a moment of hesitation, Mr. Tyrcomel admitted that his father had lived at Aleppo, where he had met Kamylk Pasha. There, no doubt, he had been of service to the Pasha, as had Thomas Antifer and Zambuco.

“I will now ask you,” continued Juhel, “if your father received a letter from Kamylk Pasha?”

“Yes.”

“A letter in which there was some mention of the position of an island in which treasure was buried?”

“Yes.”

“And did not this letter contain the latitude of this island?”

“Yes.”

“And did it not say that one day a certain Antifer and a certain Zambuco would come and see you on this subject?”

“Yes.”

Every “yes” fell like a hammer stroke, louder and louder.

“Well,” continued Juhel, “Captain Antifer and the banker Zambuco are in your presence, and if you will show them the Pasha’s letter, they will have only to make a note of its contents, and be off to fulfil the intentions of the testator, of whom you and they are the three legatees.”

As Juhel spoke, Captain Antifer struggled in vain to keep still. The minister paused before he replied.

“And when you have reached the place where the treasure is, what are your intentions?”

“To unearth it, of course!” said Antifer.

“And when you have unearthed it?”

“To divide it into three shares.”

“And what are you going to do with your shares?”

“Whatever we please.”

“That is it, gentlemen!” replied the minister, while his eyes glowed like fire. You intend to take advantage of these riches to satisfy your instincts, your appetites, your passions. That is to say, to contribute towards the increase of the iniquities of the world!”

“Allow me - “interrupted Zambuco.

“No, I will not allow you; and I ask you this simple question: If this treasure falls into your hands, will you undertake to destroy it?”

“Each will do with his legacy as he judges best,” said the banker, evasively.

Antifer exploded.

“That is not it, at all!” he shouted. “Do you know what this treasure is worth?”

“It makes no difference.”

“It is worth four million pounds, and there is a third of that for you.”

The minister shrugged his shoulders.

“Are you aware that you are not allowed to refuse us the information the testator requires you to give?”

“Really?”

“Do you know that you have no more right to leave four millions unproductive than to steal them?”

“That is not my opinion.”

“Do you know that if you persist in your refusal,” yelled Captain Antifer in a fury, “we shall not hesitate to bring you to justice - to denounce you as a fraudulent legatee, as a criminal.”

“As a criminal!” repeated the minister, angry but cool. “Really, gentlemen, your audacity equals your absurdity. Do you imagine that I shall agree to spreading four millions over the earth to become the cause of four million sins the more? To stultify all my teachings, and give my congregation the chance of flinging four millions in my face!”

Juhel could not help admiring the preacher, while his uncle, wild with anger, was ready to spring on him.

“Yes or no!” hissed Antifer, clenching his fists and stepping forward - “yes or no, will you give us the Pasha’s letter?”

“No.”

Antifer foamed at the mouth.

“No.”

“No.”

“Ah. I will make you give it to us!”

Juhel interposed. His uncle pushed him aside. Antifer would have strangled the minister, searched the rooms, ransacked the cupboard, and it would not take him long to do so. But he was stopped dead by this simple and peremptory reply, -

“It is useless for you to search for the letter.”

“And why?” asked Zambuco.

“Because I have not got it”

“What have you done with it?”

“I have burnt it.”

“He has put it in the fire!” gasped Antifer. “The wretch! A letter containing the secret of four millions - a secret never to be discovered now!”

And it was only too true. Doubtless for fear of being tempted to make use of it - a use contrary to all his principles - the reverend gentleman had burnt the letter several years before.

“And now you can go!” said he, showing his visitors the door.

Antifer was overwhelmed at the blow. The document destroyed! The finding of the island impossible!

And so it was with Zambuco, who burst into tears, like a child deprived of his plaything.

Juhel had to help the two legatees out on to the stairs, then into the road; and then sorrowfully they went back to the hotel.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SUCH emotions, disasters, anxieties, troubles, shocks, and alternations of hope and despair, were too much for Captain Antifer. Even the constitution of a coasting captain has its limits. And as soon as Juhel's much-harassed uncle reached the hotel he took to his bed. He was attacked by fever, a violent fever, with delirium, the consequences of which might be serious. What deceptive illusions haunted him! This campaign interrupted just at the moment when it promised to end successfully; the uselessness of further search; this enormous treasure of which they would never know the position; this third island lost in some unknown sea; the only document that could give its exact position destroyed, burnt, by this abominable minister; this latitude, which not even torture would make him disclose, and which he had voluntarily and criminally forgotten. Yes! It was to be feared that Antifer's much- troubled mind would be unable to resist this last blow, and the doctor called in haste gave it as his opinion that there was every likelihood of the patient going mad.

Every care was taken of him. His friend Tregomain and his nephew Juhel would not leave him for a moment, and, if he recovered, would be entitled to his warmest gratitude.

As soon as he returned to the hotel, Juhel had informed Ben Omar, and through him Saouk learnt all about Mr. Tyrcomel's refusal. The fury of the false Nazim can be imagined. But this time there was no outward manifestation of his anger. He kept it to himself, hoping thatthe secret which Antifer could not discover might be discovered by himself, and utilized for his sole advantage. This was the object on which he concentrated his attention, and during that day and the subsequent days he was not seen at the hotel.

When the bargeman heard what had happened, he remarked, -

“I think the matter is buried at last.”

“I think so too,” said Juhel. “It seems impossible to get anything out of this obstinate fanatic.”

“It is rather funny though, to take millions to a minister, and find him refuse them.”

“Take millions!” exclaimed the young captain shaking his head.

“You do not believe in them, Juhel? You may be wrong!”

“How you have changed!”

“Since the finding of those diamonds. I do not say that the millions are on the third island, but they may be there. Unfortunately, if this clergyman will not listen to anything, we shall never know.”

“Well, no, Mr. Tregomain, and in spite of the two diamonds at Ma-Yumba, nothing will prevent my thinking that the Pasha has a huge hoax in store for us.”

“In that case your poor uncle will suffer! What we have to do now is to get him well. Let us hope his head will stand it. When we have set him on his feet again and he is strong enough to travel, he will, I think, agree to return to France, and resume his former quiet life.”

“Ah!” said Juhel,” would we were only in the house in the Rue des Hautes-Salles ?”

“And you near our little Enogate, my boy! By the way, did you think of writing to her?”

“I wrote this morning, and said I thought we might now talk of coming home.”

A few days elapsed. The patient had become no worse. The fever had decreased, but the doctor was uneasy as to the mental state of his patient. Antifer, though his head was weak, was able to recognize Tregomain and Juhel, and his future brother- in-law. Brother in-law? Between ourselves, if any lady was in danger of remaining single, was it not Talisma Zambuco, now on the confines of fifty, and waiting, not without impatience, for the appearance of her promised husband? No treasure, no husband, for one was the complement of the other.

From all which it resulted that neither the bargeman nor Juhel could leave the hotel. Antifer was always asking for them. Day and night he kept them in his room, listening to his complaints, his recriminations, and above all his menaces against the horrible minister. He spoke of nothing else than going to law with him. The judges would know how to make him speak. He could not keep silent when it meant keeping four millions out of circulation. He would be punished most severely, most terribly, might even be hanged, etc. etc.

From morning to night Antifer continued in this tone. Tregomain and Juhel took it in turns to be with him, except when some violent crisis required them both to be present The patient would have got up, rushed out of his room, run away to the minister and blown out his brains, if the bargeman’s strong hand had not kept him down.

Although he greatly desired to visit this superb city of Edinburgh, Tregomain had to give up the idea. Later on, when his friend was on the road to recovery, he would make up for it. He would visit the palace of Holyrood, the ancient residence of the Scottish kings. He would stroll along the Canongate to the Castle firmly planted on its rock, and see the little room in which the child came into the world who was to become James the Sixth of Scotland and James the First of England. He would make the ascent of Arthur’s Seat, and enjoy the view from its summit Soon a rumour arose calculated to greatly increase Mr. Tyrcomel’s already considerable popularity. It was reputed that the celebrated preacher had, in conformity with his expressed opinions, just refused a very large legacy. Perhaps the minister had himself started the rumour, which was so much to his advantage; at any rate there was an immense crowd to hear his next sermon.

This time, for a very good reason, Captain Antifer and his companions were not present. But behind one of the columns in the nave, there might have been recognized a foreigner whom nobody knew, of from thirty to thirty-five years of age, with black hair and beard, hard featured, and of any but prepossessing appearance. Did he understand the language in which the minister spoke? We cannot say that he did. Standing hidden in the shade, he watched the preacher narrowly. His gleaming eyes never lost sight of him for a moment.

The man remained in this attitude until the close of the sermon, and, when the last words were spoken, made his way through the crowd towards the minister. Did he intend to follow him from the church to his house in the Canongate? It would seem like it, from the vigour with which he used his elbows on the steps of the porch.

That evening Mr. Tyrcomel did not return alone. A small crowd accompanied him. The mysterious man was one of them, but did not join in their expressions of enthusiasm. On reaching his house, the popular orator ascended some of the outer steps and addressed the crowd; and then retired, without noticing that an intruder was at his heels. The crowd slowly dispersed, and when the minister mounted the narrow staircase leading to the third floor, the unknown followed him as stealthily as a cat.

The minister reached the landing, entered his room and shut the door.

The other stopped on the landing, cowered down in a dark corner, and waited.

And then what happened?

Next morning the people in the house were surprised at not seeing the minister go out early as usual. They did not see him all the morning. Several visitors called and knocked at the door in vain.

This appeared so suspicious that in the afternoon one of the lodgers gave information to the police. The police came to the house, mounted the staircase, knocked at the door, and as they received no reply, broke it in, with that push from the shoulder peculiar to the officers of the force.

What a spectacle! Some one had evidently picked the lock of the door, entered the room, and ransacked it from top to bottom. The cupboard was open, and emptied of the few clothes it contained, which had been thrown on the ground. The table was upset. The lamp lay in a corner. Books and papers were scattered all over the floor; and near the bed. half-stripped, pinioned and gagged, was Mr. Tyrcomel.

The police quickly set him free. He was only just breathing. He had quite lost consciousness. Since when? He alone could say, if he recovered.

He was rubbed energetically. There was no need to take his clothes off, for he was almost naked; his shirt was torn from his back, his chest and shoulders were bare.

The policeman who began to rub him could not restrain an exclamation of surprise. On Mr. Tyrcomel’s left shoulder some figures and a letter had been tattooed.

The tattoo marks were legible enough, brown in colour, on the minister’s white skin. And this was the inscription - 77 19’ N.

As may be supposed, this was the much-sought-for latitude! The minister’s father, to prevent it being lost, had evidently had it tattooed on his son’s shoulder when he was young, as if he had inscribed it in a note book. A note-book might be lost, but not a shoulder. Thus it was that, although he had really burnt the letter of Kamylk Pasha addressed to his father, the minister possessed this inscription so strangely placed, an inscription he had never had the curiosity to read with the aid of a looking- glass.

But undoubtedly the rascal who had entered the room while the minister was asleep had read it. The minister had found him ransacking his cupboard and looking over his papers. In vain had he struggled. After binding him and gagging him, the scoundrel had fled, leaving him half suffocated.

Such were the details given by Mr. Tyrcomel as soon as a doctor, summoned in haste, had restored him to consciousness. He related all that had passed. In his opinion the sole object of the assault was to wrest from him the secret of the island of the millions he refused to disclose.

The scoundrel, then, had found it out while struggling with him. And with regard to this he spoke of the visit he had received from two Frenchmen and a Maltese, come to Edinburgh to interrogate him regarding the legacy of Kamylk Pasha.

Here was a clue for the police, who began their inquiries immediately. Two hours afterwards they discovered that the foreigners in question were at Gibb’s Royal Hotel.

And it was fortunate for Captain Antifer, Zambuco, Tregomain, Juhel and Ben Omar that they could prove an incontestable alibi. Antifer had not left his bed; Juhel and the bargeman had not left his room; Zambuco and the notary had not been away from the hotel. And none of them answered to the description given by the minister.

But there was Saouk.

Saouk was the man. He it was who had gone to get the secret from Mr. Tyrcomel. And now, thanks to the figures he had found on that gentleman’s back, he was master of the situation. He knew the longitude mentioned in the document found on the island in Ma-Yumba Bay, and thus possessed the necessary elements for determining the position of the new island.

Unfortunate Antifer! It needed but this last blow to drive him mad. In fact, after the description given in the newspapers, Captain Antifer, Zambuco, Tregomain and Juhel, had no doubt but that it was Nazim, this clerk ofBen Omar with whom Mr. Tyrcomel had had to do; and when they learned that he had disappeared, they took it for granted that he had seen the figures that had been tattooed, and that he had started for the new island, to take possession of the treasure.

The least astonished of the party was Juhel, whose suspicions with regard to Nazim we know, and next to him Tregomain, to whom the young captain had communicated his suspicions. The rage of Antifer and Zambuco was extreme, and it found a victim in the person of Ben Omar.

We need scarcely say that Ben Omar was more certain than anybody of the guilt of Saouk. And how could it be otherwise, knowing as he did his intentions, and that he was the sort of man who would recoil at nothing, not even at crime?

What a scene it was to which the notary had to submit! Juhel fetched him to the sick room. Ill as he might have been, Antifer was not the man to remain ill under such circumstances. If, as the doctor said, he was suffering from bilious fever, here was a splendid opportunity for him to relieve himself of his bile, and bring about his own recovery.

We really cannot describe the way in which the unfortunate notary was treated. He was told, to begin with, that the assault on the minister and the robbery - “Yes, you miserable Omar! the robbery” - was the work of Nazim. “What, is that the way you choose the clerks in your office? - Is this the sort of man you bring to assist you as an executor? - A nice sort of rascal, scoundrel, villain, to thrust upon us!” And now this wretch, this unscrupulous wretch, had fled with the position of island number three, and he would get hold of Kamylk Pasha’s millions, and it would be impossible to lay hands on him!

“Ah! Saouk! Saouk!”

The name escaped the overwhelmed notary. All Juhel’s suspicions were confirmed. Nazim was not Narim. He was Saouk, the son of Mourad, disinherited by Kamylk for the benefit of the legatees.

“What!” exclaimed Juhel. “It was Saouk!”

Ben Omar would have recalled the name if he could. His face, his terror, his dejection showed only too clearly that Juhel was not mistaken.

“Saouk!” roared Antifer, jumping out of bed with a bound.

And with a tremendous kick he laid the notary flat on his back.

This kick, with the broadside of abuse that followed it, was a real relief to Captain Antifer, and when Ben Omar, with his shoulders up and his stomach in, tottered out of the room, he felt considerably better. One thing more completed the cure, and that was the news that appeared in one of the newspapers a day or two afterwards.

We know of what reporters and interviewers are capable. Of everything, it must be admitted. At this period they had begun to intervene in public and private affairs, with a vigour and audacity that had made them a new power in the world. One of them had been clever enough to obtain an interview with regard to the tattoo marks with which Mr. Tyrcomel’s father had illustrated his son’s left shoulder. He made a drawing of it, and this drawing appeared next day in a journal the circulation of which on that occasion was so phenomenal that in a short time the whole world knew of the famous latitude - 17 19’ N.

The public were not much the wiser, for before they could solve “the treasure problem “as it was called, they required the other element of the position namely, the longitude.

But Antifer had this longitude - and so had Saouk for that matter - and when Juhel brought him the newspaper in question, and he saw the drawing, he jumped out of bed, he put on his clothes - he was cured as never a patient had been cured before.

“Juhel, have you bought another atlas?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“The longitude of the third island is 15 n’ E.. is it not?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“The latitude tattooed on the minister’s shoulder Is 17 19’ N. is it not?”

“Yes, uncle.”

“Well, see where island number three ought to be.”

Juhel took the atlas, opened up the map of the Arctic regions, applied the compasses, and remarked, -

“Spitzbergen, the southern end of the large island.”

Spitzbergen? What, was it in this northern region that Kamylk had chosen an island for his millions? Was this the last island?

“Let us go,” said Antifer,” this very day, if we can find a ship ready.”

“Uncle!” exclaimed Juhel.

“We must not let this miserable Saouk get there before us.”

“You are right, my friend,” said the bargeman.

“Let us go!” repeated Antifer imperiously. And ha added, -

“Go and tell that fool of a notary, for Kamylk Pasha wanted him to be present at the discovery of the treasure.”

They had to bow to his will, supported as it was by the will of Zambuco.

“Well,” said Juhel,” at any rate, it is lucky that this joker of a Pasha did not send us to the Antipodes.”

CHAPTER XXX.

CAPTAIN Antifer and his four companions - including Ben Omar - had to go first to Bergen, one of the chief ports of Norway.

No sooner resolved upon than done. Nazim. otherwise Saouk, had a start of four or five days, and not an hour was to be lost. The noonday ball had not fallen at the Edinburgh Observatory when the tram deposited our five friends at Leith, where they hoped to find a steamer on the point of sailing for Bergen. The distance from Edinburgh to this port is only about four hundred miles. From there it would be easy to reach Hammerfest, the northern- most Norwegian port, by means of the steamer which, in the summer season, takes tourists to the North Cape.

From Bergen to Hammerfest is about eight hundred miles, and it is about six hundred miles from Hammerfest to the south end of Spitzbergen. For this last stage a vessel would have to be chartered fit for the voyage, but at this period of the year there is no bad weather in that part of the Arctic Ocean.

There remained the question of money. This third voyage would evidently be very costly, particularly that part of it north of Hammerfest. Tregomain's funds had begun to run low, after so much expenditure since leaving St. Malo. Fortunately the banker's signature was as good as gold. There are people so favoured by fortune that they can dip their hands into any money-chest in Europe. Zambuco was one of these. He placed his credit at the disposal of his co-legatee. The brothers-in law could adjust their accounts afterwards. The treasure, and in default of the treasure, the diamond, of the one would yield more than enough to pay what the other had advanced.

Before leaving Edinburgh, the banker had visited the Bank of Scotland, where he was cordially received. Thus laden, our travellers could go to the end of the world, and who knows if they would not have to go there if things went on as they had been doing?

At Leith, situated a mile and a half from Edinburgh, on the Firth of Forth, there are always a number of vessels. If there was one outward bound for the coast of Norway? There was one. This time fortune seemed to favour Antifer.

Though the said ship was not to start that day, she was due out next day. She was a trading steamer, the Viking: Here was a delay of thirty-six hours for Juhel’s uncle to fret about. He would not even allow Juhel and Tregomain to take a stroll through Edinburgh - much to the disgust of the bargeman, notwithstanding the interest he had begun to take in the millions of the Pasha.

On the yth of July the Viking left the docks, and two days afterwards sighted the heights of Norway, arriving at Bergen about three in the afternoon.

We need scarcely say that before leaving Edinburgh Juhel had bought a sextant, a chronometer, and a nautical almanac, to replace those lost in the Portalegre.

If they could have chartered a vessel at Leith direct for Spitzbergen they would have saved time, but the opportunity did not present itself. Antifer’s impatience, however, was not tried over-much. The steamer for the North Cape was expected next day; but the few hours seemed as long to him as they did to Zambuco. Neither of them would hear of leaving their hotel.

Besides, it rained, for it seems that it generally rains at Bergen, which occupies a sort of basin surrounded by mountains.

This did not prevent the bargeman and Juhel from taking a run through the town. Captain Antifer, quite recovered from his fever, did not insist on their remaining with him. But all that was worth seeing they had seen when in the early morning the steamer came into the harbour. At ten o'clock she was off with her cargo of tourists, anxious to see the midnight sun on the horizon of the North Cape.

This was a phenomenon of supreme indifference to Captain Antifer and Zambuco, and especially so to Hen Omar, who was in his usual state of collapse in his bunk.

What most annoyed Antifer was the steamer's continual stoppages to satisfy the curiosity of the tourists.

The thought that Saouk was several days in front of him kept him in a state of irritation that was anything but agreeable to his travelling companions. The remonstrances of Tregomain and Juhel were of no avail, and the captain of the steamer threatened to put him ashore if he persisted in making himself a nuisance to those on board.

Whether he liked it or not, Antifer had to put in at Drontheim, the old city of Saint Olaf, which is not as large as Bergen, but more interesting. We need not be surprised at Antifer and Zambuco refusing to go ashore. Tregomain and Juhel, however, took advantage of the delay to explore the town. If the eyes of the tourists were to a certain extent satisfied, their feet were not. The streets might as well be paved with broken bottles, so pointed are the stones.

“Cobblers ought to make fortunes in this country,” said the bargeman, judiciously trying in vain to save his soles from damage The only acceptable pavement the two friends could find was under the arches of the cathedral, where the kings, after being crowned at Stockholm as Kings of Sweden, come to be crowned as Kings of Norway.

After conscientiously visiting the Cathedral, and the vast cemetery that surrounds it, after following the banks of the wide Nid whose waters, increased or decreased by the flood or ebb, flow through the town between long stockades of wood that serve as quays, after sampling the odours of the fish market, and visiting the vegetable market, almost entirely supplied from England, after venturing across the Nid to the suburb round an old citadel, Tregomain and Juhel returned on board quite tired out. A letter addressed to Enogate, containing a pleasant postscript in the heavy handwriting of the bargeman, was that evening put in the post for St. Malo.

Next morning at daybreak the steamer left, with a few new passengers, and resumed her voyage to high latitudes. There were more stoppages, more delays - much to the disgust of Antifer. In crossing the Arctic Circle, represented by a thread stretched across the deck, he refused to jump over it, though Tregomain good-humouredly complied with the tradition. At last, in advancing northward, the steamer avoided the famous Maelstrom, whose roaring waters turn in a gigantic whirlpool. Then the Loffoden Islands, so much frequented by the Norwegian fishermen, appeared to the west, and on the i7th anchor was dropped in the port of Tromso.

To say that during the voyage it had rained sixteen hours out of the twenty-four would be only just, according to the figures. But the verb” to rain” is quite insufficient to give an idea of such deluges. Anyhow, these cataracts were not displeasing to our travellers. They showed that the temperature was relatively high; and what was to be feared by men bound for the seventy-seventh parallel was the prevalence of the Arctic cold, which would have rendered very difficult, and even impossible, the approaches to Spitzbergen. This period of the year, July, is late for navigation in these parts. The sea might suddenly close in at a change of wind; and if Antifer were detained at Hammerfest until the early ice had drifted south, would it not be dangerous for him to venture further north in a fishing-boat?

The thought of this made Juhel anxious.

“And if the sea does close in?” asked Tregomain.

“My uncle will have to winter at the North Cape, and wait for next season!”

“Well, my boy, we must not abandon the millions.”

The old mariner of the Ranee no longer growled.. And why not? He could not get those diamonds found in Ma-Yumba Bay out of his head.

But having been roasted under the sun of Loango, was he to be frozen among the glaciers of Spitzbergen? Confound that Pasha! What possessed him to bury his treasure in such extraordinary places!

The steamer stayed but a few hours at Tromso, where the passengers could for the first time make acquaintance with the natives of Lapland; and on the morning of the 2ist of July she entered the narrow fiord of Hammerfest.

There Antifer and his party landed. Next day she would take the tourists on to the North Cape. Little did Antifer care for the North Cape. There was no North Cape worth comparing, as far as he was concerned, with island number three, somewhere in Spitzbergen. But as there happened to be a North Pole Hotel at Hammerfest it was to the North Pole that he went.

As soon as they had engaged their rooms, they went out, in their anxiety not to lose a moment, to endeavour to charter a boat to take them to Spitzbergen. They walked towards the harbour, which is fed by the limpid waters of a lovely river bordered with stockades, on which were built houses and warehouses, the whole pervaded by the odours from the neighbouring fish-drying establishments.

Hammerfest is above all things the town of fish and every fishing product. The dogs eat it, the cattle eat it, the sheep and goats eat it, and the hundreds of boats which work in these wonderful regions bring more fish than can be eaten. A curious town is Hammerfest, rainy as it may be, lighted by the long summer days, darkened by the long winter nights, and often illuminated by sheaves of the aurora borealis of inexpressible magnificence.

At the entrance of the harbour Captain Antifer and his companions stopped at the foot of a granite column with a bronze capital bearing the arms of Norway, and surmounted by a terrestrial globe. This column was erected by Oscar the First, and is commemorative of the measurement of the meridian between Hammerfest and the mouths of the Danube. From this point our travellers directed their steps towards the stockades, at the foot of which were moored the vessels of all rigs and every tonnage employed in the major and minor fisheries of the Polar Sea.

But you may ask, how were they to make themselves understood? Did any of the party understand Norwegian? No, but Juhel understood English, and, with the aid of that cosmopolitan language, there was every chance of his making himself intelligible in Scandinavia.

In fact, before the day was over, they had on moderate terms chartered a fishing- boat, the Kroon, of about a hundred tons, commanded by Captain

Olaf, and manned by a crew of eleven. This would take the passengers to Spitzbergen, wait there for them during their search, load up with any merchandise they might find, and bring them back to Hammerfest.

This was fortunate for Antifer. It seemed that everything was going in his favour. Juhel inquired if a foreigner had been seen at Hammerfest a few days before, if anybody had embarked for Spitzbergen - and received replies in the negative to both questions. It seemed that Saouk - “Oh! you miserable Omar!” - had not got in front of them, or that he had gone to island number three by a different route.

The rest of the day was spent in walking about the town. Antifer and Zambuco being persuaded to do so on this occasion, as they were so near their goal. When they retired to rest at eleven o’clock it was still day, and the twilight did not end before the dawn appeared.

At eight o’clock in the morning the Kroon was off northwards before a good southeasterly breeze. As there were some six hundred miles to traverse, she would be about five days on the voyage, if the weather continued favourable. There was no fear of their having to meet with ice drifting southwards, nor of their finding Spitzbergen surrounded by pack-ice. The temperature remained at normal, and the prevailing winds rendered a sudden cole) blast unlikely. The sky, dappled with clouds, which occasionally dissolved in rain, not snow, had nothing disquieting in its appearance. Now and then the cloud broke, and the sun’s rays shot through the rifts. Juhel had every reason to hope that the radiant disk would be visible when it became necessary to use the sextant for fixing the position of the third island.

Evidently their good fortune continued, and there was nothing to lead them to think that after bringing his legatees to the uttermost part of Europe, Kamylk Pasha would send them once more several thousand leagues away.

The Kroon went splendidly, the wind never failing her. Captain Olaf averred that he had never made a better ? assage. At four o’clock in the morning of the 26th of July, high land was reported to the northward, above a horizon quite clear of ice. This was Spitzbergen, which Olaf knew well, from having frequently fished in these regions.

Twenty years ago, Spitzbergen was not often visited by tourists, but nowadays it is gradually being embraced in their round. The time is not far distant when return tickets will be issued for the Norwegian possession, as they are now for the North Cape, and may eventually be for the Pole of the same name.

As far as was then known, Spitzbergen was an archipelago extending to the eightieth parallel. It is composed of three islands, Spitzbergen, properly so called, the South East Island and the North East Island. Does it belong to Europe or America? A question of purely scientific interest which we need not stop to answer. One thing is certain, that it is chiefly Englishmen, Danes and Russians who send their ships there for the whale and seal fisheries. It mattered little to the legatees of Kamylk Pasha to whom these islands belonged once they had safely removed from them the millions earned by their courage and tenacity.

Spitzbergen, as the name indicates, is a land of pointed rocks, difficult of access. The islands were discovered bythe Englishman Willughby, in 1553, and their name was given them by the Dutchmen Barents and Cornelius Not only does the archipelago consist of three principal islands, but these are surrounded by numerous islets.

After marking on the chart the longitude 15 n’ east, and the latitude 77 19’ north, Juhel gave Captain Olaf orders to make for the South East Island, the most southerly of the archipelago.

The Kroon scudded rapidly before a following wind and the four or five miles which separated them from the islands were accomplished in less than an hour.

The Kroon dropped anchor two cables off an islet which had a high abrupt promontory rising from its end.

It was then a quarter past twelve. Antifer, Zambuco, Ben Omar, Tregomain, and Juhel embarked in the boat and rowed towards the shore.

An immense number of gulls, guillemots, and other polar birds flew off with deafening cries. A herd of seals rapidly shuffled off, not without protesting with mournful wailings against the intrusion.

The treasure was evidently carefully guarded.

Antifer leapt ashore, and took possession. What curious good fortune after so many failures. He had not even to search amid the masses of rock! He had landed on the very spot where the Egyptian had buried his millions.

The island was deserted, as need hardly be said. There was not a human creature on it. And there was not a ship in sight save the Kroon. Nothing but the immensity of the Arctic Sea.

Antifer and Zambuco could hardly restrain themselves, and even the fishy eyes of the notary lighted up. Tregomain, more excited than he had ever been before, his back rounded, his legs far apart, was hardly recognizable. And after all, why should he not be happy at his friend’s happiness?

And what added to their joy was that there was no mark of a footprint on the ground. Assuredly no one had recently landed there. The ground, softened by the rains, would have retained any footprint. There was no doubt, then, with regard to Saouk. Mourad’s terrible son had not preceded the legitimate owners of the treasure. Either he had been stopped on the way, or he had met with delays which would render his search useless if he arrived after Captain Antifer.

When good fortune takes you by the hand, the best thing is to be led as she wishes you to be. Antifer was brought before a rock, rising like one of the landmarks set up by Arctic explorers.

“Here! Here!” he exclaimed, in a voice choked with emotion.

They ran up. They looked.

On the outer face of this rock appeared the monogram of Kamylk Pasha, the double K, so deeply incised that the rigours of a polar climate had not worn away its lines.

All remained silent at first, as if they had arrived before the tomb of some hero. And then they set to work. This time pick and mattock rapidly made the chips fly at the foot of the rock. At every blow, they expected the tools would ring on the metal hoops of a barrel, or stick into a stave.

Suddenly Antifer’s pickaxe grated against something.

“At last!” he shouted, removing the piece of rock which covered the hole in which the treasure lay.

But to this cry of joy succeeded a cry of despair, a cry so loud that it might have been heard for half a mile around.

In the hole was a box, a metal box, marked with the double K, a box just like those that had been found in the Gulf of Oman and in Ma-Yumba Bay.

“Again!” groaned the bargeman, lifting his arms on high.

That was the word! Yes - again! and again it would undoubtedly be necessary to go in search of another island!

Antifer, in a furious passion, seized his pickaxe and dealt the box such a violent blow that it flew into splinters.

From it escaped a parchment, spotted, stained, dilapidated - the damage due to the infiltration of rain and snow.

This time there was not even a diamond for Tyrcomel, who had not been subject to expenses like his co-legatees. That was fortunate. A diamond for him! Why, he would have reduced it to vapour!

But to our parchment. To pick it up, to unfold it carefully - for it might easily have torn - was what Juhel did, for he alone retained his coolness.

Antifer shaking his fist at the sky, Zambuco bowing his head, Ben Omar collapsing, Tregomain all eyes and ears, all were as silent as the grave.

The parchment consisted of one sheet, of which the upper part had not suffered from the damp. On this sheet several of the lines were still legible.

Juhel read them, almost without interruption, and this is how they ran: -

“There are three men to whom I am under an obligation, and to whom I wish to leave a token of my gratitude. If I have placed these three documents on three different islands, it is that these three men, made acquainted with each other during their voyages, might be united in an indissoluble bond of friendship. If they have had a certain amount of trouble and fatigue in arriving at the possession of this fortune, they have not experienced as much as I have in keeping it for them. These three men are the Frenchman Antifer, the Maltese Zambuco, the Scotsman Tyrcomel. In their default, if death has removed them from this world, their natural heirs will enjoy the same right to my legacy. In the presence, then, of the notary, Ben Omar, whom I have appointed my executor, this box having been opened and notice having been taken of this document, which is the last, the co-legatees can proceed to the fourth island, where the three casks, containing the gold and precious stones have been buried by my own hands -”

Notwithstanding the disappointment they felt at finding another voyage necessary, Antifer and the others could not help a sigh of relief. At least the fourth island to be the last But where was it?

“To find this island,” continued Juhel, “all that is necessary is to bring -”

Unfortunately the lower part of the parchment had rotted away. The sentences were illegible; most of the words had disappeared.

The young captain tried in vain to decipher them.

“Island - situated - geometrical law -”

“Go on, go on!” said Antifer. But Juhel could not go on. There were only a few doubtful words which he sought in vain to connect together. As to the figures of the latitude and longitude there was not left a trace.

Juhel began again, -

“Situated - geometrical law -” At last he made out another word,” Pole.”

“Pole?” he exclaimed,” what, is it at the North Pole?”

“Unless it is at the South Pole!” muttered the bargeman, in despair.

Evidently here was the expected hoax. The Pole, now, the Pole! Had ever a human being set foot on the Pole?

Antifer jumped at his nephew, snatched from him the document, tried to read it, stumbled over the few words that were only barely legible -

Nothing, nothing to give him any indication of the whereabouts of the fourth island. He would have to give up all hopes of discovering it.

And when he saw that the search was at an end. he was struck as if by lightning, and fell rigid on the ground.

CHAPTER XXXI.

On the 12th of August, the house in the Rue des Hautes Salles, at St. Malo, was in a state of rejoicing. There was a wedding that morning, and the happy couple had left about ten o’clock for the mairie and the church, amid a numerous gathering of friends and acquaintances.

Juhel had married neither a princess, nor a duchess, nor a baroness. Enogate had neither married a prince, nor a duke, nor a baron. For want of the millions their uncle’s wishes had not been realized; and we have every reason to think that they did not regret it.

Two other personages were radiant with joy: Nanon, who felt sure of her daughter’s happiness, and Gildas Tregomain, in a lovely new coat and trousers, and a silk hat, and white gloves, who was acting as best man.

Quite so. But how about Captain Antifer?

An hour after the discovery of the document on island number three, which ended in such disappointment and despair, the passengers of the Kroon had returned on board, Antifer being carried in the arms of the sailors, who had been called up to help. So shattered had he been by the blow, that he spoke not a word.

The return voyage was accomplished as quickly as possible by sea and land. The Kroon took her passengers to Hammerfest, the steamer from the North Cape landed them at Bergen. The railway from Drontheim to Christiania not then being opened, they had to travel by road to the Norwegian capital. A steamer took them to Copenhagen, and thence the railways of Denmark, Germany, Holland, Belgium and France brought them to Paris, and so home to St. Malo.

At Paris, Antifer and Zambuco bade each other farewell. Both were dissatisfied. Talisma Zambuco would probably remain single for the rest of her life; it was written above that it was not Antifer who was to save her from this undesirable position, against which she had struggled for so many years. It need scarcely be said that all the moneys advanced to Antifer for the expenses of the voyage were repaid to Zambuco, and they amounted to a good round sum. But the sale of the diamond realized enough for there to be a balance left, and Antifer had no cause of regret on this head. Ben Omar paid his own expenses, and departed for Alexandria by the shortest way, declaring that he would never again venture on a treasure-hunt.

The next morning, Antifer, and Tregomain. and Juhel returned to St. Malo. And what a welcome they had! Nanon and Enogate had nothing but affectionate consolations for their brother, uncle, cousin, and friend. And then it was that Captain Antifer, finding it impossible to endow his niece and nephew with millions, gave his consent to their marriage. But he took no part in it, and would not even leave his room. In vain did Tregomain try to persuade him to be present at the wedding.

“You really ought to be there.”

“Indeed!”

“The young people do not like your being away. I beg-”

“And I beg that you will leave me in peace.”

And so the young people were married. They stayed at home only to leave it occasionally to visit the best of men, their friend Tregomain. There they often talked about Antifer, and their sorrow at seeing him so irritated and cast down. He never went out; he saw nobody. No more walks for him on the ramparts, no more saunters along the quays, pipe in mouth. It was said that he was ashamed to show himself after such a failure, and there was a good deal of truth in this.

I am afraid his health will give way," said Enogate, the tears coming into her eyes when she spoke of her uncle.

"And so am I," said Nanon," and every day I pray that Heaven may grant that my brother may recover from his disappointment."

"That horrid Pasha!" exclaimed Juhel. "What did he want to throw his millions at us for?"

"Particularly millions we could not find!" said Tregomain. "But yet they are somewhere, if we could only have made out that document to the end."

One day the bargeman said to Juhel, -

"Do you know what I think, my boy?"

"What do you think?"

"That your uncle would have been less upset if he had learnt where the treasure was, even if he could not have put his hand on it."

"Perhaps you are right, Tregomain. What makes him angry is, that he had in his hand the document indicating the position of island number four, and yet was unable to decipher the last lines."

"There would have been no mistake about it this time," replied Tregomain. "The document was explicit on that point"

“Uncle has got it; he has it always under his eyes; he spends his time in reading it, over and over again.”

“A waste of time, my boy, a waste of time. We shall never find his Excellency’s millions - never!”

A day or so after the wedding they learnt the news of what had happened to that rascal Saouk. The reason that he had not got to Spitzbergen before the others was that he had been arrested at Glasgow. The day of his attack on Tyrcomel he had started for Glasgow, where he hoped to find a vessel sailing for Drontheim or Bergen. Instead of starting from the east coast of Scotland, as Antifer had done, he would go from the west. The distance was much the same, and he hoped to reach the bland before the legatees.

Unfortunately for him, he had to wait at Glasgow for a week before a ship started, and fortunately for human justice, he was recognized just as he was going on board. He was immediately arrested, and being sent to prison, was saved from a useless voyage to Spitzbergen.

The days rolled on. Juhel and Enogate would have had nothing to mar their happiness had it not been for the truly melancholy state of their uncle. On the other hand, the young captain could not look forward without sorrow to the time when he would have to leave his wife and his friends. Le Baillif’s three-master was nearly finished building, and of her he was to be chief officer. It was a splendid position for a man of his age. In six months he would have to be at sea, on a voyage to India.

Juhel often talked about these things with Enogate, who was always sad at the thought of being separated from her husband. But in seaport towns are not families accustomed to these separations? Enogate, not wishing to talk about herself, preferred to look at the matter as affecting only Captain

Antifer. Would it not be a cause of regret to his nephew to have to leave him in such a state, particularly as it was doubtful if he would find him alive when he came back?

Juhel returned continually to the incomplete document, to the almost illegible lines of the old parchment. Yes! in these lines lay the beginning of a sentence which he tried again and again to decipher.

“All that is necessary is to bring -”

Bring - what?

And then these words, “island - situated - law - geometrical - pole -”

What geometrical law? What was there that brought the three islands in connection? Had the Pasha chosen them at haphazard? Was it a mere whim that had sent the treasure-seekers successively to the Gulf of Oman, Ma-Yumba Bay and Spitzbergen? If the rich Egyptian had, as was reported, some knowledge of mathematics had he been giving them some problem to solve?

As to the word “Pole,” did it mean the extremities of the earth’s axis? Certainly not. But, then, what did it mean?

Juhel racked his brain to obtain some answer to all this, but in vain.

“Pole, Pole” - he repeated to himself - “that is the key to the mystery.”

Often would he talk about this to the bargeman, who approved of his endeavours, for he had no doubt as to the existence of the millions.

“But, my boy,” he would say, “there is no need for you to make- yourself ill in trying to find the solution.”

“Well, Tregomain, it is not for my own sake, I assure you. I do not care a fig for the treasure. But my uncle -”

“Yes, for your uncle, Juhel. It is hard lines, certainly. To have there under his eyes the document, and not be able to - but have you no clue?”

“No, and yet there is the word ‘ geometrical’ in the sentence, and it would not be without some reason that it would be there, and then it says,’ All that is necessary is to bring’ - what?”

“That is it. What?”

“And there is that word ‘ Pole’ - which I do not understand the sense of.”

“Unfortunately I do not understand anything about it. I might help you if I did.”

Two months went by. There was no change with regard to Antifer, and none with regard to the solution of the problem.

One day - it was the 15th of October - before breakfast, Enogate and Juhel were in their room. It was rather cold, and a good fire was blazing in the grate.

The young wife, with her hands in her husband’s, was looking at him silently. Seeing him so absorbed, she wished to give another turn to his thoughts.

“Juhel,” said she, “you often wrote to me during this unfortunate voyage which has brought us so much trouble. I read your letters over and over again and I kept them carefully -”

“They can only recall unpleasant remembrances now, my dearest.”

“Yes - but yet I have kept them; and I will always keep them. But these letters have not told me all that happened to you, and you have never told me all about it yourself. Will you tell me to-day?”

“What good would that be?”

“It would please me. I should like to be with you on the steamers, in the train, in the caravan -”

“My darling, we should have to have a map, so that I can show you our route from point to point.”

“Well, here is a terrestrial globe. Will not that do as well?”

“Quite as well.”

Enogate went and brought the globe, and set it on the table before the fire.

Juhel, seeing that it would please Enogate, sat down by her, turned the globe so as to bring Europe opposite to them, and pointed with his finger to the town of St. Malo.

“Let us start,” he said.

And, to begin with, Juhel passed from France to Egypt, where Captain Antifer and his friends had stopped at Suez. Then his finger ran down the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, and stopped at Muscat.

“And so Muscat is there,” said Enogate. “And island number one is close by.”

“Yes, a little out in the Gulf.”

Then, turning the globe, Juhel reached Tunis, where they met with the banker Zambuco. He traversed the Mediterranean, he stopped at Dakar, and he crossed the Equator, descended the African coast, and paused at Ma-Yumba Bay.

“That is island number two,” said Enogate.

“Yes, wifie.”

Then he went north again, along Africa, and across Europe to Edinburgh, where he had met Tyrcomel. Then his finger went further north until he reached the deserted rocks of Spitzbergen.

“That is island number three,” said Enogate.

“Yes, island number three, where we had the greatest disappointment we met with during this stupid adventure.”

Enogate said nothing, but kept her eyes fixed on the globe.

“Why did your Pasha choose these three islands, one after the other?”

“That is what we do not know, and what we shall probably never know.”

“Never?”

“And yet these islands ought to be connected by some geometrical law, if we are to believe the last document. And then there is that word ‘ Pole’ which bothers me."

As he spoke, Juhel seemed to fall into a kind of trance, as though his whole mind was concentrated on the solution of this obscure problem. And while he remained silent, Enogate amused herself by tracing with her finger the route he had travelled. Placing her finger on Muscat, she moved it along to Ma-Yumba, and then in the same curve ran up to Spitzbergen, and returned to the point of departure.

"That is a circle," she said, with a smile;" you have been travelling on a round."

"On around?"

"Yes, a circumference, a circular voyage -"

"Circular!" exclaimed Juhel.

He jumped up, and took two or three turns across the room, repeating the word, -

"Circumference, circumference!"

Then he stepped towards the table, took the globe, ran his finger round it, and uttered a cry.

Enogate was frightened, and looked at him anxiously. Was he going mad, like his uncle? She looked, and trembled, the tears in her eyes.

Juhel uttered a second cry.

"I have found it! I have found it!"

“What?”

“Island number four.”

Surely the young captain had gone out of his mind. Island number four? Impossible!

“Tregomain! Tregomain!” shouted Juhel, opening the window, and calling in his neighbour.

Then he returned to the globe.

A minute afterwards the bargeman was in the room, and Juhel greeted him with, -

“I have found it”

“What have you found, my boy?”

“I have found how these islands are geometrically con- nected, and the place that ought to be occupied by island number four.”

“Can it be possible?” replied Tregomain. And looking at Juhel he wondered, like Enogate, if the young captain had gone mad.

“No,” replied Juhel, who understood the look, “I have not gone out of my mind. Listen.”

“I am listening.”

“These three islands are situated on the circumference of the same circle. Join them, two and two, by straight lines, bring them together, as the document says, and raise a perpendicular from the middle of each line; the perpendiculars will meet in the centre of the circle, and that is the central point, the ‘ Pole’ where we shall find island number four.”

A very simple problem of geometry, as we see, which Kamylk and Captain Zo had put into practice. The solution had not previously occurred to Juhel, because he had not noticed that the three islands occupied three points on the same circumference.

And it was Enogate’s pretty finger which had traced this thrice blessed circumference, and solved the problem.

“It is not possible,” said the bargeman. “It is so. Look again, and convince yourself.”

It did not take long to convince him. And the young captain ran to and fro, no longer able to restrain himself, and kissed the globe, and kissed Enogate’s two cheeks, which were much fresher than the painted cardboard, and said, -

“She found it, Tregomain, she found it Without her the idea would never have occurred to me.”

And then Tregomain became attacked by a sort ot delirium jubilans. He began to kick out his legs and round his arms with the grace of a sylphide of thirty stone, and rolling from port to starboard more than he had ever done on the Chamante Amelie between the banks of the Ranee, or on the Portalegre, with her cargo of elephants, he roared out, -

I have my lon-lon-la.

I have my gi - Ion gi.

I have my Ion, I have my gi -

I have my longitude.

But at length he calmed down.

“We must tell uncle!” said Enogate.

“Tell him?” said Tregomain, a little surprised at the proposal - “is it wise for us to tell him?”

“That requires reflection!” replied Juhel.

They called Nanon. The old Breton was told how things stood in a few words, and when Juhel asked if they ought to tell her brother, she replied, - “We ought not to hide anything from him.”

“But if another disappointment awaits him,” said Enogate,” he will not be able to bear it.”

“A disappointment this time? Certainly not!”

“The last document said the treasure was buried on island number four,” said Juhel, “and island number four is situated in the centre of the circle we have travelled. I am sure of it -”

“I will go and see my brother,” said Nanon.

A moment afterwards Captain Antifer appeared in the room, his eyes haggard, his look gloomy, his brows knit “What is the matter?” he asked.

Juhel explained what had passed - how he had first discovered the geometrical line uniting the three islands and the reason why island number four must necessarily be in the centre of that circle.

To the surprise of everybody, Antifer took matters quite coolly. He seemed to have been waiting for the news, as though nothing was more natural than that he should hear it sooner or later.

“Where is this central point, Juhel?” was all he asked.

Juhel placed the globe on the table. With a flexible rule in his hand he joined Muscat to Ma-Yumba, and Ma- Yumba to Spitzbergen. From the middle of each line he drew a perpendicular, and the perpendiculars crossed in the centre of the circle on which the islands were placed.

The centre was in the Mediterranean, between Sicily and Cape Bon, close to the island of Pantellaria.

“There it is!” said Juhel,” there it is!”

And carefully going over the position again, and noting’ the meridian and parallel, he said in a firm voice, -

“Thirty-seven degrees, twenty-six minutes north latitude, ten degrees, thirty-three minutes east longitude.”

“But is there an island there?” asked Tregomain.

“There ought to be,” said Juhel.

“Is there one there? That is it exactly, Tregomain, said Antifer, in a voice that made the windows rattle. “Exactly! It wants but that!”

And he rushed out, shut himself up in his own room, and did not appear again during the day.

CHAPTER XXXII.

What did all this mean if Antifer had not gone mad? During the following days he resumed his walks on the ramparts and along the harbour, smoking his pipe and grinding away at his pebbles. He was no longer the same man. A sort of sardonic smile was stereotyped on his lips. He made no allusion to the treasure, nor to his travels, nor to the final expedition which would enable him to put his hands on the much-sought-for millions.

Tregomain and the others did not return to the subject. Every moment they expected Antifer to give them their marching orders, but he said not a word.

“What can it mean?” asked Nanon.

“A change has come over him,” said Juhel.

“Perhaps he is afraid of having to marry Miss Zambuco!” suggested the bargeman. “But that does not matter. It will never do to leave all those millions there!”

If Antifer’s opinions had changed, it was evident that Tregomain’s had. He it was who was now seized with thirst for gold. And yet he was logical. When they did not know if they would find an island, they went in search of it; now that they knew where the island was, why should they not be off?

Tregomain was constantly talking to Juhel about it.

“What is the use?” asked the young captain.

He spoke about it to Nanon.

“Bah!” said she. “Leave the treasure where it is!”

He spoke to Enogate.

Look here, my little one, there’s more than a million to put in your pocket.”

“Well, Mr. Tregomain, there is a kiss for you, and that is worth more.”

At last he resolved to mention the matter to Antifer. And a fortnight after the last scene he did so.

“Ah! There’s that - er - that - er - island - er -”

“What island?”

“That island in the Mediterranean. It exists, I suppose?”

“Exists? I am more certain of its existence than I am of yours and mine.”

“Then why do we not go there?”

Antifer’s reply was so oracular that Tregomain tried in vain to understand it. But he was not discouraged. After all, the millions were not for himself, but for the young people who were not thinking of the future. He would think of it for them!

And so he persisted, and one day Antifer said to him, -

“So it is you who want to go?”

“Yes. I want to go.”

“Your opinion is that we ought to go?”

“We ought to go - and better to-day than to-morrow.”

"Very well. Let us go."

But before starting it was necessary to come to some determination regarding Zambuco and Ben Omar. Their positions as co-legatee and executor required that they should be present at the discovery of island number four; and they were invited to be at that island on a certain day, the one to take his share, the other to take his commission.

Antifer would have everything done in order. Two letters were sent - to Tunis and Alexandria - making an appointment for a meeting to take place on the 23rd of October at Girgenti in Sicily, the nearest town to the island. Tyrcomel's share could be sent to him in due course, and he could do what he liked with it - throw it into the Firth of Forth, perhaps, if he was afraid of its burning his fingers.

When the voyage was decided on, no one will be astonished at Tregomain having to be one of the party. What is more surprising is that Enogate had also to go, Juhel had only been married two months, and he would not consent to leave his wife behind.

How long would this new exploration last? Not long. They had only to go and return. They had no fifth document to search for. It was certain that Kamylk Pasha had not added other links to the chain of islands, which was long enough already. No! the statement was definite, the treasure was under one of the rocks in island number four, and this island was mathematically placed between the coast of Sicily and the island of Pantellaria.

"Only it cannot be of much importance, for it is not marked on any of the maps!" said Juhel.

“Probably not!” replied Antifer, with a grin that would have done credit to Mephisto.

Really it was incomprehensible!

It was decided to go by the shortest road, which was the railway. There existed already an uninterrupted line of rails across France and Italy, from St. Malo to Naples. Expense was no object, considering the millions that were in view.

On the morning of the i6th of October, Nanon bade good-bye to the travellers, who started by the first train. At Paris, where they did not stop, they took the fast train to Lyons, crossed the Franco-Italian frontier, saw nothing of Milan, or Florence, or Rome, and reached Naples on the 20lh of October. Tregomain was as confident of the result of this new expedition, as he was exhausted by a hundred hours of shaking in a railway-carriage.

Leaving the hotel in the morning, Captain Antifer and his companions took passage on a steamer sailing for Palermo, and after a fine day’s crossing, landed in the Sicilian capital.

Do not imagine that there was any talk of visiting the local attractions. This time, not even Tregomain thought of bringing away a fugitive remembrance of this last voyage, nor of piously assisting at those Sicilian vespers he had heard of. As far as he was concerned, Palermo was not the famous city captured in turn by Normans, Frenchmen, Spaniards, Englishmen; it was merely the point of departure of the public conveyances, which run twice a week to Corleone in nine hours, and from Corleone to Girgenti, also twice a week, in twelve hours.

It was at Girgenti that our travellers had business, and it was in this ancient Agrigentum, situated on the southern coast of the island, that they were to meet Zambuco and Ben Omar.

This means of locomotion might be subject to certain incidents or accidents. The post roads are not very safe. There are still brigands in Sicily; there always are. They flourish there like olive-trees or aloes. But nevertheless the coach started next day, and the journey was accomplished without adventure. They reached Girgenti in the evening of the 24th of October, and if they had not reached their goal, they were at least very near it The banker and the notary were already there, one from Tunis, the other from Alexandria. O inextinguishable thirst for gold, of what art thou not capable?

As they met, the co-legatees exchanged but these words; “Sure of the island this time?”

“Sure.”

But in what a sarcastic tone was Atifer’s reply, and what an ironical look he had in his eye!

To find a boat of some sort at Girgenti was not difficult. Fishing-boats there are many, and coasting vessels also - balancelles, tartanes, feluccas, speronares, and every other sort of Mediterranean rig.

Besides, all they wanted was a short excursion on the sea - a mere trip of forty miles or so to the westward. With a fair wind they could start that evening, and in the morning would be so near their island that they could land there before noon.

The boat was soon engaged. Her name was the Providenza. She was a felucca of about thirty tons, commanded by an old sea wolf, who in spite of his fifty years, still frequented these parts. And well he knew them. With his eyes shut he could take his ship from Sicily to Malta, and from Malta to the coast of Tunis.

“There is no need to tell him what our business is,” said Tregomain, and Juhel thought it prudent not to do so.

The name of the captain of the felucca was Jacopo Grappa, and it was fortunate for the travellers that he knew enough French to understand it, and make himself understood.

And the travellers were fortunate in another respect. It was October; there were a thousand reasons for expecting bad weather, a heavy sea, a cloudy sky. But no! The cold was already perceptible, the air was dry, the breeze blew from the land, and when the Providenza set sail, a magnificent moon poured its rays on to the high Sicilian mountains.

Grappa’s crew consisted but of five men, enough for handling the felucca. The light boat flew over the quiet sea, a sea so quiet that even Ben Omar suffered no disturbance. The night passed without incident, and the dawn announced a superb day.

Antifer’s behaviour was astonishing. He walked about the deck, hands in pockets, pipe in mouth, affecting perfect indifference. Tregomain, in a great state of excitement, could hardly believe his eyes. The bargeman had taken up his position in the bow. Enogate and Juhel were side by side, Enogate enjoying the charm of the voyage. Ah! Why could she not follow her husband wherever the chances of his sailor’s life would take him!

From time to time, Juhel would stroll up to the steersman to see that the Providenza was keeping on her course due west. At the rate at which she appeared to be going he reckoned that she would be at the desired place about eleven o’clock. Then he would return to Enogate, a proceeding which once or twice brought him an admonition from Tregomain.

“Do not devote so much attention to your wife, Juhel; give a little to our business.”

Notice that he said “our “business! Oh, how he had changed. But was it not in the interests of his young friends?

At ten o’clock there was no sign of land. And in fact in this part of the Mediterranean, between Sicily and Cape Bon, there is no island of importance except Pantellaria. But they were not seeking an island of importance, nothing but an islet, a simple little islet.

Grappa could not understand why the felucca was put on this course. Were his passengers bound for the coast of Tunis? But it did not matter to him. They had paid him well to go west, and he would go west as long as they asked him to.

“Are we to go west all the time?” he asked Juhel.

“Yes.”

“Very well.”

At a quarter past ten, Juhel, sextant in hand, took his first observation. He found that the felucca was in latitude 37 30’ north, and longitude 10 33’ east.

While he was at work, Antifer looked at him sideways, and winked.

“Well, Juhel?”

“We are in the right longitude, but we have to drop a few miles to the south.”

“Then drop a few miles, nephew, drop! I fancy that we shall never drop enough!”

The felucca was put on the port tack, so as to approach Pantellaria. Old Grappa, with his eyes screwed up and his lips pressed together, was lost in conjectures, and when Tregomain came near he could not help asking him, in a low voice, what they were looking for in these parts.

“A handkerchief we lost here!” replied the bargeman, as if he were getting out of temper - if so excellent a man could do so. “Very well, signer!”

At a quarter to twelve there was still no mass of rocks in view; and yet the Providenza ought to be on the site of island number four. Nothing, nothing, as far as the eye could reach.

Juhel went up the starboard shrouds of the masthead From there he could see for twelve or fifteen miles around him. Nothing, always nothing.

When he returned to the deck, Zambuco, flanked by the notary, approached to him, and in an anxious voice asked, - “Island number four?”

“It is not in sight”

“Are you sure of your position?” asked Antifer in a jeering tone. “Sure.”

“Then it would appear that you no longer know how to take an observation.” Juhel flushed with anger, but Enogate calmed him with a supplicating gesture. Tregomain judged it wise to interfere. “Grappa!” he said. “Signor?”

“We are in search of an islet.”

“Yes, signer.”

“Is there an islet anywhere near here?”

“An islet?”

“Yes.”

“Do you mean an island?”

“An island!” said Antifer, shrugging his shoulders. Yes, an island! a pretty little island! an islet! an icky little isliekie of an islet! Do you not understand?”

“Excuse me, Excellency; are you really looking for an island?”

“Yes,” said Gildas Tregomain. “Does one exist?”

“No, signor.”

“No?”

“No! But there used to be one, for I have seen it, and landed on its surface -”

“Its surface?” repeated the bargeman. “But it has disappeared -” Disappeared?” exclaimed Juhel. “Yes, signer; thirty-one years ago, come San Lucia.”

“And what was this island?” asked Tregomain, clasping his hands. “Why,” said Antifer,” it was Graham’s Island.” Graham’s Island! What a revelation to Juhel!

Yes! It was Julia Island, or Graham’s Island, or Hotham’s Island, or Ferdinandea, or Nerita - whichever name you please - which had appeared on this spot on the 28th of June, 1831. What doubt could there be as to its existence? The Neapolitan Captain Corrao had been present at the very moment of the submarine eruption which had produced it Prince Pignatelli had observed the column which burnt in the centre of the new-born island with a continuous light as if it were a firework. Captain Ireton and Doctor John Davy had been witnesses of this marvellous phenomenon. During two months the island, covered with ashes and hot sand, could be walked over. It was part of the sea bed which plutonic forces had raised above the water level.

In the month of December, 1831, the rocky mass had sunk, the island had disappeared, and this portion of the sea had retained no trace of it During this lapse of time - so short - ill luck had led Kamylk Pasha and Captain Zo into this part of the Mediterranean. They sought an unknown islet, and they found one, which appeared in June and vanished in December. And now it was fifty fathoms down that the precious treasure lay. The millions which Tyrcomel would have hurled into the sea, had gone down into the sea of themselves, and would never be spread over the world.

And Captain Antifer knew this. When Juhel, three weeks before, had given him the position of island number four, between Sicily and Pantellaria, he had at once recognized it as Graham's Island. When he was a youngster at sea, he had sailed in these parts, and knew all about the double phenomenon in 183 r - the appearance and disappearance of an ephemeral island, now three hundred feet below the level of the waves. When he had satisfied himself of this, after a fit of anger the most terrible in his life, he had made up his mind to give up all hope of ever obtaining the treasure of Kamylk Pasha. And that is why he had not spoken of resuming the search. If he had consented, under Tregomain's insistence, if he had plunged into the expenses of another voyage, it was only for his own self- esteem, to show that he was not the greatest dupe in the matter. The appointment he had made with Zambuco and Ben Omar was to give them the lesson which their duplicity towards him so well deserved.

Turning towards the Maltese banker and the Egyptian notary, he said, -

“Yes, the millions are there, under our feet, and if you want your share you have only to dive for them. Come Zambuco; to the water, Ben Omar.”

And if ever these two regretted their acceptance of Antifer's invitation, it was when he overwhelmed them with sarcasms, forgetting that he had been as keen as they were in the search for the treasure.

“And now for the eastward,” said Antifer,” and for home.”

“Where we will live so happily,” said Juhel.

“Even without the millions of the Pasha!” said Enogate.

“We shall have to do without them!” added Tregomain, in a tone of comic resignation.

But meanwhile the young captain - out of curiosity- asked for a sounding to be taken.

Grappa obeyed, with a shake of the head, and when the line had run out to a little over three hundred feet, the lead struck a resisting mass.

That was Graham’s Island. That was island number four, lost at this depth.

At Juhel’s orders, the felucca wore into the wind. The wind being ahead, she had to beat to windward all night, and the morning was well advanced when the Providenza moored alongside the quay at Girgenti, after this fruitless exploration.

But as the passengers were taking leave of old Grappa he said to Antifer, -

“Excellency?”

“What is it?”

“I have something to say.”

“Speak, my friend, speak.”

“Signer, all hope is not lost.”

Antifer drew himself up, and it was as though a look of supreme covetousness illumined his glance.

“All hope?” he answered.

“Yes, excellency. The island disappeared towards the end of the year 1831, but -”

“But -”

“It has been rising ever since 1850 -”

“Like the barometer, when fine weather is coming l “said Antifer, with a loud shout of laughter. “Unfortunately, when it appears with its millions - our millions I - we shall not be here, not even you, Tregomain, unless you die a centenarian many times over!”

“Which is hardly probable!” replied the bargeman.

But it is true, as the old sailor said. The island is gradually rising to the surface of the Mediterranean. And a few centuries later it may be possible to have quite another ending to these wonderful adventures of Captain Antifer.

THE END.

THE FLOATING ISLAND

Anonymous translation, 1896

Also known as *Propeller Island*, this science fiction novel was first published in 1895. It tells the adventures of a French string quartet in Milliard City, a city on a massive ship in the Pacific Ocean, inhabited entirely by millionaires.

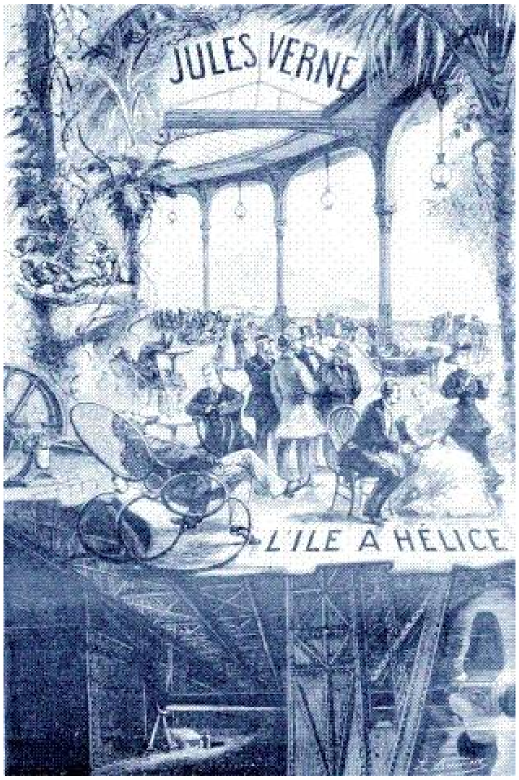
JULES VERNE
L'ILE A HÉLICE

The original frontispiece

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PART I

CHAPTER I.

WHEN a journey begins badly it rarely ends well. At least that ought to have been the opinion of the four instrumentalists whose instruments lay on the ground, the carriage in which they were riding having suddenly upset against a mound by the side of the road.

“Anybody hurt?” asked the first, actively springing to his feet.

“I have got off with a scratch,” replied the second, wiping his cheek, striped by a piece of glass.

“And I with a graze,” replied the third, whose calf was bleeding.

There was nothing serious as yet.

“And my violoncello?” said the fourth. “It is to be hoped nothing has happened to my violoncello.”

Fortunately the cases were untouched.

Neither the violoncello, nor the two violins, nor the alto had suffered from the shock, and it was hardly necessary to put them in tune. They were high-class instruments, of course.

“Confound that railway which left us in distress when we had only gone half-way,” said one.

“Confound that carriage which has thrown us out in the open country,” retorted another.

“Just at the moment night was beginning,” added a third.

“Fortunately our concert is announced for the day after to-morrow,” observed the fourth.

Then a few ridiculous repartees were exchanged between the artistes who took their adventure so gaily. One of them, according to his inveterate habit, gave his nonsense a musical twist.

“There is our carriage with the *mi* on the *do.”*

“Pinchinat!” exclaimed one of his companions. “And my opinion is,” continued Pinchinat, “that there are rather too many accidents in this key.”

“Will you be quiet?”

“And that we shall have to transpose our pieces in another carriage!” added Pinchinat.

Yes! rather too many accidents, as the reader will not be slow to learn.

The driver had suffered most, having been pitched off his seat as the front axle broke. The damage was restricted to a few contusions more painful than serious; but he could not walk on account of a sprain. Hence the necessity of finding some means of transport to the nearest village.

It was a miracle, indeed, that somebody had not been killed. The road winds across a mountainous country, skirting high precipices, bordered in many places with deep tumultuous torrents and crossed by fords only passable with difficulty. If the axle had broken a moment sooner the vehicle would have rolled deep down the rocks, and no one could have survived the catastrophe. Anyhow, the carriage was useless. One of the two horses, whose head had struck against a sharp stone, was gasping on the ground.

The other was severely wounded on the quarter; so that there were no horses and no carriage.

In short, ill-fortune had not spared these four artistes, in these regions of Lower California. At this period San Francisco, the capital of the State, was in direct railway communication with San Diego, situated almost on the frontier of the old Californian province. The four travellers were on their way to this important town, where on the next day but one they were to give a concert much advertised and long expected. The night before they had left San Francisco, but when they were within fifty miles of San Francisco the first contretemps had occurred. Yes, contretemps, as the most jovial of the troupe remarked, and the expression might be tolerated on the part of an old master of solfeggio.

The train was stopped at Paschal owing to the line having been swept away by a flood for three or four miles. The accident had occurred but a few hours before, and the communication with the other end had not been organized. The passengers must either wait until the road was repaired, or obtain in the nearest village a vehicle of some sort for San Diego.

And this it was that the quartette decided to do. In a neighbouring village they discovered an old landau, rickety, noisy, and moth-eaten, but not uncomfortable. They hired it from the owner, promised the driver a handsome present, and started with their instruments, but without their luggage, about two o’clock in the afternoon; and up to seven o’clock in the evening the journey was accomplished without much difficulty or fatigue. But here a second contretemps occurred, the upsetting of the carriage, and that with such damage that it was impossible for the said carriage to continue the journey.

And the quartette were a good twenty miles from San Diego.

But why had four musicians, French by nationality, and Parisians by birth, ventured across these out-of-the-way regions of Lower California?

Why? We will tell you in twenty lines, with a few explanatory notes regarding the four virtuosos which chance, that fantastic distributor of parts, was about to introduce among the personages of this extraordinary story.

At this same time a feeling for art had developed among the Americans; and if their productions were of limited number in the domain of the beautiful — if their national genius was still somewhat refractory in painting, sculpture, and music — the taste for good work was, at least, widely spread among them. By purchasing, for their weight in gold, the pictures of old and modern masters for public or private galleries; by engaging, at enormous prices, lyrical and dramatic artistes of renown, instrumentalists of the highest talent, they had infused among themselves that sense of beautiful and noble things which they had been in want of so long.

As regards music, it was by listening to Meyerbeer, Halévy, Gounod, Berlioz, Wagner, Verdi, Massé, Saint-Saëns, Reyer, Massenet, Delibes, the famous composers of the second half of the nineteenth century, that the dilettanti of the New Continent first awoke to enthusiasm. Then gradually they advanced to the comprehension of the profounder work of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven; mounting back to the sources of the sublime art which expanded to full flood in the course of the eighteenth century. After the operas, the lyric dramas; after the lyric dramas, the symphonies, sonatas, and orchestral pieces. And, just at the moment we speak of, the sonata was the rage among the different States of the Union. The people would willingly have paid so much a note — twenty dollars a minim, ten dollars a crotchet, five dollars a quaver.

When this infatuation was at its height, four instrumentalists of ability conceived the idea of tempting success and fortune in the United States of America. Four excellent fellows, old pupils of the Conservatoire, well known in Paris, much appreciated by the audiences of what is known as “chamber music,” which was then little known in North America. With what rare perfection, what marvellous time, what profound feeling, they interpreted the works of Mozart, of Beethoven, of Mendelssohn, of Haydn, of Chopin, written for four-stringed instruments, a first and second violin, alto, and violoncello. Nothing noisy, nothing showy, but what consummate execution, what incomparable virtuosity! The success of the quartette was all the more intelligible, as at the time people were beginning to tire of formidable harmonic and symphonic orchestras. That music is only an artistic combination of sonorous waves may be true, but there is no reason why these waves should be let loose in deafening tempests.

In short, our four instrumentalists had decided to introduce the Americans to the gentle and ineffable delights of chamber music. They set out together for the New World, and for two years the dilettanti Yankees had spared them neither cheers nor dollars. Their matinées and soirées were well attended. The Quartette Party, as they called themselves, were hardly able to accept their invitations from the wealthy. Without them there was no festival, no meeting, no rout, no five o’clock teas, no garden parties worth talking about. This infatuation had put a good deal of money in the pockets of the fortunate four, and if they had placed it in the Bank of New York it must have constituted a fairly large capital. But why should we not confess it? They had spent their money freely, had these Americanized Parisians! They never thought of saving, did these princes of the bow, these kings of the four strings! They enjoyed to the full this life of adventure, sure of meeting everywhere and always with a good welcome and a profitable engagement. They had travelled from New York to San Francisco, from

Quebec to New Orleans, from Nova Scotia to Texas, living rather a Bohemian life — that Bohemia of the young which is the most ancient, the most charming, the most enviable, the most loved province of our old France! We are much mistaken if the moment has not come to introduce them individually to those of our readers who never had, and never will have, the pleasure of listening to them.

Yvernès — first violin — thirty-two years old, above the medium height, slight in build, fair, curly hair, smooth face, large black eyes, long hands, made to stretch to any extent over his Guarnerius, of elegant bearing, wearing a flowing cloak of some dark colour, and a high silk hat, somewhat of an attitudinizer perhaps, the most careless of the four, the least troubled abotit matters of interest, in all respects the artiste, an enthusiastic admirer of beautiful things, a virtuoso of great talent and great promise.

Frascolin — second violin — thirty years old, short, with a tendency to stoutness — which he by no means liked — brown in hair and brown in beard, big in the head, black eyes, and a long nose, marked at the side with red by the pinch of his gold eyeglasses — which he could not do without — a good fellow, good natured in every way, acting as the banker of the quartette, preaching economy, and never listened to, not at all envious of the success of his comrade, having no ambition of being promoted as solo violin, excellent musician nevertheless — and then wearing but a simple dust coat over his travelling suit.

Pinchinat — alto, commonly addressed as “his highness “ — twenty-seven years of age, the youngest of the troupe, the most frolicsome too, one of those incorrigibles who are boys all their life, a fine head, intelligent eyes, always wide-awake, hair approaching to red, pointed moustache, teeth white and sharp, tongue never still, never tired of puns and nonsense, and alert for repartee, invariably good- humoured, for ever making light of the discomforts that fell to his comrades, and therefore continually being reprimanded and taken up short by the chief of the Quartette Party.

For it had a chief, the violoncellist, Sebastien Zorn, chief by his talent, chief by his age, for he was fifty, short, rotund, hair abundant, and curled on the temples, moustache bristling, and losing itself in the whiskers which ended in points, complexion brick red, eyes gleaming through the glasses of his spectacles, which he doubled by means of an eyeglass when he read music, hands plump, the right accustomed to the undulatory movements of the bow, ornamented with large rings on the second and little finger.

This slight sketch is probably sufficient description for the man and the artiste, but one cannot with impunity for forty years hold a sonorous box between one's knees. It affects one's whole life, and the character is influenced. Most violoncellists are talkative and quick tempered, impetuous and domineering, and such was Sebastien Zorn, to whom Yvernès, Frascolin, and Pinchinat had willingly abandoned the management of their musical tour. They let him say what he liked, and do what he liked, for they understood him. Accustomed to his imperious manners, they laughed when he "outran the measure" — which is regrettable in the case of an executant, as was remarked by the irrepressible Pinchinat. The composition of the programmes, the direction of the routes, the correspondence with the managers, devolved on him, and permitted his aggressive temperament to manifest itself under a thousand circumstances. Where he did not interfere was with regard to the receipts and the management of the purse, which formed the particular duty of the second violin and chief accountant, the exact and careful Frascolin.

The quartette are now introduced as if they were before you on a platform. We know the types, if not very original, at least very distinct, of which it was composed. As the reader allows the incidents of this strange history to unroll themselves he will see to what adventures were destined these four Parisians, who, after receiving so many bravos throughout the States of the American Confederation, were to be transported.

But let us not anticipate, "not hurry the movement," as "his highness" would exclaim, and let us have patience.

The four Parisians then, at eight o'clock this evening, were on a deserted road in Lower California, near the ruins of their overturned carriage. The chief of the quartette was violently angry. Why not? Yvernès pretended that he was descended from Ajax and Achilles, those two illustrious angry heroes of antiquity.

Let it not be forgotten that though Zorn might be bilious, Yvernès phlegmatic, Frascolin quiet, and Pinchinat of superabundant joviality, all were excellent comrades, and felt for each other like brothers. They were united by a bond which no dispute or self-love could break, by a community of taste originating from the same source. Their hearts, like well-made instruments, always kept in tune.

While Zorn fretted and fumed, and patted the case of his violoncello to make sure that it was safe and sound, Frascolin went up to the driver.

"Well, my friend," he said; "what are we to do now, if you please?"

"What you can do when you have neither a carriage nor a horse, and that is to wait."

“Wait for what comes,” said Pinchinat. “And if nothing comes?”

“We must look for it,” said Frascolin, whose practical mind never failed him.

“Where?” roared Zorn, in a great state of agitation. “Where it is,” replied the driver.

“Is that the way you ought to answer?” said the ‘cellist, in a voice that gradually mounted towards the high notes. “What! A clumsy fellow who pitches us out, smashes his carriage, lames his horses, and then contents himself with saying, ‘ Get out of it as you like!’”

Carried away by his natural loquacity, Zorn began to launch forth into an interminable series of objurgations, all of them of no use, when Frascolin interrupted him, — “Allow me, my old Zorn.”

And then, addressing himself to the driver, he asked, —

“Where are we, my friend?”

“Five miles from Freschal.”

“A railway station?”

“No, a village near the coast.”

“Where can we find a carriage?”

“A carriage, nowhere — perhaps a cart.”

“A bullock cart, as in Merovingian times!” exclaimed Pinchinat.

“What does it matter?” said Frascolin.

“Eh!” resumed Zorn. “Ask him if there is a hotel in this hole of a Freschal. I have had enough for tonight.”

“My friend,” asked Frascolin, “is there any hotel in Freschal?”

“Yes, the one where we were to change horses.”

“And to get there we have only to keep on the main road?”

“Straight on.”

“Let us be off!” said the ‘cellist.

“But,” said Pinchinat, “this poor fellow. It will be cruel to leave him here in distress. Look here, my friend, could you not come along if we were to help you?”

“Impossible!” replied the driver. “Besides, I prefer to remain here with my carriage. When daylight comes I shall see how to get out of this.”

“When we get to Freschal,” said Frascolin, “we can send you help.”

“Yes, the hotel-keeper knows me, and will not let me remain here in this state.”

“Shall we go?” asked the ‘cellist, picking up the case of his instrument.

“In a moment,” replied Pinchinat. “Just lend a hand to lift the driver to the side of the road.”

Pinchinat and Frascolin lifted him up, and placed him against the roots of a large tree, the lower branches of which formed a cradle of verdure as they fell.

“Shall we go?” roared Zorn for the third time, having hoisted his case on to his back by means of a double strap arranged for the purpose.

“We have done now,” said Frascolin, who then addressed the man, saying, —

“It is understood that the hotel-keeper at Freschal will send you help. Till then you want nothing, is that so?”

“Yes,” said the driver, “unless you happen to have a drink with you.”

Pinchinat’s flask happened to be full, and “his highness “willingly made the sacrifice.

“With that, my good man,” said he, “you will never catch cold to-night — inside you.”

A final objurgation from the ‘cellist decided his companions to make a start. Fortunately their luggage was in the train, instead of with them in the carriage. It might be delayed in getting to San Diego, but they would not have the trouble of carrying it to Freschal. They had enough to do to carry the violin cases, and perhaps rather too much with the ‘cello case. True, an instrumentalist worthy of the name never separates from his instrument any more than a soldier does from his arms, or a snail from its shell.

CHAPTER II.

To journey at night along an unknown road, amid an almost deserted country, where there are usually more malefactors than travellers, was enough to make them rather anxious. Such was the fate of the quartette. Frenchmen are brave, of course, and these were as brave as any. But between bravery and temerity there is a limit which no healthy mind will overstep. After all, if the railway had not run into a flooded plain, if the carriage had not upset five miles from Freschal, our instrumentalists would not have had to venture by night along this suspicious road. It was to be hoped that no harm would happen to them.

It was about eight o'clock when Sebastien Zorn and his companions started towards the coast, as directed by the driver. As they had only their leather violin cases, light and handy, the violinists had little reason to grumble. Neither the wise Frascolin, nor the cheery Pinchinat, nor the idealist Yvernès, had a word of complaint. But the cellist with his case — a cupboard as it were on his back! Knowing his character, we can understand that he found every opportunity of working himself into a rage. Hence groans and grunts exhaling under the onomatopoeic forms of “ahs,” and “ohs,” and “oufs.”

The darkness was already profound. Thick clouds chased each other across the sky, drifting apart into narrow rifts, from which occasionally peeped a fitful moon, almost in its first quarter. Somehow, why we know not, unless it were that he was peevish and irritable, the pale Phoebe did not please Sebastien Zorn. He pointed his finger at her, exclaiming, —

“What are you doing there with your stupid face? I know nothing more imbecile than that slice of unripe melon up there!”

“It would be better if the moon were to look us in the face,” said Frascolin.

“And for what reason?” asked Pinchinat.

“Because we could see it more clearly.”

“O chaste Diana!” declaimed Yvernès. “O messenger of the peaceful night! O pale satellite of the earth! O adored idol of the adorable Endymion! — ”

“Have you finished your ballad?” asked the ‘cellist. “When the first violins take to flourishing on the fourth string — ”

“Take longer strides,” said Frascolin, “or we shall have to sleep under the stars.”

“If there are any,” observed Pinchinat. “And lose our concert at San Diego.”

“A fine idea, my word!” exclaimed Zorn, shaking his box, which gave forth a plaintive sound.

“But this idea, my old friend, was yours,” said Pinchinat.

“Mine?”

“Undoubtedly! That we did not remain at San Francisco, when we had quite a collection of Californian ears to charm.”

“Once more,” asked the ‘cellist, “why did we start?”

“Because you wished it!”

“Well, I must admit that it was a deplorable inspiration, and if — ”

“Ah, my friends!” said Yvernès, pointing towards a point in the sky where a narrow moon-ray fell on the whitish edges of a cloud.

“What is the matter, Yvernès?”

“Look at that cloud turning into the shape of a dragon, its wings open, a peacock’s tail eyed as with the hundred eyes of Argus.”

Perhaps Sebastien Zorn did not possess that power of hundredfold vision which distinguished the guardian of the son of Machus, for he did not notice a deep rut into which he trod. Consequently he fell on his face, with his box on his back, and looked like some huge beetle creeping over the ground.

Violent rage of the instrumentalist — and he had cause to be angry — and then objurgations on account of the first violin’s admiration of the aerial monster.

“It is the fault of Yvernès!” said Sebastien Zorn. “If I had not been looking at that confounded dragon — ”

“It is no longer a dragon, it is an amphora! with the gift of imagination but feebly developed you can see it in the hands of Hebe who is pouring out the nectar — ”

“Take care that there is not too much water in that nectar,” exclaimed Pinchinat, “and that your charming goddess of youth does not give us an overdose of it.”

Here was another trouble in store; rain was apparently coming. Prudence required that they should make haste so as to get into shelter at Freschal.

They picked up the ‘cellist, as angry as he could be. They put him on his legs, growling all the time. Frascolin good-naturedly offered to carry the case, but this Zorn refused. Separate himself from his instrument! one of Gand and Bernardel’s, almost a part of himself? But he had to give in, and this precious half passed on to the back of the useful Frascolin, who entrusted his light violin case to Zorn.

The route was resumed. They walked at a good pace for two miles. No incident worth mentioning; the night getting blacker and blacker with every promise of rain. A few drops fell, very large ones, a proof that they came from clouds high in the air and stormy. But Hebe’s amphora did not overflow, and our four travellers hoped to reach Freschal perfectly dry.

Careful precautions were constantly necessary against falls on the dark road, deeply cut into by ravines, turning suddenly, bordered by high crags, skirting gloomy precipices with the roar of the torrents beneath.

Yvernès thought the position was poetical; Frascolin that it was alarming. There was the fear of certain meetings which make the safety of travellers on the roads of Lower California rather problematical. The only weapons possessed by the quartette were the bows of the violins and the ‘cello, and these would appear to be insufficient in a country where Colt’s revolvers were invented. If Sebastien Zorn and his comrades had been Americans, they would have been furnished with one of those engines of warfare, kept in a special pocket of the trousers. Even for a trip from San Francisco to San Diego a real Yankee would never have started without carrying a six-shot viaticum. But Frenchmen had not thought it necessary. We may add that they had not thought about it, and perhaps would repent it. Pinchinat marched at the head, peering right and left as he walked. Practical joker as he was, “his highness “could not help playing off a few pleasantries on his comrades. Pulling up short, for instance, every now and then, and muttering in a voice tremulous with fear, —

“Ah! There! What is that I see before me? Be ready to fire.”

But when the road plunged through a thick forest, amid mammoth trees, sequoias a hundred and fifty feet high, vegetable giants of these Californian regions, his joking humour disappeared. Ten men might hide behind one of these enormous trunks. A bright flash, followed by a report, the swift whistling of a bullet, might they not see it, might they not hear it? In such places so suitable for a nocturnal attack, an ambush was plainly suggested. If luckily they did not meet with bandits, it was because these estimable people had totally disappeared from Western America, or were then engaged in financial operations on the borders of the old and new continent. What an end for the great great grand-children of the Karl Moors and Jean Sbogars. To whom could these reflections come but to Yvernès? Decidedly, he thought, the play is not worthy of the stage.

Suddenly Pinchinat stopped still. Frascolin, who was behind him, also stopped.

Zorn and Yvernès were up with them immediately.

“What is it?” asked the second violin.

“I thought I saw something,” said the alto.

And this was no joke on his part. Really there was a form moving amid the trees.

“Human or animal?” asked Frascolin.

“I do not know.”

Which was the more formidable no one would have ventured to say. They crowded together, without retreating, without uttering a word.

Through a rift in the clouds the rays of the moon lighted the dome of this gloomy forest, and flittered to the ground through the branches of the sequoias. For a hundred yards or so the surroundings were visible.

Pinchinat had not been the dupe of an illusion. Too large for a man, the mass could only be a big quadruped. What quadruped? A wild beast? A wild beast certainly. But what wild beast?

“A plantigrade,” said Yvernès.

“Oh! bother the animal!” muttered Zorn, in a low impatient tone, “and by animal, I mean you, Yvernès. Why cannot you talk like other people? What do you mean by a plantigrade?”

“An animal that walks on its plants!” explained Pinchinat.

“A bear!” replied Frascolin.

It was a bear, and a large bear too. Lions, tigers, leopards are not met with in these forests of Lower California. Bears are, however, constantly found there, and encounters with them are generally disagreeable.

No surprise will be felt at the Parisians, with one accord, resolving to get out of the way of this plantigrade. Besides, was he not at home? And so the group closed up and retreated backwards, facing the bear, but moving slowly and deliberately, without seeming to be running away.

The bear followed at a slow pace, shaking his fore paws like the arms of a semaphore, and balancing himself on his haunches. Gradually he approached, and his demonstrations became hostile — gruff growls and a snapping of the jaws, which were rather alarming.

“Suppose we run each on his own account?” proposed “his highness.”

“Do nothing of the sort,” replied Frascolin. “One of us would be sure to be caught, and who would pay for the others?”

The imprudence was not committed; it was evident that its consequences might be disastrous.

The quartette thus arrived huddled together on the edge of the clearing where the darkness was not so great. The bear had approached within a dozen yards. Did the spot appear to him convenient for an attack? Probably, for his growls redoubled, and he hastened his advance.

Precipitate retreat of the group, and earnest appeals from the second violin, “Be cool! be cool, my friends!”

The clearing was crossed and they found the shelter of the trees. But there the peril was as great. By running from one tree to another, the animal could leap on them without its being possible to foresee his attack, and he was about to act in this way, when his terrible growlings ceased, he began to halt —

The deep gloom was filled with a penetrating musical sound, an expressive *largo*, in which the soul of an artiste was fully revealed.

It was Yvernès, who had drawn his violin from its case and made it vibrate under the powerful caress of the bow. An idea of genius! Why should not the musicians owe their safety to music? Had not the stones moved by the strains of Amphion ranged themselves round Thebes? Had not the wild beasts, thrilled by his lyrical inspirations, run to the knees of Orpheus? It seemed as though this Californian bear, under atavistic influence, was as artistically gifted as his congeners in the fable, for his fierceness disappeared, his instincts of melomania took possession of him, and as the quartette retreated in good order, he fol- lowed them uttering little cries of approval. It would not have taken much to make him say “Bravo!”

A quarter of an hour later Zorn and his companions were at the edge of the wood. They crossed it, Yvernès fiddling all the time.

The animal stopped. It looked as though he had no intention of going further. He patted his big paws against each other.

And then Pinchinat also seized his instrument, and shouted, —

“The dancing bear. Come on!”

And while the first violin ploughed away steadily at the well-known tune in the major, the alto assisted with a base shrill and false in the mediant minor.

The bear began to dance, lifting the right foot, lifting the left foot, turning and twisting, while the four men went further and further away.

“Well,” said Pinchinat, “he is only a circus bear.”

“It does not matter,” replied Frascolin, “Yvernès had a capital idea.”

“Let us run for it, *allegretto* said the ‘cellist, “and don’t look behind.”

It was about nine o’clock when the four disciples of Apollo arrived at Freschal. They had come along splendidly during the latter half of their journey, although the plantigrade was not on their traces.

Some forty wooden houses around a square planted with beeches, that was Freschal, a village isolated in the country and about two miles from the coast.

Our artistes glided between a few houses shaded with large trees, came out on the square, looked up at the humble spire of a little church, stopped, formed in a circle as if they were about to give an appropriate performance, and began to talk.

“Is this a village?” asked Pinchinat.

“Did you expect to find a city like Philadelphia or New York?” asked Frascolin.

“But your village is asleep!” replied Sebastien Zorn.

“Awake not a village that sleeps,” sighed Yvernès, melodiously.

“On the contrary,” said Pinchinat, “wake it up well.”

And unless they were to spend the night in the open air they would have to do so.

Yet the place was quite deserted, the silence complete. Not a shutter was open, not a light was at a window.

“And where is the hotel?” asked Frascolin.

Yes, the hotel which the driver had mentioned, where travellers in distress would receive good welcome and treatment. And the hotel-keeper who would send help to the unfortunate coachman. Had the poor man dreamt of these things? Or — another suggestion — had Zorn and his companions gone astray? Was this really Freschal?

These questions required an immediate reply. The villagers must be applied to for information, and the door of one of the houses must be knocked at; that of the hotel if possible, if by a lucky chance they could find which it was.

The four musicians began to reconnoitre round the place, prowling along the front of the houses, trying to find a sign hanging overhead. But there was nothing to show them which was the hotel.

As they could not find the hotel, perhaps there was some private house that would give them shelter. What native of Freschal would refuse a couple of dollars for a supper and a bed?

“Let us knock,” said Frascolin.

“And in time,” said Pinchinat, “in six-eight time.”

They knocked three or four times with the same result. Not a door, not a window opened.

“We are deceived,” said Yvernès, “it is not a village, it is a cemetery, where if they sleep their sleep is eternal. *Vox clamantis in deserto.”*

“Amen!” replied “his highness “in a deep voice, as if chanting in a cathedral.

What was to be done as the silence remained unbroken? Continue the journey towards San Diego? They were dying — that is the word — of hunger and fatigue. And then what road were they to follow without a guide through this dark night? Try to reach another village? Which one? According to the coachman there was no other village on this part of the coast. The best thing they could do was to wait for daylight. But to spend six hours without shelter beneath a sky overcast with heavy clouds threatening rain every instant — that was not to be thought of, even by artistes.

Pinchinat had an idea. His ideas were not always axcellent, but they abounded in his brain. This one, however, obtained the approval of the wise Frascolin.

“My friends,” said he, “why should not what succeeded with a bear succeed with a Californian village? We tamed the plantigrade with a little music; let us wake up these rustics with a vigorous concert, in which we will not spare either the *forte* or the *allegro.”*

“We might try that,” replied Frascolin.

Zorn did not wait for Pinchinat to finish. His case was opened, his ‘cello upright on its steel point, for he had no seat, his bow in hand, ready to extract all the human voices stored up in the sonorous carcase.

Almost immediately his comrades were ready to follow him to the utmost limits of their art.

“Onslow’s quartette,in B flat,” said he. “Come.”

Onslow’s Quartette they knew by heart, and good instrumentalists did not want to see clearly to use their skilful fingers on the ‘cello, the violins, and the alto.

Behold them given up to their inspiration. Never perhaps have they played with more talent and more soul in the concert halls and theatres of the American Union. Space is filled with sublime harmony, and unless they were deaf how could human beings resist it? Had it been a cemetery, as Yvernès pretended, the tombs would have opened at the music’s charm, the dead would have risen, and the skeletons clapped hands.

But none of the houses opened; the sleepers did not awake. The piece ended in its powerful *finale*, yet Freschal gave no sign of life.

“Ah!” exclaimed Zorn, in a fury. “Is it like that? They want a serenade like their bears for their savage ears? Be it so! Let us have it over again; but you, Yvernès, play in D; you, Frascolin, in E; you, Pinchinat, in G. I will keep to B flat! and now then, with all your might.”

What cacophony! What ear-torture! It was as bad as the improvised orchestra directed by the Prince de Joinville in an unknown village in Brazil. It seemed as though they were playing Wagner backwards on “vinaigriuses.”

Pinchinat’s idea was excellent. What admirable execution could not obtain this absurdity did. Freschal began to awake. Lights appeared. Windows opened here and there. The natives of the village were not dead, for they gave signs of life. They were not deaf, for they heard and listened.

“They are going to throw apples at us,” said Pinchinat, during a pause, for the time throughout had been scrupulously kept.

“So much the better,” said the practical Frascolin, “we will eat them.”

And at Zorn’s command the players suddenly shifted into their proper key, and ended with a perfect chord of four different notes.

No! They were not apples that came from the twenty or thirty open windows, but plaudits and cheers. Never had the Freschalian ears been filled with such musical delights! And there could be no doubt that every house was ready to receive with hospitality such incomparal virtuosos.

But while they were engaged in their performance, a spectator had approached them within a few yards without being seen. This personage had descended from a sort of electrical tram-car at one angle of the square. He was a man of tall stature, and somewhat corpulent, so far as could be judged in the darkness.

While our Parisians were asking if, after the windows the doors of the houses were going to open to receive them — which appeared at least to be rather uncertain — the new arrival approached, and said, in an amiable tone, —

“I am a dilettante, gentlemen, and I have the very great pleasure of applauding you.”

“For our last piece?” replied Pinchinat, ironically.

“No, gentlemen, for the first. I have seldom heard Onslow’s Quartette given with more talent.”

The personage was evidently a connoisseur.

“Sir,” said Sebastien Zorn, in the name of his companions, “we are much pleased by your compliments. If our second piece tortured your ears, it is — ”

“Sir,” replied the unknown, interrupting a phrase that might have been a long one, “I have never heard a thing played out of tune with so much precision. But I understand why you did it. It was to wake up the natives of Freschal, who have already gone to sleep again. Well, gentlemen, what you endeavoured to obtain from them by this desperate means permit me to offer you.”

“Hospitality?” demanded Frascolin.

“Yes, hospitality. Unless I am mistaken I have before me the Quartette Party renowned throughout our superb America, which is never stingy in its enthusiasm.”

“Sir,” said Frascolin, “we are indeed flattered. And — this hospitality, where can we find it, thanks to you?”

“Two miles from here.”

“In another village?”

“No, in a town.”

“A town of importance?”

“Certainly.”

“Allow me,” observed Pinchinat. “We were told that there were no towns until we got to San Diego.”

“It is a mistake — which I cannot explain.”

“A mistake?” repeated Frascolin.

“Yes, gentlemen, and if you will accompany me I promise you a welcome such as artistes of your class are entitled to.”

“I am of opinion that we should accept it,” said Yvernès.

“And I share that opinion,” said Pinchinat.

“One moment!” said Zorn, “do not go faster than the leader of the orchestra.”

“Which means?” asked the American.

“That we are expected at San Diego,” replied Frascolin.

“At San Diego,” added the ‘cellist, “where the city has engaged us for a series of musical matinées, the first of which is to take place on Sunday afternoon.”

“Ah!” replied the personage, in a tone that betrayed extreme annoyance.

Then he continued, —

“That does not matter. In a day you will have time to visit a city which is well worth the trouble, and I will see that you are taken to the nearest station, so that you can be at San Diego at the appointed time.”

The offer was attractive and welcome. The quartette were assured of finding a good room in a good hotel — to say nothing of the attention promised by this obliging personage.

“Gentlemen, do you accept?”

“We accept,” replied Zorn, whom hunger and fatigue disposed to welcome such an invitation.

“Agreed,” replied the American. “We start at once. In twenty minutes we shall be there, and you will thank me, I am sure.”

We need scarcely say that after the cheers provoked by the burlesque serenade the windows of the houses were shut. With its lights extinguished, the village of Freschal was again plunged in sleep.

The American and the four artistes went to the car, put down their instruments, and placed themselves behind them, while the American installed himself forward next to the engineer. A lever was touched, the electric accumulators worked, the vehicle trembled, and began to get up a rapid rate of speed, travelling westward.

A quarter of an hour afterwards an immense whitish light appeared, as if it were a dazzling diffusion of lunar rays. This was the town, the existence of which none of the Parisians had suspected.

The car stopped, and Frascolin said, —

“Here we are on the shore.”

“The shore — no,” replied the American, “but a watercourse we have to cross.”

“And how?” asked Pinchinat.

“By means of this boat in which the car is carried.”

It was one of the ferry boats, so numerous in the United States, and on it the car was placed with its passengers. Probably the ferry boat was worked by electricity, for there was no steam, and in two minutes they were on the other side of the watercourse, alongside a quay. The car resumed its course along some country roads, and entered a park over which aerial appliances poured an intense light. The gate of the park gave access to a wide and long road paved with sonorous flags. Five minutes later the artistes descended at the steps of a comfortable hotel, where they were received with a welcome that augured well, thanks to a word from the American. They were immediately placed before a well-served table, and supped with good appetite, as may be believed.

The repast over, the major-domo led them to a spacious chamber lighted by incandescent lamps, to which shades were fitted, so as to shut out nearly all the light at will. Then, postponing to the morrow the explanation of all these marvels, they slept in the four beds placed in the four angles of the room, and snored with that extraordinary simultaneity which had given the Quartette Party its renown.

CHAPTER III.

NEXT morning at seven o’clock, these words, or rather these cries, resounded in the room after a startling imitation of a trumpet-call — something like the reveillée.

“Now then! Whoop! On your feet; and in two- time!” vociferated Pinchinat.

Yvernès, the most careless of the four, would have preferred three-time, and even four-time, to disengage himself from the warm coverings of his bed. But he had to follow the example of his comrades, and leave the horizontal for the vertical.

“We have not a minute to lose — not one!” observed “his highness.”

“Yes,” replied Zorn, “for to-morrow we must be at San Diego.”

“Good,” replied Yvernès; “half-a-day will suffice for us to visit the town of this amiable American.”

“What astonishes me,” added Frascolin, “is that there is an important city in the neighbourhood of Freschal. How could our driver have forgotten to tell us about it?”

“The point is that we should be here, my old G key,” said Pinchinat. “And here we are.”

Through the large windows the light was pouring into the room, and the view extended for a mile down a superb road planted with trees.

The four friends proceeded to their toilette in a comfortable cabinet — a quick and easy task, for it was fitted with all the latest inventions, taps graduated thermometrically for hot water and cold water, basins emptying automatically, hot baths, hot irons, sprays of perfumes, ventilators worked by voltaic currents, brushes moved mechanically, some for the head, some for the clothes, some for the boots, either to clean the dust off them, or to black them. And then there were the buttons of the bells and telephones communicating with every part of the establishment. And not only could Sebastien Zorn and his companions obtain communication with every part of the. hotel, but with the different quarters of the town, and perhaps — such was Pinchinat's opinion — with every town in the United States of America.

"Or even in the two worlds," added Yvernès. But before they had an opportunity of trying the experiment, a message was telephoned to them at forty-seven minutes past seven, as follows: —

"Calistus Munbar presents his morning civilities to each of the honourable members of the Quartette Party, and begs them to descend as soon as they are ready to the dining-room of the Excelsior Hotel, where their first breakfast awaits them."

"Excelsior Hotel!" said Yvernès. "The name of this caravanserai is superb."

"Calistus Munbar, that is our obliging American," remarked Pinchinat. "And the name is splendid."

"My friends," said the 'cellist, whose stomach was as imperious as its proprietor; "as breakfast is on the table, let us breakfast, and then — "

"And then take a run through the town," added Frascolin. "But what is this town?"

Our Parisians were dressed or nearly so. Pinchinat replied telephonically that in less than five minutes they would do honour to the invitation of Mr. Calistus Munbar. And when their toilette was finished, they walked to a lift which deposited them in the large hall of the hotel, at the end of which was the door of the dining- room, an immense saloon gleaming with gilding. “I am yours, gentlemen, always yours.” It was the man of the night before who had just uttered this phrase of six words. He belonged to that type of personages who may be said to introduce themselves. It seems as though we had known them always.

Calistus Munbar was between fifty and sixty years of age, but he did not look more than forty-five. He was above the usual height, rather stout, his limbs long and strong, and every movement vigorous and healthy.

Zorn and his friends had many times met with people of this type, which is not rare in the United States. Calistus Munbar’s head was enormous, round, with hair still fair and curly, shaking like leaves in a breeze; his features were highly coloured, his beard long, yellow, divided into points; moustache shaven; mouth, with the corners raised, smiling, satirical perhaps; teeth white as ivory; nose rather large at the end, with quivering nostrils, marked at the base of the forehead with two vertical folds supporting an eyeglass fastened to a thread of silver as fine and supple as a thread of silk. Behind the glasses gleamed an eye always in movement, with a greenish iris and a pupil glowing like fire.

Calistus Munbar wore a very ample loose jacket of brown diagonal stuff. From the side pocket peeped a handkerchief with a pattern on it. His waistcoat was white, very open, and fastened with three gold buttons. From one pocket to the other a massive chain was festooned, with a chronometer at one end of it and a pedometer at the other, to say nothing of the charms which jingled in the centre. His jewellery was completed by a series of rings which ornamented his fat, pink hands. His shirt was of immaculate whiteness, stiff with starch, dotted with three diamonds, surmounted by a wide, open collar, beneath the fold of which lay an almost imperceptible cravat of reddish brown cord. The trousers were striped and very full, and at the feet showed the laced boots with aluminium fastenings.

The Yankee’s physiognomy was in the highest degree expressive — the face of a man who suspected nobody, and could only see good in others. This was a man who could get out of difficulties, certainly, and he was also energetic, as was shown by the tonacity of his muscles, the apparent contraction of his superciliary and his masseter. He laughed noisily, but his laugh was nasal rather than oral, a sort of giggle, the *hennitus* of the physiologists.

Such was Calistus Munbar. He raised his big hat at the entrance of the Quartette Party. He shook hands with the four artistes. He led them to a table where the tea- urn was steaming and the traditional toast was smoking. He spoke all the time, giving them no opportunity to ask a single question — perhaps with the object of avoiding having to reply — boasting of the splendours of his town, the extraordinary creation of this city, keeping up the monologue without interruption, and when the breakfast was over, ending his monologue with these words,-

“Come, gentlemen, and follow me. But one piece of advice.”

“What?” asked Frascolin.

“It is expressly forbidden to spit in the streets.”

“We are not accustomed to,” protested Yvernès.

"Good! That will save you a fine."

"Not spit — in America!" murmured Pinchinat, in a tone in which surprise was mingled with incredulity.

It would have been difficult to have obtained a guide and cicerone more complete than Calistus Munbar. This town he knew thoroughly. There was not a hotel of which he did not know the owner's name, not a house that he did not know who lived there, not a man in the street by whom he was not saluted with sympathetic familiarity.

The city was built on a regular plan. The avenues and roads, provided with verandahs above the footways, crossed each other at right angles, forming a sort of chessboard. There was no want of variety about the houses; in their style and interior arrangements they were according to no other rule than the fancy of their architects. Except along a few commercial streets, these houses had a look of the palace about them, with their courtyards flanked by elegant wings, the architectural arrangement of their front, the luxury of the furniture of their rooms, the gardens, not to say parks, in their rear. It was remarkable that the trees, of recent planting, no doubt, were none of them fully grown. So it was with the squares at the intersection of the chief arteries of the city, carpeted with lawns of a freshness quite English, in which the clumps of trees of both temperate and torrid species had not drawn from the soil its full vegetative power. This peculiarity presented a striking contrast with the portion of Western America, where forest giants abound in the vicinity of the great Californian cities.

The quartette walked in front of him, observing this part of the town, each according to his manner — Yvernès attracted by what did not attract Frascolin; Zorn interested in what did not interest Pinchinat — all of them curious as to the mystery which enveloped this unknown city. From this diversity of views arose a fairly complete assemblage of remarks. But Calistus Munbar was there, and he had an answer for everything. An answer? He did not wait to be asked; he talked and talked, and never left off talking. His windmill of words turned and turned at the slightest wind.

Twenty minutes after leaving the Excelsior Hotel, Calistus Munbar said, —

“Here we are in Third Avenue, and there are thirty in the town. This is the most business one, it is our Broadway, our Regent Street, our Boulevard des Italiens. In this stores and bazaars you find the superfluous and the necessary, all that can be asked for by the requirements of modern comfort.”

“I see the shops,” observed Pinchinat, “but I don’t see the customers.”

“Perhaps it is too early in the morning?” added Yvernès.

“It is due,” said Calistus Munbar, “to most of the orders being given telephonically, or rather telautogra- phically.”

“What does that mean?” asked Frascolin.

“It means that we commonly use the telautograph, an instrument which sends the written as the telephone sends the spoken word, without forgetting the kinetograph, which registers the movements; being for the eye what the phonograph is for the ear, and the telephote, which reproduces the images. The telautograph gives a better guarantee than the mere message, which the first to come is free to make bad use of. We sign our orders and deeds by electricity.”

“Even the marriage registers?” asked Pinchinat, ironically.

“Doubtless, Mr. Alto. Why should you not marry by the telegraphic wire?”

“And cjivorce?”

“And divorce; that is the very thing that keeps the wires busiest.”

And he laughed a long laugh that made all the jewellery on his waistcoat jingle.

“You are merry, Mr. Munbar,” said Pinchinat, joining in the American’s hilarity.

“Yes, as a flock of finches on a sunshiny day.”

At this point a transverse artery was reached. This was Nineteenth Avenue, from which all trade was banished. Tram lines ran down it as down the others, swift cars passed along without raising a grain of dust, for the roadway, laid with an imputrescible pavement of Australian karry or jarrah, was as clean as if it had been polished. Frascolin, always observant of physical phenomena, noticed that the footway sounded under his feet like a plate of metal.

“These are splendid workers in iron,” he said, “they make their footways of sheet iron.”

And he stepped up to Calistus Munbar to hear what he had to say.

“Gentlemen,” said Munbar, “look at that mansion.”

And he pointed to a vast construction of monumental aspect, the courtyard of which had along its front a railing of aluminium.

“This mansion — I might say this palace — is inhabited by the family of one of the principal notables of the town, that is Jem Tankerdon, the owner of inexhaustible mines of petroleum in Illinois, the richest, perhaps, and consequently the most honourable and most honoured of our citizens.”

“Millions?” asked Zorn.

“Phew!” said Calistus Munbar. “The million is for us but the current dollar, and here we count them by hundreds! Only the richest men are in this city. That explains why the shopkeepers make fortunes in a few years. I mean retail shopkeepers, for wholesale traders there are none in this unique microcosm of the world.”

“And manufacturers?” asked Pinchinat.

“There are no manufacturers.”

“And shipowners?” asked Frascolin.

“There are none.”

“People living on their investments?” asked Zorn.

“Only those and merchants on the way to be like them.”

“What about the workmen?” observed Yvernès.

“When we want workmen we get them from somewhere else, and when their work is over we return them — with a good sum in wages.”

“Look here, Mr. Munbar,” said Frascolin, “you have a few poor in the town, just to keep the race from becoming extinct?”

“Poor! Mr. Second Violin! We have not got a single poor man in the town.”

“Then mendicity is forbidden?”

“There is no necessity to forbid it, as the town is not accessible to beggars. That is all very well for the cities of the Union, with their depots, their asylums, their workhouses, and the houses of correction.”

“Do you mean to say you have no prisons?”

“No more than we have prisoners.”

“But criminals?”

“They remain in the old and new Continent, where they can exercise their vocation under more advantageous conditions.”

“Really, Mr. Munbar,” said Sebastien Zorn; “one would think to listen to you that we were no longer in America.”

“You were yesterday,” replied this astonishing cicerone.

“Yesterday!” exclaimed Frascolin; wondering what could be the meaning of this strange expression.

“Doubtless. To-day you are in an independent city, over which the Union has no claim, which belongs only to itself.”

“And its name?” asked Sebastien Zorn, whose natural irritability began to peep out.

“Its name?” replied Calistus Munbar. “Allow me to be silent a little longer.”

"And when shall we know?"

"When you have finished the visit by which it is so much honoured."

This reserve was at least peculiar. But it was of no consequence. Before noon the Quartette would have finished their curious walk, and to learn the city's name as they were leaving it would be quite enough. The only puzzle about it was this: How could so considerable a city occupy one of the points on the Californian coast without belonging to the United States, and how was it that the driver of the carriage had never mentioned it? The main thing after all was that in twenty-four hours the Quartette would be at San Diego, where they would learn the word of this enigma if Calistus Munbar decided not to reveal it to them.

This strange personage had again given himself over to the indulgence of his descriptive faculty, not without letting it be seen that he did not wish to explain himself more categorically.

"Gentlemen," said he, "we are at the beginning of Thirty-Seventh Avenue. Behold the admirable perspective. In this quarter there are no shops, no bazaars, none of that movement in the streets which denotes a business existence. Nothing but hotels and private houses, but the fortunes are inferior to those of Nineteenth Avenue. Incomes of from ten to twelve millions."

"Mere beggars!" observed Pinchinat, with a significant grimace.

"Eh, Mr. Alto!" replied Calistus Munbar, "it is always possible to be a beggar in comparison with someone else! A millionaire is rich in comparison with a man who possesses only a hundred thousand, but not in comparison with him who has a hundred millions."

Many times already our artistes had noticed that of all the words used by their cicerone it was “million “which recurred most frequently. And a fascinating word it was, pronounced as he pronounced it with metallic sonorousness.

The quartette continued their walk through the extraordinary town, the name of which was unknown to them. The people in the streets were all comfortably dressed; nowhere could the rags of a beggar be seen. Everywhere were trams, drays, trucks, moved by electricity. A few of the larger streets were provided with moving pavements, worked by an endless chain, and on which people walked as if on a travelling train sharing in its own motion. Electric carriages rolled along the roads with the smoothness of a ball on a billiard-table. Equipages in the true sense of the word, that is to say, vehicles drawn by horses, were only met with in the wealthy quarters.

“Ah! there is a church,” said Frascolin, and he pointed to an edifice of heavy design, without architectural style, rising from the green lawns of a square.

“That is the Protestant temple,” said Calistus Munbar, stopping in front of the building.

“Are there any Catholic churches in your town?” asked Yvernès.

“Yes, sir, and I would like you to observe that although there are about a thousand different religions on our globe, we here confine ourselves to Catholicism and Protestantism. It is not here as in the United States disunited by religion, if not by politics, in which there are as many sects as families — Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Wesleyans,

&c. Here there are only Protestants faithful to the Calvinistic doctrine or Roman Catholics."

"And what language do they speak?"

"English and French are both used."

"We congratulate you," said Pinchinat. "The town," continued Calistus Munbar, "is divided into two sections, which are almost equal. Here we are in the section — "

"West, I think?" said Frascolin, looking up at the sun. "West, if you like."

"What, if I like?" replied the Second Violin, much surprised at the reply. "Do the cardinal points of this city vary as somebody pleases?"

"Yes and no," said Calistus Munbar, "I will explain that later on. Let us return to this section, west if you please, which is only inhabited by Protestants; it is here that the practical people live, while the Catholics, who are more intellectual and refined, occupy the east section. That tells you that this temple is the Protestant temple."

"It looks like it," observed Yvernès. "With its heavy architecture, prayer would not be an elevating towards the sky, but a crushing towards the ground."

"Well expressed!" said Pinchinat. "Mr. Munbar, in a town so up-to-date in its inventions I suppose you listen to the sermon or the mass by telephone?"

"Quite so."

"And confession?"

“Just as you can get married by telautograph; you must admit that it is practicable enough — ”

“Not to be believed,” replied Pinchinat, “not to be believed.”

CHAPTER IV.

AT eleven o’clock, after so long a walk, it was permissible to be hungry. And our artistes took advantage of this permission; and they agreed that at any price they must have some luncheon. This was also the opinion of Calistus Munbar.

Should they return to the Excelsior Hotel? Yes, for there did not seem to be many restaurants in this town, where the people probably preferred to have their meals at home, and tourists were apparently rather rare.

In a few minutes a tramcar took the hungry men to their hotel, where they took their places before a well- served table. It afforded a striking contrast with the ordinary American style, in which the multiplicity of the dishes is not at all in proportion to the quantity they contain. Excellent was the beef and mutton; tender and tasty was the poultry; of tempting freshness was the fish. And instead of the iced water of the restaurants of the Union, there were several kinds of beer and wines which the sun of France had distilled ten years before on the hill sides of Medoc and Burgundy.

Pinchinat and Frascolin did honour to this repast, as did also Zorn and Yvernès. Calistus Munbar had invited them, and it would have been bad taste not to have accepted his hospitality.

Besides, this Yankee, whose conversational powers were inexhaustible, displayed quite a charming humour. He told them all about the town except the one thing his guests wished to know, namely, what was this independent city, the name of which he hesitated to reveal? “A little patience,” he would say; “wait till the exploration is finished.” Was his idea to make the quartette tipsy, with the object of letting them miss the train to San Diego? No, but they drank well after having eaten well, and the dessert was being finished with tea, coffee and liqueurs, when an explosion shook the glasses in the hotel.

“What is that?” asked Yvernès, with a start.

“Do not be uneasy, gentlemen,” replied Calistus Munbar, “that is the gun at the observatory.”

“If it only means noon,” said Frascolin, looking at his watch, “I beg to state that it is late.”

“No, Mr. Alto, no! The sun is no later here than elsewhere.”

A singular smile played on the American’s lips, his eyes sparkled behind his spectacles, and he rubbed his hands. He seemed to be congratulating himself on having perpetrated some excellent joke.

Frascolin, less excited than the others by the good cheer, looked at him suspiciously without knowing what to make of it.

“Come, my friends,” added the American, in his most amiable manner, “allow me to remind you that there is the second part of the town for us to visit, and I shall die of despair if a single detail escapes you. We have no time to lose.”

“At what time does the train start for San Diego?” asked Zorn, always anxious not to fail in his engagements by arriving late.

“Yes, at what time?” repeated Frascolin.

“Oh, in the evening,” replied Calistus Munbar, with a wink of his left eye. “Come, my guests, come. You will not repent of having had me as a guide.”

How could they disobey such an obliging personage? The four artistes left the Excelsior Hotel and strolled along the road. It really seemed as though they had drunk rather freely of the wine, for a kind of thrill seemed to run through their legs, although they had not taken their places on one of the moving footways.

“Eh! eh I Support us, Chatillon!” exclaimed “his highness.”

“I think we have had a little to drink,” said Yvernès, wiping his forehead.

“All right,” observed the American, “once is not always! We had to water your welcome.”

“And we have emptied the watering-pot,” replied Pinchinat, who had never felt in a better humour.

Calistus Munbar took them down one of the roads leading to the second half of the town. In this district there was more animation than in the other. It was as though they had been suddenly transported from the northern to the southern States of the Union; from Chicago to New Orleans, from Illinois to Louisiana. The shops were better filled, the houses of more elegant architecture, the family mansions more comfortable, the hotels as magnificent as those in the Protestant section but of more cheerful aspect. The people were different in bearing and character. The city was apparently double, like certain stars, only the sections did not revolve round one another.

When they had nearly reached the centre of the district, the group stopped about the middle of Fifteenth Avenue, and Yvernès exclaimed, —

“Upon my word, that is a palace!”

“The palace of the Coverley family,” replied Calistus Munbar, “Nat Coverley, the equal of Jem Tankerdon.” Richer than he is?” asked Pinchinat. “Quite as rich, said the American. “An ex-banker of New Orleans, who has more hundreds of millions than he has fingers on both hands.”

“A nice pair of gloves, Mr. Munbar!”

“Just so.”

“And these two notables, Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley, are enemies, naturally?”

“Rivals, at least! each striving for preponderance in the city’s affairs, jealous of one another.”

“Will they end by eating one another?” asked Zorn.

“Perhaps, and if one devours the other — ”

“What an attack of indigestion will follow!” And Calistus Munbar absolutely shook with laughter, so much was he amused at the reply.

The Catholic church rises in a vast open space so as to give a good view of its fine proportions. It is in the Gothic style, the style that can be admired close to, for the vertical lines which constitute its beauty lose their character when seen from a distance. St. Mary’s Church merits admiration for the slenderness of its pinnacles, the delicacy of its rose work, the elegance of its flamboyant pointed arches, the gracefulness of its windows.

“A fine specimen of Anglo-Saxon Gothic,” said Yvernès, who was a good judge of architecture. “You are right, Mr. Munbar, the two sections of your town have no more resemblance between them than the temple of the one and the cathedral of the other!”

“And yet, Monsieur Yvernès, these two sections are born of the same mother — ”

“But not of the same father, probably?” said Pinchinat. “Yes, of the same father, my excellent friends. Only they have been built in a different way. They were designed for the convenience of those in search of an existence, tranquil, happy, free from all care, an existence offered by no other city of the old or new world.”

“By Apollo, Mr. Munbar,” replied Yvernès, “take care not to excite our curiosity too much. It is as if you were singing one of those musical phrases which make you long for the key-note.”

“And the result is that they tire your ear,” added Zorn. “Has the moment come when you will consent to tell us the name of this extraordinary town?”

“Not yet, my dear guests,” replied the American, adjusting his gold eyeglasses on his nasal appendage. “Wait until we have finished our walk — let us go on now.”

“Before going on,” said Frascolin, who felt a sort of vague uneasiness mingling with his curiosity, “I have a proposition to make.”

“And what is that?”

“Why not ascend the spire of St. Mary’s church? From there we could see — ”

“Oh, no,” said Munbar, shaking his bushy head, “not now, later on.”

“And when?” asked the violoncellist, getting provoked at so many evasions.

“At the end of our excursion, Monsieur Zorn.”

“Then we shall return to this church?”

“No, my friends, our walk will end with a visit to the observatory, the tower of which is a third higher than the spire of St. Mary’s church.”

“But why not take advantage of this opportunity?” asked Frascolin.

“Because it would spoil the effect I have in view.”

And there was no means of extracting any further reply from this enigmatic personage.

The best thing being to submit, the various avenues of this part of the town were conscientiously explored. A visit was paid to the commercial quarters, those of the tailors, boot-makers, hatters, butchers, grocers, bakers, fruiterers, &c. Calistus Munbar, saluted by most of the people he met, returned the salutes with vainglorious satisfaction. He talked incessantly, this exhibitor of wonders, and the rattle of his tongue was like the ringing of a bell on a feast day.

In about two hours the quartette had arrived at the boundary of the town, which was marked by a superb iron railing, adorned with flowers and climbing plants. Beyond was the country, the circular line of which blended with the horizon of the sky.

And here Frascolin noticed something which he did not think it his duty to communicate to his comrades. Everything would doubtless be explained from the summit of the observatory tower. What he noticed was that the sun, instead of being in the south-west at two o'clock, was in the south-east.

This was something to astonish a mind as reflective as that of Frascolin, and he had begun to rack his brains when Calistus Munbar changed the course of his ideas by exclaiming, —

"Gentlemen, the tram starts in a few minutes. Let us be off to the harbour."

"The harbour?" asked Zorn.

"Yes, it is only about a mile — and that will enable you to admire our park?"

The harbour, if it existed, ought to be a little below or a little above this town on the coast of Lower California. In truth, where could it be if it were not on some point of the coast?

The artistes, rather perplexed, sat down on the seats of an elegant car, in which were several other passengers, all of whom shook hands with Munbar, who seemed to know everybody, and then the dynamos of the train began to drive them along. That which Munbar called a park was the country extending round the city. There were paths running out of sight, and verdant lawns, and painted barriers, straight and zigzagged, known as fences, around preserves, and clumps of trees — oaks, maples, ashes, chest- nuts, nettle-trees, elms, cedars — all of them young, but the haunts of a world of birds of a thousand species. It was a regular English garden, with leaping fountains, baskets of flowers then in all the abundance of spring, masses of shrubs of the most diversified species, giant geraniums like those of Monte Carlo, orange trees, lemon trees, olive trees, oleanders, lentisks, aloes, camellias, dahlias, roses of Alexandria with their white flowers, hortensias, white and pink lotuses, South American passion-flowers, rich collections of fuchsias, salvias, begonias, hyacinths, tulips, crocuses, narcissi, anemones, Persian ranunculi, bearded irises, cyclamens, orchids, calceolarias, tree ferns, and also species characteristic of the tropics, such as cannas, palms, date trees, fig trees, eucalypti, mimosas, banana trees, guava trees, calabash trees, cocoanut trees; in a word, all that a connoisseur could ask for in the richest botanic garden.

With his propensity for evoking the memories of ancient poetry, Yvernès thought he was transported to the bucolic landscapes of the romance of Astrea. It is true if sheep were not wanting in these fresh pastures, if ruddy cows grazed between the fences, if deer and other elegant quadrupeds of the forest fauna bounded among the trees, it was the absence of the shepherds of D’Urfé and their charming shepherdesses which they had to regret. As to the Lignon, it was represented by a serpentine river, whose vivifying waters followed the valleys of the landscape.

But at the same time it all seemed artificial.

This provoked the ironical Pinchinat to exclaim, —

“Ah! is that all you have in the shape of a river?”

And Calistus Munbar to reply, —

“Rivers? What is the good of them?”

“To have water, of course.”

“Water! That is to say, a substance generally unhealthy, microbian, and typhoic?”

“Yes, but it can be purified.”

“And why give yourself that trouble when it is easy to make a water pure, hygienic, free from all impurity, and even gaseous or ferruginous, if you please.”

“You manufacture this water?” asked Frascolin.

“Certainly, and we distribute it hot or cold to the houses as we distribute light, sound, the time, heat, cold, power, the antiseptic agents, electrization by auto-conduction.”

“Allow me,” said Yvernès, “to believe that you also make the rain for watering your lawns and flowers.”

“And so we do, sir,” said the American, making the jewels on his fingers sparkle across the flowing masses of his hand.

“Do you have your rain on tap?” exclaimed Sebastien Zorn.

“Yes, my dear friends, rain which the conduits arranged underground distribute in a way that is regular, controllable, opportune, and practical. Is not that better than waiting for nature’s good pleasure, and submitting to the climate’s caprices, better than complaining against excesses without the power of remedying them, sometimes a too persistent humidity, sometimes too long a drought?”

“I have you there, Mr. Munbar,” declared Frascolin. “That you can produce your rain at will may be all very well, but how do you prevent it falling from the sky?”

“The sky? What has that got to do with it?”

“The sky, or, if you prefer it, the clouds which break, the atmospheric currents with their accompaniment of cyclones, tornadoes, storms, squalls, hurricanes. During the bad season, for example.”

“The bad season?” repeated Calistus Munbar.

“Yes; the winter.”

“The winter? What do you mean by that?”

“We said winter — hail, snow, ice!” exclaimed Zorn, enraged at the Yankee’s ironical replies.

“We know them not!” was Munbar’s tranquil reply.

The four Parisians looked at one another. Were they in the presence of a madman or a mystificator? In the first case he ought to be shut up; in the second he ought to be taken down.

Meanwhile the tramcar continued its somewhat leisurely journey through these enchanting gardens. To Zorn and his companions it seemed as though beyond the limits of this immense park were pieces of ground, methodically cultivated, displaying their different colours like the patterns of cloth formerly shown at tailors’ doors. These were, no doubt, fields of vegetables, potatoes, cabbages, carrots, turnips, leeks, in fact, everything required for the composition of a perfect *pot-au-feu.* At the same time, they would have been glad to get out into the open country to discover what this singular region produced in corn, oats, maize, barley, rye, buckwheat, and other cereals.

But here a factory appeared, its iron chimneys rising from its low, rough glass roofs. These chimneys, strengthened by iron stays, resembled those of a steamer under way, of a *Great Eastern* whose hundred thousand horses were driving her powerful screws, with this difference, that instead of black smoke they were only emitting mere threads which in no way injured the atmosphere.

This factory covered about ten thousand square yards. It was the first industrial establishment the quartette had seen since they had started on their excursion, under the American's guidance.

"And what is that establishment?" asked Pinchinat.

"It is a factory worked with petroleum," replied Munbar, looking as though his eyes would perforate his glasses.

"And what does this factory manufacture?"

"Electrical energy, which is distributed through the town, the park, the country, in producing motive force and light. At the same time, it keeps going our telegraphs, telautographs, telephones, telephotes, bells, cooking stoves, machinery, arc lights, incandescent lights, aluminium moons, and submarine cables."

"Your submarine cables?" observed Frascolin, sharply.

"Yes, those that connect the town with the different points of the American coast."

“And is it necessary to have a factory of such size for that purpose?”

“I think so, considering what we do with our electrical energy, and also our mental energy!” replied Munbar. “Believe me, gentlemen, it required a pretty strong dose to found this incomparable city without a rival in the world!”

They could hear the dull rumbling of the huge factory, the vigorous belchings of the steam, the clanking of the machines, the thuds on the ground, bearing witness to a mechanical effort greater than any in modern industry. Who could have imagined that such power was necessary to move dynamos or charge accumulators?

The tram passed, and a quarter of a mile further on stopped at the harbour.

The travellers alighted, and their guide, still profuse in his praises of everything, took them along the quays by the warehouses and docks. The harbour was oval in form, and large enough to hold some twenty ships. It was more of a wet dock than a harbour terminated by jetties; two piers, supported on iron piles, and lighted by two lamps, facilitating the entry of vessels from the sea.

On that day the wet dock contained only half a dozen steamers, some destined for the transport of petroleum, others for the transport of the goods needed for daily consumption, and a few barques fitted with electrical apparatus employed in sea fishing.

Frascolin noticed that the entrance of the harbour faced the north, and concluded that it must be on the north shore of one of those points which jut out from Lower California into the Pacific. He also noticed that there was a current in the sea running eastward at an appreciable speed, as it ran against the pierheads like the water along the side of a ship when under way — an effect due doubtless to the action of the rising tide, although the tide does not run very strong on the western coast of America.

“Where is the river we crossed yesterday in the ferry boat?” asked Frascolin.

“That is at the back of us,” the Yankee was content to reply.

But it would not do to delay if they wished to return to the town in time to take the evening train to San Diego.

Zorn mentioned this to Munbar, who answered, —

“Never fear, my dear friends. We have plenty of time. A tram will take us back to the town after we have followed the shore, a little. You wished to have a bird’s-eye view of the place, and in less than an hour you will get that from the top of the observatory.”

“You guarantee that?” said Zorn.

“I guarantee that at sunrise to-morrow you will no longer be where you are now.”

This enigmatic reply had to be accepted; although Frascolin’s curiosity, which was much greater than that of his comrades, was excited to the utmost. He was impatient to find himself at the summit of this tower, from which the American affirmed that the view extended to a horizon of at least a hundred miles in circumference. After that, if he could not fix the geographical position of this extraordinary city, he would have to give up the problem for ever.

At the head of the dock was a second tram line running along the coast. There was a train of cars, six in number, in which a number of passengers had already taken their seats. These cars were drawn by an electric locomotive, with a capacity of two hundred ampères-ohms, and their speed was from nine to twelve miles an hour.

Calistus Munbar invited the quartette to take their places in the tram, and it seemed as though it had only been waiting for our Parisians. The country appeared to differ very little from the park which lay between the town and the harbour. The same flat soil, and as carefully looked after. Green fields and meadows instead of lawns, that was all, fields of vegetables, not of cereals. At this momentartificial rain, projected from subterranean conduits, was falling in a beneficent shower on the long rectangles traced by line and square. The sky could not have distributed it more mathematically or more opportunely.

The tram road skirted the coast, with the sea on one side, the fields on the other. The cars ran along in this way for about four miles. Then they stopped before a battery of twelve guns of heavy calibre, the entrance to which bore the inscription “Prow Battery.”

“Cannons which load but do not discharge by the breech, like so many of those in Old Europe,” said Calistus Munbar.

Hereabouts the coast was deeply indented. A sort of cape ran out, very long and narrow, like the prow of a ship, or the ram of a man-of-war, on which the waves divided, sprinkling it with their white foam. The effect of the current probably, for the sea in the offing was reduced to long undulations, which were getting smaller and smaller with the setting of the sun.

From this point another line of rails went off towards the centre, while the other continued to follow the curve of the coast; and Calistus Munbar made his friends change cars, announcing that they would return direct towards the city.

The excursion had lasted long enough.

Calistus Munbar drew out his watch, a masterpiece of Sivan, of Geneva — a talking watch, a phonographic watch — of which he pressed the button, and which distinctly spoke, “Thirteen minutes past four.”

“You will not forget the ascent of the observatory? “Frascolin reminded him.

“Forget it, my dear, and I may say my old, friends! I would sooner forget my own name, which enjoys a certain celebrity, I believe. In another four miles we shall be in front of the magnificent edifice, built at the end of First Avenue, that which divides the two sections of our town.”

The tram started. Beyond were the fields, on which fell the afternoon rain, as the American called it; here again was the enclosed park with its fences, its lawns, its beds and its shrubberies.

Half-past four then chimed. Two hands indicated the hour on a gigantic dial, like that of the Houses of Parliament at Westminster, on the face of a quadrangular tower.

At the foot of this tower were the buildings of the observatory, devoted to different duties, some of which, with round metal roofs and glass windows, allowed the astronomers to follow the circuit of the stars. There were arranged round a central court, from the midst of which rose the tower for a hundred and fifty feet. From its upper gallery the view around would extend over a radius of sixteen miles, if the horizon were not bounded by any high ground or mountains.

Calistus Munbar, preceding his guests, entered a door which was opened to him by a porter in superb livery.

At the end of the hall the lift cage was waiting, which was worked by electricity. The quartette took their places in it with their guide. The cage ascended slowly and quietly. Forty-five seconds after they stopped at the level of the upper platform of the tower. From this platform rose the staff of a gigantic flag, of which the bunting floated out in the northerly breeze.

Of what nationality was this flag? None of our Parisians could recognize it. It was like the American ensign, with its lateral stripes of white and red, but the upper canton, instead of the sixty-seven stars which twinkled in the Confederation at this epoch, bore only one, a star or rather a sun of gold on a blue ground, which seemed to rival in brilliancy the star of day.

“Our flag, gentlemen,” said Calistus Munbar, taking off his hat as a mark of respect.

Sebastien Zorn and his comrades could not do otherwise than follow his example. Then they advanced to the parapet and looked over.

What a shriek — at first of surprise and then of anger — escaped them!

The country lay extended beneath them. The country was a perfect oval, surrounded by a horizon of sea, and as far as the eye could carry no land was in sight. And yet the night before, after leaving the village of Freschal in the American’s company, Zorn, Frascolin, Yvernès, Pinchinat had travelled for two miles on the land. They had then crossed the river in the ferry boat and again reached land. In fact, if they had lett the Californian shore for any sea voyage they would certainly have noticed it.

Frascolin turned towards Calistus Munbar.

“We are on an island?” he asked.

“As you see!” said the Yankee, with the most amiable of smiles.

“And what is this island?”

“Floating Island.”

“And this town?”

“Milliard City.”

CHAPTER V.

AT this period the world was still waiting for the audacious statistical geographer who could give the exact number of the islands scattered over the face of the globe. The number, we may make bold to say, would amount to many thousands. Among all these islands was there not one that answered the requirements of the founders of Floating Island, and the wants of its future inhabitants? No, not one. Hence this peculiarly American notion of making an island which would be the latest and greatest thing in modern construction.

Floating Island was an island worked by screws. Milliard City was its capital. Why this name? Evidently because the capital was the town of the millionaires, a Gouldian, Vanderbiltian, Rothschildian City.

An artificial island; there was nothing extraordinary in the idea. With a sufficient mass of materials submerged in a river, a lake, a sea, it was not beyond the power of men to make it. But that was not sufficient. Having regard to its destination, to the requirements it had to satisfy, it was necessary that this island could be moved from place to place, and consequently that it should float. There was the difficulty, which was not too great for ironworkers and engineers to overcome.

Already, at the end of the nineteenth century, with their instinct for the “big,” their admiration for the “enormous,” the Americans had conceived the project of forming a large raft some miles out at sea, and their mooring it with anchors. If this was not a city, it was at least a station in the Atlantic with restaurants, hotels, clubs, theatres, &co, where tourists could find all the conveniences of the watering places then most in vogue. This project was realized and completed. And then, instead of a stationary raft, they made a movable island.

Six years before the opening of this story an American company, under the title of *Floating Island Company, Limited*, had been formed with a capital of five hundred million dollars, divided into five hundred shares, for the construction of an artificial island, affording the nabobs of the United States the various advantages of which the stationary regions of the globe are deprived. The shares were quickly taken up, for immense fortunes were then plentiful in America, gained either by manipulating railways, or banking operations, or oil transactions, or speculations in pickled pork.

Four years were occupied in the construction of this island, of which we may conveniently give the chief dimensions, the internal arrangements, the means of locomotion which enabled it to cruise amongst the most beautiful regions of the immense Pacific Ocean.

There are floating villages in China on the River Yang- tse-Kiang, in Brazil on the Amazon, in Europe on the Danube. But these are only ephemeral constructions, a few small houses built on the top of long rafts of wood. When it reaches its destination the raft is broken up, the houses taken off — the village has lived and died.

But it was quite another affair with regard to this island; it was to be launched on the sea, it was to last as long as any of the works issued from the hands of man.

And besides, who knows if the earth will not some day be too small for its inhabitants, whose numbers will almost reach six milliards in 2072 — as the statisticians following Ravenstein affirm with astonishing precision.

And will it not be necessary to build on the sea when the continents are overcrowded?

Floating Island was an island in steel, and the strength of its hull had been calculated for the weight it had to bear. It was composed of 270,000 caissons, each of them eighteen yards high, by ten long and ten wide- Their horizontal surface represented a square of ten yards on the side, that is to say, of a hundred square yards. When the caissons were all bolted and riveted together, they gave the island an area of about twenty-seven million square yards. In the oval form which the constructors had given it, it measured about four and a half miles long and three broad, and its circuit in round numbers was about eleven miles.

Floating Island drew thirty feet of water, and had a freeboard of twenty feet. In volume it was about 430,000,000 cubic yards, and its displacement, being three- fifths of its volume, amounted to 258,000,000 cubic yards.

The whole of the caissons below the water line had been covered with a preparation up to then undiscoverable — which had made a millionaire of its inventor — which prevented barnacles and other growths from attaching themselves to the parts in contact with the sea.

The subsoil of the new island was made safe from distortion and breakage by cross girders, riveting and bolting.

Special workshops had had to be erected for the construction of this huge example of naval construction. These were built by the Floating Island Company, who had acquired Madeleine Bay and its coast, at the extremity of the long peninsula of Old California, which is just on the Tropic of Cancer. It was in this bay that the work was executed under the direction of the engineers of the Floating Island Company, the chief being the celebrated

William Tersen, who died a few months after the completion of the work, as Brunei did after the unfortunate launch of the *Great Eastern.* And Floating Island was but a *Great Eastern* modernized — only several thousand times larger.

It will be understood that there could be no question of launching the island as a ship is launched. It was built in sections, in compartments alongside one another on the waters of Madeleine Bay. This portion of the American coast became the station of the moving island, to which it could return when repairs were necessary.

The carcase of the island, its hull, if you will, was formed of two hundred and seventy thousand compartments, and filled in with vegetable soil, all except the site of the city, where the hull was of extraordinary strength. The depth of mould was ample for a vegetation restricted to lawns, flower beds, shrubberies, clumps of trees and fields of vegetables. It had seemed impracticable to require this artificial soil to produce cereals and feed for cattle, which could be regularly imported. But the necessary arrangements had been made, so as not to be dependent on importation for milk and poultry.

The three quarters of the soil of Floating Island devoted to vegetation amounted to about thirteen square miles, in which the park lawns afforded permanent verdure, and the carefully tilled fields abounded in vegetables and fruits, and the artificial prairies served as grazing ground for the flocks and herds. Electro-culture was largely employed, that is to say, the influence of continuous currents, the result being an extraordinary acceleration of growth and the production of vegetables of remarkable dimensions, such as radishes eighteen inches long and carrots weighing seven pounds apiece. The flower gardens, vegetable gardens, and orchards could hold their own with the best in Virginia or Louisiana. In this there was nothing astonishing; expense was no object in this island so justly called the “Pearl of the Pacific.”

Its capital, Milliard City, occupied about a fifth of the seventeen square miles reserved for it, and was about six miles in circumference. Our readers who are willing to accompany Sebastien Zorn and his comrades on their excursion will soon know it well enough in every part. They will find it unlike the American towns which have the happiness and misfortune to be modern — happiness on account of the facilities for communication, misfortune on account of the artistic side, which is absolutely wanting.

Milliard City, as we know, is oval in form, and divided into two sections divided by a central artery, First Avenue, which is about two miles long. The observatory is at one end, and the town hall at the other. Here are centralized all the public departments, the water supply and highways, the plantations and pleasure grounds, the municipal police, custom-house, markets, cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and science and art.

And now what was the population contained within this circuit of eleven miles?

The earth, it appears, has only twelve towns — of which four are in China — which have more than a million inhabitants. Well, Floating Island had but ten thousand, all of them natives of the United States. It was never intended that international discussions should arise among the citizens, who might repose in tranquility on this most modern of constructions.

It was enough, or rather more than enough, that they could not be mustered under the same banner with regard to religion. But it would have been difficult to reserve the exclusive right of residence on the island to the

Yankees of the North, who were the port watch of Floating Island, or the Americans of the South, who formed its starboard watch. The interests of the Floating Island Company would not have admitted of this.

When the frame of the hull was finished, when the part reserved for the town was ready for building on, when the plan of the streets and avenues had been adopted, the buildings began to rise — superb hotels, less ornate mansions, houses destined for shops, public edifices, churches and temples, but none of those monstrosities of twenty- seven floors, those "sky-scrapers" one sees at Chicago. The materials used were light and strong. The inoxydis- able metal that prevailed was aluminium, seven times as light as iron, the metal of the future, as it was called by Sainte-Claire-Deville, and which is suitable for all the requirements of solid construction. This was used in conjunction with artificial stones, cubes of cement which can be worked with so much ease. Use was also made of glass bricks — hollow, blown, and moulded like bottles — set with mortar, transparent bricks with which if desired the ideal glass house could be realized. But it was really metal framework which was most employed, as in the different kinds of naval architecture. And what was Floating Island but an immense ship?

These various properties all belonged to the Floating Island Company. Those who lived in them were only tenants whatever the amount of their fortune might be. Care had been taken to provide for all the requirements of comfort demanded by these extraordinarily rich Americans, by the side of whom the sovereigns of Europe and the nabobs of India cut but a sorry figure.

If the statistics are correct which give the stock of gold accumulated in the world at eighteen millions and that of silver at twenty millions, it must be admitted that the inhabitants of the Pearl of the Pacific had their fair share.

From the outset the financial side of the enterprise had been kept well in view. The hotels and houses had been let at fabulous prices. The rents amounted to millions, and many of the families could without inconvenience afford this payment for annual lodging. Hence, under this head alone the Company secured a good revenue. Evidently the capital of Floating Island justified the name it bore in geographical nomenclature.

Setting aside these opulent families, there were several hundreds paying a rental of from four to eight thousand a year. The surplus of the population comprised the professors, tradesmen, shopmen, and servants, and the foreigners, who were not very numerous, and were not allowed to settle in Milliard City or in the island. Lawyers were very few, and lawsuits consequently rare; doctors were fewer, and the death rate was consequently absurdly low. Every inhabitant knew his constitution exactly, his muscular force measured by the dynamometer, his pulmonary capacity measured by the spirometer, his power of cardial contraction measured by the sphygmometer, his degree of vital force measured by the magnetometer. In the town there were neither bars nor cafés, nor drinking saloons, nothing to encourage alcoholism. Never was there a case of dipsomania — let us say drunkenness, to be understood by those who do not know Greek. The municipal departments distributed electric energy, light, power, warmth, compressed air, rarefied air, cold air, water under pressure, as well as pneumatic telegrams and telephonic messages. If you died on this Floating Island, regularly withdrawn from intemperate climates and sheltered from every microbic influence, it was because you had to die after the springs of life had been worked to a centenarian old age.

Were there any soldiers in Floating Island? Yes, a body of five hundred men under the orders of Colonel Stewart, for it had to be remembered that some parts of the Pacific are not always safe. In approaching certain groups of islands it is prudent to be prepared against any attack by pirates. That this militia was highly paid, that every man received a salary superior to that of a full general in old Europe, need not occasion surprise. The recruiting of these soldiers, lodged, boarded, and clothed at the expense of the administration, took place under excellent conditions, controlled by chiefs who were as rich as Croesus; the candidates were numerous enough to be embarrassing.

Were there any police on Floating Island? Yes, a few companies, and they sufficed to keep the peace of a town which had no reason to be troubled. To reside there, permission was necessary from the municipal administration. The shores of the island were watched day and night by custom-house officers. You could only land at the ports. How could rascals get in there? And as to those who went wrong on the island, they were arrested at once, sentenced, and put ashore in the west or east of the Pacific, on any corner of the old or new continent, without the possibility of ever returning to Floating Island.

We said the ports of Floating Island. Were there many of them, then? There were two, situated at the extremity of the smaller diameter of the oval. One of these was called Starboard Harbour, the other Larboard Harbour. In this way there was no danger of regular communications being interrupted. If, owing to bad weather, one of these harbours was unavailable, the other was open to ships, which could thus reach the island in all winds. It was through these harbours that the island was supplied with goods, with petroleum brought by special steamers, with flour and cereals, wines, beers and other drinks, tea, coffee, cocoa, groceries, preserves, etc. At these were landed the cattle, sheep, and pigs from the best markets of America. Thus was assured a full supply of fresh meat and everything required by the most exact- ing gourmet. There were also landed the dress materials, linen, and fashions required by the most refined dandy or the most elegant lady. These things were bought from the tradesmen in the island at prices we dare not name, for fear of exciting the incredulity of the reader.

It may be asked how a regular service of steamers could be established between the American coast and an island which constantly changed its position — one day in one position, next day twenty miles away. The reply is very simple. Floating Island did not cruise about at a venture. Its position was in accordance with a programme drawn up by the adminstration, at the advice of the meteorologists of the observatory. It was a voyage — open to modifications, however — across that part of the Pacific containing the most beautiful archipelagoes, avoiding as much as possible sudden bursts of cold or heat, which are the causes of so many pulmonary affections. It was this which enabled Calistus Munbar to say, with regard to winter, “we know it not I “Floating Island only manoeuvred between the thirty-fifth parallels of north and south latitude. Seventy degrees to traverse, over four thousand sea miles. What a magnificent field of navigation! Ships always knew where to find the Pearl of the Pacific, for its movements were arranged in advance among the various groups of these delightful islands, which form the oases in the desert of this mighty ocean.

But, in any case, vessels were not reduced to having to find Floating Island by chance. The company did not care to avail themselves of the twenty-five cables, six thousand miles long, belonging to the Eastern Extension, Australia and China Company. No! Floating Island must not be dependent on anybody! Scattered about the surface of the sea were a few hundred buoys, supporting the ends of electric cables connected with Madeleine

Bay. One of these buoys would be picked up, the cable attached to the instruments in the observatory, and the agents in the Bay informed of the present latitude and longitude of Floating Island, the shipping service being consequently conducted with railway regularity.

There is, however, an important question which is worth dealing with at length.

How was enough fresh water procured for the wants of the island?

It was made by distillation in two special establishments, and was brought in pipes to the inhabitants of Milliard City, or led under the fields and country around. In this way it was provided for house and street service, and fell in beneficent rain on the fields and lawns, which were thus independent of the caprices of the sky. And not only was this water fresh, it was distilled, electrolyzed, more hygienic than the purest springs of both continents, of which a drop the size of a pin’s head may contain fifteen milliards of microbes.

But we have still to describe how the island was moved. Great speed was unnecessary, as for six months it was not intended to leave the region comprised between the tropics and the hundred and thirtieth and hundred and eightieth meridians. From fifteen to twenty miles a day was all that Floating Island required. This speed it would have been possible to obtain by towage, by having a cable made of the Indian plant known as bastin, which is very strong and light, and would float just below the surface so as not to be damaged by shoals. This cable could be passed over pulleys at the extremities of the island, which could be towed backwards and forwards as barges are towed up and down certain rivers. And this cable would have had to be of enormous size for such a mass, and it would have been subject to many injuries. And the freedom would be that of an island in chains, obliged to follow a definite line; and such freedom the citizens of free America revolted at.

At this period electricians had fortunately so far advanced that they could obtain almost anything from electricity. And it was to it they entrusted the locomotion of their island. Two establishments were enough to drive dynamos of enormous power, furnishing electrical energy by continuous current under a moderate voltage of two thousand volts. These dynamos drove a powerful system by screws, placed near the two ports. They each developed five millions of horse-power, by means of their hundreds of boilers fed with petroleum briquettes, which are less cumbersome, less dirty than oil, and richer in caloric. These works were under the direction of the two chief engineers, Watson and Somwah, assisted by a numerous staff of engineers and stokers under the supreme command of Commodore Ethel Simcoe. From his residence in the observatory, the commodore was in telephonic communication with the works. From him came the orders for advance or retreat, according to the programme. It was owing to him that, during the night of the 25th, the order to start had been given just as Floating Island was in the vicinity of the Californian coast, at the commencement of its annual campaign.

The maximum speed to which the island could attain, when the engines were developing their ten million horse-power, was eight knots an hour. The most powerful waves, when raised by a storm, could have no influence on it. Its size rendered it unaffected by the undulations of the surge. Fear of sea-sickness there could be none. For the first few days just a slight thrill could be perceived, which the rotation of the screws communicated to its subsoil. Terminated by rams extending at each end for some sixty yards, dividing the waters without effort, it passed without shock or jolt over the immense liquid field open to its excursions.

The electrical energy produced at the works was employed for other purposes than the locomotion of Floating Island. It lighted the country, the park, and the city. It gave the luminant for the lighthouse, whose beams signalled from afar the presence of the island and prevented all chance of collision. It furnished the various currents required by the telegraphs, telephotes, telautographs, telephones used in the private houses and business establishments. It fed the artificial moons, of five thousand candle-power, which lighted an area of five hundred square yards.

This extraordinary construction was now on its second voyage across the Pacific. A month before it had left Madeleine Bay and coasted up to the thirty-fifth parallel, so as to be in the latitude of the Sandwich Islands. It was off the coast of Lower California when Calistus Munbar, learning by telephone that the Concert Quartette had left San Francisco, had started for San Diego to secure those eminent artistes. We know the way he effected this, how he brought them on to Floating Island, then moored a few cable lengths off the coast, and how, thanks to this peculiarly smart proceeding, the dilettanti of Floating Island were to be charmed with chamber music.

Such was this new wonder of the world, this masterpiece of human genius, worthy of the twentieth century, of which two violins, an alto, and a ‘cello were the guests, and which was bearing them to the west across the Pacific.

CHAPTER VI.

EVEN supposing that Sebastien Zorn, Frascolin, Yvernès, and Pinchinat were men who could be astonished at nothing, it would have been difficult for them to resist a legitimate outburst of anger, and a desire to spring at Calistus Munbar’s throat. To have every reason to think that they were in North America, and yet to be really in mid ocean! To believe that they were within twenty miles of San Diego, where they were expected to give a concert next day, and to suddenly learn that they were moving away from it on an artificial island! Really their anger was excusable.

Fortunately for himself, the American had taken care to get out of the way. Profiting by the surprise, or rather the amazement of the quartette, he had left the platform and gone down in the lift, where he was for the moment out of range of the recriminations and exuberances of the four Parisians.

“Rascal!” exclaimed the ‘cellist.

“Animal!” exclaimed the alto.

“Suppose that, thanks to him, we are to see wonders!” remarked the solo violin.

“Are you going to make excuses for him, then?” asked the second violin.

“No excuses!” said Pinchinat. “If there is a magistrate on Floating Island, we will have this Yankee hoaxer sent to prison.”

“And if there is an executioner,”said Zorn, “we will have him hanged.”

But to obtain their different results it was first necessary to descend to the level of the inhabitants of Milliard City, the police not acting at a hundred and fifty feet in the air. And that they would have done in a few moments, if descent had been possible. But the cage of the lift had not come up again, and there was nothing like a staircase. At the summit of this tower the quartette found themselves cut off from communication with the rest of humanity.

After their first outburst of vexation and anger, Sebastien Zorn, Pinchinat, and Frascolin left Yvernès to his admirations and remained silent, and finally motionless. Above them rose the flagstaff on which the flag floated.

Zorn experienced a furious desire to cut the halliards, and bring down the flag, as a ship lowers its colours. But as this might lead to trouble, his comrades restrained him at the moment when his hand was brandishing a bowie-knife.

“Do not put us in the wrong,” said the wise Frascolin.

“Then — you accept the situation?” asked Pinchinat.

“No, but do not complicate it.”

“And our luggage on the road to San Diego!” remarked his highness, crossing his arms.

“And our concert to-morrow!” exclaimed Zorn.

“We will give it by telephone,” said the first violin, but the joke had anything but a soothing effect on the excited ‘cellist.

The observatory, it will be remembered, occupied the middle of a vast square, on which abutted the First Avenue. At the other end of this principal artery, some two miles long, which separated the two sections of Milliard

City, the artistes could perceive a sort of monumental palace, surmounted by a belfry of very light and elegant construction. They said to themselves that this must be theseat of government of the island, the residence of the municipality, supposing that Milliard City had a mayor and etceteras. They were not mistaken. And just then the clock in the belfry gave forth a joyous carillon, the notes of which reached the tower with the last undulations of the breeze.

“Listen!” said Yvernès. “That is in D major.”

“And in two-four time,” said Pinchinat.

The clock was striking five.

“And dinner,” exclaimed Sebastien Zorn, “and bed I Are we, owing to this miserable Munbar, to spend the night on this platform a hundred and fifty feet in the air?”

It was to be feared so, if the lift did not afford the prisoners the means of quitting their prison.

In fact the twilight is short in these low latitudes, and the sun falls like a projectile below the horizon. The four looked away to the furthest limits of the sky, over a deserted sea, without a sail, without even a trace of smoke. Across the country ran the trams away to the shore of the island, and between the two harbours. At this time the park was crowded. From the tower it looked like an immense basket of flowers — azaleas, clematis, jasmine, glycenas, passion-flowers, begonias, salvias, hyacinths, dahlias, camellias, roses of a hundred varieties. The people were crowding in, grown men and young folks, none of those little fops which are the shame of the great cities of Europe, but strong, well-built adults. Women and girls, most of them in pale straw-coloured dresses, the hue preferred in the torrid zone, leading little lap-dogs in silk coats with chains laced with gold. Here and there these people were following the sandy paths, capriciously winding among the lawns. Some were reclining on the cushions of electric cars, others were seated on benches sheltered by the trees. Farther off young gentlemen were playing tennis, and cricket, and golf, and also polo, mounted on spirited ponies. Groups of children — American children of astonishing exuberance, among whom originality is so precocious, particularly in the case of the girls — were playing on the grass.

The commercial quarters of the town were still busy at this time of day.

The moving footways still ran on with their burden of passengers down the principal streets. At the foot of the tower, in the square of the observatory, there was a passing crowd whose attention the four prisoners endeavoured to attract.

Pinchinat and Frascolin yelled again and again to them. They were heard, evidently, for arms were stretched out towards them, and even words reached their ears. But there was no sign of surprise. Nobody seemed astonished at the group on the tower.

The words that came aloft were “good-bye “and “how do you do,” and “good-evening,” and other formulas of polite greeting. It seemed as though the people had been informed of the arrival of the four Parisians on Floating Island.

“Ah!” said Pinchinat, “they are laughing at us.”

“I think they are,” remarked Yvernès.

An hour went by — an hour during which their appeals were in vain. The pressing invitations of Frascolin met with no more success than the furious invectives of Zorn. And the dinner-hour was approaching, the park was beginning to empty, the idlers in the streets were clearing off. It was maddening.

“Certainly,” said Yvernès, “we resemble the people whom some evil genius attracted within a sacred enclosure, and who were condemned to perish for having seen what their eyes should not have seen.”

“And we are to be left to the tortures of hunger,” said Pinchinat.

“That shall not be until we have exhausted every means of prolonging our existence,” said Zorn.

“If we have to eat each other, we will let Yvernès b number one!” said Pinchinat.

“When you please!” sighed the first violin in a subdued voice, bowing his head to receive the fatal blow.

At this moment a noise was heard in the depths of the tower. The cage of the lift came up and stopped at the platform. The prisoners, expecting to see Calistus Munbar, prepared to give him the welcome he deserved.

The cage was empty.

Be it so. There was plenty of time for that. The hoaxed would not fail to find the hoaxer. The thing to do at once was to descend to his level, and the way to do that was to enter the cage.

That is what they did; and as soon as they were in it began to descend, and in less than a minute they were at the ground level of the tower.

The door opened. The four went out. The interior court was deserted. They crossed it and took one of the paths along the square.

A few people were moving about who appeared to take no notice of the strangers. At a remark from Frascolin, advising him to be cautious, Zorn restrained his tempestuous recriminations. It was of the authorities that they must demand justice. There was no danger in doing that. It was decided to return to the Excelsior Hotel and wait until the morning to claim their rights as free men; and the quartette began to walk along First Avenue.

Did they attract much attention? Yes and no. People looked at them, but not to any great extent — as though, perhaps, they were some of the few tourists occasionally visiting Milliard City. The quartette, under the influence of such extraordinary circumstances, did not feel very comfortable, and thought they were gazed at much more than they really were. On the other hand, it was not astonishing that the people appeared strange to them, these islanders of a moving island, these men voluntarily separated from their kind wandering over the face of the largest ocean of the globe. With a little imagination they might fancy these Floating Islanders belonged to another planet of the solar system. This was the opinion of Yvernès, whose excitable brain was rather attracted by imaginary worlds. As to Pinchinat, he was content to say, —

“These people we are meeting have quite a millionaire look about them, and seem to be fitted with screws behind, like their island.”

But they got more and more hungry, and began to hurry towards the hotel. In the morning they would see about getting back to San Diego on one of the Floating Island steamers, after receiving an indemnity which Calistus Munbar would have to pay, as was only just.

But as they were going along First Avenue, Frascolin stopped before a sumptuous edifice, on the front of which, in gold letters, was the inscription “Casino.” To the right of the superb arcade which surmounted the principal door a restaurant was visible, and through the arabesqued glass could be seen a series of tables, of which some were occupied by diners, while a numerous staff was busy about them.

“Here people eat!” said the second violin, consulting his famished comrades with a look.

Pinchinat’s laconic reply was, “Let us go in.”

And they entered the restaurant in single file. No particular notice seemed to be taken of their presence in this establishment, usually patronized by strangers. Five minutes afterwards they were attacking the first course of an excellent dinner, of which Pinchinat had chosen the bill of fare. Fortunately, the quartette’s purse was well filled, and if it ran low on Floating Island it would soon be replenished by the takings at San Diego.

The cookery was excellent, being much superior to that of the New York and San Francisco hotels; the apparatus used was the electric stove, admirably adapted for either a fierce or gentle fire. The preserved oyster soup, fricasseed corn, stewed celery, and rhubarb cakes, which are traditional, were followed by fish of extreme freshness, rump- steaks of incomparable tenderness, game doubtless from the forests and prairies of California, and vegetables grown on the island. As drinks, there was no iced water in American fashion, but various beers and wines which the growers of Burgundy, the Bordelais, and the Rhine had placed in the cellars of Milliard City — at a high price we may be sure.

This bill of fare cheered up the Parisians. Their ideas took another turn. Perhaps they took a less gloomy view of the day’s adventures. It is well known that orchestral musicians know how to drink, as is only natural with those who expend their breath in chasing sonorous waves through wind instruments, though less excusable with those who have only to manipulate the strings. It is of no consequence, however. Yvernès, Pinchinat, and Frascolin began to see life in rose colour, and even in the colours of gold, in this city of millionaires. Sebastien Zorn alone refused to follow his comrades’ lead, and did not let his anger drown in the vintages of France.

In short, the quartette had become very well satisfied with themselves on the whole, when the time came to ask for their bill. It was handed to Frascolin by the superintendent in a black coat. The second violin cast his eyes on the total, rose from his seat, sat down again, rose again, rubbed his eyes, and looked at the ceiling.

“What is the matter with you?” asked Yvernès.

“A shudder from head to foot,” replied Frascolin.

“Is it dear?”

“More than dear. We have to pay two hundred francs.”

“The four?”

“No-each.”

In fact, the amount was a hundred and sixty dollars. The game cost fifteen dollars, the fish twenty dollars, the rump-steaks twenty-five dollars, the Medoc and Burgundy thirty dollars a bottle, the rest at the same rate.

“Confound it!” exclaimcd his Highness.

“The thieves!” exclaimed Sebastien Zorn.

These remarks being in French were not understood by the restaurant manager. Nevertheless this personage was quite aware of what was passing. But if a slight smile appeared on his lips, it was a smile of surprise not of disdain. It seemed to him quite natural that a dinner should cost a hundred and sixty dollars. That was the price in Floating Island.

“No scandal!” said Pinchinat. “France is looking at us. Let us pay.”

“And no matter how,” replied Frascolin. “On the road to San Diego, after to-morrow, we shall not have enough to buy a sandwich with!”

So saying, he took out his purse and extracted from it a respectable number of paper dollars, which, fortunately, were current at Milliard City, and he was about to hand them over when a voice was heard, —

“These gentlemen have not to pay anything.”

It was the voice of Calistus Munbar. The Yankee had just entered the room, expansive and smiling as usual.

“At last!” shouted Zorn, feeling inclined to take him by the throat and clutch him as he clutched the fingerboard of his ‘cello in the *forte* passages.

“Be calm, my dear Zorn,” said the American. “Let us go into the room where coffee is waiting for us. There we can talk at our ease, and when our conversation is over — ”

“I will strangle you!” replied Sebastien Zorn.

“No, you will kiss my hands.”

“I shall not kiss you at all,” said the ‘cellist, by turns red and white with anger.

A minute afterwards, Calistus Munbar’s guests were lounging on soft couches while he was balancing himself in a rocking-chair.

And this is what he said by way of introduction: —

“Calistus Munbar, of New York, fifty years of age, great-grand-nephew of the celebrated Barnum, at the moment Superintendent of the Fine Arts of Floating Island, entrusted with all that concerns painting, sculpture, music, and the pleasures generally of Milliard City. And now that you know me, gentlemen — ”

“Is it by chance,” said Zorn, “that you are not also an agent of the police, entrusted with the enticing of people into traps and keeping them prisoners, whether they like it or not?”

“Do not be too hasty, irritable ‘cellist,” replied the American, “and wait for the end.”

“We will wait,” said Frascolin, gravely, “and we are listening.”

“Gentlemen,” continued Calistus Munbar, graciously, “all I wish to touch on in this interview is the question of music as it exists in our island. Lyrical theatres, Milliard City does not as yet possess any, but if you wish it, they will rise from the soil as by enchantment. Up to the present our fellow-citizens have satisfied their musical tendencies by keeping themselves acquainted with the masterpieces of lyric art by means of the most approved apparatus. The ancient and modern masters, the great artistes of the day, the most sought after of instrumentalists, have been heard by us by means of the phonograph — ”

“A mere bird-organ, your phonograph!” exclaimed Yvernès, disdainfully.

“Not quite so much as you may think,” said the superintendent. “We are the possessors of instruments which have enabled us to listen to you when you were at Boston or Philadelphia; and if you please, you can applaud yourself with your own hands.”

At this period the inventions of the illustrious Edison had attained their final degree of perfection. The phonograph was no longer the mere musical-box which it resembled so closely to begin with. Thanks to its admirable inventor, the ephemeral talent of singers or instrumentalists had been preserved for the admiration of future races with as much precision as the works of statuaries and painters. An echo, if you will, but an echo faithful as a photograph reproduction, the shades and delicacies of singing or playing in all their unalterable purity.

Calistus Munbar said this so warmly that his hearers were impressed. He spoke of Saint-Saëns, Reyer, Ambroise Thomas, Gounod, Massenet, Verdi, of the imperishable masterpieces of Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Halévy, Rossini, Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, like one who knew them thoroughly, who appreciated them, who, to make them better known, had devoted his already long life as an impresario, and it was pleasant to listen to him. At the same time he did not seem to have been attacked by the Wagnerian epidemic which, at this period, was subsiding.

When he stopped to take breath, Pinchinat, profiting by the calm, remarked, —

"All that is very well, but your Milliard City, I see, has only heard music in a box, melodic preserves sent to it like tinned sardines or salt beef."

"Pardon me, Mr. Alto."

"I will pardon you, but I insist on this point, that your phonographs only preserve the past, and that you have probably never heard an artiste in Milliard City when he is playing."

"You must pardon me once more."

"Our friend, Pinchinat, will pardon you as much as you like, Mr. Munbar," said Frascolin. "His pockets are full of pardons, but his remark is just. Still, if you could put yourselves in communication with the theatres of America or Europe — "

"And do you think that would be impossible, my dear Frascolin?" exclaimed the superintendent, stopping in his see-saw.

"What do you mean?"

"I say that it is only a question of price, and our city is rich enough to satisfy all its fancies, all its aspirations as regards lyric art, and it has done so."

“And how?”

“By means of the theatrophones installed in the concert room of this casino. The company possesses a number of submarine cables immersed in the waters of the Pacific, one end of which is at Madeleine Bay, and the other held in suspension by powerful buoys. When our fellow-citizens wish to hear one of the singers of the Old or New World, we fix on to one of these cables, and send a telephonic order to our agents at Madeleine Bay. These agents put us in communication with America or with Europe. The cables are connected with such and such a theatre, such and such a concert-room, and our dilettanti seated in this casino really assist at these distant performances and applaud.”

“But the people over there cannot hear theïr applause!” exclaimed Yvernès.

“I beg your pardon, they do — by return wire!”

And then Calistus Munbar launched forth into transcendental considerations on music, considered not only as one of the manifestations of art, but as a therapeutic agent. According to the system of J. Harford, of Westminster Abbey, the good folks of Milliard City had experienced extraordinary results regarding this utilization of the lyric art. The system kept them in perfect health. Music exercising a reflex action on the nervous centres, the harmonic vibrations had the effect of dilating the arterial vessels, influencing the circulation and increasing or diminishing it as required. It provoked an acceleration of the heart’s pulsations and respiratory movements by reason of the tonality and intensity of the sounds, and aided ths nutrition of the tissues. Consequently, musical energy stations were working at Milliard City, and transmitting sound waves to the houses by means of the telephones, etc. etc.

The quartette listened with open mouths. Never had they heard their art discussed from a medical point of view, and probably they were not particularly pleased. Nevertheless, Yvernès the whimsical, ready to adopt these theories, which are as old as King Saul, according to the practice of the celebrated harpist, David, excitedly exclaimed, —

“Yes, yes. It is clear enough. You must choose your tune according to the diagnosis. Take Wagner or Berlioz, for instance, for the anaemic.”

“And Mendelssohn and Mozart for the sanguine instead of bromide of strontium!” replied Calistus Munbar.

Sebastien Zorn here interposed, and hurled his discordant note into this high-flighted conversation.

“We have nothing to do with all this,” he said; “why have you brought us here?”

“Because stringed instruments have the most powerful effect.”

“Indeed, sir; and was It to soothe your neurotics that you interrupted our journey, and hindered our reaching San Diego, where we are engaged to give a concert tomorrow?”

“That was the reason, my excellent friends.”

“And all you saw in us was a kind of musical sawbones, or lyrical apothecaries?” asked Pinchinat.

“No, gentlemen,” answered Calistus Munbar rising, “I saw in you only artistes of great talent and great reputation. The cheers which greeted the Quartette Party on its American tour have reached our island. The Floating

Island Company thought that the time had come to replace their phonographs and theatrophones by living artistes in flesh and blood, and give the inhabitants of Milliard City the inexpressible pleasure of a direct execution of the masterpieces of art. It wished to begin with chamber music before organizing operatic orchestras. It thought of you, the accredited representatives of that music. It gave me instructions to secure you at any price, to carry you off if need be. You are the first artistes that have had access to Floating Island, and I leave you to imagine the welcome that awaits you!”

Yvernès and Pinchinat were much affected by these enthusiastic periods of the superintendent. That it might be a hoax did not occur to them. Frascolin, a man of reflection, asked himself if he were to take this adventure seriously. After all, in such an extraordinary island would not things appear under an extraordinary aspect! As to Sebastien Zorn, he had resolved not to give in.

“No, sir,” he said, “men are not to be carried off without their consent! We will begin an action against you.”

“An action! When you ought to overwhelm me with thanks, ungrateful that you are!” replied the superintendent.

“And we will obtain damages, sir.”

“Damages! When I offer you a hundred times more than you could hope to get.”

“How much?” said the practical Frascolin.

Calistus Munbar took out his pocket-book and produced a sheet of paper bearing the arms of Floating Island. Presenting it to the four artistes, he said, —

“Your four signatures at the end of this agreement, and the matter is done.”

“Sign it before we have read it?” said the second violin. “That we will never do.”

“You will never have cause to regret it,” said Calistus Munbar, indulging in an outburst of hilarity that shook his whole body. “But let us proceed in proper form. It is an engagement which the company proposes to you, an engagement for twelve months from this date, for the execution of chamber music such as you have been giving in your programmes in America. In twelve months Floating Island will have returned to Madeleine Bay, where you will arrive in time — ”

“For our concert at San Diego, I suppose?” exclaimed Sebastien Zorn, “San Diego, where we shall be greeted with hisses.”

“No, gentlemen, with cheers. Artistes such as you, the dilettanti are always too honoured and too happy to hear, even if a year behind time.”

How could they be angry with such a man?

Frascolin took the paper and read it attentively.

“What guarantee have we?”

“The guarantee of the Floating Island Company under the signature of Mr. Cyrus Bikerstaff, our governor.”

“And the terms are these I see set forth in this agreement?”

“Exactly. One million francs — ”

“For the four?” asked Pinchinat.

“For each,” said Calistus Munbar with a smile, “and yet that amount is not in accordance with your merit, which no one can reward at its proper value.”

It would, it must be admitted, have been difficult to have been more pleasant. And yet Sebastien Zorn protested. He would not accept at any price. He would go to San Diego, and it was not without difficulty that Frascolin succeeded in calming his indignation.

Yet there could not help being some mistrust regarding the superintendent’s proposition. An engagement for a year at the rate of a million francs apiece, could it be serious? Quite serious, as Frascolin discovered when he asked, —

“When is the money payable?”

“Quarterly,” replied the superintendent, “and here is the first payment, in advance.”

Of the roll of notes which bulged his pocket-book Calistus Munbar made four bundles of fifty thousand dollars, that is two hundred and fifty thousand francs, which he handed to Frascolin and his comrades.

That is the way to manage matters in American fashion.

Sebastien Zorn could not help being shaken. But his ill-humour never lost its rights, and he could not help remarking, —

“After all, at the prices that prevail in your island, if you pay twenty-five francs for a partridge, you probably pay a hundred francs for a pair of gloves, and five hundred francs for a pair of boots?”

“Oh, Monsieur Zorn,” exclaimed Calistus Munbar, “the company does not stand at such trifles, and it desires that the Quartette Party will have all their expenses paid for them during their sojourn on the island.”

To these generous offers what other response could there be but to sign the engagement?

This was what Frascolin, Pinchinat, and Yvernès did. Zorn muttered that it was all absurd. To embark on a Floating Island was ridiculous. They would see how it would end. At last he decided to sign.

And this formality accomplished, if Frascolin, Pinchinat, and Yvernès did not kiss Calistus Munhar’s hand, they at least shook it warmly. Four shakes of the hand at a million each!

And that is how the Quartette Party were launched on this extraordinary adventure, and it was under such circumstances that its members became the guests of Floating Island,

CHAPTER VII.

FLOATING ISLAND glided gently over the waters of this Pacific Ocean, which justifies its name at this season of the year. Accustomed for twenty-four hours now to this tranquil motion, Sebastien Zorn and his comrades no longer noticed that they were being carried over the sea. So powerful were its hundreds of screws, driven by their ten million horse-power, that the thrill of the steel hull was barely perceptible. There was no sign of the oscillations of the waves, to which even the most powerful ironclads have to yield. In the houses there were no rolling tables or swing lamps. Why should there be? The houses of Paris, London, and New York were not more securely fixed on their foundations.

After a few weeks' stay at Madeleine Bay, the assembly of notables of Floating Island, called together by the president of the administrative council of the company, had determined on the programme of their annual tour. The island would visit the chief archipelagoes of the Eastern Pacific, voyaging through that hygienic atmosphere, so rich in ozone, in condensed electrized oxygen, gifted with active peculiarities not possessed by oxygen in its ordinary state. As the apparatus was free to move anywhere, advantage was taken of this power to go either east or west, to the American or Asiatic shore, as might be desired. Floating Island went where it pleased, so as to experience the distractions of a varied voyage. And even if it were desired to abandon the Pacific for the Indian Ocean or the Atlantic, to round Cape Horn or the Cape of Good Hope, it could proceed in the direction wished for, and rest assured that neither currents nor tempests would prevent its attaining its object.

But there was no question of its visiting these distant seas, in which it would not find what the Pacific offers among its innumerable archipelagoes. That ocean was a theatre quite large enough for its many voyages. Floating Island could move about from one archipelago to another If it was not endowed with that special instinct of animals — that sixth sense of orientation which guides them where their wants call them — it was directed in safety according to a programme discussed at length and unanimously approved. Up to then there had never been any disagreement between the Starboardites and Larboardites. And the present intention was a westerly voyage to the Sandwich Islands. The distance of about twelve hundred leagues which separates this group from the place where the quartette came on board would take about a month to accomplish at moderate speed, and Floating Island could remain in the archipelago until it was found convenient to start again for another group in the southern hemisphere.

On the morrow of this memorable day the quartette left the Excelsior Hotel and took up their quarters in some rooms in the casino which were put at their disposal — a comfortable suite, richly furnished as may be supposed. First Avenue lay displayed in front of its windows. Sebastien Zorn, Frascolin, Pinchinat, Yvernès, had each his own room communicating with a sitting- room common to all. The central court of the establishment yielded them the shade of its trees in full foliage, and the freshness of its fountains. On one side of this court was the museum of Milliard City; on the other the concert-room where the Parisian artistes were so happily to replace the echoes of the phonographs and the transmissions of the theatrophones. Twice a day, three times a day, as many times a day as they wished, their table was laid in the restaurant, where the manager favoured them with no more of his remarkable efforts in addition.

This morning, when they had all met in the sitting-room before descending for breakfast, —

“Well!” said Pinchinat, “what do you say to what has happened to us?”

“A dream,” replied Yvernès, “a dream in which we are engaged at a million a year.”

“It is unmistakable reality,” replied Frascolin. “Search in your pockets, and you can pull out the first quarter of the said million.”

“It remains to see how it is going to end! Very badly, I imagine,” said Zorn, bent on discovering a folded rose- leaf in the bed on which he had been laid in spite of himself. “Besides, where is our luggage?”

In fact, the luggage was probably at San Diego, to which they could not go in search of it. Oh! Very rudimentary luggage; a few portmanteaus, linen, toilet utensils, a change of clothes, and also, it is true, the costume of the executants when they appeared before the public.

There was nothing to be uneasy about on this point. In forty-eight hours this rather faded wardrobe would be replaced by another presented to the four artistes without their having to pay fifteen hundred francs for a coat or five hundred francs for a pair of boots.

Besides, Calistus Munbar, enchanted at having so ably conducted this delicate affair, took care that the quartette had nothing to wish for. It was impossible to imagine a more inexhaustibly obliging superintendent. He occupied a suite of rooms in the casino of which he had the chief management, and the company had taken care that the fittings and appointments were worthy of his magnificence and munificence. We would rather not say how much they cost.

The casino included lecture-rooms and recreation- rooms, but baccarat, trente et quarante, roulette, poker, and all other games of chance were strictly prohibited. Here was the smoke room from which was delivered direct to the houses the tobacco smoke prepared by a company recently established. The smoke of the tobacco burnt in the furnaces of this central establishment was purified and cleared of nicotine and distributed by pipes with amber mouthpieces to each subscriber. The subscribers had only to apply their lips and a meter registered the daily expense.

In this casino, where the dilettanti came to listen to the music from afar, to which the concerts of the quartette were now to be added, there were also the public collections of Milliard City. To the lovers of paintings, the gallery, rich in ancient and modern pictures, offered a number of masterpieces bought at extravagant prices, canvases of the Italian, Dutch, German and French schools which would make envious the collections of Paris, London, Munich, Rome and Florence. It had examples of Raffaelle, Da Vinci, Giorgione, Correggio, Domenichino, Ribeira, Murillo, Ruysdael, Rembrandt, Rubens, Cuyp, Frans Hals, Hobbema, Van Dyck, Holbein, etc. and also among the moderns, Fragonard, Ingres, Delacroix, Schefifer, Cabat, Delaroche, Regnaut, Couture, Meissonier, Millet, Rousseaux, Jules Duprê, Brascassat, Mackart, Turner, Troyon, Corot, Daubigny, Baudry, Bonnat, Carolus Duran, Jules Lefebvre, Vollon, Breton, Binet, You, Cabanel, etc. In order to make these pictures last for ever, they were placed in glass cases, from which the air was exhausted. It is worth mentioning that the impressionists, the intensists, the futurists had not yet encumbered this gallery, but doubtless that would occur in time, and Floating Island would not escape an invasion of this decadent pest. The museum also possessed statues of real value, marbles of the great sculptors ancient and modern, placed in the courts of the casino. Thanks to this climate being without rain or fog, groups, statues and busts could resist the attacks of the weather without injury.

That these marvels were often visited, that the nabobs of Milliard City had a very pronounced taste for the productions of art, that the artistic sense was very strongly developed amongst them, it would be hazardous to pretend. But it was noteworthy that the Starboardists included more amateurs than the Larboardists. All were, however, agreed when it was proposed to buy any masterpiece, and when their astonishing offers invariably obtained them from all the Dukes of Aumale, and all the Chauchards of the old and new continents.

The most frequented rooms in the casino were the reading-rooms devoted to the newspapers, and the European and American reviews brought by the regular service of steamers to Floating Island from Madeleine Bay. After being turned over, read and re-read, these reviews were placed on the shelves of the library with many thousand other works, the classification of which required the presence of a librarian at a salary of twenty-five thousand dollars, who had probably less to do than any of the other functionaries of the island. This library also contained a number of phonographic books which gave no trouble to read; all you had to do was to press a button and you heard the voice of some excellent reader aloud. For instance, there was the *Phèdre* of Racine read by M. Legouvé. As to the local journals, they were edited, composed and printed in the workshops of the casino under the direction of two editors-in-chief. One was the *Starboard Chronicle* for the Starboard section; the other the *New Herald* for the Larboard Section. The news consisted of the different events on the island, the arrival of the steamers, marine intelligence, ships sighted, the price lists of interest to the commercial quarters, the daily position of the island, the decision of the council of notables, the orders of the governor, the decrees of the civil power; births, marriages, deaths — the last very seldom; besides, there were never any robberies or murders, the courts only dealing with civil matters, actions between private persons. Never were there any articles on centenarians, longevity being no longer the privilege of the few.

For foreign intelligence the papers were indebted to the daily telephonic communication with Madeleine Bay, whence started the cables submerged in the depths of the Pacific. The people of Milliard City were thus informed of all that passed all over the world, if there were sufficient interest in it. Let it be added that the *Starboard Chronicle* and the *New Herald* were on excellent terms with each other. Up till then they had existed in harmony, but there was no saying that their exchange of courteous discussions would last for ever. Tolerant and conciliatory in all religious matters, Protestantism and Catholicism worked very well together in Floating Island. It is true that if in the future some odious political matter became mixed up with religion, if questions of private interest and selfishness intervened —

Besides these daily high-priced journals, there were weekly and monthly reviews, reprinting the articles from foreign magazines, the articles of Sarcey, Lemaître, Fouquier, and other critics of eminence; then there were magazines, illustrated or not, without counting half-a- dozen society papers devoted to current fashionable gossip. Their only object was to afford a little enjoyment to the mind — and to the stomach. Yes, some of these society pages were printed on edible pastry with chocolate ink. After they were read they were inwardly digested at the next breakfast. Some of them were astringent, some of them were gently purgative, and all proved very excellent eating. And we may here say that the quartette found this invention as agreeable as it was practical.

“These are lectures of easy digestion,” observed Yvernèf judiciously.

“Quite a nourishing literature,” replied Pinchinat; “pastry and literature combined, that agrees perfectly with hygienic music!”

Now it is natural to ask what resources the island possessed for maintaining its population in such conditions of welfare as no other city in the world approached. Its revenues must have amounted to a considerable sum, considering the expenditure under the different headings and the handsome salaries paid to its employed.

The quartette inquired of the superintendent concerning this.

“*Here,”* he replied, “we do not bother about business. We have no Board of Trade, no Exchange, no export trade. The only commerce is that needed by the wants of the island, and we shall never offer strangers the equivalent of the World’s Fair at Chicago in 1893, or the Paris Exposition of 1900. No! The mighty religion of business does not exist, and we never raise the cry of ‘ Go ahead!’ unless it is for the Pearl of the Pacific to keep in front. It is not to trade we look for the needful revenue of Floating Island, but to the custom-house. Yes! our customs dues yield all we require for the exigencies of our budget.”

“And this budget?” asked Frascolin.

“Its total is twenty million dollars, my excellent friends!”

“A hundred millions of francs!” exclaimed the second violin, “and for a town of ten thousand souls.”

“That is it, my dear Frascolin; and the amount is entirely provided by the customs dues. We have no octroi, the products of the island being almost insignificant. We have nothing but the dues levied at Starboard Harbour and Larboard Harbour. That explains the dearness of our articles of consumption — dearness which is relative, mind you, for the prices, high as they may appear to you, are in accordance with the means of those who pay them."

And hereupon Calistus Munbar started off again, boasting of his town, boasting of his island — in his eyes a fragment of a superior planet fallen into the Pacific, a floating Eden, in which the wise men had taken refuge, and if true happiness could not be found there, it could be found nowhere. It was a showman's speech! It seemed as though he said, "Walk up, gentlemen; walk up, ladies! take your tickets, there are only a few places left. Who will take a ticket?" etc. etc.

It is true that the places were few and the tickets dear. Bah! The superintendent threw the millions about as if they were but units in this city of millionaires.

It was in the course of this tirade, in which the phrases poured forth in cascades, in which the gestures became accelerated with semaphoric frenzy, that the quartette were informed regarding the different branches of the administration. And first, the schools, in which the instruction was gratuitous and obligatory, and of which the professors were paid as if they were ministers. Here were taught the dead and living languages, history, geography, the physical and mathematical sciences, and the accomplishments more thoroughly than in any university or academy in the Old World — according to Calistus Munbar. The truth was that there was no great rush of pupils to these public schools, and if the present generation retained some traces of study in the colleges of the United States, the succeeding generation would have less learning than they had dividends.

Did not the inhabitants of this moving island travel in foreign parts? Did they never visit the great capitals of Europe? Did they not see the countries that had given them so many masterpieces of all kinds? Yes! There were a few whom a certain feeling of curiosity drove to these distant regions. But they found it fatiguing; they grew weary of it for the most part; they found there nothing of the uniformity of existence on Floating Island; they suffered from heat, they suffered from cold; in short they caught cold, and people never caught cold in Milliard City. Consequently they, the imprudent adventurers, who had had the unhappy idea to leave it, were only too glad and impatient to return to it. What good did they get from these travels? None.

As to the foreigners who might be attracted by the fame of Floating Island, this ninth wonder of the world, the Eiffel Tower being at least the eighth, Calistus Munbar thought that they never would be very numerous. Of those who had come during the last year the majority had been Americans; of other nations there were few or none. There had been a few English, recognizable by their turning their trousers up on the pretext that it was raining in London. Besides, Great Britain had looked with no friendly eye on the building of this artificial island, which provided another obstacle to navigation, and would have rejoiced at its disappearance. The Germans obtained but a very cool welcome, as if they would quickly have made Milliard City a new Chicago, once they had set foot in it. The French were of all foreigners those whom the Company would greet with most sympathy and attention, owing to their not belonging to the invading races of Europe. But had a Frenchman ever appeared on Floating Island?

“That is not likely,” said Pinchinat.

“We are not rich enough,” added Frascolin.

“To live here, yes,” replied the superintendent, “but not to be an official.”

“Is there, then, one of our compatriots in Milliard City?” asked Yvernès.

“There is one.”

“And who is this privileged person?”

“Monsieur Athanase Dorémus.”

“And what is he doing here, this Athanase Dorémus?” exclaimed Pinchinat.

“He is professor of dancing and deportment, with a handsome salary from the government, to say nothing of his income from private finishing lessons.”

“Which a Frenchman is alone capable of giving!” replied his Highness.

The quartette had thus become fairly well acquainted with the organization of the administrative life of Floating Island. They had now only to abandon themselves to the charm of this voyage which was taking them to the west of the Pacific. If it had not been for the sun rising sometimes over one part of the island and sometimes over another, according to the direction in which the island was moving, Sebastien Zorn and his comrades could have believed they were on firm ground. On two occasions during the fortnight that followed there had been a violent storm and gale, for there are always a few on the Pacific notwithstanding its name. The waves dashed up against the metal hull, and covered it with spray as if it was an ordinary shore. But Floating Island did not even groan under the assaults of the raging sea. The fury of the ocean was impotent against it. The genius of man had conquered nature.

On the nth of June, a fortnight after their arrival, the quartette gave their first concert, the announcement, in electric letters, being exhibited along the larger avenues. It need hardly be said that the instrumentalists had been previously presented to the governor and the municipal council. Cyrus Bikerstaff had given them a most cordial’ welcome. The newspapers had referred to the success of the tours of the Quartette Party in the United States of America, and warmly congratulated the superintendent on having secured their services — in rather an arbitrary manner, as we know. What pleasure there would be in seeing as well as hearing these artistes executing the works of the masters! What a treat for connoisseurs!

Although the four Parisians had been engaged for the casino at Milliard City at fabulous expense, do not let it be supposed that the concerts were to be free to the public. Far from that The administration intended to make a large profit out of the affair, like the American impresarios whose singers cost them a dollar a bar. and even a dollar a note. It was customary to pay for the theatrophonic and phonographic concerts at the casino, and now the people must pay considerably more. The seats were all at the same price, two hundred dollars each — that is a thousand francs in French money — and the superintendent flattered himself that the room would be full.

He was not deceived. Every seat was taken. The comfortable and elegant room of the casino could only contain a hundred, it is true; and if the seats had been put up to auction, there is no knowing what amount the receipts would have reached. But that would have been contrary to the usages of Floating Island. Everything with a market value appeared in the price lists the superfluous as well as the necessary. Without this precaution, owing to the enormous fortunes of some of the inhabitants, the whole supply might be bought up by one man, and this it was desirable to avoid. The rich

Starboardites might, it is true, go to the concert for the love of the art, while the rich Larboardites might possibly go there because it was the fashion.

When Sebastien Zorn, Pinchinat, Yvernès, and Frascolin appeared before the spectators of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, it was no exaggeration on their part to say, “there is an audience worth millions.” This evening they would have been within the truth in saying that their audience was worth hundreds of millions. Only think of it! Jem Tankerdon, Nat Coverley, and their families were conspicuous in the front row of seats. In other parts of the room, *passim*, were a number of amateurs, who, though only minor millionaires, had none the less “a heavy bag,” as Pinchinat very justly remarked.

“Now then!” said the chief of the quartette when the time came for them to appear on the platform.

And they took their places, not more excited than usual, nor even so much as if they were appearing before a Parisian public, which might have less money in their pockets but more of the artistic sense in their minds.

It is necessary to say that they had not yet taken lessons of their countryman, the professor of deportment. Sebastien Zorn, yvernes emès, Frascolin, and Pinchinat were perfect as to their attire — white cravat at twenty-five francs, pearl-grey gloves at fifty francs, shirt at seventy francs, boots at a hundred and eighty francs, waistcoat at two hundred francs, black trousers at five hundred francs, black coats at fifteen hundred francs — all at the expense of the administration, be it understood. They were welcomed with applause or very warmly by the Starboardite hands, more discreetly by the Larboardite hands — a matter of temperament.

The programme of the concert comprised four items which they had obtained from the casino library, which was well supplied with works by the superintendent’s care: First quartette in E flat; Op. 12, Mendelssohn.

Second quartette in F major; Op. 16, Haydn.

Tenth quartette in E flat; Op. 74, Beethoven.

Fifth quartette in A major; Op. 10, Mozart.

The executants played marvellously in this millionized room of the floating island, on the surface of an abyss more than five thousand metres deep in this portion of the Pacific. They obtained a success that was considerable and deserved, more especially among the dilettanti of the Starboardite section. You should have seen the superintendent during this memorable evening. He exulted. It looked as though it was he who had just been playing on both violins, the alto, and the ‘cello. What a fortunate first appearance for the champions of chamber music — and for their impresario!

It should be stated that if the room was full, the vicinity of the casino was crowded. What a number there were who had not been able to obtain a bracket-seat or a stall, to say nothing of those whom the high prices kept away. This outside audience heard the music from afar, as if it came from the box of a phonograph or the mouth of a telephone. But their applause was none the less hearty.

And they applauded uproariously when the concert ended, and Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès, Frascolin, and Pinchinat appeared on the terrace of the left-hand pavilion.

First Avenue was inundated with luminous rays. From the heights of space, the electric moons shed rays of which the pale Selene might well be jealous.

In front of the casino, on the footpath, a little apart from the others, a couple attracted the attention of Yvernès. A man was there, with a woman on his arm.

The man was above the middle height, of distinguished physiognomy, severe, sad even, and perhaps fifty years old. The woman was a few years younger, tall, proud- looking, with grey hair peeping from under her hat.

Yvernès, struck with their reserved attitude, pointed them out to Calistus Munbar.

“Who are those people?” he asked.

“Those people?” replied the superintendent, with a disdainful pout. “Oh! they are raving melomaniacs.”

“And why did they not have a seat in the casino room?”

“Probably because it cost too much.”

“Their fortune?”

“Hardly two hundred thousand francs a year.”

“Pooh!” said Pinchinat. “And who are these poor beggars?”

“The King and Queen of Malecarlie.”

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER the construction of this extraordinary concern, the Floating Island Company had to provide for the requirements of a double organization, maritime on the one hand and administrative on the other.

The former, as we know, had as director, or rather captain, Commodore Ethel Simcoe, of the United States navy. He was a man of about fifty, an experienced navigator, thoroughly acquainted with every part of the Pacific, its currents, its storms, its reefs, its coralline shoals. Consequently he was fully qualified for the safe guidance of the floating island confided to his care, and the valuable lives for whom he was responsible to God and the shareholders of the company.

The second organization, that which comprised the various administrative services, was in the hands of the governor of the island. Mr. Cyrus Bikerstaff was a Yankee of Maine, one of the Federal States which took the least part in the fratricidal strife of the American confederation during the War of Secession. Cyrus Bikerstaff had been happily chosen to maintain a golden mean between the two sections of the island.

The governor, who was on the verge of sixty, was a bachelor. He was a man of much coolness and self- control, very strict, very energetic, notwithstanding his phlegmatic appearance, very English in his reserved attitude, his gentlemanly manners, the diplomatic discretion with which he spoke and acted. In any other country than Floating Island, he would have been a considerable man and consequently made much of. But here he was only the chief servant of the company, and though his salary exceeded the civil list of many a petty sovereign of Europe, he was not rich, and could not make much of a figure in the presence of the nabobs of Milliard City.

Cyrus Bikerstaff was not only governor of the island but mayor of the capital. As such he occupied the mansion at the end of First Avenue, facing the observatory where Commodore Simcoe had his residence. There were the public offices, there were received all the civil registrations, the births, with a mean rate assuring the future, the deaths — the dead were taken to the cemetery at Madeleine Bay — the marriages, which had to be celebrated by the civil authorities before the religious ceremonial, according to the code of Floating Island. There the different branches of the administration had their headquarters, and were worked without any complaint from the administered, a fact that did honour to the mayor and his staff. When Sebastien Zorn, Pinchinat, Yvernès and Frascolin were introduced to him by the superintendent, he made a very favourable impression on them, such as is produced by the individuality of a good and just man, of a practical turn of mind, who did not abandon himself to prejudices or chimeras.

“Gentlemen,” he said to them, “it is very fortunate for us that we have got you. Perhaps the proceedings of our superintendent were not quite as they should have been. But you have forgiven him, I suppose. Besides, you will not have to complain of the way our municipality treats you. All it asks is two concerts a month, and you are free to accept any private engagements that may be offered you. We welcome you as musicians of great merit, and will never forget that you are the first artistes we have had the honour to welcome.”

The quartette were delighted at this reception, and made no attempt to hide their satisfaction from Calistus Munbar.

“Yes! He is a nice man, Mr. Cyrus Bikerstaff,” replied the superintendent, with a slight shrug of his shoulders. “It is a pity that he does not possess a million or two."

"We cannot be perfect," replied Pinchinat.

The governor-mayor of Milliard City had two assistants, who helped him in the very simple administration of Floating Island. Under their orders, a small number of employed, at suitable wages, were engaged in the different branches. There was no municipal council. What would be the use of it? In its place was a council of notables — thirty of the men best qualified by their intelligence and their fortune. It met when any important measure was in contemplation — among others the choice of the itinerary which was to be followed in the interests of the general health. As far as our Parisians could see, there was frequently, in this respect, matter for discussion and difficulties to be settled. But thanks to his clever and judicious intervention, Cyrus Bikerstaff had always been able to conciliate opposing interests, and gratify the self-respect of those under his control.

One of his assistants, Barthelemy Ruge, was a Protestant, the other, Hubley Harcourt, was a Catholic, both of them chosen from among the high functionaries of the Floating Island Company, and both seconding Cyrus Bikerstaff with zeal and intelligence.

Thus had existed for eighteen months already, in the plenitude of its independence, free from all diplomatic connections, at liberty on this vast sea of the Pacific, sheltered from all unpleasant weather, beneath the skies of its choice, the island on which the quartette were to reside for a whole year. That they would be exposed to any adventures, that the future had in reserve for them anything unforeseen, it was not possible to imagine or to fear, for, as the 'cellist-observed, everything on board was done with order and regularity. And yet, in creating this artificial domain, launched on the surface of the ocean, had not human genius exceeded the limits assigned to man by the Creator?

The voyage continued towards the West. Every day when the sun passed the meridian the position was fixed by the officers of the observatory under the orders of Commodore Ethel Simcoe. Four dials on the lateral faces of the belfry of the town hall gave the exact position of the island in longitude and latitude, and these indications were reproduced telegraphically at the street corners, in the hotels, in the public buildings, in the private houses, in the same way as the time which changed every day as the island moved from west to east. The inhabitants of Milliard City were thus enabled to know at any moment what place on its itinerary Floating Island occupied.

With the exception of this insensible movement on the surface of the ocean, Milliard City differed in no respect from the capitals of the old and new Continents. The existence was the same. The same routine of public and private life. As they were not very busy, our instrumentalists employed their first leisure in visiting all that was curious in the Pearl of the Pacific. The trams took them towards all points of the island. The two factories of electrical energy evoked their sincere admiration by the simplicity of their machinery, the power of their engines driving a double series of screws, and the admirable discipline of their staff, the one directed by Engineer Watson, the other by Engineer Somwah. At regular intervals Larboard Harbour and Starboard Harbour received in their basins the steamers running to and from Floating Island, according as their position offered the easier access.

If the obstinate Sebastien Zorn refused to admire these marvels, if Frascolin was more reserved in his sentiments, in what a constant state of rapture was the enthusiastic Yvernès! In his opinion the twentieth century would not end before the seas were ploughed by floating towns. This would be the last word of progress and comfort in the future. What a superb spectacle was this moving island going to visit its sisters of Oceania. As to Pinchinat, amid these opulent surroundings, he was almost intoxicated at hearing the people talk of nothing but millions, as they talk elsewhere of pounds. The banknotes were of the usual values. It was the custom to carry two or three thousand dollars in the pocket. And more than once his highness had said to Frascolin, —

“Old boy, you don’t happen to have fifty thousand francs about you, do you?”

Meanwhile the quartette party made many acquaintances, being assured of an excellent welcome everywhere. Besides, on the recommendation of the deafening Munbar, who would not be eager to treat them well?

In the first place they went to visit their compatriot, Athanase Dorémus, professor of dancing and deportment.

This good fellow occupied in the Starboard Section a modest house in Twenty-Fifth Avenue, at three thousand dollars a year rent. His servant was an old negress, at a hundred dollars a month. He was enchanted to make the acquaintance of Frenchmen — Frenchmen who did honour to France.

He was an old man of seventy; thin, emaciated, short, with a bright look, and all his teeth still perfect, as was his abundant frizzly hair, which was white as his beard. He walked sedately, with a certain rhythmic cadence, his chest in advance, his stomach curved in, his arms rounded, his feet a little turned out, and with irreproachable boots. Our artistes took great pleasure in making him talk, and he was quite willing, for his graciousness was equal to his loquacity.

“I am delighted, my dear compatriots, I am delighted,” he repeated twenty times at their first visit. “I am delighted to see you! What an excellent idea it was of yours to come and settle in this town. You will not regret it, for now I have lived here, I do not know how it would be possible to live in any other way.”

“And how long have you been here, Monsieur Dorémus?” asked Yvernès.

“For eighteen months,” replied the professor, bringing his feet to the second position. “I am one of the first comers on Floating Island. Thanks to the excellent references I obtained at New Orleans, where I had established myself, my services were accepted by Mr. Cyrus Bikerstaff, our adored governor. From that blessed day the salary assigned me for managing a conservatoire of dancing and deportment has permitted me to live — ”

“Like a millionaire!” exclaimed Pinchinat.

“Oh! Millionaires here — ”

“I know — I know — my dear compatriot. But from what we have heard from the superintendent, the courses of your conservatoire are not largely attended.”

“The only pupils I have are all young men, the young ladies thinking they are provided at birth with all the necessary graces. And the young men prefer to take their lessons in private, and it is in private that I teach them good French manners! “And he smiled as he spoke, simpering like an old coquette, and disposing himself in graceful attitudes.

Athanase Dorémus, a Picard of Santerre, had left France in his early youth, and settled in the United States at New Orleans. There among the French population of our regretted Louisiana, opportunities did not fail him for exercising the talents. Admitted into the principal families, he achieved success, and had begun to save money, when one of the most American of enterprises lifted him into smooth water. This was at the time that the Floating Island Company launched its project, scattering its prospectuses far and wide, advertising itself lavishly in the newspapers, appealing to all the ultra-rich who had made their incalculable fortunes out of railways, petroleum wells, and the pork trade, salt or otherwise. Athanase Dorémus conceived the idea of asking for employment of the governor of the new city in which professors of his kind! were not likely to be found. Favourably known in tne Coverley family, who were natives of New Orleans, he was recommended by its chief, who was about to become one of the most prominent notables of the Starboardites of Milliard City, and thereupon accepted. That is how a Frenchman, and even a Picard, became one of the functionaries of Floating Island.

It is true that his lessons were only given at his house, and the dancing-room at the casino saw nobody but the professor reflected in its mirrors. But what did that matter so long as the lack of pupils made no decrease in his salary?

In short, he was a good fellow, slightly ridiculous and crazy, perhaps, and infatuated with himself, persuaded that he possessed, with the heritage of the Vestrises and Saint Leons, the traditions of Brummel and Lord Seymour. In the eyes of the quartette he was a compatriot — a quality always appreciated when thousands of leagues from France.

He had to be told the later adventures of the four Parisians, under what circumstances they had arrived in the island, how Calistus Munbar had enticed them on board, and how the island had weighed anchor a few hours after they had embarked.

"I am not at all surprised at that, in our superintendent," replied the old professor. "That is quite in his style. He has done it, and will do it again with others. He is a true son of Barnum, and will end by getting the company into trouble. He is a free-and-easy gentleman who would be all the better for a few lessons in deportment, I assure you; one of those Yankees who see-saw in a chair with their legs on the window-sill. Not bad at the bottom, but thinking they can do what they like. But do not bear him any ill-will. Except for the unpleasantness of having broken your engagement at San Diego, you will have only to congratulate yourselves on your sojourn at Milliard City. People will have a high opinion of you, as you will find."

"Particularly at the end of each quarter!" replied Frascolin, whose functions as treasurer of the party began to be of exceptional importance.

To the question he was asked on the subject of the rivalry between the two sections of the island, Athanase Dorémus confirmed what Calistus Munbar had said. In his opinion there was a cloud on the horizon, and even the menace of an approaching storm. Between the Star- boardites and Larboardites a conflict of interests and self- esteem was to be feared. The families of Tankerdon and Coverley, the richest in the place, were betraying increasing jealousy towards each other, and this would probably produce an explosion, if some means of conciliation could not be found. Yes. An explosion!

"Providing it does not explode in the island, we have nothing to be anxious about them," observed Pinchinat.

“At least, so long as we are on board!” added the ‘cellist.

“Oh! It is firm enough, my dear compatriots,” replied Athanase Dorémus. “For the eighteen months’ it has been afloat, no accident of any importance has happened to it. Nothing but a few insignificant repairs, which did not even require it to return to Madeleine Bay. Just think, it is made of plates of steel!”

That answered everything, and if plates of steel did not give an absolute guarantee in this world, to what metal could you trust?

Pinchinat was then led to ask what the professor thought of Governor Cyrus Bikerstaff.

“Is he of steel also?”

“Yes, Monsieur Pinchinat,” replied Athanase Dorémus, “he is gifted with great energy, and is a most able administrator. Unfortunately, in Milliard City it is not enough to be made of steel.”

“You must be made of gold,” retorted Yvernès.

“Just so; or if you are not, you are of no account!”

That was the case exactly. Cyrus Bikerstaff, notwith standing his high position, was only a servant of the company. He presided at the proceedings of the municipality, he had to receive the customs, to watch over the public health, to keep the roads clean, to superintend the plantations, to receive the revenue — in a word, to make enemies on all sides. In Floating Island it was necessary to be wealthy; Cyrus Bikerstaff was not wealthy.

In addition to this, his duties obliged him to maintain a conciliatory attitude between both parties, to risk nothing that might be agreeable to one that was not agreeable to the other. A policy that was not easy.

Already ideas were evidently getting about that might bring the two sections into conflict. If the Starboardites had settled on Floating Island solely with a view to peaceably enjoy their riches, the Larboardites began to hanker after business. They were asking why Floating Island should not be used as an immense merchant vessel and carry cargo to every part of Oceania, why all industries were forbidden in the island? In short, although they had been here less than two years, these Yankees, with Tankerdon at the head, were beginning to long to do a trade again. Although they had not stated this in so many words, Cyrus Bikerstaff could not help being anxious about it. He hoped, however, that the future would not grow worse, and that intestine dissension would not trouble an island made expressly for the tranquillity of its inhabitants.

In taking leave of Athanase Dorémus, the quartette promised to visit him again. As a rule, the professor went in the afternoon to the casino to which nobody came. There, not wishing to be accused of unpunctuality, he waited preparing his lessons before the looking-glasses in the room.

The island gradually moved to the westward, and a little towards the north-west, 60 as to touch at the Sandwich Islands. In the latitudes bordering on the torrid zone the temperature is already high, and the inhabitants of Milliard City would have found it almost unbearable had it not been for the cooling sea breeze. Fortunately, the nights are fresh, and even in the dog-days the trees and lawns watered with artificial rain retained their attractive verdure. Every day, at noon, the position shown on the dials of the town hall was telegraphed to the different quarters. On the 17th of June, Floating

Island was in 155° longitude west and 270 latitude north, and approaching the tropics.

“You might say it was the sun which towed us,” remarked Yvernès, “or if you like it more elegantly, that we have for our team the horses of the divine Apollo!”

The observation was as appropriate as it was poetical, but Sebastien Zorn received it with a shrug of his shoulders. It did not suit him to be towed — against his will.

“Well,” he would never cease repeating, “we shall see how this adventure will end.”

The quartette generally went into the park every day at the fashionable hour. On horse, on foot, in their carriages, all the notables of Milliard City were to be met with around the lawns. The ladies of fashion here showed their third daily toilette, of one colour throughout, from the hat to the boots, and usually of Indian silk, which was very fashionable this year. Often, too, they wore artificial silk made of cellulose, in which there is such a play of colour; or even imitation cotton, made of pine or larch- wood defibrized and disintegrated.

This provoked Pinchinat to remark, “You will see that one day they will make fabrics of ivy-wood for faithful friends, and weeping willow for inconsolable widows.”

In any case, the wealthy Milliardites would not have worn these fabrics if they had not come from Paris, nor these dresses if they had not borne the name of the king of dressmakers — of him who haughtily proclaimed the axiom: “Woman is only a question of dress.”

Sometimes the King and Queen of Malecarlie would pass among these smart gentry. The royal couple, deprived of their sovereignty, inspired our artistes with real sympathy. What reflections occurred to them at seeing these august personages arm-in-arm. They were relatively poor amid this wealthy crowd, but they were evidently proud and honourable, like philosophers withdrawn from the cares of this world. It is true that the Americans of Floating Island were at heart much flattered at having a king for one of their citizens, and treated him with the respect due to his former position. The quartette respectfully saluted their Majesties when they met them in the avenues of the town or the footpath of the park. The king and queen showed that they much appreciated these marks of deference that were so French. But their Majesties were of no more account than Cyrus Bikerstaff — perhaps less.

In truth, travellers who were frightened at a sea-voyage might well adopt this kind of navigation on a moving island. Under such circumstances, there could not be any anxiety as to the accidents of the sea. There was nothing to fear from storms. With ten million horse-power on its flanks, a Floating Island could never be detained by calms, and would be powerful enough to make headway against contrary winds. If there were any danger from collisions, the danger was not to the island. So much the worse for the vessels that hurled themselves at full speed or under full sail against its sides of steel. But there was not much fear of such encounters, owing to the electric light of its aluminium moons with which the atmosphere was filled during the night. As to storms, they were not worth talking about. The island was large enough to put a bridle on the fury of the waves.

And when their walks brought Pinchinat and Frascolin to the bow or stern of the island, either to the Prow or Stern Battery, they were both of opinion that there was a want of capes, promontories, points, creeks, and beaches.

The shore was but a breastwork of steel kept in place by millions of bolts and rivets. And how a painter would have regretted the absence of those old rocks, rough as an elephant’s skin, which the surf caresses with seaweeds as the tide comes in. Decidedly, you do not replace the beauties of nature by the marvels of industry. In spite of his permanent admiration, Yvernès was forced to admit that the imprint of the Creator was wanting on this artificial island.

During the evening of the 25th of June Floating Island crossed the tropic of Cancer and entered the Torrid Zone of the Pacific. At this hour, the quartette were giving their second performance in the casino. Kindly note that owing to the success of their first appearance, the price of stalls was now increased by a third.

No matter! The room was still too small. The dilettanti struggled for places. Evidently this chamber music should be excellent for health, and no one could entertain a doubt as to its therapeutic qualities. Again examples of Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, as before. Immense success for the performers to whom Parisian bravos would certainly have given greater pleasure. But in their absence, Yvernès, Frascolin, and Pinchinat knew how to be contented with Milliardite hurrahs, for which Sebastien Zorn continued to profess the most complete disdain.

“What more can we wish for?” said Yvernès, when they crossed the tropic of Cancer.

“The tropic of Concert!” replied Pinchinat, taking safety in flight.

And when they came out of the casino, whom should they see among the poor beggars who could not afford three hundred and sixty dollars for a stall? The King and Queen of Malecarlie standing humbly at the door.

CHAPTER IX.

THERE exists in this portion of the Pacific a submarine mountain range extending from the west-north-west to the east-south-east for nine hundred leagues, if the abysses of two thousand fathoms which separate it from the other ocean lands were emptied away. Of this chain but seven summits appear above the waters: Nirhau, Kauai, Oahu, Molokai, Lanai, Kahulaui, and Hawaii. These seven islands, of unequal size, constitute the Hawaiian Archipelago, otherwise known as the Sandwich Islands.

Leaving Sebastien Zorn to grumble in his corner, and shut himself up in his complete indifference to all natural curiosities as if he were a violoncello in its box, Pinchinat, Yvernès and Frascolin reasoned in this way, and they were not wrong in doing so.

“I shall not be sorry to visit these Sandwich Islands! If we have to cruise about the Pacific, we may as well have a few souvenirs to take away with us.”

“The natives will be a change to us after the Pawnees, Sioux and other too civilized Indians of the Far West, and I shall not be sorry to meet a few real savages — cannibals.”

“Are they cannibals still?”

“Let us hope so,” replied Pinchinat. “Their grandfathers ate Captain Cook, and if the grandfathers enjoyed the illustrious navigator, it is not likely that the grandchildren have lost the taste for human flesh!”

It must be confessed that his highness spoke rather irreverently of the celebrated English sailor who discovered this archipelago in *1778.*

The result of this conversation was that our artistes hoped that the chances of the voyage would bring them into the presence of natives more authentic than the specimens exhibited in the *Jardin d' Acclimatation,* and in any case in their native country, instead of that of their production. They experienced a certain impatience to get there, expecting every day that the look-outs at the observatory would signal the first heights of the Hawaiian Group.

This they did in the morning of the 6th of July. The news immediately spread, and the placard at the casino bore this notice telautographically inscribed, "Sandwich Islands now in sight."

It is true that the islands were still fifty leagues away; but the highest summits of the group, those of the island of Hawaii, are over 4200 metres high, and in fine weather are visible at this distance.

Coming from the north-east, Commodore Ethel Simcoe steered for Oahu, having for its capital Honolulu, which is also the capital of the archipelago. This island is the third of the group in latitude. Nuhau, which is a vast cattle park, and Kauai being both to the north-west of it. Oahu is not the largest of the Sandwich Islands; it measures only 1680 square kilometres, while Hawaii has an area of nearly 17,000. As to the other islands, their area is more than 3812 all together.

As a matter of course, our Parisian artistes had formed agreeable acquaintanceships with the chief functionaries of Floating Island. All of them, as well as the Governor, the Commodore, Colonel Stewart and Engineers Somwah and Watson, had done their best to make them welcome. They frequently visited the observatory, and remained for hours on the platform of the tower. One need not be astonished therefore that on this occasion Yvernès and Pinchinat, the most enterprising of the quartette, had come here, and that about ten o'clock in the morning, the lift hoisted them to the masthead, as his highness called it Commodore Ethel Simcoe was there already, and lending the two friends his telescope, told them to observe a point on the horizon to the south-west among the lower mists of the sky.

“That is Mauna Loa of Hawaii,” said he; “or it is Mauna Kea, two superb volcanoes which in 1852 and 1855 precipitated on to the island a flood of lava covering seven hundred square metres, and whose craters in 1880 hurled forth seven hundred million cubic metres of eruptive substances.”

“Famous!” replied Yvernès. “Do you think, Commodore, that we shall have the good luck to see such a spectacle?”

“I do not know, Monsieur Yvernès,” replied Ethel Simcoe. “Volcanoes do not erupt to order.”

“Oh! on this occasion only, and under distinguished patronage!” added Pinchinat. “If I were rich like Messrs. Tankerdon and Coverley, I would pay for eruptions when I liked.”

“Well, we will talk to them about it,” said the Commodore, smiling, “and I have no doubt they will do even the impossible to make themselves agreeable to you.”

Thereupon Pinchinat asked what was the population of the Sandwich Islands. The Commodore told him that it had been two hundred thousand at the beginning of the century, and was then reduced to about half.

“Good! Mr. Simcoe, a hundred thousand savages, that is quite enough, and if only they have remained cannibals, and lost nothing of their appetite, they will make only a mouthful of all the Milliardites of Floating Island.”

It was not the first time that the island had visited this archipelago. The preceding year it had been in these waters attracted by the salubrity of the climate. And in fact invalids went there from America, sent by the doctors, as the doctors send Europeans to breathe the humid air of the Pacific? Why not? Honololu is not more than twenty-five days from Paris, and when you can there impregnate your lungs with an oxygen you can get nowhere else —

Floating Island arrived within sight of the group in the morning of the 9th of July. The island of Oahu lay about five miles off to the south-west. Above, pointing to the east, was Diamond Head, an ancient volcano dominating the roadstead behind, and another cone called the Punch Bowl by the English. As the Commodore observed, if this enormous cup were filled with brandy or gin, John Bull could have no difficulty in emptying it.

They passed between Oahu and Molokai. Floating Island, like a ship under the action of its rudder, was steered by its starboard and larboard screws. The floating island stopped after rounding the south-east cape of Oahu, at ten cables' lengths from the shore, its draught of water being considerable. As it was necessary for the purpose of keeping a clear berth to remain at some distance from the land, it did not moor in the strict sense of the word, that is to say, it did not use anchors, which would have been impossible, owing to the depth of a hundred metres and more. By means of the engines, which were kept working during the stay, it lay as motionless as the eight principal islands of the Hawaiian Archipelago. The quartette contemplated the heights which developed before their eyes. In the distance they could see nothing but masses of trees — clumps of orange trees, and other magnificent specimens of the temperate flora. To the west, through a narrow break in the reef, appeared a little lake, the Lake of Pearls, a sort of lacustrine plain pierced with ancient craters.

The aspect of Oahu was smiling enough, and the anthropophagi so desired by Pinchinat had nothing to complain of the theatre of their exploits. If they still abandoned themselves to their cannibalistic instincts, his Highness could wish for nothing more.

But this is what he suddenly exclaimed, — "Great Heaven! what is it I see?"

"What do you see?" asked Frascolin.

* There. Steeples — "

"Yes — and towers — and palace façades!" said Yvernès. "It cannot be possible that they ate Captain Cook, there!"

"We are not at the Sandwiches!" said Sebastien Zorn, shrugging his shoulders. "The Commodore has made a mistake as to the route."

"Assuredly," replied Pinchinat. No! Commodore Simcoe had not gone astray. It was really Oahu, and the town extending over many square kilometres was Honolulu.

Evidently the quartette were mistaken. What changes there had been since the great English navigator discovered this group! Missionaries had excelled each other in devotion and zeal. Not only had the original language disappeared before the Anglo-Saxon tongue, but the archipelago contained Americans, Chinese — for the most part employed by the owners of the soil, from whom had arisen a race of semi-Chinese, the Hapa-Paké — and even Portuguese, owing to the line of vessels between the Sandwich Islands and the Azores. Aborigines were still to be found, however, and enough of them to satisfy our four artistes, although these natives had been decimated by leprosy, a malady of Chinese importation. But they were hardly of the type of eaters of human flesh.

“O local colour!” exclaimed the first violin, “what hand has wiped thee from the modern palette!”

Yes! Time, civilization, progress, which is a law of nature, had almost effaced this colour; and this had to be recognized, not without regret, when one of the electric launches of Floating Island passed the long line of reefs and put Sebastien Zorn and his comrades ashore.

Between two lines of piles meeting at an acute angle opened the harbour sheltered from the dangerous winds by an amphitheatre of mountains. Since 1794 the reefs which protect it from the ocean waves had risen more than a yard in height.

Nevertheless, tnere was sufficient water for vessels drawing from eighteen to twenty feet of water to come alongside the quays.

“What a deception!” murmured Pinchinat. “It is really deplorable that we should have to get rid of so many illusions when we travel.”

“And we would do much better to stay at home,” retorted the ‘cellist.

“No!” exclaimed Yvernès, always enthusiastic. “What spectacle can be compared to that of this artificial island coming to visit the oceanic archipelagoes?”

Nevertheless, if the moral condition of the Sandwich Islanders had regrettably changed to the lively displeasure of our artistes, it was not the same with the climate. It is one of the most salubrious in these parts of the Pacific, notwithstanding that the group is in a region known as the Hot Sea.

If the thermometer does not stand at a high level when the north-east trade winds are not in force, if the northern trades cause violent storms known as kouas, the mean temperature of Honolulu does not exceed twenty-one degrees centigrade. It would be bad taste to complain of this on the borders of the torrid zone; and the inhabitants did not complain of it, and, as we have indicated, American invalids crowded into the archipelago.

But the more the quartette penetrated into the secrets of this archipelago, the more their illusions fell, fell like the leaves at the end of autumn. They pretended to have been mystified when they should have accused themselves of inviting this mystification.

“It is this Calistus Munbar who has again taken a rise out of us,” said Pinchinat, remembering what the superintendent had told them as to the Sandwich Islands being the last rampart of native savagery in the Pacific. And when they bitterly reproached him, —

“What would you have, my dear friends?” he replied, with a wink of his right eye. “The place has changed so since my last voyage that I no longer recognize it.”

“Joker!” retorted Pinchinat, amusing himself with a dig in the superintendent’s stomach.

There could be no doubt that if changes had taken place, they must have occurred with extraordinary rapidity. The Sandwich Islands had rejoiced in a constitutional monarchy, founded in 1837, with two chambers, that of the nobles and that of the deputies. The first was nominated by the proprietors of the land, the second elected by all the people who knew how to read and write, the nobles for six years, the deputies for two years.

Each chamber was composed of twenty-four members, who held their deliberations together in the presence of the royal ministry, formed of four of the king’s councillors.

“And then,” said Yvernès, “they had a king, a constitutional king, instead of a monkey in feathers, and to whom foreigners could offer their humble respects.”

“I am sure,” affirmed Pinchinat, “that his Majesty did not even wear rings in his nose, and that he was provided with false teeth by the best dentists in the New World.”

“Ah! civilization, civilization!” repeated the first violin, “These Kanakas had no need of false teeth when they ate their prisoners of war.”

Floating Island was prepared for a stay of ten days, and a number of its inhabitants took advantage of this to explore Honolulu and its environs. The Coverley and Tankerdon families, the chief notables of Milliard City, went ashore daily. On the other hand, although it was the second appearance of the island in these parts of Hawaii, the admiration of the Hawaiians was boundless, and they came in crowds to visit this marvel. It is true that the policy of Cyrus Bikerstaff made the admission of strangers difficult, and required that when evening came the visitors returned at the stated hour. Owing to these measures of security it would have been anything but pleasant for an intruder to remain on the Pearl of the Pacific without a permit, which was not easily obtained. There were thus nothing but good relations on both sides, but there were no official receptions between the two islands.

The quartette enjoyed several very interesting walks. The natives pleased our Parisians. Their character is well marked, their hue brown, their physiognomy gentle and proud. And although the Hawaiians were a republic, it is not unlikely that they regretted their former savage independence.

“The air of our country is free,” says one of their proverbs, and they are none the less so.

And in fact, after the conquest of the archipelago by Kamehameha, after the representative monarchy established in 1840, each island had been administered by its own governor. At this period, under the republican *regime*, they were divided into districts and sub-districts.

“Come,” said Pinchinat, “there is no want of prefects, sub-prefects, and counsellors of prefecture, with the constitution of the Year VIII.”

“All I want is to get away!” replied Sebastien Zorn.

He would have been mistaken to have done so without admiring the chief places of Oahu. They are superb, if the flora is not rich. Along the shore there is an abundance of cocoa-nut trees and other palms, breadfruit trees, trilobas which yield the oil, castor-oil plants, daturas, indigo plants. The valleys, watered by the mountain streams, are carpeted with such encroaching vegetation as menervia, shrubs becoming arborescent, chenopodium, and halapepe, a sort of gigantic asparigines. The forest zone, prolonged to an altitude of two thousand metres, is covered with ligneous species, myrtles of lofty growth, colossal docks, and band-creepers, which intermingle like a many-branched thicket of serpents. As to the products of the soil which furnish items of commerce and exportation, there are rice, cocoa-nuts, and sugar-cane. Hence an important coasting trade between one island and another, so as to concentrate at Honolulu the products which are despatched to America. In the fauna there is little variety. If there is a tendency for the Kanakas to become absorbed in the more intelligent races, the species of animals show no sign of change. There are only pigs, fowls, and goats as domestic animals; there are no wild animals beyond a few pigs. There are mosquitoes, which are not easy to get rid of, a number of scorpions, and a few species of inoffensive lizards; birds that never sing, among others the “Oo,” the *Drepanis pacifica,* of black plumage, with ornamental yellow feathers, of which was formed the famous mantle of Kamehameha, on which nine generations of natives had worked.

Man’s task — a considerable one in this archipelago — has been to become civilized in imitation of the United States with his learned societies, his schools of compulsory education, which gained a prize at the Exposition of 1878, his rich libraries, his newspapers published in English and Kanaka. Our Parisians could not well be surprised at this, for the notables of the archipelago are most of them Americans, and their language is as current as their money. Only these notables freely attract to their service the Chinese of the Celestial Empire, contrary to what is done in Western America, to combat the infliction to which has been given the significant name of the “Yellow Plague.”

After the arrival of Floating Island within sight of the capital of Oahu, many of the local boats often sailed round it. With this magnificent weather, this sea so calm, nothing could be pleasanter than an excursion of some twenty kilometres at a cable’s length from the steel shore, over which the custom-house officers exercised such strict surveillance.

Among these excursion boats one could not help noticing a small vessel which every day persisted in sailing in Floating Island waters. It was a kind of Malay ketch, with two masts and a square stern, manned by twelve men under the orders of a captain of energetic appearance. The Governor, however, took no objection to this, although the practice might have seemed suspicious. These people, in fact, kept a constant watch on the island all round it hanging about from one port to the other, examining through the glasses every part of the coast. After all, supposing that their intentions were unfriendly, what could such a crew undertake against a population of ten thousand inhabitants? So that there was nothing to be uneasy about in the proceedings of this ketch during the day and night, and the maritime administration of Honolulu was not appealed to in the matter.

The quartette bade farewell to the island of Oahu on the morning of the 10th of July. Floating Island got under way at the dawn, obediently to the impulsion of its powerful propellers. Turning quite round, it headed south-west, to come in sight of the other Hawaiian islands. Moving obliquely across the equatorial current running from east to west, it moved in an inverse direction to that in which the archipelago lies towards the north.

For the convenience of the inhabitants on the larboard side, Floating Island boldly entered between the islands Molokai and Kauai. Over the latter, one of the smallest of the group, rises a volcano of eighteen hundred metres, Nirhau, which is always giving forth a few fuliginous vapours. At the foot are rounded hills of coralline formation, dominated by a range of sand-hills, against which the echoes are reflected with metallic sonority when the surf beats fiercely on the shore. The night had come when the island entered the narrow channel; but there was nothing to fear under the command of Ethel Simcoe. When the sun disappeared behind the heights of Lanai, the look-outs could not have noticed the ketch, which left the harbour after Floating Island, and endeavoured to keep in its wake. Besides, as we may again remark, why should any one have been uneasy at the presence of this Malay vessel?

Next day, when the sun reappeared, the ketch was only a white speck on the horizon.

During the day the voyage was continued between Kahulaui and Maui. Owing to its extent, the latter, with Lahaina for its capital, a harbour renowned for its whalers, occupies the second place in the Sandwich Archipelago.

Haleahala, “the house of the sun,” rises three thousand metres towards the sky.

The two following days were spent in coasting along the shores of the Great Hawaii, whose mountains, as we have said, are the highest in the group. It was in the Bay of Kealakeacua that Captain Cook, after being received as a god by the natives, was massacred in 1779, a year after discovering the archipelago, to which he gave the name of Sandwich in honour of the celebrated Minister of Great Britain. Hilo, the chief place of the island, which is on the eastern coast, was not sighted; but a view was obtained of Kailu on the western shore. Hawaii possesses fifty-seven kilometres of railway, used principally in the transport of goods, and the quartette could perceive the white smoke of its locomotives.

“It only wanted that!” said Yvernès.

Next morning the Pearl of the Pacific had left these regions, and the ketch rounded the extreme point of Hawaii, dominated by Mauna Loa, the Great Mountain, whose summit is lost in the clouds at a height of twelve thousand feet.

“Come,” said Pinchinat, “we have been cheated — really cheated!”

“You are right, said Yvernès; “we ought to have been here a hundred years earlier. But then we should not have been brought here on this admirable Floating Island!”

“No matter. Having found natives in waistcoats and turn-down collars, instead of savages in feathers, as that rascal Calistus promised us, I regret the days of Captain Cook!”

“And if these cannibals had eaten your Highness?” said Frascolin.

“Well, I should have died with the consolation of having once in my life been loved for myself alone!”

CHAPTER X.

SINCE the 23rd of June the sun had been moving towards the southern hemisphere, and it had become necessary to leave these regions, wherein the bad season would soon exercise its ravages. As the star of day in its apparent course was nearing the equinoctial line, the island should cross the line in its track. Beyond were pleasant climates, where, in spite of the names of October, November, December, January, and February, the months were no less agreeable than those of the warm season. The distance which separates the Hawaiian Archipelago from the Marquesas Islands is about three thousand kilometres, and Floating Island, being in haste to accomplish it, was driven at maximum speed.

Polynesia properly so-called is comprised within that wide extent of ocean bounded on the north by the Equator, on the south by the tropic of Capricorn. In that five millions of square kilometres there are eleven groups, composed of two hundred and twenty islands, a land surface of ten thousand kilometres, of which the islets can be counted in thousands. These are the summits of submarine mountains, of which the chain runs from the northwest to the south-east, to the Marquesas and Pitcairn, throwing out almost parallel ramifications.

If, in imagination, this vast basin were suddenly emptied, what an extraordinary country would be displayed to view I What Switzerland, what Norway, what Tibet, could equal it in grandeur? Of these submarine mountains, volcanic for the most part, some of madreporic origin are formed of calcareous or corneous matter secreted in concentric beds by the polyps, those radiated animalcules of such simple organization, endowed with immense productive power. Of these islands, some — the youngest — have the mantle of vegetation only at their summit; the others, draped in vegetation from head to foot, are the most ancient, even where their origin is coralline. There exists then a wide mountainous region buried in the waters of the Pacific. Floating Island moved above the mountains as an aerostat over the peaks of the Alps or the Himalaya. Only it was not the air, but the water that bore her up.

And as large displacements of atmospheric waves exist across space, so there are liquid displacements on the surface of this ocean. The main current flows from east to west, and under its lower beds are two counter currents from June to October, when the sun moves towards the tropic of Cancer. Besides these, on the borders of Tahiti there are four tides, which neutralize each other in such a way as to be almost imperceptible. The climate of these different archipelagoes is essentially variable. The mountainous islands stop the clouds, which pour their showers down on to them; the lower islands are drier, owing to the mists being driven away by the prevailing winds.

It would have been strange if the casino library did not possess a few charts relative to the Pacific. It had a complete collection, and Frascolin, the most serious of the quartette, often consulted them. Yvernès preferred to abandon himself to the surprises of the voyage, to the admiration provoked in him by this moving island, and did not seek to bother his brain with geographical notions. Pinchinat only cared to take matters on their amusing or fantastic side. For Sebastien Zorn the itinerary mattered little, inasmuch as it was taking him where he had never intended to go.

Frascolin was the only one to work at this Polynesia, studying the principal groups that compose it, the Low Islands, the Marquesas, Paumotu, the Society Islands, the Cook Islands, the Friendly Islands, Samoa, the Austral

Islands, Wallis Island, Fanning Island, the Tokelau Islands, the Phoenix Islands, the Penrhyn Islands, Easter Island, Sala y Gomez, etc. etc. He knew then that in most of this archipelago, even those under protectorates, the government is always in the hands of powerful chiefs, whose influence is never disputed, and that the poorer classes are entirely subject to the rich. He knew also that the natives are of all religions, Brahmin, Mahometan, Protestant, Catholic, Catholic being preponderant in the islands dependent on France owing to the pomp of its services. He knew that the native language, of which the alphabet is simple enough, owing to its being composed of from thirteen to seventeen characters, is much mixed with English, and will be finally absorbed by the Anglo-Saxon. He knew, in short, that in a general way from an ethnic point of view the Polynesian population tends to decrease, which is regrettable, for the Kanaka type — a word which signifies a man — is whiter under the Equator than in the groups distant from the equinoctial line, and is magnificent, Polynesia losing much by its absorption by the foreign races. Yes! He knew that and many other things which he learnt in the course of his conversations with Commodore Ethel Simcoe, and when his comrades asked him he was not at all embarrassed at having to reply to them.

And so Pinchinat nicknamed him the Larousse of the tropical zone.

Such were the principal groups amid which Floating Island was to bear its wealthy population. It justly deserved its name of the happy island, for in a certain way it offered all that could promote happiness. Why was it that this state of things was in danger of being troubled by the rivalries, the jealousies, the disagreements, by questions of influence and precedence which divided Milliard City into two camps, as it were into two sections — the camp of the Tankerdons and the camp of the Cover- leys? In any case, for the artistes who were quite disinterested in the matter, the struggle promised to be interesting.

Jem Tankerdon was Yankee from his head to his feet, big in build, with a reddish goatee, lank hair, eyes bright in spite of his sixty years, the iris almost yellow like that of a dog’s eye, the pupil glowing. He was tall in stature, powerful in the body, strong in the limbs. He was the trapper of the prairies, although the only traps he had set were those into which he had precipitated the millions of pigs in his slaughter-houses at Chicago. He was a violent man, whose position ought to have made him more careful, had not his early education been defective. He liked to show off his fortune, and, as people say, he had noisy pockets. And it seemed that he did not find them full enough, for he and a few others on the island were thinking of returning to business.

Mrs. Tankerdon was an American, a fairly good wife, very submissive to her husband, an excellent mother, gentle to her children, predestined to bring up a numerous family, and having in no way failed to fulfil her functions. If there were several millions to be shared amongst the direct heirs, why should there not be a dozen in the world? And there were.

Of the whole family the attention of the quartette was directed only to the eldest son, who is destined to play a certain part in this history. Walter Tankerdon, most elegant in his person, of moderate intelligence, of pleasing manners and face, taking more after Mrs. Tankerdon than after the head of the family. Fairly well educated, having travelled in America and Europe, but recalled by his habits and tastes to the attractive life on Floating Island, he was familiar with every branch of sport, and the best player in the island at tennis, polo, golf and cricket. He was not too proud of the fortune which would be his some day, and he was a good-hearted fellow; but as there were no poor in the island, he had no opportunity of being charitable. In short, it was to be desired that his brothers and sisters would resemble him. If these were not yet old enough to marry, he, who was nearly thirty, might think of doing so. Did he? We will see.

There existed a striking contrast between the Tankerdon family, the most important of the Larboard Section, and the Coverley family, the most considerable in the Starboard Section. Nat Coverley was of a much finer nature than his rival. That was due to the French origin of his ancestors. His fortune had not come from the entrails of the soil in the form of petroleum lakes, nor from the smoking entrails of the porcine race. No! It was industrial enterprises, railways and banking, which had made him what he was. All he wanted was to enjoy his wealth in peace, and — he made no secret of it — he would oppose to the utmost every attempt to transform the Pearl of the Pacific into an enormous workshop or an immense house of business.

Tall, well set up, his fine head grey-haired, wearing all his beard, the chestnut of which was streaked with a few silver threads. Somewhat cold in character, of distinguished manners, he occupied the first rank among the notables who in Milliard City kept up the traditions of good society in the Southern States. He loved the arts, understood painting and music, spoke easily the French language, which was much in use among the Starboard-ites, kept himself abreast of American and European literature, and when opportunity offered applauded in bravos and bravas which the ruder types of New England and the Far West applauded in hurrahs and hips.

Mrs. Coverley was ten years younger than her husband, and had just turned forty. She was an elegant, distinguished woman, belonging to one of the old demi-Creole families of Louisiana, a good musician, a good pianist, and it is not to be believed that a Reyer of the twentieth century would have proscribed the piano in Milliard City. In her house in Fifteenth Avenue the quartette had many an occasion to perform with her assistance, and they could but congratulate her on her artistic talents.

Heaven had not blessed the Coverleys as it had blessed the Tankerdons. Three daughters were the heiresses of an immense fortune, which Coverley did not brag about as his rival did. They were good-looking enough, and would find suitors enough among the nobility or the wealthy when the time came for them to marry. In America these remarkable dowries are not rare. A few years ago did we not hear of little Miss Terry, who, at the age of two years, was being sought for her 30,000,000/.? Let us hope that each girl would marry to her taste, and that to the advantage of being among the richest women in the States they would add that of being among the happiest.

Diana, or rather Di, as she was familiarly called, the eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Coverley, was barely twenty. She was a very pretty girl, and possessed the physical and mental qualities of her father and mother. Beautiful blue eyes, magnificent hair, between chestnut and blonde, a colour fresh as the petals of the rose newly opened, an elegant and graceful figure, explained why Miss Coverley was the admired of the young men of Milliard City, who would probably not leave to strangers the task of winning this “inestimable treasure,” as she might well be called in terms of mathematical accuracy. There was reason for supposing that Mr. Coverley would not see in difference of religion an obstacle to a union which seemed to assure the happiness of his daughter.

In truth, it was regrettable that questions of social rivalry separated the two leading families of Floating Island. Walter Tankerdon seemed to have been specially created to become the husband of Di Coverley.

But that was a combination not to be thought of. Rather cut the island in two, and let the Larboardites float away on one half, and the Starboardites on the other, than sign such a marriage contract.

“Providing that love does not enter into the matter!” said the superintendent, winking his eye behind his gold eye-glasses.

But it did not seem that Walter Tankerdon had any fancy for Di Coverley, and inversely — or at least if it were so, they both maintained a reserve which deceived the curious of the select world of Milliard City.

The island continued to descend towards the Equator, along the hundred and sixtieth meridian. Ahead of it extended that portion of the Pacific which offers the widest expanses destitute of islands and islets, and the depth of which reaches two leagues. During the 25th of July they passed over the basin of Belknap, an abyss of six thousand metres, from which the sounding apparatus brought up those curious molluscs or zoophytes, constituted in such a way as to support with impunity the pressure of masses of water estimated at six hundred atmospheres.

Five days afterwards Floating Island traversed a group of islands belonging to England, although they are occasionally called the American Islands. Leaving Palmyra and Samarang to starboard, it approached within two miles of Fanning, one of the numerous guano islands in these parts, the most important of the archipelago. The others are but emerged peaks, more barren than verdant, of which the United Kingdom has not made much up to now. But she has put her foot down in this place, and we know that the large foot of England generally leaves ineffaceable impressions.

Every day, while his comrades walked in the park or in the surrounding country, Frascolin, much interested by the details of this curious voyage, went to the Prow Battery. There he often met the Commodore. Ethel Simcoe gladly talked to him about the phenomena peculiar to these seas, and when they were of interest, the second violin did not omit to communicate them to his companions.

For instance, they could not restrain their admiration in presence of a spectacle which Nature gratuitously offered them during the night of the 30th of July.

An immense shoal of jelly-fish, covering several square miles, had been signalled during the afternoon. Never before had the islanders met with such masses of these medusae, to which certain naturalists have given the name of Oceanians. These animals, of very rudimentary organization, approach in their hemispherical form to the products of the vegetable kingdom. The fish, greedy as they may be, treat them as flowers, for none, it seems, feed on them. The Oceanians peculiar to the torrid zone of the Pacific are of the shape of many-coloured umbrellas, transparent, and bordered with tentacles. They do not measure more than an inch or so; judge then of the milliards required to form a shoal of such extent.

And when these numbers were mentioned in presence of Pinchinat: “They could not,” remarked his Highness, “surprise these notables of Floating Island, for the milliard is the current coin.”

At nightfall, many of the people went out to the forecastle, that is to say the terrace which looked down on Prow Battery. The trams were invaded; the electric cars were loaded with sight-seers. Elegant carriages conveyed the leading nabobs. The Coverleys and the Tankerdons elbowed each other at a distance. Mr. Jem did not salute Mr. Nat, who did not salute Mr. Jem. The families were fully represented. Yvernès and Pinchinat had the pleasure of talking with Mrs. Coverley and her daughter, who always gave them a hearty welcome. Perhaps Walter Tankerdon felt a little annoyance at not being able to join in the conversation, and perhaps also Miss Di would not have been averse to his doing so. But what a scandal that would have caused, and what allusions more or less indiscreet on the part of the *Starboard Chronicle* or the *New Herald* in their society article!

When the darkness is complete as far as it can be in these tropical starlight nights, the Pacific seems to sleep in its deepest depths. The immense mass of water is impregnated with phosphorescent lights, illuminated by rosy and blue reflections, not only in well marked luminous lines along the crests of the waves, but as if the light were shed from innumerable legions of gleaming worms. This phosphorescence becomes so intense that it is possible to read by it as by the radiation of a distant aurora. It seems as if the Pacific dissolved the sunshine during the day and emitted it at night in luminous waves.

When the prow of Floating Island cut into the mass of medusae, it divided it into two branches along its metal shore. In a few hours the island was girt by a belt of phosphorescent light. It was as it were an aureole, one of those glories of the middle ages which surround the heads of the saints. The phenomenon lasted until the birth of the dawn, the first hues of which extinguished it.

Six days afterwards the Pearl of the Pacific touched the imaginary great circle of our spheroid which cuts the horizon into equal parts. From it the poles of the celestial sphere could be simultaneously seen, the one in the north illuminated by the scintillations of the Pole Star, the other in the south decorated like a soldier’s breast with the Southern Cross. From the different points on this equatorial line the stars appeared to describe circles perpendicular to the plane of the horizon. If you would enjoy nights and days of equal length, it is in these regions or in continents and islands traversed by the Equator that you should make your home.

It was the second time since its creation that Floating Island had passed from one hemisphere to another, crossing the equinoctial line, first in descending towards the south, then in ascending towards the north. The occasion of this passage was kept as a holiday. There would be public games in the park, religious ceremonies in the temple and cathedral, races of electric vehicles round the island. From the platform of the observatory there would be a magnificent display of fireworks, from which the rockets and serpents and Roman candles would rival the splendours of the stars of the firmament.

This, as you may have guessed, was in imitation of the fantastic scenes customary on ships when they cross the Equator, a pendant to the baptism of the line. And, as a fact, this day was always chosen for the baptism of the children born since the departure from Madeleine Bay, and there was a similar baptismal ceremony with regard to the strangers who had not before entered the southern hemisphere.

“It will be our turn then,” said Frascolin to his comrades, “and we are going to receive baptism.”

“Fancy!” replied Sebastien Zorn, with protesting gestures of indignation.

“Yes, my old bass scraper!” replied Pinchinat. “They will throw unblessed buckets of water on our head, seat us on planks that see-saw, pitch us into surprise depths, and Father Neptune will come on board with his company of buffoons to shave our faces with the black grease pot.”

“If they think,” said Zorn, “that I will submit to this masquerade — ”

“We shall have to,” said Yvernès. “Every country has its customs, and the guests must submit.”

“Not when they are detained against their will!” said the intractable chief of the quartette party.

He need not have excited himself about this carnival with which many crews amuse themselves when crossing the line! He need have had no fear of Father Neptune! He and his comrades would not be sprinkled with sea water, but with champagne of the best brands. They would not be hoaxed by being shown the Equator previously drawn on the object glass of a telescope. That might do for sailors on board ship, but not for the serious people of Floating Island.

The festival took place in the afternoon of the 5 th of August. With the exception of the custom-house officers, who were never allowed to leave their posts, the State servants all had a holiday. All work was suspended in the town and harbours. The screws did not work. The accumulators possessed a voltage sufficient for the lighting and communications. The island was not stationary, but drifted with the current towards the line which divides the two hemispheres of the globe. Chants and prayers were heard in the churches, in the temple as at St. Mary’s church, and the organs played cheerily. Great rejoicings took place in the park, where the sporting events were brought off with remarkable enthusiasm. The different classes associated together. The richest gentlemen, with Walter Tankerdon at their head, did wonders at golf and tennis. When the sun had dropped perpendicularly below the horizon, leaving a twilight of only forty-eight minutes, the rockets would take their flight across space, and a moonless night would give the best of conditions for the display of firework magnificence.

In the large room of the casino the quartette were baptized, as we have said, and by the hand of Cyrus Bikerstaff. The Governor offered them a foaming tankard, and the champagne flowed in torrents. The artistes had their full share of Cliquot and Roederer. Sebastien Zorn could not have the bad taste to complain of a baptism which in no way reminded him of the salt water he had imbibed in the earliest days of his life.

To these testimonies of sympathy the quartette responded by the execution of the finest works in their repertory: the seventh quartette in F major, op. 59 of Beethoven; the fourth quartette in E flat, op. 10 of Mozart; the fourth quartette in D minor, op. 17 of Haydn; the seventh quartette (andante, scherzo, capriccioso, and fugue), op. 18 of Mendelssohn. Yes, all these marvels of concerted music, and there was no charge for hearing them! The crush at the doors was tremendous, and the room was suffocating. The pieces were encored and encored again, and the Governor presented to the executants a medal in gold encircled with diamonds respectable in the number of their carats, having on one face the arms of Milliard City, and on the other —

Presented to the Quartette Party By the Company, the Municipality, and the People of Floating Island.

And if all these honours did not reach to the very depths of the soul of the irreconcilable violoncellist, it was decidedly because he was a deplorable character, as his comrades told him.

“Wait for the end!” he was content to reply, twisting his beard with a feverish hand.

It was at thirty-five minutes past ten in the evening — the calculation was made by the astronomers of Floating Island — that the line would be crossed. At that precise moment a salute would be fired from one of the cannon in the Prow Battery. A wire connected this gun with an electric apparatus arranged in the centre of the square of the observatory. Extraordinary satisfaction of self-esteem for the notable on whom devolved the honour of sending the current which would provoke the formidable detonation!

On this occasion the honour was sought by two important personages. These were, as may be guessed, Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley. Consequently, considerable embarrassment for Cyrus Bikerstaff. Difficult negotiations had been taking place between the town hall and the two sections of the city. No agreement had been arrived at. At the ..Governor's invitation, the services of Calistus Munbar had been called in. Despite his well-known diplomatic adroitness, he had failed. Jem Tankerdon would not give way to Nat Coverley, who would not give way to Jem Tankerdon. An explosion was expected.

It did not promise to be long in coming when the two chiefs met in the square. The apparatus was but five paces away from them. They had but to touch the button.

Aware of the difficulty, the crowd, much interested in this question of precedence, had invaded the garden. After the concert, Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès, Frascolin, and Pinchinat had come to the square, curious to observe the phases of this rivalry, which, considering the dispositions of the Larboardites and Starboardites, was of exceptional gravity for the future.

The two notables advanced towards the apparatus, without the slightest inclination of the head.

“I think, sir,” said Jem Tankerdon, “that you will not contest this honour.”

“That is exactly what I expect from you, sir,” replied Nat Coverley.

“I shall not allow any one to deprive me of it.”

“Nor shall I allow any one to deprive me of it.”

“We shall see, then!” said Jem Tankerdon, taking a step towards the instrument.

Nat Coverley also took a step. The partisans of the two notables began to mingle. Ill-sounding provocations broke out in the ranks. Doubtless Walter Tankerdon was ready to maintain the rights of his father; but when he caught sight of Miss Coverley standing a little way off, he was visibly embarrassed.

As to the Governor, although the superintendent was at his side, ready to act as buffer, he was in intense distress at not being able to unite in a single bouquet the white rose of York and the red rose of Lancaster. And who knows if this deplorable competition might not have consequences as regrettable as the roses had in the fifteenth century for the English aristocracy?

But the moment was approaching when the prow of Floating Island would cut the equinoctial line. Calculated precisely to a quarter of a second of time, the error could not be greater than eight metres. The signal would soon be sent from the observatory.

“I have an idea,” murmured Pinchinat.

“What?” asked Yvernès.

“I will give a whack on the instrument, and that will put matters right.”

“Don’t do that!” said Frascolin, stopping his Highness with a vigorous grip.

No one knew how the matter would have ended if a detonation had not suddenly taken place.

The report was certainly not from the Prow Battery. It came from a gun out at sea, which had been heard distinctly.

The crowd paused in suspense. What could be the meaning of this discharge of a gun which did not belong to the island’s artillery?

A telegram from Starboard Harbour almost immediately gave the explanation.

Two or three miles off, a ship in distress had signalled its presence and demanded assistance.

Fortunate and unexpected diversion! There was no more thought of touching the button nor saluting the crossing of the Equator. There was no time. The Equator was crossed, and the charge remained in the cannon. All the better for the honour of the Tankerdons and Coverleys.

The public evacuated the square, and, as the trams were not working, proceeded rapidly on foot to Starboard Harbour.

Immediately the signal had been heard, the harbour master had taken measures for the rescue. One of the electric launches moored in the wet dock had gone out. And at the moment the crowd arrived, the launch had brought back the crew from the ship, which had soon afterwards foundered in the Pacific.

The ship was the Malay ketch which had followed Floating Island since its departure from the Sandwich Archipelago.

CHAPTER XI.

IN the morning of the 29th of August, the Pearl of the Pacific reached the Marquesas Islands, lying between 7° 55’ and io° 30’ south latitude, and 1410 and 1430 6’ longitude west of the meridian of Paris. It had traversed a distance of three thousand four hundred kilometres since leaving the Sandwich group.

If this group is called after Mendana, it is because the Spaniard of that name discovered its southern portion in 1595. If it is called Revolution Islands, it is because it was visited by Captain Marchand in 1791, in its northwestern part. If it is called the Nuka Hiva Archipelago, it is because that is the name of the largest island in it. And yet, as a matter of justice, it ought to bear the name of Cook, for that celebrated navigator surveyed it in 1774.

This was what Commodore Ethel Simcoe remarked to Frascolin, who thought the observation very reasonable, adding, —

“We might also call it the French Archipelago, for we are not without a few marquises in France.”

In fact, a Frenchman has the right to regard this group of eleven islands or islets as one of his country’s squadrons moored in the waters of the Pacific. The largest are vessels of the first class, Nuka-Hiva and Hiva-Oa; the moderate ones are cruisers of different ranks, Hiavu, Uapvu, Uahuka; the little ones are despatch boats, Motane, Fatu-Hiva, Taou-Ata; while the islets and atolls will do for the launches and boats. It is true, these islands could not move about like Floating Island.

It was on the 1st of May, 1842, that the Commander of the naval station of the Pacific, Vice-Admiral Dupetit- Thouars, took possession of this archipelago in the name of France. It is separated by from a thousand to two thousand leagues from the coast of America, New Zealand, Australia, China, the Moluccas, and the Philippines. Under these conditions, was the act of the Vice-Admiral to be praised or blamed? He was blamed by the Opposition and praised by the Government. It is none the less true that France has there an insular domain where its whaling vessels can shelter and re-victual, and to which the Panama Canal, if it is ever open, will give very considerable commercial importance. This domain should be completed by the taking possession or declaration of a protectorate over the Paumotu Islands and the Society Islands, which form its natural prolongation. As British influence extends over the north-western regions of this immense ocean, it is good that French influence should counterbalance it in the regions of the south-east.

“But,” asked Frascolin of his complaisant cicerone, “have we military forces there of any strength?”

“Up to 1859,” replied the Commodore, “there was a detachment at Nuka-Hiva. Since the detachment has been withdrawn the care of the flag has been confided to the missionaries, and they will not leave it undefended.”

“And now?”

“You will only find at Taio-Hae a resident, a few gendarmes, and native soldiers, under the orders of an officer who fulfils the functions of a justice of the peace.”

“In the native law-suits?”

“For the natives and the colonists.”

“Then there are colonists at Nuka-Hiva?”

“Yes; twenty-four.”

“Not enough to form an orchestra, Commodore, nor even a harmony, and hardly a fanfare!”

The archipelago of the Marquesas extends over a hundred and ninety-five miles in length and forty-eight miles in width, covering an area of thirteen thousand superficial kilometres, and its population consists of twenty-four thousand natives. That gives one colonist to each thousand inhabitants.

Is this population destined to increase when a new route of communication is made through the two Americas? The future will show. But as far as concerns the population of Floating Island, the number of its inhabitants had been increased several days before by the rescue of the Malays of the ketch, which took place in the evening of the 5th of August.

They were ten in number, in addition to their captain, a man of energetic face and figure. This captain was about forty years of age, and his name was Sarol. His sailors were stoutly-built fellows of the Malay race, natives of the furthest islands of Western Malaysia. Three months before Sarol had brought them to Honolulu with a cargo of coprah. When Floating Island had come to stay there for ten days, its appearance had excited their surprise, as it excited surprise in every archipelago it visited. If they did not visit it, permission to do so being very difficult to obtain, it will not be forgotten how their ketch was often at sea observing it at close quarters, and coasting along it within half a cable’s length of its perimeter.

The continual presence of this vessel had excited no suspicion, and neither did its departure from Honolulu a few hours after Commodore Simcoe.

Besides, what was there to be uneasy about in this vessel of a hundred tons with not a dozen men on board?

When the report of the gun attracted the attention of the officer at Starboard Harbour, the ketch was within two or three miles. The launch was fortunate enough to bring off the captain and his crew.

These Malays spoke English fluently, in which there was nothing astonishing on the part of natives of the Western Pacific, where, as we have mentioned, British preponderance is unquestioned. They could thus describe the circumstances of their being in distress, and tell how they would have been lost in the depths of the ocean if the launch had been a few minutes later.

According to these men, twenty-four hours before, during the night of the 4th of August, the ketch had been run into by a steamer at full speed. Although his lights were all showing, Captain Sarol had not been noticed. The collision had been so slight for the steamer that she seemed to feel nothing of it, and continued her voyage, unless — which is, unfortunately, not too rare — she had gone off at full speed "to avoid costly and disagreeable claims."

But the blow, insignificant for a vessel of heavy tonnage with her iron hull driven at considerable speed, was terrible for the Malay vessel. Cut down just before the mizen mast, it was hardly intelligible that she did not immediately sink. She remained, however, at the water level, the men clinging on to the deck. If the weather had been bad the wreck could not have resisted the waves. By good luck the current took them towards the east, and they arrived within sight of Floating Island.

At the same time, when the Commodore questioned Captain Sarol he could not help manifesting his astonishment that the ketch, half submerged, had been able to drift within sight of Starboard Harbour.

“Neither do I understand it,” replied the Malay. “Your island cannot have moved very far during the last twenty-four hours.”

“That is the only explanation possible,” replied Commodore Simcoe. “It does not matter after all, we have been able to rescue you, that is the main point.”

It was true. Before the launch had got a quarter of a mile away the ketch had gone down head foremost.

Such was the story Captain Sarol told to the officer who had rescued him, then to the Commodore, then to the Governor, Cyrus Bickerstaff, after he had been given all the assistance that he and his crew seemed to be in urgent need of.

Then arose the question as to sending these men home. They were bound for the New Hebrides when the collision occurred. Floating Island was going south-east, and could not change its route. Cyrus Bikerstaff proposed to put the captain and his men ashore at Nuka-Hiva, where they could wait for a merchant ship bound for the New Hebrides.

The captain and his men looked at one another. They seemed greatly distressed. This proposal was hard on poor fellows, without resources, despoiled of all they possessed with the ketch and its cargo. To wait at the Marquesas was to chance having to wait an interminable time, and how would they get a living?

“Mr Governor,” said the captain in a suppliant tone, you have rescued us, and we don’t know how to show our gratitude. But yet we beg you will assure our return under better circumstances.”

“And in what manner?” asked Cyrus Bikerstaff.

“At Honolulu it was said that Floating Island after going south was to visit the Marquesas, Paumotu, the society Islands, and then make for the west of the Pacific.

“That is true,” said the Governor, “and very probably we shall get as far as the Fijis before returning to Madeleine Bay.”

“The Fijis,” continued the captain, “are an English archipelago, where we should easily find a ship to take us to the New Hebrides, which are not far off, and if you could keep us until then — ”

“I cannot promise you anything with regard to that,” said the Governor. “We are forbidden to give passages to foreigners. You must wait till we reach Nuka-Hiva. I will consult the administration by cable, and if they consent we will take you on to Fiji, whence you could get home more easily.”

That is the reason why the Malays were on Floating island when it came within sight of ihe Marquesas on the 29th of August.

This archipelago is situated in the belt of the trade winds, as are also the Paumotu and Society Islands, which owe to these winds a moderate temperature and a salubrious climate.

It was off the north-west of this group that Commodore Simcoe appeared in the early hours of the morning. He first sighted a sandy atoll which the maps called Coral Islet, and against which the sea, driven by the extents, beats with extreme violence.

This atoll being left to port, the look-outs now signalled the first island, Fetuhuhu, very steep, surrounded by perpendicular cliffs four hundred metres in height. Beyond is Hiau, six hundred metres high, of a barren aspect on this side, while on the other it is fresh and verdant, and has two creeks practicable for small vessels.

Frascolin, Yvernès, and Pinchinat, leaving Sebastien Zorn to his chronic ill-humour, took their places on the tower, in company with Ethel Simcoe and several of his officers.

One need not be astonished that this name of Hiau had excited his Highness to emit several strange onomatopes.

“Assuredly,” said he, “it is a colony of cats which inhabits that island with a tom for chief.”

Hiau was left to port. There was no intention of stopping there, and the course was continued towards the principal island of the group, to which it had given its name, and which was now to be temporarily increased by this extraordinary Floating Island.

Next morning, that of the 30th of August, at daybreak our Parisians returned to their port. The heights of Nuka- Hiva had been visible the evening before. In fine weather the mountain chains of this archipelago can be seen from a distance of eighteen or twenty leagues, for the altitude of certain summits exceeds twelve hundred metres, and they lie like a gigantic backbone along the length of the islands.

“You will notice,” said the Commodore to his guests, “a peculiarity common to all this archipelago. The summits are singularly bare, and the vegetation which begins about two-thirds up the mountain slopes penetrates to the very bottom of the ravines and gorges, and spreads magnificently down to the white beaches of the coast.”

“And yet,” said Frascolin, “it seems that Nuka-Hiva is an exception to the general rule, at least as regards the verdure of the intermediate zones. It appears barren!”

“Because we are approaching it from the north-west,” said the Commodore, “but when we turn at the south, you will be surprised at the contrast. Everywhere, verdant plains, forests, cascades of three hundred metres.”

“Eh!” exclaimed Pinchinat, “a mass of water falling from the top of the Eiffel Tower, that is worth considering! Niagara should be jealous.”

“Not at all,” said Frascolin, “it prides itself on its width, and its fall extends for nine hundred metres, from the American shore to the Canadian. You know that well, Pinchinat, for we have visited it.”

“That is so, and I beg to apologize to Niagara,” replied his Highness.

That day Floating Island coasted along about a mile away from the island. Always the barren slopes rising to the central plateau of Tovii, rocky cliffs which seemed to have no break in them. Nevertheless, according to the navigator Brown, there are good anchorages, which, in fact, have recently been discovered.

In short, the aspect of Nuka-Hiva, the name of which evokes such pleasant landscapes, is rather mournful. But, as has been justly observed by

Dumoulin and Desgraz, the companions of Dumont d’Urville during his voyage to the South Pole and in Oceania, “all its natural beauties are confined to the interior of its bays, into the valleys formed by the ramifications of the chain of mountains which rise in the centre of the island.”

After following this desert shore beyond the acute angle projecting to the west, Floating Island gradually changed its direction by diminishing the speed of its starboard screws, and rounding Cape Tchitchagoff, so called by the Russian navigator Krusenstern. The coast then runs in, describing an elongated curve, in the course of which a narrow inlet gives access to the port of Taiva or Akaui, one of the creeks of which offers a shelter against the most terrible storms of the Pacific.

Commodore Simcoe did not stop there. To the south are two other bays, that of Anna Maria or Taio-Hae in the centre, and that of Comptroller or Taipis on the other side of Cape Martin, the extreme south-westerly point of the island. Is was off Taio-Hae that they were to make a stay of twelve days.

A little distance from the shore of Nuka-Hiva the sea is of great depth. Near the bays there is anchorage at a depth of forty or fifty fathoms. It was thus easy for the Commodore to bring up very close to Taio-Hae Bay, which he did in the afternoon of the 31st of August.

As soon as they arrived in sight of the port, reports were heard on the right, and a circling smoke appeared above the cliffs to the east.

“Hallo!” said Pinchinat. “Are they firing the guns to welcome our arrival?”

“Not so,” said the Commodore. “Neither the Tais nor the Happas, the two principal tribes of the island, possess artillery capable of firing the simplest salutes. What you hear is the noise of the sea plunging into the depths of a cavern half-way up Cape Martin, and the smoke is the spray hurled aloft from it."

The island of Nuka-Hiva has many names — we might say many baptismal names — given it by its successive godfathers: Federal Island by Ingraham, Beaux Island by Marchand, Sir Henry Martin Island by Hergert, Adam Island by Roberts, Madison Island by Porter. It measures seventeen miles from east to west and ten miles from north to south, its circumference being about fifty-four miles.

Its climate is healthy; its temperature that of the tropical zone moderated by the trade winds. At this anchorage Floating Island would not be subject to the formidable tempests and pluvial cataracts which occur during the winter, for it was not going to be there from April to October, when the easterly and south-easterly winds, known to the natives as tuatuka, prevail. It is in October that the heat is greatest, the months of November and December being the driest. At other times the prevailing winds range from east to north-east.

For the population of the Marquesas Islands, we must reject the exaggerations of their early discoverers, who estimated it at a hundred thousand. Elisée Reclus, relying on official documents, says that it does not exceed six thousand for the whole group, and that the great majority are in Nuka-Hiva. If at the time of Dumont d'Urville the Nuka-Hivans numbered eight thousand, divided into Tais, Happas, Taionas, and Taipis, the number must have continued to decrease. Whence results this depopulation? From the extermination of natives by wars, the carrying off of the males to the plantations of Peru, the abuse of strong liquors, and, it must also be confessed, to the evils which conquest brings, even when the conquerors belong to civilized races.

During their stay here the Milliardites made numerous visits to Nuka-Hiva, and the principal Europeans, by the Governor’s permission, had free access to Floating Island.

On their side, Sebastien Zorn and his comrades undertook several long excursions, the pleasure of which amply paid them for their fatigues.

The bay of Taio-Hae describes a circle, cut by the narrow inlet, in which Floating Island could not have found room, so much is this bay cut up by the two sandy beaches. These beaches are separated by a sort of hill with rugged escarpments, where still exist the remains of a fort, built here by Porter in 1812. It was at this period that this sailor made the conquest of the island, the American camp occupying the eastern beach — a capture which was not ratified by the Federal Government.

In place of a town, on the opposite beach, our Parisians found a small village; the Marquesan habitations being, for the most part, scattered under the trees. But what admirable valleys ran up from it, among others that of Taio- Hae, in which the Nuka-Hivans had placed most of their dwellings. It was a pleasure to explore beneath the clumps of cocoa-nut trees, bananas, casuarinas, guavas, breadfruit trees, hibiscus, and other species rich in overflowing sap. The tourists were hospitably received in the huts, where a century earlier they might have appreciated banana cakes and mel pastry and breadfruit, and the yellowish fecula of the taro, sweet when fresh and sour when stale, and the edible roots of the tacca. As to the hanu, a species of large ray which was eaten raw, and filets of shark, esteemed most highly the higher they are, our tourists declined to taste them.

Athanase Dorémus occasionally went with them on their walks. The year before this good man had visited this archipelago and was able to act as guide. Perhaps he was not very strong in natural history or botany, perhaps he confounded the superb *Spondia cytherea*, whose fruits resemble the apple, with the *Pandanus odoratissimus*, which justifies this superlative epithet; with the casuarina, whose bark is as hard as iron; with the hibiscus, whose bark yields the garments worn by the natives; with the papaw tree; with the *Gardenia florida?* It is true that the quartette had no necessity to have recourse to his somewhat suspicious knowledge, when the Marquesan flora displayed its magnificent ferns, its superb polypodies, its China roses, red and white, its grasses, its solanaceous plants, among others tobacco, its labiates in violet clusters, which form the cherished finery of the Nuka-Hivaris, its castor- oil plants a dozen feet high, its dracaenas, its sugar-canes, its oranges, its lemon trees of recent importation, which had succeeded marvellously in a soil impregnated by summer heat and watered by the many mountain streams.

One morning when the quartette had ascended beyond the village of Tais along the banks of a torrent to the summit of the chain, and beneath their feet and before their eyes lay spread the valleys of the Tais, the Taipis, and the Happas, a shout of admiration escaped them. If they had had their instruments with them they could not have resisted their desire to reply by the execution of some lyric masterpiece to this spectacle of one of the masterpieces of nature. Doubtless the executants would have had but a few birds for their audience! But how beautiful is the kurukuru pigeon which flies at these heights, how charming the little salangane, which beats the air with so capricious a wing, and the tropic-bird, the habitual visitor to these Nuka-Hivan gorges. Besides, no venomous reptile was to be feared in the depths of these forests. There was no fear of the boas, barely two feet long, as inoffensive as a common snake, nor of the simquas, whose blue tail is indistinguishable among the flowers.

The natives are of a remarkable type. There is a sort of Asiatic character about them, on account of which they are assigned a very different origin to that of the other races of Oceania. Their extremities are well shaped, their face oval, their forehead high, their black eyes with long lashes, their nose aquiline, their teeth white and regular, their colour neither black nor red, but brown like that of the Arabs, a physiognomy marked by cheerfulness and gentleness.

Tattooing had almost disappeared — tattooing obtained not by cutting into the flesh, but by prickings, dusted with carbon and the aleurite triloba, and now replaced by the cotton cloth of the missionaries.

“Very fine, these men,” said Yvernès, “but not so much so as when they were simply clothed in their skins, wore their own hair, and brandished bows and arrows!”

This remark was made during an excursion to Comptroller Bay in the Governor’s company. Cyrus Bikerstaff had expressed a wish to take his guests to this bay, divided into several harbours like Valetta, and doubtless in the hands of the English Nuka-Hiva would become a Malta of the Pacific Ocean. In this district the Happas are principally found, among the gorges of a fertile country, with a small river fed by a noisy cascade. This was the chief theatre of the struggle between Porter, the American, and the natives.

The remark of Yvernès required a reply, and the Governor made answer: “Perhaps you are right, Monsieur Yvernès. The Marquesans must have looked well in their cotton drawers, with the maro and pareo of brilliant colours, the aim bun, a kind of flying scarf, and the tiputa, a sort of Mexican poncho. It is certain that the modern costume hardly becomes them. What would you have? Decency is the consequence of civilization! At the same time, as our missionaries endeavour to instruct the natives, they encourage them to clothe themselves in a more or less rudimentary fashion."

"Are they not right?" asked Frascolin. "From the point of view of the proprietors, yes! From the hygienic point of view, no! Since they have become more decently clothed, the Nuka-Hivans and other islanders have undoubtedly lost their native vigour, and also their natural cheerfulness. They get weary, and their health suffers. Formerly they knew nothing of bronchitis, pneumonia, phthisis — "

"And since they have not gone stark naked they have caught colds," remarked Pinchinat.

"As you say! And that has been an important cause of the decay of the race."

"From which I conclude," said his Highness, "that Adam and Eve did not sneeze until the day they wore shirts and pants, aftei being chased from the terrestrial Paradise — and that has given us, their degenerate and responsible children, diseases of the chest."

"It seems to us," remarked Yvernès, "that the women are not as good-looking as the men in this archipelago."

"As in the others," replied Cyrus Bikerstaff, "and yet here perhaps you see the most perfect type of the Oceanians. But is not that a law of nature common to the races which approach the savage state? Is it not also so in the animal kingdom, where the fauna, from the point of view of physical beauty, shows us almost invariably the males superior to the females?"

"Well," exclaimed Pinchinat, "we must come to the Antipodes to make observations of that kind. Our lovely Parisians would never admit it."

There are only two classes in the Nuka-Hiva population, and they are subject to the law of the taboo. This law was invented by the strong against the weak, by the rich against the poor, so as to protect their privileges and their goods. The taboo has white for its colour, and tabooed objects, sacred places, funereal monuments, the houses of the chiefs, the lower class are not allowed to touch. Hence a tabooed class, to which belong the priests, the sorcerers or touas, the akarkis or civil chiefs, and a non- tabooed class, to which are relegated the greater part of the women and the poorer people. Besides, not only is it not allowed to lift the hand against an object protected by the taboo, but it is even forbidden to look at it.

"And this rule," said Cyrus Bikerstaff, "is so strict in the Marquesas, as in Paumotu and the Society Islands, that I would advise you never to infringe it."

"You understand, my brave Zorn," said Frascolin. "Keep a watch on your hands and a watch on your eyes."

The violoncellist was content to shrug his shoulders like a man whom these things in no way interested.

On the 5th of September, Floating Island left its moorings at Tacoahe. It left to the east the island of Hua- Huna (Kahuga), the most easterly of the first group, of which they only perceived the distant verdant heights, and which has no beach, its circumference being formed of steep cliffs. It need hardly be mentioned that in passing along these islands Floating Island reduced its speed, for such a mass driven at a full rate would produce a sort of tide that would hurl small craft on to the shore and inundate the coast. A few miles further was Uapou, of remarkable aspect, for it bristles with basaltic peaks. Two creeks, one named Possession Bay and the other Bon Accueil Bay, indicate that their names had been given by Frenchmen. It was there in fact that Captain Marchand hoisted the flag of France.

Beyond Ethel Simcoe entered the regions of the second group, standing towards Hiva-Oa, Dominica, according to its Spanish designation. The longest of the archipelago, of volcanic origin, it measures fifty-six miles round. Its cliffs could be distinctly observed, cut in blackish rock, and the cascades which fall from the central hills covered with rich vegetation.

A strait three miles in width separates this island from Taou-Ata. As Floating Island could not find space enough to pass, it had to round Taou-Ata by the west, where the Bay of Madré de Dios — Resolution Bay of Cook — received the first European vessels. This island is less easy of access than its rival Hiva-Oa. Perhaps then, war being more difficult between them, the inhabitants could not come into touch with one another, and decimate themselves with their accustomed energy.

After sighting to the eastward Motane, a sterile island, without shelter, without inhabitants, the Commodore moved on towards Fatu-Hiva. This in truth is but an enormous rock, where the birds of the tropical zone swarm, a sort of sugar-loaf measuring three miles in circumference.

Such was the third islet in the south-east, of which the Milliardites lost sight in the afternoon of the 9th of September. In conformity with its itinerary, Floating Island then steered south-west for the Paumotu Archipelago, and passed through the centre of that group.

The weather continued favourable, this month of September corresponding to that of March in the northern hemisphere.

In the morning of the nth of September the launch from Larboard Harbour picked up one of the floating buoys, to which was attached one of the cables from Madeleine Bay. The end of this copper wire, of which a sheath of gutta-percha assured the complete insulation, was connected with the instruments in the observatory, and telephonic communication established with the American coast.

The council of administration of the Floating Island Company was consulted concerning the shipwrecked crew of the Malay ketch. Would they authorize the governor to give them a passage to the Fijis, whither they could return to their country quickly and cheaply?

The reply was favourable. Floating Island even received permission to cruise to the New Hebrides, so as to land the crew there, if the notables of Milliard City considered that it would not be inconvenient to do so.

Cyrus Bikerstaff conveyed this reply to Captain Sarol, who in the name of his companions begged the Governor to transmit their thanks to the administrators at Madeleine Bay.

CHAPTER XII.

REALLY the quartette would have been guilty of revolting ingratitude to Calistus Munbar if they had not thanked him for having, somewhat treacherously perhaps, brought them on to Floating Island. What mattered the means employed by the superintendent to make them the welcome, petted, and handsomely paid guests of Milliard City! Sebastien Zorn never ceased from sulking, for you can never change a hedgehog with his prickly spines into a cat with soft fur. But Yvernès, Pinchinat, and Frascolin could not dream of a more delicious existence. An excursion with neither danger nor fatigue across these wonderful waters of the Pacific. Taking no part in the rivalry between the two camps, accepted as the island's soul of song, welcomed always by the Tankerdons and the chiefs of the Larboard section, as they were by the Coverleys and most distinguished families of the Starboard section, treated with honour by the Governor and his assistants at the town hall, by Commodore Simcoe and his officers at the observatory, by Colonel Stewart and his militia, giving their services at the temple and at the ceremonies in the cathedral, finding good friends in both ports, in the workshops, among the functionaries and servants of the State, could our compatriots, we ask any reasonable person, regret the time when they were travelling from city to city of the Federal Republic, and who is the man who would be sufficiently his own enemy not to envy them?

“You will kiss my hands!” the superintendent had told them at their first interview.

And if they had not done it, if they would never do it, it was because it is never necessary to kiss a masculine hand.

One day Axhanase Dorémus, most fortunate of mortals as he was, said to them, “I have been two years on Floating Island, and I am sorry it is not to be sixty, if I could be certain that in sixty years I shall still be here.”

“Won’t you have too much of it,” asked Pinchinat, “if you are to become a centenarian?”

“Ah! Monsieur Pinchinat, be sure that I shall attain the century! Why do you want people to die on Floating Island?”

“Because they die everywhere.”

“Not here, sir, no more than they do in the celestial paradise.”

What could be said to that? However, there were from time to time a few ill-advised people who took upon themselves to die even in this enchanted island. And then the steamers took away their remains to the distant cemetery at Madeleine Bay. Decidedly it is written that we cannot be completely happy in this world below.

But at the same time there were a few black spots on the horizon. It must even be admitted that these black spots were gradually taking the form of electrified clouds, which before long would bring storm and tempest. Disquieting was this regrettable rivalry between the Tankerdons and the Coverleys — a rivalry which was approaching an acute stage. Their partisans made common cause with them. Were the two sections to fight each other some day? Was Milliard City threatened with troubles, outbreaks, revolutions? Would the council of administration have an arm energetic enough, and Governor Cyrus Bikerstaff have a hand firm enough to keep the peace between these Capulets and Montagues of Floating

Island? We can hardly say. Everything is possible with rivals whose self-esteem is apparently boundless.

Since the scene at the crossing of the line the two millionaires had been avowed enemies. Their friends supported them. All communication had ceased between the two sections. When they saw each other from afar they avoided each other, and if they met, what an exchange of menacing gestures and fierce looks! A rumour had spread that the old merchant of Chicago and a few of the Larboardites were going to found a trading business, that they were asking the company for permission to build a huge establishment, that they were going to import a hundred thousand pigs, and that they would slaughter them and salt them and sell them in the different archipelagoes of the Pacific.

After that it can easily be believed that the house of the Tankerdons and the house of the Coverleys were two powder magazines. It wanted but a spark to blow them up, and the island with them. Do not forget that the island was afloat above the deepest depths. It is true that this explosion would be only an explosion in a figurative sense, but the consequences would probably be that the notables would clear out. That proceeding would compromise the future and the financial position of the Floating Island Company.

All this was full of menacing complications, if not of actual catastrophes. And who knows if the latter were not to be feared?

In fact, if the authorities of the island had been less asleep in deceptive security, they might have done well to keep a watch on Captain Sarol and his Malays. Not that these people had said anything suspicious, being but slightly loquacious, living apart, keeping themselves clear of all connections, rejoicing in a state of happiness they would regret in their savage New Hebrides. Were there any grounds for suspecting them? Yes and no. But a more watchful observer would have noticed that they were exploring every part of Floating Island, that they were constantly making notes of Milliard City, the position of its avenues, the situation of its palaces and its houses, as if they were making an exact plan of it. They were met with in the park and the country. They were frequently either at Larboard Harbour or Starboard Harbour, observing the arrival and departure of the ships. They were seen to take long walks exploring the coast, where the custom-house officers were on duty day and night, and visiting the batteries at the bow and stern of the island. After all, what could be more natural? These out-of-work Malays could not employ their time better than in such walks, and what was there suspicious in that?

The Commodore gradually moved towards the southwest at reduced speed. Yvernès, as if he had been transformed since he had become a Floating Islander, abandoned himself to the charm of the voyage. So did Pinchinat and Frascolin. What delightful hours were passed at the casino during the fortnightly concerts and the evenings when the crowd struggled for admission at prices that could only be paid in gold. Every morning, thanks to the newspapers of Miliard City, provided with fresh news by the cables and with facts a few days old by the steamers, they were informed of everything of interest that was happen:rig in both continents in society, science, arts, and politics. And from the last point of view it was noticeable that the English press of all parties never ceased to complain about the existence of this moving island which had chosen the Pacific as the theatre of its excursions. But such recriminations were treated with contempt at Floating Island as in Madeleine Bay.

Let us not forget to mention that for some weeks now Sebastien Zorn and his comrades had been reading under the heading of foreign intelligence that their disappearance had been mentioned by the American journals. The celebrated Quartette Party, so well received in the States of the Union, so expected by those who had not yet had the pleasure of listening to them, could not vanish without a good deal of fuss being made about their disappearance. San Diego had not seen them on the appointed date, and San Diego had raised a cry of alarm. Inquiries had been made, and it had been ascertained that the French artistes were on Floating Island after being carried off from the coast of Lower California. As they had not protested against their capture, there had been no exchange of diplomatic notes between the Company and the Federal Republic. When it pleased the quartette to reappear on the scene of their successes they would be welcome.

It goes without saying that the two violins and the alto had imposed silence on the violoncello, who would not have been sorry to be the cause of a declaration of war which would have brought about a contest between the new continent and the Pearl of the Pacific.

Besides, our instrumentalists had many times written to France since their departure from Madeleine Bay. Their families, relieved of all fears for their safety, frequently sent them letters, and the correspondence continued as regularly as the postal service between Paris and New York.

One morning — that of the 17th of September — Frascolin, installed in the library of the casino, felt a very natural desire to consult the map of this archipelago of Paumotu to which they were bound. As soon as he opened the atlas, as soon as his eye lighted on these regions of the Pacific, he exclaimed: “A thousand treble strings! How can Ethel Simcoe get through this chaos? Never will he find a passage through this mass of islets and islands. There are hundreds of them! A regular heap of pebbles in the middle of a pond. He will touch, he will run aground, he will hook his machine on to this point, he will knock it in on this. “We shall end by remaining fixed in this group, which is more numerous than our Morbihan in Brittany.”

The judicious Frascolin was right. Morbihan has only three hundred and sixty-five islands — as many as there are days in the year — and in this Paumotu Archipelago there are quite double as many. It is true chat the sea which beats on them is circumscribed by a girdle of coral reefs, the circumference of which, according to Elisée Reclus, is not less than six hundred and fifty leagues.

Nevertheless, in looking at the map of this group, one would feel astonished that a ship, and more than all such a peculiar vessel as Floating Island, should dare to venture through this archipelago. Comprised between the seventeenth and twenty-eighth parallels of south latitude, and between the hundred and fortieth and hundred and forty- seventh meridians of west longitude, it is composed of hundreds of islands and islets — seven hundred at the least — ranging from Mata-Hiva to Pitcairn.

It is not surprising, then, that this group has received several names, among others that of the Dangerous Archipelago and the Evil Sea. Thanks to that geographical prodigality of which the Pacific Ocean has the privilege, it is also called the Low Islands, the Tuamotou Islands, which means the distant isles, the Southern Islands, the Isles of the Night, the Mysterious Islands. As to the name of Paumotu or Pamautou, which signifies the subject islands, a deputation from the archipelago assembled in 1850 at Papaete, the capital of Tahiti, protested against this designation. But although the French Government, deferring to this protest in 1852, chose among all these names that of Tuamotu, it is more convenient to speak of them here under their better-known name of Paumotu.

Dangerous as the navigation might be, the Commodore did not hesitate. He was so accustomed to these seas that every confidence was to be placed in him. He manoeuvred his island as if it were a canoe. He could spin it round within its own length. He was said to treat it as if it were a sculling boat. Frascolin need have no fear for Floating Island; the capes of Paumotu would not even be grazed by its hull of steel.

In the afternoon of the 19th the look-outs at the observatory reported the first appearance of the heights of the group twelve miles away. If a few rise some fifty metres above the level of the sea, seventy-four of them rise but a yard or so, and would be under water twice a day if the tides were not almost imperceptible. The others are but atolls surrounded by breakers, coral banks of absolute aridity, mere reefs leading on tc the larger islands of the archipelago.

It was on the east that Floating Island approached the group and was to reach Anaa Island, which Farakava has replaced as the capital, owing to Anaa having been partially destroyed by the terrible cyclone of 1878, in which a large number of its inhabitants perished, and which extended its ravages to the island of Kaukura.

The first island passed was Vahitahi, three miles away. The most minute precautions were taken in these parts, the most dangerous of the archipelago, on account of the currents and the extensions of the reefs towards the east. Vahitahi is but a mass of coral flanked by three wooded islands, of which that to the north is occupied by the principal village.

Next morning they sighted the island of Akiti, with its reefs carpeted with prionia, with purslane, a creeping plant of yellowish hue, and with hairy borage. It differs from the others in that it possesses no interior lagoon. If it is visible for some distance away, it is because its height is rather above that of the average of the group.

The following day another island of rather more importance, Anranu, was sighted, the lagoon of which communicates with the sea by two channels on the north-west coast.

While the Floating Islanders were content to wander indolently amidst the archipelago, which they had visited the preceding year, admiring its wonders as they passed, Pinchinat, Frascolin, Yvernès would have been glad of a few stoppages, that they might explore these islands, due to the work of polyparies, that is to say artificial, like Floating Island.

“Only,” said the Commodore, “ours has the power of movement.”

“A little too much so,” replied Pinchinat, “for it stops nowhere.”

“It will stop at the islands of Hao, Anaa, and Farakava, and you will have plenty of time to explore them.”

When asked as to the mode of formation of these islands, Ethel Simcoe answered in the terms of the theory most generally adopted; that is, that in this part of the Pacific the ocean bed has gradually sunk about thirty metres. The zoophytes, the polyps, have formed on its sunken summits a solid foundation for their coral constructions. Little by little these constructions have risen stage by stage, owing to the work of the infusorians, who cannot work at great depths. They have reached the surface, they have formed this archipelago, the islands of which can be classed as barrier reefs, fringing reefs, and atolls — the Indian name of those provided with interior lagoons. Then the fragments dashed up by the waves shave formed a vegetable mould; seeds have been brought by the wind; vegetation has appeared on their coral rings; the calcareous margin is clothed with herbs and plants, and dotted with shrubs and trees under the influence of our intertropical climate.

"And who knows," asked Yvernès in a burst of prophetic enthusiasm, "if the continent swallowed up by the waters of the Pacific will not appear again at its surface, reconstructed by these myriads of microscopic animalcules? And then on these regions, now ploughed by sailing ships and steamers, there will run at full speed express trains which will connect the old with the new world — "

"Take the handle off — take the handle off, my old Isaiah!" replied the disrespectful Pinchinat.

As the Commodore had said, Floating Island stopped on the 23rd of September off the island of Hao, which it was able to get rather near to, owing to the great depth of water. Its boats took several visitors through the passage, which on the right is sheltered by a curtain of cocoa-nut trees. The principal village is six miles away on the top of a hill. The village consists of from two to three hundred inhabitants, for the most part pearl fishers, employed as such by the merchants at Tahiti. There abound the pandanus and the mikimiki myrtle, which were the first trees of a soil whence now rises the sugar-cane, the pineapple, the taro, the prionia, the tobacco, and above all the cocoa-nut tree, of which the immense palm groves of the archipelago contain more than forty thousand.

One might say that this "tree of providence" succeeds almost without culture. Its nut serves as the customary food of the natives, being superior in nutritive substances to the fruits of the pandanus. With it they fatten their pigs, their poultry, and also their dogs, whose chops and steaks are much in demand. And then the cocoa-nut gives a valuable oil. When scraped, reduced to pulp, and dried in the sun, it is submitted to pressure in a very rudimentary machine. Ships take cargoes of these “copperas “to the continent, where the factories treat them in more profitable fashion.

It is not at Hao that an idea of the people of Paumotu can be gained. The natives there are not numerous, but where the quartette could observe them to advantage was in the island of Anaa, before which Floating Island arrived in the morning of the 27th of September.

Anaa shows its wooded masses of superb aspect from but a short distance. One of the largest islands of the archipelago, it is eighteen miles in length by nine in breadth, measured at its madreporic base.

We have said that in 1878 a cyclone ravaged this island and necessitated the transport of the capital of the archipelago to Farakava. That is true, although in this wonderful climate it was presumable that the devastation would be repaired in a few years. In fact, Anaa has become as flourishing as ever, and possesses fifteen hundred inhabitants. It is, however, inferior to Farakava, its rival, for a reason which is of importance; the communication between the sea and the lagoon being through a narrow channel troubled with whirlpools. At Farakava, on the contrary, the lagoon has two wide openings to the north and south. At the same time, although the principal market for cocoa-nut oil has been removed to Farakava, Anaa, which is more picturesque, always attracts the preference of visitors.

As soon as Floating Island had taken up its position in a favourable spot, a number of the Milliardites went ashore. Sebastien Zorn and his comrades were among the first, the violoncellist having consented to take part in the excursion.

At first they went to the village of Tuahora, after studying the way in which the island had been formed — a formation common to all the islands of this archipelago. Here the calcareous margin, the width of the ring, if you like, is from four to five metres, very steep towards the sea and sloping gently towards the lagoon, the circumference of which encloses about a hundred miles, as at Rairoa and Farakava. On this ring are massed thousands of cocoa-nut trees, the principal, if not the only wealth of the island, the branches of which shelter the huts of the natives.

The village of Tuahora is traversed by a sandy road of dazzling whiteness. The French resident in the archipelago no longer lives at Anaa, since it has ceased to be the capital; but his house is there protected by a small fortification. On the barracks of the little garrison, confided to the care of a sergeant of marines, floats the tricolour.The houses of Tuahora are not undeserving of praise. They are not huts, but comfortable and salubrious dwellings, sufficiently furnished, and built for the most part on coral foundations. Their roofs are of the leaves of the pandanus, the wood of this valuable tree being used for the doors and windows. Occasionally they are surrounded with kitchen gardens, which the hand of the native has filled with vegetable soil, and their appearance is really enchanting.

If these natives, with their lighter colour, their less expressive physiognomy, their less amiable character, are of a type less remarkable than those of the Marquesas, they yet offer fine specimens of the people of equatorial Oceania. Being intelligent and laborious workers, they may perhaps oppose more resistance to the physical degeneracy which menaces the Pacific Islanders.

Their principal industry, as Frascolin noticed, was the fabrication of cocoa-nut oil; hence the considerable quantity of cocoa-nut trees in the palm gardens of the archipelago. These trees reproduce themselves as easily as the coralligens at the surface of the atoll. But they have one enemy, and the Parisian excursionists discovered it one day when they were stretched on the beach of the interior lake, whose green waters contrasted with the azure of the surrounding sea.

At first their attention, and then their horror was provoked by a sound of creeping among the herbage.

What did they see? A crustacean of enormous size.

Their first movement was to jump up, their second to look at the animal.

“The ugly beast!” said Yvernès.

“It is a crab,” said Frascolin.

A crab it was, the crab called “birgo “by the natives. Its front claws form two strong pincers or shears with which it opens the nuts on which it chiefly feeds. These birgos live in a kind of cave dug deeply in among the roots, the fibres of cocoa-nut being heaped up to form a bed. During the night more particularly they seek about for fallen nuts, and even catch hold of the trunk and branches to shake the fruit down. The crab must have been seized with wolfish hunger, as Pinchinat said, to have left his dark retreat in broad daylight.

They let the animal alone, for the operation promised to be extremely curious. He found a large nut among the bushes, he tore off gradually the fibres with his pincers; then when the nut was bare, he attacked the hard skin, knocking it, hammering it at the same place. When he had made the opening the birgo picked out the interior substance, using his hind pincers, which are very narrow at the end.

“It is certain,” observed Yvernès, “that nature has created this birgo for opening cocoa-nuts.”

“And that nature created the cocoa-nut for feeding the birgo,” added Frascolin.

“Well, suppose we frustrate the intentions of nature by preventing this crab from eating this nut, and this nut from being eaten by this crab?” proposed Pinchinat.

“I beg you will not disturb him,” said Yvernès. “Do not even to a birgo give a bad impression of Parisians on their travels.”

They consented, and the crab, who had doubtless given an angry look at his Highness, gave a grateful glance at the first violin of the Quartette Party.

After a stay of sixty hours at Anaa, Floating Island moved off towards the north. It passed through the thicket of islets and islands, Commodore Simcoe following the channel with perfect sureness of hand. It need hardly be said that under these circumstances Milliard City was rather abandoned by its inhabitants for the shore, and especially that part of it about Prow Battery. Islands were constantly in view, or rather baskets of verdure which seemed to float on the surface of the waters. It looked like a flower market on one of the Dutch canals. Numerous canoes tacked about at the entrances to the harbours, but were not permitted to enter, the custom-house officers having received formal notice with regard to this. Numbers of native women came swimming towards the island, when it went close to the madreporic cliffs. If they did not accompany the men in the canoes, it was because their vessels are tabooed to the Paumotuan fair sex, and they are forbidden to enter them.

On the 4th of October Floating Island stopped off Farakava, at the opening of the southern passage. Before the boats were got ready to take visitors ashore the French Resident presented himself at Starboard Harbour, whence the Governor gave orders to conduct him to the town hall.

The interview was very cordial. Cyrus Bikerstaff put on his official manner — which he kept for ceremonies of this nature. The resident, an old officer of infantry of marine, was in no way behind him. Impossible to imagine anything more serious, more dignified, more proper, more wooden on both sides!

The reception over, the Resident was invited to look round Milliard City, Calistus Munbar doing the honours. As Frenchmen, the Parisians and Athanase Dorémus asked to accompany the superintendent.

Next day the Governor went to Farakava, to return the visit, and did so in the style of the day before. The quartette landed and went to the residency. It was a very simple habitation, occupied by a garrison of twelve old sailors, and from the mast was displayed the flag of France.

Although Farakava has become the capital, it cannot compare with its rival, Anaa. The principal village is not as picturesque under the verdure of the trees, and the people move about more.

Besides the manufacture of cocoa-nut oil, the centre of which is at Farakava, the natives are employed in pearl fishing. The mother-o’-pearl trade obliges them to frequent the neighbouring island of Toau, which is specially devoted to this industry. Bold divers, these natives do not hesitate to plunge to depths of twenty and thirty metres, accustomed as they are to support such pressures without inconvenience and to hold their breath for more than a minute.

A few of these fishermen were authorized to offer the products of their fishery, mother-o'-pearl or pearls, to the notables of Milliard City. Assuredly it was not jewels that these opulent dames were in want of. But these natural productions in their rough state were not easily procurable, and the opportunity presenting itself, the fishers were able to sell at unheard-of prices. The moment Mrs. Tankerdon bought a pearl of great price, Mrs. Coverley must have another. Fortunately there was no opportunity of outbidding one another on some one thing different to anything else, for no one knows when the bidding would have stopped. Other families took heart to imitate their friends, and that day the Farakavans had a good time.

After twelve days, on the 13th of October, the Pearl of the Pacific started early. In leaving the capital of the Paumotu it had reached the western limit of the archipelago. Commodore Simcoe had no longer to be anxious regarding such a wonderful maze of isles and islets, reefs and atolls. He had come out of it without a scratch Beyond extended that portion of the Pacific which over a space of four degrees separates the Paumotu group from the Society Islands. It was in heading south-west that Floating Island, driven by the million horses of its engines proceeded towards the island so poetically celebrated by Bougainville, as the enchantress Tahiti.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Society Islands, otherwise the Tahiti Archipelago are comprised between the fifteenth and seventeeth degrees c f south latitude and the hundred and fiftieth and hundred and fifty-sixth west longitude. The area of the archipelago is two thousand two hundred superficial kilometres.

There are two groups; first the Windward Islands, Taiti or Tahiti Tahau, Tapamanoa, Moorea or Simeo, Tetiaroa, Meetia, which are under the protectorate of France; and secondly the Leeward Islands, Tubuai, Manu, Huahmi, Kaiateathao, Bora-Bora, Moffy-Iti, Maupiti, Mapetia, Bellinghausen, Scilly, governed by native sovereigns. Cook, their discoverer, called them the Society Islands, in honour of the Royal Society of London. Situated some two hundred and fifty marine leagues from the Marquesas, this group, according to the most recent census, contains but forty thousand inhabitants.

Coming from the north-east, Tahiti is the first of the Windward Islands to be sighted by navigators. And it was Tahiti that the look-outs of the observatory reported at a great distance, thanks to Mount Maiao or Diadem, which rises for a thousand two hundred and thirty-nine metres above the level of the sea.

The voyage was accomplished without incident. Aided Dy the trade winds, Floating Island crossed these admirable waters above which the sun moves as it descends towards the tropic of Capricorn. Still two months and a few days more and it would reach the tropic and return towards the equatorial line, and Floating Island would have it in its zenith during several weeks of burning heat; then the island would follow it as a dog follows his master, keeping it at the regulation distance.

It was the first time the Milliardites were to put in at Tahiti. The preceding year their voyage had begun too late; they had not gone so far to the westward, and after leaving Paumotu they had steered for the equator. Yet this archipelago of the Society Islands is the most beautiful in the Pacific. As they passed through it our Parisians would realize all that was enchanting in the moving island, free to choose its anchorages and its climate.

“Yes; but we shall see what will be the end of this absurd adventure!” was the invariable conclusion of Sebastien Zorn.

“May it never finish! That is all I ask!” exclaimed Yvernès.

Floating Island arrived in sight of Tahiti at dawn on the 17th of October. It was the north shore of the island that was seen first. During the night the lighthouse on Point Venus had been sighted. During the day they could reach Papaete, situated in the north-west, beyond the point. But the council of notables had assembled under the presidency of the governor. Like every well-balanced council it was divided into two camps. One section with Jem Tankerdon wished to go west; the other with Nat Coverley wished to go east. Cyrus Bikerstatf”, having a vote when the sides were equal, decided to reacn Papaete by passing round the south of the island. This decision could but satisfy the quartette, for it would allow of their admiring in all its beauty this Jewel of the Pacific, the New Cythera of Bougainville.

Tahiti possesses an area of a hundred and four thousand two hundred and fifteen hectares, about nine times that of Paris. Its population, which in 1875 comprised seven thousand six hundred natives, three hundred French and eleven hundred foreigners, is now but seven thousand.

In shape it is exactly like a flask turned upside down, the body of the flask being the principal island, joined to the mouth, represented by the peninsula of Tatarapu, by the narrow isthmus of Taravao.

It was Frascolin who made this comparison in studying the large scale map of the archipelago, and his comrades thought it so good that they christened Tahiti “the Flask of the Tropics.”

Administratively, Tahiti is divided into six sections, subdivided into twenty-one districts, since the establishment of the protectorate on the 9th of September, 1842. It will be remembered what difficulties occurred between Admiral Dupetit-Thouars, Queen Pomare, and England at the instigation of that abominable trafficker in bibles and cotton goods who called himself Pritchard, and was so humorously caricatured in the Guêpes of Alphonse Karr.

But that is ancient history, quite as much fallen into oblivion as the performances of the famous Anglo-Saxon apothecary.

Floating Island could venture without danger within a mile of the shore of the Flask of the Tropics. This flask reposes on a coral base, whose foundations descend sheer down into the depths of the ocean. But before approaching so near, the Milliardites were able to contemplate its imposing mass, its mountains more generously favoured by nature than those of the Sandwich Islands, its verdant summits, its wooded gorges, its peaks rising like the pinnacles of some vast cathedral, its belt of cocoa-nut trees watered by the white foam of the surf on the ridge of breakers.

During the day the course lay along the western side; the sightseers, glasses in hand, gathered in the environs of Starboard Harbour, watching the thousand details of the shore. The district of Papenoo, the river of which they saw across, the wide valley from the base of the mountains, and which falls into the sea where there is a break of several miles in width; Hitiia, a safe port from which millions and millions of oranges are exported to San Francisco; Mahaeua, where the conquest of the island was completed in 1845, after a terrible battle with the natives.

In the afternoon, they had arrived off the narrow isthmus of Taravao. In rounding the peninsula the Commodore approached close enough for the fertile fields of the Tautira district, the numerous water-courses of which make it one of the richest in the archipelago, to be admired in all its splendour. Tatarapu, reposing on its plate of coral, lifts majestically the rugged cones of its extinct craters. As the sun sinks on the horizon, the summits grow purple for the last time, and the colours fade into the hot transparent mist. Soon it is no more than a confused mass from which the evening breeze arises laden with the fragrance of oranges and lemons, and after a short twilight the darkness is profound.

Floating Island then rounded the extreme south-east point of the peninsula, and next morning at daybreak was moving up the western side of the island.

The district of Taravao, much cultivated, and thickly populated, displayed its fine roads among the orange woods which link it to the district of Papeiri. At the highest point is a fort, commanding both sides of the isthmus, defended by a few cannon, whose muzzles project from the embrasures like gargoyles of bronze. Below is Port Phaeton.

“Why has the name of that presumptuous driver of the solar chariot lighted on this isthmus?” asked Yvernès.

The day was spent in coasting at slow speed along the more varied contours of the coralline substructure which distinguishes the west of Tahiti. New districts rose into view — Papeiri with its marshy plains, Mataiea with its excellent harbour of Papeiriri, then a wide valley watered by the river Vaihiria, and at the head this mountain of five hundred metres, as a sort of washstand supporting a basin half a kilometre in circumference. This ancient crater, doubtless full of fresh water, did not appear to have any communication with the sea.

After the district of Ahauraono, devoted to vast cotton fields, after the district of Papara, which is principally given over to agriculture, Floating Island, beyond Point Mara, opened the wide valley of Paruvia, cut off from the Diadem, and watered by the Punarnu. Beyond Tapuna, Cape Tatao and the mouth of the Faa, the Commodore headed slightly to the north-east, cleverly avoiding the islet of Motu-Uta, and at six o'clock in the evening stopped before the gap giving access to the Bay of Papaete.

At the entrance lay in capricious windings through the coral reef the channel buoyed with obsolete guns up to Point Fareute. Ethel Simcoe, thanks to his charts, had no need for the services of the pilots who cruise in whale- boats off the entrance of the channel. A boat, however, came out, with a yellow flag at its stern. This was the quarantine boat, bound for Starboard Harbour. People are strict at Tahiti, and no one can land before the health officer accompanied by the harbour master has given free pratique.

Landing at Starboard Harbour, the doctor put himself in communication with the authorities. It was only mere formality. Sick there were none, either in Milliard City or its environs. In any case epidemic maladies, cholera, influenza, yellow fever, were absolutely unknown. A clear bill of health was given according to custom. But as the night was rapidly closing in, landing was postponed until the morning, and Floating Island slept until daybreak.

At dawn there were reports of cannon. It was Prow Battery saluting with twenty-one guns the group of the Windward Islands and Tahiti the capital of the French Protectorate. At the same time, on the observatory tower, the red flag with the golden sun rose and fell three times.

Immediately an identical salvo was given by the Ambuscade Battery at the head of the main passage into Tahiti.

Starboard Harbour was crowded from the earliest hour. The trams had brought a considerable crowd of tourists, on their way to the capital of the archipelago. Doubt not that Sebastien Zorn and his friends were as impatient as any. As the boats were not numerous enough to take all this crowd, the natives were busy offering their services to cross the six cables' length which separated Starboard Harbour from the port.

At the same time it was necessary for the Governor to be the first to land. He must have the customary interview with the civil and military authorities of Tahiti, and pay the no less official visit to the Queen.

Consequently about nine o'clock Cyrus Bikerstaff and his assistants, Barthélémy Ruge, and Hubley Harcourt, all in full uniform, the chief notables of both sections, among others Nat Coverley and Jem Tankerdon, Commodore Simcoe and his officers in brilliant uniforms, Colonel Stewart and his escort, took their places in the boats and were rowed towards Papaete.

Sebastien Zorn, Frascolin, Yvernès, Pinchinat, Athanase Dorémus, and Calistus Munbar occupied another boat with a certain number of functionaries.

Canoes and native boats formed in procession behind the official world of Milliard City, worthily represented by its Governor, its authorities, its notables, of whom the two chief were rich enough to buy Tahiti right out, and even the Society Islands, including their sovereign.

This harbour of Papaete is an excellent one, and of such depth that ships of heavy tonnage can anchor there. There are three channels into it: the main channel on the north, seventy metres wide and eighty long, narrowed by a small bank marked with buoys, the Tanoa channel on the east, and Tapuna channel on the west.

The electric launches majestically skirted the beach dotted with villas and country houses, and the quays at which the vessels were moored. The landing took place at the foot of an elegant fountain which serves as a watering- place and is fed by the streams from the neighbouring mountains, on one of which is a semaphore.

yCyrus Bikerstaff and his suite landed amid a large crowd of the French, native and foreign population, who welcomed the Pearl of the Pacific as the most extraordinary of the marvels made by the genius of man. After the first outbursts of enthusiasm the procession moved towards the palace of the Governor of Tahiti.

Calistus Munbar, superb in his state costume, which he only wore on ceremony days, invited the quartette to follow him, and they were only too happy to accept the superintendent’s invitation.

The French protectorate not only embraces the island of Tahiti and the island of Moorea, but also the neighbouring group. The chief is a commandant-commissioner, having under his orders an “ordonnateur “who manages the troops, the shipping, the colonial and local finances and the judicial administration. The general secretary of the commissioner has charge of the civil affairs of the country. Several Residents are located in the islands, at Moorea, at Farakava in the Paumotus, at Taio-Hahè, at Nuka-Hiva, and a justice of the peace, whose jurisdiction extends over the Marquesas. Since 1861 there has been a consultative committee for agriculture and trade, which sits once a year at Papaete. There also are the headquarters of the artillery and the engineers. The garrison comprises detachments of colonial gendarmerie, artillery, and marine infantry. A curé and a vicar appointed by the government, and nine missionaries scattered among the islands, assure the practice of the Catholic religion. In truth the Parisians might believe themselves in France, in a French port, and there was nothing displeasing to them in that.

As to the villages on the different islands, they are administered by a sort of native municipal council presided over by a tarana, assisted by a judge, a chief mutoi, and two councillors elected by the inhabitants.

Under the shade of beautiful trees the procession marched towards the palace of the government. On every side were cocoa-nut trees of superb growth, miros with rosy foliage, bancoulias, clumps of orange trees, guava trees, caoutchoucs, etc. The palace stood amid this charming verdure, which rose as high as its roof, which was decorated with charming mansardes; its front was of considerable elegance and embraced a ground floor and one storey. The principal French functionaries were here assembled, and the colonial gendarmerie formed a guard of honour.

The commandant-commissioner received Cyrus Biker- staff with a graciousness that he certainly would not have met with in the English archipelagoes of these parts. He thanked him for having brought Floating Island into the waters of this archipelago. He hoped that the visit would be renewed every year, regretting that Tahiti could not return the compliment. The interview lasted half an hour, and it was agreed that Cyrus Bikerstaff might expect the authorities next day at the town hall.

“Do you intend to remain some time at Papaete?” asked the commandant-commissioner.

“A fortnight,” replied the Governor.

“Then you will have the pleasure of seeing the French naval division which is expected here at the end of the week.”

“We shall be happy to do them the honours of our island.”

Cyrus Bikerstaff presented the members of his suite, his assistants, Commodore Ethel Simcoe, the commandant of the militia, the different functionaries, the superintendent of fine arts, and the artistes of the Quartette Party, who were welcomed as they ought to be by a compatriot.

Then there was a slight embarrassment with regard to the delegates of the sections of Milliard City. How was he to avoid giving offence to Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley, those two irritable personages who had the right —

“To march both at once,” said Pinchinat.

The difficulty was evaded by the commandant-commissioner himself. Knowing the rivalry between the two famous millionaires, he was of such perfect tact, so rigid in his official correctness, and acted with such diplomatic address, that the matter passed over as if it had been all arranged.

It is needless to say that Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès, Pinchinat, and Frascolin had intended to leave Athanase Dorémus, who was already out of breath, to get back to his house in Twenty-Fifth Avenue. They hoped to spend as much time as possible at Papaete, in visiting the environs, making excursions into the principal districts, even as far as the peninsula of Tatarapu, even to exhaust to the last drop this Flask of the Pacific.

Having decided on this, they informed Calistus Munbar, who could but approve of the plan.

“But,” he said, “you had better wait a couple of days before starting on your journey.”

“And why not to-day?” asked the impatient Yvernès.

“Because the authorities of Floating Island wish to pay their respects to the Queen, and you will have to be presented to her and her court.”

“And to-morrow?” said Frascolin.

“To-morrow the commandant-commissioner of the archipelago is to return the visit he has received from the authorities of Floating Island, and it is the proper thing — ”

“For us to be there,” replied Pinchinat. “Well, Mr. Superintendent, we shall be there, we shall be there.”

Leaving the palace of the Government, Cyrus Bikerstaff and his procession directed their steps to the palace of her Majesty. It was a simple promenade under the trees, which did not take more than a quarter of an hour.

The royal dwelling is very agreeably situated amid masses of verdure. It is a quadrilateral in two storeys, with a chalet-like roof overhanging two tiers of verandahs. From the upper windows the view embraces the large plantations which extend up to the town, and beyond is a large section of sea. In short a charming house, not luxurious, but comfortable.

The Queen had lost nothing of her prestige in passing under the rule of a French protectorate. If the flag of France is displayed from the masts of the vessels moored in the port of Papaete or anchored in the roadstead, on the civil and military edifices of the city, at least the standard of the sovereign displays over her palace the ancient colours of the archipelago — red and white stripes, horizontal, with a tricolour in the upper canton.

It was in 1706 that Quiros discovered the island of Tahiti, to which he gave the name of Sagittaria. After him Walter in 1767, Bougainville in 1768, completed the exploration of the group. At the time of the first discovery Queen Oberea was reigning, and after her death the celebrated dynasty of the Pomares appeared in the history of Oceania.

Pomare I. (1762-1780) having reigned under the name of Otoo, the Black Heron, changed it for that of Pomare.

Her son, Pomare II. (1780-1819), favourably welcomed in 1797 the first English missionaries, who converted him to the Christian religion ten years afterwards. This was a period of dissensions and internecine war, and the population of the archipelago gradually decreased from a hundred thousand to sixteen thousand.

Pomare III. son of the preceding, reigned from 1819 to 1827, and his sister Aimata, born in 1812, became Queen of Tahiti and the neighbouring islands. Having no children by Tapoa, her first husband, she repudiated him to marry Ariifaaite. From this union there was born in 1849 Arione, the heir presumptive, who died at the age of thirty-five. From the following year afterwards the Queen presented four children to her husband, who was the finest man in the islands — a daughter, Teriimaevarua, princess of the island of Bora-Bora since 1860; Prince Tamatoa, born in 1842, King of the island of Raiatea, who was overthrown by his subjects revolting against his brutality; Prince Teriitapunui, born in 1846, afflicted with lameness, and Prince Tuavira, born in 1848, who finished his education in France.

The reign of Queen Pomare was not absolutely peaceful. In 1835 the Catholic missionaries began a struggle with the Protestant missionaries. Being sent out of the country, they were browght back by a French expedition in 1838. Four years afterwards the protectorate of France was accepted by the five chiefs of the island. Pomare protested, the English protested. Admiral Dupetit-Thouars proclaimed the deposition of the Queen in 1843. But the admiral having been disavowed to a certain extent, Admiral Bruat was sent to bring the matter to a conclusion.

Tahiti submitted in 1846, and Pomare accepted the protectorate by the treaty of June 19th, 1847, receiving the sovereignty of the islands of Raiatea, Huahine and Bora-Bora. There were further troubles in 1852; an outbreak overthrew the Queen, and a republic was even proclaimed. At last the French Government reinstated the sovereign, who abandoned three of her crowns; in favour of her eldest son that of Raiatea and Tahaa, in favour of her second son that of Huahine, and in favour of her daughter that of Bora-Bora.

In these days it is one of her descendants, Pomare IV. who occupies the throne of the archipelago.

The complaisant Frascolin continued to justify his title of the Larousse of the Pacific which Pinchinat had given him. These historical and biographical details he gave to his comrades, declaring that it was always better to know the people among whom they went and to whom they spoke. Yvernès and Pinchinat replied that he was right in instructing them as to the genealogy of the Pomares, and Sebastien Zorn observed that it was a matter of indifference to him.

The sensitive Yvernès became entirely steeped in the charm of this poetic Tahitian nature. To his memory returned the enchanting narratives of the voyages of Bougainville and Dumont-D'Urville. He did not hide his emotion at the thought that he was to find himself in the presence of this sovereign of New Cy thera, of a real Queen Pomare, whose name —

"Signifies ' right of coughing,'" said Frascolin.

"Good!" exclaimed Pinchinat, "as if you were to say the goddess of catarrh, the empress of coryza! Beware, Yvernès, and don't forget your handkerchief."

Yvernès was furious at this unseasonable attempt at wit, but the others laughed so heartily that he finished by joining in with them.

The reception of the Governor of Floating Island, his assistants, and the delegation of the notables took place in great state. The honours were rendered by the mutoi, the chief of the gendarmerie, with whom were some of the native auxiliaries.

Queen Pomare IV. was about forty years of age. She wore, like her family who surrounded her, a ceremonial costume of pale rose, the colour preferred by the Tahi- tian populace. She received the compliments of Cyrus Bikerstaff with an affable dignity, if such an expression is permissible, which would not have disgraced a European monarch. She replied graciously and in very correct French, for our language is current in the Society Archipelago. She had besides a very great wish to see this Floating Island, of which there had been so much talking in the Pacific, and hoped that its stay would not be the last. Jem Tankerdon was the object of particular attention — much to the disgust of Nat Coverley. This was because the royal family are of the Protestant religion, and Jem Tankerdon was the most notable personage of the Protestant section of Milliard City.

The Quartette Party were not forgotten in the presentations. The Queen deigned to inform its members that she would be charmed to hear them and applaud them. They bowed respectfully, affirming that they were at her Majesty's command, and the superintendent would arrange for the Queen to be gratified.

After the audience, which lasted for half an hour, the honours given to the procession as it entered the royal palace were repeated as it retired.

The visitors returned to Papaete. A halt was made at the military club, where the officers had prepared a luncheon in honour of the Governor and his companions. The champagne flowed, toasts succeeded, and it was six o'clock when the launches left the Papaete quays for Starboard Harbour.

In the evening, when the Parisian artistes found themselves in the casino, —

“We have a concert in view,” said Frascolin. “What shall we play to her Majesty? Will she understand Mozart or Beethoven?”

“We will play Offenbach, Varney, Lecoq, or Audran!” replied Sebastien Zorn.

“Not at all! The bamboula is plainly suggested!” said Pinchinat, indulging in the characteristic hip motions of this negro dance

CHAPTER XIV.

THE island of Tahiti was destined to become a stopping place for Floating Island. Every year, before pursuing its route towards the tropic of Capricorn, its inhabitants would sojourn in the neighbourhood of Papaete. Received with sympathy by the French authorities as well as by the natives, they showed their gratitude by opening wide their gates, or rather their ports. Soldiers and civilians crowded onto the island, exploring the country, the park, the avenues, and probably no incident would happen to alter this satisfactory state of affairs. At the departure, it is true, the Governor’s police would have to assure themselves that the population had not been fraudulently increased by the intrusion of a few Tahitians, not authorized to take up their abode on his floating domain.

It followed, that by reciprocity, every latitude was given to the Milliardites to visit the islands of the group, when Commodore Simcoe called at one or the other of them.

In view of the stay here, a few rich families had rented villas in the environs of Papaete, and secured them in advance by telegraph. They intended to take up their quarters there, as the Parisians do in the neighbourhood of Paris, with their servants and horses, so as to live the life of large landowners, as tourists, excursionists, sportsmen even although they had little taste for sport. In short, they would have a little country life without having anything to fear from the salubrious climate, the temperature of which ranges between thirty and forty degrees centigrade between April and December the other months of the year constituting the winter in the southern hemisphere.

Among the notables who left their mansions on the island for their country houses ashore were the Tankerdons and the Coverleys. Mr. and Mrs. Tankerdon, their sons and their daughters, departed next day for a picturesque chalet on the heights of Tatao Point. Mr. and Mrs. Coverley, Miss Diana and her sisters left their palace in Fifteenth Avenue for a delightful villa, hidden beneath the big trees of Venus Point. Between these habitations there was a distance of several miles, which Walter Tankerdon perhaps thought a little too long. But it was not in his power to bring these two points of the Tahitian coast any nearer. Besides, there were carriage roads, conveniently arranged to place them in direct communication with Papaete.

Frascolin remarked to Calistus Munbar that if they started in the morning, the two families could not be present at the visit of the commandant to the Governor.

“Well, so much the better!” replied the superintendent, his eyes brightening with diplomatic acuteness. “That will avoid any conflict between them. If the representative of France paid his first visit to the Coverleys, what would the Tankerdons say, and if he went to the Tankerdons, what would the Coverleys say? Cyrus Bikerstaff must be glad of their departure.”

“Is there no reason for hoping that the rivalry of these families will end?” asked Frascolin.

“Who knows?” replied Calistus Munbar.

“It may perhaps depend on the amiable Walter and the charming Diana.”

“Up to the present, however,” observed Yvernès, “it does not seem that this heir and this heiress — ”

“Good! good!” replied the superintendent. “It wants an opportunity, and if chance does not bring it about, we may have to take the place of chance — for the good of our beloved island.”

And Calistus Munbar performed a pirouette on his heels, which would have been applauded by Athanase Dorémus, and would not have been disavowed by a marquis in the days of Louis Quatorze.

In the afternoon of the 20th of October, the commander and his staff landed at Starboard Harbour. They were received by the Governor with the honours due to their rank. There was a salute from both batteries. Cars decorated with the French and Milliardite colours took the procession to the capital, where the rooms at the town hall were prepared for this interview. On the road there was a flattering reception from the population, and before the steps of the municipal palace an exchange of official speeches of regulation length.

Then came a visit to the temple, the cathedral, the observatory, the two electric works, the two harbours, the park, and finally a circular trip on the trams round the coast. On the return a luncheon was served in the grand hall of the casino. It was six o’clock when the commandant and his staff embarked for Papaete amid the thunders of the artillery of Standard Island, taking away with him a pleasing remembrance of this reception.

The next morning, the 21st of October, the four Parisians landed at Papaete. They had invited no one to accompany them, not even the professor of deportment, whose legs were not suited for lengthy peregrinations. They were free as the air — like schoolboys on a holiday, happy to have under foot a real soil of rocks and vegetable mould.

In the first place they must visit Papaete. The capital of the archipelago is incontestably a pretty town. The quartette took a real pleasure in wandering about under the lovely trees which shaded the houses on the beach, and the offices and trading establishments near the harbour. Then passing up one of the streets abutting on the quay, where a railway on the American system was working, our artistes ventured into the interior of the city.

There the streets are wide, as well planned with rule and square as the avenues of Milliard City, among gardens of verdure and freshness. Even at this early hour there was a constant passing and re-passing of Europeans and natives, and this animation, which would be greater after sight o’clock in the evening, would last all through the night. You understand that the tropical nights, and particularly Tahitian nights, are not made to spend in bed, although the beds of Papaete are composed of a network of cocoa fibre, a palliasse of banana leaves, and a mattress of tufts of the silk cotton tree, to say nothing of the net protecting the sleeper against the irritating attacks of mosquitoes.

As to the houses, it is easy to distinguish those which are European from those which are Tahitian. The former, built almost entirely of wood, are raised a few feet on blocks of masonry, and leave nothing to be desired in the way of comfort. The latter, of which there are not many in the town, scattered here and there under the shade of the trees, are made of jointed bamboos covered with matting, which renders them clean, airy and agreeable.

But the natives?

“The natives!” said Frascolin to his comrades. “There are no more here than at the Sandwich Islands; we shall not find those gallant savages, who, before the conquest, dined on a human cutlet, and reserved for their sovereign the eyes of a vanquished warrior roasted according to the recipe of Tahitian cookery!”

“Ah, is that it?” asked Pinchinat. “Then there are no more cannibals in Oceania. What! we shall have voyaged thousands of miles without meeting one of them!”

“Patience!” remarked the violoncellist, beating the air with his right hand like Rodin in the Mysteries of Paris; “we may find one, if it is only to gratify your foolish curiosity.”

The Tahitians are of Malay origin, very probably, and of the race known as Maori. Raiatea, the Holy Island, was the cradle of their kings — a charming cradle washed by the limpid waters of the Pacific in the Windward group.

Before the arrival of the missionaries, Tahitian society comprised three classes: those of the princes, privileged persons who were recognized as possessing the gift of performing miracles; chiefs, or owners of the soil, of little consideration, ana reduced to servitude by the princes; the common people, possessing nothing, or when they did possess it, having nothing beyond a life interest in the land.

All this has been changed since the conquest, and even before, under the influence of the English and Catholic missionaries. But that which has not changed is the intelligence of the natives, their lively speech, their cheerful disposition, their unfailing courage, their physical beauty. The Parisians could not help admiring this in the town and in the country.

“What fine men!” said one.

“And what fine girls!” said another.

Men of a stature above the average, their skin copper- coloured as if impregnated with the ardour of their blood, their proportions as admirable as those of antique statues, their faces gentle and prepossessing. These Maories are truly superb, with their large bright eyes, their rather thick but well-cut lips. Their tattooing for war purposes is disappearing with the occasions which formerly rendered it necessary.

The more wealthy natives clothe themselves in European fashion, and yet they look well with shirts cut to the figure, vest of pale rose stuff, trousers falling over the boots. But these did not attract the attention of the quartette. No! To the trousers of modern cut, our tourists preferred the pareo of cotton, coloured and striped, draped from the belt to the ankle, and in place of the high hat, and even the Panama hat, the headdress common to both sexes, the hei, composed of leaves and flowers.

The women are still the poetic and graceful Otaheitans of Bougainville. The white petals of the tiara, a sort of gardenia, mingle with the black mats unrolled on their shoulders their heads covered with the light hat made of the epidermis of a cocoa-nut, but of which the sweet name of revareva “seems to come from reverie,” as Yvernès said. Add to the charm of this costume, with its colours like those of a kaleidoscope modifying at every movement, the gracefulness of the walk, the freedom of the attitudes, the sweetness of the smile, the penetration of the look, the harmonious sonorousness of the voice, and you will understand why, as soon as one of our artistes exclaimed, “What fine men!” the others should have answered in chorus, —

“And what fine girls!”

When the Creator had fashioned such marvels of beauty, would it have been possible for Him not to have given them a frame worthy of them? And what could be imagined more delightful than the Tahitian landscapes, in which the vegetation is so luxuriant under the influence of the running streams and abundant dews of the night?

During their excursions across this island, and in the neighbourhood of Papaete, the four Parisians did not cease to admire this world of vegetable wonders. Leaving the borders of the sea, which are more suited to cultivation, where the forests are replaced by plantations of lemon trees, orange trees, arrowroot, sugar-cane, coffee- plants/cotton trees, fields of yams, manioc, indigo, sorghum, and tobacco, they ventured under the masses of trees in the interior up to the foot of the mountains, whose summits rose above the dome of foliage. Everywhere were elegant cocoa-nut trees of magnificent growth, miros or rosewood trees, casuarinas or ironwood trees, tiairi or bancoulias, puraus, tamanas, ahis or santals, guava trees, mango trees, taccas, whose roots are edible, and also the superb taro, the precious breadfruit tree, high in the stem, slender and white, with large brownish-green leaves, amid which are groups of large fruits, with chiselled bark, and of which the white pulp forms the principal food of the natives.

The tree which with the cocoa-nut is the commonest is the guava tree, which grows all the way up the mountains, and whose name in the Tahitian tongue is tuava. It grows in thick forests, while the puraus form gloomy thickets, difficult to get through, when you are imprudent enough to venture among them.

There were no dangerous animals. The only native quadruped is a sort of pig. As to the horses and cattle, they have been imported into the island, where they prosper like the sheep and goats. The fauna is much less rich than the flora, even with the birds included. There are pigeons and swallows as at the Sandwich Islands. There are no reptiles. There are centipedes and scorpions. And for insects there are wasps and mosquitoes.

)The products of Tahiti are mainly cotton and sugarcane, the cultivation of which is largely developed, to the detriment of tobacco and coffee; besides these there are cocoa-nut oil, arrowroot, oranges, nacre and pearls. This is, however, enough for an important trade with America, Australia, and New Zealand, with China in Asia, with France and England in Europe, to a value of three million two hundred thousand francs of imports, counterbalanced by four millions and a half of exports.

The excursions of the quartette extended to the peninsula of Tabaratu. A visit to Fort Phaeton introduced them to a detachment of marine infantry, who were delighted to welcome their compatriots.

At an inn near the harbour, kept by a colonist, Frascolin stood treat. To the natives of the neighbourhood, to the mutoi of the district, there were glasses round of French wine, which the innkeeper did not forget to charge for. in return the locals offered their entertainers some of the products of the country, such as the preparation from a species of banana known as fei, of beautiful yellow colour, yams prepared in a succulent fashion, maiore, which is the breadfruit cooked to bursting in a hole full of hot stones, and finally a confection sourish in flavour, made from grated cocoa nut, and which, under the name of taiero, is kept in bamboo twigs.

This luncheon was very jolly. The party smoked many hundreds of cigarettes made of tobacco leaf dried at the fire, and rolled within a pandanus leaf. Only, instead of imitating the Tahitian men and women, who pass them from mouth to mouth after taking a few whiffs, the Frenchmen preferred to smoke them in French fashion. And when the mutoi offered his, Pinchinat thanked him with a “mea maitai,” that is to say “very well,” with such a grotesque intonation that it put the whole crowd into good humour.

In the course of their excursions it need not be said that the quartette returned every evening to Papaete or to Floating Island. Everywhere, in the villages, in the scattered habitations, among the colonies, among the natives, they were received with as much sympathy as comfort.

On the 7th of November they decided to visit Point Venus, an excursion undertaken by every tourist worthy of the name.

They started at dawn, crossing the river Fantalina by the bridge. They ascended the valley up to the noisy cascade, double that of Niagara in height, but much narrower, which falls with superb uproar from a height of 200 feet. In this way they arrived, by following the road along the flank of Paharahi Hill, on the edge of the sea, at the hillock to which Captain Cook gave the name of Tree Cape — a name justified at that time by the presence of an isolated tree, since dead of old age. An avenue planted with magnificent trees led them from the village of Paharahi to the lighthouse at the extreme end of the island.

It was in this place, half-way up a verdant hill, that the Coverley family had fixed their residence. There was no apparent reason for Walter Tankerdon, whose villa was on the other side of Papaete, to be in the neighbourhood of Point Venus. The young man was, however, on horseback, close to the cottage of the Coverleys, and he exchanged a salute with the quartette, and asked them if they intended to return to Papaete that evening.

“No, Mr. Tankerdon,” replied Frascolin. “We have received an invitation from Mrs. Coverley, and it is probable that we shall spend the evening at the villa.”

“Then, gentlemen, I bid you good-bye,” said Walter Tankerdon.”

And it seemed as if the young man’s face darkened as if a cloud had for a moment veiled the sun.

He then spurred his horse and went off at a gentle trot, giving a glance at the villa, which stood out white among the trees.

“Eh!” said Pinchinat. “Perhaps he would like to have accompanied us, this charming cavalier?”

“Yes,” added Frascolin, “and it is evident that our friend Munbar may be right. He did not seem happy at not being able to meet Miss Coverley.”

“That proves that millions do not bring happiness,” replied Yvernès, like a great philosopher.

During the afternoon and evening a delightful time was spent with the Coverleys. At the villa the quartette met with as warm a welcome as at the house in the Fifteenth Avenue. A sympathetic meeting in which art was agreeably mingled. The music was excellent — at the piano, be it understood. Mrs. Coverley played a few new pieces, Miss Coverley sang like a true artiste, and Yvernès, who had a fine voice, mingled his tenor with her soprano.

We do not know why — perhaps designedly — Pinchinat slipped into the conversation that he and his comrades had met Walter Tankerdon in the neighbourhood of the villa. Was this clever on his part, or had he done better to have been silent? No, and if the superintendent had been there he could not but have approved of his Highness. A slight smile, almost imperceptible, flitted across Miss Coverley’s lips, her beautiful eyes sparkled, and it seemed when she sang again as though her voice had become more penetrating.

Mrs. Coverley looked at her for a moment, and was content to say, while Mr. Coverley frowned: “You are not tired, my child?”

“No, mother.”

“And you, Monsieur Yvernès?”

“Not the least in the world, madam. Before my birth I ought to have been a chorister boy in one of the chapels of Paradise.”

The evening came to an end, and it was nearly midnight when Mr. Coverley thought the time had come to retire to rest.

Next morning the quartette, enchanted at their simple and cordial reception, went back again down the road to Papaete.

The stay at Tahiti could not last longer than a week; according to the programme which had been laid down in advance, Floating Island would then resume its route to the south-west. And without doubt there would have been nothing to distinguish this last week, during which the quartette completed their excursions, if a very pleasant incident had not happened on the nth of November. The division of the French squadron of the Pacific was signalled in the morning by the semaphore on the hill behind Papaete.

At eleven o’clock a cruiser of the first class, the *Paris*, escorted by two cruisers of the second class and a gunboat, dropped anchor in the roadstead.

The regulation salutes were exchanged, and the rear- admiral, whose flag was flying on the *Paris*, landed with his officers.

After the official salutes, in which the Floating Island batteries took part, the rear-admiral and the commandant of the Society Islands returned each other’s visits.

It was fortunate for the ships of the divisions, their officers and crews, to have arrived in the roadstead of Tahiti while Floating Island was there. Here were new opportunities for receptions and festivities. The Pearl of the Pacific was open to the French sailors, who crowded to admire its wonders. For two days the uniforms of our navy mingled with the Milliardite costumes. Cyrus Bikerstaff did the honours at the observatory, the superintendent did the honours at the casino and the other establishments under his superintendence.

It was under these circumstances that an idea occurred to that astonishing Calistus Munbar, a genial idea, the realization of which would never be forgotten, and this idea he communicated to the Governor, who adopted it at the advice of his council of notables.

Yes! A grand festival was decreed for the 15th of November. Its programme included a set dinner and a ball given in the rooms of the town hall.

By this time all the Milliardites would have returned to the island, for the departure would take place two days afterwards.

The high personages of both sections would not fail to be present at this festival in honour of Queen Pomare IV. the Tahitians, native or European, and the French squadron.

Calistus Munbar was entrusted with the management of the festival, and his imagination and zeal could be relied on. „ The quartette offered their services, and it was agreed that a concert should figure among the most attractive features of the programme.

As far as the invitations were concerned, the Governor undertook to send them out.

In the first place Cyrus Bikerstaff went in person to Queen Pomare and the princes of her court to assist at the festivities, and the Queen deigned to reply by accepting the invitation. There were similar thanks on the part of the commandant and the chief French functionaries, and of the rear-admiral and his officers, who showed themselves deeply sensible of the kindness.

In short a thousand invitations were issued. It must be understood that the thousand guests could not sit down at the municipal table. No! Only a hundred: the royal personages, the officers of the squadron, the authorities of the protectorate, the chief functionaries and council of notables and superior clergy of Floating Island. But there would be in the park, refreshments, games, and fireworks, with which to satisfy the populace.

The King and Queen of Malecarlie were not forgotten, that need scarcely be said. But their Majesties, averse to all pomp, living retired in their modest habitation in the Thirty-Second Avenue, thanked the Governor for an invitation they regretted to be unable to accept.

“Poor sovereigns!” said Yvernès.

The great day arrived, and the island was decked with the French and Tahitian colours mingled with the Mil- liardite colours.

Queen Pomare and her court, in gala costume, were received at Starboard Harbour amid a salute from the island’s artillery, replied to by the guns of

Papaete and the guns of the fleet.

About six o’clock in the evening, after a promenade in the park, all the great ones went to the municipal palace, which was superbly decorated. What a splendid sight was the monumental staircase, every step of which cost at least ten thousand francs, like that at Vanderbilt’s house in New York! And in the splendid dining-hall the guests sat down at the tables.

The code of precedence was observed by the Governor with perfect tact. There was no reason for conflict between the great rival families of the two sections. Everyone was contented with the places reserved for them, among others Miss Coverley, who found herself opposite Walter Tankerdon. That was as much as the young people could expect, for they could not be brought much nearer.

There is no need to say that the French artistes had nothing to complain of. They were placed at the table of honour, a new proof of esteem and sympathy for their talent and for themselves.

As to the bill of fare of this memorable repast, studied, meditated, and composed by the superintendent, it proved that even from the culinary point of view Milliard City had nothing to fear from old Europe.

Here is this bill of fare as printed in gold on vellum by Calistus Munbar: —

At the table of the Queen of England, of the Emperor of Russia, of the German Emperor, or the President of the French Republic, was there ever any better combination for an official dinner, and could the most famous cooks of both continents have produced a better one?

At nine o’clock the guests went to the casino for the concert. The programme contained four items: —

Fifth quartette in A major: Op. 18, Beethoven.

Second quartette in D minor: Op. 10, Mozart.

Second quartette in D major: Op. 64 (2nd part), Haydn.

Twelfth quartette in E flat. Onslow.

This concert was a fresh triumph for the Parisian executants so fortunately embarked — no matter what the recalcitrant violoncellist might say — on Floating Island.

Meanwhile Europeans and strangers took part in the different games in the park. Open-air dances were organized on the lawns, and — why should we not admit it? — there was dancing to the music of accordions, which are instruments much in vogue among the natives of the Society Islands. French sailors have a weakness for this pneumatic apparatus, and as the men on leave from the *Paris* and other ships of the squadron had landed in great numbers, accordions became the rage. Voices joined in, and ship songs responded to the “himerre,” which are the popular and favourite airs of the Oceanic peoples.

Besides, the natives of Tahiti, men and women, have a decided taste for singing and dancing in which they excel On this occasion they many times repeated the figures of the “repanipa,” which may be considered a national dance, of which the measure is marked by beating the tambourine. Thus dancers of all kinds, natives and foreigners, enjoyed themselves immensely, thanks to the stimulus of refreshments of all kinds provided by the municipality.

At the same time there were dances of more select arrangement and composition, at which, under the direction of Athanase Dorémus, the families gathered in the saloons of the town hall. The Milliardite and the Tahitian ladies tried to surpass each other in their dresses, but we need not be surprised at the former, who were faithful customers of the Parisian dressmakers, easily eclipsing even the most elegant Europeans of the colony. The diamonds rippled on their heads, their shoulders, their necks, and it was amongst them only that the contest was of any interest. But who would dare say if Mrs. Coverley or Mrs. Tankerdon were the more dazzling? Certainly not Cyrus Bickerstaff, always so careful to preserve a perfect equilibrium between the two sections of the island.

In the quadrille of honour there figured the sovereign of Tahiti and her august spouse, Cyrus Bikerstaff and Mrs. Coverley, the rear-admiral and Mrs. Tankerdon, the commodore and the first lady of honour to the Queen. At the same time other quadrilles were formed, in which the couples took part according to their tastes and sympathies. All this was charming, and yet Sebastien Zorn kept himself apart in an attitude, if not of protest, at least of disdain, like the two snarling Romans in the famous picture of the *Décadence.* But Yvernès, Pinchinat, Frascolin waltzed and danced polkas and mazurkas with the prettiest Tahitians and the most delightful young ladies of Floating Island. And who knows if, this evening, a few weddings \vere not decided as a finish to the ball — which would doubtless give a little more work to the civil officials?

Besides, what was the general surprise when chance made Walter Tankerdon Miss Coverley’s cavalier in a quadrille? Was it chance, or had not that astute diplomatist, the superintendent, managed to assist it in some way? In any case it was the event of the evening, great perhaps in its consequences, if it marked a first step towards the reconciliation of these two powerful families.

After the fireworks on the large lawn, dancing was resumed in the park and at the town hall, and continued until daylight.

Such was the memorable festival, of which the remembrance would be perpetuated through the long and happy series of ages that the future — it was hoped — had in store for Floating Island.

Two days afterwards the stay terminated and Commodore Simcoe gave orders to get under way at dawn. The roar of cannon saluted the departure of the island as it had saluted its arrival, and it returned the salutes gun for gun from both Tahiti and the naval division.

The direction was north-west, so as to pass in review the other isles of the archipelago. Thus it coasted along the picturesque outline of Moorea, bristling with superb peaks; Raiatea, the Holy Island, the cradle of the native royalty; Bora-Bora, dominated by a mountain a thousand metres high; then the islets of Motu-Iti, Mapeta, Tubuai, Manu, the heads of the Tahitian chain stretched across these regions.

On the 19th of November, as the sun descended towards the horizon, the last summits of the archipelago disappeared.

Floating Island then steered south-west, as shown by the charts displayed on the windows of the casino.

And who at this moment would notice Captain Sarol, as, with a gloomy look in his eye and a fierce expression on his face, with a menacing hand he showed his Malays the route to the New Hebrides, situated twelve hundred leagues to the westward?

PART II

CHAPTER I.

FOR six months, Floating Island, after leaving Madeleine Bay, had been voyaging from archipelago to archipelago across the Pacific. Not an accident had occurred in the course of this marvellous journey. At this period of the year the equatorial regions are calm, the trade winds blowing steadily between the tropics. Even if there had been a storm, the solid basis which bore Milliard City, the two harbours, the park and the country, would not have experienced the least shock. The squall would have passed, the tempest would have abated. Hardly would it have been noticed on the surface of the Pearl of the Pacific.

That which was rather to be feared under these circumstances was the monotony of too uniform an existence. But our Parisians would have been the first to agree that there was none of this. On this immense desert of ocean oasis succeeded oasis, such as the groups they had already visited, the Sandwich Isles, the Marquesas, Paumotu, the Society Islands, such as those they would explore before turning northwards, the Cook Islands, Samoa, Fiji, the New Hebrides, and others perhaps. So many stopping places, so many opportunities of exploring these countries so interesting from an ethnographic point of view.

As far as the Quartette Party were concerned how could they think of complaining even if they had the time? Perhaps they might consider themselves separated from the rest of the world. Were not the postal services with the two continents regular? Not only did the petroleum ships bring their cargoes for the wants of the electric works almost to the day, but there was not a fortnight without steamers unloading at Starboard Harbour or Larboard Harbour, their cargoes of all sorts and the batches of newspapers with which the inhabitants filled up their leisure time.

The salaries of the artistes were paid with a punctuality that bore witness to the inexhaustible resources of the Company. Thousands of dollars found their way into their pockets, and accumulated there, and they would be rich, very rich at the expiration of such an engagement. Never had instrumentalists been made so much of, and they could not regret the results, “relatively mediocre,” of their tour across the United States of America.

“Come,” said Frascolin one day to the violoncellist, “have you got over your prejudices against Floating Island?”

“No,” replied Sebastien Zorn.

“And yet,” added Pinchinat, “we shall have a good bag when the campaign is over?”

“To have a good bag is not everything, you must be sdre of carrying the bag away with you.”

“And you are not sure?”

“No.”

What answer could there be to that? And yet there was nothing to fear for the said bag, as the instalments in the form of bills had been sent to America, and paid into the Bank of New York. The best thing to do was to leave the obstinate man alone to his unjustifiable suspicions.

In fact, the future appeared more settled than ever. It seemed as though the rivalry of the two sections had entered on a period of appeasement. Cyrus Bikerstaff and his assistants had reason to congratulate themselves. The superintendent assumed more airs than ever since “the great event of the ball at the town hall.” Yes! Walter Tankerdon had danced with Miss Coverley. Were people to conclude that the estrangement between the families had become easier? It was certain that Jean Tankerdon and his friends no longer spoke of making Floating Island an industrial and commercial island. In the best society the incident at the ball was much spoken of. A few perspicacious persons saw in it a reconciliation, perhaps a union which might put an end to dissensions private and public.

And if these previsions were realized, a young man and a young woman assuredly worthy of one another would accomplish their dearest wish we have every reason to believe.

There was no doubt that Walter Tankerdon had not remained insensible to the charms of Miss Coverley. He had been so for a year already. Under the circumstances he had confided the secret of his feelings to no one. Miss Coverley had guessed it, she had understood him, and had been pleased at his discretion. Perhaps she had clearly read her own heart — and was this heart ready to respond to Walter’s? She had let no sign of it appear. She was as distant as her dignity and the estrangement between the families demanded.

But an observer might have remarked that Walter and Miss Coverley never took part in the discussions which occasionally arose in the mansion in the Fifteenth Avenue or in that in the Nineteenth. When the intractable Jean Tankerdon abandoned himself to some fulminating diatribe against the Coverleys, his son would bow his head, remain silent, and retreat. When Nat Coverley stormed against the Tankerdons his daughter lowered her eyes, her pretty face turned pale, and she tried to turn the conversation, without succeeding, it is true. That these two personages saw nothing is the common lot of fathers over whose eyes Nature has put a bandage. But —

at least Calistus Munbar affirmed it — neither Mrs. Coverley nor Mrs. Tankerdon were in a similar state of blindness. The mothers had not eyes to see nothing, and this state of mind in their children was a subject of constant apprehension, as the only remedy possible was inapplicable. They felt that in face of the enmity between the rivals, in face of their self-esteem, constantly injured by questions of precedence, any reconciliation, any union was inadmissible. And yet Walter and Di loved one another. Their mothers had found that out.

More than once the young man had been asked to make his choice among the marriageable girls of the Larboard section. There were many charming ones amongst them, perfectly educated, with fortunes almost equal to his own, and whose families would have been delighted at such a union. His father had spoken to him pretty plainly on the subject, and so had his mother, though not so press- ingly. Walter had always refused, giving as a reason that he had no desire to be married. But the old Chicago merchant would not listen to this — when you can get hundreds of millions as a wedding present you ought not to remain unmarried. If his son could not find a girl to his taste on Floating Island — among his own circle — well, let him travel through America or through Europe. With his name, his fortune, to say nothing of his appearance, he would have only too many to choose from — would he like a princess of the imperial or royal blood? Thus said John Tankerdon. Each time his father brought him to the foot of the wall, Walter declined to clear it, to go in search of a wife abroad. And once when his mother said to him, —

“My dear child, is there any girl here that you like?”

“Yes, mother,” he replied.

And as Mrs. Tankerdon did not ask which girl, her son did not think it necessary to tell her.

A similar state of affairs existed in the Coverley family. That the old New Orleans banker wished to marry his daughter to one of the young fellows visiting the house, where the receptions were very fashionable, could not be doubted. If none of them were agreeable to her, well, her father and mother would willingly have consented to her marriage with a foreigner. They would visit France, Italy, England. Miss Coverley's answer was that she did not wish to leave Milliard City. She was very well on Floating Island; she only asked to be left there. Mr. Coverley was very uneasy at this reply, the real motive of which escaped him.

Besides, Mrs. Coverley had not put the question to her daughter as bluntly as Mrs. Tankerdon had to Walter, as need scarcely be said, and it is presumable that Miss Coverley would hardly have dared to reply with the same frankness — even to her mother.

This was how matters stood. Although neither of them could doubt the state of their feelings, and they had often exchanged looks, they had never said a word to each other. If they had met, it was only at official entertainments, at the receptions of Cyrus Bikerstaff, at some ceremony at which the Milliardite notables felt it necessary to be present, if only to maintain their position. Under these circumstances Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley maintained complete reserve, being so placed that any imprudence might have the most unfortunate consequences.

Judge then of the effect produced by the extraordinary incident at the Governor's ball, an incident in which many endeavoured to see a scandal, and of which the whole town was talking next day. The superintendent had asked Miss Coverley to dance with him: he was not there at the opening of the quadrille; that artful Munbar! Walter Tankerdon, had offered himself in his place, and the lady had accepted him as her partner. That explanation would be asked for regarding this fact, of such importance to the fashionable world of Milliard City, was probable, even certain. Mr. Tankerdon would question his son; Mr. Coverley would question his daughter on the subject. What would Miss Coverley say? What would Walter say? Had Mrs. Coverby and Mrs. Tankerdon interfered, and what had been the result? With all his ferret-like perspicacity, all his diplomatic acuteness, Calistus Munbar could not discover. When Frascolin asked him about it, he was content to reply with a wink of his right eye, which was worth nothing, for he knew absolutely nothing. The interesting thing to notice was that, since this memorable day, whenever Walter met Mrs. Coverley and Miss Coverley, he bowed respectfully, and the girl and her mother returned his salute.

According to the superintendent this was “an immense step in advance.”

In the morning of the 25th of November an event happened which had nothing to do with the position of the two preponderating families of Floating Island.

At daybreak the look-out at the observatory reported several large vessels steering south-west. These ships were in line, keeping their distances. Evidently they formed a division of one of the Pacific squadrons.

Commodore Simcoe telegraphically informed the governor, who gave orders for salutes to be exchanged with the ships of war.

Frascolin, Yvernès, and Pinchinat went to the observatory tower, in the hope of seeing this exchange of international courtesy.

The glasses were directed at these ships, to the number of four, which were from five to six miles distant. There was no flag at their peaks, and the Frenchmen could not recognize their nationality.

“Nothing indicates to what navy they belong?” said Frascolin to the officer.

“Nothing,” he replied; “but from their appearance they are evidently British. Besides, in these parts we hardly ever meet with any men-of-war that are not either English, French, or American.”

The ships were approaching at very moderate speed, and if they did not change their course they would pass very close to Floating Island.

A good many sight-seers went out to the Prow Battery to watch the approach of the ships.

An hour later the vessels were within two miles of them. From their large funnels the smoke poured forth, which the westerly breeze bore to the furthest limits of the horizon.

When they were within a mile and a half, the officer was able to announce that they formed the British West Pacific division — Great Britain possessing or having under its protection certain archipelagoes in these parts, such as Tonga, Samoa, and Cook’s Islands.

In the morning of the 29th of November the look-outs caught sight of the first heights of Cook’s Archipelago, situated in 20 deg. south latitude and 160 deg. west longitude. Known as the Mangaia Islands and the Hervey Islands, and then named after Cook, who landed here in 1770, it is composed of the Islands of Mangaia, Rarotonga, Watson, Mittri, Hervey, Palmerston, Hagemeister, &c. Its population, of Maori origin, decreased from twenty thousand to twelve thousand, is formed of Malay Polynesians, whom the European missionaries have converted to Christianity. The islanders, pertinacious as to their independence, have always resisted foreign invasion. They believe they are still their own masters, although they have gradually submitted to the protecting influence — we know what that means — of the British.

The first island of the group to be met with was Mangaia, the most important and the most peopled — in fact the capital of the archipelago. The plan of campaign allowed of a stay here of a fortnight.

Was it then in this archipelago that Pinchinat was to make the acquaintance of veritable savages — savages like those of Robinson Crusoe, whom he had vainly sought in the Marquesas, in the Society Islands, and at Nuka Hiva? Was his Parisian curiosity about to be satisfied? Would he see absolutely authentic cannibals?

“My dear Zorn,” said he one day to his comrade, “il there are not cannibals here, there are none anywhere else!”

“I might say what does that matter to me? But let me ask why nowhere else?”

“Because an island which is called Mangaia could only be peopled by cannibals.”

And Pinchinat had only just time to evade the punch that his miserable attempt at a pun deserved.

But whether there were cannibals or not at Mangaia, his Highness was not to have the chance of entering into communication with them.

In fact, when Floating Island had arrived within a mile of Mangaia, a canoe put out and came alongside the pier at Starboard Harbour. It bore the minister, a German, who, more than the Mangaian chiefs, exercises his provoking tyranny over the archipelago. In this island — measuring thirty miles in circumference, peopled by four thousand inhabitants — which is carefully cultivated, rich in plantations of taros, in fields of arrowroot and yams, it was this gentleman who owned the best lands. His was the most comfortable house in Ouchora, the capital of the island, at the foot of a hill crowded with breadfruit trees, cocoanut trees, mango- trees, bourras, pimentos, to say nothing of a flower-garden, in which coleas, gardenias, and paeonies were in full bloom. His power was due to the mutois, those native policemen before whom their Mangaian Majesties have to bow.

When this fat little man landed, the officer of the port went to meet him, and salutes were exchanged.

“In the name of the King and Queen of Mangaia,” said the minister, “I present the compliments of their Majesties to his Excellency the Governor of Floating Island.”

“I am under orders to accept them, and to thank you,” replied the officer, “until our Governor goes in person to present his respects.”

“His Excellency will be welcome,” said the minister. “The sanitary state of Floating Island leaves nothing to be desired, I suppose?”

“Never has it been better.”

“There might, however, be a few slight epidemics, influenza, typhus, smallpox — ”

“Not even a cold, sir. Will you then give us a clean bill, and as soon as we are at our moorings we can enter into communication in all due form.”

“That,” said the minister, not without a certain hesitation, “can only be done if the epidemic — ”

“I tell you there is no trace of one.”

“Then the inhabitants of Floating Island intend to land.”

“Yes, as they have recently done in the other groups to the eastward.”

“Very well, very well,” replied the stout little man. “Be sure they will be heartily welcome, from the moment that no epidemic — ”

“None, I tell you.”

“Let them land then in large numbers. The inhabitants will do their utmost to make them welcome, for the Mangaians are hospitable. Only — ”

“Only?”

“Their Majesties, in accordance with the advice of the chiefs, have decided that at Mangaia, as at the other islands of the archipelago, strangers must pay a landing tax.”

“A tax?”

“Yes, two piastres. It is very little, you see; two piastres for every person landing on the island.”

It was very evident that the minister was the author of this proposal, which the king and queen and council of chiefs had readily adopted, and of which a fair share was reserved for his Excellency. As in the groups of the Eastern Pacific there had never been such a tax heard of before, the officer of the port could not help expressing his surprise.

“Are you in earnest?” asked he.

“Quite in earnest,” affirmed the minister, “and in default of payment we shall not let anybody — ”

“All right!” replied the officer.

Then bowing to his Excellency, he stepped into the telegraphic office, and reported the matter to the Commodore. Ethel Simcoe put himself in communication with the Governor. Was it advisable for Floating Island to stop off Mangaia under the circumstances?

The reply was not long in coming. After conferring with his assistants, Cyrus Bikerstaff refused to submit to this vexatious tax. Floating Island would not stop at Mangaia, nor at any island of the archipelago. The greedy minister would get nothing by his proposition, and the Milliardites would, in the neighbouring archipelagoes, visit natives less rapacious and less exacting.

Orders were sent to the engineers to give the rein to their million horses, and that is why Pinchinat was deprived of the pleasure of shaking hands with cannibals — if there were any. But they do not eat each other now in Cook’s Islands — which is perhaps regrettable.

Floating Island crossed the wide arm which projects up to the group of four islands, the line of which lies northward. A number of canoes were seen, some fairly well built and rigged, others merely dug out of the trunk of a tree, but manned with hardy fishermen who venture in pursuit of the whales so numerous in these seas.

These islands are very verdant, very fertile. When off Mangaia, there could be seen its rocky coasts, bordered by a bracelet of coral, its houses of dazzling whiteness, rough cast with quicklime made from the coral reefs, its hills clothed with the sombre verdure of tropical vegetation, their altitude not exceeding two hundred metres.

Next morning Commodore Simcoe sighted the wooded heights of Rarotonga. Near the centre rises a volcano, fifteen hundred metres high, whose summit emerges from a crown of brushwood. Among the foliage is a white building with Gothic windows. This is the Protestant temple, built amid large forests of mape trees, which descend to the shore. The trees — of great height, and much branched and with curious trunks — are crooked and gnarled, like the old apple-trees of Normandy or the old olive-trees of Provence.

Cyrus Bikerstaflf did not think it convenient to land at this island, and he was supported by the council of notables, who were accustomed to be received like kings on their travels.

At the end of the day no more of the island could be seen than the peak of the volcano, rising like a pillar on the horizon. Myriads of sea birds landed without permission and flew over Floating Island, but when night came they flew off to regain the islets incessantly lashed by the surges to the north of the archipelago.

Then a meeting was held, presided over by the Governor, in which it was proposed to modify the route of Floating Island. Continuing to the westward along the twentieth parallel, as had been decided, they would pass the Tonga Islands and the Fijis. But what had happened at Cook's Islands was not very encouraging. Would it not be better to make for New Caledonia and the Loyalty Archipelago, where the Pearl of the Pacific would be received with French urbanity? Then after the December solstice they could return towards the Equator. It is true this would take them away from the New Hebrides, where they had promised to land the shipwrecked crew of the ketch.

During this deliberation as to a new route, the Malays were evidently a prey to very intelligible anxiety, for if the change were adopted their return home would be difficult. Captain Sarol could not conceal his disappointment, or even his anger, and anyone who had heard him speaking to his men would probably have thought his irritation rather suspicious.

"You see," he said, "they will drop us at the Loyalties or at New Caledonia. And our friends are expecting us at Erromango. Our plans were so well arranged for the New Hebrides! Is this stroke of fortune to escape us?"

Fortunately for the Malays — unfortunately for Floating Island — the proposal for changing the route was not carried. The campaign would be proceeded with according to the programme arranged at the departure from Madeleine Bay. Only, so as to make up for the fortnight which was to have been spent at Cook's Islands, it was decided to go to Samoa, steering north-west so as to touch at the Tonga Islands.

When this decision was known the Malays could not hide their satisfaction.

After all, what could be more natural, and had they not reason to be glad that the council of notables had not renounced its plan of putting them ashore at the New Hebrides?

CHAPTER II.

IF the horizon of Floating Island seemed to be clearer in one respect, inasmuch as relations were much less acute between the Larboardites and Starboardites owing to the feelings mutually experienced by Walter Tankerdon and Di Coverley, so that the governor and superintendent believed that the future would not be complicated by intestine quarrels, the Pearl of the Pacific was none the less in danger of its existence. It was difficult to see how it could escape a catastrophe which had been so long in preparation. The farther it went towards the west the nearer it became to the regions where its destruction was certain. And the author of this criminal machination was no other than Captain Sarol.

In fact it was not by mere accident that the Malays had come to the Sandwich Islands. The ketch had put in at Honolulu with the intention of waiting for Floating Island at its annual visit. To follow it after its departure, to cruise in its waters without exciting suspicion, to be received as a shipwrecked crew, as they could not obtain admittance as passengers, and then, under pretext of being returned to their own country, to direct it towards the New Hebrides, had been Captain Sarol’s plan all through.

We know how this plan in its first developments had been put into execution. The collision between the ketch and the other vessel was imaginary. No ship had run into them in the vicinity of the Equator. It was the Malays who had scuttled their ship, but in such a way that they could keep it afloat until the arrival of the assistance demanded by the signal of distress, and then sink when the launch from Starboard Harbour had taken off the crew. In this manner no suspicion could exist with regard to the collision, and no one could doubt they were a shipwrecked crew when their ship was seen to sink, so that a shelter could not well be denied them.

It is true that the governor might not care to keep them. Perhaps there were regulations forbidding strangers to reside on the island? Perhaps it might be decided to land them on the nearest archipelago? That was a risk to run, and Captain Sarol ran it. But after the favourable opinion of the company it was resolved to keep the shipwrecked crew on the island, and take them within sight of the New Hebrides.

Such had been the course of events. For four months Captain Sarol and his ten Malays had been living at liberty on Floating Island. They had been exploring it throughout and penetrating all its secrets, and had neglected nothing in this respect. That suited them exactly. Fora moment they had reason to fear that the itinerary would be modified by the council of notables, and they had been anxious to such an extent that their anxiety might seem suspicious. Fortunately for their plans, the itinerary had not been altered. In another three months Floating Island would arrive among the New Hebrides, and then would take place a catastrophe unequalled among disasters of the sea.

This archipelago of the New Hebrides is dangerous to navigation, not only by reason of the reefs which are scattered about it, and the rapidity of the currents, but also on account of the native ferocity of a part of its population. Since the epoch when it had been discovered by Quiros in 1706, since it had been explored by Bougainville in 1768, and by Cook in 1773, it had been the theatre of horrible massacres, and its evil reputation was enough to justify the fears of Sebastien Zorn regarding the result of this maritime campaign. Kanakas, Papuans, Malays, are there mingled with Australian blaoks — perfidious, dastardly, refractory to every attempt at civilization. A few of the islands of the group are regular nests of rascals, and their inhabitants only live by piracies.

Captain Sarol, a Malay by birth, belonged to this class of pirates, whalers, sandalwood traders, slave dealers, who, as has been noticed by Doctor Hagon in his voyage in the New Hebrides, infest these regions. Audacious, enterprising, well acquainted with these archipelagoes of ill- repute, thoroughly master of his trade, having more than once been in command of bloodthirsty expeditions, this Sarol was no novice, and his deeds had made him notorious in this part of the Western Pacific.

A few months before, Captain Sarol and his companions having for their accomplices the murderous population of the Island of Erromango, one of the New Hebrides, had prepared an attempt which, if it succeeded, would enable them to live as respectable people wherever they pleased. They knew the reputation of this Floating Island, which the year before had voyaged in the tropics. They knew what incalculable riches were to be found in this opulent Milliard City. But as it was not likely to venture so far to the west, it was necessary to allure it within sight of this savage Erromango, where everything was prepared for assuring its complete destruction.

On the other hand, although they would be reinforced by the natives of the neighbouring islands, these New Hebrideans had no intention of attacking Floating Island when in the open sea as if it were an ordinary merchant vessel, nor of boarding it from a fleet of canoes. Thanks to the sentiments of humanity the Malays had been able to take advantage of, without awaking suspicion, Floating Island would arrive in the neighbourhood of Erromango. She would anchor a short distance from the island. Thousands of natives would invade her by surprise. They would throw her on the rocks. They would smash her. They would hand her over to pillage, to massacre. In truth this horrible plot had many chances of success. In return for the hospitality accorded to Captain Sarol and his accomplices, the Milliardites were advancing to a supreme catastrophe.

On the 9th of December, Commodore Simcoe reached the hundred and seventy-first meridian, at its intersection with the fifteenth parallel. Between this meridian and the hundred and seventy-fifth lies the group of Samoa, visited by Bougainville in 1768, by La Perouse in 1787, by Edwards in 1791. Rose Island was first sighted in the north-west — an inhabited island which did not even deserve the honour of a visit.

Two days afterwards the island of Manona was sighted, flanked by the two islets of Olosaga and Ofou. Its highest point rises seven hundred and sixty mètres above sea level. Although it contains about two thousand inhabitants, it is not the most interesting island of the archipelago, and the governor gave no order to stop at it. It was better to stay a fortnight at the islands of Tetuila, Upolu, Savai, the most beautiful of the group. Manona rejoices in a certain celebrity in maritime annals. It was on its shores at Ma Oma that many of Cook's companions perished, at the head of a bay which still retains its well justified name of Massacre Bay.

Twenty leagues separate Manona from Tetuila, its neighbour. Floating Island approached it during the night of the 14th of December. That evening the quartette, who were walking in the vicinity of Prow Battery, had "smelt" Tetuila, although it was still several miles away. The air was laden with the most delicious perfumes.

"It is not an island," said Pinchinat, "it is Piver's shop, it is Lubin's manufactory, it is a fashionable perfumer's warehouse."

"If your Highness does not object," observed Yvernès, "I prefer to compare it to a casket of perfumes."

“Well, a scent-box, then,” replied Pinchinat, who had no wish to oppose the poetic flights of his comrade.

And in truth it seemed as though a current of perfumes were being borne by the breeze over the surface of these wonderful waters. These were the emanations of that scented tree to which the Kanakas of Samoa have given the name of moussooi.

At sunrise, Floating Island was coasting along Tetuila, at about six cables’ length from its northern shore. It looked like a basket of verdure, or rather tier upon tier of forests, rising to the summits, of which the highest exceeds seventeen hundred metres. A few islets lay in front of it, among others that of Amru. Hundreds of elegant canoes manned by powerful, half naked natives, working their paddles to a Samoan song in two-four time, were acting as an escort. From fifty to sixty men were in some of them. This is no exaggeration for these long vessels, which are strongly enough built to go far out to sea. Our Parisians then understood why the early Europeans had given this archipelago the name of Navigators’ Islands. But its true geographical name is Hamoa, or preferably Samoa.

Savai, Upolu, Tetuila, stretching from north-west to south-east; Olosaga, Ofou, Manona, scattered to the southeast, such are the principal islands of this group of volcanic origin. Its total area is about two thousand eight hundred square kilomètres, and it has a population of thirty-five thousand six hundred inhabitants. It is necessary therefore to reduce the estimates of the first explorers by one half.

Be it observed that none of these islands could offer such favourable climatic conditions as Floating Island. The temperature ranges between twenty-six and thirty-four degrees centigrade. July and August are the coldest months, and the highest temperature occurs in February. From December to April the Samoans are deluged with abundant rains, and this is also the period when occur the storms and hurricanes so fruitful of disasters.

The trade, which is chiefly in the hands of the English, and in a minor degree of the Americans and Germans, amounts to about eighteen hundred thousand francs of imports and nine hundred thousand francs for exports. It consistsmainly of agricultural products, cotton — the cultivation of which increased every year — and coprah, that is, the dried kernel of the cocoanut.

The population, which is of Malayo-Polynesian origin, contains about three hundred whites and a few thousand labourers from different islands of Melanesia. Since 1830 the missionaries have converted the Samoans to Christianity, but they retain a few of the practices of their ancient religious rites. The great majority of the natives are Protestants, owing to the influence of Germany and England. Nevertheless Catholicism has a few thousand converts, which the Mariste Fathers are doing their best to increase in number with a view of opposing Anglo-Saxon proselytism.

Floating Island stopped at the south of Tetuila, at the opening of Pago — Pago roadstead. This is the real port of the island, whose capital is Leone, situated in the central portion. This time there was no difficulty between Cyrus Bikerstaff and the Samoan authorities. Free pratique was accorded. It is not at Tetuila but at Upolu that the sovereign of the archipelago resides, and where the English, American, and German residencies are established. There were no official receptions. A certain number of Samoans took advantage of the opportunity of visiting Milliard City and its environs, while the Mil- liardites were assured that the population of the group would give them a cordial welcome.

The port is at the head of the bay. The shelter it offers against the winds from the offing is excellent and its access easy. Ships of war often put in there.

Among the first to land we need not be astonished at meeting Sebastien Zorn and his three comrades, accompanied by the superintendent, who had asked to join them. Calistus Munbar was as usual delightful and in high spirits. He had ascertained that an excursion to Leone in carriages drawn by New Zealand horses had been arranged among three or four families of notables. As the Coverleys and Tankerdons were going, perhaps there might be a meeting between Walter and Di, which would anything but displease him.

During the walk with the quartette he began talking about this great event in his usual grandiose way.

“My friends,” he said, “we are in a regular comic opera. With a lucky accident we shall arrive at the end of the piece. A horse runs away — a carriage upsets — ”

“An attack of brigands!” said Yvernès.

“A general massacre of the excursionists!” added Pinchinat.

“And that might happen!” growled the violoncellist in a funereal voice, as if he were down in the depths of his fourth string.

“No, my friends, no!” said Calistus Munbar. “Don’t let us go as far as a massacre! We need not go to that. Let us have a nice sort of accident, in which Walter Tankerdon will be lucky enough to save the life of Miss Coverley.”

“And then a little music from Boieldieu or Auber!” said Pinchinat, working his hand as if he were turning the handle of a barrel-organ.

“And so,” said Frascolin, “you are still thinking of this marriage?”

“Think of it, my dear Frascolin! I dream of it night and day! I am losing my good humour, though I do not look like it! I am getting thinner, though you would not think so! I shall die if it does not take place.”

“It will,” said Yvernès, in a voice of prophetic sonority, “for God does not at present require the death of your Excellency.”

And they entered a native inn, and drank to the health of the future couple in several glasses of cocoa milk, while they ate some luscious bananas.

Quite a joy to the eyes of the Parisians was this Samoan population in the streets of Pago-Pago, and amid the trees which surrounded the harbour. The men are of a stature above the average, their colour of a yellowish brown, their heads round, their bodies powerful, their limbs mus- cular, their faces gentle and jovial. Perhaps there was too much tattooing on their arms and bodies and even on their thighs, which were imperfectly hidden under a petticoat of grass and leaves. Their hair was black, straight or waved, according to the taste of native dandyism. But under the coating of white lime with which it was plastered it formed a wig.

“Savages in the style of Louis XV!” said Pinchinat. “They only want the cloak, the sword, the breeches, the stockings, the red-heeled shoes, the plumed hat, and the snuff-box, to figure at the receptions at Versailles.”

The Samoans, women or girls, are as rudimentarily clothed as the men, tattooed on the hands and breast, their heads garlanded with gardenias, their necks ornamented with collars of red hibiscus, fully justifying the admiration with which they were described by the early navigators — at least, such as were young. But they were distant, and of rather affected prudery. Graceful and smiling, they enchanted the quartette, wishing them the *kalofa*, that is, the good morning, in a sweet and melodious voice.

An excursion, or rather a pilgrimage, which our tourists had wished for, and which they performed on the morrow, gave them the opportunity of traversing the island from one shore to the other. One of the country carriages took them to the opposite coast at França Bay, the name of which recalls a remembrance of France. There, on a monument of white coral, raised in 1884, is a plate of bronze bearing in engraved letters the never-to-be-forgotten names of Commandant De Langle, the naturalist Lamanon, and nine sailors, the companions of La Perouse, who were massacred here on the nth of December, 1787.

Sebastien Zorn and his comrades returned to Pago-Pago through the interior of the island. What wonderful masses of trees, interlaced with lianas, cocoanut-trees, wild bananas, and many native species suitable for cabinet-making. Over the country stretched fields of taro, sugar-cane, coffee plantations, cotton plantations, cinnamon-trees. Everywhere orange-trees, guava-trees, mangoes, avocado- trees, and climbing-plants, orchids and arborescent shrubs. A flora astonishingly rich from this fertile soil, fertilized by a humid and warm climate. The Samoan fauna, reduced to a few birds, a few almost inoffensive reptiles, contains among its mammals only a small rat, the sole representative of the rodents.

Four days afterwards, on the 18th of December, Floating Island left Tetuila without any such providential accident as had been desired by the superintendent. But it was evident that the state of affairs between the two families continued to improve.

Hardly a dozen leagues separate Tetuila from Upolu. In the morning of the next day Commodore Simcoe passed in succession, at a distance of a quarter of a mile, the three islets of Nom-tua, Samusu, Salafuta, which defend the island as if they were detached forts. He took Floating Island along with great ability, and in the afternoon reached his moorings in front of Apia.

Upolu is the most important island of the archipelago, with its sixteen thousand inhabitants. Here Germany, America, and England have established their representatives, united in a sort of council for the protection of the interests of their nations. The sovereign of the group reigns amid his court at Malinuu, at the eastern extremity of Apia Point.

The aspect of Upolu is similar to that of Tetuila, a mass of mountains, dominated by the peak of Mount Mission, which constitutes the backbone of the island. These ancient extinct volcanoes are covered with thick forests, which clothe them up to their craters. At the foot of these mountains are plains and fields, joining on to the alluvial strip along the shore, in which the vegetation is in all the luxuriant variety of the tropics.

In the morning, the governor and his assistants and a few notabilities landed at the fort of Apia. Their object was to pay an official visit to the representatives of Germany, England, and the United States of America, this composite municipality in whose hands are concentrated the administrative services of the archipelago.

While Cyrus Bikerstaff and his suite visited the residents, Sebastien Zorn, Frascolin, Yvernès, and Pinchinat, who had landed with them, occupied their leisure by visiting the town.

And at first sight they were struck with the contrast presented by the European houses with the huts of the old Kanaka village, in which the natives obstinately persist in living. These dwellings are comfortable, healthy, charming in a word. Scattered along the banks of the Apia river, their low roofs are sheltered under an elegant sunshade of palm trees. There was no lack of animation in the harbour. This is the most frequented harbour of the group, and the headquarters of the Commercial Company of Hamburg, which owns a fleet employed in the local service between Samoa and the neighbouring islands.

But if the influence of the English, Americans, and Germans preponderates in this archipelago, France is represented by Catholic missionaries, whose devotion and zeal keep them in good repute among the Samoans. Genuine satisfaction, profound emotion even, seized our artists when they perceived the little church of the Mission, which has not the Puritan severity of the Protestant chapels, and a little beyond, on the hill, a school-house, on which the tricolour was flying.

They walked in this direction, and a few minutes afterwards they were being welcomed in the French quarters. The Maristes gave them a patriotic welcome. Three fathers were in residence, employed in the services of the Mission, which includes two others at Savai, and a certain number of sisters stationed in the islands.

What a pleasure it was to converse with the Superior, already advanced in years, who had lived in Samoa for a long time. He was so happy to welcome his fellow- countrymen, and what was more — artistes of his nation. The conversation was varied with refreshing drinks of which the Mission possesses the recipe.

“But first,” said the old man, “do not think, my dear sons, that the islands of our archipelago are in a savage state. It is not here that you will find natives who practise cannibalism.”

“We have not met with any up to the present,” said Frascolin.

“To our great regret,” added Pinchinat.

“Why do you regret?”

“Excuse me, father, that is the confession of a curious Parisian! It is for love of local colour!”

“Oh!” said Sebastien Zorn, “we are not at the end of our campaign yet; and we may see more than we want to of these cannibals mentioned by our comrade.”

“That is possible,” replied the Superior. “Among the approaches to the Western groups, the New Hebrides, the Solomons, navigators can only venture with extreme prudence; but in Tahiti, the Marquesas, the Society Islands, as at Samoa, civilization has made remarkable progress. I know that the massacre of the companions of La Perouse has given the Samoans the reputation of being ferocious aborigines, devoted to the practice of cannibalism; but there has been a great change since then, owing to the influence of the religion of Christ. The natives of these times are looked after by the police, rejoicing in a European Government, with two chambers in the European style — and revolutions.”

“In European style?” observed Yvernès.

“As you say, my dear son, the Samoans are not exempt from political dissensions.”

“We have them on Floating Island,” replied Pinchinat. “We are even expecting to have a dynastic war between two royal families.”

“In fact, my friends, there has been a struggle between King Tupua, who is descended from the ancient sovereigns of the archipelago, and whom we supported with our influence, and King Malietoa, the man of the English and Germans. Much blood was shed, particularly in the great battle of December, 1887. These kings saw themselves successively proclaimed and dethroned, and finally Malietoa was declared sovereign by the three powers, in conformity with the arrangements stipulated by the court of Berlin — Berlin!”

And the old missionary could not restrain a convulsive movement as the name escaped from his lips.

“You see,” said he, “up to now the influence of the Germans has been the dominating one at Samoa. Nine- tenths of the cultivated lands are in their hands. In the environs of Apia, at Suluafata, they have obtained from the Government a very important concession in the proximity of the port, which could serve as a victualling station for their ships of war. Quick-firing guns have been introduced by them. But all that will end some day.”

“To the advantage of France?” asked Frascolin.

“No; to the advantage of the United Kingdom!”

“Oh!” said Yvernès. “England or Germany!”

“No, my dear child,” replied the Superior; “there is a notable difference.”

The conversation ended, after the Superior had given divers details as to the customs of the Samoans. He added that if the majority belonged to the Wesleyan religion, Catholicism seemed to be making more progress every day. The church of the Mission was already too small for their services, and the school required early enlargement. He appeared very happy, and his guests rejoiced with him.

The stay of Floating Island at the island of Upolu lasted three days.

The missionaries came to return the visit they had received. The French artistes took them through Milliard City, and they were struck with wonder. And why should we not say that in the room at the casino the quartette party entertained the Father and his colleagues with a few selections from their repertory? He wept with emotion, did the good old man, for he adored classical music, and to his great regret had never had an opportunity of hearing it at the festivals of Upolu.

The day before the departure, Sebastien Zorn, Frascolin, Pinchinat, Yvernès, accompanied this time by the professor of dancing and deportment, went to bid farewell to the missionaries The parting was most affectionate — the parting of people who had only known each other for a few days, and would never see each other again. The old man gave them his benediction and embraced them, and they retired in deep emotion.

Next day, the 23rd of December, Commodore Simcoe got under way at dawn, and Floating Island moved off amid a procession of canoes, who were to escort it to the neighbouring island of Savai.

This island is separated from Upolu by a strait of some seven or eight leagues. But the port of Apia being situated on the northern shore, it is necessary to coast along this shore all day before reaching the strait.

According to the itinerary arranged by the Governor, it was not intended to make the tour of Savai, but to manœuvre between it and Upolu, so as to run down southwest to the Tonga Archipelago. For this reason Floating Island advanced at very moderate speed, it being undesirable to venture during the night through this strait, which is flanked by the small islands of Apolinia and Manono.

At daybreak Commodore Simcoe manoeuvred between these two islands, of which one, Apolinia, contains only two hundred and fifty inhabitants, and the other, Manono, a thousand. These natives have the reputation of being the bravest and most honest Samoans in the archipelago.

From this place Savai could be admired in all its splendour. It is protected by impregnable cliffs of granite against the attacks of the sea which the hurricanes, tornadoes and cyclones of the winter season make more formidable. Savai is covered with thick forests, dominated by an ancient volcano twelve hundred metres high, dotted with gleaming villages beneath the domes of gigantic palm trees, watered by tumultuous cascades, penetrated by deep caverns, from which escaped the violent echoes of the beating of the waves on the shore.

And, if legend is to be believed, this island is the cradle of the Polynesian races, of which its eleven thousand inhabitants have retained the purest type. Its real name is Savaiki, the famous Eden of the Maori divinities.

Floating Island slowly moved away, and lost sight of its last heights in the evening of the 24th of December.

CHAPTER III.

SINCE the 21st of December, the sun in its apparent movement, after stopping on the tropic of Capricorn, recommenced its course towards the north, abandoning these regions to the inclemencies of winter, and bringing spring again to the northern hemisphere.

Floating Island was not more than a dozen degrees from the tropic. In descending to the islands of Tonga- Tabou, it reached the extreme latitude fixed by the itinerary, and continuing its course to the north, remained in the most favourable climatic conditions. It is true it could not avoid a period of extreme heat while the sun was in the zenith, but this heat would be tempered by the sea breeze, and would diminish as the distance of the sun increased.

Between Samoa and the principal island of Tonga- Tabou there are eight degrees — about nine hundred kilometres. There was no need to increase the speed. Floating Island skimmed over this ever beautiful sea, which the atmosphere hardly troubled with storms, that were as rare as they were short-lived. It was enough to be at Tonga-Tabou in the first days of January, to remain there a week, and then to proceed to Fiji. From there Floating Island would run up to the New Hebrides, and there land the Malay crew; then heading north-east, it would regain the latitude of Madeleine Bay, and its second cruise would be at an end.

Life at Milliard City continued amid unchanging calm. Always this existence, as in one of the large towns of America or Europe — constant communications with the new continent by steamers or telegraphic cables, the usual family visits, the manifest tendency towards reconciliation between the two rival sections, the walks and games, the concerts of the quartette always in favour among the dilettanti.

Christmas, so dear to Protestants and Catholics, was celebrated with great pomp at the temple and at St. Mary’s church, as in the mansions, the hotels, and the houses of the commercial quarter. This solemnity meant a general holiday throughout the island during the week which ended on the ist of January.

In the meantime, the newspapers of Floating Island, the *Starboard Chronicle* and the *New Herald*, did not cease from offering their readers the latest news, home and foreign. An item of news, published simultaneously by both papers, caused a good deal of comment.

In the papers for the 26th of December it was stated that the King of Malecarlie had been to the town hall, where the Governor had given him an audience. What was the object of this visit? Rumours of all sorts flew about the town, and they would doubtless have been based on the most unlikely hypotheses, if the newspapers next day had not contained positive information on this subject.

The King of Malecarlie had asked for a place in the Observatory, and the company had acceded to his request.

“Well,” exclaimed Pinchinat, “you must live in Milliard City to see a thing like that; a sovereign, with a glass at his eye, watching the stars on the horizon.”

“A star of the earth interrogating his brothers in the firmament!” replied Yvernès.

The news was authentic, and this is why His Majesty was under the necessity of asking for the appointment.

He was a good king, this King of Malecarlie, and the princess his wife was a good queen. They had done all the good they could in one of the minor states of Europe, being of enlightened liberal minds, without pretending that their dynasty, although it was one of the most ancient on the old continent, was of divine origin. The king was well informed in scientific matters, a great admirer of art, and passionately fond of music. A learned man and a philosopher, he was in no way blind with regard to the future of European sovereignties, and he was always prepared to leave his kingdom as soon as his people wanted him no more. Having no direct heir, he in no way injured his family when the time came for him to abandon his throne and lay aside his crown.

This time had come three years before. But there had been no revolution in the kingdom of Malecarlie, or at least no blood had been shed. By mutual agreement the contract was broken between his Majesty and his subjects. The king became a man, his subjects became citizens, and he left without more fuss than if he had been a tourist who had taken his ticket at the railway station, leaving his government to be replaced by another.

Vigorous still at sixty years of age, the king rejoiced in a constitution, better perhaps than that which his old kingdom had given itself. But the health of the queen was rather precarious, and required a climate free from sudden changes of temperature. This approach to uniformity of climatic conditions it was difficult to meet with elsewhere than on Floating Island, since it appeared that she was not able to submit to the fatigue of running from latitude to latitude after fine weather. It seemed as though the invention of the Floating Island Company offered these advantages, as the wealthiest men in the United States had made it the town of their adoption.

That is why, as soon as Floating Island had been constructed, the King and Queen of Malecarlie had resolved to take up their abode in Milliard City. Permission to do so had been granted them on condition that they lived as simple citizens, without any distinction or privilege.

There was not much chance of their Majesties wishing to live otherwise. They rented a small house in the Thirty-ninth Avenue, in the Starboard Section, surrounded by a garden which opened on to the large park. There lived the two sovereigns in retirement, mixing in no way with the rivalries and intrigues of the rival sections, and content with their humble existence. The king occupied himself in astronomical studies, for which he had always had a great taste. The queen, a sincere Catholic, lived a semi-cloistral life, having not even the opportunity of devoting herself to charitable works, inasmuch as misery was unknown on the Pearl of the Pacific.

Such is the story of these ancient masters of the kingdom of Malecarlie — a story which the superintendent related to our artistes, adding that this king and this queen were the best people it was possible to meet, although their fortune was relatively very small.

The quartette, greatly affected at this fall from high estate, born with such philosophy and resignation, felt respectful sympathy for the dethroned sovereigns. Instead of taking refuge in France, that country of kings in exile, their Majesties had made choice of Floating Island as wealthy people make choice of Nice or Corfu, for reasons of health. They were not, of course, exiles; they had not been driven from their kingdom; they could live there, they could return there, if they chose to do so, as simple citizens. But they had no thought of doing so, and were content with this peaceful existence, conforming to the laws and regulations of Floating Island.

That the King and Queen of Malecarlie were not rich was true enough, compared with the majority of the Milliardites, and relatively to the wants of life in Milliard City. What could you do with two hundred thousand francs of income, when the rent of a small house was fifty thousand? The ex-sovereigns were not wealthy compared with the emperors and kings of Europe, who do not make much of a figure compared with the Goulds, Vanderbilts, Rothschilds, Astors, Mackays, and other deities of finance. Although they indulged in no luxuries, confining themselves only to necessaries, they were not easy in their circumstances. But the queen’s health was so well suited by this residence in the island, that the king had no thought of leaving it. Thus he wished to increase his income by his work, and a situation becoming vacant at the observatory — a situation of which the salary was very high — he had applied for it to the Governor. Cyrus Bickerstaff, after consulting the general administration at Madeleine Bay, had granted the appointment to the sovereign, and that is why the newspapers had announced that the King of Malecarlie had been appointed astronomer of Floating Island.

What a subject for conversation in other countries! There they talked about it for a couple of days and thought no more of it. It appeared quite natural that a king should seek in work the possibility of continuing this tranquil existence at Milliard City. He was a scientific man; they would profit by his science. There was nothing in that but what was honourable. If he discovered some new star, planet, or comet, they would give it his name, which would figure with honour among the mythological names with which the official annuals swarm.

As they were walking in the park, Sebastien Zorn, Pinchinat, Yvernès, and Frascolin were talking about this event. In the morning they had seen the king going to his office, and they were not yet sufficiently Americanized to accept the situation as an every-day occurrence. Then they chatted about this matter, and Frascolin observed: “It seems that if his Majesty had not been capable of doing the work of an astronomer, he would have had to give lessons like a professor of music.”

“A king going out teaching!” exclaimed Pinchinat.

“Certainly, and at the price his rich pupils would pay him for his lessons — ”

“They say he is a very good musician,” observed Yvernès.

“I am not surprised at his being enthusiastic over music,” added Sebastien Zorn; “for we have seen him at the door of the casino, during our concerts, owing to his not being able to afford a stall for the queen and himself.”

“Well, fiddlers, I have an idea!” said Pinchinat.

“An idea of his Highness’s,” replied the violoncellist, “is sure to be a queer one.”

“Queer or not, old Sebastien,” said Pinchinat, “I am sure you will approve of it.”

“Let us hear this idea,” said Frascolin.

“To give a concert at their Majesties’, to them alone in their drawing-room, and to play the best pieces in our repertory.”

“Well,” said Sebastien Zorn, “your idea is not a bad one.

“Confound it, I have many like that in my head, and when I shake it — ”

“It sounds like a rattle!” said Yvernès.

“My dear Pinchinat,” said Frascolin, “let us be content to-day with your proposal. I am certain it would be a great pleasure to this good king and this good queen.”

“To-morrow, we will write and ask for an audience,” said Sebastien Zorn.

“Better than that!” said Pinchinat. “This very evening let us call at the royal habitation with our instruments, like a band of musicians come to give them a morning greeting — ”

“You mean a serenade,” said Yvernès, “for it will be at night.”

“Be it so, first violin, severe but just! Do not let us juggle with words! Is it agreed?”

“Agreed.”

It was really an excellent idea. The king would no doubt appreciate this delicate attention, and be happy to hear the French artistes.

When the day closed in, the Quartette Party, laden with their violin cases and the violoncello box, left the casino in the direction of Thirty-ninth Avenue, situated at the extremity of the Starboard Section.

It was a very quiet house, having a small court in front with a verdant lawn. On one side were the domestic offices, on the other the stables, which were not used. The house consisted of a ground floor entered from a flight of steps, and a story surmounted by a mezzanine window and a mansard roof. On the right and left two magnificent nettle trees shaded the double footpath which led to the garden. Beneath the trees in the garden, which did not measure two hundred superficial metres, extended a lawn. There was no comparison between this cottage and the mansions of the Coverleys, Tankerdons, and other notables of Milliard City. It was the retreat of a sage who lived in retirement, of a learned man, a philosopher. Abdolonymus would have been satisfied with it when he left the throne of the kings of Sidon.

The king of Malecarlie had for his only chamberlain a valet, and the queen for a maid of honour had but her lady's maid. Add to this an American cook, and you have all the household of the deposed sovereigns, who once on a time were brother to brother with the emperors of the old continent.

Frascolin touched an electric bell. The valet opened the gate.

Frascolin expressed the wish of himself and comrades to present their respects to his Majesty, and begged the favour of being admitted.

The servant asked them to enter, and they stopped before the flight of steps.

Almost immediately the valet returned to inform them that the king would receive them with pleasure. They were introduced into the vestibule, where they put down their instruments, then into the drawing-room, where their Majesties entered at the same instant. That was all the ceremonial of this reception.

The artistes bowed respectfully before the king and queen. The queen, very simply dressed in dark coloured stuff, wore no headdress, but her abundant hair whose grey locks gave a charm to her rather pale face and somewhat weary look. She sat in an arm-chair near the window which opened on to the garden, beyond which were the trees of the park.

The king, standing, replied to the greeting of the visitors, and asked them to say what motive had brought them to this house, which was away on the outskirts of Milliard City.

The quartette felt somewhat affected as they looked at this sovereign whose appearance was one of inexpressible dignity. His look was keen under his almost black eyebrows — the profound look of a scientific man. His white beard fell large and silky on his chest. His face, of which a charming smile tempered the rather serious expression, could but arouse the sympathy of those who approached him.

Frascolin acted as spokesman, his voice trembling slightly.

“We thank your Majesty,” said he, “for having deigned to welcome artistes who desire to offer you their respectful homage.”

“The queen and I thank you, gentlemen, and we are sensible of your compliment. To this island, where we hope to end so troubled an existence, it seems as though you had brought a little of the fine air of your France. Gentlemen, you are not unknown to a man who, though busy with science, is passionately fond of music, that art in which you have acquired such good reputation in the artistic world. We know the successes you have obtained in Europe, in America. In the applause which welcomed the Quartette Party to Floating Island we have taken part — at a distance, it is true. And we have had one regret, that at not having yet heard you as you deserve to be heard.”

The king gave a sign for his guests to sit down, while he stood before the mantelpiece, the marble of which supported a magnificent bust of the queen, when young, by Franquetti.

To come to business, Frascolin had only to reply to the last sentence uttered by the king.

“Your Majesty is right,” said he, “and the regret expressed is fully justified as concerning that branch of music of which we are the interpreters. Chamber music demands more privacy than is obtainable with a numerous audience. It requires a little of the meditation of the sanctuary.”

“Yes, gentlemen,” said the queen, “this music should be heard as one would hear a strain of celestial harmony, and it is really in a sanctuary that it should — ”

“Will, then, your Majesties,” said Yvernès, “allow us to transform this room into a sanctuary for an hour, and be heard by your Majesties alone — ”

Yvernès had not finished these words when the faces of the two sovereigns brightened.

“Gentlemen,” said the king, “you wish — you had thought of this?”

“That is the object of our visit.”

“Ah!” said the king, extending his hand to them. “I therein recognize French musicians in whom the heart equals the talent. I thank you in the name of the queen and myself! Nothing — no! nothing could give us greater pleasure.”

And while the valet received orders to bring in the instruments and arrange the room for the improvised concert, the king and queen invited their guests to follow them into the garden. There they talked of music as artistes might in the completest intimacy.

The king abandoned himself to his enthusiasm for this art, like a man who felt all its charm, and understood all its beauties. He showed, to the astonishment of his auditors, how well he knew the masters he was to listen to in a few minutes. He talked of the ingenuous and ingenious genius of Haydn. He recalled what a critic had said of Mendelssohn, that unequalled composer of chamber music, who expressed his ideas in the language of Beethoven. Weber, what exquisite sensibility, what a chivalrous spirit, which made him a master different from all the others! Beethoven, that prince of instrumental music... His soul was revealed in his symphonies. The works of his genius yielded neither in grandeur nor in value to the masterpieces of poetry, painting, sculpture, or architecture — that sublime star which finally set in the choir symphony in which the voices of the instruments mingle so closely with human voices.

“And yet he was never able to dance in time.”

As may be imagined, it was from Pinchinat that this most inopportune remark emanated.

“Yes,” replied the king, smiling, “that shows that the ear is not necessarily an indispensable organ to the musician. It is with the heart, and that alone, that he hears. And has not Beethoven proved that in the incomparable symphony I mentioned, composed when his deafness did not allow him to hear a sound?”

After Haydn, Weber, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, it was of Mozart that his Majesty spoke with enthusiastic eloquence.

“Ah, gentlemen,” he said, “let me give vent to my raptures. It is such a time since I have had an opportunity of saying what I think! Were you not the first artistes I have been able to understand since my arrival at Floating Island? Mozart! Mozart! One of your dramatic composers, the greatest, in my opinion, of the end of the nineteenth century, has devoted some admirable pages to him! I have read them, and nothing will ever efface them from my memory! He tells us with what facility Mozart gave to each word its special emphasis and intonation without affecting the rhythm and character of the musical phrase. He says that to pathetic truthfulness he added the perfection of physical beauty. Was not Mozart the only one who divined with certainty as unfailing, as complete, the musical form of all the sentiments of all the shades of passion and character; that is all that forms the human drama? Mozart was not a king — what is a king nowadays?” added his Majesty, shaking his head; “I say he was a god, if they will still permit the existence of a god. He was the God of Music!”

We cannot describe, for it was indescribable, the ardour with which his Majesty manifested his admiration; and when he and the queen had entered the room, the artistes following him, he took up a pamphlet that lay on the table. This pamphlet, which seemed to have been read and re-read, bore the title, “Mozart’s Don Juan.” Then he opened it and read these few lines from the pen of the master who most understood and best loved Mozart, the illustrious Gounod: “O Mozart! Divine Mozart! It is little you require to be understood to be adored. Thine is constant truthfulness! Thine is perfect beauty! Thine is inexhaustible charm! Thou art always profound and always clear! Thine are complete humanity and the simplicity of the child! Thou hast felt everything and expressed everything in musical phrase, which has never been surpassed, and never will be surpassed!”

Then Sebastien Zorn and his comrades took their instruments, and in the light of the electric lamp, which shed a gentle radiance through the room, they played the first of the pieces they had chosen for this concert.

It was the second quartette in A minor, op. 13 of Mendelssohn, in which the royal audience took infinite pleasure.

To this quartette succeeded the third in C major, op. 75 of Haydn, that is to say, the Austrian Hymn, executed with incomparable mastery. Never had executants been nearer perfection than in the intimacy of this sanctuary where our artistes had no one to hear them but two deposed sovereigns.

And when they had finished the hymn enriched by the genius of the composer, they played the sixth quartette in B flat op. 18 of Beethoven, the *Malinconia*, of character so sad, and power so penetrating, that the eyes of their Majesties were wet with tears.

Then came the admirable fugue in C minor of Mozart, so perfect, so free from all scholastic research, so natural, that it seemed to flow like limpid water, or pass like the breeze through the leaves. Finally, it was one of the most admirable quartettes of the divine composer, the tenth in D major, op. 35, which ended this never-to-be- forgotten evening, of which the nabobs of Milliard City had never had the equal.

And it was not that the Frenchmen were tired of playing these admirable works, or that the king and queen were tired of listening to them; but it was eleven o’clock, and his Majesty said, —

“We thank you, gentlemen, and our thanks come from the depths of our hearts. Thanks to the perfection of your execution, we have enjoyed artistic delights which nothing will make us forget! It has done us so much good.”

“If the king desires it,” said Yvernès, “we could still — ”

“Thank you, gentlemen, for the last time, thanks. We will not abuse your kindness. It is late, and then — tonight — I am on duty — ”

This expression, in the mouth of the king, recalled our artistes to the realities. Before the sovereign who thus spoke they felt somewhat confused — they lowered their eyes.

“Yes, gentlemen,” continued the king, playfully, “am I not the astronomer of the observatory of Floating Island, and,” added he, with some emotion, “inspector o1 stars — of falling stars?”

CHAPTER IV.

DURING the last week of the year, devoted to Christmas joys, numerous invitations were given for dinners, parties, and official receptions; a banquet given by the Governor to the principal personages of Milliard City, attended by the Starboard and Larboard notables, testified to a certain fusion between the two sections of the town. The Tan- kerdons and the Coverleys found themselves at the same table. On New Year's Day there was an exchange of cards between the mansion in the Nineteenth Avenue and that in the Fifteenth. Walter Tankerdon even received an invitation for one of Mrs. Coverley's concerts. The welcome with which he was received by the mistress of the house appeared to be of good augury. But it was a long way from that to closer ties, although Calistus Munbar, in his characteristic way, was continually repeating to those who cared to listen to him, —

"It is done, my friends, it is done."

Floating Island continued its peaceful navigation towards the archipelago of Tonga-Tabou. Nothing seemed likely to trouble it, when on the night of the 30th of December there occurred an unexpected météorologie phenomenon.

Between two and three in the morning distant detonations were heard. The look-outs did not trouble about this more than was necessary. They did not suppose that it meant a naval combat, unless it was between the ships of those South American Republics who are frequently at war. After all, why should they trouble about it on Floating Island, an independent island at peace with the powers of the two worlds?

Besides, these detonations, which came from the eastern parts of the Pacific, lasted until daylight, and certainly could not be mistaken for the full regular roar of distant artillery.

Commodore Simcoe, informed by one of his officers, went to observe the horizon frorn the top of the observatory tower. There was no light visible on the surface of the wide segment of sea that lay before his eyes. But the sky had not its usual aspect. Reflections of flames coloured it up to the zenith. The air appeared misty, although the weather was fine and the barometer did not indicate by a sudden fall any perturbation in the atmosphere.

At daybreak the early risers of Milliard City had a strange surprise. Not only did the detonations continue, but the air was full of red and black mist, a kind of impalpable dust, which began to fall like rain. You might call it a shower of fuliginous molecules. In a few moments the streets of the town, the roofs of the houses were covered with a substance in which were combined the colours of carmine, madder, nacarat, and purple with blackish ashes.

The people were all out of doors — except Athanase Dorémus, who never got up before eleven after going to bed at eight. The quartette had, of course, jumped out of bed and gone to the observatory, where the Commodore, his officers, his astronomers, without forgetting the new royal functionary, were endeavouring to discover the cause of the phenomenon.

“It is regrettable,” remarked Pinchinat, “that this red matter is not liquid, and that this liquid is not a shower of Pomard or Château Lafitte!”

“Tippler!” said Sebastien Zorn.

But what was the cause of this phenomenon? There have been many examples of these showers of red dust,composed of silica, alumina, chromic oxide and ferric oxide. At the beginning of the century Calabria and the Abruzzi were inundated with these showers, which the superstitious inhabitants took for drops of blood when, as at Blancen- berghe, in 1819, they were merely chloride of cobalt. There have also been clouds of molecules of soot or carbon borne from distant fires. There have even been showers of soot at Fernambouc in 1820, yellow showers at Orleans in 1829, and in the Basses Pyrenees in 1836 shqyers of pollen drifted from firs in bloom.

What origin could be attributed to this fall of dust mingled with scoriae, with which the air seemed laden and which fell on Floating Island and the surrounding sea in thick reddish masses?

The King of Malecarlie gave it as his opinion that these substances came from some volcano in the islands to the west. His colleagues at the observatory agreed with him. They collected several handfuls of these scoriae, the temperature of which was above that of the air, and which had not cooled down in their passage through the atmosphere. An eruption of great violence would explain the irregular detonations that had been heard. These regions are strewn with craters, some in activity, others extinct, but susceptible of revival under subterranean action; without counting those which geologic upheavals occasionally lift from the ocean’s depths, the force of their projection being often extraordinary.

And in the midst of this archipelago of Tonga to which Floating Island was going, had not a few years before the peak of Tufua been covered with its eruptive matters for an area of more than a hundred kilometres? And for hours had not the detonations of the volcano been heard two hundred kilometres away?

Then, in the month of August, 1883, the eruption of Krakatoa had desolated the parts of the islands of Java and Sumatra adjoining Sunda Strait, destroying entire villages, causing earthquakes, covering the soil with compact mud, raising the sea in formidable waves, infecting the atmosphere with sulphurous vapours, and wrecking ships. Really, it might be asked if Floating Island were not threatened with dangers of this kind.

Commodore Simcoe began to be uneasy, for navigation threatened to become very difficult. He gave orders to slacken speed, and Floating Island began to move with extreme slowness.

A certain amount of alarm seized on the Milliardites. Were the dismal prognostics of Sebastien Zorn regarding the issue of the campaign on the point of realization?

Towards noon the darkness was profound. The people had left their houses which could not stand if the metal hull were lifted by plutonian forces. There was equal danger in the case of the sea rising and sweeping over the coast.

The governor and the commodore went to Prow Battery, followed by some of the people. Officers were sent to both harbours with orders to remain there. The engineers were at their posts ready to manoeuvre the island if it became necessary to retreat in the opposite direction. The misfortune was that the navigation became more difficult as the sky grew darker.

About three o’clock in the afternoon the people could hardly see ten yards in front of them. There was no trace of diffused light, such was the mass of cinders which absorbed the solar rays. It was feared that Floating Island, laden with the weight of the scoria fallen on its surface, would not be able to maintain its water line on the surface of the ocean.

It was not a ship that could be lightened by throwing overboard cargo, or clearing it of its weight. All that could be done was to trust in the strength of the construction.

The evening, or rather the night came, and still the only way to tell the time was by the clock. The darkness was complete. Beneath the shower of scoriae it was impossible to keep the electric moons aloft, and they were brought down. But the lighting of the streets and houses which had gone on through the day was to be continued as long as the phenomenon lasted.

The night came; the situation remained unchanged. It seemed, however, that the detonations were less frequent and also less violent. The fury of the eruption was diminishing and the rain of cinder, carried away to the south by rather a strong breeze, began to abate.

The Milliardites, regaining confidence a little, went into their houses, hoping that next day Floating Island would find itself under normal conditions. And then they could proceed to a long and complete clearing up.

No matter! What a miserable New Year's Day for the Pearl of the Pacific, and by how little Milliard City had escaped the fate of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Although it was not situated at the foot of Vesuvius, did not its voyage bring it within range of the volcanoes with which the bed of the Pacific is strewn?

The governor, his assistants, and the council of notables remained in constant attendance at the town hall. The look-outs on the tower watched every change on the horizon or at the zenith. So as to maintain its south westerly direction, Floating Island had not stopped its progress, but its speed was only two or three miles an hour. When day came — or at least when the darkness cleared off — its course would be laid for the Tonga

Archipelago. Then doubtless it would be ascertained which of the islands of this part of the ocean had been the theatre of such an eruption.

In any case it was manifest as the night advanced that the phenomenon was passing away.

About three o’clock in the morning there was a fresh incident which caused another outbreak of alarm among the dwellers in Milliard City.

Floating Island received a shock which was felt through all the compartments of its hull. The shock was not sufficient force to cause the destruction of the houses or throw the engines out of work. The screws were not stopped in their propulsive movement. Nevertheless there was no doubt there had been a collision at the fore-end.

What had happened? Had Floating Island grounded on a shoal? No, for it continued to move. Had it then struck against a reef? Amid this profound darkness had it run into some vessel crossing its course, which had not been able to see it lights?

From this collision had there resulted any serious injuries, if not of a nature to imperil its safety, at least sufficient to require important repairs at the next stopping- place?

Cyrus Bikerstaff and Commodore Simcoe made their way not without difficulty through the thick bed of scoriae and cinders to the Prow Battery.

There the customs’ officers informed them that the shock was due to a collision. A ship of large tonnage, a steamer passing from west to east, had been rammed by the prow of Floating Island. The shock had not been serious for the island, but perhaps it had been different for the steamer.

They had only sighted her at the moment of the collision. Shouts had been heard, but they had lasted only a few moments. The chief of the station and his men had run to the battery, but had seen nothing and heard nothing. Had the vessel gone down where she was? The hypothesis was unfortunately only too probable.

As to Floating Island, they had found that the collision had not caused it any serious damage. Its mass was such that even at reduced speed it would crumple in any vessel, no matter how strong she might be — even an ironclad of the first class — and sink it there and then. Something of this sort had doubtless happened.

As to the nationality of this ship, the chief of the station thought he had heard orders given in a rough voice — one of those roars peculiar to the commanders of English vessels. He could not, however, say so positively.

This was a serious matter, and might have consequences no less serious. What would the United Kingdom say? An English vessel was a part of England, and we know that Great Britain does not allow amputation with impunity. What claims and responsibilities Floating Island might expect!

Thus the New Year began. At ten o’clock in the morning Commodore Simcoe was still unable to make any observations. The air was still thick with vapours, although the freshening breeze was beginning to blow away the rain of cinders. At length the sun pierced the mists of the horizon.

In what a state were Milliard City, the park, the country, the works, the ports! What a lot of cleaning had to be done! After all, that concerned the road officers. It was merely a question of time and money, and neither was wanting.

The most urgent work was started on first. The engineers went to Prow Battery on the side of the coast where the collision had occurred. The damages were insignificant. The solid hull of steel was no more injured than the wedge driven into a piece of wood — the ship, for instance.

On the sea there was no wreckage. From the observatory tower the most powerful glasses could see nothing, although Floating Island had not moved two miles since the collision.

It was only right to prolong the investigations in the name of humanity.

The governor conferred with Commodore Simcoe. Orders were given to the engineers to stop the engines, and to the electric launches of both ports to proceed to sea.

The search, which extended over a range of five or six miles, yielded no result. It seemed only too true that the vessel, rammed below the water line, had sunk without leaving a trace of her disappearance.

Commodore Simcoe then resumed his ordinary speed.

At noon the observation indicated that Floating Island was a hundred and fifty miles south-west of Samoa.

Meanwhile, the look-outs were instructed to watch with extreme care.

About five o’clock in the evening they reported thick smoke in the south-west.

Was this smoke due to the final eruptions of the volcano which had so greatly troubled these regions? This wa3 hardly likely as the charts showed neither an island nor an islet in the vicinity. Had a new crater arisen from the sea?

No, and it was manifest that the smoke was approaching Floating Island.

An hour afterwards three vessels came in sight together, approaching rapidly.

Half an hour later they were recognized as ships of war. It was the division of the British squadron which, five weeks before, had passed Floating Island.

At nightfall the ships were within four miles of Prow Battery. Were they going to pass in the offing and continue their course? It was not probable, as from their lights they seemed to be remaining stationary.

“These vessels evidently intend to communicate with us,” said the commodore to the governor.

“Wait and see,” replied Cyrus Bikerstaff.

But in what way would the governor reply to the commander of the division if he had come to make a claim with regard to the recent collision? It was possible, in fact, that such was his intention; perhaps the crew had been picked up, perhaps they had been saved in their boats. It would be time to act when they knew what was the matter.

They knew in the morning very early.

At sunrise, the flag of the rear-admiral floated from the mizen of the leading cruiser, which slowly approached within two miles of Larboard Harbour. A boat was launched, and came towards the port.

A quarter of an hour afterwards Commodore Simcoe received the message, —

“Captain Turner, of Her Britannic Majesty’s cruiser *Herald*, desires to be conducted at once to the governor of Floating Island.”

Cyrus Bikerstaff, being informed of this, authorized the officer of the port to allow the landing to take place, and replied that he would await Captain Turner at the town Ten minutes afterwards a car placed at the disposal of the chief of the staff, who was accompanied by a lieutenant, deposited these two personages before the municipal palace.

The governor immediately received them in the room adjoining his office.

The usual salutations were exchanged — very stiffly on both sides.

Then carefully punctuating his words, as if he were reciting some quotations from current literature, Captain Turner expressed himself thus in one long interminable sentence, —

“I have the honour to acquaint his Excellency the Governor of Floating Island, at this moment in a hundred and seventy-seven degrees thirteen minutes east of the meridian of Greenwich, and in sixteen degrees fifty-four minutes south latitude, that during the night of the 31st of December and the ist of January, the steamer *Glen*, of Glasgow, of three thousand five hundred tons, laden with wheat, indigo, rice, and wine, a cargo of considerable value, was run into by Floating Island, belonging to the Floating Island Company, Limited, whose offices are at Madeleine Bay, Lower California, United States of America, although the steamer was showing the regulation lights, a white at the foremast, green at the starboard side, and red at the port side, and that having got clear after the collision she was met with next morning thirty-five miles from the scene of the disaster, ready to sink on account of a gap in her port side, and that she did sink after fortunately putting her captain, his officers and crew on board the *Herald*, Her Britannic Majesty's cruiser of the first-class under the flag of Rear-Admiral Sir Edward Collinson, who reports the fact to his Excellency Governor Cyrus Bikerstaff, requesting him to acknowledge the responsibility of the Floating Island Company, Limited, under the guarantee of the inhabitants of the said Floating Island, in favour of the owners of the said *Glen}* the value of which in hull, engines, and cargo amounts to the sum of twelve hundred thousand pounds sterling, that is six millions of dollars, which sum should be paid into the hands of the said Admiral Sir Edward Collinson, or in default he will forcibly proceed against the said Floating Island."

One long sentence of about three hundred words, cut up with commas, but without a single full-stop. But it said all and left no way of escape. Yes or no, would the governor decide to admit the claim made by Sir Edward Collinson, and accept the statement as to the responsibility of the Company and the estimated value of twelve hundred thousand pounds attributed to the steamer *Glen*, of Glasgow?

Cyrus Bikerstaff replied by the usual arguments in cases of collision.

The weather was very obscure on account of a volcanic eruption which had happened in the westward. If the *Glen* had her lights going, so had Floating Island. Neither of them could see each other. The matter was beyond the control of either party; and according to the usual practice in such matters, each had to bear his own losses, and there was no question of claim or responsibility.

Captain Turner's reply, —

"His Excellency would doubtless be right in the case of two vessels navigating under ordinary conditions. If the *Glen* fulfilled these conditions, it was manifest that Floating Island did not; it could not be considered a ship; it constituted a constant danger in moving its enormous mass across the maritime routes; it was like an island, an islet, a reef which shifted its position in such a way that it could not be placed on the chart. England had always protested against this obstacle to which it was impossible to give a definite position hydrographically, and Floating Island would always be responsible for accidents of this nature, &c. &c."

It was evident that Captain Turner's arguments were not devoid of a certain logic. In his heart Cyrus Bikerstaff felt that they were just. But he could not himself give a decision. The matter would be brought before those who had the right to do so, and all he could do was to acknowledge the receipt of Sir Edward Collinson's claim. Fortunately there had been no loss of life.

"Very fortunately," replied Captain Turner, "but there has been the loss of the ship, and thousands have been swallowed up in the damage done by Floating Island. Will the Governor consent to hand over to Admiral Sir Edward Collinson the estimated value of the *Glen* and her cargo?"

How could the governor consent to this payment? After all, Floating Island offered a sufficient guarantee. It was there to answer for any damage, if the tribunals decided that it was responsible, after investigating the causes of the accident and the value of the loss.

"That is your Excellency's last word?" asked Captain Turner.

"That is my last word," said Cyrus Bikerstaff, "for I am not in a position to admit the Company's responsibility."

Further salutes, stiffer than ever, exchanged between the governor and the English captain. Departure of the latter by the car which took him to Larboard Harbour, and return to the *Herald* by the steam launch.

When Cyrus Bikerstaff’s reply was made known to the council of notables, it received their full and entire approbation, as it did that of the whole population of Floating Island.

That being settled, Commodore Simcoe gave orders for Floating Island to resume its voyage at full speed.

But if Admiral Collinson persisted, would it be possible to evade his pursuit? Were not his vessels of much superior speed? And if he enforced his claim with a few melinite shells, would it be possible to resist it? Doubtless the batteries of the island were capable of replying to the Armstrongs with which the cruisers of the division were armed. But the field offered to the English fire was infinitely greater. What would become of the women and children under the impossibility of finding shelter? Every shot would tell, while the batteries of the Prow and Stern would lose about fifty per cent, of her projectiles in aiming at a small and moving target.

It was therefore necessary to wait and see what Admiral Sir Edward Collinson would do.

They had not to wait long.

At nine forty-five a blank cartridge was fired from the central turret of the *Herald*, at the same time as the flag of the United Kingdom ran up to the mast-head.

Under the presidency of the governor and his assistants the council of notables was in session at the town hall. This time Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley were of the same opinion. These Americans, being practical men, did not think of attempting a resistance which might endanger the safety of everybody and everything on Floating Island.

A second gun was fired. This time a shell whistled over, aimed in such a way as to fall half a cable’s length off in the sea, where it exploded with formidable violence, throwing up enormous masses of water.

By the governor’s orders Commodore Simcoe hauled down the flag which had been hoisted in reply to that of the *Herald*. Captain Turner returned to Larboard Harbour. There he received securities signed by Cyrus Bikerstaff, and endorsed by the chief notables, for the sum of twelve hundred thousand pounds.

Three hours later the smoke of the squadron disappeared in the west, and Floating Island continued its course towards the Tonga archipelago.

CHAPTER V.

“AND then,” said Yvernès, “we shall put in at the principal islands of Tonga-Tabou.”

“Yes, my dear fellow,” replied Calistus Munbar, “you will have time to make acquaintance with this archipelago, which you can call the archipelago of Hapai, and even the Friendly Islands, as they were called by Captain Cook in acknowledgment of the good welcome he received.”

“And we shall probably be better treated than we were at Cook’s Islands,” said Pinchinat.

“That is probable.”

“Shall we visit all the islands of this group?” inquired Frascolin.

“Certainly not, considering that there are about a hundred and fifty of them.”

“And afterwards?” asked Yvernès.

“Afterwards, we shall go to the Fijis, then to the New Hebrides, then as soon as we have landed those Malays we shall return to Madeleine Kay, where our campaign will end.”

“Will Floating Island stop at many places in the Tonga Islands?”

“At Vavao and at Tonga-Tabou only,” replied the superintendent, “and it is not there that you will find the real savages of your dreams, my dear Pinchinat.”

Evidently there are none in the West Pacific,” replied his Highness.

“Pardon me, there are a respectable number in the New Hebrides and Solomon Islands. But at Tonga the sub jects of George the First are almost civilized, and I may add the ladies are charming. I would not, however, advise you to marry one of these delightful Tongans.”

“For what reason?”

“Because marriages between foreigners and natives are not usually happy. There is generally incompatibility of temper.”

“Good!” exclaimed Pinchinat, “and yet this old fiddler Zorn was thinking of getting married at Tonga-Tabou!”

“I!” retorted the violoncellist, shrugging his shoulders. “Neither at Tonga-Tabou nor elsewhere, understand, you clumsy joker.”

“Evidently our conductor is a wise man,” replied Pinchinat. “You see, my dear Calistus — and even allow me to call you Eucalistus, so much do you inspire me with sympathy — ”

“I have no objection, Pinchinat.”

“Well, my dear Eucalistus, a man does not scrape the strings of a violoncello for forty years without becoming a philosopher, and philosophy teaches that the only way of being happy in marriage is not to get married.”

In the morning of the 6th of January the heights of Vavao appeared on the horizon, the most important island of the northern group. This group is very different, owing to its volcanic formation, from the two others, Hapai and Tonga-Tabou. The three lay between seventeen and twenty-two degrees south latitude and a hundred and seventy-six and a hundred and seventy-eight degrees west latitude. They have an area of two thousand four hundred square kilometres distributed over a hundred and fifty islands, peopled by sixty thousand inhabitants. <

The ships of Tasman were there in 1643, and Cook's ships in 1773, during his second voyage of discovery in the Pacific. After the overthrow of the dynasty of Finare- Finare, and the foundation of a Federal State in 1797, a civil war decimated the population of the archipelago.

Navigation is difficult enough amid this maze of islands and islets planted with cocoanut trees which it is necessary to follow to reach Nu-Ofa, the capital of the Vavao group. Vavao is volcanic, and being such is subject to earthquakes. This is taken into account in building the houses, not one of which has a nail in it. Wattled rushes form the walls with laths of cocoanut wood, and on piles or trunks of trees an oval roof is laid. The whole is very fresh and neat. This more particularly attracted the notice of our artistes posted at Prow Battery, while Floating Island passed along the channels bordered with Kanaka villages. Here and there a few European houses displayed the flags of Germany or England.

But if this part of the archipelago is volcanic, it was not to one of its volcanoes that could be attributed the formidable eruption of scoriae and cinders that had been spread over these regions. The Tongans had not even been plunged into darkness, the western breezes having driven the clouds of eruptive matter towards the opposite horizon. Probably the crater from which they came belonged to some isolated island in the east, unless it was a volcano of recent formation between Samoa and Tonga.

The stay at Vavao lasted but a week. This island was worth visiting, although a few years before it had been ravaged by a terrible cyclone, which had thrown down the little church of the French Maristes and destroyed a quantity of native dwellings. Nevertheless the country remained very attractive with its numerous villages, enclosed by belts of orange trees, its fertile plains, its fields of sugarcane and yams, its clumps of banana trees, mulberry trees, bread-fruit trees, and sandalwood trees. The only domestic animals were pigs and poultry. The only birds were thousands of pigeons and noisy parrots of brilliant colours. For reptiles there were only a few harmless serpents and lovely green lizards, which could be mistaken for leaves fallen from the trees.

The superintendent had not exaggerated the beauty of the native type — which is common to the Malay race of the different archipelagoes of the central Pacific. Superb men of tall stature, rather stout, perhaps, but of admirable build and noble attitude, and a colour as of copper shaded with olive. The women graceful and well proportioned, hands and feet of a delicacy of form and a smallness that must move to envy the Germans and English of the European colony. The women are employed only in the making of mats, baskets, and fabrics like those of Tahiti, and their fingers are not deformed by such manual labour. And then it is easy to judge of the perfection of Tongan beauty. Neither the abominable trousers nor the trained skirt had been adopted in the native fashions. Mere cotton drawers or a belt for the men, the caraco and short petticoat with ornaments in fine dried bark for the women, who are at once distant and coquettish. In both sexes the headdress is elaborate, the girls raising their hair over their foreheads and piling it up on a trellis of cocoanut fibre in the shape of a comb.

But there was nothing in all this to make Sebastien Zorn recall his resolution. He would not marry either at Vavao or at Tonga-Tabou or anywhere else in this sublunary world.

It was always a great satisfaction for his comrades and himself to land on these archipelagoes. They were pleased enough with Floating Island, but to set foot on firm ground was none the less pleasing to them. Real mountains, real country, real water-courses were a change from imitation streams and artificial shores. It required a Calistus Munbar to assign to his Pearl of the Pacific a superiority over the works of nature.

Although Vavao is not the usual residence of King George, he possesses at Nu-ofa a palace, let us say a pretty cottage, at which he frequently lives. But on this island of Tonga-Tabou are found the royal palace and the establishments of the English residents.

Floating Island was to make its last stoppage there almost at the limit of the Tropic of Capricorn, the extreme point it would reach in the course of its voyage across the southern hemisphere.

After leaving Vavao, the voyage of the Milliardites for two days was one of considerable variety. One island was not lost sight of until another rose to view; all of them presenting the same volcanic character due to the action of plutonian force. It was with this northern group as with the central group of Hapai. The hydrographie charts of these regions are extremely accurate, and allowed Commodore Simcoe to venture without danger amid the channels of the labyrinth between Hapai and Tonga- Tabou. Besides there was no paucity of pilots if he had wanted their services. A number of vessels were moving among the islands — for the most part schooners under the German flag employed in the coasting trade, while the larger merchant vessels take away the cotton and coprah and coffee and maize, the principal productions of the archipelago. Not only would pilots have hastened to come if Ethel Simcoe had asked them, but also the crews of their double canoes, united by a platform and able to carry two hundred men. Yes!

Hundreds of natives would have come at the first signal, and what a harvest they would have had if the pilotage dues were calculated on the tonnage of Floating Island. Two hundred and fifty-nine million tons! But Commodore Simcoe, to whom all these figures were familiar, had no want of their good offices. He had confidence in himself, and trusted to the merit of the officers who executed his orders with absolute precision.

Tonga-Tabou was sighted on the morning of the 9th of January, when Floating Island was but three or four miles away from it. Very low, its foundation not being due to geologic effort, it has not been thrust up from below like so many other islands that seem to have remained motionless after coming to the surface of the sea to breathe. It has been gradually built by infusorians, who have raised tier upon tier of coral, and what labour! A hundred kilometres in circumference, an area of from seven to eight hundred superficial kilometres on which live twenty thousand inhabitants.

Commodore Simcoe stopped off the port of Maofuga.

Communications were immediately opened between the sedentary island and the movable island, a sister of the Latona of mythologic memory. What a difference there was between this archipelago and the Marquesas, Pau-motu, and the Society Islands! English influence is here predominant, and King George the First was in no hurry to offer a cordial welcome to these Milliardites of American origin.

However, at Maofuga the quartette discovered a small French centre. There resides the Bishop of Oceania, who was then making a pastoral tour among the different groups. There are the Catholic mission, the house of the sisters, the schools for the boys and girls. Needless to say, the Parisians were received with cordiality by their compatriots. As to their excursions, there were only two places of importance for them to go to, Nakualofa, the capital, and the village of Mua, where four hundred inhabitants profess the Catholic religion.

When Tasman discovered Tonga-Tabou he gave it the name of Amsterdam — a name hardly justified by its houses of pandanus leaves at d cocoanut fibres. It is true that European habitations are not wanting; but the native name is more appropriate for this island.

The port of Maofuga is situated on the northern coast. If Floating Island had taken up its position a few miles more to the west of Nakualofa, its royal gardens and its royal palace would have been in sight of it. If, on the contrary, Commodore Simcoe had gone more to the east, he would have found a bay cut deeply into the coast, the head of which is occupied by the village of Mua. He did not do this because the island would have run the risk of being wrecked among the hundreds of islets, the channels between which only give passage to vessels of moderate tonnage. Floating Island had therefore to remain off Maofuga during the whole of the stay.

Though a certain number of Milliardites landed, there were not many who thought of exploring the interior of the island. It is charming nevertheless, and deserves the praises which Elisée Reclus has showered upon it. Doubtless the heat is very great, the atmosphere stormy, the rains of extreme violence and calculated to calm the ardour of an excursionist, and a man must be touched with the tourist’s mania who would venture into the country. Nevertheless this is what Frascolin, Pinchinat, and Yvernès did, for it was impossible to persuade the violoncellist to leave his comfortable room in the casino before the evening, when the sea-breeze refreshed the beach of Maofuga. Even the superintendent begged to be excused for being unable to accompany the enthusiasts.

“I should melt on the road,” he told them.

“Well, we could carry you along in a bottle!” replied his Highness.

This engaging prospect did not persuade Calistus Mun- bar, who preferred to retain his solid state.

Very fortunately for the Milliardites, the sun had been moving northward for three weeks, and Floating Island could keep it at a distance, so as to maintain a normal temperature.

Next morning the three friends left Maofuga at daybreak, and started for the capital of the island. Certainly it was warm; but the warmth was bearable under cover of the cocoanut trees, the leki-lekis, the toui-touis, which are the candle trees, the cocas, whose red and black berries formed bunches of dazzling gems.

It was nearly noon when the capital showed itself in full bloom — an expression which is not inappropriate at this season of the year. The king’s palace seemed to rise from a gigantic bouquet of verdure. There was a striking contrast between the native huts covered with flowers and the houses of English aspect which belonged to the Protestant missionaries. The influence of these Wesleyan ministers has been considerable, and after massacring a certain number of them the Tongans have adopted their creed. Observe, however, that they have not entirely renounced the practices of their Kanaka mythology; with them the high priest is superior to the king. In the teachings of their curious cosmogony good and evil geniuses play an important part. Christianity will not easily uproot the taboo which is always held in honour, and when it has been decided to break it, it cannot be done without expiatory sacrifices in which human life is sometimes sacrificed.

It should be mentioned that according to the accounts of explorers — particularly that of Aylie Marin in his travels in 1882 — Nakualofa is still but half-civilized.

Frascolin, Pinchinat, and Yvernès had no desire to pay their respects at the feet of King George. This is not to be understood in a metaphoric sense, as the custom is to kiss the sovereign's feet. And our Parisians congratulated themselves when, in the square of Nakualofa, they noticed the "tui" whom they call his Majesty, clothed in a sort of white shirt, with a little skirt of native stuff tied round his waist. This kissing of the feet would certainly have been among the most disagreeable remembrances of the voyage.

"You can see," said Pinchinat, "that water-courses are not very abundant in this country."

At Tonga-Tabou, at Vavao, as in the other islands of the archipelago, the maps show neither stream nor lagoon. The rain-water is collected in cisterns, and that is all the natives have, the subjects of George I. being as careful with it as their sovereign.

During the day the three tourists, greatly fatigued, returned to the port of Maofuga, and regained their rooms in the casino with great satisfaction. To the incredulous Sebastien Zorn they affirmed that their excursion had been most interesting. But the poetic inducements of Yvernès could not prevail on the violoncellist to start next morning for the village of Mua.

The journey promised to be long and very fatiguing. They might have easily spared themselves this fatigue by using one of the electric launches that Cyrus Bikerstaff offered to put at their disposal. But to explore the interior of this curious country was a consideration of some value, and the tourists started on foot for Mua Bay along the coral shore which bordered the islets, where there seemed to have collected all the cocoanut trees in Oceania.

Their arrival at Mua could not take place before the afternoon. There was a place evidently pointed out for the Frenchmen to stay at. This was the residence of the Catholic missionaries. In welcoming his guests the Superior’s delight was most affecting — the welcome recalled the way in which they had been received by the Maristes of Samoa. What an excellent evening! What interesting conversation, in which France was more talked of than the Tongan colony! These good men could not think without regret of their native land so far away.

It was with a certain pride that the Superior showed, to the admiration of his visitors, the establishments of the Mission — the house which was built for nothing by the natives of Mua, and the beautiful church due to the Tongan architects, of which their brethren in France would not be ashamed.

During the evening they took a walk in the environs of the village and visited the ancient tombs of Tui-Tonga, where schist and coral are intermingled with primitive and charming art. They even visited that old plantation of meas, banyans or monstrous fig-trees, with their roots interlaced like serpents, the circumference of which, in places, exceeds sixty metres. Frascolin measured them, and having entered the figures in his note-book, had them certified as correct by the Superior. After that, there could be no doubt as to the existence of such a vegetable phenomenon.

A good supper was followed by a good night in the best rooms of the mission. After that was a good breakfast and hearty farewells from the missionaries, and the return to Floating Island as five o’clock was striking from the belfry of the town hall. This time the three excursionists had not to have recourse to metaphorical amplification to assure Sebastien Zorn that their journey had left them with pleasant memories.

Next day Cyrus Bikerstaff received a visit from Captain Sarol under the following circumstances.

A certain number of Malays — about a hundred — had been recruited at the New Hebrides and taken to Tonga- Tabou to work in the clearings — an indispensable importation considering the indifference, or rather idleness, of the Tongans, who live from day to day. These clearings had been finished a short time before, and the Malays were awaiting an opportunity of returning to their country. Would the Governor allow them to take passage on Floating Island? It was this permission which Captain Sarol had come to ask. In five or six weeks they would arrive at Erromango, and the carriage of these natives would not be much expense.

It would not have been generous to refuse these men a service so easy to render; and so the Governor gave his permission, for which he was thanked by Captain Sarol, and also by the Maristes of Tonga-Tabou, for whom these Malays had been imported.

Who could doubt that Captain Sarol had in this way increased the number of his accomplices? that these New Hebrideans would come to his assistance when he had need of them, and that he could only congratulate himself at having met with them at Tonga-Tabou and introduced them on to Floating Island?

This was the last day the Milliardites were to spend in the archipelago, the departure being fixed for the morning.

During the afternoon they were able to be present at one of those half-civil, half-religious festivals in which the natives take part with extraordinary enthusiasm.

The programme of these festivals, to which the Tongans are as partial as their congeners in Samoa and the Marquesas, comprises several dances. As these were of a kind to interest our Parisians, they went ashore about three o'clock.

The superintendent accompanied them, and this time Athanase Dorémus expressed a wish to join them. The presence of a professor of dancing and deportment was surely appropriate at a ceremony of this kind? Sebastien Zorn decided to follow his comrades, more desirous, doubtless of hearing the Tongan music than of looking at the choregraphic eccentricities of the population.

When they arrived on the spot, the festival was in full swing. The Kava liquor extracted from the dried root of the pepper plant was circulating in gourds and flowing down the throats of a hundred dancers, men and women, young men and girls, the girls having coquettishly decorated their long hair, which they had to wear in that fashion until their wedding-day.

The orchestra was of the simplest. For instruments, the nasal flute known as the fanghu-fanghu, more than a dozen nafas, as the drums are called, on which they thump vigorously, "and even in time," as Pinchinat remarked.

Evidently the highly superior Athanase Dorémus felt the most perfect contempt for the dances, which did not enter into the category of quadrilles, polkas, mazurkas, and waltzes of the French school. And he did not fail to shrug his shoulders in protest against Yvernès, to whom these dances appeared to be marked with real originality.

First there were seated dances, composed of attitudes, pantomimic gestures, balancings of the body, to a rhythm slow and sad and of strange effect.

To these succeeded standing dances, in which the Tongans abandoned themselves to all the impetuosity of their temperament, representing in pantomime the fury of warriors on the war-path. The quartette looked at this spectacle from an artistic point of view, and wondered what the natives would have done if they had been excited by the fascinating music of a Parisian ball-room.

And then Pinchinat — the idea was characteristic — Proposed to his comrades to send for their instruments trom the casino, and treat these dancers to the wildest six-eights and most formidable two-fours of Lecoq, Audran, and Offenbach.

The proposal was agreed to, and Calistus Munbar had no doubt that the effect would be prodigious.

Half an hour afterwards the instruments had been brought, and the players began.

Immense surprise of the natives, and also immense delight at listening to this violoncello and these three violins, going at their loudest, and giving off music that was ultra-French.

The natives remained not unaffected, and it was clearly proved that their characteristic dances are instinctive, that they learn without masters — whatever Athanase Dorémus might think. The men and women strove to outdo each other in leaping and swaying when Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès, Frascolin, and Pinchinat attacked the furious rhythms of *Orphée aux Enfers*. The superintendent could not contain himself, and took part in a wild quadrille, while the professor of dancing and deportment veiled his face before such horrors. At the height of this cacophony, in which mingled the nasal flutes and the sonorous drums, the fury of the dancers attained its maximum of intensity, and we know not where it would have stopped, if something had not happened to put an end to this infernal choregraphy.

A Tongan — tall and very strong — wonder-struck at the notes which the violoncellist drew from his instrument, hurled himself on the violoncello, seized it, and rushed away with it, shouting, “Taboo! taboo!”

The violoncello was tabooed! It could not be touched again without sacrilege! The high priest, King George, the dignitaries of his court, the whole population of the island would rise, if this sacred custom were violated.

Sebastien Zorn did not care about this. He had no idea of parting with this masterpiece of Gand and Benardel. Off he went after the thief. In a moment his comrades were following in pursuit. There was a general stampede But the Tongan sprang along with such speed that they had to give up their attempt to catch him. In a few minutes he was far away, very far away.

Sebastien Zorn and the others, unable to do more, returned to find Calistus Munbar, out of breath. To say that the violoncellist was in a state of indescribable fury would be insufficient. He foamed, he choked! Tabooed or not, they would have to give him back his instrument. Even if Floating Island had to declare war against Tonga-Tabou — and had not war broken out for less serious motives? — the violoncello must be restored to its owner.

Fortunately, the authorities of the island had intervened in the matter. An hour later they had caught the native, and obliged him to bring back the instrument. The restitution was not effected without trouble, and a crisis was only just avoided in which the ultimatum of Cyrus Bikerstaff might, on this question of taboo, have perhaps raised the religious passions of the whole archipelago.

But the breaking of the taboo had to take place in regular form, according to the usual ceremonies. As was customary, a considerable number of pigs had their throats cut, and were cooked in a hole filled with hot stones, and there were sweet potatoes, taros, and macore fruits, which were also afterwards eaten, to the extreme satisfaction of the Tongan stomachs.

The violoncello had its strings let down in the fray, and Sebastien Zorn had to tune it up again, after ascertaining that it had lost none of its qualities by reason of the incantations of the natives.

CHAPTER VI.

IN leaving Tonga-Tabou, Floating Island steered northwest towards the Fiji archipelago, moving away from the tropic in the track of the sun, which was mounting towards the Equator. There was no need for haste. Two hundred leagues only separated it from the Fijian group, and Commodore Simcoe took it along at moderate speed.

The breeze was variable, but what mattered the breeze to this powerful concern? If, now and then, violent storms broke on this twenty-third parallel, the Pearl of the Pacific did not even dream of being anxious. The electricity which saturated the atmosphere was drawn off by the numerous conductors with which its buildings were provided. As to the rain, even in the torrents that the storm-clouds poured down, it was welcome. The park and the country grew verdant under it, rare as it was. Life passed under the most fortunate conditions, amid festivals, concerts, receptions. At this time, friendly communications between the sections were frequent, and it seemed as though nothing would threaten their safety in the future.

Cyrus Bikerstaff had no reason to repent of having given a passage to the New Hebrideans embarked at Captain Sarol’s request. These natives endeavoured to make themselves useful. They set to work in the fields, as they had done at Tonga. Sarol and his Malays hardly left them during the day, and at night they returned to the two ports in which the municipality had given them quarters. No complaint was made against them. Perhaps opportunity offered for converting them. Up to then they had not adopted Christianity, like a large number of the New Hebrides population, despite the efforts of the Anglican and Catholic missionaries. The clergy of Floating Island had considered this, but the Governor would allow no attempt of such a nature.

These New Hebrideans are between twenty and forty years of age. Darker in hue than the Malays, although they are not so well built as the natives of Tonga or Samoa, they were apparently endowed with more endurance. The little money that they had earned in the service of the Maristes of Tonga-Tabou, they kept with great care, and did not attempt to spend in alcoholic drinks, which would not readily have been sold to them. Being free of all expense, they had probably never been so happy in their savage archipelago.

Thanks to Captain Sarol, these natives would unite with their compatriots, and connive at the work of destruction, the hour of which was approaching. Then all their native ferocity would appear. Were they not the descendants of the murderers who have so formidable a reputation among the people of this part of the Pacific?

Meanwhile, the Milliardites lived in the thought that nothing could compromise an existence which had been so logically provided for and so wisely organized. The quartette continued their successful career. People were never tired of hearing them or applauding them. The works of Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, Mendelssohn, were run through completely.

Besides the regular concerts at the casino, Mrs. Coverley gave musical evenings, which were largely attended. The king and queen of Malecarlie many times honoured them with their presence. If the Tankerdons had not yet visited the mansion in the Fifteenth Avenue, at least alter had become assiduous in his attendance at the concerts. It was certain that his marriage with Miss Coverley would come off some day or other. It was talked about openly in the Starboardite and Larboardite drawing-rooms. Even the witnesses to the inevitable marriage were named. The only thing wanting was the announcement from the heads of the families. Would anything happen that would oblige Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley to make it?

This circumstance, so impatiently expected, was soon about to take place. But at the cost of what danger and how greatly the safety of Floating Island was menaced!

In the afternoon of the 16th of January, at about halfway between Tonga and Fiji,, a ship was signalled in the south-east. It seemed to be heading for Starboard Harbour, and was apparently a steamer of some eight hundred tons. No flag floated from its peak, and none was hoisted when it was within a mile of the island.

The ship did not attempt to enter one of the harbours, but apparently was passing, and doubtless would soon be out of sight.

The night came, very dark and moonless. The sky was covered with lofty fleecy clouds, which absorbed all the light and reflected none. There was no wind. The calm was absolute in sea and sky. The silence was profound amid the thick darkness.

About eleven o’clock came an atmospheric change. The weather became very stormy. The air was rent by lightning until midnight, and the growls of the thunder continued, without a drop of rain falling.

Perhaps these rumblings, due to some distant storm, prevented the Customs’ officers on duty about the Stern Battery from hearing strange hissings and curious roarings, which troubled this part of the coast. These were not the hiss of the lightning or the rumbling oi the thunder. The phenomenon, whatever it was, did not occur until between two and three o’clock in the morning.

Next day a new cause of uneasiness spread in the outer quarters of the town. The men engaged in watching the flocks pasturing in the country were seized with a sudden panic and dispersed in all directions, some towards the Sorts and some towards the gate of Milliard City.

A serious fact was that fifty sheep had been half devoured during the night, and their remains were found in the vicinity of Stern Battery. A few dozen cows, hinds, bucks, in the enclosures of the park, and some twenty horses had met with the same fate.

No doubt these animals had been attacked by wild beasts. What wild beasts? Lions, tigers, leopards, hyenas? Was that improbable? Had any of these formidable carnivores ever appeared on Floating Island? Could it be possible for these animals to arrive by sea? Was the Pearl of the Pacific in the neighbourhood of the Indies, of Africa, of Malaysia, the former of which comprises these varieties of ferocious animals?

No! Floating Island was not near the mouth of the Amazon, or the mouth of the Nile, and yet, about seven o’clock in the morning two women ran into the square of the town hall who had been pursued by an enormous alligator, which had regained the banks of the Serpentine River and disappeared in the water. At the same time the agitation of the plants along the banks indicated that other saurians were struggling there at that very moment.

The effect of this incredible news can be judged. An hour afterwards the look-outs noticed several tigers, lions, and leopards bounding across the country. Several sheep running towards Prow Battery were attacked by two immense tigers. The domestic animals began to run about in all directions, terrified at the roar of the wild beasts. And so did the men whose occupations called them out into the fields in the morning. The first tram for

Larboard Harbour had barely time to run into the siding. Three lions had pursued it, and in a hundred yards more would have reached it.

There was no doubt that during the night Floating land had been invaded by a band of ferocious animals, and so would Milliard City if precautions were not immediately taken.

It was Athanase Dorémus who brought our artistes the news. The professor of dancing and deportment had gone out earlier than usual, and had not dared to return to his house. He had taken refuge in the casino, from which no human power could remove him.

“Come, now!” said Pinchinat. “Your lions and tigers and alligators are imaginary.”

But he had to yield to the evidence. The municipality had given orders to shut the town gates and bar the entrance to the ports and the custom-house stations along the coast. At the same time the service of trams was suspended, and people were prohibited from venturing into the park or the country until the dangers of this inexplicable invasion had been removed.

Then at the moment the gates were being closed at the extremity of the First Avenue near the square of the observatory, a couple of tigers had bounded from fifty yards beyond with eyes aflame and mouths open. A few seconds more and these ferocious animals would have been through the gate.

At the side of the town hall the same precaution had been taken, and Milliard City had nothing to fear from an attack.

What an incident, what a subject for copy, what varied reports in the *Starboard Chronicle,* the *New Herald* and other journals of Floating Island!

Terror was at its height. Mansions and houses were barricaded. The shops closed their shutters. Not a door remained open. At the windows of the upper storeys affrighted faces appeared. The only people in the streets were the detachments of militia under the orders of Colonel Stewart and the police under the command of their officers.

Cyrus Bikerstaff and his assistants, Barthélémy Ruge and Hubley Harcourt, who had met at the earliest moment, remained on duty at the town hall. By the telegraph from the two ports, the batteries and the posts along the shore, the municipality received the most disquieting news. There were wild beasts almost everywhere, hundreds at least, said the telegrams, to which haps fear had added a cipher too many. It was undoubtedly the case that a number of lions, tigers, oanthers, and caymans were at large in the island.

What, then, had happened? Had a menagerie broken out of its cages and taken refuge on Floating Island? But whence had this menagerie come? What ship had brought it? Was it the steamer that had been seen the evening before? If so, where had this steamer come from? Had she communicated with the shore during the night? Had the animals swum ashore and landed on the low part of the coast near the mouth of Serpentine River? Had the ship sunk immediately afterwards? And yet, as far as the look-outs could see, as far as Commodore Simcoe's glasses could carry, there was not a fragment of wreckage on the surface of the sea, and Floating Island had hardly moved during the night! Besides, if this ship had foundered, why had not the crew taken refuge on the island as the carnivores had done?

The telephone from the town hall questioned the different posts on this subject, and the posts replied that there had been neither collision nor shipwreck. There could be no mistake in this matter, although the darkness had been profound. Evidently, of all the hypotheses this was the least likely.

“Mystery! mystery! “Yvernès continued to repeat. He and his comrades were gathered at the casino, where Athanase Dorémus was sharing their early breakfast, which would be followed by their luncheon and their dinner at six o’clock.

“My word!” said Pinchinat, munching his chocolate journal, which he had soaked in the smoking basin. “I give up these dogs or wild beasts. Anyhow, let us eat Mormein, Dorémus, until we are eaten.”

“Who knows?” replied Zorn. “Perhaps by lions, or tigers, or cannibals.”

“I would rather have cannibals!” replied his Highness every one to his taste, eh?”

He laughed, this indefatigable joker, but the professor of dancing and deportment did not laugh, and Milliard City, a prey to terror, had no cause for laughter.

At eight o’clock in the morning, the council of notables, convoked at the town hall, had all attended the Governor’s summons. There was nobody in the avenues nor in the streets except the squads of militia and police going to the positions assigned to them.

The council, at which Cyrus Bikerstaff presided, immediately began its deliberations.

“Gentlemen,” said the Governor, “you are acquainted with the cause of this well-justified panic which has seized on the people of Floating Island. During the night our island has been invaded by a band of carnivores and saurians. It is urgent that we proceed to the destruction of these animals, and we shall certainly do so. But the people must conform to the measures we decide upon. If traffic is still authorized in Milliard City, the gates of which are shut, it cannot be permitted in the park and in the country. Hence, until fresh orders, communications are forbidden between the town, the two ports and the batteries.”

These measures being approved, the council passed to the discussion of the means which would permit of the destruction of the formidable animals which infested Floating Island.

“Our militia and our sailors,” continued the Governor, “are organizing expeditions to the different points of the island. Those of you who are sportsmen we would like to join us, to direct their movements so as to prevent any possible catastrophe.”

“Years ago,” said Jem Tankerdon, “I had some shooting in India and in America, and it will not be my first attempt. I am ready, and my eldest son will accompany me.”

“We thank the honourable Jem Tankerdon,” replied Cyrus Bikerstaff, “and for my part I will follow his example. At the same time as Colonel Stewart’s militia, a squad of sailors will be in the field, under Commodore Simcoe’s orders, and their ranks are open to you, gentlemen.”

Nat Coverley made a similar proposition to that of Jem Tankerdon, and finally all the notables whose age allowed, offered their services. Magazine rifles of long range were not wanting at Milliard City. There was little doubt that, thanks to everyone’s devotion and courage, Floating Island would soon be cleared of this formidable band. But, as Cyrus Bikerstaff repeated, the main point was not to have to regret anyone’s death.

“These wild beasts, of which we cannot estimate the number,” he added, “must be destroyed as quickly as possible. To leave them time to acclimatize themselves, to multiply, would be to endanger the safety of our island.”

“It is not likely,” said one of the notables, “that there are many of these animals.”

“Quite so. It could only come from some ship which was carrying a menagerie,” replied the Governor, “some ship from India, from the Philippines, or the Sunda Islands, on account of some Hamburg house, which is noted for its trade in these animals. The animals may have escaped or been thrown overboard owing to their becoming unmanageable.”

The principal market for wild beasts is at Hamburg, the current prices being two thousand francs for elephants, twenty-seven thousand for giraffes, twenty-five thousand for hippopotamuses, five thousand for lions, four thousand for tigers, two thousand for jaguars — good prices, as will be seen, which have a tendency to rise, while those for snakes are going down.

A member of the council having observed that the menagerie in question might have some representatives of the ophidians, the Governor replied that no ophidians had as yet been reported. Besides if lions, tigers, and alligators had been able to swim ashore, that would not have been possible with snakes.

Cyrus Bikerstaff remarked, —

“I think we have nothing to fear from the presence of boas, coral-snakes, rattle-snakes, najas, vipers, and other examples of that kind. Nevertheless, we will do all that is necessary to reassure the people on this subject. „ But we must not lose time, gentlemen, and before inquiring into the cause of this invasion of wild beasts, let us destroy them. They are here, and they must not remain here."

Nothing could be more sensible, and it could not have een better put.

CHAPTER VII.

THE total destruction of the animals which had invaded Floating Island must be proceeded with. Not a single pair of these formidable beasts must escape, as the future safety of the island was in danger. This pair would multiply, and the people might just as well live in the forests of India or Africa.

And at the outset, contrary to what had been asked by certain families under their influence of terror, there was no reason why the population should take refuge on the steamers at the two ports, and escape from Floating Island. Besides, the ships were not large enough.

The Milliardites set to work without losing a moment. A few had not hesitated to propose extreme methods; amongst others that of introducing the sea on to the island, of burning down the trees in the parks so as to drown or burn all this vermin. But in any case the means would not be efficacious as regards the amphibians, and it would be better to proceed by means of well- organized shooting parties.

This is what was done.

Captain Sarol, the Malays, and the New Hebrideans had offered their services, which had been eagerly accepted by the Governor. These gallant fellows were desirous of showing their gratitude to the Governor. In reality Captain Sarol was afraid that this incident would interrupt his plans, that the Milliardites and their families would abandon Floating Island. That would oblige the management to go back direct to Madeleine Bay, and thus foil his intentions.

The quartette showed themselves equal to the circumstances and worthy of their nationality. It would not be said that four Frenchmen had not risked their lives when danger was to be incurred. They put themselves under the direction of Calistus Munbar, who, according to his account, had been in a worse plight before, and shrugged his shoulders in sign of contempt for lions, tigers, panthers, and other-inoffensive beasts I Perhaps he had been a tamer, this grandson of Barnum, or at least a manager of a travelling menagerie?

The hunt began that morning, and opened well.

During the first hour two crocodiles had the imprudence to venture out of Serpentine River, and as we know saurians, though formidable in their liquid element, are much less so on land owing to the difficulty they have in turning, Captain Sarol and his Malays attacked them with courage, and not without one receiving a wound, cleared the park.

Meanwhile twelve more were observed, which doubtless constituted the band. These were animals of large size, measuring from four to five metres, and consequently very dangerous. As they had taken refuge under the water, the sailors stood ready to send them a few of their explosive bullets, which would shatter the hardest carapaces.

On the other hand the detachments of hunters went out over the country. One of the lions was killed by Jem Tankerdon, who had reason to say that this was not his first attempt, and who recovered his coolness and skill as an old hunter in the Far West. The beast was superb — one of those worth from five to six thousand francs. A steel slug had passed through its heart at the moment it bounded on the quartette, and Pinchinat affirmed that he felt the wind of its tail as it went by!

In the afternoon, during an attack in which one of the militia was bitten in the shoulder, the Governor brought down a lioness of remarkable beauty.

The day did not end before a couple of tigers had fallen under the bullets of Commodore Simcoe, at the head of a detachment of sailors, one of whom, seriously wounded by a claw, had to be taken to Starboard Harbour. According to report, these terrible felines appeared to be the most numerous of the carnivores landed on Floating Island. At the fall of night, the wild beasts on being resolutely pursued had retired under the trees at Prow Battery, whence it was proposed to dislodge them at break of day.

From the evening to the morning frightful growls spread terror among the female and infant population of Milliard City.

At daybreak the hunt commenced as on the day before. At the Governor's orders, conformably to the advice of Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart brought up his artillery against the carnivores so as to sweep their hiding-places. Two cannons from Starboard Harbour, working on the Hotchkiss system in firing charges of bullets, were brought into the vicinity of Prow Battery.

At this place the clumps of nettle-trees were traversed by the tramway which branched towards the observatory. It was under the shelter of these trees that a certain number of the wild beasts had passed the night. A few heads of lions and tigers with gleaming eyes appeared among the lower branches. The sailors, the militia, the hunters, led by Jem and Walter Tankerdon, Nat Coverley, and Hubley Harcourt, took up their position on the left of this clump, waiting for the rush of wild beasts which the discharge from the cannon did not kill on the spot.

At Commodore Simcoe’s signal the two pieces of cannon were fired simultaneously. Formidable growls were heard in reply. There was no doubt many of the carnivores had been hit. The others (about twenty) rushed out, and Passing near the quartette, were saluted with a fusillade, which struck two mortally. At this moment an enormous tiger jumped on to the group, and Frascolin was struck by so terrible a leap that he rolled for ten paces.

His comrades rushed to his help. They raised him, almost unconscious. But he almost immediately recovered. He had only received a shock. Ah! what a shock!

Meanwhile the caymans were being pursued under the waters of the Serpentine River, but how could they be got rid of with certainty? Fortunately, Hubley Harcourt thought of raising the sluices of the river, and it was possible to attack the saurians under the best conditions, not without success.

The only victim to be regretted was a magnificent dog belonging to Nat Coverley. Seized by an alligator, the poor animal was cut in two by a bite. But a dozen of these saurians had succumbed under the bullets of the militia, and it was possible that Floating Island was definitely delivered from these redoubtable reptiles.

On the whole it had been a good day. Six lions, eight tigers, five jaguars, nine panthers, male and female, were among the beasts slain.

The evening came, and the quartette, including Frascolin, recovered from his shock, had just sat down at the table in the restaurant.

“I should like to believe that we are at the end of our troubles,” said Yvernès.

“Unless this steamer, like a second Noah’s Ark, contained all the animals in creation,” said Pinchinat.

This was not probable, and Athanase Dorémus felt himself sufficiently reassured to return to his house in the Twenty-fifth Avenue. There in the barricaded house he found his old servant in despair at the thought that nothing was left of her old master but a few shapeless fragments.

This night was tranquil enough. Only a few distant roars had been heard on the Larboard Harbour side. It was to be hoped that next day, by proceeding to a general hunt across the country, the destruction of these wild beasts would be complete.

The group of hunters met in the early morning. During the twenty-four hours, it need scarcely be said that Floating Island had remained stationary, all the machinery staff being engaged with the rest.

The squads, each comprising twenty men with magazine rifles, had orders to advance through the island. Colonel Stewart did not consider it advisable to use cannon against the wild beasts, now they had dispersed. Thirteen tracked to the vicinity of Stern Battery fell to his gun. But he had to rescue, not without difficulty, two customs officers from the neighbouring post, who had been knocked down by a tiger and a panther, and had received serious wounds.

This last attack brought up to fifty-three the number of animals killed since the beginning of the day before.

It was four o’clock in the morning. Cyrus Bikerstaff and Commodore Simcoe, Jem Tankerdon and his son, Nat Coverley and the two assistants, escorted by a detachment of militia, were proceeding towards the town hall, where the council were awaiting the reports from the two ports and the two batteries.

At their approach, when they were within a hundred yards of the hall, loud shouts arose. A number of people, women and children, seized with a sudden panic, were running along First Avenue.

Immediately the Governor, Commodore Simcoe, and their companions rushed towards the square, the gate of which ought to have been shut. But by some inexplicable negligence this gate was open, and there could be no doubt that one of the wild beasts — the last perhaps — had entered by it.

Nat Coverley and Walter Tankerdon were the first to run into the square.

Suddenly, while be was within three yards of Nat Coverley, Walter Tankerdon was knocked down by an enormous tiger.

Nat Coverley, having no time to slip a cartridge into his gun, drew the hunting knife at his belt, and jumped to the rescue of Walter at the moment the animal’s claws strusk the young man’s shoulder.

Walter was saved, but the tiger turned and attacked Nat Coverley.

He stabbed the animal with his knife without reaching the heart, and fell under.

The tiger recoiled, his throat roaring, his jaws open, his tongue bleeding —

There was the report of a gun.

It was Jem Tankerdon who had fired.

There was a second report It was the bullet which had exploded in the tiger’s body.

They raised Walter, his shoulder wounded.

As to Nat Coverley, if he was not hurt, he had at least been close to death.

He rose, and advancing towards Jem Tankerdon, said in a solemn voice: “You have saved me — thanks!”

“You have saved my son — thanks!” replied Jem Tankerdon.

And they shook hands in token of a reconciliation which might end in a sincere friendship.

Walter was immediately taken to the mansion in Nineteenth Avenue, where his family had taken refuge; while Nat Coverley regained his house on the arm of Cyrus Bikerstaff.

We need not be astonished if next morning Mrs. Tankerdon visited Mrs. Coverley to express her thanks for the service rendered to Walter, and if Mrs. Coverley visited Mrs. Tankerdon to express her thanks for the service ren« dered Mat Coverley. Let us even say that Miss Coverley accompanied her mother, and was it not natural that both should ask how the young man was progressing?

In fact everything was for the best, and, rid of its formidable visitors, Floating Island could safely resume its voyage towards the Fijis,

CHAPTER VIII.

“HOW many did you say?” asked Pinchinat.

“Two hundred and fifty-five, my friends,” replied Frascolin. “Yes, there are two hundred and fifty-five islands and islets in the Fiji Archipelago.”

“And how does that interest us,” replied Pinchinat, “if the Pearl of the Pacific does not make two hundred and fifty-five stoppages?”

“You will never learn geography!” proclaimed Frascolin.

“And you — you know too much,” replied his Highness.

And that was always the sort of welcome the second violin received when he tried to instruct his recalcitrant comrades.

However, Sebastien Zorn, who listened more willingly, allowed himself to be taken before the map at the casino, on which the position was marked each day. It was easy to follow the itinerary of Floating Island since its departure from Madeleine Bay. This itinerary formed a sort of large S, of which the lower loop curved up to the Fiji group.

. Erascolin showed the violoncellist this collection of islands, discovered by Tasman in 1643 — an archipelago comprised between the sixteenth and twentieth parallels ot south latitude, and between the hundred and seventy-ourth and hundred and seventy-ninth meridians of east longitudes.

“So we are going to take our cumbrous machine among those hundreds of pebbles scattered on the road?” observed Sebastien Zorn.

“Yes, xy old string-fellow,” replied Frascolin, “and if you look with attention — ”

“And shut your mouth,” added Pinchinat. “Why?”

“Because the proverb says that the fly cannot enter a closed mouth!”

“Of what fly are you speaking?”

“The one that stings you whenever you want to break out against Floating Island!”

Sebastfen Zorn shrugged his shoulders disdainfully, and turned to Frascolin. “You were saying?”

“I was saying that to reach the two large islands of Viti-Levu and Vanua-Levu, there are three passages which cross the eastern group, those of Nanuku, La- kemba, and Oneata.”

“To say nothing of the passage where you are smashed into a thousand pieces!” exclaimed Sebastien Zorn. “That w ill be the end of it! Is it possible to navigate such seas with such a town, and a large population in that town? No, it is contrary to the laws of nature!”

“The fly!” retorted Pinchinat. “That is Zorn’s fly; see it!”

In fact, the obstinate violoncellist was always full of these dismal prognostics, and made no attempt to control them.

In this part of the Pacific the first group of the Fijis forms quite a barrier to ships arriving from the East. But there were passages wide enough for Commodore Simcoe to venture to bring Floating Island through them besides those pointed out by Frascolin. Among these islands the most important are the two Levus, situated in the west, and Ono, Ngaloa, Kandavu, &c.

A sea is enclosed within their summits emerged from the depths of the ocean, the Koro Sea, and if this archipelago, discovered by Cook, visited by Bligh in 1789, by Wilson in 1792, is so minutely known, it is because the remarkable voyages of Dumont D'Urville in 1828 and in 1833, of the American Wilkes in 1839, of the English Erskine in 1853, and the *Herald* expedition, under Captain Durham of the British Navy, have enabled them to be charted with a precision that does honour to the hydrographers.

Hence there was no hesitation on the part of Commodore Simcoe. Coming from the south-east, he entered the Voulanga passage, leaving to port the island of that name, in shape like a cut cake served on a coral dish. Next morning Floating Island entered the interior sea, which is protected against the ocean surges by substantial submarine chains.

It need hardly be said that all fears had not been allayed regarding the wild beasts. The Milliardites remained constantly on the alert. Constant expeditions were organized through the woods, fields and waters. No trace of wild beasts was discovered. No growling was heard by day or night.

The most positive result was the complete reconciliation that had been effected between the two sections of the town. After the Coverley-Tankerdon affair, the Starboardite and Larboardite families visited each other, invited each other, received each other. Every evening there was a ball and concert at one of the chief notables', particularly at the mansion in Nineteenth Avenue and the mansion in the Fifteenth. The Quartette Party had more than they could do; the enthusiasm they provoked did not diminish; on the contrary it increased.

At last the great news came one morning while Floating Island was beating with its powerful screws the tranquil surface of this Koro Sea. Jem Tankerdon had gone officially to the house of Nat Coverley, and demanded the hand of Miss Di Coverley for his son Walter. And Nat Coverley had given Miss Coverley's hand to Walter Tankerdon, the son of Jem Tankerdon. The question of dowry had led to no difficulty. It would be two hundred millions for each of the young couple.

"They should have enough to live on — even in Europe," remarked Pinchinat, judiciously.

Felicitations reached both families from all parts. The Governor, Cyrus Bikerstaff, made no attempt to hide his extreme satisfaction. Thanks to this marriage, there would disappear all those causes of rivalry which had menaced the future of Floating Island. The king and queen of Malecarlie were among the first to send their compliments and good wishes. Visiting cards, printed in gold on aluminium, rained into the boxes at the mansions. The journals had paragraph after paragraph regarding the splendours in preparation — such as had never been seen at Milliard City, nor anywhere else on the globe. Cablegrams were sent to Paris with regard to the trousseau. The linendrapers' shops, the establishments of the great dressmakers, the jewellers, received the most extraordinary orders. A special steamer, starting from Marseilles, would come by Suez and the Indian Ocean, bringing these marvels of French industry. The wedding day was to be five weeks from then, on the 27th of February. The tradesmen of Milliard City had their share of profit in the affair. They had - to furnish their contingent to this wedding outfit, and fortunes were to be made out of the orders they received from the nabobs of Floating Island.

There could be no doubt who would organize the entertainments. Calistus Munbar was evidently the man. His state of mind was indescribable when the marriage of Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley was publicly announced. We know how he desired it, how he would have done everything to bring it about. It was the realization of his dream, and as the municipality intended to give him a free hand, rest assured that he would be at the height of his powers in organizing an ultra-marvellous festival.

At the date chosen for the nuptial ceremony, Commodore Simcoe announced in a note to the newspapers that Floating Island would be in that part of the sea between Fin and the New Hebrides. Before then it would stop at Viti-Levu, where the stay would last twelve days — the only one it was proposed to make amid this vast archipelago.

The voyage was delightful. Many whales played on the surface of the sea. With the thousand jets of water from their blowholes, it seemed like an immense basin of Neptune, in comparison with which that of Versailles was but a child’s toy, as Yvernès said. But also in hundreds appeared enormous sharks, escorting Floating Island as if they were following a ship under way.

This portion of the Pacific is the boundary of Polynesia, which here is bordered by Melanesia, in which the group of the New Hebrides is situated.

(These positions are according to the French charts, the rero meridian of which passes through Paris — a meridian which was generally adopted at this period.)

It is cut by the hundred and eightieth degree of longitude — the conventional line which forms the boundary between the two parts of this immense ocean. When they reach this meridian, sailors coming from the east omit a day from their calendar, and, inversely, those coming from the west add one. Without this precaution there would be no concordance of dates. The preceding year Floating Island had not had to make this change, for it had not advanced to the westward beyond this meridian. But this time it had to conform to the rule, and as it came from the east, the 22nd of January had to become the 23rd.

Of the two hundred and fifty-five islands of which the archipelago of Fiji is composed, only a hundred are inhabited. The total population does not exceed a hundred and twenty-eight thousand inhabitants — a very slight density for an extent of twenty-one thousand square kilometres.

Of these islets, mere fragments of atolls, or summits of submarine mountains, fringed with coral, there are none that measure more than a hundred and fifty superficial kilometres. This political domain England has annexed to her colonial empire. If the Fijians have at length decided to submit to a British Protectorate, it is because they were in 1859 threatened with a Tongan invasion, which was checked by the United Kingdom. The archipelago is divided into seventeen districts, administered by the native chiefs, more or less related to the royal family of the last king, Thakumbau.

“Is it the consequence of the English system,” asked Commodore Simcoe, who was talking on this subject with Frascolin, “that the Fijis will be like Tasmania? I do not know, but it is certain that the natives are disappearing. The colony does not prosper, nor does the population increase, as is shown by the numerical inferiority of the women compared to the men.”

“That is a sign of the approaching extinction of a race,” said Frascolin; “and in Europe there are already a few States which this inferiority menaces.”

“Here,” said the commodore, “the natives are really but serfs, like the natives of the neighbouring islands, recruited by the planters for the work of clearing the ground. Diseases decimate them, and in 1875 small-pox swept off more than thirty thousand. But it is an admirable country, as you can see. If the temperature is high in the interior of the islands, it is at least moderate on the shore. The country is very fertile in fruits and vegetables, in trees — cocoanut trees, bananas, etc. There is little more than the trouble of gathering the yams and taros, and the nourishing sap of the palm which produces sago.”

“Sago!” exclaimed Frascolin, “what a remembrance of our ‘ Swiss Family Robinson ‘!”

“As to the pigs and the fowls,” said the commodore, “these animals have multiplied since their importation with extraordinary prolificness. They furnish all the means of subsistence. Unfortunately, the natives are inclined to indolence, although they are intelligent and witty.”

“And as they have high spirits — ” said Frascolin.

« The children amuse themselves,” replied Commodore Simcoe.

In fact, all these natives, Polynesians, Melanesians, and others, are nothing but children.

In approaching Viti-Levu, Floating Island sighted many intermediate islands, such as Vanua-Vatu, Moala, Ngau, without stopping at them.

From all parts came scudding along the coast flotillas of those long outrigger canoes with intersecting bamboos, which serve to maintain the equilibrium of the vessel and carry the cargo. They were gracefully handled, but did not seek to enter Starboard Harbour or Larboard Harbour. Probably they would not have been allowed to on account of the evil reputation of these Fijians. These natives have embraced Christianity, it is true. Since the European missionaries established themselves at Lecumba, in 1835, they have nearly all become Wes- leyans, mingled with a few thousand Catholics. But previously they were so addicted to the practice of cannibalism that perhaps they have not yet quite lost the taste for human flesh. Besides, it is a matter of religion. Their gods love blood. Kindness is regarded among these people as weakness, and even sin. To eat an enemy is to do him honour. They cook the man they despise, but they do not eat him. Children furnished the principal joints at their festivities, and the time is not so distant when King Thakumbau delighted to sit under a tree, from every branch of which hung a human limb reserved for the royal table. Sometimes a tribe — as happened to the Nulocas in Viti-Levu near Namosi — was devoured completely except a few females, one of whom died in 1880 . Decidedly if Pinchinat did not meet on one of these islands the grandchildren of cannibals retaining the customs of their ancestors, he would have to give up asking for local colour in these archipelagoes of the Pacific. . The western group of the Fijis comprises two large isands, Viti-Levu and Vanua-Levu, and two smaller islands, Kandavu and Taviuni. More to the north-west lie the Wassava Islands and the Ronde Passage, by which Commodore Simcoe would make his way out towards the New Hebrides.

On the afternoon of the 25th of January the heights of Viti-Levu appeared on the horizon. This mountainous island is the largest of the archipelago, being a third larger than Corsica. Its peaks run from twelve to fifteen hundred metres above the level of the sea. These are volcanoes, extinct, or rather dormant, and apt to be disagreeable when they wake up. Viti-Levu has an area of six thousand four hundred and seventy-five square kilometres, and is connected with Vanua-Levu, its neighbour to the north, by a submarine barrier of reefs, which were doubtless above water when the land was formed. Above this barrier Floating Island could venture without danger. To the north of Viti-Levu the depths are estimated at from four to five hundred metres, and to the south from five hundred metres to two thousand.

Formerly the capital of the archipelago was Levuka, in the island of Ovalau, to the east of Viti-Levu. Perhaps the offices founded by English houses are still more important than those of Suva, the present capital, in the island of Viti-Levu. But the harbour of the latter has many advantages, being situated at the south-east extremity of the island, between two deltas. The port of call used by steamers in the Fijis occupies the head of Ngalao Bay, at the south of the island of Kandavu, the position of which is the nearest to New Zealand, Australia, and the French islands of New Caledonia and the Loyalties.

Floating Island stopped at the mouth of Suva harbour. The formalities were completed the same day and free pratique was accorded. As the visit would be a source of profit to both colonist, and natives, the Milliardites were sure of an excellent welcome, in which there was probably more interest than sympathy.

Next day, the 26th of January, the tradesmen of Floating Island who had purchases to make or sales to effect went ashore early in the morning. The tourists, and among them our Parisians, were almost as early. Although Pinchinat and Yvernès made fun of Frascolin — the distinguished pupil of Commodore Simcoe — concerning his ethno-geographical studies, they none the less availed themselves of his knowledge. To the questions of his comrades on the inhabitants of Viti-Levu, their customs, their practices, the replies of the second violin were always instructive. Sebastien Zorn did not disdain to refer to him occasionally, and when Pinchinat learnt that these regions were not long ago the principal theatre of cannibalism, he could not restrain a sigh as he said: “Yes — but we shall arrive too late, and you will see that these Fijians, enervated by civilization, have corae down to fricasseed fowl and pigs’ feet *à la* Sainte Mene- hould!”

“Cannibal!” exclaimed Frascolin, “you deserve to have figured on the table of King Thakumbau. Ah! ah! *Entrecote de Pinchinat à la Bordelaise.”*

“Come,” said Sebastien Zorn, “if we are to waste our time in these useless recriminations — ”

“We shall make no progress by a forward movement,” said Pinchinat. “That is the sort of phrase you like, isn’t it, my old Violoncelluloidist? Well, forward, march!”

The town of Suva, built on the right of a little bay, ha3 its buildings scattered on the back of a green hill. It has quays for mooring ships, roads furnished with plank sideways, like the beaches of our large bathing places. The wooden houses have but one floor; a few of them have two floors, but all are cheerful and fresh-looking. In the suburbs the native huts display their gable-ends raised into horns and ornamented with shells. The roofs are substantial, to resist the winter rains from May to October, which fall in torrents. In fact in March, 1871, according to Frascolin, who was very strong on statistics, Mbua, situated in the east of the island, had a rainfall in one day thirty-eight centimetres.

Viti-Levu, like the other islands of the archipelago, is subject to great differences in climate, and the vegetation differs on each shore. On the side exposed to the southeast trades the atmosphere is humid, and magnificent forests cover the soil. On the other side are immense savannahs suitable for cultivation. But it is noticeable that certain trees tend to disappear, among others the sandal-wood, almost entirely exhausted, and also the dakua, a pine peculiar to Fiji.

However, in their promenades, the quartette discovered that the flora of the island is of tropical luxuriance. Everywhere are forests of cocoanut trees and palms, their trunks covered with parasitic orchids, clumps of casuarinas, pandanus, acacias, tree ferns, and in the marshy parts numbers of mangrove trees with roots winding out of the ground. But the cultivation of cotton and tea has not given the results the climate had led people to expect. The soil of Viti-Levu, as in the rest of the group, is clayey and yellowish in colour, formed of volcanic cinders to which decomposition has given the productive qualities.

The fauna is not more varied than in other parts of the Pacific; some forty species of birds, acclimatized parrots and canaries, bats, rats in legions, reptiles of non-venomous species, much appreciated by the natives from a commissariat point of view, lizards, and horrible cockroaches of cannibalistic voracity. But of wild beasts there were none which provoked this sally from Pinchinat.

“Our Governor, Cyrus Bikerstaff, should have kept a few lions, tigers, panthers, crocodiles, and landed these useful carnivores in the Fijis. It would be a curious experiment in acclimatisation.”

The natives, of mixed Polynesian and Melanesian race, still yield some fine examples, less remarkable, however, than those of Samoa and the Marquesas. The men are copper-coloured, almost black, their heads covered with a thick mass of hair, among them being a number of half- breeds, and they are tall and strong. Their clothing is rudimentary enough, oftenest being but mere cotton drawers made of the native fabric called “masi,” produced by a species of mulberry tree, which also produces paper. In its first stage this fabric is quite white, but the Fijians know how to dye it and stripe it, and it is in demand in all the archipelagoes of the Eastern Pacific. It must be added that the men do not disdain to clothe themselves, when opportunity offers, in old European garments sent out from the old clothes stores of the United Kingdom or Germany. A fine field for joking was thus offered to a Parisian, when he saw these Fijians clad in worn-out trousers, a great-coat the worse for age, and even a black coat, which, after many phases of decadence, had come to end its days on the back of a native of Viti-Levu.

“You might make a romance out of one of those coats!” observed Yvernès.

“A romance that might end in a waistcoat!” replied Pinchinat.

The women have the short petticoat and masi jacket, which they wear in a fashion more or less decent. They are well-built, and with the attractions of youth some of them might pass for pretty. But what a detestable habit they have — as have also the men — in plastering their hair with lime so as to form a sort of calcareous hat to preserve themselves against sunstroke. And then they smoke as much as their husbands and brothers the tobacco of the country, which has the odour of burning hay, and when the cigarette is not between their teeth it is stuck into the lobe of their ears in the place where in Europe you have the pendants of diamonds and pearls.

In general these women are reduced to the condition of slaves, doing the hardest of household work, and the time is not distant when, after toiling to encourage the indolence of their husband, they were strangled on his tomb.

On many occasions, during the three days they devoted to their excursions round Suva, our tourists endeavoured to visit the native huts. They were repulsed, not by the hospitality of their owners, but by the abominable odour was given forth. All these natives, rubbed over with ocoa-nut oil, live in promiscuity with the pigs, the fowls, the dogs, the cats, in evil-smelling huts, the choking light being obtained by burning the resinous gum of the dammana. No! They could not stop there. And if they had taken their places at the Fijian fireside, would they not, at the risk of failing in politeness, have had to steep their lips in the bowl of kava, the special Fijian drink? Though extracted from the dried bark of the pepper plant, this pimentoed kava is unpleasing to European palates owing to the way in which it is prepared. Is it not enough to provoke the most insurmountable repugnance? They do not grind their pepper, they chew it, they triturate it through their teeth, then they spit it out into the water in a vase, and offer it you with a savage insistence that will hardly bear refusal. And nothing remains but to thank them by pronouncing these words, which are current in the archipelago, *E mana ndina,* otherwise *amen.*

Do not let us forget the cockroaches which swarm in the huts, the white ants which devastate them, and mosquitoes — mosquitoes in thousands — that can be seen on the walls, on the ground, on the clothes in innumerable bands.

CHAPTER IX.

WHILE our artistes were passing their time in walking about, and taking note of the customs of the archipelago, a few notables of Floating Island had not disdained to enter into communication with the native authorities of the archipelago. The “papalangis,” as strangers are called in these islands, had no fear of being badly received.

During the stay the Tankerdon and Coverley families organized excursions in the neighbourhood of Suva, and in the forests which clothe its heights up to their topmost peaks.

And with regard to this, the superintendent made a very just observation to his friends the quartette.

“If our Milliardites are so fond of these excursions into high altitudes, it shows that Floating Island is not sufficiently undulating. It is too flat, too uniform. But I hope that some day we shall have an artificial mountain, rivalling the loftiest summits of the Pacific. Meanwhile, every time they have an opportunity our citizens are eager to ascend a few hundred feet, and breathe the Pure and refreshing air of space. It meets a want of human nature.”

“Very well,” said Pinchinat. “But a suggestion, my dear Eucalistus! When you build your mountain in sheet steel or aluminium, do not forget to put a nice volcano inside it — a volcano with plenty of fireworks.”

“And why, Mr. Facetious?” replied Calistus Munbar.

“And why not?” replied his Highness As a matter of course Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley took part in these excursions arm-in-arm.

The curiosities of the capital of Viti-Levu were visited their “mbure-kaiou,” the temples of the spirits, and also the place used for the political assemblies. These constructions, raised on a base of dry stones, are composed of plaited bamboos, of beams covered with a sort of vegetable lace-work, of laths ingeniously arranged to support the thatch of the roofs. The tourists went to see the hospital, the botanic garden, laid out like an amphitheatre, behind the town. These walks often lasted until late, and the tourists returned, lantern in hand, as in the good old times.

And Captain Sarol and his Malays and the New Hebrideans embarked at Samoa. What were they doing during this stay? Nothing out of their usual way. They did not go ashore, knowing Viti-Levu and its neighbours, some by having frequented these parts during their coasting cruises, others by having worked there for the planters. They very much preferred to remain on Floating Island, exploring it in every part — town, harbours, park, country, and batteries. A few weeks more, and thanks to the kindness of the company, thanks to Governor Cyrus Bikerstaff these fellows would land in their own country, after a sojourn of five months on Floating Island.

Occasionally our artistes talked to Sarol, who was very intelligent, and spoke English fluently. Sarol spoke to them enthusiastically of the New Hebrides, of the natives of the group, of their way of living, their cooking — which interested his Highness particularly. The secret ambition of Pinchinat was to discover some new dish, the recipe for which he could communicate to the gastronomic societies of Old Europe.

On the 30th of January, Sebastien Zorn and his comrades, at whose disposal the Governor put one of the electric launches of Starboard Harbour, went away with the intention of ascending the course of the Rewa, one of the principal rivers of the island. The captain of the launch, an engineer, and two sailors were on board, with a Fijian pilot. In vain had Athanase Dorémus been asked to join the excursionists; the feeling of curiosity was extinct in the professor of dancing and deportment. And then, during his absence, a pupil might apply, and he would therefore rather not leave the dancing-room.

At six o’clock in the morning, well armed, and furnished with a few provisions, for they would not return until the evening, the launch left the Bay of Suva, and ran along the coast to the bay of the Rewa.

Not only reefs, but sharks showed themselves in great numbers in these parts, and as much care had to be taken of one as of the other.

“Phew!” said Pinchinat. “Your sharks are only saltwater cannibals! I’ll undertake to say that those fellows have lost the taste for human flesh.”

“Do not trust them,” replied the pilot, “any more than you would trust the Fijians of the interior.”

Pinchinat contented himself with shrugging his shoulders. He was getting weary of these pretended cannibals, who did not even become cannibalistic on festival days!

The pilot was thoroughly acquainted with the bay and the course of the Rewa. Up this important river, called also the Wai-Levu, the tide is apparent for a distance of forty-five kilometres, and vessels can go up as far as eighty.

The width of the Rewa exceeds two hundred yards at its mouth. It runs between sandy banks, low on the left, steep on the right, from which the banana and cocoa-nut trees rise luxuriantly from a wide stretch of verdure.

Its name is Rewa-Rewa, conformably to that duplication of the word which is almost general among the people of the Pacific. And, as Yvernès remarked, is this not an Citation of the childish pronunciation one finds In such words as papa, dada, bonbon, etc.? In fact, these natives have barely emerged from childhood.

Ahe true Rewa is formed by the Wai-Levu (the great water) and the Wai-Manu, and its principal mouth bears the name of Wai-Ni-Ki.

After the circuit of the delta, the launch ran past the village of Kamba, half hidden in its basket of flowers. It did not stop here, so as to lose nothing of the flood-tide, nor did it stop at the village of Naitasiri. Besides, at this epoch the village had been declared “taboo,” with its houses, its trees, its inhabitants, up to the waters of the Rewa which bathed its beach. The natives would permit no one to set foot in it.

As the excursionists ran along in front of Naitasiri, the pilot pointed out a tall tree, a tavala, which rose in an angle of the bank.

“And what is there remarkable about that tree?” asked Frascolin.

“Nothing,” replied the pilot, “except that its bark is gashed from its roots to the fork. These indicate the number of human bodies that were cooked there and then eaten.”

“Like the notches of a baker on his sticks,” observed Pinchinat, shrugging his shoulders as a sign of incredulity.

But he was wrong. The Fiji Islands are pre-eminently the country of cannibalism, and, it is necessary to repeat it, these practices are not entirely extinct. The love of good living will keep them alive for a long time yet among the tribes of the interior. Yes, the love of good living! for, in the opinion of the Fijians, nothing is comparable in taste and delicacy to human flesh, which is much superior to beef. If the pilot were to be believed, there was a certain chief, Ra-Undrenudu, who set up stones on his estate, and when he died these stones numbered eight hundred and twenty-two.

“And do you know what these stones indicated?”

“It is impossible for us to guess,” said Yvernès, “even if we apply all our intelligence as instrumentalists!”

“They showed the number of human bodies this chief had devoured.”

“By himself?”

“*By* himself.”

“He was a large eater!” replied Pinchinat, whose opinion was made up regarding these “Fijian fairytales.”

About eleven o’clock a bell rang on the right bank. The village of Naililii, composed of a few straw huts, appeared among the foliage, under the shade of cocoa-nut trees and banana trees. A Catholic mission is established in this village. Could the tourists stop an hour and shake hands with the missionary, a compatriot? The pilot saw no reason why they should not, and the launch was moored to the root of a tree.

Sebastien Zorn and his comrades landed, and they had not walked for two minutes before they met with the Superior of the mission.

He was a man of about fifty, of pleasant face and energetic figure. Happy to be able to welcome Frenchmen, he took them to his hut in the village, which comprises about a hundred Fijians. He insisted that his guests must accept some of the refreshments of the country. He assured them that this did not mean the repugnant kava, but a sort of drink, or rather soup, of agreeable flavour, obtained by cooking the cyrenae, molluscs very abundant on the beaches of the Rewa.

This missionary admitted that it was a hard task to withdraw his faithful from the lord of “bukalo,” that is to say, human flesh. “And as you are going towards the interior, my dear guests,” added he, “be prudent, and keep on your guard.”

“Do you hear that, Pinchinat?” said Sebastien Zorn.

They left a little before the noonday angelus sounded from the bell of the little church. As they proceeded the launch met several canoes laden with bananas. This is the local currency in which the natives pay their taxes. The river banks continued to be bordered with laurels, acacias, citron trees, and cactus with blood-red flowers. Over them the banana and cocoa-nut trees raise their lofty branches laden with bunches, and all this verdure stretches back to the mountains dominated by the peak of Mbugge- Levu.

Among these masses of foliage are one or two European factories, little in keeping with the savage nature of the country. These are sugar factories, fitted up with the best modern machinery, and their products, as a traveller, M. Verschnur, says, “can advantageously bear comparison with the sugars of the Antilles and other colonies.”

About one o’clock the launch reached the end of its voyage on the Rewa. In two hours the ebb would begin, and it was as well to take advantage of it for the return journey. The run down would not take long, as the tide ebbs quickly. The excursionists ought to be back on Floating Island before ten o’clock in the evening.

A little time could be spent here, and it could not be better employed than in visiting the village of Tampoo, the first huts of which were visible about half a mile away.

It was arranged that the engineer and two sailors should remain in charge of the launch, while the pilot piloted his passengers to the village, where the ancient customs were preserved in all their Fijian purity. In this part of the island the missionaries have wasted their trouble and their sermons. There still reign the sorcerers; there still are worked the sorceries, particularly those bearing the complicated name of “Vaka-Ndran-in-Kan-Tacka,” that is to say, “incantation by leaves.” Here the people worship the Katvavous, the gods whose existence had no beginning, and will have no end, and who do not disdain special sacrifices that the governor-general is powerless to prevent, and even to punish.

Perhaps it would have been more prudent not to venture among these suspicious tribes. But our artistes, quite Parisian in their curiosity, insisted on it, and the pilot consented to accompany them, advising them not to get far away from each other.

On entering Tampoo, which consisted of a hundred straw huts, they met some women, real savages, wearing but cotton drawers knotted round their waist: they betrayed no surprise at the sight of the strangers. They were occupied in the preparation of curcuma, made of roots preserved in trenches previously lined with grasses and banana leaves. These roots were taken out, grilled, scraped, pressed into baskets lined with ferns, and the juice which ran out was poured into bamboos. This juice serves as food and pomatum, and in both respects is very widely used.

The partv enterefr the village. There was no welcome on the part of the natives, who were in no hurry to greet the visitors, or to offer them hospitality. The exterior of the huts was not attractive. Considering the odour that issued from them in which that of rancid cocoa-nut oil prevailed, the quartette congratulated themselves that the laws of hospitality were not much honoured here.

However, when they arrived before the habitation of the chief — a Fijian of tall stature, and stern and ferocious look — he advanced towards them amid an escort of natives. His woolly hair was white with lime. He had assumed his ceremonial garb, a striped shirt, a belt round his body, an old carpet slipper on his left foot, and — how did Pinchinat restrain a burst of laughter? — an old blue coat with gold buttons, patched in many places, and its unequal tails flapping against his calves. As he advanced towards the papalangis, the chief stumbled against a stump, lost his equilibrium, and fell to the ground.

Immediately, conformably to the etiquette of the “bale muri,” the whole of the escort fell down flat “in order to take their share in the absurdity of this fall.”

This was explained by the pilot, and Pinchinat approved of the formality as being no more ridiculous than many others in use in European courts — at least in his opinion.

-When the natives had got up, the chief and the pilot exchanged a few sentences in Fijian, of which the quartette did not understand a word. These sentences, translated by the pilot, were merely asking why the strangers had come to the village of Tampoo. The reply being that they wished to visit the village and take a walk round the neighbourhood, permission was given, after an exchange of several questions and replies.

The chief, however, manifested neither pleasure nor displeasure at this arrival of tourists in Tampoo, and at a sign from him the natives returned to their huts.

“After all,” said Pinchinat, “they do not seem to be so very bad.”

“That is no reason for our not being careful,” replied Frascolin.

For an hour our artistes walked about the village without being interfered with by the natives. The chief in his blue coat had gone into his hut, and it was obvious that the visit was treated as a matter of indifference.

After moving about Tampoo without any hut being opened to welcome them, Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès, Pinchinat, Frascolin, and the pilot strolled towards the ruins of some temples, like abandoned huts, which were not far from the dwelling of one of the sorcerers of the place.

This sorcerer, who was seated at his door, gave them anything but an encouraging look, and his gestures appeared to indicate that he certainly was not giving them a blessing.

Frascolin tried to enter into conversation with him through the pilot; but he assumed so repulsive a look, and so threatening an attitude, that they had to abandon any hope of a word from this Fijian porcupine.

Meanwhile, in spite of the advice which had been given him, Pinchinat had strolled off through a thick clump of bananas on the side of a hill.

When Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès and Frascolin had been rebuffed by the sorcerer’s surliness, and were preparing to leave Tampoo, their comrade was out of sight.

The time had come for them to get back to the launch. The tide had begun to ebb, and there were none too many hours for them to run down the Rewa.

Frascolin, uneasy at not seeing Pinchinat, hailed him in a loud voice.

There was no reply.

“Where is he, then?” asked Sebastien Zorn.

“I do not know,” replied Yvernès.

“Did any of you see him go away?” asked the pilot.

No one had seen him.

“Probably he has gone back to the launch by the footpath from the village,” said Frascolin.

“Then he was wrong,” said the pilot “But let us lose no time, and rejoin him.”

They left, not without considerable anxiety. As they went through Tampoo the pilot remarked that not a Fijian was visible. All the doors of the huts were shut. There was no gathering in front of the chief’s house. The women who were occupied in the preparation of curcuma had disappeared. It seemed that the village had been abandoned for some time.

The party hurried along. Frequently they shouted for the absent one, and the absent one did not reply. Had he not, then, got back to the shore where the launch was moored? Or was the launch no longer then in charge of the engineer and two sailors?

There remained but a few hundred yards to traverse. They hurried along, and as soon as they were through the trees saw the launch and the three men at their posts.

“Our comrade?” shouted Frascolin.

“Is he not with you?” replied the engineer.

“No — not for the last half-hour.”

“Has he not come back?” asked Yvernès.

“No.”

“What had become of him? The pilot did not conceal his extreme uneasiness.

“We must return to the village,” said Sebastien Zorn.

We cannot abandon Pinchinat.”

The launch was left in charge of one of the sailors, although it was dangerous to do so. But it was better to return to Tampoo in force and well armed this time. If they had to search all the huts, they would not leave the village, they would not return to Floating Island until they had found Pinchinat.

They went back along the road to Tampoo. The same solitude in the village and its surroundings. Where had the population gone? Not a sound was heard in the streets, and the huts were empty.

There could be no doubt as to what had happened. Pinchinat had ventured into the banana wood; he had been seized and dragged away — where? As to the fate reserved for him by these cannibals whom he derided, it was only too easy to imagine it! A search in the environs of Tampoo produced no result. How could you find a track through this forest region, which is known only to the Fijians? Besides, was it not to be feared that they would try to capture the launch, guarded only by a single sailor? If that misfortune happened, all hope of rescuing Pinchinat was at an end, the safety of his companions would be endangered.

The despair of Frascolin, Yvernès, and Sebastien Zorn was indescribable. What could be done? The pilot and the engineer did not know what to do.

Frascolin, who had preserved his coolness, said, —

“We must return to Floating Island.”

“Without our comrade?” asked Yvernès.

“Do you think so?” added Sebastien Zorn.

“I do not see what else to do,” replied Frascolin. “The governor of Floating Island should be informed; the authorities of Viti-Levu should be communicated with and asked to take action — ”

“Yes; let us go!” said the pilot, “and if we are to take advantage of the tide, we have not a minute to lose.”

“It is the only way of saving Pinchinat,” said Frascolin, “if it is not too late.”

The only way, in fact.

They left Tampoo, fearing that they might not find the launch at her post. In vain the name of Pinchinat was shouted by all! And if they had been less excited they might have seen among the bushes a few savage Fijians watching their departure.

The launch had not been interfered with. The sailor had seen no one prowling on the banks of the Rewa.

It was with inexpressible sadness that Sebastien Zorn, Frascolin and Yvernès decided to take their places in the boat. They hesitated; they shouted again. But they had to go, as Frascolin said, and they were right in doing so.

The engineer set the dynamos going, and the launch with the tide under her flew down the Rewa at prodigious speed.

At six o’clock the western point of the delta was rounded, and half an hour afterwards they were alongside the pier at Starboard Harbour.

In a quarter of an hour Frascolin and his two comrades had by means of the tram reached Milliard City, and were at the town hall.

As soon as he had heard what had occurred, Cyrus Bikerstaff started for Suva, and there he asked for an interview with the governor-general of the archipelago, which was granted him.

When this official learned what had passed at Tampoo, he admitted that it was a very serious matter. This Frenchman was in the hands of one of the tribes of the interior who evaded all authority.

“Unfortunately,” he added, “we cannot do anything before to-morrow. Our boats cannot get up to Tampoo against the tide. Besides, it is indispensable for us to go in force, and the best way would be to go through the bush.”

“Quite so,” replied Cyrus Bikerstaff; “but it is not tomorrow, but to-day — this very moment — that we should start.”

“I have not the necessary men at my disposal,” said the governor.

“We have them, sir,” replied Cyrus Bikerstaff. “Under the orders of one of your officers who know the country — ”

“Very well, sir, you can start at once.”

Half an hour afterwards, a hundred men, sailors and militia, landed at Suva, under the orders of Commodore Simcoe, who had asked to take the command of the expedition. The superintendent, Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès, Frascolin, were at his side. A detachment of the Viti- Levu police went with them.

The expedition started into the bush under the guidance of the pilot, who knew these difficult regions of the interior. They went the shortest way, and at a rapid rate, so as to reach Tampoo as quickly as possible.

It was not necessary to go as far as the village. About an hour after midnight orders were given for the column to halt.

In the deepest part of an almost impenetrable thicket the glare of a fire was noticed. Doubtless the natives of Tampoo were gathered here, the village being within half an hour’s march to the east.

Commodore Simcoe, the pilot, Calistus Munbar, the three Parisians, went on in front.

They had not gone a hundred yards before they stopped.

In the light of the fire, surrounded by a tumultuous crowd of men and women, Pinchinat, half naked, was tied to a tree, and the Fijian chief was advancing towards him axe in hand.

“Forward! Forward!” shouted Commodore Simcoe to his sailors and militia.

Sudden surprise and well-grounded terror on the part of the natives, on whom the detachment spared neither fire nor steel. In a moment the place was deserted, and the whole band had dispersed under the trees.

Pinchinat, detached from the tree, fell into the arms of his friend Frascolin.

How can we describe the joy of these artistes, these brothers — in which were mingled a few tears, and also well-merited reproaches.

“But, you wretch,” said the violoncellist, “what possessed you to go away from us?”

“Wretch as much as you like, my old Sebastien,” replied Pinchinat, “but do not sit upon an alto as poorly clothed as I am at this moment. Pass me my clothes, so that I can present myself before the authorities in a more suitable fashion.”

His clothes were found at the foot of a tree, and he put them on with the greatest coolness imaginable. Then when he was “presentable “he went to shake hands with the commodore and superintendent.

“Well,” said Calistus Munbar, “do you now believe in the cannibalism of the Fijians?”

CHAPTER X.

THE departure of Floating Island was fixed for the 2nd of February. The day before the excursions ended, the different tourists returned to Milliard City. The Pinchinat affair created a great sensation. All the Pearl of the Pacific was interested in his Highness, for the Concert Party were held in universal esteem. The council of notables accorded its entire approbation to the energetic conduct of the governor, Cyrus Bikerstaff. The newspapers warmly congratulated him. Pinchinat became the celebrity of the day. Could you have an alto terminating his artistic career in the stomach of a Fijian? It was cheerfully admitted that the natives of Viti-Levu had not absolutely renounced their cannibalistic tastes. After all, human flesh was so good, according to them, and this fellow, Pinchinat, was so appetizing!

Floating Island started at daybreak and moved off towards the New Hebrides. This would take it about twelve degrees or two hundred leagues out of the way; but it could not be avoided if Captain Sarol and his companions were to be landed in the New Hebrides. No one regretted it, however. Everybody was glad to be of service to these brave fellows who had shown so much courage in the proceedings against the wild beasts. And they appeared to be so satisfied at being taken home in this way after such a long absence! Added to which it would be an opportunity of visiting a group with which the Milliardites were not yet acquainted.

The voyage proceeded with intentional slowness. It was in these regions between the Fijis and the New Hebrides in one hundred and seventy degrees thirty-five minutes of east longitude, and nineteen degrees thirteen minutes south latitude, that the steamer from Marseilles chartered by the Tankerdon and Coverley families was to meet Floating Island.

The marriage of Walter and Miss Coverley was more than ever the subject of general interest. How could anything else be thought of? Calistus Munbar had not a minute to himself. He was preparing and organizing the different elements of a festival that would make its mark in the annals of Floating Island. That he grew thin over the task need surprise nobody.

Floating Island did not move more than from twenty to twenty-five kilometres a day. It came within sight of Viti, whose superb banks are bordered with luxuriant forests of sombre verdure. It took three days traversing the tranquil waters from Wanara to Ronde. The passage to which this name is given on the charts afforded a wide road for the Pearl of the Pacific. A number of terrified whales collided with the steel hull, which trembled at the blows. But the plates of the compartments held firm and there were no damages.

At length in the afternoon of the sixth, the last summits of Fiji disappeared below the horizon. At this moment Commodore Simcoe left the Polynesian for the Melanesian region of the Pacific.

During the three next days, Floating Island continued to drift towards the west, after reaching the nineteenth degree of south latitude. On the 10th of February it was in the locality where it had been arranged for the steamer from Europe to meet it. The point marked on the charts displayed in Milliard City was known to all. The lookouts at the observatory were on the alert. The horizon was swept by hundreds of telescopes, and as soon as the ship was signalled — all the population were expectant — was not this as it were the prologue of the drama the people were so eager for, the marriage of Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley?

Floating Island had only to remain stationary, to keep in position against the currents of these seas shut in by archipelagoes. Commodore Simcoe gave his orders accordingly, and his officers saw that they were carried out.

“The position is decidedly most interesting!” said Yvernès.

This was during the two hours’ rest that he and his comrades habitually allowed themselves after luncheon.

“Yes,” replied Frascolin, “and we shall have no reason to regret this campaign on Floating Island — whatever friend Zorn may think.”

“Wait until it is over,” said the violoncellist, “and when we have pocketed the fourth instalment of the salary we have earned.”

“Well,” said Yvernès, “the company has paid us three since our departure, and I very much approve of what Frascolin, our worthy accountant, has done in sending this large sum to the bank at New York.”

In fact the worthy accountant had deemed it wise to pay the money through the bankers of Milliard City into one of the best banks in the Union. This was not out of any distrust, but because a bank on shore seemed to offer more security than one floating over five or six thousand metres of Pacific water.

It was during this conversation, amid the scented wreaths of smoke from pipes and cigars, that Yvernès was led to make the following observation, —

“The marriage festivities promise to be splendid, my friends. Our superintendent is sparing neither imagination nor pains. He will have showers of dollars, and the fountains of Milliard City will flow with generous wine, I have no doubt. But do you know what is wanting about this ceremony?”

“A cataract of liquid gold flowing from rocks of diamonds,” exclaimed Pinchinat.

“No,” replied Yvernès, “a cantata.”

“A cantata?” asked Frascolin.

“Undoubtedly,” said Yvernès; “there will be music, we shall play our most favourite pieces, appropriate to the circumstances, but if there is no cantata, no nuptial song, no epithalamium in honour of the young couple — ”

“Why not?” said Frascolin. “If you, Yvernès, will throw together a few lines of unequal length with a rhyme here and there, Sebastien Zorn, who has had experience as a composer, can easily set your words to music.”

“Excellent idea!” said Pinchinat.

“That will suit you, old growler! Something matrimonial, you know, with plenty of *spiccatos* and *allegros* and *molto agitatos* and a delirious *coda* — at five dollars a note.”

“No; for nothing this time,” said Frascolin.

“It shall be the Quartette Party’s offering to the nabobs of Floating Island.”

It was agreed upon, and the violoncellist declared himself ready to implore the inspiration of the God of Music if the God of Poetry would pass his inspiration into the heart of Yvernès.

And it was from this noble collaboration that there originated the Cantata of Cantatas, in imitation of the Song of Songs, in honour of the union of the Tankerdons and the Coverleys.

During the afternoon of the 10th, a report got about that a large steamer was in sight, coming from the north-east. Its nationality was unknown, as it was still ten miles off when the shades of twilight sank upon the sea.

The steamer seemed to be coming at full speed, and there was no doubt it was making for Floating Island. Probably it would not come alongside until sunrise.

The news produced an indescribable effect. All the feminine imaginations were excited at the thought of the marvels of jewellery and fashion brought by this ship, which had been transformed into a huge wedding basket, of five or six hundred horse power.

There was no mistake as to the steamer being bound for Floating Island. Early in the morning she had rounded the jetty of Starboard Harbour, and displayed the flag of the Floating Island Company.

Suddenly another item of news came through the tele- phones to Milliard City. The flag of this vessel was awaft.

What then had happened? An accident — a death on board? That would be a sorry omen for the marriage that was to assure the future of Floating Island.

But there was something else. The steamer in question was not the one expected, and it did not come from Europe. It came from America, from Madeleine Bay. Besides, the steamer laden with the nuptial treasures was not behind time. The wedding was fixed for the 27th, and it was now only the 11th.

What, then, did this ship mean? What news did it bring? Why was its flag awaft? Why had the Company sent it off to the New Hebrides, where they knew it would fall in with Floating Island?

Had they to communicate any message of exceptional gravity to the Milliardites?

Yes, and this was soon to be known.

The steamer had hardly come alongside than a passenger landed.

He was one of the superior officers of the Company, who declined to reply to the questions of the numerous and impatient crowd that had assembled on the pier of Starboard Harbour.

A tram was ready to start, and without losing a moment, the man jumped into one of the cars.

Ten minutes later he had reached the town hall, and demanded an audience of the Governor “on urgent business” — an audience which was immediately granted.

Cyrus Bikerstaff received the visitor in his office, the door of which was closed.

A quarter of an hour had not elapsed before each of the members of the council of thirty notables was summoned telephonically to a meeting of urgency in the assembly room.

Meanwhile, imagination ran riot in the harbour and the town, and apprehension, following on curiosity, was at its height.

At twenty minutes to eight the council had assembled under the presidency of the Governor. The visitor then made the following declaration; —

“On the 23rd of January, the Floating Island Company, Limited, stopped payment, and William T. Pomering was appointed liquidator, with full powers to do his best for the interests of the said Company.”

William T. Pomering, on whom these functions had devolved, was the new arrival.

The news spread, and, in truth, did not provoke as much excitement as it had produced in Europe. Why should it? Floating Island, as Pinchinat said, was a detached piece of the United States of America. There was nothing in a failure to astonish Americans, still less to overwhelm them. Was it not one of the phases natural to business, an incident acceptable and accepted? The Milliardites looked at the matter with their habitual coolness. The Company had gone under. Well? That might happen to the most respectable financial companies. Were its liabilities considerable? Very considerable; for, according to the liquidator, they amounted to five hundred million dollars. And what had caused this failure? Speculations — insane, if you please, as they had turned out badly — but which might have succeeded — an immense undertaking for founding a new town on land in Arkansas, which had been swallowed up in a geological depression that no one could have foreseen. After all, it was not the Company’s fault, and if the land came up again, the shareholders might come up again at the same time. Solid as Europe appeared, it might go down some day in a similar way. But there was nothing of that sort to be feared with regard to Floating Island, and did not that triumphantly show its superiority over estates on the continents or terrestrial islands!

The pressing point was to act. The assets of the Company consisted of the value of Floating Island, hull, works, hotels, houses, country, flotilla — in a word, all that was borne by the floating apparatus designed by William Tersen, all that was connected with it, and the establishments at Madeleine Bay into the bargain. Was it advisable for a new company to be formed to take over the assets by arrangement? Yes. There was no hesitation on this point, and the proceeds of the sale would be applied to the liquidation of the Company's debts. But in forming this new company, would it be necessary to apply to outside sources? Were not the Milliardites rich enough to pay for Floating Island out of their own pockets? From mere tenants would it not be preferable to become owners of this Pearl of the Pacific?

That there were millions in the pocket-books of the members of the council of notables we know. And so they were of opinion that it was advisable to buy Floating Island, and without delay. Had the liquidator power to treat? He had. If the Company could realize without delay the sum required for its liquidation, the money must come from the notables of Milliard City, among whom were some of the largest shareholders. Now that the rivalry had ceased between the two principal families and the two sections of the town, the matter could be easily managed. Among the Anglo-Saxons of the United States there is no delay in business matters. The money was at once forthcoming. In the opinion of the notables there was no need to appeal to the public. Jem Tankerdon, Nat Coverley, and a few others offered four hundred million dollars. There was no discussion as to the price. It could be taken or left — and the liquidator took it.

The council met at thirteen minutes past eight in the room at the town hall. When it separated at forty-seven minutes past nine, the ownership of Floating Island had passed into the hands of the two richest Milliardites and a few of their friends under the name of Jem Tankerdon, Nat Coverley & Co.

Just as the news of the Company's failure had caused no emotion among the population of Floating Island, neither did the news of its acquisition by the chief notables. It seemed only natural, and if it had been necessary to raise a more considerable sum, the money would have been there in a moment. It was a great satisfaction to the Milliardites to feel that they were at home, or at least that they were no longer dependent on an outside company. And so the Pearl of the Pacific, as represented by all classes, conveyed its thanks to the two heads of the families who had so well understood the general feeling.

That very day a meeting was held in the park, and a motion to this effect carried amid a triple round of cheers. Delegates were nominated, and a deputation sent to the Coverley and Tankerdon mansions.

The deputation was graciously received, and departed with the assurance that nothing would be changed with regard to the regulations, usages, and customs of Floating Island. The administration would remain as it was. All the functionaries would be retained in their functions, and all the employés in their employ.

And how could it be otherwise?

Hence it resulted that Commodore Ethel Simcoe remained in charge of the navigating branch, having the chief direction of the movements of Floating Island, conformably to the itineraries decided on by the council of notables. The same as regards Colonel Stewart and the command of the militia. There was no change in the observatory, and the King of Malecarlie continued to be astronomer. Nobody was discharged from the place he occupied at the ports, at the works, or in the municipal administration. Athanase Dorémus was not even relieved of his useless functions, although pupils obstinately declined to attend the classes in dancing and deportment.

There was no change in the arrangements with the Quartette Party, who, to the end of the voyage, would continue to draw the unheard-of salary that had been promised at their engagement.

“These people are extraordinary,” said Frascolin, when he learnt that mattero had been arranged to the general satisfaction.

“That is because they have plenty of money,” said Pinchinat.

“Perhaps we might take advantage of this change of proprietors to withdraw from our engagement,” observed Sebastien Zorn, who could not shake off his absurd prejudice against Floating Island.

“Withdraw!” exclaimed his Highness. “Let me see you try!”

And with his left hand, opening and closing his fingers as if he were stopping the fourth string, he threatened to give the violoncellist one of those blows of the fist which attain a speed of eight metres and a half in a second.

But a change had to take place in the position of the Governor. Cyrus Bikerstaff, being the direct representative of the *Floating Island Company*, considered that he ought to resign, and under the circumstances the determination appeared reasonable. His resignation was accepted, but in terms most flattering to the Governor. His two assistants, Barthélémy Ruge and Hubley Harcourt, half ruined by the failure of the company, in which they were large shareholders, intended to leave Floating Island by one of the next steamers.

At the same time Cyrus Bikerstaff agreed to remain at the head of the municipal administration until the end of the voyage.

Thus was accomplished without noise, without discussion, without trouble, without rivalry, this important financial transformation, and the business was so wisely, so quickly completed, that that very day the liquidator was able to re-embark, taking with him the signatures of the principal purchasers and the guarantee of the council of notables.

As to the personage of such prodigious consideration known as Calistus Munbar, superintendent of the fine arts and amusements of the incomparable Pearl of the Pacific, he was simply confirmed in his office and emoluments, and, really, could a successor have been found to this irreplaceable man?

“Come!” said Frascolin, “everything is for the best, the future of Floating Island is assured; there is nothing more to fear.”

“We shall see!” murmured the obstinate violoncellist.

Under these conditions, then, the marriage of Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley would take place. The two families would be united by pecuniary interests, which in America, as elsewhere, form the strongest social ties. What assurance of prosperity for the citizens of Floating Island! Now it belonged to the Milliardites, it would seem more independent than ever, more mistress of its destinies. Before, a cable had attached it to Madeleine Bay, in the United States — now the cable was broken!

At present everything was flourishing.

Is it necessary to insist on the happiness of the parties in question, to express the inexpressible, to depict the happiness that radiated around them? What appeared but a marriage of policy was really a love match. Both Walter and Di loved each other with an affection into which interest in no way entered. They both had the qualities which would assure them the happiest of lives. This Walter had a soul of gold, and Miss Di's was of the same metal — figuratively speaking, be it understood, and not in the sense that their millions might justify. They were made for one another, and never was this somewhat hackneyed phrase more strictly true. They counted the days, they counted the hours, which separated them from this longed-for date of the 27th of February. They regretted one thing, that Floating Island did not move towards the hundred and eightieth meridian, when, coming from the west, it would have to eliminate twenty-four hours from its calendar. Their happiness might be advanced a day. No! It was in sight of the New Hebrides that the ceremony was to take place, and all they could do was to resign themselves to it.

But the ship lad en with all the marvels of Europe had not yet arrived. Here was a wealth of things with which they would willingly have dispensed. What need had they of these quasi-regal magnificences? They mutually gave each other their love — what more could they give?

But the families and the friends and the people of Floating Island desired that this ceremony should be surrounded with extraordinary brilliancy. And so glasses were obstinately levelled at the eastern horizon. Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley even offered a handsome prize to whoever first sighted this steamer, whose propeller could never propel fast enough for the public impatience.

Meanwhile the programme of the festivities was carefully elaborated. It comprised games, receptions, the double ceremony at the Protestant temple and the Catholic cathedral, the gala evening at the town hall, the festival in the park. Calistus Munbar had an eye for everything, he was everywheïe, he was indefatigable, it might even be said he was ruining his health. What would you have? His temperament drove him ahead, and you could no more stop him than you could stop an express train.

The cantata was ready. Yvernès, the poet, and Sebastien Zorn, the musician, proved worthy of each other. This cantata would be sung by the choral masses of an orpheonic society founded expressly for the purpose. The effect would be very grand when it was heard in the square of the observatory, electrically lighted, at the fall of night. Then would come the appearance of the young couple before the officer of the civil power, and the religious marriage would be celebrated at midnight amid the fairy surroundings of Milliard City.

At last the expected ship was signalled in the offing. It was one of the look-outs at Starboard Harbour who won the prize, which was worth a respectable number of dollars.

It was nine o’clock in the morning of the 19th of February when the steamer came into harbour, and the landing at once began.

Useless to give in detail the names of the articles, jewels, dresses, objects of art, which composed this nuptial cargo. Suffice it to know that they were on view in the vast saloons of the Coverley mansion, and the show was an unprecedented success. The whole population of Milliard City wanted to inspect these marvels. That numbers of people extraordinarily rich might obtain such magnificent products at a price may be true; but we must also take into account the taste and artistic feeling which had presided at their selection, and that could not be sufficiently admired. If any one is anxious to see a list of the said articles, he will find them in the *Starboard Chronicle* and *New Herald* of the 21st and 22nd of February. If they are not satisfied at that, it is because absolute satisfaction does not exist in this world.

“Fichtre!” said Yvernès, when he came away from the saloons in Fifteenth Avenue in company with his three comrades.

“Fichtre!” said Pinchinat, “appears to me to be the correct expression. It intimates that you would like to marry Miss Coverley without her dowry — for herself alone.”

As to the two young people, the truth is that they took but little notice of this stock of masterpieces of art and fashion.

After the steamer’s arrival, Floating Island resumed its westerly course so as to reach the New Hebrides. If one of the islands was sighted before the 27th, Captain Sarol would be landed with his companions, and Floating Island would begin its return journey.

The Malay captain was very familiar with these regions of the Western Pacific, and this made the task of navigating an easy one. By request of Commodore Simcoe, who had secured his services, he remained on duty at the observatory tower. As soon as the first heights appeared nothing would be easier than to approach the island of Erromango, one of the most easterly of the group — which would enable them to avoid the numerous reefs of the New Hebrides.

Was it chance, or was it that Captain Sarol, desirous of being present at the marriage festivities, took the Island along so slowly that the first islands were not signalled until the morning of the 27th of February — the very day fixed for the wedding.

It mattered little, however. The marriage of Walter Tankerdon and Di Coverley would be none the less happy for having been celebrated in view of the New Hebrides, and it gave so much pleasure to these brave Malays — and they made no secret of it — who would be free to take part in the festivities on Floating Island.

Several islets were first sighted and passed according to the very precise indications of Captain Sarol, and Floating Island then steered for Erromango, leaving to the south the heights of Tanna.

In these regions Sebastien Zorn, Frascolin, Pinchinat, and Yvernès were not far — three hundred miles at the outside — from the French possessions in this part of the Pacific, the Loyalty Islands and New Caledonia, that penitentiary situated at the antipodes of France.

Erromango is much wooded in the interior, undulated with many hills, at the foot of which extend wide cultivable plateaux. Commodore Simcoe stopped within a mile of Cook Bay, on the eastern coast. It was not prudent to approach nearer, as the coral reefs ran half a mile out to sea at the water level. The Governor’s intention was not to remain stationary off this island, nor to stay at any other island in the Archipelago. After the festivities the Malays would land, and Floating Island would steer towards the Equator, on the way to Madeleine Bay.

It was one o’clock in the afternoon when Floating Island remained stationary.

By order of the authorities every one had a holiday, even the sailors and militiamen, with the exception of the customs officers on duty along the coast.

Needless to say the weather was magnificent, and the sea-breeze refreshing. According to the usual expression, “The sun shone on them.”

“Positively,” said Pinchinat, “this haughty disc appears to be at the orders of the shareholders! They will ask him, as Joshua did, to make the day longer, and he will obey them! O power of gold!”

We need not enlarge on the different items of the sensational programme that had been drawn up by the superintendent. At three o’clock all the inhabitants, those of the country as well as those of the town and the forts, flocked into the park along the banks of the Serpentine. The notables mixed familiarly with the populace. The sports were carried on with an enthusiasm which might perhaps be accounted for by the value of the prizes. Dances were organized in the open air. The most brilliant was given in one of the large halls of the casino, in which the young people danced with much grace and animation. Yvernès and Pinchinat took part in these dances, and yielded to none in their duties as partners to the prettiest of the Milliardites. Never had his Highness been so amiable, never had he shown so much wit, never had he such a success. All the Tankerdons and Coverleys were there, and the graceful sisters of the bride seemed to be very happy at her happiness. Miss Coverley walked about on Walter’s arm, in which there was nothing strange considering that they were citizens by birth of free America. They were applauded, they were offered flowers, compliments were bestowed on t.\em, which they received with perfect affability.

And during the hours that followed refreshments were served in profusion, so that nothing should interfere with the people’s good humour.

When night came, the park was resplendent with the electric fires that the aluminium moons poured down in torrents. The sun had wisely disappeared below the horizon. Would he not have been humiliated by these artificial effluences which made the night as bright as the day!

The cantata was sung between nine and ten o’clock, with such success as neither poet nor musician had ever hoped for. Perhaps, at this moment, the violoncellist felt inclined to withdraw his unjust prejudices against the Pearl of the Pacific.

Eleven o’clock struck, and a long procession advanced towards the town hall. Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley were walking in the midst of their relatives. The whole population accompanied them along First Avenue.

Governor Cyrus Bikerstaff was waiting in the grand saloon of the town hall. The finest of all the marriages it had been given him to celebrate during his administrative career, was about to be accomplished.

Suddenly shouts were heard towards the outer quarter of the Larboard section.

The procession stopped in the middle of the avenue.

Almost immediately with these shouts, which increased, detonations were heard.

A moment afterwards some customs officers — many of them wounded — ran into the square opposite the town hall.

Anxiety was at its height. Through the crowd ran that unreasoning fear which precedes an unknown danger.

Cyrus Bikerstaff appeared on the steps of the town hall, followed by Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart, and the notables, who had just joined them.

To the questions put to them, the customs officers replied that Floating Island had just been invaded by a band of New Hebrideans — three or four thousand of them — and that Captain Sarol was at their head.

CHAPTER XI.

SUCH was the outbreak of the abominable conspiracy prepared by Captain Sarol with the concurrence of the Malays rescued with him by Floating Island, the New Hebrideans embarked at Samoa, and the natives of Erromango and the neighbouring islands. What would it end in? No one could say, considering the conditions under which this sudden and terrible attack was made.

The New Hebridean group comprises at least a hundred and fifty islands, which, under the protection of England, forms a geographical dependency of Australia. Nevertheless, here, as at the Solomon Islands, situated in the north-west of the same regions, this question of protectorate is an apple of discord between France and the United Kingdom. And again, the United States do not look favourably on the establishment of European colonies in an ocean of which they dream of claiming the exclusive enjoyment.

The population of the New Hebrides is composed of negroes and Malays of Kanaka origin. But the character of these natives, their temperament, their instincts, differ according as they belong to the northern or southern islands — which permits of the archipelago being divided into two groups.

In the northern group at Santo Island at Saint Philip Bay, the natives are of a higher type, their colour not so dark’ and their hair not so woolly. The men, short and strong, gentle and peaceful, rarely attack the business establishments or European ships. The same may be said regarding Vaté or Sandwich Island, in which most of the villages are flourishing, among others, Port Vila, the capital of the archipelago — which also bears the name of Franceville — where our colonists avail themselves of the riches of an admirable soil, luxuriant pasturages, fields adapted for cultivation, land suitable for plantation of coffee, bananas, cocoanuts, and the lucrative industry of coprah-making. In this group the customs of the natives have completely changed since the arrival of the Europeans. Their moral and intellectual level has been raised. Thanks to the efforts of the missionaries, the scenes of cannibalism, so frequent formerly, have ceased to exist. Unfortunately the Kanaka race is disappearing, and it is only too evident that it will finish by becoming extinct, to the detriment of this northern group, in which it has been transformed by the contact of European civilization.

But these regrets would be misplaced with regard to the southern islands of the archipelago. And it was not without reason that Captain Sarol had chosen this group for his criminal attempt on Floating Island. On these islands the natives remain veritable Papuans, and may be relegated to the lowest scale of humanity, at Tanna as at Erromango. Concerning this last, an old sandal-wood dealer remarked to Doctor Hayers, “If this island could speak, it would tell things that would make the hair stand on your head.”

In fact, the race of these Kanakas of inferior origin has not been improved by Polynesian blood, as in the northern islands. At Erromango, of ten thousand five hundred inhabitants, the English missionaries, five of whom have been massacred since 1839, have converted only half. The other half remains Pagan. Besides, converted or not, they all still represent those savage natives, who deserve their evil reputation, although they are of shorter stature and less robust constitution than those of Santo Island and Sandwich Island. And hence the serious dangers against which it is necessary to warn tourists venturing into the southerly group.

We may mention a few examples. Fifty years ago the brig *Aurore* was piratically attacked, and there were severe repressive measures in consequence on the part of France. In 1869 the missionary Gordon was killed by tomahawks. In 1875 the crew of an English ship was treacherously attacked and massacred, and then eaten by cannibals. In 1894, in the neighbouring Louisiade Archipelago, at Rossel Island, a French merchant and his workmen, and the captain of a Chinese ship and his crew, perished under the blows of cannibals. Finally the English cruiser *Royalist* was forced to undertake a campaign to punish these savage people for having massacred a great number of Europeans. And as Pinchinat was being told this story, he, who had recently escaped from the terrible molars of the Fijians, forbore to shrug his shoulders.

Such were the people among whom Captain Sarol had recruited his accomplices. He had promised them the pillage of this opulent Pearl of the Pacific, not an inhabitant of which was to be spared. Of these savages, who were awaiting his appearance at the approaches to Erromango, some had come from the neighbouring islands, separated by narrow arms of the sea; principally from Tanna, which is within thirty-five miles to the south. From here had come the sturdy natives of the district of Wanissi, savage worshippers of the god Teapolo, and whose nudity is almost complete, the natives of Plage Noire, of Sangalli, the most formidable and the most dreaded of the archipelago.

But although the northern group is relatively less savage, it does not follow that no contingent from there had placed itself under Captain Sarol. To the north of Sandwich Island there is the island of Api, with its eighteen thousand inhabitants, where they eat their prisoners, the body of which is reserved for the young people, the arms and thighs for the full-grown men, the intestines for the dogs and pigs. There is the island of Paama with its ferocious tribes, who yield in nothing to the natives of Api. There ls the island of Mallicolo, with its cannibal Kanakas.

There is finally Aurora Island, one of the worst of the archipelago, in which no white man lives, and in which, a few years before, had been massacred the crew of the French coaster. It was from these different islands that reinforcements had come to Captain Sarol.

As soon as Floating Island appeared, as soon as it was within a few cables' lengths of Erromango, Captain Sarol had given the signal expected by the natives.

In a few minutes the rocks at the water level had given passage to three or four thousand savages.

The danger was most serious, for these New Hebrideans let loose on Milliard City would recoil from no attempt, from no violence. They had the advantage of surprise, and were armed not only with long javelins tipped with bone, which make very dangerous wounds, and with arrows poisoned with a sort of vegetable venom, but with Snider rifles, the use of which has greatly spread in the archipelago.

At the beginning of this affair, which had been a long time in preparation — for it was Sarol who was marching at the head of the assailants — the militia, the sailors, the functionaries, every man in a fit state to fight, was called upon.

Cyrus Bikerstaff, Commodore Simcoe, and Colonel Stewart were quite equal to the occasion. The King of Malecarlie had offered his services. Although he was no longer in the vigour of youth, he at least had courage. The natives were still at Larboard Harbour, where the officer of the port was trying to organize resistance. But no doubt the bands would not delay to precipitate themselves on the town.

To begin with, orders were given to shut the gates of the enclosure round Milliard City, in which almost the whole population had assembled for the marriage festivities.

That the country and park would be ravaged was to be expected. That the two harbours and the electrical works would be devastated was to be feared. That the batteries at the Prow and Stern would be destroyed, there was nothing to prevent. The greatest misfortune would be that the artillery of Floating Island would be turned against the town, and it was not impossible that the Malays knew how to use it.

First of all, at the King of Malecarlie’s proposal, most of the women and children were sent to the town hall. This vast municipal hotel was plunged in profound obscurity, as was the entire island, for the electrical apparatus had ceased working, owing to the engineers having to escape from the assailants.

However, by Commodore Simcoe’s efforts, the arms deposited at the town hall were distributed to the militia and the sailors, and there was no scarcity of ammunition. Leaving Di with Mrs. Tankerdon and Mrs. Coverley, Walter came to join the group, which now included Jem Tankerdon, Nat Coverley, Calistus Munbar, Pinchioat, Yvernès, Frascolin, and Sebastien Zorn.

“Well,” murmured the violoncellist, “it seems as though this was to be the end of it.”

“But it is not the end of it!” exclaimed the Superintendent. “No I it is not the end; and it is not our dear Floating Island which will succumb to a handful of Kanakas!”

Well spoken, Calistus Munbar! We can understand what rage devoured you at the thought of these rascally New Hebrideans interrupting so well-organized a festival! Yes! he must hope to repulse them. Unfortunately they were not superior in number, and they had not the advantage of the offensive.

The reports of guns were heard in the distance, in the direction of both harbours. Captain Sarol had begun by interfering with the working of the screws, without which Floating Island could not get away from Erromango, which was his basis of operations.

The Governor, the King of Malecarlie, Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart, united in a committee of defence, had at first thought of making a sortie. No, that would be to sacrifice a number of the defenders of whom they had such want. There was no mercy to be hoped from these savages, who, like the wild beasts a fortnight before, had invaded Floating Island. Besides, would they not attempt to wreck it on the rocks of Erromango, and then hand it over to pillage?

An hour afterwards the assailants arrived before the gates of Milliard City. They tried to break them in in vain. They tried to climb them, but were driven back by firearms.

As Milliard City had not been taken by surprise, it had become difficult to force an entry in the darkness. And so Captain Sarol drew off his savages towards the park and country, and there waited for daylight.

Between four and five o’clock the first hues of the morning appeared on the eastern horizon. The militia and sailors under Commodore Simcoe and Captain Stewart, leaving half their forces at the town hall, marched to the observatory square, expecting that Captain Sarol would endeavour to force the gates on that side; for as no help could come from without, it was necessary, at all costs, to prevent the savages from penetrating into the town.

The quartette followed the defenders, whose officii 3 led them towards the end of First Avenue.

“To have escaped from the cannibals of Fiji,” said Pinchinat, “to be obliged to defend one’s cutlets from the cannibals of the New Hebrides!”

“They will not eat the whole of us!” said Yvernès.

“And I will resist to my last fragment!” added Yvernès.

Sebastien Zorn remained silent. We know that what he thought of the adventure would not prevent him from doing his duty.

As soon as the light came, shots began to be interchanged through the gates of the square. There was a courageous defence in the enclosure of the observatory. There were victims on both sides. Among the Milliard- ites, Jem Tankerdon was wounded in the shoulder slightly, but he would not abandon his post. Nat Coverley and Walter were conspicuous in the fight. The King of Malecarlie endeavoured to bring down Captain Sarol, who did not spare himself among the savages.

In truth, the assailants were too many. All that Erromango, Tanna, and the neighbouring islands could furnish were in this attack on Milliard City. There was one fortunate circumstance, however, and Commodore Simcoe noticed it: Floating Island, instead of drifting on to Erromango, was being gently carried by a slight current towards the northern group, although it would have been better if it had been moving out to sea.

Nevertheless time went on, the savages redoubled their efforts, and in spite of their courageous resistance, the defenders could not keep them back. About ten o’clock the gates were forced. Before the howling crowd that swarmed into the square Commodore Simcoe had to retreat towards the town hall, which could be defended like a fortress.

In their retreat, the militia and sailors gave way foot by foot. Perhaps now they had entered the town, the New Hebrideans, carried away by their instincts, of pillage, might disperse through the different quarters, and thus give the MillianJites some advantage.

Vain hope! Captain Sarol would not allow his men to leave First Avenue. By it they would reach the town hall, where they would overcome the last efforts of the besieged. When Captain Sarol was master of that, the victory would be complete. The hour of pillage and massacre would sound.

“Decidedly there are too many of them,” said Fras- colin, whose arm was grazed by a javelin.

And the arrows rained, and the bullets too, as the retreat became quicker.

About two o’clock the defenders had been driven back to the town hall square. Of dead there were already fifty — of wounded about twice or thrice as many. Before the town hall was reached by the savages, its doors were closed; the women and children were moved into the interior apartments, where they would be sheltered from the projectiles. Then Cyrus Bikerstaff, the King of Male- carlie, Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart, Jem Tankerdon, Nat Coverley, their friends, the militiamen and the sailors, posted themselves at the windows, and the firing recommenced with fresh violence.

“We must hold this,” said the Governor. “This is our last chance, and it will require a miracle to save us.”

The assault was immediately ordered by Captain Sarol, who felt sure of success, although the task was a serious one. In fact, the doors were strong, and it would be difficult to break them in without artillery. The savages attacked them with tomahawks, under the fire from the windows, which made them lose heavily. But that did not matter to their chief; though if he could be killed, his death might change the face of matters.

Two hours elapsed. The town hall still held out. If the bullets decimated the assailants, their masses were renewed unceasingly. In vain the most skilful marksmen, Jem Tankerdon, Colonel Stewart, endeavoured to hit Captain Sarol. While numbers of his people fell around him, he seemed invulnerable.

And it was not Sarol, amid a more furious fusillade than ever, whom a Snider bullet had hit on the central balcony. It was Cyrus Bikerstaff, shot full in the chest. He fell — he could only utter a few stifled words, the blood mounted to his throat. He was carried into the room behind, where he soon yielded his last breath. Thus died the first governor of Floating Island, an able administrator, an honest and great man.

The assault was pursued with redoubled fury. The doors were yielding to the axes of the savages. How could the last fortress of Floating Island be saved? How could they save the women, the children, all those within from a general massacre?

The King of Malecarlie, Ethel Simcoe, and Colonel Stewart, were discussing whether it would be better to retreat by the rear of the town hall. But where would they go? To the battery at the Stern? But could they reach it? To one of the harbours? But were not the savages in possession of them? And the wounded, already numerous, how could they resolve to abandon them?

At this moment a fortunate thing happened, which would probably change the state of affairs.

The King of Malecarlie stepped out on to the balcony, without heeding the bullets and arrows which rained around him. He brought up his rifle and aimed at Captain Sarol, just as one of the doors was about to give passage to the assailants.

Captain Sarol fell dead.

The Malays drew back, carrying the body of their chief, and began to retreat towards the gates of the square.

Almost immediately shouts were heard at the top of First Avenue, where a fusillade broke out with renewed intensity.

What had happened? Had the defenders of the ports and batteries been successful? Had they advanced on the town? Had they attempted to take the natives in the rear, notwithstanding their small numbers?

“The firing is increasing near the observatory,” said Colonel Stewart.

“The scoundrels have had a reinforcement,” said Commodore Simcoe.

“I do not think so,” observed the King of Malecarlie. “This firing cannot be explained — ”

“Yes! There it is again,” said Pinchinat, “and again to our advantage.”

“Look! look!” said Calistus Munbar; “the beggars are beginning to run.”

“Come, my friends,” said the King of Malecarlie, “let us chase these rascals out of the town. Forward!”

Officers, militiamen, sailors, ran downstairs and out of the principal doorway.

The square was abandoned by the crowd of savages, who fled, some down First Avenue, others along the neighbouring streets.

What was the cause of this rapid and unexpected change? Was it to be attributed to the disappearance of Captain Sarol — to the absence of leadership which had followed? Was it possible that the assailants, so superior in force, had been discouraged by the death of their chief at the very moment the town hall was about to be carried?

Led by Commodore Simcoe and Colonel Stewart, about two hundred men of the sailors and militia, with them Jem and Walter Tankerdon, Nat Coverley, Fras- colin and his comrades, advanced down First Avenue, chasing the fugitives, who did not even turn to give them a bullet or an arrow, and threw away Sniders, bows, and javelins.

“Forward! Forward!” shouted Commodore Simcoe, in a voice of thunder.

Round the observatory the firing grew fiercer, It was evident that a terrible fight was going on.

Help, then, had arrived on Floating Island. But what help? Where had it come from?

Anyhow, the assailants were retreating on all sides, a prey to an inc mprehensible panic. Had they been attacked by reinforcements from Larboard Harbour?

Yes. A thousand New Hebrideans had invaded Standard Island, under the leadership of the French colonists of Sandwich Island. We need not be astonished at the quartette being greeted in their national language, when they met their brave compatriots.

It was under these circumstances that this unexpected, or it might be said quasi-miraculous intervention had taken place.

During the preceding night and since daybreak Floating Island had continued to drift towards Sandwich Island, where, it will be remembered, there resided a prosperous French colony. As soon as the colonists got wind of the attack devised by Captain Sarol, they resolved, with the aid of a thousand natives devoted to them, to go to the help of Floating Island. But to transport them the vessels of Sandwich Island were not sufficient.

Judge of the joy of these gallant colonists when, during the morning, Floating Island came drifting up on the current. Immediately they threw themselves into fishing- boats, followed by the natives, most of them swimming, and landed at Larboard Harbour.

In a moment the men in the Prow and Stern batteries, and those in the port, joined them. Across the country, across the park they ran, towards Milliard City, and owing to this diversion the town hall did not fall into the hands of the assailants, already shaken by the death of Captain Sarol.

Two hours afterwards, the New Hebridean bands pursued on all sides, had to seek safety by plunging into the sea, so as to reach Sandwich Island, while the greater number of them fell under the bullets of the militia.

And now Floating Island had no more to fear; it was saved from pillage, massacre, and annihilation.

It might seem that the issue of this terrible affair would have evoked manifestations of public joy. No! Oh! these Americans are always astonishing! They said that there was nothing surprising in the result — that they had foreseen it. And yet how nearly had the attempt of Captain Sarol ended in a terrible catastrophe!

However, we may be allowed to think that the chief proprietors of Floating Island congratulated themselves in private at having been able to retain their property, and that at the moment when the marriage of Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley would make the future secure.

It should be said that when the lovers met again, they fell into each other’s arms. And no one thought of seeing in that any breach of the proprieties. Should they not have been married a day ago?

There was no need to seek for any ultra-American reserve in the welcome our Parisian artistes gave to the French colonists of Sandwich Island. What an exchange of grips of the hand! What felicitations did the Quartette Party receive from their compatriots! If the bullets had spared them, they had none the less done their duty, these two violins, this alto, and this violoncello! As to the excellent Athanase Dorgmus, he had been quietly waiting in his room at the casino, ready for the pupil who never came — and who could reproach him?

An exception must be made with regard to the Superintendent. Ultra-Yankee as he was, his joy was delirious. But what would you have? In his veins flowed the blood of the illustrious Barnum, and it will be cheerfully admitted that the descendant of such an ancestor would hardly be as sane as his fellow-citizens of North America.

After the affair was over, the King of Malecarlie, accompanied by the Queen, returned to his house in Thirty- seventh Avenue, where the council of notables conveyed to him the thanks which his courage and devotion to the common cause deserved.

Thus Floating Island was safe and sound. Its safety had cost it dear.

Cyrus Bikerstaff, killed at the height of the battle, sixty militiamen and sailors hit by bullets or arrows, and almost as many among the government servants and tradesmen, wh 3 had fought so bravely.

In the public mourning the people all joined, and the Pearl of the Pacific would never forget it.

With the rapidity of execution characteristic of them, these Milliardites promptly set to work to repair damages.

After a stay of a few days at Sandwich Island all trace of the sanguinary strife would disappear.

Meantime, there was complete accord with regard to the question of the military powers, which were left in the hands of Commodore Simcoe. On this head there was no difficulty, no competition. Neither Jem Tankerdon nor Nat Coverley had any ambition on this head. Later, an election would settle the important question as to the new governor of Floating Island.

The day after, an imposing ceremony summoned the population to the quays of Starboard Harbour. The corpses of the Malays and the natives were thrown into the sea; but it was not so with those of the citizens who had died in defence of Floating Island. Their bodies were taken to the temple and the cathedral to receive the honours due to them; from Governor Cyrus Bikerstaft to the humblest amongst them, all were the object of the same prayer and the same sorrow.

Then this funeral cargo was confided to one of the swift steamers of Floating Island, and the ship departed for Madeleine Bay, carrying these honoured corpses to a Christian land.

CHAPTER XII.

FLOATING ISLAND left the neighbourhood of Sandwich Island on the 3rd of March. Before its departure, the French colony and their native allies were the object of cordial gratitude on the part of the Milliardites. These were friends whom they would see again; they were brothers whom Sebastien Zorn and his comrades left on this island of the New Hebrides group, who would for the future appear in the annual itinerary.

Under Commodore Simcoe's direction, the repairs were quickly made. The damages were not extensive. The electrical machinery was uninjured. With what remained of the stock of petroleum, the working of the dynamos was assured for many weeks. Besides, Floating Island would soon be back in that part of the Pacific where its submarine cables would allow of its communicating with Madeleine Bay. There was, consequently, the certainty of the campaign ending without disaster. Within four months Floating Island would be on the American coast.

"Let us hope so," said Sebastien Zorn, when the Superintendent was as usual enlarging on the future of this marvellous maritime invention.

"But," observed Calistus Munbar, "what a lesson we have received! These Malays, so obliging, this Captain Sarol, no one would have suspected them. This is the last time Floating Island will give shelter to strangers."

"Not even if a shipwreck throws them in the way?" asked Pinchinat.

"I do not believe any more in shipwrecks or shipwrecked crews!"

But though Commodore Simcoe had charge as before of the navigation of Floating Island, it did not follow that the civil powers were in his hands.

Since the death of Cyrus Bikerstaff Milliard City had had no mayor, and, as we know, the assistants had resigned their positions. Consequently it would be necessary to nominate a new governor of Floating Island.

As there was no official of the civil power they could not proceed to the marriage of Walter Tankerdon and Di Coverley. Here was a difficulty which would not have arisen had it not been for the machinations of that scoundrel Sarol! And not only the couple themselves, but all the notables of Milliard City, and all the population, were anxious that this marriage should be definitely settled. In it was one of the safest guarantees of the future. That there might be no delay, Walter Tankerdon was already talking of embarking on one of the Starboard Harbour steamers with the two families to the nearest archipelago, where a mayor could proceed with the nuptial ceremony. There were mayors at Samoa, at Tonga, at the Marquesas, and in less than a week, if they went full steam —

The wiser minds argued with the impatient young man. The people were busy getting ready for the election. In a few days the new governor would be nominated. The first act of his administration would be to celebrate with great pomp the marriage so ardently expected. The programme of the festivities would be resumed. A mayor! a mayor! That was the cry in every mouth.

“Let us hope that these elections may not revive the rivalries that may not be entirely extinct!” said Frascolin.

No, and Calistus Munbar had resolved to do his best to bring matters to an end.

“Besides,” he exclaimed, “have we not our lovers? You will, I think, agree with me that self-esteem has no chance against love?”

Floating Island continued its course to the northeast, towards the point where the twelfth degree of south latitude crosses the hundred and seventy-fifth of west longitude.

It was in these parts that the last cablegrams sent before the stay at the New Hebrides had communicated with the supply ships loading at Madeleine Bay. Commodore Simcoe was not at all anxious regarding provisions. The reserves were enough for more than a month, and there could be no trouble on this point. It is true that foreign news was running short. The political chronicle was meagre. The *Starboard Chronicle* complained, the *New Herald* was in despair. But what mattered it? Was not Floating Island a little world in itself, and what had it to do with what happened on the rest of the terrestrial spheroid? Did it want politics? Well, there would soon be politics enough for it — perhaps too much.

In fact the electoral contest began. The council of notables, in which the Larboardites equalled the Star- boardites, was busy. It was certain that the choice of a new governor would give rise to discussions, for Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley would be on opposite sides.

A few days were spent in preliminary meetings. From the outset it was evident that the parties would not agree. Secret agitation arose in the town and ports. The agents of the two sections tried to provoke a popular movement to bring pressure on the notables. As time went on, it did not seem as though an agreement could be brought about. It began to be feared that Jem Tankerdon and the principal Larboardites would now endeavour to carry out their ideas, so objected to by the Starboardites, and make Floating Island an industrial and commercial island. Never would the other section consent to that! The more the Coverley party grew angry, the more the Tankerdon party persisted. Hence offensive recriminations, bitterness between the two camps, manifest coolness between the two families — a coolness which Walter and Di did not care to notice. What had all this rubbish about politics to do with them?

There was a very simple way of arranging these matters, at least from an administrative point of view; that was to resolve that the two competitors should take it in turn to be governor, six months one and six months the other, even a year apiece if that seemed preferable. Then there would be no rivalry, and the arrangement would satisfy both parties. But good sense has never a chance of being adopted in this world, and though it was independent of the terrestrial continents, Floating Island was none the less subject to all the passions of sub-lunary humanity.

“There,” said Frascolin one day to his companions. “There you have the difficulties I feared.”

“And what do these dissensions matter to us?” replied Pinchinat. “How can they damage us? In a few months we shall be at Madeleine Bay, and our engagement will be at an end, and we can set foot on firm ground, with a little million in our pockets.”

“If some catastrophe does not take place?” added the intractable Sebastien Zorn. “Is such a floating machine ever sure of a future? After the collision with the English ship, the invasion of the wild beasts; after the wild beasts the invasion of the New Hebrideans; after the savages the — ”

“Silence, bird of ill augury!” exclaimed Yvernès. “Silence, we will put a padlock on your beak!”

Nevertheless, it was greatly to be regretted that the marriage had not been celebrated at the date fixed. The families being united by a new tie, the problem would be less difficult of solution. The newly married couple might intervene in a more efficacious fashion. After all, the agitation would not last, as the election would take place on the 15th of March.

Commodore Simcoe tried to bring about an understanding between the two sections of the town. He was asked not to interfere in what did not concern him. He had to navigate the island, let him navigate it. He had reefs to avoid, let him avoid them. Politics were not his business.

Commodore Simcoe did as he was told.

Religious passions began to enter into the debate, and the clergy — in which they were perhaps wrong — interfered more than was desirable. They had been living in such accord, the temple and the cathedral, the pastor and the bishop.

The newspapers, of course, descended into the arena. *The New Herald* fought for the Tankerdons, *The Starboard Chronicle* for the Coverleys. Ink flowed in deluges, and it was to be feared that the ink would be mingled with blood! Great Heaven! Had it not already been too much sprinkled, this virgin soil of Floating Island, during the struggle with the savages of the New Hebrides!

The bulk of the population were chiefly interested in the two young people, whose romance had been interrupted at the first chapter. But what could they do to make them happy? Already communications had ceased between the two sections of Milliard city. No more receptions, invitations, musical evenings. If this sort of thing lasted, the instruments of the Quartette Party might go mouldy in their cases, and our artistes earn their enormous salaries with their hands in their pockets.

The Superintendent, although he would not admit it, was in an agony of anxiety. He was in a false position, for his whole mind was occupied in displeasing nobody — a sure means of displeasing everybody.

On the 12th of March, Floating Island was approaching the Equator, although it had not reached the latitude in which it would meet the ships sent from Madeleine Bay. It would not be long before they did so, but apparently the elections would take place beforehand, as they were fixed for the 15th.

Meanwhile the Starboardites and Larboardites took to forecasting the result. Always the same promise of equality. No majority was possible, unless some voters would change sides. And the voters remained as firm as the teeth in a tiger's jaw.

Then arose a genial idea. It seemed to have occurred at the same moment to the minds of all. This idea was simple, it was an honourable one, it would put an end to the rivalry. The candidates themselves would doubtless bow to this just solution.

Why not offer the government of Floating Island to the King of Malecarlie? The ex-sovereign was a wise man, of firm and liberal mind. His toleration and his philosophy would be the best guarantee against the surprises of the future. He knew men from having lived amongst them. He knew that he had to reckon with their weaknesses and their ingratitude. Ambition was not his failing, and never would the thought occur to him to substitute the personal power for the democratic institutions which existed on Floating Island. He would never be more than the president of the council of administration of the new company, *Tankerdon, Coverley & Co.*

An important group of merchants and functionaries of Milliard City, with whom were a certain number of the officers and sailors at the ports, decided to convey this proposal to their royal fellow-citizen.

It was in the room on the ground floor of the house in Thirty-ninth Avenue that their Majesties received the deputation. They listened with friendliness, and answered with a decided refusal. The deposed sovereigns remembered the past, and under this impression the King replied, —

“I thank you, gentlemen. We are not insensible to your request, but we are happy at present, and we hope that nothing will trouble our future. Believe me, we have finished with the illusions that are inherent to any sovereignty whatever. I am now only an astronomer at the observatory of Floating Island, and I do not wish to be anything else.”

There was no opportunity to persist, after so formal a reply, and the deputation retired.

During the few days preceding the election the excitement increased. It was impossible to arrive at an understanding. The partisans of Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley avoided meeting each other, even in the streets. People no longer went from one section to the other. Neither the Starboardites nor the Larboardites crossed First Avenue. Milliard City was now formed into two hostile camps. The only personage who went from one to the other, agitated, crushed, knocked up, perspiring water and blood, exhausting himself in good advice, repulsed to the right, repulsed to the left, was the despairing Superintendent, Calistus Munbar. And three or four times a day he ran aground, like a rudderless ship, in the rooms of the casino, where the quartette overwhelmed him with vain consolations.

Commodore Simcoe confined himself to his special duties. He navigated Floating Island according to the itinerary. Having a holy horror of politics, he would accept whatever governor was given him. His officers, like those of Colonel Stewart, were quite as little interested in the question which had set so many heads on the boil. It was not in Floating Island that pronunciamentos were to be feared.

However, the council of notables, in permanent session at the town hall, discussed and disputed. They were taking to personalities. The police were compelled to take certain precautions, for the crowd thronged from morning to night in front of the town hall, and raised seditious cries.

On the other hand, deplorable news got abroad. Walter Tankerdon had called at the Coverley mansion, and not been admitted. The two young people were forbidden to see one another, and as the marriage had not been celebrated before the attack of the New Hebridean bands, who dared say if it ever would be accomplished?

At last the 15th of March arrived. The election was to take place in the principal room of the town-hall. A noisy crowd blocked the square, as the Roman populace formerly did before the palace of the Quirinal, when the conclave proceeded to the elevation of a Pope to the throne of Saint Peter.

What would come out of this supreme deliberation? The forecast showed that there would be an equality of votes. If the Starboardites remained faithful to Nat Coverley and the Larboardites to Jem Tankerdon, what would happen?

The great day arrived. Between one and three o’clock the ordinary life seemed to be suspended on Floating Island. From five to six thousand people stood excited beneath the windows of the municipal edifice. They awaited the result of the voting of the notables — a result which would be immediately communicated by telephone to the two sections and the two ports.

A first scrutiny took place at thirty-five minutes past one.

The candidates had obtained the same number of suffrages.

An hour afterwards there was a second scrutiny.

It in no way modified the figures of the first.

At thirty-five minutes past three there was the third and last scrutiny.

This time neither had a vote in excess of the other.

The council then separated, and it was best to do so. If it had remained sitting, the members would have become so exasperated that they would have taken to blows. As they crossed the square on their way, some of them to the Tankerdon mansion, and some to the Coverley mansion, the crowd greeted them with the most disagreeable murmurs.

But it was necessary to put an end to this state of affairs, which was most damaging to the interests of Floating Island.

“Between ourselves,” said Pinchinat, when they had heard from the Superintendent the result of the three scrutinies, “it seems that there is a very simple way of settling the question.”

“And what is that?” asked Calistus Munbar, lifting his arms in despair to heaven. “What?”

“Cut the island in half; divide it into two equal parts, like a cake; let the two halves go on as they please, each with a governor of its own!”

“Cut our island in half!” gasped the Superintendent, as if Pinchinat had proposed to cut off a limb.

“With a cold chisel, a mallet, and a screw-wrench, the question would be solved, and there would be two moving islands instead of one on the surface of the Pacific Ocean.”

Pinchinat could never be serious, even when circumstances were of such gravity.

His advice was not accepted — at least in a material sense; but if there were no mallet and screw-wrench, if no division was made down the middle of First Avenue from Prow Battery to Stern Battery, the separation was none the less accomplished from a political point of view. The Larboardites and Starboardites had become as much strangers to each other as if a hundred leagues of sea separated them. In fact, the thirty notables had decided to vote separately in default of an understanding. On one side, Jem Tankerdon was appointed governor of his section, and he could govern it as he pleased. On the other, Nat Coverley was appointed governor of his section, and he could govern it as he pleased. Each of them would keep his port, his ships, his officers, his sailors, his militiamen, his functionaries, his tradesmen, his electrical works, his engines, his motors, his engineers, his stokers.

This was very well, but what would Commodore Simcoe do when he wanted to turn, and how could Calistus Munbar perform his duties to the common satisfaction?

As regards the latter, it is true, it was not of much importance. His place had become a sinecure. There could be no question as to amusements and festivities when Floating Island was menaced by civil war — for a reconciliation was not possible.

This was evident from a single indication. On the 17th of March the newspapers announced that the marriage between Walter Tankerdon and Miss Coverley was definitely broken off.

Yes! Broken off — in spite of their prayers, in spite of their supplications; and yet Calistus Munbar had once said that love was the strongest! Well, no! Walter and Di would not separate. They would abandon their relatives; they would marry in some foreign country; they would find a corner in the world where they could be happy without so many millions hanging round their hearts!

After the nomination of Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley, nothing had been changed with regard to the course of Floating Island. Commodore Simcoe continued to steer north-east. Once they reached Madeleine Bay, it was probable, if the present state of things continued, that several of the Milliardites would seek on the Continent the quiet which was no longer offered them by the Pearl of the Pacific. Perhaps even Floating Island would be abandoned. And then they would liquidate it; they would put it up to auction; they would sell it at so much a pound, like old and useless iron, and it would be melted down!

But the five thousand miles it had to travel would take another five months to accomplish. During the voyage would the direction be interfered with by the obstinacy of the two chiefs? The spirit of revolt had begun to show itself among the people. Would the Larboardites and Starboardites come to blows, and take to firing on each other, and bathing with blood the steel sidewalks of Milliard City?

No! The parties would not, apparently, go to these extremities. There would not be another secession war between north and south, or rather between the Larboard and Starboard sections of Floating Island. But the inevitable happened, at the risk of provoking a catastrophe.

In the morning of the 19th of March, Commodore Simcoe was in his office at the observatory, waiting for the first observation of altitude to be communicated to him. In his opinion Floating Island could not be far from the spot where it would meet with the supply ships. Look-outs on the tower surveyed the vast circuit of sea, so as to signa \ the steamers as soon as they appeared on the horizon. With the Commodore were the King of Malecarlie, Colonel Stewart, Sebastien Zorn, Pinchinat, Frascolin, Yvernès, and a few officers and functionaries — who might all be classed as neutrals, for they had not yet taken part in the intestine dissensions. The essential point for them was to arrive as soon as possible at Madeleine Bay, where this deplorable state of things would end.

At this moment two bells sounded, and two orders were transmitted to the Commodore by telephone. They came from the town hall, where Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley, with their respective supporters, were in different wings. Here they administered Floating Island, and we need not be astonished at the orders being contradictory.

This very morning the two governors had resolved to disagree regarding the course hitherto followed by Ethel Simcoe. Nat Covcrley had decided that Floating Island should go north-east, so as to touch at the Gilbert Islands. Jem Tankerdon, with the object of opening up commercial relations, decided to go south-west, towards Australia.

Thus had the rivals committed themselves, and their friends had sworn to support them.

When he received the two orders sent simultaneously to the observatory, the Commodore remarked, —

“This is what I feared.”

“And which must not last, in the public interest,” said the King of Malecarlie.

“What do you decide?” asked Frascolin.

“I am curious to see how you will manoeuvre,” said Pinchinat.

“Inform Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley,” said the Commodore, “that we cannot execute their orders, as they contradict each other. Besides, it is better for Floating Island to remain where it is, and wait for the ships which are to meet it here.”

This very wise reply was immediately telephoned to the town hall.

An hour passed without the observatory receiving any other orders. Probably the two governors had given up their intentions.

Suddenly Floating Island began to move in a strange manner. What did this movement indicate? That Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley had persisted in their obstinacy to the furthest limits.

All the persons present looked at each other interrogatively.

“What is the matter? What is the matter?”

“What is the matter?” answered the Commodore, shrugging his shoulders; “Jem Tankerdon has sent his orders direct to Watson, the engineer at Larboard Harbour, and Nat Coverley has sent contradictory orders to Somwah, the engineer at Starboard Harbour. One has given orders to go north-east, the other to go southwest. The result is that Floating Island is swinging round on its centre, and the gyration will last as long as the caprice of these two obstinate personages.”

“Well!” said Pinchinat. “This ought to end in a waltz! Athanase Doremus might as well resign. The Milliardites do not want his lessons!”

This absurd situation — comic from one point of view — probably caused a laugh. Unfortunately the double manoeuvre was extremely dangerous, as the Commodore observed. Driven round and round by six million horsepower, Floating Island was in danger of being shaken to pieces.

In fact, the engines were going full speed, the screws working at their maximum power, and the steel subsoil was all of a tremble. The motion became more noticeable. Floating Island pirouetted on its centre. The park, the country described concentric circles, and the places on the shore swung round at from ten to twelve miles an hour.

To argue with the engineers was not to be thought of. Commodore Simcoe had no authority over them. They were subject to the same passions as the Starboardites and Larboardites. Faithful servants of their chiefs, Watson and Somwah would drive on to the bitter end, engine for engine, dynamo for dynamo.

Then occurred a phenomenon, the unpleasantness of which should have calmed the heads by softening the hearts.

On account of the rotation of Floating Island, a number of Milliardites, especially the women, began to feel strangely unwell. Within the houses there were attacks of sickening nausea, principally in those which, being farthest from the centre, were most affected by this waltzing motion.

At this farcical result, Yvernès, Pinchinat, and Frascolin burst out int,o peals of laughter, although matters were getting most serious.

Under the influence of this continuous whirling, Sebastien Zorn became pale, very pale. He “struck his colours,” as Pinchinat said, and his heart mounted to his lips. Was this ill-timed joke never to finish? To be a prisoner on this immense turning table, which did not even have the gift of revealing the secrets of the future.

For a whole week Floating Island continued to spin round on its centre, which was Milliard City. In vain the King of Malecarlie, Commodore Simcoe, and Colonel Stewart attempted to intervene between the two powers which shared the municipal palace. Neither would lower his flag! Cyrus Bikerstaff himself, if he could have come to life again, would have found his efforts fail against such ultra-American tenacity.

Then, to add to the misfortune, the sky had been so constantly covered with clouds during this week, that it was not possible to take an altitude. Commodore Simcoe did not know where Floating Island was. Driven round by its powerful screws, it trembled in every wall of its compartments. No one thought of staying indoors. The park was crowded with people camping in the open air. On either side were heard cries of “Hurrah for Tankerdon!” and “Hurrah for Coverley!” Eyes flashed lightnings, fists were clenched threateningly. Was civil war going to break out, with its worst excesses, now that the people had reached a paroxysm of madness?

Neither one side nor the other would see anything of the approaching danger. They would not give in, even if the Pearl of the Pacific were to break into a thousand fragments, and it would continue to spin until the dynamos ceased to drive the screws.

Amid this general irritation, in which he took no part, Walter Tankerdon was a prey to the keenest anguish. He feared not for himself, but for Miss Coverley, that some sudden breaking up would annihilate Milliard City. For eight days he had not seen her. Twenty times he had begged his father to have done with this deplorable manoeuvre; but all was in vain.

Then on the night of the 27th of March, taking advantage of the darkness, he endeavoured to see Miss Coverley. He wished to be near her when the catastrophe occurred. Gliding through the crowd which blocked First Avenue, he penetrated into the hostile section, so as to reach the Coverleys' house.

A little before daybreak a terrific explosion shook the air. Driven beyond the pressure they would bear, the boilers of the Lai board section blew up with the buildings and machinery. And as the source of electrical energy suddenly gave out on this side, half Floating Island was plunged into profound darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

IF the engines of Larboard Harbour were now useless, on account of the bursting of the boilers, those of Starboard Harbour were uninjured. But it was as if Floating Island had lost all power of locomotion. Reduced to its starboard screws, all it could do was to turn round and round on itself, for it could not go ahead.

This accident consequently made matters worse. While Floating Island had two sets of engines, capable of acting together, it was only necessary for an understanding to be arrived at between the Tankerdon and Coverley parties for this state of things to be put an end to. The motors would then resume their customary task of working together, and the island, after its delay of a few days, could have resumed its course to Madeleine Bay.

Now this was impossible, and Commodore Simcoe had not the propelling force necessary to enable him to leave his present position.

If Floating Island had remained stationary during the last week, if the steamers came up it might still be possible to regain the northern hemisphere.

But it was not, for an astronomic observation taken this *day* showed that Floating Island had drifted to the south during its prolonged gyration. It had drifted from the twelfth parallel to the seventeenth.

In fact, between the New Hebrides group and the Fiji group there are certain currents, due to the proximity of the two archipelagoes to each other, which flow to the south-east. While the engines worked together Floating Island could easily make headway against the current.

But as soon as it became afflicted with vertigo it had been irresistibly drawn towards the tropic of Capricorn.

When this was recognized, Commodore Simcoe did not hide from those we have called neutrals the gravity of the circumstances.

“We have drifted,” he said, “five degrees south. What a sailor can do with a steamer when her engines break down I cannot do with Floating Island. An island has no sails, and we are at the mercy of the currents. Where will they take us? I do not know. As to the steamers despatched from Madeleine Bay, they will seek us in vain in the place agreed upon, and it is towards the least frequented portion of the Pacific that we are drifting, at the rate of from eight to ten miles an hour.”

In these few sentences Ethel Simcoe stated the position, which it was impossible to modify. Floating Island was like an immense wreck delivered over to the caprices of the currents. If they ran towards the north, it would go north; if they ran towards the south, it would go south — perhaps to the extreme limits of the Antarctic Ocean. And then —

This state of things soon became known to the people at Milliard City, as at both harbours. A feeling of great fear arose. Hence — which was very human — a certain softening of asperities under the fear of this new peril. They no longer dreamt of coming to blows in a fratricidal strife, and if hatreds continued, they would not at least lead to violence. Gradually every one returned to his section, his quarter, his house. Jem Tankerdon and Nat Coverley gave up their dispute for first place. At the proposal of the two governors, the council of notables came to the only reasonable decision dictated by the circumstances, and transferred its powers to the hands of Commodore Simcoe, the only chief to whom the safety of Floating Island was henceforth entrusted.

Ethel Simcoe accepted the task without hesitation. He reckoned on the devotion of his friends, his officers, his staff. But what could he do with this vast floating apparatus, with an area of twenty-seven square kilometres, become unmanageable, now that it had no longer its two sets of engines?

And was there not some foundation for saying that this was the condemnation of Floating Island, up to then regarded as the masterpiece of marine construction, inasmuch as such accidents would render it the sport of the winds and waves?

It is true that this accident was not due to the forces of nature, over which the Pearl of the Pacific had triumphed since its foundation. It was the fault of these intestine dissensions, these rivalries of the Milliardites, this unreasonable obstinacy of some to go south and others to go north. It was their immeasurable madness that had brought about the explosion of the Larboard boilers.

But what was the good of recriminations? What was necessary was to inquire into the damages at Larboard Harbour. Commodore Simcoe assembled his officers and his engineers. The King of Malecarlie went with them. It was assuredly not this royal philosopher who was surprised at human passions bringing about such a catastrophe.

The commission went to the Larboard engine works. The explosion of the over-driven boilers had caused the deaths of two engineers and six stokers. The ravages were no less complete in the workshops where the electricity was produced for the different services of this half of Floating Island. Fortunately, the starboard dynamos continued to work, and as Pinchinat observed, —

“We have got off with the loss of one eye.”

“That may be,” replied Frascolin, “but we have also lost a limb, and the one that is left is of little use to us.”

To be blind and lame was too much.

The result of the inquiry was that the damages could not be repaired, and that it would be impossible to arrest the movement towards the south. Hence the need of waiting until Floating Island got out of the current which was taking it below the tropic.

This being ascertained, the next thing was to examine the state of the compartments of the hull. Had they not suffered from the gyratory movement which had so violently shaken them? Were the plates strained, the rivets started?

If leaks had opened, what means were there of stopping them?

The engineers proceeded to this second inquiry. Their reports, communicated to Commodore Simcoe, were anything but comforting. In many places the shaking had cracked the plates and broken the ties. Thousands of rivets had been started, and there had been a good deal of breakage. Certain compartments had already been invaded by the sea. But as the line of flotation had not been lowered, the strength of the hull had not been seriously affected, and the new proprietors of Floating Island had nothing to fear for their property. It was near the Stern Battery that the cracks were most numerous. At Larboard Harbour one of the piers had dropped off into the sea when the explosion occurred. But Starboard Harbour was all right, and its docks afforded every safety for vessels against the waves of the sea.

Orders were given to repair all that was repairable. It was important that the population should be tranquillized. It was enough, it was too much, that without its larboard screws Floating Island could not make for the nearest land. For that there was no remedy.

There remained the serious question of hunger and thirst. Would the reserves be sufficient for a month, for two months?

These particulars were furnished to Commodore Simcoe.

With regard to the water there was nothing to fear. One of the distilling apparatus had been destroyed by the explosion, but the other, which continued at work, could furnish all requirements.

With regard to provisions, the state of affairs was not so promising. Taking everything into account, their duration would not exceed a fortnight, unless these ten thousand people were placed on short rations. The fruits and vegetables came, as we know, from the outside. And outside — where was that? Where was the nearest land, and how could it be reached?

Then, whatever might be the effect, Commodore Simcoe had to make instant arrangements as to putting the people on rations. That evening the telephones and telautographs spread this melancholy news.

Whereupon general dismay in Milliard City and the two ports, and a presentiment of worse catastrophes. Would not the spectre of famine, to adopt a familiar image, soon appear on the horizon, as there existed no means of replenishing the stock of provisions? In fact, Commodore Simcoe had not a single ship to send to the American continent. Fate had so willed it that the last had been sent away three weeks before with the mortal remains of Cyrus Bikerstaff and the defenders in the battle at Erromango. It was to be feared that matters of mere self-esteem would put Floating Island in a worse position than when it was invaded by the New Hebrideans.

What is the use of possessing millions, of being as rich as Rothschilds, Mackays, Astors, Vanderbilts, Goulds, when no riches can keep away famine? Doubtless, these nabobs had the greater part of their fortunes safely placed in the banks of the new and old continents. But who knew if the day were not approaching when a million would not procure a pound of meat or a pound of bread!

After all, the fault was in their absurd dissensions, their stupid rivalries, their desire to seize upon power! The culprits were the Tankerdons and the Coverleys, who had caused all the trouble. Let them take care of reprisals, of the rage of the officers, and functionaries, and employees, and tradesmen, of the whole of the population they had brought into such danger! To what excesses might not these betake themselves when they were suffering the tortures of hunger.

Let us say, that no reproaches were levelled against Walter Tankerdon nor Miss Coverley, who shared none of the blame deserved by their families. No! The young man and the girl were not responsible! They were the bond that might have assured the future of both sections, and it was not they who had broken it!

For two days, owing to the state of the sky, no observation could be taken, and the position of Floating Island could not be ascertained with any certainty.

On the 31st of March the zenith at dawn was clear enough, and the mists in the offing soon died away. There was reason to hope that an altitude could be taken under good conditions.

The observation was awaited with feverish impatience. Many hundreds of the inhabitants went out to Prow Battery. Walter Tankerdon joined them. But neither his father, nor Nat Coverley, nor any of the notables, who could be justly accused of having brought about this state of affairs, left their houses, where they were kept indoors by public indignation.

A little before noon the observers prepared to catch the solar disc at the instant of its culmination. Two sextants, one in the hands of the King of Malecarlie, the other in the hands of Commodore Simcoe, were directed towards the horizon.

As soon as the altitude was taken, the calculations began, with the needful corrections, and the result gave 290 17’ latitude south. About two o’clock a second observation, made under the same favourable conditions, indicated 1790 32’ longitude east.

And so, since Floating Island had been a prey to this gyratory folly, the currents had carried it about a thousand miles to the south-east.

When the position was marked on the map, this was what appeared.

The nearest islands — a hundred miles distant at least — were the Kermadecs, barren rocks, hardly inhabited, without resources; and, besides, how could they be reached? Three hundred miles to the south was New Zealand, and how could that be reached if the currents took them along the open sea? To the west, fifteen hundred miles, was Australia — to the east, several thousand miles, was South America, in the neighbourhood of Chili. Beyond New Zealand was the Antarctic Ocean. Was it there, on the lands of the Pole, that Floating Island was to be wrecked? Was it there that navigators would one day find a whole population dead of misery and hunger?

Commodore Simcoe proceeded to study the currents of these seas with the greatest care. But what would happen if they did not change, if they did not meet opposing currents, if one of those formidable tempests broke out which are so frequent in the circumpolar regions?

The news was well calculated to provoke alarm. Feeling rose higher and higher against the authors of the trouble — these mischievous nabobs of Milliard City, who were responsible for this state of affairs. It required all the influence of the King of Malecarlie, all the energy of Commodore Simcoe and Colonel Stewart, all the devotion of their officers, all their authority over the sailors and soldiers of the militia to prevent an insurrection.

The day passed without change. All had to submit to be rationed, and to restrict themselves to the absolutely necessary as regards food — the wealthiest as well as those who were not so wealthy.

Meanwhile a service of look-outs was carefully arranged, and the horizon strictly watched. If a ship appeared, they would signal it, and perhaps it would be possible to enter into communication with it. Unfortunately Floating Island had drifted out of the maritime routes, there being few vessels which traverse these regions bordering on the Antarctic Ocean. And beyond to the south, there arose before the affrighted imagination the spectre of the Pole lighted by the volcanic gleams of Erebus and Terror.

A fortunate circumstance occurred in the night of the 3rd of April. The north wind, which had been violent for some hours, fell suddenly. A dead calm succeeded, and the breeze went suddenly round to the south-east, in one of those atmospheric caprices so frequent at the periods of the equinox.

Commodore Simcoe began to hope. Floatii g Island need only be forced a hundred miles to the westward for the counter-current to take it near Australia or New Zealand. Anyhow, its progress towards the Polar Sea would be checked, and it was possible that ships might be met with in the vicinity of the large islands of Australasia.

As the sun rose, the breeze freshened from the southeast. Floating Island was plainly enough affected by it. Its high buildings, the observatory, the town hall, the temple, the cathedral, offered a certain resistance to the wind. They acted as sails for this enormous vessel of four hundred and thirty-two million tons.

Although the sky was swept by swift clouds, the solar disc appeared at intervals, and a good observation would probably be taken. In fact, on two occasions the sun was caught between the clouds, and the calculation showed that since the day before, Floating Island had mounted two degrees towards the north-west.

It was difficult to admit that this was entirely due to the influence of the wind. The conclusion was that the Island had drifted into one of the eddies which divide the great currents of the Pacific; that it had had the good fortune to enter one that was taking it to the north-west, and that its chances of safety were considerable. But there must be no delay, for it was necessary to further reduce the rations. The reserves were diminishing at a rate which caused anxiety in the presence of ten thousand inhabitants to feed.

When the last astronomical observation was communicated to the ports and the town it somewhat allayed the excitement. We know how suddenly a crowd will pass from one sentiment to another, from despair to hope. That is what happened. These people, very different to the miserable masses of the great continental cities, ought to be and were less subject to panic, more reflective, more patient. But with a threatened famine was not everything to be feared?

During the morning the wind showed a tendency to freshen. The barometer fell slowly. The sea rose in long, powerful waves, proving that it was subject to great agitation in the south-east. Floating Island, hitherto impassible, was no longer insensible to these enormous disturbances of level. Some of the houses shook from top to bottom, and the things in them began to shift, as if there were an earthquake. The phenomenon was new to the Milliardites, and gave rise to considerable uneasiness.

Commodore Simcoe and his staff remained constantly on duty at the observatory, where the whole administration was concentrated. The shocks began to affect the observatory, and the extreme seriousness of the matter was recognized.

“It is too evident,” said the Commodore, “that Floating Island has been injured below. Its compartments have opened. Its hull has no longer the rigidity which rendered it so solid.”

“It is to be hoped,” said the King of Malecarlie,” that it will not have to stand a violent storm, for it is no longer strong enough to resist it.”

Yes! And now the people began to lose confidence in the artificial soil. They felt that their foothold was about to fail them. Better a hundred times be smashed on the rocks of the Antarctic lands. To fear every moment that Floating Island would open and be swallowed up in the depths of the Pacific, which had never yet been sounded, was enough to make the bravest hearts fail as they thought of it.

It was impossible to doubt that fresh injuries had cocurred in some of the compartments. Partitions had given way, and the rivets of the plates must have been torn out. In the park, along the Serpentine, on the surface of the outer streets of the town, there were strange undulations resulting in dislocations of the soil. Already some of the buildings had begun to lean, and if they fell, they would break in the substructure on which their foundation rested. That the sea had made its way into the subsoil was unmistakable, for the water line had altered. Nearly all round, at the two ports as at the batteries, the line had sunk a foot, and if it sunk more the waves would come over the coast. Floating Island was in danger; its foundering was only a question of a few hours.

Commodore Simcoe would have kept this quiet, for it would probably cause a panic and worse perhaps. To what excesses might not the people be led against those responsible for this disaster? They could not seek safety in flight like the passengers of a ship, throw themselves into boats, or construct a raft, as a crew does, in the hope of being saved from the sea. No! The raft was Floating Island itself; and it was going down.

From hour to hour during the day Commodore Simcoe noted the changes in the water line. Floating Island continued to settle down. Hence infiltration must be taking place in the compartments, slow, but incessant and irresistible.

At the same time the weather was getting worse. The sky was covered with red, coppery hues. The barometer was falling more quickly. The atmosphere had every sign of an approaching storm. Behind the accumulated vapours the horizon became so restricted that it seemed to be limited to the shore of Floating Island.

As the evening came on, terrible gusts of wind arose. In the fury of the surge the compartments burst, the crossbars broke, the plates were torn away. Everywhere was a sound of the cracking of metal. The avenues of the town, the lawns of the park, threatened to gape open. As night approached, Milliard City was abandoned for the country, which, less laden with heavy buildings, seemed to be safer. The whole population lay scattered between the ports and the batteries.

About nine o’clock a violent shock shook Floating Island to its foundations. The works at Starboard Harbour, which furnished the electric light, fell into the sea. The darkness was so profound that neither sky nor sea was visible.

Immediately more quakings of the ground took place, and the houses began to fall as if they were built of cards. In a few hours nothing would be left of the superstructure of Floating Island.

“Gentlemen,” said Commodore Simcoe, “we can no longer remain at the observatory, which is in danger of being a heap of ruins. Let us get into the country, and wait until the storm is over.”

“It is a cyclone,” replied the King of Malecarlie, showing the barometer, fallen to 713 millimetres.

Floating Island had been caught in one of those cyclonic movements which act like powerful condensers. These eddying tempests formed by a mass of water, whose gyration takes place round an almost vertical axis, move from east to west along the north of the southern hemisphere. A cyclone is the atmospheric phenomenon most fraught with disasters, and to escape from it, its comparatively calm centre must be reached, or at least the right side of its trajectory, the workable semicircle which is free from the fury of the waves. But this manoeuvre was impossible for want of motors. This time it was not human stupidity nor the imbecile obstinacy of its leaders which was ruining Floating Island, but a formidable atmospheric disturbance which would end by annihilating it.

The King of Malecarlie, Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart, Sebastien Zorfl and his comrades, the astronomers, and the officers, abandoned the observatory, where they were no longer safe. It was time. Scarcely had they gone a hundred yards, before the lofty tower collapsed with a horrible noise, fell through the ground, and disappeared into the abyss.

A moment afterwards the entire edifice was a mass of ruins.

Nevertheless the quartette thought of going up First Avenue and running to the casino, where their instruments were, which they wished to save if possible. The casino was still standing. They reached it, they mounted to their rooms, they carried off the two violins, the alto, and the violoncello to the park, in which they sought refuge.

There were gathered several thousand persons of both sections. The Tankerdon and Coverley families were there, and perhaps it was fortunate for them that amid the darkness they could not see each other, could not recognize each other.

Walter had, however, been fortunate enough to meet with Di. He would try and save her at the moment of the supreme catastrophe. He would cling with her to some piece of wreckage.

The girl divined that the young man was near her, and this cry escaped her, —

“Ah! Walter!”

“Di, dear Di! I am here! I will not leave you any more.”

As to our Parisians, they would not leave each other. They would remain together. Frascolin had lost nothing of his coolness. Yvernès was very nervous. Pinchinat was ironically resigned. Sebastien Zorn said to Athanase Doremus, who had at last decided to join his compatriots, —

“I told them it would end badly! I predicted it!”

“Enough of your tremolos in a minor key, old Isaiah,” said his Highness; “start on your penitential psalms.”

Towards midnight the force of the cyclone increased. The converging winds raised monstrous waves and hurled them against Floating Island. Where would this strife of the elements take them? To be sheltered on some reef? To be rent asunder in mid-ocean?

The hull was now rent in a thousand places. The joints were cracking everywhere. St. Mary’s church, the temple, the town hall, had fallen through the gaping fissures through which the sea came leaping up. Of these magnificent edifices not a vestige remained. What riches, what treasures, pictures, statues, objects of art had vanished for ever! The people would see no more of this superb Milliard City when daylight came, if ever the daylight came for them.

The sea began to spread over the country, over the park. The island sank lower and lower in the water. The surface of Floating Island was at the level of the sea, and the cyclone was driving the waves over on to it.

No shelter now anywhere. Prow Battery, which was then to windward, afforded no protection against the waves or the squalls which swept on to it.

The compartments opened, and the dislocation continued, with a noise that was heard above the most violent rolls of thunder. The supreme catastrophe was approaching.

About three in the morning the park cracked along a length of two kilometres in the bed of Serpentine River, and through this the sea flowed. Instant flight was inevitable, and the people dispersed into the country. Some ran towards the ports, others towards the batteries. Families were separated; mothers in vain sought for their children; while the sea rolled over Floating Island as if in an enormous tidal wave.

Walter Tankerdon, who had not left Di, tried to lead her towards Starboard Harbour. She had not strength to follow him. He lifted her, almost inanimate; he carried her in his arms; and in this way he went through the terror-stricken crowd, amid this horrible darkness.

At five o’clock in the morning, more cracking and rending of metal were heard in the east.

A piece about half a square mile in area had been detached from Floating Island.

It was Starboard Harbour, with its works, its engines, its warehouses, that had drifted off.

Beneath the redoubled blows of the cyclone, then at the height of its violence, Floating Island was thrown about like a wreck. Its hull became broken up. The compartments divided; and some, as the waves leapt over them, disappeared in the depths of the ocean.

“After the burst-up of the company,” said Pinchinat, “the burst-up of Floating Island.”

That was the summing-up of the situation.

Of the marvellous Floating Island there now remained but a few scattered pieces, like the sporadic fragments of a shattered comet, floating not in space, but on the surface of the wide Pacific.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN the day broke, a spectator from a height of a few hundred feet would have seen three fragments of Floating Island, measuring two or three hectares each, floating on the sea, and about a dozen of smaller size at a short distance from one another.

The cyclone began to die away with the first appearance of daylight. With the rapidity peculiar to these great atmospheric disturbances, its centre moved thirty miles towards the east. But the sea, so terribly lashed, continued tremendous, and the wrecks large and small rolled and pitched like vessels on an ocean in fury.

The part of Floating Island which had suffered most was that which had formed the base of Milliard City. It had sunk beneath the weight of its edifices. In vain would you search for any vestige of its monuments, of the houses which bordered the main avenues of both sections. Never had the separation between Larboardites and Star- boardites been more complete, and never assuredly had they dreamt of such.

Was the number of victims considerable? It was to be feared so, although the people had taken refuge in time in the centre of the country, where the ground offered more resistance to dismemberment.

Well! Were they satisfied, these Coverleys and Tankerdons, of the result due to their culpable rivalry? It was not one of them who would govern, to the exclusion of the other. Swallowed up was Milliard City, and with it the enormous price they had paid for it. But do not pity their fate! There remained to them millions enough in the coffers of the American and European banks to assure them of their daily bread in their old age.

The largest fragment comprised that portion of the country which extended between the observatory and Prow Battery. Its area was about three acres, and on it the shipwrecked people — if we can so describe them — were gathered to the number of three thousand.

On the next largest portion were some of the buildings in the neighbourhood of Larboard Harbour, the port, with some of the storehouses of provisions and one of the tanks of fresh water. The electric works, the buildings in which were the machinery and boilers, had disappeared at the time of the explosion. On this second fragment two thousand people had taken refuge.

With regard to Starboard Harbour, it will not have been forgotten that this part of Floating Island had been violently forced off at three o'clock in the morning. It had doubtless sunk, for as far as the eye could reach, nothing could be seen of it.

With the first two fragments floated a third, of an area of from four to five hectares, comprising that portion of the country about Stern Battery, on which were about four thousand people. And there were twelve more pieces, measuring a few hundred square metres each, on which the rest of the people saved from the disaster had taken refuge.

That was all that was left of the Pearl of the Pacific.

There must, therefore, have been many hundred victims of the catastrophe; and the survivors might be thankful that Floating Island had not been swallowed up entirely in the waters of the Pacific.

But if they were far from land, how were these fragments to reach a coast? Were the people to perish by famine? And would there survive a single witness of this disaster, unequalled in maritime necrology?

No, there was no need to despair. These drifting fragments bore energetic men, and all that was possible to do for the common safety would be done.

It was on the fragment around Prow Battery that wero gathered Commodore Ethel Simcoe, the King and Queen of Malecarlie, the staff of the observatory, Colonel Stewart, some of the officers, a certain number of the notables of Milliard City, the clergy — in fact, an important part of the population.

There also were the Coverley and Tankerdon families, overwhelmed by the frightful responsibility which rested on their chiefs. And were they not also smitten in their dearest affections, for Walter and Di had disappeared! Were they on one of the other fragments? Could they ever hope to see them again?

The Quartette Party with their precious instruments were complete. To use a well-known formula, “death alone would separate them.” Frascolin was still taking matters coolly, and had not lost all hope. Yvernès, who was accustomed to look at things on their extraordinary side, remarked; “It would be difficult to imagine a grander finish.”

Sebastien Zorn was nearly crazy. To have been the prophet predicting the misfortunes of Floating Island, as Jeremiah did the misfortunes of Sion, did not console him. He was hungry, he was cold, he was continually coughing.

And Calistus Munbar? Well, the superintendent was simply sublime — yes, sublime! He would not despair of the safety of the people, or the safety of Floating Island. Floating Island could be repaired. The fragments were sound, and it could not be said that the elements had triumphed over this masterpiece of naval architecture.

It was certain that danger was no longer imminent. All that could sink during the cyclone had sunk with Milliard City — its hotels, its houses, the works, the batteries, all the heavy superstructure. The fragments now were in good condition. They were floating higher than before, and the waves were not sweeping over their surface.

Here was a respite, a tangible amelioration, and as the fear of immediate sinking was removed, the people’s spirits had improved. They were much calmer. Only the women and children, incapable of reasoning, had failed to overcome their terror.

And what had happened to Athanase Dorémus? At the commencement of the breaking up, the professor of dancing and deportment had been carried away with his old servant on one of the fragments. But a current had brought him towards the piece on which were his compatriots of the quartette.

Commodore Simcoe, like the captain of a disabled ship, aided by his devoted staff, had set to work. In the first place, would it be possible to join up the pieces that were floating separately? If it were impossible, could they establish communications between them? This last question was easily answered in the affirmative, for several boats had remained uninjured in Larboard Harbour. By sending them from one fragment to another, Commodore Simcoe could ascertain what resources were left, what amount of fresh water and provisions.

But was he able to find out the longitude and latitude of this flotilla of wreckage?

No! For want of instruments to take an altitude, the position could not be determined, and hence they could not know if they were near any island or continent.

About nine o’clock in the morning, Commodore Simcoe embarked with two of his officers in a boat which had come from Larboard Harbour to fetch him. In this boat he visited the different fragments, and this was what he ascertained in the course of the inquiry.

The distilling apparatus at Larboard Harbour had been destroyed, but the tank contained enough drinking water for a fortnight, if the consumption were reduced to what was strictly necessary. The reserves in the store-houses were sufficient for the food of the people for nearly as long.

It was therefore necessary that in two weeks at the outside a landing should be effected on some point in the Pacific.

This information was in a certain measure reassuring.

But Commodore Simcoe could not help discovering that there had been many hundred victims of this terrible night. The grief of the Tankerdon and Coverley families was inexpressible. Neither Walter nor Di had been found on any of the fragments visited by the boat. At the moment of the catastrophe the young man, carrying his betrothed, was going towards Starboard Harbour, and of this part of Floating Island nothing remained on the surface of the Pacific.

In the afternoon the wind abated from hour to hour, the sea fell, and the fragments were barely affected by the undulations of the surge. By means of the boats from Larboard Harbour, Commodore Simcoe provided for the food of the people, sending them what was necessary to save them from dying of hunger.

Communications became easier and more rapid. The different pieces, obedient to the laws of attraction, like fragments of cork on the surface of a basin of water, approached one another. And was not that of good augury to the confident Calistus Munbar, who saw in it the re- constitution of the Pearl of the Pacific?

The night went by in darkness. The time had gone when the avenues of Milliard City, the streets of the commercial quarters, the lawns in the park, the fields and prairies were bright with electric lights, when the aluminium moons poured in profusion a dazzling effulgence over the surface of Floating Island!

Amid the darkness there were a few collisions between the fragments. These shocks could not be avoided, but fortunately they were not violent enough to cause serious damage.

At daybreak it was seen that the pieces were all very near together, and floating on a tranquil sea. In a few strokes of the oar it was easy to pass from one to the other. Commodore Simcoe had every facility for regulating the consumption of food and fresh water. That was the important point, and the people understood it and were resigned.

The boats took several families about. They went in search of those they had not yet found. What happiness among these who were met with again, who gave no thought to the dangers with which they were still threatened. What sorrow for those who vainly sought for the absent?

It was evidently a fortunate circumstance that the sea had calmed down- But it was perhaps regrettable that the wind had not continued blowing from the south-east. It would have helped the current which in this part of the Pacific runs towards the Australian coast.

By order of Commodore Simcoe, look-outs were posted to watch every point of the horizon. If a ship appeared, they would make signals. But ships are few in these distant regions at this period of the year when the equinoctial storms prevail.

There was, therefore, a very poor chance of noticing either smoke or masts and sails along the line of sky and water. And yet about two in the afternoon Commodore Simcoe received the following communication from one of the look-outs: “In the north-east there is something on the move, and although the hull cannot be distinguished, it is certain that a vessel is passing in the offing.”

This news caused extraordinary excitement. The King of Malecarlie, Commodore Simcoe, the officers and engineers, all went to the side where the vessel had been signalled from. Orders were given to attract attention by hoisting flags at the end of spars and by simultaneous discharges of the firearms they had left. If the night came before these signals were noticed, a fire would be lighted, and during the night, as it would be visible at a great distance, it was impossible that it could escape being perceived.

It was not necessary to wait until the evening. The mass in question visibly approached. Clouds of smoke rolled overhead, and there could be no doubt it was making for the fragments of Floating Island.

The glasses kept it in view, although its hull was very little above the sea, and it possessed neither masts nor sails.

“My friends,” Commodore Simcoe soon exclaimed, “I am not mistaken! It is a piece of our island! It is Starboard Harbour which was carried away by the currents. Doubtless Mr. Somwah has repaired his engines, and is coming to us.”

Demonstrations verging on madness welcomed the news. It seemed that the safety of all was now assured- It was as it were a vital part of Floating Island which came back with this piece of Starboard Harbour.

Matters had, in fact, happened as Commodore Simcoe supposed. After the breaking off, Starboard Harbour, seized by a counter-current, had drifted off to the northeast. When day came Mr. Somwah had repaired the slight damages to his engines, and returned to the scene of the wreck, bringing with him several hundred more survivors.

Three hours afterwards, Starboard Harbour was not more than a cable’s length from the flotilla. And what transports of joy, what shouts of enthusiasm welcomed its arrival. Walter Tankerdon and Di Coverley, who had taken refuge there before the catastrophe, were there side by side.

With the arrival of Starboard Harbour, with its reserves of provisions and water, there was some chance of safety. The stores contained enough oil to drive the engines and dynamos and work the screws for some days. Its five million horse-power would enable it to reach the nearest land. This land, according to the observations made by the officer of the port, was New Zealand.

But the difficulty was that these thousands of people could not take passage on Starboard Harbour, its area being only from six to seven thousand square metres. Would it have to be sent fifty miles away in search of help?

No! The voyage would require considerable time, and there were not many hours to spare. There was not a day to lose If the people were to be preserved from the horrors of famine.

“We can do better than that,” said the King of Malecarlie. “The fragments of Starboard Harbour and the batteries can carry all the survivors of Floating Island. Fasten these three fragments together by strong chains, and tow them one behind the other as if they were barges. Then, with Starboard Harbour at the head, its five million horse-power can take us to New Zealand.”

The advice was excellent, it was practicable, it had every chance of success, now that Starboard Harbour possessed such enormous locomotive power. Confidence returned to the people as if they were already in sight of port.

The rest of the day was employed in the work necessitated by the fixing of the chains which were furnished by the stores of Starboard Harbour. Commodore Simcoe estimated that in this way a speed of from eight to ten miles a day could be obtained. In five days they would, if assisted by the current, accomplish the fifty miles which separated them from New Zealand. There was no doubt that the provisions would last until then. But to provide against delays, the rations were prudently maintained as before.

The preparations being complete, Starboard Harbour took the head of the procession about seven o’clock in the evening. Under the propulsion of its screws the two other fragments were slowly towed over the calm sea.

Next morning at daylight the look-outs had lost sight of the fragments left behind.

Nothing of importance occurred during the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th of April. The weather was favourable, the motion of the sea was hardly perceptible, and the voyage continued under excellent conditions.

About eight o'clock on the morning of the 9th of April; the land was sighted on the port bow — a high land that could be seen from a considerable distance.

Observations being taken with the instruments at Starboard Harbour, there was no doubt as to the identity of this land. It was the northern island of New Zealand.

A day and a night passed, and on the ioth of April, in the morning, Starboard Harbour ran aground about a cable length from the shore in Ravaraki Bay.

What satisfaction, what security the people experienced when they felt the real ground beneath their feet, and not the artificial soil of Floating Island. And yet how long might not this substantial maritime apparatus have lasted, if human passions, stronger than the winds and the sea, had not driven it to destruction.

The shipwrecked people were very hospitably received by the New Zealanders, who gave everybody food who required it.

As soon as they arrived at Auckland, the marriage of Walter Tankerdon with Di Coverley was at last celebrated with all the pomp the circumstances deserved. Let us add that the Quartette Party were heard for the last time at this ceremony, at which all the Milliardites were present. It would be a happy union — would it had taken place sooner, in the interest of all! Doubtless the young couple only possessed a poor million each —

“But,” as Pinchinat said, “there is every reason to believe that they will still find happiness with such a moderate fortune.”

The Tankerdons and Coverleys and other notables intended to return to America, where they would no longer dispute over the government of a Floating Island.

The same determination was come to by Commodore Simcoe, Colonel Stewart and their officers, the staff of the observatory, and even the superintendent, Calistus Munbar, who had not given up the idea of building a new artificial island.

The King and Queen of Malecarlie made no secret as to their regret for Floating Island, in which they had hoped to peacefully terminate their existence. Let us hope that these ex-sovereigns found a corner of the earth where they could spend their last days sheltered from political discussions.

And the Quartette Party?

Well, the Quartette Party, whatever Sebastien Zorn might say, had not done so badly, and if they bore any ill- will to Calistus Munbar for having taken them against their will, it would have been sheer ingratitude.

From the 25th of May the preceding year until the 10th of April a little more than eleven months had elapsed, during which our artistes had lived the luxurious life we know. They had received the fourth instalment of their salary, three instalments of which were deposited in the banks of San Francisco and New York, payable to them on demand.

After the marriage ceremony at Auckland, Sebastien Zorn, Yvernès, Frascolin, and Pinchinat went to take leave of their friends, not forgetting

Athanase Doremus. Then they embarked on a steamer bound for San Diego.

Arriving on the 3rd of May in this capital of Lower California, their first care was to apologize through the newspapers for having failed to keep their appointment eleven months before, and to express their sincere regret at what had happened.

“Gentlemen, we would have waited for you for twenty years!”

That was the reply they received from the amiable director of concerts at San Diego.

Nobody could have been more accommodating or more gracious. The only way to acknowledge such courtesy was to give this concert which had been announced for so long.

And before a public as numerous as enthusiastic, the quartette in F major, from Op. 9 of Mozart, was for these virtuosos escaped from the wreck of Floating Island one of the greatest successes of their artistic career.

Such is the end of the story of the ninth wonder of the orld, this incomparable Pearl of the Pacific! All is well that ends well, as people say, but all is bad that ends badly, and was such the case with Floating Island?

Ended, no! It will be rebuilt some day — at least Calistus Munbar says so.

And yet — we cannot repeat it too often — to create an artificial island, an island that moves on the surface of the seas, is it not to overstep the limits assigned to human genius, and is it not forbidden to man, who disposes not of the winds or the waves, to so recklessly usurp the functions of the Creator?

THE END.

FACING THE FLAG

Anonymous translation, 1896

This 1896 novel is set in France, which is depicted as being under threat with the rest of the world by a super weapon. The novel resonates with French patriotism and it is a precursor work of fiction to deal with problems that would later affect our world, like nuclear war and terrorism.

Verne, close to the time of publication

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CHAPTER I.

HEALTHFUL HOUSE.

The *carte de visite* received that day, June 15, 189 — , by the director of the establishment of Healthful House was a very neat one, and simply bore, without escutcheon or coronet, the name:

COUNT D’ARTIGAS.

Below this name, in a corner of the card, the following address was written in lead pencil:

“On board the schooner *Ebba*, anchored off New-Berne, Pamlico Sound.”

The capital of North Carolina — one of the forty-four states of the Union at this epoch — is the rather important town of Raleigh, which is about one hundred and fifty miles in the interior of the province. It is owing to its central position that this city has become the seat of the State legislature, for there are others that equal and even surpass it in industrial and commercial importance, such as Wilmington, Charlotte, Fayetteville, Edenton, Washington, Salisbury, Tarborough, Halifax, and New-Berne. The latter town is situated on estuary of the Neuse River, which empties itself into Pamlico Sound, a sort of vast maritime lake protected by a natural dyke formed by the isles and islets of the Carolina coast.

The director of Healthful House could never have imagined why the card should have been sent to him, had it not been accompanied by a note from the Count d’Artigas soliciting permission to visit the establishment. The personage in question hoped that the director would grant his request, and announced that he would present himself in the afternoon, accompanied by Captain Spade, commander of the schooner *Ebba*.

This desire to penetrate to the interior of the celebrated sanitarium, then in great request by the wealthy invalids of the United States, was natural enough on the part of a foreigner. Others who did not bear such a high-sounding name as the Count d’Artigas had visited it, and had been unstinting in their compliments to the director. The latter therefore hastened to accord the authorization demanded, and added that he would be honored to open the doors of the establishment to the Count d’Artigas.

Healthful House, which contained a select *personnel*, and was assured of the co-operation of the most celebrated doctors in the country, was a private enterprise. Independent of hospitals and almshouses, but subjected to the surveillance of the State, it comprised all the conditions of comfort and salubrity essential to establishments of this description designed to receive an opulent *clientele*.

It would have been difficult to find a more agreeable situation than that of Healthful House. On the landward slope of a hill extended a park of two hundred acres planted with the magnificent vegetation that grows so luxuriantly in that part of North America, which is equal in latitude to the Canary and Madeira Islands. At the furthermost limit of the park lay the wide estuary of the Neuse, swept by the cool breezes of Pamlico Sound and by the winds that blew from the ocean beyond the narrow *lido* of the coast.

Healthful House, where rich invalids were cared for under such excellent hygienic conditions, was more generally reserved for the treatment of chronic complaints; but the management did not decline to admit patients affected by mental troubles, when the latter were not of an incurable nature.

It thus happened — a circumstance that was bound to attract a good deal of attention to Healthful House, and which perhaps was the motive for the visit of the Count d’Artigas — that a person of world-wide notoriety had for eighteen months been under special observation there.

This person was a Frenchman named Thomas Roch, forty-five years of age. He was, beyond question, suffering from some mental malady, but expert alienists admitted that he had not entirely lost the use of his reasoning faculties. It was only too evident that he had lost all notion of things as far as the ordinary acts of life were concerned; but in regard to subjects demanding the exercise of his genius, his sanity was unimpaired and unassailable — a fact which demonstrates how true is the *dictum* that genius and madness are often closely allied! Otherwise his condition manifested itself by complete loss of memory; — the impossibility of concentrating his attention upon anything, lack of judgment, delirium and incoherence. He no longer even possessed the natural animal instinct of self-preservation, and had to be watched like an infant whom one never permits out of one’s sight. Therefore a warder was detailed to keep close watch over him by day and by night in Pavilion No. 17, at the end of Healthful House Park, which had been specially set apart for him.

Ordinary insanity, when it is not incurable, can only be cured by moral means. Medicine and therapeutics are powerless, and their inefficacy has long been recognized by specialists. Were these moral means applicable to the case of Thomas Roch? One may be permitted to doubt it, even amid the tranquil and salubrious surroundings of Healthful House. As a matter of fact the very symptoms of uneasiness, changes of temper, irritability, queer traits of character, melancholy, apathy, and a repugnance for serious occupations were distinctly apparent; no treatment seemed capable of curing or even alleviating these symptoms. This was patent to all his medical attendants.

It has been justly remarked that madness is an excess of subjectivity; that is to say, a state in which the mind accords too much to mental labor and not enough to outward impressions. In the case of Thomas Roch this indifference was practically absolute. He lived but within himself, so to speak, a prey to a fixed idea which had brought him to the condition in which we find him. Could any circumstance occur to counteract it — to “exteriorize” him, as it were? The thing was improbable, but it was not impossible.

It is now necessary to explain how this Frenchman came to quit France, what motive attracted him to the United States, why the Federal government had judged it prudent and necessary to intern him in this sanitarium, where every utterance that unconsciously escaped him during his crises were noted and recorded with the minutest care.

Eighteen months previously the Secretary of the Navy at Washington, had received a demand for an audience in regard to a communication that Thomas Roch desired to make to him.

As soon as he glanced at the name, the secretary perfectly understood the nature of the communication and the terms which would accompany it, and an immediate audience was unhesitatingly accorded.

Thomas Roch’s notoriety was indeed such that, out of solicitude for the interests confided to his keeping, and which he was bound to safeguard, he could not hesitate to receive the petitioner and listen to the proposals which the latter desired personally to submit to him.

Thomas Roch was an inventor — an inventor of genius. Several important discoveries had brought him prominently to the notice of the world. Thanks to him, problems that had previously remained purely theoretical had received practical application. He occupied a conspicuous place in the front rank of the army of science. It will be seen how worry, deceptions, mortification, and the outrages with which he was overwhelmed by the cynical wits of the press combined to drive him to that degree of madness which necessitated his internment in Healthful House.

His latest invention in war-engines bore the name of Roch's Fulgurator. This apparatus possessed, if he was to be believed, such superiority over all others, that the State which acquired it would become absolute master of earth and ocean.

The deplorable difficulties inventors encounter in connection with their inventions are only too well known, especially when they endeavor to get them adopted by governmental commissions. Several of the most celebrated examples are still fresh in everybody's memory. It is useless to insist upon this point, because there are sometimes circumstances underlying affairs of this kind upon which it is difficult to obtain any light. In regard to Thomas Roch, however, it is only fair to say that, as in the case of the majority of his predecessors, his pretensions were excessive. He placed such an exorbitant price upon his new engine that it was practicably impossible to treat with him.

This was due to the fact — and it should not be lost sight of — that in respect of previous inventions which had been most fruitful in result, he had been imposed upon with the greatest audacity. Being unable to obtain therefrom the profits which he had a right to expect, his temper had become soured. He became suspicious, would give up nothing without knowing just what he was doing, impose conditions that were perhaps unacceptable, wanted his mere assertions accepted as sufficient guarantee, and in any case asked for such a large sum of money on account before condescending to furnish the test of practical experiment that his overtures could not be entertained.

In the first place he had offered the fulgurator to France, and made known the nature of it to the commission appointed to pass upon his proposition. The fulgurator was a sort of auto-propulsive engine, of peculiar construction, charged with an explosive composed of new substances and which only produced its effect under the action of a deflagrator that was also new.

When this engine, no matter in what way it was launched, exploded, not on striking the object aimed at, but several hundred yards from it, its action upon the atmospheric strata was so terrific that any construction, warship or floating battery, within a zone of twelve thousand square yards, would be blown to atoms. This was the principle of the shell launched by the Zalinski pneumatic gun with which experiments had already been made at that epoch, but its results were multiplied at least a hundred-fold.

If, therefore, Thomas Roch's invention possessed this power, it assured the offensive and defensive superiority of his native country. But might not the inventor be exaggerating, notwithstanding that the tests of other engines he had conceived had proved incontestably that they were all he had claimed them to be? This, experiment could alone show, and it was precisely here where the rub came in. Roch would not agree to experiment until the millions at which he valued his fulgurator had first been paid to him.

It is certain that a sort of disequilibrium had then occurred in his mental faculties. It was felt that he was developing a condition of mind that would gradually lead to definite madness. No government could possibly condescend to treat with him under the conditions he imposed.

The French commission was compelled to break off all negotiations with him, and the newspapers, even those of the Radical Opposition, had to admit that it was difficult to follow up the affair.

In view of the excess of subjectivity which was unceasingly augmenting in the profoundly disturbed mind of Thomas Roch, no one will be surprised at the fact that the cord of patriotism gradually relaxed until it ceased to vibrate. For the honor of human nature be it said that Thomas Roch was by this time irresponsible for his actions. He preserved his whole consciousness only in so far as subjects bearing directly upon his invention were concerned. In this particular he had lost nothing of his mental power. But in all that related to the most ordinary details of existence his moral decrepitude increased daily and deprived him of complete responsibility for his acts.

Thomas Roch's invention having been refused by the commission, steps ought to have been taken to prevent him from offering it elsewhere. Nothing of the kind was done, and there a great mistake was made.

The inevitable was bound to happen, and it did. Under a growing irritability the sentiment of patriotism, which is the very essence of the citizen — who before belonging to himself belongs to his country — became extinct in the soul of the disappointed inventor. His thoughts turned towards other nations. He crossed the frontier, and forgetting the ineffaceable past, offered the fulgurator to Germany.

There, as soon as his exorbitant demands were made known, the government refused to receive his communication. Besides, it so happened that the military authorities were just then absorbed by the construction of a new ballistic engine, and imagined they could afford to ignore that of the French inventor.

As the result of this second rebuff Roch's anger became coupled with hatred — an instinctive hatred of humanity — especially after his *pourparlers* with the British Admiralty came to naught. The English being practical people, did not at first repulse Thomas Roch. They sounded him and tried to get round him; but Roch would listen to nothing. His secret was worth millions, and these millions he would have, or they would not have his secret. The Admiralty at last declined to have anything more to do with him.

It was in these conditions, when his intellectual trouble was growing daily worse, that he made a last effort by approaching the American Government. That was about eighteen months before this story opens.

The Americans, being even more practical than the English, did not attempt to bargain for Roch's fulgurator, to which, in view of the French chemist's reputation, they attached exceptional importance. They rightly esteemed him a man of genius, and took the measures justified by his condition, prepared to indemnify him equitably later.

As Thomas Roch gave only too visible proofs of mental alienation, the Administration, in the very interest of his invention, judged it prudent to sequestrate him.

As is already known, he was not confined in a lunatic asylum, but was conveyed to Healthful House, which offered every guarantee for the proper treatment of his malady. Yet, though the most careful attention had been devoted to him, no improvement had manifested itself.

Thomas Roch, let it be again remarked — this point cannot be too often insisted upon — incapable though he was of comprehending and performing the ordinary acts and duties of life, recovered all his powers when the field of his discoveries was touched upon. He became animated, and spoke with the assurance of a man who knows whereof he is descanting, and an authority that carried conviction with it. In the heat of his eloquence he would describe the marvellous qualities of his fulgurator and the truly extraordinary effects it caused. As to the nature of the explosive and of the deflagrator, the elements of which the latter was composed, their manufacture, and the way in which they were employed, he preserved complete silence, and all attempts to worm the secret out of him remained ineffectual. Once or twice, during the height of the paroxysms to which he was occasionally subject, there had been reason to believe that his secret would escape him, and every precaution had been taken to note his slightest utterance. But Thomas Roch had each time disappointed his watchers. If he no longer preserved the sentiment of self-preservation, he at least knew how to preserve the secret of his discovery.

Pavilion No. 17 was situated in the middle of a garden that was surrounded by hedges, and here Roch was accustomed to take exercise under the surveillance of his guardian. This guardian lived in the same pavilion, slept in the same room with him, and kept constant watch upon him, never leaving him for an hour. He hung upon the lightest words uttered by the patient in the course of his hallucinations, which generally occurred in the intermediary state between sleeping and waking — watched and listened while he dreamed.

This guardian was known as Gaydon. Shortly after the sequestration of Thomas Roch, having learned that an attendant speaking French fluently was wanted, he had applied at Healthful House for the place, and had been engaged to look after the new inmate.

In reality the alleged Gaydon was a French engineer named Simon Hart, who for several years past had been connected with a manufactory of chemical products in New Jersey. Simon Hart was forty years of age. His high forehead was furrowed with the wrinkle that denoted the thinker, and his resolute bearing denoted energy combined with tenacity. Extremely well versed in the various questions relating to the perfecting of modern armaments, Hart knew everything that had been invented in the shape of explosives, of which there were over eleven hundred at that time, and was fully able to appreciate such a man as Thomas Roch. He firmly believed in the power of the latter's fulgurator, and had no doubt whatever that the inventor had conceived an engine that was capable of revolutionizing the condition of both offensive and defensive warfare on land and sea. He was aware that the demon of insanity had respected the man of science, and that in Roch's partially diseased brain the flame of genius still burned brightly. Then it occurred to him that if, during Roch's crises, his secret was revealed, this invention of a Frenchman would be seized upon by some other country to the detriment of France. Impelled by a spirit of patriotism, he made up his mind to offer himself as Thomas Roch's guardian, by passing himself off as an American thoroughly conversant with the French language, in order that if the inventor did at any time disclose his secret, France alone should benefit thereby. On pretext of returning to Europe, he resigned his position at the New Jersey manufactory, and changed his name so that none should know what had become of him.

Thus it came to pass that Simon Hart, alias Gaydon, had been an attendant at Healthful House for fifteen months. It required no little courage on the part of a man of his position and education to perform the menial and exacting duties of an insane man's attendant; but, as has been before remarked, he was actuated by a spirit of the purest and noblest patriotism.

The idea of depriving Roch of the legitimate benefits due to the inventor, if he succeeded in learning his secret, never for an instant entered his mind.

He had kept the patient under the closest possible observation for fifteen months yet had not been able to learn anything from him, or worm out of him a single reply to his questions that was of the slightest value. But he had become more convinced than ever of the importance of Thomas Roch's discovery, and was extremely apprehensive lest the partial madness of the inventor should become general, or lest he should die during one of his paroxysms and carry his secret with him to the grave.

This was Simon Hart's position, and this the mission to which he had wholly devoted himself in the interest of his native country.

However, notwithstanding his deceptions and troubles, Thomas Roch's physical health, thanks to his vigorous constitution, was not particularly affected. A man of medium height, with a large head, high, wide forehead, strongly-cut features, iron-gray hair and moustache, eyes generally haggard, but which became piercing and imperious when illuminated by his dominant idea, thin lips closely compressed, as though to prevent the escape of a word that could betray his secret — such was the inventor confined in one of the pavilions of Healthful House, probably unconscious of his sequestration, and confided to the surveillance of Simon Hart the engineer, become Gaydon the warder.

CHAPTER II.

COUNT D’ARTIGAS.

Just who was this Count d’Artigas? A Spaniard? So his name would appear to indicate. Yet on the stern of his schooner, in letters of gold, was the name *Ebba*, which is of pure Norwegian origin. And had you asked him the name of the captain of the *Ebba*, he would have replied, Spade, and would doubtless have added that that of the boatswain was Effrondat, and that of the ship’s cook, Helim — all singularly dissimilar and indicating very different nationalities.

Could any plausible hypothesis be deducted from the type presented by Count d’Artigas? Not easily. If the color of his skin, his black hair, and the easy grace of his attitude denoted a Spanish origin, the *ensemble* of his person showed none of the racial characteristics peculiar to the natives of the Iberian peninsula.

He was a man of about forty-five years of age, about the average height, and robustly constituted. With his calm and haughty demeanor he resembled an Hindoo lord in whose blood might mingle that of some superb type of Malay. If he was not naturally of a cold temperament, he at least, with his imperious gestures and brevity of speech, endeavored to make it appear that he was. As to the language usually spoken by him and his crew, it was one of those idioms current in the islands of the Indian Ocean and the adjacent seas. Yet when his maritime excursions brought him to the coasts of the old or new world he spoke English with remarkable facility, and with so slight an accent as to scarcely betray his foreign origin.

None could have told anything about his past, nor even about his present life, nor from what source he derived his fortune, — obviously a large one, inasmuch as he was able to gratify his every whim and lived in the greatest luxury whenever he visited America, — nor where he resided when at home, nor where was the port from which his schooner hailed, and none would have ventured to question him upon any of these points so little disposed was he to be communicative. He was not the kind of man to give anything away or compromise himself in the slightest degree, even when interviewed by American reporters.

All that was known about him was what was published in the papers when the arrival of the *Ebba* was reported in some port, and particularly in the ports of the east coast of the United States, where the schooner was accustomed to put in at regular periods to lay in provisions and stores for a lengthy voyage. She would take on board not only flour, biscuits, preserves, fresh and dried meat, live stock, wines, beers, and spirits, but also clothing, household utensils, and objects of luxury — all of the finest quality and highest price, and which were paid for either in dollars, guineas, or other coins of various countries and denominations.

Consequently, if no one knew anything about the private life of Count d’Artigas, he was nevertheless very well known in the various ports of the United States from the Florida peninsula to New England.

It is therefore in no way surprising that the director of Healthful House should have felt greatly flattered by the Count’s visit, and have received him with every mark of honor and respect.

It was the first time that the schooner *Ebba* had dropped anchor in the port of New-Berne, and no doubt a mere whim of her owner had brought him to the mouth of the Neuse. Otherwise why should he have come to such a place? Certainly not to lay in stores, for Pamlico Sound offered neither the resources nor facilities to be found in such ports as Boston, New York, Dover, Savannah, Wilmington in North Carolina, and Charleston in South Carolina. What could he have procured with his piastres and bank-notes in the small markets of New-Berne? This chief town of Craven County contained barely six thousand inhabitants. Its commerce consisted principally in the exportation of grain, pigs, furniture, and naval munitions. Besides, a few weeks previously, the schooner had loaded up for some destination which, as usual, was unknown.

Had this enigmatical personage then come solely for the purpose of visiting Healthful House? Very likely. There would have been nothing surprising in the fact, seeing that the establishment enjoyed a high and well-merited reputation.

Or perhaps the Count had been inspired by curiosity to meet Thomas Roch? This curiosity would have been legitimate and natural enough in view of the universal renown of the French inventor. Fancy — a mad genius who claimed that his discoveries were destined to revolutionize the methods of modern military art!

As he had notified the director he would do, the Count d’Artigas presented himself in the afternoon at the door of Healthful House, accompanied by Captain Spade, the commander of the *Ebba*.

In conformity with orders given, both were admitted and conducted to the office of the director. The latter received his distinguished visitor with *empressement*, placed himself at his disposal, and intimated his intention of personally conducting him over the establishment, not being willing to concede to anybody else the honor of being his *cicerone*. The Count on his part was profuse in the expression of his thanks for the considerations extended to him.

They went over the common rooms and private habitations of the establishment, the director prattling unceasingly about the care with which the patients were tended — much better care, if he was to be believed, than they could possibly have had in the bosoms of their families — and priding himself upon the results achieved, and which had earned for the place its well-merited success.

The Count d’Artigas listened to his ceaseless chatter with apparent interest, probably in order the better to dissemble the real motive of his visit. However, after going the rounds for an hour he ventured to remark:

“Have you not among your patients, sir, one anent whom there was a great deal of talk some time ago, and whose presence here contributed in no small measure to attract public attention to Healthful House?”

“You refer to Thomas Roch, I presume, Count?” queried the director.

“Precisely — that Frenchman — that inventor — whose mental condition is said to be very precarious.”

“Very precarious, Count, and happily so, perhaps! In my opinion humanity has nothing to gain by his discoveries, the application of which would increase the already too numerous means of destruction.”

“You speak wisely, sir, and I entirely agree with you. Real progress does not lie in that direction, and I regard as inimical to society all those who seek to follow it. But has this inventor entirely lost the use of his intellectual faculties?”

“Entirely, no; save as regards the ordinary things of life. In this respect he no longer possesses either comprehension or responsibility. His genius as an inventor, however, remains intact; it has survived his moral degeneracy, and, had his insensate demands been complied with, I have no doubt he would have produced a new war engine — which the world can get along very well without."

"Very well without, as you say, sir," re-echoed the Count d'Artigas, and Captain Spade nodded approval.

"But you will be able to judge for yourself, Count, for here is the pavilion occupied by Thomas Roch. If his confinement is well justified from the point of view of public security he is none the less treated with all the consideration due to him and the attention which his condition necessitates. Besides, Healthful House is beyond the reach of indiscreet persons who might..."

The director completed the phrase with a significant motion of his head — which brought an imperceptible smile to the lips of the stranger.

"But," asked the Count, "is Thomas Roch never left alone?"

"Never, Count, never. He has a permanent attendant in whom we have implicit confidence, who speaks his language and keeps the closest possible watch upon him. If in some way or other some indication relative to his discovery were to escape him, it would be immediately noted down and its value would be passed upon by those competent to judge."

Here the Count d'Artigas stole a rapid and meaning glance at Captain Spade, who responded with a gesture which said plainly enough: "I understand." And had any one observed the captain during the visit, they could not have failed to remark that he examined with the greatest minuteness that portion of the park surrounding Pavilion No. 17, and the different paths leading to the latter — probably in view of some prearranged scheme.

The garden of the pavilion was near the high wall surrounding the property, from the foot of which on the other side the hill sloped gently to the right bank of the Neuse.

The pavilion itself was a one-story building surmounted by a terrace in the Italian style. It contained two rooms and an ante-room with strongly-barred windows. On each side and in rear of the habitation were clusters of fine trees, which were then in full leaf. In front was a cool, green velvety lawn, ornamented with shrubs and brilliantly tinted flowers. The whole garden extended over about half an acre, and was reserved exclusively for the use of Thomas Roch, who was free to wander about it at pleasure under the surveillance of his guardian.

When the Count d’Artigas, Captain Spade, and the director entered the garden, the first person they saw was the warder Gaydon, standing at the door of the pavilion. Unnoticed by the director the Count d’Artigas eyed the attendant with singular persistence.

It was not the first time that strangers had come to see the occupant of Pavilion No. 17, for the French inventor was justly regarded as the most interesting inmate of Healthful House. Nevertheless, Gaydon’s attention was attracted by the originality of the type presented by the two visitors, of whose nationality he was ignorant. If the name of the Count d’Artigas was not unfamiliar to him, he had never had occasion to meet that wealthy gentleman during the latter’s sojourn in the eastern ports. He therefore had no idea as to who the Count was. Neither was he aware that the schooner *Ebba* was then anchored at the entrance to the Neuse, at the foot of the hill upon which Healthful House was situated.

“Gaydon,” demanded the director, “where is Thomas Roch?”

“Yonder,” replied the warder, pointing to a man who was walking meditatively under the trees in rear of the pavilion.

“The Count d’Artigas has been authorized to visit Healthful House,” the director explained; “and does not wish to go away without having seen Thomas Roch, who was lately the subject of a good deal too much discussion.”

“And who would be talked about a great deal more,” added the Count, “had the Federal Government not taken the precaution to confine him in this establishment.”

“A necessary precaution, Count.”

“Necessary, as you observe, Mr. Director. It is better for the peace of the world that his secret should die with him.”

After having glanced at the Count d’Artigas, Gaydon had not uttered a word; but preceding the two strangers he walked towards the clump of trees where the inventor was pacing back and forth.

Thomas Roch paid no attention to them. He appeared to be oblivious of their presence.

Meanwhile, Captain Spade, while being careful not to excite suspicion, had been minutely examining the immediate surroundings of the pavilion and the end of the park in which it was situated. From the top of the sloping alleys he could easily distinguish the peak of a mast which showed above the wall of the park. He recognized the peak at a glance as being that of the

Ella, and knew therefore that the wall at this part skirted the right bank of the Neuse.

The Count d'Artigas' whole attention was concentrated upon the French inventor. The latter's health appeared to have suffered in no way from his eighteen months' confinement; but his queer attitude, his incoherent gestures, his haggard eye, and his indifference to what was passing around him testified only too plainly to the degeneration of his mental faculties.

At length Thomas Roch dropped into a seat and with the end of a switch traced in the sand of the alley the outline of a fortification. Then kneeling down he made a number of little mounds that were evidently intended to represent bastions. He next plucked some leaves from a neighboring tree and stuck them in the mounds like so many tiny flags. All this was done with the utmost seriousness and without any attention whatever being paid to the onlookers.

It was the amusement of a child, but a child would have lacked this characteristic gravity.

"Is he then absolutely mad?" demanded the Count d'Artigas, who in spite of his habitual impassibility appeared to be somewhat disappointed.

"I warned you, Count, that nothing could be obtained from him."

"Couldn't he at least pay some attention to us?"

"It would perhaps be difficult to induce him to do so."

Then turning to the attendant:

"Speak to him, Gaydon. Perhaps he will answer you."

“Oh! he’ll answer me right enough, sir, never fear,” replied Gaydon.

He went up to the inventor and touching him on the shoulder, said gently: “Thomas Roch!”

The latter raised his head, and of the persons present he doubtless saw but his keeper, though Captain Spade had come up and all formed a circle about him.

“Thomas Roch,” continued Gaydon, speaking in English, “here are some visitors to see you. They are interested in your health — in your work.”

The last word alone seemed to rouse him from his indifference.

“My work?” he replied, also in English, which he spoke like a native.

Then taking a pebble between his index finger and bent thumb, as a boy plays at marbles, he projected it against one of the little sand-heaps. It scattered, and he jumped for joy.

“Blown to pieces! The bastion is blown to pieces! My explosive has destroyed everything at one blow!” he shouted, the light of triumph flashing in his eyes.

“You see,” said the director, addressing the Count d’Artigas. “The idea of his invention never leaves him.”

“And it will die with him,” affirmed the attendant.

“Couldn’t you, Gaydon, get him to talk about his fulgurator?” asked his chief.

“I will try, if you order me to do so, sir.”

“Well, I do order you, for I think it might interest the Count d’Artigas.”

“Certainly,” assented the Count, whose physiognomy betrayed no sign of the sentiments which were agitating him.

“I ought to warn you that I risk bringing on another fit,” observed Gaydon.

“You can drop the conversation when you consider it prudent. Tell Thomas Roch that a foreigner wishes to negotiate with him for the purchase of his fulgurator.”

“But are you not afraid he may give his secret away?” questioned the Count.

He spoke with such vivacity that Gaydon could not restrain a glance of distrust, which, however, did not appear to disturb the equanimity of that impenetrable nobleman.

“No fear of that,” said the warder. “No promise would induce him to divulge his secret. Until the millions he demands are counted into his hand he will remain as mute as a stone.”

“I don’t happen to be carrying those millions about me,” remarked the Count quietly.

Gaydon again touched Roch on the shoulder and repeated:

“Thomas Roch, here are some foreigners who are anxious to acquire your invention.”

The madman started.

"My invention?" he cried. "My deflagrator?"

And his growing animation plainly indicated the imminence of the fit that Gaydon had been apprehensive about, and which questions of this character invariably brought on.

"How much will you give me for it — how much?" continued Roch. "How much — how much?"

"Ten million dollars," replied Gaydon.

"Ten millions! Ten millions! A fulgurator ten million times more powerful than anything hitherto invented! Ten millions for an autopropulsive projectile which, when it explodes, destroys everything in sight within a radius of over twelve thousand square yards! Ten millions for the only deflagrator that can provoke its explosion! Why, all the wealth of the world wouldn't suffice to purchase the secret of my engine, and rather than sell it at such a price I would cut my tongue in half with my teeth. Ten millions, when it is worth a billion — a billion — a billion!"

It was clear that Roch had lost all notion of things, and had Gaydon offered him ten billions the madman would have replied in exactly the same manner.

The Count d'Artigas and Captain Spade had not taken their eyes off him. The Count was impassible as usual, though his brow had darkened, but the captain shook his head in a manner that implied plainly: "Decidedly there is nothing to hope from this poor devil!"

After his outburst Roch fled across the garden crying hoarsely:

"Billions! Billions!"

Gaydon turned to the director and remarked:

“I told you how it would be.”

Then he rushed after his patient, caught him by the arm, and led him, without any attempt at resistance, into the pavilion and closed the door.

The Count d’Artigas remained alone with the director, Captain Spade having strolled off again in the direction of the wall at the bottom of the park.

“You see I was not guilty of exaggeration, Count,” said the director. “It is obvious to every one that Thomas Roch is becoming daily worse. In my opinion his case is a hopeless one. If all the money he asks for were offered to him, nothing could be got from him.”

“Very likely,” replied the Count, “still, if his pecuniary demands are supremely absurd, he has none the less invented an engine the power of which is infinite, one might say.”

“That is the opinion expressed by competent persons, Count. But what he has discovered will ere long be lost with himself in one of these fits which are becoming more frequent and intense. Very soon even the motive of interest, the only sentiment that appears to have survived in his mind, will become extinct.”

“Mayhap the sentiment of hatred will remain, though,” muttered the Count, as Spade joined them at the garden gate.

CHAPTER III.

KIDNAPPED.

Half an hour later the Count d’Artigas and Captain Spade were following the beech-lined road that separated the Healthful House estate from the right bank of the Neuse. Both had taken leave of the director, the latter declaring himself greatly honored by their visit, and the former thanking him warmly for his courteous reception. A hundred-dollar bill left as a tip for the staff of the establishment had certainly not belied the Count’s reputation for generosity. He was — there could be no doubt about it — a foreigner of the highest distinction, if distinction be measured by generosity.

Issuing by the gate at the main entrance to Healthful House, they had skirted the wall that surrounded the property, and which was high enough to preclude the possibility of climbing it. Not a word passed between them for some time; the Count was deep in thought and Captain Spade was not in the habit of addressing him without being first spoken to.

At last when they stood beneath the rear wall behind which, though it was not visible, the Count knew Pavilion No. 17 was situated, he said:

“You managed, I presume, to thoroughly explore the place, and are acquainted with every detail of it?”

“Certainly, *Count*” replied Captain Spade, emphasizing the title.

“You are perfectly sure about it?”

“Perfectly. I could go through the park with my eyes shut. If you still persist in carrying out your scheme the pavilion can be easily reached.”

“I do persist, Spade.”

“Notwithstanding Thomas Roch’s mental condition?”

“Notwithstanding his condition; and if we succeed in carrying him off — — ”

“That is my affair. When night comes on I undertake to enter the park of Healthful House, and then the pavilion garden without being seen by anybody.”

“By the entrance gate?”

“No, on this side.”

“Yes, but on this side there is the wall, and if you succeed in climbing it, how are you going to get over it again with Thomas Roch? What if the madman cries out — what if he should resist — what if his keeper gives the alarm?”

“Don’t worry yourself in the least about that. We have only got to go in and come out by this door.”

Captain Spade pointed to a narrow door let into the wall a few paces distant, and which was doubtless used by the staff of the establishment when they had occasion to go out by the river.

“That is the way I propose to go in. It’s much easier than scaling the wall with a ladder.”

“But the door is closed.”

“It will open.”

“Has it no bolts?”

“Yes, but I shot them back while we were strolling about, and the director didn’t notice what I had done.”

“How are you going to open it?” queried the Count, going to the door.

“Here is the key,” replied Spade, producing it.

He had withdrawn it from the lock, where it happened to be, when he had unbolted the door.

“Capital!” exclaimed the Count. “It couldn’t be better. The business will be easier than I expected. Let us get back to the schooner. At eight o’clock one of the boats will put you ashore with five men.”

“Yes, five men will do,” said Captain Spade. “There will be enough of them to effect our object even if the keeper is aroused and it becomes necessary to put him out of the way.”

“Put him out of the way — well, if it becomes absolutely necessary of course you must, but it would be better to seize him too and bring him aboard the *Ebba* Who knows but what he has already learned a part of Roch’s secret?”

“True.”

“Besides, Thomas Roch is used to him, and I don’t propose to make him change his habitudes in any way.”

This observation was accompanied by such a significant smile that Captain Spade could entertain no doubt as to the rôle reserved for the warder of Healthful House.

The plan to kidnap them both was thus settled, and appeared to have every chance of being successful; unless during the couple of hours of daylight that yet remained it was noticed that the key of the door had been stolen and the bolts drawn back, Captain Spade and his men could at least count upon being able to enter the park, and the rest, the captain affirmed, would be easy enough.

Thomas Roch was the only patient in the establishment isolated and kept under special surveillance. All the other invalids lived in the main building, or occupied pavilions in the front of the park. The plan was to try and seize Roch and Gaydon separately and bind and gag them before they could cry out.

The Count d'Artigas and his companion wended their way to a creek where one of the *Ebba's* boats awaited them. The schooner was anchored two cable lengths from the shore, her sails neatly rolled upon her yards, which were squared as neatly as those of a pleasure yacht or of a man-of-war. At the peak of the mainmast a narrow red pennant was gently swayed by the wind, which came in fitful puffs from the east.

The Count and the captain jumped into the boat and a few strokes of the four oars brought them alongside of the schooner. They climbed on deck and going forward to the jib-boom, leaned over the starboard bulwark and gazed at an object that floated on the water a few strokes ahead of the vessel. It was a small buoy that was rocked by the ripple of the ebbing tide.

Twilight gradually set in, and the outline of New-Berne on the left bank of the sinuous Neuse became more and more indistinct until it disappeared in the deepening shades of night. A mist set in from the sea, but though it obscured the moon it brought no sign of rain. The lights gleamed out one by one in the houses of the town. The fishing smacks came slowly up the river to their anchorage, impelled by the oars of their crews which struck the water with sharp, rhythmical strokes, and with their sails distended on the chance of catching an occasional puff of the dropping wind to help them along. A couple of steamers passed, sending up volumes of black smoke and myriads of sparks from their double stacks, and lashing the water into foam with their powerful paddles.

At eight o’clock the Count d’Artigas appeared on the schooner’s deck accompanied by a man about fifty years of age, to whom he remarked:

“It is time to go, Serko.”

“Very well, I will tell Spade,” replied Serko.

At that moment the captain joined them.

“You had better get ready to go,” said the Count.

“All is ready.”

“Be careful to prevent any alarm being given, and arrange matters so that no one will for a minute suspect that Thomas Roch and his keeper have been brought on board the *Ebba*.”

“They wouldn’t find them if they came to look for them,” observed Serko, shrugging his shoulders and laughing heartily as though he had perpetrated a huge joke.

“Nevertheless, it is better not to arouse their suspicion,” said d’Artigas.

The boat was lowered, and Captain Spade and five sailors took their places in it. Four of the latter got out the oars. The boatswain, Effrondat, who was to remain in charge of the boat, went to the stern beside Captain Spade and took the tiller.

“Good luck, Spade,” said Serko with a smile, “and don’t make more noise about it than if you were a gallant carrying off his lady-love.”

“I won’t — unless that Gaydon chap — ”

“We must have both Roch and Gaydon,” insisted the Count d’Artigas.

“That is understood,” replied Spade.

The boat pushed off, and the sailors on the deck of the schooner watched it till it was lost to sight in the darkness.

Pending its return, no preparations for the *Ebba’s* departure were made. Perhaps there was no intention of quitting the port after the men had been kidnapped. Besides, how could the vessel have reached the open sea? Not a breath of air was now stirring, and in half an hour the tide would be setting in again, and rising strongly and rapidly for several miles above New-Berne.

Anchored, as has already been said, a couple of cable-lengths from the shore, the *Ebba* might have been brought much nearer to it, for the water was deep enough, and this would have facilitated the task of the kidnappers when they returned from their expedition. If, however, the Count d’Artigas preferred to let the vessel stay where she was, he probably had his reasons.

Not a soul was in sight on the bank, and the road, with its borders of beech trees that skirted the wall of Healthful House estate, was equally deserted. The boat was made fast to the shore. Then Captain Spade and his four sailors landed, leaving the boatswain in charge, and disappeared amid the trees.

When they reached the wall Captain Spade stopped and the sailors drew up on each side of the doorway. The captain had only to turn the key in the lock and push the door, unless one of the servants, noticing that the door was not secured as usual, had bolted it. In this event their task would be an extremely difficult one, even if they succeeded in scaling the high wall.

The captain put his ear to the key-hole and listened.

Not a sound was to be heard in the park. Not even a leaf was rustling in the branches of the beeches under which they were standing. The surrounding country was wrapt in the profoundest silence.

Captain Spade drew the key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock and turned it noiselessly. Then he cautiously pushed the door, which opened inward.

Things were, then, just as he had left them, and no one had noticed the theft of the key.

After assuring himself that nobody happened to be in the neighborhood of the pavilion the captain entered, followed by his men. The door was left wide open, so that they could beat a hurried and uninterrupted retreat in case of necessity. The trees and bushes in this shady part of the park were very thick, and it was so dark that it would not have been easy to distinguish the pavilion had not a light shone brightly in one of the windows.

No doubt this was the window of the room occupied by Roch and his guardian, Gaydon, seeing that the latter never left the patient placed in his charge either by night or day. Captain Spade had expected to find him there.

The party approached cautiously, taking the utmost precaution to avoid kicking a pebble or stepping on a twig, the noise of which might have revealed their presence. In this way they reached the door of the pavilion near which was the curtained window of the room in which the light was burning.

But if the door was locked, how were they going to get in? Captain Spade must have asked himself. He had no key, and to attempt to effect an entrance through the window would be hazardous, for, unless Gaydon could be prevented from giving the alarm, he would rouse the whole establishment.

There was no help for it, however. The essential was to get possession of Roch. If they could kidnap Gaydon, too, in conformity with the intentions of the Count d'Artigas, so much the better. If not —

Captain Spade crept stealthily to the window, and standing on tiptoe, looked in. Through an aperture in the curtain he could see all over the room.

Gaydon was standing beside Thomas Roch, who had not yet recovered from the fit with which he had been attacked during the Count d'Artigas' visit. His condition necessitated special attention, and the warder was ministering to the patient under the direction of a third person.

The latter was one of the doctors attached to Healthful House, and had been at once sent to the pavilion by the director when Roch's paroxysm came on. His presence of course rendered the situation more complicated and the work of the kidnappers more difficult.

Roch, fully dressed, was extended upon a sofa. He was now fairly calm. The paroxysm, which was abating, would be followed by several hours of torpor and exhaustion.

Just as Captain Spade peeped through the window the doctor was making preparations to leave. The Captain heard him say to Gaydon that his (the doctor's) presence was not likely to be required any more that night, and that there was nothing to be done beyond following the instructions he had given.

The doctor then walked towards the door, which, it will be remembered, was close to the window in front of which Spade and his men were standing. If they remained where they were they could not fail to be seen, not only by the doctor, but by the warder, who was accompanying him to the door.

Before they made their appearance, however, the sailors, at a sign from their chief, had dispersed and hidden themselves behind the bushes, while Spade himself crouched in the shadow beneath the window. Luckily Gaydon had not brought the lamp with him, so that the captain was in no danger of being seen.

As he was about to take leave of Gaydon, the doctor stopped on the step and remarked:

“This is one of the worst attacks our patient has had. One or two more like that and he will lose the little reason he still possesses.”

“Just so,” said Gaydon. “I wonder that the director doesn’t prohibit all visitors from entering the pavilion. Roch owes his present attack to a Count d’Artigas, for whose amusement harmful questions were put to him.”

“I will call the director’s attention to the matter,” responded the doctor.

He then descended the steps and Gaydon, leaving the door of the pavilion ajar, accompanied him to the end of the path.

When they had gone Captain Spade stood up, and his men rejoined him.

Had they not better profit by the chance thus unexpectedly afforded them to enter the room and secure Roch, who was in a semi-comatose condition, and then await Gaydon’s return, and seize the warder as he entered?

This would have involved considerable risk. Gaydon, at a glance, would perceive that his patient was missing and raise an alarm; the doctor would come running back; the whole staff of Healthful House would turn out, and Spade would not have time to escape with his precious prisoner and lock the door in the wall after him.

He did not have much chance to deliberate about it, for the warder was heard returning along the gravel path. Spade decided that the best thing to be done was to spring upon him as he passed and stifle his cries and overpower him before he could attempt to offer any resistance. The carrying off of the mad inventor would be easy enough, inasmuch as he was unconscious, and could not raise a finger to help himself.

Gaydon came round a clump of bushes and approached the entrance to the pavilion. As he raised his foot to mount the steps the four sailors sprang upon him, bore him backwards to the ground, and had gagged him, securely bound him hand and foot, and bandaged his eyes before he began to realize what had happened.

Two of the men then kept guard over him, while Captain Spade and the others entered the house.

As the captain had surmised, Thomas Roch had sunk into such a torpor that he could have heard nothing of what had been going on outside. Reclining at full length, with his eyes closed, he might have been taken for a dead man but for his heavy breathing. There was no need either to bind or gag him. One man took him by the head and another by the feet and started off with him to the schooner.

Captain Spade was the last to quit the house after extinguishing the lamp and closing the door behind him. In this way there was no reason to suppose that the inmates would be missed before morning.

Gaydon was carried off in the same way as Thomas Roch had been. The two remaining sailors lifted him and bore him quietly but rapidly down the path to the door in the wall. The park was pitch dark. Not even a glimmer of the lights in the windows of Healthful House could be seen through the thick foliage.

Arrived at the wall, Spade, who had led the way, stepped aside to allow the sailors with their burdens to pass through, then followed and closed and locked the door. He put the key in his pocket, intending to throw it into the Neuse as soon as they were safely on board the schooner.

There was no one on the road, nor on the bank of the river.

The party made for the boat, and found that Effrondat, the boatswain, had made all ready to receive them.

Thomas Roch and Gaydon were laid in the bottom of the boat, and the sailors again took their places at the oars.

“Hurry up, Effrondat, and cast off the painter,” ordered the captain.

The boatswain obeyed, and pushed the boat off with his foot as he scrambled in.

The men bent to their oars and rowed rapidly to the schooner, which was easily distinguishable, having hung out a light at her mizzenmast head.

In two minutes they were alongside.

The Count d’Artigas was leaning on the bulwarks by the gangway.

“All right, Spade?” he questioned.

“Yes, sir, all right!”

“Both of them?”

“Both the madman and his keeper.”

“Doesn’t anybody know about it up at Healthful House?

“Not a soul.”

It was not likely that Gaydon, whose eyes and ears were bandaged, but who preserved all his sang-froid, could have recognized the voices of the Count d’Artigas and Captain Spade. Nor did he have the chance to. No attempt was immediately made to hoist him on board. He had been lying in the bottom of the boat alongside the schooner for fully half an hour, he calculated, before he felt himself lifted, and then lowered, doubtless to the bottom of the hold.

The kidnapping having been accomplished it would seem that it only remained for the *Ebba* to weigh anchor, descend the estuary and make her way out to sea through Pamlico Sound. Yet no preparations for departure were made.

Was it not dangerous to stay where they were after their daring raid? Had the Count d’Artigas hidden his prisoners so securely as to preclude the possibility of their being discovered if the *Ebba*, whose presence in proximity to Healthful House could not fail to excite suspicion, received a visit from the New-Berne police?

However this might have been, an hour after the return of the expedition, every soul on board save the watch — the Count d’Artigas, Serko, and Captain Spade in their respective cabins, and the crew in the fore-castle, were sound asleep.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SCHOONER EBBA.

It was not till the next morning, and then very leisurely, that the *Ebba* began to make preparations for her departure. From the extremity of New-Berne quay the crew might have been seen holystoning the deck, after which they loosened the reef lines, under the direction of Effrondat, the boatswain, hoisted in the boats and cleared the halyards.

At eight o’clock the Count d’Artigas had not yet appeared on deck. His companion, Serko the engineer, as he was called on board, had not quitted his cabin. Captain Spade was strolling quietly about giving orders.

The *Ebba* would have made a splendid racing yacht, though she had never participated in any of the yacht races either on the North American or British coasts. The height of her masts, the extent of the canvas she carried, her shapely, raking hull, denoted her to be a craft of great speed, and her general lines showed that she was also built to weather the roughest gales at sea. In a favorable wind she would probably make twelve knots an hour.

Notwithstanding these advantages, however, she must in a dead calm necessarily suffer from the same disadvantages as other sailing vessels, and it might have been supposed that the Count d’Artigas would have preferred a steam-yacht with which he could have gone anywhere, at any time, in any weather. But apparently he was satisfied to stick to the old method, even when he made his long trips across the Atlantic.

On this particular morning the wind was blowing gently from the west, which was very favorable to the *Ebba*, and would enable her to stand straight out of the Neuse, across Pamlico Sound, and through one of the inlets that led to the open sea.

At ten o’clock the *Ebba* was still rocking lazily at anchor, her stem up stream and her cable tautened by the rapidly ebbing tide. The small buoy that on the previous evening had been moored near the schooner was no longer to be seen, and had doubtless been hoisted in.

Suddenly a gun boomed out and a slight wreath of white smoke arose from the battery. It was answered by other reports from the guns on the chain of islands along the coast.

At this moment the Count d’Artigas and Engineer Serko appeared on deck. Captain Spade went to meet them.

“Guns barking,” he said laconically.

“We expected it,” replied Serko, shrugging his shoulders. “They are signals to close the passes.”

“What has that to do with us %” asked the Count d’Artigas quietly.

“Nothing at all,” said the engineer.

They all, of course, knew that the alarm-guns indicated that the disappearance of Thomas Roch and the warder Gaydon from Healthful House had been discovered.

At daybreak the doctor had gone to Pavilion No. 17 to see how his patient had passed the night, and had found no one there. He immediately notified the director, who had the grounds thoroughly searched. It was then discovered that the door in rear of the park was unbolted, and that, though locked, the key had been taken away. It was evident that Roch and his attendant had been carried out that way. But who were the kidnappers? No one could possibly imagine. All that could be ascertained was that at half-past seven on the previous night one of the doctors had attended Thomas Roch, who was suffering from one of his fits, and that when the medical man had left him the invalid was in an unconscious condition. What had happened after the doctor took leave of Gaydon at the end of the garden-path could not even be conjectured.

The news of the disappearance was telegraphed to New Berne, and thence to Raleigh. On receipt of it the Governor had instantly wired orders that no vessel was to be allowed to quit Pamlico Sound without having been first subjected to a most rigorous search. Another dispatch ordered the cruiser *Falcon*, which was stationed in the port, to carry out the Governor's instructions in this respect. At the same time measures were taken to keep a strict lookout in every town and village in the State.

The Count d'Artigas could see the *Falcon*, which was a couple of miles away to the east in the estuary, getting steam up and making hurried preparations to carry out her mission. It would take at least an hour before the warship could be got ready to steam out, and the schooner might by that time have gained a good start.

"Shall I weigh anchor?" demanded Captain Spade.

"Yes, as we have a fair wind; but you can take your time about it," replied the Count d'Artigas.

"The passes of Pamlico Sound will be under observation," observed Engineer Serko, "and no vessel will be able to get out without receiving a visit from gentlemen as inquisitive as they will be indiscreet."

“Never mind, get under way all the same,” ordered the Count. “When the officers of the cruiser or the Custom-House officers have been over the *Ebba* the embargo will be raised. I shall be indeed surprised if we are not allowed to go about our business.”

“With a thousand pardons for the liberty taken, and best wishes for a good voyage and speedy return,” chuckled Engineer Serko, following the phrase with a loud and prolonged laugh.

When the news was received at New-Berne, the authorities at first were puzzled to know whether the missing inventor and his keeper had fled or been carried off. As, however, Roch’s flight could not have taken place without the connivance of Gaydon, this supposition was speedily abandoned. In the opinion of the director and management of Healthful House the warder was absolutely above suspicion. They must both, then, have been kidnapped.

It can easily be imagined what a sensation the news caused in the town. What! the French inventor who had been so closely guarded had disappeared, and with him the secret of the wonderful fulgurator that nobody had been able to worm out of him? Might not the most serious consequences follow? Might not the discovery of the new engine be lost to America forever? If the daring act had been perpetrated on behalf of another nation, might not that nation, having Thomas Roch in its power, be eventually able to extract from him what the Federal Government had vainly endeavored to obtain? And was it reasonable, was it permissible, to suppose for an instant that he had been carried off for the benefit of a private individual?

Certainly not, was the emphatic reply to the latter question, which was too ridiculous to be entertained. Therefore the whole power of the State was employed in an effort to recover the inventor. In every county of North Carolina a special surveillance was organized on every road and at every railroad station, and every house in town and country was searched. Every port from Wilmington to Norfolk was closed, and no craft of any description could leave without being thoroughly overhauled. Not only the cruiser *Falcon*, but every available cutter and launch was sent out with orders to patrol Pamlico Sound and board yachts, merchant vessels and fishing smacks indiscriminately whether anchored or not and search them down to the keelson.

Still the crew of the *Ebba* prepared calmly to weigh anchor, and the Count d’Artigas did not appear to be in the least concerned at the orders of the authorities and at the consequences that would ensue, if Thomas Roch and his keeper, Gaydon, were found on board.

At last all was ready, the crew manned the capstan bars, the sails were hoisted, and the schooner glided gracefully through the water towards the Sound.

Twenty miles from New-Berne the estuary curves abruptly and shoots off towards the northwest for about the same distance, gradually widening until it empties itself into Pamlico Sound.

The latter is a vast expanse about seventy miles across from Swan Island to Roanoke. On the seaward side stretches a chain of long and narrow islands, forming a natural breakwater north and south from Cape Lookout to Cape Hatteras and from the latter to Cape Henry, near Norfolk City, in Virginia.

Numerous beacons on the islands and islets form an easy guide for vessels at night seeking refuge from the Atlantic gales, and once inside the chain they are certain of finding plenty of good anchoring grounds.

Several passes afford an outlet from the Sound to the sea. Beyond Swan Island lighthouse is Ocracoke inlet, and next is the inlet of Hatteras. There are also three others known as Logger Head inlet, New inlet, and Oregon inlet. The Ocracoke was the one nearest the *Ebba*, and she could make it without tacking, but the *Falcon* was searching all vessels that passed through. This did not, however, make any particular difference, for by this time all the passes, upon which the guns of the forts had been trained, were guarded by government vessels.

The *Ebba*, therefore, kept on her way, neither trying to avoid nor offering to approach the searchers. She seemed to be merely a pleasure-yacht out for a morning sail.

No attempt had up to that time been made to accost her. Was she, then, specially privileged, and to be spared the bother of being searched? Was the Count d’Artigas considered too high and mighty a personage to be thus molested, and delayed even for an hour? It was unlikely, for though he was regarded as a distinguished foreigner who lived the life of luxury enjoyed by the favored of fortune, no one, as a matter of fact, knew who he was, nor whence he came, nor whither he was going.

The schooner sped gracefully over the calm waters of the sound, her flag — a gold crescent in the angle of a red field — streaming proudly in the breeze. Count d’Artigas was cosily ensconced in a basket-work chair on the after-deck, conversing with Engineer Serko and Captain Spade.

“They don’t seem in a hurry to board us,” remarked Serko.

“They can come whenever they think proper,” said the Count in a tone of supreme indifference.

“No doubt they are waiting for us at the entrance to the inlet,” suggested Captain Spade.

“Let them wait,” grunted the wealthy nobleman.

Then he relapsed into his customary unconcerned impassibility.

Captain Spade’s hypothesis was doubtless correct. The *Falcon* had as yet made no move towards the schooner, but would almost certainly do so as soon as the latter reached the inlet, and the Count would have to submit to a search of his vessel if he wished to reach the open sea.

How was it then that he manifested such extraordinary unconcern? Were Thomas Roch and Gaydon so safely hidden that their hiding-place could not possibly be discovered?

The thing was possible, but perhaps the Count d’Artigas would not have been quite so confident had he been aware that the *Ebba* had been specially signalled to the warship and revenue cutters as a suspect.

The Count’s visit to Healthful House on the previous day had now attracted particular attention to him and his schooner. Evidently, at the time, the director could have had no reason to suspect the motive of his visit. But a few hours later, Thomas Roch and his keeper had been carried off. No one else from outside had been near the pavilion that day. It was admitted that it would have been an easy matter for the Count’s companion, while the former distracted the director’s attention, to push back the bolts of the door in the wall and steal the key. Then the fact that the *Ebba* was anchored in rear of, and only a few hundred yards from, the estate, was in itself suspicious. Nothing would have been easier for the desperadoes than to enter by the door, surprise their victims, and carry them off to the schooner.

These suspicions, neither the director nor the *personnel* of the establishment had at first liked to give expression to, but when the *Ebba* was seen to weigh anchor and head for the open sea, they appeared to be confirmed.

They were communicated to the authorities of New-Berne, who immediately ordered the commander of the *Falcon* to intercept the schooner, to search her minutely high and low, and from stem to stern, and on no account to let her proceed, unless he was absolutely certain that Roch and Gaydon were not on board.

Assuredly the Count d'Artigas could have had no idea that his vessel was the object of such stringent orders; but even if he had, it is questionable whether this superbly haughty and disdainful nobleman would hove manifested any particular anxiety.

Towards three o'clock, the warship which was cruising before the inlet, after having sent search parties aboard a few fishing-smacks, suddenly manoeuvred to the entrance of the pass, and awaited the approaching schooner. The latter surely did not imagine that she could force a passage in spite of the cruiser, or escape from a vessel propelled by steam. Besides, had she attempted such a foolhardy trick, a couple of shots from the *Falcon's* guns would speedily have constrained her to lay to.

Presently a boat, manned by two officers and ten sailors, put off from the cruiser and rowed towards the *Ebba*. When they were only about half a cable's length off, one of the men rose and waved a flag.

“That’s a signal to stop,” said Engineer Serko.

“Precisely,” remarked the Count d’Artigas.

“We shall have to lay to.”

“Then lay to.”

Captain Spade went forward and gave the necessary orders, and in a few minutes the vessel slackened speed, and was soon merely drifting with the tide.

The *Falcon’s* boat pulled alongside, and a man in the bows held on to her with a boat-hook. The gangway was lowered by a couple of hands on the schooner, and the two officers, followed by eight of their men, climbed on deck.

They found the crew of the *Ebba* drawn up in line on the forecastle.

The officer in command of the boarding-party — a first lieutenant — advanced towards the owner of the schooner, and the following questions and answers were exchanged:

“This schooner belongs to the Count d’Artigas, to whom, I presume, I have the honor of speaking?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What is her name?”

“The *Ebba*.”

“She is commanded by? — ”

“Captain Spade.”

“What is his nationality?”

“Hindo-Malay.”

The officer scrutinized the schooner’s flag, while the Count d’Artigas added:

“Will you be good enough to tell me, sir, to what circumstance I owe the pleasure of your visit on board my vessel?”

“Orders have been received,” replied the officer, “to search every vessel now anchored in Pamlico Sound, or which attempts to leave it.”

He did not deem it necessary to insist upon this point since the *Ebba*, above every other, was to be subjected to the bother of a rigorous examination.

“You, of course, sir, have no intention of refusing me permission to go over your schooner?”

“Assuredly not, sir. My vessel is at your disposal from peaks to bilges. Only I should like to know why all the vessels which happen to be in Pamlico Sound to-day are being subjected to this formality.”

“I see no reason why you should not be informed, Monsieur the Count,” replied the officer. “The governor of North Carolina has been apprised that Healthful House has been broken into and two persons kidnapped, and the authorities merely wish to satisfy themselves that the persons carried off have not been embarked during the night.”

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the Count, feigning surprise. "And who are the persons who have thus disappeared from Healthful House?"

"An inventor — a madman — and his keeper."

"A madman, sir? Do you, may I ask, refer to the Frenchman, Thomas Roch?"

"The same."

"The Thomas Roch whom I saw yesterday during my visit to the establishment — whom I questioned in presence of the director — who was seized with a violent paroxysm just as Captain Spade and I were leaving?"

The officer observed the stranger with the keenest attention, in an effort to surprise anything suspicious in his attitude or remarks.

"It is incredible!" added the Count, as though he had just heard about the outrage for the first time.

"I can easily understand, sir, how uneasy the authorities must be," he went on, "in view of Thomas Roch's personality, and I cannot but approve of the measures taken. I need hardly say that neither the French inventor nor his keeper is on board the *Ebba*. However, you can assure yourself of the fact by examining the schooner as minutely as you desire. Captain Spade, show these gentlemen over the vessel."

Then saluting the lieutenant of the *Falcon* coldly, the Count d'Artigas sank into his deck-chair again and replaced his cigar between his lips, while the two officers and eight sailors, conducted by Captain Spade, began their search.

In the first place they descended the main hatchway to the after saloon — a luxuriously-appointed place, filled with art objects of great value, hung with rich tapestries and hangings, and wainscotted with costly woods.

It goes without saying that this and the adjoining cabins were searched with a care that could not have been surpassed by the most experienced detectives. Moreover, Captain Spade assisted them by every means in his power, obviously anxious that they should not preserve the slightest suspicion of the *Ebba's* owner.

After the grand saloon and cabins, the elegant dining-saloon was visited. Then the cook's galley, Captain Spade's cabin, and the quarters of the crew in the forecastle were overhauled, but no sign of Thomas Roch or Gaydon was to be seen.

Next, every inch of the hold, etc. was examined, with the aid of a couple of lanterns. Water-kegs, wine, brandy, whisky and beer barrels, biscuit-boxes, in fact, all the provision boxes and everything the hold contained, including the stock of coal, was moved and probed, and even the bilges were scrutinized, but all in vain.

Evidently the suspicion that the Count d'Artigas had carried off the missing men was unfounded and unjust. Even a rat could not have escaped the notice of the vigilant searchers, leave alone two men.

When they returned on deck, however, the officers, as a matter of precaution looked into the boats hanging on the davits, and punched the lowered sails, with the same result.

It only remained for them, therefore, to take leave of the Count d'Artigas.

“You must pardon us for having disturbed you, Monsieur the Count,” said the lieutenant.

“You were compelled to obey your orders, gentlemen.”

“It was merely a formality, of course,” ventured the officer.

By a slight inclination of the head the Count signified that he was quite willing to accept this euphemism.

“I assure you, gentlemen, that I have had no hand in this kidnapping.”

“We can no longer believe so, Monsieur the Count, and will withdraw.”

“As you please. Is the *Ebba* now free to proceed?”

“Certainly.”

“Then *au revoir*, gentlemen, *au revoir*, for I am an *habitué* of this coast and shall soon be back again. I hope that ere my return you will have discovered the author of the outrage, and have Thomas Roch safely back in Healthful House. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished in the interest of the United States — I might even say of the whole world.”

The two officers courteously saluted the Count, who responded with a nod. Captain Spade accompanied them to the gangway, and they were soon making for the cruiser, which had steamed near to pick them up.

Meanwhile the breeze had freshened considerably, and when, at a sign from d’Artigas, Captain Spade set sail again, the *Ebba* skimmed swiftly through the inlet, and half an hour after was standing out to sea.

For an hour she continued steering east-northeast, and then, the wind, being merely a land breeze, dropped, and the schooner lay becalmed, her sails limp, and her flag drooping like a wet rag. It seemed that it would be impossible for the vessel to continue her voyage that night unless a breeze sprang up, and of this there was no sign.

Since the schooner had cleared the inlet Captain Spade had stood in the bows gazing into the water, now to port, now to starboard, as if on the lookout for something. Presently he shouted in a stentorian voice:

“Furl sail!”

The sailors rushed to their posts, and in an instant the sails came rattling down and were furled.

Was it Count d’Artigas’ intention to wait there till daybreak brought a breeze with it? Presumably, or the sails would have remained hoisted to catch the faintest puff.

A boat was lowered and Captain Spade jumped into it, accompanied by a sailor, who paddled it towards an object that was floating on the water a few yards away.

This object was a small buoy, similar to that which had floated on the bosom of the Neuse when the *Ebba* lay off Healthful House.

The buoy, with a towline affixed to it, was lifted into the boat that was then paddled to the bow of the *Ella*, from the deck of which another hawser was cast to the captain, who made it fast to the towline of the buoy. Having dropped the latter overboard again, the captain and the sailor returned to the ship and the boat was hoisted in.

Almost immediately the hawser tautened, and the *Elba*, though not a stitch of canvas had been set, sped off in an easterly direction at a speed that could not have been less than ten knots an hour.

Night was falling fast, and soon the rapidly receding lights along the American coast were lost in the mist on the horizon.

CHAPTER V.

WHERE AM I?

(Notes by Simon Hart, the Engineer.)

Where am I? What has happened since the sudden aggression of which I was the victim near the pavilion.

I had just quitted the doctor, and was about to mount the steps, close the door and resume my post beside Thomas Roch when several men sprang upon me and knocked me down. Who are they? My eyes having been bandaged I was unable to recognize them. I could not cry for help, having been gagged. I could make no resistance, for they had bound me hand and foot. Thus powerless, I felt myself lifted and carried about one hundred paces, then hoisted, then lowered, then laid down.

Where? Where?

And Thomas Roch, what has become of him? It must have been he rather than I they were after. I was but Gaydon, the warder. None suspected that I was Simon Hart, the engineer, nor could they have suspected my nationality. Why, therefore, should they have desired to kidnap a mere hospital attendant?

There can consequently be no doubt that the French inventor has been carried off; and if he was snatched from Healthful House it must have been in the hope of forcing his secret from him.

But I am reasoning on the supposition that Thomas Roch was carried off with me. Is it so? Yes — it must be — it is. I can entertain no doubt whatever about it. I have not fallen into the hands of malefactors whose only intention is robbery. They would not have acted in this way. After rendering it impossible for me to cry out, after having thrown me into a clump of bushes in the corner of the garden, after having kidnapped Thomas Roch they would not have shut me up — where I now am.

Where? This is the question which I have been asking myself for hours without being able to answer it.

However, one thing is certain, and that is that I have embarked upon an extraordinary adventure, that will end? — In what manner I know not — I dare not even imagine what the upshot of it will be. Anyhow, it is my intention to commit to memory, minute by minute, the least circumstance, and then, if it be possible, to jot down my daily impressions. Who knows what the future has in store for me? And who knows but what, in my new position, I may finally discover the secret of Roth’s fulgurator? If I am to be delivered one day, this secret must be made known, as well as who is the author, or who are the authors, of this criminal outrage, which may be attended with such serious consequences.

I continually revert to this question, hoping that some incident will occur to enlighten me:

Where am I?

Let me begin from the beginning.

After having been carried by the head and feet from Healthful House, I felt that I was laid, without any brutality, I must admit, upon the stretchers of a row-boat of small dimensions.

The rocking caused by the weight of my body was succeeded shortly afterwards by a further rocking — which I attribute to the embarking of a second person. Can there be room for doubt that it was Thomas Roch? As far as he was concerned they would not have had to take the precaution of gagging him, or of bandaging his eyes, or of binding him. He must still have been in a state of prostration which precluded the possibility of his making any resistance, or even of being conscious of what was being done. The proof that I am not deceiving myself is that I could smell the unmistakable odor of ether. Now, yesterday, before taking leave of us, the doctor administered a few drops of ether to the invalid and — I remember distinctly — a little of this extremely volatile substance fell upon his clothing while he was struggling in his fit. There is therefore nothing astonishing in the fact that this odor should have clung to him, nor that I should have distinguished it, even beneath the bandages that covered my face.

Yes, Thomas Roch was extended near me in the boat. And to think that had I not returned to the pavilion when I did, had I delayed a few minutes longer, I should have found him gone!

Let me think. What could have inspired that Count d’Artigas with the unfortunate curiosity to visit Healthful House? If he had not been allowed to see my patient nothing of the kind would have happened. Talking to Thomas Roch about his inventions brought on a fit of exceptional violence. The director is primarily to blame for not heeding my warning. Had he listened to me the doctor would not have been called upon to attend him, the door of the pavilion would have been locked, and the attempt of the band would have been frustrated.

As to the interest there could have been in carrying off Thomas Roch, either on behalf of a private person or of one of the states of the Old World, it is so evident that there is no need to dwell upon it. However, I can be perfectly easy about the result. No one can possibly succeed in learning what for fifteen months I have been unable to ascertain. In the condition of intellectual collapse into which my fellow-countryman has fallen, all attempts to force his secret from him will be futile. Moreover, he is bound to go from bad to worse until he is hopelessly insane, even as regards those points upon which he has hitherto preserved his reason intact.

After all, however, it is less about Thomas Roch than myself that I must think just now, and this is what I have experienced, to resume the thread of my adventure where I dropped it:

After more rocking caused by our captors jumping into it, the boat is rowed off. The distance must be very short, for a minute after we bumped against something. I surmise that this something must be the hull of a ship, and that we have run alongside. There is some scurrying and excitement. Indistinctly through my bandages I can hear orders being given and a confused murmur of voices that lasts for about five minutes, but I cannot distinguish a word that is said.

The only thought that occurs to me now is that they will hoist me on board and lower me to the bottom of the hold and keep me there till the vessel is far out at sea. Obviously they will not allow either Thomas Roch or his keeper to appear on deck as long as she remains in Pamlico Sound.

My conjecture is correct. Still gagged and bound I am at last lifted by the legs and shoulders. My impression, however, is that I am not being raised over a ship’s bulwark, but on the contrary am being lowered. Are they going to drop me overboard to drown like a rat, so as to get rid of a dangerous witness? This thought flashes into my brain, and a quiver of anguish passes through my body from head to foot. Instinctively I draw a long breath, and my lungs are filled with the precious air they will speedily lack.

No, there is no immediate cause for alarm. I am laid with comparative gentleness upon a hard floor, which gives me the sensation of metallic coldness. I am lying at full length. To my extreme surprise, I find that the ropes with which I was bound have been untied and loosened. The tramping about around me has ceased. The next instant I hear a door closed with a bang.

Where am I? And, in the first place, am I alone? I tear the gag from my mouth, and the bandages from my head.

It is dark — pitch dark. Not a ray of light, not even the vague perception of light that the eyes preserve when the lids are tightly closed.

I shout — I shout repeatedly. No response. My voice is smothered. The air I breathe is hot, heavy, thick, and the working of my lungs will become difficult, impossible, unless the store of air is renewed.

I extend my arms and feel about me, and this is what I conclude:

I am in a compartment with sheet-iron walls, which cannot measure more than four cubic yards. I can feel that the walls are of bolted plates, like the sides of a ship’s water-tight compartment.

I can feel that the entrance to it is by a door on one side, for the hinges protrude somewhat. This door must open inwards, and it is through here, no doubt, that I was carried in.

I place my ear to the door, but not a sound can be heard. The silence is as profound as the obscurity — a strange silence that is only broken by the sonorousness of the metallic floor when I move about. None of the dull noises usually to be heard on board a ship is perceptible, not even the rippling of the water along the hull. Nor is there the slightest movement to be felt; yet, in the estuary of the Neuse, the current is always strong enough, to cause a marked oscillation to any vessel.

But does the compartment in which I am confined, really belong to a ship? How do I know that I am afloat on the Neuse, though I was conveyed a short distance in a boat? Might not the latter, instead of heading for a ship in waiting for it, opposite Healthful House, have been rowed to a point further down the river? In this case is it not possible that I was carried into the collar of a house? This would explain the complete immobility of the compartment. It is true that the walls are of bolted plates, and that there is a vague smell of salt water, that odor *sui generis* which generally pervades the interior of a ship, and which there is no mistaking.

An interval, which I estimate at about four hours, must have passed since my incarceration. It must therefore be near midnight. Shall I be left here in this way till morning? Luckily, I dined at six o’clock, which is the regular dinner-hour at Healthful House. I am not suffering from hunger. In fact I feel more inclined to sleep than to eat. Still, I hope I shall have energy enough to resist the inclination. I will not give way to it. I must try and find out what is going on outside. But neither sound nor light can penetrate this iron box. Wait a minute, though; perhaps by listening intently I may hear some sound, however feeble. Therefore I concentrate all my vital power in my sense of hearing. Moreover, I try — in case I should really not be on *terra firma* — to distinguish some movement, some oscillation of my prison. Admitting that the ship is still at anchor, it cannot be long before it will start — otherwise I shall have to give up imagining why Thomas Roch and I have been carried off.

At last — it is no illusion — a slight rolling proves to me, beyond a doubt, that I am not on land. We are evidently moving, but the motion is scarcely perceptible. It is not a jerky, but rather a gliding movement, as though we were skimming through the water without effort, on an even keel.

Let me consider the matter calmly. I am on board a vessel that was anchored in the Neuse, waiting under sail or steam, for the result of the expedition. A boat brought me aboard, but, I repeat, I did not feel that I was lifted over her bulwarks. Was I passed through a porthole? But after all, what does it matter? Whether I was lowered into the hold or not, I am certainly upon something that is floating and moving.

No doubt I shall soon be let out, together with Thomas Roch, supposing them to have locked him up as carefully as they have me. By being let out, I mean being accorded permission to go on deck. It will not be for some hours to come, however, that is certain, for they won’t want us to be seen, so that there is no chance of getting a whiff of fresh air till we are well out at sea. If it is a sailing vessel, she must have waited for a breeze — for the breeze that freshens off shore at daybreak, and is favorable to ships navigating Pamlico Sound.

It certainly cannot be a steamer. I could not have failed to smell the oil and other odors of the engine-room. And then I should feel the trembling of the machinery, the jerks of the pistons, and the movements of the screws or paddles.

The best thing to do is to wait patiently. I shan’t be taken out of this hole until to-morrow, anyway. Moreover, if I am not released, somebody will surely bring me something to eat. There is no reason to suppose that they intend to starve me to death. They wouldn’t have taken the trouble to bring me aboard, but would have dropped me to the bottom of the river had they been desirous of getting rid of me. Once we are out at sea, what will they have to fear from me? No one could hear my shouts. As to demanding an explanation and making a fuss, it would be useless. Besides, what am I to the men who have carried us off? A mere hospital attendant — one Gaydon, who is of no consequence. It is Thomas Roch they were after. I was taken along too because I happened to return to the pavilion at the critical moment.

At any rate, no matter what happens, no matter who our kidnappers may be, no matter where we are taken, I shall stick to this resolution: I will continue to play my role of warder. No one, no! none, can suspect that Gaydon is Simon Hart, the engineer. There are two advantages in this: in the first place, they will take no notice of a poor devil of a warder, and in the second, I may be able to solve the mystery surrounding this plot and turn my knowledge to profit, if I succeed in making my escape.

But whither are my thoughts wandering? I must perforce wait till we arrive at our destination before thinking of escaping. It will be time enough to bother about that when the occasion presents itself. Until then the essential is that they remain ignorant as to my identity, and they cannot, and shall not, know who I am.

I am now certain that we are going through the water. But there is one thing that puzzles me. It is hot a sailing vessel, neither can it be a steamer. Yet it is incontestably propelled by some powerful machine. There are none of the noises, nor is there the trembling that accompanies the working of steam engines. The movement of the vessel is more continuous and regular, it is a sort of direct rotation that is communicated by the motor, whatever the latter may be. No mistake is possible: the ship is propelled by some special mechanism. But what is it?

Is it one of those turbines that have been spoken of lately, which, fitted into a submerged tube, are destined to replace the ordinary screw, it being claimed that they utilize the resistance of the water better than the latter and give increased speed to a ship?

In a few hours' time I shall doubtless know all about this means of locomotion.

Meanwhile there is another thing that equally puzzles me. There is not the slightest rolling or pitching. How is it that Pamlico Sound is so extraordinarily calm? The varying currents continuously ruffle the surface of the Sound, even if nothing else does.

It is true the tide may be out, and I remember that last night the wind had fallen altogether. Still, no matter, the thing is inexplicable, for a ship propelled by machinery, no matter at what speed she may be going, always oscillates more or less, and I cannot perceive the slightest rocking.

Such are the thoughts with which my mind is persistently filled. Despite an almost overpowering desire to sleep, despite the torpor that is coming upon me in this suffocating atmosphere, I am resolved not to close my eyes. I will keep awake till daylight, and there will be no daylight for me till it is let into my prison from the outside. Perhaps even if the door were open it would not penetrate to this black hole, and I shall probably not see it again until I am taken on deck.

I am squatting in a corner of my prison, for I have no stool or anything to sit upon, but as my eyelids are heavy and I feel somnolent in spite of myself, I get up and walk about. Then I wax wrathful, anger fills my soul, I beat upon the iron walls with my fists, and shout for help. In vain! I hurt my hands against the bolts of the plates, and no one answers my cries.

Such conduct is unworthy of me. I flattered myself that I would remain calm under all circumstances and here I am acting like a child.

The absence of any rolling or lurching movement at least proves that we are not yet at sea. Instead of crossing Pamlico Sound, may we not be going in the opposite direction, up the River Neuse? No! What would they go further inland for? If Thomas Roch has been carried off from Healthful House, his captors obviously mean to take him out of the United States — probably to a distant island in the Atlantic, or to some point on the European continent. It is, therefore, not up the Neuse that our maritime machine, whatever it may be, is going, but across Pamlico Sound, which must be as calm as a mirror.

Very well, then, when we get to sea I shall soon, know, for the vessel will rock right enough in the swell off shore, even though there be no wind, — unless I am aboard a battleship, or big cruiser, and this I fancy can hardly be!

But hark! If I mistake not — no, it was not imagination — I hear footsteps. Some one is approaching the side of the compartment where the door is. One of the crew no doubt. Are they going to let me out at last? I can now hear voices. A conversation is going on outside the door, but it is carried on in a language that I do not understand. I shout to them — I shout again, but no answer is vouchsafed.

There is nothing to do, then, but wait, wait, wait! I keep repeating the word and it rings in my ears like a bell.

Let me try to calculate how long I have been here. The ship must have been under way for at least four or five hours. I reckon it must be past midnight, but I cannot tell, for unfortunately my watch is of no use to me in this Cimmerian darkness.

Now, if we have been going for five hours, we must have cleared Pamlico Sound, whether we issued by Ocracoke or Hatteras inlet, and must be off the coast a good mile, at least. Yet I haven’t felt any motion from the swell of the sea.

It is inexplicable, incredible! Come now, have I made a mistake? Am I the dupe of an illusion? Am I not imprisoned in the hold of a ship under way?

Another hour has passed and the movement of the ship suddenly ceases; I realize perfectly that she is stationary. Has she reached her destination? In this event we can only be in one of the coast ports to the north or south of Pamlico Sound. But why should Thomas Roch be landed again? The abduction must soon have been discovered, and our kidnappers would run the greatest risk of falling into the hands of the authorities if they attempted to disembark.

However this may be, if the vessel is coming to anchor I shall hear the noise of the chain as it is paid out, and feel the jerk as the ship is brought up. I know that sound and that jerk well from experience, and I am bound to hear and feel them in a minute or two.

I wait — I listen.

A dead and disquieting silence reigns on board. I begin to wonder whether I am not the only living being in the ship.

Now I feel an irresistible torpor coming over me. The air is vitiated. I cannot breathe. My chest is bursting. I try to resist, but it is impossible to do so. The temperature rises to such a degree that I am compelled to divest myself of part of my clothing. Then I lie me down in a corner. My heavy eyelids close, and I sink into a prostration that eventually forces me into heavy slumber.

How long have I been asleep? I cannot say. Is it night? Is it day? I know not. I remark, however, that I breathe more easily, and that the air is no longer poisoned carbonic acid.

Was the air renewed while I slept? Has the door been opened? Has anybody been in here?

Yes, here is the proof of it!

In feeling about, my hand has come in contact with a mug filled with a liquid that exhales an inviting odor. I raise it to my lips, which, are burning, for I am suffering such an agony of thirst that I would even drink brackish water.

It is ale — an ale of excellent quality — which refreshes and comforts me, and I drain the pint to the last drop.

But if they have not condemned me to die of thirst, neither have they condemned me to die of hunger, I suppose?

No, for in one of the corners I find a basket, and this basket contains some bread and cold meat.

I fall to, eating greedily, and my strength little by little returns.

Decidedly, I am not so abandoned as I thought I was. Some one entered this obscure hole, and the open door admitted a little of the oxygen from the outside, without which I should have been suffocated. Then the wherewithal to quench my thirst and appease the pangs of hunger was placed within my reach.

How much longer will this incarceration last? Days? Months? I cannot estimate the hours that have elapsed since I fell asleep, nor have I any idea as to what time of the day or night it may be. I was careful to wind up my watch, though, and perhaps by feeling the hands — Yes, I think the little hand marks eight o'clock — in the morning, no doubt. What I do know, however, is that the ship is not in motion. There is not the slightest quiver.

Hours and hours, weary, interminable hours go by, and I wonder whether they are again waiting till night comes on to renew my stock of air and provisions. Yes, they are waiting to take advantage of my slumbers. But this time I am resolved to resist. I will feign to be asleep — and I shall know how to force an answer from whoever enters!

CHAPTER VI.

ON DECK.

Here I am in the open air, breathing freely once more. I have at last been hauled out of that stifling box and taken on deck. I gaze around me in every direction and see no sign of land. On every hand is that circular line which defines earth and sky. No, there is not even a speck of land to be seen to the west, where the coast of North America extends for thousands of miles.

The setting sun now throws but slanting rays upon the bosom of the ocean. It must be about six o'clock in the evening. I take out my watch and it marks thirteen minutes past six.

As I have already mentioned, I waited for the door of my prison to open, thoroughly resolved not to fall asleep again, but to spring upon the first person who entered and force him to answer my questions. I was not aware then that it was day, but it was, and hour after hour passed and no one came. I began to suffer again from hunger and thirst, for I had not preserved either bite or sup.

As soon as I awoke I felt that the ship was in motion again, after having, I calculated, remained stationary since the previous day — no doubt in some lonely creek, since I had not heard or felt her come to anchor.

A few minutes ago — it must therefore have been six o'clock — I again heard footsteps on the other side of the iron wall of my compartment. Was anybody coming to my cell? Yes, for I heard the creaking of the bolts as they were drawn back, and then the door opened, and the darkness in which I had been plunged since the first hour of my captivity was illumined by the light of a lantern.

Two men, whom I had no time to look at, entered and seized me by the arms. A thick cloth was thrown over my head, which was enveloped in such a manner that I could see absolutely nothing.

What did it all mean? What were they going to do with me? I struggled, but they held me in an iron grasp. I questioned them, but they made no reply. The men spoke to each other in a language that I could not understand, and had never heard before.

They stood upon no ceremony with me. It is true I was only a madhouse warder, and they probably did not consider it necessary to do so; but I question very much whether Simon Hart, the engineer, would have received any more courtesy at their hands.

This time, however, no attempt was made to gag me nor to bind either my arms or legs. I was simply restrained by main force from breaking away from them.

In a moment I was dragged out of the compartment and pushed along a narrow passage. Next, the steps of a metallic stairway resounded under our feet. Then the fresh air blew in my face and I inhaled it with avidity.

Finally they took their hands from off me, and I found myself free. I immediately tore the cloth off my head and gazed about me.

I am on board a schooner which is ripping through the water at a great rate and leaving a long white trail behind her.

I had to clutch at one of the stays for support, dazzled as I was by the light after my forty-eight hours’ imprisonment in complete obscurity.

On the deck a dozen men with rough, weather-beaten faces come and go — very dissimilar types of men, to whom it would be impossible to attribute any particular nationality. They scarcely take any notice of me.

As to the schooner, I estimate that she registers from two hundred and fifty to three hundred tons. She has a fairly wide beam, her masts are strong and lofty, and her large spread of canvas must carry her along at a spanking rate in a good breeze.

Aft, a grizzly-faced man is at the wheel, and he is keeping her head to the sea that is running pretty high.

I try to find out the name of the vessel, but it is not to be seen anywhere, even on the life-buoys.

I walk up to one of the sailors and inquire:

“What is the name of this ship?”

No answer, and I fancy the man does not understand me.

“Where is the captain?” I continue.

But the sailor pays no more heed to this than he did to the previous question.

I turn on my heel and go forward.

Above the forward hatchway a bell is suspended. Maybe the name of the schooner is engraved upon it. I examine it, but can find no name upon it.

I then return to the stern and address the man at the wheel. He gazes at me sourly, shrugs his shoulders, and bending, grasps the spokes of the wheel solidly, and brings the schooner, which had been headed off by a large wave from port, stem on to sea again.

Seeing that nothing is to be got from that quarter, I turn away and look about to see if I can find Thomas Roch, but I do not perceive him anywhere. Is he not on board? He must be. They could have had no reason for carrying me off alone. No one could have had any idea that I was Simon Hart, the engineer, and even had they known it what interest could they have had in me, and what could they expect of me?

Therefore, as Roch is not on deck, I conclude that he is locked in one of the cabins, and trust he has met with better treatment than his ex-guardian.

But what is this — and how on earth could I have failed to notice it before? How is this schooner moving? Her sails are furled — there is not an inch of canvas set — the wind has fallen, and the few puffs that occasionally come from the east are unfavorable, in view of the fact that we are going in that very direction. And yet the schooner speeds through the sea, her bows down, throwing off clouds of foam, and leaving a long, milky, undulating trail in her wake.

Is she a steam-yacht? No — there is not a smokestack about her. Is she propelled by electricity — by a battery of accumulators, or by piles of great power that work her screw and send her along at this rate?

I can come to no other conclusion. In any case she must be fitted with a screw, and by leaning over the stern I shall be able to see it, and can find out what sets it working afterwards.

The man at the wheel watches me ironically as I approach, but makes no effort to prevent me from looking over.

I gaze long and earnestly, but there is no foaming and seething of the water such as is invariably caused by the revolutions of the screw — naught but the long white furrow that a sailing vessel leaves behind is discernible in the schooner’s wake.

Then, what kind of a machine is it that imparts such a marvellous speed to the vessel? As I have already said, the wind is against her, and there is a heavy swell on.

I must — I will know. No one pays the slightest attention, and I again go forward.

As I approach the forecastle I find myself face to face with a man who is leaning nonchalantly on the raised hatchway and who is watching me. He seems to be waiting for me to speak to him.

I recognize him instantly. He is the person who accompanied the Count d’Artigas during the latter’s visit to Healthful House. There can be no mistake — it is he right enough.

It was, then, that rich foreigner who abducted Thomas Roch, and I am on board the *Ebba* his schooner-yacht which is so well known on the American coast!

The man before me will enlighten me about what I want to know. I remember that he and the Count spoke English together.

I take him to be the captain of the schooner.

“Captain,” I say, “you are the person I saw at Healthful House. You remember me, of course?”

He looks me up and down but does not condescend to reply.

“I am Warder Gaydon, the attendant of Thomas Roch,” I continue, “and I want to know why you have carried me off and placed me on board this schooner?”

The captain interrupts me with a sign. It is not made to me, however, but to some sailors standing near.

They catch me by the arms, and taking no notice of the angry movement that I cannot restrain, bundle me down the hatchway. The hatchway stair in reality, I remark, is a perpendicular iron ladder, at the bottom of which, to right and left, are some cabins, and forward, the men’s quarters.

Are they going to put me back in my dark prison at the bottom of the hold?

No. They turn to the left and push me into a cabin. It is lighted by a port-hole, which is open, and through which the fresh air comes in gusts from the briny. The furniture consists of a bunk, a chair, a chest of drawers, a wash-hand-stand and a table.

The latter is spread for dinner, and I sit down. Then the cook’s mate comes in with two or three dishes. He is a colored lad, and as he is about to withdraw, I try to question him, but he, too, vouchsafes no reply. Perhaps he doesn’t understand me.

The door is closed, and I fall to and eat with an excellent appetite, with the intention of putting off all further questioning till some future occasion when I shall stand a chance of getting answered.

It is true I am a prisoner, but this time I am comfortable enough, and I hope I shall be permitted to occupy this cabin for the remainder of the voyage, and not be lowered into that black hole again.

I now give myself up to my thoughts, the first of which is that it was the Count d’Artigas who planned the abduction; that it was he who is responsible for the kidnapping of Thomas Roch, and that consequently the French inventor must be just as comfortably installed somewhere on board the schooner.

But who is this Count d’Artigas? Where does he hail from? If he has seized Thomas Roch, is it not because he is determined to secure the secret of the fulgurator at no matter what cost? Very likely, and I must therefore be careful not to betray my identity, for if they knew the truth, I should never be afforded a chance to get away.

But what a lot of mysteries to clear up, how many inexplicable things to explain — the origin of this d’Artigas, his intentions as to the future, whither we are bound, the port to which the schooner belongs, and this mysterious progress through the water without sails and without screws, at a speed of at least ten knots an hour!

The air becoming keener as night deepens, I close and secure the port-hole, and as my cabin is bolted on the outside, the best thing I can do is to get into my bunk and let myself be gently rocked to sleep by the broad Atlantic in this mysterious cradle, the *Ebba*.

The next morning I rise at daybreak, and having performed my ablutions, dress myself and wait.

Presently the idea of trying the door occurs to me. I find that it has been unbolted, and pushing it open, climb the iron ladder and emerge on deck.

The crew are washing down the deck, and standing aft and conversing are two men, one of whom is the captain. The latter manifests no surprise at seeing me, and indicates my presence to his companion by a nod.

This other man, whom I have never before seen, is an individual of about fifty years of age, whose dark hair is streaked with gray. His features are delicately chiselled, his eyes are bright, and his expression is intelligent and not at all displeasing. He is somewhat of the Grecian type, and T have no doubt that he is of Hellenic origin when I hear him called Serko — Engineer Serko — by the Captain of the *Ebba*.

As to the latter, he is called Spade — Captain Spade — and this name has an Italian twang about it. Thus there is a Greek, an Italian, and a crew recruited from every corner of the earth to man a schooner with a Norwegian name! This mixture strikes me as being suspicious.

And that Count d’Artigas, with his Spanish name and Asiatic type, where does he come from?

Captain Spade and Engineer Serko continue to converse in a low tone of voice. The former is keeping a sharp eye on the man at the wheel, who does not appear to pay any particular attention to the compass in front of him. He seems to pay more heed to the gestures of one of the sailors stationed forward, and who signals to him to put the helm to port or to starboard.

Thomas Roch is near them, gazing vacantly out upon the vast expanse which is not limited on the horizon by a single speck of land. Two sailors watch his every movement. It is evidently feared that the madman may possibly attempt to jump overboard.

I wonder whether I shall be permitted to communicate with my ward.

I walk towards him, and Captain Spade and Engineer Serko watch me.

Thomas Roch doesn’t see me coming, and I stand beside him. Still he takes no notice of me, and makes no movement. His eyes, which sparkle brightly, wander over the ocean, and he draws in deep breaths of the salt, vivifying atmosphere. Added to the air surcharged with oxygen is a magnificent sunset in a cloudless sky. Does he perceive the change in his situation? Has he already forgotten about Healthful House, the pavilion in which he was a prisoner, and Gaydon, his keeper? It is highly probable. The past has presumably been effaced from his memory and he lives solely in the present.

In my opinion, even on the deck of the *Ebba*, in the middle of the sea, Thomas Roch is still the helpless, irresponsible man whom I tended for fifteen months. His intellectual condition has undergone no change, and his reason will return only when he is spoken to about his inventions. The Count d’Artigas is perfectly aware of this mental disposition, having had a proof of it during his visit, and he evidently relies thereon to surprise sooner or later the inventor’s secret. But with what object?

“Thomas Roch!” I exclaim.

My voice seems to strike him, and after gazing at me fixedly for an instant he averts his eyes quickly.

I take his hand and press it. He withdraws it brusquely and walks away, without having recognized me, in the direction of Captain Spade and Engineer Serko.

Does he think of speaking to one or other of these men, and if they speak to him will he be more reasonable than he was with me, and reply to them?

At this moment his physiognomy lights up with a gleam of intelligence. His attention, obviously, has been attracted by the queer progress of the schooner. He gazes at the masts and the furled sails. Then he turns back and stops at the place where, if the *Ebba* were a steamer, the funnel ought to be, and which in this case ought to be belching forth a cloud of black smoke.

What appeared so strange to me evidently strikes Thomas Roch as being strange, too. He cannot explain what I found inexplicable, and, as I did, he walks aft to see if there is a screw.

On the flanks of the *Ebba* a shoal of porpoises are sporting. Swift as is the schooner's course they easily pass her, leaping and gambolling in their native element with surprising grace and agility.

Thomas Roch pays no attention to them, but leans over the stern.

Engineer Serko and Captain Spade, fearful lest he should fall overboard, hurry to him and drag him gently, but firmly, away.

I observe from long experience that Roch is a prey to violent excitement. He turns about and gesticulates, uttering incoherent phrases the while.

It is plain to me that another fit is coming on, similar to the one he had in the pavilion of Healthful House on the night we were abducted. He will have to be seized and carried down to his cabin, and I shall perhaps be summoned to attend to him.

Meanwhile Engineer Serko and Captain Spade do not lose sight of him for a moment. They are evidently curious to see what he will do.

After walking towards the mainmast and assuring himself that the sails are not set, he goes up to it and flinging his arms around it, tries with all his might to shake it, as though seeking to pull it down.

Finding his efforts futile, he quits it and goes to the foremast, where the same performance is gone through. He waxes more and more excited. His vague utterances are followed by inarticulate cries.

Suddenly he rushes to the port stays and clings to them, and I begin to fear that he will leap into the rigging and climb to the cross-tree, where he might be precipitated into the sea by a lurch of the ship.

On a sign from Captain Spade, some sailors run up and try to make him relinquish his grasp of the stays, but are unable to do so. I know that during his fits he is endowed with the strength of ten men, and many a time I have been compelled to summon assistance in order to overpower him.

Other members of the crew, however, come up, and the unhappy madman is borne to the deck, where two big sailors hold him down, despite his extraordinary strength.

The only thing to do is to convey him to his cabin, and let him lie there till he gets over his fit. This is what will be done in conformity with orders given by a new-comer whose voice seems familiar to me.

I turn and recognize him.

He is the Count d’Artigas, with a frown on his face and an imperious manner, just as I had seen him at Healthful House.

I at once advance toward him. I want an explanation and mean to have it.

“By what right, sir?” — I begin.

“By the right of might,” replies the Count.

Then he turns on his heel, and Thomas Roch is carried below.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO DAYS AT SEA.

Perhaps — should circumstances render it necessary — I may be induced to tell the Count d’Artigas that I am Simon Hart, the engineer. Who knows but what I may receive more consideration than if I remain Warder Gaydon? This measure, however, demands reflection. I have always been dominated by the thought that if the owner of the *Ebba* kidnapped the French inventor, it was in the hope of getting possession of Roch’s fulgurator, for which, neither the old nor new continent would pay the impossible price demanded. In that case the best thing I can do is to remain Warder Gaydon, on the chance that I may be allowed to continue in attendance upon him. In this way, if Thomas Roch should ever divulge his secret, I may learn what it was impossible to do at Healthful House, and can act accordingly.

Meanwhile, where is the *Ebba* bound? — first question.

Who and what is the Count d’Artigas? — second question.

The first will be answered in a few days’ time, no doubt, in view of the rapidity with which we are ripping through the water, under the action of a means of propulsion that I shall end by finding out all about. As regards the second, I am by no means so sure that my curiosity will ever be gratified.

In my opinion this enigmatical personage has an all important reason for hiding his origin, and I am afraid there is no indication by which I can gauge his nationality. If the Count d’Artigas speaks English fluently — and I was able to assure myself of that fact during his visit to Pavilion No. 17, — he pronounces it with a harsh, vibrating accent, which is not to be found among the peoples of northern latitudes. I do not remember ever to have heard anything like it in the course of my travels either in the Old or New World — unless it be the harshness characteristic of the idioms in use among the Malays. And, in truth, with his olive, verging on copper-tinted skin, his jet-black, crinkly hair, his piercing, deep-set, restless eyes, his square shoulders and marked muscular development, it is by no means unlikely that he belongs to one of the extreme Eastern races.

I believe this name of d'Artigas is an assumed one, and his title of Count likewise. If his schooner bears a Norwegian name, he at any rate is not of Scandinavian origin. He has nothing of the races of Northern Europe about him.

But whoever and whatever he may be, this man abducted Thomas Roch — and me with him — with no good intention, I'll be bound.

But what I should like to know is, has he acted as the agent of a foreign power, or on his own account? Does he wish to profit alone by Thomas Roch's invention, and is he in the position to dispose of it profitably? That is another question that I cannot yet answer. Maybe I shall be able to find out from what I hear and see ere I make my escape, if escape be possible.

The *Ebba* continues on her way in the same mysterious manner. I am free to walk about the deck, without, however, being able to go beyond the fore hatchway. Once I attempted to go as far as the bows where I could, by leaning over, perceive the schooner's stem as it cut through the water, but acting, it was plain, on orders received, the watch on deck turned me back, and one of them, addressing me brusquely in harsh, grating English, said:

"Go back! Go back! You are interfering with the working of the ship!"

With the working of the ship! There was no working.

Did they realize that I was trying to discover by what means the schooner was propelled? Very likely, and Captain Spade, who had looked on, must have known it, too. Even a hospital attendant could not fail to be astonished at the fact that a vessel without either screw or sails was going along at such a speed. However this may be, for some reason or other, the bows of the *Ebba* are barred to me.

Toward ten o'clock a breeze springs up — a northwest wind and very favorable — and Captain Spade gives an order to the boatswain. The latter immediately pipes all hands on deck, and the mainsail, the foresail, staysail and jibs are hoisted. The work could not have been executed with greater regularity and discipline on board a man-of-war.

The *Ebba* now has a slight list to port, and her speed is notably increased. But the motor continues to push her along, as is evident from the fact that the sails are not always as full as they ought to be if the schooner were bowling along solely under their action. However, they continue to render yeoman's service, for the breeze has set in steadily.

The sky is clear, for the clouds in the west disappear as soon as they attain the horizon, and the sunlight dances on the water.

My preoccupation now is to find out as near as possible where we are bound for. I am a good-enough sailor to be able to estimate the approximate speed of a ship. In my opinion the *Ebba* has been travelling at the rate of from ten to eleven knots an hour. As to the direction we have been going in, it is always the same, and I have been able to verify this by casual glances at the binnacle. If the fore part of the vessel is barred to Warder Gaydon he has been allowed a free run of the remainder of it. Time and again I have glanced at the compass, and noticed that the needle invariably pointed to the east, or to be exact, east-southeast.

These are the conditions in which we are navigating this part of the Atlantic Ocean, which is bounded on the west by the coast of the United States of America.

I appeal to my memory. What are the islands or groups of islands to be found in the direction we are going, ere the continent of the Old World is reached?

North Carolina, which the schooner quitted forty-eight hours ago, is traversed by the thirty-fifth parallel of latitude, and this parallel, extending eastward, must, if I mistake not, cut the African coast at Morocco. But along the line, about three thousand miles from America, are the Azores. Is it presumable that the *Ebba* is heading for this archipelago, that the port to which she belongs is somewhere in these islands which constitute one of Portugal’s insular domains? I cannot admit such an hypothesis.

Besides, before the Azores, on the line of the thirty-fifth parallel, is the Bermuda group, which belongs to England. It seems to me to be a good deal less hypothetical that, if the Count d’Artigas was entrusted with the abduction of Thomas Roch by a European Power at all, it was by the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The possibility, however, remains that he may be acting solely in his own interest.

Three or four times during the day Count d’Artigas has come aft and remained for some time scanning the surrounding horizon attentively. When a sail or the smoke from a steamer heaves in sight he examines the passing vessel for a considerable time with a powerful telescope. I may add that he has not once condescended to notice my presence on deck.

Now and then Captain Spade joins him and both exchange a few words in a language that I can neither understand nor recognize.

It is with Engineer Serko, however, that the owner of the *Ebba* converses more readily than with anybody else, and the latter appears to be very intimate with him. The engineer is a good deal more free, more loquacious and less surly than his companions, and I wonder what position he occupies on the schooner. Is he a personal friend of the Count d'Artigas? Does he scour the seas with him, sharing the enviable life enjoyed by the rich yachtsman? He is the only man of the lot who seems to manifest, if not sympathy with, at least some interest in me.

I have not seen Thomas Roch all day. He must be shut in his cabin, still under the influence of the fit that came upon him last night.

I feel certain that this is so, when about three o'clock in the afternoon, just as he is about to go below, the Count beckons me to approach.

I do not know what he wishes to say to me, this Count d'Artigas, but I do know what I will say to him.

"Do these fits to which Thomas Roch is subject last long?" he asks me in English.

"Sometimes forty-eight hours," I reply.

"What is to be done?"

"Nothing at all. Let him alone until he falls asleep. After a night's sleep the fit will be over and Thomas Roch will be his own helpless self again."

“Very well, Warder Gaydon, you will continue to attend him as you did at Healthful House, if it be necessary.”

“To attend to him!”

“Yes — on board the schooner — pending our arrival.”

“Where?”

“Where we shall be to-morrow afternoon,” replies the Count.

To-morrow, I say to myself. Then we are not bound for the coast of Africa, nor even the Azores. There only remains the hypothesis that we are making for the Bermudas.

Count d’Artigas is about to go down the hatchway when I interrogate him in my turn:

“Sir,” I exclaim, “I desire to know, I have the right to know, where I am going, and — — ”

“Here, Warder Gaydon,” he interrupted, “you have no rights. All you have to do is to answer when you are spoken to.” “I protest!”

“Protest, then,” replies this haughty and imperious personage, glancing at me menacingly.

Then he disappears down the hatchway, leaving me face to face with Engineer Serko.

“If I were you, Warder Gaydon, I would resign myself to the inevitable,” remarks the latter with a smile. “When one is caught in a trap — — ”

“One can cry out, I suppose?”

“What is the use when no one is near to hear you?”

“I shall be heard some day, sir.”

“Some day — that’s a long way off. However, shout as much as you please.”

And with this ironical advice, Engineer Serko leaves me to my own reflections.

Towards four o’clock a big ship is reported about six miles off to the east, coming in our direction. She is moving rapidly and grows perceptibly larger. Black clouds of smoke pour out of her two funnels. She is a warship, for a narrow pennant floats from her main-mast, and though she is not flying any flag I take her to be an American cruiser.

I wonder whether the *Ebba* will render her the customary salute as she passes.

No; for the schooner suddenly changes her course with the evident intention of avoiding her.

This proceeding on the part of such a suspicious yacht does not astonish me greatly. But what does cause me extreme surprise is Captain Spade’s way of manoeuvring.

He runs forward to a signalling apparatus in the bows, similar to that by which orders are transmitted to the engine room of a steamer. As soon as he presses one of the buttons of this apparatus the *Ebba* veers off a point to the south-west.

Evidently an order of “some kind” has been transmitted to the driver of the machine of “some kind” which causes this inexplicable movement of the schooner by the action of a motor of “some kind” the principle of which I cannot guess at.

The result of this manoeuvre is that the *Ebba* slants away from the cruiser, whose course does not vary. Why should this warship cause a pleasure-yacht to turn out of its way? I have no idea.

But the *Ebba* behaves in a very different manner when about six o’clock in the evening a second ship comes in sight on the port bow. This time, instead of seeking to avoid her, Captain Spade signals an order by means of the apparatus above referred to, and resumes his course to the east — which will bring him close to the said ship.

An hour later, the two vessels are only about four miles from each other.

The wind has dropped completely. The strange ship, which is a three-masted merchantman, is taking in her top-gallant sails. It is useless to expect the wind to spring up again during the night, and she will lay becalmed till morning. The *Ebba*, however, propelled by her mysterious motor, continues to approach her.

It goes without saying, that Captain Spade has also begun to take in sail, and the work, under the direction of the boatswain Effrondat, is executed with the same precision and promptness that struck me before.

When the twilight deepens into darkness, only a mile and a half separates the vessels.

Captain Spade then comes up to me — I am standing on the starboard side — and unceremoniously orders me to go below.

I can but obey. I remark, however, ere I go, that the boatswain has not lighted the head-lamps, whereas the lamps of the three-master shine brightly — green to starboard, and red to port.

I entertain no doubt that the schooner intends to pass her without being seen; for though she has slackened speed somewhat, her direction has not been in any way modified.

I enter my cabin under the impression of a vague foreboding. My supper is on the table, but uneasy, I know not why, I hardly touch it, and lie down to wait for sleep that does not come.

I remain in this condition for two hours. The silence is unbroken save by the water that ripples along the vessel’s sides.

My mind is full of the events of the past two days, and other thoughts crowd thickly upon me. To-morrow afternoon we shall reach our destination. To-morrow, I shall resume, on land, my attendance upon Thomas Roch, “if it be necessary,” said the Count d’Artigas.

If, when I was thrown into that black hole at the bottom of the hold, I was able to perceive when the schooner started off across Pamlico Sound, I now feel that she has come to a stop. It must be about ten o’clock.

Why has she stopped? When Captain Spade ordered me below, there was no land in sight. In this direction, there is no island until the Bermuda group is reached — at least there is none on the map — and we shall have to go another fifty or sixty miles before the Bermudas can be sighted by the lookout men. Not only has the *Ebba* stopped, but her immobility is almost complete. There is not a breath of wind, and scarcely any swell, and her slight, regular rocking is hardly perceptible.

Then my thoughts turn to the merchantman, which was only a mile and a half off, on our bow, when I came below. If the schooner continued her course towards her, she must be almost alongside now. We certainly cannot be lying more than one or two cables' length from her. The three-master, which was becalmed at sundown, could not have gone west. She must be close by, and if the night is clear, I shall be able to see her through the porthole.

It occurs to me, that perhaps a chance of escape presents itself. Why should I not attempt it, since no hope of being restored to liberty is held out to me? It is true I cannot swim, but if I seize a life buoy and jump overboard, I may be able to reach the ship, if I am not observed by the watch on deck.

I must quit my cabin and go up by the forward hatchway. I listen. I hear no noise, either in the men's quarters, or on deck. The sailors must all be asleep at this hour. Here goes.

I try to open the door, and find it is bolted on the outside, as I might have expected.

I must give up the attempt, which, after all, had small chance of success.

The best thing I can do, is to go to sleep, for I am weary of mind, if not of body. I am restless and racked by conflicting thoughts, and apprehensions of I know not what. Oh! if I could but sink into the blessed oblivion of slumber!

I must have managed to fall asleep, for I have just been awakened by a noise — an unusual noise, such as I have not hitherto heard on board the schooner.

Day begins to peer through the glass of my port-hole, which is turned towards the east. I look at my watch. It is half-past four.

The first thing I wonder is, whether the *Ebba* has resumed her voyage.

No, I am certain she has not, either by sail, or by her motor. The sea is as calm at sunrise as it was at sunset. If the *Ebba* has been going ahead while I slept, she is at any rate, stationary now.

The noise to which I referred, is caused by men hurrying to and fro on deck — by men heavily laden. I fancy I can also hear a similar noise in the hold beneath my cabin floor, the entrance to which is situated abaft the foremast. I also feel that something is scraping against the schooner's hull. Have boats come alongside? Are the crew engaged in loading or unloading merchandise?

And yet we cannot possibly have reached our journey's end. The Count d'Artigas said that we should not reach our destination till this afternoon. Now, I repeat, she was, last night, fully fifty or sixty miles from the nearest land, the group of the Bermudas. That she could have returned westward, and can be in proximity to the American coast, is inadmissible, in view of the distance. Moreover, I have reason to believe that the *Ebba* has remained stationary all night. Before I fell asleep, I know she had stopped, and I now know that she is not moving.

However, I shall see when I am allowed to go on deck. My cabin door is still bolted, I find on trying it; but I do not think they are likely to keep me here when broad daylight is on.

An hour goes by, and it gradually gets lighter. I look out of my porthole. The ocean is covered by a mist, which the first rays of the sun will speedily disperse.

I can, however, see for a half a mile, and if the three-masted merchantman is not visible, it is probably because she is lying off the other, or port, side of the *Ebba*.

Presently I hear a key turned in my door, and the bolts drawn. I push the door open and clamber up the iron ladder to the deck, just as the men are battening down the cover of the hold.

I look for the Count d'Artigas, but do not see him. He has not yet left his cabin.

Aft, Captain Spade and Engineer Serko are superintending the stowing of some bales, which have doubtless been hoisted from the hold. This explains the noisy operations that were going on when I was awakened. Obviously, if the crew are getting out the cargo, we are approaching the end of our voyage. We are not far from port, and perhaps in a few hours, the schooner will drop anchor.

But what about the sailing ship that was to port of us? She ought to be in the same place, seeing that there has been and is no wind.

I look for her, but she is nowhere to be seen. There is not a sail, not a speck on the horizon either east, west, north or south.

After cogitating upon the circumstance I can only arrive at the following conclusion, which, however, can only be accepted under reserve: Although

I did not notice it, the *Ebba* resumed her voyage while I slept, leaving the three-master becalmed behind her, and this is why the merchantman is no longer visible.

I am careful not to question Captain Spade about it, nor even Engineer Serko, as I should certainly receive no answer.

Besides, at this moment Captain Spade goes to the signalling apparatus and presses one of the buttons on the upper disk. Almost immediately the *Ebba* gives a jerk, then with her sails still furled, she starts off eastward again.

Two hours later the Count d'Artigas comes up through the main hatchway and takes his customary place aft. Serko and Captain Spade at once approach and engage in conversation with him.

All three raise their telescopes and sweep the horizon from southeast to northeast.

No one will be surprised to learn that I gaze intently in the same direction; but having no telescope I cannot distinguish anything.

The midday meal over we all return on deck — all with the exception of Thomas Roch, who has not quitted his cabin.

Towards one o'clock land is sighted by the lookout man on the foretop cross-tree. Inasmuch as the *Elba* is bowling along at great speed I shall soon be able to make out the coast line.

In effect, two hours later a vague semicircular line that curves outward is discernible about eight miles off. As the schooner approaches it becomes more distinct. It is a mountain, or at all events very high ground, and from its summit a cloud of smoke ascends.

What! A volcano in these parts? It must then be — —

CHAPTER VIII.

BACK CUP.

In my opinion the *Ebba* could have struck no other group of islands but the Bermudas in this part of the Atlantic. This is clear from the distance covered from the American coast and the direction sailed in since we issued from Pamlico Sound. This direction has constantly been south-southeast, and the distance, judging from the *Ebba's* rate of speed, which has scarcely varied, is approximately seven hundred and fifty miles.

Still, the schooner does not slacken speed. The Count d'Artigas and Engineer Serko remain aft, by the man at the wheel. Captain Spade has gone forward.

Are we not going to leave this island, which appears to be isolated, to the west?

It does not seem likely, since it is still broad daylight, and the hour at which the *Ebba* was timed to arrive.

All the sailors are drawn up on deck, awaiting orders, and Boatswain Effrondat is making preparations to anchor.

Ere a couple of hours have passed I shall know all about it. It will be the first answer to one of the many questions that have perplexed me since the schooner put to sea.

And yet it is most unlikely that the port to which the *Ebba* belongs is situated on one of the Bermuda islands, in the middle of an English archipelago — unless the Count d'Artigas has kidnapped Thomas Roch for the British government, which I cannot believe.

I become aware that this extraordinary man is gazing at me with singular persistence. Although he can have no suspicion that I am Simon Hart, the engineer, he must be asking himself what I think of this adventure. If Warder Gaydon is but a poor devil, this poor devil will manifest as much unconcern as to what is in store for him as any gentleman could — even though he were the proprietor of this queer pleasure yacht. Still I am a little uneasy under his gaze.

I dare say that if the Count d'Artigas could guess how certain things have suddenly become clear to me, he would not hesitate to have me thrown overboard.

Prudence therefore commands me to be more circumspect than ever.

Without giving rise to any suspicion — even in the mind of Engineer Serko — I have succeeded in raising a corner of the mysterious veil, and I begin to see ahead a bit.

As the *Ebba* draws nearer, the island, or rather islet, towards which she is speeding shows more sharply against the blue background of the sky. The sun which has passed the zenith, shines full upon the western side. The islet is isolated, or at any rate I cannot see any others of the group to which it belongs, either to north or south.

This islet, of curious contexture, resembles as near as possible a cup turned upside down, from which a fuliginous vapor arises. Its summit — the bottom of the cup, if you like — is about three hundred feet above the level of the sea, and its flanks, which are steep and regular, are as bare as the sea-washed rocks at its base.

There is another peculiarity about it which must render the islet easily recognizable by mariners approaching it from the west, and this is a rock which forms a natural arch at the base of the mountain — the handle of the cup, so to speak — and through which the waves wash as freely as the sunshine passes. Seen this way the islet fully justifies the name of Back Cup given to it.

Well, I know and recognize this islet! It is situated at the extremity of the archipelago of the Bermudas. It is the “reversed cup” that I had occasion to visit a few years ago — No, I am not mistaken. I then climbed over the calcareous and crooked rocks at its base on the east side. Yes, it is Back Cup, sure enough!

Had I been less self-possessed I might have uttered an exclamation of surprise — and satisfaction — which, with good reason, would have excited the attention and suspicion of the Count d’Artigas.

These are the circumstances under which I came to explore Back Cup while on a visit to Bermuda.

This archipelago, which is situated about seven hundred and fifty miles from North Carolina is composed of several hundred islands or islets. Its centre is crossed by the sixty-fourth meridian and the thirty-second parallel. Since the Englishman Lomer was shipwrecked and cast up there in 1609, the Bermudas have belonged to the United Kingdom, and in consequence the colonial population has increased to ten thousand inhabitants. It was not for its productions of cotton, coffee, indigo, and arrowroot that England annexed the group — seized it, one might say; but because it formed a splendid maritime station in that part of the Ocean, and in proximity to the United States of America. Possession was taken of it without any protest on the part of other powers, and Bermuda is now administered by a British governor with the addition of a council and a General Assembly.

The principal islands of the archipelago are called St. David, Somerset, Hamilton, and St. George. The latter has a free port, and the town of the same name is also the capital of the group.

The largest of these isles is not more than seventeen miles long and five wide. Leaving out the medium-sized ones, there remains but an agglomeration of islets and reefs scattered over an area of twelve square leagues.

Although the climate of Bermuda is very healthy, very salubrious, the isles are nevertheless frightfully beaten by the heavy winter tempests of the Atlantic, and their approach by navigators presents certain difficulties.

What the archipelago especially lacks are rivers and rios. However, as abundant rains fall frequently, this drawback is got over by the inhabitants, who treasure up the heaven-sent water for household and agricultural purposes. This has necessitated the construction of vast cisterns which the downfalls keep filled. These works of engineering skill justly merit the admiration they receive and do honor to the genius of man.

It was in connection with the setting up of these cisterns that I made the trip, as well as out of curiosity to inspect the fine works.

I obtained from the company of which I was the engineer in New Jersey a vacation of several weeks, and embarked at New York for the Bermudas.

While I was staying on Hamilton Island, in the vast port of Southampton, an event occurred of great interest to geologists.

One day a whole flotilla of fishers, men, women and children, entered Southampton Harbor. For fifty years these families had lived on the east coast of Back Cup, where they had erected log-cabins and houses of stone. Their position for carrying on their industry was an exceptionally favorable one, for the waters teem with fish all the year round, and in March and April whales abound.

Nothing had hitherto occurred to disturb their tranquil existence. They were quite contented with their rough lot, which was rendered less onerous by the facility of communication with Hamilton and St. George. Their solid barks took cargoes of fish there, which they exchanged for the necessities of life.

Why had they thus abandoned the islet with the intention, as it pretty soon appeared, of never returning to it? The reason turned out to be that they no longer considered themselves in safety there.

A couple of months previously they had been at first surprised, then alarmed, by several distinct detonations that appeared to have taken place in the interior of the mountain. At the same time smoke and flames issued from the summit — or the bottom of the reversed cup, if you like. Now no one had ever suspected that the islet was of volcanic origin, or that there was a crater at the top, no one having been able to climb its sides. Now, however, there could be no possible doubt that the mountain was an ancient volcano that had suddenly become active again and threatened the village with destruction.

During the ensuing two months internal rumblings and explosions continued to be heard, which were accompanied by bursts of flame from the top — especially at night. The island was shaken by the explosions — the shocks could be distinctly felt. All these phenomena were indicative of an imminent eruption, and there was no spot at the base of the mountain that could afford any protection from the rivers of lava that would inevitably pour down its smooth, steep slopes and overwhelm the village in their boiling flood. Besides, the very mountain might be destroyed in the eruption.

There was nothing for the population exposed to such a dire catastrophe to do but leave. This they did. Their humble Lares and Penates, in fact all their belongings, were loaded into the fishing-smacks, and the entire colony sought refuge in Southhampton Harbor.

The news that a volcano, that had presumably been smouldering for centuries at the western extremity of the group, showed signs of breaking out again, caused a sensation throughout the Bermudas. But while some were terrified, the curiosity of others was aroused, mine included. The phenomenon was worth investigation, even if the simple fisher-folk had exaggerated.

Back Cup, which, as already stated, lies at the western extremity of the archipelago, is connected therewith by a chain of small islets and reefs, which cannot be approached from the east. Being only three hundred feet in altitude, it cannot be seen either from St. George or Hamilton. I joined a party of explorers and we embarked in a cutter that landed us on the island, and made our way to the abandoned village of the Bermudan fishers.

The internal crackings and detonations could be plainly heard, and a sheaf of smoke was swayed by the wind at the summit.

Beyond a peradventure the ancient volcano had been started again by the subterranean fire, and an eruption at any moment was to be apprehended.

In vain we attempted to climb to the mouth of the crater. The mountain sheered down at an angle of from seventy-five to eighty degrees, and its smooth, slippery sides afforded absolutely no foothold. Anything more barren than this rocky freak of nature it would be difficult to conceive. Only a few tufts of wild herbs were to be seen upon the whole island, and these seemed to have no *raison d'être*.

Our explorations were therefore necessarily limited, and in view of the active symptoms of danger that manifested themselves, we could but approve the action of the villagers in abandoning the place; for we entertained no doubt that its destruction was imminent.

These were the circumstances in which I was led to visit Back Cup, and no one will consequently be surprised at the fact that I recognized it immediately we hove in sight of the queer structure.

No, I repeat, the Count d'Artigas would probably not be overpleased if he were aware that Warder Gaydon is perfectly acquainted with this islet, even if the *Ebba* was to anchor there — which, as there is no port, is, to say the least, extremely improbable.

As we draw nearer, I attentively examine Back Cup. Not one of its former inhabitants has been induced to return, and, as it is absolutely deserted, I cannot imagine why the schooner should visit the place.

Perhaps, however, the Count d'Artigas and his companions have no intention of landing there. Even though the *Ebba* should find temporary shelter between the rocky sides of a narrow creek there is nothing to give ground to the supposition that a wealthy yachtsman would have the remotest idea of fixing upon as his residence an arid cone exposed to all the terrible tempests of the Western Atlantic. To live hero is all very well for rustic fishermen, but not for the Count d'Artigas, Engineer Serko, Captain Spade and his crew.

Back Cup is now only half a mile off, and the seaweed thrown up on its rocky base is plainly discernible. The only living things upon it are the sea-gulls and other birds that circle in clouds around the smoking crater.

When she is only two cable's lengths off, the schooner slackens speed, and then stops at the entrance of a sort of natural canal formed by a couple of reefs that barely rise above the water.

I wonder whether the *Ebba* will venture to try the dangerous feat of passing through it. I do not think so. She will probably lay where she is — though why she should do so I do not know — for a few hours, and then continue her voyage towards the east.

However this may be I see no preparations in progress for dropping anchor. The anchors are suspended in their usual places, the cables have not been cleared, and no motion has been made to lower a single boat.

At this moment Count d'Artigas, Engineer Serko and Captain Spade go forward and perform some manoeuvre that is inexplicable to me.

I walk along the port side of the deck until I am near the foremast, and then I can see a small buoy that the sailors are hoisting in. Almost immediately the water, at the same spot becomes dark and I observe a black mass rising to the surface. Is it a big whale rising for air, and is the *Ebba* in danger of being shattered by a blow from the monster's tail?

Now I understand! At last the mystery is solved. I know what was the motor that caused the schooner to go at such an extraordinary speed without sails and without a screw. Her indefatigable motor is emerging from the sea, after having towed her from the coast of America to the archipelago of the Bermudas. There it is, floating alongside — a submersible boat, a submarine tug, worked by a screw set in motion by the current from a battery of accumulators or powerful electric piles.

On the upper part of the long cigar-shaped iron tug is a platform in the middle of which is the “lid” by which an entrance is effected. In the fore part of the platform projects a periscope, or lookout, formed by port-holes or lenses through which an electric searchlight can throw its gleam for some distance under water in front of and on each side of the tug. Now relieved of its ballast of water the boat has risen to the surface. Its lid will open and fresh air will penetrate it to every part. In all probability, if it remained submerged during the day it rose at night and towed the *Ebba* on the surface.

But if the mechanical power of the tug is produced by electricity the latter must be furnished by some manufactory where it is stored, and the means of procuring the batteries is not to be found on Back Cup, I suppose.

And then, why does the *Ebba* have recourse to this submarine towing system? Why is she not provided with her own means of propulsion, like other pleasure-boats?

These are things, however, upon which I have at present no leisure to ruminate.

The lid of the tug opens and several men issue on to the platform. They are the crew of this submarine boat, and Captain Spade has been able to communicate with them and transmit his orders as to the direction to be taken by means of electric signals connected with the tug by a wire that passes along the stem of the schooner.

Engineer Serko approaches me and says, pointing to the boat:

“Get in.”

“Get in!” I exclaim.

“Yes, in the tug, and look sharp about it.”

As usual there is nothing for it but to obey. I hasten to comply with the order and clamber over the side.

At the same time Thomas Roch appears on deck accompanied by one of the crew. He appears to be very calm, and very indifferent too, and makes no resistance when he is lifted over and lowered into the tug. When he has been taken in, Count d’Artigas and Engineer Serko follow.

Captain Spade and the crew of the *Ebba* remain behind, with the exception of four men who man the dinghy, which has been lowered. They have hold of a long hawser, with which the schooner is probably to be towed through the reef. Is there then a creek in the middle of the rocks where the vessel is secure from the breakers? Is this the port to which she belongs?

They row off with the hawser and make the end fast to a ring in the reef. Then the crew on board haul on it and in five minutes the schooner is so completely lost to sight among the rocks that even the tip of her mast could not be seen from the sea.

Who in Bermuda imagines that a vessel is accustomed to lay up in this secret creek? Who in America would have any idea that the rich yachtsman so well known in all the eastern ports abides in the solitude of Back Cup mountain?

Twenty minutes later the dinghy returns with the four men towards the tug which was evidently waiting for them before proceeding — where?

They climb on board, the little boat is made fast astern, a movement is felt, the screw revolves rapidly and the tug skims along the surface to Back Cup, skirting the reefs to the south.

Three cable's lengths further on, another tortuous canal is seen that leads to the island. Into this the tug enters. When it gets close inshore, an order is given to two men who jump out and haul the dinghy up on a narrow sandy beach out of the reach of wave or weed, and where it will be easily get-at-able when wanted.

This done the sailors return to the tug and Engineer Serko signs to me to go below.

A short iron ladder leads into a central cabin where various bales and packages are stored, and for which no doubt there was not room in the hold of the schooner. I am pushed into a side cabin, the door is shut upon me, and here I am once more a prisoner in profound darkness.

I recognize the cabin the moment I enter it. It is the place in which I spent so many long hours after our abduction from Healthful House, and in which I was confined until well out at sea off Pamlico Sound.

It is evident that Thomas Roch has been placed in a similar compartment.

A loud noise is heard, the banging of the lid as it closes, and the tug begins to sink as the water is admitted to the tanks.

This movement is succeeded by another — a movement that impels the boat through the water.

Three minutes later it stops, and I feel that we are rising to the surface again.

Another noise made by the lid being raised.

The door of my cabin opens, and I rush out and clamber on to the platform.

I look around and find that the tug has penetrated to the interior of Back Cup mountain.

This is the mysterious retreat where Count d’Artigas lives with his companions — out of the world, so to speak.

CHAPTER IX.

INSIDE BACK CUP

The next morning I am able to make a first inspection of the vast cavern of Back Cup. No one seeks to prevent me.

What a night I have passed! What strange visions I have seen! With what impatience I waited for morning!

I was conducted to a grotto about a hundred paces from the edge of the lake where the tug stopped. The grotto, twelve feet by ten, was lighted by an incandescent lamp, and fitted with an entrance door that was closed upon me.

I am not surprised that electricity is employed in lighting the interior of the cavern, as it is also used in the submarine boat. But where is it generated? Where does it come from? Is there a manufactory installed somewhere or other in this vast crypt, with machinery, dynamos and accumulators?

My cell is neatly furnished with a table on which provisions are spread, a bunk with bedding, a basket chair, a wash-hand-stand with toilet set, and a closet containing linen and various suits of clothes. In a drawer of the table I find paper, ink and pens.

My dinner consists of fresh fish, preserved meat, bread of excellent quality, ale and whisky; but I am so excited that I scarcely touch it. Yet I feel that I ought to fortify myself and recover my calmness of mind. I must and will solve the mystery surrounding the handful of men who burrow in the bowels of this island.

So it is under the carapace of Back Cup that Count d’Artigas has established himself! This cavity, the existence of which is not even suspected, is his home when he is not sailing in the *Ebba* along the coasts of the new world or the old. This is the unknown retreat he has discovered, to which access is obtained by a submarine passage twelve or fifteen feet below the surface of the ocean.

Why has he severed himself from the world? What has been his past? If, as I suspect, this name of d’Artigas and this title of Count are assumed, what motive has he for hiding his identity? Has he been banished, is he an outcast of society that he should have selected this place above all others? Am I not in the power of an evildoer anxious to ensure impunity for his crimes and to defy the law by seeking refuge in this undiscoverable burrow? I have the right of supposing anything in the case of this suspicious foreigner, and I exercise it.

Then the question to which I have never been able to suggest a satisfactory answer once more surges into my mind. Why was Thomas Roch abducted from Healthful House in the manner already fully described? Does the Count d’Artigas hope to force from him the secret of his fulgurator with a view to utilizing it for the defence of Back Cup in case his retreat should by chance be discovered? Hardly. It would be easy enough to starve the gang out of Back Cup, by preventing the tug from supplying them with provisions. On the other hand, the schooner could never break through the investing lines, and if she did her description would be known in every port. In this event, of what possible use would Thomas Roch’s invention be to the Count d’Artigas Decidedly, I cannot understand it!

About seven o’clock in the morning I jump out of bed. If I am a prisoner in the cavern I am at least not imprisoned in my grotto cell. The door yields when I turn the handle and push against it, and I walk out.

Thirty yards in front of me is a rocky plane, forming a sort of quay that extends to right and left. Several sailors of the *Ebba* are engaged in landing bales and stores from the interior of the tug, which lays alongside a little stone jetty.

A dim light to which my eyes soon grow accustomed envelops the cavern and comes from a hole in the centre of the roof, through which the blue sky can be seen.

“It is from that hole that the smoke which can be seen for such a distance issues,” I say to myself, and this discovery suggests a whole series of reflections.

Back Cup, then, is not a volcano, as was supposed — as I supposed myself. The flames that were seen a few years ago, and the columns of smoke that still rise were and are produced artificially. The detonations and rumblings that so alarmed the Bermudan fishers were not caused by the internal workings of nature. These various phenomena were fictitious. They manifested themselves at the mere will of the owner of the island, who wanted to scare away the inhabitants who resided on the coast. He succeeded, this Count d’Artigas, and remains the sole and undisputed monarch of the mountain. By exploding gunpowder, and burning seaweed swept up in inexhaustible quantities by the ocean, he has been able to simulate a volcano upon the point of eruption and effectually scare would-be settlers away!

The light becomes stronger as the sun rises higher, the daylight streams through the fictitious crater, and I shall soon be able to estimate the cavern’s dimensions. This is how I calculate:

Exteriorly the island of Back Cup, which is as nearly as possible circular, measures two hundred and fifty yards in circumference, and presents an interior superficies of about six acres. The sides of the mountain at its base vary in thickness from thirty to a hundred yards.

It therefore follows that this excavation practically occupies the whole of that part of Back Cup island which appears above water. As to the length of the submarine tunnel by which communication is obtained with the outside, and through which the tug passed, I estimate that it is fifty yards in length.

The size of the cavern can be judged from these approximate figures. But vast as it is, I remember that there are caverns of larger dimensions both in the old and new worlds. For instance in Carniole, Northumberland, Derbyshire, Piedmont, the Balearics, Hungary and California are larger grottoes than Back Cup, and those at Han-sur-Lesse in Belgium, and the Mammoth Caves in Kentucky, are also more extensive. The latter contain no fewer than two hundred and twenty-six domes, seven rivers, eight cataracts, thirty two wells of unknown depth, and an immense lake which extends over six or seven leagues, the limit of which has never been reached by explorers.

I know these Kentucky grottoes, having visited them, as many thousands of tourists have done. The principal one will serve as a comparison to Back Cup. The roof of the former, like that of the latter, is supported by pillars of various lengths, which give it the appearance of a Gothic cathedral, with naves and aisles, though it lacks the architectural regularity of a religious edifice. The only difference is that whereas the roof of the Kentucky grotto is over four hundred feet high, that of Back Cup is not above two hundred and twenty at that part of it where the round hole through which issue the smoke and flames is situated.

Another peculiarity, and a very important one, that requires to be pointed out, is that whereas the majority of the grottoes referred to are easily accessible, and were therefore bound to be discovered some time or other, the same remark does not apply to Back Cup. Although it is marked on the map as an island forming part of the Bermuda group, how could any one imagine that it is hollow, that its rocky sides are only the walls of an enormous cavern? In order to make such a discovery it would be necessary to get inside, and to get inside a submarine apparatus similar to that of the Count d’Artigas would be necessary.

In my opinion this strange yachtsman’s discovery of the tunnel by which he has been able to found this disquieting colony of Back Cup must have been due to pure chance.

Now I turn my attention to the lake and observe that it is a very small one, measuring not more than four hundred yards in circumference. It is, properly speaking, a lagoon, the rocky sides of which are perpendicular. It is large enough for the tug to work about in it, and holds enough water too, for it must be one hundred and twenty-five feet deep.

It goes without saying that this crypt, given its position and structure, belongs to the category of those which are due to the encroachments of the sea. It is at once of Neptunian and Plutonian origin, like the grottoes of Crozon and Morgate in the bay of Douarnenez in France, of Bonifacio on the Corsican coast, Thorgatten in Norway, the height of which is estimated at over three hundred feet, the catavaults of Greece, the grottoes of Gibraltar in Spain, and Tourana in Cochin China, whose carapace indicates that they are all the product of this dual geological labor.

The islet of Back Cup is in great part formed of calcareous rocks, which slope upwards gently from the lagoon towards the sides and are separated from each other by narrow beaches of fine sand. Thick layers of seaweed that have been swept through the tunnel by the tide and thrown up around the lake have been piled into heaps, some of which are dry and some still wet, but all of which exhale the strong odor of the briny ocean. This, however, is not the only combustible employed by the inhabitants of Back Cup, for I see an enormous store of coal that must have been brought by the schooner and the tug. But it is the incineration of masses of dried seaweed that causes the smoke vomited forth by the crater of the mountain.

Continuing my walk I perceive on the northern side of the lagoon the habitations of this colony of troglodytes — do they not merit the appellation? This part of the cavern, which is known as the Beehive, fully justifies its name, for it is honeycombed by cells excavated in the limestone rock and in which these human bees — or perhaps they should rather be called wasps — reside.

The lay of the cavern to the east is very different. Here hundreds of pillars of all shapes rise to the dome, and form a veritable forest of stone trees through the sinuous avenues of which one can thread one’s way to the extreme limit of the place.

By counting the cells of the Beehive I calculate that Count d’Artigas’ companions number from eighty to one hundred.

As my eye wanders over the place I notice that the Count is standing in front of one of the cells, which is isolated from the others, and talking to Engineer Serko and Captain Spade. After a while they stroll down to the jetty alongside which the tug is lying.

A dozen men have been emptying the merchandise out of the tug and transporting the goods in boats to the other side, where great cellars have been excavated in the rocks and form the storehouses of the band.

The orifice of the tunnel is not visible in the waters of the lagoon, and I remember that when I was brought here I felt the tug sink several feet before it entered. In this respect therefore Back Cup does not resemble either the grottoes of Staffa or Morgate, entrance to which is always open, even at high tide. There may be another passage communicating with the coast, either natural or artificial, and this I shall have to make my business to find out.

The island well merits its name of Back Cup. It is indeed a gigantic cup turned upside down, not only to outward appearance, but inwardly, too, though people are ignorant of the fact.

I have already remarked that the Beehive is situated to the north of the lagoon, that is to say to the left on entering by the tunnel. On the opposite side are the storerooms filled with provisions of all kinds, bales of merchandise, barrels of wine, beer, and spirits and various packets bearing different marks and labels that show that they came from all parts of the world. One would think that the cargoes of a score of ships had been landed here.

A little farther on is a large wooden shed the nature of which is easily distinguishable. From a pole above it a network of thick copper wires extends which conducts the current to the powerful electric lights suspended from the roof or dome, and to the incandescent lamps in each of the cells of the hive. A large number of lamps are also installed among the stone pillars and light up the avenues to their extremities.

“Shall I be permitted to roam about wherever I please?” I ask myself. I hope so. I cannot for the life of me see why the Count d’Artigas should prohibit me from doing so, for I cannot get farther than the surrounding walls of his mysterious domain. I question whether there is any other issue than the tunnel, and how on earth could I get through that?

Besides, admitting that I am able to get through it, I cannot get off the island. My disappearance would be soon noticed, and the tug would take out a dozen men who would explore every nook and cranny. I should inevitably be recaptured, brought back to the Beehive, and deprived of my liberty for good.

I must therefore give up all idea of making my escape, unless I can see that it has some chance of being successful, and if ever an opportunity does present itself I shall not be slow to take advantage of it.

On strolling round by the rows of cells I am able to observe a few of these companions of the Count d’Artigas who are content to pass their monotonous existence in the depths of Back Cup. As I said before, calculating from the number of cells in the Beehive, there must be between eighty and a hundred of them.

They pay no attention whatever to me as I pass, and on examining them closely it seems to me that they must have been recruited from every country. I do not distinguish any community of origin among them, not even a similarity by which they might be classed as North Americans, Europeans or Asiatics. The color of their skin shades from white to yellow and black — the black peculiar to Australia rather than to Africa. To sum up, they appear for the most part to pertain to the Malay races. I may add that the Count d’Artigas certainly belongs to that particular race which peoples the Dutch isles in the West Pacific, while Engineer Serko must be Levantine and Captain Spade of Italian origin.

But if the inhabitants of Back Cup are not bound to each other by ties of race, they certainly are by instinct and inclination. What forbidding, savage-looking faces they have, to be sure! They are men of violent character who have probably never placed any restraint upon their passions, nor hesitated at anything, and it occurs to me that in all likelihood they have sought refuge in this cavern, where they fancy they can continue to defy the law with impunity, after a long series of crimes — robbery, murder, arson, and excesses of all descriptions committed together. In this case Back Cup is nothing but a lair of pirates, the Count d'Artigas is the leader of the band and Serko and Spade are his lieutenants.

I cannot get this idea out of my head, and the more I consider the more convinced I am that I am right, especially as everything I see during my stroll about the cavern seems to confirm my opinion.

However this may be, and whatever may be the circumstances that have brought them together in this place, Count d'Artigas' companions appear to accept his all-powerful domination without question. On the other hand, if he keeps them under his iron heel by enforcing the severest discipline, certain advantages, some compensation, must accrue from the servitude to which they bow. What can this compensation be?

Having turned that part of the bank under which the tunnel passes, I find myself on the opposite side of the lagoon, where are situated the storerooms containing the merchandise brought by the *Ebba* on each trip, and which contain a great quantity of bales.

Beyond is the manufactory of electric energy. I gaze in at the windows as I pass and notice that it contains machines of the latest invention and highest attained perfection, which take up little space. Not one steam engine, with its more or less complicated mechanism and need of fuel, is to be seen in the place. As I had surmised, piles of extraordinary power supply the current to the lamps in the cavern, as well as to the dynamos of the tug. No doubt the current is also utilized for domestic purposes, such as warming the Beehive and cooking food, I can see that in a neighboring cavity it is applied to the alembics used to produce fresh water. At any rate the colonists of Back Cup are not reduced to catching the rain water that falls so abundantly upon the exterior of the mountain.

A few paces from the electric power house is a large cistern that, save in the matter of proportions, is the counterpart of those I visited in Bermuda. In the latter place the cisterns have to supply the needs of over ten thousand people, this one of a hundred — what?

I am not sure yet what to call them. That their chief had serious reasons for choosing the bowels of this island for his abiding place is obvious. But what were those reasons? I can understand monks shutting themselves behind their monastery walls with the intention of separating themselves from the world, but these subjects of the Count d’Artigas have nothing of the monk about them, and would not be mistaken for such by the most simple-minded of mortals.

I continue my way through the pillars to the extremity of the cavern. No one has sought to stop me, no one has spoken to me, not a soul apparently has taken the very slightest notice of me. This portion of Back Cup is extremely curious, and comparable to the most marvellous of the grottoes of Kentucky or the Balearics. I need hardly say that nowhere is the labor of man apparent. All this is the handiwork of nature, and it is not without wonder, mingled with awe, that I reflect upon the telluric forces capable of engendering such prodigious substructions. The daylight from the crater in the centre only strikes this part of the cavern obliquely, so that it is very imperfectly lighted, but at night, when illuminated by the electric lamps, its aspect must be positively fantastic.

I have examined the walls everywhere with minute attention, but have been unable to discover any means of communicating with the outside.

Quite a colony of birds — gulls, sea-swallows and other feathery denizens of the Bermudan beaches have made their home in the cavern. They have apparently never been hunted, for they are in no way disturbed by the presence of man.

But besides sea-birds, which are free to come and go as they please by the orifice in the dome, there is a whole farmyard of domestic poultry, and cows and pigs. The food supply is therefore no less assured than it is varied, when the fish of all kinds that abound in the lagoon and around the island are taken into consideration.

Moreover, a mere glance at the colonists of Back Cup amply suffices to show that they are not accustomed to fare scantily. They are all vigorous, robust seafaring men, weatherbeaten and seasoned in the burning beat of tropical latitudes, whose rich blood is surcharged with oxygen by the breezes of the ocean. There is not a youth nor an old man among them. They are all in their prime, their ages ranging from thirty to fifty.

But why do they submit to such an existence? Do they never leave their rocky retreat?

Perhaps I shall find out ere I am much older.

CHAPTER X.

KER KARRAJE.

The cell in which I reside is about a hundred paces from the habitation of the Count d’Artigas, which is one of the end ones of this row of the Beehive. If I am not to share it with Thomas Roch, I presume the latter’s cell is not far off, for in order that Warder Gaydon may continue to care for the ex-patient of Healthful House, their respective apartments will have to be contiguous. However, I suppose I shall soon be enlightened on this point.

Captain Spade and Engineer Serko reside separately in proximity to D’Artigas’ mansion.

Mansion? Yes, why not dignify it with the title since this habitation has been arranged with a certain art? Skillful hands have carved an ornamental façade in the rock. A large door affords access to it. Colored glass windows in wooden frames let into the limestone walls admit the light. The interior comprises several chambers, a dining-room and a drawing-room lighted by a stained-glass window, the whole being perfectly ventilated. The furniture is of various styles and shapes and of French, English and American make. The kitchen, larder, etc. are in adjoining cells in rear of the Beehive.

In the afternoon, just as I issue from my cell with the firm intention of “obtaining an audience” of the Count d’Artigas, I catch sight of him coming along the shore of the lagoon towards the hive. Either he does not see me, or wishes to avoid me, for he quickens his steps and I am unable to catch him.

“Well, he will have to receive me, anyhow!” I mutter to myself.

I hurry up to the door through which he has just disappeared and which has closed behind him.

It is guarded by a gigantic, dark-skinned Malay, who orders me away in no amiable tone of voice.

I decline to comply with his injunction, and repeat to him twice the following request in my very best English:

“Tell the Count d’Artigas that I desire to be received immediately.”

I might just as well have addressed myself to the surrounding rock. This savage, no doubt, does not understand a word of English, for he scowls at me and orders me away again with a menacing cry.

I have a good mind to attempt to force the door and shout so that the Count d’Artigas cannot fail to hear me, but in all probability I shall only succeed in rousing the wrath of the Malay, who appears to be endowed with herculean strength. I therefore judge discretion to be the better part of valor, and put off the explanation that is owing to me — and which, sooner or later, I will have — to a more propitious occasion.

I meander off in front of the Beehive towards the east, and my thoughts revert to Thomas Roch. I am surprised that I have not seen him yet. Can he be in the throes of a fresh paroxysm?

This hypothesis is hardly admissible, for if the Count d’Artigas is to be believed, he would in this event have summoned me to attend to the inventor.

A little farther on I encounter Engineer Serko.

With his inviting manner and usual good-humor this ironical individual smiles when he perceives me, and does not seek to avoid me. If he knew I was a colleague, an engineer — providing he himself really is one — perhaps he might receive me with more cordiality than I have yet encountered, but I am not going to be such a fool as to tell him who and what I am.

He stops, with laughing eyes and mocking mouth, and accompanies a "Good day, how do you do?" with a gracious gesture of salutation.

I respond coldly to his politeness — a fact which he affects not to notice.

"May Saint Jonathan protect you, Mr. Gaydon!" he continues in his clear, ringing voice. "You are not, I presume, disposed to regret the fortunate circumstance by which you were permitted to visit this surpassingly marvellous cavern — and it really is one of the finest, although the least known on this spheroid."

This word of a scientific language used in conversation with a simple hospital attendant surprises me, I admit, and I merely reply:

"I should have no reason to complain, Mr. Serko, if, after having had the pleasure of visiting this cavern, I were at liberty to quit it."

"What! Already thinking of leaving us, Mr. Gaydon, — of returning to your dismal pavilion at Healthful House? Why, you have scarcely had time to explore our magnificent domain, or to admire the incomparable beauty with which nature has endowed it."

"What I have seen suffices," I answer; "and should you perchance be talking seriously I will assure you seriously that I do not want to see any more of it.”

“Come, now, Mr. Gaydon, permit me to point out that you have not yet had the opportunity of appreciating the advantages of an existence passed in such unrivalled surroundings. It is a quiet life, exempt from care, with an assured future, material conditions such as are not to be met with anywhere, an even climate and no more to fear from the tempests which desolate the coasts in this part of the Atlantic than from the cold of winter, or the heat of summer. This temperate and salubrious atmosphere is scarcely affected by changes of season. Here we have no need to apprehend the wrath of either Pluto or Neptune.”

“Sir,” I reply, “it is impossible that this climate can suit you, that you can appreciate living in this grotto of — — ”

I was on the point of pronouncing the name of Back Cup. Fortunately I restrained myself in time. What would happen if they suspected that I am aware of the name of their island, and, consequently, of its position at the extremity of the Bermuda group?

“However,” I continue, “if this climate does not suit me, I have, I presume, the right to make a change.”

“The right, of course.”

“I understand from your remark that I shall be furnished with the means of returning to America when I want to go?”

“I have no reason for opposing your desires, Mr. Gaydon,” Engineer Serko replies, “and I regard your presumption as a very natural one. Observe, however, that we live here in a noble and superb independence, that we acknowledge the authority of no foreign power, that we are subject to no outside authority, that we are the colonists of no state, either of the old or new world. This is worth consideration by whomsoever has a sense of pride and independence. Besides, what memories are evoked in a cultivated mind by these grottoes which seem to have been chiselled by the hands of the gods and in which they were wont to render their oracles by the mouth of Trophonius."

Decidedly, Engineer Serko is fond of citing mythology! Trophonius after Pluto and Neptune? Does he imagine that Warder Gaydon ever heard of Trophonius? It is clear this mocker continues to mock, and I have to exercise the greatest patience in order not to reply in the same tone.

"A moment ago," I continue shortly, "I wanted to enter yon habitation, which, if I mistake not, is that of the Count d'Artigas, but I was prevented."

"By whom, Mr. Gaydon?"

"By a man in the Count's employ."

"He probably had received strict orders about it."

"Possibly, yet whether he likes it or not, Count d'Artigas will have to see me and listen to me."

"Maybe it would be difficult, and even impossible to get him to do so," says Engineer Serko with a smile.

"Why so?"

"Because there is no such person as Count d'Artigas here."

“You are jesting, I presume; I have just seen him.”

“It was not the Count d’Artigas whom you saw, Mr. Gaydon.”

“Who was it then, may I ask?”

“The pirate Ker Karraje.”

This name was thrown at me in a hard tone of voice, and Engineer Serko walked off before I had presence of mind enough to detain him.

The pirate Ker Karraje!

Yes, this name is a revelation to me. I know it well, and what memories it evokes! It by itself explains what has hitherto been inexplicable to me. I now know into whose hands I have fallen.

With what I already knew, with what I have learned since my arrival in Back Cup from Engineer Serko, this is what I am able to tell about the past and present of Ker Karraje:

Eight or nine years ago, the West Pacific was infested by pirates who acted with the greatest audacity. A band of criminals of various origins, composed of escaped convicts, military and naval deserters, etc. operated with incredible audacity under the orders of a redoubtable chief. The nucleus of the band had been formed by men pertaining to the scum of Europe who had been attracted to New South Wales, in Australia, by the discovery of gold there. Among these gold-diggers, were Captain Spade and Engineer Serko, two outcasts, whom a certain community of ideas and character soon bound together in close friendship.

These intelligent, well educated, resolute men would most assuredly have succeeded in any career. But being without conscience or scruples, and determined to get rich at no matter what cost, deriving from gambling and speculation what they might have earned by patient and steady work, they engaged in all sorts of impossible adventures. One day they were rich, the next day poor, like most of the questionable individuals who had hurried to the gold-fields in search of fortune.

Among the diggers in New South Wales was a man of incomparable audacity, one of those men who stick at nothing — not even at crime — and whose influence upon bad and violent natures is irresistible.

That man’s name was Ker Karraje.

The origin or nationality or antecedents of this pirate were never established by the investigations ordered in regard to him. He eluded all pursuit, and his name — or at least the name he gave himself — was known all over the world, and inspired horror and terror everywhere, as being that of a legendary personage, a bogey, invisible and unseizable.

I have now reason to believe that Ker Karraje is a Malay. However, it is of little consequence, after all. What is certain is that he was with reason regarded as a formidable and dangerous villain who had many crimes, committed in distant seas, to answer for.

After spending a few years on the Australian goldfields, where he made the acquaintance of Engineer Serko and Captain Spade, Ker Karraje managed to seize a ship in the port of Melbourne, in the province of Victoria. He was joined by about thirty rascals whose number was speedily tripled. In that part of the Pacific Ocean where piracy is still carried on with great facility, and I may say, profit, tho number of ships pillaged, crews massacred, and raids committed in certain western islands which the colonists were unable to defend, cannot be estimated.

Although the whereabouts of Ker Karraje’s vessel, commanded by Captain Spade, was several times made known to the authorities, all attempts to capture it proved futile. The marauder would disappear among the innumerable islands of which he knew every cove and creek, and it was impossible to come across him.

He maintained a perfect reign of terror. England, France, Germany, Russia and America vainly dispatched warships in pursuit of the phantom vessel which disappeared, no one knew whither, after robberies and murders that could not be prevented or punished had been committed by her crew.

One day this series of crimes came to an end, and no more was heard of Ker Karraje. Had he abandoned the Pacific for other seas? Would this pirate break out in a fresh place? It was argued that notwithstanding what they must have spent in orgies and debauchery the pirate and his companions must still have an enormous amount of wealth hidden in some place known only to themselves, and that they were enjoying their ill-gotten gains.

Where had the band hidden themselves since they had ceased their depredations? This was a question which everybody asked and none was able to answer. All attempts to run them to earth were vain. Terror and uneasiness having ceased with the danger, Ker Karraje’s exploits soon began to be forgotten, even in the West Pacific.

This is what had happened — and what will never be known unless I succeed in escaping from Back Cup:

These wretches were, as a matter of fact, possessed of great wealth when they abandoned the Southern Seas. Having destroyed their ship they dispersed in different directions after having arranged to meet on the American continent.

Engineer Serko, who was well versed in his profession, and was a clever mechanic to boot, and who had made a special study of submarine craft, proposed to Ker Karraje that they should construct one of these boats in order to continue their criminal exploits with greater secrecy and effectiveness.

Ker Karraje at once saw the practical nature of the proposition, and as they had no lack of money the idea was soon carried out.

While the so-called Count d’Artigas ordered the construction of the schooner *Ebba* at the shipyards of Gotteborg, in Sweden, he gave to the Cramps of Philadelphia, in America, the plans of a submarine boat whose construction excited no suspicion. Besides, as will be seen, it soon disappeared and was never heard of again.

The boat was constructed from a model and under the personal supervision of Engineer Serko, and fitted with all the known appliances of nautical science. The screw was worked with electric piles of recent invention which imparted enormous propulsive power to the motor.

It goes without saying that no one imagined that Count d’Artigas was none other than Ker Karraje, the former pirate of the Pacific, and that Engineer Serko was the most formidable and resolute of his accomplices. The former was regarded as a foreigner of noble birth and great fortune, who for several months had been frequenting the ports of the United States, the *Ebba* having been launched long before the tug was ready.

Work upon the latter occupied fully eighteen months, and when the boat was finished it excited the admiration of all those interested in these engines of submarine navigation. By its external form, its interior arrangements, its air-supply system, the rapidity with which it could be immersed, the facility with which it could be handled and controlled, and its extraordinary speed, it was conceded to be far superior to the *Goubet*, the *Gymnote*, the *Zede*, and other similar boats which had made great strides towards perfection.

After several extremely successful experiments a public test was given in the open sea, four miles off Charleston, in presence of several American and foreign warships, merchant vessels, and pleasure boats invited for the occasion.

Of course the *Ebba* was among them, with the Count d'Artigas, Engineer Serko, and Captain Spade on board, and the old crew as well, save half a dozen men who manned the submarine machine, which was worked by a mechanical engineer named Gibson, a bold and very clever Englishman.

The programme of this definite experiment comprised various evolutions on the surface of the water, which were to be followed by an immersion to last several hours, the boat being ordered not to rise again until a certain buoy stationed many miles out at sea had been attained.

At the appointed time the lid was closed and the boat at first manoeuvred on the surface. Her speed and the ease with which she turned and twisted were loudly praised by all the technical spectators.

Then at a signal given on board the *Ebba* the tug sank slowly out of sight, and several vessels started for the buoy where she was to reappear.

Three hours went by, but there was no sign of the boat.

No one could suppose that in accordance with instructions received from the Count d’Artigas and Engineer Serko this submarine machine, which was destined to act as the invisible tug of the schooner, would not emerge till it had gone several miles beyond the rendezvous. Therefore, with the exception of those who were in the secret, no one entertained any doubt that the boat and all inside her had perished as the result of an accident either to her metallic covering or machinery.

On board the *Ebba* consternation was admirably simulated. On board the other vessels it was real. Drags were used and divers sent down along the course the boat was supposed to have taken, but it could not be found, and it was agreed that it had been swallowed up in the depths of the Atlantic.

Two days later the Count d’Artigas put to sea again, and in forty-eight hours came up with the tug at the place appointed.

This is how Ker Karraje became possessed of the admirable vessel which was to perform the double function of towing the schooner and attacking ships. With this terrible engine of destruction, whose very existence was ignored, the Count d’Artigas was able to recommence his career of piracy with security and impunity.

These details I have learned from Engineer Serko, who is very proud of his handiwork, — and also very positive that the prisoner of Back Cup will never be able to disclose the secret.

It will easily be realized how powerful was the offensive weapon Ker Karraje now possessed. During the night the tug would rush at a merchant vessel, and bore a hole in her with its powerful ram. At the same time the schooner which could not possibly have excited any suspicion, would run alongside and her horde of cutthroats would pour on to the doomed vessel’s deck and massacre the helpless crew, after which they would hurriedly transfer that part of the cargo that was worth taking to the *Ebba*. Thus it happened that ship after ship was added to the long list of those that never reached port and were classed as having gone down with all on board.

For a year after the odious comedy in the bay of Charleston Ker Karraje operated in the Atlantic, and his wealth increased to enormous proportions. The merchandise for which he had no use was disposed of in distant markets in exchange for gold and silver. But what was sadly needed was a place where the profits could be safely hidden pending the time when they were to be finally divided.

Chance came to their aid. While exploring the bottom of the sea in the neighborhood of the Bermudas, Engineer Serko and Driver Gibson discovered at the base of Back Cup island the tunnel which led to the interior of the mountain. Would it have been possible for Ker Karraje to have found a more admirable refuge than this, absolutely safe as it was from any possible chance of discovery? Thus it came to pass that one of the islands of the Archipelago of Bermuda, erstwhile the haunt of buccaneers, became the lair of another gang a good deal more to be dreaded.

This retreat having been definitely adopted, Count d’Artigas and his companions set about getting their place in order. Engineer Serko installed an electric power house, without having recourse to machines whose construction abroad might have aroused suspicion, simply employing piles that could be easily mounted and required but metal plates and chemical substances that the *Ebba* procured during her visits to the American coast.

What happened on the night of the 19th inst. can easily be divined. If the three-masted merchantman which lay becalmed was not visible at break of day it was because she had been scuttled by the tug, boarded by the cut-throat band on the *Ebba*, and sunk with all on board after being pillaged. The bales and things that I had seen on the schooner were a part of her cargo, and all unknown to me the gallant ship was lying at the bottom of the broad Atlantic!

How will this adventure end? Shall I ever be able to escape from Back Cup, denounce the false Count d'Artigas and rid the seas of Ker Karraje's pirates?

And if Ker Karraje is terrible as it is, how much more so will he become if he ever obtains possession of Roch's fulgurator! His power will be increased a hundred-fold? If he were able to employ this new engine of destruction no merchantman could resist him, no warship escape total destruction.

I remain for some time absorbed and oppressed by the reflections with which the revelation of Ker Karraje's name inspires me. All that I have ever heard about this famous pirate recurs to me — his existence when he skimmed the Southern Seas, the useless expeditions organized by the maritime powers to hunt him down. The unaccountable loss of so many vessels in the Atlantic during the past few years is attributable to him. He had merely changed the scene of his exploits. It was supposed that he had been got rid of, whereas he is continuing his piratical practices in the most frequented ocean on the globe, by means of the tug which is believed to be lying at the bottom of Charleston Bay.

"Now," I say to myself, "I know his real name and that of his lair — Ker Karraje and Back Cup;" and I surmise that if Engineer Serko has let me into the secret he must have been authorized to do so. Am I not meant to understand from this that I must give up all hope of ever recovering my liberty?

Engineer Serko had manifestly remarked the impression created upon me by this revelation. I remember that on leaving me he went towards Ker Karraje’s habitation, no doubt with the intention of apprising him of what had passed.

After a rather long walk around the lagoon I am about to return to my cell, when I hear footsteps behind me. I turn and find myself face to face with the Count d’Artigas, who is accompanied by Captain Spade. He glances at me sharply, and in a burst of irritation that I cannot suppress, I exclaim:

“You are keeping me here, sir, against all right. If it was to wait upon Thomas Roch that you carried me off from Healthful House, I refuse to attend to him, and insist upon being sent back.”

The pirate chief makes a gesture, but does not reply.

Then my temper gets the better of me altogether.

“Answer me, Count d’Artigas — or rather, for I know who you are — answer me, Ker Karraje!” I shout.

“The Count d’Artigas is Ker Karraje,” he coolly replies, “just as Warder Gaydon is Engineer Simon Hart; and Ker Karraje will never restore to liberty Engineer Simon Hart, who knows his secrets.”

CHAPTER XI.

FIVE WEEKS IN BACK CUP.

The situation is plain. Ker Karraje knows who I am. He knew who I was when he kidnapped Thomas Roch and his attendant.

How did this man manage to find out what I was able to keep from the staff of Healthful House? How comes it that he knew that a French engineer was performing the duties of attendant to Thomas Roch? I do not know how he discovered it, but the fact remains that he did.

Evidently he had means of information which must have been costly, but from which he has derived considerable profit. Besides, men of his kidney do not count the cost when they wish to attain an end they have in view.

Henceforward Ker Karraje, or rather Engineer Serko, will replace me as attendant upon Thomas Roch. Will he succeed better than I did? God grant that he may not, that the civilized world may be spared such a misfortune!

I did not reply to Ker Karraje’s Parthian shot, for I was stricken dumb. I did not, however, collapse, as the alleged Count d’Artigas perhaps expected I would.

No! I looked him straight in the eyes, which glittered angrily, and crossed my arms defiantly, as he had done. And yet he held my life in his hands! At a sign a bullet would have laid me dead at his feet. Then my body, cast into the lagoon, would have been borne out to sea through the tunnel and there would have been an end of me.

After this scene I am left at liberty, just as before. No measure is taken against me, I can walk among the pillars to the very end of the cavern, which — it is only too clear — possesses no other issue except the tunnel.

When I return to my cell, at the extremity of the Beehive, a prey to a thousand thoughts suggested by my situation, I say to myself:

“If Ker Karraje knows I am Simon Hart, the engineer, he must at any rate never know that I am aware of the position of Back Cup Island.”

As to the plan of confiding Thomas Roch to my care, I do not think he ever seriously entertained it, seeing that my identity had been revealed to him. I regret this, inasmuch as the inventor will indubitably be the object of pressing solicitations, and as Engineer Serko will employ every means in his power to obtain the composition of the explosive and deflagrator, of which he will make such detestable use during future piratical exploits. Yes, it would have been far better if I could have remained Thomas Roch’s keeper here, as in Healthful House.

For fifteen days I see nothing of my late charge. No one, I repeat, has placed any obstacles in the way of my daily peregrinations. I have no need to occupy myself about the material part of my existence. My meals are brought to me regularly, direct from the kitchen of the Count d’Artigas — I cannot accustom myself to calling him by any other name. The food leaves nothing to be desired, thanks to the provisions that the *Ebba* brings on her return from each voyage.

It is very fortunate, too, that I have been supplied with all the writing materials I require, for during my long hours of idleness I have been able to jot down in my notebook the slightest incidents that have occurred since I was abducted from Healthful House, and to keep a diary day by day. As long as I am permitted to use a pen I shall continue my notes. Mayhap some day, they will help to clear up the mysteries of Back Cup.

From July 5 to July 25. — A fortnight has passed, and all my attempts to get near Thomas Roch have been frustrated. Orders have evidently been given to keep him away from my influence, inefficacious though the latter has hitherto been. My only hope is that the Count d'Artigas, Engineer Serko, and Captain Spade will waste their time trying to get at the inventor's secrets.

Three or four times to my knowledge, at least, Thomas Roch and Engineer Serko have walked together around the lagoon. As far as I have been able to judge, the former listened with some attention to what the other was saying to him. Serko has conducted him over the whole cavern, shown him the electric power house and the mechanism of the tug. Thomas Roch's mental condition has visibly improved since his departure from Healthful House.

Thomas Roch lives in a private room in Ker Karraje's "mansion." I have no doubt that he is daily sounded in regard to his discoveries, especially by Engineer Serko. Will he be able to resist the temptation if they offer him the exorbitant price that he demands? Has he any idea of the value of money? These wretches may dazzle him with the gold that they have accumulated by years of rapine. In the present state of his mind may he not be induced to disclose the composition of his fulgurator? They would then only have to fetch the necessary substances and Thomas Roch would have plenty of time in Back Cup to devote to his chemical combinations. As to the war-engines themselves nothing would be easier than to have them made in sections in different parts of the American continent. My hair stands on end when I think what they could and would do with them if once they gained possession of them.

These intolerable apprehensions no longer leave me a minute’s peace; they are wearing me out and my health is suffering in consequence. Although the air in the interior of Back Cup is pure, I become subject to attacks of suffocation, and I feel as though my prison walls were falling upon me and crushing me under their weight. I am, besides, oppressed by the feeling that I am cut off from the world, as effectually as though I were no longer upon our planet, — for I know nothing of what is going on outside.

Ah! if it were only possible to escape through that submarine tunnel, or through the hole in the dome and slide to the base of the mountain!

On the morning of the 25th I at last encounter Thomas Roch. He is alone on the other side of the lagoon, and I wonder, inasmuch as I have not seen them since the previous day, whether Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, and Captain Spade have not gone off on some expedition.

I walk round towards Thomas Roch, and before he can see me I examine him attentively.

His serious, thoughtful physiognomy is no longer that of a madman. He walks slowly, with his eyes bent on the ground, and under his arm a drawing-board upon which is stretched a sheet of paper covered with designs.

Suddenly he raises his head, advances a step and recognizes me.

“Ah! Gaydon, it is you, is it?” he cries, “I have then escaped from you! I am free!”

He can, indeed, regard himself as being free — a good deal more at liberty in Back Cup than he was in Healthful House. But maybe my presence evokes unpleasant memories, and will bring on another fit, for he continues with extraordinary animation:

“Yes, I know you, Gaydon. — Do not approach me! Stand off! stand off! You would like to get me back in your clutches, incarcerate me again in your dungeon! Never! I have friends here who will protect me. They are powerful, they are rich. The Count d’Artigas is my backer and Engineer Serko is my partner. We are going to exploit my invention! We are going to make my fulgurator! Hence! Get you gone!”

Thomas Roch is in a perfect fury. He raises his voice, agitates his arms, and finally pulls from his pockets many rolls of dollar bills and banknotes, and handfuls of English, French, American and German gold coins, which slip through his fingers and roll about the cavern.

How could he get all this money except from Ker Karraje, and as the price of his secret? The noise he makes attracts a number of men to the scene. They watch us for a moment, then seize Thomas Roch and drag him away. As soon as I am out of his sight he ceases-to struggle and becomes calm again.

July 27. — Two hours after meeting with Thomas Roch, I went down to the lagoon and walked out to the edge of the stone jetty.

The tug is not moored in its accustomed place, nor can I see it anywhere about the lake. Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko had not gone yesterday, as I supposed, for I saw them in the evening.

To-day, however, I have reason to believe that they really have gone away in the tug with Captain Spade and the crew of the *Ebba*, and that the latter must be sailing away.

Have they set out on a piracy expedition? Very likely. It is equally likely that Ker Karraje, become once more the Count d'Artigas, travelling for pleasure on board his yacht, intends to put into some port on the American coast to procure the substances necessary to the preparation of Roch's fulgurator.

Ah! if it had only been possible for me to hide in the tug, to slip into the *Ebba's* hold, and stow myself away there until the schooner arrived in port! Then perchance I might have escaped and delivered the world from this band of pirates.

It will be seen how tenaciously I cling to the thought of escape — of fleeing — fleeing at any cost from this lair. But flight is impossible, except through the tunnel, by means of a submarine boat. Is it not folly to think of such a thing? Sheer folly, and yet what other way is there of getting out of Back Cup?

While I give myself up to these reflections the water of the lagoon opens a few yards from me and the tug appears. The lid is raised and Gibson, the engineer, and the men issue on to the platform. Other men come up and catch the line that is thrown to them. They haul upon it, and the tug is soon moored in its accustomed place.

This time, therefore, at any rate, the schooner is not being towed, and the tug merely went out to put Ker Karraje and his companions aboard the *Ebba*.

This only confirms my impression that the sole object of their trip is to reach an American port where the Count d'Artigas can procure the materials for making the explosive, and order the machines in some foundry. On the day fixed for their return the tug will go out through the tunnel again to meet the schooner and Ker Karraje will return to Back Cup.

Decidedly, this evildoer is carrying out his designs and has succeeded sooner than I thought would be possible.

August 3. — An incident occurred to-day of which the lagoon was the theatre — a very curious incident that must be exceedingly rare.

Towards three o'clock in the afternoon there was a prodigious bubbling in the water, which ceased for a minute or two and then recommenced in the centre of the lagoon.

About fifteen pirates, whose attention had been attracted by this unaccountable phenomenon, hurried down to the bank manifesting signs of astonishment not unmingled with fear — at least I thought so.

The agitation of the water was not caused by the tug, as the latter was lying alongside the jetty, and the idea that some other submarine boat had found its way through the tunnel was highly improbable.

Almost at the same instant cries were heard on the opposite bank. The newcomers shouted something in a hoarse voice to the men on the side where I was standing, and these immediately rushed off towards the Beehive.

I conjectured that they had caught sight of some sea-monster that had found its way in, and was floundering in the lagoon, and that they had rushed off to fetch arms and harpoons to try and capture it.

I was right, for they speedily returned with the latter weapons and rifles loaded with explosive bullets.

The monster in question was a whale, of the species that is common enough in Bermudan waters, which after swimming through the tunnel was plunging about in the narrow limits of the lake. As it was constrained to take refuge in Back Cup I concluded that it must have been hard pressed by whalers.

Some minutes elapsed before the monster rose to the surface. Then the green shiny mass appeared spouting furiously and darting to and fro as though fighting with some formidable enemy.

“If it was driven in here by whalers,” I said to myself, “there must be a vessel in proximity to Back Cup — peradventure within a stone’s throw of it. Her boats must have entered the western passes to the very foot of the mountain. And to think I am unable to communicate with them! But even if I could, I fail to see how I could go to them through these massive walls.”

I soon found, however, that it was not fishers, but sharks that had driven the whale through the tunnel, and which infest these waters in great numbers. I could see them plainly as they darted about, turning upon their backs and displaying their enormous mouths which were bristling with their cruel teeth. There were five or six of the monsters, and they attacked the whale with great viciousness. The latter’s only means of defence was its tail, with which it lashed at them with terrific force and rapidity. But the whale had received several wounds and the water was tinged with its life-blood; for plunge and lash as it would, it could not escape the bites of its enemies.

However, the voracious sharks were not permitted to vanquish their prey, for man, far more powerful with his instruments of death, was about to take a hand and snatch it from them. Gathered around the lagoon were the companions of Ker Karraje, every whit as ferocious as the sharks themselves, and well deserving the same name, for what else are they?

Standing amid a group, at the extremity of the jetty, and armed with a harpoon, was the big Malay who had prevented me from entering Ker Karraje's house. When the whale got within shot, he hurled the harpoon with great force and skill, and it sank into the leviathan's flesh just under the left fin. The whale plunged immediately, followed by the relentless sharks. The rope attached to the weapon ran out for about sixty yards, and then slackened. The men at once began to haul on it, and the monster rose to the surface again near the end of the tunnel, struggling desperately in its death agony, and spurting great columns of water tinged with blood. One blow of its tail struck a shark, and hurled it clean out of water against the rocky side, where it dropped in again, badly, if not fatally injured.

The harpoon was torn from the flesh by the jerk, and the whale went under. It came up again for the last time, and lashed the water so that it washed up from the tunnel end, disclosing the top of the orifice.

Then the sharks again rushed on their prey, but were scared off by a hail of the explosive bullets. Two men then jumped into a boat and attached a line to the dead monster. The latter was hauled into the jetty, and the Malays started to cut it up with a dexterity that showed they were no novices at the work.

No more sharks were to be seen, but I concluded that it would be as well to refrain from taking a bath in the lagoon for some days to come.

I now know exactly where the entrance to the tunnel is situated. The orifice on this side is only ten feet below the edge of the western bank. But of what use is this knowledge to me?

August 7. — Twelve days have elapsed since the Count d'Artigas, Engineer Serko, and Captain Spade put to sea. There is nothing to indicate that their return is expected, though the tug is always kept in readiness for immediate departure by Gibson, the engine-driver. If the *Ebba* is not afraid to enter the ports of the United States by day, I rather fancy she prefers to enter the rocky channel of Back Cup at nightfall. I also fancy, somehow, that Ker Karraje and his companions will return to-night.

August 10. — At ten o'clock last night, as I anticipated, the tug went under and out, just in time to meet the *Ebba* and tow her through the channel to her creek, after which she returned with Ker Karraje and the others.

When I look out this morning, I see Thomas Roch and Engineer Serko walking down to the lagoon, and talking. What they are talking about I can easily guess. I go forward and take a good look at my ex-patient. He is asking questions of Engineer Serko With great animation. His eyes gleam, his face is flushed, and he is all eagerness to reach the jetty. Engineer Serko can hardly keep up with him.

The crew of the tug are unloading her, and they have just brought ashore ten medium-sized boxes. These boxes bear a peculiar red mark, which Thomas Roch examines closely.

Engineer Serko orders the men to transport them to the storehouses on the left bank, and the boxes are forthwith loaded on a boat and rowed over.

In my opinion, these boxes contain the substances by the combination or mixture of which, the fulgurator and deflagrator are to be made. The engines, doubtless, are being made in an American foundry, and when they are ready, the schooner will fetch them and bring them to Back Cup.

For once in a while, anyhow, the *Ebba* has not returned with any stolen merchandise. She went out and has returned with a clear bill. But with what terrible power Ker Karraje will be armed for both offensive and defensive operations at sea! If Thomas Roch is to be credited, this fulgurator could shatter the terrestrial spheroid at one blow. And who knows but what one day, he will try the experiment?

CHAPTER XII.

ENGINEER SERKO’S ADVICE.

Thomas Roch has started work and spends hours and hours in a wooden shed on the left bank of the lagoon that has been set apart as his laboratory and workshop. No one enters it except himself. Does he insist upon preparing the explosive in secret and does he intend to keep the formula thereof to himself? I should not wonder.

The manner of employing Roch’s fulgurator is, I believe, very simple indeed. The projectile in which it is used requires neither gun nor mortar to launch it, nor pneumatic tube like the Zalinski shell. It is autopropulsive, it projects itself, and no ship within a certain zone when the engine explodes could escape utter destruction. With such a weapon as this at his command Ker Karraje would be invincible.

From August 11 to August 17. — During the past week Thomas Roch has been working without intermission. Every morning the inventor goes to his laboratory and does not issue therefrom till night. I have made no attempt to stop him or speak to him, knowing that it would be useless to do so.

Although he is still indifferent to everything that does not touch upon his work he appears to be perfectly self-possessed. Why should he not have recovered his reason? Has he not obtained what he has so long sought for? Is he not at last able to carry out the plans he formed years and years ago?

August 18. — At one o’clock this morning I was roused by several detonations.

“Has Back Cup been attacked?” was my first thought. “Has the schooner excited suspicion, and been chased to the entrance to the passes? Is the island being bombarded with a view to its destruction? Has justice at last overtaken these evil-doers ere Thomas Roch has been able to complete the manufacture of his explosive, and before the autopropulsive engine could be fetched from the continent?”

The detonations, which are very violent, continue, succeeding each other at regular intervals, and it occurs to me that if the schooner has been destroyed, all communication with the bases of supply being impossible, Back Cup cannot be provisioned.

It is true the tug would be able to land the Count d’Artigas somewhere on the American coast where, money being no object, he could easily buy or order another vessel. But no matter. If Back Cup is only destroyed before Ker Karraje has Roch’s fulgurator at his disposal I shall render thanks to heaven.

A few hours later, at the usual time, I quit my cell. All is quiet at the Beehive. The men are going about their business as usual. The tug is moored near the jetty. Thomas Roch is going to his laboratory, and Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko are tranquilly pacing backwards and forwards by the lake and chatting. The island therefore could not have been attacked during the night. Yet I was awakened by the report of cannon, this I will swear.

At this moment Ker Karraje goes off towards his abode and Engineer Serko, smilingly ironical, as usual, advances to meet me.

“Well, Mr. Simon Hart,” he says, “are you getting accustomed to your tranquil existence? Do you appreciate at their just merit the advantages of this enchanted grotto? Have you given up all hope of recovering your liberty some day or other?”

What is the use of waxing wroth with this jester? I reply calmly:

“No, sir. I have not given up hope, and I still expect that I shall be released.”

“What! Mr. Hart, separate ourselves from a man whom we all esteem — and I from a colleague who perhaps, in the course of Thomas Roch’s fits of delirium, has learned some of his secrets? You are not serious!”

So this is why they are keeping me a prisoner in Back Cup! They suppose that I am in part familiar with Roch’s invention, and they hope to force me to tell what I know if Thomas Roch refuses to give up his secret. This is the reason why I was kidnapped with him, and why I have not been accommodated with an involuntary plunge in the lagoon with a stone fastened to my neck. I see it all now, and it is just as well to know it.

“Very serious,” I affirm, in response to the last remark of my interlocutor.

“Well,” he continues, “if I had the honor to be Simon Hart, the engineer, I should reason as follows: ‘Given, on the one hand, the personality of Ker Karraje, the reasons which incited him to select such a mysterious retreat as this cavern, the necessity of the said cavern being kept from any attempt to discover it, not only in the interest of the Count d’Artigas, but in that of his companions — ’”

“Of his accomplices, if you please.”

“‘Of his accomplices,’ then — ’and on the other hand, given the fact that I know the real name of the Count d’Artigas and in what mysterious safe he keeps his riches — ’”

“Riches stolen, and stained with blood, Mr. Serko.”

“‘Riches stolen and stained with blood,’ if you like — ’I ought to understand that this question of liberty cannot be settled in accordance with my desires.’”

It is useless to argue the point under these conditions, and I switch the conversation on to another line.

“May I ask,” I continue, “how you came to find out that Gaydon, the warder, was Simon Hart, the engineer?”

“I see no reason for keeping you in ignorance on the subject, my dear colleague. It was largely by hazard. We had certain relations with the manufactory in New Jersey with which you were connected, and which you quitted suddenly one day under somewhat singular circumstances. Well, during a visit I made to Healthful House some months before the Count d’Artigas went there, I saw and recognized you.”

“You?”

“My very self, and from that moment I promised myself the pleasure of having you for a fellow-passenger on board the *Ebba*.”

I do not recall ever having seen this Serko at Healthful House, but what he says is very likely true.

“I hope your whim of having me for a companion will cost you dear, some day or other,” I say to myself.

Then, abruptly, I go on:

“If I am not mistaken, you have succeeded in inducing Thomas Roch to disclose the secret of his fulgurator?”

“Yes, Mr. Hart. We paid millions for it. But millions, you know, are nothing to us. We have only the trouble of taking them! Therefore we filled all his pockets — covered him with millions!”

“Of what use are these millions to him if he is not allowed to enjoy them outside?”

“That, Mr. Hart, is a matter that does not trouble him a little bit! This man of genius thinks nothing of the future: he lives but in the present. While engines are being constructed from his plans over yonder in America, he is preparing his explosive with chemical substances with which he has been abundantly supplied. He! he! What an invention it is, this autopropulsive engine, which flies through the air of its own power and accelerates its speed till the goal is reached, thanks to the properties of a certain powder of progressive combustion! Here we have an invention that will bring about a radical change in the art of war.”

“Defensive war, Mr. Serko.”

“And offensive war, Mr. Hart.”

“Naturally,” I answer.

Then pumping him still more closely, I go on:

“So, what no one else has been able to obtain from Thomas Roch — ”

“We obtained without much difficulty.”

“By paying him.”

“By paying him an incredible price — and, moreover, by causing to vibrate what in him is a very sensitive chord.”

“What chord?”

“That of vengeance!”

“Vengeance? — against whom?”

“Against all those who have made themselves his enemies by discouraging him, by spurning him, expelling him, by constraining him to go a-begging from country to country with an invention of incontestable superiority! Now all notion of patriotism is extinct in his soul. He has now but one thought, one ferocious desire: to avenge himself upon those who have denied him — and even upon all mankind! Really, Mr. Hart, your governments of Europe and America committed a stupendous blunder in refusing to pay Roch the price his fulgurator is worth!”

And Engineer Serko describes enthusiastically the various advantages of the new explosive which, he says, is incontestably superior to any yet invented.

“And what a destructive effect it has,” he adds. “It is analogous to that of the Zalinski shell, but is a hundred times more powerful, and requires no machine for firing it, as it flies through the air on its own wings, so to speak.”

I listen in the hope that Engineer Serko will give away a part of the secret, but in vain. He is careful not to say more than he wants to.

“Has Thomas Roch,” I ask, “made you acquainted with the composition of his explosive?”

“Yes, Mr. Hart — if it is all the same to you — and we shall shortly have considerable quantities of it stored in a safe place.”

“But will there not be a great and ever-impending danger in accumulating large quantities of it? If an accident were to happen it would be all up with the island of — — !”

Once more the name of Back Cup was on the point of escaping me. They might consider me too well-informed if they were aware that in addition to being acquainted with the Count d’Artigas’ real name I also know where his stronghold is situated.

Luckily Engineer Serko has not remarked my reticence, and he replies:

“There will be no cause for alarm. Thomas Roch’s explosive will not burn unless subjected to a special deflagrator. Neither fire nor shock will explode it.”

“And has Thomas Roch also sold you the secret of his deflagrator?”

“Not yet, Mr. Hart, but it will not be long before the bargain is concluded. Therefore, I repeat, no danger is to be apprehended, and you need not keep awake of nights on that account. A thousand devils, sir! We have no desire to be blown up with our cavern and treasures! A few more years of good business and we shall divide the profits, which will be large enough to enable each one of us to live as he thinks proper and enjoy life to the top of his bent — after the dissolution of the firm of Ker Karraje and Co. I may add that though there is no danger of an explosion, we have everything to fear from a denunciation — which you are in the position to make, Mr. Hart. Therefore, if you take my advice, you will, like a sensible man, resign yourself to the inevitable until the disbanding of the company. We shall then see what in the interest of our security is best to be done with you!”

It will be admitted that these words are not exactly calculated to reassure me. However, a lot of things may happen ere then. I have learned one good thing from this conversation, and that is that if Thomas Roch has sold his explosive to Ker Karraje and Co. he has at any rate, kept the secret of his deflagrator, without which the explosive is of no more value than the dust of the highway.

But before terminating the interview I think I ought to make a very natural observation to Mr. Serko.

“Sir,” I say, “you are now acquainted with the composition of Thomas Roch’s explosive. Does it really possess the destructive power that the inventor attributes to it? Has it ever been tried? May you not have purchased a composition as inert as a pinch of snuff?”

“You are doubtless better informed upon this point than you pretend, Mr. Hart. Nevertheless, I thank you for the interest you manifest in our affairs, and am able to reassure you. The other night we made a series of decisive experiments. With only a few grains of this substance great blocks of rock were reduced to impalpable dust!”

This explanation evidently applies to the detonation I heard.

“Thus, my dear colleague,” continues Engineer Serko, “I can assure you that our expectations have been answered. The effects of the explosive surpass anything that could have been imagined. A few thousand tons of it would burst our spheroid and scatter the fragments into space. You can be absolutely certain that it is capable of destroying no matter what vessel at a distance considerably greater than that attained by present projectiles and within a zone of at least a mile. The weak point in the invention is that rather too much time has to be expended in regulating the firing.”

Engineer Serko stops short, as though reluctant to give any further information, but finally adds:

“Therefore, I end as I began, Mr. Hart. Resign yourself to the inevitable. Accept your new existence without reserve. Give yourself up to the tranquil delights of this subterranean life. If one is in good health, one preserves it; if one has lost one’s health, one recovers it here. That is what is happening to your fellow countryman. Yes, the best thing you can do is to resign yourself to your lot.”

Thereupon this giver of good advice leaves me, after saluting me with a friendly gesture, like a man whose good intentions merit appreciation. But what irony there is in his words, in his glance, in his attitude. Shall I ever be able to get even with him?

I now know that at any rate it is not easy to regulate the aim of Roch’s auto-propulsive engine. It is probable that it always bursts at the same distance, and that beyond the zone in which the effects of the fulgurator are so terrible, and once it has been passed, a ship is safe from its effects. If I could only inform the world of this vital fact!

August 20. — For two days no incident worth recording has occurred. I have explored Back Cup to its extreme limits. At night when the long perspective of arched columns are illuminated by the electric lamps, I am almost religiously impressed when I gaze upon the natural wonders of this cavern, which has become my prison. I have never given up hope of finding somewhere in the walls a fissure of some kind of which the pirates are ignorant and through which I could make my escape. It is true that once outside I should have to wait till a passing ship hove in sight. My evasion would speedily be known at the Beehive, and I should soon be recaptured, unless — a happy thought strikes me — unless I could get at the *Ebba's* boat that was drawn up high and dry on the little sandy beach in the creek. In this I might be able to make my way to St. George or Hamilton.

This evening — it was about nine o'clock — I stretched myself on a bed of sand at the foot of one of the columns, about one hundred yards to the east of the lagoon. Shortly afterwards I heard footsteps, then voices. Hiding myself as best I could behind the rocky base of the pillar, I listened with all my ears.

I recognized the voices as those of Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko. The two men stopped close to where I was lying, and continued their conversation in English — which is the language generally used in Back Cup. I was therefore able to understand all that they said.

They were talking about Thomas Roch, or rather his fulgurator.

“In a week's time,” said Ker Karraje, “I shall put to sea in the *Ebba*, and fetch the sections of the engines that are being cast in that Virginian foundry.”

“And when they are here,” observed Engineer Serko, “I will piece them together and fix up the frames for firing them. But beforehand, there is a job to be done which it seems to me is indispensable.”

“What is that?”

“To cut a tunnel through the wall of the cavern.”

“Through the wall of the cavern?”

“Oh! nothing but a narrow passage through which only one man at a time could squeeze, a hole easy enough to block, and the outside end of which would be hidden among the rocks.”

“Of what use could it be to us, Serko?”

“I have often thought about the utility of having some other way of getting out besides the submarine tunnel. We never know what the future may have in store for us.”

“But the walls are so thick and hard,” objected Ker Karraje.

“Oh, with a few grains of Roch’s explosive I undertake to reduce the rock to such fine powder that we shall be able to blow it away with our breath,” Serko replied.

It can easily be imagined with what interest and eagerness I listened to this. Here was a ray of hope. It. was proposed to open up communication with the outside by a tunnel in the wall, and this held out the possibility of escape.

As this thought flashed through my mind, Ker Karraje said:

“Very well, Serko, and if it becomes necessary some day to defend Back Cup and prevent any ship from approaching it — — . It is true,” he went on, without finishing the reflection, “our retreat would have to have been discovered by accident — or by denunciation.”

“We have nothing to fear either from accident or denunciation,” affirmed Serko.

“By one of our band, no, of course not, but by Simon Hart, perhaps.”

“Hart!” exclaimed Serko. “He would have to escape first and no one can escape from Back Cup. I am, by the bye, interested in this Hart. He is a colleague, after all, and I have always suspected that he knows more about Roch’s invention than he pretends. I will get round him so that we shall soon be discussing physics, mechanics, and matters ballistic like a couple of friends.”

“No matter,” replied the generous and sensible Count d’Artigas, “when we are in full possession of the secret we had better get rid of the fellow.”

“We have plenty of time to do that, Ker Karraje.”

“If God permits you to, you wretches,” I muttered to myself, while my heart thumped against my ribs.

And yet, without the intervention of Providence, what hope is there for me?

The conversation then took another direction.

“Now that we know the composition of the explosive, Serko,” said Ker Karraje, “we must, at all cost, get that of the deflagrator from Thomas Roch.”

“Yes,” replied Engineer Serko, “that is what I am trying to do. Unfortunately, however, Roch positively refuses to discuss it. Still he has already made a few drops of it with which those experiments were made, and he will furnish as with some more to blow a hole through the wall.”

"But what about our expeditions at sea?" queried Ker Karraje.

"Patience! We shall end by getting Roch's thunderbolts entirely in our own hand, and then — — "

"Are you sure, Serko?"

"Quite sure, — by paying the price, Ker Karraje."

The conversation dropped at this point, and they strolled off without having seen me — very luckily for me, I guess. If Engineer Serko spoke up somewhat in defence of a colleague, Ker Karraje is apparently animated with much less benevolent sentiments in regard to me. On the least suspicion they would throw me into the lake, and if I ever got through the tunnel, it would only be as a corpse carried out by the ebbing tide.

August 21. — Engineer Serko has been prospecting with a view to piercing the proposed passage through the wall, in such a way that its existence will never be dreamed of outside. After a minute examination he decided to tunnel through the northern end of the cavern about sixty feet from the first cells of the Beehive.

I am anxious for the passage to be made, for who knows but what it may be the way to freedom for me? Ah! if I only knew how to swim, perhaps I should have attempted to escape through the submarine tunnel, as since it was disclosed by the lashing back of the waters by the whale in its death-struggle, I know exactly where the orifice is situated. It seems to me that at the time of the great tides, this orifice must be partly uncovered. At the full and new moon, when the sea attains its maximum depression below the normal level, it is possible that — I must satisfy myself about this.

I do not know how the fact will help me in any way, even if the entrance to the tunnel is partly uncovered, but I cannot afford to miss any detail that may possibly aid in my escape from Back Cup.

August 29. — This morning I am witnessing the departure of the tug. The Count d'Artigas is, no doubt, going off in the *Ebba* to fetch the sections of Thomas Roch's engines. Before embarking, the Count converses long and earnestly with Engineer Serko, who, apparently, is not going to accompany him on this trip, and is evidently giving him some recommendations, of which I may be the object. Then, having stepped on to the platform, he goes below, the lid shuts with a bang, and the tug sinks out of sight, leaving a trail of bubbles behind it.

The hours go by, night is coming on, yet the tug does not return. I conclude that it has gone to tow the schooner, and perhaps to destroy any merchant vessels that may come in their way.

It cannot, however, be absent very long, as the trip to America and back will not take more than a week.

Besides, if I can judge from the calm atmosphere in the interior of the cavern, the *Ebba* must be favored with beautiful weather. This is, in fact, the fine season in this part of the world. Ah! if only I could break out of my prison!

CHAPTER XIII.

GOD BE WITH IT.

From August 29 to September 10. — Thirteen days have gone by and the *Ebba* has not returned. Did she then not make straight for the American coast? Has she been delayed by a buccaneering cruise in the neighborhood of Back Cup? It seems to me that Ker Karraje's only desire would be to get back with the sections of Roch's engines as soon as possible. Maybe the Virginian foundry had not quite finished them.

Engineer Serko does not display the least anxiety or impatience. He continues to greet me with his accustomed ironical cordiality, and with a kindly air that I distrust — with good reason. He affects to be solicitous as to my health, urges me to make the best of a bad job, calls me Ali Baba, assures me that there is not, in the whole world, such an enchanting spot as this Arabian Nights cavern, observes that I am fed, warmed, lodged, and clothed, that I have no taxes to pay, and that even the inhabitants of the favored principality of Monaco do not enjoy an existence more free from care.

Sometimes this ironical verbiage brings the blood to my face, and I am tempted to seize this cynical banterer by the throat and choke the life out of him. They would kill me afterwards. Still, what would that matter! Would it not be better to end in this way than to spend years and years amid these infernal and infamous surroundings? However, while there is life there is hope, I reflect, and this thought restrains me.

I have scarcely set eyes upon Thomas Roch since the *Ebba* went away. He shuts himself up in his laboratory and works unceasingly. If he utilizes all the substances placed at his disposition there will be enough to blow up Back Cup and the whole Bermudan archipelago with it!

I cling to the hope that he will never consent to give up the secret of his deflagrator, and that Engineer Serko's efforts to acquire it will remain futile.

September 3. — To-day I have been able to witness with my own eyes the power of Roch's explosive, and also the manner in which the fulgurator is employed.

During the morning the men began to pierce the passage through the wall of the cavern at the spot fixed upon by Engineer Serko, who superintended the work in person. The work began at the base, where the rock is as hard as granite. To have continued it with pickaxes would have entailed long and arduous labor, inasmuch as the wall at this place is not less than from twenty to thirty yards in thickness, but thanks to Roch's fulgurator the passage will be completed easily and rapidly.

I may well be astonished at what I have seen. The pickaxes hardly made any impression on the rock, but its disaggregation was effected with really remarkable facility by means of the fulgurator.

A few grains of this explosive shattered the rocky mass and reduced it to almost impalpable powder that one's breath could disperse as easily as vapor. The explosion produced an excavation measuring fully a cubic yard. It was accompanied by a sharp detonation that may be compared to the report of a cannon.

The first charge used, although a very small one, a mere pinch, blew the men in every direction, and two of them were seriously injured. Engineer

Serko himself was projected several yards, and sustained some rather severe contusions.

Here is how this substance, whose bursting force surpasses anything hitherto conceived, is employed.

A small hole about an inch and a half in length is pierced obliquely in the rock. A few grains of the explosive are then inserted, but no wad is used.

Then Thomas Roch steps forward. In his hand is a little glass phial containing a bluish, oily liquid that congeals almost as soon as it comes in contact with the air. He pours one drop on the entrance of the hole, and draws back, but not with undue haste. It takes a certain time — about thirty-five seconds, I reckon — before the combination of the fulgurator and deflagrator is effected. But when the explosion does take place its power of disaggregation is such — I repeat — that it may be regarded as unlimited. It is at any rate a thousand times superior to that of any known explosive.

Under these circumstances it will probably not take more than a week to complete the tunnel.

September 19. — For some time past I have observed that the tide rises and falls twice every twenty-four hours, and that the ebb and flow produce a rather swift current through the submarine tunnel. It is pretty certain therefore that a floating object thrown into the lagoon when the top of the orifice is uncovered would be carried out by the receding tide. It is just possible that during the lowest equinoctial tides the top of the orifice is uncovered. This I shall be able to ascertain, as this is precisely the time they occur. To-day, September 19, I could almost distinguish the summit of the hole under the water. The day after to-morrow, if ever, it will be uncovered.

Very well then, if I cannot myself attempt to get through, may be a bottle thrown into the lagoon might be carried out during the last few minutes of the ebb. And might not this bottle by chance — an ultra-providential chance, I must avow — be picked up by a ship passing near Back Cup? Perhaps even it might be borne away by a friendly current and cast upon one of the Bermudan beaches. What if that bottle contained a letter?

I cannot get this thought out of my mind, and it works me up into a great state of excitement. Then objections crop up — this one among others: the bottle might be swept against the rocks and smashed ere ever it could get out of the tunnel. Very true, but what if, instead of a bottle a diminutive, tightly closed keg were used? It would not run any danger of being smashed and would besides stand a much better chance of reaching the open sea.

September 20. — This evening, I, unperceived, entered one of the store houses containing the booty pillaged from various ships and procured a keg very suitable for my experiment.

I hid the keg under my coat, and returned to the Beehive and my cell. Then without losing an instant I set to work. Paper, pen, ink, nothing was wanting, as will be supposed from the fact that for three months I have been making notes and dotting down my impressions daily.

I indite the following message:

“On June 15 last Thomas Roch and his keeper Gaydon, or rather Simon Hart, the French engineer who occupied Pavilion No. 17, at Healthful House, near New-Berne, North Carolina, United States of America, were kidnapped and carried on board the schooner *Ebba*, belonging to the Count d’Artigas. Both are now confined in the interior of a cavern which serves as a lair for the said Count d’Artigas — who is really Ker Karraje, the pirate who some time ago carried on his depredations in the West Pacific — and for about a hundred men of which his band is composed.

“When he has obtained possession of Roch’s fulgurator whose power is, so to speak, without limit, Ker Karraje will be in a position to carry on his crimes with complete impunity.

“It is therefore urgent that the states interested should destroy his lair without delay.

“The cavern in which the pirate Ker Karraje has taken refuge is in the interior of the islet of Back Cup, which is wrongly regarded as an active volcano. It is situated at the western extremity of the archipelago of Bermuda, and on the east is bounded by a range of reefs, but on the north, south, and west is open.

“Communication with the inside of the mountain is only possible through a tunnel a few yards under water in a narrow pass on the west. A submarine apparatus therefore is necessary to effect an entrance, at any rate until a tunnel they are boring through the northwestern wall of the cavern is completed.

“The pirate Ker Karraje employs an apparatus of this kind — the submarine boat that the Count d’Artigas ordered of the Cramps and which was supposed to have been lost during the public experiment with it in Charleston Bay. This boat is used not only for the purpose of entering and issuing from Back Cup, but also to tow the schooner and attack merchant vessels in Bermudan waters.

“This schooner *Ebba,* so well known on the American coast, is kept in a small creek on the western side of the island, behind a mass of rocks, and is invisible from the sea.

“The best place to land is on the west coast formerly occupied by the colony of Bermudan fishers; but it would first be advisable to effect a breach in the side of the cavern by means of the most powerful melinite shells.

“The fact that Ker Karraje may be in the position to use Roch’s fulgurator for the defence of the island must also be taken into consideration. Let it be well borne in mind that if its destructive power surpasses anything ever conceived or dreamed of, it extends over a zone not exceeding a mile in extent. The distance of this dangerous zone is variable, but once the engines have been set, the modification of the distance occupies some time, and a warship that succeeds in passing the zone has nothing further to fear.

“This document is written on the twentieth day of September at eight o’clock in the evening and is signed with my name

“THOMAS HART, Engineer.”

The above is the text of the statement I have just drawn up. It says all that is necessary about the island, whose exact situation is marked on all modern charts and maps, and points out the expediency of acting without delay, and what to do in case Ker Karraje is in the position to employ Roch’s fulgurator.

I add a plan of the cavern showing its internal configuration, the situation of the lagoon, the lay of the Beehive, Ker Karraje’s habitation, my cell, and Thomas Roch’s laboratory.

I wrap the document in a piece of tarpaulin and insert the package in the little keg, which measures six inches by three and a half. It is perfectly watertight and will stand any amount of knocking about against the rocks.

There is one danger, however, and that is, that it may be swept back by the returning tide, cast up on the island, and fall into the hands of the crew of the *Ebba* when the schooner is hauled into her creek. If Ker Karraje ever gets hold of it, it will be all up with me.

It will be readily conceived with what anxiety I have awaited the moment to make the attempt: I am in a perfect fever of excitement, for it is a matter of life or death to me. I calculate from previous observations that the tide will be very low at about a quarter to nine. The top of the tunnel ought then to be a foot and a half above water, which is more than enough to permit of the keg passing through it. It will be another half hour at least before the flow sets in again, and by that time the keg may be far enough away to escape being thrown back on the coast.

I peer out of my cell. There is no one about, and I advance to the side of the lagoon, where by the light of a nearby lamp, I perceive the arch of the tunnel, towards which the current seems to be setting pretty swiftly.

I go down to the very edge, and cast in the keg which contains the precious document and all my hopes.

“God be with it!” I fervently exclaim. “God be with it!”

For a minute or two the little barrel remains stationary, and then floats back to the side again. I throw it out once more with all my strength.

This time it is in the track of the current, which to my great joy sweeps it along and in twenty seconds, it has disappeared in the tunnel.

Yes, God be with it! May Heaven guide thee, little barrel! May it protect all those whom Ker Karraje menaces and grant that this band of pirates may not escape from the justice of man!

CHAPTER XIV.

BATTLE BETWEEN THE “SWORD” AND THE TUG.

Through all this sleepless night I have followed the keg in fancy. How many times I seem to see it swept against the rocks in the tunnel into a creek, or some excavation. I am in a cold perspiration from head to foot. Then I imagine that it has been carried out to sea. Heavens! if the returning tide should sweep it back to tho entrance and then through the tunnel into the lagoon! I must be on the lookout for it.

I rise before the sun and saunter down to the lagoon. Not a single object is floating on its calm surface.

The work on the tunnel through the side of the cavern goes on, and at four o’clock in the afternoon on September 23, Engineer Serko blows away the last rock obstructing the issue, and communication with the outer world is established. It is only a very narrow hole, and one has to stoop to go through it. The exterior orifice is lost among the crannies of the rocky coast, and it would be easy to obstruct it, if such a measure became necessary.

It goes without saying that the passage will be strictly guarded. No one without special authorization will be able either to go out or come in, therefore there is little hope of escape in that direction.

September 25. — This morning the tug rose from the depth of the lagoon to the surface, and has now run alongside the jetty. The Count d’Artigas and Captain Spade disembark, and the crew set to work to land the provisions — boxes of canned meat, preserves, barrels of wine and spirits, and other things brought by the *Ebba,* among which are several packages destined for

Thomas Roch. The men also land the various sections of Roch's engines which are discoid in shape.

The inventor watches their operations, and his eyes glisten with eagerness. He seizes one of the sections, examines it, and nods approval. I notice that his joy no longer finds expression in incoherent utterances, that he is completely transformed from what he was while a patient at Healthful House. So much is this the case that I begin to ask myself whether his madness which was asserted to be incurable, has not been radically cured.

At last Thomas Roch embarks in the boat used for crossing the lake and is rowed over to his laboratory. Engineer Serko accompanies him. In an hour's time the tug's cargo has all been taken out and transported to the storehouses.

Ker Karraje exchanges a word or two with Engineer Serko and then enters his mansion. Later, in the afternoon, I see them walking up and down in front of the Beehive and talking earnestly together.

Then they enter the new tunnel, followed by Captain Spade. If I could but follow them! If I could but breathe for awhile the bracing air of the Atlantic, of which the interior of Back Cup only receives attenuated puffs, so to speak.

From September 26 to October 10. — Fifteen days have elapsed. Under the directions of Engineer Serko and Thomas Roch the sections of the engines have been fitted together. Then the construction of their supports is begun. These supports are simple trestles, fitted with transverse troughs or grooves of various degrees of inclination, and which could be easily installed on the deck of the *Ebba*, or even on the platform of the tug, which can be kept on a level with the surface.

Thus Ker Karraje, will be ruler of the seas, with his yacht. No warship, however big, however powerful, will be able to cross the zone of danger, whereas the *Ebba* will be out of range of its guns. If only my notice were found! If only the existence of this lair of Back Cup were known! Means would soon be found, if not of destroying the place, at least of starving the band into submission!

October 20. — To my extreme surprise I find this morning that the tug has gone away again. I recall that yesterday the elements of the piles were renewed, but I thought it was only to keep them in order. In view of the fact that the outside can now be reached through the new tunnel, and that Thomas Roch has everything he requires, I can only conclude that the tug has gone off on another marauding expedition.

Yet this is the season of the equinoctial gales, and the Bermudan waters are swept by frequent tempests. This is evident from the violent gusts that drive back the smoke through the crater and the heavy rain that accompanies it, as well as by the water in the lagoon, which swells and washes over the brown rocks on its shores.

But it is by no means sure that the *Ebba* has quitted her cove. However staunch she may be, she is, it seems to me, of too light a build to face such tempests as now rage, even with the help of the tug.

On the other hand, although the tug has nothing to fear from the heavy seas, as it would be in calm water a few yards below the surface, it is hardly likely that it has gone on a trip unless to accompany the schooner.

I do not know to what its departure can be attributed, but its absence is likely to be prolonged, for it has not yet returned.

Engineer Serko has remained behind, but Ker Karraje, Captain Spade, and the crew of the schooner, I find, have left.

Life in the cavern goes on with its usual dispiriting monotony. I pass hour after hour in my cell, meditating, hoping, despairing, following in fancy the voyage of my little barrel, tossed about at the mercy of the currents and whose chances of being picked up, I fear, are becoming fainter each day, and killing time by writing my diary, which will probably not survive me.

Thomas Roch is constantly occupied in his laboratory manufacturing his deflagrator. I still entertain the conviction that nothing will ever induce him to give up the secret of the liquid's composition; but I am perfectly aware that he will not hesitate to place his invention at Ker Karraje's service.

I often meet Engineer Serko when my strolls take me in the direction of the Beehive. He always shows himself disposed to chat with me, though, it is true, he does so in a tone of impertinent frivolity. We converse upon all sorts of subjects, but rarely of my position. Recrimination thereanent is useless and only subjects me to renewed bantering.

October 22. — To-day I asked Engineer Serko whether the *Ebba* had put to sea again with the tug.

"Yes, Mr. Simon Hart," he replied, "and though the clouds gather and loud the tempest roars, be in no uneasiness in regard to our dear *Ebba*."

"Will she be gone long?"

"We expect her back within forty-eight hours. It is the last voyage Count d'Artigas proposes to make before the winter gales render navigation in these parts impracticable."

“Is her voyage one of business or pleasure?”

“Of business, Mr. Hart, of business,” answered Engineer Serko with a smile. “Our engines are now completed, and when the fine weather returns we shall resume offensive operations.”

“Against unfortunate merchantmen.”

“As unfortunate as they are richly laden.”

“Acts of piracy, whose impunity will, I trust, not always be assured,” I cried..

“Calm yourself, dear colleague, be calm! Be calm! No one, you know, can ever discover our retreat, and none can ever disclose the secret! Besides, with these engines, which are so easily handled and are of such terrible power, it would be easy for us to blow to pieces any ship that attempted to get within a certain radius of the island.”

“Providing,” I said, “that Thomas Roch has sold you the composition of his deflagrator as he has sold you that of his fulgurator.”

“That he has done, Mr. Hart, and it behooves me to set your mind at rest upon that point.”

From this categorical response I ought to have concluded that the misfortune had been consummated, but a certain hesitation in the intonation of his voice warned me that implicit reliance was not to be placed upon Engineer Serko’s assertions.

October 25. — What a frightful adventure I have just been mixed up in, and what a wonder I did not lose my life! It is only by a miracle that I am able to resume these notes, which have been interrupted for forty-eight hours. With a little luck, I should have been delivered! I should now be in one of the Bermudan ports — St. George or Hamilton. The mysteries of Back Cup would have been cleared up. The description of the schooner would have been wired all over the world, and she would not dare to put into any port. The provisioning of Back Cup would be impossible, and Ker Karraje's bandits would be condemned to starve to death!

This is what occurred:

At eight o'clock in the evening on October 23, I quitted my cell in an indefinable state of nervousness, and with a presentiment that a serious event was imminent. In vain I had tried to seek calmness in sleep. It was impossible to do so, and I rose and went out.

Outside Back Cup the weather must have been very rough. Violent gusts of wind swept in through the crater and agitated the water of the lagoon.

I walked along the shore on the Beehive side. No one was about. It was rather cold, and the air was damp. The pirates were all snugly ensconced in their cells, with the exception of one man, who stood guard over the new passage, notwithstanding that the outer entrance had been blocked. From where he was this man could not see the lagoon, moreover there were only two lamps alight, one on each side of the lake, and the forest of pillars was wrapt in the profoundest obscurity.

I was walking about in the shadow, when some one passed me.

I saw that he was Thomas Roch.

He was walking slowly, absorbed by his thoughts, his brain at work, as usual.

Was this not a favorable opportunity to talk to him, to enlighten him about what he was probably ignorant, namely, the character of the people into whose hands he had fallen?

“He cannot,” I argued, “know that the Count d’Artigas is none other than Ker Karraje, the pirate. He cannot be aware that he has given up a part of his invention to such a bandit. I must open his eyes to the fact that he will never be able to enjoy his millions, that he is a prisoner in Back Cup, and will never be allowed to leave it, any more than I shall. Yes, I will make an appeal to his sentiments of humanity, and point out to him what frightful misfortunes he will be responsible for if he does not keep the secret of his deflagrator.”

All this I had said to myself, and was preparing to carry out my resolution, when I suddenly felt myself seized from behind.

Two men held me by the arms, and another appeared in front of me.

Before I had time to cry out the man exclaimed in English:

“Hush! not a word! Are you not Simon Hart?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“I saw you come out of your cell.”

“Who are you, then?”

“Lieutenant Davon, of the British Navy, of H.M.S. *Standard*, which is stationed at the Bermudas.”

Emotion choked me so that it was impossible for me to utter a word.

“We have come to rescue you from Ker Karraje, and also propose to carry off Thomas Roch,” he added.

“Thomas Roch?” I stammered.

“Yes, the document signed by you was found on the beach at St. George — — ”

“In a keg, Lieutenant Davon, which I committed to the waters of the lagoon.”

“And which contained,” went on the officer, “the notice by which we were apprised that the island of Back Cup served as a refuge for Ker Karraje and his band — Ker Karraje, this false Count d’Artigas, the author of the double abduction from Healthful House.”

“Ah! Lieutenant Davon — — ”

“Now we have not a moment to spare, we must profit by the obscurity.”

“One word, Lieutenant Davon, how did you penetrate to the interior of Back Cup?”

“By means of the submarine boat *Sword*, with which we have been making experiments at St. George for six months past.”

“A submarine boat!”

"Yes, it awaits us at the foot of the rocks. And now, Mr. Hart, where is Ker Karraje's tug?"

"It has been away for three weeks."

"Ker Karraje is not here, then?"

"No, but we expect him back every day — every hour, I might say."

"It matters little," replied Lieutenant Davon. "It is not after Ker Karraje, but Thomas Roch, we have come — and you also, Mr. Hart. The *Sword* will not leave the lagoon till you are both on board. If she does not turn up at St. George again, they will know that I have failed — and they will try again."

"Where is the *Sword*, Lieutenant?"

"On this side, in the shadow of the bank, where it cannot be seen. Thanks to your directions, I and my crew were able to locate the tunnel. We came through all right, and ten minutes ago rose to the surface of the lake. Two men landed with me. I saw you issue from the cell marked on your plan. Do you know where Thomas Roch is?"

"A few paces off. He has just passed me, on his way to his laboratory."

"God be praised, Mr. Hart!"

"Amen, Lieutenant Davon."

The lieutenant, the two men and I took the path around the lagoon. We had not gone far when we perceived Thomas Roch in front of us. To throw ourselves upon him, gag him before he could utter a cry, bind him before he could offer any resistance, and bear him off to the place where the *Sword* was moored was the work of a minute.

The *Sword* was a submersible boat of only twelve tons, and consequently much inferior to the tug, both in respect of dimensions and power. Her screw was worked by a couple of dynamos fitted with accumulators that had been charged twelve hours previously in the port of St. George. However, the *Sword* would suffice to take us out of this prison, to restore us to liberty — that liberty of which I had given up all hope. Thomas Roch was at last to be rescued from the clutches of Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko. The rascals would not be able to utilize his invention, and nothing could prevent the warships from landing a storming party on the island, who would force the tunnel in the wall and secure the pirates!

We saw no one while the two men were conveying Thomas Roch to the *Sword*, and all got on board without incident. The lid was shut and secured, the water compartments filled, and the *Sword* sank out of sight. We were saved!

The *Sword* was divided into three water-tight compartments. The after one contained the accumulators and machinery. The middle one, occupied by the pilot, was surmounted by a periscope fitted with lenticular portholes, through which an electric search-lamp lighted the way through the water. Forward, in the other compartment, Thomas Roch and I were shut in.

My companion, though the gag which was choking him had been removed, was still bound, and, I thought, knew what was going on.

But we were in a hurry to be off, and hoped to reach St. George that very night if no obstacle was encountered.

I pushed open the door of the compartment and rejoined Lieutenant Davon, who was standing by the man at the wheel. In the after compartment three other men, including the engineer, awaited the lieutenant's orders to set the machinery in motion.

"Lieutenant Davon," I said, "I do not think there is any particular reason why I should stay in there with Roch. If I can help you to get through the tunnel, pray command me."

"Yes, I shall be glad to have you by me, Mr. Hart."

It was then exactly thirty-seven minutes past eight.

The search-lamp threw a vague light through the water ahead of the *Sword*. From where we were, we had to cross the lagoon through its entire length to get to the tunnel. It would be pretty difficult to fetch it, we knew, but, if necessary, we could hug the sides of the lake until we located it. Once outside the tunnel the *Sword* would rise to the surface and make for St. George at full speed.

"At what depth are we now?" I asked the lieutenant.

"About a fathom."

"It is not necessary to go any lower," I said. "From what I was able to observe during the equinoctial tides, I should think that we are in the axis of the tunnel."

"All right," he replied.

Yes, it was all right, and I felt that Providence was speaking by the mouth of the officer. Certainly Providence could not have chosen a better agent to work its will.

In the light of the lamp I examined him. He was about thirty years of age, cool, phlegmatic, with resolute physiognomy — the English officer in all his native impassibility — no more disturbed than if he had been on board the *Standard*, operating with extraordinary *sang-froid,* I might even say, with the precision of a machine.

“On coming through the tunnel I estimated its length at about fifty yards,” he remarked.

“Yes, Lieutenant, about fifty yards from one extremity to the other.”

This calculation must have been pretty exact, since the new tunnel cut on a level with the coast is thirty-five feet in length.

The order was given to go ahead, and the *Sword* moved forward very slowly for fear of colliding against the rocky side.

Sometimes we came near enough to it to distinguish a black mass ahead of it, but a turn of the wheel put us in the right direction again. Navigating a submarine boat in the open sea is difficult enough. How much more so in the confines of a lagoon!

After five minutes’ manoeuvring, the *Sword,* which was kept at about a fathom below the surface, had not succeeded in sighting the orifice.

“Perhaps it would be better to return to the surface, Lieutenant,” I said. “We should then be able to see where we are.”

“I think you are right, Mr. Hart, if you can point out just about where the tunnel is located.”

“I think I can.”

“Very well, then.”

As a precaution the light was turned off. The engineer set the pumps in motion, and, lightened of its water ballast, the boat slowly rose in the darkness to the surface.

I remained at my post so that I could peer through the lookouts.

At last the ascensional movement of the *Sword* stopped, and the periscope emerged about a foot.

On one side of me, lighted by the lamp by the shore, I could see the Beehive.

“What is your opinion?” demanded the lieutenant.

“We are too far north. The orifice is in the west side of the cavern.”

“Is anybody about?”

“Not a soul.”

“Capital, Mr. Hart. Then we will keep on a level with the surface, and when we are in front of the tunnel, and you give the signal, we will sink.”

It was the best thing to be done. We moved off again and the pilot kept her head towards the tunnel.

When we were about twelve yards off I gave the signal to stop. As soon as the current was turned off the *Sword* stopped, opened her water tanks and slowly sank again.

Then the light in the lookout was turned on again, and there in front of us was a black circle that did not reflect the lamp's rays.

"There it is, there is the tunnel!" I cried.

Was it not the door by which I was going to escape from my prison? Was not liberty awaiting me on the other side?

Gently the *Sword* moved towards the orifice.

Oh! the horrible mischance! How have I survived it? How is it that my heart is not broken?

A dim light appeared in the depth of the tunnel, about twenty-five yards in front of us. The advancing light could be none other than that, projected through the lookout of Ker Karraje's submarine boat.

"The tug! The tug!" I exclaimed. "Lieutenant, here is the tug returning to Back Cup!"

"Full speed astern," ordered the officer, and the *Sword* drew back just as she was about to enter the tunnel.

One chance remained. The lieutenant had swiftly turned off the light, and it was just possible that we had not been seen by the people in the tug. Perhaps, in the dark waters of the lagoon, we should escape notice, and when the oncoming boat had risen and moored to the jetty, we should be able to slip out unperceived.

We had backed close in to the south side and the *Sword* was about to stop, but alas, for our hopes! Captain Spade had seen that another submarine boat was about to issue through the tunnel, and he was making preparations to chase us. How could a frail craft like the *Sword* defend itself against the attacks of Ker Karraje's powerful machine?

Lieutenant Davon turned to me and said: "Go back to the compartment where Thomas Roch is and shut yourself in. I will close the after-door. There is just a chance that if the tug rams us the water-tight compartments will keep us up."

After shaking hands with the lieutenant, who was as cool as though we were in no danger, I went forward and rejoined Thomas Roch. I closed the door and awaited the issue in profound darkness.

Then I could feel the desperate efforts made by the *Sword* to escape from or ram her enemy. I could feel her rushing, gyrating and plunging. Now she would twist to avoid a collision. Now she would rise to the surface, then sink to the bottom of the lagoon. Can any one conceive such a struggle as that in which, like two marine monsters, these machines were engaged in beneath the troubled waters of this inland lake?

A few minutes elapsed, and I began to think that the *Sword* had eluded the tug and was rushing through the tunnel.

Suddenly there was a collision. The shock was not, it seemed to me, very violent, but I could be under no illusion: the *Sword* had been struck on her starboard quarter. Perhaps her plates had resisted, and if not, the water would only invade one of her compartments, I thought.

Almost immediately after, however, there was another shock that pushed the *Sword* with extreme violence. She was raised by the ram of the tug which sawed and ripped its way into her side. Then I could feel her heel over and sink straight down, stern foremost.

Thomas Roch and I were tumbled over violently by. this movement. There was another bump, another ripping sound, and the *Sword* lay still.

Just what happened after that I am unable to say, for I lost consciousness.

I have since learned that all this occurred many hours ago.

I however distinctly remember that my last thought was:

“If I am to die, at any rate Thomas Roch and his secret perish with me — and the pirates of Back Cup will not escape punishment for their crimes.”

CHAPTER XV.

EXPECTATION.

As soon as I recover my senses I find myself lying on my bed in my cell, where it appears I have been lying for thirty-six hours.

I am not alone. Engineer Serko is near me. He has attended to me himself, not because he regards me as a friend, I surmise, but as a man from whom indispensable explanations are awaited, and who afterwards can be done away with if necessary.

I am still so weak that I could not walk a step. A little more and I should have been asphyxiated in that narrow compartment of the *Sword* at the bottom of the lagoon.

Am I in condition to reply to the questions that Engineer Serko is dying to put to me? Yes — but I shall maintain the utmost reserve.

In the first place I wonder what has become of Lieutenant Davon and the crew of the *Sword*. Did those brave Englishmen perish in the collision? Are they safe and sound like us — for I suppose that Thomas Roch has also survived?

The first question that Engineer Serko puts to me is this:

“Will you explain to me what happened, Mr. Hart?”

Instead of replying it occurs to me to question him myself.

“And Thomas Roch?” I inquire.

“In good health, Mr. Hart.” Then he adds in an imperious tone: “Tell me what occurred!”

“In the first place, tell me what became of the others.”

“What others?” replies Serko, glancing at me savagely.

“Why, those men who threw themselves upon Thomas Roch and me, who gagged, bound, and carried us off and shut us up, I know not where?”

On reflection I had come to the conclusion that the best thing to do was to pretend that I had been surprised before I knew where I was or who my aggressors were.

“You will know what became of them later. But first, tell me how, the thing was done.”

By the threatening tone of his voice, as he for the third time puts this question, I understand the nature of the suspicions entertained of me. Yet to be in the position to accuse me of having had relations with the outside he would have had to get possession of my keg. This he could not have done, seeing that it is in the hands of the Bermudan authorities. The pirates cannot, I am convinced, have a single proof to back up their suspicions.

I therefore recount how about eight o’clock on the previous evening I was walking along the edge of the lagoon, after Thomas Roch had passed me, going towards his laboratory, when I felt myself seized from behind; how having been gagged, bound, and blindfolded, I felt myself carried off and lowered into a hole with another person whom I thought I recognized from his groans as Thomas Roch; how I soon felt that I was on board a boat of some description and naturally concluded that it was the tug; how I felt it sink; how I felt a shock that threw me violently against the side, and how I felt myself suffocating and lost consciousness, since I remember nothing further.

Engineer Serko listens with profound attention, a stern look in his eyes and a frown on his brow; and yet he can have no reason that authorizes him to doubt my word.

“You claim that three men threw themselves upon you?” he asks.

“Yes. I thought they were some of your people, for I did not see them coming. Who were they?”

“Strangers, as you must have known from their language.”

“They did not utter a word!”

“Have you no idea as to their nationality?”

“Not the remotest.”

Do you know what were their intentions in entering the cavern?”

“I do not.”

“What is your opinion about it?”

“My opinion, Mr. Serko? I repeat I thought they were two or three of your pirates who had come to throw me into the lagoon by the Count d’Artigas’ orders, and that they were going to do the same thing to Thomas Roch. I supposed that having obtained his secrets — as you informed me was the case — you had no further use for him and were about to get rid of us both.”

“Is it possible, Mr. Hart, that you could have thought such a thing!” continued Serko in his sarcastic way.

“I did, until having been able to remove the bandage from my eyes, I perceived that I was in the tug.”

“It was not the tug, but a boat of the same kind that had got through the tunnel.”

“A submarine boat?” I ejaculate.

“Yes, and manned by persons whose mission was to kidnap you and Thomas Roch.”

“Kidnap us?” I echo, continuing to feign surprise.

“And,” adds Engineer Serko, “I want to know what you think about the matter.”

“What I think about it? Well, it appears to me that there is only one plausible explanation possible. If the secret of your retreat has not been betrayed — and I cannot conceive how you could have been betrayed or what imprudence you or yours could have committed — my opinion is that this submarine boat was exploring the bottom of the sea in this neighborhood, that she must have found her way into the tunnel, that she rose to the surface of the lagoon, that her crew, greatly surprised to find themselves inside an inhabited cavern, seized hold of the first persons they came across, Thomas Roch and myself, and others as well perhaps, for of course I do not know — — ”

Engineer Serko has become serious again. Does he realize the inanity of the hypothesis I try to pass off on him? Does he think I know more than I will say? However this may be, he accepts my professed view, and says:

“In effect, Mr. Hart, it must have happened as you suggest, and when the stranger tried to make her way out through the tunnel just as the tug was entering, there was a collision — a collision of which she was the victim. But we are not the kind of people to allow our fellow-men to perish before our eyes. Moreover, the disappearance of Thomas Roch and yourself was almost immediately discovered. Two such valuable lives had to be saved at all hazards. We set to work. There are many expert divers among our men. They hastily donned their suits and descended to the bottom of the lagoon. They passed lines around the hull of the *Sword* — — ”

“The *Sword*?” I exclaim.

“That is the name we saw painted on the bow of the vessel when we raised her to the surface. What satisfaction we experienced when we recovered you — unconscious, it is true, but still breathing — and were able to bring you back to life! Unfortunately all our attentions to the officer who commanded the *Sword*, and to his crew were useless. The shock had torn open the after and middle compartments, and they paid with their lives the misfortune — due to chance, as you observe — of having discovered our mysterious retreat.”

On learning that Lieutenant Davon and his companions are dead, my heart is filled with anguish; but to keep up my role — as they were persons with whom, presumably, I was not acquainted, and had never seen — I am careful not to display any emotion. I must, on no account, afford ground for the suspicion that there was any connivance between the commander of the

Sword and me. For aught I know, Engineer Serko may have reason to be very skeptical about the discovery of the tunnel being accidental.

What, however, I am most concerned about is that the unlooked-for occasion to recover my liberty was lost. Shall I ever be afforded another chance? However this may be, my notice reached the English authorities of the archipelago, and they now know where Ker Karraje is to be found. When it is seen that the *Sword* does not return to Bermuda, there can be no doubt that another attempt will be made to get inside Back Cup, in which, had it not been for the inopportune return of the tug, I should no longer be a prisoner.

I have resumed my usual existence, and having allayed all mistrust, am permitted to wander freely about the cavern, as usual.

It is patent that the adventure has had no ill effect upon Thomas Roch. Intelligent nursing brought him around, as it did me. In full possession of his mental faculties he has returned to work, and spends the entire day in his laboratory.

The *Ebba* brought back from her last trip bales, boxes, and a quantity of objects of varied origin, and I conclude that a number of ships must have been pillaged during this marauding expedition.

The work on the trestles for Roch’s engine goes steadily forward, and there are now no fewer than fifty engines. If Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko are under the necessity of defending Back Cup, three or four will be sufficient to render the island unapproachable, as they will cover a zone which no vessel could enter without being blown to pieces. And it occurs to me that they intend to put Back Cup in a state of defence after having argued as follows:

“If the appearance of the *Sword* in the lagoon was due to chance the situation remains unchanged, and no power, not even England, will think of seeking for the *Sword* inside the cavern. If, on the other hand, as the result of an incomprehensible revelation, it has been learned that Back Cup is become the retreat of Ker Karraje, if the expedition of the *Sword* was a first effort against the island, another of a different kind — either a bombardment from a distance, or an attack by a landing party — is to be expected. Therefore, ere we can quit Back Cup and carry away our plunder, we shall have to defend ourselves by means of Roch’s fulgurator.”

In my opinion the rascals must have gone on to reason still further in this wise:

“Is there any connection between the disclosure of our secret — if it was, and however it may have been made — and the double abduction from Healthful House? Is it known that Thomas Roch and his keeper are confined in Back Cup? Is it known that the abduction was effected in the interest of Ker Karraje? Have Americans, English, French, Germans, and Russians reason to fear that an attack in force against the island would be doomed to failure?”

Ker Karraje must know very well that these powers would not hesitate to attack him, however great the danger might be. The destruction of his lair is an urgent duty in the interest of public security and of humanity. After sweeping the West Pacific the pirate and his companions are infesting the West Atlantic, and must be wiped out at all costs.

In any case, it is imperative that the inhabitants of Back Cup should be on their guard. This fact is realized, and, from the day on which the *Sword* was destroyed, strict watch has been kept. Thanks to the new passage, they are able to hide among the rocks without having recourse to the submarine tunnel to get there, and day and night a dozen sentries are posted about the island. The moment a ship appears in sight the fact is at once made known inside the cavern.

Nothing occurs for some days, and the latter succeed each other with dreadful monotony. The pirates, however, feel that Back Cup no longer enjoys its former security. Every moment an alarm from the sentries posted outside is expected. The situation is no longer the same since the advent of the *Sword*. Gallant Lieutenant Davon, gallant crew, may England, may the civilized nations, never forget that you have sacrificed your lives in the cause of humanity!

It is evident that now, however powerful may be their means of defence, even more powerful than a network of torpedoes, Engineer Serko and Captain Spade are filled with an anxiety that they vainly essay to dissemble. They hold frequent conferences together. Maybe they discuss the advisability of quitting Back Cup with their wealth, for they are aware that if the existence of the cavern is known means will be found to reduce it, even if the inmates have to be starved out.

This is, of course, mere conjecture on my part. What is essential to me is that they do not suspect me of having launched the keg that was so providentially picked up at Bermuda. Never, I must say, has Engineer Serko ever made any allusion to any such probability. No, I am not even suspected. If the contrary were the case I am sufficiently acquainted with Ker Karraje to know that he would long ago have sent me to rejoin Lieutenant Davon and the *Sword* at the bottom of the lagoon.

The winter tempests have set in with a vengeance. The wind howls though the hole in the roof, and rude gusts sweep through the forest of pillars producing sonorous sounds, so sonorous, so deep, that one might sometimes almost fancy they were produced by the firing of the guns of a squadron. Flocks of seabirds take refuge in the cavern from the gale, and at intervals, when it lulls, almost deafen us with their screaming.

It is to be presumed that in such weather the schooner will make no attempt to put to sea, for the stock of provisions is ample enough to last all the season. Moreover, I imagine the Count d'Artigas will not be so eager in future to show his *Ebba* along the American coast, where he risks being received, not, as hitherto, with the consideration due to a wealthy yachtsman, but in the manner Ker Karraje so richly merits.

It occurs to me that if the apparition of the *Sword* was the commencement of a campaign against the island, a question of great moment relative to the future of Back Cup arises.

Therefore, one day, prudently, so as not to excite any suspicion, I ventured to pump Engineer Serko about it.

We were in the neighborhood of Thomas Roch's laboratory, and had been conversing for some time, when Engineer Serko touched upon the extraordinary apparition of an English submarine boat in the lagoon. On this occasion he seemed to incline to the view that it might have been a premeditated expedition against Ker Karraje.

"That is not my opinion," I replied, in order to bring him to the question that I wanted to put to him.

"Why?" he demanded.

“Because if your retreat were known a fresh attempt, if not to penetrate to the cavern, at least to destroy Back Cup, would ere this have been made.”

“Destroy it!” cried Serko. “It would be a dangerous undertaking, in view of the means of defence of which we now dispose.”

“They can know nothing about this matter, Mr. Serko. It is not imagined, either in the new world or the old, that the abduction from Healthful House was effected for your especial benefit, or that you have succeeded in coming to terms with Thomas Roch for his invention.”

Engineer Serko made no response to this observation, which, for that matter, was unanswerable.

I continued:

“Therefore a squadron sent by the maritime powers who have an interest in breaking up this island would not hesitate to approach and shell it. Now, I argue from this that as this squadron has not yet appeared, it is not likely to come at all, and that nothing is known as to Ker Karraje’s whereabouts, and you must admit that this hypothesis is the most cheerful one, as far as you are concerned.”

“That may be,” Engineer Serko replied, “but what is, is. Whether they are aware of the fact or no, if warships approach within five or six miles of this island they will be sunk before they have had time to fire a single shot!”

“Well, and what then?”

“What then? Why the probability is that no others would care to repeat the experiment.”

“That, again, may be. But these warships would invest you beyond the dangerous zone, and the *Ebba* would not be able to put in to the ports she previously visited with the Count d’Artigas. In this event, how would you be able to provision the island?”

Engineer Serko remained silent.

This argument, which he must already have brooded over, was too logical to be refuted or dismissed, and I have an idea that the pirates contemplate abandoning Back Cup.

Nevertheless, not relishing being cornered, he continued:

“We should still have the tug, and what the *Ebba* could not do, this would.”

“The tug?” I cried. “But if Ker Karraje’s secrets are known, do you suppose the powers are not also aware of the existence of the Count d’Artigas’ submarine boat?”

Engineer Serko looked at me suspiciously.

“Mr. Hart,” he said, “you appear to me to carry your deductions rather far.”

“I, Mr. Serko?”

“Yes, and I think you talk about all this like a man who knows more than he ought to.”

This remark brought me up abruptly. It was evident that my arguments might give rise to the suspicion that I was not altogether irresponsible for the recent incident. Engineer Serko scrutinized me sharply as though he would read my innermost thoughts.

“Mr. Serko,” I observed, “by profession, as well as by inclination, I am accustomed to reason upon everything. This is why I communicated to you the result of my reasoning, which you can take into consideration or not, as you like.”

Thereupon we separate. But I fancy my lack of reserve may have excited suspicions which may not be easy to allay.

From this interview, however, I gleaned a precious bit of information, namely, that the dangerous zone of Roch’s fulgurator is between five and six miles off. Perhaps, during the next equinoctial tides, another notice to this effect in another keg may also reach a safe destination.

But how many weary months to wait before the orifice of the tunnel will again be uncovered!

The rough weather continues, and the squalls are more violent than ever. Is it the state of the sea that delays another campaign against Back Cup? Lieutenant Davon certainly assured me that if his expedition failed, if the *Sword* did not return to St. George, another attempt under different conditions would be made with a view to breaking up this bandits’ lair. Sooner or later the work of justice must be done, and Back Cup be destroyed, even though I may not survive its destruction.

Ah! why can I not go and breathe, if only for a single instant, the vivifying air outside? Why am I not permitted to cast one glance over the ocean towards the distant horizon of the Bermudas? My whole life is concentrated in one desire: to get through the tunnel in the wall and hide myself among the rocks. Perchance I might be the first to catch sight of the smoke of a squadron heading for the island.

This project, alas! is unrealizable, as sentries are posted day and night at each extremity of the passage. No one can enter it without Engineer Serko's authorization. Were I to attempt it, I should risk being deprived of my liberty to walk about the cavern, and even worse might happen to me.

Since our last conversation, Engineer Serko's attitude towards me has undergone a change. His gaze has lost its old-time sarcasm and is distrustful, suspicious, searching and as stern as Ker Karraje's.

November 17. — This afternoon there was a great commotion in the Beehive, and the men rushed out of their cells with loud cries.

I was reclining on my bed, but immediately rose and hurried out.

All the pirates were making for the passage, in front of which were Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, Captain Spade, Boatswain Effrondat, Engine-driver Gibson and the Count d'Artigas' big Malay attendant.

I soon learn the reason for the tumult, for the sentries rush in with shouts of alarm.

Several vessels have been sighted to the northwest — warships steaming at full speed in the direction of Back Cup.

CHAPTER XVI.

ONLY A FEW MORE HOURS.

What effect this news has upon me, and what emotion it awakens within my soul! The end, I feel, is at hand. May it be such as civilization and humanity are entitled to.

Up to the present I have indited my notes day by day. Henceforward it is imperative that I should inscribe them hour by hour, minute by minute. Who knows but what Thomas Roch's last secret may be revealed to me and that I shall have time to commit it to paper! Should I die during the attack God grant that the account of the five months I have passed in Back Cup may be found upon my body!

At first Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, Captain Spade, and several of their companions took up position on the exterior base of the island. What would I not give to be able follow to them, and in the friendly shelter of a rook watch the on-coming warships!

An hour later they return after having left a score of men to keep watch. As the days at this season of the year are very short there is nothing to fear before the morrow. It is not likely that the ships will attempt a night attack and land a storming party, for they must imagine that the place is in a thorough condition of defence.

All night long the pirates work, installing the trestles at different points of the coast. Six have been taken through the passage to places selected in advance.

This done, Engineer Serko joins Thomas Roch in his laboratory. Is he going to tell him what is passing, that a squadron is in view of Back Cup, and that his fulgurator will be employed to defend the island?

What is certain is that half a hundred engines, each charged with several pounds of the explosive and of the substance that ensures a trajectory superior to that of any other projectile, are ready for their work of destruction.

As to the deflagrator liquid, Thomas Roch has a certain number of phials of it, and — I know only too well — will not refuse to help Ker Karraje's pirates with it.

During these preparations night has come on. Only the lamps of the Beehive are lighted and a semi-obscurity reigns in the cavern.

I return to my cell. It is to my interest to keep out of the way as much as possible, for Engineer Serko's suspicions might be revived now that the squadron is approaching Back Cup.

But will the vessels sighted continue on their course in this direction? May they not be merely passing on their way to Bermuda? For an instant this doubt enters my mind. No, no, it cannot be! Besides, I have just heard Captain Spade declare that they are lying to in view of the island.

To what nation do they belong? Have the English, desirous of avenging the destruction of the *Sword*, alone undertaken the expedition? May not cruisers of other nations be with them? I know not, and it is impossible to ascertain. And what does it matter, after all, so long as this haunt is destroyed, even though I should perish in the ruins like the heroic Lieutenant Davon and his brave crew?

Preparations for defence continue with coolness and method under Engineer Serko's superintendence. These pirates are obviously certain that they will be able to annihilate their assailants as soon as the latter enter the dangerous zone. Their confidence in Roch's fulgurator is absolute. Absorbed by the idea that these warship are powerless against them, they think neither of the difficulties nor menaces held out by the future.

I surmise that the trestles have been set up on the northwest coast with the grooves turned to send the engines to the north, west, and south. On the east, as already stated, the island is defended by the chain of reefs that stretches away to the Bermudas.

About nine o'clock I venture out of my cell. They will pay little attention to me, and perhaps I may escape notice in the obscurity. Ah! if I could get through that passage and hide behind some rock, so that I could witness what goes on at daybreak! And why should I not succeed now that Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, Captain Spade, and the pirates have taken their posts outside?

The shores of the lake are deserted, but the entrance to the passage is kept by Count d'Artigas' Malay. I saunter, without any fixed idea, towards Thomas Roch's laboratory. This reminds me of my compatriot. I am, on reflection, disposed to think that he knows nothing about the presence of a squadron off Back Cup. Probably not until the last moment will Engineer Serko apprise him of its proximity, not till he brusquely points out to him the vengeance he can accomplish.

Then I conceive the idea of enlightening Thomas Roch, myself, of the responsibility he is incurring and of revealing to him in this supreme hour the character of the men who want him to co-operate in their criminal projects.

Yes, I will, attempt it, and may I succeed in fanning into a flame any spark of patriotism that may still linger in his rebellious soul!

Roch is shut up in his laboratory. He must be alone, for never does he allow any one to enter while he is preparing his deflagrator.

As I pass the jetty I notice that the tug is moored in its accustomed place. Here I judge it prudent to walk behind the first row of pillars and approach the laboratory laterally — which will enable me to see whether anybody is with him. When I have gone a short distance along the sombre avenue I see a bright light on the opposite side of the lagoon. It is the electric light in Roch's laboratory as seen through a narrow window in the front.

Except in that particular spot, the southern shore of the lake is in darkness, whereas, in the opposite direction, the Beehive is lit up to its extremity at the northern wall. Through the opening in the dome, over the lake I can see the stars shining. The sky is clear, the tempest has abated, and the squalls no longer penetrate to the interior of Back Cup.

When near the laboratory, I creep along the wall and peep in at the window.

Thomas Roch is there alone. The light shines full on his face. If it is somewhat drawn, and the lines on the forehead are more pronounced, his physiognomy, at least, denotes perfect calmness and self-possession. No, he is no longer the inmate of Pavilion No. 17, the madman of Healthful House, and I ask myself whether he is not radically cured, whether there is no further danger of his reason collapsing in a final paroxysm.

He has just laid two glass phials upon the table, and holds a third in his hand. He holds it up to the light, and observes the limpidity of the liquid it contains.

I have half a mind to rush in, seize the tubes and smash them, but I reflect that he would have time to make some more of the stuff. Better stick to my first plan.

I push the door open and enter.

“Thomas Roch!” I exclaim.

He has not heard, nor has he seen me.

“Thomas Roch!” I repeat.

He raises his head, turns and gazes at me.

“Ah! it is you, Simon Hart!” he replies calmly, even indifferently.

He knows my name. Engineer Serko must have informed him that it was Simon Hart, and not Keeper Gaydon who was watching over him at Healthful House.

“You know who I am?” I say.

“Yes, as I know what your object was in undertaking such a position. You lived in hopes of surprising a secret that they would not pay for at its just value!”

Thomas Roch knows everything, and perhaps it is just as well, in view of what I am going to say.

“Well, you did not succeed, Simon Hart, and as far as this is concerned,” he added, flourishing the phial, “no one else has succeeded, or ever will succeed.”

As I conjectured, he has not, then, made known the composition of his deflagrator.

Looking him straight in the face, I reply:

“You know who I am, Thomas Roch, but do you know in whose place you are?”

“In my own place!” he cries.

That is what Ker Karraje has permitted him to believe. The inventor thinks he is at home in Back Cup, that the riches accumulated in this cavern are his, and that if an attack is made upon the place, it will be with the object of stealing what belongs to him! And he will defend it under the impression that he has the right to do so!

“Thomas Roch,” I continue, “listen to me.”

“What do you want to say to me, Simon Hart?”

“This cavern into which we have been dragged, is occupied by a band of pirates, and — ”

Roch does not give me time to complete the sentence — I doubt even whether he has understood me.

“I repeat,” he interrupts vehemently, “that the treasures stored here are the price of my invention. They have paid me what I asked for my fulgurator — what I was everywhere else refused — even in my own country — which is also yours — and I will not allow myself to be despoiled!”

What can I reply to such insensate assertions? I, however, go on:

“Thomas Roch, do you remember Healthful House?”

“Healthful House, where I was sequestrated after Warder Gaydon had been entrusted with the mission of spying upon me in order to rob me of my secret? I do, indeed.”

“I never dreamed of depriving you of the benefit of your secret, Thomas Roch. I would never have accepted such a mission. But you were ill, your reason was affected, and your invention was too valuable to be lost. Yes, had you disclosed the secret during one of your fits you would have preserved all the benefit and all the honor of it.”

“Really, Simon Hart!” Roch replies disdainfully. “Honor and benefit! Your assurances come somewhat late in the day. You forget that on the pretext of insanity, I was thrown into a dungeon. Yes, it was a pretext; for my reason has never left me, even for an hour, as you can see from what I have accomplished since I am free.”

“Free! Do you imagine you are free, Thomas Roch? Are you not more closely confined within the walls of this cavern than you ever were at Healthful House?”

“A man who is in his own home,” he replies angrily, “goes out as he likes and when he likes. I have only to say the word and all the doors will open before me. This place is mine. Count d’Artigas gave it to me with everything it contains. Woe to those who attempt to attack it. I have here the wherewithal to annihilate them, Simon Hart!” The inventor waves the phial feverishly as he speaks.”

“The Count d’Artigas has deceived you,” I cry, “as he has deceived so many others. Under this name is dissembled one of the most formidable monsters who ever scoured the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. He is a bandit steeped in crime — he is the odious Ker Karraje!”

“Ker Karraje!” echoes Thomas Roch.

And I wonder if this name has not impressed him, if he remembers who the man is who bears it. If it did impress him, it was only momentarily.

“I do not know this Ker Karraje,” he says, pointing towards the door to order me out. “I only know the Count d’Artigas.”

“Thomas Roch,” I persist, in a final effort, “the Count d’Artigas and Ker Karraje are one and the same person. If this man has purchased your secret, it is with the intention of ensuring impunity for his crimes and facilities for committing fresh ones. He is the chief of these pirates.”

“Pirates!” cries Roch, whose irritation increases the more I press him. “The real pirates are those who dare to menace me even in this retreat, who tried it on with the *Sword* — for Serko has told me everything — who sought to steal in my own home what belongs to me, what is but the just price of my discovery.”

“No, Thomas Roch, the pirates are those who have imprisoned you in this cavern of Back Cup, who will utilize your genius to defend it, and who will get rid of you when they are in entire possession of your secrets!”

Thomas Roch here interrupts me. He does not appear to listen to what I say. He has a fixed idea, that of vengeance, which has been skilfully worked upon by Engineer Serko, and in which his hatred is concentrated to the exclusion of everything else.

“The bandits,” he hisses, “are those who spurned me without a hearing, who heaped injustice and ignominy upon me, who drove me from country to country, whereas I offered them superiority, invincibleness, omnipotence!”

It is the eternal story of the unappreciated inventor, to whom the indifferent or envious refuse the means of testing his inventions, to pay him the value he sets upon them. I know it well — and also know all the exaggeration that has been written upon this subject.

It is clearly no time for reasoning with Thomas Roch. My arguments are entirely lost upon the hapless dupe of Ker Karraje and his accomplices. In revealing to him the real name of the Count d’Artigas, and denouncing to him this band and their chief I had hoped to wean him from their influence and make him realize the criminal end they have in view. My hope was vain. He does not believe me. And then what does he care whether the brigand’s name is Count ‘d’Artigas or Ker Karraje? Is not he, Thomas Roch, master of Back Cup? Is he not the owner of these riches accumulated by twenty years of murder and rapine?

Disarmed before such moral degeneracy, knowing not how I can touch his ulcerated, irresponsible heart, I turn towards the door. It only remains for me to withdraw. What is to be, will be, since it is out of my power to prevent the frightful *dénouement* that will occur in a few hours.

Thomas Roch takes no more notice of me. He seems to have forgotten that I am here. He has resumed his manipulations without realizing that he is not alone.

There is only one means of preventing the imminent catastrophe. Throw myself upon Roch, place him beyond the power of doing harm — strike him — kill him — yes, kill him! It is my right — it is my duty!

I have no arms, but on a near-by shelf I see some tools — a chisel and a hammer. What is to prevent me from knocking his brains out? Once he is dead I have but to smash the phials and his invention dies with him. The warships can approach, land their men upon the island, demolish Back Cup with their shells. Ker Karraje and his band will be killed to a man. Can I hesitate at a murder that will bring about the chastisement of so many crimes?

I advance to the shelf and stretch forth my hand to seize the chisel.

As I do so, Thomas Roch turns round.

It is too late to strike. A struggle would ensue. The noise and his cries would be heard, for there are still some pirates not far off, I can even now hear some one approaching, and have only just time to fly if I would not be seen.

Nevertheless, I make one last attempt to awaken the sentiment of patriotism within him.

“Thomas Roch,” I say, “warships are in sight. They have come to destroy this lair. Maybe one of them flies the French flag!”

He gazes at me. He was not aware that Back Cup is going to be attacked, and I have just apprised him of the fact. His brow darkens and his eyes flash.

“Thomas Roch, would you dare to fire upon your country’s flag — the tricolor flag?”

He raises his head, shakes it nervously, and with a disdainful gesture:

“What do you mean by ‘your country?’ I no longer have any country, Simon Hart. The inventor spurned no longer has a country. Where he finds an asylum, there is his fatherland! They seek to take what is mine. I will defend it, and woe, woe to those who dare to attack me!”

Then rushing to the door of the laboratory and throwing it violently open he shouts so loudly that he must be heard at the Beehive:

“Go! Get you gone!”

I have not a second to lose, and I dash out.

CHAPTER XVII.

ONE AGAINST FIVE.

For a whole hour I wander about among Back Cup’s dark vaults, amid the stone trees, to the extreme limit of the cavern. It is here that I have so often sought an issue, a crevice, a crack through which I might squeeze to the shore of the island.

My search has been futile. In my present condition, a prey to indefinable hallucinations it seems to me that these walls are thicker than ever, that they are gradually closing in upon and will crush me.

How long this mental trouble lasts I cannot say. But I afterwards find myself on the Beehive side, opposite the cell in which I cannot hope for either repose or sleep. Sleep, when my brain is in a whirl of excitement? Sleep, when I am near the end of a situation that threatened to be prolonged for years and years?

What will the end be as far as I am personally concerned? What am I to expect from the attack upon Back Cup, the success of which I have been unable to assure by placing Thomas Roch beyond the possibility of doing harm? His engines are ready to be launched, and as soon as the vessels have reached the dangerous zone they will be blown to atoms.

However this may be, I am condemned to pass the remaining hours of the night in my cell. The time has come for me to go in. At daybreak I shall see what is best for me to do. Meanwhile, for aught I know I may hear the thunder of Roch’s fulgurator as it destroys the ships approaching to make a night attack.

I take a last look round. On the opposite side a light, a single light, is burning. It is the lamp in Roch's laboratory and it casts its reflection upon the waters of the lake.

No one is about, and it occurs to me that the pirates must have taken up their lighting positions outside and that the Beehive is empty.

Then, impelled by an irresistible instinct, instead of returning to my cell, I creep along the wall, listening, spying, ready to hide if I hear voices or footsteps.

I at length reach the passage.

God in heaven! No one is on guard there — the passage is free!

Without giving myself time to reflect I dart into the dark hole, and grope my way along it. Soon I feel a fresher air — the salt, vivifying air of the sea, that I have not breathed for five months. I inspire it with avidity, with all the power of my lungs.

The outer extremity of the passage appears against the star-studded sky. There is not even a shadow in the way. Perhaps I shall be able to get outside.

I lay down, and crawl along noiselessly to the orifice and peer out.

Not a soul is in sight!

By skirting the rocks towards the east, to the side which cannot be approached from the sea on account of the reefs and which is not likely to be watched, I reach a narrow excavation about two hundred and twenty-five yards from where the point of the coast extends towards the northwest.

At last I am out of the cavern. I am not free, but it is the beginning of freedom.

On the point the forms of a few sentries stand out against the clear sky, so motionless that they might be mistaken for pieces of the rock.

On the horizon to the west the position lights of the warship show in a luminous line.

From a few gray patches discernable in the east, I calculate that it must be about five o’clock in the morning.

November 18. — It is now light enough for me to be able to complete my notes relating the details of my visit to Thomas Roch’s laboratory — the last lines my hand will trace, perhaps.

I have begun to write, and shall dot down the incidents of the attack as they occur.

The light damp mist that hangs over the water soon lifts under the influence of the breeze, and at last I can distinguish the warships.

There are five of them, and they are lying in a line about six miles off, and consequently beyond the range of Roch’s engines.

My fear that after passing in sight of the Bermudas the squadron would continue on its way to the Antilles or Mexico was therefore unfounded. No, there it is, awaiting broad daylight in order to attack Back Cup.

There is a movement on the coast. Three or four pirates emerge from the rocks, the sentries are recalled and draw in, and the entire band is soon assembled. They do not seek shelter inside the cavern, knowing full well that the ships can never get near enough for the shells of the big guns to reach, the island.

I run no risk of being discovered, for only my head protrudes above the hole in the rock and no one is likely to come this way. The only thing that worries me is that Serko, or somebody else may take it into his head to see if I am in my cell, and if necessary to lock me in, though what they have to fear from me I cannot conceive.

At twenty-five minutes past seven: Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko and Captain Spade advance to the extremity of the point, where they sweep the north-western horizon with their telescopes. Behind them the six trestles are installed, in the grooves of which are Roch's autopropulsive engines.

Thirty-five minutes past seven: Smoke arises from the stacks of the warships, which are getting under way and will soon be within range of the engines.

Horrible cries of joy, salvos of hurrahs — howls of wild beasts I might more appropriately say — arise from the pirate horde.

At this moment Engineer Serko quits Ker Karraje, whom he leaves with Captain Spade, and enters the cavern, no doubt to fetch Thomas Roch.

When Ker Karraje orders the latter to launch his engines against the ships will he remember what I told him? Will not his crime appear to him in all its horror? Will he refuse to obey? No, I am only too convinced of the contrary. It is useless to entertain any illusion on the subject. The inventor believes he is on his own property. They are going to attack it. He will defend it.

The five warships slowly advance, making for the point. Perhaps they imagine on board that Thomas Roch has not given up his last and greatest secret to the pirates — and, as a matter of fact, he had not done so when I threw the keg into the lagoon. If the commanders propose to land storming parties and the ships advance into the zone of danger there will soon be nothing left of them but bits of shapeless floating wreckage.

Here comes Thomas Roch accompanied by Engineer Serko. On issuing from the passage both go to the trestle that is pointing towards the leading warship.

Ker Karraje and Captain Spade are awaiting them.

As far as I am able to judge, Roch is calm. He knows what he is going to do. No hesitation troubles the soul of the hapless man whom hatred has led astray.

Between his fingers shines the glass phial containing the deflagrator liquid.

He then gazes towards the nearest ship, which is about five miles’ distant.

She is a cruiser of about two thousand five hundred tons — not more.

She flies no flag, but from her build I take her to belong to a nation for which no Frenchman can entertain any particular regard.

The four other warships remain behind.

It is this cruiser which is to begin the attack.

Let her use her guns, then, since the pirates allow her to approach, and may the first of her projectiles strike Thomas Roch!

While Engineer Serko is estimating the distance, Roch places himself behind the trestle. Three engines are resting on it, charged with the explosive, and which are assured a long trajectory by the fusing matter without it being necessary to impart a gyratory movement to them — as in the case of Inventor Turpin’s gyroscopic projectiles. Besides, if they drop within a few hundred yards of the vessel, they will be quite near enough to utterly destroy it.

The time has come.

“Thomas Roch!” Engineer Serko cries, and points to the cruiser.

The latter is steaming slowly towards the northwestern point of the island and is between four and five miles off.

Roch nods assent, and waves them back from the trestle.

Ker Karraje, Captain Spade and the others draw back about fifty paces.

Thomas Roch then takes the stopper from the phial which he holds in his right hand, and successively pours into a hole in the rear-end of each engine a few drops of the liquid, which mixes with the fusing matter.

Forty-five seconds elapse — the time necessary for the combination to be effected — forty-five seconds during which it seems to me that my heart ceases to beat.

A frightful whistling is then heard, and the three engines tear through the air, describing a prolonged curve at a height of three hundred feet, and pass the cruiser.

Have they missed it? Is the danger over?

No! the engines, after the manner of Artillery Captain Chapel’s discoid projectile, return towards the doomed vessel like an Australian boomerang.

The next instant the air is shaken with a violence comparable to that which would be caused by the explosion of a magazine of melinite or dynamite, Back Cup Island trembles to its very foundations.

The cruiser has disappeared, — blown to pieces. The effect is that of the Zalinski shell, but centupled by the infinite power of Roch’s fulgurator.

What shouts the bandits raise as they rush towards the extremity of the point! Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko, and Captain Spade remain rooted to the spot, hardly able to credit the evidence of their own eyes.

As to Thomas Roch, he stands with folded arms, and flashing eyes, his face radiant with pride and triumph.

I understand, while I abhor his feelings.

If the other warships approach they will share the same fate as the cruiser. They will inevitably be destroyed. Oh! if they would but give up the struggle and withdraw to safety, even though my last hope would go with them! The nations can consult and arrive at some other plan for destroying the island. They can surround the place with a belt of ships that the pirates cannot break through and starve them to death like so many rats in a hole.

But I know that the warships will not retire, even though they know they are going to certain death. One after the other they will all make the attempt.

And I am right. Signals are exchanged between them. Almost immediately clouds of black smoke arise and the vessels again advance.

One of them, under forced draught, distances the others in her anxiety to bring her big guns quickly into action.

At all risks I issue from my hole, and gaze at the on-coming warship with feverish eyes, awaiting, without being able to prevent it, another catastrophe.

This vessel, which visibly grows larger as it comes nearer, is a cruiser of about the same tonnage as the one that preceded her. No flag is flying and I cannot guess her nationality. She continues steaming at full speed in an effort to pass the zone of danger before other engines can be launched. But how can she escape them since they will swoop back upon her?

Thomas Roch places himself behind the second trestle as the cruiser passes on to the surface of the abysm in which she will in turn soon be swallowed up.

No sound disturbs the stillness.

Suddenly the rolling of drums and the blare of bugles is heard on board the warship.

I know those bugle calls: they are French bugles! Great God! She is one of the ships of my own country’s navy and a French inventor is about to destroy her!

No! it shall not be. I will rush towards Thomas Roch — shout to him that she is a French ship. He does not, cannot, know it.

At a sign from Engineer Serko the inventor has raised the phial.

The bugles sound louder and more strident. It is the salute to the flag. A flag unfurls to the breeze — the tricolor, whose blue, white and red sections stand out luminously against the sky.

Ah! What is this? I understand! Thomas Roch is fascinated at the sight of his national emblem. Slowly he lowers his arm as the flag flutters up to the mast-head. Then he draws back and covers his eyes with his hand.

Heavens above! All sentiment of patriotism is not then dead in his ulcerated heart, seeing that it beats at the sight of his country's flag!

My emotion is not less than his. At the risk of being seen — and what do I now care if I am seen? — I creep over the rocks. I will be there to sustain Thomas Roch and prevent him from weakening. If I pay for it with my life I will once more adjure him in the name of his country. I will cry to him:

"Frenchman, it is the tricolor that flies on yonder ship! Frenchman, it is a very part of France that is approaching you! Frenchman, would you be so criminal as to strike it?"

But my intervention will not be necessary. Thomas Roch is not a prey to one of the fits to which he was formerly subject. He is perfectly sane.

When he found himself facing the flag he understood — and drew back.

A few pirates approach to lead him to the trestle again. He struggles and pushes them from him.

Ker Karraje and Engineer Serko run up. They point to the rapidly advancing ship. They order him to launch his engines.

Thomas Roch refuses.

Captain Spade and the others, mad with rage, menace him — curse him — strike him — try to wrest the phial from him.

Roch throws it on the ground and crushes it under foot.

Then panic seizes upon the crowd of wretches. The cruiser has passed the zone and they cannot return her fire. Shells begin to rain all over the island, bursting the rocks in every direction.

But where is Thomas Roch? Has he been killed by one of the projectiles? No, I see him for the last time as he dashes into the passage.

Ker Karraje, Engineer Serko and the others follow him to seek shelter inside of Back Cup.

I will not return to the cavern at any price, even if I get killed by staying where I am.

I will jot down my final notes and when the French sailors land on the point I will go —

END OF ENGINEER SIMON HART’S NOTES.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ON BOARD THE “TONNANT.”

After the failure of Lieutenant Davon’s mission with the *Sword*, the English authorities waited in vain for the expedition to return, and the conviction at length gained ground that the bold sailors had perished; but whether the *Sword* had been lost by striking against a rock or had been destroyed by Ker Karraje’s pirates, could not, of course, be ascertained.

The object of the expedition, based upon the indications of the document found in the keg that was thrown up on the shore at St. George, was to carry off Thomas Roch ere his engines were completed. The French inventor having been recovered — without forgetting Engineer Simon Hart — he was to be handed over to the care of the Bermudan authorities. That done, there would be nothing to fear from his fulgurator when the island was attacked.

When, however, the *Sword* had been given up for lost, another expedition of a different kind, was decided upon.

The time that had elapsed — nearly eight weeks — from the date of the document found in the keg, had to be taken into consideration. It was thought that during the interval, Ker Karraje might have gained possession of Roch’s secrets.

An *entente* concluded between the maritime powers, resulted in the sending of five warships to Bermudan waters. As there was a vast cavern inside Back Cup mountain, it was decided to attempt to bring the latter down like the walls of a bastion, by bombarding it with powerful modern artillery.

The squadron assembled at the entrance to the Chesapeake, in Virginia, and sailed for the archipelago, which was sighted on the evening of November 17.

The next morning the vessel selected for the first attack, steamed forward. It was about four and a half miles from the island, when three engines, after passing the vessel, swerved round and exploded about sixty yards from her. She sank immediately.

The effect of the explosion, which was superior to any previously obtained by new explosives, was instantaneous. Even at the distance they were from the spot where it occurred, the four remaining ships felt the shock severely.

Two things were to be deduced from this sudden catastrophe:

1. — The pirate Ker Karraje was in possession of Roch’s fulgurator.

2. — The new engine possessed the destructive power attributed to it by its inventor.

After the disappearance of the unfortunate cruiser, the other vessels lowered boats to pick up a few survivors who were clinging to the floating wreckage.

Then it was that the signals were exchanged and the warships started towards the island.

The swiftest of them, the *Tonnant*, a French cruiser, forged ahead while the others forced their draught in an effort to catch up with her.

The *Tonnant*, at the risk of being blown to pieces in turn, penetrated the danger zone half a mile, and then ran up her flag while manoeuvring to bring her heavy guns into action.

From the bridge the officers could see Ker Karraje’s band scattered on the rocks of the island.

The occasion was an excellent one for getting a shot at them before the bombardment of their retreat was begun, and fire was opened with the result that the pirates made a rush to get into the cavern.

A few minutes later there was a shock terrific enough to shake the sky down.

Where the mountain had been, naught but a heap of smoking, crumbling rocks was to be seen. Back Cup had become a group of jagged reefs against which the sea, that had been thrown back like a gigantic tidal wave, was beating and frothing.

What was the cause of the explosion?

Had it been voluntarily caused by the pirates when they realized that escape was impossible?

The *Tonnant* had not been seriously damaged by the flying rocks. Her boats were lowered and made towards all that was left of Back Cup.

The landing parties explored the ruins, and found a few horribly mangled corpses. Not a vestige of the cavern was to be seen.

One body, and one only, was found intact. It was lying on the northeast side of the reefs. In one hand, tightly clasped, was a note-book, the last line of which was incomplete.

A close examination showed that the man was still breathing. He was conveyed on board the *Tonnant*, where it was learned from the note-book that he was Simon Hart.

For some time his life was despaired of, but he was eventually brought round, and from the answers made to the questions addressed to him the following conclusion was reached:

Moved to his very soul at the sight of the tricolor flag, being at last conscious of the crime of *lèse-patrie* he was about to commit, Thomas Roch rushed through the passage to the magazine where a considerable quantity of his explosive was stored. Then, before he could be prevented, brought about the terrible explosion which destroyed the island of Back Cup.

And now Ker Karraje and his pirates have disappeared — and with them Thomas Roch and the secret of his invention.

THE END.

CLOVIS DARDENTOR

Anonymous translation, 1897

This 1896 novel is notable for its burlesque tone and lively dialogues. *Clovis Dardentor* tells the story of two cousins, Jean Taconnat and Marcel Lornans, travelling from Cette, France to Oran, Algeria, with the purpose of enlisting in the 5th regiment of the Chausseurs D’Afrique.

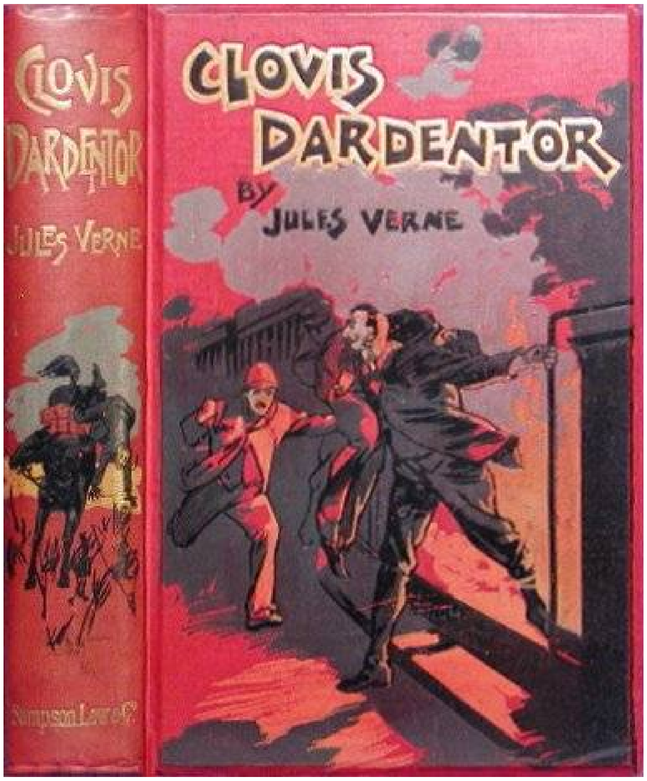
CLOVIS DARDENTOR
JULES VERNE
Sampson Low & Co.
CLOVIS DARDENTOR
BY JULES VERNE

An early English edition

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CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH THE PRINCIPAL PERSONAGE OF THIS STORY IS NOT INTRODUCED TO THE READER.

WHEN they had both left the train at the Cette railway- station — the train from Paris to the Mediterranean — Marcel Lornans, addressing Jean Taconnat, said to him: “What are you going to do until the boat starts?”

“Nothing,” replied Jean Taconnat. “Yet, according to the Traveller’s Guide, Cette is an interesting town, although not of great antiquity, since being of later creation than the port, which is the terminus of the Languedoc Canal built by Louis XIV...”

“Probably the most useful thing Louis XIV. did during the whole of his reign!” exclaimed Jean Taconnat.

“Doubtless the *Grand Roi* foresaw that we should embark here on the 27th April, 1895.”

“Do be serious, Jean, and dotft forget that ‘the South ‘ may hear us! It seems to me that we might as well see Cette, since we are at Cette; the basins, the canals, the marine docks, the seven miles of wharves, the promenade bedewed by the limpid waters of an aqueduct. . .

“Have you done with spouting Joanne’s Guide-book, Marcel?”

“A town,” continued Marcel Lornans, “which might have been a Venice...”

“And is satisfied to be a miniature Marseilles!”

“As you say, my dear Jean, the rival of the magnificent Provençal city, next to it the first free port of the Mediterranean, which exports wine, salt, brandy, oil, chemicals...”

“And imports,” cried the other, turning away his head, “bores such as you.”

“Also raw hides, wool from La Plata, flour, fruit, codfish, horn, metals...”

“Enough... enough!” protested the young man, who wanted to escape from his friend’s torrent of information.

“Two hundred and seventy-three thousand tons import, and two hundred and thirty-five thousand export,” continued the pitiless Marcel Lornans, “exclusive of the anchovy and sardine salting-works, which annually turn out from twelve to fourteen thousand tons, or its cooperage, which employs two thousand workmen and manufactures two hundred thousand casks. . .

“I wish you were shut up in them two thousand times over,” cried Jean Taconnat. “In heaven’s name, what has all this industrial and commercial superiority in it to interest two young fellows on their way to Oran to join the 5th Chasseurs d’Afrique?”

Everything is interesting to travellers, even what isn’t,” said Marcel Lornans gravely.

“And is there enough cotton in Cette to stop my ears?”

“Let us ask as we go along.”

“The *Argèlès* starts in two hours,” responded Jean Taconnat, “and in my opinion it is best to go on board immediately.”

Perhaps he was right. In two hours what chance was there of seeing that ever-growing city — at least with any profit? They would have had to go to the Than pond, to climb the chalk cliff between the pond and the sea, called the Pillar of Saint Clair, on whose side the town is built like an amphitheatre, and which will be re-clothed with fir plantations in the near future. Does not this marine capital of the South-West deserve a few days' halt from the tourist? It communicates with the ocean by the *Canal du Midi,* with the interior by the *Canal de Beaucaire,* and is united to the heart of France by two lines of railway, those of Bordeaux and the Centre.

Marcel Lornans, however, did not insist, but submissively followed Jean Taconnat, who was preceded by a porter pushing a luggage-truck.

They reached the old dock after a short walk. The railway passengers for the same destination as the young men were already assembled. A number of the idlers always attracted by an outward-bound vessel, lounged about the quay, and it would be no exaggeration to set the number down at a hundredth part of the population of thirty-two thousand inhabitants.

Cette has a regular service of steamers to Algiers, Oran, Marseilles, Nice, Genoa and Barcelona. Travellers, it seems to us, do better by giving prefêrence to a passage which is favoured by the shelter of the coast of Spain and the Balearic Islands in the west of the Mediterranean. About fifty on that day were going on board the *Argèlès,* a vessel of eight or nine hundred tons, which offered .them every advantage, under the command of Captain Bugarach.

The *Argèlès,* getting up steam, its funnels discharging volumes of black smoke, was made fast to the inside of the old basin, along the Frontignan jetty, which bounded it on the east. To the north lay the new dock in the form of a triangle, to which the sea canal extends. On the opposite side is the circular battery for the defence of the port and the Mole of Saint-Louis. Between this mole and the head of the Frontignan jetty, a channel of easy access gives admittance to the old dock.

It was by the jetty that the passengers went on board the *Argèlès,* while the captain in person was superintending the stowing of the packages under the deck tarpaulin. The encumbered hold could offer no more space, with its cargo of coal, horns, oil, salt, provisions, and those diluted wines which form a considerable part of the export trade of Cette.

Some old sailors — with faces tanned by the winds, eyes shining under bushy eyebrows, ears with thick red rims, and characteristically rolling gait — chatted on the wharf through the smoke of their pipes. What they said could only be agreeable to those passengers to whom a crossing of thirty to thirty-six hours was a matter of equable contemplation.

“Fine weather,” said one.

“A nor’-easter that’s going to last, to all appearance,” added another.

“It will be fine and fresh about the Balearics,” concluded a third, as he shook out the ashes of his extinguished pipe.

“With a head wind the *Argèlès* will do her eleven knots an hour,” said the master pilot, who was about to go on board. “Besides, with Captain Bugarach on the bridge there is nothing to fear. He carries the favourable wind in his cap, and needs only to uncover to have as much as he wants!”

Very reassuring these old salts; but do we not all know the nautical proverb: “He who wants to lie, has only to talk of the weather “?

Ifthe two young men paid but scant attention to these forecasts, if indeed they troubled themselves not in the least either about the state of the sea or the chances of the voyage, the majority of the passengers did not display equal indifference or philosophy. They felt uneasy in head and stomach, even before they stepped on board.

Among that majority, Jean Taconnat directed the attention of Marcel Lornans to a family party consisting of father, mother and son. The father was about fifty-five, with the face of a magistrate, although he was neither a judge nor a procureur, with mutton-chop, pepper and salt whiskers, a narrow forehead, a clumsy figure five feet two inches high, thanks to his high-heeled shoes — in a word, one of those fat little men commonly described as "tobacco-jars." Dressed in a checked suit of thick material, a cap with side-pieces on his rather grey head, he held in one hand an umbrella in a shiny cover, in the other a striped travelling rug in a double leather strap.

The mother was a couple of inches taller than her husband. She was a bony woman, withered and thin as a lath, with a yellow face, a haughty air, doubtless on account of her height; she wore her hair in bands of a black that is suspicious at fifty, and the whole of her important person was covered by a circular cloak of brown cloth trimmed with miniver. A bag with a steel clasp hung from her right wrist and a muff of imitation sable from her left wrist.

The son was an ordinary youth of twenty-one, with an insignificant face, a long neck, frequently an indication of inborn stupidity, a fair moustache beginning to sprout, eyes without expression, and the eye-glass of the shortsighted, a slouching body, a helpless ruminating air, not knowing what to do with his arms and legs — although he had received lessons in grace and deportment — in a word, a lout.

Such was this family of vulgar townsfolk. They lived on an income of some four or five hundred pounds a year derived from a double inheritance, and they had never done anything to-’increase it, or to lessen it either. They came from Perpignan, where they lived in an old house on *La Popinière*, beside the River Têt. When they were announced in the salons of the Prefecture or the General Treasury, it was as Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle and Monsieur Agathocle Désirandelle.

On arrival at the gangway that gave access to the *Argèlès*, the family stopped. Should they go on board immediately, or walk up and down the quay until the moment of departure? — truly, a very important question.

“We have come too soon, Monsieur Désirandelle,” said the lady fuming, “as you never fail to do.”

“Just as you never fail to grumble, Madame Désirandelle,” replied the gentleman.

This couple always addressed each other as “Monsieur” and “Madame,” both in public and in privâte; this they imagined to be excessive good form.

“Let us go and settle ourselves on board,” Monsieur Désirandelle began again.

“Two hours beforehand,” cried Madame Désirandelle, “when we have thirty to spend on that boat, which is already going like a see-saw! . .

In fact, although the sea was calm, the *Argèlès* was experiencing a slight roll on account of the swell, from which the old dock is not entirely protected by the breakwater, five hundred yards long.

“If we are afraid of being sea-sick in port,” observed M. Désirandelle, “it would have been better not to undertake this voyage.”

“Do you imagine that I would ever have consented to do so, Monsieur Désirandelle, if it were not for Agathocle?”

“Very well, since it is decided...” rejoined the gentleman.

“That is no reason,” retorted the lady, “for going on board before the time.”

“But,” said Monsieur, “we shall have only enough time to see to our luggage, take possession of our cabin, and choose our place in the dining-room.”

“Don’t you see,” said Madame sharply, “that M. Dar- dentor has not yet arrived?”

She stood on tiptoe so as to enlarge her range of vision, and looked about the pier. But the individual designated by the imposing name of Dardentor did not appear.

“Ah!” cried M. Désirandelle, “you don’t know! That is just like Dardentor. We shall not see him until the last moment! He always runs the risk of being left behind.”

“Bless me!” exclaimed Madame’Désirandelle, “if such a thing were to happen!”

“It would not be the first time!”

“But why did he leave the hotel before us?”

“He wanted to call on Pigorin, a former cooper, and friend-of his, and he promised to join us on the boat As soon as he arrives, he will go on board. I am sure he will not wait to catch cold on the quay!”

“But he has not arrived!”

“He won’t be long,” concluded Monsieur Désirandelle, as he walked with great deliberation towards the gangway.

“What do you think about it, Agathocle?” asked Madame Désirandelle, addressing her son.

Agathocle thought nothing about it, for this reason, that he never thought. Why should the simpleton trouble himself about all this maritime and commercial activity, the transport of merchandise, the embarking of passengers, the tumult on board which precedes the departure of a steamer? To go on a voyage, to explore a new country, did not excite in him the joyous curiosity, the instinctive excitement so natural to young men of his age. Indifferent to all, alien to all, apathetic, without imagination or mind, he only asked to be let alone. His father had said to him: “We are going to Oran,” and he had answered: “Ah! “His mother had said to him: “M. Dardentor has promised to accompany us,” and he had answered: “Ah!” They both had said to him: “We shall stay for some weeks with Madame Elissane and her daughter, whom you sawduring their last visit to Perpignan,” and he had answered: “Ah! “That interjection serves ordinarily to express either joy, sorrow, admiration, commiseration, or impatience. Now, in Agathocle’s mouth it would have been difficult to say what it indicated, if it were not stupidity almost amounting to nonentity.

But at the moment of his mother’s question as to what he thought of the expediency of going on board or of remaining on the quay, seeing Monsieur Désirandelle step on to the gangway, he had followed his father, and Madame Désirandelle resigned herself to embark with them.

The two young men were already seated in the stern of the steamer. All this fuss amused them. They exchanged remarks upon their fellow-travellers as each came on board, noting the various types. The time for departure was approaching. The steam whistle rent the air. The smoke, increasing in volume, swirled about the neck of the great funnel, near the mainmast that had been enveloped in its yellow cover.

The *Argèlès*’ passengers were for the most part French people going to Algeria — soldiers rejoining their regiments or battalions, some Arabs, some Moors also, bound for Oran. These latter, as they came on board, made for the bow, reserved for the second class. The first-class passengers, for whom the poop was exclusively reserved, were collected aft; the drawing-room and dining-saloon, which were down below, and lighted by a handsome skylight, were also appropriatèd to them. The side cabins were lighted by port-holes, thickly glazed. Evidently the *Argèlès* offered none of the comfort or the luxury of the boats of the Compagnie Transatlantique or the Messageries Maritimes. The steamers that leave Marseilles for Algeria are of heavier tonnage, greater speed and more elaborate accommodation; but when the crossing is so short, what good is it to be so hard to please? And in truth this service between Cette and Oran, worked on lower prices, did not want for passengers or merchandise. That day, though the passengers before the mast numbered about sixty, those in the stern did not apparently exceed twenty or thirty. One of the sailors had just struck half-past two on board; in half an hour the *Argèlès* would let go her cables, and there are few loiterers when the start of a steamer is in question.

So soon as they came on board the Désirandelle family hurried towards the swing doors that gave access to the saloon.

“How this boat tosses already! “Agathocle’s mother could not help saying.

His father took good care not to answer. He occupied himself solely with the choice of a three-berthed cabin, and three places at the saloon table near the pantry. The dishes come in that way, so one can choose the best bits and not be put off with other people’s leavings.

The cabin which obtained his preference was numbered “19” one of those nearest the centre, where the pitching was least felt. As for the rocking of the swell, there was no escaping that. In the bows, as in the stern, it was equally felt and equally disagreeable.

The cabin secured, and the small baggage deposited, Monsieur Désirandelle, leaving Madame Désirandelle to stow away her packages, returned to the dining saloon with Agathocle. The pantry being on the port side, he selected the latter, and proceeded to mark the three seats he wished to secure at the end of the table.

A traveller was already seated at that end, while the stewards were occupied in laying the table for the five o’clock dinner. This traveller had already put his card between the folds of the napkin placed on the plate bearing the *Argèlès*’ monogram. It was plain that lest an intruder should dispute this good place he meant to remain seated in front of his knife and fork until the departure of the packet.

Monsieur Désirandelle cast a glance at him out of the corner of his eye, and received one equally oblique in return; succeeded as he passed in reading the names Eustache Oriental engraved on the card in the plate, marked three places opposite this personage, and then, followed by his son, left the saloon for the deck.

The hour for departure was about to strike. Twelve minutes more and the passengers belated on the Frontignan pier would hear the last whistle. Captain Bugarach was already pacing up and down the bridge, and the second officer of the *Argèlès* was superintending the preparation for starting.

Monsieur Désirandelle grew more and more fidgety, repeating impatiently,—

“But he is not coming... What is he doing?... He knows the boat starts at three precisely!... He will miss the boat!... Agathocle?”

“Well?” the younger Désirandelle replied vacantly, without seeming to know why his father was giving way to this unusual excitement.

“You don’t see Monsieur Dardentor?”

“He has not arrived?”

“No! He has not arrived... What are you thinking of?”

Agathocle was thinking of nothing.

Monsieur Désirandelle rushed about in despair, examining now the jetty, then the quay on the opposite side of the old dock, for the belated one might possibly have appeared from that side and in a few strokes a boat would bring him to the steamer. But he was nowhere to be seen.

“What will Madame Désirandelle say?” cried Monsieur Désirandelle, driven to the last extremity. “She is so careful- of her interests!... However, I must tell her! If that devil of a Dardentor is not here in five minutes, what is to be done?”

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat were amused at this fussy person’s distress. It was evident that the *Argèlès’* cables might be let go at any moment if the captain was not warned, and, supposing the captain did not grant the traditional quarter of an hour’s grace — and this he could scarcely do in the case of a steamer — M. Dardentor would certainly lose the boat.

At that moment Madame Désirandelle appeared on the poop deck, more grim than ever, more pale than usual. She would have remained in her cabin, which she was not again to quit during the voyage, had she not been driven out of it by her anxiety. Suspecting that M. Dardentor was not on board, she resolved, in spite of her sufferings, to approach Captain Bugarach with a petition on behalf of the belated passenger.

“Well?” said she to her husband.

“He has not arrived!”

“We cannot go without Monsieur Dardenlor.”

“Yet...”

“But go, then, and speak to the captain, Monsieur Désirandelle!... You-can see I have not the strength to get up to him!”

Captain Bugarach, with an eye to everything, flinging an order to the bow, shouting an order to the stern, appeared to be somewhat inaccessible.

It was scarcely the m’oment to interrupt him, and yet under his wife’s imperative injunction, after having with difficulty hoisted himself up the little iron ladder, Monsieur Désirandelle laid hold of the uprights of the bridge under a canvas awning.

“Captain?” he said.

“What do you want with me?” replied “the Master under God “shortly, in a voice that rolled from between his teeth like thunder from the clouds.

“You intend to start?”

“At three o’clock... exactly... and it only wants a minute.”‘

“But one of our travelling companions is late.”

“So much the worse for him.”

“But could you not wait?”

“Not a second.”

“But it is Monsieur Dardentor.”

At the mention of this name Monsieur Désirandelle believed Captain Bugarach would first take off his hat, and then bow.

“Who’s he?... Dardentor?... Don’t know him!”

“Monsieur Clovis Dardentor... of Perpignan.”“Very well, if M. Clovis Dardentor of Perpignan is not on board in forty seconds from now, the *Argèlès* will go without M. Clovis Dardentor... Let go there!”

Monsieur Désirandelle tumbled rather then stepped down the ladder, and picked himself up on the deck.

“Are they starting?” cried Madame Désirandelle with anger suffusing her already blanched cheeks.

“The captain is a boor! He would listen to nothing, and he will not wait! “ — .

“Let us go on shore instantly.”

“Madame Désirandelle, that is impossible! Our luggage is at the bottom of the hold.”

“Let us go on shore, I say!”

“Our fares are paid.”

At the thought of losing the price of a triple passage from Cette to Oran Madame became livid again.

“The good lady lowers her flag!” said Jean Taconnat, laughing.

“Then she is going to surrender!” added Marcel Lornans.

She did surrender, in fact, but not wi’.hout pouring out idle recriminations.

“Oh, that Dardentor . ! he is incorrigible!... Never where he ought to be!... Instead of coming straight to the boat, why has he gone to this Pigorin?...And. . .out there... without him... at Oran... what shall we do? . .

“We shall wait for him at Madame Elissane’s,” replied Monsieur Désirandelle. “He will join us by the next vessel, if he even has to go to

Marseilles.”

“That Dardentor... that Dardentor!” repeated the lady, whose pallor increased at the first oscillations of the *Argèlès*. “Ah! if it were not on account of our son... the happiness and future of Agathocle.” Was that young man himself in the least anxious about his own future and his own happiness? There was no reason to think he was, judging from his indifference to the bodily and mental affliction of his mother and father.

Madame Désirandelle had only the strength to breathe these words: .

“My cabin... my cabin!”

The gangway had just been withdrawn by the men on duty. Her head clear of the parapet, the steamer turned a little to get into the channel. The screw was moving slowly, causing a white eddy on the surface of the dock.

The whistle was giving forth its piercing notes in order to clear the way out in case some vessel might be entering from the other side.

Once more Monsieur Désirandelle ran his eyes over the people who were assisting at the departure of the boat, then glanced at the extremity of the Perpignan pier by which the missing man might have come... With a boat he would have still had time to reach the *Argèlès.*

“My cabin... my cabin!” murmured Madame Désirandelle in an exhausted tone.

Monsieur Désirandelle, very much vexed at the disappointment, very much worried by the noise, would willingly have sent both Monsieur Dardentor and Madame Désirandelle to the devil. But the most pressing duty was to restore the latter to the cabin she never ought to have left. He tried to raise her from the bench on which she was lying in a heap. That done, he seized her round the waist and with the assistance of a stewardess he got her down the stair. After having dragged her through the saloon to her cabin, they undressed and put her into her berth, covering her up in her bed-clothes, in order to restore the vital warmth which was almost extinct.

That laborious operation completed, Monsieur Désirandelle went on deck again, and his angry eyes again turned to the wharves of the old dock.

The delinquent was not” there, and had he been there, what could he have done except strike his breast and say, “Mea culpa!”

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE PRINCIPAL PERSONAGE OF THIS STORY IS INTRODUCED TO THE READER.

“So we arc off,” said Marcel Lornans, “off to. . .”

“The unknown,” replied Jean Taconnat, “the unknown which must be searched to find the new, as Beaudelaire has said.”

“The unknown, Jean? Do you hope to meet it in a mere crossing from France to Africa, a voyage from Cette to Oran?”

“That it is only a matter of thirty or forty hours’ sailing, Marcel, a mere journey with Oran for its first and perhaps its only stage, I do not dispute. But when one starts, does one always know where one is going?”

“Certainly, when a steamer takes you whither you are bound, barring accidents at sea...”

“Eh, who talks of that, Marcel?” replied Jean in a scornful tone. “Accidents at sea, a collision, a shipwreck, a boiler explosion, a Robinson Crusoe life for twenty years on a desert island, a fine thing! No, the unknown, which I seldom think about, however, is the *x* of existence, that secret of destiny that in olden times men inscribed on the skin of the she-goat Amalthea, that which is written in the great book on high, and which the best spectacles cannot enable us to read... it is...”

“Just stem that torrent of metaphor, will you, Jean?” cried Marcel, “or you will make me sea-sick!”

"It is the mysterious scenery on which the curtain is about to rise!"

"Enough, I say, enough! Don't get yourself into a muddle on your first appearance!... Don't ride the hobby horse of fancy at such a rate..."

"Oh!... There! It seems to me you are metaphoriz- ing in your turn!..."

"You are right, Jean. Let us talk rationally, and look at things as they are. What we want to do is quite commonplace. We have taken our passage at Cette for Oran with forty pounds each in our pockets, and we are going to enlist in the 5th Chasseurs d'Afrique. All this is very sensible and simple, and the unknown with its fantastic perspective has no place in it."

"Who knows I "answered Jean Taconnat, tracing a note of interrogation with his forefinger in the air.

This conversation, which marks certain distinctive traits of character in the two young men, took place in the stern of the boat.

About twenty passengers occupied the side benches and folding chairs which were sheltered by an awning from the rays of the sun.

Among these passengers were M. Désirandelle and his son. The former paced the deck excitedly with his hands now behind his back, again raised up to heaven. Anon he would lean over the side and contemplate the wake of the *Argèlès*, as if Monsieur Dardentor, transformed into a porpoise, might possibly appear amid the churning white foam.

Agathocle continued to display the most absolute indifference to the misadventure which caused his parents so much surprise and worry.

The other travellers, some indifferent to the rolling, which, however, was slight, walked about, chatting, smoking, and handing the ship's spy-glass from one to another, in order to watch the fading coast marked on the west by the superb crests of the Pyrenees. Others, less undisturbed by the oscillations of the *Argèlès*, were seated in the cane chairs in the corner they had chosen for the whole voyage. Some ladies wrapped in shawls, resigned to inevitable discomfort, and wearing a thoughtful expression of countenance, had taken their places nearer the centre, where the pitching and settling were less felt — family groups of mothers with their children, very sympathetic, certainly, but who regretted not being older by thirty-six hours.

Around the female passengers revolved the stewardesses, around the male passengers the cabin boys, watching for a gesture, a sign, to run and offer their services... both indispensable and profitable.

Of these various travellers how many would appear at the dining table two hours hence? That was the question the doctor of the *Argèlès* invariably asked himself, and he was seldom mistaken in estimating those who failed to appear at that first meal at fifty or sixty per cent.

This doctor was a little, plump, sprightly, loquacious man, imperturbably good-humoured, surprisingly active in spite of his fifty years, who ate and drank heartily, and possessed a collection of prescriptions against sea-sickness in whose efficacy he had no belief whatever. But he was so very consoling and persuasive in his attentions to his temporary patients, that the unfortunate victims of Neptune smiled at him even in the pangs of the malady.

“It will be nothing,” he repeated. “Only be careful to exhale when you feel yourself going up and inhale when you feel yourself going down... When you step on land it will be all over... It means health in the future!... It will save you from many illnesses by-and-by!... A sea voyage is as good as a season at Vichy or Urriage!”

The two young men had immediately remarked this bright, fussy little man — he was called Doctor Bruno — and Marcel had said to Jean Taconnat: “Here is a facetious doctor; he does not deserve the name of death-dealer.”

“No,” replied Jean, “simply for the reason that he treats a disease that is not deadly.”

Monsieur Eustache Oriental had not reappeared on deck Could it be that he was experiencing disturbance? No! The bearer of this poetic name was not ill. He had never been sea-sick, he never would be. He was still to be seen at the end of the table, seated in the place he had chosen, and which he would not leave before the dessert. How then could his right of first occupant be disputed?

Dr. Bruno’s preséhee was sufficient to give animation to the scene. To make acquaintance with all this crowd of travellers was at once his delight and his duty. Eager to learn where they came from, where they were going to, as curious as a daughter of Eve, as chatty as a pair of magpies and blackbirds, a perfect ferret in a hole, he passed from one to another, congratulating each on having chosen the *ArgHts*, the best boat of all the Algerian lines, the best managed, the most comfortable, a steamer commanded by Captain Bugarach, and which possessed — he did not say it, but it was easy to guess — a doctor such as Dr. Bruno... etc. etc. Then addressing the ladies; he reassured them about the chances of the passage... The *Argèlès* did not know what a storm was... She shot across the Mediterranean without even wetting her head... etc. etc... Then the doctor dispensed sweets to the children... They must not be shy about taking some, the cherubs!... There was plenty more in the hold, etc. etc.

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat smiled throughout this performance. They knew the Dr. Bruno type; he is not rare among the staff of ocean liners... A regular nautical and colonial gazette.

“Well, gentlemen,” he said, after seating himself beside them in the stern, “it is necessary for the ship’s doctor to make friends with the passengers... You will allow me, I think? . .

“Very willingly, doctor!” Jean Taconnat replied. “Since we have placed our lives in your hands it is right that we should shake them...”

They shook hands warmly.

“If I am not very much mistaken,” the doctor began again, “I have the pleasure of talking to Parisians?”

“Just so,” replied Marcel, “Parisians... from Paris. . .

“From Paris... good,” cried the doctor, “... from Paris itself... and not the outskirts... from the centre, perhaps?”

“From the neighbourhood of the Bank,” said Jean, “and if you would like me to be still more precise, Rue Montmartre No. 133, the left-hand door on the fourth floor.”

“Ah, gentlemen,” the doctor answered, “perhaps my questions are inquisitive, but that is part of my calling... A doctor must know all, even what is no business of his... You will excuse me, therefore...”

“You are quite excused,” Marcel Lornans replied.

Then Dr. Bruno began to talk in earnest, his tongue going like a mill’s clapper, and with such gestures, and such expressions! recounting all he had learnt from this one and that one, laughing at the Désirandelles, at that Monsieur Dardentor who had given them the slip, praising beforehand the dinner that would be excellent, assuring them that the *Argèlès* would be in sight of the Balearic Isles to-morrow, where there would be a delay of some hours, a delightful delay for the tourists; in short, giving full vent to his constitutional garrulity.

“Had you time, gentlemen, to see Cette before coming on board?” he asked, rising.

“No, doctor,” replied Lornans.

“What a pity!... The town is well worth the trouble! And have you already visited Oran?”

“Not even in dream!” answered Taconnat.

One of the boys came at that moment to inform Dr. Bruno he was wanted in the captain’s cabin. The doctor left the two friends, not without overwhelming them with fresh civilities and promising himself to continue the conversation which still left him so many things to learn.

What he had not learnt relating to the past and present of these two young men may be epitomized in a few brief lines.

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat were first cousins; their mothers were sisters, widows, and Parisians by birth. From an early age they had been brought up in very moderate circumstances. After their education at the same school, Jean Taconnat followed the course of higher commercial studies, and Marcel that of law. They belonged to the small shopkeeping class of Paris. And modest was their ambition. Very united, as if they had been brothers in a common home, they had the deepest and most immutable affection for each other, although there was a great dissimilarity of character between them.

Marcel Lornans, reflective, disciplined, and self-controlled, had begun early to contemplate life on it’s serious side.

Jean Taconnat, on the contrary, a boyish fellow, always full of fun, perhaps a little fonder of play than work, was the life and. soul of the house. If he did sometimes incur rebuke for his tempestuous liveliness, he knew so well how to make amends! Besides, he, as well as his cousin, displayed qualities that amply redeemed their faults. Both had good hearts, open, frank and honest. Then both adored their mothers, their only relations, and Mesdames Lornans and Taconnat may be forgiven if they loved them to excess, since their devotion had met with a full return.

When they were twenty years of age, the army required their services for one year only, as each was the only son of a widow. This time they spent in a light infantry regiment of chasseurs in the Paris garrison. There, again by good luck, they were not separated either in the squadron or in quarters. Life in barracks was not otherwise disagreeable to them. They did their work with zeal and good-humour. They were excellent “subjects,” remarked their chiefs, liked by their comrades, and perhaps a military life would not have come amiss to them if their thoughts had been directed from childhood to that end.

In short, though during their leave they had received some reprimands; — you are not thought much of in the company, it appears, if you never get into trouble — still they left the regiment with a good “note.”

When they returned to their mothers’ home, Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat, then aged twenty-one, realized that the time had come to get to work. With their mothers’ concurrence it was decided that both should enter a good mercantile house. There they would learn business methods, and afterwards might take a share in the business.

Mesdames Lornans and Taconnat encouraged their sons to seek their fortune on this path of life. It would mean a certain future for the two sons they loved. They delighted to think that after some years they would be settled, they would marry suitably, that from humble employés they would become partners, then principals, although still young, that their business would prosper, that their grandfather’s honourable name would be continued in the grandchildren, etc. etc.; in short, those dreams that all mothers dream, and which come from their hearts, were theirs.

They were not, however, destined to see their realization. Some months after their return from the regiment, before they had entered the establishment in which they were to begin work, a double disaster befell the two cousins.

An epidemic then raging in the central quarters of Paris carried off Madame Lornans and Madame Taconnat within a few weeks of each other.

What a blow for these young men, who were now alone in the world! They were almost unable to realize the disaster.

It was necessary, however, to think of the future. They each inherited a hundred thousand francs (about four thousand pounds), that is to say, with the diminution of the interest of money, something like one hundred and twenty or one hundred and forty pounds (three thousand or three thousand five hundred francs) a year. This modest revenue would hardly allow them to remain idle. Nor would they have wished to do so. But ought they to venture their little fortune in business these hard times, to risk it in the chances of trade or commerce? In a word, should they follow out the plans made for them by their mothers? Madame Lornans and Madame Taconnat were no longer there to encourage them.

There was an’old friend of the family, a retired officer of the Chasseurs d’Afrique, who then intervened and whose advice they followed. Commandant Beauregard told them plainly that he thought they ought not to risk their inheritance, but to invest it in good French railway bonds, and enlist, since they had no unpleasant recollections of their time in the regiment... They would soon get steps. Examinations would enable them to enter the school at Saumur. They would leave it as sub-lieutenants. An interesting and noble career was open to them... An officer with three thousand francs a year, not counting his pay, was, if Commandant Beauregard was to be believed, in the most enviable position in the world... Then there was promotion, the cross, glory!... In short, everything an old African soldier could urge was urged.

Were Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat quite convinced that the military profession is of a nature to satisfy every aspiration of heart and mind?... Would they answer as decidedly on this subject as Commandant Beauregard? When they talked it over together, did they persuade themselves that this was the only path to follow, and that marching along the road of honour they would meet happiness on the way?

“We can always try, Marcel,” Jean Taconnat said. “Perhaps after all our good old friend is right!... He offers us introductions to the colonel of the

5th Chasseurs at Oran... Let us start for Oran... We shall have plenty of time to reflect on the journey... and once on Algerian ground we can sign or not sign.”

“That will have cost us a passage... and I might add, a useless outlay,” observed the wise Marcel.

“Right, O Wisdom itself personified!” replied Jean. “But at the price of a few hundred francs we shall have trodden the soil of another France! That fine phrase alone is worth the expense, my old Marcel!... Besides, who knows?”

“What do those words mean, Jean?”

“What they generally mean, and nothing more.” In short, Marcel Lornans gave in without much difficulty. It was arranged that the cousins should start for Oran armed with recommendations from the old soldier to his old friend the colonel of the 5th Chasseurs. Once at Oran with full knowledge to hand they would decide for themselves, and Commandant Beauregard had no doubt but that their decision would coincide with his opinion.

And, after all, if at the time of enlisting their resolution wavered, they were free to return to Paris, where they might choose another career. S9, since in that case their journey would have been useless, Jean Taconnat thought it ought to be “circular.” What did he mean by this word, whose signification Marcel did not at first grasp.”

“I mean,” he replied, “it would be well to avail ourselves of this opportunity of seeing the country.”

“How?”

“By going by one route and returning by another. That will not cost very much more, and it will be infinitely more agreeable. For example, we shall embark at Cette for Oran, then we shall go to Algiers and take the boat for Marseilles.”

“That is an idea.”

“An excellent idea, Marcel, and it simply means that Thaïes, Pittacos, Bias, Cleobulos, Periander, Chilo and Solon are talking by my mouth!”

Marcel Lornans did not allow himself to discuss a resolution so indubitably dictated by the Seven Sages of Greece, and that is why, on the 27th of April, the two cousins found themselves on board the *Argèlès.*

Marcel Lornans was twenty-two and Jean Taconnat a few months younger. The former, of above medium height, was a little taller than the latter, but with an elegant figure, a kind face, the eyes slightly veiled, with an extremely sweet expression, and a fair beard, that he was quite ready to sacrifice if circumstances required it.

Though Jean Taconnat did not possess the external attractions of his cousin, he must not be thought unattractive in his appearance. He was dark, well built, had a curling moustache, a bright countenance, eyes of singular vivacity, a graceful carriage and the air of a thorough good fellow!

The reader knows the young men now physically and morally. Behold them started on a journey that promises nothing extraordinary. They have no position save that of first class passengers on the boat bound for Oran. Will they change it on arrival for that of soldiers belonging to the 5th Chasseurs d’Afrique?

“Who” knows?” as Jean Taconnat, said, like a man convinced that chance plays a preponderant part in human destiny.

The *Argèlès*, under way about twenty-five minutes, was not yet going at full speed. The breakwater lay a mile behind, and she was about to take the direction of south-west.

At that moment Dr. Bruno seized the telescope and turned it towards the port, bringing it to bear on a moving object crowned by wreaths of black smoke and white steam.

To gaze upon this object for some seconds, to utter an exclamation of surprise, run towards the ladder, slide down on the deck, rush to the bridge where Captain Bugarach was standing, and call him in a breathless and urgent tone, was for Dr. Bruno the work of half a minute.

“Look, captain, look,” he; said pointing to an object towards the west that was growing larger as it approached. The captain looked, and said: “I believe I can distinguish a steam launch.”

“And that steam launch is trying to catch us.”

“It looks like it; they are signalling with a flag in the bow.”

“Well, will you not give the order to stop?”

“I do not know if I ought... What can the launch want with us?”

“We shall know when it comes alongside.”

The captain whistled. He did not seem desirous of stopping his screw.

The doctor would not give up the game.

"I know," he cried, "it is the belated passenger, coming after the *Argèlès.*"

"That Monsieur Dardentor who missed the steamer?"

"And who has taken that steam launch in order to reach us."

The explanation seemed sufficiently plausible. It was certain that the launch, increasing her speed, was trying to overhaul the packet before she reached the open sea. It would be done too, since the missing man, whose absence the Désirandelles deplored so bitterly, would have to pay for it.

Captain Bugarach was not one to lose the fare of a first- class passenger for the trouble of waiting a few minutes. He committed himself to three or four oaths of quite meridional strength, but he sent the order to stop to the engine-room.

The *Argèlès* continued her way for the length of a cable, then her pace lessened, and she stopped. But the ocean swell caught her broadside on, and her rolling increased, to the great detriment of those passengers already suffering the terrors of sea-sickness. Yet the launch was advancing so rapidly that an individual was clearly discerned in the bow, waving his hat.

At that moment Monsieur Désirandelle ventured to go on the bridge, and there, addressing Dr. Bruno, who had not left the captain: "What are you waiting for?" he asked.

"That launch," replied the doctor.

"And what does she want?"

"To gratify us with an extra passenger... doubtless the one who was late..."

“Monsieur Dardentor?”

“Monsieur Dardentor, if that is his name.”

Monsieur Désirandelle seized the telescope which the doctor offered him, and after several fruitless attempts succeeded in framing the launch in the object-glass of that unsteady instrument.

“It is — it is really he!” he cried.

And he hurried off to inform Agathocle’s mother of the good news.

The launch was not more than three cables from the *Argèlès,* which the swell rocked in nauseous helplessness, while the overflow escaped from the valves with a noise like a deafening rattle.

The launch came alongside at the moment when Monsieur Désirandelle, looking rather pale from his visit to his wife’s cabin, reappeared on deck.

Immediately a rope ladder with Wooden rungs was run out over the netting, and fell against the side of the boat.

The passenger was then busy settling with the master of the launch, and it is presumable that he did this loyally, for he was saluted with one of those “Thanks, your Excellency,” of which the lazzaroni alone seem to have the secret.

Some seconds later the aforesaid individual, followed by his servant, who carried his valise, put his leg over the netting, jumped on to the deck, and smilingly bowed all round.

Then catching sight of Monsieur Désirandelle, who was preparing to expostulate with him: “Yes... here I am, old fellow!” he cried; giving him a heavy slap on the back.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE PRINCIPAL PERSONAGE OF THIS STORY TAKES THE LEADING POSITION.

MONSIEUR DARDENTOR — Christian name Clovis — first saw the light forty-five years before the opening of this story, at 4 Place de la Loge in the ancient Ruscino, now the chief-place of Rousillon, the present chief town of the South Pyrenees, the celebrated and patriotic Perpignan.

Clovis Dardentor’s type is not rare in that worthy provincial town. Imagine a man above middle height, square shouldered, strongly built, the muscular system ruling the nervous system, that is to say, for those who have forgotten Greek, in good condition, the head round, short-cropped pepper and salt hair, spreading brown beard, bright eyes, large mouth, magnificent teeth, a sure foot, a clever hand, well tempered morally and physically, a good fellow although naturally imperious, with a good disposition and inexhaustible loquacity, very adaptable, very ready, in short as Southern as anyone could be who is not a native of that Provence in which the whole Midi is summed up and absorbed.

Clovis Dardentor was a bachelor, and really one could not conceive such a man fettered in matrimonial bonds, or that any kind of honeymoon would ever rise above his horizon. Not that he was a misogynist, for he took pleasure in ladies’ society, but he was misoganist in the last degree.. This enemy of marriage could not conceive a man, sound in mind and body, occupied in business, having time to think of it. Marriage! He admitted it neither from love, prudence, interest, money, reason, neither under the régime of community nor under the regime of separation of property, or any other fashion in use in this lower world.

Furthermore, although a man has remained a bachelor, it does not follow that he has lived in idleness. That could not have been said of Clovis Dardentor. If he was worth two whole millions, they did not come from patrimony or inheritance. No! he had well and honestly earned them. He was interested in numerous companies, both commercial and industrial, in tanneries, stone-yards, cork- making, and the wines of Riversaltes: he had always, with great judgment, made large profits.

But it was to the coopering industry, so important in that region, that he had devoted the most of his time and his intelligence. Retiring from business at forty, his fortune made, he was of those hoarders whose whole desire is to save.

Since his retirement from affairs, he lived liberally, not disdaining journeys, above all to Paris, where he went frequently.

He was blessed with invulnerable health, and gifted with a digestion which the traditional ostrich might have envied.

His family consisted of himself alone. The long line of his forefathers was to end in his person, without a descendant or a collateral — unless it was in the twenty-sixth or twenty-seventh degree, since statisticians say all Frenchmen are related in that degree, by merely going back to the time of Francis I. But it will be agreed that collaterals need not trouble us.

However, although Clovis Dardentor was as destitute of relations as it was possible to be, he saw no inconvenience in the fact. To be brief, here he was on his way to Oran, and may he land safe and sound in the chief place of the great Algerian province!

One of the main reasons why the *Argèlès* ought to have a favourable passage was the presence on board of this magnate. Until that day, whenever he went to Algeria — a country that pleased him — he had started from Marseilles, and this was the first time he had accorded preference to the Cette line. As he had done it the honour of entrusting the transport of his person to one of its steamers, it was fitting that the voyage should give him every satisfaction; in other words, that he should be conducted in safety after a crossing as short as it was pleasant.

So soon as he put his foot on the deck he turned to his servant: “Patrick, go and secure cabin No. 13,” he said; and Patrick answered: “Monsieur knows that it was reserved by telegram, and he need have no anxiety on the subject.”

“Very well, then, take down my portmanteau, and keep the best place vacant at table for me... near the Captain...”

Clovis Dardentor then caught sight of the captain, who had just left the bridge, and he accosted him, saying: “I say, captain! You were in such a hurry, you had not patience to wait for one of your passengers! Her engine was itching, your vessel had to scratch itself with the screw.”

There Was nothing nautical about this metaphor, it must be acknowledged; but Clovis Dardentor was not a sailor. And he said things as they came to him, in phrases sometimes pompous and sometimes lamentably vulgar.

“Monsieur,” replied Captain Bugarach, “we always start at fixed times, and the rules of the company do not allow us to wait.”

“Oh, I owe you no grudge,” replied Clovis Dardentor, holding out his hand to the captain.

“Neither do I,” replied the latter, “although I have been forced to stop.”

“Very well, stop there!” cried our man of Perpignan, and he shook the captain’s hand with all the vigour of an old cooper.

“Besides,” he added, “if my launch had not succeeded in catching your boat we would have gone on to Algeria, and if I had not found the launch I would have jumped off the end of the pier and followed you swimming. That is the sort of man I am, Captain.”

Yes, such was Clovis Dardentor, and the two young men who took pleasure in listening to this queer fellow were honoured by a bow which they returned smilingly.

“He’s a joke!” murmured Jean Taconnat.

The *Argèlès* at that moment fetched a point and turned toward Cape Agde.

“Captain Bugarach, I have to put a question of the greatest importance to you.”

“What is it, then?”

“At what time is dinner?”

“At five o’clock.”

“In forty-five minutes, then... sooner, but not later!” and Monsieur Dardentor executed a pirouette as he consulted his fine repeater, which was attached by a thick gold chain to the buttonhole of his waistcoat of stout cloth with big metal buttons.

Otherwise, to use a term justified by his whole appearance, he was really “very smart “with his soft hat perched on his right ear, his travelling plaid falling from his shoulder to his belt, his full knickerbockers, his gaiters with brass buckles, and his thick-soled shooting boots.

“If I was too late for the start,” he continued, “I shall not be too late for dinner, my dear captain, and however slight the skill of your cook, you shall see me...”

Suddenly this stream of words was turned aside from its course towards another interlocutor.

Monsieur Désirandelle, who had informed Madame Désirandelle of the arrival on board of their travelling companion, had just appeared.

“Ah! here comes our good friend!” cried Clovis Dardentor. “And Madame Désirandelle?... Where is that excellent lady?... And Agathocles?...”

“Have no fear, Dardentor,” Monsieur Désirandelle replied, “we did not arrive late, and the *Argèlès* did not go without us.”

“What, reproaches, my good fellow?”

“Upon my word... you thoroughly deserve them. What uneasiness you caused us! Can’t you see us landing at Oran — at Madame Elissane’s... without you?”

“Ah, that was not my fault, Désirandelle... It was the fault of that animal, Pigorin! He kept me with his samples of old Riversaltes... I had to sip and taste... and when I reached the old dock the *Argèlès* was passing out of the channel...-Hut after all here I am, and it is no use scolding about it, or rolling your eyes like a dying salmon... You will end by increasing the pitching of the steamer... Where is your wife?”

“She is in her berth... a little...”

“Already?”

“Already,” replied Monsieur Désirandelle, whose eyelids were quivering, “and I myself...”

“My good fellow, take a friendly hint,” said Clovis Dardentor. “You must not open your mouth as you do... Hold it shut as tight as possible, or you will tempt the devil...” — ; “Oh, yes!” stammered Monsieur Désirandelle, “it is easy for you to talk. Ah! neither Madame Désirandelle nor I would have undertaken this journey had not Agathocle’s future been at stake.”

The future of the sole heir of the Désirandelles was indeed in question. Every evening Clovis Dardentor, who was an old friend of that family, went to play bezique or piquet at the house in the Rue de la Popinière. He had almost seen the child come into the world; he had seen him grow up — at least physically — for his intelligence had lagged behind his inches.

Agathocle made no more progress at school than the ordinary lazy, inapt scholar. Of inclination for one study rather than for another he showed none.

To do nothing in life appeared to him the ideal of a human being. With what he expected from his parents, he ought to have one day some ten thousand francs a year. That would be something, but no one will be astonished that Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle desired better prospects for their son. Now, they knew the Elissane family, who before settling in Algeria lived at Perpignan. Madame Elissane, the widow of a merchant, and then about fifty years of age, enjoyed a comfortable income, thanks to the fortune left her by her husband, who after having retired from business had settled in Algeria. The widow had only one daughter, aged twenty. Mademoiselle Louise Elissane was quoted as an eligible match as far as the Sud-Oranais and also in the Pyrenées Orientales, or, at least, in the house in the Rue de la Popinière. What could be more desirable than a marriage between Agathocle and Louise?

But before marrying they must know one another, and although Agathocle and Louise had met as children, they could have no recollection of each other. Then since Oran no longer came to Perpignan, Madame Elissane not liking to leave home, it was for Perpignan to go to Oran. Thus this voyage came about, though Madame Désirandelle felt all the terrors of sea-sickness from only watching the waves break on the strand, and Monsieur Désirandelle in spite of his pretensions was little better. Then they thought of their friend Dardentor. He was accustomed to travelling. He would not refuse to accompany his friends. Perhaps he was under no illusion as to the worth of this boy for whom they wanted a wife! But in his opinion, when there was a question of becoming a husband every man has his value. If Agathocle pleased the young heiress, matters would settle themselves. It is true Louise Elissane was charming... But when the Désirandelles have arrived at Oran it will be time to introduce her to the reader, and if he pleases he may enter the lists as Agathocle’s rival.

The reason is now known why this party from Perpignan took passage on board the *Arçèlès* and faced a Mediterranean voyage.

While awaiting the dinner hour, Clovis Dardentor went up on the poop, where those first-class passengers who had not yet been driven to their cabins by the rolling of the vessel were collected. Monsieur Désirandelle, whose pallor was increasing, followed him there and sank down on a bench.

Agathocle drew near.

“Well, my boy, you look better than your father!” said Monsieur Dardentor. “Are you well?”

Agathocle replied that he was;well.

“So much the better; try and keep so to the very end! Don’t arrive there with a face like papier-maché, the expression of a pumpkin in pulp.”

No!... no fear of that... the sea did not harm Agathocle.

Clovis Dardentor had not judged it expedient to go down to Madame Désirandelle’s cabin. The good lady knew he was on board, and that was sufficient. The consolations he might have offered would have produced no effect. Besides, Monsieur Dardentor belonged to that category of objectionable people, always inclined to make fun of the victims of sea-sickness. Under the pretext that they are not sea-sick themselves, they will not admit that anyone else can suffer! They ought to be hung from the yard-arm to teach them manners!

The *Argèlès* had reached Cape Agde when a bell rang in the bows. Five o’clock had just struck — the hour for dinner. Until then the rolling and pitching had not been very great. The swell, though rather short, caused only a slight motion, quite bearable to the greater number of the passengers. Thus there was reason to hope that the guests would not fail at table.

All the gentlemen, and even five or six ladies, went down by the double staircase from the poop and reached their reserved places at table.

Monsieur Eustache Oriental occupied his, and was already showing signs of great impatience. For two hours he had been there! But there was hope that, the dinner ended, this monopolist of good seats would go up on deck, and not remain a fixture during the whole voyage.

Captain Bugarach and Dr. Bruno stood at the end of the saloon. They never failed in their duty of doing the honours. Monsieur Dardentor, Messieurs Désirandelle, father and son, were the first to make for the upper end of the table. Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat, being desirous of studying these various Perpignan types, placed themselves beside Monsieur Dardentor. The other guests sat wherever they pleased — about twenty in all, some in the vicinity of Monsieur Oriental, close to the pantry by which the chief steward sent in the dishes.

Monsieur Clovis Dardentor immediately made friends with Dr. Bruno, and one may be sure, thanks to those two outrageous talkers, conversation would not languish in the vicinity of Captain Bugarach.

“Doctor,” said Monsieur Dardentor, “I am happy... very happy to shake your hand, were it filled with microbes like those of all your fraternity.”

“Have no fear, Monsieur Dardentor,” the doctor answered in the same bantering tone of good humour, “I have just washed them in boracic acid.”

“Pooh! what do I care for microbes or microzymes? “Monsieur Dardentor answered. “Never have I been ill, not even for a day, my dear Esculapius!... Never have I had a cold, not even for an hour! Never have I swallowed a draught or a pill... and you will permit me to observe that I shall not begin to take medicine in obedience to your commands! Oh, I like all doctors! They are very fine fellows, with only one fault, that ol spoiling your health by feeling your pulse and looking at your tongue!... That being said, I am delighted to seat myself beside you at table; and if this dinner is good, I shall do it honour!”

Dr. Bruno had found a greater chatterer than himself. He replied, however, without endeavouring to defend the medical profession against so well armed an adversary. Then, the soup having been served, no one thought of anything but the satisfaction of an appetite sharpened by the strong sea air.

In the beginning the oscillation of the boat caused no inconvenience to the diners, with the exception of Monsieur Désirandelle, who very soon became as white as his serviette. If this state of things remained unchanged during the whole of the meal no one would have any cause to grumble, and the various courses would follow each other uninterruptedly until dessert.

But suddenly, after the soup, the rattling of the china began. The suspended trays swung over the heads of the guests, to their great discomfiture. The rolling and pitching combined to cause general disorder among the passengers, whose seats took alarming inclinations. There was no certainty in the movements of their hands and arms. Glasses reached m,ouths with great difficulty, and more often the forks pricked cheeks and chins...

The majority could not remain. Monsieur Désirandelle was one of the first to depart with significant precipitation to breathe the fresh air above. Several others followed him in a regular stampede, notwithstanding the advice of Captain Bugarach, who repeated: “It will be nothing, gentlemen... a mere lurch of the *Argèlès* which will not last!” And Clovis Dardentor cried out: “Look at them skedaddling in Indian file!”

“They always do it,” the captain said, winking. In short, at the moment when the chief steward was sending round the entrée after the soup there were only about twenty braves at table. Amongst these, not without counting Captain Bugarach and Dr. Bruno, who were accustomed to this dining-room disturbance, were Clovis Dardentor, faithful to his post, Agathocle, whose father’s flight did not affect in the least, the two cousins, Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat, and lastly, at the other end, the imperturbable Monsieur Oriental, lying in wait for the dishes, questioning the stewards, hardly thinking about the *Argèlès’* behaviour since he had his choice of viands.

However, after that exodus of discomfited guests at the beginning of dinner, Captain Bugarach cast a significant glance at the doctor, who answered with a significant smile. This glance and smile seemed to be understood, and they were reflected as in a faithful mirror on the impenetrable face of the chief steward. Jean Taconnat nudged his cousin and said in a low tone: “That was a put-up thing!”

“Good!” said Marcel Lornans, “it is all one to me.”

“And to me too!” retorted Jean Taconnat, slipping a savoury slice of pale pink salrmn on his plate.

And in fact this is what that “put-up thing “amounted to: There -are captains — not all — but there are some it appears who, with an obvious purpose, slightly alter the course of their vessel just at the beginning of the meal — oh, a slight change of the helm, nothing more; and truly who can reproach them? Is it forbidden to steer a ship’s head to the sea for only a quarter of an hour? Is it prohibited to connive with the pitching and the rolling, so as to realize a sensible saving of table expenses? No. And if such things happen, no one has a right to complain.

The inconvenience on board the *Argèlès* did not last, but, to speak the truth, the evicted were not tempted to reinstate themselves at the general table, though the steamer had resumed a quieter and, let us say it, a most honest course.

The dinner, reduced to a chosen few, was continued under excellent conditions, and none troubled themselves about those unfortunates who were expelled from the saloon and grouped on the deck in various and lamentable attitudes.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH CLOVIS DARDENTOR SAYS THINGS TO THE POSSIBLE ADVANTAGE OF JEAN TACONNAT.

“WHAT a number of empty seats you have at your table, my dear captain!” cried Clovis Dardentor as the chief steward superintended the circulation of the dishes without departing from his usual dignity.

“Perhaps it is to be feared that these empty seats may further increase if the sea becomes worse,” observed Marcel Lornans.

“But it is not! “Captain Bugarach replied. The *Argèlès* has met with a cross current where the waves are stronger! That happens sometimes...”

“And often at the hour for breakfast or dinner,” replied Jean Taconnat as seriously as possible.

“That is so,” exclaimed Clovis Dardentor, “I have remarked it before, and if these lucky companies make a profit by it...”

‘ “Could you believe...?” cried Dr. Bruno.

“I only believe one thing,” retorted Clovis Dardentor, “and that is, that as for myself I have never lost or missed a mouthful, and if there were only one passenger left at table...”

“You would be he,” Jean Taconnat interposed.

“As you say, Monsieur Taconnat.”

That friendly person of Perpignan already called him by his name,”as if he had known him forty-eight hours.

“Still,” Marcel Lornans observed, “it is possible some of our companions may return to their places... The motion is less...”

“I repeat,” the captain continued, “it was only momentary... it was just a mistake of the steersman. . . Steward, see if among our guests...”

“Among others your poor dear father, Agathocle!” suggested Clovis Dardentor.

But young Désirandelle shook his head, knowing well that the author of his existence would not decide to come back to the saloon, and he did not budge.

The chief steward moved phlegmaticilly towards the door, not unconscious of the uselessness of his enterprise.

When they once leave the table, even though circumstances may improve, it is unusual for anyone to consent to return; and indeed the gaps were not filled up — at which the worthy captain and excellent doctor strove to appear very much concerned.

A slight movement of the helm rectified the direction of the steamer, the waves were no longer against her, and tranquillity was secured to the ten diners remaining at their post.

On the whole it is better not to be too many at table — this was what Clovis Dardentor maintained. The attendance gained by it friendliness also, and the conversation could become general!

That was what happened. .The die was held by the hero of this story, and in such a way! Dr. Bruno, great talker as he was, scarccly found time to put in a word — neither did Jean Taconnat, who was infinitely amused by listening.

Marcel Lornans contented himself with smiling, Agathocle with eating, without hearing anything, Monsieur Oriental with tasting the best bits, to the accompaniment of a bottle of Pommard, served to him by the chief steward in a proper horizontal pose.

The supremacy of the South over the North, the indisputable merits of the city of Perpignan, the rank possessed by one of its most prominent sons, Clovis Dardentor, in person, the consideration due to his honourably acquired fortune, the journeys he had already made, those he thought of undertaking, his resolution to visit Oran, of which the Désirandelles had talked perpetually, the project he had formed of seeing the whole of that splendid Algerian province! So he had started, and he did not know when he would return.

It must not be thought that this flow of words escaping from the lips of Clovis Dardentor prevented the contents of his plate from entering his mouth.

No! The output and the input were executed simultaneously with marvellous ease. This surprising individual talked and ate at the same time, not forgetting to empty his’glass in order to facilitate the double operation.

“What a human machine! “Jean Taconnat said to himself. “How it works! This Dardentor is one of the most successful Southern specimens I have met!”

Dr. Bruno did not admire him less. What a remarkable subject for dissection the said specimen would form, and what advantages physiology might gain by investigating the mysteries of such an organism! But, as the proposal to M. Dardentor to allow himself to be cut open doubtless appeared inopportune, the doctor contented himself with asking him if he was always careful of his health.

“Health... my dear doctor?... What do you mean by that word, if you please?”

“I mean what everybody means,” replied the doctor. “That is, according to the accepted definition, the constant and easy exercise of all the functions in the human economy.”

“And in accepting this definition,” interposed Marcel Lornans, “we wish to know whether, in your case, that exercise is easy.”

“And constant,” added Jean Taconnat.

“Constant, since I have never been ill,” affirmed Dardentor, striking his torso, “and easy, since it acts without my knowing it.”

“Well, my dear passenger,” asked Captain Bugarach, “have you now decided on the meaning of the word health? — perhaps we may be permitted to drink to yours?”

“If that depends on permission, I admit I am absolutely decided, and in fact it seems to me the time has come for tossing off champagne!”

In the Midi the expression “toss off champagne” is generally used, and pronounced by Clovis Dardentor it certainly had a magnificent Southern redundancy.

Roederer was then brought in, the glasses were filled, crowned with a white foam, and the conversation was not drowned — quite the contrary.

It was Dr. Bruno who took it up in these words: “Then, Monsieur Dardentor, I shall beg you to answer this other question: to have preserved that state of imperturbable health, have you abstained from all excess?”

“What do you mean by the word excess?”

“Ah!” and Marcel Lornans smiled, “the word excess, like the word health, is unknown in the Eastern Pyrénées?”

“Unknown... no, Monsieur Lornans, but accurately speaking, I don’t quite know what it signifies...”

“Monsieur Dardentor,” continued the doctor, “to com- mit excesses is to abuse, is to misuse; it is to wear out the body and the mind by being immoderate, intemperate, above all, by abandoning oneself to the pleasures of the table, a deplorable passion which quickly destroys the stomach.”

“What is the stomach?” asked Clovis Dardentor in a most serious tone.

“What is it?” cried the doctor. “By Jove! a machine which manufactures gastralgia, gastritis, gastro-enteritis, endogastritis, exogastritis!”

In running over this string of expressions which have gaster for root, he seemed quite pleased that the stomach had given birth to so many special maladies.

“Well, well! “Captain Bugarach observed, “I see, Monsieur Dardentor, that nature has built you for a centenarian!”

“Why not, dear captain?”

“Yes — why not?” repeated Marcel Lornans.

“When a machine is solidly constructed,” continued Clovis Dardentor, “well balanced, well oiled, well kept, there is no reason why it should not last for ever.”

“That is true,” remarked Jean Taconnat, “and so long as one is not short of fuel...”

“It is not the fuel that will fail! “Clovis Dardentor exclaimed, as he rattled some coins in his pockets. “And now,” he added, laughing, “have you finished catechizing me?”

“No!” rejoined the doctor, and desiring to put the traveller in a corner, he cried: “Wrong, Monsieur, wrong! There is no machine so good that it does not wear out, and no mechanism so good that it does not get out of order some day or other...”

“That depends on the mechanician!” retorted Clovis Dardentor, who filled his glass to the brim.

“But still,” cried the doctor, “you will die in the end, I suppose?”

“Why do you wish me to die, since I never consult and never will consult a doctor... Your healths, gentlemen,” and in the midst of the general hilarity he raised his glass, clinked it gaily against those of his table companions, and emptied it at a draught.

Then the conversation went on, noisy, heated, deafening, until the dessert.

The effect of this convivial tumult upon the unhappy passengers in the cabins, stretched upon their beds of misery, may readily be imagined.

Several times Monsieur Désirandelle had appeared in the doorway of the saloon. Since his dinner and that of his wife were included in the price of the passage, how unpleasant not to be able to eat his share I But scarcely was the door opened, when he was so overcome by giddiness that he could only hasten back to the deck.

He found his sole consolation in saying to himself: “Fortunately that good boy Agathocle is devouring enough for three!” and in fact the youth was wroking conscientiously to retrieve as far as possible the paternal disbursement.

However, after Clovis Dardentor’s last response the conversation was shunted on to another branch line. Could they not find some weak spot in this good liver, good drinker and good eater? That his constitution was excellent, his health invariable, his organism of the highest quality, was indisputable. But, as it had been remarked, he must in the end quit this sordid world, like so many other mortals — let us say almost all, so as to discourage no one. And when that fatal hour should strike, what would become of his fortune, since nature had given him no heir, either direct or indirect, not a single collateral of heritable degree?

Marcel Lornkns asked him how it was that he had no natural heirs.

“Why I have not married, you mean,” replied Dardentor.

“Yes. Why have you not become the husband of a wife, young, lovely, healthy, worthy of you?”

“I... marry!”

“Of course!”

“The idea has never occurred to me!”

“It ought to have occurred to you, Monsieur Dardentor,” said Captain Bugarach, “and there is still time.”

“Are you married, my dear captain?”

“NO!”

“And you, doctor?”

“No.”

“And you, gentlemen?”

“Not at all!” replied Jean Taconnat, “but at our age that is not surprising.”

“Well, if you are not married, why do you want me to have a wife?”

“But to have a family,” replied Jean. “And with a family the cares that it brings!”

“And to have children — grandchildren...”

“And with them the trouble they occasion!”

“Well, to have natural descendants who will grieve at your death.”

“Or who will rejoice!”

“Don’t you think, then, that the State will rejoice if it inherits from you?”

“The State... inherit my fortune... to squander it, like the spendthrift it is!”

“That is no answer, Monsieur Dardentor,” observed Marcel Lornans, “and it is in the destiny of man to create a family, to perpetuate himself in his children.”

“Granted, but a man may do that without marry- ing — ”

“What do you mean?” demanded the doctor. “I mean, gentlemen, that for my part I would prefer those who are already in existence.”

“Adopted children?” inquired Jean Taconnat. “Certainly! Is that not a hundred times better?... Is it not wiser?... You have a choice... You can take them sound in mind and body after they have passed the age of whooping cough, scarlatina and measles! You can “have them dark or fair, stupid or intelligent! You can give yourself girls or boys according to the sex desired... You may have one, two, three, four,: or even a dozen, according as your bump of adoptive paternity is more or less developed!... So you may manufacture a family of heirs under the most excellent conditions physical and moral, without waiting until God deigns to bless your union! You bless yourself... at your own time and according to your own taste! . .

“Bravo, Monsieur Dardentor, bravo!” cried Jean Taconnat; “here’s to the health of your adopted children,” and the glasses clinked once again.

What the guests seated at the *Argèlès’* dining table would have lost if they had not heard the expansive man from Perpignan deliver that last sentence of his tirade, it is impossible to imagine! He was magnificent!

“Yet,” Captain Bugarach thought he might add, “your method has good in it, my dear passenger, I grant. But if every one were to conform, if there were only adoptive fathers, think o£ it! there would soon be no children to adopt.”

“Not so, captain, not so!” answered Clovis Dardentor, “there will always be worthy people who want to marry... thousands and millions.”

“That is fortunate,” Dr. Bruno added, “otherwise the world would end in no time.”

The conversation was carried on with sustained ardour, without causing the least distraction to either Monsieilr Oriental, sipping his coffee at the other end of the table, or to Agathocle Désirandelle, clearing the various dessert dishes.

Then Marcel Lornans, remembering a certain clause VIII. of the Civil Code, put the question on legal grounds.

“Monsieur Dardentor,” he said, “when you wish to adopt some one, it is indispensable to fulfil certain conditions.”

“I am not unaware of that, Monsieur Lornans, and I believe I already fulfil some of them.”

“Certainly,” rejoined Marcel Lornans. “First of all you are French, of one or the other sex.”

“More especially of the male.”

“In addition,” continued Marcel, “the law exacts that the person who desires to adopt should have neither children nor legitimate descendants.”

“That is precisely my case, Dr. Jurist,” replied Clovis Dardentor, “and I add that I have no ascendants.”

“The ascendant is not prohibited.”

“All the same I have none.”

“But there is also something else that you have not, Monsieur Dardentor!”

“What is it, then?”

“The legal number of years. You must be fifty years old in order to be capable of adopting...”

“I shall be fifty in five years if God gives me life, and why should He refuse?”

“It would be a mistake,” remarked Jean Taconnat, “for He will find no better investment.”

“So I think, Monsieur Taconnat. So I shall wait for the completion of my fiftieth year to make act of adoption if the opportunity presents itself, a good bargain as we say in business.”

“On condition,” said Marcel Lornans, “that he or she on whom you cast your eyes is not more than thirty-five, for the law exacts that the adopter shall be at least fifteen years older than the adopted.”

“Eh! do you imagine, then,” cried Monsieur Dardentor, “that I think of adopting an old bachelor or an old maid? No, God forbid; and it will not be either at thirty-five or thirty years that I shall choose them, but at the beginning of their majority, since the Code stipulates that they must be twenty- one.

“That is all very well, Monsieur Dardentor,” replied Marcel Lornans. “It is unquestionable that you must fulfil these conditions... But I am very sorry for your projects of paternity by adoption. There is one thing wanting to you, undoubtedly...”

“It is not a good reputation!... Would anyone permit himself to suspect the honour of Clovis Dardentor, of Perpignan, Pyrénées-Orientales, in his public life or in his private life?”

“Oh, no one!” exclaimed Captain Bugarach.

“No one!” added Dr. Bruno.

“No... no one,” echoed Jean Taconnat.

“No one assuredly,” repeated Marcel Lornans. «‘ Besides, it was not of that I was about to speak.”

“Of what, then?” demanded Clovis Dardentor.

“Of a certain condition imposed by the Code, a condition which you have perhaps overlooked.”

“Which one, if you please?”

“That which exacts that the adopter shall have given the adopted child uninterrupted care for a period of six years during the minority of that person.”

“Does the law say -that?”

“Expressly.”

“And who was the booby that thrust that regulation into the Code.”

“It matters little who was the booby.”

“Well, Monsieur Dardentor,” asked: the doctor, persisting, “have you taken care of some minor of your acquaintance?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then,” resumed Jean Taconnat, “you have no resource but to employ your fortune in founding a charitable institution which will bear your name!”

“The law wills it so?”

“Yes, the law so wills it,” solemnly affirmed Marcel Lornans.

Clovis Dardentor did not conceal the disappointment which this legal exaction caused him. It would have been so easy to provide for the needs and the education of a minor for six years! And no one had informed him of it! It is true, how could he be sure of making a good choice, when it was a question of youngsters who offered no guarantee for the future? However, he had never thought of this. But was the condition indispensable, and might not Marcel Lornans be mistaken?

“You are quite certain that the Civil Code? . . he asked a second time.

“I am quite certain,” replied Marcel Lornans. “Consult the Code — right of adoption, article 6. It makes that an essential condition — unless...”

“Unless...” repeated Clovis Dardentor, and his face cleared up.

“Come now, come now!” he cried, “you tantalize me with your provisions.”

“Unless,” continued Marcel, “the individual to be adopted has saved the life of the adopter, either in a fight, or by rescuing him from flame or flood... conformably with the law.”

“But I have not fallen and never will fall into the water!” answered Ciovis Dardentor.

“The same may happen to you as to anyone else!” said Jean Taconnat.

“I do hope my house will not catch fire. . .

“Your house may be burned like any other, and if not your house, a theatre where you may be. This steamer even, if fire broke out on board.”

“So be it, gentlemen, fire and water. As for a fight, I should be very much astonished if I ever had need of succour. I have two good arms and two good legs which ask aid from no one!”

“Who knows?” asked Jean Taconnat.

Whatever might happen, Marcel Lornans had clearly established in this conversation the provisions of law on the right of adoption, in the Civil Code. He had said nothing of the provision in the case of the adopter being married, that his consort should consent to the adoption — Clovis Dardentor was a bachelor — nor had he said anything of the consent required from the parents of the adopted, if the latter had not attained the age of twenty-five years.

It seemed difficult on the whole for Clovis Dardentor to realize his dream, and set up a family of adopted children for himself. Of course he might still choose a child and look after it for six consecutive years, bring it up with great care, then bestow his name and all the rights of a legitimate heir upon it. But what a risk to run! Nevertheless, if he did not decide upon this, he would be reduced to the three cases prescribed by the law, rescue from combat, flood or flame. Now, was there a chance that any one of these circumstances would happen to a man such as Clovis Dardentor? He thought there was not, and most other people would have thought likewise.

The passengers at table exchanged a few more remarks, abundantly diluted with champagne. The jesting did not spare our hero, who was the first to laugh at it. If he did not desire that his fortune should fall to the nation, if he refused to make the State his sole heir, he would be forced to follow Jean Taconnat's advice, and devote all he had to some charitable endowment. After all he was free to give his heritage to the first comer. But no! he stuck to his ideas. At length this memorable meal came to a conclusion, and the guests went up again to the after- deck.

It was nearly seven o'clock, for the dinner had lasted unusually long. A fine evening announced a fine night. The awning had been put away. The passengers breathed a pure air whipped up by the breeze. The land showed in the twilight like a vague outline on the western horizon.

Clovis Dardentor and his companions, walked about together, chatting and smoking excellent cigars with which the Perpignan citizen was plentifully supplied, and which he distributed with charming liberality. Towards half-past nine they separated, after having arranged to meet on the morrow.

Clovis Dardentor, having assisted Monsieur Désirandelle to regain Madame Désirandelle's cabin, went to his own, where neither the noises nor the disturbance on board could trouble his slumber.

And then Jean Taconnat said to his cousin: “I have an idea.”

“What?”

“Supposing we could get ourselves adopted by that old fellow!”

“We!”

“You and I... or you or I.”

“But you are mad, Jean.”

“Take counsel with your pillow, Marcel, and what advice mine favours me with I shall tell you tomorrow.”

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH PATRICK CONTINUES TO THINK HIS MASTER SOMETIMES WANTING IN REFINEMENT.

AT eight o’clock next day there was no one on the poop. Yet the state of the sea was not such as to oblige the passengers to shut themselves up in their cabins. After a fine night there was promise of a fine day. If the passengers had not left their berths at daybreak, it was because they were lazy; some were enjoying their late sleep, others were awake and dreaming; the latter like the former abandoning themselves to the rocking cradlelike movement.

We are occupied here only with those privileged ones who are never sick at sea, even in bad weather, and not with the unlucky mortals who are always so, even in fine weather. In that last category might be classed the Désirandelles and numerous others who would only recover their self-possession, moral and physical, when in port.

The atmosphere was very clear and very cloudless The *Argèlès* was going at the rate of ten miles an hour, with her head to the south-west, in the direction of the Balearic Isles.

Captain Bugarach was walking up and down from one end of the deck to the other.

At that moment Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat appeared, and the captain advanced to shake hands with them, saying: “You have had a good night, gentlemen?”

“More than good, Captain,” replied Marcel Lornans, “it would be difficult to imagine a better! I do not know any hotel bedroom equal to a cabin in the *Argèlès.”*

“I am of your opinion, Monsieur Lornans,” replied the captain, “and for my part I do not understand how one can live anywhere but on board a ship.”

“Go and say that to Monsieur Désirandelle,” observed the young man, “and if he shares your taste...”

“No more of that landlubber and his like, incapable of appreciating the charms of a voyage!” cried the captain. “They are like bales at the bottom of the hold! Those passengers! They are a disgrace to the boats!... However, as they pay their passage...”

“Ah, there it is! “Marcel answered.

Jean Taconnat, usually so loquacious, so expansive, had merely shaken hands with the captain, but had taken no part in the conversation. He seemed preoccupied.

Marcel Lornans, continuing to interrogate Captain Bugarach, said: “When shall we sight Majorca?”

“Sight Majorca?... Towards one o’clock in the afternoon. It will not be long before we see the first heights of the Balearics.”

“And we shall put in at Palma?”

“Until eight o’clock in the evening; just long enough to ship the merchandise for Oran.”

“We shall have time to visit the island?”

“The island... no, but the town of Palma, which is worth seeing, they say.”

“How... they say? Have you never been to Majorca before, Captain?”

“Thirty or forty times at least.”

“Without ever having explored it?”

“The time, sir, the time! Have I had it?”

“Neither the time... nor the wish, perhaps.”

“Nor the wish in fact! I am land-sick when I am not at sea.”

Thereupon the captain left his interlocutor and went to the bridge.

Marcel Lornans turned to his cousin: “Come, Jean, you are as mute this morning as Harpo- crates.”

“It is because I am thinking, Marcel.”

“Of what?”

“Of what I told you yesterday.”

“What did you tell me?”

“That we had a splendid opportunity to get ourselves adopted by the man of Perpignan.”

“You are thinking of that still?”

“Yes... after having .dreamed of it all night.”

“Is this serious?”

“Very serious... He seeks children to adopt!”

“Let him take us... He will not find better!”

“As modest as you are imaginative, Jean!”

“Look, Marcel, to be a soldier is very fine! To enlist in the 5th Chasseurs d’Afrique is, very creditable. Still I am afraid that the profession of arms is no longer what it was. In the good old times there was war every three or four years. That meant certain promotion, rank, decorations. But war — a European war, be it understood — has been rendered almost impossible by the enormous armies which amount to millions of men, to be conveyed, fed and armed. Our young officers have nothing to anticipate in the future but to be captains on the retired list, at least the greater number. The military career, even with the best of luck, can no longer be what it was even thirty years ago. Great wars have given place to great manœuvres. That is progress, of course, from the social point of view, but...”

“Jean,” interrupted Marcel, “you should have argued in this way before setting out for Algeria.

“Let us understand each other, Marcel. I am still ready, as you are, to enlist, yet if the goddess with full hands were to decide to open them as we pass...”

“*Ate* you mad?”

“Not a bit of it.”

“You already regard this Monsieur Dardentor...”

“As a father.”

“You forget, then, that to be in a position to adopt you, it would be necessary, since he has not looked after you during six years of your minority... at least if he has not done so...” added Marcel, laughing.

“Not that I know of,” replied Jean Taconnat,” or at any rate I have never perceived it.”

“I see your reason is returning, my dear Jean, since you are joking.”

“I joke and I do not joke.”

“Well, have you, by any chance, saved this worthy man from a fight, a fire, or a flood?”

“No... but I shall save him... or rather you and I, we shall save him.”

“How?”

“I have not the least idea.”

“Will it be on land, or sea, or in space?”

“That will be according as opportunity presents itself, and it is not impossible that one may occur...”

“When you contrive that it shall?”

“Why not?... and since we are on board the *Argèlès*, supposing Monsieur Dardentor were to fall into the sea.”

“You do not intend to throw him overboard?”

“Well... let us suppose that he falls! either you or I jump in after him like a brave Newfoundland, he is saved by the said Newfoundland, and of the said Newfoundland he makes an... adopted child.”

“Speak for yourself, who can swim, Jean! I cannot, and if that is my only chance of adoption by this excellent gentleman...”

“All right, Marcel! Be it mine to operate on sea and you on land! But let it be agreed between us: if you become Marcel Dardentor I shall not be jealous, and if that magnificent name be conferred on me... unless both of us...”

“I do not mean even to answer you, my poor fellow!”

“I dispense you from answering me, on condition that you let me do as I like... that you do not thwart me...”

“What makes me anxious, Jean,” replied Marcel Lornans, “is that you talk all this nonsense with a gravity which is not your wont.”

“Because it is very grave. Never mind, calm yourself; I shall take things cheerfully, and if I fail, I shall not blow my brains out. . .

“Have you any left?”

“A few ounces still.”

“I repeat... you are mad.”

“All right!”

Here they broke off the conversation, to which Marcel Lornans declined to attach the least importance, and smoking in company they paced the deck from bow ta stern.

As they approached the poop rail they could see Monsieur Dardentor's servant, who stood motionless near the engine room.

What was he doing there, and what was he waiting for, without the least sign of impatience? Dressed in a travelling livery of irreproachable correctness, his gloves very carefully adjusted, this eccentric personage, in the service of the no less eccentric Dardentor, waited for his master to awake.

Patrick — so he was called, although he was not of Scotch or Irish extraction — merited his name, which comes from the patricians of ancient Rome. He was a man of about forty, and no one could be more "well-bred." His distinguished manners contrasted with the easy-going ways of the master whom he had at once the good and the ill luck to serve. The features of his smooth face, always freshly shaved, his slightly receding forehead, a certain pride in his glance, his mouth with half-closed lips revealing fine teeth, his light hair carefully brushed, his well-pitched voice, gave him the air of a member of the English House of Lords. Though he had been for fifteen years in his service, this did not mean that he had not many times wished to leave Dardentor, and on the other hand, Dardentor had frequently entertained the idea of showing him the door. The truth is that the one could not do without the other, although it would be difficult to imagine two natures more dissimilar.

Patrick was closely tied to the house in Perpignan, not by his wages, although they were high, but by the certainty that his master had the absolute confidence in him that he richly deserved. But Patrick was constantly offended by the familiarity, the loquacity, the southern exuberance of his master.

In his eyes Monsieur Dardentor was wanting in address.

He departed from the dignity which his position and his fortune demanded. His former estate was always to be detected in his way of bowing, presenting himself and expressing himself. Fine manners were wanting in him; how could he acquire them when making, hooping, and rolling thousands of casks through his stores?... No, it was not that, and Patrick permitted himself to tell him so.

Sometimes Clovis Dardentor, who, as it has already been observed loved to “make fine phrases,” would accept remarks from his servant; he only laughed at them; he amused himself by making irritating rejoinders. Sometimes he, too, had ill-humoured days when he grew angry; he would send his unlucky adviser about his business with the traditional week’s “notice “that never came to a close.

However, if Patrick’s pride was hurt by serving so inelegant a master, Clovis Dardentor’s pride was gratified by the possession of so distinguished a servant.

Now, on lhat day. Patrick had no reason to be satisfied. He learned from the chief steward that during dinner the night before, Monsieur Clovis Dardentor had given way to regrettable intemperance of language, talking so much at random as to give the guests a pitiful idea of a native of the Pyrénées-Orientales.

No! Patrick was not content, and he did not intend to conceal the fact. So at an early hour, before he was called, he knocked at the door of cabin 13.

The first summons remained unanswered; he tried a second and more imperative knock.

“Who is there?...” said a sleepy voice.

“Patrick.”

“Go to the devil!...”

Without going whither he was sent, Patrick immediately retired, much ruffled at this unparliamentary reply, to which, however, he ought to have been accustomed.

“1 shall never do anything for-such a man!” he muttered as he went.

Still dignified, still bearing him like the traditional “lord,” he returned on deck to await patiently the appearance of his master.

He had to wait a good hour, for Monsieur Dardentor was in no hurry to leave his bed. Then the door of No. 13 creaked, and afterwards the door to the poop opened to give entrance to the principal personage in this story.

Jean Taconnat and Marcel Lornans, at that moment leaning over the hand-rail, caught sight of him.

“Look... our father!” said Jean.

On hearing that title, equally ridiculous and premature, Marcel could not refrain from laughter.

Yet with a measured step, stern face, and disapproving expression, Patrick advanced towards Monsieur Dardentor, who was little disposed to receive his orders.

“Ah, it is you, Patrick?... It was you who came and wakened me just as I was lulled in golden dreams?”

“Monsieur will admit that my duty...”

“Your duty is to wait until I ring for you!”

“Monsieur doubtless thinks himself at Perpignan, in his house, Place de la Loge, in his room . .

“I think myself where I am,” replied Monsieur Dardentor, “and if I wanted you, I would have sent some one to fetch you... do you hear, alarm-clock as you are! wrongly set too!”

Patrick’s face contracted slightly, and he answered in a solemn tone: “I prefer not to hear, Monsieur, when Monsieur expresses an uncivil thought in such terms! Furthermore, I would observe to Monsieur that the head covering which he has thought proper to assume does not seem to me suitable for a first-class passenger!”

In fact, this head-gear stuck on the back of Clovis Dar- dentor’s neck was deficient in distinction. “So my cap does not please you, Patrick?”

“No more than the pea-jacket in which Monsieur has arrayed himself under the pretext that when at sea one ought to look nautical.”

“Really!”

“If I had been received by Monsieur, I would certainly have prevented Monsieur from dressing himself in that style!”

“You would have prevented me, Patrick?”

“I am not in the habit of concealing my opinion from Monsieur, even when it obliges me to contradict him. And what I do at Perpignan in Monsieur’s house, it is natural that I should do on board this boat!”

“When do you propose to have done, Monsieur Patrick?”

“Although that formula is perfectly polite,” continued Patrick, “I must confess that I have not said all I have to say, and I think, first, that yesterday during dinner Monsieur should have been more careful than he was...”

“Careful — about what I ate, do you mean?”

“And about what Monsieur drank! According to what the chief steward reported to me... a very superior man...”

“And what did this very superior man report to you? “Monsieur Dardentor demanded.

(At this point M. Dardentor drops in the original the familiar ‘ tu,” and resumes the formal and highly significant “you.”)

“That Monsieur talked... talked... and of things on which it is, in my opinion, best to be silent, when one does not know the people who are listening... It is not only a question of prudence, but also a question of dignity...”

“Monsieur Patrick . .

“Monsieur?”

“Did you go where I sent you this morning when you so stupidly knocked at my cabin door?”

“My memory does not recall...”

“Very well, I am going to refresh it for you!... To the devil! It was to the devil I told you to go... and with all due regard to you, you will permit me to send you there a second time, and mind you stay there till I ring for you!”

Patrick half closed his eyes, his lips tightened; then

turning on his heel, he went towards the bow at the moment when Monsieur Désirandelle came on deck.

“Ah, my excellent friend! “exclaimed Clovis Dardentor, perceiving him.

Monsieiir Désirandelle had ventured on deck to breathe fresher air than that of the cabins.

“Well, my dear Désirandelle,” continued the speaker, “how have you been since yesterday?...”

“Not well.”

“Cheer up, my friend, cheer up!... You are as white as a sheet, your eyes are glassy; but that will be nothing, and this journey will end...”

“Ill, Dardentor!”

“What a pessimist you are! Come! Cheer up! In a few hours you will be on solid earth again. The *Argèlès* will put in at Palma...”

“But only for half a day,” sighed Monsieur Désirandelle, “and when night comes we shall be obliged to return to this abominable see-saw!... Ah, if it were not on account of Agathocle!...”

“Of course, Désirandelle, and that is well worth this slight inconvenience. Ah! my old friend, I think I sec that charming girl yonder, lamp in hand, like Hero waiting for Leander — I mean Agathocle — on the Algerianshore... Not so though... The comparison is not worth a fig, for, in the legend, it appears, that unhappy Leander was drowned on the way... Will you breakfast with us this morning?...”

“Oh!... Dardentor, in the state I am in...”

“Unfortunate!... Very unfortunate... Last night’s dinner was particularly brilliant in repartee, and excellent as to the menu! The dishes were worthy of the guests!

Doctor Bruno!... That honest doctor, how I gave it to him...”

“Afid those two young men... Such agreeable travelling companions!... And how that astonishing Agathocle ate!... If he did not open his mouth to speak, at least he opened it to feed... He stuffed himself up to the chin!...”

“He did well.”

“Certainly!... But are we not going to see Madame Désirandelle this morning?...”

“I do not think so... neither this morning... nor later...”

“What!... Not even at Palma?...”

“She is incapable of sitting up.”

“The dear woman!... how I pity her... and how I admire her... All this upset for her Agathocle. . . She has a real mother’s heart!... Will you come on deck?”

“No... I could not, Dardentor! I had better remain in the saloon! It is safer! Ah, when will they build boats that do not rock, and why do they persist in sailing such machines?...”

“No doubt, Désirandelle, ships on land do not either roll or pitch! We have not got to that yet!”

While awaiting the realization of such progress, however, Monsieur Désirandelle had resigned himself to one of the sofas in the saloon, which he did not leave until the Balearic Isles were reached.

Clovis Dardentor pressed his hand and climbed the ladder with the confidence of an old Jack Tar. His cap was rakishly thrown back, his face beaming, his pea- jacket flying in the breeze like an admiral’s flag.

The two cousins joined him. Friendly salutations were exchanged between them, and then reciprocal inquiries about health... Had Monsieur Dardentor slept well after the hours spent at table?... Perfectly, an uninterrupted and restorative slumber in the arms of Morpheus.

“And these gentlemen... had they slept soundly?...”

“Without a break,” replied Jean Taconnat.

In the meantime Patrick was exchanging the politest phrases with his new friend the chief steward, and would not have approved the ease with which the conversation settled down into a tone of friendliness. Monsieur Clovis Dardentor could only congratulate himself on his meeting with these two young men... And they — well, what a lucky chance it was to make the acquaintance of so sympathetic a travelling companion as Monsieur

Dardentor!... There was reason to hope that it would not end there!... They would meet again at Oran! Did these gentlemen think of making a long stay?...

“Oh, yes!” replied Marcel Lornans, “for it is our intention to enlist...”

“To enlist... as soldiers?...”

“Yes, Monsieur Dardentor, in the 5th Chasseurs d’Afrique.”

“A fine regiment, gentlemen, a fine regiment, and you will make your way there!... So... it is quite settled? . .

“Unless,” insinuated Jean Taconnat, “certain circumstances supervene.”

“Gentlemen,” replied Clovis Dardentor, “whatever career you embrace, I am certain that you will do it honour!”

Ah! if Patrick had heard that sentence uttered in such style! But he had just gone down to the pantry, in company with the chief steward, where coffee was steaming in the ship’s enormous cups.

However, one thing was gained: Messrs. Dardentor, Taconnat and Lornans had great pleasure in meeting each other; they even hoped that the landing, after the arrival of the *Argèlès,* would not lead to so immediate a separation as usually takes place.

“And,” said Clovis Dardentor, “if it would be no inconvenience, we might put up at the same hotel.”

“Not the least inconvenience,” Jean Taconnat hastened to reply; “in fact it would have unquestionable advantages.”

“Agreed, then, gentlemen.”

Another hand-shake was exchanged between them, and in this Jean contrived to find something paternal and filial.

“If,” thought he, “by some good luck that hotel would only take fire, what a chance it would be to save this excellent man from the flames!”

Towards eleven o’clock the coasts of the Balearic Isles were sighted in the south-east. Before three o’clock the steamer would be in sight of Majorca. With that favourable sea there was nothing to delay it, and its arrival at Palma with the punctuality of an express might be looked for.

Those of the passengers who had appeared at dinner on the previous evening went down to the salpon.

The first person they saw was Monsieur Eustache Oriental, again seated at the end of the table.

Who could this pertinacious, unsociable individual, this flesh and blood chronometer with its hands only set for meal-times, be?

“Has he sat there all night?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“Probably,” replied his cousin.

Captain Bugarach, who was waiting for his guests, wished them good morning, and expressed a hope that the breakfast would be to their taste.

Then Doctor Bruno saluted everyone in turn. He was as hungry as a wolf — a sea wolf be it understood — à condition that recurred three times a day. He inquired more particularly after the health of Monsieur Clovis Dardentor.

Monsieur Clovis Dardentor had never been better, but he regretted this on the doctor’s account, as he could not utilize his valuable services.

“You must never be cocksure, Monsieur Dardentor,” Dr. Bruno replied. “Many men as strong as you have resisted throughout a whole voyage, and succumbed just in sight of port.”

“Get along with you, Doctor! You might as well tell a porpoise to beware of being sea-sick.”

“But I have seen porpoises sea-sick,” retorted the doctor, “when they are taken out of the water at the end of a harpoon!”

Agathocle occupied his seat of the night before. Three or four new passengers came to the table. Did Captain Bugarach make a grimace? Perhaps. These people had fasted since yesterday! What havoc they would make in the breakfast!

During this meal, and in spite of Patrick’s reproofs, Monsieur Dardentor monopolized the conversation. But this time he spoke less of his past and more of his future, meaning his sojourn at Oran. He intended to visit the whole district, perhaps the whole of Algeria, perhaps he might even venture so far as the desert... And *à propos* of this he asked if there were still Arabs in Algeria.

“A few,” Marcel Lornans answered, “they are kept for their local colour.”

“And lions?”

“A good half-dozen,” said Jean Taconnat, “they are still in sheep’s skin, with mufflers on their paws.”

“Don’t you trust to that, gentlemen!” said the captain, laughing.

They ate well and they drank well. The strangers made up for lost time. Ah! if Monsieur Désirandelle had been there... ». But it was better that he was not there, for the glasses jingled several times against the covers, and the plates gave out the jarring sound of shaken china.

In short, midday had already struck, when, the coffee being disposed of and the wines and liqueurs swallowed, all the passengers rose, left the saloon and sought shelter under the awning on the poop.

Monsieur Oriental only remained in his place, and this led Clovis Dardentor to ask who this passenger, so punctual at meals, so anxious to keep aloof from the others, actually was.

“I do not know,” Captain Bugarach replied. “I only know that he calls himself Monsieur Eustache Oriental.”

“Where is he going to?... Where does he come from?... What is his profession?”

“No one knows, I imagine.”

Patrick had advanced to offer his services, if needed. Now as he had just heard the series of questions put by his master he thought he would speak: “If Monsieur authorizes me, I am in a position to inform him about the passenger in question.”

“You know him?’

“No, but I have learnt from the chief steward, who learnt it from the hotel porter at Cette, that...”

“Just tell us in three words who the individual is.”

“President of the Astronomical Society of Montelimart,” answered Patrick drily.

An astronomer! Monsieur Eustache Oriental was an astronomer! That explained his carrying a telescope in a shoulder belt and using it to examine the various points of the horizon, when he did appear on the deck. At all events he seemed in no humour to fraternize with anyone.

“It is his astronomy, of course, that absorbs him!” remarked Clovis Dardentor.

About one o’clock Majorca displayed the varied undulations of her coast and the picturesque heights above it.

The *Argèlès* altered her course in order to round the island, and under shelter of the land found the sea more calm; this enabled a number of passengers to leave their cabins.

The steamer soon doubled the dangerous rock Dragonera, on which a lighthouse is built, and entered the narrow Strait of Frion between precipitous cliffs. Then, having passed Cape Calanguera, the *Argèlès* entered Palma Bay, and presently was made fast to the wharf, which was crowded with spectators.

CHAPTER VI.

OCCURS IN THE TOWN OF PALMA.

IF there be a region that one can know thoroughly without ever having visited it, that region is the magnificent Balearic group. It certainly ought to attract tourists, who will never regret having gone from one island to another, even though the blue waves of the Mediterranean were white with foam. After Majorca, Minorca, after Minorca, the wild Cabrera, the islet of goats. Then after the Balearic Isles, which form the principal group, Ivica, Formentera, Conigliera, with their dark pine forests.

If all that has been done for these oases in the Mediterraranean Sea had been done for no matter what other country of the two continents, one would not need to leave home, and set out to admire the marvels of nature which are recommended to the attention of travellers *de visu.* It would suffice to shut oneself up in a library, provided that library included the admirable work of His Highness the Archduke Louis Salvador of Austria, on the Balearic Isles, to read the very complete and exact text, to look at the coloured engravings, the views, drawings, sketches, plans, charts, which make that publication a work without a rival.

This work is of magistral importance, incomparable, geographical, ethnical and statistical; it is also most artistic; but unfortunately it is not on sale.

Consequently Clovis Dardentor did not know it, nor did Marcel Lornans or Jean Taconnat However, since the *Argèlès* put in at the principal island of the group, at least they would be able to make their appearance in its capital, penetrate to the heart of that most charming city, fix the remembrance of it in their notes; and probably, after having saluted the Archduke Louis Salvador’s steam yacht *Nixe* in the port, they would envy him his home in that beautiful island.

A certain number of passengers went on shore so soon as the steamer had reached the wharf in the artificial port of Palma. Some, still shaken by the tossing of that very quiet voyage — more particularly the ladies — derived their sole satisfaction from being on land for a few hours. Others, who had been quite well, intended to avail themselves of the delay to visit the capital of the island and its environs, if time permitted, between the hours of two and eight p m. The *Argèlès* was bound to put to sea at nightfall, and dinner had been postponed until after the departure in the interests of the excursionists.

Among the latter were Clovis Dardentor, Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat. Monsieur Oriental also landed, with the Désirandelles, father and son, who left Madame Désirandelle in her cabin, where she was enjoying a refreshing restorative slumber.

“A good idea, my excellent friend!” said Clovis Dardentor to Monsieur Désirandelle. “A few hours at Palma will do your rather disordered machine good... We are going to stretch our legs in the town. Will you come with us?”

“Thank you, Dardentor,” replied Monsieur Désirandelle, whose face was beginning to regain its colour. “It would be impossible for me to keep up with you, and I prefer to wait in a café until your return.”

That was what he did, while Agathocle sauntered about in one direction and Monsieur Oriental in another. Evidently neither was animated by the tourist spirit!

It goes without saying that Patrick had left the steamer at the same time as his master, and that he came to put himself under his orders, saying in a solemn voice: “Shall I accompany Monsieur in his promenade?”

“Of course,” replied Clovis Dardentor. “It is possible I may make some purchases; if I find an article to my taste, a curio of the country, you shall carry the thing back to the vessel.”

“If you don’t object,” said Jean Taconnat, “we should be glad to make the excursion in your company, Monsieur Dardentor.”

“Indeed, Monsieur Taconnat!... I was going to ask you to accept me as your companion for these few hours!”

Patrick considered this an agreeably turned phrase and approved of it by a slight nod. He felt sure that his master could only gain by the society of these two Parisians, who, in his opinion, must belong to the best society.

While Clovis Dardentor and Jean Taconnat were exchanging these civilities, Marcel Lornans, guessing to what end they tended on the part of his fantastic friend, could not refrain from smiling.

“Well... yes!” the latter said to him apart, “why should not the opportunity present itself?...”

“Yes... yes... the opportunity... Jean... the famous opportunity required by the Code... fight, fire, flood...”

“Who knows? . .

Now, there was no time to lose if they wished to profit by the few hours in port As the *Argèlès* entered Palma Bay the passengers had noticed three edifices which rose in a picturesque way above the houses of the port. These were respectively the cathedral, a palace adjoining it, and on the left, near the wharf, a fine square building whose turrets were reflected in the waves. Beyond were tall church steeples, and the great sails of windmills worked by the active sea breeze.

When one does not know a place it is well to consult a guide-book, and if there is not one at hand to take a flesh and blood guide. The man from Perpignan and his companions met such an one in a tall fellow about thirty years old, of engaging manners and mild countenance. He wore a sort of cloak draped over his shoulder, trousers full to the knees, had a red handkerchief folded round his head like a bandage, and looked well in this attire.

For a few douros this native of Majorca undertook to conduct the party all over the town, show them the principal buildings, and to complete the exploration by a carriage excursion in the neighbourhood.

Clovis Dardentor was delighted to find that the guide spoke the French of the south, that which is spoken by the natives of the environs of Montpellier, intelligibly. Now, everyone knows that the distance between Montpellier and Perpignan is not great.

Blithely did our three tourists set out on their way, listening to the information of the guide, which was conveyed in phrases as pompous as they were descriptive.

The Balearic group moreover deserves that its history, authoritatively narrated by the voice of its buildings and its legends, should be known.

Until the sixteenth century the archipelago was very prosperous, if not from the industrial, at least from the commercial point of view. Its admirable situation in the middle of the western basin of the Mediterranean, the facility of its shipping intercourse with the three great countries of Europe, France, Italy and Spain, the proximity of the African coast, rendered it a central place of call for the whole merchant marine. Under the intelligent rule of Jayme (James) I. of Aragon, whose memory is so venerated by the population, it attained its apogee owing to the genius of its enterprising shipowners, who numbered in their ranks the highest members of the Majorcan nobility.

Its commerce is now limited to the exportation of the products of the soil, oils, almonds, capers, lemons, vegetables, and its industry to the rearing of pigs, which are sent to Barcelona. The orange crop is less abundant than is supposed, and would no longer justify the name “Garden of the Hesperides,” still conferred upon the Balearic Isles.

But what those islands have not lost, what Majorca, the most extensive of the group, with an area of two thousand one hundred and twenty-five square miles and a population of over two hundred thousand inhabitants, cannot lose, is its deliciously mild, enchanting climate, its light, salubrious, vivifying atmosphere, its natural wonders, the splendour of its scenery, the luminous colour of its sky, which justifies its second mythological name, i e. the Isle of the Good Genius.

The guide conscientiously performed his task of cicerone. He proved himself a real phonograph, ready to repeat for the hundredth time the sentences in his repertory. He told how the foundation of Palma was dated from a period previous to the Christian era, indeed from the time the

Romans occupied the island, after they had disputed it with the inhabitants, who were already celebrated for their skill in using the sling.

Clovis Dardentor was ready to admit that the name Balearic was due to the exercise in which David made his first big mark, and even that their daily bread was only given to the children after they had hit the target with a stone from the sling. But when the guide affirmed that the balls thrown by this primitive engine of projection melted in passing through the air, so great was their rapidity, he honoured the two young men with a significant glance.

“Is this native islander making fun of us?” he whispered.

“Oh... in the south, you know!” replied Marcel Lornans.

They agreed to accept as authentic the statement that Hamilcar the Carthagenian landed on the Island of Majorca during his voyage from Africa to Catalonia, and that there his son, generally known under the name of Hannibal, came into the world.

Clovis Dardentor refused, however, to admit that it was established on evidence that the Buonaparte family originally came from the island of Majorca, having resided there from the fifteenth century.

“Corsica, certainly! The Balearic Isles, never! “Though Palma had been the scene of much fighting, first, when she defended herself against the troops of Don Jayme, afterwards when the peasant proprietors rose in revolt against the nobles who loaded them with taxes, again when she had to resist the Corsairs of Barbary, that time was past. The city now enjoyed quietness that ought to have deprived Jean Taconnat of all hope of intervening in an aggression upon his father in anticipation.

But, when the guide related that at the beginning of the fifteenth century the Riena, rising to an extraordinary height and volume, had caused the death of sixteen hundred and thirty-three persons, Jean Taconnat put this question to him: “Where is this Riena?”

“It flows through the town.”

“Shall we meet with it?”

“Of course.”

“And has it much water?”

“Not enough to drown a mouse.”

“Then it’s all up!” murmured Jean Taconnat, looking at his cousin.

Chatting together, the three tourists” first took a glance at the lower town, from the quays, or rather the terraces, which support the bastioned enclosure along the line of sea front.

A few houses were built in the fantastic style of Moorish architecture: the Arabians had inhabited the island during a period of four hundred years. Through the half-open doors were seen central courts or “patios “surrounded by light colonnades, the traditional well surmountèd by its elegant ironwork, the graceful staircase, the peristyle ornamented with climbing plants in full bloom, the windows with their incomparable stone settings, with miradors in the Spanish style.

Clovis Dardentor and his companions had reached a building flanked by four octagonal towers, which produced a Gothic note in the midst of these early essays of the Renascence.

“What is that thing-em-bob?” asked Monsieur Dardentor. And were it only in order not to shock Patrick, he might have employed a more select word. It was the “Fonda,” a magnificent building, whose superb battlemented windows, artistically cut surbase, delicate notchings, did honour to the ornament-makers of the time.

“Let us enter,” said Marcel Lornans, who was deeply interested in the archaeological curiosities.

They entered by crossing an arcade divided in the centre by a stout pillar.

Marcel Lornans was genuinely interested in this fine old building, but Dardentor merely observed that he wished he could transport the “Fonda “to his natal city of Perpignan, where all its former animation would be revived.

It is needless to remark that Patrick admired these beautiful things with the phlegmatic indifference of a travelling Englishman, giving the guide the impression of a discreet and reserved gentleman.

Jean Taconnat took only a tepid interest in the rigmaroles of the cicerone. Not that he was insensible to ‘the charms of the great science of architecture; but under the obsession of a fixed idea, his thoughts followed another course, and he regretted “that in this magnificent fonda nothing could be done.”

After a visit which was necessarily brief, the guide led the way to the street of the Riena. The pedestrians, in great numbers there, included very noticeable men, of a fine type, elegant figures, and prepossessing appearance, arrayed in full trousers, with sashes wound round the waist, and round jackets of goat skin, the fur outside. The women were handsome, with rich glowing complexions, deep black eyes, and expressive physiognomy. They were dressed in bright-coloured skirts, short aprons, and low-cut bodices showing their bare arms. Some young girls wore the graceful head-dress called the “rebosillo,” which, notwithstanding it is rather conventional, takes nothing from the charm of the face or the vivacity of the glance.

But there was no chance of an exchange of compliments and salutations, although the Majorcan way of speaking is so sweet, fresh, and melodious. The tourists hurried on, skirting the wall of the royal palace in the vicinity of the Cathedral; which, when seen from the bay, seems to blend with the former.

A few hundred yards farther on the excursionists reached a fairly large square, of very irregular shape; from this several streets that led towards the heart of the town.

“What square is this?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“Piazza Isabella Square II.” answered the guide.

“And that large street with the fine houses?”

“The paseo del Borne.”

It was a picturesque street; the fronts of the houses were varied, their windows were framed in greenery; the awnings that shaded their wide projecting balconies were many-coloured, and miradors with coloured panes were set in the walls. Some trees were growing here and there. This paseo del Borne led to the oblong Plaza de la Constitucion, in which stands the “hacienda publica,” or Hôtel de Ville.

“Do we go up by the paseo del Borne?” asked Clovis Dardentor.

“We shall come down by it on our return,” answered the guide. “It is better to go to the Cathedral, which is not far.”

“Well, let us go to the Cathedral,” replied the man from Perpignan, “and I shall not object to ascend one of its towers, so as to have a general view.”

“I should propose instead,” resumed the guide, “to visit Bellver Castle, outside the town, where a view may be had of the surrounding country.”

“And shall we have time?” inquired Marcel Lornans; “the *Argèlès* leaves Palma at eight p m.”

“We shall have plenty of time, sir; Bellver Castle is not far, and no traveller ever leaves Palma without going there.”

“And how shall we get there?”

“By taking a carriage when we come to the Jesus gate.”

“Very well, to the Cathedral,” said Marcel Lornans.

The guide turned to the left,’went through a narrow street, “la calle de la Seo,” turned;off at the square of the same name, where the Cathedral rears its western front and commands the enclosing wall above “la calle Mirador.”

The guide first led the tourists to the great door of the “Portal of the Sea,” which belongs to the admirable period of pointed architecture that preceded the fanciful- ness of the Renascence.

Clovis Dardentor was, very naturally, about to push back one of the great halves of the portal when the guide stopped him.

“This door is walled up,” said he.

“And for what reason?”

“Because the ocean winds rushed in there with such violence that the faithful might imagine themselves in the Valley of Jehoshaphat under the storm of the last judgment.”

This phrase the guide invariably repeated to every stranger; he was very proud of it, and it pleased Patrick.

By making the circuit of the building (finished in 1601) the visitors were enabled to admire the outside, its two ornamented spires, its numerous rather defaced pinnacles, at the angles of the arched buttresses.

The Cathedral of Palma may in fact compare with the better known churches of the Iberian peninsula.

The visitors entered by a great door, in the chief front. The interior of the church was as dark as the interiors of all Spanish churches are, and there were no seats either in the nave or in the aisles, save here and there a few wooden benches. The faithful had to kneel on the cold flags, and this lent a special character to the religious ceremonies.

Clovis Dardentor and his two companions walked up the nave between the double row of prismatic pillars, until they reached the extremity, when they paused before the royal chapel to admire a magnificent altar screen, and entered the choir, which is situated in the middle of the building. But time would have failed them to examine the rich treasury of the Cathedral in detail, its artistic wonders, its sacred relics, which are held in extreme veneration at Majorca — particularly the skeleton of the King Don Jayme de Aragon, who has lain for three centuries in his black marble sarcophagus.

“And where are we going now?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“To the Ayuntamiento,” responded the guide.

“By what street?”

“By the ‘ calle Palacio.’”

The tourists retraced their steps by ascending that street for three hundred yards, or about sixteen hundred palmos, if we count by. the Majorcan method. The street leads to a square less spacious than the piazza Isabella II. and of no less irregular design. However, in the BalearhrTsle it is vain to look for towns where rectilineal lines and the rectangular squares lay out chess-board divisions as in the American cities.

Was it worth the trouble of visiting the Ayuntamiento, otherwise called “la Casa Consistorial “? Yes, certainly. And no stranger could come to Palma without wishing to behold a building which its architect had endowed with so remarkable a façade, the two doors, each opening between two windows, which give admittance to the interior, the tribune, that charming “loggia “with its curving front in the centre. Then there is the first floor whose seven windows open upon a balcony the whole width of the building, the second floor protected by the projecting roof like a Swiss châlet, and its compartment-ceilings supported by indefatigable stone caryatides. In short this “Casa Consistorial “is regarded as a masterpiece of the Italian Renascence.

In the “Saba,” which is adorned with paintings representing the local notabilities — not to speak of a remarkable Saint Sebastian by Van Dyck — the Government of the Balearic Isles is carried on. There the decrees are passed, which are afterwards proclaimed in the town by the majestic drummers of the official Ayuntamiento, in traditional costumes braided with red lace, gold being the exclusive privilege of their chief, the drum-major.

Clovis Dardentor would willingly have sacrificed some douros to see this personage, of whom the guide spoke with a pride truly Balearic, in all his splendour, but the said personage was not visible.

One hour of the five granted by putting into port had already elapsed. If the tourists wished to make an excursion to Bellver Castle, they must be quick.

Then, through a maze of streets and crossways in which Daedalus would have lost himself even though he had held Ariadne’s clue, the guide returned by the Piazza de Cort and the Piazza de Mercado, and a hundred and fifty yards farther on the tourists came into the square in which the theatre is situated. Clovis Dardentor was then able to buy a couple of pieces of majolica at a sufficiently remunerative price. Patrick having received orders to carry these articles to the steamer, and place them safely in his master’s cabin, repaired to the port.

Beyond the theatre the visitors took a wide road, the “paseo de la Rambla,” which leads to the Piazza de Jesus. The paseo is lined with churches and convents, among others the convent of the Magdalen nuns.

At the back of the Piazza de Jesus is the gate of that name, and over the latter stretch the telegraph wires; on either side houses brightened up by awnings over the balconies and greenish Venetian shutters.

On the left are trees which adorn this pretty corner of the square into which the afternoon sun shines.

Through the wide open gate the tourists could see the green plain crossed by a road that sloped downwards towards lo Torreno and led to the Castle of Bellver.

CHAPTER VII.

WHEREIN CLOVIS DARDENTOR COMES BACK FROM THE CASTLE OF BELLVER MORE QUICKLY THAN HE WENT THITHER.

IT was half-past four o'clock. There was just time to prolong the excursion so far as this castillo, whose pleasant situation the guide had extolled, to visit the interior, to ascend the platform of the great tower, and survey the coast around Palma Bay.

In fact a carriage with tolerably good mules can do the journey in less than forty minutes, if the driver does not purposely spin out the time. This, however, is only a question of douros, and it was easily settled by the man from Perpignan.

The guide engaged a carriage at the Jesus gate, and his choice was approved by Clovis Dardentor — he was a judge of muleflesh.

"So, gentlemen," asked the guide, "that galera seems to be good enough for you?"

"At all points," replied Marcel Lornans, "and if Monsieur Dardentor will be kind enough to take his seat"...

"Instantly, my young friends. Get in first, Monsieur Marcel."

"After you, Monsieur Dardentor."

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

Not wishing to prolong this exchange of civilities, Marcel Lornans made up his mind.

“And you, Monsieur Taconnat,” said Clovis Dardentor!... “You look gloomy... What has become of your good spirits?...”

“I... Monsieur Dardentor?... There is nothing the matter with me, I assure you... nothing. .

“You do not imagine that an accident can happen to us with this vehicle?”

“An accident, Monsieur Dardentor!” returned Jean Taconnat, shrugging his shoulders, “why should an accident happen?... I do not believe in accidents!”

“That is right, young man. For my part I do not believe in them, and I engage that ourgalera will not upset on the way.”

“And besides,” added Jean Taconnat, “if it did upset, there would have to be a river, a lake, a pond, a basin — but that would not count!”

“What would not count?” asked Monsieur Dardentor, with wide open eyes.

“I mean,” continued Jean Taconnat, “that the text of the Code is plain... It is necessary... In fine I understand . .

Marcel Lornans burst out laughing at the embarrassed explanations of his cousin.

Jean Taconnat got in after his cousin and took his place on the second seat. Clovis Dardentor, whose face still wore a look of surprise, seated .himself in front beside the coachman, and the guide hung on to the footboard at the back of the carriage.

The Jesus gate was soon passed, and from that point the Castillo de Bellver, squarely set on its green hill, was visible.” It was not open country through which the galera passed after the walls were left behind; the road lay through Torreno, a suburb of Palma. This suburb is regarded as a watering-place in proximity to Palma, and its elegant cottages are shaded and kept cool by fine trees, especially by .ojd fig trees, fantastically twisted by age.

The group of white houses is situated on an eminence, whose rocky base is fretted by the foam of the surf. After the carriage had passed Torreno, Clovis Dardentor and the two Parisians could, by turning round, take in the whole town of Palma its bay, azure to the farthest limits of the open sea, and the capricious windings of its coast line.

The galera went along an ascending road, deeply shaded by outer trees of a forest of Aleppo pines, which surrounded the village and bedecked the hillside that was crowned by the walls of the Castillo de Bellver.

But, all along the ascent, what glimpses were obtained of the country, whose scattered houses stood out against the tints of palm, orange trees, pomegranate, fig trees, caper bushes, and olive trees! Clovis Dardentor, always demonstrative, was not sparing of his admiration, although he was accustomed to see similar landscapes in the South of France. But he had never seen such strange shapes, so gnarled, so bulging, so twisted, among olive trees, as these, the giants of their kind.

And then the dwellings of the peasants (pagesès), surrounded by vegetable fields lying beyond the myrtle and cytisus bushes, and embowered in flowers, among others those “lagrymas” (tears) — sad and poetic name

— how they gladdened the eyes, with their penthouse roofs covered with glowing red capsicums.

At five o.’clock the tourists reached the bridge in front of the Castle of Bellver (Bel-vedere). This fortress was destined for the defencc of the bay, the port, and the town of Palma, and wears the military aspect common to all the mediaeval fortresses.

Four small towers flank its circular enclosure, which consists of two stories in a style of mixed Roman and Gothic. Outside this enclosure is the principal tower, called in good English, “The Tower of Homage “and unmistakably feudal in appearance.

It was to the platform of this donjon that Clovis Dardentor, Marcel Lornans, and Jean Taconnat intended to ascend, in order to obtain a more complete view of the country and the town than they could have had from one of the spires of the Cathedral.

The galera remained before the stone bridge, and the driver had orders to await the visitors, who entered the castillo with the guide.

Their visit had to be brief. In reality their motive was not so much to pry into the nooks and corners of that old building as to cast their eyes over its distant horizon.

Therefore after having glanced hastily at the lower rooms that opened on to the courtyard, Clovis Dardentor said: “Now, *are* we to climb up there, young people?”

“As soon as you like,” replied Marcel Lornans, “but let us not delay there! What an adventure, if Monsieur Dardentor, having missed the *Argèlès* a first time...”

“Were to miss it a second!” said the man from Perpignan. “That would indeed be more unpardonable, as I should not find a steam launch at Palma to run after the *Argèlès*... and what would poor Désirandelle do?”

They then walked towards the Tower of Homage, which rose outside the enceinte, and was connected by two bridges with the Castillo.

The base of the tower, a round and massive building of a warm tone of burnt stone, is the bottom of a moat. In its south-western side there is a reddish door on a level with the top of the ditch, above the door a semicircular window, and higher up are two narrow loopholes, lastly, the supports of the parapet of the upper platform.

Following their guide, the three companions ascended a staircase constructed in the thickness of the wall and feebly lighted by the loopholes. Then after a rather steep ascent they came out on the platform.

Truly the guide could not be accused of exaggeration. From that eminence the view was magnificent.

At the foot of the Castillo the hill sloped away, clad in its black mantle of Aleppo pines, and beyond it lay the pleasant suburb of Torreno. Still lower the bay stretched out, very blue, dotted with little white specks, that one might have taken for sea-birds, but which were only the sails of small boats. Farther away was the town, semicircular in form, its cathedral, its palace, its churches, forming a dazzling whole bathed in the luminous atmosphere pierced by the golden rays of the sun as it sinks towards the horizon. Finally, in the offing, shone the great ocean, some craft displaying their white sails, and steamers sweeping the sky with their long smoky trail

Nothing was to be seen of Minorca in the east, nothing of Ivica in the south-west, but on the south rose the rugged islet of Cabrera, where so many French soldiers perished miserably during the wars of the First Empire.

From that tower of the Castillo de Bellver the western part of the island gives an idea of Majorca, the only one of the group which possesses real sierras with deep and mysterious valleys, above which rise the porphyritic, greenstone, or limestone peaks. The plain is dotted with tumuli which bear the name of” puys “in the Balearic Isles, as in France, and not one is to be found uncrowned by a castle, a church, or a hermitage in ruins. Let us add that rushing torrents abound, and according to the guide the number of them in the island are more than two hundred.

“Two hundred opportunities for Monsieur Dardentor to fall in,” thought Jean Taconnat, “and you will find he will not fall in.’-’

One very modern thing that met their view was the railway which serves the central part of Majorca. It runs from Palma to Alendia, the districts of Santa Maria and Benisalem, and it is proposed to prolong it by new branch lines through the winding valleys of the chain, whose highest peaks rise to over three thouand feet.

According to his usual custom Clovis Dardentor went into raptures over this marvellous spectacle, and Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat shared his very justifiable admiration. It was really a pity that the halt at the Castle of Bellver could not be prolonged, that it was not possible to return thither, that the delay of the *Argèlès* would come to an end in some hours.

“Yes,” declared the man from Perpignan, “we ought to stay here for weeks — months...”

“Well!” replied the guide, whose trade it was to be well supplied with anecdotes, “that is precisely what happened to one of your countrymen, gentlemen, rather against his will, however!”

“What was his name?” asked Marcel.

“François Arago.”

“Arago... Arago...” cried Clovis Dardentor, “one of the most famous of French savants!”

In fact, the illustrious astronomer had come to the Balearic Isles in 1808 with the object of completing the measurement of an arc of the meridian between Dunkerque and Formentera. He was suspected by the population of Majorca, even threatened with death, and was imprisoned in the Castillo de Bellver for two months. How long would his imprisonment have lasted if he had not escaped by one of the castle windows and then reached a boat which took him to Algiers, who can tell?

“Arago,” repeated Clovis Dardentor, “Arago, the celebrated son of Estagel, the glorious child of my Perpignan, of my Southern Pyrenees!”

However, the time had come when they had to leave the platform from whence, as from the car of a balloon, they commanded a view of the incomparable landscape. Clovis Dardentor could not tear himself away from this sight. He went backwards and forwards and leaned on the parapet of the tower.

“Ah! take care! “Jean Taconnat called out to him as he c aught him by the collar of his jacket.

“Take care?” echoed Dardentor in surprise.

“Undoubtedly... a little more and you would have fallen over!... What is the good of alarming us in this way?”

It was a legitimate alarm, for if the worthy man had fallen head foremost over the parapet Jean Taconnat could have done nothing but look on at his fall into the depth of the moat without being able to give him assistance.

In short,”it was to be regretted that time, too niggard of measure, did not admit of organizing the complete exploration of Majorca. It is not sufficient to walk through the different quarters of Palma, its capital, the other towns ought to be visited, and what more worthy to attract tourists than Soller, Pollensa, Manacor, Valdemosa? And those natural grottoes of Arta and Drach, which are regarded as the most beautiful in the world, with their legendary lakes, their stalactite chapels, their baths of fresh, limpid water, their theatre, their infernal regions — fantastic denominations if you like, but merited by the marvels of their subterranean immensity. And what of Miramar, the incomparable domain of the Archduke Louis Salvador, of the forests a thousand years old, whose lofty trees the learned and artistic prince has respected, and his castle built on a terrace that overhangs the coast in the midst of an enchanting site, and the “hospederia,” kept at his Highness’s expense, open to all passers-by, which offers them bed and board for two days gratuitously, and where even those who can do it, try in vain to acknowledge that hospitality by a gratuity. And is not the Chartreuse of Valdemosa, where Georges Sand and Chopin lived all one season, also worthy of a visit — now deserted, silent, forsaken as it is — a sojourn to which we owe those beautiful inspirations of the great performer and the great novelist, the recital of “Un Hiver à Majorque,” and the strange novel “Spiridion.” — ’

The guide related all this in the course of his inexhaustible loquacity, in phrases long stereotyped in his guide-book brain. No wonder then that Clovis Dardentor expressed his regret at leaving this Mediterranean oasis, that he resolved to return to the Balearic Isles, and even in company with his young and new friends, if théy should ever have leisure...

“It is six o’clock,” observed Jean Taconnat.

“And if it is six o’clock,” added Marcel Lornans, “we cannot defer our departure any longer. We have still a quarter of Palma to see before we go on board again.”

“Let us start, then!” replied Clovis Dardentor, sighing. A last glance was cast on the varied scenery of the western side, and towards the glorious sun whose declining disc swung above the horizon and gilded with its slanting rays» the white houses of Torreno.

Clovis Dardentor, Marcel Lornans, and Jean Taconnat descended the narrow spiral staircase in the great thick wall of the tower, crossed the bridge, entered the inner court, and went out by the postern.

The galera was waiting where they had left it, the driver sauntering along the moat-side.

The guide called him, he rejoined them with the calm and even step of those privileged mortals who never hurry themselves, in a happy land where existence does not require one to make haste.

Clovis Dardentor stepped into the vehicle first, before the coachman was ready to take his place on the front seat.

But just as Lornans and Jean Taconnat were’ about to follow him, the mules started off suddenly, and they were obliged to draw back quickly to avoid being struck by the vehicle.

The coachman in the meantime had caught at the heads of the animals, but to hold them was impossible. The mules reared, upset him, and it is a miracle that he was not crushed by the wheel of the carriage, which started at full speed.

The driver and the guide yelled simultaneously. They both rushed along Bellver road, down which the galera was going at full gallop at the risk of either falling over the precipice that borders it on one side or of being dashed against the fir trees of the dark thicket on the other.

“Monsieur Dardentor... Monsieur Dardentor!” exclaimed Marcel Lornans with the whole strength of his lungs. “He is going to be killed! Let us run, Jean, let us run!”

“Yes,” answered Jean Taconnat, “and yet if this opportunity does not count...”

The driver, the guide, the two young men, and some peasants who had joined them, were all running along the road at their utmost speed.

Meanwhile, Clovis Dardentor, whose presence of mind never forsook him under any circumstances, had seized the reins with a strong hand, and pulling hard he tried to get control over the runaways. It was like trying to keep back a ball at the moment of expulsion from the mortar, and for the passers-by who tried, it was like stopping the said ball in projection.

The mules tore madly down the road and rushed furiously across the stream. Clovis Dardentor, still quite self-possessed, having been able to keep the galera in a straight line, said to himself that their wild escapade would surely come to an end before the bastioned enclosure, that the vehicle could not possibly pass through one of the gates.

As for letting go the reins and jumping out of the vehicle, he knew the danger of that too well, and that it was better to remain in his rocking and whirling machine, even should it be upset, or smashed against something.

And those cursed mules were going at a pace such as the memory of man could not recall either in Majorca or any other of the islands.

After Torreno the galera tore along the outer wall, describing a series of the most eccentric zigzags, capering like a goat, bounding like a kangaroo, passing before the gates of the enceinte until it reached the puerta Pintada at the north-eastern corner of the town.

The two mules must have been well acquainted with this gate, for! they passed through it without the least hesitation, and it may be held for certain that they were obeying neither the voice nor the hand of Clovis Dardentor. It was they who were directing the galera, encouraging each other more than ever at full gallop, taking no heed of the passers-by, who were yelling, running under doorways, and scattering through the neighbouring streets. The malicious brutes seemed to whisper to each other, “We will go on like this as long as we please, and so long as it does not capsize, *vogue la galera!*”

And into the midst of the maze at that corner of the town — a veritable labyrinth — the maddened pair rushed with redoubled ardour.

From the inside of the houses, from the back of the shops the people shouted, and scared heads appeared at the windows. The quarter was as much agitated as when in former times, some centuries ago, the cry of “The Moors!... The Moors!” arose. And how was it an accident did not happen in those narrow winding streets, that ended in the calle dos Capuchinos?

Clovis Dardentor tried to manage them in the meanwhile. To moderate their mad gallop he pulled at the reins at the risk of either breaking them or of dragging his arms out of their sockets. In reality it was the reins that were pulling him, and bade fair to drag him out of the carriage under very vexatious circumstances.

“Ah, the rascals, how they are going!” he said to himself. “I see no reason why they should stop so long as they have four legs apiece!... and we are going down, we are going down!”

They had been going down, all the way from the Castillo de Bellver, and they would go down to the port, where the galera would perhaps dive into the waters of the bay — that would certainly quiet them.

They turned to the right, they turned to the left, they came out on the piazza de Olivar and tore round it like the old Roman cars on the Colosseum course, and yet there was neither competition to overcome nor prize to carry off!

Three or four police in vain endeavoured to stop the mules to avert a catastrophe in the square. Their efforts were inefficacious. Some were knocked down and hurt; others had to let go their hold; in short the galera continued its progress with increased velocity.

Nevertheless the mad race was coming to an end — -disastrously it is true — when the galera tore through the calle de Olivar. In the middle of that very steep street there is a flight of stairs, and if ever there was a street impracticable for carriage traffic it is certainly that one.

The shouting, therefore, was redoubled, but loud as it was it did not stop the mules. They scarcely troubled themselves about a few steps! And behold the wheels of the galera clattering down the steep staircase, jolting the body as though the vehicle must be shaken to pieces.

Yet no, it did not come asunder; the shafts did not snap in two, and Clovis Dardentor's two hands did not let go the reins during that extraordinary descent!

Behind the galera an ever-increasing crowd was gathering, but Marcel Lornans, Jean Taconnat, the guide, the coachman, always the last, had not yet appeared.

After the calle de Olivar, came the calle San Miguel, and the piazza de Abastos, where one of the mules fell, but instantly got up again safe and sound, then the calle de la Plateria, and the piazza de Santa-Eulalia.

"It is evident," said Clovis Dardentor to himself, "that the galera will go on until land fails it, and I see nothing but Palma Bay to stop it effectually."

In the piazza de Santa-Eulalia stands the church dedicated to that holy martyr, who is the object of special veneration. Not long ago that church was esteemed as "sanctuary," and malefactors who succeeded in taking refuge there were safe from the clutches of the police.

Well, this time it was not a malefactor whose good fortune brought him there; it was Clovis Dardentor, still occupying the driving seat of his carriage.

Yes! at that moment the magnificent portal of Santa- Eulalia was wide open. The faithful filled the church. The service of Benediction was taking place, and as it was about to end, the officiating priest, turning towards the pious assembly, was preparing to give the blessing.

What an uproar, what a disturbance among the crowd, what screams of terror when the galera rushed on to the flagstones of the nave! But also what a prodigious effect when the mules fell down finally before the altar steps at the moment when the priest was pronouncing the words: “*Et spiritu sancto!*”

“Amen!” answered a sonorous voice.

It was the voice of the tourist who had just received a well merited blessing.

An hour later Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat had rejoined Clovis Dardentor before a fonda of la calle de Miramar where that remarkable man had come to rest from his emotions and his fatigues.

And yet one must not speak of emotions when alluding to so strong a character.

“Monsieur Dardentor!” cried Jean Taconnat.

“Ah, my young friends,” replied the hero of the day. “That carriage drive has somewhat shaken me...”

“You are safe and sound?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“Yes... perfectly, and I believe I have never felt better... Your health, gentlemen!”

The two young men had to empty a few glasses of that excellent Benisalem wine whose fame extends beyond the Balearic group.

Then as soon as Jean Taconnat could take his cousin aside: “That was an opportunity missed,” he said.

“Why, no, Jean!”

“Why, yes, Marcel, for if I had saved Monsieur Dardentor, if I had stopped his galera, even though I had not dragged him out of flood or flame or combat, you will not make me believe that...”

“A fine thesis to support before a Court of justice! “Marcel Lornans did not deign to say more than this.

At eight in the evening all those who had landed from the *Argèlès* had returned on board. No one was late this time, neither the Désirandelles, father and son, nor Monsieur Eustache Oriental.

As for that astronomer, had he passed his time in observing the sun on the Balearic horizon? No one would have been able to say. At all events he brought back divers packets containing edible products peculiar to the islands, “encimadas,” a kind of puff-paste cake in which butter is used instead of fat, and which are none the less savoury, and also half-a-dozen “tourgs “(?), fish much appreciated by the Cape Formentor fishermen, and which the chief steward received orders to have prepared with special care, for his use.

Truly this President of the Montélimar Astronomical Society made more use of his mouth than of his eyes — at least since he had left France.

Towards half-past eight the cables were let go, and the *Argèlès* left the port of Palma without Captain Bugarach’s having allowed his passengers a -complete night in the Majorcan city. So that is why Clovis Dardentor did not hear the voice of the “Serenos “and their nocturnal songs, or the refrains of the national “habaneras” and the “jotas,” accompanied by the melodious tinkling of the guitar, with which the patios of the Balearic houses were filled until sunrise.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH THE DÉSIRANDELLE FAMILY MEET THE ELISSANE FAMILY.

“TO-DAY we shall postpone dinner until eight o’clock,” said Madame Elissane. “Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle, with their son, and probably this Monsieur Dardentor — that will make four covers.”

“Yes, Madame,” replied the maid.

“Our guests will be in great need of rest, Manuela, and I fear poor Madame Désirandelle has suffered by the rough crossing. See that her room is ready, for it is possible she may prefer to lie down when she comes.”

“I understand, Madame.”

“Where is my daughter?”

“In the pantry, Madame, occupied in preparing the dessert,” answered Manuela.

Manuela, who had been in Madame Elissane’s service ever since her arrival, was one of those Spaniards among whom the domestic staff of the Oran families are chiefly recruited.

Madame Elissane occupied a pretty house in the Rue du Vieux-Chateau, where the residences have retained a half Spanish, half Moorish physiognomy. A little garden made a fair show of convolvuli, its lawn was still green at this beginning of the hot season, and it boasted a few trees — among others those “bella-ombra,” a name of good omen,- of which the Etang promenade possesses such fine specimens.

This house, comprising a ground-floor and an upper storey, was large enough for the Désirandelle family to find comfortable hospitality there. Neither rooms nor consideration would be wanting during their stay at Oran.

The capital of the province is a very fine town. It is pleasantly situated between the slopes of a ravine. Being divided into two parts by the fortifications of the Château- Neuf, it looks, like all those cities, ancient on one side, modern on the other. The old Spanish town, with its kasbah, its tapering houses, its harbour, situated on the west, has preserved its ancient ramparts. On the east, the modern town, with its Jewish and Moorish houses, is defended by a battlemented walWrom the Castle to Fort Saint-André. This city, which was the Gonharan of the Arabians, founded in the tenth century by the Moors from Andalusia, is overlooked by a high mountain, whose rugged side is occupied by Fort La Moune. Oran is five times larger now than at the time of its foundation, its area is not under two hundred and eighty acres, and several stfeets extend two kilometres outside its walls towards the sea. Pursuing his route beyond the belt of the forts towards the north and to the east, the tourist will reach the recently created suburbs of Gambetta and Noiseaux-Eckmulh.

It would be difficult to find an Algerian town where the diversity of types are more interesting to study. Among its forty-seven thousand inhabitants, only seven thousand French and naturalized Jews are to be found, as against eighteen thousand foreigners, the majority Spaniards, then Italians, English and Anglo-Maltese. Let us add to these about four thousand Arabs, south of the town in the suburb of Djalli, called also the negro village, which supplies street sweepers and wharf porters; divide this mixture of races into twenty-seven thousand of the Catholic religion, seven thousand of the

Jewish religion, a thousand Mohammedans, and you will have from that point of view an almost exact estimate of the hybrid population of Oran.

The climate of the province is generally dry and hot. The wind raises great whirls of dust. The daily watering of the town is in the hands of the municipality, and ought to be more regular and more abundant.

Such is the city to which Monsieur Elissane had retired (after having been in business in Perpignan for a bout ten years), on twelve thousand francs in *rentes*, and this comfortable little fortune had not diminished under the prudent administration of his widow.

Madame Elissane, then forty-four years of age, could never have been so pretty as her daughter, or so graceful, or so charming. She was practical to a rare degree, weighed her words like her bread, and presented the well-known type of the female accountant, reckoning her feelings, keeping her existence by double entry after the manner of her books, balancing debit and credit like a current account, taking care that it should always be in her favour. Who does not know those faces with set features, rigid curves, prominent foreheads, shârp eyes and close-shut mouths? — all in the weaker sex denoting habits of concentration and obstinacy. Madame Elissane had organized her house very accurately, without useless expense. She saved money which she laid out in safe and profitable investments. She disregarded it, however, .when her daughter, in whom all her affections were centred, was in question. Her own dress was almost as simple as a nun’s, but she wished Louise to be elegantly attired, and she neglected nothing with that purpose. It was to her child’s happiness that all her desires tended, and she believed that happiness would be secured by the contemplated union of her own with the Désirandelle family. The twelve thousand francs of *rentes* which Agathocle would possess, added to the fortune that Louise would inherit from her mother, would form a metallic basis amply sufficient for a structure of repose in the future.

Louise meanwhile could only vaguely remember what Agathocle Was like. But her mother had brought her up with the idea of one day becoming Madame Elissane junior. On the whole this appeared to her natural enough, provided the proposed *fiancé* pleased her, and why should he not have all the qualities to please her?

After she had given her final orders Madame Elissane passed into the drawing-room, where her daughter joinéd her.

“Your dessert is ready, my child?” she asked.

“Yes, mother.”

“It is a pity thfe steamer arrives so late, almost at nightfall!... Be dressed by six o’clock, Louise, and we will go down to the harbour, perhaps the *Agathoclès* may be signalled by then.”

“You mean the *Argèlès*, dear mother,” answered Louise laughing, “and then my intended is not called Agathoclès, but Agathocle!”

“Yes... yes...” rejoined Madame Elissane.

“*Argèlès*... Agathocle... What does it matter? But you may be certain that he will not blunder in pronouncing the name of Louise...”

“Is that quite so sure?...” said the young girl archly. “I am a stranger to Monsieur Agathocle, and I know him no better...”

“Oh, we shall give you plenty of time to make acquaintance before anything is decided.”

“That is too kind!”

“Besides I am sure and certain that you will please him, my child, and there is every reason to think that he will contrive to please you, for Madame Désirandelle praises him up to the skies!... and then we shall settle the conditions of the marriage.”

“And the account will be balanced, mother?”

“Yes, to your profit!... Ah, let us not forget that their friend Monsieur Clovis Dardentor accompanies the Désirandelle family... you know, this rich man from Perpignan they are so proud of, and according to them the best man in the world. Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle not being accustomed to travel by sea, he has been kind enough to escort them so far as Oran. It is very good of him, and we must give him a warm welcome, Louise...”

“All the welcome he deserves, and even if he has an idea of asking my hand!... But no, I am forgetting that I have to be... that I shall be Madame Agathocle... a fine name, although rather Greek.”

“Come, come, Louise, do be serious.”

Serious the young girl was, though of a gay and charming disposition. And this was the fact, not because the heroine of a story is always charming; no, she was so in reality, in the bloom of her twentieth year, with her frank nature, her animated and mobile countenance, with her bright, velvety eyes, her abundant dark brown hair, her graceful, even let us say “silken,” carriage — to employ an epithet which Pierre Loti — before becoming an Academician — applied to the flight of the swallow.

This slight pencil sketch suffices to paint Louise Elissane, and, as the reader may see, she was somewhat of a contrast to the booby who had been forwarded to her from Cette with the rest of the cargo of the *Argèlès.*

When the time had come, after the mistress of the house had given a last glance to the rooms prepared for the Désirandelle family, Madame Elissane called her daughter and they started for the harbour. They both wished to pause first in the amphitheatre-like garden that overlooks the roadstead. From that spot the view extended far out to the open sea. The sky was magnificent, the horizon perfectly clear. Already the sun was sinking towards the point of Mers-el-Kebir — that *portus divinus* of the ancients where ironclads and cruisers find an excellent shelter against the frequent squalls from the west.

Some white sails were to be seen towards the north. Distant streaks of smoke indicated the passage of steamers belonging to the numerous lines that serve .the Mediterranean, and nearly approach the African coast. Two or three of these steamers were, of course, bound for Oran, and one of them was not more than three miles off. Was this the *Argèlès* so impatiently expected, at least by the mother, if not by her daughter?

“It is nearly half-past six,” observed Madame Elissane. “Let us go down to the harbour.”

“Yes, let us go,” replied Louise. And by the wide street that leads to the wharf they made their way to the side of the dock where the steamers were usually moored.

Madame Elissane asked one of the officials on the wharf if the *Argèlès* was signalled.

“Yes, Madame,” replied the officer, “she will arrive in half an hour.”

Twenty minutes later, a prolonged whistle announced an arrival; the boat doubled the mole at the end of the jetty half a mile in length, at the foot of Fort La Moune, and after some evolutions, arrived alongside the pier.

So soon as communication was established, Madame Elissane and Louise went on board.

The former embraced Madame Désirandelle, who had ceased to be ill after the steamer entered the harbour, then Monsieur Désirandelle, then Agathocle Désirandelle, while Louise conducted herself with the reserve which all young girls understand.

“Well, and what of me, dear and excellent lady?... Did we not know each other long ago at Perpignan?... Come, I remember you, and Mademoiselle Louise also; she has grown a little since! And now is there not to be a kiss, or even two, for that good fellow Dardentor?”

If Patrick had hoped that, in this first interview, his master would display the reserve of a man of the world, he must have been cruelly disappointed by this familiar beginning. He withdrew therefore, severe, but just, at the moment when the lips of Clevis Dardentor sounded on the withered cheek of Madame Elissane like the drum-stick on the skin of a drum.

Louise had not been able to escape the embrace of the Désirandelle household. Yet, free and easy as he was, Monsieur Dardentor did not go so far as to bestow fatherly kisses upon the young girl, though she would doubtless have accepted them with a good grace.

As for young Agathocle, after advancing towards Louise, he had honoured her with a mechanical salutation in which his head alone took part, thanks to the play of the muscles of his neck, and he withdrew without pronouncing a word.

The young girl could not restrain a scornful pout, which Monsieur Dardentor failed to perceive, although it did not escape either Marcel Lornans or Jean Taconnat.

“Ah!” said the former, “I did not expect to see such a pretty girl.”

“Pretty indeed!” added the latter.

“And will she marry that fool?” said Marcel Lornans.

“She!” cried Jean Taconnat. “God forgive me, but if it would present that, I would break the oath I have taken never to marry.”

It appears that Jean Taconnat had taken that oath — he said so at least. Marcel Lornans, however, had not sworn any such oath. What did it matter? Both had come to Oran with the intention of enlisting in the 5th Chasseurs d’Afrique, not to marry Mademoiselle Louise Elissane.

Let it be mentioned here once for oil that the passage of the *Argèlès* between Palmaand Oran had been accomplished in really extraordinary comfort, with a sea as smooth as though all the oils of Provence had been poured on its surface, and a favourable north-east breeze. Not a wave had broken into foam during the passage of twenty-three hours. Everybody had arrived in good health, even Madame Désirandelle and the majority of the lady passengers who had suffered so much between Cette and the Balearic group. Thus the morning breakfast had gathered together nearly the whole of the travellers at the general table, and when all was said and done the Maritime Company would have been wrong to complain of that unaccustomed number of guests.

As for Monsieur Oriental, he considered the “tourds “cooked à la mode napolitaine delicious, and had feasted upon “encimadas” with the gusto of the professional gourmet.

Meanwhile, although he had recovered his mental and physical equilibrium so far as to occupy his place in the saloon since leaving Palma, Monsieur Désirandelle had not made acquaintance with the two Parisians. These two young men left him alone. He regarded them as very inferior to his son Agathocle, in spite of all their wit, which appeared to him in bad taste. Dardentor might think their acquaintance agreeable, and their conversation amusing if he pleased; but in his opinion that would come to an end with the voyage of the *Argèlès.*

Monsieur Désirandelle did not, therefore, dream of introducing the two cousins to Madame Elissane any more than to her daughter. But with his Southern disregard of ceremony, and his habit of yielding to every impulse, Clovis Dardentor did not hesitate.

“Monsieur Marcel Lornans and Monsieur Jean Taconnat of Paris,” said he, “two young travelling companions for whom I have a great regard, which they reciprocate, and I hope our friendship will last longer than the voyage.”

What contrasts there are in this man from Perpignan! Here were sentiments expressed with the utmost propriety. Patrick was not there to hear him.

The two young men bowed before Madame Elissane, who made them a very distant salutation.

“Madame,” said Marcel Lornans, “we are much obliged for this kind attention on the part of Monsieur Dardentor. During the passage we have been able to appreciate him as he deserves. We too believe in the duration of this friendship...”

“Paternal on his part, and filial on ours!” added Jean Taconnat.

Madame Désirandelle, weary of all these civilities, looked at her son, who had not yet opened his lips. Madame Elissane, who might have told these young Parisians that she would receive them with pleasure during their sojourn at Oran, did not do so — at this Agathocle’s mother was pleased *in petto*. Their maternal instinct suggested to the two ladies that a prudent reserve with regard tp these strangers would be advisable.

Madame Elissane then informed Monsieur Dardentor that his place was laid at her table, and that she hoped he would dine every day with the Désirandelle family.

“Give me time to go to the hotel,” replied the man from Perpignan, “to change my jacket and my sailor’s cap for a more suitable dress, and I will come and do honour to your dinner, dear Madame!”

This agreed to, Clovis Dardentor, Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat took leave of Captain Bugarach and Dr. Bruno. If they should ever again embark in the *Argèlès*, it would be a satisfaction to find so kind a doctor and so attentive a skipper on board. The latter replied that they had seldom met passengers so agreeable, and the parties separated very well satisfied wjth each other.

Monsieur Eustache Oriental had already set foot upon African soil; his telescope was at his back in a leather cover, his travelling bag was in his hand, and he followed a porter carrying a heavy valise. As he had always held aloof during the voyage, no one took the trouble to salute him on his departure.

Clovis Dardentor and the two Parisians went on shore, leaving the Désirandelle family occupied with the transport of their luggage to the house in the Rue du Vieux- Chateau. Then the three got into the same carriage and they set out for an excellent hotel on the Place Napoléon specially recommended to them by Dr. Bruno. There on the first floor, a sitting-room, a bed-room, and a little room for Patrick were placed at the disposal of Clovis Dardentor. Marcel Lornans and jean Taconnat secured two rooms on the floor above, with windows looking on the square.

Now it happened that Monsieur Oriental had also made choice of that hotel. So when his travelling companions arrived there, they perceived him installed in the dining- room, meditating upon the menu of the meal which was about to be served.

“A singular astronomer!” observed Jean Taconnat, “I am surprised that he does not order for his dinner an omelette of jumbled stars, or a duck stuffed with little planets!”

Half an hour later, Clovis Dardentor left his room, accurately dressed by the assistance of Patrick.

On meeting the cousins at the hall door he cried: “Well, my young friends, so here we are at Oran! . .

“Yes, indeed, here we are!” replied Jean Taconnat.

“Well, well! I do hope that you do. not think of enlisting in the 5th Chasseurs to-day! . .

“Ah, Monsieur Dardentor, that cannot be delayed,” answered Marcel Lornans.

“You are in a great hurry then to put on the blue jacket, to get into red trousers, to wear the regulation cap...”

“When one’s mind is made up...”

“Good... good!... Wait at least until we have visited the town and its environs together!... Until to-morrow...”

“Until to-morrow!” said Jean Taconnat.

And Clovis Dardentor was driven by the shortest way to his destination.

“Yes, as that amiable man says, here we are at Oran!” repeated Marcel Lornans.

“And when one is somewhere the question is, what is one going to do there? . .

“It seems to me, Jean, that question was settled long ago... We have to enlist...”

“Of course, Marcel... but...”

“What... are you still dreaming of article 117 of the Civil Code?”

“What is that article?”

“The one that treats of the conditions of adoption.”

“If that article is article 117,” replied Jean Taconnat.

“Yes... I am thinking of article 117. The opportunity which did not present itself at Palma, may present itself at Oran. . .”

“With one chance the less,” said Marcel Lornans, laughing. “You have no more waves at your disposal, my poor Jean, and so you are reduced to fight and flame. For instance, if the hotel takes fire to-night, I warn you that I shall strive to save you first, and to save myself afterwards...”

“That is like a real friend, Marcel.”

“As for Monsieur Dardentor, he is the sort of man to save himself unaided. He possesses coolness of the first order... We know something about that.”

“Granted, Marcel, and he gave a proof of it when he went to receive Benediction at Saint Eulalie. Still, if he did not suspect a danger... if he were surprised by a fire... if he could only be saved from the outside...”

“So then, Jean,” Marcel Lornans continued, “you do *not* abandon the idea of Monsieur Dardentor becoming our adopted father?”

“Exactly... our adopted father!”

“Well and good!... You do not intend to renounce?”

“Never!”

“Then I shall say no more on this subject, Jean, but on one condition!...”

“What?”

“That you have done with your gloomy and preoccupied ways, recover your good humour of old, and take things laughingly!”

“Agreed, Marcel... laughingly if I succeed in saving Monsieur Dardentor from one of the dangers provided for by the Code, laughingly if the opportunity of saving him does not occur, laughingly if I succeed, laughingly if I fail, laughingly everywhere and always!”

“Bravo! There, you have become fantastic again!... As to our enlisting...”

“There is no hurry, Marcel, and before going to the office of the deputy-commissary, I ask for a delay...”

“And what delay?”

“A fortnight’s delay!... The deuce! when one is going to enrol oneself for life ofte may well be granted two weeks of real liberty...”

“Here goes for the two weeks, then, and from this until then, if you have not procured a father in the person of Monsieur Dardentor...”

“*I or* you, Marcel.”

“Or I... Very well, all right! We will go in for the big prize.”

“Agreed, Marcel, agreed.”

“But you will be gay, Jean?”

“Gay as a son-in-law who inherits from his mother-in- law in the first year of his marriage!”

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH THE COVENANTED “DELAY “EXPIRES WITHOUT RESULT EITHER FOR MARCEL LORNANS OR JEAN TACONNAT.

A COCK is not more lively in the first glimmer of the dawn than was Jean Taconnat when he jumped out of his bed and awoke Marcel Lornans by his morning song. Two weeks — he had two whole weeks before him to transform this good man and bi-millionaire into an adopted father.

It was certain that Clovis Dardentor would not leave Oran before the marriage of Agathocle Désirandelle and Louise Elissane had taken place.

Must he not act as witness to the son of his old friends from Perpignan? Now, at least four or five weeks must elapse before the accomplishment of the nuptial ceremony, if it was to be accomplished... But, in truth, would it be accomplished?...

That “if” and that “but” fluttered about in the young man’s brain. It seemed to him impossible that the booby Agathocle should become the husband of that adorable girl, for, little as Marcel had seen of her on board the *Argèlès,* he would have considered it a failure in duty not to adore her. That Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle regarded their son as a perfectly suitable husband for Louise was easily explicable. From the beginning fathers and mothers have been gifted with a special “trick of the retina,” as Monsieur Dardentor said, with regard to their progeny. But it was inevitable that — sooner or later — the man from Perpignan would discover the worthless- ness of this youth and be convinced that two beings so different were not made for each other.

At half-past eight o’clock Monsieur Dardentor and the two Parisians met in the dining-room of the hotel for the early breakfast.

Clovis Dardentor was in joyous mood. He had dined well the previous evening, he had slept well during the night. With excellent digestion, excellent sleep, a quiet conscience, if one is not sure of the morrow, can one ever be so?

“Young men,” said Clovis Dardentor as he moistened his brioche in a cup of chocolat Ménier of extra-superior quality, “we have not met since last night, and that separation has seemed long...”

“You appeared to us in dreams, Monsieur Dardentor,” replied Jean Taconnat, “your head encircled by a nimbus.”

“A saint, what?”

“Something like the heavenly patron of the Pyrénées- Orientales!”

“Ah, Monsieur Jean, then you have resumed your natural cheerfulness.”

“Yes, he has,” said Marcel Lornans; “but he is in danger of losing it again.”

“Why?”

“Because we must separate once more, Monsieur Darcentor, and go, you one way, we another.”

“How... separate?”

“Of course, inasmuch as the Désirandelle family will claim you.”

“Oh, over the way I... not at all... not at all... That is settled... I shall not permit myself to be monopolized... That I may accept an invitation to dinner from time to time, I grant! but to allow myself to be held in leash, never! The forenoons and the afternoons I keep for myself, and I hope we three shall employ them in going about the town together... the town and its neighbourhood.”

“With all my heart, Monsieur Dardentor!” exclaimed Jean Taconnat, “I don’t want to leave you, I assure you.”

. “That’s all right,” said the man from Perpignan. “I like young people; I seem to throw off half my years when I am with friends half as young as myself! and still... on calculation, I might easily be the father of you both.” .

“Oh, Monsieur Dardentor!” cried Jean Taconnat, with self-betraying enthusiasm.

“Let us then remain together, young people! It will be soon enough to drop hands when I leave Oran to go — really I do not know where...”

“After the marriage?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“What marriage?”

“Young Désirandelle’s...”

“To be sure... I was forgetting it already... Hey! what a pretty girl Mademoiselle Louise Elissane is!”

“We thought her so,” adcled Marcel Lornans, “the moment she arrived on board the *Argèlès.”*

“So did I, my friends. But since Î have contemplated her in her mother’s home, so graceful, so attentive... so... “well, so... she has gained cent, per cent, in my mind! Truly Agathocle has nothing to complain of...”

“If he pleases Mademoiselle Elissane,” Marcel Lornans ventured to observe.

“Of course, but he will please her! They know each other since their birth... And then Agathocle is a good sort, on the whole, perhaps a little... a little...”

“A little, a great deal...” said Marcel Lornans.

“And even not at all — ” said Jean Taconnat.

He completed the sentence to himself: “Not at all suitable to Mademoiselle Elissane! “For he thought it too soon to declare that opinion to Monsieur Dardentor, who repeated his phrase: “Yes, he is a little, I own it. Good! he will brighten up — like a marmot after the winter...”

Marcel Lornans could not refrain from saying: “But he will remain no less a marmot!”

“Make allowances, young fellows, make allowances!” replied Monsieur Dardentor. “If Agathocle were only living with Parisians like you, in two months he would get over his stupidity. You should give him some lessons.”

“Lessons in wit, at a hundred sous the lesson! That would be as good as stealing his money. . .”

Monsieur Dardentor would not consent to give in altogether. That Désirandelle junior was as sharp as a blade he doubted, it is true, but he added: “You may laugh, gentlemen! You forget love makes the most stupid clever.

Then Marcel Lornans spoke of Madame Elissane again. He asked some questions about the life she led in Oran. “What did Monsieur Dardentor think of her house?”

“A pretty residence,” replied the latter. “A pretty cage, quite enlivened by the presence of a charming bird. You will come there?”

“If it would not be an intrusion,” answered Marcel.

“If you are introduced by me, it will be all right! Not to-day, though! Agathocle must be allowed to get a footing. We shall see to-morrow. Now let us think only of our excursions. The town, the harbour, the sights!”

“And our enlisting?...” said Marcel Lornans.

“You are not going to sign to-day, I imagine, or to-morrow, or the next day. Wait at least until after the wedding.”

“That may mean we shall wait until we have reached the age for a pension...”

“No, no! This affair will not linger.”

“Then,” continued Monsieur Dardentor, “don’t let us talk about enlisting.”

“Keep up your courage,” said Jean Taconnat. “We have given ourselves fifteen days. Between this and then If our position is not modified; if new interests — ”

“Well, my friends, let us not argue!” cried Clovis Dardentor. “You have granted yourselves fifteen days. I take them and I give you a receipt!... You will belong to me during that period. Truly I only embarked on the *Argèlès* because I knew I would find you there... on board...”

“And yet you were late for the steamer, Monsieur Dardentor!” replied Jean Taconnat.

In the best of good humours the man from Perpignan rose from the table and passed into the hall. Patrick was there.

“Has Monsieur any orders to give me?”

“Orders? no, but ‘campo’ the whole day. Camp that in a corner of your brain and don’t shift it until six o’clock strikes”

Patrick’s face was scornful, he was not at all pleased with his master for this whole day’s holiday granted in such terms.

“Then Monsieur does not desire me to accompany him?”

“What I do desire, Patrick, is not to have you at my heels, and I beg you to show me yours!”

“Perhaps Monsieur will permit me to give him a recommendation?”

“Yes, if you disappear after it is given.”

“Well, the advice which I beg Monsieur to act upon is not to get into a carriage again before the coachman is in his seat... That might perhaps end not by a benediction, but by a tumble...”

“*Go* to the devil!” said Clovis Dardentor as he descended the steps of the hotel, followed by the two Parisians.

“That is a good type of servant you have,” said Marcel Lornans. “What correctness... what distinction!”

“And what a nuisance with his ways! But he is a good, faithful fellow, who would fling himself into the fire to save me.”

“He is not the only one who would do that, Monsieur Dardentor!” cried Jean Taconnat, who in such *a.* case would have done all in his power to forestall Patrick as a rescuer.

Clovis Dardentor and the two cousins passed the morning in visiting the lower town. The port of Oran has been reclaimed from the sea. A long pier protects it and transverse piers divide it into docks — the whole covering an area of sixty acres.

The two young cousins did not particularly care about the commercial activity which makes Oran the first among Algerian towns. Clovis Dardentor, the man from Perpignan, evinced a lively interest in it. The shipment of esparto grass (or rushes), which constitutes a considerable industry, the grass being supplied in abundance by the vast southern territories of the province, the transport of cattle, of cereals, raw sugar, the shipping of minerals found in the mountainous regions, all this commercial activity was pleasing to Monsieur Dardentor.

“I shall spend several days in the midst of all this,” said he. “I feel as much at home here as I did formerly among my barrels. Oran cannot possibly have anything» more interesting to show us.”

Except its buildings, its Cathedral, its mosques,” replied Marcel Lornans.

“Oh!” said Jean Taconnat, who wanted to conciliate his father in expectation, “I almost agree with Monsieur Dardentor! This bustle is most interesting, the ships coming in and going out, the trucks laden with merchandise, ‘the legions of Arab porters. In the interior of the town of course there are buildings to see, and we shall see them. But this port, the sea flowing into its docks, the blue water reflecting the masts...”

Marcel Lornans looked at hjim derisively.

“Bravo!” cried Monsieur Dardentor. “When there is no water in a landscape it seems to me that something, I know not what, is wanting! I have several fine pictures in my house on the Place de la Loge, and there is always water in the foreground. Without that I would not buy . .

“Ah, you are a connoisseur, Monsieur Dardentor,” replied Marcel Lornans. “So let us go and find those parts where there is water... Do you insist upon its being salt?”

“That matters little to me, since I don’t mean to drink it.”

“And you, Jean?”

“It matters as little to me for what I want to do!” replied Jean Taconnat with a glance at his friend.

“Very well,” said Marcel Lornans, “we shall find water elsewhere than in the port, and according to Joanne’s Guide Book there is the Righi torrent, which is partly covered by the boulevard Oudinot.”

. After all, much against Marcel Lornans’ will, the whole of the morning was employed in going round the wharves, and then Monsieur Dardentor and the two Parisians went back to the hotel to luncheon. After two hours devoted to the siesta and to reading newspapers, Clovis Dardentor came to a conclusion which he communicated to his young friends: “It would be better to put off our walk through the interior of the town until to-morrow.”

“And why?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“Because the Désirandelle family might think it ill- natured if I neglected them.”

“But,” interrogated Jean Taconnat, “do you not dine at Madame Elissane’s?”

“Yes, to-day again. To-morrow we shall amuse our-

selves all day, upon my honour!... And now *au*

revoir.”

And Clovis Dardentor set out gaily for the Rue du Vieux-Château.

. “When I am not with him,” said Jean Taconnat, “I am always afraid something may happen to him.”

“Kind soul I “replied Marcel Lornans.

It is needless to say that Monsieur Dardentor was received with pleasure by Madame Elissane, and that Louise, who was instinctively attracted towards that excellent man, added her heart-felt welcome.

As for young Désirandelle, he was not there, he was never there. That youth preferred to loiter out of doors, and only came back at meal-times. Although he took his place at table beside Louise, he scarcely addressed a word to her. It is true that Monsieur Dardentor, who was also seated near her, did not allow the conversation to languish. He talked of everything, of his department, of his birthplace, his voyage on board the *Argèlès*, his adventures at „Palrtfa, his run-away galera, his memorable entry into the church of Saint-Eulalia, and of his young travelling companions, whom he praised highly — in short, talking of them as though he had known them from their birth.

On hearing him, Louise Elissane conceived a secret wish that the two Parisians should be admitted to her mother's house, and she could not refrain from a faint sign of approval when' Monsieur Dardentor made the proposal. "I shall bring them to you, Madame Elissane," said he. "I shall bring them to you to-morrow forthwith. Two nice-looking young men, very nice-looking, and whose acquaintance you wilL not regret having made!"

Perhaps Madame Désirandelle considered their friend's proposal inopportune, to say the least. However, Madame ElisSane thought she could not do otherwise than acquiesce in it. She could refuse nothing to Monsieur Dardentor.

"Nothing you could refuse me I "cried the latter. "Ah, I shall take you at your word, dear Madame. Besides, I never ask anything out of reason » . . for myself or from others... Ask my friend Désirandelle."

"Undoubtedly," replied Agathocle's father, not with absolute conviction.

"Then it is agreed," resumed Monsieur Dardentor, "Messieurs Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat will spend to-morrow evening in your society, Madame Elissane... By the way, Désirandelle, will you come with us to visit the town between nine o’clock and noon?...”

“You will excuse me, Dardentor, but I don’t wish to leave these ladies, and I want to keep our dear Louise company.”

“As you please... as you please!... I understand that!... Ah, Mademoiselle Louise, how they love you already in that excellent family which you arc about to enter... Why, Agathocle, you are saying nothing, my boy!... Must I exert myself in your place?... Come now, don’t you think Mademoiselle Louise charming?”

Agathocle assumed his most sprightly air and answered that if he did not utter what he thought, it was because he thought it was better to say it low — a clumsy sentence that meant nothing, and which he would never have been able to get out if Monsieur Dardentor had not helped him.

And Louise Elissane, who could scarcely hide her repugnance to this booby, looked at Monsieur Dardentor with lovely disconcerted eyes, while Madame Désirandelle said encouragingly: “Is he not charming?”

And Monsieur Désirandelle added: “And how he loves her!”

Clovis Dardentor was evidently determined to be blind to the facts. The marriage being arranged, he regarded it as accomplished, and it never etitered his head that it might not take place.

The next day found Clovis Dardentor fresh, jovial and active as usual, before the matutinal cup of chocolate with the two Parisians.

First of all he informed them that they were to spend the evening together at the house of Madame Elissane.

“It was an excellent idea of yours to introduce us!” answered Marcel Lornans. “During our stay in garrison we shall have at least one agreeable house...”

“Agreeable, yes, but especially so long as Mademoiselle Louise remains there,” replied Clovis Dardentor. “But after the marriage...”

“That is true,” said Marcel Lornans, “there is the marriage.”

“To which you will be invited, my young friends...”

“Monsieur Dardentor,” replied Jean Taconnat, “you overwhelm us... I do not know how we shall ever be able to acknowledge... You treat us...”

“Like my children!... Well, would not my age allow of my being your father?”

“Ah, Monsieur Dardentor...” cried Jean Taconnat in a tone that said so many things, “Monsieur Dardentor! “The whole day was passed in inspecting the town. This trio of tourists conscientiously “did” the principal promenades, the Promenade de Turin, planted with fine trees, the Boulevard Oudinot and its double row of bella- ombra, and the squares — Place de la Carrière, Place du Theatre, Place d’Orléans, Place de Nemours.

They had an opportunity of observing the various types of the population, largely mixed with soldiers and officers, a certain number of whom wore the uniform of the 5th Chasseurs d’Afrique.

“Very elegant, that uniform,” repeated Monsieur Dardentor. “The braided jacket will fit you like a glove, and you will be irresistible in full dress! Ah! I can already see you turning the heads of all the girls when you are officers. The soldier’s is decidedly a fine profession for those who like it, and since you do like it...”

“It is in our blood!” replied Jean Taconnat. “We get it from our ancestors, worthy traders in the Rue St. Denis, from whom we have inherited military instincts!”

They met Jews in the costume of Morocco, Jewesses in dresses of gold-embroidered silk, then Moors lounging idly along the sunny footways, finally Frenchmen and Frenchwomen.

Clovis Dardentor, it need hardly be said, proclaimed himself enchanted with all he saw. But his interest increased notably when in the progress of the excursion they came to tan-yards, vermicelli factories, foundries, and tobacco manufactories.

In fact — why not admit . it? — his admiration was moderate in presence of the monuments of, the town, the Cathedral, which was rebuilt in 1829, and whose three Aaves are worthy of remark, the Prefecture, the bank, the theatre, which are modern edifices.

The two young men gave serious attention to the church of Saint-André, a former rectangular mosque built on horse-shoe arches of Moorish architecture, and surmounted by a graceful minaret. They were, however, less impressed by that church than by the mosque of the Pasha, whose front gate in Koubba shape is much admired by artists. They might also have stayed longer before the mosque of Sidi-el-Haouri, remarkable for its three series of archwork, if Clovis Dardentor had not observed that “time was flying.”

As they left the spot Marcel Lornans caught sight of a person on the balcony of the minaret observing the various points of the horizon through a telescope.

“Look! Monsieur Oriental,” he said.

“What... the hunter-up of stars... the census- taker of planets?” said Dardentor.

“The very man... he is looking through a telescope...”

“If he is looking through a telescope it is not he,” asserted Jean Taconnat. “The moment he leaves off eating he is no longer Monsieur Oriental.”

It certainly was the president of the Montelimar Astronomical Society, however, and he was following the sun’s diurnal course.

The three tourists returned to the hotel at dinner-time, thoroughly tired, but in very good humour. Patrick had profited by the leisure allowed him by his master without abusing it. He proceeded along the principal streets of the town systematically, not considering himself obliged to see everything in a single day, and gathering up a store of precious recollections.

At eight o’clock Monsieur Dardentor and the two cousins arrived at the house in the Rue du Vieux-Château.

The Elissane and Désirandelle families were in the drawing-room. Upon their presentation by Clovis Dardentor, Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat received a kind welcome.

The evening was like all those middle-class evenings, an occasion for a chat, a cup of tea, and a little music. Louise Elissane played on the piano with good taste, for she had the real artistic sense. Now it happened that Marcel Lornans possessed a very good voice. The young man and the young girl performed some pieces from a new score.

Clovis Dardentor adored music with the unconscious fervour of people who do not know much about it. It is enough that it goes into one ear and out of the other. Nevertheless our man from Perpignan indulged himself in complimenting and applauding and “bravoing “with all his southern enthusiasm.

“Two talents happily united!” he concluded.

The young pianist smiled, the young singer looked slightly embarrassed, Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle frowned. In truth, their friend was not fortunate in his choice of expressions.

The conversation turned on the exploration that Monsieur Dardentor and the two Parisians had made of the town. Louise Elissane, who was very well informed, replied with intelligence and simplicity to the questions that were put to her on the occupation of the Arabs for three hundred years, the taking possession of Oran by France early in the present century, and the commerce which gives it the first rank among Algerian cities.

“But,” added the girl, “our town has not always been fortunate, and its history records many calamities.

After Mussulman attacks came disasters of nature. The earthquake of 1790 almost completely destroyed the town.”

Jean Taeonnat pricked up his ears.

“And after the conflagrations occasioned by that disaster it was sacked by the Turks and the Arabs. Its tranquillity only dates from 1831, from the time of the French rule.”

Jean Taconnat said to himself: “Earthquakes... conflagrations... There, I have arrived a hundred years too late... Do shocks make themselves felt in these days, Mademoiselle?” he asked.

“No, Monsieur,” replied Mademoiselle Elissane.

“That is unfortunate.”

“What! unfortunate!” cried Monsieur Désirandelle. “Do you want earthquakes... conflagrations... cataclysms of that kind, Monsieur?...”

“Let us talk no more of such things,” exclaimed Madame Désirandelle, “or I shall be sea-sick again. We are on land now, and have had enough of the rolling of the boats without the towns joining in.”

Marcel Lornans could not help smiling at this reflection.

“I regret having recalled these memories,” said Louise Elissane, “as Madame Désirandelle is so impressionable...”

“Oh, my dear child,” replied Monsieur Désirandelle, “do not reproach yourself.”

“And besides,” cried Monsieur Dardentor, “if an earthquake did occur, . . I should be well able to stop it... One foot here, another there, like the Colossus of Rhodes... Nothing would’ move...”

And the man from Perpignan planted his legs widely apart, made the floor creak under his boots, stood firm against any commotion of the African soil, and laughed so heartily that everyone joined in his hilarity.

The time for retiring had now come, and they separated, having made an appointment with the two families to visit the Kasbah on the morrow. Marcel re-entered the hotel in a thoughtful mood, wondering whether to enlist in the 5th Chasseurs d'Afrique was, after all, the ideal of happiness here below!...

During the next morning the Elissane and Désirandelle families, with Monsieur Dardentor and the two Parisians, visited the old Oranian Kasbah — now a vulgar barrack, which communicates by two gates with the town. Then the walk was extended to the negro village, justly considered one of the curiosities of Oran. And during that excursion, chance — oh! only chance — threw Louise Elissane with Marcel Lornans, and she talked gaily with him, to the lively discomfiture of Madame Désirandelle.

In the evening the "whole company," as he said, was entertained at dinner by Clovis Dardentor. The various courses of a magnificent repast were served under Patrick's direction, and he was an adept in such matters. Mademoiselle Elissane especially pleased the gentleman in livery; he recognized in her an extremely distinguished person.

Several days passed, and meanwhile the respective situation of the persons in the Vieux-Château house with whom we are concerned remained unaltered.

Madame Elissane had sounded her daughter several times on the subject of Agathocle. As a practical woman she laid before her the advantages offered by a union between the two families. Louise avoided giving, any answer to her mother, who, in her turn, did not know what reply to make to. the urgent entreaties of Madame Désirandelle. who did all in her power to spur the lagging energies of her son.

“Do be more assiduous in your attentiôns!” she said to him ten times a day. “We take care to leave Louise and you together, and I am sure you stand there looking through the window instead of paying her any attention.”

“But yes... I do try... I...”

“Yes... you try, and try... and you don’t pronounce ten words in ten minutes...”

“Ten minutes... not so much as that!” answered the blockhead.

“But do think of your future, Agathocle!” continued his mother in despair, shaking him by the sleeve of his coat. “There ought to be no difficulty about this marriage, since the two families are agreed, and it is not even approached...”

“Yes it is... Have I not given my consent?...” replied Agathocle.

“No... for Louise has not given hers!” retorted Madame Désirandelle.

Things were not advancing, and even Monsieur Dardentor’s interference failed to strike a spark out of this youth.

In short, they were trampling the ground without making any advance. Now it is not by practising the goose step that one storms a citadel. Besides, the stock of diversions was beginning to run out. The town had been visited to its last suburbs. Monsieur Dardentor now knew as much about it as the distinguished president of the Geographical Society of Oran, which is the most important of the Algerian region. And bqth the Désirandelles and Jean Taconnat were driven to despair because in. this tranquil city, whose immovable soil itself enjoyed absolute repose, “there was nothing to do.”

By good luck an idea occurred to Clovis Dardentor — an idea such as might have been expected from such a man.

The Algerian Railway Company had just announced a circular trip to the south of the province of Oran at reduced prices. This was enough to, tempt the most stay-at-home. Excursionists were to gp by one line and to return by another. Between the two stretched a hundred leagues of superb country. The tour would mean fifteen days to be employed in interesting sight-seeing.

On the multi-coloured posters of the company was shown a map of the region which drew the tourists’ attention to a thick red zigzag line. The train went to Tlélat, Saint- Denis du Sig, Perregaux, Mascara, and Salda, the terminal point. From thence the tourists were taken in carriages or as a caravan to Daya, Magenta, Sebdon, Tlemcen, Lamoricière, Sidi-bel-Abbés, returning by train from Sidi-bel-Abbés to Oran.

Upon this circular trip Clovis Dardentor seized with all the energy that characterized him. He had no difficulty in inducing the Désirandelles to adopt his views. The risks of the excursion, the life in common, the. little services to be rendered, were all so many opportunities for Agathocle to make himself acceptable to Louise!

Perhaps Madame Elissane prayed a little. This expedition terrified her, and then this, and then that. But to resist Monsieur Dardentor! Had not the excellent lady herself said that no one could refuse him anything? He reminded her of this at an opportune moment; Besides, his reasoning was decisive. During this excursion Agathocle would reveal himself in a new light. Mademoiselle Louise would appreciate his worth, and the marriage would be concluded on their return.

“And,” asked Madame Elissane, “will Messrs. Lornans and Taconnat come with us?”

“No, unfortunately,” replied Monsieur Dardentor. “They must enlist, and it would delay them too much.”

Madame Elissane was evidently pleased.

But after her mother’s the girl’s consent had to be obtained.

Monsieur Dardentor had hard work to secure this: a journey during which she would be in continual contact with the Désirandelle family was evidently repugnant to her. At Oran, at least, Agathocle was frequently absent. They scarcely saw him except at meal-times — the only times he opened his mouth in earnest, and that was not to talk. In the train, in the carriage, in the caravan he would be there, always there... This prospect was not inviting to Louise. The young man could not be otherwise than displeasing to her, and perhaps she would have been wise had she told her mother frankly that she never would marry him. But she knew Madame Ellisane to be a resolute, tenacious woman, little disposed to abandon her plans. Assuredly it would be better that the good lady herself should discover that the union was impossible...

Monsieur Dardentor was irresistibly eloquent. He was quite sincere, too, in his belief that this journey would provide his heir with opportunities of appearing to advantage, and he hoped that his old friends’ wish would be realized in the end. It would be such a grief to them if they were disappointed! Although that consideration did not touch the young girl, he did ultimately induce her to set about preparations for departure.

“You will thank me for this, later,” he repeated to her. “You will thank me for this!”

When Patrick was informed, he let his master know that the trip had not his entire approbation. He made reservations. “There would of course be other tourists, no one knew-whom, and to live in common . .

His master enjoined him to hold himself ready to strap the valises on the 10th of May, viz. in forty-eight hours.

When Monsieur Dardentor made known to the two young men his plans for the Elissane and Désirandelle families and himself, he expressed his sincere regret that they could not accompany him. It would have been perfect and charming to “caravan “together — so he expressed it — for some weeks through the province of Oran.

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat could only express regrets no less sincere; but they had now been ten days at Oran, and they must no longer delay the fulfilment of their purpose.

Yet the next evening, the eve of the proposed departure, after they had taken leave of Monsieur Dardentor, the two cousins exchanged the following questions and replies: —

“I say, Jean?” — ’

“What is it, Marcel?”

“Does a delay of two weeks?”

“Last longer than a fortnight? No, Marcel. I do not think so at least.”

“Suppose we were to go with Monsieur Dardentor?”

“Go, Marcel! And *you* propose this to me... you who gave me only a fortnight for my life-saving experiments?”

“*Yes*, Jean, because here at Oran, such a quiet town, you could not succeed... While during this circular trip who knows? occasions may...”

“Yes, yes, Marcel, that might happen. Water! fire I and especially fighting. And it is really to give me a chance that you think of joining the excursion?”

“Solely,” replied Marcel Lornans.

“You rogue!” replied Jean Taconnat.

CHAPTER X.

A FINE OPPORTUNITY OF RESCUE ON THE RAIL.

THE circular trip organized by the Algerian Railway Company was of a nature to please the Oran tourists. The distance to be covered was one hundred and ninety miles in the train, and two hundred and twenty in carriages or other means of conveyance between Saïda, Daya, Sebdon, Tlemcen and Sidi-bel-Abbès. Travellers might make the excursion at their option from May to October, that is to say, during those months which were not exposed to great atmospheric disturbances.

Moreover this was not a cheap trip of the kind of the Lubin, Cook or other agencies which bind the tourist to a rigid and invariable routine, to visit the same towns and the same monuments, on the same day at the same hour. No, and Patrick was mistaken on one point There would be no servitude, no promiscuity. The tickets were available for the whole season. Tourists might start when they liked, and stop when they pleased. And as a matter of fact the start on the 10th of May was made by only thirty excursionists.

The route had been well chosen. Of the three sub- prefectures that the province of Oran possesses, Mostaga- nem, Tlemcen and Mascara, the road lay through the two last, and it included three out of six of the military subdivisions, Mostaganem, Saïda, Oran, Mascara, Tlemcen and Sidi-bel-Abbès. The province, which is bounded on the north by the Mediterranean, on the east by the department of Algiers, on the west by Morocco, on the south by the Sahara, presents varied aspects; mountains whose height sometimes attains three thousand feet, forests whose total area is not less than one million acres, then lakes, watercourses, the Inneta, the Habra, the Chelif, the Mekena, the Sig.

Although the caravan might not be able to accomplish the whole of it, at least it would visit the most important portions.

That day Clovis Dardentor was not going to miss the train as he had missed the steamer. He arrived at the station early. As promoter of the journey he was only doing his duty by preceding his companions, who recognized him as the leader of the expedition.

Patrick, unmoved and silent, stood near his master waiting for the luggage which he was to have registered — not very bulky luggage — a few valises, bags and rugs, nothing but necessaries.

It was not yet half-past eight, and the train was to start at five minutes past nine.

“Well,” cried Clovis Dardentor, “now what are they doing? Is our smala not coming?”

Patrick was quite ready to adopt this indigenous word, since they were in an Arab country, and he replied that a first group were on their way to the station.

That group was formed by the Désirandelle family complete, with Madame and Mademoiselle Elissane.

Monsieur Dardentor received them heartily. He was so happy that his old French friends and his new African friends had accepted his proposal.

According to him, this expedition was destined to make an indelible impression upon them. Madame Elissane was evidently in good health this morning. And Mademoiselle Elissane, how charming she was in her tourist costume! Let no one trouble themselves about places, that was his business. He took tickets for the whole party. The matter could be settled later. As for the luggage, that was Patrick’s affair. They might rely on his care of anything entrusted to him. Clovis Dardentor himself was literally beaming with good-humour.

The two families entered the waiting-room, leaving to Patrick’s care the few packages that they did not wish to keep in their carriage.

After having begged Madame Désirandelle and Agathocle to stay with Madame Elissane and her daughter in the waiting-room, Clovis Dardentor with a light step — and Monsieur Désirandelle with a heavy one — posted themselves near the window where the circular tickets were given. About twenty travellers stood there in a line impatient to pass the barrier.

Now amongst them whom did Monsieur Dardentor immediately espy? Monsieur Oriental in person, the president of the Montélimar Astronomical Society, his inseparable telescope on his shoulder. Yes, that queer individual had allowed himself to be seduced by the allurement of a fortnight’s trip at reduced prices.

“What,” said Monsieur Dardentor, ‘f he is going to be in it! Well, we shall take care that he has not always the best place at table, and the best bits on his plate! No, no, not this time! Ladies first!”

However, when Monsieur Oriental and Monsieur Dardentor met at the window, they respectively felt they ought to recognize each other by a bow. Then Monsieur Dardentor took six first-class tickets for the Elissanes, Désirandelles and himself, and a second-class ticket for Patrick, who would not have consented to travel third.

Almost immediately the bell was rung, the doors of the waiting-room were opened, and the travellers poured on to the platform at which the train stood.

The passengers are numerous in this through train running between Oran and Algiers, and as usual it consisted of only half-a-dozen carriages. The tourists besides had to change at Perregaux in order to take the railway southwards in the direction of Saïda.

Six people do not easily find six seats unoccupied in one compartment when there is a rush of travellers. Happily Clovis Dardentor, who had a two-franc piece ready, succeeded, thanks to the zeal of an employé, in seating his little party in a compartment; the two other places were immediately taken. Consequently it was full. The three ladies occupied the back seat and the three men the front seat. It ought to be observed that Clovis Dardentor was facing Louise Elissane, and that both had corner seats at that end of the carriage.

As for Monsieur Eustache Oriental, they had not seen him again, and they did not otherwise trouble themselves about him. He must have got into the first carriage.

The first portion of the journey was not more than forty miles between Oran and Saint-Denis du Sig.

At nine o’clock exactly the doors were shut and locked, the station master’s signal was given, and the train started.

On leaving the Oranian capital the traveller’s eye falls first on a cemetery and a hospital on the right of the railway line — neither is suggestive of cheerfulness. On the left is a long row of sheds, and beyond are green fields of a more gladsome aspect.

It was this side that lay before the eyes of Monsieur Dardentor and his pretty *vis-à-vis*. Three and a half miles farther on, after having skirted the little lake Morselli, the train stopped at the Senia station, but the sharpest eyes could hardly distinguish the straggling village «which lay twelve hundred yards away at the bifurcation of the departmental road from Oran to Mascara.

Three miles beyond, the old redoubt of Abd-el-Kader being left on the right, there was a delay at Valmy station, where the railway crosses the road.

On the left lay a large segment of the great salt lake Sebgha, which lies high above the Mediterranean level.

From the corners that they occupied in their compartment, Clovis Dardentor and Louise Elissane saw this lake imperfectly. In any case, though it was so vast, it would have obtained but a disdainful glance from Jean Taconnat, for its waters were already very low, and before long it would be completely dried up under the burning heat of the hot season.

Until then the direction of the line had been south-east; but it turned up towards the village of Tlélat, where the train soon came to a standstill.

Clovis Dardentor had provided himself with a folding pocket map on linen containing the plain of the route, as might be expected. This was not surprising in a man so practical and cautious.

“It is here,” said he, “that the Sidi-bel-Abbès branches *off*; that will bring us back to Oran on the return journey.”

“But,” asked Monsieur Désirandelle, “does not that line continue so far as Tlemcen?”

“It is to be continued,” replied Monsieur Dardentor, “but it is not yet finished!”

“That is vexatious,” Madame Elissane observed, “if we had been able...”

“But, my dear Madame,” cried Clovis Dardentor, “that would have meant abolishing our caravan progress! From the inside of a railway carriage you see nothing or so little! Besides I long to be at Saïda! Is not that your opinion, Mademoiselle Louise?”

Why should not the girl be of Monsieur Dardentor’s opinion?

From Tlélat the railway turned sharply to the eastward and crossed some little streams of water, faithful tributaries of the Sig. The train went down again towards Saint- Denis after it had crossed the river which, under the name of Macta, flows into the vast bay between Arzen and Mostaganem.

The travellers arrived at Saint-Denis a little after eleven o’clock, and there the majority of those who were “doing “the tour, got out.

Monsieur Dardentor’s private programme had prepared for a day and a night in that village, whence they were to set out on the following day about ten o’clock. As his companions left the details of the journey to him; he had resolved exactly to follow his motto: *transire videndo.* , Our man from Perpignan was the first to leave the railway carriage, not doubting but that he should be followed by Agathocle, who would be eager to assist Louise to get down. But this deplorable youth was forestalled by the girl, and it was with the aid of Monsieur Dardentor that she sprang lightly out.

“Ah,” she cried, the moment she turned round.

“Have you hurt yourself, Mademoiselle? . . asked Clovis Dardentor.

“No, no,” replied Louise, “thank you, Monsieur; but I thought that...”

“You thought?”

“That M. Marcel Lornans and M. Jean Taconnat were not travelling.”

“They here?” cried Clovis Dardentor, and, daiting forward, he found himself in the presence of the two young men, to whom he stretched out his arms while they greeted the girl.

“You! You?...” he repeated.

“Ourselves!” replied Jean Taconnat.

“And the enlisting in the 5th Chasseurs?”

“We thought that it would be just as valid in a fortnight,” said Marcel Lornans, “and in order to make the best use of that time...”

“It seemed to us that a circular trip...” added Jean Taconnat.

“Ah! an excellent idea!” cried Monsieur Dardentor, “and what pleasure it gives us all!”

All? perhaps the word was excessive. Not to speak of Louise Elissane, how did her mother and the Désirandelle family regard the circumstance?...

With evident displeasure. The salutations returned to the two Parisians were cold on the part of the ladies, stiff on the part of the men.

Clovis Dardentor had no doubt spoken quite truly when he answered Madame Elissane that neither Marcel Lornans nor’ Jean Taconnat was to accompany him. There was therefore no reason to bear him a grudge on that account; but perhaps he was a little too evidently pleased.

“This is a good joke!” he cried. “You were in the train and we did not suspect it.”

“The train was about to start when we arrived at the station,” replied Jean Taconnat. “The trouble I had to make Marcel decide... though indeed he had no less trouble in persuading me! In short, we hesitated up to the last...”

In short, Clovis Dardentor and his smala were at Saint- Denis du Sig, the first halting-place of the journey, and the two young men were installed as among the members of the caravan. Now they had to make inquiries about an hotel where they might lunch, dine and sleep comfortably. They would not separate any more. There would not be two groups — the Dardentor group on one side, and the Lornans-Taconnat group on the other. No, indeed. That arrangement doubtless pleased some and displeased others, but none remonstrated against it.

“Certainly,” whispered Jean Taconnat, “this Pyrenean has a fatherly affection for us!”

If the tourists had got out at Saint-Denis du Sig four days earlier — on Sunday instead of on Wednesday — they would have met some thousands of Arabs. Indeed that was market day and the hotel question was not easily resolved. Ordinarily the population of the town did not exceed six thousand inhabitants; one-fifth of these were of Jewish origin plus four thousand foreigners.

An hotel was at last found, they lunched there gaily —

Monsieur Dardentor especially contributing his share to the general hilarity. With the idea of gliding gently into unconstrained intimacy with these travelling companions upon whom they had in fact thrust themselves, the two Parisians at first affected a discreet reserve. But Clovis Dardentor would have none of this.

“Come, come, my young friends,” he said. “I do not recognize you!... Your nurses have changed you *en route.* You, so merry and — ”

“Merriment is not suited to our age, Monsieur Dardentor,” replied Jean Taconnat; “we are not so young as you.”

“Ah! You rascals! Stay! I did not catch sight of Monsieur Oriental at the station.”

“Was that planetary individual in the train?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“Yes, but no doubt he has gone on to Saïda.”

“A fellow of that kind is as good or as bad as a swarin of locusts; he will devour everything on his way!”

Since they had not to start again until the next morning at nine o'clock, it was agreed after luncheon that the whole day should be passed in visiting Saint-Denis du Sig, although these Algerian market towns are very like the chief towns of French cantons; even to possessing a commissary of police, a justice of the peace, a notary, a collector of taxes, an officer of the Board of Works (*Pont et Chausées),* and gendarmes!

Saint-Denis du Sig boasts some fine streets, regularly laid out squares and well-grown plantations — especially of plantains — and a pretty church of twelfth-century Gothic. In reality it is rather the surroundings of the town that attract tourists.

They walked about the environs, therefore. Monsieur Dardentor called upon the ladies, who were not much interested, and the young men, whose minds were elsewhere — probably in the mists of the future — to admire lands of exceptional fertility, superb vineyards that decked the solitary solid mass, a kind of natural fortress easy to defend, on which the town rests. Dardentor belonged to the class who admire simply because they are away from home, and to whom the editing of a guide-book ought not to be confided. Their afternoon stroll was favoured by most perfect weather. They strolled by the side of the Sig, to the great dam which drives the waters back over a space of two miles and a half, and contains fourteen million cubic yards of water. The said dam has given way more than once, and it will give way again no doubt; but the engineers are on the watch, and therefore there is nothing to fear — according to them.

After so protracted an excursion the excuse of fatigue was very admissible. So when Clovis Dardentor spoke of an expedition which would involve a journey of some hours, Madame Elissane and Madame Désirandelle, with whom her husband joined, begged to be excused. Louise had to accompany them to the hotel under the protection of Agathocle. What an opportunity for her future husband to offer his arm to his future wife! Needless to say he did not avail himself of it.

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat would have asked nothing better than to go back with the ladies if they had not felt themselves obliged to follow Monsieur Dardentor.

The latter had taken it into his head to go five miles farther for the purpose of visiting a farm of five thousand acres in extent, L'Union du Sig, whose origin in a phalanstery is of the date of 1844. Happily the journey could be made on the backs of mules, without much delay or fatigue. While "crossing that rich and peaceful country Jean Taconnat said to himself: "This is discouraging. Some fifty years ago, perhaps, at the time when they fought in the scrub for the Orania capital, I might have had a chance; but now there is none."

In short no opportunity for saving life had offered when all three returned to the hotel for dinner. The evening was not. protracted; everyone retired by nine o'clock. Agathocle, who never dreamt, did not dream of Louise, and Louise, whose sleep was always embellished by pleasant dreams, did not dream of Agathocle.

The next day at eight o'clock Patrick knocked a cautious little knock at all the doors, and the tourists obeyed the signal of the punctual servant. After an early breakfast of coffee or chocolate, each according to his taste, they paid the bill and set out on foot for the station.

This time Monsieur Dardentor and his companions had the eight places of the compartment to themselves for the short journey between Saint-Denis du Sig and the Perregaux station.

After a brief halt at Mocta-Donz, a European hamlet situated eleven miles from Saint-Denis, the train stopped five miles farther on.

Perregaux, a little town of only three thousand inhabitants, sixteen hundred of them natives, is watered by the Habra in the centre of a marvellously fertile plain of ninety thousand acres. At this point the railway from Oran to Algiers crosses the railway from Arzen, the port on the northern side which goes to Saïda. It runs from the north to the south through the province, carrying for the immense territories where the esparto grass is reaped, as far as Am-Safra, near the Morocco frontier.

The tourists were therefore obliged to change at this station, and after a run of thirteen miles they pulled up again at Crève-Cœur. In fact the line from Arzen to Saïda leaves Mascara on the left. For the twelve and a half miles they had to go, vehicles requisitioned by the company stood before the railway station at the service of its clients.

The same omnibus received the Dardentor smala, and chance, which arranges things strangely, placed Marcel Lornans beside Louise Elissane. Never did twelve miles seem to him so short! And yet the omnibus went slowly as the road ascends to the coast four hundred and fifty feet above the level of the sea. After all, short or not, the last mile was completed about half-past three. In accordance with the plan adopted, the tourists were to pass the evening of the 11th at Mascara, and the night; the day of the 12th, and then set out for Saïda.

“Why should we not take the train to-night forthwith? . . asked Madame Elissane.

“Oh! my dear lady,” replied Monsieur Dardentor, “you would not like it, and if you did and I was so weak as to obey you, you would reproach me for it all my life.”

“Mother,” said Louise, laughing, “would you expose Monsieur Dardentor to self-reproach so prolonged?”

“And so just?” added Marcel Lornans, whose intervention appeared to please Mademoiselle Elissane.

“Yes... just indeed,” resumed Monsieur Dardentor, “for Mascara is one of the prettiest towns in Algeria, and the time that we shall devote to it will not be lost!”

The docile little troop yielded easily to the wish of its chief.

Mascara is a fortified town. Lying on the southern side of the principal chain of the Atlas, at the foot of Chareb-el- Riehh, it overlooks the spacious plain of Eghris. Three streams of water meet there, the Wady-Toudman, the Aïn-Réïda and the Ben-Arrach. Taken in 1835 by the Duc d’Orléans and Marshal Clausel, then abandoned almost immediately, it was only retaken in 1841 by Generals Bugeaud and Lamoricière.

Before dinner the tourists had to acknowledge that Monsieur Dardentor did not exaggerate. Mascara occupied a delightful site on the two hills between which the Wady-Toudman flows. They visited its five quarters, four of which are enclosed by a boulevard planted with trees; it has six gates, defended by ten towers and eight bastions. Then the pedestrians stopped on the Place d’Armes.

“What a phenomenon!...” cried Monsieur Dardentor, planting himself with legs wide apart, and uplifted arms, before an enormous mulberry tree two or three centuries old.

“A forest in itself!” replied Marcel Lornans.

Clovis Dardentor gathered a leaf from it.

Finally an excellent and copious dinner refreshed the tourists, who did not spare the excellent Mascara wine. Then, as on the night before, the ladies retired early. They would not be required to be up at dawn. The Désirandelle father and son might spend the morning in bed. They were all to meet again at the luncheon hour. The afternoon would be devoted to a visit by the whole party to the principal buildings of the town.

In consequence of that arrangement, at eight o’clock the next day the three inseparables repaired to the commercial quarter. The instincts of the former trader and manufacturer attracted Dardentor thither. That base flatterer, Jean Taconnat, encouraged him besides, to the great vexation of Marcel Lornans, who was in no way interested by the oil and flour mills and the native works. Ah! If Mademoiselle Elissane had but been confided to the fatherly care of Monsieur Dardentor! but she was not there, and at that hour had in fact scarcely opened her pretty eyes...

During the walk some purchases were made by Clovis Dardentor — among others a pair of those black bernouses known under the name of “Zerdanis,” in which he intended clothing himself on occasion after the fashion of the North African Arabs.

At the appointed time the whole party proceeded to visit the three mosques of the town. The first is that of Aïn- Beida, which dates from 1761, and in which Abd-el-Kadir preached the Holy War; the second has been transformed into a church; the third into a corn store. After the Place Napoleon, adorned by an elegant fountain with a basin of white marble, they visited in succession the beylik, which is an old palace of Arab construction, the Arab “Bureau,” of Moorish construction, the public garden, laid out at the bottom of the ravine of Wady-Toudman, its rich nurseries, its plantations of olives, and fig trees from whose fruit a sort of edible paste is made. At dinner Monsieur Dardentor helped himself to a large piece of this paste, and declared it excellent, on which Jean Taconnat thought he was bound to accord it the same praise — in the superlative.

About eight o’clock the omnibus again took up its travellers of the day before and left Mascara. This time,- the vehicle, instead of returning to Crève-Cceur, ascended towards the station of Tizih across the Eghris plain, whose vineyards produce a white wine of good repute.

The train started at eleven o’clock. That night, although Clovis Dardentor had showered forty sous on the employé, his party was broken up.

The train, composed of four carriages, was almost too full. Madame Désirandelle, Madame Elissane and her daughter could only find seats in the compartment reserved for ladies, and already occupied by two old persons of their sex. Monsieur Désirandelle tried hard to gain admittance there, but on the protest of the two irreconcilable passengers, whose age rendered them fierce, he was obliged to desist.

Clovis Dardentor made him get up into the adjacent compartment with him, grumbling meanwhile: “These are nice companies!... In Africa they are just as stupid as in Europe... saving on carriages as well as saving on staff!”

The compartment already contained five passengers; there still remained one place after Messrs. Dardentor and Désirandelle had seated themselves face to face.

“I would rather be with him still,” said Jean Taconnat to his cousin.

Marcel Lornans had not to ask to whom this pronoun applied, and he laughed as he answered: “You are right. One never knows.”

As for him, he was not sorry to settle himself in a less crowded compartment, where he might dream at his ease.

In the last carriage of the train only three passengers were seated, and there he took his place.

The night was dark, without moon, without stars, the horizon misty. However the country offered nothing of interest on this line, which runs through the territories of colonization. Nothing but farms and wadys, quite a watery network.

Marcel Lornans, huddled up in his corner, abandoned himself to those dreams which come without sleep. He thought of Louise Elissane, of the charm of her conversation, the graces of her person. That she should become the wife of that Agathocle, no! it was not possible!... The entire universe would protest... and Monsieur Dardentor would end by making himself the spokesman of the universe...

“Froha... Froha!...”

That name, which resembles the cry of a crow, was shouted by the shrill voice of the guard. No passenger got down from the compartment where the young man was deluding himself with his thoughts. He loved her. Yes! he loved that lovely girl. He had loved her from the day when he had first seen her on the deck of the *Argèlès*. Love had come to him like a thunderbolt from a cloudless sky.

“Thiersville... Thiersville!” was shouted twenty minutes after.

The name of the statesman given to this out-of-the-way station — a hamlet composed of a few Arab houses — did not draw Marcel Lornans from his reverie, and Louise Elissane totally eclipsed the illustrious “liberator of the territory.”

The train went along slowly as it climbed up to the station of Traria, on the wady of that name, at a considerable altitude.

At the station Marcel Lornans’ three companions got out, leaving him alone in the compartment.

He was therefore free to assume a horizontal position, while the train, having passed the little market town of Charrier, skirted the foot of mountains wooded from their base to their crest.

His eyelids grew heavy though he tried to resist an inclination to sleep which would have effaced the image before his mind’s eye. But he yielded at last, and “Franchetti “was the last name of a station which he heard.

How long had he slept, and why when half awake did he feel half suffocated? His chest heaved, and he groaned heavily; he was choking. His breath was failing. An acrid smoke filled the compartment, and darts of flame came through the flooring, momentarily increased by the progress of the train. Marcel Lornans tried to rise in order to break one of the windows; but he fell back, half asphyxiated.

An hour later, when the young Parisian regained consciousness in the Saïda railway station, thanks to the attentions he had received, he reopened his eyes on the faces of Monsieur Dardentor, Jean Taconnat and Louise Elissane.

The carriage he was in had caught fire, and so soon as the train was stopped at the signal from the conductor, Clovis Dardentor had rushed into the midst of the flames at the risk of his life to save the life of Marcel Lornans.

“Ah, Monsieur Dardentor!” murmured the latter in a tone of thankfulness.

“All right! all right!” answered the man from Perpignan.

“Do you think I was going to leave you to roast like a chicken? Your friend Jean or yourself would have done as much for me . .

“Certainly!” cried Jean Taconnat. “But this time it is you who — and that is not the same thing! “And low in his cousin’s ear he whispered: “Decidedly, I have no luck!”

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARATORY TO THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER.

AT last the time had come when the various components of the Dardentor party were to be collected in a caravan. There was no railway communication between Saïda and Sidi-bel-Abbès, the means of transport was thenceforth by ordinary road. Two hundred and eighteen miles, or about one hundred leagues, had to be done “under the most agreeable circumstances,” according to Clovis Dardentor. The journey would be made on horses, on mules, on camels, on dromedaries, or in vehicles through the esparto-grass lands and the interminable forests south of Oran.

During this journey of one hundred and ten miles it was evident that the heir of the Désirandelles had not approached the goal towards which his family were urging him. On the other hand, how could Madame Elissane have failed to observe that Marcel Lornans was seeking opportunities for being with her daughter, for doing, in a word, all that the imbecile Agathocle did not do, although it was his right!... Louise was sensible of the young man’s attentions, no doubt, but nothing more, Madame Elissane answered for that. And she herself was not a woman to change her mind... Louise, whom she must lecture if need be, would never venture to refuse her consent to the projected marriage...

As for Jean Taconnat, had he reason to be satisfied?

‘«Why, no!” he had declared that morning. Marcel Lornans was still in the room in the hotel whither he had been carried the night before, and was still in his bed.

“No!” he continued, “and it seems that all the chances in the world are against — ”

“Not against *me,”* observed his cousin.

“Against you also, Marcel!”

“Not at all, for I never had any intention of becoming the adopted son of Monsieur Dardentor.”

“Ah! the lover is talking now!”

“What! the lover!...”

“Dissembler! It is as clear as daylight that you love Mademoiselle Louise Elissane.”.

“Hush! Jean... you might be overheard.”

“And supposing they did hear me, what would they learn that is not known already? Is it not as visible as the moon a yard off? Is Monsieur Oriental’s spyglass necessary to see *you* gravitate? Is not Madame Elissane beginning to be uneasy? Do not the Désirandelle father, mother and son wish you at the devil?...”

“You exaggerate, Jean.”

“Not at all!... Only Monsieur Dardentor is ignorant of it, and may-be Mademoiselle Elissane also.”

“She? you think? “Marcel Lornans demanded eagerly.

“There, there! keep quiet, my suffocated friend! Do you think a young girl does not know when her little heart beats?”

“Jean!”

“As for her scorn of Agathocle!...”

“Do you know, Jean, that I have fallen madly in love with Mademoiselle Louise... .”

“Mad, that is the word, for what will it lead to? That Mademoiselle Elissane is adorable is obvious, and I should have adored her quite as much as you, but that she is engaged; and if there be no love in this marriage, there is expediency, money, and the desire of the parents on both sides! It has been planned since the childhood of the two young people, and do you imagine that you can undo it with a breath?...”

“I imagine nothing, and I am letting things slide.”

“Well, then, you are wrong, Marcel.”

“In what?”

“Wrong in abandoning our first project!”

“I prefer to leave the place free for you, Jean!”

“And yet, Marcel, do reflect! If you happened to get yourself adopted.”

“I?”

“Yes... you! Why, then you might court Mademoiselle Elissane... with a fat money bag in your hand instead of the stripe of a private of the Chasseurs, and oust Agathocle by your pecuniary superiority, to say nothing of the influence that your new father, who is bewitched by Mademoiselle Louise, would exert for you... He would not hesitate, not he, to make her his adopted daughter, if Providence willed that she should save him from fighting, flood, or flame!”

“You are talking nonsense!”

“I am talking nonsense with all the seriousness of transcendent sense and giving you good advice!”

“Come, Jean, you will own, at least, that I have begun well! A fire breaks out in the train, and not only it is not I who saves Monsieur Dardentor, but it is Monsieur Dardentor who saves me...”

“That is true, Marcel. What an unlucky turn of affairs! Now I think of it, you are in the required condition to adopt M. Dardentor! And after all, that would come to the same thing!... Adopt him, and he will settle a fortune on his father.”

“Impossible,” said Marcel Lornans, laughing.

“Why?”

“Because in every case the adopter must be older than the adopted, were it only by a few days, friend Jean.”

“Oh! What a nuisance! How difficult it is to procure a father for one’s self by judicial means!”

At that moment a sonorous voice was raised in the passage outside the door.

“It is he,” said Jean Taconnat.

Clovis Dardentor appeared, and he made but one stride from the threshold to Marcel Lornans’ bed.

“What!” he cried, “not yet up? Is he ill? Can’t he breathe? Shall I breathe air into his lungs? I have a chest full of superior oxygen of which I alone possess the secret!”

“Monsieur Dardentor... my preserver!” said Marcel Lornans, sitting up.

“Why, no! why, no!”

“Why, yes! why, yes!” said Jean Taconnat. “But for you he would have been smothered!... But for you he would have been burnt to cinders, overdone, roasted, a handful of ashes would have been all that remained of him, and I should have had to carry him away in an urn!”

“Poor fellow! poor fellow!” repeated Monsieur Dardentor, and he added: “Yes, it is true — true that I have saved him.”

And he looked at Marcel with kind, troubled eyes, and embraced him with real affection.

Then the trio began to talk. How had the compartment in which Marcel Lornans was sleeping caught fire? No doubt sparks from the locomotive came through the lowered window. Then the cushions took fire, and the fire spread owing to the speed of the train.

“And the ladies?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“They are well, and have recovered from their fright, my dear Marcel.”

Already “my dear Marcel “Jean Taconnat seemed to say as he shook his head.

“For you are like a son to me henceforth!” continued Clovis Dardentor.

“His son!” murmured Jean.

“And if you had seen Mademoiselle Elissane when at last the train was stopped! How she rushed towards the flaming railway carriage. Yes, as quickly as I did! And when I had laid you on the path, if you had seen her take her handkerchief, pour some drops on it from a scent bottle and moisten your lips!... Ah, you gave her a fine fright, and I thought she was going to faint . .

Marcel Lornans, who was more agitated than he wished to appear, seized Monsieur Dardentor by both hands and thanked him for all he had done for him... and also for the young lady’s handkerchief!

Dardentor regarded him with tearful eyes..

“A raindrop between two sunbeams!” said Jean Taconnat to himself, as he contemplated this touching scene with a slightly mocking air.

“But, my dear Marcel, are you not going to get out of your bed?” asked Monsieur Dardentor.

“I was about to rise when you came in.”

“Can I assist you?”

“Thanks, thanks!... Jean is there.”

“You must not spare me! “Monsieur Dardentor went on. “You belong to me now! I have a right to take every care of you.”

“Paternal care,” suggested Jean.

“Paternal; thoroughly paternal. And now, my friends, be quick! We shall expect you both in the dining- room. A cup of coffee, and then off we go to the railway station, where I want to see for myself that nothing is amiss with the caravan. Then we shall have a look at the town and its surroundings; that will be quickly done. And to-morrow between eight and nine away we go in Arab fashion. You shall see if I do not look fine in my zerbani, a sheik... a real sheik of sheiks!”

Then, after having favoured Marcel Lornans with a handshake that dragged him out of bed, he went away singing the Pyrenean mountaineer’s song.

“Hey!” said Jean, “where would you find one like him, or like her: the one with his African zerbani, the other with her scented handkerchief?”

“Jean,” said Marcel Lornans, a little vexed, “your mirth is overdone.”

“You wanted me to be merry, and I am merry!” replied Jean with a pirouette.

Marcel Lornans began to dress himself — he was still rather pale, but that would soon pass away.

“Besides,” continued his cousin, “are we. not liable to many other adventures in the Sth Chasseurs? Hey, what a prospect! falls from our horses, kicks from those noble animals,-and in time of war the loss of a leg or an arm, a nose; or a ball in the chest, a head blown off, carried away, and the futility of objecting to five-inch shells!”

Marcel Lornans seeing him in such spirits preferred not to interrupt him, and waited a little before he said: “Laugh as much as you like, Jean! but do not forget that I have renounced every attempt to get,myself adopted by my rescuer by saving him in turn! Manoeuvre, plan, operate as you will! I wish you all success!”

“Thanks, Marcel Lornans.”

“Do not mention it, Jean — Dardentor! “Half an hour later the two cousins entered the dining- room of the hotel — a modest inn, cleanly kept and of attractive appearance. The Elissane and Désirandelle families were at the window.

“There he comes! there he comes!” cried Clovis Dardentor. “There he is complete, with all his respiratory and digestive faculties restored!”

Patrick turned away his head slightly, his master’s tone offended his nice perception.

Madame Elissane welcomed Marcel Lornans with a few pleasant words, and congratulated him on having escaped a terrible danger.

“Thanks to Monsieur Dardentor,” responded Marcel Lornans; “but for his prompt kindness...”

Patrick was glad to see that his master was content merely to grasp the young man’s hand in silence.

Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle, with their hopeful son, wore cold, unmoved aspect, and hardly saluted the two Parisians.

Louise Elissane did not utter a word; but her eyes met Marcel Lornans' eyes, and doubtless they told each other more than their lips could have said.

After lunch Monsieur Dardentor begged the ladies to prepare for the journey, while the men waited for them. Then the two young men and he, with Désirandelle senior and junior, set out for the station.

As aforesaid, the railway from Arzen to Saïda stops at the latter town, which forms its terminus. Beyond, through the Franco-Algerian Society's esparto-grass lands, the South Oran Company's line passes through Tafararona to the Kralfalla station, whence three branch lines start: the first, completed, descends by the Kreider to Mécheria and Aïn-Sefra; the second, in course of construction, serves the eastern region in the direction of Traguet; the third, only projected, is to be connected by Ain-Sfissifa with Géryville at a very considerable height above the level of the sea.

But the circular trip did not include an excursion so far south. From Saïda the tourists were to advance westwards to Sebdon, then again northwards so far as Sidi-bel- Abbès, where they would resume the line from Oran.

Clovis Dardentor then proceeded to the railway station, to examine the means of transport for the use of the excursionists, and he had reason to be satisfied with all he saw.

Chars-à-bancs drawn by mules; horses, donkeys, camels, were in readiness to receive the travellers. None of the other tourists from Oran had yet left Saïda, and it was desirable that the caravan should be more numerous for the excursion through the southern territories, although there was no danger to be feared from the nomadic tribes.

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat, both perfect horsemen, chose two horses, apparently excellent, steady and enduring animals, from the uplands of South Oran. Monsieur Désirandelle, upon reflection, selected a seat in one of the vehicles in company with the three ladies. Agathocle, who was not a distinguished equestrian, chose a seemingly trustworthy mule. Clovis Dardentor, an excellent rider, inspected the horses like a connoisseur, shook his head and said nothing.

The management of the caravan was of course entrusted to an agent of the company. This agent, named Dérivas, had under his orders a guide of the name of Moktani and several Arab servants. A cart was provided for the conveyance of provisions in sufficient quantities; the supply might be renewed at Daya, at Sebdon and at Tlemcen. Besides, the caravan was not to camp at night; to keep within the arranged stages, it would not have to do more than a dozen leagues a day, and at nightfall it was to remain in the villages or hamlets on its route.

“All is perfect,” said Clovis Dardentor, “and the organization does credit to the company. To-morrow at nine o’clock we shall turn up at the station, and since we have a whole day for rambling, let us away, my friends, and visit Sa’ida the beautiful!”

As they were about to go out Monsieur Dardentor and his companions caught sight of an acquaintance of theirs a few yards off. Monsieur Eustache Oriental had come to the railway station with a purpose similar to their own.

Again the President of the Astronomical Society of Montélimar bowed, but no words were exchanged. Monsieur Eustache Oriental maintained the attitude he had adopted on board the *Argèlès.*

“So he is coming with us?...” observed Marcel Lornans.

“I think,” added Jean Taconnat, “the company ought to be warned to supply additional victuals...”

“Have your jest, Monsieur Taconnat,” rejoined Clovis Dardentor, “yet who knows whether this astronomer may not be useful to us on the journey? Suppose the caravan loses its way, would he not be there to set it on the right path by merely consulting the stars?”

As Monsieur Danlentor had proposed, the forenoon and the afternoon were devoted to making a tour of the town and its surroundings.

The population of Saïda amounts to about three thousand inhabitants — a mixed population, composed of one-sixth French, one-twelfth Jews, and the rest natives.

The Commune, originally formed from a circle of the military sub-division of Mascara, was founded in 1854. But ten years before there existed nothing but the ruins of the old town, which had been taken and destroyed by the French. This quadrilateral, surrounded by walls, had formed one of the strongholds of Abd-el-Kader. Since that period the new town has been rebuilt a mile and a quarter to the south-west, near the lofty ridge between Tell and Hauts-Plateaux. It is watered by the Meniarin, which issues from a deep gorge.

Saïda the beautiful presented to the tourists only a reproduction of Saint-Denis of Sig and Mascara, with its modern organization mingled with native customs. There was the inevitable magistrate, the registrar of lands, the collector of taxes,the keeper of the forests,and the traditional Arab bureau. And not a monument, nothing artistic to remark, no remains of local colour — this, however, ought not to have surprised the tourists, since the town in question is of relatively recent foundation.

Monsieur Dardentor did not dream of complaining. His curiosity was satisfied, or rather he recovered possession of his industrial instincts in presence of the mills and the saw mills, whose shrill clicking and jarring charmed his ears. He did, however, regret that he had not come to Saïda on a Wednesday, so as to be present at the great Arab wool market. Besides, his happy disposition *tot admirari* was always active during the whole excursion, and as they saw him at the beginning so he wouid appear at the end of the journey.

The environs of Saïda are beautiful. There artists find landscapes to enchant their eyes. There, also, lie rich vineyards, and nursery grounds in which all the varieties of the Algerian flora bloom. Saïda, like all the other provinces, is generously productive. It is calculated that one million two hundred thousand acres are devoted to the cultivation of esparto grass. The land is excellent, and the dam of Wady Meniarin provides the necessary irrigation. Thus superb soil has also been endowed by nature with rich quarries of yellow veined marble.

Hence the reflection made by Monsieur Dardentor, which has also occurred to so many thoughtful minds: “How does it happen that Algeria with its natural resources cannot support itself?”

“It grows too many officials,” replied Jean Taconnat, “and not enough colonists, who would be choked there, however. It is a question of weeding! “; About a mile and a quarter to the north-west of Saïda, on a height, the Miniarin flowing beneath at a depth of three hundred feet, stands the old town. Nothing remains but the ruins of the fortress of the famous Arab conqueror, who met the final fate of all conquerors.

The Dardentor party returned to the hotel for dinner, and after the meal dispersed to their respective rooms to finish the preparations for departure on the morrow.

Jean Taconnat had nothing particular in the way of profit and loss to record that day, but Marcel Lornans might enter a little incident to his credit. He had had an opportunity of conversing with Louise Elissane and thanking her for her attentions.

“Oh, Monsieur,” the girl had answered, “when I saw you, lifeless, hardly breathing, I thought... No, I shall never forget it...”

These words meant more than that Marcel had given Louise the “fine fright “of which Monsieur Dardentor had talked.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CARAVAN LEAVES SAÏDA AND ARRIVES AT DAYA.

THE next day, an hour before the departure, the caravan was awaiting the arrival of the tourists at the station. Dérivas, the agent, was giving his final orders. The Arab Moktani had finished saddling his horse. Three chars-à-bancs and a cart drawn up at the bottom of the yard, the drivers, on the box, were ready to start their teams. A dozen horses and mules were snorting and pawing the ground, while two peaceful camels, equipped for the road, were lying on the ground. Five natives, engaged for the whole of the excursion, squatted in a corner, motionless, in their white bournouses, their arms crossed, waiting for the signal of the chief.

With the Dardentor party, represented by nine persons, the caravan would be composed of sixteen excursionists — no lady had joined them. Madame and Mademoiselle Elissane and Madame Désirandelle would alone represent the feminine contingent.

Clovis Dardentor and his companions, preceded by Patrick, arrived first at the railway station. By degrees the other tourists appeared. The majority were dwellers in Oran; some of these were acquainted with Madame Elissane.

Monsieur Eustache Oriental, with his spy-glass at his back and his bag in his hand, bowed to the ex-passengers by th*e Argèlès*, who returned his salutation. But this time Monsieur Dardentor went up to him, smiling frankly, and with outstretched hand.

“You are in this trip?” he asked.

“I am in it,” replied the President of the Astronomical Society of Montélimar.

Meanwhile, Marcel Lornans relieved Madame and Mademoiselle Elissane of the small things which they carried in their hand. Monsieur Désirandelle superintended the safe deposit of the luggage in the cart, Agathocle stupidly teased the mule he had chosen, and the aggrieved animal threw back its ears angrily, while Jean Taconnat was pensive, interrogating that future of a fortnight’s duration to which the journey through the South Oran territory was limited.

The caravan was rapidly formed. In the first char-à banc, Madame Elissane and her daughter, with Monsieur Désirandelle and his wife, had comfortably cushioned seats. The second and third vehicles took five of the tourists, who preferred this mode of transport to the jolting of the four-footed creatures.

The two Parisians had mounted like men to whom horsemanship was no mystery. This was not so in the case of Agathocle, who hitched himself on to his mule very awkwardly.

“You would do better to get into our char-à-banc, where your father would give you his place,” cried Madame Désirandelle.

And Monsieur Désirandelle was really ready to do this. Such a move would have had the advantage of placing his son near Louise Elissane. Of course Agathocle would not listen, but insisted upon riding a beast no less obstinate than himself, and bent upon playing him a nasty trick.

Dérivas, the agent, was already in the saddle, and two of the tourists were also on horseback, when all eyes were directed towards Clovis Dardentor.

That eccentric individual, aided by Patrick, had just thrown the African zerbani over his shoulders; but the place of the fez or the turban was usurped by the blue cap of the excursionists; his leggings typified the Arab footgear, and he looked well in this garb, which was highly approved of by Patrick.

Monsieur Dardentor seated himself against the hump of one of the crouching camels, while Moktani, the guide, took his uneasy place on the back of the other. The two meharis then rose majestically from the ground, and the man from Perpignan saluted his travelling companions with a graceful gesture.

“That is just like him!” said Madame Désirandelle.

“I hope no accident may happen to him,” murmured the girl.

“What a man!” repeated Jean Taconnat to his cousin. “And who would not be honoured by being his son?...”

“At the same time, how are we to get hold of him for our father?” replied Marcel Lornans, whose momentous question was answered by a laugh.

Patrick bestrode his mule in a dignified manner, and Dérivas, the agent, gave the signal to start.

The caravan was formed in the following order: At the head, on their camels, the agent and Monsieur Dardentor, the two young men and the two tourists on horseback.

Agathocle on his mule, then the three chars-à-bancs, finally the cart wherein the natives had taken their places with the provisions and the luggage, except two, who formed a mounted rearguard.

The journey from Saïda to Daya was not more than sixty-two miles. At a hamlet half-way, where they ought to arrive at about eight p m. they would pass the night, and from thence they would set out again the next day in order to reach Daya in the evening. A league an hour on an average would enable them to perform the journey on merely recreative terms.

On leaving Saïda, the caravan immediately abandoned the scene of colonization for the territory of Beni-Meniarin. A main road, which extended so far as Daya, stretched out before the tourists in a westerly direction. They had only to follow it.

The sky was decked with clouds driven swiftly by a breeze from the north-west. The heat was quite tolerable, thanks to the moist atmosphere. The sun only sent such rays as were necessary to produce the contrast of light and shade, and to give meaning to the scenery. The teams were trotting slowly, for the road rose steeply from the coast. After a few miles the caravan left the ruins on the right, and passing the extremity of the forest of Doui-Thabet, took its way towards the springs of Wady Hounet. It afterwards skirted the forest of the Djeffra-Cheraga, which covers a vast area.

The region that the caravan passed through belongs to the Tell (the name given to a belt which slopes towards the Mediterranean). It is the most favoured of all in the province of Oran, where the heat is excessive, and greater than in the whole of former Barbary. Yet the temperature is supportable there on the Hauts-Plateaux of the pastures and the salt lakes; beyond, in the Sahara, where the air is charged with blinding dust, the vegetable and the animal kingdoms are victims to the fierceness of the African sun.

The climate of the province of Oran is the hottest of Algeria, but it is also the healthiest, and its salubrity is due to the prevalence of the north-west wind. Besides, that portion of the Oranian Tell which the caravan was about to pass through was less mountainous than the Tell of the provinces of Algiers and Constantine. Its better watered plains were favourable for cultivation, especially that of cotton, its soil was of excellent quality, being impregnated with salt — -there are three hundred thousand acres under silch conditions.

Under cover of those immense forests the caravan might travel without any dread of the heat, although it was already oppressive in the month of May. And what varied, rich, luxuriant vegetation lay before their eyes! What fine air was that air they breathed, laden with the perfume of odoriferous plants! All around were thickets of jujube trees, carob trees, arbutus, lentisks, and dwarf-palms, with undergrowths of thyme, myrtle, lavender. In giant groups stood the oaks that are so valuable among forest produce, then thujas, cedars, elms, ash trees, wild olive and pistachio trees, juniper and lemon trees, eucalypti, which flourish in Algeria, thousands of Aleppo pines and Other resinous species.

The excursionists accomplished their first stage in high spirits. The birds sang on their passage, and Monsieur Dardentor maintained that the Algerian Railway Company had organized the concert. His mehari carried him with all the care due to so important a personage, and although at times a more rapid trot knocked him against the two humps of the camel, he declared he never had ridden a more easy-going beast.

“It is very superior to a horse,” said M. Clovis Dardentor, in a tone of conviction.

Just then the riders approached the chars-à-bancs, and the fellow travellers exchanged some remarks. Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat chatted with Madame Elissane and her daughter, to the great annoyance of Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle, who kept a constant watch on Agathocle. That gallant cavalier was not on good terms with his mule.

“Take care you don’t fall!” cried his mother, as the mule swerved abruptly to one side.

“If he falls he can pick himself up again!” replied Monsieur Dardentor. “Come, Agathocle, try to stick *it* on.”

“I wish he had come in the carriage instead,” repeated Monsieur Désirandelle.

“Why, where is he going to now?” exclaimed Dardentor. “Back to Saïda? Hi! Agathocle! you are going the wrong way, my boy!”

In fact, in spite of all his rider’s efforts, the mule turned sharp round, and obstinately retraced the way it had come. The caravan had to stop for a few minutes, and Patrick was despatched by his master with orders to bring the beast back.

“Which of them is the beast?” asked Jean Taconnat in an undertone. “Is it the ridqr or his mount?”

“Both,” whispered Marcel Lornans.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, be indulgent!” answered Monsieur Dardentor, who could hardly restrain his merriment. But Louise heard what was ‘ said, and a slight smile hovered about her lips.

Finally Madame Désirandelle was restored to calmness. Patrick speedily overtook Agathocle and led back the recalcitrant animal.

“It is not my fault,” said the booby, “I pulled hard...”

At half-past ten the caravan crossed the boundary which separates Béni-Meniarim from Djafraben-Djafeur. The fording of a narrow tributary of the Havouret, which feeds the wadys of the northern region, was easily accomplished.

At twenty minutes before noon the signal to stop was given by Moktani, at a spot on the edge of the forest, under the shade of evergreen oaks which the hottest sun-rays could not penetrate.

The riders dismounted from their horses and mules; the two meharis, bending their knees, extended their long heads on the grass, and Clovis Dardentor, with the guide, landed — a fairly accurate expression; for the camel, according to the Arabs, is “the ship of the desert.”

All the animals were taken by the natives to a grazing place at a little distance, where they fed plentifully on esparto grass, diss and chichh, close to a group of turpentine trees, magnificent samples of the essence-bearing species of the Tell.

The cart was unloaded of the provisions taken in at Saïda, cold meats, fresh bread, preserves of various kinds, appetizing fruits in baskets of plaited leaves, bananas, guavas, figs, Japanese medlars, pears, dates. And what an appetite they all had, sharpened by the splendid air!

“This time,” observed Jean Taconnat, “there is no Captain Bugarach to put his ship in the trough of the waves at the luncheon hour!”

“What, would the Captain of the *Argèlès* have dared?” demanded Monsieur Désirandelle.

“Oh yes, my excellent good friend, he did dare!” cried Monsieur Dardentor. “It was in the interest of the company’s shareholders! Dividends before all, you know! But here the floor does not move, and we have no need of a swinging table!”

The table-cloth had been laid on the grass. Nothing was wanting, dishes, plates, glasses, forks, spoons, knives — the whole most enticingly clean.

Needless to say that the tourists partook of this welcome repast in common, and were thus enabled to become better acquainted. Each sat where he or she pleased. Marcel Lornans chose a place not too near Mademoiselle Elissane, for prudence sake, yet not too far away, by the side of his “preserver,” who was enchanted with him ever since he had snatched him from “the whirling flames of a railway carriage on fire “ — a superb phrase which Monsieur Dardentor readily repeated and which greeted Patrick in passing.

This time the rural table had neither an upper nor a lower “bad end.” The dishes did not come one way to go out another. Monsieur Eustache Oriental had therefore no reason for choosing one particular seat, after the free- and-easy fashion he had adopted on board the steamer. Nevertheless he held himself rather aloof, and thanks to the keenness of sight with which he was gifted, the “tit-bits” did not escape him. Jean Taconnat indeed succeeded in “cribbing” some from him with the dexterity of a juggler, whereat the astronomer looked very glum.

This” first meal in the open air was very gay. The conversation soon became general and animated. The tourists talked of the journey, of the “unknown “that they were about to behold, and of the hazards of a tour in that interesting country. Apropos of this Madame Elissane asked whether there was anything to fear from wild animals.

“From wild animals?” replied Clovis Dardentor. “With so many as we are? Why, the luggage cart carries three or four good rifles and a supply of ammunition. And there are my young friends Jean Taconnat and Marcel Lornans, who are accustomed to firearms, since they have served... and amongst our companions no doubt some have carried off shooting prizes. As for me, without boasting, it would be no trouble to me to put a bullet, conical or not, into the crown of my hat at four hundred yards!”

“Hum,” said Patrick, dubiously.

At this point Dérivas, the agent, intervened. “Ladies,” said he, “you may make your minds easy on that point. There is nothing to fear; for we travel only by day. It is at night that lions, panthers, cheetahs and hyenas leave their dens. Now, at nightfall, our caravan will always be under the shelter of some village, either European or Arab.”

The agent spoke truly; no attack from wild beasts was to be feared during the day. As for the other inhabitants of the forests, jackals, foxes, moufflons, gazelles, ostriches, monkeys with or without tails, there was no need to think about them, nor even about scorpions and vipers, which are rarely found in the Tell.

At half-past one, having drunk freely of good wine, coffee, and liqueurs, the caravan started again in the same order. The road then lay deeper in the forest of Tendfeld, and the large esparto fields were lost to sight. On the right the Iron Mountains, from which excellent ore is taken, came into view.

The paths that cross the forest zone of the province were frequented by the workmen employed in the mines or in the esparto works. Most of these men present that Moorish type in which the blood of the ancient Libyans, Berbers, Arabs, Turks and other Orientals is blended. They passed in gangs; from them there was no reason to apprehend the attacks of which Jean Taconnat dreamed.

Towards seven o'clock in the evening the tourists reached the place at which the main road crosses the waggon track that breaks off from Sidi-bel-Abbès to Daya, and stretches on southwards to the territories of the Franco-Algerian Company.

There lay the hamlet where the caravan was to halt for the night. Three comfortable houses had been prepared to receive the tourists. After they had dined, beds were arranged for all the party, and that first stage of a dozen leagues procured the travellers ten hours' good sleep.

The next morning the caravan started again at so good a pace that the second day's stage extended to Daya.

But before the start Monsieur Dardentor took Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle aside, and held the following conversation with them, beginning with the abrupt question: "Now, my good friends, what about your son and Mademoiselle Louise? It seems to me that there's not much doing there! What is he about? Why does he not press his suit?"

"What would you have, Dardentor?" replied, Monsieur Désirandelle. "He is so shy, so reserved, that..."

“So reserved!” cried Monsieur Dardentor impatiently, “nonsense. Why, he ought always to be by the side of your carriage, and devote himself during the halts to his *fiancée*, talk to her nicely, compliment her on her good-humour and her good looks, and talk of the trifles that please and amuse girls. Instead of this, the booby never opens his lips.”

“Monsieur Dardentor,” said Madame Désirandelle, “shall I tell you something that I have on my mind?”

“Go on, dear madame.”

“Well, you did wrong in bringing those two Parisians with you!”

“Jean and Marcel? In the first place, I did not bring them, they brought themselves! No one could prevent them from coming.”

“More is the pity, for it is very vexatious!”

“And why?”

“Because one of them pays more attention to Louise than is proper.”

“Which of them?”

“That Monsieur Lornans... that handsome fop... whom I cannot bear!”

“Nor I!” added Monsieur Désirandelle.

“What!” cried Monsieur Dardentor, “my friend Marcel, whom I tore from the whirling flames!”...”

But he kept the end of the phrase *in petto.*

“Come, my friends,” he resumed, “that will not hold water! Marcel Lornans no more concerns himself about our dear Louise than a hippopotamus about a bunch of violets! When this excursion is over, Jean Taconnat and he will return to Oran, where they are to enlist in the 5th Chasseurs. You have dreamt all this stuff! Why, if -Marcel had not come I would not have had the opportunity of...”

And he ended his phrase by the three words, “carriage on fire!”

The honest man was perfectly sincere, yet how could’ he fail to see that if things were not going well with Agathocle they were going well with Marcel?

At nine o’clock the caravan entered the most extensive forest of the region, that of Zigla, which is crossed diagonally by the main road as it descended towards Daya.

At mid-day the third stage was completed, and, as on the previous day, the caravan halted for the noontide meal under the cool shade of the trees on the edge of Wady Sefioum.

Monsieur Dardentor did not even think of observing whether Marcel Lornans did or did not pay any special attention to Mademoiselle Elissane.

During this repast Jean Taconnat remarked that Monsieur Eustache Oriental extracted sundry dainties from his bag, which he did not offer to share with anybody, but seemed to relish extremely. As usual, he had secured the best bits at the sylvan table.

“And he does not need his spy-glass to recognize them,” said Jean Taconnat to Monsieur Dardentor.

In the afternoon, at about three o’clock, carriages, horses, camels and mules halted before the Berber ruins of Tavarina, which appeared to interest two of the tourists, who had more taste for archaeology than the others.

On its route to the south-west the caravan entered the territory of Djafra-Thouma and Mehamid, watered by Wady Taourina. It was not even necessary to unharness the animals for the crossing at a fordable place.

At length the village of Daya, at the extremity of the little forest of that name, emerged from the twilight, at eight o’clock in the evening, and the rather tired party found accommodation at a fairly good inn. As they were getting into their respective beds, one of the Parisians said to the other: “But, Marcel, supposing we were attacked by beasts, and that we had the good fortune to save Monsieur Dardentor from the claws of a lion or a panther, would that not count?”

“Yes,” responded Marcel Lornans, who was already half asleep. “I warn you, however, that in any such case it would not be he whom I should try to save.”

“Whom, then?” said Jean Taconnat, staring in surprise at his cousin. But he received no reply.

Presently he heard a hoarse sound of roaring in the vicinity of the village, and thus apostrophized the disturbers of his repose: “Hold your tongues, you stupid brutes that spend your days asleep! It is written that I shall not succeed in becoming that excellent man’s son; no, nor even his grandson!”

CHAPTER XIII.

JEAN TACONNAT IS EQUALLY GRATEFUL AND DISAPPOINTED.

DAYA, the ancient Sidi-bel-Kheradji of the Arabs — now a town surrounded by a battlemented wall, defended by four bastions — commands the entrance of the Oranian highlands.

According to the arrangement for the journey, the caravan was to halt at Daya for twenty-four hours. The brief sojourn there promised to be pleasant. The lofty little town is situated on wooded hills in the midst of a vast forest of pines and oaks, and enjoys exceptional salubrity. It is therefore justly esteemed by Europeans.

The population, which numbers between sixteen and eighteen hundred, is almost entirely native, the French contingent consisting only of the officers and soldiers in military occupation of the post.

There is nothing to relate concerning the halt of the excursionists at Daya. The ladies did not go outside the boundaries of the town. The men ventured a little farther, on the slope of the hills, and into the interior of the beautiful forests. Some even went down towards the plain so far as the marshy woods of Daya, in which the pistachio and wild jujube trees grow.

Monsieur Dardentor, always full of interest and admiration, kept his young companions with him all day. Perhaps .Marcel Lornans would have preferred to stay with Madame and Mademoiselle Elissane, even though he should have had to submit to the insupportable presence of the Désirandelles. But the saviour could not separate himself from the saved.

As for Jean Taconnat, he was to be relied upon to keep his appointed place by the side of M. Dardentor under all circumstances.

One member of the party took no part in the excursion; this was Agathocle, thanks to the intervention of Clovis Dardentor with Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle. Their son had to stay with Louise Elissane, since the ladies did not accompany the excursionists'. A frank explanation between the young people would clear up the situation. And now was the time to bring it about. Agathocle had therefore received orders to remain. Did such an explanation take place? No one knew. Nevertheless, in the evening, when Monsieur Dardentor, taking Louise apart, asked her whether she was sufficiently rested to start again the next day, she replied: "At the earliest hour you please, Monsieur Dardentor," and her face wore an expression of deep annoyance.

"Agathocle kept you company the whole day, my dear young lady!... You have been able to talk to him with greater ease! You owe that to me."

"Ah!... to you, Monsieur Dardentor..."

"Yes, that excellent idea was mine, and I have no doubt that you are pleased. Now..."

"Oh! Monsieur Dardentor!"

That "oh!" said a great deal — so much that a conversation of two hours' duration could not have said more.

Nevertheless Clovis Dardentor did not stop there, but pressed Louise with questions until she at length acknowledged that she could not endure Agathocle.

“Ha! ha!” said he to himself, as he left her, “there is something more in this than appears on the surface. We shall hear more about it. A girl’s heart is unfathomable. I am very glad I never tried to sound any such depths.”

Nevertheless it did not occur to Clovis Dardentor that Marcel Lornans had done any wrong to the aspirant Agathocle.

The unutterable stupidity of the youth was quite sufficient to explain Louise Elissane’s sentiments.

The caravan left Daya the next day at seven o’clock. The travellers and the animals were all fresh and active; the weather was favourable; the sky, overcast at dawn, speedily cleared, and there was no rain to fear. The average rainfall on the surface of the province of Oran in twenty years is half that of the other Algerian provinces. Fortunately, however, if water does not come from the sky, it comes from the soil, through the agency of the innumerable wadys.

The distance between Daya and Sebdon is about forty miles by the carriage road from Ras-el-Ma to Sebdon by El-Gor.

From Daya the road descends towards Sebdon. By starting early in the morning, and travelling at a quicker pace than usual, the caravan counted on reaching El-Gor in the evening. A long stage, of course, with only one halt by the midday meal, and one of which the meharis, the horses and the mules might fairly have complained had they been capable of protest.

In two hours the caravan reached Ras-el-Ma, a station on the railway in course of construction from Sidi-bel- Abbès to the region known as Hauts-Plateaux.

This was the southernmost point of the circular tour, and there now remained only to follow the long curve that connects Ras-el-Ma with El-Gor, not to be confounded with the railway station of the same name.

The caravan made only a. brief halt at El-Gor, where workmen were then making the railroad from the Magenta station along the left bank of the Wady Haca’ibo.

The caravan passed through the forest of Haca’ibo, and at half-past eleven stopped on its farther edge.

“Gentlemen,” said Dérivas, the agent, after he had conferred with Moktani, the guide, “I propose that we should halt here for luncheon.”

“A welcome proposal, for we are all very hungry,” replied Jean Taconnat.

“Here is a stream that will supply us with fresh water,” observed Marcel Lornans, “and if the place will suit the ladies...”

“Moktani’s proposal,” said Dérivas, “is all the more acceptable, as until we reach the forest of Ourgla, eight or nine miles off, we shall have no shade.”

“We accept,” replied Monsieur Dardentor with the approval of his companions. “But the ladies must not be afraid of doing a bit of the journey in the sun. They will be sheltered in their chars-à-bancs... As for us, we need only to look the day-star in the -face to make bim cast down his eyes...”

“Stronger than eagles’!” added Jean Ta-connat.

A greater intimacy already existed among the various members of the caravan, with the exception of Monsieur Eustache Oriental, who always kept to himself. They were all well satisfied with the manner in which the tour was being conducted, and had nothing but praise for the company and their officials.

Marcel Lornans distinguished himself by his politeness, good-humour and attention to everybody. Monsieur Dardentor felt as proud of him as a father might have been of a son, and at length exclaimed: “Hey! ladies, did I not do well to save this dear fellow, to tear him...”

“Out of the whirling flames of a railway carriage on fire!” quoted Jean Taconnat.

“Quite right! Quite right!” cried Monsieur Dardentor. “That proud and high-sounding phrase is mine!”

“Come, gentlemen,” continued the man from Perpignan, as he raised his glass, “to the health of the ladies... and ours too.”

It is needless to mention that to Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle Marcel Lornans became more and more insufferable; and that they were fully determined to turn Clovis Dardentor against him; a difficult task, considering the nature of the man from Perpignan; but they judged him from their own point of view.

At half-past twelve everything was ready for the resumption of the journey, but at the last moment Monsieur Eustache Oriental was missing.

“Where is Monsieur Oriental?” inquired Dérivas.

No one knew, although he had partaken of the mid-day meal with his accustomed punctuality of appetite. Since then he had vanished.

“Monsieur Oriental? “... shouted Clovis Dardentor in his stentorian tones. “Where have you got to with that telescope of yours? Hi! Monsieur Oriental...”

There was no reply.

“The gentleman cannot be far off,” said Madame Elissane, “we cannot go on without him.”

This was quite evident, and they all set out to look for the errant astronomer, who was presently discovered at a turn in the edge of the forest, with his field-glass fixed on a spot to the north-west.

“Don’t let us disturb him!” said Monsieur Dardentor. “Perhaps he is busy interrogating the horizon. Do you know that that learned person may be of great use to us! If our guide should go astray, for instance, and we should want to be led in the direction — ”

“Of the larder!” interpolated Jean Taconnat.

“Ha, ha, he would always be on the spot for that.”

For a considerable distance the route now lay through vast shadeless fields of esparto grass, quivering under the heat of the sun. The curtains of the chars-à-bancs had to be closed. If ever Marcel Lornans cursed the sunshine, it was certainly on that day when the pretty face of Louise Elissane disappeared from his vision.

At three o’clock the caravan reached the forest and once more found shelter beneath a canopy of evergreen oaks, in delightful air saturated with cool refreshing odours.

The vast forest ofOurglais one of the most important in the province: the road lies through it for seven or eight miles. The curtains of the carriages were put up, the riders drew near, and the united company could talk at their ease. Monsieur Dardentor once more invited those congratulations which none except the sulky Désirandelle trio failed to offer.

“Hey, my friends, who was it that advised you to make this delightful tour? Are you pleased, Madame Elissane, and you, my dear Mademoiselle Louise? Nevertheless you hesitated to leave your residence in the Rue du Vieux- Château?... Look, does this magnificent forest resemble the streets of Oran?... Could the Boulevard Oudinot or the Promenade de Letang vie with this?”

No! they could not; more especially as a troop of little monkeys just then formed an escort to the caravan, frisking among the trees, jumping from branch to branch, screaming and grimacing in emulation of each other. Now Monsieur Dardentor, who wanted to show his skill — and he was very adroit, bragging apart — was seized with a desire to shoot one of these harmless animals with a rifle. But as others would undoubtedly have wanted to imitate him, this would have meant the massacre of the whole troop. The ladies interceded, and how was he to resist Mademoiselle Louise Elissane when she begged for mercy for these pretty specimens of the Algerian fauna?

“Besides,” whispered Jean Taconnat in the ear of Monsieur Dardentor, “in aiming at a monkey you would be so likely to hit Agathocle.”

“Oh! Monsieur Jean,” replied Dardentor, “really you are hard on the boy. It is not right!”

He glanced, as he spoke, at young Désirandelle, whose mule had just thrown him, though without doing him much harm, and added: “Besides a monkey would not have fallen.”

“You are right,” replied Jean, “and I apologize to the . four-handed folk for my comparison!”

It was important that the caravan should make haste if the tourists were to reach El Gor before night. They had to urge their animals unduly, but the next day’s stage would be very short.

The ladies especially were in haste to arrive at El-Gor, that is to say, at a place of safety. They did not like the idea of the forest at night. To meet bands of monkeys, and troops of antelopes or gazelles, was charming. But now and then distant howls and growls were heard, and at nightfall beasts of prey come forth from their lairs.

“Ladies,” said Clovis Dardentor with the intention of reassuring them, “do not be afraid, for there is nothing to be afraid of! Supposing we were overtaken by night in the middle of this wood, what would it signify?... We would encamp under shelter of the vehicles and sleep soundly in the open air!... I am sure that you would not be afraid, Mademoiselle Louise?...”

“With you, no, Monsieur Dardentor.”

“See that now! ‘ With you, Monsieur Dardentor! ‘ You hear, ladies! That dear child has every confidence in me, and she is right.”

“Whatever confidence we may have in your valour,” replied Madame Désirandelle, “we would rather not to be forced to put it to the test!”

Agathocle’s mother pronounced these words in a sharp tone which had the tacit approval of her husband.

“Oh,” said Marcel Lornans, “should such be the case, Monsieur Dardentor might count on us all, ladies, and we would sacrifice our lives before — ”

“*A* great advantage truly,” retorted Monsieur Désirandelle, “if we were to lose ours after!”

“There is logic for you!” cried- Clovis Dardentor. “I cannot imagine what danger — ”

“Why not an attack by brigands?” suggested Madame Désirandelle.

“I do not think you have anything of that kind to fear,” protested Dérivas, the_agent.

“Well, if not brigands,” resumed the lady, “of the wild beasts that come out at night.”

“No fear of them,” cried Monsieur Dardentor. “We should protect ourselves by sentinels placed at each corner of the camp, and fires kept up until sunrise. We would give the Castibelza rifle to Agathocle and he would be placed — ”

“I beg you to leave Agathocle where he is,” retorted Madame Désirandelle sourly.

“Be it so, let him stay there! But Monsieur Marcel and Monsieur Jean would keep a bright look out — ”

“Although we have no doubt of that,” observed Madame Elissane gravely, “it is preferable to spend the night at El-Gor.”

“Then, forward, horses, mules and meharis!” cried Clovis Dardentor with imperturbable good-humour.

In fact, the caravan advanced with such speed that towards half-past six it reached the outer edge of the forest of Ourgla, and might reckon upon arriving at El-Gor before night.

At that spot the river had to be crossed at a ford which was less easy than the preceding ones.

Moktani chose a place at which the chars-à-bancs and the cart could cross the bed of the wady, a distance of about one hundred yards, in safety.

The guide took the lead, followed by Dérivas and Monsieur Dardentor, magisterially seated upon his mehari.

Marcel Lornans rode on the left side of the char-à-banc in which the ladies were seated, Jean Taconnat on the right, followed by the other two vehicles. Patrick came after them, and the natives in the cart formed the rear of the caravan.

At the express desire of his mother, Agathocle had been obliged to abandon his mule and hoist himself into the cart. Madame Désirandelle did not want her son to be obliged to take an involuntary bath in the Sâr in case the animal should play tricks in the water.

Things went well until the caravan was in the middle of the wady. It was advancing slowly, led by Moktani. As the bed gradually deepened, the draught animals sank in proportion. Still the water did not rise higher than their bellies, even when they had reached the middle of the stream. The horsemen indeed had to hold up their legs, but Monsieur Dardentor and the guide, perched on the meharis, were not obliged to take that precaution.

Half the crossing had been accomplished when a scream was uttered by Louise Elissane on seeing Jean Taconnat disappear, his horse's four feet having given way. In fact there existed on the right of the ford a depression five or six yards deep, which the guide would have avoided if he had gone a little higher up. At Mademoiselle Elissane's scream the caravan stopped.

Jean Taconnat, good swimmer that he was, would have incurred no danger had he been able to release his feet from the stirrups. In the sudden surprise of his fall he failed to do this, and being thrown against his horse's side, he sank with the struggling animal.

Marcel Lornans had turned his horse sharply to the right, and had scarcely seen his cousin at the moment when the latter vanished. “Jean...” he cried, “Jean!”

And although he could not swim, he was about to jump into the water to rescue his cousin, and probably to perish without saving him, when he saw that another had preceded him.

That other was Clovis Dardentor.

The man from Perpignan, after having rid himself of the zerbani which enveloped him, had taken a header into the bed of the Sâr, and was swimming towards the spot where the water still bubbled.

Motionless, scarcely breathing, terrified, everyone was looking on. Had the courageous young fellow presumed too much upon his strength?... Would it not be a case of two victims instead of one?...

Clovis Dardentor dived, and in a minute reappeared, dragging Jean Taconnat with him. He had been half choked by the water he had swallowed, but had succeeded in freeing himself from the stirrups. Monsieur Dardentor held him by the collar, his head above water, while with his free hand he pulled him back to the ford.

A little later the caravan clambered up the opposite bank. Here the tourists left the carriages and horses and gathered around the young man, who speedily regained consciousness, while Clovis Dardentor shook himself like a Newfoundland dog after a rescue.

Jean Taconnat then understood all that had passed and to whom he owed his life, and, stretching out his hand to his rescuer, said, instead of the thanks he ought to have uttered: “No luck!”

Marcel only understood the meaning of those words.

Then Clovis Dardentor and Jean Taconnat, to whom Patrick brought clothes from their valises, changed their dress in a thicket on the bank of the river.

The caravan set out again after a short halt, and at half- past eight at night the long stage ended at the hamlet of El-Gor.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH TLEMCEN DOES NOT RECEIVE DUE ATTENTION.

SEBDON, of whose sixteen hundred inhabitants only a few dozen are French, is situated in the midst of a beautiful landscape, and possesses a climate of exceptional salubrity; it is also remarkably fertile. Sebdon is supposed to be the Tafraona of the former dwellers in the land. And yet Jean Taconnat did not take the slightest interest in that place. In fact the poor young man was profoundly depressed. During the portion of the day which the caravan passed in Sebdon, he persistently remained in his room. Marcel Lornans had to leave him to himself, for he did not wish either to see or receive anyone. The gratitude which he owed to his brave preserver he was incapable of feeling, still less of expressing. If he had fallen on the neck of his preserver, he might have longed to strangle him.

The result was that Monsieur Dardentor, Marcel Lornans, and some other of the tourists, conscientiously carrying out the programme of the journey, explored Sebdon without Jean Taconnat. The ladies, who had not quite recovered from their fright and their fatigue, devoted that day to resting. Marcel Lornans was sorry for this, for he met Louise Elissane only at meals.

Besides, there was nothing interesting at Sebdon, and one hour would have sufficed for seeing the whole place. However, Monsieur Dardentor found the things he cared to see in the lime-kilns, tile-works and mills which abound in the towns of Oran. His companions and he made the tour of the bastioned wall that surrounds the town, which was for some years an advanced post of the French colony. On that day too, Thursday, there was an Arab market, and Dardentor took a lively interest in any commercial event.

The caravan started the next day, 19th May, and early, in order to accomplish the distance between Sebdon and Tlemcen. On leaving Sebdon it passed the Wady Merdja, a tributary of the Tafna, passed through great fields of esparto grass, came upon some limpid pools, crossed some lesser forests, made a halt for luncheon in a caravanserai at a considerable altitude, and passing by the village of Terny and the Black Mountains, beyond the Wady Sakaf, reached Tlemcen.

It was very late. The stage had been rather hard work. A good hotel received all the members of the caravan, who were to sojourn there for thirty-six hours.

During the route Jean Taconnat had held aloof, scarcely replying to Monsieur Dardentor's quasi-paternal attentions. His disappointment was mingled with shame: that he, who purposed to be the benefactor, should be the obliged! So in the morning, after having sulked since the night before, he jumped out of bed and awakened Marcel Lornans by calling out to him: Well! what do you say about it?"

The sleeper could not say anything about it for the reason that his mouth and his eyes were both closed. His cousin walked backwards and forwards gesticulating, crossed his arms, and talked vehemently. No! he would no longer take things pleasantly, as he had promised! He meant, on the contrary, to take them tragically.

Finally, however, Marcel was roused into sitting up and replying: "I do wish, Jean, that you would keep quiet! When one's ill-luck is so very evident, it is best just to submit."

“But it really is too bad! Just think! Of the three conditions required by the Code, two have presented themselves, flood and flames! And if Dardentor had been enveloped by the flames of the train, if he had disappeared under the waters of the Sâr, perhaps either you or I might have saved him!... And it is you, Marcel, that the fire, it is I, Jean, that the waters have chosen for victims! And it is this everlasting rescuer who has saved us, first one, and then the other.”

“Do you wish for my opinion, Jean?”

“Out with it, Marcel.”

“Well, I consider it funny.”

“Really! You consider it funny?...”

“Yes, and I think that if the third incident should occur, for instance a fight during the remainder of this tour, I am very much mistaken if it will not be Monsieur Dardentor who saves us both at the same time.” ..

Jean Taconnat stamped his foot, pushed back the chairs, strummed on the window panes, and, strange to say, the anger of this singular person was really serious.

“Look here, Jean!” continued Marcel Lornans, “you must renounce the idea of getting yourself adopted by Monsieur Dardentor, just as I have renounced it on my part.”

“Never!”

“More especially as, like the immortal Perrichon, now that he has saved you, he will adore you as he adores me!”

"I do not want his adoration, Marcel, but his adoption, and may Mahomet strangle me if I do not find some means of becoming his son!"

"And how will you set to work, seeing that luck invariably declares itself in his favour?"

"I will set traps for him. I will push him into the first river we come to. I will, if necessary, set fire to his room, to his house. I will hire a band of Bedouins or Touaregs to attack us on the way."

"And do you know what will comc of your traps, Jean? It is you who will fall into one of them, and be dragged out by Monsieur Dardentor, the protégé of the good fairies, the favourite of Providence, the prototype of fortunate men, with whom everything has succeeded in life, and for whom Dame Fortune's wheel has always turned the right way."

"Granted, but I shall seize the first opportunity of reversing her handle!"

"In the meantime, Jean, here we are at Tlemeen..."

"Well?..."

"Well, in three or four days we shall be at Oran, and the wisest thing for us to do will be to forget all these whims and fancies, and to proceed at once to our enlistment."

As he spoke that sentence Marcel Lornans' voice changed.

"Tell me, then," resumed Jean Taconnat, "I thought Mademoiselle Louise Elissane — "

“Yes, Jean, yes! But why think about that? It is a dream which can never come true. At least, however, I will carry away an indelible remembrance of the girl.”

“You are so resigned as all that, Marcel?”

“I am.”

“Just about as much as I am to not becoming Monsieur Dardentor’s adopted son some day or another!” cried Jean Taconnat. “And if I may say what I think, it is that of us two, you have the greater chance of succeeding.”

“You are mad!”

“No, for luck is not dead against you, that I know of, and at heart I believe it would be easier for Mademoiselle Elissane to become Madame Lornans than for Jean Taconnat to become Jean Dardentor, although it is only a question of a simple change of name!”

While the two young men were engaged in a conversation that lasted until luncheon, Monsieur Dardentor, aided by Patrick, was occupied with his toilet. The visit to Tlemcen and its environs was to take place in the afternoon.

“Well, Patrick,” asked the master of the servant, “what do you think of those two young men?”

“Monsieur Jean and Monsieur Marcel?”

“Yes.”

“I think that one would have perished in the flames and the other in the river if Monsieur had npt devoted himself, at the risk of his life, to save them from a terrible death!”

“And that would have been a pity, Patrick, for they both deserve a long and happy existence! With their pleasant disposition, their fun, their intelligence, their wit, they will make their way in the world. Don’t you think so, Patrick?”

“My opinion is exactly that of Monsieur. But will Monsieur permit me an observation which is inspired by my personal reflections?”

“I promise you I will, if you do not embroider your phrases too much!”

“Is it the case? — perhaps Monsieur will contest the accuracy of my observation — yet — ”

“Go on, without palavering, and don’t beat about the bush for an hour!”

“Would Monsieur consent to let me learn his opinion of Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle’s son?”

“Agathocle? He is a good fellow, a little... not quite.” Clovis hesitated painfully. “H’m! He is one of those young men who only reveal themselves after marriage! Give me my moustache comb.”

“Here is the comb, Monsieur.”

“But, after all, they make the best husbands. His parents have chosen an excellent wife for him, and I am certain that the couple will be happy in every respect! But your observation does not seem to be forthcoming, Patrick.”

“It will come forth when Monsieur has had the goodness to answer the second question which his condescension authorizes me to put to him.”

“Put it, Patrick, put it!”

“What does Monsieur think of Mademoiselle Elissane?”

“Oh, charming, delightful, good, good-looking, bright, and intelligent, both merry and serious — words fail me — so does my hair-brush! Where is my hair-brush?”

“Here is Monsieur’s hair-brush.”

“If I were married I would like to have a wife like that dear Louise! Agathocle may consider himself really lucky to win such a prize!”

“So Monsieur looks upon this marriage as a settled thing.”

“Just as sure as though the Mayor’s scarf had bound them together! Besides, we only came to Oran for that! I certainly did hope the two would have become greater friends during the trip; but the matter will settle itself, Patrick! Young girls always hesitate a little, that is nitural to them! Remember what I say to you — before three weeks are gone, we shall dance at the wedding, and if I do not do a frolicsome ‘ Cavalier seul’ for them — ”

Patrick did not smile; he regarded the image of a frolicsome “Cavalier seul,” on so solemn an occasion, with displeasure.

“Come, now, here, I am ready,” said Monsieur Dardentor, “my toilet is finished, and still I know nothing of your observation inspired by personal reflections.”

“Personal, and I am surprised that the same observation has not been suggested to Monsieur.”

“Do go on,” cried Dardentor, in a tone of exasperation. “What is your observation?”

“It is so apposite that Monsieur will make it himself, after a third question.”

“A third!”

“If Monsieur does not desire — ”

“Ah, get it out, do! One would say you were trying to enrage me!”

“Monsieur knows very well that I am incapable of any such attempt!”

“Are you going to put your third question? Yes or no?”

“Has Monsieur not noticed Monsieur Lornans’ behaviour since we left Oran?”

“What? Marcel?” replied Clovis Dardentor. “Indeed, he has appeared extremely grateful for the little service that I was so fortunate as to render him, and also another of our companions, who is less demonstrative.”

“Monsieur Lornans is in question, and not Monsieur Taconnat,” said Patrick. “Has Monsieur not remarked that Mademoiselle Elissane appears to please him exceed- ingly, that he devotes himself to her more than is proper towards a young girl already betrothed, and that Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle have taken real and legitimate offence at his conduct?”

“You have remarked that, Patrick?”

“With Monsieur’s leave.”

“Yes; they have already spoken to me of that — good Madame Désirandelle — I believe — bah! it is all pure imagination.”

“I venture to assert to Monsieur that Madame Désirandelle is not the only one who has perceived — ”

“You none of you know what you are saying,” cried Clovis Dardentor. “And besides, if it were so, what would it come to? No! I have promised to make this marriage between Agathocle and Louise, and it shall take place!”

“Much as I regret to dissent from Monsieur, I must persist in my view.”

“Persist, then, and much good may it do you! But there is not common sense in it! Marcel, a young fellow whom I have snatchcd from the whirling flames, woo Louise! You might as well say that glutton Oriental was seeking her hand!”

“I was not speaking of Monsieur Eustaclie Oriental,” replied Patrick, “and Monsieur Eustache has nothing to do with this affair, which is only Monsieur Marcel Lornans’.”

“Where is my chimney-pot?”

“Monsieur’s chimney-pot?”

“Yes, my hat!”

“Here is Monsieur’s hat, and not his — ,” replied Patrick, in high indignation.

“And mind this, Patrick, you do not know what you are saying; you do not know anything at all about it.”

Then Monsieur Dardentor, taking his hat, left Patrick to reflect on the blindness of those who refuse to see.

Nevertheless, the man from Perpignan did feel rather disturbed. Agathocle was making no progress. Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle were giving him the cold shoulder, as if he were responsible for the ideas of Marcel Lornans, admitting that they were such. Certain little things recurred to his memory; in short, he resolved to keep his eyes open.

That morning, during luncheon, Clovis Dardentor observed nothing suspicious. Neglecting Marcel Lornans a little, he bestowed all his attentions on Jean Taconnat, “his latest case of salvage,” who responded feebly.

Louise Elissane was very affectionate to him, and maybe he at length suspected that she and the ninny to whom they wanted to marry her, agreed about as well as sugar and salt.

Monsieur Dardentor?...” said Madame Désirandelle when they were at dessert.

“Yes, dear lady,” replied Monsieur Dardentor.

“Is there no railway between Tlemcen and Sidi-bel- Abbès?”

“There is; but it is unfinished.”

“That is a pity!”

“Why?”

“Because Monsieur Désirandelle and I would have preferred to return to Oran by it.”

“Bless me!” cried Clovis Dardentor. “The road is splendid to Sidi-bel-Abbès! No fear of fatigue, no danger for anyone!”

And he smiled at Marcel Lornans, who did not see his smile, and at Jean Taconnat, who ground his teeth as though he would have liked to bite him.

“Yes,” resumed Madame Désirandelle, “we have felt the journey very much, and it is to be regretted that we cannot shorten it. Madame Elissane and Mademoiselle Louise as well as ourselves would have — ”

Before the sentence was completed Marcel Lornans had looked at the young girl and she had looked at him. This time Monsieur Dardentor was obliged to admit it, and remembering that a poet has said, “God has given woman the mouth to speak and the eyes to answer,” he asked himself what answer Louise’s eyes had made.

Then resuming: “What would you have, my friends?” he said; “the railway is not working yet, and We must continue our journey in caravan.”

“Could we not go on to-day?” asked Madame Désirandelle.

“To-day!” exclaimed Monsieur Dardentor. “What? clear out without having visited Tlemcen the magnificent, its warehouses, its citadel, its synagogues, its mosques, its promenades, its environs, all the wonders our guide has described to me? Two days would scarcely be sufficient.”

“These ladies are too tired to undertake such an excursion, Dardentor,” Monsieur Désirandelle replied coldly, “and I shall keep them company. A stroll in the town is all we shall do! But you are at liberty, with these gentlemen, whom you have saved from flood and fire, thoroughly to inspect Tlemeen ‘ the magnificent.’ But it is quite agreed, is it not, that we start to-morrow at an early hour?”

This was plain speaking, and Clovis Dardentor, a little nettled at Monsieur Désirandelle’s sneers, saw the faces of Marcel Lornans and Louise Elissane sadden simultaneously. He felt, however, that he must not insist, and taking leave of the ladies after he had cast a last glance at the downcast girl, he called to the two young men: “Are you coming, Marcel? Are you coming, Jean?”

“We follow you,” replied the former.

Under the circumstances, there was nothing left for them to do but to follow in Clovis Dardentor’s wake. As for young Désirandelle, he had already made his escape, and many times during that day he might have been seen frequenting the provision shops and “the confectionery stalls in the congenial company of Monsieur Oriental.

The two young men, considering their respective states of mind, could hardly be much interested in Tlemcen, the Bab-el-Gharb of the Arabs, situated in the middle of the basin of the Isser in the semicircle of the Tafna. And yet the town is so pretty that it is called the African Granada. The old deserted Pomaria of the Romans in the south-east, replaced by Tagrat in the west, has become the modern Tlemcen. But Monsieur Dardentor, with his Joanne’s guide-book in his hand, in vain repeated that the town had flourished in the fifteenth century, in industry, commerce, art, and science, under the sway of the Berber races; that it then reckoned twenty-five thousand families, and was now the fifth town in Algeria, with its population of twenty-five thousand inhabitants, three thousand of them French and three thousand Jews; that after having been taken by the Turks in 1553, by the French in 1836, then yielded to Abd-el-Kadir, it was definitely retaken in 1842; that it constituted a strategical position of great importance on the frontier of Morocco, &c. &c. Notwithstanding all his efforts he was scarcely listened to, and obtained only vague answers.

And the worthy man began to think he would have done better to leave these two to mope in their corners!... But no! he felt the affection of a father for them, and he forbade himself to show any disappointment or displeasure.

More than once Monsieur Dardentor longed to question Marcel Lornans, to ask him: “Is this true? Is this serious? Open your heart, Marcel, and let me read it...”

He did not do this, however. What was the use? This young man would never be accepted by the practical- minded Madame Elissane. And then could he, the friend of the family, touch the matter?

The result of all this was that Clovis Dardentor did not extract so much pleasure from Tlemcen as he expected; that he felt but moderately interested in the town, which is admirably situated on the side of Lilla Terni, which is detached from the mass of the Nador, with a view extending beyond the plains of the Isser and the Tafna over the lower valleys, where orchards succeed to gardens, making a green zone, rich in orange groves, venerable walnut, and flowering turpentine trees, not to speak of the variety of fruit trees, and the olive plantations.

It is needless to add that all the machinery of French administration works at Tlemcen with the regularity of the Corliss machine. So far as its industrial establishments are concerned, Monsieur Dardentor might have chosen between flour mills, oil manufactories, and cloth mills, chiefly those which weave the stuff for the black bernous. He purchased a charming pair of Turkish slippers in a shop in the Place Napoleon.

“They look rather small for you,” observed Jean Taconnat in a jesting tone.

“I should think so!”

“And rather dear?”

“Oh, the money is there.”

“Then you intend them — ?” asked Marcel Lornans.

“For Louise Elissane,” replied Clovis Dardentor, with a faint — oh! a very faint wink.

Marcel Lornans could not allow himself such a privilege, and yet he would have been happy to expend all the money of the journey in presents for the girl.

At Tlemcen the commerce of the west, that of the tribes of Morocco, grain, cattle, skins, textures, ostrich feathers, meet, and the town also possesses great attractions for lovers of the antique. It contains numerous remains of Arab architecture; the ruins of its three former walls, now replaced by the modern wall, with its nine gates; also Moorish quarters with vaulted alleys and some specimens of the sixty mosques it possessed of old. The young men certainly ought to have had a glance to spare for that venerable citadel, the Mechoar of the twelfth century, which has been made into a barrack with royal apartments, and also that Kissaria where the traders from Genoa, Pisa, and Provence assembled. Then the mosques with their profusion of white minarets, their slender pillars in Mosaic, their paintings, their ceramic ornaments, with the mosque of Djema-Kebir, and that of Abdul-Hassim, and three bays resting on onyx pillars, where its Arab lads now work hard at reading, writing and arithmetic, in the very spot where Boabdil, the last of the kings of Granada, died.

Afterwards the trio went through streets and across the regularly laid-out squares, a hybrid quarter with the contrast of native and European houses, and other modern quarters. Everywhere they saw fountains, the prettiest that of the Place Saint Michel, this is, in fact, the esplanade of Michouan; it is shaded by four rows of trees, and an incomparable view of the surrounding country is to be obtained from it.

As for the environs of Tlemcen, its agricultural hamlets, the koubba of Sidi-ben-Medim, the rushing cascade of El-Writ, by which the Saf-Saf falls eighty yards, and many other attractions for excursionists, Clovis Dardentor had to content himself with admiring them in the official text of his guide-book.

Yes! several days would be needed for a thorough exploration of Tlemcen and its environs. But to propose such a prolongation of the journey to people who only wanted to be off by the quickest and the shortest way would have been labour lost. Whatever authority the man from Perpignan had over his companions — and it was now a diminished authority — he could not venture so far.

“Now, my dear Marcel, and my dear Jean, what do you think of Tlemcen?...”

“A beautiful town,” the former answered.

“Beautiful, yes...” added the latter, mechanically.

“Hey, my fine fellows, I did well to catch both of you — you, Marcel, by the collar, and you, Jean, by the seat of your breeches! What fine things you never would have seen.”

“You risked your life, Monsieur Dardentor, and pray believe that we are grateful.”

“Monsieur Dardentor,” asked Jean Taconnat impulsively, interrupting his cousin, “is the saving of life a habit of yours?”

“Well! the thing has happened to me more than once, and I might pin a fair collection of medals on my person. So in spite of my desire to become an adoptive papa, you know, I have never been able to adopt anyone!”

“It was — in fact — you were in the position of being...” observed Jean Taconnat.

“As you say,” interrupted Clovis Dardentor, tapping him on the chest. “But we must step out now.”

They re-entered the hotel. The dinner was tedious. The guests had the air of people who have strapped their trunks, and for whom the train is waiting. At dessert the man from Perpignan presented the Arab slippers to her for whom they were intended.

“In remembrance of Tlemcen, dear young lady!” he said.

Madame Elissane could only acquiesce by a smile, whereas in the Désirandelle group Madame bit her lips, and Monsieur slightly shrugged his shoulders.

As for Louise, her face cleared, happiness shone in her eyes, and she said: “Thank you, Monsieur Dardentor. Will you allow me to kiss you?...”

“*Parbleu*, I only bought them for that!... A kiss for each slipper!...”

The young girl embraced Monsieur Dardentor, and Marcel Lornans, though he was envious, could not be jealous of the excellent man.

CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH ONE OF THE THREE CONDITIONS IMPOSED BY A CLAUSE IN THE CIVIL CODE IS AT LAST FULFILLED.

To tell the truth, it was perhaps time this voyage, so well arranged in other respects by the Algerian Railway Company, should come to an end. Although it had begun well, it threatened to end badly — at least for the Dardentor party.

On leaving Tlemcen, the caravan was reduced by half. A few of the tourists had desired to stay some days longer in a town that deserved to detain them. Dérivas, the agent, remained with them; Monsieur Dardentor and his party, under the care of Moktani, the guide, had set out alone towards Sidi-bel-Abbès at dawn on the 21st May.

It is fitting that the presence of Monsieur Eustache Oriental should be mentioned; doubtless he was in haste to get back to Oran. Monsieur Dardentor and the others would not have been astonished had his intention been to draw up a scientific narrative of that excursion; but as a matter of fact they had never seen him use his instruments. If he possessed any, they had remained at the bottom of his valise.

The caravan was thenceforth composed of two chars-à bancs only. The first conveyed the ladies and Monsieur Désirandelle. The second conveyed Monsieur Oriental, Agathocle, who was tired of his recalcitrant mule, two native servants, the luggage, and some provisions in reserve. In fact there was only a luncheon to be provided between Tlemcen and the village of Lamorcière, where they would put up for the night, and the next day a second luncheon between Lamorcière and Sidi-bel-Abbès, where the guide calculated they would arrive about eight o’clock in the evening. There the caravan journey would terminate, and the railway would take the advance guard of the excursionists back to Oran.

Monsieur Dardentor and Moktani had not relinquished their meharis, two excellent beasts of whom they had no reason to complain, and the two young Parisians retained their horses; they would be sorry when they had to part with them.

The caravan made its way through a country more varied than the South Oran region from Saïda to Sebdon. There were fewer forests, but vast agricultural and colonization tracts, and the capricious network of tributaries of the Chonly and the Isser. The latter is one of the great rivers of Algeria; it is the main artery whose course is continued to the sea through a valley where cotton trees thrive, owing to the slopes of the Hauts Plateaux and the Tell.

But what a change in the spirits of the tourists who were so united when starting from Oran in the train, and when starting from Saïda in the caravan! A manifest chill pervaded their intercourse. The Désirandelle family and Madame Elissane conversed apart in their char-à-banc, and Louise had to hear things little likely to please her. Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat, abandoning “themselves to their sad thoughts, walked behind Clovis, and scarcely answered him when he stopped to wait for them.

Unfortunate Dardentor! Everyone now seemed to bear him ill-will: Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle, because he did not entreat Louise to accept Agathocle; Madame Elissane, because he had not induced Louise to agree to this long arranged marriage; Marcel Lornans, because he ought to have intervened in favour of him whom he had saved; Jean Taconnat, because he had saved him, instead of giving Jean the opportunity he desired! In short, Clovis Dardentor was virtually reduced to the condition of a scape-goat mounted on a camel. There remained to him only the faithful Patrick, who seemed to say: “Yes... see what things have come to, and your servant was not mistaken!”

But he did not formulate that sentence, he did not give it a literary consistency, lest he should receive a reply which would have cut him to the quick.

“Come, Clovis,” said Dardentor to himself, “do you *owe* those people anything? Are you going to frçt because things do not turn out according to their liking?... Is it your fault that Agathocle is a fool, that his father and mother look upon him as an accomplished youth, that Louise has ended by estimating the clown at his real value? for one must yield to evidence. That Marcel is in love with the girl, I am beginning to suspect! But by the two humps of my mehari I cannot for all that cry out to them both: ‘ Come to me, my children, that I may bless you! ‘ And as for this jolly Jean, who has left all his fun in the Sâr, it would seem that he is angry with me for having dragged him out? Upon my honour, they are all in the same boat. Ah, well! . .

Patrick had just drawn near with the intention of speaking to his master, and he said to him: “I fear, Monsieur, that the weather is going to be bad, and perhaps it would be better.”

“Bad weather would be better than none at all, stupid!”

“Than not at all?” replied Patrick, who was much puzzled by this saying. “If therefore Monsieur . .

“Tut!”

Patrick, much disconcerted by this rude expression, returned to the rear of the caravan.

During the morning, while a warm rain fell from the storm-clouds, the caravan performed the eight miles between Tlemcen and the pond of Fezza. Then, the shower having ceased, they lunched at the halting-place chosen by Moktani in a wooded gorge watered by numerous cascades in the vicinity. The meal lacked friendliness; indeed, there was a visible restraint. The party was like a group of guests at a *table d’hôte* who had never seen ‘each other until they seated themselves, each before his plate, and who were never to see each other again. Under the lowering glance of Monsieur and Madame Désirandelle, Marcel Lornans avoided looking at Louise Elissane. As for Jean Taconnat, no longer counting on the chances of the road — a state road, kept in good repair, with milestones, road labourers at work, and bridges — he cursed the unlucky administration which had civilized this country.

Clovis Dardentor strove several times to get up a reaction; he tried to knit the broken links, but his attempts were unavailing.

“They really do worry me,” he muttered.

The caravan started again at about eleven o’clock, and crossed the Chonly, a rapid tributary of the Isser, by a bridge; skirted a small forest, some stone quarries, and the ruins of Hadjar-Roum, and without incident reached the annex of Lamorcière about six o’clock in the evening, but not to make any stay.

The solitary inn was not comfortable; they were served with boiled eggs which might have been put on the spit. Fortunately the agent, Monsieur Dérivas, was not there, and thus escaped well-merited reproof. To make up for this the tourists were favoured with a native serenade. Perhaps they might have declined this concert but for Monsieur Dardentor’s eager welcome of it, but as it would have been imprudent to annoy him, they resigned themselves to the infliction.

The serenade was given in the great hall of the inn, and it was worth hearing.

It was a “nouba “reduced to three kinds of Arab instruments, the “tébeul,” a great drum beaten on both sides by two slight wooden drumsticks; the “rheita,” a flute, partly metallic, resembling the banjo in sonorousness; the “nouara,” composed of two half-gourds with a dried skin stretched over them. Though the nouba is usually accompanied by local dances in which the stomach plays an important part, that night the dances did not figure in the programme.

When the little merry-making had come to an end: “Enchanted! I am enchanted!” said Monsieur Dardentor in a stern voice.

And none having dared to express a contrary opinion, he complimented the native musicians through Moktani, and rewarded them with a very liberal tip.

Was Clovis so well satisfied as he would have it appear? That is the question. In any case there was one of the audience whose satisfaction was complete. Yes! during that nouba, one of the cousins — which may be guessed — had contrived to seat himself beside Mademoiselle Elissane.

And who knows if he did not then reveal to her the three words engraven in his heart, and echoed in the girl’s?...

Early the next day the tourists departed, all being impatient to arrive at the end of the journey. After Lamorcière and as far as Aïn-Telout they followed the track of the projected railway for about six miles. At this point the road branches off and turns directly to the north-east, where it crosses, a few miles from Sidi-bel- Abbès, the then unfinished railway to South Oran.

The vehicles and the horses went as fast as possible in order to get through that long stage in a single day. There was no longer any question of slackening their pace for purposes of conversation, and besides, there is nothing interesting to see on this line, not even ruins either Roman or Berber.

The temperature was high. Happily a screen of clouds moderated the power of the sun, which would otherwise have been unbearable on the surface of that cleared region. There were fields without trees everywhere, plains without shade. The same style of progress was pursued until the halt for luncheon.

It was eleven o’clock when the caravan stopped at a signal from Moktani. By bearing a few miles to the left of the border of the forest of Waled, Mimoun would have offered them a favourable spot. But it was not convenient to lengthen the journey by this means.

The provisions were taken out of the baskets. The travellers seated themselves on the roadside in groups. There was the Désirandelle-Elissane group, and of course Louise had to belong to it. There was the Jean-Marcel group, and Marcel Lornans showed discrétion which she ought to have been grateful for by not seeking to join the girl. Since they had left Lamorcière, it is probable that both had travelled farther than the caravan, and towards an end that was not exactly Sidi-bel-Abbès...

Finally, there was the Dardentor party, which would have been composed only of the individual of that name, had not Clovis accepted the company of Monsieur Oriental, for want of better.

They found themselves next one another and they talked. Of what?... Of everything... of the trip which was about to finish, and in reality without let or hindrances; no delays, no accidents of any importance since the start; all the tourists in perfect health; perhaps a little tired, more especially the ladies. Still five or six hours' march to Sidi-bel-Abbès and then they would have only to shut themselves up in a first-class railway carriage bound for Oran.

“And are you satisfied, Monsieur Oriental?” asked Clovis Dardentor.

“Very well satisfied, Monsieur Dardentor,” replied the *savant.* “This tour has been admirably arranged, and the question of food has been resolved in a very acceptable manner, even in the least important villages.”

“That question seems to have considerable importance for you.”

“Very considerable in fact and I have procured several samples of edible products previously unknown to me.”

“.For my part, Monsieur Oriental, I do not know much about these matters.”

“In my opinion, M. Dardentor, they ought to take the first place in existence,” answered Monsieur Oriental.

“Well, dear sir, permit me to assure you that if we had expected you to render us any services, they would not have been culinary, but astronomical.”

“Astronomical?...” repeated Monsieur Oriental.

“Yes... for instance, if our guide had lost his way; if it had been necessary to have recourse to observations to find our road again, we should have looked to you to take the height of the sun...”

“To *me* to take the height of the sun?”

“Of course, during the day... or that of the stars during the night. You know! — the declensions.”

“What declensions?... *Rosa*, the rose?”

“Ah! charming!” cricd Monsieur Dardentor.

And he laughed loudly, but the cheery sound was not echoed.

“In short,” he continued, “I mean that with the aid of your instruments, your sextant, like the sailors; the sextant that is in your valise — ”

“*I* have a sextant in my valise?”

“Probably. The spy-glass does for scenery, but when it comes to be a question of the passage of the sun at the meridian?...”

“I do not understand you.”

“Are you not President of the Astronomical Society of Montélimar?”

“Gastronomical, my dear sir, Gastronomical Society!”

replied Monsieur Oriental, who shouted with laughter in his turn.

That answer, which explained everything that had been inexplicable until then, succeeded in arousing Jean Taconnat’s merriment after Monsieur Dardentor had repeated it.

“But that fool of a Patrick told us so on board the *Argèlès,”* he cried.

“What, Monsieur is not an astronomer?” asked the worthy servant.

“No... Gastronomer, you were told, gastronomer!”

“Then I misunderstood the chief steward,” replied . Patrick, and anybody might do that.” With this reluctant admission Patrick went off, vexed with himself for his blunder, and still more humiliated by the general laughter.

Horses and conveyances started again. To the esparto lands had succeeded the colonization tracts. About two o’clock the hamlet of Lamtar was reached — just at the junction of a little branch line which joins the main line of railway from Aïn-Temonchent to the state road of Sidi- bel-Abbès.

At three o’clock the caravan arrived at the bridge of Mouzen, at the spot where the wady of that name is joined by one of its tributaries, then at four o’clock the crossways where the two steep roads meet a little below Sidi-Khaled, only a few miles from Sidi-Lhassen, after having followed the course of the Mekerra, the name which the Sig takes in that region.

Sidi-Lhassen is only an annex of about ‘six hundred inhabitants, Germans and natives for the most part, and halt was made there.

Suddenly — it was half-past four — the mehari ridden by the guide, who was leading, stopped with a sudden swerve. In vain did the guide encourage the animal by his voice, it refused to advance, and turned back.

Almost immediately the two young men’s horses snorted, reared, and neighed affrightedly; then in spite of spur and curb they backed towards the chars-à-bancs, whose teams gave similar signs of fear.

“What is the matter?” asked Clovis Dardentor.

His mehari, snuffling, and smelling some distant emanation, crouched down on the ground.

The question was answered by two tremendous roars, of a nature there could be no mistaking. These terrific sounds came from a pine wood, about a hundred paces away.

“Lions!’ cried the guide.

As may be supposed, justifiable terror seized upon the caravan. Wild beasts in the vicinity, in broad daylight, wild bsasts that were doubtless making ready to spring upon them!

Madame Elissane, Madame Désirandelle, and Louise jumped out of the char-à-banc, while the mules strove frantically to break their traces.

The first instinctive idea that came to the two ladies, to Désirandelle senior and junior, and to M. Eustache Oriental, was to run back by the road and take refuge in the last hamlet they had passed.

“Stand still, all of you!” cried Clovis Dardentor in a voice so imperious that he was instantly obeyed.

Madame Désirandelle had fainted. As for the horses and camels, the conductor and the natives had hobbled them instantly, so that they could not escape across the country.

Marcel Lornans had rushed to the cart, and aided by Patrick he brought back the arms, two rifles and two revolvers, which were immediately loaded. These were all the travelling arsenal could furnish.

Monsieur Dardentor and Marcel Lornans took the rifles, Jean Taconnat and Moktani seized the revolvers. They all stood at the foot of a group of turpentine trees on a slope to the left of the road.

The country was deserted, there was no prospect of any help.

The roaring sounded again, nearer, and almost at the same moment a formidable couple appeared on the edge of the wood. These were a lion and a lioness of colossal size; their yellow colour was thrown into sharp relief against the sombre verdure of the Aleppo pines.

Would these animals spring upon the caravan, at which they were gazing with flaming eyes, or, dismayed by the number of human beings, would they go back to the wood and allow them free passage?...

First they stalked forward leisurely, with low ferocious growls.

“Let no one move,” repeated Monsieur Dardentor, “and leave it to us!”

Marcel Lornans cast a glance at Louise, who, self- possessed, but with pale face and contracted features, was trying to encourage her mother by a few words. Then Jean Taconnat and he ranged themselves beside Monsieur Dardentor and Moktani, about ten paces in front of the turpentine trees.

A few seconds later, as the two brutes were drawing near, Dardentor fired at the lioness. This time his usual skill had abandoned him. The animal, only grazed on the neck, bounded forward with a hoarse roar, and as at the same moment the lion also sprang forward, Marcel Lornans, shouldering his rifle, fired.

“Clumsy that I am!” cried Monsieur Dardentor after his fruitless shot.

Marcel Lornans had not the same reproach to make to himself, for the lion was hit in the shoulder. It is true his thick mane deadened the force of the ball, which did not wound him mortally, and mad with pain and rage he rushed on to the road, undeterred by three bullets from Jean Taconnat’s revolver.

All this had occurred in a few seconds, and the two rifles had not been reloaded when the brutes came in another bound to within fifty paces of the group of turpentine trees.

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat were thrown down by the rush of the lioness, whose claws were striking at them when one of the bullets from Moktani’s revolver suddenly drove back the animal. Then returning to the charge, she fell upon the two young men, who were still on the ground.

A ball from M. Dardentor’s rifle, which he fired a second time, hit the lioness in the chest but did not pierce her heart, and if the two cousins had not rolled themselves out of her reach they could not have escaped safe and sound, for the animal, though seriously wounded, was still formidable. The lion had just joined her, and the two beasts dashed towards the group, where the fright and bewilderment of the horses added to the confusion and dismay.

Moktani was seized by the lion, dragged for about ten paces, then left all covered with blood. Jean Taconnat with his revolver in hand, Marcel Lornans with his rifle re-loaded, returned to the slope. Then two shots fired at close quarters finished the lioness; she fell lifeless after a last plunge.

There remained the lion, and he, roused to the highest pitch of fury, made a tremendous bound, and fell on Clovis Dardentor, who, not being able to use his weapon, rolled on the ground, crushed by the weight of the beast, and was in uttermost peril.

Jean Taconnat ran to him, while Marcel Lornans loaded his rifle a third time. He approached within three yards of the lion, and then you may be sure he thought not at all about fulfilling one of the three conditions imposed by the Civil Code! He fired his revolver and its last bullet missed!...

At this moment the caravan animals in a paroxysm of terror broke their hobbles and fled across the country. Moktani, who was covered with blood, and whose arm hung useless, was no longer able to use his weapon, but dragged himself so far as the slope. Monsieur Désirandelle. Monsieur Oriental and Agathocle stood there in order to protect the two swooning ladies.

Clovis Dardentor was not able to rise, and the paw of the beast was upon his chest, when a shot was heard.

The huge man-eater flung back his shattered skull and fell dead beside his prey.

It was Louise Elissane who had picked up the revolver that had fallen from Moktani’s hand, bofldly approached the animal, and applying the barrel to his ear, shot him dead.

“Saved! and saved by her!” cried Monsieur Dardentor. And he sprang up again with a bound that the dead king of beasts need not have disowned.

Thus, what neither Jean Taconnat and Marcel Lornans had been able to do, the young girl had done. The next moment her strength failed, and overcome with faintness, she would have fallen, if Marcel Lornans had not caught her in his arms and carried her to her mother.

All danger was now at an end, and what more could Monsieur Dardentor say than those first words that came from his heart? Nothing. So aided by Patrick he busied himself in catching the runaway mules and horses. This was done in a short time, for the animals, whose terror was allayed by the death of the lions, came back of their own accord.

Moktani, being rather seriously wounded in the thigh, was placed in the cart, and Patrick had to take his seat between the two camel-humps, where he looked no less distinguished a sportsman than if he had been riding a pure-bred Arab.

Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat mounted their horses again, and the latter said to the former: “Do you realize that this Newfoundland of the South Pyrenees has again saved us both? Clearly, there is nothing to be done with such a man.”

“Nothing I “replied Marcel Lornans.

The caravan started again. Half an hour later it reached Sidi Lhassen, and at seven o’clock the tourists entered the best hotel in Sidi-bel-Abbès.

First of all a doctor was called in to attend to Moktani, and he discovered that the guide’s wounds were not very serious.

At eight o’clock they dined together — a silent dinner during which, as though by tacit agreement, the guests made no allusion whatever to the adventure of the day. It was at dessert that Monsieur Dardentor rose, and addressing Louise in a serious tone, which the company scarcely recognized as his: “Dear young lady,” he said, “you have saved me.”

“Oh! Monsieur Dardentor,” replied the young girl, whose delicate cheeks flushed a bright pink.

“Yes... saved... me, and from a conflict in which without your intervention I must have lost my life! So with your mother’s permission, since you fulfil the conditions required by the Civil Code, my most ardent desire is to adopt you...”

“Monsieur!” stammered Madame Elissane, taken aback by this proposal.

“Make no objections!” resumed Dardentor, “for if you do not permit Mademoiselle Louise...”

“If I do not permit?”

“I will marry you, dear Madame, and Mademoiselle Louise will become my daughter all the same.”

CHAPTER XVI.

IN WHICH THIS ROMANCE COMES TO A FITTING CONCLUSION.

AT nine o’clock the next morning the train from Sidi-bel- Abbès carried off a fraction of the caravan, which after a tour of fourteen days had returned to its point of departure.

That fraction comprised Monsieur Clovis Dardentor, Madame and Mademoiselle Elissane, the Désirandelle pair and their son Agathocle, Jean Taconnat and Marcel Lornans, without counting Patrick, who was longing again to take up his quiet and regular life in the house on the Place de la Loge at Perpignan.

There remained at Sidi-bel-Abbès Moktani the guide — who was about to be conscientiously cared for, after having been royally remunerated by Monsieur Dardentor — and the natives in the service of the Algerian Railway Company.

And Monsieur Eustache Oriental?... Well, the President of the Gastronomical Society of Montélimar was not the man to leave Sidi-bel-Abbès without having studied from an edible point of view a city which has received the pleasing cognomen of “Biscuitville.”

Sidi-bel-Abbès is an important market town, a commune of seventeen thousand inhabitants, four thousand French, fifteen hundred Jews, the remainder natives. This chief place of a district which was near being the capital of the province of Oran is the former domain of the Beni-Amor who had to cross the frontier again and take refuge in Morocco. The pretty and prosperous modern town, dating from 1843, whose fertile suburbs are watered by the Mekerra, is built on an escarpment of the Tessala.

Notwithstanding its many attractions, this time it was Monsieur Dardentor who was in a hurry to quit “Biscuit- ville.” Never had he been so anxious to return to Oran.

The demand he had made for the permission of Madame Elissane to adopt her daughter had been accepted in general, and without that excellent lady’s being obliged to become Monsieur Dardentor’s wife. An adopted father, possessed of two millions, and resolved to remain a bachelor, is not refused anywhere on the face of our sublunary world. If Madame Elissanc had displayed a little reluctance as a matter of form and discretion, that reluctance was more serious on the part of Louise. But the girl had spoken in vain: “Consider, Monsieur Dardentor!”

“I have considered, my dear child.”

“You cannot make such a sacrifice!...”

“I can and I will, little one!”

“But you will repent...”

“Never, my child.”

And indeed Madame Elissane, like a practical woman, having realized the advantages of the arrangement — this was not difficult — had thanked Monsieur Dardentor from the bottom of her heart.

The Désirandelle family could not contain themselves for joy. What a fat marriage portion Louise would bring to her husband! What wealth some day! What an heiress! .And all that for Agathocle, for now they did not imagine that their friend, their compatriot Clovis Dardentor, would do otherwise than place his paternal influence at their service. This must be his intention, and their son would become the son-in-law of the rich man from Perpignan.

Consequently the whole party were agreed to return to Oran without delay.

So far as Jean Taconnat and Marcel Lornans were concerned this was what occurred: The former, having definitely come back from the land of dreams whither his imagination had been straying, said to Marcel that morning: "For my part, I say long live Dardentor, and since it is not we who are to be his sons, I am delighted that the charming Louise should become bis daughter. And you, Marcel?"

The young man did not answer.

But, tell me, Marcel, does that count from the legal point of view?"

"What?"

"A fight with lions."

"Whether it be with animals or with men, a fight is always a fight, and it is undeniable that Mademoiselle saved Monsieur Dardentor."

"Oh, now I come to think of it," observed Jean Taconnat, "it is fortunate that neither you nor I participated with Mademoiselle Louise in the saving of this honest man."

"And why?"

“Because he might perhaps have wished to adopt1 us all three. In that case she would have become your sister, and you could not have thought — ”

“True,” replied Marcel Lornans, angrily, “the law forbids marriage between the — Besides, I do not think of it.”

“Poor fellow! You love her very much?”

“Yes, Jean, with all my soul!”

“What a pity it was not you who saved this bi- millionaire! He would have chosen you for his son, and then — ”

Yes! what a pity, but it was not to be, and the two young men were very sad when the train, after having rounded Tessala on the north, proceeded towards Oran at full speed.

Monsieur Dardentor had seen nothing of Sidi-bel-Abbès, neither its wind and water mills, nor its plaster works, its tan-yards, nor its brick-fields. He had explored neither its civil quarter nor its military quarter, he had not walked about its right-angled streets planted with superb plantains, he had not drunk at its cool fountains, or passed through the four gates of its outer wall, nor visited its magnificent nursery at the Daya gate.

After having followed the course of the Sig for about twelve miles, passed by the hamlet of Trembles and the small town of Saint Lucien, rejoining the line from Algiers to Oran at Sainte-Barbe-du-Tlelat, the locomotive, after a run of forty-eight miles, reached the railway station of the capital about noon.

The circular trip was at last ended, with the addition of certain incidents that the Algerian Railway Company had not included in its programme and which the tourists would never forget.

While Monsieur Dardentor and the two Parisians regained their hotel, Madame Elissane, her daughter and the Désirandelle family returned to the residence in the Rue du Vieux Château after fourteen days’ absence.

With Monsieur Dardentor things did not drag, and we beg leave to use that rather vulgar expression, though Patrick may be offended. He conducted the business of the adoption, although the formalities were somewhat complicated, with rapidity. Though he was not fifty years old, though he had not looked after Louise during her minority, it was undeniable that Louise Elissane had saved him in a fight, conformably with a certain article of the Civil Code. Therefore the conditions required for adopter and adopted were fulfilled.

As Monsieur Dardentor was constantly summoned to the Rue du Vieux Château during that period, he found it more convenient to take up his abode in Madame Elissane’s home.

It was, however, a remarkable fact that during this period the jovial, expansive, communicative Clovis Dardentor became more reserved, indeed almost taciturn. The Désirandelle family were anxious about this sometimes, but they could not suspect their friend’s willingness to serve them. Moreover, Agathocle, under the instructions and observations of his father and mother, became assiduous in his attentions to the young heiress, who would one day possess more hundreds of thousands in francs than she now counted in years, and he left her side no more.

The result of this state of things was that Marcel Lornans and Jean Taconnat were much neglected by their former preserver. Since he had abandoned the hotel they saw him but seldom; when they met him in the street he was always full of business, and carried a lawyer’s portfolio under his arm containing voluminous papers. Yes! there was no doubt Clovis Dardentor’s enthusiasm with regard to the two Parisians was on the wane. The Pyrenean seemed no longer to remember that he had saved them twice separately from tumultuous floods and whirling flames, and once together in a fight with wild beasts.

So it happened one fine morning that Jean Taconnat thought it well to say to his cousin: “My dear old Marcel, we must decide! Since we have come here to be soldiers, let us be soldiers! When will you come with me to the office of the deputy-commissary, and then to the recruiting office?”

“To-morrow,” replied Marcel Lornans. And on the morrow, when Jean Taconnat renewed his proposal, he obtained the same reply.

What saddened Marcel Lornans most was that he had no opportunities of seeing Mademoiselle Elissane. The young girl seldom went out, and the receptions at the house in the Rue du Vieux Château had ceased. The marriage between Monsieur Agathocle Désirandelle and Mademoiselle Louise Elissane was announced as near at hand. Marcel Lornans was in despair.

One day Clovis Dardentor came to the hotel to call on the two young men.

“Well, my friends,” he asked without other preamble, “what about your enlisting?”

“To-morrow,” replied Marcel Lornans. “Yes, to-morrow,” added Jean Taconnat, “to-morrow, without fail, dear Monsieur Dardentor!”

“To-morrow?” replied the latter. “Why, no, no! What the devil! You have plenty of time to bury yourselves in the 5th Chasseurs! Wait, there is no hurry! I want you both to be present at an entertainment I am about to give.”

“For the marriage of Monsieur Désirandelle and Mademoiselle Elissane?” asked Marcel Lornans, whose face had changed visibly.

“No,” replied Monsieur Dardentor, “for the *fête* of the adoption, before the marriage. I count on you, and gojd evening!”

And with that he left them, he was in such a hurry.

Monsieur Dardentor had to take up his residence in the Canton of Oran, for it was the chief magistrate there who must draw up the deed of adoption. Then the parties presented themselves before the magistrate, Madame and Mademoiselle Elissane on one side, Monsieur Clovis Dardentor on the other, provided with their certificates of birth and other documents relating to the fulfilment of the conditions required for the adopter and the adopted.

The magistrate, after having received the consent of the several parties, had drawn up the contract. In ten days a copy was made by the magistrate’s clerk, and to this was added all the necessary certificates, and finally the bundle of papers reached the hands of the Procureur de la Republique in due form.

“What coming and going, what fuss and rubbish!” repeated Dardentor. “It is enough to sicken a sensible man.”

On examination of the documents, the “tribunal of first instance “announced that there was just cause for adoption. Then the judgment and the papers were transmitted to the court of Algiers, which also declared that the right to adopt was established. All this took weeks and weeks, and every morning the two Parisians passed before the military offices without going in.

Finally, the adoption was allowed, the decision of the court was posted in certain appointed places, and the other formalities of publication were fulfilled.

The whole business cost about three hundred francs, and Monsieur Dardentor would have consented to expend double or treble that sum in order to get it over more quickly.

At last the day of the ceremony arrived, and the expected entertainment took place in the great drawing- room of the hotel. Madame Elissane's dining-room was not large enough to accommodate the guests, among whom were Jean Taconnat, Marcel Lornans, and even Monsieur Oriental, who had returned to Oran, and to whom Monsieur Dardentor had addressed an invitation, which was received as it deserved. But, to the extreme surprise of some, and to the extreme satisfaction of others, the Désirandelle family did not figure among the number of the guests. No! on the previous evening, utterly disconcerted and furious, cursing Monsieur Dardentor to the most remote generations of his adopted daughter's descendants, they had left Oran on board the *Argèlès,* where Captain Bugarach and Dr. Bruno had not to ruin themselves in food for the party.

Is it necessary to say that the repast was both magnificent and merry, that Marcel Lornans beheld Louise Elissane once more in the brilliance of her beauty, that Jean Taconnat had made a ballad on the departure of "Little Gagathocle," but that he did not dare to sing it, that Monsieur Eustache

Oriental ate of everything, but with moderation, and that he drank of everything, but with discretion.

Yes! it was splendid, and remarkable, that speech of Monsieur Dardentor's after the dessert. It was well for the Désirandelles that they had departed on the previous day, for how would they have looked at that solemn moment?...

"Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your kindness in taking part in that ceremony which has just fulfilled the dearest of my wishes."

Patrick might well hope from this beginning that his master would conclude in a becoming manner.

"Let me inform you also, that if the dinner has appeared good to you, the dessert will be still better, owing to the appearance of a new dish which is not inscribed on the bill of fare."

Patrick began to be uneasy.

"Ah, ah, a new dish!" said Monsieur Oriental, smacking his lips.

"I need not," continued Monsieur Dardentor, "introduce you to our charming Louise, whom her excellent mother has allowed me to adopt, and who, while remaining her daughter, has become mine."

(Unanimous applause, and also some tears in feminine eyes.)

"Now, with her mother's consent, it is our Louise whom I offer at dessert, a morsel from the table of the gods..."

(Discomfiture of Monsieur Oriental, who ceases to smack his lips.)

“And to whom, think you, my friends?... To one of our guests — to Marcel Lornans, who, by reason cf this fact, will become my son...”

“And I? “Jean Taconnat could not refrain from the exclamation.

“Why, you know you will be my nephew, Jean! And now, for the music! Boum . . boum... pif... paf... and all the fun of a real jolly evening.”

Patrick had veiled his face with his napkin.

Need it be told Marcel Lornans was married with great ceremony to Louise Elissane in the following week, and that neither his name nor Jean Taconnat’s ever figured on the muster roll of the 5th Chasseurs d’Afrique.

But, it will be said, our story ends like a vaudeville. Well, what is it if not a vaudeville, without songs, but with the inevitable finale of marriage?

THE END

THE SPHINX OF THE ICE FIELDS

Translated by Frances Cashel Hoey

Also known as *An Antarctic Mystery*, this 1897 novel is Verne's response to Edgar Allan Poe's 1838 novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Verne's sequel follows the adventures of the narrator and his journey from the Kerguelen Islands aboard Halbrane. The story is set in 1839, eleven years after the events in Poe's novel. The narrator is wealthy American Jeorling, who has entertained himself with private studies of the wildlife on the Kerguelen Islands and is now looking for a passage back to the US.

For your interest, Poe's original novel is also provided in this edition to accompany your reading of Verne's sequel. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* follows this novel.

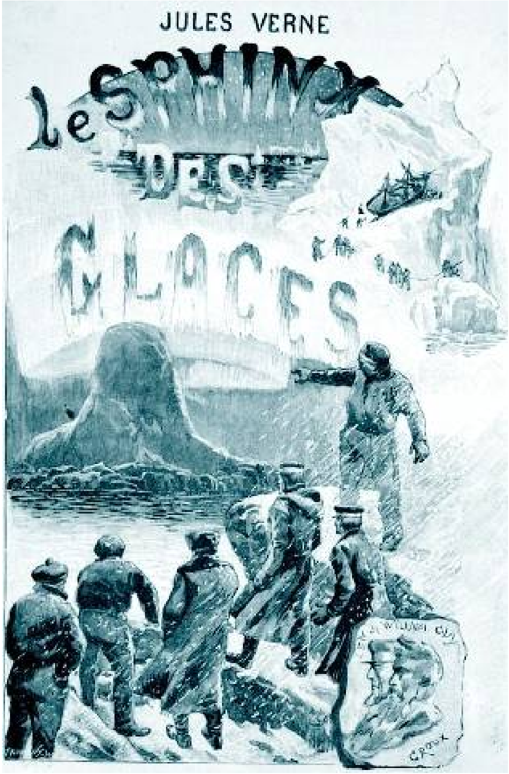
JULES VERNE
Le SPHINX DES GLACES

An original illustration

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CHAPTER I.

THE KERGUELEN ISLANDS

No doubt the following narrative will be received: with entire incredulity, but I think it well that the public should be put in possession of the facts narrated in “An Antarctic Mystery.” The public is free to believe them or not, at its good pleasure.

No more appropriate scene for the wonderful and terrible adventures which I am about to relate could be imagined than the Desolation Islands, so called, in 1779, by Captain Cook. I lived there for several weeks, and I can affirm, on the evidence of my own eyes and my own experience, that the famous English explorer and navigator was happily inspired when he gave the islands that significant name.

Geographical nomenclature, however, insists on the name of Kerguelen, which is generally adopted for the group which lies in 49° 45’ south latitude, and 69° 6’ east longitude. This is just, because in 1772, Baron Kerguelen, a Frenchman, was the first to discover those islands in the southern part of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, the commander of the squadron on that voyage believed that he had found a new continent on the limit of the Antarctic seas, but in the course of a second expedition he recognized his error. There was only an archipelago. I may be believed when I assert that Desolation Islands is the only suitable name for this group of three hundred isles or islets in the midst of the vast expanse of ocean, which is constantly disturbed by austral storms.

Nevertheless, the group is inhabited, and the number of Europeans and Americans who formed the nucleus of the Kerguelen population at the date of the 2nd of August, 1839, had been augmented for two months past by a unit in my person. Just then I was waiting for an opportunity of leaving the place, having completed the geological and mineralogical studies which had brought me to the group in general and to Christmas Harbour in particular.

Christmas Harbour belongs to the most important islet of the archipelago, one that is about half as large as Corsica. It is safe, and easy, and free of access. Your ship may ride securely at single anchor in its waters, while the bay remains free from ice.

The Kerguelens possess hundreds of other fjords. Their coasts are notched and ragged, especially in the parts between the north and the south-east, where little islets abound. The soil, of volcanic origin, is composed of quartz, mixed with a bluish stone. In summer it is covered with green mosses, grey lichens, various hardy plants, especially wild saxifrage. Only one edible plant grows there, a kind of cabbage, not found anywhere else, and very bitter of flavour. Great flocks of royal and other penguins people these islets, finding good lodging on their rocky and mossy surface. These stupid birds, in their yellow and white feathers, with their heads thrown back and their wings like the sleeves of a monastic habit, look, at a distance, like monks in single file walking in procession along the beach.

The islands afford refuge to numbers of sea-calves, seals, and sea-elephants. The taking of those amphibious animals either on land or from the sea is profitable, and may lead to a trade which will bring a large number of vessels into these waters.

On the day already mentioned, I was accosted while strolling on the port by mine host of mine inn.

“Unless I am much mistaken, time is beginning to seem very long to you, Mr. Jeorling?”

The speaker was a big tall American who kept the only inn on the port.

“If you will not be offended, Mr. Atkins, I will acknowledge that I do find it long.”

“Of course I won’t be offended. Am I not as well used to answers of that kind as the rocks of the Cape to the rollers?”

“And you resist them equally well.”

“Of course. From the day of your arrival at Christmas Harbour, when you came to the Green Cormorant, I said to myself that in a fortnight, if not in a week, you would have enough of it, and would be sorry you had landed in the Kerguelens.”

“No, indeed, Mr. Atkins; I never regret anything I have done.”

“That’s a good habit, sir.”

“Besides, I have gained knowledge by observing curious things here. I have crossed the rolling plains, covered with hard stringy mosses, and I shall take away curious mineralogical and geological specimens with me. I have gone sealing, and taken sea-calves with your people. I have visited the rookeries where the penguin and the albatross live together in good fellowship, and that was well worth my while. You have given me now and again a dish of petrel, seasoned by your own hand, and very acceptable when one has a fine healthy appetite. I have found a friendly welcome at the Green Cormorant, and I am very much obliged to you. But, if I am right in my reckoning, it is two months since the Chilian twomaster *Penãs* set me down at Christmas Harbour in mid-winter.

“And you want to get back to your own country, which is mine, Mr. Jeorling; to return to Connecticut, to Providence, our capital.”

“Doubtless, Mr. Atkins, for I have been a globe-trotter for close upon three years. One must come to a stop and take root at some time.”

“Yes, and when one has taken root, one puts out branches.”

“Just so, Mr. Atkins. However, as I have no relations living, it is likely that I shall be the last of my line. I am not likely to take a fancy for marrying at forty.”

“Well, well, that is a matter of taste. Fifteen years ago I settled down comfortably at Christmas Harbour with my Betsy; she has presented me with ten children, who in their turn will present me with grandchildren.”

“You will not return to the old country?”

“What should I do there, Mr. Jeorling, and what could I ever have done there? There was nothing before me but poverty. Here, on the contrary, in these Islands of Desolation, where I have no reason to feel desolate, ease and competence have come to me and mine!”

“No doubt, and I congratulate you, Mr. Atkins, for you are a happy man. Nevertheless it is not impossible that the fancy may take you some day —”

Mr. Arkins answered by a vigorous and convincing shake of the head. It was very pleasant to hear this worthy American talk. He was completely acclimatized on his archipelago, and to the conditions of life there. He lived with his family as the penguins lived in their rookeries. His wife was a “valiant” woman of the Scriptural type, his sons were strong, hardy fellows, who did not know what sickness meant. His business was prosperous. The Green Cormorant had the custom of all the ships, whalers and others, that put in at Kerguelen. Atkins supplied them with everything they required, and no second inn existed at Christmas Harbour. His sons were carpenters, sailmakers, and fishers, and they hunted the amphibians in all the creeks during the hot season. In short, this was a family of honest folk who fulfilled their destiny without much difficulty.

“Once more, Mr. Atkins, let me assure you,” I resumed, “I am delighted to have come to Kerguelen. I shall always remember the islands kindly. Nevertheless, I should not be sorry to find myself at sea again.”

“Come, Mr. Jeorling, you must have a little patience,” said the philosopher, “you must not forget that the fine days will soon be here. In five or six weeks — ”

“Yes, and in the meantime, the hills and the plains, the rocks and the shores will be covered thick with snow, and the sun will not have strength to dispel the mists on the horizon.”

“Now, there you are again, Mr. Jeorling! Why, the wild grass is already peeping through the white sheet! Just look!”

“Yes, with a magnifying glass! Between ourselves, Arkins, could you venture to pretend that your bays are not still ice-locked in this month of August, which is the February of our northern hemisphere?”

“I acknowledge that, Mr. Jeorling. But again I say have patience! The winter has been mild this year. The ships will soon show up, in the east or in the west, for the fishing season is near.”

“May Heaven hear you, Atkins, and guide the *Halbrane* safely into port.”

“Captain Len Guy? Ah, he’s a good sailor, although he’s English — there are good people everywhere — and he takes in his supplies at the Green Cormorant.”

“You think the *Halbrane* — ”

“Will be signalled before a week, Mr. Jeorling, or, if not, it will be because there is no longer a Captain Len Guy; and if there is no longer a Captain Len Guy, it is because the *Halbrane* has sunk in full sail between the Kerguelens and the Cape of Good Hope.”

Thereupon Mr. Atkins walked away, with a scornful gesture, indicating that such an eventuality was out of all probability.

My intention was to take my passage on board the *Halbrane* so soon as she should come to her moorings in Christmas Harbour. After a rest of six or seven days, she would set sail again for Tristan d’Acunha, where she was to discharge her cargo of tin and copper. I meant to stay in the island for a few weeks of the fine season, and from thence set out for Connecticut. Nevertheless, I did not fail to take into due account the share that belongs to chance in human affairs, for it is wise, as Edgar Poe has said, always “to reckon with the unforeseen, the unexpected, the inconceivable, which have a very large share (in those affairs), and chance ought always to be a matter of strict calculation.”

Each day I walked about the port and its neighbourhood. The sun was growing strong. The rocks were emerging by degrees from their winter clothing of snow; moss of a wine-like colour was springing up on the basalt cliffs, strips of seaweed fifty yards long were floating on the sea, and on the plain the lyella, which is of Andean origin, was pushing up its little points, and the only leguminous plant of the region, that gigantic cabbage already mentioned, valuable for its anti-scorbutic properties, was making its appearance.

I had not come across a single land mammal — sea mammals swarm in these waters — not even of the batrachian or reptilian kinds. A few insects only — butterflies or others — and even these did not fly, for before they could use their wings, the atmospheric currents carried the tiny bodies away to the surface of the rolling waves.

“And the *Halbrane*” I used to say to Atkins each morning.

“The *Halbrane*, Mr. Jeorling,” he would reply with complacent assurance, “will surely come into port to-day, or, if not to-day, to-morrow.”

In my rambles on the shore, I frequently routed a crowd of amphibians, sending them plunging into the newly released waters. The penguins, heavy and impassive creatures, did not disappear at my approach; they took no notice; but the black petrels, the puffins, black and white, the grebes and others, spread their wings at sight of me.

One day I witnessed the departure of an albatross, saluted by the very best croaks of the penguins, no doubt as a friend whom they were to see no more. Those powerful birds can fly for two hundred leagues without resting for a moment, and with such rapidity that they sweep through vast spaces in a few hours. The departing albatross sat motionless upon a high rock, at the end of the bay of Christmas Harbour, looking at the waves as they dashed violently against the beach.

Suddenly, the bird rose with a great sweep into the air, its claws folded beneath it, its head stretched out like the prow of a ship, uttering its shrill cry: a few moments later it was reduced to a black speck in the vast height and disappeared behind the misty curtain of the south.

CHAPTER II.

THE SCHOONER *HALBRANE*

The *Halbrane* was a schooner of three hundred tons, and a fast sailer. On board there was a captain, a mate, or lieutenant, a boatswain, a cook, and eight sailors; in all twelve men, a sufficient number to work the ship. Solidly built, copper-bottomed, very manageable, well suited for navigation between the fortieth and sixtieth parallels of south latitude, the *Halbrane* was a credit to the ship-yards of Birkenhead.

All this I learned from Atkins, who adorned his narrative with praise and admiration of its theme. Captain Len Guy, of Liverpool, was three-fifths owner of the vessel, which he had commanded for nearly six years. He traded in the southern seas of Africa and America, going from one group of islands to another and from continent to continent. His ship's company was but a dozen men, it is true, but she was used for the purposes of trade only; he would have required a more numerous crew, and all the implements, for taking seals and other amphibia. The *Halbrane* was not defenceless, however; on the contrary, she was heavily armed, and this was well, for those southern seas were not too safe; they were frequented at that period by pirates, and on approaching the isles the *Halbrane* was put into a condition to resist attack. Besides, the men always slept with one eye open.

One morning — it was the 27th of August — I was roused out of my bed by the rough voice of the innkeeper and the tremendous thumps he gave my door. "Mr. Jeorling, are you awake?"

"Of course I am, Atkins. How should I be otherwise, with all that noise going on? What's up?"

“A ship six miles out in the offing, to the nor’east, steering for Christmas!”

“Will it be the *Halbrane*?”

“We shall know that in a short time, Mr. Jeorling. At any rate it is the first boat of the year, and we must give it a welcome.”

I dressed hurriedly and joined Atkins on the quay, where I found him in the midst of a group engaged in eager discussion. Atkins was indisputably the most considerable and considered man in the archipelago — consequently he secured the best listeners. The matter in dispute was whether the schooner in sight was or was not the *Halbrane*. The majority maintained that she was not, but Atkins was positive she was, although on this occasion he had only two backers.

The dispute was carried on with warmth, the host of the Green Cormorant defending his view, and the dissentients maintaining that the fast-approaching schooner was either English or American, until she was near enough to hoist her flag and the Union Jack went fluttering up into the sky. Shortly after the *Halbrane* lay at anchor in the middle of Christmas Harbour.

The captain of the *Halbrane*, who received the demonstrative greeting of Atkins very coolly, it seemed to me, was about forty-five, red-faced, and solidly built, like his schooner; his head was large, his hair was already turning grey, his black eyes shone like coals of fire under his thick eyebrows, and his strong white teeth were set like rocks in his powerful jaws; his chin was lengthened by a coarse red beard, and his arms and legs were strong and firm. Such was Captain Len Guy, and he impressed me with the notion that he was rather impassive than hard, a shut-up sort of person, whose secrets it would not be easy to get at. I was told the very same day that my impression was correct, by a person who was better informed than Atkins, although the latter pretended to great intimacy with the captain. The truth was that nobody had penetrated that reserved nature.

I may as well say at once that the person to whom I have alluded was the boatswain of the *Halbrane*, a man named Hurliguerly, who came from the Isle of Wight. This person was about forty-four, short, stout, strong, and bow-legged; his arms stuck out from his body, his head was set like a ball on a bull neck, his chest was broad enough to hold two pairs of lungs (and he seemed to want a double supply, for he was always puffing, blowing, and talking), he had droll roguish eyes, with a network of wrinkles under them. A noteworthy detail was an ear-ring, one only, which hung from the lobe of his left ear. What a contrast to the captain of the schooner, and how did two such dissimilar beings contrive to get on together? They had contrived it, somehow, for they had been at sea in each other’s company for fifteen years, first in the brig *Power*, which had been replaced by the schooner *Halbrane*, six years before the beginning of this story.

Atkins had told Hurliguerly on his arrival that I would take passage on the *Halbrane*, if Captain Len Guy consented to my doing so, and the boatswain presented himself on the following morning without any notice or introduction. He already knew my name, and he accosted me as follows:

“Mr. Jeorling, I salute you.”

“I salute you in my turn, my friend. What do you want?”

“To offer you my services.”

“On what account?”

“On account of your intention to embark on the *Halbrane*.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Hurliguerly, the boatswain of the *Halbrane*, and besides, I am the faithful companion of Captain Len Guy, who will listen to me willingly, although he has the reputation of not listening to anybody.”

“Well, my friend, let us talk, if you are not required on board just now.”

“I have two hours before me, Mr. Jeorling. Besides, there’s very little to be done to-day. If you are free, as I am — ”

He waved his hand towards the port.

“Cannot we talk very well here?” I observed.

“Talk, Mr. Jeorling, talk standing up, and our throats dry, when it is so easy to sit down in a corner of the Green Cormorant in front of two glasses of whisky.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Well, then, I’ll drink for both of us. Oh! don’t imagine you are dealing with a sot! No! never more than is good for me, but always as much!”

I followed the man to the tavern, and while Atkins was busy on the deck of the ship, discussing the prices of his purchases and sales, we took our places in the eating room of his inn. And first I said to Hurliguerly: “It was on Atkins that I reckoned to introduce me to Captain Len Guy, for he knows him very intimately, if I am not mistaken.”

“Pooh! Atkins is a good sort, and the captain has an esteem for him. But he can’t do what I can. Let me act for you, Mr. Jeorling.”

“Is it so difficult a matter to arrange, boatswain, and is there not a cabin on board the *Halbrane*? The smallest would do for me, and I will pay — ”

“All right, Mr. Jeorling! There is a cabin, which has never been used, and since you don’t mind putting your hand in your pocket if required — however — between ourselves — it will take somebody sharper than you think, and who isn’t good old Atkins, to induce Captain Len Guy to take a passenger. Yes, indeed, it will take all the smartness of the good fellow who now drinks to your health, regretting that you don’t return the compliment!”

What a wink it was that accompanied this sentiment! And then the man took a short black pipe out of the pocket of his jacket, and smoked like a steamer in full blast.

“Mr. Hurliguerly?” said I.

“Mr. Jeorling.”

“Why does your captain object to taking me on his ship?”

“Because he does not intend to take anybody on board his ship. He never has taken a passenger.”

“But, for what reason, I ask you.”

“Oh! because he wants to go where he likes, to turn about if he pleases and go the other way without accounting for his motives to anybody. He never leaves these southern seas, Mr. Jeorling; we have been going these many years between Australia on the east and America on the west; from Hobart

Town to the Kerguelens, to Tristan d’Acunha, to the Falklands, only taking time anywhere to sell our cargo, and sometimes dipping down into the Antarctic Sea. Under these circumstances, you understand, a passenger might be troublesome, and besides, who would care to embark on the *Halbrane*? she does not like to flout the breezes, and goes wherever the wind drives her.”

“The *Halbrane* positively leaves the Kerguelens in four days?”

“Certainly.”

“And this time she will sail westward for Tristan d’Acunha?”

“Probably.”

“Well, then, that probability will be enough for me, and since you offer me your services, get Captain Len Guy to accept me as a passenger.”

“It’s as good as done.”

“All right, Hurliguerly, and you shall have no reason to repent of it.”

“Eh! Mr. Jeorling,” replied this singular mariner, shaking his head as though he had just come out of the sea, “I have never repented of anything, and I know well that I shall not repent of doing you a service. Now, if you will allow me, I shall take leave of you, without waiting for Arkins to return, and get on board.”

With this, Hurliguerly swallowed his last glass of whisky at a gulp — I thought the glass would have gone down with the liquor — bestowed a patronizing smile on me, and departed.

An hour later, I met the innkeeper on the port, and told him what had occurred.

“Ah! that Hurliguerly!” said he, “always the old story. If you were to believe him, Captain Len Guy wouldn’t blow his nose without consulting him. He’s a queer fellow, Mr. Jeorling, not bad, not stupid, but a great hand at getting hold of dollars or guineas! If you fall into his hands, mind your purse, button up your pocket, and don’t let yourself be done.”

“Thanks for your advice, Atkins. Tell me, you have been talking with Captain Len Guy; have you spoken about me?”

“Not yet, Mr. Jeorling. There’s plenty of time. The *Halbrane* has only just arrived, and — ”

“Yes, yes, I know. But you understand that I want to be certain as soon as possible.”

“There’s nothing to fear. The matter will be all right. Besides, you would not be at a loss in any case. When the fishing season comes, there will be more ships in Christmas Harbour than there are houses around the Green Cormorant. Rely on me. I undertake your getting a passage.”

Now, these were fair words, but, just as in the case of Hurliguerly, there was nothing in them. So, notwithstanding the fine promises of the two, I resolved to address myself personally to Len Guy, hard to get at though he might be, so soon as I should meet him alone.

The next day, in the afternoon, I saw him on the quay, and approached him. It was plain that he would have preferred to avoid me. It was impossible that Captain Len Guy, who knew every dweller in the place, should not have known that I was a stranger, even supposing that neither of my would-be patrons had mentioned me to him.

His attitude could only signify one of two things — either my proposal had been communicated to him, and he did not intend to accede to it; or neither Hurliguerly nor Arkins had spoken to him since the previous day. In the latter case, if he held aloof from me, it was because of his morose nature; it was because he did not choose to enter into conversation with a stranger.

At the moment when I was about to accost him, the *Halbrane's* lieutenant rejoined his captain, and the latter availed himself of the opportunity to avoid me. He made a sign to the officer to follow him, and the two walked away at a rapid pace.

“This is serious,” said I to myself. “It looks as though I shall find it difficult to gain my point. But, after all it only means delay. To-morrow morning I will go on board the *Halbrane*. Whether he likes it or whether he doesn’t, this Len Guy will have to hear what I’ve got to say, and to give me an answer, yes or no!”

Besides, the captain of the *Halbrane* might come at dinner-time to the Green Cormorant, where the ship’s people usually took their meals when ashore. So I waited, and did not go to dinner until late. I was disappointed, however, for neither the captain nor anyone belonging to the ship patronized the Green Cormorant that day. I had to dine alone, exactly as I had been doing every day for two months.

After dinner, about half-past seven, when it was dark, I went out to walk on the port, keeping on the side of the houses. The quay was quite deserted; not a man of the *Halbrane* crew was ashore. The ship’s boats were alongside, rocking gently on the rising tide. I remained there until nine, walking up and down the edge in full view of the *Halbrane*. Gradually the mass of the ship became indistinct, there was no movement and no light. I returned to the inn, where I found Atkins smoking his pipe near the door.

“Atkins,” said I, “it seems that Captain Len Guy does not care to come to your inn very often?”

“He sometimes comes on Sunday, and this is Saturday, Mr. Jeorling.”

“You have not spoken to him?”

“Yes, I have.”

Atkins was visibly embarrassed.

“You have informed him that a person of your acquaintance wished to take passage on the *Halbrane*?”

“Yes.”

“What was his answer?”

“Not what either you or I would have wished, Mr. Jeorling.”

“He refuses?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it was refusing; what he said was: ‘My ship is not intended to carry passengers. I never have taken any, and I never intend to do so.’”

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN LEN GUY

I slept ill. Again and again I “dreamed that I was dreaming.” Now — this is an observation made by Edgar Poe — when one suspects that one is dreaming, the waking comes almost instantly. I woke then, and every time in a very bad humour with Captain Len Guy. The idea of leaving the Kerguelens on the *Halbrane* had full possession of me, and I grew more and more angry with her disobliging captain. In fact, I passed the night in a fever of indignation, and only recovered my temper with daylight. Nevertheless I was determined to have an explanation with Captain Len Guy about his detestable conduct. Perhaps I should fail to get anything out of that human hedgehog, but at least I should have given him a piece of my mind.

I went out at eight o’clock in the morning. The weather was abominable. Rain, mixed with snow, a storm coming over the mountains at the back of the bay from the west, clouds scurrying down from the lower zones, an avalanche of wind and water. It was not likely that Captain Len Guy had come ashore merely to enjoy such a wetting and blowing.

No one on the quay; of course not. As for my getting on’ board the *Halbrane*, that could not be done without hailing one of her boats, and the boatswain would not venture to send it for me.

“Besides,” I reflected, “on his quarter-deck the captain is at home, and neutral ground is better for what I want to say to him, if he persists in his unjustifiable refusal. I will watch him this time, and if his boat touches the quay, he shall not succeed in avoiding me.”

I returned to the Green Cormorant, and took up my post behind the window panes, which were dimmed by the hissing rain. There I waited, nervous, impatient, and in a state of growing irritation. Two hours wore away thus. Then, with the instability of the winds in the Kerguelens, the weather became calm before I did. I opened my window, and at the same moment a sailor stepped into one of the boats of the *Halbrane* and laid hold of a pair of oars, while a second man seated himself in the back, but without taking the tiller ropes. The boat touched the landing, place and Captain Len Guy stepped on shore.

In a few seconds I was out of the inn, and confronted him.

“Sir,” said I in a cold hard tone.

Captain Len Guy looked at me steadily, and I was struck by the sadness of his eyes, which were as black as ink. Then in a very low voice he asked:

“You are a stranger?”

“A stranger at the Kerguelens? Yes.”

“Of English nationality?”

“No. American.”

He saluted me, and I returned the curt gesture.

“Sir,” I resumed, “I believe Mr. Atkins of the Green Cormorant has spoken to you respecting a proposal of mine. That proposal, it seems to me, deserved a favourable reception on the part of a — ”

“The proposal to take passage on my ship?” interposed Captain Len Guy.

“Precisely.”

“I regret, sir, I regret that I could not agree to your request.”

“Will you tell me why?”

“Because I am not in the habit of taking passengers. That is the first reason.”

“And the second, captain?”

“Because the route of the *Halbrane* is never settled beforehand. She starts for one port and goes to another, just as I find it to my advantage. You must know that I am not in the service of a shipowner. My share in the schooner is considerable, and I have no one but myself to consult in respect to her.”

“Then it entirely depends on you to give me a passage?”

“That is so, but I can only answer you by a refusal — to my extreme regret.”

“Perhaps you will change your mind, captain, when you know that I care very little what the destination of your schooner may be. It is not unreasonable to suppose that she will go somewhere — ”

“Somewhere indeed.” I fancied that Captain Len Guy threw a long look towards the southern horizon.

“To go here or to go there is almost a matter of indifference to me. What I desired above all was to get away from Kerguelen at the first opportunity that should offer.”

Captain Len Guy made me no answer; he remained in silent thought, but did not endeavour to slip away from me.

“You are doing me the honour to listen to me?” I asked him sharply.

“Yes, sir.”

“I will then add that, if I am not mistaken, and if the route of your ship has not been altered, it was your intention to leave Christmas Harbour for Tristan d’ Acunha.”

“Perhaps for Tristan d’Acunha, perhaps for the Cape, perhaps for the Falklands, perhaps for elsewhere.”

“Well, then, Captain Guy, it is precisely elsewhere that I want to go,” I replied ironically, and trying hard to control my irritation.

Then a singular change took place in the demeanour of Captain Len Guy. His voice became more sharp and harsh. In very plain words he made me understand that it was quite useless to insist, that Our interview had already lasted too long, that time pressed, and he had business at the port; in short that we had said all that we could have to say to each other.

I had put out my arm to detain him — to seize him would be a more correct term — and the conversation, ill begun, seemed likely to end still more ill, when this odd person turned towards me and said in a milder tone, —

“Pray understand, sir, that I am very sorry to be unable to do what you ask, and to appear disobliging to an American. But I could not act otherwise. In the course of the voyage of the *Halbrane* some unforeseen incident might occur to make the presence of a passenger inconvenient — even one so accommodating as yourself. Thus I might expose myself to the risk of being unable to profit by the chances which I seek."

"I have told you, captain, and I repeat it, that although my intention is to return to America and to Connecticut, I don't care whether I get there in three months or in six, or by what route; it's all the same to me, and even were your schooner to take me to the Antarctic seas — "

"The Antarctic seas!" exclaimed Captain Len Guy with a question in his tone. And his look searched my thoughts with the keenness of a dagger.

"Why do you speak of the Antarctic seas?" he asked, taking my hand.

"Well, just as I might have spoken of the 'Hyperborean seas' from whence an Irish poet has made Sebastian Cabot address some lovely verses to his Lady. (1) I spoke of the South Pole as I might have spoken of the North."

Captain Len Guy did not answer, and I thought I saw tears glisten in his eyes. Then, as though he would escape from some harrowing recollection which my words had evoked, he said, —

"Who would venture to seek the South Pole?"

"It would be difficult to reach, and the experiments would be of no practical use," I replied. "Nevertheless there are men sufficiently adventurous to embark in such an enterprise."

"Yes — adventurous is the word!" muttered the captain.

"And now," I resumed, "the United States is again making an attempt with Wilkes's fleet, the *Vancouver*, the *Peacock*, the *Flying Fish*, and others."

“The United States, Mr. Jeorling? Do you mean to say that an expedition has been sent by the Federal Government to the Antarctic seas?”

“The fact is certain, and last year, before I left America, I learned that the vessels had sailed. That was a year ago, and it is very possible that Wilkes has gone farther than any of the preceding explorers.”

Captain Len Guy had relapsed into silence, and came out of his inexplicable musing only to say abruptly —

“You come from Connecticut, sir?”

“From Connecticut.”

“And more specially?”

“From Providence.”

“Do you know Nantucket Island?”

“I have visited it several times.”

“You know, I think,” said the captain, looking straight into my eyes, “that Nantucket Island was the birthplace of Arthur Gordon Pym, the hero of your famous romance-writer Edgar Poe.”

“Yes. I remember that Poe’s romance starts from Nantucket.”

“Romance, you say? That was the word you used?”

“Undoubtedly, captain.”

“Yes, and that is what everybody says! But, pardon me, I cannot stay any longer. I regret that I cannot alter my mind with respect to your proposal. But, at any rate, you will only have a few days to wait. The season is about to open. Trading ships and whalers will put in at Christmas Harbour, and you will be able to make a choice, with the certainty of going to the port you want to reach. I am very sorry, sir, and I salute you.”

With these words Captain Len Guy walked quickly away, and the interview ended differently from what I had expected, that is to say in formal, although polite, fashion.

As there is no use in contending with the impossible, I gave up the hope of a passage on the *Halbrane*, but continued to feel angry with her intractable captain. And why should I not confess that my curiosity was aroused? I felt that there was something mysterious about this sullen mariner, and I should have liked to find out what it was.

That day, Atkins wanted to know whether Captain Len Guy had made himself less disagreeable. I had to acknowledge that I had been no more fortunate in my negotiations than my host himself, and the avowal surprised him not a little. He could not understand the captain’s obstinate refusal. And — a fact which touched him more nearly — the Green Cormorant had not been visited by either Len Guy or his crew since the arrival of the Halbrane. The men were evidently acting upon orders. So far as Hurliguerly was concerned, it was easy to understand that after his imprudent advance he did not care to keep up useless relations with me. I knew not whether he had attempted to shake the resolution of his chief; but I was certain of one thing; if he had made any such effort it had failed.

During the three following days, the 10th, 11th, and 12th of August, the work of repairing and re-victualling the schooner went on briskly; but all this was done with regularity, and without such noise and quarrelling as seamen at anchor usually indulge in. The *Halbrane* was evidently well commanded, her crew well kept in hand, discipline strictly maintained.

The schooner was to sail on the 15th of August, and on the eve of that day I had no reason to think that Captain Len Guy had repented him of his categorical refusal. Indeed, I had made up my mind to the disappointment, and had no longer any angry feeling about it. When Captain Len Guy and myself met on the quay, we took no notice of each other; nevertheless, I fancied there was some hesitation in his manner; as though he would have liked to speak to me. He did not do so, however, and I was not disposed to seek a further explanation.

At seven o’clock in the evening of the 14th of August, the island being already wrapped in darkness, I was walking on the port after I had dined, walking briskly too, for it was cold, although dry weather. The sky was studded with stars and the air was very keen. I could not stay out long, and was returning to mine inn, when a man crossed my path, paused, came back, and stopped in front of me. It was the captain of the *Halbrane.*

“Mr. Jeorling,” he began, “the *Halbrane* sails tomorrow morning, with the ebb tide.”

“What is the good of telling me that,” I replied, “since you refuse — ”

“Sir, I have thought over it, and if you have not changed your mind, come on board at seven o’clock.”

“Really, captain,” I replied, “I did not expect this relenting on your part.”

“I repeat that I have thought over it, and I add that the *Halbrane* shall proceed direct to Tristan d’Acunha. That will suit you, I suppose?”

“To perfection, captain. To-morrow morning, at seven o’clock, I shall be on board.”

“Your cabin is prepared.”

“The cost of the voyage — ”

“We can settle that another time,” answered the captain, “and to your satisfaction. Until to-morrow, then — ”

“Until to-morrow.”

I stretched out my arm, to shake hands with him upon our bargain. Perhaps he did not perceive my movement in the darkness, at all events he made no response to it, but walked rapidly away and got into his boat.

I was greatly surprised, and so was Arkins, when I found him in the eating-room of the Green Cormorant and told him what had occurred. His comment upon it was characteristic.

“This queer captain,” he said, “is as full of whims as a spoilt child! It is to be hoped he will not change his mind again at the last moment.”

The next morning at daybreak I bade adieu to the Green Cormorant, and went down to the port, with my kind-hearted host, who insisted on accompanying me to the ship, partly in order to make his mind easy respecting the sincerity of the captain’s repentance, and partly that he might take leave of him, and also of Hurliguerly. A boat was waiting at the quay, and we reached the ship in a few minutes.

The first person whom I met on the deck was Hurliguerly; he gave me a look of triumph, which said as plainly as speech: “Ha! you see now. Our hard-to-manage captain has given in at last. And to whom do you owe this, but to the good boatswain who did his best for you, and did not boast overmuch of his influence?”

Was this the truth? I had strong reasons for doubting it. After all, what did it matter?

Captain Len Guy came on deck immediately after my arrival; this was not surprising, except for the fact that he did not appear to remark my presence.

Atkins then approached the captain and said in a pleasant tone, —

“We shall meet next year!”

“If it please God, Atkins.”

They shook hands. Then the boatswain took a hearty leave of the innkeeper, and was rowed back to the quay.

Before dark the white summits of Table Mount and Havergal, which rise, the former to two, the other to three thousand feet above the level of the sea, had disappeared from our view.

(1) Thomas D’Arcy McGee. (J.V.)

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE KERGUELEN ISLES TO PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Never did a voyage begin more prosperously, or a passenger start in better spirits. The interior of the *Halbrane* corresponded with its exterior. Nothing could exceed the perfect order, the Dutch cleanliness of the vessel. The captain’s cabin, and that of the lieutenant, one on the port, the other on the starboard side, were fitted up with a narrow berth, a cupboard anything but capacious, an arm-chair, a fixed table, a lamp hung from the ceiling, various nautical instruments, a barometer, a thermometer, a chronometer, and a sextant in its oaken box. One of the two other cabins was prepared to receive me. It was eight feet in length, five in breadth. I was accustomed to the exigencies of sea life, and could do with its narrow proportions, also with its furniture — a table, a cupboard, a cane-bottomed arm-chair, a washing-stand on an iron pedestal, and a berth to which a less accommodating passenger would doubtless have objected. The passage would be a short one, however, so I took possession of that cabin, which I was to occupy for only four, or at the worst five weeks, with entire content.

The eight men who composed the crew were named respectively Martin Holt, sailing-master; Hardy, Rogers, Drap, Francis, Gratian, Burg, and Stern — sailors all between twenty-five and thirty-five years old — all Englishmen, well trained, and remarkably well disciplined by a hand of iron.

Let me set it down here at the beginning, the exceptionally able man whom they all obeyed at a word, a gesture, was not the captain of the *Halbrane*;

that man was the second officer, James West, who was then thirty-two years of age.

James West was born on the sea, and had passed his childhood on board a lighter belonging to his father, and on which the whole family lived. Ail his life he had breathed the salt air of the English Channel, the Atlantic, or the Pacific. He never went ashore except for the needs of his service, whether of the State or of trade. If he had to leave one ship for another he merely shifted his canvas bag to the latter, from which he stirred no more. When he was not sailing in reality he was sailing in imagination. After having been ship’s boy, novice, sailor, he became quartermaster, master, and finally lieutenant of the *Halbrane*, and he had already served for ten years as second in command under Captain Len Guy.

James West was not even ambitious of a higher rise; he did not want to make a fortune; he did not concern himself with the buying or selling of cargoes; but everything connected with that admirable instrument a sailing ship, James West understood to perfection.

The personal appearance of the lieutenant was as follows: middle height, slightly built, all nerves and muscles, strong limbs as agile as those of a gymnast, the true sailor’s “look,” but of very unusual far-sightedness and surprising penetration, sunburnt face, hair thick and short, beardless cheeks and chin, regular features, the whole expression denoting energy, courage, and physical strength at their utmost tension.

James West spoke but rarely — only when he was questioned. He gave his orders in a clear voice, not repeating them, but so as to be heard at once, and he was understood. I call attention to this typical officer of the Merchant Marine, who was devoted body and soul to Captain Len Guy as to the schooner Halbrane. He seemed to be one of the essential organs of his ship, and if the *Halbrane* had a heart it was in James West's breast that it beat.

There is but one more person to be mentioned; the ship's cook — a negro from the African coast named Endicott, thirty years of age, who had held that post for eight years. The boatswain and he were great friends, and indulged in frequent talks.

Life on board was very regular, very simple, and its monotony was not without a certain charm. Sailing is repose in movement, a rocking in a dream, and I did not dislike my isolation. Of course I should have liked to find out why Captain Len Guy had changed his mind with respect to me; but how was this to be done? To question the lieutenant would have been loss of time. Besides, was he in possession of the secrets of his chief? It was no part of his business to be so, and I had observed that he did not occupy himself with anything outside of it. Not ten words were exchanged between him and me during the two meals which we took in common daily. I must acknowledge, however, that I frequently caught the captain's eyes fixed upon me, as though he longed to question me, as though he had something to learn from me, whereas it was I, on the contrary, who had something to learn from him. But we were both silent.

Had I felt the need of talking to somebody very strongly, I might have resorted to the boatswain, who was always disposed to chatter; but what had he to say that could interest me? He never failed to bid me good morning and good evening in most prolix fashion, but beyond these courtesies I did not feel disposed to go.

The good weather lasted, and on the 18th of August, in the afternoon, the look-out discerned the mountains of the Crozet group. The next day we passed Possession Island, which is inhabited only in the fishing season. At this period the only dwellers there are flocks of penguins, and the birds which whalers call “white pigeons.”

The approach to land is always interesting at sea. It occurred to me that Captain Len Guy might take this opportunity of speaking to his passenger; but he did not.

We should see land, that is to say the peaks of Marion and Prince Edward Islands, before arriving at Tristan d’Acunha, but it was there the *Halbrane* was to take in a fresh supply of water. I concluded therefore that the monotony of our voyage would continue unbroken to the end. But, on the morning of the 20th of August, to my extreme surprise, Captain Len Guy came on deck, approached me, and said, speaking very low, —

“Sir, I have something to say to you.”

“I am ready to hear you, captain.”

“I have not spoken until to-day, for I am naturally taciturn.” Here he hesitated again, but after a pause, continued with an effort, —

“Mr. Jeorling, have you tried to discover my reason for changing my mind on the subject of your passage?”

“I have tried, but I have not succeeded, captain. Perhaps, as I am not a compatriot of yours, you — ”

“It is precisely because you are an American that I decided in the end to offer you a passage on the *Halbrane*.”

“Because I am an American?”

"Also, because you come from Connecticut."

"I don't understand."

"You will understand if I add that I thought it possible, since you belong to Connecticut, since you have visited Nantucket Island, that you might have known the family of Arthur Gordon Pym."

"The hero of Edgar Poe's romance?"

"The same. His narrative was founded upon the manuscript in which the details of that extraordinary and disastrous voyage across the Antarctic Sea was related."

I thought I must be dreaming when I heard Captain Len Guy's words. Edgar Poe's romance was nothing but a fiction, a work of imagination by the most brilliant of our American writers. And here was a sane man treating that fiction as a reality.

I could not answer him. I was asking myself what manner of man was this one with whom I had to deal.

"You have heard my question?" persisted the captain.

"Yes, yes, captain, certainly, but I am not sure that I quite understand."

"I will put it to you more plainly. I ask you whether in Connecticut you personally knew the Pym family who lived in Nantucket Island? Arthur Pam's father was one of the principal merchants there, he was a Navy contractor. It was his son who embarked in the adventures which he related with his own lips to Edgar Poe — "

“Captain! Why, that story is due to the powerful imagination of our great poet. It is a pure invention.”

“So, then, you don’t believe it, Mr. Jeorling?” said the captain, shrugging his shoulders three times.

“Neither I nor any other person believes it, Captain Guy, and you are the first I have heard maintain that it was anything but a mere romance.”

“Listen to me, then, Mr. Jeorling, for although this ‘romance’ — as you call it — appeared only last year, it is none the less a reality. Although eleven years have elapsed since the facts occurred, they are none the less true, and we still await the ‘ word J of an enigma which will perhaps never be solved.”

Yes, he was mad; but by good fortune West was there to take his place as commander of the schooner. I had only to listen to him, and as I had read Poe’s romance over and over again, I was curious to hear what the captain had to say about it.

“And now,” he resumed in a sharper tone and with a shake in his voice which denoted a certain amount of nervous irritation, “it is possible that you did not know the Pym family; that you have never met them either at Providence or at Nantucket — ”

“Or elsewhere.”

“Just so! But don’t commit yourself by asserting that the Pym family never existed, that Arthur Gordon is only a fictitious personage, and his voyage an imaginary one! Do you think any man, even your Edgar Poe, could have been capable of inventing, of creating — ?”

The increasing vehemence of Captain Len Guy warned me of the necessity of treating his monomania with respect, and accepting all he said without discussion.

“Now,” he proceeded, “please to keep the facts which I am about to state clearly in your mind; there is no disputing about facts. You may deduce any results from them you like. I hope you will not make me regret that I consented to give you a passage on the *Halbrane*.”

This was an effectual warning, so I made a sign of acquiescence. The matter promised to be curious. He went on, —

“When Edgar Poe’s narrative appeared in 1838, I was at New York. I immediately started for Baltimore, where the writer’s family lived; the grandfather had served as quarter-master-general during the War of Independence. You admit, I suppose, the existence of the Poe family, although you deny that of the Pym family?”

I said nothing, and the captain continued, with a dark glance at me, —

“I inquired into certain matters relating to Edgar Poe. His abode was pointed out to me and I called at the house. A first disappointment! He had left America, and I could not see him. Unfortunately, being unable to see Edgar Poe, I was unable to refer to Arthur Gordon Pym in the case. That bold pioneer of the Antarctic regions was dead! As the American poet had stated, at the close of the narrative of his adventures, Gordon’s death had already been made known to the public by the daily press.”

What Captain Len Guy said was true; but, in common with all the readers of the romance, I had taken this declaration for an artifice of the novelist. My notion was that, as he either could not or dared not wind up so extraordinary a work of imagination, Poe had given it to be understood that he had not received the last three chapters from Arthur Pym, whose life had ended under sudden and deplorable circumstances which Poe did not make known.

“Then,” continued the captain, “Edgar Poe being absent, Arthur Pym being dead, I had only one thing to do; to find the man who had been the fellow-traveller of Arthur Pym, that Dirk Peters who had followed him to the very verge of the high latitudes, and whence they had both returned — how? This is not known. Did they come back in company? The narrative does not say, and there are obscure points in that part of it, as in many other places. However, Edgar Poe stated explicitly that Dirk Peters would be able to furnish information relating to the non-communicated chapters, and that he lived at Illinois. I set out at once for Illinois; I arrived at Springfield; I inquired for this man, a half-breed Indian. He lived in the hamlet of Vandalia; I went there, and met with a second disappointment. He was not there, or rather, Mr. Jeorling, he was no longer there. Some years before this Dirk Peters had left Illinois, and even the United States, to go — nobody knows where. But I have talked, at Vandalia with people who had known him, with whom he lived, to whom he related his adventures, but did not explain the final issue. Of that he alone holds the secret.”

What! This Dirk Peters had really existed? He still lived? I was on the point of letting myself be carried away by the statements of the captain of the *Halbrane*! Yes, another moment, and, in my turn, I should have made a fool of myself. This poor mad fellow imagined that he had gone to Illinois and seen people at Vandalia who had known Dirk Peters, and that the latter had disappeared. No wonder, since he had never existed, save in the brain of the novelist!

Nevertheless I did not want to vex Len Guy, and perhaps drive him still more mad. Accordingly I appeared entirely convinced that he was speaking words of sober seriousness, even when he added, —

“You are aware that in the narrative mention is made by the captain of the schooner on which Arthur Pym had embarked, of a bottle containing a sealed letter, which was deposited at the foot of one of the Kerguelen peaks?”

“Yes, I recall the incident.”

“Well, then, in one of my latest voyages I sought for the place where that bottle ought to be. I found it and the letter also. That letter stated that the captain and Arthur Pym intended to make every effort to reach the uttermost limits of the Antarctic Sea!”

“You found that bottle?”

“Yes!”

“And the letter?”

“Yes!”

I looked at Captain Len Guy. Like certain monomaniacs he had come to believe in his own inventions. I was on the point of saying to him, “Show me that letter,” but I thought better of it. Was he not capable of having written the letter himself? And then I answered, —

“It is much to be regretted, captain, that you were unable to come across Dirk Peters at Vandalia! He would at least have informed you under what conditions he and Arthur Pym returned from so far. Recollect, now, in the last chapter but one they are both there. Their boat is in front of the thick curtain of white mist; it dashes into the gulf of the cataract just at the moment when a veiled human form rises. Then there is nothing more; nothing but two blank lines — ”

“Decidedly, sir, it is much to be regretted that I could not lay my hand on Dirk Peters! It would have been interesting to learn what was the outcome of these adventures. But, to my mind, it would have been still more interesting to have ascertained the fate of the others.”

“The others?” I exclaimed almost involuntarily. “Of whom do you speak?”

“Of the captain and crew of the English schooner which picked up Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters after the frightful shipwreck of the *Grampus*, and brought them across the Polar Sea to Tsalal Island — ”

“Captain,” said I, just as though I entertained no doubt of the authenticity of Edgar Poe’s romance, “is it not the case that all these men perished, some in the attack on the schooner, the others by the infernal device of the natives of Tsalal?”

“Who can tell?” replied the captain in a voice hoarse from emotion. “Who can say but that some of the unfortunate creatures survived, and contrived to escape from the natives?”

“In any case,” I replied, “it would be difficult to admit that those who had survived could still be living.”

“And why?”

“Because the facts we are discussing are eleven years old.”

“Sir,” replied the captain, “since Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters were able to advance beyond Tsalal Island farther than the eighty-third parallel, since they found means of living in the midst of those Antarctic lands, why should not their companions, if they were not all killed by the natives, if they were so fortunate as to reach the neighbouring islands sighted during the voyage — why should not those unfortunate countrymen of mine have contrived to live there? Why should they not still be there, awaiting their deliverance?”

“Your pity leads you astray, captain,” I replied. “It would be impossible.”

“Impossible, sir! And if a fact, on indisputable evidence, appealed to the whole civilized world; if a material proof of the existence of these unhappy men, imprisoned at the ends of the earth, were furnished, who would venture to meet those who would fain go to their aid with the cry of ‘Impossible!’”

Was it a sentiment of humanity, exaggerated to the point of madness, that had roused the interest of this strange man in those shipwrecked folk who never had suffered shipwreck, for the good reason that they never had existed?

Captain Len Guy approached me anew, laid his hand on my shoulder and whispered in my ear, —

“No, sir, no! the last word has not been said concerning the crew of the *Jane*.”

Then he promptly withdrew.

The *Jane* was, in Edgar Poe's romance, the name of the ship which had rescued Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters from the wreck of the *Grampus*, and Captain Len Guy had now uttered it for the first time. It occurred to me then that Guy was the name of the captain of the *Jane*, an English ship; but what of that? The captain of the *Jane* never lived but in the imagination of the novelist, he and the skipper of the *Halbrane* have nothing in common except a name which is frequently to be found in England. But, on thinking of the similarity, it struck me that the poor captain's brain had been turned by this very thing. He had conceived the notion that he was of kin to the unfortunate captain of the *Jane*! And this had brought him to his present state, this was the source of his passionate pity for the fate of the imaginary shipwrecked mariners!

It would have been interesting to discover whether James West was aware of the state of the case, whether his chief had ever talked to him of the follies he had revealed to me. But this was a delicate question, since it involved the mental condition of Captain Len Guy; and besides, any kind of conversation with the lieutenant was difficult. On the whole I thought it safer to restrain my curiosity. In a few days the schooner would reach Tristan d'Acunha, and I should part with her and her captain for good and all. Never, however, could I lose the recollection that I had actually met and sailed with a man who took the fictions of Edgar Poe's romance for sober fact. Never could I have looked for such an experience!

On the 22nd of August the outline of Prince Edward's Island was sighted, south latitude 46° 55', and 37° 46' east longitude. We were in sight of the island for twelve hours, and then it was lost in the evening mists.

On the following day the Halbrane headed in the direction of the north-west, towards the most northern parallel of the southern hemisphere which she had to attain in the course of that voyage.

CHAPTER V.

EDGAR POE'S ROMANCE

In this chapter I have to give a brief summary of Edgar Poe's romance, which was published at Richmond under the title of

THE ADVENTURES OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM.

We shall see whether there was any room for doubt that the adventures of this hero of romance were imaginary. But indeed, among the multitude of Poe's readers, was there ever one, with the sole exception of Len Guy, who believed them to be real? The story is told by the principal personage. Arthur Pym states in the preface that on his return from his voyage to the Antarctic seas he met, among the Virginian gentlemen who took an interest in geographical discoveries, Edgar Poe, who was then editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* at Richmond, and that he authorized the latter to publish the first part of his adventures in that journal "under the cloak of fiction." That portion having been favourably received, a volume containing the complete narrative was issued with the signature of Edgar Poe.

Arthur Gordon Pym was born at Nantucket, where he attended the Bedford School until he was sixteen years old. Having left that school for Mr. Ronald's, he formed a friendship with one Augustus Barnard, the son of a ship's captain. This youth, who was eighteen, had already accompanied his father on a whaling expedition in the southern seas, and his yarns concerning that maritime adventure fired the imagination of Arthur Pym. Thus it was that the association of these youths gave rise to Pym's irresistible vocation to adventurous voyaging, and to the instinct that especially attracted him towards the high zones of the Antarctic region. The first exploit of Augustus Barnard and Arthur Pym was an excursion on board a little sloop, the *Ariel*, a two-decked boat which belonged to the Pyms. One evening the two youths, both being very tipsy, embarked secretly, in cold October weather, and boldly set sail in a strong breeze from the south-west. The *Ariel*, aided by the ebb tide, had already lost sight of land when a violent storm arose. The imprudent young fellows were still intoxicated. No one was at the helm, not a reef was in the sail. The masts were carried away by the furious gusts, and the wreck was driven before the wind. Then came a great ship which passed over the *Ariel* as the *Ariel* would have passed a floating feather.

Arthur Pym gives the fullest details of the rescue of his companion and himself after this collision, under conditions of extreme difficulty. At length, thanks to the second officer of the *Penguin*, from New London, which arrived on the scene of the catastrophe, the comrades were picked with life all but extinct, and taken back to Nantucket.

This adventure, to which I cannot deny an appearance veracity, was an ingenious preparation for the chapters that were to follow, and indeed, up to the day on which Pym penetrates into the polar circle, the narrative might conceivably be regarded as authentic. But, beyond the polar circle, above the austral icebergs, it is quite another thing, and, if the author's work be not one of pure imagination, I am — well, of any other nationality than my own. Let us get on.

Their first adventure had not cooled the two youths, and eight months after the affair of the *Ariel* — June, 1827 — the brig *Grampus* was fitted out by the house of Lloyd and Vredenburg for whaling in the southern seas. This brig was an old, ill-repaired craft, and Mr. Barnard, the father of Augustus, was its skipper. His son, who was to accompany him on the voyage, strongly urged Arthur to go with him, and the latter would have asked nothing better, but he knew that his family, and especially his mother, would never consent to let him go.

This obstacle, however, could not stop a youth not much given to submit to the wishes of his parents. His head was full of the entreaties and persuasion of his companion, and he determined to embark secretly on the *Grampus*, for Mr. Barnard would not have authorized him to defy the prohibition of his family. He announced that he had been invited to pass a few days with a friend at New Bedford, took leave of his parents and left his home. Forty-eight hours before the brig was to sail, he slipped on board unperceived, and got into a hiding-place which had been prepared for him unknown alike to Mr. Barnard and the crew.

The cabin occupied by Augustus communicated by a trap-door with the hold of the *Grampus*, which was crowded with barrels, bales, and the innumerable components of a cargo. Through the trap-door Arthur Pym reached his hiding-place, which was a huge wooden chest with a sliding side to it. This chest contained a mattress, blankets, a jar of water, ship's biscuit, smoked sausage, a roast quarter of mutton, a few bottles of cordials and liqueurs, and also writing-materials. Arthur Pym, supplied with a lantern, candles, and tinder, remained three days and nights in his retreat. Augustus Barnard had not been able to visit him until just before the *Grampus* set sail.

An hour later, Arthur Pym began to feel the rolling and pitching of the brig. He was very uncomfortable in the chest, so he got out of it, and in the dark, while holding on by a rope which was stretched across the hold to the trap of his friend's cabin, he was violently sea-sick in the midst of the chaos. Then he crept back into his chest, ate, and fell asleep.

Several days elapsed without the reappearance of Augustus Barnard. Either he had not been able to get down into the hold again, or he had not ventured to do so, fearing to betray the presence of Arthur Pym, and thinking the moment for confessing everything to his father had not yet come.

Arthur Pym, meanwhile, was beginning to suffer from the hot and vitiated atmosphere of the hold. Terrible nightmares troubled his sleep. He was conscious of raving, and in vain sought some place amid the mass of cargo where he might breathe a little more easily. In one of these fits of delirium he imagined that he was gripped in the claws of an African lion, (1) and in a paroxysm of terror he was about to betray himself by screaming, when he lost consciousness.

The fact is that he was not dreaming at all. It was not a lion that Arthur Pym felt crouching upon his chest, it was his own dog, Tiger, a young Newfoundland. The animal had been smuggled on board by Augustus Barnard unperceived by anybody — (this, at least, is an unlikely occurrence). At the moment of Arthur's coming out of his swoon the faithful Tiger was licking his face and hands with lavish affection.

Now the prisoner had a companion. Unfortunately, the said companion had drunk the contents of the water jar while Arthur was unconscious, and when Arthur Pym felt thirsty, he discovered that there was "not a drop to drink!" His lantern had gone out during his prolonged faint; he could not find the candles and the tinder-box, and he then resolved to rejoin Augustus Barnard at all hazards. He came out of the chest, and although faint from inanition and trembling with weakness, he felt his way in the direction of the trap-door by means of the rope. But, while he was approaching, one of the bales of cargo, shifted by the rolling of the ship, fell down and blocked up the passage. With immense but quite useless exertion he contrived to get over this obstacle, but when he reached the trap-door under Augustus Barnard’s cabin he failed to raise it, and on slipping the blade of his knife through One of the joints he found that a heavy mass of iron was placed upon the trap, as though it were intended to condemn him beyond hope. He had to renounce his attempt and drag himself back towards the chest, on which he fell, exhausted, while Tiger covered him with caresses.

The master and the dog were desperately thirsty, and when Arthur stretched out his hand, he found Tiger lying on his back, with his paws up and his hair on end. He then felt Tiger all over, and his hand encountered a string passed round the dog’s body. A strip of paper was fastened to the string under his left shoulder.

Arthur Pym had reached the last stage of weakness. Intelligence was almost extinct. However, after several fruitless attempts to procure a light, he succeeded in rubbing the paper with a little phosphorus — (the details given in Edgar Poe’s narrative are curiously minute at this point) — and then by the glimmer that lasted less than a second he discerned just seven words at the end of a sentence. Terrifying words these were: *blood — remain hidden — life depends on it.*

What did these words mean? Let us consider the situation of Arthur Pym, at the bottom of the ship’s hold, between the boards of a chest, without light, without water, with only ardent liquor to quench his thirst! And this warning to remain hidden, preceded by the word “blood “ — that supreme word, king of words, so full of mystery, of suffering, of terror! Had there been strife on board the *Grampus*? Had the brig been attacked by pirates? Had the crew mutinied? How long had this state of things lasted?

It might be thought that the marvellous poet had exhausted the resources of his imagination in the terror of such a situation; but it was not so. There is more to come!

Arthur Pym lay stretched upon his mattress, incapable of thought, in a sort of lethargy; suddenly he became aware of a singular sound, a kind of continuous whistling breathing. It was Tiger, panting, Tiger with eyes that glared in the midst of the darkness, Tiger with gnashing teeth — Tiger gone mad. Another moment and the dog had sprung upon Arthur Pym, who, wound up to the highest pitch of horror, recovered sufficient strength to ward off his fangs, and wrapping around him a blanket which Tiger had torn with his white teeth, he slipped out of the chest, and shut the sliding side upon the snapping and struggling brute.

Arthur Pym contrived to slip through the stowage of the hold, but his head swam, and, falling against a bale, he let his knife drop from his hand.

Just as he felt himself breathing his last sigh he heard his name pronounced, and a bottle of water was held to his lips. He swallowed the whole of its contents, and experienced the most exquisite of pleasures.

A few minutes later, Augustus Barnard, seated with his comrade in a corner of the hold, told him all that had occurred on board the brig.

Up to this point, I repeat, the story is admissible, but we have not yet come to the events which “surpass all probability by their marvellousness.”

The crew of the *Grampus* numbered thirty-six men, including the Barnards, father and son. After the brig had put to sea on the 20th of June, Augustus Barnard had made several attempts to rejoin Arthur Pym in his hiding place, but in vain. On the third day a mutiny broke out on board, headed by the ship’s cook, a negro like our Endicott; but he, let me say at once, would never have thought of heading a mutiny.

Numerous incidents are related in the romance — the massacre of most of the sailors who remained faithful to Captain Barnard, then the turning adrift of the captain and four of those men in a small whaler’s boat when the ship was abreast of the Bermudas. These unfortunate persons were never heard of again.

Augustus Barnard would not have been spared, but for the intervention of the sailing-master of the *Grampus*. This sailing-master was a half-breed named Dirk Peters, and was the person whom Captain Len Guy had gone to look for in Illinois!

The *Grampus* then took a south-east course under the command of the mate, who intended to pursue the occupation of piracy in the southern seas.

These events having taken place, Augustus Barnard would again have joined Arthur Pym, but he had been shut up in the forecastle in irons, and told by the ship’s cook that he would not be allowed to come out until “the brig should be no longer a brig.” Nevertheless, a few days afterwards, Augustus contrived to get rid of his fetters, to cut through the thin partition between him and the hold, and, followed by Tiger, he tried to reach his friend’s hiding place. He could not succeed, but the dog had scented Arthur Pym, and this suggested to Augustus the idea of fastening a note to Tiger’s neck bearing the words:

“I scrawl this with blood — remain hidden — your life depends on it — ”

This note, as we have already learned, Arthur Pym had received. Just as he had arrived at the last extremity of distress his friend reached him.

Augustus added that discord reigned among the mutineers. Some wanted to take the Grampus towards the Cape Verde Islands; others, and Dirk Peters was of this number, were bent on sailing to the Pacific Isles.

Tiger was not mad. He was only suffering from terrible thirst, and soon recovered when it was relieved.

The cargo of the *Grampus* was so badly stowed away that Arthur Pym was in constant danger from the shifting of the bales, and Augustus, at all risks, helped him to remove to a corner of the ‘tween decks.

The half-breed continued to be very friendly with the son of Captain Barnard, so that the latter began to consider whether the sailing-master might not be counted on in an attempt to regain possession of the ship.

They were just thirty days out from Nantucket when, on the 4th of July, an angry dispute arose among the mutineers about a little brig signalled in the offing, which some of them wanted to take and others would have allowed to escape. In this quarrel a sailor belonging to the cook’s party, to which Dirk Peters had attached himself, was mortally injured. There were now only thirteen men on board, counting Arthur Pym.

Under these circumstances a terrible storm arose, and the *Grampus* was mercilessly knocked about. This storm raged until the 9th of July, and on that day, Dirk Peters having manifested an intention of getting rid of the mate, Augustus Barnard readily assured him of his assistance, without, however, revealing the fact of Arthur Pym’s presence on board. Next day, one of the cook’s adherents, a man named Rogers, died in convulsions, and, beyond all doubt, of poison. Only four of the cook’s party then remained, of these Dirk Peters was one. The mate had five, and would probably end by carrying the day over the cook’s party.

There was not an hour to lose. The half-breed having informed Augustus Barnard that the moment for action had arrived, the latter told him the truth about Arthur Pym.

While the two were in consultation upon the means to be employed for regaining possession of the ship, a tempest was raging, and presently a gust of irresistible force struck the *Grampus* and flung her upon her side, so that on righting herself she shipped a tremendous sea, and there was considerable confusion on board. This offered a favourable opportunity for beginning the struggle, although the mutineers had made peace among themselves. The latter numbered nine men, while the half-breed’s party consisted only of himself, Augustus Barnard and Arthur Pym. The ship’s master possessed only two pistols and a hanger. It was therefore necessary to act with prudence.

Then did Arthur Pym (whose presence on board the mutineers could not suspect) conceive the idea of a trick which had some chance of succeeding. The body of the poisoned sailor was still lying on the deck; he thought it likely, if he were to put on the dead man’s clothes and appear suddenly in the midst of those superstitious sailors, that their terror would place them at the mercy of Dirk Peters. It was still dark when the half-breed went softly towards the ship’s stern, and, exerting his prodigious strength to the utmost, threw himself upon the man at the wheel and flung him over the poop.

Augustus Barnard and Arthur Pym joined him instantly, each armed with a belaying-pin. Leaving Dirk Peters in the place of the steersman, Arthur Pym, so disguised as to present the appearance of the dead man, and his comrade, posted themselves close to the head of the forecastle gangway. The mate, the ship’s cook, all the others were there, some sleeping, the others drinking or talking; guns and pistols were within reach of their hands.

The tempest raged furiously; it was impossible to stand on the deck.

At that moment the mate gave the order for Augustus Barnard and Dirk Peters to be brought to the forecastle. This order was transmitted to the man at the helm, no other than Dirk Peters, who went down, accompanied by Augustus Barnard, and almost simultaneously Arthur Pym made his appearance.

The effect of the apparition was prodigious. The mate, terrified on beholding the resuscitated sailor, sprang up, beat the air with his hands, and fell down dead. Then Dirk Peters rushed upon the others, seconded by Augustus Barnard, Arthur Pym, and the dog Tiger. In a few moments all were strangled or knocked on the head save Richard Parker, the sailor, whose life was spared.

And now, while the tempest was in full force, only four men were left to work the brig, which was labouring terribly with seven feet of water in her hold. They had to cut down the mainmast, and, when morning came, the mizen. That day was truly awful, the night was more awful still! If Dirk Peters and his companions had not lashed themselves securely to the remains of the rigging, they must have been carried away by a tremendous sea, which drove in the hatches of the *Grampus.*

Then follows in the romance a minute record of the series of incidents ensuing upon this situation, from the 14th of July to the 7th of August; the fishing for victuals in the submerged hold, the coming of a mysterious brig laden with corpses, which poisoned the atmosphere and passed on like a huge coffin, the sport of a wind of death; the torments of hunger and thirst;

the impossibility of reaching the provision store; the drawing of lots by straws — the shortest gave Richard Parker to be sacrificed for the life of the other three — the death of that unhappy man, who was killed by Dirk Peters and devoured; lastly, the finding in the hold of a jar of olives and a small turtle.

Owing to the displacement of her cargo the *Grampus* rolled and pitched more and more. The frightful heat caused the torture of thirst to reach the extreme limit of human endurance, and on the 1st of August, Augustus Barnard died. On the 3rd, the brig foundered in the night, and Arthur Pym and the half-breed, crouching upon the upturned keel, were reduced to feed upon the barnacles with which the bottom was covered, in the midst of a crowd of waiting, watching sharks. Finally, after the shipwrecked mariners of the *Grampus* had drifted no less than twenty-five degrees towards the south, they were picked up by the schooner *Jane*, of Liverpool, Captain William Guy.

Evidently, reason is not outraged by an admission of the reality of these facts, although the situations are strained to the utmost limits of possibility; but that does not surprise us, for the writer is the American magician-poet, Edgar Poe. But from this moment onwards we shall see that no semblance of reality exists in the succession of incidents.

Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters were well treated on board the English schooner *Jane*. In a fortnight, having recovered from the effects of their sufferings, they remembered them no more. With alternations of fine and bad weather the *Jane* sighted Prince Edward’s Island on the 13th of October, then the Crozet Islands, and afterwards the Kerguelens, which I had left eleven days ago.

Three weeks were employed in chasing sea-calves; these furnished the *Jane* with a goodly cargo. It was during this time that the captain of the *Jane* buried the bottle in which his namesake of the *Halbrane* claimed to have found a letter containing William Guy's announcement of his intention to visit the austral seas.

On the 12th of November, the schooner left the Kerguelens, and after a brief stay at Tristan d'Acunha she sailed to reconnoitre the Auroras in 35° 15' of south latitude, and 37° 38' of west longitude. But these islands were not to be found, and she did not find them.

On the 12th of December the Jane headed towards the Antarctic pole. On the 26th, the first icebergs came in sight beyond the seventy-third degree.

From the 1st to the 14th of January, 1828, the movements were difficult, the polar circle was passed in the midst of ice-floes, the icebergs' point was doubled and the ship sailed on the surface of an open sea — the famous open sea where the temperature is 47° Fahrenheit, and the water is 34°.

Edgar Poe, every one will allow, gives free rein to his fancy at this point. No navigator had ever reached latitudes so high — not even James Weddell of the British Navy, who did not get beyond the seventy-fourth parallel in 1822. But the achievement of the *Jane*, although difficult of belief, is trifling in comparison with the succeeding incidents which Arthur Pym, or rather Edgar Poe, relates with simple earnestness. In fact he entertained no doubt of reaching the pole itself.

In the first place, not a single iceberg is to be seen on this fantastic sea. Innumerable flocks of birds skim its surface, among them is a pelican which is shot. On a floating piece of ice is a bear of the Arctic species and of gigantic size. At last land is signalled. It is an island of a league in circumference, to which the name of Bennet Islet was given, in honour of the captain's partner in the ownership of the *Jane.*

Naturally, in proportion as the schooner sailed southwards the variation of the compass became less, while the temperature became milder, with a sky always clear and a uniform northerly breeze. Needless to add that in that latitude and in the month of January there was no darkness.

The *Jane* pursued her adventurous course, until, on the 18th of January, land was sighted in latitude 83° 20' and longitude 43° 5'.

This proved to be an island belonging to a numerous group scattered about in a westerly direction.

The schooner approached and anchored off the shore. Arms were placed in the boats, and Arthur Pym got into one of the latter with Dirk Peters. The men rowed shorewards, but were stopped by four canoes carrying armed men, "new men" the narrative calls them. These men showed no hostile intentions, but cried out continuously "anamoo" and "lamalama." When the canoes were alongside the schooner, the chief, Too-Wit, was permitted to go on board with twenty of his companions. There was profound astonishment on their part then, for they took theship for a living creature, and lavished caresses on the rigging, the masts, and the bulwarks. Steered between the reefs by these natives, she crossed a bay with a bottom of black sand, and cast anchor within a mile of the beach. Then William Guy, leaving the hostages on board, stepped ashore amid the rocks.

If Arthur Pym is to be believed, this was Tsalal Island! Its trees resembled none of the species in any other zone of our planet. The composition of the rocks revealed a stratification unknown to modern mineralogists. Over the bed of the streams ran a liquid substance without any appearance of limpidity, streaked with distinct veins, which did not reunite by immediate cohesion when they were parted by the blade of a knife!

Klock-Klock, which we are obliged to describe as the chief “town” of the island, consisted of wretched huts entirely formed of black skins; it possessed domestic animals resembling the common pig, a sort of sheep with a black fleece, twenty kinds of fowls, tame albatross, ducks, and large turtles in great numbers.

On arriving at Klock-Klock, Captain William Guy and his companions found a population — which Arthur Pym estimated at ten thousand souls, men, women, and children — if not to be feared, at least to be kept at a distance, so noisy and demonstrative were they. Finally, after a long halt at the hut of Too-Wit, the strangers returned to the shore, where the “bêche-de-mer” — the favourite food of the Chinese — would provide enormous cargoes; for the succulent mollusk is more abundant there than in any other part of the austral regions.

Captain William Guy immediately endeavoured to come to an understanding with Too-Wit on this matter, requesting him to authorize the construction of sheds in which some of the men of the *Jane* might prepare the bêche-de-mer, while the schooner should hold on her course towards the Pole. Too-Wit accepted this proposal willingly, and made a bargain by which the natives were to give their labour in the gathering-in of the precious mollusk.

At the end of a month, the sheds being finished, three men were told off to remain at Tsalal. The natives had not given the strangers cause to entertain the slightest suspicion of them. Before leaving the place, Captain William Guy wished to return once more to the village of Klock-Klock, having, from prudent motives, left six men on board, the guns charged, the bulwark nettings in their place, the anchor hanging at the forepeak — in a word, all in readiness to oppose an approach of the natives. Too-Wit, escorted by a hundred warriors, came out to meet the visitors. Captain William Guy and his men, although the place was propitious to an ambuscade, walked in close order, each pressing upon the other. On the right, a little in advance, were Arthur Pym, Dirk Peters, and a sailor named Allen. Having reached a spot where a fissure traversed the hillside, Arthur Pym turned into it in order to gather some hazel nuts which hung in clusters upon stunted bushes. Having done this, he was returning to the path, when he perceived that Allen and the half-breed had accompanied him. They were all three approaching the mouth of the fissure, when they were thrown down by a sudden and violent shock. At the same moment the crumbling masses of the hill slid down upon them and they instantly concluded that they were doomed to be buried alive.

Alive — all three? No! Allen had been so deeply covered by the sliding soil that he was already smothered, but Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters contrived to drag themselves on their knees, and opening a way with their bowie knives, to a projecting mass of harder clay, which had resisted the movement from above, and from thence they climbed to a natural platform at the extremity of a wooded ravine. Above them they could see the blue sky-roof, and from their position were enabled to survey the surrounding country.

An artificial landslip, cunningly contrived by the natives, had taken place. Captain William Guy and his twenty-eight companions had disappeared; they were crushed beneath more than a million tons of earth and stones.

The plain was swarming with natives who had come, no doubt, from the neighbouring islets, attracted by the prospect of pillaging the *Jane*. Seventy boats were being paddled towards the ship. The six men on board fired on them, but their aim was uncertain in the first volley; a second, in which mitraille and grooved bullets were used, produced terrible effect. Nevertheless, the *Jane* being boarded by the swarming islanders, her defenders were massacred, and she was set on fire.

Finally a terrific explosion took place — the fire had reached the powder store — killing a thousand natives and mutilating as many more, while the others fled, uttering the cry of *tékéli-li! tékéli-li!*

During the following week, Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters, living on nuts and bitterns’ flesh, escaped discovery by the natives, who did not suspect their presence. They found themselves at the bottom of a sort of dark abyss including several planes, but without issue, hollowed out from the hillside, and of great extent. The two men could not live in the midst of these successive abysses, and after several attempts they let themselves slide on one of the slopes of the hill. Instantly, six savages rushed upon them; but, thanks to their pistols, and the extraordinary strength of the half-breed, four of the assailants were killed. The fifth was dragged away by the fugitives, who reached a boat which had been pulled up on the beach and was laden with three huge turtles. A score of natives pursued and vainly tried to stop them; the former were driven off, and the boat was launched successfully and steered for the south.

Arthur Pym was then navigating beyond the eighty-fourth degree of south latitude. It was the beginning of March, that is to say, the antarctic winter was approaching. Five or six islands, which it was prudent to avoid, were visible towards the west. Arthur Pym’s opinion was that the temperature would become more mild by degrees as they approached the pole. They tied together two white shirts which they had been wearing, and hoisted them to do duty as a sail. At sight of these shirts the native, who answered to the name of Nu-Nu, was terrified. For eight days this strange voyage continued, favoured by a mild wind from the north, in permanent daylight, on a sea without a fragment of ice, indeed, owing to the high and even temperature of the water, no ice had been seen since the parallel of Bennet Island.

Then it was that Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters entered upon a region of novelty and wonder. Above the horizon line rose a broad bar of light grey vapour, striped with long luminous rays, such as are projected by the polar aurora. A very strong current came to the aid of the breeze. The boat sailed rapidly upon a liquid surface of milky aspect, exceedingly hot, and apparently agitated from beneath. A fine white ash-dust began to fall, and this increased the terror of Nu-Nu, whose lips trembled over his two rows of black ivory.

On the 9th of March this rain of ashes fell in redoubled volume, and the temperature of the water rose so high that the hand could no longer bear it. The immense curtain of vapour, spread over the distant perimeter of the southern horizon resembled a boundless cataract falling noiselessly from the height of some huge rampart lost in the height of the heavens.

Twelve days later, it was darkness that hung over these waters, darkness furrowed by luminous streaks darting from the milky depths of the Antarctic Ocean, while the incessant shower of ash-dust fell and melted in its waters.

The boat approached the cataract with an impetuous velocity whose cause is not explained in the narrative of Arthur Pym. In the midst of this frightful darkness a flock of gigantic birds, of livid white plumage, swept by, uttering their eternal *tékéli-li,* and then the savage, in the supreme throes of terror, gave up the ghost.

Suddenly, in a mad whirl of speed, the boat rushed into the grasp of the cataract, where a vast gulf seemed ready to swallow it up. But before the mouth of this gulf there stood a veiled human figure, of greater size than any inhabitant of this earth, and the colour of the man’s skin was the perfect whiteness of snow.

Such is the strange romance conceived by the more than human genius of the greatest poet of the New World.

(1) The American “lion” is only a small species of pumas and not formidable enough to terrify a Nantucket youth. J.V.

CHAPTER VI.

AN OCEAN WAIF.

The navigation of the *Halbrane* went on prosperously with the help of the sea and the wind. In fifteen days, if this state of things lasted, she might reach Tristan d’Acunha. Captain Len Guy left the working of the ship to James West, and well might he do so; there was nothing to fear with such a seaman as he.

“Our lieutenant has not his match afloat,” said Hurliguerly to me one day. “He ought to be in command of a flag-ship.”

“Indeed,” I replied, “he seems to be a true son of the sea.”

“And then, our *Halbrane*, what a craft! Congratulate yourself, Mr. Jeorling, and congratulate yourself also that I succeeded in bringing the captain to change his mind about you.”

“If it was you who obtained that result, boatswain, I thank you heartily.”

“And so you ought, for he was plaguily against it, was our captain, in spite of all old man Atkins could say. But I managed to make him hear reason.”

“I shan’t forget it, boatswain, I shan’t forget it, since, thanks to your intervention, instead of moping at Kerguelen. I hope shortly to get within sight of Tristan d’Acunha.”

“In a few days, Mr. Jeorling. Only think, sir, according to what I hear tell, they are making ships in England and America with machines in their insides, and wheels which they use as a duck uses its paddles. All right, we shall know what’s the good of them when they come into use. My notion is, however, that those ships will never be able to fight with a fine frigate sailing with a fresh breeze.”

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It was the 3rd of September. If nothing occurred to delay us, our schooner would be in sight of port in three days. The chief island of the group is visible on clear days at a great distance.

That day, between ten and eleven o’clock in the morning, I was walking backwards and forwards on the deck, on the windward side. We were sliding smoothly over the surface of an undulating sea. The *Halbrane* resembled an enormous bird, one of the gigantic albatross kind described by Arthur Pym — which had spread its sail-like wings, and was carrying a whole ship’s crew towards space.

James West was looking out through his glasses to starboard at an object floating two or three miles away, and several sailors, hanging over the side, were also curiously observing it.

I went forward and looked attentively at the object. It was an irregularly formed mass about twelve yards in length, and in the middle of it there appeared a shining lump.

“That is no whale,” said Martin Holt, the sailing-master. “It would have blown once or twice since we have been looking at it.”

“Certainly!” assented Hardy. “Perhaps it is the carcase of some deserted ship.”

“May the devil send it to the bottom!” cried Roger. “It would be a bad job to come up against it in the dark; it might send us down before we could know what had happened.”

“I believe you,” added Drap, “and these derelicts are more dangerous than a rock, for they are now here and again there, and there’s no avoiding them.”

Hurliguerly came up at this moment and planted his elbows on the bulwark, alongside of mine.

“What do you think of it, boatswain?” I asked.

“It is my opinion, Mr. Jeorling,” replied the boatswain, “that what we see there is neither a blower nor a wreck, but merely a lump of ice.”

“Hurliguerly is right,” said James West; “it is a lump of ice, a piece of an iceberg which the currents have carried hither.”

“What?” said I, “to the forty-fifth parallel?”

“Yes, sir,” answered West, “that has occurred, and the ice sometimes gets up as high as the Cape, if we are to take the word of a French navigator, Captain Blosseville, who met one at this height in 1828.”

“Then this mass will melt before long,” I observed, feeling not a little surprised that West had honoured me by so lengthy a reply.

“It must indeed be dissolved in great part already,” he continued, “and what we see is the remains of a mountain of ice which must have weighed millions of tons.”

Captain Len Guy now appeared, and perceiving the group of sailors around West, he came forward. A few words were exchanged in a low tone between the captain and the lieutenant, and the latter passed his glass to the former, who turned it upon the floating object, now at least a mile nearer to us.

“It is ice,” said he, “and it is lucky that it is dissolving. The *Halbrane* might have come to serious grief by collision with it in the night.”

I was struck by the fixity of his gaze upon the object, whose nature he had so promptly declared: he continued to contemplate it for several minutes, and I guessed what was passing in the mind of the man under the obsession of a fixed idea. This fragment of ice, torn from the southern icebergs, came from those waters wherein his thoughts continually ranged. He wanted to see it more near, perhaps at close quarters, it might be to take away some bits of it. At an order from West the schooner was directed towards the floating mass; presently we were within two cables’-length, and I could examine it.

The mound in the center was melting rapidly; before the end of the day nothing would remain of the fragment of ice which had been carried by the currents so high up as the forty-fifth parallel.

Captain Len Guy gazed at it steadily, but he now needed no glass, and presently we all began to distinguish a second object which little by little detached itself from the mass, according as the melting process went on — a black shape, stretched on the white ice.

What was our surprise, mingled with horror, when we saw first an arm, then a leg, then a trunk, then a head appear, forming a human body, not in a state of nakedness, but clothed in dark garments.

For a moment I even thought that the limbs moved, that the hands were stretched towards us.

The crew uttered a simultaneous cry. No! this body was not moving, but it was slowly slipping off the icy surface.

I looked at Captain Len Guy. His face was as livid as that of the corpse that had drifted down from the far latitudes of the austral zone. What could be done was done to recover the body of the unfortunate man, and who can tell whether a faint breath of life did not animate it even then? In any case his pockets might perhaps contain some document that would enable his identity to be established. Then, accompanied by a last prayer, those human remains should be committed to the depths of the ocean, the cemetery of sailors who die at sea.

A boat Was let down. I followed it with my eyes as it neared the side of the ice fragment eaten by the waves.

Hurliguerly set foot upon a spot which still offered some resistance. Gratian got out after him, while Francis kept the boat fast by the chain. The two crept along the ice until they reached the corpse, then drew it to them by the arms and legs and so got it into the boat. A few strokes of the oars and the boatswain had rejoined the schooner. The corpse, completely frozen, having been laid at the foot of the mizen mast, Captain Len Guy approached and examined it long and closely, as though he sought to recognize it.

It was the corpse of a sailor, dressed in coarse stuff, woollen trousers and a patched jersey; a belt encircled his waist twice. His death had evidently occurred some months previously, probably very soon after the unfortunate man had been carried away by the drift. He was about forty, with slightly grizzled hair, a mere skeleton covered with skin. He must have suffered agonies of hunger.

Captain Len Guy lifted up the hair, which had been preserved by the cold, raised the head, gazed upon the scaled eyelids, and finally said with a sort of sob, —

“Patterson! Patterson!”

“Patterson?” I exclaimed.

The name, common as it was, touched some chord in my memory. When had I heard it uttered? Had I read it anywhere?

At this moment, James West, on a hint from the boatswain, searched the pockets of the dead man, and took out of them a knife, some string, an empty tobacco box, and lastly a leather pocket-book furnished with a metallic pencil.

“Give me that,” said the captain. Some of the leaves were covered with writing, almost entirely effaced by the damp. He found, however, some words on the last page which were still legible, and my emotion may be imagined when I heard him read aloud in a trembling voice: “The *Jane*... Tsalal island... by eighty-three... There... eleven years... Captain... five sailors surviving... Hasten to bring them aid.”

And under these lines was a name, a signature, the name of Patterson!

Then I remembered! Patterson was the second officer of the *Jane*, the mate of that schooner which had picked up Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters on the wreck of the *Grampus*, the *Jane* having reached Tsalal Island; the *Jane* which was attacked by natives and blown up in the midst of those waters.

So then it was all true? Edgar Poe’s work was that of an historian, not a writer of romance? Arthur Gordon Pym’s journal had actually been confided to him! Direct relations had been established between them! Arthur Pym existed, or rather he had existed, he was a real being! And he had died, by a sudden and deplorable death under circumstances not revealed before he had completed the narrative of his extraordinary voyage. And what parallel had he reached on leaving Tsalal Island with his companion, Dirk Peters, and how had both of them been restored to their native land, America?

I thought my head was turning, that I was going mad — I who accused Captain Guy of being insane! No! I had not heard aright! I had misunderstood! This was a mere phantom of my fancy!

And yet, how was I to reject the evidence found on the body of the mate of the Jane, that Patterson whose words were supported by ascertained dates? And above all, how could I retain a doubt, after James West, who was the most self-possessed among us, had succeeded in deciphering the following fragments of sentences: —

“Drifting since the 3rd of June north of Tsalal Island...Still there...Captain William Guy and five of the men of the *Jane* — the piece of ice I am on is drifting across the iceberg...food will soon fail me...Since the 13th of June...my last resources exhausted...to-day...16th of June... I am going to die.”

So then for nearly three months Patterson’s body had lain on the surface of this ice-waif which we had met on our way from the Kerguelens to Tristan d’Acunha! Ah! why had we not saved the mate of the *Jane*!

I had to yield to evidence. Captain Len Guy, who knew Patterson, had recognized him in this frozen corpse! It was indeed he who accompanied the captain of the *Jane* when he had interred that bottle, containing the letter which I had refused to believe authentic, at the Kerguelens. Yes! for eleven years, the survivors of the English schooner had been cast away there without any hope of succour.

Len Guy turned to me and said, “Do you believe — *now*?”

“I believe,” said I, falteringly; “but Captain William Guy of the *Jane*, and Captain Len Guy of the *Halbrane* — ”

“Are brothers!” he cried in a loud voice, which was heard by all the crew.

Then we turned our eyes once more to the place where the lump of ice had been floating; but the double influence of the solar rays and the waters in this latitude had produced its effect, no trace of the dead man’s last refuge remained on the surface of the sea.

CHAPTER VII.

TRISTAN D’ACUNHA.

Four days later, the *Halbrane* neared that curious island of Tristan d’Acunha, which may be described as the big boiler of the African seas. By that time I had come to realize that the “hallucination” of Captain Len Guy was a truth, and that he and the captain of the *Jane* (also a reality) were connected with each other by this ocean waif from the authentic expedition of Arthur Pym. My last doubts were buried in the depths of the ocean with the body of Patterson.

And now, what was Captain Len Guy going to do? There was not a shadow of doubt on that point. He would take the *Halbrane* to Tsalal Island, as marked upon Patterson’s note-book. His lieutenant, James West, would go whithersoever he was ordered to go; his crew would not hesitate to follow him, and would not be stopped by any fear of passing the limits assigned to human power, for the soul of their captain and the strength of their lieutenant would be in them.

This, then, was the reason why Captain Len Guy refused to take passengers on board his ship, and why he had told me that his routes never were certain; he was always hoping that an opportunity for venturing into the sea of ice might arise. Who could tell indeed, whether he would not have sailed for the south at once without putting in at Tristan d’Acunha, if he had not wanted water? After what I had said before I went on board the *Halbrane*, I should have had no right to insist on his proceeding to the island for the sole purpose of putting me ashore. But a supply of water was indispensable, and besides, it might be possible there to put the schooner in a condition to contend with the icebergs and gain the open sea — since open it was beyond the eighty-second parallel — -in fact to attempt what Lieutenant Wilkes of the American Navy was then attempting.

The navigators knew at this period, that from the middle of November to the beginning of March was the limit during which some success might be looked for. The temperature is more bearable then, storms are less frequent, the icebergs break loose from the mass, the ice wall has holes in it, and perpetual day reigns in that distant region.

Tristan d’Acunha lies to the south of the zone of the regular south-west winds. Its climate is mild and moist. The prevailing winds are west and north-west, and, during the winter — August and September — south. The island was inhabited, from 1811, by American whale fishers. After them, English soldiers were installed there to watch the St. Helena seas, and these remained until after the death of Napoleon, in 1821. Several years later the group of islands populated by Americans and Dutchmen from the Cape acknowledged the suzerainty of Great Britain, but this was not so in 1839. My personal observation at that date convinced me that the possession of Tristan d’Acunha was not worth disputing. In the sixteenth century the islands were called the Land of Life.

On the 5th of September, in the morning, the towering volcano of the chief island was signalled; a huge snow-covered mass, whose crater formed the basin of a small lake. Next day, on our approach, we could distinguish a vast heaped-up lava field. At this distance the surface of the water was striped with gigantic seaweeds, vegetable ropes, varying in length from six hundred to twelve hundred feet, and as thick as a wine barrel.

Here I should mention that for three days subsequent to the finding of the fragment of ice, Captain Len Guy came on deck for strictly nautical purposes only, and I had no opportunities of seeing him except at meals, when he maintained silence, that not even James West could have enticed him to break. I made no attempt to do this, being convinced that the hour would come when Len Guy would again speak to me of his brother, and of the efforts which he intended to make to save him and his companions. Now, I repeat, the season being considered, that hour had not come, when the schooner cast anchor on the 6th of September at Ansiedling, in Falmouth Bay, precisely in the place indicated in Arthur Pym's narrative as the moorings of the *Jane*.

At the period of the arrival of the *Jane*, an ex-corporal of the English artillery, named Glass, reigned over a little colony of twenty-six individuals, who traded with the Cape, and whose only vessel was a small schooner. At our arrival this Glass had more than fifty subjects, and was, as Arthur Pym remarked, quite independent of the British Government. Relations with the ex-corporal were established on the arrival of the *Halbrane*, and he proved very friendly and obliging. West, to whom the captain left the business of refilling the water tanks and taking in supplies of fresh meat and vegetables, had every reason to be satisfied with Glass, who, no doubt, expected to be paid, and was paid, handsomely.

The day after our arrival I met ex-corporal Glass, a vigorous, well-preserved man, whose sixty years had not impaired his intelligent vivacity. Independently of his trade with the Cape and the Falklands, he did an important business in seal-skins and the oil of marine animals, and his affairs were prosperous. As he appeared very willing to talk, I entered briskly into conversation with this self-appointed Governor of a contented little colony, by asking him, —

"Do many ships put in to Tristan d'Acunha?"

“As many as we require,” he replied, rubbing his bands together behind his back, according to his invariable custom.

“In the fine season?”

“Yes, in the fine season, if indeed we can be said to have any other in these latitudes.”

“I congratulate you, Mr. Glass. But it is to be regretted that Tristan d’Acunha has not a single port. If you possessed a landing-stage, now?”

“For what purpose, sir, when nature has provided us with such a bay as this, where there is shelter from gales, and it is easy to lie snug right up against the rocks? No, Tristan has no port, and Tristan can do without one.”

Why should I have contradicted this good man? He was proud of his island, just as the Prince of Monaco is justly proud of his tiny principality.

I did not persist, and we talked of various things. He offered to arrange for me an excursion to the depths of the thick forests, which clothed the volcano up to the middle of the central cove.

I thanked him, but declined his offer, preferring to employ my leisure on land in some mineralogical studies. Besides, the *Halbrane* was to set sail so soon as she had taken in her provisions.

“Your captain is in a remarkable hurry!” said Governor Glass.

“You think so?”

“He is in such haste that his lieutenant does not even talk of buying skins or oil from me.”

“We require only fresh victuals and fresh water, Mr. Glass.”

“Very well,” replied the Governor, who was rather annoyed, “what the *Halbrane* will not take other vessels will.”

Then he resumed, —

“And where is your schooner bound for on leaving us?”

“For the Falklands, no doubt, where she can be repaired.”

“You, sir, are only a passenger, I suppose?”

“As you say, Mr. Glass, and I had even intended to remain at Tristan d’Acunha for some weeks. But I have had to relinquish that project.”

“I am sorry to hear it, sir. We should have been happy to offer you hospitality while awaiting the arrival of another ship.”

“Such hospitality would have been most valuable to me,” I replied, “but unfortunately I cannot avail myself of it.”

In fact, I had finally resolved not to quit the schooner, but to embark for America from the Falkland Isles with out much delay. I felt sure that Captain Len Guy would not refuse to take me to the islands. I informed Mr. Glass of my intention, and he remarked, still in a tone of annoyance, —

“As for your captain, I have not even seen the colour of his hair.”

“I don’t think he has any intention of coming ashore.”

“Is he ill?”

“Not to my knowledge. But it does not concern you, since he has sent his lieutenant to represent him.”

“Oh, he’s a cheerful person! One may extract two words from him occasionally. Fortunately, it is easier to get coin out of his pocket than speech out of his lips.”

“That’s the important thing, Mr. Glass.”

“You are right, sir — Mr. Jeorling, of Connecticut, I believe?”

I assented.

“So! I know your name, while I have yet to learn that of the captain of the *Halbrane.*”

“His name is Guy — Len Guy.”

“An Englishman?”

“Yes — an Englishman.”

“He might have taken the trouble to pay a visit to a countryman of his, Mr. Jeorling! But stay! I had some dealings formerly with a captain of that name. Guy, Guy — ”

“William Guy?” I asked, quickly.

“Precisely. William Guy.”

“Who commanded the *Jane*?”

“The *Jane*? Yes. The same man.”

“An English schooner which put in at Tristan d’Acunha eleven years ago?”

“Eleven years, Mr. Jeorling. I had been settled in the island where Captain Jeffrey, of the *Berwick*, of London, found me in the year 1824, for full seven years. I perfectly recall this William Guy, as if he were before me. He was a fine, open-hearted fellow, and I sold him a cargo of seal-skins. He had the air of a gentleman, rather proud, but good-natured.”

“And the *Jane*!”

“I can see her now at her moorings in the same place as the *Halbrane*. She was a handsome vessel of one hundred and eighty tons, very slender for’ards. She belonged to the port of Liverpool.”

“Yes; that is true, all that is true.”

“And is the Jane still afloat, Mr. Jeorling?”

“No, Mr. Glass.”

“Was she lost?”

“The fact is only too true, and the greater part of her crew with her.”

“Will you tell me how this happened?”

“Willingly. On leaving Tristan d’Acunha the *Jane* headed for the bearings of the Aurora and other islands, which William Guy hoped to recognize from information — ”

“That came from me,” interrupted the ex-corporal. “And those other islands, may I learn whether the *Jane* discovered them?”

“No, nor the Auroras either, although William Guy remained several weeks in those waters, running from east to west, with a look-out always at the masthead.”

“He must have lost his bearings, Mr. Jeorling, for, if several whalers, who were well deserving of credit, are to be believed, these islands do exist, and it was even proposed to give them my name.”

“That would have been but just,” I replied politely. “It will be very vexatious if they are not discovered some day,” added the Governor, in a tone which indicated that he was not devoid of vanity.

“It was then,” I resumed, “that Captain Guy resolved to carry out a project he had long cherished, and in which he was encouraged by a certain passenger who was on board the Jane — ”

“Arthur Gordon Pym,” exclaimed Glass, “and his companion, one Dirk Peters; the two had been picked up at sea by the schooner.”

“You knew them, Mr. Glass?” I asked eagerly.

“Knew them, Mr. Jeorling? I should think I did, indeed! That Arthur Pym was a strange person, always wanting to rush into adventures — a real rash American, quite capable of starting off to the moon! Has he gone there at last?”

“No, not quite, Mr. Glass, but, during her voyage, the schooner, it seems, did clear the polar circle, and pass the ice-wall. She got farther than any ship had ever done before.”

“What a wonderful feat!”

"Yes. Unfortunately, the *Jane* did not return. Arthur Pym and William Guy escaped the doom of the *Jane* and the most of her crew. They even got back to America, how I do not know. Afterwards Arthur Pym died, but under what circumstances I am ignorant. As for the half-breed, after having retired to Illinois, he went off one day without a word to anyone and no trace of him has been found."

"And William Guy?" asked Mr. Glass.

I related the finding of the body of Patterson, the mate of the *Jane*, and I added that everything led to the belief that the captain of the *Jane* and five of his companions were still living on an island in the austral regions, at less than six degrees from the Pole.

"Ah, Mr. Jeorling," cried Glass, "if some day William Guy and his sailors might be saved! They seemed to me to be such fine fellows."

"That is just what the *Halbrane* is certainly going to attempt, so soon as she is ready, for her captain, Len Guy, is William Guy's own brother."

"Is it possible? Well, although I do not know Captain Len Guy, I venture to assert that the brothers do not resemble each other — at least in their behaviour to the Governor of Tristan d'Acunha!"

It was plain that the Governor was profoundly mortified, but no doubt he consoled himself by the prospect of selling his goods at twenty-five per cent above their value.

One thing was certain: Captain Len Guy had no intention of coming ashore. This was the more singular, inasmuch as he could not be unaware that the *Jane* had put in at Tristan d'Acunha before proceeding to the southern seas.

Surely he might be expected to put himself in communication with the last European who had shaken hands with his brother!

Nevertheless, Captain Len Guy remained persistently on board his ship, without even going on deck; and, looking through the glass skylight of his cabin, I saw him perpetually stooping over the table, which was covered with open books and out-spread charts. No doubt the charts were those of the austral latitudes, and the books were narratives of the precursors of the Jane in those mysterious regions of the south.

On the table lay also a volume which had been read and re-read a hundred times. Most of its pages were dogs'-eared and their margins were filled with pencilled notes. And on the cover shone the title in brightly gilded letters:

THE ADVENTURES OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM.

CHAPTER VIII.

BOUND FOR THE FALKLANDS.

On the 8th of September, in the evening, I had taken leave of His Excellency the Governor-General of the Archipelago of Tristan d'Acunha — for such is the official title bestowed upon himself by that excellent fellow, Glass, ex-corporal of artillery in the British Army. On the following day, before dawn, the *Halbrane* sailed.

After we had rounded Herald Point, the few houses of Ansiedlung disappeared behind the extremity of Falmouth Bay. A fine breeze from the east carried us along gaily.

During the morning we left behind us in succession Elephant Bay, Hardy Rock, West Point, Cotton Bay, and Daly's Promontory; but it took the entire day to lose sight of the volcano of Tristan d'Acunha, which is eight thousand feet high; its snow-clad bulk was at last veiled by the shades of evening.

During that week our voyage proceeded under the most favourable conditions; if these were maintained, the end of the month of September ought to bring us within sight of the first peaks of the Falkland Group; and so, very sensibly towards the south; the schooner having descended from the thirty-eighth parallel to the fifty-fifth degree of latitude.

The most daring, or, perhaps I ought to say, the most lucky of those discoverers who had preceded the *Halbrane*, under the command of Captain Len Guy, in the Antarctic seas, had not gone beyond — Kemp, the sixty-sixth parallel; Ballerry, the sixty-seventh; Biscoe, the sixty-eighth; Bellinghausen and Morrell, the seventieth; Cook, the seventy-first; Weddell, the seventy-fourth. And it was beyond the eighty-third, nearly five hundred and fifty miles farther, that we must go to the succour of the survivors of the *Jane!*

I confess that for a practical man of unimaginative temperament, I felt strangely excited; a nervous restlessness had taken possession of me. I was haunted by the figures of Arthur Pym and his companions, lost in Antarctic ice-deserts. I began to feel a desire to take part in the proposed undertaking of Captain Len Guy. I thought about it incessantly. As a fact there was nothing to recall me to America. It is true that whether I should get the consent of the commander of the *Halbrane* remained to be seen; but, after all, why should he refuse to keep me as a passenger? Would it not be a very "human" satisfaction to him to give me material proof that he was in the right, by taking me to the very scene of a catastrophe that I had regarded as fictitious, showing me the remains of the *Jane* at Tsalal, and landing me on that selfsame island which I had declared to be a myth?

Nevertheless, I resolved to wait, before I came to any definite determination, until an opportunity of speaking to the captain should arise.

After an interval of unfavourable weather, during which the *Halbrane* made but slow progress, on the 4th of October, in the morning, the aspect of the sky and the sea underwent a marked change. The wind became calm, the waves abated, and the next day the breeze veered to the north-west. This was very favourable to us, and in ten days, with a continuance of such fortunate conditions, we might hope to reach the Falklands.

It was on the 11th that the opportunity of an explanation with Captain Len Guy was presented to me, and by himself, for he came out of his cabin, advanced to the side of the ship where I was seated, and took his place at my side.

Evidently he wished to talk to me, and of what, if not the subject which entirely absorbed him? He began by saying:

“I have not yet had the pleasure of a chat with you, Mr. Jeorling, since our departure from Tristan d’Acunha!”

“To my regret, captain,” I replied, but with reserve, for I wanted him to make the running.

“I beg you to excuse me,” he resumed, “I have so many things to occupy me and make me anxious. A plan of campaign to organize, in which nothing must be unforeseen or unprovided for. I beg you not to be displeased with me — ”

“I am not, I assure you.”

“That is all right, Mr. Jeorling; and now that I know you, that I am able to appreciate you, I congratulate myself upon having you for a passenger until our arrival at the Falklands.”

“I am very grateful, captain, for what you have done for me, and I feel encouraged to — ”

The moment seemed propitious to my making my proposal, when Captain Len Guy interrupted me.

“Well, Mr. Jeorling,” he asked, “are you now convinced of the reality of the voyage of the *Jane*, or do you still regard Edgar Poe’s book as a work of pure imagination?”

“I do not so regard it, captain.”

“You no longer doubt that Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters have really existed, or that my brother William Guy and five of his companions are living?”

“I should be the most incredulous of men, captain, to doubt either fact, and my earnest desire is that the favour of Heaven may attend you and secure the safety of the shipwrecked mariners of the *Jane*.”

“I will do all in my power, Mr. Jeorling, and by the blessing of God I shall succeed.”

“I hope so, captain. Indeed, I am certain it will be so, and if you consent — ”

“Is it not the case that you talked of this matter with one Glass, an English ex-corporal, who sets up to be Governor of Tristan d’Acunha?” inquired the captain, without allowing me to finish my sentence.

“That is so,” I replied, “and what I learned from Glass has contributed not a little to change my doubts into certainty.”

“Ah I he has satisfied you?”

“Yes. He perfectly remembers to have seen the *Jane*, eleven years ago, when she had put in at Tristan d’Acunha.”

“The *Jane* — and my brother?”

“He told me that he had personal dealings with Captain William Guy.”

“And he traded with the *Jane*?”

“Yes, as he has just been trading with the *Halbrane*.”

“She was moored in this bay?”

“In the same place as your schooner.”

“And — Arthur Pym — Dirk Peters?”

“He was with them frequently.”

“Did he ask what had become of them?”

“Oh yes, and I informed him of the death of Arthur Pym, whom he regarded as a foolhardy adventurer, capable of any daring folly.”

“Say a madman, and a dangerous madman, Mr. Jeorling. Was it not he who led my unfortunate brother into that fatal enterprise?”

“There is, indeed, reason to believe so from his narrative.”

“And never to forget it! added the captain in a tone of agitation.

“This man, Glass,” I resumed, “also knew Patterson, the mate of the *Jane*.”

“He was a fine, brave, faithful fellow, Mr. Jeorling, and devoted, body and soul, to my brother.”

“As West is to you, captain.”

“Does Glass know where the shipwrecked men from the *Jane* are now?”

“I told him, captain, and also all that you have resolved to do to save them.”

I did not think proper to add that Glass had been much surprised at Captain Guy’s abstaining from visiting him, as, in his absurd vanity, he held the commander of the *Halbrane* bound to do, nor that he did not consider the Governor of Tristan d’Acunha bound to take the initiative.

“I wish to ask you, Mr. Jeorling, whether you think everything in Arthur Pym’s journal, which has been published by Edgar Poe, is exactly true?”

“I think there is some need for doubt,” I answered “the singular character of the hero of those adventures being taken into consideration — at least concerning the phenomena of the island of Tsalal. And we know that Arthur Pym was mistaken in asserting that Captain William Guy and several of his companions perished in the landslip of the hill at Klock-Klock.”

“Ah! but he does not assert this, Mr. Jeorling! He says only that, when he and Dirk Peters had reached the opening through which they could discern the surrounding country, the seat of the artificial earthquake was revealed to them. Now, as the whole face of the hill was rushing into the ravine, the fate of my brother and twenty-nine of his men could not be doubtful to his mind. He was, most naturally, led to believe that Dirk Peters and himself were the only white men remaining alive on the island. He said nothing but this — nothing more. These were only suppositions — very reasonable, are they not?”

“I admit that, fully, captain.”

“But now, thanks to Patterson’s note-book, we are certain that my brother and five of his companions escaped from the landslip contrived by the natives.”

“That is quite clear, captain. But, as to what became of the survivors of the *Jane*, whether they were taken by the natives of Tsalal and kept in captivity, or remained free, Patterson’s note-book says nothing, nor does it relate under what circumstances he himself was carried far away from them.”

“All that we shall learn, Mr. Jeorling. Yes, we shall know all. The main point is that we are quite sure my brother and five of his sailors were living less than four months ago on some part of Tsalal Island. There is now no question of a romance signed ‘Edgar Poe,’ but of a veracious narrative signed ‘Patterson.’”

“Captain,” said I, “will you let me be one of your company until the end of the campaign of the *Halbrane* in the Antarctic seas?”

Captain Len Guy looked at me with a glance as penetrating as a keen blade. Otherwise hedid not appear surprised by the proposal I had made; perhaps he had been expecting it — and he uttered only the single word:

“Willingly.”

CHAPTER IX.

FITTING OUT THE *HALBRANE*

On the 15th of October, our schooner cast anchor in Port Egmont, on the north of West Falkland. The group is composed of two islands, one the above-named, the other Soledad or East Falkland. Captain Len Guy gave twelve hours' leave to the whole crew. The next day the proceedings were to begin by a careful and minute inspection of the vessel's hull and keel, in view of the contemplated prolonged navigation of the Antarctic seas. That day Captain Len Guy went ashore, to confer with the Governor of the group on the subject of the immediate re-victualling of the schooner. He did not intend to make expense a consideration, because the whole adventure might be wrecked by an unwise economy. Besides I was ready to aid with my purse, as I told him, and I intended that we should be partners in the cost of this expedition.

James West remained on board all day, according to his custom in the absence of the captain, and was engaged until evening in the inspection of the hold. I did not wish to go ashore until the next day. I should have ample time while we remained in port to explore Port Egmont and its surroundings, and to study the geology and mineralogy of the island. Hurliguerly regarded the opportunity as highly favourable for the renewal of talk with me, and availed himself of it accordingly. He accosted me as follows:

"Accept my sincere compliments, Mr. Jeorling?"

"And wherefore, boatswain?"

"On account of what I have just heard — that you are to come with us to the far end of the Antarctic seas."

"Oh! not so far, I imagine, and if it is not a matter of going beyond the eighty-fourth parallel — "

"Who can tell," replied the boatswain, "at all events the *Halbrane* will make more degrees of latitude than any other ship before her."

"We shall see."

"And does that not alarm you, Mr. Jeorling?"

"Not in the very least."

"Nor us, rest assured. No, no! You see, Mr. Jeorling, our captain is a good one, although he is no talker. You only need to take him the right way! First he gives you the passage to Tristan d'Acunha that he refused you at first, and now he extends it to the pole."

"The pole is not the question, boatswain."

"Ah! it will be reached at last, some day."

"The thing has not yet been done. And, besides, I don't take much interest in the pole, and have no ambition to conquer it. In any case it is only to Tsalal Island — "

"Tsalal Island, of course. Nevertheless, you will acknowledge that our captain has been very accommodating to you, and — "

"And therefore I am much obliged to him, boatswain, and," I hastened to add, "to you also; since it is to your influence I owe my passage."

"Very likely." Hurliguerly, a good fellow at bottom, as I afterwards learned, discerned a little touch of irony in my tone; but he did not appear to do so; he was resolved to persevere in his patronage of me. And, indeed, his conversation could not be otherwise than profitable to me, for he was thoroughly acquainted with the Falkland Islands. The result was that on the following day I went ashore adequately prepared to begin my perquisitions. At that period the Falklands were not utilized as they have been since.

It was at a later date that Port Stanley — described by Elisée Réclus, the French geographer, as "ideal" — was discovered. Port Stanley is sheltered at every point of the compass, and could contain all the fleets of Great Britain.

If I had been sailing for the last two months with bandaged eyes, and without knowing whither the *Halbrane* was bound, and had been asked during the first few hours at our moorings, "Are you in the Falkland Isles or in Norway?" I should have puzzled how to answer the question. For here were coasts forming deep creeks, the steep hills with peaked sides, and the coast-ledges faced with grey rock. Even the seaside climate, exempt from great extremes of cold and heat, is common to the two countries. Besides, the frequent rains of Scandinavia visit Magellan's region in like abundance. Both have dense fogs, and, in spring and autumn, winds so fierce that the very vegetables in the fields are frequently rooted up.

A few walks inland would, however, have sufficed to make me recognize that I was still separated by the equator from the waters of Northern Europe. What had I found to observe in the neighbourhood of Port Egmont after my explorations of the first few days? Nothing but the signs of a sickly vegetation, nowhere arborescent. Here and there a few shrubs grew, in place of the flourishing firs of the Norwegian mountains, and the surface of a spongy soil which sinks and rises under the foot is carpeted with mosses, fungi, and lichens. No! this was not the enticing country where the echoes of the sagas resound, this was not the poetic realm of Wodin and the Valkyries.

On the deep waters of the Falkland Strait, which separates the two principal isles, great masses of extraordinary aquatic vegetation floated, and the bays of the Archipelago, where whales were already becoming scarce, were frequented by other marine mammals of enormous size — seals, twenty-five feet long by twenty in circumference, and great numbers of sea elephants, wolves, and lions, of proportions no less gigantic. The uproar made by these animals, by the females and their young especially, surpasses description. One would think that herds of cattle were bellowing on the beach. Neither difficulty nor danger attends the capture, or at least the slaughter of the marine beasts. The sealers kill them with a blow of a club when they are lying in the sands on the strand. These are the special features that differentiate Scandinavia from the Falklands, not to speak of the infinite number of birds which rose on my approach, grebe, cormorants, black-headed swans, and above all, tribes of penguins, of which hundreds of thousands are massacred every year.

One day, when the air was filled with a sound of braying, sufficient to deafen one, I asked an old sailor belonging to Port Egmont, —

“Are there asses about here?”

“Sir,” he replied, “those are not asses that you hear, but penguins.”

The asses themselves, had any been there, would have been deceived by the braying of these stupid birds. I pursued my investigations some way to the west of the bay. West Falkland is more extensive than its neighbour, La

Soledad, and possesses another fort at the southern point of Byron’s Sound — too far off for me to go there.

I could not estimate the population of the Archipelago even approximately. Probably, it did not then exceed from two to three hundred souls, mostly English, with some Indians, Portuguese, Spaniards, Gauche from the Argentine Pampas, and natives from Tier Del Fuel. On the other hand, the representatives of the ovine and bovine races were to be counted by tens of thousands. More than five hundred thousand sheep yield over four hundred thousand dollars’ worth of wool yearly. There are also horned cattle bred on the islands; these seem to have increased in size, while the other quadrupeds, for instance, horses, pigs, and rabbits, have decreased. All these live in a wild state, and the only beast of prey is the dog-fox, a species peculiar to the fauna of the Falklands.

Not without reason has this island been called “a cattle farm.” What inexhaustible pastures, what an abundance of that savoury grass, the tussock, does nature lavish on animals there! Australia, though so rich in this respect, does not set a better spread table before her ovine and bovine pensioners.

The Falklands ought to be resorted to for the re-victualling of ships. The groups are of real importance to navigators making for the Strait of Magellan, as well as to those who come to fish in the vicinity of the polar regions.

When the work on the hull was done, West occupied himself with the masts and the rigging, with the assistance of Martin Holt, our sailing master, who was very clever at this kind of industry.

On the 21st of October, Captain Len Guy said to me: “You shall see, Mr. Jeorling, that nothing will be neglected to ensure the success of our enterprise. Everything that can be foreseen has been foreseen, and if the *Halbrane* is to perish in some catastrophe, it will be because it is not permitted to human beings to go against the designs of God.”

“I have good hopes, captain, as I have already said. Your vessel and her crew are worthy of confidence. But, supposing the expedition should be much prolonged, perhaps the supply of provisions — ”

“We shall carry sufficient for two years, and those shall be of good quality. Port Egmont has proved capable of supplying us with everything we require.”

“Another question, if you will allow me?”

“Put it, Mr. Jeorling, put it.”

“Shall you not need a more numerous crew for the *Halbrane*? Though you have men enough for the working of the ship, suppose you find you have to attack or to defend in the Antarctic waters? Let us not forget that, according to Arthur Pym’s narrative, there were thousands of natives on Tsalal Island, and if your brother — if his companions are prisoners — ”

“I hope, Mr. Jeorling, our artillery will protect the *Halbrane* better than the Jane was protected by her guns. To tell the truth, the crew we have would not be sufficient for an expedition of this kind. I have been arranging for recruiting our forces.”

“Will it be difficult?”

“Yes and no; for the Governor has promised to help me.”

“I surmise, captain, that recruits will have to be attracted by larger pay.”

“Double pay, Mr. Jeorling, and the whole crew must have the same.”

“You know, captain, I am disposed, and, indeed, desirous to contribute to the expenses of the expedition. Will you kindly consider me as your partner?”

“All that shall be arranged, Mr. Jeorling, and I am very grateful to you. The main point is to complete our armament with the least possible delay. We must be ready to clear out in a week.”

The news that the schooner was bound for the Antarctic seas had produced some sensation in the Falklands, at Port Egmont, and in the ports of La Soledad. At that season a number of unoccupied sailors were there, awaiting the passing of the whaling-ships to offer their services, for which they were very well paid in general. If it had been only for a fishing campaign on the borders of the Polar Circle, between the Sandwich Islands and New Georgia, Captain Len Guy would have merely had to make a selection. But the projected voyage was a very different thing; and only the old sailors of the *Halbrane* were entirely indifferent to the dangers of such an enterprise, and ready to follow their chief whithersoever it might please him to go.

In reality it was necessary to treble the crew of the schooner. Counting the captain, the mate, the boatswain, the cook and myself, we were thirteen on board. Now, thirty-two or thirty-four men would not be too many for us, and it must be remembered that there were thirty-eight on board the *Jane*.

In this emergency the Governor exerted himself to the utmost, and thanks to the largely-extra pay that was offered, Captain Len Guy procured his full tale of seamen. Nine recruits signed articles for the duration of the campaign, which could not be fixed beforehand, but was not to extend beyond Tsalal Island.

The crew, counting every man on board except myself, numbered thirty-one, and a thirty-second for whom I bespeak especial attention. On the eve of our departure, Captain Len Guy was accosted at the angle of the port by an individual whom he recognized as a sailor by his clothes, his walk, and his speech.

This individual said, in a rough and hardly intelligible voice, —

“Captain, I have to make a proposal to you.”

“What is it?”

“Have you still a place?”

“For a sailor?”

“For a sailor.”

“Yes and no.”

“Is it yes?”

“It is yes, if the man suits me.”

“Will you take me?”

“You are a seaman?”

“I have served the sea for twenty-five years?

“Where?”

“In the Southern Seas,”

“Far?”

“Yes, far, far.”

“Your age?”

“Forty-four years.”

“And you are at Port Egmont?”

“I shall have been there three years, come Christmas.”

“Did you expect to get on a passing whale-ship?”

“No.”

“Then what were you doing here?”

“Nothing, and I did not think of going to sea again.”

“Then why seek a berth?”

“Just an idea. The news of the expedition your schooner is going on was spread. I desire, yes, I desire to take part in it — with your leave, of course.”

“You are known at Port Egmont?”

“Well known, and I have incurred no reproach since I came here.”

“Very well,” said the captain. “I will make inquiry respecting you.”

“Inquire, captain, and if you say yes, my bag shall he on board this evening.”

“What is your name?”

“Hunt.”

“And you are — ?”

“An American.”

This Hunt was a man of short stature, his weather beaten face was brick red, his skin of a yellowish-brown like an Indian’s, his body clumsy, his head very large, his legs were bowed, his whole frame denoted exceptional strength, especially the arms, which terminated in huge hands. His grizzled hair resembled a kind of fur.

A particular and anything but prepossessing character was imparted to the physiognomy of this individual by the extraordinary keenness of his small eyes, his almost lipless mouth, which stretched from ear to ear, and his long teeth, which were dazzlingly white; their enamel being intact, for he had never been attacked by scurvy, the common scourge of seamen in high latitudes.

Hunt had been living in the Falklands for three years; he lived alone on a pension, no one knew from whence this was derived. He was singularly uncommunicative, and passed his time in fishing, by which he might have lived, not only as a matter of sustenance, but as an article of commerce.

The information gained by Captain Len Guy was necessarily incomplete, as it was confined to Hunt's conduct during his residence at Port Egmont. The man did not fight, he did not drink, and he had given many proofs of his Herculean strength. Concerning his past nothing was known, but undoubtedly he had been a sailor. He had said more to Len Guy than he had ever said to anybody; but he kept silence respecting the family to which he belonged, and the place of his birth. This was of no importance; that he should prove to be a good sailor was all we had to think about. Hunt obtained a favourable reply, and came on board that same evening.

On the 27th, in the morning, in the presence of the authorities of the Archipelago, the *Halbrane's* anchor was lifted, the last good wishes and the final adieus were exchanged, and the schooner took the sea. The same evening Capes Dolphin and Pembroke disappeared in the mists of the horizon.

Thus began the astonishing adventure undertaken by these brave men, who were driven by a sentiment of humanity towards the most terrible regions of the Antarctic realm.

CHAPTER X.

THE OUTSET OF THE ENTERPRISE.

Here was I, then, launched into an adventure which seemed likely to surpass all my former experiences. Who would have believed such a thing of me. But I was under a spell which drew me towards the unknown, that unknown of the polar world whose secrets so many daring pioneers had in vain essayed to penetrate. And this time, who could tell but that the sphinx of the Antarctic regions would speak for the first time to human ears!

The new crew had firstly to apply themselves to learning their several duties, and the old — all fine fellows — aided them in the task. Although Captain Len Guy had not had much choice, he seemed to have been in luck. These sailors, of various nationalities, displayed zeal and good will. They were aware, also, that the mate was a man whom it would not do to vex, for Hurliguerly had given them to understand that West would break any man’s head who did not go straight. His chief allowed him full latitude in this respect.

“A latitude,” he added, “which is obtained by taking the altitude of the eye with a shut fist.”

I recognized my friend the boatswain in the manner of this warning to all whom it might concern.

The new hands took the admonition seriously, and there was no occasion to punish any of them. As for Hunt, while he observed the docility of a true sailor in all his duties, he always kept himself apart, speaking to none, and even slept on the deck, in a corner, rather than occupy a bunk in the forecastle with the others.

Captain Len Guy's intention was to take the Sandwich Isles for his point of departure towards the south, after having made acquaintance with New Georgia, distant eight hundred miles from the Falklands. Thus the schooner would be in longitude on the route of the *Jane*.

On the 2nd of November this course brought us to the bearings which certain navigators have assigned to the Aurora Islands, 30° 15' of latitude and 47° 33' of east longitude.

Well, then, notwithstanding the affirmations — which I regarded with suspicion — of the captains of the *Aurora* in 1762, of the *Saint Miguel*, in 1769, of the *Pearl*, in 1779, of the *Prinicus* and the *Dolores*, in 1790, of the *Atrevida*, in 1794, which gave the bearings of the three islands of the group, we did not perceive a single indication of land in the whole of the space traversed by us. It was the same with regard to the alleged islands of the conceited Glass. Not a single little islet was to be seen in the position he had indicated, although the look-out was most carefully kept. It is to be feared that his Excellency the Governor of Tristan d'Acunha will never see his name figuring in geographical nomenclature.

It was now the 6th of November. Our passage promised to be shorter than that of the Jane. We had no need to hurry, however. Our schooner would arrive before the gates of the iceberg wall would be open. For three days the weather caused the working of the ship to be unusually laborious, and the new crew behaved very well; thereupon the boatswain congratulated them. Hurliguerly bore witness that Hunt, for all his awkward and clumsy build, was in himself worth three men.

“A famous recruit,” said he.

“Yes, indeed,” I replied, “and gained just at the last moment.”

“Very true, Mr. Jeorling! But what a face and head he has, that Hunt!”

“I have often met Americans like him in the regions of the Far West,” I answered, “and I should not be surprised if this man had Indian blood in his veins. Do you ever talk with Hunt?”

“Very seldom, Mr. Jeorling. He keeps himself to himself, and away from everybody. And yet, it is not for want of mouth. I never saw anything like his! And his hands! Have you seen his hands? Be on your guard, Mr. Jeorling, if ever he wants to shake hands with you.”

“Fortunately, boatswain, Hunt does not seem to be quarrelsome. He appears to be a quiet man who does not abuse his strength.”

“No — except when he is setting a halyard. Then I am always afraid the pulley will come down and the yard with it.”

Hunt certainly was a strange being, and I could not resist observing him with curiosity, especially as it struck me that he regarded me at times with a curious intentness.

On the 10th of November, at about two in the afternoon, the look-out shouted, —

“Land ahead, starboard!”

An observation had just given 55° 7’ latitude and 41° 13’ longitude. This land could only be the Isle de Saint Pierre — its British names are South Georgia, New Georgia, and King George’s Island — and it belongs to the circumpolar regions.

It was discovered by the Frenchman, Barbe, in 1675, before Cook; but, although he came in second, the celebrated navigator gave it the series of names which it still bears.

The schooner took the direction of this island, whose snow-clad heights — formidable masses of ancient rock-rise to an immense altitude through the yellow fogs of the surrounding space.

New Georgia, situated within five hundred leagues of Magellan Straits, belongs to the administrative domain of the Falklands. The British administration is not represented there by anyone, the island is not inhabited, although it is habitable, at least in the summer season.

On the following day, while the men were gone in search of water, I walked about in the vicinity of the bay. The place was an utter desert, for the period at which sealing is pursued there had not arrived. New Georgia, being exposed to the direct action of the Antarctic polar current, is freely frequented by marine mammals. I saw several droves of these creatures on the rocks, the strand, and within the rock grottoes of the coast. Whole “smalas” of penguins, standing motionless in interminable rows, brayed their protest against the invasion of an intruder — I allude to myself.

Innumerable larks flew over the surface of the waters and the sands; their song awoke my memory of lands more favoured by nature. It is fortunate that these birds do not want branches to perch on; for there does not exist a tree in New Georgia. Here and there I found a few phanerogams, some pale-coloured mosses, and especially tussock grass in such abundance that numerous herds of cattle might be fed upon the island.

On the 12th November the *Halbrane* sailed once more, and having doubled Charlotte Point at the extremity of Royal Bay, she headed in the direction of the Sandwich Islands, four hundred miles from thence.

So far we had not encountered floating ice. The reason was that the summer sun had not detached any, either from the icebergs or the southern lands. Later on, the current would draw them to the height of the fiftieth parallel, which, in the southern hemisphere, is that of Paris or Quebec. But we were much impeded by huge banks of fog which frequently shut out the horizon. Nevertheless, as these waters presented no danger, and there was nothing to fear from ice packs or drifting icebergs, the *Halbrane* was able to pursue her route towards the Sandwich Islands comfortably enough. Great flocks of clangorous birds, breasting the wind and hardly moving their wings, passed us in the midst of the fogs, petrels, divers, halcyons, and albatross, bound landwards, as though to show us the way.

Owing, no doubt, to these mists, we were unable to discern Traversey Island. Captain Len Guy, however, thought some vague streaks of intermittent light which were perceived in the night, between the 14th and 15th, probably proceeded from a volcano which might be that of Traversey, as the crater frequently emits flames.

On the 17th November the schooner reached the Archipelago to which Cook gave the name of Southern Thule in the first instance, as it was the most southern land that had been discovered at that period. He afterwards baptized it Sandwich Isles.

James West repaired to Thule in the large boat, in order to explore the approachable points, while Captain Len Guy and I descended on the Bristol strand.

We found absolutely desolate country; the only inhabitants were melancholy birds of Antarctic species. Mosses and lichens cover the nakedness of an unproductive soil. Behind the beach a few firs rise to a considerable height on the bare hill-sides, from whence great masses occasionally come crashing down with a thundering sound. Awful solitude reigns everywhere. There was nothing to attest the passage of any human being, or the presence of any shipwrecked persons on Bristol Island.

West's exploration at Thule produced a precisely similar result. A few shots fired from our schooner had no effect but to drive away the crowd of petrels and divers, and to startle the rows of stupid penguins on the beach.

While Captain Len Guy and I were walking, I said to him, —

"You know, of course, what Cook's opinion on the subject of the Sandwich group was when he discovered it. At first he believed he had set foot upon a continent. According to him, the mountains of ice carried out of the Antarctic Sea by the drift were detached from that continent. He recognized afterwards that the Sandwiches only formed an Archipelago, but, nevertheless, his belief that a polar continent farther south exists, remained firm and unchanged."

"I know that is so, Mr. Jeorling," replied the captain, "but if such a continent exists, we must conclude that there is a great gap in its coast, and that Weddell and my brother each got in by that gap at six years' interval. That our great navigator had not the luck to discover this passage is easy to explain; he stopped at the seventy-first parallel! But others found it after Captain Cook, and others will find it again."

"And we shall be of the number, captain."

"Yes — with the help of God! Cook did not hesitate to assert that no one would ever venture farther than he had gone, and that the Antarctic lands, if any such existed, would never be seen, but the future will prove that he was mistaken. They have been seen so far as the eighty-fourth degree of latitude — ”

“And who knows,” said I, “perhaps beyond that, by Arthur Pym.”

“Perhaps, Mr. Jeorling. It is true that we have not to trouble ourselves about Arthur Pym, since he, at least, and Dirk Peters also, returned to America.”

“But — supposing he did not return?”

“I consider that we have not to face that eventuality,” replied Captain Len Guy.

CHAPTER XI.

FROM THE SANDWICH ISLANDS TO THE POLAR CIRCLE.

The *Halbrane*, singularly favoured by the weather, sighted the New South Orkneys group in six days after she had sailed from the Sandwich Islands. This archipelago was discovered by Palmer, an American, and Bothwell, an Englishman, jointly, in 1821-22. Crossed by the sixty-first parallel, it is comprehended between the forty-fourth and the forty, seventh meridian.

On approaching, we were enabled to observe contorted masses and steep cliffs on the north side, which became less rugged as they neared the coast, at whose edge lay enormous ice-floes, heaped together in formidable confusion; these, before two months should have expired, would be drifted towards the temperate waters. At that season the whaling ships would appear to carry on the taking of the great blowing creatures, while some of their crews would remain on the islands to capture seals and sea-elephants.

In order to avoid the strait, which was encumbered with islets and ice-floes, Captain Len Guy first cast anchor at the south-eastern extremity of Laurie Island, where he passed the day on the 24th; then, having rounded Cape Dundas, he sailed along the southern coast of Coronation Island, where the schooner anchored on the 25th. Our close and careful researches produced no result as regarded the sailors of the *Jane*.

The islands and islets were peopled by multitudes of birds. Without taking the penguins into account, those guano-covered rocks were crowded with white pigeons, a species of which I had already seen some specimens. These birds have rather short, conical beaks, and red-rimmed eyelids; they can be knocked over with little difficulty. As for the vegetable kingdom in the New South Orkneys, it is represented only by grey lichen and some scanty seaweeds. Mussels are found in great abundance all along the rocks; of these we procured an ample supply.

The boatswain and his men did not lose the opportunity of killing several dozens of penguins with their sticks, not from a ruthless instinct of destruction, but from the legitimate desire to procure fresh food.

“Their flesh is just as good as chicken, Mr. Jeorling,” said Hurliguerly. “Did you not eat penguin at the Kerguelens?”

“Yes, boatswain, but it was cooked by Arkins.”

“Very well, then; it will be cooked by Endicott here, and you will not know the difference.”

And in fact we in the saloon, like the men in the forecastle, were regaled with penguin, and acknowledged the merits of our excellent sea-cook.

The *Halbrane* sailed on the 26th of November, at six o’clock in the morning, heading south. She reascended the forty-third meridian; this we were able to ascertain very exactly by a good observation. This route it was that Weddell and then William Guy had followed, and, provided the schooner did not deflect either to the east or the west, she must inevitably come to Tsalal Island. The difficulties of navigation had to be taken into account, of course.

The wind, continuing to blow steadily from the west, was in our favour, and if the present speed of the *Halbrane* could be maintained, as I ventured to suggest to Captain Len Guy, the voyage from the South Orkneys to the

Polar Circle would be a short one. Beyond, as I knew, we should have to force the gate of the thick barrier of icebergs, or to discover a breach in that ice-fortress.

“So that, in less than a month, captain — ” I suggested, tentatively.

“In less than a month I hope to have found the iceless sea which Weddell and Arthur Pym describe so fully, beyond the ice-wall, and thenceforth we need only sail on under ordinary conditions to Bennet Island in the first place, and afterwards to Tsalal Island. Once on that ‘wide open sea,’ what obstacle could arrest or even retard our progress?”

“I can foresee none, captain, so soon as we shall get to the back of the ice-wall. The passage through is the difficult point; it must be our chief source of anxietys and if only the wind holds — ”

“It will hold, Mr. Jeorling. All the navigators of the austral seas have been able to ascertain, as I myself have done, the permanence of this wind.”

“That is true, and I rejoice in the assurance, captain. Besides, I acknowledge, without shrinking from the admission, that I am beginning to be superstitious.”

“And why not, Mr. Jeorling? What is there unreasonable in admitting the intervention of a supernatural power in the most ordinary circumstances of life? And we, who sail the *Halbrane*, should we venture to doubt it? Recall to your mind our meeting with the unfortunate Patterson on our ship’s course, the fragment of ice carried into the waters where we were, and dissolved immediately afterwards. Were not these facts providential? Nay, I go farther still, and am sure that, after having done so much to guide us towards our compatriots, God will not abandon us — ”

“I think as you think, captain. No, His intervention is not to be denied, and I do not believe that chance plays the part assigned to it by superficial minds upon the stage of human life. All the facts are united by a mysterious chain.”

“A chain, Mr. Jeorling, whose first link, so far as we are concerned, is Patterson’s ice-block, and whose last will be Tsalal Island. Ah! My brother! my poor brother! Left there for eleven years, with his companions in misery, without being able to entertain the hope that succour ever could reach them! And Patterson carried far away from them, under we know not what conditions, they not knowing what had become of him! If my heart is sick when I think of these catastrophes, Mr. Jeorling, at least it will not fail me unless it be at the moment when my brother throws himself into my arms.”

So then we two were agreed in our trust in Providence. It had been made plain to us in a manifest fashion that God had entrusted us with a mission, and we would do all that might be humanly possible to accomplish it.

The schooner’s crew, I ought to mention, were animated by the like sentiments, and shared the same hopes. I allude to the original seamen who were so devoted to their captain. As for the new ones, they were probably indifferent to the result of the enterprise, provided it should secure the profits promised to them by their engagement.

At least, I was assured by the boatswain that such was the case, but with the exception of Hunt. This man had apparently not been induced to take service by the bribe of high wages or prize money. He was absolutely silent on that and every other subject.

“If he does not speak to you, boatswain,” I said, “neither does he speak to me.”

“Do you know, Mr. Jeorling, what it is my notion that man has already done?”

“Tell me, Hurliguerly.”

“Well, then, I believe he has gone far, far into the southern seas, let him be as dumb as a fish about it. Why he is dumb is his own affair. But if that sea-hog of a man has not been inside the Antarctic Circle and even the ice wall by a good dozen degrees, may the first sea we ship carry me overboard.”

“From what do you judge, boatswain?”

“From his eyes, Mr. Jeorling, from his eyes. No matter at what moment, let the ship’s head be as it may, those eyes of his are always on the south, open, unwinking, fixed like guns in position.”

Hurliguerly did not exaggerate, and I had already remarked this. To employ an expression of Edgar Poe’s, Hunt had eyes like a falcon’s.

“When he is not on the watch,” resumed the boatswain, “that savage leans all the time with his elbows on the side, as motionless as he is mute. His right place would be at the end of our bow, where he would do for a figurehead to the Halbrane, and a very ugly one at that! And then, when he is at the helm, Mr. Jeorling, just observe him! His enormous hands clutch the handles as though they were fastened to the wheel; he gazes at the binnacle as though the magnet of the compass were drawing his eyes. I pride myself on being a good steersman, but as for being the equal of Hunt, I’m not! With him, not for an instant does the needle vary from the sailing-line, however rough a lurch she may give. I am sure that if the binnacle lamp were to go out in the night Hunt would not require to relight it. The fire in his eyes would light up the dial and keep him right."

For several days our navigation went on in unbroken monotony, without a single incident, and under favourable conditions. The spring season was advancing, and whales began to make their appearance in large numbers.

In these waters a week would suffice for ships of heavy tonnage to fill their casks with the precious oil. Thus the new men of the crew, and especially the Americans, did not conceal their regret for the captain's indifference in the presence of so many animals worth their weight in gold, and more abundant than they had ever seen whales at that period of the year. The leading malcontent was Hearne, a sealing-master, to whom his companions were ready to listen. He had found it easy to get the upper hand of the other sailors by his rough manner and the surly audacity that was expressed by his whole personality. Hearne was an American, and forty-five years of age. He was an active, vigorous man, and I could see him in my mind's eye, standing up on his double bowed whaling-boat brandishing the harpoon, darting it into the flank of a whale, and paying out the rope. He must have been fine to see. Granted his passion for this business, I could not be surprised that his discontent showed itself upon occasion. In any case, however, our schooner was not fitted out for fishing, and the implements of whaling were not on board.

One day, about three o'clock in the afternoon, I had gone forward to watch the gambols of a "school" of the huge sea mammals. Hearne was pointing them out to his companions, and muttering in disjointed phrases, —

"There, look there! That's a fin-back! There's another, and another; three of them with their dorsal fins five or six feet high. Just see them swimming between two waves, quietly, making no jumps. Ah! if I had a harpoon, I bet my head that I could send it into one of the four yellow spots they have on their bodies. But there's nothing to be done in this traffic-box; one cannot stretch one's arms. Devil take it! In these seas it is fishing we ought to be at, not — "

Then, stopping short, he swore a few oaths, and cried out, "And that other whale!"

"The one with a hump like a dromedary?" asked a sailor.

"Yes. It is a humpback," replied Hearne. "Do you make out its wrinkled belly, and also its long dorsal fin? They're not easy to take, those humpbacks, for they go down into great depths and devour long reaches of your lines. Truly, we deserve that he should give us a switch of his tail on our side, since we don't send a harpoon into his."

"Look out! Look out!" shouted the boatswain. This was not to warn us that we were in danger of receiving the formidable stroke of the humpback's tail which the sealing-master had wished us. No, an enormous blower had come alongside the schooner, and almost on the instant a spout of ill-smelling water was ejected from its blow-hole with a noise like a distant roar of artillery. The whole foredeck to the main hatch was inundated.

"That's well done!" growled Hearne, shrugging his shoulders, while his companions shook themselves and cursed the humpback.

Besides these two kinds of cetacea we had observed several right-whales, and these are the most usually met with in the southern seas. They have no fins, and their blubber is very thick. The taking of these fat monsters of the deep is not attended with much danger. The right-whales are vigorously pursued in the southern seas, where the little shell fish called “whales’ food” abound. The whales subsist entirely upon these small crustaceans.

Presently, one of these right-whales, measuring sixty feet in length — that is to say, the animal was the equivalent of a hundred barrels of oil — was seen floating within three cables’ lengths of the schooner.

“Yes! that’s a right-whale,” exclaimed Hearne. “You might tell it by its thick, short spout. See, that one on the port side, like a column of smoke, that’s the spout of a right-whale! And all this is passing before our very noses — -a dead loss! Why, it’s like emptying money-bags into the sea not to fill one’s barrels when one can. A nice sort of captain, indeed, to let all this merchandise be lost, and do such wrong to his crew!”

“Hearne,” said an imperious voice, “go up to the maintop. You will be more at your ease there to reckon the whales.”

“But, sir — ”

“No reply, or I’ll keep you up there until to-morrow. Come — be off at once.”

And as he would have got the worst of an attempt at resistance, the sealing-master obeyed in silence.

The season must have been abnormally advanced, for although we continued to see a vast number of testaceans, we did not catch sight of a single whaling-ship in all this fishing-ground.

I hasten to state that, although we were not to be tempted by whales, no other fishing was forbidden on board the *Halbrane*, and our daily bill of fare profited by the boatswain’s trawling lines, to the extreme satisfaction of stomachs weary of salt meat. Our lines brought us goby, salmon, cod, mackerel, conger, mullet, and parrot-fish.

The birds which we saw, and which came from every point of the horizon, were those I have already mentioned, petrels, divers, halcyons, and pigeons in countless flocks. I also saw — but beyond aim — a giant petrel; its dimensions were truly astonishing. This was one of those called “quebrantahnesos” by the Spaniards. This bird of the Magellanian waters is very remarkable; its curved and slender wings have a span of from thirteen to fourteen feet, equal to that of the wings of the great albatross. Nor is the latter wanting among these powerful winged creatures; we saw the dusky-plumed albatross of the cold latitudes, sweeping towards the glacial zone.

On the 30th of November, after observation taken at noon, it was found that we had reached 66° 23’ 3” of latitude.

The *Halbrane* had then crossed the Polar Circle which circumscribes the area of the Antarctic zone.

CHAPTER XII.

BETWEEN THE POLAR CIRCLE AND THE ICE WALL.

Since the *Halbrane* has passed beyond the imaginary curve drawn at twenty-three and a half degrees from the Pole, it seems as though she had entered a new region, “that region of Desolation and Silence,” as Edgar Poe says; that magic person of splendour and glory in which the *Eleanora’s* singer longed to be shut up to all eternity; that immense ocean of light ineffable.

It is my belief — to return to less fanciful hypotheses — that the Antarctic region, with a superficies of more than five millions of square miles, has remained what our spheroid was during the glacial period. In the summer, the southern zone, as we all know, enjoys perpetual day, owing to the rays projected by the orb of light above its horizon in his spiral ascent. Then, so soon as he has disappeared, the long night sets in, a night which is frequently illumined by the polar aurora or Northern Lights.

It was then in the season of light that our schooner was about to sail in these formidable regions. The permanent brightness would not fail us before we should have reached Tsalal Island, where we felt no doubt of finding the men of the *Jane*.

When Captain Len Guy, West, and the old sailors of the crew learned that the schooner had cleared the sixty-sixth parallel of latitude, their rough and sunburnt faces shone with satisfaction. The next day, Hurliguerly accosted me on the deck with a broad smile and a cheerful manner.

“So then, Mr. Jeorling,” said he, “we’ve left the famous ‘Circle’ behind us!”

“Not far enough, boatswain, not far enough!”

“Oh, that will come! But I am disappointed.”

“In what way?”

“Because we have not done what is usual on board ships

on crossing the Line!”

“You regret that?”

“Certainly I do, and the *Halbrane* might have been allowed the ceremony of a southern baptism.”

“A baptism? And whom would you have baptized, boatswain, seeing that all our men, like yourself, have already sailed beyond this parallel?”

“We! Oh, yes! But you! Oh, no, Mr. Jeorling. And why, may I ask, should not that ceremony be performed in your honour?”

“True, boatswain; this is the first time in the course of my travels that I have been in so high a latitude.”

“And you should have been rewarded by a baptism, Mr. Jeorling. Yes, indeed, but without any big fuss — no drum and trumpet about it, and leaving out old Father Neptune with his masquerade. If you would permit me to baptize you — ”

“So be it, Hurliguerly,” said I, putting my hand into my pocket. “Baptize as you please. Here is something to drink my health with at the nearest tavern.”

“Then that will be Bennet Islet or Tsalal Island, provided there are any taverns in those savage islands, and any Atkinses to keep them.”

“Tell me, boatswain — I always get back to Hunt — does he seem so much pleased to have passed the Polar Circle as the *Halbrane’s* old sailors are?”

“Who knows? There’s nothing to be got out of him one way or another. But, as I have said before, if he has not already made acquaintance with the ice-barrier.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Everything and nothing, Mr. Jeorling. One feels these things; one doesn’t think them. Hunt is an old sea-dog, who has carried his canvas bag into every corner of the world.”

The boatswain’s opinion was mine also, and some inexplicable presentiment made me observe Hunt constantly, for he occupied a large share of my thoughts.

Early in December the wind showed a north-west tendency, and that was not good for us, but we would have no serious right to complain so long as it did not blow due south-west. In the latter case the schooner would have been thrown out of her course, or at least she would have had a struggle to keep in it, and it was better for us, in short, not to stray from the meridian which we had followed since our departure from the New South Orkneys. Captain Len Guy was made anxious by this alteration in the wind, and besides, the speed of the *Halbrane* was manifestly lessened, for the breeze began to soften on the 4th, and in the middle of the night it died away.

In the morning the sails hung motionless and shrivelled along the masts. Although not a breath reached us, and the surface of the ocean was unruffled, the schooner was rocked from side to side by the long oscillations of the swell coming from the west.

“The sea feels something,” said Captain Len Guy to me, “and there must be rough weather on that side,” he added, pointing westward.

“The horizon is misty,” I replied; “but perhaps the sun towards noon — ”

“The sun has no strength in this latitude, Mr. Jeorling, not even in summer. Jem!”

West came up to us.

“What do you think of the sky?”

“I do not think well of it. We must be ready for anything and everything, captain.”

“Has not the look-out given warning of the first drifting ice?” I asked.

“Yes,” replied Captain Len Guy, “and if we get near the icebergs the damage will not be to them. Therefore, if prudence demands that we should go either to the east or to the west, we shall resign ourselves, but only in case of absolute necessity.”

The watch had made no mistake. In the afternoon we sighted masses, islets they might be called, of ice, drifting slowly southward, but these were not yet of considerable extent or altitude. These packs were easy to avoid; they could not interfere with the sailing of the *Halbrane.* But, although the wind had hitherto permitted her to keep on her course, she was not advancing, and it was exceedingly disagreeable to be rolling about in a rough and hollow sea which struck our ship's sides most unpleasantly.

About two o'clock it was blowing a hurricane from all the points of the compass. The schooner was terribly knocked about, and the boatswain had the deck cleared of everything that was movable by her rolling and pitching.

Fortunately, the cargo could not be displaced, the stowage having been effected with perfect forecast of nautical eventualities. We had not to dread the fate of the *Grampus,* which was lost owing to negligence in her lading. It will be remembered that the brig turned bottom upwards, and that Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters remained for several days crouching on its keel.

Besides, the schooner's pumps did not give a drop of water; the ship was perfectly sound in every part, owing to the efficient repairs that had been done during our stay at the Falklands. The temperature had fallen rapidly, and hail, rain, and snow thickened and darkened the air. At ten o'clock in the evening — I must use this word, although the sun remained always above the horizon — the tempest increased, and the captain and his lieutenant, almost unable to hear each other's voices amid the elemental strife, communicated mostly by gestures, which is as good a mode as speech between sailors.

I could not make up my mind to retire to my cabin, and, seeking the shelter of the roundhouse, I remained on deck, observing the weather phenomena, and the skill, certainty, celerity, and effect with which the crew carried out the orders of the captain and West. It was a strange and terrible experience for a landsman, even one who had seen so much of the sea and seamanship as I had. At the moment of a certain difficult manoeuvre, four men had to climb to the crossbars of the fore-mast in order to reef the mainsail. The first who sprang to the ratlines was Hunt. The second was Martin Holt;

Burry and one of the recruits followed them. I could not have believed that any man could display such skill and agility as Hunt's. His hands and feet hardly caught the ratlines. Having reached the crossbars first, he stretched himself on the ropes to the end of the yard, while Holt went to the other end, and the two recruits remained in the middle.

While the men were working, and the tempest was raging round us, a terrific lurch of the ship to starboard under the stroke of a mountainous wave, flung everything on the deck into wild confusion, and the sea rushed in through the scupper-holes. I was knocked down, and for some moments was unable to rise.

So great had been the incline of the schooner that the end of the yard of the mainsail was plunged three or four feet into the crest of a wave. When it emerged Martin Holt, who had been astride on it, had disappeared. A cry was heard, uttered by the sailing-master, whose arm could be seen wildly waving amid the whiteness of the foam. The sailors rushed to the side and flung out one a rope, another a cask, a third a spar — in short, any object of which Martin Holt might lay hold. At the moment when I struggled up to my feet I caught sight of a massive substance which cleft the air and vanished in the whirl of the waves.

Was this a second accident? No! it was a voluntary action, a deed of self-sacrifice. Having finished his task, Hunt had thrown himself into the sea, that he might save Martin Holt.

"Two men overboard!"

Yes, two — one to save the other. And were they not about to perish together?

The two heads rose to the foaming surface of the water.

Hunt was swimming vigorously, cutting through the waves, and was nearing Martin Holt.

“They are lost! both lost!” exclaimed the captain. “The boat, West, the boat!”

“If you give the order to lower it,” answered West, “I will be the first to get into it, although at the risk of my life. But I must have the order.”

In unspeakable suspense the ship’s crew and myself had witnessed this scene. None thought of the position of the *Halbrane*, which was sufficiently dangerous; all eyes were fixed upon the terrible waves. Now fresh cries, the frantic cheers of the crew, rose above the roar of the elements. Hunt had reached the drowning man just as he sank out of sight, had seized hold of him, and was supporting him with his left arm, while Holt, incapable of movement, swayed helplessly about like a weed. With the other arm Hunt was swimming bravely and making way towards the schooner.

A minute, which seemed endless, passed. The two men, the one dragging the other, were hardly to be distinguished in the midst of the surging waves.

At last Hunt reached the schooner, and caught one of the lines hanging over the side.

In a minute Hunt and Martin Holt were hoisted on board; the latter was laid down at the foot of the foremast, and the former was quite ready to go to his work. Holt was speedily restored by the aid of vigorous rubbing; his senses came back, and he opened his eyes.

“Martin Holt,” said Captain Len Guy, who was leaning over him, “you have been brought back from very far — ”

“Yes, yes, captain,” answered Holt, as he looked about him with a searching gaze, “but who saved me?”

“Hunt,” cried the boatswain, “Hunt risked his life for you.”

As the latter was hanging back, Hurliguerly pushed him towards Martin Holt, whose eyes expressed the liveliest gratitude.

“Hunt,” said he, “you have saved me. But for you I should have been lost. I thank you.”

Hunt made no reply.

“Hunt,” resumed Captain Len Guy, “don’t you hear?”

The man seemed not to have heard.

“Hunt,” said Martin Holt again, “come near to me. I thank you. I want to shake hands with you.”

And he held out his right hand. Hunt stepped back a few paces, shaking his head with the air of a man who did not want so many compliments for a thing so simple, and quietly walked forward to join his shipmates, who were working vigorously under the orders of West.

Decidedly, this man was a hero in courage and self-devotion; but equally decidedly he was a being impervious to impressions, and not on that day either was the boatswain destined to know “the colour of his words!”

For three whole days, the 6th, 7th, and 8th of December, the tempest raged in these waters, accompanied by snow storms which perceptibly lowered the temperature. It is needless to say that Captain Len Guy proved himself a true seaman, that James West had an eye to everything, that the crew seconded them loyally, and that Hunt was always foremost when there was work to be done or danger to be incurred.

In truth, I do not know how to give an idea of this man! What a difference there was between him and most of the sailors recruited at the Falklands, and especially between him and Hearne, the sealing-master! They obeyed, no doubt, for such a master as James West gets himself obeyed, whether with good or ill will. But behind backs what complaints were made, what recriminations were exchanged I All this, I feared, was of evil presage for the future.

Martin Holt had been able to resume his duties very soon, and he fulfilled them with hearty good-will. He knew the business of a sailor right well, and was the only man on board who could compete with Hunt in handiness and zeal.

“Well, Holt,” said I to him one day when he was talking with the boatswain, “what terms are you on with that queer fellow Hunt now? Since the salvage affair, is he a little more communicative?”

“No, Mr. Jeorling, and I think he even tries to avoid me.”

“To avoid you?”

“Well, he did so before, for that matter.”

“Yes, indeed, that is true,” added Hurliguerly; “I have made the same remark more than once.”

“Then he keeps aloof from you, Holt, as from the others?”

“From me more than from the others.”

“What is the meaning of that?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Jeorling.”

I was surprised at what the two men had said, but a little observation convinced me that Hunt actually did avoid every occasion of coming in contact with Martin Holt. Did he not think that he had a right to Holt’s gratitude although the latter owed his life to him? This man’s conduct was certainly very strange.

In the early morning of the 9th the wind showed a tendency to change in the direction of the east, which would mean more manageable weather for us. And, in fact, although the sea still remained rough, at about two in the morning it became feasible to put on more sail without risk, and thus the *Halbrane* regained the course from which she had been driven by the prolonged tempest.

In that portion of the Antarctic sea the ice-packs were more numerous, and there was reason to believe that the tempest, by hastening the smash-up, had broken the barrier of the iceberg wall towards the east.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALONG THE FRONT OF THE ICEBERGS.

Although the seas beyond the Polar Circle were wildly tumultuous, it is but just to acknowledge that our navigation had been accomplished so far under exceptional conditions. And what good luck it would be if the *Halbrane*, in this first fortnight of December, were to find the Weddell route open!

There! I am talking of the Weddell route as though it were a macadamized road, well kept, with mile-stones and “This way to the South Pole” on a signpost!

The numerous wandering masses of ice gave our men no trouble; they were easily avoided. It seemed likely that no real difficulties would arise until the schooner should have to try to make a passage for herself through the icebergs.

Besides, there was no surprise to be feared. The presence of ice was indicated by a yellowish tint in the atmosphere, which the whalers called “blink.” This is a phenomenon peculiar to the glacial zones which never deceives the observer.

For five successive days the Halbrane sailed without sustaining any damage, without having, even for a moment, had to fear a collision. It is true that in proportion as she advanced towards the south the number of icepacks increased and the channels became narrower. On the 14th an observation gave us 72° 37’ for latitude, our longitude remaining the same, between the forty-second and the forty-third meridian. This was already a point beyond the Antarctic Circle that few navigators had been able to reach. We were at only two degrees lower than Weddell.

The navigation of the schooner naturally became a more delicate matter in the midst of those dim, wan masses soiled with the excreta of birds. Many of them had a leprous look: compared with their already considerable volume, how small our little ship, over whose mast some of the icebergs already towered, must have appeared!

Captain Len Guy admirably combined boldness and prudence in his command of his ship. He never passed to leeward of an iceberg, if the distance did not guarantee the success of any manoeuvre whatsoever that might suddenly become necessary. He was familiar with all the contingencies of ice-navigation, and was not afraid to venture into the midst of these flotillas of drifts and packs. That day he said to me, —

“Mr. Jeorling; this is not the first time that I have tried to penetrate into the Polar Sea, and without success. Well, if I made the attempt to do this when I had nothing but presumption as to the fate of the *Jane* to go upon, what shall I not do now that presumption is changed into certainty?”

“I understand that, captain, and of course your experience of navigation in these waters must increase our chances of success.”

“Undoubtedly. Nevertheless, all that lies beyond the fixed icebergs is still the unknown for me, as it is for other navigators.”

“The Unknown! No, not absolutely, captain, since we possess the important reports of Weddell, and, I must add, of Arthur Pym also.”

“Yes, I know; they have spoken of the open sea.”

“Do you not believe that such a sea exists?”

“Yes, I do believe that it exists, and for valid reasons. In fact, it is perfectly manifest that these masses, called icebergs and icefields, could not be formed in the ocean itself. It is the tremendous and irresistible action of the surge which detaches them from the continents or islands of the high latitudes. Then the currents carry them into less cold waters, where their edges are worn by the waves, while the temperature disintegrates their bases and their sides, which are subjected to thermometric influences.”

“That seems very plain,” I replied. “Then these masses have come from the icebergs. (1) They clash with them in drifting, sometimes break into the main body, and clear their passage through. Again, we must not judge the southern by the northern zone. The conditions are not identical. Cook has recorded that he never met the equivalent of the Antarctic ice mountains in the Greenland seas, even at a higher latitude.”

“What is the reason?” I asked.

“No doubt that the influence of the south winds is predominant in the northern regions. Now, those winds do not reach the northern regions until they have been heated in their passage over America, Asia, and Europe, and they contribute to raise the temperature of the atmosphere. The nearest land, ending in the points of the Cape of Good Hope, Patagonia, and Tasmania, does not modify the atmospheric currents.”

“That is an important observation, captain, and it justifies your opinion with regard to an open sea.”

“Yes, open — at least, for ten degrees behind the icebergs. Let us then only get through that obstacle, and our greatest difficulty will have been conquered. You were right in saying that the existence of that open sea has been formally recognized by Weddell.”

“And by Arthur Pym, captain.”

“And by Arthur Pym.”

From the 15th of December the difficulties of navigation increased with the number of the drifting masses. The wind, however, continued to be uniformly favourable, showing no tendency to veer to the south. The breeze freshened now and then, and we had to take in sail. When this occurred we saw the sea foaming along the sides of the ice packs, covering them with spray like the rocks on the coast of a floating island, but without hindering their onward march.

Our crew could not fail to be impressed by the sight of the schooner making her way through these moving masses; the new men among them, at least, for the old hands had seen such manoeuvres before. But they soon became accustomed to it, and took it all for granted.

It was necessary to organize the look-out ahead with the greatest care. West had a cask fixed at the head of the foremast — what is called a crow’s-nest — and from thence an unremitting watch was kept.

The 16th was a day of excessive fatigue to the men. The packs and drifts were so close that only very narrow and winding passage-way between them was to be found, so that the working of the ship was more than commonly laborious.

Under these circumstances, none of the men grumbled, but Hunt distinguished himself by his activity. Indeed, he was admitted by Captain Len Guy and the crew to be an incomparable seaman. But there was something mysterious about him that excited the curiosity of them all.

At this date the *Halbrane* could not be very far from the icebergs. If she held on in her course in that direction she would certainly reach them before long, and would then have only to seek for a passage. Hitherto, however, the look-out had not been able to make out between the icebergs an unbroken crest of ice beyond the ice-fields.

Constant and minute precautions were indispensable all day on the 16th, for the helm, which was loosened by merciless blows and bumps, was in danger of being unshipped.

The sea mammals had not forsaken these seas. Whales were seen in great numbers, and it was a fairy-like spectacle when several of them spouted simultaneously. With fin-backs and hump-backs, porpoises of colossal size appeared, and these Hearne harpooned cleverly when they came within range. The flesh of these creatures was much relished on board, after Endicott had cooked it in his best manner.

As for the usual Antarctic birds, petrels, pigeons, and cormorants, they passed in screaming flocks, and legions of penguins, ranged along the edges of the icefields, watched the evolutions of the schooner. These penguins are the real inhabitants of these dismal solitudes, and nature could not have created a type more suited to the desolation of the glacial zone.

On the morning of the 17th the man in the crow’s-nest at last signalled the icebergs.

Five or six miles to the south a long dentated crest upreared itself, plainly standing out against the fairly clear sky, and all along it drifted thousands of ice-packs. This motionless barrier stretched before us from the north-west to the south-east, and by merely sailing along it the schooner would still gain some degrees southwards.

When the *Halbrane* was within three miles of the icebergs, she lay-to in the middle of a wide basin which allowed her complete freedom of movement.

A boat was lowered, and Captain Len Guy got into it, with the boatswain, four sailors at the oars, and one at the helm. The boat was pulled in the direction of the enormous rampart, vain search was made for a channel through which the schooner could have slipped, and after three hours of this fatiguing reconnoitring, the men returned to the ship. Then came a squall of rain and snow which caused the temperature to fall to thirty-six degrees (2’22 C. above zero), and shut out the view of the ice-rampart from us.

During the next twenty-four hours the schooner lay within four miles of the icebergs. To bring her nearer would have been to get among winding channels from which it might not have been possible to extricate her. Not that Captain Len Guy did not long to do this, in his fear of passing some opening unperceived.

“If I had a consort,” he said, “I would sail closer along the icebergs, and it is a great advantage to be two, when one is on such an enterprise as this! But the *Halbrane* is alone, and if she were to fail us — ”

Even though we approached no nearer to the icebergs than prudence permitted, our ship was exposed to great risk, and West was constantly obliged to change his trim in order to avoid the shock of an icefield.

Fortunately, the wind blew from east to north-nor’-east without variation, and it did not freshen. Had a tempest arisen I know not what would have become of the schooner — yes, though, I do know too well: she would have been lost and all on board of her. In such a case the *Halbrane* could not have escaped; we must have been flung on the base of the barrier.

After a long examination Captain Len Guy had to renounce the hope of finding a passage through the terrible wall of ice. It remained only to endeavour to reach the south-east point of it. At any rate, by following that course we lost nothing in latitude; and, in fact, on the 18th the observation taken made the seventy-third parallel the position of the *Halbrane*.

I must repeat, however, that navigation in the Antarctic seas will probably never be accomplished under more felicitous circumstances — the precocity of the summer season, the permanence of the north wind, the temperature forty-nine degrees at the lowest; all this was the best of good-fortune. I need not add that we enjoyed perpetual light, and the whole twenty-four hours round the sun's rays reached us from every point of the horizon.

Two or three times the captain approached within two miles of the icebergs. It was impossible but that the vast mass must have been subjected to climateric influences; ruptures must surely have taken place at some points.

But his search had no result, and we had to fall back into the current from west to east.

I must observe at this point that during all our search we never descried land or the appearance of land out at sea, as indicated on the charts of preceding navigators. These maps are incomplete, no doubt, but sufficiently exact in their main lines. I am aware that ships have often passed over the indicated bearings of land. This, however, was not admissible in the case of Tsalal. If the *Jane* had been able to reach the islands, it was because that portion of the Antarctic sea was free, and in so "early" a year, we need not fear any obstacle in that direction.

At last, on the 19th, between two and three o’clock in the afternoon, a shout from the crow’s-nest was heard.

“What is it?” roared West.

“The iceberg wall is split on the south-east.”

“What is beyond?” “Nothing in sight.”

It took West very little time to reach the point of observation, and we all waited below, how impatiently may be imagined. What if the look-out were mistaken, if some optical delusion? — But West, at all events, would make no mistake.

After ten interminable minutes his clear voice reached us on the deck.

“Open sea!” he cried.

Unanimous cheers made answer.

The schooner’s head was put to the south-east, hugging the wind as much as possible.

Two hours later we had doubled the extremity of the ice-barrier, and there lay before our eyes a sparkling sea, entirely open.

(1) The French word is *banquise*, which means the vast stretch of icebergs farther south than the barrière or ice wall.

CHAPTER XIV.

A VOICE IN A DREAM.

Entirely free from ice? No. It would have been premature to affirm this as a fact. A few icebergs were visible in the distance, while some drifts and packs were still going east. Nevertheless, the break-up had been very thorough on that side, and the sea was in reality open, since a ship could sail freely.

“God has come to our aid,” said Captain Len Guy. “May He be pleased to guide us to the end.”

“In a week,” I remarked, “our schooner might come in sight of Tsalal Island.”

“Provided that the east wind lasts, Mr. Jeorling. Don’t forget that in sailing along the icebergs to their eastern extremity, the *Halbrane* went out of her course, and she must be brought back towards the west.”

“The breeze is for us, captain.”

“And we shall profit by it, for my intention is to make for Bennet Islet. It was there that my brother first landed, and so soon as we shall have sighted that island we shall be certain that we are on the right route. To-day, when I have ascertained our position exactly, we shall steer for Bennet Islet.”

“Who knows but that we may come upon some fresh sign?”

“It is not impossible, Mr. Jeorling.”

I need not say that recourse was had to the surest guide within our reach, that veracious narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, which I read and re-read with intense attention, fascinated as I was by the idea that I might be permitted to behold with my own eyes those strange phenomena of nature in the Antarctic world which I, in common with all Edgar Poe's readers, had hitherto regarded as creations of the most imaginative writer who ever gave voice by his pen to the phantasies of a unique brain. No doubt a great part of the wonders of Arthur Gordon Pym's narrative would prove pure fiction, but if even a little of the marvellous story were found to be true, how great a privilege would be mine!

The picturesque and wonderful side of the story we were studying as gospel truth had little charm and but slight interest for Captain Len Guy; he was indifferent to everything in Pym's narrative that did not relate directly to the castaways of Tsalal Island: his mind was solely and constantly set upon their rescue.

According to the narrative of Arthur Pym *Jane* experienced serious difficulties, due to bad weather, from the 1st to the 4th of January, 1828. It was not until the morning of the 5th, in latitude 23° 15' that she found a free passage through the last iceberg that barred her way. The final difference between our position and the *Jane* in a parallel ease, was that the *Jane* took fifteen days to accomplish the distance of ten degrees, or six hundred miles, which separated her on the 5th of January from Tsalal Island, while on the 19th of December the *Halbrane* was only about seven degrees, or four hundred miles, off the island. Bennet Islet, where Captain Guy intended to put in for twenty-four hours, was fifty miles nearer. Our voyage was progressing under prosperous conditions; we were no longer visited by sudden hail and snow storms, or those rapid falls of temperature which tried the crew of the *Jane* so sorely. A few ice-floes drifted by us, occasionally peopled, as tourists throng a pleasure yacht, by penguins, and also by dusky seals, lying flat upon the white surfaces like enormous leeches. Above this strange flotilla we traced the incessant flight of petrels, pigeons, black puffins, divers, grebe, sterns, cormorants, and the sooty-black albatross of the high latitudes. Huge medusas, exquisitely tinted, floated on the water like spread parasols. Among the denizens of the deep, captured by the crew of the schooner with line and net, I noted more particularly a sort of giant John Dory (1) (*dorade*) three feet in length, with firm and savoury flesh.

During the night, or rather what ought to have been the night of the 19th-20th, my sleep was disturbed by a strange dream. Yes! there could be no doubt but that it was only a dream! Nevertheless, I think it well to record it here, because it is an additional testimony to the haunting influence under which my brain was beginning to labour.

I was sleeping — at two hours after midnight — and was awakened by a plaintive and continuous murmuring sound. I opened — or I imagined I opened my eyes. My cabin was in profound darkness. The murmur began again; I listened, and it seemed to me that a voice — a voice which I did not know — whispered these words: —

“Pym... Pym... poor Pym!”

Evidently this could only be a delusion; unless, indeed, some one had got into my cabin: the door was locked.

“Pym!” the voice repeated. “Poor Pym must never be forgotten.”

This time the words were spoken close to my ear. What was the meaning of the injunction, and why was it addressed to me? And besides, had not Pym, after his return to America, met with a sudden and deplorable death, the circumstances or the details being unknown?

I began to doubt whether I was in my right mind, and shook myself into complete wakefulness, recognizing that I had been disturbed by an extremely vivid dream due to some cerebral cause.

I turned out of my berth, and, pushing back the shutter, looked out of my cabin. No one aft on the deck, except Hunt, who was at the helm.

I had nothing to do but to lie down again, and this I did. It seemed to me that the name of Arthur Pym was repeated in my hearing several times; nevertheless, I fell asleep and did not wake until morning, when I retained only a vague impression of this occurrence, which soon faded away. No other incident at that period of our voyage calls for notice. Nothing particular occurred on board our schooner. The breeze from the north, which had forsaken us, did not recur, and only the current carried the *Halbrane* towards the south. This caused a delay unbearable to our impatience.

At last, on the 21st, the usual observation gave 82° 50’ of latitude, and 42° 20’ of west longitude. Bennet Islet, if it had any existence, could not be far off now.

Yes! the islet did exist, and its bearings were those indicated by Arthur Pym.

At six o’clock in the evening one of the crew cried out that there was land ahead on the port side.

(1) The legendary etymology of this piscatorial designation is *Janitore*, the “door-keeper,” in allusion to St. Peter, who brought a fish said to be of that species, to our Lord at His command.

CHAPTER XV.

BENNET ISLET.

The *Halbrane* was then within sight of Bennet Islet! The crew urgently needed rest, so the disembarkation was deferred until the following day, and I went back to my cabin.

The night passed without disturbance, and when day came not a craft of any kind was visible on the waters, not a native on the beach. There were no huts upon the coast, no smoke arose in the distance to indicate that Bennet Islet was inhabited. But William Guy had not found any trace of human beings there, and what I saw of the islet answered to the description given by Arthur Pym. It rose upon a rocky base of about a league in circumference, and was so arid that no vegetation existed on its surface.

“Mr. Jeorling,” said Captain Len Guy, “do you observe a promontory in the direction of the north-east?”

“I observe it, captain.”

“Is it not formed of heaped-up rocks which look like giant bales of cotton?”

“That is so, and just what the narrative describes.”

“Then all we have to do is to land on the promontory, Mr. leoding. Who knows but we may come across some vestige of the crew of the fane, supposing them to have succeeded in escaping from Tsalal Island.”

The speaker was devouring the islet with his eyes. What must his thoughts, his desires, his impatience have been! But there was a man whose gaze was set upon the same point even more fixedly; that man was Hunt.

Before we left the *Halbrane* Len Guy enjoined the most minute and careful watchfulness upon his lieutenant. This was a charge which West did not need. Our exploration would take only half a day at most. If the boat had not returned in the afternoon a second was to be sent in search of us.

“Look sharp also after our recruits,” added the captain.

“Don’t be uneasy, captain,” replied the lieutenant. “Indeed, since you want four men at the oars you had better take them from among the new ones. That will leave four less troublesome fellows on board.”

This was a good idea, for, under the deplorable influence of Hearne, the discontent of his shipmates from the Falklands was on the increase. The boat being ready, four of the new crew took their places forward, while Hunt, at his own request, was steersman. Captain Len Guy, the boatswain and myself, all well armed, seated ourselves aft, and we started for the northern point of the islet. In the course of an hour we had doubled the promontory, and come in sight of the little bay whose shores the boats of the fane had touched.

Hunt steered for this bay, gliding with remarkable skill between the rocky points which stuck up here and there. One would have thought he knew his way among them.

We disembarked on a stony coast. The stones were covered with sparse lichen. The tide was already ebbing, leaving uncovered the sandy bottom of a sort of beach strewn with black blocks, resembling big nail-heads.

Two men were left in charge of the boat while we landed amid the rocks, and, accompanied by the other two, Captain Len Guy, the boatswain, Hunt and I proceeded towards the centre, where we found some rising ground, from whence we could see the whole extent of the islet. But there was nothing to be seen on any side, absolutely nothing. On coming down from the slight eminence Hunt went on in front, as it had been agreed that he was to be our guide. We followed him therefore, as he led us towards the southern extremity of the islet. Having reached the point, Hunt looked carefullyon all sides of him, then stooped and showed us a piece of half rotten wood lying among the scattered stones.

"I remember!" I exclaimed; "Arthur Pym speaks of a piece of wood with traces of carving on it which appeared to have belonged to the bow of a ship."

"Among the carving my brother fancied he could trace the design of a tortoise," added Captain Len Guy.

"Just so," I replied, "but Arthur Pym pronounced that resemblance doubtful. No matter; the piece of wood is still in the same place that is indicated in the narrative, so we may conclude that since the *Jane* cast anchor here no other crew has ever set foot upon Bennet Islet. It follows that we should only lose time in looking out for any tokens of another landing. We shall know nothing until we reach Tsalal Island."

"Yes, Tsalal Island," replied the captain.

We then retraced our steps in the direction of the bay. In various places we observed fragments of coral reef, and bêche-de-mer was so abundant that our schooner might have taken a full cargo of it.

Hunt walked on in silence with downcast eyes, until as we were close upon the beach to the east, he, being about ten paces ahead, stopped abruptly, and summoned us to him by a hurried gesture.

In an instant we were by his side. Hunt had evinced no surprise on the subject of the piece of wood first found, but his attitude changed when he knelt down in front of a worm-eaten plank lying on the sand. He felt it all over with his huge hands, as though he were seeking sotne tracery on its rough surface whose signification might be intelligible to him. The black paint was hidden under the thick dirt that had accumulated upon it. The plank had probably formed part of a ship's stern, as the boatswain requested us to observe.

"Yes, yes," repeated Captain Len Guy, "it made part of a stern."

Hunt, who still remained kneeling, nodded his big head in assent.

"But," I remarked, "this plank must have been cast upon Bennet Islet from a wreck! The cross-currents must have found it in the open sea, and — "

"If that were so — " cried the captain.

The same thought had occurred to both of us. What was our surprise, indeed our amazement, our unspeakable emotion, when Hunt showed us eight letters cut in the plank, not painted, but hollow and distinctly traceable with the finger.

It was only too easy to recognize the letters of two names, arranged in two lines, thus:

AN

LI.E.PO.L.

The Jane of Liverpool! The schooner commanded by Captain William Guy! What did it matter that time had blurred the other letters? Did not those suffice to tell the name of the ship and the port she belonged to? *The Jane of Liverpool!*

Captain Len Guy had taken the plank in his hands, and now he pressed his lips to it, while tears fell from his eyes.

It was a fragment of the *Jane*! I did not utter a word until the captain's emotion had subsided. As for Hunt, I had never seen such a lightning glance from his brilliant hawk-like eyes as he now cast towards the southern horizon.

Captain Len Guy rose.

Hunt, without a word, placed the plank upon his shoulder, and we continued our route.

When we had made the tour of the island, we halted at the place where the boat had been left under the charge of two sailors, and about half-past two in the afternoon we were again on board.

Early on the morning of the 23rd of December the *Halbrane* put off from Bennet Islet, and we carried away with us new and convincing testimony to the catastrophe which Tsalal Island had witnessed.

During that day, I observed the sea water very attentively, and it seemed to me less deeply blue than Arthur Pym describes it. Nor had we met a single specimen of his monster of the austral fauna, an animal three feet long, six inches high, with fourshort legs, long coral claws, a silky body, a rat's tail, a cat's head, the hanging ears, blood-red lips and white teeth of a dog. The truth is that I regarded several of these details as "suspect," and entirely due toan over-imaginative temperament.

Seated far aft in the ship, I read Edgar Poe’s book with sedulous attention, but I was not unaware of the fact that Hunt, whenever his duties furnished him with an opportunity, observed me pertinaciously, and with looks of singular meaning.

And, in fact, I was re-perusing the end of Chapter XVII. in which Arthur Pym acknowledged his responsibility for the sad and tragic events which were the results of his advice. It was, in fact, he who over-persuaded Captain William Guy, urging him “to profit by so tempting an opportunity of solving the great problem relating to the Antarctic Continent.” And, besides, while accepting that responsibility, did he not congratulate himself on having been the instrument of a great discovery, and having aided in some degree to reveal to science one of the most marvellous secrets which had ever claimed its attention?

At six o’clock the sun disappeared behind a thick curtain of mist. After midnight the breeze freshened, and the Halbrane’s progress marked a dozen additional miles.

On the morrow the good ship was less than the third of a degree, that is to say less than twenty miles, from Tsalal Island.

Unfortunately, just after mid-day, the wind fell. Nevertheless, thanks to the current, the Island of Tsalal was signalled at forty-five minutes past six in the evening.

The anchor was cast, a watch was set, with loaded firearms within hand-reach, and boarding-nets ready. The Halbrane ran no risk of being surprised. Too eyes were watching on board — especially those of Hunt, whose gaze never quitted the horizon of that southern zone for an instant.

CHAPTER XVI,

TSALAL ISLAND.

The night passed without alarm. No boat had put off from the island, nor had a native shown himself upon the beach. The *Halbrane*, then, had not been observed on her arrival; this was all the better.

We had cast anchor in ten fathoms, at three miles from the coast.

When the Jane appeared in these waters, the people of Tsalal beheld a ship for the first time, and they took it for an enormous animal, regarding its masts as limbs, and its sails as garments. Now, they ought to be better informed on this subject, and if they did not attempt to visit us, to what motive were we to assign such conduct?

Captain Len Guy gave orders for the lowering of the ship’s largest boat, in a voice which betrayed his impatience.

The order was executed, and the captain, addressing West, said —

“Send eight men down with Martin Holt; send Hunt to the helm. Remain yourself at the moorings, and keep a look-out landwards as well as to sea.”

“Aye, aye, sir; don’t be uneasy.”

“We are going ashore, and we shall try to gain the village of Klock-Klock. If any difficulty should arise on sea, give us warning by firing three shots.”

“All right,” replied West — ”at a minute’s interval.”

“If we should not return before evening, send the second boat with ten armed men under the boatswain’s orders, and let them station themselves within a cable’s length of the shore, so as to escort us back. You understand?”

“Perfectly, captain.”

“If we are not to be found, after you have done all in your power, you will take command of the schooner, and bring her back to the Falklands.”

“I will do so.”

The large boat was rapidly got ready. Eight men embarked in it, including Martin Holt and Hunt, all armed with rifles, pistols, and knives; the latter weapons were slung in their belts. They also carried cartridge-pouches. I stepped forward and said, —

“Will you not allow me to accompany you, captain?”

“If you wish to do so, Mr. Jeorling.”

I went to my cabin, took my gun — a repeating rifle — with ball and powder, and rejoined Captain Len Guy, who had kept a place in the stern of the boat for me. Our object was to discover the passage through which Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters had crossed the reef on the 19th of January, 1828, in the *Jane’s* boat. For twenty minutes we rowed along the reef, and then Hunt discovered the pass, which was through a narrow cut in the rocks. Leaving two men in the boat, we landed, and having gone through the winding gorge which gave access to the crest of the coast, our little force, headed by Hunt, pushed on towards the centre of the island. Captain Len Guy and myself exchanged observations, as we walked, on the subject of this country, which, as Arthur Pym declared, differed essentially from every other land hitherto visited by human beings. We soon found that Pym's description was trustworthy. The general colour of the plains was black, as though the clay were made of lava-dust; nowhere was anything white to be seen. At a hundred paces distance Hunt began to run towards an enormous mass of rock, climbed on it with great agility, and looked out overa wide extent of space like a man who ought to recognize the place he is in, but does not.

"What is the matter with him?" asked Captain Len Guy, who was observing Hunt attentively.

"I don't know what is the matter with him, captain. But, as you are aware, everything about this man is odd: his ways are inexplicable, and on certain sides of him he seems to belong to those strange beings whom Arthur Pym asserts that he found on this island. One would even say that — "

"That — " repeated the captain.

And then, without finishing my sentence, I said, —

"Captain, are you sure that you made a good observation when you took the altitude yesterday?"

"Certainly."

"So that your point — "

"Gave 83° 20' of latitude and 43° 5' of longitude."

"Exactly?"

“Exactly.”

“There is, then, no doubt that we are on Tsalal Island?”

“None, Mr. Jeorling, if Tsalal Island lies where Arthur Pym places it.”

This was quite true, there could be no doubt on the point, and yet of all that Arthur Pym described nothing existed, or rather, nothing was any longer to be seen. Not a tree, not a shrub, not a plant was visible in the landscape. There was no sign of the wooded hills between which the village of Klock-Klock ought to lie, or of the streams from which the crew of the fane had not ventured to drink. There was no water anywhere; but everywhere absolute, awful drought.

Nevertheless, Hunt walked on rapidly, without showing any hesitation. It seemed as though he was led by a natural instinct, “a bee’s flight,” as we say in America. I know not what presentiment induced us to follow him as the best of guides, a Chingachgook, a Renard-Subtil. And why not? Was not he the fellow-countryman of Fenlmore Coopet’s heroes?

But, I must repeat that we had not before our eyes that fabulous land which Arthur Pym described. The soil we were treading had been ravaged, wrecked, torn by convulsion. It was black, a cindery black, as though it had been vomited from the earth under the action of Plutonian forces; it suggested that some appalling and irresistible cataclysm had overturned the whole of its surface.

Not one of the animals mentioned in the narrative was to be seen, and even the penguins which abound in the Antarctic regions had fled from this uninhabitable land. Its stern silence and solitude made it a hideous desert. No human being was to be seen either on the coast or in the interior. Did any chance of finding William Guy and the survivors of the fane exist in the midst of this scene of desolation?

I looked at Captain Len Guy. His pale face, dim eyes, and knit brow told too plainly that hope was beginning to die within his breast.

And then the population of Tsalal Island, the almost naked men, armed with clubs and lances, the tall, well-made, upstanding women, endowed with grace and freedom of bearing not to be found in a civilized society — those are the expressions of Arthur Pym — and the crowd of children accompanying them, what had become of all these? Where were the multitude of natives, with black skins, black hair, black teeth, who regarded white colour with deadly terror?

All of a sudden a light flashed upon me. "An earthquake!" I exclaimed. "Yes, two or three of those terrible shocks, so common in these regions where the sea penetrates by infiltration, and a day comes when the quantity of accumulated vapour makes its way out and destroys everything on the surface."

"Could an earthquake have changed Tsalal Island to such an extent?" asked Len Guy, musingly.

"Yes, captain, an earthquake has done this thing; it has destroyed every trace of all that Arthur Pym saw here."

Hunt, who had drawn nigh to us, and was listening, nodded his head in approval of my words.

"Are not these countries of the southern seas volcanic?" I resumed; "If the *Halbrane* were to transport us to Victoria Land, we might find the *Erebus* and the *Terror* in the midst of an eruption.”

“And yet,” observed Martin Holt, “if there had been an eruption here, we should find lava beds.”

“I do not say that there has been an eruption,” I replied, “but I do say the soil has been convulsed by an earthquake.”

On reflection it will be seen that the explanation given by me deserved to be admitted. And then it came to my remembrance that according to Arthur Pym’s narrative, Tsalal belonged to a group of islands which extended towards the west. Unless the people of Tsalal had been destroyed, it was possible that they might have fled into one of the neighbouring islands. We should do well, then, to go and reconnoitre that archipelago, for Tsalal clearly had no resources whatever to offer after the cataclysm. I spoke of this to the captain.

“Yes,” he replied, and tears stood in his eyes, “yes, it may be so. And yet, how could my brother and his unfortunate companions have found the means of escaping? Is it not far more probable that they all perished in the earthquake?”

Here Hunt made us a signal to follow him, and we did so.

After he had pushed across the valley for a considerable distance, he stopped.

What a spectacle was before our eyes!

There, lying in heaps, were human bones, all the fragments of that framework of humanity which we call the skeleton, hundreds of them, without a particle of flesh, clusters of skulls still bearing some tufts of hair

— a vast bone heap, dried and whitened in this place! We were struck dumb and motionless by this spectacle. When Captain Len Guy could speak, he murmured, —

“My brother, my poor brother!”

On a little reflection, however, my mind refused to admit certain things. How was this catastrophe to be reconciled with Patterson’s memoranda? The entries in his note-book stated explicitly that the mate of the *Jane* had left his companions on Tsalal Island seven months previously. They could not then have perished in this earthquake, for the state of the bones proved that it had taken place several years earlier, and must have occurred after the departure of Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters, since no mention of it was made in the narrative of the former.

These facts were, then, irreconcilable. If the earthquake was of recent date, the presence of those time-bleached skeletons could not be attributed to its action. In any case, the survivors of the *Jane* were not among them. But then, where were they?

The valley of Klock-Klock extended no farther; we had to retrace our steps in order to regain the coast. We had hardly gone half a mile on the cliff’s edge when Hunt again stopped, on perceiving some fragments of bones which were turning to dust, and did not seem to be those of a human being.

Were these the remains of one of the strange animals described by Arthur Pym, of which we had not hitherto seen any specimens?

Hunt suddenly uttered a cry, or rather a sort of savage growl, and held out his enormous hand, holding a metal collar. Yes I a brass collar, a collar eaten by rust, but bearing letters which might still be deciphered. These letters formed the three following words: —

“*Tiger* — Arthur Pym.”

Tiger! — the name of the dog which had saved Arthur Pym’s life in the hold of the *Grampus*, and, during the revolt of the crew, had sprung at the throat of Jones, the sailor, who was immediately “finished” by Dirk Peters.

So, then, that faithful animal had not perished in the shipwreck of the *Grampus*. He had been taken on board the *Jane* at the same time as Arthur Pym and the half-breed. And yet the narrative did not allude to this, and after the meeting with the schooner there was no longer any mention of the dog. All these contradictions occurred to me. I could not reconcile the facts. Nevertheless, there could be no doubt that Tiger had been saved from the shipwreck like Arthur Pym, had escaped the landslip of the Klock-Klock hill, and had come to his death at last in the catastrophe which had destroyed a portion of the population of Tsalal.

But, again, William Guy and his five sailors could not be among those skeletons which were strewn upon the earth, since they were living at the time of Patterson’s departure, seven months ago, and the catastrophe already dated several years back!

Three hours later we had returned on board the *Halbrane*, without having made any other discovery. Captain Len Guy went direct to his cabin, shut himself up there, and did not reappear even at dinner hour.

The following day, as I wished to return to the island in order to resume its exploration from one coast to the other, I requested West to have me rowed ashore.

He consented, after he had been authorized by Captain Len Guy, who did not come with us.

Hung the boatswain, Martin Holt, four men, and myself took our places in the boatt without arms; for there was no longer anything to fear.

We disembarked at our yesterday’s landing-place, and Hunt again led the way towards the hill of Klock-Klock. Nothing remained of the eminence that had been carried away in the artificial landslip, from which the captain of the *Jane*, Patterson, his second officer, and five of his men had happily escaped. The village of Klock-Klock had thus disappeared; and doubtless the mystery of the strange discoveries narrated in Edgar Poe’s work was now and ever would remain beyond solution.

We had only to regain our ship, returning by the east side of the coast. Hunt brought us through the space where sheds had been erected for the preparation of the *bêche-de mer*, and we saw the remains of them. On all sides silence and abandonment reigned.

We made a brief pause at the place where Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters seized upon the boat which bore them towards higher latitudes, even to that horizon of dark vapour whose rents permitted them to discern the huge human figure, the white giant.

Hunt stood with crossed arms, his eyes devouring the vast extent of the sea.

“Well, Hunt?” said I, tentatively.

Hunt did not appear to hear me; he did not turn his head in my direction.

“What are we doing here?” I asked him, and touched him on the shoulder.

He started, and cast a glance upon me which went to my heart.

“Come along, Hunt,” cried Hurliguerly. “Are you going to take root on this rock? Don’t you see the *Halbrane* waiting for us at her moorings? Come along. We shall be off to-morrow. There is nothing more to do here.”

It seemed to me that Hunt’s trembling lips repeated the word “nothing,” while his whole bearing protested against what the boatswain said.

The boat brought us back to the ship. Captain Len Guy had not left his cabin. West, having received no orders, was pacing the deck aft. I seated myself at the foot of the mainmast, observing the sea which lay open and free before us.

At this moment the captain came on deck; he was very pale, and his features looked pinched and weary.

“Mr. Jeorling,” said he, “I can affirm conscientiously that I have done all it was possible to do. Can I hope henceforth that my brother William and his companions — No! No! We must go away — before winter — ”

He drew himself up, and cast a last glance towards Tsalal Island.

“To-morrow, Jim,” he said to West, “to morrow we will make sail as early as possible.”

At this moment a rough voice uttered the words:

“And Pym — poor Pym!”

I recognized this voice.

It was the voice I had heard in my dream.

CHAPTER XVII.

AND PYM?

“And Pym — poor Pym?”

I turned round quickly.

Hunt had spoken. This strange person was standing motionless at a little distance, gazing fixedly at the horizon.

It was so unusual to hear Hunt’s voice on board the schooner, that the men, whom the unaccustomed sound reached, drew near, moved by curiosity. Did not his unexpected intervention point to — I had a presentiment that it did — some wonderful revelation?

A movement of West’s hand sent the men forward, leaving only the mate, the boatswain, Martin Holt, the sailing-master, and Hardy, with the captain and myself in the vicinity of Hunt. The captain approached and addressed him:

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘And Pym — poor Pym.’”

“Well, then, what do you mean by repeating the name of the man whose pernicious advice led my brother to the island on which the *Jane* was lost, the greater part of her crew was massacred, and where we have not found even one left of those who were still here seven months ago?”

Hunt did not speak.

“Answer, I say — answer!” cried the captain.

Hunt hesitated, not because he did not know what to say, but from a certain difficulty in expressing his ideas. The latter were quite clear, but his speech was confused, his words were unconnected. He had a certain language of his own which sometimes was picturesque, and his pronunciation was strongly marked by the hoarse accent of the Indians of the Far West.

“You see,” he said, “I do not know how to tell things. My tongue stops. Understand me, I spoke of Pym, poor Pym, did I not?”

“Yes,” answered West, sternly; “and what have you to say about Arthur Pym?”

“I have to say that he must not be abandoned.”

“Abandoned!” I exclaimed.

“No, never! It would be cruel — too cruel. We must go to seek him.”

“To seek him?” repeated Captain Len Guy.

“Understand me; it is for this that I have embarked on the *Halbrane* — yes, to find poor Pym!”

“And where is he,” I asked, “if not deep in a grave, in the cemetery of his natal city?”

“No, he is in the place where he remained, alone, all alone,” continued Hunt, pointing towards the south; “and since then the sun has risen on that horizon seven times.”

It was evident that Hunt intended to designate the Antarctic regions, but what did he mean by this?

“Do you not know that Arthur Pym is dead?” said the captain.

“Dead!” replied Hunt, emphasizing the word with an expressive gesture. “No! listen to me: I know things; understand me, he is not dead.”

“Come now, Hunt,” said I, “remember what you do know. In the last chapter of the adventures of Arthur Pym, does not Edgar Poe relate his sudden and deplorable end?”

“Explain yourself, Hunt,” said the captain, in a tone of command. “Reflect, take your time, and say plainly whatever you have to say.”

And, while Hunt passed his hand over his brow, as though to collect his memory of far-off things, I observed to Captain Len Guy, —

“There is something very singular in the intervention of this man, if indeed he be not mad.”

At my words the boatswain shook his head, for he did not believe Hunt to be in his right mind.

The latter understood this shake of the boatswain’s head, and cried out in a harsh tone, —

“No, not mad. And madmen are respected on the prairies, even if they are not believed. And I — I must be believed. No, no, no! Pym is not dead!”

“Edgar Poe asserts that he is,” I replied.

"Yes, I know, Edgar Poe of Baltimore. But — he never saw poor Pym, never, never."

"What!" exclaimed Captain Len Guy; "the two men were not acquainted?"

"No!"

"And it was not Arthur Pym himself who related his adventures to Edgar Poe?"

"No, captain, no! He, below there, at Baltimore, had only the notes written by Pym from the day when he hid himself on board the *Grampus* to the very last hour — the last — understand me the last."

"Who, then, brought back that journal?" asked Captain Len Guy, as he seized Hunt's hand.

"It was Pym's companion, he who loved him, his poor Pym, like a son. It was Dirk Peters, the half-breed, who came back alone from there — beyond."

"The half-breed, Dirk Peters!" I exclaimed.

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"And Arthur Pym may be — "

"There," answered Hunt, in a loud voice, bending towards the southern line, from which he had not diverted his gaze for a moment.

Could such an assertion prevail against the general incredulity? No, assuredly not! Martin Holt nudged Hurliguerly with his elbow, and both regarded Hunt with pity, while West observed him without speaking. Captain Len Guy made me a sign, meaning that nothing serious was to be got out of this poor fellow, whose mental faculties must have been out of gear for a long time.

And nevertheless, when I looked keenly at Hunt, it seemed to me that a sort of radiance of truth shone out of his eyes:

Then I set to work to interrogate the man, putting to him precise and pressing questions which he tried to answer categorically, as we shall see, and not once did he contradict himself.

“Tell me,” I asked, “did Arthur Pym really come to Tsalal Island on board the *Grampus*?”

“Yes.”

“Did Arthur Pym separate himself, with the half-breed and one of the sailors, from his companions while Captain William Guy had gone to the village of Klock-Klock?”

“Yes. The sailor was one Allen, and he was almost immediately stifled under the stones.”

“Then the two others saw the attack, and the destruction of the schooner, from the top of the hill?”

“Yes.”

“Then, some time later, the two left the island, after they had got possession of one of the boats which the natives could not take from them?”

“Yes.”

“And, after twenty days, having reached the front of the curtain of vapour, they were both carried down into the gulf of the cataract?”

This time Hunt did not reply in the affirmative; he hesitated, he stammered out some vague words; he seemed to be trying to rekindle the half-extinguished flame of his memory. At length, looking at me and shaking his head, he answered, —

“No, not both. Understand me — Dirk never told me — ”

“Dirk Peters” interposed Captain Len Guy, quickly. “You knew Dirk Peters?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“At Vandalia, State of Illinois.”

“And it is from him that you have all this information concerning the voyage?”

“From him.”

“And he came back alone — alone — from that voyage, having left Arthur Pym.”

“Alone!”

“Speak, man — do speak!” I cried, impatiently. Then, in broken, but intelligible sentences, Hunt spoke, —

“Yes — there — a curtain of vapour — so the half-breed often said — understand me. The two, Arthur Pym and he, were in the Tsalal boat. Then an enormous block of ice came full upon them. At the shock Dirk Peters was thrown into the sea, but he clung to the ice block, and — understand me, he saw the boat drift with the current, far, very far, too far! In vain did Pym try to rejoin his companion, he could not; the boat drifted on and on, and Pym, that poor dear Pym, was carried away. It is he who has never come back, and he is there, still there!”

If Hunt had been the half-breed in person he could not have spoken with more heartfelt emotion of “poor Pym.”

It was then, in front of the “curtain of vapour,” that Arthur Pym and the half-breed had been separated from each other. Dirk Peters had succeeded in returning from the ice-world to America, whither he had conveyed the notes that were communicated to Edgar Poe.

Hunt was minutely questioned upon all these points and he replied, conformably, he declared, to what the half-breed had told him many times. According to this statement, Dirk Peters had Arthur Pym’s note-book in his pocket at the moment when the ice-block struck them, and thus the journal which the half-breed placed at the disposal of the American romance-writer was saved.

“Understand me,” Hunt repeated, “for I tell you things as I have them from Dirk Peters. While the drift was carrying him away, he cried out with all his strength. Pym, poor Pym, had already disappeared in the midst of the vapour. The half-breed, feeding upon raw fish, which he contrived to catch, was carried back by a cross current to Tsalal Island, where he landed half dead from hunger."

"To Tsalal Island!" exclaimed Captain Len Guy. "And how long was it since they had left it?"

"Three weeks — yes, three weeks at the farthest, so Dirk Peters told me."

"Then he must have found all that remained of the crew of the *Jane* — my brother William and those who had survived with him?"

"No," replied Hunt; "and Dirk Peters always believed that they had perished — yes, to the very last man. There was no one upon the island."

"No one?"

"Not a living soul."

"But the population?"

"No one! No one, I tell you. The island was a desert — yes, a desert!"

This statement contradicted certain facts of which we were absolutely certain. After all, though, it that when Dirk Peters returned to Tsalal Island, the population, seized by who can tell what terror, had already taken refuge upon the south-western group, and that William Guy and his companions were still hidden in gorges of Klock-Klock. That would explain why half-breed had not come across them, and also why survivors of the *Jane* had had nothing to fear during eleven years of their sojourn in the island. On the other hand, since Patterson had left them there seven previously, if we did not find them, that must have because they had been obliged to leave Tsalal, the being rendered uninhabitable by the earthquake.

“So that,” resumed Captain Len Guy, “on the return of Dirk Peters, there was no longer an inhabitant on the island?”

“No one,” repeated Hunt, “no one. The half-breed did not meet a single native.”

“And what did Dirk Peters do?”

“Understand me. A forsaken boat lay there, at the back of the bay, containing some dried meat and several casks of water. The half-breed got into it, and a south wind — yes, south, very strong, the same that had driven the ice block, with the cross current, towards Tsalal Island — carried him on for weeks and weeks — to the iceberg barrier, through a passage in it — you may believe me, I am telling you only what Dirk Peters told me — and he cleared the polar circle.”

“And beyond it?” I inquired.

“Beyond it. He was picked up by an American whaler, the *Sandy Hook*, and taken back to America.”

Now, one thing at all events was clear. Edgar Poe had never known Arthur Pym. This was the reason why, to leave his readers in exciting uncertainty, he had brought Pym to an end “as sudden as it was deplorable,” without indicating the manner or the cause of his death.

“And yet, although Arthur Pym did not return, could it be reasonably admitted that he had survived his companion for any length of time, that he was still living, eleven years having elapsed since his disappearance?”

“Yes, yes,” replied Hunt.

And this he affirmed with the strong conviction that Dirk Peters had infused into his mind while the two were living togather in Vandalia, in Illinois.

Now the question arose, was Hunt sane? Was it not he who had stolen into my cabin in a fit of insanity — of this I had no doubt — and murmured in my ear the words: “And Pym — poor Pym?”

Yes, and I had not been dreaming! In short, if all that Hunt had just said was true, if he was but the faithful reporter of secrets which had been entrusted to him by Dirk Peters, ought he to be believed when he repeated in a tone of mingled command and entreaty, —

“Pym is not dead. Pym is there. Poor Pym must not be forsaken!”

When I had made an end of questioning Hunt, Captain Len Guy came out of his meditative mood, profoundly troubled, and gave the word, “All hands forward!”

When the men were assembled around him, he said, —

“Listen to me, Hunt, and seriously consider the gravity of the questions I am about to put to you.”

Hunt held his head up, and ran his eyes over the crew of the *Halbrane*.

“You assert, Hunt, that all you have told us concerning Arthur Pym is true?”

“Yes.”

“You knew Dirk Peters?”

“Yes.”

“You lived some years with him in Illinois?”

“Nine years.”

“And he often related these things to you?”

“Yes.”

“And, for your own part, you have no doubt that he told you the exact truth?”

“None.”

“Well, then, did it never occur to him that some of the crew of the *Jane* might have remained on Tsalal Island?”

“No.”

“He believed that William Guy and his companions must all have perished in the landslip of the hill of Klock-Klock?”

“Yes, and from what he often repeated to me, Pym believed it also.”

“Where did you see Dirk Peters for the last time?”

“At Vandalia.”

“How long ago?”

“Over two years.”

“And which of you two was the first to leave Vandalia?”

I thought I detected a slight hesitation in Hunt before he answered, —

“We left the place together.”

“You, to go to?”

“The Falklands.”

“And he — ”

“He?” repeated Hunt.

And then his wandering gaze fixed itself on Martin Holt, our sailing-master, whose life he had saved at the risk of his own during the tempest.

“Well!” resumed the captain, “do you not understand what I am asking you?”

“Yes.”

“Then answer me. When Dirk Peters left Illinois, did he finally give up America?”

“Yes.”

“To go whither? Speak!”

“To the Falklands.”

“And where is he now?”

“He stands before you.”

Dirk Peters! Hunt was the half-breed Dirk Peters, the devoted companion of Arthur Pym, he whom Captain Guy had so long sought for in the United

States, and whose presence was probably to furnish us with a fresh reason for pursuing our daring campaign.

I shall not be at all surprised if my readers have already recognized Dirk Peters in Hunt; indeed, I shall be astonished if they have failed to do so. The extraordinary thing is that Captain Len Guy and myself, who had read Edgar Poe's book over and over again, did not see at once, when Hunt came on the ship at the Falklands, that he and the half-breed were identical! I can only admit that we were both blindfolded by some hidden action of Fate, just when certain pages of that book ought to have effectually cleared our vision.

There was no doubt whatever that Hunt really was Dirk Peters. Although he was eleven years older, he answered in every particular to the description of him given by Arthur Pym, except that he was no longer "of fierce aspect." In fact, the half-breed had changed with age and the experience of terrible scenes through which he had passed; nevertheless, he was still the faithful companion to whom Arthur Pym had often owed his safety, that same Dirk Peters who loved him as his own son, and who had never — no, never — lost the hope of finding him again one day amid the awful Antarctic wastes.

Now, why had Dirk Peters hidden himself in the Falklands under the name of Hunt? Why, since his embarkation on the *Halbrane*, had he kept up that *incognito*? Why had he not told who he was, since he was aware of the intentions of the captain, who was about to make every effort to save his countrymen by following the course of the *Jane*?

Why? No doubt because he feared that his name would inspire horror. Was it not the name of one who had shared in the horrible scenes of the *Grampus*, who had killed Parker, the sailor, who had fed upon the man's flesh, and quenched his thirst in the man's blood? To induce him to reveal his name he must needs be assured that the Halbrane would attempt to discover and rescue Arthur Pym!

And as to the existence of Arthur Pym? I confess that my reason did not rebel against the admission of it as a possibility. The imploring cryof the half-breed, “Pym, poor Pym! he must not be forsaken!” troubled me profoundly.

Assuredly, since I had resolved to take part in the expedition of the *Halbrane*, I was no longer the same man!

A long silence had followed the astounding declaration of the half-breed. None dreamed of doubting his veracity. He had said, “I am Dirk Peters.” He was Dirk Peters.

At length, moved by irresistible impulse, I said:

“My friends, before any decision is made, let us carefully consider the situation. Should we not lay up everlasting regret for ourselves if we were to abandon our expedition at the very moment when it promises to succeed? Reflect upon this, captain, and you, my companions. It is less than seven months since Patterson left your countrymen alive on Tsalal Island. If they were there then, the fact proves that for eleven years they had been enabled to exist on the resources provided by the island, having nothing to fear from the islanders, some of whom had fallen victims to circumstances unknown to us, and others had probably transferred themselves to some neighbouring island. This is quite plain, and I do not see how any objection can be raised to my reasoning.”

No one made answer: there was none to be made.

"If we have not come across the captain of the *Jane* and his people," I resumed, "it is because they have been obliged to abandon Tsalal Island since Patterson's departure. Why? In my belief, it was because the earthquake had rendered the island uninhabitable. Now, they would only have required a native boat to gain either another island or some point of the Antarctic continent by the aid of the southern current. I hardly hesitate to assert that all this has occurred; but in any case, I know, and I repeat, that we shall have done nothing if we do not persevere in the search on which the safety of your countrymen depends."

I questioned my audience by a searching look. No answer.

Captain Len Guy, whose emotion was unrestrained, bowed his head, for he felt that I was right, that by invoking the duties of humanity I was prescribing the only course open to men with feeling hearts.

"And what is in question?" I continued, after the silent pause. "To accomplish a few degrees of latitude, and that while the sea is open, while we have two months of good weather to look for, and nothing to fear from the southern winter. I certainly should not ask you to brave its severity. And shall we hesitate, when the *Halbrane* is abundantly furnished, her crew complete and in good health? Shall we take fright at imaginary dangers? Shall we not have courage to go on, on, thither?"

And I pointed to the southern horizon. Dirk Peters pointed to it also, with an imperative gesture which spoke for him.

Still, the eyes of all were fixed upon us, but there was no response. I continued to urge every argument, and to quote every example in favour of the safety of pursuing our voyage, but the silence was unbrokenj and now the men stood with eyes cast down.

And yet I had not once pronounced the name of Dirk Peters, nor alluded to Dirk Peters' proposal.

I was asking myself whether I had or had not succeeded in inspiring my companions with my own belief, when Captain Len Guy spoke:

"Dirk Peters," he said, "doyou assert that Arthur Pym and you after your departure from Tsalal Island saw land in the direction of the south?"

"Yes, land," answered the half-breed. "Islands or continent — understand me — and I believe that Pym, poor Pym, is waiting there until aid comes to him."

"There, where perhaps William Guy and his companions are also waiting," said I, to bring back the discussion to more practical points.

Captain Len Guy reflected for a little while, and then spoke:

"Is it true, Dirk Peters," he asked, "that beyond the eighty-fourth parallel the horizon is shut in by that curtain of vapour which is described in the narrative? Have you seen — seen with your own eyes — those cataracts in the air, that gulf in which Arthur Pym's boat was lost?"

The half-breed looked from one to the other of us, and shook his big head.

"I don't know," he said. "What are you asking me about, captain? A curtain of vapour? Yes, perhaps, and also appearances of land towards the south."

Evidently Dirk Peters had never read Edgar Poe's book, and very likely did not know how to read. After having handed over Pym's journal, he had not troubled himself about its publication. Having retired to Illinois at first and to the Falklands afterwards, he had no notion of the stir that the work had made, or of the fantastic and baseless climax to which our great poet had brought those strange adventures.

And, besides, might not Arthur Pym himself, with his tendency to the supernatural, have fancied that he saw these wondrous things, due solely to his imaginative brain?

Then, for the first time in the course of this discussion, West’s voice made itself heard. I had no idea which side he would take. The first words he uttered were:

“Captain, your orders?”

Captain Len Guy turned towards his crew, who surrounded him, both the old and the new. Hearne remained in the background, ready to intervene if he should think it necessary.

The captain questioned the boatswain and his comrades, whose devotion was unreservedly his, by a long and anxious look, and I heard him mutter between his teeth, —

“Ah! if it depended only on me! if I were sure of the assent and the help of them all!

“Then Hearne spoke roughly:

“Captain,” said he, “it’s two months since we left the Falklands. Now, my companions were engaged for a voyage which was not to take them farther beyond the icebergs than Tsalal Island.”

“That is not so,” exclaimed Captain Len Guy. “No! That is not so. I recruited you all for an enterprise which I have a right to pursue, so far as I please."

"Beg pardon," said Hearne, coolly, "but we have come to a point which no navigator has ever yet reached, in a sea, no ship except the *Jane* has ever ventured into before us, and therefore my comrades and I mean to return to the Falklands before the bad season. From there you can return to Tsalal Island, and even go on to the Pole, if you so please."

A murmur of approbation greeted his words; no doubt the sealing-master justly interpreted the sentiments of the majority, composed of the new recruits. To go against their opinion, to exact the obedience of these ill-disposed men, and under such conditions to risk the unknown Antarctic waters, would have been an act of temerity — or, rather, an act of madness — that would have brought about some catastrophe.

Nevertheless, West, advancing upon Hearne, said to him in a threatening tone, "Who gave you leave to speak?"

"The captain questioned us," replied Hearne. "I had a right to reply."

The man uttered these words with such insolence that West, who was generally so self-restrained, was about to give free vent to his wrath, when Captain Len Guy, stopping him by a motion of his hand, said quietly, —

"Be calm, Jem. Nothing can be done unless we are all agreed. What is your opinion, Hurtiguerly?"

"It is very clear, captain," replied the boatswain. "I will obey your orders, whatever they may be! It is our duty not to forsake William Guy and the others so long as any chance of saving them remains."

The boatswain paused for a moment, while several of the sailors gave unequivocal signs of approbation.

“As for what concerns Arthur Pym — ”

“There is no question of Arthur Pym,” struck in the captain, “but only of my brother William and his companions.”

I saw at this moment that Dirk Peters was about to protest, and caught hold of his arm. He shook with anger, but kept silence.

The captain continued his questioning of the men, desiring to know by name all those upon whom he might reckon. The old crew to a man acquiesced in his proposals, and pledged themselves to obey his orders implicitly and follow him whithersoever he chose to go.

Three only of the recruits joined those faithful seamen; these were English sailors. The others were of Hearne’s opinion, holding that for them the campaign was ended at Tsalal Island. They therefore refused to go beyond that point, and formally demanded that the ship should be steered northward so as to clear the icebergs at the most favourable period of the season.

Twenty men were on their side, and to constrain them to lend a hand to the working of the ship if she were to be diverted to the south would have been to provoke them to rebel. There was but one resource: to arouse their covetousness, to strike the chord of self-interest.

I intervened, therefore, and addressed them in a which placed the seriousness of my proposal beyond a doubt.

“Men of the *Halbrane*, listen to me! Just as various States have done for voyages of discovery in the Polar Regions, I offer a reward to the crew of this schooner. Two thousand dollars shall be shared among you for every degree we make beyond the eighty-fourth parallel.”

Nearly seventy dollars to each man; this was a strong temptation.

I felt that I had hit the mark.

“I will sign an agreement to that effect,” I continued, “with Captain Len Guy as your representative, and the sums gained shall be handed to you on your return, no matter under what conditions that return be accomplished.”

I waited for the effect of this promise, and, to tell the truth, I had not to wait long.

“Hurrah!” cried the boatswain, acting as fugleman to his comrades, who almost unanimously added their cheers to his. Hearne offered no farther opposition; it would always be in his power to put in his word when the stances should be more propitious.

Thus the bargain was made, and, to gain my ends, I have made a heavier sacrifice. It is true we were within seven degrees of the South and, if the *Halbrane* should indeed reach that spot, it would never cost me more than fourteen thousand dollars.

Early in the morning of the 27th of December the *Halbrane* put out to sea, heading south-west.

After the scene of the preceding evening Captain Len Guy had taken a few hours’ rest. I met him next day on deck while West was going about fore and aft, and he called us both to him.

“Mr. Jeorling,” he said, “it was with a terrible pang that I came to the resolution to bring our schooner back to the north! I felt I had not done all I ought to do for our unhappy fellow-countrymen: but I knew that the majority of the crew would be against me if I insisted on going beyond Tsalal Island.”

“That is true, captain; there was a beginning of indiscipline on board, and perhaps it might have ended in a revolt.”

“A revolt we should have speedily put down,” said West, coolly, “were it only by knocking Hearne, who is always exciting the mutinous men, on the head.”

“And you would have done well, Jem,” said the captain. “Only, justice being satisfied, what would have become of the agreement together, which we must have in order to do anything?”

“Of course, captain, it is better that things passed off without violence! But for the future Hearne will have to look out for himself.”

“His companions,” observed the captain, “are now greedy for the prizes that have been promised them. The greed of gain will make them more willing and persevering. The generosity of Mr. Jeorling has succeeded where our entreaties would undoubtedly have failed. I thank him for it.”

Captain Len Guy held out a hand to me, which I grasped cordially.

After some general conversation relating to our purpose, the ship’s course, and the proposed verification of the bearings of the group of islands on the west of Tsalal which is described by Arthur Pym, the captain said, —

“As it is possible that the ravages of the earthquake did not extend to this group, and that it may still be inhabited, we must be on our guard in approaching the bearings.”

“Which cannot bevery far off,” I added. “And then, captain, who knows but that your brother and his sailors might have taken refuge on one of these islands!”

This was admissible, but not a consoling eventuality, for in that case the poor fellows would have fallen into the hands of those savages of whom they were rid while they remained at Tsalal.

“Jem,” resumed Captain Len Guy, “we are making good way, and no doubt land will be signalled in a few hours. Give orders for the watch to be careful.”

“It’s done, captain.”

“There is a man in the crow’s-nest?”

“Dirk Peters himself, at his own request.” “All right, Jem; we may trust his vigilance.”

“And also his eyes,” I added, “for he is gifted with amazing sight.”

For two hours of very quick sailing not the smallest indication of the group of eight islands was visible.

“It is incomprehensible that we have not come in sight of them,” said the captain. “I reckon that the *Halbrane* has made sixty miles since this morning, and the islands in question are tolerably close together.”

“Then, captain, we must conclude — and it is not unlikely — that the group to which Tsalal belonged has entirely disappeared in the earthquake.”

“Land ahead!” cried Dirk Peters.

We looked, but could discern nothing on the sea, nor was it until a quarter of an hour had elapsed that our glasses enabled us to recognize the tops of a few scattered islets shining in the oblique rays of the sun, two or three miles to the westward.

What a change! How had it come about? Arthur Pym described spacious islands, but only a small number of tiny islets, half a dozen at most, protruded from the waters.

At this moment the half-breed came sliding down from his lofty perch and jumped to the deck.

“Well, Dirk Peters! Have you recognized the group?” asked the captain.

“The group?” replied the half-breed, shaking his head. “No, I have only seen the tops of five or six islets. There is nothing but stone heaps there — not a single island!”

As the schooner approached we easily recognized these fragments of the group, which had been almost entirely destroyed on its western side. The scattered remains formed dangerous reefs which might seriously injure the keel or the sides of the Halbrane, and there was no intention of risking the ship’s safety among them. We accordingly cast anchor at a safe distance, and a boat was lowered for the reception of Captain Len Guy, the boatswain, Dirk Peters, Holt, two men and myself. The still, transparent water, as Peters steered us skilfully between the projecting edges of the little reefs, allowed us to see, not a bed of sand strewn with shells, but heaps which were overgrown by land vegetation, tufts plants not belonging to the marine flora that floated the surface of the sea. Presently we landed on one of the larger islets which rose to about thirty feet above the sea.

“Do the tides rise sometimes to that height?” I inquired of the captain.

“Never,” he replied, “and perhaps we shall discover some remains of the vegetable kingdom, of habitations, or of an encampment.”

“The best thing we can do,” said the boatswain, “is to follow Dirk Peters, who has already distanced us. The half-breed’s lynx eyes will see what we can’t.”

Peters had indeed scaled the eminence in a moment, and we presently joined him on the top.

The islet was strewn with remains (probably of those domestic animals mentioned in Arthur Pym’s journal), but these bones differed from the bones on Tsalal Island by the fact that the heaps dated from a few months only. This then agreed with the recent period at which we placed the earthquake. Besides, plants and tufts of flowers were growing here and there.

“And these are this year’s,” I cried, “no southern winter has passed over them.”

These facts having been ascertained, no doubt could remain respecting the date of the cataclysm after the departure of Patterson. The destruction of the population of Tsalal whose bones lay about the village was not attributable to that catastrophe. William Guy and the five sailors of the *Jane* had been able to fly in time, since no bones that could be theirs had been found on the island.

Where had they taken refuge? This was the everpressing question. What answer were we to obtain? Must we conclude that having reached one of these islets they had perished in the swallowing-up of the archipelago? We debated this point, as may be supposed, at a length and with detail which I can only indicate here. Suffice it to say that a decision was arrived at to the following effect. Our sole chance of discovering the unfortunate castaways was to continue our voyage for two or three parallels farther; the goal was there, and which of us would not sacrifice even his life to attain it?

“God is guiding us, Mr. Jeorling,” said Captain Len Guy.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REVELATION.

The following day, the 29th of December, at six in the morning, the schooner set sail with a north-east wind, and this time her course was due south. The two succeeding days passed wholly without incident; neither land nor any sign of land was observed. The men on the Halbrahe took great hauls of fish, to their own satisfaction and ours. It was New Year’s Day, 1840, four months and seventeen days since I had left the Kerguelens and two months and five days since the Halbrahe had sailed from the Falklands. The half-breed, between whom and myself an odd kind of tacit understanding subsisted, approached the bench on which I was sitting — the captain was in his cabin, and West was not in sight — with a plain intention of conversing with me. The subject may easily be guessed.

“Dirk Peters,” said I, taking up the subject at once, “do you wish that we should talk of *him*?”

“Him!” he murmured.

“You have remained faithful to his memory, Dirk Peters.”

“Forget him, sir! Never!”

“He is always there — before you?”

“Always! So many dangers shared! That makes brothers! No, it makes a father and his son! Yes! And I have seen America again, but Pym — poor Pym — he is still beyond there!”

“Dirk Peters,” I asked, “have you any idea of the route which you and Arthur Pym followed in the boat after your departure from Tsalal Island?”

“None, sir! Poor Pym had no longer any instrument — you know — sea machines — for looking at the sun. We could not know, except that for the eight days the current pushed us towards the south, and the wind also. A fine breeze and a fair sea, and our shirts for a sail.”

“Yes, white linen shirts, which frightened your prisoner Nu Nu — ”

“Perhaps so — I did not notice. But if Pym has said so, Pym must be believed.”

“And during those eight days you were able to supply yourselves with food?”

“Yes, sir, and the days after — we and the savage. You know — the three turtles that were in the boat. These animals contain a store of fresh water — and their flesh is sweet, even raw. Oh, raw flesh, sir!”

He lowered his voice, and threw a furtive glance around him. It would be impossible to describe the frightful expression of the half-breed’s face as he thus recalled the terrible scenes of the *Grampus*. And it was not the expression of a cannibal of Australia or the New Hebrides, but that of a man who is pervaded by an insurmountable horror of himself.

“Was it not on the 1st of March, Dirk Peters,” I asked, “that you perceived for the first time the veil of grey vapour shot with luminous and moving rays?”

“I do not remember, sir, but if Pym says It was so, Pym must be believed.”

“Did he never speak to you of fiery rays which fell from the sky?” I did not use the term “polar aurora,” lest the half-breed should not understand it.

“Never, sir,” said Dirk Peters, after some reflection. “Did you not remark that the colour of the sea changed, grew white like milk, and that its surface became ruffled around your boat?”

“It may have been so, sir; I did not observe. The boat went on and on, and my head went with it.”

“And then, the fine powder, as fine as ashes, that fell — ”

“I don’t remember it.”

“Was it not snow?”

“Snow? Yes! No! The weather was warm. What did Pym say? Pym must be believed.” He lowered his voice and continued: “But Pym will tell you all that, sir. He knows. I do not know. He saw, and you will believe him.”

“Yes, Dirk Peters, I shall believe him.”

“We are to go in search of him, are we not?”

“I hope so.”

“After we shall have found William Guy and the sailors of the *Jane*!”

“Yes, after.”

“And even if we do not find them?”

“Yes, even in that case. I think I shall induce our captain. I think he will not refuse — ”

“No, he will not refuse to bring help to a man — a man like him g”

“And yet,” I said, “if William Guy and his people are living, can we admit that Arthur Pym — ”

“Living? Yes! Living!” cried the half-breed. “By the great spirit of my fathers, he is — he is waiting for me, my poor Pym! How joyful he will be when he clasps his old Dirk in his arms, and I — I, when I feel him, there, there.”

And the huge chest of the man heaved like a stormy sea. Then he went away, leaving me inexpressibly affected by the revelation of the tenderness for his unfortunate companion that lay deep in the heart of this semi-savage.

In the meantime I said but little to Captain Len Guy, whose whole heart and soul were set on the rescue of brother, of the possibility of our finding Arthur Gordon Pym. Time enough, if in the course of this strange enterprise of ours we succeeded in that object, to urge upon him one still more visionary.

At length, on the 7th of January — according to Dirk Peters, who had fixed it only by the time that had expired — we arrived at the place where Nu Nu the savage breathed his last, lying in the bottom of the boat. On that day an observation gave 86° 33’ for the latitude, the longitude remaining the same between the and the forty-third meridian. Here it was, according the half-breed, that the two fugitives were parted after the collision between the boat and the floating mass of ice. But a question now arose. Since the mass of ice carrying away Dirk Peters had drifted towards the north, was this because it was subjected to the action of a countercurrent?

Yes, that must have been so, for oar schooner had not felt the influence of the current which had guided her on leaving the Falklands, for fully four days. And yet, there was nothing surprising in that, for everything is variable in the austral seas. Happily, the fresh breeze from the north-east continued to blow, and the *Halbrane* made progress toward higher waters, thirteen degrees in advance upon Weddells ship and two degrees upon the fane. As for the land — islands or continent — which Captain Len Guy was seeking on the surface of that vast ocean, it did not appear. I was well aware that he was gradually losing confidence in our enterprise.

As for me, I was possessed by the desire to rescue Arthur Pym as well as the survivors of the *Jane*. And yet, how could he have survived! But then, the half-breed’s fixed idea! Supposing our captain were to give the order to go back, what would Dirk Peters do? Throw himself into the sea rather than return northwards? This it was which made me dread some act of violence on his part, when he heard the greater number of the sailors protesting against this insensate voyage, and talking of putting the ship about, especially towards Hearne, who was stealthily inciting his comrades of the Falklands to insubordination.

It was absolutely necessary not to allow discipline to decline, or discouragement to grow among the crew; so that, on the 7th of January, Captain Len Guy at my request assembled the men and addressed them in the following words: —

“Sailors of the *Halbrane*, since our departure from Tsalal Island, the schooner has gained two degrees southwards, and I now inform you, that, conformably with the engagement signed by Mr. Jeorling, four thousand dollars — that is two thousand dollars for each degree — are due to you, and will be paid at the end of the voyage.”

These words were greeted with some murmurs of satisfaction, but not with cheers, except those of Hurliguerly the boatswain, and Endicott the cook, which found no echo.

On the 13th of January a conversation took place between the boatswain and myself of a nature to justify my anxiety concerning the temper of our crew.

The men were at breakfast, with the exception of Drap and Stern. The schooner was cutting the water under a stiff breeze. I was walking between the fore and main masts, watching the great flights of birds wheeling about the ship with deafening clangour, and the petrels occasionally perching on our yards. No effort was made to catch or shoot them; it would have been useless cruelty, since their oily and stringy flesh is not eatable.

At this moment Hurliguerly approached me, looked attentively at the birds, and said, —

“I remark one thing, Mr. Jeorling.”

“What is it, boatswain?”

“That these birds do not fly so directly south as they did up to the present. Some of them are setting north.”

“I have noticed the same fact.”

“And I add, Mr. Jeorling, that those who are below there will come back without delay.”

“And you conclude from this?”

“I conclude that they feel the approach of winter.”

“Of winter?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“No, no, boatswain; the temperature is so high that the birds can’t want to get to less cold regions so prematurely.”

“Oh! prematurely, Mr. Jeorling.”

“Yes, boatswain; do we not know that navigators have always been able to frequent the Antarctic waters until the month of March?”

“Not at such a latitude. Besides, there are precocious winters as well as precocious summers. The fine season this year was full two months in advance, and it is to ba feared the bad season may come sooner than usual.”

“That is very likely,” I replied. “After all, it does not signity to us, since our campaign will certainly be over in three weeks.”

“If some obstacle does not arise beforehand, Mr. Jeorling.”

“And what obstacle?”

“For instance, a continent stretching to the south and barring our way.”

“A continent, Hurliguerly!”

“I should not be at all surprised.”

“And, in fact, there would be nothing surprising in it.”

“As for the lands seen by Dirk Peters,” said the boatswain, “where the men of the *Jane* might have landed on one or another of them, I don’t believe in them.”

“Why?”

“Because William Guy, who can only have had a small craft at his disposal, could not have got so far into these seas.”

“I do not feel quite so sure of that. Nevertheless, Mr. Jeorling — ”

“What would there be so surprising in William Guy’s being carried to land somewhere by the action of the currents? He did not remain on board his boat for eight months, I suppose. His companions and he may have been able to land on an island, or even on a continent, and that is a sufficient motive for us to pursue our search.”

“No doubt — but all are not of your opinion,” replied Hurliguerly, shaking his head.

“I know,” said I, “and that is what makes me most anxious. Is the ill-feeling increasing?”

“I fear so, Mr. Jeorling. The satisfaction of having gained several hundreds of dollars is already lessened, and the prospect of gaining a few more hundreds does not put a stop to disputes. And yet the prize is tempting! From Tsalal Island to the pole, admitting that we might get there, is six degrees. Now six degrees at two thousand dollars each makes twelve thousand dollars for thirty men, that is four hundred dollars a head A nice little sum to slip into one’s pocket on the return of the *Halbrane*; but, notwithstanding, that fellow Hearne works so wickedly upon his comrades that I believe they are ready to ‘bout ship in spite of anybody.”

“I can believe that of the recruits, boatswain, but the old crew — ”

“H — m! there are three or four of those who are beginning to reflect, and they are not easy in their minds about the prolongation of the voyage.”

“I fancy Captain Len Guy and his lieutenant will how to get themselves obeyed.”

“We shall see, Mr. Jeorling. But may it not that our captain himself will get disheartened; that the sense of his responsibility will prevail, and that he will renounce his enterprise?”

Yes! this was what I feared, and there was no remedy on that side.

“As for my friend Endicott, Mr. Jeorling, I answer for him as for myself. We would go to the end of the world — if the world has an end — did the captain want to go there. True, we two, Dirk Peters and yourself, are but a few to be a law to the others.”

“And what do you think of the half-breed?” I asked.

“Well, our men appear to accuse him chiefly of the prolongation of the voyage. You see, Mr. Jeorling, though you have a good deal to do with it, you pay, and pay well, while this crazy fellow, Dirk Peters, persists in asserting that his poor Pym is still living — his poor Pym who was drowned, or frozen, or crushed — killed, anyhow, one way or another, eleven years ago!”

So completely was this my own belief that I never discussed the subject with the half-breed.

“You see, Mr. Jeorling,” resumed the boatswain, “at the first some curiosity was felt about Dirk Peters. Then, after he saved Martin Holt, it was interest. Certainly, he was no more talkative than before, and the bear came no oftener out of his den! But now we know what he is, and no one likes him the better for that. At all events it was he who induced our captain, by talking of land to the south of Tsalal Island, to make this voyage, and it is owing to him that he has reached the eighty-sixth degree of latitude.”

“That is quite true, boatswain.”

“And so, Mr. Jeorling, I am always afraid that one of these days somebody will do Peters an ill turn.”

“Dirk Peters would defend himself, and I should pity the man who laid a finger on him.”

“Quite so. It would not be good for anybody to be in his hands, for they could bend iron! But then, all being against him, he would be forced into the hold.”

“Well, well, we have not yet come to that, I hope, and I count on you, Hurliguerly, to prevent any against Dirk Peters. Reason with your men. Make them understand that we have time to return to the Falklands before the end of the fine season. Their reproaches must not be allowed to provide the captain with an excuse for turning back before the object is attained.”

“Count on me, Mr. Jeorling, to will serve you to the best of my ability.”

“You will not repent of doing so, Hurliguerly. Nothing is easier than to add a round o to the four hundred dollars which each man is to have, if that man be something more than a sailor — even were his functions simply those of boatswain on board the *Halbrane.*”

Nothing important occurred on the 13th and 14th, but a fresh fall in the temperature took place. Captain Len Guy called my attention to this, pointing out the flocks of birds continuously flying north.

While he was speaking to me I felt that his last hopes were fading. And who could wonder? Of the land indicated by the half-breed nothing was seen, and we were already more than one hundred and eighty miles Tsalal Island. At every point of the compass was the sea, nothing but the vast sea with its desert horizon which the sun’s disk had been nearing since the 21st and would touch on the 21st March, prior to during the six months of the austral night. Honestly, was it possible to admit that William Guy and his five panions could have accomplished such a distance on a craft, and was there one chance in a hundred that the could ever be recovered?

On the 15th of January an observation most carefully taken gave 43° 13’ longitude and 88° 17’ latitude. The *Halbrane* was less than two degrees from the pole.

Captain Len Guy did not seek to conceal the result of this observation, and the sailors knew enough of nautical calculation to understand it. Besides, if the consequences had to be explained to them, were not Holt and Hardy there to do this, and Hearne, to exaggerate them to the utmost?

During the afternoon I had indubitable proof that the sealing-master had been working on the minds of the crew. The men, emerging at the foot of the mainmast, talked in whispers and cast evil glances at us. Two or three sailors made threatening gestures undisguisedly; then arose such angry mutterings that West could not to be deaf to them.

He strode forward and called out. “Silence, there! The first man who speaks will have to reckon with me!”

Captain Len Guy was shut up in his cabin, but every moment I expected to see him come out, give one last long around the waste of waters, and then order the ship’s course to be reversed. Nevertheless, on the next day the schooner was sailing in the same direction. Unfortunately — for the circumstance had some gravity — a mist was beginning to come down on us. I could not keep still, I My apprehensions were redoubled. It was that West was only awaiting the order to change the helm. What mortal anguish soever the captain’s must be, I understood too well that he would not give that order without hesitation.

For several days past I had not seen the half-breed, or, least, I had not exchanged a word with him. He was boycotted by the whole crew, with the exception of the boatswain, who was careful to address him, although rarely got a word in return. Dirk Peters took not faintest notice of this state of things. He remained completely absorbed in his own thoughts, yet, had he heard West give the word to steer north, I know not acts of violence he might have been driven. He seemed to avoid me; was this from a desire not to compromise me?

On the 17th, in the afternoon, however, Dirk Peters manifested an intention of speaking to me, and never, never, could I have imagined what I was to learn in that interview.

It was about half-past two, and, not feeling well, I gone to my cabin, where the side window was open, that at the back was closed. I heard a knock at the dom and asked who was there.

“Dirk Peters,” was the reply.

“You want to speak to me?”

“Yes.”

“I am coming out.”

“If you please — I should prefer — may I come into your cabin?”

“Come in.”

He entered, and shut the door behind him?

Without rising I signed to him to seat himself arm-chair, but he remained standing.

“What do you want of me, Dirk Peters?” I asked at length, as he seemed unable to make up his mind to speak.

“I want to tell you something — because it seems well that you should know it, and you only. In the crew — they must never know it.”

“If it is a grave matter, and you fear any indiscretion, Dirk Peters, why do you speak to me?”

“If! — I must! Ah, yes! I must! It is impossible to keep it there! It weighs on me like a stone.”

And Dirk Peters struck his breast violently.

Then he resumed:

“Yes! I am always afraid it may escape me during my sleep, and that someone will hear it, for I dream of it, and in dreaming — ”

“You dream,” I replied, “and of what?”

“Of him, of him. Therefore it is that I sleep in corners, all alone, for fear that his true name should be discovered.”

Then it struck me that the half-breed was perhaps about to respond to an inquiry which I had not yet made — why he had gone to live at the Falklands under the name of Hunt after leaving Illinois?

I put the question to him, and he replied, —

“It is not that; no, it is not that I wish — ”

“I insist, Dirk Peters, and I desire to know in the first place for what reason you did not remain in America, for what reason you chose the Falklands — ”

“For what reason, sir? Because I wanted to get near Pym, my poor Pym — because I hoped to find an opportunity at the Falklands of embarking on a whaling ship bound for the southern sea.”

“But that name of Hunt?”

“I would not bear my own name any longer — on account of the affair of the *Grampus*.”

The half-breed was alluding to the scene of the “short straw” (or lot-drawing) on board the American brig, when it was decided between Augustus Barnard, Arthur Pym, Dirk Peters, and Parker, the sailor, that one of the four should be sacrificed — as food for the three others. I remembered the obstinate resistance of Arthur Pym, and how it was impossible for him to refuse to take his the tragedy about to be performed — he says this himself — and the horrible act whose remembrance must poison the existence of all those who had survived it.

Oh, that lot-drawing! The “short straws” were little splinters of wood of uneven length which Arthur held in his hand. The shortest was to designate him who should be immolated. And he speaks of the sort of involuntary fierce desire to deceive his corn that he felt — ”to cheat” is the word he uses — but he did not “cheat,” and he asks pardon for having had the idea! Let us try to put ourselves in his place!

He made up his mind, and held out his hand, closed on the four slips. Dirk Peters drew the first. Fate favoured him. He had nothing more to fear. Arthur Pym calculated that one more chance was against him. Augustus Barnard drew in his turn. Saved, too, he! And now Arthur Pym reckoned up the exact chances Parker and himself. At that moment all the ferocity the tiger entered into his soul. He conceived an intense and devilish hatred of his poor comrade, his fellow-man.

Five minutes elapsed before Parker dared to draw. At length Arthur Pym, standing with closed eyes, not knowing whether the lot was for or against him, felt a hand seize his own. It was the hand of Dirk Peters. Arthur Pym had escaped death. And then the half-breed upon Parker and stabbed him in the back. The frightful repast followed — immediately — and words are not sufficient to convey to the mind the horror of the reality.

Yes! I knew that hideous story, not a fable, as I had long believed. This was what had happened on board the *Grampus*, on the 16th of July, 1827, and vainly did I try to understand Dirk Peters’ reason for recalling it to my recollection.

“Well, Dirk Peters,” I said, “I will ask you, since you were anxious to hide your name, what it was that induced you to reveal it, when the *Halbrane* was moored off Tsalal Island; why you did not keep to the name of Hunt?”

“Sir — understand me — there was hesitation about going farther — they wanted to turn back. This was decided, and then I thought that by telling who I was — Dirk Peters — of the *Grampus* — poor Pym’s companion — I should be heard; they would belieye with me that he was still living, they would go in search of him! And yet, it was a serious thing to do — to acknowledge that I was Dirk Peters, he who had killed Parker! But hunger, devouring hunger!”

“Come, come, Dirk Peters,” said I, “you exaggerate! If the lot had fallen to you, you would have incurred the fate of Parker. You cannot be charged with a crime.”

“Sir, would Parker’s family speak of it as you do?”

“His family! Had he then relations?”

“Yes — and that is why Pym changed his name in the narrative. Parker’s name was not Parker — it was — ”

“Arthur Pym was right,” I said, interrupting him quickly, “and as for me, I do not wish to know Parker’s real name. Keep this secret.”

“No, I will tell it to you. It weighs too heavily on me, and I shall be relieved, perhaps, when I have told you, Mr. Jeorling.”

“No, Dirk Peters, no!”

“His name was Holt — Ned Holt.”

“Holt!” I exclaimed, “the same name as our sailing-master’s.”

“Who is his own brother, sir.”

“Martin Holt?”

“Yes — understand me — his brother.”

“But he believes that Ned Holt perished in the wreck of the *Grampus* with the rest.”

“It was not so, and if he learned that I — ”

Just at that instant a violent shock flung me out of my bunk.

The schooner had made such a lurch to the port side that she was near foundering.

I heard an angry voice cry out:

“What dog is that at the helm?”

It was the voice of West, and the person he was Hearne.

I rushed out of my cabin.

“Have you let the wheel go?” repeated West, who had seized Hearne by the collar of his jersey.

“Lieutenant — I don’t know — ”

“Yes, I tell you, you have let it go. A little more and the schooner would have capsized under full sail.”

“Gratian,” cried West, calling one of the sailors, “take the helm; and you, Hearne, go down into the hold.”

On a sudden the cry of “Land!” resounded, and every eye was turned southwards.

CHAPTER XIX.

LAND?

“Land” is the only word to be found at the beginning of the nineteenth chapter of Edgar Poe’s book. I thought it would be a good idea — placing after it a note of interrogation — to put it as a heading to this portion of our narrative.

Did that word, dropped from our fore-masthead, indicate an island or a continent? And, whether a continent or an island, did not a disappointment await us? Could they be there whom we had come to seek? And Arthur Pym, who was dead, unquestionably dead, in spite of Dirk Peters’ assertions, had he ever set foot on this land?

When the welcome word resounded on board the *Jane* on the 17th January, 1828 — (a day full of incidents according to Arthur Pym’s diary) — it was succeeded by “Land on the starboard bow!” Such might have been the signal from the masthead of the *Halbrane.*

The outlines of land lightly drawn above the sky line were visible on this side.

The land announced to the sailors of the fane was the wild and barren Bennet Islet. Less than one degree south of it lay Tsalal Island, then fertile, habitable and inhabited, and on which Captain Len Guy had hoped to meet his fellow-countrymen. But what would this unknown island, five degrees farther off in the depths of the southern sea, be for our schooner? Was it the goal so ardently desired and so earnestly sought for? Were the two brothers, William and Len Guy, to meet at this place Would the *Halbrane* come there to the end of a voyage whose success would be definitely secured by the restoration of the survivors of the fane to their country?

I repeat that I was just like the half-breed. Our aim was not merely to discover the survivors, nor was success in this matter the only success we looked for. However, since land was before our eyes, we must get nearer to it first.

That cry of “Land” caused an immediate diversion of our thoughts. I no longer dwelt upon the secret Dirk Peters had just told me — and perhaps the half-breed forgot it also, for he rushed to the bow and fixed his eyes immovably on the horizon. As for West, whom nothing could divert from his duty, he repeated his commands. Gratian came to take the helm, and Hearne was shut up in the hold.

On the whole this was a just punishment, and none of the old crew protested against it, for Hearne’s inattention awkwardness had really endangered the schooner, for a short time only.

Five or six of the Falklands sailors did, however, murmur a little.

A sign from the mate silenced them, and they returned at once to their posts.

Needless to say, Captain Len Guy, upon hearing the cry of the look-out man, had tumbled up from his cabin: and eagerly examined this land at ten or twelve miles distance.

As I have said, I was no longer thinking about the secret Dirk Peters had confided to me. Besides, so long as the secret remained between us two — and neither would betray it — there would be nothing to fear. But if ever an unlucky accident were to reveal to Martin Holt that his brother's name had been changed to Parker, that the unfortunate man had not perished in the shipwreck of the *Grampus*, but had been sacrificed to save his companions from perishing of hunger; that Dirk Peters, to whom Martin Holt himself owed his life, had killed him with his own hand, what might not happen then? This was the reason why the half-breed shrank from any expression of thanks from Martin Holt — why he avoided Martin Holt, the victim's brother.

The boatswain had just struck six bells. The schooner was sailing with the caution demanded by navigation in unknown seas. There might be shoals or reefs barely hidden under the surface on which she might run aground or be wrecked. As things stood with the *Halbrane,* and even admitting that she could be floated again, an accident would have rendered her return impossible before the winter set in. We had urgent need that every chance should be in our favour and not one against us.

West had given orders to shorten sail. When the boatswain had furled the top-gallant-sail, the top-sail and royal, the *Halbrane* remained under her mainsail, her fore-sail and her jib: sufficient canvas to cover the distance that separated her from land in a few hours. Captain Len Guy immediately heaved the lead, which showed a depth of twenty fathoms. Several other soundings showed that the coast, which was very steep, was probably prolonged like a wall under the water. Nevertheless, as the bottom might happen to rise sharply instead of following the slope of the coast, we did not venture to proceed out the sounding line in hand.

The weather was still beautiful, although the sky was overcast by a mist from south-east to souih-west. Owing to this there was some difficulty in identifying the vague outlines which stood out like floating vapour in the sky, disappearing and then reappearing between the breaks of the mist.

However, we all agreed to regard this land as from twenty-five to thirty fathoms in height, at least at its highest part.

No! we would not admit that we were the victims of a delusion, and yet our uneasy minds feared that it might so!

Is it not natural, after all, for the heart to be assailed by a thousand apprehensions as we near the end of any enterprise? At this thought my mind became confused and dreamy. The *Halbrane* seemed to be reduced to the dimensions of a small boat lost in this boundless space — the contrary of that limitless sea of which Edgar Poe speaks, where, like a living body, the ship grows larger.

When we have charts, or even sailing directions instruct us concerning the hydrography of the coasts, the nature of the landfalls, the bays and the creeks, we may sail along boldly. In every other region, the master of a ship must not defer the order to cast anchor near the shore until the morrow. But, where we were, what an amount of prudence was necessary! And yet, no manifest obstacle was before us. Moreover, we had no cause to fear that the light would fail us during the sunny the night. At this season the sun did not set so soon under the western horizon, and its rays bathed the vast Antarctic zone in unabated light.

From that day forward the ship’s log recorded that the temperature fell continuously. The thermometer in the air and in the shade did not mark more than 32° (0° C.), and when plunged into water it only indicated 26° (3° 33’ C. below 0°). What could be the cause of this fall, since we were at the height of the southern summer? The crew were obliged to resume their woollen clothing, which they had left off a month previously. The schooner, however, was sailing before the wind, and these first cold blasts were less keenly felt. Yet we recognized the necessity of reaching our goal as soon as possible. To linger in this region or to expose ourselves to the danger of wintering out would be to tempt Providence!

Captain Len Guy tested the direction of the current by heavy lead lines, and discovered that it was beginning to deviate from its former course.

“Whether it is a continent,” said he, “that lies before us, or whether it is an island, we have at present no means of determining. If it be a continent, we must conclude that the current has an issue towards the south-east.”

“And it is quite possible,” I replied, “that the solid part of the Antarctic region may be reduced to a mere polar mound. In any case, it is well to note any of those observations which are likely to be accurate.”

“That is just what I am doing, Mr. Jeorling, and we shall bring back a mass of information about this portion of the southern sea which will prove useful to navigators.”

“If ever any venture to come so far south, captain! We have penetrated so far, thanks to the help of particular circumstances, the earliness of the summer season, an abnormal temperature and a rapid thaw. Such conditions may only occur once in twenty or fifty years!”

“Wherefore, Mr. Jeorling, I thank Providence for this, and hope revives in me to some extent. As the weather has been constantly fine, what is there to make it impossible for my brother and my fellow-countrymen to have landed on this coast, whither the wind and the tide bore them? What our schooner has done, their boat may have done! They surely did not start on a voyage which might prolonged to an indefinite time without a proper supply of provisions! Why should they not have found the resources as those afforded to them by the island of Tsalal during many long years? They had ammunition and arms elsewhere. Fish abound in these waters, water-fowl also. Oh yes! my heart is full of hope, and I wish I were a few hours older!"

Without being quite so sanguine as Len Guy, I was glad to see he had regained his hopeful mood. Perhaps, if his investigations were successful, I might be able to have them continued in Arthur Pym's interest — even into the heart of this strange land which we were approaching.

The *Halbrane* was going along slowly on these clear waters, which swarmed with fish belonging to the same species as we had already met. The sea-birds were more numerous, and were evidently not frightened; for they kept flying round the mast, or perching in the yards. Several whitish ropes about five or six feet long were brought on board. They were chaplets formed of millions of shell-fish.

Whales, spouting jets of feathery water from their blow-holes, appeared at a distance, and I remarked that all them took a southerly direction. There was therefore reason to believe that the sea extended far and wide in that direction.

The schooner covered two or three miles of her course without any increase of speed. This coast evidently Stretched from north-west to south-east. Nevertheless, the telescopes revealed no distinctive features — even after three hours' navigation.

The crew, gathered together on the forecastle, were looking on without revealing their impressions. West, after going aloft to the fore-cross-trees, where he had remained ten minutes, had reported nothing precise. Stationed at the port side, leaning my elbows on the bulwarks, I closely watched the sky line, broken only towards the east.

At this moment the boatswain rejoined me, and without preface said:

“Will you allow me to give you my opinion, Mr. Jeorling?”

“Give it, boatswain,” I replied, “at the risk of my not adopting it if I don’t agree with it.”

“It is correct, and according as we get nearer one must really be blind not to adopt it!”

“And what idea have you got?”

“That it is not land which lies before us, Mr. Jeorling!”

“What is it you are saying?”

“Look attentively, putting one finger before your eyes — look there — out a — starboard.”

I did as Hurliguerly directed.

“Do you see?” he began again. “May I lose my liking for my grog if these heights do not change place, not with regard to the schooner, but with regard to themselves!”

“And what do you conclude from this?”

“That they are moving icebergs.”

“Icebergs?”

“Sure enough, Mr. Jeorling.”

Was not the boatswain mistaken? Were we in for a disappointment? Were there only drifting ice-mountains in the distance instead of a shore?

Presently, there was no doubt on the subject; for some time past the crew had no longer believed existence of land in that direction.

Ten minutes afterwards, the man in the crow’s-nest announced that several icebergs were coming north-west, in an oblique direction, into the course of the *Halbrane.*

This news produced a great sensation on board. Our last hope was suddenly extinguished. And what a blow to Captain Len Guy! We should have to seek land of the austral zone under higher latitudes without being sure of ever coming across it!

And then the cry, “Back ship! back ship!” sounded almost unanimously on board the *Halbrane*.

Yes, indeed, the recruits from the Falklands demanding that we should turn back, although Hearne was not there to fan the flame of insubordination, and I must acknowledge that the greater part of the old tars seemed to agree with them.

West awaited his chief’s orders, not daring to impose silence.

Gratian was at the helm, ready to give a turn to wheel, whilst his comrades with their hands on the cleats were preparing to ease off the sheets.

Dirk Peters remained immovable, leaning against the fore-mast, his head down, his body bent, and his mouth set firm. Not a word passed his lips.

But now he turned towards me, and what a look of mingled wrath and entreaty he gave me!

I don’t know what irresistible motive induced me to interfere personally, and once again to protest! A final argument had just crossed my mind — an argument whose weight could not be disputed.

So I began to speak, and I did so with such conviction that none tried to interrupt me.

The substance of what I said was as follows: —

“No! all hope must not be abandoned. Land cannot be far off. The icebergs which are formed in the open sea by the accumulation of ice are not before us. These icebergs must have broken off from the solid base of a continent or an island. Now, since the thaw begins at this season of the year, the drift will last for only a short time. Behind them we must meet the coast on which they were formed. In another twenty-four hours, or forty-eight at the most, if the land does not appear, Captain Len Guy will steer to the north again!”

Had I convinced the crew, or ought I to take advantage of Hearne’s absence and of the fact that he could not communicate with them to make them understand that they were being deccived, and to repeat to them that it would endanger the schooner if our course were now to be reversed.

The boatswain came to my help, and in a good-humoured voice exclaimed, —

"Very well reasoned, and for my part I accept Mr. Jeorling's opinion. Assuredly, land is near! If we seek it beyond those icebergs, we shall discover it without much hard work, or great danger! What is one degree farther south, when it is a question of putting a hundred additional dollars into one's pocket? And let us not forget that if they are acceptable when they go in, they are none the less so when they come out!"

Upon this, Endicott, the cook, came to the aid of his friend the boatswain.

"Yes, very good things indeed are dollars!" cried he, showing two rows of shining white teeth.

Did the crew intend to yield to Hurliguerly's argument, or would they try to resist if the *Halbrane* went on in the direction of the icebergs?

Captain Len Guy took up his telescope again, and turned it upon these moving masses; he observed them with much attention, and cried out in a loud voice, —

"Steer south-sou'-west!"

West gave orders to execute the manoeuvres. The sailors hesitated an instant. Then, recalled to obedience, they began to brace the yards and slack the sheets, and the schooner increased her speed.

When the operation was over, I went up to Hurliguerly, and drawing him aside, I said, —

"Thank you, boatswain."

"Ah, Mr. Jeorling," he replied, shaking his head, "it is all very fine for this time, but you must not do it again! Everyone would turn against me, even

Endicott, perhaps.”

“I have urged nothing which is not at least probable,” I answered sharply.

“I don’t deny that fact, Mr. Jeorling.”

“Yes, Hurliguerly, yes — I believe what I have said, and I have no doubt but that we shall really see the land beyond the icebergs.”

“Just possible, Mr. Jeoding, quite possible. But it must appear before two days, or, on the word of a boatswain, nothing can prevent us from putting about!”

During the next twenty-four hours the *Halbrane* took a south-south-westerlycourse. Nevertheless, her direction must have been frequently changed and her speed decreased in avoiding the ice. The navigation became very difficult so soon as the schooner headed towards the line of the bergs, which it had to cut obliquely. However, there were none of the packs which blocked up all access to the iceberg on the 67th parallel. The enormous heaps were melting away with majestic slowness. The ice-blocks appeared “quite new” (to employ a perfectly accurate expression), and perhaps they had only been formed some days. However, with a height of one hundred and fifty feet, their bulk must have been calculated by millions of tons. West was watching closely in order to avoid collisions, and did not leave the deck even for an instant.

Until now, Captain Len Guy had always been able to rely upon the indications of the compass. The magnetic pole, still hundreds of miles off, had no influence on the compass, its direction bcing east. The needle remained steady, and might be trusted.

So, in spite of my conviction, founded, however, on very serious arguments, there was no sign of land, and I was wondering whether it would not be better to steer more to the west, at the risk of removing the *Halbrane* from that extreme point where the meridians of the globe cross each other.

Thus, as the hours went by — and I was only allowed forty-eight — it was only too plain that lack of courage prevailed, and that everyone was inclined to be insubordinate.

After another day and a half, I could no longer contend with the general discontent. The schooner must ultimately retrace her course towards the north.

The crew were working in silence, whilst West was giving sharp short orders for manoeuvring through the channels, sometimes luffing in order to avoid a collision, now bearing away almost square before the wind. Nevertheless, in spite of a close watch, in spite of the skill of the sailors, in spite of the prompt execution of the manoeuvres, dangerous friction against the hull, which left long traces of the ridge of the icebergs, occurred. And, in truth, the bravest could not repress a feeling of terror when thinking that the planking might have given way and the sea have invaded us.

The base of these floating ice-mountains was very steep, so that it would have been impossible for us to land upon one. Moreover, we saw no seals — these were usually very numerous where the ice-fields abounded — nor even a flock of the screeching penguins which, on other occasions, the *Halbrane* sent diving by myriads as she passed through them; the birds themselves seemed rarer and wilder. Dread, from which none of us could escape, seemed to come upon us from these desolate and deserted regions. How could we still entertain a hope that the survivors of the *Jane* had found shelter, and obtained means of existence in those awful solitudes?

And if the Halbrahe were also shipwrecked, would there remain any evidence of her fate?

Since the previous day, from the moment our southern course had been abandoned, to cut the line of the icebergs, a change had taken place in the demeanour of the half-breed. Nearly always crouched down at the foot of the fore-mast, looking afar into the boundless space, he only got up in order to lend a hand to some manoeuvre, and without any of his former vigilance or zeal. Not that he had ceased to believe that his comrade of the *Jane* was still living — that thought never even came into his mind! But he felt by instinct that the traces of poor Pym were not to be recovered by following this course.

“Sir,” he would have said to me, “this is not the way! No, this is not the way!” And how could I have answered him?

Towards seven o’clock in the evening a rather thick mist arose; this would tend to make the navigation of the schooner difficult and dangerous.

The day, with its emotions of anxiety and alternatives, had worn me out. So I returned to my cabin, where I threw myself on my bunk in my clothes.

But sleep did not come to me, owing to my besetting thoughts. I willingly admit that the constant reading of Edgar Poe’s works, and reading them in this place in which his heroes delighted, had exercised an influence on me which I did not fully recognize.

To-morrow, the forty-eight hours would be up, the last concession which the crew had made to my entreaties.

“Things are not going as you wish?” the boatswain said to me just as I was leaving the deck.

No, certainly not, since land was not to be seen behind the fleet of icebergs. If no sign of a coast appeared between these moving masses, Captain Len Guy would steer north to-morrow.

Ah! were I only master of the schooner! If I could have bought it even at the price of all my fortune, if these men had been my slaves to drive by the lash, the *Halbrane* should never have given up this voyage, even if it led her so far as the point above which flames the Southern Cross.

My mind was quite upset, and teemed with a thousand thoughts, a thousand regrets, a thousand desires! I wanted to get up, but a heavy hand held me down in my bunk! And I longed to leave this cabin where I was struggling against nightmare in my half-sleep, to launch one of the boats of the *Halbrane,* to jump into it with Dirk Peters, who would not hesitate about following me, and so abandon both of us to the current running south.

And lo! I was doing this in a dream. It is to-morrow! Captain Len Guy has given orders to reverse our course, after a last glance at the horizon. One of the boats is in tow. I warn the half-breed. We creep along without being seen. We cut the painter. Whilst the schooner sails on ahead, we stay astern and the current carries us off.

Thus we drift on the sea without hindrance! At length our boat stops. Land is there. I see a sort of sphinx surmounting the southern peak — the sea-sphinx. I go to him. I question him. He discloses the secrets of these mysterious regions to me. And then, the phenomena whose reality Arthur Pym asserted appear around the mythic monster. The curtain of flickering vapours, striped with luminous rays, is rent asunder. And it is not a face of superhuman grandeur which arises before my astonished eyes: it is Arthur Pym, fierce guardian of the south pole, flaunting the ensign of the United States in those high latitudes!

Was this dream suddenly interrupted, or was it changed by a freak of my brain? I cannot tell, but I felt as though I had been suddenly awakened. It seemed as though a change had taken place in the motion of the schooner, which was sliding along on the surface of the quiet sea, with a slight list to starboard. And yet, there was neither rolling nor pitching. Yes, I felt myself carried off as though my bunk were the car of an air-balloon. I was not mistaken, and I had fallen from dreamland into reality.

Crash succeeded crash overhead. I could not account for them. Inside my cabin the partitions deviated from the vertical in such a way as to make one believe that the *Halbrane* had fallen over on her beam ends. Almost immediately, I was thrown out of my bunk and barely escaped splitting my skull against the corner of the table. However, I got up again, and, clinging on to the edge of the door frame, I propped myself against the door.

At this instant the bulwarks began to crack and the port side of the ship was torn open.

Could there have been a collision between the schooner and one of those gigantic floating masses which West was unable to avoid in the mist?

Suddenly loud shouts came from the after-deck, and then screams of terror, in which the maddened voices of the crew joined.

At length there came a final crash, and the *Halbrane* remained motionless.

I had to crawl along the floor to reach the door and gain the deck. Captain Len Guy having already left his cabin, dragged himself on his knees, so great was the list to port, and caught on as best he could.

In the fore part of the ship, between the forecastle and the fore-mast, many heads appeared.

Dirk Peters, Hardy, Martin Holt and Endicott, the latter with his black face quite vacant, were clinging to the starboard shrouds.

A man came creeping up to me, because the slope of the deck prevented him from holding himself upright: it was Hurliguerly, working himself along with his hands like a top-man on a yard.

Stretched out at full length, my feet propped up against the jamb of the door, I held out my hand to the boatswain, and helped him, not without difficulty, to hoist himself up near me.

“What is wrong?” I asked. “A stranding, Mr. Jeorling.”

“We are ashore!”

“A shore presupposes land,” replied the boatswain ironically, “and so far as land goes there was never any except in that rascal Dirk Peters’ imagination.”

“But tell me — what has happened?”

“We came upon an iceberg in the middle of the fog, and were unable to keep clear of it.”

“An iceberg, boatswain?”

"Yes, an iceberg, which has chosen just now to turn head over heels. In turning, it struck the *Halbrane* and carried it off just as a battledore catches a shuttlecock, and now here we are, stranded at certainly one hundred feet above the level of the Antarctic Sea."

Could one have imagined a more terrible conclusion to the adventurous voyage of the *Halbrane?*

In the middle of these remote regions our only means of transport had just been snatched from its natural element, and carried off by the turn of an iceberg to a height of more than one hundred feet! What a conclusion! To be swallowed up in a polar tempest, to be destroyed in a fight with savages, to be crushed in the ice, such are the dangers to which any ship engaged in the polar seas is exposed! But to think that the *Halbrane* had been lifted by a floating mountain just as that mountain was turning over, was stranded and almost at its summit — no! such a thing seemed quite impossible.

I did not know whether we could succeed in letting down the schooner from this height with the means we had at our disposal. But I did know that Captain Len Guy, the mate and the older members of the crew, when they had recovered from their first fright, would not give up in despair, no matter how terrible the situation might be; of that I had no doubt whatsoever! They would all look to the general safety; as for the measures to be taken, no one yet knew anything. A foggy veil, a sort of greyish mist still hung over the iceberg. Nothing could be seen of its enormous mass except the narrow craggy cleft in which the schooner was wedged, nor even what place it occupied in the middle of the ice-fleet drifting towards the south-east.

Common prudence demanded that we should quit the *Halbrane,* which might slide down at a sharp shake ot the iceberg. Were we even certain that the latter had regained its position on the surface of the sea? Was her stability secure? Should we not be on the look-out for a fresh upheaval? And if the schooner were to fall into the abyss, which of us could extricate himself safe and sound from such a fall, and then from the final plunge into the depths of the ocean?

In a few minutes the crew had abandoned the *Halbrane*. Each man sought for refuge on the ice-slopes, awaiting the time when the iceberg should be freed from mist. The oblique rays from the sun did not succeed in piercing it, and the red disk could hardly be perceived through the opaque mass.

However, we could distinguish each other at about twelve feet apart. As for the *Halbrane*, she looked like a confused blackish mass standing out sharply against the whiteness of the ice.

We had now to ascertain whether any of those who were on the deck at the time of the catastrophe had been thrown over the bulwarks and precipitated, into the sea?

By Captain Len Guy's orders all the sailors then present joined the group in which I stood with the mate, the boatswain, Hardy and Martin Holt.

So far, this catastrophe had cost us five men — these were the first since our departure from Kerguelen, but were they to be the last?

There was no doubt that these unfortunate fellows had perished, because we called them in vain, and in vain we sought for them, when the fog abated, along the sides of the iceberg, at every place where they might have been able to catch on to a projection.

When the disappearance of the five men had been ascertained, we fell into despair. Then we felt more keenly than before the dangers which threaten every expedition to the Antarctic zone.

“What about Hearne?” said a voice.

Martin Holt pronounced the name at a moment when there was general silence. Had the sealing-master been crushed to death in the narrow part of the hold where he was shut up?

West rushed towards the schooner, hoisted himself on board by means of a rope hanging over the bows, and gained the hatch which gives access to that part of the hold.

We waited silent and motionless to learn the fate of Hearne, although the evil spirit of the crew was but little worthy of our pity.

And yet, how many of us were then thinking that if we had heeded his advice, and if the schooner had taken the northern course, a whole crew would not have been reduced to take refuge on a drifting ice-mountain! I scarcely dared to calculate my own share of the vast responsibility, I who had so vehemently insisted on the prolongation of the voyage.

At length the mate reappeared on deck and Hearne followed him! By a miracle, neither the bulkheads, nor the ribs, nor the planking had yielded at the place where the sealing-master was confined.

Hearne rejoined his comrades without opening his lips, and we had no further trouble about him.

Towards six o’clock in the morning the fog cleared off, owing to a marked fall in the temperature. We had no longer to do with completely frozen vapour, but had to deal with the phenomenon called frost-rime, which often occurs in these high latitudes. Captain Len Guy recognized it by the quantity of prismatic threads, the point following the wind which roughened the light ice-crust deposited on the sides ot the iceberg. Navigators know better than to confound this frost-rime with the hoar frost of the temperate zones, which only freezes when it has been deposited on the surface of the soil.

We were now enabled to estimate the size of the solid mass on which we clustered like flies on a sugar-loaf, and the schooner, seen from below, looked no bigger than the yawl of a trading vessel.

This iceberg of between three and four hundred fathoms in circumference measured from 130 to 140 feet high. According to all calculations, therefore, its depth would be four or five times greater, and it would consequently weigh millions of tons.

This is what had happened:

The iceberg, having been melted away at its base by contact with warmer waters, had risen little by little; its centre of gravity had become displaced, and its equilibrium could only be re-established by a sudden capsize, which had lifted up the part that had been underneath above the sea-level. The *Halbrane*, caught in this movement, was hoisted as by an enormous lever. Numbers of icebergs capsize thus on the polar seas, and form one of the greatest dangers to which approaching vessels are exposed.

Our schooner was caught in a hollow on the west side of the iceberg. She listed to starboard with her stern raised and her bow lowered. We could not help thinking that the slightest shake would cause her to slide along the slope of the iceberg into the sea. The collision had been so violent as to stave in some of the planks of her hull. After the first collision, the galley situated before the fore-mast had broken its fastenings. The door between

Captain Len Guy's and the mate's cabins was torn away from the hinges. The topmast and the topgallant-mast had come down after the back-stays parted, and fresh fractures could plainly be seen as high as the cap of the masthead.

Fragments of all kinds, yards, spars, a part of the sails, breakers, cases, hen-coops, were probably floating at the foot of the mass and drifting with it.

The most alarming part of our situation was the fact that of the two boats belonging to the *Halbrane*, one had been stove in when we grounded, and the other, the larger of the two, was still hanging on by its tackles to the starboard davits. Before anything else was done this boat had to be put in a safe place, because it might prove our only means of escape.

As a result of the first examination, we found that the lower masts had remained in their places, and might be of use if ever we succeeded in releasing the schooner. But how were we to release her from her bed in the ice and restore her to her natural element?

When I found myself with Captain Len Guy, the mate, and the boatswain, I questioned them on this subject.

"I agree with you," replied West, "that the operation involves great risks, but since it is indispensable, we will accomplish it. I think it will be necessary to dig out a sort of slide down to the base of the iceberg."

"And without the delay of a single day," added Captain Len Guy.

"Do you hear, boatswain?" said Jem West.

"Work begins to-day."

“I hear, and everyone will set himself to the task,” replied Hurliguerly. “If you allow me, I shall just make one observation, captain.”

“What is it?”

“Before beginning the work, let us examine the hull and see what the damage is, and whether it can be repaired. For what use would it be to launch a ship stripped of her planks, which would go to the bottom at once?”

We complied with the boatswain’s just demand.

The fog having cleared off, a bright sun then illumined the eastern side of the iceberg, whence the sea was visible round a large part of the horizon. Here the sides of the iceberg showed rugged projections, ledges, shoulders, and even flat instead of smooth surfaces, giving no foothold. However, caution would be necessary in order to avoid the falling of those unbalanced blocks, which a single shock might set loose. And, as a matter of fact, during the morning, several of these blocks did roll into the sea with a frightful noise just like an avalanche.

On the whole, the iceberg seemed to be very steady on its new base. So long as the centre of gravity was below the level of the water-line, there was no fear of a fresh capsize.

I had not yet had an opportunity of speaking to Dirk Peters since the catastrophe. As he had answered to his name, I knew he was not numbered among the victims. At this moment, I perceived him standing on a narrow projection; needless to specify the direction in which his eyes were turned.

Captain Len Guy, the mate, the boatswain, Hardy, and Martin Holt, whom I accompanied, went up again towards the schooner in order to make a minute investigation of the hull. On the starboard side the operation would be easy enough, because the *Halbrane* had a list to the opposite side. On the port side we would have to slide along to the keel as well as we could by scooping out the ice, in order to insure the inspection of every part of the planking.

After an examination which lasted two hours, it was discovered that the damage was of little importance, and could be repaired in a short time. Two or three planks only were wrenched away by the collision. In the inside the skin was intact, the ribs not having given way. Our vessel, constructed for the polar seas, had resisted where many others less solidly built would have been dashed to pieces. The rudder had indeed been unshipped, but that could easily be set right.

Having finished our inspection inside and outside, we agreed that the damage was less considerable than we feared, and on that subject we became reassured. Reassured! Yes, if we could only succeed in getting the schooner afloat again.

CHAPTER XX,

“UNMERCIFUL DISASTER”

In the morning, after breakfast, it was decided that the men should begin to dig a sloping bed which would allow the *Halbrane* to slide to the foot of the iceberg. Would that Heaven might grant success to the operation, for who could contemplate without terror having to brave the severity of the austral winter, and to pass six months under such conditions as ours on a vast iceberg, dragged none could tell whither? Once the winter had set in, none of us could have escaped from that most terrible of fates — dying of cold.

At this moment, Dirk Peters, who was observing the horizon from south to east at about one hundred paces off, cried out in a rough voice: “Lying to!”

Lying to? What could the half-breed mean by that, except that the floating mass had suddenly ceased to drift? As for the cause of this stoppage, it was neither the moment to investigate it, nor to ask ourselves what the consequences were likely to be.

“It is true, however,” cried the boatswain. “The iceberg is not stirring, and perhaps has not stirred since it capsized!”

“How?” said I, “it no longer changes its place?”

“No,” replied the mate, “and the proof is that the others, drifting on, are leaving it behind!”

And, in fact, whilst five or six icebergs were descending towards the south, ours was as motionless as though it had been stranded on a shoal.

The simplest explanation was that the new base had encountered ground at the bottom of the sea to which it now adhered, and would continue to adhere, unless the submerged part rose in the water so as to cause a second capsize.

This complicated matters seriously, because the dangers of positive immobility were such that the chances of drifting were preferable. At least, in the latter case there was some hope of coming across a continent or an island, or even (if the currents did not change) of crossing the boundaries of the austral region.

Here we were, then, after three months of this terrible voyage! Was there now any question of trying to save William Guy, his comrades on the lane, and Arthur Pym? Was it not for our own safety that any means at our disposal should be employed? And could it be wondered at were the sailors of the *Halbrane* to rebel, were they to listen to Hearne's suggestions, and make their officers, or myself especially, responsible for the disasters of this expedition?

Moreover, what was likely to take place, since, notwithstanding their losses, the followers of the sealing-master were still a majority of the ship's company?

This question I could clearly see was occupying the thoughts of Captain Len Guy and West.

Again, although the recruits from the Falklands formed only a total of fourteen men, as against the twelve of the old crew, was it not to be feared that some of the latter would take Hearne's side? What if Hearne's people, urged by despair, were already thinking of seizing the only boat we now possessed, setting off towards the north, and leaving us on this iceberg? It was, then, of great importance that our boat should be put in safety and closely watched.

A marked change had taken place in Captain Len Guy since the recent occurrences. He seemed to be transformed upon finding himself face to face with the dangers which menaced us. Up to that time he had been solely occupied in searching for his fellow-countrymen; he had handed over the command of the schooner to West, and he could not have given it to anyone more zealous and more capable. But from this date he resumed his position as master of the ship, and used it with the energy required by the circumstances; in a word, he again became sole master on board, after God.

At his command the crew were drawn up around him on a flat spot a little to the left of the *Halbrane*. In that place the following were assembled: — on the seniors' side: Martin Holt and Hardy, Rogers, Francis, Gratian, Bury, Stern, the cook (Endicott), and I may add Dirk Peters; on the side of the new-comers, Hearne and the thirteen other Falkland sailors. The latter composed a distinct group; the sealing-master was their spokesman and exercised a baneful influence over them.

Captain Len Guy cast a stern glance upon the men and said in a sharp tone:

"Sailors of the *Halbrane*, I must first speak to you of our lost companions. Five of us have just perished in this catastrophe."

"We are waiting to perish in our turn, in these seas, where we have been dragged in spite of — "

"Be silent, Hearne," cried West, pale with anger, "or if not — "

“Hearne has said what he had to say,” Captain Len Guy continued, coldly. “Now it is said, and I advise him not to interrupt me a second time!”

The sealing-master might possibly have ventured on an answer, for he felt that he was backed by the majority of the crew; but Martin Holt held him back, and he was silent.

Captain Len Guy then took off his hat and pronounced the following words with an emotion that affected us to the bottom of our hearts: —

“We must pray for those who have died in this dangerous voyage, which was undertaken in the name of humanity. May God be pleased to take into consideration the fact that they devoted their lives to their fellow-creatures, and may He not be insensible to our prayers! Kneel down, sailors of the *Halbrane*!”

They all knelt down on the icy surface, and the murmurs of prayer ascended towards heaven.

We waited for Captain Len Guy to rise before we did so.

“Now,” he resumed, “after those who are dead come those who have survived. To them I say that they must obey me, whatever my orders may be, and even in our present situation I shall not tolerate any hesitation or opposition. The responsibility for the general safety is mine, and I will not yield any of it to anyone. I am master here, as on board — ”

“On board — when there is no longer a ship,” muttered the sealing-master.

“You are mistaken, Hearne, the vessel is there, and we will put it back into the sea. Besides, if we had only a boat, I am the captain of it. Let him beware who forgets this!”

That day, Captain Len Guy, having taken the height of the sun by the sextant and fixed the hour by the chronometer (both of these instruments had escaped destruction in the collision), obtained the following position of his ship: —

South latitude: 88° 55’.

West longitude: 39° 12’.

The Halbrane was only at 1° 5’ — about 65 miles — from the south pole.

“All hands to work,” was the captain’s order that afternoon, and every one obeyed it with a will. There was not a moment to lose, as the question of time was more important than any other. So far as provisions were concerned, there was enough in the schooner for eighteen months on full rations, so we were not threatened with hunger, nor with thirst either, notwithstanding that owing to the water-casks having been burst in the collision, their contents had escaped through their staves. Luckily, the barrels of gin, whisky, beer, and wine, being placed in the least exposed part of the hold, were nearly all intact. Under this head we had experienced no loss, and the iceberg would supply us with good drinking-water. It is a well-known fact that ice, whether formed from fresh or salt water, contains no salt, owing to the chloride of sodium being eliminated in the change from the liquid to the solid state. The origin of the ice, therefore, is a matter of no importance. However, those blocks which are easily distinguished by their greenish colour and their perfect transparency are preferable. They are solidified rain, and therefore much more suitable for drinklng-water.

Without doubt, our captain would have recognized any blocks of this description, but none were to be found on the glacier, owing to its being that part of the berg which was originally submerged, and came to the top after the fall.

The captain and West decided first to lighten the vessel, by conveying everything on board to land. The masts were to be cleared of rigging, taken out, and placed on the plateau. It was necessary to lighten the vessel as much as possible, even to clear out the ballast, owing to the difficult and dangerous operation of launching. It would be better to put off our departure for some days if this operation could be performed under more favourable circumstances. The loading might be afterwards accomplished without much difficulty.

Besides this, another reason by no means less serious presented itself to us. It would have been an act of unpardonable rashness to leave the provisions in the storeroom of the *Halbrane*, her situation on the side of the iceberg being very precarious. One shake would suffice to detach the ship, and with her would have disappeared the supplies on which our lives depended.

On this account, we passed the day in removing casks of half-salted meat, dried vegetables, flour, biscuits, tea, coffee, barrels of gin, whisky, wine and beer from the hold and store-room and placing them in safety in the hammocks near the *Halbrane.*

We also had to insure our landing against any possible accident, and, I must add, against any plot on the part of Hearne and others to seize the boat in order to return to the ice-barrier.

We placed the long boat in a cavity which would be easy to watch, about thirty feet to the left of the schooner, along with its oars, rudder, compass, anchor, masts and sail.

By day there was nothing to fear, and at night, or rather during the hours of sleep, the boatswain and one of the superiors would keep guard near the cavity, and we might rest assured that no evil could befall.

The 19th, 20th, and 21st of January were passed in working extra hard in the unshipping of the cargo and the dismantling of the *Halbrane*. We slung the lower masts by means of yards forming props. Later on, West would see to replacing the main and mizzen masts; in any case, we could do without them until we had reached the Falklands or some other winter port.

Needless to say, we had set up a camp on the plateau of which I have spoken, not far from the *Halbrane*. Sufficient shelter against the inclemency of the weather, not unfrequent at this time of the year, was to be found under tents, constructed of sails placed on spars and fastened down by pegs. The glass remained set fair; the wind was nor'-east, the temperature having risen to 46 degrees (2° 78' C.).

Endicott's kitchen was fitted up at the end of the plain, near a steep projection by which we could climb to the very top of the berg.

It is only fair to state that during these three days of hard work no fault was to be found with Hearne. The sealing-master knew he was being closely watched, and he was well aware that Captain Len Guy would not spare him if he tried to get up insubordination amongst his comrades. It was a pity that his bad instincts had induced him to play such a part, for his strength, skill, and cleverness made him a very valuable man, and he had never proved more useful than under these circumstances.

Was he changed for the better? Did he understand that general good feeling was necessary for the safety of all? I know not, but I had no confidence in him, neither had Hurliguerly!

I need not dwell on the ardour with which the half-breed did the rough work, always first to begin and the last to leave off, doing as much as four men, and scarcely sleeping, only resting during meals, which he took apart from the others. He had hardly spoken to me at all since the schooner had met with this terrible accident.

What indeed could he say to me? Did I not know as well as he that it would be necessary to renounce every hope of pursuing our intended voyage?

Now and again I noticed Martin Holt and the halfbreed near each other while some difficult piece of work wasin progress. Our sailing-masterdid not miss a chance of getting near Dirk Peters, who always tried his best to escape from him, for reasons well known to me. And whenever I thought of the secret of the fate of the so-called Parker, Martin Holt's brother, which had been entrusted to me, that dreadful scene of the *Grampus* filled me with horror. I was certain that if this secret were made known the half-breed would become an object of terror. He would no longer be looked upon as the rescuerof the sailingmaster; and the latter, learning that his brother — Luckily, Dirk Peters and myself were the only two acquainted with the fact.

While the *Halbrane* was being unloaded, Captain Len Guy and the mate were considering how the vessel might be launched. They had to allow for a drop of one hundred feet between the cavity in which the ship lay and the sea; this to be effected by means of an inclined bed hollowed in an oblique line along the west side of the iceberg, and to measure two or three hundred perches in length. So, while the first lot of men, commanded by the boatswain, was unloading the schooner, a second batch under West's orders began to cut the trench between the blocks which covered the side of the floating mountain.

Floating? I know not why I use this expression, for the iceberg no longer floated, but remained as motionless as an island. There was nothing to indicate that it would ever move again. Other icebergs drifted along and passed us, going south-east, whilst ours, to use Dirk Peters' expression, was "lying to." Would its base be sufficiently undermined to allow it to detach itself? Perhaps some heavy mass of ice might strike it and set it free by the shock. No one could predict such an event, and we had only the *Halbrane* to rely upon for getting us out of these regions.

We were engaged in these various tasks until the 24th of January. The atmosphere was clear, the temperature was even, and the thermometer had indeed gone up to two or three degrees above freezing-point. The number of icebergs coming from the nor'-west was therefore increasing; there were now a hundred of them, and a collision with any of these might have a most disastrous result. Hardy, the caulker, hastened first of all to mend the hull; pegs had to be changed, bits of planking to be replaced, seams to be caulked. We had everything that was necessary for this work, and we might rest assured that it would be performed in the best possible manner. In the midst of the silence of these solitudes, the noise of the hammers striking nails into the side, and the sound of the mallet stuffing tow into the seams, had a startling effect. Sea-gulls, wild duck, albatross, and petrels flew in a circle round the top of the berg with a shrill screaming, and made a terrible uproar.

When I found myself with West and the captain, our conversation naturally turned on our situation and how to get out of it, and upon our chances of pulling through. The mate had good hopes that if no accident occurred the launching would be successfullyaccomplished. The captain was more reserved on the subject, but at the thought that he would have to renounce all hope of finding the survivors of the fane, his heart was ready to break.

When the *Halbrane* should again be ready for the sea, and when West should inquire what course he was to steer, would Captain Len Guy dare to reply, “To the south”? No! for he would not be followed either by the new hands, or by the greater portion of the older members of the crew. To continue our search in this direction, to go beyond the pole, without being certain of reaching the Indian Ocean instead of the Atlantic, would have been rashness of which no navigator would be guilty. If a continent bound the sea on this side, the schooner would run the danger of being crushed by the mass of ice before it could escape the southern winter.

Under such circumstances, to attempt to persuade Captain Len Guy to pursue the voyage would only be to court a certain refusal. It could not even be proposed, now that necessity obliged us to return northwards, and not to delay a single day in this portion of the Antarctic regions. At any rate, though I resolved not again to speak of the matter to the captain, I lost no opportunity of sounding the boatswain. Often when he had finished his work, Hurliguerly would come and join me; we would chat, and we would compare our recollections of travel.

One day as we were seated on the summit of the iceberg, gazing fixedly on the deceptive horizon, he exclaimed, —

“Who could ever have imagined, Mr. Jeorling, when the *Halbrane* left Kerguelen, that six and a half months afterwards she would be stuck on the side of an icemountain?”

“A fact much more to be regretted,” I replied, “because only for that accident we should have attained our object, and we should have begun our return journey.”

“I don’t mean to contradict,” replied the boatswain, “but you say we should have attained our object, Do you mean by that, that we should have found our countrymen?”

“Perhaps.”

“I can scarcely believe such would have been the case, Mr. Jeorling, although this was the principal and perhaps even the only object of our navigation in the polarseas.”

“The only one — yes — at the start,” I insinuated. “But since the half-breed’s revelations about Arthur Pym — ”

“Ah! You are always harking back on that subject, like brave Dirk Peters.”

“Always, Hurliguerly; and only that a deplorable and unforeseen accident made us run aground — ”

“I leave you to your delusions, Mr. Jeorling, since you believe you have run aground — ”

“Why? Is not this the case?”

“In any case it is a wonderful running aground,” replied the boatswain. “Instead of a good solid bottom, we have run aground in the air.”

“Then I am right, Hurliguerly, in saying it is an unfortunate adventure.”

“Unfortunate, truly, but in my opinion we should take warning by it.”

“What warning?”

“That it is not permitted to us to venture so farin these latitudes, and I believe that the Creator forbids His creatures to climb to the summit of the poles.”

“Notwithstanding that the summit of one pole is only sixty miles away from us now.”

“Granted, Mr. Jeorling, but these sixty miles are equal to thousands when we have no means of making them! And if the launch of the schooner is not successful, here are we condemned to winter quarters which the polar bears themselves would hardly relish!”

I replied only by a shake of my head, which Hurliguerly could not fail to understand.

“Do you know, Mr. Jeorling, of what I think oftenest?”

“What do you think of, boatswain?”

“Of the Kerguelens, whither we are certainly not travelling. Truly, in a bad season it was cold enough there! There is not much difference between this archipelago and the islands situated on the edge of the Antarctic Sea! But there one is not far from the Cape, and if we want to warm our shins, no iceberg bars the way. Whereas here it is the devil to weigh anchor, and one never knows if one shall find a clear course.”

“I repeat it, boatswain. If this last accident had not occurred, everything would have been over by this time, one way or another. We should still have had more than six weeks to get out of these southern seas. It is seldom that a ship is so roughly treated as ours has been, and I consider it real bad luck, after our having profited by such fortunate circumstances — ”

“These circumstances are all over, Mr. Jeorling,” exclaimed Hurliguerly, “and I fear indeed — ”

“What — you also, boatswain — you whom I believed to be so confident!”

“Confidence, Mr. Jeorling, wears out like the ends of one’s trousers, What would you have me do? When I compare my lot to old Atkins, installed in his cosy inn; when I think of the Green Cormorant, of the big parlours downstairs with the little tables round which friends sip whisky and gin, discussing the news of the day, while the stove makes more noise than the weathercock on the roof — oh, then the comparison is not in our favour, and in my opinion Mr. Atkins enjoys life better than I do.”

“You shall see them all again, boatswain — Atkins, the Green Cormorant, and Kerguelen! For God’s sake do not let yourself grow downhearted! And if you, a sensible and courageous man, despair already — ”

“Oh, if I were the only one it would not be half so bad as it is!”

“The whole crew does not despair, surely?”

“Yes — and no,” replied Hurliguerly, “for I know some who are not at all satisfied!”

“Has Hearne begun his mischief again? Is he exciting his companion?”

“Not openly at least, Mr. Jeorling, and since I have kept him under my eye I have neither seen nor heard anything. Besides, he knows what awaits him if he budges. I believe I am not mistaken, the sly dog has changed his tactics. But what does not astonish me in him, astonishes me in Martin Holt.”

“What do you mean, boatswain?”

“That they seem to be on good terms with each other. See how Hearne seeks out Martin Holt, talks to him frequently, and Holt does not treat his overtures unfavourably.’’

“Martin Holt is not one of those who would listen to Hearne’s advice, or follow it if he tried to provoke rebellion amongst the crew.”

“No doubt, Mr. Jeorling. However, I don’t fancy seeing them so much together. Hearne is a dangerous and unscrupulous individual, and most likely Martin Holt does not distrust him sufficiently.”

“He is wrong, boatswain.”

“And — wait a moment — do you know what they were talking about the other day when I overheard a few scraps of their conversation?”

“I could not possibly guess until you tell me, Hurliguerly.

“Well, while they were conversing on the bridge of the *Halbrane*, I heard them talking about Dirk Peters, and Hearne was saying: ‘You must not owe a grudge to the half-breed, Master Holt, because he refused to respond to your advances and accept your thanks! If he be only a sort of brute, he possesses plenty of courage, and has showed it in getting you out of a bad corner at the risk of his life. And besides, do not forget that he formed part of the crew of the *Grampus* and your brother Ned, if I don’t mistake — ’”

“He said that, boatswain; he spoke of the *Grampus*!” I exclaimed.

“Yes — of the *Grampus*!

“And of Ned Holt?”

“Precisely, Mr. Jeorling!”

“And what answer did Martin Holt make?”

“He replied: ‘I don’t even know under what circumstances my unfortunate brother perished. Was it during a revolt on board? Brave man that he was, he would not betray his captain, and perhaps he was massacred.”

“Did Hearne dwell on this, boatswain?”

“Yes, but he added: ‘It is very sad for you, Master Holt! The captain of the *Grampus*, according to what I have been told, was abandoned, being placed in a small boat with one or two of his men — and who knows if your brother was not along with him?’”

“And what next?”

“Then, Mr. Jeorling, he added: ‘Did it never occur to you to ask Dirk Peters to enlighten you on the subject?’ ‘Yes, once,’ replied Martin Holt, ‘I questioned the halfbreed about it, and never did I see a man so overcome. He replied in so low a voice that I could scarcely understand him, ‘I know not — I know not — ’ and he ran away with his face buried in his hands.”

“Was that all you heard of the conversation, boatswain?”

“That was all, Mr. Jeorling, and I thought it so strange that I wished to inform you of it.”

“And what conclusion did you draw from it?”

“Nothing, except that I look upon the sealing-master as a scoundrel of the deepest dye, perfectly capable of working in secret for some evil purpose with which he would like to associate Martin Holt!”

What did Hearne’s new attitude mean? Why did he strive to gain Martin Holt, one of the best of the crew, as an ally? Why did he recall the scenes of the *Grampus*? Did Hearne know more of this matter of Dirk Peters and Ned Holt than the others; this secret of which the half-breed and I believed ourselves to be the sole possessors?

The doubt caused me serious uneasiness. However, I took good care not to say anything of it to Dirk Peters. If he had for a moment suspected that Hearne spoke of what happened on board the *Grampus*, if he had heard that the rascal (as Hurliguerly called him, and not without reason) constantly talked to Martin Holt about his brother, I really do not know what would have happened.

In short, whatever the intentions of Hearne might be, it was dreadful to think that our sailing-master, on whose fidelity Captain Len Guy ought to be able to count, was in conspiracy with him.

The sealing-master must have a strong motive for acting in this way. What it was I could not imagine. Although the crew seemed to have abandoned every thougilt of mutiny, a strict watch was kept, especially on Hearne.

Besides, the situation must soon change, at least so far as the schooner was concerned. Two days afterwards the work was finished. The caulking operations were completed, and also the slide for lowering the vessel to the base of our floating mountain.

Just now the upper portion of the ice had been slightly softened, so that this last work did not entail much labour for pick-axe or spade. The course ran obliquely round the west side of the berg, so that the incline should not be too great at any point. With cables properly fixed, the launch, it seemed, might be effected without any mishap. I rather feared lest the melting of the ice should make the gliding less smcoth at the lower part of the berg.

Needless to say, the cargo, masting, anchors, chains, &c. had not been put on board. The hull was quite heavy enough, and not easily moved, so it was necessary to lighten it as much as possible.

When the schooner was again in its element, the loading could be effected in a few days.

On the afternoon of the 28th, the finishing touches were given. It was necessary to put supports for the sides of the slide in some places where the ice had melted quickly. Then everyone was allowed to rest from 4 o’clock p.m. The captain had double rations served out to all hands, and well they merited this extra supply of spirits; they had indeed worked hard during the week. I repeat that every sign of mutiny had disappeared. The crew thought of nothing except this great operation of the launching. The *Halbrane* in the sea would mean departure, it would also mean return! For Dirk Peters and me it would be the definite abandonment of Arthur Pym.

That night the temperature was the highest we had so far experienced. The thermometer registered 53° (11° 67’ C. below zero). So, although the sun was nearing the horizon, the ice was melting, and thousands of small streams flowed in every direction. The early birds awoke at four o’clock, and I was one of their number. I had scarcely slept, and I fancy that Dirk Peters did not sleep much, haunted as he was by the sad thought of having to turn back!

The launch was to take place at ten o’clock. Taking every possible difficulty into account, and allowing for the minutest precautions, the captain hoped that it would be completed before the close of the day. Everyone believed that by evening the schooner would be at the foot of the berg.

Of course we had all to lend a hand to this difficult task. To each man a special duty was assigned; some were employed to facilitate the sliding with wooden rollers, if necessary; others to moderate the speed of the hull, in case it became too great, by means of hawsers and cables.

We breakfasted at nine o’clock in the tents. Our sailors were perfectly confident, and could not refrain from drinking “success to the event”; and although this was a little premature, we added our hurrahs to theirs. Success seemed very nearly assured, as the captain and the mate had worked out the matter so carefully and skilfully. At last we were about to leave our encampment and take up our stations (some of the sailors were there already), when cries of amazement and fear were raised. What a frightful scene, and, short as it may have been, what an impression of terror it left on our minds!

One of the enormous blocks which formed the bank of the mud-bed where the *Halbrane* lay, having become loose owing to the melting of its base, had slipped and was bounding over the others down the incline.

In another moment, the schooner, being no longer retained in position, was swinging on this declivity.

On board, on deck, in front, there were two sailors, Rogers and Gratian. In vain did the unfortunate men try to jump over the bulwarks, they had not time, and they were dragged away in this dreadful fall.

Yes! I saw it! I saw the schooner topple over, slide down first on its left side, crush one of the men who delayed too long about jumping to one side, then bound from block to block, and finally fling itself into space.

In another moment the *Halbrane*, staved in, broken up, with gaping planks and shattered ribs, had sunk, causing a tremendous jet of water to spout up at the foot of the iceberg.

Horrified! yes, indeed, we were horrified when the schooner, carried off as though by an avalanche, had disappeared in the abyss! Not a particle of our *Halbrane* remained, not even a wreck!

A minute ago she was one hundred feet in the air, now she was five hundred in the depths of the sea! Yes, we were so stupefied that we were unable to think of the dangers to come — our amazement was that of people who “cannot believe their eyes.”

Prostration succeeded as a natural consequence. There was not a word spoken. We stood motionless, with our feet rooted to the icy soil. No words could express the horror of our situation!

As for West, when the schooner had disappeared in the abyss, I saw big tears fall from his eyes. The *Halbrane* that he loved so much was now an unknown quantity! Yes, our stout-hearted mate wept.

Three of our men had perished, and in what frightful fashion! I had seen Rogers and Gratian, two of our most faithful sailors, stretch out their hands in despair as they were knocked about by the rebounding of the schooner, and finally sink with her! The other man from the Falklands, an American, was crushed in its rush; his shapeless form lay in a pool of blood. Three new victims within the last ten days had to be inscribed on the register of those who died during this fatal voyage! Ah! fortune had favoured us up to the hour when the *Halbrane* was snatched from her own element, but her hand was now against us. And was not this last the worst blow — must it not prove the stroke of death?

The silence was broken by a tumult of despairing voices, whose despair was justified indeed by this irreparable misfortune!

And I am sure that more than one thought it would have been better to have been on the *Halbrane* as she rebounded off the side of the iceberg!

Everything would have been over then, as all was over with Rogers and Gratian! This foolish expedition would thus have come to a conclusion worthy of such rashness and imprudence!

At last, the instinct of self-preservation triumphed, and except Hearne, who stood some distance off and affected silence, all the men shouted: “To the boat! to the boat!”

These unfortunate fellows were out of their mind. Terror led them astray. They rushed towards the crag where our one boat (which could not hold them all) had been sheltered during the unloading of the schooner.

Captain Len Guy and Jem West rushed after them. I joined them immediately, followed by the boatswain. We were armed, and resolved to make use of our arms. We had to prevent these furious men from seizing the boat, which did not belong to a few, but to all!

“Hallo, sailors!” cried the captain.

“Hallo!” repeated West, “stop there, or we fire on the first who goes a step farther!”

Both threatened the men with their pistols. The boatswain pointed his gun at them. I held my rifle, ready to fire.

It was in vain! The frenzied men heard nothing, would not hear anything, and one of them fell, struck by the mate's bullet, just as he was crossing the last block. He was unable to catch on to the bank with his hands, and slipping on the frozen slope, he disappeared in the abyss.

Was this the beginning of a massacre? Would others let themselves be killed at this place? Would the old hands side with the new-comers?

At that moment I remarked that Hardy, Martin Holt, Francis Bury, and Stern hesitated about coming over to our side, while Hearne, still standing motionless at some distance, gave no encouragement to the rebels.

However, we could not allow them to become masters of the boat, to bring it down, to embark ten or twelve men, and to abandon us to our certain fate on this iceberg. They had almost reached the boat, heedless of danger and deaf to threats, when a second report was heard, and one of the sailors fell, by a bullet from the boatswain's gun.

One American and one Fuegian less to be numbered amongst the sealing-master's partisans!

Then, in front of the boat, a man appeared. It was Dirk Peters, who had climbed the opposite slope.

The half-breed put one of his enormous hands on the stern and with the other made a sign to the furious men to clear off. Dirk Peters being there, we no longer needed our arms, as he alone would suffice to protect the boat.

And indeed, as five or six of the sailors were advancing, he went up to them, caught hold of the nearest by the belt, lifted him up, and sent him flying ten paces off. The wretched man not being able to catch hold of anything, would have rebounded into the sea had not Hearne seized him.

Owing to the half-breed's intervention the revolt was instantly queued. Besides, we were coming up to the boat, and with us those of our men whose hesitation bad not lasted long.

No matter. The others were still thirteen to our ten. Captain Len Guy made his appearance; anger shone in his eyes, and with him was West, quite unmoved. Words failed the captain for some moments, but his looks said what his tongue could not utter. At length, in a terrible voice, he said, —

"I ought to treat you as evil-doers; however, I will only consider you as madmen! The boat belongs to everybody. It is now our only means of salvation, and you wanted to steal it — to steal it like cowards! Listen attentively to what I say for the last time! This boat, belonging to the *Halbrane*, is now the *Halbrane* herself! I am the captain of it, and let him who disobeys me, beware!"

With these last words Captain Len Guy looked at Hearne, for whom this warning was expressly meant. The sealing-master had not appeared in the last scene, not openly at least, but nobody doubted that he had urged his comrades to make off with the boat, and that he had every intention of doing the same again.

"Now to the camp," said the captain, "and you, Dirk Peters, remain here!"

The half-breed's only reply was to nod his big head and betake himself to his post.

The crew returned to the camp without the least hesitation. Some lay down in their sleeping-places, others wandered about. Hearne neither tried to join them nor to go near Martin Holt.

Now that the sailors were reduced to idleness, there was nothing to do except to ponder on our critical situation, and invent some means of getting out of it.

The captain, the mate, and the boatswain formed a council, and I took part in their deliberations. Captain Len Guy began by saying, —

“We have protected our boat, and we shall continue to protect it.”

“Until death,” declared West.

“Who knows,” said I, “whether we shall not soon be forced to embark?”

“In that case,” replied the captain, “as all cannot fit into it, it will be necessary to make a selection. Lots shall determine which of us are to go, and I shall not ask to be treated differently from the others.”

“We have not come to that, luckily,” replied the boatswain. “The iceberg is solid, and there is no fear of its melting before winter.”

“No,” assented West, “that is not to be feared. What it behoves us to do is, while watching the boat, to keep an eye on the provisions.”

“We are lucky,” added Hurllguerly, “to have put our cargo in safety. Poor, dear *Halbrane*. She will remain in these seas, like the fane, her elder sister!”

Yes, without doubt, and I thought so for many reasons, the one destroyed by the savages of Tsalal, the other by one of these catastrophes that no human power can prevent.

“You are right,” replied the captain, “and we must prevent our men from plundering. We are sure of enough provisions for one year, without counting what we may get by fishing.”

“And it is so much the more necessary, captain, to keep a close watch, because I have seen some hovering about the spirit casks.”

“I will see to that,” replied West.

“But,” I then asked, “had we not better prepare ourselves for the fact that we may be compelled to winter on this iceberg.”

“May Heaven avert such a terrible probability,” replied the captain.

“After all, if it were necessary, we could get through it, Mr. Jeorling,” said the boatswain. “We could hollow out sheltering-places in the ice, so as to be able to bear the extreme cold of the pole, and so long as we had sufficient to appease our hunger — ”

At this moment the horrid recollection of the Grampus came to my mind — the scenes in which Dirk Peters killed Ned Holt, the brother of our sailing-master. Should we ever be in such extremity?

Would it not, before we proceed to set up winter quarters for seven or eight months, be better to leave the iceberg altogether, if such a thing were possible?

I called the attention of Captain Len Guy and West to this point.

This was a difficult question to answer, and a long silence preceded the reply.

At last the captain said, —

“Yes, that would be the best resolution to come to; and if our boat could hold us all, with the provisions necessary for a voyage that might last three or four weeks, I would not hesitate to put to sea now and return towards the north.”

But I made them observe that we should be obliged to direct our course contrary to wind and current; our schooner herself could hardly have succeeded in doing this. Whilst to continue towards the south —

“Towards the south?” repeated the captain, who looked at me as though he sought to read my thoughts.

“Why not?” I answered. “If the iceberg had not been stopped in its passage, perhaps it would have drifted to some land in that direction, and might not our boat accomplish what it would have done?”

The captain, shaking his head, answered nothing. West also was silent.

“Eh! our iceberg will end by raising its anchor,” replied Hurliguerly. “It does not hold to the bottom, like the Falklands or the Kerguelens! So the safest course is to wait, as the boat cannot carry twenty-three, the number of our party.”

I dwelt upon the fact that it was not necessary for all twenty-three to embark. It would be sufficient, I said, for five or six of us to reconnoitre further south for twelve or fifteen miles.

“South?” repeated Captain Len Guy.

“Undoubtedly, captain,” I added. “You probably know what the geographers frankly admit, that the antarctic regions are formed by a capped continent.”

“Geographers know nothing, and can know nothing about it,” replied West, coldly.

“It is a pity,” said I, “that as we are so near, we should not attempt to solve this question of a polar continent.”

I thought it better not to insist just at present.

Moreover there would be danger in sending out our only boat on a voyage of discovery, as the current might carry it too far, or it might not find us again in the same place. And, indeed, if the iceberg happened to get loose at the bottom, and to resume its interrupted drift, what would become of the men in the boat?

The drawback was that the boat was too small to carry us all, with the necessary provisions. Now, of the seniors, there remained ten men, counting Dirk Peters; of the new men there were thirteen; twenty-three in all. The largest number our boat could hold was from eleven to twelve persons. Then eleven of us, indicated by lot, would have to remain on this island of ice. And what would become of them?

With regard to this Hurliguerly made a sound observation.

“After all,” he said, “I don’t know that those who would embark would be better off than those who remained! I am so doubtful of the result, that I would willingly give up my place to anyone who wanted it.”

Perhaps the boatswain was right. But in my own mind, when I asked that the boat might be utilized, it was only for the purpose of reconnoitring the iceberg.

We finally decided to arrange everything with a view to wintering out, even were our ice-mountain again to drift.

“We may be sure that will be agreed to by our men,” declared Hurliguerly.

“What is necessary must be done,” replied the mate, “and to-day we must set to work.”

That was a sad day on which we began our preparations.

Endicott, the cook, was the only man who submitted without murmuring. As a negro, who cares little about the future, shallow and frivolous like all his race, he resigned himself easily to his fate; and this is, perhaps, true philosophy. Besides, when it came to the question of cooking, it mattered very little to him whether it was here or there, so long as his stoves were set up somewhere.

So he said to his friend the mate, with his broad negro smile, —

“Luckily my kitchen did not go off with the schooner, and you shall see, Hurliguerly, if I do not make up dishes just as good as on board the Halbrane, so long as provisions don’t grow scarce, of course — ”

“Well! they will not be wanting for some time to come,” replied the boatswain. “We need not fear hunger, but cold, such cold as would reduce you to an icicle the minute you cease to warm your feetwcold that makes your skin crack and your skull split! Even if we had some hundreds of tons of coal — But, all things being well calculated, there is only just what will do to boil this large kettle.”

“And that is sacred,” cried Endicott; “touching is forbidden! The kitchen before all.”

“And that is the reason why it never strikes you to pity yourself, you old nigger! You can always make sure of keeping your feet warm at your oven!”

“What would you have, boatswain? You are a first-rate cook, or you are not. When you are, you take advantage of it; but I will remember to keep you a little place before my stove.”

“That’s good! that’s good, Endicott! Each one shall have his turn! There is no privilege, even for a boatswain! On the whole, it is better not to have to fear famine! One can fight against the cold. We shall dig holes in the iceberg, and cuddle ourselves up there. And why should we not have a general dwelling-room? We could make a cave for ourselves with pickaxes! I have heard tell that ice preserves heat. Well, let it preserve ours, and that is all I ask of it!”

The hour had come for us to return to the camp and to seek our sleeping-places.

Dirk Peters alone refused to be relieved of his duty as watchman of the boat, and nobody thought of disputing the post with him.

Captain Len Guy and West did not enter the tents until they had made certain that Hearne and his companions had gone to their usual place of rest. I came back likewise and went to bed.

I could not tell how long I had been sleeping, nor what time it was, when I found myself rolling on the ground after a violent shock.

What could be happening? Was it another capsize of the iceberg?

We were all up in a second, then outside the tents in the full light of a night in the polar regions.

A second floating mass of enormous size had just struck our iceberg, which had “hoisted the anchor” (as the sailors say) and was drifting towards the south.

An unhoped-for change in the situation had taken place. What were to be the consequences of our being no longer cast away at that place? The current was now carrying us in the direction of the pole! The first feeling of joy inspired by this conviction was, however, succeeded by all the terrors of the unknown l and what an unknown!

Dirk Peters only was entirely rejoiced that we had resumed the route which, he believed, would lead us to the discovery of traces of his “poor Pym” — far other ideas occupied the minds of his companions.

Captain Len Guy no longer entertained any hope of rescuing his countrymen, and having reached the condition of despair, he was bound by his duty to take his crew back to the north, so as to clear the antarctic circle while the season rendered it possible to do so. And we were being carried away towards the south!

Naturally enough, we were all deeply impressed by the fearfulness of our position, which may be summed up in a few words. We were no longer cast away, with a possible ship, but the tenants of a floating iceberg, with no hope but that our monster tenement might encounter one of the whaling ships whose business in the deep waters lies between the Orkneys, New Georgia, and the Sandwich Islands. A quantity of things had been thrown into the ice by the collision which had set our iceberg afloat, but these were chiefly articles belonging to the *Halbrane*. Owing to the precaution that had been taken on the previous day, when the cargo was stowed away in the clefts, it had been only slightly damaged. What would have become of us, had all our reserves been swallowed up in that grim encounter?

Now, the two icebergs formed but one, which was travelling south at the rate of two miles an hour. At this rate, thirty hours would suffice to bring us to the point of the axis at which the terrestrial meridians unite. Did the current which was carrying us along pass on to the pole itself, or was there any land which might arrest our progress? This was another question, and I discussed it with the boatswain.

“Nobody knows, Mr. Jeorling,” was Hurliguerly’s reply. “If the current goes to the pole, we shall go there; and if it doesn’t, we shan’t. An iceberg isn’t a ship, and as it has neither sails nor helm, it goes as the drift takes it.”

“That’s true, boatswain. And therefore I had the idea that if two or three of us were to embark in the boat — ”

“Ah! you still hold to your notion of the boat — ”

“Certainly, for, if there is land somewhere, is it not possible that the people of the *Jane* — ”

“Have come upon it, Mr. Jeorling — at four thousand miles from Tsalal Island.”

“Who knows, boatswain?”

“That may be, but allow me to say that your argument will be reasonable when the land comes in sight, if it ever does so. Our captain will see what ought to be done, and he will remember that time presses. We cannot delay in these waters, and, after all, the one thing of real importance to us is to get out of the polar circle before the winter makes it impassable.”

There was good sense in Hurliguerly’s words; I could not deny the fact.

During that day the greater part of the cargo was placed in the interior of a vast cave-like fissure in the side of the iceberg, where, even in case of a second collision, casks and barrels would be in safety. Our men then assisted Endicott to set up his cooking-stove between two blocks, so that it was firmly fixed, and they heaped up a great mass of coals close to it.

No murmurs, no recrimination disturbed these labours. It was evident that silence was deliberately maintained. The crew obeyed the captain and West because they gave no orders but such as were of urgent necessity. But, afterwards, would these men allow the authority of their leaders to be uncontested? How long would the recruits from the Falklands, who were already exasperated by the disasters of our enterprise, resist their desire to seize upon the boat and escape?

I did not think they would make the attempt, however, so long as our iceberg should continue to drift, for the boat could not outstrip its progress; but, if it were to run aground once more, to strike upon the coast of an island or a continent, what would not these unfortunate creatures do to escape the horrors of wintering under such conditions?

In the afternoon, during the hour of rest allowed to the crew, I had a second conversation with Dirk Peters. I had taken my customary seat at the top of the iceberg, and had occupied it for half an hour, being, as may be supposed, deep in thought, when I saw the half-breed coming quickly up the slope. We had exchanged hardly a dozen words since the iceberg had begun to move again. When Dirk Peters came up to me, he did not address me at first, and was so intent on his thoughts that I was not quite sure he saw me. At length, heleaned back against an ice-block, and spoke:

“Mr. Jeorling,” he said, “you remember, in your cabin in the *Halbrane*, I told you the — the affair of the *Grampus*?”

I remembered well.

“I told you that Parker’s name was not Parker, that it was Holt, and that he was Ned Holt’s brother?”

“I know, Dirk Peters,” I replied, “but why do you refer to that sad story again?”

“Why, Mr. Jeorling? Have not — have you never sam anything about it to anybody?”

“Not to anybody,” I protested. “How could you suppose I should be so ill-advised, so imprudent, as to divulge your secret, a secret which ought never to pass our lips — a dead secret?”

“Dead, yes, dead! And yet, understand me, it seems to me that, among the crew, something is known.”

I instantly recalled to mind what the boatswain had told me concerning a certain conversation in which he had overheard Hearne prompting Martin

Holt to ask the half-breed what were the circumstances of his brother’s death on board the Grampus. Had a portion of the secret got out, or was this apprehension on the part of Dirk Peters purely imaginary?

“Explain yourself,” I said.

“Understand me, Mr. Jeorling, I am a bad hand at explaining. Yes, yesterday — I have thought of nothing else since — Martin Holt took me aside, far from the others, and told me that he wished to speak to me — ”

“Of the *Grampus*?”

“Of the *Grampus* — yes, and of his brother, Ned Holt. For the first time he uttered that name before me — and yet we have sailed together for nearly three months.”

The half-breed’s voice was so changed that I could hardly hear him.

“It seemed to me,” he resumed, “that in Martin Holt’s mind — no, I was not mistaken — there was something like a suspicion.”

“But tell me what he said! Tell me exactly what he asked you. What is it?”

I felt sure that the question put by Martin Holt, whatsoever its bearing, had been inspired by Hearne. Nevertheless, as I considered it well that the half-breed should know nothing of the sealing-master’s disquieting and inexplicable intervention in this tragic affair, I decided upon concealing it from him.

“He asked me,” replied Dirk Peters, “did I not remember Ned Holt of the *Grampus*, and whether he had perished in the fight with the mutineers or in the shipwreck; whether he was one of the men who had been abandoned with Captain Barnard; in short, he asked me if I could tell him how his brother died. Ah! how!”

No idea could be conveyed of the horror with which the half-breed uttered words which revealed a profound loathing of himself.

“And what answer did you make to Martin Holt?”

“None, none!”

“You should have said that Ned Holt perished in the wreck of the brig.”

“I could not — understand me — I could not. The two brothers are so like each other. In Martin Holt I seemed to see Ned Holt. I was afraid, I got away from him.”

The half-breed drew himself up with a sudden movement, and I sat thinking, leaning my head on my hands. These tardy questions of Holt’s respecting his brother were put, I had no doubt whatsoever, at the instigation of Hearne, but what was his motive, and was it at the Falklands that he had discovered the secret of Dirk Peters? I had not breathed a word on the subject to anymm. To the second question no answer suggested itself; the first involved a serious issue. Did the sealing-master merely desire to gratify his enmity against Dirk Peters, the only one of the Falkland sailors who had always taken the side of Captain Len Guy, and who had prevented the seizure of the boat by Hearne and his companions? Did he hope, by arousing the wrath and vengeance of Martin Holt, to detach the sailing-master from his allegiance and induce him to become an accomplice in Hearne’s own designs? And, in fact, when it was a question of sailing the boat in these seas, had he not imperative need of Martin Holt, one of the best seamen of the *Halbrane*? A man who would succeed where Hearne and his companions would fail, if they had only themselves to depend on?

I became lost in this labyrinth of hypotheses, and it must be admitted that its complications added largely to the troubles of an already complicated position.

When I raised my eyes, Dirk Peters had disappeared; he had said what he came to say, and he now knew that I had not betrayed his confidence.

The customary precautions were taken for the night, no individual being allowed to remain outside the camp, with the exception of the half-breed, who was in charge of the boat.

The following day was the 31st of January. I pushed back the canvas of the tent, which I shared with Captain Len Guy and West respectively, as each succeeded the other on release from the alternate "watch," very early, and experienced a severe disappointment.

Mist, everywhere! Nay, more than mist, a thick yellow, mouldy-smelling fog. And more than this again; the temperature had fallen sensibly: this was probably a forewarning of the austral winter. The summit of our ice-mountain was lost in vapour, in a fog which would not resolve itself into rain, but would continue to muffle up the horizon.

"Bad luck!" said the boatswain, "for now if we were to pass by land we should not perceive it."

"And our drift?"

"More considerable than yesterday, Mr. Jeorling. The captain has sounded, and he makes the speed no less than between three and four miles."

“And what do you conclude from this?”

“I conclude that we must be within a narrower sea, since the current is so strong. I should not be surprised if we had land on both sides of us within ten or fifteen miles.”

“This, then, would be a wide strait that cuts the antarctic continent?”

“Yes. Our captain is of that opinion.”

“And, holding that opinion, is he not going to make an attempt to reach one or other of the coasts of this strait?”

“And how?”

“With the boat.”

“Risk the boat in the midst of this fog!” exclaimed the boatswain, as he crossed his arms. “What are you thinking of, Mr. Jeorling? Can we cast anchor to wait for it? And all the chances would be that we should never see it again. Ah! if we only had the *Halbrane*!”

But there was no longer a *Halbrane*!

In spite of the difficulty of the ascent through the half-condensed vapour, I climbed up to the top of the iceberg, but when I had gained that eminence I strove in vain to pierce the impenetrable grey mantle in which the waters were wrapped.

I remained there, hustled by the north-east wind, which was beginning to blow freshly and might perhaps rend the fog asunder. But no, fresh vapours accumulated around our floating refuge, driven up by the immense ventilation of the open sea. Under the double action of the atmospheric and antarctic currents, we drifted more and more rapidly, and I perceived a sort of shudder pass throughout the vast bulk of the iceberg.

Then it was that I felt myself under the dominion of a sort of hallucination, one of those hallucinations which must have troubled the mind of Arthur Pym. It seemed to me that I was losing myself in his extraordinary personality; at last I was beholding all that he had seen! Was not that impenetrable mist the curtain of vapours which he had seen in his delirium? I peered into it, seeking for those luminous rays which had streaked the sky from east to west! I sought in its depths for that limitless cataract, rolling in silence from the height of some immense rampart lost in the vastness of the zenith! I sought for the awful white giant of the South Pole!

At length reason resumed her sway. This visionary madness, intoxicating while it lasted, passed off by degrees, and I descended the slope to our camp.

The whole day passed without a change. The fog never once lifted to give us a glimpse outside of its muffling folds, and if the iceberg, which had travelled forty miles since the previous day, had passed by the extremity of the axis of the earth, we should never know it.

CHAPTER XXI.

AMID THE MISTS.

So this was the sum of all our efforts, trials and disappointments! Not to speak of the destruction of the *Halbrane*, the expedition had already cost nine lives. From thirty-two men who had embarked on the schooner, our number was reduced to twenty-three: how low was that figure yet to fall?

Between the south pole and antarctic circle lay twenty degrees, and those would have to be cleared in a month or six weeks at the most; if not, the iceberg barrier would be re-formed and closed-up. As for wintering in that part of the antarctic circle, not a man of us could have survived it.

Besides, we had lost all hope of rescuing the survivors of the *Jane*, and the sole desire of the crew was to escape as quickly as possible from the awful solitudes of the south. Our drift, which had been south, down to the pole, was now north, and, if that direction should continue, perhaps vle might be favoured with such good fortune as would make up for all the evil that had befallen us! In any case there was nothing for it but, in familiar phrase, “to let ourselves go.”

The mist did not lift during the end, 3rd, and 4th of February, and it would have been difficult to make out the rate of progress of our iceberg since it had passed the pole. Captain Len Guy, however, and West, considered themselves safe in reckoning it at two hundred and fifty miles.

The current did not seem to have diminished in speed or changed its course. It was now beyond a doubt that we were moving between the two halves of a continent, one on the east, the other on the west, which formed the vast antarctic region. And I thought it was matter of great regret that we could not get aground on one or the other side of this vast strait, whose surface would presently be solidified by the coming of winter.

When I expressed this sentiment to Captain Len Guy, he made me the only logical answer:

“What would you have, Mr. Jeorling? We are powerless. There is nothing to be done, and the persistent fog is the worst part of our ill luck. I no longer know where we are. It is impossible to take an observation, and this befalls us just as the sun is about to disappear for long months.”

“Let me come back to the question of the boat,” said I, “for the last time. Could we not, with the boat — ”

“Go on a discovery cruise? Can you think of such a thing? That would be an imprudence I would not commit, even though the crew would allow me.”

I was on the point of exclaiming: “And what if your brother and your countrymen have found refuge on some spot of the land that undoubtedly lies about us?”

But I restrained myself. Of what avail was it to reawaken our captain’s grief? He, too, must have contemplated this eventuality, and he had not renounced his purpose of further search without being fully convinced of the folly of a last attempt.

During those three days of fog I had not caught sight of Dirk Peters, or rather he had made no attempt to approach, but had remained inflexibly at his post by the boat. Martin Holt’s questions respecting his brother Ned seemed to indicate that his secret was known — at least in part, and the half-breed held himself more than ever aloof, sleeping while the others watched, and watching in their time of sleep. I even wondered whether he regretted having confided in me, and fancied that he had aroused my repugnance by his sad story. If so, he was mistaken; I deeply pitied the poor half-breed.

Nothing could exceed the melancholy monotony of the hours which we passed in the midst of a fog so thick that the wind could not lift its curtain. The position of the iceberg could not be ascertained. It went with the current at a like speed, and had it been motionless there would have been no appreciable difference for us, for the wind had fallen — at least, so we supposed — and not a breath was stirring. The flame of a torch held up in the air did not flicker. The silence of space was broken only by the clangour of the sea-birds, which came in muffled croaking tones through the stifling atmosphere of vapour. Petrels and albatross swept the top of the iceberg, where they kept a useless watch in their flight. In what direction were those swift-winged creatures — perhaps already driven towards the confines of the arctic region but the approach of winter — bound? We could not tell. One day, the boatswain, who was determined to solve this question if possible, having mounted to the extreme top, not without risk of breaking his neck, came into such violent contact with a *quebranta huesos* — a sort of gigantic petrel measuring twelve feet with spread wings — that he was flung on his back.

“Curse the bird!” he said on his return to the camp, addressing the observation to me. “I have had a narrow escape! A thump, and down I went, sprawling. I saved myself I don’t know how, for I was all but over the side. Those ice ledges, you know, slip through one’s fingers like water. I called out to the bird, ‘Can’t you even look before you, you fool?’ But what was the good of that? The big blunderer did not even beg my pardon!”

In the afternoon of the same day our ears were assailed by a hideous braying from below. Hurliguerly remarked that as there were no asses to treat us to the concert, it must be given by penguins. Hitherto these countless dwellers in the polar regions had not thought proper to accompany us on our moving island; we had not seen even one, either at the foot of the iceberg or on the drifting packs. There could be no doubt that they were there in thousands, for the music was unmistakably that of a multitude of performers. Now those birds frequent by choice the edges of the coasts of islands and continents in high latitudes, or the ice-fields in their neighbourhood. Was not their presence an indication that land was near?

I asked Captain Len Guy what he thought of the presence of these birds.

“I think what you think, Mr. Jeorling,” he replied. “Since we have been drifting, none of them have taken refuge on the iceberg, and here they are now in crowds, if we may judge by their deafening cries. From whence do they come? No doubt from land, which is probably near.”

“Is this West’s opinion?”

“Yes, Mr. Jeorling, and you know he is not given to vain imaginations.”

“Certainly not.”

“And then another thing has struck both him and me, which has apparently escaped your attention. It is that the braying of the penguins is mingled with a sound like the lowing of cattle. Listen and you will readily distinguish it.”

I listened, and, sure enough, the orchestra was more full than I had supposed.

“I hear the lowing plainly,” I said; “there are, then, seals and walrus also in the sea at the base.”

“That is certain, Mr. Jeorling, and I conclude from the fact that those animals — both birds and mammals — very rare since we left Tsalal Island, frequent the waters into which the currents have carried us.”

“Of course, captain, of course. Oh! what a misfortune it is that we should be surrounded by this impenetrable fog!”

“Which prevents us from even getting down to the base of the iceberg! There, no doubt, we should discover whether there are seaweed drifts around us; if that be so, it would be another sign.”

“Why not try, captain?”

“No, no, Mr. Jeorling, that might lead to falls, and I will not permit anybody to leave the camp. If land be there, I imagine our iceberg will strike it before long.”

“And if it does not?”

“If it does not, how are we to make it?”

I thought to myself that the boat might very well be used in the latter case. But Captain Len Guy preferred to wait, and perhaps this was the wiser course under our circumstances.

At eight o’clock that evening the half-condensed mist was so compact that it was difficult to walk through it. The composition of the air seemed to be changed, as though it were passing into a solid state. It was not possible to discern whether the fog had any effect upon the compass. I knew the matter had been studied by meteorologists, and that they believe they may safely affirm that the needle is not affected by this condition of the atmosphere. I will add here that since we had left the South Pole behind no confidence could be placed in the indications of the compass; it had gone wild at the approach to the magnetic pole, to which we were no doubt on the way. Nothing could be known, therefore, concerning the course of the iceberg.

The sun did not set quite below the horizon at this period, yet the waters were wrapped in tolerably deep darkness at nine o'clock in the evening, when the muster of the crew took place.

On this occasion each man as usual answered to his name except Dirk Peters.

The call was repeated in the loudest of Hurliguerly's stentorian tones. No reply.

“Has nobody seen Dirk Peters during the day?” inquired the captain.

“Nobody,” answered the boatswain.

“Can anything have happened to him?”

“Don't be afraid,” cried the boatswain. “Dirk Peters is in his element, and as much at his ease in the fog as a polar bear. He has got out of one bad scrape; he will get out of a second!”

I let Hurliguerly have his say, knowing well why the half-breed kept out of the way.

That night none of us, I am sure, could sleep. We were smothered in the tents, for lack of oxygen. And we were all more or less under the influence of a strange sort of presentiment, as though our fate were about to change, for better or worse, if indeed it could be worse.

The night wore on without any alarm, and at six o’clock in the morning each of us came out to breathe a more wholesome air.

The state of things was unchanged, the density of the fog was extraordinary. It was, however, found that the barometer had risen, too quickly, it is true, for the rise to be serious. Presently other signs of change became evident. The wind, which was growing colder — a south wind since we had passed beyond the south pole — began to blow a full gale, and the noises from below were heard more distinctly through the space swept by the atmospheric currents.

At nine o’clock the iceberg doffed its cap of vapour quite suddenly, producing an indescribable transformation scene which no fairy’s wand could have accomplished in less time or with greater success.

In a few moments, the sky was clear to the extreme verge of the horizon, and the sea reappeared, illumined by the oblique rays of the sun, which now rose only a few degrees above it. A rolling swell of the waves bathed the base of our iceberg in white foam, as it drifted, together with a great multitude of floating mountains under the double action of wind and current, on a course inclining to the nor-’nor’-east.

“Land!”

This cry came from the summit of the moving mountain, and Dirk Peters was revealed to our sight, standing on the outermost block, his hand stretched towards the north.

The half-breed was not mistaken. The land this time — yes! — it was land! Its distant heights, of a blackish hue, rose within three or four miles of us.

86° 12’ south latitude.

114° 17’ east longitude.

The iceberg was nearly four degrees beyond the antarctic pole, and from the western longitudes that our schooner had followed tracing the course of the *Jane*, we had passed into the eastern longitudes.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN CAMP.

A little after noon, the iceberg was within a mile of the land.

After their dinner, the crew climbed up to the topmost block, on which Dirk Peters was stationed. On our approach the half-breed descended the opposite slope and when I reached the top he was no longer to be seen.

The land on the north evidently formed a continent or island of considerable extent. On the west there was a sharply projecting cape, surmounted by a sloping height which resembled an enormous seal’s head on the side view; then beyond that was a wide stretch of sea. On the east the land was prolonged out of sight.

Each one of us took in the position. It depended on the current-whether it would carry the iceberg into an eddy which might drive it on the coast, or continue to drift it towards the north. Which was the more admissible hypothesis?

Captain Len Guy, West, Hurliguerly, and I talked over the matter, while the crew discussed it among themselves. Finally, it was agreed that the current tended rather to carry the iceberg towards the northern point of land.

“After all,” said Captain Len Guy, “if it is habitable during the months of the summer season, it does not look like being inhabited, since we cannot descry a human being on the shore.”

“Let us bear in mind, captain,” said I, “that the iceberg is not calculated to attract attention as the *Halbrane* would have done.”

"Evidently, Mr. Jeorling; and the natives, if there were any, would have been collected on the beach to see the *Halbrane* already."

"We must not conclude, captain, because we do not see any natives — "

"Certainly not, Mr. Jeorling; but you will agree with me that the aspect of this land is very unlike that of Tsalal Island when the fane reached it; there is nothing here but desolation and barrenness."

"I acknowledge that — barrenness and desolation, that is all. Nevertheless, I want to ask you whether it is your intention to go ashore, captain?"

"With the boat?"

"With the boat, should the current carry cur iceberg away from the land."

"We have not an hour to lose, Mr. Jeorling, and the delay of a few hours might condemn us to a cruel winter stay, if we arrived too late at the iceberg barrier."

"And, considering the distance, we are not too soon," observed West.

"I grant it," I replied, still persisting. "But, to leave this land behind us without ever having set foot on it, without having made sure that it does not preserve the traces of an encampment, if your brother, captain — his companions — "

Captain Len Guy shook his head. How could the castaways have supported life in this desolate region for several months?

Besides, the British flag was hoisted on the summit of the iceberg, and William Guy would have recognized it and come down to the shore had he been living.

No one. No one.

At this moment, West, who had been observing certain points of approach, said, —

“Let us wait a little before we come to a decision. In less than an hour we shall be able to decide. Our speed is slackening, it seems to me, and it is possible that an eddy may bring us back obliquely to the coast.”

“That is my opinion too,” said the boatswain, “and if our floating machine is not stationary, it is nearly so. It seems to be turning round.”

West and Hurliguerly were not mistaken. For some reason or other the iceberg was getting out of the course which it had followed continuously. A giratory movement had succeeded to that of drifting, owing to the action of an eddy which set towards the coast.

Besides, several ice-mountains, in front of us, had just run aground on the edge of the shore. It was, then, useless to discuss whether we should take to the boat or not. According as we approached, the desolation of the land became more and more apparent, and the prospect of enduring six months’ wintering there would have appalled the stoutest hearts.

At five in the afternoon, the iceberg plunged into a deep rift in the coast ending in a long point on the right, and there stuck fast.

“On shore! On shore!” burst from every man, like a single exclamation, and the men were already hurrying down the slope of the iceberg, when West commanded:

“Wait for orders!”

Some hesitation was shown — especially on the part of Hearne and several of his comrades. Then the instinct of discipline prevailed, and finally the whole crew ranged themselves around Captain Len Guy. It was not necessary to lower the boat, the iceberg being in contact with the point.

The captain, the boatswain, and myself, preceding the others, were the first to quit the camp; ours were the first human feet to tread this virgin and volcanic soil.

We walked for twenty minutes on rough land, strewn with rocks of igneous origin, solidified lava, dusty slag, and grey ashes, but without enough clay to grow even the hardiest plants.

With some risk and difficulty, Captain Len Guy, the boatswain, and I succeeded in climbing the hill; this exploit occupied a whole hour. Although evening had now come, it brought no darkness in its train. From the top of the hill we could see over an extent of from thirty to forty miles, and this was what we saw.

Behind us lay the open sea, laden with floating masses; a great number of these had recently heaped themselves up against the beach and rendered it almost inaccessible.

On the west was a strip of hilly land, which extended beyond our sight, and was washed on its east side by a boundless sea. It was evident that we had been carried by the drift through a strait.

Ah! if we had only had our *Halbrane*! But our sole possession was a frail craft barely capable of containing a dozen men, and we were twenty-three!

There was nothing for it but to go down to the shore again, to carry the tents to the beach, and take measures in view of a winter sojourn under the terrible conditions imposed upon us by circumstances.

On our return to the coast the boatswain discovered several caverns in the granitic cliffs, sufficiently spacious to house us all and afford storage for the cargo of the *Halbrane*. Whatever might be our ultimate decision, we could not do better than place our material and instal ourselves in this opportune shelter.

After we had reascended the slopes of the iceberg and reached our camp, Captain Len Guy had the men mustered. The only missing man was Dirk Peters, who had decidedly isolated himself from the crew. There was nothing to fear from him, however; he would be with the faithtul against the mutinous, and under all circumstanceswe might count upon him. When the circle had been formed, Captain Len Guy spoke, without allowing any sign of discouragement to appear, and explained the position with the utmost frankness and lucidity, stating in the first place that it was absolutely necessary to lower the cargo to the coast and stow it away in one of the caverns. Concerning the vital question of food, he stated that the supply of flour, preserved meat, and dried vegetables would suffice for the winter, however prolonged, and on that of fuel he was satisfied that we should not want for coal, provided it was not wasted; and it would be possible to economize it, as the hibernating waifs might brave the cold of the polar zone under a covering of snow and a roof of ice.

Was the captain’s tone of security feigned? I did not think so, especially as West approved of what he said.

A third question raised by Hearne remained, and was well calculated to arouse jealousy and anger among the crew. It was the question of the use to be made of the only craft remaining to us. Ought the boat to be kept for the needs of our hibernation, or used to enable us to return to the iceberg barrier?

Captain Len Guy would not pronounce upon this; he desired to postpone the decision for twenty-four or forty-eight hours. The boat, carrying the provisions necessary for such a voyage, could not accommodate more than eleven or, at the outside, twelve men. If the departure of the boat were agreed to, then its passengers must be selected by lot. The captain proceeded to state that neither West, the boatswain, I, nor he would claim any privilege, but would submit to the fortune of the lot with all the others. Both Martin Holt and Hardy were perfectly capable of taking the boat to the fishing-grounds, where the whalers would still be found.

Then, those to whom the lot should fall were not to forget their comrades, left to winter on the eighty-sixth parallel, and were to send a ship to take them off at the return of summer.

All this was said in a tone as calm as it was firm. I must do Captain Len Guy the justice to say that he rose to the occasion.

When he had concluded — without any interruption even from Hearne — no one made a remark. There was, indeed, none to be made, since, in the given case, lots were to be drawn under conditions of perfect equality.

The hour of rest having arrived, each man entered the camp, partook of the supper prepared by Endicott, and went to sleep for the last time under the tents.

Dirk Peters had not reappeared, and I sought for him in vain.

On the following day, the 7th of February, everybody set to work early with a will. The boat was let down with all due precaution to the base of the iceberg, and drawn up by the men on a little sandy beach out of reach of the water. It was in perfectly good condition, and thoroughly serviceable.

The boatswain then set to work on the former contents of the *Halbrane*, furniture, bedding, sails, clothing, instruments, and utensils. Stowed away in a cabin, these things would no longer be exposed to the knocking about and damage of the iceberg. The cases containing preserved food and the casks of spirits were rapidly carried ashore.

I worked with the captain and West at this onerous task, and Dirk Peters also turned up and lent the valuable assistance of his great strength, but he did not utter a word to anyone.

Our occupation continual on the 8th, 9th, and 10th February, and our task was finished in the afternoon of the 10th. The cargo was safely stowed in the interior of a large grotto, with access to it by a narrow opening. We were to inhabit the adjoining grotto, and Endicott set up his kitchen in the latter, on the advice of the boatswain. Thus we should profit by the heat of the stove, which was to cook our food and warm the cavern during the long days, or rather the long nights of the austral winter.

During the process of housing and storing, I observed nothing to arouse suspicion in the bearing of Hearne and the Falklands men. Nevertheless, the half-breed was kept on guard at the boat, which might easily have been seized upon the beach.

Hurliguerly, who observed his comrades closely, appeared less anxious.

On that same evening Captain Len Guy, having reassembled his people, stated that the question should be discussed on the morrow, adding that, if it were decided in the affirmative, lots should be drawn immediately. No reply was made.

It was late, and half dark outside, for at this date the sun was on the edge of the horizon, and would very soon disappear below it.

I had been asleep for some hours when I was awakened by a great shouting at a short distance. I sprang up instantly and darted out of lhe cavern, simultaneously with the captain and West, who had also been suddenly aroused from sleep.

“The boat! the boat!” cried West.

The boat was no longer in its place — that place so jealously guarded by Dirk Peters.

After they had pushed the boat into the sea, three men had got into it with bales and casks, while ten others strove to control the half-breed.

Hearne was there, and Martin Holt also; the latter, it seemed to me, was not interfering.

These wretches, then, intended to depart before the lots were drawn; they meant to forsake us. They had succeeded in surprising Dirk Peters, and they would have killed him, had he not fought hard for life.

In the face of this mutiny, knowing our inferiority of numbers, and not knowing whether he might count on all the old crew, Captain Len Guy re-entered the cavern with West in order to procure arms. Hearne and his accomplices were armed.

I was about to follow them when the following words arrested my steps.

The half-breed, overpowered by numbers, had been knocked down, and at this moment Martin Holt, in gratitude to the man who saved his life, was rushing to his aid, but Hearne called out to him, —

“Leave the fellow alone, and come with us!”

Martin Holt hesitated.

“Yes, leave him alone, I say; leave Dirk Peters, the assassin of your brother, alone.”

“The assassin of my brother!”

“Your brother, killed on board the *Grampus* — ”

“Killed! by Dirk Peters?”

“Yes! Killed and eaten — eaten — eaten!” repeated Hearne, who pronounced the hateful worms with a kind of howl.

And then, at a sign from Hearne, two of his comrades seized Martin Holt and dragged him into the boat. Hearne was instantly followed by all those whom he had induced to join in this criminal deed.

At that moment Dirk Peters rose from the ground, and sprang upon one of the Falklands men as he was in the act of stepping on the platform of the boat, lifted him up bodily, hurled him round his head and dashed his brains out against a rock.

In an instant the half-breed fell, shot in the shoulder by a bullet from Hearne’s pistol, and the boat was pushed off.

Then Captain Len Guy and West came out of the cavern — the whole scene had passed in less than a minute — and ran down to the point, which they reached together with the boatswain, Hardy, Francis, and Stern.

The boat, which was drawn by the current, was already some distance off, and the tide was falling rapidly.

West shouldered his gun and fired; a sailor dropped into the bottom of the boat. A second shot, fired by Captain Len Guy, grazed Hearne’s breast, and the ball was lost among the ice-blocks at the moment when the boat disappeared behind the iceberg.

The only thing for us to do was to cross to the other side of the point. The current would carry the wretches thither, no doubt, before it bore them northsyard. If they passed within range, and if a second shot should hit Hearne, either killing or wounding him, his companions might perhaps decide on coming back to us.

A quarter of an hour elapsed. When the boat appeared at the other side of the point, it was so far off that our bullets could not reach it. Hearne had already had the sail set, and the boat, impelled by wind and current jointly, was soon no more than a white speck on the face of the waters, and speedily disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOUND AT LAST

The question of our wintering on the land whereon we had been thrown was settled for us. But, after all, the situation was not changed for those among the nine (now only remaining of the twenty-three) who should not have drawn the lot of departure. Who could speculate upon the chances of the whole nine? Might not all of them have drawn the lot of “stay”? And, when every chance was fully weighed, was that of those who had left us the best? To this question there could be no answer.

When the boat had disappeared, Captain Len Guy and his companions retraced their steps towards the cavern in which we must live for all the time during which we could not go out, in the dread darkness of the antarctic winter. My first thought was of Dirk Peters, who, being wounded, could not follow us when we hurried to the other side of the point.

On reaching the cavern I failed to find the half-breed, Was he severely wounded? Should we have to mourn the death of this man who was as faithful to us as to his “poor Pym”?

“Let us search for him, Mr. Jeorling!” cried the boatswain.

“We will go together,” said the captain. “Dirk Peters would never have forsaken us, and we will not forsake him.”

“Would he come back,” said I, “now that what he thought was known to him and me only has come out?”

I informed my companions of the reason why the name of Ned Holt had been changed to that of Parker in Arthur Pym’s narrative, and of the circumstances under which the half-breed had apprised me of the fact. At the same time I urged every consideration that might exculpate him, dwelling in particular upon the point that if the lot had fallen to Dirk Peters, he would have been the victim of the others' hunger.

"Dirk Peters confided this secret to you only?" inquired Captain Len Guy.

"To me only, captain."

"And you have kept it?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I cannot understand how it came to the knowledge of Hearne."

"At first," I replied, "I thought Hearne might have talked in his sleep, and that it was by chance Martin Holt learned the secret. After reflection, however, I recalled to mind that when the half-breed related the scene on the *Grampus* to me, he was in my cabin, and the side sash was raised. I have reason to think that the man at the wheel overheard our conversation. Now that man was Hearne, who, in order to hear it more clearly, let go the wheel, so that the *Halbrane* lurched — "

"I remember," said West. "I questioned the fellow sharply, and sent him clown into the hold."

"Well, then, captain," I resumed, "it was from that day that Hearne made up to Martin Holt. Hurliguerly called my attention to the fact."

"Of course he did," said the boatswain, "for Hearne, not being capable of managing the boat which he intended to seize, required a master-hand like Holt."

“And so,” I said, “he kept on urging Holt to question the half-breed concerning his brother’s fate, and you know how Holt came at last to learn the fearful truth. Martin Holt seemed to be stupefied by the revelation. The others dragged him away, and now he is with them!” We were all agreed that things had happened as I supposed, and now the question was, did Dirk Peters, in his present state of mind, mean to absent himself? Would he consent to resume his place among us?

We all left the cavern, and after an hour’s search we came in sight of Dirk Peters, whose first impulse was to escape from us. At length, however, Hurliguerly and Francis came up with him. He stood still and made no resistance. I advanced and spoke to him, the others did the same. Captain Len Guy offered him his hand, which he took after a moment’s hesitation. Then, without uttering a single word, he returned towards the beach.

From that day no allusion was ever made to the tragic story of the *Grampus*. Dirk Peters’ wound proved to be slight; he merely wrapped a piece of sailcloth round the injured arm, and went off to his work with entire unconcern.

We made all the preparation in our power for a prolonged hibernation. Winter was threatening us. For some days past the sun hardly showed at all through the mists. The temperature fell to 36 degrees and would rise no more, while the solar rays, casting shadows of endless length upon the soil, gave hardly any heat. The captain made us put on warm woollen clothes without waiting for the cold to become more severe.

Icebergs, packs, streams, and drifts came in greater numbers from the south. Some of these struck and stayed upon the coast, which was already heaped up with ice, but the greater number disappeared in the direction of the north-east.

“All these pieces,” said the boatswain, “will go to the closing up of the iceberg wall. If Hearne and his lot of scoundrels are not ahead of them, I imagine they will find the door shut, and as they have no key to open it with — ”

“I suppose you think, boatswain, that our case is less desperate than theirs?”

“I do think so, Mr. Jeorling, and I have always thought so. If everything had been done as it was settled, and the lot had fallen to me to go with the boat, I would have given up my turn to one of the others. After all, there is something in feeling dry ground under our feet. I don’t wish the death of anybody, but if Hearne and his friends do not succeed in clearing the iceberg barrier — if they are doomed to pass the winter on the ice, reduced for food to a supply that will only last a few weeks, you know the fate that awaits them!”

“Yes, a fate worse than ours!”

“And besides,” said the boatswain, “even supposing they do reach the Antarctic Circle. If the whalers have already left the fishing-grounds, it is not a laden and overladen craft that will keep the sea until the Australian coasts are in sight.”

This was my own opinion, and also that of the captain and West.

During the following four days, we completed the storage of the whole of our belongings, and made some excursions into the interior of the country, finding “all barren,” and not a trace that any landing had ever been made there.

One day, Captain Len Guy proposed that we should give a geographical name to the region whither the iceberg had carried us. It was named Halbrane Land, in memory of our schooner, and we called the strait that separated the two parts of the polar continent the Jane Sound.

Then we took to shooting the penguins which swarmed upon the rocks, and to capturing some of the amphibious animals which frequented the beach. We began to feel the want of fresh meat, and Endicott’s cooking rendered seal and walrus flesh quite palatable. Besides, the fat of these creatures would serve, at need, to warm the cavern and feed the cooking-stove. Our most formidable enemy would be the cold, and we must fight it by every means within our power. It remained to be seen whether the amphibia would not forsake Halbrane Land at the approach of winter, and seek a less rigorous climate in lower latitudes. Fortunately there were hundreds of other animals to secure our little company from hunger, and even from thirst, at need. The beach was the home of numbers of galapagos — a kind of turtle so called from an archipelago in the equinoctial sea, where also they abound, and mentioned by Arthur Pym as supplying food to the islanders, It will be remembered that Pym and Peters found three of these galapagos in the native boat which carried them away from Tsalal Island.

The movement of these huge creatures is slow, heavy, and waddling; they have thin necks two feet long, triangular snake-like heads, and can go without food for very long periods.

Arthur Pym has compared the antarctic turtles to dromedaries, because, like those ruminants, they have a pouch just where the neck begins, which contains from two to three gallons of cold fresh water. He relates, before the scene of the lot-drawing, that but for one of these turtles the shipwrecked crew of the Grampus must have died of hunger and thirst. If Pym is to be believed, some of the great turtles weigh from twelve to fifteen hundred pounds. Those of Halbrane Land did not go beyond seven or eight hundred pounds, but their flesh was none the less savoury.

On the 19th of February an incident occurred — an incident which those who acknowledge the intervention of Providence in human affairs will recognize as providential.

It was eight o'clock in the morning; the weather was calm; the sky was tolerably clear; the thermometer stood at thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit.

We were assembled in the cavern, with the exception of the boatswain, waiting for our breakfast, which Endicott was preparing, and were about to take our places at table, when we heard a call from outside.

The voice was Hurliguerly's, and we hurried out. On seeing us, he cried, —

"Come — come quickly!"

He was standing on a rock at the foot of the hillock above the beach in which Halbrahe Land ended beyond the point, and his right hand was stretched out towards the sea.

"What is it?" asked Captain Len Guy.

"A boat."

"Is it the Halbrane's boat coming back?"

“No, captain — it is not.”

Then we perceived a boat, not to be mistaken for that of our schooner in form or dimensions, drifting without oars or paddle, seemingly abandoned to the current.

We had but one idea in common — to seize at any cost upon this derelict craft, which would, perhaps, prove our salvation. But how were we to reach it? how were we to get it in to the point of Halbrane Land?

While we were looking distractedly at the boat and at each other, there came a sudden splash at the end of the hillock, as though a body had fallen into the sea.

It was Dirk Peters, who, having flung off his clothes, had sprung from the top of a rock, and was swimming rapidly towards the boat before we made him out.

We cheered him heartily. I never beheld anything like that swimming. He bounded through the waves like a porpoise, and indeed he possessed the strength and swiftness of one. What might not be expected of such a man!

In a few minutes the half-breed had swum several cables’ lengths towards the boat in an oblique direction. We could only see his head like a black speck on the surface of the rolling waves. A period of suspense, of intense watching of the brave swimmer succeeded. Surely, surely he would reach the boat; but must he not be carried away with it? Was it to be believed that even his great strength would enable him, swimming, to tow it to the beach?

“After all, why should there not be oars in the boat?” said the boatswain.

“He has it! He has it! Hurrah, Dirk, hurrah!” shouted Hurliguerly, and Endicott echoed his exultant cheer.

The half-breed had, in fact, reached the boat and raised himself alongside half out of the water. His big, strong hand grasped the side, and at the risk of causing the boat to capsize, he hoisted himself up to the side, stepped over it, and sat down to draw his breath.

Almost instantly a shout reached our cars. It was uttered by Dirk Peters. What had he found? Paddles! It must be so, for we saw him seat himself in the front of the boat, and paddle with all his strength in striving to get out of the current.

“Come along!” said the captain, and, turning the base of the hillock, we all ran along the edge of the beach between the blackish stones that bestrewed it.

After some time, West stopped us. The boat had reached the shelter of a small projection at that place, and it was evident that it would be run ashore there.

When it was within five or six cables’ lengths, and the eddy was helping it on, Dirk Peters let go the paddles, stooped towards the after-part of the boat, and then raised himself, holding up an inert body.

An agonized cry from Captain Len Guy rent the air!

“My brother — my brother!”

“He is living! He is living!” shouted Dirk Peters.

A moment later, the boat had touched the beach, and Captain Len Guy held his brother in his arms.

Three of William Guy’s companions lay apparently lifeless in the bottom of the boat.

And these four men were all that remained of the crew of the *Jane*.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ELEVEN YEARS IN A FEW PAGES.

The heading of the following chapter indicates that the adventures of William Guy and his companions after destruction of the English schooner, and the details of their history subsequent to the departure of Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters, are about to be narrated with all possible brevity.

We carried our treasure-trove to the cavern, and had happiness of restoring all four men to life. In reality, it was hunger, nothing but hunger, which had reduced the poor fellows to the semblance of death.

On the 8th of February, 1828, the crew of the *Jane*, having no reason to doubt the good faith of the population of Tsalal Island, or that of their chief, Too-Wit, disembarked, in order to visit the village of Klock-Klock, having previously put the schooner into a state of defense, leaving six men on board.

The crew, counting William Guy, the captain, Arthur Pym, and Dirk Peters, formed a body of thirty-two men armed with guns, pistols, and knives. The dog Tiger accompanied them.

On reaching the narrow gorge leading to the village preceded and followed by the numerous warriors of Too Wit, the little company divided, Arthur Pym, Dirk Peters, and Allen (the sailor) entering a cleft in the hill-side with the intention of crossing it to the other side. From that moment their companions were never to see them more.

After a short interval a shock was felt. The opposite hill fell down in a vast heap, burying William Guy and his twenty-eight companions.

Twenty-two of these unfortunate men were crushed to death on the instant, and their bodies would never be found under that mass of earth.

Seven, miraculously sheltered in the depth of a great cleft of the hill, had survived the catastrophe. These were William Guy, Patterson, Roberts, Coyin, Trinkle, also Forbes and Sexton, since dead. As for Tiger, they knew not whether he had perished in the landslip, or whether he had escaped. There existed in the right side of the hill, as well as in the left, on either side of the fissure, certain winding passages, and it was by crawling along these in the darkness that William Guy, Patterson, and the others reached a cavity which let in light and air in abundance. From this shelter they beheld the attack on the *Jane* by sixty pirogues, the defence made by the six men on board; the invasion of the ship by the savages, and finally the explosion which caused the death of a vast number of natives as well as the complete destruction of the ship.

Too-Wit and the Tsalal islanders were at first terrified by the effects of this explosion, but probably still more disappointed. Their instincts of pillage could not be gratified, because some valueless wreckage was all that remained of the ship and her cargo, and they had no reason to suppose that any of the crew had survived the cleverly contrived collapse of the hill. Hence it came about that Arthur Pym and Dirk Peters on the one side, and William Guy and his companions on the other, were enabled to remain undisturbed in the labyrinths of Klock-Klock, where they fed on the flesh of bitterns — these they could catch with their hands — and the fruit of the nut-trees which grow on the hill-sides. They procured fire by rubbing pieces of soft against pieces of hard wood; there was a quantity of both within their reach.

After a whole week of this confinement, Arthur Pym and the half-breed had succeeded, as we know, in leaving their hiding-place, securing a boat, and abandoning Tsalal Island, but William Guy and his companions had not yet found an opportunity to escape.

After they had been shut up in the labyrinth for twentyone days, the birds on which they lived began to fail them, and they recognized that their only means of escaping hunger — (they had not to fear thirst, for there was a spring of fresh water in the interior of the hill) — was to go down again to the coast, lay hands upon a native boat, and get out to sea. Where were the fugitives to go, and what was to become of them without provisions? — these were questions that had to be asked, and which nobody could answer. Nevertheless, they would not have hesitated to attempt the adventure if they could have a few hours of darkness; but, at that time of year, the sun did not as yet go down behind the horizon of the eighty-fourth parallel.

Death would probably have put an end to their misery had not the situation been changed by the following events.

On the 22nd of February, in the morning, William Guy and Patterson were talking together, in terrible perplexity of mind, at the orifice of the cavity that opened upon the country. They no longer knew how to provide for the wants of seven persons, who were then reduced to eating nuts only, and were suffering in consequence from severe pain in the head and stomach. They could see big turtles crawling on the beach, but how could they venture to go thither, with hundreds of natives coming and going about their several occupations, with their constant cry of *tékéli-li*?

Suddenly, this crowd of people became violently agitated. Men, women, and children ran wildly about on every side. Some of the savages even took to their boats as though a great danger were at hand. What was happening?

William Guy and his companions were very soon informed. The cause of the tumult was the appearance of an unknown animal, a terrible quadruped, which dashed into the midst of the islanders, snapping at and biting them indiscriminately, as it sprang at their throats with a hoarse growling.

And yet the infuriated animal was alone, and might easily have been killed by stones or arrows. Why then did a crowd of savages manifest such abject terror? Why did they take to flight? Why did they appear incapable of defending themselves against this one beast?

The animal was white, and the sight of it had produced the phenomenon previously observed, that inexplicable terror of whiteness common to all the natives of Tsalal.

To their extreme surprise, William Guy and hie companions recognized the strange animal as the dog Tiger.

Yes! Tiger had escaped from the crumbling mass of the hill and betaken himself to the interior of the island, whence he had returned to Klock-Klock, to spread terror among the natives. But Tiger was no mere phantom foe; he was the most dangerous and deadly of enemies, for the poor animal was mad, and his fangs were fatal!

This was the reason why the greater part of the Tsalal islanders took to flight, headed by their chief, Too-Wit, and the Wampos, who are the leading personages of Klock-Klock. It was under these extraordinary circumstances that they abandoned their island, whither they were destined never to return.

Although the boats carried off the bulk of the population, a considerable number still remained on Tsalal, having no means of escape, and their fate accomplished itself quickly. Several natives who were bitten by Tiger developed hydrophobia rapidly, and attacked the others. Fearful scenes ensued, and are briefly to be summed up in one dismal statement. The bones we had seen in or near Klock-Klock were those of the poor savages, which had lain there bleaching for eleven years!

The poor dog had died after he had done his fell work, in a corner on the beach, where Dirk Peters found his skeleton and the collar bearing the name of Arthur Pym.

Then, after those natives who could not escape from the island had all perished in the manner described, William Guy, Patterson, Trinkle, Covin, Forbes, and Sexton ventured to come out of the labyrinth, where they were on the verge of death by starvation.

What sort of existence was that of the seven survivors of the expedition during the eleven ensuing years?

On the whole, it was more endurable than might have been supposed. The natural products of an extremely fertile soil and the presence of a certain number of domestic animals secured them against want of food; they had only to make out the best shelter for themselves they could contrive, and wait for an opportunity of getting away from the island with as much patience as might be granted to them. And from whence could such an opportunity come? Only from one of the chances within the resources of Providence.

Captain William Guy, Patterson, and their five companions descended the ravine, which was half filled with the fallen masses of the hill-face, amid heaps of scoria and blocks of black granite. Before they left this gorge, it occurred to William Guy to explore the fissure on the right into which Arthur Pym, Dirk Peters, and Allen had turned, but he found it blocked up;

it was impossible for him to get into the pass. Thus he remained in ignorance of the existence of the natural or artificial labyrinth which corresponded with the one he had just left, and probably communicated with it under the dry bed of the torrent. The little company, having passed the chaotic barrier that intercepted the northern route, proceeded rapidly towards the north-west. There, on the coast, at about three miles from Klock-Klock, they established themselves in a grotto very like that in our own occupation on the coast of Halbrane Land.

And it was in this place that, during long, hopeless years, the seven survivors of the fane lived, as we were about to do ourselves, but under better conditions, for the fertility of the soil of Tsalal furnished them with resources unknown in Halbrane Land. In reality, we were condemned to perish when our provisions should be exhausted, but they could have waited indefinitely — and they did wait.

They had never entertained any doubt that Arthur Pym, Dirk Peters, and Allen had perished, and this was only too true in Allen's case. How, indeed, could they ever have imagined that Pyro and the half-breed had got hold of a boat and made their escape from Tsalal Island?

So, then, as William Guy told us, not an incident occurred to break the monotony of that existence of eleven years — not even the reappearance of the islanders, who were kept away from Tsalal by superstitious terror. No danger had threatened them during all that time; but, of course, as it became more and more prolonged, they lost the hope of ever being rescued. At first, with the return of the fine season, when the sea was once more open, they had thought it possible that a ship would be sent in search of the *Jane*. But after four or five years they relinquished all hope.

There is no need for dwelling on this period, which extends from the year 1828 to the year 1839. The winters were hard. The summer did indeed extend its beneficent influence to the islands of the Tsalal group, but the cold season, with its attendant snows, rains, and tempests, spared them none of its severity.

During seven months Captain William Guy had not lost one of those who had come with him safe and sound out of the trap set for them at Klock-Klock, and this was due, no doubt, to their robust constitutions, remarkable power of endurance, and great strength of character. Alas! misfortune was making ready to fall on them.

The month of May had come — it corresponds in those regions to the month of November in northern lands-and the ice-packs which the current carried towards the north were beginning to drift past Tsalal. One day, one of the seven men failed to return to the cavern. They called, they waited, they searched for him. All was in vain. He did not reappear; no doubt he had been drowned. He was never more seen by his fellow-exiles.

This man was Patterson, the faithful companion of William Guy.

Now, what William Guy did not know, but we told him, was that Patterson — under what circumstances none would ever learn — had been carried away on the surface of an iceblock, where he died of hunger. And on that ice-block, which had travelled so far as Prince Edward Island, the boatswain had discovered the corpse of the unfortunate man almost decomposed by the action of the warmer waters.

When Captain Len Guy told his brother of the finding of the body of Patterson, and how it was owing to the notes in his pocket-book that the

Halbrane had been enabled to proceed towards the antarctic seas, William Guy hid his face in his hands and wept.

Other misfortunes followed upon this one.

Five months after the disappearance of Patterson, in the middle of October, Tsalal Island was laid waste from coast to coast by an earthquake, which destroyed the southwestern group almost entirely. William Guy and his companions must soon have perished on the barren land, which no longer could give them food, had not the means of leaving its coast, now merely an expanse of tumbled rocks, been afforded them in an almost miraculous manner. Two days after the earthquake, the current carried ashore within a few hundred yards of their cavern a boat which had drifted from the island group on the south-west.

Without the delay of even one day, the boat was laden with as much of the remaining provisions as it could contain, and the six men embarked in it, bidding adieu for ever to the now uninhabitable island.

Unfortunately a very strong breeze was blowing; it was impossible to resist it, and the boat was driven southwards by that very same current which had caused our iceberg to drift to the coast of Halbrane Land.

For two months and a half these poor fellows were borne across the open sea, with no control over their course. It was not until the 2nd of January in the present year (1840) that they sighted land — east of the Jane Sound.

Now, we already knew this land was not more than fifty miles from Halbrane Land. Yes! so small, relatively, was the distance that separated us from those whom we had sought for in the antarctic regions far and wide, and concerning whom we had lost hope.

Their boat had gone ashore far to the south-east of us. But on how different a coast from that of Tsalal Island, or, rather, on one how like that of Halbrane Land! Nothing was to be seen but sand and stones; neither trees, shrubs, nor plants of any kind. Their provisions were almost exhausted; William Guy and his companions were soon reduced to extreme want, and two of the little company, Forbes and Sexton, died.

The remaining four resolved not to remain a single day longer in the place where they were doomed to die of hunger. They embarked in the boat with the small supply of food still remaining, and once more abandoned themselves to the current, without having been able to verify their position, for want of instruments.

Thus had they been borne upon the unknown deep for twenty-five days, their resources were completely exhausted, and they had not eaten for forty-eight hours, when the boat, with its occupants lying inanimate at the bottom of it, was sighted from Halbrane Land. The rest is already known to the reader of this strange eventful history.

And now the two brothers were at length reunited in that remote corner of the big world which we had dubbed Halbrane Land.

CHAPTER XXV.

“WE WERE THE FIRST.”

Two days later not one of the survivors from the two schooners, the *Jane* and the *Halbrane*, remained upon any coast of the Antarctic region.

On the 21st of February, at six o’clock in the morning, the boat, with us all (we numbered thirteen) in it, left the little creek and doubled the point of Halbrane Land. On the previous day we had fully and finally debated the question of our departure, with the understanding that if it were settled in the affirmative, we should start without delay.

The captain of the fane was for an immediate departure, and Captain Len Guy was not opposed to it. I willingly sided with them, and West was of a similar opinion. The boatswain was inclined to oppose us. He considered it imprudent to give up a certainty for the uncertain, and he was backed by Endicott, who would in any case say “ditto” to his “Mr. Burke.” However, when the time came, Hurliguerly Conformed to the view of the majority with a good grace, and declared himself quite ready to set out, since we were all of that way of thinking.

Our boat was one of those in use in the Tsalal Archipelago for plying between the islands. We knew, from the narrative of Arthur Pym, that these boats are of two kinds, one resembling rafts or flat boats, the other strongly-built pirogues. Our boat was of the former kind, forty feet long, six feet in width, and worked by several paddles.

We called our little craft the *Paracura*, after a fish which abounds in these waters. A rough image of that denizen of the southern deep was cut upon the gunwale.

Needless to say that the greater part of the cargo of the *Halbrane* was left in our cavern, fully protected from the weather, at the disposal of any shipwrecked people who might chance to be thrown on the coast of Halbrane Land. The boatswain had planted a spar on the top of this slope to attract attention. But, our two schooners notwithstanding, what vessel would ever venture into such latitudes?

Nota Bene. — We were just thirteen — the fatal number. Perfectly good relations subsisted among us. We had no longer to dread the rebellion of a Hearne. (How often we speculated upon the fate of those whom he had beguiled!)

At seven o'clock, the extreme point of Halbrahe Land lay five miles behind us, and in the evening we gradually lost sight of the heights that variated that part of the coast.

I desire to lay special stress on the fact that not a single scrap of iron entered into the construction of this boat, not so much as a nail or a bolt, for that metal was entirely unknown to the Tsalal islanders. The planks were bound together by a sort of liana, or creeping-plant, and caulked with moss steeped in pitch, which was turned by contact with the sea-water to a substance as hard as metal.

I have nothing special to record during the week that succeeded our departure. The breeze blew steadily from the south, and we did not meet with any unfavourable current between the banks of the Jane Sound.

During those first eight days, the Paracuts, by paddling when the wind fell, had kept up the speed that was indispensable for our reaching the Pacific Ocean within a short time.

The desolate aspect of the land remained the same, while the strait was already visited by floating drifts, packs of one to two hundred feet in length, some oblong, others circular, and also by icebergs which our boat passed easily. We were made anxious, however, by the fact that these masses were proceeding towards the iceberg barrier, for would they not close the passages, which ought to be still open at this time?

I shall mention here that in proportion as Dirk Peters was carried farther and farther from the places wherein no trace ofhis poor Pym had been found, he was more silent than ever, and no longer even answered me when I addressed him.

It must not be forgotten that since our iceberg had passed beyond the south pole, we were in the zone of eastern longitudes counted from the zero of Greenwich to the hundred and eightieth degree. All hope must therefore be abandoned of our either touching at the Falklands, or finding whaling-ships in the waters of the Sandwich Islands, the South Orkneys, or South Georgia.

Our voyage proceeded under unaltered conditions for ten days. Our little craft was perfectly sea-worthy. The two captains and West fully appreciated its soundness, although, as I have previously said, not a scrap of iron had a place in its construction. It had not once been necessary to repair its seams, so staunch were they. To be sure, the sea was smooth, its long, rolling waves were hardly ruffled on their surface.

On the loth of March, with the same longitude the observation gave 7° 13’ for latitude. The speed of the *Paracuta* had then been thirty miles in each twenty-four hours. If this rate of progress could be maintained for three weeks, there was every chance of our finding the passes open, and being able to get round the iceberg barrier; also that the whaling-ships would not yet have left the fishing-grounds.

The sun was on the verge of the horizon, and the time was approaching when the Antarctic region would be shrouded in polar night. Fortunately, in re-ascending towards the north we were getting into waters from whence light was not yet banished. Then did we witness a phenomenon as extraordinary as any of those described by Arthur Pym. For three or four hours, sparks, accompanied by a sharp noise, shot out of our fingers' ends, our hair, and our beards. There was an electric snowstorm, with great flakes falling loosely, and the contact produced this strange luminosity. The sea rose so suddenly and tumbled about so wildly that the *Paracuta* was several times in danger of being swallowed up by the waves, but we got through the mystic-seeming tempest all safe and sound.

Nevertheless, space was thenceforth but imperfectly lighted. Frequent mists came up and bounded our outlook to a few cable-lengths. Extreme watchfulness and caution were necessary to avoid collision with the floating masses of ice, which were travelling more slowly than the *Paracuta*.

It is also to be noted that, on the southern side, the sky was frequently lighted up by the broad and brilliant rays of the polar aurora.

The temperature fell very perceptibly, and no longer rose above twenty-three degrees.

Forty-eight hours later Captain Len Guy and his brother succeeded with great difficulty in taking an approximate observation, with the following results of their calculations:

Latitude: 75° 17' south.

Latitude: 118° 3' east.

At this date, therefore (12th March), the *Paracuta* was distant from the waters of the Antarctic Circle only four hundred miles.

During the night a thick fog came on, with a subsidence of the breeze. This was to be regretted, for it increased the risk of collision with the floating ice. Of course fog could not be a surprise to us, being where we were, but what did surprise us was the gradually increasing speed of our boat, although the falling of the wind ought to have lessened it.

This increase of speed could not be due to the current for we were going more quickly than it.

This state of things lasted until morning, without our being able to account for what was happening, when at about ten o'clock the mist began to disperse in the low zones. The coast on the west reappeared — a rocky coast, without a mountainous background; the *Paracuta* was following its line.

And then, no more than a quarter of a mile away, we beheld a huge mound, reared above the plain to a height of three hundred feet, with a circumference of from two to three hundred feet. In its strange form this great mound resembled an enormous sphinx; the body uptight, the paws stretched out, crouching in the attitude of the winged monster which Grecian Mythology has placed upon the way to Thebes.

Was this a living animal, a gigantic monster, a mastodon a thousand times the size of those enormous elephants of the polar seas whose remains are still found in the ice? In our frame of mind we might have believed that it was such a creature, and believed also that the mastodon was about to hurl itself on our little craft and crush it to atoms.

After a few moments of unreasoning and unreasonable fright, we recognized that the strange object was only a great mound, singularly shaped, and that the mist had just rolled off its head, leaving it to stand out and confront us.

Ah! that sphinx! I remembered, at sight of it, that on the night when the iceberg was overturned and the *Halbrane* was carried away, I had dreamed of a fabulous animal of this kind, seated at the pole of the world, and from whom Edgar Poe could only wrest its secrets.

But our attention was to be attracted, our surprise, even our alarm, was evoked soon by phenomena still more strange than the mysterious earth form upon which the mist-curtain had been raised so suddenly.

I have said that the speed of the Paracuta was gradually increasing; now it was excessive, that of the current remaining inferior to it. Now, of a sudden, the grapnel that had belonged to the *Halbrane*, and was in the bow of the boat, flew out of its socket as though drawn by an irresistible power, and the rope that held it was strained to breaking point. It seemed to tow us, as it grazed the surface of the water towards the shore.

“What’s the matter?” cried William Guy. “Cut away, boatswain, cut away!” shouted West, “or we shall be dragged against the rocks.”

Hurliguerly hurried to the bow of the *Paracuta* to cut away the rope. Of a sudden the knife he held was snatched out of his hand, the rope broke, and the grapnel, like a projectile, shot off in the direction of the sphinx.

At the same moment, all the articles on board the boat that were made of iron or steel — cooking utensils, arms, Endicott’s stove, our knives, which were torn from out pockets — took flight after a similar fashion in the same direction, while the boat, quickening its course, brought up against the beach.

What was happening? In order to explain these inexplicable things, were we not obliged to acknowledge that we had come into the region of those wonders which I attributed to the hallucinations of Arthur Pym?

No! These were physical facts which we had just witnessed, and not imaginary phenomenal!

We had, however, no time for reflection, and immediately upon our landing, our attention was turned in another direction by the sight of a boat lying wrecked upon the sand.

“The *Halbrane’s* boat!” cried Hurliguerly. It was indeed the boat which Hearne had stolen, and it was simply smashed to pieces; in a word, only the formless wreckage of a craft which has been flung against rocks by the sea, remained.

We observed immediately that all the ironwork of the boat had disappeared, down to the hinges of the rudder. Not one trace of the metal existed.

What could be the meaning of this?

A loud call from West brought us to a little strip of beach on the right of our stranded boat.

Three corpses lay upon the stony soil, that of Hearne, that of Martin Holt, and that of one of the Falklands men.

Of the thirteen who had gone with the sealing-master, there remained only these three, who had evidently been dead some days.

What had become of the ten missing men? Had their bodies been carried out to sea?

We searched all along the coast, into the creeks, and between the outlying rocks, but in vain. Nothing was to be found, no traces of a camp, not even the vestiges of a landing.

“Their boat,” said William Guy, “must have been struck by a drifting iceberg. The rest of Hearne’s companions have been drowned, and only these three bodies have come ashore, lifeless.”

“But,” asked the boatswain, “how is the state the boat is in to be explained?”

“And especially,” added West, “the disappearance of all the iron?”

“Indeed,” said I, “it looks as though every bit had been violently torn off.”

Leaving the *Paracuta* in the charge of two men, we again took our way to the interior, in order to extend our search over a wider expanse.

As we were approaching the huge mound the mist cleared away, and the form stood out with greater distinctness. It was, as I have said, almost that of a sphinx, a dusky-hued sphinx, as though the matter which composed it had been oxidized by the inclemency of the polar climate.

And then a possibility flashed into my mind, an hypothesis which explained these astonishing phenomena.

“Ah!” I exclaimed, “a loadstone! that is it! A magnet with prodigious power of attraction!”

I was understood, and in an instant the final catastrophe, to which Hearne and his companions were victims, was explained with terrible clearness.

The Antarctic Sphinx was simply a colossal magnet. Under the influence of that magnet the iron bands of the *Halbrane's* boat had been torn out and projected as though by the action of a catapult. This was the occult force that had irresistibly attracted everything made of iron on the *Paracuta*. And the boat itself would have shared the fate of the *Halbrane's* boat had a single bit of that metal been employed in its construction. Was it, then, the proximity of the magnetic pole that produced such effects?

At first we entertained this idea, but on reflection we rejected it.

At the place where the magnetic meridians cross, the only phenomenon produced is the vertical position of the magnetic needle in two similar points of the terrestrial globe. This phenomenon, already proved by observations made on the spot, must be identical in the Antarctic regions.

Thus, then, there did exist a magnet of prodigious intensity in the zone of attraction which we had entered. Under our eyes one of those surprising effects which had hitherto been classed among fables was actually produced.

The following appeared to me to be the true explanation.

The Trade-winds bring a constant succession of clouds or mists in which immense quantities of electricity not completely exhausted by storms, are stored. Hence there exists a formidable accumulation of electric fluid at the poles, and it flows towards the land in a permanent stream.

From this cause come the northern and southern auroras, whose luminous splendours shine above the horizon, especially during the long polar night, and are visible even in the temperate zones when they attain theix maximum of culmination.

These continuous currents at the poles, which bewilder our compasses, must possess an extraordinary influence. And it would suffice that a block of iron should be subjected to their action for it to be changed into a magnet of power proportioned to the intensity of the current, to the number of turns of the electric helix, and to the square root of the diameter of the block of magnetized iron. Thus, then, the bulk of the sphinx which upreared its mystic form upon this outer edge of the southern lands might be calculated by thousands of cubic yards.

Now, in order that the current should circulate around it and make a magnet of it by induction, what was required? Nothing but a metallic lode, whose innumerable windings through the bowels of the soil should be connected subterraneously at the base of the block.

It seemed to me also that the place of this block ought to be in the magnetic axis, as a sort of gigantic calamite, from whence the imponderable fluid whose currents made an inexhaustible accumulator set up at the confines of the world should issue. Our compass could not have enabled us to determine whether the marvel before our eyes really was at the magnetic pole of the southern regions. All I can say is, that its needle staggered about, helpless and useless. And in fact the exact location of the Antarctic Sphinx mattered little in respect of the constitution of that artificial loadstone, and the manner in which the clouds and metallic lode supplied its attractive power.

In this very plausible fashion I was led to explain the phenomenon by instinct. It could not be doubted that we were in the vicinity of a magnet which produced these terrible but strictly natural effects by its attraction.

I communicated my idea to my companions, and they regarded this explanation as conclusive, in presence of the physical facts of which we were the actual witnesses.

“We shall incur no risk by going to the foot of the mound, I suppose,” said Captain Len Guy.

“None,” I replied.

“There — yes — here!”

I could not describe the impression those three words made upon us. Edgar Poe would have said that they were three cries from the depths of the under world.

It was Dirk Peters who had spoken, and his body was stretched out in the direction of the sphinx, as though it had been turned to iron and was attracted by the magnet.

Then he sped swiftly towards the sphinx-like mound, and his companions followed him over rough ground strewn with volcanic remains of all sorts.

The monster grew larger as we neared it, but lost none of its mythological shape. Alone on that vast plain it produced a sense of awe. And — but this could only have been a delusionr — we seemed to be drawn towards it by the force of its magnetic attraction.

On arriving at the base of the mound, we found there the various articles on which the magnet had exerted its power; arms, utensils, the grapnel of the *Paracuta*, all adhering to the sides of the monster. There also were the iron relics of the *Halbrane's* boat, all her utensils, arms, and fittings, even to the nails and the iron portions of the rudder.

There was no possibility of regaining possession of any of these things. Even had they not adhered to the loadstone rock at too great a height to be reached, they adhered to it too closely to be detached. Hurliguerly was infuriated by the impossibility of recovering his knife, which he recognized at fifty feet above his head, and cried as he shook his clenched fist at the imperturbable monster, —

"Thief of a sphinx!"

Of course the things which had belonged to the *Halbrane's* boat and the *Paracuta's* were the only artlcles that adorned the mighty sides of the lonely mystic form. Never had any ship reached such a latitude of the Antarctic Sea. Hearne and his accomplices, Captain Len Guy and his companions, were the first who had trodden this point of the southern continent. And any vessel that might have approached this colossal magnet must have incurred certain destruction. Our schooner must have perished, even as its boat had been dashed into a shapeless wreck.

West now reminded us that it was imprudent to prolong our stay upon this Land of the Sphinx — a name to be retained. Time pressed, and a few days' delay would have entailed our wintering at the foot of the ice-barrier.

The order to return to the beach had just been given, when the voice of the half-breed was again heard, as he cried out:

“There! There! There!”

We followed the sounds to the back of the monster’s right paw, and we found Dirk Peters on his knees, with his hands stretched out before an almost naked corpse, which had been preserved intact by the cold of these regions, and was as rigid as iron. The head was bent, a white beard hung down to the waist, the nails of the feet and hands were like claws.

How had this corpse been fixed to the side of the mound at six feet above the ground?

Across the body, held in place by its cross-belt, we saw the twisted barrel of’ a musket, half-eaten by rust.

“Pym-my poor Pym!” groaned Dirk Peters.

He tried to rise, that he might approach and kiss the ossified corpse. But his knees bent under him, a strangled sob seemed to rend his throat, with a terrible spasm his faithful heart broke, and the half-breed fell back — dead!

The story was easy to read. After their separation, the boat had carried Arthur Pym through these Antarctic regions! Like us, once he had passed beyond the south pole, he came into the zone of the monster! And there, while his boat was swept along on the northern current, he was seized by the magnetic fluid before he could get rid of the gun which was slung over his shoulder, and hurled against the fatal loadstone Sphinx of the Ice-realm.

Now the faithful half-breed rests under the clay of the Land of the Antarctic Mystery, by the side of his “poor Pym,” that hero whose strange adventures found a chronicler no less strange in the great American poet!

CHAPTER XXVI.

A LITTLE REMNANT.

That same day, in the afternoon, the *Paracuta* departed from the coast of the Land of the Sphinx, which had lain to the west of us since the 21st of February.

By the death of Dirk Peters the number of the passengers was reduced to twelve. These were all who remained of the double crew of the two schooners, the first comprising thirty-eight men, the second, thirty-two; in all seventy souls. But let it not be forgotten that the voyage of the *Halbrane* had been undertaken in fulfilment of a duty to humanity, and four of the survivors of the *Jane* owed their rescue to it.

And now there remains but little to tell, and that must be related as succinctly as possible. It is unnecessary to dwell upon our return voyage, which was favoured by the constancy of the currents and the wind to the northern course. The last part of the voyage was accomplished amid great fatigue, suffering, and but it ended in our safe deliverance from all these.

Firstly, a few days after our departure from the Land the Sphinx, the sun set behind the western horizon reappear no more for the whole winter. It was then the midst of the semi-darkness of the austral night that the *Paracuta* pursued her monotonous course. True, the southern polar lights were frequently visible; but they were not the sun, that single orb of day which had illumined our horizons during the months of the Antarctic summer, and their capricious splendour could not replace his unchanging light. That long darkness of the poles sheds a moral and physical influence on mortals which no one can elude, a gloomy and overwhelming impression almost impossible to resist.

Of all the *Paracuta's* passengers, the boatswain and Endicott only preserved their habitual good-humour; those two were equally insensible to the weariness and the peril of our voyage. I also except West, who was ever ready to face every eventuality, like a man who is always on the defensive. As for the two brothers Guy, their happiness in being restored to each other made them frequently oblivious of the anxieties and risks of the future.

Of Hurliguerly I cannot speak too highly. He proved himself a thoroughly good fellow, and it raised our drooping spirits to hear him repeat in his jolly voice, —

"We shall get to port all right, my friends, be sure of that. And, if you only reckon things up, you will see that we have had more good luck than bad. Oh, yes, I know, there was the loss of our schooner! Poor *Halbrane*, carried up into the air like a balloon, then flung into the deep llke an avalanche! But, on the other hand, there was the iceberg which brought us to the coast, and the Tsalal boat which brought us and Captain William Guy and his three companions together. And don't forget the current and the breeze that have pushed us on up to now, and will keep pushing us on, I'm sure of that. With so many trumps in our hand we cannot possibly lose the game. The only thing to be regretted is that we shall have to get ashore again in Australia or New Zealand, instead of casting anchor at the Kerguelens, near the quay of Christmas Harbour, in front of the Greea Cormorant."

For a week we pursued our course without deviation to east or west, and it was not until the 21st of March that the *Paracutis* lost sight of Halbrane Land, being carried towards the north by the current, while the coast-line of the continent, for such we are convinced it is, trended in a round curve to the north-east.

Although the waters of this portion of sea were still open, they carried a flotilla of icebergs or ice-fields. Hence arose serious difficulties and also dangers to navigation in the midst of the gloomy mists, when we had to manoeuvre between these moving masses, either to find passage or to prevent our little craft from being crushed like grain between the millstones.

Besides, Captain Len Guy could no longer ascertain his position either in latitude or longitude. The sun being absent, calculations by the position of the stars was too complicated, it was impossible to take altitudcs, and the *Paracuta* abandoned herself to the action of the current, which invariably bore us northward, as the compass indicated. By keeping the reckoning of its medium speed, however, we concluded that on the 27th of March our boat was between the sixty-ninth and the sixty-eighth parallels, that is to say, some seventy miles only from the Antarctic Circle.

Ah! if no obstacle to the course of our perilous navigation had existed, if passage between this inner sea of the southern zone and the waters of the Pacific Ocean had been certain, the *Paracuta* might have reached the extreme limit of the austral seas in a few days. But a few hundred miles more to sail, and the iceberg-barrier would confront us with its immovable rampart, and unless a passage could be found, we should be obliged to go round it either by the east or by the west.

Once cleared indeed —

Ah! once cleared, we should be in a frail craft upon the terrible Pacific Ocean, at the period of the year when its tempests rage with redoubled fury and strong ships dread the might of its waves.

We were determined not to think of this. Heaven would come to our aid. We should be picked up by some ship. This the boatswain asserted confidently, and we were bound to believe the boatswain.

For six entire days, until the and of April, the Paracura held her course among the ice-barrier, whose crest was profiled at an altitude of between seven and eight hundred feet above the level of the sea. The extremities were not visible either on the east or the west, and if our boat did not find an open passage, we could not clear it. By a most fortunate chance a passage was found on the above-mentioned date, and attempted, amid a thousand risks. Yes, we required all the zeal, skill, and courage of our men and their chiefs to accomplish such a task.

At last we were in the South Pacific waters, but our boat had suffered severely in getting through, and it had sprung more than one leak. We were kept busy in baling out the water, which also came in from above.

The breeze was gentle, the sea more calm than we could have hoped, and the real danger did not lie in the risks of navigation. No, it arose from the fact that not a ship was visible in these waters, not a whaler was to be seen on the fishing-grounds. At the beginning of April these places are forsaken, and we arrived some weeks too late.

We learned afterwards that had we arrived a little sooner, we should have met the vessels of the American expedition.

In fact, on the 1st of February, by 95° 50’ longitude and 64° 17’ latitude, Lieutenant Wilkes was still exploring these seas in one of his ships, the *Vincennes*, after having discovered a long extent of coast stretching from east to west. On the approach of the bad season, he returned to Hobart Town, in Tasmania. The same year, the expedition of the French captain Dumont d’Urville, which started in 1838, discovered Adélie Land in 66° 30’ latitude and 38° 21’ east longitude, and Clarie Coast in 64° 30’ and

129° 54’. Their campaign having ended with these important discoveries, the *Astrolabe* and the *Zélée* left the Antarctic Ocean and returned to Hobart Town.

None of these ships, then, were in those waters; so that, when our nutshell *Paracuta* was “alone on a lone, lone sea” beyond the ice-barrier, we were bound to believe that it was no longer possible we could be saved.

We were fifteen hundred miles away from the nearest land, and winter was a month old!

Hurliguerly himself was obliged to acknowledge the last fortunate chance upon which he had counted failed us.

On the 6th of April we were at the end of our resources; the sea began to threaten, the boat seemed likely to be swallowed up in the angry waves.

“A ship!” cried the boatswain, and on the instant we made out a vessel about four miles to the north-east, beneath the mist which had suddenly risen.

Signals were made, signals were perceived; the ship lowered her largest boat and sent it to our rescue.

This ship was the *Tasman*, an American three-master, from Charlestown, where we were received with eager welcome and cordiality. The captain treated my companions as though they had been his own countrymen.

The *Tasman* had come from the Falkland Islands where the captain had learned that seven months previously the American schooner *Halbrane* had gone to the southern seas in search of the shipwrecked people of the *Jane*.

But as the season advanced, the schooner not having reappeared, she was given up for lost in the Antarctic regions.

Fifteen days after our rescue the *Tasman* disembarked the survivors of the crew of the two schooners at Melbourne, and it was there that our men were paid the sums they had so hardly earned, and so well deserved.

We then learned from maps that the *Paracuta* had debouched into the Pacific from the land called Clarie by Dumont d’Urville, and the land called Fabricia, which was discovered in 1838 by Bellenny.

Thus terminated this adventurous and extraordinary expedition, which cost, alas, too many victims. Our final word is that although the chances and the necessities of our voyage carried us farther towards the south pole than hose who preceded us, although we actually did pass beyond the axial point of the terrestrial globe, discoveries of great value still remain to be made in those waters!

Arthur Pym, the hero whom Edgar Poe has made so famous, has shown the way. It is for others to follow him, and to wrest the last Antarctic Mystery from the Sphinx of the Ice-realm.

THE END.

THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM OF NANTUCKET by Edgar Allan Poe

Published in 1838, this is the only complete novel by Poe. It tells the tale of young Arthur Gordon Pym, who stows away aboard a whaling ship called the Grampus. Various adventures and misadventures befall Pym, including shipwreck, mutiny, and cannibalism, before he is saved by the crew of the Jane Guy. Aboard this vessel, Pym and a sailor named Dirk Peters continue their adventures further south. Docking on land, they encounter hostile black-skinned natives before escaping back to the ocean. The novel ends abruptly as Pym and Peters continue towards the South Pole. The story starts out as a fairly conventional adventure at sea, but it becomes increasingly strange and hard to classify. Poe, who intended to present a realistic story, was inspired by several real-life accounts of sea voyages, and drew heavily from Jeremiah N. Reynolds. Later on, the novel influenced Herman Melville and Jules Verne.

Verne’s novel *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields* is a sequel to this novel, which is why *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* is in this collection.

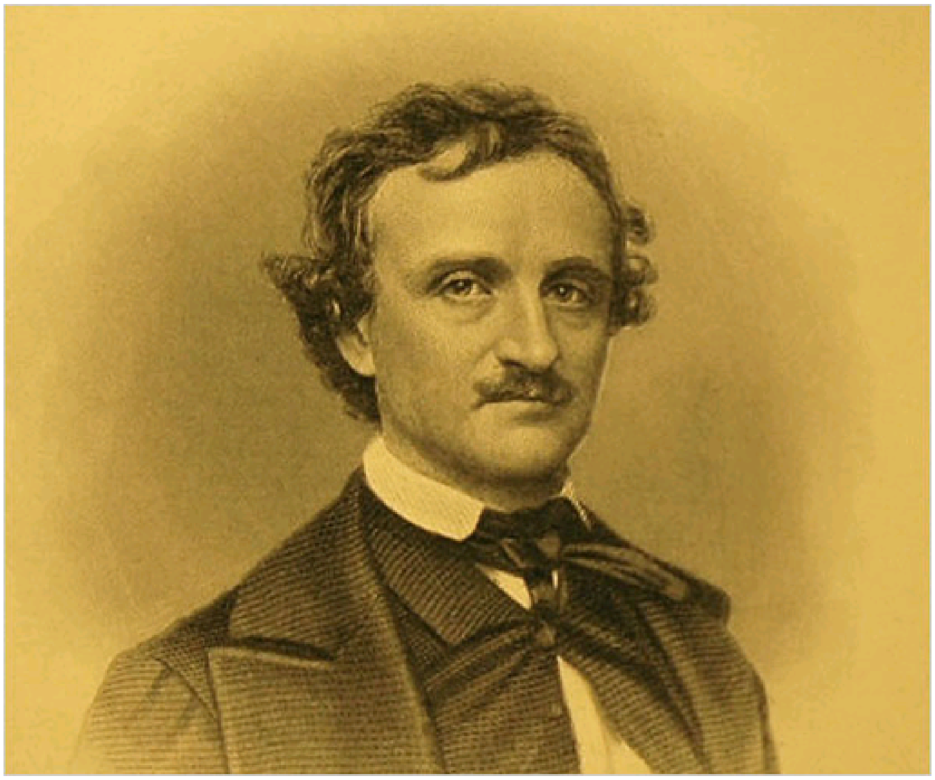

NARRATIVE OF A. GORDON PYM

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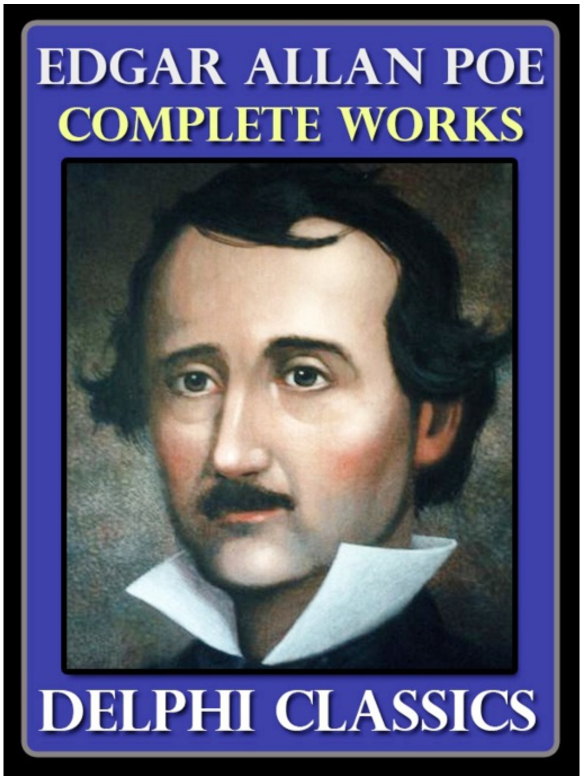
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

UPON my return to the United States a few months ago, after the extraordinary series of adventure in the South Seas and elsewhere, of which an account is given in the following pages, accident threw me into the society of several gentlemen in Richmond, Va. who felt deep interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited, and who were constantly urging it upon me, as a duty, to give my narrative to the public. I had several reasons, however, for declining to do so, some of which were of a nature altogether private, and concern no person but myself; others not so much so. One consideration which deterred me was that, having kept no journal during a greater portion of the time in which I was absent, I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the appearance of that truth it would really possess, barring only the natural and unavoidable exaggeration to which all of us are prone when detailing events which have had powerful influence in exciting the imaginative faculties. Another reason was, that the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvellous that, unsupported as my assertions must necessarily be (except by the evidence of a single individual, and he a half-breed Indian), I could only hope for belief among my family, and those of my friends who have had reason, through life, to put faith in my veracity-the probability being that the public at large would regard what I should put forth as merely an impudent and ingenious fiction. A distrust in my own abilities as a writer was, nevertheless, one of the principal causes which prevented me from complying with the suggestions of my advisers.

Among those gentlemen in Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my statement, more particularly in regard to that portion of it which related to the Antarctic Ocean, was Mr. Poe, lately editor of the “Southern Literary Messenger,” a monthly magazine, published by Mr. Thomas W. White, in the city of Richmond. He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and trust to the shrewdness and common-sense of the public-insisting, with great plausibility, that however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness, if there were any, would give it all the better chance of being received as truth.

Notwithstanding this representation, I did not make up my mind to do as he suggested. He afterward proposed (finding that I would not stir in the matter) that I should allow him to draw up, in his own words, a narrative of the earlier portion of my adventures, from facts afforded by myself, publishing it in the “Southern Messenger” under the garb of fiction. To this, perceiving no objection, I consented, stipulating only that my real name should be retained. Two numbers of the pretended fiction appeared, consequently, in the “Messenger” for January and February (1837), and, in order that it might certainly be regarded as fiction, the name of Mr. Poe was affixed to the articles in the table of contents of the magazine.

The manner in which this ruse was received has induced me at length to undertake a regular compilation and publication of the adventures in question; for I found that, in spite of the air of fable which had been so ingeniously thrown around that portion of my statement which appeared in the “Messenger” (without altering or distorting a single fact), the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as fable, and several letters were sent to Mr. P.’s address, distinctly expressing a conviction to the contrary. I thence concluded that the facts of my narrative would prove of such a nature as to carry with them sufficient evidence of their own authenticity, and that I had consequently little to fear on the score of popular incredulity.

This exposé being made, it will be seen at once how much of what follows I claim to be my own writing; and it will also be understood that no fact is misrepresented in the first few pages which were written by Mr. Poe. Even to those readers who have not seen the “Messenger,” it will be unnecessary to point out where his portion ends and my own commences; the difference in point of style will be readily perceived.

A. G. PYM.

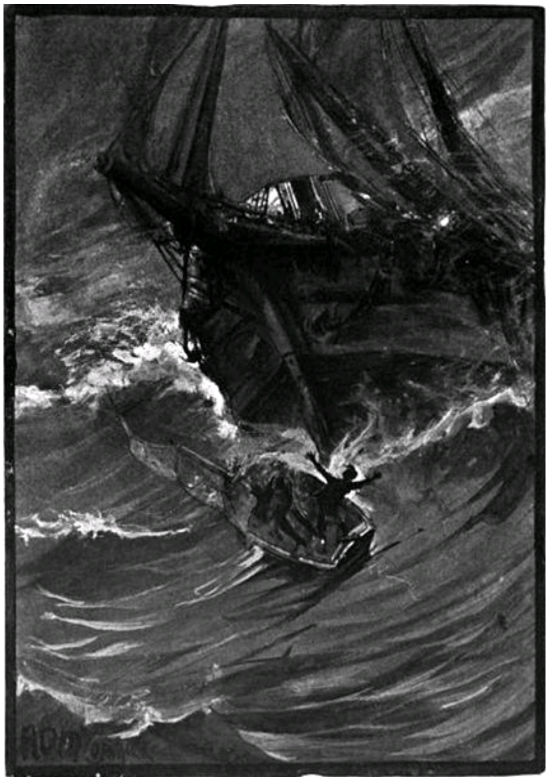

CHAPTER 1

MY name is Arthur Gordon Pym. My father was a respectable trader in sea-stores at Nantucket, where I was born. My maternal grandfather was an attorney in good practice. He was fortunate in every thing, and had speculated very successfully in stocks of the Edgarton New Bank, as it was formerly called. By these and other means he had managed to lay by a tolerable sum of money. He was more attached to myself, I believe, than to any other person in the world, and I expected to inherit the most of his property at his death. He sent me, at six years of age, to the school of old Mr. Ricketts, a gentleman with only one arm and of eccentric manners — he is well known to almost every person who has visited New Bedford. I stayed at his school until I was sixteen, when I left him for Mr. E. Ronald’s academy on the hill. Here I became intimate with the son of Mr. Barnard, a sea-captain, who generally sailed in the employ of Lloyd and Vredenburgh — Mr. Barnard is also very well known in New Bedford, and has many relations, I am certain, in Edgarton. His son was named Augustus, and he was nearly two years older than myself. He had been on a whaling voyage with his father in the John Donaldson, and was always talking to me of his adventures in the South Pacific Ocean. I used frequently to go home with him, and remain all day, and sometimes all night. We occupied the same bed, and he would be sure to keep me awake until almost light, telling me stories of the natives of the Island of Tinian, and other places he had visited in his travels. At last I could not help being interested in what he said, and by degrees I felt the greatest desire to go to sea. I owned a sailboat called the Ariel, and worth about seventy-five dollars. She had a half-deck or cuddy, and was rigged sloop-fashion — I forget her tonnage, but she would hold ten persons without much crowding. In this boat we were in the habit of going on some of the maddest freaks in the world; and, when I now think of them, it appears to me a thousand wonders that I am alive to-day.

I will relate one of these adventures by way of introduction to a longer and more momentous narrative. One night there was a party at Mr. Barnard’s, and both Augustus and myself were not a little intoxicated toward the close of it. As usual, in such cases, I took part of his bed in preference to going home. He went to sleep, as I thought, very quietly (it being near one when the party broke up), and without saying a word on his favorite topic. It might have been half an hour from the time of our getting in bed, and I was just about falling into a doze, when he suddenly started up, and swore with a terrible oath that he would not go to sleep for any Arthur Pym in Christendom, when there was so glorious a breeze from the southwest. I never was so astonished in my life, not knowing what he intended, and thinking that the wines and liquors he had drunk had set him entirely beside himself. He proceeded to talk very coolly, however, saying he knew that I supposed him intoxicated, but that he was never more sober in his life. He was only tired, he added, of lying in bed on such a fine night like a dog, and was determined to get up and dress, and go out on a frolic with the boat. I can hardly tell what possessed me, but the words were no sooner out of his mouth than I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure, and thought his mad idea one of the most delightful and most reasonable things in the world. It was blowing almost a gale, and the weather was very cold — it being late in October. I sprang out of bed, nevertheless, in a kind of ecstasy, and told him I was quite as brave as himself, and quite as tired as he was of lying in bed like a dog, and quite as ready for any fun or frolic as any Augustus Barnard in Nantucket.

We lost no time in getting on our clothes and hurrying down to the boat. She was lying at the old decayed wharf by the lumber-yard of Pankey & Co. and almost thumping her side out against the rough logs. Augustus got into her and bailed her, for she was nearly half full of water. This being done, we hoisted jib and mainsail, kept full, and started boldly out to sea.

The wind, as I before said, blew freshly from the southwest. The night was very clear and cold. Augustus had taken the helm, and I stationed myself by the mast, on the deck of the cuddy. We flew along at a great rate — neither of us having said a word since casting loose from the wharf. I now asked my companion what course he intended to steer, and what time he thought it probable we should get back. He whistled for a few minutes, and then said crustily: "*I* am going to sea — *you* may go home if you think proper." Turning my eyes upon him, I perceived at once that, in spite of his assumed *nonchalance*, he was greatly agitated. I could see him distinctly by the light of the moon — his face was paler than any marble, and his hand shook so excessively that he could scarcely retain hold of the tiller. I found that something had gone wrong, and became seriously alarmed. At this period I knew little about the management of a boat, and was now depending entirely upon the nautical skill of my friend. The wind, too, had suddenly increased, as we were fast getting out of the lee of the land — still I was ashamed to betray any trepidation, and for almost half an hour maintained a resolute silence. I could stand it no longer, however, and spoke to Augustus about the propriety of turning back. As before, it was nearly a minute before he made answer, or took any notice of my suggestion. "By-and-by," said he at length — "time enough — home by-and-by." I had expected a similar reply, but there was something in the tone of these words which filled me with an indescribable feeling of dread. I again looked at the speaker attentively. His lips were perfectly livid, and his knees shook so violently together that he seemed scarcely able to stand. "For God's sake, Augustus," I screamed, now heartily frightened, “what ails you? — what is the matter? — what *are* you going to do?” “Matter!” he stammered, in the greatest apparent surprise, letting go the tiller at the same moment, and falling forward into the bottom of the boat — ”matter — why, nothing is the — matter — going home — d — d — don’t you see?” The whole truth now flashed upon me. I flew to him and raised him up. He was drunk — beastly drunk — he could no longer either stand, speak, or see. His eyes were perfectly glazed; and as I let him go in the extremity of my despair, he rolled like a mere log into the bilge-water, from which I had lifted him. It was evident that, during the evening, he had drunk far more than I suspected, and that his conduct in bed had been the result of a highly-concentrated state of intoxication — a state which, like madness, frequently enables the victim to imitate the outward demeanour of one in perfect possession of his senses. The coolness of the night air, however, had had its usual effect — the mental energy began to yield before its influence — and the confused perception which he no doubt then had of his perilous situation had assisted in hastening the catastrophe. He was now thoroughly insensible, and there was no probability that he would be otherwise for many hours.

It is hardly possible to conceive the extremity of my terror. The fumes of the wine lately taken had evaporated, leaving me doubly timid and irresolute. I knew that I was altogether incapable of managing the boat, and that a fierce wind and strong ebb tide were hurrying us to destruction. A storm was evidently gathering behind us; we had neither compass nor provisions; and it was clear that, if we held our present course, we should be out of sight of land before daybreak. These thoughts, with a crowd of others equally fearful, flashed through my mind with a bewildering rapidity, and for some moments paralyzed me beyond the possibility of making any exertion. The boat was going through the water at a terrible rate — full before the wind — no reef in either jib or mainsail — running her bows completely under the foam. It was a thousand wonders she did not broach to — Augustus having let go the tiller, as I said before, and I being too much agitated to think of taking it myself. By good luck, however, she kept steady, and gradually I recovered some degree of presence of mind. Still the wind was increasing fearfully, and whenever we rose from a plunge forward, the sea behind fell combing over our counter, and deluged us with water. I was so utterly benumbed, too, in every limb, as to be nearly unconscious of sensation. At length I summoned up the resolution of despair, and rushing to the mainsail let it go by the run. As might have been expected, it flew over the bows, and, getting drenched with water, carried away the mast short off by the board. This latter accident alone saved me from instant destruction. Under the jib only, I now boomed along before the wind, shipping heavy seas occasionally over the counter, but relieved from the terror of immediate death. I took the helm, and breathed with greater freedom as I found that there yet remained to us a chance of ultimate escape. Augustus still lay senseless in the bottom of the boat; and as there was imminent danger of his drowning (the water being nearly a foot deep just where he fell), I contrived to raise him partially up, and keep him in a sitting position, by passing a rope round his waist, and lashing it to a ringbolt in the deck of the cuddy. Having thus arranged every thing as well as I could in my chilled and agitated condition, I recommended myself to God, and made up my mind to bear whatever might happen with all the fortitude in my power.

Hardly had I come to this resolution, when, suddenly, a loud and long scream or yell, as if from the throats of a thousand demons, seemed to pervade the whole atmosphere around and above the boat. Never while I live shall I forget the intense agony of terror I experienced at that moment. My hair stood erect on my head — I felt the blood congealing in my veins

— my heart ceased utterly to beat, and without having once raised my eyes to learn the source of my alarm, I tumbled headlong and insensible upon the body of my fallen companion.

I found myself, upon reviving, in the cabin of a large whaling-ship (the Penguin) bound to Nantucket. Several persons were standing over me, and Augustus, paler than death, was busily occupied in chafing my hands. Upon seeing me open my eyes, his exclamations of gratitude and joy excited alternate laughter and tears from the rough-looking personages who were present. The mystery of our being in existence was now soon explained. We had been run down by the whaling-ship, which was close-hauled, beating up to Nantucket with every sail she could venture to set, and consequently running almost at right angles to our own course. Several men were on the look-out forward, but did not perceive our boat until it was an impossibility to avoid coming in contact — their shouts of warning upon seeing us were what so terribly alarmed me. The huge ship, I was told, rode immediately over us with as much ease as our own little vessel would have passed over a feather, and without the least perceptible impediment to her progress. Not a scream arose from the deck of the victim — there was a slight grating sound to be heard mingling with the roar of wind and water, as the frail bark which was swallowed up rubbed for a moment along the keel of her destroyer — but this was all. Thinking our boat (which it will be remembered was dismasted) some mere shell cut adrift as useless, the captain (Captain E. T. V. Block, of New London) was for proceeding on his course without troubling himself further about the matter. Luckily, there were two of the look-out who swore positively to having seen some person at our helm, and represented the possibility of yet saving him. A discussion ensued, when Block grew angry, and, after a while, said that “it was no business of his to be eternally watching for egg-shells; that the ship should not put about for any such nonsense; and if there was a man run down, it was nobody's fault but his own, he might drown and be dammed" or some language to that effect. Henderson, the first mate, now took the matter up, being justly indignant, as well as the whole ship's crew, at a speech evincing so base a degree of heartless atrocity. He spoke plainly, seeing himself upheld by the men, told the captain he considered him a fit subject for the gallows, and that he would disobey his orders if he were hanged for it the moment he set his foot on shore. He strode aft, jostling Block (who turned pale and made no answer) on one side, and seizing the helm, gave the word, in a firm voice, Hard-a-lee! The men flew to their posts, and the ship went cleverly about. All this had occupied nearly five minutes, and it was supposed to be hardly within the bounds of possibility that any individual could be saved — allowing any to have been on board the boat. Yet, as the reader has seen, both Augustus and myself were rescued; and our deliverance seemed to have been brought about by two of those almost inconceivable pieces of good fortune which are attributed by the wise and pious to the special interference of Providence.

While the ship was yet in stays, the mate lowered the jolly-boat and jumped into her with the very two men, I believe, who spoke up as having seen me at the helm. They had just left the lee of the vessel (the moon still shining brightly) when she made a long and heavy roll to windward, and Henderson, at the same moment, starting up in his seat bawled out to his crew to back water. He would say nothing else — repeating his cry impatiently, back water! black water! The men put back as speedily as possible, but by this time the ship had gone round, and gotten fully under headway, although all hands on board were making great exertions to take in sail. In despite of the danger of the attempt, the mate clung to the main-chains as soon as they came within his reach. Another huge lurch now brought the starboard side of the vessel out of water nearly as far as her keel, when the cause of his anxiety was rendered obvious enough. The body of a man was seen to be affixed in the most singular manner to the smooth and shining bottom (the Penguin was coppered and copper-fastened), and beating violently against it with every movement of the hull. After several ineffectual efforts, made during the lurches of the ship, and at the imminent risk of swamping the boat I was finally disengaged from my perilous situation and taken on board — for the body proved to be my own. It appeared that one of the timber-bolts having started and broken a passage through the copper, it had arrested my progress as I passed under the ship, and fastened me in so extraordinary a manner to her bottom. The head of the bolt had made its way through the collar of the green baize jacket I had on, and through the back part of my neck, forcing itself out between two sinews and just below the right ear. I was immediately put to bed — although life seemed to be totally extinct. There was no surgeon on board. The captain, however, treated me with every attention — to make amends, I presume, in the eyes of his crew, for his atrocious behaviour in the previous portion of the adventure.

In the meantime, Henderson had again put off from the ship, although the wind was now blowing almost a hurricane. He had not been gone many minutes when he fell in with some fragments of our boat, and shortly afterward one of the men with him asserted that he could distinguish a cry for help at intervals amid the roaring of the tempest. This induced the hardy seamen to persevere in their search for more than half an hour, although repeated signals to return were made them by Captain Block, and although every moment on the water in so frail a boat was fraught to them with the most imminent and deadly peril. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to conceive how the small jolly they were in could have escaped destruction for a single instant. She was built, however, for the whaling service, and was fitted, as I have since had reason to believe, with air-boxes, in the manner of some life-boats used on the coast of Wales.

After searching in vain for about the period of time just mentioned, it was determined to get back to the ship. They had scarcely made this resolve when a feeble cry arose from a dark object that floated rapidly by. They pursued and soon overtook it. It proved to be the entire deck of the Ariel's cuddy. Augustus was struggling near it, apparently in the last agonies. Upon getting hold of him it was found that he was attached by a rope to the floating timber. This rope, it will be remembered, I had myself tied around his waist, and made fast to a ringbolt, for the purpose of keeping him in an upright position, and my so doing, it appeared, had been ultimately the means of preserving his life. The Ariel was slightly put together, and in going down her frame naturally went to pieces; the deck of the cuddy, as might have been expected, was lifted, by the force of the water rushing in, entirely from the main timbers, and floated (with other fragments, no doubt) to the surface — Augustus was buoyed up with it, and thus escaped a terrible death.

It was more than an hour after being taken on board the Penguin before he could give any account of himself, or be made to comprehend the nature of the accident which had befallen our boat. At length he became thoroughly aroused, and spoke much of his sensations while in the water. Upon his first attaining any degree of consciousness, he found himself beneath the surface, whirling round and round with inconceivable rapidity, and with a rope wrapped in three or four folds tightly about his neck. In an instant afterward he felt himself going rapidly upward, when, his head striking violently against a hard substance, he again relapsed into insensibility. Upon once more reviving he was in fuller possession of his reason — this was still, however, in the greatest degree clouded and confused. He now knew that some accident had occurred, and that he was in the water, although his mouth was above the surface, and he could breathe with some freedom. Possibly, at this period the deck was drifting rapidly before the wind, and drawing him after it, as he floated upon his back. Of course, as long as he could have retained this position, it would have been nearly impossible that he should be drowned. Presently a surge threw him directly athwart the deck, and this post he endeavored to maintain, screaming at intervals for help. Just before he was discovered by Mr. Henderson, he had been obliged to relax his hold through exhaustion, and, falling into the sea, had given himself up for lost. During the whole period of his struggles he had not the faintest recollection of the Ariel, nor of the matters in connexion with the source of his disaster. A vague feeling of terror and despair had taken entire possession of his faculties. When he was finally picked up, every power of his mind had failed him; and, as before said, it was nearly an hour after getting on board the Penguin before he became fully aware of his condition. In regard to myself — I was resuscitated from a state bordering very nearly upon death (and after every other means had been tried in vain for three hours and a half) by vigorous friction with flannels bathed in hot oil — a proceeding suggested by Augustus. The wound in my neck, although of an ugly appearance, proved of little real consequence, and I soon recovered from its effects.

The Penguin got into port about nine o’clock in the morning, after encountering one of the severest gales ever experienced off Nantucket. Both Augustus and myself managed to appear at Mr. Barnard’s in time for breakfast — which, luckily, was somewhat late, owing to the party over night. I suppose all at the table were too much fatigued themselves to notice our jaded appearance — of course, it would not have borne a very rigid scrutiny. Schoolboys, however, can accomplish wonders in the way of deception, and I verily believe not one of our friends in Nantucket had the slightest suspicion that the terrible story told by some sailors in town of their having run down a vessel at sea and drowned some thirty or forty poor devils, had reference either to the Ariel, my companion, or myself. We two have since very frequently talked the matter over — but never without a shudder. In one of our conversations Augustus frankly confessed to me, that in his whole life he had at no time experienced so excruciating a sense of dismay, as when on board our little boat he first discovered the extent of his intoxication, and felt himself sinking beneath its influence.

CHAPTER 2

IN no affairs of mere prejudice, pro or con, do we deduce inferences with entire certainty, even from the most simple data. It might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion for the sea. On the contrary, I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after our miraculous deliverance. This short period proved amply long enough to erase from my memory the shadows, and bring out in vivid light all the pleasurably exciting points of color, all the picturesqueness, of the late perilous accident. My conversations with Augustus grew daily more frequent and more intensely full of interest. He had a manner of relating his stories of the ocean (more than one half of which I now suspect to have been sheer fabrications) well adapted to have weight with one of my enthusiastic temperament and somewhat gloomy although glowing imagination. It is strange, too, that he most strongly enlisted my feelings in behalf of the life of a seaman, when he depicted his more terrible moments of suffering and despair. For the bright side of the painting I had a limited sympathy. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. Such visions or desires — for they amounted to desires — are common, I have since been assured, to the whole numerous race of the melancholy among men — at the time of which I speak I regarded them only as prophetic glimpses of a destiny which I felt myself in a measure bound to fulfil. Augustus thoroughly entered into my state of mind. It is probable, indeed, that our intimate communion had resulted in a partial interchange of character.

About eighteen months after the period of the Ariel’s disaster, the firm of Lloyd and Vredenburgh (a house connected in some manner with the Messieurs Enderby, I believe, of Liverpool) were engaged in repairing and fitting out the brig Grampus for a whaling voyage. She was an old hulk, and scarcely seaworthy when all was done to her that could be done. I hardly know why she was chosen in preference to other good vessels belonging to the same owners — but so it was. Mr. Barnard was appointed to command her, and Augustus was going with him. While the brig was getting ready, he frequently urged upon me the excellency of the opportunity now offered for indulging my desire of travel. He found me by no means an unwilling listener — yet the matter could not be so easily arranged. My father made no direct opposition; but my mother went into hysterics at the bare mention of the design; and, more than all, my grandfather, from whom I expected much, vowed to cut me off with a shilling if I should ever broach the subject to him again. These difficulties, however, so far from abating my desire, only added fuel to the flame. I determined to go at all hazards; and, having made known my intentions to Augustus, we set about arranging a plan by which it might be accomplished. In the meantime I forbore speaking to any of my relations in regard to the voyage, and, as I busied myself ostensibly with my usual studies, it was supposed that I had abandoned the design. I have since frequently examined my conduct on this occasion with sentiments of displeasure as well as of surprise. The intense hypocrisy I made use of for the furtherance of my project — an hypocrisy pervading every word and action of my life for so long a period of time — could only have been rendered tolerable to myself by the wild and burning expectation with which I looked forward to the fulfilment of my long-cherished visions of travel.

In pursuance of my scheme of deception, I was necessarily obliged to leave much to the management of Augustus, who was employed for the greater part of every day on board the Grampus, attending to some arrangements for his father in the cabin and cabin hold. At night, however, we were sure to have a conference and talk over our hopes. After nearly a month passed in this manner, without our hitting upon any plan we thought likely to succeed, he told me at last that he had determined upon everything necessary. I had a relation living in New Bedford, a Mr. Ross, at whose house I was in the habit of spending occasionally two or three weeks at a time. The brig was to sail about the middle of June (June, 1827), and it was agreed that, a day or two before her putting to sea, my father was to receive a note, as usual, from Mr. Ross, asking me to come over and spend a fortnight with Robert and Emmet (his sons). Augustus charged himself with the inditing of this note and getting it delivered. Having set out as supposed, for New Bedford, I was then to report myself to my companion, who would contrive a hiding-place for me in the Grampus. This hiding-place, he assured me, would be rendered sufficiently comfortable for a residence of many days, during which I was not to make my appearance. When the brig had proceeded so far on her course as to make any turning back a matter out of question, I should then, he said, be formally installed in all the comforts of the cabin; and as to his father, he would only laugh heartily at the joke. Vessels enough would be met with by which a letter might be sent home explaining the adventure to my parents.

The middle of June at length arrived, and every thing had been matured. The note was written and delivered, and on a Monday morning I left the house for the New Bedford packet, as supposed. I went, however, straight to Augustus, who was waiting for me at the corner of a street. It had been our original plan that I should keep out of the way until dark, and then slip on board the brig; but, as there was now a thick fog in our favor, it was agreed to lose no time in secreting me. Augustus led the way to the wharf, and I followed at a little distance, enveloped in a thick seaman’s cloak, which he had brought with him, so that my person might not be easily recognized. Just as we turned the second corner, after passing Mr. Edmund’s well, who should appear, standing right in front of me, and looking me full in the face, but old Mr. Peterson, my grandfather. “Why, bless my soul, Gordon,” said he, after a long pause, “why, why, — whose dirty cloak is that you have on?” “Sir!” I replied, assuming, as well as I could, in the exigency of the moment, an air of offended surprise, and talking in the gruffest of all imaginable tones — ”sir! you are a sum’mat mistaken — my name, in the first place, bee’nt nothing at all like Goddin, and I’d want you for to know better, you blackguard, than to call my new obercoat a darty one.” For my life I could hardly refrain from screaming with laughter at the odd manner in which the old gentleman received this handsome rebuke. He started back two or three steps, turned first pale and then excessively red, threw up his spectacles, then, putting them down, ran full tilt at me, with his umbrella uplifted. He stopped short, however, in his career, as if struck with a sudden recollection; and presently, turning round, hobbled off down the street, shaking all the while with rage, and muttering between his teeth: “Won’t do — new glasses — thought it was Gordon — d — d good-for-nothing salt water Long Tom.”

After this narrow escape we proceeded with greater caution, and arrived at our point of destination in safety. There were only one or two of the hands on board, and these were busy forward, doing something to the forecastle combings. Captain Barnard, we knew very well, was engaged at Lloyd and Vredenburgh’s, and would remain there until late in the evening, so we had little to apprehend on his account. Augustus went first up the vessel’s side, and in a short while I followed him, without being noticed by the men at work. We proceeded at once into the cabin, and found no person there. It was fitted up in the most comfortable style — a thing somewhat unusual in a whaling-vessel. There were four very excellent staterooms, with wide and convenient berths. There was also a large stove, I took notice, and a remarkably thick and valuable carpet covering the floor of both the cabin and staterooms. The ceiling was full seven feet high, and, in short, every thing appeared of a more roomy and agreeable nature than I had anticipated. Augustus, however, would allow me but little time for observation, insisting upon the necessity of my concealing myself as soon as possible. He led the way into his own stateroom, which was on the starboard side of the brig, and next to the bulkheads. Upon entering, he closed the door and bolted it. I thought I had never seen a nicer little room than the one in which I now found myself. It was about ten feet long, and had only one berth, which, as I said before, was wide and convenient. In that portion of the closet nearest the bulkheads there was a space of four feet square, containing a table, a chair, and a set of hanging shelves full of books, chiefly books of voyages and travels. There were many other little comforts in the room, among which I ought not to forget a kind of safe or refrigerator, in which Augustus pointed out to me a host of delicacies, both in the eating and drinking department.

He now pressed with his knuckles upon a certain spot of the carpet in one corner of the space just mentioned, letting me know that a portion of the flooring, about sixteen inches square, had been neatly cut out and again adjusted. As he pressed, this portion rose up at one end sufficiently to allow the passage of his finger beneath. In this manner he raised the mouth of the trap (to which the carpet was still fastened by tacks), and I found that it led into the after hold. He next lit a small taper by means of a phosphorous match, and, placing the light in a dark lantern, descended with it through the opening, bidding me follow. I did so, and he then pulled the cover upon the hole, by means of a nail driven into the under side — the carpet, of course, resuming its original position on the floor of the stateroom, and all traces of the aperture being concealed.

The taper gave out so feeble a ray that it was with the greatest difficulty I could grope my way through the confused mass of lumber among which I now found myself. By degrees, however, my eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and I proceeded with less trouble, holding on to the skirts of my friend’s coat. He brought me, at length, after creeping and winding through innumerable narrow passages, to an iron-bound box, such as is used sometimes for packing fine earthenware. It was nearly four feet high, and full six long, but very narrow. Two large empty oil-casks lay on the top of it, and above these, again, a vast quantity of straw matting, piled up as high as the floor of the cabin. In every other direction around was wedged as closely as possible, even up to the ceiling, a complete chaos of almost every species of ship-furniture, together with a heterogeneous medley of crates, hampers, barrels, and bales, so that it seemed a matter no less than miraculous that we had discovered any passage at all to the box. I afterward found that Augustus had purposely arranged the stowage in this hold with a view to affording me a thorough concealment, having had only one assistant in the labour, a man not going out in the brig.

My companion now showed me that one of the ends of the box could be removed at pleasure. He slipped it aside and displayed the interior, at which I was excessively amused. A mattress from one of the cabin berths covered the whole of its bottom, and it contained almost every article of mere comfort which could be crowded into so small a space, allowing me, at the same time, sufficient room for my accommodation, either in a sitting position or lying at full length. Among other things, there were some books, pen, ink, and paper, three blankets, a large jug full of water, a keg of sea-biscuit, three or four immense Bologna sausages, an enormous ham, a cold leg of roast mutton, and half a dozen bottles of cordials and liqueurs. I proceeded immediately to take possession of my little apartment, and this with feelings of higher satisfaction, I am sure, than any monarch ever experienced upon entering a new palace. Augustus now pointed out to me the method of fastening the open end of the box, and then, holding the taper close to the deck, showed me a piece of dark whipcord lying along it. This, he said, extended from my hiding-place throughout all the necessary windings among the lumber, to a nail which was driven into the deck of the hold, immediately beneath the trap-door leading into his stateroom. By means of this cord I should be enabled readily to trace my way out without his guidance, provided any unlooked-for accident should render such a step necessary. He now took his departure, leaving with me the lantern, together with a copious supply of tapers and phosphorous, and promising to pay me a visit as often as he could contrive to do so without observation. This was on the seventeenth of June.

I remained three days and nights (as nearly as I could guess) in my hiding-place without getting out of it at all, except twice for the purpose of stretching my limbs by standing erect between two crates just opposite the opening. During the whole period I saw nothing of Augustus; but this occasioned me little uneasiness, as I knew the brig was expected to put to sea every hour, and in the bustle he would not easily find opportunities of coming down to me. At length I heard the trap open and shut, and presently he called in a low voice, asking if all was well, and if there was any thing I wanted. “Nothing,” I replied; “I am as comfortable as can be; when will the brig sail?” “She will be under weigh in less than half an hour,” he answered. “I came to let you know, and for fear you should be uneasy at my absence. I shall not have a chance of coming down again for some time — perhaps for three or four days more. All is going on right aboveboard. After I go up and close the trap, do you creep along by the whipcord to where the nail is driven in. You will find my watch there — it may be useful to you, as you have no daylight to keep time by. I suppose you can't tell how long you have been buried — only three days — this is the twentieth. I would bring the watch to your box, but am afraid of being missed." With this he went up.

In about an hour after he had gone I distinctly felt the brig in motion, and congratulated myself upon having at length fairly commenced a voyage. Satisfied with this idea, I determined to make my mind as easy as possible, and await the course of events until I should be permitted to exchange the box for the more roomy, although hardly more comfortable, accommodations of the cabin. My first care was to get the watch. Leaving the taper burning, I groped along in the dark, following the cord through windings innumerable, in some of which I discovered that, after toiling a long distance, I was brought back within a foot or two of a former position. At length I reached the nail, and securing the object of my journey, returned with it in safety. I now looked over the books which had been so thoughtfully provided, and selected the expedition of Lewis and Clarke to the mouth of the Columbia. With this I amused myself for some time, when, growing sleepy, I extinguished the light with great care, and soon fell into a sound slumber.

Upon awakening I felt strangely confused in mind, and some time elapsed before I could bring to recollection all the various circumstances of my situation. By degrees, however, I remembered all. Striking a light, I looked at the watch; but it was run down, and there were, consequently, no means of determining how long I slept. My limbs were greatly cramped, and I was forced to relieve them by standing between the crates. Presently feeling an almost ravenous appetite, I bethought myself of the cold mutton, some of which I had eaten just before going to sleep, and found excellent. What was my astonishment in discovering it to be in a state of absolute putrefaction! This circumstance occasioned me great disquietude; for, connecting it with the disorder of mind I experienced upon awakening, I began to suppose that I must have slept for an inordinately long period of time. The close atmosphere of the hold might have had something to do with this, and might, in the end, be productive of the most serious results. My head ached excessively; I fancied that I drew every breath with difficulty; and, in short, I was oppressed with a multitude of gloomy feelings. Still I could not venture to make any disturbance by opening the trap or otherwise, and, having wound up the watch, contented myself as well as possible.

Throughout the whole of the next tedious twenty-four hours no person came to my relief, and I could not help accusing Augustus of the grossest inattention. What alarmed me chiefly was, that the water in my jug was reduced to about half a pint, and I was suffering much from thirst, having eaten freely of the Bologna sausages after the loss of my mutton. I became very uneasy, and could no longer take any interest in my books. I was overpowered, too, with a desire to sleep, yet trembled at the thought of indulging it, lest there might exist some pernicious influence, like that of burning charcoal, in the confined air of the hold. In the meantime the roll of the brig told me that we were far in the main ocean, and a dull humming sound, which reached my ears as if from an immense distance, convinced me no ordinary gale was blowing. I could not imagine a reason for the absence of Augustus. We were surely far enough advanced on our voyage to allow of my going up. Some accident might have happened to him — but I could think of none which would account for his suffering me to remain so long a prisoner, except, indeed, his having suddenly died or fallen overboard, and upon this idea I could not dwell with any degree of patience. It was possible that we had been baffled by head winds, and were still in the near vicinity of Nantucket. This notion, however, I was forced to abandon; for such being the case, the brig must have frequently gone about; and I was entirely satisfied, from her continual inclination to the larboard, that she had been sailing all along with a steady breeze on her starboard quarter. Besides, granting that we were still in the neighborhood of the island, why should not Augustus have visited me and informed me of the circumstance? Pondering in this manner upon the difficulties of my solitary and cheerless condition, I resolved to wait yet another twenty-four hours, when, if no relief were obtained, I would make my way to the trap, and endeavour either to hold a parley with my friend, or get at least a little fresh air through the opening, and a further supply of water from the stateroom. While occupied with this thought, however, I fell in spite of every exertion to the contrary, into a state of profound sleep, or rather stupor. My dreams were of the most terrific description. Every species of calamity and horror befell me. Among other miseries I was smothered to death between huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect. Immense serpents held me in their embrace, and looked earnestly in my face with their fearfully shining eyes. Then deserts, limitless, and of the most forlorn and awe-inspiring character, spread themselves out before me. Immensely tall trunks of trees, gray and leafless, rose up in endless succession as far as the eye could reach. Their roots were concealed in wide-spreading morasses, whose dreary water lay intensely black, still, and altogether terrible, beneath. And the strange trees seemed endowed with a human vitality, and waving to and fro their skeleton arms, were crying to the silent waters for mercy, in the shrill and piercing accents of the most acute agony and despair. The scene changed; and I stood, naked and alone, amidst the burning sand-plains of Sahara. At my feet lay crouched a fierce lion of the tropics. Suddenly his wild eyes opened and fell upon me. With a conclusive bound he sprang to his feet, and laid bare his horrible teeth. In another instant there burst from his red throat a roar like the thunder of the firmament, and I fell impetuously to the earth. Stifling in a paroxysm of terror, I at last found myself partially awake. My dream, then, was not all a dream. Now, at least, I was in possession of my senses. The paws of some huge and real monster were pressing heavily upon my bosom — his hot breath was in my ear — and his white and ghastly fangs were gleaming upon me through the gloom.

Had a thousand lives hung upon the movement of a limb or the utterance of a syllable, I could have neither stirred nor spoken. The beast, whatever it was, retained his position without attempting any immediate violence, while I lay in an utterly helpless, and, I fancied, a dying condition beneath him. I felt that my powers of body and mind were fast leaving me — in a word, that I was perishing, and perishing of sheer fright. My brain swam — I grew deadly sick — my vision failed — even the glaring eyeballs above me grew dim. Making a last strong effort, I at length breathed a faint ejaculation to God, and resigned myself to die. The sound of my voice seemed to arouse all the latent fury of the animal. He precipitated himself at full length upon my body; but what was my astonishment, when, with a long and low whine, he commenced licking my face and hands with the greatest eagerness, and with the most extravagant demonstration of affection and joy! I was bewildered, utterly lost in amazement — but I could not forget the peculiar whine of my Newfoundland dog Tiger, and the odd manner of his caresses I well knew. It was he. I experienced a sudden rush of blood to my temples — a giddy and overpowering sense of deliverance and reanimation. I rose hurriedly from the mattress upon which I had been lying, and, throwing myself upon the neck of my faithful follower and friend, relieved the long oppression of my bosom in a flood of the most passionate tears.

As upon a former occasion my conceptions were in a state of the greatest indistinctness and confusion after leaving the mattress. For a long time I found it nearly impossible to connect any ideas; but, by very slow degrees, my thinking faculties returned, and I again called to memory the several incidents of my condition. For the presence of Tiger I tried in vain to account; and after busying myself with a thousand different conjectures respecting him, was forced to content myself with rejoicing that he was with me to share my dreary solitude, and render me comfort by his caresses. Most people love their dogs — but for Tiger I had an affection far more ardent than common; and never, certainly, did any creature more truly deserve it. For seven years he had been my inseparable companion, and in a multitude of instances had given evidence of all the noble qualities for which we value the animal. I had rescued him, when a puppy, from the clutches of a malignant little villain in Nantucket who was leading him, with a rope around his neck, to the water; and the grown dog repaid the obligation, about three years afterward, by saving me from the bludgeon of a street robber.

Getting now hold of the watch, I found, upon applying it to my ear, that it had again run down; but at this I was not at all surprised, being convinced, from the peculiar state of my feelings, that I had slept, as before, for a very long period of time, how long, it was of course impossible to say. I was burning up with fever, and my thirst was almost intolerable. I felt about the box for my little remaining supply of water, for I had no light, the taper having burnt to the socket of the lantern, and the phosphorus-box not coming readily to hand. Upon finding the jug, however, I discovered it to be empty — Tiger, no doubt, having been tempted to drink it, as well as to devour the remnant of mutton, the bone of which lay, well picked, by the opening of the box. The spoiled meat I could well spare, but my heart sank as I thought of the water. I was feeble in the extreme — so much so that I shook all over, as with an ague, at the slightest movement or exertion. To add to my troubles, the brig was pitching and rolling with great violence, and the oil-casks which lay upon my box were in momentary danger of falling down, so as to block up the only way of ingress or egress. I felt, also, terrible sufferings from sea-sickness. These considerations determined me to make my way, at all hazards, to the trap, and obtain immediate relief, before I should be incapacitated from doing so altogether. Having come to this resolve, I again felt about for the phosphorus-box and tapers. The former I found after some little trouble; but, not discovering the tapers as soon as I had expected (for I remembered very nearly the spot in which I had placed them), I gave up the search for the present, and bidding Tiger lie quiet, began at once my journey toward the trap.

In this attempt my great feebleness became more than ever apparent. It was with the utmost difficulty I could crawl along at all, and very frequently my limbs sank suddenly from beneath me; when, falling prostrate on my face, I would remain for some minutes in a state bordering on insensibility. Still I struggled forward by slow degrees, dreading every moment that I should swoon amid the narrow and intricate windings of the lumber, in which event I had nothing but death to expect as the result. At length, upon making a push forward with all the energy I could command, I struck my forehead violently against the sharp corner of an iron-bound crate. The accident only stunned me for a few moments; but I found, to my inexpressible grief, that the quick and violent roll of the vessel had thrown the crate entirely across my path, so as effectually to block up the passage. With my utmost exertions I could not move it a single inch from its position, it being closely wedged in among the surrounding boxes and ship-furniture. It became necessary, therefore, enfeebled as I was, either to leave the guidance of the whipcord and seek out a new passage, or to climb over the obstacle, and resume the path on the other side. The former alternative presented too many difficulties and dangers to be thought of without a shudder. In my present weak state of both mind and body, I should infallibly lose my way if I attempted it, and perish miserably amid the dismal and disgusting labyrinths of the hold. I proceeded, therefore, without hesitation, to summon up all my remaining strength and fortitude, and endeavour, as I best might, to clamber over the crate.

Upon standing erect, with this end in view, I found the undertaking even a more serious task than my fears had led me to imagine. On each side of the narrow passage arose a complete wall of various heavy lumber, which the least blunder on my part might be the means of bringing down upon my head; or, if this accident did not occur, the path might be effectually blocked up against my return by the descending mass, as it was in front by the obstacle there. The crate itself was a long and unwieldy box, upon which no foothold could be obtained. In vain I attempted, by every means in my power, to reach the top, with the hope of being thus enabled to draw myself up. Had I succeeded in reaching it, it is certain that my strength would have proved utterly inadequate to the task of getting over, and it was better in every respect that I failed. At length, in a desperate effort to force the crate from its ground, I felt a strong vibration in the side next me. I thrust my hand eagerly to the edge of the planks, and found that a very large one was loose. With my pocket-knife, which, luckily, I had with me, I succeeded, after great labour, in prying it entirely off; and getting it through the aperture, discovered, to my exceeding joy, that there were no boards on the opposite side — in other words, that the top was wanting, it being the bottom through which I had forced my way. I now met with no important difficulty in proceeding along the line until I finally reached the nail. With a beating heart I stood erect, and with a gentle touch pressed against the cover of the trap. It did not rise as soon as I had expected, and I pressed it with somewhat more determination, still dreading lest some other person than

Augustus might be in his state-room. The door, however, to my astonishment, remained steady, and I became somewhat uneasy, for I knew that it had formerly required but little or no effort to remove it. I pushed it strongly — it was nevertheless firm: with all my strength — it still did not give way: with rage, with fury, with despair — it set at defiance my utmost efforts; and it was evident, from the unyielding nature of the resistance, that the hole had either been discovered and effectually nailed up, or that some immense weight had been placed upon it, which it was useless to think of removing.

My sensations were those of extreme horror and dismay. In vain I attempted to reason on the probable cause of my being thus entombed. I could summon up no connected chain of reflection, and, sinking on the floor, gave way, unresistingly, to the most gloomy imaginings, in which the dreadful deaths of thirst, famine, suffocation, and premature interment crowded upon me as the prominent disasters to be encountered. At length there returned to me some portion of presence of mind. I arose, and felt with my fingers for the seams or cracks of the aperture. Having found them, I examined them closely to ascertain if they emitted any light from the state-room; but none was visible. I then forced the blade of my pen-knife through them, until I met with some hard obstacle. Scraping against it, I discovered it to be a solid mass of iron, which, from its peculiar wavy feel as I passed the blade along it, I concluded to be a chain-cable. The only course now left me was to retrace my way to the box, and there either yield to my sad fate, or try so to tranquilize my mind as to admit of my arranging some plan of escape. I immediately set about the attempt, and succeeded, after innumerable difficulties, in getting back. As I sank, utterly exhausted, upon the mattress, Tiger threw himself at full length by my side, and seemed as if desirous, by his caresses, of consoling me in my troubles, and urging me to bear them with fortitude.

The singularity of his behavior at length forcibly arrested my attention. After licking my face and hands for some minutes, he would suddenly cease doing so, and utter a low whine. Upon reaching out my hand toward him, I then invariably found him lying on his back, with his paws uplifted. This conduct, so frequently repeated, appeared strange, and I could in no manner account for it. As the dog seemed distressed, I concluded that he had received some injury; and, taking his paws in my hands, I examined them one by one, but found no sign of any hurt. I then supposed him hungry, and gave him a large piece of ham, which he devoured with avidity — afterward, however, resuming his extraordinary manoeuvres. I now imagined that he was suffering, like myself, the torments of thirst, and was about adopting this conclusion as the true one, when the idea occurred to me that I had as yet only examined his paws, and that there might possibly be a wound upon some portion of his body or head. The latter I felt carefully over, but found nothing. On passing my hand, however, along his back, I perceived a slight erection of the hair extending completely across it. Probing this with my finger, I discovered a string, and tracing it up, found that it encircled the whole body. Upon a closer scrutiny, I came across a small slip of what had the feeling of letter paper, through which the string had been fastened in such a manner as to bring it immediately beneath the left shoulder of the animal.

CHAPTER 3

THE thought instantly occurred to me that the paper was a note from Augustus, and that some unaccountable accident having happened to prevent his relieving me from my dungeon, he had devised this method of acquainting me with the true state of affairs. Trembling with eagerness, I now commenced another search for my phosphorus matches and tapers. I had a confused recollection of having put them carefully away just before falling asleep; and, indeed, previously to my last journey to the trap, I had been able to remember the exact spot where I had deposited them. But now I endeavored in vain to call it to mind, and busied myself for a full hour in a fruitless and vexatious search for the missing articles; never, surely, was there a more tantalizing state of anxiety and suspense. At length, while groping about, with my head close to the ballast, near the opening of the box, and outside of it, I perceived a faint glimmering of light in the direction of the steerage. Greatly surprised, I endeavored to make my way toward it, as it appeared to be but a few feet from my position. Scarcely had I moved with this intention, when I lost sight of the glimmer entirely, and, before I could bring it into view again, was obliged to feel along by the box until I had exactly resumed my original situation. Now, moving my head with caution to and fro, I found that, by proceeding slowly, with great care, in an opposite direction to that in which I had at first started, I was enabled to draw near the light, still keeping it in view. Presently I came directly upon it (having squeezed my way through innumerable narrow windings), and found that it proceeded from some fragments of my matches lying in an empty barrel turned upon its side. I was wondering how they came in such a place, when my hand fell upon two or three pieces of taper wax, which had been evidently mumbled by the dog. I concluded at once that he had devoured the whole of my supply of candles, and I felt hopeless of being ever able to read the note of Augustus. The small remnants of the wax were so mashed up among other rubbish in the barrel, that I despaired of deriving any service from them, and left them as they were. The phosphorus, of which there was only a speck or two, I gathered up as well as I could, and returned with it, after much difficulty, to my box, where Tiger had all the while remained.

What to do next I could not tell. The hold was so intensely dark that I could not see my hand, however close I would hold it to my face. The white slip of paper could barely be discerned, and not even that when I looked at it directly; by turning the exterior portions of the retina toward it — that is to say, by surveying it slightly askance, I found that it became in some measure perceptible. Thus the gloom of my prison may be imagined, and the note of my friend, if indeed it were a note from him, seemed only likely to throw me into further trouble, by disquieting to no purpose my already enfeebled and agitated mind. In vain I revolved in my brain a multitude of absurd expedients for procuring light — such expedients precisely as a man in the perturbed sleep occasioned by opium would be apt to fall upon for a similar purpose — each and all of which appear by turns to the dreamer the most reasonable and the most preposterous of conceptions, just as the reasoning or imaginative faculties flicker, alternately, one above the other. At last an idea occurred to me which seemed rational, and which gave me cause to wonder, very justly, that I had not entertained it before. I placed the slip of paper on the back of a book, and, collecting the fragments of the phosphorus matches which I had brought from the barrel, laid them together upon the paper. I then, with the palm of my hand, rubbed the whole over quickly, yet steadily. A clear light diffused itself immediately throughout the whole surface; and had there been any writing upon it, I should not have experienced the least difficulty, I am sure, in reading it. Not a syllable was there, however — nothing but a dreary and unsatisfactory blank; the illumination died away in a few seconds, and my heart died away within me as it went.

I have before stated more than once that my intellect, for some period prior to this, had been in a condition nearly bordering on idiocy. There were, to be sure, momentary intervals of perfect sanity, and, now and then, even of energy; but these were few. It must be remembered that I had been, for many days certainly, inhaling the almost pestilential atmosphere of a close hold in a whaling vessel, and for a long portion of that time but scantily supplied with water. For the last fourteen or fifteen hours I had none — nor had I slept during that time. Salt provisions of the most exciting kind had been my chief, and, indeed, since the loss of the mutton, my only supply of food, with the exception of the sea-biscuit; and these latter were utterly useless to me, as they were too dry and hard to be swallowed in the swollen and parched condition of my throat. I was now in a high state of fever, and in every respect exceedingly ill. This will account for the fact that many miserable hours of despondency elapsed after my last adventure with the phosphorus, before the thought suggested itself that I had examined only one side of the paper. I shall not attempt to describe my feelings of rage (for I believe I was more angry than any thing else) when the egregious oversight I had committed flashed suddenly upon my perception. The blunder itself would have been unimportant, had not my own folly and impetuosity rendered it otherwise — in my disappointment at not finding some words upon the slip, I had childishly torn it in pieces and thrown it away, it was impossible to say where.

From the worst part of this dilemma I was relieved by the sagacity of Tiger. Having got, after a long search, a small piece of the note, I put it to the dog’s nose, and endeavored to make him understand that he must bring me the rest of it. To my astonishment, (for I had taught him none of the usual tricks for which his breed are famous,) he seemed to enter at once into my meaning, and, rummaging about for a few moments, soon found another considerable portion. Bringing me this, he paused awhile, and, rubbing his nose against my hand, appeared to be waiting for my approval of what he had done. I patted him on the head, when he immediately made off again. It was now some minutes before he came back — but when he did come, he brought with him a large slip, which proved to be all the paper missing — it having been torn, it seems, only into three pieces. Luckily, I had no trouble in finding what few fragments of the phosphorus were left — being guided by the indistinct glow one or two of the particles still emitted. My difficulties had taught me the necessity of caution, and I now took time to reflect upon what I was about to do. It was very probable, I considered, that some words were written upon that side of the paper which had not been examined — but which side was that? Fitting the pieces together gave me no clew in this respect, although it assured me that the words (if there were any) would be found all on one side, and connected in a proper manner, as written. There was the greater necessity of ascertaining the point in question beyond a doubt, as the phosphorus remaining would be altogether insufficient for a third attempt, should I fail in the one I was now about to make. I placed the paper on a book as before, and sat for some minutes thoughtfully revolving the matter over in my mind. At last I thought it barely possible that the written side might have some unevenness on its surface, which a delicate sense of feeling might enable me to detect. I determined to make the experiment and passed my finger very carefully over the side which first presented itself. Nothing, however, was perceptible, and I turned the paper, adjusting it on the book. I now again carried my forefinger cautiously along, when I was aware of an exceedingly slight, but still discernable glow, which followed as it proceeded. This, I knew, must arise from some very minute remaining particles of the phosphorus with which I had covered the paper in my previous attempt. The other, or under side, then, was that on which lay the writing, if writing there should finally prove to be. Again I turned the note, and went to work as I had previously done. Having rubbed in the phosphorus, a brilliancy ensued as before — but this time several lines of MS. in a large hand, and apparently in red ink, became distinctly visible. The glimmer, although sufficiently bright, was but momentary. Still, had I not been too greatly excited, there would have been ample time enough for me to peruse the whole three sentences before me — for I saw there were three. In my anxiety, however, to read all at once, I succeeded only in reading the seven concluding words, which thus appeared — ”blood — your life depends upon lying close.”

Had I been able to ascertain the entire contents of the note-the full meaning of the admonition which my friend had thus attempted to convey, that admonition, even although it should have revealed a story of disaster the most unspeakable, could not, I am firmly convinced, have imbued my mind with one tithe of the harrowing and yet indefinable horror with which I was inspired by the fragmentary warning thus received. And “blood,” too, that word of all words — so rife at all times with mystery, and suffering, and terror — how trebly full of import did it now appear — how chilly and heavily (disjointed, as it thus was, from any foregoing words to qualify or render it distinct) did its vague syllables fall, amid the deep gloom of my prison, into the innermost recesses of my soul!

Augustus had, undoubtedly, good reasons for wishing me to remain concealed, and I formed a thousand surmises as to what they could be — but I could think of nothing affording a satisfactory solution of the mystery. Just after returning from my last journey to the trap, and before my attention had been otherwise directed by the singular conduct of Tiger, I had come to the resolution of making myself heard at all events by those on board, or, if I could not succeed in this directly, of trying to cut my way through the orlop deck. The half certainty which I felt of being able to accomplish one of these two purposes in the last emergency, had given me courage (which I should not otherwise have had) to endure the evils of my situation. The few words I had been able to read, however, had cut me off from these final resources, and I now, for the first time, felt all the misery of my fate. In a paroxysm of despair I threw myself again upon the mattress, where, for about the period of a day and night, I lay in a kind of stupor, relieved only by momentary intervals of reason and recollection.

At length I once more arose, and busied myself in reflection upon the horrors which encompassed me. For another twenty-four hours it was barely possible that I might exist without water — for a longer time I could not do so. During the first portion of my imprisonment I had made free use of the cordials with which Augustus had supplied me, but they only served to excite fever, without in the least degree assuaging thirst. I had now only about a gill left, and this was of a species of strong peach liqueur at which my stomach revolted. The sausages were entirely consumed; of the ham nothing remained but a small piece of the skin; and all the biscuit, except a few fragments of one, had been eaten by Tiger. To add to my troubles, I found that my headache was increasing momentarily, and with it the species of delirium which had distressed me more or less since my first falling asleep. For some hours past it had been with the greatest difficulty I could breathe at all, and now each attempt at so doing was attended with the most depressing spasmodic action of the chest. But there was still another and very different source of disquietude, and one, indeed, whose harassing terrors had been the chief means of arousing me to exertion from my stupor on the mattress. It arose from the demeanor of the dog.

I first observed an alteration in his conduct while rubbing in the phosphorus on the paper in my last attempt. As I rubbed, he ran his nose against my hand with a slight snarl; but I was too greatly excited at the time to pay much attention to the circumstance. Soon afterward, it will be remembered, I threw myself on the mattress, and fell into a species of lethargy. Presently I became aware of a singular hissing sound close at my ears, and discovered it to proceed from Tiger, who was panting and wheezing in a state of the greatest apparent excitement, his eyeballs flashing fiercely through the gloom. I spoke to him, when he replied with a low growl, and then remained quiet. Presently I relapsed into my stupor, from which I was again awakened in a similar manner. This was repeated three or four times, until finally his behaviour inspired me with so great a degree of fear, that I became fully aroused. He was now lying close by the door of the box, snarling fearfully, although in a kind of undertone, and grinding his teeth as if strongly convulsed. I had no doubt whatever that the want of water or the confined atmosphere of the hold had driven him mad, and I was at a loss what course to pursue. I could not endure the thought of killing him, yet it seemed absolutely necessary for my own safety. I could distinctly perceive his eyes fastened upon me with an expression of the most deadly animosity, and I expected every instant that he would attack me. At last I could endure my terrible situation no longer, and determined to make my way from the box at all hazards, and dispatch him, if his opposition should render it necessary for me to do so. To get out, I had to pass directly over his body, and he already seemed to anticipate my design — missing himself upon his fore-legs (as I perceived by the altered position of his eyes), and displayed the whole of his white fangs, which were easily discernible. I took the remains of the ham-skin, and the bottle containing the liqueur, and secured them about my person, together with a large carving-knife which Augustus had left me — then, folding my cloak around me as closely as possible, I made a movement toward the mouth of the box. No sooner did I do this, than the dog sprang with a loud growl toward my throat. The whole weight of his body struck me on the right shoulder, and I fell violently to the left, while the enraged animal passed entirely over me. I had fallen upon my knees, with my head buried among the blankets, and these protected me from a second furious assault, during which I felt the sharp teeth pressing vigorously upon the woollen which enveloped my neck — yet, luckily, without being able to penetrate all the folds. I was now beneath the dog, and a few moments would place me completely in his power. Despair gave me strength, and I rose boldly up, shaking him from me by main force, and dragging with me the blankets from the mattress. These I now threw over him, and before he could extricate himself, I had got through the door and closed it effectually against his pursuit. In this struggle, however, I had been forced to drop the morsel of ham-skin, and I now found my whole stock of provisions reduced to a single gill of liqueur. As this reflection crossed my mind, I felt myself actuated by one of those fits of perverseness which might be supposed to influence a spoiled child in similar circumstances, and, raising the bottle to my lips, I drained it to the last drop, and dashed it furiously upon the floor.

Scarcely had the echo of the crash died away, when I heard my name pronounced in an eager but subdued voice, issuing from the direction of the steerage. So unexpected was anything of the kind, and so intense was the emotion excited within me by the sound, that I endeavoured in vain to reply. My powers of speech totally failed, and in an agony of terror lest my friend should conclude me dead, and return without attempting to reach me, I stood up between the crates near the door of the box, trembling convulsively, and gasping and struggling for utterance. Had a thousand words depended upon a syllable, I could not have spoken it. There was a slight movement now audible among the lumber somewhere forward of my station. The sound presently grew less distinct, then again less so, and still less. Shall I ever forget my feelings at this moment? He was going — my friend, my companion, from whom I had a right to expect so much — he was going — he would abandon me — he was gone! He would leave me to perish miserably, to expire in the most horrible and loathesome of dungeons — and one word, one little syllable, would save me — yet that single syllable I could not utter! I felt, I am sure, more than ten thousand times the agonies of death itself. My brain reeled, and I fell, deadly sick, against the end of the box.

As I fell the carving-knife was shaken out from the waist-band of my pantaloons, and dropped with a rattling sound to the floor. Never did any strain of the richest melody come so sweetly to my ears! With the intensest anxiety I listened to ascertain the effect of the noise upon Augustus — for I knew that the person who called my name could be no one but himself. All was silent for some moments. At length I again heard the word “Arthur!” repeated in a low tone, and one full of hesitation. Reviving hope loosened at once my powers of speech, and I now screamed at the top of my voice, “Augustus! oh, Augustus!” “Hush! for God’s sake be silent!” he replied, in a voice trembling with agitation; “I will be with you immediately — as soon as I can make my way through the hold.” For a long time I heard him moving among the lumber, and every moment seemed to me an age. At length I felt his hand upon my shoulder, and he placed, at the same moment, a bottle of water to my lips. Those only who have been suddenly redeemed from the jaws of the tomb, or who have known the insufferable torments of thirst under circumstances as aggravated as those which encompassed me in my dreary prison, can form any idea of the unutterable transports which that one long draught of the richest of all physical luxuries afforded.

When I had in some degree satisfied my thirst, Augustus produced from his pocket three or four boiled potatoes, which I devoured with the greatest avidity. He had brought with him a light in a dark lantern, and the grateful rays afforded me scarcely less comfort than the food and drink. But I was impatient to learn the cause of his protracted absence, and he proceeded to recount what had happened on board during my incarceration.

CHAPTER 4

THE brig put to sea, as I had supposed, in about an hour after he had left the watch. This was on the twentieth of June. It will be remembered that I had then been in the hold for three days; and, during this period, there was so constant a bustle on board, and so much running to and fro, especially in the cabin and staterooms, that he had had no chance of visiting me without the risk of having the secret of the trap discovered. When at length he did come, I had assured him that I was doing as well as possible; and, therefore, for the two next days he felt but little uneasiness on my account — still, however, watching an opportunity of going down. It was not until the fourth day that he found one. Several times during this interval he had made up his mind to let his father know of the adventure, and have me come up at once; but we were still within reaching distance of Nantucket, and it was doubtful, from some expressions which had escaped Captain Barnard, whether he would not immediately put back if he discovered me to be on board. Besides, upon thinking the matter over, Augustus, so he told me, could not imagine that I was in immediate want, or that I would hesitate, in such case, to make myself heard at the trap. When, therefore, he considered everything he concluded to let me stay until he could meet with an opportunity of visiting me unobserved. This, as I said before, did not occur until the fourth day after his bringing me the watch, and the seventh since I had first entered the hold. He then went down without taking with him any water or provisions, intending in the first place merely to call my attention, and get me to come from the box to the trap, — when he would go up to the stateroom and thence hand me down a supply. When he descended for this purpose he found that I was asleep, for it seems that I was snoring very loudly. From all the calculations I can make on the subject, this must have been the slumber into which I fell just after my return from the trap with the watch, and which, consequently, must have lasted for more than three entire days and nights at the very least. Latterly, I have had reason both from my own experience and the assurance of others, to be acquainted with the strong soporific effects of the stench arising from old fish-oil when closely confined; and when I think of the condition of the hold in which I was imprisoned, and the long period during which the brig had been used as a whaling vessel, I am more inclined to wonder that I awoke at all, after once falling asleep, than that I should have slept uninterruptedly for the period specified above.

Augustus called to me at first in a low voice and without closing the trap — but I made him no reply. He then shut the trap, and spoke to me in a louder, and finally in a very loud tone — still I continued to snore. He was now at a loss what to do. It would take him some time to make his way through the lumber to my box, and in the meanwhile his absence would be noticed by Captain Barnard, who had occasion for his services every minute, in arranging and copying papers connected with the business of the voyage. He determined, therefore, upon reflection, to ascend, and await another opportunity of visiting me. He was the more easily induced to this resolve, as my slumber appeared to be of the most tranquil nature, and he could not suppose that I had undergone any inconvenience from my incarceration. He had just made up his mind on these points when his attention was arrested by an unusual bustle, the sound of which proceeded apparently from the cabin. He sprang through the trap as quickly as possible, closed it, and threw open the door of his stateroom. No sooner had he put his foot over the threshold than a pistol flashed in his face, and he was knocked down, at the same moment, by a blow from a handspike.

A strong hand held him on the cabin floor, with a tight grasp upon his throat; still he was able to see what was going on around him. His father was tied hand and foot, and lying along the steps of the companion-way, with his head down, and a deep wound in the forehead, from which the blood was flowing in a continued stream. He spoke not a word, and was apparently dying. Over him stood the first mate, eyeing him with an expression of fiendish derision, and deliberately searching his pockets, from which he presently drew forth a large wallet and a chronometer. Seven of the crew (among whom was the cook, a negro) were rummaging the staterooms on the larboard for arms, where they soon equipped themselves with muskets and ammunition. Besides Augustus and Captain Barnard, there were nine men altogether in the cabin, and these among the most ruffianly of the brig's company. The villains now went upon deck, taking my friend with them after having secured his arms behind his back. They proceeded straight to the forecastle, which was fastened down — two of the mutineers standing by it with axes — two also at the main hatch. The mate called out in a loud voice: "Do you hear there below? tumble up with you, one by one — now, mark that — and no grumbling!" It was some minutes before any one appeared: — at last an Englishman, who had shipped as a raw hand, came up, weeping piteously, and entreating the mate, in the most humble manner, to spare his life. The only reply was a blow on the forehead from an axe. The poor fellow fell to the deck without a groan, and the black cook lifted him up in his arms as he would a child, and tossed him deliberately into the sea. Hearing the blow and the plunge of the body, the men below could now be induced to venture on deck neither by threats nor promises, until a proposition was made to smoke them out. A general rush then ensued, and for a moment it seemed possible that the brig might be retaken. The mutineers, however, succeeded at last in closing the forecastle effectually before more than six of their opponents could get up.

These six, finding themselves so greatly outnumbered and without arms, submitted after a brief struggle. The mate gave them fair words — no doubt with a view of inducing those below to yield, for they had no difficulty in hearing all that was said on deck. The result proved his sagacity, no less than his diabolical villainy. All in the forecastle presently signified their intention of submitting, and, ascending one by one, were pinioned and then thrown on their backs, together with the first six — there being in all, of the crew who were not concerned in the mutiny, twenty-seven.

A scene of the most horrible butchery ensued. The bound seamen were dragged to the gangway. Here the cook stood with an axe, striking each victim on the head as he was forced over the side of the vessel by the other mutineers. In this manner twenty-two perished, and Augustus had given himself up for lost, expecting every moment his own turn to come next. But it seemed that the villains were now either weary, or in some measure disgusted with their bloody labour; for the four remaining prisoners, together with my friend, who had been thrown on the deck with the rest, were respited while the mate sent below for rum, and the whole murderous party held a drunken carouse, which lasted until sunset. They now fell to disputing in regard to the fate of the survivors, who lay not more than four paces off, and could distinguish every word said. Upon some of the mutineers the liquor appeared to have a softening effect, for several voices were heard in favor of releasing the captives altogether, on condition of joining the mutiny and sharing the profits. The black cook, however (who in all respects was a perfect demon, and who seemed to exert as much influence, if not more, than the mate himself), would listen to no proposition of the kind, and rose repeatedly for the purpose of resuming his work at the gangway. Fortunately he was so far overcome by intoxication as to be easily restrained by the less bloodthirsty of the party, among whom was a line-manager, who went by the name of Dirk Peters. This man was the son of an Indian squaw of the tribe of Upsarokas, who live among the fastnesses of the Black Hills, near the source of the Missouri. His father was a fur-trader, I believe, or at least connected in some manner with the Indian trading-posts on Lewis river. Peter himself was one of the most ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature, not more than four feet eight inches high, but his limbs were of Herculean mould. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape. His arms, as well as legs, were bowed in the most singular manner, and appeared to possess no flexibility whatever. His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald. To conceal this latter deficiency, which did not proceed from old age, he usually wore a wig formed of any hair-like material which presented itself — occasionally the skin of a Spanish dog or American grizzly bear. At the time spoken of, he had on a portion of one of these bearskins; and it added no little to the natural ferocity of his countenance, which betook of the Upsaroka character. The mouth extended nearly from ear to ear, the lips were thin, and seemed, like some other portions of his frame, to be devoid of natural pliancy, so that the ruling expression never varied under the influence of any emotion whatever. This ruling expression may be conceived when it is considered that the teeth were exceedingly long and protruding, and never even partially covered, in any instance, by the lips. To pass this man with a casual glance, one might imagine him to be convulsed with laughter, but a second look would induce a shuddering acknowledgment, that if such an expression were indicative of merriment, the merriment must be that of a demon. Of this singular being many anecdotes were prevalent among the seafaring men of Nantucket. These anecdotes went to prove his prodigious strength when under excitement, and some of them had given rise to a doubt of his sanity. But on board the Grampus, it seems, he was regarded, at the time of the mutiny, with feelings more of derision than of anything else. I have been thus particular in speaking of Dirk Peters, because, ferocious as he appeared, he proved the main instrument in preserving the life of Augustus, and because I shall have frequent occasion to mention him hereafter in the course of my narrative — a narrative, let me here say, which, in its latter portions, will be found to include incidents of a nature so entirely out of the range of human experience, and for this reason so far beyond the limits of human credulity, that I proceed in utter hopelessness of obtaining credence for all that I shall tell, yet confidently trusting in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and most improbable of my statements.

After much indecision and two or three violent quarrels, it was determined at last that all the prisoners (with the exception of Augustus, whom Peters insisted in a jocular manner upon keeping as his clerk) should be set adrift in one of the smallest whaleboats. The mate went down into the cabin to see if Captain Barnard was still living — for, it will be remembered, he was left below when the mutineers came up. Presently the two made their appearance, the captain pale as death, but somewhat recovered from the effects of his wound. He spoke to the men in a voice hardly articulate, entreated them not to set him adrift, but to return to their duty, and promising to land them wherever they chose, and to take no steps for bringing them to justice. He might as well have spoken to the winds. Two of the ruffians seized him by the arms and hurled him over the brig’s side into the boat, which had been lowered while the mate went below. The four men who were lying on the deck were then untied and ordered to follow, which they did without attempting any resistance — Augustus being still left in his painful position, although he struggled and prayed only for the poor satisfaction of being permitted to bid his father farewell. A handful of sea-biscuit and a jug of water were now handed down; but neither mast, sail, oar, nor compass. The boat was towed astern for a few minutes, during which the mutineers held another consultation — it was then finally cut adrift. By this time night had come on — there were neither moon nor stars visible — and a short and ugly sea was running, although there was no great deal of wind. The boat was instantly out of sight, and little hope could be entertained for the unfortunate sufferers who were in it. This event happened, however, in latitude 35 degrees 30’ north, longitude 61 degrees 20’ west, and consequently at no very great distance from the Bermuda Islands. Augustus therefore endeavored to console himself with the idea that the boat might either succeed in reaching the land, or come sufficiently near to be fallen in with by vessels off the coast.

All sail was now put upon the brig, and she continued her original course to the southwest — the mutineers being bent upon some piratical expedition, in which, from all that could be understood, a ship was to be intercepted on her way from the Cape Verd Islands to Porto Rico. No attention was paid to Augustus, who was untied and suffered to go about anywhere forward of the cabin companion-way. Dirk Peters treated him with some degree of kindness, and on one occasion saved him from the brutality of the cook. His situation was still one of the most precarious, as the men were continually intoxicated, and there was no relying upon their continued good-humor or carelessness in regard to himself. His anxiety on my account be represented, however, as the most distressing result of his condition; and, indeed, I had never reason to doubt the sincerity of his friendship. More than once he had resolved to acquaint the mutineers with the secret of my being on board, but was restrained from so doing, partly through recollection of the atrocities he had already beheld, and partly through a hope of being able soon to bring me relief. For the latter purpose he was constantly on the watch; but, in spite of the most constant vigilance, three days elapsed after the boat was cut adrift before any chance occurred. At length, on the night of the third day, there came on a heavy blow from the eastward, and all hands were called up to take in sail. During the confusion which ensued, he made his way below unobserved, and into the stateroom. What was his grief and horror in discovering that the latter had been rendered a place of deposit for a variety of sea-stores and ship-furniture, and that several fathoms of old chain-cable, which had been stowed away beneath the companion-ladder, had been dragged thence to make room for a chest, and were now lying immediately upon the trap! To remove it without discovery was impossible, and he returned on deck as quickly as he could. As he came up, the mate seized him by the throat, and demanding what he had been doing in the cabin, was about flinging him over the larboard bulwark, when his life was again preserved through the interference of Dirk Peters. Augustus was now put in handcuffs (of which there were several pairs on board), and his feet lashed tightly together. He was then taken into the steerage, and thrown into a lower berth next to the forecastle bulkheads, with the assurance that he should never put his foot on deck again "until the brig was no longer a brig." This was the expression of the cook, who threw him into the berth — it is hardly possible to say what precise meaning intended by the phrase. The whole affair, however, proved the ultimate means of my relief, as will presently appear.

CHAPTER 5

FOR some minutes after the cook had left the forecastle, Augustus abandoned himself to despair, never hoping to leave the berth alive. He now came to the resolution of acquainting the first of the men who should come down with my situation, thinking it better to let me take my chance with the mutineers than perish of thirst in the hold, — for it had been ten days since I was first imprisoned, and my jug of water was not a plentiful supply even for four. As he was thinking on this subject, the idea came all at once into his head that it might be possible to communicate with me by the way of the main hold. In any other circumstances, the difficulty and hazard of the undertaking would have prevented him from attempting it; but now he had, at all events, little prospect of life, and consequently little to lose, he bent his whole mind, therefore, upon the task.

His handcuffs were the first consideration. At first he saw no method of removing them, and feared that he should thus be baffled in the very outset; but upon a closer scrutiny he discovered that the irons could be slipped off and on at pleasure, with very little effort or inconvenience, merely by squeezing his hands through them, — this species of manacle being altogether ineffectual in confining young persons, in whom the smaller bones readily yield to pressure. He now untied his feet, and, leaving the cord in such a manner that it could easily be readjusted in the event of any person's coming down, proceeded to examine the bulkhead where it joined the berth. The partition here was of soft pine board, an inch thick, and he saw that he should have little trouble in cutting his way through. A voice was now heard at the forecastle companion-way, and he had just time to put his right hand into its handcuff (the left had not been removed) and to draw the rope in a slipknot around his ankle, when Dirk Peters came below, followed by Tiger, who immediately leaped into the berth and lay down. The dog had been brought on board by Augustus, who knew my attachment to the animal, and thought it would give me pleasure to have him with me during the voyage. He went up to our house for him immediately after first taking me into the hold, but did not think of mentioning the circumstance upon his bringing the watch. Since the mutiny, Augustus had not seen him before his appearance with Dirk Peters, and had given him up for lost, supposing him to have been thrown overboard by some of the malignant villains belonging to the mate’s gang. It appeared afterward that he had crawled into a hole beneath a whale-boat, from which, not having room to turn round, he could not extricate himself. Peters at last let him out, and, with a species of good feeling which my friend knew well how to appreciate, had now brought him to him in the forecastle as a companion, leaving at the same time some salt junk and potatoes, with a can of water, he then went on deck, promising to come down with something more to eat on the next day.

When he had gone, Augustus freed both hands from the manacles and unfastened his feet. He then turned down the head of the mattress on which he had been lying, and with his penknife (for the ruffians had not thought it worth while to search him) commenced cutting vigorously across one of the partition planks, as closely as possible to the floor of the berth. He chose to cut here, because, if suddenly interrupted, he would be able to conceal what had been done by letting the head of the mattress fall into its proper position. For the remainder of the day, however, no disturbance occurred, and by night he had completely divided the plank. It should here be observed that none of the crew occupied the forecastle as a sleeping-place, living altogether in the cabin since the mutiny, drinking the wines and feasting on the sea-stores of Captain Barnard, and giving no more heed than was absolutely necessary to the navigation of the brig. These circumstances proved fortunate both for myself and Augustus; for, had matters been otherwise, he would have found it impossible to reach me. As it was, he proceeded with confidence in his design. It was near daybreak, however, before he completed the second division of the board (which was about a foot above the first cut), thus making an aperture quite large enough to admit his passage through with facility to the main orlop deck. Having got here, he made his way with but little trouble to the lower main hatch, although in so doing he had to scramble over tiers of oil-casks piled nearly as high as the upper deck, there being barely room enough left for his body. Upon reaching the hatch he found that Tiger had followed him below, squeezing between two rows of the casks. It was now too late, however, to attempt getting to me before dawn, as the chief difficulty lay in passing through the close stowage in the lower hold. He therefore resolved to return, and wait till the next night. With this design, he proceeded to loosen the hatch, so that he might have as little detention as possible when he should come again. No sooner had he loosened it than Tiger sprang eagerly to the small opening produced, snuffed for a moment, and then uttered a long whine, scratching at the same time, as if anxious to remove the covering with his paws. There could be no doubt, from his behaviour, that he was aware of my being in the hold, and Augustus thought it possible that he would be able to get to me if he put him down. He now hit upon the expedient of sending the note, as it was especially desirable that I should make no attempt at forcing my way out at least under existing circumstances, and there could be no certainty of his getting to me himself on the morrow as he intended. After-events proved how fortunate it was that the idea occurred to him as it did; for, had it not been for the receipt of the note, I should undoubtedly have fallen upon some plan, however desperate, of alarming the crew, and both our lives would most probably have been sacrificed in consequence.

Having concluded to write, the difficulty was now to procure the materials for so doing. An old toothpick was soon made into a pen; and this by means of feeling altogether, for the between-decks was as dark as pitch. Paper enough was obtained from the back of a letter — a duplicate of the forged letter from Mr. Ross. This had been the original draught; but the handwriting not being sufficiently well imitated, Augustus had written another, thrusting the first, by good fortune, into his coat-pocket, where it was now most opportunely discovered. Ink alone was thus wanting, and a substitute was immediately found for this by means of a slight incision with the pen-knife on the back of a finger just above the nail — a copious flow of blood ensuing, as usual, from wounds in that vicinity. The note was now written, as well as it could be in the dark and under the circumstances. It briefly explained that a mutiny had taken place; that Captain Barnard was set adrift; and that I might expect immediate relief as far as provisions were concerned, but must not venture upon making any disturbance. It concluded with these words: “*I have scrawled this with blood — your life depends upon lying close.*”

This slip of paper being tied upon the dog, he was now put down the hatchway, and Augustus made the best of his way back to the forecastle, where he found no reason to believe that any of the crew had been in his absence. To conceal the hole in the partition, he drove his knife in just above it, and hung up a pea-jacket which he found in the berth. His handcuffs were then replaced, and also the rope around his ankles.

These arrangements were scarcely completed when Dirk Peters came below, very drunk, but in excellent humour, and bringing with him my friend’s allowance of provision for the day. This consisted of a dozen large Irish potatoes roasted, and a pitcher of water. He sat for some time on a chest by the berth, and talked freely about the mate and the general concerns of the brig. His demeanour was exceedingly capricious, and even grotesque. At one time Augustus was much alarmed by odd conduct. At last, however, he went on deck, muttering a promise to bring his prisoner a good dinner on the morrow. During the day two of the crew (harpooners) came down, accompanied by the cook, all three in nearly the last stage of intoxication. Like Peters, they made no scruple of talking unreservedly about their plans. It appeared that they were much divided among themselves as to their ultimate course, agreeing in no point, except the attack on the ship from the Cape Verd Islands, with which they were in hourly expectation of meeting. As far as could be ascertained, the mutiny had not been brought about altogether for the sake of booty; a private pique of the chief mate’s against Captain Barnard having been the main instigation. There now seemed to be two principal factions among the crew — one headed by the mate, the other by the cook. The former party were for seizing the first suitable vessel which should present itself, and equipping it at some of the West India Islands for a piratical cruise. The latter division, however, which was the stronger, and included Dirk Peters among its partisans, were bent upon pursuing the course originally laid out for the brig into the South Pacific; there either to take whale, or act otherwise, as circumstances should suggest. The representations of Peters, who had frequently visited these regions, had great weight, apparently, with the mutineers, wavering, as they were, between half-engendered notions of profit and pleasure. He dwelt on the world of novelty and amusement to be found among the innumerable islands of the Pacific, on the perfect security and freedom from all restraint to be enjoyed, but, more particularly, on the deliciousness of the climate, on the abundant means of good living, and on the voluptuous beauty of the women. As yet, nothing had been absolutely determined upon; but the pictures of the hybrid line-manager were taking strong hold upon the ardent imaginations of the seamen, and there was every possibility that his intentions would be finally carried into effect.

The three men went away in about an hour, and no one else entered the forecastle all day. Augustus lay quiet until nearly night. He then freed himself from the rope and irons, and prepared for his attempt. A bottle was found in one of the berths, and this he filled with water from the pitcher left by Peters, storing his pockets at the same time with cold potatoes. To his great joy he also came across a lantern, with a small piece of tallow candle in it. This he could light at any moment, as he had in his possession a box of phosphorus matches. When it was quite dark, he got through the hole in the bulkhead, having taken the precaution to arrange the bedclothes in the berth so as to convey the idea of a person covered up. When through, he hung up the pea-jacket on his knife, as before, to conceal the aperture — this manoeuvre being easily effected, as he did not readjust the piece of plank taken out until afterward. He was now on the main orlop deck, and proceeded to make his way, as before, between the upper deck and the oil-casks to the main hatchway. Having reached this, he lit the piece of candle, and descended, groping with extreme difficulty among the compact stowage of the hold. In a few moments he became alarmed at the insufferable stench and the closeness of the atmosphere. He could not think it possible that I had survived my confinement for so long a period breathing so oppressive an air. He called my name repeatedly, but I made him no reply, and his apprehensions seemed thus to be confirmed. The brig was rolling violently, and there was so much noise in consequence, that it was useless to listen for any weak sound, such as those of my breathing or snoring. He threw open the lantern, and held it as high as possible, whenever an opportunity occurred, in order that, by observing the light, I might, if alive, be aware that succor was approaching. Still nothing was heard from me, and the supposition of my death began to assume the character of certainty. He determined, nevertheless, to force a passage, if possible, to the box, and at least ascertain beyond a doubt the truth of his surmises. He pushed on for some time in a most pitiable state of anxiety, until, at length, he found the pathway utterly blocked up, and that there was no possibility of making any farther way by the course in which he had set out. Overcome now by his feelings, he threw himself among the lumber in despair, and wept like a child. It was at this period that he heard the crash occasioned by the bottle which I had thrown down. Fortunate, indeed, was it that the incident occurred — for, upon this incident, trivial as it appears, the thread of my destiny depended. Many years elapsed, however, before I was aware of this fact. A natural shame and regret for his weakness and indecision prevented Augustus from confiding to me at once what a more intimate and unreserved communion afterward induced him to reveal. Upon finding his further progress in the hold impeded by obstacles which he could not overcome, he had resolved to abandon his attempt at reaching me, and return at once to the forecastle. Before condemning him entirely on this head, the harassing circumstances which embarrassed him should be taken into consideration. The night was fast wearing away, and his absence from the forecastle might be discovered; and indeed would necessarily be so, if he should fail to get back to the berth by daybreak. His candle was expiring in the socket, and there would be the greatest difficulty in retracing his way to the hatchway in the dark. It must be allowed, too, that he had every good reason to believe me dead; in which event no benefit could result to me from his reaching the box, and a world of danger would be encountered to no purpose by himself. He had repeatedly called, and I had made him no answer. I had been now eleven days and nights with no more water than that contained in the jug which he had left with me — a supply which it was not at all probable I had hoarded in the beginning of my confinement, as I had every cause to expect a speedy release. The atmosphere of the hold, too, must have appeared to him, coming from the comparatively open air of the steerage, of a nature absolutely poisonous, and by far more intolerable than it had seemed to me upon my first taking up my quarters in the box — the hatchways at that time having been constantly open for many months previous. Add to these considerations that of the scene of bloodshed and terror so lately witnessed by my friend; his confinement, privations, and narrow escapes from death, together with the frail and equivocal tenure by which he still existed — circumstances all so well calculated to prostrate every energy of mind — and the reader will be easily brought, as I have been, to regard his apparent falling off in friendship and in faith with sentiments rather of sorrow than of anger.

The crash of the bottle was distinctly heard, yet Augustus was not sure that it proceeded from the hold. The doubt, however, was sufficient inducement to persevere. He clambered up nearly to the orlop deck by means of the stowage, and then, watching for a lull in the pitchings of the vessel, he called out to me in as loud a tone as he could command, regardless, for the moment, of being overheard by the crew. It will be remembered that on this occasion the voice reached me, but I was so entirely overcome by violent agitation as to be incapable of reply. Confident, now, that his worst apprehensions were well founded, he descended, with a view of getting back to the forecastle without loss of time. In his haste some small boxes were thrown down, the noise occasioned by which I heard, as will be recollected. He had made considerable progress on his return when the fall of the knife again caused him to hesitate. He retraced his steps immediately, and, clambering up the stowage a second time, called out my name, loudly as before, having watched for a lull. This time I found voice to answer. Overjoyed at discovering me to be still alive, he now resolved to brave every difficulty and danger in reaching me. Having extricated himself as quickly as possible from the labyrinth of lumber by which he was hemmed in, he at length struck into an opening which promised better, and finally, after a series of struggles, arrived at the box in a state of utter exhaustion.

CHAPTER 6

THE leading particulars of this narration were all that Augustus communicated to me while we remained near the box. It was not until afterward that he entered fully into all the details. He was apprehensive of being missed, and I was wild with impatience to leave my detested place of confinement. We resolved to make our way at once to the hole in the bulkhead, near which I was to remain for the present, while he went through to reconnoiter. To leave Tiger in the box was what neither of us could endure to think of, yet, how to act otherwise was the question. He now seemed to be perfectly quiet, and we could not even distinguish the sound of his breathing upon applying our ears closely to the box. I was convinced that he was dead, and determined to open the door. We found him lying at full length, apparently in a deep stupor, yet still alive. No time was to be lost, yet I could not bring myself to abandon an animal who had now been twice instrumental in saving my life, without some attempt at preserving him. We therefore dragged him along with us as well as we could, although with the greatest difficulty and fatigue; Augustus, during part of the time, being forced to clamber over the impediments in our way with the huge dog in his arms — a feat to which the feebleness of my frame rendered me totally inadequate. At length we succeeded in reaching the hole, when Augustus got through, and Tiger was pushed in afterward. All was found to be safe, and we did not fail to return sincere thanks to God for our deliverance from the imminent danger we had escaped. For the present, it was agreed that I should remain near the opening, through which my companion could readily supply me with a part of his daily provision, and where I could have the advantages of breathing an atmosphere comparatively pure.

In explanation of some portions of this narrative, wherein I have spoken of the stowage of the brig, and which may appear ambiguous to some of my readers who may have seen a proper or regular stowage, I must here state that the manner in which this most important duty had been per formed on board the Grampus was a most shameful piece of neglect on the part of Captain Barnard, who was by no means as careful or as experienced a seaman as the hazardous nature of the service on which he was employed would seem necessarily to demand. A proper stowage cannot be accomplished in a careless manner, and many most disastrous accidents, even within the limits of my own experience, have arisen from neglect or ignorance in this particular. Coasting vessels, in the frequent hurry and bustle attendant upon taking in or discharging cargo, are the most liable to mishap from the want of a proper attention to stowage. The great point is to allow no possibility of the cargo or ballast shifting position even in the most violent rollings of the vessel. With this end, great attention must be paid, not only to the bulk taken in, but to the nature of the bulk, and whether there be a full or only a partial cargo. In most kinds of freight the stowage is accomplished by means of a screw. Thus, in a load of tobacco or flour, the whole is screwed so tightly into the hold of the vessel that the barrels or hogsheads, upon discharging, are found to be completely flattened, and take some time to regain their original shape. This screwing, however, is resorted to principally with a view of obtaining more room in the hold; for in a full load of any such commodities as flour or tobacco, there can be no danger of any shifting whatever, at least none from which inconvenience can result. There have been instances, indeed, where this method of screwing has resulted in the most lamentable consequences, arising from a cause altogether distinct from the danger attendant upon a shifting of cargo.

A load of cotton, for example, tightly screwed while in certain conditions, has been known, through the expansion of its bulk, to rend a vessel asunder at sea. There can be no doubt either that the same result would ensue in the case of tobacco, while undergoing its usual course of fermentation, were it not for the interstices consequent upon the rotundity of the hogsheads.

It is when a partial cargo is received that danger is chiefly to be apprehended from shifting, and that precautions should be always taken to guard against such misfortune. Only those who have encountered a violent gale of wind, or rather who have experienced the rolling of a vessel in a sudden calm after the gale, can form an idea of the tremendous force of the plunges, and of the consequent terrible impetus given to all loose articles in the vessel. It is then that the necessity of a cautious stowage, when there is a partial cargo, becomes obvious. When lying-to (especially with a small bead sail), a vessel which is not properly modelled in the bows is frequently thrown upon her beam-ends; this occurring even every fifteen or twenty minutes upon an average, yet without any serious consequences resulting, provided there be a proper stowage. If this, however, has not been strictly attended to, in the first of these heavy lurches the whole of the cargo tumbles over to the side of the vessel which lies upon the water, and, being thus prevented from regaining her equilibrium, as she would otherwise necessarily do, she is certain to fill in a few seconds and go down. It is not too much to say that at least one-half of the instances in which vessels have foundered in heavy gales at sea may be attributed to a shifting of cargo or of ballast.

When a partial cargo of any kind is taken on board, the whole, after being first stowed as compactly as may be, should be covered with a layer of stout shifting-boards, extending completely across the vessel. Upon these boards strong temporary stanchions should be erected, reaching to the timbers above, and thus securing every thing in its place. In cargoes consisting of grain, or any similar matter, additional precautions are requisite. A hold filled entirely with grain upon leaving port will be found not more than three fourths full upon reaching its destination — this, too, although the freight, when measured bushel by bushel by the consignee, will overrun by a vast deal (on account of the swelling of the grain) the quantity consigned. This result is occasioned by settling during the voyage, and is the more perceptible in proportion to the roughness of the weather experienced. If grain loosely thrown in a vessel, then, is ever so well secured by shifting-boards and stanchions, it will be liable to shift in a long passage so greatly as to bring about the most distressing calamities. To prevent these, every method should be employed before leaving port to settle the cargo as much as possible; and for this there are many contrivances, among which may be mentioned the driving of wedges into the grain. Even after all this is done, and unusual pains taken to secure the shifting-boards, no seaman who knows what he is about will feel altogether secure in a gale of any violence with a cargo of grain on board, and, least of all, with a partial cargo. Yet there are hundreds of our coasting vessels, and, it is likely, many more from the ports of Europe, which sail daily with partial cargoes, even of the most dangerous species, and without any precaution whatever. The wonder is that no more accidents occur than do actually happen. A lamentable instance of this heedlessness occurred to my knowledge in the case of Captain Joel Rice of the schooner Firefly, which sailed from Richmond, Virginia, to Madeira, with a cargo of corn, in the year 1825. The captain had gone many voyages without serious accident, although he was in the habit of paying no attention whatever to his stowage, more than to secure it in the ordinary manner. He had never before sailed with a cargo of grain, and on this occasion had the corn thrown on board loosely, when it did not much more than half fill the vessel. For the first portion of the voyage he met with nothing more than light breezes; but when within a day’s sail of Madeira there came on a strong gale from the N. N. E. which forced him to lie-to. He brought the schooner to the wind under a double-reefed foresail alone, when she rode as well as any vessel could be expected to do, and shipped not a drop of water. Toward night the gale somewhat abated, and she rolled with more unsteadiness than before, but still did very well, until a heavy lurch threw her upon her beam-ends to starboard. The corn was then heard to shift bodily, the force of the movement bursting open the main hatchway. The vessel went down like a shot. This happened within hail of a small sloop from Madeira, which picked up one of the crew (the only person saved), and which rode out the gale in perfect security, as indeed a jolly boat might have done under proper management.

The stowage on board the Grampus was most clumsily done, if stowage that could be called which was little better than a promiscuous huddling together of oil-casks {*1} and ship furniture. I have already spoken of the condition of articles in the hold. On the orlop deck there was space enough for my body (as I have stated) between the oil-casks and the upper deck; a space was left open around the main hatchway; and several other large spaces were left in the stowage. Near the hole cut through the bulkhead by Augustus there was room enough for an entire cask, and in this space I found myself comfortably situated for the present.

By the time my friend had got safely into the berth, and readjusted his handcuffs and the rope, it was broad daylight. We had made a narrow escape indeed; for scarcely had he arranged all matters, when the mate came below, with Dirk Peters and the cook. They talked for some time about the vessel from the Cape Verds, and seemed to be excessively anxious for her appearance. At length the cook came to the berth in which Augustus was lying, and seated himself in it near the head. I could see and hear every thing from my hiding-place, for the piece cut out had not been put back, and I was in momentary expectation that the negro would fall against the pea-jacket, which was hung up to conceal the aperture, in which case all would have been discovered, and our lives would, no doubt, have been instantly sacrificed. Our good fortune prevailed, however; and although he frequently touched it as the vessel rolled, he never pressed against it sufficiently to bring about a discovery. The bottom of the jacket had been carefully fastened to the bulkhead, so that the hole might not be seen by its swinging to one side. All this time Tiger was lying in the foot of the berth, and appeared to have recovered in some measure his faculties, for I could see him occasionally open his eyes and draw a long breath.

After a few minutes the mate and cook went above, leaving Dirk Peters behind, who, as soon as they were gone, came and sat himself down in the place just occupied by the mate. He began to talk very sociably with Augustus, and we could now see that the greater part of his apparent intoxication, while the two others were with him, was a feint. He answered all my companion’s questions with perfect freedom; told him that he had no doubt of his father’s having been picked up, as there were no less than five sail in sight just before sundown on the day he was cut adrift; and used other language of a consolatory nature, which occasioned me no less surprise than pleasure. Indeed, I began to entertain hopes, that through the instrumentality of Peters we might be finally enabled to regain possession of the brig, and this idea I mentioned to Augustus as soon as I found an opportunity. He thought the matter possible, but urged the necessity of the greatest caution in making the attempt, as the conduct of the hybrid appeared to be instigated by the most arbitrary caprice alone; and, indeed, it was difficult to say if he was at any moment of sound mind. Peters went upon deck in about an hour, and did not return again until noon, when he brought Augustus a plentiful supply of junk beef and pudding. Of this, when we were left alone, I partook heartily, without returning through the hole. No one else came down into the forecastle during the day, and at night, I got into Augustus' berth, where I slept soundly and sweetly until nearly daybreak, when he awakened me upon hearing a stir upon deck, and I regained my hiding-place as quickly as possible. When the day was fully broke, we found that Tiger had recovered his strength almost entirely, and gave no indications of hydrophobia, drinking a little water that was offered him with great apparent eagerness. During the day he regained all his former vigour and appetite. His strange conduct had been brought on, no doubt, by the deleterious quality of the air of the hold, and had no connexion with canine madness. I could not sufficiently rejoice that I had persisted in bringing him with me from the box. This day was the thirtieth of June, and the thirteenth since the Grampus made sad from Nantucket.

On the second of July the mate came below drunk as usual, and in an excessively good-humor. He came to Augustus's berth, and, giving him a slap on the back, asked him if he thought he could behave himself if he let him loose, and whether he would promise not to be going into the cabin again. To this, of course, my friend answered in the affirmative, when the ruffian set him at liberty, after making him drink from a flask of rum which he drew from his coat-pocket. Both now went on deck, and I did not see Augustus for about three hours. He then came below with the good news that he had obtained permission to go about the brig as he pleased anywhere forward of the mainmast, and that he had been ordered to sleep, as usual, in the forecastle. He brought me, too, a good dinner, and a plentiful supply of water. The brig was still cruising for the vessel from the Cape Verds, and a sail was now in sight, which was thought to be the one in question. As the events of the ensuing eight days were of little importance, and had no direct bearing upon the main incidents of my narrative, I will here throw them into the form of a journal, as I do not wish to omit them altogether.

July 3. Augustus furnished me with three blankets, with which I contrived a comfortable bed in my hiding-place. No one came below, except my companion, during the day. Tiger took his station in the berth just by the aperture, and slept heavily, as if not yet entirely recovered from the effects of his sickness. Toward night a flaw of wind struck the brig before sail could be taken in, and very nearly capsized her. The puff died away immediately, however, and no damage was done beyond the splitting of the foretopsail. Dirk Peters treated Augustus all this day with great kindness and entered into a long conversation with him respecting the Pacific Ocean, and the islands he had visited in that region. He asked him whether he would not like to go with the mutineers on a kind of exploring and pleasure voyage in those quarters, and said that the men were gradually coming over to the mate's views. To this Augustus thought it best to reply that he would be glad to go on such an adventure, since nothing better could be done, and that any thing was preferable to a piratical life.

July 4th. The vessel in sight proved to be a small brig from Liverpool, and was allowed to pass unmolested. Augustus spent most of his time on deck, with a view of obtaining all the information in his power respecting the intentions of the mutineers. They had frequent and violent quarrels among themselves, in one of which a harpooner, Jim Bonner, was thrown overboard. The party of the mate was gaining ground. Jim Bonner belonged to the cook's gang, of which Peters was a partisan.

July 5th. About daybreak there came on a stiff breeze from the west, which at noon freshened into a gale, so that the brig could carry nothing more than her trysail and foresail. In taking in the foretopsail, Simms, one of the common hands, and belonging also to the cook's gang, fell overboard, being very much in liquor, and was drowned — no attempt being made to save him. The whole number of persons on board was now thirteen, to wit: Dirk Peters; Seymour, the black cook; Jones, Greely, Hartman Rogers and William Allen, all of the cook's party; the mate, whose name I never learned; Absalom Hicks, Wilson, John Hunty Richard Parker, of the mate's party; — besides Augustus and myself.

July 6th. The gale lasted all this day, blowing in heavy squalls, accompanied with rain. The brig took in a good deal of water through her seams, and one of the pumps was kept continually going, Augustus being forced to take his turn. Just at twilight a large ship passed close by us, without having been discovered until within hail. The ship was supposed to be the one for which the mutineers were on the lookout. The mate hailed her, but the reply was drowned in the roaring of the gale. At eleven, a sea was shipped amidships, which tore away a great portion of the larboard bulwarks, and did some other slight damage. Toward morning the weather moderated, and at sunrise there was very little wind.

July 7th. There was a heavy swell running all this day, during which the brig, being light, rolled excessively, and many articles broke loose in the hold, as I could hear distinctly from my hiding-place. I suffered a great deal from sea-sickness. Peters had a long conversation this day with Augustus, and told him that two of his gang, Greely and Allen, had gone over to the mate, and were resolved to turn pirates. He put several questions to Augustus which he did not then exactly understand. During a part of this evening the leak gained upon the vessel; and little could be done to remedy it, as it was occasioned by the brigs straining, and taking in the water through her seams. A sail was thrummed, and got under the bows, which aided us in some measure, so that we began to gain upon the leak.

July 8th. A light breeze sprang up at sunrise from the eastward, when the mate headed the brig to the southwest, with the intention of making some of the West India islands in pursuance of his piratical designs. No opposition was made by Peters or the cook — at least none in the hearing of Augustus. All idea of taking the vessel from the Cape Verds was abandoned. The leak was now easily kept under by one pump going every three quarters of an hour. The sail was drawn from beneath the bows. Spoke two small schooners during the day.

July 9th. Fine weather. All hands employed in repairing bulwarks. Peters had again a long conversation with Augustus, and spoke more plainly than he had done heretofore. He said nothing should induce him to come into the mate's views, and even hinted his intention of taking the brig out of his hands. He asked my friend if he could depend upon his aid in such case, to which Augustus said, "Yes," without hesitation. Peters then said he would sound the others of his party upon the subject, and went away. During the remainder of the day Augustus had no opportunity of speaking with him privately.

CHAPTER 7

JULY 10. Spoke a brig from Rio, bound to Norfolk. Weather hazy, with a light baffling wind from the eastward. To-day Hartman Rogers died, having been attacked on the eighth with spasms after drinking a glass of grog. This man was of the cook's party, and one upon whom Peters placed his main reliance. He told Augustus that he believed the mate had poisoned him, and that he expected, if he did not be on the look-out, his own turn would come shortly. There were now only himself, Jones, and the cook belonging to his own gang — on the other side there were five. He had spoken to Jones about taking the command from the mate; but the project having been coolly received, he had been deterred from pressing the matter any further, or from saying any thing to the cook. It was well, as it happened, that he was so prudent, for in the afternoon the cook expressed his determination of siding with the mate, and went over formally to that party; while Jones took an opportunity of quarrelling with Peters, and hinted that he would let the mate know of the plan in agitation. There was now, evidently, no time to be lost, and Peters expressed his determination of attempting to take the vessel at all hazards, provided Augustus would lend him his aid. My friend at once assured him of his willingness to enter into any plan for that purpose, and, thinking the opportunity a favourable one, made known the fact of my being on board. At this the hybrid was not more astonished than delighted, as he had no reliance whatever upon Jones, whom he already considered as belonging to the party of the mate. They went below immediately, when Augustus called to me by name, and Peters and myself were soon made acquainted. It was agreed that we should attempt to retake the vessel upon the first good opportunity, leaving Jones altogether out of our councils. In the event of success, we were to run the brig into the first port that offered, and deliver her up. The desertion of his party had frustrated Peters' design of going into the Pacific — an adventure which could not be accomplished without a crew, and he depended upon either getting acquitted upon trial, on the score of insanity (which he solemnly avowed had actuated him in lending his aid to the mutiny), or upon obtaining a pardon, if found guilty, through the representations of Augustus and myself. Our deliberations were interrupted for the present by the cry of, "All hands take in sail," and Peters and Augustus ran up on deck.

As usual, the crew were nearly all drunk; and, before sail could be properly taken in, a violent squall laid the brig on her beam-ends. By keeping her away, however, she righted, having shipped a good deal of water. Scarcely was everything secure, when another squall took the vessel, and immediately afterward another — no damage being done. There was every appearance of a gale of wind, which, indeed, shortly came on, with great fury, from the northward and westward. All was made as snug as possible, and we laid-to, as usual, under a close-reefed foresail. As night drew on, the wind increased in violence, with a remarkably heavy sea. Peters now came into the forecastle with Augustus, and we resumed our deliberations.

We agreed that no opportunity could be more favourable than the present for carrying our designs into effect, as an attempt at such a moment would never be anticipated. As the brig was snugly laid-to, there would be no necessity of manoeuvring her until good weather, when, if we succeeded in our attempt, we might liberate one, or perhaps two of the men, to aid us in taking her into port. The main difficulty was the great disproportion in our forces. There were only three of us, and in the cabin there were nine. All the arms on board, too, were in their possession, with the exception of a pair of small pistols which Peters had concealed about his person, and the large seaman’s knife which he always wore in the waistband of his pantaloons. From certain indications, too — such, for example, as there being no such thing as an axe or a handspike lying in their customary places — we began to fear that the mate had his suspicions, at least in regard to Peters, and that he would let slip no opportunity of getting rid of him. It was clear, indeed, that what we should determine to do could not be done too soon. Still the odds were too much against us to allow of our proceeding without the greatest caution.

Peters proposed that he should go up on deck, and enter into conversation with the watch (Allen), when he would be able to throw him into the sea without trouble, and without making any disturbance, by seizing a good opportunity, that Augustus and myself should then come up, and endeavour to provide ourselves with some kind of weapons from the deck, and that we should then make a rush together, and secure the companion-way before any opposition could be offered. I objected to this, because I could not believe that the mate (who was a cunning fellow in all matters which did not affect his superstitious prejudices) would suffer himself to be so easily entrapped. The very fact of there being a watch on deck at all was sufficient proof that he was upon the alert, — it not being usual except in vessels where discipline is most rigidly enforced, to station a watch on deck when a vessel is lying-to in a gale of wind. As I address myself principally, if not altogether, to persons who have never been to sea, it may be as well to state the exact condition of a vessel under such circumstances. Lying-to, or, in sea-parlance, “laying-to,” is a measure resorted to for various purposes, and effected in various manners. In moderate weather it is frequently done with a view of merely bringing the vessel to a stand-still, to wait for another vessel or any similar object. If the vessel which lies-to is under full sail, the manoeuvre is usually accomplished by throwing round some portion of her sails, so as to let the wind take them aback, when she becomes stationary. But we are now speaking of lying-to in a gale of wind. This is done when the wind is ahead, and too violent to admit of carrying sail without danger of capsizing; and sometimes even when the wind is fair, but the sea too heavy for the vessel to be put before it. If a vessel be suffered to scud before the wind in a very heavy sea, much damage is usually done her by the shipping of water over her stern, and sometimes by the violent plunges she makes forward. This manoeuvre, then, is seldom resorted to in such case, unless through necessity. When the vessel is in a leaky condition she is often put before the wind even in the heaviest seas; for, when lying-to, her seams are sure to be greatly opened by her violent straining, and it is not so much the case when scudding. Often, too, it becomes necessary to scud a vessel, either when the blast is so exceedingly furious as to tear in pieces the sail which is employed with a view of bringing her head to the wind, or when, through the false modelling of the frame or other causes, this main object cannot be effected.

Vessels in a gale of wind are laid-to in different manners, according to their peculiar construction. Some lie-to best under a foresail, and this, I believe, is the sail most usually employed. Large square-rigged vessels have sails for the express purpose, called storm-staysails. But the jib is occasionally employed by itself, — sometimes the jib and foresail, or a double-reefed foresail, and not unfrequently the after-sails, are made use of. Foretopsails are very often found to answer the purpose better than any other species of sail. The Grampus was generally laid-to under a close-reefed foresail.

When a vessel is to be laid-to, her head is brought up to the wind just so nearly as to fill the sail under which she lies when hauled flat aft, that is, when brought diagonally across the vessel. This being done, the bows point within a few degrees of the direction from which the wind issues, and the windward bow of course receives the shock of the waves. In this situation a good vessel will ride out a very heavy gale of wind without shipping a drop of water, and without any further attention being requisite on the part of the crew. The helm is usually lashed down, but this is altogether unnecessary (except on account of the noise it makes when loose), for the rudder has no effect upon the vessel when lying-to. Indeed, the helm had far better be left loose than lashed very fast, for the rudder is apt to be torn off by heavy seas if there be no room for the helm to play. As long as the sail holds, a well modelled vessel will maintain her situation, and ride every sea, as if instinct with life and reason. If the violence of the wind, however, should tear the sail into pieces (a feat which it requires a perfect hurricane to accomplish under ordinary circumstances), there is then imminent danger. The vessel falls off from the wind, and, coming broadside to the sea, is completely at its mercy: the only resource in this case is to put her quietly before the wind, letting her scud until some other sail can be set. Some vessels will lie-to under no sail whatever, but such are not to be trusted at sea.

But to return from this digression. It had never been customary with the mate to have any watch on deck when lying-to in a gale of wind, and the fact that he had now one, coupled with the circumstance of the missing axes and handspikes, fully convinced us that the crew were too well on the watch to be taken by surprise in the manner Peters had suggested. Something, however, was to be done, and that with as little delay as practicable, for there could be no doubt that a suspicion having been once entertained against Peters, he would be sacrificed upon the earliest occasion, and one would certainly be either found or made upon the breaking of the gale.

Augustus now suggested that if Peters could contrive to remove, under any pretext, the piece of chain-cable which lay over the trap in the stateroom, we might possibly be able to come upon them unawares by means of the hold; but a little reflection convinced us that the vessel rolled and pitched too violently for any attempt of that nature.

By good fortune I at length hit upon the idea of working upon the superstitious terrors and guilty conscience of the mate. It will be remembered that one of the crew, Hartman Rogers, had died during the morning, having been attacked two days before with spasms after drinking some spirits and water. Peters had expressed to us his opinion that this man had been poisoned by the mate, and for this belief he had reasons, so he said, which were incontrovertible, but which he could not be prevailed upon to explain to us — this wayward refusal being only in keeping with other points of his singular character. But whether or not he had any better grounds for suspecting the mate than we had ourselves, we were easily led to fall in with his suspicion, and determined to act accordingly.

Rogers had died about eleven in the forenoon, in violent convulsions; and the corpse presented in a few minutes after death one of the most horrid and loathsome spectacles I ever remember to have seen. The stomach was swollen immensely, like that of a man who has been drowned and lain under water for many weeks. The hands were in the same condition, while the face was shrunken, shrivelled, and of a chalky whiteness, except where relieved by two or three glaring red blotches like those occasioned by the erysipelas: one of these blotches extended diagonally across the face, completely covering up an eye as if with a band of red velvet. In this disgusting condition the body had been brought up from the cabin at noon to be thrown overboard, when the mate getting a glimpse of it (for he now saw it for the first time), and being either touched with remorse for his crime or struck with terror at so horrible a sight, ordered the men to sew the body up in its hammock, and allow it the usual rites of sea-burial. Having given these directions, he went below, as if to avoid any further sight of his victim. While preparations were making to obey his orders, the gale came on with great fury, and the design was abandoned for the present. The corpse, left to itself, was washed into the larboard scuppers, where it still lay at the time of which I speak, floundering about with the furious lurches of the brig.

Having arranged our plan, we set about putting it in execution as speedily as possible. Peters went upon deck, and, as he had anticipated, was immediately accosted by Allen, who appeared to be stationed more as a watch upon the forecastle than for any other purpose. The fate of this villain, however, was speedily and silently decided; for Peters, approaching him in a careless manner, as if about to address him, seized him by the throat, and, before he could utter a single cry, tossed him over the bulwarks. He then called to us, and we came up. Our first precaution was to look about for something with which to arm ourselves, and in doing this we had to proceed with great care, for it was impossible to stand on deck an instant without holding fast, and violent seas broke over the vessel at every plunge forward. It was indispensable, too, that we should be quick in our operations, for every minute we expected the mate to be up to set the pumps going, as it was evident the brig must be taking in water very fast. After searching about for some time, we could find nothing more fit for our purpose than the two pump-handles, one of which Augustus took, and I the other. Having secured these, we stripped off the shirt of the corpse and dropped the body overboard. Peters and myself then went below, leaving Augustus to watch upon deck, where he took his station just where Allen had been placed, and with his back to the cabin companionway, so that, if any of the mates gang should come up, he might suppose it was the watch.

As soon as I got below I commenced disguising myself so as to represent the corpse of Rogers. The shirt which we had taken from the body aided us very much, for it was of singular form and character, and easily recognizable — a kind of smock, which the deceased wore over his other clothing. It was a blue stockinett, with large white stripes running across. Having put this on, I proceeded to equip myself with a false stomach, in imitation of the horrible deformity of the swollen corpse. This was soon effected by means of stuffing with some bedclothes. I then gave the same appearance to my hands by drawing on a pair of white woollen mittens, and filling them in with any kind of rags that offered themselves. Peters then arranged my face, first rubbing it well over with white chalk, and afterward blotching it with blood, which he took from a cut in his finger. The streak across the eye was not forgotten and presented a most shocking appearance.

CHAPTER 8

AS I viewed myself in a fragment of looking-glass which hung up in the cabin, and by the dim light of a kind of battle-lantern, I was so impressed with a sense of vague awe at my appearance, and at the recollection of the terrific reality which I was thus representing, that I was seized with a violent tremour, and could scarcely summon resolution to go on with my part. It was necessary, however, to act with decision, and Peters and myself went upon deck.

We there found everything safe, and, keeping close to the bulwarks, the three of us crept to the cabin companion-way. It was only partially closed, precautions having been taken to prevent its being suddenly pushed to from without, by means of placing billets of wood on the upper step so as to interfere with the shutting. We found no difficulty in getting a full view of the interior of the cabin through the cracks where the hinges were placed. It now proved to have been very fortunate for us that we had not attempted to take them by surprise, for they were evidently on the alert. Only one was asleep, and he lying just at the foot of the companion-ladder, with a musket by his side. The rest were seated on several mattresses, which had been taken from the berths and thrown on the floor. They were engaged in earnest conversation; and although they had been carousing, as appeared from two empty jugs, with some tin tumblers which lay about, they were not as much intoxicated as usual. All had knives, one or two of them pistols, and a great many muskets were lying in a berth close at hand.

We listened to their conversation for some time before we could make up our minds how to act, having as yet resolved on nothing determinate, except that we would attempt to paralyze their exertions, when we should attack them, by means of the apparition of Rogers. They were discussing their piratical plans, in which all we could hear distinctly was, that they would unite with the crew of a schooner *Hornet*, and, if possible, get the schooner herself into their possession preparatory to some attempt on a large scale, the particulars of which could not be made out by either of us.

One of the men spoke of Peters, when the mate replied to him in a low voice which could not be distinguished, and afterward added more loudly, that “he could not understand his being so much forward with the captain’s brat in the forecastle, and he thought the sooner both of them were overboard the better.” To this no answer was made, but we could easily perceive that the hint was well received by the whole party, and more particularly by Jones. At this period I was excessively agitated, the more so as I could see that neither Augustus nor Peters could determine how to act. I made up my mind, however, to sell my life as dearly as possible, and not to suffer myself to be overcome by any feelings of trepidation.

The tremendous noise made by the roaring of the wind in the rigging, and the washing of the sea over the deck, prevented us from hearing what was said, except during momentary lulls. In one of these, we all distinctly heard the mate tell one of the men to “go forward, have an eye upon them, for he wanted no such secret doings on board the brig.” It was well for us that the pitching of the vessel at this moment was so violent as to prevent this order from being carried into instant execution. The cook got up from his mattress to go for us, when a tremendous lurch, which I thought would carry away the masts, threw him headlong against one of the larboard stateroom doors, bursting it open, and creating a good deal of other confusion. Luckily, neither of our party was thrown from his position, and we had time to make a precipitate retreat to the forecastle, and arrange a hurried plan of action before the messenger made his appearance, or rather before he put his head out of the companion-hatch, for he did not come on deck. From this station he could not notice the absence of Allen, and he accordingly bawled out, as if to him, repeating the orders of the mate. Peters cried out, “Ay, ay,” in a disguised voice, and the cook immediately went below, without entertaining a suspicion that all was not right.

My two companions now proceeded boldly aft and down into the cabin, Peters closing the door after him in the same manner he had found it. The mate received them with feigned cordiality, and told Augustus that, since he had behaved himself so well of late, he might take up his quarters in the cabin and be one of them for the future. He then poured him out a tumbler half full of rum, and made him drink it. All this I saw and heard, for I followed my friends to the cabin as soon as the door was shut, and took up my old point of observation. I had brought with me the two pump-handles, one of which I secured near the companion-way, to be ready for use when required.

I now steadied myself as well as possible so as to have a good view of all that was passing within, and endeavoured to nerve myself to the task of descending among the mutineers when Peters should make a signal to me, as agreed upon. Presently he contrived to turn the conversation upon the bloody deeds of the mutiny, and by degrees led the men to talk of the thousand superstitions which are so universally current among seamen. I could not make out all that was said, but I could plainly see the effects of the conversation in the countenances of those present. The mate was evidently much agitated, and presently, when some one mentioned the terrific appearance of Rogers’ corpse, I thought he was upon the point of swooning. Peters now asked him if he did not think it would be better to have the body thrown overboard at once as it was too horrible a sight to see it floundering about in the scuppers. At this the villain absolutely gasped for breath, and turned his head slowly round upon his companions, as if imploring some one to go up and perform the task. No one, however, stirred, and it was quite evident that the whole party were wound up to the highest pitch of nervous excitement. Peters now made me the signal. I immediately threw open the door of the companion-way, and, descending, without uttering a syllable, stood erect in the midst of the party.

The intense effect produced by this sudden apparition is not at all to be wondered at when the various circumstances are taken into consideration. Usually, in cases of a similar nature, there is left in the mind of the spectator some glimmering of doubt as to the reality of the vision before his eyes; a degree of hope, however feeble, that he is the victim of chicanery, and that the apparition is not actually a visitant from the old world of shadows. It is not too much to say that such remnants of doubt have been at the bottom of almost every such visitation, and that the appalling horror which has sometimes been brought about, is to be attributed, even in the cases most in point, and where most suffering has been experienced, more to a kind of anticipative horror, lest the apparition might possibly be real, than to an unwavering belief in its reality. But, in the present instance, it will be seen immediately, that in the minds of the mutineers there was not even the shadow of a basis upon which to rest a doubt that the apparition of Rogers was indeed a revivification of his disgusting corpse, or at least its spiritual image. The isolated situation of the brig, with its entire inaccessibility on account of the gale, confined the apparently possible means of deception within such narrow and definite limits, that they must have thought themselves enabled to survey them all at a glance. They had now been at sea twenty-four days, without holding more than a speaking communication with any vessel whatever. The whole of the crew, too — at least all whom they had the most remote reason for suspecting to be on board — were assembled in the cabin, with the exception of Allen, the watch; and his gigantic stature (he was six feet six inches high) was too familiar in their eyes to permit the notion that he was the apparition before them to enter their minds even for an instant. Add to these considerations the awe-inspiring nature of the tempest, and that of the conversation brought about by Peters; the deep impression which the loathsomeness of the actual corpse had made in the morning upon the imaginations of the men; the excellence of the imitation in my person, and the uncertain and wavering light in which they beheld me, as the glare of the cabin lantern, swinging violently to and fro, fell dubiously and fitfully upon my figure, and there will be no reason to wonder that the deception had even more than the entire effect which we had anticipated. The mate sprang up from the mattress on which he was lying, and, without uttering a syllable, fell back, stone dead, upon the cabin floor, and was hurled to the leeward like a log by a heavy roll of the brig. Of the remaining seven, there were but three who had at first any degree of presence of mind. The four others sat for some time rooted apparently to the floor, the most pitiable objects of horror and utter despair my eyes ever encountered. The only opposition we experienced at all was from the cook, John Hunt, and Richard Parker; but they made but a feeble and irresolute defence. The two former were shot instantly by Peters, and I felled Parker with a blow on the head from the pump-handle which I had brought with me. In the meantime, Augustus seized one of the muskets lying on the floor and shot another mutineer Wilson through the breast. There were now but three remaining; but by this time they had become aroused from their lethargy, and perhaps began to see that a deception had been practised upon them, for they fought with great resolution and fury, and, but for the immense muscular strength of Peters, might have ultimately got the better of us. These three men were — Jones, Greely, and Absolom Hicks. Jones had thrown Augustus to the floor, stabbed him in several places along the right arm, and would no doubt have soon dispatched him (as neither Peters nor myself could immediately get rid of our own antagonists), had it not been for the timely aid of a friend, upon whose assistance we, surely, had never depended. This friend was no other than Tiger. With a low growl, he bounded into the cabin, at a most critical moment for Augustus, and throwing himself upon Jones, pinned him to the floor in an instant. My friend, however, was now too much injured to render us any aid whatever, and I was so encumbered with my disguise that I could do but little. The dog would not leave his hold upon the throat of Jones — Peters, nevertheless, was far more than a match for the two men who remained, and would, no doubt, have dispatched them sooner, had it not been for the narrow space in which he had to act, and the tremendous lurches of the vessel. Presently he was enabled to get hold of a heavy stool, several of which lay about the floor. With this he beat out the brains of Greely as he was in the act of discharging a musket at me, and immediately afterward a roll of the brig throwing him in contact with Hicks, he seized him by the throat, and, by dint of sheer strength, strangled him instantaneously. Thus, in far less time than I have taken to tell it, we found ourselves masters of the brig.

The only person of our opponents who was left alive was Richard Parker. This man, it will be remembered, I had knocked down with a blow from the pump-handle at the commencement of the attack. He now lay motionless by the door of the shattered stateroom; but, upon Peters touching him with his foot, he spoke, and entreated for mercy. His head was only slightly cut, and otherwise he had received no injury, having been merely stunned by the blow. He now got up, and, for the present, we secured his hands behind his back. The dog was still growling over Jones; but, upon examination, we found him completely dead, the blood issuing in a stream from a deep wound in the throat, inflicted, no doubt, by the sharp teeth of the animal.

It was now about one o’clock in the morning, and the wind was still blowing tremendously. The brig evidently laboured much more than usual, and it became absolutely necessary that something should be done with a view of easing her in some measure. At almost every roll to leeward she shipped a sea, several of which came partially down into the cabin during our scuffle, the hatchway having been left open by myself when I descended. The entire range of bulwarks to larboard had been swept away, as well as the caboose, together with the jollyboat from the counter. The creaking and working of the mainmast, too, gave indication that it was nearly sprung. To make room for more stowage in the afterhold, the heel of this mast had been stepped between decks (a very reprehensible practice, occasionally resorted to by ignorant ship-builders), so that it was in imminent danger of working from its step. But, to crown all our difficulties, we plummed the well, and found no less than seven feet of water.

Leaving the bodies of the crew lying in the cabin, we got to work immediately at the pumps — Parker, of course, being set at liberty to assist us in the labour. Augustus’s arm was bound up as well as we could effect it, and he did what he could, but that was not much. However, we found that we could just manage to keep the leak from gaining upon us by having one pump constantly going. As there were only four of us, this was severe labour; but we endeavoured to keep up our spirits, and looked anxiously for daybreak, when we hoped to lighten the brig by cutting away the mainmast.

In this manner we passed a night of terrible anxiety and fatigue, and, when the day at length broke, the gale had neither abated in the least, nor were there any signs of its abating. We now dragged the bodies on deck and threw them overboard. Our next care was to get rid of the mainmast. The necessary preparations having been made, Peters cut away at the mast (having found axes in the cabin), while the rest of us stood by the stays and lanyards. As the brig gave a tremendous lee-lurch, the word was given to cut away the weather-lanyards, which being done, the whole mass of wood and rigging plunged into the sea, clear of the brig, and without doing any material injury. We now found that the vessel did not labour quite as much as before, but our situation was still exceedingly precarious, and in spite of the utmost exertions, we could not gain upon the leak without the aid of both pumps. The little assistance which Augustus could render us was not really of any importance. To add to our distress, a heavy sea, striking the brig to the windward, threw her off several points from the wind, and, before she could regain her position, another broke completely over her, and hurled her full upon her beam-ends. The ballast now shifted in a mass to leeward (the stowage had been knocking about perfectly at random for some time), and for a few moments we thought nothing could save us from capsizing. Presently, however, we partially righted; but the ballast still retaining its place to larboard, we lay so much along that it was useless to think of working the pumps, which indeed we could not have done much longer in any case, as our hands were entirely raw with the excessive labour we had undergone, and were bleeding in the most horrible manner.

Contrary to Parker’s advice, we now proceeded to cut away the foremast, and at length accomplished it after much difficulty, owing to the position in which we lay. In going overboard the wreck took with it the bowsprit, and left us a complete hulk.

So far we had had reason to rejoice in the escape of our longboat, which had received no damage from any of the huge seas which had come on board. But we had not long to congratulate ourselves; for the foremast having gone, and, of course, the foresail with it, by which the brig had been steadied, every sea now made a complete breach over us, and in five minutes our deck was swept from stern to stern, the longboat and starboard bulwarks torn off, and even the windlass shattered into fragments. It was, indeed, hardly possible for us to be in a more pitiable condition.

At noon there seemed to be some slight appearance of the gale’s abating, but in this we were sadly disappointed, for it only lulled for a few minutes to blow with redoubled fury. About four in the afternoon it was utterly impossible to stand up against the violence of the blast; and, as the night closed in upon us, I had not a shadow of hope that the vessel would hold together until morning.

By midnight we had settled very deep in the water, which was now up to the orlop deck. The rudder went soon afterward, the sea which tore it away lifting the after portion of the brig entirely from the water, against which she thumped in her descent with such a concussion as would be occasioned by going ashore. We had all calculated that the rudder would hold its own to the last, as it was unusually strong, being rigged as I have never seen one rigged either before or since. Down its main timber there ran a succession of stout iron hooks, and others in the same manner down the stern-post. Through these hooks there extended a very thick wrought-iron rod, the rudder being thus held to the stern-post and swinging freely on the rod. The tremendous force of the sea which tore it off may be estimated by the fact, that the hooks in the stern-post, which ran entirely through it, being clinched on the inside, were drawn every one of them completely out of the solid wood.

We had scarcely time to draw breath after the violence of this shock, when one of the most tremendous waves I had then ever known broke right on board of us, sweeping the companion-way clear off, bursting in the hatchways, and filling every inch of the vessel with water.

CHAPTER 9

LUCKILY, just before night, all four of us had lashed ourselves firmly to the fragments of the windlass, lying in this manner as flat upon the deck as possible. This precaution alone saved us from destruction. As it was, we were all more or less stunned by the immense weight of water which tumbled upon us, and which did not roll from above us until we were nearly exhausted. As soon as I could recover breath, I called aloud to my companions. Augustus alone replied, saying: “It is all over with us, and may God have mercy upon our souls!” By-and-by both the others were enabled to speak, when they exhorted us to take courage, as there was still hope; it being impossible, from the nature of the cargo, that the brig could go down, and there being every chance that the gale would blow over by the morning. These words inspired me with new life; for, strange as it may seem, although it was obvious that a vessel with a cargo of empty oil-casks would not sink, I had been hitherto so confused in mind as to have overlooked this consideration altogether; and the danger which I had for some time regarded as the most imminent was that of foundering. As hope revived within me, I made use of every opportunity to strengthen the lashings which held me to the remains of the windlass, and in this occupation I soon discovered that my companions were also busy. The night was as dark as it could possibly be, and the horrible shrieking din and confusion which surrounded us it is useless to attempt describing. Our deck lay level with the sea, or rather we were encircled with a towering ridge of foam, a portion of which swept over us even instant. It is not too much to say that our heads were not fairly out of the water more than one second in three. Although we lay close together, no one of us could see the other, or, indeed, any portion of the brig itself, upon which we were so tempestuously hurled about. At intervals we called one to the other, thus endeavouring to keep alive hope, and render consolation and encouragement to such of us as stood most in need of it. The feeble condition of Augustus made him an object of solicitude with us all; and as, from the lacerated condition of his right arm, it must have been impossible for him to secure his lashings with any degree of firmness, we were in momentary expectation of finding that he had gone overboard — yet to render him aid was a thing altogether out of the question. Fortunately, his station was more secure than that of any of the rest of us; for the upper part of his body lying just beneath a portion of the shattered windlass, the seas, as they tumbled in upon him, were greatly broken in their violence. In any other situation than this (into which he had been accidentally thrown after having lashed himself in a very exposed spot) he must inevitably have perished before morning. Owing to the brig's lying so much along, we were all less liable to be washed off than otherwise would have been the case. The heel, as I have before stated, was to larboard, about one half of the deck being constantly under water. The seas, therefore, which struck us to starboard were much broken, by the vessel's side, only reaching us in fragments as we lay flat on our faces; while those which came from larboard being what are called back-water seas, and obtaining little hold upon us on account of our posture, had not sufficient force to drag us from our fastenings.

In this frightful situation we lay until the day broke so as to show us more fully the horrors which surrounded us. The brig was a mere log, rolling about at the mercy of every wave; the gale was upon the increase, if any thing, blowing indeed a complete hurricane, and there appeared to us no earthly prospect of deliverance. For several hours we held on in silence, expecting every moment that our lashings would either give way, that the remains of the windlass would go by the board, or that some of the huge seas, which roared in every direction around us and above us, would drive the hulk so far beneath the water that we should be drowned before it could regain the surface. By the mercy of God, however, we were preserved from these imminent dangers, and about midday were cheered by the light of the blessed sun. Shortly afterward we could perceive a sensible diminution in the force of the wind, when, now for the first time since the latter part of the evening before, Augustus spoke, asking Peters, who lay closest to him, if he thought there was any possibility of our being saved. As no reply was at first made to this question, we all concluded that the hybrid had been drowned where he lay; but presently, to our great joy, he spoke, although very feebly, saying that he was in great pain, being so cut by the tightness of his lashings across the stomach, that he must either find means of loosening them or perish, as it was impossible that he could endure his misery much longer. This occasioned us great distress, as it was altogether useless to think of aiding him in any manner while the sea continued washing over us as it did. We exhorted him to bear his sufferings with fortitude, and promised to seize the first opportunity which should offer itself to relieve him. He replied that it would soon be too late; that it would be all over with him before we could help him; and then, after moaning for some minutes, lay silent, when we concluded that he had perished.

As the evening drew on, the sea had fallen so much that scarcely more than one wave broke over the hulk from windward in the course of five minutes, and the wind had abated a great deal, although still blowing a severe gale. I had not heard any of my companions speak for hours, and now called to Augustus. He replied, although very feebly, so that I could not distinguish what he said. I then spoke to Peters and to Parker, neither of whom returned any answer.

Shortly after this period I fell into a state of partial insensibility, during which the most pleasing images floated in my imagination; such as green trees, waving meadows of ripe grain, processions of dancing girls, troops of cavalry, and other phantasies. I now remember that, in all which passed before my mind's eye, motion was a predominant idea. Thus, I never fancied any stationary object, such as a house, a mountain, or any thing of that kind; but windmills, ships, large birds, balloons, people on horseback, carriages driving furiously, and similar moving objects, presented themselves in endless succession. When I recovered from this state, the sun was, as near as I could guess, an hour high. I had the greatest difficulty in bringing to recollection the various circumstances connected with my situation, and for some time remained firmly convinced that I was still in the hold of the brig, near the box, and that the body of Parker was that of Tiger.

When I at length completely came to my senses, I found that the wind blew no more than a moderate breeze, and that the sea was comparatively calm; so much so that it only washed over the brig amidships. My left arm had broken loose from its lashings, and was much cut about the elbow; my right was entirely benumbed, and the hand and wrist swollen prodigiously by the pressure of the rope, which had worked from the shoulder downward. I was also in great pain from another rope which went about my waist, and had been drawn to an insufferable degree of tightness. Looking round upon my companions, I saw that Peters still lived, although a thick line was pulled so forcibly around his loins as to give him the appearance of being cut nearly in two; as I stirred, he made a feeble motion to me with his hand, pointing to the rope. Augustus gave no indication of life whatever, and was bent nearly double across a splinter of the windlass. Parker spoke to me when he saw me moving, and asked me if I had not sufficient strength to release him from his situation, saying that if I would summon up what spirits I could, and contrive to untie him, we might yet save our lives; but that otherwise we must all perish. I told him to take courage, and I would endeavor to free him. Feeling in my pantaloons' pocket, I got hold of my penknife, and, after several ineffectual attempts, at length succeeded in opening it. I then, with my left hand, managed to free my right from its fastenings, and afterward cut the other ropes which held me. Upon attempting, however, to move from my position, I found that my legs failed me altogether, and that I could not get up; neither could I move my right arm in any direction. Upon mentioning this to Parker, he advised me to lie quiet for a few minutes, holding on to the windlass with my left hand, so as to allow time for the blood to circulate. Doing this, the numbness presently began to die away so that I could move first one of my legs, and then the other, and, shortly afterward I regained the partial use of my right arm. I now crawled with great caution toward Parker, without getting on my legs, and soon cut loose all the lashings about him, when, after a short delay, he also recovered the partial use of his limbs. We now lost no time in getting loose the rope from Peters. It had cut a deep gash through the waistband of his woollen pantaloons, and through two shirts, and made its way into his groin, from which the blood flowed out copiously as we removed the cordage. No sooner had we removed it, however, than he spoke, and seemed to experience instant relief — being able to move with much greater ease than either Parker or myself — this was no doubt owing to the discharge of blood.

We had little hopes that Augustus would recover, as he evinced no signs of life; but, upon getting to him, we discovered that he had merely swooned from the loss of blood, the bandages we had placed around his wounded arm having been torn off by the water; none of the ropes which held him to the windlass were drawn sufficiently tight to occasion his death. Having relieved him from the fastenings, and got him clear of the broken wood about the windlass, we secured him in a dry place to windward, with his head somewhat lower than his body, and all three of us busied ourselves in chafing his limbs. In about half an hour he came to himself, although it was not until the next morning that he gave signs of recognizing any of us, or had sufficient strength to speak. By the time we had thus got clear of our lashings it was quite dark, and it began to cloud up, so that we were again in the greatest agony lest it should come on to blow hard, in which event nothing could have saved us from perishing, exhausted as we were. By good fortune it continued very moderate during the night, the sea subsiding every minute, which gave us great hopes of ultimate preservation. A gentle breeze still blew from the N. W. but the weather was not at all cold. Augustus was lashed carefully to windward in such a manner as to prevent him from slipping overboard with the rolls of the vessel, as he was still too weak to hold on at all. For ourselves there was no such necessity. We sat close together, supporting each other with the aid of the broken ropes about the windlass, and devising methods of escape from our frightful situation. We derived much comfort from taking off our clothes and wringing the water from them. When we put them on after this, they felt remarkably warm and pleasant, and served to invigorate us in no little degree. We helped Augustus off with his, and wrung them for him, when he experienced the same comfort.

Our chief sufferings were now those of hunger and thirst, and when we looked forward to the means of relief in this respect, our hearts sunk within us, and we were induced to regret that we had escaped the less dreadful perils of the sea. We endeavoured, however, to console ourselves with the hope of being speedily picked up by some vessel and encouraged each other to bear with fortitude the evils that might happen.

The morning of the fourteenth at length dawned, and the weather still continued clear and pleasant, with a steady but very light breeze from the N. W. The sea was now quite smooth, and as, from some cause which we could not determine, the brig did not lie so much along as she had done before, the deck was comparatively dry, and we could move about with freedom. We had now been better than three entire days and nights without either food or drink, and it became absolutely necessary that we should make an attempt to get up something from below. As the brig was completely full of water, we went to this work despondently, and with but little expectation of being able to obtain anything. We made a kind of drag by driving some nails which we broke out from the remains of the companion-hatch into two pieces of wood. Tying these across each other, and fastening them to the end of a rope, we threw them into the cabin, and dragged them to and fro, in the faint hope of being thus able to entangle some article which might be of use to us for food, or which might at least render us assistance in getting it. We spent the greater part of the morning in this labour without effect, fishing up nothing more than a few bedclothes, which were readily caught by the nails. Indeed, our contrivance was so very clumsy that any greater success was hardly to be anticipated.

We now tried the forecastle, but equally in vain, and were upon the brink of despair, when Peters proposed that we should fasten a rope to his body, and let him make an attempt to get up something by diving into the cabin. This proposition we hailed with all the delight which reviving hope could inspire. He proceeded immediately to strip off his clothes with the exception of his pantaloons; and a strong rope was then carefully fastened around his middle, being brought up over his shoulders in such a manner that there was no possibility of its slipping. The undertaking was one of great difficulty and danger; for, as we could hardly expect to find much, if any, provision in the cabin itself, it was necessary that the diver, after letting himself down, should make a turn to the right, and proceed under water a distance of ten or twelve feet, in a narrow passage, to the storeroom, and return, without drawing breath.

Everything being ready, Peters now descended in the cabin, going down the companion-ladder until the water reached his chin. He then plunged in, head first, turning to the right as he plunged, and endeavouring to make his way to the storeroom. In this first attempt, however, he was altogether unsuccessful. In less than half a minute after his going down we felt the rope jerked violently (the signal we had agreed upon when he desired to be drawn up). We accordingly drew him up instantly, but so incautiously as to bruise him badly against the ladder. He had brought nothing with him, and had been unable to penetrate more than a very little way into the passage, owing to the constant exertions he found it necessary to make in order to keep himself from floating up against the deck. Upon getting out he was very much exhausted, and had to rest full fifteen minutes before he could again venture to descend.

The second attempt met with even worse success; for he remained so long under water without giving the signal, that, becoming alarmed for his safety, we drew him out without it, and found that he was almost at the last gasp, having, as he said, repeatedly jerked at the rope without our feeling it. This was probably owing to a portion of it having become entangled in the balustrade at the foot of the ladder. This balustrade was, indeed, so much in the way, that we determined to remove it, if possible, before proceeding with our design. As we had no means of getting it away except by main force, we all descended into the water as far as we could on the ladder, and giving a pull against it with our united strength, succeeded in breaking it down.

The third attempt was equally unsuccessful with the two first, and it now became evident that nothing could be done in this manner without the aid of some weight with which the diver might steady himself, and keep to the floor of the cabin while making his search. For a long time we looked about in vain for something which might answer this purpose; but at length, to our great joy, we discovered one of the weather-forechains so loose that we had not the least difficulty in wrenching it off. Having fastened this securely to one of his ankles, Peters now made his fourth descent into the cabin, and this time succeeded in making his way to the door of the steward's room. To his inexpressible grief, however, he found it locked, and was obliged to return without effecting an entrance, as, with the greatest exertion, he could remain under water not more, at the utmost extent, than a single minute.

Our affairs now looked gloomy indeed, and neither Augustus nor myself could refrain from bursting into tears, as we thought of the host of difficulties which encompassed us, and the slight probability which existed of our finally making an escape. But this weakness was not of long duration. Throwing ourselves on our knees to God, we implored His aid in the many dangers which beset us; and arose with renewed hope and vigor to think what could yet be done by mortal means toward accomplishing our deliverance.

CHAPTER 10

SHORTLY afterward an incident occurred which I am induced to look upon as more intensely productive of emotion, as far more replete with the extremes first of delight and then of horror, than even any of the thousand chances which afterward befell me in nine long years, crowded with events of the most startling and, in many cases, of the most unconceived and unconceivable character. We were lying on the deck near the companion-way, and debating the possibility of yet making our way into the storeroom, when, looking toward Augustus, who lay fronting myself, I perceived that he had become all at once deadly pale, and that his lips were quivering in the most singular and unaccountable manner. Greatly alarmed, I spoke to him, but he made me no reply, and I was beginning to think that he was suddenly taken ill, when I took notice of his eyes, which were glaring apparently at some object behind me. I turned my head, and shall never forget the ecstatic joy which thrilled through every particle of my frame, when I perceived a large brig bearing down upon us, and not more than a couple of miles off. I sprung to my feet as if a musket bullet had suddenly struck me to the heart; and, stretching out my arms in the direction of the vessel, stood in this manner, motionless, and unable to articulate a syllable. Peters and Parker were equally affected, although in different ways. The former danced about the deck like a madman, uttering the most extravagant rhodomontades, intermingled with howls and imprecations, while the latter burst into tears, and continued for many minutes weeping like a child.

The vessel in sight was a large hermaphrodite brig, of a Dutch build, and painted black, with a tawdry gilt figure-head. She had evidently seen a good deal of rough weather, and, we supposed, had suffered much in the gale which had proved so disastrous to ourselves; for her foretopmast was gone, and some of her starboard bulwarks. When we first saw her, she was, as I have already said, about two miles off and to windward, bearing down upon us. The breeze was very gentle, and what astonished us chiefly was, that she had no other sails set than her foremast and mainsail, with a flying jib — of course she came down but slowly, and our impatience amounted nearly to phrensy. The awkward manner in which she steered, too, was remarked by all of us, even excited as we were. She yawed about so considerably, that once or twice we thought it impossible she could see us, or imagined that, having seen us, and discovered no person on board, she was about to tack and make off in another direction. Upon each of these occasions we screamed and shouted at the top of our voices, when the stranger would appear to change for a moment her intention, and again hold on toward us — this singular conduct being repeated two or three times, so that at last we could think of no other manner of accounting for it than by supposing the helmsman to be in liquor.

No person was seen upon her decks until she arrived within about a quarter of a mile of us. We then saw three seamen, whom by their dress we took to be Hollanders. Two of these were lying on some old sails near the forecastle, and the third, who appeared to be looking at us with great curiosity, was leaning over the starboard bow near the bowsprit. This last was a stout and tall man, with a very dark skin. He seemed by his manner to be encouraging us to have patience, nodding to us in a cheerful although rather odd way, and smiling constantly, so as to display a set of the most brilliantly white teeth. As his vessel drew nearer, we saw a red flannel cap which he had on fall from his head into the water; but of this he took little or no notice, continuing his odd smiles and gesticulations. I relate these things and circumstances minutely, and I relate them, it must be understood, precisely as they *appeared* to us.

The brig came on slowly, and now more steadily than before, and — I cannot speak calmly of this event — our hearts leaped up wildly within us, and we poured out our whole souls in shouts and thanksgiving to God for the complete, unexpected, and glorious deliverance that was so palpably at hand. Of a sudden, and all at once, there came wafted over the ocean from the strange vessel (which was now close upon us) a smell, a stench, such as the whole world has no name for — no conception of — hellish — utterly suffocating — insufferable, inconceivable. I gasped for breath, and turning to my companions, perceived that they were paler than marble. But we had now no time left for question or surmise — the brig was within fifty feet of us, and it seemed to be her intention to run under our counter, that we might board her without putting out a boat. We rushed aft, when, suddenly, a wide yaw threw her off full five or six points from the course she had been running, and, as she passed under our stern at the distance of about twenty feet, we had a full view of her decks. Shall I ever forget the triple horror of that spectacle? Twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females, lay scattered about between the counter and the galley in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction. We plainly saw that not a soul lived in that fated vessel! Yet we could not help shouting to the dead for help! Yes, long and loudly did we beg, in the agony of the moment, that those silent and disgusting images would stay for us, would not abandon us to become like them, would receive us among their goodly company! We were raving with horror and despair — thoroughly mad through the anguish of our grievous disappointment.

As our first loud yell of terror broke forth, it was replied to by something, from near the bowsprit of the stranger, so closely resembling the scream of a human voice that the nicest ear might have been startled and deceived. At this instant another sudden yaw brought the region of the forecastle for a moment into view, and we beheld at once the origin of the sound. We saw the tall stout figure still leaning on the bulwark, and still nodding his head to and fro, but his face was now turned from us so that we could not behold it. His arms were extended over the rail, and the palms of his hands fell outward. His knees were lodged upon a stout rope, tightly stretched, and reaching from the heel of the bowsprit to a cathead. On his back, from which a portion of the shirt had been torn, leaving it bare, there sat a huge sea-gull, busily gorging itself with the horrible flesh, its bill and talons deep buried, and its white plumage spattered all over with blood. As the brig moved farther round so as to bring us close in view, the bird, with much apparent difficulty, drew out its crimsoned head, and, after eyeing us for a moment as if stupefied, arose lazily from the body upon which it had been feasting, and, flying directly above our deck, hovered there a while with a portion of clotted and liver-like substance in its beak. The horrid morsel dropped at length with a sullen splash immediately at the feet of Parker. May God forgive me, but now, for the first time, there flashed through my mind a thought, a thought which I will not mention, and I felt myself making a step toward the ensanguined spot. I looked upward, and the eyes of Augustus met my own with a degree of intense and eager meaning which immediately brought me to my senses. I sprang forward quickly, and, with a deep shudder, threw the frightful thing into the sea.

The body from which it had been taken, resting as it did upon the rope, had been easily swayed to and fro by the exertions of the carnivorous bird, and it was this motion which had at first impressed us with the belief of its being alive. As the gull relieved it of its weight, it swung round and fell partially over, so that the face was fully discovered. Never, surely, was any object so terribly full of awe! The eyes were gone, and the whole flesh around the mouth, leaving the teeth utterly naked. This, then, was the smile which had cheered us on to hope! this the — but I forbear. The brig, as I have already told, passed under our stern, and made its way slowly but steadily to leeward. With her and with her terrible crew went all our gay visions of deliverance and joy. Deliberately as she went by, we might possibly have found means of boarding her, had not our sudden disappointment and the appalling nature of the discovery which accompanied it laid entirely prostrate every active faculty of mind and body. We had seen and felt, but we could neither think nor act, until, alas! too late. How much our intellects had been weakened by this incident may be estimated by the fact, that when the vessel had proceeded so far that we could perceive no more than the half of her hull, the proposition was seriously entertained of attempting to overtake her by swimming!

I have, since this period, vainly endeavoured to obtain some clew to the hideous uncertainty which enveloped the fate of the stranger. Her build and general appearance, as I have before stated, led us to the belief that she was a Dutch trader, and the dresses of the crew also sustained this opinion. We might have easily seen the name upon her stern, and, indeed, taken other observations, which would have guided us in making out her character; but the intense excitement of the moment blinded us to every thing of that nature. From the saffron-like hue of such of the corpses as were not entirely decayed, we concluded that the whole of her company had perished by the yellow fever, or some other virulent disease of the same fearful kind. If such were the case (and I know not what else to imagine), death, to judge from the positions of the bodies, must have come upon them in a manner awfully sudden and overwhelming, in a way totally distinct from that which generally characterizes even the most deadly pestilences with which mankind are acquainted. It is possible, indeed, that poison, accidentally introduced into some of their sea-stores, may have brought about the disaster, or that the eating of some unknown venomous species of fish, or other marine animal, or oceanic bird, might have induced it — but it is utterly useless to form conjectures where all is involved, and will, no doubt, remain for ever involved, in the most appalling and unfathomable mystery.

CHAPTER 11

WE spent the remainder of the day in a condition of stupid lethargy, gazing after the retreating vessel until the darkness, hiding her from our sight, recalled us in some measure to our senses. The pangs of hunger and thirst then returned, absorbing all other cares and considerations. Nothing, however, could be done until the morning, and, securing ourselves as well as possible, we endeavoured to snatch a little repose. In this I succeeded beyond my expectations, sleeping until my companions, who had not been so fortunate, aroused me at daybreak to renew our attempts at getting up provisions from the hull.

It was now a dead calm, with the sea as smooth as have ever known it, — the weather warm and pleasant. The brig was out of sight. We commenced our operations by wrenching off, with some trouble, another of the forechains; and having fastened both to Peters' feet, he again made an endeavour to reach the door of the storeroom, thinking it possible that he might be able to force it open, provided he could get at it in sufficient time; and this he hoped to do, as the hulk lay much more steadily than before.

He succeeded very quickly in reaching the door, when, loosening one of the chains from his ankle, he made every exertion to force the passage with it, but in vain, the framework of the room being far stronger than was anticipated. He was quite exhausted with his long stay under water, and it became absolutely necessary that some other one of us should take his place. For this service Parker immediately volunteered; but, after making three ineffectual efforts, found that he could never even succeed in getting near the door. The condition of Augustus's wounded arm rendered it useless for him to attempt going down, as he would be unable to force the room open should he reach it, and it accordingly now devolved upon me to exert myself for our common deliverance.

Peters had left one of the chains in the passage, and I found, upon plunging in, that I had not sufficient balance to keep me firmly down. I determined, therefore, to attempt no more, in my first effort, than merely to recover the other chain. In groping along the floor of the passage for this, I felt a hard substance, which I immediately grasped, not having time to ascertain what it was, but returning and ascending instantly to the surface. The prize proved to be a bottle, and our joy may be conceived when I say that it was found to be full of port wine. Giving thanks to God for this timely and cheering assistance, we immediately drew the cork with my penknife, and, each taking a moderate sup, felt the most indescribable comfort from the warmth, strength, and spirits with which it inspired us. We then carefully recorked the bottle, and, by means of a handkerchief, swung it in such a manner that there was no possibility of its getting broken.

Having rested a while after this fortunate discovery, I again descended, and now recovered the chain, with which I instantly came up. I then fastened it on and went down for the third time, when I became fully satisfied that no exertions whatever, in that situation, would enable me to force open the door of the storeroom. I therefore returned in despair.

There seemed now to be no longer any room for hope, and I could perceive in the countenances of my companions that they had made up their minds to perish. The wine had evidently produced in them a species of delirium, which, perhaps, I had been prevented from feeling by the immersion I had undergone since drinking it. They talked incoherently, and about matters unconnected with our condition, Peters repeatedly asking me questions about Nantucket. Augustus, too, I remember, approached me with a serious air, and requested me to lend him a pocket-comb, as his hair was full of fish-scales, and he wished to get them out before going on shore. Parker appeared somewhat less affected, and urged me to dive at random into the cabin, and bring up any article which might come to hand. To this I consented, and, in the first attempt, after staying under a full minute, brought up a small leather trunk belonging to Captain Barnard. This was immediately opened in the faint hope that it might contain something to eat or drink. We found nothing, however, except a box of razors and two linen shirts. I now went down again, and returned without any success. As my head came above water I heard a crash on deck, and, upon getting up, saw that my companions had ungratefully taken advantage of my absence to drink the remainder of the wine, having let the bottle fall in the endeavour to replace it before I saw them. I remonstrated with them on the heartlessness of their conduct, when Augustus burst into tears. The other two endeavoured to laugh the matter off as a joke, but I hope never again to behold laughter of such a species: the distortion of countenance was absolutely frightful. Indeed, it was apparent that the stimulus, in the empty state of their stomachs, had taken instant and violent effect, and that they were all exceedingly intoxicated. With great difficulty I prevailed upon them to lie down, when they fell very soon into a heavy slumber, accompanied with loud stertorous breathing.

I now found myself, as it were, alone in the brig, and my reflections, to be sure, were of the most fearful and gloomy nature. No prospect offered itself to my view but a lingering death by famine, or, at the best, by being overwhelmed in the first gale which should spring up, for in our present exhausted condition we could have no hope of living through another.

The gnawing hunger which I now experienced was nearly insupportable, and I felt myself capable of going to any lengths in order to appease it. With my knife I cut off a small portion of the leather trunk, and endeavoured to eat it, but found it utterly impossible to swallow a single morsel, although I fancied that some little alleviation of my suffering was obtained by chewing small pieces of it and spitting them out. Toward night my companions awoke, one by one, each in an indescribable state of weakness and horror, brought on by the wine, whose fumes had now evaporated. They shook as if with a violent ague, and uttered the most lamentable cries for water. Their condition affected me in the most lively degree, at the same time causing me to rejoice in the fortunate train of circumstances which had prevented me from indulging in the wine, and consequently from sharing their melancholy and most distressing sensations. Their conduct, however, gave me great uneasiness and alarm; for it was evident that, unless some favourable change took place, they could afford me no assistance in providing for our common safety. I had not yet abandoned all idea being able to get up something from below; but the attempt could not possibly be resumed until some one of them was sufficiently master of himself to aid me by holding the end of the rope while I went down. Parker appeared to be somewhat more in possession of his senses than the others, and I endeavoured, by every means in my power, to rouse him. Thinking that a plunge in the sea-water might have a beneficial effect, I contrived to fasten the end of a rope around his body, and then, leading him to the companion-way (he remaining quite passive all the while), pushed him in, and immediately drew him out. I had good reason to congratulate myself upon having made this experiment; for he appeared much revived and invigorated, and, upon getting out, asked me, in a rational manner, why I had so served him. Having explained my object, he expressed himself indebted to me, and said that he felt greatly better from the immersion, afterward conversing sensibly upon our situation. We then resolved to treat Augustus and Peters in the same way, which we immediately did, when they both experienced much benefit from the shock. This idea of sudden immersion had been suggested to me by reading in some medical work the good effect of the shower-bath in a case where the patient was suffering from *mania a potu*.

Finding that I could now trust my companions to hold the end of the rope, I again made three or four plunges into the cabin, although it was now quite dark, and a gentle but long swell from the northward rendered the hulk somewhat unsteady. In the course of these attempts I succeeded in bringing up two case-knives, a three-gallon jug, empty, and a blanket, but nothing which could serve us for food. I continued my efforts, after getting these articles, until I was completely exhausted, but brought up nothing else. During the night Parker and Peters occupied themselves by turns in the same manner; but nothing coming to hand, we now gave up this attempt in despair, concluding that we were exhausting ourselves in vain.

We passed the remainder of this night in a state of the most intense mental and bodily anguish that can possibly be imagined. The morning of the sixteenth at length dawned, and we looked eagerly around the horizon for relief, but to no purpose. The sea was still smooth, with only a long swell from the northward, as on yesterday. This was the sixth day since we had tasted either food or drink, with the exception of the bottle of port wine, and it was clear that we could hold out but a very little while longer unless something could be obtained. I never saw before, nor wish to see again, human beings so utterly emaciated as Peters and Augustus. Had I met them on shore in their present condition I should not have had the slightest suspicion that I had ever beheld them. Their countenances were totally changed in character, so that I could not bring myself to believe them really the same individuals with whom I had been in company but a few days before. Parker, although sadly reduced, and so feeble that he could not raise his head from his bosom, was not so far gone as the other two. He suffered with great patience, making no complaint, and endeavouring to inspire us with hope in every manner he could devise. For myself, although at the commencement of the voyage I had been in bad health, and was at all times of a delicate constitution, I suffered less than any of us, being much less reduced in frame, and retaining my powers of mind in a surprising degree, while the rest were completely prostrated in intellect, and seemed to be brought to a species of second childhood, generally simpering in their expressions, with idiotic smiles, and uttering the most absurd platitudes. At intervals, however, they would appear to revive suddenly, as if inspired all at once with a consciousness of their condition, when they would spring upon their feet in a momentary flash of vigour, and speak, for a short period, of their prospects, in a manner altogether rational, although full of the most intense despair. It is possible, however, that my companions may have entertained the same opinion of their own condition as I did of mine, and that I may have unwittingly been guilty of the same extravagances and imbecilities as themselves — this is a matter which cannot be determined.

About noon Parker declared that he saw land off the larboard quarter, and it was with the utmost difficulty I could restrain him from plunging into the sea with the view of swimming toward it. Peters and Augustus took little notice of what he said, being apparently wrapped up in moody contemplation. Upon looking in the direction pointed out, I could not perceive the faintest appearance of the shore — indeed, I was too well aware that we were far from any land to indulge in a hope of that nature. It was a long time, nevertheless, before I could convince Parker of his mistake. He then burst into a flood of tears, weeping like a child, with loud cries and sobs, for two or three hours, when becoming exhausted, he fell asleep.

Peters and Augustus now made several ineffectual efforts to swallow portions of the leather. I advised them to chew it and spit it out; but they were too excessively debilitated to be able to follow my advice. I continued to chew pieces of it at intervals, and found some relief from so doing; my chief distress was for water, and I was only prevented from taking a draught from the sea by remembering the horrible consequences which thus have resulted to others who were similarly situated with ourselves.

The day wore on in this manner, when I suddenly discovered a sail to the eastward, and on our larboard bow. She appeared to be a large ship, and was coming nearly athwart us, being probably twelve or fifteen miles distant. None of my companions had as yet discovered her, and I forbore to tell them of her for the present, lest we might again be disappointed of relief. At length upon her getting nearer, I saw distinctly that she was heading immediately for us, with her light sails filled. I could now contain myself no longer, and pointed her out to my fellow-sufferers. They immediately sprang to their feet, again indulging in the most extravagant demonstrations of joy, weeping, laughing in an idiotic manner, jumping, stamping upon the deck, tearing their hair, and praying and cursing by turns. I was so affected by their conduct, as well as by what I considered a sure prospect of deliverance, that I could not refrain from joining in with their madness, and gave way to the impulses of my gratitude and ecstasy by lying and rolling on the deck, clapping my hands, shouting, and other similar acts, until I was suddenly called to my recollection, and once more to the extreme human misery and despair, by perceiving the ship all at once with her stern fully presented toward us, and steering in a direction nearly opposite to that in which I had at first perceived her.

It was some time before I could induce my poor companions to believe that this sad reverse in our prospects had actually taken place. They replied to all my assertions with a stare and a gesture implying that they were not to be deceived by such misrepresentations. The conduct of Augustus most sensibly affected me. In spite of all I could say or do to the contrary, he persisted in saying that the ship was rapidly nearing us, and in making preparations to go on board of her. Some seaweed floating by the brig, he maintained that it was the ship’s boat, and endeavoured to throw himself upon it, howling and shrieking in the most heartrending manner, when I forcibly restrained him from thus casting himself into the sea.

Having become in some degree pacified, we continued to watch the ship until we finally lost sight of her, the weather becoming hazy, with a light breeze springing up. As soon as she was entirely gone, Parker turned suddenly toward me with an expression of countenance which made me shudder. There was about him an air of self-possession which I had not noticed in him until now, and before he opened his lips my heart told me what he would say. He proposed, in a few words, that one of us should die to preserve the existence of the others.

CHAPTER 12

I had for some time past, dwelt upon the prospect of our being reduced to this last horrible extremity, and had secretly made up my mind to suffer death in any shape or under any circumstances rather than resort to such a course. Nor was this resolution in any degree weakened by the present intensity of hunger under which I laboured. The proposition had not been heard by either Peters or Augustus. I therefore took Parker aside; and mentally praying to God for power to dissuade him from the horrible purpose he entertained, I expostulated with him for a long time, and in the most supplicating manner, begging him in the name of every thing which he held sacred, and urging him by every species of argument which the extremity of the case suggested, to abandon the idea, and not to mention it to either of the other two.

He heard all I said without attempting to controvert any of my arguments, and I had begun to hope that he would be prevailed upon to do as I desired. But when I had ceased speaking, he said that he knew very well all I had said was true, and that to resort to such a course was the most horrible alternative which could enter into the mind of man; but that he had now held out as long as human nature could be sustained; that it was unnecessary for all to perish, when, by the death of one, it was possible, and even probable, that the rest might be finally preserved; adding that I might save myself the trouble of trying to turn him from his purpose, his mind having been thoroughly made up on the subject even before the appearance of the ship, and that only her heaving in sight had prevented him from mentioning his intention at an earlier period.

I now begged him, if he would not be prevailed upon to abandon his design, at least to defer it for another day, when some vessel might come to our relief; again reiterating every argument I could devise, and which I thought likely to have influence with one of his rough nature. He said, in reply, that he had not spoken until the very last possible moment, that he could exist no longer without sustenance of some kind, and that therefore in another day his suggestion would be too late, as regarded himself at least.

Finding that he was not to be moved by anything I could say in a mild tone, I now assumed a different demeanor, and told him that he must be aware I had suffered less than any of us from our calamities; that my health and strength, consequently, were at that moment far better than his own, or than that either of Peters or Augustus; in short, that I was in a condition to have my own way by force if I found it necessary; and that if he attempted in any manner to acquaint the others with his bloody and cannibal designs, I would not hesitate to throw him into the sea. Upon this he immediately seized me by the throat, and drawing a knife, made several ineffectual efforts to stab me in the stomach; an atrocity which his excessive debility alone prevented him from accomplishing. In the meantime, being roused to a high pitch of anger, I forced him to the vessel's side, with the full intention of throwing him overboard. He was saved from his fate, however, by the interference of Peters, who now approached and separated us, asking the cause of the disturbance. This Parker told before I could find means in any manner to prevent him.

The effect of his words was even more terrible than what I had anticipated. Both Augustus and Peters, who, it seems, had long secretly entertained the same fearful idea which Parker had been merely the first to broach, joined with him in his design and insisted upon its immediately being carried into effect. I had calculated that one at least of the two former would be found still possessed of sufficient strength of mind to side with myself in resisting any attempt to execute so dreadful a purpose, and, with the aid of either one of them, I had no fear of being able to prevent its accomplishment. Being disappointed in this expectation, it became absolutely necessary that I should attend to my own safety, as a further resistance on my part might possibly be considered by men in their frightful condition a sufficient excuse for refusing me fair play in the tragedy that I knew would speedily be enacted.

I now told them I was willing to submit to the proposal, merely requesting a delay of about one hour, in order that the fog which had gathered around us might have an opportunity of lifting, when it was possible that the ship we had seen might be again in sight. After great difficulty I obtained from them a promise to wait thus long; and, as I had anticipated (a breeze rapidly coming in), the fog lifted before the hour had expired, when, no vessel appearing in sight, we prepared to draw lots.

It is with extreme reluctance that I dwell upon the appalling scene which ensued; a scene which, with its minutest details, no after events have been able to efface in the slightest degree from my memory, and whose stern recollection will embitter every future moment of my existence. Let me run over this portion of my narrative with as much haste as the nature of the events to be spoken of will permit. The only method we could devise for the terrific lottery, in which we were to take each a chance, was that of drawing straws. Small splinters of wood were made to answer our purpose, and it was agreed that I should be the holder. I retired to one end of the hulk, while my poor companions silently took up their station in the other with their backs turned toward me. The bitterest anxiety which I endured at any period of this fearful drama was while I occupied myself in the arrangement of the lots. There are few conditions into which man can possibly fall where he will not feel a deep interest in the preservation of his existence; an interest momentarily increasing with the frailness of the tenure by which that existence may be held. But now that the silent, definite, and stern nature of the business in which I was engaged (so different from the tumultuous dangers of the storm or the gradually approaching horrors of famine) allowed me to reflect on the few chances I had of escaping the most appalling of deaths — a death for the most appalling of purposes — every particle of that energy which had so long buoyed me up departed like feathers before the wind, leaving me a helpless prey to the most abject and pitiable terror. I could not, at first, even summon up sufficient strength to tear and fit together the small splinters of wood, my fingers absolutely refusing their office, and my knees knocking violently against each other. My mind ran over rapidly a thousand absurd projects by which to avoid becoming a partner in the awful speculation. I thought of falling on my knees to my companions, and entreating them to let me escape this necessity; of suddenly rushing upon them, and, by putting one of them to death, of rendering the decision by lot useless — in short, of every thing but of going through with the matter I had in hand. At last, after wasting a long time in this imbecile conduct, I was recalled to my senses by the voice of Parker, who urged me to relieve them at once from the terrible anxiety they were enduring. Even then I could not bring myself to arrange the splinters upon the spot, but thought over every species of finesse by which I could trick some one of my fellow-sufferers to draw the short straw, as it had been agreed that whoever drew the shortest of four splinters from my hand was to die for the preservation of the rest. Before any one condemn me for this apparent heartlessness, let him be placed in a situation precisely similar to my own.

At length delay was no longer possible, and, with a heart almost bursting from my bosom, I advanced to the region of the forecastle, where my companions were awaiting me. I held out my hand with the splinters, and Peters immediately drew. He was free — his, at least, was not the shortest; and there was now another chance against my escape. I summoned up all my strength, and passed the lots to Augustus. He also drew immediately, and he also was free; and now, whether I should live or die, the chances were no more than precisely even. At this moment all the fierceness of the tiger possessed my bosom, and I felt toward my poor fellow-creature, Parker, the most intense, the most diabolical hatred. But the feeling did not last; and, at length, with a convulsive shudder and closed eyes, I held out the two remaining splinters toward him. It was fully five minutes before he could summon resolution to draw, during which period of heartrending suspense I never once opened my eyes. Presently one of the two lots was quickly drawn from my hand. The decision was then over, yet I knew not whether it was for me or against me. No one spoke, and still I dared not satisfy myself by looking at the splinter I held. Peters at length took me by the hand, and I forced myself to look up, when I immediately saw by the countenance of Parker that I was safe, and that he it was who had been doomed to suffer. Gasping for breath, I fell senseless to the deck.

I recovered from my swoon in time to behold the consummation of the tragedy in the death of him who had been chiefly instrumental in bringing it about. He made no resistance whatever, and was stabbed in the back by Peters, when he fell instantly dead. I must not dwell upon the fearful repast which immediately ensued. Such things may be imagined, but words have no power to impress the mind with the exquisite horror of their reality. Let it suffice to say that, having in some measure appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head, throwing them together with the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body, piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the month.

On the nineteenth, there coming on a smart shower which lasted fifteen or twenty minutes, we contrived to catch some water by means of a sheet which had been fished up from the cabin by our drag just after the gale. The quantity we took in all did not amount to more than half a gallon; but even this scanty allowance supplied us with comparative strength and hope.

On the twenty-first we were again reduced to the last necessity. The weather still remained warm and pleasant, with occasional fogs and light breezes, most usually from N. to W.

On the twenty-second, as we were sitting close huddled together, gloomily revolving over our lamentable condition, there flashed through my mind all at once an idea which inspired me with a bright gleam of hope. I remembered that, when the foremast had been cut away, Peters, being in the windward chains, passed one of the axes into my hand, requesting me to put it, if possible, in a place of security, and that a few minutes before the last heavy sea struck the brig and filled her I had taken this axe into the forecastle and laid it in one of the larboard berths. I now thought it possible that, by getting at this axe, we might cut through the deck over the storeroom, and thus readily supply ourselves with provisions.

When I communicated this object to my companions, they uttered a feeble shout of joy, and we all proceeded forthwith to the forecastle. The difficulty of descending here was greater than that of going down in the cabin, the opening being much smaller, for it will be remembered that the whole framework about the cabin companion-hatch had been carried away, whereas the forecastle-way, being a simple hatch of only about three feet square, had remained uninjured. I did not hesitate, however, to attempt the descent; and a rope being fastened round my body as before, I plunged boldly in, feet foremost, made my way quickly to the berth, and at the first attempt brought up the axe. It was hailed with the most ecstatic joy and triumph, and the ease with which it had been obtained was regarded as an omen of our ultimate preservation.

We now commenced cutting at the deck with all the energy of rekindled hope, Peters and myself taking the axe by turns, Augustus's wounded arm not permitting him to aid us in any degree. As we were still so feeble as to be scarcely able to stand unsupported, and could consequently work but a minute or two without resting, it soon became evident that many long hours would be necessary to accomplish our task — that is, to cut an opening sufficiently large to admit of a free access to the storeroom. This consideration, however, did not discourage us; and, working all night by the light of the moon, we succeeded in effecting our purpose by daybreak on the morning of the twenty-third.

Peters now volunteered to go down; and, having made all arrangements as before, he descended, and soon returned bringing up with him a small jar, which, to our great joy, proved to be full of olives. Having shared these among us, and devoured them with the greatest avidity, we proceeded to let him down again. This time he succeeded beyond our utmost expectations, returning instantly with a large ham and a bottle of Madeira wine. Of the latter we each took a moderate sup, having learned by experience the pernicious consequences of indulging too freely. The ham, except about two pounds near the bone, was not in a condition to be eaten, having been entirely spoiled by the salt water. The sound part was divided among us. Peters and Augustus, not being able to restrain their appetite, swallowed theirs upon the instant; but I was more cautious, and ate but a small portion of mine, dreading the thirst which I knew would ensue. We now rested a while from our labors, which had been intolerably severe.

By noon, feeling somewhat strengthened and refreshed, we again renewed our attempt at getting up provisions, Peters and myself going down alternately, and always with more or less success, until sundown. During this interval we had the good fortune to bring up, altogether, four more small jars of olives, another ham, a carboy containing nearly three gallons of excellent Cape Madeira wine, and, what gave us still more delight, a small tortoise of the Gallipago breed, several of which had been taken on board by Captain Barnard, as the *Grampus* was leaving port, from the schooner *Mary Pitts*, just returned from a sealing voyage in the Pacific.

In a subsequent portion of this narrative I shall have frequent occasion to mention this species of tortoise. It is found principally, as most of my readers may know, in the group of islands called the Gallipagos, which, indeed, derive their name from the animal — the Spanish word Gallipago meaning a fresh-water terrapin. From the peculiarity of their shape and action they have been sometimes called the elephant tortoise. They are frequently found of an enormous size. I have myself seen several which would weigh from twelve to fifteen hundred pounds, although I do not remember that any navigator speaks of having seen them weighing more than eight hundred. Their appearance is singular, and even disgusting. Their steps are very slow, measured, and heavy, their bodies being carried about a foot from the ground. Their neck is long, and exceedingly slender, from eighteen inches to two feet is a very common length, and I killed one, where the distance from the shoulder to the extremity of the head was no less than three feet ten inches. The head has a striking resemblance to that of a serpent. They can exist without food for an almost incredible length of time, instances having been known where they have been thrown into the hold of a vessel and lain two years without nourishment of any kind — being as fat, and, in every respect, in as good order at the expiration of the time as when they were first put in. In one particular these extraordinary animals bear a resemblance to the dromedary, or camel of the desert. In a bag at the root of the neck they carry with them a constant supply of water. In some instances, upon killing them after a full year's deprivation of all nourishment, as much as three gallons of perfectly sweet and fresh water have been found in their bags. Their food is chiefly wild parsley and celery, with purslain, sea-kelp, and prickly pears, upon which latter vegetable they thrive wonderfully, a great quantity of it being usually found on the hillsides near the shore wherever the animal itself is discovered. They are excellent and highly nutritious food, and have, no doubt, been the means of preserving the lives of thousands of seamen employed in the whale-fishery and other pursuits in the Pacific.

The one which we had the good fortune to bring up from the storeroom was not of a large size, weighing probably sixty-five or seventy pounds. It was a female, and in excellent condition, being exceedingly fat, and having more than a quart of limpid and sweet water in its bag. This was indeed a treasure; and, falling on our knees with one accord, we returned fervent thanks to God for so seasonable a relief.

We had great difficulty in getting the animal up through the opening, as its struggles were fierce and its strength prodigious. It was upon the point of making its escape from Peter's grasp, and slipping back into the water, when Augustus, throwing a rope with a slipknot around its throat, held it up in this manner until I jumped into the hole by the side of Peters, and assisted him in lifting it out.

The water we drew carefully from the bag into the jug; which, it will be remembered, had been brought up before from the cabin. Having done this, we broke off the neck of a bottle so as to form, with the cork, a kind of glass, holding not quite half a gill. We then each drank one of these measures full, and resolved to limit ourselves to this quantity per day as long as it should hold out.

During the last two or three days, the weather having been dry and pleasant, the bedding we had obtained from the cabin, as well as our clothing, had become thoroughly dry, so that we passed this night (that of the twenty-third) in comparative comfort, enjoying a tranquil repose, after having supped plentifully on olives and ham, with a small allowance of the wine. Being afraid of losing some of our stores overboard during the night, in the event of a breeze springing up, we secured them as well as possible with cordage to the fragments of the windlass. Our tortoise, which we were anxious to preserve alive as long as we could, we threw on its back, and otherwise carefully fastened.

CHAPTER 13

JULY 24. This morning saw us wonderfully recruited in spirits and strength. Notwithstanding the perilous situation in which we were still placed, ignorant of our position, although certainly at a great distance from land, without more food than would last us for a fortnight even with great care, almost entirely without water, and floating about at the mercy of every wind and wave on the merest wreck in the world, still the infinitely more terrible distresses and dangers from which we had so lately and so providentially been delivered caused us to regard what we now endured as but little more than an ordinary evil — so strictly comparative is either good or ill.

At sunrise we were preparing to renew our attempts at getting up something from the storeroom, when, a smart shower coming on, with some lightning, we turn our attention to the catching of water by means of the sheet we had used before for this purpose. We had no other means of collecting the rain than by holding the sheet spread out with one of the forechain-plates in the middle of it. The water, thus conducted to the centre, was drained through into our jug. We had nearly filled it in this manner, when, a heavy squall coming on from the northward, obliged us to desist, as the hulk began once more to roll so violently that we could no longer keep our feet. We now went forward, and, lashing ourselves securely to the remnant of the windlass as before, awaited the event with far more calmness than could have been anticipated or would have been imagined possible under the circumstances. At noon the wind had freshened into a two-reef breeze, and by night into a stiff gale, accompanied with a tremendously heavy swell.

Experience having taught us, however, the best method of arranging our lashings, we weathered this dreary night in tolerable security, although thoroughly drenched at almost every instant by the sea, and in momentary dread of being washed off. Fortunately, the weather was so warm as to render the water rather grateful than otherwise.

July 25. This morning the gale had diminished to a mere ten-knot breeze, and the sea had gone down with it so considerably that we were able to keep ourselves dry upon the deck. To our great grief, however, we found that two jars of our olives, as well as the whole of our ham, had been washed overboard, in spite of the careful manner in which they had been fastened. We determined not to kill the tortoise as yet, and contented ourselves for the present with a breakfast on a few of the olives, and a measure of water each, which latter we mixed half and half, with wine, finding great relief and strength from the mixture, without the distressing intoxication which had ensued upon drinking the port. The sea was still far too rough for the renewal of our efforts at getting up provision from the storeroom. Several articles, of no importance to us in our present situation, floated up through the opening during the day, and were immediately washed overboard. We also now observed that the hulk lay more along than ever, so that we could not stand an instant without lashing ourselves. On this account we passed a gloomy and uncomfortable day. At noon the sun appeared to be nearly vertical, and we had no doubt that we had been driven down by the long succession of northward and northwesterly winds into the near vicinity of the equator. Toward evening we saw several sharks, and were somewhat alarmed by the audacious manner in which an enormously large one approached us. At one time, a lurch throwing the deck very far beneath the water, the monster actually swam in upon us, floundering for some moments just over the companion-hatch, and striking Peters violently with his tail. A heavy sea at length hurled him overboard, much to our relief. In moderate weather we might have easily captured him.

July 26. This morning, the wind having greatly abated, and the sea not being very rough, we determined to renew our exertions in the storeroom. After a great deal of hard labor during the whole day, we found that nothing further was to be expected from this quarter, the partitions of the room having been stove during the night, and its contents swept into the hold. This discovery, as may be supposed, filled us with despair.

July 27. The sea nearly smooth, with a light wind, and still from the northward and westward. The sun coming out hotly in the afternoon, we occupied ourselves in drying our clothes. Found great relief from thirst, and much comfort otherwise, by bathing in the sea; in this, however, we were forced to use great caution, being afraid of sharks, several of which were seen swimming around the brig during the day.

July 28. Good weather still. The brig now began to lie along so alarmingly that we feared she would eventually roll bottom up. Prepared ourselves as well as we could for this emergency, lashing our tortoise, waterjug, and two remaining jars of olives as far as possible over to the windward, placing them outside the hull below the main-chains. The sea very smooth all day, with little or no wind.

July 29. A continuance of the same weather. Augustus’s wounded arm began to evince symptoms of mortification. He complained of drowsiness and excessive thirst, but no acute pain. Nothing could be done for his relief beyond rubbing his wounds with a little of the vinegar from the olives, and from this no benefit seemed to be experienced. We did every thing in our power for his comfort, and trebled his allowance of water.

July 30. An excessively hot day, with no wind. An enormous shark kept close by the hulk during the whole of the forenoon. We made several unsuccessful attempts to capture him by means of a noose. Augustus much worse, and evidently sinking as much from want of proper nourishment as from the effect of his wounds. He constantly prayed to be relieved from his sufferings, wishing for nothing but death. This evening we ate the last of our olives, and found the water in our jug so putrid that we could not swallow it at all without the addition of wine. Determined to kill our tortoise in the morning.

July 31. After a night of excessive anxiety and fatigue, owing to the position of the hulk, we set about killing and cutting up our tortoise. He proved to be much smaller than we had supposed, although in good condition, — the whole meat about him not amounting to more than ten pounds. With a view of preserving a portion of this as long as possible, we cut it into fine pieces, and filled with them our three remaining olive jars and the wine-bottle (all of which had been kept), pouring in afterward the vinegar from the olives. In this manner we put away about three pounds of the tortoise, intending not to touch it until we had consumed the rest. We concluded to restrict ourselves to about four ounces of the meat per day; the whole would thus last us thirteen days. A brisk shower, with severe thunder and lightning, came on about dusk, but lasted so short a time that we only succeeded in catching about half a pint of water. The whole of this, by common consent, was given to Augustus, who now appeared to be in the last extremity. He drank the water from the sheet as we caught it (we holding it above him as he lay so as to let it run into his mouth), for we had now nothing left capable of holding water, unless we had chosen to empty out our wine from the carboy, or the stale water from the jug. Either of these expedients would have been resorted to had the shower lasted.

The sufferer seemed to derive but little benefit from the draught. His arm was completely black from the wrist to the shoulder, and his feet were like ice. We expected every moment to see him breathe his last. He was frightfully emaciated; so much so that, although he weighed a hundred and twenty-seven pounds upon his leaving Nantucket, he now did not weigh more than forty or fifty at the farthest. His eyes were sunk far in his head, being scarcely perceptible, and the skin of his cheeks hung so loosely as to prevent his masticating any food, or even swallowing any liquid, without great difficulty.

August 1. A continuance of the same calm weather, with an oppressively hot sun. Suffered exceedingly from thirst, the water in the jug being absolutely putrid and swarming with vermin. We contrived, nevertheless, to swallow a portion of it by mixing it with wine; our thirst, however, was but little abated. We found more relief by bathing in the sea, but could not avail ourselves of this expedient except at long intervals, on account of the continual presence of sharks. We now saw clearly that Augustus could not be saved; that he was evidently dying. We could do nothing to relieve his sufferings, which appeared to be great. About twelve o’clock he expired in strong convulsions, and without having spoken for several hours. His death filled us with the most gloomy forebodings, and had so great an effect upon our spirits that we sat motionless by the corpse during the whole day, and never addressed each other except in a whisper. It was not until some time after dark that we took courage to get up and throw the body overboard. It was then loathsome beyond expression, and so far decayed that, as Peters attempted to lift it, an entire leg came off in his grasp. As the mass of putrefaction slipped over the vessel’s side into the water, the glare of phosphoric light with which it was surrounded plainly discovered to us seven or eight large sharks, the clashing of whose horrible teeth, as their prey was torn to pieces among them, might have been heard at the distance of a mile. We shrunk within ourselves in the extremity of horror at the sound.

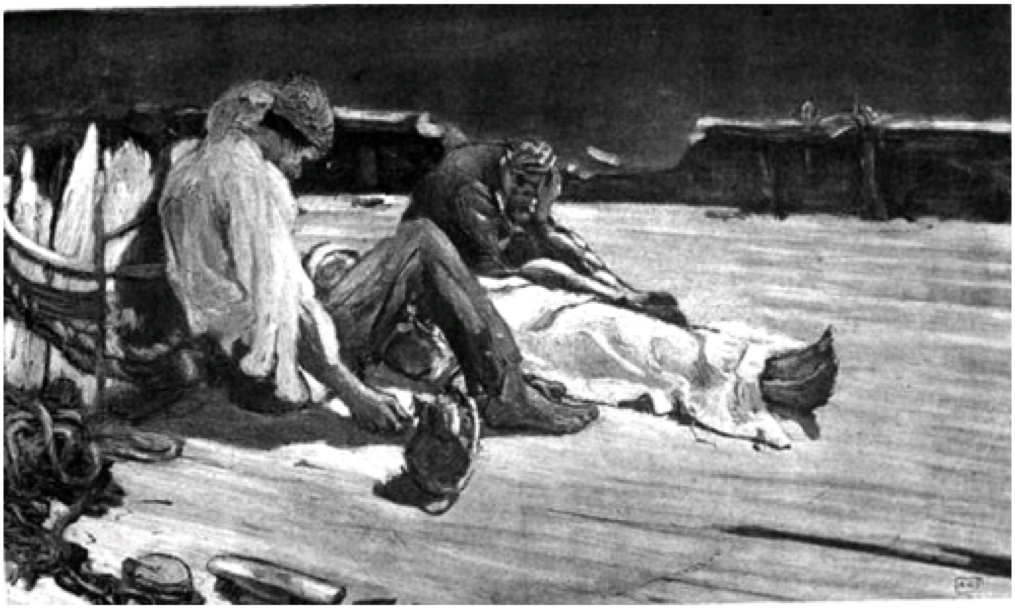

August 2. The same fearfully calm and hot weather. The dawn found us in a state of pitiable dejection as well as bodily exhaustion. The water in the jug was now absolutely useless, being a thick gelatinous mass; nothing but frightful-looking worms mingled with slime. We threw it out, and washed the jug well in the sea, afterward pouring a little vinegar in it from our bottles of pickled tortoise. Our thirst could now scarcely be endured, and we tried in vain to relieve it by wine, which seemed only to add fuel to the flame, and excited us to a high degree of intoxication. We afterward endeavoured to relieve our sufferings by mixing the wine with seawater; but this instantly brought about the most violent retchings, so that we never again attempted it. During the whole day we anxiously sought an opportunity of bathing, but to no purpose; for the hulk was now entirely besieged on all sides with sharks — no doubt the identical monsters who had devoured our poor companion on the evening before, and who were in momentary expectation of another similar feast. This circumstance occasioned us the most bitter regret and filled us with the most depressing and melancholy forebodings. We had experienced indescribable relief in bathing, and to have this resource cut off in so frightful a manner was more than we could bear. Nor, indeed, were we altogether free from the apprehension of immediate danger, for the least slip or false movement would have thrown us at once within reach of those voracious fish, who frequently thrust themselves directly upon us, swimming up to leeward. No shouts or exertions on our part seemed to alarm them. Even when one of the largest was struck with an axe by Peters and much wounded, he persisted in his attempts to push in where we were. A cloud came up at dusk, but, to our extreme anguish, passed over without discharging itself. It is quite impossible to conceive our sufferings from thirst at this period. We passed a sleepless night, both on this account and through dread of the sharks.

August 3. No prospect of relief, and the brig lying still more and more along, so that now we could not maintain a footing upon deck at all. Busied ourselves in securing our wine and tortoise-meat, so that we might not lose them in the event of our rolling over. Got out two stout spikes from the forechains, and, by means of the axe, drove them into the hull to windward within a couple of feet of the water, this not being very far from the keel, as we were nearly upon our beam-ends. To these spikes we now lashed our provisions, as being more secure than their former position beneath the chains. Suffered great agony from thirst during the whole day — no chance of bathing on account of the sharks, which never left us for a moment. Found it impossible to sleep.

August 4. A little before daybreak we perceived that the hulk was heeling over, and aroused ourselves to prevent being thrown off by the movement. At first the roll was slow and gradual, and we contrived to clamber over to windward very well, having taken the precaution to leave ropes hanging from the spikes we had driven in for the provision. But we had not calculated sufficiently upon the acceleration of the impetus; for, presently the heel became too violent to allow of our keeping pace with it; and, before either of us knew what was to happen, we found ourselves hurled furiously into the sea, and struggling several fathoms beneath the surface, with the huge hull immediately above us.

In going under the water I had been obliged to let go my hold upon the rope; and finding that I was completely beneath the vessel, and my strength nearly exhausted, I scarcely made a struggle for life, and resigned myself, in a few seconds, to die. But here again I was deceived, not having taken into consideration the natural rebound of the hull to windward. The whirl of the water upward, which the vessel occasioned in rolling partially back, brought me to the surface still more violently than I had been plunged beneath. Upon coming up I found myself about twenty yards from the hulk, as near as I could judge. She was lying keel up, rocking furiously from side to side, and the sea in all directions around was much agitated, and full of strong whirlpools. I could see nothing of Peters. An oil-cask was floating within a few feet of me, and various other articles from the brig were scattered about.

My principal terror was now on account of the sharks, which I knew to be in my vicinity. In order to deter these, if possible, from approaching me, I splashed the water vigorously with both hands and feet as I swam towards the hulk, creating a body of foam. I have no doubt that to this expedient, simple as it was, I was indebted for my preservation; for the sea all round the brig, just before her rolling over, was so crowded with these monsters, that I must have been, and really was, in actual contact with some of them during my progress. By great good fortune, however, I reached the side of the vessel in safety, although so utterly weakened by the violent exertion I had used that I should never have been able to get upon it but for the timely assistance of Peters, who, now, to my great joy, made his appearance (having scrambled up to the keel from the opposite side of the hull), and threw me the end of a rope — one of those which had been attached to the spikes.

Having barely escaped this danger, our attention was now directed to the dreadful imminency of another — that of absolute starvation. Our whole stock of provision had been swept overboard in spite of all our care in securing it; and seeing no longer the remotest possibility of obtaining more, we gave way both of us to despair, weeping aloud like children, and neither of us attempting to offer consolation to the other. Such weakness can scarcely be conceived, and to those who have never been similarly situated will, no doubt, appear unnatural; but it must be remembered that our intellects were so entirely disordered by the long course of privation and terror to which we had been subjected, that we could not justly be considered, at that period, in the light of rational beings. In subsequent perils, nearly as great, if not greater, I bore up with fortitude against all the evils of my situation, and Peters, it will be seen, evinced a stoical philosophy nearly as incredible as his present childlike supineness and imbecility — the mental condition made the difference.

The overturning of the brig, even with the consequent loss of the wine and turtle, would not, in fact, have rendered our situation more deplorable than before, except for the disappearance of the bedclothes by which we had been hitherto enabled to catch rainwater, and of the jug in which we had kept it when caught; for we found the whole bottom, from within two or three feet of the bends as far as the keel, together with the keel itself, thickly covered with large barnacles, which proved to be excellent and highly nutritious food. Thus, in two important respects, the accident we had so greatly dreaded proved to be a benefit rather than an injury; it had opened to us a supply of provisions which we could not have exhausted, using it moderately, in a month; and it had greatly contributed to our comfort as regards position, we being much more at ease, and in infinitely less danger, than before.

The difficulty, however, of now obtaining water blinded us to all the benefits of the change in our condition. That we might be ready to avail ourselves, as far as possible, of any shower which might fall we took off our shirts, to make use of them as we had of the sheets — not hoping, of course, to get more in this way, even under the most favorable circumstances, than half a gill at a time. No signs of a cloud appeared during the day, and the agonies of our thirst were nearly intolerable. At night, Peters obtained about an hour’s disturbed sleep, but my intense sufferings would not permit me to close my eyes for a single moment.

August 5. To-day, a gentle breeze springing up carried us through a vast quantity of seaweed, among which we were so fortunate as to find eleven small crabs, which afforded us several delicious meals. Their shells being quite soft, we ate them entire, and found that they irritated our thirst far less than the barnacles. Seeing no trace of sharks among the seaweed, we also ventured to bathe, and remained in the water for four or five hours, during which we experienced a very sensible diminution of our thirst. Were greatly refreshed, and spent the night somewhat more comfortably than before, both of us snatching a little sleep.

August 6. This day we were blessed by a brisk and continual rain, lasting from about noon until after dark. Bitterly did we now regret the loss of our jug and carboy; for, in spite of the little means we had of catching the water, we might have filled one, if not both of them. As it was, we contrived to satisfy the cravings of thirst by suffering the shirts to become saturated, and then wringing them so as to let the grateful fluid trickle into our mouths. In this occupation we passed the entire day.

August 7. Just at daybreak we both at the same instant descried a sail to the eastward, and *evidently coming towards us!* We hailed the glorious sight with a long, although feeble shout of rapture; and began instantly to make every signal in our power, by flaring the shirts in the air, leaping as high as our weak condition would permit, and even by hallooing with all the strength of our lungs, although the vessel could not have been less than fifteen miles distant. However, she still continued to near our hulk, and we felt that, if she but held her present course, she must eventually come so close as to perceive us. In about an hour after we first discovered her, we could clearly see the people on her decks. She was a long, low, and rakish-looking topsail schooner, with a black ball in her foretopsail, and had, apparently, a full crew. We now became alarmed, for we could hardly imagine it possible that she did not observe us, and were apprehensive that she meant to leave us to perish as we were — an act of fiendish barbarity, which, however incredible it may appear, has been repeatedly perpetuated at sea, under circumstances very nearly similar, and by beings who were regarded as belonging to the human species. {*2} In this instance, however, by the mercy of God, we were destined to be most happily deceived; for, presently we were aware of a sudden commotion on the deck of the stranger, who immediately afterward ran up a British flag, and, hauling her wind, bore up directly upon us. In half an hour more we found ourselves in her cabin. She proved to be the Jane Guy, of Liverpool, Captain Guy, bound on a sealing and trading voyage to the South Seas and Pacific.

CHAPTER 14

THE *Jane Guy* was a fine-looking topsail schooner of a hundred and eighty tons burden. She was unusually sharp in the bows, and on a wind, in moderate weather, the fastest sailer I have ever seen. Her qualities, however, as a rough sea-boat, were not so good, and her draught of water was by far too great for the trade to which she was destined. For this peculiar service, a larger vessel, and one of a light proportionate draught, is desirable — say a vessel of from three hundred to three hundred and fifty tons. She should be bark-rigged, and in other respects of a different construction from the usual South Sea ships. It is absolutely necessary that she should be well armed. She should have, say ten or twelve twelve-pound carronades, and two or three long twelves, with brass blunderbusses, and water-tight arm-chests for each top. Her anchors and cables should be of far greater strength than is required for any other species of trade, and, above all, her crew should be numerous and efficient — not less, for such a vessel as I have described, than fifty or sixty able-bodied men. The Jane Guy had a crew of thirty-five, all able seamen, besides the captain and mate, but she was not altogether as well armed or otherwise equipped, as a navigator acquainted with the difficulties and dangers of the trade could have desired.

Captain Guy was a gentleman of great urbanity of manner, and of considerable experience in the southern traffic, to which he had devoted a great portion of his life. He was deficient, however, in energy, and, consequently, in that spirit of enterprise which is here so absolutely requisite. He was part owner of the vessel in which he sailed, and was invested with discretionary powers to cruise in the South Seas for any cargo which might come most readily to hand. He had on board, as usual in such voyages, beads, looking-glasses, tinder-works, axes, hatchets, saws, adzes, planes, chisels, gouges, gimlets, files, spokeshaves, rasps, hammers, nails, knives, scissors, razors, needles, thread, crockery-ware, calico, trinkets, and other similar articles.

The schooner sailed from Liverpool on the tenth of July, crossed the Tropic of Cancer on the twenty-fifth, in longitude twenty degrees west, and reached Sal, one of the Cape Verd islands, on the twenty-ninth, where she took in salt and other necessaries for the voyage. On the third of August, she left the Cape Verds and steered southwest, stretching over toward the coast of Brazil, so as to cross the equator between the meridians of twenty-eight and thirty degrees west longitude. This is the course usually taken by vessels bound from Europe to the Cape of Good Hope, or by that route to the East Indies. By proceeding thus they avoid the calms and strong contrary currents which continually prevail on the coast of Guinea, while, in the end, it is found to be the shortest track, as westerly winds are never wanting afterward by which to reach the Cape. It was Captain Guy's intention to make his first stoppage at Kerguelen's Land — I hardly know for what reason. On the day we were picked up the schooner was off Cape St. Roque, in longitude thirty-one degrees west; so that, when found, we had drifted probably, from north to south, *not less than five-and-twenty degrees!*

On board the Jane Guy we were treated with all the kindness our distressed situation demanded. In about a fortnight, during which time we continued steering to the southeast, with gentle breezes and fine weather, both Peters and myself recovered entirely from the effects of our late privation and dreadful sufferings, and we began to remember what had passed rather as a frightful dream from which we had been happily awakened, than as events which had taken place in sober and naked reality. I have since found that this species of partial oblivion is usually brought about by sudden transition, whether from joy to sorrow or from sorrow to joy — the degree of forgetfulness being proportioned to the degree of difference in the exchange. Thus, in my own case, I now feel it impossible to realize the full extent of the misery which I endured during the days spent upon the hulk. The incidents are remembered, but not the feelings which the incidents elicited at the time of their occurrence. I only know, that when they did occur, I then thought human nature could sustain nothing more of agony.

We continued our voyage for some weeks without any incidents of greater moment than the occasional meeting with whaling-ships, and more frequently with the black or right whale, so called in contradistinction to the spermaceti. These, however, were chiefly found south of the twenty-fifth parallel. On the sixteenth of September, being in the vicinity of the Cape of Good Hope, the schooner encountered her first gale of any violence since leaving Liverpool. In this neighborhood, but more frequently to the south and east of the promontory (we were to the westward), navigators have often to contend with storms from the northward, which rage with great fury. They always bring with them a heavy sea, and one of their most dangerous features is the instantaneous chopping round of the wind, an occurrence almost certain to take place during the greatest force of the gale. A perfect hurricane will be blowing at one moment from the northward or northeast, and in the next not a breath of wind will be felt in that direction, while from the southwest it will come out all at once with a violence almost inconceivable. A bright spot to the southward is the sure forerunner of the change, and vessels are thus enabled to take the proper precautions.

It was about six in the morning when the blow came on with a white squall, and, as usual, from the northward. By eight it had increased very much, and brought down upon us one of the most tremendous seas I had then ever beheld. Every thing had been made as snug as possible, but the schooner laboured excessively, and gave evidence of her bad qualities as a seaboat, pitching her forecastle under at every plunge and with the greatest difficulty struggling up from one wave before she was buried in another. Just before sunset the bright spot for which we had been on the look-out made its appearance in the southwest, and in an hour afterward we perceived the little headsail we carried flapping listlessly against the mast. In two minutes more, in spite of every preparation, we were hurled on our beam-ends, as if by magic, and a perfect wilderness of foam made a clear breach over us as we lay. The blow from the southwest, however, luckily proved to be nothing more than a squall, and we had the good fortune to right the vessel without the loss of a spar. A heavy cross sea gave us great trouble for a few hours after this, but toward morning we found ourselves in nearly as good condition as before the gale. Captain Guy considered that he had made an escape little less than miraculous.

On the thirteenth of October we came in sight of Prince Edward’s Island, in latitude 46 degrees 53’ S. longitude 37 degrees 46’ E. Two days afterward we found ourselves near Possession Island, and presently passed the islands of Crozet, in latitude 42 degrees 59’ S. longitude 48 degrees E. On the eighteenth we made Kerguelen’s or Desolation Island, in the Southern Indian Ocean, and came to anchor in Christmas Harbour, having four fathoms of water.

This island, or rather group of islands, bears southeast from the Cape of Good Hope, and is distant therefrom nearly eight hundred leagues. It was first discovered in 1772, by the Baron de Kergulen, or Kerguelen, a

Frenchman, who, thinking the land to form a portion of an extensive southern continent carried home information to that effect, which produced much excitement at the time. The government, taking the matter up, sent the baron back in the following year for the purpose of giving his new discovery a critical examination, when the mistake was discovered. In 1777, Captain Cook fell in with the same group, and gave to the principal one the name of Desolation Island, a title which it certainly well deserves. Upon approaching the land, however, the navigator might be induced to suppose otherwise, as the sides of most of the hills, from September to March, are clothed with very brilliant verdure. This deceitful appearance is caused by a small plant resembling saxifrage, which is abundant, growing in large patches on a species of crumbling moss. Besides this plant there is scarcely a sign of vegetation on the island, if we except some coarse rank grass near the harbor, some lichen, and a shrub which bears resemblance to a cabbage shooting into seed, and which has a bitter and acrid taste.

The face of the country is hilly, although none of the hills can be called lofty. Their tops are perpetually covered with snow. There are several harbors, of which Christmas Harbour is the most convenient. It is the first to be met with on the northeast side of the island after passing Cape Francois, which forms the northern shore, and, by its peculiar shape, serves to distinguish the harbour. Its projecting point terminates in a high rock, through which is a large hole, forming a natural arch. The entrance is in latitude 48 degrees 40’ S. longitude 69 degrees 6’ E. Passing in here, good anchorage may be found under the shelter of several small islands, which form a sufficient protection from all easterly winds. Proceeding on eastwardly from this anchorage you come to Wasp Bay, at the head of the harbour. This is a small basin, completely landlocked, into which you can go with four fathoms, and find anchorage in from ten to three, hard clay bottom. A ship might lie here with her best bower ahead all the year round without risk. To the westward, at the head of Wasp Bay, is a small stream of excellent water, easily procured.

Some seal of the fur and hair species are still to be found on Kerguelen’s Island, and sea elephants abound. The feathered tribes are discovered in great numbers. Penguins are very plenty, and of these there are four different kinds. The royal penguin, so called from its size and beautiful plumage, is the largest. The upper part of the body is usually gray, sometimes of a lilac tint; the under portion of the purest white imaginable. The head is of a glossy and most brilliant black, the feet also. The chief beauty of plumage, however, consists in two broad stripes of a gold color, which pass along from the head to the breast. The bill is long, and either pink or bright scarlet. These birds walk erect; with a stately carriage. They carry their heads high with their wings drooping like two arms, and, as their tails project from their body in a line with the legs, the resemblance to a human figure is very striking, and would be apt to deceive the spectator at a casual glance or in the gloom of the evening. The royal penguins which we met with on Kerguelen’s Land were rather larger than a goose. The other kinds are the macaroni, the jackass, and the rookery penguin. These are much smaller, less beautiful in plumage, and different in other respects.

Besides the penguin many other birds are here to be found, among which may be mentioned sea-hens, blue peterels, teal, ducks, Port Egmont hens, shags, Cape pigeons, the nelly, sea swallows, terns, sea gulls, Mother Carey’s chickens, Mother Carey’s geese, or the great peterel, and, lastly, the albatross.

The great peterel is as large as the common albatross, and is carnivorous. It is frequently called the break-bones, or osprey peterel. They are not at all shy, and, when properly cooked, are palatable food. In flying they sometimes sail very close to the surface of the water, with the wings expanded, without appearing to move them in the least degree, or make any exertion with them whatever.

The albatross is one of the largest and fiercest of the South Sea birds. It is of the gull species, and takes its prey on the wing, never coming on land except for the purpose of breeding. Between this bird and the penguin the most singular friendship exists. Their nests are constructed with great uniformity upon a plan concerted between the two species — that of the albatross being placed in the centre of a little square formed by the nests of four penguins. Navigators have agreed in calling an assemblage of such encampments a rookery. These rookeries have been often described, but as my readers may not all have seen these descriptions, and as I shall have occasion hereafter to speak of the penguin and albatross, it will not be amiss to say something here of their mode of building and living.

When the season for incubation arrives, the birds assemble in vast numbers, and for some days appear to be deliberating upon the proper course to be pursued. At length they proceed to action. A level piece of ground is selected, of suitable extent, usually comprising three or four acres, and situated as near the sea as possible, being still beyond its reach. The spot is chosen with reference to its evenness of surface, and that is preferred which is the least encumbered with stones. This matter being arranged, the birds proceed, with one accord, and actuated apparently by one mind, to trace out, with mathematical accuracy, either a square or other parallelogram, as may best suit the nature of the ground, and of just sufficient size to accommodate easily all the birds assembled, and no more — in this particular seeming determined upon preventing the access of future stragglers who have not participated in the labor of the encampment. One side of the place thus marked out runs parallel with the water's edge, and is left open for ingress or egress.

Having defined the limits of the rookery, the colony now begin to clear it of every species of rubbish, picking up stone by stone, and carrying them outside of the lines, and close by them, so as to form a wall on the three inland sides. Just within this wall a perfectly level and smooth walk is formed, from six to eight feet wide, and extending around the encampment — thus serving the purpose of a general promenade.

The next process is to partition out the whole area into small squares exactly equal in size. This is done by forming narrow paths, very smooth, and crossing each other at right angles throughout the entire extent of the rookery. At each intersection of these paths the nest of an albatross is constructed, and a penguin's nest in the centre of each square — thus every penguin is surrounded by four albatrosses, and each albatross by a like number of penguins. The penguin's nest consists of a hole in the earth, very shallow, being only just of sufficient depth to keep her single egg from rolling. The albatross is somewhat less simple in her arrangements, erecting a hillock about a foot high and two in diameter. This is made of earth, seaweed, and shells. On its summit she builds her nest.

The birds take especial care never to leave their nests unoccupied for an instant during the period of incubation, or, indeed, until the young progeny are sufficiently strong to take care of themselves. While the male is absent at sea in search of food, the female remains on duty, and it is only upon the return of her partner that she ventures abroad. The eggs are never left uncovered at all — while one bird leaves the nest the other nestling in by its side. This precaution is rendered necessary by the thieving propensities prevalent in the rookery, the inhabitants making no scruple to purloin each other’s eggs at every good opportunity.

Although there are some rookeries in which the penguin and albatross are the sole population, yet in most of them a variety of oceanic birds are to be met with, enjoying all the privileges of citizenship, and scattering their nests here and there, wherever they can find room, never interfering, however, with the stations of the larger species. The appearance of such encampments, when seen from a distance, is exceedingly singular. The whole atmosphere just above the settlement is darkened with the immense number of the albatross (mingled with the smaller tribes) which are continually hovering over it, either going to the ocean or returning home. At the same time a crowd of penguins are to be observed, some passing to and fro in the narrow alleys, and some marching with the military strut so peculiar to them, around the general promenade ground which encircles the rookery. In short, survey it as we will, nothing can be more astonishing than the spirit of reflection evinced by these feathered beings, and nothing surely can be better calculated to elicit reflection in every well-regulated human intellect.

On the morning after our arrival in Christmas Harbour the chief mate, Mr. Patterson, took the boats, and (although it was somewhat early in the season) went in search of seal, leaving the captain and a young relation of his on a point of barren land to the westward, they having some business, whose nature I could not ascertain, to transact in the interior of the island. Captain Guy took with him a bottle, in which was a sealed letter, and made his way from the point on which he was set on shore toward one of the highest peaks in the place. It is probable that his design was to leave the letter on that height for some vessel which he expected to come after him. As soon as we lost sight of him we proceeded (Peters and myself being in the mate’s boat) on our cruise around the coast, looking for seal. In this business we were occupied about three weeks, examining with great care every nook and corner, not only of Kerguelen’s Land, but of the several small islands in the vicinity. Our labours, however, were not crowned with any important success. We saw a great many fur seal, but they were exceedingly shy, and with the greatest exertions, we could only procure three hundred and fifty skins in all. Sea elephants were abundant, especially on the western coast of the mainland, but of these we killed only twenty, and this with great difficulty. On the smaller islands we discovered a good many of the hair seal, but did not molest them. We returned to the schooner: on the eleventh, where we found Captain Guy and his nephew, who gave a very bad account of the interior, representing it as one of the most dreary and utterly barren countries in the world. They had remained two nights on the island, owing to some misunderstanding, on the part of the second mate, in regard to the sending a jollyboat from the schooner to take them off.

CHAPTER 15

ON the twelfth we made sail from Christmas Harbour retracing our way to the westward, and leaving Marion’s Island, one of Crozet’s group, on the larboard. We afterward passed Prince Edward’s Island, leaving it also on our left, then, steering more to the northward, made, in fifteen days, the islands of Tristan d’Acunha, in latitude 37 degrees 8’ S, longitude 12 degrees 8’ W.

This group, now so well known, and which consists of three circular islands, was first discovered by the Portuguese, and was visited afterward by the Dutch in 1643, and by the French in 1767. The three islands together form a triangle, and are distant from each other about ten miles, there being fine open passages between. The land in all of them is very high, especially in Tristan d’Acunha, properly so called. This is the largest of the group, being fifteen miles in circumference, and so elevated that it can be seen in clear weather at the distance of eighty or ninety miles. A part of the land toward the north rises more than a thousand feet perpendicularly from the sea. A tableland at this height extends back nearly to the centre of the island, and from this tableland arises a lofty cone like that of Teneriffe. The lower half of this cone is clothed with trees of good size, but the upper region is barren rock, usually hidden among the clouds, and covered with snow during the greater part of the year. There are no shoals or other dangers about the island, the shores being remarkably bold and the water deep. On the northwestern coast is a bay, with a beach of black sand where a landing with boats can be easily effected, provided there be a southerly wind. Plenty of excellent water may here be readily procured; also cod and other fish may be taken with hook and line.

The next island in point of size, and the most westwardly of the group, is that called the Inaccessible. Its precise situation is 37 degrees 17’ S. latitude, longitude 12 degrees 24’ W. It is seven or eight miles in circumference, and on all sides presents a forbidding and precipitous aspect. Its top is perfectly flat, and the whole region is sterile, nothing growing upon it except a few stunted shrubs.

Nightingale Island, the smallest and most southerly, is in latitude 37 degrees 26’ S. longitude 12 degrees 12’ W. Off its southern extremity is a high ledge of rocky islets; a few also of a similar appearance are seen to the northeast. The ground is irregular and sterile, and a deep valley partially separates it.

The shores of these islands abound, in the proper season, with sea lions, sea elephants, the hair and fur seal, together with a great variety of oceanic birds. Whales are also plenty in their vicinity. Owing to the ease with which these various animals were here formerly taken, the group has been much visited since its discovery. The Dutch and French frequented it at a very early period. In 1790, Captain Patten, of the ship Industry, of Philadelphia, made Tristan d’Acunha, where he remained seven months (from August, 1790, to April, 1791) for the purpose of collecting sealskins. In this time he gathered no less than five thousand six hundred, and says that he would have had no difficulty in loading a large ship with oil in three weeks. Upon his arrival he found no quadrupeds, with the exception of a few wild goats; the island now abounds with all our most valuable domestic animals, which have been introduced by subsequent navigators.

I believe it was not long after Captain Patten's visit that Captain Colquhoun, of the American brig Betsey, touched at the largest of the islands for the purpose of refreshment. He planted onions, potatoes, cabbages, and a great many other vegetables, an abundance of all which is now to be met with.

In 1811, a Captain Haywood, in the Nereus, visited Tristan. He found there three Americans, who were residing upon the island to prepare sealskins and oil. One of these men was named Jonathan Lambert, and he called himself the sovereign of the country. He had cleared and cultivated about sixty acres of land, and turned his attention to raising the coffee-plant and sugar-cane, with which he had been furnished by the American Minister at Rio Janeiro. This settlement, however, was finally abandoned, and in 1817 the islands were taken possession of by the British Government, who sent a detachment for that purpose from the Cape of Good Hope. They did not, however, retain them long; but, upon the evacuation of the country as a British possession, two or three English families took up their residence there independently of the Government. On the twenty-fifth of March, 1824, the Berwick, Captain Jeffrey, from London to Van Diemen's Land, arrived at the place, where they found an Englishman of the name of Glass, formerly a corporal in the British artillery. He claimed to be supreme governor of the islands, and had under his control twenty-one men and three women. He gave a very favourable account of the salubrity of the climate and of the productiveness of the soil. The population occupied themselves chiefly in collecting sealskins and sea elephant oil, with which they traded to the Cape of Good Hope, Glass owning a small schooner. At the period of our arrival the governor was still a resident, but his little community had multiplied, there being fifty-six persons upon Tristan, besides a smaller settlement of seven on Nightingale Island. We had no difficulty in procuring almost every kind of refreshment which we required — sheep, hogs, bullocks, rabbits, poultry, goats, fish in great variety, and vegetables were abundant. Having come to anchor close in with the large island, in eighteen fathoms, we took all we wanted on board very conveniently. Captain Guy also purchased of Glass five hundred sealskins and some ivory. We remained here a week, during which the prevailing winds were from the northward and westward, and the weather somewhat hazy. On the fifth of November we made sail to the southward and westward, with the intention of having a thorough search for a group of islands called the Auroras, respecting whose existence a great diversity of opinion has existed.

These islands are said to have been discovered as early as 1762, by the commander of the ship Aurora. In 1790, Captain Manuel de Oyarvido,, in the ship Princess, belonging to the Royal Philippine Company, sailed, as he asserts, directly among them. In 1794, the Spanish corvette Atrevida went with the determination of ascertaining their precise situation, and, in a paper published by the Royal Hydrographical Society of Madrid in the year 1809, the following language is used respecting this expedition: “The corvette Atrevida practised, in their immediate vicinity, from the twenty-first to the twenty-seventh of January, all the necessary observations, and measured by chronometers the difference of longitude between these islands and the port of Soledad in the Manillas. The islands are three, they are very nearly in the same meridian; the centre one is rather low, and the other two may be seen at nine leagues’ distance.” The observations made on board the Atrevida give the following results as the precise situation of each island. The most northern is in latitude 52 degrees 37’ 24” S. longitude 47 degrees, 43’ 15” W.; the middle one in latitude 53 degrees 2’ 40” S. longitude 47 degrees 55’ 15” W.; and the most southern in latitude 53 degrees 15’ 22” S. longitude 47 degrees 57’ 15” W.

On the twenty-seventh of January, 1820, Captain James Weddel, of the British navy, sailed from Staten Land also in search of the Auroras. He reports that, having made the most diligent search and passed not only immediately over the spots indicated by the commander of the Atrevida, but in every direction throughout the vicinity of these spots, he could discover no indication of land. These conflicting statements have induced other navigators to look out for the islands; and, strange to say, while some have sailed through every inch of sea where they are supposed to lie without finding them, there have been not a few who declare positively that they have seen them; and even been close in with their shores. It was Captain Guy's intention to make every exertion within his power to settle the question so oddly in dispute. {*3}

We kept on our course, between the south and west, with variable weather, until the twentieth of the month, when we found ourselves on the debated ground, being in latitude 53 degrees 15' S. longitude 47 degrees 58' W. — that is to say, very nearly upon the spot indicated as the situation of the most southern of the group. Not perceiving any sign of land, we continued to the westward of the parallel of fifty-three degrees south, as far as the meridian of fifty degrees west. We then stood to the north as far as the parallel of fifty-two degrees south, when we turned to the eastward, and kept our parallel by double altitudes, morning and evening, and meridian altitudes of the planets and moon. Having thus gone eastwardly to the meridian of the western coast of Georgia, we kept that meridian until we were in the latitude from which we set out. We then took diagonal courses throughout the entire extent of sea circumscribed, keeping a lookout constantly at the masthead, and repeating our examination with the greatest care for a period of three weeks, during which the weather was remarkably pleasant and fair, with no haze whatsoever. Of course we were thoroughly satisfied that, whatever islands might have existed in this vicinity at any former period, no vestige of them remained at the present day. Since my return home I find that the same ground was traced over, with equal care, in

1822, by Captain Johnson, of the American schooner Henry, and by Captain Morrell in the American schooner Wasp — in both cases with the same result as in our own.

CHAPTER 16

It had been Captain Guy’s original intention, after satisfying himself about the Auroras, to proceed through the Strait of Magellan, and up along the western coast of Patagonia; but information received at Tristan d’Acunha induced him to steer to the southward, in the hope of falling in with some small islands said to lie about the parallel of 60 degrees S. longitude 41 degrees 20’ W. In the event of his not discovering these lands, he designed, should the season prove favourable, to push on toward the pole. Accordingly, on the twelfth of December, we made sail in that direction. On the eighteenth we found ourselves about the station indicated by Glass, and cruised for three days in that neighborhood without finding any traces of the islands he had mentioned. On the twenty-first, the weather being unusually pleasant, we again made sail to the southward, with the resolution of penetrating in that course as far as possible. Before entering upon this portion of my narrative, it may be as well, for the information of those readers who have paid little attention to the progress of discovery in these regions, to give some brief account of the very few attempts at reaching the southern pole which have hitherto been made.

That of Captain Cook was the first of which we have any distinct account. In 1772 he sailed to the south in the Resolution, accompanied by Lieutenant Furneaux in the Adventure. In December he found himself as far as the fifty-eighth parallel of south latitude, and in longitude 26 degrees 57’ E. Here he met with narrow fields of ice, about eight or ten inches thick, and running northwest and southeast. This ice was in large cakes, and usually it was packed so closely that the vessel had great difficulty in forcing a passage. At this period Captain Cook supposed, from the vast number of birds to be seen, and from other indications, that he was in the near vicinity of land. He kept on to the southward, the weather being exceedingly cold, until he reached the sixty-fourth parallel, in longitude 38 degrees 14’ E.. Here he had mild weather, with gentle breezes, for five days, the thermometer being at thirty-six. In January, 1773, the vessels crossed the Antarctic circle, but did not succeed in penetrating much farther; for upon reaching latitude 67 degrees 15’ they found all farther progress impeded by an immense body of ice, extending all along the southern horizon as far as the eye could reach. This ice was of every variety — and some large floes of it, miles in extent, formed a compact mass, rising eighteen or twenty feet above the water. It being late in the season, and no hope entertained of rounding these obstructions, Captain Cook now reluctantly turned to the northward.

In the November following he renewed his search in the Antarctic. In latitude 59 degrees 40’ he met with a strong current setting to the southward. In December, when the vessels were in latitude 67 degrees 31’, longitude 142 degrees 54’ W. the cold was excessive, with heavy gales and fog. Here also birds were abundant; the albatross, the penguin, and the peterel especially. In latitude 70 degrees 23’ some large islands of ice were encountered, and shortly afterward the clouds to the southward were observed to be of a snowy whiteness, indicating the vicinity of field ice. In latitude 71 degrees 10’, longitude 106 degrees 54’ W. the navigators were stopped, as before, by an immense frozen expanse, which filled the whole area of the southern horizon. The northern edge of this expanse was ragged and broken, so firmly wedged together as to be utterly impassible, and extending about a mile to the southward. Behind it the frozen surface was comparatively smooth for some distance, until terminated in the extreme background by gigantic ranges of ice mountains, the one towering above the other. Captain Cook concluded that this vast field reached the southern pole or was joined to a continent. Mr. J. N. Reynolds, whose great exertions and perseverance have at length succeeded in getting set on foot a national expedition, partly for the purpose of exploring these regions, thus speaks of the attempt of the Resolution. “We are not surprised that Captain Cook was unable to go beyond 71 degrees 10’, but we are astonished that he did attain that point on the meridian of 106 degrees 54’ west longitude. Palmer’s Land lies south of the Shetland, latitude sixty-four degrees, and tends to the southward and westward farther than any navigator has yet penetrated. Cook was standing for this land when his progress was arrested by the ice; which, we apprehend, must always be the case in that point, and so early in the season as the sixth of January — and we should not be surprised if a portion of the icy mountains described was attached to the main body of Palmer’s Land, or to some other portions of land lying farther to the southward and westward.”

In 1803, Captains Kreutzenstern and Lisiausky were dispatched by Alexander of Russia for the purpose of circumnavigating the globe. In endeavouring to get south, they made no farther than 59 degrees 58’, in longitude 70 degrees 15’ W. They here met with strong currents setting eastwardly. Whales were abundant, but they saw no ice. In regard to this voyage, Mr. Reynolds observes that, if Kreutzenstern had arrived where he did earlier in the season, he must have encountered ice — it was March when he reached the latitude specified. The winds, prevailing, as they do, from the southward and westward, had carried the floes, aided by currents, into that icy region bounded on the north by Georgia, east by Sandwich Land and the South Orkneys, and west by the South Shetland islands.

In 1822, Captain James Weddell, of the British navy, with two very small vessels, penetrated farther to the south than any previous navigator, and this, too, without encountering extraordinary difficulties. He states that although he was frequently hemmed in by ice before reaching the seventy-second parallel, yet, upon attaining it, not a particle was to be discovered, and that, upon arriving at the latitude of 74 degrees 15’, no fields, and only three islands of ice were visible. It is somewhat remarkable that, although vast flocks of birds were seen, and other usual indications of land, and although, south of the Shetlands, unknown coasts were observed from the masthead tending southwardly, Weddell discourages the idea of land existing in the polar regions of the south.

On the 11th of January, 1823, Captain Benjamin Morrell, of the American schooner Wasp, sailed from Kerguelen’s Land with a view of penetrating as far south as possible. On the first of February he found himself in latitude 64 degrees 52’ S. longitude 118 degrees 27’ E. The following passage is extracted from his journal of that date. “The wind soon freshened to an eleven-knot breeze, and we embraced this opportunity of making to the west; being however convinced that the farther we went south beyond latitude sixty-four degrees, the less ice was to be apprehended, we steered a little to the southward, until we crossed the Antarctic circle, and were in latitude 69 degrees 15’ E. In this latitude there was no field ice, and very few ice islands in sight.”

Under the date of March fourteenth I find also this entry. “The sea was now entirely free of field ice, and there were not more than a dozen ice islands in sight. At the same time the temperature of the air and water was at least thirteen degrees higher (more mild) than we had ever found it between the parallels of sixty and sixty-two south. We were now in latitude 70 degrees 14’ S. and the temperature of the air was forty-seven, and that of the water forty-four. In this situation I found the variation to be 14 degrees 27’ easterly, per azimuth... I have several times passed within the Antarctic circle, on different meridians, and have uniformly found the temperature, both of the air and the water, to become more and more mild the farther I advanced beyond the sixty-fifth degree of south latitude, and that the variation decreases in the same proportion. While north of this latitude, say between sixty and sixty-five south, we frequently had great difficulty in finding a passage for the vessel between the immense and almost innumerable ice islands, some of which were from one to two miles in circumference, and more than five hundred feet above the surface of the water.”

Being nearly destitute of fuel and water, and without proper instruments, it being also late in the season, Captain Morrell was now obliged to put back, without attempting any further progress to the westward, although an entirely open, sea lay before him. He expresses the opinion that, had not these overruling considerations obliged him to retreat, he could have penetrated, if not to the pole itself, at least to the eighty-fifth parallel. I have given his ideas respecting these matters somewhat at length, that the reader may have an opportunity of seeing how far they were borne out by my own subsequent experience.

In 1831, Captain Briscoe, in the employ of the Messieurs Enderby, whale-ship owners of London, sailed in the brig Lively for the South Seas, accompanied by the cutter Tula. On the twenty-eighth of February, being in latitude 66 degrees 30’ S. longitude 47 degrees 31’ E. he descried land, and “clearly discovered through the snow the black peaks of a range of mountains running E. S. E.” He remained in this neighbourhood during the whole of the following month, but was unable to approach the coast nearer than within ten leagues, owing to the boisterous state of the weather.

Finding it impossible to make further discovery during this season, he returned northward to winter in Van Diemen’s Land.

In the beginning of 1832 he again proceeded southwardly, and on the fourth of February was seen to the southeast in latitude 67 degrees 15’ longitude 69 degrees 29’ W. This was soon found to be an island near the headland of the country he had first discovered. On the twenty-first of the month he succeeded in landing on the latter, and took possession of it in the name of William IV, calling it Adelaide’s Island, in honour of the English queen. These particulars being made known to the Royal Geographical Society of London, the conclusion was drawn by that body “that there is a continuous tract of land extending from 47 degrees 30’ E. to 69 degrees 29’ W. longitude, running the parallel of from sixty-six to sixty-seven degrees south latitude.” In respect to this conclusion Mr. Reynolds observes: “In the correctness of it we by no means concur; nor do the discoveries of Briscoe warrant any such indifference. It was within these limits that Weddel proceeded south on a meridian to the east of Georgia, Sandwich Land, and the South Orkney and Shetland islands.” My own experience will be found to testify most directly to the falsity of the conclusion arrived at by the society.

These are the principal attempts which have been made at penetrating to a high southern latitude, and it will now be seen that there remained, previous to the voyage of the Jane, nearly three hundred degrees of longitude in which the Antarctic circle had not been crossed at all. Of course a wide field lay before us for discovery, and it was with feelings of most intense interest that I heard Captain Guy express his resolution of pushing boldly to the southward.

CHAPTER 17

We kept our course southwardly for four days after giving up the search for Glass’s islands, without meeting with any ice at all. On the twenty-sixth, at noon, we were in latitude 63 degrees 23’ S. longitude 41 degrees 25’ W. We now saw several large ice islands, and a floe of field ice, not, however, of any great extent. The winds generally blew from the southeast, or the northeast, but were very light. Whenever we had a westerly wind, which was seldom, it was invariably attended with a rain squall. Every day we had more or less snow. The thermometer, on the twenty-seventh stood at thirty-five.

January 1, 1828. — This day we found ourselves completely hemmed in by the ice, and our prospects looked cheerless indeed. A strong gale blew, during the whole forenoon, from the northeast, and drove large cakes of the drift against the rudder and counter with such violence that we all trembled for the consequences. Toward evening, the gale still blowing with fury, a large field in front separated, and we were enabled, by carrying a press of sail to force a passage through the smaller flakes into some open water beyond. As we approached this space we took in sail by degrees, and having at length got clear, lay-to under a single reefed foresail.

January 2. — We had now tolerably pleasant weather. At noon we found ourselves in latitude 69 degrees 10’ S, longitude 42 degrees 20’ W, having crossed the Antarctic circle. Very little ice was to be seen to the southward, although large fields of it lay behind us. This day we rigged some sounding gear, using a large iron pot capable of holding twenty gallons, and a line of two hundred fathoms. We found the current setting to the north, about a quarter of a mile per hour. The temperature of the air was now about thirty-three. Here we found the variation to be 14 degrees 28’ easterly, per azimuth.

January 5. — We had still held on to the southward without any very great impediments. On this morning, however, being in latitude 73 degrees 15’ E. longitude 42 degrees 10’ W, we were again brought to a stand by an immense expanse of firm ice. We saw, nevertheless, much open water to the southward, and felt no doubt of being able to reach it eventually. Standing to the eastward along the edge of the floe, we at length came to a passage of about a mile in width, through which we warped our way by sundown. The sea in which we now were was thickly covered with ice islands, but had no field ice, and we pushed on boldly as before. The cold did not seem to increase, although we had snow very frequently, and now and then hail squalls of great violence. Immense flocks of the albatross flew over the schooner this day, going from southeast to northwest.

January 7. — The sea still remained pretty well open, so that we had no difficulty in holding on our course. To the westward we saw some icebergs of incredible size, and in the afternoon passed very near one whose summit could not have been less than four hundred fathoms from the surface of the ocean. Its girth was probably, at the base, three-quarters of a league, and several streams of water were running from crevices in its sides. We remained in sight of this island two days, and then only lost it in a fog.

January 10. — Early this morning we had the misfortune to lose a man overboard. He was an American named Peter Vredenburgh, a native of New York, and was one of the most valuable hands on board the schooner. In going over the bows his foot slipped, and he fell between two cakes of ice, never rising again. At noon of this day we were in latitude 78 degrees 30’, longitude 40 degrees 15’ W. The cold was now excessive, and we had hail squalls continually from the northward and eastward. In this direction also we saw several more immense icebergs, and the whole horizon to the eastward appeared to be blocked up with field ice, rising in tiers, one mass above the other. Some driftwood floated by during the evening, and a great quantity of birds flew over, among which were nellies, peterels, albatrosses, and a large bird of a brilliant blue plumage. The variation here, per azimuth, was less than it had been previously to our passing the Antarctic circle.

January 12.-Our passage to the south again looked doubtful, as nothing was to be seen in the direction of the pole but one apparently limitless floe, backed by absolute mountains of ragged ice, one precipice of which arose frowningly above the other. We stood to the westward until the fourteenth, in the hope of finding an entrance.

January 14.-This morning we reached the western extremity of the field which had impeded us, and, weathering it, came to an open sea, without a particle of ice. Upon sounding with two hundred fathoms, we here found a current setting southwardly at the rate of half a mile per hour. The temperature of the air was forty-seven, that of the water thirtyfour. We now sailed to the southward without meeting any interruption of moment until the sixteenth, when, at noon, we were in latitude 81 degrees 21’, longitude 42 degrees W. We here again sounded, and found a current setting still southwardly, and at the rate of three quarters of a mile per hour. The variation per azimuth had diminished, and the temperature of the air was mild and pleasant, the thermometer being as high as fifty-one. At this period not a particle of ice was to be discovered. All hands on board now felt certain of attaining the pole.

January 17. — This day was full of incident. Innumerable flights of birds flew over us from the southward, and several were shot from the deck, one of them, a species of pelican, proved to be excellent eating. About midday a small floe of ice was seen from the masthead off the larboard bow, and upon it there appeared to be some large animal. As the weather was good and nearly calm, Captain Guy ordered out two of the boats to see what it was. Dirk Peters and myself accompanied the mate in the larger boat. Upon coming up with the floe, we perceived that it was in the possession of a gigantic creature of the race of the Arctic bear, but far exceeding in size the largest of these animals. Being well armed, we made no scruple of attacking it at once. Several shots were fired in quick succession, the most of which took effect, apparently, in the head and body. Nothing discouraged, however, the monster threw himself from the ice, and swam with open jaws, to the boat in which were Peters and myself. Owing to the confusion which ensued among us at this unexpected turn of the adventure, no person was ready immediately with a second shot, and the bear had actually succeeded in getting half his vast bulk across our gunwale, and seizing one of the men by the small of his back, before any efficient means were taken to repel him. In this extremity nothing but the promptness and agility of Peters saved us from destruction. Leaping upon the back of the huge beast, he plunged the blade of a knife behind the neck, reaching the spinal marrow at a blow. The brute tumbled into the sea lifeless, and without a struggle, rolling over Peters as he fell. The latter soon recovered himself, and a rope being thrown him, he secured the carcass before entering the boat. We then returned in triumph to the schooner, towing our trophy behind us. This bear, upon admeasurement, proved to be full fifteen feet in his greatest length. His wool was perfectly white, and very coarse, curling tightly. The eyes were of a blood red, and larger than those of the Arctic bear, the snout also more rounded, rather resembling the snout of the bulldog. The meat was tender, but excessively rank and fishy, although the men devoured it with avidity, and declared it excellent eating.

Scarcely had we got our prize alongside, when the man at the masthead gave the joyful shout of “land on the starboard bow!” All hands were now upon the alert, and, a breeze springing up very opportunely from the northward and eastward, we were soon close in with the coast. It proved to be a low rocky islet, of about a league in circumference, and altogether destitute of vegetation, if we except a species of prickly pear. In approaching it from the northward, a singular ledge of rock is seen projecting into the sea, and bearing a strong resemblance to corded bales of cotton. Around this ledge to the westward is a small bay, at the bottom of which our boats effected a convenient landing.

It did not take us long to explore every portion of the island, but, with one exception, we found nothing worthy of our observation. In the southern extremity, we picked up near the shore, half buried in a pile of loose stones, a piece of wood, which seemed to have formed the prow of a canoe. There had been evidently some attempt at carving upon it, and Captain Guy fancied that he made out the figure of a tortoise, but the resemblance did not strike me very forcibly. Besides this prow, if such it were, we found no other token that any living creature had ever been here before. Around the coast we discovered occasional small floes of ice — but these were very few. The exact situation of the islet (to which Captain Guy gave the name of Bennet’s Islet, in honour of his partner in the ownership of the schooner) is 82 degrees 50’ S. latitude, 42 degrees 20’ W. longitude.

We had now advanced to the southward more than eight degrees farther than any previous navigators, and the sea still lay perfectly open before us. We found, too, that the variation uniformly decreased as we proceeded, and, what was still more surprising, that the temperature of the air, and latterly of the water, became milder. The weather might even be called pleasant, and we had a steady but very gentle breeze always from some northern point of the compass. The sky was usually clear, with now and then a slight appearance of thin vapour in the southern horizon — this, however, was invariably of brief duration. Two difficulties alone presented themselves to our view; we were getting short of fuel, and symptoms of scurvy had occurred among several of the crew. These considerations began to impress upon Captain Guy the necessity of returning, and he spoke of it frequently. For my own part, confident as I was of soon arriving at land of some description upon the course we were pursuing, and having every reason to believe, from present appearances, that we should not find it the sterile soil met with in the higher Arctic latitudes, I warmly pressed upon him the expediency of persevering, at least for a few days longer, in the direction we were now holding. So tempting an opportunity of solving the great problem in regard to an Antarctic continent had never yet been afforded to man, and I confess that I felt myself bursting with indignation at the timid and ill-timed suggestions of our commander. I believe, indeed, that what I could not refrain from saying to him on this head had the effect of inducing him to push on. While, therefore, I cannot but lament the most unfortunate and bloody events which immediately arose from my advice, I must still be allowed to feel some degree of gratification at having been instrumental, however remotely, in opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention.

CHAPTER 18

January 18. — This morning {*4} we continued to the southward, with the same pleasant weather as before. The sea was entirely smooth, the air tolerably warm and from the northeast, the temperature of the water fifty-three. We now again got our sounding-gear in order, and, with a hundred and fifty fathoms of line, found the current setting toward the pole at the rate of a mile an hour. This constant tendency to the southward, both in the wind and current, caused some degree of speculation, and even of alarm, in different quarters of the schooner, and I saw distinctly that no little impression had been made upon the mind of Captain Guy. He was exceedingly sensitive to ridicule, however, and I finally succeeded in laughing him out of his apprehensions. The variation was now very trivial. In the course of the day we saw several large whales of the right species, and innumerable flights of the albatross passed over the vessel. We also picked up a bush, full of red berries, like those of the hawthorn, and the carcass of a singular-looking land-animal. It was three feet in length, and but six inches in height, with four very short legs, the feet armed with long claws of a brilliant scarlet, and resembling coral in substance. The body was covered with a straight silky hair, perfectly white. The tail was peaked like that of a rat, and about a foot and a half long. The head resembled a cat’s, with the exception of the ears — these were flopped like the ears of a dog. The teeth were of the same brilliant scarlet as the claws.

January 19. — To-day, being in latitude 83 degrees 20’, longitude 43 degrees 5’ W. (the sea being of an extraordinarily dark colour), we again saw land from the masthead, and, upon a closer scrutiny, found it to be one of a group of very large islands. The shore was precipitous, and the interior seemed to be well wooded, a circumstance which occasioned us great joy. In about four hours from our first discovering the land we came to anchor in ten fathoms, sandy bottom, a league from the coast, as a high surf, with strong ripples here and there, rendered a nearer approach of doubtful expediency. The two largest boats were now ordered out, and a party, well armed (among whom were Peters and myself), proceeded to look for an opening in the reef which appeared to encircle the island. After searching about for some time, we discovered an inlet, which we were entering, when we saw four large canoes put off from the shore, filled with men who seemed to be well armed. We waited for them to come up, and, as they moved with great rapidity, they were soon within hail. Captain Guy now held up a white handkerchief on the blade of an oar, when the strangers made a full stop, and commenced a loud jabbering all at once, intermingled with occasional shouts, in which we could distinguish the words Anamoo-moo! and Lama-Lama! They continued this for at least half an hour, during which we had a good opportunity of observing their appearance.

In the four canoes, which might have been fifty feet long and five broad, there were a hundred and ten savages in all. They were about the ordinary stature of Europeans, but of a more muscular and brawny frame. Their complexion a jet black, with thick and long woolly hair. They were clothed in skins of an unknown black animal, shaggy and silky, and made to fit the body with some degree of skill, the hair being inside, except where turned out about the neck, wrists, and ankles. Their arms consisted principally of clubs, of a dark, and apparently very heavy wood. Some spears, however, were observed among them, headed with flint, and a few slings. The bottoms of the canoes were full of black stones about the size of a large egg.

When they had concluded their harangue (for it was clear they intended their jabbering for such), one of them who seemed to be the chief stood up in the prow of his canoe, and made signs for us to bring our boats alongside of him. This hint we pretended not to understand, thinking it the wiser plan to maintain, if possible, the interval between us, as their number more than quadrupled our own. Finding this to be the case, the chief ordered the three other canoes to hold back, while he advanced toward us with his own. As soon as he came up with us he leaped on board the largest of our boats, and seated himself by the side of Captain Guy, pointing at the same time to the schooner, and repeating the word Anamoo-moo! and Lama-Lama! We now put back to the vessel, the four canoes following at a little distance.

Upon getting alongside, the chief evinced symptoms of extreme surprise and delight, clapping his hands, slapping his thighs and breast, and laughing obstreperously. His followers behind joined in his merriment, and for some minutes the din was so excessive as to be absolutely deafening. Quiet being at length restored, Captain Guy ordered the boats to be hoisted up, as a necessary precaution, and gave the chief (whose name we soon found to be Too-wit) to understand that we could admit no more than twenty of his men on deck at one time. With this arrangement he appeared perfectly satisfied, and gave some directions to the canoes, when one of them approached, the rest remaining about fifty yards off. Twenty of the savages now got on board, and proceeded to ramble over every part of the deck, and scramble about among the rigging, making themselves much at home, and examining every article with great inquisitiveness.

It was quite evident that they had never before seen any of the white race — from whose complexion, indeed, they appeared to recoil. They believed the Jane to be a living creature, and seemed to be afraid of hurting it with the points of their spears, carefully turning them up. Our crew were much amused with the conduct of Too-wit in one instance. The cook was splitting some wood near the galley, and, by accident, struck his axe into the deck, making a gash of considerable depth. The chief immediately ran up, and pushing the cook on one side rather roughly, commenced a half whine, half howl, strongly indicative of sympathy in what he considered the sufferings of the schooner, patting and smoothing the gash with his hand, and washing it from a bucket of seawater which stood by. This was a degree of ignorance for which we were not prepared, and for my part I could not help thinking some of it affected.

When the visitors had satisfied, as well as they could, their curiosity in regard to our upper works, they were admitted below, when their amazement exceeded all bounds. Their astonishment now appeared to be far too deep for words, for they roamed about in silence, broken only by low ejaculations. The arms afforded them much food for speculation, and they were suffered to handle and examine them at leisure. I do not believe that they had the least suspicion of their actual use, but rather took them for idols, seeing the care we had of them, and the attention with which we watched their movements while handling them. At the great guns their wonder was redoubled. They approached them with every mark of the profoundest reverence and awe, but forbore to examine them minutely. There were two large mirrors in the cabin, and here was the acme of their amazement. Too-wit was the first to approach them, and he had got in the middle of the cabin, with his face to one and his back to the other, before he fairly perceived them. Upon raising his eyes and seeing his reflected self in the glass, I thought the savage would go mad; but, upon turning short round to make a retreat, and beholding himself a second time in the opposite direction, I was afraid he would expire upon the spot. No persuasion could prevail upon him to take another look; throwing himself upon the floor, with his face buried in his hands, he remained thus until we were obliged to drag him upon deck.

The whole of the savages were admitted on board in this manner, twenty at a time, Too-wit being suffered to remain during the entire period. We saw no disposition to thievery among them, nor did we miss a single article after their departure. Throughout the whole of their visit they evinced the most friendly manner. There were, however, some points in their demeanour which we found it impossible to understand; for example, we could not get them to approach several very harmless objects — such as the schooner's sails, an egg, an open book, or a pan of flour. We endeavoured to ascertain if they had among them any articles which might be turned to account in the way of traffic, but found great difficulty in being comprehended. We made out, nevertheless, what greatly astonished us, that the islands abounded in the large tortoise of the Gallipagos, one of which we saw in the canoe of Too-wit. We saw also some biche de mer in the hands of one of the savages, who was greedily devouring it in its natural state. These anomalies — for they were such when considered in regard to the latitude — induced Captain Guy to wish for a thorough investigation of the country, in the hope of making a profitable speculation in his discovery. For my own part, anxious as I was to know something more of these islands, I was still more earnestly bent on prosecuting the voyage to the southward without delay. We had now fine weather, but there was no telling how long it would last; and being already in the eighty-fourth parallel, with an open sea before us, a current setting strongly to the southward, and the wind fair, I could not listen with any patience to a proposition of stopping longer than was absolutely necessary for the health of the crew and the taking on board a proper supply of fuel and fresh provisions. I represented to the captain that we might easily make this group on our return, and winter here in the event of being blocked up by the ice. He at length came into my views (for in some way, hardly known to myself, I had acquired much influence over him), and it was finally resolved that, even in the event of our finding biche de mer, we should only stay here a week to recruit, and then push on to the southward while we might. Accordingly we made every necessary preparation, and, under the guidance of Too-wit, got the Jane through the reef in safety, coming to anchor about a mile from the shore, in an excellent bay, completely landlocked, on the southeastern coast of the main island, and in ten fathoms of water, black sandy bottom. At the head of this bay there were three fine springs (we were told) of good water, and we saw abundance of wood in the vicinity. The four canoes followed us in, keeping, however, at a respectful distance. Too-wit himself remained on board, and, upon our dropping anchor, invited us to accompany him on shore, and visit his village in the interior. To this Captain Guy consented; and ten savages being left on board as hostages, a party of us, twelve in all, got in readiness to attend the chief. We took care to be well armed, yet without evincing any distrust. The schooner had her guns run out, her boarding-nettings up, and every other proper precaution was taken to guard against surprise. Directions were left with the chief mate to admit no person on board during our absence, and, in the event of our not appearing in twelve hours, to send the cutter, with a swivel, around the island in search of us.

At every step we took inland the conviction forced itself upon us that we were in a country differing essentially from any hitherto visited by civilized men. We saw nothing with which we had been formerly conversant. The trees resembled no growth of either the torrid, the temperate, of the northern frigid zones, and were altogether unlike those of the lower southern latitudes we had already traversed. The very rocks were novel in their mass, their color, and their stratification; and the streams themselves, utterly incredible as it may appear, had so little in common with those of other climates, that we were scrupulous of tasting them, and, indeed, had difficulty in bringing ourselves to believe that their qualities were purely those of nature. At a small brook which crossed our path (the first we had reached) Too-wit and his attendants halted to drink. On account of the singular character of the water, we refused to taste it, supposing it to be polluted; and it was not until some time afterward we came to understand that such was the appearance of the streams throughout the whole group. I am at a loss to give a distinct idea of the nature of this liquid, and cannot do so without many words. Although it flowed with rapidity in all declivities where common water would do so, yet never, except when falling in a cascade, had it the customary appearance of limpidity. It was, nevertheless, in point of fact, as perfectly limpid as any limestone water in existence, the difference being only in appearance. At first sight, and especially in cases where little declivity was found, it bore resemblance, as regards consistency, to a thick infusion of gum arabic in common water. But this was only the least remarkable of its extraordinary qualities. It was not colourless, nor was it of any one uniform colour — presenting to the eye, as it flowed, every possible shade of purple; like the hues of a changeable silk. This variation in shade was produced in a manner which excited as profound astonishment in the minds of our party as the mirror had done in the case of Too-wit. Upon collecting a basinful, and allowing it to settle thoroughly, we perceived that the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; that these veins did not commingle; and that their cohesion was perfect in regard to their own particles among themselves, and imperfect in regard to neighbouring veins. Upon passing the blade of a knife athwart the veins, the water closed over it immediately, as with us, and also, in withdrawing it, all traces of the passage of the knife were instantly obliterated. If, however, the blade was passed down accurately between the two veins, a perfect separation was effected, which the power of cohesion did not immediately rectify. The phenomena of this water formed the first definite link in that vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to be at length encircled.

CHAPTER 19

We were nearly three hours in reaching the village, it being more than nine miles in the interior, and the path lying through a rugged country. As we passed along, the party of Too-wit (the whole hundred and ten savages of the canoes) was momentarily strengthened by smaller detachments, of from two to six or seven, which joined us, as if by accident, at different turns of the road. There appeared so much of system in this that I could not help feeling distrust, and I spoke to Captain Guy of my apprehensions. It was now too late, however, to recede, and we concluded that our best security lay in evincing a perfect confidence in the good faith of Too-wit. We accordingly went on, keeping a wary eye upon the manoeuvres of the savages, and not permitting them to divide our numbers by pushing in between. In this way, passing through a precipitous ravine, we at length reached what we were told was the only collection of habitations upon the island. As we came in sight of them, the chief set up a shout, and frequently repeated the word Klock-klock, which we supposed to be the name of the village, or perhaps the generic name for villages.

The dwellings were of the most miserable description imaginable, and, unlike those of even the lowest of the savage races with which mankind are acquainted, were of no uniform plan. Some of them (and these we found belonged to the Wampoos or Yampoos, the great men of the land) consisted of a tree cut down at about four feet from the root, with a large black skin thrown over it, and hanging in loose folds upon the ground. Under this the savage nestled. Others were formed by means of rough limbs of trees, with the withered foliage upon them, made to recline, at an angle of forty-five degrees, against a bank of clay, heaped up, without regular form, to the height of five or six feet. Others, again, were mere holes dug in the earth perpendicularly, and covered over with similar branches, these being removed when the tenant was about to enter, and pulled on again when he had entered. A few were built among the forked limbs of trees as they stood, the upper limbs being partially cut through, so as to bend over upon the lower, thus forming thicker shelter from the weather. The greater number, however, consisted of small shallow caverns, apparently scratched in the face of a precipitous ledge of dark stone, resembling fuller’s earth, with which three sides of the village were bounded. At the door of each of these primitive caverns was a small rock, which the tenant carefully placed before the entrance upon leaving his residence, for what purpose I could not ascertain, as the stone itself was never of sufficient size to close up more than a third of the opening.

This village, if it were worthy of the name, lay in a valley of some depth, and could only be approached from the southward, the precipitous ledge of which I have already spoken cutting off all access in other directions. Through the middle of the valley ran a brawling stream of the same magical-looking water which has been described. We saw several strange animals about the dwellings, all appearing to be thoroughly domesticated. The largest of these creatures resembled our common hog in the structure of the body and snout; the tail, however, was bushy, and the legs slender as those of the antelope. Its motion was exceedingly awkward and indecisive, and we never saw it attempt to run. We noticed also several animals very similar in appearance, but of a greater length of body, and covered with a black wool. There were a great variety of tame fowls running about, and these seemed to constitute the chief food of the natives. To our astonishment we saw black albatross among these birds in a state of entire domestication, going to sea periodically for food, but always returning to the village as a home, and using the southern shore in the vicinity as a place of incubation. There they were joined by their friends the pelicans as usual, but these latter never followed them to the dwellings of the savages. Among the other kinds of tame fowls were ducks, differing very little from the canvass-back of our own country, black gannets, and a large bird not unlike the buzzard in appearance, but not carnivorous. Of fish there seemed to be a great abundance. We saw, during our visit, a quantity of dried salmon, rock cod, blue dolphins, mackerel, blackfish, skate, conger eels, elephantfish, mullets, soles, parrotfish, leather-jackets, gurnards, hake, flounders, paracutas, and innumerable other varieties. We noticed, too, that most of them were similar to the fish about the group of Lord Auckland Islands, in a latitude as low as fifty-one degrees south. The Gallipago tortoise was also very plentiful. We saw but few wild animals, and none of a large size, or of a species with which we were familiar. One or two serpents of a formidable aspect crossed our path, but the natives paid them little attention, and we concluded that they were not venomous.

As we approached the village with Too-wit and his party, a vast crowd of the people rushed out to meet us, with loud shouts, among which we could only distinguish the everlasting Anamoo-moo! and Lama-Lama! We were much surprised at perceiving that, with one or two exceptions, these new comers were entirely naked, and skins being used only by the men of the canoes. All the weapons of the country seemed also to be in the possession of the latter, for there was no appearance of any among the villagers. There were a great many women and children, the former not altogether wanting in what might be termed personal beauty. They were straight, tall, and well formed, with a grace and freedom of carriage not to be found in civilized society. Their lips, however, like those of the men, were thick and clumsy, so that, even when laughing, the teeth were never disclosed. Their hair was of a finer texture than that of the males. Among these naked villagers there might have been ten or twelve who were clothed, like the party of Too-wit, in dresses of black skin, and armed with lances and heavy clubs. These appeared to have great influence among the rest, and were always addressed by the title Wampoo. These, too, were the tenants of the black skin palaces. That of Too-wit was situated in the centre of the village, and was much larger and somewhat better constructed than others of its kind. The tree which formed its support was cut off at a distance of twelve feet or thereabouts from the root, and there were several branches left just below the cut, these serving to extend the covering, and in this way prevent its flapping about the trunk. The covering, too, which consisted of four very large skins fastened together with wooden skewers, was secured at the bottom with pegs driven through it and into the ground. The floor was strewed with a quantity of dry leaves by way of carpet.

To this hut we were conducted with great solemnity, and as many of the natives crowded in after us as possible. Too-wit seated himself on the leaves, and made signs that we should follow his example. This we did, and presently found ourselves in a situation peculiarly uncomfortable, if not indeed critical. We were on the ground, twelve in number, with the savages, as many as forty, sitting on their hams so closely around us that, if any disturbance had arisen, we should have found it impossible to make use of our arms, or indeed to have risen to our feet. The pressure was not only inside the tent, but outside, where probably was every individual on the whole island, the crowd being prevented from trampling us to death only by the incessant exertions and vociferations of Too-wit. Our chief security lay, however, in the presence of Too-wit himself among us, and we resolved to stick by him closely, as the best chance of extricating ourselves from the dilemma, sacrificing him immediately upon the first appearance of hostile design.

After some trouble a certain degree of quiet was restored, when the chief addressed us in a speech of great length, and very nearly resembling the one delivered in the canoes, with the exception that the Anamoo-moos! were now somewhat more strenuously insisted upon than the Lama-Lamas! We listened in profound silence until the conclusion of this harangue, when Captain Guy replied by assuring the chief of his eternal friendship and goodwill, concluding what he had to say be a present of several strings of blue beads and a knife. At the former the monarch, much to our surprise, turned up his nose with some expression of contempt, but the knife gave him the most unlimited satisfaction, and he immediately ordered dinner. This was handed into the tent over the heads of the attendants, and consisted of the palpitating entrails of a specials of unknown animal, probably one of the slim-legged hogs which we had observed in our approach to the village. Seeing us at a loss how to proceed, he began, by way of setting us an example, to devour yard after yard of the enticing food, until we could positively stand it no longer, and evinced such manifest symptoms of rebellion of stomach as inspired his majesty with a degree of astonishment only inferior to that brought about by the looking-glasses. We declined, however, partaking of the delicacies before us, and endeavoured to make him understand that we had no appetite whatever, having just finished a hearty dejeuner.

When the monarch had made an end of his meal, we commenced a series of cross-questioning in every ingenious manner we could devise, with a view of discovering what were the chief productions of the country, and whether any of them might be turned to profit. At length he seemed to have some idea of our meaning, and offered to accompany us to a part of coast where he assured us the biche de mer (pointing to a specimen of that animal) was to be found in great abundance. We were glad of this early opportunity of escaping from the oppression of the crowd, and signified our eagerness to proceed. We now left the tent, and, accompanied by the whole population of the village, followed the chief to the southeastern extremity of the island, nor far from the bay where our vessel lay at anchor. We waited here for about an hour, until the four canoes were brought around by some of the savages to our station. The whole of our party then getting into one of them, we were paddled along the edge of the reef before mentioned, and of another still farther out, where we saw a far greater quantity of biche de mer than the oldest seamen among us had ever seen in those groups of the lower latitudes most celebrated for this article of commerce. We stayed near these reefs only long enough to satisfy ourselves that we could easily load a dozen vessels with the animal if necessary, when we were taken alongside the schooner, and parted with Too-wit, after obtaining from him a promise that he would bring us, in the course of twenty-four hours, as many of the canvass-back ducks and Gallipago tortoises as his canoes would hold. In the whole of this adventure we saw nothing in the demeanour of the natives calculated to create suspicion, with the single exception of the systematic manner in which their party was strengthened during our route from the schooner to the village.

CHAPTER 20

THE chief was as good as his word, and we were soon plentifully supplied with fresh provisions. We found the tortoises as fine as we had ever seen, and the ducks surpassed our best species of wild fowl, being exceedingly tender, juicy, and well-flavoured. Besides these, the savages brought us, upon our making them comprehend our wishes, a vast quantity of brown celery and scurvy grass, with a canoe-load of fresh fish and some dried. The celery was a treat indeed, and the scurvy grass proved of incalculable benefit in restoring those of our men who had shown symptoms of disease. In a very short time we had not a single person on the sick-list. We had also plenty of other kinds of fresh provisions, among which may be mentioned a species of shellfish resembling the mussel in shape, but with the taste of an oyster. Shrimps, too, and prawns were abundant, and albatross and other birds' eggs with dark shells. We took in, too, a plentiful stock of the flesh of the hog which I have mentioned before. Most of the men found it a palatable food, but I thought it fishy and otherwise disagreeable. In return for these good things we presented the natives with blue beads, brass trinkets, nails, knives, and pieces of red cloth, they being fully delighted in the exchange. We established a regular market on shore, just under the guns of the schooner, where our barterings were carried on with every appearance of good faith, and a degree of order which their conduct at the village of *Klock-klock* had not led us to expect from the savages.

Matters went on thus very amicably for several days, during which parties of the natives were frequently on board the schooner, and parties of our men frequently on shore, making long excursions into the interior, and receiving no molestation whatever. Finding the ease with which the vessel might be loaded with *biche de mer*, owing to the friendly disposition of the islanders, and the readiness with which they would render us assistance in collecting it, Captain Guy resolved to enter into negotiations with Too-wit for the erection of suitable houses in which to cure the article, and for the services of himself and tribe in gathering as much as possible, while he himself took advantage of the fine weather to prosecute his voyage to the southward. Upon mentioning this project to the chief he seemed very willing to enter into an agreement. A bargain was accordingly struck, perfectly satisfactory to both parties, by which it was arranged that, after making the necessary preparations, such as laying off the proper grounds, erecting a portion of the buildings, and doing some other work in which the whole of our crew would be required, the schooner should proceed on her route, leaving three of her men on the island to superintend the fulfilment of the project, and instruct the natives in drying the *biche de mer*. In regard to terms, these were made to depend upon the exertions of the savages in our absence. They were to receive a stipulated quantity of blue beads, knives, red cloth, and so forth, for every certain number of piculs of the *biche de mer* which should be ready on our return.

A description of the nature of this important article of commerce, and the method of preparing it, may prove of some interest to my readers, and I can find no more suitable place than this for introducing an account of it. The following comprehensive notice of the substance is taken from a modern history of a voyage to the South Seas.

“It is that *mollusca* from the Indian Seas which is known to commerce by the French name *bouche de mer* (a nice morsel from the sea). If I am not much mistaken, the celebrated Cuvier calls it *gasteropeda pulmonifera*. It is abundantly gathered in the coasts of the Pacific islands, and gathered especially for the Chinese market, where it commands a great price, perhaps as much as their much-talked-of edible birds' nests, which are properly made up of the gelatinous matter picked up by a species of swallow from the body of these molluscae. They have no shell, no legs, nor any prominent part, except an *absorbing* and an *excretory,* opposite organs; but, by their elastic wings, like caterpillars or worms, they creep in shallow waters, in which, when low, they can be seen by a kind of swallow, the sharp bill of which, inserted in the soft animal, draws a gummy and filamentous substance, which, by drying, can be wrought into the solid walls of their nest. Hence the name of *gasteropeda pulmonifera*.

"This mollusca is oblong, and of different sizes, from three to eighteen inches in length; and I have seen a few that were not less than two feet long. They were nearly round, a little flattish on one side, which lies next to the bottom of the sea; and they are from one to eight inches thick. They crawl up into shallow water at particular seasons of the year, probably for the purpose of gendering, as we often find them in pairs. It is when the sun has the most power on the water, rendering it tepid, that they approach the shore; and they often go up into places so shallow that, on the tide's receding, they are left dry, exposed to the beat of the sun. But they do not bring forth their young in shallow water, as we never see any of their progeny, and full-grown ones are always observed coming in from deep water. They feed principally on that class of zoophytes which produce the coral.

"The *biche de mer* is generally taken in three or four feet of water; after which they are brought on shore, and split at one end with a knife, the incision being one inch or more, according to the size of the mollusca. Through this opening the entrails are forced out by pressure, and they are much like those of any other small tenant of the deep. The article is then washed, and afterward boiled to a certain degree, which must not be too much or too little. They are then buried in the ground for four hours, then boiled again for a short time, after which they are dried, either by the fire or the sun. Those cured by the sun are worth the most; but where one picul (133 1/3 lbs.) can be cured that way, I can cure thirty piculs by the fire. When once properly cured, they can be kept in a dry place for two or three years without any risk; but they should be examined once in every few months, say four times a year, to see if any dampness is likely to affect them.

"The Chinese, as before stated, consider *biche de mer* a very great luxury, believing that it wonderfully strengthens and nourishes the system, and renews the exhausted system of the immoderate voluptuary. The first quality commands a high price in Canton, being worth ninety dollars a picul; the second quality, seventy-five dollars; the third, fifty dollars; the fourth, thirty dollars; the fifth, twenty dollars; the sixth, twelve dollars; the seventh, eight dollars; and the eighth, four dollars; small cargoes, however, will often bring more in Manilla, Singapore, and Batavia."

An agreement having been thus entered into, we proceeded immediately to land everything necessary for preparing the buildings and clearing the ground. A large flat space near the eastern shore of the bay was selected, where there was plenty of both wood and water, and within a convenient distance of the principal reefs on which the *biche de mer* was to be procured. We now all set to work in good earnest, and soon, to the great astonishment of the savages, had felled a sufficient number of trees for our purpose, getting them quickly in order for the framework of the houses, which in two or three days were so far under way that we could safely trust the rest of the work to the three men whom we intended to leave behind.

These were John Carson, Alfred Harris, and ___ Peterson (all natives of London, I believe), who volunteered their services in this respect.

By the last of the month we had everything in readiness for departure. We had agreed, however, to pay a formal visit of leave-taking to the village, and Too-wit insisted so pertinaciously upon our keeping the promise that we did not think it advisable to run the risk of offending him by a final refusal. I believe that not one of us had at this time the slightest suspicion of the good faith of the savages. They had uniformly behaved with the greatest decorum, aiding us with alacrity in our work, offering us their commodities, frequently without price, and never, in any instance, pilfering a single article, although the high value they set upon the goods we had with us was evident by the extravagant demonstrations of joy always manifested upon our making them a present. The women especially were most obliging in every respect, and, upon the whole, we should have been the most suspicious of human beings had we entertained a single thought of perfidy on the part of a people who treated us so well. A very short while sufficed to prove that this apparent kindness of disposition was only the result of a deeply laid plan for our destruction, and that the islanders for whom we entertained such inordinate feelings of esteem, were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe.

It was on the first of February that we went on shore for the purpose of visiting the village. Although, as said before, we entertained not the slightest suspicion, still no proper precaution was neglected. Six men were left in the schooner, with instructions to permit none of the savages to approach the vessel during our absence, under any pretence whatever, and to remain constantly on deck. The boarding-nettings were up, the guns double-shotted with grape and canister, and the swivels loaded with canisters of musket-balls. She lay, with her anchor apeak, about a mile from the shore, and no canoe could approach her in any direction without being distinctly seen and exposed to the full fire of our swivels immediately.

The six men being left on board, our shore-party consisted of thirty-two persons in all. We were armed to the teeth, having with us muskets, pistols, and cutlasses; besides, each had a long kind of seaman's knife, somewhat resembling the bowie knife now so much used throughout our western and southern country. A hundred of the black skin warriors met us at the landing for the purpose of accompanying us on our way. We noticed, however, with some surprise, that they were now entirely without arms; and, upon questioning Too-wit in relation to this circumstance, he merely answered that *Mattee non we pa pa si* — meaning that there was no need of arms where all were brothers. We took this in good part, and proceeded.

We had passed the spring and rivulet of which I before spoke, and were now entering upon a narrow gorge leading through the chain of soapstone hills among which the village was situated. This gorge was very rocky and uneven, so much so that it was with no little difficulty we scrambled through it on our first visit to Klock-klock. The whole length of the ravine might have been a mile and a half, or probably two miles. It wound in every possible direction through the hills (having apparently formed, at some remote period, the bed of a torrent), in no instance proceeding more than twenty yards without an abrupt turn. The sides of this dell would have averaged, I am sure, seventy or eighty feet in perpendicular altitude throughout the whole of their extent, and in some portions they arose to an astonishing height, overshadowing the pass so completely that but little of the light of day could penetrate. The general width was about forty feet, and occasionally it diminished so as not to allow the passage of more than five or six persons abreast. In short, there could be no place in the world better adapted for the consummation of an ambuscade, and it was no more than natural that we should look carefully to our arms as we entered upon it. When I now think of our egregious folly, the chief subject of astonishment seems to be, that we should have ever ventured, under any circumstances, so completely into the power of unknown savages as to permit them to march both before and behind us in our progress through this ravine. Yet such was the order we blindly took up, trusting foolishly to the force of our party, the unarmed condition of Too-wit and his men, the certain efficacy of our firearms (whose effect was yet a secret to the natives), and, more than all, to the long-sustained pretension of friendship kept up by these infamous wretches. Five or six of them went on before, as if to lead the way, ostentatiously busying themselves in removing the larger stones and rubbish from the path. Next came our own party. We walked closely together, taking care only to prevent separation. Behind followed the main body of the savages, observing unusual order and decorum.

Dirk Peters, a man named Wilson Allen, and myself were on the right of our companions, examining, as we went along, the singular stratification of the precipice which overhung us. A fissure in the soft rock attracted our attention. It was about wide enough for one person to enter without squeezing, and extended back into the hill some eighteen or twenty feet in a straight course, sloping afterward to the left. The height of the opening, is far as we could see into it from the main gorge, was perhaps sixty or seventy feet. There were one or two stunted shrubs growing from the crevices, bearing a species of filbert which I felt some curiosity to examine, and pushed in briskly for that purpose, gathering five or six of the nuts at a grasp, and then hastily retreating. As I turned, I found that Peters and Allen had followed me. I desired them to go back, as there was not room for two persons to pass, saying they should have some of my nuts. They accordingly turned, and were scrambling back, Allen being close to the mouth of the fissure, when I was suddenly aware of a concussion resembling nothing I had ever before experienced, and which impressed me with a vague conception, if indeed I then thought of anything, that the whole foundations of the solid globe were suddenly rent asunder, and that the day of universal dissolution was at hand.

CHAPTER 21

AS soon as I could collect my scattered senses, I found myself nearly suffocated, and grovelling in utter darkness among a quantity of loose earth, which was also falling upon me heavily in every direction, threatening to bury me entirely. Horribly alarmed at this idea, I struggled to gain my feet, and at last succeeded. I then remained motionless for some moments, endeavouring to conceive what had happened to me, and where I was. Presently I heard a deep groan just at my ear, and afterward the smothered voice of Peters calling to me for aid in the name of God. I scrambled one or two paces forward, when I fell directly over the head and shoulders of my companion, who, I soon discovered, was buried in a loose mass of earth as far as his middle, and struggling desperately to free himself from the pressure. I tore the dirt from around him with all the energy I could command, and at length succeeded in getting him out.

As soon as we sufficiently recovered from our fright and surprise to be capable of conversing rationally, we both came to the conclusion that the walls of the fissure in which we had ventured had, by some convulsion of nature, or probably from their own weight, caved in overhead, and that we were consequently lost for ever, being thus entombed alive. For a long time we gave up supinely to the most intense agony and despair, such as cannot be adequately imagined by those who have never been in a similar position. I firmly believed that no incident ever occurring in the course of human events is more adapted to inspire the supremeness of mental and bodily distress than a case like our own, of living inhumation. The blackness of darkness which envelops the victim, the terrific oppression of lungs, the stifling fumes from the damp earth, unite with the ghastly considerations that we are beyond the remotest confines of hope, and that such is the allotted portion of the dead, to carry into the human heart a degree of appalling awe and horror not to be tolerated — never to be conceived.

At length Peters proposed that we should endeavour to ascertain precisely the extent of our calamity, and grope about our prison; it being barely possible, he observed, that some opening might yet be left us for escape. I caught eagerly at this hope, and, arousing myself to exertion, attempted to force my way through the loose earth. Hardly had I advanced a single step before a glimmer of light became perceptible, enough to convince me that, at all events, we should not immediately perish for want of air. We now took some degree of heart, and encouraged each other to hope for the best. Having scrambled over a bank of rubbish which impeded our farther progress in the direction of the light, we found less difficulty in advancing and also experienced some relief from the excessive oppression of lungs which had tormented us. Presently we were enabled to obtain a glimpse of the objects around, and discovered that we were near the extremity of the straight portion of the fissure, where it made a turn to the left. A few struggles more, and we reached the bend, when to our inexpressible joy, there appeared a long seam or crack extending upward a vast distance, generally at an angle of about forty-five degrees, although sometimes much more precipitous. We could not see through the whole extent of this opening; but, as a good deal of light came down it, we had little doubt of finding at the top of it (if we could by any means reach the top) a clear passage into the open air.

I now called to mind that three of us had entered the fissure from the main gorge, and that our companion, Allen, was still missing; we determined at once to retrace our steps and look for him. After a long search, and much danger from the farther caving in of the earth above us, Peters at length cried out to me that he had hold of our companion’s foot, and that his whole body was deeply buried beneath the rubbish beyond the possibility of extricating him. I soon found that what he said was too true, and that, of course, life had been long extinct. With sorrowful hearts, therefore, we left the corpse to its fate, and again made our way to the bend.

The breadth of the seam was barely sufficient to admit us, and, after one or two ineffectual efforts at getting up, we began once more to despair. I have before said that the chain of hills through which ran the main gorge was composed of a species of soft rock resembling soapstone. The sides of the cleft we were now attempting to ascend were of the same material, and so excessively slippery, being wet, that we could get but little foothold upon them even in their least precipitous parts; in some places, where the ascent was nearly perpendicular, the difficulty was, of course, much aggravated; and, indeed, for some time we thought insurmountable. We took courage, however, from despair, and what, by dint of cutting steps in the soft stone with our bowie knives, and swinging at the risk of our lives, to small projecting points of a harder species of slaty rock which now and then protruded from the general mass, we at length reached a natural platform, from which was perceptible a patch of blue sky, at the extremity of a thickly-wooded ravine. Looking back now, with somewhat more leisure, at the passage through which we had thus far proceeded, we clearly saw from the appearance of its sides, that it was of late formation, and we concluded that the concussion, whatever it was, which had so unexpectedly overwhelmed us, had also, at the same moment, laid open this path for escape. Being quite exhausted with exertion, and indeed, so weak that we were scarcely able to stand or articulate, Peters now proposed that we should endeavour to bring our companions to the rescue by firing the pistols which still remained in our girdles — the muskets as well as cutlasses had been lost among the loose earth at the bottom of the chasm. Subsequent events proved that, had we fired, we should have sorely repented it, but luckily a half suspicion of foul play had by this time arisen in my mind, and we forbore to let the savages know of our whereabouts.

After having reposed for about an hour, we pushed on slowly up the ravine, and had gone no great way before we heard a succession of tremendous yells. At length we reached what might be called the surface of the ground; for our path hitherto, since leaving the platform, had lain beneath an archway of high rock and foliage, at a vast distance overhead. With great caution we stole to a narrow opening, through which we had a clear sight of the surrounding country, when the whole dreadful secret of the concussion broke upon us in one moment and at one view.

The spot from which we looked was not far from the summit of the highest peak in the range of the soapstone hills. The gorge in which our party of thirty-two had entered ran within fifty feet to the left of us. But, for at least one hundred yards, the channel or bed of this gorge was entirely filled up with the chaotic ruins of more than a million tons of earth and stone that had been artificially tumbled within it. The means by which the vast mass had been precipitated were not more simple than evident, for sure traces of the murderous work were yet remaining. In several spots along the top of the eastern side of the gorge (we were now on the western) might be seen stakes of wood driven into the earth. In these spots the earth had not given way, but throughout the whole extent of the face of the precipice from which the mass had fallen, it was clear, from marks left in the soil resembling those made by the drill of the rock blaster, that stakes similar to those we saw standing had been inserted, at not more than a yard apart, for the length of perhaps three hundred feet, and ranging at about ten feet back from the edge of the gulf. Strong cords of grape vine were attached to the stakes still remaining on the hill, and it was evident that such cords had also been attached to each of the other stakes. I have already spoken of the singular stratification of these soapstone hills; and the description just given of the narrow and deep fissure through which we effected our escape from inhumation will afford a further conception of its nature. This was such that almost every natural convulsion would be sure to split the soil into perpendicular layers or ridges running parallel with one another, and a very moderate exertion of art would be sufficient for effecting the same purpose. Of this stratification the savages had availed themselves to accomplish their treacherous ends. There can be no doubt that, by the continuous line of stakes, a partial rupture of the soil had been brought about probably to the depth of one or two feet, when by means of a savage pulling at the end of each of the cords (these cords being attached to the tops of the stakes, and extending back from the edge of the cliff), a vast leverage power was obtained, capable of hurling the whole face of the hill, upon a given signal, into the bosom of the abyss below. The fate of our poor companions was no longer a matter of uncertainty. We alone had escaped from the tempest of that overwhelming destruction. We were the only living white men upon the island.

CHAPTER 22

OUR situation, as it now appeared, was scarcely less dreadful than when we had conceived ourselves entombed forever. We saw before us no prospect but that of being put to death by the savages, or of dragging out a miserable existence in captivity among them. We might, to be sure, conceal ourselves for a time from their observation among the fastnesses of the hills, and, as a final resort, in the chasm from which we had just issued; but we must either perish in the long polar winter through cold and famine, or be ultimately discovered in our efforts to obtain relief.

The whole country around us seemed to be swarming with savages, crowds of whom, we now perceived, had come over from the islands to the southward on flat rafts, doubtless with a view of lending their aid in the capture and plunder of the Jane. The vessel still lay calmly at anchor in the bay, those on board being apparently quite unconscious of any danger awaiting them. How we longed at that moment to be with them! either to aid in effecting their escape, or to perish with them in attempting a defence. We saw no chance even of warning them of their danger without bringing immediate destruction upon our own heads, with but a remote hope of benefit to them. A pistol fired might suffice to apprise them that something wrong had occurred; but the report could not possibly inform them that their only prospect of safety lay in getting out of the harbour forthwith — it could not tell them that no principles of honour now bound them to remain, that their companions were no longer among the living. Upon hearing the discharge they could not be more thoroughly prepared to meet the foe, who were now getting ready to attack, than they already were, and always had been. No good, therefore, and infinite harm, would result from our firing, and after mature deliberation, we forbore.

Our next thought was to attempt to rush toward the vessel, to seize one of the four canoes which lay at the head of the bay, and endeavour to force a passage on board. But the utter impossibility of succeeding in this desperate task soon became evident. The country, as I said before, was literally swarming with the natives, skulking among the bushes and recesses of the hills, so as not to be observed from the schooner. In our immediate vicinity especially, and blockading the sole path by which we could hope to attain the shore at the proper point were stationed the whole party of the black skin warriors, with Too-wit at their head, and apparently only waiting for some re-enforcement to commence his onset upon the Jane. The canoes, too, which lay at the head of the bay, were manned with savages, unarmed, it is true, but who undoubtedly had arms within reach. We were forced, therefore, however unwillingly, to remain in our place of concealment, mere spectators of the conflict which presently ensued.

In about half an hour we saw some sixty or seventy rafts, or flatboats, without riggers, filled with savages, and coming round the southern bight of the harbor. They appeared to have no arms except short clubs, and stones which lay in the bottom of the rafts. Immediately afterward another detachment, still larger, appeared in an opposite direction, and with similar weapons. The four canoes, too, were now quickly filled with natives, starting up from the bushes at the head of the bay, and put off swiftly to join the other parties. Thus, in less time than I have taken to tell it, and as if by magic, the Jane saw herself surrounded by an immense multitude of desperadoes evidently bent upon capturing her at all hazards.

That they would succeed in so doing could not be doubted for an instant. The six men left in the vessel, however resolutely they might engage in her defence, were altogether unequal to the proper management of the guns, or in any manner to sustain a contest at such odds. I could hardly imagine that they would make resistance at all, but in this was deceived; for presently I saw them get springs upon the cable, and bring the vessel's starboard broadside to bear upon the canoes, which by this time were within pistol range, the rafts being nearly a quarter of a mile to windward. Owing to some cause unknown, but most probably to the agitation of our poor friends at seeing themselves in so hopeless a situation, the discharge was an entire failure. Not a canoe was hit or a single savage injured, the shots striking short and ricocheting over their heads. The only effect produced upon them was astonishment at the unexpected report and smoke, which was so excessive that for some moments I almost thought they would abandon their design entirely, and return to the shore. And this they would most likely have done had our men followed up their broadside by a discharge of small arms, in which, as the canoes were now so near at hand, they could not have failed in doing some execution, sufficient, at least, to deter this party from a farther advance, until they could have given the rafts also a broadside. But, in place of this, they left the canoe party to recover from their panic, and, by looking about them, to see that no injury had been sustained, while they flew to the larboard to get ready for the rafts.

The discharge to larboard produced the most terrible effect. The star and double-headed shot of the large guns cut seven or eight of the rafts completely asunder, and killed, perhaps, thirty or forty of the savages outright, while a hundred of them, at least, were thrown into the water, the most of them dreadfully wounded. The remainder, frightened out of their senses, commenced at once a precipitate retreat, not even waiting to pick up their maimed companions, who were swimming about in every direction, screaming and yelling for aid. This great success, however, came too late for the salvation of our devoted people. The canoe party were already on board the schooner to the number of more than a hundred and fifty, the most of them having succeeded in scrambling up the chains and over the boarding-netting even before the matches had been applied to the larboard guns. Nothing now could withstand their brute rage. Our men were borne down at once, overwhelmed, trodden under foot, and absolutely torn to pieces in an instant.

Seeing this, the savages on the rafts got the better of their fears, and came up in shoals to the plunder. In five minutes the Jane was a pitiable scene indeed of havoc and tumultuous outrage. The decks were split open and ripped up; the cordage, sails, and everything movable on deck demolished as if by magic, while, by dint of pushing at the stern, towing with the canoes, and hauling at the sides, as they swam in thousands around the vessel, the wretches finally forced her on shore (the cable having been slipped), and delivered her over to the good offices of Too-wit, who, during the whole of the engagement, had maintained, like a skilful general, his post of security and reconnaissance among the hills, but, now that the victory was completed to his satisfaction, condescended to scamper down with his warriors of the black skin, and become a partaker in the spoils.

Too-wit’s descent left us at liberty to quit our hiding place and reconnoitre the hill in the vicinity of the chasm. At about fifty yards from the mouth of it we saw a small spring of water, at which we slaked the burning thirst that now consumed us. Not far from the spring we discovered several of the filbert-bushes which I mentioned before. Upon tasting the nuts we found them palatable, and very nearly resembling in flavour the common English filbert. We collected our hats full immediately, deposited them within the ravine, and returned for more. While we were busily employed in gathering these, a rustling in the bushes alarmed us, and we were upon the point of stealing back to our covert, when a large black bird of the bittern species strugglingly and slowly arose above the shrubs. I was so much startled that I could do nothing, but Peters had sufficient presence of mind to run up to it before it could make its escape, and seize it by the neck. Its struggles and screams were tremendous, and we had thoughts of letting it go, lest the noise should alarm some of the savages who might be still lurking in the neighbourhood. A stab with a bowie knife, however, at length brought it to the ground, and we dragged it into the ravine, congratulating ourselves that, at all events, we had thus obtained a supply of food enough to last us for a week.

We now went out again to look about us, and ventured a considerable distance down the southern declivity of the hill, but met with nothing else which could serve us for food. We therefore collected a quantity of dry wood and returned, seeing one or two large parties of the natives on their way to the village, laden with the plunder of the vessel, and who, we were apprehensive, might discover us in passing beneath the hill.

Our next care was to render our place of concealment as secure as possible, and with this object, we arranged some brushwood over the aperture which I have before spoken of as the one through which we saw the patch of blue sky, on reaching the platform from the interior of the chasm. We left only a very small opening just wide enough to admit of our seeing the bay, without the risk of being discovered from below. Having done this, we congratulated ourselves upon the security of the position; for we were now completely excluded from observation, as long as we chose to remain within the ravine itself, and not venture out upon the hill, We could perceive no traces of the savages having ever been within this hollow; but, indeed, when we came to reflect upon the probability that the fissure through which we attained it had been only just now created by the fall of the cliff opposite, and that no other way of attaining it could be perceived, we were not so much rejoiced at the thought of being secure from molestation as fearful lest there should be absolutely no means left us for descent. We resolved to explore the summit of the hill thoroughly, when a good opportunity should offer. In the meantime we watched the motions of the savages through our loophole.

They had already made a complete wreck of the vessel, and were now preparing to set her on fire. In a little while we saw the smoke ascending in huge volumes from her main hatchway, and, shortly afterward, a dense mass of flame burst up from the forecastle. The rigging, masts and what remained of the sails caught immediately, and the fire spread rapidly along the decks. Still a great many of the savages retained their stations about her, hammering with large stones, axes, and cannon balls at the bolts and other iron and copper work. On the beach, and in canoes and rafts, there were not less, altogether, in the immediate vicinity of the schooner, than ten thousand natives, besides the shoals of them who, laden with booty, were making their way inland and over to the neighbouring islands. We now anticipated a catastrophe, and were not disappointed. First of all there came a smart shock (which we felt as distinctly where we were as if we had been slightly galvanized), but unattended with any visible signs of an explosion. The savages were evidently startled, and paused for an instant from their labours and yellings. They were upon the point of recommencing, when suddenly a mass of smoke puffed up from the decks, resembling a black and heavy thundercloud — then, as if from its bowels, arose a tall stream of vivid fire to the height, apparently, of a quarter of a mile — then there came a sudden circular expansion of the flame — then the whole atmosphere was magically crowded, in a single instant, with a wild chaos of wood, and metal, and human limbs-and, lastly, came the concussion in its fullest fury, which hurled us impetuously from our feet, while the hills echoed and re-echoed the tumult, and a dense shower of the minutest fragments of the ruins tumbled headlong in every direction around us.

The havoc among the savages far exceeded our utmost expectation, and they had now, indeed, reaped the full and perfect fruits of their treachery. Perhaps a thousand perished by the explosion, while at least an equal number were desperately mangled. The whole surface of the bay was literally strewn with the struggling and drowning wretches, and on shore matters were even worse. They seemed utterly appalled by the suddenness and completeness of their discomfiture, and made no efforts at assisting one another. At length we observed a total change in their demeanour. From absolute stupor, they appeared to be, all at once, aroused to the highest pitch of excitement, and rushed wildly about, going to and from a certain point on the beach, with the strangest expressions of mingled horror, rage, and intense curiosity depicted on their countenances, and shouting, at the top of their voices, “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!”

Presently we saw a large body go off into the hills, whence they returned in a short time, carrying stakes of wood. These they brought to the station where the crowd was the thickest, which now separated so as to afford us a view of the object of all this excitement. We perceived something white lying upon the ground, but could not immediately make out what it was. At length we saw that it was the carcass of the strange animal with the scarlet teeth and claws which the schooner had picked up at sea on the eighteenth of January. Captain Guy had had the body preserved for the purpose of stuffing the skin and taking it to England. I remember he had given some directions about it just before our making the island, and it had been brought into the cabin and stowed away in one of the lockers. It had now been thrown on shore by the explosion; but why it had occasioned so much concern among the savages was more than we could comprehend. Although they crowded around the carcass at a little distance, none of them seemed willing to approach it closely. By-and-by the men with the stakes drove them in a circle around it, and no sooner was this arrangement completed, than the whole of the vast assemblage rushed into the interior of the island, with loud screams of “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!”

CHAPTER 23

DURING the six or seven days immediately following we remained in our hiding-place upon the hill, going out only occasionally, and then with the greatest precaution, for water and filberts. We had made a kind of penthouse on the platform, furnishing it with a bed of dry leaves, and placing in it three large flat stones, which served us for both fireplace and table. We kindled a fire without difficulty by rubbing two pieces of dry wood together, the one soft, the other hard. The bird we had taken in such good season proved excellent eating, although somewhat tough. It was not an oceanic fowl, but a species of bittern, with jet black and grizzly plumage, and diminutive wings in proportion to its bulk. We afterward saw three of the same kind in the vicinity of the ravine, apparently seeking for the one we had captured; but, as they never alighted, we had no opportunity of catching them.

As long as this fowl lasted we suffered nothing from our situation, but it was now entirely consumed, and it became absolutely necessary that we should look out for provision. The filberts would not satisfy the cravings of hunger, afflicting us, too, with severe gripings of the bowels, and, if freely indulged in, with violent headache. We had seen several large tortoises near the seashore to the eastward of the hill, and perceived they might be easily taken, if we could get at them without the observation of the natives. It was resolved, therefore, to make an attempt at descending.

We commenced by going down the southern declivity, which seemed to offer the fewest difficulties, but had not proceeded a hundred yards before (as we had anticipated from appearances on the hilltop) our progress was entirely arrested by a branch of the gorge in which our companions had perished. We now passed along the edge of this for about a quarter of a mile, when we were again stopped by a precipice of immense depth, and, not being able to make our way along the brink of it, we were forced to retrace our steps by the main ravine.

We now pushed over to the eastward, but with precisely similar fortune. After an hour's scramble, at the risk of breaking our necks, we discovered that we had merely descended into a vast pit of black granite, with fine dust at the bottom, and whence the only egress was by the rugged path in which we had come down. Toiling again up this path, we now tried the northern edge of the hill. Here we were obliged to use the greatest possible caution in our maneuvers, as the least indiscretion would expose us to the full view of the savages in the village. We crawled along, therefore, on our hands and knees, and, occasionally, were even forced to throw ourselves at full length, dragging our bodies along by means of the shrubbery. In this careful manner we had proceeded but a little way, when we arrived at a chasm far deeper than any we had yet seen, and leading directly into the main gorge. Thus our fears were fully confirmed, and we found ourselves cut off entirely from access to the world below. Thoroughly exhausted by our exertions, we made the best of our way back to the platform, and throwing ourselves upon the bed of leaves, slept sweetly and soundly for some hours.

For several days after this fruitless search we were occupied in exploring every part of the summit of the hill, in order to inform ourselves of its actual resources. We found that it would afford us no food, with the exception of the unwholesome filberts, and a rank species of scurvy grass, which grew in a little patch of not more than four rods square, and would be soon exhausted. On the fifteenth of February, as near as I can remember, there was not a blade of this left, and the nuts were growing scarce; our situation, therefore, could hardly be more lamentable. {*5} On the sixteenth we again went round the walls of our prison, in hope of finding some avenue of escape; but to no purpose. We also descended the chasm in which we had been overwhelmed, with the faint expectation of discovering, through this channel, some opening to the main ravine. Here, too, we were disappointed, although we found and brought up with us a musket.

On the seventeenth we set out with the determination of examining more thoroughly the chasm of black granite into which we had made our way in the first search. We remembered that one of the fissures in the sides of this pit had been but partially looked into, and we were anxious to explore it, although with no expectation of discovering here any opening.

We found no great difficulty in reaching the bottom of the hollow as before, and were now sufficiently calm to survey it with some attention. It was, indeed, one of the most singular-looking places imaginable, and we could scarcely bring ourselves to believe it altogether the work of nature. The pit, from its eastern to its western extremity, was about five hundred yards in length, when all its windings were threaded; the distance from east to west in a straight line not being more (I should suppose, having no means of accurate examination) than forty or fifty yards. Upon first descending into the chasm, that is to say, for a hundred feet downward from the summit of the hill, the sides of the abyss bore little resemblance to each other, and, apparently, had at no time been connected, the one surface being of the soapstone, and the other of marl, granulated with some metallic matter. The average breadth or interval between the two cliffs was probably here sixty feet, but there seemed to be no regularity of formation. Passing down, however, beyond the limit spoken of, the interval rapidly contracted, and the sides began to run parallel, although, for some distance farther, they were still dissimilar in their material and form of surface. Upon arriving within fifty feet of the bottom, a perfect regularity commenced. The sides were now entirely uniform in substance, in colour, and in lateral direction, the material being a very black and shining granite, and the distance between the two sides, at all points facing each other, exactly twenty yards. The precise formation of the chasm will be best understood by means of a delineation taken upon the spot; for I had luckily with me a pocketbook and pencil, which I preserved with great care through a long series of subsequent adventure, and to which I am indebted for memoranda of many subjects which would otherwise have been crowded from my remembrance.

This figure [No figures in text] gives the general outlines of the chasm, without the minor cavities in the sides, of which there were several, each cavity having a corresponding protuberance opposite. The bottom of the gulf was covered to the depth of three or four inches with a powder almost impalpable, beneath which we found a continuation of the black granite. To the right, at the lower extremity, will be noticed the appearance of a small opening; this is the fissure alluded to above, and to examine which more minutely than before was the object of our second visit. We now pushed into it with vigor, cutting away a quantity of brambles which impeded us, and removing a vast heap of sharp flints somewhat resembling arrowheads in shape. We were encouraged to persevere, however, by perceiving some little light proceeding from the farther end. We at length squeezed our way for about thirty feet, and found that the aperture was a low and regularly formed arch, having a bottom of the same impalpable powder as that in the main chasm. A strong light now broke upon us, and, turning a short bend, we found ourselves in another lofty chamber, similar to the one we had left in every respect but longitudinal form. Its general figure is here given.

The total length of this chasm, commencing at the opening a and proceeding round the curve *b* to the extremity *d,* is five hundred and fifty yards. At *c* we discovered a small aperture similar to the one through which we had issued from the other chasm, and this was choked up in the same manner with brambles and a quantity of the white arrowhead flints. We forced our way through it, finding it about forty feet long, and emerged into a third chasm. This, too, was precisely like the first, except in its longitudinal shape, which was thus.

We found the entire length of the third chasm three hundred and twenty yards. At the point *a* was an opening about six feet wide, and extending fifteen feet into the rock, where it terminated in a bed of marl, there being no other chasm beyond, as we had expected. We were about leaving this fissure, into which very little light was admitted, when Peters called my attention to a range of singular-looking indentures in the surface of the marl forming the termination of the *cul-de-sac*. With a very slight exertion of the imagination, the left, or most northern of these indentures might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters, and Peters was willing, at all events, to adopt the idle opinion that they were really such. I convinced him of his error, finally, by directing his attention to the floor of the fissure, where, among the powder, we picked up, piece by piece, several large flakes of the marl, which had evidently been broken off by some convulsion from the surface where the indentures were found, and which had projecting points exactly fitting the indentures; thus proving them to have been the work of nature.

After satisfying ourselves that these singular caverns afforded us no means of escape from our prison, we made our way back, dejected and dispirited, to the summit of the hill. Nothing worth mentioning occurred during the next twenty-four hours, except that, in examining the ground to the eastward of the third chasm, we found two triangular holes of great depth, and also with black granite sides. Into these holes we did not think it worth while to attempt descending, as they had the appearance of mere natural wells, without outlet. They were each about twenty yards in circumference, and their shape, as well as relative position in regard to the third chasm, is shown in figure 5. {image}

CHAPTER 24

ON the twentieth of the month, finding it altogether impossible to subsist any longer upon the filberts, the use of which occasioned us the most excruciating torment, we resolved to make a desperate attempt at descending the southern declivity of the hill. The face of the precipice was here of the softest species of soapstone, although nearly perpendicular throughout its whole extent (a depth of a hundred and fifty feet at the least), and in many places even overarching. After a long search we discovered a narrow ledge about twenty feet below the brink of the gulf; upon this Peters contrived to leap, with what assistance I could render him by means of our pocket-handkerchiefs tied together. With somewhat more difficulty I also got down; and we then saw the possibility of descending the whole way by the process in which we had clambered up from the chasm when we had been buried by the fall of the hill-that is, by cutting steps in the face of the soapstone with our knives. The extreme hazard of the attempt can scarcely be conceived; but, as there was no other resource, we determined to undertake it.

Upon the ledge where we stood there grew some filbert-bushes; and to one of these we made fast an end of our rope of handkerchiefs. The other end being tied round Peters' waist, I lowered him down over the edge of the precipice until the handkerchiefs were stretched tight. He now proceeded to dig a deep hole in the soapstone (as far in as eight or ten inches), sloping away the rock above to the height of a foot, or thereabout, so as to allow of his driving, with the butt of a pistol, a tolerably strong peg into the levelled surface. I then drew him up for about four feet, when he made a hole similar to the one below, driving in a peg as before, and having thus a resting-place for both feet and hands. I now unfastened the handkerchiefs from the bush, throwing him the end, which he tied to the peg in the uppermost hole, letting himself down gently to a station about three feet lower than he had yet been that is, to the full extent of the handkerchiefs. Here he dug another hole, and drove another peg. He then drew himself up, so as to rest his feet in the hole just cut, taking hold with his hands upon the peg in the one above. It was now necessary to untie the handkerchiefs from the topmost peg, with the view of fastening them to the second; and here he found that an error had been committed in cutting the holes at so great a distance apart. However, after one or two unsuccessful and dangerous attempts at reaching the knot (having to hold on with his left hand while he labored to undo the fastening with his right), he at length cut the string, leaving six inches of it affixed to the peg. Tying the handkerchiefs now to the second peg, he descended to a station below the third, taking care not to go too far down. By these means (means which I should never have conceived of myself, and for which we were indebted altogether to Peters' ingenuity and resolution) my companion finally succeeded, with the occasional aid of projections in the cliff, in reaching the bottom without accident.

It was some time before I could summon sufficient resolution to follow him; but I did at length attempt it. Peters had taken off his shirt before descending, and this, with my own, formed the rope necessary for the adventure. After throwing down the musket found in the chasm, I fastened this rope to the bushes, and let myself down rapidly, striving, by the vigor of my movements, to banish the trepidation which I could overcome in no other manner. This answered sufficiently well for the first four or five steps; but presently I found my imagination growing terribly excited by thoughts of the vast depths yet to be descended, and the precarious nature of the pegs and soapstone holes which were my only support. It was in vain I endeavored to banish these reflections, and to keep my eyes steadily bent upon the flat surface of the cliff before me. The more earnestly I struggled *not to think*, the more intensely vivid became my conceptions, and the more horribly distinct. At length arrived that crisis of fancy, so fearful in all similar cases, the crisis in which we began to anticipate the feelings with which we *shall* fall-to picture to ourselves the sickness, and dizziness, and the last struggle, and the half swoon, and the final bitterness of the rushing and headlong descent. And now I found these fancies creating their own realities, and all imagined horrors crowding upon me in fact. I felt my knees strike violently together, while my fingers were gradually but certainly relaxing their grasp. There was a ringing in my ears, and I said, “This is my knell of death!” And now I was consumed with the irrepressible desire of looking below. I could not, I would not, confine my glances to the cliff; and, with a wild, indefinable emotion, half of horror, half of a relieved oppression, I threw my vision far down into the abyss. For one moment my fingers clutched convulsively upon their hold, while, with the movement, the faintest possible idea of ultimate escape wandered, like a shadow, through my mind — in the next my whole soul was pervaded with a longing to fall; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable. I let go at once my grasp upon the peg, and, turning half round from the precipice, remained tottering for an instant against its naked face. But now there came a spinning of the brain; a shrill-sounding and phantom voice screamed within my ears; a dusky, fiendish, and filmy figure stood immediately beneath me; and, sighing, I sunk down with a bursting heart, and plunged within its arms.

I had swooned, and Peters had caught me as I fell. He had observed my proceedings from his station at the bottom of the cliff; and perceiving my imminent danger, had endeavored to inspire me with courage by every suggestion he could devise; although my confusion of mind had been so great as to prevent my hearing what he said, or being conscious that he had even spoken to me at all. At length, seeing me totter, he hastened to ascend to my rescue, and arrived just in time for my preservation. Had I fallen with my full weight, the rope of linen would inevitably have snapped, and I should have been precipitated into the abyss; as it was, he contrived to let me down gently, so as to remain suspended without danger until animation returned. This was in about fifteen minutes. On recovery, my trepidation had entirely vanished; I felt a new being, and, with some little further aid from my companion, reached the bottom also in safety.

We now found ourselves not far from the ravine which had proved the tomb of our friends, and to the southward of the spot where the hill had fallen. The place was one of singular wildness, and its aspect brought to my mind the descriptions given by travellers of those dreary regions marking the site of degraded Babylon. Not to speak of the ruins of the disrupted cliff, which formed a chaotic barrier in the vista to the northward, the surface of the ground in every other direction was strewn with huge tumuli, apparently the wreck of some gigantic structures of art; although, in detail, no semblance of art could be detected. Scoria were abundant, and large shapeless blocks of the black granite, intermingled with others of marl, {*6} and both granulated with metal. Of vegetation there were no traces whatsoever throughout the whole of the desolate area within sight. Several immense scorpions were seen, and various reptiles not elsewhere to be found in the high latitudes. As food was our most immediate object, we resolved to make our way to the seacoast, distant not more than half a mile, with a view of catching turtle, several of which we had observed from our place of concealment on the hill. We had proceeded some hundred yards, threading our route cautiously between the huge rocks and tumuli, when, upon turning a corner, five savages sprung upon us from a small cavern, felling Peters to the ground with a blow from a club. As he fell the whole party rushed upon him to secure their victim, leaving me time to recover from my astonishment. I still had the musket, but the barrel had received so much injury in being thrown from the precipice that I cast it aside as useless, preferring to trust my pistols, which had been carefully preserved in order. With these I advanced upon the assailants, firing one after the other in quick succession. Two savages fell, and one, who was in the act of thrusting a spear into Peters, sprung to his feet without accomplishing his purpose. My companion being thus released, we had no further difficulty. He had his pistols also, but prudently declined using them, confiding in his great personal strength, which far exceeded that of any person I have ever known. Seizing a club from one of the savages who had fallen, he dashed out the brains of the three who remained, killing each instantaneously with a single blow of the weapon, and leaving us completely masters of the field.

So rapidly bad these events passed, that we could scarcely believe in their reality, and were standing over the bodies of the dead in a species of stupid contemplation, when we were brought to recollection by the sound of shouts in the distance. It was clear that the savages had been alarmed by the firing, and that we had little chance of avoiding discovery. To regain the cliff, it would be necessary to proceed in the direction of the shouts, and even should we succeed in arriving at its base, we should never be able to ascend it without being seen. Our situation was one of the greatest peril, and we were hesitating in which path to commence a flight, when one of the savages *whom* I had shot, and supposed dead, sprang briskly to his feet, and attempted to make his escape. We overtook *him*, however, before he had advanced many paces, and were about to put him to death, when Peters suggested that we might derive some benefit from forcing him to accompany us in our attempt to escape. We therefore dragged him with us, making him understand that we would shoot him if he offered resistance. In a few minutes he was perfectly submissive, and ran by our sides as we pushed in among the rocks, making for the seashore.

So far, the irregularities of the ground we had been traversing hid the sea, except at intervals, from our sight, and, when we first had it fairly in view, it was perhaps two hundred yards distant. As we emerged into the open beach we saw, to our great dismay, an immense crowd of the natives pouring from the village, and from all visible quarters of the island, making toward us with gesticulations of extreme fury, and howling like wild beasts. We were upon the point of turning upon our steps, and trying to secure a retreat among the fastnesses of the rougher ground, when I discovered the bows of two canoes projecting from behind a large rock which ran out into the water. Toward these we now ran with all speed, and, reaching them, found them unguarded, and without any other freight than three of the large Gallipago turtles and the usual supply of paddles for sixty rowers. We instantly took possession of one of them, and, forcing our captive on board, pushed out to sea with all the strength we could command.

We had not made, however, more than fifty yards from the shore before we became sufficiently calm to perceive the great oversight of which we had been guilty in leaving the other canoe in the power of the savages, who, by this time, were not more than twice as far from the beach as ourselves, and were rapidly advancing to the pursuit. No time was now to be lost. Our hope was, at best, a forlorn one, but we had none other. It was very doubtful whether, with the utmost exertion, we could get back in time to anticipate them in taking possession of the canoe; but yet there was a chance that we could. We might save ourselves if we succeeded, while not to make the attempt was to resign ourselves to inevitable butchery.

The canoe was modelled with the bow and stern alike, and, in place of turning it around, we merely changed our position in paddling. As soon as the savages perceived this they redoubled their yells, as well as their speed, and approached with inconceivable rapidity. We pulled, however, with all the energy of desperation, and arrived at the contested point before more than one of the natives had attained it. This man paid dearly for his superior agility, Peters shooting him through the head with a pistol as he approached the shore. The foremost among the rest of his party were probably some twenty or thirty paces distant as we seized upon the canoe. We at first endeavored to pull her into the deep water, beyond the reach of the savages, but, finding her too firmly aground, and there being no time to spare, Peters, with one or two heavy strokes from the butt of the musket, succeeded in dashing out a large portion of the bow and of one side. We then pushed off. Two of the natives by this time had got hold of our boat, obstinately refusing to let go, until we were forced to despatch them with our knives. We were now clear off, and making great way out to sea. The main body of the savages, upon reaching the broken canoe, set up the most tremendous yell of rage and disappointment conceivable. In truth, from everything I could see of these wretches, they appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe. It is clear we should have had no mercy had we fallen into their hands. They made a mad attempt at following us in the fractured canoe, but, finding it useless, again vented their rage in a series of hideous vociferations, and rushed up into the hills.

We were thus relieved from immediate danger, but our situation was still sufficiently gloomy. We knew that four canoes of the kind we had were at one time in the possession of the savages, and were not aware of the fact (afterward ascertained from our captive) that two of these had been blown to pieces in the explosion of the *Jane Guy.* We calculated, therefore, upon being yet pursued, as soon as our enemies could get round to the bay (distant about three miles) where the boats were usually laid up. Fearing this, we made every exertion to leave the island behind us, and went rapidly through the water, forcing the prisoner to take a paddle. In about half an hour, when we had gained probably five or six miles to the southward, a large fleet of the flat-bottomed canoes or rafts were seen to emerge from the bay evidently with the design of pursuit. Presently they put back, despairing to overtake us.

CHAPTER 25

WE now found ourselves in the wide and desolate Antarctic Ocean, in a latitude exceeding eighty-four degrees, in a frail canoe, and with no provision but the three turtles. The long polar winter, too, could not be considered as far distant, and it became necessary that we should deliberate well upon the course to be pursued. There were six or seven islands in sight belonging to the same group, and distant from each other about five or six leagues; but upon neither of these had we any intention to venture. In coming from the northward in the *Jane Guy* we had been gradually leaving behind us the severest regions of ice-this, however little it maybe in accordance with the generally received notions respecting the Antarctic, was a fact — experience would not permit us to deny. To attempt, therefore, getting back would be folly — especially at so late a period of the season. Only one course seemed to be left open for hope. We resolved to steer boldly to the southward, where there was at least a probability of discovering other lands, and more than a probability of finding a still milder climate.

So far we had found the Antarctic, like the Arctic Ocean, peculiarly free from violent storms or immoderately rough water; but our canoe was, at best, of frail structure, although large, and we set busily to work with a view of rendering her as safe as the limited means in our possession would admit. The body of the boat was of no better material than bark — the bark of a tree unknown. The ribs were of a tough osier, well adapted to the purpose for which it was used. We had fifty feet room from stem to stern, from four to six in breadth, and in depth throughout four feet and a half-the boats thus differing vastly in shape from those of any other inhabitants of the Southern Ocean with whom civilized nations are acquainted. We never did believe them the workmanship of the ignorant islanders who owned them; and some days after this period discovered, by questioning our captive, that they were in fact made by the natives of a group to the southwest of the country where we found them, having fallen accidentally into the hands of our barbarians. What we could do for the security of our boat was very little indeed. Several wide rents were discovered near both ends, and these we contrived to patch up with pieces of woollen jacket. With the help of the superfluous paddles, of which there were a great many, we erected a kind of framework about the bow, so as to break the force of any seas which might threaten to fill us in that quarter. We also set up two paddle-blades for masts, placing them opposite each other, one by each gunwale, thus saving the necessity of a yard. To these masts we attached a sail made of our shirts-doing this with some difficulty, as here we could get no assistance from our prisoner whatever, although he bad been willing enough to labor in all the other operations. The sight of the linen seemed to affect him in a very singular manner. He could not be prevailed upon to touch it or go near it, shuddering when we attempted to force him, and shrieking out, *“Tekeli-li!”*

Having completed our arrangements in regard to the security of the canoe, we now set sail to the south-southeast for the present, with the view of weathering the most southerly of the group in sight. This being done, we turned the bow full to the southward. The weather could by no means be considered disagreeable. We had a prevailing and very gentle wind from the northward, a smooth sea, and continual daylight. No ice whatever was to be seen; *nor did I ever see one particle of this after leaving the parallel of Bennet’s Islet.* Indeed, the temperature of the water was here far too warm for its existence in any quantity. Having killed the largest of our tortoises, and obtained from him not only food but a copious supply of water, we continued on our course, without any incident of moment, for perhaps seven or eight days, during which period we must have proceeded a vast distance to the southward, as the wind blew constantly with us, and a very strong current set continually in the direction we were pursuing.

March 1st. {*7}-Many unusual phenomena now — indicated that we were entering upon a region of novelty and wonder. A high range of light gray vapor appeared constantly in the southern horizon, flaring up occasionally in lofty streaks, now darting from east to west, now from west to east, and again presenting a level and uniform summit-in short, having all the wild variations of the Aurora Borealis. The average height of this vapor, as apparent from our station, was about twenty-five degrees. The temperature of the sea seemed to be increasing momentarily, and there was a very perceptible alteration in its color.

March 2d.-To-day by repeated questioning of our captive, we came to the knowledge of many particulars in regard to the island of the massacre, its inhabitants, and customs-but with these how can I now detain the reader? I may say, however, that we learned there were eight islands in the group-that they were governed by a common king, named *Tsalemon* or *Psalemoun,* who resided in one of the smallest of the islands; that the black skins forming the dress of the warriors came from an animal of huge size to be found only in a valley near the court of the king-that the inhabitants of the group fabricated no other boats than the flat-bottomed rafts; the four canoes being all of the kind in their possession, and, these having been obtained, by mere accident, from some large island in the southwest-that his own name was Nu-Nu-that he had no knowledge of Bennet’s Islet-and that the appellation of the island he had left was Tsalal. The commencement of the words *Tsalemon* and Tsalal was given with a prolonged hissing sound, which ‘we found it impossible to imitate, even after repeated endeavors, and which was precisely the same with the note of the black bittern we had eaten up on the summit of the hill.

March 3d.-The heat of the water was now truly remarkable, and in color was undergoing a rapid change, being no longer transparent, but of a milky consistency and hue. In our immediate vicinity it was usually smooth, never so rough as to endanger the canoe-but we were frequently surprised at perceiving, to our right and left, at different distances, sudden and extensive agitations of the surface; these, we at length noticed, were always preceded by wild flickerings in the region of vapor to the southward.

March 4th.-To-day, with the view of widening our sail, the breeze from the northward dying away perceptibly, I took from my coat-pocket a white handkerchief. Nu-Nu was seated at my elbow, and the linen accidentally flaring in his face, he became violently affected with convulsions. These were succeeded by drowsiness and stupor, and low murmurings of *“‘Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!”*

March 5th.-The wind had entirely ceased, but it was evident that we were still hurrying on to the southward, under the influence of a powerful current. And now, — indeed, it would seem reasonable that we should experience some alarm at the turn events were taking-but we felt none. The countenance of Peters indicated nothing of this nature, although it wore at times an expression I could not fathom. The polar winter appeared to be coming on — but coming without its terrors. I felt a numbness of body and mind — a dreaminess of sensation but this was all.

March 6th.-The gray vapor had now arisen many more degrees above the horizon, and was gradually losing its grayness of tint. The heat of the water was extreme, even unpleasant to the touch, and its milky hue was more evident than ever. Today a violent agitation of the water occurred very close to the canoe. It was attended, as usual, with a wild flaring up of the vapor at its summit, and a momentary division at its base. A fine white powder, resembling ashes-but certainly not such-fell over the canoe and over a large surface of the water, as the flickering died away among the vapor and the commotion subsided in the sea. Nu-Nu now threw himself on his face in the bottom of the boat, and no persuasions could induce him to arise.

March 7th.-This day we questioned Nu-Nu concerning the motives of his countrymen in destroying our companions; but he appeared to be too utterly overcome by terror to afford us any rational reply. He still obstinately lay in the bottom of the boat; and, upon reiterating the questions as to the motive, made use only of idiotic gesticulations, such as raising with his forefinger the upper lip, and displaying the teeth which lay beneath it. These were black. We had never before seen the teeth of an inhabitant of Tsalal.

March 8th.-To-day there floated by us one of the white animals whose appearance upon the beach at Tsalal had occasioned so wild a commotion among the savages. I would have picked it up, but there came over me a sudden listlessness, and I forbore. The heat of the water still increased, and the hand could no longer be endured within it. Peters spoke little, and I knew not what to think of his apathy. Nu-Nu breathed, and no more.

March 9th.-The whole ashy material fell now continually around us, and in vast quantities. The range of vapor to the southward had arisen prodigiously in the horizon, and began to assume more distinctness of form. I can liken it to nothing but a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart in the heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon. It emitted no sound.

March 21st.-A sullen darkness now hovered above us-but from out the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose, and stole up along the bulwarks of the boat. We were nearly overwhelmed by the white ashy shower which settled upon us and upon the canoe, but melted into the water as it fell. The summit of the cataract was utterly lost in the dimness and the distance. Yet we were evidently approaching it with a hideous velocity. At intervals there were visible in it wide, yawning, but momentary rents, and from out these rents, within which was a chaos of flitting and indistinct images, there came rushing and mighty, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their course.

March 22d.-The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal *Tekeli-li!* as they retreated from our vision. Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but upon touching him we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

NOTE

THE circumstances connected with the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym are already well known to the public through the medium of the daily press. It is feared that the few remaining chapters which were to have completed his narrative, and which were retained by him, while the above were in type, for the purpose of revision, have been irrecoverably lost through the accident by which he perished himself. This, however, may prove not to be the case, and the papers, if ultimately found, will be given to the public.

No means have been left untried to remedy the deficiency. The gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface, and who, from the statement there made, might be supposed able to fill the vacuum, has declined the task-this, for satisfactory reasons connected with the general inaccuracy of the details afforded him, and his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration. Peters, from whom some information might be expected, is still alive, and a resident of Illinois, but cannot be met with at present. He may hereafter be found, and will, no doubt, afford material for a conclusion of Mr. Pym's account.

The loss of two or three final chapters (for there were but two or three) is the more deeply to be regretted, as it can not be doubted they contained matter relative to the Pole itself, or at least to regions in its very near proximity; and as, too, the statements of the author in relation to these regions may shortly be verified or contradicted by means of the governmental expedition now preparing for the Southern Ocean.

On one point in the narrative some remarks may well be offered; and it would afford the writer of this appendix much pleasure if what he may here observe should have a tendency to throw credit, in any degree, upon the very singular pages now published. We allude to the chasms found in the island of Tsalal, and to the whole of the figures upon pages 245-47 {of the printed edition — ed.}.

(Note: No figures were included with this text)

Mr. Pym has given the figures of the chasms without comment, and speaks decidedly of the *indentures* found at the extremity of the most easterly of these chasms as having but a fanciful resemblance to alphabetical characters, and, in short, as being positively *not such.* This assertion is made in a manner so simple, and sustained by a species of demonstration so conclusive (viz. the fitting of the projections of the fragments found among the dust into the indentures upon the wall), that we are forced to believe the writer in earnest; and no reasonable reader should suppose otherwise. But as the facts in relation to all the figures are most singular (especially when taken in connection with statements made in the body of the narrative), it may be as well to say a word or two concerning them all-this, too, the more especially as the facts in question have, beyond doubt, escaped the attention of Mr. Poe.

Figure 1, then, figure 2, figure 3, and figure 5, when conjoined with one another in the precise order which the chasms themselves presented, and when deprived of the small lateral branches or arches (which, it will be remembered, served only as a means of communication between the main chambers, and were of totally distinct character), constitute an Ethiopian verbal root-the root “To be shady,’ — whence all the inflections of shadow or darkness.

In regard to the “left or most northwardly” of the indentures in figure 4, it is more than probable that the opinion of Peters was correct, and that the hieroglyphical appearance was really the work of art, and intended as the representation of a human form. The delineation is before the reader, and he may, or may not, perceive the resemblance suggested; but the rest of the indentures afford strong confirmation of Peters’ idea. The upper range is evidently the Arabic verbal root “To be white,” whence all the inflections of brilliancy and whiteness. The lower range is not so immediately perspicuous. The characters are somewhat broken and disjointed; nevertheless, it can not be doubted that, in their perfect state, they formed the full Egyptian word. “The region of the south.’ It should be observed that these interpretations confirm the opinion of Peters in regard to the “most northwardly” of the figures. The arm is outstretched toward the south.

Conclusions such as these open a wide field for speculation and exciting conjecture. They should be regarded, perhaps, in connection with some of the most faintly detailed incidents of the narrative; although in no visible manner is this chain of connection complete. Tekeli-li! was the cry of the affrighted natives of Tsalal upon discovering the carcase of the *white* animal picked up at sea. This also was the shuddering exclamatives of Tsalal upon discovering the carcass of the *white* materials in possession of Mr. Pym. This also was the shriek of the swift-flying, *white,* and gigantic birds which issued from the vapory *white* curtain of the South. Nothing *white* was to be found at Tsalal, and nothing otherwise in the subsequent voyage to the region beyond. It is not impossible that “Tsalal,” the appellation of the island of the chasms, may be found, upon minute philological scrutiny, to betray either some alliance with the chasms themselves, or some reference to the Ethiopian characters so mysteriously written in their windings.

“I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock.”

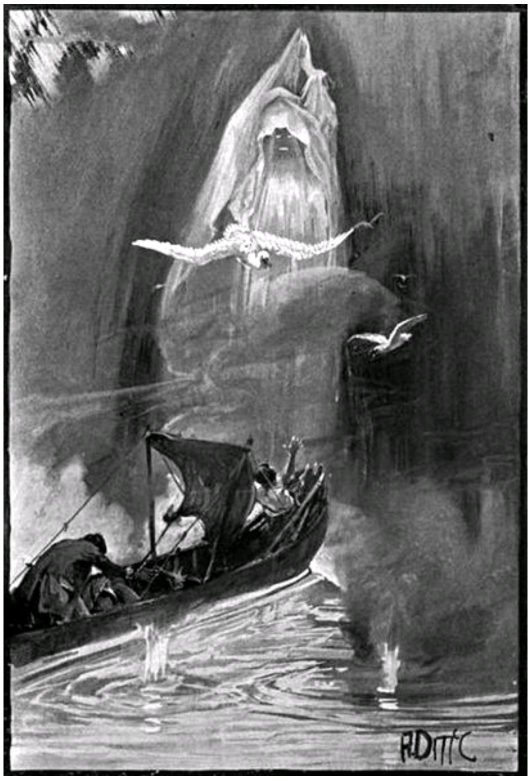

THE SUPER ORINOCO

This novel was first published in 1898 and tells the story of young Jeanne’s journey up the Orinoco River in Venezuela with her protector, Sergeant Martial, in search of her father, Colonel de Kermor, who disappeared some years before.

Unfortunately, the novel was first translated in English in 2003 and so is only available in French in this edition, due to copyright restrictions.

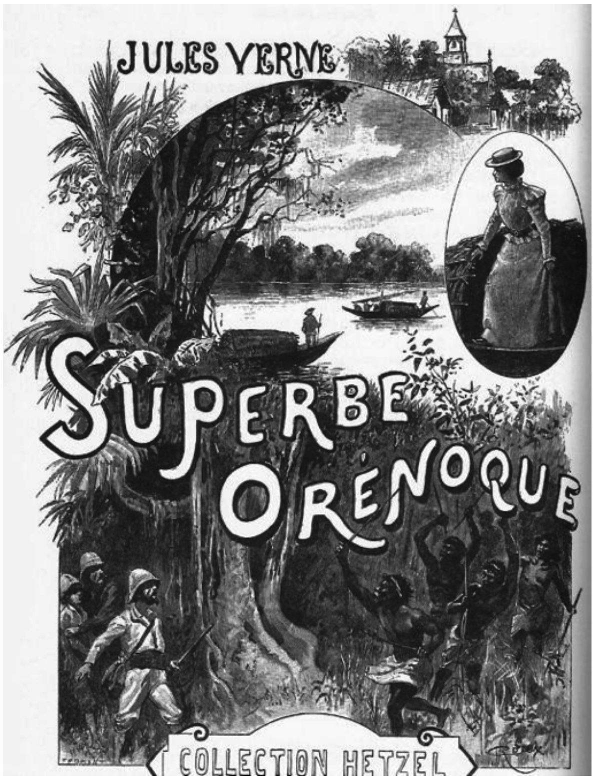
JULES VERNE
SUPERBE ORÉNOQUE
COLLECTION HETZEL

The original frontispiece

LE SUPERBE ORÉNOQUE

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PARTIE I

CHAPITRE I

I

M. Miguel et ses deux collègues

“Il n’y a vraiment pas apparence de raison que cette discussion puisse prendre fin… dit M. Miguel, qui cherchait à s’interposer entre les deux bouillants contradicteurs.

— Eh bien… elle ne finira pas… répondit M. Felipe, du moins par le sacrifice de mon opinion à celle de M. Varinas…

— Ni par l’abandon de mes idées au profit de M. Felipe!” répliqua M. Varinas.

Depuis déjà trois bonnes heures, ces deux entêtés savants disputaient, sans se rien céder, sur la question de l’Orénoque. Ce célèbre fleuve de l’Amérique méridionale, principale artère du Venezuela, se dirigeait-il, dans la de son cours, de l’est à l’ouest, ainsi que l’établissaient les plus récentes cartes, ou ne venait-il pas du sud-ouest? En ce cas, le Guaviare ou l’Atabapo n’étaient-ils pas considérés à tort comme des affluents?

“C’est l’Atabapo qui est l’Orénoque, affirmait énergiquement M. Felipe.

— C’est le Guaviare”, affirmait avec non moins d’énergie M. Varinas.

Quant à M. Miguel, son opinion était celle qu’ont adoptée les géographes modernes. À leur avis, les sources de l’Orénoque sont situées en cette portion du Venezuela qui confine au Brésil et à la Guyane anglaise, de sorte que ce fleuve est vénézuélien sur tout son parcours. Mais en vain M. Miguel essayait-il de convaincre ses deux amis, qui se contredisaient d’ailleurs sur un autre point de non moindre importance.

“Non, répétait l’un, l’Orénoque prend sa source dans les Andes colombiennes, et le Guaviare, que vous prétendez être un affluent, est tout bonnement l’Orénoque, colombien dans son cours supérieur, vénézuélien dans son cours inférieur.

— Erreur, certifiait l’autre, c’est l’Atabapo qui est l’Orénoque et non le Guaviare.

— Eh! mes amis, répondit M. Miguel, j’aime mieux croire que l’un des plus beaux fleuves de l’Amérique n’arrose pas d’autre pays que le nôtre!

— Il ne s’agit pas d’une question d’amour-propre, répliqua M. Varinas, mais d’une vérité géographique. Le Guaviare…

— Non… l’Atabapo!” s’écria M. Felipe.

Et les deux adversaires, qui s’étaient vivement levés, se regardèrent dans le blanc des yeux.

“Messieurs… messieurs!” répéta M. Miguel, excellent homme très conciliant de sa nature.

Il y avait une carte suspendue au mur de la salle, alors troublée par les éclats de cette discussion. Sur cette carte, à grands points, se développait l’aire de neuf cent soixante-douze mille kilomètres superficiels de l’État hispano-américain du Venezuela. Combien l’avaient modifié les événements politiques depuis l’année (1499) où Hojeda, le compagnon du Florentin

Amerigo Vespucci, débarquant sur le littoral du golfe de Maracaïbo, découvrait une bourgade bâtie sur pilotis au milieu des lagunes, et à laquelle il donnait le nom de Venezuela, ou “Petite Venise”! Après la guerre de l’Indépendance, dont Simon Bolivar fut le héros, après la fondation de la capitainerie générale de Caracas, après cette séparation opérée en 1839 entre la Colombie et le Venezuela, — séparation qui fit de ce dernier une république indépendante, — la carte le représentait tel que l’établit le Statut fondamental. Des lignes coloriées séparaient le département de l’Orénoque en trois provinces: Varinas, Guyana, Apure. Le relief de son système orographique, les ramifications de son système hydrographique s’y accusaient nettement par des hachures multiples avec le réseau de ses fleuves et de ses rivières. On y voyait se développer sur la mer des Antilles sa frontière maritime depuis la province de Maracaïbo avec la ville de ce nom pour capitale, jusqu’aux bouches de l’Orénoque qui le séparent de la Guyane anglaise.

M. Miguel regardait cette carte, laquelle, de toute évidence, lui donnait raison contre ses collègues Felipe et Varinas. Précisément, à la surface du Venezuela, un grand fleuve, minutieusement dessiné, traçait son élégant demi-cercle, et, aussi bien à sa première courbure, où un affluent, l’Apure, lui verse ses eaux, qu’à la seconde, où le Guaviare et l’Atabapo lui apportent celles des Cordillères andines, il était uniquement baptisé de ce magnifique nom d’Orénoque sur tout son parcours.

Pourquoi donc MM. Varinas et Felipe s’obstinaient-ils à chercher les sources de ce cours d’eau dans les montagnes de la Colombie, et non dans le massif de la sierra Parima, voisine du mont Roraima, gigantesque borne militaire, haute de deux mille trois cents mètres, où s’appuient les angles de ces trois États du Sud-Amérique, le Venezuela, le Brésil, la Guyane anglaise?

Il est juste de le mentionner, ces deux géographes n’étaient pas seuls à professer pareille opinion. Malgré les assertions de hardis explorateurs qui remontèrent l’Orénoque presque jusqu’à sa source, Diaz de la Fuente en 1760,

Bobadilla en 1764, Robert Schomburgk en 1840, malgré la reconnaissance opérée par le Français Chaffanjon, cet audacieux voyageur qui déploya le pavillon de la France sur les pentes de la Parima, toute suintante des premières gouttes d’eau de l’Orénoque, — oui! malgré tant de constatations qui paraissaient être décisives, la question n’était pas résolue pour certains esprits tenaces, disciples de saint Thomas, aussi exigeants, en fait de preuves, que cet antique patron de l’incrédulité.

Cependant, de prétendre que cette question passionnait la population à cette époque, en l’an 1893, ce serait s’exposer à être taxé d’exagération. Que, deux ans auparavant, elle eût pris intérêt à la délimitation des frontières, lorsque l’Espagne, chargée de l’arbitrage, fixa les limites définitives entre la Colombie et le Venezuela, soit. De même, s’il se fût agi d’une exploration ayant pour but de déterminer la frontière le long du Brésil. Mais sur deux millions deux cent cinquante mille habitants, qui comprennent trois cent vingt-cinq mille Indiens “apprivoisés” ou indépendants au milieu de leurs forêts et de leurs savanes, cinquante mille noirs, puis, mélangés par le sang, des métis, des blancs, des étrangers ou farangos anglais, italiens, hollandais, français, allemands, il est indubitable que c’était l’infime minorité qui pût s’acharner à cette thèse d’hydrographie. Dans tous les cas, il se trouvait au moins deux Vénézuéliens, le susdit Varinas pour revendiquer le droit du Guaviare, le susdit Felipe pour soutenir le droit de l’Atabapo, à s’appeler Orénoque, sans compter quelques partisans qui, le cas échéant, leur prêteraient main forte.

Il ne faudrait pas croire, toutefois, que M. Miguel et ses deux amis fussent de ces vieux savants, encroûtés dans la science, au crâne dénudé, à la barbe blanche. Non! savants, ils l'étaient et jouissaient tous les trois d'une considération méritée, qui dépassait les bornes de leur pays. Le plus âgé, M. Miguel, avait quarante-cinq ans, les deux autres quelques années de moins. Hommes très vifs, très démonstratifs, ils ne démentaient pas leur origine basque, qui est celle de l'illustre Bolivar et du plus grand nombre des blancs dans ces républiques de l'Amérique méridionale, ayant parfois un peu de sang corse et de sang indien dans les veines, mais pas un seul globule de sang nègre.

Ces trois géographes se rencontraient chaque jour à la bibliothèque de l'Université de Ciudad-Bolivar. Là, MM. Varinas et Felipe, si décidés qu'ils fussent à ne point la recommencer, se laissaient emporter dans une discussion interminable au sujet de l'Orénoque… Même après l'exploration si probante du voyageur français, les défenseurs de l'Atabapo et du Guaviare s'obstinaient dans leur dire.

On l'a vu par les quelques répliques rapportées au début de cette histoire. Et la dispute allait, continuant de plus belle, en dépit de M. Miguel, impuissant à modérer les vivacités de ses deux collègues.

C'était pourtant un personnage qui imposait avec sa haute taille, sa noble figure aristocratique, sa barbe brune à laquelle se mêlaient quelques poils argentés, l'autorité de sa situation, et le chapeau tromblon dont il se coiffait à l'exemple du fondateur de l'indépendance hispano- américaine.

Et, ce jour-là, M. Miguel de répéter d'une voix pleine, calme, pénétrante:

“Ne vous emportez pas, mes amis! Qu'il coule de l'est ou de l'ouest, l'Orénoque n'en est pas moins un fleuve vénézuélien, le père des eaux de notre république…

— Il ne s’agit pas de savoir de qui il est le père, répondit le bouillant Varinas, mais de qui il est le fils, s’il est né du massif de la Parima ou des Andes colombiennes…

— Des Andes… des Andes!” riposta M. Felipe, en haussant les épaules.

Évidemment, ni l’un ni l’autre ne céderaient au sujet de l’acte de naissance de l’Orénoque, et ils s’entêteraient à lui attribuer chacun un père différent.

“Voyons, chers collègues, reprit M. Miguel, désireux de les amener à se faire des concessions, il suffit de jeter les yeux sur cette carte pour reconnaître ceci: c’est que, d’où qu’il vienne, et surtout s’il vient de l’est, l’Orénoque forme une courbe très harmonieuse, un demi-cercle mieux dessiné que ce malencontreux zigzag que lui donneraient l’Atabapo ou le Guaviare…

— Eh! qu’importe que le dessin en soit harmonieux ou non… s’écria M. Felipe.

— S’il est exact et conforme à la nature du territoire!” s’exclama M. Varinas.

Et, en effet, peu importait que les courbes fussent ou ne fussent pas artistement tracées. C’était une question purement géographique, non une question d’art. L’argumentation de M. Miguel portait à faux. Il le sentit bien. Aussi la pensée lui vint-elle de lancer dans la discussion un nouvel élément de nature à la modifier. À coup sûr, ce ne serait pas le moyen d’accorder les deux adversaires. Il est vrai, peut-être, comme des chiens déviés de leur voie, s’acharneraient-ils à la poursuite d’un troisième sanglier.

“Soit, dit M. Miguel, et laissons de côté cette manière d’envisager la chose. Vous prétendez, Felipe, et avec quelle obstination! que l’Atabapo, loin d’être un affluent de notre grand fleuve, est le fleuve lui-même…

— Je le prétends.

— Vous soutenez, Varinas, et avec quel entêtement! que c’est, au contraire, le Guaviare qui serait l’Orénoque en personne…

— Je le soutiens.

— Eh bien, reprit M. Miguel, dont le doigt suivait sur la carte le cours d’eau en discussion, pourquoi ne vous tromperiez-vous pas tous les deux?…

— Tous les deux!… s’écria M. Felipe.

— Un seul de nous se trompe, affirma M. Varinas, et ce n’est pas moi!

— Écoutez donc jusqu’au bout, dit M. Miguel, et ne répondez point avant d’avoir entendu. Il existe d’autres affluents que le Guaviare et l’Atabapo, qui versent leur apport à l’Orénoque, des tributaires d’une importance caractéristique et par leur parcours et par leur débit. Tels sont le Caura dans sa partie septentrionale, l’Apure et le Meta dans sa partie occidentale, le Cassiquiare et l’Iquapo dans sa partie méridionale. Les apercevez-vous là, sur cette carte?… Eh bien, je vous le demande, pourquoi l’un de ces affluents ne serait-il pas l’Orénoque plutôt que votre Guaviare, mon cher Varinas, et que votre Atabapo, mon cher Felipe?”

C’était la première fois que cette proposition voyait le jour, et l’on ne peut s’étonner si les deux contradicteurs restèrent muets tout d’abord en l’entendant formuler. Comment, la question ne serait plus seulement entre l’Atabapo et le Guaviare?… Comment, d’autres prétendants surgiraient à la voix de leur collègue?…

“Allons donc! s’écria M. Varinas. Ce n’est pas sérieux, et ce n’est pas sérieusement que vous parlez, monsieur Miguel…

— Très sérieusement, au contraire, et je trouve naturelle, logique et par conséquent admissible cette opinion que d’autres tributaires puissent se disputer l’honneur d’être le véritable Orénoque…

— Vous plaisantez! riposta M. Felipe.

— Je ne plaisante jamais quand il s’agit de questions géographiques, répondit gravement M. Miguel. Il y a sur la rive droite du cour supérieur le Padamo…

— Votre Padamo n’est qu’un ruisseau auprès de mon Guaviare! riposta M. Varinas.

— Un ruisseau que les géographes considèrent comme aussi important que l’Orénoque, répondit M. Miguel. Il y a sur la rive gauche le Cassiquiare…

— Votre Cassiquiare n’est qu’un ruisselet auprès de mon Atabapo! s’écria M. Felipe.

— Un ruisselet qui met en communication les bassins vénézuélien et amazonien! Sur la même rive, il y a le Meta…

— Mais votre Meta n’est qu’un robinet de fontaine…

— Un robinet d’où sort un cours d’eau que les économistes regardent comme devant être le futur chemin entre l’Europe et les territoires colombiens.”

On le voit, M. Miguel, très documenté, avait réponse à tout, et continuant:

“Sur la même rive, reprit-il, il y a l’Apure, le fleuve des llanos, que les navires peuvent remonter pendant plus de cinq cents kilomètres.”

Ni M. Felipe, ni M. Varinas ne relevèrent cette affirmation. Cela tenait à ce qu’ils étaient comme à demi suffoqués par l’aplomb de M. Miguel.

“Enfin, ajouta celui-ci, sur la rive droite, il y a le Cuchivero, le Caura, le Caroni…

— Quand vous aurez achevé de débiter cette nomenclature… dit M. Felipe.

— Nous discuterons, ajouta M. Varinas, qui venait de se croiser les bras.

— J’ai fini, répondit M. Miguel, et si vous voulez connaître mon opinion personnelle…

— En vaut-elle la peine?… répliqua d’un ton d’ironie supérieure M. Varinas.

— C’est peu probable! déclara M. Felipe.

— La voici, cependant, mes chers collègues. Aucun de ces affluents ne saurait être considéré comme étant la rivière maîtresse, celle à laquelle appartient légitimement le nom d’Orénoque. Donc, à mon avis, cette dénomination ne peut être appliquée ni à l’Atabapo, recommandé par mon ami Felipe…

— Erreur! affirma celui-ci.

— Ni au Guaviare, recommandé par mon ami Varinas…

— Hérésie! affirma ce dernier.

— Et j’en conclus, ajouta M. Miguel, que le nom d’Orénoque doit être conservé à la partie supérieure du fleuve dont les sources sont situées dans les massifs de la Parima. Il coule tout entier à travers le territoire de notre république et il n’en arrose aucun autre. Le Guaviare et l’Atabapo voudront bien se contenter de n’être que de simples tributaires, ce qui est, en somme, une situation géographique très acceptable…

— Que je n’accepte pas… répliqua M. Felipe.

— Que je refuse!” répliqua M. Varinas.

Le résultat de l’intervention de M. Miguel dans cette discussion hydrographique fut uniquement que trois personnes au lieu de deux se jetèrent à la tête le Guaviare, l’Orénoque et l’Atabapo. La querelle dura une heure encore, et peut-être n’aurait-elle jamais pris terme, si M. Felipe d’un côté, M. Varinas de l’autre, ne se fussent écriés:

“Eh bien… partons…

— Partir?… répondit M. Miguel, qui ne s’attendait guère à cette proposition.

— Oui! ajouta M. Felipe, partons pour San-Fernando, et là si je ne vous prouve pas péremptoirement que l’Atabapo, c’est l’Orénoque…

— Et moi, riposta M. Varinas, si je ne vous démontre pas catégoriquement que l’Orénoque, c’est le Guaviare…

— C’est que moi, dit M. Miguel, je vous aurai obligés de reconnaître que l’Orénoque est bien l’Orénoque!”

Et voilà dans quelles circonstances, à la suite de quelle discussion, ces trois personnages résolurent d’entreprendre un pareil voyage. Peut-être cette nouvelle expédition fixerait-elle enfin le cours du fleuve vénézuélien, en admettant qu’il ne l’eût pas été définitivement par les derniers explorateurs.

Du reste, il ne s’agissait que de le remonter jusqu’à la bourgade de San-Fernando, à ce coude où le Guaviare et l’Atabapo versent leurs eaux à quelques kilomètres l’un de l’autre. Quand il serait établi que l’un et l’autre n’étaient, ne pouvaient être que de simples affluents, force serait de donner raison à M. Miguel et de confirmer à l’Orénoque son état civil de fleuve dont d’indignes rivières prétendaient le déposséder.

Qu’on ne s’étonne pas si cette résolution, née au cours d’une discussion orageuse, allait être immédiatement suivie d’effet. Qu’on ne s’étonne pas davantage du bruit qu’elle produisit dans le monde savant, parmi les classes supérieures de Ciudad-Bolivar, et si elle passionna bientôt toute la république vénézuélienne.

Il en est de certaines villes comme de certains hommes: avant d’avoir un domicile fixe et définitif, ils hésitent, ils tâtonnent. C’est ce qui advint pour le chef-lieu de cette province de la Guyane, depuis la date de son apparition, en 1576, sur la rive droite de l’Orénoque. Après s’être établie à l’embouchure du Caroni sous le nom de San-Tomé, elle fut reportée dix ans plus tard à quinze lieues en aval. Brûlée par les Anglais sous les ordres du célèbre Walter Raleigh, elle se déplaça, en 1764, de cent cinquante kilomètres vers l’amont, en un endroit où la largeur du fleuve est réduite à moins de quatre cents toises. De là ce nom d’”Étroit” Angostura, qui lui fut alors donné pour s’effacer enfin devant celui de Ciudad-Bolivar.

Ce chef-lieu de province est situé à cent lieues environ du delta de l’Orénoque, dont l’étiage, indiqué par la Piedra del Midio, roche qui se dresse au milieu du courant, varie considérablement sous l’influence de la saison sèche de janvier à mai, ou de la saison pluvieuse.

Cette ville, à laquelle le dernier recensement attribue onze à douze mille habitants, se complète du faubourg de la Soledad, sur la rive gauche. Elle s’étend depuis la promenade de l’Alameda jusqu’au quartier du “Chien-Sec”, appellation singulière, puisque ce quartier, en contrebas, est, plus que tout autre, sujet aux inondations provoquées par les subites et copieuses crues de l’Orénoque. La rue principale, avec ses édifices publics, ses magasins élégants, ses galeries couvertes, les maisons échelonnées au flanc de cette colline schisteuse qui domine la cité, l’éparpillement des habitations rurales sous les arbres qui les encorbeillent, ces sortes de lacs que le fleuve forme par son élargissement en aval et en amont, le mouvement et l’animation du port, les nombreux navires à voile et à vapeur témoignant de l’activité du commerce fluvial, doublé d’un important trafic qui se fait par terre, tout cet ensemble contribue à charmer les yeux.

Par la Soledad, où doit aboutir le chemin de fer, Ciudad-Bolivar ne tardera pas à se relier avec Caracas, la capitale vénézuélienne. Ses exportations en peaux de bœufs et de cerfs, en café, en coton, en indigo, en cacao, en tabac y gagneront une extension nouvelle, si accrues qu’elles soient déjà par l’exploitation des gisements de quartz aurifère, découverts en 1840 dans la vallée du Yuruauri.

Donc, la nouvelle que les trois savants, membres de la Société de Géographie du

Venezuela, allaient partir pour trancher la question de l’Orénoque et de ses deux affluents du sud-ouest, eut un vif retentissement dans le pays. Les Bolivariens sont démonstratifs, passionnés, ardents. Les journaux s’en mêlèrent, prenant parti pour les Atabaposistes, les Guaviariens et les Orénoquois. Le public s’enflamma. On eût dit vraiment que ces cours d’eau menaçaient de changer de lit, de quitter les territoires de la république, d’émigrer en quelque autre état du Nouveau-Monde, si on ne leur rendait pas justice.

Ce voyage, à la remontée du fleuve, offrait-il des dangers sérieux? Oui, dans une certaine mesure, pour des voyageurs qui eussent été réduits à leurs seules ressources. Mais cette question vitale ne valait-elle pas que le gouvernement fit quelques sacrifices afin de la résoudre? N’était-ce pas une occasion tout indiquée d’utiliser cette milice qui pourrait avoir deux cent cinquante mille hommes dans le rang, et qui n’en a jamais réuni plus du dixième? Pourquoi ne pas mettre à la disposition des explorateurs une compagnie de l’armée permanente qui compte six mille soldats et dont l’état-major a possédé jusqu’à sept mille généraux, sans parler des officiers supérieurs, ainsi que l’établit Élisée Reclus, toujours si parfaitement documenté sur ces curiosités ethnographiques.

Ils n’en demandaient pas tant, MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas. C’est à leur frais qu’ils voyageraient, sans autre escorte que les péons, les llaneros, les mariniers, les guides qui séjournent le long des rives du fleuve. Ils feraient ce que bien d’autres pionniers de la science avaient fait avant eux.

D’ailleurs, ils ne devaient pas dépasser la bourgade de San-Fernando, bâtie au confluent de l’Atabapo et du Guaviare. Or, c’est principalement sur les territoires traversés par le haut cours du fleuve qu’il y a plutôt lieu de redouter l’attaque des Indiens, ces tribus indépendantes, si difficiles à contenir et auxquelles on attribue, non sans raison, des massacres et des pillages dont on ne saurait être surpris en un pays qui fut autrefois peuplé de Caraïbes.

Sans doute, en aval de San-Fernando, vers l’embouchure du Meta, sur les territoires de l’autre rive, il ne fait pas bon rencontrer certains Guahibos, toujours réfractaires aux lois sociales, et ces Quivas dont la réputation de férocité n’était que trop justifiée par leurs attentats en Colombie, avant qu’ils se fussent transportés aux rives de l’Orénoque.

Aussi, à Ciudad-Bolivar, n’était-on pas sans quelque inquiétude sur le sort de deux Français partis depuis un mois environ. Après avoir remonté le cours du fleuve, et dépassé le confluent du Meta, ces voyageurs s’étaient aventurés à travers ce pays des Quivas et des Guahibos, et l’on ne savait ce qu’ils étaient devenus.

Il est vrai, le cours supérieur de l’Orénoque, moins connu d’ailleurs, soustrait par son éloignement même à l’action des autorités vénézuéliennes, dépourvu de tout commerce, livré aux bandes errantes des indigènes, est encore infiniment plus redoutable. En réalité, si les Indiens sédentaires, à l’ouest et au nord du grand fleuve, sont de moeurs plus douces, se livrant à des travaux agricoles, il n’en va pas ainsi de ceux qui vivent au milieu des savanes du département de l’Orénoque. Pillards par intérêt et par nécessité, ils ne reculent ni devant la trahison ni devant l’assassinat.

Sera-t-il possible dans l’avenir de prendre quelque empire sur ces natures farouches et indomptables? Ce qui ne peut réussir pour les fauves des llanos réussira-t-il avec ces naturels des plaines de l’Alto Orinoco? La vérité est que de hardis missionnaires l’ont essayé sans grand résultat.

Et même l’un d’eux, un Français, appartenant aux missions étrangères, se trouvait depuis quelques années dans ces hautes régions du fleuve. Son courage et sa foi avaient-ils été récompensés?… Était-il parvenu à civiliser ces peuplades sauvages, à les convertir aux pratiques du catholicisme?… Avait-on lieu de croire que le courageux apôtre de la Mission de Santa-Juana eût pu grouper autour de lui ces Indiens, réfractaires jusqu’alors à toute tentative de civilisation?…

En somme, pour en revenir à M. Miguel et à ses deux collègues, il ne s’agissait pas de se hasarder en ces lointaines contrées dominées par le massif de Roraima. Et cependant, s’il l’avait fallu dans l’intérêt de la science géographique, ils n’auraient pas hésité à relever jusqu’aux sources l’Orénoque aussi bien que le Guaviare et l’Atabapo. Leurs amis espéraient, toutefois, — non sans raison, — que cette question d’origine serait résolue au confluent des trois fleuves. D’ailleurs, on admettait généralement que ce serait en faveur de cet Orénoque, lequel, après avoir reçu trois cents rivières et parcouru deux mille cinq cents kilomètres, va, par les ramures de cinquante bras, se jeter dans l’Atlantique.

CHAPITRE II

II

Le sergent Martial et son neveu

Le départ de ce trio de géographes, — un trio dont les exécutants ne parvenaient point à accorder leurs flûtes, — avait été fixé au 12 août, en pleine saison des pluies.

La veille de ce jour, deux voyageurs, descendus à un hôtel de Ciudad-Bolivar, causaient dans la chambre de l’un deux, vers huit heures du soir. Une légère brise rafraîchissante entrait par la fenêtre, qui s’ouvrait sur la promenade de l’Alameda.

En ce moment, le plus jeune de ces voyageurs venait de se lever, et dit à l’autre en français:

“Écoute-moi bien, mon bon Martial, et, avant de prendre le lit, je te rappelle une dernière fois tout ce qui a été convenu entre nous avant notre départ.

— Comme vous voudrez, Jean…

— Allons, s’écria Jean, voilà que tu oublies déjà ton rôle dès les premiers mots!

— Mon rôle?…

— Oui… tu ne me tutoies pas…

— C’est juste!… Satané tutoiement!… Que voulez-vous… non!… que veux-tu?… le manque d’habitude…

— Le manque d’habitude, mon pauvre sergent!… Y penses-tu?… Voilà un mois que nous avons quitté la France, et tu m’as tutoyé pendant toute la traversée de Saint-Nazaire à Caracas.

— C’est pourtant vrai! répliqua le sergent Martial.

— Et maintenant que nous sommes arrivés à Bolívar, c’est-à-dire au point où commence ce voyage qui nous réserve tant de joies… peut-être tant de déceptions… tant de douleurs…”

Jean avait prononcé ces mots avec une émotion profonde. Sa poitrine se soulevait, ses yeux devenaient humides. Cependant il se maîtrisa, en voyant le sentiment d’inquiétude qui se peignit sur la rude figure du sergent Martial.

Et, alors, il reprit en souriant, d’un ton câlin:

“Oui… maintenant que nous sommes à Bolívar, il t’arrive d’oublier que tu es mon oncle et que je suis ton neveu…

— Quelle bête je fais! répondit le sergent Martial, en s’administrant une forte tape sur le front.

— Non… mais tu te troubles, et, au lieu que ce soit toi qui veilles sur moi, il faudra que… Voyons, mon bon Martial, n’est-il pas d’usage qu’un neveu soit tutoyé par son oncle?…

— C’est l’usage.

— D’ailleurs, est-ce que, depuis notre embarquement, je ne t’ai pas donné l’exemple en te disant tu?…

— Oui… et pourtant… tu n’as pas commencé trop…

— Trop petit!… interrompit Jean en insistant sur la dernière syllabe de ce mot.

— Oui… petit… petit! répéta le sergent Martial, dont le regard s’adoucissait en se fixant sur son prétendu neveu.

— Et n’oublie pas, ajouta celui-ci, que “petit” cela se dit pequeño en espagnol.

— Pequeño, répéta de nouveau le sergent Martial. Bon, ce mot-là!… Je le sais, puis une cinquantaine d’autres encore… guère plus, malgré tout ce que j’ai pu y mettre d’attention!

— Oh! la tête dure! reprit Jean. Est-ce que chaque jour je ne t’ai pas fait réciter ta leçon d’espagnol pendant la traversée du Pereire…

— Que veux-tu, Jean?… C’est terrible pour un vieux soldat de mon âge, qui a parlé le français toute sa vie, d’apprendre ce charabia des Andalouses!… Vrai! j’ai de la peine à m’espagnoliser, comme dit cet autre…

— Cela viendra, mon bon Martial.

— C’est même déjà venu pour la cinquantaine de mots dont j’ai parlé. Je sais demander à manger:”Deme usted algo de comer”; à boire:

“Deme usted de beber”; à coucher: “Deme usted una cama”; par où aller: “Enseñeme usted el camino”; combien ça coûte: “Cuánto vale esto?”. Et je sais dire merci: “Gracias!” et bonjour: “Buenos dias”, et bonsoir: “Buenas noches”, et comment vous portez-vous: “Comó esta usted?”. Et je suis capable de jurer comme un Aragonais ou un Castillan… Carambi de carambo de caramba…

— Bon… bon!… s’écria Jean, en rougissant un peu. Ce n’est pas moi qui t’ai appris ces jurons-là, et tu ferais mieux de ne pas les servir à tout propos…

— Que veux-tu, Jean?… Habitude d’ancien sous-off!… Toute ma vie j’ai lancé des nom d’un bonhomme, des nom d’un tonnerre!… et quand on ne l’assaisonne pas de quelques sacrediés, il me semble que la conversation manque de charme! Aussi ce qui me plaît dans ce baragouin espagnol que tu parles comme une señora…

— Eh bien, Martial?…

— Oui… entendu!… c’est que dans ce baragouin, il y a des jurons à revendre… presque autant que de mots…

— Et ce sont ceux-là que tu as naturellement retenus le plus facilement…

— J’en conviens, Jean, et ce n’est pas le colonel de Kermor, lorsque je servais sous ses ordres, qui m’aurait reproché mes tonnerre de Brest!”

Au nom du colonel de Kermor, on aurait pu voir s’altérer l’expressif visage du jeune garçon, tandis qu’une larme mouillait les paupières du sergent Martial.

“Vois-tu, Jean, reprit-il, Dieu viendrait me dire: “Sergent, dans une heure tu serreras la main de ton colonel, mais je te foudroierai deux minutes après”, que je lui répondrais: “C’est bien, Seigneur… prépare ta foudre et vise au cœur!”“

Jean se rapprocha du vieux soldat, il lui essuya ses larmes, il regarda avec attendrissement ce bon être, rude et franche nature, capable de tous les dévouements. Et, comme celui-ci l’attirait sur sa poitrine, le pressait entre ses bras: “Il ne faut pas m’aimer tant que cela, mon sergent! lui dit-il en le câlinant.

— Est-ce que c’est possible?…

— Possible… et nécessaire… du moins devant le monde, quand on nous observe…

— Mais quand on ne nous observe pas…

— Libre à toi de me traiter avec plus de douceur, en prenant des précautions…

— Ce sera difficile!

— Rien n’est difficile, lorsque c’est indispensable. N’oublie pas ce que je suis, un neveu qui a besoin d’être sévèrement traité par son oncle…

— Sévèrement!… repartit le sergent Martial en levant ses grosses mains vers le ciel.

— Oui… un neveu que tu as dû emmener avec toi dans ce voyage… parce qu’il n’y avait pas moyen de le laisser seul à la maison… de peur de quelque sottise…

— Sottise!

— Un neveu dont tu veux faire un soldat comme toi…

— Un soldat!…

— Oui… un soldat… qu’il convient d’élever à la dure, et auquel tu ne dois pas ménager les corrections, quand il les mérite…

— Et s’il n’en mérite pas?…

— Il en méritera, répondit Jean en souriant, car c’est un mauvais conscrit…

— Un mauvais conscrit!…

— Et lorsque tu l’auras corrigé en public…

— Je lui demanderai pardon en particulier! s’écria le sergent Martial.

— Comme il te plaira, mon brave compagnon, à la condition que personne ne nous regarde!”

Le sergent Martial embrassa son neveu, après avoir fait observer que nul ne pouvait les voir dans cette pièce bien close de l’hôtel.

“Et maintenant, mon ami, dit Jean, l’heure est venue de se coucher. Regagne ta chambre à côté, et je m’enfermerai dans la mienne.

— Veux-tu que je veille la nuit à ta porte?… demanda le sergent Martial.

— C’est inutile… Il n’y a aucun danger…

— Sans doute, mais…

— Si c’est de cette manière que tu me gâtes dès le début, tu joueras bien mal ton rôle d’oncle féroce…

— Féroce!… Est-ce que je puis être féroce envers toi?…

— Il le faut… pour écarter tous les soupçons.

— Aussi… Jean, pourquoi as-tu voulu venir?…

— Parce que je le devais.

— Pourquoi n’es-tu pas resté dans notre maison… là-bas… à Chantenay… ou à Nantes?…

— Parce que mon devoir était de partir.

— Est-ce que je n’aurais pas pu entreprendre ce voyage tout seul?…

— Non.

— Des dangers, c’est mon métier de les braver!… Je n’ai fait que cela toute ma vie!… Et, d’ailleurs, ils ne sont pas pour moi ce qu’ils seraient pour toi…

— Aussi ai-je tenu à devenir ton neveu, mon oncle.

— Ah! si mon colonel avait pu être consulté là-dessus!… s’écria le sergent Martial.

— Et comment?… répondit Jean, dont le front s’obscurcit.

— Non… c’était impossible!… Mais, après avoir obtenu à San-Fernando des renseignements certains, s’il nous est jamais donné de le revoir, que dira-t-il?…

— Il remerciera son ancien sergent de ce que celui-ci se sera rendu à mes prières, de ce qu’il aura consenti à me laisser entreprendre ce voyage!… Il te pressera dans ses bras en disant que tu as fait ton devoir, comme j’ai fait le mien!

— Enfin… enfin… s’écria le sergent Martial, tu m’auras tourné et retourné comme tu l’as voulu!

— C’est dans l’ordre, puisque tu es mon oncle, et qu’un oncle doit toujours obéir à son neveu… pas devant le monde, par exemple!

— Non… pas devant le monde… C’est la consigne!

— Et, maintenant, mon bon Martial, va dormir et dors bien. Demain nous devons embarquer dès la première heure sur le bateau de l’Orénoque, et il ne faut pas manquer le départ.

— Bonsoir, Jean!

— Bonne nuit, mon ami, mon seul ami! — À demain, et que Dieu nous protège!”

Le sergent Martial se dirigea vers la porte, l’ouvrit, la referma avec soin, s’assura que Jean tournait la clef et poussait le verrou à l’intérieur. Quelques instants il resta immobile, l’oreille appuyée contre le panneau. Il entendit Jean, qui, avant de se mettre au lit, faisait sa prière dont le murmure arriva jusqu’à lui. Puis, lorsqu’il eut la certitude que le jeune garçon était couché, il passa dans sa chambre, et sa seule prière — à lui — consista à dire en se frappant la tête du poing:

“Oui!… que le Seigneur nous protège, car c’est diantrement raide tout de même!”

Quels sont ces deux Français?… D’où viennent-ils?… Quel motif les amène au Venezuela?… Pourquoi se sont-ils résolus à jouer ce rôle d’oncle et de neveu?… Dans quel but vont-ils prendre passage à bord de l’un des bateaux de l’Orénoque, et jusqu’où remonteront-ils le grand fleuve?…

À ces multiples questions, il est encore impossible de répondre d’une façon explicite. L’avenir le fera, sans doute, et, en réalité, l’avenir seul le peut faire.

Toutefois voici ce qu’il était permis de déduire, d’après la conversation rapportée ci-dessus.

C’étaient deux Français, deux Bretons, deux Nantais. S’il n’y a pas de doute sur leur origine, il y en a sur les liens qui les unissent, et il est moins facile de dire quelle situation ils ont l’un vis-à-vis de l’autre. Et, d’abord, qui était ce colonel de Kermor dont le nom revenait souvent entre eux et leur causait une si profonde émotion?

Dans tous les cas, ce jeune garçon ne paraît pas avoir plus de seize à dix-sept ans. Il est de taille moyenne et semble doué d’une constitution vigoureuse pour son âge. Sa figure est un peu sévère, triste même, lorsqu’il s’abandonne à ses pensées habituelles; mais sa physionomie est charmante, avec le doux regard de ses yeux, le sourire de sa bouche aux petites dents blanches, la carnation chaude de ses joues, assez hâlées d’ailleurs par l’air vif des dernières traversées.

L’autre de ces deux Français, — il est sur la limite de la soixantaine, — reproduit bien le type du sergent, du briscard d’autrefois, qui a servi tant que son âge lui a permis de rester au service. Ayant pris sa retraite comme sous-officier, il a servi sous les ordres du colonel de Kermor, lequel lui a même sauvé la vie sur le champ de bataille pendant cette guerre du second empire que termina le désastre de 1870-1871. C'est un de ces vieux braves qui restent dans la maison de leur ancien chef, dévoués et grondeurs, qui deviennent le factotum de la famille, qui voient élever les enfants, quand ils ne les élèvent pas eux-mêmes, qui les gâtent, quoi qu'on puisse dire, qui leur donnent leurs premières leçons d'équitation en les achevalant sur leurs genoux, et leurs premières leçons de chant en leur apprenant les fanfares du régiment.

Le sergent Martial, malgré ses soixante ans, est encore droit et vigoureux. Endurci, trempé pour le métier de soldat, et sur lequel le froid et le chaud n'ont plus de prise, il ne cuirait pas au Sénégal et ne gèlerait pas en Russie. Sa constitution est solide, son courage à toute épreuve. Il n'a peur de rien, ni de personne, si ce n'est de lui-même, car il se défie de son premier mouvement. Haut de stature, maigre pourtant, ses membres n'ont rien perdu de leur force, et à l'âge qu'il a, il a conservé toute la raideur militaire. C'est un grognard, une vieille moustache, soit! Mais, au demeurant, quelle bonne nature, quel excellent cœur, et que ne ferait-il pas pour ceux qu'il aime! Il semble, d'ailleurs, que ceux-là se réduisent à deux en ce bas monde, le colonel de Kermor, et Jean, dont il a consenti à devenir l'oncle.

Aussi, avec quelle méticuleuse sollicitude il veille sur ce jeune garçon! Comme il l'entoure de soins, bien qu'il soit décidé qu'il se montrera très sévère à son égard! Pourquoi cette dureté de commande, pourquoi ce rôle qui lui répugnait tant à remplir, il n'aurait pas fallu le lui demander. Quels regards farouches on aurait essuyés! Quelle réponse malsonnante on aurait reçue! Enfin, avec quelle grâce on eut été “envoyé promener”.

C’est même de la sorte que les choses s’étaient passées pendant la navigation entre l’ancien et le nouveau continent à travers l’Atlantique. Ceux des passagers du Pereire qui avaient voulu se lier avec Jean, qui avaient cherché à lui parler, à lui rendre de ces petits services si communs à bord, qui avaient paru s’intéresser à ce jeune garçon, durement mené par cet oncle bourru et peu sociable, comme ils avaient été remis à leur place, avec injonction de ne pas recommencer!

Si le neveu était vêtu d’un simple costume de voyage, large de coupe, le veston et le pantalon flottant, le chapeau-casque d’étoffe blanche sur des cheveux tondus courts, les bottes à forte semelle, l’oncle, au contraire, était sanglé dans sa longue tunique. Elle n’était pas d’uniforme, mais elle rappelait la tenue militaire. Il n’y manquait que les brisques et les épaulettes. Impossible de faire comprendre au sergent Martial que mieux valait des habits amples appropriés au climat vénézuélien, et que, par conséquent, il aurait dû les adopter. S’il ne portait pas le bonnet de police, c’est que Jean l’avait obligé à se coiffer d’un casque de toile blanche, semblable au sien, lequel protège mieux que toute autre coiffure contre les ardeurs du soleil.

Le sergent Martial avait obtempéré à l’ordre. Mais “ce qu’il se fichait pas mal du soleil!” avec sa tête fourrée de cheveux ras et rudes, et son crâne en tôle d’acier.

Il va de soi que, sans être trop encombrantes, les valises de l’oncle et de son neveu contenaient, en fait de vêtements de rechange, de linge, d’ustensiles de toilette, de chaussures, tout ce qu’exigeait un pareil voyage, étant donné qu’on ne pourrait rien renouveler en route. Il y avait des couvertures pour le coucher, et aussi des armes et des munitions en quantité suffisante, une paire de revolvers pour le jeune garçon, une seconde paire pour le sergent

Martial — sans compter une carabine, dont, très adroit tireur, il se promettait de faire bon usage à l’occasion.

À l’occasion?… Les dangers sont-ils donc si grands à travers les territoires de l’Orénoque, et convient-il d’être toujours sur la défensive, comme en ces pays de l’Afrique centrale?… Est-ce que les rives du fleuve et leurs abords sont incessamment battus par des bandes d’Indiens, pillards, massacreurs, anthropophages?…

Oui et non.

Ainsi qu’il ressort de la conversation de MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, le bas Orénoque de Ciudad-Bolivar à l’embouchure de l’Apure ne présentait aucun danger. Sa partie moyenne, entre cette embouchure et San-Fernando de Atabapo, exigeait certaines précautions, surtout en ce qui concerne les Indiens Quivas. Quant au cours supérieur, il n’est rien moins que sûr, les tribus qui le fréquentent étant toujours en état de pleine sauvagerie.

On ne l’a pas oublié, il n’entrait pas dans les desseins de M. Miguel et ses deux collègues de dépasser la bourgade de San-Fernando. Le sergent Martial et son neveu iraient-ils plus loin?… Le but de leur voyage ne se trouvait-il pas au-delà de cette bourgade?… Des circonstances imprévues ne les entraîneraient-elles pas jusqu’aux sources de l’Orénoque?… C’est ce que personne n’était en mesure de savoir, c’est ce qu’ils ne savaient pas eux-mêmes.

Ce qui était certain, c’est que le colonel de Kermor avait quitté la France depuis quatorze ans pour se rendre au Venezuela. Ce qu’il y faisait, ce qu’il était devenu, à la suite de quelles circonstances il avait voulu s’expatrier, sans même avoir prévenu son vieux compagnon d’armes, peut-être la suite de cette histoire l’apprendra-t-elle? On n’aurait rien pu trouver de précis à ce sujet dans l’entretien du sergent Martial et du jeune garçon.

Ce que tous deux avaient fait, le voici.

Trois semaines auparavant, après avoir quitté leur maison de Chantenay, près Nantes, ils avaient été s’embarquer, à Saint-Nazaire, sur le Pereire, paquebot de la Compagnie transatlantique, à destination des Antilles. De là, un autre navire les avait transportés à La Guayra, le port de Caracas. Puis, en quelques heures, le chemin de fer les avait conduits à la capitale du Venezuela.

Leur séjour à Caracas ne dura qu’une semaine. Ils ne l’employèrent point à visiter cette cité, sinon curieuse, du moins pittoresque, puisque, de sa partie basse à sa partie haute, la différence d’altitude se mesure par plus de mille mètres. À peine eurent-ils le loisir de monter sur sa colline du Calvaire, d’où le regard embrasse l’ensemble de ces maisons qui sont légèrement construites, afin de parer aux dangers des tremblements de terre, — tel celui de 1812, où périrent douze mille personnes.

On remarque cependant à Caracas de jolis parcs, plantés de groupes d’arbres dont la verdure est éternelle, quelques beaux édifices publics, un palais présidentiel, une cathédrale de belle architecture, des terrasses qui semblent dominer cette magnifique mer des Antilles, enfin toute l’animation d’une grande cité où l’on compte plus de cent mille habitants.

Et, cependant, ce spectacle ne fut pas pour distraire un seul instant le sergent Martial et son neveu de ce qu’ils étaient venus faire en cette ville. Ces huit jours, ils les occupèrent à réunir des renseignements relatifs au voyage qu’ils allaient entreprendre, qui les entraînerait peut-être jusqu’en ces régions lointaines et presque inconnues de la république vénézuélienne.

Les indications qu’ils possédaient alors étaient bien incertaines, mais ils espéraient les compléter à San-Fernando. De là, Jean était résolu à continuer ses recherches aussi loin qu’il le faudrait, fût-ce sur les plus dangereux territoires du haut Orénoque.

Et si, alors, le sergent Martial voulait faire acte d’autorité, s’il prétendait empêcher Jean de s’exposer aux dangers d’une telle campagne, il se heurterait, — le vieux soldat ne le savait que trop, — à une ténacité vraiment extraordinaire chez un garçon de cet âge, une volonté que rien ne ferait fléchir, et il céderait, parce qu’il faudrait céder.

Voilà pourquoi ces deux Français, après être arrivés la veille à Ciudad-Bolivar, devaient en repartir le lendemain à bord du bateau à vapeur qui fait le service du bas Orénoque.

“Dieu nous protège, avait dit Jean… Oui!… qu’il nous protège… à l’aller comme au retour!”

CHAPITRE III

III

À bord du Simon-Bolivar

“L’Orénoque sort du Paradis terrestre”, cela est dit dans les récits de Christophe Colomb.

La première fois que Jean énonça cette opinion du grand navigateur génois devant le sergent Martial, celui-ci se borna à répondre:

“Nous verrons bien!”

Et peut-être avait-il raison de mettre en doute cette assertion de l’illustre découvreur de l’Amérique.

Également, paraît-il, il convenait de mettre au rang des pures légendes que le grand fleuve descendît du pays de l’El Dorado, ainsi que semblaient le croire les premiers explorateurs, les Hojeda, les Pinzon, les Cabral, les Magalhâez, les Valdivia, les Sarmiento, et tant d’autres qui s’aventurèrent à travers les régions du Sud-Amérique.

Dans tous les cas, l’Orénoque trace un immense demi-cercle à la surface du territoire entre les 3e et 8e parallèles au nord de l’Équateur, et dont la courbe s’étend au-delà du 70° degré de longitude à l’ouest du méridien de Paris. Les Vénézuéliens sont fiers de leur fleuve, et il est visible que, sous ce rapport, MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas ne le cédaient à aucun de leurs compatriotes.

Et peut-être, même, eurent-ils la pensée de protester publiquement, contre le dire d'Élisée Reclus, dans le dix-huitième volume de sa Nouvelle Géographie universelle, qui attribue à l'Orénoque le neuvième rang parmi les fleuves de la terre, après l'Amazone, le Congo, le Parana-Uruguay, le Niger, le Yang-tse-Kiang, le Brahmapoutre, le Mississipi et le Saint-Laurent. Ne pouvaient-ils faire valoir que, d'après Diego Ordaz, un explorateur du seizième siècle, les Indiens le nommaient Paragua, c'est-à-dire: Grande-Eau?… Cependant, malgré un argument de cette force, ils ne donnèrent pas libre cours à leurs protestations, et peut-être firent-ils bien, tant l'œuvre du géographe français s'appuie sur des bases sérieuses.

Dès six heures du matin, le 12 août, le Simon-Bolivar, — on ne saurait s'étonner de ce nom, — était prêt à partir. Ces communications par bateaux à vapeur entre cette ville et les bourgades du cours de l'Orénoque ne dataient que de quelques années, et encore ne dépassent-elles pas l'embouchure de l'Apure. Mais en remontant cet affluent, les passagers et les marchandises peuvent se transporter jusqu'à San-Fernando[1] et même au-delà, au port de Nutrias, grâce à la Compagnie vénézuélienne, qui a fondé des services bimensuels.

Ce serait aux bouches de l'Apure, ou plutôt quelques milles en aval, à la bourgade de Caïcara, que ceux des voyageurs qui devaient continuer leur voyage sur l'Orénoque abandonneraient le Simon-Bolivar, afin de se confier aux rudimentaires embarcations indiennes.

[1] Il s'agit de San-Fernando de Apure qu'il ne faut pas confondre avec San-Fernando de Atabapo sur l'Orénoque.

Ce steamboat était construit pour naviguer sur ces fleuves dont l’étiage varie dans des proportions considérables depuis la saison sèche jusqu’à la saison pluvieuse. D’un gabarit semblable à celui des paquebots de la Magdalena de Colombie, il tirait aussi peu d’eau que possible, étant plat dans ses fonds. Comme unique propulseur, il possédait une énorme roue sans tambour disposée à l’arrière, et qui tourne sous l’action d’une assez puissante machine à double effet. Que l’on se figure une sorte de radeau surmonté d’une superstructure, le long de laquelle s’élevaient en abord les deux cheminées des chaudières. Cette superstructure, terminée par un spardeck, contenait les salons et cabines réservés aux passagers, le pont inférieur servant à l’empilement des marchandises, — ensemble qui rappelle les steamboats américains avec leurs balanciers et leurs bielles démesurés. Le tout est peinturluré de couleurs voyantes jusqu’au poste du pilote et du capitaine, établi au dernier étage sous les plis du pavillon de la république. Quant aux appareils évaporatoires, ils dévorent les forêts de la rive, et l’on aperçoit déjà d’interminables coupées, dues à la hache du bûcheron, qui s’enfoncent de chaque côté de l’Orénoque.

Ciudad-Bolivar étant située à quatre cent vingt kilomètres des bouches de l’Orénoque, si le flot s’y fait encore sentir, du moins ne renverse-t-il pas le courant normal. Ce flot ne peut donc profiter aux embarcations qui naviguent vers l’amont. Toutefois, il s’y produit des crues qui, à la capitale même, peuvent dépasser douze à quinze mètres. Mais, d’une façon générale, l’Orénoque croit régulièrement jusqu’à la mi-août et conserve son niveau jusqu’à la fin de septembre. Puis la baisse se continue jusqu’en novembre, avec légère recrudescence à cette époque, et ne prend fin qu’en avril.

Le voyage entrepris par M. Miguel et ses collègues allait donc s’accomplir pendant la période favorable à l’enquête des Atabaposistes, des Guaviariens et des Orénoquois.

Il y eut grand concours de leurs partisans à saluer les trois géographes sur le quai d'embarquement de Ciudad-Bolivar. On n'était qu'au départ, cependant, et que serait-ce à l'arrivée! De vifs et bruyants encouragements leur furent adressés soit par les tenants du fameux fleuve, soit par ceux de ses prétendus tributaires. Et au milieu des carambas et des caraïs que ne ménageaient ni les porteurs de colis, ni les mariniers en achevant les préparatifs du démarrage, malgré le sifflet assourdissant des chaudières qui écorchait les oreilles, et des hennissements de la vapeur fusant à travers les soupapes, on entendait ces cris:

“Viva el Guaviare!

— Viva el Atabapo!

— Viva el Orinoco!”

Puis, entre les partisans de ces opinions diverses, des discussions éclataient, qui menaçaient de mal finir, bien que M. Miguel essayât de s'entremettre entre les plus exaltés.

Placés sur le spardeck, le sergent Martial et son neveu assistaient à ces scènes tumultueuses, sans parvenir à y rien comprendre.

“Que veulent tous ces gens-là?… s'écria le vieux soldat. C'est bien sûr quelque révolution…”

Ce ne pouvait en être une, puisque dans les États hispano-américains, les révolutions ne s'accomplissent jamais sans l'intervention de l'élément militaire. Or, on ne voyait pas là un seul des sept mille généraux de l'état-major du Venezuela.

Jean et le sergent Martial ne devaient pas tarder à être fixés à ce sujet, car, à n’en pas douter, au cours de la navigation, la discussion continuerait à mettre aux prises M. Miguel et ses deux collègues.

Bref, les derniers ordres du capitaine furent envoyés, — d’abord au mécanicien ordre de balancer sa machine, ensuite aux mariniers d’avant et d’arrière ordre de larguer les amarres de poste. Tous ceux qui n’étaient pas du voyage, disséminés sur les étages de la superstructure, durent redescendre sur le quai. Enfin, après quelques bousculades, il ne resta plus à bord que les passagers et l’équipage.

Dès que le Simon-Bolivar se fut mis en mouvement, redoublement de clameurs, tumulte d’adieux, entre lesquels éclatèrent les vivats en l’honneur de l’Orénoque et de ses affluents. Le bateau à vapeur écarté, sa puissante roue battit les eaux avec violence, et le timonier prit direction vers le milieu du fleuve. Un quart d’heure après, la ville avait disparu derrière un tournant de la rive gauche, et bientôt on ne vit plus rien des dernières maisons de la Soledad sur la rive opposée.

On n’estime pas à moins de cinq cent mille kilomètres carrés l’étendue des llanos vénézuéliens. Ce sont des plaines presque plates. À peine, en de certains endroits, le sol s’accidente-t-il de ces renflements, qui sont appelés bancos dans le pays, ou de ces buttes à pans brusques, à terrasses régulières, appelées mesas. Les llanos ne se relèvent que vers la base des montagnes, dont le voisinage se fait déjà sentir. D’autres, les bajos, sont limitrophes des cours d’eau. C’est à travers ces immenses aires, tantôt verdoyantes à la saison des pluies, tantôt jaunes et presque décolorées pendant les mois de sécheresse, que se déroule en demi-cercle le cours de l’Orénoque.

Au reste, les passagers du Simon-Bolivar, désireux de connaître le fleuve au double point de vue hydrographique et géographique, n'auraient eu qu'à poser des questions à MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas pour obtenir des réponses positives. Ces savants n'étaient-ils pas toujours prêts à fournir de minutieux renseignements sur les bourgades, sur les villages, sur les affluents, sur les diverses peuplades sédentaires ou errantes? À quels plus consciencieux cicerones eût-il été possible de s'adresser, et avec quelle obligeance, quel empressement, ils se fussent mis à la disposition des voyageurs!

Il est vrai, parmi les passagers du Simon-Bolivar, le plus grand nombre n'avaient rien à apprendre au sujet de l'Orénoque, l'ayant vingt fois remonté ou descendu, les uns jusqu'aux bouches de l'Apure, les autres jusqu'à la bourgade de San-Fernando de Atabapo. La plupart étaient des commerçants, des trafiquants, qui transportaient des marchandises vers l'intérieur, ou les ramenaient vers les ports de l'est. À citer les plus ordinaires entre ces divers objets de trafic, des cacaos, des peaux, cuirs de bœufs et de cerfs, des minerais de cuivre, des phosphates, des bois pour charpente, ébénisterie, marqueterie, teinture, fèves de tonka, caoutchouc, salsepareille, et enfin le bétail, car l'élevage forme la principale industrie des llaneros répandus sur les plaines.

Le Venezuela appartient à la zone équatoriale. La moyenne de la température y est donc comprise entre vingt-cinq et trente degrés centigrades. Mais elle est variable, ainsi que cela se produit dans les pays de montagnes. C'est entre les Andes du littoral et celles de l'ouest que la chaleur acquiert le plus d'intensité, c'est-à-dire à la surface de ces territoires où s'arrondit le lit de l'Orénoque, et auxquels ne parviennent jamais les brises marines. Même les vents généraux, les alizés du nord et de l'est, arrêtés par l’écran orographique des côtes, ne peuvent apporter un adoucissement aux rigueurs de ce climat.

Ce jour-là, par un ciel couvert, avec quelques menaces de pluie, les passagers ne souffraient pas trop de la chaleur. La brise, venant de l’ouest, à contre de la marche du steamboat, donnait aux passagers une sensation de bien-être très appréciable.

Le sergent Martial et Jean, sur le spardeck, observaient les rives du fleuve. Leurs compagnons de voyage se montraient assez indifférents à ce spectacle. Seul le trio des géographes en étudiait les détails, non sans discuter avec une certaine animation.

Certes, s’il s’était adressé à eux, Jean aurait pu être exactement renseigné. Mais, d’une part, le sergent Martial, très jaloux, très sévère, n’eût permis à aucun étranger d’entrer en conversation avec son neveu, et, d’autre part, celui-ci n’avait besoin de personne pour reconnaître pas à pas les villages, les îles, les détours du fleuve. Il possédait un guide sûr dans le récit des deux voyages exécutés par M. Chaffanjon par ordre du ministre de l’Instruction publique de France. Le premier, en 1884, comprend la partie du cours inférieur de l’Orénoque entre Ciudad-Bolivar et l’embouchure du Caura, ainsi que l’exploration de cet important tributaire. Le second, en 1886-1887, comprend le cours entier du fleuve depuis Ciudad-Bolivar jusqu’à ses sources. Ce récit de l’explorateur français est fait avec une extrême précision, et Jean comptait en tirer grand profit.

Il va sans dire que le sergent Martial, muni d’une somme suffisante, convertie en piastres, serait à même de pourvoir à toutes les dépenses de route. Il n’avait pas négligé de se précautionner d’une certaine quantité d’articles d’échange, étoffes, couteaux, miroirs, verroteries, ustensiles de quincaillerie et bibelots de mince valeur, qui devaient faciliter les relations avec les Indiens des llanos. Cette pacotille remplissait deux caisses, placées avec les autres bagages au fond de la cabine de l'oncle, contiguë à celle de son neveu.

Donc, son livre sous les yeux, Jean suivait d'un regard consciencieux les deux rives qui se déplaçaient en sens contraire de la marche du Simon-Bolivar. Il est vrai, à l'époque de cette expédition, son compatriote, moins bien servi par les circonstances, avait dû faire sur une embarcation à voile et à rames le trajet que faisaient alors les bateaux à vapeur jusqu'à l'embouchure de l'Apure. Mais, à partir de cet endroit, le sergent Martial et le jeune garçon devraient, eux aussi, revenir à ce primitif mode de transport, nécessité par les multiples obstacles du fleuve, ce qui ne ménage point les ennuis aux voyageurs.

Dans la matinée, le Simon-Bolivar passa en vue de l'île d'Orocopiche, dont les cultures approvisionnent largement le chef-lieu de la province. En cet endroit, le lit de l'Orénoque se réduit à neuf cents mètres, pour retrouver en amont une largeur au moins triple. De la plate-forme, Jean aperçut distinctement la plaine environnante, bossuée de quelques cerros isolés.

Avant midi, le déjeuner appela les passagers, — une vingtaine au total, — dans la salle, où M. Miguel et ses deux collègues furent des premiers à occuper leurs places. Quant au sergent Martial, il ne se laissa pas distancer, et entraîna son neveu, auquel il parlait avec une certaine rudesse qui n'échappa point à M. Miguel.

“Un homme dur, ce Français, fit-il observer à M. Varinas, assis près de lui.

— Un soldat, et c'est tout dire!” répliqua le partisan du Guaviare.

On le voit, le costume de l’ancien sous-officier était de coupe assez militaire pour que l’on ne pût se méprendre.

Préalablement à ce déjeuner, le sergent Martial avait “tué le ver” en absorbant son anisado, eau-de-vie de canne mélangée d’anis. Mais Jean, qui ne paraissait pas avoir le goût des liqueurs fortes, n’eut pas besoin de recourir à cet apéritif pour faire honneur au repas. Il avait, près de son oncle, pris place à l’extrémité de la salle, et la mine du grognard était si rébarbative que personne ne fut tenté de s’asseoir à son côté.

Quant aux géographes, ils tenaient le centre de la table, et aussi le dé de la conversation. Comme on savait dans quel but ils avaient entrepris ce voyage, les autres passagers ne pouvaient que s’intéresser à ce qu’ils disaient, et pourquoi le sergent Martial eût-il trouvé mal que son neveu les écoutât avec curiosité?…

Le menu était varié, mais de qualité inférieure, et il convient de ne pas se montrer difficile sur les bateaux de l’Orénoque. À vrai dire, pendant la navigation sur le haut cours du fleuve, n’aurait-on pas été trop heureux d’avoir même de tels bistecas, bien qu’ils parussent avoir été cueillis sur un caoutchouc, de tels ragoûts noyés dans leur sauce jaune-safran, de tels œufs déjà en état d’être mis à la broche, de tels rogatons de volailles qu’une longue cuisson aurait pu seule attendrir. En fait de fruits, des bananes à profusion, soit qu’elles fussent à l’état naturel, soit qu’une adjonction de sirop de mélasse les eût transformées en une sorte de confiture. Du pain?… oui, assez bon — du pain de maïs, bien entendu. Du vin?… oui, assez mauvais et coûteux. Tel était cet almuerzo, ce déjeuner, qui, au surplus, fut expédié rapidement.

Dans l’après-midi, le Simon-Bolivar dépassa l’île de la Bernavelle. Le cours de l’Orénoque, encombré d’îles et d’îlots, se resserrait alors, et il fallut que la roue battît ses eaux à coups redoublés pour vaincre la force du courant. D'ailleurs, le capitaine était assez habile manœuvrier pour qu'il n'y eût pas à craindre de s'engraver.

Vers la rive gauche, le fleuve se découpait de multiples anses aux berges très boisées, surtout au-delà d'Almacen, petit village d'une trentaine d'habitants, et tel encore que l'avait vu M. Chaffanjon, huit ans auparavant. De çà et de là descendaient de petits affluents, le Bari, le Lima. À leurs embouchures, s'arrondissaient des massifs de copayferas, dont l'huile, extraite par incision, est de vente fructueuse, et nombre de palmiers moriches. Puis, de tous côtés, des bandes de singes, dont la chair comestible vaut bien ces semelles de bistecas du déjeuner, que le dîner devait faire reparaître sur la table.

Ce ne sont pas seulement des îles qui rendent parfois difficile la navigation de l'Orénoque. On y rencontre aussi des récifs dangereux, brusquement dressés au milieu des passes.

Cependant le Simon-Bolivar parvint à éviter les collisions, et le soir, après un parcours de vingt-cinq à trente lieues, il alla porter ses amarres au village de Moitaco.

Là devait se prolonger l'escale jusqu'au lendemain, car il n'eût pas été prudent de s'aventurer au milieu d'une nuit que d'épais nuages et l'absence de lune allaient rendre assez obscure.

À neuf heures, le sergent Martial pensa que l'instant était venu de prendre du repos, et Jean ne s'avisa pas de vouloir résister aux injonctions de son oncle.

Tous deux regagnèrent donc leur cabine, placée au second étage de la superstructure, vers l’arrière. Chacune comprenait un simple cadre de bois, avec une légère couverture et une des ces nattes, qu’on appelle esteras dans le pays, — literie très suffisante en ces régions de la zone tropicale.

Dans sa cabine le jeune garçon se dévêtit, se coucha, et le sergent Martial vint alors envelopper le cadre du toldo, sorte de mousseline qui sert de moustiquaire, précaution indispensable contre les acharnés insectes de l’Orénoque. Il ne voulait pas permettre à un seul de ces maudits moustiques de s’attaquer à la peau de son neveu. La sienne, passe encore, car elle était assez épaisse et coriace pour braver leurs piqûres, et, soyez sûr qu’il se défendrait de son mieux.

Ces mesures prises, Jean ne fit qu’un somme jusqu’au matin, en dépit des myriades de bestioles qui bruissaient autour de son toldo protecteur.

Le lendemain, aux premières heures, le Simon-Bolivar dont les feux avaient été maintenus, se remit en route, après que l’équipage eut embarqué et empilé sur le premier pont le bois coupé d’avance dans les forêts riveraines.

C’était dans l’une des deux baies, à gauche et à droite du village de Moitaco, que le steamboat avait relâché pendant la nuit. Dès qu’il fut sorti de cette baie, le coquet assemblage de maisonnettes, autrefois centre important des missions espagnoles, disparut derrière un coude de la rive. C’est dans ce village que M.

Chaffanjon chercha vainement la tombe de l’un des compagnons du docteur Crevaux, François Burban, — tombe restée introuvable en ce modeste cimetière de Moitaco.

Pendant cette journée, on dépassa le hameau de Santa-Cruz, assemblage d’une vingtaine de cases sur la rive gauche, puis l’île Guanarès, jadis résidence des missionnaires, placée à peu près à l’endroit où la courbe du fleuve se dessine vers le sud pour reprendre vers l’ouest, puis l’île del Muerto.

Il y eut à franchir plusieurs raudals — ainsi désigne-t-on les rapides produits par le resserrement du lit. Mais ce qui occasionne une grosse fatigue aux bateliers des embarcations à l’aviron ou à la voile ne coûta qu’un surcroît de combustible aux générateurs du Simon-Bolivar. Les soupapes sifflèrent sans qu’il fût nécessaire de les charger. La grande roue repoussa plus violemment les eaux de ses larges pales. Dans ces conditions, trois ou quatre de ces raudals purent être remontés sans trop de retards, même celui de la Bouche de l’Enfer, que Jean signala en amont de l’île de Matapalo.

“Alors, lui demanda le sergent Martial, le bouquin de ce Français est bien conforme à tout ce que nous voyons défiler le long du Simon-Bolivar?

— Tout à fait conforme, mon oncle. Seulement, nous faisons en vingt-quatre heures ce qui a nécessité trois ou quatre jours à notre compatriote. Il est vrai, lorsque nous aurons échangé le steamboat pour les embarcations du moyen Orénoque, nous serons retardés autant qu’il a pu l’être. Qu’importe! L’essentiel n’est-il pas d’arriver à San-Fernando… où j’espère recueillir des renseignements plus précis…

— Assurément, et il n’est pas possible que mon colonel ait passé par là sans avoir laissé quelques traces!… Nous finirons bien par savoir en quel endroit il a planté sa tente… Ah!… quand nous serons en face de lui… lorsque tu te précipiteras dans ses bras… lorsqu’il saura…

— Que je suis ton neveu… ton neveu!” répliqua le jeune garçon, qui craignait toujours qu’une indiscrète répartie n’échappât à son soi- disant oncle.

Le soir venu, le Simon-Bolivar lança ses amarres au pied de la barranca sur laquelle est gracieusement perchée la petite bourgade de Mapire.

MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, profitant d’une heure de crépuscule, voulurent visiter cette bourgade assez importante de la rive gauche. Jean eût été désireux de les accompagner; mais le sergent Martial ayant déclaré qu’il n’était pas convenable de quitter le bord, il ne le quitta pas par obéissance.

Quant aux trois collègues de la Société de Géographie, ils ne regrettèrent point leur excursion. Des hauteurs de Mapire, la vue s’étend largement sur le fleuve en amont et en aval, tandis que vers le nord, elle domine ces llanos où les Indiens élèvent des mulets, des chevaux, des ânes, vastes plaines encadrées d’une verdoyante ceinture de forêts.

À neuf heures, tous les passagers dormaient dans leurs cabines, après avoir pris les précautions habituelles contre l’envahissement des myriades de moustiques.

La journée du lendemain fut noyée — c’est le mot — sous les averses. Personne ne put se tenir sur le spardeck. Le sergent Martial et le jeune garçon passèrent ces longues heures dans le salon de l’arrière, où MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe avaient élu domicile. Il eût été difficile de n’être pas au courant de la question Atabapo-Guaviare-Orénoque, car leurs champions ne parlaient pas d’autre chose et discutaient à haute voix. Plusieurs des passagers se mêlèrent à la conversation, prenant parti pour ou contre. On peut être certain, d’ailleurs, qu’ils n’iraient pas jusqu’à se transporter de leur personne à San-Fernando dans le but d’élucider ce problème géographique.

“Et quel intérêt cela peut-il avoir?… demanda le sergent Martial à son neveu, lorsque celui-ci l’eut mis au courant de l’affaire. Qu’un fleuve s’appelle d’une façon ou d’une autre, c’est toujours de l’eau qui coule en suivant sa pente naturelle…

— Y songes-tu! mon oncle, répondit Jean. S’il n’y avait pas de ces questions-là, à quoi serviraient les géographes, et s’il n’y avait pas de géographes…

— Nous ne pourrions pas apprendre la géographie, répliqua le sergent Martial. En tout cas, ce qui est clair, c’est que nous aurons la compagnie de ces disputeurs jusqu’à San-Fernando.”

En effet, à partir de Caïcara, le voyage devrait s’effectuer en commun dans une de ces embarcations auxquelles leur construction permet de franchir les nombreux raudals du moyen Orénoque.

Grâce aux intempéries de cette journée, on ne vit rien de l’île Tigritta. Par compensation, au déjeuner comme au dîner, les convives purent se régaler d’excellents poissons, ces morocotes qui fourmillent en ces parages, et dont il s’expédie des quantités énormes, conservées dans la salure, à Ciudad-Bolivar comme à Caracas.

Ce fut pendant les dernières heures de la matinée que le steamboat passa à l’ouest de l’embouchure du Caura. Ce cours d’eau est l’un des plus considérables affluents de la rive droite, qui vient du sud-est à travers les territoires des Panares, des Inaos, des Arebatos, des Taparitos, et il arrose une des plus pittoresques vallées du Venezuela. Les villages rapprochés des bords de l’Orénoque sont habités par des métis policés, d’origine espagnole. Les plus lointains ne donnent asile qu’à des Indiens, encore sauvages, ces gardiens de bétail, qu’on nomme gomeros, parce qu’ils s’occupent aussi de récolter les gommes pharmaceutiques.

Jean avait employé une partie de son temps à lire le récit de son compatriote, lequel, en 1885, lors de sa première expédition, abandonna l’Orénoque pour s’aventurer à travers les llanos du Caura, au milieu des tribus Ariguas et Quiriquiripas. Ces dangers qu’il avait courus, Jean les retrouverait, sans doute, et même aggravés, s’il lui fallait remonter le cours supérieur du fleuve. Mais, tout en admirant l’énergie et le courage de cet audacieux Français, il espérait ne pas être moins courageux et moins énergique.

Il est vrai, l’un était un homme fait, et lui n’était qu’un jeune garçon!… Eh bien, que Dieu lui donne assez de force pour endurer les fatigues d’un tel voyage, et il ira jusqu’au bout!

En amont de l’embouchure du Caura, l’Orénoque présente encore une très grande largeur, — environ trois mille mètres. Depuis trois mois, la saison des pluies et les nombreux tributaires des deux rives contribuaient, par un apport considérable, à la surélévation de ses eaux.

Néanmoins, il fallut que le capitaine du Simon-Bolivar manœuvrât avec prudence pour ne pas s’engraver sur les hauts-fonds, en amont de l’île de Tucuragua, à la hauteur du rio de ce nom. Peut-être même le steamboat subit-il certains raclements qui ne laissèrent pas de causer quelque inquiétude à bord. En effet, si sa coque n’en devait pas souffrir, ayant les fonds plats comme ceux d’un chaland, il y avait toujours lieu de craindre pour l’appareil propulseur, soit un bris des pales de la roue, soit des avaries à la machine.

Enfin, cette fois, on s’en tira sans dommage, et, dans la soirée, le Simon-Bolivar vint mouiller au fond d’une anse de la rive droite, au lieu dit Las Bonitas.

CHAPITRE IV

IV

Premier contact

C’est à Las Bonitas, sa résidence officielle, que demeure le gouverneur militaire duquel relève le Caura, c’est-à-dire le territoire arrosé par cet important tributaire. La bourgade occupe, sur la rive droite du fleuve, à peu près l’emplacement que possédait autrefois la mission espagnole de l’Altagracia. Les missionnaires ont été les véritables conquérants de ces provinces hispano-américaines, et ils ne voient pas sans jalousie les Anglais, les Allemands, les Français chercher à convertir les Indiens sauvages de l’intérieur. Aussi des conflits sont toujours à craindre.

Le gouverneur militaire se trouvait alors à Las Bonitas. Il connaissait personnellement M. Miguel. Ayant appris son départ pour le cours supérieur de l’Orénoque, il se hâta, lorsque le bateau eut pris son poste, de venir à bord.

M. Miguel présenta ses deux amis au gouverneur. Il y eut sympathique échange de civilités entre ces divers personnages. Une invitation pour déjeuner le lendemain à la résidence fut acceptée, — ce que permettait la relâche du Simon-Bolivar, qui devait se prolonger jusqu’à une heure de l’après-midi.

Il suffisait, en somme, de partir à cette heure-là, et le steamboat arriverait le soir même à Caïcara, où débarqueraient les passagers qui n’étaient pas à destination de San-Fernando ou autres bourgades de la province de l’Apure.

Le lendemain donc, — 15 août, — les trois collègues de la Société de Géographie se rendirent à l’habitation du gouverneur. Mais, avant eux, le sergent Martial ayant ordonné à son neveu, — sur la proposition de celui-ci, — de débarquer, tous deux se promenaient déjà à travers les rues de Las Bonitas.

Une bourgade, en cette partie du Venezuela, c’est à peine un village, quelques cases éparses sous les frondaisons, noyées au milieu de l’épaisse verdure de la zone tropicale. Çà et là se groupaient de magnifiques arbres, qui témoignaient de la puissance végétative du sol — des chapparos au tronc tortu comme celui d’un olivier, couverts de feuilles rudes à odeur forte, des palmiers copernicias aux branches épanouies en gerbes et dont les pétioles se déploient comme des éventails, des palmiers moriches, qui constituent ce qu’on appelle le morichal, c’est-à-dire le marécage, car ces arbres ont la propriété de pomper l’eau du sol au point de le rendre fangeux à leur pied.

Puis c’était des copayferas, des saurans, mimosées géantes, avec une large ramure, au feuillage d’une fine contexture et d’un rose délicat.

Jean et le sergent Martial s’enfoncèrent au milieu de ces palmeraies qui sont naturellement disposées en quinconce, à travers un sous-bois dégagé de broussailles, où poussaient, par myriades, d’élégants bouquets de ces sensitives appelées dormideras ou dormeuses, — d’une si attrayante couleur.

Entre ces arbres passaient, gambadaient, voltigeaient des bandes de singes. Cette engeance pullule sur les territoires vénézuéliens, où l’on ne compte pas moins de seize espèces, aussi inoffensives que bruyantes, — entre autres ces aluates ou araguatos, des hurleurs dont la voix est effrayante pour qui n’a pas l’habitude des forêts tropicales. D’une branche à l’autre sautillait tout un monde ailé, des trupials, qui sont les premiers ténors de ces orphéons aériens, et dont le nid pend à l’extrémité d’une longue liane, des cochets de lagunes, charmants oiseaux, gracieux et caressants; puis, cachés dans les fentes des trous, et attendant la nuit pour sortir, nombre de ces guarharos frugivores, plus communément appelés diablotins, qui ont l’air d’être brusquement poussés par un ressort, lorsqu’ils s’élancent au sommet des arbres.

Et, tout en gagnant les profondeurs de la palmeraie, le sergent Martial de dire:

“J’aurais bien dû prendre mon fusil…

— Veux-tu donc tuer des singes?… demanda

Jean.

— Des singes, non… Mais… s’il y a par ici des bêtes peu commodes…

— Sois sans inquiétude, mon oncle! Il faut aller fort loin des habitations pour rencontrer des fauves dangereux, et il n’est pas impossible que nous ayons plus tard à nous défendre…

— N’importe!… Un soldat ne doit pas sortir sans ses armes, et je mériterais d’être consigné!…”

Le sergent Martial n’eut point à se repentir de ce manquement à la discipline. La vérité est que les félidés, grands ou petits, les jaguars, les tigres, les lions, les ocelots, les chats, fréquentent de préférence les épaisses forêts du haut fleuve. Peut-être risque-t-on aussi d’y rencontrer des ours, mais ces plantigrades sont d’humeur débonnaire, vivant de poissons et de miel, et quant aux paresseux — le bradypus trydactylus, — ce sont des pleignards dont il n’y a pas à se préoccuper.

Au cours de cette promenade, le sergent

Martial n’aperçut que de timides rongeurs, entre autres, des cabiais et quelques couples de ces chiriquis, habiles au plongeon, inhabiles à la course.

Quant aux habitants du district, c’étaient généralement des métis, mêlés à des familles d’Indiens, plus disposés à se cacher au fond de leurs paillotes qu’à se montrer au-dehors, — les femmes et les enfants surtout.

C’est bien au-delà, en amont du fleuve, que l’oncle et le neveu se trouveraient en communication avec les farouches indigènes de l’Orénoque, et sans doute, le sergent Martial ferait-il bien de ne jamais oublier sa carabine.

Après une assez fatigante excursion de trois bonnes heures aux alentours de Las Bonitas, tous deux revinrent à bord pour le déjeuner du Simon-Bolivar.

À la même heure, MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, réunis dans la case résidentielle, s’asseyaient à la table du gouverneur.

Si le menu du repas fut très simple, — et, franchement, on ne peut attendre d’un gouverneur de province ce qu’on eût attendu du Président de la république vénézuélienne, — les convives furent l’objet d’un très cordial accueil. On causa naturellement de la mission que s’étaient donnée les trois géographes, et le gouverneur, en homme avisé, se garda bien de prendre parti pour l’Orénoque, le Guaviare ou l’Atabapo. L’essentiel était que la conversation ne dégénérât pas en dispute, et, plus d’une fois, il dut l’aiguiller fort à propos sur un autre sujet.

Et, à un certain moment où les voix de MM. Felipe et Varinas prenaient une intensité provocante, il sut opérer une diversion en disant:

“Savez-vous, messieurs, si, parmi les passagers du Simon-Bolivar, il en est qui remonteront l’Orénoque jusqu’à son cours supérieur?…

— Nous l’ignorons, répondit M. Miguel. Cependant il semble bien que le plus grand nombre compte soit s’arrêter à Caïcara, soit continuer par l’Apure jusqu’aux bourgades de la Colombie…

— À moins que ces deux Français ne se dirigent vers le haut Orénoque, fit observer M. Varinas.

— Deux Français?… demanda le gouverneur.

— Oui, répondit M. Felipe, un vieux et un jeune, qui se sont embarqués à Bolivar.

— Où vont-ils?…

— Personne ne le sait, répondit M. Miguel, car ils ne sont pas précisément communicatifs. Lorsque l’on veut entrer en conversation avec le jeune, le vieux, qui a toute l’apparence d’un ancien soldat, intervient d’un air furibond, et si l’on persiste, il envoie brutalement son neveu, — car il paraît que c’est son neveu, — réintégrer sa cabine… C’est un oncle qui a des façons de tuteur…

— Et je plains le pauvre garçon qu’il a sous sa tutelle, répliqua M. Varinas, car il souffre de ces brutalités, et, plus d’une fois, j’ai cru voir des larmes dans ses yeux…”

Vraiment, cet excellent M. Varinas avait vu cela!… Dans tous les cas, si les yeux de Jean sont quelquefois humides, c’est parce qu’il songe à l’avenir, au but qu’il poursuit, aux déceptions qui l’attendent peut-être, et non parce que le sergent Martial le traite avec trop de dureté. Après tout, des étrangers pouvaient s’y méprendre.

“Enfin, reprit M. Miguel, nous serons fixés, ce soir même, sur le point de savoir si ces deux Français ont l’intention de remonter l’Orénoque. Je n’en serais pas étonné, parce que le jeune garçon consulte sans cesse l’ouvrage de ce compatriote à lui, qui a pu atteindre, il y a quelques années, les sources du fleuve…

— Si elles sont de ce côté, dans le massif de la Parima… s’écria M. Felipe, tout indiqué pour faire cette réserve, en sa qualité de partisan de l’Atabapo.

— Et si elles ne sont pas dans les montagnes des Andes, s’écria M. Varinas, au lieu même où naît cet affluent improprement appelé le Guaviare…”

Le gouverneur comprit que la discussion allait recommencer de plus belle.

“Messieurs, dit-il à ses hôtes, cet oncle et ce neveu dont vous parlez piquent ma curiosité. S’ils ne s’arrêtent pas à Caïcara, s’ils ne sont pas à destination de San-Fernando de Apure ou de Nutrias, en un mot, s’ils ont l’intention de poursuivre leur voyage sur le cours du haut Orénoque, je me demande quel est leur but. Les Français sont hardis, j’en conviens, ce sont d’audacieux explorateurs, mais ces territoires du Sud-Amérique leur ont déjà coûté plus d’une victime… le docteur Crevaux, tombé sous les coups des Indiens dans les plaines de la Bolivie, son compagnon, François Burban, dont on ne retrouve plus même la tombe dans le cimetière de Moitaco… Il est vrai, M. Chaffanjon a pu parvenir jusqu'aux sources de l'Orénoque…

— Si c'est l'Orénoque!… répliqua M. Varinas qui n'aurait jamais laissé passer cette affirmation monstrueuse sans une énergique protestation.

— En effet, si c'est l'Orénoque, répondit le gouverneur, et nous serons définitivement fixés sur ce point géographique après votre voyage, messieurs. Je disais donc que si M. Chaffanjon a pu revenir sain et sauf, ce n'est pas faute d'avoir couru plus d'une fois le risque d'être massacré comme l'ont été ses prédécesseurs. En vérité, on dirait que notre superbe fleuve vénézuélien les attire, ces Français, et sans parler de ceux qui sont parmi les passagers du Simon-Bolivar…

— Au fait, c'est vrai, fit observer M. Miguel. Il y a quelques semaines, deux de ces intrépides ont entrepris une reconnaissance à travers les llanos, dans l'est du fleuve…

— Parfaitement, monsieur Miguel, répondit le gouverneur. Je les ai reçus ici même, des hommes jeunes encore, de vingt-cinq à trente ans, l'un, Jacques Helloch, un explorateur, l'autre, nommé Germain Paterne, un de ces naturalistes qui risqueraient leur vie pour découvrir un nouveau brin d'herbe…

— Et, depuis, vous n'en avez aucune nouvelle?… demanda M. Felipe.

— Aucune, messieurs. Je sais seulement qu'ils se sont embarqués sur une pirogue à Caïcara, qu'on a signalé leur passage à Buena Vista et à la Urbana, d'où ils sont partis pour remonter l'un des affluents de la rive droite. Mais, à dater de cette relâche, on n'en a plus entendu parler, et les inquiétudes qu'ils donnent ne se justifient que trop!

— Espérons que ces deux explorateurs, dit M. Miguel, ne sont pas tombés entre les mains de ces Quivas, pillards et assassins, dont la Colombie a rejeté les tribus sur le Venezuela, et qui ont maintenant pour chef, assure-t-on, un certain Alfaniz, forçat évadé du bagne de Cayenne…

— Est-ce que le fait est positif?…. interrogea M. Felipe.

— Il paraît l'être, et je vous souhaite de ne point rencontrer ces bandes de Quivas, messieurs, ajouta le gouverneur. Après tout, il est possible que ces Français n'aient pas été attirés dans un guet-apens, possible qu'ils poursuivent leur voyage avec autant de bonheur que d'audace, possible enfin que, d'un jour à l'autre, leur retour s'opère par un des villages de la rive droite. Puissent-ils réussir comme a réussi leur compatriote! Mais on parle également d'un missionnaire qui a été plus loin encore à travers ces territoires de l'est: c'est un Espagnol, le Père Esperante. Après un court séjour à San-Fernando, ce missionnaire n'avait pas hésité à dépasser les sources de l'Orénoque…

— Le faux Orénoque!” s'écrièrent à la fois MM. Felipe et Varinas.

Et ils jetèrent un regard de provocation à leur collègue, qui inclina doucement la tête en disant:

“Aussi faux qu'il vous plaira, mes chers collègues!”

Et M. Miguel ajouta en s'adressant au gouverneur:

“N'ai-je pas entendu dire que ce missionnaire avait réussi à fonder une mission…

— En effet… la Mission de Santa-Juana, dans les régions voisines du Roraima, et qui paraît être en voie de prospérité.

— Une tâche difficile… affirma M. Miguel.

— Surtout quand il s’agit, répondit le gouverneur, de civiliser, de convertir au catholicisme, de régénérer, en un mot, les plus sauvages des Indiens sédentaires qui errent sur les territoires du sud-est, ces Guaharibos, pauvres êtres relégués au bas de l’échelle humaine! Et l’on ne se figure pas ce qu’il faut de courage, d’abnégation, de patience, en un mot de vertu apostolique, pour accomplir une telle œuvre d’humanité. Pendant les premières années, on est resté sans nouvelles du Père Esperante, et, en 1888, le voyageur français n’en avait pas entendu parler, bien que la Mission de Santa-Juana ne fût pas très éloignée des sources…”

Le gouverneur se garda bien d’ajouter: de l’Orénoque, afin de ne pas mettre le feu aux poudres.

“Mais, continua-t-il, depuis deux ans, on a eu de ses nouvelles à San-Fernando, et il se confirme qu’il a fait là, parmi ces Guaharibos, œuvre miraculeuse de civilisation.”

Jusqu’à la fin du déjeuner, la conversation porta sur les faits relatifs aux territoires traversés par le cours moyen de l’Orénoque, — cours qui, lui, n’était pas en discussion, — sur l’état actuel des Indiens, de ceux qui sont apprivoisés comme de ceux qui se soustraient à toute domination, c’est-à-dire à toute civilisation. Le gouverneur du Caura donna des détails circonstanciés à propos de ces indigènes, — détails dont M. Miguel, si savant qu’il fût en matières géographiques, devait faire et fit son profit.

Bref, cette conversation ne dégénéra point en dispute, car elle ne mit pas aux prises MM. Felipe et Varinas.

Vers midi, les hôtes de la résidence quittèrent la table, et se dirigèrent vers le Simon-Bolivar, dont le départ devait s'effectuer à une heure de l'après-midi.

L'oncle et son neveu, depuis qu'ils étaient rentrés pour prendre leur part de l'almuerzo, n'avaient plus remis le pied à terre. De l'arrière du pont supérieur, où le sergent Martial fumait sa pipe, ils aperçurent de loin M. Miguel et ses collègues qui regagnaient le bord.

Le gouverneur avait voulu les accompagner. Désireux de leur donner une dernière poignée de main et un dernier adieu à l'instant où le bateau larguerait ses amarres, il embarqua et monta sur le spardeck.

Le sergent Martial dit alors à Jean:

“C'est au moins un général, ce gouverneur-là, bien qu'il ait un veston pour tunique, un chapeau de paille pour bicorne, et que sa poitrine manque de décorations…

— C'est probable, mon oncle.

— Un de ces généraux sans soldats, comme il y en a tant dans ces républiques américaines!

— Il a l'air d'un homme fort intelligent, fit observer le jeune garçon.

— Possible, mais il a surtout l'air d'un curieux, répliqua le sergent Martial, car il nous regarde d'une façon qui ne me va qu'à moitié… et, à vrai dire, pas du tout!”

En effet, le gouverneur s’obstinait à dévisager particulièrement les deux Français, dont il avait été question pendant le déjeuner.

Leur présence à bord du Simon-Bolivar, le motif pour lequel ils avaient entrepris ce voyage, la question de savoir s’ils s’arrêteraient à Caïcara, ou s’ils iraient au-delà, soit par l’Apure, soit par l’Orénoque, cela ne laissait pas d’exciter sa curiosité. Les explorateurs du fleuve, ce sont généralement des hommes dans la force de l’âge — tels ceux qui avaient visité Las Bonitas, il y avait quelques semaines, et dont on n’avait plus de nouvelles depuis leur départ de la Urbana. Mais ce jeune garçon de seize à dix-sept ans, et ce vieux soldat de soixante, il était difficile d’admettre qu’ils fussent en train d’effectuer une expédition scientifique…

Après tout, un gouverneur, même au Venezuela, a bien le droit de s’enquérir des motifs qui amènent des étrangers sur son territoire, de leur poser des questions à ce sujet, de les interroger au moins officieusement.

Le gouverneur fit donc quelques pas vers l’arrière du spardeck, en causant avec M. Miguel, que ses compagnons, occupés dans leur cabine, avaient laissé seul à lui tenir compagnie.

Le sergent Martial comprit la manœuvre:

“Attention! dit-il. Le général cherche à prendre contact, et, pour sûr, il va nous demander qui nous sommes… pourquoi nous sommes venus… où nous allons…

— Eh bien, mon bon Martial, il n’y a point à le cacher, répondit Jean.

— Je n’aime pas qu’on s’occupe de mes affaires, et je vais l’envoyer promener…

— Veux-tu donc nous attirer des difficultés, mon oncle?… dit le jeune garçon en le retenant de la main.

— Je ne veux pas qu’on te parle… je ne veux pas que l’on tourne autour de toi…

— Et moi, je ne veux pas que tu compromettes notre voyage par des maladresses ou des sottises! répliqua Jean d’un ton résolu. Si le gouverneur du Caura m’interroge, je ne refuserai pas de répondre, et il est même désirable que j’obtienne de lui quelques renseignements.”

Le sergent Martial bougonna, tira de rageuses bouffées de sa pipe, et se rapprocha de son neveu, auquel le gouverneur dit en cette langue espagnole que Jean parlait couramment:

“Vous êtes un Français…

— Oui, monsieur le gouverneur, répondit Jean, qui se découvrit devant Son Excellence.

— Et votre compagnon?…

— Mon oncle… c’est un Français comme moi, un ancien sergent à la retraite.”

Le sergent Martial, bien qu’il fût très peu familiarisé avec la langue espagnole, avait compris qu’il s’agissait de lui. Aussi se redressa-t-il de toute sa hauteur, convaincu qu’un sergent du 72e de ligne valait bien un général vénézuélien, fût-il gouverneur de territoire.

“Je ne crois pas être indiscret, mon jeune ami, reprit ce dernier, en vous demandant si votre voyage doit se prolonger au-delà de Caïcara?…

— Oui… au-delà, monsieur le gouverneur, répondit Jean.

— Par l’Orénoque ou par l’Apure?…

— Par l’Orénoque.

— Jusqu’à San-Fernando de Atabapo?…

— Jusqu’à cette bourgade, monsieur le gouverneur, et peut-être plus loin encore si les renseignements que nous espérons y recueillir l’exigent.”

Le gouverneur, à l’exemple de M. Miguel, ne pouvait qu’être vivement impressionné par l’air de ce jeune garçon, la netteté de ses réponses, et il était aisé de voir qu’il leur inspirait à tous deux une réelle sympathie.

Or, c’était contre ces trop visibles sympathies-là que le sergent Martial prétendait bien le défendre. Il n’entendait pas que l’on regardât son neveu de si près, il ne voulait pas que d’autres, étrangers ou non, se montrassent touchés de sa grâce naturelle et charmante. Et ce qui l’enrageait davantage, c’est que M. Miguel ne cachait point les sentiments qu’il éprouvait pour ce jeune garçon. Le gouverneur du Caura, peu importait, puisqu’il resterait à Las Bonitas; mais M. Miguel était, lui, plus qu’un passager du Simon-Bolivar… il devait remonter le fleuve jusqu’à San-Fernando… et lorsqu’il aurait fait connaissance avec Jean, il serait bien difficile d’empêcher ces relations, qui sont comme obligées entre voyageurs pendant un long itinéraire.

Eh bien, pourquoi pas?… voudra-t-on demander au sergent Martial.

Quel inconvénient y aurait-il eu à ce que des personnages de haute situation, à même de rendre quelques services au cours d’une navigation sur l’Orénoque, laquelle n’est pas sans danger, se fussent mis en une certaine intimité avec l’oncle et le neveu?… Cela n’est-il pas dans l’ordre ordinaire des choses?…

Oui, et, cependant, si l’on eût prié le sergent Martial de dire pourquoi il avait l’intention d’y faire obstacle:

“Parce que cela ne me convient pas!” se fût-il borné à répondre d’un ton cassant, et il aurait fallu se contenter de cette réponse, faute d’une autre que, sans doute, il se refuserait à donner.

Au surplus, en ce moment, il ne pouvait envoyer promener Son Excellence, et il dut laisser le jeune garçon prendre part à cet entretien, comme il l’entendait.

Le gouverneur fut alors tout porté à interroger Jean sur l’objet de son voyage.

“Vous allez à San-Fernando?… lui dit-il.

— Oui, monsieur le gouverneur.

— Dans quel but?…

— Afin d’obtenir des renseignements.

— Des renseignements… et sur qui?…

— Sur le colonel de Kermor.

— Le colonel de Kermor?… répondit le gouverneur. C’est la première fois que ce nom est prononcé devant moi, et je n’ai pas entendu dire qu’un Français ait jamais été signalé à San-Fernando depuis le passage de M. Chaffanjon…

— Il s’y trouvait, cependant, quelques années auparavant, fit observer le jeune garçon.

— Sur quoi vous appuyez-vous pour affirmer ce fait?… demanda le gouverneur.

— Sur la dernière lettre du colonel qu’on ait reçue en France, une lettre adressée à l’un de ses amis de Nantes, et qui était signée de son nom…

— Et vous dites, mon cher enfant, reprit le gouverneur, que le colonel de Kermor a séjourné il y a quelques années à San-Fernando?…

— Ce n’est pas douteux, puisque sa lettre était datée du 12 avril 1879.

— Cela m’étonne!…

— Et pourquoi, monsieur le gouverneur?…

— Parce que je me trouvais à cette époque dans la bourgade, en qualité de gouverneur de l’Atabapo, et si un Français tel que le colonel de Kermor avait paru sur le territoire, j’en eusse été certainement informé… Or, ma mémoire ne me rappelle rien… absolument rien…”

Cette affirmation si précise du gouverneur parut faire une profonde impression sur le jeune garçon. Sa figure, qui s’était animée pendant la conversation, perdit sa coloration habituelle. Il pâlit, ses yeux devinrent humides, et il dut faire preuve d’une grande énergie pour ne pas s’abandonner.

“Je vous remercie, monsieur le gouverneur, dit-il, je vous remercie de l’intérêt que nous vous inspirons, mon oncle et moi… Mais, si certain que vous soyez de n’avoir jamais entendu parler du colonel de Kermor, il n’est pas moins acquis qu’il était à San-Fernando, en avril 1879, puisque c’est de là qu’il a envoyé la dernière lettre qu’on ait reçue de lui en France.

— Et qu’allait-il faire à San-Fernando?…” demanda M. Miguel, question que le gouverneur n’avait pas encore posée.

Ce qui valut à l’honorable membre de la Société de Géographie un formidable coup d’œil du sergent Martial, lequel murmurait entre ses dents:

“Ah çà! de quoi se mêle-t-il, celui-là?… Le gouverneur, passe encore… mais ce pékin…”

Et pourtant, ce pékin, Jean n’hésita pas à lui répondre:

“Ce qu’allait faire le colonel, monsieur, je l’ignore… C’est un secret que nous découvrirons, si Dieu nous permet d’arriver jusqu’à lui…

— Quel lien vous rattache donc au colonel de Kermor?… demanda le gouverneur.

— C’est mon père, répondit Jean, et je suis venu au Venezuela pour retrouver mon père!”

CHAPITRE V

V

La Maripare et la Gallinetta

Une bourgade, à laquelle il aurait plu de se blottir dans le coude d'un fleuve, ne pourrait qu'envier la situation de Caïcara. Elle est placée là comme une auberge à un tournant de route, ou mieux, à un carrefour. Excellente position pour prospérer, même à quatre cents kilomètres du delta de l'Orénoque.

Et Caïcara est en pleine prospérité, grâce au voisinage du confluent de l'Apure, qui s'ouvre en amont au commerce de la Colombie et du Venezuela.

Le Simon-Bolivar n'avait atteint ce port fluvial que vers neuf heures du soir. Ayant quitté Las Bonitas à une heure après midi, puis, dépassant successivement le rio Cuchivero, le Manapire, l'île Taruma, il était venu déposer ses passagers à l'appontement du quai de Caïcara.

Ces passagers, cela va sans dire, étaient uniquement ceux que le bateau ne devait pas conduire, par l'Apure, à San-Fernando ou à Nutrias.

Le trio des géographes, le sergent Martial et Jean de Kermor, un certain nombre de voyageurs, étaient de ceux-là. Le lendemain, au jour levant, le Simon-Bolivar quitterait la bourgade afin de remonter cet important tributaire de l'Orénoque jusqu'aux pieds des Andes colombiennes.

M. Miguel n’avait point négligé de rapporter à ses deux amis les quelques renseignements ajoutés par le jeune garçon dans sa conversation avec le gouverneur. Tous deux savaient maintenant que Jean allait à la recherche de son père, sous la tutelle d’un vieux soldat, le sergent Martial, qui se disait son oncle. Il y avait quatorze ans que le colonel de Kermor avait quitté la France pour se rendre au Venezuela. À la suite de quelles circonstances s’était-il expatrié, que faisait-il dans ces contrées lointaines, peut-être l’avenir se réservait-il de l’apprendre. En somme, ce qui était certain, d’après la lettre écrite par lui à l’un de ses amis, — lettre qui ne fut connue que bien des années après son arrivée, — c’est que le colonel passait en avril 1879 à San-Fernando de Atabapo, bien que le gouverneur du Caura, qui résidait alors en cette bourgade, n’eût pas eu connaissance de son passage.

Voilà donc pourquoi Jean de Kermor, résolu à retrouver les traces de son père, avait entrepris ce périlleux et difficile voyage. Un tel but à atteindre par un jeune garçon de dix-sept ans, cela était bien pour toucher des âmes généreuses. MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas se promirent de lui venir en aide dans la mesure du possible lors des démarches qu’ils feraient pour recueillir les renseignements relatifs au colonel de Kermor.

Il est vrai, M. Miguel et ses deux collègues parviendraient-ils à amadouer le farouche sergent Martial?… Celui-ci leur permettrait-il de faire plus ample connaissance avec son neveu?… Triompheraient-ils de cette défiance vraiment inexplicable du vieux soldat?… L’obligeraient-ils à adoucir ses regards de cerbère, bien faits pour tenir les gens à distance?… Ce serait malaisé, mais cela arriverait peut-être, — dans le cas, surtout, où la même embarcation les conduirait jusqu’à San-Fernando.

Caïcara possède environ cinq cents habitants et reçoit fréquemment des voyageurs, ceux que leurs affaires appellent à parcourir le cours supérieur de l’Orénoque. On y trouve donc un ou deux hôtels, en réalité de simples cases, et c’est dans l’une d’elles que les trois Vénézuéliens d’un côté, les deux Français de l’autre, allaient descendre pendant les quelques jours qu’ils devaient rester en cet endroit.

Ce fut le lendemain, 16 août, que le sergent Martial et Jean visitèrent Caïcara, tout en s’occupant de chercher une embarcation.

Au vrai, une petite bourgade fraîche et riante, blottie entre les premières collines du système parimien et la rive droite du fleuve, vis-à-vis du village du Cabruta, qui occupe l’autre rive à la naissance de l’Apurito. Devant, s’allonge une de ces îles comme il s’en rencontre tant sur l’Orénoque, boisée de beaux arbres. Son minuscule port se dessine entre de noirs granits, qui hérissent le courant du fleuve. On y compte cent cinquante cases, — maisons si l’on veut, — la plupart construites en pierres, avec une toiture en feuilles de palmier, quelques-unes coiffées d’un toit de tuiles dont le rouge éclate au milieu des verdures. La bourgade est dominée par un monticule, haut de cinquante mètres. Au sommet, se montre un couvent de missionnaires, abandonné depuis l’expédition de Miranda et la guerre de l’Indépendance, et que souillèrent jadis des pratiques de cannibalisme, — d’où cette réputation trop justifiée que méritaient les anciens Caraïbes.

Du reste, les vieilles coutumes indiennes sont encore en usage à Caïcara, même celles qui mêlent le christianisme aux plus invraisemblables cérémonies religieuses. Telles celle du velorio, de la veillée des morts, et à laquelle put assister l’explorateur français. Là, au milieu des nombreux invités, qui n’épargnent ni le café, ni le tabac, ni surtout l’eau-de-vie, l’aguardiente, en présence du cadavre du mari ou de l’enfant, l’épouse ou la mère ouvre le bal, et les danses ne prennent fin qu'avec les forces des danseurs, épuisés par l'ivresse. Cela est plus chorégraphique que funèbre.

Cependant, si la question d'affréter une barque pour remonter le moyen Orénoque, entre Caïcara et San-Fernando, sur un parcours de huit cents kilomètres environ, était la première que Jean de Kermor et le sergent Martial eussent à résoudre, c'était aussi celle dont MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas devaient s'inquiéter préalablement. Au premier échut la tâche de s'assurer d'un mode de transport aux conditions les meilleures.

On pensera, comme M. Miguel, qu'une entente commune entre le sergent Martial et lui aurait eu pour avantage de simplifier les choses. Que les voyageurs fussent au nombre de trois ou de cinq, peu importait. Les embarcations pourraient aisément les contenir, et le personnel des mariniers nécessaires à la manœuvre n'en serait pas augmenté.

Or, le recrutement de ces mariniers n'est pas toujours facile. Il est nécessaire d'engager des hommes exercés. La plupart du temps, les pirogues ont à naviguer contre la brise pendant cette saison des pluies, et toujours contre le courant. Il existe de nombreux raudals dangereux, et aussi certaines passes encombrées de roches ou de sables, qui obligent à des portages de longue durée. L'Orénoque a ses caprices, ses colères tout comme l'Océan, et on ne les affronte pas sans risques et périls.

Ces mariniers, c'est aux tribus riveraines qu'il est d'habitude de les demander. Nombre de ces indigènes dont c'est l'unique métier, savent accomplir leur tâche avec grande habileté et non moins grande audace. Entre les plus sûrs, on cite les Banivas, dont les peuplades fréquentent principalement les territoires arrosés par le triple cours du Guaviare, de l'Orénoque et de l'Atabapo. Après avoir remonté le fleuve, soit avec des passagers, soit avec des marchandises, ils le redescendent jusqu’à Caïcara, afin d’y attendre de nouveaux voyageurs et de nouvelles cargaisons.

Peut-on se fier à ces mariniers?…

Médiocrement, cela n’est que trop vrai. Ce serait donc une garantie à cet égard, s’il n’y avait qu’un équipage à recruter. Ainsi raisonnait le sage M. Miguel, et il raisonnait juste. En outre, puisqu’il s’intéressait vivement au jeune garçon, Jean ne pourrait que gagner à avoir pour compagnons de voyage ses deux amis et lui.

Donc, féru de cette idée, il était résolu à pressentir le sergent Martial, et, dès qu’il les aperçut au petit port de Caïcara, Jean et lui se démarchant pour noliser une embarcation, il n’hésita pas à les accoster.

Froncement des sourcils du vieux soldat, et mine peu engageante à l’égard de son interlocuteur.

“Monsieur le sergent, dit M. Miguel, en un français qu’il parlait très correctement, nous avons eu le plaisir de naviguer ensemble à bord du Simon-Bolivar…

— Et d’en débarquer hier soir”, répondit le sergent Martial, les pieds rassemblés, raide comme un fantassin au port d’arme.

M. Miguel voulut bien attribuer un sens aimable à cette phrase, et il continua:

“Mes deux amis et moi, c’est à Las Bonitas seulement… dans une conversation entre votre neveu…”

La bouche du sergent Martial commença à se contracter, — mauvais symptôme, — et, interrompant M. Miguel:

“Plaît-il… une conversation?…

— Entre M. Jean de Kermor et le gouverneur, que nous avons connu votre intention de débarquer à Caïcara…

— Je pense que nous n’avions à demander la permission de personne?… répliqua le grognard d’un ton rogue.

— De personne, assurément, reprit M. Miguel, bien décidé à ne point tenir compte du mauvais accueil réservé sans doute à sa proposition. Mais, ayant appris quel était le but de votre voyage…

— Un!… marmotta le sergent Martial entre ses dents, comme s’il comptait combien de fois il aurait à répondre aux questions du bienveillant géographe.

— Dans quelles conditions votre neveu allait à la recherche du colonel de Kermor, son père…

— Deux!… prononça le sergent Martial.

— Et sachant que votre intention était de remonter l’Orénoque jusqu’à San-Fernando…

— Trois!… bougonna le sergent Martial.

— Je viens vous demander, puisque mes collègues et moi nous nous rendons au même lieu, s’il ne serait pas plus convenable, plus avantageux, plus sûr aussi, de faire le trajet de Caïcara à San-Fernando avec la même embarcation…”

Si jamais offre fut acceptable, c’était bien celle que venait d’émettre M. Miguel. Il ne semblait pas qu’il pût exister un motif de la rejeter. En choisissant une pirogue de dimension suffisante, les cinq voyageurs accompliraient certainement leur navigation dans des conditions plus favorables.

Le sergent Martial ne devait donc pas avoir une apparence de bonne raison à opposer, et, cependant, sans même consulter son neveu, en homme dont le parti est pris d’avance, il répondit sèchement:

“Très honoré, monsieur, très honoré!… Que votre proposition soit plus avantageuse, possible, mais convenable… non… en ce qui nous concerne du moins!

— Et qu’a-t-elle donc d’inconvenant?… demanda M. Miguel, assez surpris de ce que sa proposition fût taxée d’inconvenance.

— Elle a d’inconvenant… qu’elle ne peut nous convenir! répliqua le sergent Martial.

— Sans doute, vous avez vos raisons pour répondre ainsi, monsieur le sergent, reprit M. Miguel. Cependant, puisque mon désir était de nous entraider, cela eût mérité une réponse moins blessante…

— Je le regrette… oui… je le regrette… monsieur… répondit le sergent Martial, qui ne se trouvait évidemment pas sur un bon terrain, et je ne pouvais vous répondre que par un refus…

— Un refus peut être accompagné de certaines formes, et je ne reconnais pas là la politesse française…

— Eh, monsieur, répliqua l’ancien, qui commençait à s’échauffer, il ne s’agit pas ici de politesse… Vous nous avez fait une proposition… cette proposition, j’ai des motifs pour ne pas l’accepter, je vous l’ai dit comme ça m’est venu… sans me perdre dans les feux de file… et si vous y trouvez à reprendre…”

L’air hautain que prit M. Miguel n’était pas pour calmer le sergent Martial, qui ne possédait pas des trésors de patience. C’est alors que Jean de Kermor intervint en disant:

“Monsieur, veuillez excuser mon oncle… Son intention n’a pas été de vous blesser… Ce que vous nous proposez témoigne d’une extrême obligeance de votre part, et, en toute autre occasion, nous aurions été heureux de mettre votre bonne volonté à profit… Mais notre désir est d’avoir une embarcation à nous seuls… dont nous puissions toujours disposer suivant les circonstances… car il est possible que les renseignements, recueillis en route, nous obligent à changer notre itinéraire, à séjourner dans une bourgade ou dans une autre… En un mot, nous avons besoin de la liberté de nos mouvements…

— Très bien, monsieur de Kermor, répondit M. Miguel. Nous ne prétendons pas vous gêner en rien… et, malgré la réponse un peu trop… sèche de votre oncle…

— Celle d’un ancien militaire, monsieur! déclara le sergent Martial.

— Soit!… Néanmoins, si mes amis et moi, nous pouvons vous être de quelque utilité pendant le voyage…

— Je vous remercie pour mon oncle et pour moi, monsieur, répondit le jeune garçon, et, au besoin, croyez-le bien, nous n’hésiterons pas à vous demander assistance.

— Vous entendez, monsieur le sergent?… ajouta M. Miguel d’un ton moitié plaisant, moitié sérieux.

— J’entends, monsieur le géographe!” répondit le sergent Martial d’un ton bourru, car il ne voulait pas désarmer, malgré les avances de

M. Miguel, en réalité le meilleur et le plus obligeant des hommes.

M. Miguel tendit alors la main à Jean de Kermor, qui la serra de bonne amitié, — ce qui fit sortir des yeux de son terrible oncle deux éclairs accompagnés d’un long grognement de tonnerre.

Lorsque le sergent Martial et le jeune garçon furent seuls, le premier dit:

“Tu as vu comme je l’ai reçu, ce particulier-là!…

— Tu l’as mal reçu et tu as eu tort.

— J’ai eu tort?…

— Absolument.

— Eh bien… il n’aurait plus manqué que de consentir à partager la pirogue de ces trois Bolivariens!

— Tu as bien fait de refuser, mais il fallait le faire plus poliment, mon oncle!

— Je n’avais pas à être poli avec un indiscret…

— M. Miguel n’a point été indiscret, il s’est montré très serviable, et sa proposition méritait d’être acceptée… si elle avait pu l’être… Tout en la rejetant, tu aurais dû le remercier en bons termes. Qui sait si ses amis et lui ne sont pas appelés à faciliter notre tâche, grâce aux relations qu’ils ont sans doute à San-Fernando, et qui peuvent nous aider à retrouver, toi, ton colonel, mon bon Martial, et moi, mon père…

— Ainsi… c’est moi qui ai eu tort?…

— Oui, mon oncle.

— Et c’est toi qui as raison?…

— Oui, mon oncle.

— Merci, mon neveu!”

Les pirogues du moyen Orénoque, les plus petites, sont creusées dans le tronc d’un gros arbre, entre autres le cachicamo. Les plus grandes, faites de planches ajustées, arrondies sur les flancs, taillées en proue à l’avant, se relèvent en voûte. Ces embarcations, construites assez solidement, résistent à l’usure du traînage sur les bas-fonds et aux chocs du portage, lorsqu’il faut les transporter au-delà des raudals infranchissables.

Au centre se dresse un mât, maintenu par un étai et deux haubans auquel se grée une voile carrée, utilisable pour le vent arrière et un peu de grand largue. Une sorte de pagaie, qui sert de gouvernail, est manœuvrée par le patron.

La partie antérieure de la pirogue est découverte depuis l’emplanture du mât jusqu’à la proue. C’est là que se tient le jour, se couche la nuit, l’équipage ordinairement composé de dix Indiens, un patron et neuf hommes.

La partie postérieure, depuis le pied de mât jusqu'à l'arrière, moins la place réservée au timonier, est abritée d'un rouf, sorte de toit dont les feuilles de palmier sont retenues par des bambous disposés longitudinalement.

Ce rouf forme la cabine de la pirogue. Il contient les couchettes, — de simples esteras étendues sur une litière sèche, — les ustensiles de cuisine et de table, le petit fourneau qui sert à la cuisson des aliments, gibier provenant de la chasse, poisson provenant de la pêche. Il est possible de le diviser en plusieurs compartiments au moyen de nattes retombantes, car il n'a pas moins de cinq à six mètre de longueur sur les dix à onze que mesure l'embarcation de bout en bout.

Ces pirogues de l'Orénoque sont désignées sous le nom de falcas. Lorsque le vent est propice, elles naviguent à la voile, assez lentement d'ailleurs, car elles ont à vaincre un courant parfois très rapide entre les nombreuses îles dont le fleuve est semé. Le vent vient-il à manquer, on remonte soit au milieu du lit du fleuve, à la gaffe, soit le long des rives, à la cordelle.

La gaffe, c'est à la fois la palanca, perche à fourche, que manœuvrent les mariniers à l'avant, et le garapato, solide bambou à crochet, que brandit le patron à l'arrière.

La cordelle, c'est l'espilla, câble léger, fait de ces fibres très élastiques du palmier chiquichiqui, d'une longueur de cent pieds environ, et auquel sa légèreté permet de flotter à la surface de l'eau. On le porte sur la rive, on l'accroche à quelque tronc ou à quelque racine, et on se hale du bord.

Telles sont les dispositions de la falca, qui sert à la navigation du fleuve en son cours moyen, et à laquelle on adjoint, pour la manœuvre de l'espilla, un petit canot nommé curiare en langue indienne.

C’est avec le patron de ces pirogues que doivent traiter les voyageurs, et le prix de l’affrètement est basé, non pas sur la distance à parcourir, mais sur le temps que l’embarcation restera à leur service. La rétribution convenue est due par jour. Il ne saurait en être différemment. En effet, il se présente de fréquentes causes de retard pour la navigation de l’Orénoque, les crues, les coups de vent, le déplacement des rapides, les difficultés des portages que nécessite l’obstruction capricieuse des passes. Un parcours, qui pourrait s’effectuer en trois semaines, exige le double de temps, lorsque les circonstances climatériques viennent à se modifier. Aussi, pas un patron ne voudrait-il s’engager à transporter ses passagers de Caïcara, soit à l’embouchure du Meta, soit à San-Fernando, dans un délai déterminé d’avance. Il fallut donc traiter dans ces conditions avec les Indiens Banivas, qui mirent deux pirogues au service des voyageurs.

M. Miguel eut la main heureuse en choisissant un excellent pratique du fleuve. C’était un Indien, nommé Martos, âgé d’une quarantaine d’années, énergique, vigoureux, intelligent, et qui répondait de son équipage, neuf solides indigènes très familiarisés avec le maniement de la palanca, du garapato et de l’espilla. Le prix de la journée qu’il demanda fut élevé, sans doute; mais qui se fût avisé d’y regarder, lorsqu’il s’agissait de résoudre l’importante question Guaviare-Orénoque-Atabapo!…

Il était permis de croire que le choix fait par Jean de Kermor et le sergent Martial ne serait pas moins heureux — neuf Banivas, également, sous les ordres d’un métis mi-indien, mi-espagnol, qui était pourvu de bons certificats. Ce métis se nommait Valdez, et si le voyage de ses passagers devait se poursuivre au-delà de San-Fernando sur le cours du haut Orénoque qu’il avait déjà remonté en partie, il demeurerait volontiers à leur service. Mais c’était une question à résoudre ultérieurement, suivant les renseignements qui seraient recueillis à San-Fernando relativement au colonel.

Les deux falcas avaient des noms particuliers: celle de MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas s’appelait la Maripare, nom d’une des nombreuses îles de l’Orénoque. Origine identique pour la pirogue du sergent Martial et de son neveu, qui s’appelait la Gallinetta. Elles étaient de couleur blanche dans leur accastillage, et la coque noire de l’avant à l’arrière.

Il va sans dire que ces pirogues navigueraient de conserve, et que l’une ne tiendrait pas à honneur de distancer l’autre. L’Orénoque n’est point le Mississipi, les falcas ne sont pas des steamboats, et il n’y a aucune raison de se faire concurrence ni de chercher à détenir le record de vitesse. En outre, on doit toujours craindre l’agression des Indiens des savanes riveraines, et mieux vaut être en nombre afin de leur imposer le respect.

La Maripare et la Gallinetta eussent été prêtes à partir dès le soir, s’il n’y avait eu à les approvisionner. Quant aux marchands de Caïcara, ils étaient à même de fournir tout ce qu’exigeait une navigation de plusieurs semaines jusqu’à

San-Fernando, où les réserves pourraient être renouvelées. Ils ont de tout à vendre, des conserves, des vêtements, des munitions, des ustensiles de pêche et de chasse, et ils se prêtent volontiers à ces opérations, pourvu que le prix des achats soit réglé en piastres.

Certes, il est permis aux voyageurs de l’Orénoque de compter sur le gibier si abondant de ses rives, sur le poisson dont ses eaux fourmillent. D’une part, M. Miguel était un adroit chasseur; de l’autre, le sergent Martial maniait adroitement sa carabine. Même entre les mains de Jean de Kermor, son léger fusil ne resterait ni inactif ni inutile. Mais on ne vit pas uniquement de la chasse et de la pêche. Il convient d'embarquer du thé, du sucre, de la viande séchée, des conserves de légumes, de la farine de cassave, tirée du manioc, qui remplace la farine de maïs ou de froment, puis les tonnelets de tafia et d'aguardiente. Quant au combustible, les forêts riveraines ne laisseraient pas chômer les fourneaux des pirogues. Enfin, contre le froid, ou plutôt contre l'humidité, il était facile de se procurer ces couvertures de laine qui sont de vente courante dans toutes les bourgades vénézuéliennes.

Néanmoins, plusieurs jours durent être consacrés à des diverses acquisitions. D'ailleurs, il n'y eut pas lieu de regretter ce retard. Pendant quarante-huit heures, le temps fut particulièrement mauvais. Caïcara reçut un de ces coups de vent d'une excessive violence auxquels les Indiens donnent le nom de chubasco. Il soufflait du sud-ouest, accompagné de pluies torrentielles qui provoquèrent une sensible crue du fleuve.

Le sergent Martial et son neveu eurent là un avant-goût des difficultés que présente la navigation de l'Orénoque. Les falcas n'auraient pu ni remonter le courant accru par le grossissement des eaux, ni résister au vent qui les eût prises debout. Nul doute qu'elles n'eussent été obligées de revenir à Caïcara, et peut-être avec des avaries graves.

MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas acceptèrent en philosophes ce contretemps. Ils n'étaient pas autrement pressés. Peu importait que leur voyage se prolongeât de quelques semaines. Au contraire, le sergent Martial enrageait, bougonnait, pestait contre la crue, sacrait en français et en espagnol contre la bourrasque, et il fallait que Jean intervînt pour le calmer.

“Il ne suffit pas d'avoir du courage, mon bon Martial, lui répétait-il, il faut faire provision de patience, car nous en aurons à dépenser…

— J’en aurai, Jean, mais ce maudit Orénoque, pourquoi ne se montre-t-il pas plus aimable au début?

— Réfléchis donc, mon oncle!… N’est-il pas préférable qu’il nous garde ses amabilités pour la fin?… Qui sait si nous ne serons pas contraints d’aller jusqu’à sa source?…

— Oui… qui sait, murmura le sergent Martial, et qui sait ce qui nous attend là-bas!…”

Dans la journée du 20, la violence du chubasco diminua notablement, avec le changement du vent qui tournait au nord. S’il tenait de ce côté, les pirogues sauraient en tirer profit. En même temps, les eaux baissèrent, et le fleuve rentra dans son lit normal. Les patrons Martos et Valdez déclarèrent que l’on pourrait partir le jour suivant, à mi-matinée.

Et, en effet, le départ s’effectua dans de très favorables conditions. Vers dix heures, les habitants de la bourgade s’étaient portés sur la rive. Le pavillon du Venezuela flottait à l’extrémité du mât de chaque pirogue. Sur l’avant de la Maripare se tenaient MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, qui répondaient en saluant aux acclamations des indigènes.

Puis, M. Miguel se retournant vers la Gallinetta:

“Bon voyage, monsieur le sergent! cria-t-il d’un ton de joyeuse humeur.

— Bon voyage, monsieur, répondit le vieux soldat, car s’il est bon pour vous…

— Il le sera pour tout le monde, ajouta M. Miguel, puisque nous le faisons ensemble!”

Les palancas s’appuyèrent contre la berge, les voiles furent hissées à bloc, et les deux embarcations, enlevées par une jolie brise, prirent le milieu du fleuve, au bruit des derniers vivats.

CHAPITRE VI

VI

D’îles en îles

Ce parcours du moyen Orénoque était commencé. Que de longues heures, que de monotones journées à passer à bord de ces pirogues! Que de retards aussi sur un fleuve, en réalité, si peu propre à une rapide navigation! Cette monotonie n’existerait pas, sans doute, pour M. Miguel et ses compagnons. En attendant leur arrivée au confluent du Guaviare et de l’Atabapo, ils feraient œuvre de géographes, ils compléteraient la reconnaissance hydrographique de l’Orénoque, ils étudieraient la disposition de ses affluents non moins nombreux que ses îles, ils relèveraient la situation de ses raudals, ils rectifieraient enfin les erreurs dont la carte de ces territoires était encore entachée. Le temps s’écoule vite pour des savants… qui cherchent à en savoir davantage!

Peut-être était-il regrettable que le sergent Martial se fût opposé à ce que le voyage s’effectuât dans une seule et même embarcation, car les heures eussent paru moins interminables. Mais, sur ce point, l’intransigeance de l’oncle avait été absolue, et, d’ailleurs, le neveu n’avait fait aucune observation à ce sujet, comme s’il eût été nécessaire qu’il en fût ainsi.

Le jeune garçon dut se contenter de lire et relire l’ouvrage de son compatriote, si précis, en somme, sur tout ce qui concerne l’Orénoque, et il n’aurait pu trouver un meilleur guide que le voyageur français.

Lorsque la Maripare et la Gallinetta eurent atteint le milieu du fleuve, on aperçut les cerros qui bossuent la surface des plaines voisines. Sur la rive gauche, un amas de cases devint visible vers onze heures du matin, au pied de collines granitiques. C’était le village de Cabruta, composé d’une cinquantaine de paillotes, et si l’on veut bien multiplier ce nombre par huit, on aura à peu près celui de ses habitants. Là les métis ont remplacé les Indiens Guamos, actuellement dispersés, des indigènes dont la peau est plus blanche que celle des mulâtres. Cependant, comme on était dans la saison des pluies, le sergent Martial et Jean de Kermor purent voir d’assez près quelques-uns de ces Guamos, qui viennent, à cette époque, pêcher sur leurs canots d’écorce.

Le patron de la Gallinetta parlait l’espagnol. Aussi, le jeune garçon lui adressait-il maintes questions auxquelles Valdez répondait volontiers. Et, le soir, alors que la falca s’approchait de la rive droite, Valdez dit à Jean:

“Voici Capuchino, une ancienne mission abandonnée depuis longtemps.

— Est-ce que vous comptez vous y arrêter, Valdez?… demanda Jean.

— C’est indispensable, puisque la brise va cesser avec la nuit. D’ailleurs on ne navigue que de jour sur l’Orénoque par prudence, car les passes changent souvent, et il est indispensable d’y voir clair pour se diriger.”

En effet, les mariniers ont l’habitude de s’amarrer chaque soir aux rives du fleuve ou des îles. Aussi la Maripare vint-elle atterrir le long de la berge de Capuchino. Après le dernier repas, où figurèrent quelques poissons de l’espèce des dorades, achetés aux pêcheurs de Cabruta, les passagers des pirogues s’endormirent d’un profond sommeil.

Ainsi que l’avait pronostiqué le patron Valdez, la brise était tombée aux premières heures de la nuit, mais elle reprit dès le jour naissant, en se maintenant au nord-est. Les voiles furent donc hissées, et les deux falcas, vent arrière, remontèrent le fleuve sans encombre.

En face de Capuchino s’ouvrait la bouche de l’Apurito, un bras de l’Apure. Le delta de ce puissant tributaire se montra deux heures plus tard. C’est par cet affluent que le Simon-Bolivar, après avoir quitté Caïcara, s’avançait à travers les territoires de la Colombie, limités à l’ouest par les Andes.

Et, à ce propos, M. Miguel demanda à ses deux compagnons pourquoi, en somme, ce ne serait pas l’Apure qui serait l’Orénoque plutôt que l’Atabapo ou le Guaviare.

“Par exemple!… riposta M. Felipe. L’Apure peut-il être autre chose que l’affluent d’un fleuve qui mesure ici près de trois mille mètres de largeur?…

— Et ses eaux ne sont-elles pas troubles et blanchâtres, s’écria M. Varinas, tandis que celles-ci, depuis Ciudad-Bolivar, sont claires et limpides?…

— Entendu, dit M. Miguel en souriant, et mettons l’Apure hors de concours. Nous trouverons assez d’autres concurrents sur notre route.”

Ce que M. Miguel aurait pu dire, c’est que, en tout cas, l’Apure arrose des llanos autrement riches que ceux de l’Orénoque, et qu’il semble véritablement le continuer vers l’ouest, tandis que celui-ci fait un angle en cet endroit et vient du sud depuis San-Fernando. C’est sur une longueur de cinq cents kilomètres, presque à Palmirito, que les bateaux à vapeur, qui ne peuvent s’aventurer en amont de son embouchure, en suivent le cours.

On l’a justement nommé le “fleuve des llanos”, ces vastes surfaces propices à toutes cultures, si heureusement disposées pour l’élevage des bestiaux, et qui renferment la population la plus robuste et la plus laborieuse du Venezuela central.

Ce qu’il convient aussi de remarquer, — et Jean put le constater de ses propres yeux, — c’est que les caïmans abondent sous ces eaux épaisses, qui leur permettent d’approcher plus facilement leur proie. Quelques-uns de ces sauriens monstrueux vinrent s’ébattre à quelques pieds de la Gallinetta. Longs de plus de six mètres, ces géants de l’espèce des crocodiles sont nombreux dans les tributaires de l’Orénoque, alors que les caïmans des rivières des llanos n’atteignent qu’une taille inférieure.

Et, sur une demande que lui fit le jeune garçon, le patron Valdez répondit:

“Ces bêtes ne sont pas toutes dangereuses, et il y en a, — entre autres les bavas, — qui n’attaquent même pas les baigneurs. Quant aux cebados, c’est-à-dire ceux qui ont déjà goûté de la chair humaine, ils s’élanceraient jusque dans les embarcations pour vous dévorer!…

— Qu’ils y viennent! s’écria le sergent Martial.

— Non… qu’ils n’y viennent pas, mon oncle!” répondit Jean, en montrant une de ces énormes bêtes dont les formidables mâchoires s’ouvraient et se refermaient à grand bruit.

Au surplus, les crocodiles ne sont pas seuls à infester les eaux de l’Orénoque et de ses affluents. Il s’y rencontre aussi les caribes, poissons d’une telle vigueur qu’ils brisent d’un coup les plus forts hameçons, et dont le nom, dérivé de celui de Caraïbe, indique des cannibales aquatiques. En outre, que l’on se défie des raies et des anguilles électriques, ces gymnotes appelées trembladors. Pourvues d'un appareil assez compliqué, elles tuent les autres poissons à coups de décharges que l'homme ne supporterait pas impunément.

Pendant cette journée, les falcas côtoyèrent quelques îles le long desquelles le courant était plus rapide, et, une ou deux fois, il fallut employer l'espilla fixée à de solides racines d'arbres.

En passant devant l'île Verija de Mono, hérissée de massifs à peu près impénétrables, plusieurs coups de fusil retentirent à bord de la Maripare. Une demi-douzaine de canards tombèrent à la surface du fleuve. C'étaient M. Miguel et ses amis qui venaient de se montrer adroits tireurs.

Quelques instants après, la curiare s'approchait de la Gallinetta.

“Pour varier votre ordinaire!” dit M. Miguel, en offrant une couple de ces canards.

Jean de Kermor remercia M. Miguel, tandis que le sergent Martial grommelait une sorte de remerciement.

Après avoir demandé au jeune garçon comment il avait passé ces deux jours de navigation, et reçu une réponse satisfaitante de tous points, M. Miguel souhaita le bonsoir au neveu comme à l'oncle, et la curiare le ramena à sa pirogue.

Dès la tombée de la nuit, les deux falcas vinrent s'amarrer à l'île Pajaral, la rive droite du fleuve étant encombrée de roches erratiques, sur lesquelles M. Chaffanjon avait pu relever de nombreuses inscriptions, dues au couteau des marchands qui fréquentent cette partie du fleuve.

On soupa de bon appétit. Les canards, apprêtés par le sergent Martial, lequel s’entendait en cuisine comme un cantinier de régiment, offraient une chair savoureuse et parfumée, bien supérieure à celle des espèces européennes. À neuf heures, on se coucha, ou du moins le jeune garçon alla s’étendre sur l’estera dans la partie du rouf qui lui servait de chambre, et son oncle, fidèle à ses habitudes, vint soigneusement l’envelopper de la moustiquaire.

Précaution qui fut loin d’être inutile! Que de moustiques et quels moustiques! Et M. Chaffanjon, à en croire le sergent Martial, ne saurait être taxé d’exagération pour avoir dit que là “est peut-être la plus grande difficulté d’un voyage sur l’Orénoque”. Des myriades de dards venimeux vous piquent sans relâche, et cette piqûre produit une inflammation, encore douloureuse après quinze jours, qui va jusqu’à provoquer une fièvre intense.

Aussi avec quel soin l’oncle ajusta le voile protecteur autour de la couche du neveu! Puis, quelles bouffées il tira de sa pipe, afin d’écarter momentanément les terribles insectes! Et de quelles énergiques tapes il écrasa ceux qui cherchaient à s’introduire par les plis mal fermés!

“Mon bon Martial, tu vas te démettre les poignets… répétait Jean. Il est inutile de te donner tant de peine!… Rien ne m’empêche de dormir…

— Non, répondait le vieux soldat, je ne veux pas qu’une seule de ces abominables bêtes siffle à tes oreilles!”

Et il continua sa manœuvre aussi longtemps qu’il entendit quelque bourdonnement suspect. Puis, lorsqu’il s’aperçut que Jean était plongé dans le sommeil, il alla se coucher à son tour. Quant à lui, il se moquait pas mal de ces attaques-là. Mais, bien qu’il se dît trop coriace pour en souffrir, la vérité est qu’il était piqué tout comme un autre, et se grattait à faire trembler la pirogue.

Le lendemain matin, démarrage des embarcations et départ à la voile. Le vent était favorable, intermittent, il est vrai. De gros nuages boursouflés couvraient le ciel à moyenne hauteur. La pluie tombait par violentes averses, et les passagers durent se tenir sous les roufs.

En premier lieu, il y eut à vaincre d’assez forts courants, le lit du fleuve étant rétréci par un barrage de petites îles. Il fut même indispensable de rallier la rive gauche où la résistance des eaux était moindre.

Cette rive présentait un aspect marécageux, avec un embrouillis de canaux et de bayous. Telle elle se poursuit depuis l’embouchure de l’Apurito jusqu’à l’embouchure de l’Arauca, sur une étendue de deux cents kilomètres. Là est la région si fréquentée des canards sauvages. On les voyait voler à la surface des plaines, tachetant l’espace de milliers de points noirs.

“S’il y en a autant que de moustiques, ils ne sont pas du moins aussi désagréables, s’écria le sergent Martial, et sans compter qu’ils se mangent!”

Il n’aurait pu imaginer une comparaison plus juste.

Cela ne justifiait-il pas le fait qui est rapporté par Élisée Reclus d’après Carl Sachs. On raconte, assure-t-il, qu’un régiment de cavalerie campé près d’une lagune de cette région se nourrit exclusivement de canards sauvages pendant quinze jours, sans qu’il eût été possible de constater une diminution apparente de ces oiseaux dans les canaux environnants.

Les chasseurs de la Gallinetta et de la Maripare, — pas plus que le régiment de cavalerie dont il est question, — ne diminuèrent d’une manière sensible ces légions de volatiles. Ils se contentèrent d’en abattre quelques douzaines que les curiares allèrent ramasser au fil du courant. Le jeune garçon eut plusieurs coups heureux, à l’extrême satisfaction du sergent Martial, et, comme celui-ci se disait qu’une politesse en vaut une autre, il envoya à M. Miguel et à ses compagnons, très pourvus déjà, une part de son gibier. Décidément, il voulait ne rien leur devoir.

Pendant cette journée, les patrons des pirogues eurent à faire preuve d’une réelle habileté pour éviter les pointes de roches. Heurter l’une d’elles eût amené la perte de l’embarcation au milieu de ces eaux grossies par les pluies. Et non seulement cette manœuvre exigeait une parfaite sûreté de main dans le maniement de la pagaie d’arrière, mais il fallait veiller aux troncs en dérive et se garer de leurs chocs. Ces arbres étaient détachés de l’île de Zamuro, laquelle commençait déjà à s’en aller par morceaux depuis quelques années. Les passagers des pirogues purent constater que cette île, rongée par les infiltrations, touchait à sa destruction complète.

Les falcas vinrent passer la nuit à la pointe amont de l’île Casimirito. Elles trouvèrent en cet endroit un suffisant refuge contre la bourrasque, qui se déchaînait avec une rare violence. Quelques cases abandonnées, servant habituellement aux pêcheurs de tortues, assurèrent aux passagers un abri plus sérieux que celui des roufs. Il s’agit des passagers de la Maripare, car ceux de la Gallinetta ne descendirent pas à terre, malgré l’invitation qui leur fut faite.

D’ailleurs, il n’était peut-être pas très prudent de prendre pied sur l’île Casimirito qui est peuplée de singes et aussi de pumas et de jaguars. Très heureusement, la tempête engagea ces fauves à rester au fond de leurs repaires, car le campement ne fut point attaqué. Il est vrai, certains rauquements sauvages se propagèrent à travers les accalmies des rafales, et aussi quelques bruyantes vociférations de ces singes, si dignes du qualificatif de hurleurs, dont les naturalistes les ont gratifiés.

Le lendemain, meilleure apparence du ciel. Les nuages s'étaient abaissés pendant la nuit. À la grosse pluie formée dans les zones élevées, succédait une pluie fine, presque de l'eau pulvérisée, qui cessa même au lever du jour.

Le soleil reparut par intervalles, et la brise, franchement établie au nord-est, permit aux falcas de naviguer grand largue, — le fleuve faisant un crochet vers l'ouest jusqu'au-delà de Buena Vista, avant de se diriger vers le sud.

Le lit de l'Orénoque, très élargi, offrait alors un aspect qui devait frapper Jean de Kermor et le sergent Martial en leur qualité de Nantais. De là vint que celui-ci ne put retenir cette observation:

“Hé! mon neveu, regarde donc un peu où nous sommes aujourd'hui…”

Le jeune garçon, quittant le rouf, se plaça sur l'avant de l'embarcation, dont la voile gonflée s'arrondissait derrière lui. L'atmosphère, très pure, laissait apercevoir les lointains horizons des llanos.

Alors le sergent Martial d'ajouter:

“Est-ce que, par hasard, nous sommes revenus dans notre cher pays de Bretagne?…

— Je te comprends, répondit Jean. Ici, l'Orénoque ressemble à la Loire…

— Oui, Jean, à notre Loire au-dessus comme au-dessous de Nantes!… Vois-tu ces bancs de sable jaune!… S'il naviguait entre eux une demi-douzaine de chalands, avec leur grande voile carrée, à la queue les uns des autres, je croirais que nous allons arriver à Saint-Florent ou à Mauves!

— Tu as raison, mon bon Martial, et la ressemblance est frappante. Toutefois, ces longues plaines qui s'étendent au-delà des deux rives, me rappellent plutôt les prairies de la basse Loire, du côté du Pellerin ou de Paimbœuf…

— C'est ma foi vrai, mon neveu, et je m'attends à voir paraître le bateau à vapeur de Saint-Nazaire, — le pyroscaphe, comme on dit là-bas, un mot qui est fait avec du grec, paraît-il, et que je n'ai jamais pu comprendre!

— Et, s'il vient, le pyroscaphe, répondit le jeune garçon en souriant, nous ne le prendrons pas, mon oncle… nous le laisserons passer… Nantes est maintenant où est mon père… n'est-ce pas?…

— Oui… là où est mon brave colonel, et lorsque nous l'aurons retrouvé, lorsqu'il saura qu'il n'est plus seul au monde, eh bien… il redescendra le fleuve avec nous en pirogue… puis sur le Bolivar… puis il prendra avec nous le bateau de Saint-Nazaire… et ce sera bien pour retourner cette fois en France…

— Dieu t'entende!" murmura Jean.

Et, tandis qu'il prononçait ces paroles, son regard se perdait, en amont du fleuve, vers les cerros dont la lointaine silhouette se dessinait au sud-est.

Puis, revenant à l'observation, fort juste d'ailleurs, que le sergent Martial avait faite sur la ressemblance de la Loire et de l'Orénoque en cette partie de son cours:

“Par exemple, dit-il, ce que l’on peut voir ici, à certaines époques, sur ces plages de sable, on ne le verrait ni sur la haute ni sur la basse Loire…

— Et qu’est-ce donc?…

— Ce sont ces tortues qui, chaque année, vers la mi-mars, viennent y pondre et enterrer leurs œufs.

— Ah!… il y a des tortues…

— Par milliers, et, même, le rio que tu aperçois sur la rive droite s’appelait le rio Tortuga avant de s’appeler le rio Chaffanjon.

— S’il s’appelait le rio Tortuga, c’est qu’il méritait ce nom, sans doute… Cependant jusqu’ici, je ne vois pas…

— Un peu de patience, oncle Martial, et bien que le moment de la ponte soit passé, tu verras ces tortues en de telles quantités… à ne pas le croire…

— Mais, si elles ne pondent plus, nous ne pourrons pas nous régaler de leurs œufs, qui sont excellents, m’a-t-on dit…

— Excellents, et la chair de l’animal n’est pas moins succulente. Aussi je compte bien que notre patron Valdez saura en attraper pour notre pot-au-feu…

— Une soupe à la tortue!… s’écria le sergent.

— Oui, et cette fois, elle ne sera pas faite comme en France, avec de la tête de veau…

— Ce ne serait pas la peine d’être venu si loin, répliqua le sergent Martial, et de ne manger qu’une simple blanquette!”

Le jeune garçon ne se trompait pas, en disant que les pirogues approchaient de ces plages où la présence des chéloniens attire les Indiens des territoires environnants. Si ces indigènes n'y apparaissent plus qu'aux époques de pêche, ils les occupaient en grand nombre autrefois. Ces Taparitos, ces Panares, ces Yaruros, ces Guamos, ces Mapoyos, se faisaient une guerre acharnée afin de s'en assurer la possession. Là et avant eux, sans doute, habitaient les Otomacos, actuellement dispersés sur les contrées de l'ouest. D'après les récits de Humboldt, ces Indiens, qui prétendaient descendre d'aïeux de pierre, étaient d'intrépides joueurs de paume, plus habiles encore que ces Basques, de race européenne, introduits au Venezuela. On les citait également parmi ces populations géophages, qui, à l'époque de l'année où manque le poisson, se nourrissaient de boulettes de glaise, de l'argile pure, à peine torréfiée. C'est, du reste, une habitude qui n'a pas entièrement disparu. Ce vice, — on ne saurait l'appeler autrement, — a été contracté dès l'enfance et devient impérieux. Les géophages dévorent la terre comme les Chinois fument l'opium, poussés à cet acte par un besoin irrésistible. M. Chaffanjon a rencontré quelques-uns de ces misérables, qui en étaient arrivés à lécher l'argile de leurs paillotes.

Pendant l'après-midi, la navigation des falcas éprouva mille difficultés, et il en coûta d'extrêmes fatigues à leurs équipages. Le courant se propageait avec une extrême rapidité en cette partie du lit, notablement rétréci par l'empiétement des bancs de sable.

Sous un ciel orageux, au milieu d'une atmosphère saturée de fluide électrique, les roulements de la foudre arrivaient du sud. Un gros orage montait contre le vent. La brise ne tarda pas à exhaler ses derniers souffles, et c'est à peine si quelques bouffées intermittentes se firent sentir.

Dans ces conditions, la prudence commandait de chercher un abri, car on ne sait jamais comment finissent ces orages de l’Orénoque, et s’ils n’amèneront pas de violentes perturbations atmosphériques. Les bateliers ont donc hâte de se réfugier au fond de quelque crique, dont les hautes berges les garantissent contre les rafales.

Par malheur, cette portion du fleuve ne présentait aucune relâche convenable. Les llanos s’étendaient de chaque côté à perte de vue, d’immenses prairies dénuées d’arbres, dont l’ouragan balaierait la surface sans rencontrer aucun obstacle.

M. Miguel, amené à interroger le patron Martos sur ce qu’il allait faire, lui demanda s’il ne serait pas obligé de mouiller dans le lit du fleuve jusqu’au lendemain.

“Ce serait dangereux, répondit Martos. Notre ancre ne tiendrait pas en cet endroit… Nous serions jetés sur les sables, roulés, mis en pièces…

— Quel parti prendre alors?…

— Essayons d’atteindre le plus prochain village en amont, ou, si c’est impossible, nous redescendrons à l’île Casimirito près de laquelle nous avons passé la nuit.

— Et quel est ce village?…

— Buena Vista sur la rive gauche.”

Cette manœuvre était, en effet, tellement indiquée que, sans s’être concerté avec le patron de la Maripare, Valdez prenait déjà direction vers ce village.

Les voiles dégonflées pendaient le long des mâts. Les mariniers les affalèrent au fond de l’embarcation afin qu’elles ne pussent donner prise au vent. Peut-être, après tout, l’orage n’éclaterait-il pas avant une ou deux heures. Les nuages, d’une teinte livide, semblaient être immobilisés contre l’horizon du sud.

“Mauvais temps, dit le sergent Martial en interrogeant le patron de la Gallinetta.

— Mauvais temps, répondit Valdez, mais tâchons de gagner sur lui.”

Les deux pirogues se trouvaient alors, par le travers l’une de l’autre, à une cinquantaine de pieds, pas davantage. Les longues perches en fourche furent alors utilisées comme des gaffes, en prenant appui au pied des bancs. Ce fut, en somme, beaucoup de travail pour peu de résultat, car on étalait à peine le courant. D’ailleurs, nulle possibilité de procéder d’une façon différente. L’essentiel, c’était de rallier la rive gauche du fleuve, le long de laquelle on pourrait se haler au moyen de l’espilla.

Une grande heure fut employée à cette opération. Que de fois dut-on craindre, si les falcas ne se décidaient pas à mouiller, de les voir entraînées en aval, et peut-être jetées sur quelque récif! Enfin, grâce à l’adresse des patrons, à la vigueur des mariniers, auxquels MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, d’une part, le sergent Martial et Jean de l’autre, vinrent en aide, les deux embarcations accostèrent la rive gauche, sans avoir très sensiblement perdu en obliquant à travers le lit du fleuve.

Il fallut alors faire usage de l’espilla, et, du moins, si l’on dépensait de la force, on était certain de n’être point ramené en aval.

Sur la proposition de Valdez, les pirogues furent amarrées l’une à l’arrière de l’autre, et les deux équipages se réunirent pour le halage le long de la rive. Lorsque la berge le permettait, ils débarquaient et remorquaient les embarcations que la pagaie du timonier maintenait en bonne route. Lorsque la berge devenait impraticable à des piétons, on portait l’espilla à une quarantaine de mètres en avant, on la tournait sur une roche ou sur une souche. Puis, les mariniers revenaient à bord de la Maripare, et halaient d’ensemble.

C’est ainsi que les îles Seiba, Cururuparo et Estillero furent laissées sur bâbord, et, un peu après, l’île Posso Redondo, plus rapprochée de la rive droite.

Entre-temps, l’orage montait vers le zénith. Tout l’horizon méridional se zébrait d’éclairs d’une extraordinaire fréquence. Les roulements de la foudre, mêlés d’éclats intenses, ne discontinuaient plus. Par bonheur, vers huit heures du soir, lorsque la tempête se déchaîna en violentes bourrasques de vent et de grêle sur la rive gauche de l’Orénoque, les deux pirogues se trouvaient en sûreté au pied du village de Buena Vista.

CHAPITRE VII

VII

Entre Buena Vista et la Urbana

La nuit fut féconde en désastres. Les dégâts, produits par les fureurs de l’orage, s’étendirent sur une aire d’une quinzaine de kilomètres jusqu’à l’embouchure du rio Arauca. On le reconnut bien, le lendemain, 26 août, à voir les débris de toutes sortes que charriait le fleuve, dont les eaux, d’habitude si limpides, avaient pris une teinte limoneuse. Si les deux pirogues ne s’étaient abritées au fond de ce petit port, si elles eussent été surprises en plein Orénoque, il n’en serait plus resté que d’informes carcasses. Équipages et passagers auraient péri, sans qu’il eût été possible de leur porter secours.

Très heureusement, Buena Vista fut épargnée, la diagonale de ce chubasco s’étant établie plus à l’ouest.

Buena Vista occupe la partie latérale d’une île prolongée par de vastes bancs de sable à l’époque de la saison sèche, et que la crue du fleuve réduit notablement pendant la saison des pluies. C’est ce qui avait permis à la Gallinetta et à la Maripare de gagner la base même du village.

Village?…. Il n’y a là qu’une agglomération de quelques cases, pouvant loger cent cinquante à deux cents Indiens. Ils n’y viennent que pour la récolte des œufs de tortues, dont on tire une huile de vente courante sur les marchés vénézuéliens. Aussi, durant le mois d’août, ce village est-il à peu près abandonné, car la ponte cesse vers la moitié du mois de mai. Il n’y avait plus à Buena Vista qu’une demi-douzaine d’Indiens, vivant de pêche et de chasse, et ce n’est pas chez eux que les pirogues auraient pu s’approvisionner, si cela eût été nécessaire. Comme leurs réserves n’étaient point épuisées, elles suffiraient jusqu’à la bourgade de la Urbana où il serait facile de se ravitailler.

L’important était que les falcas n’eussent pas souffert de ce terrible coup de vent.

D’ailleurs, sur le conseil des mariniers, les passagers avaient accepté d’être mis à terre pendant la nuit. Une famille de ces indigènes, qui occupait une case assez propre, leur avait offert l’hospitalité. Ces Indiens appartenaient à la tribu des Yaruros, qui comptaient jadis parmi les premières du pays, et, contrairement à leurs congénères, ils restaient à Buena Vista, même après la période de la ponte.

Cette famille se composait du mari, — un homme vigoureux, vêtu du guayaco et du pagne traditionnels, — de sa femme, habillée de la longue chemise indienne, jeune encore, de petite taille, bien faite, — d’une enfant de douze ans, aussi sauvage que sa mère. Ces Indiens furent cependant sensibles aux cadeaux qu’offrirent leurs hôtes, du tafia et des cigares pour l’homme, des colliers de verroterie et un petit miroir pour la mère et sa fillette. Ces objets de pacotille sont prisés au plus haut degré chez les indigènes vénézuéliens.

Cette case ne possédait, en fait de mobilier, que des hamacs suspendus aux bambous de la toiture, et trois ou quatre de ces paniers, nommés canastos, où les Indiens déposent leurs vêtements et leurs ustensiles les plus précieux.

Quoi qu’en eût le sergent Martial, les passagers de la Maripare et lui durent partager cette hospitalité en commun, car son neveu et lui ne l’eussent rencontrée en aucune autre case. M. Miguel, plus encore que ses collègues, se montra très prévenant pour les deux Français. Jean de Kermor, tout en se tenant sur une réserve que lui imposaient d'ailleurs les regards fulminants de son oncle, eut l'occasion de faire plus ample connaissance avec ses compagnons de voyage. En outre, il fut promptement accaparé — c'est le mot, — par la petite indigène, qui se sentit attirée par sa bonne grâce.

On causa donc, tandis que la tempête mugissait au-dehors. La conversation fut fréquemment interrompue. Les éclats de la foudre se répercutaient si bruyamment qu'il eût été malaisé de s'entendre. Ni l'Indienne, ni la fillette ne manifestaient la moindre peur, alors même que l'éclair et le coup de tonnerre se produisaient ensemble. Et plus d'une fois, ainsi que cela devait être constaté le lendemain, des arbres voisins de la case furent foudroyés avec un horrible fracas.

Évidemment, les Indiens, habitués à ces orages qui sont fréquents sur l'Orénoque, n'éprouvaient pas cette impression que subissent les animaux eux-mêmes. Leurs nerfs résistent à cet ébranlement physique autant que moral. Il n'en allait pas ainsi du jeune garçon, et, s'il n'avait pas précisément “peur du tonnerre”, comme on dit, il n'échappait pas à ce sentiment de nerveuse inquiétude dont d'énergiques natures ne sont pas toujours exemptes.

Jusqu'à minuit, la conversation se poursuivit entre les hôtes de l'Indien, et le sergent Martial y aurait pris un vif intérêt, s'il eût compris l'espagnol comme le comprenait son neveu.

Cette conversation, provoquée par MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, porta précisément sur les travaux qui, trois mois avant, attirent chaque année plusieurs centaines d'indigènes en cette partie du fleuve.

Certes, les tortues fréquentent d’autres plages de l’Orénoque, mais nulle part en aussi grand nombre qu’à la surface des bancs de sable depuis le rio Cabullare jusqu’au village de la Urbana. Ainsi que le raconta l’Indien, très au courant des moeurs de la gent chélonienne, très habile à cette chasse ou à cette pêche, — les deux mots se valent, — c’est dès le mois de février qu’on voit apparaître les tortues, il ne serait peut-être pas suffisant de dire par centaines de mille.

Il va de soi que cet Indien, ignorant les classifications de l’histoire naturelle, ne pouvait indiquer à quelle espèce appartiennent ces tortues, si incroyablement multipliées sur les battures de l’Orénoque. Il se contentait de les pourchasser, de concert avec les Guahibos, Otomacos et autres, auxquels se joignaient les métis des llanos voisins, de recueillir les œufs à l’époque de la ponte, et d’en extraire l’huile par des procédés très simples, — aussi simples que lorsqu’il s’agit du fruit des oliviers. Pour récipient, tout bonnement, un canot qui est tiré sur la plage; en travers du canot, des corbeilles dans lesquelles sont déposés les œufs; un bâtonnet qui sert à les briser, tandis que leur contenu, délayé d’eau, tombe au fond du canot. Une heure après, l’huile remonte à la surface; on la chauffe afin d’en évaporer l’eau, et elle devient claire. L’opération est terminée.

“Et cette huile est, paraît-il, excellente, dit Jean, qui s’en rapportait là-dessus à l’opinion de son guide favori.

— Excellente, en effet, ajouta M. Felipe.

— Dans quelle espèce classe-t-on ces tortues?… demanda le jeune garçon.

— Dans l’espèce des cinosternon scorpioïdes, répondit M. Miguel, et ces animaux, qui mesurent près d’un mètre de carapace, ne pèsent pas moins d’une soixantaine de livres.”

Et comme M. Varinas n’avait pas encore déployé ses connaissances spéciales à l’endroit de l’ordre des chéloniens, il fit observer que le nom véritablement scientifique des scorpioïdes de son ami Miguel était le podocnemis dumerilianus, appellation à laquelle l’Indien parut être on ne peut plus indifférent.

“Une simple question… dit alors Jean de

Kermor, en s’adressant à M. Miguel.

— Tu parles trop, mon neveu… murmura le sergent Martial, en mâchonnant sa moustache.

— Sergent, demanda en souriant M. Miguel, pourquoi empêcher votre neveu de s’instruire?…

— Parce que… parce qu’il n’a pas besoin d’en savoir plus que son oncle!

— C’est entendu, mon mentor, reprit le jeune garçon, mais voici ma question: ces bêtes-là sont-elles dangereuses?…

— Elles peuvent l’être par leur nombre, répondit M. Miguel, et on courrait de gros risques à se trouver sur leur passage, quand elles processionnent par centaines de mille…

— Par centaines de mille!…

— Tout autant, monsieur Jean, puisqu’on ne recueille pas moins de cinquante millions d’œufs, rien que pour les dix mille dames-jeannes que remplissent annuellement les produits de cette pêche. Or, d’une part, comme la moyenne d’œufs est d’une centaine par tortue, de l’autre, comme les carnassiers en détruisent un nombre considérable, et, enfin, comme il en reste assez pour perpétuer la race, j’estime à un million le nombre des tortues qui fréquentent les sables de la Manteca, précisément sur cette partie de l’Orénoque.”

Les calculs de M. Miguel n’étaient point entachés d’exagération. Ce sont réellement des myriades de ces animaux que rassemble une sorte d’attraction mystérieuse, a dit E. Reclus, — mascaret vivant, lent et irrésistible, qui renverserait tout comme une inondation ou une avalanche.

Il est. vrai, l’homme en détruit de trop grandes quantités, et l’espèce pourrait bien disparaître un jour. Certaines battures sont déjà abandonnées, au grand dommage des Indiens, et entre autres les plages de Cariben, situées au-dessous des bouches du Meta.

L’Indien donna alors quelques détails intéressants sur les habitudes de ces tortues, lorsque l’époque de la ponte est arrivée. On les voit sillonner ces vastes espaces sablonneux, y creuser des trous profonds de deux pieds environ où sont déposés les œufs, — cela durant une vingtaine de jours à partir de la mi-mars, — puis recouvrir soigneusement de sable le trou où ces œufs ne tarderont pas à éclore.

En outre, sans parler du rendement de l’huile, les indigènes cherchent à s’emparer de ces tortues pour l’alimentation, car leur chair est très estimée. Les atteindre sous les eaux est presque impossible. Quant à les prendre sur les bancs de sable, lorsqu’elles les parcourent isolément, cela se fait simplement au moyen de bâtons qui permettent de les retourner sur le dos, — posture des plus critiques pour un chélonien, lequel ne saurait se replacer tout seul sur ses pattes.

“Il y a des gens comme cela, fit observer M. Varinas. Lorsque, par malheur, ils sont tombés à la renverse, ils ne peuvent plus se relever.”

Juste remarque qui termina d’une façon assez inattendue cette discussion sur les chéloniens de l’Orénoque.

C’est alors que M. Miguel, s’adressant à l’Indien, lui posa cette question:

“Avez-vous vu, à leur passage à Buena Vista, les deux voyageurs français qui remontaient le fleuve, il y a quatre ou cinq semaines?”

La question intéressait directement Jean de Kermor, puisqu’il s’agissait de compatriotes. Aussi attendait-il avec une certaine émotion la réponse de l’Indien.

“Deux Européens?… demanda l’Indien.

— Oui… deux Français.

— Il y a cinq semaines?… Oui… je les ai vus, répondit l’Indien, et leur falca s’est arrêtée pendant vingt-quatre heures à l’endroit où sont les vôtres.

— Ils étaient en bonne santé?… demanda le jeune garçon.

— Bonne santé… deux hommes vigoureux et de belle humeur… L’un est un chasseur comme je voudrais l’être, et avec une carabine comme je voudrais en posséder une… Des jaguars et des pumas, il en a mis quantité par terre… Ah! c’est beau de tirer avec une arme qui met une balle à cinq cents pas dans la tête d’un ocelot ou d’un fourmilier!”

Et, tandis que l’Indien parlait de la sorte, son œil étincelait. Lui aussi était un habile tireur, un chasseur passionné. Mais que pouvaient son fusil de pacotille, son arc et ses flèches, lorsqu’il s’agissait de lutter avec ces armes de choix dont le Français était certainement pourvu.

“Et son compagnon?… dit M. Miguel.

— Son compagnon?… répliqua l’Indien. Oh! celui-là… c’est un chercheur de plantes, un ramasseur d’herbes…”

En ce moment, l’Indienne prononça quelques mots en langue indigène que ses hôtes ne purent comprendre, et, presque aussitôt, son mari d’ajouter:

“Oui… oui… je lui ai donné une tige de saurau qui a paru lui faire plaisir… une espèce rare… et il était si content qu’il a voulu faire notre petite image avec une machine… notre image sur un petit miroir…

— Leur photographie, sans doute… dit M. Felipe.

— Voulez-vous la montrer?…” demanda M. Miguel.

La fillette quitta sa place près de son ami Jean. Puis, ouvrant un des canastos déposés à terre, elle en tira “la petite image” et l’apporta au jeune garçon.

C’était bien une épreuve photographique. L’Indien avait été pris dans sa pose favorite, le chapeau de fibres sur la tête, la cobija drapée sur les épaules; à droite, sa femme vêtue de la longue chemise, des colliers de verroterie aux bras et aux jambes; à gauche, l’enfant enveloppée du pagne et grimaçant comme un joyeux petit singe.

“Et savez-vous ce que sont devenus ces deux Français?… demanda M. Miguel à l’Indien.

— Je sais qu’ils ont traversé le fleuve pour gagner la Urbana, où ils ont laissé leur pirogue, et qu’ils ont pris à travers les llanos du côté du soleil.

— Étaient-ils seuls?…

— Non… ils avaient emmené un guide et trois

Indiens Mapoyos.

— Et, depuis leur départ, vous n’en avez plus entendu parler?…

— On est sans nouvelles.”

Qu’étaient devenus ces deux voyageurs, MM. Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne?… N’y avait-il pas lieu de craindre qu’ils eussent péri dans cette expédition à l’est de l’Orénoque?… Les Indiens les avaient-ils trahis?… Leur existence était-elle menacée au milieu de ces régions peu connues?… Jean n’ignorait pas que M. Chaffanjon avait couru les plus grands dangers de la part des gens de son escorte, alors qu’il opérait une reconnaissance sur le Caura, qu’il n’avait sauvé sa vie qu’en abattant d’une balle le guide qui le trahissait… Et le jeune garçon se sentait profondément ému à la pensée que ses deux compatriotes avaient peut-être trouvé la mort, comme tant d’autres explorateurs de cette partie du Sud-Amérique…

Un peu après minuit, l’orage commença à décroître. À la suite d’une pluie diluvienne, le ciel se rasséréna. Quelques étoiles apparurent tout humides, semblaient-elles, comme si les averses eussent inondé les extrêmes limites du firmament. Le météore prit fin presque subitement, — phénomène fréquemment observé en ces contrées, lorsque l’atmosphère a été troublée par les décharges électriques.

“Du beau temps pour demain”, fit observer l’Indien, au moment où ses hôtes se retiraient.

En effet, le plus sage était de regagner les falcas, puisque la nuit promettait d’être sèche et calme. On serait mieux couché sur l’estera des roufs que sur le sol de la paillote indienne.

Le lendemain, dès l’aube, les passagers étaient prêts à quitter Buena Vista. Non seulement le soleil se levait sur un horizon assez pur, mais le vent halait le nord-est, et les voiles pourraient être substituées aux palancas.

Il n’y avait d’ailleurs que peu de route à faire jusqu’à la bourgade de la Urbana, où la relâche durerait vingt-quatre heures. S’il ne survenait aucun incident, les falcas y arriveraient dans l’après-midi.

M. Miguel et ses deux amis, le sergent Martial et Jean de Kermor prirent congé de l’Indien et de sa famille. Puis, leurs voiles hissées, la Gallinetta et la Maripare s’engagèrent entre les passes que les battures sablonneuses ménageaient entre elles. Il eût suffi d’une crue un peu forte pour recouvrir tous ces bancs et donner au fleuve une largeur de plusieurs kilomètres.

À bord de leur pirogue, le sergent Martial et le jeune garçon s’étaient placés en avant du rouf afin de respirer cet air vif et salubre d’une belle matinée. La voile les protégeait contre les rayons du soleil, déjà brillant à son lever.

Le sergent Martial, sous l’influence de la conversation de la veille, et dont il avait saisi une partie, prit la parole en ces termes:

“Dis un peu, Jean, est-ce que tu crois à toutes ces histoires de l’Indien?…

— Lesquelles?…

— Ces milliers et milliers de tortues qui se promènent dans les environs comme une armée en campagne…

— Pourquoi non?…

— Ça me paraît bien extraordinaire! Des légions de rats, je ne dis pas… on en a vu… mais des légions de ces grosses bêtes longues d'un mètre…

— On en a vu aussi.

— Qui les a vues?…

— L'Indien d'abord.

— Bah! des contes de sauvages!…

— Et puis, les voyageurs qui ont remonté l'Orénoque du côté de la Urbana en parlent également…

— Oh! ce qu'il y a dans les livres!… répondit le sergent Martial, très incrédule à l'endroit des récits de voyages.

— Tu as tort, mon oncle. Cela est très croyable, et j'ajoute que cela est très certain.

— Bon… bon!… Dans tous les cas, si la chose est vraie, je ne pense pas, comme le prétend M. Miguel, qu'il y ait grand danger à rencontrer tant de tortues sur sa route!

— Cependant… si elles vous barrent le chemin…

— Eh bien… on passe par-dessus, que diable!

— Et le risque d’être écrasé, si, par malheur, l’on fait une chute au milieu de ces bêtes…

— N’importe!… Je voudrais le voir pour le croire…

— Nous arrivons un peu tard, répondit Jean, et il y a quatre mois, à l’époque de la ponte, tu aurais pu juger de tes propres yeux…

— Non, Jean, non!… Tout cela, c’est des histoires que les voyageurs inventent pour attraper les braves gens qui préfèrent rester chez eux…

— Il y en a de très véridiques, mon bon Martial.

— S’il existe tant de tortues que cela, il est étonnant que nous n’en apercevions pas une seule!… Vois-tu ces bancs de sable disparaissant sous des carapaces!… Tiens… je ne suis pas exigeant… je ne demande pas à les compter par centaines de mille, ces tortues, mais rien qu’une cinquantaine… une dizaine… d’autant que, puisque cela fait de si bon pot-au-feu, j’aurais plaisir à tremper mon pain dans un bouillon de cette espèce…

— Tu me donnerais bien la moitié de ta gamelle, n’est-ce pas, mon oncle?

— Et pourquoi, s’il te plaît?… Rien qu’avec cinq ou six mille de ces bêtes-là, il y aurait de quoi remplir ta gamelle et la mienne, je pense… Mais pas une… pas une!… Où peuvent-elles s’être cachées?… Dans la cervelle de notre Indien, sans doute!”

Il était difficile de pousser l’incrédulité plus loin. Si le sergent Martial n’apercevait pas un de ces chéloniens nomades, ce n’était pourtant pas faute de regarder, et, vraiment, il finirait par y user sa lunette.

Cependant les deux pirogues continuaient à remonter de conserve sous la poussée du vent. Tant qu'elles purent suivre la rive gauche, la brise demeura favorable, et il n'y eut pas lieu d'employer les palancas. La navigation continua de la sorte jusqu'à l'embouchure de l'Arauca, important tributaire de l'Orénoque, auquel il verse une partie des eaux nées sur le versant même de la chaîne des Andes, et qui ne se mélange d'aucun autre affluent, tant son bassin est étroitement limité.

La remontée se poursuivit pendant la matinée et, vers onze heures, il fut nécessaire de traverser le fleuve, puisque la Urbana est située sur la rive droite.

Là, les difficultés commencèrent, et assez grandes pour occasionner des retards. Entre ces bancs d'un sable très fin, alors rétrécis par la surélévation des eaux, les passes présentaient des coudes brusques. Par instant, au lieu du vent arrière, les falcas trouvaient le vent debout. De là, l'obligation d'amener les voiles, de marcher avec les palancas, et, comme il fallait rebrousser un courant rapide, on dut recourir à tous les bras afin de ne pas être ramené en aval.

Les montres marquaient donc deux heures de l'après-midi, lorsque la Gallinetta et la Maripare, l'une précédant l'autre, atteignirent une île baptisée du même nom que la bourgade. D'un aspect différent de celui des llanos riverains, cette île était boisée, et même laissait voir quelques essais de culture. C'est chose rare en cette portion du fleuve, où les Indiens ne connaissent guère d'autre occupation que la chasse, la pêche, la récolte des œufs de tortues, — récolte si abondante qu'elle nécessite un grand nombre de travailleurs, quoi qu'en pût penser le sergent Martial.

Comme les mariniers se sentaient très fatigués de leur manœuvre opérée sous un ciel brûlé des feux de la méridienne, les patrons jugèrent opportun de leur accorder une heure qui serait consacrée au repas d'abord, au repos ensuite. On aurait toujours le temps de gagner la Urbana avant le soir. En effet, dès que l'île serait contournée, ce village se laisserait apercevoir. Il est le dernier du moyen Orénoque, précédant celui de Cariben, situé à deux cents kilomètres en amont, près de l'embouchure du Meta.

Les falcas vinrent s'amarrer le long de la berge, et les passagers descendirent à terre, où quelques arbres leur offrirent l'abri de leur large frondaison.

En dépit du sergent Martial, une sorte d'intimité commençait à s'établir entre les passagers des deux pirogues, et n'est-ce pas naturel, lorsque l'on voyage en ces conditions? L'insociabilité eût été un contresens. M. Miguel cachait moins que jamais l'intérêt que lui inspirait le jeune de Kermor, et celui-ci n'aurait pu, sans manquer aux plus élémentaires lois de la politesse, demeurer insensible à ces marques de sympathie. Il fallait bien que le sergent Martial se résignât à subir ce qu'il ne pouvait empêcher. Mais, s'il indiquait une tendance à s'adoucir, à rentrer ses piquants de porc-épic, il ne le faisait pas sans s'administrer les plus violents reproches au sujet de sa sottise et de sa faiblesse.

Si cette île était cultivée en de certains endroits, il ne semblait pas qu'elle contint aucun gibier de poil. À peine quelques couples de canards ou de ramiers voletaient-ils à sa surface. Les chasseurs n'eurent donc pas la pensée de prendre leur fusil en vue de varier le menu du dîner prochain. Ils trouveraient, d'ailleurs, à la Urbana tout ce qui serait nécessaire au ravitaillement des falcas.

Cette halte de repos se passa en causeries, tandis que les mariniers dormaient à l'ombre des arbres.

Vers trois heures, Valdez donna le signal du départ. Aussitôt les pirogues débordèrent. On devait d'abord se haler avec l'espilla jusqu'à la pointe méridionale de l'île. De là, il n'y aurait qu'à traverser obliquement l'autre moitié du fleuve.

Cette dernière partie de la navigation ne donna lieu à aucun incident, et, avant le soir, les deux falcas vinrent relâcher au pied même de la Urbana.

CHAPITRE VIII

VIII

Un nuage de poussière à l’horizon

On pourrait appeler la Urbana la capitale du moyen Orénoque. C’est la bourgade la plus importante entre Caïcara et San-Fernando de Atabapo, situés chacun aux deux angles que fait le fleuve, — le premier à l’endroit où il quitte la direction de l’est à l’ouest pour prendre celle du sud, le second à l’endroit où il quitte la direction du sud pour prendre celle de l’ouest à l’est.

Il va sans dire que cette disposition hydrographique n’est la véritable que si l’opinion de M. Miguel prévaut contre celles de MM. Felipe et Varinas, et conformément au tracé de l’Orénoque, tel qu’il est indiqué sur les cartes modernes.

Au surplus, encore six cents kilomètres environ, et les géographes auraient atteint le triple confluent où serait tranchée cette question, — on devait l’espérer du moins.

Un cerro, — colline de moyenne altitude, — s’élève sur la rive droite et porte le même nom que la bourgade bâtie à son pied. À cette époque, la Urbana possédait une population de trois cent cinquante à quatre cents habitants, répartis en une centaine de cases, pour la plupart de race mulâtre, métis d’Espagnols et d’Indiens. Ils ne sont point cultivateurs, et quelques-uns seulement s’occupent de l’élevage des bestiaux. À part la récolte de la sarrapia et des œufs de tortues dont le temps est très limité, ils ne font rien que pêcher ou chasser et, en somme, montrent un penchant naturel à l’oisiveté. Ils vivent à l’aise, d’ailleurs, et les habitations disséminées entre les bananiers de la rive offrent l’aspect d’un bien-être rare en ces lointaines régions.

MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, le sergent Martial et Jean de Kermor, comptaient ne rester qu’une nuit à la Urbana. Arrivés vers cinq heures, la soirée leur suffirait au renouvellement de leurs provisions en viande et légumes, car la Urbana était en mesure de fournir amplement à tous leurs besoins.

Ce qu’il y avait de mieux à faire, c’était de s’adresser au chef civil de la localité, lequel s’empressa d’offrir ses services et mit sa demeure à la disposition des passagers.

C’était un mulâtre d’une cinquantaine d’années, ce chef civil, dont l’autorité s’étend sur les llanos du district et auquel incombe la police du fleuve. Il vivait là avec sa femme d’origine métisse, et une demi-douzaine d’enfants de six à dix-huit ans, garçons et filles, vigoureux et de santé florissante.

Lorsqu’il sut que M. Miguel et ses deux collègues étaient de hauts personnages de Ciudad-Bolivar, il leur fit encore meilleur accueil, et les invita à passer la soirée dans sa case.

L’invitation s’étendit jusqu’aux passagers de la Gallinetta. Jean de Kermor en fut d’autant plus heureux qu’il aurait peut-être là l’occasion de se renseigner relativement à ses deux compatriotes, dont le sort ne laissait pas de le préoccuper.

En premier lieu, les patrons Valdez et Martos se chargèrent de ravitailler les pirogues, de les réapprovisionner de sucre, d’ignames et surtout de cette farine de manioc, écrasée à la râpe de pierre, le rayo, qu’on emploie communément, pour ne pas dire exclusivement, à la fabrication du pain dans les régions du moyen Orénoque.

Les deux falcas avaient accosté le revers même de la berge assez escarpée au fond d’une petite anse qui formait port et dans lequel quelques curiares et canots de pêche étaient sur leurs amarres.

On y voyait aussi une troisième falca sous la garde d’un patron indigène.

C’était l’embarcation des deux explorateurs français, MM. Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne. Leurs mariniers les attendaient à la Urbana depuis six semaines, n’ayant reçu aucune nouvelle d’eux, et pris d’une très vive inquiétude, on peut le croire.

Après avoir dîné à bord des falcas, les passagers se rendirent à la case du chef civil.

La famille se tenait dans la salle principale, qui était simplement meublée d’une table, de sièges en cuir de cerf, et ornée de quelques attributs de chasse.

Plusieurs “notables” de la Urbana avaient été conviés à cette soirée, et, avec eux, un habitant des environs. Ce personnage ne fut pas tout à fait un inconnu pour Jean, grâce au portrait que M. Chaffanjon en fait dans son récit, et chez lequel le voyageur français avait reçu une très cordiale et très généreuse hospitalité. Et voici ce qu’il en dit:

“M. Marchal, un Vénézuélien déjà d’un âge avancé, est venu, depuis une quinzaine d’années, se fixer à la Tigra, située en amont de la Urbana. C’est un vrai sage, M. Marchal. Il a abandonné la politique pour l’élevage des bestiaux. Il a fondé un hato, dont le corral renferme une centaine d’animaux, soignés par quelques péons et leurs familles. Autour du hato s’étendent des champs de manioc, de maïs, de canne à sucre, délimités par des bordures de bananiers superbes, et qui pourvoient largement à l’alimentation de ce petit monde heureux et tranquille.”

Ce M. Marchal, dont quelques affaires avaient exigé la présence à la Urbana, s’y trouvait donc à l’arrivée des pirogues. Il s’y était transporté avec sa curiare, conduite par deux de ses hommes, et, descendu chez le chef civil, son ami, il faisait tout naturellement partie des personnes invitées à cette soirée.

Qu’on ne s’attende pas à une réception du high-life dans cette petite bourgade, au fond des llanos de l’Orénoque. Mais, à défaut des pâtisseries fines, des confiseries délicates, des vins de grande marque, des liqueurs recherchées, il y eut des gâteaux confectionnés par la maîtresse de maison et ses filles, — sans parler d’un franc et cordial accueil. On servit quelques tasses de ce délicieux café de bruquilla, qui provient d’une légumineuse herbacée, cultivée au hato de M. Marchal.

Cet excellent vieillard prit un extrême plaisir à causer avec Jean de Kermor en la langue du pays. Il lui rappela que, cinq ans avant, son compatriote avait séjourné quelque temps dans son hato, — trop peu à son vif regret.

“Mais il avait une telle impatience de continuer son aventureux voyage! ajouta M. Marchal. C’est un hardi pionnier, mon cher enfant. Dédaigneux du danger, il a reconnu notre fleuve national jusqu’à ses sources, et au risque de sa vie. Voilà un Français qui honore la France!”

Ces paroles, prononcées avec une véritable animation, témoignaient de la chaleur que conservait le cœur de ce vénérable Vénézuélien.

Lorsque M. Marchal et le chef civil surent quel but poursuivaient MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, Jean crut bien s'apercevoir qu'ils se regardaient non sans quelque surprise. Pour eux, la question de l'Orénoque n'était-elle pas tranchée depuis longtemps, et en faveur de M. Miguel?

Bien que M. Marchal n'en fût plus à connaître San-Fernando, et que son opinion fût établie relativement à l'Atabapo et le Guaviare, il ne laissa pas d'encourager les trois membres de la Société de Géographie à pousser leur recherche jusqu'au confluent des trois fleuves.

“La science ne pourra qu'en profiter, dit-il, et qui sait, messieurs, si vous ne rapporterez pas de cette expédition quelque découverte personnelle?…

— C'est notre espoir, répondit M. Miguel, car il s'agit de visiter une région presque inconnue, s'il faut aller au-delà de San-Fernando…

— Et nous irons… affirma M. Felipe.

— Aussi loin qu'il le faudra!” ajouta M. Varinas.

Le sergent Martial ne saisissait qu'imparfaitement le sens de cette conversation, dont son neveu lui traduisait quelques mots. Cela l'étonnait toujours, que des gens, à moins qu'ils ne fussent privés de raison, eussent la curiosité de savoir de “quel trou sortait une rivière”.

“Enfin, murmura-t-il, si tous les hommes étaient sages, on ne bâtirait pas tant d'hospices pour les fous!”

L’entretien porta alors sur les deux Français dont on attendait vainement le retour à la Urbana.

Le chef civil les avait reçus à leur arrivée. M. Marchal les connaissait aussi, car, en partant, ils s’étaient arrêtés un jour au hato de la Tigra.

“Et depuis leur départ, demanda M. Miguel, vous n’avez plus entendu parler d’eux?…

— Ni d’une façon, ni d’une autre, répondit le chef civil. Les llaneros, qui revenaient de l’est, que nous avons interrogés à plusieurs reprises, affirment ne point les avoir rencontrés.

— Est-ce que leur intention, reprit Jean, n’était pas de remonter le cours de l’Orénoque?…

— Oui, mon cher enfant, répondit M. Marchal, et ils comptaient stationner aux divers villages riverains. Ils voyagent un peu à l’aventure, m’ont-ils déclaré. L’un, M. Germain Paterne, herborise avec la curiosité d’un naturaliste qui risquerait sa vie pour découvrir une plante inconnue. L’autre, M. Jacques Helloch, chasseur déterminé, est passionné pour les choses géographiques, le relèvement d’une contrée, la détermination d’un cours d’eau. Ces passions-là conduisent loin… très loin souvent… trop loin peut-être… et quand il s’agit de revenir…

— Espérons, dit M. Varinas, qu’il n’est rien arrivé de fâcheux à ces deux Français!

— Il faut l’espérer, répondit le chef civil, bien que leur absence se soit déjà trop prolongée!

— Est-il certain, questionna M. Felipe, qu’ils devaient revenir à la Urbana?…

— Aucun doute à cet égard, puisque leur pirogue les y attend avec les collections qu’ils ont recueillies déjà et le matériel de campement.

— Lorsqu’ils sont partis, dit Jean, avaient-ils un guide… une escorte?…

— Oui… quelques Mapoyos que je leur avais procurés, répliqua le chef civil.

— Des hommes dont vous étiez sûr?… demanda M. Miguel en insistant.

— Aussi sûr qu’on peut l’être, lorsqu’il s’agit des Indiens de l’intérieur.

— Et, reprit Jean, sait-on quelle partie du territoire ils s’apprêtaient à visiter?…

— D’après ce que je connais de leurs projets, répondit M. Marchal, ils ont dû se diriger vers la sierra Matapey, à l’est de l’Orénoque, contrée peu connue, et que les Yaruros ou les Mapoyos sont seuls à parcourir. Vos deux compatriotes et le chef de l’escorte étaient à cheval, les autres Indiens, au nombre d’une demi-douzaine, les accompagnaient à pied en portant les sacs.

— Est-ce que le pays à l’est de l’Orénoque est sujet aux inondations?… demanda Jean de Kermor.

— Non, répondit M. Miguel, et la surface de ses llanos est sensiblement au-dessus du niveau de la mer.

— En effet, monsieur Miguel, ajouta le chef civil, mais il est sujet aux tremblements de terre, et vous savez qu’ils ne sont pas rares au Venezuela.

— En tout temps?… dit le jeune garçon.

— Non, déclara M. Marchal, à certaines époques, et, précisément, depuis un mois, nous avons ressenti d’assez violentes secousses jusqu’au hato de la Tigra.”

On a reconnu, en effet, que le sol vénézuélien est souvent troublé par les poussées volcaniques, bien que ses montagnes n’aient point de cratères en activité. Humboldt a même pu l’appeler “le pays des tremble-terre par excellence”. Et cette appellation n’était-elle pas justifiée par la destruction de la ville de Cumana au seizième siècle, qui fut renversée de nouveau cent cinquante ans après, et dont les environs “tremblèrent” pendant quinze mois? Est-ce qu’une autre ville du territoire des Andes, Mesida, n’a pas été cruellement éprouvée par ces terribles commotions? En 1812, douze mille habitants ne furent-ils pas écrasés sous les ruines de Caracas? Ces désastres, qui ont fait des milliers de victimes, sont donc toujours à redouter pour ces provinces hispano-américaines, et il était vrai que, depuis quelque temps, on sentait le sol frémir dans la contrée orientale du moyen Orénoque.

Lorsque tout eut été demandé et répondu au sujet des deux Français, M. Marchal fut conduit à interroger le sergent Martial et son neveu.

“Nous savons, maintenant, dit-il, pourquoi

MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe ont entrepris cette campagne sur l’Orénoque. Votre voyage n’a sans doute pas le même objet…”

Le sergent Martial eut un énorme geste de dénégation; mais, sur un signe de Jean, il dut s’abstenir d’exprimer son dédain pour ces questions géographiques, bonnes tout au plus à intéresser les fabricants de manuels et d’atlas.

Le jeune garçon raconta alors son histoire, quels motifs l’avaient entraîné à quitter la France, à quel sentiment filial il obéissait en remontant le cours de l’Orénoque dans l’espoir de se procurer quelques nouveaux renseignements à San-Fernando, d’où était partie la dernière lettre écrite par le colonel de Kermor, son père.

Le vieux M. Marchal ne put cacher l’émotion que lui causa cette réponse. Il prit les mains de Jean, il l’attira dans ses bras, il l’embrassa au front, — ce qui fit peut-être sourdement grommeler le sergent, — et ce fut comme une bénédiction qu’il lui donna, avec les souhaits les plus ardents pour la réussite de ses projets.

“Mais ni vous, monsieur Marchal, ni monsieur le chef civil, vous n’avez entendu parler du colonel de Kermor?…” demanda le jeune garçon.

Réponse négative.

“Peut-être, reprit le chef civil, le colonel ne s’est-il pas arrêté à la Urbana?… Cela m’étonnerait, cependant, car il est rare que les pirogues ne viennent pas s’approvisionner ici… C’était en 1879, dites-vous…

— Oui, monsieur, répondit Jean. Est-ce que vous habitiez déjà cette bourgade?…

— Assurément, et je n’ai jamais appris que le colonel de Kermor y ait passé.”

Toujours cet incognito, dont il semblait que le colonel eût voulu se couvrir depuis son départ.

“Peu importe, mon cher enfant, affirma M. Miguel, il est impossible que votre père n’ait pas laissé trace de son séjour à San-Fernando, et là, vous obtiendrez les renseignements qui assureront le succès de vos recherches.”

La réunion se prolongea jusqu’à dix heures, et les hôtes du chef civil, après avoir pris congé de cette obligeante famille, retournèrent à bord de leurs pirogues, qui devaient démarrer le lendemain au jour levant.

Jean alla s’étendre sur sa couchette à l’arrière du rouf, et, sa chasse ordinaire aux moustiques terminée, le sergent Martial vint s’étaler sur la sienne.

Tous les deux s’endormirent, mais leur sommeil ne fut pas de longue durée.

Vers deux heures, une rumeur lointaine, continue, croissante, les réveilla.

C’était comme un sourd bruissement qu’on ne pouvait confondre avec le roulement même éloigné de la foudre. En ce moment aussi, les eaux du fleuve, soumises à une agitation singulière, imprimaient un balancement de roulis à la Gallinetta.

Le sergent Martial et le jeune garçon se relevèrent, sortirent du rouf, vinrent se poster au pied du mât.

Le patron Valdez et ses mariniers, debout à l’avant de la falca, interrogeaient l’horizon.

“Qu’y a-t-il, Valdez?… demanda Jean.

— Je ne sais…

— Est-ce un orage qui s'approche?…

— Non… le ciel est sans nuages… la brise souffle du levant… elle est faible…

— D'où vient ce trouble?…

— Je ne sais… je ne sais…” répétait Valdez.

En effet, c'était inexplicable, à moins qu'il ne se produisit, en amont ou en aval du village, une sorte de mascaret, dû à la crue subite du fleuve. On peut s'attendre à tout de la part de ce capricieux Orénoque.

À bord de la Maripare, même étonnement chez les passagers et chez l'équipage.

M. Miguel et ses deux amis, hors du rouf, cherchaient vainement à reconnaître la cause de ce phénomène.

Des propos, échangés entre les deux pirogues, il ne résulta aucune explication plausible.

D'ailleurs, si ce mouvement des eaux se ressentait dans les deux falcas, le sol riverain n'en était pas exempt.

Aussi, presque au même instant, les habitants de la Urbana, abandonnant leurs cases, se dirigèrent-ils vers la berge.

M. Marchal et le chef civil ne tardèrent pas à rejoindre la population qu'un peu d'épouvante commençait à gagner.

Il était, alors quatre heures et demie du matin, et le jour allait poindre.

Les passagers des deux embarcations débarquèrent aussitôt et vinrent interroger le chef civil.

“Que se passe-t-il?… demanda M. Miguel.

— Il y a sans doute un tremblement de terre dans la sierra Matapey, répondit le chef civil, et les secousses se propagent jusque sous le lit du fleuve…”

M. Miguel émit la même opinion.

Nul doute que la région ne fût soumise à ces trépidations dues aux commotions sismiques, très fréquentes dans les terrains des llanos.

“Mais… il y a autre chose… fit observer M. Miguel. Entendez-vous cette sorte de bourdonnement qui vient de l’est?”

Et, en prêtant l’oreille, on percevait comme une espèce de ronflement, une basse continue, sur la nature de laquelle on ne pouvait se prononcer.

“Attendons, dit M. Marchal. Je ne crois pas que la Urbana ait rien à craindre…

— C’est mon avis, déclara le chef civil, et il n’y a aucun danger à rentrer dans les cases.”

C’était probable, et cependant il n’y eut que la minorité des habitants à suivre ce conseil. Au surplus, le jour s’accentuait, et peut-être les yeux donneraient-ils l’explication d’un phénomène que n’avaient pu donner les oreilles.

Pendant trois heures, la lointaine rumeur ne cessa de s’accroître d’une façon étrange. Il semblait qu’il se produisît une espèce de glissement, une puissante reptation à la surface du territoire. Lourd et cadencé, ce glissement se transmettait jusqu’à la rive droite du fleuve, comme si le sol eût été tourbeux. Que les secousses fussent attribuées à un tremblement de terre dont le centre se trouvait à la sierra Matapey, rien que de très admissible, et ce n’était pas la première fois que la bourgade les subissait. Quant à ce roulement, semblable à celui qui proviendrait du matériel d’une armée en marche, personne n’en soupçonnait encore la véritable cause.

Le chef civil et M. Marchal, accompagnés des passagers des deux falcas, se dirigèrent vers les premières assises du cerro d’Urbana, afin d’observer la campagne dans un plus large rayon.

Le soleil montait sur un ciel très pur, pareil à un énorme ballon gonflé d’un gaz lumineux que la brise eût poussé vers les rives de l’Orénoque. Aucun nuage à l’horizon, nul indice même que la journée dût être orageuse.

Lorsque les observateurs se furent élevés d’une trentaine de mètres, ils dirigèrent leurs regards vers l’est.

L’immensité se développait devant eux, la vaste plaine verdoyante, cette “mer silencieuse des herbes”, suivant la poétique métaphore d’Élisée Reclus. Il est vrai, cette mer n’était pas au calme plat, et il fallait qu’elle fût sérieusement troublée dans ses fonds, car, à quatre ou cinq kilomètres de distance, les llanos se couronnaient de volutes sablonneuses.

“Cela, dit M. Marchal, c’est une poussière intense… la poussière du sol qui se dégage…

— Ce n’est cependant pas le vent qui la soulève… affirma M. Miguel.

— En effet, puisqu’il est à peine sensible, répondit M. Marchal. Seraient-ce donc les trépidations?… Non… cette explication ne tient pas…

— Et puis, ajouta le chef civil, il y a ce bruit… qui semble venir d’une marche pesante…

— Qu’est-ce donc alors?…” s’écria M. Felipe.

Et, en ce moment, comme une réponse qui lui eût été adressée, une détonation se fit entendre, la détonation d’une arme à feu que répercutèrent les échos du cerro d’Urbana, et à laquelle d’autres succédèrent.

“Des coups de fusil!… affirma le sergent

Martial. Ce sont des coups de feu, ou je ne m’y connais plus!

— Il faut qu’il y ait des chasseurs en chasse sur la plaine… observa Jean.

— Des chasseurs… mon cher enfant?… répondit M. Marchal. Ils ne soulèveraient pas une telle masse de poussière… à moins d’être légion…”

Il n’était pas contestable, cependant, que les détonations entendues ne provinssent d’armes à feu, revolvers ou carabines. Et même on pouvait apercevoir une vapeur blanchâtre, qui tranchait sur la teinte jaune du nuage de poussière.

Du reste, de nouveaux coups éclatèrent, et si éloignés qu’ils fussent encore, la légère brise suffisait à les apporter jusqu’à la bourgade.

“À mon avis, messieurs, dit M. Miguel, nous devrions aller reconnaître ce qui se passe de ce côté…

— Et porter secours à des gens qui en ont besoin peut-être… ajouta M. Varinas.

— Qui sait, dit Jean, en regardant M. Marchal, si ce ne sont pas mes compatriotes…

— Ils auraient donc affaire à une armée, répondit le vieillard. Il n’y a que des milliers d’hommes qui puissent soulever tant de poussière!… Vous avez raison, M. Miguel, descendons sur la plaine…

— Bien armés!” ajouta M. Miguel.

Mesure de prudence très indiquée, en effet, si les pressentiments de Jean de Kermor ne l’avaient pas trompé, si c’étaient les deux Français, que les Indiens de cette région attaquaient et qui se défendaient à coups de fusil.

En quelques instants, chacun eut regagné l’un sa case, l’autre sa pirogue. Le chef civil et quelques-uns des habitants, les trois géographes, le sergent Martial et son neveu, le revolver à la ceinture, la carabine sur l’épaule, prirent direction à travers les llanos, en contournant le pied du cerro d’Urbana.

M. Marchal avait voulu se joindre à eux, tant son impatience était grande de savoir à quoi s’en tenir.

La petite troupe allait d’un bon pas, et comme le nuage venait au-devant d’elle, les trois ou quatre kilomètres qui les séparaient alors ne tarderaient pas à être franchis.

D’ailleurs, même à cette distance, il eût été possible de distinguer des formes humaines, si les volutes de poussière n’eussent été si épaisses.

Cependant on apercevait la lueur des détonations, qui éclataient par instants, de plus en plus perceptibles à l’oreille.

Le bruit lourd et rythmé s’accusait aussi davantage, à mesure que se rapprochait la masse basse et rampante qui se dérobait encore aux regards.

À un kilomètre de là, M. Miguel, qui marchait en tête à côté du chef civil, leurs carabines prêtes à être épaulées, s’arrêta soudain. Une exclamation d’extrême surprise lui échappa…

En vérité, si jamais mortel eut l’occasion de voir sa curiosité satisfaite, si jamais homme fut confondu dans son incrédulité, ce fut bien le sergent Martial. Ah! le vieux soldat ne croyait pas à la présence de ces milliers de chéloniens, qui, à l’époque de la ponte, envahissaient les plages de l’Orénoque, entre l’embouchure de l’Arauca et les bancs de sable de Cariben…

“Des tortues… ce sont des tortues!” s’écria M. Miguel, et il ne se trompait pas.

Oui!… des tortues, une centaine de mille, plus peut-être, s’avançaient vers la rive droite du fleuve. Et pourquoi cet exode anormal, en dehors de leurs habitudes, puisqu’on n’était plus à l’époque de la ponte?…

M. Marchal répondit à cette question, qui venait à l’esprit de tous:

“Je pense que ces bêtes auront été effrayées par les secousses du tremblement de terre… Sans doute chassées par les eaux du Tortuga ou du Suapure qui ont été rejetées hors de leur lit… elles viennent chercher un abri dans l’Orénoque, et même au-delà… poussées par l’irrésistible instinct de la conservation…”

C’était là une explication très naturelle, et même la seule admissible. La sierra Matapey et ses environs avaient dû être profondément bouleversés par ce tremblement de terre. Déjà, en ces conditions, pareil envahissement s’était produit en dehors des mois de mars et d’avril où il s’opère d’une façon régulière, et il n’y avait pas lieu, pour des riverains du fleuve, d’en être autrement surpris. Toutefois, dans une certaine mesure, ils pouvaient s’en montrer inquiets.

Et maintenant, l’exode des tortues une fois admis, d’où provenaient ces coups de feu?… Qui donc avait à se défendre contre ces chéloniens?… Et, d’ailleurs, que feraient des balles contre leurs impénétrables carapaces?…

On le reconnut bientôt à travers les déchirures de l’épais nuage.

En effet, les myriades de tortues s’avançaient en masse compacte, serrées les unes contre les autres. C’était comme une immense surface d’écailles, couvrant plusieurs kilomètres carrés, qui se déplaçait.

Or, sur cette surface mouvante, s’agitaient nombre d’animaux, lesquels, pour éviter d’être écrasés, avaient dû y chercher refuge. Là, surpris par cette invasion à travers les llanos, courait et gambadait une troupe de singes hurleurs, qui semblaient “la trouver drôle”, pour employer une locution du sergent Martial. Puis, on apercevait aussi plusieurs couples de ces fauves, habitués des vastes campagnes vénézuéliennes, des jaguars, des pumas, des tigres, des ocelots, non moins redoutables que s’ils eussent librement couru la forêt ou la plaine.

Et c’était contre ces bandes que se défendaient deux hommes, à coups de fusil et de revolver.

Déjà quelques cadavres gisaient sur le dos des carapaces, dont le mouvement ondulatoire ne pouvait que gêner des êtres humains qui ne pouvaient y assurer leur pied, alors que les quadrupèdes et les singes n'y prenaient garde.

Quels étaient ces deux hommes?… Ni M. Marchal ni le chef civil ne parvinrent à les reconnaître, à cause de la distance. Toutefois, à leur costume, il y avait lieu d'affirmer que ce n'étaient point des Yaruros, ni des Mapoyos; ni aucun des Indiens qui fréquentent les territoires du moyen Orénoque.

S'agissait-il donc des deux Français aventurés sur les plaines de l'est, et dont on attendait vainement le retour?… Jean de Kermor, — la pensée lui en était venue, — allait-il éprouver cette joie de retrouver des compatriotes?…

MM. Marchal, Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, le chef civil et ceux des habitants qui l'accompagnaient, avaient suspendu leur marche… Convenait-il de se porter plus avant?… Non, assurément… Arrêtés par le premier rang des tortues, obligés bientôt de revenir en arrière, ils n'auraient pu rejoindre les deux hommes, cernés de tous côtés par la bande des fauves.

Cependant Jean insista afin qu'on se lançât à leur secours, ne mettant pas en doute que ces deux hommes fussent l'explorateur et le naturaliste français…

“C'est impossible, dit M. Marchal, et c'est inutile… On s'exposerait sans leur venir en aide… Mieux vaut laisser les tortues arriver jusqu'au fleuve… Là… leur masse se disloquera d'elle-même…

— Sans doute, dit le chef civil, mais nous sommes menacés d’un grave danger!…

— Lequel?…

— Si ces milliers de tortues rencontrent la Urbana sur leur route… si leur marche ne dévie pas en gagnant le fleuve… c’en est fait de notre bourgade!”

Par malheur, on ne pouvait rien pour empêcher cette catastrophe. Après avoir contourné la base du cerro, la lente et irrésistible avalanche gagnait vers la Urbana, dont deux centaines de mètres la séparaient alors. Tout serait renversé, écrasé, anéanti à l’intérieur du village… L’herbe ne pousse plus là où les Turcs ont passé, a-t-on pu dire… Eh bien… il ne resterait pas une case, pas une hutte, pas un arbre, pas un arbrisseau, là où aurait passé la masse des tortues…

“Le feu… le feu!” s’écria M. Marchal.

Le feu, — c’était la seule barrière que l’on pût opposer à cet envahissement.

Les habitants du village, à la pensée du danger qu’ils couraient, les femmes et les enfants, pris de panique, jetaient des cris d’épouvante…

M. Marchal avait été compris, et les passagers des pirogues, leurs équipages, tous se mirent à l’œuvre.

En avant de la bourgade s’étendaient de larges prairies, revêtues d’une herbe épaisse, que deux jours d’un soleil ardent avaient desséchée, et sur lesquelles quelques goyaviers et autres arbres dressaient leurs branches chargées de fruits.

Il ne fallait pas hésiter à sacrifier ces plantations, et il n’y eut pas une hésitation.

En dix ou douze places, à cent pas de la Urbana, le feu fut mis simultanément aux herbes.

Des flammes jaillirent comme si elles sortaient des entrailles du sol. Une intense fumée vint se mêler au nuage de poussière qui se rabattait vers le fleuve.

Et, néanmoins, la masse des tortues avançait toujours, et elle avancerait, sans doute, tant que le premier rang ne serait pas atteint par l’incendie. Mais, peut-être, les derniers rangs pousseraient-ils les premiers jusque dans les flammes qui s’éteindraient alors?…

Le péril n’aurait donc pas été conjuré, et la Urbana, écrasée, détruite, ne serait bientôt plus qu’un monceau de ruines…

Il en arriva autrement, et le moyen, proposé par M. Marchal, devait réussir.

Tout d’abord, les fauves furent accueillis par les coups de fusil du sergent Martial, de M. Miguel et de ses amis, des habitants qui étaient armés, tandis que les deux hommes, sur la masse mouvante, épuisaient contre eux leurs dernières munitions.

Pris de deux côtés, quelques-uns de ces fauves tombèrent sous les balles. Les autres, effrayés par les volutes de flammes qui tourbillonnaient, cherchèrent à s’échapper en remontant vers l’est, et ils parvinrent à se sauver à la suite des singes qui les précédaient, remplissant l’air de hurlements.

On put voir, à cet instant, les deux hommes se précipiter vers la barrière de feu, avant qu’elle eût gagné le premier rang des tortues, qui s’avançaient toujours avec lenteur…

Une minute plus tard, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne, — c’étaient eux, — se trouvaient en sûreté près de M. Marchal, après y avoir gagné le revers du cerro.

Alors, se détournant de ce rideau de flammes tendu sur une longueur d’un demi-kilomètre, la masse des chéloniens inclina vers la gauche de la bourgade, puis, descendant la rive, disparut sous les eaux de l’Orénoque.

CHAPITRE IX

IX

Trois pirogues naviguant de conserve

À la suite de cette extraordinaire invasion qui avait menacé de détruire complètement la Urbana, le départ des falcas fut retardé de vingt-quatre heures. Si l’intention des deux Français était de continuer leur exploration du cours de l’Orénoque jusqu’à San-Fernando de Atabapo, ne valait-il pas mieux remonter le fleuve avec eux?… Et, dans ce cas, pour leur laisser le temps de se reposer, puis de faire leurs préparatifs, ne convenait-il pas de remettre le départ au lendemain?…

Assurément, et ainsi en jugèrent dans leur sagesse MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas. De fait, on se fût demandé, non sans surprise, pourquoi l’oncle et le neveu n’auraient pas été de cet avis. D’ailleurs, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne, ayant leur propre pirogue, ne seraient ni une charge ni une gêne, et, quoi que pût penser le sergent Martial, il y aurait plus de sécurité pour les trois embarcations à naviguer de conserve.

“Et, en outre, n’oublie pas, ce sont des compatriotes, lui dit Jean de Kermor.

— Un peu jeunes!” avait murmuré le sergent Martial, en secouant la tête.

En somme, il y avait intérêt à connaître leur histoire, et lorsqu’ils apprirent que l’oncle et le neveu étaient français, — même bretons, — ils s’empressèrent de la raconter.

Jacques Helloch, âgé de vingt-six ans, était originaire de Brest. Après quelques missions remplies avec succès, il avait été chargé par le ministre de l’Instruction publique d’une expédition à travers les territoires de l’Orénoque. Six semaines auparavant, il était arrivé au delta du fleuve.

On considérait à juste titre ce jeune homme comme un explorateur de grand mérite, alliant le courage à la prudence, ayant déjà donné maintes preuves de son endurance et de son énergie. Ses cheveux noirs, ses yeux ardents, son teint animé par un sang généreux, sa taille au-dessus de la moyenne, sa constitution vigoureuse, l’élégance naturelle de sa personne disposaient en sa faveur. Il possédait cette physionomie à la fois sérieuse et souriante qui inspire la sympathie dès le premier abord. Il plaisait, sans chercher à plaire, naturellement, simplement, étranger à toute pose comme à toute préoccupation de se faire valoir.

Son compagnon, Germain Paterne, — vingt-huit ans, — adjoint à sa mission scientifique par le ministre, était breton, lui aussi. Issu d’une honorable famille de Rennes, son père, conseiller à la cour d’appel, sa mère et ses deux sœurs vivaient encore, tandis que Jacques Helloch, fils unique, avait perdu ses parents desquels il tenait une certaine fortune qui eût suffi à ses goûts pour le présent comme pour l’avenir.

Germain Paterne, non moins résolu que son ancien camarade de collège, mais d’un caractère très différent, allait où Jacques Helloch le conduisait, et ne présentait jamais aucune objection. Il était passionné pour l’histoire naturelle et plus particulièrement pour la botanique, et non moins pour la photographie. Il eût photographié sous la mitraille, et n’aurait pas plus “bougé” que son objectif. S’il n’était pas beau, il n’était pas laid, et peut-on l’être avec une physionomie intelligente, lorsqu’on possède une inaltérable bonne humeur? Un peu moins grand que son ami, il jouissait d’une santé de fer, d’une constitution à toute épreuve, un marcheur insensible à la fatigue, doué d’un de ces estomacs qui digèrent des cailloux et ne se plaignent pas quand le dîner est sommaire ou se fait attendre. Ayant appris de quelle mission Jacques Helloch avait été chargé, il s’était proposé comme second. Quel meilleur compagnon, et plus utile et plus sûr, aurait pu trouver celui-ci, qui le connaissait de longue date? En ce qui concernait la mission, elle durerait ce qu’elle durerait. Aucun terme ne lui était fixé. Elle devait s’étendre non seulement au cours de l’Orénoque, mais à ses tributaires à peine relevés sur les cartes, spécialement en sa partie moyenne jusqu’à San-Fernando, bourgade qui devait être le point extrême atteint par les explorateurs.

Il reste maintenant à dire dans quelles conditions, après avoir étudié l’Orénoque, depuis les multiples bras de son embouchure jusqu’à Ciudad-Bolivar, et de Ciudad-Bolivar à la Urbana, les deux amis avaient voulu reconnaître l’est du fleuve. Laissant leur pirogue et leurs bagages à la Urbana, l’un avait emporté ses instruments d’observation plus une excellente carabine Hammerless à répétition et à éjecteur Greener, l’autre s’était chargé de sa boîte de naturaliste, et d’une non moins excellente arme de la même maison, — sans compter deux revolvers serrés dans leur étui de cuir.

En quittant la Urbana, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne s’étaient dirigés vers le massif de la sierra Matapey, imparfaitement visitée jusqu’alors. Une escorte de Mapoyos, chargée d’un léger matériel de campement, les accompagnait. Trois cents kilomètres les séparaient des rives de l’Orénoque, lorsqu’ils furent à la limite extrême de leur expédition, qui avait duré un peu plus de trois semaines. Après avoir étudié le cours du Suapure dans le sud, et du rio Tortuga ou rio Chaffanjon dans le nord, procédé à des levés orographiques et hydrographiques, colligé des plantes qui allaient enrichir l’herbier du naturaliste, ils avaient, quinze jours auparavant, commencé leur voyage de retour.

C’est alors que de graves et inattendues éventualités s’étaient produites.

Et d’abord, les deux jeunes gens furent attaqués par un parti de ces Indiens Bravos qui errent en bandes à l’intérieur du territoire. Lorsqu’ils eurent, non sans péril, repoussé ces attaques, ils durent rétrograder avec l’escorte jusqu’au pied de la sierra Matapey, où le guide et ses hommes les abandonnèrent traîtreusement. Volés de leur matériel, réduits à leurs instruments et à leurs armes, quand ils se trouvaient encore à vingt lieues de la Urbana, ils résolurent de se diriger vers la bourgade, chassant pour assurer la nourriture quotidienne, couchant sous les arbres, l’un dormant, l’autre veillant tour à tour.

Et c’est ainsi que, quarante-huit heures auparavant, à la suite du tremblement de terre qui secouait la région, cet invraisemblable exode de tortues vint les surprendre à leur campement. S’ils ne purent devancer cette masse, c’est que le passage fut fermé par les fauves qu’elle repoussait devant elle. Alors ils n’hésitèrent pas à se faire véhiculer par ces chéloniens, carapaces ambulantes, qui se dirigeaient vers la rive droite de l’Orénoque, — ce qui était à la fois prudent et profitable. Or, il n’y avait encore que les singes à les avoir imités, quand, à quelques lieues du fleuve, pendant cette journée, plusieurs couples d’animaux, affolés, prirent exemple sur les quadrumanes. La situation devint alors très périlleuse. Il fallut se défendre contre ces fauves, tigres, pumas et jaguars. Quelques-uns furent abattus par les Hammerless, tandis que la masse, semblable à ces trottoirs mouvants des grandes cités d’Amérique, continuait à se rapprocher de l’Orénoque. Toutefois, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne en étaient à leurs dernières cartouches, lorsqu’ils aperçurent les premières maisons de la Urbana, derrière ce rideau de flammes qui protégeait la bourgade, où ils arrivèrent dans les circonstances que l'on sait. Ainsi s'était terminée l'expédition des deux Français. Bref, les jeunes gens étaient sains et saufs, et la Urbana ayant échappé au danger d'être écrasée sous cette avalanche rampante, tout était pour le mieux.

Tel fut le récit que fit Jacques Helloch. Quant à son itinéraire, il ne songeait point à y rien changer. Germain Paterne devait rembarquer avec lui afin de continuer la reconnaissance du fleuve jusqu'à San-Fernando de Atabapo.

“Jusqu'à San-Fernando?… dit le sergent Martial, dont les sourcils se froncèrent.

— Mais pas plus loin, répondit Jacques Helloch.

— Ah!”

Et il est probable que, dans la bouche du sergent Martial, ce “ah!” indiquait moins de satisfaction que de contrariété.

Décidément, il devenait de plus en plus insociable, l'oncle intérimaire de Jean de Kermor!

Celui-ci dut alors narrer sa propre histoire, et on ne s'étonnera pas que Jacques Helloch se sentît pris d'un vif intérêt pour ce jeune garçon de dix-sept ans à peine, qui ne reculait pas devant les risques d'un tel voyage. Son compagnon et lui ne connaissaient pas personnellement le colonel de Kermor; mais, en Bretagne, ils avaient entendu parler de sa disparition, et voici que le hasard les mettait précisément sur la route de cet enfant parti à la recherche de son père… Et Germain Paterne, qui avait conservé quelques souvenirs de la famille de Kermor, cherchait à les retrouver au fond de sa mémoire…

“Monsieur Jean, dit Jacques Helloch, lorsque l’histoire eut été terminée, nous sommes heureux de cette circonstance qui nous fait rencontrer sur la même route, et puisque notre intention était d’aller à San-Fernando, nous irons ensemble. Là, je l’espère, vous aurez de nouveaux renseignements concernant le colonel de Kermor, et si nous pouvons vous êtres utiles, comptez sur nous.”

Le jeune garçon remercia ses compatriotes, tandis que le sergent Martial murmurait à part lui:

“Les trois géographes, d’une part, les deux Français de l’autre!… Mille tonnerres de carambas!… ils sont trop… beaucoup trop à vouloir nous rendre service!… Attention… et garde à nous!”

Cette après-midi, les préparatifs furent achevés, c’est-à-dire ceux qui se rapportaient à la troisième pirogue, car les deux autres étaient, depuis le matin, prêtes à partir. Cette falca se nommait la Moriche, ayant pour patron un Banivas, appelé Parchal, et pour équipage neuf Indiens, dont il n’y avait qu’à se louer. Les approvisionnements renouvelés, Jacques Helloch n’eut à regretter que la perte de son matériel de campement, volé au cours de l’expédition à la sierra Matapey. Quant à Germain Paterne, comme il avait sauvé, intacte et bien garnie, sa boîte de botaniste, il aurait eu mauvaise grâce à se plaindre.

Le lendemain, 28 août, dès la pointe de l’aube, les passagers des trois pirogues prirent congé du chef civil de la Urbana, de M. Marchal et des habitants qui leur avaient fait si cordial accueil.

L’excellent vieillard voulut serrer dans ses bras le jeune garçon, qu’il espérait bien revoir, lorsque le colonel de Kermor et lui repasseraient devant le hato de la Tigra, où ils ne refuseraient pas de s’arrêter quelques jours. Puis, l’embrassant:

“Courage, mon cher enfant, lui dit-il, mes voeux vous accompagnent, et Dieu vous conduise!”

Les trois falcas démarrèrent l’une après l’autre. Le vent qui remontait favorisait la marche, et comme il tendait à fraîchir, on pouvait compter sur une rapide navigation. Leurs voiles hissées, les pirogues, après un dernier adieu à la Urbana, longèrent la rive droite, où le courant était moins accentué.

À partir de la Urbana, l’Orénoque va presque en droite ligne du nord au sud jusqu’à San-Fernando. Ces deux bourgades occupent chacune l’angle des deux principales courbures du fleuve et à peu près sur le même méridien. Donc, si le vent tenait, le voyage n’éprouverait aucun retard.

Les trois falcas marchaient de conserve, sensiblement animées de la même vitesse, tantôt en file comme les chalands de la Loire, lorsque l’étroitesse du chenal l’exigeait, tantôt de front, lorsque la passe présentait une largeur suffisante.

Ce n’est pas que le lit de l’Orénoque ne fût assez étendu d’une rive à l’autre; mais, en amont de la Urbana, son lit est obstrué de vastes plages sablonneuses. À cette époque, il est vrai, ces plages, rétrécies par la crue des eaux, formaient autant d’îles, avec une partie centrale, à l’abri des inondations, qui se montrait toute verdoyante. De là, nécessité de s’aventurer entre ces îles, et à travers les quatre bras qu’elles dessinent, et dont deux seulement sont navigables pendant la période de sécheresse.

Lorsque les pirogues n’étaient séparées que par un intervalle de quelques mètres, on causait d’un bord à l’autre. Jean, interpellé, ne pouvait se dispenser de répondre. On parlait surtout du voyage à la recherche du colonel de Kermor, de ses chances de succès, et Jacques Helloch ne ménageait pas ses encouragements au garçon.

Entre-temps, Germain Paterne, son objectif posé à l’avant de la Moriche, prenait des vues instantanées, dès que le paysage en valait la peine.

Toutefois, ce n’était pas uniquement entre leur embarcation et la Gallinetta que s’échangeaient ces propos. Les deux Français s’intéressaient aussi à l’expédition géographique de MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas. Ils les entendaient souvent discuter, et avec quelle animation, lorsqu’ils croyaient pouvoir tirer argument d’une observation recueillie en route. La diversité de caractère des trois collègues, ils l’avaient reconnue dès le début, et, comme de juste, c’était M. Miguel qui leur inspirait à la fois plus de sympathie et de confiance. Au total, ce petit monde s’entendait bien, et Jacques Helloch excusait même chez le sergent Martial son humeur grommelante de vieux soldat.

Par exemple, il avait été amené à se faire cette réflexion, qui ne semblait pas être venue à l’esprit de M. Miguel et de ses amis, et il l’avait communiquée à Germain Paterne:

“Est-ce que tu ne trouves pas singulier que ce grognard soit l’oncle du jeune de Kermor?…

— Pourquoi serait-ce singulier, si le colonel et lui sont beaux-frères?…

— En effet, mais alors, — tu l’avoueras, — ils n’ont guère marché du même pas… L’un devenu colonel, tandis que l’autre est resté sergent…

— Cela s’est vu, Jacques… cela se voit… et cela se verra encore…

— Soit, Germain!… Après tout, s’il leur convient d’être oncle et neveu, cela les regarde.”

En réalité, Jacques Helloch avait quelque raison de trouver la chose bizarre, et son opinion était qu’il n’y avait peut-être là qu’une parenté occasionnelle, improvisée pour les facilités du voyage.

Pendant la matinée, la flottille passa à l’ouvert de la bouche du Capanaparo, puis de celle de l’Indabaro, qui n’est qu’un bras de ce dernier affluent.

Il va sans dire que les principaux chasseurs des pirogues, M. Miguel d’une part, Jacques Helloch de l’autre, tiraient volontiers le gibier qui venait à portée de fusil. Les canards et les ramiers, convenablement accommodés, variaient d’une façon agréable la viande séchée et les conserves.

La rive gauche offrait alors un curieux aspect avec sa falaise de rochers, taillés à pic, premières assises des cerros de Baraguan, au pied desquels le fleuve a encore une largeur de dix-huit cents mètres. Au-delà, il se rétrécit vers l’embouchure du Mina, et le courant, qui devient plus rapide, menaçait de retarder la marche des falcas.

Par bonne chance, le vent soufflait en fraîche brise, au point que les mâts tortus, — de simples troncs à peine écorcés, — pliaient sous la tension des voiles. Rien ne craqua, en somme, et dans l’après-midi, vers trois heures, on arriva devant le hato de la Tigra, propriété de M. Marchal.

Nul doute que si l’hospitalier vieillard eût été chez lui, il aurait fallu, bon gré mal gré, — bon gré certainement, — faire escale pendant une journée à tout le moins. M. Marchal n’eût permis ni à

Jacques Helloch ni à Germain Paterne de ne pas le favoriser d’une seconde visite, en outre de celle que les deux Français lui avaient promise à leur retour.

Mais, si les pirogues ne débarquèrent pas leurs passagers, ceux-ci voulurent emporter une vue du pittoresque hato de la Tigra, dont Germain Paterne fit une photographie très réussie.

À partir de ce point, la navigation devint plus difficile, et l’eût été davantage, si le vent n’avait conservé une direction et une force suffisantes pour permettre aux falcas de gagner contre le courant. En effet, la largeur de l’Orénoque était alors réduite à douze cents mètres, et de nombreux récifs encombraient son lit assez sinueux.

Toutes ces difficultés furent vaincues, grâce à l’habileté des mariniers. Vers cinq heures et demie du soir, les falcas, ayant dépassé le rio Caripo, vinrent prendre leur poste de nuit à l’embouchure du rio Sinaruco.

À peu de distance gisait l’île Macupina, couverte de massifs d’arbres étroitement serrés et qui présente un sous-bois presque impénétrable. Il se compose en partie de nombreux palmas llaneras, sorte de palmiers, dont les feuilles déploient quatre à cinq mètres de longueur. Ces feuilles servent à fabriquer la toiture des paillotes indiennes, lorsque les indigènes n’ont besoin que d’un abri temporaire à l’époque de la pêche.

Il y avait là, précisément, quelques familles de Mapoyos, avec lesquels M. Miguel et Jacques Helloch prirent contact. Alors, dès que les pirogues eurent accosté, ils débarquèrent, afin de se mettre en chasse, et non sans succès, — du moins l’espéraient-ils.

Au premier abord, suivant l’habitude du pays, les femmes s’enfuirent à l’approche de ces étrangers, et ne reparurent qu’après avoir revêtu la longue chemise qui les couvre d’une façon à peu près décente. Elles ne portaient, quelques instants avant, que le guayuco, comme les hommes, et n’avaient pour tout voile que leur longue chevelure. Ces Indiens méritent d’être remarqués entre ces diverses peuplades qui forment la population indigène du Venezuela central. Robustes, bien musclés, bien bâtis, ils donnent l’idée de la force et de la santé.

Les chasseurs, grâce à leur concours, purent pénétrer à travers l’épaisse forêt, qui se masse à l’embouchure du Sinaruco.

Deux coups de fusils mirent à terre deux pécaris de grande taille, sans parler de ceux qui au cours de cette chasse furent adressés à une bande de capucins, — singes dignes sans doute de cette désignation congréganiste, mais dont aucun ne put être atteint.

“On ne dira pas de ceux-là, fit observer Jacques Helloch, qu’ils tombent comme des capucins de cartes!

— Il est, en effet, difficile d’approcher ces quadrumanes, répondit M. Miguel, et pour mon compte, ce que j’ai perdu de poudre et de plomb!… Jamais je n’en ai touché un seul…

— Eh! c’est regrettable; monsieur Miguel, car cette bête, cuite à point, offre aux gourmets un excellent régal!”

Tel est aussi l’avis de M. Chaffanjon, ainsi que Jean le déclara: un singe, vidé, flambé, rôti à petit feu suivant la mode indienne, et d’une couleur dorée des plus appétissantes, c’est un manger de premier choix.

Ce soir-là, il fallut se contenter des pécaris, qui furent partagés entre les trois pirogues. Assurément, le sergent Martial aurait eu mauvaise grâce à refuser la part que lui apporta Jacques Helloch, attention dont le jeune garçon le remercia en disant:

“Si notre compatriote fait l’éloge du singe à la broche, il ne vante pas moins les mérites du pécari, et il affirme même quelque part n’avoir rien goûté de meilleur pendant le cours de son exploration…

— Et il a raison, monsieur Jean… répondit Jacques Helloch; mais, faute de singes…

— On mange des merles!” répliqua le sergent Martial, qui regarda cette réponse comme un remerciement.

En réalité, ces pécaris, appelés boquiros en langue indigène, étaient délicieux, et le sergent

Martial dut en convenir. Toutefois il déclara à Jean qu’il entendait ne plus jamais manger que de ceux qu’il aurait tués de sa propre main.

“Cependant, mon oncle, il est difficile de refuser… M. Helloch est fort complaisant…

— Trop complaisant, mon neveu!… D’ailleurs, je suis là, que diable! et qu’on me mette un pécari à bonne portée, je l’abattrai tout aussi bien que ce M. Helloch!”

Le jeune garçon ne put s’empêcher de sourire, en tendant la main à son brave compagnon.

“Heureusement, murmura celui-ci, toutes ces politesses, qui ne me vont guère, prendront fin à San-Fernando, et ce ne sera pas trop tôt, je pense!”

Départ le lendemain, dès le petit jour, alors que les passagers reposaient encore sous leurs roufs. Le vent paraissant bien établi au nord, les patrons Valdez, Martos et Parchal, en démarrant de bonne heure, espéraient arriver, le soir même, à Cariben, une quarantaine de kilomètres en aval de l’embouchure du Meta.

La journée ne fut marquée par aucun incident. Les eaux du fleuve étaient alors assez hautes, et les pirogues purent franchir les capricieux angosturas, entre l’arête des récifs, principalement à la pointe d’amont de l’île Parguaza, nom du rio qui débouche sur la rive droite.

Cette passe formait une sorte de raudal, d’un accès peu facile pendant la saison sèche. Toutefois, sa longueur n’est pas comparable à celle des autres raudals que les falcas devaient rencontrer aux approches d’Atures, à une trentaine de lieues sur le cours supérieur de l’Orénoque. Il n’y eut donc pas lieu d’opérer le débarquement du matériel, ni de procéder à ces portages, qui occasionnent tant de fatigues et de retards.

Le territoire, à droite du fleuve, présentait un aspect très différent. Ce n’était plus l’immensité de ces plaines qui s’étendaient jusqu’à l’horizon, où se profilait le cadre des montagnes. Les mouvements du sol, très accentués et très rapprochés, formaient des mamelons isolés, des bancos de structure bizarre, — disposition orographique qui se rattachait dans l’est à de véritables chaînes. On eût cru voir une sorte de cordillère riveraine, qui tranchait avec les llanos de la rive gauche. Entre ces cerros, il y avait lieu de distinguer ceux de Carichana, capricieusement dessinés au milieu d’une région très boisée et couverte d’une luxuriante verdure.

Dans l’après-midi, lorsque la rive droite fut devenue plate, les pirogues durent s’élever vers la gauche, afin de remonter le raudal de Cariben, le seul passage praticable que le fleuve offre en cet endroit.

À l’est, s’étendaient ces vastes battures, ces larges plages à tortues, si fructueusement exploitées autrefois, et qui valaient celles de la Urbana. Mais cette exploitation, mal réglée, conduite sans aucune méthode, livrée à l’avidité déraisonnable des indigènes, amènera certainement la totale destruction de ces chéloniens. Ce qui est certain, dans tous les cas, c’est que les tortues ont à peu près abandonné les plages de cette partie du bassin. Aussi, la station de Cariben, agréablement située à peu de distance en aval du Meta, l’un des grands affluents du fleuve, a-t-elle perdu toute son importance. Au lieu de devenir bourgade, elle n’est plus qu’un village à peine, et finira par descendre au rang des infimes hameaux du moyen Orénoque.

En longeant les berges granitiques d’une île qui porte le nom de Piedra del Tigre, les passagers des pirogues se trouvèrent en présence d’un curieux buffet de ces roches sonores, qui sont célèbres au Venezuela.

En premier lieu, leur oreille avait été frappée par une suite de sons musicaux très distincts, un ensemble harmonique d’une intensité particulière. Comme les falcas naviguaient alors l’une près de l’autre, on put entendre le sergent Martial s’écrier de l’avant de la Gallinetta:

“Ah çà! quel est le chef de musique qui nous donne une pareille sérénade?…”

Il ne s’agissait point d’une sérénade, bien que la région fût aussi espagnole de moeurs que la Castille ou l’Andalousie. Mais les voyageurs auraient pu se croire à Thèbes, au pied de la statue de Memnon.

M. Miguel s’empressa de donner l’explication de ce phénomène d’acoustique, qui n’est pas particulier à ce pays.

“Au lever du soleil, dit-il, cette musique que perçoivent nos oreilles, eût été plus perceptible encore, et voici quelle en est la cause. Ces roches contiennent en grand nombre des paillettes de mica. Sous les rayons solaires, l’air dilaté s’échappe des fissures de ces roches, et, en s’échappant, fait vibrer ces paillettes.

— Eh! répondit Jacques Helloch, le soleil est un habile exécutant!…

— Ça ne vaut pas le biniou de notre Bretagne! dit le sergent Martial.

— Non, sans doute, répliqua Germain Paterne. Tout de même un orgue naturel, cela fait bien dans le paysage…

— Mais il y a trop de monde à l’entendre!” grommela le sergent Martial.

CHAPITRE X

X

À l’embouchure du Meta

Après avoir rallié la rive gauche du fleuve, les trois pirogues purent se dégager du raudal de Cariben, sans qu’il fût nécessaire de débarquer leur matériel. Vers six heures du soir, elles vinrent s’amarrer l’une après l’autre au fond du petit port.

Autrefois, les passagers eussent trouvé en cet endroit une bourgade, habitée par une population active, douée d’un certain mouvement commercial, et qui ne demandait qu’à prospérer. À présent, la ruine était arrivée, pour les causes que l’on sait, et Cariben ne comptait plus que cinq cases d’Indiens, — une de moins qu’à l’époque où M. Chaffanjon y débarquait avec le général Oublion.

Au surplus, demander l’hospitalité aux quelques Yaruros qui les habitaient n’eût offert aucun avantage. Ce n’est pas en cette localité déchue que les falcas auraient eu chance de se ravitailler. D’ailleurs, elles l’avaient amplement fait à la Urbana, et pourraient gagner Atures, sans avoir besoin de renouveler les approvisionnements. Les chasseurs, entre-temps, ne les laisseraient point à court de gibier.

Le lendemain, 31 août, les amarres furent larguées un peu avant le lever du soleil. La navigation serait encore favorisée si la brise continuait à souffler du nord. La direction à suivre, en effet, était sensiblement vers le sud, qui est celle de l’Orénoque depuis la Urbana jusqu’à San-Fernando, Cariben étant à peu près à mi-route entre ces deux points.

Le vent venait bien du nord, mais par risées, et il ne fallait pas compter sur les voiles, qui, gonflées deux ou trois minutes, pendaient ensuite inertes le long des mâts. Il y eut lieu de recourir aux palancas et aux garapatos, car, à cette hauteur, le courant, renforcé par les apports du Meta, quelques kilomètres en amont, était assez rude à refouler.

En cette partie de son cours, l’Orénoque n’était pas désert. Un certain nombre d’embarcations indigènes le remontaient et le descendaient. Aucune ne manifesta l’intention d’accoster l’une ou l’autre des pirogues.

Ces curiares servaient aux Quivas, qui fréquentent plus volontiers le fleuve aux approches de son important tributaire. Or, il n’y avait pas lieu à s’étonner, ni à regretter de ne point entrer en communication avec eux. En effet, ces Indiens jouissent d’une réputation détestable — qu’ils méritent.

Vers onze heures, le vent ayant refusé, Valdez et les deux patrons firent amener les voiles. Il y eut alors nécessité de naviguer à la palanca, en profitant des remous le long de la rive, où le courant se faisait moins sentir.

Les pirogues ne gagnèrent donc que peu vers l’amont pendant cette journée, maussade et pluvieuse d’ailleurs, et, à cinq heures de l’après-midi, elles vinrent mouiller à l’embouchure du Meta, derrière une pointe de sa rive droite, où elles se trouvèrent en dehors du courant.

Le ciel s’était rasséréné aux approches de la nuit. Il ne pleuvait plus. Un grand calme régnait dans l’atmosphère. Par une trouée des nuages, à l’horizon du couchant, le soleil envoya ses derniers rayons sur les eaux du

Meta, qui semblèrent se mêler à celles de l’Orénoque en un ruissellement lumineux.

Les falcas se disposèrent bord à bord, la Gallinetta entre les deux autres. C’était comme si les voyageurs eussent occupé les trois chambres d’une maison unique, — et même trois chambres dont les portes restaient ouvertes.

En ces conditions, après tant d’heures désagréables que la rafale avait obligé à passer sous les roufs, pourquoi ne pas respirer ensemble le bon air du soir, pourquoi ne pas prendre ensemble le repas, pourquoi ne pas s’entretenir comme des amis réunis à la même table?… Si “ours” qu’il fût, le sergent Martial aurait été mal venu à se plaindre de cette vie en commun.

Les quatre Français et les trois Vénézuéliens fraternisèrent donc. Chacun prit sa part de la conversation, qui fut d’abord engagée par Jacques Helloch sur un terrain où des adversaires allaient se trouver aux mains, — le terrain géographique.

En effet, et malicieusement peut-être, il dit:

“Monsieur Miguel, nous voici mouillés à l’embouchure du Meta…

— Effectivement, monsieur Helloch.

— C’est un des affluents de l’Orénoque?…

— Oui, et l’un des plus importants, puisqu’il lui verse quatre mille cinq cents mètres cubes d’eau par seconde.

— Ne vient-il pas des hautes cordillères de la République colombienne?…

— Comme vous dites, répliqua alors M. Felipe, qui ne voyait pas trop à quoi tendaient ces demandes de Jacques Helloch.

— Est-ce qu’il ne reçoit pas sur son parcours un grand nombre de tributaires?…

— Un grand nombre, répondit M. Miguel, et dont les plus considérables sont l’Upia et l’Humadea à la jonction desquels il prend son nom, puis le Casanare qui a donné le sien à toute une immense aire de llanos.

— Mon cher Jean, dit alors Jacques Helloch, — si vous me permettez de vous appeler ainsi…”

Le jeune garçon rougit légèrement, et le sergent Martial se leva comme s’il eût été projeté par un ressort.

“Qu’avez-vous, sergent…? demanda M. Miguel.

— Rien!” répondit le vieux soldat en se rasseyant.

Jacques Helloch reprit donc:

“Mon cher Jean, je pense que nous ne retrouverons jamais une occasion pareille de causer du Meta, puisqu’il coule maintenant sous nos yeux…

— Et tu peux ajouter, fit observer Germain Paterne en se retournant vers M. Miguel et ses deux collègues, que nous n’aurons jamais de meilleurs professeurs pour nous instruire.

— Vous êtes fort polis, messieurs, répondit M.

Varinas, mais nous ne connaissons pas le Meta autant que vous pourriez le croire… Ah! s’il s’agissait du Guaviare…

— Ou de l’Atabapo! riposta M. Felipe.

— Nous allons y arriver, messieurs, reprit Jacques Helloch. Néanmoins, comme je pense que M. Miguel est très ferré sur l’hydrographie du Meta, je poursuivrai mes questions en lui demandant si cet affluent de l’Orénoque n’atteint pas parfois une grande largeur…

— En effet… et sa largeur peut même atteindre à deux mille mètres, répondit M. Miguel.

— Et sa profondeur…

— Actuellement, depuis que le chenal est balisé, les navires tirant six pieds le remontent jusqu’au confluent de l’Upia, pendant la saison des pluies, et jusqu’au tiers de ce parcours pendant la sécheresse.

— Il s’ensuit donc, conclut Jacques Helloch, que le Meta est une voie de communication toute naturelle entre l’Atlantique et la Colombie…

— Ce n’est pas contestable, répondit M.

Miguel, et quelques géographes ont pu justement affirmer que le Meta était le plus court chemin de Bogota à Paris.

— Eh bien, alors, messieurs, pourquoi, au lieu d’être un simple tributaire de l’Orénoque, le Meta ne serait-il pas l’Orénoque lui-même, et pourquoi MM. Felipe et Varinas n’abandonneraient-ils pas à son profit les prétentions insuffisamment justifiées du Guaviare et de l’Atabapo?…”

Ah! c’est à cela qu’il en voulait venir, ce Français!… On imagine aisément qu’il n’avait pu achever sa phrase sans que les deux champions de l’Atabapo et du Guaviare eussent protesté par gestes à défaut de paroles.

Et aussitôt, une discussion de s’engager, et les arguments de pleuvoir comme des hallebardes sur l’audacieux qui venait de soulever une question relative au cours de l’Orénoque. Non pas qu’il s’y intéressât autrement, car il lui semblait bien que la vérité était du côté de M. Miguel et de la plupart des géographes, mais il lui plaisait de voir les rivaux aux prises. Et, en réalité, ses arguments valaient ceux de MM. Varinas et Felipe, si même ils ne valaient mieux, car, sous le rapport de l’importance hydrographique, le Meta distance très certainement l’Atabapo et le Guaviare. D’ailleurs, les deux savants ne voulurent céder ni l’un ni l’autre, et la discussion se fût sans doute prolongée bien avant dans la nuit, si Jean de Kermor ne l’eût détournée en posant une question bien autrement sérieuse à M. Miguel.

D’après son guide, les rives du Meta étaient fréquentées par des Indiens redoutables. Aussi lui demanda-t-il ce qu’il pouvait leur apprendre à ce sujet.

“Cela nous intéresse évidemment davantage”, répondit M. Miguel, qui ne fut pas fâché d’opérer une diversion.

En effet, ses deux collègues s’étaient “emballés”, suivant leur habitude, et que serait-ce donc, lorsqu’ils se trouveraient au confluent des trois fleuves?…

“Il s’agit des Quivas, reprit-il, une tribu dont la férocité n’est que trop connue des voyageurs qui naviguent jusqu’à San-Fernando. On parle même d’une bande de ces Indiens qui aurait franchi le fleuve et gagné les territoires de l’est, où elle se livre au pillage et au massacre.

— Est-ce que le chef de cette bande n’est pas mort?… fit observer Jacques Helloch, qui n’était pas sans avoir entendu parler de ce ramassis de malfaiteurs.

— Il est mort, en effet, répondit M. Miguel, mort il y a deux ans environ.

— Et quel homme était-ce?…

— Un nègre nommé Sarrapia, que la bande avait mis à sa tête et qu’elle a remplacé par un forçat en fuite…

— Les Quivas, demanda Jean, ceux qui sont restés sur les rives de l’Orénoque…

— Ils ne sont pas moins redoutables, affirma M. Miguel. La plupart des canots que nous avons rencontrés depuis Cariben leur appartiennent, et il sera prudent de nous tenir sur nos gardes, tant que nous n’aurons pas dépassé ces territoires, où ces pillards, capables de tous les crimes, sont encore très nombreux.”

Cette assertion n’était que trop justifiée par des attaques dont quelques marchands de San-Fernando avaient été récemment les victimes. Le président du Venezuela et le Congrès, disait-on, songeaient à organiser une expédition qui aurait pour objet de détruire ces bandes de l’Alto-Orinoco. Après avoir été chassés de la Colombie, les Quivas seraient chassés du Venezuela, et, — à moins qu’ils ne fussent anéantis jusqu’au dernier, — ce serait le Brésil qui deviendrait le théâtre de leurs déprédations. En attendant cette expédition, les Quivas faisaient courir aux voyageurs de très sérieux dangers, surtout depuis qu’ils avaient pour chef un évadé du pénitencier de Cayenne. Donc, les passagers des trois pirogues devraient exercer une minutieuse et incessante surveillance au cours de cette navigation.

“Il est vrai, nous sommes en nombre, en comptant nos mariniers qui nous sont dévoués, déclara Jacques Helloch, et les armes ne nous manquent point ni les munitions… Mon cher Jean, vous pourrez, cette nuit, dormir tranquille à l’abri de votre rouf… Nous veillerons sur vous…

— C’est mon affaire, il me semble! fit sèchement observer le sergent Martial.

— Cela nous regarde tous, mon brave sergent, répondit Jacques Helloch, l’essentiel est que votre neveu ne soit point privé de sommeil à son âge…

— Je vous remercie, monsieur Helloch, répondit le jeune garçon en souriant, mais mieux vaut que chacun de nous soit de garde à tour de rôle.

— À chacun sa faction!” ajouta le sergent Martial.

Mais à part lui, il se promit bien, si Jean dormait au moment où son heure serait arrivée, de ne point interrompre son sommeil et de veiller seul sur le campement.

Cette détermination prise, la garde de huit à onze heures fut confiée aux deux Français. M. Miguel et ses collègues les relèveraient de onze heures à deux heures du matin. Ce serait ensuite à Jean de Kermor et au sergent Martial de les remplacer jusqu’à la pointe du jour.

Les passagers de la Gallinetta et de la

Maripare allèrent donc s’étendre sur leurs esteras, tandis que, d’autre part, les équipages, après les fatigues de cette rude manœuvre du halage, prenaient un repos bien gagné.

Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne vinrent se poster à l’arrière de la pirogue. De là, leur surveillance pourrait s’étendre en amont et en aval du fleuve et même sur l’embouchure du Meta. Du côté de la rive, il n’y avait rien à craindre, car elle s’accoudait à une sorte de marécage impraticable.

Les deux amis, assis l’un près de l’autre, causaient de choses et d’autres. L’un fumait un de ces cigares dont il était largement approvisionné, car le tabac est d’échange courant avec les riverains de l’Orénoque. L’autre tirait de grosses bouffées de sa pipe de bruyère à laquelle il était aussi fidèle que pouvait l’être le sergent Martial à la sienne.

Les étoiles resplendissaient au firmament, pur de toute humidité, dégagé de toute vapeur. La brise, presque entièrement tombée, ne se manifestait plus qu’en légers souffles intermittents. La Croix du Sud étincelait à quelques degrés au-dessus de l’horizon méridional. Grâce à ce calme des éléments, le moindre bruit, l’eau fendue par une embarcation, troublée par une pagaie, se fût entendue de loin, et il suffirait d’observer les berges avec quelque attention pour prévenir n’importe quelle approche suspecte.

C’est à cette surveillance que s’employaient les deux jeunes gens, en s’abandonnant à une intime causerie.

Il est certain que Jean de Kermor inspirait une très vive sympathie à Jacques Helloch. Celui-ci ne voyait pas sans appréhension un garçon de cet âge lancé dans un voyage gros de périls. Tout en admirant le mobile si généreux, si respectable qui le faisait agir, il s’effrayait des dangers auxquels l’exposait son projet de s’aventurer… jusqu’où… il ne le savait…

À ce propos maintes fois déjà, il s’était entretenu de la famille du colonel de Kermor avec Germain Paterne, et celui-ci interrogeait sa mémoire au sujet de cette famille dont il avait certainement entendu parler, il y avait quelque quinze ans.

“Vois-tu, Germain, lui dit ce soir-là Jacques Helloch, je ne puis me faire à l’idée que cet enfant, — car ce n’est qu’un enfant, — s’en aille ainsi à travers ces régions du haut Orénoque!… Et sous la conduite de qui?… De ce vieux brave, un excellent cœur, j’en conviens, mais qui ne me paraît pas être le guide qu’il faut à son neveu, si les circonstances deviennent graves…

— Est-ce bien son oncle?… interrompit Germain Paterne. Cela me paraît au moins douteux!…

— Que le sergent Martial soit ou non l’oncle de Jean de Kermor, reprit Jacques Helloch, peu importerait, à la condition que ce soldat fût encore un homme dans la force de l’âge, ayant l’habitude de ces périlleuses expéditions!… Aussi je me demande toujours comment il a pu consentir…

— Consentir… tu dis bien, Jacques, insista Germain Paterne en secouant les cendres de sa pipe. Oui, consentir, car c’est à n’en pas douter, notre jeune garçon qui a eu l’idée de ce voyage… C’est lui qui a entraîné son oncle… Non… décidément, ce grognard n’est pas son oncle, car il me semble bien me rappeler que le colonel de Kermor n’avait plus de famille, lorsqu’il a quitté Nantes…

— Pour aller où?…

— C’est ce qu’on n’a jamais pu savoir.

— Cependant, ce que son fils nous a dit avoir appris par la dernière lettre écrite de San-Fernando… En vérité, si c’est sur d’aussi vagues renseignements qu’ils sont partis…

— Il espèrent en obtenir de plus complets à San-Fernando, Jacques, où il est certain que le colonel de Kermor a séjourné, il y a treize ou quatorze ans…

— En effet, Germain, et c’est bien ce qui m’inquiète! Que ce jeune garçon recueille de nouvelles informations à San-Fernando, qui sait s’il ne voudra pas aller plus loin… très loin… soit en Colombie, à travers ces territoires de l’Atabapo ou du Guaviare, soit aux sources de l’Orénoque!… Or, cette tentative le conduirait à une perte presque certaine…”

À cet instant, Germain Paterne, interrompant son compagnon, dit à mi-voix:

“N’entends-tu rien, Jacques…?”

Celui-ci se releva, rampa vers l’avant de la pirogue, prêta l’oreille, parcourut du regard la surface du fleuve depuis la rive opposée jusqu’à l’embouchure du Meta.

“Je ne vois rien, dit-il à Germain Paterne qui l’avait suivi, et pourtant… Oui… ajouta-t-il, après avoir écouté plus attentivement, il se fait comme un bruit sur les eaux…

— Ne serait-il pas prudent de réveiller nos équipages?…

— Attends… Ce bruit n’est pas celui d’un canot qui s’approche… Peut-être est-ce les eaux du Meta et de l’Orénoque qui s’entrechoquent à leur confluent…

— Tiens… tiens… là!” dit Germain Paterne.

Et il indiquait de gros points noirs, lesquels se mouvaient à une centaine de pieds en aval des falcas.

Jacques Helloch vint prendre sa carabine, déposée près du rouf, et se pencha au-dessus du bord.

“Ce n’est pas une embarcation, dit-il, et cependant, je crois voir…”

Il venait d’épauler son arme, lorsque Germain Paterne l’arrêta d’un geste.

“Ne tire pas… ne tire pas!… répéta-t-il. Il ne s’agit point de Quivas en quête de pillage!… Ce sont d’honnêtes amphibies qui viennent respirer à la surface du fleuve…

— Des amphibies?…

— Oui… trois ou quatre de ces lamantins et de ces toninos, hôtes habituels de l’Orénoque…”

Germain Paterne n’avait point fait erreur. Ce n’étaient que des couples de ces vaches marines, — les lamantins, — et de ces toninos, — les cochons de mer, — qui se rencontrent fréquemment dans les fleuves et les rivières du Venezuela.

Ces inoffensifs amphibies s’approchaient lentement des pirogues; mais, saisis de peur, sans doute, ils disparurent presque aussitôt.

Les deux jeunes gens regagnèrent leur place à l’arrière, et la conversation, un moment interrompue, recommença en ces termes, après que Germain Paterne eut de nouveau bourré et allumé sa pipe. “Tu disais, tout à l’heure, demanda Jacques Helloch, que, si tes souvenirs ne te trompaient pas, le colonel de Kermor n’avait plus de famille…

— Je crois pouvoir l’affirmer, Jacques!… Et… tiens… un détail me revient… Il y eut un procès qui lui fut fait par un parent de sa femme, procès que le colonel gagna en appel à Rennes, après l’avoir perdu en première instance à Nantes… Oui… oui… tout cela se représente à ma mémoire… Quatre ou cinq ans plus tard, Mme de Kermor, qui était une créole de la Martinique, avait péri dans un naufrage, lorsqu’elle revenait des colonies en France… péri avec sa fille unique… Ce fut là un coup terrible pour le colonel… À la suite d’une longue maladie, frappé dans ce qu’il avait de plus cher, sa femme et son enfant, sans famille, comme je te disais, Jacques, il donna sa démission… À quelque temps de là, le bruit se répandit qu’il avait quitté la France. Or, semble-t-il, on n’a jamais su en quel pays il s’était expatrié, autrement que par cette dernière lettre, adressée de San-Fernando à l’un de ses amis… Oui… c’est bien cela, et je m’étonne que ma mémoire ait pu me faire défaut à ce sujet. Si nous interrogions là-dessus le sergent Martial et le jeune de Kermor, je suis certain qu’ils confirmeraient mon dire…

— Ne leur demandons rien, répondit Jacques Helloch. Ce sont là des affaires privées, et il y aurait indiscrétion de notre part à vouloir nous y mêler.

— Soit, Jacques, mais, tu le vois, j’avais raison de prétendre que le sergent Martial ne pouvait être l’oncle de Jean de Kermor, puisque le colonel de Kermor, après la perte de sa femme et de sa fille, n’avait plus aucun proche parent…”

Jacques Helloch, les bras croisés, la tête inclinée, réfléchissait à ce que venait de lui apprendre son compagnon. Celui-ci commettait-il donc quelque méprise?… Non!… Il habitait

Rennes, lorsque le procès du colonel de Kermor était venu en appel, et les faits rapportés ci-dessus avaient été mentionnés au cours du procès…

C’est alors que lui vint à l’esprit cette réflexion si naturelle, que chacun eût faite, d’ailleurs.

Si le sergent Martial n’est pas le parent, dit-il, Jean ne peut pas davantage être le fils du colonel de Kermor, puisque le colonel n’a jamais eu qu’une fille, et que cette enfant a péri, toute petite encore, dans ce naufrage qui avait coûté la vie à sa mère…

“C’est évident, déclara Germain Paterne. Il est impossible que ce jeune garçon soit le fils du colonel…

— Et pourtant… il dit l’être”, ajouta Jacques Helloch.

Il y avait certainement là quelque chose de très obscur, de très mystérieux même. Était-il admissible que ce jeune garçon fût victime d’une erreur, — une erreur qui l’aurait engagé en une si périlleuse aventure…? Non, assurément. Le sergent Martial et son prétendu neveu devaient, au sujet du colonel de Kermor et des liens qui l’unissaient à Jean, s’appuyer sur une certitude en contradiction avec les renseignements de Germain Paterne. Au total, l’intérêt que Jacques Helloch portait au jeune garçon ne put que s’accroître par tout ce que la situation offrait d’inexplicable.

Les deux amis continuèrent à discuter jusqu’au moment où, — vers onze heures, — MM. Miguel et Felipe, laissant dormir le farouche champion du Guaviare, vinrent les relever de leur garde.

“Vous n’avez rien vu de suspect?… demanda M. Miguel, debout à l’arrière de la Maripare.

— Absolument rien, monsieur Miguel, répondit Jacques Helloch. Les rives et le fleuve sont tranquilles…

— Et il est probable, ajouta Germain Paterne, que votre faction ne sera pas plus troublée que la nôtre.

— Alors, bonne nuit, messieurs”, répondit M.

Felipe en leur serrant la main d’un bord à l’autre.

Très probablement, si M. Miguel et son collègue employèrent à causer les quelques heures confiées à leur surveillance, cette conversation n’eut aucun rapport avec celle de Jacques Helloch et de Germain Paterne. Sans doute, M. Felipe dut profiter de l’absence de M. Varinas pour accabler celui-ci de toutes les foudres de son argumentation, et il est probable que M. Miguel l’écouta avec sa bienveillance ordinaire.

Bref, il n’était survenu rien d’anormal, lorsque, vers deux heures du matin, ils réintégrèrent le rouf de la Maripare, au moment où le sergent Martial venait les remplacer.

Le sergent Martial s’installa sur l’arrière de la pirogue, sa carabine à son côté, et se prit à réfléchir. Jamais il n’avait eu l’âme si pleine d’inquiétudes, — non pour lui, grand Dieu! mais pour ce cher enfant qui dormait sous le toit de la pirogue. Il revoyait dans sa pensée tous les détails de cette campagne entreprise par Jean, à la volonté duquel il avait dû céder, le départ d’Europe, la traversée de l’Atlantique, les divers incidents survenus depuis que tous deux avaient quitté Ciudad-Bolivar… Où allaient-ils ainsi… et jusqu’où les entraînerait cette campagne de recherches?… Quels renseignements seraient fournis à San-Fernando?… En quelle bourgade lointaine du territoire le colonel de Kermor était-il allé enfouir les dernières années d’une existence si heureuse au début, si vite brisée par la plus épouvantable des catastrophes?… Et, pour le retrouver, à quels dangers serait exposé le seul être qui lui restait au monde?…

Et puis, les choses n’avaient pas marché comme le désirait le sergent Martial… Il aurait voulu que ce voyage s’accomplît sans que nul étranger se fût rencontré sur la route… Et voilà, d’abord, que la Maripare et la Gallinetta avaient navigué de conserve… Ses passagers s’étaient trouvés en relation avec son prétendu neveu, et pouvait-il en être autrement entre gens qui voyagent dans les mêmes conditions?… En second lieu, — et c’était peut-être plus grave à son avis, et pour des raisons connues de lui seul, — la malchance venait de mettre ces deux Français sur son passage… Et comment aurait-il pu empêcher que des relations plus étroites s’établissent entre compatriotes, l’intérêt excité par le but que poursuivait Jean, les offres de services presque impossibles à refuser… Et, pour comble, c’étaient des Bretons de cette même Bretagne… En vérité, le hasard est singulièrement indiscret, et se mêle trop volontiers de choses qui ne le regardent point!…

En cet instant, dans la direction de l’est, le calme fut troublé par un léger bruit, une sorte de cadence, qui s’accentuait peu à peu.

Absorbé dans ses pensées, le sergent Martial ne l’entendit pas, ce bruit, assez faible d’ailleurs. Il ne distingua pas davantage quatre petites embarcations que le courant du Meta amenait le long de la rive droite. Elles étaient mues à la pagaie, ce qui leur permettait de s’approcher des falcas, en refoulant le courant d’aval.

Montées par une vingtaine de Quivas, ces curiares n’étaient plus qu’à deux cents mètres des pirogues, et si les passagers étaient surpris pendant leur sommeil, ils seraient égorgés sans avoir eu le temps de se défendre, puisque le sergent Martial, distrait de sa surveillance, ne voyait rien… n’entendait rien…

Soudain, alors que les falcas et les curiares n’étaient plus séparées que par une soixantaine de pieds, la détonation d’une arme à feu éclata.

Presque aussitôt, des cris retentirent à bord de l’embarcation la plus voisine.

C’était Jacques Helloch qui venait de tirer ce coup de feu auquel succéda un second coup dû à la carabine de Germain Paterne.

Les deux jeunes gens, — il était alors cinq heures du matin, et l’aube pointait à peine, — venaient de se réveiller, lorsque ce bruit de pagaie était arrivé jusqu’à leur oreille. Après s’être glissés à l’arrière de la Moriche, ils avaient reconnu l’imminence de l’attaque et déchargé leurs armes sur les curiares.

L’alarme donnée, passagers et mariniers, tous furent sur pied au même moment.

MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe, le fusil à la main, se précipitèrent hors du rouf de la

Maripare.

Jean surgit près du sergent Martial, lequel, à son tour, venait de tirer dans la direction des embarcations, s’écriant d’un ton de désespoir:

“Malheur… malheur!… M’être laissé surprendre!”

Les Quivas ripostaient alors, et une vingtaine de flèches passèrent au-dessus des pirogues. Quelques-unes s’implantèrent dans le toit des roufs, mais n’atteignirent personne à bord.

M. Miguel et ses compagnons répondirent par une seconde décharge, et les balles, mieux dirigées que les flèches, jetèrent le désordre chez les Quivas.

“Rentrez dans le rouf, Jean, rentrez dans le rouf!…” cria alors Jacques Helloch, trouvant inutile que le jeune garçon s’exposât pendant cette attaque.

Une nouvelle volée de flèches arriva en cet instant, et l’une d’elles blessa le sergent Martial à l’épaule.

“Bien fait!… bien fait!… s’écria-t-il. Moi… un soldat… pendant sa faction!… Je n’ai que ce que je mérite!”

Troisième décharge des carabines et des revolvers sur les curiares, qui dérivaient alors par le travers des pirogues.

Les Quivas, n’ayant pu surprendre les passagers et les équipages, n’avaient plus qu’à s’enfuir. Plusieurs d’entre eux étaient mortellement atteints, et quelques autres avaient reçu de graves blessures.

Le coup manqué, les curiares disparurent en aval de l’Orénoque.

CHAPITRE XI

XI

Relâche au village d’Atures

Ce jour-là, — 1er septembre, — dès six heures du matin, les falcas quittèrent ces dangereux parages. Passagers et mariniers venaient d’échapper au massacre, aux lieux mêmes où tant d’autres furent les victimes de ces cruelles tribus.

Et, décidément, pensa M. Miguel, puisque le Congrès a voté la destruction de cette maudite engeance de Quivas, il ne serait pas trop tôt de se mettre à l’œuvre!

“Je n’ai que ce que je mérite!” s’était écrié le sergent Martial, en arrachant la flèche qui lui avait déchiré l’épaule.

Et les remords qu’il éprouvait d’avoir regardé plutôt dans le passé que dans le présent pendant sa faction étaient autrement cuisants que les souffrances de sa blessure. Toutefois cette faute ne valait pas la mort d’un homme, — même celle d’un soldat qui s’était laissé surprendre à son poste, et — on l’espérait, — cette blessure ne serait pas mortelle.

Dès que les embarcations des Quivas furent hors de vue, le sergent Martial, étendu sur la litière du rouf, reçut les premiers soins de Jean. Mais il ne suffit pas d’être le neveu de son oncle et d’y déployer tant de zèle, pour tirer celui-ci d’affaire. Encore doit-on posséder quelques connaissances en médecine, et le jeune garçon ne les possédait pas.

Il est donc heureux que Germain Paterne, en sa qualité de naturaliste-botaniste, eût fait ses études en médecine et qu’une boîte de pharmacie fût à bord de la Moriche…

Aussi Germain Paterne voulut-il donner au sergent Martial les soins que nécessitait son état, et on ne s’étonnera pas que Jacques Helloch montrât un extrême empressement à lui venir en aide.

Il résulta de ce concours de circontances que la Gallinetta allait compter deux passagers supplémentaires, durant les premières heures de navigation, — et ils ne purent voir sans en être touchés quelle affection Jean de Kermor témoignait au vieux soldat.

Après avoir examiné la blessure, Germain Paterne reconnut que la pointe de la flèche s’était enfoncée au défaut de l’épaule de trois centimètres, sans atteindre aucun muscle, aucun nerf, la chair seulement. En somme, il n’y avait pas à craindre que cette blessure pût avoir des conséquences graves, si la flèche n’était pas empoisonnée.

Or, il arrive trop souvent que les Indiens de l’Orénoque trempent leurs flèches dans la liqueur connue sous le nom de curare. Cette liqueur est composée du suc du mavacare, liane de la famille des strychnées, et de quelques gouttes de venin de serpent. Ce produit noirâtre, brillant comme de la réglisse, est très employé par les indigènes. Il paraît même que jadis les Indiens Otomaques, cités dans les récits de Humboldt, enduisaient l’ongle de leur index de cette substance, et communiquaient le poison rien que par un serrement de main.

Or, si le sergent Martial avait été touché par une flèche trempée dans le curare, on le reconnaîtrait bientôt. Le blessé ne tarderait pas à être privé de la voix, puis du mouvement des membres, de la face et du thorax, tout en gardant son intelligence entière jusqu'à la mort qu'on ne pourrait conjurer.

Il convenait donc d'observer si ces symptômes se produiraient pendant les premières heures.

Après le pansement, le sergent Martial ne put faire autrement que de remercier Germain Paterne, quoiqu'il enrageât à la pensée que des relations plus intimes allaient s'établir entre les deux pirogues. Puis il tomba dans une sorte d'assoupissement léthargique, qui ne laissa pas d'inquiéter ses compagnons.

Le jeune garçon s'adressant à Germain Paterne:

“Êtes-vous ou n'êtes-vous pas rassuré sur son état… monsieur?… demanda-t-il.

— Je ne puis me prononcer encore… répondit Germain Paterne. Il n'y a là, en réalité, qu'une légère blessure… et elle se fermera d'elle-même… si la flèche n'était pas empoisonnée… Attendons et nous serons avant peu fixés à cet égard…

— Mon cher Jean, ajouta Jacques Helloch, ayez bon espoir… Le sergent Martial guérira et guérira vite… Il me semble que s'il s'agissait de curare la plaie aurait déjà un autre aspect…

— C'est mon avis, Jacques, déclara Germain Paterne. Au prochain pansement, nous saurons à quoi nous en tenir… et votre oncle… je veux dire le sergent Martial…

— Dieu me le conserve! murmura le jeune garçon, dont une larme mouillait les yeux.

— Oui… mon cher Jean… répéta Jacques Helloch, Dieu le conservera… Vos soins… les nôtres guériront le vieux soldat!… Je vous le répète, ayez confiance!”

Et il serra la main de Jean de Kermor, qui tremblait dans la sienne.

Heureusement, le sergent Martial dormait.

MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, — alors que les trois falcas marchaient en ligne sous l’action d’une forte brise du nord-est, — eurent aussitôt des nouvelles du blessé, et voulaient croire qu’il en réchapperait.

En effet, les Quivas emploient souvent le curare pour empoisonner leurs flèches et aussi les traits de leurs sarbacanes; mais que ce soit une habitude constante, non point. La préparation de ce poison ne peut même se faire que par des “spécialistes”, s’il est permis d’employer cette qualification quand il s’agit de sauvages, et il n’est pas toujours facile de recourir à l’industrie de ces praticiens de la savane. Donc, toutes les probabilités étaient pour que l’affaire n’eût aucun dénouement fâcheux.

Au surplus, si, contre toute attente, l’état du sergent Martial exigeait quelques jours de repos, et dans des conditions meilleures que celles où il se trouvait à bord de la Gallinetta, il serait facile de relâcher au village d’Atures, une soixantaine de kilomètres en amont des bouches du Meta.

C’était là, en effet, que les voyageurs devraient attendre pendant une semaine au moins que leurs pirogues, dont ils se seraient séparés, eussent franchi les nombreux rapides compris en cette partie de l’Orénoque. Or, puisque le vent était favorable, il y avait lieu de prévoir que le village d’Atures apparaîtrait dans la journée du lendemain.

Les voiles furent étarquées, de manière à imprimer le maximum de vitesse, et, si la brise se maintenait, les falcas auraient fait le soir plus de la moitié du chemin.

Pendant la matinée, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne vinrent trois ou quatre fois observer le sergent Martial.

La respiration du blessé était bonne, son sommeil profond et tranquille.

L’après-midi, vers une heure, lorsqu’il se réveilla, le sergent Martial vit à son côté le jeune garçon, et il le salua d’un bon sourire. Mais, en apercevant les deux Français près de lui, il ne put dissimuler une certaine grimace.

“Est-ce que vous souffrez davantage?… lui demanda Germain Paterne.

— Moi… monsieur… répliqua le sergent Martial, comme s’il eût été froissé d’une pareille demande, pas le moins du monde!… Une simple égratignure… un bobo!… Est-ce que vous vous imaginez que j’ai une peau de femmelette!… Il n’y paraîtra plus demain, et, si cela vous plaît, je ne serais pas gêné de vous porter sur mon épaule!… D’ailleurs, je compte bien me lever…

— Non… vous resterez couché, sergent, déclara Jacques Helloch…. C’est ordonné par le médecin…

— Mon oncle, ajouta le jeune garçon, tu voudras bien obéir à l’ordre… et sous peu tu n’auras plus qu’à remercier ces messieurs de leurs soins…

— C’est bon… c’est bon!…” murmura le sergent Martial, grognant comme un dogue agacé par un roquet.

Germain Paterne fit alors un nouveau pansement, et constata que la plaie ne s’était point envenimée. À coup sûr, si la flèche eût été empoisonnée, l’effet du poison aurait déjà commencé à se manifester. Physiquement sinon moralement, le blessé, en ce moment, eût été frappé de paralysie partielle.

“Allons… sergent… cela va mieux… affirma Germain Paterne.

— Et, dans quelques jours, cela ira tout à fait bien!” ajouta Jacques Helloch.

Puis, lorsqu’ils eurent regagné leur pirogue, qui naviguait bord à bord avec la Gallinetta:

“Il ne manquait plus que cela!… grommela le sergent Martial. Les voilà ici à demeure… ces deux Français…

— Que veux-tu, mon oncle… répondit Jean en le calmant. Il ne fallait pas te faire blesser…

— Non, pardieu, il ne le fallait pas, et tout ça… c’est ma faute… à moi… un conscrit de huit jours… un propre à rien… qui ne sais seulement plus monter la garde!…”

À l’heure où le crépuscule obscurcissait les rives du fleuve, les pirogues atteignirent la barrière de Vivoral, où elles devaient s’abriter pendant la nuit. Déjà se faisaient entendre les rumeurs confuses et lointaines des raudals d’Atures.

Comme on pouvait redouter encore quelque attaque des Quivas, les plus sévères précautions furent prises. Le patron Valdez ne laissa pas ses hommes s’endormir sans avoir désigné ceux qui devraient veiller durant les premières heures. Mêmes mesures ordonnées à bord des deux autres falcas par Martos et Parchal. En outre, les armes, carabines, revolvers, furent mises en état, leurs charges renouvelées.

Aucune alerte ne troubla cette relâche, et le sergent Martial put dormir tout d'une traite. Au pansement du matin, Germain Paterne constata que la blessure était en voie de guérison. Encore quelques jours, elle serait cicatrisée. Les conséquences du terrible curare n'étaient plus à craindre.

Le temps restait pur, la brise fraîche et favorable. Au loin se profilaient ces montagnes des deux rives entre lesquelles se resserrent les raudals d'Atures.

En cet endroit, l'île Vivoral divise le fleuve en deux branches dont les eaux forment de furieux rapides. D'ordinaire, à l'époque où l'étiage est en décroissance, les roches du lit découvrent, et il est impossible de passer sans procéder au transport des bagages jusqu'à l'extrémité de l'île.

Cette opération, longue et fatigante, ne fut pas nécessaire cette fois, et, en se halant le long des berges au moyen de l'espilla, les pirogues purent doubler la pointe d'amont. Plusieurs heures furent ainsi gagnées, et la navigation régulière reprit, lorsque le soleil débordait l'horizon de quelques degrés au-dessus des cerros du Cataniapo de la rive droite.

Pendant la matinée, on put suivre assez aisément la berge, au pied des cerros, et, vers midi, les falcas s'arrêtaient au petit village de Puerto-Real. Un beau nom pour un port fluvial, où sont disséminées quelques paillotes à peine habitées.

C'est de là que s'effectue d'habitude le portage du matériel des embarcations, lequel est conduit par terre au village d'Atures, situé à cinq kilomètres au-dessus. Aussi les Guahibos recherchent-ils avec empressement cette occasion de gagner quelques piastres.

Lorsqu’on a traité avec eux, ils prennent les bagages à dos, et les passagers les suivent, laissant aux mariniers la dure tâche de traîner leurs pirogues à travers les rapides.

Ce raudal est une sorte de couloir, creusé entre les montagnes escarpées de la rive, d’une longueur de dix kilomètres. Les eaux, irritées par le resserrement du défilé où leur pente les engage, deviennent torrentueuses. D’ailleurs, la nature ne leur a pas assuré un libre passage. Le lit du fleuve, “en escalier”, dit de Humboldt, est barré de corniches qui transforment le rapide en cataractes. Partout des écueils émergeant en bouquets de verdure, des rochers qui affectent la forme sphérique et semblent ne se maintenir sur leur base que par une dérogation aux lois de l’équilibre. La dénivellation du fleuve entre l’amont et l’aval est de neuf mètres. Et c’est à travers ces sas ménagés d’un barrage à l’autre, entre ces blocs semés çà et là, à la surface de ces hauts-fonds prompts à se déplacer, qu’il faut haler les bateaux. Véritable traînage sur ces seuils granitiques, et, pour peu que les circonstances climatériques ne s’y prêtent pas, cette manœuvre exige beaucoup de temps et d’efforts.

On le comprend, il est de première nécessité que l’on procède au déchargement des embarcations. Aucune ne pourrait franchir ces raudals, sans risquer d’y perdre sa cargaison. Il est déjà assez surprenant qu’elles puissent le faire à vide, et la plupart seraient englouties ou démolies, n’était la merveilleuse habileté des mariniers, qui les dirigent au milieu de ces tourbillons.

Les trois pirogues furent donc déchargées. On traita avec les Guahibos pour le transport des colis jusqu’au village d’Atures. Le salaire qu’ils demandent leur est ordinairement payé en étoffes, bibelots de pacotille, cigares, eau-de-vie. Il est vrai qu’ils ne refusent point les piastres, et le portage des trois falcas se régla à un prix dont ils parurent satisfaits.

Il va sans dire que les passagers ne confient pas leurs bagages à ces Indiens, en leur donnant rendez-vous au village d’Atures. Les Guahibos ne méritent pas une si absolue confiance, — loin de là, — et il est sage de ne point mettre leur probité à l’épreuve. Aussi font-ils, d’habitude, escorte aux voyageurs, et c’est ce qui eut lieu en cette occasion.

La distance de Puerto-Real au village d’Atures n’étant que de cinq kilomètres, elle eût donc pu être aisément franchie en quelques heures, même avec l’impedimentum du matériel, qui était assez encombrant, les ustensiles, les couvertures, les valises, les vêtements, les armes, les munitions, les instruments d’observation de Jacques Helloch, les herbiers, boîtes et appareils photographiques de Germain Paterne. Mais là n’était pas la difficulté. Le sergent Martial pourrait-il faire le trajet à pied?… Sa blessure n’obligerait-elle pas à le transporter sur une civière jusqu’au village?…

Non! l’ancien sous-officier n’était pas une femmelette, comme il ne cessait de le répéter, et un pansement à l’épaule n’empêche pas de mettre un pied devant l’autre. Sa blessure ne le faisait aucunement souffrir, et à Jacques Helloch qui lui offrait son bras, il répondit:

“Merci, monsieur… Je marcherai d’un bon pas et n’ai besoin de personne.”

Un regard du jeune garçon à Jacques Helloch signifia que mieux valait ne pas contrarier le sergent Martial, même en lui faisant des offres obligeantes.

La petite troupe prit donc congé des mariniers chargés de remorquer les falcas à travers les remous de ce rapide. Les patrons Valdez, Martos et

Parchal promirent de ne pas perdre une heure, et l’on pouvait se fier à leur zèle.

Les passagers quittèrent Puerto-Real vers onze heures et demie du matin.

Il n’était pas nécessaire d’aller d’”un bon pas”, ainsi que le sergent Martial se disait prêt à le faire. Comme Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons avaient eu la précaution de déjeuner, ils pouvaient atteindre le village d’Atures sans hâter leur marche, et y arriver avant l’heure du dîner.

La route, ou plutôt le sentier, longeait la rive droite du fleuve. Cela dispenserait de le traverser, puisque le village est situé sur cette rive. À gauche se dressait le talus très à pic des cerros, dont la chaîne se continue jusqu’en amont des raudals. Parfois, le passage suffisait à peine pour une seule personne, et la petite troupe marchait en file.

Les Guahibos tenaient la tête, à quelques pas. Après eux venaient M. Miguel et ses deux collègues. Suivaient Jacques Helloch, Jean de Kermor et le sergent Martial. Germain Paterne formait l’arrière-garde.

Lorsque la largeur de la berge le permettait, on marchait par trois ou par deux. Le jeune garçon, le sergent Martial, Jacques Helloch se trouvaient alors sur la même ligne.

Décidément, Jacques Helloch et Jean étaient devenus une paire d’amis, et à moins d’être un vieil entêté, toujours geignant, comment voir cela d’un mauvais œil?…

Entre-temps, Germain Paterne, sa précieuse boîte au dos, s’arrêtait, lorsque quelque plante sollicitait sa curiosité. Ses compagnons, qui le devançaient, lui adressaient des rappels énergiques, auxquels il ne se hâtait pas d’obéir.

Chasser dans ces conditions, inutile d’y songer, si l’occasion ne se présentait pas de remonter sur une centaine de pieds les étroites gorges des cerros.

C’est même ce qui arriva, à l’extrême satisfaction de M. Miguel, mais au grand dommage d’un singe aluate, — le premier qu’il eût la bonne chance d’abattre.

“Mes compliments, monsieur Miguel, mes compliments! cria Jacques Helloch, lorsque l’un des Guahibos, qui s’était détaché, rapporta la bête en question.

— Je les accepte, monsieur Helloch, et je vous promets que la peau de cet animal figurera à notre retour au musée d’Histoire naturelle, avec cette inscription: “Tué de la main de M. Miguel, membre de la Société de Géographie de Ciudad-Bolivar.”

— Et ce sera justice, ajouta M. Felipe.

— Pauvre bête! fit Jean, en considérant l’aluate étendu sur le sol, le cœur traversé d’une balle.

— Pauvre… mais excellente à manger… dit-on… répliqua Germain Paterne.

— En effet, monsieur, affirma M. Varinas, et vous pourrez tous en juger ce soir, lorsque nous serons à Atures. Ce singe formera la principale pièce de notre prochain dîner…

— Ne sera-ce pas presque de l’anthropophagie?… fit observer en plaisantant Jacques Helloch.

— Oh! monsieur Helloch!… répondit Jean. Entre un singe et un homme…

— Bah! la différence n’est pas déjà si grande, mon cher Jean!… N’est-il pas vrai, sergent?…

— En effet… tous les deux s’entendent en grimaces!” répondit le sergent Martial, et il le prouvait bien en ce moment.

Quant au gibier de plume, il ne manquait pas, des canards, des ramiers, d’autres oiseaux aquatiques en grand nombre, et surtout de ces pavas qui sont des poules à large envergure.

Toutefois, s’il eût été facile de démonter ces volatiles, il eût été difficile d’en prendre possession, car ils seraient tombés dans les tourbillons du rapide.

Il est vraiment curieux, cet Orénoque, lorsque ses eaux furieuses se précipitent à travers ce raudal d’Atures, qui est le plus long et le plus impraticable peut-être de son cours. Que l’on se figure les assourdissantes rumeurs des cataractes, les vapeurs pulvérisées qui les couronnent, le charriage des troncs, arrachés aux rives par la violence du torrent et choqués contre les rocs émergés, les portions de berge qui se détachent par instants et menacent l’étroit sentier tracé à leur surface. C’est à se demander comment des pirogues peuvent le franchir sans y laisser les bordages de leurs flancs ou de leurs fonds. Et, en vérité, les passagers de la Gallinetta, de la Moriche et de la Maripare ne seraient rassurés qu’à l’heure où ils verraient apparaître leurs embarcations au port d’Atures.

La petite troupe, dont la marche n’avait été interrompue ni par un incident, ni par un accident, fit halte au village, un peu après deux heures de l’après-midi.

À cette époque, Atures était tel encore que l’avait trouvé l’explorateur français cinq ans auparavant, tel qu’il restera sans doute, si l’on s’en tient aux pronostics d’Élisée Reclus, relativement à ces villages du moyen Orénoque. Tant que les voyageurs des trois pirogues ne seraient pas arrivés à San-Fernando, ils ne rencontreraient aucune bourgade de quelque importance. Et, au-delà, c’est le désert ou à peu près, même sur les vastes bassins du Rio Negro et de l’Amazone.

Sept ou huit cases, c’était tout Atures, une trentaine d’Indiens, toute sa population. Là, encore, les indigènes s’occupent à l’élevage des bestiaux, mais on chercherait vainement, en amont du fleuve, des llaneros qui se livrent à ce travail. On n’y voit plus que des passages de bêtes à cornes, lorsque l’époque est venue de “transhumer” les troupeaux d’un territoire à un autre.

M. Miguel et ses deux compagnons, le sergent

Martial et Jean, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne durent donc s’accommoder des moins délabrées de ces paillotes, où chaque groupe put tant bien que mal s’installer.

Au total, si ce village n’offrait aucun confort, s’il y avait lieu de regretter les roufs des pirogues, il jouissait d’un avantage des plus appréciables. Pas un seul moustique! Pourquoi ces insupportables insectes le fuyaient-ils?… on l’ignorait, et Germain Paterne ne put s’expliquer à ce sujet. Ce qui est certain, c’est que, la nuit venue, le sergent Martial fut dispensé d’abriter son neveu sous le toldo habituel.

Toutefois, à défaut de moustiques, il y a, en quantité, de ces niguas ou chiques dont les Indiens ont particulièrement à souffrir sur ces rives du fleuve.

En effet, ces indigènes marchent pieds nus, or, la piqûre de ces chiques est extrêmement douloureuse. En s’introduisant sous la peau, elles produisent la tuméfaction des parties atteintes. On ne peut les extraire qu’au moyen d’une pointe, et l’opération ne se pratique pas sans difficulté ni douleur.

Inutile de dire qu’au dîner du soir, — qui fut pris en commun sous un bouquet d’arbres, — l’aluate tué par M. Miguel et cuit à petit feu, figura comme plat de résistance…

“Eh bien, s’écria M. Felipe, n’est-ce pas un rôti de premier choix?…

— Excellent, ce quadrumane, affirma M. Miguel, et il mériterait la place d’honneur sur une table européenne!

— C’est mon avis, répondit Jacques Helloch, et nous devrions en expédier quelques douzaines aux restaurants parisiens…

— Et pourquoi ces bêtes-là ne vaudraient-elles pas le veau, le bœuf ou le mouton, observa Germain Paterne, puisqu’elles ne se nourrissent que de végétaux d’un parfum exquis?…

— Seulement, répondit M. Varinas, le difficile est de les approcher d’assez près pour les tirer avec avantage.

— Nous en savons quelque chose, répliqua M. Miguel, puisque, je le répète, celui-ci est le premier…

— Auquel il faudra joindre un deuxième, monsieur Miguel, dit Jacques Helloch. Puisque nous devons passer quelques jours dans ce village, faisons la chasse aux singes. — Vous serez des nôtres, n’est-il pas vrai, mon cher Jean?

— Je ne me crois pas digne de vous accompagner, répondit le jeune garçon en remerciant d’un geste. D’ailleurs, mon oncle ne me permettrait pas… sans lui, du moins…

— Certes, non, je ne le permettrais pas! déclara le sergent Martial, très heureux que son neveu l’eût mis à même de répondre par un refus à la proposition de son compatriote.

— Et pourquoi?… reprit Jacques Helloch. Cette chasse n’offre aucun danger…

— Il est toujours dangereux de s’aventurer à travers ces forêts qui ne sont pas uniquement fréquentées par des singes, je suppose, répondit le sergent Martial.

— En effet… on peut y rencontrer des ours… quelquefois… répliqua M. Felipe.

— Oh! des ours débonnaires, répondit Germain Paterne, quelques-uns de ces fourmiliers qui n’attaquent jamais l’homme, et qui vivent de poissons et de miel!

— Et les tigres… et les lions… et les ocelots… est-ce aussi du miel qu’ils mangent?… riposta le sergent Martial, résolu à ne point en démordre.

— Ces fauves sont rares, affirma M. Miguel, et ils ne rôdent guère autour des villages, tandis que les singes viennent volontiers gambader dans le voisinage des habitations.

— En tout cas, dit alors M. Varinas, il y a un moyen très simple qu’on emploie dans les bourgades de l’Orénoque pour s’emparer des singes, sans les poursuivre, et même sans quitter sa case…

— Et lequel?… demanda Jean.

— On dépose à la lisière d’un bois quelques calebasses, on les fixe solidement au sol, on les perce d’un trou par lequel le singe peut introduire sa main lorsqu’elle est ouverte, mais d’où il ne peut la retirer quand elle est fermée. Un fruit, un de ceux qu’ils préfèrent, est placé à l’intérieur de ces calebasses. Le singe le voit, il le sent, son désir le pousse, il introduit sa main par le trou, il saisit sa proie, et, comme d’une part il ne veut pas lâcher le fruit, et, comme de l’autre, il ne peut pas retirer sa main, le voilà prisonnier…

— Comment, s’écria le sergent Martial, cet animal n’a pas l’idée d’abandonner…

— Non… il n’a pas cette idée, répondit M. Varinas.

— Et l’on viendra prétendre que les singes sont remplis d’intelligence et de malice…

— Sans doute, mais leur gourmandise l’emporte sur leur intelligence, dit M. Felipe.

— Les fichues bêtes!”

Assurément, les quadrumanes qui se laissent prendre à ce piège méritent la qualification susdite. Et pourtant, le moyen indiqué par M. Varinas est souvent employé avec succès dans les forêts de l’Orénoque.

Cependant il convenait d’occuper les quelques jours de cette halte au village d’Atures, en attendant l’arrivée des pirogues. Le jeune garçon put même raconter que, six ans avant, son compatriote y était resté onze jours, — laps de temps qui avait été nécessaire à sa falca pour franchir le raudal d’Atures. Cette fois, les eaux étant hautes, peut-être faudrait-il moins de temps aux pirogues parties le matin même de Puerto-Real.

Dans tous les cas, durant leur séjour, Jean de Kermor et le sergent Martial n’accompagnèrent point les trois Vénézuéliens et les deux Français qui allèrent battre la plaine aux environs du village. Les chasseurs ne rencontrèrent aucun fauve, ou du moins ceux qu’ils aperçurent ne cherchèrent pas à les attaquer. Un tapir seulement fut blessé par une balle de Jacques Helloch, et put s’éloigner sans en attendre une seconde, qui l’aurait sans doute étendu sur le sol.

En revanche, les chasseurs eurent l’occasion de tuer ce qu’ils voulaient de pécaris, de cerfs, de cabiais, pour le renouvellement de leurs provisions. Ce qui ne fut pas consommé, on le fit sécher ou boucaner, suivant la mode indienne, de manière à se réserver une quantité de viande suffisante au reste du voyage.

Entre-temps, MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne poussèrent leurs excursions jusqu’aux célèbres grottes situées sur le territoire d’Atures, à Punta Cerro, puis à l’île Cucuritale, où se retrouvent les traces du passage de l’infortuné docteur Crevaux, enfin au cerro de Los Muertos, où ces grottes servent de cimetière aux Indiens Piaroas. M. Miguel et ses compagnons descendirent même pendant une douzaine de kilomètres vers le sud-est, afin de visiter le cerro Pintado. C’est un bloc de porphyre, haut de deux cent cinquante mètres, que les indigènes sont parvenus à décorer, vers son milieu, d’inscriptions gigantesques, de dessins représentant un scolopendre, un homme, un oiseau, un serpent long de plus de trois cents pieds.

Peut-être Germain Paterne eût-il préféré recueillir quelque plante rare à la base de la Montagne-Peinte, — il vaudrait mieux l’appeler la Montagne-Gravée, — mais, à son vif regret, ses recherches furent infructueuses.

Il va sans dire que les excursionnistes revenaient de ces longues promenades passablement fatigués. La chaleur était excessive, et les fréquents orages, qui éclataient avec violence, n’arrivaient pas à la modérer.

Ainsi s’écoula le temps au village d’Atures. Les deux repas quotidiens réunissaient tous les convives à la même table. On se narrait les événements de la journée. Jean prenait un vif plaisir au récit des chasses de Jacques Helloch, toujours soucieux de détourner le jeune garçon des tristes préoccupations de l’avenir. Et quels voeux il formait pour que Jean obtînt à San-Fernando d’exactes informations relativement au colonel de Kermor, et qu’il ne fût pas obligé de se risquer en de lointaines aventures!

Puis, le soir venu, le jeune garçon lisait à haute voix diverses pages de son guide favori, et plus spécialement celles qui concernaient Atures et ses environs. M. Miguel et ses collègues étaient frappés de l’exactitude, de la précision des renseignements de l’explorateur français en ce qui concernait le cours de l’Orénoque, les moeurs des différentes tribus indiennes, les particularités de leurs territoires, les coutumes des llaneros, avec lesquels il s’était trouvé en rapport.

Et, au vrai, si Jean de Kermor était obligé de prolonger sa campagne jusqu’aux sources du fleuve, il ne pourrait que tirer grand profit des informations si sûres de son compatriote.

Enfin, le 9 septembre, vers midi, Germain Paterne, qui avait été herboriser sur la rive, en avant du village, reparut en appelant ses compagnons.

Aucune excursion n'ayant été projetée ce jour-là, ils étaient tous réunis dans la principale paillote du village, attendant l'heure du déjeuner.

Aux cris qui se faisaient entendre, Jacques Helloch s'élança d'un bond au-dehors.

Les autres le suivirent, pouvant craindre que Germain Paterne ne demandât du secours, soit qu'il fût aux prises avec quelque fauve, soit qu'il eût rencontré une bande de Quivas dans le voisinage d'Atures.

Germain Paterne revenait seul, sa boîte au dos, faisant de grands gestes.

“Eh! qu'y a-t-il?… lui cria Jacques Helloch.

— Nos pirogues, mes amis!

— Nos pirogues?… répondit M. Miguel.

— Déjà?… s'écria M. Felipe.

— Elles ne sont pas à un demi-kilomètre.”

Tous de courir alors, en redescendant la rive gauche du fleuve, et, à un tournant, ils aperçurent les falcas que leurs équipages remorquaient à l'espilla le long de la berge.

Bientôt les passagers purent se faire entendre des patrons, lesquels, debout à l'arrière, maintenaient les embarcations contre les embardées du halage.

“Vous… Valdez?… demanda le sergent Martial.

— Moi-même, sergent, et, vous le voyez, mes camarades me suivent…

— Pas d’avaries?… interrogea M. Miguel.

— Pas d’avaries, répondit Valdez, mais nous avons eu du mal tout de même!

— Enfin, vous voilà arrivés… dit Jacques Helloch au patron de la Moriche.

— Oui… et en sept jours… ce qui est rare, lorsqu’il s’agit de franchir le raudal d’Atures.”

Et Parchal disait vrai, mais ces Banivas sont d’excellents mariniers, il est juste de le reconnaître. Il n’y avait qu’à les louer de leur habileté et de leur zèle, et ces braves gens se montrèrent d’autant plus sensibles aux éloges des passagers, que ces éloges furent accompagnés de quelques piastres supplémentaires, — à titre de bonne main.

CHAPITRE XII

XII

Quelques observations de Germain Paterne

Le départ des trois pirogues s’effectua le lendemain aux premières heures du soleil levant. La veille, l’après-midi, on avait procédé au rembarquement du matériel, et comme aucune avarie n’était survenue pendant le passage du raudal, le voyage n’eut à subir aucun retard de ce chef.

Il est vrai, peut-être les passagers allaient-ils être moins favorisés entre Atures et la bourgade de San-Fernando. Le vent, qui marquait une tendance à calmir, ne suffirait pas à pousser les falcas contre le courant de l’Orénoque. Tout au plus pourraient-elles l’étaler. Cependant, comme la brise soufflait encore de la partie du nord, ne variant guère que de l’est à l’ouest, les voiles furent hissées, en attendant qu’il y eût lieu de recourir à l’espilla ou aux palancas.

Inutile de mentionner que chaque groupe avait repris sa place dans sa pirogue, — le sergent Martial et Jean de Kermor à bord de la Gallinetta, MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe à bord de la Maripare, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne à bord de la Moriche.

Autant que possible, on naviguait en ligne, et le plus souvent — le sergent Martial l’observait non sans grogner en sourdine, — la Moriche marchait de conserve avec la Gallinetta, ce qui permettait aux passagers de causer, et ils ne s’en faisaient pas faute.

Pendant la matinée, les falcas ne gagnèrent que cinq kilomètres vers l’amont. Il fut d’abord indispensable d’évoluer au milieu de ce dédale d’îlots et de récifs dont le fleuve est embarrassé jusqu’au-dessus d’Atures. Impossible même de conserver aux voiles une orientation constante. Entre ces passes rétrécies, les eaux descendaient avec rapidité, et les palancas durent être maniées avec une grande vigueur.

Lorsque la flottille se trouva par le travers du cerro de Los Muertos, le lit de l’Orénoque devint plus libre. Après s’être rapprochées de la rive droite où le courant est moins fort, les falcas purent s’aider de la brise dans une certaine mesure.

En arrière de la rive opposée se dressait le cerro Pintado que M. Miguel et ses compagnons avaient visité et dont on put alors observer le bizarre massif, qui domine les vastes plaines fréquentées des Indiens Guahibos.

En même temps que le soleil déclinait sur l’horizon, le vent diminua graduellement en halant le nord-est, et il refusa même vers les cinq heures du soir.

Les pirogues naviguaient alors à la hauteur du raudal de Garcita. Sur le conseil du patron Valdez, les passagers se préparèrent à stationner en cet endroit, qui leur offrait un abri convenable pour la durée de la nuit.

Le parcours pendant cette journée n’avait été que d’une quinzaine de kilomètres, et l’on se remit en route le lendemain dès l’aube naissante.

Le passage du raudal de Garcita n’offrit aucune difficulté. Il est praticable toute l’année et ne nécessite aucun transbordement. En ce mois, d’ailleurs, l’Orénoque, coulant à pleine eau, gardait une profondeur suffisante pour des embarcations à fond plat. Cependant il commençait à baisser, puisqu’on était déjà à la mi-septembre, et la saison sèche ne tarderait pas à réduire son étiage.

Il est vrai, les pluies étaient encore abondantes et fréquentes. Elles n’avaient point épargné les voyageurs depuis leur départ, et ils devaient subir des averses torrentielles jusqu’à leur arrivée à San-Fernando. Ce jour-là, d’interminables rafales obligèrent à se confiner sous les roufs. En somme, la brise tendait plutôt à fraîchir — ce dont il n’y avait pas à se plaindre.

Le soir, dans un coude du fleuve arrondi vers l’est, entre la rive droite et une île, l’île Rabo Pelado, les pirogues relâchèrent à un endroit assez abrité.

De six heures à sept heures, les chasseurs battirent la lisière de cette île, toute hérissée de taillis et presque impénétrable. Ils purent abattre une demi-douzaine de gabiotas, palmipèdes de petite espèce, gros comme des pigeons, et qui furent servis au repas du soir.

En outre, au retour, Jacques Helloch tua d’une balle un de ces jeunes caïmans que les Indiens appellent babas, et dont ils déclarent la chair excellente.

Il est vrai, cette préparation culinaire, ce sancocho, comme on le nomme dans le pays, fut dédaigné des convives. On l’abandonna aux mariniers qui s’en régalèrent.

Seul, Germain Paterne voulut y goûter, parce qu’un naturaliste n’a pas la permission d’être difficile et doit se sacrifier dans l’intérêt de la science.

“Eh bien?… lui demanda Jacques Helloch.

— Eh bien, répondit Germain Paterne, ce n’est pas bon à la première bouchée… mais à la seconde…

— C’est…

— Détestable!”

Le sancocho était jugé et condamné sans appel.

Le lendemain, départ de l’île Rabo Pelado et reprise de la navigation vers le sud-ouest, — direction qu’affecte l’Orénoque jusqu’au raudal des Guahibos. Jour de pluie continue. Brise intermittente venant du nord-est. Voiles des pirogues, tantôt inertes, pendant le long du mât, tantôt gonflées et arrondies comme une enveloppe d’aérostat.

Le soir, Valdez vint s’amarrer en aval de l’île de Guayabo, n’ayant parcouru que douze kilomètres, car l’action du vent avait été souvent inférieure à celle du courant.

Le lendemain, après une journée fatigante, les trois pirogues purent atteindre le raudal des Guahibos et relâchèrent à l’embouchure du bras de Carestia, qui contourne par la rive droite une longue île à l’endroit où elle divise le cours de l’Orénoque.

La nuit se passa tranquillement après le souper, qui fut renforcé d’une couple de hoccos, volatiles aquatiques, démontés sur les berges de l’île.

Là, le lit du fleuve est sinueux, large, mais encombré d’îlots et d’îles. De plus, il est coupé par un barrage d’où les eaux retombent en cascades retentissantes. Le site est d’une sauvagerie superbe, l’un des plus beaux peut-être qui se rencontrent sur le moyen Orénoque.

Les voyageurs eurent le temps de l’admirer, car il leur fallut quelques heures pour remonter le raudal des Guahibos. Les pirogues le franchirent sans qu’il y eût nécessité de procéder à leur déchargement, et bien qu’il présente d’habitude plus de difficultés que celui de Garcita.

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, en suivant le bras de la rive gauche, on arriva au village de Carestia, où devait s’opérer le débarquement, afin de faciliter aux pirogues le passage du raudal de Maipures.

Il y eut donc lieu de recommencer la manœuvre qui s’était faite à Puerto-Real. Des Indiens se chargèrent de transporter à dos les bagages et accompagnèrent les passagers jusqu’à Maipures, où ils s’arrêtèrent avant cinq heures du soir.

Du reste, la distance entre Carestia et Maipures n’est que de six kilomètres, et le sentier, le long de la berge, se prêtait aisément à la marche.

C’était là que l’on devait attendre la Gallinetta, la Maripare et la Moriche, auxquelles il ne faudrait pas moins de trois à quatre jours pour rejoindre.

En effet, si le raudal de Maipures mesure une longueur moindre que celui d’Atures, peut-être offre-t-il de plus sérieux obstacles. Dans tous les cas, la dénivellation des eaux s’y accuse davantage, — douze mètres environ à répartir entre six kilomètres. Mais on pouvait compter sur le zèle et l’habileté des équipages. Tout ce qu’il serait humainement possible de faire pour gagner du temps, ils le feraient.

Au surplus, on n’avait pas mis cinq jours à parcourir les soixante kilomètres qui séparent les deux principaux raudals de cette partie de l’Orénoque.

Les Indiens Maipures, qui ont donné leur nom à ce village, formaient une ancienne tribu, alors réduite à quelques familles, dont le métissage a profondément modifié le type. Le village, situé au pied d’âpres falaises granitiques d’un grand caractère, ne se compose plus que d’une dizaine de cases.

C’est là que la petite troupe eut à s’installer pour quelques jours, et dans des conditions à peu près identiques à celles du village d’Atures.

C’était la dernière fois, d’ailleurs, qu’ils seraient forcés d’abandonner les pirogues avant de relâcher à San-Fernando. Jusqu’à cette bourgade, le fleuve n’est plus coupé par ces rapides, qui nécessitent, d’une part, le débarquement des passagers et des bagages, et de l’autre, le traînage des embarcations sur les seuils rocheux que balaient des eaux torrentueuses. Donc, le mieux était de patienter, sans récriminer contre cet état de choses, et l’on prit ce nouveau retard en patience, quoi que pût dire le sergent Martial, qui brûlait d’avoir atteint San-Fernando.

À Maipures, il n’y eut pas lieu de tuer le temps en excursions, ainsi qu’on avait pu le faire dans les plaines du cerro Pintado. On se contenta de chasser et d’herboriser. Le jeune garçon, accompagné du sergent Martial, prit un très vif intérêt aux promenades scientifiques de Germain Paterne, tandis que les chasseurs pourvoyaient aux besoins journaliers.

C’était utile, nécessaire même, car les approvisionnements faits à la Urbana et dans les chasses précédentes seraient épuisés, s’il se produisait quelque retard, et il n’y aurait plus possibilité de se ravitailler avant le terme du voyage.

Or, de Maipures à San-Fernando, étant donné le cours irrégulier de l’Orénoque, il faut compter environ de cent trente à cent quarante kilomètres.

Enfin, le 18, dans l’après-midi, les trois falcas arrivèrent à ce village, après avoir suivi la rive gauche du fleuve, sur laquelle il est bâti. Par sa situation, il n’est pas vénézuélien, et il appartient à la Colombie. Seulement, le chemin de halage de cette rive doit, paraît-il, rester neutralisé jusqu’en 1911, et ne deviendra colombien qu’à partir de cette date.

On voit que Valdez et ses compagnons avait fait diligence, puisque, en cinq jours, ils avaient pu remonter le raudal. Sans attendre au lendemain, les pirogues furent rechargées, et, le 19 au matin, elles reprirent leur navigation.

Durant cette journée pluvieuse, la flottille dut encore circuler entre une infinité d’îlots et de roches qui hérissent le lit du fleuve. Comme le vent soufflait de l’ouest, il ne favorisait plus la marche des falcas, et même eût-il soufflé du nord qu’elles n’auraient pu en profiter, tant elles étaient obligées à de fréquents changements de direction à travers les passes.

Au-delà de l’embouchure du Sipapo, se rencontre un petit raudal, celui de Sijuaumi, dont le passage n’exigea que quelques heures sans débarquement.

Cependant, grâce à ces diverses causes de retard, les pirogues ne purent s’avancer au-delà de l’embouchure du rio Vichada, où elles se disposèrent pour la nuit.

Les deux rives du fleuve, en cet endroit, présentent un contraste frappant. À l’est, le territoire est bossué de tumescences, de bancos réguliers, de collines basses, qui se raccordent avec les montagnes, dont les lointains profils recevaient alors les derniers rayons du soleil à l’instant de son coucher. Vers l’ouest, au contraire, se développaient de spacieuses plaines, arrosées par ces eaux noires du Vichada, venues des llanos colombiens, et qui fournissent un si considérable apport au lit de l’Orénoque.

Peut-être Jacques Helloch s’attendait-il à ce qu’il s’élevât une discussion entre MM. Felipe et Varinas relativement au Vichada, car il aurait pu être considéré comme principale branche, avec autant de raison que le Guaviare ou l’Atabapo. Il n’en fut rien. Les deux adversaires n’étaient plus éloignés de l’endroit où confluaient leurs cours d’eau favoris. Ils auraient alors le temps de se disputer sur les lieux mêmes et en connaissance de cause.

La journée suivante les en rapprocha d’une vingtaine de kilomètres. La navigation devint plus aisée sur cette partie du fleuve dégagée de récifs. Les patrons purent durant quelques heures se servir des voiles, et rallier, dans ces conditions moins fatigantes, le village de Mataweni, situé sur la rive gauche, près du rio de ce nom.

On ne vit là qu’une douzaine de huttes, appartenant aux Guahibos, qui occupent les territoires riverains de l’Orénoque, et plus particulièrement ceux de la rive gauche. Si les voyageurs avaient eu le temps de remonter le Vichada, ils auraient trouvé un certain nombre de villages habités par ces Indiens, doux de caractère, laborieux, intelligents, qui font le commerce du manioc avec les marchands de San-Fernando.

Et même, en cas que Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne eussent été seuls, peut-être auraient-ils relâché à l’embouchure de ce tributaire, comme ils l’avaient fait à la Urbana, quelques semaines avant. Il est vrai, leur excursion à travers la sierra Matapey avait failli mal finir. Néanmoins, Germain Paterne crut devoir formuler sa proposition en ces termes, lorsque la Moriche eut été amarrée à la berge de Mataweni, bord à bord avec la Gallinetta.

“Mon cher Jacques, dit-il, nous avons été chargés par le ministre de l’Instruction publique d’une mission scientifique sur l’Orénoque, si je ne me trompe…

— Où veux-tu en venir?… demanda Jacques Helloch, assez surpris de cette observation.

— À ceci, Jacques… Est-ce que cette mission concerne uniquement l'Orénoque?…

— L'Orénoque et ses affluents…

— Eh bien, pour dire les choses comme elles sont, il me semble que nous négligeons quelque peu les affluents du superbe fleuve depuis que nous avons quitté la Urbana…

— Tu crois?…

— Juges-en, cher ami. Avons-nous remonté le Suapure, le Pararuma et le Parguaza de la rive droite?…

— Je ne le pense pas.

— Avons-nous engagé notre pirogue entre les rives du Meta de la rive gauche, ce Meta qui est l'un des plus importants tributaires du grand fleuve vénézuélien?…

— Non, et nous avons dépassé l'embouchure du Meta sans y pénétrer.

— Et le rio Sipopo?…

— Nous avons négligé le rio Sipopo.

— Et le rio Vichada?…

— Nous avons aussi manqué à tous nos devoirs envers le rio Vichada.

— C’est ainsi que tu plaisantes, Jacques?…

— C’est ainsi, mon bon Germain, car, enfin, tu devrais te dire que ce que nous n’avons pas fait à l’aller, il sera toujours temps de le faire au retour. Ils ne disparaîtront pas, tes affluents, j’imagine, ils ne s’assèchent même pas dans la saison chaude, et nous les retrouverons à leur place habituelle, lorsque nous redescendrons le superbe fleuve…

— Jacques… Jacques… quand nous aurons l’honneur d’être reçus par le ministre de l’Instruction publique…

— Eh bien, naturaliste que tu es, nous lui dirons, à ce haut fonctionnaire: si nous avions été seuls, monsieur le ministre, nous aurions sans doute procédé à ces excursions en remontant l’Orénoque, mais nous étions en compagnie… en bonne compagnie… et il nous a paru qu’il valait mieux naviguer de conserve jusqu’à San-Fernando…

— Où nous séjournerons quelque temps, je suppose… demanda Germain Paterne.

— Le temps de trancher cette question du Guaviare et de l’Atabapo, répondit Jacques Helloch, non point qu’elle ne me paraisse résolue au profit de M. Miguel. Après tout, ce sera une occasion excellente d’étudier ces deux affluents dans la société de MM. Felipe et Varinas. Tu peux être certain que notre mission y gagnera, et que le ministre de l’Instruction publique nous enguirlandera de ses félicitations les plus officielles!”

Il convient de dire que Jean de Kermor, alors seul à bord de la Gallinetta, avait entendu cette conversation des deux amis. Ce n’était point indiscrétion de sa part, et, en somme, le sujet qu’ils traitaient n’avait rien de bien intime.

Il était indéniable, quoique le sergent Martial eût tout fait pour y mettre obstacle, que, depuis leur rencontre, Jacques Helloch n’avait négligé aucune occasion de témoigner la plus vive sympathie à Jean de Kermor. Que celui-ci s’en fût aperçu, nul doute, et, à cette sympathie, comment répondait-il?… S’abandonnait-il, comme on eût pu l’attendre d’un jeune garçon de son âge envers ce compatriote si serviable qui lui portait tant d’intérêt, qui faisait des voeux si ardents pour la réussite de ses projets, qui se mettait à sa disposition dans la mesure du possible?…

Non, et cela pouvait même sembler assez bizarre. Quelque touché que pût être Jean, quelque reconnaissant qu’il dût se montrer envers Jacques Helloch, il gardait une extrême réserve vis-à-vis de lui, — non point parce que le sergent Martial l’aurait grondé, s’il en eût été autrement, mais par suite de son caractère discret, toujours empreint d’une certaine timidité.

Et, lorsque le moment de se séparer serait venu, lorsque Jean quitterait San-Fernando s’il lui fallait continuer ses recherches, lorsque Jacques Helloch reprendrait la route du retour, oui! Jean serait très affecté de cette séparation… Peut-être même se dirait-il que si Jacques Helloch lui eût servi de guide, il aurait plus sûrement atteint son but…

Et ne fut-il pas très ému, quand, à la fin de cette conversation, à laquelle il prêtait une complaisante oreille, il entendit Jacques Helloch dire à son camarade:

“Et puis, Germain, il y a ce jeune garçon que le hasard a mis sur notre route, et auquel je m’intéresse… Est-ce qu’il ne t’inspire pas une profonde sympathie?…

— Profonde, Jacques!

— Car plus j’y réfléchis, Germain, s’il a raison d’obéir au sentiment filial qui lui a fait entreprendre ce voyage, plus je crains qu’il se trouve bientôt aux prises avec de telles difficultés et de tels dangers qu’il ne puisse les vaincre! S’il recueille de nouveaux renseignements à San-

Fernando, ne va-t-il pas se lancer à travers ces régions du haut Orénoque… ou même du rio Negro?… Oui!… s’il se dit: mon père est la!… il voudra aller!… C’est une âme forte dans le corps d’un enfant!… Il suffit de l’observer, il suffit de l’entendre, et le sentiment du devoir est poussé chez lui jusqu’à l’héroïsme!… N’est-ce pas ton avis, Germain?…

— Jacques, je partage tes idées sur le jeune de Kermor, et c’est avec raison que tu t’effraies…

— Et qui a-t-il pour le conseiller, pour le défendre?… reprit Jacques Helloch. Un vieux soldat, qui assurément se ferait tuer pour lui… Mais est-ce le compagnon qu’il lui faudrait?… Non, Germain, et veux-tu que je te dise toute ma pensée?… Eh bien, mieux vaudrait que ce pauvre enfant ne trouvât à San-Fernando aucun renseignement relatif à son père…”

Si Jacques Helloch avait pu observer Jean au moment où il parlait ainsi, il l’aurait vu se redressant, relevant la tête, ses yeux animés… puis retombant, accablé, à la pensée qu’il n’atteindrait peut-être pas son but… qu’il était condamné à revenir, sans avoir réussi…

Toutefois, après cet instant de défaillance, l’espoir le reprit, lorsqu’il entendit Jacques Helloch ajouter:

“Non! non!… ce serait trop cruel pour ce pauvre Jean, et je veux encore croire que ses recherches aboutiront!… C’est à San-Fernando que le colonel de Kermor était de passage, il y a treize ans… Aucun doute à cet égard… Là… Jean apprendra ce qu’est devenu son père… Ah! j’aurais voulu pouvoir l’accompagner…

— Je te comprends, Jacques… Il lui aurait fallu pour guide un homme comme toi, et non ce vieux briscard… qui n’est pas plus son oncle que je ne suis sa tante!… Mais que veux-tu?… Notre itinéraire ne peut être le sien, et, sans parler des affluents que nous devons explorer au retour…

— Est-ce qu’il n’y en a pas au-delà de San-Fernando?… fit observer Jacques Helloch.

— Si vraiment… Je t’en citerai d’admirables même… le Cunucunuma, le Cassiquiare, le Mavaca… et, à ce compte-là, notre expédition nous conduirait jusqu’aux sources de l’Orénoque…

— Et pourquoi pas, Germain?… L’exploration serait plus complète, voilà tout… et ce n’est pas le ministre de l’Instruction publique qui pourrait se plaindre!…

— Le ministre… le ministre, Jacques! Tu le tournes et le retournes à toutes sauces, ce grand maître de l’Université!… Et puis, si ce n’est plus du côté de l’Orénoque que Jean de Kermor va continuer ses recherches… s’il va s’aventurer à travers des llanos de la Colombie… si même il descend vers le bassin du Rio Negro et de l’Amazone…”

Jacques Helloch ne répondit pas, car il ne pouvait répondre. À la rigueur, il le comprenait bien, poursuivre son voyage même jusqu’aux sources de l’Orénoque, ce serait toujours rester dans l’esprit de sa mission… tandis que quitter le bassin du fleuve, et aussi le Venezuela pour suivre le jeune garçon à travers les territoires de la Colombie ou du Brésil…

Dans la pirogue voisine, agenouillé au fond du rouf, Jean avait tout entendu… Il savait quelle sympathie il inspirait à ses compagnons… Et il savait aussi que ni Jacques Helloch ni Germain Paterne ne croyaient à cette parenté qui l’unissait au sergent Martial… Sur quoi se fondaient-ils pour cela, et que penserait son vieil ami, s’il venait à l’apprendre?…

Et, sans se demander ce que lui réservait l’avenir, si le courage, le dévouement de Jacques Helloch lui viendraient jamais en aide, il remerciait Dieu d’avoir mis sur sa route ce brave et généreux compatriote.

CHAPITRE XIII

XIII

Respect au tapir

Le lendemain matin, — 21 septembre, — lorsque les voyageurs quittèrent le petit port de Mataweni, ils n'étaient plus qu'à trois jours et demi de San-Fernando. En quatre-vingts heures, s'il ne leur survenait aucun retard, — même si le temps ne les favorisait pas, — ils devaient être rendus au terme de leur voyage.

La navigation fut reprise dans les conditions ordinaires, — à la voile lorsque la brise le permettait, — à la palanca et au garapato, lorsque les pirogues pouvaient profiter des remous dus aux nombreux coudes du fleuve, — à l'espilla, quand les perches ne parvenaient pas à vaincre la force du courant.

La température se tenait à un haut degré. Des nuages orageux traînaient lourdement, se résolvant parfois en grosse pluie tiède. Puis, un ardent soleil leur succédait, et il fallait s'abriter sous les roufs. En somme, le vent était faible, intermittent, et ne suffisait pas à rafraîchir cette dévorante atmosphère.

Des rios nombreux affluaient au fleuve, surtout par sa rive gauche, — rios innomés, dont le lit devait se tarir pendant la saison sèche. Du reste, Germain Paterne ne plaida pas en leur faveur, et ils ne méritaient pas la visite des géographes.

On rencontra, à plusieurs reprises, des canots montés par ces Piaroas qui occupent d'habitude la rive droite de cette partie de l'Orénoque.

Ces Indiens accostaient familièrement les pirogues et offraient leurs services pour les dures manœuvres de l'espilla. On les acceptait sans hésiter, et ils se contentaient pour toute rétribution de morceaux d'étoffe, de verroteries, de cigares. Ce sont, — eux aussi, — d'habiles mariniers, recherchés pour le passage des rapides.

Ce fut donc avec une escorte d'une demi-douzaine de curiares que la flottille accosta le village d'Augustino, situé sur la rive droite, et dont M. Chaffanjon ne parle point, pour cette bonne raison qu'il n'existait pas lors de son voyage.

Du reste, en général, ces Indiens ne sont pas sédentaires. De même qu'ils abandonnent le canot d'écorce dont ils ont eu besoin pour traverser une rivière, ils abandonnent la case qu'ils ont dressée comme une tente et pour quelques jours.

Il paraissait cependant que ce village d'Augustino devait avoir quelques chances de durée, bien que sa construction fût récente. Il occupait une place heureusement choisie dans un coude de l'Orénoque. Sur la grève, et en arrière jusqu'à de moyens cerros verdoyants, les arbres poussaient par centaines. À gauche, se massait une forêt de caoutchoucs, dont les gomeros tiraient profit en recueillant cette précieuse gomme.

Le village comprenait une quarantaine de paillotes cylindriques ou cylindro-coniques, et sa population s'élevait à deux cents habitants environ.

En débarquant, M. Miguel et ses compagnons auraient pu croire qu'il n'y avait à Augustino ni enfants ni femmes.

Cela tenait à ce que femmes et enfants, effarouchés, s'étaient enfuis à travers la forêt, suivant leur habitude, dès qu'on leur signale l'approche des étrangers.

Parut un Piaroa de belle taille, quarante ans d'âge, de constitution vigoureuse, de large carrure, revêtu du guayuco, sa chevelure brûlée à la naissance du front et tombant sur les épaules, des bracelets de corde au-dessous des genoux et au-dessus des chevilles. Ce personnage se promenait le long de la berge, entouré d'une dizaine d'Indiens, qui lui marquaient un certain respect.

C'était le capitan, le chef du village, celui qui en avait indiqué l'emplacement, — un endroit très sain, où Augustino n'avait point à souffrir du fléau ordinaire de ces rives, les maudits et insupportables moustiques.

M. Miguel, suivi des autres passagers, s'avança vers ce capitan, qui parlait la langue vénézuélienne.

“Vous êtes les bienvenus, tes amis avec toi, dit-il, en leur tendant la main.

— Nous ne sommes ici que pour quelques heures, répondit M. Miguel, et nous comptons repartir demain au point du jour.

— En attendant, dit le Piaroa, tu peux prendre repos dans nos cases… Elles sont à ta disposition.

— Nous te remercions, capitan, répondit M. Miguel, et nous te rendrons visite. Mais pour une nuit, il est préférable de rester à bord de nos falcas.

— Comme il te plaira.

— Tu es le chef d’un beau village, reprit alors M. Miguel, en remontant vers la grève.

— Oui… il vient seulement de naître, et il prospérera, s’il trouve protection chez le gouverneur de San-Fernando. J’espère que de posséder un village de plus sur le cours de l’Orénoque, cela est agréable au Président de la

République…

— Nous lui apprendrons, à notre retour, répondit M. Miguel, que le capitan…

— Caribal, dit l’Indien, dont le nom fut donné avec autant de fierté que si c’eût été celui d’un fondateur de ville ou celui du héros Simon Bolivar.

— Le capitan Caribal, reprit M. Miguel, peut compter sur nos bons offices à San-Fernando près du gouverneur, comme à Caracas près du Président.”

On ne pouvait entrer en relation avec ces Piaroas dans des conditions plus avantageuses et converser en meilleurs termes.

M. Miguel et ses compagnons suivirent ces Indiens jusqu’au village, à une portée de fusil de la berge.

Jacques Helloch et son ami Jean marchaient à côté l’un de l’autre devant le sergent Martial.

“Votre guide habituel, le livre de notre compatriote, mon cher Jean, demanda Jacques Helloch, vous donne sans doute des renseignements précis sur ces Piaroas, et vous devez en savoir plus que nous à leur sujet…

— Ce qu’il nous apprend, répondit le jeune garçon, c’est que ces Indiens sont d’un tempérament placide, peu enclins à la guerre. La plupart du temps, ils vivent à l’intérieur des forêts les plus reculées du bassin de l’Orénoque. Il est à croire que ceux-ci ont voulu essayer d’une vie nouvelle sur les bords du fleuve…

— C’est probable, mon cher Jean, et leur capitan, qui paraît doué d’intelligence, les aura décidés à fonder ce village en cet endroit. Le gouvernement vénézuélien aura raison d’encourager ces tentatives, et si quelques missionnaires venaient s’installer à Augustino, ces Piaroas ne tarderaient pas à prendre rang parmi les indigènes civilisés, ces “racionales”, comme on les appelle…

— Des missionnaires, monsieur Helloch, répondit Jean. Oui… ces gens de courage et de dévouement réussiraient au milieu de ces tribus indiennes… Et j’ai toujours pensé que ces apôtres, qui abandonnent le bien-être dont ils pourraient jouir, qui renoncent aux joies de la famille, qui poussent le dévouement à ces pauvres sauvages jusqu’au sacrifice de leur vie, remplissent la plus noble des missions au grand honneur de l’humanité… Et voyez, d’après ce qu’on raconte, quels résultats le Père Esperante a obtenus à Santa-Juana, et quel encouragement à l’imiter!

— En effet”, répondit Jacques Helloch.

Et il était toujours surpris de trouver des idées si sérieuses, si généreuses aussi, chez ce jeune garçon, évidemment plus avancé que son âge. Aussi ajouta-t-il:

“Mais, mon cher Jean, ce sont là des choses auxquelles on ne pense guère… quand on est jeune…

— Oh! je suis vieux… monsieur Helloch, répondit Jean, dont le visage rougit légèrement.

— Vieux… à dix-sept ans…

— Dix-sept ans, moins deux mois et neuf jours, affirma le sergent Martial, qui intervint dans la conversation, et je n’entends pas que tu te vieillisses, mon neveu…

— Pardon, mon oncle, je ne me vieillirai plus”, répondit Jean, qui ne put s’empêcher de sourire.

Puis, se retournant vers Jacques Helloch:

“Enfin, pour en revenir aux missionnaires, reprit-il, ceux qui se fixeront à Augustino auront à lutter contre les préjugés de ces Indiens, car, au dire de mon guide, ce sont bien les plus crédules et les plus superstitieux qui se rencontrent dans les provinces de l’Orénoque!”

Et les passagers des falcas n’allaient pas tarder à reconnaître le bien-fondé de cette observation.

La case du capitan était agréablement bâtie sous un massif d’arbres magnifiques. Une toiture en feuilles de palmiers la recouvrait, terminée par une sorte de couronne cylindrique que surmontait une touffe de fleurs. Une seule porte donnait accès à la chambre unique, qui mesurait quinze pieds de diamètre. Le mobilier, réduit au strict nécessaire, comprenait des paniers, des couvertures, une table, quelques sièges grossièrement fabriqués, les très simples ustensiles du ménage de l’Indien, ses arcs, ses flèches, ses instruments de culture.

Cette case venait d’être récemment achevée, et la veille même, avait eu lieu la cérémonie d’inauguration, — une cérémonie qui consiste à chasser le mauvais esprit.

Or, le mauvais esprit ne s’évanouit pas comme une vapeur, il ne se dissipe pas comme un souffle. Battre les paillis des murs, les épousseter ainsi que le ferait une ménagère européenne, ne saurait suffire. Cet esprit, ce n’est pas une poussière que le balai rejette au-dehors. Il est immatériel de son essence, et il faut qu’un animal vivant le respire d’abord, l’emporte ensuite à tire d’aile à travers l’espace. Il est donc nécessaire de confier cette tâche à quelque oiseau de choix.

D’habitude, c’est à un toucan que l’on accorde la préférence, et ce volatile s’acquitte de ses fonctions à merveille. Tandis qu’il opère, la famille, réunie à l’intérieur de la case, revêtue de ses ornements de fête, se livre à des chants, à des danses, à des libations, en absorbant d’innombrables tasses de ce café bruquilla, dans lesquelles l’aguardiente ou le tafia n’ont point été épargnés.

Comme, la veille, il n’avait pas été possible de se procurer un toucan, c’était un perroquet qui avait dû remplir à sa place ce rôle de purificateur.

Bref, après avoir voleté et piaillé à l’intérieur, l’oiseau s’était envolé dans la forêt, et l’on pouvait en toute sécurité habiter la paillote. Aussi le capitan ne se fit-il point scrupule d’y introduire les étrangers, et ceux-ci n’eurent pas à craindre d’être hantés par le mauvais esprit.

Lorsque les visiteurs sortirent de la case du capitan Caribal, ils trouvèrent la population d’Augustino plus nombreuse, on peut même dire au complet. Les femmes, les enfants, rassurés maintenant et rappelés par leurs pères, leurs frères, leurs maris, avaient réintégré le village. Ils allaient d’une paillote à l’autre, déambulaient sous les arbres, gagnaient la grève du côté de l’endroit où s’amarraient les falcas.

Germain Paterne put observer que les femmes, aux traits réguliers, de petite taille, bien faites, étaient, en réalité, d’un type inférieur à celui des hommes.

Tous ces Piaroas procédèrent alors aux échanges communément effectués entre les Indiens et les voyageurs, touristes ou négociants, qui remontent ou descendent l’Orénoque. Ils offrirent des légumes frais, des cannes à sucre, quelques-uns de ces régimes de bananes, qui sont désignées sous le nom de platanos, lesquelles, séchées et conservées, assurent la nourriture des Indiens pendant leurs excursions.

En retour, ces Piaroas reçurent des paquets de cigares dont ils sont très friands, des couteaux, des hachettes, des colliers de verroterie, et se montrèrent très satisfaits de leurs relations avec les étrangers.

Cependant ces allées et venues n’avaient pris qu’une heure. Avant que le soleil se fût abaissé derrière l’horizon, il restait assez de temps aux chasseurs pour tenter quelques coups heureux à travers les forêts voisines d’Augustino.

La proposition fut donc faite, et autant dire que Jacques Helloch et M. Miguel se la firent à eux-mêmes. D’ailleurs, leurs compagnons les chargeaient volontiers du soin d’abattre cabiais, pécaris, cerfs, pavas, hoccos, pigeons, canards, toujours bien accueillis par le personnel des pirogues.

Il suit de là que MM. Varinas et Felipe, Jean de Kermor et le sergent Martial demeurèrent les uns dans les embarcations, les autres sur la rive ou dans le village, tandis que Jacques Helloch, M. Miguel, suivis de Germain Paterne, sa boîte de botaniste au dos, s’enfonçaient sous le couvert des palmiers, des calebassiers, des coloraditos et des innombrables morichals disposés en épais taillis au-delà des champs de cannes et de manioc.

Il n’y avait pas à craindre de s’égarer, car la chasse devrait s’effectuer dans le voisinage d’Augustino, à moins que les chasseurs ne fussent entraînés au loin par leur passion cynégétique.

Au surplus, il n’y eut pas lieu de s’éloigner. Dès la première heure, M. Miguel abattit un cabiai, et Jacques Helloch coucha un cerf sur le sol. Avec ces deux bêtes, ils auraient une suffisante charge à rapporter aux falcas. Peut-être auraient-ils mieux fait d’emmener avec eux un ou deux Indiens; mais aucun d’eux ne s’étant offert pour ce service, ils n’avaient point réclamé leur concours. D’autre part, n’ayant pas voulu déranger les mariniers occupés aux petites réparations des pirogues, ils étaient partis seuls et ils reviendraient seuls au village.

Les voilà donc, alors qu’ils étaient éloignés de deux à trois kilomètres, M. Miguel, son cabiai sur l’épaule, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne, portant le cerf, en route pour Augustino, et ils ne s’en trouvaient plus qu’à cinq ou six portées de fusil, lorsqu’ils s’arrêtèrent afin de reprendre haleine.

Il faisait très chaud, et l’air circulait assez difficilement sous le dôme épais des arbres. À cet instant, comme ils venaient de s’étendre au pied d’un palmier, les branches d’un fourré très dru, à leur droite, s’agitèrent avec violence. Il semblait qu’une masse puissante essayait de s’engager entre le fouillis des arbrisseaux.

“Attention!… dit Jacques Helloch à ses compagnons. Il y a là quelque fauve…

— J’ai deux cartouches à balle dans ma carabine… répondit M. Miguel.

— Eh bien, tenez-vous prêt, tandis que je vais recharger la mienne”, répliqua Jacques Helloch.

Et il ne lui fallut que quelques secondes pour mettre son Hammerless en état de faire feu.

Les arbustes du fourré ne remuaient plus. Néanmoins, en prêtant l’oreille, les chasseurs purent surprendre le souffle d’une respiration haletante, et aussi un rauque grognement sur la nature duquel il n’y avait pas à se tromper.

“Ce doit être un animal de forte taille, dit Germain Paterne, en s’avançant.

— Reste ici… reste… lui dit Jacques Helloch. Nous avons affaire sans doute à un jaguar ou un puma… Mais, avec les quatre balles qui l’attendent…

— Prenons garde… prenons garde!… s’écria M. Miguel. Il me semble bien apercevoir un long museau qui s’allonge entre les branches…

— Eh bien, quel que soit le propriétaire de ce museau…” répondit Jacques Helloch.

Et il déchargea ses deux coups.

Aussitôt, le fourré s’ouvrit sous une poussée formidable, un hurlement retentit à travers le feuillage, et une énorme masse se précipita hors des branches.

Deux autres détonations éclatèrent.

À son tour, M. Miguel venait de décharger sa carabine.

Cette fois, l'animal tomba sur le sol, en poussant un dernier cri de mort.

“Eh!… ce n'est qu'un tapir! s'écria Germain Paterne. Vrai… il ne valait pas vos quatre charges de poudre et de balles!”

Assurément, s'il ne les valait pas, au point de vue de la défensive, cet inoffensif animal, peut-être les valait-il au point de vue comestible.

Donc, au lieu d'un puma ou d'un jaguar, qui sont les plus redoutables carnassiers de l'Amérique méridionale, les chasseurs n'avaient eu affaire qu'à un tapir. C'est un fort animal, brun de pelage, grisâtre sur la tête et à la gorge, court, de poils clairsemés, portant une sorte de crinière, attribut du mâle. Cette bête, plutôt nocturne que diurne, habite les fourrés et aussi les marais. Son nez, une sorte de petite trompe mobile prolongée en forme de boutoir, lui donne l'aspect d'un sanglier, et même d'un cochon, mais un cochon qui aurait la taille d'un âne.

En somme, il n'y a pas lieu de craindre les attaques de ce pachyderme. Il ne vit que de fruits et de végétaux, et il est tout au plus capable de bousculer un chasseur.

Cependant il ne fallait pas regretter les quatre coups de carabine, et si l'on parvenait à transporter ce tapir aux pirogues, les équipages sauraient en faire leur profit.

Mais, après que l'animal eut roulé sur le sol, M. Miguel et ses compagnons n'avaient pas entendu le cri d'un Indien, qui les guettait sur la gauche du fourré, ni vu cet Indien s'enfuir à toutes jambes dans la direction du village. Ils rechargèrent le cerf et le cabiai sur leurs épaules, et se remirent en route, ayant l’intention d’envoyer chercher le tapir par quelques-uns des mariniers.

Lorsqu’ils arrivèrent à Augustin, la population était en proie à la colère et à l’épouvante. Hommes, femmes, entouraient le capitan. Le sieur Caribal ne paraissait pas moins animé que ses administrés, et, lorsque parurent Germain Paterne, M. Miguel et Jacques Helloch, ce furent des cris formidables, des cris de haine et de vengeance qui les accueillirent.

Que s’était-il passé?… D’où provenait ce revirement?… Est-ce que ces Piaroas se préparaient à quelques démonstrations hostiles contre les pirogues?…

Jacques Helloch et ses deux compagnons furent bientôt rassurés en voyant le jeune garçon, le sergent Martial, MM. Felipe et Varinas se diriger de leur côté.

“Qu’y a-t-il? demandèrent-ils.

— Valdez qui était au village, répondit Jean, a vu un Indien sortir de la forêt, courir auprès du capitan, et il l’a entendu lui dire que vous aviez tué…

— Un cabiai… un cerf… que nous rapportons… répondit M. Miguel.

— Et aussi un tapir?…

— Oui… un tapir, répondit Jacques Helloch, et quel mal y a-t-il à tuer un tapir?…

— Aux pirogues… aux pirogues!” cria vivement le sergent Martial.

En effet, la population paraissait sur le point de se livrer à des actes de violence. Ces Indiens, si pacifiques, si accueillants, si serviables, étaient maintenant en proie à une véritable fureur. Quelques-uns s’étaient armés d’arcs et de flèches. Leurs clameurs ne cessaient de grossir. Ils menaçaient de se jeter sur les étrangers. Le capitan Caribal ne parviendrait que très difficilement à les contenir, en admettant qu’il le voulût, et le danger s’accroissait à chaque seconde.

Était-ce donc pour ce seul motif que les chasseurs avaient abattu un tapir?…

Uniquement, et il était regrettable qu’avant leur départ, Jean, conformément à ce que racontait son guide, ne les eût pas avertis de ne jamais toucher à un poil de ce pachyderme. C’est, paraît-il, un animal sacré aux yeux de ces indigènes enclins à toutes les superstitions, et, comme tels, portés par nature à admettre les transformations de la métempsycose.

Non seulement ils croient aux esprits, mais ils regardent le tapir comme un de leurs aïeux, le plus vénérable et le plus vénéré des ancêtres piaroas. C’est dans le corps d’un tapir que va se loger l’âme de l’Indien, quand il meurt. Or, un tapir de moins, c’est un logement de moins pour ces âmes, qui risqueraient d’errer indéfiniment à travers l’espace, faute de domicile. De là, cette défense absolue d’attenter aux jours d’un animal destiné à cette honorable fonction de logeur, et, lorsque l’un d’eux a été mis à mort, la colère de ces Piaroas peut les porter aux plus redoutables représailles.

Cependant, ni M. Miguel ni Jacques Helloch ne voulaient abandonner le cerf et le cabiai, dont le trépas n’entraînait aucune responsabilité. Aussi les mariniers, qui étaient accourus, s’en saisirent-ils et tous de se diriger vers les pirogues.

La population les suivait, de plus en plus surexcitée. Le capitan n’essayait pas de modérer les furieux, — au contraire. Il marchait en tête, il brandissait son arc, et l’irritation de ces indigènes fut au comble, lorsque le corps du tapir arriva sur une civière de branchages portée par quatre hommes.

À cet instant, les passagers avaient atteint leurs falcas, dont les roufs suffiraient à les protéger contre les flèches de ces Indiens, qui sont dépourvus d’armes à feu.

Jacques Helloch fit rapidement entrer Jean dans la Gallinetta, avant que le sergent Martial eût pu prendre ce soin, et il lui recommanda de s’étendre sous le rouf. Puis, il se précipita à bord de la Moriche, suivi de Germain Paterne.

De leur côté, MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe avaient trouvé asile dans la Maripare.

Les équipages, maintenant à leur poste, prirent les mesures pour se lancer au milieu du fleuve.

Les amarres furent larguées, à l’instant même où une grêle de flèches s’abattit sur les pirogues, qui s’éloignaient à la palanca, de manière à sortir du remous produit par le revers de la pointe. Avant de se jeter dans le courant, la manœuvre ne pouvait qu’être fort lente, et les pirogues étaient exposées à recevoir une seconde décharge des indigènes, rangés le long de la grève.

La première n’avait touché personne. La plupart des flèches avaient volé au-dessus des embarcations, sauf quelques-unes, qui s’étaient fichées dans le paillis des roufs.

Les armes étant prêtes alors, MM. Miguel et ses deux collègues, Jacques Helloch, Germain Paterne et le sergent Martial, se portèrent à l’avant et à l’arrière des trois pirogues.

Les carabines épaulées, six détonations retentirent à quelques secondes d’intervalle, et furent suivies de six autres.

Sept à huit Indiens tombèrent plus ou moins blessés, et deux des Piaroas, après avoir roulé au revers de la berge, disparurent sous les eaux du petit port.

Il n’en fallait pas tant pour mettre en fuite cette population affolée, et ce fut une débandade qui, au milieu des vociférations, la ramena vers Augustino.

Les falcas, ne courant plus le risque d’être inquiétées, contournèrent la pointe, et, avec l’aide de la brise, traversèrent obliquement le fleuve.

Il était six heures du soir, lorsque la Moriche, la Maripare et la Gallinetta allèrent sur la rive gauche prendre leur amarre de nuit dont aucune agression ne viendrait troubler le repos.

À propos de cet événement, voici la question qui fut faite par Germain Paterne à son ami, au moment où le sommeil s’appesantissait sur leurs paupières:

“Dis donc, Jacques, qu’est-ce que ces Piaroas vont faire de leur tapir?…

— Ils l’enterreront avec tous les honneurs dus à une bête si sacrée!

— Par exemple… Jacques!… Je te parie qu’ils le mangeront, et ils n’auront pas tort, car rien de bon comme un filet de tapir à la braise!”

CHAPITRE XV

XV

San-Fernando

L’Atabapo et le Guaviare, à l’endroit où ils se jettent dans l’Orénoque, — que l’on veuille bien admettre cette hypothèse jusqu’à plus ample informé, — sont séparés par une sorte de presqu’île. Les lits de ces deux affluents limitent cette presqu’île, le premier à l’est, le second à l’ouest, et sa pointe se dirige vers le nord.

Là se dessine ce carrefour dont M. E. Reclus fait avec raison “le véritable centre hydrographique de toute la région comprise entre les Antilles et l’Amazone”.

San-Fernando occupe la rive occidentale de ladite presqu’île, bordée en même temps par la rive droite de l’Atabapo. Ce tributaire tombe-t-il directement dans l’Orénoque, ou même n’est-il qu’un bras du Guaviare?… Question indécise que les nouvelles discussions et études de MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe finiraient peut-être par élucider.

La petite bourgade, que fonda Solano en 1757, est située à une altitude de deux cent trente-sept mètres au-dessus du niveau de la mer. Si jamais bourgade a le juste espoir d’acquérir une grande importance dans l’avenir, c’est bien San-Fernando. En effet, cinq voies navigables se ramifient autour de ce point géographique: l’Atabapo mène au Brésil, en passant par Gavita, à travers les bassins du rio Negro et de l’Amazone; le haut Orénoque conduit vers les régions orientales du Venezuela, et le moyen Orénoque aux régions septentrionales; l'Yrinida dessert les contrées du sud-ouest; le Guaviare coule à la surface des territoires de la Colombie.

Cependant, bien que San-Fernando rayonne comme une étoile sur cette province hispano-américaine, il ne semble pas qu'elle ait encore profité de son rayonnement — en ce qui la concerne du moins. Ce n'était qu'un gros village en 1887, à l'époque où M. Chaffanjon y séjourna, avant d'entreprendre son expédition aux sources de l'Orénoque. Sans doute, ses maisons sont plus nombreuses, sa population s'est augmentée depuis sept années, mais cela ne s'est pas effectué dans une très sensible proportion.

De cinq à six cents habitants, voilà au maximum ce que compte San-Fernando. Ils travaillent à la construction des barques qu'emploie la navigation de ce carrefour, ils font le commerce du caoutchouc, des gommes et des fruits, principalement ceux du palmier piriguao.

C'est de ce village que partit en 1882, le docteur Crevaux, accompagné de M. Lejeanne, pour remonter le Guaviare, — exploration qui devait ajouter une victime de plus à la nécrologie des découvreurs modernes.

La population de San-Fernando comprend quelques familles d'origine blanche, un certain nombre de nègres et d'Indiens, ces derniers appartenant pour la plupart à la tribu des Banivas. L'autorité du Président de la République et du Congrès est dévolue à un gouverneur, qui ne dispose que d'un chiffre très restreint de soldats.

Cette milice est surtout affectée à la police du territoire et aux réquisitions d'hommes, lorsqu'il est nécessaire de mettre à la raison les bandes qui infestent les rives de l'Orénoque et de ses tributaires.

Les Banivas méritent d’être remarqués entre toutes les races autochtones du Venezuela. Leur constitution physique les place au-dessus de leurs congénères, — corps robuste, membres solidement attachés, physionomie qui dénote l’intelligence, sans aucune dépression de la face, sang généreux qui coule sous leur peau rougeâtre, ardeur de leurs yeux présentant une légère obliquité. Au point de vue moral, ils l’emportent aussi sur les autres indigènes, étant industrieux, soit qu’ils exercent le métier de bateliers, soit qu’ils confectionnent des hamacs ou des espillas employées au halage des embarcations. La bonté et l’honnêteté de ces Indiens les recommandent aux voyageurs qui ont besoin de leurs services. Ils sont pêcheurs, ils sont chasseurs, ils s’entendent à la culture et à la récolte du caoutchouc. Eux aussi, sont-ils donc superstitieux?… Non, si on les compare aux

Piaroas. Ils professent la religion catholique, à laquelle les ont convertis les missionnaires, mais y mélangent parfois des pratiques locales difficiles à déraciner.

Bien que les habitations de San-Fernando ne méritent guère que le nom de cases ou de paillotes, il en est parmi elles qui offrent un certain confort.

MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas trouvèrent domicile chez le gouverneur. Ce haut personnage tint à avoir pour hôtes ces trois notables de Ciudad-Bolivar. Il était donc probable que la demeure de Son Excellence s’emplirait des éclats d’une discussion qui la rendraient à peu près inhabitable. Toutefois, M. Miguel et ses deux collègues n’en étaient pas encore là. Avant de s’y abandonner, si l’on veut que la discussion soit sérieuse, il convient de s’être rendu sur les lieux, d’avoir observé, constaté, contrôlé le pour et le contre. La question nécessiterait donc un examen minutieux de l’embouchure des trois fleuves, de longues stations aux confluents de l’Atabapo et du Guaviare, peut-être même une reconnaissance effective de leurs cours sur un certain nombre de kilomètres. En ce moment, les tenants de ces tributaires avaient à se reposer des fatigues d'un voyage de plus de six semaines sur le cours du bas et du moyen Orénoque.

Le sergent Martial et Jean de Kermor purent se loger dans une sorte d'hôtel convenable, non loin du port, en attendant que de nouveaux renseignements leur permissent d'organiser les recherches en telle ou telle direction.

Quant à Jacques Helloch et à Germain Paterne, ils préférèrent ne point débarquer de leur pirogue. Habitués à cette demeure flottante, ils s'y trouveraient mieux installés que partout ailleurs. C'était la Moriche qui les avait amenés à San-Fernando, c'était la Moriche qui les ramènerait à Caïcara, lorsque leur mission scientifique aurait été remplie.

Inutile de dire que dès que les violences du chubasco eurent pris fin, les mariniers s'étaient hâtés de ramener les trois falcas au port de San-Fernando. Cette opération fut achevée le soir même, car ces coups de vent s'apaisent d'ordinaire après deux ou trois heures. Les pirogues n'étaient pas sans avoir souffert des chocs alors qu'elles traversaient le fleuve, et aussi quelque peu de leur échouage sur la grève. Il est vrai, comme elles n'avaient point abordé les récifs, leurs avaries, sans gravité, pourraient être promptement réparées. Le temps, d'ailleurs, ne manquerait ni à la Maripare ni à la Moriche, puisque leurs passagers devaient séjourner à San-Fernando. En serait-il ainsi de la Gallinetta?… C'est ce que les circonstances allaient décider, car, s'il retrouvait les traces du colonel de Kermor, Jean comptait se remettre en route sans perdre un jour.

Du reste, ses compagnons de voyage, vivement intéressés à l'œuvre de ce jeune garçon, allaient unir leurs efforts pour obtenir de nouveaux renseignements. Par M. Miguel et ses deux collègues, le concours du gouverneur de San-Fernando était assuré, et nul mieux que lui n'eût pu procéder à une sérieuse enquête. De leur côté, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne feraient l’impossible pour venir en aide à leurs compatriotes. Ils étaient munis d’une lettre de recommandation près d’un très obligeant habitant de la bourgade, blanc d’origine, M. Mirabal, alors âgé de soixante-huit ans, et dont M. Chaffanjon parle avec un vif sentiment de reconnaissance dans le récit de son expédition aux sources de l’Orénoque. Les deux Français, ou plutôt les quatre Français devaient trouver le meilleur accueil dans cette honnête, affectueuse et serviable famille.

Toutefois, avant de raconter quelles démarches furent faites dès l’arrivée des voyageurs à San-Fernando, il est nécessaire de dire comment s’était effectué leur acheminement vers la bourgade, après le naufrage des pirogues.

On ne l’a point oublié, le sergent Martial portait Jean entre ses bras, MM. Varinas, Felipe et Miguel marchaient en avant, suivis de Jacques Helloch et de Germain Paterne. Celui-ci avait assuré qu’une bonne nuit rendrait au jeune garçon toutes ses forces. Il avait eu la précaution de prendre sa boîte de pharmacie, et ce n’étaient pas les soins qui feraient défaut au jeune garçon. Il est vrai, toujours aussi désagréable qu’incompréhensible, le sergent Martial ne cessait de tenir Germain Paterne à l’écart, et, lorsque celui-ci voulut s’approcher:

“C’est bon… c’est bon!… grommela-t-il. Mon neveu respire comme vous et moi… et nous ne manquerons de rien, dès que la Gallinetta sera au port…

— Dans quelques heures, affirma Jacques Helloch, qui savait par Valdez et Parchal que les pirogues arriveraient avant la nuit.

— C’est bien, repartit le sergent Martial, et pourvu que nous trouvions un bon lit à San-Fernando… À propos… monsieur Helloch… je vous remercie d’avoir sauvé le petit!”

Sans doute, il s’était dit qu’il devait au moins ce très simple et très bref remerciement; mais de quel ton singulier il l’agrémenta, et quel regard soupçonneux il jeta sur Jacques Helloch…

Celui-ci ne répondit qu’en inclinant la tête et resta de quelques pas en arrière.

Ce fut ainsi que les “naufragés” atteignirent la bourgade, où, sur l’indication de M. Miguel, le sergent Martial put retenir deux chambres, dans l’une desquelles Jean serait mieux installé que sous le rouf de la Gallinetta.

Germain Paterne vint plusieurs fois au cours de la soirée, — sans que son compagnon se fût joint à lui, — prendre des nouvelles du jeune garçon. Pour toute réponse, il lui fut assuré que tout allait aussi bien que possible, et que l’on pouvait se passer de ses services, dont on le remerciait.

Cela était vrai, le jeune de Kermor reposait paisiblement, et, dès que la pirogue eut été amarrée au port, Valdez apporta une valise contenant des vêtements que le sergent Martial tint prêts pour le lendemain.

Et, de fait, ce matin-là, lorsque Germain Paterne se présenta en la double qualité de médecin et d’ami, ce fut à l’ami seulement, que, malgré les grondements de son oncle, Jean, ne se ressentant plus des fatigues de la veille, fit le meilleur accueil, tout reconnaissant qu’il était de ses bons offices.

“Puisque je vous ai dit que cela ne serait rien, monsieur… déclara une fois de plus le sergent Martial.

— Vous aviez raison, sergent, mais cela aurait pu être grave, et sans mon ami Jacques…

— Je dois la vie à monsieur Helloch, répondit Jean, et quand je le verrai… je ne sais comment je pourrai lui exprimer…

— Il n’a fait que son devoir, répondit Germain Paterne, et même si vous n’aviez pas été notre compatriote…

— C’est bon… c’est bon… grommela le sergent Martial, et quand nous rencontrerons M. Helloch!…”

On ne le rencontra pas — dans la matinée du moins. Son intention était-elle donc de se tenir à l’écart?… Lui répugnait-il de paraître quêter les remerciements que méritait sa conduite?… Ce qui est certain, c’est qu’il demeura à bord de la Moriche, très pensif, très taciturne, et, après lui avoir donné des nouvelles du jeune garçon, Germain Paterne ne put pas en tirer quatre paroles.

Cependant Jacques Helloch et Jean se revirent dans l’après-midi. Le premier, un peu embarrassé, — le sergent Martial mordit sa moustache en l’observant, — prit la main qui lui fit tendue, mais ne la pressa pas sans façon comme d’habitude.

Ce fut chez M. Mirabal que cette rencontre eut lieu, Jacques Helloch s’y trouvait avec la lettre de recommandation qu’il avait près de cet excellent vieillard. Autant au sergent Martial et à Jean, s’ils avaient eu la pensée de venir s’adresser à lui, c’était pour obtenir des renseignements relatif au colonel de Kermor.

M. Mirabal ne cacha point à ces Français qui lui étaient adressés ou qui s’adressaient à lui, sa vive satisfaction de les accueillir. Il déclara être à leur entière disposition, et il n’épargnerait rien pour leur être utile.

La sympathie qu’il éprouvait à l’égard de ces voyageurs, dont il parlait la langue, éclatait dans son attitude, dans ses propos, dans l’empressement qu’il mettait à les renseigner sur toutes choses. Il avait vu le docteur Crevaux lors de son passage… il se souvenait de M. Chaffanjon, auquel il était heureux d’avoir rendu service… il ne ferait pas moins pour Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne… pour le sergent Martial et son neveu, qui pouvaient compter sur lui en toute circonstance.

Le jeune garçon fit alors connaître le motif qui l’avait amené au Venezuela, et cela ne fit qu’accroître la sympathie qu’il inspirait à M. Mirabal.

Et tout d’abord, le vieillard avait-il souvenir que le colonel de Kermor eût séjourné, quatorze ans auparavant, à la bourgade de San-Fernando?…

La réponse ne fut point de nature à satisfaire le jeune garçon. En remontant dans sa mémoire, M. Mirabal ne se rappelait rien de relatif à la présence d’un colonel de ce nom à San-Fernando.

Un profond chagrin se peignit sur la figure de Jean, et ses yeux laissèrent couler quelques larmes.

“Monsieur Mirabal, demanda alors Jacques

Helloch, y a-t-il longtemps que vous êtes ici?…

— Plus de quarante ans, monsieur Helloch, répondu le vieillard, et je n’ai quitté San-Fernando qu’à de rares et courts intervalles. Si un voyageur tel que le colonel de Kermor y eût passé quelques jours, je l’aurais certainement vu… Notre bourgade n’est ni assez grande ni assez peuplée pour qu’un étranger n’y soit pas signalé, et j’eusse été informé de sa présence…

— Mais… s’il a voulu garder l’incognito…

— À cela je ne puis vous répondre, répliqua M. Mirabal. Aurait-il donc eu des raisons pour le faire?…

— Monsieur, dit Jean, mon père a quitté la France depuis quatorze ans, et ses amis n’ont connu son départ que longtemps après… Mon oncle… le sergent Martial… n’était même pas dans la confidence des projets de son colonel…

— Non, certes! s’écria le vieux soldat, car j’aurais bien su l’empêcher…

— Et vous, mon cher enfant?… demanda M. Mirabal.

— Je n’habitais pas la maison de mon père à cette époque, répondit Jean, non sans montrer une certaine hésitation. Ma mère et moi, nous étions au colonies… et c’est lorsque nous revenions en France, qu’elle a péri dans un naufrage… Moi… j’ai pu être sauvé… et quelques années plus tard, quand je fus de retour en Bretagne… mon père avait quitté Nantes… et nous ne savons ce qu’il est devenu…”

Il y avait évidemment, dans la vie de ce jeune garçon, un mystère que Jean Helloch avait déjà pressenti. Mais comme il ne lui appartenait pas de le pénétrer, il s’était toujours tenu sur une extrême réserve. Ce qui ne pouvait pas être mis en doute, c’est que le colonel de Kermor avait déjà abandonné le pays, lorsque son fils y arriva, et que le sergent Martial, qu’il fût ou non de sa famille, ignorait absolument où il était allé.

“Et cependant, dit M. Maribal, vous avez des raisons sérieuses de croire, mon cher enfant, que votre père est venu à San-Fernando…

— Des raisons non seulement sérieuses, monsieur, mais formelles.

— Lesquelles?…

— Une lettre écrite par mon père, signée de lui, datée de San-Fernando, est arrivée à l’un de ses amis dans le courant de l’année 1879.

— C’est formel, en effet… à moins que… ajouta M. Mirabal. Il existe une autre bourgade de ce nom au Venezuela, dans l’est de l’Orénoque… San-Fernando de Apure…

— La lettre venait de San-Fernando de Atabapo, et portait le timbre de la poste à cette date du 12 avril 1879.

— Et pourquoi, mon cher enfant, n’avez-vous pas aussitôt mis à exécution votre projet?…

— Parce que… mon oncle et moi… nous n’avons eu connaissance de cette lettre qu’il y a trois mois… L’ami, auquel elle était adressée, ne devait la communiquer à personne… et c’est après sa mort que sa famille nous l’a remise… Ah! si je n’avais pas été loin au moment où mon père s’expatriait… il ne serait pas parti…”

M. Mirabal très ému, attira Jean et l’embrassa affectueusement. Que pourrait-il faire pour lui venir en aide?… Il se le demandait… Un fait dominait tout, cependant, c’est qu’une lettre avait été écrite par le colonel de Kermor, lettre datée du 12 avril 1879, et qu’elle était partie de San-Fernando de Atabapo.

“Et pourtant, dit M. Mirabal, ma mémoire ne me rappelle rien… non… rien… bien qu’à cette époque je fusse certainement à San-Fernando…

— Comment, s’écria le jeune garçon, mon père a passé ici… il a dû y séjourner quelque temps… et il n’aurait pas laissé trace de son passage!…”

Et des sanglots lui échappèrent, comme si son dernier espoir se fût évanoui devant les affirmations si précises, si désolantes de M. Mirabal.

“Ne vous désespérez pas… Jean, — cette fois, il ne dit pas: mon cher Jean! — reprit Jacques Helloch, incapable, lui aussi, de maîtriser son émotion. Assurément le colonel de Kermor a pu venir à San-Fernando sans que M. Mirabal en ait été informé…”

Le vieillard releva la tête.

“D’autres personnes l’ont peut-être connu… continua Jacques Helloch… Nous chercherons… nous interrogerons… Je vous le répète… Jean… il ne faut pas renoncer…”

Le sergent Martial se taisait… Il regardait le jeune garçon… Il semblait lui redire ce qu’il lui avait maintes fois répété avant leur départ: “Tu verras, mon pauvre enfant, que nous ne ferons qu’un inutile voyage!”

“Enfin, ajouta M. Mirabal pour conclure, comme il serait possible, après tout, que je n’eusse rien su de la présence du colonel de Kermor, je ferai des recherches… je m’informerai près des habitants de San-Fernando… Moi aussi, je vous l’assure, il ne faut pas désespérer… Que votre père soit venu à San-Fernando, ce n’est pas douteux… Mais voyageait-il sous son nom?… Avait-il conservé en voyage sa qualité de colonel?”

Oui! il y avait encore cette hypothèse, admissible en somme, bien qu’on ne se fût pas trop expliqué pourquoi le colonel aurait caché son nom et sa qualité.

“À moins, fit observer Jacques Helloch, que M. de Kermor ait voulu passer à San-Fernando sans être connu…

— Dans quel intérêt?… demanda M. Mirabal.

— Mon père avait éprouvé de grands chagrins, répondit le jeune garçon, dont le cœur battait avec violence. Après la mort de ma pauvre mère, il s’est cru seul au monde…

— Mais vous… mon cher enfant?…

— Il me croyait mort aussi…” répondit Jean, tandis que le sergent Martial ne cessait de gronder dans son coin.

Il était visible que cette sorte d’interrogatoire ne lui plaisait en aucune façon. Cela touchait à certains points qu’il avait toujours voulu tenir dans l’ombre en ce qui concerne le passé de son prétendu neveu.

Ni M. Mirabal, ni Jacques Helloch n’insistèrent. En somme, le colonel de Kermor, éprouvé par tant de malheurs, avait cru devoir partir secrètement, — si secrètement que son ancien compagnon d’armes n’en avait rien su.

Donc il n’était pas impossible qu’il eût changé de nom, ne voulant pas que l’on pût jamais découvrir l’endroit où il avait été réfugier une vie brisée par tant d’épreuves!

Le sergent Martial et le jeune garçon prirent alors congé de M. Mirabal, et se retirèrent, profondément attristés tous les deux. Mais enfin le vieillard leur avait promis de s’enquérir de tout ce qui aurait pu se rapporter au colonel de Kermor, et nul doute qu’il tiendrait sa promesse.

Après avoir regagné l’auberge, le sergent Martial et Jean n’en sortirent plus de la journée.

Le lendemain, sur la présentation de M. Miguel, Jean eut une entrevue avec le gouverneur de cette province de l’Orénoque.

Son Excellence ne put rien lui apprendre de relatif à son père. D’ailleurs, il ne résidait à San-Fernando que depuis cinq années. Mais, s’il ne pouvait renseigner le jeune garçon, il se joindrait à M. Mirabal pour l’enquête dont celui-ci s’était chargé.

Cette seconde journée s’écoula sans que la question eût fait un pas. Le sergent Martial ne décolérait plus!… Être venu si loin, avoir couru tant de dangers en pure perte!… Comment avait-il été assez faible pour consentir à ce voyage, assez faible pour l’avoir entrepris!… Toutefois il s’imposa de ne point récriminer devant le malheureux Jean, car c’eût été bénévolement accroître son chagrin, et il le voyait si accablé, si désespéré…

De son côté, Jacques Helloch s’occupa de recueillir des renseignements. Par malheur, ses démarches furent vaines. Et alors, rentré à bord de la Moriche, il s’abandonnait à une tristesse dont Germain Paterne commençait à s’effrayer. Son ami, si volontiers causeur, d’une humeur si égale, si communicatif, répondait à peine à ses questions.

“Qu’as-tu?… lui demandait Germain Paterne.

— Rien.

— Rien… cela veut dire tout quelquefois!… Certes, la situation de ce pauvre garçon est très affligeante, j’en conviens, mais enfin il ne faut pas que cela te fasse perdre de vue ta mission…

— Ma mission!…

— Ce n’est pas… j’imagine… ou du moins je ne crois pas que le ministre de l’Instruction publique t’ait envoyé sur l’Orénoque pour retrouver le colonel de Kermor…

— Et pourquoi pas?…

— Voyons… Jacques… parlons sérieusement!… Tu as été assez heureux pour sauver le fils du colonel…

— Le fils!… s’écria Jacques Helloch. Ah!… le fils!… Eh bien, Germain, peut-être… Oui!… mieux vaudrait peut-être que Jean eût péri… s’il ne doit pas retrouver son père…

— Je ne comprends pas, Jacques…

— Parce que ce sont des choses auxquelles tu n’entends rien… auxquelles tu ne peux rien entendre…

— Merci!”

Et alors, Germain Paterne prit le parti de ne plus interroger son compagnon, se demandant ce qu’il y avait au fond de cette extraordinaire affection croissante pour le jeune de Kermor.

Le lendemain, lorsque Jean arriva avec le sergent Martial chez M. Mirabal, celui-ci, en compagnie de Jacques Helloch, se disposait à leur rendre visite.

De l’enquête faite chez les habitants de San-Fernando, il résultait qu’un étranger, une douzaine d’années auparavant, avait effectivement séjourné dans la bourgade. Cet étranger était-il français?… Personne à pouvoir le dire, et il semblait, d’ailleurs, avoir des raisons particulières pour garder le plus secret incognito.

Jean crut voir l’obscurité de cette mystérieuse affaire s’éclairer de quelque lueur. Que l’on doive ou non ajouter foi aux pressentiments, il lui vint à la pensée que l’étranger était… devait être son père.

“Et lorsque ce voyageur a quitté San-Fernando, monsieur Mirabal, demanda-t-il, sait-on de quel côté il s’est dirigé?…

— Oui… Il allait vers les régions du haut Orénoque.

— Et depuis… plus eu de nouvelles?…

— On ne sait ce qu’il est devenu.

— On le saurait peut-être, dit Jacques Helloch, en faisant des recherches sur cette partie du fleuve…

— Ce serait une expédition pleine de périls, fit observer M. Mirabal, et vouloir s’y exposer sur des indices si vagues…”

Le sergent Martial approuva d’un geste les craintes exprimées par M. Mirabal.

Jean, lui, se taisait, mais à son attitude résolue, au feu qui brillait dans son regard, on sentait la ferme intention de n’en pas tenir compte, de continuer sa campagne, si dangereuse qu’elle pût être, de ne pas abandonner ses projets, d’aller jusqu’au bout…

Et M. Mirabal le comprit bien, lorsque Jean lui dit:

“Je vous remercie, monsieur Mirabal… je vous remercie également, monsieur Helloch, de ce que vous avez fait… Un étranger a été vu ici à l’époque où mon père s’y trouvait… à l’époque où il écrivait de San-Fernando même…

— Sans doute… mais de là à penser… que ce soit le colonel de Kermor… observa le vieillard.

— Pourquoi pas… s’écria Jacques Helloch, et n’y a-t-il pas des chances pour que ce soit lui?…

— Eh bien… puisque cet étranger s’est dirigé vers le haut Orénoque, dit Jean, c’est là que j’irai…

— Jean… Jean!… s’écria le sergent Martial, qui se précipita vers le jeune garçon…

— J’irai!” répéta Jean d’un ton qui indiquait une résolution inébranlable.

Puis, se retournant vers le vieillard:

“Existe-t-il sur le haut Orénoque quelques bourgades, quelque villages, où je pourrais me rendre et prendre des informations, monsieur Mirabal?…

— Des villages… il y en a plusieurs, Guachapana… la Esmeralda… d’autres encore… À mon avis, pourtant, s’il était possible de retrouver les traces de votre père, mon cher enfant, ce serait au-delà des sources… à la Mission de Santa-Juana.

— Nous avons déjà entendu parler de cette mission, répondit Jacques Helloch. Est-elle de création récente?…

— Voilà quelques années déjà qu’elle a été fondée, répondit M. Mirabal, et elle est en voie de prospérité.

— Une mission espagnole?…

— Oui, et c’est un missionnaire espagnol qui la dirige… le Père Esperante.

— Dès que nos préparatifs de voyage seront achevés, déclara Jean, nous partirons pour Santa-Juana…

— Mon cher enfant, dit le vieillard, je ne dois pas vous laisser ignorer que les périls sont grands sur le cours du haut Orénoque, fatigues, privations, risque de tomber entre les mains de bandes d’Indiens, qui ont une réputation de férocité… ces cruels Quivas, que commande maintenant un forçat évadé de Cayenne…

— Ces dangers que mon père a courus, répondit Jean, je n’hésiterai pas à les courir pour le retrouver!”

L’entretien se termina sur cette réponse du jeune garçon. M. Mirabal comprit que rien ne pourrait l’arrêter. Il irait “jusqu’au bout”, ainsi qu’il venait de le dire.

Le sergent Martial, désespéré, s’en alla avec Jean, qui vint passer le reste du jour sur la Gallinetta.

Lorsque Jacques Helloch fut seul avec M. Mirabal, celui-ci ne put que lui confirmer à quels dangers de toutes sortes allait s’exposer le fils du colonel de Kermor, n’ayant que ce vieux soldat pour guide.

“Si vous avez quelque influence sur lui, monsieur Helloch, ajouta-t-il, détournez-le de ce projet, qui repose sur tant d’incertitude… Empêchez-le de partir…

— Rien ne l’en détournera, monsieur Mirabal, affirma Jacques Helloch. Je le connais… rien!”

Jacques Helloch retourna à bord de la Moriche, plus soucieux que jamais, et ne répondit même plus aux quelques paroles de son compagnon.

Assis à l’arrière de la pirogue, Jacques Helloch regardait Valdez et deux de ses hommes qui s’occupaient de préparer la Gallinetta pour un long voyage. Il convenait de la décharger entièrement afin de visiter ses fonds et procéder à un complet radoub, nécessité par les fatigues du dernier parcours et l’échouage sur la grève de San-Fernando.

Jacques Helloch observait aussi Jean, qui surveillait ce travail. Peut-être le jeune garçon s’attendait-il à ce que Jacques Helloch lui adressât la parole… voulût lui faire des observations sur la témérité de ses projets… essayât de l’en détourner…

Celui-ci restait muet, immobile. Plongé dans ses réflexions, il semblait obsédé d’une idée fixe… une de ces idées qui s’incrustent dans le cerveau… qui le dévorent…

Le soir arriva.

Vers huit heures, Jean se disposa à regagner l’auberge pour prendre quelque repos.

“Bonsoir… monsieur Helloch… dit-il.

— Bonsoir… Jean…” répondit Jacques Helloch, qui se releva comme s’il eût l’intention de suivre le jeune garçon…

Jean marchait sans retourner la tête, et disparut entre les paillotes à cent pas de là.

Le sergent Martial était resté sur la grève, très agité à la pensée d’une démarche qu’il avait résolu de faire. Enfin, il s’y décida, et revenant vers la Moriche:

“Monsieur Helloch, murmura-t-il, j’aurais deux mots à vous dire.”

Jacques Helloch débarqua aussitôt et vint retrouver le vieux soldat:

“Que me voulez-vous, sergent?… demanda-t-il.

— Si c’était un effet de votre complaisance… d’engager mon neveu… qui vous écoutera peut-être… vous… à ne point entreprendre ce voyage…”

Jacques Helloch regarda le sergent Martial bien en face. Puis, après une certaine hésitation, répondit:

“Je ne l’en dissuaderai pas, car ce serait inutile, vous le savez bien… et même… à la condition que cela vous convienne… j’ai pris une résolution…

— Laquelle?…

— La résolution d’accompagner Jean…

— Vous… accompagner mon neveu…

— Qui n’est pas votre neveu, sergent!

— Lui… le fils du colonel…

— Qui n’est pas son fils… mais sa fille… la fille du colonel de Kermor!”

PARTIE II

CHAPITRE I

I

Quelques mots du passé

Vers huit heures, dans la matinée du 2 octobre, les pirogues Gallinetta et Moriche, ayant descendu le bras qui longe à droite la presqu’île d’Atabapo, remontaient le cours du haut Orénoque sous une favorable brise du nord-ouest.

La veille, après la conversation du sergent Martial et de Jacques Helloch, le premier ne pouvait plus refuser au second la permission de les accompagner, “son neveu et lui”, jusqu’à la Mission de Santa-Juana. À présent, le secret de Jeanne de Kermor était connu de celui qui l’avait sauvée, et ne tarderait pas à l’être — nul doute à cet égard — de Germain Paterne. Il eût été difficile, on l’avouera, que cette révélation ne se produisît pas, et même il était préférable qu’il en fût ainsi, étant donné les circonstances dans lesquelles la deuxième partie du voyage allait s’accomplir. Mais ce secret, si précieusement conservé jusqu’alors, les deux jeunes gens sauraient le garder vis-à-vis de MM. Miguel, Felipe, Varinas, Mirabal et le gouverneur de la province. Au retour, si les recherches aboutissaient, ce serait le colonel de Kermor en personne qui aurait cette joie de leur présenter sa fille.

Il fut aussi convenu que ni Valdez, ni Parchal, ni aucun des mariniers des pirogues ne seraient instruits de ces derniers incidents. Au total, on ne pouvait qu’approuver le sergent Martial d’avoir fait passer Jeanne pour son neveu Jean, dans l’espoir d’obvier aux difficultés d’une telle campagne, et mieux valait ne pas se départir de cette prudente conduite.

Et maintenant, dépeindre la stupéfaction, l’abattement, puis la colère du vieux soldat, lorsque Jacques Helloch lui eut fait connaître ce qu’il avait découvert, — à savoir que Jean de Kermor était Jeanne de Kermor, — ce serait malaisé et, d’ailleurs, inutile, car on se le figurera sans peine.

De même, il n’y a pas lieu d’insister sur la très naturelle confusion que ressentit la jeune fille, quand elle se retrouva en présence de Jacques Helloch et de Germain Paterne. Tous deux voulurent l’assurer de leur respect, de leur dévouement, de leur discrétion. Au surplus, son caractère décidé, supérieur aux timidités ordinaires de son sexe, reprit promptement le dessus.

“Pour vous, Jean… toujours Jean… dit-elle en tendant la main à ses deux compatriotes.

— Toujours… mademoiselle… répondit Germain Paterne en s’inclinant.

— Oui… Jean… mon cher Jean… répondit Jacques Helloch, et il en sera ainsi jusqu’au jour où nous aurons remis Mlle Jeanne de Kermor entre les mains de son père.”

Il va de soi que Germain Paterne ne crut devoir faire aucune observation au sujet de ce voyage qui allait se prolonger jusqu’aux sources de l’Orénoque et peut-être au-delà.

Personnellement, cette circonstance ne lui déplaisait point, et elle lui procurerait mainte occasion d’enrichir ses collections, en botanisant à travers la flore du haut fleuve. Cela lui permettrait de compléter sa mission de naturaliste, et décidément le ministre de l’Instruction publique serait mal venu à blâmer qu’elle se fût étendue si loin.

Quant à Jeanne de Kermor, elle ne pouvait qu’être profondément touchée à la pensée que les deux jeunes gens allaient joindre leurs efforts aux siens, l’accompagner à la Mission de Santa-Juana, braver dans son intérêt les éventualités de cette expédition, accroître ainsi ses chances de réussite. Aussi son cœur débordait-il de reconnaissance envers celui qui l’avait arrachée à la mort, et qui voulait être à ses côtés pendant tout le voyage.

“Mon ami, dit-elle au sergent Martial, que la volonté de Dieu s’accomplisse!… Dieu sait ce qu’il fait…

— Avant de le remercier, j’attendrai la fin!” se borna à répondre le vieux soldat.

Et il s’en fut grommeler en son coin, honteux comme un oncle qui a perdu son neveu.

Il va sans dire que Jacques Helloch avait déclaré à Germain Paterne:

“Tu comprends bien que nous ne pouvions pas abandonner Mlle de Kermor…

— Je comprends tout, mon cher Jacques, répondit Germain Paterne, même les choses auxquelles tu prétends que je n’entends rien!… Tu as cru sauver un jeune garçon, tu as sauvé une jeune fille, voilà le fait, et il est évident qu’il nous serait impossible de quitter cette intéressante personne…

— Je ne l’eusse pas fait avec Jean de Kermor! affirma Jacques Helloch. Non!… je n’aurais pu le laisser s’exposer à tant de périls, sans vouloir les partager!… C’était mon devoir, — notre devoir à tous les deux, Germain, de lui venir en aide jusqu’au bout…

— Parbleu!” répliqua Germain Paterne le plus sérieusement du monde.

Voici ce que Mlle de Kermor avait, de façon sommaire, raconté à ses deux compatriotes.

Le colonel de Kermor, né en 1829, ayant actuellement soixante-trois ans, avait épousé, en 1859, une créole de la Martinique. Les deux premiers enfants de ce mariage étaient morts en bas âge. Jeanne ne les avait pas connus, et de cette perte M. et Mme de Kermor étaient demeurés inconsolables.

M. de Kermor, officier distingué, dut à sa bravoure, à son intelligence, à ses qualités spéciales, un avancement brillant et rapide. Il était colonel à quarante et un ans. Le soldat, puis caporal, puis sergent Martial, avait voué un absolu dévouement à cet officier, qui eut l’occasion de lui sauver la vie sur le champ de bataille de Solférino. Tous deux firent ensuite la funeste et héroïque campagne contre les armées prussiennes.

Deux ou trois semaines avant la déclaration de cette guerre de 1870, des affaires de famille avaient obligé Mme de Kermor à partir pour la Martinique. Là naquit Jeanne. Au milieu des violents chagrins qui l’accablaient, le colonel éprouva une profonde joie de la naissance de cette enfant. Si son devoir ne l’avait retenu, il eût été rejoindre sa femme et sa fille aux Antilles, et il les aurait ramenées toutes les deux en France.

Dans ces conditions, Mme de Kermor ne voulut pas attendre que la fin de la guerre permît à son mari de venir la chercher. Elle avait hâte de se retrouver près de lui, et, au mois de mai 1871, elle s’embarqua à Saint-Pierre-Martinique sur un paquebot anglais, le Norton, à destination de Liverpool.

Mme de Kermor était accompagnée d’une femme créole, la nourrice de sa fille, âgée de quelques mois seulement. Son intention était de garder cette femme à son service, lorsqu’elle serait rentrée en Bretagne, à Nantes, où elle demeurait avant son départ.

Dans la nuit du 23 au 24 mai, en plein Atlantique, alors que régnait un épais brouillard, le Norton fut abordé par le steamer espagnol Vigo, de Santander. À la suite de cette collision, le Norton coula à pic presque immédiatement, entraînant ses passagers, moins cinq de ceux-ci, et son équipage, moins deux hommes, sans que le navire abordeur eût pu lui porter secours.

Mme de Kermor n’avait pas eu le temps de quitter la cabine qu’elle occupait du côté où le choc s’était produit, et la nourrice périt également, bien qu’elle fût parvenue à remonter sur le pont avec l’enfant.

Par miracle, cette enfant ne compta pas au nombre des victimes, grâce au dévouement de l’un des deux matelots du Norton qui réussit à atteindre le Vigo.

Après l’engloutissement du Norton, le navire espagnol endommagé dans son avant, mais dont les machines n’avaient pas souffert de la collision, resta sur le lieu de la catastrophe et mit ses embarcations à la mer. Ses recherches prolongées n’aboutirent pas, et il dut se diriger vers la plus rapprochée des Antilles, où il arriva huit jours plus tard.

C’est de là que s’opéra le rapatriement des quelques personnes qui avaient trouvé refuge à bord du Vigo.

Parmi les passagers de ce navire il y avait M. et Mme Eredia, riches colons originaires de la Havane, qui voulurent recueillir la petite Jeanne. Cette enfant était-elle maintenant sans famille? On ne parvint pas à le savoir. Un des deux matelots sauvés affirmait bien que la mère de la petite fille, une Française, était embarquée sur le Norton, mais il ignorait son nom, et, ce nom, comment pourrait-on l'apprendre, s'il n'avait pas été inscrit aux bureaux du steamer anglais avant l'embarquement?… Or il ne l'était pas, ainsi que cela fut établi dans l'enquête relative à l'abordage des deux navires.

Jeanne, adoptée par les Eredia, les suivit à la Havane. C'est là qu'ils l'élevèrent, après avoir inutilement essayé de découvrir à quelle famille elle appartenait. Le nom qu'elle reçut fut précisément celui de Juana. Très intelligente, elle profita de l'éducation qui lui fut donnée et apprit à parler le français comme l'espagnol. D'ailleurs elle savait sa propre histoire, on ne la lui avait point cachée. Aussi sa pensée l'entraînait-elle sans cesse vers ce pays de France où se trouvait peut-être un père qui la pleurait et qui n'espérait plus jamais la revoir.

Quant au colonel de Kermor, on se figure ce qu'avait été sa douleur, quand il se vit doublement frappé, par la mort de sa femme et la mort de cette enfant qu'il ne connaissait même pas. Au milieu des troubles de la guerre de 1871, il n'avait pu apprendre que Mme de Kermor s'était décidée à quitter Saint-Pierre-Martinique pour venir le rejoindre. Il ignorait donc qu'elle eût pris passage à bord du Norton. Et lorsqu'il l'apprit, ce fut en même temps que la nouvelle de ce sinistre maritime. En vain multiplia-t-il ses recherches. Elles ne produisirent d'autre résultat que de lui donner la certitude que sa femme et sa fille avaient péri avec la plupart des passagers et des hommes du paquebot.

La douleur du colonel de Kermor fut immense. Il perdait à la fois une femme adorée, et cette petite fille qui n'avait pas même reçu son premier baiser. Tel fut l'effet de ce double malheur qu'il y eut lieu de craindre pour sa raison. Et même il tomba si dangereusement malade que, sans les soins assidus de son fidèle soldat, le sergent Martial, la famille de Kermor se fût peut-être éteinte en la personne de son chef.

Le colonel guérit cependant, mais sa convalescence fut longue. Toutefois, ayant pris la résolution de renoncer au métier qui avait été l'honneur de toute sa vie et qui lui réservait un magnifique avenir, il démissionna en 1873. Il n'avait alors que quarante-quatre ans, et était dans la force de l'âge.

Depuis ce jour, le colonel de Kermor vécut, très retiré, dans une modeste maison de campagne à Chantenay-sur-Loire, près de Nantes. Il ne recevait plus aucun ami, n'ayant d'autre compagnon que le sergent Martial, qui s'était retiré du service en même temps que lui. Ce n'était plus qu'un malheureux abandonné sur une côte déserte, après un naufrage, — le naufrage de ses affections terrestres.

Enfin, deux ans plus tard, le colonel de Kermor disparut. Ayant prétexté un voyage, il quitta Nantes, et le sergent Martial attendit vainement son retour. La moitié de sa fortune, — une dizaine de mille francs de rentes, — avait été laissée par lui à ce dévoué compagnon d'armes, qui les reçut du notaire de la famille. Quant à l'autre moitié, le colonel de Kermor l'avait réalisée, puis emportée… où?… Cela devait rester un impénétrable mystère.

L'acte de donation au profit du sergent Martial était accompagné d'une notice, ainsi libellée:

“Je fais mes adieux à mon brave soldat, avec lequel j'ai voulu partager mon bien. Qu'il ne cherche pas à me retrouver, ce serait peine inutile. Je suis mort pour lui, mort pour mes amis, mort pour ce monde, comme sont morts les êtres que j’ai le plus aimés sur la terre.”

Et rien de plus.

Le sergent Martial ne voulut pas croire à cette impossibilité de jamais revoir son colonel. Des démarches furent faites dans le but de découvrir en quel pays il était allé ensevelir son existence désespérée, loin de tous ceux qui l’avaient connu, et auxquels il avait dit un éternel adieu…

Cependant la petite fille grandissait au milieu de sa famille d’adoption. Douze ans s’écoulèrent avant que les Eredia fussent parvenus à recueillir quelques renseignements relatifs à la famille de cette enfant. Enfin, on finit par apprendre qu’une Mme de Kermor, passagère à bord du Norton, était la mère de Juana, et que son mari, le colonel de ce nom, vivait encore.

L’enfant était alors une fillette d’une douzaine d’années, qui promettait de devenir une charmante jeune fille. Instruite, sérieuse, pénétrée d’un profond sentiment de ses devoirs, elle possédait une énergie peu commune à son âge et à son sexe.

Les Eredia ne se crurent pas en droit de lui cacher ces nouvelles informations, et, à partir de ce jour, il sembla que son esprit fût éclairé d’une lueur persistante. Elle se crut appelée à retrouver son père. Cette croyance devint sa pensée habituelle, une sorte d’obsession qui produisit une modification très visible de son état intellectuel et moral. Bien que si heureuse, si filialement traitée en cette maison où s’était passée son enfance, elle ne vécut plus que dans l’idée de rejoindre le colonel de Kermor… On sut qu’il s’était retiré en Bretagne, près de Nantes, sa ville natale… On écrivit pour savoir s’il y résidait actuellement… Quelle accablante nouvelle, lorsque la jeune fille apprit pour toute réponse que son père avait disparu depuis bien des années déjà.

Alors Mlle de Kermor supplia ses parents adoptifs de la laisser partir pour l'Europe… Elle irait en France… à Nantes… Elle parviendrait à ressaisir des traces que l'on disait perdues… Où des étrangers échouent, une fille, guidée par son seul instinct, peut réussir…

Bref, les Eredia consentirent à son départ, sans aucun espoir, d'ailleurs. Mlle de Kermor quitta donc la Havane, puis, après une heureuse traversée, arriva à Nantes, où elle ne trouva plus que le sergent Martial, toujours dans l'ignorance de ce qu'était devenu son colonel.

Que l'on juge de l'émotion du vieux soldat, lorsque cette enfant, celle que l'on disait avoir péri dans la catastrophe du Norton, franchit le seuil de la maison de Chantenay. Il ne voulait pas croire, et il fut forcé de croire. Le visage de

Jeanne lui rappelait les traits de son père, ses yeux, sa physionomie, tout ce qui peut se transmettre par le sang de ressemblance physique et morale. Aussi reçut-il la jeune fille comme un ange que son colonel lui eût envoyé de là-haut…

Mais, à cette époque, il avait déjà abandonné tout espoir d'apprendre en quel pays le colonel de Kermor avait été enfouir sa triste existence…

Quant à Jeanne, elle prit la résolution de ne plus quitter la maison paternelle. Cette fortune que le sergent Martial avait reçue et qu'il se mit en mesure de lui restituer, tous deux l'emploieraient à entreprendre de nouvelles recherches.

En vain la famille Eredia insista-t-elle pour ramener Mlle de Kermor près d’elle. Il lui fallut se résigner à être séparée de sa fille adoptive. Jeanne remercia ses bienfaiteurs de tout ce qu’ils avaient fait pour elle… son cœur débordait de reconnaissance envers ceux qu’elle ne reverrait pas de longtemps sans doute… mais, pour elle, le colonel de Kermor vivait toujours, et peut-être y avait-il lieu de le penser, puisque la nouvelle de sa mort n’était arrivée ni au sergent Martial, ni à aucun des amis qu’il avait laissés en Bretagne… Elle le chercherait, elle le retrouverait… À l’amour paternel répondait cet amour filial, bien que ni le père ni la fille ne se fussent jamais connus… Il y avait entre eux un lien qui les réunissait, un lien si tenace que rien ne pourrait le rompre!

La jeune fille resta donc à Chantenay avec le sergent Martial. Celui-ci lui apprit qu’elle avait été baptisée sous le nom de Jeanne, quelques jours après sa naissance à Saint-Pierre-Martinique, et il lui restitua ce nom à la place de celui qu’elle portait dans la famille Eredia. Jeanne vécut près de lui, s’obstinant à relever les plus légers indices, qui eussent permis de se lancer sur les traces du colonel de Kermor.

Mais à qui s’adresser pour obtenir quelque nouvelle de l’absent?… Est-ce que le sergent Martial n’avait pas tenté par tous les moyens, et sans y réussir, de recueillir des renseignements sur son compte?… Et dire que le colonel de Kermor ne s’était expatrié que parce qu’il se croyait seul au monde!… Ah! s’il pouvait savoir que sa fille, sauvée du naufrage, l’attendait dans la maison paternelle…

Plusieurs années s’écoulèrent. Aucun rayon n’avait effleuré ces ténèbres. Et, sans doute, le plus impénétrable mystère eût continué d’envelopper le colonel de Kermor, si une première révélation, très inattendue, ne se fût produite dans les circonstances suivantes.

On ne l’a pas oublié, une lettre, signée du colonel, était arrivée à Nantes en 1879. Cette lettre venait de San-Fernando de Atabapo, Venezuela, Amérique du Sud. Adressée au notaire de la famille de Kermor, elle se rapportait à une affaire toute personnelle qu’il s’agissait de régler. Mais, en même temps, recommandation était faite de garder un absolu secret sur l’existence de cette lettre. Or, ledit notaire vint à décéder, alors que Jeanne de Kermor se trouvait encore à la Martinique, et que personne ne savait qu’elle fût la fille du colonel.

C’est seulement sept ans après que cette lettre fut retrouvée dans les papiers du défunt, — vieille de treize ans déjà. À cette époque, ses héritiers, qui connaissaient l’histoire de Jeanne de Kermor, son installation près du sergent Martial, les tentatives faites pour se procurer des documents relatifs à son père, s’empressèrent de lui donner communication de cette lettre.

Jeanne de Kermor était majeure alors. Depuis qu’elle avait vécu, — on pourrait dire, sous “l’aile maternelle” du vieux compagnon d’armes de son père, — l’éducation qu’elle avait reçue dans la famille Eredia s’était complétée de cette instruction solide et sérieuse qu’offre la pédagogie moderne.

S’imagine-t-on ce qu’elle éprouva, de quel irrésistible désir elle fut prise, lorsque ce document tomba entre ses mains! C’était la certitude acquise que le colonel de Kermor, en 1879, se trouvait à San-Fernando. Et si on ignorait ce qu’il était devenu depuis ce temps, du moins y avait-il là un indice, — l’indice, tant réclamé, — qui permettrait de faire les premiers pas sur la route des recherches. On écrivit au gouverneur de San-Fernando, on écrivit plusieurs fois… Les réponses furent toujours les mêmes… Personne ne connaissait le colonel de Kermor… personne n’avait souvenir qu’il fût venu dans la bourgade… Et, cependant, la lettre était formelle.

Dans ces conditions, le mieux ne serait-il pas de se rendre à San-Fernando?… Assurément… Aussi la jeune fille résolut-elle de partir pour cette région du haut Orénoque. Mlle de Kermor était restée en correspondance régulière avec la famille Eredia. Elle fit connaître à ses parents adoptifs cette détermination d’aller là où il lui serait peut-être possible de retrouver les dernières traces de son père, et ceux-ci ne purent que l’encourager dans sa résolution, malgré les difficultés d’un tel voyage.

Mais, de ce que Jeanne de Kermor eût formé ce projet, d’une extrême gravité, on en conviendra, s’ensuivait-il que le sergent Martial voudrait y accéder?… Ne refuserait-il pas son consentement?… Ne s’opposerait-il pas à l’accomplissement de ce que Jeanne considérait comme un devoir?… Ne résisterait-il pas, par crainte des fatigues, des dangers qu’elle courrait en ces lointaines régions du Venezuela?… Plusieurs milliers de kilomètres à franchir!… Une jeune fille se lançant dans une campagne si aventureuse… avec un vieux soldat pour guide… car, si elle partait, il ne la laisserait pas partir seule…

“Et, cependant, mon bon Martial a dû y consentir, dit Jeanne en achevant ce récit, qui venait de dévoiler aux deux jeunes gens le mystère de son passé. Oui!… il a consenti, et il l’a bien fallu, n’est-ce pas, mon vieil ami?”….

— Et j’ai tout lieu de m’en repentir, répondit le sergent Martial, puisque, malgré tant de précautions…

— Notre secret a été découvert! ajouta la jeune fille en souriant. Voici donc que je ne suis plus ton neveu… et que tu n’es plus mon oncle!… Mais monsieur Helloch et monsieur Paterne n’en diront rien à personne… N’est-il pas vrai, monsieur Helloch?…

— À personne, mademoiselle!

— Pas de mademoiselle, monsieur Helloch, se hâta de déclarer Jeanne de Kermor, et il ne faut pas prendre cette mauvaise habitude de m’appeler ainsi… Vous finirez par vous trahir… Non… Jean… rien que Jean…

— Oui… Jean… tout court… et même notre cher Jean… pour varier un peu… dit Germain Paterne.

— Maintenant, monsieur Helloch, vous vous expliquez ce qu’a exigé de moi mon bon Martial… Il est devenu mon oncle, et je suis devenue son neveu… J’ai revêtu l’habit d’un jeune garçon, j’ai coupé mes cheveux, et, ainsi métamorphosée, je me suis embarquée à Saint-Nazaire pour Caracas. Je parlais l’espagnol comme ma langue naturelle, — ce qui pouvait m’être bien utile pendant ce voyage, — et me voici dans cette bourgade de San-Fernando!… Puis, lorsque j’aurai retrouvé mon père, nous reviendrons en Europe par la Havane… Je tiens à ce qu’il rende visite à cette généreuse famille qui l’a remplacé près de sa fille… et à laquelle nous devons tous deux tant de reconnaissance!”

Les yeux de Jeanne de Kermor se mouillèrent de quelques larmes. Mais elle se remit, et ajouta:

“Non, mon oncle, non, il ne faut pas se plaindre si notre secret a été découvert… Dieu l’a voulu, comme il a voulu que deux de nos compatriotes, deux amis dévoués, se soient rencontrés sur notre route… Et, au nom de mon père, messieurs, je vous remercie de toute mon âme, de ce que vous avez déjà fait… et de ce que vous avez résolu de faire encore!”

Et elle tendit la main à Jacques Helloch et à Germain Paterne, qui la pressèrent affectueusement.

Le lendemain, les jeunes gens, le sergent Martial et Jean — ce nom lui sera conservé tant que les circonstances l’exigeront — prirent congé de MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, lesquels faisaient leurs préparatifs en vue d’explorer les confluents du Guaviare et de l’Atabapo. Les trois collègues ne voyaient pas, sans de vives appréhensions, le jeune garçon s’engager sur le lit supérieur de l’Orénoque, même avec le concours de ses compatriotes. Et, tout en faisant des voeux pour le succès de son voyage, M. Miguel lui dit:

“Peut-être nous trouverez-vous ici à votre retour, mon cher enfant, si mes compagnons et moi, nous n’avons pas pu nous mettre d’accord…”

Enfin, après avoir reçu les adieux du gouverneur de San-Fernando qui leur donna des lettres pour les commissaires des principales bourgades de l’amont, puis les embrassements de M. Mirabal qui pressa Jean sur son cœur, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne, Jean et le sergent Martial s’embarquèrent à bord de leurs pirogues.

La population avait voulu assister au départ. Des vivats saluèrent les deux falcas, lorsqu’elles se détachèrent de la rive gauche du fleuve. Dès qu’elles eurent contourné les rochers, qui se dressent au confluent où s’entremêlent les eaux de l’Atabapo et du Guaviare, elles gagnèrent l’Orénoque et disparurent en remontant dans la direction de l’est.

CHAPITRE II

II

Première étape

La Gallinetta et la Moriche étaient commandées, ainsi qu'elles l'avaient été depuis leur départ de Caïcara, par les patrons Parchal et Valdez. Avec Parchal et ses hommes, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne n'avaient éprouvé aucune difficulté pour la prolongation du voyage. Engagés en vue d'une campagne d'une durée indéterminée, peu importait à ces braves gens qu'elle eût pour résultat l'exploration de l'Orénoque jusqu'à ses sources ou de tout autre de ses affluents, du moment qu'ils étaient assurés d'un bon salaire.

En ce qui concernait Valdez, il avait fallu établir les conditions d'un nouveau marché. L'Indien ne devait conduire le sergent Martial et son neveu que jusqu'à San-Fernando, ceux-ci n'ayant pu traiter que de cette façon, puisque tout dépendait des renseignements qui seraient recueillis dans la bourgade. Valdez, on le sait, était originaire de San-Fernando, où il demeurait d'habitude, et, après avoir pris congé du sergent Martial, il comptait attendre l'occasion de redescendre le fleuve pour le compte d'autres passagers, marchands ou voyageurs.

Or, le sergent Martial et Jean avaient été extrêmement satisfaits de l'habileté et du zèle de Valdez, et ce n'est pas sans regret qu'ils s'en fussent séparés pour cette de la campagne, la plus difficile assurément. Aussi lui proposèrent-ils de rester à bord de sa pirogue la Gallinetta au cours de cette navigation sur le haut Orénoque.

Valdez consentit volontiers. Toutefois, des neuf hommes de son équipage, il ne put en conserver que cinq, quatre devant s'employer à la récolte du caoutchouc, qui leur vaut de plus grands bénéfices. Le patron trouva heureusement à les remplacer, en engageant trois Mariquitares et un Espagnol, de manière à compléter l'équipage de la Gallinetta.

Les Mariquitares, qui appartiennent aux tribus de ce nom répandues sur les territoires de l'est, sont d'excellents bateliers. Et même ceux-ci connaissaient le fleuve sur une étendue de plusieurs centaines de kilomètres au-delà de San-Fernando.

Quant à l'Espagnol, nommé Jorrès, arrivé depuis quinze jours à la bourgade, il cherchait précisément une occasion de se rendre à Santa-Juana où, disait-il, le Père Esperante ne refuserait pas de l'admettre au service de la Mission. Or, ayant appris que le fils du colonel de Kermor avait résolu de se rendre à Santa-Juana, et dans quel but il entreprenait ce voyage, Jorrès s'était empressé de s'offrir comme batelier. Valdez, auquel il manquait un homme, accepta son offre. Cet Espagnol paraissait être doué d'intelligence, bien que la dureté de ses traits, le feu de son regard, ne prévinssent pas trop en sa faveur. Il était, d'ailleurs, de tempérament taciturne et peu communicatif.

Il est bon d'ajouter que les patrons Valdez et

Parchal avaient déjà remonté le fleuve jusqu'au rio Mavaca, un des tributaires de gauche, à trois cent cinquante kilomètres environ en aval du massif de la Parima, d'où s'épanchent les premières eaux du grand fleuve.

Il convient de faire remarquer aussi que les pirogues employées sur le haut Orénoque sont ordinairement de construction plus légère que celles du cours moyen. Mais la Gallinetta et la Moriche, de dimensions restreintes, n’avaient point paru impropres à ce genre de navigation. On les avait visitées avec soin, radoubées dans leurs fonds, remises en parfait état. Au mois d’octobre, la saison sèche n’a pas encore abaissé à son minimum l’étiage du fleuve. Sa profondeur devait donc suffire au tirant d’eau des deux falcas. Mieux valait ne pas les changer pour d’autres, puisque leurs passagers y étaient habitués depuis plus de deux mois.

À l’époque où M. Chaffanjon accomplissait son extraordinaire voyage, il n’existait, en fait de carte, que celle de Coddazzi, généralement peu exacte, et dont le voyageur français avait dû rectifier en maint endroit les erreurs. En conséquence, ce dut être la carte dressée par M. Chaffanjon qui allait servir pendant cette de la campagne.

Le vent était favorable, une assez forte brise. Les deux pirogues, voiles hissées à bloc, marchaient rapidement, à peu près sur la même ligne. Les équipages, groupés à l’avant, n’avaient point à faire usage de leurs bras. Beau temps, avec un ciel semé de légers nuages chassant de l’ouest.

À San-Fernando, les falcas avaient été ravitaillées de viande séchée, de légumes, de cassave, de conserves, de tabac, de tafia et d’aguardiente, d’objets d’échange, couteaux, hachettes, verroterie, miroirs, étoffes, et aussi de vêtements, de couvertures, de munitions. Mesure prudente, car, en amont de la bourgade, il eût été malaisé de se procurer le nécessaire, sauf pour la nourriture. En ce qui concernait l’alimentation du personnel, d’ailleurs, le Hammerless de Jacques Helloch et la carabine du sergent Martial devaient y pourvoir largement. La pêche ne manquerait pas non plus d’être fructueuse, car le poisson fourmille aux embouchures des nombreux rios qui grossissent le cours supérieur du fleuve.

Le soir, vers cinq heures, les deux pirogues, bien servies par la brise, vinrent s’amarrer à l’extrême pointe de l’île Mina, presque en face du Mawa. Un couple de cabiais furent tués, et il n’y eut lieu de toucher aux provisions ni pour les passagers ni pour les équipages.

Le lendemain, 4 octobre, on repartit dans des conditions identiques. Après une navigation en droite ligne sur les vingt kilomètres de cette portion de l’Orénoque, à laquelle les Indiens donnent le nom de cañon Nube, la Moriche et la Gallinetta relâchèrent au pied des étranges rocs de la Piedra Pintada.

C’est la “Pierre Peinte” dont Germain Paterne essaya vainement de déchiffrer les inscriptions, en partie recouvertes par les eaux. En effet, les crues de la saison pluvieuse maintenaient au-dessus de l’étiage normal le niveau du fleuve. Du reste, on rencontre une autre Piedra Pintada au-delà de l’embouchure du

Cassiquiare, avec les mêmes signes hiéroglyphiques, — signature authentique de ces races indiennes que le temps a respectée.

D’habitude, les voyageurs de l’Alto Orinoco préfèrent débarquer pendant la nuit. Dès qu’est établi une sorte de campement sous les arbres, ils suspendent leurs hamacs aux basses branches, et dorment à la belle étoile, et les étoiles sont toujours belles au firmament vénézuélien quand elles ne sont pas voilées de nuages. Il est vrai, les passagers s’étaient contentés jusqu’alors de l’abri des roufs à bord de leurs pirogues, et ils ne pensèrent pas qu’il y eût lieu de les abandonner.

En effet, outre que les dormeurs risquent d’être surpris par des averses soudaines et violentes, assez communes en ces contrées, d’autres éventualités peuvent se produire, qui ne sont pas moins inquiétantes.

C’est ce que firent observer, ce soir-là, les deux patrons Valdez et Parchal.

“Si cela défendait contre les moustiques, expliqua le premier, mieux vaudrait camper. Mais les moustiques sont aussi malfaisants sur la berge que sur le fleuve…

— En outre, ajouta Parchal, on est exposé aux fourmis, dont les piqûres vous donnent des heures de fièvre.

— Ne sont-ce pas celles qu’on appelle “veinte y cuatro”, demanda Jean, très renseigné par la lecture assidue de son guide.

— Précisément, répondit Valdez, sans compter les chipitas, des petites bêtes qu’on distingue à peine, qui vous dévorent de la tête aux pieds, les termites, si insupportables qu’ils obligent les Indiens à fuir leurs cases…

— Et sans compter les chiques, ajouta Parchal, et aussi ces vampires, qui vous sucent le sang jusqu’à la dernière goutte…

— Et sans compter les serpents, amplifia Germain Paterne, des culebra mapanare et autres, longs de plus de six mètres!… Je leur préfère encore les moustiques…

— Et moi je n’aime ni les uns ni les autres!” déclara Jacques Helloch.

Tous furent de cet avis. Aussi, le couchage à bord des falcas devait-il être maintenu, tant que quelque orage, un coup de chubasco, par exemple, n’obligerait pas les passagers à chercher refuge sur les berges.

Le soir, on avait pu atteindre l’embouchure du rio Ventuari, un important tributaire de la rive droite. À peine était-il cinq heures, et il restait deux heures de jour. Toutefois, d’après le conseil de Valdez, on fit halte en cet endroit, car, au-dessus du Ventuari, le lit, obstrué de roches, présente une navigation difficile et dangereuse qu’il serait imprudent de tenter aux approches de la nuit.

Le repas fut pris en commun. Le sergent Martial n’y pouvait plus faire d’objections, maintenant que le secret de Jean était connu de ses deux compatriotes. Visiblement même, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne apportaient une extrême réserve dans leurs rapports avec la jeune fille. Ils se seraient reprochés de la gêner par trop d’assiduité, — Jacques Helloch surtout. Si ce n’était pas de l’embarras, c’était du moins un sentiment particulier qu’il éprouvait, lorsqu’il se trouvait en présence de Mlle de Kermor. Celle-ci n’aurait pu ne point s’en apercevoir, mais elle ne voulait y prendre garde. Elle agissait avec la même franchise, la même simplicité qu’autrefois. Elle invitait les deux jeunes gens à se réunir dans sa pirogue, le soir venu. Puis, l’on causait des incidents de la navigation, des éventualités que présentait l’avenir, des chances de succès, des renseignements qui seraient sans doute recueillis à la Mission de Santa-Juana.

“Et c’est de bon augure qu’elle porte ce nom, fit alors observer Jacques Helloch. Oui! de bon augure, puisque c’est précisément votre nom… mademoiselle…

— Monsieur Jean… s’il vous plaît… monsieur Jean! interrompit la jeune fille en souriant, tandis que se fronçait le gros sourcil du sergent Martial.

— Oui… monsieur Jean!” répondit Jacques Helloch, après avoir indiqué du geste qu’aucun des mariniers de la falca n’avait pu l’entendre.

Ce soir-là, la conversation s’engagea sur cet affluent à l’embouchure duquel les pirogues avaient pris leur poste de nuit.

C’est un des plus considérables de l’Orénoque. Il lui verse une énorme masse d’eau par sept bouches disposées en delta, à travers une des courbes les plus prononcées de tout son système hydrographique, — un coude en angle aigu, qui mord profondément sa coulière. Le Ventuari descend du nord-est au sud-ouest, alimenté par les inépuisables réservoirs des Andes guyanaises, et il arrose les territoires ordinairement habités par les Indiens Macos et les Indiens Mariquitares. Son apport est donc plus volumineux que celui des affluents de gauche, qui se promènent lentement à travers la plate savane.

Et c’est ce qui amena Germain Paterne à déclarer, en haussant quelque peu les épaules:

“En vérité, MM. Miguel, Varinas et Felipe auraient là un beau sujet de discussion! Voici ce Ventuari, qui le disputerait non sans avantage à leur Atabapo et à leur Guaviare, et s’ils avaient été ici, nous en aurions eu pour toute la nuit à entendre les arguments qu’ils s’envoient en pleine poitrine.

— C’est probable, répondit Jean, car ce cours d’eau est le plus important de la région.

— Au fait, s’écria Germain Paterne, je sens que le démon de l’hydrographie s’empare de mon cerveau!… Pourquoi le Ventuari ne serait-il pas l’Orénoque?…

— Si tu penses que je vais discuter cette opinion… répliqua Jacques Helloch.

— Et pourquoi pas?… Elle est aussi bonne que celles de MM. Varinas et Felipe…

— Tu veux dire qu’elle est aussi mauvaise…

— Et pour quelle raison?…

— Parce que l’Orénoque… c’est l’Orénoque.

— Bel argument, Jacques!

— Ainsi, monsieur Helloch, demanda Jean, votre opinion est conforme à celle de M. Miguel…

— Entièrement… mon cher Jean.

— Pauvre Ventuari! répondit en riant Germain Paterne. Je vois qu’il n’a pas de chance de réussir, et je l’abandonne.”

Les journées des 4, 5 et 6 octobre exigèrent une grande dépense de forces, qu’il fallut demander aux bras des équipages, soit pour le halage, soit pour la manœuvre des pagaies et des palancas. Après la Piedra Pintada, les pirogues avaient dû contourner pendant sept à huit kilomètres un encombrement d’îlots et de rochers qui rendait la marche très lente et très difficile. Et, bien que la brise continuât à souffler de l’ouest, se servir des voiles eût été impossible à travers ce labyrinthe. En outre, la pluie tomba en tumultueuses averses, et les passagers furent contraints de se consigner sous leurs roufs durant de longues heures.

En amont de ces rochers avaient succédé les rapides de Santa-Barbara, que les pirogues franchirent heureusement sans avoir été obligées à aucun transbordement. On n’aperçut point en cet endroit les ruines de l’ancien village, signalées par M. Chaffanjon, et il ne semblait même pas que cette portion de la rive gauche du fleuve eût jamais été habituée par des Indiens sédentaires.

Ce ne fut qu’au-delà des passes de Cangreo que la navigation put être reprise dans des conditions normales, — ce qui permit aux falcas d’atteindre dès l’après-midi du 6 octobre le village de Guachapana où elles relâchèrent.

Et si les patrons Valdez et Parchal y firent halte, ce fut uniquement pour accorder une demi-journée et une nuit de repos à leurs équipages.

En effet, Guachapana ne se compose que d’une demi-douzaine de paillotes depuis longtemps abandonnées. Cela tient à ce que la savane environnante est infestée de termites, dont les nids mesurent jusqu’à deux mètres de hauteur. Devant cet envahissement des “poux de bois”, il n’y a qu’un parti à prendre, leur céder la place, et c’est ce que les Indiens avaient fait.

“Telle est, observa Germain Paterne, la puissance des infiniment petits. Rien ne résiste aux bestioles, lorsque leur nombre se chiffre par myriades. Une bande de tigres, de jaguars, on peut parvenir à la repousser, même à en débarrasser un pays… et on ne décampe point devant ces fauves…

— À moins qu’on ne soit un Indien Piaroa, dit Jean, d’après ce que j’ai lu…

— Mais, dans ce cas, c’est bien plus par superstition que par crainte que ces Piaroas prennent la fuite, ajouta Germain Paterne, tandis que des fourmis, des termites finissent par rendre un pays inhabitable.”

Vers cinq heures, les mariniers de la Moriche purent s’emparer d’une tortue de l’espèce terecaïe. Ce chélonien servit à la confection d’une soupe excellente, et d’un non moins excellent bouilli, auquel les Indiens donnent le nom de sancocho. Au surplus, — ce qui permettait d’économiser sur les approvisionnements des falcas, — à la lisière des bois voisins, singes, cabiais, pécaris, n’attendaient qu’un coup de fusil pour figurer sur la table des passagers. De tous côtés, il n’y avait qu’à cueillir ananas et bananes. Au-dessus des berges se dispersaient incessamment, en bruyantes volées, des canards, des hoccos au ventre blanchâtre, des poules noires. Les eaux fourmillaient de poissons, et ils sont si abondants que les indigènes peuvent les tuer à coup de flèches. En une heure, on aurait rempli les canots des pirogues.

La question de nourriture n’est donc pas pour préoccuper les voyageurs du haut Orénoque.

Au-delà de Guachapana, la largeur du fleuve ne dépasse plus cinq cents mètres. Néanmoins, son cours est toujours divisé par de nombreuses îles, qui créent des chorros, violents rapides dont le courant se déroule avec une très gênante impétuosité. La Moriche et la Gallinetta ne purent rallier ce jour-là que l’île Perro de Agua, et encore faisait-il presque nuit lorsqu’elles y arrivèrent.

À vingt-quatre heures de là, après une journée pluvieuse, maintes fois troublée par des sautes de vent qui obligèrent de naviguer à la palanca en amont de l’île Camucapi, les voyageurs atteignirent la lagune de Carida.

Il y avait jadis, en cet endroit, un village qui fut abandonné, parce qu’un Piaroa avait succombé sous la dent d’un tigre, — ainsi que le fait fut certifié à M. Chaffanjon. Le voyageur français, d’ailleurs, ne trouva plus en ce village que quelques cases, utilisées par un Indien Baré moins superstitieux ou moins poltron que ses congénères. Ce Baré fonda un rancho dont Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons reconnurent le parfait état de prospérité. Ce rancho comprenait des champs de maïs, de manioc, des plantations de bananiers, de tabac, d’ananas. Au service de l’Indien et de sa femme, on comptait une douzaine de péons, qui vivaient à Carida dans la plus heureuse entente.

Il eût été difficile d'opposer un refus à l'invitation que fit ce brave homme de visiter son établissement. Il vint à bord des pirogues, dès qu'elles eurent accosté la grève. Un verre d'aguardiente lui fut présenté. Il ne l'accepta qu'à la condition qu'on irait boire le tafia et fumer les cigarettes de tabari à l'intérieur de sa case. Il y aurait eu mauvaise grâce à décliner cette invitation, et les passagers promirent de se rendre au rancho après leur dîner.

Un petit incident se produisit alors, auquel on n'attacha pas, et on ne pouvait même attacher grande importance.

Au moment où il débarquait de la Gallinetta, le Baré avisa un des hommes de l'équipage, — ce Jorrès que le patron avait engagé à San-Fernando.

On n'a point oublié que l'Espagnol n'avait offert ses services que parce que son intention était de se rendre à la Mission de Santa-Juana.

Et alors le Baré de lui demander, après l'avoir regardé avec une certaine curiosité:

“Hé! l'ami… dites-moi… est-ce que je ne vous ai pas déjà vu quelque part?…”

Il y eut un léger froncement des sourcils de Jorrès, qui se hâta de répondre:

“Pas ici… toujours, l'Indien, car je ne suis jamais venu à votre rancho.

— C'est étonnant… Peu d'étrangers passent à Carida, et l'on n'oublie guère leur figure, quand ils l'ont montrée… ne fût-ce qu'une seule fois…

— C’est peut-être à San-Fernando que vous m’aurez rencontré? répliqua l’Espagnol.

— Depuis combien de temps y étiez-vous?…

— Depuis… trois semaines.

— Non, ce n’est pas là… car il y a plus de deux ans que je ne suis allé à San-Fernando.

— Alors vous vous trompez, l’Indien… Vous ne m’avez jamais vu, déclara l’Espagnol d’un ton brusque, et j’en suis à mon premier voyage sur le haut Orénoque…

— Je veux vous croire, répondit le Baré, et pourtant…”

La conversation prit fin, et si Jacques Helloch entendit ce bout de dialogue, du moins ne s’en préoccupa-t-il pas autrement. En effet, pourquoi Jorrès aurait-il tenu à cacher qu’il fût déjà venu à Carida, si cela était?

D’ailleurs, Valdez n’avait qu’à se louer de cet homme, qui ne reculait point devant la besogne, quelque fatigante qu’elle dût être, étant vigoureux et adroit. Seulement, on pouvait observer, — non pour lui en faire un reproche, — qu’il vivait à l’écart des autres, causant peu, écoutant plutôt ce qui se disait aussi bien entre les passagers qu’entre les équipages.

Cependant, à la suite de cet échange de paroles entre le Baré et Jorrès, il vint à la pensée de Jacques Helloch de demander à ce dernier pour quelle raison il se rendait à Santa-Juana.

Jean, vivement intéressé à tout ce qui concernait cette mission, attendit non sans impatience ce que l’Espagnol allait répondre.

Ce fut très simplement, sans témoigner l'ombre d'embarras, que celui-ci dit:

“J'étais d'Église dans mon enfance, novice au couvent de la Merced, à Cadix… Puis, l'envie me prit de voyager… J'ai servi comme matelot sur les navires de l'État pendant quelques années… Mais ce service m'a fatigué, et, ma première vocation reprenant le dessus, j'ai songé à entrer dans les missions… Or, je me trouvais à Caracas, sur un navire de commerce, il y a six mois, lorsque j'ai entendu parler de la Mission de Santa-Juana, fondée depuis quelques années par le Père Esperante… La pensée m'est alors venue de l'y rejoindre, ne doutant pas que je serais bien accueilli dans cet établissement qui prospère… J'ai quitté Caracas, et, en me louant comme batelier, tantôt à bord d'une falca, tantôt à bord d'une autre, j'ai pu gagner San-Fernando… J'attendais là une occasion de remonter le haut Orénoque, et mes ressources, c'est-à-dire ce que j'avais économisé durant le voyage, commençaient à s'épuiser, lorsque vos pirogues ont relâché à la bourgade… Le bruit s'est répandu que le fils du colonel de Kermor, dans l'espoir de retrouver son père, se préparait à partir pour Santa-Juana… Ayant appris que le patron Valdez recrutait son équipage, je lui ai demandé de me prendre, et me voici naviguant sur la Gallinetta… Je suis donc fondé à dire que cet Indien n'a jamais pu me voir à Carida, puisque j'y suis arrivé ce soir pour la première fois.”

Jacques Helloch et Jean furent frappés du ton de vérité avec lequel parlait l'Espagnol. Cela ne pouvait les surprendre, étant donné, d'après son propre récit, que cet homme avait reçu, dès sa jeunesse, une certaine instruction. Ils lui proposèrent alors d'engager un Indien pour la manœuvre de la Gallinetta et de le conserver comme passager à bord de l'une des pirogues.

Jorrès remercia les deux Français. Habitué maintenant à ce métier de batelier, après l'avoir fait jusqu'au rancho de Carida, il le continuerait jusqu'aux sources du fleuve.

“Et, ajouta-t-il, si je ne trouve pas à entrer dans le personnel de la Mission, je vous demanderai, messieurs, de me ramener à San-Fernando, en me prenant à votre service, et même en Europe, lorsque vous y retournerez.”

L'Espagnol parlait d'une voix tranquille, assez dure cependant, bien qu'il s'efforçât de l'adoucir. Mais cela allait avec sa physionomie rude, son air déterminé, sa tête forte à la chevelure noire, sa figure colorée, sa bouche dont les lèvres minces se relevaient sur des dents très blanches.

Il y avait aussi une particularité, dont personne ne s'était aperçu jusqu'alors, laquelle, à dater de ce jour, fut maintes fois observée par Jacques Helloch: c'était ce regard singulier que Jorrès jetait de temps à autre sur le jeune garçon. Avait-il donc découvert le secret de Jeanne de Kermor que ne soupçonnaient ni Valdez, ni Parchal, ni aucun des hommes des deux falcas?

Cela rendit Jacques Helloch assez inquiet, et l'Espagnol méritait d'être surveillé, bien que la jeune fille ni le sergent Martial n'eussent conçu le moindre soupçon. Si ceux de Jacques Helloch se changeaient en certitudes, il serait toujours temps d'agir radicalement, et de se débarrasser de Jorrès en le débarquant dans quelque village, — à la Esmeralda, par exemple, lorsque les pirogues y relâcheraient. On n'aurait même aucune raison à lui donner à cet égard. Valdez réglerait son compte, et il se transporterait comme il l'entendrait à la Mission de Santa-Juana.

Toutefois, à propos de cette Mission, Jean fut conduit à interroger l'Espagnol sur ce qu'il en pouvait savoir, et il lui demanda s'il connaissait le Père Esperante, près duquel il désirait se fixer.

“Oui, monsieur de Kermor, répondit Jorrès, après une légère hésitation.

— Vous l’avez vu?

— À Caracas.

— À quelle époque?…

— En 1879, alors que je me trouvais à bord d’un navire de commerce.

— Était-ce la première fois que le Père Esperante venait à Caracas?…

— Oui… la première fois… et c’est de là qu’il partit pour aller fonder la Mission de Santa-Juana.

— Et quel homme est-ce… ajouta Jacques Helloch, ou plutôt quel homme était-ce à cette époque?…

— Un homme d’une cinquantaine d’années, de haute taille, de grande vigueur, portant toute sa barbe, déjà grise, et qui doit être blanche à présent. On voyait que c’était une nature résolue, énergique, comme le sont ces missionnaires, qui n’hésitent pas à risquer leur vie pour convertir les Indiens…

— Une noble tâche… dit Jean.

— La plus belle que je connaisse!” répliqua l’Espagnol.

La conversation s’arrêta sur cette réponse. L’heure était venue d’aller rendre visite au rancho du Baré. Le sergent Martial et Jean, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne, débarquèrent sur la berge. Puis, à travers les champs de maïs et de manioc, ils se dirigèrent vers l'habitation où demeurait l'Indien avec sa femme.

Cette case était plus soigneusement construite que ne le sont d'ordinaire les paillotes des Indiens de cette région. Elle contenait divers meubles, des hamacs, des ustensiles de culture et de cuisine, une table, plusieurs paniers servant d'armoires, et une demi-douzaine d'escabeaux.

Ce fut le Baré qui en fit les honneurs, car sa femme ne comprenait pas l'espagnol dont il se servait couramment. Cette femme n'était qu'une Indienne, demeurée à demi sauvage, et certainement inférieure à son mari.

Celui-ci, très fier de son domaine, causa longtemps de son exploitation, de son avenir, manifestant le regret que ses hôtes ne pussent visiter le rancho dans toute son étendue. Ce ne serait d'ailleurs que partie remise, et à leur retour les pirogues y séjourneraient plus longtemps.

Des galettes de manioc, des ananas de première qualité, du tafia que le Baré tirait lui- même du sucre de ses cannes, des cigarettes de ce tabac qui pousse sans culture, simples feuilles roulées dans une mince écorce de tabari, tout cela fut offert de bon cœur et accepté de même.

Seul, Jean refusa les cigarettes, malgré l'insistance de l'Indien, et il ne consentit qu'à mouiller ses lèvres de quelques gouttes de tafia. Sage précaution, car cette liqueur brûlait comme du feu. Si Jacques Helloch et le sergent Martial ne sourcillèrent pas, Germain Paterne, lui, ne put retenir une grimace, dont les singes de l'Orénoque eussent été jaloux, — ce qui parut procurer une véritable satisfaction à l'Indien.

Les visiteurs se retirèrent vers dix heures, et le Baré, suivi de quelques péons, les accompagna jusqu'aux falcas, dont les équipages dormaient d'un sommeil profond.

Au moment où ils allaient se quitter, l’Indien ne put s’empêcher de dire, par allusion à Jorrès:

“Je suis pourtant sûr d’avoir vu cet Espagnol aux environs du rancho…

— Pourquoi s’en cacherait-il?… demanda Jean.

— Il n’y a là qu’une ressemblance, mon brave Indien”, se contenta de répliquer Jacques Helloch.

CHAPITRE III

III

Une halte de deux jours à Danaco

Déjà, depuis quarante-huit heures, se dessinait à l’horizon de l’est la cime d’une montagne que les deux patrons Valdez et Parchal disaient être le cerro Yapacana. Ils ajoutaient même que cette montagne était hantée, que les esprits, chaque année, en février et mars, allument sur sa pointe un grand feu dont le reflet s’étend sur toute la contrée en s’élevant jusqu’au ciel.

Ce cerro, les pirogues eurent atteint, dans la soirée du 11 octobre, l’endroit d’où il se montre sous ses véritables dimensions, — long de quatre kilomètres, large d’un kilomètre et demi, haut d’environ douze cents mètres.

Pendant les trois jours qui avaient suivi leur départ de Carida, la navigation des falcas, servie par une brise constante, s’était accomplie rapidement et sans obstacles. On avait dépassé l’île Luna, remonté le fleuve entre des rives bordées d’épaisses palmeraies, n’ayant eu d’autre difficulté que de franchir un petit raudal qu’on appelle la “Traversée du Diable”. Seulement, le diable ne s’était pas mis en travers.

Le cerro de Yapacana occupe la plaine qui se développe sur la droite de l’Orénoque. Ainsi que l’indique M. Chaffanjon, il se présente sous la forme d’un énorme sarcophage.

“Et dès lors, fit observer Germain Paterne, pourquoi ne recèlerait-il pas des dévas, des myagres, des trolls, des cucufas et autres esprits d’origine mythologique?”

En face du cerro, la rive gauche, au-delà de l’île Mavilla, était occupée par l’établissement du commissaire vénézuélien. C’était un métis, nommé Manuel Assomption. Cet homme vivait là avec sa femme, également une métisse, et plusieurs enfants, — au total, une intéressante famille.

Lorsque les falcas s’arrêtèrent devant Danaco, il faisait déjà nuit, la navigation ayant été retardée par une avarie survenue à la Gallinetta. Malgré toute son habileté, Valdez n’avait pu empêcher la pirogue, prise dans un remous, de heurter un angle de roche. À la suite de ce choc, une voie d’eau s’était déclarée, peu importante, il est vrai, puisqu’elle put être aveuglée avec quelques poignées d’herbes sèches. Mais, en vue de la continuation du voyage, il fallait que cette avarie fût solidement réparée, et il serait aisé de le faire à Danaco.

Les passagers restèrent toute la nuit au pied de la berge, sur la côté méridional de l’île Mavilla, sans que leur arrivée eût été signalée au commissaire.

Le lendemain, au jour levant, les pirogues traversèrent le petit bras du fleuve, et vinrent accoster une sorte d’appontement, destiné aux chargements et déchargements des embarcations.

Danaco était alors un village, non un simple rancho, tel que le voyageur français l’a noté dans son récit.

En effet, grâce à l’intelligente activité de Manuel Assomption, cet établissement avait grandi en quelques années, et sa prospérité tendait toujours à s’accroître. Une heureuse idée qu’avait eue ce métis de quitter son sitio de Guachapana, plus rapproché de San-Fernando, où l’atteignaient trop aisément les tracassantes réquisitions du gouverneur. Ici, à Danaco, il était à peu près libre d'exercer son commerce, et cette liberté produisait d'excellents résultats.

Dès le point du jour, Manuel avait eu connaissance de l'arrivée des pirogues. Aussi, accompagné de quelques-uns de ses péons, accourut-il afin de recevoir les voyageurs.

Ceux-ci descendirent immédiatement sur la berge. Là, tout d'abord, Jean crut devoir présenter une des lettres qui lui avait remises le gouverneur de San-Fernando pour les commissaires du haut Orénoque.

Manuel Assomption prit la lettre, la lut, et, avec une certaine fierté, dit:

“Je n'avais pas besoin de cette lettre pour faire bon accueil à des voyageurs qui venaient relâcher à Danaco. Les étrangers, et surtout des Français, sont toujours assurés d'être bien reçus dans nos villages du Venezuela.

— Nous vous remercions, monsieur Manuel, répondit Jacques Helloch. Mais une réparation que nécessite l'avarie de l'une de nos falcas, nous obligera peut-être à devenir vos hôtes pendant quarante-huit heures…

— Pendant huit jours, si vous le voulez, monsieur… Danaco est à jamais ouvert aux compatriotes du Français Truchon, auquel les planteurs du haut Orénoque doivent de la reconnaissance.

— Nous savions que nous serions parfaitement accueillis, monsieur Manuel… affirma Jean.

— Et comment le saviez-vous, mon jeune ami?…

— Parce que cette hospitalité que vous nous offrez, vous l’avez offerte, il y a cinq ans, à l’un de nos compatriotes qui a remonté l’Orénoque jusqu’à ses sources…

— M. Chaffanjon! s’écria le commissaire. Oui! un audacieux explorateur, et dont j’ai conservé bon souvenir, ainsi que de son compagnon, M. Moussot…

— Et qui en a conservé un non moins bon de vous, monsieur Manuel, ajouta Jean, comme des services que vous lui avez rendus, — ce qu’il a consigné dans le récit de son voyage.

— Vous avez ce récit?… demanda Manuel avec un vif sentiment de curiosité.

— Je l’ai, répondit Jean, et, si vous le désirez, je vous traduirai le passage qui vous concerne…

— Cela me fera plaisir”, répondit le commissaire, en tendant la main aux passagers des falcas.

Et, dans ce récit, non seulement il était parlé en termes excellents de M. Manuel Assomption et de son établissement de Danaco, mais aussi de ce M. Truchon, qui valait aux Français d’être en grand honneur sur le cours supérieur du fleuve.

M. Truchon vint, il y a quelque quarante ans, fonder un établissement en ce territoire du haut Orénoque. Or, avant lui, les Indiens n’entendaient rien à l’exploitation du caoutchouc, et c’est grâce aux procédés qu’il introduisit que cette exploitation si fructueuse a fait la fortune de ces lointaines régions. De là cette légitime popularité du nom français dans toutes les provinces dont cette culture forme la principale industrie.

Manuel Assomption comptait soixante ans d’âge. Il avait l’apparence d’un homme vigoureux encore, le teint basané, la physionomie intelligente, le regard plein d’ardeur, sachant se faire obéir, car il savait commander, mais bon, attentif, prévenant pour les Indiens engagés à son rancho.

C’étaient des Mariquitares, l’une des meilleures races autochtones du Venezuela, et le village, qui avait été fondé autour du rancho, possédait une population uniquement mariquitare.

Lorsque les passagers eurent accepté l’hospitalité offerte par le commissaire, des ordres furent donnés pour que l’on procédât immédiatement à la réparation des avaries de la Gallinetta. Il allait être nécessaire d’en débarquer le matériel, de la tirer sur la grève, de la retourner pour calfater ses fonds. Avec les ouvriers que le commissaire proposait de mettre à la disposition de Valdez, ce travail serait certainement achevé en deux jours.

Il était alors sept heures du matin. Temps couvert, nuages très élevés, sans menace de pluie, température supportable, ne dépassant pas vingt-sept degrés centigrades.

On partit dans la direction du village, enfoui sous l’épais dôme des arbres, et qu’un demi-kilomètre séparait de la rive gauche.

Manuel Assomption, Jacques Helloch et Jean précédaient, en suivant un large sentier, bien tracé, bien entretenu, le sergent Martial et Germain Paterne.

Tout en marchant, le commissaire faisait admirer aux voyageurs les riches produits du rancho, dont les cultures s’étendaient presque jusqu’au fleuve, ses plants de manguiers, citronniers, bananiers, cacaoyers, palmiers de l’espèce macanille, — auxquels le sergent Martial trouvait que ce nom convenait parfaitement. Au-delà se développaient de vastes bananeraies en plein rapport, des champs de maïs, de manioc, de canne à sucre, de tabac. Quant aux caoutchoucs, ces euphorbiacées formaient la principale récolte du domaine, et aussi les tonkas, arbrisseaux qui donnent cette fève appelée sarrapia.

Et M. Manuel de répéter:

“Si votre compatriote vient nous revoir, quel changement il trouvera au rancho de Danaco, sans parler du village, qui est déjà l’un des plus importants du territoire…

— Plus important que la Esmeralda?… demanda Jacques Helloch, en citant le nom de l’un des villages de l’amont.

— Assurément, car cette petite bourgade est abandonnée désormais, répondit le commissaire, tandis que Danaco est en pleine prospérité. Vous en jugerez, lorsque vous passerez devant la Esmeralda. D’ailleurs, les Mariquitares sont des Indiens travailleurs et industrieux, et vous pouvez observer que leurs cases sont autrement confortables que celles des Mapoyos ou des Piaroas du moyen Orénoque.

— Cependant, reprit Jacques Helloch, nous avons fait connaissance à la Urbana d’un M. Marchal…

— Je sais… je sais! répondit Manuel Assomption. C’est le propriétaire du hato de la Tigra… Un homme intelligent… J’en ai entendu dire du bien…

Mais, en somme, son hato ne deviendra jamais bourgade, et bourgade sera un jour notre village de Danaco dans lequel nous arrivons en ce moment.”

Peut-être y avait-il un peu de jalousie du commissaire envers M. Marchal.

“Et où la jalousie va-t-elle se nicher?…” put se demander fort à propos Jacques Helloch.

Du reste, Manuel Assomption n’avait dit que la vérité relativement au village dont il parlait avec un juste orgueil. À cette époque, Danaco se composait d’une cinquantaine d’habitations, auxquelles le nom de paillotes n’eût point convenu.

Ces cases reposent sur une sorte de soubassement cylindro-conique, que domine un haut toit en feuilles de palmier, terminé par une pointe agrémentée de quelques pendeloques à sa base. Le soubassement est entrelacé de branches solidement reliées entre elles, et cimentées d’un gâchis de terre, dont les fendillements lui donnent l’apparence d’une maçonnerie de brique.

Deux portes, l’une à l’opposé de l’autre, permettent de s’introduire à l’intérieur; au lieu de la chambre unique, il forme deux chambres distinctes à l’usage des membres de la même famille, et séparées par la salle commune. Notable progrès sur l’aménagement des paillotes indiennes, qui empêche toute promiscuité. Puis, progrès non moins égal pour l’ameublement qui, tout rudimentaire qu’il soit, bahuts, table, escabeaux, paniers, hamacs, etc. témoigne d’un besoin de confort.

En traversant le village, les voyageurs purent observer la population masculine et féminine de Danaco, car les femmes et les enfants ne s’enfuirent point à leur approche.

Les hommes, d’un type assez beau, robustes, de saine constitution, étaient peut-être moins “couleur locale” qu’au temps où leur costume ne comportait que le guayuco serré à la ceinture. De même pour les femmes, qui se contentaient autrefois d’un simple tablier dont l’étoffe, semée de dessins en verroteries, se retenait au-dessus des hanches par une ceinture de perles. Actuellement, leur costume, se rapprochant de celui des métis ou des Indiens civilisés, ne choquait plus les règles de la décence. En somme, on retrouvait l’équivalent du poncho mexicain chez les chefs, et quant aux femmes, elles n’auraient pas été de leur sexe si elles n’eussent porté nombre de bracelets aux bras et aux jambes.

Après avoir fait une centaine de pas dans le village, le commissaire dirigea ses hôtes vers la gauche. À deux minutes de là, ils s’arrêtaient devant la principale habitation de Danaco.

Que l’on se figure une case double ou plutôt deux cases accouplées, communiquant entre elles, très élevées sur leur soubassement, les murs percés de fenêtres et de portes. Elles étaient entourées d’une haie en clayonnage, protégée par des palissades, avec cour d’entrée devant la façade. De magnifiques arbres les ombrageaient latéralement, et, de chaque côté, plusieurs hangars où l’on déposait les instruments de culture, où l’on enfermait les bestiaux, constituaient les annexes de cette importante exploitation.

La réception se fit dans la première pièce de l’une des cases, où se tenait la femme de Manuel Assomption, métisse d’Indien du Brésil et d’une négresse, accompagnée de ses deux fils, vigoureux gaillards de vingt-cinq et trente ans, d’un teint moins foncé que leurs père et mère.

Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons reçurent un accueil très cordial. Comme toute cette famille comprenait et parlait l’espagnol, la conversation put s’établir sans difficultés.

“Et d’abord, puisque la Gallinetta est en réparation pour quarante-huit heures, le sergent et son neveu demeureront ici, dit M. Manuel en s’adressant à sa femme. Tu leur prépareras une chambre ou deux à leur convenance.

— Deux… si vous le voulez bien… répondit le sergent Martial.

— Deux, soit, reprit le commissaire, et si M. Helloch et son ami veulent coucher au rancho…

— Nous vous remercions, monsieur Manuel, répondit Germain Paterne. Notre pirogue, la Moriche, est en bon état, et, désireux de ne point vous occasionner tant de peine, nous retournerons ce soir à bord…

— Comme il vous plaira, répliqua le commissaire. Vous ne nous gêneriez pas, mais nous ne voulons vous gêner en rien.”

Puis, à ses fils:

“Il faudra envoyer quelques-uns de nos meilleurs péons afin d’aider les équipages des falcas…

— Et nous y travaillerons avec eux”, répondit le plus âgé des garçons.

Il prononça ces mots en s’inclinant respectueusement devant son père et sa mère, — marques de respect qui sont habituelles chez les familles du Venezuela.

Après le déjeuner, très abondant en gibier, en fruits et en légumes, M. Manuel interrogea ses hôtes sur le but de leur voyage. Jusqu’alors, le haut

Orénoque n’était guère fréquenté que par les rares marchands qui se rendaient au Cassiquiare, en amont de Danaco. Au-delà, la navigation ne comportait plus aucun commerce, et, seuls, des explorateurs pouvaient avoir la pensée de se rendre aux sources du fleuve.

Le commissaire fut donc assez surpris, lorsque Jean eut énoncé les raisons qui lui avaient fait entreprendre cette campagne à laquelle s’étaient associés ses deux compatriotes.

“Ainsi vous êtes à la recherche de votre père?… dit-il, avec une émotion que partageaient ses fils et sa femme.

— Oui, monsieur Manuel, et nous espérons retrouver ses traces à Santa-Juana.

— Vous n’avez pas entendu parler du colonel de Kermor?… demanda Jacques Helloch à M. Manuel.

— Jamais ce nom n’a été prononcé devant moi.

— Et pourtant, dit Germain Paterne, vous étiez déjà établi à Danaco, il y a douze ans…

— Non… nous occupions encore le sitio de Guachapana, mais il n’est pas à notre connaissance que l’arrivée du colonel de Kermor ait été signalée en cet endroit.

— Cependant, insista le sergent Martial, qui comprenait assez pour prendre part à la conversation, entre San-Fernando et Santa-Juana, il n’y a pas d’autre route à suivre que celle de l’Orénoque…

— C’est la plus facile et la plus directe, répondit M. Manuel, et un voyageur y est moins exposé que s’il s’engageait à travers les territoires de l’intérieur parcourus par les Indiens. Si le colonel de Kermor s’est dirigé vers les sources du fleuve, il a dû le remonter comme vous le faites.”

En parlant de la sorte, Manuel Assomption ne se montrait certainement pas trop affirmatif. Il était donc surprenant que le colonel de Kermor, lorsqu’il gagnait Santa-Juana, n’eût laissé aucun vestige de cette navigation sur le cours de l’Orénoque à partir de San-Fernando.

“Monsieur Manuel, demanda alors Jacques

Helloch, avez-vous visité la Mission?…

— Non, et je n’ai pas été, dans l’est, au-delà de l’embouchure du Cassiquiare.

— Vous a-t-on quelquefois parlé de Santa-Juana?…

— Oui… comme d’un établissement prospère, grâce au dévouement de son chef.

— Vous ne connaissez pas le Père Esperante?…

— Si… je l’ai vu une fois… voilà trois ans environ… Il avait descendu le fleuve pour les affaires de Mission, et il s’est arrêté un jour à Danaco.

— Et quel homme est-ce, ce missionnaire?…” demanda le sergent Martial.

Le commissaire fit du Père Esperante un portrait qui s’accordait avec ce qu’en avait dit l’Espagnol Jorrès. Il n’était certainement pas douteux que celui-ci eût rencontré le missionnaire à Caracas, ainsi qu'il l'avait affirmé.

“Et depuis son passage à Danaco, reprit Jean, vous n'avez plus eu de rapport avec le Père

Esperante?…

— Aucun rapport, répondit M. Manuel. Toutefois, à plusieurs reprises, j'ai su par les Indiens qui venaient de l'est que Santa-Juana prenait chaque année un nouvel accroissement. C'est une belle œuvre que celle de ce missionnaire, et qui honore l'humanité…

— Oui, monsieur le commissaire, déclara Jacques Helloch, et elle honore aussi le pays qui produit de tels hommes!… Je suis certain que nous recevrons un bon accueil du Père Esperante…

— N'en doutez pas, répliqua M. Manuel, et il vous traitera comme si vous étiez ses compatriotes. C'est l'accueil qu'il réservait à M. Chaffanjon, si celui-ci eût été jusqu'à Santa-Juana…

— Et, ajouta Jean, puisse-t-il nous mettre sur les traces de mon père!”

L'après-midi, les hôtes du commissaire durent visiter le rancho, ses champs bien cultivés, ses plantations bien entretenues, ses bois où les fils

Manuel faisaient une incessante guerre aux singes déprédateurs, ses prairies où paissaient les troupeaux.

On était à l'époque de la récolte du caoutchouc, — récolte prématurée cette année. D'habitude, elle ne commence qu'en novembre pour se continuer jusqu’à la fin de mars.

Aussi, M. Manuel de dire:

“Si cela peut vous intéresser, messieurs, je vous montrerai demain comment on procède à cette récolte.

— Nous acceptons très volontiers, répondit Germain Paterne, et j’en ferai mon profit…

— À la condition de se lever de grand matin, observa le commissaire. Mes gomeros se mettent au travail dès le point du jour…

— Nous ne les ferons pas attendre, soyez-en sûr, répondit Germain Paterne. Ça te va-t-il, Jacques?…

— Je serai prêt à l’heure, promit Jacques Helloch. — Et vous, mon cher Jean?…

— Je ne manquerai pas cette occasion, répondit

Jean, et si mon oncle est encore endormi…

— Tu me réveilleras, mon neveu, tu me réveilleras, j’y compte bien! répliqua le sergent Martial. Puisque nous sommes venus dans le pays du caoutchouc, c’est bien le moins que nous sachions comment on fait…

— La gomme élastique, sergent, la gomme élastique!” s’écria Germain Paterne.

Et l’on regagna l’habitation, après une promenade qui avait duré toute l’après-midi.

Le souper réunit les hôtes du commissaire à la même table. La conversation porta principalement sur le voyage, sur les incidents survenus depuis le départ de Caïcara, l'invasion des tortues, le coup de chubasco qui avait compromis les pirogues et la vie de leurs passagers.

“En effet, affirma M. Manuel, ces chubascos sont terribles, et le haut Orénoque n'en est point exempt. Quant aux invasions de tortues, nous n'avons pas à les craindre sur nos territoires, qui n'offrent pas de plages propices à la ponte, et ces animaux ne s'y rencontrent guère qu'isolément…

— N'en disons pas de mal! ajouta Germain Paterne. Un sancocho de tortues cuit à point, c'est excellent. Rien qu'avec ces bêtes-là et les rôtis de singe, — qui le croirait? — on est assuré de faire bonne chère en remontant votre fleuve!

— Cela est exact, dit le commissaire. Mais, pour revenir aux chubascos, défiez-vous-en, messieurs. Ils sont aussi soudains, aussi violents en amont de San-Fernando qu'en aval, et il ne faut pas donner à M. Helloch l'occasion de vous sauver une seconde fois, monsieur Jean…

— C'est bon… c'est bon!… répliqua le sergent Martial, qui n'aimait guère ce sujet de conversation. On veillera aux chubascos… on y veillera, monsieur le commissaire!”

Alors, Germain Paterne de dire:

“Et nos compagnons, dont nous ne parlons pas à M. Manuel… Est-ce que nous les avons déjà oubliés?…

— C'est juste, ajouta Jean, cet excellent M. Miguel… et M. Felipe… et M. Varinas…

— Quels sont ces messieurs dont vous citez les noms?… s’enquit le commissaire.

— Trois Vénézuéliens, avec lesquels nous avons fait le voyage de Ciudad-Bolivar à San-Fernando.

— Des voyageurs?… demanda M. Manuel.

— Et aussi des savants, déclara Germain Paterne.

— Et que savent-ils, ces savants?…

— Vous feriez mieux de demander ce qu’ils ne savent pas, fit observer Jacques Helloch.

— Et que ne savent-ils pas?…

— Ils ne savent pas si le fleuve qui arrose votre rancho est l’Orénoque…

— Comment! s’écria M. Manuel, ils auraient l’audace de contester…

— L’un, M. Felipe, soutient que le véritable Orénoque est son affluent l’Atabapo, l’autre, M. Varinas, que c’est son affluent le Guaviare…

— Voilà de la belle impudence! s’écria le commissaire. À les entendre… l’Orénoque ne serait pas l’Orénoque!”

Et il était vraiment furieux, ce digne M. Manuel Assomption, et sa femme, ses deux fils, partageaient sa fureur. Leur amour-propre était réellement touché dans ce qui leur tenait le plus au cœur, leur Orénoque, c’est-à-dire la “Grande Eau”, en dialecte tamanaque, “le Roi des Fleuves”!

Il fallut alors expliquer ce que M. Miguel et ses deux collègues étaient venus faire à San-Fernando, à quelles investigations, suivies sans doute de discussions orageuses, ils devaient se livrer en ce moment.

“Et… ce monsieur Miguel… que prétend-il?… demanda le commissaire.

— Monsieur Miguel, lui, affirme que l’Orénoque est bien le fleuve que nous avons suivi de San-Fernando à Danaco, répondit Germain Paterne.

— Et qui sort du massif de la Parima! affirma d’une voix éclatante le commissaire. Aussi, que M. Miguel vienne nous voir, et il sera reçu avec cordialité!… Mais que les deux autres ne s’avisent pas de relâcher au rancho, car nous les jetterions dans le fleuve, et ils en boiraient assez pour s’assurer que son eau est bien celle de l’Orénoque!”

Rien de plus plaisant que M. Manuel parlant avec cette animation et proférant de si terribles menaces. Mais, toute exagération à part, le propriétaire du rancho tenait pour son fleuve, et il l’eût défendu jusqu’à sa dernière goutte.

Vers dix heures du soir, Jacques Helloch et son compagnon prirent congé de la famille Assomption, dirent adieu au sergent Martial et à Jean, puis regagnèrent leur pirogue.

Fut-ce involontairement, ou par suite d’une sorte de pressentiment, la pensée de Jacques Helloch se porta sur Jorrès. Il n’y avait plus à douter que cet Espagnol eût connu le Père Esperante, qu’il l’eût rencontré à Caracas ou ailleurs, puisqu’il l’avait dépeint tel que M. Manuel venait de le faire. De ce chef, on ne pouvait accuser Jorrès d’avoir inventé une prétendue rencontre avec le missionnaire dans le but de s’imposer aux passagers des pirogues qui se rendaient à Santa-Juana.

Toutefois, d’autre part, restait cette affirmation de l’Indien Baré, prétendant que Jorrès avait dû déjà remonter l’Orénoque, au moins jusqu’au rancho de Carida. Malgré les dénégations de l’Espagnol, l’Indien avait maintenu son dire. Les étrangers ne sont pas tellement nombreux à parcourir ces territoires du Venezuela méridional que l’on puisse commettre une erreur de personne. À propos d’un indigène, cette erreur aurait été admissible. L’était-elle, alors qu’il s’agissait de cet Espagnol dont la figure était si reconnaissable?

Or, si Jorrès était venu à Carida, et, comme conséquence, dans les villages, ou les sitios situés en dessus et en dessous, pourquoi le niait-il?… Quelles raisons avait-il de s’en cacher?… En quoi cela eût-il pu lui nuire dans l’esprit de ceux qu’il accompagnait à la Mission de Santa-Juana?…

Après tout, peut-être le Baré se trompait-il. Entre quelqu’un qui dit: “Je vous ai vu ici”, et quelqu’un qui dit: “Vous ne pouvez m’avoir vu ici, puisque je n’y suis jamais venu”, s’il y a erreur, elle ne peut évidemment pas venir du second…

Et cependant, cet incident ne laissait pas de préoccuper Jacques Helloch, non qu’il vît là un sujet d’appréhension pour lui-même; mais tout ce qui intéressait le voyage de la fille du colonel de Kermor, tout ce qui pouvait en retarder ou en compromettre le succès, l’obsédait, l’inquiétait, le troublait plus qu’il ne voulait en convenir.

Cette nuit-là, le sommeil ne le prit que très tard, et, le lendemain, il fallut que Germain Paterne l’en tirât par une tape amicale, au moment où le soleil commençait à déborder l’horizon.

CHAPITRE IV

IV

Derniers conseils de M. Manuel Assomption

Est-il utile d’insister sur les sentiments de Jacques Helloch depuis le jour où Jean avait fait place à Jeanne, depuis le jour où la fille du colonel de Kermor, après avoir été sauvée des eaux de l’Orénoque, ne pouvait plus se cacher sous le masque de ce prétendu neveu du sergent Martial?

Que la nature de ces sentiments n’eût point échappé à Jeanne, qui, âgée de vingt-deux ans, avait pu, sous l’habit d’un jeune garçon, n’en paraître avoir que dix-sept, cela est très naturellement explicable.

Et, en somme, Germain Paterne, qui “n’entendait rien à ces choses-là!” à en croire son compagnon, avait très bien remarqué les changements qui se produisaient par une inévitable gradation dans le cœur de Jacques Helloch. Et s’il fût venu lui dire: “Jacques, tu aimes Mlle Jeanne de Kermor”, est-il certain que Jacques lui aurait encore répondu: “Mon pauvre ami, tu n’entends rien à ces choses-là?”

Et Germain Paterne n’attendait que l’occasion de lui exprimer son opinion à ce sujet, — ne fût-ce que pour réhabiliter en sa propre personne les naturalistes, botanistes et autres savants en istes, qui ne sont point si étrangers aux sentiments les plus délicats de l’âme qu’on veut bien le prétendre en ce bas monde!

Quant au sergent Martial, lorsqu’il songeait à ces divers incidents, son secret découvert, son plan à vau-l’eau, tant de précautions prises que les conséquences de ce maudit chubasco avaient détruites, sa situation d’oncle de Jean de Kermor irrévocablement perdue, puisque ce neveu était une nièce dont il n’était pas même l’oncle, à quelles réflexions se laissait-il aller?…

Au fond, il était furieux, — furieux contre lui, furieux contre tous. Jean n’aurait pas dû tomber dans le fleuve pendant la bourrasque… Lui-même aurait dû s’y jeter afin de ne pas permettre à un autre de l’en tirer… Ce Jacques Helloch n’avait pas besoin de lui porter secours… Est-ce que cela le regardait?… Et pourtant, il avait bien fait, parce que sans lui… il… non… elle… eût péri certainement… Il est vrai, on pouvait espérer que cela n’irait pas plus loin… Le secret avait été soigneusement gardé… En observant l’attitude réservée du sauveur de Jeanne, le sergent Martial ne voyait rien de suspect… et son colonel, lorsqu’ils se retrouveraient tous les deux face à face, n’aurait aucun reproche à lui adresser…

Pauvre sergent Martial!

De très grand matin, il fut réveillé par Jean que M. Manuel et ses fils attendaient déjà devant l’habitation.

Presque aussitôt arrivèrent leurs compatriotes, qui avaient débarqué un quart d’heure avant.

On se souhaita le bonjour. Jacques Helloch annonça que les réparations de la Gallinetta avançaient, et la falca serait prête à naviguer dès le lendemain.

On partit aussitôt pour les champs où étaient déjà rassemblés les gomeros.

En réalité, ces champs sont plutôt des forêts, où l’on a marqué préalablement les arbres, ainsi que cela se fait à l’époque des coupes. Il ne s’agissait pas de les couper, d’ailleurs, mais d’en inciser l’écorce, de les “traire”, en un mot, comme on dit de l’arbre à lait dans les régions australiennes.

M. Manuel, suivi de ses hôtes, pénétra sous ces étranges massifs de caoutchoucs, au moment où les gomeros commençaient leur besogne.

Le plus curieux des visiteurs, celui qui s’intéressait surtout à cette opération, en sa qualité de botaniste, c’était — qui pourrait en être surpris? — c’était Germain Paterne. Il voulut observer de très près ce travail, et le commissaire s’empressa de répondre à toutes ses questions.

L’opération était des plus simples.

En premier lieu, chaque gomero, ayant une centaine d’arbres sur l’”estrade” qui lui était réservée, alla fendre leur écorce avec une petite hachette très affilée.

“Est-ce que le nombre des incisions est limité?… demanda Germain Paterne.

— Limité entre quatre et douze, selon la grosseur de l’arbre, répondit M. Manuel, et il convient qu’elles soient faites avec une extrême précision, de manière à ne pas entamer l’écorce plus profondément qu’il ne faut.

— Alors, répliqua Germain Paterne, ce n’est pas une amputation, ce n’est qu’une saignée.”

Dès que chaque incision eut été achevée, la sève coula, le long de l’arbre, dans un petit pot, placé de façon à la recueillir jusqu’à la dernière goutte.

“Et quelle est la durée de l’écoulement?… demanda Germain Paterne.

— De six à sept heures”, répondit M. Manuel.

Pendant une partie de la matinée, Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons se promenèrent à travers cette plantation, tandis que les gomeros mettaient ces arbres en perce, — expression assez juste dont se servit le sergent Martial. Sept cents arbres furent ainsi soumis à cette opération phlébotomique, qui promettait une abondante récolte de caoutchouc.

On ne revint à l’habitation que pour l’heure du déjeuner, auquel, l’appétit aidant, chacun fit grand honneur. Les deux fils de Manuel avaient organisé une chasse dans la forêt voisine, et le gibier, dont leur mère avait surveillé la cuisson, était excellent. Excellents aussi, les poissons que deux péons avaient pêchés ou fléchés, le matin même, près des berges de l’Orénoque. Excellents les fruits et les légumes du rancho, entre autres les ananas qui, cette année, donnaient à profusion.

Au total, d’avoir assisté au début de la récolte du caoutchouc, d’avoir vu pratiquer les incisions, cela ne pouvait suffire à satisfaire la curiosité de Germain Paterne, et il pria M. Manuel de lui indiquer de quelle manière se continuait l’opération.

“Si vous restiez plusieurs jours à Danaco, répondit le commissaire, vous auriez d’abord à observer ceci: c’est que, pendant les premières heures, après les incisions, la gomme coule avec une certaine lenteur. Aussi se passe-t-il une semaine avant que les arbres aient épuisé leur sève.

— Ainsi, c’est dans huit jours seulement que vous aurez recueilli toute cette gomme…

— Non, monsieur Paterne. Ce soir, chaque gomero rapportera le produit de cette journée, puis il procédera sans tarder au fumage qui est nécessaire pour obtenir la coagulation de la gomme. Après avoir étendu le liquide sur une planchette, on l’expose à la fumée très épaisse de bois vert. Il se forme alors une première couche durcie, à laquelle se superpose une seconde, à mesure que l’on en baigne la planchette. On fabrique de cette façon une sorte de pain de caoutchouc, lequel se trouve dans des conditions à être livré au commerce, et l’opération est terminée.

— Et avant l’arrivée de notre compatriote Truchon, demanda Jacques Helloch, les Indiens, n’est-il pas vrai, n’entendaient rien à cette besogne?…

— Rien, ou presque rien, répondit le commissaire. Ils ne soupçonnaient même pas la valeur de ce produit. Aussi personne ne pouvait-il prévoir l’importance commerciale et industrielle qu’il prendrait dans l’avenir. C’est le Français Truchon qui, après s’être installé à San-Fernando d’abord, à la Esmeralda ensuite, révéla aux Indiens les procédés de cette exploitation, la plus considérable peut-être de cette partie de l’Amérique.

— Alors, vive M. Truchon, et vive le pays qui lui donna le jour!” s’écria ou plutôt chantonna Germain Paterne.

Et l’on but avec enthousiasme d’abord à la santé de M. Truchon, puis à la France.

Dans l’après-midi, après une sieste de quelques heures, le commissaire proposa à ses hôtes de se diriger vers le petit port où l’on travaillait à la réparation de la pirogue. Il voulait s’assurer par lui-même de la manière dont on procédait à ce travail.

Tous redescendirent à travers les champs du rancho vers la rive, écoutant M. Manuel qui parlait de son domaine, avec la légitime fierté d’un propriétaire.

Lorsqu’on arriva au port, la Gallinetta, entièrement réparée, allait être remise à l’eau, près de la Moriche qui se balançait au bout de son amarre.

Valdez et Parchal, aidés de leurs hommes et des péons, avaient mené à bonne fin cette besogne. Le commissaire fut très satisfait, et l’une comme l’autre des deux falcas lui parurent être dans des conditions excellentes pour le reste du voyage.

Il n’y avait plus qu’à traîner la Gallinetta sur la grève, et, une fois en pleine flottaison, à replacer le rouf, à planter la mâture, à embarquer le matériel. Le soir même, Jean et le sergent Martial pourraient s’y réinstaller, et le départ s’effectuerait dès que l’horizon se blanchirait des premières lueurs de l’aube.

En ce moment, le soleil déclinait derrière ces vapeurs empourprées, qui annonçaient la brise de l’ouest, — circonstance favorable dont il convenait de profiter.

Tandis que les mariniers et les péons prenaient les dispositions relatives à la mise à l’eau de la Gallinetta, M. Manuel Assomption, ses fils et les passagers des pirogues, se promenaient le long de la grève.

Au milieu de ces gens qui prêtaient la main à la manœuvre, le commissaire distingua Jorrès, d’un type physique si différent de ses compagnons.

“Quel est cet homme?… demanda-t-il.

— Un des bateliers embarqués sur la Gallinetta, répondit Jacques Helloch.

— Ce n’est pas un Indien…

— Non, il est Espagnol.

— Où l’avez-vous pris?…

— À San-Fernando.

— Et il fait le métier de marinier de l’Orénoque?…

— Pas d’habitude, mais il nous manquait un homme, et cet Espagnol, qui avait l’intention de se rendre à Santa-Juana, s’étant offert, le patron

Valdez a accepté ses services.”

Jorrès n’était pas sans avoir observé qu’on parlait de lui, et, tout en s’occupant à la manœuvre, il prêtait l’oreille à ce qui se disait à son sujet.

Jacques Helloch fit alors au commissaire cette demande qui lui vint naturellement à l’esprit:

“Est-ce que vous connaissez cet homme?…

— Non, répondit M. Manuel. Est-il donc déjà venu sur le haut Orénoque?…

— L’Indien Baré prétend l’avoir rencontré à Carida, bien que Jorrès affirme n’y avoir jamais été.

— Voici la première fois, reprit le commissaire, qu’il se trouve en ma présence, et si je l’ai remarqué, c’est qu’il était impossible de le confondre avec un Indien. — Et vous dites qu’il se rend à Santa-Juana…

— Son désir, paraît-il, serait d’entrer au service de la Mission, ayant déjà fait son noviciat avant de courir le monde, car il a été marin. À l’en croire, il connaît le Père Esperante pour l’avoir vu à Caracas, il y a une douzaine d’années, et cela paraît probable, puisqu’il nous a fait de ce missionnaire un portrait identique à celui que vous en avez fait vous-même.

— Après tout, reprit M. Manuel, peu importe, si cet homme est un batelier habile. Seulement, dans ce pays il faut se défier de ces aventuriers qui viennent on ne sait d’où… et qui vont on ne sait où… peut-être…

— Recommandation dont je tiendrai compte, monsieur Manuel, répondit Jacques Helloch, et je ne cesserai d’avoir cet Espagnol en surveillance.”

Jorrès avait-il entendu ce qui venait d’être dit?… Dans tous les cas, il n’en laissa rien paraître, bien que son œil se fût plusieurs fois allumé d’un regard dont il ne parvenait guère à dissimuler l’inquiète ardeur. Puis, bien qu’il ne fût plus question de lui, lorsque le commissaire et les voyageurs s’approchèrent de la Gallinetta, amarrée près de la Moriche, il continua de prêter l’oreille sans en avoir l’air. La conversation portait, en ce moment, sur la nécessité d’avoir des pirogues en très bon état, lorsqu’il s’agit de refouler le courant, qui est raide dans la partie supérieure du fleuve — et M. Manuel en parlait avec insistance.

“Vous rencontrerez encore des raudals, dit-il, moins longs, moins difficiles sans doute que ceux d’Apure et de Maipure, mais d’une navigation très pénible. Il y a même lieu d’effectuer des traînages sur les récifs, ce qui suffirait à mettre les embarcations hors d’usage, si elles n’étaient d’une extrême solidité. Je vois qu’on a fait un bon travail pour celle du sergent Martial. — J’y pense, n’a-t-on pas visité la vôtre, monsieur Helloch?…

— N’en doutez pas, monsieur Manuel, car j’en avais donné l’ordre. Parchal s’est assuré que la Moriche était solide dans ses fonds. Nous devons donc espérer que nos deux falcas pourront se tirer des raudals sans dommage, comme aussi supporter les coups de chubasco — puisque, selon vous, ils ne sont pas moins terribles en amont qu’en aval…

— C’est la pure vérité, répondit le commissaire, et, faute de prudence, avec des bateliers qui ne connaîtraient pas le fleuve, on ne saurait parer à ces dangers. D’ailleurs, ce ne sont pas les plus redoutables…

— Et quels autres?… demanda le sergent Martial, pris de quelque inquiétude.

— Les dangers qu’implique la présence des Indiens le long de ces rives…

— Monsieur Manuel, dit alors Jean, ne voulez-vous pas parler des Guaharibos?…

— Non, mon cher enfant, répondit le commissaire en souriant, car ces Indiens sont inoffensifs. Je sais bien qu’ils passaient autrefois pour dangereux. Et précisément, en 1879 à l’époque où le colonel de Kermor aurait remonté vers les sources de l’Orénoque, on mettait à leur compte la destruction de plusieurs villages, le massacre de leurs habitants…

— Mon père aurait-il eu à se défendre contre les attaques de ces Guaharibos, s’écria Jean, et serait-il donc tombé entre leurs mains?…

— Non… non! se hâta de répondre Jacques

Helloch. Jamais, sans doute, M. Manuel n’a entendu dire…

— Jamais, monsieur Helloch, jamais, mon cher enfant, et je vous le répète, votre père n’a pu être la victime de ces tribus indiennes, parce que, depuis une quinzaine d’années, ils ne méritent plus une si mauvaise réputation…

— Vous avez eu des rapports avec eux, monsieur Manuel?… demanda Germain Paterne.

— Oui… plusieurs fois, et j’ai pu m’assurer que M. Chaffanjon ne m’avait dit que la vérité, lorsque, à son retour, il me dépeignit ces Indiens comme des êtres assez misérables, de petite taille, chétifs, très craintifs, très fuyards et peu à craindre, en somme. Aussi ne vous dirai-je point: “Prenez garde aux Guaharibos”, mais je vous dirai: “Prenez garde aux aventuriers de toute nation qui fréquentent ces savanes… Défiez-vous des bandits capables de tous les crimes, et dont le gouvernement devrait purger le territoire, en mettant ses milices à leurs trousses!”

— Une question? fit observer Germain Paterne. Ce qui est un danger pour les voyageurs, ne l’est-il pas pour les ranchos et leurs propriétaires?…

— Assurément, monsieur Paterne. C’est pourquoi, à Danaco, mes fils, mes péons et moi, nous tenons-nous sur le qui-vive. Si ces bandits s’approchaient du rancho, ils seraient signalés, ils ne nous surprendraient pas, on les recevrait à coups de fusil, et nous leur ferions passer le goût de revenir. D’ailleurs, à Danaco, ils savent que les Mariquitares n’ont pas peur, et ils ne se hasarderaient pas à nous attaquer. Quant aux voyageurs qui naviguent sur le fleuve, surtout au-dessus du Cassiquiare, ils ne doivent point se départir d’une extrême vigilance, car les rives ne sont pas sûres.

— En effet, répondit Jacques Helloch, nous sommes prévenus qu’une nombreuse bande de Quivas infeste ces territoires…

— Par malheur! répondit le commissaire.

— On dit même qu’ils ont pour chef un forçat évadé…

— Oui… et un homme redoutable!

— Voici plusieurs fois, observa alors le sergent Martial, que nous entendons parler de ce forçat, qui, dit-on, s'est évadé du bagne de Cayenne…

— De Cayenne… c'est la vérité.

— Est-ce donc un Français?… demanda Jacques Helloch.

— Non… un Espagnol, qui a été condamné en France, affirma M. Manuel.

— Et il se nomme?…

— Alfaniz.

— Alfaniz?… Un nom d'emprunt, peut-être?… fit observer Germain Paterne.

— C'est son vrai nom, paraît-il."

Si Jacques Helloch eût regardé Jorrès à cet instant, il aurait certainement surpris sur ses traits un tressaillement que celui-ci n'avait su dissimuler. L'Espagnol longeait alors la berge, à petits pas, de manière à se rapprocher du groupe, afin de mieux entendre cette conversation, tout en s'occupant de rassembler divers objets épars sur le sable.

Mais Jacques Helloch venait de se retourner à une soudaine exclamation.

"Alfaniz?… s'était écrié le sergent Martial en s'adressant au commissaire. Vous avez dit Alfaniz?…

— Oui… Alfaniz…

— Eh bien… vous avez raison… Il ne s'agit pas là d'un nom d'emprunt… C'est bien celui de ce misérable…

— Vous connaissez cet Alfaniz?… demanda vivement Jacques Helloch, très surpris de cette déclaration.

— Si je le connais!… Parle, Jean, et raconte comment il se fait que nous le connaissions!… Moi, je m'embrouillerais dans mon mauvais espagnol, et M. Manuel ne parviendrait pas à me comprendre."

Jean raconta alors cette histoire qu'il tenait du sergent Martial, — histoire que le vieux soldat lui avait plus d'une fois rappelée, lorsque, dans leur maison de Chantenay, ils parlaient tous les deux du colonel de Kermor.

En 1871, un peu avant la fin de cette désastreuse guerre, alors que le colonel commandait un des régiments d'infanterie, il eut occasion d'intervenir comme témoin dans une double affaire de vol et de trahison.

Ce voleur n'était autre que l'Espagnol Alfaniz. Le traître, tout en opérant pour le compte des Prussiens, en faisant de l'espionnage à leur profit, commettait des vols de connivence avec un malheureux soldat d'administration, qui n'échappa au châtiment que par le suicide.

Lorsque les agissements d'Alfaniz furent découverts, il eut le temps de prendre la fuite, et il fut impossible de mettre la main sur lui. C'est par une circonstance toute fortuite que son arrestation eut lieu, deux ans après, en 1873, environ six mois avant la disparition de M. de Kermor.

Traduit devant la cour d'assises de la Loire-Inférieure, accablé par la déposition du colonel, il s'entendit condamner à la peine des travaux forcés à perpétuité. À la suite de cette affaire, Alfaniz garda une haine terrible contre le colonel de Kermor, — haine qui se traduisit par les plus effroyables menaces, en attendant qu'elle pût se traduire par des actes de vengeance.

L'Espagnol fut envoyé au bagne de Cayenne, et il venait de s'en échapper au début de 1892, après dix-neuf années, avec deux de ses compagnons de chaîne. Comme il avait vingt-trois ans à l'époque de sa condamnation, il était alors âgé de quarante-deux ans. Considéré comme un très dangereux malfaiteur, l'administration française mit ses agents en campagne afin de retrouver ses traces. Ce fut inutile. Alfaniz était parvenu à quitter la Guyane, et au milieu de ces vastes territoires à peine peuplés, à travers ces immenses llanos du Venezuela, comment eût-il été possible de reconnaître la piste du forçat évadé?…

En somme, tout ce qu'apprit l'administration, — et ce dont la police vénézuélienne ne fut que trop certaine, — c'est que le forçat s'était mis à la tête de la bande de ces Quivas qui, chassés de la Colombie, s'étaient transportés sur la rive droite de l'Orénoque. Privés de leur chef par la mort de

Meta Sarrapia, ces Indiens, les plus redoutés de tous les indigènes, se rangèrent sous les ordres d'Alfaniz. En réalité, c'était bien à sa bande que devaient être attribués les pillages et les massacres dont les provinces méridionales de la république avaient été le théâtre depuis un an.

Ainsi, la fatalité voulait que cet Alfaniz parcourût précisément ces territoires où Jeanne de Kermor et le sergent Martial venaient rechercher le colonel. Nul doute, si son accusateur tombait entre ses mains, que le forçat se montrât sans pitié envers lui. Ce fut une nouvelle appréhension ajoutée à tant d'autres pour la jeune fille, et elle ne put retenir ses larmes, à la pensée que le misérable envoyé au bagne de Cayenne, et qui en voulait mortellement à son père, s’en fût échappé…

Jacques Helloch et M. Manuel, cependant, lui firent entendre de rassurantes paroles. Quelle apparence qu’Alfaniz eût découvert l’endroit où s’était retiré le colonel de Kermor — ce qu’aucune enquête n’avait jusqu’alors révélé?… Non!… il n’y avait pas à craindre que celui-ci fût tombé entre ses mains…

Dans tous les cas, il importait de faire diligence, de continuer les démarches, de ne se permettre aucun retard, de ne reculer devant aucun obstacle.

Du reste, tout allait être prêt pour le départ. Les hommes de Valdez, — Jorrès compris, — s’occupaient de recharger la Gallinetta, qui pourrait démarrer dès le lendemain.

M. Manuel ramena à l’habitation du rancho, afin d’y passer cette dernière soirée, ses hôtes reconnaissants du bon accueil qu’ils avaient trouvé à Danaco.

Après le souper, la conversation reprit de plus belle. Chacun prenait bonne note des instantes recommandations du commissaire, — surtout en ce qui concernait la surveillance à exercer à bord des pirogues.

Enfin, l’heure étant venue de se retirer, la famille Assomption reconduisit les passagers jusqu’au petit port. Là se firent les adieux, là furent échangées les dernières poignées de main, là on promit de se revoir au retour, et M. Manuel n’oublia pas de dire:

“À propos, monsieur Helloch, et vous aussi, monsieur Paterne, lorsque vous rejoindrez les compagnons que vous avez laissés à San-Fernando, tous mes compliments à M. Miguel! Quant à ses deux amis, toutes mes malédictions, et vive l’Orénoque! — bien entendu le seul… le vrai… celui qui passe à Danaco et arrose les rives de mon domaine!”

CHAPITRE V

V

Bœufs et gymnotes

La voici reprise, cette navigation sur le cours supérieur du fleuve. Les voyageurs ont toujours confiance dans le succès de leur voyage. Ils ont hâte d’être arrivés à la Mission de Santa-Juana, et fasse le ciel que le Père Esperante les mette sur la bonne route, que des renseignements plus précis les conduisent enfin au but! Puissent-ils aussi éviter une rencontre avec la bande d’Alfaniz, qui risquerait de compromettre le sort de la campagne!

Ce matin-là, presque à l’heure du départ, Jeanne de Kermor avait dit à Jacques Helloch, alors qu’ils se trouvaient seuls:

“Monsieur Helloch, non seulement vous m’avez sauvé la vie mais vous avez voulu joindre vos efforts aux miens… Mon âme est pleine de reconnaissance… Je ne sais comment je pourrai jamais m’acquitter envers vous…

— Ne parlons pas de reconnaissance, mademoiselle, répondit Jacques Helloch. De compatriote à compatriote, ces services sont des devoirs, et ces devoirs, rien ne m’empêchera de les accomplir jusqu’au bout!

— De nouveaux, de graves dangers nous menacent peut-être, monsieur Jacques…

— Non… je l’espère! D’ailleurs, c’est une raison pour que je n’abandonne pas Mlle de Kermor… Moi… vous abandonner… car, ajouta-t-il en regardant la jeune fille qui baissait les yeux, c’est bien cela que vous avez eu la pensée de me dire…

— Monsieur Jacques… oui… je voulais… je devais… Je ne puis abuser ainsi de votre générosité… J’étais partie seule pour ce long voyage… Dieu vous a mis sur mon chemin, et je l’en remercie du fond du cœur… Mais…

— Mais votre pirogue vous attend, mademoiselle, comme m’attend la mienne, et elles iront ensemble au même but… J’ai pris cette résolution, sachant à quoi je m’engageais, et ce que j’ai résolu de faire, je le fais… Si, pour que je vous laisse continuer seule cette navigation, vous n’avez pas d’autre raison que les dangers dont vous parlez…

— Monsieur Jacques, répondit vivement Mlle de Kermor, quelles autres raisons pourrais-je avoir?..

— Eh bien… Jean… mon cher Jean… comme je dois vous appeler… ne parlons plus de séparation… et en route!”

Le cœur lui battait bien fort à ce “cher Jean”, tandis qu’il regagnait la Gallinetta! Et, lorsque Jacques Helloch eut rejoint son ami, qui souriait:

“Je parie, lui dit ce dernier, que Mlle de Kermor te remerciait de ce que tu as fait pour elle, et te demandait de ne pas faire davantage…

— Mais j’ai refusé… s’écria Jacques Helloch. Je ne l’abandonnerai jamais…

— Parbleu!” répondit simplement Germain Paterne en frappant sur l’épaule de son compatriote.

Que cette dernière partie du voyage réservât de graves complications aux passagers des deux pirogues, c’était possible, c’était probable. Toutefois, ils auraient eu mauvaise grâce à se plaindre. Les brises de l’ouest se maintenaient avec persistance, et les falcas rebroussaient assez rapidement le courant du fleuve sous leur voilure.

Ce jour-là, après avoir dépassé plusieurs îles, dont le vent courbait les hauts arbres, on atteignit vers le soir l’île Bayanon, à un coude de l’Orénoque. Les provisions abondant, grâce à la générosité de M. Manuel Assomption et de ses fils, il n’y eut point à se mettre en chasse. Aussi, comme la nuit était claire, magnifiquement illuminée des rayons de la lune, Parchal et Valdez proposèrent de ne faire halte que le lendemain.

“Si le cours du fleuve est libre de récifs et de roches, répondit Jacques Helloch, et si vous ne craignez pas de vous jeter sur quelque caillou…

— Non, dit le patron Valdez, et il faut profiter de ce beau temps pour gagner en amont. Il est rare que l’on soit aussi favorisé à cette époque.”

La proposition était sage, elle fut adoptée, et les pirogues n’envoyèrent pas leurs amarres à terre.

La nuit s’écoula sans accidents, bien que la largeur du fleuve, qui n’était que de trois cent cinquante mètres, fût parfois très réduite par le chapelet des îles, surtout à l’embouchure du rio Guanami, un affluent de la rive droite.

Au matin, la Gallinetta et la Moriche se trouvèrent à la hauteur de l’île Temblador, où M. Chaffanjon s’était mis en rapport avec un nègre intelligent et serviable du nom de Ricardo. Mais ce nègre, qui avait alors le titre de commissaire du Cunucunuma et du Cassiquiare, deux importants tributaires de droite et gauche, n’occupait plus cette résidence. À s’en rapporter au voyageur français, c’était un homme industrieux, d’une extrême sobriété, d’une remarquable énergie, en passe de réussir dans ses entreprises, et qui, sans doute, après fortune faite, avait été fonder quelque autre rancho sur les territoires au nord de la savane.

Peut-être les passagers s’attendaient-ils à le rencontrer à l’île Temblador, car Jean avait parlé de lui d’après son guide si bien renseigné.

“Je regrette que ce Ricardo ne soit plus là, fit observer Jacques Helloch. Peut-être aurions-nous appris par lui si Alfaniz a été vu aux environs du fleuve.”

Et s’adressant à l’Espagnol:

“Jorrès, pendant votre séjour à San-Fernando, est-ce que vous avez entendu parler de ces évadés de Cayenne et de la bande d’Indiens qui s’est jointe à eux?…

— Oui, monsieur Helloch, répondit l’Espagnol.

— Avait-on signalé leur présence sur les provinces du haut Orénoque?…

— Pas que je sache… Il était question d’un parti d’Indiens Quivas…

— Précisément, Jorrès, et c’est Alfaniz, un forçat, qui s’est mis à leur tête.

— Voici la première fois que ce nom est prononcé devant moi, déclara l’Espagnol. Dans tous les cas, nous n’aurions pas à redouter la rencontre de ces Quivas, car, à ce que l’on disait dans le pays, ils cherchaient à regagner les territoires de la Colombie, d’où ils avaient été chassés, et, si cela est, ils ne peuvent être de ce côté de l’Orénoque!”

Jorrès était-il bien informé, quand il disait que ces Quivas devaient se diriger vers les llanos de la Colombie en passant plus au nord, c’était possible. Quoi qu’il en soit, les voyageurs n’oublieraient pas les recommandations de M. Manuel Assomption et se tiendraient sur leurs gardes.

La journée s’écoula, sans avoir été marquée par aucun incident. La navigation s’accomplissait dans les meilleures conditions de vitesse. Les pirogues allaient d’îles en îles, ne quittant l’une que pour atteindre l’autre.

Le soir, elles vinrent prendre leur poste à la pointe de l’île Caricha.

Le vent ayant calmi, mieux valait stationner que de recourir aux palancas pendant l’obscurité.

Dans une excursion sur la lisière de l’île, Jacques Helloch et le sergent Martial abattirent un de ces paresseux juché entre les branches d’un cecropia, dont les feuilles fournissent à cet animal son habituelle nourriture. Puis, en revenant, à l’embouchure du rio Caricha, au moment où un couple de ces sarigues, qui appartiennent à la famille des chironectes, s’occupait à pêcher pour son compte, les chasseurs firent un coup double, qui fut plus adroit qu’opportun. En effet, à se repaître de poissons, ces sarigues ne donnent qu’une chair coriace et huileuse, dont les Indiens ne veulent pas. Elles ne peuvent donc remplacer ces singes, lesquels sont un véritable régal, — même pour des estomacs européens.

Il est vrai, ces chironectes reçurent bon accueil de Germain Paterne, qui s’occupa, avec l’aide de Parchal, de les préparer pour en conserver la peau.

Quant au paresseux, uniquement fructivore, on le mit à l’étuve dans un trou rempli de pierres brûlantes, où il devait rester toute la nuit. Les passagers se promettaient bien d’y goûter, lorsqu’il serait servi au déjeuner du lendemain, et si sa chair, un peu forte de fumet, ne leur agréait pas, elle trouverait amateurs parmi les mariniers des pirogues. Au surplus, ces Indiens n’étaient pas difficiles, et, ce soir-là, l’un d’eux ayant remporté quelques douzaines de ces gros vers de terre, des lombrics longs d’un pied, ils les coupèrent en morceaux, les firent bouillir avec des herbes, et s’en régalèrent consciencieusement.

Il va sans dire que Germain Paterne, fidèle à la règle qu’il s’était imposée de tout expérimenter par lui-même, voulut tâter de cette matelote vénézuélienne. Mais la répugnance l’emporta sur la curiosité scientifique, et l’expérience ne fut faite que du bout des lèvres.

“Je te croyais plus dévoué que cela à la science! dit Jacques Helloch en le plaisantant de son dégoût inconciliable avec ses instincts de naturaliste.

— Que veux-tu, Jacques, le dévouement d’un naturaliste a des bornes!” répondit Germain Paterne, en essayant de dissimuler un dernier haut-le-cœur.

Le lendemain, départ hâtif, afin d’utiliser une brise matinale assez vive pour remplir la voile des falcas. De cet endroit, on voyait poindre une chaîne de montagnes au-dessus des forêts qui s’étendaient sur la rive droite jusqu’à l’horizon. C’était la chaîne du Duido, dont les voyageurs se trouvaient encore à quelques jours de distance, et l’une des plus considérables de ce territoire.

Vingt-quatre heures après, au terme d’une fatigante journée, pendant laquelle la brise avait été intermittente, entre des averses violentes et des éclaircies courtes, Valdez et Parchal vinrent prendre le poste de nuit à la Piedra Pintada.

Il ne faut pas confondre cette “Pierre Peinte” et celle que les voyageurs avaient déjà rencontrée, en amont de San-Fernando. Si elle est ainsi dénommée, c’est que les roches de la rive gauche portent également l’empreinte de figurines et autres signes hiéroglyphiques.

Grâce à la baisse des eaux déjà prononcée, ces signes étaient apparents à la base des roches, et Germain Paterne put les examiner à loisir.

M. Chaffanjon l’avait fait, d’ailleurs, ainsi que le témoigne le récit de son voyage.

Mais il y avait lieu d’observer que leur compatriote parcourait cette partie de l’Orénoque dans la seconde quinzaine de novembre, tandis que Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons l’effectuaient dans la seconde quinzaine d’octobre. Or, ce délai d’un mois se traduit par des différences climatériques assez notables en un pays où la saison sèche succède brusquement, pour ainsi dire, à la saison pluvieuse.

L’étiage du fleuve était donc un peu plus élevé alors qu’il ne le serait dans quelques semaines, et cette circonstance devait favoriser la navigation des deux pirogues, car c’est au manque d’eau qu’il faut attribuer les plus difficiles obstacles.

Le soir même, on s’arrêtait à l’embouchure du Cunucunuma, l’un des principaux affluents de la rive droite. Germain Paterne ne crut pas devoir prendre fait et cause pour ce tributaire comme il l’avait fait pour le Ventuari. Il l’aurait pu, cependant, et avec non moins de raison.

“À quoi cela servirait-il, se borna-t-il à dire. MM. Varinas et Felipe ne sont pas là, et la discussion languirait.”

Peut-être, en d’autres circonstances, Jacques Helloch, en vue de la mission qui lui avait été confiée, eût-il suivi l’exemple du compatriote qui l’avait précédé sur le haut Orénoque. Peut-être se fût-il embarqué avec Parchal et un de ses hommes dans la curiare de la Moriche? Peut-être, à l’exemple de M. Chaffanjon, aurait-il exploré le Cunucunuma pendant cinq à six jours, à travers les territoires mariquitares? Peut-être enfin aurait-il renoué des relations avec ce capitan général, ce finaud d’Aramare et sa famille, qui avaient été visités et photographiés par le voyageur français?…

Mais, — on l’avouera, — les instructions du ministre étaient sacrifiées au nouvel objectif qui entraînait Jacques Helloch jusqu’à Santa-Juana. Il avait hâte d’y arriver, et se fût fait un scrupule de retarder Jeanne de Kermor dans l’accomplissement de son œuvre filiale.

Parfois, — non pour le lui reprocher, mais un peu par acquit de conscience, — Germain Paterne lui touchait un mot de cette mission un peu négligée.

“Bon… c’est bon! répondait Jacques Helloch. Ce que nous ne faisons pas à l’aller, on le fera au retour…

— Quand?…

— Quand nous reviendrons, parbleu!… Est-ce que tu te figures que nous ne reviendrons pas?…

— Moi? Je n’en sais rien!… Qui sait où nous allons?… Qui sait ce qui se passera là-bas?… Supposons qu’on ne retrouve pas le colonel de Kermor…

— Eh bien, Germain, il sera temps alors de songer à redescendre le fleuve.

— Avec Mlle de Kermor?…

— Sans doute.

— Et supposons que nos recherches aboutissent… que le colonel soit retrouvé… que sa fille, comme c’est probable, veuille rester près de lui, te décideras-tu à revenir?…

— Revenir?… répondit Jacques Helloch du ton d’un homme que ces questions embarrassaient.

— Revenir seul… avec moi, s’entend?

— Certainement… Germain…

— Je n’y crois guère, Jacques, à ton “certainement”!

— Tu es fou.

— Soit… mais toi… tu es amoureux, — ce qui est un autre genre de folie, non moins incurable.

— Encore?… Te voilà parlant de choses…

— Auxquelles je n’entends goutte… c’est convenu!… Voyons, Jacques… entre nous… si je n’entends pas, je vois clair… et je ne sais pas pourquoi tu essaies de cacher un sentiment qui n’a rien de commun avec ta mission scientifique… et que je trouve, d’ailleurs, tout naturel!

— Eh bien, oui, mon ami! répondit Jacques Helloch d’une voix altérée par l’émotion, oui!… J’aime cette jeune fille, si courageuse, et est-il donc étonnant que la sympathie qu’elle m’inspirait soit devenue… Oui!… je l’aime!… Je ne l’abandonnerai pas!… Qu’adviendra-t-il de ce sentiment qui m’a pris tout entier, je ne sais… Comment cela finira-t-il?…

— Bien!” répondit Germain Paterne.

Et il ne crut pas devoir rien ajouter à ce mot, trop affirmatif, peut-être, mais qui lui valut la meilleure poignée de main qu’il eût jamais reçue de son compagnon.

Il suit de toutes ces complications que si le cours du Cunucunuma ne fut pas exploré, il n’était pas certain qu’il le serait au retour des pirogues. Il méritait de l’être pourtant, car il arrose une pittoresque et riche contrée. Quant à son embouchure, elle ne mesure pas moins de deux cents mètres de largeur.

Donc, le lendemain, la Gallinetta et la Moriche se remirent en route, et ce qu’on n’avait pas fait pour le Cunucunuma, on ne le fit pas davantage pour le Cassiquiare, dont le confluent fut dépassé dans la matinée.

Il s’agissait là, cependant, de l’un des plus importants tributaires du grand fleuve. L’apport qu’il lui verse, par une échancrure de la rive gauche, vient des versants du bassin de l’Amazone. De Humboldt l’avait reconnu, et avant lui, l’explorateur Solano s’était assuré qu’une communication existait entre les deux bassins par le rio Negro, puis par le Cassiquiare.

En effet, vers 1725, le capitaine portugais Moraès, poursuivant sa navigation sur le rio Negro jusqu’au-dessous de San-Gabriel, au confluent du Guaïria, puis sur le Guaïria jusqu’à San-Carlos, descendit le Cassiquiare à partir de ce point, et déboucha dans l’Orénoque, après avoir ainsi parcouru la région venezuelo-brésilienne.

Décidément le Cassiquiare valait la peine d’être visité par un explorateur, bien que sa largeur, en cet endroit, ne dépasse guère une quarantaine de mètres. Néanmoins, les pirogues continuèrent leur marche en amont.

En cette partie du fleuve, la rive droite est très accidentée. Sans parler de la chaîne du Duido, qui se profile à l’horizon, couverte de forêts impénétrables, les cerros Guaraco forment une berge naturelle, laissant la vue s’étendre largement à la surface des llanos de gauche, sillonnés par le cours capricieux et varié du Cassiquiare.

Les falcas marchaient donc sous petite brise, ayant parfois quelque peine à refouler le courant, lorsque, un peu avant midi, Jean signala un nuage très bas et très épais, qui se traînait en rasant la savane.

Parchal et Valdez vinrent examiner ce nuage, dont les lourdes et opaques volutes se déroulaient en gagnant peu à peu la rive droite.

Jorrès, debout à l’avant de la Gallinetta, promenait ses regards en cette direction, et cherchait à reconnaître la cause de ce phénomène.

“C’est un nuage de poussière”, dit Valdez.

Cette opinion fut aussi celle de Parchal.

“Qui peut soulever cette poussière? demanda le sergent Martial.

— Quelque troupe en marche, sans doute… répondit Parchal.

— Il faudrait alors qu’elle fût nombreuse… fit observer Germain Paterne.

— Très nombreuse, en effet!” répliqua Valdez.

Le nuage, à deux cents mètres de la rive, s’avançait, avec rapidité. Il se déchirait parfois, et l’on voyait, semblait-il, des masses rougeâtres se mouvoir à travers ces déchirures.

“Est-ce que ce serait la bande des Quivas?… s’écria Jacques Helloch.

— Dans ce cas, prudence, dit Parchal, ramenons les pirogues vers l’autre rive…

— Par prudence, oui, répliqua Valdez, et sans tarder d’un instant.”

La manœuvre fut ordonnée.

On amena les voiles, qui eussent gêné les falcas dans une marche oblique à travers le fleuve, et les hommes, appuyant sur leurs palancas, dirigèrent vers la rive gauche la Gallinetta qui précédait la Moriche.

Du reste, après avoir lui aussi attentivement regardé le nuage de poussière, Jorrès était venu prendre sa place aux pagaies, sans montrer aucune inquiétude.

Mais si l’Espagnol n’était pas inquiet, les voyageurs avaient le droit de l’être, au cas qu’ils fussent menacés d’une rencontre avec Alfaniz et ses Indiens. De la part de ces bandits il n’y aurait à espérer aucune pitié.

Par bonheur, comme ils ne devaient pas avoir les moyens de traverser le fleuve, les pirogues, en se maintenant près de la rive gauche, seraient momentanément à l’abri de leur attaque.

Une fois là, Valdez et Parchal s’amarrèrent aux souches de la berge, et les passagers attendirent, leurs armes en état, prêts à la défensive.

Les trois cents mètres de l’Orénoque ne dépassaient pas la portée des carabines.

On n’attendit pas longtemps. Les volutes de poussière ne se déroulaient plus qu’à une vingtaine de pas du fleuve. Des cris en sortaient, ou plutôt des meuglements caractéristiques, auxquels il ne fut pas possible de se tromper.

“Eh! rien à craindre!… Ce n’est qu’un troupeau de bœufs!… s’écria Valdez.

— Valdez a raison, ajouta Parchal. Plusieurs milliers de bêtes soulèvent toute cette poussière…

— Et font tout ce tapage!” ajouta le sergent Martial.

Et ce tapage assourdissant, c’étaient bien des beuglements échappés de cette espèce de mascaret vivant, qui roulait à la surface des llanos.

Jean, que Jacques Helloch avait supplié de se mettre à l’abri sous le rouf de la Gallinetta, reparut alors, curieux de voir ce passage d’un troupeau à travers l’Orénoque.

Ces migrations de bœufs sont fréquentes sur les territoires du Venezuela. En effet, les propriétaires de bestiaux doivent se conformer aux exigences de la saison sèche et de la saison humide. Lorsque l’herbe manque aux prairies des hautes terres, il y a nécessité de pâturer celles des plaines basses dans le voisinage des cours d’eau, en recherchant de préférence ces fonds qui sont périodiquement atteints par les crues et dont la végétation est prodigieuse. Les graminées fournissent aux animaux une nourriture aussi abondante qu’excellente sur toute l’étendue des esteros.

Il est donc nécessaire que les llaneros fassent transhumer leurs bêtes, et, quand il se présente un cours d’eau, fleuve, rio ou bayou, elles le franchissent à la nage.

Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons allaient assister à cet intéressant spectacle, sans avoir rien à redouter de cette agglomération de plusieurs milliers de ruminants.

Dès qu’ils furent arrivés sur la berge, les bœufs s’arrêtèrent. Et quel redoublement de tumulte, car les derniers rangs poussaient irrésistiblement les premiers, alors que ceux-ci hésitaient à se jeter dans le fleuve!

Ils y furent déterminés, d’ailleurs, par le cabestero qui les précédait.

“C’est le capitaine de nage, dit Valdez. Il va lancer son cheval dans le courant, et les bêtes suivront.”

En effet, ce cabestero tomba d’un seul bond du haut de la berge. Des vachers, précédés d’un guide qui venait d’entonner une sorte d’hymne sauvage, un “en avant” de rythme étrange, se mirent à la nage. Aussitôt le troupeau de se précipiter dans les eaux du fleuve, à la surface duquel on ne vit plus que des têtes aux longues cornes courbes, dont les puissants naseaux reniflaient avec une extrême violence.

Le passage s’effectua facilement jusqu’au milieu du lit, malgré la rapidité du courant, et il y avait lieu d’espérer qu’il s’achèverait sans encombre sous la direction du capitaine de nage et grâce à l’habileté des guides.

Il n’en fut rien.

Soudain, un immense remuement agita ces bœufs alors que plusieurs centaines se trouvaient encore à quelque vingt mètres de la rive droite. Puis, au même instant, les vociférations des vachers se mêlèrent au beuglement des animaux.

Il semblait que cette masse fût prise d’une épouvante dont la cause échappait…

“Les caribes… les caribes!… s’écrièrent les mariniers de la Moriche et de la Gallinetta.

— Les caribes?… répéta Jacques Helloch.

— Oui!… s’écria Parchal, les caribes et les parayos!”

Effectivement, le troupeau venait de rencontrer une bande de ces redoutables raies, de ces anguilles électriques, de ces gymnotes tembladors, qui peuplent par millions les cours d’eau du Venezuela.

Sous les décharges de ces vivantes “bouteilles de Leyde” toujours en tension et d’une extraordinaire puissance, les bœufs furent atteints de commotions successives, paralysés, réduits à l’état inerte. Ils se retournaient sur le flanc, ils agitaient une dernière fois leurs jambes, secouées par les secousses électriques.

Et beaucoup disparurent en quelques secondes, tandis que les autres, rebelles à la voix de leurs guides, dont quelques-uns furent également frappés par les gymnotes, durent céder au courant, et n’accostèrent la berge opposée qu’à plusieurs centaines de mètres en aval.

En outre, comme il n’avait pas été possible d’arrêter les rangs en arrière de la berge que poussait la masse du troupeau, les bœufs affolés furent contraints de se précipiter dans le fleuve, en proie à l’épouvante. Mais, sans doute, l’énergie électrique des parayos et des caribes avait diminué. Aussi, nombre de bêtes finirent par gagner la rive gauche, et s’enfuirent tumultueusement à travers la savane.

“Voilà, dit Germain Paterne, ce qui ne se voit ni dans la Seine, ni dans la Loire, ni même dans la Garonne, et c’est un spectacle digne d’être vu!

— Tonnerre de tonnerres, nous ferons bien de nous défier de ces abominables anguilles! grommela le sergent Martial.

— Assurément, mon brave sergent, déclara Jacques Helloch, et, le cas échéant, on s’en défierait comme d’une batterie de piles électriques!

— Le plus prudent, ajouta Parchal, c’est de ne point tomber dans ces eaux où elles fourmillent…

— Comme vous dites, Parchal, comme vous dites!” conclut Germain Paterne.

Il est certain que ces gymnotes pullulent au sein des rivières vénézuéliennes. En revanche, au point de vue alimentaire, les pêcheurs n’ignorent pas qu’ils fournissent une nourriture excellente. Ils cherchent à les prendre au moyen de filets, et, après les avoir laissés s’épuiser en vaines décharges, il peuvent les manier sans inconvénient.

Que faut-il penser du récit de Humboldt, rapportant que, de son temps, des troupes de chevaux étaient lancées au milieu de ces monstres aquatiques et livrées à leurs secousses, afin de faciliter cette pêche? L’opinion d’Élisée Reclus est que, même à l’époque où d’innombrables chevaux parcouraient les llanos, ils avaient encore trop de valeur pour qu’on les sacrifiât d’une façon aussi barbare, et il doit avoir raison.

Lorsque les pirogues eurent repris leur marche, la navigation fut retardée par l’insuffisance du vent, qui calmissait généralement dans l’après-midi. En de certaines passes étroites, où le courant se mouvait avec rapidité, on dut se haler à l’espilla, — ce qui occasionna une perte de plusieurs heures. La nuit était venue, lorsque les passagers firent halte au pied du village de la Esmeralda.

En ce moment, sur la rive droite, l’espace était brillamment illuminé par un magnifique vacillement de lueurs à la cime boisée de cette pyramide du Duido, haute de deux mille quatre cent soixante-quatorze mètres au-dessus du niveau de la mer. Ce n’était point une éruption volcanique, mais des flammes, souples et falotes, qui dansaient sur les flancs du cerro, tandis que les chauves-souris pêcheuses, éblouies par ces fulgurations éclatantes, tourbillonnaient au-dessus des falcas endormies près de la berge.

CHAPITRE VI

VI

Terribles inquiétudes

Aussi longtemps que les Barés seront les Barés, l’apparition de ces énormes feux follets au sommet du Duido devra être considérée dans le pays comme un funeste présage, avant-coureur de catastrophes.

Aussi longtemps que les Mariquitares seront les Mariquitares, ce phénomène sera pour eux l’indication d’une série d’heureux événements.

Ces deux tribus indiennes ont donc une façon très opposée d’envisager les pronostics de leur prophétique montagne. Mais, qu’elles aient raison l’une ou l’autre, il est certain que le voisinage du Duido n’a pas porté bonheur au village de la Esmeralda.

On ne trouverait guère de plus agréable situation dans les savanes contiguës à l’Orénoque, des pâturages mieux appropriés à l’élevage du bétail, un meilleur climat qui ne connaît pas les excès de la température tropicale. Et, pourtant, la Esmeralda est en un triste état d’abandon et de déchéance. À peine reste-t-il, de l’ancien village fondé par les colons espagnols, les ruines d’une petite église et cinq à six paillotes, qui ne sont occupées que temporairement aux époques de chasse et de pêche.

Lorsque la Gallinetta et la Moriche arrivèrent, elles ne rencontrèrent pas une seule embarcation dans le port.

Et qui en a chassé les Indiens?… Ce sont ces légions de moustiques, qui rendent l’endroit inhabitable, ces myriades d’insectes, dont les flammes du Duido seraient impuissantes à détruire la race maudite.

Et les falcas en furent tellement assaillies, les moustiquaires devinrent tellement insuffisantes, passagers et bateliers reçurent de telles morsures, — même le neveu du sergent Martial, son oncle n’étant pas parvenu à le protéger cette fois, — que Parchal et Valdez démarrèrent avant le jour à l’aide des palancas, en attendant la brise matinale. Cette brise ne commença à s’établir que vers six heures, et les pirogues, deux heures après, dépassaient l’embouchure de l’Iguapo, un des affluents de la rive droite.

Jacques Helloch ne songea pas plus à explorer l’Iguapo qu’il n’avait eu l’idée d’explorer le Cunucunuma ou le Cassiquiare, et Germain Paterne ne lui en toucha pas un mot, même en manière d’amicale plaisanterie.

Il y avait d’ailleurs un nouveau sujet d’inquiétude pour le sergent Martial, non moins que pour Jacques Helloch.

Si forte qu’elle fût, si endurante, si énergique aussi, il y eut lieu de craindre que Jeanne de Kermor, qui avait résisté jusqu’alors à tant de fatigues, ne payât son tribut au climat de ce pays. À la surface des parties marécageuses, règnent des fièvres endémiques, qu’il est difficile d’éviter. Grâce à leur accoutumance, les équipages étaient restés indemnes. Mais la jeune fille éprouvait depuis quelques jours un malaise général dont la gravité ne pouvait échapper.

Germain Paterne reconnut que Jeanne de Kermor était sous l’influence des fièvres paludéennes. Ses forces diminuaient, l’appétit faisait défaut, et, dès ce jour-là, une insurmontable lassitude l’obligea de s’étendre sous le rouf pendant des heures entières. Elle s’efforçait de résister, s’attristant surtout à la pensée de ce surcroît d’inquiétude pour ses compagnons de voyage.

Restait cependant l’espoir que cette indisposition ne serait que passagère… Peut-être le diagnostic de Germain Paterne était-il entaché d’erreur?… Et, d’ailleurs, étant donné l’endurance morale et physique de Jeanne, la nature ne serait-elle pas son meilleur médecin et n’avait-elle pas le meilleur remède, la jeunesse?…

Toutefois, ce fut en proie à de croissantes anxiétés que Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons reprirent la navigation sur le haut fleuve.

Les pirogues établirent leur halte de nuit à l’embouchure du Gabirima, un affluent de la rive gauche. On ne rencontra aucune trace de ces Indiens Barés, signalés par M. Chaffanjon. Il n’y eut pas trop à le regretter, puisque les deux cases du Gabirima, à l’époque où les visita le voyageur français, abritaient une famille d’assassins et de pillards, dont l’un des membres était l’ancien capitan de la Esmeralda. Étaient-ils restés des coquins, étaient-ils devenus d’honnêtes gens, — question qui ne fut point élucidée. Dans tous les cas, ils avaient transporté autre part leur coquinerie ou leur honnêteté. On ne put donc se procurer à cet endroit aucun renseignement sur la bande d’Alfaniz.

Les falcas repartirent le lendemain, approvisionnées de viande de cerfs, de cabiais, de pécaris, que les chasseurs avaient tués la veille. Le temps était mauvais. Il tombait parfois des pluies diluviennes. Jeanne de Kermor souffrait beaucoup de ces intempéries. Son état ne s’améliorait pas. La fièvre persistait et s’aggravait même, malgré des soins incessants.

Les détours du fleuve, dont la largeur se réduisait à deux cents mètres sur un cours encombré de récifs, ne permirent pas de dépasser ce jour-là l’île

Yano, — la dernière que les pirogues dussent rencontrer en amont.

Le lendemain, 21 octobre, un raudal, qui sinuait entre de hautes berges assez resserrées, offrit quelques difficultés, et, le soir, la Moriche et la Gallinetta, aidées de la brise, vinrent relâcher devant le rio Padamo.

Cette fièvre qui minait peu à peu la jeune fille n'avait point cédé. Jeanne était de plus en plus abattue, et sa faiblesse ne lui permettait pas de quitter le rouf.

C'est alors que le vieux soldat s'adressa de violents reproches pour avoir consenti à ce voyage!… Tout cela, c'était sa faute!… Et que faire?… Comment arrêter les accès de fièvre, comment en empêcher le retour?… En admettant même que la pharmacie de la Moriche possédât un remède efficace, ne serait-il pas prudent de revenir en arrière?… En quelques jours, entraînées par le courant, les pirogues seraient de retour à San-Fernando…

Jeanne de Kermor avait entendu le sergent Martial discuter à ce sujet avec Jacques Helloch, et, toute brisée, elle dit d'une voix éteinte:

“Non… non!… ne retournons pas à San-Fernando… J'irai jusqu'à la Mission… J'irai jusqu'à ce que j'aie retrouvé mon père… À Santa-Juana… à Santa-Juana!…”

Puis elle retomba, presque sans connaissance, après ce suprême effort.

Jacques Helloch ne savait quel parti prendre. À céder aux instances du sergent Martial, ne serait-ce pas risquer de déterminer chez la jeune fille une crise funeste, si elle voyait la pirogue redescendre le fleuve? En somme, ne valait-il pas mieux continuer le voyage, atteindre Santa-Juana, où les secours étaient aussi assurés qu'à San-Fernando?…

Et alors, Jacques Helloch s’adressait à Germain Paterne:

“Tu ne peux donc rien!… s’écriait-il, d’une voix désespérée. Tu ne connais donc pas un remède qui puisse couper cette fièvre dont elle meurt!… Ne vois-tu pas que la pauvre enfant dépérit chaque jour?…”

Germain Paterne ne savait que répondre, ni que faire au-delà de ce qu’il avait fait. Le sulfate de quinine, dont la pharmacie était suffisamment approvisionnée, n’avait pu enrayer cette fièvre, bien qu’il eût été administré à haute dose.

Et, lorsque le sergent Martial, lorsque Jacques Helloch le pressaient de leurs questions, de leurs prières, il ne trouvait que ceci à répondre:

“Le sulfate de quinine est malheureusement sans effet sur elle!… Peut-être faudrait-il recourir à des herbes… à des écorces d’arbres… Il doit s’en trouver sur ces territoires… Mais qui nous les indiquera et comment se les procurer?…”

Valdez et Parchal, interrogés à ce sujet, confirmèrent le dire de Germain Paterne. À San-Fernando, on faisait communément usage de certaines substances fébrifuges du pays. Ce sont de véritables spécifiques contre les fièvres engendrées par les émanations marécageuses, dont les indigènes comme les étrangers ont tant à souffrir au cours de la saison chaude.

“Le plus souvent, affirma Valdez, on emploie l’écorce du chinchora et surtout celle du coloradito…

— Reconnaîtriez-vous ces plantes?…. demanda Jacques Helloch.

— Non, répondit Valdez. Nous ne sommes que des bateliers, toujours sur le fleuve… C’est aux llaneros qu’il faudrait recourir, et il ne s’en rencontre pas un sur les rives!”

Germain Paterne ne l’ignorait pas, l’effet du coloradito est souverain dans les cas de fièvres paludéennes, et nul doute que la fièvre eût cédé si la malade eût pu prendre plusieurs décoctions de cette écorce. Et, par malheur, lui, un botaniste, il en était encore à chercher cet arbrisseau dans les savanes riveraines.

Cependant, devant la formelle volonté de Jeanne de Kermor, ses compagnons avaient résolu de continuer le voyage sans s’attarder.

Ce précieux spécifique, on se le procurerait certainement à Santa-Juana. Mais les deux cents kilomètres, que l’on comptait jusqu’à la Mission, combien de temps faudrait-il aux pirogues pour les franchir?…

La navigation fut reprise le lendemain dès l’aube. Temps orageux, accompagné de lointains roulements de tonnerre. Vent favorable dont Valdez et Parchal ne voulaient pas perdre un souffle. Ces braves gens compatissaient à la douleur de leurs passagers. Ils aimaient ce jeune garçon, se désolaient à voir son affaiblissement s’accroître. Le seul qui montrait une certaine indifférence, c’était l’Espagnol Jorrès. Ses regards ne cessaient de parcourir les llanos sur la droite du fleuve. Tout en prenant garde d’éveiller les soupçons, il se tenait le plus souvent à l’extrémité de la Gallinetta, tandis que ses camarades étaient couchés au pied du mât. Une ou deux fois, Valdez en fit la remarque, et nul doute que Jacques Helloch aurait trouvé suspecte l’attitude de l’Espagnol, s’il avait eu le loisir de l’observer. Mais sa pensée était ailleurs, et, alors que les falcas naviguaient côte à côte, il restait de longues heures à l’entrée du rouf, regardant la jeune fille qui essayait de sourire pour le remercier de ses soins.

Et ce jour-là, elle lui dit:

“Monsieur Jacques, je vous demanderai de vouloir bien me faire une promesse…

— Parlez… parlez… mademoiselle Jeanne… Je tiendrai cette promesse, quelle qu’elle soit…

— Monsieur Jacques… peut-être ne serai-je pas assez forte pour continuer nos recherches… Quand nous serons à la Mission, peut-être me faudra-t-il demeurer à Santa-Juana… Eh bien… si nous apprenons ce qu’est devenu mon père… voudrez-vous…

— Tout faire pour le rejoindre…. oui… Jeanne… ma chère Jeanne… oui!… Je partirai… je me jetterai sur les traces du colonel de Kermor… je le retrouverai… je le ramènerai à sa fille…

— Merci… monsieur Jacques… merci!…” répondit la jeune fille, dont la tête retomba sur sa couche, après qu’elle l’eut soulevée un instant.

Le Padamo fournit à l’Orénoque un apport considérable d’eaux claires et profondes à travers une embouchure supérieure en largeur à celle du fleuve lui-même. Encore un de ces tributaires qui, non sans quelque raison, eût pu mettre aux prises les Guaviariens et les Atabaposistes!

En amont, le courant se propageait avec une certaine vitesse, entre des rives escarpées au-dessus desquelles se dessinait la lisière d’épaisses forêts. Les pirogues naviguaient tantôt à la voile, tantôt à la pagaie.

En amont du rio Ocamo, la largeur du fleuve se réduisait à une cinquantaine de mètres.

La fin de la journée fut mauvaise pour la malade, à la suite d'un accès d'une extrême violence. On allait à un dénouement fatal et prochain, si Germain Paterne ne parvenait pas à se procurer le seul remède qui pût agir avec efficacité.

Comment peindre la douleur qui régnait parmi les passagers des pirogues! C'était un affreux désespoir chez le sergent Martial, à faire craindre qu'il ne devînt fou. Les hommes de la Gallinetta ne le perdaient pas de vue, redoutant que, dans un accès d'aliénation mentale, il ne se précipitât dans le fleuve.

Jacques Helloch, près de Jeanne, étanchait avec un peu d'eau fraîche la soif qui la dévorait, guettant ses moindres paroles, angoissé de ses moindres soupirs. Ne pourrait-il donc sauver celle qu'il aimait d'un si profond, d'un si pur amour, et pour laquelle il eût sacrifié cent fois sa vie?…

Et alors, la pensée lui venait qu'il aurait dû résister à la volonté de la jeune fille et donner l'ordre de retourner à San-Fernando. C'était insensé de prétendre, en de telles conditions, remonter jusqu'aux sources de l'Orénoque… Les eût-on atteintes, on ne serait pas rendu à Santa-Juana… Si un rio ne mettait pas la Mission en communication avec le fleuve, il serait nécessaire de prendre la voie de terre, de cheminer sous ces interminables forêts par une chaleur accablante…

Mais lorsque Jeanne de Kermor sortait de son assoupissement, lorsque la fièvre lui laissait quelque répit, elle demandait d'une voix inquiète:

“Monsieur Jacques… nous allons toujours dans la bonne direction… n'est-ce-pas?…

— Oui… Jeanne… Oui!… répondait-il.

— Je pense sans cesse à mon pauvre père!… J’ai rêvé que nous l’avions retrouvé!… Et il vous remerciait… de tout ce que vous aviez fait pour moi… et pour lui…”

Jacques Helloch détournait la tête pour cacher ses larmes. Oui! il pleurait, cet homme, si énergique, il pleurait de se sentir impuissant devant ce mal qui s’aggravait, devant la mort assise au chevet de cette adorée jeune fille!

Le soir, les pirogues s’arrêtèrent à Pedra Mapaya, d’où elles repartirent de grand matin, naviguant tantôt à la voile, tantôt à la pagaie. Les eaux étant déjà fort basses, les falcas risquèrent plusieurs fois d’échouer sur le fond sablonneux du fleuve.

Pendant cette fatigante journée, les falcas dépassèrent le point où les cerros Moras accidentent la rive droite de leurs premières ramifications.

L’après-midi, une nouvelle crise d’une violence extraordinaire menaça d’emporter la malade. On crut sa dernière heure arrivée. Et tel fut le désespoir du sergent Martial, que Germain Paterne, afin que Jeanne ne pût entendre ses cris, dut le faire embarquer sur la Moriche qui suivait à une centaine de pieds en arrière. Le sulfate de quinine ne produisait plus aucun effet.

“Germain… Germain… dit alors Jacques Helloch, qui avait entraîné son compagnon à l’avant de la Gallinetta, Jeanne va mourir…

— Ne te désespère pas, Jacques!…

— Je te dis qu’elle va mourir!… Si cet accès ne la tue pas, elle n’en pourra supporter un autre…”

Ce n’était que trop certain, et Germain Paterne baissa la tête.

“Et ne rien pouvoir… rien!” soupirait-il.

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, tomba une pluie torrentielle, qui rafraîchit un peu l’atmosphère dévorante, presque constamment orageuse. Il n’y eut pas lieu de s’en plaindre, car le fleuve profitait de cette eau abondamment versée des nuages blafards, amassés en couches profondes. Ses tributaires de droite et de gauche, si multipliés en cette portion de son cours, relevaient son étiage et assuraient le passage des pirogues.

À quatre heures, le cerro Yaname, dont l’altitude est considérable, apparut à gauche, au détour d’un massif boisé. Au-delà du brusque coude que dessine l’Orénoque en cet endroit, s’ouvrait l’étroite embouchure du rio Mavaca.

La brise étant entièrement tombée, Valdez et Parchal vinrent prendre leur poste au pied d’un sitio, composé de quelques paillotes, où vivaient cinq ou six familles mariquitares.

Le premier qui sauta sur la berge fut Jacques Helloch, après avoir dit au patron de la Moriche:

“Venez, Parchal.”

Où allait-il?…

Il allait chez le capitan de ce sitio.

Que voulait-il?…

Il voulait lui demander d’arracher la mourante à la mort!…

Le capitan occupait une case assez confortable, telle que le sont généralement celles des Mariquitares. C’était un Indien d’une quarantaine d’années, intelligent et serviable, qui reçut les deux visiteurs avec empressement.

Sur l’insistance de Jacques Helloch, Parchal lui posa immédiatement la question relative au coloradito.

Le capitan connaissait-il cette écorce?… Cet arbrisseau poussait-il sur la région du Mavaca?…

“Oui, répondit l’Indien, et nous en faisons souvent usage contre les fièvres…

— Et il les guérit?…

— Toujours.”

Ces propos s’échangeaient en cette langue indienne, que Jacques Helloch ne pouvait comprendre. Mais, lorsque Parchal lui eut traduit les réponses du capitan:

“Que cet Indien nous procure un peu de cette écorce… s’écria-t-il. Je la lui paierai ce qu’il en voudra… de tout ce que j’ai!…”

Le capitan se contenta de tirer d’un des paniers de sa case quelques débris ligneux, et il les remit à Parchal. Un instant après, Jacques Helloch et le patron étaient de retour à bord de la Gallinetta.

“Germain… Germain… le coloradito… le coloradito!…”

C’est tout ce que put dire Jacques Helloch.

“Bien, Jacques!… répondit Germain Paterne. Le nouvel accès de fièvre n’est pas revenu… C’est le moment… Nous la sauverons… mon ami…

nous la sauverons!”

Tandis que Germain Paterne préparait la décoction, Jacques Helloch, près de Jeanne, la rassurait… Jamais fièvre n’avait résisté à ce coloradito… On pouvait en croire le capitan de Mavaca…

Et la pauvre malade, ses yeux agrandis, ses joues blanches comme une cire, après cet accès qui avait élevé à quarante degrés la température de son corps, eut la force de sourire.

“Je me sens mieux déjà, dit-elle, et pourtant… je n’ai encore rien pris…

— Jeanne… ma chère Jeanne!…” murmura

Jacques Helloch en s’agenouillant.

Quelques minutes suffirent à Germain Paterne pour obtenir une infusion de cette écorce du coloradito, et Jacques Helloch approcha la tasse des lèvres de la jeune fille.

Dès qu’elle en eut vidé le contenu:

“Merci!” dit-elle, et ses yeux se refermèrent.

Il fallait maintenant la laisser seule. Aussi Germain Paterne entraîna-t-il Jacques, qui refusait de s’éloigner. Tous deux s’assirent à l’avant de la pirogue, où ils restèrent silencieux.

Les hommes avaient reçu ordre de débarquer, afin qu’il ne se produisît aucun bruit à bord. Si Jeanne s’endormait, il importait que rien ne troublât son sommeil.

Le sergent Martial avait été prévenu. Il savait que l’on s’était procuré le fébrifuge, il savait que celui-ci venait d’être administré à Jeanne. Aussi, quittant la Moriche, il sauta sur la berge, il courut vers la Gallinetta…

Germain Paterne lui fit signe de s’arrêter…

Le pauvre homme obéit, et, les yeux en pleurs, s’appuya contre une roche.

D’après l’opinion de Germain Paterne, si un nouvel accès ne se déclarait pas, c’est que l’absorption de coloradito aurait produit son effet. Avant deux heures, cela serait décidé. Avant deux heures, on saurait s’il y avait espoir, peut-être même certitude de sauver la jeune fille.

En quelles inexprimables transes tous attendirent! On écoutait si quelque soupir s’échappait des lèvres de Jeanne… si elle appelait… Non!… elle ne prononçait pas une parole…

Jacques Helloch se rapprocha du rouf…

Jeanne dormait, elle dormait sans agitation, sans paraître oppressée, dans un calme absolu.

“Elle est sauvée!… sauvée… murmurait-il à l’oreille de Germain Paterne.

— Je l’espère… je le crois… Eh! il a du bon, ce coloradito!… Seulement les pharmaciens sont rares sur le haut Orénoque!”

L’heure passée, l’accès n’était pas revenu… Il ne devait plus revenir.

Et, dans l’après-midi, lorsque Jeanne se réveilla, ce fut, non sans raison, cette fois, qu’elle put murmurer en tendant la main à Jacques Helloch:

“Je me sens mieux!… oui!… je me sens mieux!”

Puis, quand le sergent Martial, qui avait eu la permission de rentrer à bord de la Gallinetta, se trouva près d’elle:

“Cela va bien… mon oncle!” lui dit-elle en souriant, tandis que sa main essuyait les larmes du vieux soldat.

On la veilla toute la nuit. De nouvelles infusions de la salutaire écorce lui furent administrées. Elle dormit paisiblement, et, le lendemain, à son réveil, sa guérison ne fit plus doute pour personne. Quelle joie ressentirent les passagers, quelle joie aussi les équipages des deux pirogues!

Il va de soi que le capitan de Mavaca, malgré ses honnêtes refus, eut le droit de choisir au profit de sa famille ce qui pouvait le tenter dans la cargaison de la Moriche. Au total, ce brave homme se montra discret. Quelques couteaux, une hachette, une pièce d’étoffe, des miroirs, des verroteries, une demi-douzaine de cigares, lui payèrent le prix de son coloradito.

Au moment de partir, on s’aperçut que Jorrès n’était pas à bord de la Gallinetta, et, sans doute, il avait été absent depuis la veille au soir.

Interrogé par Jacques Helloch, dès qu’il fut de retour, il répondit que l’équipage ayant eu ordre de débarquer, il était allé dormir dans la forêt. Il fallut se contenter de cette réponse, qui ne pouvait être contrôlée, — réponse plausible, d’ailleurs.

Pendant les quatre jours qui suivirent, les falcas remontèrent non sans de grands efforts le courant de l’Orénoque. À peine faisait-on une dizaine de kilomètres par vingt-quatre heures. Qu’importait! Jeanne revenait rapidement à la santé, elle reprenait des forces, grâce aux aliments que lui préparait avec un extrême soin Germain Paterne. Jacques Helloch ne la quittait plus, et, en vérité, le sergent Martial avait fini par trouver cela tout naturel.

“C’était écrit! se répétait-il. Mais mille et mille carambas de carambas, que dira mon colonel?”

Bref, dès le lendemain, la convalescente put sortir du rouf entre midi et deux heures. Enveloppée d’une légère couverture, étendue sur une bonne literie d’herbes sèches à l’arrière de l’embarcation, elle respirait l’air vif et réconfortant des savanes.

La largeur du fleuve ne dépassait pas alors une trentaine de mètres. Le plus souvent, il fallait pousser les falcas au moyen des garapatos ou les haler à l’espilla. Il se rencontra quelques petits raudals assez difficiles, et l’eau était si basse, par endroits, qu’il fut question de débarquer le matériel des pirogues.

Par bonheur, on put éviter cette longue opération. En se mettant à l’eau, les hommes déchargèrent d’autant les pirogues, qui parvinrent à franchir les mauvaises passes. Ainsi fut-il fait au raudal de Manaviche, à celui de Yamaraquin, au pied des cerros Bocon, qui dominent le fleuve de plus de huit cents mètres.

Chaque soir, Jacques Helloch et le sergent Martial allaient chasser à travers les giboyeuses forêts de la rive, et ils rapportaient des chapelets de hoccos ou de pavas. Décidément, en ces provinces méridionales du Venezuela, la question de nourriture n’est pas pour préoccuper, si l’on aime le gibier, qui est de qualité supérieure, — et le poisson, dont fourmillent les eaux du grand fleuve.

La santé de Jeanne était rétablie maintenant. Elle n’avait plus ressenti le moindre mouvement de fièvre depuis l’emploi du coloradito. Il ne paraissait pas qu’une rechute fût à craindre, et il n’y avait qu’à laisser faire la nature, aidée de la jeunesse.

Dans la journée du 25, apparut à droite une chaîne de montagnes, indiquée sur la carte sous le nom de cerros Guanayos.

Le 26, ce n’est pas sans d’extrêmes difficultés, ni d’énormes fatigues, que les pirogues enlevèrent le raudal de Marquès.

À plusieurs reprises, Jacques Helloch, Valdez et Parchal furent induits à penser que la rive droite n’était pas aussi déserte qu’elle le paraissait. Il semblait parfois que des formes humaines se faufilaient entre les arbres et derrière les halliers. À supposer que ce fussent des Guaharibos, il n’y avait pas lieu de s’en inquiéter, puisque ces tribus sont à peu près inoffensives.

Le temps n’était plus où, alors que M. Chaffanjon explorait cette partie de l’Orénoque, ses hommes s’attendaient chaque jour à l’attaque des indigènes.

À noter, cependant, que Jacques Helloch et le sergent Martial essayèrent en vain de rejoindre les êtres quelconques qu’ils croyaient entrevoir sur la lisière de la forêt. La vérité est qu’ils en furent pour leur inutile poursuite.

Il va de soi que si ces indigènes n’étaient pas des Guaharibos, mais des Quivas, — et précisément ceux d’Alfaniz, — leur présence eût constitué le plus grave des dangers. Aussi, Parchal et Valdez surveillaient-ils vigilamment les berges, et ne laissaient plus leurs hommes descendre à terre. Quant à l’attitude de Jorrès, elle ne présentait rien de suspect, et il ne manifesta pas une seule fois l’intention de débarquer. Du reste, encore sept ou huit étapes, et les pirogues devraient s’arrêter, faute de trouver assez d’eau dans le lit du fleuve. L’Orénoque serait réduit à ce mince filet liquide qui sort de la Parima, et dont trois cents affluents font ensuite la grande artère de l’Amérique méridionale.

Alors il y aurait nécessité d’abandonner les falcas, et, pendant une cinquantaine de kilomètres, à travers les profondes forêts de la rive droite, de se transporter pédestrement à Santa-Juana. Il est vrai, là était le but, et l’on serait soutenu par l’espoir de l’atteindre en quelques marches.

Cette journée du 27 octobre et celle qui suivit purent compter parmi les plus rudes du voyage depuis le départ de Caïcara. Il fallut tout le dévouement des équipages, toute l’habileté des patrons pour franchir le raudal de Guaharibos, — point qu’atteignit en 1760 Diaz de la Fuente, le premier explorateur de l’Orénoque. Ce qui amena

Germain Paterne à faire cette juste réflexion:

“Si les Indiens de ce nom ne sont pas redoutables, on ne peut en dire autant des rapides qui s’appellent comme eux…

— Et ce sera un miracle si nous passons sans dommage! répondit Valdez.

— Puisque le ciel en a fait un en sauvant la vie à notre cher Jean, dit Jacques Helloch, il en fera bien un autre pour la pirogue qui le porte! La belle affaire qu’un miracle, quand on est le Dieu tout-puissant, créateur du ciel et de la terre….

— Amen!” murmura le sergent Martial, le plus sérieusement du monde.

Et, au vrai, ce fut miraculeux de s’en tirer au prix d’avaries légères, quelques déchirures, qui purent aisément être réparées en cours de navigation.

Que l’on se figure un escalier de réservoirs étagés, se succédant l’espace de dix à douze kilomètres. Cette disposition rappelait sur une vaste échelle les séries d’écluses du canal de Gotha en Suède. Seulement, ce canal de

Stockholm à Gotteborg est pourvu de sas et muni de portes qui les ouvrent et les ferment, — ce qui facilite la marche des bâtiments. Ici, ni sas, ni écluses, et obligation de se haler à la surface de ces paliers de pierres, qui ne laissaient pas un pouce d’eau sous les fonds des falcas. Tous les bateliers durent se mettre à la besogne et manœuvrer l’espilla accrochée aux arbres ou aux roches.

Assurément, si la saison sèche eût été plus avancée, ce raudal aurait définitivement arrêté les pirogues.

Et cela est si certain que M. Chaffanjon, en cet endroit même, dut abandonner son embarcation, et achever sur une curiare l’itinéraire qui devait aboutir aux sources de l’Orénoque.

De grand matin, on repartit. La largeur du fleuve ne se mesurait plus que par quinze à vingt mètres. Les falcas remontèrent encore des rapides, au pied de la sierra Guaharibа, — entre autres le raudal des Français, et plus d’une fois, les embarcations, flottant à peine, traînées à bras, creusèrent de profondes ornières sur les seuils de sable.

Enfin, le soir, Parchal et Valdez vinrent tourner leurs amarres à la berge de la rive droite.

En face, sur l’autre rive, se dressait la masse sombre d’un haut pic. Ce ne pouvait être que le pic Maunoir, ainsi appelé par le voyageur français en l’honneur du secrétaire général de la Société de Géographie de Paris.

Peut-être, — par excès de fatigue, — la surveillance ne serait-elle pas complète cette nuit-là. En effet, après le souper, chacun ne songea plus qu’à chercher le repos dont il avait besoin. Passagers et mariniers ne tardèrent pas à s’endormir d’un profond sommeil.

Pendant la nuit, aucune agression ne se produisit, aucune attaque ne vint ni des Indiens Bravos, ni des Quivas d’Alfaniz.

Au petit jour, les deux patrons, à leur réveil, poussèrent un cri de désappointement.

L’eau avait baissé de cinquante centimètres depuis la veille. Les pirogues étaient à sec. À peine quelques filets jaunâtres couraient-ils sur le lit de l’Orénoque.

Donc, c’était la navigation interrompue pour toute la durée de la saison chaude.

Lorsque les équipages furent rassemblés sur l’avant des pirogues, on s’aperçut que l’un des hommes manquait à l’appel.

Jorrès avait disparu, et, cette fois, il ne devait pas revenir.

CHAPITRE VII

VII

Le campement du Pic Maunoir

Le pic Maunoir domine la savane de la rive gauche d’une hauteur de quinze cents mètres. La chaîne, qui vient s’appuyer à son énorme masse, dont il semble être l’inébranlable contrefort, prolonge ses ramifications à perte de vue vers le sud-est.

À quatre-vingts kilomètres de là environ, pointe le pic Ferdinand de Lesseps, ainsi dénommé sur la carte de M. Chaffanjon.

C’est la contrée montagneuse qui commence, celle où le système orographique du Venezuela profile ses plus hauts reliefs. Là s’arrondissent de larges et énormes voussures. Là s’entrecroisent de capricieuses arêtes de jonction. Là l’ossature des monts prend un aspect imposant et grandiose. Là se développe la sierra Parima, qui engendre l’Orénoque. Là se dresse la “montagne Rouge”, entourée de nuages, cette mère féconde des ruisseaux, disent les incantations indiennes, ce Roraima, gigantesque borne milliaire, plantée à l’intersection des frontières des trois États.

Si le fleuve s’y fût prêté, Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons eussent navigué jusqu’à la sierra Parima, de laquelle sourdent ses premiers suintements. Il fallut, à leur extrême regret, renoncer à ce mode de transport. On eût sans doute pu continuer le voyage avec les curiares des pirogues. Mais ces canots n’auraient contenu que deux personnes chacun.

Puis, comment se passer de l’aide des bateliers pour la manœuvre, et comment faire en ce qui concernait les bagages?

Le matin de ce jour, Jacques Helloch, Germain Paterne, Jean, dont les forces revenaient à vue d’œil, le sergent Martial, auxquels s’étaient joints les patrons Valdez et Parchal, tinrent conseil, — ce que les Indiens de l’Amérique du Nord appellent un palabre.

Palabre ou conseil, d’importantes décisions devaient en sortir, desquelles allaient dépendre la prolongation et peut-être aussi la réussite de cette campagne.

Ces six personnes avaient pris place près la lisière de la forêt en un endroit qui fut désigné sous le nom de campement du pic Maunoir, — quoique le pic s’élevât sur l’autre rive. Au-dessous s’étendait le palier de pierres et de sable, le long duquel les deux falcas gisaient à sec, à l’embouchure d’un rio — le rio Torrida.

Le temps était beau, la brise fraîche et régulière. À gauche, sur la rive opposée, étincelait la cime du pic, baignée de rayons solaires, et, du côté de l’est, une large plaque illuminait son flanc boisé.

Les équipages s’occupaient de préparer leur premier repas à l’avant des pirogues, empanachées d’une légère fumée que la brise déroulait vers le sud.

Le vent soufflait du nord, en petite brise, et n’eût point été favorable à la navigation, au cas qu’elle eût pu se poursuivre en amont du campement.

Du reste, ni sur le cours d’aval, ni sur la berge, ni sous les premiers arbres de la forêt, ne se montrait aucun Indien. De cases ou de paillotes, habitées ou abandonnées, on ne voyait pas vestiges. Et, cependant, d’ordinaire, ces rives étaient fréquentées à cette époque. Mais les tribus éparses à la surface de ces territoires ne se fixent nulle part. Il va de soi, d’ailleurs, que les marchands de San-Fernando ne vont jamais si loin sur le cours du fleuve, car ils seraient exposés à manquer d’eau. Et puis, avec quelle bourgade, avec quel rancho, feraient-ils leur commerce d’exportation et d’importation? Au-delà de la Esmeralda, maintenant désertée, on ne rencontre pas même d’habitations en assez grand nombre pour former un village. Aussi est-il rare que les pirogues dépassent l’embouchure du Cassiquiare.

Le premier, Jacques Helloch prit la parole:

“Vous n’êtes jamais remonté au-delà sur le haut Orénoque, Valdez?… demanda-t-il.

— Jamais, répondit le patron de la Gallinetta.

— Ni vous, Parchal?…

— Ni moi, répondit le patron de la Moriche.

— Aucun homme de vos équipages ne connaît le cours du fleuve en amont du pic Maunoir?…

— Aucun, répliquèrent Parchal et Valdez.

— Aucun… sauf peut-être Jorrès, fit observer Germain Paterne, mais cet Espagnol nous a faussé compagnie… Je le soupçonne de ne pas en être à sa première promenade à travers ces territoires, quoiqu’il ait soutenu le contraire…

— Où a-t-il pu aller?… interrogea le sergent Martial.

— Où il est attendu, sans doute… répondit Jacques Helloch.

— Attendu?…

— Oui, sergent, et, je l'avoue, depuis un certain temps, ce Jorrès me paraissait assez suspect d'allure…

— Comme à moi, ajouta Valdez. Après cette absence de toute une nuit au rio Mavaca, lorsque je le questionnai, il me répondit… sans me répondre.

— Cependant, fit observer Jean, quand il s'est embarqué à San-Fernando, son intention était bien de se rendre à la Mission de Santa-Juana…

— Et il n'est même pas douteux qu'il ait connu le Père Esperante, ajouta Germain Paterne.

— Cela est vrai, dit le sergent Martial, mais cela n'explique pas pourquoi il a précisément disparu, lorsque nous ne sommes plus qu'à quelques étapes de la Mission…"

Pendant ces derniers jours, l'idée que Jorrès pouvait justifier ses soupçons avait fait de sérieux progrès dans l'esprit de Jacques Helloch. S'il n'en avait parlé à personne, c'est qu'il désirait ne point inquiéter ses compagnons. Aussi, de tous, était-il celui que le départ de l'Espagnol avait le moins surpris, en même temps qu'il en concevait de graves appréhensions.

Dans cette disposition d'esprit, il en était à se demander si Jorrès ne faisait pas partie des évadés de Cayenne, à la tête des Quivas, commandés par cet Alfaniz, Espagnol comme lui… Si cela était, que faisait Jorrès à San-Fernando, lorsqu'on l'y avait rencontré?…

Pourquoi se trouvait-il dans cette bourgade?… Il s’y trouvait, voilà le certain, et, ayant appris que les passagers des pirogues se proposaient d’aller à Santa-Juana, il avait offert ses services au patron de la Gallinetta…

Et, maintenant, Jacques Helloch, depuis que ces soupçons avaient pris corps à la suite de la disparition de l’Espagnol, se faisait ce raisonnement:

Si Jorrès n’appartient pas à la bande d’Alfaniz, s’il n’est point animé d’intentions mauvaises, si son projet était bien de se rendre à la Mission, pourquoi venait-il d’abandonner ses compagnons avant le terme du voyage?…

Or, il était parti, alors que tout indiquait qu’il aurait dû rester. Et qui sait si, secrètement averti que les Quivas et leur chef parcouraient la savane environnante, il n’avait pas profité de la nuit pour les rejoindre?…

Et s’il en était ainsi, à présent que les pirogues ne pouvaient plus naviguer, la petite troupe, contrainte de s’engager au milieu de ces épaisses forêts pour gagner Santa-Juana, serait exposée aux dangers d’une agression que son infériorité numérique rendrait difficile à repousser…

Telles étaient les très sérieuses craintes qui assaillaient Jacques Helloch.

Mais, de ces craintes, il n’avait fait part à personne — à peine quelques mots dits à Valdez, qui partageait ses soupçons à l’égard de l’Espagnol.

Aussi, après la question précise, posée par le sergent Martial sur l’inexplicable disparition de Jorrès, voulut-il imprimer à la conversation un cours différent, et dans un sens plus pratique.

“Laissons ce Jorrès où il est, dit-il. Il se peut qu’il revienne, il se peut qu’il ne revienne pas… C’est de notre situation actuelle qu’il importe de s’occuper, et des moyens d’atteindre notre but. Nous sommes dans l’impossibilité de continuer le voyage par l’Orénoque, circonstance fâcheuse, je le reconnais…

— Mais cette difficulté, fit observer Jean, se serait toujours présentée dans quelques jours. En admettant que nous fussions parvenus à gagner les sources mêmes avec nos pirogues, il aurait fallu débarquer au pied de la sierra Parima. De là à la Mission, puisque Santa-Juana n’est pas en communication avec l’Orénoque par un affluent navigable, nous avons toujours pensé que les dernières étapes se feraient à travers la savane…

— Mon cher Jean, répondit Jacques Helloch, vous avez raison, et, tôt ou tard, demain, si ce n’eût été aujourd’hui, nous aurions dû abandonner les falcas. Il est vrai, d’avoir fait une quarantaine de kilomètres plus à l’est, — et cette navigation eût été facile pendant la saison pluvieuse, — cela nous aurait épargné des fatigues… que je redoute… pour vous surtout…

— Les forces me sont entièrement revenues, monsieur Helloch, affirma Jean. Je suis prêt à partir dès aujourd’hui… et je ne resterai pas en arrière…

— Bien parlé, s’écria Germain Paterne, et rien que de vous entendre, Jean, cela nous rendrait lestes et dispos! Mais concluons, et, afin de conclure, peux-tu dire, Jacques, à quelle distance nous sommes et des sources et de la Mission…

— J’ai relevé ces distances sur la carte, répondit Jacques Helloch. En ce qui concerne la Parima, nous ne devons pas en être à plus de cinquante kilomètres. Mais je ne pense pas que le vrai chemin soit de remonter jusqu’aux sources…

— Et pourquoi?… demanda le sergent Martial.

— Parce que si la Mission est située, ainsi que nous l’avons appris à San-Fernando, et comme nous l’a confirmé M. Manuel, sur le rio Torrida, dans le nord-est de notre campement, mieux vaut essayer de s’y rendre directement, sans allonger la route en passant par la sierra Parima…

— En effet, répondit Jean. Je crois inutile de nous imposer les fatigues de ce détour, et il est préférable de marcher en droite ligne sur la Mission de Santa-Juana…

— Comment?… demanda le sergent Martial.

— Comme nous devions le faire… comme nous l’aurions fait, une fois arrivés à la sierra Parima.

— À pied?…

— À pied, répondit Jacques Helloch. Sur ces territoires déserts, il n’y a ni un sitio ni un rancho où nous puissions nous procurer des chevaux.

— Et nos bagages?… demanda Germain Paterne. Il faudra donc les laisser à bord des pirogues…

— Je le pense, répondit Jacques Helloch, et cela sera sans grand inconvénient. Pourquoi nous embarrasser de colis encombrants?…

— Hum! fit Germain Paterne, qui songeait à ses collections de naturaliste plus qu’à ses chemises et à ses chaussettes.

— D’ailleurs, objecta Jean, qui sait si des recherches ultérieures ne nous conduiront pas au-delà de Santa-Juana…

— En effet, et dans ce cas, répondit Jacques Helloch, faute de trouver à la Mission tout ce qui nous serait nécessaire, nous ferions venir nos bagages. C'est ici que les pirogues attendront notre retour. Parchal et Valdez, ou tout au moins l'un d'eux, les gardera avec nos bateliers. La Mission n'est pas à une distance telle qu'un homme à cheval ne puisse la franchir en vingt-quatre heures, et sans doute les communications sont faciles avec Santa-Juana.

— Votre avis est donc, monsieur Helloch, reprit Jean, de n'emporter que l'indispensable à un voyage qui durera au plus trois ou quatre jours…

— C'est, à mon avis, mon cher Jean, le seul parti qui convienne, et je vous proposerais de nous mettre immédiatement en route, si nous n'avions pas à organiser le campement à l'embouchure du rio Torrida. N'oublions pas que nous devons y retrouver les pirogues, lorsque nous voudrons redescendre l'Orénoque pour revenir à San-Fernando…

— Avec mon colonel… s'écria le sergent Martial.

— Avec mon père!" murmura Jean.

Un nuage de doute avait assombri le front de Jacques Helloch. C'est qu'il pressentait bien des difficultés et redoutait bien des obstacles avant d'être arrivé au but!… D'autre part, obtiendrait-on à Santa-Juana des renseignements précis qui permettraient de se lancer avec quelques chances de réussite sur les traces du colonel de

Kermor?…

Toutefois, il se garda de décourager ses compagnons. Les circonstances lui avaient fait accepter d'aller jusqu'au bout de cette campagne, et il ne reculait devant aucun danger. Devenu le chef de cette expédition, dont le succès était peut-être si éloigné, il avait le devoir d’en prendre la direction, et il ne négligerait rien pour accomplir ce devoir.

Le départ étant remis au lendemain, on s’occupa de choisir les objets que nécessitait un cheminement de trois ou quatre longues étapes à travers les forêts de la sierra.

Sur sa proposition, Valdez et deux de ses hommes furent désignés pour accompagner les voyageurs jusqu’à la Mission. Parchal et les seize autres mariniers demeureraient au campement et veilleraient sur les pirogues. Qui sait si plusieurs mois ne se passeraient pas avant que Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons eussent pu les rejoindre?… Et alors la saison sèche tirant à sa fin, la navigation redeviendrait possible. Du reste, il serait temps d’y aviser, lorsqu’il s’agirait du retour.

Ce qui devait donner lieu à des regrets, c’était que cette région de l’Alto Orinoco fût absolument déserte. Quel avantage n’eût-on pas retiré de la rencontre en cet endroit de quelques familles indiennes? Elles auraient assurément fourni d’utiles renseignements sur la route à suivre, sur la Mission de Santa-Juana, sur sa situation exacte dans le nord-est du fleuve.

Également, Jacques Helloch se fût enquis de savoir si la bande des Quivas d’Alfaniz avait paru aux alentours de la rive droite, car, si Jorrès avait pu la rejoindre, c’est qu’elle devait parcourir la campagne environnante.

En outre, il eût été permis, sans doute, d’engager un de ces Indiens à servir de guide pour franchir ces épaisses forêts, sillonnées seulement de quelques sentiers dus au passage des fauves ou des indigènes.

Et, comme Jacques Helloch exprimait devant Valdez le désir qu’il aurait eu de rencontrer des Indiens, celui-ci l’interrompit:

“Il se peut qu’à une ou deux portées de fusil du campement, il y ait des cases de Guaharibos…

— Avez-vous des raisons de le croire?…

— J’en ai une au moins, monsieur Helloch, car, en longeant la lisière de la forêt à deux cents pas de la berge, j’ai trouvé les cendres d’un foyer…

— Éteint…

— Oui, mais dont les cendres étaient encore chaudes…

— Puissiez-vous ne pas vous être trompé, Valdez! Et pourtant, s’il y a des Guaharibos à proximité, comment ne se sont-ils pas hâtés d’accourir au-devant des pirogues?…

— Accourir, monsieur Helloch!… Croyez bien qu’ils auraient plutôt décampé…

— Et pourquoi?… N’est-ce pas une bonne aubaine pour eux que d’entrer en relations avec des voyageurs… une occasion d’échanges et de profits?…

— Ils sont trop poltrons, ces pauvres Indiens!… Aussi leur premier soin aura-t-il été de se cacher dans les bois, quitte à revenir quand ils croiront pouvoir le faire sans danger.

— Eh bien, s’ils se sont enfuis, Valdez, leurs paillotes, du moins, n’ont pas pris la fuite, et peut-être en découvrirons-nous quelques-unes dans la forêt…

— Il est facile de s’en assurer, répondit Valdez, en poussant une reconnaissance à deux ou trois cents pas de la lisière… Les Indiens, d’habitude, ne s’éloignent pas du fleuve… S’il y a un sitio, une case aux environs, nous n’aurons pas marché une demi-heure sans l’avoir aperçu…

— Soit, Valdez, allons à la découverte… Mais comme l’excursion pourrait se prolonger, déjeunons d’abord, puis nous nous mettrons en route.”

Le campement fut promptement organisé sous la direction des deux patrons. Bien que les réserves de viande salée, les conserves, la farine de manioc, ne manquassent pas, on résolut de garder ces provisions pour le voyage, afin de n’être point pris au dépourvu. Valdez et deux de ses hommes se chargeraient des sacs. On leur adjoindrait quelques Indiens, s’il s’en rencontrait dans le voisinage, et l’appât de quelques piastres en ferait aisément des porteurs.

Au surplus, la chasse devait fournir plus que le nécessaire à Jacques Helloch et à ses compagnons de route comme aux mariniers en relâche au campement du pic Maunoir. On le sait, ce n’était pas la question de nourriture qui eût jamais causé d’inquiétude en parcourant de si giboyeux territoires. Même à l’entrée de la forêt, on voyait voler des canards, des hoccos, des pavas, gambader des singes d’un arbre à l’autre, courir des cabiais et des pécaris derrière les épaisses broussailles, fourmiller dans les eaux du rio Torrida des myriades de poissons.

Pendant le repas, Jacques Helloch fit connaître la résolution qu’il avait prise de concert avec Valdez. Tous deux iraient dans un rayon d’un kilomètre à la recherche des Indiens Guaharibos, qui fréquentaient peut-être ces llanos du haut Orénoque.

“Je vous accompagnerais volontiers… dit Jean.

— Si je te le permettais, mon neveu! déclara le sergent Martial; mais j’entends que tu gardes tes jambes pour le voyage… Repose-toi encore cette journée… par ordre du médecin.”

Quelque plaisir que Jacques Helloch aurait eu à faire cette excursion en compagnie de la jeune fille, il dut avouer que le sergent Martial avait raison. Assez de fatigues attendaient la petite troupe dans ce cheminement jusqu’à Santa-Juana, pour que Jeanne de Kermor s’imposât un repos de vingt-quatre heures.

“Mon cher Jean, dit-il, votre oncle est de bon conseil… Cette journée vous rendra toutes vos forces, si vous demeurez au campement… Valdez et moi, nous suffirons…

— On ne veut donc pas d’un naturaliste?… demanda Germain Paterne.

— On n’a pas besoin d’un naturaliste quand il s’agit de découvrir des naturels, répondit Jacques Helloch. Reste ici, Germain, et herborise à ta fantaisie sur la lisière de la forêt ou le long de la berge.

— Je vous aiderai, monsieur Paterne, ajouta

Jean, et pour peu qu’il y ait des plantes rares, nous ferons à nous deux bonne besogne!”

En partant, Jacques Helloch recommanda à Parchal d’activer les préparatifs du voyage. Quant à Valdez et à lui, ils espéraient être revenus avant deux heures, et, dans tous les cas, ils ne prolongeraient pas leur reconnaissance au-delà d’une certaine distance.

Donc l’un, sa carabine sur l’épaule, l’autre, sa hachette à la ceinture, quittèrent leurs compagnons, puis, obliquant au nord-est, disparurent sous les premiers arbres.

Il était neuf heures du matin. Le soleil inondait la forêt de rayons de feu. Heureusement, d’épaisses frondaisons s’étendaient au-dessus du sol.

Dans la région de l’Orénoque supérieur, si les montagnes ne sont pas boisées jusqu’à leur cime comme le sont les cerros du cours moyen, les forêts se montrent riches en essences variées et toutes luxuriantes des produits d’un sol vierge.

Cette forêt de la sierra Parima paraissait être déserte. Cependant, à quelques signes observés par lui, herbes foulées, branches rompues, empreintes fraîches encore, Valdez put, dès le début, affirmer la présence des Indiens sur la rive droite du fleuve.

Ces massifs d’arbres — c’est à noter — étaient formés généralement d’essences d’une exploitation facile, même pour les indigènes. Çà et là, des palmiers d’espèces très diverses sinon nouvelles aux yeux de voyageurs qui avaient remonté le fleuve depuis Ciudad-Bolivar jusqu’au pic Maunoir, des bananiers, des chapparos, des cobigas, des calebassiers, des marinas, dont l’écorce sert à fabriquer les sacs indigènes.

Çà et là, aussi, quelques-uns de ces arbres à vache ou à lait, qui se rencontrent peu communément aux approches du littoral, et des groupes de ces murichis, “arbres de la vie”, si abondants au delta de l’Orénoque; les feuilles de ces précieux végétaux servent de toiture aux paillotes, leurs fibres se transforment en fils et en cordes, leur moelle produit une nourriture substantielle, et leur sève, après fermentation, donne une boisson très salutaire.

À mesure que Jacques Helloch s’enfonçait sous bois, les instincts du chasseur se réveillaient en lui. Que de beaux coups de fusil, des cabiais, des paresseux, des pécaris, nombre de ces singes blancs nommés vinditas, et plusieurs tapirs, qui vinrent à bonne portée! Mais se charger de tant de gibier, ni Valdez ni lui ne l’auraient pu, et, par prudence, d’ailleurs, mieux valait ne point se trahir par la détonation d’une arme à feu. Savait-on de qui elle aurait été entendue, et si des Quivas ne rôdaient pas derrière les halliers?… Dans tous les cas, les Guaharibos, s’ils s’étaient retirés par peur, n’eussent pas été tentés de reparaître.

Jacques Helloch et Valdez marchaient donc en silence. Ils suivaient une sorte de sinueuse sente, reconnaissable au froissement des herbes.

Où conduisait cette sente?… Aboutissait-elle à quelque clairière du côte de la sierra?…

En somme, — cela fut facile à constater, — le cheminement ne pourrait être que très lent, très pénible, et il fallait compter avec les retards, les fatigues, les haltes fréquentes. Si les pirogues eussent pu atteindre les sources de l’Orénoque, peut-être la région de la Parima eût-elle offert une route moins obstruée vers la Mission de Santa-Juana?

C’est à ces diverses pensées que s’abandonnait Jacques Helloch, tandis que son compagnon ne se laissait pas distraire de l’objet de cette exploration, c’est-à-dire la découverte d’un sitio ou d’une case, habitée par un de ces Indiens dont il espérait tirer de bons services.

Aussi, après une heure de marche, le patron de la Gallinetta fut-il le premier à s’écrier:

“Une paillote!”

Jacques Helloch et lui s’arrêtèrent.

À cent pas, s’arrondissait une case en forme de gros champignon, misérable d’aspect. Perdue au plus profond d’un massif de palmiers, son toit conique s’abaissait presque jusqu’à terre. À la base de ce toit s’évidait une étroite ouverture irrégulière, qui n’était même pas fermée par une porte.

Jacques Helloch et Valdez se dirigèrent vers cette paillote et pénétrèrent à l’intérieur…

Elle était vide.

En ce moment, une détonation assez rapprochée retentit dans la direction du nord.

CHAPITRE VIII

VIII

Le jeune indien

“Un coup de feu… s’écria Jacques Helloch.

— Et à moins de trois cents pas… répondit Valdez.

— Est-ce le sergent Martial qui se serait mis en chasse après votre départ?…

— Je ne le pense pas…

— Est-ce donc l’Indien à qui appartient, sans doute, cette case?…

— Voyons d’abord si elle était habitée…” répondit le patron de la Gallinetta.

Tous deux — ils étaient sortis de quelques pas, lorsque la détonation avait retenti — rentrèrent dans la paillote.

Intérieur aussi misérable que l’extérieur. De meubles point. Au fond, sur le sol de terre, une litière d’herbe qui avait été récemment foulée. Plusieurs calebasses rangées au bas du mur. Dans un angle, un canastero contenant un restant de cassave, un morceau de pécari pendu à l’une des perches de la toiture. En tas, deux ou trois douzaines de fourmis bachacos et de comejens rôtis, dont les Indiens Bravos font leur nourriture. Enfin, sur une pierre plate, un foyer où brûlait encore un tison d’où suintait une fumée lourde.

“Le propriétaire de cette case, fit observer Valdez, devait être là… avant notre arrivée…

— Et il ne peut être loin, ajouta Jacques Helloch, et c’est sans doute lui qui a tiré?…”

Valdez secoua la tête.

“Ces Indiens n’ont ni fusils ni pistolets, dit-il. Un arc, des flèches, une sarbacane, c’est tout.

— Il faut pourtant savoir…” s’écria Jacques Helloch, qui, repris de ses inquiétudes, se demandait si les Quivas d’Alfaniz n’erraient pas aux environs.

Et alors, de quels dangers seraient menacés les voyageurs campés au pic Maunoir! Et, lorsqu’ils seraient en marche vers Santa-Juana, à quelles agressions devaient-ils s’attendre!…

Jacques Helloch et Valdez sortirent de la paillote, leurs armes en état, et, se dissimulant derrière les arbres et les taillis, ils cheminèrent dans la direction du coup de feu.

La case qu’ils venaient de quitter n’appartenait pas même à un sitio. Nulle part, aux alentours, trace de défrichement ou de culture, pas un plant de légumes, pas d’arbres fruitiers, pas un herbage pour le bétail.

Jacques Helloch et Valdez, prêtant l’oreille, l’œil aux aguets, s’avançaient à petits pas.

Aucun bruit autre que le cri des hoccos et le sifflement des pavas, égarés sous les ramures, ou le frôlement d’un animal sauvage secouant le rideau des broussailles.

Depuis vingt minutes, ils allaient ainsi, se demandant s’il ne convenait pas de revenir à la paillote, puis de là au campement, lorsqu’ils crurent entendre des gémissements à courte distance.

Valdez fit signe de se courber sur le sol, — non pour mieux entendre, mais pour n’être point vus, avant que le moment fût venu de se montrer.

Au-delà d’un buisson de calebassiers nains s’ouvrait une clairière où les rayons de soleil pénétraient à flots.

En écartant les branches du buisson, Valdez put observer cette clairière sur toute son étendue, et il reconnut que les gémissements venaient de ce côté.

Jacques Helloch, accroupi près de lui, le doigt à la détente de sa carabine, regardait à travers les branches.

“Là… là!” dit enfin Valdez.

Tant de précautions n’étaient pas nécessaires, — en cet instant du moins. On ne distinguait, à l’autre extrémité de la clairière, au pied d’un palmier moriche, que deux individus.

L’un gisait sur le sol, immobile, comme s’il eût été endormi ou plutôt comme si la mort l’eût couché à cette place.

L’autre, agenouillé, lui relevait la tête et poussait ces gémissements dont on comprit alors la cause.

Il n’y avait aucun danger à s’approcher de ces Indiens, et le devoir s’imposait de leur porter secours.

Ce n’étaient point de ces Bravos, errants ou sédentaires, qui se rencontrent sur les territoires du haut Orénoque. Valdez reconnut à leur type qu’ils appartenaient à cette race des Banivas, dont il était lui-même.

L’un, — celui qui ne donnait plus signe de vie, — paraissait être un homme d’une cinquantaine d’années, l’autre un jeune garçon âgé de treize ans.

Jacques Helloch et Valdez tournèrent le buisson et se montrèrent à dix pas.

Aussitôt qu’il aperçut les deux étrangers, le jeune Indien se releva.

L’effroi peint sur sa figure, il hésita un instant. Puis, après avoir une dernière fois soulevé la tête de l’homme tombé au pied de l’arbre, il s’enfuit, sans que le geste amical que lui adressait Valdez eût pu le retenir.

Tous deux coururent vers l’homme, ils se penchèrent sur lui, ils le redressèrent, ils écoutèrent sa respiration, ils mirent la main sur son cœur…

Le cœur ne battait plus. Aucun souffle de respiration n’entrouvrait ses lèvres décolorées.

L’Indien était mort, — mort depuis un quart d’heure à peine, car son corps ne présentait ni la froideur ni la raideur cadavérique. Sous son guayuco, taché de sang, on voyait sa poitrine trouée d’une balle à la hauteur des poumons.

Valdez examina le sol et, entre les herbes rougies, il ramassa un projectile.

C’était la balle d’un revolver du calibre de six millimètres et demi.

“Le calibre de ceux qui sont à bord de la Gallinetta, fit observer Jacques Helloch… ceux de la Moriche ont huit millimètres… Est-ce que?…”

Et sa pensée se porta sur Jorrès.

“Il faudrait tâcher, dit-il, de ramener l’enfant… Lui seul peut nous apprendre dans quelles conditions cet Indien a été frappé, et peut-être quel est son assassin…

— Sans doute, répondit Valdez, mais où le retrouver? La peur lui a fait prendre la fuite…

— Ne serait-il pas retourné à la paillote?…

— C’est peu probable.”

Peu probable, en effet, et, en réalité, cela n’était pas.

Le jeune Indien ne s’était écarté que d’une centaine de pas sur la gauche de la clairière. De là, caché derrière un arbre, il observait les deux étrangers. Lorsqu’il comprit qu’il n’avait rien à craindre d’eux, quand il les vit donner leurs soins à l’Indien, il fit quelques pas en avant de manière à se rapprocher.

Valdez l’aperçut, se redressa, et l’enfant sembla prêt à s’enfuir de nouveau.

“Parlez-lui, Valdez”, dit Jacques Helloch.

Le patron de la Gallinetta prononça quelques mots en langue indienne pour appeler le jeune garçon. Puis, après l’avoir rassuré par ses paroles, il l’engagea à les rejoindre. Il lui demanda même de venir les aider à rapporter l’Indien à la paillote…

Non sans un peu d’hésitation, l’enfant parut se décider. À l’effroi qui se peignait sur sa figure succéda une vive douleur, et des gémissements s’échappèrent de sa poitrine.

Il revint à pas lents, et, dès qu’il fut près du corps, il s’agenouilla tout en pleurs.

Ce jeune Indien, de physionomie douce, de constitution vigoureuse, semblait être amaigri par les privations et la misère. Et comment eût-il pu en être autrement dans les conditions où il vivait, au fond de cette forêt déserte, à l’intérieur de cette case, seul avec l’Indien qui gisait sur le sol? À sa poitrine pendait une de ces petites croix que distribuent les missionnaires catholiques aux prosélytes des missions. Il paraissait intelligent, et comme Jacques Helloch venait de parler en espagnol à Valdez, il dit qu’il comprenait cette langue.

On l’interrogea.

“Comment t’appelles-tu?…

— Gomo.

— Quel est cet Indien?…

— Mon père…

— Le malheureux!… s’écria Jacques Helloch. C’est son père qui vient d’être tué…”

Et comme l’enfant pleurait, il lui prit la main, il l’attira près de lui, il le consola par ses caresses.

Gomo se remit, et ses yeux retinrent quelques larmes. Un sûr instinct lui disait qu’il avait là, dans ces étrangers, des protecteurs, des amis…

Valdez lui demanda alors:

“Qui a frappé ton père?

— Un homme… Il est venu au milieu de la nuit… Il est entré dans la case…

— Cette case qui est là?… reprit Valdez, en dirigeant sa main vers la paillote.

— Oui… il n’y en a pas d’autre de ce côté.

— D’où venait cet homme?…

— Je ne sais pas.

— Était-ce un Indien?…

— Non… un Espagnol.

— Un Espagnol!… s’écria Jacques Helloch.

— Oui… et nous l’avons compris, quand il nous a parlé, répondit Gomo.

— Et que voulait-il?…

— Il voulait savoir si les Quivas étaient arrivés dans la forêt de la Parima…

— Quels Quivas?… demanda Valdez aussi vivement que son compagnon aurait pu le faire.

— Les Quivas d’Alfaniz… répondit Gomo.

— La bande de ce forçat évadé!”

Et aussitôt, Jacques Helloch d’ajouter:

“Ont-ils donc été vus par ici?…

— Je ne sais pas, répondit l’enfant.

— Et tu as entendu dire qu’ils s’étaient montrés sur le territoire?…

— Non.

— Mais… les as-tu rencontrés… autrefois?…

— Oui… oui!”

Et les yeux du jeune Indien, dont les traits respiraient l’effroi, se mouillèrent de nouvelles larmes.

Valdez l’ayant pressé de questions, il raconta que ces Quivas et leur chef avaient surpris le village de San-Salvador, où demeurait sa famille, dans le nord de la sierra Parima, qu’ils en avaient massacré tous les habitants, que sa mère avait été tuée, que son père et lui, ayant pu parvenir à se sauver, s’étaient réfugiés dans cette forêt, qu’ils avaient bâti cette case, où ils vivaient depuis dix mois environ…

Quant à la présence des Quivas dans le pays, Gomo ne pouvait donner aucun renseignement. Son père et lui ne savaient pas s’ils avaient été signalés aux environs de l’Orénoque.

“Et cet Espagnol, qui est venu la nuit dans ta case, vous a demandé des informations là-dessus?… reprit Valdez.

— Oui… et il s’est mis en colère, parce que nous n’avions pas pu lui répondre.

— Et il est resté?…

— Jusqu’au matin.

— Et alors?…

— Il a voulu que mon père lui servît de guide pour le conduire du côté de la sierra.

— Ton père a consenti?…

— Il a refusé, parce que cet homme ne lui donnait pas confiance.

— Et cet homme?…

— Il est parti seul, au jour, quand il a vu que nous ne voulions pas le conduire.

— Il est donc revenu?…

— Oui… environ quatre heures après.

— Quatre heures après?… Et pour quelle raison?…

— Il s’était égaré à travers la forêt… il ne pouvait retrouver la direction de la sierra, et, cette fois, il nous menaça de son revolver… il jura qu’il nous tuerait si nous refusions…

— Et ton père a été obligé…

— Oui… mon père… mon pauvre père! répondit le jeune Indien. L’Espagnol l’avait saisi par le bras… il l’avait entraîné hors de la case… il le forçait à marcher devant lui… Moi, je les suivais… Nous avons été ainsi pendant une heure… Mon père, qui ne voulait pas guider cet homme, faisait des détours sans trop s’éloigner… Je le comprenais bien, car je connais la forêt… Mais l’Espagnol finit par le comprendre aussi… Il devint furieux… il accabla mon père d’injures… il le menaça de nouveau… Mon père, que la colère prit alors, se précipita sur l’Espagnol… Il y eut une lutte qui ne dura pas longtemps… Mon père étant sans armes… Je ne pus lui porter secours… Un coup de feu partit… et il tomba, tandis que l’homme s’enfuyait… Je relevai mon père… Le sang sortait de sa poitrine… Il n’avait plus la force de parler… Il voulut revenir vers la case… Il ne put se traîner que jusqu’ici… où il est mort!…”

Et l’enfant, tout plein de cet amour filial qui caractérise les tribus indigènes du haut Orénoque, se jeta en pleurant sur le corps de l’Indien.

Il fallut le calmer, le consoler, et surtout lui donner à entendre que l’on vengerait son père… On retrouverait l’assassin… on lui ferait expier son crime…

À ces paroles, les yeux de Gomo se rouvrirent, et, à travers ses larmes, brilla le feu de la vengeance.

Jacques Helloch lui posa une dernière question.

“Tu as bien vu cet homme?… demanda-t-il.

— Oui… je l’ai vu… et je n’oublierai jamais sa figure.

— Peux-tu nous dire comment il était vêtu… sa taille… ses cheveux… ses traits?…

— Il était vêtu d’une veste et d’un pantalon de marinier.

— Bien.

— Il était un peu plus grand que vous… ajouta Gomo en regardant Valdez.

— Bien.

— Il avait les cheveux très noirs… toute sa barbe… noire aussi…

— C’est Jorrès!… dit Jacques Helloch.

— C’est lui!” dit Valdez.

Alors, tous deux, ils proposèrent à Gomo de les suivre.

“Où? demanda-t-il.

— Au fleuve, à l’embouchure du rio Torrida, où se sont arrêtées nos pirogues.

— Des pirogues?… répondit-il.

— Ton père et toi, vous ne saviez pas que deux falcas sont arrivées hier soir?

— Non… mais si nous n’avions pas été emmenés dans la forêt par l’Espagnol, nous vous aurions rencontrés ce matin, à l’heure de la pêche…

— Eh bien, mon enfant, dit Jacques Helloch, je te le répète, veux-tu venir avec nous?…

— Et vous me promettez que nous chercherons l’homme qui a tué mon père…

— Je te promets que ton père sera vengé…

— Je vous suis…

— Viens donc…”

Tous deux, emmenant le jeune Gomo, reprirent le chemin de l’Orénoque.

Quant à l’Indien, on ne l’abandonnerait pas à la dent des fauves. Il appartenait à ces tribus Banivas du village de San-Salvador, converties au christianisme, et dont la population avait été massacrée par la bande des Quivas.

Aussi Jacques Helloch se proposait-il de revenir dans l’après-midi avec quelques-uns des mariniers, afin de donner à ce corps une sépulture chrétienne.

Ce fut Gomo qui les conduisit par le plus court, et sans avoir repassé devant la paillote, ils regagnèrent le campement en une demi-heure.

Il avait été convenu entre Jacques Helloch et Valdez qu’ils ne diraient rien de Jorrès. Mieux valait se taire sur les rapports qui existaient, à n’en pas douter, entre Alfaniz et lui. Inutile d’ajouter dans l’esprit de leurs compagnons de nouvelles appréhensions à tant d’autres.

En effet, la situation était très aggravée par ce fait que l’Espagnol connaissait le lien de parenté qui unissait Jean au colonel de Kermor. Alfaniz l’apprendrait par lui, et, pour assouvir sa haine contre le colonel, ce misérable chercherait à s’emparer de son enfant.

Il est vrai, — ce qui était rassurant dans une certaine mesure, — c’est que les Quivas n’avaient point paru aux environs du fleuve. En effet, si leur présence avait été signalée dans la sierra Parima, l’Indien et son fils en auraient eu connaissance. Jacques Helloch se contenterait de dire que l’Espagnol, après s’être enfui, s’était pris de querelle avec cet Indien qui refusait de lui servir de guide jusqu’à la Mission de Santa-Juana, et, que, au cours de cette querelle, il y avait eu mort d’homme.

Cette leçon fut faite à Gomo, et il la comprit, car ses yeux pétillaient d’intelligence. Il ne parlerait à personne ni des Quivas ni d’Alfaniz.

Quelle surprise pour le sergent Martial, pour Jean et pour Germain Paterne, lorsque Jacques Helloch leur présenta Gomo à son retour au campement, et leur raconta de son histoire ce qu’il était convenu de dire!

Chacun fit très bon accueil au jeune Indien, et Jean l’attira, le combla de caresses, quand il apprit que ce pauvre enfant était maintenant seul au monde… On ne l’abandonnerait pas… Non!… on ne l’abandonnerait pas!…

Et même l’arrivée de Gomo put être regardée comme providentielle, puisque Jean, lui ayant demandé s’il connaissait la Mission de Santa-Juana:

“Je la connais, répondit-il, et j’y suis allé plusieurs fois avec mon père.

— Et tu nous y conduiras?…

— Oui… oui!… Vous n’êtes pas comme ce méchant homme… qui voulait nous avoir pour guides…”

Sur un signe de Valdez, Gomo se garda d’en dire davantage.

Quant à l’auteur de l’assassinat commis sur la personne de l’Indien, ni Jacques Helloch ni Valdez ne pouvaient avoir le moindre doute, après le portrait que l’enfant avait fait du meurtrier. Et s’ils en avaient eu, ces doutes auraient cessé, lorsqu’on eut constaté qu’un revolver avait été dérobé dans le rouf de la Gallinetta.

C’était celui du sergent Martial.

“Mon revolver volé, s’écria-t-il, et volé par ce bandit, et il a servi à assassiner ce malheureux Indien!… Un revolver qui m’avait été donné par mon colonel!…”

Et, en vérité, le chagrin du vieux soldat fut aussi grand que sa colère. Si jamais Jorrès lui tombait sous la main…

Gomo se montra très touché des soins dont il fut l’objet. Après le déjeuner, on acheva l’organisation du campement du pic Maunoir que devaient occuper les mariniers des falcas, et les préparatifs du voyage pour les passagers, en vue d’une séparation qui pouvait durer… on ne savait.

Entre-temps, Gomo avait appris de Jean quel but ses compagnons poursuivaient en se rendant à la Mission de Santa-Juana.

Sa figure s’était aussitôt altérée.

“Vous allez rejoindre votre père… dit-il.

— Oui, mon enfant!

— Vous le reverrez donc… et moi… je ne reverrai plus jamais le mien… jamais!”

Dans l’après-midi, Jacques Helloch, Germain Paterne, et les mariniers de la Moriche quittèrent le campement, et se dirigèrent vers la clairière.

Gomo les accompagnait, et Jean avait eu la permission de les suivre.

En une demi-heure, on fut arrivé à l’endroit où le corps de l’Indien gisait au pied du palmier. Les hommes, qui s’étaient munis de pioches, creusèrent une tombe assez profonde pour ne pas être atteinte par les fauves.

Le corps y fut déposé, après que Gomo, tout en larmes, eut embrassé son père une dernière fois.

La fosse comblée, Jean s’agenouilla sur le bord, à côté du jeune garçon, et tous deux s’unirent dans une même prière.

On revint au campement.

Jean n’avait pas été trop fatigué. Il répondait de lui. La force ne lui ferait pas défaut pendant le voyage. Il en donna l’assurance à Jacques Helloch et au sergent Martial.

“J’ai si bon espoir!…” répétait-il.

La nuit venue, les passagers regagnèrent le rouf des pirogues, tandis que les mariniers se disposaient à veiller sur le campement.

On avait fait une place à bord de la Gallinetta, pour Gomo. Mais le pauvre enfant ne dormit guère et de gros soupirs troublèrent fréquemment son sommeil.

CHAPITRE IX

IX

À travers la sierra

Dès six heures du matin, Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons quittèrent le campement du pic Maunoir, laissé à la garde de Parchal, en qui l’on pouvait avoir toute confiance.

Parchal avait sous ses ordres les bateliers de la Gallinetta et de la Moriche, — en tout quinze hommes. Les deux autres, chargés du transport des bagages, accompagnaient les voyageurs. En cas d’agression, si Parchal ne se sentait pas en mesure de se défendre soit contre des indigènes, soit contre une attaque d’Alfaniz, il devrait abandonner le campement et, autant que possible, rallier la Mission de Santa-Juana.

Il n’était pas douteux, d’ailleurs, — et Jacques Helloch s’en croyait assuré, — que la Mission serait en mesure de résister aux Quivas, qui infestaient sans doute cette partie du territoire vénézuélien.

À ce sujet, dont il s’était entretenu avec Valdez, il y avait tout lieu de se dire que les bonnes chances l’emporteraient sur les mauvaises. Assurément, de rencontrer la bande d’Alfaniz eût été la plus redoutable éventualité pendant ces étapes à travers les forêts de la sierra Parima. Mais, suivant l’affirmation du jeune Gomo, d’après ce que son père avait répondu à Jorrès, cette bande ne s’était pas montrée dans le voisinage de la sierra. Il est vrai, en se jetant vers le nord, l’Espagnol espérait évidemment rejoindre cet Alfaniz dont il avait peut-être été le compagnon de bagne, — toute hypothèse étant permise à son égard. Au surplus, si les Quivas n’étaient pas loin, la Mission ne l’était pas non plus — une cinquantaine de kilomètres seulement. À raison de vingt-cinq kilomètres par vingt-quatre heures, des piétons pourraient probablement franchir cette distance en deux jours et demi. Partis le 30 octobre, au soleil levant, était-ce exagéré de penser qu’ils arriveraient à Santa-Juana dans l’après-midi du

1er novembre?… Non, si le mauvais temps ne leur suscitait pas des retards.

Donc, avec un peu de bonne chance, la petite troupe comptait effectuer ce voyage sans faire aucune fâcheuse rencontre.

Le détachement se composait de huit personnes. Jacques Helloch et Valdez marchaient en tête, puis Jean et Gomo, suivant la direction indiquée par le jeune Indien. Derrière venaient Germain Paterne et le sergent Martial. Après eux, les deux mariniers de la Gallinetta portaient les colis, réduits au strict nécessaire, des couvertures pour les haltes de nuit, de la viande conservée et de la farine de manioc en quantité suffisante, chacun ayant sa gourde d’aguardiente ou de tafia.

Certes, au milieu de ces giboyeuses forêts, la chasse aurait suffi à assurer la nourriture des voyageurs. Toutefois, mieux valait ne point donner l’éveil et signaler sa présence par des détonations d’armes à feu.

Si quelques pécaris ou cabiais voulaient se laisser capturer sans tomber sous une balle, ils seraient les bienvenus. Ainsi les échos de la sierra ne répercuteraient-ils pas un seul coup de fusil.

Il va de soi que Jacques Helloch, le sergent Martial et Valdez étaient armés de leurs carabines, la cartouchière pleine, le revolver et le couteau à la ceinture. Germain Paterne avait pris son fusil de chasse, et sa boîte d’herboriste, dont il ne se séparait jamais.

Le temps se prêtait à la marche. Nulle menace de pluie ou d’orage. Des nuages élevés tamisaient les rayons solaires. Une fraîche brise courait à la cime des arbres, pénétrait sous les ramures, faisait voler les feuilles sèches. Le sol montait en gagnant du côté du nord-est. À moins d’une brusque dépression de la savane, il ne se présenterait aucun marécage, aucun de ces esteros humides, qui occupent souvent les profondes bassures des llanos.

Néanmoins, les voyageurs ne seraient pas privés d’eau sur leur parcours. Au dire de Gomo, le rio Torrida, à partir de son embouchure sur l’Orénoque, prenait la direction de Santa-Juana. C’était un rio torrentueux et innavigable, obstrué de roches granitiques, impraticable aux falcas et même aux curiares. Il se déroulait en capricieux zigzags à travers la forêt, et c’était sa rive droite que suivait la petite troupe.

Sous la conduite du jeune Indien, après avoir laissé sur la gauche la paillote abandonnée, on gagna vers le nord-est, de manière à couper obliquement les territoires de la sierra.

La marche n’était pas aisée à la surface d’un sol embroussaillé, parfois recouvert d’une épaisse couche de feuilles mortes, parfois encombré de ces branches que les impétueuses rafales des chubascos abattent par centaines. Jacques Helloch, d’ailleurs, tendait plutôt à modérer le cheminement, afin de ménager les forces de la jeune fille. Et lorsqu’elle lui faisait quelque observation à ce sujet:

“Il importe d’aller vite, sans doute, mais il importe plus encore de ne pas être arrêté par la fatigue.

— Je suis toute remise, maintenant, monsieur Helloch… Ne craignez pas que je sois une cause de retard…

— Je vous en prie… mon cher Jean… répondait-il, permettez-moi de prendre pour vous les précautions que je crois nécessaires… En causant avec Gomo, j’ai pu me rendre compte de la situation de Santa-Juana, établir notre route, étape par étape, que j’ai calculées avec soin… À moins de rencontres qui ne se produiront pas, je l’espère, nous n’aurons pas besoin de doubler ces étapes… Cependant, s’il le fallait, nous nous féliciterions d’avoir ménagé nos forces… les vôtres surtout… Mon seul regret est qu’il ait été impossible de se procurer une monture, ce qui vous eût épargné un voyage à pied…

— Merci, monsieur Helloch, répondit Jeanne. Ce mot est le seul qui puisse répondre à tout ce que vous faites pour moi!… Et vraiment, à y bien réfléchir, en présence des difficultés que je n’avais pas voulu voir au début, je me demande comment mon sergent et son neveu auraient pu atteindre leur but, si Dieu ne vous avait pas mis sur notre route!… Et pourtant… vous ne deviez pas aller au-delà de San-Fernando…

— Je devais aller où allait Mlle de Kermor, et il est bien évident que si j’ai entrepris ce voyage sur l’Orénoque, c’est que nous devions vous rencontrer en chemin!… Oui!… cela était écrit, mais ce qui est également écrit, c’est qu’il faut que vous vous en rapportiez à moi pour tout ce qui regarde ce voyage jusqu’à la Mission.

— Je le ferai, monsieur Helloch, et à quel plus sûr ami pourrais-je me fier?…” répondit la jeune fille.

À la halte de midi, on s’arrêta sur le bord du rio Torrida, qu’il eût été impossible de traverser au milieu de ses eaux bondissantes. Sa largeur ne dépassait pas une cinquantaine de pieds. Des canards et des pavas voletaient à sa surface. Le jeune Indien put en abattre quelques couples avec ses flèches. Ils furent conservés pour le dîner du soir, et on se contenta de viande froide et de gâteaux de cassave.

Après une heure de repos, la petite troupe se remit en marche. Si les pentes du sol s'accentuaient, l'épaisseur de la forêt ne semblait pas devoir s'éclaircir. Toujours les mêmes arbres, les mêmes halliers, les mêmes broussailles. À côtoyer le Torrida, en somme, on évitait nombre d'obstacles à travers des fourrés encombrés de palmas llaneras. Nul doute que, le soir, la moyenne de kilomètres, calculée par Jacques Helloch, fût atteinte, sauf complications.

Le sous-bois était tout animé. Des milliers d'oiseaux s'envolaient de branches en branches, pépiant à pleins becs. Les singes cabriolaient sous les ramures, principalement des couples de ces aluates hurleurs, qui ne hurlent pas le jour, et réservent pour le soir ou le matin leurs assourdissants concerts. Parmi les volatiles les plus nombreux, Germain Paterne eut la satisfaction d'observer des bandes de guacharos ou diablotins, dont la présence indiquait que l'on se rapprochait du littoral de l'est. Troublés dans leur tranquillité diurne, car, le plus souvent, ils ne sortent qu'à la nuit des anfractuosités rocheuses, ils se réfugiaient sur la cime des matacas dont les baies, fébrifuges comme l'écorce du coloradito, servent à leur nourriture.

D'autres oiseaux encore voltigeaient de branche en branche, ceux-là passés maîtres en danses et pirouettes, les mâles faisant “le beau” en l'honneur des femelles. À mesure qu'on avancerait vers le nord-est, les espèces aquatiques deviendraient plus rares, car, habituées des bayous, elles ne s'éloignent guère des rives de l'Orénoque.

Entre-temps aussi, Germain Paterne aperçut quelques nids, suspendus aux branches par une légère liane, qui se balançaient à la manière d'une escarpolette. De ces nids, hors de l'atteinte des reptiles, comme s'ils eussent été pleins de rossignols auxquels on aurait appris à solfier la gamme, s'échappaient des volées de trupials, les merveilleux chanteurs du monde aérien. On se rappelle que le sergent Martial et Jean en avaient déjà vu, lorsqu'ils s'étaient promenés aux environs de Caïcara, en débarquant du Simon-Bolivar.

La tentation de mettre la main dans l'un de ces nids était trop forte pour que Germain Paterne pût y résister. Mais, au moment où il allait le faire:

“Prenez garde… prenez garde!…” cria Gomo.

Et, en effet, une demi-douzaine de ces trupials se précipitèrent sur l'audacieux naturaliste, s'attaquant à ses yeux. Il fallut que Valdez et le jeune Indien accourussent pour le débarrasser de ses agresseurs.

“De la prudence, lui recommanda Jacques Helloch, et ne risque pas de revenir borgne ou aveugle en Europe!”

Germain Paterne se le tint pour dit.

Il était sage, également, de ne pas frôler les broussailles qui foisonnaient à la gauche du rio. Le mot myriade n'est pas exagéré, lorsqu'on l'applique aux serpents qui rampent sous les herbes. Ils sont aussi à craindre que les caïmans dans les eaux ou le long des rives de l'Orénoque. Si ceux-ci, pendant la saison d'été, s'enfouissent au fond des vases encore humides et y dorment jusqu'à l'époque des pluies, les représentants de l'erpétologie ne s'engourdissent pas sous le fouillis des feuilles mortes. Ils sont toujours à l’affût, et plusieurs furent aperçus, — entre autres un trigonocéphale, long de deux mètres que Valdez signala à propos et mit en fuite.

Quant aux tigres, aux ours, aux ocelots et autres fauves, pas un seul ne se montra dans le voisinage. Mais, très probablement, la nuit venue, leurs hurlements se feraient entendre, et il serait opportun de surveiller le campement.

Jusqu’alors, Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons avaient donc évité toute mauvaise rencontre, ni animaux dangereux, ni malfaiteurs, — ceux-ci plus redoutables que ceux-là. Il est vrai, sans avoir rien dit de Jorrès et d’Alfaniz, Jacques Helloch et Valdez ne se départissaient pas d’une minutieuse surveillance. Assez souvent, le patron de la Gallinetta, précédant la petite troupe, s’éloignait vers la gauche, et allait battre l’estrade, afin d’empêcher toute surprise ou de prévenir une soudaine agression. Puis, n’ayant rien observé de suspect, bien qu’il se fût écarté parfois d’un demi-kilomètre, Valdez venait reprendre sa place près de Jacques Helloch. Un regard échangé leur suffisait à se comprendre.

Les voyageurs se tenaient en groupe compact, autant que le permettait l’étroitesse de la sente parallèle au rio Torrida. À plusieurs reprises, cependant, il y eut nécessité de rentrer sous bois, afin de contourner de hautes roches ou de profondes excavations. La direction du cours d’eau se maintenait toujours vers le nord-est, en longeant les assises de la sierra Parima. Sur l’autre rive, la forêt se développait en étages boisés, dominés çà et là par quelque palmier gigantesque. Au-dessus pointait le sommet de la montagne, dont l’arête septentrionale devait se rattacher au système orographique du Roraima.

Jean et Gomo marchaient l’un près de l’autre, côtoyant la berge, tout juste assez large pour le passage de deux piétons.

Ce dont ils parlaient, c’était de la Mission de Santa-Juana. Le jeune Indien donnait des détails très complets sur cette fondation du Père Esperante, et sur le Père lui-même. Tout ce qui concernait ce missionnaire était de nature à intéresser.

“Tu le connais bien?… demanda Jean.

— Oui… je le connais… je l’ai vu souvent… Pendant une année, mon père et moi, nous sommes restés à Santa-Juana…

— Il y a longtemps?…

— Non… avant la saison des pluies de l’autre année… C’était après le malheur… notre village de San-Salvador pillé par les Quivas… D’autres Indiens et nous, nous avions fui jusqu’à la Mission.

— Et vous avez été recueillis à Santa-Juana par le Père Esperante?…

— Oui… un homme si bon!… Et il voulait nous retenir… Quelques-uns sont restés…

— Pourquoi êtes-vous partis?…

— Mon père l’a voulu… Nous sommes des Banivas… Son désir était de regagner les territoires… Il avait été batelier sur le fleuve… Je savais déjà… je me servais d’une petite pagaie… À quatre ans… je ramais avec lui…”

Ce que disait le jeune garçon n’était pas pour étonner Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons. D’après le récit du voyageur français, ils connaissaient le caractère de ces Banivas, les meilleurs mariniers de l’Orénoque, depuis nombre d’années convertis au catholicisme, des

Indiens intelligents et honnêtes. C’était par suite de circonstances particulières, — et parce que la mère de Gomo appartenait à une tribu de l’est, — que son père avait été se fixer au village de San-Salvador, au-delà des sources du fleuve. Et, en prenant cette décision de quitter Santa-Juana, il obéissait à son instinct qui le poussait à retourner vers les llanos entre San-Fernando et Caïcara. Il guettait donc une occasion, l’arrivée de pirogues à bord desquelles il eût pu trouver du service, et, en attendant, il habitait cette misérable case de la sierra Parima.

Et que fût devenu son enfant, après l’assassinat commis par Jorrès, si les falcas n’eussent été dans la nécessité de s’arrêter au campement du pic Maunoir?…

C’est à toutes ces choses que réfléchissait Jeanne de Kermor, en écoutant le jeune Indien. Puis, elle ramenait la conversation sur Santa-Juana, sur l’état actuel de la Mission, plus particulièrement sur le Père Esperante. Gomo répondait avec netteté à toutes ces questions. Il dépeignait le missionnaire espagnol, un homme grand, vigoureux, malgré sa soixantaine d’années, — beau… beau… répétait-il, sa barbe blanche, ses yeux qui brillaient comme du feu, tel que l’avaient dépeint M. Manuel Assomption et le misérable Jorrès. Et alors, dans une disposition d’esprit à prendre ses désirs pour des réalités, Jeanne se voyait déjà rendue à Santa-Juana… Le Père Esperante l’accueillait à bras ouverts… il lui fournissait les renseignements dont elle avait besoin… il lui apprenait ce qu’était devenu le colonel de Kermor depuis son dernier passage à San-Fernando… elle savait enfin où il avait été chercher refuge en quittant Santa-Juana…

À six heures du soir, Jacques Helloch donna le signal d'arrêt, après la seconde étape de la journée.

Les Indiens s'occupèrent d'organiser la halte de nuit. Le lieu paraissait propice. Une profonde anfractuosité, coupant la berge, se dessinait en entonnoir jusqu'au bord du rio. Au-dessus de cette anfractuosité, de grands arbres inclinaient leurs branches, comme une sorte de rideau qui retombait sur les parois de la roche. Au bas, s'évidait une sorte de niche, dans laquelle la jeune fille pourrait s'étendre. Avec une litière d'herbes sèches et de feuilles mortes, on lui ferait un lit, et elle y reposerait aussi bien que sous le rouf de la Gallinetta.

Naturellement, Jean se défendait de ce que l'on voulût prendre tant de peines à son sujet. Jacques Helloch se refusa à rien entendre, et il invoqua l'autorité du sergent Martial… Il fallut bien que le neveu obéît à son oncle.

Germain Paterne et Valdez préparèrent le repas. Le rio fourmillait de poissons. Gomo en tua quelques-uns en les fléchant à la manière indienne, et ils furent grillés sur un petit feu allumé contre la roche. Avec les conserves et les gâteaux de cassave, tirés du sac des porteurs, l'appétit aidant après cinq heures de marche, les convives ne se refusèrent pas à reconnaître qu'ils n'avaient jamais fait un meilleur repas… depuis…

“Depuis le dernier!…” déclara Germain Paterne, pour qui tout repas était excellent, à la condition de satisfaire la faim.

La nuit venue, chacun alla choisir sa place, dès que Jean eut été se coucher au fond de sa niche. Le jeune Indien s'étendit à l'entrée. Le campement ne pouvant pas rester sans surveillance, on avait décidé que, pendant la de la nuit, Valdez serait de garde avec l'un de ses hommes, et, pendant la, Jacques Helloch avec l'autre.

En effet, du côté de la forêt sur la berge, et du côté du rio ou de la rive opposée, il fallait être à même d'apercevoir toute approche suspecte.

Bien que le sergent Martial eût réclamé sa part de faction, il dut consentir à reposer jusqu'au jour. La nuit suivante, on accepterait son offre, et aussi l'offre de Germain Paterne. Jacques Helloch et Valdez suffiraient en se relayant. Donc le vieux soldat alla s'accoter contre la paroi, aussi près que possible de la jeune fille.

Le concert des fauves, auquel se mêlait celui des singes hurleurs, commença dès que le jour devint obscur, et il ne devait finir qu'aux premières lueurs de l'aurore. La meilleure précaution, afin de tenir ces animaux éloignés du campement, eût été d'allumer un foyer flambant et de l'entretenir de bois sec toute la nuit. On le savait, mais on fut d'accord pour n'en rien faire. Si ce foyer eût écarté les animaux, il aurait pu, au contraire, attirer des malfaiteurs, — peut-être les Quivas, s'ils couraient ce territoire, et c'est de ces malfaiteurs surtout qu'il importait de n'être point vu.

Bientôt, à l'exception de Valdez, posté sur la berge, et du batelier qui veillait près de lui, le campement fut plongé dans un profond sommeil.

Vers minuit, tous deux furent remplacés par Jacques Helloch et le second porteur.

Valdez n'avait rien observé, rien entendu de suspect. Entendre, d'ailleurs, eût été difficile, au milieu du tumulte dont les eaux du rio en se brisant contre les roches emplissaient la sierra.

Jacques Helloch engagea Valdez à prendre quelques heures de repos, et remonta vers la berge.

De là, non seulement il pouvait surveiller la lisière de la forêt, mais aussi la rive gauche du Torrida.

Assis au pied d’un énorme moriche, les réflexions, les sentiments dont son esprit et son cœur étaient pleins, ne l’empêchèrent pas de faire bonne garde.

Était-il le jouet d’une illusion… mais vers quatre heures du matin, lorsque l’horizon de l’est commençait à blanchir, son attention fut mise en éveil par un certain mouvement sur la rive opposée, moins escarpée que la rive droite. Il lui sembla que des formes se déplaçaient entre les arbres. Étaient-ce des animaux… étaient-ce des hommes?…

Il se redressa, il rampa de manière à gagner la crête de la berge, il parvint à se rapprocher de quelques mètres vers la rive, et demeura immobile, regardant…

Il ne vit rien de distinct. Cependant, qu’une certaine animation se produisît à la lisière du massif de l’autre rive, il crut en avoir la certitude.

Devait-il donner l’alarme, ou tout au moins réveiller Valdez, qui dormait à quelques pas?…

Ce fut à ce dernier parti qu’il s’arrêta, et, touchant l’Indien à l’épaule, il le tira du sommeil.

“Ne bougez pas, Valdez, dit-il à voix basse, et observez l’autre berge du rio.”

Valdez, étendu de son long, n’eut qu’à tourner la tête dans la direction indiquée. Pendant une minute, son regard fouilla les dessous de cet obscur massif d’arbres.

“Je ne me trompe pas, dit-il enfin, il y a là trois ou quatre hommes qui rôdent sur la rive…

— Que faire?…

— Ne réveillons personne… Il est impossible de traverser le rio en cet endroit… et à moins qu’il n’y ait un gué en amont…

— Mais de l’autre côté?… demanda Jacques Helloch, en montrant la forêt, qui s’étendait vers le nord-ouest.

— Je n’ai rien vu… je ne vois rien… répondit Valdez, qui s’était retourné sans se relever… Peut-être, n’avons-nous là que deux ou trois Indiens Bravos…

— Que seraient-ils venus faire, la nuit, sur cette rive?… Non, pour moi… cela n’est que trop certain… notre campement est découvert… Et, tenez, Valdez, voici un de ces hommes qui essaie de descendre jusqu’au rio…

— En effet… murmura Valdez… et ce n’est point un Indien… Cela se reconnaît rien qu’à la manière dont il marche…”

Les premières lueurs, après avoir contourné les lointaines cimes de l’horizon, arrivaient en ce moment jusqu’au lit du Torrida. Valdez put donc être affirmatif en ce qui concernait l’homme aperçu sur la berge opposée.

“Ce sont les Quivas d’Alfaniz… dit Jacques Helloch. Eux seuls ont intérêt à s’assurer si nous sommes ou non accompagnés de tous les mariniers des pirogues…

— Et cela eût mieux valu, répondit le patron de la Gallinetta.

— Sans doute, Valdez… mais à moins d’aller à l’Orénoque chercher du renfort… Non… si nous avons été reconnus, il n’est plus temps d’envoyer un de nos hommes au campement… Nous serons attaqués avant d’avoir reçu des secours…”

Valdez saisit vivement le bras de Jacques Helloch, qui se tut aussitôt.

Un peu plus de jour éclairait les rives du Torrida, tandis que l’anfractuosité, au fond de laquelle dormaient Jean, Gomo, le sergent Martial, Germain Paterne et le second porteur, s’enveloppait encore d’une profonde obscurité.

“Je crois… dit alors Valdez, je crois reconnaître… oui!… mes yeux sont bons… ils ne peuvent me tromper!… Je reconnais cet homme… C’est l’Espagnol…

— Jorrès!

— Lui-même.

— Il ne sera pas dit que je l’aurai laissé échapper, ce misérable!…

Jacques Helloch venait de saisir sa carabine, placée près de lui contre une roche, et, d’un rapide mouvement, il la mit à son épaule.

“Non… non! fit Valdez… Ce ne serait qu’un de moins, et il y en a peut-être des centaines sous les arbres… D’ailleurs, il leur est impossible de franchir le rio…

— Ici… non… mais en amont… qui sait?…”

Cependant Jacques Helloch se rendit à l’avis de Valdez avec d’autant plus de raison que le patron de la Gallinetta était de bon conseil, et possédait les remarquables qualités de finesse et de prudence des Banivas.

D'ailleurs, Jorrès, — si c'était lui, — dans son désir d'observer de plus près le campement, eût risqué d'être aperçu lui-même. Aussi venait-il de rentrer sous les arbres, au moment où le marinier, posté près du Torrida, s'avançait comme s'il eût aperçu quelque chose.

Pendant un quart d'heure, Jacques Helloch et Valdez demeurèrent à la même place, sans faire un mouvement.

Ni Jorrès ni aucun autre ne se montrèrent sur la rive opposée. Rien ne passait à la lisière de ces massifs d'arbres, qui commençaient à se dégager de l'ombre.

Mais avec le jour croissant, l'Espagnol, — en admettant que Valdez ne se fût pas trompé, — allait pouvoir reconnaître que deux mariniers seulement accompagnaient les passagers des pirogues, et constater l'infériorité de cette petite troupe.

Or, comment continuer le voyage dans des conditions de sécurité si insuffisantes?… On avait été découvert… on était épié… Jorrès venait de retrouver Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons en marche vers la Mission de Santa-Juana… Il ne perdrait plus maintenant leurs traces…

Conjonctures d'une extrême gravité, et ce qui était plus grave encore, c'est que l'Espagnol avait certainement rejoint la bande des Quivas, qui parcourait ces territoires sous les ordres du forçat Alfaniz.

CHAPITRE X

X

Le gué de Frascaès

À cinq heures, le campement s’éveilla.

Le premier à se lever fut Jean. Tandis qu’il allait et venait le long de la rive du rio, le sergent Martial, Germain Paterne et le jeune Indien dormaient encore, enveloppés de leurs couvertures, le chapeau sur les yeux.

Le marinier de garde au bord de la grève, après s’être rapproché de Jacques Helloch et de Valdez, les entretenait de ce qu’il avait observé pendant sa faction. D’ailleurs, il confirmait le dire de Valdez. Lui aussi avait reconnu Jorrès dans l’homme qui rôdait sur la berge du Torrida.

Tout d’abord, Jacques Helloch fit à tous les deux la recommandation de ne rien dire. Inutile de révéler les dangers de la situation aggravée par cette rencontre. Il suffisait qu’elle leur fût connue, et c’était à eux de prendre les mesures qu’exigeait la sécurité de leurs compagnons.

Après réflexions et arguments pour ou contre, il avait été décidé que la petite troupe continuerait à se diriger vers la Mission de Santa-Juana.

En effet, si Alfaniz occupait les environs, si Jacques Helloch et les siens devaient être attaqués, cette attaque se produirait aussi bien pendant une marche en avant que pendant un retour en arrière. Il est vrai, à revenir vers l’Orénoque, on serait couvert par le rio Torrida, à moins qu’il ne fût franchissable en amont. Dans ce cas, rien n’empêcherait les Quivas de redescendre jusqu’au campement du pic Maunoir, et ce n’était pas avec le renfort du personnel des pirogues que l’on parviendrait à repousser leur agression.

Marcher vers Santa-Juana présentait, au contraire, quelques avantages. D’abord on conserverait la protection du rio Torrida, tant qu’il ne serait pas guéable, — et il y aurait lieu d’interroger Gomo à ce sujet. Ensuite, c’était se rapprocher du but, c’était peut-être l’atteindre, et il n’y aurait plus rien à craindre à la Mission de Santa-Juana, avec sa population qui comptait plusieurs centaines de Guaharibos, ces Indiens dont le dévouement d’un missionnaire avait fait des hommes. Santa-Juana offrait un refuge assuré contre toute tentative d’Alfaniz.

Il fallait donc, à tout prix, gagner la Mission dans le plus court délai, s’efforcer de l’atteindre avant la nuit prochaine en doublant les étapes. Vingt-cinq à trente kilomètres, cela ne pouvait-il s’enlever en vingt heures?

Jacques Helloch revint au campement, afin de préparer un départ immédiat.

“Ils dorment encore, monsieur Helloch, dit la jeune fille, qui s’avança aussitôt vers lui.

— Et vous êtes la première levée, mademoiselle Jeanne!… répondit Jacques Helloch. Je vais les réveiller et nous nous mettrons en route…

— Vous n’avez rien remarqué de suspect?…

— Non… rien… rien… mais partons… J’ai calculé qu’en marchant sans nous arrêter, nous pourrions, sinon ce soir du moins dans la nuit, arriver à Santa-Juana…

— Ah! monsieur Helloch, qu’il me tarde d’être rendue à la Mission!

— Où est Gomo?… demanda Jacques Helloch.

— Là… dans ce coin!… Il dort d’un si bon sommeil, le pauvre enfant…

— Il faut que je lui parle… J’ai besoin de certains renseignements avant de partir…

— Voulez-vous me laisser ce soin?” proposa Jeanne de Kermor. Et elle ajouta:

“Vous semblez soucieux, ce matin, monsieur Helloch… Est-ce que quelque mauvaise nouvelle?…

— Non… je vous assure… mademoiselle Jeanne… non!”

La jeune fille fut sur le point d’insister; mais, comprenant que cette insistance embarrasserait Jacques, elle se dirigea vers Gomo qu’elle réveilla doucement.

Le sergent Martial, lui, se détira les bras, poussa quelques hums! sonores, et se remit sur pied en un instant.

Il y eut plus de façons avec Germain Paterne. Roulé dans sa couverture, la tête appuyée sur sa boîte d’herboriste en guise d’oreiller, il dormait comme un loir, — animal qui a la réputation d’être le plus déterminé dormeur de toute la création.

Pendant ce temps, Valdez faisait refermer les sacs, après en avoir retiré les restes du souper de la veille réservés au premier déjeuner du matin. Lorsque le jeune Indien se fut réveillé, il vint, avec Jean, rejoindre Jacques Helloch près d’une roche sur laquelle était déployée la carte du pays. Cette carte indiquait les territoires entre la sierra Parima et le massif de Roraima, sillonnés par les zigzags du rio.

Gomo savait lire et écrire, et il allait pouvoir donner des renseignements assez précis sur la contrée.

“Tu as vu quelquefois des cartes qui représentent une région avec ses mers, ses continents, ses montagnes, ses fleuves?… lui demanda Jacques Helloch.

— Oui, monsieur… On nous en a montré à l’école de Santa-Juana, répondit le jeune Indien.

— Eh bien, regarde celle-ci et prends le temps de réfléchir… Ce grand fleuve, qui est dessiné là en demi-cercle, c’est l’Orénoque que tu connais…

— Que je connais et que j’aime!

— Oui!… tu es un brave enfant, et tu aimes ton beau fleuve!… Vois-tu à son extrémité cette grosse montagne?… C’est là qu’il a sa source…

— La sierra Parima, je le sais, monsieur… Voici les raudals que j’ai souvent remontés avec mon père…

— Oui… le raudal de Salvaju.

— Et après, il y a un pic…

— C’est le pic de Lesseps.

— Mais ne te trompe pas… Nous ne sommes pas allés si loin avec nos pirogues…

— Non… pas si loin.

— Pourquoi toutes ces questions à Gomo, monsieur Helloch?… demanda Jeanne.

— Je désire être fixé sur le cours du rio Torrida, et, peut-être Gomo pourra-t-il me fournir les renseignements qui me sont nécessaires…”

La jeune fille jeta un regard plus interrogateur sur Jacques Helloch, qui baissa la tête.

“Maintenant, Gomo, dit-il, voici l’endroit où nous avons laissé nos pirogues… voici la forêt où était la case de ton père… voici l’embouchure du rio Torrida…

— Là… là… répondit le jeune Indien, en posant le doigt sur la carte.

— Là même, Gomo, et, fais bien attention… je vais suivre le cours du rio dans la direction de Santa-Juana, et tu m’arrêteras s’il y a erreur.”

Jacques Helloch promena son doigt sur la carte, en obliquant vers le nord-est, après avoir contourné la base de la sierra Parima pendant une cinquantaine de kilomètres. À ce point, il fit une croix au crayon et dit:

“Là doit être la Mission?…

— Oui… là…

— Et le rio Torrida en descend?…

— Oui… comme il est marqué.

— Mais ne descend-il pas de plus haut?…

— De plus haut, certainement, et quelquefois nous l'avons remonté au-delà.

— Santa-Juana se trouve alors sur la rive gauche…

— Sur la rive gauche.

— Il faudra donc le traverser, puisque nous sommes sur la rive droite…

— Il le faudra… monsieur… et ce sera facile.

— Comment?…

— Il y a… au-dessus… un passage, avec des roches où l'on peut mettre le pied, quand les eaux sont basses… un gué qu'on appelle le gué de Frascaès.

— Tu connais ce gué?…

— Oui, monsieur… et, avant que le soleil soit à midi, nous y serons arrivés."

Les réponses du jeune Indien étaient très affirmatives en ce qui concernait ce passage, puisqu'il avait eu lui-même l'occasion de le franchir.

Et ce fut cette constatation dont devait, en somme, s'alarmer Jacques Helloch. Si le gué de Frascaès permettait à la petite troupe de passer sur la rive gauche du rio Torrida, il permettait aux Quivas de passer sur la rive droite. Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons ne seraient plus couverts par le rio jusqu'à la hauteur de la Mission.

La situation empirait donc de ce fait. Néanmoins, ce n'était pas une raison pour revenir en arrière, du moment que les chances d'une agression eussent été aussi grandes. À Santa-Juana, la petite troupe serait en sûreté… C’est à Santa-Juana qu’il importait d’arriver d’ici vingt-quatre heures.

“Et tu dis, demanda une dernière fois Jacques Helloch, tu dis que nous pouvons atteindre le gué de Frascaès vers midi…

— Oui… si nous partons tout de suite.”

La distance qui séparait le campement du gué pouvait être d’une douzaine de kilomètres. Or, comme on avait résolu de hâter la marche dans l’espoir d’être au but vers minuit, il serait aisé de passer ce gué avant la première halte.

L’ordre du départ fut donné. Tout était prêt, d’ailleurs, les sacs sur l’épaule des deux bateliers, les couvertures roulées au dos des voyageurs, la boîte du botaniste à la courroie de Germain Paterne, les armes en état.

“Vous pensez, monsieur Helloch, qu’il est possible d’atteindre Santa-Juana en une dizaine d’heures?… demanda le sergent Martial.

— Je l’espère, si vous faites bon usage de vos jambes, qui auront le temps de se reposer ensuite.

— Ce n’est pas moi qui vous retarderai, monsieur Helloch. Mais sera-t-il capable… lui… Jean….

— Votre neveu, sergent Martial, répliqua Germain Paterne. Allons donc!… Il nous battrait à la course!… On voit bien qu’il a été à une fameuse école!… Vous lui avez donné des jambes de soldat, et il a le pas gymnastique!”

Jusqu’alors, paraît-il, Gomo ne savait pas quel lien de parenté, — parenté imaginaire, — unissait le fils du colonel de Kermor au sergent Martial. Aussi, regardant ce dernier:

“Vous êtes son oncle?… demanda-t-il.

— Un peu… petit!

— Alors le frère de son père?…

— Son propre frère, et c’est même pour cela que Jean est mon neveu… Comprends-tu?”

Le jeune garçon inclina la tête en signe qu’il avait compris.

Le temps était couvert. Les nuages couraient bas, poussés par une brise de sud-est, avec menaces sérieuses de pluie. Derrière ce voile grisâtre disparaissait le sommet de la sierra Parima, et, vers le sud, la pointe du pic Maunoir n’apparaissait plus qu’à travers l’éclaircie des arbres.

Jacques Helloch jeta un regard inquiet du côté de l’horizon d’où venait le vent. Après les premiers rayons au lever du soleil, le ciel s’était presque aussitôt assombri sous l’enroulement des vapeurs qui montaient en s’épaississant. Qu’il vînt à tomber une de ces violentes averses dont s’inondent si fréquemment les savanes méridionales, le cheminement serait retardé, et il deviendrait difficile d’être à Santa-Juana dans le délai fixé.

La petite troupe partit en reprenant la sente entre le rio Torrida et la lisière de l’impénétrable forêt. L’ordre de la veille fut conservé, — le patron Valdez et Jacques Helloch en tête. Tous deux avaient observé une dernière fois la rive opposée. Elle était déserte. Déserts aussi les massifs d’arbres qui se développaient vers la gauche. Pas un être vivant, si ce n’est un monde assourdissant d’oiseaux, dont les chants saluaient le lever du soleil avec accompagnement des aluates hurleurs.

Chacun s’attachait à l’espoir d’être rendu à la Mission dès le milieu de la nuit. Cela ne s’obtiendrait qu’au prix d’une marche forcée, à peine interrompue par une très courte halte à midi. Il convenait donc d’allonger le pas, et on le faisait sans se plaindre. Sous ce ciel voilé de brumes, la température conservait une moyenne supportable, heureuse circonstance, car aucun arbre n’abritait la berge.

De temps à autre, Jacques Helloch, dévoré d’inquiétudes, se retournait en disant:

“Est-ce que nous n’allons pas trop vite pour vous, mon cher Jean?…

— Non, monsieur Helloch, non, lui était-il répondu. Ne vous inquiétez ni de moi ni de mon ami Gomo, qui paraît avoir des jambes de jeune cerf…

— Monsieur Jean, répliqua Gomo, s’il le fallait, je pourrais être, ce soir, à Santa-Juana…

— Peste… quel coureur tu fais!” s’écria Germain Paterne, qui, lui, n’était pas doué de telles facultés locomotrices et restait parfois en arrière.

Il est vrai, Jacques Helloch ne le prenait point en pitié. Il l’appelait, il l’interpellait, il lui criait:

“Voyons… Germain… tu te ralentis…”

Et l’autre de répondre:

“Nous ne sommes pas à une heure près!

— Qu’en sais-tu?”

Et comme Germain Paterne ne le savait pas, il n’avait qu’à obéir, et il obéissait.

Un instant, Jacques Helloch s’était arrêté à cette réflexion que la dernière réponse du jeune Indien venait de faire naître dans son esprit: “Ce soir, avait affirmé Gomo, je pourrais être à Santa-Juana.”

Donc, en six ou sept heures, Gomo se faisait fort d’avoir atteint la Mission de Santa-Juana. N’était-ce pas là une chance dont il conviendrait de profiter?…

Jacques Helloch, tout en marchant, fit connaître cette réponse à Valdez.

“Oui… en six ou sept heures, dit-il, le Père Esperante pourrait être prévenu que notre petite troupe se dirige vers Santa-Juana… Il n’hésiterait pas à nous envoyer des renforts… Il viendrait lui-même sans doute…

— En effet, répondit Valdez. Mais, laisser partir l’enfant, ce serait nous priver de notre guide, et je crois que nous avons besoin de lui, puisqu’il connaît le pays…

— Vous avez raison, Valdez, Gomo nous est nécessaire, et surtout pour le passage du gué de Frascaès…

— Nous y serons vers midi, et, une fois le gué franchi, nous verrons…

— Oui… nous verrons… Valdez!… C’est peut-être à ce gué qu’est le danger.”

Et qui sait si un danger plus prochain ne menaçait pas Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons avant qu'ils y fussent arrivés?… Après avoir reconnu le campement établi sur la rive droite du Torrida, Jorrès n'avait-il pu remonter la rive gauche du rio avec la bande d'Alfaniz?… Et, puisque les Quivas avaient une avance de quelques heures, était-il impossible qu'ils eussent déjà franchi le gué de Frascaès?…

Et maintenant, ne redescendaient-ils pas la rive droite où ils devaient rencontrer la petite troupe?… Cette hypothèse était vraisemblable.

Cependant, à neuf heures, Valdez, qui s'était éloigné de quelques centaines de pas, put affirmer, lorsqu'il eut rejoint, que la route semblait libre. Quant à l'autre rive, rien n'y indiquait la présence des Quivas.

Jacques Helloch eut alors la pensée de faire halte en cet endroit, après avoir demandé à Gomo:

“À quelle distance sommes-nous du gué?…

— À deux heures de marche environ, répondit le jeune Indien, qui ne savait guère évaluer les distances que par le temps nécessaire à les parcourir.

— Reposons-nous, commanda Jacques Helloch, et déjeunons rapidement avec ce qui nous reste de provisions… Il est inutile d'allumer du feu.”

En effet, c'eût été risquer de trahir sa présence — réflexion que Jacques Helloch garda pour lui.

“Hâtons-nous… mes amis… hâtons-nous, répéta-t-il, rien qu'un quart d'heure de halte!”

La jeune fille ne le comprenait que trop! Jacques Helloch était rongé d’inquiétudes dont elle ne connaissait pas la cause. Sans doute, d’une façon générale, elle savait que les Quivas parcouraient ces territoires, elle savait que Jorrès avait disparu, mais elle ne pouvait supposer que l’Espagnol, en remontant l’Orénoque à bord de la Gallinetta, ne l’eût fait que dans l’intention de rejoindre Alfaniz, ni qu’il existât des relations d’ancienne date entre cet évadé de Cayenne et lui. Plus d’une fois elle fut sur le point de s’écrier:

“Qu’y a-t-il, monsieur Helloch?…”

Elle se tut, cependant, s’en rapportant à l’intelligence de Jacques Helloch, à son courage, à son dévouement, à son désir d’arriver le plus tôt possible au but. Le repas fut vite expédié. Germain Paterne qui l’eût volontiers prolongé, fit contre mauvaise fortune bon cœur, ou plutôt “bon estomac”, comme il se plut à le dire.

À neuf heures quinze, les sacs refermés et chargés, on se remit en route dans le même ordre.

Si la forêt se développait sans discontinuité sur la rive droite du rio Torrida, la rive gauche présentait alors un aspect très différent. Les arbres ne s’y groupaient que par bouquets épars à la surface des llanos, tapissés d’une herbe épaisse, dont les flancs de la sierra étaient également revêtus presque jusqu’à la cime.

D’autre part, la berge opposée, très basse, affleurait presque le niveau du rio. Il était donc aisé de fouiller du regard une vaste étendue de savane que ne masquait plus l’épais rideau d’arbres. Après avoir eu la sierra, au nord-est, on l’avait dans le sud depuis la veille.

Jacques Helloch et Valdez ne cessaient d’observer anxieusement l’autre rive, sans négliger toutefois celle qu’ils longeaient en remontant le rio.

Rien de suspect encore.

Peut-être les Quivas attendaient-ils la petite troupe au gué de Frascaès?

Vers une heure après midi, Gomo indiqua à quelques centaines de pas un coude du rio, lequel, en obliquant vers l’est, disparaissait derrière un gros massif de rocs dénudés.

“C’est là, dit-il.

— Là?…” répondit Jacques Helloch, qui fit signe à ses compagnons de s’arrêter.

Et, s’approchant de manière à reconnaître le cours du rio Torrida, il constata que son lit était encombré de pierres et de sables, entre lesquels ne coulaient plus que de minces filets d’eau aisément franchissables.

“Voulez-vous que j’aille en avant examiner les abords du gué?… proposa Valdez à Jacques Helloch.

— Faites, Valdez, mais, par prudence, ne vous aventurez pas de l’autre côté, et revenez ici dès que vous aurez vu si la route est libre.”

Valdez partit, et, quelques minutes après, on le perdit de vue au tournant du Torrida.

Jacques Helloch, Jean, le sergent Martial, Gomo et les porteurs attendaient en groupe serré près de la berge. Germain Paterne s’était assis.

Si maître qu’il fût de lui-même, Jacques Helloch ne parvenait pas à dissimuler ses appréhensions.

Gomo demanda alors:

“Pourquoi ne continuons-nous pas?…

— Oui, pourquoi… ajouta Jean, et pourquoi

Valdez a-t-il pris les devants?…”

Jacques Helloch ne répondit rien. Il se détacha du groupe, et fit quelques pas en se rapprochant du rio, impatient d’observer de plus près la rive gauche.

Cinq minutes s’écoulèrent, — de ces minutes qui semblent durer autant que des heures.

Jeanne avait rejoint Jacques Helloch.

“Pourquoi Valdez ne revient-il pas?… lui demanda-t-elle en cherchant à lire dans ses yeux.

— Il ne peut tarder…” se contenta de répondre Jacques Helloch.

Cinq minutes, puis cinq autres minutes se passèrent. Pas un mot ne fut prononcé…

Valdez devait avoir eu le temps d’aller et de revenir, et il ne paraissait pas. On n’avait entendu aucun cri, cependant, rien qui fût de nature à jeter l’alarme.

Jacques Helloch eut assez d’empire sur lui-même pour patienter pendant cinq minutes encore.

Assurément, il n’y avait pas plus de danger à gagner le gué de Frascaès qu’à rester à cette place, ou même à rebrousser chemin. Si la petite troupe devait être attaquée, elle le serait en amont comme en aval.

“Marchons”, dit enfin Jacques Helloch.

Il prit la tête, et ses compagnons le suivirent, sans lui poser une seule question. Ils remontèrent la berge sur un espace de trois cents pas, et arrivèrent au coude du rio Torrida. C’était en cet endroit qu’il fallait descendre au gué de Frascaès.

À cinq pas en avant, le jeune Indien se laissa glisser et dévala jusqu’aux premières roches mouillées par le courant.

Soudain des cris tumultueux éclatèrent sur la rive gauche que Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons allaient atteindre.

Une centaine de Quivas accouraient de toutes parts, se précipitaient à travers le gué, brandissant leurs armes, poussant des cris de mort… Jacques Helloch n’eut pas le temps de se défendre à coups de fusil. Et qu’auraient pu sa carabine, celles de

Germain Paterne et du sergent Martial… qu’auraient pu les revolvers des mariniers contre cette centaine d’hommes, qui occupaient et fermaient le gué de Frascaès?… Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons, aussitôt entourés, furent mis dans l’impossibilité de repousser l’attaque.

À ce moment même, Valdez apparut au milieu d’un groupe vociférant de Quivas.

“Valdez!… s’écria Jacques Helloch.

— Ces coquins m’ont pris comme dans un terrier!… répondit le patron de la Gallinetta.

— Et à qui avons-nous affaire?… demanda Germain Paterne.

— À la bande des Quivas… répondit Valdez.

— Et à son chef!…” fut-il ajouté d’une voix menaçante.

Un homme se tenait debout sur la rive, ayant près de lui trois individus, qui n’étaient pas de race indienne.

“Jorrès!… s’écria Jacques Helloch.

— Appelez-moi de mon nom… Alfaniz!

— Alfaniz!” répéta le sergent Martial.

Et son regard comme celui de Jacques Helloch, empreints d’épouvante, se portèrent sur la fille du colonel de Kermor.

Jorrès était bien cet Alfaniz, qui s’était évadé du bagne de Cayenne avec trois forçats, ses complices.

Après avoir remplacé à la tête des Quivas leur chef Meta Serrapia, tué dans une rencontre avec la milice vénézuélienne, l’Espagnol courait depuis plus d’un an la savane.

Cinq mois auparavant, — on ne l’a pas oublié, — ces Quivas avaient formé le projet de retourner sur les territoires à l’ouest de l’Orénoque, d’où ils avaient été chassés par les troupes colombiennes. Mais, avant d’abandonner les régions montagneuses du Roraima, leur nouveau chef voulut opérer une reconnaissance de ce côté du fleuve. Il se sépara donc de la bande, et descendit les llanos jusqu’à San-Fernando de Atabapo, après avoir passé par le rancho de Carida, où l’Indien Baré affirmait avec raison l’avoir vu à son passage. Or il attendait à San-Fernando l’occasion de revenir aux sources de l’Orénoque, lorsque les pirogues Gallinetta et Moriche se préparèrent à partir pour la Mission de Santa-Juana.

Alfaniz, — uniquement connu sous le nom de Jorrès, — prétextant le désir de se rendre à la Mission, offrit ses services au patron de la Gallinetta qui reformait son équipage, et il fut accepté, comme on sait, pour le malheur de ceux qui allaient s’aventurer sur le haut cours du fleuve.

En même temps qu’Alfaniz aurait la possibilité de retrouver les Quivas, il satisferait enfin la haine qu’il avait vouée au colonel de Kermor.

En effet, il avait appris que ce jeune garçon, embarqué sur la Gallinetta avec le sergent Martial, était à la recherche de son père, dont la déposition devant la cour d’assises de la Loire-Inférieure avait amené sa condamnation aux travaux forcés à perpétuité et son envoi au bagne de Cayenne.

N’était-ce pas ou jamais l’occasion inespérée de s’emparer de ce jeune garçon, peut-être même du colonel, si l’on retrouvait ses traces à la Mission de Santa-Juana, et, dans tous les cas, de se venger sur le fils à défaut du père?…

On sait le reste. Ayant rencontré un de ses complices pendant cette nuit qu’il avait passée à terre au sitio de Yaname, Alfaniz s’était enfui dès l’arrivée des pirogues au campement du pic Maunoir. Puis, après avoir assassiné l’Indien, qui refusait de lui servir de guide, il avait remonté le rio Torrida, traversé le gué de Frascaès, et rejoint la bande des Quivas…

Maintenant, Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons à sa merci, ce misérable comptait s’emparer des pirogues, à leur mouillage sur l’Orénoque.

Le fils ou plutôt la fille du colonel de Kermor était en son pouvoir.

CHAPITRE XI

XI

La mission de Santa-Juana

Treize ans avant le début de cette histoire, la région que traversait le rio Torrida ne possédait ni un village, ni un rancho, ni un sitio. C’est à peine si les Indiens le parcouraient, lorsque la nécessité les obligeait à faire transhumer leurs troupeaux. À la surface de ces territoires, rien que de vastes llanos, fertiles mais incultivés, des forêts impénétrables, des esteros marécageux, inondés l’hiver par le trop-plein des coulières avoisinantes. Rien que des fauves, des ophidiens, des singes, des volatiles, — sans oublier les insectes et particulièrement les moustiques, — à représenter la vie animale en ces contrées presque inconnues encore. C’était, à vrai dire, le désert, où ne s’aventuraient jamais ni les marchands ni les exploitants de la république vénézuelienne.

En s’élevant de quelques centaines de kilomètres vers le nord et le nord-est, on se fût perdu à la surface d’une extraordinaire région, dont le relief se rattachait peut-être à celui des Andes, avant que les grands lacs se fussent vidés à travers un incohérent réseau d’artères fluviales dans les profondeurs de l’Atlantique. Pays tourmenté, où les arêtes se confondent, où les reliefs semblent en désaccord avec les logiques lois de la nature, même dans ses caprices hydrographiques et orographiques, immense aire, génératrice inépuisable de cet Orénoque qu’elle envoie vers le nord, et de ce rio Blanco qu’elle déverse vers le sud, dominée par l’imposant massif du Roraima, dont Im Thurn et Perkin devaient, quelques années plus tard, fouler la cime inviolée jusqu’alors.

Telle était cette portion du Venezuela, son inutilité, son abandon, lorsqu'un étranger, un missionnaire, entreprit de la transformer.

Les Indiens, épars sur ce territoire, appartenaient, pour le plus grand nombre, à la tribu des Guaharibos. D'habitude, ils erraient sur les llanos, au sein des forêts profondes, dans le nord de la rive droite du haut Orénoque. C'étaient de misérables sauvages, que la civilisation n'avait pu toucher de son souffle. À peine avaient-ils des paillotes pour se loger, des haillons d'écorce pour se couvrir. Ils vivaient de racines, de bourgeons de palmiers, de fourmis et de poux de bois, ne sachant pas même tirer la cassave de ce manioc, qui fait le fond de l'alimentation du Centre-Amérique. Ils semblaient être au dernier degré de l'échelle humaine, petits de taille, chétifs de constitution, grêles de forme, avec l'estomac gonflé des géophages, et, trop souvent, en effet, pendant l'hiver, ils étaient réduits, en guise de nourriture, à manger de la terre. Leurs cheveux un peu rougeâtres tombant sur leurs épaules, leur physionomie où, cependant, un observateur eût soupçonné une certaine intelligence restée à l'état rudimentaire, une coloration de la peau moins foncée que celle des autres Indiens, Quivas, Piaroas, Barés, Mariquitares, Banivas, tout les reléguait au dernier rang des races les plus inférieures.

Et ces indigènes passaient cependant pour si redoutables que leurs congénères osaient à peine s'aventurer sur ces territoires, et on les disait si enclins au pillage et au meurtre, que les marchands de San-Fernando ne s'aventuraient jamais au-delà de l'Ocamo et du Mavaca.

Ainsi s'était établie la détestable réputation dont jouissaient encore les Guaharibos, il y avait cinq ou six ans, lorsque M. Chaffanjon, dédaignant les terreurs de ses bateliers, n'hésita pas à poursuivre sa navigation jusqu'aux sources du fleuve. Mais, après les avoir enfin rencontrés à la hauteur du pic Maunoir, il fit bonne justice de ces accusations mal fondées contre de pauvres Indiens inoffensifs.

Et pourtant, à cette époque déjà, nombre d'entre eux réunis à la voix du missionnaire espagnol, formaient le premier noyau de la Mission de Santa-Juana. La religion avait pénétré ces âmes, grâce au dévouement de l'apôtre qui leur consacrait sa vie et leur sacrifiait toutes les joies de l'existence.

Le Père Esperante eut la pensée de prendre corps à corps, — on dirait mieux, âme à âme, — ces malheureux Guaharibos. C'est dans ce but qu'il vint s'installer au plus profond de ces savanes de la sierra Parima. Là, il résolut de fonder un village qui, le temps aidant, deviendrait une bourgade. Du reste de sa fortune, il ne croyait pouvoir faire un plus généreux emploi qu'à créer cette œuvre de charité, à l'édifier sur de si solides bases, qu'elle ne menacerait pas de s'écrouler après lui.

Pour tout personnel, en arrivant au milieu de ce désert, le Père Esperante n'avait qu'un jeune compagnon, nommé Angelos. Ce novice des missions étrangères, alors âgé de vingt ans, était enflammé comme lui de ce zèle apostolique qui accomplit des prodiges et des miracles. Tous les deux, — au prix de quelles difficultés et de quels dangers! — sans jamais faiblir, sans jamais reculer, ils avaient créé, développé, organisé cette Mission de Santa-Juana, ils avaient régénéré toute une tribu au double point de vue moral et physique, constitué une population qui, à cette heure, se chiffrait par un millier d'habitants, en y comprenant ceux des llanos du voisinage.

C'était à une cinquantaine de kilomètres dans le nord-est des sources du fleuve et de l'embouchure du rio Torrida que le missionnaire avait choisi l'emplacement de la future bourgade. Choix heureux, s'il en fût, — un sol d'une étonnante fertilité où croissaient les plus utiles essences, arbres et arbrisseaux, entre autres ces marimas dont l'écorce forme une sorte de feutre naturel, des bananiers, des platanes, des cafiers ou caféiers qui se couvrent à l’ombre des grands arbres de fleurs écarlates, des bucares, des caoutchoucs, des cacaoyers, puis des champs de cannes à sucre et de salsepareille, des plantations de ce tabac d’où l’on tire le “cura nigra” pour la consommation locale et le “cura seca” mélangé de salpêtre, pour l’exportation, les tonkas dont les fèves sont extrêmement recherchées, les sarrapias dont les gousses servent d’aromates. Un peu de travail, et ces champs défrichés, labourés, ensemencés, allaient donner en abondance les racines de manioc, les cannes à sucre, et cet inépuisable maïs, qui produit quatre récoltes annuelles avec près de quatre cents grains pour le seul grain dont l’épi a germé.

Si le sol de cette contrée possédait une si merveilleuse fertilité que devaient accroître les bonnes méthodes de culture, c’est qu’il était vierge encore. Rien n’avait épuisé sa puissance végétative. De nombreux ruisselets couraient à sa surface, même en été, et venaient se jeter dans le rio Torrida, lequel, pendant l’hiver, apportait un large tribut d’eaux au lit de l’Orénoque.

Ce fut sur la rive gauche de ce rio, né des flancs du Roraima, que se disposèrent les premières habitations de la Mission. Ce n’étaient point de simples paillotes, mais des cases qui valaient les mieux construites des Banivas ou des Mariquitares. La Urbana, Caïcara, San-Fernando de Atabapo, auraient pu envier ces solides et confortables habitations.

Le village s’était établi tout près d’un cerro détaché de la sierra Parima, dont les premières déclivités se prêtaient à une installation salubre et agréable.

Au pied d’un talus, sous les ombrages d’un frais morichal, s’élevait l’église de Santa-Juana, de style très simple, dont la pierre fut fournie par les carrières de la sierra. À peine suffisait-elle actuellement au nombre des fidèles qu’attiraient les prédications du Père Esperante et les cérémonies du culte catholique, alors que peu à peu la langue espagnole se substituait à l’idiome des Guaharibos. Et, d’ailleurs, des blancs, d’origine vénézuélienne, — une cinquantaine environ, — étaient venus se fixer dans la Mission, bien accueillis de son chef.

C’était par l’Orénoque que, d’année en année, arrivait tout ce qu’avait exigé la création de cette bourgade, et l’on comprendra que son renom se fût étendu jusqu’à San-Fernando, puis jusqu’à Ciudad-Bolivar et à Caracas. Et pourquoi le Congrès n’aurait-il pas encouragé une œuvre si hautement civilisatrice, qui devait mettre en valeur ces territoires inutilisés, relever intellectuellement des tribus dont la dégénérescence et la misère auraient amené l’anéantissement?…

Lorsque, du petit clocher, pointant entre les arbres, s’échappaient les battements de la cloche, qui n’eût admiré l’empressement de ces indigènes, vêtus avec décence et respirant la bonne santé? Hommes, femmes, enfants, vieillards, s’empressaient autour du Père Esperante. Et même, dans la vive expression de leur reconnaissance, ces Indiens se fussent volontiers agenouillés, comme au pied de l’église, devant le presbytère élevé à la base du cerro, au milieu d’un massif de palmiers moriches. Ils étaient heureux, leurs familles prospéraient, ils vivaient dans l’aisance, ils échangeaient fructueusement les produits de leur sol avec les produits manufacturés qui venaient du cours inférieur de l’Orénoque, et leur situation ne cessait de s’améliorer, leur bien-être de s’accroître. Aussi, d’autres llaneros affluaient-ils à la Mission, et d’autres cases s’élevaient-elles. Aussi la bourgade s’agrandissait-elle, en mordant sur la forêt qui l’entourait de son éternelle verdure. Aussi les cultures se développaient sans avoir à craindre que le sol vînt à leur manquer, puisque ces savanes de l’Orénoque sont pour ainsi dire sans limites.

On aurait tort de croire que l’établissement de la Mission de Santa-Juana n’eût pas été soumis parfois à de dures épreuves. Oui! c’était au prix d’un dévouement admirable, d’efforts persévérants, qu’il s’était développé. Mais, que de graves dangers au début! Il avait fallu défendre le village naissant contre des tribus jalouses, poussées par leurs instincts meurtriers et pillards. La population s’était vue contrainte à repousser des attaques qui risquaient de détruire l’œuvre dans l’œuf. Pour résister aux bandes errant à travers la courbe de l’Orénoque ou descendues des cordillères du littoral, les plus urgentes mesures et les mieux entendues avaient été prises. Le missionnaire se révéla alors comme un homme d’action, et son courage égala ses talents d’organisateur.

Tous les Guaharibos dans la force de l’âge furent enrégimentés, disciplinés, instruits au maniement des armes. Actuellement, une compagnie de cent hommes, pourvus du fusil moderne, approvisionnés de munitions, tireurs habiles, — car ils possédaient la justesse du coup d’œil de l’Indien, — assurait la sécurité de la Mission et ne laissait aucune chance de succès à une agression qui ne pouvait les surprendre.

Et n’en avait-on pas eu la preuve, un an auparavant, lorsqu’Alfaniz, ses complices du bagne et son ramassis de Quivas, s’étaient jetés sur la bourgade? Bien qu’ils fussent en force numérique égale, lorsque le père Esperante les combattit à la tête de ses guerriers, ils éprouvèrent des pertes sensibles, tandis que le sang ne coula que peu du côté des Guaharibos.

Ce fut, précisément, à la suite de cet échec, que les Quivas songèrent à abandonner le pays et à regagner les territoires situés à l’ouest de l’Orénoque.

Au surplus, la Mission de Santa-Juana était organisée, au point de vue de la défensive comme de l'offensive. Non pas que le Père Esperante eût la pensée de jamais faire acte de conquête, puisque le territoire dont il disposait était assez vaste pour suffire à ses besoins; mais il ne voulait pas que l'on vînt l'insulter, ni que ces bandes de malfaiteurs de la pire espèce pussent assaillir la bourgade. Aussi, afin de prévenir tout danger, avait-il agi en militaire. Et, de fait, un missionnaire est-il autre chose qu'un soldat, et s'il a le devoir de sacrifier sa vie, n'a-t-il pas le devoir de défendre les fidèles rangés autour de lui sous le drapeau du christianisme?

Il a été parlé plus haut des cultures qui contribuaient si largement à la prospérité de la Mission de Santa-Juana. Cependant ce n'était pas son unique source de richesses. Aux champs de céréales confinaient d'immenses plaines, où pâturaient des troupeaux de bœufs, de vaches, dont l'alimentation était assurée par les herbages de la savane et llanera-palma des fourrés. Cet élevage constituait une importante branche de commerce, et il en est d'ailleurs ainsi dans toutes les provinces de la république vénézuélienne. Puis, les Guaharibos avaient une certaine quantité de ces chevaux, dont il existait autrefois tant de milliers autour des ranchos, et nombre d'entre eux servaient au transport et aux excursions des Guaharibos, lesquels devinrent promptement d'excellents cavaliers. De là, ces fréquentes reconnaissances qui pouvaient s'étendre aux environs de la bourgade.

Le Père Esperante était bien tel que l'avaient dépeint M. Mirabal, le jeune Gomo, et aussi le faux Jorrès. Sa physionomie, son attitude, ses mouvements, indiquaient l'homme d'action, d'une volonté toujours prête à se manifester, le chef qui a l'habitude du commandement. Il possédait cette énergie de tous les instants qu'éclaire une vive intelligence. Son œil, ferme et calme, s'imprégnait d'une expression de parfaite bonté, indiquée par le sourire permanent des lèvres que laissait entrevoir une barbe blanchie par l’âge. Il était courageux et généreux, au même degré, — deux qualités qui le plus souvent n’en font qu’une. Bien qu’il eût dépassé la soixantaine, sa haute taille, ses épaules larges, sa poitrine développée, ses membres robustes, témoignaient d’une grande résistance physique, à la hauteur de sa force intellectuelle et morale.

Quelle avait été l’existence de ce missionnaire avant qu’il l’eût vouée à cet apostolat si rude, personne ne l’eût su dire. Il gardait à cet égard un absolu silence. Mais, à de certaines tristesses dont se voilait parfois sa mâle figure, on eût compris qu’il portait en lui les douleurs d’un inoubliable passé.

À noter que le Père Esperante avait été courageusement secondé dans sa tâche par son adjoint. Le frère Angelos lui était dévoué de corps et d’âme, et avait droit de revendiquer une large part dans le succès de cette entreprise.

Auprès d’eux, quelques Indiens, choisis parmi les meilleurs, concouraient à l’administration de la bourgade. Il est vrai, on pouvait dire que le Père Esperante, à la fois, maire et prêtre, baptisant les enfants, célébrant et bénissant les mariages, assistant les mourants à leur dernière heure, concentrait en lui tous les services de la Mission.

Et ne devait-il pas se sentir payé de toutes ses peines, lorsqu’il voyait à quel degré de prospérité en était arrivée son œuvre? La vitalité n’était-elle pas assurée à cette création, si les successeurs du missionnaire continuaient à marcher dans la voie tracée par lui, et dont il n’y avait pas à sortir?…

Depuis l’attaque des Quivas, rien n’était venu troubler les habitants de Santa-Juana, et il ne semblait pas que de nouvelles agressions fussent à la veille de se produire.

Or, vers les cinq heures du soir, le 1er novembre, le lendemain du jour où Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons étaient tombés entre les mains d'Alfaniz, voici qu'un commencement, sinon de panique, du moins quelques symptômes d'inquiétude se manifestèrent dans la bourgade.

Un jeune Indien venait d'être aperçu, passant à travers la savane du sud-ouest, accourant à toutes jambes, comme s'il eût été poursuivi.

Quelques Guaharibos sortirent de leurs cases, et, dès que ce jeune Indien les aperçut, il cria:

“Le Père Esperante… le Père Esperante!”

Un instant après, le frère Angelos l'introduisait près du missionnaire.

Celui-ci reconnut tout d'abord cet enfant, qui avait assidûment fréquenté l'école de la Mission, lorsqu'il demeurait avec son père à Santa-Juana.

“Toi… Gomo?…” dit-il.

Celui-ci pouvait à peine parler.

“D'où viens-tu?…

— Je me suis échappé… Depuis ce matin… j'ai couru… pour arriver ici…”

La respiration manquait au jeune Indien.

“Repose-toi, mon enfant, dit le missionnaire. Tu meurs de fatigue… Veux-tu manger?…

— Pas avant que je ne vous aie dit pourquoi je suis venu… On demande secours…

— Secours?…

— Les Quivas sont là-bas… à trois heures d’ici… dans la sierra… du côté du fleuve…

— Les Quivas!… s’écria le frère Angelos.

— Et leur chef aussi… ajouta Gomo.

— Leur chef… répéta le Père Esperante, ce forçat évadé… cet Alfaniz…

— Il les a rejoints, il y a quelques jours… et… avant-hier soir… ils ont attaqué une troupe de voyageurs que je guidais vers Santa-Juana…

— Des voyageurs qui venaient à la Mission?…

— Oui… Père… des voyageurs français…

— Des Français!”

La figure du missionnaire se couvrit d’une subite pâleur, puis ses paupières se refermèrent un instant.

Il prit alors le jeune Indien par la main, il l’attira près de lui, et le regardant:

“Dis tout ce que tu sais!” prononça-t-il d’une voix qu’une involontaire émotion faisait trembler.

Gomo reprit:

“Il y a quatre jours, dans la case que mon père et moi nous habitions près de l’Orénoque, un homme est entré… Il nous a demandé où se trouvaient les Quivas, et si nous voulions le conduire… C’étaient ceux-là qui avaient détruit notre village de San-Salvador… qui avaient tué ma mère!… Mon père refusa… et d’un coup de revolver… il fut tué à son tour…

— Tué!… murmura le frère Angelos.

— Oui… par l’homme… Alfaniz…

— Alfaniz!… Et d’où venait-il, ce misérable?… demanda le Père Esperante.

— De San-Fernando.

— Et comment avait-il remonté l’Orénoque?…

— En qualité de batelier, sous le nom de… Jorrès… à bord de l’une des deux pirogues qui amenaient les voyageurs…

— Et tu dis que ces voyageurs sont des Français?…

— Oui… des Français, qui n’ont pu naviguer plus loin que le rio Torrida… Ils ont laissé leurs pirogues à l’embouchure, et l’un deux, le chef, accompagné du patron de l’une des falcas, m’a trouvé dans la forêt, près du corps de mon père… Ils ont eu pitié… ils m’ont emmené… ils ont enterré mon père… Puis ils m’ont offert de les conduire à Santa-Juana… Nous sommes partis… et, avant-hier, nous étions arrivés au gué de Frascaès, lorsque les Quivas nous ont attaqués et faits prisonniers…

— Et depuis?… demanda le Père Esperante.

— Depuis?… Les Quivas se sont dirigés du côté de la sierra… et c’est ce matin seulement que j’ai pu m’échapper…”

Le missionnaire avait écouté le jeune Indien avec une extrême attention. L’éclair de ses yeux disait quelle colère l’animait contre ces malfaiteurs.

“Tu dis bien, mon enfant, reprit-il pour la troisième fois, que ces voyageurs sont des Français…

— Oui, Père.

— Tu en comptes?…

— Quatre.

— Et ils avaient avec eux…

— Le patron d’une des pirogues, un Banivas, nommé Valdez, et deux bateliers qui portaient les bagages…

— Et ils venaient?….

— De Bolivar, d’où ils étaient partis, il y a deux mois, pour se rendre à San-Fernando, afin de remonter le fleuve jusqu’à la sierra Parima.”

Le Père Esperante, abîmé dans ses réflexions, garda le silence quelques instants. Puis:

“Tu as parlé d’un chef, Gomo?… demanda-t-il. Cette petite troupe a donc un chef?…

— Oui, un des voyageurs.

— Et il se nomme?…

— Jacques Helloch.

— Il a un compagnon…

— Qui s’appelle Germain Paterne, et s’occupe de chercher des plantes dans la savane…

— Et quels sont les deux autres voyageurs?…

— D’abord un jeune homme, qui m’a témoigné bien de l’amitié… que j’aime bien…”

Les traits de Gomo exprimèrent la plus vive reconnaissance.

“Ce jeune homme, ajouta-t-il, se nomme Jean de Kermor.”

À l’énoncé de ce nom, le missionnaire se releva, et son attitude fut celle d’un homme au dernier degré de la surprise.

“Jean de Kermor?… répéta-t-il… C’est son nom?…

— Oui… Jean de Kermor.

— Ce jeune homme, dis-tu, est venu de France avec MM. Helloch et Paterne?…

— Non, Père, et, — c’est ce que m’a raconté mon ami Jean, — ils se sont rencontrés en route… sur l’Orénoque… au village de la Urbana…

— Et ils sont arrivés à San-Fernando?….

— Oui… et… de là… ils ont continué de se diriger ensemble vers la Mission.

— Et que fait ce jeune homme?…

— Il est à la recherche de son père…

— Son père?… Tu as dit son père?…

— Oui… le colonel de Kermor.

— Le colonel de Kermor!” s’écria le missionnaire.

Et qui l’eût observé en ce moment eût vu la surprise qu’il avait d’abord montrée se doubler d’une émotion extraordinaire. Si énergique, si maître de lui qu’il fût d’habitude, le Père Esperante, abandonnant la main du jeune Indien, allait et venait à travers la salle, en proie à un trouble qu’il ne pouvait contenir.

Enfin, après un suprême effort de volonté, le calme se fit en lui, et, reprenant ses questions:

“Pourquoi, demanda-t-il à Gomo, pourquoi Jean de Kermor vient-il à Santa-Juana?…

— C’est dans l’espoir d’y obtenir de nouveaux renseignements qui lui permettraient de retrouver son père…

— Il ne sait donc pas où il est?…

— Non! Depuis quatorze ans, le colonel de Kermor a quitté la France pour le Venezuela, et son fils ne sait pas où il est…

— Son fils… son fils!” murmura le missionnaire, qui passait sa main sur son front comme pour y raviver des souvenirs…

Enfin, s’adressant à Gomo:

“Est-il donc parti seul… ce jeune homme… seul pour un tel voyage?…

— Non.

— Qui l’accompagne?…

— Un vieux soldat.

— Un vieux soldat?…

— Oui… le sergent Martial.

— Le sergent Martial!” répéta le Père Esperante.

Et, cette fois, si le frère Angelos ne l’eût retenu, il fût tombé, comme foudroyé, sur le plancher de la chambre.

CHAPITRE XII

XII

En route

Porter secours à ces Français, prisonniers des Quivas, cela ne permettait pas même une hésitation, après les réponses si précises du jeune Indien.

Le missionnaire se fût donc mis en route le soir même, il se serait jeté à travers la savane, s'il eût su en quelle direction effectuer ses poursuites.

En effet, où se trouvait actuellement Alfaniz?… Près du gué de Frascaès?… Non! Au dire de Gomo, il l'aurait quitté le lendemain de l'attaque. D'ailleurs, son intérêt lui commandait de s'éloigner de Santa-Juana, de se perdre au milieu des forêts voisines de la sierra, peut-être aussi de regagner l'Orénoque à l'embouchure du rio Torrida, afin d'enlever les pirogues et les équipages.

Le Père Esperante comprit qu'une reconnaissance de la situation s'imposait avant de se mettre en campagne.

À six heures, deux Indiens montèrent à cheval et se dirigèrent vers le gué de Frascaès.

Trois heures après, ces cavaliers étaient de retour, n'ayant plus trouvé aucune trace des Quivas.

Alfaniz et sa bande avaient-ils traversé le cours d'eau pour courir les forêts de l'ouest, ou descendaient-ils vers la sierra Parima, de manière à rejoindre par la rive gauche du rio le campement du pic Maunoir?…

On ne savait, et il fallait savoir, dût la nuit s’écouler avant le départ.

Deux autres Indiens quittèrent la Mission, avec ordre d’observer la savane du côté des sources de l’Orénoque, car il se pouvait qu’Alfaniz eût descendu directement vers le fleuve.

À la pointe du jour, ces deux Indiens rentrèrent à Santa-Juana, après avoir poussé une pointe de vingt-cinq kilomètres. S’ils n’avaient pas rencontré les Quivas, du moins tenaient-ils de quelques Indiens Bravos, rencontrés dans la savane, que la bande se rendait vers la sierra Parima. Alfaniz cherchait donc à atteindre l’Orénoque à sa naissance, avec l’intention de se rabattre sur le campement du pic Maunoir.

Ainsi c’était à la sierra Parima qu’il fallait le surprendre, et, Dieu aidant, on débarrasserait enfin le territoire de ce ramassis d’Indiens et de galériens.

Le soleil venait de se lever, lorsque le Père Esperante quitta la Mission. Sa troupe se composait d’une centaine de Guaharibos, spécialement exercés au maniement des armes modernes. Ces braves gens savaient qu’ils marchaient contre les Quivas, leurs ennemis de longue date, et non seulement pour les disperser, mais pour les détruire jusqu’au dernier.

Une vingtaine de ces Indiens étaient montés, escortant un certain nombre de charrettes, qui portaient l’approvisionnement de quelques jours.

La bourgade était restée sous l’autorité du frère Angelos, et, par des coureurs, celui-ci devait autant que possible demeurer en communication avec l’expédition.

Le Père Esperante, à cheval, en tête de sa troupe, avait revêtu un habillement plus commode que l'habit de missionnaire. Un casque de toile le coiffait; des bottes s'engageaient dans ses étriers; une carabine à deux coups pendait à sa selle; un revolver s'accrochait à sa ceinture.

Il allait, silencieux et pensif, en proie à un inexprimable ébranlement moral, dont il ne voulait rien laisser paraître. Les révélations faites par le jeune Indien se confondaient dans son esprit. Il était comme un aveugle auquel on aurait rendu la lumière et qui aurait désappris de voir.

En sortant de Santa-Juana, la troupe prit à travers la savane, en obliquant vers le sud-est, — une plaine à végétation arborescente, des mimosas épineux, des chapparos malingres, des palmiers nains dont le vent agitait les éventails. Ces Indiens, habitués à la marche, cheminaient d'un pas rapide, et les piétons ne retardaient guère les cavaliers.

Le sol s'inclinait graduellement, et ne remontait qu'aux approches de la sierra Parima. Ses parties marécageuses, — des esteros, qui ne devaient se remplir qu'à la saison pluvieuse, — alors solidifiées par la chaleur, offraient une surface résistante, ce qui permettait de les franchir, sans avoir à les contourner.

La route faisait à peu près un angle aigu avec celle que Gomo avait suivie en guidant Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons. C'était la plus courte entre la Mission et le massif de la Parima. À quelques empreintes d'origine récente, on reconnaissait qu'une nombreuse troupe l'avait parcourue peu de jours auparavant.

Les Guaharibos s'éloignaient donc du rio Torrida, qui coulait vers le sud-est. Leur itinéraire rencontrait divers petits affluents de sa rive gauche.

Desséchés alors, ils ne présentaient aucun obstacle. Il y eut seulement à éviter certains bayous, encore remplis d’une eau dormante.

Après une halte d’une demi-heure, vers midi, le Père Esperante reprit la marche, et telle fut la diligence déployée, que, dès cinq heures, ses Guaharibos stationnaient au pied du massif de la Parima, non loin de l’endroit où s’élève un des cerros auquel M. Chaffonjon a donné le nom de Ferdinand de Lesseps.

Là furent relevés les indices d’un campement, récemment établi en cet endroit. Cendres refroidies, restes de repas, litières d’herbes foulées, indiquaient qu’on y avait passé la nuit précédente. Donc aucun doute sur ce point que les Quivas d’Alfaniz, — et aussi les prisonniers — eussent pris direction vers le fleuve.

Pendant la halte, qui dura une heure et permit aux chevaux de pâturer, le Père Esperante se promenait à l’écart.

Toute sa pensée s’attachait à ces deux noms que le jeune Indien avait prononcés.

“Le sergent Martial… se répétait-il, le sergent… ici… se rendant à Santa-Juana…”

Puis, elle se reportait sur Jean de Kermor… sur cet enfant à la recherche de son père!… Qui était ce jeune garçon?… Le colonel n’avait pas de fils!… Non!… Gomo s’était trompé!… Dans tous les cas, il y avait là des Français prisonniers… des compatriotes à délivrer des mains des Quivas!…

On se remit en route, et, vers six heures, la rive droite de l’Orénoque fut atteinte.

Là s’épanchaient les premières eaux de la sierra Parima, à travers cette gorge au fond de laquelle un hardi explorateur avait arboré le pavillon de la France, le 18 décembre 1886.

Cette partie de la sierra était hérissée de vieux arbres, destinés à tomber de vieillesse, car la hache d’un bûcheron ne viendrait jamais, sans doute, les abattre en de si lointaines régions.

Le lieu semblait absolument désert. Pas une pirogue, pas même une curiare n’aurait pu remonter jusque-là pendant la saison chaude, et c’était à cinquante kilomètres en aval que les deux falcas avaient dû s’arrêter.

Ces cinquante kilomètres, si les Guaharibos étaient animés de la même ardeur que leur chef, pouvaient être enlevés dans la nuit, et la troupe arriverait au campement du pic Maunoir dès la pointe du jour. Quant à s’égarer, il n’y avait pas lieu de le craindre, puisqu’il suffirait de côtoyer la rive droite du fleuve, dont les rios à sec n’offriraient aucun obstacle.

Le Père Esperante n’eut pas même à demander à ses Indiens s’ils voulaient faire cet effort. Il se leva, il prit les devants. Cavaliers et piétons suivirent.

L’Orénoque, très encaissé à sa naissance, ne mesurait alors que quelques mètres de largeur entre des berges escarpées, mélangées d’argile et de roches. Sur cette de son parcours, à l’époque des grandes pluies, une pirogue aurait eu plusieurs raudals à franchir, et elle n’y eût réussi qu’au prix de retards considérables.

Lorsque la nuit commença à tomber vers huit heures, les Guaharibos traversèrent à gué le Crespo, — ainsi dénommé sur la carte du voyageur français en l’honneur du Président de la république vénézuélienne.

En déclinant sur un fond de ciel très pur, le soleil avait disparu derrière un horizon dégagé de nuages. Les constellations étincelantes allaient pâlir devant la lune qui se levait en pleine syzygie.

Favorisés par cette clarté qui dura toute la nuit, les Guaharibos purent fournir une longue et rapide étape. Ils ne furent même pas gênés par les marécages herbeux, que l’obscurité ne leur aurait pas permis de traverser, sans le risque de s’y embourber jusqu’à mi-corps.

Au-dessous de la berge, le lit du fleuve présentait un encombrement de roches, qui devait en rendre la navigation presque impossible, même au temps des crues de la saison pluvieuse. Trois mois plus tôt, la Gallinetta et la Moriche n’eussent pas aisément remonté ces “étroits” indiqués sur la carte par les noms de raudal Guereri, raudal Yuvilla, raudal Salvajuo. Il eût fallu recourir au portage, et il est douteux que cette partie du haut Orénoque puisse jamais devenir une voie de communication praticable. À cette hauteur, le cours du fleuve se réduit à quelques filets qui circulaient entre les récifs et mouillaient à peine l’argile blanchâtre des berges.

Cependant, depuis le cerro Ferdinand de Lesseps, sa profondeur s’accroissait graduellement, grâce à l’apport des tributaires de droite et de gauche.

Lorsque le jour reparut, vers cinq heures du matin, le Père Esperante avait atteint un coude du fleuve, à une douzaine de kilomètres de l’embouchure du rio Torrida.

En moins de trois heures, il aurait pris contact avec le patron Parchal et les mariniers restés à la garde des deux falcas.

Vers le sud-ouest, de l’autre côté de l’Orénoque, pointait le pic Maunoir, dont la cime s’éclairait des premiers rayons de l’aube. Sur cette rive s’arrondissait un cerro de six à sept cents mètres d’altitude, dépendant de ce système orographique.

Il ne fut pas un instant question de prendre du repos, — même une heure. Si les Quivas s’étaient dirigés le long du fleuve afin de descendre au campement, s’y trouvaient-ils encore, ou, après avoir déjà pillé les pirogues, ne s’étaient-ils pas enfoncés à travers la savane?… Qui sait si Alfaniz ne serait pas alors tenté de mettre à exécution ce projet de revenir vers les territoires de l’ouest du Venezuela, emmenant ses prisonniers avec lui?…

On marcha pendant une heure, et le Père Esperante n’eût pas fait halte, sans doute, avant d’avoir atteint l’embouchure du rio Torrida, si un incident ne se fût produit vers six heures du matin.

Le jeune Indien précédait la troupe d’une cinquantaine de pas sur cette rive qu’il avait maintes fois parcourue avec son père. Il s’appliquait à relever les traces du passage des Quivas, lorsqu’on le vit soudain s’arrêter, se courber vers le sol, et qu’on l’entendit pousser un cri…

En cet endroit, au pied d’un arbre, gisait un homme dans l’immobilité du sommeil ou de la mort.

Au cri de Gomo, le Père Esperante dirigea son cheval de ce côté, et, en un temps de galop, il eut rejoint le jeune Indien.

“C’est lui… lui! criait l’enfant.

— Lui?…” répondit le Père Esperante.

Il sauta à terre, il s’approcha de l’homme…

“Le sergent… le sergent Martial!” s’écria-t-il.

Le vieux soldat était étendu à cette place, qui était tachée de son sang, la poitrine trouée d’une balle, peut-être mort…

“Martial… Martial!…” répétait le Père Esperante, dont les yeux laissaient échapper de grosses larmes.

Et il soulevait le malheureux, il approchait sa tête de la sienne, il cherchait quelque souffle sur ses lèvres… Puis on l’entendit répéter ces mots:

“Il vit… il vit!”

En effet, le sergent Martial venait de respirer faiblement. À ce moment, son bras se releva et se rabattit sans force. Puis ses yeux s’entrouvrirent une seconde, et son regard se dirigea vers le missionnaire…

“Vous… mon colonel!… Là-bas… Alfaniz!…”

Et il perdit connaissance, après avoir prononcé cette phrase, entrecoupée de mouvements convulsifs.

Le Père Esperante se redressa, en proie à un inexprimable trouble, au milieu de tant d’idées confuses et inconciliables. Le sergent Martial là… ce jeune garçon qu’il accompagnait à la recherche de son père et qui n’était plus avec lui… tous deux en ces lointaines contrées du Venezuela… Qui donc lui donnerait l’explication de tant d’inexplicables choses, si le malheureux mourait sans avoir pu parler?… Non!… il ne mourrait pas!… Le missionnaire le sauverait encore une fois… comme il l’avait déjà sauvé sur le champ de bataille… Il le disputerait à la mort…

À son ordre, une des charrettes s’approcha, et le sergent Martial y fut déposé sur une litière d’herbes. Ni ses yeux ni ses lèvres ne s’ouvrirent. Mais, si faiblement que ce fût, son haleine passait entre ses lèvres décolorées.

La marche fut continuée. Le père Esperante se tenait près de la charrette, où reposait son vieux compagnon d’armes, qui l’avait reconnu après une si longue absence… son sergent, laissé quatorze ans avant dans ce pays de Bretagne, que le colonel de Kermor avait abandonné sans esprit de retour!… Et il le retrouvait là… en cette contrée perdue… frappé d’une balle… et peut-être par la main de ce misérable Alfaniz…

“Ainsi… pensait-il, Gomo ne s’est pas trompé, lorsqu’il parlait du sergent Martial… Mais qu’a-t-il voulu dire?… Cet enfant… ce fils à la recherche de son père… Un fils… un fils?…”

Et, s’adressant au jeune Indien qui marchait près de lui:

“Ce soldat n’est pas venu seul, m’as-tu dit?… Il avait avec lui un jeune garçon…

— Oui… mon ami Jean…

— Et tous deux se rendaient à la Mission?…

— Oui… pour rechercher le colonel de Kermor…

— Et ce jeune garçon est le fils du colonel?…

— Oui… son fils.”

Devant des réponses si affirmatives, le Père

Esperante sentit son cœur battre comme s'il allait éclater. Enfin il n'y avait plus qu'à attendre. Peut-être ce mystère se dénouerait-il avant la fin de la journée?…

Attaquer les Quivas, si on les rencontrait au campement du pic Maunoir, — et les quelques mots échappés au sergent Martial donnaient l'assurance qu'Alfaniz se trouvait là, — lui arracher ses prisonniers, tout ne tendit plus qu'à ce but.

Les Guaharibos prirent le pas de course, et les charrettes restèrent en arrière avec une escorte suffisante.

En vérité, toutes les chances de succès n'étaient-elles pas du côté de cet ancien colonel, devenu le missionnaire de Santa-Juana, le chef de ces courageux Indiens qu'il allait jeter sur cette bande de scélérats?…

Un peu avant huit heures, le Père Esperante s'arrêta, et les Guaharibos suspendirent leur marche, après avoir atteint une assez vaste clairière, en arrière d'un coude du fleuve.

Vis-à-vis, au-delà de l'autre rive, se dressait le pic Maunoir. Le long de la berge de droite, personne. Entre les rives de l'Orénoque, pas une embarcation.

Au tournant du coude, s'élevait verticalement une fumée, car il ne faisait pas un souffle de vent.

Un campement était donc établi en cet endroit, à moins de cent cinquante mètres, et, par conséquent, sur la rive gauche du rio Torrida.

Ce ne pouvait être que le campement des Quivas, mais il convenait de s'en assurer.

Quelques-uns des Guaharibos rampèrent à travers les broussailles, et, trois minutes après, ils revenaient, affirmant que ce campement était bien occupé par la bande d'Alfaniz.

La troupe du Père Esperante se massa au fond de la clairière. Les charrettes la rejoignirent, et celle qui transportait le sergent Martial fut placée au centre.

Après avoir constaté que l'état du blessé n'avait pas empiré, le colonel de Kermor prit ses dispositions pour envelopper Alfaniz et ses compagnons. En dirigeant ses cavaliers de manière à traverser obliquement la clairière, il parviendrait à cerner les Quivas et il pourrait les détruire jusqu'au dernier.

Quelques instants plus tard, éclatèrent des cris terribles, auxquels se mêla une décharge des armes à feu.

Les Guaharibos venaient de se précipiter sur Alfaniz avant que celui-ci eût pu se mettre en défense. S'ils s'égalaient en nombre, les Guaharibos étaient mieux armés et mieux commandés que les Quivas. Les armes dont l'Espagnol disposait étaient celles qui provenaient du pillage des pirogues, — quelques revolvers laissés par Jacques Helloch, et celles qui avaient été enlevées aux prisonniers.

La lutte ne pouvait donc être longue, elle ne le fut pas. Du moment que la bande avait été surprise, elle était battue. Aussi, la plupart des Quivas abandonnèrent-ils la place, après une faible résistance. Les uns se jetèrent dans la forêt, les autres s'enfuirent à travers le fleuve presque à sec, afin de gagner la savane opposée, la plupart mortellement atteints par les balles.

En même temps, Jacques Helloch, Germain Paterne, Valdez, Parchal, les mariniers des falcas, s'étaient élancés sur ceux des Quivas qui les gardaient.

Gomo avait été le premier à courir vers eux, criant:

“Santa-Juana… Santa-Juana!”

C’est donc au milieu du campement que se fut bientôt concentrée toute l’action.

Là, Alfaniz, les évadés de Cayenne et quelques Quivas se défendaient à coups de revolver. Il en résulta que plusieurs Guaharibos reçurent des blessures qui heureusement ne devaient pas avoir de suites graves.

C’est alors que l’on vit le Père Esperante bondir au milieu du groupe entourant l’Espagnol.

Jeanne de Kermor se sentait irrésistiblement attirée vers le missionnaire… Elle voulait le rejoindre, mais Jacques Helloch la retint…

Alfaniz, abandonné des Quivas, dont on n’entendait plus que les cris lointains, résistait encore; deux de ses compagnons de bagne venaient d’être tués près de lui.

Le Père Esperante se trouva juste en face de l’Espagnol et, d’un geste, il arrêta les Guaharibos, qui l’entouraient déjà.

Alfaniz recula vers la rive du rio, tenant un revolver chargé de plusieurs cartouches.

Un calme se fit, au milieu duquel retentit la voix puissante du Père Esperante:

“Alfaniz… c’est moi!… dit-il.

— Le missionnaire de Santa-Juana!” s’écria l’Espagnol.

Et, braquant son revolver, il allait faire feu, lorsque Jacques Helloch lui saisit la main, et la balle se perdit au loin.

“Oui… Alfaniz… le Père de la Mission de Santa-Juana… et aussi le colonel de Kermor!…”

Alfaniz, voyant à quelques pas ce Jean qu’il croyait le fils du colonel, le visa…

Avant qu’il eût tiré, une détonation éclata, et le misérable tomba, frappé par le Père Esperante.

En ce moment, la charrette, qui transportait le sergent Martial, arriva sur le lieu de la lutte.

Jeanne s’était jetée dans les bras du colonel de Kermor… Elle l’appelait son père…

Celui-ci, qui ne pouvait reconnaître dans ce jeune garçon sa propre fille qu’il croyait morte… qu’il n’avait jamais vue… répétait:

“Je n’ai pas de fils…”

Le sergent Martial venait de se redresser, et, les bras tendus vers Jeanne, il dit:

“Non… mon colonel… mais vous aviez une fille… et la voilà!”

CHAPITRE XIII

XIII

Deux mois à la mission

Depuis la disparition du colonel de Kermor, depuis son départ pour le Nouveau-Monde, quatorze ans s'étaient écoulés, et l'histoire de ces quatorze années tiendra en quelques lignes.

Ce fut en 1872 qu'il apprit, avec le naufrage du Norton, la nouvelle que sa femme et son enfant avaient péri dans ce sinistre maritime. Les conditions où s'était produite la catastrophe ne lui permettaient pas de croire que, de ces deux êtres si chers, l'un, sa fille Jeanne, toute petite alors, eût été sauvée. Il ne la connaissait même pas, puisqu'il avait dû quitter la Martinique quelques mois avant sa naissance.

Pendant un an encore, le colonel de Kermor resta à la tête de son régiment. Puis, après avoir donné sa démission, aucun lien de famille ne le rattachant au monde, il résolut de consacrer le reste de sa vie à cette œuvre si généreuse des missions étrangères.

Il y avait toujours eu en lui, avec l'âme d'un soldat, l'âme d'un apôtre. L'officier était tout préparé à se fondre dans le prêtre, le prêtre militant, qui se consacre à la conversion, en d'autres termes, à la civilisation des tribus sauvages.

Le colonel de Kermor, sans avoir mis personne, — pas même le sergent Martial, — dans la confidence de ses projets, quitta secrètement la France en 1875, et se rendit au Venezuela, où tant de tribus indiennes étaient vouées à l’ignorance, à la dégradation physique et morale.

Dès qu’il eut terminé ses études ecclésiastiques dans ce pays, il reçut l’ordination, et entra dans la Compagnie des missions étrangères sous le nom de Père Esperante, qui devait assurer l’incognito de sa nouvelle existence.

Sa démission d’officier datait de 1873, et son ordination datait de 1878, alors qu’il avait quarante-neuf ans.

Ce fut à Caracas que le Père Esperante prit la résolution d’aller vivre sur ces territoires presque inconnus du Venezuela méridional, où les missionnaires se montraient rarement. Nombre de peuplades indigènes n’avaient jamais reçu les enseignements civilisateurs du christianisme, ou, du moins, étaient demeurées à l’état sauvage. Les chercher jusqu’à ces régions limitrophes de l’empire du Brésil, telle fut l’œuvre à laquelle le missionnaire français se sentit appelé, et, personne ne soupçonnant rien de sa vie antérieure, il partit au commencement de l’année 1879.

Après avoir remonté le cours moyen de l’Orénoque, le Père Esperante, qui parlait l’espagnol comme sa langue maternelle, arriva à San-Fernando, où il séjourna quelques mois. C’est de cette bourgade qu’il adressa une lettre à l’un de ses amis, notaire à Nantes. Cette lettre, — la dernière qui devait être signée de son vrai nom et que nécessitait le règlement d’une affaire de famille, — il priait le destinataire de la tenir secrète.

Il convient de rappeler ici que ladite lettre, trouvée dans les papiers de ce notaire, ne fut communiquée au sergent Martial qu’en 1891, alors que Jeanne de Kermor était déjà revenue près de lui depuis six ans.

À San-Fernando, grâce à ses ressources personnelles, le Père Esperante put se procurer le matériel nécessaire à la création d’un établissement au-delà des sources du fleuve. Ce fut aussi dans cette bourgade qu’il s’adjoignit le frère Angelos, déjà familiarisé avec les moeurs indiennes, et qui devait apporter un concours non moins utile que dévoué à son œuvre.

Le frère Angelos appela l’attention du Père Esperante sur ces Guaharibos, dont le plus grand nombre errent le long des rives du haut Orénoque et dans le voisinage de la sierra Parima. En évangélisant ces Indiens, il y avait à faire acte de charité, car ils étaient des plus misérables, acte de civilisation, car ils comptaient parmi les plus farouches des indigènes du Venezuela. Ces Guaharibos avaient, on ne l’ignore pas, une réputation de pillards, de massacreurs et même d’anthropophages, réputation qu’ils ne méritaient point. Or, cela n’était pas pour arrêter un homme aussi déterminé que l’ex-colonel de Kermor, et il résolut de créer un centre de mission dans le nord du Roraima, en groupant autour de lui les indigènes de la région.

Le Père Esperante et le frère Angelos quittèrent San-Fernando sur deux pirogues, largement approvisionnées des objets indispensables au début de leur établissement. Le reste du matériel devait leur être envoyé au fur et à mesure des besoins de la petite colonie. Les falcas remontèrent le fleuve, relâchant aux principales bourgades et aux ranchos riverains, et elles atteignirent le rio Torrida, sur le territoire des Guaharibos.

Après plus d’une tentative infructueuse, après bien des déboires, bien des dangers, les Indiens furent entraînés par les promesses du Père Esperante, par sa bonté, par sa générosité. Un village prit place sur la carte, auquel le missionnaire donna le nom de Santa-Juana, —

Juana, ce nom qui avait été celui de sa fille…

Quatorze ans s’écoulèrent. La Mission avait prospéré, on sait dans quelles conditions. Il semblait donc que rien ne relierait plus le Père Esperante à son douloureux passé, lorsque se produisirent les événements sur lesquels repose cette histoire.

Après les paroles du sergent Martial, le colonel avait pressé Jeanne dans ses bras, et ce fut comme un baptême de larmes qu’il répandit sur le front de son enfant. En quelques mots, la jeune fille lui raconta sa vie, son sauvetage à bord du Vigo, son existence dans la famille Eredia à la Havane, son retour en France, les quelques années vécues dans la maison de Chantenay, la résolution qui fut prise dès que le sergent Martial et elle eurent connaissance de la lettre écrite de San-Fernando, le départ pour le Venezuela sous le nom et l’habit de Jean, le voyage sur l’Orénoque, l’attaque du forçat Alfaniz et des Quivas au gué de Frascaès, et enfin cette miraculeuse délivrance…

Tous deux revinrent alors vers la charrette, près du vieux soldat. Le sergent Martial se sentait ranimé. Il rayonnait… il pleurait aussi, et toujours ces mots qui s’échappaient de ses lèvres:

“Mon colonel… mon colonel!… maintenant que notre Jeanne a retrouvé son père… je puis mourir…

— Je te le défends bien, mon vieux compagnon!

— Ah! si vous me le défendez…

— Nous te soignerons… nous te guérirons…

— Si vous me soignez… je ne mourrai pas… bien sûr!…

— Mais il te faut du calme…

— J’en ai, mon colonel! Tenez… voilà le sommeil qui me reprend… et c’est du bon sommeil, cette fois…

— Dors, mon vieil ami, dors!… Nous allons revenir à Santa-Juana… La route ne te causera aucune fatigue, et tu seras sur pied dans quelques jours.”

Le colonel de Kermor s’était penché sur la litière, il avait posé ses lèvres sur le front du sergent Martial, et “son vieil ami” s’était endormi tout souriant.

“Mon père, s’écria Jeanne, nous le sauverons…

— Oui… ma Jeanne chérie… avec l’aide de Dieu!” répondit le missionnaire.

Du reste, Germain Paterne et lui avaient examiné la blessure du sergent Martial, et il ne leur semblait pas qu’elle dût avoir des suites mortelles. On sut alors que l’assassin, c’était Alfaniz, qui avait frappé le vieux soldat au moment où celui-ci, dans un accès de fureur, s’était jeté sur lui.

Le Père Esperante dit alors:

“Aujourd’hui, j’entends que mes braves Indiens se reposent et aussi vos compagnons, monsieur Helloch, car ils en ont besoin… Demain matin, nous reprendrons le chemin de la Mission, et Gomo nous y guidera par le plus court…

— C’est à ce courageux enfant que nous devons notre salut… fit observer Jeanne.

— Je le sais”, répondit le Père Esperante.

Et, appelant le jeune Indien:

“Viens, Gomo, dit-il, viens!… Je t’embrasse pour tous ceux que tu as sauvés!”

Et, après être sorti des bras du Père Esperante, Gomo passa entre ceux de Jeanne qu’il continuait, dans son trouble, d’appeler: mon ami Jean!…

Comme la jeune fille n’avait point abandonné les vêtements masculins qu’elle portait depuis le commencement du voyage, son père se demandait si ses compagnons savaient que “monsieur Jean” était Mlle Jeanne de Kermor.

Il n’allait pas tarder à l’apprendre.

Dès qu’il eut serré les mains de Jacques Helloch et de Germain Paterne, de Parchal et de Valdez, ces deux honnêtes patrons dont le dévouement, au cours de cette longue et pénible navigation, n’avait jamais faibli, Jeanne prit la parole:

“Mon père, il faut que je vous dise tout ce que je dois à mes deux compatriotes envers lesquels il me sera impossible de jamais m’acquitter…

— Mademoiselle… répondit Jacques Helloch, dont la voix tremblait, je vous en prie… je n’ai rien fait…

— Laissez-moi parler, monsieur Helloch…

— Alors parlez de Jacques, mais non de moi, mademoiselle de Kermor, s’écria Germain Paterne en riant, car je ne mérite aucunement.

— Je suis votre obligée à tous les deux, mes chers compagnons, reprit Jeanne, oui… à tous les deux, mon père!… Si M. Helloch m’a sauvé la vie…

— Vous avez sauvé la vie de ma fille?…” s’écria le colonel de Kermor.

Et il fallut bien que Jacques Helloch entendît le récit que fit Jeanne du naufrage des pirogues en vue de San-Fernando, et comment, grâce à son dévouement, elle avait échappé à la mort.

Et la jeune fille ajouta:

“Je disais, mon père, que M. Helloch m’a sauvé la vie, mais il a fait plus encore, en nous accompagnant, Martial et moi, en s’associant à nos recherches… avec M. Germain Paterne…

— Par exemple! répliqua ce dernier en protestant. Croyez bien… mademoiselle… nous avions l’intention de remonter jusqu’aux sources de l’Orénoque… C’était notre mission… le ministre de l’Instruction publique…

— Non, monsieur Germain, non, répondit Jeanne en souriant. Vous deviez vous arrêter à San-Fernando, et si vous êtes venus jusqu’à Santa-Juana…

— C’est que c’était notre devoir!” déclara simplement Jacques Helloch.

Il va de soi que des détails plus complets seraient ultérieurement donnés au colonel de Kermor, et qu’il connaîtrait les divers incidents de cet aventureux voyage. Mais, en attendant, malgré la réserve voulue de Jacques Helloch, en voyant Jeanne si reconnaissante, le père ne comprenait-il pas déjà quels sentiments débordaient du cœur de sa fille…?

Pendant que Jeanne de Kermor, Jacques Helloch, Germain Paterne et lui causaient de ces choses, Parchal et Valdez préparaient le campement en vue d’y passer le reste de la journée et la nuit suivante. Leurs hommes avaient transporté dans la forêt les corps de tous ceux qui avaient succombé.

Quant aux Guaharibos blessés dans la lutte, Germain Paterne allait s’occuper de leur pansement.

Puis, après que les provisions eurent été retirées des charrettes, afin que chacun en prît sa part, tandis que des foyers de bois s’allumaient à différentes places, Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne, suivis du colonel de Kermor et de sa fille, se dirigèrent vers les deux pirogues, à sec sur la grève. N’avaient-elles pas été détruites par les Quivas?

Il n’en était rien, car Alfaniz comptait s’en servir pour revenir vers les territoires de l’ouest, en remontant le Ventuari. Qu’une crue du fleuve vînt à se produire, et les deux falcas seraient prêtes à redescendre son cours.

“Merci à ces coquins, s’écria Germain Paterne, qui ont bien voulu respecter mes collections!… Me voyez-vous revenant sans elles en Europe!… Après avoir tant photographié en route, ne pas rapporter un seul cliché!… Jamais je n’aurais osé me représenter devant le ministre de l’Instruction publique!”

On conçoit cette joie du naturaliste, et aussi la satisfaction des autres passagers de la Gallinetta et de la Moriche, en retrouvant à bord leur matériel de voyage, sans parler des armes qu’ils ramassèrent dans la clairière.

À présent les pirogues pouvaient rester sans rien craindre près de l’embouchure du rio Torrida, sous la garde des équipages. Lorsque l’heure serait venue de se rembarquer, — tout au moins dans la Moriche, — Jacques Helloch et Germain Paterne n’auraient qu’à monter à bord.

En somme, il n’était pas encore question de départ. Le Père Esperante allait ramener à Santa-Juana sa fille Jeanne, le sergent Martial, le jeune Gomo et le plus grand nombre de ses Indiens. Et comment les deux Français n’eussent-ils pas accepté de passer quelques jours, ou même quelques semaines, à la Mission, dans la maison d’un compatriote?…

Ils acceptèrent.

“Il le faut, fit observer Germain Paterne à Jacques Helloch. Nous vois-tu retourner en Europe sans avoir visité Santa-Juana!… Jamais je n’oserais me présenter devant le ministre de l’Instruction publique, — ni toi, Jacques…

— Ni moi, Germain…

— Parbleu!”

Pendant cette journée, les repas furent pris en commun sur les réserves des pirogues et les approvisionnements apportés de la bourgade. Le sergent Martial seul y manqua, mais il était si heureux, si heureux d’avoir retrouvé son colonel, — même sous la robe du Père Esperante!… Le bon air de Santa-Juana le rétablirait en quelques jours!… Il n’en doutait pas…

Il va sans dire que Jacques Helloch et Jeanne avaient dû faire au colonel de Kermor un récit détaillé du voyage. Il les écoutait, il observait, il devinait sans peine les sentiments dont le cœur de Jacques Helloch était rempli, et il demeurait pensif… En effet, quels nouveaux devoirs allait lui créer cette situation nouvelle?…

Il va sans dire que la jeune fille revêtit dès ce jour-là les vêtements de son sexe, — vêtements soigneusement renfermés dans une valise placée sous le rouf de la Gallinetta.

Et Germain Paterne de déclarer à son ami:

“Charmante en garçon… charmante en fille!… Il est vrai… je n’y entends rien!…”

Le lendemain, après avoir pris congé de Parchal et de Valdez, lesquels préféraient demeurer à la garde des pirogues, le Père Esperante, ses hôtes et les Guaharibos quittèrent le campement du pic Maunoir. Avec les chevaux et les charrettes, le cheminement s’effectuerait sans fatigues à travers les forêts et la savane.

On ne crut pas devoir se diriger par la route antérieurement suivie vers les sources de l’Orénoque. Le plus court était de longer la rive droite du rio, ainsi que l’avait fait Jacques Helloch sous la conduite du jeune Indien. Et la marche fut si rapide que, dès midi, on avait atteint le gué de Frascaès.

Aucune trace des Quivas, dispersés maintenant, n’avait été retrouvée, et ils n’étaient plus à craindre.

Là, il y eut une courte halte, et, le mouvement de la charrette n’ayant point trop fatigué le sergent Martial, on se remit en marche vers Santa-Juana.

La distance entre le gué et la bourgade put être franchie en quelques heures, et, dans l’après-midi, la Mission était atteinte.

À l’accueil dont le Père Esperante fut l’objet, Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons comprirent combien il était aimé de ses fidèles Indiens. Deux chambres furent réservées dans le presbytère à Jeanne de Kermor et au sergent Martial, deux autres à Jacques Helloch et à Germain Paterne dans une case voisine, dont le frère Angelos leur fit les honneurs.

Le lendemain, la cloche de l'église appela toute la bourgade à une messe d'action de grâces. Pendant cette messe dite par le Père Esperante, quelle impression éprouva la jeune fille, lorsqu'elle vit pour la première fois son père devant l'autel. Et quelle eût été celle du sergent Martial, s'il avait pu être présent à cet office célébré par son colonel!…

Il est inutile de raconter par le menu ces journées qui s'écoulèrent à la Mission de Santa-Juana. Que l'on sache, avant tout, que la santé du blessé se refit à vue d'œil. Dès la fin de la semaine, il avait permission de s'asseoir dans un bon fauteuil de cuir de cerf, à l'ombre des palmiers.

Le colonel de Kermor et sa fille avaient eu de longues conversations sur le passé. Jeanne apprit alors comment, époux privé de sa femme, père privé de ses enfants, il avait voulu mettre toute sa vie dans cette œuvre apostolique. Pourrait-il donc l'abandonner maintenant, la laissant inachevée?… Non, assurément… Jeanne resterait près de lui… elle lui consacrerait son existence entière…

Et, à ces entretiens succédaient ceux du Père Esperante et du sergent Martial.

Le missionnaire remerciait le vieux soldat de ce qu'il avait fait pour sa fille… Il le remerciait d'avoir consenti à ce voyage… Puis il l'interrogeait sur le compte de Jacques Helloch… Il lui demandait s'il ne les avait pas observés tous deux… Jeanne et lui…

“Que voulez-vous, mon colonel, répondait le sergent Martial, j'avais pris toutes mes précautions… C'était Jean… un jeune gars de Bretagne… un neveu que son oncle faisait voyager dans ce pays de sauvages… Il a fallu que Jacques Helloch et notre chère fille se soient rencontrés en route… J'ai tout fait pour empêcher… je n'ai pas pu!… Le diable s'en est mêlé…

— Non… Dieu, mon brave compagnon!…” répondit le Père Esperante.

Cependant le temps marchait et les choses n’avançaient pas. En somme, pourquoi Jacques Helloch hésitait-il à parler?… Se trompait-il donc?… Non… ni sur ses propres sentiments, ni sur ceux qu’il avait inspirés à Jeanne de Kermor. Mais, par une discrétion qui l’honorait, il gardait le silence… C’eût été là, lui semblait-il, réclamer le prix des services rendus…

Très à propos, Germain Paterne brusqua les choses, et, un jour, il dit à son ami:

“Quand partons-nous?…

— Quand tu voudras, Germain.

— Entendu!… Seulement, lorsque je le voudrai, tu ne le voudras pas…

— Et pourquoi?…

— Parce que Mlle de Kermor sera mariée alors…

— Mariée!…

— Oui… car je vais demander sa main…

— Tu vas… s’écria Jacques.

— Pas pour moi… bien sûr… mais pour toi!…”

Et il fit comme il disait, — sans s’arrêter à des objections qu’il jugeait inacceptables.

Jacques Helloch et Jeanne de Kermor comparurent devant le missionnaire en présence de Germain Paterne et du sergent Martial. Puis, sur la demande que lui fit son père:

“Jacques, dit la jeune fille d’une voix profondément émue, je suis prête à devenir votre femme… et ce ne sera pas trop de toute ma vie pour vous prouver ma reconnaissance…

— Jeanne… ma chère Jeanne… répondit Jacques Helloch, je vous aime… oui!… je vous aime…

— N’en dis pas davantage, cher ami, s’écria Germain Paterne. Tu ne trouverais pas mieux!”

Et le colonel de Kermor attira ses deux enfants qui s’unirent sur son cœur.

Il fut convenu que le mariage serait célébré dans une quinzaine de jours à Santa-Juana. Après les avoir mariés comme chef civil de la Mission, le Père Esperante donnerait aux nouveaux époux la bénédiction nuptiale, qui serait aussi la bénédiction paternelle. Jacques Helloch, libre de sa personne, et dont le colonel de Kermor avait autrefois connu la famille, n’avait aucun consentement à demander. Sa fortune et celle de Jeanne, confiée au sergent Martial, suffiraient à leur assurer une large aisance. Quelques semaines après le mariage, ils partiraient, ils passeraient par la Havane afin d’y voir la famille Eredia. Puis ils retourneraient en Europe, en France, en Bretagne pour terminer leurs affaires. Enfin ils reviendraient à Santa-Juana, où ils retrouveraient le colonel de Kermor et son vieux soldat.

Ainsi allèrent les choses, et le 25 novembre, devant la population en fête, en présence de Germain Paterne et du sergent Martial, témoins des jeunes époux, le père célébra le mariage civil et religieux de sa fille Jeanne de Kermor avec Jacques Helloch.

Touchante cérémonie, et qu’on ne s’étonne pas de l’émotion profonde qu’elle produisit, qui se manifesta par une joie débordante chez ces braves Guaharibos.

Près d’un mois s’écoula, et il vint à l’esprit de Germain Paterne qu’il était peut-être temps d’aller rendre compte de la mission scientifique dont son compagnon et lui avaient été chargés par le ministre de l’Instruction publique. On le voit, c’était toujours son ministre qu’il faisait intervenir.

“Déjà?…” répondit Jacques Helloch.

C’est qu’il n’avait pas compté les jours… Il était trop heureux pour se livrer à de tels calculs!

“Oui… déjà!… répliqua Germain Paterne. Son Excellence doit croire que nous avons été dévorés par des jaguars vénézuéliens… à moins que ce ne soit dans l’estomac des Caraïbes que nous ayons terminé notre carrière scientifique!”

D’accord avec le Père Esperante, le départ de la Mission fut fixé au 22 décembre.

Ce n’était pas sans un serrement de cœur que le colonel de Kermor voyait arriver l’heure de se séparer de sa fille, bien qu’elle dût lui revenir dans quelques mois. Il est vrai, ce voyage se ferait en des conditions favorables, et Mme Jacques Helloch ne courrait plus les mêmes dangers que Jeanne de Kermor. Cette descente du fleuve s’effectuerait rapidement jusqu’à Ciudad-

Bolivar. Sans doute, on serait privé de MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas, car ils devaient avoir quitté San-Fernando.

Mais, en cinq semaines, les pirogues auraient atteint Caïcara, où l’on prendrait le paquebot du bas Orénoque. Quant au retour à Santa-Juana… on pouvait s’en rapporter à Jacques Helloch, il s’accomplirait avec toutes les chances de rapidité et de sécurité possibles.

“Et puis, mon colonel, fit observer le sergent Martial, notre fille a un bon mari pour la défendre, et ça vaut mieux qu’un vieux bonhomme de soldat… une vieille bête… qui n’a pas même été capable de la sauver… ni des flots de l’Orénoque… ni de l’amour de ce brave Jacques Helloch!”

CHAPITRE XIV

XIV

Au revoir

Le 25 décembre, dans la matinée, les pirogues étaient prêtes à redescendre le cours du fleuve.

À cette époque de l’année, les crues n’avaient pas encore relevé le niveau de l’Orénoque. Il avait donc fallu traîner la Gallinetta et la Moriche à cinq kilomètres en aval, à l’embouchure d’un petit rio de la rive droite, où la profondeur de l’eau était suffisante. À partir de cet endroit elles ne couraient plus que le risque de s’engraver pendant quelques heures, et non celui de demeurer à sec jusqu’au début de la saison pluvieuse.

Le Père Esperante voulut reconduire ses enfants au nouveau campement. Le sergent Martial, entièrement rétabli, se joignit à lui, en même temps que le jeune Indien, devenu enfant adoptif de la Mission de Santa-Juana.

Une cinquantaine de Guaharibos leur firent escorte, et tous arrivèrent heureusement à l’embouchure du rio.

L’heure du départ venue, Valdez prit son poste dans la Gallinetta, où Jacques Helloch et sa femme devaient s’embarquer. Parchal reprit le sien dans la Moriche, dont le rouf abriterait à la fois les précieuses collections de Germain Paterne et sa non moins précieuse personne.

Comme les deux falcas devaient naviguer de conserve, et le plus souvent bord à bord, Germain Paterne n’en serait pas réduit à sa seule société.

Autant qu’il le voudrait, il tiendrait compagnie aux jeunes époux. En outre, — cela va de soi, — les repas se prendraient en commun à bord de la Gallinetta, sauf le cas où Jacques et Jeanne Helloch accepteraient une invitation de Germain Paterne à bord de la Moriche.

Le temps était favorable, c’est-à-dire que le vent soufflait de l’est en bonne brise. Les rayons solaires tamisés par un léger voile de nuages, rendaient la température très supportable.

Le colonel de Kermor et le sergent Martial descendirent au pied de la berge pour embrasser leurs chers enfants. Ni les uns ni les autres ne cherchèrent à se défendre d’une émotion bien naturelle. Jeanne, si énergique pourtant, pleurait silencieusement entre les bras de son père…

“Je te ramènerai à lui, ma chère Jeanne!… dit Jacques Helloch. Dans quelques mois, nous serons tous les deux de retour à Santa-Juana…

— Tous les trois… ajouta Germain Paterne, car j’ai dû oublier de récolter quelques-unes de ces plantes rares… qui ne poussent que sur les territoires de la Mission… et je prouverai au ministre de l’Instruction publique…

— Adieu… mon bon Martial… adieu, dit la jeune femme, en embrassant le vieux soldat.

— Oui… Jeanne… et pense à ton bonhomme d’oncle… qui ne t’oubliera jamais!…”

Puis, ce fut le tour de Gomo, lequel eut sa bonne part de ces embrassements.

“Adieu… mon père… dit Jacques Helloch en serrant la main du missionnaire, et au revoir… au revoir!”

Jacques Helloch, sa femme et Germain Paterne embarquèrent dans la Gallinetta.

Les voiles furent hissées, les amarres larguées, et les deux pirogues suivirent le fil du courant, au moment où le Père Esperante tendait le bras pour leur donner une dernière bénédiction.

Puis le sergent Martial, le jeune Indien et lui, escortés des Guaharibos, reprirent le chemin de la Mission.

Il n’y a pas lieu de raconter étape par étape cette navigation des falcas à la descente de l’Orénoque. Le voyage, grâce au courant, exigerait trois ou quatre fois moins de temps et dix fois moins d’efforts, il présenterait dix fois moins de dangers que s’il se fût agi de remonter vers les sources du fleuve. L’emploi de l’espilla ne devint jamais nécessaire pour le halage des pirogues, et les palancas suffirent, lorsque la brise tombait ou devenait contraire.

Les passagers revirent alors comme dans un tableau mouvant les lieux par lesquels ils avaient déjà passé, — les mêmes villages, les mêmes ranchos, les mêmes raudals, les mêmes rapides. La crue commençant à se faire sentir, les falcas trouvèrent assez d’eau pour éviter un déchargement, et le voyage s’accomplissait sans peine ni fatigues.

Mais quel contraste, lorsque la jeune femme et son mari se rappelaient les tourments, les inquiétudes, les périls de cette navigation quelques semaines avant!

En vue du sitio du capitan de Mavaca, Jeanne se souvint: c’est là qu’elle eût succombé à la fièvre, si Jacques Helloch n’eût découvert ce précieux coloradito qui avait empêché le retour d’un mortel accès…

Puis on reconnut, non loin du cerro Guaraco, l’endroit où le troupeau de bœufs avait été attaqué par ces terribles gymnotes électriques…

Puis, à Danaco, Jacques Helloch présenta sa femme à Manuel Assomption, chez lequel, en compagnie de Germain Paterne, ils acceptèrent l’hospitalité d’un jour. Et quelle fut la surprise des braves gens du rancho, lorsqu’ils retrouvèrent dans cette belle jeune femme le neveu Jean qui avait occupé avec son oncle Martial une des cases du village mariquitare!…

Enfin, le 4 janvier, la Gallinetta et la Moriche abandonnèrent le cours de l’Orénoque pour celui de l’Atabapo, et elles vinrent s’amarrer au quai de la bourgade.

Il y avait trois mois, Jacques Helloch et ses compagnons avaient laissé à San-Fernando MM. Miguel, Felipe et Varinas. Les trois collègues s’y trouvaient-ils encore?… On avouera que c’était improbable. Après avoir traité à fond la question de l’Orénoque, du Guaviare et de l’Atabapo, ils devaient s’être remis en route pour Ciudad-Bolivar.

Et, maintenant, lequel des trois fleuves l’avait emporté, c’est ce que Germain Paterne était assez curieux de savoir. Or, comme les falcas exigeraient une relâche de quelques jours afin de se ravitailler avant de descendre vers Caïcara, il aurait le temps de satisfaire sa curiosité.

Jacques Helloch, sa femme et Germain Paterne débarquèrent donc et prirent logement dans la case que le sergent Martial avait déjà habitée.

Le jour même, ils firent visite au gouverneur, lequel apprit avec satisfaction les événements dont la Mission de Santa-Juana avait été le théâtre, — d’une part, la destruction presque complète de la bande d’Alfaniz, — de l’autre, l’heureux résultat du voyage.

Quant à M. Miguel, à M. Felipe, à M. Varinas, — qu'on ne s'en étonne pas! — ils n'avaient point quitté la bourgade, encore moins d'accord sur la question hydrographique des trois fleuves qu'ils ne l'étaient au départ de Ciudad-Bolivar.

En effet, le soir même, les passagers de la Gallinetta et de la Moriche purent serrer la main des trois passagers de la Maripare.

Quel bon accueil M. Miguel et ses collègues firent à leurs anciens compagnons de voyage! On imagine aussi leur surprise, lorsqu'ils virent Jean… leur cher Jean… au bras de Jacques Helloch, avec des vêtements de femme.

“Nous direz-vous pourquoi il est ainsi travesti?… demanda M. Varinas.

— Parce que je l'ai épousé… répondit Jacques Helloch.

— Vous avez épousé Jean de Kermor?… s'écria M. Felipe, dont les yeux s'agrandirent démesurément.

— Non… Mlle Jeanne de Kermor.

— Quoi!… dit M. Miguel, Mlle de Kermor?…

— Est la sœur de Jean! répondit en riant Germain Paterne. Hein! comme ils se ressemblent!”

Tout s'expliqua, et les compliments les plus sincères furent adressés aux nouveaux époux, comme les plus vives félicitations à Mme Jacques Helloch, puisqu'elle avait retrouvé son père, le colonel de Kermor, dans le missionnaire de Santa-Juana.

“Et l’Orénoque?… demanda Germain Paterne… Il est toujours à sa place?…

— Toujours, déclara M. Miguel.

— Eh bien… est-ce lui dont les eaux ont porté nos pirogues jusqu’aux sources de la sierra Parima?…”

À cette question, les figures de MM. Varinas et Felipe se rembrunirent. Leurs yeux lancèrent des éclairs, précurseurs d’orages, tandis que M. Miguel hochait la tête.

Et alors la discussion de reprendre avec une vigueur que le temps n’avait pu diminuer, entre le partisan de l’Atabapo et le partisan du Guaviare. Non!… ils n’étaient point d’accord, ils ne le seraient jamais, et, plutôt que de céder l’un à l’autre, ils eussent donné raison à M. Miguel et conclu en faveur de l’Orénoque!

“Répondez à ceci, monsieur, s’écria M. Varinas, et niez, si vous l’osez, que le Guaviare n’ait pas été désigné maintes fois sous le nom d’Orénoque occidental par des géographes d’une véritable compétence…

— D’une incompétence égale à la vôtre, monsieur!” s’écria M. Felipe.

Et l’on remarquera que, dès les premiers mots, la discussion s’élevait à son maximum d’intensité. Qu’on n’en soit pas étonné, d’ailleurs, puisque, chaque jour, du lever au coucher du soleil, cette discussion mettait aux prises les deux adversaires. Et si leurs arguments n’étaient pas usés jusqu’à la corde, c’est que probablement ils étaient inusables!

Et M. Varinas de répliquer:

“Prendre sa source dans la sierra Suma-Paz, à l’est du haut Magdalena, sur les territoires de la Colombie, cela est autrement honorable que de sourdre on ne sait d’où…

— On ne sait d’où, monsieur?… riposta aigrement M. Felipe. Vous avez l’aplomb d’employer de pareils termes, lorsqu’il s’agit de l’Atabapo, qui descend de ces llanos arrosés par le rio Negro, et alors que ce grand fleuve établit une communication avec le bassin de l’Amazone!

— Mais les eaux de votre Atabapo sont noires et ne parviennent même pas à se mélanger avec celles de l’Orénoque!

— Mais les eaux de votre Guaviare sont d’un blanc jaunâtre, et vous ne seriez pas capable de les distinguer à quelques kilomètres en aval de San-Fernando!

— Mais le Guaviare, monsieur Varinas, est un fleuve à caïmans, il en possède des milliers comme l’Orénoque, tandis que l’Atabapo en est réduit à des poissons ridicules, qui sont sans valeur, malingres et noirs comme lui-même!

— Envoyez donc des navires sur votre Atabapo, monsieur Felipe, et vous verrez s’ils iront loin, à moins de portages, tandis que ceux du Guaviare peuvent le remonter pendant mille kilomètres jusqu’au confluent de l’Ari-Ari… et même au-delà!

— Portages ou non, monsieur Varinas, il n’en est pas moins vrai que nous sommes le lien hydrographique entre l’Amazonie et la république vénézuélienne!

— Et nous entre le Venezuela et la Colombie!

— Allons donc!… N’avez-vous pas l’Apure pour former ce lien de navigation?…

— Et vous… n’avez-vous pas le Cassiquiare?…

— Votre Guaviare n’a seulement pas de tortues…

— Votre Atabapo n’a seulement pas de moustiques…

— Enfin le Guaviare se jette dans l’Atabapo… ici même… de l’avis de tout le monde…

— Non… c’est l’Atabapo qui se jette dans le Guaviare, ainsi que tous les gens de bonne foi en conviennent, et l’apport du Guaviare n’est pas inférieur à trois mille deux cents mètre cubes…

— Et, comme le Danube, dit alors Germain Paterne, en citant le poète des Orientales:

… Il coule

De l’Occident à l’Orient.”

Un argument dont M. Varinas ne s’était pas encore servi, mais qu’il inséra précieusement dans le dossier du Guaviare.

Pendant cet échange de répliques en faveur des deux tributaires, M. Miguel ne cessait de sourire, laissant tranquillement couler l’Orénoque sur les deux mille cinq cents kilomètres de son parcours, entre la sierra Parima et l’estuaire de ses cinquante bras, qui se ramifient à travers le littoral de l’Atlantique.

Cependant les préparatifs avançaient. Les pirogues, visitées, réparées, mises en parfait état, réapprovisionnées, seraient prêtes pour le 9 janvier.

Jacques et Jeanne Helloch écrivirent alors une lettre à leur père, — lettre dans laquelle n’étaient oubliés ni le sergent Martial ni le jeune Indien. Cette lettre arriverait à Santa-Juana par les marchands qui, d’ordinaire, remontent le fleuve au début de la saison pluvieuse. Elle disait tout ce que pouvaient dire deux cœurs heureux et reconnaissants.

La veille du départ, les passagers furent conviés une dernière fois chez le gouverneur de San-Fernando. Durant cette soirée il y eut suspension d’armes, et la discussion hydrographique ne se renouvela pas. Non qu’elle fût épuisée, mais les discuteurs avaient des mois et des années pour la reprendre.

“Ainsi, monsieur Miguel, demanda la jeune femme, votre Maripare ne va pas accompagner la Gallinetta et la Moriche?…

— Il paraît que non, madame, répondit M. Miguel, très résigné, d’ailleurs, à prolonger son séjour au confluent de l’Atabapo et du Guaviare.

— Nous avons encore quelques points importants à établir… déclara M. Varinas.

— Et des recherches à faire… ajouta M. Felipe.

— Alors, au revoir, messieurs… dit Jacques Helloch.

— Au revoir?… demanda M. Miguel.

— Oui… répondit Germain Paterne… à San-Fernando… lorsque nous repasserons… dans six mois… car il n’est pas probable que l’interminable question de l’Orénoque…”

Le lendemain, 9 janvier, après avoir reçu les adieux du gouverneur, de M. Miguel et de ses collègues, les voyageurs s’embarquèrent, et, entraînées par le rapide courant du fleuve, — qu’il se nommât Orénoque, Atabapo ou Guaviare, — les deux pirogues eurent bientôt perdu de vue la bourgade de San-Fernando.

À une heure de là, la jeune femme revit l’endroit où les falcas s’étaient échouées sur la rive droite, la place même où Jacques l’avait sauvée au péril de sa vie, pendant cette terrible tourmente du chubasco!

“Oui… ma Jeanne chérie… dit Jacques, et c’est là…

— C’est là, mon Jacques, que te vint la pensée de ne point abandonner ton cher Jean… de l’accompagner au milieu de tant de périls jusqu’au terme de son voyage…

— Et qui ne fut pas content?… s’écria Germain Paterne. Ce fut bien le sergent Martial!… Oh! pas content du tout, l’oncle à son neveu!”

Pendant les jours suivants, les pirogues, favorisées par la brise, eurent une navigation très rapide. Elles franchirent sans trop de difficultés, puisqu’il ne s’agissait que de les descendre, les raudals de Maipure et d’Ature, puis dépassèrent l’embouchure du Meta et le village de Cariben.

Les îles giboyeuses du fleuve fournissaient tout le gibier nécessaire, et la pêche ne cessait d’être fructueuse.

On arriva devant le rancho de M. Marchal à la Tigra. Là, promesse faite, promesse tenue. Les passagers des falcas furent pendant vingt-quatre heures les hôtes de cet excellent homme. Et avec quelle joie il les complimenta sur l’issue de leur entreprise, envisagée au double point de vue de la présence du colonel de Kermor à Santa-Juana et de “ce qui s’en était suivi!”

À la Urbana les pirogues eurent à se ravitailler pour la dernière partie de leur expédition.

“Et les tortues?… s’écria Germain Paterne. Jacques… te rappelles-tu les tortues… les myriades de tortues… Hein! être arrivés ici à tortues…

— C’est dans ce village que nous nous sommes rencontrés… la première fois, monsieur Germain, dit la jeune femme.

— Et grâce à ces excellentes bêtes… auxquelles nous devons bien quelque reconnaissance… déclara Jacques Helloch.

— Et nous la leur prouverons en les mangeant, car elle est excellente, la tortue de l’Orénoque!” s’écria Germain Paterne, qui envisageait toujours les choses à un point de vue spécial.

Bref, le 25 janvier, les falcas atteignirent Caïcara.

Ce fut en cette bourgade que Jacques Helloch, Jeanne, Germain Paterne se séparèrent des patrons et de leurs équipages, non sans avoir remercié de tout cœur ces braves gens si dévoués, et dont ils reconnurent généreusement les services.

De Caïcara, le paquebot de l’Apure transporta les voyageurs en deux jours à Ciudad-Bolivar, d’où le chemin de fer les conduisit à Caracas.

Dix jours après, ils étaient à la Havane, près de la famille Eredia, et vingt-cinq jours plus tard en Europe, en France, en Bretagne, à Saint-Nazaire, à Nantes.

Et alors Germain Paterne de dire:

“Sais-tu bien, Jacques… c’est cinq mille kilomètres que nous avons faits sur l’Orénoque!… Est-ce que cela ne t’a point paru un peu long?…

— Pas en redescendant!…” répondit Jacques Helloch, qui regardait Jeanne, heureuse et souriante.

THE WILL OF AN ECCENTRIC

Anonymous translation, 1900

First published in 1899, this adventure novel is based on the board game *Game of the Goose*. The narrative features William J. Hypperbone, an eccentric millionaire, who resides in Chicago, has left the sum of his fortune, $60,000,000, to the first person to reach the end of “The Noble Game of the United States of America.”

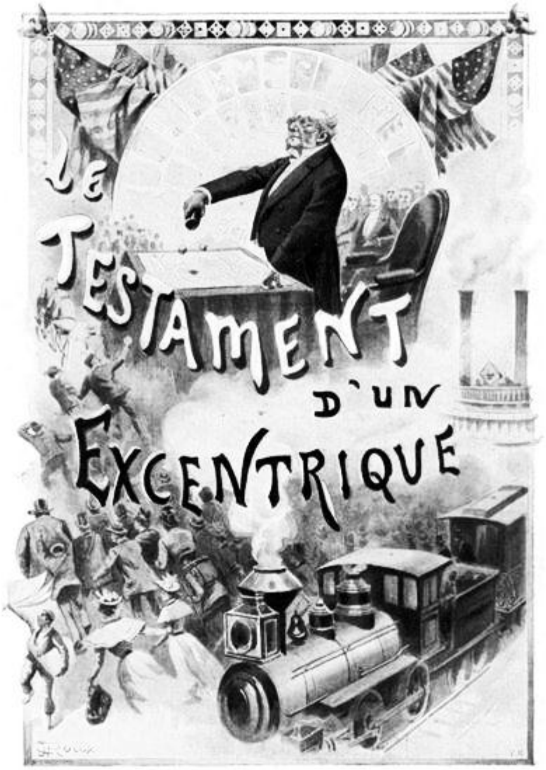
Le
Testament
d'un
Excentrique

The original frontispiece

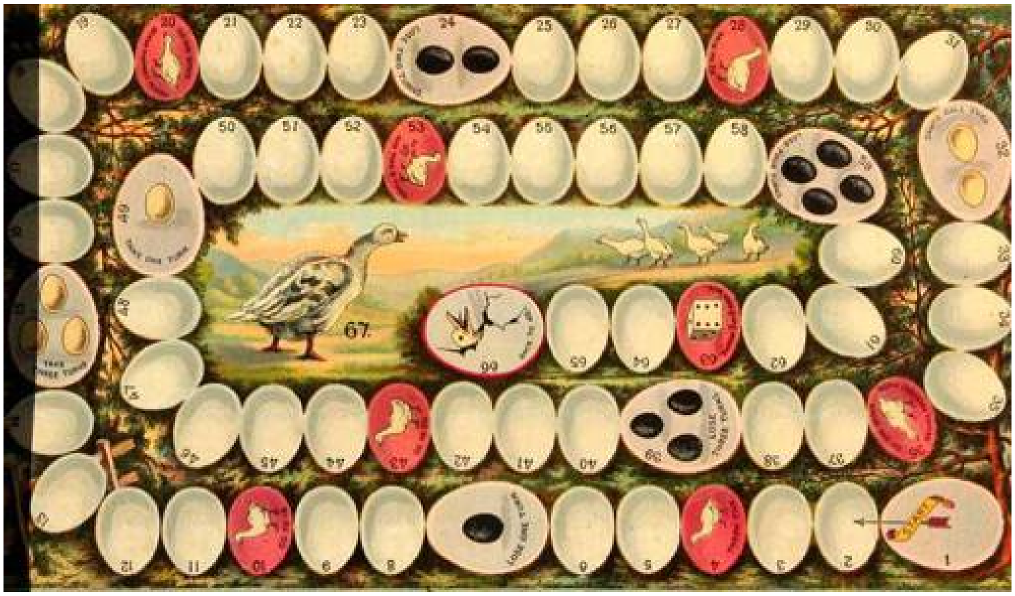

An original French version of the board game

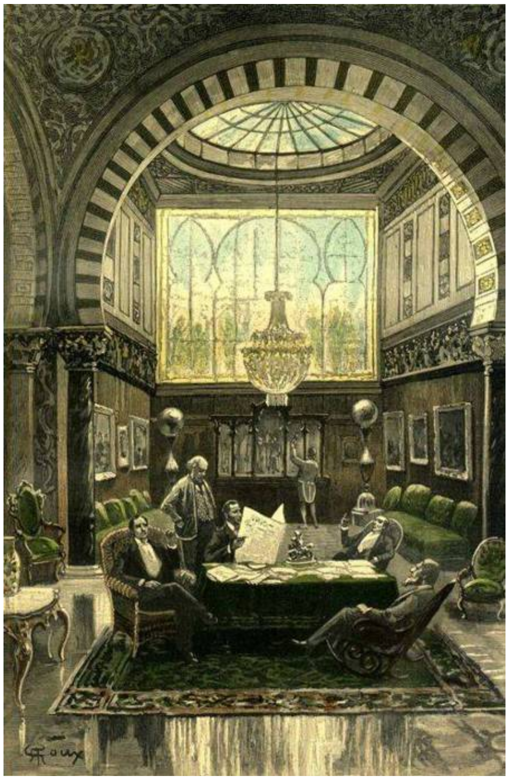

One of the original illustrations

THE WILL OF AN ECCENTRIC

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CHAPTER I

A WHOLE TOWN IN FESTIVITY

A STRANGER arriving in the chief city of Illinois on the morning of the 3rd of April, 1897, would have had good reason for considering himself the most fortunate of travellers. His note-book that day would have had entries enough to yield copy for many sensational articles. And assuredly if he had prolonged his stay in Chicago by a few weeks before and a few months after, he would have taken a share in the emotions, palpitations, and alternations of hope and despair, of the feverishness and bewilderment even, of this great city which for the time was beside itself.

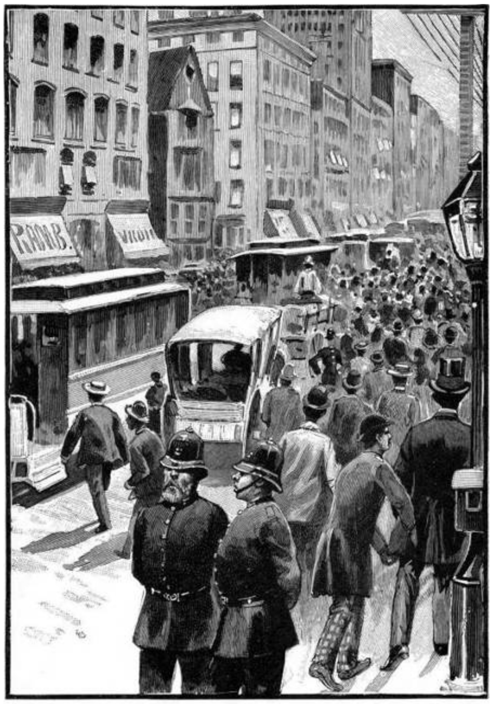

“It will be a fine day for the pickpockets!” [Page 2.

Since eight o’clock an ever-increasing crowd had been streaming towards the twenty-second quarter. This is one of the wealthiest, and is comprised between North Avenue and Division Street on the north and south, and on the east and west, between North Halstead Street and Lake Shore Drive which skirts the waters of Michigan. As you know, the modern towns of the United States lay out their streets conformably to latitudes and longitudes, and make them as regular as the lines on a chess-board.

“Well!” said a member of the municipal police, on duty at the angle of Beethoven Street and North Wells Street, “are all the people going to invade this quarter?”

A man of tall stature was this policeman, and of Irish origin like most of his colleagues of the corporation — gallant fellows in fact, who spend most of their salary of a thousand dollars in combating the inextinguishable thirst so natural to the natives of green Erin.

“It will be a fine day for the pickpockets,” replied one of his comrades, no less tall, no less thirsty, no less Irish.

“And so,” said the first, “let everyone see to his pocket, if he does not want to find it empty when he goes into a house, and that as we know — ”

“There will be plenty to do to-day,” concluded the second, “nothing but offering your arm to the ladies at the street crossings — ”

“I will bet on a hundred being run over,” added his comrade.

Fortunately one has the excellent habit in America of looking after oneself without calling on the administration for an assistance it is incapable of giving.

But what a crowd there would be in this twenty-second quarter if only half of the people of Chicago went there! The city did not then contain less than seventeen hundred thousand inhabitants of whom about a fifth were born in the United States. Germany could claim nearly four hundred thousand, Ireland almost as many. As for the rest, the English and Scotch numbered about fifty thousand, the Canadians about forty thousand, the Scandinavians a hundred thousand, the Bohemians and Poles about the same number, the Jews fifteen thousand, the French ten thousand, the smallest number in this agglomeration.

Besides, the town, as Elisée Reclus observes, does not yet occupy all the municipal territory that the legislators assigned for it on the shore of Lake Michigan, an area of 471 square kilometres, almost equal to that of the Department of the Seine. It is not impossible and it is even probable that its population will increase to occupy these forty-seven thousand hectares.

It was evident that on this occasion the sightseers were streaming from the three sections which the river Chicago forms with its two branches from the north-west and south-east, from the north side as from the south side, considered by certain travellers as being the first the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the second the Faubourg Saint-Honoré of the great city of Illinois. It is true that the influx was also taking place from the angle comprised on the west between the two branches of the river. Though they dwelt in a less fashionable section, the people were none the less disposed to furnish a contingent to the crowd, even from the miserable houses in the environs of Madison Street and Clark Street, in which swarm the Bohemians, the Poles, the Italians, and a number of Chinese escaped from the folding screens of the Celestial empire.

All this exodus was thronging towards the twenty second quarter, tumultuously, noisily, and the eighty streets which it contains, would not suffice for the accommodation of such a crowd.

And very different classes of the population mingled in this human swarm, — functionaries of the Federal Building and of the Post Office; magistrates of the Court House; higher officials of the County Hall; municipal councillors of the City Hall; the staff of that immense caravansary, the Auditorium; in which the rooms are in thousands; clerks from the great stores and bazaars, those of Marshall Field, Lehmann and W. W. Kimball; workmen from the factories of lard and margarine which produce a butter of excellent quality at ten cents the pound; men in the great car factory of the celebrated Pullman come from their distant suburb in the south; assistants from the important retail establishment of Montgomery Ward & Co., three thousand of the workmen of Mr. MacCormick, the inventor of the famous reaping and harvesting machine; some from the furnaces and rolling mills of the Bessemer steel factories; some from the shops of Mr. J. MacGregor Adams who work in nickel, tin, zinc, copper, and refine gold and silver; some from the shoe factories, where a boot and a half is made every minute; and in addition to all these the eighteen hundred workmen of the Elgin factory which puts on the market two thousand watches a day.

To this long list we might add the staff engaged in the elevators of Chicago which is the leading market of the world in the grain trade. With them should be mentioned the railway men from the network of lines which by twenty-seven different ways and more than 1300 trains carry 175,000 passengers daily through the town, and to these we may join the men employed on the steam and electric tram cars, rope cars and others which carry 2,000,000 people, and finally the boatmen and sailors of an extensive port dealing inwards and outwards with sixty vessels a day.

You would have had to be blind not to have seen in this crowd, the managers, editors, compositors, reporters of the 540 journals, daily and weekly, of the Chicago press. You would have had to be deaf not to have heard the shouts of the brokers, the bulls or operators for a rise, the bears or operators for a fall, as if they had been in full swing at the Board of Trade or the Wheat Pit, that is, the Grain Exchange. And with all this noisy crowd were the clerks of all the banks, national or state, the Corn Exchange, Calumet, Merchants' Loan Trust, Fort Dearborn, Oakland, Prairie State, American Trust and Savings, Chicago City, Guarantee of North America, Dime Savings, Northern Trust Company, etc., etc.

And how could we forget in this public demonstration the students of the colleges and universities, the Northwestern University, Union College of Law, Chicago Manual Training School and so many others, or forget the performers at the twenty-three theatres and casinos of the town, such as the Grand Opera House, Jacob's Clark Street theatre, the Auditorium and the Lyceum, or forget the people from the twenty-nine principal hotels, or the waiters and servants of the restaurants large enough to accommodate 25,000 customers an hour, or the packers or butchers of the Great Union Stock Yard, which, on account of the houses of Armour, Swift, Nelson, Morris and a number of others, kill millions of cattle and pigs at two dollars a head. And can you be surprised that the Queen of the West holds the second place after New York among the industrial and commercial towns of the United States, its volume of business reaching a total of thirty milliards.

Chicago, like the other great American cities, rejoices in a liberty as absolute as democratic. Decentralization is complete, and yet, if we may say so, what was it that caused it to centralize on this day around La Salle Street?

Was it towards the City Hall that its population was pouring, in tumultuous masses? Was there an irresistible current, what is here called a boom, in some lands speculation? Was it one of those electoral contests which drive crowds to fury, a meeting of conservative republicans or liberal democrats in the precincts of the Federal Building? Was it to inaugurate a new World's Columbian Exhibition, to recommence under the shady trees of Lincoln Park and along the Midway Plaissance the solemn pomps of 1893?

No, it was for a ceremony of quite a different kind, the character of which ought to have been profoundly sorrowful if its organizers had not, in accordance with the wishes of the person concerned; carried it out amid universal festivity.

At this hour La Salle Street was quite clear, thanks to the police posted in great numbers at each end. The procession which was to pass down the street, would thus have no obstacle to meet with.

If La Salle Street is not sought after by rich Americans as the equal of Prairie, Calumet or Michigan Avenues with their opulent mansions, it is none the less one of the most frequented thoroughfares in the city. It bears the name of a Frenchman, Robert Cavelier de La Salle, one of the first travellers who came in 1619 to explore this region of the lakes — a name very justly celebrated in the United States. Towards the middle of La Salle Street the spectator who had been able to get through the double barrier of policemen, would have seen at the corner of Goethe Street, a car drawn by six horses, standing before a house of magnificent appearance. In front and behind this car was a procession arranged in perfect order waiting only for the signal to move.

The first half of this procession comprised several companies of militia, all in review order, under the orders of their officers, a band of not less than a hundred performers, and a choir of singers amounting to as many, who would occasionally mingle their voices with the music of the instruments.

The car was decked with draperies of brilliant red, relieved by borders of silver and gold, on which were, sparkling with diamonds, the three letters W. J. H. Heaped on the car was a profusion of bouquets, or rather armfuls of flowers, which would have been rare anywhere else than in a town generally known as Garden City. From the top of this vehicle, worthy of appearing at some national festivity, garlands were hanging held in the hands of six people, three on the right, three on the left.

A few steps behind was a group of some twenty people, among whom were James T. Davidson, Gordon S. Allen, Harry B. Andrews, John I. Dickinson, Thomas R. Carlisle, etc., of the Eccentric Club in Mohawk Street, of which George B. Higginbotham was the President, members of the Calumet Club in Michigan Avenue, the Hyde Park Club in Washington Avenue, the Columbus Club in Munroe Street, the Union League in Custom House Place, the Irish American Club in Dearborn Street, and the fourteen other clubs in the town.

You are not unaware that at Chicago are the headquarters of the Missouri division and the residence of the commandant. It goes without saying, therefore, that the commandant, General James Morris, with his staff and the officers installed in Pullman Building, were in a crowd behind the group mentioned. Then the governor of the State, John Hamilton, the mayor and his assistants, the members of the municipal council, the administrators of the county arrived for the occasion from Springfield, the official capital of Illinois where the public offices are established, and also the magistrates of the Federal Court, who differ from the other functionaries, in not being appointed by universal suffrage, but by the President of the Union.

Elbowing each other at the end of the procession were merchants, manufacturers, engineers, professors, barristers, solicitors, doctors, dentists, coroners, sheriffs, to whom would be added an immense concourse of the public when the procession debouched from La Salle Street.

With a view to protect this tail end from being lost in the crowd, General James Morris had massed strong detachments of cavalry with drawn swords, whose standards floated in the breeze.

This long description of all the bodies, civil and military, of all the societies and corporations which took part in this extraordinary ceremony, should be completed by this very significant detail: those present, without an exception, wore in their button-holes a gardenia given to them by the major-domo in a black suit, who stood on the steps of the mansion.

The house itself had every appearance of festivity. Its girandoles and electric lamps streaming with light contended with the brilliant rays of an April sun. The windows wide open displayed their multi-coloured draperies. The servants in their best liveries were on duty on the marble steps of the principal staircase. The drawing-rooms were prepared for a solemn reception. The dining-rooms were set out with tables on which glittered the massive silver plate and marvellous ware of the millionaires of Chicago, with the crystal cups full of wines of the best vintages and champagnes of the best brands.

At last nine o’clock sounded from the clock of the City Hall. There was a fanfare of trumpets at the end of La Salle Street. Three cheers, given unanimously, filled the air. At a signal from the superintendent of police the procession began to move with banners flying.

At first, from the formidable instruments of the band amid the enlivening strains of the Columbus March by Professor J. K. Paine, of Cambridge, with slow and measured step the procession moved up La Salle Street.

Almost immediately the car started, drawn by its six luxuriously caparisoned horses, plumed with tufts and aigrettes. The garlands of flowers were held in the hands of the six privileged persons, whose choice seemed to be due to the fantastic caprices of chance.

Then the clubs, the authorities, military, civil, and municipal, the masses which followed the detachments of cavalry, advanced in perfect order. Needless to say, the doors, windows, balconies, the roofs even, of La Salle Street were thronged with spectators of every age, of whom the greater number had taken up their positions the evening before.

When the first ranks of the procession had reached the end of the street they inclined a little to the left so as to take the avenue that skirts Lincoln Park. What an incredible swarm of people were gathered on the two hundred and fifty acres of this admirable enclosure, bounded on the east by the rippling waters of Lake Michigan, with its shady alleys, its thickets, its lawns, its wooded dunes, its Winston lagoon, its lofty monuments to the memory of Grant and Lincoln, and its parade ground, and its zoological department, in which the wild beasts howled and the monkeys capered to be in unison with all this popular agitation. As the park is almost deserted during the week, a stranger might have asked if the day were not Sunday. No, it was a Friday — the miserable unlucky Friday — that fell this year on the third of April.

But the people hardly gave this a thought as they exchanged observations with each other while the procession went by, regretting doubtless, that they did not take part in it.

“Certainly,” said one, “it is as fine as the dedication ceremony of our exhibition.”

“True,” said the other, “and that was as good as the closing on the 24th of October in Midway Plaisance.”

“And the six who walk near the car — ” said a boatman from the Chicago River.

“And who will return with their pockets full,” remarked a workman from McCormick’s factory.

“There are the winners of the big prizes,” grunted an enormous brewer, who sweated beer from all his pores.

“I would give my weight in gold to be in their place.”

“And you would not lose by it!” announced a strong slaughterman from the Stock Yards.

“Bundles of bonds for them to-day!” said those around them, “Yes: their fortunes are made!”

“And what fortunes!”

“Ten million dollars to each — ”

“You should say twenty million dollars!”

“Nearer fifty than twenty!”

Started in this way, the good people ended by reaching a milliard — a word in current conversation in the United States. But it should be noted that all this was based on mere hypothesis!

Was this procession going to make the tour of the town? Well, if the programme included such a perambulation the day would not have sufficed for it.

Anyhow, always with some demonstrations of joy, always amid the loud outbursts from the orchestra and the singing of the choir who had just given “To the Son of Art” amid the cheering of the crowd, the long unbroken column arrived before the entrance to Lincoln Avenue on which abuts Fullerton Avenue. It then took the road to the left and went westward for about two miles to the northern branch of the Chicago River. Between the sidewalks, black with people, there was enough width for it to move along freely.

Crossing the bridge the procession, by way of Brand Street, reached that magnificent artery which bears the name of Humboldt Boulevard for a length of eleven miles and descends again towards the south after running towards the west. It was at the angle of Logan Square that it took this direction as soon as the police, not without difficulty, had cleared the road between the quintuple hedge of spectators.

From this point the car proceeded to Palmer Square and appeared before the Park which also bears the name of the illustrious Prussian scientist.

It was noon. A halt of half an hour was made in Humboldt Park — a halt quite justifiable, for there was still a long way to go. The crowd could disperse at its ease over its green expanse which has an area exceeding two hundred acres and is watered by running streams.

The car stopped. The band and choir attacked “The Star Spangled Banner,” which was received with applause as if it had been at a music hall.

The point furthest west which the programme assigned for the procession, was reached about two o’clock at Garfield Park. We can see that there is no want of parks in the great city of Illinois. At least fifteen principal ones can be enumerated — Jackson Park does not contain less than five hundred and eighty-six acres — and altogether they cover two thousand acres of underwood, thickets, shrubberies and lawns.

When the angle made by Douglas Boulevard as it turns towards the east had been passed, the procession followed the same direction so as to reach Douglas Park, and thence by the south-west cross the southern branch of the Chicago River and the Michigan Canal which runs alongside it further up. It then descended to the south along Western Avenue for about three miles to reach Gage Park.

Three o’clock then struck and a new direction had to be taken so as to return towards the eastern quarters of the town.

This time the band grew furious, playing with extraordinary vigour the liveliest two-fours, the maddest allegros, chosen from Lecocq, Varney, Andran and Offenbach. It was almost incredible that the people did not break out into a dance under the influence of these ball-room airs. In France no one could have resisted them.

The weather was magnificent although rather cold. In the early days of April the wintry period is far from having come to an end in the climate of Illinois, and the navigation of Lake Michigan and the Chicago River is generally interrupted from the beginning of December to the end of March.

But although the temperature was rather low the air was so pure, the sun pursuing his course in a cloudless sky gave forth such dazzling rays that he also seemed to be making holiday, as the reporters said, and everything went magnificently to the close of the day.

The masses of people showed no tendency to diminish. If the spectators no longer came from the northern quarters, they came from the southern, and these were as good as the others in their demonstrative animation and the enthusiasm of their cheering as the procession passed along.

In its various groups the procession remained as at its start from the mansion in La Salle Street, and such it would remain until its long journey had finished.

Coming out of Gage Park the car returned towards the east by Garfield Boulevard.

At the end of this boulevard there stretches in all its magnificence Washington Park, which occupies an area of three hundred and seventy-one acres.

The crowd covered it as they had done a few years before when the Great Exposition was held in its vicinity. From four o’clock to half-past four o’clock there was a halt here, during which, amid the applause of the innumerable audience, the choir performed Beethoven’s “In Praise of God.”

Then the procession went on again under the shade of the trees to the park which, with Midway Plaisance, comprised the surroundings of the World’s Columbian Fair within the spacious limits of Jackson Park on the very shore of Lake Michigan.

Was the car going to this already famous place? Was there to be a ceremony to recall to remembrance this memorable event in the annals of Chicago?

Was there to be an annual festival to prevent its ever being forgotten?

No. After passing round the Washington Park Club by Cottage Grove, the leading ranks of militia halted before a park which the railways enclose with their network of steel in this populous quarter.

The procession stopped, and before advancing beneath the shades of the magnificent oaks, the instrumentalists played one of Strauss’s most exhilarating waltzes.

Was this park then that of a. casino, and was there some immense hall prepared for an evening festival in which all these people were to take part?

The gates had just opened wide, and the police could only with great effort keep back the crowd that were here more noisy and overflowing than ever.

This time they had not invaded the park which was guarded by detachments of militia, so as to permit the car to enter it at the end of its fifteen miles of route through the immense city.

The park was not a park. It was Oakwood Cemetery, the largest of the eleven cemeteries of Chicago. And the car was a funeral car which bore to his last home the mortal remains of William J. Hypperbone, one of the members of the Eccentric Club.

CHAPTER II

WILLIAM J HYPPERBONE

BECAUSE James T. Davidson, Gordon S. Allen, Harry B Andrews, John I. Dickinson, George B. Higginbotharn, and Thomas R. Carlisle have been mentioned among the distinguished crowd walking behind the car, it need not be inferred that they were the most prominent members of the Eccentric Club.

In fact, to tell the truth, there was nothing eccentric in their manner of living in this world, except in their belonging to the said club in Mohawk Street. These eminent sons of Jonathan, grown wealthy in their multiple and profitable businesses in land, salt provisions, petroleum, railways, mines, stock raising, stock slaughtering, may have intended to astonish their compatriots in the fifty-one States of the Union and the new and old worlds by their ultra-American extravagances; but their existence, public and private, offered, it must be admitted, nothing of a kind to attract the attention of the universe? They were there, some fifty or so," worth a good deal for taxes, "paying a high subscription, going little into Chicago society, regular attendants in the reading and play rooms, reading a number of journals and reviews, playing more or less heavily as in all clubs, and saying to themselves occasionally with regard to what they had done in the past and what they were doing in the present, —

"Decidedly we are not at all eccentric!"

One of the members, however, seemed to show more tendencies towards originality than his colleagues. Although he had not yet distinguished himself by a series of notorious extravagances, there was evidently a chance that in the future he would justify the name prematurely adopted by the celebrated club.

But, unfortunately, William J. Hypperbone had just died. It is true that what he had never done when living he had just done in a certain fashion after his death, for it had been his express wish that his funeral should take place amid general hilarity.

The late William J. Hypperbone, when his life had suddenly ended, had not passed his fiftieth year. At this age he was a well-built man, tall of stature, broad of shoulder, strong of chest, rather stiff in his bearing, not without a certain elegance, a certain nobleness. He had chestnut hair, which he wore short, a fan-shaped beard in which the silky threads of gold were mingled with a few threads of silver, eyes of a dark blue with glowing pupils beneath the thick eyebrows, the mouth with its dental furniture complete, lips rather tightly closed with their corners slightly raised — the sign of a disposition inclined to raillery and even to disdain.

This superb specimen of the North American rejoiced in vigorous health. Never had a doctor felt his pulse, examined his tongue, looked at his throat, sounded his chest, listened to his heart, nor taken his temperature with a thermometer. And yet there is no scarcity of doctors in Chicago, nor of dentists, all of them of great professional ability, which they had never had an opportunity of displaying in his case.

It might have been said that no machine — ever of a hundred doctor power — would have been able to drag him from the world and transport him to another, and yet he was dead, dead without the help of the Faculty, and having passed from life to death here was his funeral car standing before the gate of Oakwood Cemetery.

To complete the portrait of this physical personage by the portrait of the mental personage it may be added that William J. Hypperbone was of a nature very cool, very positive, and that he never lost control of himself. That he found life pleasant was because he was a philosopher; and philosophy is easy when a large fortune and freedom from every care for wealth or family allows of benevolence being joined to generosity.

It will be asked if it were logical to expect anything eccentric from a nature so practical and well balanced. Had there been anything in this American’s past to lead one to suppose so?

Yes, there had been such a circumstance.

At the age of forty, William J. Hypperbone had made up his mind to marry the most authentic centenarian of the New World, whose birth dated from 1781, the very day when, during the Great War, the Capitulation of Lord Cornwallis had obliged England to recognize the Independence of the United States. Just as he was going to ask her to be his wife the worthy Miss Anthonia Burgoyne was carried off by an attack of infantine whooping-cough, so that he was not in time to be accepted. Faithful to the memory of the venerable lady, he remained a bachelor, and that perhaps may pass as an example of eccentricity.

Henceforth nothing troubled his life, for he was not of the school of the great poet, who has said in magnificent verse: —

“Oh death, dark goddess, unto whom Returneth all and their own selves efface, Receive thy children in thy starry breast, Free them from time, from number and from space, And give them that which life hath troubled — rest.”

In truth, why should William J. Hypperbone have thought of invoking “the dark goddess”? Time, number, space, had they ever wearied him in this world? Had not, on the contrary, everything succeeded with him? Had he not been the great favourite of fortune who had always and everywhere heaped its favours on him?

At twenty-five he had rejoiced in a fair share of wealth, he had doubled it, increased it ten times, a hundred times, by lucky speculations without a single disaster. A native of Chicago he had but to follow the prodigious development of this town of which the forty-seven thousand hectares — declares a traveller — were worth two thousand five hundred dollars in 1823 and are now worth eight milliards. It was under these easy conditions, by buying at low prices and selling at high ones the plots of ground that purchasers acquired at the rate of two or three thousand dollars the square yard for the construction of houses of twenty-eight stories, and by also taking shares in railroads, oil wells and mines, William J. Hypperbone was able to enrich himself sufficiently to leave after him an enormous fortune. Really Miss Anthonia Burgoyne was unwise to lose the chance of so grand a marriage.

After all there was nothing astonishing in inexorable death carrying off a centenarian of that age, but it was remarkable that William J. Hypperbone, who was not even half a centenarian, in the prime of life, in the fulness of his strength, should go to join her in a world which he had no reason for thinking a better one.

And now that he was dead, to whom would come the millions of the honourable member of the Eccentric Club?

At the outset it had been asked if this club would not be the sole legatee of the first of its members who had quitted this life since its foundation — to encourage, perhaps, his colleagues later on to follow his example.

It should be said that William J. Hypperbone lived more at the club in Mohawk Street than at his home in La Salle Street. There he took his meals, his ease, his amusements, of which the greatest please note this — was the game not of chess, nor backgammon, nor tricktrack, nor cards, neither baccarat, trente-et-quarante, lansquenet, poker, not even piquet, écarté, or whist, but that which he had introduced himself into the club and which he preferred to all the rest.

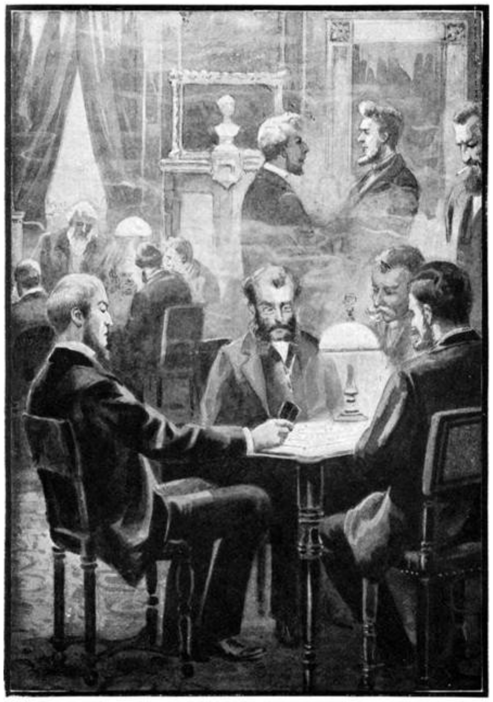

The club in Mohawk Street.

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This was the Royal Game of Goose, the noble game that has come down to us in a more or less altered form from the Ancient Greeks. It would be impossible to say how passionately he was fond of it — so fond that he had succeeded in imparting some of his enthusiasm for it to his colleagues. Great was his excitement in leaping from one division to another at the caprice of the dice, hurling himself from goose to goose to reach the last of these denizens of the poultry-yard, walking on “the bridge,” resting in “the inn,” falling down “the well,” losing himself in “the maze,” casting himself into “the prison,” stumbling against “the death’s head,” visiting the compartments of “the sailor,”

“the fisherman,”

“the harbour,”

“the stag,”

“the mill,”

“the snake,”

“the sun,”

“the helmet,”

“the lion,”

“the rabbit,”

“the flower-pot,” etc.

It goes without saying that among the opulent personages of the Eccentric Club, the fines to pay according to the rules of the game were not small, that they amounted to thousands of dollars, and that the winner, however rich he might be, experienced considerable pleasure in transferring the respectable total to his pocket.

For about twenty years William J. Hypperbone had been spending his days at the club, satisfying himself with a walk or so along Lake Michigan. Without any of the inclination of the Americans for running round the world, his travels were limited by the United States. Then why did not his colleagues with whom he was on such excellent terms, succeed to what he had left? Were they not the only people to whom he was bound by ties of sympathy and friendship? Had they not every day joined in his immoderate passion for the Royal Game of Goose, and contended with him on this field where chance brought so many surprises? At least he might have conceived the idea of founding an annual prize in favour of his fellow member who had won the greatest number of games between the first of January and the thirty-first of December.

It should be said here that the deceased possessed neither family nor direct or collateral heir, nor any relation near enough of kin to be his heir, and if he had died without disposing of his fortune it would have gone to the federal republic, which, like any monarchical State, would have accepted it without any pressing.

Anyhow, if you wished to know what were the last wishes of the deceased you had only to go to No. 17, Sheldon Street, to Mr. Tornbrock, the notary, and ask if William J. Hypperbone had left a will, and if so, what were its clauses and conditions, "Gentlemen," said Mr. Tornbrock to George B. Higginbotham, the president, and Thomas R. Carlisle, who had been delegated to call at the office of the worthy notary, "I expected your visit. I am honoured by it."

"And we are equally honoured," said the two members of the club with a bow.

“But,” continued the notary, “before troubling ourselves about the will, we must see about the funeral of the deceased.”

“With regard to that,” said George B, Higginbotham, “should it not be conducted with a magnificence worthy of our late colleague?”

“I can only conform to the instructions of my client which are contained in this cover,” replied Mr. Tornbrock, showing an envelope of which he had broken the seal.

“And what sort of a funeral is it to be?” asked Thomas R. Carlisle.

“Pompous and lively, gentlemen, accompanied by a band and a choir so that the people will join in cheers of delight in honour of William J. Hypperbone.”

“I should have hoped no less of a member of our club,” replied the president, with an approving nod of the head.

“He could not be interred like a simple mortal,” said Thomas R. Carlisle.

“Likewise,” continued Tornbrock, “William J. Hypperbone has signified his wish that the entire population of Chicago should be represented at his funeral by a delegation of six members drawn by lot under special circumstances. With this project in view he had for some months been collecting in an urn the names of all his fellow-citizens of Chicago of both sexes between the ages of twenty and sixty. Yesterday, as his instructions required me, I proceeded to draw the lots in the presence of the Mayor and his assistants. The first six individuals whose names were drawn I have informed by registered letter of the intention of the deceased, and I have invited them to take their places at the head of the procession, and entreated them not to decline the duty of rendering him the last honours.”

“Which they will take good care not to decline,” exclaimed Thomas R. Carlisle,” for there is reason for believing that the testator has left them something to their advantage, if he has not left them the whole of his property — ”

“That is possible,” said Mr. Tornbrock,” and I should not be surprised if it were so.”

“And what conditions have to be fulfilled by the people who have been chosen by lot? asked George B. Higginbotham.

“Only that they should have been born and reside in Chicago.”

“What! nothing else?”

“Nothing at all.”

“That is, understood,” said Thomas R. Carlisle,” and now, when are you going to open the will?”

“A fortnight after the death.”

“In a fortnight only?”

“That is all — as is directed in this note which accompanies it. Consequently on the 15th of April — ”

“Why the delay?”

“Because my client desired before making the public acquainted with his last wishes that no doubt should exist of his having passed from life to death.”

“A practical man, our friend Hypperbone,” said George B. Higginbotham.

“One cannot be too careful in such circumstances,” said Thomas R. Carlisle,” and unless you are cremated — ”

“Or,” added the notary, “burnt alive — ”

“Of course,” added the president, “but then you are at least certain of the death.”

But nothing had been said about cremating the body of William J. Hypperbone, and beneath the draperies of the funeral car the body lay ready for burial.

As may be imagined, the news of the death of William J. Hypperbone had produced a prodigious sensation. The earliest accounts were as follows: —

On the 30th of March, in the afternoon, the member of the Eccentric Club was seated with two of his colleagues before the Game of Goose table. He had just made the first throw, nine, made up of a six and a three, the most fortunate beginning, which sent him on to the fifty-ninth square.

Suddenly his face became congested, his limbs grew stiff. He tried to rise, he tottered as he did so, stretched out his hands and would have fallen on the floor if John T. Dickinson and Harry B. Andrews had not caught him in their hands and laid him on a sofa.

A doctor was at once called in. Two came. They said that William J. Hypperbone had succumbed to congestion of the brain, that all was over, and Dr. H. Burnham, of Cleveland Avenue, and Dr. S. Buchanan, of Franklin Street, were not likely to make a mistake in pronouncing a man to be dead.

An hour afterwards the deceased had been removed to a room in his own house whither Mr. Tornbrock, to whom the news had at once been conveyed, had hastened without losing a moment.

The notary's first care was to open the packet containing the deceased's dispositions with regard to his obsequies. In the first place he was requested to draw by lot the six people who were to take part in the procession, and whose names were contained with hundreds of thousands of others in an enormous urn that stood in the centre of the hall.

When this extraordinary arrangement became known it may easily be imagined what hosts of journalists assailed Mr. Tornbrock. To him came the reporters of the *Chicago Tribune,* the *Chicago Inter-Ocean,* the *Chicago Evening Journal*, which are republican or conservative, those of the *Chicago Globe,* the *Chicago Herald,* the *Chicago Times,* the *Chicago Mail*, the *Chicago Evening Post,* which are democratic or liberal, those of the *Chicago Daily News* the *Daily News Record,* the *Freie Presse,* the *Staats Zeitung,* which are of independent politics. The house in La Salle Street was crowded with visitors for half the day. And what these news-hunters, these fact-providers, these editors of sensational chronicles, these reporters, wished to get at was not the details of Hypperbone's death, which had occurred so unexpectedly at the famous throw of nine by six and three — No! it was the names of the six privileged ones that had just been drawn from the urn. Mr. Tornbrock, overwhelmed by the numbers, got out of the difficulty like a practical man — practical as so many of his countrymen are to an unusual degree. He offered to put the names up for auction, to hand them over to the journal which would pay the highest price, with the understanding that the sum paid should be divided between two of the twenty-one hospitals of the town.

The *Tribune* was the purchaser at ten thousand dollars. The bidding ran to ten thousand dollars after a prolonged competition with the *Chicago Inter-Ocean.*

They rubbed their hands that day, did the managers of the Illinois Charitable Eye and Ear Infirmary, 237, W. Adams Street, as did those of the Chicago Hospital for Women and Children, Paulina Corner, W. Adams Street.

But next day what a success was made by the powerful journal, and what a profit it realized by its extra edition of two million five hundred thousand copies, for it had to supply them by hundreds of thousands to the fifty-one States of which the Union was then composed.

“The names!” shouted the newsboys — the names of the mortals fortunate above all, who had been chosen by lot from among the population of Chicago.

They were the six “chancers” as they were called, coining a word for the occasion, which would have to find its way into the dictionary — or, more briefly,” the six.”

The *Tribune* was accustomed to these audacious outbursts, and what could dare to do so with a better grace than the well-informed journal of Dearborn and Madison Streets, which is run with a capital of a million dollars, the shares of which were issued at a thousand dollars, and are now worth twenty-five thousand.

In addition to this issue of the 1st of April, the *Tribune* published the six names on a special list which its agents distributed in profusion to the most distant towns of the Republic of the United States.

Herewith, in the order in which chance had designated them, are the names which were to be heard in the world for many months in connection with such extraordinary vicissitudes as were never imagined by the most imaginative of French romancers.

Max Real.

Tom Crabbe.

Hermann Titbury.

Harris T. Kymbale.

Lizzie Wag.

Hodge Urrican.

It will be seen that of these six persons, five were of the stronger sex and one of the gentler sex — supposing that this qualification is correct when speaking of American women.

Public curiosity was not, however, entirely satisfied at the outset. Who were the bearers of these names? where did they live? to what class of society did they belong? This information the *Tribune* was not at first in a position to give its innumerable readers.

Were they even still alive at this time, the elect of this posthumous lottery? That was an important question.

In fact, the names had been in the urn for some time, some months already, and some of those on whom chance had chosen might have died or left America.

But if they were able to do so, although they had never been consulted on the subject, they would come and take their places round the car — there was no doubt about that. Was it likely that they would reply by a refusal to the strange but serious invitation of William J. Hypperbone — an eccentric, at least, after his death — that they would renounce the advantages reserved for them, as was almost certain, in the will deposited with Mr. Tornbrock! No! they would all be there, for they had every reason to consider themselves the heirs to the large fortune of the deceased, and a heritage would assuredly not be allowed to fall to the greedy authorities of the State; and that was clear enough when, three days later, the "six," without knowing one another, appeared on the steps of the mansion in La Salle Street before the notary, who after proving their identity, placed in their hands the garlands of the car.

Of what curiosity they were the object, and, equally, of what envy! By the orders of William J. Hypperbone all signs of mourning had been proscribed at this extraordinary funeral, and they had conformed to this injunction, as published in the newspapers, and appeared in their best holiday clothes — clothes, which by their quality and cut, denoted that their wearers belonged to very different grades of society.

They took up their positions in the following order: —

In the first rank: Lizzie Wag to the right, Max Real to the left.

In the second rank: Hermann Titbury to the right, Hodge Urrican to the left.

In the third rank: Harris T. Kymbale to the right, Tom Crabbe to the left.

A thousand cheers greeted them when these positions had been taken up — cheers which some acknowledged by an amiable bow and to which others made no reply.

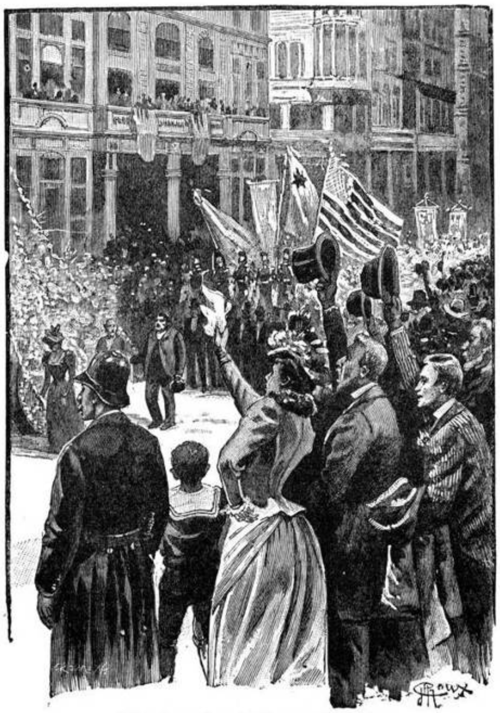

Thus it was they had begun their walk. p. 23

Thus it was they had begun their walk as soon as the signal had been given by the superintendent of police, and thus it was that for about eight hours they had passed along the roads, avenues and boulevards of the great city of Chicago.

Assuredly these six guests at the funeral of William J. Hypperbone were quite unacquainted with each other, but that would soon be altered. And who knows, for human avidity is insatiable, if these candidates to the succession were not already looking upon each other as rivals and feared that after all the fortune was to fall to one of them instead of being divided among the six.

We have seen how the funeral had proceeded through a prodigious concourse of people from La Salle Street to Oakwood amid music and singing, in which there was nothing funereal, and exclamations of delight at every turn in honour of the deceased.

And now it had only to enter the cemetery and place in the depths of the tomb, to sleep an eternal sleep, him who was William J. Hypperbone of the Eccentric Club.

CHAPTER III

OAKWOOD

The name of Oakwood indicates that the site occupied by the cemetery was formerly covered with a forest of oaks, the principal tree of these vast solitudes of Illinois, formerly called the Prairie State on account of the exuberance of its vegetation.

Of all the monuments it contained — many of them erected at great cost — none could be compared with that which William J. Hypperbone had built some years before for his own use.

As we know, these American cemeteries, like English Cemeteries, are regular parks. Nothing is wanting which can please the eye, neither lawns, nor shady walks, nor running streams. It seems as though there could be no sadness in them. The birds warble more joyously there than elsewhere, perhaps, because their safety is complete in these fields consecrated to supreme repose.

The mausoleum built on the plans and by the care of William J. Hypperbone stood close to a small lake of calm clear water. In Anglo-Saxon architectural taste it combined all the fancifulness of that Gothic style which extended into the Renaissance. In its front surmounted by a clock tower rising a hundred feet from the ground it resembled a chapel, in its roof and its stained glass windows in the shape of miradors it had the look of a large villa.

The clock tower ornamented with crosses and finials and supported by the buttresses along the front, contained a bell of powerful sonorousness, which struck the hours for the illuminated clock at its base. The metallic voice of this bell when it escaped through the pierced and gilded louvres, could be heard beyond the boundary of Oakwood as far as the bank of Lake Michigan. The monument measured a hundred and twenty feet in length and sixty in breadth at its transept. Its plan was that of a Latin cross terminated by an apse. The railing that surrounded it, a beautiful example of aluminium metal work, was supported at intervals by lamp columns. Beyond were grouped magnificent evergreen trees which served as a frame to the superb mausoleum. The gate of this railing, then open, gave access to a path bordered with clumps and clusters leading to a staircase of fine steps of white marble. At the back of the wide landing was the doorway with its two bronze doors decorated with a pattern of interlacing fruits and flowers.

This entrance led into an antechamber furnished with gold-studded couches and ornamented with a flower vase of Chinese porcelain, the flowers in which were frequently changed. From the centre hung an electrolier of crystal with seven branches. Through copper orifices arranged at the angles there was introduced the pleasant equable temperature of a hot-air stove, looked after during the cold season by one of the attendants at Oakwood. In this way warm air was provided in the interior of the monument.

Opening the glass panels of a door facing the entrance from the steps you stood in the principal apartment of the building. It was a spacious hall, circular in form, in which was displayed all that extravagant luxury possible to an arch-millionaire who desires to continue after his death the opulent surroundings of his life. Abundant light was given from the ceiling of ground glass which closed in the upper portion of the vault. The surface of the walls was ornamented with arabesques, scrolls, annulets, embossments, floral designs, vermiculations as finely designed and carved as those of the Alhambra. The lower part was hidden by couches of startling fabrics. Here and there were bronze and marble statues of fauns and nymphs. Between the pillars of dazzling stucco on which rested the ribs of the vault were a few pictures by modern masters, mostly landscapes, in gold frames picked out with luminous points. Thick strips of soft carpet covered the pavement which was decorated with glittering mosaics.

Beyond the hall, at the back of the mausoleum, was an apse, lighted by a large window in which the splendid stained glass glowed like a flame when the sun as he set struck it with his oblique rays. This apse was fitted with modern furniture. Easy chairs, chairs, rocking-chairs, sofas, encumbered it in the wished for disorder. On a table were thrown in confusion books and pamphlets, journals and magazines, home and foreign. Behind its glass doors a sideboard equipped with china and so forth provided cold refreshments, always ready and renewed every day, delicate sweetmeats, unctuous sandwiches, dry cakes, flagons of fine wines, bottles of liqueurs of illustrious brands. An admirably arranged place it must be admitted for a read, a siesta or a luncheon.

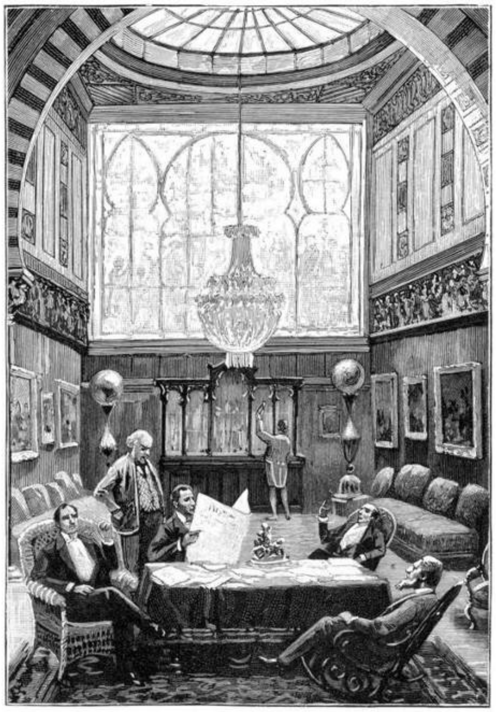

An admirably arranged place.

In the centre of the hall, bathed in the light which the dome allowed to enter through the glass, rose a tomb of white marble encircled with fine sculptures, with heraldic animals at the corners. This tomb, surrounded by a circle of incandescent lights, was open, the stone which closed it having been drawn back. Here was to be placed the coffin in which the body of William J. Hypperbone lay on its padded cushion of white satin.

Assuredly such a mausoleum was not suggestive of ideas of mourning. Gladness rather than sadness was what it evoked. Through the pure air that filled it there was no feeling of that rustling of the wings of death as over the tombs in a cemetery. And was not the monument worthy of the eccentric American to whom was due the anything but sorrowful programme of his funeral which was nearing its end, in which songs of gaiety had mingled with the joyful cheers of the crowd?

It should be noted that William J. Hypperbone never failed to come twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, and spend a few hours inside his mausoleum.

From time to time many of his colleagues had accompanied him. It was one of the quietest and most comfortable places for conversation. Stretched on the couches of the apse, seated before the table, these people read or chatted about the politics of the day, the market prices of stocks and goods, the progress of jingoism, otherwise chauvinism, in the different classes of society, the advantages or disadvantages of the McKinley Bill, with which thinking people occupied themselves unceasingly.

While they talked in this way they were served with luncheon, and when the afternoon had been spent in this agreeable way the carriages came up Grove Avenue and took away to their houses the members of the Eccentric Club.

It need scarcely be said that no one but the owner could enter his “cottage at Oakwood,” as he called it. The keeper of the cemetery, to whom the care of the said cottage was entrusted, alone possessed a second key.

Certainly if William J. Hypperbone was scarcely distinguished from his fellows by the actions of his public life, his private life divided between the club in Mohawk Street and the mausoleum at Oakwood, afforded a few singularities that admitted of his being classed among the eccentrics of his time.

It would have crowned all and pushed eccentricity to its furthest limits if Hypperbone were not really dead. But his heirs, whoever they might be, could rest assured in this respect. Here was no case of apparent death but of unmistakable death.

The ultra X-rays of Professor Friedrich of Elbing (Prussia) had at this period been brought into use, which rays possess a force of penetration so intense that they traverse the human body and rejoice in the singular property of producing different photographic images according as the body is living or dead.

These rays were tried on William J. Hypperbone, and the images obtained left no doubt in the minds of the doctors. The “defunctuosity” — such was the word they used in their report — was indubitable, and there could be no danger of error in a too hasty burial.

It was a quarter to six o’clock when the car entered the gates of Oakwood. It was in the middle of the cemetery, at the end of the lagoon, that the monument was placed. The procession in the same order as before, increased by a more jostling crowd that the police had great difficulty in restraining, made its way under the foliage of the large trees towards the lagoon.

The car stopped before the gate where the electric arc lights mingled their dazzling rays with the first shades of evening.

The interior of the mausoleum would hold a hundred people at the most, if therefore the programme of the obsequies included any more items they would have to be gone through outside, and, in fact, this was what occurred.

The car stopped, the ranks closed up, there being no crowding on the six holders of the garlands who were to accompany the coffin to the tomb. A confused noise arose from the crowd, eager to see, eager to hear. But gradually the tumult subsided, the groups became motionless, and silence reigned around the railings.

Then, the Rev. Mr. Bingham, who had followed the deceased to his last home, declaimed the words of the Liturgy. The crowd listened to them reverently, and at this moment, and this moment alone, the obsequies partook of a religious character.

To these words, given in a penetrating voice that could be heard afar, succeeded the performance of a celebrated march by Chopin, which has such an impressive effect in ceremonies of this kind. But perhaps the orchestra gave it a rather more lively movement than was warranted by the indications of the Master Symphonist — a movement more in accord with the character of the audience and of the defunct, whose feelings were considerably different from those with which Paris was inspired at the funeral of one of the founders of the Republic, when the Marseillaise, which has so striking a tonality, was played in a minor key.

After this work of Chopin’s, the principal feature of the programme, one of the colleagues of William J, Hypperbone, who had been bound to him by the ties of closest friendship, the president, George B. Higginbotham, stepped out from the group, placed himself in front of the car, and in a brilliant oration retraced in apologetic terms the life story of his friend.

“At twenty-five years of age, already possessed of a moderate fortune, William J. Hypperbone had discovered how to increase it — And his fortunate acquisitions of land, every square yard of which was now worth as much gold as would cover it — And his elevation to the rank of one of the millionaires of the city — that is to say, one of the great citizens of the United States of America — And the sagacious shareholder in the mighty railroad companies of the Federation — And the prudent speculator in industrial enterprises bearing a high rate of interest — And the generous giver, always ready to subscribe to the loans of his country whenever his country wanted to borrow, which was a want he himself had never experienced — And the distinguished colleague that the Eccentric Club had lost in him, the member on whom they had reckoned to make it famous, the man who, if his life had been prolonged, would have astonished the universe, — And he was one of those geniuses who do not reveal themselves until they are no more, — To say nothing of his funeral, conducted in the way they had seen amid the concourse of the whole population, there was reason for supposing that his last wishes would impose exceptional conditions on his heirs, — No doubt his will would contain clauses of a nature to provoke the admiration of the two Americas, — which alone was worth more than the other four quarters of the globe!”

Thus spoke George B, Higginbotham, not without producing general emotion. It seemed as though William J. Hypperbone had just appeared to the eyes of the crowd, flourishing in one hand the testamentary document which was to immortalize his name, and with the other pouring on the heads of the “six “the millions of his fortune.

To the discourse of the most intimate of his friends the public responded by flattering murmurs, which gradually spread to the outermost ranks assembled within the cemetery. Those who had heard communicated their impressions to those who could not hear, and who were not the least attentive of the audience.

Then the choir and the band in vocal and instrumental union of the loudest performed the formidable *“Hallelujah”* from Handel’s “Messiah.”

The ceremony was nearing its end, the programme had been completed, and yet it seemed as though the public were awaiting something extraordinary, something ripe, matured. Such was the excitement that no one would have been surprised at a sudden modification of the laws of nature, at some allegorical figure appearing in the sky, as when the cross and *in hoc signo vinces* appeared to Constantine, or for the sun to stand still to shine on this great manifestation for an extra hour, or for something miraculous which the fiercest free-thinker could not deny —

But this time the laws of nature remained unchanged, and the universe was not troubled by phenomena of a superior order.

The moment had come to remove the bier from the car to take it into the interior of the hall, to deposit it in the tomb. It was to be carried by eight domestics of the deceased in their best liveries. They approached it, they removed the coverings, they placed it on their shoulders and approached the gate.

The “six “marched in the order and position they had maintained since their departure from La Salle Street. Those on the right held in their left hands, those on the left held in their right hands the silver handles of the coffin as they were asked to do by the Master of the Ceremonies.

The members of the Eccentric Club, the civil and military authorities walked behind. Then the gate was closed, and it was with difficulty that the antechamber, the hall and the apse of the mausoleum could hold them all.

Outside were grouped the others who had received invitation to join the procession; the crowd straggled off in different ways, and human grapes hung themselves on the branches of the trees which surrounded the monument.

At this moment the trumpets of the militia blared forth loudly enough to burst the lungs of those who filled them with their breath, and there was let loose an immense flight of birds decorated with many coloured streamers, who flew off in different directions over the lake and above the trees uttering joyful cries of deliverance, and it seemed as though the soul of the deceased, carried off in their flight, was borne away through the depths of the sky.

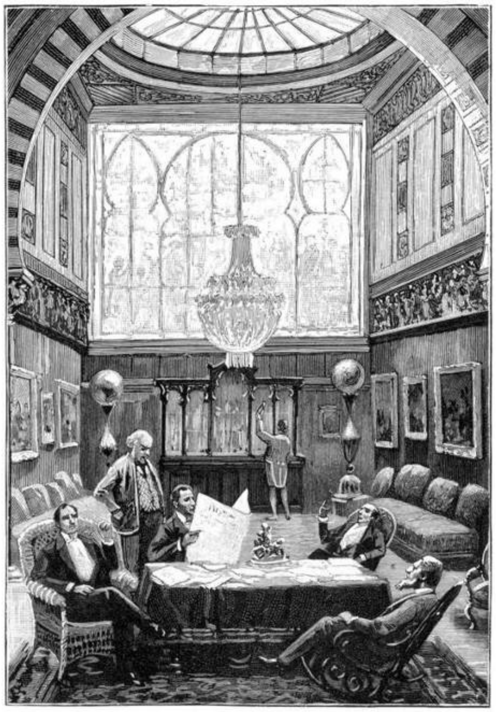

An admirably arranged place.

As soon as the steps had been mounted the coffin passed through the first door, then through the second and stopped close to the tomb in which the bearers placed it.

The voice of the Rev. Mr. Bingham was again heard praying that the celestial doors might be opened to the late William J. Hypperbone.

“Honour to the honourable Hypperbone!” said the clear loud voice of the Master of the Ceremonies.

“Honour — honour — honour — !” repeated the gathering.

And outside thousands of mouths hurled this last farewell into space.

Then the “six” passed in procession round the tomb and received the salute of George B. Higginbotham in the name of the Eccentric Club, and prepared to leave the hall.

All that had to be done was to replace the heavy marble lid on which were inscribed the name and titles of the deceased.

Mr. Tornbrock stepped a few paces in front, and taking from his pocket the note that referred to the funeral, read the last lines as follows: —

“My wish is that my tomb shall remain open for twelve days, and that when this delay has elapsed, in the morning of the twelfth day the six persons designated by lot who have followed my funeral come and lay their visiting cards on my coffin. Then the stone can be put in place, and Mr. Tornbrock will the said day at noon precisely in the hall of the Auditorium read my will which is in his hands.

“WILLIAM J. HYPPERBONE.”

Evidently the defunct was an original, and who knew if this posthumous originality were the last?

The assembly retired, and the keeper of the cemetery closed the doors of the monument and the gate of the railing.

It was nearly eight o’clock. The day had been fine throughout. The serenity of the sky appeared to be still more complete amid the early shades of night. Innumerable stars sparkled in the firmament, adding their gentle light to that of the lamps which glared round the mausoleum.

The crowd slowly dispersed through the cemetery gates, longing for rest at the close of so tiring a day. For a little a tumultuous sound of footsteps troubled the neighbouring streets, and at last tranquillity reigned in this distant quarter of Oakwood.

CHAPTER IV

THE SIX

Next day Chicago returned to its numerous occupations. The different districts had resumed their daily physiognomy. If the population no longer passed, as they had done the day before, along the avenues and the boulevards as the funeral passed by, they took no less interest in the surprises that were doubtless in store in Hypperbone’s will.

What clauses did it contain, what obligations, fantastic or otherwise, did it impose on the “six,” and how were they to be put in possession of their heritage, providing that it was not all to end in some mystification beyond the tomb worthy of a member of the Eccentric Club?

But this was an eventuality that no one could admit. People refused to believe that Miss Lizzie Wag and Messrs. Urrican, Kymbale, Titbury, Crabbe and Real were to get nothing out of the affair but deception, and much ridicule.

There was a very simple way of satisfying public curiosity on the one hand, and on the other, of saving those interested from the uncertainty which threatened to deprive them of appetite and sleep. All that had to be done was to open the will and ascertain its contents. But it was distinctly forbidden to do this before the 15th of the month, and Tornbrock would never consent to infringe the conditions imposed by the testator. On the 15th of April, in the theatre of the Auditorium, in presence of the numerous assemblage it would contain, he would read Hypperbone’s will — the 15th of April at noon not a day sooner or a minute later.

They must resign themselves to circumstances, and this could only increase the mental excitement of Chicago, as the fateful day approached. Added to this, the two thousand two hundred journals, the fifteen thousand other publications, weekly, monthly, fortnightly, of the United States were engaged in keeping up this excitement. And if they could not, even by supposition, forecast the secrets of the deceased, they could at least submit each of the six to the tortures of the interview, and discover their social position.

Considering that photography would not allow itself to be outstripped by journalism, portraits, large and small, full length, head only, head and shoulders, having been put into circulation by hundreds of thousands, it will be admitted that the six were destined to rank among the best known people in America.

The reporters of the *Chicago Mail*, who called on Hodge Urrican at 73, Randolph Street, got a very bad reception.

“What do you want with me?” he replied, with a violence that was in no way put on. “I know nothing! I have nothing to tell you! I was invited to follow the procession, and I followed it! And there were five others there, as I was, near the car — five of whom I knew no more than Adam or Eve. And if it ends badly for some of us, I shall not be astonished. I was there like a barge in tow of a tug, with no chance of steaming at my ease as I blew off my temper. Ah! this William Hypperbone, if he has deceived me, if he forces me to strike my flag before these five intruders, let him take care of himself, and dead as he is, and buried as he is, if I have to wait for the last judgment, I’ll — ”

“But,” objected one of the reporters, bowing to this storm, “there is nothing, Mr. Urrican, to lead you to believe that you will be exposed to a mystification, that you will have to regret being one of those chosen by lot. And if your share is only a sixth of the heritage — ”

“A sixth — a sixth!” replied the hot-headed Urrican in a voice of thunder; “and this sixth, am I sure of getting it in full?”

“Calm yourself, please”

“I will not calm myself. It is not in my nature to calm myself. I am accustomed to storms, and I am always more stormy than — ”

“There are no storms about,” said the reporter, “the horizon is serene,”

“That is what we shall see, sir,” shouted the irascible American; “and if you are going to tell the public about my looks and my actions and my gestures, take care what you say, or you will have to reckon with Commodore Urrican.”

He was in fact a Commodore, Hodge Urrican, an officer of the United States Navy, retired six months before, to which he could not reconcile himself, a good and brave sailor who had always done his duty before the fire of the enemy as before the fire of the heavens. Notwithstanding his fifty-two years, he had lost nothing of his natural irritability. Imagine a man vigorously built, of tall stature, powerful shoulders, strong head with large eyes rolling beneath bushy eyebrows, forehead rather low, hair close cut, chin square, with a billy-goat beard that he stroked unceasingly with a feverish hand, arms not idly hung, legs regularly bowed, and giving the body that rolling motion peculiar to seafarers. Of a fiery temper, always flying into a passion, incapable of restraining himself, as disagreeable as a human creature could be in private as in public, and — without a friend. It would have been surprising for such a man to have been married. And he was not; and "What a chance for a woman!" would be jokers exclaimed. He belonged to that class of the violent whom anger renders pale by causing a spasm of the heart, whose body is carried forward as if in attack, whose glowing pupils are in a perpetual state of contraction, and whose voice has a hardness in it when they are calm and a roar when they are not.

When the reporters of the *Chicago Globe* knocked at the studio at 3997, South Halsted Street — the street is a good length, it will be noticed — they found no one at home except a young negro of seventeen, who was in the service of Max Real and opened the door to them.

"Where is your master?" they asked.

"I don't know."

"When did he go out?"

"Don't know."

"When is he coming back?"

"Don't know."

And it was a fact that Tommy did not know, for Max Real had gone out early in the morning without saying anything to Tommy, who was as fond of sleep as a child, and whom his master did not care to wake up at so early an hour.

But because Tommy could not answer the questions of the reporters, it need not to be inferred that the *Chicago Globe* was without information regarding Max Real. No! this particular "sixer" had already been the subject of interviews widely published in the United States.

He was a young painter of talent, a landscape painter, whose pictures had begun to sell at good prices in America, and for whom the future had in reserve a high position in the domain of art. Born at Chicago, if his name was of French origin it was because he was descended from a Canadian family of Quebec. In that city still lived Madame Real, a widow for many years, who was preparing to take up her abode near him in the metropolis of Illinois.

Max Real adored his mother, who held him in similar adoration — an excellent mother and an excellent son. And so he had not lost a day in telling her what had passed and how he had been selected to take a special place at the obsequies of William J. Hypperbone. He assured her at the same time that he troubled himself very little about the testamentary dispositions of the deceased, which seemed “droll “to him, that was all.

Max Real had just reached his twenty-fifth year. From his birth he had the grace, distinction and elegance of the. French type. He was rather above the medium height, dark brown in hair and beard, eyes of dark blue, head high without haughtiness or stiffness, mouth smiling, walk deliberate, indicative of that internal contentment whence sprang his cheery unshaken confidence. That he had a fund of open-heartedness was apparent in his courage and generosity.

Having made himself known as a painter of real merit, he had decided to leave Canada for the United States. His father had left him but a small patrimony, and he had made up his mind to acquire a fortune more for his mother than himself.

In short, when it was stated that Max Real was not to be found at No. 3997, South Halsted Street, there was no need to question Tommy about him. The

Chicago Globe knew enough to satisfy the curiosity of its readers with regard to the young artist. Max Real might not be in Chicago to-day, but he was yesterday, and certainly he would be back on the 15th of April to be present at the reading of the famous will and complete the group of six at the Auditorium.

It was another sort of thing when the reporters of the *Daily News Record* presented themselves at the home of Harris T. Kymbale. There was no necessity for them to hunt him up at 213, Milwaukee Avenue, for he would have come of his own accord to deliver himself over to his colleagues.

Harris T. Kymbale was a journalist, the reporter-in-chief of the popular *Tribune*. Thirty-seven years old, medium height, robust, sympathetic face, nose like a ferret, piercing little eyes, fine ears made to hear everything, impatient mouth made to repeat everything. Vivacious, active, clear-headed, restless, talkative, patient, indefatigable, energetic, and quite an artist at brag in the American style. Thoroughly aware of his powers, always in an attitude of action, gifted with a persistent will always ready to manifest itself, he had remained a bachelor, as was best for a man who daily scaled the walls of private life. A good companion in short, very sure, very much esteemed by his comrades, who in no way envied the good fortune which had called him to figure among the six, supposing that he was to share in the worldly goods of William J. Hypperbone.

No! There was no need to interrogate Harris T. Kymbale, for he at once saved them the trouble by beginning: —

“Yes, my friends, it is really your humble servant who figured in the Council of Six. You saw me yesterday walking in my place near the car. Did you notice how I bore my self worthily and properly, and the pains I took to dissemble my delight, for never in my life did I take part in such a lively funeral? And when I think that he was then near me, laid in his coffin, this eccentric defunct! Do you know what I said to myself? If he were not dead, this worthy man! If he is going to start from the depths of his bier! If he is going to appear all alive oh! Well, believe me, I did hope that that would happen, that Hypperbone would, arise in his full height and, like a new Lazarus, break open the tomb; and I should have thought none the worse of him for his untimely resurrection! You have always the right, haven't you, to come to life, provided you are not dead?"

So said Harris T. Kymbale, but you should have heard him!"

"And what do you think," they asked, "will happen on the 15th of April?"

"What will happen" he replied, "will be that Mr. Tornbrock will open the will at noon precisely"

"And you do not doubt that the six will be declared the sole heirs of the deceased?"

"Naturally! Why, pray, did Hypperbone ask us to his funeral, unless he was going to leave us his fortune?"

"Who knows?"

"It would be too much of a good thing for him to have taken up our time without paying damages! Think of it — eleven hours of procession — "

"But is it not supposable that the will may contain some more or less curious provisions?"

"That is likely, considering that he was an original. Well, if he asks what is possible it shall be done, and if it is impossible it must do itself; anyhow, my friends, you can reckon on Harris T. Kymbale, he will not draw back an inch.”

No! For the honour of journalism he would not draw back; that was clear enough to those who knew him, and those who did not know him, if they were among the people of Chicago. No matter what were the conditions imposed by the defunct, the chief reporter of the *Tribune* would accept them and fulfil them to the end! If he had to start for the moon, he would start, and unless respiration failed him for want of air, he would not stop on the road!

What a contrast between this resolute American and his co-heir of a sixth, known by the name of Hermann Titbury, who lived in the commercial quarter traversed from south to north by the long thoroughfare of Robey Street.

When the envoys of the *Staats Zeitung* rang the bell at No. 77 they were not allowed to cross the threshold. “Mr. Hermann Titbury” they said through the half-open door,” is he at home?”

“Yes,” replied a sort of giantess of slovenly appearance with her hair in disorder, a kind of female dragon.

“Can we see him?”

“I will tell you when I have asked Mrs. Titbury.”

For there existed a Mrs. Kate Titbury, aged fifty, that is, two years older than her husband. And the reply made by this matron and transmitted faithfully by the servant was:

“Mr. Titbury has no wish to see you, and is astonished that you should have allowed yourselves to disturb him.

There was no question of having access to his office or his dining-room to ask him for particulars about himself, or of taking a seat at his table. The house remained closed and the reporters of the *Staats Zeitung* had to return reportless.

Hermann Titbury and Kate Titbury were the most avaricious couple ever united to traverse together this vale of tears, in which they had never let fall the least drop in pity for the fate of the unfortunate. Two strong, callous hearts, they were made to beat in unison. Happily heaven had disdained to bless their union and their line would become extinct with them. They were wealthy, but their fortune was derived neither from commerce nor industry. Together — for the lady worked as hard as the gentleman — they had carried on a clandestine business as pawnbrokers, lending on pledges, buying securities for as near to nothing as they could get them, being usurers of the lowest kind, sharks who live on plunder and yet manage to keep within the limits of the law — that law which a great French romancer has said would be a fine thing for scoundrels if God did not exist!

In tracing back their line of ancestors, you would at the outset have met with the progenitors of German origin, justifying the Christian name of Hermann borne by the last representative of this Teutonic tribe.

He was a short, stout man, red-bearded as his wife was red-haired. Enjoying a health that never failed them, they had never had to spend half a dollar on drugs or doctor’s visits. Provided with stomachs capable of digesting anything — such as honest people ought only to have — they lived on nothing, and their servant accommodated herself to what she could get. Since Mr. Titbury had retired from business he had had nothing to do with outside affairs and allowed himself to be completely managed by Mrs. Titbury, a masterful woman as detestable as she could be, and who "slept with his keys," as the popular phrase goes.

The couple occupied a house with windows as narrow as their ideas, iron-barred like their hearts, and which resembled a private strong-box. Their door never opened for a stranger, nor for a member of the family, as they had no family, nor for a friend, as they had no friends. And on this occasion, before the disgusted seekers after information it remained obstinately closed.

It is true that, without interviewing Titbury directly, nothing could be easier than to appreciate his state of mind on the day he took his place among the group of six. What were his feelings when Hermann Titbury read his name in the famous issue of the *Tribune* on the 1st of April! But were there not other people of the name in Chicago? None, at least at 77, Robey Street. As to supposing that he was the victim of some practical joker, he would have none of it. He saw himself already in possession of a sixth of the enormous fortune, and his great regret, his vexation even, was that he was not the only one designated by lot. And it was more than envy that he felt for his five co-heirs, it was hate — as with Commodore Urrican — and what he and Mrs. Titbury thought of these intruders had best be left to the reader's imagination.

Assuredly luck had committed one of those gross errors it is accustomed to in calling on this in no way interesting, in no way sympathetic personage to receive a share of the fortune of William J. Hypperbone, if such had been the intention of that eccentric individual.

The morning after the funeral, at five o'clock in the morning, Mr. and Mrs. Titbury had left their house and gone to Oakwood Cemetery. There they had called up the keeper and in a voice that betrayed the most intense anxiety had asked:

“Anything fresh — last night?”

“Nothing fresh,” replied the keeper.

“And so he is realty dead?”

“As dead as he can be, never fear!” declared the good man, who vainly expected a gratuity for his good news.

The deceased had not awoke from his eternal sleep and nothing had troubled the repose of the gloomy guests of Oakwood.

Mr. and Mrs. Titbury returned home, but once again in the afternoon and again in the evening they made the long journey to assure themselves that William J. Hypperbone had not returned to the sublunary world.

And that is enough regarding this couple destined to figure in this singular story, whom not even one of their neighbours complimented on their good fortune.

When the two reporters of the *Freie Presse* arrived in Calumet Street, not far from the lake of this name, situated in the southern part of the town amid a populous and industrial district, they inquired of the police where they would find the house of Tom Crabbe.

Tom Crabbe’s house, or rather that of his trainer, was No. 11. In fact it was John Milner who assisted him in those memorable encounters from which gentlemen most frequently emerge with eyes bunged up, jaw bones dislocated, chest knocked in here and there, and mouth relieved of a few teeth for the honour of the National Boxing Championship.

Tom Crabbe was a professional prize-fighter, the then Champion of the New World, owing to his having vanquished the famous Fitzsimmons, who that year had vanquished the no less famous Corbett.

The reporters without difficulty obtained admission to John Milner's house, and were received on the ground floor by the said trainer — a man of ordinary stature, of extreme leanness, mere skin and bone, but all muscles, all nerves, penetrating eyes, pointed teeth, smooth face, active as a chamois, artful as a monkey.

"Tom Crabbe?" they asked.

"He is finishing his first breakfast," replied he in a harsh voice.

"Can we see him?"

"Regarding what?"

"Regarding the will of William J. Hypperbone, and to say something about him in our newspaper."

"When you want to talk to Tom Crabbe," replied Milner, "Tom Crabbe is always visible."

The reporters entered the dining-room and found themselves in that personage's presence He was devouring his sixth slice of ham, his sixth hunch of bread, his sixth pint of half-and-half while awaiting the tea which was being made in a huge kettle, and the six small glasses of whisky which generally ended his first meal, that which he took at half-past seven, which was followed by five others in the course of the day. You will notice the important part played by the figure 6 in the life of the famous boxer, and perhaps it was to its mysterious influence that he came to be counted in the group of heirs of William J. Hypperbone.

Tom Crabbe was a colossus measuring six feet ten in height and three feet from shoulder to shoulder, his head was voluminous, his hair hard and black, cut close as if shaven, big bull's eyes under thick eyebrows, forehead low and retreating, ears prominent, heavy jaw bones, heavy moustache cut off at the corners of his lips, all his teeth, for the formidable blows he had received had not removed one, a body like a hogshead of beer, arms like connecting rods, legs like pillars made to support this enormous human structure.

Is human the proper word? No, it should be animal, for there was nothing but animality in this gigantic product. His organs worked like those of a steam engine when the fire is lighted — an engine which had for its engineer John Milner. He was celebrated in the two Americas and knew nothing of his celebrity. To eat, drink, box, sleep — that included all the acts of his existence, without any intellectual expenditure.

Did he understand what chance had done for him in introducing him among the "six"? Did he know why the day before he had marched with heavy step close to the funeral car amid the applause of the multitude? Vaguely; but his trainer understood it for him, and all that came from the stroke of fortune would John Milner turn to his own profit.

Hence it follows that it was Milner who gave the replies in the interview the reporters had with Tom Crabbe.

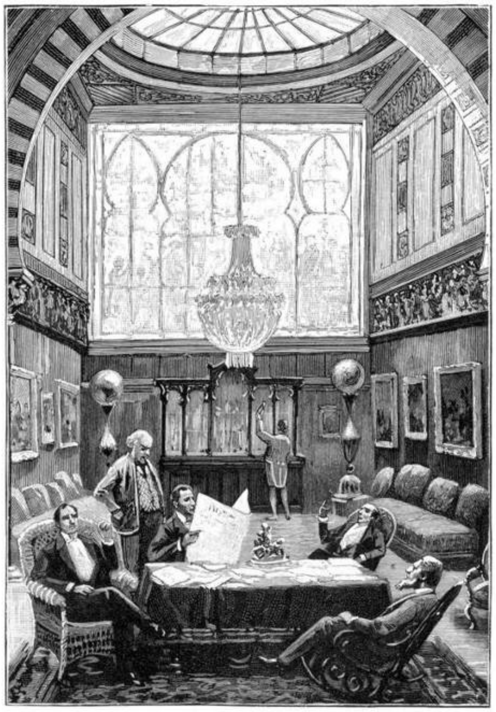

An admirably arranged place.

He furnished them with all the details likely to interest the readers of the *Freie Presse:* his personal weight, 533 lbs. before a meal and 540 after it; his height, exactly 6 feet 10 inches, as we have said; his strength, measured by the dynamometer, 75 kilogrammeters, that of one horsepower; the maximum force of contraction of his jaws, 234 lbs.; his age, 30 years, 6 months, 17 days; his parents, a father who was a packer or slaughterer at Armour’s, a mother who had been a strong-woman in a Swansea circus.

And what more could they ask to write an article of a hundred lines on Tom Crabbe?

“He hardly speaks” said one of the journalists.

“As little as possible,” said John Milner. “What is the good of using your tongue?”

“Perhaps — but does he not think?”

“What is the use of thinking?”

“None, Mr. Milner.”

“Tom Crabbe is merely a fist” said the trainer — ” a closed fist, as prompt in attack as in defence!”

And when the reporters of the *Freie Presse* had left them:

“A brute!” said one.

“And what a brute!” replied the other.

And certainly it was not of John Milner they were speaking.

Going to the north-west of the town, after passing the Humboldt boulevard you enter the twenty-seventh quarter. Here there is less bustle in the streets, the people are not so busy. The visitor might believe himself in the provinces, although the phrase has no meaning in the United States. Beyond Wabansia Avenue is the lower part of Sheridan Street. Reaching No. 19, you find yourself before a house of modest appearance, of seventeen floors, inhabited by a hundred tenants. It was here, on the ninth floor, that Lizzie Wag occupied a little flat of two rooms, to which she returned after her day spent as under-cashier in the linendraper’s shop of Marshall Field.

Lizzie Wag belonged to a respectable family of slender means, of whom she alone remained. Well brought up, educated as are most young American girls, after reverses of fortune and the death of her father and mother, prematurely carried off, she had had to go out to work to gain the means of livelihood. Mr. Wag had lost all he possessed in a disastrous matter of marine assurance, and the liquidation persisted in the interest of his daughter had produced no result.

Lizzie Wag, endowed with an energetic character, sound judgment, shrewd intelligence, quiet and self-controlled, had moral strength enough not to lose courage. By the intervention of a few friends of the family, she was recommended to the head of the house of Marshall Field and for fifteen months had held a good situation there.

She was a charming girl who had just reached her twenty-first year, of medium height, fair hair, dark blue eyes, a good colour indicating good health, carrying herself gracefully, features rather serious, animated occasionally by a smile, across which gleamed her beautiful teeth. Amiable, affable, obliging, kindly, she had none but friends among her companions.

Of tastes very simple and humble, without ambition, without giving way to the dreams which have led so many others astray, Lizzie Wag was by far the least excited of the six when she heard that chance had called her to figure at the funeral. At first she would have refused. This kind of exhibition was not at all to her liking. To have her name and herself the object of public curiosity inspired her with deep repugnance. And it was much against her feelings that, with a heavy heart and blushing forehead, she took her place by the side of the car.

It should be said that the most intimate of her friends had done everything to overcome her resistance. This was the lively, cheery, laughing Jovita Foley, twenty-five years old, neither ugly nor pretty — and she knew it — but with a face sparkling with archness and humour, very refined, very acute, of excellent nature in fact, and whom the closest affection united to Lizzie Wag.

These two girls occupied the same flat, and after the day spent in the shops of Marshall Field, where Jovita Foley was chief saleswoman, they returned together. One was seldom seen without the other.

But if Lizzie Wag under such circumstances ended by yielding to the irresistible solicitations of her companion, she by no means consented to receive the reporters of the *Chicago Herald* who presented themselves that very evening at 19, Sheridan Street. In vain Jovita Foley entreated her friend to be less disagreeable; she would have nothing to do with an interview. After the reporters would come the photographers, who would aim at her with their unceremonious lenses — after the photographers would come inquisitive people of all sorts. No! better shut the door on the first of these impor-tunates. Whatever Jovita might say, it was the wisest, and the *Chicago Herald* was unable to provide its readers with a sensational article.

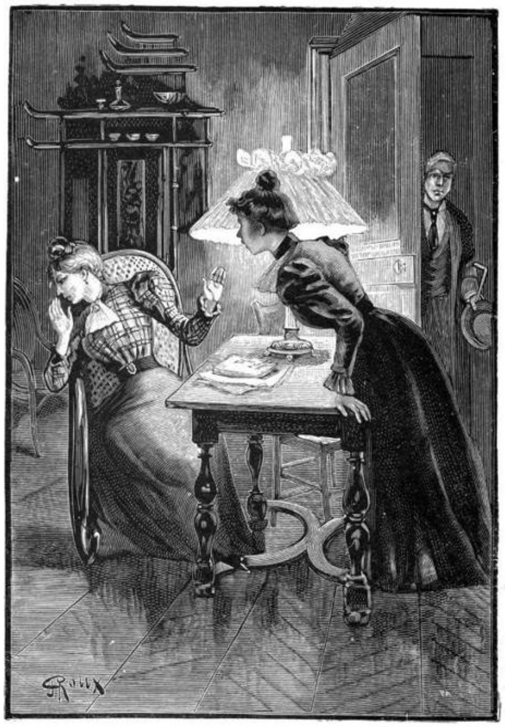
She would have nothing to do with an interview.

“So be it” said Jovita, when the disappointed journalists had retired, “You have shut your door, but you will not escape the attention of the public! Ah!

if it had been I! I warn you, Lizzie, I will make you comply with all the conditions of the will! Think, my dear, this share of such an extraordinary heritage — ”

“I scarcely believe in it, Jovita,” replied Lizzie Wag, “and if it is only the freak of some practical joker, I shall not regret it much.”

“But, my Lizzie,” said Jovita Foley, drawing her towards her, “not regret it very much! When it means a fortune — ”

“Are we not happy?”

“Agreed: but if it had been I!” repeated the ambitious young person.

Well — if it had been you!”

“To begin with, you should have your share in it, dear Lizzie.”

“As I shall do, you need not fear!” replied Lizzie, laughing at the contingent promises of her enthusiastic friend.

“Would it were the 15th of April,” continued Jovita. “How long the time seems! I am beginning to count the hours, the minutes — ”

“Spare me the seconds,” said Lizzie. “There are too many of them.”

“Can you jest about so serious a matter — millions of dollars to bring home with you?”

“Or rather, millions of annoyances, of worries, as I have had all this day — ”

“You are difficult to please, Lizzie!”

“Cannot you see, Jovita, that I am anxious as to how it is going to finish?”

“It will finish at the end,” exclaimed Jovita, “as does everything else in the world.”

Such, then, was the sixth of the co-heirs — there was hardly a doubt that they would be called upon to share the enormous estate — whom William J. Hypperbone had invited to his funeral. These mortals, privileged above all, had only to remain patient for a fortnight.

At last the two long weeks rolled by and the 15th of April arrived. That morning, in accordance with the conditions imposed, in the presence of Mr. George B. Higginbotham, assisted by Mr. Tornbrock, Lizzie Wag, Max Real, Tom Crabbe, Hermann Titbury, Harris T. Kymbale and Hodge Urrican came to place their visiting cards on the tomb of William J. Hypperbone. Then the sepulchral stone was put in its place. The eccentric deceased was to receive no further visitors at Oakwood Cemetery.

CHAPTER V

THE WILL

From dawn on that eventful day, the nineteenth quarter was invaded by the crowd. The public excitement seemed to have in no way decreased since the long procession had taken William J. Hypperbone to his last home.

The thirteen hundred trains a day of Chicago had been pouring thousands of visitors into the town since the evening before. The weather promised to be superb. A fresh morning breeze had cleared the sky of the mists of the night. The sun hung on the distant horizon of the lake, which, streaked with a few ripples on its blue surface, caressed the shore with a gentle surf.

By Michigan Avenue and Congress Street, the tumultuous mob made their way to an enormous edifice surmounted at one of its corners by a massive square tower 310 feet in height.

The list of the city’s hotels is long. The traveller’s difficulty is not to find one, but to choose among so many. It matters not whither the cabs at twenty-five cents a mile take him, he never fails to find accommodation. He can get a room in the European style at two or three dollars a day, in the American style at four or five.

Among the principal hotels are the Palmer House in State and Monroe Streets, the Continental in Wabash Avenue and Monroe Street, the Commercial and Fremont House in Dearborn and Lake Streets, the Alhambra in Archer Avenue, the Atlantic, the Wellington, the Saratoga, and a hundred others. But in importance, in management, in the amount of its business, in its well-ordered service, in its power of accommodating its visitors in either the European or American manner, the most noted is the

Auditorium, a vast caravansary whose ten floors rise one above the other at the corner of Congress Street and Michigan Avenue, opposite Lake Park. And not only can this vast edifice give shelter to a thousand travellers, but it contains a theatre large enough to hold eight thousand spectators.

During the matinee — the expression comes from the other side of the Atlantic — it would hold more than the maximum, and this expression is as justly applicable with regard to the takings. Yes, the takings; for after the happy thought of putting the names of the six up to auction, Tornbrock had decided to make everybody pay for places who wished to hear the reading of the will in the Auditorium. By this means the poor would benefit to the amount of some twelve thousand dollars, to be shared between the hospitals of the Alexian Brothers and the Maurice Porter Memorial for Children.

The charge for seats made little difference to the inquisitive crowd. On the stage were the mayor and the municipal authorities; a little behind them were the members of the Eccentric Club, around their president, George B. Higginbotham; a little in front were the six in a line near the footlights, each in the attitude most fitting to his or her social position.

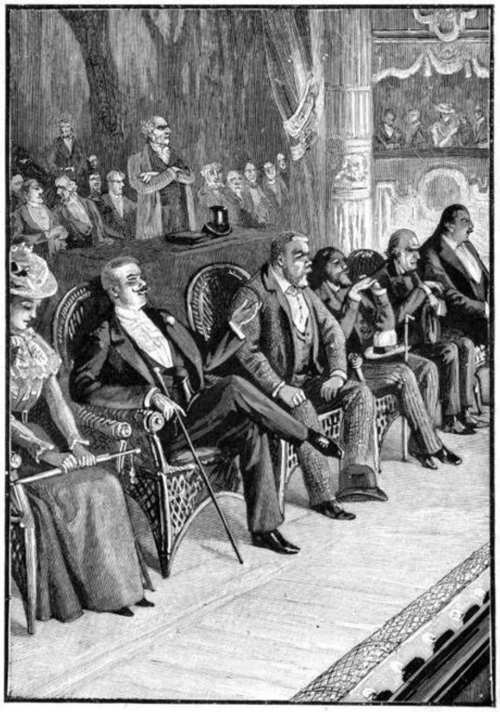

A little in front were the six.

Lizzie Wag, really ashamed at being exhibited in this way before thousands of greedy eyes, sat in her arm-chair with her head bowed, endeavouring to make herself as inconspicuous as possible.

Harris T. Kymbale expanded between the arms of his chair, waving salutes innumerable to his journalistic friends of every degree.

Commodore Urrican, rolling his ferocious eyes, seemed to be seeking a quarrel with everyone who took the liberty of looking him in the face.

Max Real carelessly looked around at all these people swarming up to the very roof, devoured by curiosity which he in no way shared, and if the truth must be told, looking principally at the charming girl seated not far from him, whose evident embarrassment inspired him with keen interest.

Hermann Titbury was calculating how much the takings would amount to — a mere drop of water amid the millions of the heritage.

Tom Crabbe, hardly knowing why he was there, was seated, not in an arm-chair — which could not have contained his enormous mass — but on a large sofa, the legs of which bent beneath him.

We need scarcely say that in the first row of spectators figured his trainer, John Milner, Mrs. Titbury, who every now and then made incomprehensible signs to her husband, and the nervous Jovita Foley, without whose intervention Lizzie Wag would never have consented to sit in the presence of this terrible public in the body of the theatre.

In the circles and amphitheatres, in the remotest tiers of seats, in every place where a human body could find room and in every hole through which a head could peep, were piled up men, women, and children belonging to the different classes of the population who could pay for admission.

And outside, along Michigan Avenue and Congress Street, in the windows of the houses, in the balconies of the hotels, on the pavements, in the roadways, where the traffic had been stopped, were massed a crowd overflowing like the Mississippi at the time of its floods, with its outermost undulation reaching beyond the furthest limits of the district.

It was estimated that on that day Chicago had received a crowd of fifty thousand visitors from different parts of Illinois and the neighbouring states, and also from New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Maine. A continued uproar, increasing and tumultuous, floated above this part of the town, filled the enclosure of Lake Park and died away on the sunny surface of Lake Michigan.

Noon sounded. A tremendous whisper of “Ah!” escaped from the Auditorium. The same instant Tornbrock arose, and the whisper, as a breeze through foliage, reached the crowd outside.

Then there was profound silence — a silence as of that between a lightning flash and the growl of the thunder.

Tornbrock, standing before the table which occupied the centre of the stage, with his arms crossed and a serious look on his face, waited until the last stroke of twelve had struck.

On the table was laid an envelope sealed with three red seals bearing the initials of the deceased. This envelope contained the will of William J. Hypperbone, and probably, from its dimensions, other testamentary papers. A few lines of writing indicated that the envelope was not to be opened until a fortnight after the death, and stipulated that the opening was to take place in the theatre of the Auditorium at noon.

Tornbrock with a feverish hand broke the seals and drew from it a parchment on which appeared the well-known large handwriting of the testator; then he drew forth a card folded in four, and then a small box about an inch square and half an inch high.

And then in a loud voice, that could be heard in the furthest corners, Tornbrock, after running his eyes, armed with aluminium spectacles, over the first lines of the parchment, read as follows: —

“This is my last will, written entirely by my own hand, done at Chicago the third day of July, one thousand eight hundred and ninety-five.

“Sound in body and mind, in all the plenitude of my intelligence, I have drawn up this deed, in which are set forth my last wishes. These wishes Mr. Notary Tornbrock, together with my colleague and friend George B. Higginbotham, president of the Eccentric Club, will carry out in all their details, as well as all that is to be done with regard to my funeral.”

At last the public and those interested knew what was coming. Now were to be solved all the questions asked during the fortnight, all the suppositions and hypotheses that had arisen during these two weeks of feverish expectation.

Tornbrock continued: —

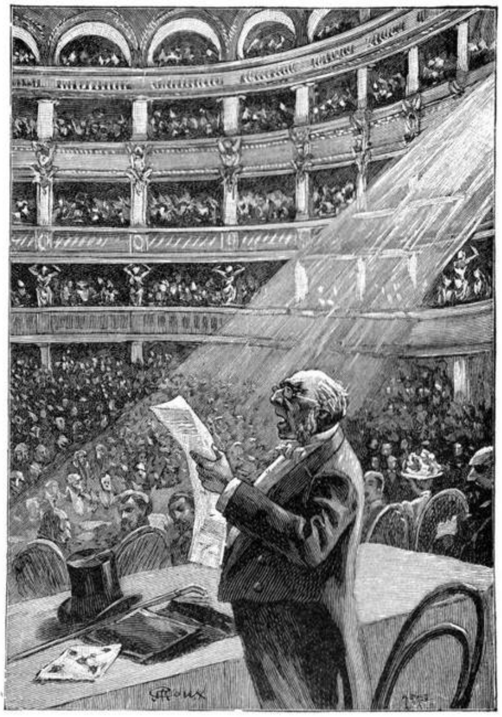

The reading of the will. p. 57

“Up to now undoubtedly no member of the Eccentric Club has made himself remarkable by notable eccentricities. The writer of these lines has, like his colleagues, never ventured beyond the commonplaces of existence. But what he has failed to do when living he can by his last will do after his death.”

A murmur of satisfaction ran round the ranks of his audience. He waited until this had died away before he resumed the reading thus interrupted for half a minute. And this was what he read: —

“My dear colleagues have not forgotten that if I ever experienced a passion it was only for the noble Game of Goose, so well known in Europe, and particularly in France, where it is said to have been revived from the Greeks, although Hellas never saw it played by Plato, Themistocles, Aristides, Leonidas, Socrates, or any other historical personage. I introduced this game into our club. It has caused me the most lively emotion by the variety of its details, the unexpectedness of its throws, the caprice of its combinations, in which pure chance guides those who struggle for victory on the field of battle.”

For what object did this Game of Goose intervene in this unexpected fashion in Hypperbone’s will? A very natural question. The notary continued: —

“This game — everyone in Chicago knows it now — consists of a series of divisions placed side by side and numbered from one to sixty-three. Fourteen of these divisions are occupied by the figure of a goose, the animal so unjustly accused of stupidity, and which should have been restored to favour from the day it saved the capitol from the attack of Brennus and his Gauls.”

A few of the more sceptical of the audience began to ask themselves if the late Mr. Hypperbone were not slyly poking fun at the public with this unseasonable eulogium on this typical example of the anserines.

The will continued in this way: —

“On account of the above arrangement, by cutting off fourteen divisions there remain forty-nine, of which six only require the player to pay a fine, the first fine being at the sixth, where there is a bridge leading to the twelfth; two fines at the nineteenth, where he has to stay at the inn until the other players have had two throws; three fines at the thirty-first, where there is a well, at the bottom of which he must remain until another comes to take his place; two fines at the forty-second, where is the labyrinth he must immediately leave to return to the thirtieth, where is displayed a nosegay of flowers; three fines at the fifty-second, where he must remain in prison until he is replaced by another player; and three fines at the fifty-eighth division, in which there is a death's head, from which the player is sent back to begin the game over again."

When Tornbrock stopped after this long sentence to take breath many murmurs arose, but they were promptly repressed by the majority of the audience, who were evidently partial to the deceased. But everybody had not come to be crushed at the Auditorium for the purpose of listening to a lesson on the noble Game of Goose.

The notary continued: —

"There will be found in this envelope a board and box. The board is that of the noble Game of Goose, arranged with a new set of divisions according to a little idea of my own with which the public should be made acquainted. The box contains two dice similar to those I have been in the habit of using at my club. The board on the one hand, the dice on the other, are intended for a game to be played on the following conditions."

What! a game? Was there to be a Game of Goose? Decidedly the man was a practical joker! He was nothing but a humbug, as they say in America!

Loud cries of silence were addressed to the malcontents and Tornbrock resumed his reading.

“This is what I’ve done in honour of my country, which I love with a patriot’s ardour, and of which I visited the various states as they increased in number and added to the stars in the flag of the American Republic!”

Here a triple salvo of cheers awoke the echoes of the Auditorium, followed by a deep calm, for curiosity was at its zenith.

“Without counting Alaska, situated outside its territory, the Union consists of fifty states, extending over an area of nearly eight million kilometres.

“By arranging these fifty states in the divisions one after the other and repeating one of them fourteen times, I have obtained a board of sixty-three divisions, identical with that of the noble Game of Goose, which thus becomes the noble Game of the United States of America.”

Those of the audience who were familiar with the game in question understood Hypperbone’s idea without difficulty. Indeed, it was a happy thought to distribute the States of the Union among the sixty-three squares; and the audience abandoned themselves to enthusiastic applause, and soon the streets resounded with acclamations at the testator’s ingenious invention.

Tornbrock continued his reading.

“It remained to be determined which of the fifty states should figure fourteen times on the board. Could I do better than choose that of which the waters of Michigan bathe the superb shores, that which prides itself on a city such as ours, that which has robbed Cincinnati for more than half a century of the title of Queen of the West, that Illinois, the privileged region which Michigan borders on the north, the Ohio on the south, the Mississippi on the west, the Wabash on the east — a state at the same time continental and insular, and now in the first rank of the great federal republic!"

Renewed thunder of cheers, which made the theatre walls tremble and were taken up outside by the crowd, now at the very height of their excitement. This time the notary suspended his reading for several minutes. When calm was at length restored, he read: —

"The next thing is to select the persons who are to play the game over the immense territory of the United States, according to the board enclosed in this envelope, and which should be printed in millions of copies in order that every citizen of the republic should follow the game's vicissitudes These players, to the number of six, have been chosen by lot from among the population of our city and should be assembled at this moment on the stage of the Auditorium. These are the people who will personally betake themselves to each state indicated by the number of points obtained, and to the very spot indicated by my executors according to the note annexed."

And so this was the part assigned to the six. The caprice of the dice was to send them moving about the surface of the Union. They were the chessmen of this extraordinary game.

If Tom Crabbe did not understand Hypperbone's idea, it was otherwise with Commodore Urrican, Harris T. Kymbale, Hermann Titbury, Max Read and Lizzie Wag. They looked at each other and were already looked upon as extraordinary creatures placed beyond the bounds of humanity. But there remained to be ascertained the final arrangements proposed by the deceased.

"A fortnight after the reading of my will," he said, "and continuing every other day in this place in the Auditorium, at eight o'clock in the morning, Tornbrock, in the presence of the members of the Eccentric Club, will shake the box, throw the dice, announce the number, and send it by telegraph to the place where each player should be found under pain of being excluded from the game. Considering the facility and rapidity of communication within the boundaries of the republic, which none of the players are allowed to cross under penalty of being disqualified, I have estimated that a fortnight will suffice for each move, however long a journey it may mean.”

It was evident that if the six decided to take part in this noble game they would have to strictly conform to the rules. Under what conditions then were they to undertake these mad careerings across the United States?

“At their own expense,” said Tornbrock, amid a profound silence, “the six will travel, and out of their own finds will they pay the fines required when reaching such and such a division, otherwise such and such a State; the fines being fixed at a thousand dollars each. Any player failing to pay any one of these fines will thereby retire from the game.”

A thousand dollars. And if this had to be paid several times — as ill luck might have it — it might amount to a considerable sum. We need not be surprised that Hermann Titbury made a grimace, which was reproduced at the same instant on the bloated face of his wife. Evidently the obligation to pay this fine of a thousand dollars when payment was necessary was not of a nature to inconvenience all, or at least some of the players. Assuredly lenders would come to the aid of the one who seemed to have the best chances. Did this not afford a new field to the speculative ardour of the citizens of speculative America?

The will contained further interesting matter. To begin with this declaration relative to the financial position of William J. Hypperbone.

“My fortune in properties built or not built upon, in shares, in industrial companies, in bank shares and railway bonds, the securities for which are deposited in the hands of Mr. Tornbrock, can be estimated as being of the value of sixty millions of dollars.”

This declaration was received with a murmur of satisfaction. People were gratified that the deceased had left a heritage of this importance, and the amount appeared respectable even in the country of Gould, Bennett, Vanderbilt, Astor, Bradley-Martin, Hetty Green, Hutchinson, Carroll, Prior, Morgan, Slade, Lennox, Rockefeller, Schemeorn, Richard King, May Goelet, Ogden Mills, Sloane, Belmont, and other millionaires, kings of sugar, grain, flour, petroleum, railways, copper, silver, and gold! Anyhow, him, her, or those to whom the fortune would fall in whole or part would be quite contented with it! But under what conditions would it be awarded? To that question the will replied in the following lines: —

“In this Game of Goose, as you know, the winner is the one who first reaches the sixty-third square. This square is not definitely reached if the number of points yielded by the last throw of the dice takes him beyond it. If he exceeds it the player must go back just as many points as he obtained in excess. Having conformed to all these rules, the inheritor of my entire fortune shall be the player who first takes possession of the sixty-third square, otherwise the sixty-third State, which is that of Illinois.”

And so there was to be one winner — the first to arrive! Nothing to his companions, after so many fatigues, so many excitements, so many expenses —

Wrong! The second was to be compensated and reimbursed to a certain extent.

“The second,” said the will, “that is to say the one who at the end of the game is nearest to the sixty-third square, shall receive the sum produced by the fines of a thousand dollars that the chances of the game may bring up to a considerable sum, which he will know how to turn to good and profitable use.”

This clause met with neither a good nor a bad reception from the assembly. Such as it was, there was no disputing it.

Then William J. Hypperbone added: — “If for one reason or another, one or several of the players retire before the end of the game, it will continue to be played by those who remain. And in the event of their all abandoning it, my heritage shall devolve on the city of Chicago as my sole legatee, to be employed in the best way for its interests.”

At last, the will ended with these lines: —

“Such are my formal wishes, the execution of which will be superintended by George B. Higginbotham, president of the Eccentric Club, and Notary Tornbrock. They must be observed in their strictness, as shall also be the rules of the noble game of the United States of America. And now may Heaven control the game, determine the chances, and favour the worthiest.”

A cheer received this final appeal to the intervention of Providence in favour of the players, and the audience were about to retire when Tornbrock, claiming silence by an imperious gesture, added these words: —

“There is a codicil.”

A codicil! Was it going to destroy all the arrangements of this testamentary work and finally reveal the mystification which some still expected of this eccentric deceased?

The notary read as follows: —

“To the six players designated by lot there shall be added a seventh of my own selection, who will figure in the game under the letters XYZ, enjoy the same rights as the others, and submit to the same rules. His real name will only be revealed in the event of his winning the game, and the information regarding the throws which concern him shall be sent to him only under these letters. Such is my final wish.”

This was strange. Whom did this codicil conceal? But there was no disputing it more than the others, and the crowd, much impressed, as the reporters said,’ left the Auditorium.

CHAPTER VI

THE BOARD IS PUBLISHED

That day the evening newspapers, and next day the morning newspapers, were snatched at double and treble prices from the vendors and the stalls. If eight thousand spectators had been able to hear the reading of the will, Americans by the hundred thousand at Chicago and by millions in the United States, devoured by curiosity, had not had that fortunate opportunity.

But although the articles, interviews, and reports were of a nature to satisfy the masses in a great measure, general opinion imperiously required the publication of the card which accompanied the will.

This card was the board on which was to be played the noble game of the United States as arranged by William J. Hypperbone, which was exactly similar to that of the Royal Game of Goose. How had the honourable member of the Eccentric Club arranged the fifty states of the Union? Which were they which caused the stoppages, short or long; which of them sent the players back to begin over again; which of them sent them back so many points, and required the payment of single, double, or triple lines? There need be no surprise that, even more than the public, the six and their personal friends were particularly desirous of ascertaining this.

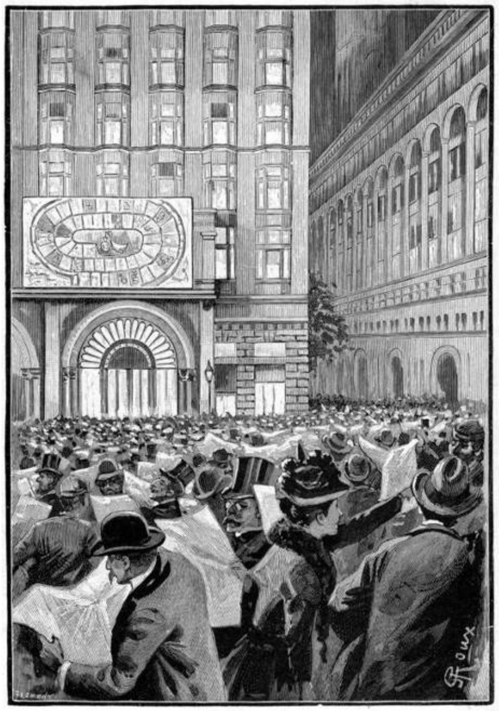

Devoured by curiosity.

By the diligence of George B. Higginbotham and Notary Tornbrock, the card or board, faithfully reproduced after that of the deceased, was drawn, engraved, coloured, and printed in less than twenty-four hours, and many millions of its copies scattered throughout America at a cost of two cents each. It was thus within reach of everybody who could pin out each throw and follow the progress of this memorable game.

Here is the order in which he had numbered and arranged the fifty states of which the republic was composed at this epoch: —

1. Rhode Island. 33. North Dakota.

2. Maine. 34. New Jersey.

3. Tennessee. 35. Ohio.

4. Utah. 36. Illinois.

5. Illinois. 37. West Virginia.

6. New York. 38. Kentucky.

7. Massachusetts. 39. South Dakota.

8. Kansas. 40. Maryland.

9. Illinois. 41. Illinois.

10. Colorado. 42. Nebraska.

11. Texas. 43. Idaho.

12. New Mexico. 44. Virginia.

13. Montana. 45. Illinois.

14. Illinois. 46. District of Columbia.

15. Mississippi. 47. Pennsylvania.

16. Connecticut. 48. Vermont.

17. Iowa. 49. Alabama.

18. Illinois. 50. Illinois.

19. Louisiana. 51. Minnesota.

20. Delaware. 52. Missouri.

21. New Hampshire. 53. Florida.

22. South Carolina. 54. Illinois.

23. Illinois. 55. North Carolina.

24. Michigan. 56. Indiana.

25. Georgia. 57. Arkansas.

26. Wisconsin. 58. California.

27. Illinois. 59. Illinois.

28. Wyoming. 60. Arizona.

29. Oklahoma. 61. Oregon.

30. Washington. 62. Indian Territory.

31. Nevada. 63. Illinois.

32. Illinois.

Such was the order assigned to each state in the sixty-three numbers, Illinois being mentioned-fourteen times.

To begin with, it is convenient to note which of the squares necessitated the payment of a fine and which of them obliged the unfortunate players to remain stationary or to effect a no less regrettable retreat.

They were six in number: —

The sixth, New York, corresponded to that of the bridge in the Game of Goose, and the player who reached it had to leave it at once and betake himself to the twelfth, New Mexico, and pay a single fine.

The nineteenth, Louisiana, corresponded to that in which figures an inn, and here the player had to remain for two turns without playing, and pay a double fine.

The thirty-first, Nevada, corresponding to that of the well, at the bottom of which the player remained until another player took his place, the fine being a triple one.

The forty-second, Nebraska, corresponding to that in which are drawn the multiple sinuosities of a labyrinth whence, after the payment of a double fine, the player goes back to the thirtieth, that of Utah.

The fifty-second, Missouri, corresponding to that of the prison in which the player has to remain on payment of a triple fine until another player takes his place and pays a similar fine.

The fifty-eighth, California, corresponds to that which displays a death's head, and which by the pitiless rule compels the player to abandon it, after paying a triple fine, so as to begin again at No. 1, that is, Rhode Island.

Regarding the State of Illinois, appearing fourteen times on the map, the numbers 5, 9, 14, 18, 23, 27, 32, 36, 41, 45, 50, 54, 59, and 63 borne by it corresponded to those of the geese. But the players could never stop there, and according to the rule they doubled the points obtained until they lighted on a number not reserved for the sympathetic animal whom Hypperbone wished to rehabilitate.

It is true that if the first throw of the dice yielded the number 9, the player could proceed from goose to goose direct to the sixty-third square, that is, to the end. In consequence of this, as the number 9 could only be obtained in two ways, either with a 3 and 6 or a 5 and 4, the player in the first case had to go to 26, that is, Wisconsin, and in the second to 53, that is, Florida. This, it will be seen, was a great advantage for this favoured player. But the advantage was more apparent than real, for the last number had to be reached by the exact, number of points, and the player was obliged to go back if he went beyond.

Again, when one player was followed by another on to the same number, he had to give up his place to him and return to that which the other occupied, and pay a single fine to the pool — unless he had already left the number the day the other should have arrived there. This exception had been introduced by the testator in consideration of the delays necessitated by having to make more than one move.

There remained a secondary question — and a most interesting one assuredly — which a study of the map was unable to solve. In each state, what was the place to which the players had to go? Was it the capital, the official chief town, or the metropolis, generally the more important, or any other locality remarkable from a historical or geographical point of view? Was it not presumable that the deceased, profiting by the experience of his own travels, would prefer the places most talked about? A note annexed to the will indicated these places, but the information was only to be given to those interested when they received the telegram announcing the result of the throw. This telegram Tornbrock was to send to the place where the player should be at the time.

Of course the American newspapers published their observations with the reminder that, according to the will, the rules of the Game of Goose were to be strictly followed.

The lapse of time allowed for the players to reach the places denoted was more than sufficient, although a throw was to take place every other day. As there were seven players, each was allowed twice seven, that is fourteen days, and in that time he could easily get from one end of the Union to the other, for instance, from Maine to Texas or from Oregon to the furthest part of Florida. In these days the network of railroads covered the entire surface of the country, and with the aid of the time-tables and maps the journeys could be made very quickly.

Such were the rules, which admitted of no discussion. As the saying goes, they could either be taken or left.

And they took them.

That all the six took them with the same eagerness and enthusiasm was certainly not the case. Commodore Urrican's interest in the matter was about on a par with that of Tom Crabbe, or rather John Milner, and that of Hermann Titbury. As to Max Real and Harris T. Kymbale, they regarded the whole affair more from a tourist point of view, one as affording subjects for pictures, the other as matter for articles. As to Lizzie Wag, this was what she was told by Jovita Foley:

"My dear, I have asked Mr. Marshall Field to give a holiday to you and to me also, for I will go with you to the sixty-third square."

"But that is foolish!" said Lizzie.

"On the contrary, it is wise," replied Jovita. "And as it is you who will win the sixty millions of dollars of the Honourable Mr. Hypperbone — "

"Me?"

"You, Lizzie — you ought to give me half of it for my trouble."

“All — if you wish.”

“Agreed!” answered Jovita Foley, as seriously as could be.

Mrs. Titbury of course would follow Hermann in his peregrinations, although it doubled the expense. As they were not forbidden to start together, they would start. It would be better for both of them. Mrs. Titbury insisted on it, as she had also insisted on Mr. Titbury consenting to be a player, for such running about and its cost quite frightened the good man, who was as timid as he was avaricious. But the imperious Kate had given him to understand that she had made up her mind, and Hermann had to obey.

It was the same with regard to Tom Crabbe, whose trainer would never leave him, and would take good care to train him, entrain him and detrain him to the best of his ability, as may be imagined.

As to Commodore Urrican, Max Real, and Harris T. Kymbale, would they travel alone or take a servant with them? They had said nothing about this as yet. No clause in the will prevented them from doing so. On the contrary, anyone could accompany them who liked, and bet on them if they chose, as men bet on racehorses.

It would be superfluous to add that the posthumous eccentricity of William J. Hypperbone produced an enormous sensation in both continents. There was no doubt that the Americans in their eagerness for speculation would venture enormous sums on the chances of this exciting game.

With their private resources, Hermann Titbury and Hodge Urrican, who were wealthy, and also John Milner, who would make a good deal of money by exhibiting Tom Crabbe, would never be defaulters in the payment of fines. As regards Harris T. Kymbale, the *Tribune* — what an advertisement for this newspaper! — was prepared to open the necessary credits for him.

Max Real did not worry himself about these financial obligations which might or might not occur. He would think of that when the time came.

With regard to Lizzie Wag, Jovita Foley was content to say to her:

“Fear nothing, my dear; we will use our savings to pay our travelling expenses.”

“Then we shall not go far, Jovita.”

“Very far, Lizzie”

“But if our luck makes us pay any fines — ”

“Luck will make us win!” declared Jovita, in so resolute a tone that Lizzie Wag refrained from arguing with her.

Nevertheless it was probable that neither Lizzie Wag nor perhaps Max Real would become favourites among the American speculators, as the non-payment of a fine would exclude them from the game, to the advantage of the other players.

In some people’s opinion there was one thing in Max Real’s favour, and that was that fortune chose him to be the first, to start. At this Commodore Urrican was furious to the verge of absurdity. He could not reconcile himself to having the sixth place, after Max Real, Tom Crabbe, Hermann Titbury, Harris T. Kyrnbale, and Lizzie Wag. And yet a little reflection would have shown that this was of no importance.

Could not, for example, the last player distance the rest by a throw of 5 and 4, and thus go on to 53, which meant Florida? For such are the possibilities of these wonderful combinations, due, if we admit the legend, to the subtle and poetic mind of the ingenious Greek.

It was evident that the public, interested as they were from the very outset, would see nothing of the difficulties, still less of the fatigues of the journeys the game entailed. Doubtless it might be over in a few weeks, and yet it might last months or even years. None knew this better than the members of the Eccentric Club, who had seen the lengthy games played daily in the club-rooms by William J. Hypperbone. By prolonging the moves and making them so hurried and rapid it was to be feared that some of the players would fall ill and have to stay in one place, so as to be obliged to give up the chance of reaching the end, to the benefit of the more energetic or those more favoured by fortune.

No good was to be obtained by thinking of these eventualities. Everyone was eager for the game to begin, and then when the six were on the road they could share in their emotions, accompany them in their imagination and even in reality as amateur cyclists in a professional race, and follow them in their numerous journeys across America. And that is what would satisfy the greed of the hotel-keepers of the states that were crossed by the lines of travel.

But if the public would not reflect on the hindrances of all sorts that would arise, a very natural reflection occurred to some of the players. Why should they not come to an arrangement between themselves — an arrangement by which the winner would undertake to share his winnings among those whom fortune had not so favoured? Or rather, if he kept half the enormous fortune, why should he not give the other half to the less fortunate? Thirty millions of dollars for himself, and the rest shared among the losers! That was tempting. To be sure in any case of gaining several millions seemed to many practical and unventuresome minds an offer worth serious consideration.

On the whole there was nothing in it contrary to the wishes of the testator, as the game would be carried on all the same under the prescribed conditions, and the winner could certainly deal with his prize as he thought fit.

And so those interested, at the invitation of one of their number — evidently the wisest of the six — were called together to discuss the proposal. Hermann Titbury advised its acceptance — think of several million dollars guaranteed to each of them! As an old gambler, Mrs. Titbury hesitated, but finally yielded. After reflection, for he was of an adventurous character, Harris T. Kymbale was of the same opinion; so was Lizzie Wag, at the advice of her patron, Mr. Marshall Field, and in spite of the opposition of the ambitious Jovita Foley, who wanted all or none. As to John Milner, he asked nothing better than to support it on behalf of Tom Crabbe; and if Max Real required a little pressing, it was because these artists have generally a grain of foolishness in their brain. Besides, he did not wish to run contrary to Lizzie Wag, whose position interested him greatly, and he announced that he was ready to sign the engagement with the other players.

But for this engagement to be definite all the six must sign. But if five had consented, there was a sixth whose obstinacy no argument could triumph over. As may be guessed, this was the terrible Hodge Urrican, who refused to listen to reason. He had been designated by lot to play the game and he would play it to the end. The agreement could proceed no further, the commodore taking refuge in impregnable obstinacy, in spite of the threat of a mighty blow Tom Crabbe was preparing to give him, at John Milner’s orders, and which would have bulged him out in several places. And in addition it will not have been forgotten that, according to the codicil, the players were no longer six, but seven. There was this unknown, this XKZ chosen by William J. Hypperbone. Who was he? Did he live in Chicago? Did even Tornbrock know who he was? The codicil declared that the name of this mysterious personage would not be revealed unless he was the winner. There indeed was something for people to think about which threw a new element of curiosity into the affair. And as this XKZ could not be found to acquiesce in the proposed arrangement, it was impossible to carry through the proposal even if Commodore Urrican had consented.

Nothing then could be done but to wait for the first throw of the dice, the result of which would be announced at the Auditorium on the 30th of April.

We are now at the 25th, six days only from the fateful day. For preparations there was plenty of time for Commodore Urrican, who was to start sixth, as well as for the four others, Hermann Titbury, Harris T. Kymbale, Tom Crabbe, and Lizzie Wag, who would take their departures before he did.

Would it be believed that it was the first who was to get away who was the least concerned about the journey? The fantastic Max Real seemed to take no thought about it at all. When Madame Real, who had quitted Quebec and now lived at the house in South Halsted Street, spoke to him about it, —

“I have plenty of time” he said.

“Not too much, my child.”

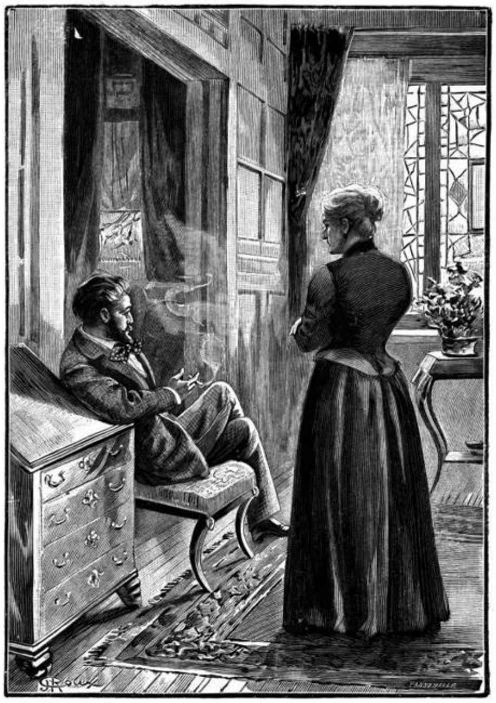

"I have plenty of time."

"And after all, what is the good of my going on this absurd adventure?"

"What, Max! surely you would not lose the chance —

"Of becoming a great millionaire?"

"Undoubtedly," continued the excellent lady, who dreamed all that mothers dream for their children. "You must get ready for your journey."

"To-morrow — dear mother, the day after to-morrow — the evening before I start — "

"But tell me at least what you think of taking with you."

"My brushes, my colour box, my canvases, and my knapsack like a soldier."

"Do you forget that you may be sent to the far end of America?"

“Of the United States, rather,” replied the young man, “and with no more than a handbag I would make the tour of the world.”

It was impossible to extract any other reply from him, and he returned to his studio. But Madame Real intended he should not lose so good an opportunity of making his fortune.

Lizzie Wag had plenty of time, as she was not to start until ten days after Max Real — hence much complaining on the part of the impatient Jovita Foley.

“How unfortunate, my poor Lizzie,” she repeated, “that you are number five!”

“Do not worry yourself, my dear friend,” replied the girl, “it is quite as good as the others — or quite as bad.”

“Do not say that Lizzie! Do not have such ideas! It will bring us ill-luck.”

“See here, Jovita — look at me — do you seriously believe — ”

“Believe that you will win?”

“Yes.”

“I am sure of it, my dear, as sure of it as that I still have my thirty-two teeth!”

And then Lizzie Wag gave such a shout of laughter as made Jovita tempted to strike her.

We need not dwell on Commodore Urrican’s state of mind. He lived no longer. He had decided to leave Chicago ten minutes after the number thrown for him had been announced. He would not wait a day nor an hour even if he were sent to the depths of the Everglades in the Florida peninsula.

As to the Titburys, they only thought of the fines they might have to pay, if luck would have it so, and still more of a sojourn in the prison of Missouri or the well of Nevada. But perhaps they would have the happiness of avoiding these fatal places.

In conclusion, a word about Tom Crabbe. The boxer continued to take his six meals a day without troubling himself about the future, and hoping that nothing would interfere with so good a custom during his travels. Large eater as he was, he might always find hotels that were sufficiently provisioned even in the smallest towns. John Milner could be there and could see that he wanted nothing. It would cost a good deal, undoubtedly, but what an advertisement for the Champion of the New World, and why should he not get up a few pugilistic entertainments on the road which would yield honour and profit to the celebrated jawbreaker?

If the impatience of the public had been great between the 1st and 15th of April — the day of the reading of the will — it was none the less so between the 15th and 30th of April, the day of the first throw of the dice on William J. Hypperbone's board. The people who intended to bet on the event were only waiting for that to take the six, or now the seven, at so much to one, or evens. On what grounds, the odds? There were none as in the case of racehorses, neither a series of victories already won, nor an illustrious hippie pedigree, nor reports from trainers. All there was to base an opinion on was the personal characters of the players — a moral and not a physical basis.

Under any circumstances, Max Real, it must be confessed, conducted himself in a way to obliterate any sympathy the sporting gentry might have for him. Will it be believed that on the 28th of April, the evening before the dice were to indicate his route, he had left Chicago? For two days, with his painter’s kit on his shoulder, he had been absent in the country! His mother, in the greatest anxiety, could not say when he was coming back. Ah! If he were to be detained, no matter where, if he were not present next day to answer to his name, what satisfaction to the sixth player, who would become the fifth! And this fifth would be Hodge Urrican, who would be already exulting at the thought that his turn would advance a step and that he would only have five rivals to beat.

In short, no one could say if Max Real on the 30th of April had returned from his excursion, or even if he were in the Auditorium.

As twelve o’clock struck, before the tumultuous crowd of spectators, Notary Tornbrock, assisted by George B. Higginbotham, surrounded by members of the Eccentric Club, shook the box with a firm hand and rolled out the dice on to the board.

“Four and four,” he shouted.

“Eight!” replied the audience with one voice.

The number was that of the square assigned by the testator to the State of Kansas.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST TO START

The next day the great railway station at Chicago was a scene of intense excitement. What was the reason of this excitement? Evidently the presence of a traveller in a tourist suit, with an artist’s kit on his back, followed by a young negro carrying a light portmanteau and with a bag slung across his shoulder, who had come to catch the 8.10 train.

There is no scarcity of railroads in the federal republic. They run through the country in all directions. The capital of the railroads of the United States exceeds fifty-five milliards of francs and seven hundred thousand men are engaged in working them. At Chicago alone, there are three hundred thousand passengers a day, besides the ten thousand tons of newspapers and letters that are carried every year.

Consequently it mattered not whither the caprice of the dice would send them across the States, none of the seven players would find it difficult to get there or would meet with much delay on the road. And in addition to their railroads there were the steamers and boats on the lakes, canals and rivers. Chicago is easy to get at and not less easy to leave.

Max Real had returned the night before from his excursion and was standing among the crowd which encumbered the Auditorium, when the numbers four and four were proclaimed by Tornbrock. No one knew he was there, for no one was aware of his return. When his name was called there was an ominous silence, broken by the powerful voice of Commodore Urrican, who shouted from his place:

“Absent!”

“Present!” was the reply.

And Max Real, greeted with applause, mounted the stage.

“Ready to start?” asked the president of the Eccentric Club, approaching the artist.

“Ready to start, and to win!” replied the young painter with a smile.

Commodore Urrican, like a Polynesian cannibal, would have eaten him alive.

That excellent fellow Harris T. Kymbale stepped up to him and said without bitterness, —

“A pleasant journey to you, comrade!”

“A pleasant journey to you also, when the day comes for you to pack your things!” replied Max Real. And they shook hands cordially.

Neither Hodge Urrican nor Tom Crabbe, the one furious, the other as stupid as usual, thought it necessary to join in the journalist’s compliments.

As to the Titburys, they had but one wish, that all the worst luck of the game should fall to this first starter, that he might fall into the well of Nevada or thrust himself into the prison of Missouri and stay there for the rest of his life.

As he passed Lizzie Wag, Max Real bowed respectfully and said:

“Allow me, miss, to wish you good luck — ”

“But that is to speak against your own interest, sir,” said the girl, somewhat surprised.

“Never mind that, miss; rest assured that I really mean it.”

“I thank you, sir,” replied Lizzie Wag.

And Jovita Foley whispered into her friend’s ear the very judicious remark, “He is rather good-looking, this Max Real, and if, as he wishes, he lets you arrive first, he will be better looking still, The proceedings being over, the Auditorium was gradually evacuated, and the result of the throw of the dice immediately spread through the town.

The “Hypperbone match,” as it was called by the public, had begun.

In the evening Max Real completed his preparations — simple as they were — and the next morning he embraced his mother after a formal promise to write to her as often as possible. Then he left 3997, Halsted Street, preceded by the faithful Tommy, and arrived on foot at the railway station ten minutes before the departure of the train.

That the railroads radiated from Chicago on all sides he was well aware, and all he had to do was to choose between the two or three lines that went to Kansas. This state does not adjoin Illinois, but is only separated from it by the state of Missouri; thus the journey imposed by fate on the young painter did not exceed five hundred and fifty or six hundred miles, according to the route he selected.

“I do not know Kansas,” he said to himself, and here is an opportunity for me to see the American desert, as they used to call it. Among the farmers there the French Canadians are not badly spoken of. I shall be at home there, for there is nothing against my going as I like, providing I get to the place picked out for me.

There was nothing against his doing so. Such was the opinion given by Tornbrock when he was consulted on the subject. The memorandum drawn up by William J. Hypperbone required Max Real to go to Fort Riley in Kansas, and it was enough for him to be there within a fortnight after his departure, so as to receive by telegram the number of the second throw which concerned him — that is the eighth in the game. In fact, among the fifty states placed on the board in the order we know, there were but three to which the player had to go as quickly as possible, to be there in the event of chance sending another player to replace him by the next throw. These were Louisiana, the nineteenth square, assigned to the inn; Nevada, the thirtieth square, assigned to the well; and Missouri, the fifty-second square, assigned to the prison.

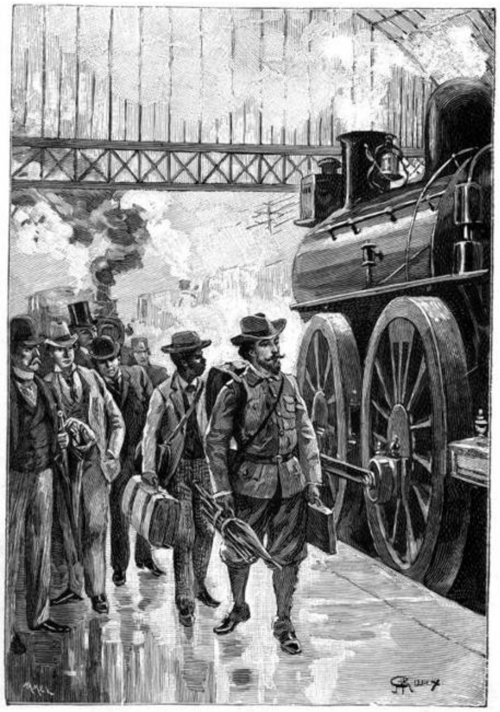

Max Real did not please his fellow-citizens.

Nothing could be better than for him to be able to go to his destination in the schoolboy way, as the French have it. But we can hardly suppose Commodore Urrican or Hermann Titbury spending their patience and their money by loitering on the way. They would drive on at full speed, little desirous of *transire videndo.*

The route adopted by Max Real was this. Instead of going the shortest way to Kansas City, by crossing Illinois and Missouri obliquely from east to west, he took the Grand Trunk, the railroad 3786 miles long which runs from New York to San Francisco — ”Ocean to Ocean”, as they say in America. A run of about 500 miles would take him to Omaha, on the Nebraska frontier, and from there on board one of the steamboats which descend the Missouri he could reach the metropolis of Kansas. Then as a tourist, an artist, he could arrive at Fort Riley on the day appointed.

When Max Real entered the station he found there a crowd of spectators. Before they wagered heavy sums on the game about to be played, the people who were going to bet wished to see with their own eyes the first of the players to get off. Although the odds depending on probabilities of more or less importance had not yet been quoted, it was desirable to have a view of the young painter at the moment of his departure. Did his looks inspire confidence? Was he in form? Was there a chance of his becoming a favourite notwithstanding the possibility of the fines to pay stopping him on his journey?

It must be confessed that Max Real did not please his fellow-citizens by carrying his painter’s kit. Jonathan is a practical man, and thought that Real need not have troubled himself about seeing the country or making pictures; he should have travelled as a player in the game and not as an artist. In the opinion of the majority, the game invented by William J. Hypperbone was raised to the height of a national question and should be played seriously. If any of the seven did not play the game with all the ardour they could muster it would be a breach of the conventionalities with the immense majority of the citizens of free America. And the result was that among the disappointed spectators not one decided to go by train with Max Real, as far at least as the first station, to give him a good send off, as it is called. The cars were occupied entirely by passengers whom the requirements of commerce or industry called away from Chicago.

Max Real, quite at his ease, installed himself in one of the seats, and Tommy sat near him, for the time had gone by when whites would not remain in the same compartment with people of colour.

At last the whistle was heard, the train began to move, the powerful locomotive puffed from its wide mouth great showers of sparks amid the steam.

And amid the crowd remaining on the platform there was noticed Commodore Urrican glaring threateningly on the first to start.

From the weather point of view the journey began badly. Do not forget that in America at this latitude — and it is on much the same parallel as northern Spain — winter does not end until the month of April. Over these vast territories which no mountain shelters it is prolonged to this season of the year and the atmospheric currents from the polar regions are freely unloosed over it. If the cold began to give way before the rays of the sun of May, storms were still troubling the air. Dense low clouds, from which fell heavy showers, hung in confused masses on the horizon and shut it in. An unfortunate circumstance for a painter in search of sunny landscapes. Far better to have toured through the states in the early days of spring. Later the heat would become insupportable. After all there was reason for hoping that the bad weather would not last beyond the end of the month, and there were already signs of better meteorological conditions.

And now a word with regard to the young negro who had for two years been in the service of Max Real and was to accompany him on a journey that would probably be fertile in surprises. He was, as we know, a boy of seventeen, and consequently born free, for the emancipation of the slaves dated from the war of secession, which ended thirty years before, to the great honour of the Americans and of humanity.

Tommy’s father and mother, who lived in the slavery times, were born in this state of Kansas, where the strife was so violent between the abolitionists and the Virginian planters. His parents — and stress should be laid on this point — had not to undergo too rigorous a fate, and their life had been much easier than that of most of their kin. Living under a good master, a man thoughtful and just, they had considered themselves as being of the family, and when abolition was proclaimed they had no more desire to leave him than he had to get rid of them.

Tommy then was born free, and after the death of his parents and their master — was it the influence of atavism or the remembrance of the happy days of his childhood? — he was much embarrassed at finding himself alone in face of the necessities of life. Perhaps his young mind did not grasp the advantages of this great act of emancipation when he had to trust to his own resources to get along with, when he had to think of to-morrow, who had never before thought of the future and to whom the present was everything. And were they not more numerous than was thought, these poor people who regretted as the children they still were that they had become free servants after having been slaves?

Fortunately Tommy had the opportunity of being recommended to Max Real. He was fairly intelligent, open-hearted, well-behaved, and ready to love those who showed the slightest affection for him. He became attached to the young artist, with whom he found a permanent situation.

One regret, one only, he had — and he did not conceal it — that he did not belong to him in a more complete way, in body as well as soul, and he often said so.

“But why?” Max Real would ask.

“Because, if you were my master, if you had bought me, I should belong to you.”

“And what would you gain by that, my boy?”

“I would gain that you could not send me away, as you can do with a servant who does not please you.”

“But who talks of sending you away? Besides, if you were my slave I could always sell you.”

“It does not matter, master, it is very different, and I should be safer — ”

“In no respect, Tommy,”

“Perhaps — perhaps — and as for me, I should not be free to go away!”

“Well, be easy; if I am satisfied with your services, I will buy you one day.”

“And from whom — for I do not belong to any one?”

“From yourself, when I am rich, and as dearly as you like.”

Tommy nodded his head, his eyes glowed in their dark orbits as he disclosed a double row of teeth of startling whiteness, happy in the thought of selling himself some day to his master, and wishing for nothing better.

Needless to say, he was delighted to accompany him during this journey about the United States. He would have had a heavy heart to see him set out alone, though it might have been for only a few days. And who knew how long this game would last if the winner took weeks, and perhaps months, to reach the sixty-third square?

Whether the journey was short or long, it was certainly very disagreeable during this first day between the windows clouded with steam and rain. The country had to be traversed without being seen. Everything was lost in the grey tones abhorred by painters; the sky, the birds, the villages, the houses, the railway stations, the landscape of Illinois appeared confusedly through the mists. All that could be identified were the high chimneys of the Napiersville flour-mills, and the roofs of the Aurora match factory. Nothing could be seen of Oswego, of Yorkville, of Sandwich, of Mendoza, of Princeton, of Rock Island, of its superb bridge across the Mississippi, whose waters surround the island; nothing of that State property transformed into an arsenal where hundreds of guns lie side by side among the green thickets and flowering shrubs.

Max Real was much disappointed. In passing through these storms he would find nothing worth remembering for his art. He might just as well sleep all the day — as Tommy was doing conscientiously.

Towards evening the rain ceased, the clouds rose into the higher zones, the sun set in cloths of gold on the horizon. This was a feast for the artist’s eyes. But almost immediately the shades of twilight invaded the sky over the region separating Iowa from Illinois, and so the crossing of this country, although the night was clear enough, gave no satisfaction to Max Real, who soon closed his eyes and did not open them again until dawn next day.

And perhaps he was right in regretting that he had not stopped the night before at Rock Island.

“Yes, I was wrong, evidently wrong,” he said to himself when he awoke. There was plenty of time, and I am not in a hurry for twenty-four hours. The day I thought of spending at Omaha I should have spent at Rock Island. From there to Davenport, that riverside city of the Mississippi, there is only the big river to cross and I should have seen this Father of Waters, which I am perhaps called upon to see all the way down now that fate has sent me across these central states.”

It was too late to indulge in such reflections. The train was now running at full steam across the plains of Iowa. Max Real could not see Iowa City in the valley of that name, which for sixteen years was the capital of the state, nor Des Moines, the present capital, an old fort built at the junction of the river of that name and the Racoon, now a city of fifty thousand inhabitants, camped amid a network of railroads.

At last the sun rose as the train was about to stop at Council Bluffs, almost on the state’s boundary and three miles only from Omaha, an important town of this Nebraska of which the Missouri forms the natural frontier.

There formerly was “The Rock of Council,” where the tribes of the Far West assembled. From there started the expeditions of conquest or commerce which were to open up the regions intersected by the multiple ramifications of the Rocky Mountains and New Mexico.

It cannot be said that Max Real ran through this first station of the Union Pacific as he had run though many others since the previous evening.

“Let us get out,” he said.

“Have we arrived?” asked Tommy, opening his eyes.

“A man has always arrived — when he is anywhere!”

And after this astonishingly positive reply, the two, one with knapsack on his back, the other with the portmanteau in his hand, stepped out on to the platform of the railway station.

The steamer would not leave Omaha before ten o’clock in the morning; it was now six, and there was plenty of time to visit Council Bluffs, on the left bank of the Missouri. This was what they did after a short halt for the first breakfast. Then the future master and the future slave went off between the two iron roads which lead to the two bridges over the river and form a double communication with the metropolis of Nebraska.

The sky had cleared. The sun was shooting a sheaf of morning rays through the rift in the clouds that a light breeze from the east was gently driving above the plain. What satisfaction, after twenty-four hours’ imprisonment in a railroad car, to swing along in this way with free and freshening stride!

True, Max Real could not think of stopping to sketch on the way. Before his eyes lay long and barren beaches with nothing about them to tempt an artist’s brush, and so he walked straight on towards the Missouri, that grand tributary of the Mississippi which was formerly called Mise Souri, Peti Kanoui, that is to say in the Indian language,” the muddy river, “which up to here is three thousand miles from its source.

Max Real had an idea which doubtless would never have occurred to Commodore Urrican, nor the trainer of Tom Crabbe, nor even Harris T. Kymbale: it was to keep away as much as he could from public curiosity. It was on this account that he had not announced his route when he left Chicago. The city of Omaha was no less interested than the others in this noble Game of the United States, and if it had known that the first to start had arrived that morning within its walls it would have received him with the honours due to a personage of such importance.

A considerable town is this Omaha, and including its southern suburb it contains at least 150,000 inhabitants. It was owing to “the boom” — that which Réclus justly describes as “the period, of puffery, of speculation, of stock-jobbing, and at the same time of furious work — that in 1854 it rose among the solitudes like so many others with all its equipment of industry and civilization.” Gamblers by instinct, how could the Omaha people resist the temptation to bet on one or other of the players whom blind destiny was dispersing among the States of the Union? And here was one of them disdaining to reveal his presence among them! Evidently this Max Real was doing nothing to win the favour of his fellow-citizens. At a modest hotel, without giving his name or occupation, he took his repast. It was possible, besides, that hazard might send him several times to Nebraska or the states which the Grand Trunk serves to the westward.

At Omaha begins that long iron road called the Pacific Union between Omaha and Ogden and the Southern Pacific between Ogden and San Francisco. As to the lines which put Omaha in connection with New York, there are so many that travellers find their only difficulty in making their choice.

There, unrecognized, Max Real walked about the principal quarters of this town, which is just as much like a chess-board as its neighbour, Council Bluffs, there being fifty-four blocks, all rectangular and all bounded by rectilineal lines.

It was ten o'clock when Max Real, followed by Tommy, returned towards the Missouri by the north of the town and went down to the quay near the steamboat wharf.

The *Dean Richmond* was ready to start. Her boilers were snoring like a drunken man, her engine beam was only waiting for the order to begin to move above her spar-deck.

The day would suffice for the *Dean Richmond* after a run of 150 miles to reach Kansas City.

Max Real and Tommy installed themselves on the upper gallery near the stern. Ah! if the passengers had only known that one of the players in this famous game was to descend in their company the Missourian waters as far as the town of Kansas, what an enthusiastic welcome he would have had! But Max Real continued to keep the strictest incognito, and Tommy was not allowed to betray it.

At ten minutes past ten, the hawsers were cast off, the powerful paddle wheels were put in motion and the steamboat started down the river, which is dotted with floating pumice stone from its sources in the gorges of the Rocky Mountains.

The banks of Missouri are flat and green and have none of that strange aspect given them higher up by the gigantic rocks of which they there consist. Here the yellow river is no longer interrupted by cataracts, weirs, locks, nor troubled with falls and rapids. Swollen by the material brought down by its tributaries from the furthest regions of Canada, it owes much to its numerous affluents, of which the chief is the Yellowstone River.

The *Dean Richmond* sped rapidly down the river among the flotilla of steam vessels and sailing vessels, which are not found above this owing to the course being hardly navigable, ice encumbering in winter, and drought making it shallow during the summer.

They reached Platte City, on the river which gives one of its names to the state, for it is also called the Nebraska. But really that of the Platte is more suitable, owing to its meandering between grassy banks that are very bare, and its bed is of little depth. Twenty-five miles further on the steamboat stopped at Nebraska City, which town is practically the port of Lincoln, the state capital, although that is twenty leagues to the west of the river.

During the afternoon Max Real was able to get a few sketches about Atkinson and at a remarkable spot near Leavenworth where the Missouri is spanned by one of the most-beautiful bridges along its course. Here in 1827 was built the fort destined to defend the country against the Indian tribes.

It was nearly midnight when the young painter and Tommy landed at Kansas City. The}’’ had still a dozen days to get to Fort Riley, the place indicated in this state by William J. Hypperbone’s memorandum.

Max Real soon selected a hotel of decent appearance, where he passed a good night after twenty-four hours in a railway train and fourteen on a steamer.

The next day was devoted to visiting the town, or rather the two towns, for there are two Kansases, situated on the same right bank of the Missouri, which here has a sharp bend, but separated by the Kansas River, one belonging to the State of Kansas, the other to that of Missouri, The second is by far the more important, with 130,000 inhabitants, while the other has but 38,000. In reality they would form but one and the same city if they were in the same state.

Max Real had no intention of staying more than a day in Kansas of Kansas or Kansas of Missouri. The two towns are as much alike as two chess-boards, and if you have seen one you have seen the other. And so in the morning of the 4th of May he started for Fort Riley, and this time it was as an artist that he travelled. True, he took the railroad, but he intended to alight at the stations that pleased him in search of landscape studies which he could turn to profitable use, if he were not the first to arrive although the first to start.

This is no longer the American desert of former times. The vast plain gradually rises towards the west to an altitude of 400 feet on the frontier of Colorado, and its successive undulations are cut up by wide wooded bottoms, separated by the steppes as far as the eye can reach which a hundred years ago were roamed over by the Kansas, Nez Percés, Otea and other Indian tribes.

But what has brought about the complete transformation of the country is the disappearance of the cypress groves and fir groves, the planting of millions of fruit trees on the savannahs, and the establishing of nurseries to supply the orchards and vineyards. Immense tracts are devoted to the cultivation of sorghum used in the manufacture of sugar, alternated with fields of barley, rye, buckwheat, oats, wheat, which make Kansas one of the richest states of the Union.

There are many different species of flowering plants, and particularly noticeable on the banks of the Kansas are the innumerable clumps with cottony leaves, some herbaceous, some frutescent, that impregnate the air with an odour of turpentine.

In going from station to station, in strolling off for four or five miles across country, in sketching in several canvases, Max Real spent a week in reaching Topeka, where he arrived during the afternoon of the 13th of May.

Topeka is the capital of Kansas. It derives its name from the wild potatoes which abound on the slopes of the valley. The town occupies the southern bank of the stream and has a suburb on the opposite bank.

A half day’s rest was taken as necessary by Max Real and the young negro — rest which was interrupted next day by a visit to the capital. Its 32,000 inhabitants were unaware that they had amongst them the celebrated player whose name had already begun to appear on the newspaper contents bills, but they were waiting to greet him on his way. They never imagined that to get to Fort Riley he had taken any other way than that which skirts the Kansas and runs through Topeka. They were waiting in expectation, and Max Real departed at dawn on the 14th without his presence being suspected for an instant.

Fort Riley, at the confluence of the Smoky Hill and Republican rivers, is some sixty miles away. Max Real could get there that evening if convenient, or next morning if the fancy took him to linger on the way, which was what he did, having left the train at Manhattan. But he had a narrow escape of being stopped at the outset of the game and losing the right to continue. The artist was almost too much for the chess-man that chance was moving across this region. In the afternoon Max Real and Tommy got out at the last station but one, three or four miles from Fort

Riley, and made for the left bank of the Kansas. As half a day was enough to allow for this distance, even if they had to walk it, there was nothing to be anxious about.

The charming landscape that suddenly greeted his eyes tempted Max Real to stop on the river bank. In an angle of the stream amid varied light and shade stood one of the survivors of an old cypress grove, its branches overhanging from one bank to the other. At its base were the remains of an adobe hut, and behind extended a vast prairie studded with flowers, principally showy sunflowers. Beyond the Kansas was a depth of verdure, mostly in heavy shadow, pierced here and there by the brilliant rays of the sun. As a composition the picture was perfect.

“What a beautiful view,” said Max Real. In two hours I can finish a sketch of it. And as we shall see immediately, it was not the sketch but himself that was nearly finished.

The young painter was seated on the bank, his little canvas fixed in the lid of his colour-box, and he had been working away for forty minutes without intermission when a distant noise — the *quadrupedante sonitu* of Virgil — was heard to the eastward of him. It seemed like a rush of horsemen across the plain that bordered the left bank.

Tommy was lying at the foot of a tree when this increasing noise woke him from the half sleep into which he had so willingly subsided.

His master hearing nothing, and not even turning his head, he rose and walked up the bank a little way so as to get a better view.

The noise then got louder, and on the edge of the horizon rose clouds of dust, which the breeze, then freshening, was driving towards the west.

Tommy returned hastily, and seized with alarm, said:

“Master!”

The painter, absorbed in his work, did not reply.

“Master!” repeated Tommy in an anxious voice, placing his hand on his shoulder.

“Eh! What is up, Tommy?” replied Max Real, busily mixing with the tip of his brush a little sienna and vermillion.

“Master — do you not hear that?” said Tommy.

He would have been deaf not to have heard the rumbling of this tumultuous gallop.

Instantly Max Real arose, put his palette on the grass, and ran to the edge of the bank.

Five hundred yards away was a vast assemblage of horses raising clouds of dust and vapour and neighing furiously, a sort of avalanche precipitated on to the plain. In a few moments the avalanche would be at the river.

The only possible flight was towards the north. Gathering up his kit, Max Real, followed or rather preceded by Tommy, ran off in that direction.

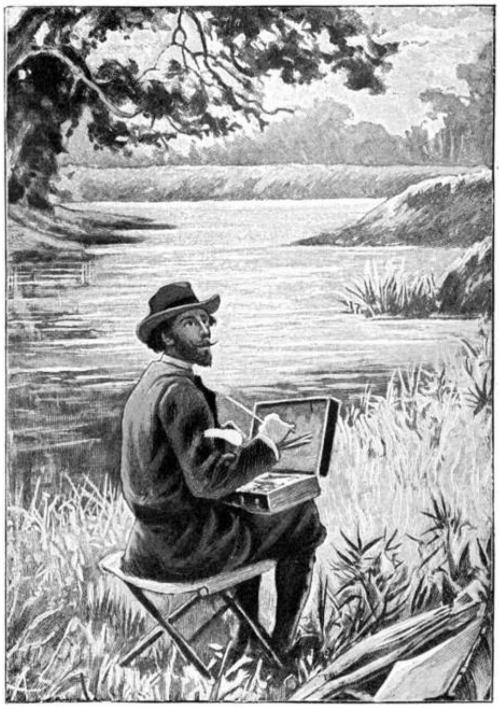

"What is up, Tommy?"

The horde which approached at full speed was composed of many thousands of horses and mules which the state formerly bred in a reserve on the bank of the Missouri, but since autocars and bicycles had come into fashion these hippomotors had been left to themselves and wandered about the country. These had evidently taken fright, and perhaps had been on the gallop for several hours. No obstacle had stopped them; the fields, the cultivated lands had been devastated on their path, and if the river did not oppose an insurmountable barrier, where would they go?

Max Real and Tommy, although they ran with all their might, were nearly caught, and would have been trampled to death under those terrible hoofs if they had not climbed up into the lower branches of a vigorous walnut tree, the only tree within reach.

It was then five o’clock in the evening.

There they remained in safety, and when the last of the herd had disappeared along the river —

“Quick! Quick!” said Max Real.

Tommy was in no hurry to leave the branch on which he sat astride.

“Quick, I tell you, or I shall lose sixteen million dollars, and shall not be able to make you a vile slave!”

Max Real was joking; there was no risk of his being late at Fort Riley. For this reason, instead of returning to the station, which was now some distance away, and where he might not have caught a train, he proceeded quietly on foot, and, when the evening came, walked towards the distant lights that shone on the horizon.

In this way the last part of the journey was accomplished, and eight o’clock had not quite struck when Max Real and Tommy found themselves before the *Jackson Hotel* The first to start was thus at the spot chosen by William J. Hypperbone in the eighth square. And why this choice? Probably because, if Missouri, situated in the geographic centre of the Union, has been called the Central State, Kansas, on the other hand, might be as justly called so from its occupying the geometric centre, and Fort Riley is in the very centre of this state. And as marking this, a monument has been built near Fort Riley, just at the junction of the Smoky Hill and Republican rivers.

At last Max Real was safe and sound at Fort Riley. Next morning he went out from the *Jackson Hotel,* where he had put up, and called at the post office and asked if a telegram were waiting for him.

“Your name, sir?” asked the clerk.

“Max Real.”

“Max Real — of Chicago?”

“In person.”

“And one of the players in the noble Game of the United States of America?”

“Quite so.”

Impossible this time to maintain his incognito, and the news of Max Real’s presence spread through the town.

It was then amid much cheering, but to his great annoyance, that the young painter returned to the hotel. There he would receive as soon as it arrived the telegram announcing the result of the second throw, and which would send him — where? Wherever he was required to go at the caprice of impenetrable destiny!

CHAPTER VIII

TOM CRABBE ENTRAINED BY JOHN MILNER

Eleven by the five and six is not a throw to be despised when the player does not bring off nine by the six and three or the five and four and go to the twenty-sixth or fifty-third square.

Perhaps it was to be regretted that the State indicated by the number happened to be a long distance from Illinois, and no doubt Tom Crabbe was rather disgusted at it — or at least his trainer was.

Fate had sent them to Texas, the largest of the States of the Union, which alone has an area larger than that of France. This State, situated in the south-west of the confederation, borders on Mexico, from which it was not separated until 1835, after the battle gained by General Houston over General Santa Anna.

Tom Crabbe could get to Texas in two ways. He could on leaving Chicago go to St. Louis and take the Mississippi steamers to New Orleans, or take the railway to the metropolis of Louisiana by traversing the States of Illinois, Tennessee, and Mississippi. And from there he could ascertain the shortest way to reach Austin, the capital of Texas, the place indicated in William J. Hypperbone’s memorandum, either by railroad or on board one of the steamers which run between New Orleans and Galveston.

John Milner decided to take Tom Crabbe to Louisiana by railway. But under any circumstances he had no time to lose like Max Real, nor leisure to loiter on the road, as he had to reach the end of the journey by the 16th.

“Well,” asked the reporter of the *Freie Presse* after result of the throw had been announced on the 3rd of May in the Auditorium,” when do you start?”

“This evening.”

“Is your luggage packed?”

“My luggage is Crabbe,” replied John Milner. He is packed, shut, corded, and I have only to take him to the station — ”

“And what does he say?”

“Nothing. As soon as his sixth meal is finished we shall go together to the train, and I should put him in the luggage van if I were not afraid of having to pay excess.”

“I have a presentiment,” continued the reporter, “that Tom Crabbe will be favoured with the same luck — ”

“Do not doubt it,” declared John Milner.

“A pleasant journey to you.”

“Thank you.”

The trainer had no intention of imposing an incognito on the champion of the New World. A personage so considerable — from a material point of view as Tom Crabbe could not be passed unseen. His departure was consequently in no way kept secret. There was a crowd that evening on the railway platforms to see him hoist himself into his car amid cheers. John Milner entered after him. Then the train started, and probably the engine felt the increase of load due to the transport of the weighty pugilist During the night the train covered 350 miles, and in the morning it reached Fulton, on the Kentucky frontier.

Tom Crabbe scarcely troubled himself to look at the country he was passing through — a State relegated to the fourteenth rank in the Union. Undoubtedly if Max Real or Harris T. Kymbale had been in his place, they would not have omitted to visit Nashville, the present capital, and the battle-field of Chattanooga, on which Sherman opened the roads to the south to the Federal armies. And then, one as artist, the other as reporter, why should they not have taken a run to the right for a hundred miles, to Grand Junction, so as to honour Memphis with their presence? This is the only important city the State possesses on the left bank of the Mississippi, and it has a fine appearance, situated on the cliff which dominates the course of the superb river strewn with islets of rich verdure.

But the trainer did not think he was called upon to diverge from his direct route to permit the enormous feet of Tom Crabbe to tread this city with an Egyptian appellation. And so he had no opportunity of asking why some sixty years ago, although Memphis is so distant from the sea, the government there established arsenals and workshops which are now abandoned, nor to hear the reply: in America they make these mistakes, as they do elsewhere. The train continued to carry the second player and his indifferent companion across the plains of the State of Mississippi. It went through Holly Springs, Grenada and Jackson. This last town is the capital, of little importance, of a region which the exclusive culture of cotton has left far behind in the industrial and commercial advance.

There, however, for during an hour at the railway station the arrival of Tom Crabbe produced a great effect. Several hundred spectators wished to see the celebrated prize-fighter. To be sure he did not possess the stature of

Adam, to whom was attributed, before the rectifications of the illustrious Cuvier, a height of ninety feet, nor that of Abraham, eighteen feet, nor even that of Moses, twelve feet, but he was a gigantic type of the human species all the same.

Among the spectators was a man of learning, the Honourable Kil Kirney, who, after measuring with extreme precision the Champion of the New World, considered he was justified in offering a few depreciatory remarks, and this was what he did not hesitate to declare *ex professo:* “Gentlemen, in connection with the historical researches to which I am devoted, I have got together the principal statistics of measurement given by giganto-graphers and reduced them to the decimal system. In the seventeenth century appeared Walter Parson, who had a height of two metres, twenty-seven. In the eighteenth century appeared the German, Muller of Leipzig, who measured two metres, forty; the Englishman Burnsfield, who was two metres, thirty-five; the Irishman, Magrath, who was two metres, thirty; the Irishman O’Brien, who was two metres, fifty-five; the Englishman Toller, who was two metres, fifty-five; and the Spaniard Elacegin, who was two metres, thirty-five. In the nineteenth century appeared the Greek Auvassab, who was two metres, thirty-three; the English Hales, of Norfolk, who was two metres, forty; the German Marianne, who was two metres, forty-five, and the Chinese Chang, who was two metres, fifty-five. Now, from the sole of the feet to the crown of the head, I would inform the honourable trainer that Tom Crabbe is only two metres, thirty — ”

“What do you want me to do?” replied the trainer rather sharply. “I cannot make him any longer.”

“No, undoubtedly,” replied Mr. Kil Kirney, and I don’t ask you to do so. But, anyhow, he’s inferior to — ”

“Tom!” said John Milner. “Give him one in the breadbasket, so that he can measure the force of your biceps.”

The learned man did not wish to assist at an experiment which would have left him without the. regulation number of ribs, and he retired with dignity.

Tom Crabbe was none the less greeted by the acclamations of the public when John Milner issued a challenge in his name to the local amateurs. But the challenge was not taken up, and the Champion of the New World hauled himself back into his car, while wishes of good luck rained around him.

After crossing the State of Mississippi from north to south the railway reaches the frontier of Louisiana at Rocky Comfort.

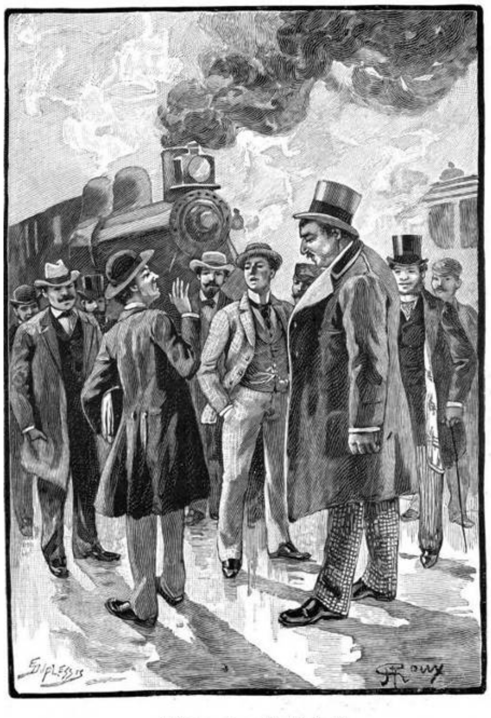

“ But, anyhow, his inferior.”

Following the course of the Tangipaoha river, the train descends to Lake Pontchartrain, the western bank of which it passes by the narrow strip of land which separates this lake from that of Maurepas, on which is the

Mauchac viaduct. At Carrolton station it reaches the river, here 900 yards across, which curves so as to encircle the Louisianan city.

At New Orleans, Tom Crabbe and John Milner left the railway after a journey of nearly nine hundred miles from Chicago. Arriving in the afternoon of the 5th of May, they had thirteen days to get to Austin, the capital of Texas — time enough, although they must allow for possible delays either by land in availing themselves of the Southern Pacific or by way of the sea.

In any case it would not have done for John Milner to take his Crabbe through the town to look at the sights. If chance sent here another of the "seven" he would acquit himself of the task much better. Austin was still four hundred miles away, and John Milner's only thought was to get his Crabbe there by the shortest and safest route.

The shortest would have been the railway, for there is direct communication between the two towns, providing the trains fit in. After running westward by Lafayette, Rarelant, Terrebone, Tigerville, Ramos, Brashear, towards Lake Grand, it reaches, a hundred and eighty miles beyond, the frontier of Texas. From this point, at Orange, the line runs on to Austin, a distance of two hundred and thirty miles. Nevertheless — perhaps he was wrong — John Milner preferred to go another way, and thought it better to embark at New Orleans for the port of Galveston, which is united by a railroad to the Texan capital.

He found that the steamer *Sherman* would leave New Orleans for Galveston the following morning. Here was something of which he could take advantage. Three hundred miles of sea on a boat travelling at twelve miles an hour meant a day and a half — two days if the wind were not favourable.

John Milner did not think it worth while to consult Tom Crabbe on the subject any more than a man consults his luggage when it is ready to start. Having finished his sixth repast, at a hotel near the harbour, the eminent boxer wanted nothing but to sleep till the morning.

It was seven o’clock when Captain Curtis gave the order to cast off the hawsers of the *Sherman,* after he had welcomed the illustrious Champion of the New World with all the respect due to the second player in the Hypperbone match.

“The honourable Tom Crabbe,” said he, “I am honoured in having the honour of your presence on my ship.”

The boxer did not seem to understand what Captain Curtis said to him, and his eyes wandered instinctively towards the door of the dining-room.

“You may depend upon it,” continued the captain, “that I will do my utmost to get you there with the least possible delay. I shall not stint my coal nor economize my steam. I will be the soul of my cylinders, the soul of my beam, the soul of my wheels, which will run at their highest speed to assure you of glory and profit.”

Tom Crabbe’s mouth opened as if to reply and closed again immediately, to open again and shut again. That indicated that the hour of the first breakfast had struck in the stomachic-time-piece of Tom Crabbe.

“The ship is at your disposal,” declared Captain Curtis, “and rest assured we shall land in time in Texas, if I have to shut down the valves and blow up the ship — ”

“Do not blow it up,” said John Milner with that good sense which distinguished him. “It would be a mistake — on the eve of winning sixty million dollars.”

The weather was fine, and besides, there was nothing to fear in the New Orleans channels, although they are subject to capricious changes which are under the surveillance of the harbour authorities. The *Sherman* took the south channel, between the reeds and rushes of the low-lying banks. Perhaps the olfactory nerve of the passengers was disagreeably affected by the hydrogenous exhalations of innumerable particles engendered by the fermentation of organic matters at the bottom, but there was no danger of running aground in this channel, which has become the main entrance of the great river.

They passed many factories and warehouses grouped on both banks in front of Algiers, in front of Point à la Hache, in front of Jump. At this period of the year the river does not run low. In April, May and June the Mississippi is swollen by regular floods and its waters do not reach their minimum until November. The *Sherman* consequently kept on at full speed, and without a check reached Port Eads, from the name of the engineer who so much improved this southern channel.

Here the Mississippi becomes absorbed in the Gulf of Mexico after a course estimated at 4500 miles.

The *Sherman,* as soon as she had doubled the last point, laid her course to the westward.

How had Tom Crabbe borne this part of the voyage? Very well. After feeding at his usual times he had gone to bed. In the morning he appeared hale and hearty, when he resumed his place on the after-part of the spar-deck.

The *Sherman* was then fifty miles out at sea and the coast to the north was only just visible very low down.

It was the first time that Tom Crabbe had ventured on a sea voyage. And consequently he looked astonished at the rolling and pitching.

This astonishment produced on his large face, which was generally so red, an increasing paleness, which John Milner, who was thoroughly seasoned, very soon noticed.

“Is he going to be ill?” he asked himself as he approached the seat on which his companion sat.

And shaking him by the shoulder, he said, “How are you getting on?

Tom Crabbe opened his mouth, and this time it was not hunger which put his masseters into motion, although the hour of his first breakfast had struck. And as he could not shut it in time, a mouthful of salt water was dashed down his throat as the *Sherman* gave a deep roll on the surge.

Tom Crabbe was thrown off the seat and fell on the deck.

It was evidently judicious to take him to the center of the steamer, where the oscillations are not so marked.

“Come, Tom,” said John Milner.

Tom Crabbe would have risen, but he tried in vain, and fell back with all his weight.

Captain Curtis, noticing the concussion, came aft.

“I see that it is,” he declared, “ — nothing, in fact, and the honourable Tom Crabbe will be all right. It is not possible for such a man to be sea-sick. It is good silly women at most; but it would be terrible for a man so strongly built.”

Terrible it was, and never did passengers behold a more lamentable spectacle. Nausea is the natural lot of the weakly and the miserable. The phenomenon developed in the usual way. But in a case of this corpulence and vigour! With him it was as with those monuments that are more damaged by an earthquake than the frail Indian hut. One resists, the other is shaken to pieces.

And Tom Crabbe was shaking to pieces and looked as though he would become a heap of ruins.

John Milner, greatly annoyed, intervened.

“We shall have to haul him up,” said he.

Captain Curtis called the boatswain and twelve sailors to undertake the job. The united efforts of the party were not equal to lifting the Champion of the New World. It was necessary to roll him along the spar-deck as if he were a cask, then to lower him below by means of a block and tackle, then to drag him to the skylight of the engine room, where he remained completely prostrate.

“There,” said John Milner to Captain Curtis, “it was that abominable salt water which Tom got in his mouth! If it had been alcohol — ”

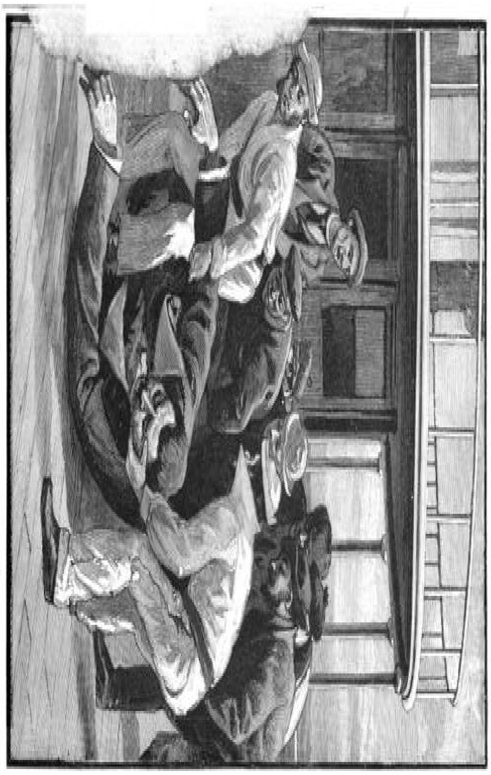

It was necessary to roll him.

“If it had been alcohol,” replied the captain judiciously, “the sea would have been drunk to the last drop long ago, and no navigation would be possible.”

It was, indeed, unlucky. The wind was coming from the westward, and had gone right round, and blew hard, the rolling and pitching being thereby increased. Steaming against a head sea made a considerable diminution in speed. The length of the voyage would be doubled — seventy or eighty hours instead of forty. In short, John Milner passed through every phase of anxiety while his companion passed through every phase of his most unpleasant affliction. In a word, to quote an expression used by Captain Curtis, “Tom Crabbe was only fit to be scraped up with a shovel.”

At last, on the 9th of May, after a furious squall which happily was of short duration, the coast of Texas, bordered by white sand-hills, defended by a string of islands over which flew flocks of enormous pelicans, appeared about three o’clock in the afternoon. There had been a great saving in provisions, owing to Tom Crabbe, although he had often and too often opened his mouth, having eaten nothing since he took his last meal when opposite Port Eads.

John Milner cherished the hope that his companion would recover himself, that he would overcome the abominable sickness, that he would resume his human form, that he would at least be presentable, when the *Sherman,* in shelter from the open sea in Galveston Bay, would be clear of the oscillations of the surge. But no! The unfortunate man did not recover in the least, even in smooth water.

The town is situated at the end of a sandy point. A viaduct connects it with the continent, and brings to it the goods it exports, which are principally cotton and are of considerable importance.

The *Sherman,* as soon as she had come up the channel, was brought alongside to her landing-stage.

John Milner was simply furious, as well he might be. Several hundred spectators were on the quay. Hearing by telegraph that Tom Crabbe had embarked at New Orleans for Galveston, they had been awaiting his arrival.

And what was his trainer going to present to them in place of the Champion of the New World, the second starter in the Hypperbone match? A shapeless mass that resembled more an empty sack than a human creature.

John Milner made another attempt to pull Tom Crabbe together.

“Well — it’s all over now?”

The sack remained a sack, and truth to tell, the sack had to be carried on a stretcher to the Beach Hotel, where apartments had been secured.

A few jests, a few gibes were heard on the way, instead of the cheers to which he was accustomed and which had greeted his departure from Chicago.

But all was not lost. Next morning, after a good night’s rest and a series of meals cleverly combined, Tom Crabbe would probably recover his vital energy, his normal vigour, and would no longer look —

So John Milner thought, but he was again mistaken. The night brought no modification in the state of his companion. The prostration of all his faculties was as profound as on the previous day. And yet what was required of him was no intellectual energy, of that he was incapable, but a mere animal effort. It was useless. His mouth had remained closed ever since he had touched land. And he had made no call for food at his accustomed hours.

In this way the 10th of May went by, then the 11th, and it was on the 16th he must be at Austin. John Milner took the only step he could. Better arrive too soon than too late. If Tom Crabbe was to emerge from this prostration, he would emerge as well at Austin as at Galveston, and, at least, he would be at his post.

So he was wheeled on a truck to the railway and put into a car as if he were a bundle. At 8.30 that evening the train started, while groups of sporting men refused to venture the very smallest sum — not even twenty-five cents — on a player in such awful form.

It was fortunate that the Champion of the New World and his trainer had not to travel over the 75,000,000 of hectares of which the Texan area consists.

They had but to cover the 160 miles which separated Galveston from the capital of the state.

Assuredly it would have been desirable to visit the regions watered by the magnificent Rio Grande, and so many other rivers, the Antonio, the Brazos, the Trinity, which flows into Galveston Bay, and the Colorado and its capricious banks strewn with pearly oysters. A magnificent country this Texas, with immense prairies, on which formerly camped the Comanches; in the west it is covered with virgin forest, rich in magnolias, sycamores, acacias, palms, oaks, cypresses, cedars; in profusion are its orange trees, nopals, cactuses, the most beautiful of its flowers; its mountains in the north-west which represent the Rockies are superb; it produces sugar-cane superior to that of the Antilles, Nacogdoches tobacco superior to that of Maryland or Virginia, cotton superior to that of Mississippi or Louisiana; it has farms of 40,000 acres with as many head of cattle, and ranches reckoned in hundreds of miles on which are raised the finest specimens of the equine race.

But what was there in all that to interest Tom Crabbe, who saw nothing, and John Milner, who saw nothing but Tom Crabbe?

In the evening the train stopped two hours at Houston, where a few vessels could be seen on an insignificant stream. Here is the centre for merchandise arriving by the Trinity, the Brazos, and the Colorado.

Next day, the 13th of May, very early in the morning, Tom Crabbe got out at Austin station, having ended his journey. It is an important industrial centre where the waters of the river are held back by a dam, and is built on a terrace to the north of the Colorado in a region abounding with iron, copper, manganese, granite, marble, gypsum and clay. The city, which is more American than many others in Texas, was chosen to be the seat of the

State legislature and contains 26,000 inhabitants, nearly all of Saxon origin. It is one town, while the towns of the Rio Grande are double — with houses of wood on one side of the river and huts of adobe on the other — such as El Paso, El Presidio, which are half Mexican.

Thus at Austin Americans only were attracted by curiosity — perhaps with a view to making a bet or so — to gaze at the second player whom a throw of the dice had sent them from the distant regions of Illinois. And these were more favoured than the people of Galveston and Houston. When he set foot on the pavement of the Texan capital, Tom Crabbe had at last got rid of that disquieting torpor over which the attentions, supplications, and objurgations of John Milner had been unable to triumph. At first the Champion of the New World may have appeared a little stale, a little limp, a little slack in his action, but how could you be astonished at that, considering he had absorbed nothing but sea-air since the *Sherman* got out to sea? Yes! The giant had been reduced to requiring food to merely keep him alive, but even reduced to this he would have to take a good deal of nourishment for some days.

What a meal he made that morning — a meal which lasted till the evening, quarters of venison, mutton and beef, odds and ends of pork, vegetables, fruit, cheese and half-and-half, gin, whisky, tea and coffee! John Milner felt rather scared when he thought of the hotel bill he would have to meet at the end of his stay.

And it went on the next day and the day after, and in that way arrived the 16th of May. Tom Crabbe had again become the prodigious human machine before whom Corbett, Fitzsimmons, and other no less celebrated boxers had so many times bitten the dust.

CHAPTER IX

ONE AND ONE MAKE TWO

This very morning a hotel — or rather an inn, that of *The Sandy Bar* and not one of the best — received two travellers, arrived by the first train in Calais, a town in the State of Maine.

These two travellers — a man and a woman evidently suffering from the fatigue of a long and painful journey — gave their names as Mr. and Mrs. Field. The name, like that of Smith and Johnson and a few others in current use, is one of the commonest among families of Anglo-Saxon origin. And you would have to be endowed with extraordinary qualities — to have gained a considerable position in politics, the arts or the sciences, to be a genius in a word — to attract public attention under this common patronymic. Thus Mr. and Mrs. Field told nothing, indicated in no way persons of distinction, and the innkeeper wrote it in his book without asking any questions.

At this time throughout the United States no names were better known, none more repeated by millions of mouths than those of the players and that of the fantastic member of the Eccentric Club. Now, not one of the seven was called Field, and at Calais they thought no more of these Fields than any other travellers. Besides, their faces did not favour them, and the innkeeper wondered if he would be favoured in another way when the time came for him to present his bill.

Whence came these strangers to this little town situated on the extreme edge of a state which is itself situated at the north-east extremity of the Union? Why had they added two units to the six hundred and sixty-one thousand inhabitants of this state, the area of which occupies half the region commonly called New England.

The room on the first floor given to Mr. and Mrs. Field was not particularly comfortable — a bed for two, a table, two chairs, a washstand. The window opened on to the St. Croix river, the left bank of which is Canadian.

The only portmanteau, placed at the entrance from the passage, had been brought by a porter from the railway station. In a corner stood two big umbrellas; and an old travelling bag lay open.

When Mr. and Mrs. Field were alone, after the departure of the innkeeper who had shown them their room, as soon as the door was shut and bolted from the inside, they placed their ears against it to make sure that no one could hear them.

“At last,” said one, “we are at the end of our journey.”

“Yes,” answered the other, “after three days and three nights since our departure.”

“I thought it would never end,” said Mr. Field, letting his arms fall as if his muscles were unable to move them.

“It is not finished,” said Mrs. Field.

“And how much will it cost us?”

“It is not what it will cost us, said the lady sharply,” but what it will bring us.”

“At least,” added the gentleman, “we had a good idea in not travelling under our real names.”

“My idea.”

“An excellent one! We should have been at the mercy of all the hotelkeepers, innkeepers, cabmen and fleecers who fatten on those who pass through their hands, and that under the pretext that millions of dollars are about to fall into our pockets.”

“We have done well,” said Mrs. Field,” and we will continue to keep down our expenses as much as possible. It was not at the railway bars that we threw away our money during the last three days — and I hope we shall continue — ”

“Never mind, but we might have done better to decline altogether — ”

“Enough, Hermann!” declared Mrs. Field in an imperious tone. “Haven’t we as many chances as the others of getting in first?”

“Undoubtedly, Kate, but the wisest of us would have signed the agreement to divide the heritage.”

“That is not my opinion. Besides, Commodore Urrican objected, and this XKZ was not there to give his consent.”

“Well — you remember what I say,” replied Mr. Field, “I am more afraid of him than all the rest. We do not know who he is, nor whence he comes. No one knows. He calls himself XKZ. Is that a name? Is it likely that anyone is called XKZ?”

Thus Mr. Field expressed himself. But if he had not hidden himself under initials had he not changed Titbury into Field? — for the reader has already discovered this from the few remarks exchanged between him and the fictitious Mrs. Field in which they both revealed their abominable instincts of avarice.

Yes, it was Hermann Titbury, the third player, whom the dice by one and one had sent to the second square, the State of Maine. And how unfortunate, for the throw only took them two steps on the sixty-three and obliged them to go to the extreme north-east point of the United States.

Maine borders on Canada. It entered into the Confederation in 1820, and has for its eastern boundary Passamaquoddy Bay, into which the St. Croix sends its waters, just as the state, which is divided into twelve counties, sends two senators and fifty deputies to Congress, the national bay into which flow the political rivers of the U.S.A.

Mr. and Mrs. Titbury had left their squint-eyed house in Robey Street on the 5th of May and were now at this one-eyed inn at Calais. We know why they had adopted an assumed name. Having told no one of the day and hour of their departure, they had accomplished their journey in the strictest incognito, as also had Max Real, though from very different motives.

This was very embarrassing to the sporting people, for it must be confessed Hermann Titbury had a good record for this match for the millions. There was no doubt that he would become one of the favourites. Was he not one of those privileged people with whom everything had succeeded up to now, being little scrupulous as to the means he used to bring his success about? His wealth permitted him to pay the fines, if luck imposed them on him, and however large they might be, he would not hesitate to settle them cash down. Besides, he would not abandon himself to any distractions or fancies as he moved from place to place, as might Max Real and Harris T. Kymbale. Was it likely to be his fault if any delay occurred in getting from one state to another? No, and it was absolutely certain that he would be at the place indicated on the day required. Undoubtedly there was much in favour of Hermann Titbury, to say nothing of his own luck, which had never failed him during his business career.

The worthy couple had managed to combine the quickest with the least expensive route across this inextricable network of railroads, stretched like an immense spider's web over the eastern states of the Union. Thus without stopping, without exposing themselves to be plundered at the bars of the railway stations or the restaurants of the hotels, depending only on the provisions they had brought with them, passing from one train to another with the precision of a ball from one hand of a juggler to the other, taking no more interest in the attractions of the country than Tom Crabbe, always absorbed in the same reflections always pursued by the same anxieties, writing down their daily expenses, counting and re-counting the money they had brought with them for the purposes of the journey, dozing by day, sleeping by night, Mr. and Mrs. Titbury had crossed Illinois from west to east, then the State of Indiana, then that of Ohio, then that of New York, then that of New Hampshire, and in this way they had reached the Maine frontier in the morning of the 8th of May, at the foot of Mount Washington of the White Mountains, whose snowy summit amid hail-showers and rain-showers bears to an altitude of 5750 feet the name of the hero of the American Republic.

From there Mr. and Mrs. Titbury reached Paris, then Lewiston on the Androscroggin, a manufacturing city, doubled by the town of Auburn, which competes with the important town of Portland, one of the best ports in New England, sheltered in Casco Bay. The railroad then took them to

Augusta, the official capital of Maine, the elegant houses of which are scattered along the banks of the Kennebec. From the station at Bangor they went north-east to Backahogan, where the railway tops, and took the stage coach to Princeton, which an outlying portion joins on to Calais.

In this way, with frequent and disagreeable changes of train, they had accomplished the crossing of Maine, to which the tourists flock to visit the mountain glens, the fields of moraines, the lacustrine plateaux, the deep and inexhaustible forests of oaks, hemlocks, maples, ashes, beeches, and other northern species which furnished the wood for the workshops before the adoption of iron in shipbuilding.

Mr. and Mrs. Titbury, — alias Field — arrived at Calais early on the 9th of May, and well in advance, for they had to stay there until the 19th. This made some ten days to be spent in this town of a few thousand inhabitants, a mere coasting port. How would they occupy their time until the telegram from Tornbrock was sent to them?

But what charming excursions are offered by a region so varied as Maine! Towards the north-west there is the magnificent country dominated by Mount Katahdin, 3500 feet high, an enormous block of granite emerging from a dome of forests in the region of the lake plateaux. And this town of Portland of 36,000 people, the birthplace of the great poet Longfellow, with its important trade with South America and the Antilles, its monuments, its parks, its gardens which its very artistic inhabitants keep up with such taste. And this modest Brunswick with its celebrated Bowdoin College, the picture gallery of which attracts so many connoisseurs! And more to the south, along the shore of the Atlantic, the seaside resorts so much in vogue among the opulent families of the neighbouring states, who would lose caste if they did not devote a few weeks amongst others to that marvellous Mount Desert Island and the refuge of Bar Harbour.

But to ask such excursions of two mollusks torn from their natal bank and transported nine hundred miles away would have been almost useless. No! They would not leave Calais for a day or for an hour. They would remain together, calculating their chances, cursing their fellow players, and arranging what they would do with their fortune if chance made them millionaires. But would they not be embarrassed?

Embarrassed — these two — with millions! Do not alarm yourself. They would know how to place it in high-class bonds, shares in banks, mines, and industrial companies, and they would collect their enormous revenues, and would not dissipate them by charitable foundations, and would reinvest them without spending any for their comfort, or pleasure, and they would live just as before, concentrating their existence on the love of money, devoured by the *auri sacra fames,* misers as they were, mere money barrels as they used to say, masses of meanness and stinginess, skinflints and save-alls, perpetual members of the Academy of Curmudgeons!

If chance favoured this dreadful couple there must be reasons for it, but what they were is difficult to imagine. And it would be to the detriment of the players more worthy of the fortune of William J. Hypperbone who would make better use of it — without excepting Tom Crabbe, without excepting Commodore Urrican.

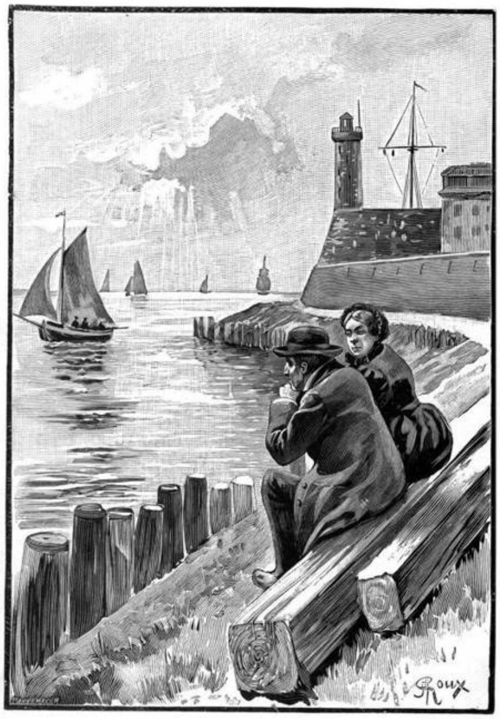

Watching the fishing-boats go out.

Here they are then at the far end of the States in this little town of Calais, hidden under the name of Field, weary and impatient, watching the fishing boats go out each tide and return with their loads of mackerel, herring, and salmon. Then they would return to their room at the *Sandy Bar*, for ever trembling at the idea of their identity being discovered.

Calais was not so far lost in the depths of Maine for the report of the famous match not to have reached its inhabitants. They knew that the second square had been assigned to this New England state, and the telegraph had informed them that the third throw of the dice — one and one — obliged the player, Hermann Titbury, to stay in their town.

Thus passed the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th of May, in profound dulness in this anything but recreative place. Max Real himself could not have survived it without difficulty. Walking along the roads bordered with wooden houses, lounging on the quays, the time seemed to be interminable.

And this telegram indicating a new journey which would not be sent before the 19th, what patience it required to wait for it during seven long days more!

But the Titburys might easily manage a tour in foreign parts by crossing the river St. Croix, the left bank of which belongs to Canada.

So said Hermann Titbury to himself, and on the morning of the 13th he made the following proposal: —

“Evidently Hypperbone chose the most disagreeable town of Maine to send there the players who had the bad luck to throw a two at the beginning of the game.”

“Take care, Hermann,” said Mrs. Titbury in a low voice.”

“If any one heard you. Chance has brought us to Calais, and whether we like it or not we must stay in Calais”.

“Are we not allowed to leave the town?”

Certainly, but on condition that we do not leave the States.”

So we have no right to go to the other side of the river?

“On no account, Hermann. The testator expressly prohibited us from going out of the United States.”

“And who would know it?” asked Mr. Titbury.

“I do not understand you, Hermann,” replied the lady in a louder voice. Is it really you who are speaking? I no longer recognize you! If later on they learnt that we had crossed the frontier? If some accident were to keep us there? If we did not return in time — the 19th? Besides — I won’t have it!”

And she had reason in her “won’t”, had the imperious Mrs. Titbury! Does one ever know what is going to happen? Supposing there had been an earthquake — that New Brunswick had been, detached from the continent — that this part of America was shaken to pieces — that an abyss opened between the two countries. How could they find the telegraph office on the proper day? Would there be no risk of their being put out of the match?

“No — we cannot cross the river,” declared Mrs. Titbury peremptorily.

“You are right, that is forbidden us,” replied Mr. Titbury. “I do not know how I could have had such an idea. In truth, since our departure from Chicago I have not been myself. This cursed journey has made me stupid. For people who have never budged from their house in Robey Street to take long journeys at our time of life! We had much better have remained at home — and declined the game — ”

“Sixty millions of dollars!” said. Mrs. Titbury,” that is worth some inconveniences! Hermann, you say the same things over again a little too often!”

And so St. Stephen, the Dominion town which occupies the other bank of the St. Croix, was not honoured by the Titburys.

It seemed as though such minute care, such excessive prudence which gave such advantages over the other players, would have sheltered them from any vexatious accident, that they never would be taken unawares, that nothing could happen to put them in difficulties — but chance loves to sport with the cleverest set snares that all our caution cannot avoid, and chance must be reckoned with.

Now, in the morning of the 14th, Mr. and Mrs. Titbury conceived the idea of going for an outing. Do not be alarmed: it was only two or three miles outside Calais. Let us remark, by the way, that the town received its French name from being at the extremity of the United States, just as its namesake is at the extremity of France; and as to the State of Maine, its name comes from the first colonists, who settled there in the reign of Charles the First.

It was stormy weather, heavy clouds were rising on the horizon, and towards noon the heat became overwhelming. It was a bad day for a walk along the right bank of the St. Croix.

Mr. and Mrs. Titbury left the inn about nine o’clock and walked along the river beyond the town under the shade of the trees, among the branches of which thousands of squirrels were at play.

The Titburys had been previously assured by the innkeeper that no wild beast was to be found in the surrounding country. No, neither wolf, nor bear — a few foxes only. They could thus venture in perfect confidence even through the forests which formerly made Maine an immense fir plantation.

It need not be said that Mr. and Mrs. Titbury did not bother themselves with the landscapes that offered themselves to their view. They spoke only of their fellow players, those who had started before them. Where now were Max Real and Tom Crabbe? And always this XKZ who made them more anxious than any of the rest.

After a walk of two hours and a half, noon approaching, they thought of returning to the *Sandy Bar* for luncheon, but, parched with thirst under the overwhelming heat, they stopped at an inn situated on the bank about half a mile from the town.

Several men were there seated at tables on which were a few pints of beer.

Mr. and Mrs. Titbury sat down away from the rest and considered for a time what they would have. Porter or ale did not seem to be quite to their taste.

“I am afraid it will be a little cold,” said Mrs. Titbury. We are streaming, and there might be a risk — ”

“You are right, Kate. Pleurisy is quickly caught,” replied Mr. Titbury; and turning to the tavern-keeper, he said, —

“A glass of whisky, please.”

Immediately the man remarked, —

“Did you say whisky?”

“Yes — or gin.”

Where is your permit?

“My permit?” asked Mr. Titbury, astounded at the question.

But he would not have been astounded if he had remembered that Maine belongs to a group of states which have established the principle of the prohibition of alcohol.

In Kansas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, New Hampshire, and particularly Maine, it is forbidden to make or sell alcoholic drinks, distilled or fermented.

In each locality, however, municipal agents are appointed to sell to those who buy them for medical or industrial use certain drinks which have been first inspected by a State officer. To infringe this law even by an imprudent request is to expose yourself to the severe penalties enacted with a view to the suppression of alcoholism.

And so Mr. Titbury had hardly spoken before a man approached.

“You have no permit?”‘

“No. I have not.”

“Then you have committed an offence.”

“An offence — in what?”

“In having asked for whisky or gin.”

This man was a policeman, a policeman on his round, and he wrote the names of Mr. and Mrs. Field in his notebook and told them they would have to appear next morning before the judge.

The couple returned crestfallen to the inn, and what a day, what a night they passed! If it was Mrs. Titbury who had had the deplorable idea of going into the tavern, it was Mr. Titbury who had had the no less deplorable idea of preferring a glass of whisky to a pint of beer. To what fine had they rendered themselves liable! Hence disputes and recriminations which lasted until daylight.

The judge, a certain R. T. Ordak, was about the most disagreeable, surly, and irascible being that could be imagined. In the morning, when the offenders were introduced into his office, he took no notice of their civilities, and questioned them brusquely and briefly. Your name? Mr. and Mrs. John Field. Where do you live? They replied at hazard, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Your profession? Independent means. Then he fined them straight away a hundred dollars for having infringed the prohibition relating to alcoholic drinks in the State of Maine.

This was too much! Self-controlled as he usually was, and in spite of the efforts of his wife, who vainly tried to keep him quiet, Titbury could not contain himself. He lost his temper; he threatened Judge R. T. Ordak, and Judge R. T. Ordak doubled the fine — a hundred dollars extra for contempt of court.

The extra made Mr. Titbury more furious still. Two hundred dollars to add to the expenses already incurred in travelling to the very end of this wretched State of Maine! Wild with rage, the offender forgot all prudence and even sacrificed the advantages his incognito gave him.

With his arms crossed, his face on fire, repulsing Mrs. Titbury with unaccustomed violence, he bent over the judge’s table and said to him, —

“Do you know with whom you are dealing?”

“With an unmannerly rascal, whom I gratify with three hundred dollars fine, since he continues in this tone!” replied the no less exasperated R. T. Ordak.

“Three hundred dollars!” exclaimed Mrs. Titbury, falling half fainting on a seat.

“Yes, replied the judge, accentuating each syllable, three hundred dollars for John Field, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania —

“Well,” roared Titbury, banging on the desk with his fist, “know then that I am not John Field, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania — ”

“Who are you. then?”

“Hermann Titbury — of Chicago — Illinois.”

“That is to say an individual travelling about under a false name! remarked the judge, as much as to say, “Another crime added to the others.”

“Yes. Hermann Titbury, of Chicago, the third to start in the Hypperbone match, the future heir of the immense fortune.”

This declaration appeared to produce no effect on R. T. Ordak. The magistrate, as badly informed as he was impartial, made no more fuss about this third player than about no matter what sailor of the port, and, in a sibilant tone as if he sucked each word as he uttered it, deliberately said, —

“Well, then, it will be Hermann Titbury, of Chicago, Illinois, who will pay three hundred dollars fine, and in addition to that, for having presented himself before the law under a name which is not his, I sentence him to go to prison for eight days.”

This was the finisher. Mrs. Titbury collapsed on her seat; Mr. Titbury collapsed in his turn.

Eight days in prison! And in five days the expected telegram would arrive! And on the 19th he must start perhaps for the other end of the United States, and if he were not there on the day fixed he would be turned out of the game.

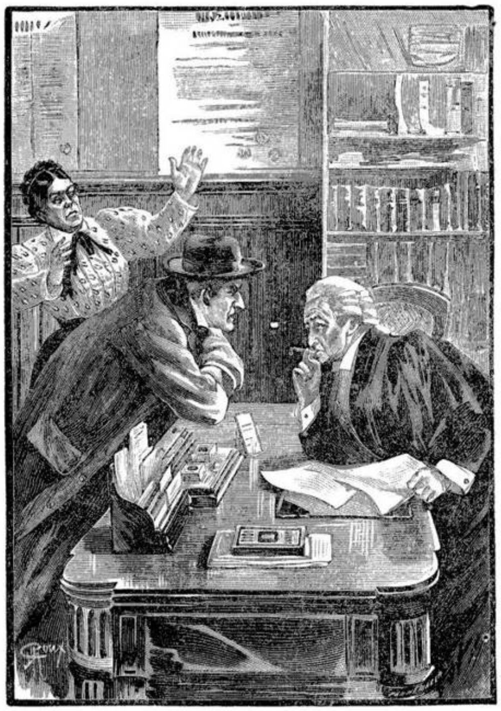

"Do you know with whom you are dealing?" p. 119

It must be admitted that it was more serious for Mr. Titbury than if he had been sent to the fifty-second square, State of Missouri, prison of St. Louis. There at least he would have had the possibility of being delivered by one of his competitors, while in the prison at Calais, by the sentence of Judge R. T. Ordak, he would remain shut up until the expiration of his time.

CHAPTER X

A REPORTER ON HIS TRAVELS

“Yes, sirs, yes! I consider this Hypperbone match one of the most astonishing national events with which the history of our glorious country will be enriched! After the War of Independence, the War of Secession, the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine, the passing of the MacKinley Bill, it is the most striking fact that the imagination of a member of the Eccentric Club has imposed on the attention of the world!”

Thus spoke Harris T. Kymbale, addressing the passengers in the train that had on this 7th of May just left the city of Chicago.

The *Tribune* reporter, overflowing with delight and confidence, spoke thus in front of the rear car at the central gangway, then at the next car by the platform between them, then in the front of the train, which was running at full speed along the southern shore of Lake Michigan.

Harris T. Kymbale had started alone. He had declined with thanks the offers of his comrades to accompany him. No, not even a servant — alone, quite alone. It will be seen that he did not seek to get away incognito like Max Real and Hermann Titbury. He took the people into his confidence and would willingly have written on his hat, *Fourth player in the Hypperbone match!* A numerous procession had escorted him to the railway station, honoured with cheers, overwhelmed him with wishes for a pleasant journey. And he was so fit, so confident, so wide awake, and at the same time so audacious and determined that already several wagers had been laid on him. These had been taken at two to one and even three to one — which flattered him and was of good augury. If Harris T. Kymbale, however, had refused to take a few friends with him to share the risks of his travels through the Union, he was not going, as we see, to isolate himself in his corner, to indulge in silent thoughts, to deliver himself in mute asides. Far from that, all the passengers with whom he travelled would become his companions. He was to a certain extent one of those people who do not think unless they talk, and it was not of words he would be stingy in the course of his journey, nor of his purse either. The purse of the wealthy *Tribune* was open to him, and he would know how to get his expenses back in interviews, in descriptions, in sketches, in articles of all sorts, for which the vicissitudes of the match would furnish him with ample and interesting matter.

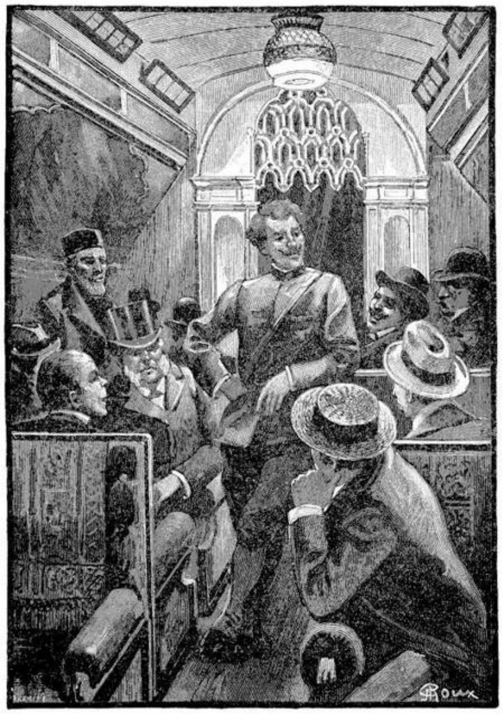

The reporter of the *Tribune*. p. 123

“But,” asked a gentleman — Yankee from head to foot — “are you not attaching too much importance to this game invented by William J. Hypperbone?”

“No, sir,” replied the reporter; “I think that so original an idea could only have originated in an ultra-American brain.”

“You are right,” said a portly merchant of Chicago. “The States are all in a ferment over it, and the day of the funeral you could see the popularity the deceased enjoyed the day after his death.”

“Sir,” asked an old lady in false teeth and spectacles, buried under her wraps in the corner, “were you in the procession?”

“Just as if I had been one of the heirs of our great citizen,” replied the man of Chicago, swelling with a puff of pride, “and I could not be more honoured than in meeting with one of his future heirs in going to Detroit — ”

“Are you going to Detroit?” asked Harris T. Kymbale, holding out his hand.

“To Detroit, Michigan.”

“Well, sir, I shall have the pleasure of accompanying you to this city of so magnificent a future — which I do not know — and which I wish to know.”

“You will not have time, Mr. Kymbale, said the Yankee so quickly that it seemed as though he was one of Kymbale’s backers. That would make your journey longer, and, I repeat it, you will not have time.”

“There is always time to do everything,” answered Kymbale in an affirmative tone which did not produce an unfavourable effect.

In fact the car, proud of possessing a passenger of this temper, broke out into cheers, the echoes of which reverberated to the end of the train.

“Sir,” said a clergyman of mature age, who with glasses to his eyes was staring at him as if to devour him, “are you satisfied with your first throw of the dice?”

“Yes and no, reverend sir,” replied the journalist in a respectful tone. “Yes, for my competitors who started before me have not passed the second, the eighth, and the eleventh square, while I was sent by two and four to the sixth and thence to the twelfth. No, because it is the State of New York which occupies the sixth square, where there is a bridge, as the inscription says, and this bridge is the foot-bridge of Niagara. Now Niagara is too well known. I have been there twenty times already. Used up, you see, done to death like the American fall, the Canadian fall, the Cave of the Winds, Goat Island! And then it is too near Chicago! What I want is to see the country, to be driven about to the four corners of the Union, to do thousands and thousands of miles on my legs-”

“Providing always,” said the clergyman, “that you are on the spot at the proper time.”

“Quite so. And depend upon it I shall never fail to be at the spot to the minute.”

“However,” said a merchant in the canned provision trade, whose healthy colour was an excellent advertisement for his goods, “it seems to me, Mr. Kymbale, that you ought to congratulate yourself, for after setting your foot down in New York State you have to be off to New Mexico. They do not quite border on each other.”

“Phew!” exclaimed the reporter, “a few hundred miles divide them — ”

“And at least,” added the Yankee, “to be sent to the land of Florida or the last village of Washington — ”

“That is what I should like,” declared Harris T. Kymbale,” to cross the United States from the northwest to the south-east.”

“But,” asked the clergyman, “does not the sending you to the sixth square, where there is a bridge, make you liable for the first fine?”

“Bah! a thousand dollars; that will not ruin the *Tribune!* From the station at Niagara Falls I will send off a cheque telegram they will be only too pleased to honour.”

“And all the more so,” declared the Yankee, “that this Hypperbone match is a business that for them — ”

“Will become good business,” said Harris T. Kymbale, as though there could be no doubt about it.

“I am so certain of it,” said the Chicago merchant, “that if I were to bet I should back you — ”

“And you would do well,” replied the reporter.

It will be seen from this that his confidence in himself was at least equal to that of Jovita Foley in her friend Lizzie Wag.

“And yet,” said the clergyman, “there is one of your competitors who, in my opinion, is more to be feared than the others.”

“Which?”

“The seventh, Mr. Kymbale; the one designated by the letters XKZ.”

“The competitor of the last hour!” exclaimed the journalist. “He benefits by the mysterious circumstances that surround him. He is the man in the mask in whom the loafers delight, but his incognito will be found out, and if he is the President of the United States in person he is no more to be feared than any other of the seven.”

At the same time, it was hardly probable that it was the President of the United States whom the testator had chosen for the seventh player; although in America none would have thought it unseemly for the first personage in the Union to enter into a competition for a fortune of sixty millions of dollars.

About seven hundred miles separate Chicago from New York, and Harris T. Kymbale had to travel only about two-thirds of them to reach Niagara without having to go on to the great American metropolis. He had no desire to visit it, the reason being that he knew it as well as the famous falls before which he had to present himself.

In leaving Chicago, after skirting the lower gulf of Lake Michigan, the train entered Indiana, bordering on Illinois at Ainsworth; and thence it ran up towards Michigan City. Notwithstanding its name, this town does not belong to the State, but is reckoned among the ports of Indiana.

If the confident reporter had chosen this way amid the railway network of the district, if he went through New Buffalo, if he stopped a few hours at Jackson, an important manufacturing centre with twenty thousand people, if he continued to go north-east, it was because he wished to visit Detroit, where he arrived on the night of the 7th of May.

Next morning, after a short sleep in the room of an hotel from which his name spread all over the town, he was called on from soon after dawn by hundreds of inquisitive people — more than inquisitive people, sympathetic partisans — who during the day did not think proper to leave him for an instant. Perhaps he was sorry he had not sheltered himself under the veil of an incognito, as his object was to go about the town. But how difficult it is to escape celebrity and its inconveniences when you are reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune* and one of the Seven in the Hypperbone match!

It was thus amid a numerous and noisy crowd that he saw the metropolis of Michigan, of which the modest Lansing is the capital. This prosperous city, founded as a little trading port established by the French in 1670, takes its name from the “détroit” or channel, here about half a mile wide, by which Lake Huron pours its waters into Lake Erie. Opposite to it is the Canadian town of Windsor, its suburb, in which the fourth competitor took good care not to set his foot. He had scarcely time to see this town of two hundred thousand inhabitants, who welcomed him with enthusiasm and overwhelmed him with the good wishes that they would doubtless have showered as freely on any of his competitors.

Harris T. Kymbale left that evening. If he had been allowed to travel on the Canadian railways, to go along the south of the province of Ontario, he could, through the long tunnel under the river St. Clair, where it flows into Lake Huron, have taken a more direct route to Buffalo and Niagara Falls. But he was prohibited from entering the Dominion. He had to enter the State of Ohio, descend to Toledo, a growing town built at the southern point of Lake Erie, strike off at an angle towards Sandusky among the richest vineyards in America, and then, skirting the lake shore, go by Cleveland. Ah! the magnificent city, its population of 262,000 people, its streets shaded with maples, its Euclid Avenue, the Champs Elysées of America, its suburbs in terraces on its hills, the wealth that is being incessantly poured forth by the petroliferous basins of the region, and which has naturally made Cincinnati so jealous. Then he touched at Erie City in Pennsylvania, and from this station he proceeded to Northville, to enter the State of New York, then he ran without stopping through Dunkirk, lighted by the hydrogen of its natural wells, and on the evening of the 10th of May he arrived at Buffalo, the second city of the state, where a hundred years before he would have met bison in thousands instead of people in hundreds of thousands.

Certainly, Harris T. Kymbale did well not to linger in this beautiful town, along its boulevards, in its avenues of Niagara Park, around its warehouses and elevators on the borders of the lake which gives passage to the waters of the Niagara. It was necessary that within ten days at the outside he should be in person at Santa Fé in New Mexico — a journey of 1400 miles, in which the railroad does not go all the way.

The next day, therefore, after a short run of about fifty-five miles, he alighted at the village of Niagara Falls.

Notwithstanding all that the reporter could say with regard to this famous cataract, now too well known and too much used for industrial purposes, which it will be more so in the future when its sixteen million horse power is fully utilized, there can be no comparison of the wonders of the Horse Shoe Fall with the Gate of the Adirondacks, that marvellous assemblage of defiles, amphitheatres and forests, with the Palisades of the Hudson, with the Central Park of the metropolis, with Broadway, or with the Brooklyn Bridge so audaciously thrown over the East River.

None of these is comparable to this tumultuous pouring over of the waters of Lake Erie into Lake Ontario by the Niagaran channel. It is the St Lawrence that passes, cleaving itself on the head of Goat Island to form on one side the American Fall, on the other the Canadian Fall, in the shape of a horse-shoe. And those furious leapings at the feet of both cataracts, those verdant excavation in the centre of the second, after which the pacified river sweeps its tranquil waters for three miles to the suspension bridge, where it breaks again into those terrible rapids! Formerly, Terrapin Tower rose on the outermost rocks of Goat Island surrounded by whirlpools, the pulverized spray of which formed over its head — rainbows by the sun in day-time, rainbows by the moon at night. But it has had to be taken down, for the fall has cut back a hundred feet in a century and a half, and it would have ended by falling into the abyss. A daring foot-bridge thrown from one bank to the other of the noisy river allows of the double stream being admired in all its splendour. Harris T. Kymbale, escorted by numerous visitors, American and Canadian, placed himself in the middle of this bridge, taking care not to encroach upon the part that belongs to the Dominion. Then raising a cheer which a thousand voices shouted across the uproar of the waters, he returned to the village of Niagara Falls, the surroundings of which are now becoming hideous with too many factories. But what would you have when there is a power of a hundred million tons to be utilized?

The reporter did not stray off among the verdant thickets of Goat Island, nor did he descend into the Cave of the Winds under the island, nor did he venture behind the deep sheets of the Horse Shoe Fall — which he could only do from the Canadian shore; but he did not forget to call at the post office in the village, where he sent off a cheque for a thousand dollars to Tornbrock’s order — a cheque which the *Tribune* cashier would hasten to pay as soon as presented.

In the afternoon, after a magnificent luncheon in his honour, Harris T. Kymbale was back in Buffalo, which he left that same evening to accomplish the second part of his journey within the prescribed time.

As he stepped into the car, the mayor of the city, the Honourable H. V. Exulton said to him in a serious tone, — “It is all very well for once, sir, but do not amuse yourself any more by taking it easy on the road as you have done up to now”

“And if it pleases me,” said Harris T. Kymbale, who did not seem to quite like the observation, although coming from so elevated a quarter, “I think I have the right — ”

“No, sir, no more than a pawn has the right to take things easy on the chess-board”

“What? I belong to myself, I suppose?” Quite a mistake, sir! you belong to those who have backed you, and I am on for five thousand dollars.”

The Honourable H. V. Exulton was undoubtedly right, and in his own interest, the *Tribune* reporter, even though his reports might suffer, had but one thing to do — to get to his place by the shortest and quickest way.

Besides, Harris T. Kymbale had nothing to learn in this State of New York, which had been many times visited by him. Between its metropolis and Chicago communications are as numerous as they are easy. It is a matter of a day for these Americans, whose trains hold the record for a thousand miles in twenty-four hours.

It was the 11th of May, and he must be in Santa Fé on the 21st at latest, before noon. Now as the two states were from fifteen to sixteen hundred miles away from each other, they were not exactly neighbours.

On leaving Buffalo, Harris T. Kymbale had proposed to return to Chicago so as to take the Grand Trunk to the west. But as there was no branch putting it in direct communication with Santa Fé, this would have been a mistake, as it would have meant a long carriage journey in a country badly furnished with transport facilities. Fortunately his colleagues on the *Tribune* had made a profound study of this part of the Far West and drawn up an itinerary, which they sent by telegram to Buffalo.

This telegram was in the following terms: —

“Return from Niagara Falls to Buffalo and come down as far as Cleveland. Cross Ohio obliquely by Columbus and Cincinnati, Indiana by Lawrenceburg, Madison, Versailles and Vincennes, Missouri by Salem, Belley and St. Louis. Choose the Jefferson line for Kansas City. Leave Kansas by the more southern line, Lawrence, Emporia, Toleda, Newton, Hutchinson, Plum Buttes, Fort Zarah, Larned, Petersburg, Dodge City, Fort Atkinson, Sherbrock, then east of Colorado by Grenade and Las Arimas. Take the branch at Pueblo, and by Trinidad reach Clifton, on the frontier of New Mexico. Then by Cimarron, Las Vegas and Galateo reach the short line which runs to Santa Fé. Do not forget that the sender of this has put a hundred dollars on you, and that by any other way you will risk making him lose them. — Brennan S. Bickhorn.

How could this one of the Seven, whose friends served him with such zeal, who helped him with such precision in the accomplishment of his task, fail to have the best chance of getting in first? But provided he followed the advice of the Honourable V. H. Exulton, that is to say, not to delay in unseasonable admirations.

“Agreed, my brave Bickhorn,” said Harris T. Kymbale,” that is the road I will go, and I will not budge from it in the least! There is nothing to worry about with regard to the railroads. Be easy; if there are delays they will not arise from my heedlessness, nor my negligence, and your hundred dollars will be as energetically defended as the five thousand of his Highness the first magistrate of Buffalo! I don’t forget that I carry the colours of the *Tribune.”*

A jockey could have said no better. This jockey, it is true, was a centaur and ran on his own account.

And in this way, by a judicious combination of trains, without hurrying, and by managing to stop at night at the best hotels, Harris T. Kymbale covered in sixty hours the five states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas and Colorado, and in the evening of the 19th stopped at Clifton, on the border of New Mexico.

There, if the reporter exchanged but 546 shakes of the hand, it was that there were only 273 humans in this little village lost in the depths of the immense plains of the Far West.

He reckoned on having a good night at Clifton. But when he alighted from the car, what was his disappointment to find that on account of important repairs the railroad traffic would be stopped for some days. And he was yet 125 miles from Santa Fé, and had only thirty-six hours to do them in. The wise Brennan S. Bickhorn had not foreseen that.

Fortunately, as he came out of the railway station he found himself in the presence of a man, half American, half Spaniard, who was waiting for him. As soon as he saw the reporter this man gave three-cracks with his whip, a triple crack with which he was probably accustomed to salute people. And in a language reminding one more of Cervantes than Cooper:

“Harris T. Kymbale?” he said.

“I am.”

“Would you like me to take you to Santa Fé!”

“Would I not!”

“Agreed.”

“Your name?”

“Isidorio.”

“Isidorio will do.”

“My carriage is there, ready to start.”

“Let us start, and do not forget, my friend, that if a carriage moves owing to its horses, it is owing to its driver that it arrives.”

Did the Hispano-American comprehend all the hidden meaning of this aphorism? Perhaps.

He was a man of from forty-five to fifty, of a very tawny skin, a very clear eye, and with a jeering expression about his face — one of those wide-awake rascals who are not easily rolled over. As to thinking that he was proud of driving a personage who had one chance in seven of becoming the owner of sixty millions of dollars, the reporter did not doubt it for a moment.

Harris T. Kymbale was the vehicle’s only passenger. It was not a stage coach with six horses, but a simple carriole that would have to take fresh horses at the villages on the way. It dashed forth on to the rocky road of Aubey’s Trail, cut by numerous creeks which it passed at the fords, took in provisions at the relays, and rested during a few hours of the night.

At dawn the carriole had covered forty miles up to Cimarron, skirting the base of the White Mountains without any mishap. There was nothing to fear from the Apaches, the Comanches, and other tribes of Redskins who formerly roamed over the country, some of which have been allowed by the federal government to retain their independence.

In the afternoon the carriage passed Fort Union, Las Vegas, and was traversing the defiles of Moro Peaks, a route, mountainous, difficult, and even dangerous — in any case little suitable for rapid driving. In fact, from these lower plains they had to ascend to 4800 feet, which is the height of Santa Fé above the level of the sea.

Beyond this huge backbone of New Mexico extends the basin watered by the numerous tributaries which form the Rio Grande del Norte, one of the most magnificent streams on the western slope of America. There you meet with the important road from Chicago to Denver which is the trade route with the provinces of Mexico.

During this night of the 20th the progress of the carriole was very slow and the road very rough. The impatient traveller, not without reason, was afraid of not arriving in time. Consequently incessant exhortations and objurgations were hurled at the phlegmatic Isidorio.

“But you are not moving”.

“What would you like, Mr. Kymbale? We have only wheels, we have not got wings.”

“But you do not understand how interested I am in getting to Santa Fé on the 21st.”

“Good! If we are not there to-day, we shall be there tomorrow.”

“But it will be too late.”

“My horse and I will do all we can, and you cannot require more from beast or man.”

Then Harris T. Kymbale had an idea. He would give this man a more direct interest in the game he was playing. And so while the carriole was going up one of the most rugged valleys of the chain, through thick forests of green trees, following the windings of a labyrinth strewn with rough heaps and trunks fallen through age, he said to his automedon:

“Isidorio, I have a proposal to make!”

“Make it, Mr. Kymbale.”

“A thousand dollars for you — if I am to-morrow, before noon, at Santa Fé.”

“A thousand dollars, you say?” said the Hispano-American, winking an eye.”

“A thousand dollars — on condition, be it understood, that I win the game.”

“Ah!” said Isidorio, “on the condition that — ”

“Evidently.”

“Be it so — it will be all the same,” and he gave his horse a triple cut with the whip.

At midnight the carriole had only reached the top of the pass, and the anxieties of Harris T. Kymbale redoubled. He could contain himself no longer and said:

“Isidorio,” giving him a slap on the shoulder, “I have a new proposal to make to you.”

“Make it, Mr. Kymbale.”

“Ten thousand — yes! ten thousand dollars if I arrive in time.”

“Ten thousand, you say”

“Ten thousand!”

“That is, if you win the game.”

“Certainly.”

To descend the range, without going to Galisteo to take the short stretch of a railroad — which would have lost a little time — then to follow the valley of the Rio Chiquito and reach Santa Fé, was about fifty miles, and he had only twelve hours to spare.

It is true the road was fairly good, not very hilly, and it would have been difficult to get a better horse than the one from Tuos; so it was possible to reach the end within the time if no stoppage were made and the weather continued favourable.

The night was magnificent, the moon seemed to have been ordered by the obliging Bickhorn, the temperature agreeable, a lovely refreshing breeze from the north, a fair wind which did not hinder the progress of the vehicle.

The horse pawed the ground with impatience at the door of the inn, a beast full of fire, of the Mexico-American race, bred in the corrals of the western provinces.

As to him who held the reins of the carriole, a better could not be found. Ten thousand dollars in his hand — even in his wildest dreams he had never seen the glitter of so much. But Isidorio did not somehow seem so very much astonished at the stroke of fortune that had come to him — at least so thought Harris T. Kymbale.

“Does the brigand want more?” he said to himself; “ten times more, for example? After all, what are a few thousand dollars among the millions of William J. Hypperbone? — a drop of water in the sea! Well! If it must be, I will go to a hundred drops.”

And just as they were starting:

“Isidorio, he said in his ear, it is not now ten thousand dollars — ”

“What — are you going to withdraw from your promise?” asked Isidorio sharply.

“No, my friend, no. Very much on the contrary! It is a hundred thousand dollars for you if we are in Santa Fé before midday.”

“A hundred thousand dollars, did you say?” repeated Isidorio, half closing his left eye.

Then he added:

“If you-win?”

“Yes — if I win.”

“Could you write that on a piece of paper, Mr. Kymbale — only a few words — ”

“With my signature?”

“With your signature.”

Clearly in an affair of this importance mere word of mouth would not suffice. Without hesitation Harris T. Kymbale opened his note-book and on one of its leaves wrote a promissory note to pay a hundred thousand dollars to Mr. Isidorio, of Santa Fé — a promise that would be faithfully kept if the reporter became the sole heir of William J. Hypperbone. Then he signed it with his usual flourish and handed it up to its destined owner.

Isidorio took it, read it, folded it carefully, stuffed it into his pocket and said:

“Come on.”

Ah! The dashing wild gallop, the vertiginous rush, of the carriole down the road along the Rio Chiquito, And in spite of all efforts, at the risk of smashing up the vehicle, of being thrown into the river, Santa Fé could not be reached until ten minutes to twelve.

There are not more than 7000 inhabitants in this capital. New Mexico was annexed in 1850, but its admission to the number of fifty states had taken place only a few months before, so that the eccentric deceased had been able to get it on his board.

Manifestly it remained Spanish in manners and aspect and did not assume the Anglo-American character very quickly. As to Santa Fé, its position among silver-bearing deposits assures it a prosperous future. According to the inhabitants the town itself rests on a thick bed of silver, and from the subsoil of its streets you can dig out an ore giving two hundred dollars to the ton.

The town has few attractions for tourists. There are the ruins of a church built by the Spaniards nearly three centuries before, and a governor’s palace, a humble building of one storey which is ornamented with small columns of wood. Its houses, Spanish and Indian, are built of adobe or unburnt bricks, a few being but a cube of masonry pierced with irregular embrasures like those met with in the native pueblos.

Harris T. Kymbale was welcomed as he had been throughout his journey. And he had no time to reply to the seven thousand hands which were stretched out to him otherwise than by a general acknowledgment of thanks. In fact, it was already 11.50, and he must be at the telegraph office before the town clock, struck twelve.

Two telegrams awaited him; sent that morning, and almost at the same time, from Chicago. The first, signed by Tornbrock, notified him of the second throw of the dice with which he was concerned. By ten, made up of five and five, he was sent to the twenty-second square, South Carolina.

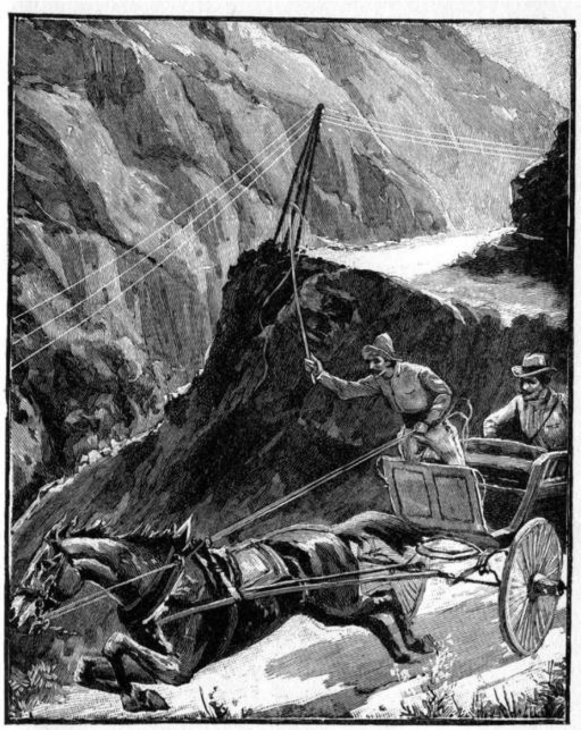

The vertiginous rush of the carriole. p. 139

Well, this intrepid, this indefatigable traveller, who dreamt of wild itineraries, had certainly got what he wanted! Fifteen hundred good miles to cover towards the Atlantic slope of the States! He made but one remark: Had it been Florida, I should have had a few hundred miles more!

At Santa Fé the Hispano-Americans wished to welcome the presence of their compatriot by organizing meetings, banquets, and other ceremonies of that kind. But to his great regret the reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune* refused. Taught by experience, he had resolved to follow the advice of the worthy Mayor of Buffalo and to delay on no pretext, to travel by the shortest way and be free to ramble when he had reached his post.

In addition to this, the other telegram, sent him by the careful Bickhorn, contained a new itinerary, as carefully worked out as the first, to which his comrades begged him to conform by starting at once. And he decided to leave the capital of New Mexico that very day.

The coachmen of the town were not unaware of what this ultra-generous traveller had done for Isidorio; and in consequence they all offered their services in the hope that they would be as well provided for as their comrade.

Doubtless you will be astonished at Isidorio not claiming the honour — almost the right — of taking the reporter to the nearest railway station, and, who knows? with the thought of adding perhaps another hundred thousand dollars to those promised by Harris T. Kymbale. But it is likely that this very practical personage was no less satisfied than fatigued. He came, however, to say goodbye to the journalist, who had engaged another man, and was preparing to start at three in the afternoon.

“Well, my brave fellow,” said Harris T. Kymbale,” are you all right?”

“I am all right, sir.”

“And now I have not done with you, for I have associated you in my fortune — ”

“Thank you, Mr. Kymbale, I do not deserve it.”

“But you do — I have to thank you, for without your zeal, your devotion, I should have arrived too late — I should have been put out of the game, and if we had failed by those ten minutes — ”

Isidorio listened to this eulogistic appreciation calmly and banteringly as usual.

“If you are pleased, Mr. Kymbale, I am.”

“And the two of us make a pair, as our friends the French say, Isidorio.”

“Then that is like two horses in a team.”

“Exactly. Now that paper that I gave you, keep it carefully. When you hear me announced to the world as the winner of the Hypperbone match, the road will then be working, I suppose; go down to Clifton, take the train to Chicago, and come along for the cash! You need not be uneasy, I will honour my signature.”

Isidorio nodded his head, scratched his forehead, winked his eye, like a man who was undecided and wished to speak and hesitated to do so.

“What is up?” asked Harris T. Kymbale. “Do you think you are not sufficiently rewarded?”

“To be sure, I am,” replied Isidorio, “but these hundred thousand dollars — are always if you win — ”

“Think, my dear fellow, think. Could it be otherwise?”

“Why not?”

“See here — it would be impossible for me to pay such a sum if I do not pocket the heritage.”

“Oh! I understand, Mr. Kymbale, I understand very well! And I should prefer — ”

“What?

“A hundred good dollars.”

“A hundred instead of a hundred thousand?”

“Yes,” replied Isidorio placidly, “I do not care to trust to chance — and a hundred good dollars which you could give me now — there would be something in it — ”

Perhaps at the bottom he regretted his generosity, anyway Harris T. Kymbale quickly drew from his pocket a hundred dollars and handed them over to the wise man, who tore up the note and handed him back the pieces.

The reporter departed, accompanied by noisy good wishes, and disappeared at a gallop down the main street of Santa Fé. This time the new driver would doubtless be less philosophic than his comrade.

When Isidorio was asked about the decision he had made:

“Good he said, a hundred dollars — it is a hundred dollars! Then I had no confidence in him! — a man so sure of himself! Look here — I would not put twenty-five cents on him!”

CHAPTER XI

THE ANXIETIES OF JOVITA FOLEY

Lizzie Wag, in numerical order, was the fifth to start. Nine days had to elapse between that on which Max Real left Chicago and that on which she had to leave the city.

In what a state of impatience did she pass this apparently interminable week, or, to tell the truth, did Jovita Foley pass it in her place. Lizzie Wag could not succeed in keeping her quiet. She ate no more, she slept no more, she lived no more. She had finished her preparations the day after the first throw of the dice, the first of the month, at eight o’clock in the morning, and the next day she had made Lizzie Wag accompany her to the Auditorium, where the second throw had taken place in the presence of a crowd quite as numerous and quite as excited. Then the third and fourth throws were announced on the 5th and 7th of May. In forty-eight hours destiny would decide regarding the two friends, for they would not separate from each other, the two girls would be one and the same person.

But it must be understood that it was Jovita Foley who absorbed Lizzie Wag, the latter being, reduced to the position of mentor, prudent and reasonable as could be listened to.

Of course, the holiday given by Mr. Marshall Field to his sub-cashier and leading saleswoman had begun on the 16th of April, the day after the reading of the will. The two girls were no longer obliged to attend at the shop in Madison Street. This, however, was the cause of some anxiety to the wiser of the two, for if this absence were prolonged for weeks or months, could their employer dispense with their services for so long?

“We have made a mistake,” said Lizzie Wag.

“Agreed,” said Jovita Foley, “and we will continue to make a mistake as long as is necessary.”

And so saying, the nervous and impressionable personage went on walking backwards and forwards in the little apartment in Sheridan Street. She opened the only bag which contained the clothes for the journey; she made sure that nothing had been forgotten for a tour of long duration, perhaps; she counted and re-counted the disposable money — all their savings converted into paper or cash, which the hotels, railways and carriages, and the unexpected would devour, to the great desolation of Lizzie Wag; and she talked about it all with the other lodgers, so numerous in these immense bee-hives of Chicago, seventeen stories high. And she went down and up in the lift each time she heard of something new in the newspapers or from the shouters in the street.

“Ah, my dear,” she said one day. “He has gone, this Mr. Real; but where is he? He has not even let anyone know his route to Kansas.”

And in fact, the smartest detectives of the local press had been unable to get on the track of the young painter, of whom they did not expect to get any news before the 15th, that is to say, a week after Jovita Foley and Lizzie Wag had been sent forth on to the railroads of the Union.

“Well, to speak frankly,” said Lizzie Wag, “of all our competitors, this young man interests me most — ”

“Because he wished you a pleasant journey, is it not?” asked Jovita Foley.

“And also because he seems to me to be worthy of all the favours of fortune — ”

“After you, Lizzie, I imagine.”

“No, before me.”

“I understand,” replied Jovita. “If you were not one of the seven, your good wishes would be for him.”

“And they are, all the same.”

“Quite so; but as you are playing in the game, and I also as your intimate friend, before imploring heaven for this Max Real, I beg that you will implore it for me. Besides, I tell you we do not know where he is — not far from Fort Riley, I suppose, unless some accident — ”

“Let us hope not, Jovita.”

“Let us hope not is understood, my dear; it is understood — ”

And in this way Jovita Foley most often replied, ironically, to the observations of the timorous Lizzie Wag.

Then, getting excited again, she said to her, “You never talk to me about that horrible Tom Crabbe, for he is on the road with his keeper — to Texas? Have you no good wishes for the crustacean?”

“I hope, Jovita, that fate will not send us into countries too far away.”

“Bah, Lizzie!”

"See, Jovita, we are only women, and a neighbouring State would suit us better — "

"Agreed, Lizzie; but if fate does not push gallantry so far as to spare our weakness — if it sends us to the Atlantic Ocean — to the Pacific Ocean — or to the Gulf of Mexico, we shall be obliged to submit — "

"We shall submit, because you wish it."

"It is not because I wish it, but because it must be done, Lizzie. You think only of the departure, never of the arrival — the grand arrival, the-sixty-third square — and I think of it night and day, and of the return to Chicago — where the millions await us in the safe of this excellent notary — "

"Yes. These famous millions of the heritage," said Lizzie Wag, smiling.

"Look here, Lizzie. Have the other players made so much fuss about accepting it? Are not the Titburys on the road to Maine?"

"Poor people! I pity them."

"Ah, you will make me angry!" exclaimed Jovita Foley.

"And you, if you do not keep quiet, if you continue to make yourself so nervous as you have been doing during the last week, you will make yourself ill, and I shall have to stay here to look after you. I warn you — "

"Me! 111! You are mad! It is my nerves which will keep me going, which will give me endurance, and I shall be nervous all through the journey!"

"Well, then, Jovita, it will not be you who will go to bed, but I shall do so."

“You! You! Well — do think better of being ill!” exclaimed the very excellent and too expansive damsel, throwing herself on Lizzie Wag’s neck.

“Then be calm,” answered Lizzie Wag, replying to her kisses, “and all will go well.”

Jovita Foley, with great effort, contrived to control herself, alarmed at the thought of her young friend being laid up on the day of departure.

On the 7th, in the morning, when she returned from the Auditorium, Jovita Foley brought the news that the fourth to start Harris T. Kymbale, had got six points, and had to go first to the State of New York, to the bridge of Niagara, and then to Santa Fé in New Mexico.

Lizzie Wag made but one remark with regard to this, and that was that the *Tribune* reporter would have to pay a fine.

“That will hardly cause his journal any trouble,” said Jovita.

“No, Jovita, but it would give us very much trouble if we were obliged to pay a thousand dollars at the beginning, or even in the course, of our journey.”

And the other replied as usual by a toss of the head signifying, “That will not happen. No! That will not happen.”

Really this was what worried her most, although she would not let it be seen. And every night during a troubled sleep which often kept Lizzie awake, she raved in a loud voice of the bridge, the inn, the labyrinth the well, the prison, those unfortunate squares where the players had to pay fines, single, double, treble, to be allowed to continue the game.

At last the 8th of May arrived, and next day the young travellers would start on their journey; and with merely the live coals that Jovita Foley had been playing with for a week or more they could have fired an express locomotive that would have taken them to the extremity of America.

It need not be said that Jovita Foley had bought a general guide to journeys across the United States, the best and most complete of the guide-books, which she turned over and read and re-read incessantly, although she was not in a position to study one route more than another.

But to be quite up-to-date it was only necessary for her to consult the newspapers of the metropolis or any other town. Communications were opened at once between each State as it was introduced into the game, and especially between the places indicated by William J. Hypperbone. The post, the telephone, the telegraph, were working all day long. Morning papers, evening papers, containing columns of information, more or less veracious, more or less fantastic even, it must be confessed. It is true that the reader and the subscriber were agreed on one point: rather false news than no news at all.

It will be understood that this information depended on the players and their way of procedure. For instance, with regard to Max Real, if the information was not trustworthy it was because he had taken nobody but his mother into his confidence. Not having been recognized at Omaha or Kansas City, or on board the *Dean Richmond,* the reporters had sought for trace of him in vain and knew not what had become of him.

A no less profound obscurity still enveloped Hermann Titbury. There was no doubt that he had started on the 5th with Mrs. Titbury, and that he was no longer at the house in Robey Street, nor was the servant, the female molossus we have mentioned. But what they did not know was that they were travelling under an assumed name, and the reporters were helpless to discover them on their journey. Apparently there would be no certain news of this couple until the day when they went to the post-office at Calais to receive the telegram.

The information was more complete with regard to Tom Crabbe. Starting on the 3rd from Chicago in a very ostentatious fashion, Milner and his companion had been viewed and interviewed in the principal cities on their route, and finally at New Orleans, where they had embarked for Galveston in Texas. The *Freie Presse* had been careful to remark that the steamer *Sherman* was of American nationality, that is to say, a piece of the mother country; and in fact, as it was forbidden to the players to leave the national territory, it would not do to take passage on a foreign ship, even though it remained on the waters of the Union.

As to Harris T. Kymbale, there was no want of news on his account. It came in showers like rain in April, for he spared neither telegram, article, nor letter that would benefit the *Tribune*. Thus people had learnt of his passing through Jackson and Detroit, and readers were impatiently awaiting the account of the receptions organized in his honour at Buffalo and Niagara Falls.

The 7th of May arrived. The next day but one, Tornbrock, assisted by George B. Higginbotham, would announce in the Auditorium the result of the fifth throw of the dice. Still thirty-six hours and Lizzie Wag would know her fate.

It can easily be imagined with what impatience Jovita Foley would have passed these two days if she had not been a prey to anxieties of the deepest gravity.

During the night of the 7th, Lizzie Wag was suddenly seized with a very violent sore throat, and she was in a high state of fever when she awoke her friend, who slept in the next room.

Jovita Foley at once arose, did what she could to help her, gave her some soothing drinks, covered her up warmly, and said to her in anything but a confident way:

“It will be nothing, my dear; it will be nothing,”

“I hope so,” answered Lizzie Wag, “for it would be to fall ill at a bad time.”

That was the opinion of Jovita Foley, who did not even think of going to bed again, but stayed to watch by the girl, whose sleep was very painfully troubled.

Next morning at dawn the whole house knew that the fifth player was so unwell that it had been necessary to send for a doctor; and the doctor came again at nine o’clock.

The house was informed of what had occurred, then the street, then the quarter, then the section, then the town, for the intelligence spread with that electric swiftness that is characteristic of bad news.

What was there to be astonished at in that? Was not Miss Wag the woman of the hour — the personage most in view since the departure of Harris T. Kymbale? Was not public attention fixed on her — the only heroine among the six heroes of the Hypperbone match?

And here was Lizzie Wag ill — seriously ill, perhaps — on the eve of the day on which destiny was to decide with regard to her!

The doctor, D. M. P. Pughe, was announced a little after nine o’clock. To begin with, he asked Jovita Foley about the patient’s temperature.

“Excellent,” he replied.

The doctor then went and sat by the bedside of Lizzie Wag; he looked at her attentively, he made her put out her tongue, he felt her pulse, he listened to her, he auscultated her. Nothing wrong with the heart, nothing wrong with the liver, nothing wrong with the stomach. At last, after a conscientious examination which to him was worth four dollars a visit, he said:

“It will not be serious, unless grave complications intervene.”

“Are these complications to be feared?” asked Jovita Foley, troubled at this declaration.

“Yes and no,” replied D. M. P. Pughe. “No if the malady is checked at the outset — yes if, in spite of our care, it is not and assumes a development which the remedies are powerless to affect — ”

“But” interrupted Jovita Foley, whom these evasive replies rendered more and more anxious, “can you say definitely what is the matter with her?”

“Yes, decidedly.”

“Tell me then, doctor.”

“Well, I have diagnosed simple bronchitis. The bases of the two lungs are attacked. There is a slight rattle, but the pleura is not affected — so — up to now — there is no fear of pleurisy — but — ”

“But what?”

"But the bronchitis may degenerate into pneumonia, and pneumonia into pulmonary congestion. That is what I call grave complications."

And the practitioner prescribed the usual remedies, drops of spirit of aconite, soothing syrups, warm infusions, rest — rest above everything. Then promising to return in the evening, he left the house in a hurry to return to his consulting-room, which the reporters were already besieging without doubt.

Would the possible complications occur, and if they occurred, when would it be?

In the presence of this event, Jovita Foley was nearly losing her head. During the hours that followed, Lizzie Wag appeared to suffer more and be more depressed. Shivering announced a second attack of fever, the pulse beat with irregular frequency and the prostration increased.

Jovita Foley, as much overcome mentally as the patient was physically, did not leave the bedside, interrupting herself only to look at her, to wipe her heated forehead, to pour the spoonfuls of draught, while she abandoned herself to the most distressing reflections and just recriminations against such conspicuous misfortune.

"No!" she said to herself, "no! It is not a Crabbe, it is not a Titbury, who would have had an attack of bronchitis on the eve of the start, nor a Kymbale, nor a Max Real! And neither will it be this Commodore Urrican who will have such ill-luck! It must be my poor Lizzie, whose health is so good — and it is to-morrow — yes! tomorrow, that the fifth throw is to take place! And if we are sent far away — far away — and if a delay of five or six days only prevents our being at our post — and even if the 23rd of the month arrives before we leave Chicago — and if it is too late to do so — and if we are shut out from the game without having begun it — ”

If! If! This unlucky conjunction tossed itself about in Jovita Foley’s brain.

Towards three o’clock the attack of fever decreased. Lizzie Wag emerged from this profound prostration, and the cough appeared to be more marked. When her eyes opened Jovita Foley was bending over her.

“Well,” she asked, “how do you feel? Better — do you not? What would you like me to give you?”

“A little to drink,” replied Lizzie in a voice much altered by her sore throat.

“There, my dear — a nice drink of this in some warm milk. And then — the doctor has ordered it — there will be a few — ”

“As you please, my good Jovita.”

“Then it will do by itself — ”

“Yes, by itself.”

“You seem to be a little better.”

“You know, dear friend” replied *Lizzie* Wag, “that when the fever leaves you, you are very low-spirited, but you feel a little better.”

“That is convalescence!” exclaimed Jovita Foley. “Tomorrow there will be no signs of it.”

“Convalescence — already — ” murmured the patient, trying to smile.

“Yes — already — and when the doctor returns he will say if you can get up.”

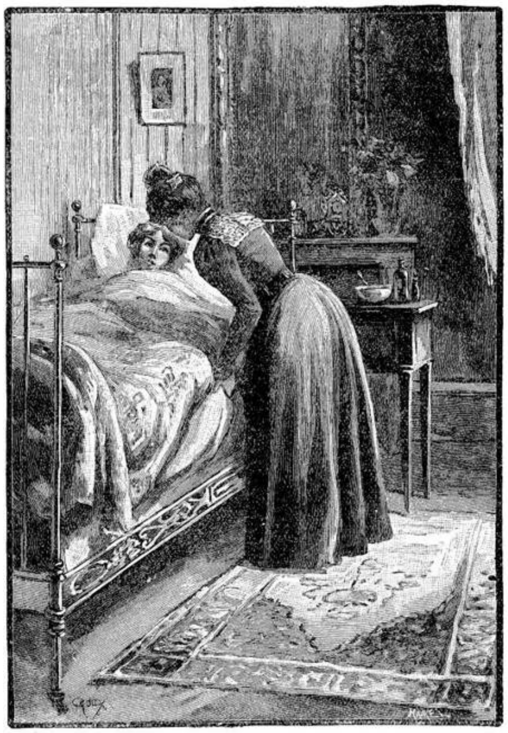

" That is convalescence ! " p. 152

“Between us — confess, my good Jovita, that I have indeed no chance.”

“No chance — you — ”

“Yes, and fate made a mistake in not choosing you in my place. To-morrow you will be at the Auditorium, and you will start the same day — ”

“I start — leaving you in this state! Never!”

“I know how to make you!”

“That is not the point,” said Jovita Foley; “I am not the fifth player — I am not the future heiress of the late Hypperbone — you are! But think a little. No harm will be done even if we start two days late. There will still remain thirteen days for the journey, and in thirteen days you can go from one end of the United States to another.”

Lizzie Wag did not care to say that her illness might last a week, and — who knows — perhaps beyond the regulation fortnight. She contented herself with saying:

“I promise, Jovita, to get well as soon as possible.”

“And I ask no more. But — for the moment — you have talked enough. Do not tire yourself — try to sleep a little. I am going to sit there, near you — ”

“You will end by falling ill yourself — ”

“I! Never fear. And besides, we have good neighbours who would take my place if it were necessary. Sleep in all confidence, Lizzie.

And after pressing her friend’s hand, Lizzie turned over and soon became sleepy.

But what disquieted and annoyed Jovita Foley was that in the afternoon the street presented a scene of animation quite unusual in this tranquil quarter. The noise was enough to trouble the repose of Lizzie Wag, even on the ninth floor of the house. Spectators moved about the pavement. Business men stopped and inquired of each other at the door of No. 19. Carriages arrived noisily and departed, at full trot towards the chief quarters of the town.

“How is she?” said some.

“Not so well,” replied the others.

“They say it is gastric fever.”

“No, typhoid.”

“Ah! poor girl! There are people who are indeed out of luck.”

“Yet, she is one of the Seven in the Hypperbone match.”

“A fine thing if you cannot take advantage of it.”

“And even when she is fit to go by train, is she capable of standing the fatigue of so much travel?”

“Perfectly, if the game finishes in a few throws — and that is possible —”

“And if it lasts for months?”

“How can you reckon with chance?”

And a thousand sayings of that sort.

It need hardly be said that a number of inquirers presented themselves at Jovita Foley’s door. Insist as they might, she refused to see them. Whereupon contradictory news, manifestly exaggerated or false in every way, spread through the town. But Jovita held out, contenting herself with approaching the window and anathematizing the noise in the street. The only exception she made was in the case of one of Marshall Field’s, staff, to whom she gave very reassuring news — a cold — a mere cold.

Between four and five o’clock in the evening, as the uproar redoubled, she put her head out and recognized amid a group in great agitation — whom? — Hodge Urrican. He was accompanied by a man of about forty, who looked like a sailor, vigorous, thick-set, fidgety, gesticulating. You would have taken him to be more violent, more irascible than the terrible commodore.

Certainly it was not out of sympathy for his young competitor that Hodge Urrican was that day in Sheridan Street, that he was walking under her windows, that he devoured them with his look. And Jovita Foley noticed distinctly that his companion, more demonstrative, shook his fist like a man who cannot control himself.

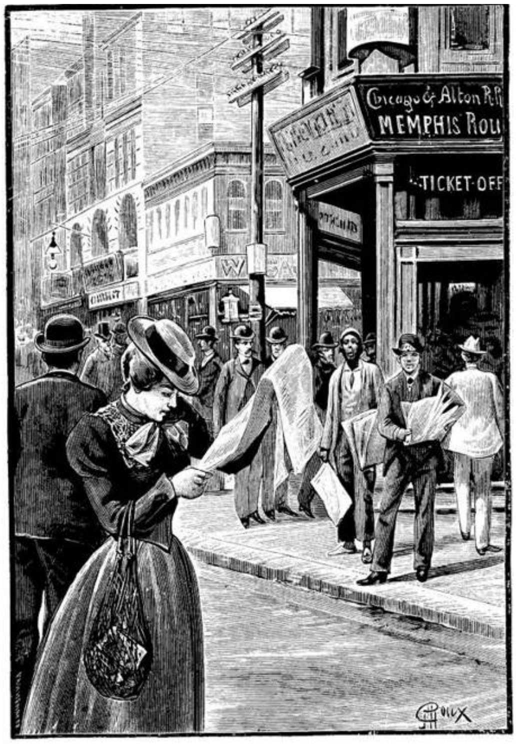

Something new in the newspapers.

When those around him assured him that the illness of Lizzie Wag was reduced to a mere indisposition:

“What imbecile says that?” he yelled. The personage called upon did not make himself known for fear of an unlucky blow.

“Bad — she is bad!” declared the commodore.

“Worse and worse,” added his companion. “And if any one says the contrary — ”

“Come, Turk, restrain yourself.”

“Restrain myself!” replied Turk, rolling his tiger’s eyes in fury. “It is easy for you, my commodore, who are the most patient of men! But I — to hear people talking like that — drives me out of my mind — and when I am like that — ”

“Good — that will do!” ordered Hodge Urrican, getting his arm away from him with a shake.

From these few phrases it was to be believed — what no one thought probable — that there existed a man below compared with whom Hodge Urrican would pass as an angel of gentleness.

In any case, if the two were there, it was in the hope that they would get some bad news and make certain that the Hypperbone match would be contested by no more than six players.

That was what Jovita Foley thought, and she restrained herself from going down into the street. How she would have liked to treat these two individuals as they deserved, at the risk of being devoured by the wild beast with the face of a man!

In short, from this state of affairs it resulted that the news in the early papers, published about six o’clock in the evening, was full of the strangest contradictions.

According to some, Lizzie Wag's indisposition had yielded to the doctor's first remedies, and her departure would not be delayed for a single day.

According to others, the illness was not of a serious character, but a certain amount of rest would be necessary, and Miss Wag would not be able to start before the end of the week.

Now it was the *Chicago Globe* and the *Chicago Evening Post*, with whom the girl was a favourite, who were the most alarmist: consultation of the princes of science — an operation necessary — Miss Wag had broken — an arm, said the first — a leg, said the second. In fact a letter, signed "Jovita Foley" had been sent to Mr. Tornbrock, testamentary executor of the deceased, informing him that the fifth competitor renounced her share in the heritage.

The *Chicago Mail*, whose editor seemed to espouse the sympathies and antipathies of Commodore Urrican, did not hesitate to declare that Lizzie Wag had taken her last breath between 4.45 and 4.47 that afternoon.

When Jovita Foley heard this news she felt anything but well. Fortunately, Dr. Pughe, at his evening visit, reassured her in a certain measure.

"No," he repeated. "It is only simple bronchitis. There is no symptom of the terrible pneumonia, nor of the terrible pulmonary congestion — at present, at least. A few days of quiet and repose will be enough — "

"How many?"

"Perhaps seven or eight."

"Seven or eight!"

"And on condition that the patient is not exposed to currents of air."

"Seven or eight days!" repeated the unhappy Jovita Foley, twisting her hands.

"That is, if serious complications do not occur!"

The night was not a very good one. Fever came on again — the attack lasting till morning and causing an abundant perspiration. But the sore throat was better.

Jovita Foley did not go to bed. These interminable hours she passed at the bedside of her poor friend. What nurse could have surpassed her in care, attention, and zeal! But she would not have yielded her place to any one.

The next day, after a few minutes of sickness and morning restlessness, Lizzie Wag went to sleep.

It was the 9th of May, and the fifth throw of the dice was to take place in the Auditorium.

Jovita Foley would have given ten years of her life to be there. But to leave the patient — no — it was not to be thought of. But it came about in this way. Lizzie Wag awoke, and calling her companion, said to her:

"My good Jovita, ask our neighbour to take your place near me — "

"You wish me — "

"I wish you to go to the-Auditorium. It is at eight o'clock — is it not?"

"Yes, eight o'clock."

"Well, you can be back in twenty minutes afterwards. I should like to know you were there — and if you believe in my chance — "

"If I believe in it!" Jovita Foley had exclaimed three days before. But now she made no answer. She put a kiss on her patient's forehead and called the neighbour, an excellent woman, who installed herself at the side of the bed. Then she went down, threw herself into a carriage, and was driven to the Auditorium.

It was a quarter to eight when Jovita Foley arrived at the door of the theatre, which was already crowded. Recognized as soon as she entered, she was assailed with questions.

"How is Lizzie Wag?"

"Perfectly well," she declared, asking to be allowed to pass on to the stage — which she did.

The girl's death had been formally affirmed by the morning newspapers, and some of the people were astonished that her most intimate friend had come — and not even in mourning.

At ten minutes to eight the president and members of the Eccentric Club, escorting Tornbrock, always with his aluminium spectacles, appeared on the stage and sat down before the table.

The board was opened under the notary's eyes. The two dice lay near the leather-covered box. Five minutes more and eight o'clock would strike.

Suddenly a voice of thunder broke the silence which had been obtained, not without difficulty.

This voice was that of the commodore. Hodge Urrican asked permission to make a simple observation, which was accorded him.

“It seems to me, Mr. President,” said he, louder and louder as the sentence developed, “it seems to me that to conform to the precise wishes of the deceased, it will not be correct to make this fifth throw, inasmuch as the fifth competitor is not in a state — ”

“Yes! Yes!” yelled a few of those in the group around Urrican, one voice more enraged than the others being that of the violent man who had accompanied him beneath Jovita Foley’s windows the night before.

“Be quiet, Turk, be quiet!” said the commodore as if he were talking to a dog.

“Quiet, indeed — ”

“This moment.”

Turk resigned himself to silence beneath the thunderous look of Hodge Urrican, who continued:

“And if I make this proposition, it is because I have serious reasons for believing that the fifth competitor will not be able to start either to-day — to-morrow — ”

“Not even in eight days?” shouted one of the spectators at the back.

“Nor in eight days, nor in fifteen, nor in thirty,” affirmed Commodore Urrican, “for she died this morning at forty-seven minutes past five.”

A long murmur followed this declaration. But above it was immediately heard a feminine voice repeating three times:

“It is false — false — false — for I, Jovita Foley, left Lizzie Wag twenty-five minutes ago, alive and well.”

Then the clamour recommenced, and renewed protests from the Urrican group. After the formal declaration of the commodore, Lizzie Wag evidently did not know how to behave properly. He had said she was dead, and she certainly ought to be dead.

But now it would be difficult to take notice of Hodge Urrican’s observation. Nevertheless that irrepressible personage insisted on modifying his argument as follows: —

“Be it so — the fifth competitor is not dead, but she is almost as bad. And so, under these circumstances, I demand that my throw of the dice be advanced forty-eight hours, and that the throw about to be announced should be that of the sixth competitor, who for the future shall be ranked as the fifth.”

Renewed thunder of shouts and shuffling of feet on the part of Urrican’s partisans, who were well worthy of sailing under his flag.

At last Tornbrock managed to calm this noisy assembly, and when silence was established he said:

“The proposal of Mr. Hodge Urrican is based on an erroneous interpretation of the wishes of the testator and is opposed to the rules of the Noble Game of the United States of America. Whatever the state of health of the fifth competitor, and whether this state will be such as to remove her from the number of the living, my duty as testamentary executor of the late William J. Hypperbone is none the less to proceed to this throw on this 9th of May, and on behalf of Miss Lizzie Wag. In a fortnight, if she is not at her post, dead or not, she will be deprived of her rights, and the game will continue to be played by the six competitors.”

Vehement protests from Hodge Urrican. He contended in a furious voice that Tornbrock had falsely interpreted the will, although the notary’s action was approved by the Eccentric Club. And in shouting his threatening phrases, the commodore, red with anger as he was, appeared pale beside his companion, whose face had become scarlet.

But he felt he must restrain Turk to prevent a disaster. He seized him as he was trying to get away.”

Where are you going?” he asked.

“There,” replied Turk, pointing to the stage with his fist.

“To?”

“To take that Tornbrock by the skin of his neck and throw him out like a porpoise — ”

“Here — Turk — here!” commanded Hodge Urrican.

And you could hear in Turk’s inside a deep growling like that of a subdued wild beast who would gladly have devoured his subduer.

Eight o’clock struck.

Instantly a deep silence fell on all.

Then Tornbrock — perhaps a little more excited than usual — took the box in his right hand, put into it the dice with his left, and shook it up and down. The little cubes of ivory could be heard clicking against each other against the side of the box, and when they escaped they rolled on the board to the edge of the table.

Tornbrock invited George B. Higginbotham and his colleagues to verify the number thrown, and in a clear voice he said:

“Nine, by six and three!”

A lucky number, for it took the fifth competitor at a bound to the twenty-sixth square, the State of Wisconsin.

CHAPTER XII

THE FIFTH PLAYER

“Ah! dear Lizzie, what a fortunate — what a marvellous throw!” exclaimed the impetuous Jovita Foley.

She was entering the room without a thought, careless girl, of how she might disturb the patient, who perhaps was asleep.

Lizzie Wag was awake, looking very pale, and exchanging a few words with the good old lady seated near her bed.

As soon as the announcement was made by Tornbrock, Jovita Foley had left the Auditorium, leaving the crowd to its reflections and Hodge Urrican furious at not having profited by such a throw.

“And what is the number of points?” asked Lizzie Wag, half rising.

“Nine, my dear, nine by six and three — which takes us at a bound to the twenty-sixth square — ”

“And that square?”

“State of Wisconsin. Milwaukee — two hours — two hours only by express.”

For a start nothing better could be wished for.

“No — no — ”repeated the enthusiastic personage, “Oh! I know well, with nine by five and four you could go right away to the fifty-third square.

But that square — look at the board — is Florida! And we should have been obliged to start for Florida — that is to say, the end of the world.”

And flushed and panting for breath, she used the board as if it were a fan.

“Well, you are right,” replied Lizzie Wag. “Florida — is rather far — ”

“All the chances, my dear,” affirmed Jovita Foley, “to you all the good chances, and to the others — well — all the bad ones.”

“Be more generous — ”

“If it pleases you, I except Mr. Max Real, because he has your good wishes — ”

“Certainly.”

“But let us return to business, Lizzie. The twenty-sixth square — do you see the start it gives us? The leader up to now was the journalist, Harris T. Kymbale, and he is only at the twelfth square, while we — want thirty-seven points — only thirty-seven points — and we-reach the end!”

Feeling some annoyance at Lizzie Wag not sharing her enthusiasm, she exclaimed:

“But you do not look as though you were pleased.”

“But I am, Jovita — and we will go to Wisconsin — to Milwaukee — ”

“Oh! we have time, my dear Lizzie! Not to-morrow, nor even the day after. In five or six days, when you have quite recovered, and even in a fortnight if necessary, provided we are there on the 23rd in the forenoon.”

“Well — all is for the best, and as you are content — ”

“And I am, my dear, just as contented as the commodore is discontented! That horrible man would have thrust you out of the game — would have made Mr. Tornbrock give him the fifth throw, on the pretext that you could not profit by it — that you would be in bed for weeks and weeks. And even that you were no longer of this world! Ah! The abominable-sea-wolf. You know — I do not wish evil to anybody — but this commodore, I hope he will lose himself in the labyrinth, fall into the well, go mouldy in the prison, pay fines, single, double, treble — in short, all the disagreeable things that the game has in store for those who have no luck and do not deserve any! If you had heard Mr. Tornbrock reply to him! Oh! that excellent notary — I could have kissed him!”

Setting aside her customary exaggeration, there was no doubt Jovita Foley was-right. This throw of nine by six and three was one of the best that could have occurred at the beginning. Not only had it put her ahead of her four preceding competitors, but it gave Lizzie Wag time to recover her health.

The State of Wisconsin borders on that of Illinois, from which it is separated on the south by the 42nd line of latitude or thereabouts. It is bounded on the west by the course of the Mississippi, and on the east by Lake Michigan, of which it forms the western border, and, in part, on the north by Lake Superior. Madison is its capital, Milwaukee is its metropolis. Situated on the shore of the lake, at less than two hundred miles from Chicago, Milwaukee is in prompt, regular and frequent communication with all the commercial centres of Illinois.

Thus, this day of the 9th, which might have been entered upon so badly, began in the happiest manner. True, the excitement she experienced caused some trouble to the patient, and when Dr. Pughe came to see her in the morning he found her rather more agitated than on the previous evening. The cough, occasionally very hacking, was followed by a lengthy prostration and some appearance of fever, but nothing could be done except to follow the treatment prescribed.

“Rest — rest above all,” he said to Jovita Foley, as she was showing him out. “I advise you to save Miss Wag from all fatigue! Let her remain alone; let her sleep — ”

“Sir, you are not more anxious?” asked Jovita Foley, seized with new apprehensions.

“No — I repeat it — it is only bronchitis, and it is taking the usual course! Nothing on the side of the lungs — nothing on the side of the heart! Above all things be careful of draughts. Ah! let her have a little nourishment — forcing her to it, if necessary — milk — beef tea — ”

“But, doctor, if there are no serious complications — ”

“Which it is always good to foresee, miss — ”

“Yes — I know — could we hope for our patient to be well in a week?”

The doctor only replied by a shake of the head which was not too encouraging.

Jovita Foley, in great trouble, consented not to remain in Lizzie Wag’s room, and kept in her own, leaving the door half-open. There, before her table, on which was spread the board of the Noble Game of the United States of America, turning over the leaves of her guide-book incessantly, she persistently studied Wisconsin to its remotest villages, as regards its climate, salubrity, habits and customs, as if she thought of installing herself there for the rest of her existence.

The newspapers of the Union had naturally published the results of the fifth throw. Many mentioned the Urrican incident, some to sustain the claims of the ferocious commodore, some to blame him. On the whole the majority was against him. No! He had no right to claim this throw for himself, and Tornbrock was praised for having applied the rules in all their rigour.

Besides, whatever Hodge Urrican may have said, Lizzie Wag was not dead, nor was she at her last breath. A sudden change, natural enough, came over the public with regard to her. She began to become more interesting, although it was difficult to believe that she could stand the fatigue of such travels to the end. As to her malady, it was not even bronchitis, not even laryngitis, and within twenty-four hours nothing more would be heard of it.

But as the reader is exacting in the matter of news, a bulletin of the fifth player's health was published morning and evening, neither more nor less than if she had been a princess of the blood royal.

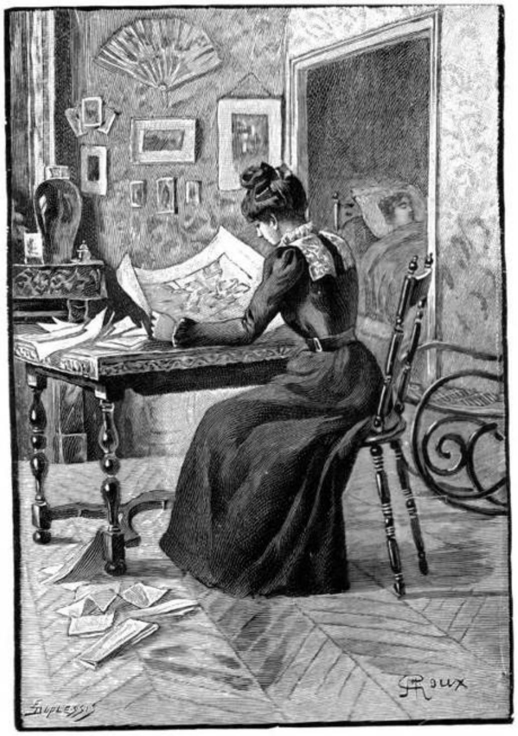

Jovita Foley in great trouble.

This day of the 9th had brought no change in the state of the patient. She got no worse during the following night or during the day of the 10th of May. Jovita Foley at once drew the conclusion that a week would suffice to set her friend on her feet. But when one’s recovery requires ten — eleven — twelve — even thirteen days — even fifteen! It was only a journey of two hours. Providing they were at Milwaukee on the 23rd in the forenoon, they would conform to the rules of the Hypperbone match. And after that, if it were necessary to take more rest, they could get it there.

The night of the 10th was calm enough. Lizzie Wag had but two or three slight shivers, and it seemed as though the period of fever was at an end. The cough, however, continued to be very exhausting, but the chest was gradually relaxing, the sound was less raucous, the respiration easier. There was, therefore, no new complication.

It follows from this that Lizzie Wag found herself decidedly better when in the morning Jovita returned after an absence of an hour. Where had she been? She had said nothing, not even to the neighbour, who could not answer Miss Wag when she was asked about it.

As soon as Jovita Foley entered the room she went, without taking off her hat, and impressed a loud kiss on Lizzie Wag's forehead, who, at the sight of the face so animated, the eyes so sparkling with malice, could not help saying:

“What have you been doing this morning?”

“Nothing, my dear, nothing! I wanted a little fresh air for the sake of my health. And it is so fine — a beautiful May sun — you know — those lovely rays you can almost drink in — that you breathe! Ah! if you could only remain for an hour at the window. Eh? A good dose of sun! I am sure that would cure you at once. But — no imprudence — for fear of serious complications — ”

“And where did you go?”

“Where did I go? I went first to Marshall Field's to give news of you. Our employers sent to say that we might take all the time, and I went thank them.”

“You did well, Jovita. They have been very good to give us this holiday — and when it comes to an end — ”

“Agreed — agreed, my dear. They will not give our situations to anyone.”

“And then — after?”

“After?”

“Did you not go somewhere else?

“Somewhere else?”

And it seemed as though Jovita Foley hesitated to speak. But she could not restrain herself for long, particularly as Lizzie Wag asked her:

“Is not to-day the 11th of May?”

“The 11th of May, my dear,” she replied in a loud voice, “and in two days we shall be at a hotel in this beautiful town of Milwaukee, if we are not kept here by bronchitis.”

“Well,” continued Lizzie Wag, “as it is the 11th of May, the sixth throw of the dice ought to have taken place.”

“Certainly”

“And then?”

“And then! Oh, I never was so pleased. Never. There, let me kiss you. I would not tell you because it might make you excited but it is too strong for me — ”

“Speak then, Jovita.”

“Fancy — my dear — he has got nine also — but by four and five!”

“Who?”

“Commodore Urrican — ”

“It seems to me that his throw is better — ”

“Yes — for he goes at the first throw to the fifty-third square — a great advance on all the others — but it is also very bad — ”

And Jovita abandoned herself to a burst of merriment no less extraordinary than inexplicable.

“And why is it bad?” asked Lizzie Wag.

“Because the commodore is sent to the devil.”

“To the devil?”

“Yes! to the depths of Florida.”

Such was in fact the result of the throw that morning, announced with visible satisfaction by Tornbrock, who was still irritated against Hodge Urrican. In what way had the commodore accepted the result? In a fury, no doubt, and perhaps he had had to interfere to prevent Turk going to some extremity. On this subject Jovita Foley could say nothing, as she had left the Auditorium immediately.

“To the depths of Florida,” she repeated, “to the very depths of Florida — more than two thousand miles from here!”

But somehow the news did not cause the patient anything like the excitement that her friend feared. Her good nature led her, rather, to pity the commodore.

“And that is how you take the news?” said her impetuous companion.

“Yes — poor man!” murmured Lizzie Wag.

The day was not a bad one, although convalescence had not commenced. However, there was no more fear of those serious complications of which a prudent doctor always foresees the possibility.

On the 12th Lizzie Wag began to take a little nourishment. As she was not allowed to leave her bed, and as the fever had gone and the time appeared long to both of them — particularly to Jovita Foley — Jovita went to sit in the room, and if not in the form of dialogue, at least in that of monologue, the conversation did not languish.

And of what would Jovita Foley not talk if it was not of this Wisconsin, according to her the most beautiful and most curious of the States of the Union. With her guidebook under her eyes she was inexhaustible. And if Lizzie Wag was delayed till the last day and only stayed there a few hours, she would know as much about it as if she had spent many weeks there.

“Fancy, my dear,” said Jovita Foley in an admiring tone, “it was formerly called Mesconsin, on account of the river of that name, and there is no part of the country which can be compared with it. In the north you still see the remains of the ancient pine forests which covered the whole territory. And it possesses hot springs superior to those of Virginia, and I am certain that if your bronchitis — ”

“But,” said Lizzie Wag, “is it not to Milwaukee we have to go?”

“Yes — Milwaukee, the principal town of the State, the name of which in an old Indian language signifies ‘beautiful country’ a city of two hundred thousand people, my dear, a large number of them Germans, so that it is called the Germano-American Athens. Ah! if we were there, what delightful walks we should have on the cliffs, where the superb houses are built along the border of the river — none but elegant and clean quarters — nothing but buildings in brick of a milky white — which give it its name. Can you guess it?”

“No, Jovita.”

“Cream City, my dear — the city of cream — you can dip your bread in it. Ah! why does this wretched bronchitis hinder us from going there?”

Wisconsin had a number of other towns they would have had time to visit if they could have started on the 9th. Madison, built on its isthmus as on a bridge between Lake Mendota and Lake Monona, which flow into each other; then other towns with strange names: Fond-du-lac on the Fox River, on soil pierced with artesian wells — a regular colander; and a beautiful place they call Eau Claire, with a fine torrent that justifies the name; and Lake Winnebago; and Green Bay; and the anchorage of the Twelve Apostles off Ashland Bay; and the Devil’s Lake, one of the natural beauties of this marvellous Wisconsin.

And in a voice of enthusiasm Jovita Foley read the pages of her guide-book and related the different changes of the country, formerly overrun by Indian tribes, discovered and colonized by French Canadians, up to the time it was known as the Badger State.

In the morning of the 13th, the curiosity of the public redoubled. The newspapers had worked up the excitement to its highest point. The Auditorium was as crowded as it had been on the day of the reading of William J. Hypperbone’s will. In fact, at eight o’clock was to be announced the seventh throw, which was on behalf of that mysterious and enigmatic personage designated by the letters XKZ. :

In vain had they endeavoured to discover the incognito of this competitor. The cleverest reporters, the shrewdest ferrets of the local press had failed. On several occasions they thought they had got a trustworthy clue and followed it to find it worthless. At first it was thought that by the codicil the deceased wished to designate one of his colleagues of the Eccentric Club and give him a seventh chance in the match. The name of George B. Higginbotham was even announced, but the worthy member formally contradicted the report. When Tornbrock was interrogated on the subject he declared he knew nothing about it, and that all he had to do was to send to the post offices of the places where he ought to be, the result of the throws regarding the “masked man” — as he was popularly called.

But it was hoped — not without reason, perhaps — that on this occasion Mr. XKZ would reply to the call in the Auditorium. Hence this crowd, of which a small portion only had found room before the stage on which appeared the notary and the members of the Eccentric Club, while spectators in thousands thronged the neighbouring streets and spread beneath the shady trees of Lake Park.

Their curiosity was, disappointed, quite disappointed. Masked or not, no individual presented himself when Tornbrock rolled out the dice on the board and announced in a loud voice:

“Nine by six and three, twenty-sixth square, State of Wisconsin.”

Strange coincidence! This was the same number as Lizzie Wag had obtained; produced in the same way by six and three. But — circumstance of extreme gravity for her — according to the rule established by the deceased, if she was still at Milwaukee the day XKZ arrived there, she would have to yield her place to him and return to her own — which meant beginning the game again. And not to be able to go there, and to be nailed to Chicago!

The crowd would not leave; they waited for nobody. They had to resign themselves to it. But it was a general disappointment which the evening journals expressed in articles that were anything but complimentary to the unlucky XKZ. A whole population was not to be played with in that way!

The days went by. Every forty-eight hours the throws took place regularly under the usual circumstances, and the results were sent by telegraph to those interested, wherever they ought to be at the time stated.

In this way the 22nd of May arrived. No news of XKZ, who had not yet appeared in Wisconsin. It is true that it would be enough if he were at the post office of Milwaukee on the 27th. Then, could not Lizzie Wag go at once to Milwaukee and, according to the rule of the game, leave it before XKZ arrived there? Yes, as she was nearly well again. But then there were grounds for fearing that Jovita Foley, who was suffering from a violent nervous attack, might fall ill in her turn. An attack of fever came on and she had to take to her bed.

“I warned you of this, my poor Jovita,” said Lizzie Wag. “You are not reasonable.”

“It will be nothing, my dear. Besides, the position is not the same. I am not in the game, and if I cannot go, you can go alone — ”

“Never, Jovita!”

“But you must!”

“Never, I tell you! With you, yes, though that is not common sense. Without you — No!”

And undoubtedly, if Jovita Foley could not accompany her, Lizzie Wag had decided to abandon all chances of becoming the sole heiress of William J. Hypperbone.

There was no need for anxiety. Jovita Foley was all right again after a day’s dieting and repose. In the afternoon of the 22nd she was able to get up and buckle the bag of the two travellers who were to travel about the United States.

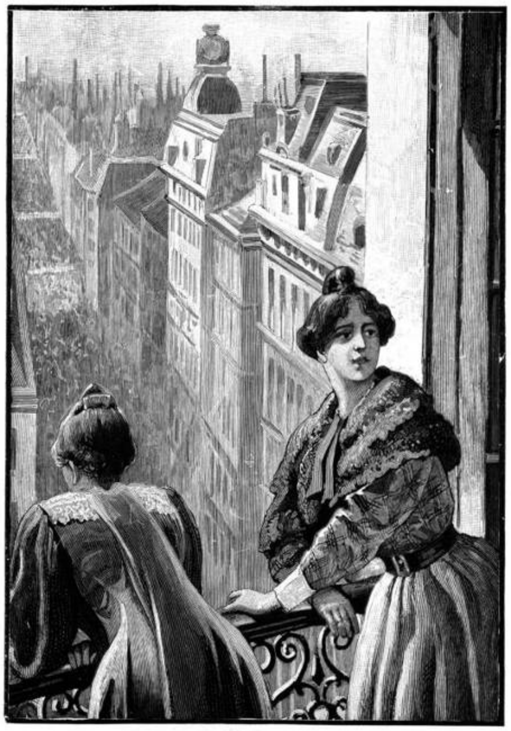

Jovita Foley was all right again.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “I would give ten years of my life to be already on the way.”

With the ten years she had already given on many occasions, and the ten years she would give again and again in the course of the journey, there would remain very little of the time she was to spend in this lower world!

The departure was fixed for the next day, the 23rd, by the train which arrives in two hours at Milwaukee, where Lizzie Wag would find the telegram from Tornbrock. Now this last day would have ended without incident if a little before five o'clock the two friends had not received a visit which they never expected.

There was a ring at the door. Jovita Foley went to open it.

The lift had just deposited an individual on the landing of the ninth floor.

"Miss Lizzie Wag?" asked the individual, turning to the girl.

"She is here, sir."

"May I see her?"

"But," replied Jovita Foley, hesitating, "Miss Wag has been very ill, and — "

"I know — I know — " said the visitor, "and I have reason to believe she is quite well again — "

"Quite, sir, and we are going to start to-morrow morning."

"Ah! Then it is to Miss Jovita Foley I have the honour of speaking — "

"To herself, sir; and with regard to your business, can I replace Lizzie?"

“I would prefer to see her — to see her with my own eyes — if it is possible — ”

“May I ask why?”

“I have nothing to hide from you with respect to what brings me here. I intend to have a little speculation on this Hypperbone match — to venture a considerable sum on the fifth player — and you understand — I would like — ”

If Jovita Foley understood — and so was delighted! Here at last was some one to whom Lizzie Wag’s chance appeared good enough to risk some thousands of dollars on.

“My visit will be short — very short,” added the gentleman with a bow.

He was a man about fifty, with greyish beard, his eyes bright behind his glasses, brighter even than usual at his age, the air of a gentleman, a distinguished face, upright figure, voice of extreme sweetness. Although persisting in seeing Lizzie Wag, he did it with perfect politeness, excusing himself from disturbing her “just on the eve of a journey of such importance — ”

In short, Jovita Foley did not think it would be in the least inconvenient for her to receive him, as his visit was not to be a long one.

“May I know your name, sir?”

“Humphrey Weldon, of Boston, Massachusetts” replied the gentleman.

And he entered the first room, of which Jovita Foley had just opened the door, and then went to the second room, in which was Lizzie Wag.

On seeing the visitor, she would have risen. “Do not disturb yourself, miss,” said he. “You will excuse my importunity, — but I wished to see you — oh! — only for a moment — ”

However, he accepted the chair which Jovita Foley placed near him, “An instant — only an instant!” he repeated. “As I have said, my intention is to venture on an important speculation with regard to you, for I believe in your final success, and I wish to assure myself that your state of health — ”

“I have quite recovered, sir,” said Lizzie Wag, “and I thank you for the confidence you show in me. But indeed, my chances — ”

“An affair of presentiment, miss,” said Mr. Weldon in a decided tone.

“Yes — of presentiment,” added Jovita Foley.

“That admits of no discussion,” affirmed the honourable gentleman.

“And what you think of Lizzie,” exclaimed Jovita Foley, “I think also. I am sure she will win.”

“I am no less sure — from the moment that nothing opposes her departure,” declared Mr. Weldon.

“To-morrow,” said Jovita Foley, “we shall both go to the railway station, and the train will land us before noon at Milwaukee — ”

“Where you can rest a few days, if necessary,” observed Mr. Weldon.

“Oh, not at all,” replied Jovita Foley.

“And why not?”

“Because we must not be there when Mr. XKZ arrives, or we shall have to begin the game again.”

“That is true.”

“But where this second throw will send us,” said Lizzie Wag, “is what makes me anxious.”

“Eh! What does it matter, my dear!” said Jovita Foley, swooping on her as if on wings.

“Let us hope, Miss Wag,” said the gentleman, “that the second throw of the dice will be as fortunate for you as the first has been.”

And then the excellent man spoke of the precautions to take on the journey, of the necessity of care in allowing sufficient time for changing from train to train in the network of lines which covers the Union.

“And,” added he, “I see with great satisfaction, Miss Wag, that you do not start alone.”

“No, my friend accompanies me — or to speak truly, drags me with her.”

“And you are right, Miss Foley,” said Mr. Weldon. “It is better for two to travel together It is more agreeable.”

“And it is more prudent, when you have got to catch trains,” declared Jovita Foley.

“And so,” added Mr. Weldon, “I reckon on you to make Miss Wag win.”

“You can depend upon me.”

“Then, my good wishes to you, ladies, for your success guarantees mine.”

The visit had lasted twenty minutes, and after asking permission to shake hands with Lizzie Wag and with her amiable companion, Mr. Humphrey Weldon was shown back to the lift, from which he gave a parting salute.

“Poor man,” said Lizzie Wag, “and when I think that I am to make him lose his money.”

“All right,” said Jovita Foley, “but remember what I tell you, my dear — these old gentlemen are full of good sense. They have a scent which never deceives them! And this worthy gentleman in your game — will bring you luck.”

The preparations were finished — and how many times, we know — there was nothing to do when night came but to go to bed and get up first thing next morning. But they had to wait for the last visit of the doctor, who had promised to call in the evening. Dr. Pughe was not late in arriving, and declared that his client’s state of health left nothing more to be desired, and that all fear of serious complications was at last at an end.

At five o’clock next morning, the more important of the travellers was up and about. And in a final attack of nerves this astonishing Jovita Foley imagined quite a series of hindrances and misfortunes, delays and accidents. If the carriage that was to take them to the railway station were to turn over — if a block stopped them on the way — if there had been a change in the time of the train — if the train were thrown off the line — ”

“Calm yourself, Jovita, Calm, yourself, I pray,” again and again did Lizzie Wag ask.

“I cannot — I cannot, my dear.”

“Are you going on like that all through the journey?”

“All the time.”

“Then I shall stop here.”

“The carriage is below, *Lizzie.* Let us be off — let us be off.”

The carriage was waiting, ordered an hour earlier than was necessary. The two friends went down, followed by the good wishes of the whole house, at the windows of which even at this early hour of the morning appeared several hundred heads, The vehicle went along North Avenue to North Branch, down the right bank of Chicago River, crossing it by the bridge at the end of Van Buren Street, and deposited the travellers at the station at ten minutes past seven.

Perhaps Jovita Foley experienced a certain amount of disappointment in noticing that the departure of the fifth player had not attracted a large crowd of spectators. Decidedly, Lizzie Wag was not the favourite in the Hypperbone match. But the bashful girl did not complain, and much preferred to leave Chicago without provoking public attention.

“Even Mr. Weldon is not here!” Jovita Foley could not help remarking.

And in fact the visitor of the previous afternoon had not come to hand to the car the player in whom he took so great an interest.

“You see,” said Lizzie Wag, “he also abandons me!”

The train started at last, without any notice whatever being taken of Lizzie Wag. No cheers, except those which Jovita Foley gave *in petto* in her own honour!

The railroad skirts the shore of Lake Michigan. Lake View, Evanston, Glenoke, and other stations were passed at full speed. The weather was superb. The waters sparkled in the offing, alive with steamers and sailing vessels — the waters which from lake to lake, Superior, Huron, Michigan, Erie, Ontario, flow down the great artery of the St. Lawrence into the vast Atlantic. After leaving Vankegan, an important town on the coast, the train leaves Illinois at State Line station to enter Wisconsin. A little further north it halts at Racine, a large manufacturing city, and it was not ten o'clock when it stopped at Milwaukee.

"We are here — we are here!" said Jovita with such a sigh of satisfaction that her veil stretched like a sail in the breeze.

"And two good hours in advance" observed Lizzie Wag, looking at her watch.

"No, fourteen days behindhand," replied Jovita Foley as she jumped out on to the platform.

Then she busied herself in finding the portmanteau among the heap of luggage.

The portmanteau had not gone astray — as Jovita had feared, one knows not why. A carriage approached. The travellers got in and ordered it to drive to a suitable hotel which was mentioned in the guide-book. And when she was asked if she was going to stay at Milwaukee, Jovita Foley replied that she would tell them when she returned from the post office, but that probably she would leave during the day. Then turning to Lizzie Wag, she said:

“Are you not hungry?”

“I should be glad to have some breakfast.”

“Well, let us breakfast, and then we can take a walk — ”

“But you know that at twelve o’clock — ”

“As if I did not know!”

They sat down in the dining-room and did not remain more than half an hour at the table.

As they had not given their names, refraining from doing so until their return from the post office, Milwaukee had no notion that the fifth player in the Hypperbone match was within its walls.

At a quarter to twelve they went to the post office and Jovita Foley asked if a telegram had arrived for Miss Lizzie Wag.

At the name the man looked up with an expression of lively satisfaction in his eyes.

“Miss Lizzie Wag?” he said.

“Yes — of Chicago,” replied Jovita Foley-

“The telegram is waiting for you,” he added, handing it over.

“Give it to me — give it to me!” said Jovita Foley. “You are too long in opening it — and I shall have an attack of nerves,”

With her fingers trembling with impatience, she tore open the envelope and read these words:

“Lizzie Wag, Post Office, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

“Twenty, by ten and ten doubled, forty-sixth square, State of Kentucky, Mammoth Caves. — Tornbrock.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE ADVENTURES OF COMMODORE URRICAN

IT was at eight o’clock in the morning of the 11th of May that Commodore Urrican knew the number of the throw that concerned him, and at twenty-five minutes past nine he left Chicago.

There was no time lost, you see, and he had none to lose, considering that within a fortnight he had to find himself at the extreme end of the peninsula of Florida.

Nine by four and five, one of the best throws of the game! At the first bound the fortunate player had been sent to the fifty-third square. It is true that on the board arranged by William J. Hypperbone it was the State of Florida which occupied this square, the furthest to the south-east of the North American Republic.

Hodge Urrican’s friends — or rather his partisans, for he had no friends, though certain people believed in the chances of a man of such violent speech — wished to congratulate him as he came out of the Auditorium. “And why, if you please?” he replied in that peevish tone which gave such a charm to his conversation. “Why load me with compliments just as I am starting? It may make me have to pay excess luggage!”

“Commodore,” said one to him, “five and four is a superb beginning — ”

“Superb — I fancy it is — particularly for those who have business in Florida!”

“Observe, commodore, that you are a long way in front of your competitors — ”

“And that is only fair, I think, as luck made me the last to start.”

“Evidently, Mr. Urrican; and it will now be enough for you to get ten points to reach the end and win the game in two throws.”

“That is true, gentlemen! And if I get nine I shall not be able to win next time, and if I get more than ten, I shall have to go back — does anyone know where?”

“Never mind, commodore; anyone else in your place would be satisfied — ”

“Perhaps — but I am not”

“Think of it — sixty millions of dollars — perhaps — on your return.”

“Which I could just as well put in my pocket if the State had been next to ours!”

Nothing could be more true, and although he refused to admit it, he had a real advantage over his five competitors. It was impossible for them to reach the last square at their next throw, to which he could go with ten points.

Though Hodge Urrican shut his ears to the language of reason, it is probable that he would have done the same if he had been sent to either Indiana or Missouri, which border on Illinois.

Growling and cursing, Commodore Urrican returned to his house in Randolph Street with Turk, whose recriminations became so violent that his master ordered him to be silent.

His master? Was then Hodge Urrican the master of Turk, when on the one hand America had proclaimed the abolition of slavery, and on the other hand the said Turk, although brown in hue, could not have passed for a negro?

Was he then his servant? Yes and no.

To begin with, Turk, although he was in the commodore’s service, received no wages, and when he was in want of money — oh! very little! — he asked for it and was given it. He was more of a companion, as they say of ladies who are in the suite of princesses. But the social distance which separated Hodge Urrican from Turk did not permit of his being considered as a companion.

Turk, whose real name was Turk, was an old sailor of the federal navy who had risen through the grades of boy, ordinary seaman, able seaman, quarter-master. It is noteworthy that he had served on board the same vessels in which Hodge Urrican had successively become cadet, ensign, lieutenant, captain, and commodore. Thus these two knew each other well, and Turk was the only one of his like with whom the fiery officer could get on. Possibly this was because he was the more violent of the two, espousing Urrican’s quarrels and always ready to do an ill-turn to those who had not the luck to please him.

During his voyages Turk was often of particular service to Hodge Urrican, who appreciated his abilities and ended by being unable to do without him. When the hour of retirement had struck, Turk left the navy, rejoined the commodore, and attached himself to his person on the conditions above given. In this way he had been for three years in the house in Randolph Street as a manager who managed nothing, or, if you will, as an honorary steward.

But one thing we have not said — and no one would have suspected it — Turk was really the gentlest, most inoffensive, least quarrelsome and easiest to live with, of men. Never on board had he got into a dispute; never had he taken part in the fights of the sailors; never had he lifted his hand against anyone, not even when he had drunk uncounted glasses of whisky — and yet he carried as much sail as a sixty-gun frigate.

Whence then had he obtained the notion that he, a man placid and tranquil, should appear to exceed in violence the most violent man in the world?

Turk had a real affection for the commodore in spite of his unsociability. He was one of those faithful dogs who, when their master is angry with them, bark with all the more fury. But if with the dog it is according to nature, with Turk it was contrary to it. The habit of storming out on all occasions, and more loudly than Hodge Urrican, had in no way altered the mildness of his character.

His rage was a feint, he played a part. It was out of pure affection for his master and with the object of restraining him that he surpassed him and alarmed him by the lengths to which he went. And whenever he intervened to calm Turk, Hodge Urrican finished by calming himself. When one spoke of giving some ill-bred fellow a talking to, the other spoke of a smack in the face, and when the commodore spoke of a smack in the face, Turk spoke of leaving him dead on the spot. Then the commodore tried to make Turk listen to reason, and in this way Turk had often put an end to matters from which the commodore would perhaps not have emerged without damage.

And finally as regards his being sent to Florida, when Hodge Urrican wished to quarrel with the notary — as if Tornbrock had had anything to do with it — Turk had raised a great uproar that the notary had cheated, and swore he would wring off both his ears to make a buttonhole in honour of his master.

Such was the original, clever enough to never let his game be detected, who on this morning accompanied Commodore Urrican to the central railway station of Chicago. At the departure of the sixth player there was a crowd, and amongst this crowd, we repeat, if there were no friends, there were at least some people who had resolved to risk their money on him. Did it not seem as though a man of such violent character would be capable of compelling fortune to be kind to him?

And now what was the itinerary adopted by the commodore? Assuredly that which offered the least risk of delay, besides being the shortest.

“Listen, Turk,” said he, as soon as he had got back to his house in Randolph Street, “listen and attend.”

“I am listening and attending.”

“This is the map of the United States I am putting under your eyes.”

“Very good — the map of the United States — ”

“Yes. Here is Illinois with Chicago, there is Florida — ”

“Oh! I know,” replied Turk, growling to himself. “We have sailed and fought in these parts, commodore.”

“You understand, Turk, that if we had only to go to Tallahassee, the State capital, or to Pensacola, or even to Jacksonville, it would not be difficult and would not take long to work out the different trains that would take us there.”

“It would not be difficult and would not take long,” repeated Turk, “And,” continued the commodore, “when I think of that Lizzie Wag, that saucy baggage, getting off with going from Chicago to Milwaukee — ”

“The wretch!” growled Turk.

“And that this Hypperbone — ”

“Oh! If that fellow is not dead — ” said Turk, lifting his fist as if he would smash the unhappy defunct.

“Calm yourself, Turk; he is dead. But why did he have the absurd idea of choosing in all Florida the most distant point of it, the end of the tail of the peninsula which dips into the Gulf of Mexico — ”

“A tail with which he deserves to be thrashed until the blood comes!” declared Turk.

“For it is to Key West, to this islet of the Pine Islands that we have to carry our traps! An islet, and even quite a ‘bone’ as the Spaniards say, good enough only to carry a lighthouse, and on which they have built a town — ”

“A bad neighbourhood, commodore,” replied Turk; “and as to the lighthouse, we have sighted it several times before entering the Straits of Florida.”

“Well, I think,” continued Hodge Urrican, “that the best, the shortest, and also the quickest way would be to effect the first part of our journey by land and the second by sea; that means nine hundred miles to reach Mobile and five or six hundred to reach Kev West.”

Turk made no objection, and in truth the very reasonable proposal did not deserve one. In thirty-six hours by the railway Hodge Urrican would be at Mobile, in Alabama, and he had left twelve days for the voyage from there to Key West.

“And if we do not get there,” declared the commodore, “it is that boats no longer move on water”

“Or that there is no more water in the sea!” replied Turk in a tone that boded ill to the Gulf of Mexico, These two eventualities were little to be feared, it must be admitted, As for not finding at Mobile a vessel starting for Florida, they never thought of it. The port is much frequented, its movement of shipping is considerable, and on the other hand, owing to its position between the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic, Key West has become a port of call for nearly all passing ships.

The itinerary was somewhat similar to that of Tom Crabbe. If the Champion of the New World had gone down the basin of the Mississippi to New Orleans, in the State of Louisiana, Commodore Urrican was going down south to Mobile, in the State of Alabama. On arriving at the port the first had gone west to the shores of Texas, the second was going east to the shores of Florida.

Preceded by a heavy portmanteau, Hodge Urrican and Turk had reached the station at nine o’clock in the morning. Their clothes, jackets, belts, boots, caps, showed them to be seafarers. And they were armed with the Derringer six-shooter, which always peeps from the trouser-pocket of a genuine American.

No incident occurred at their departure — which was greeted with the usual cheers — except that the commodore had a very lively conversation with the station-master owing to the train being three and a half minutes late. The train was soon going at full speed, and in this way the travellers crossed Illinois. At Cairo, near the frontier of Tennessee, where Tom Crabbe had followed the line that ends at New Orleans, they took that which follows the frontier of Mississippi and Alabama and ends at Mobile.

Commodore Urrican did not travel for the sake of travelling, but to arrive with the shortest delay possible at his post, to be there on the day fixed. Thus there was nothing of the tourist about him. And natural curiosities, landscapes, towns, and such things had no interest for an old seaman like Turk.

At ten o’clock in the evening the train stopped in Mobile station, having completed its long run without accident or incident. And it is worthy of remark that Hodge Urrican had not a single opportunity of getting into a quarrel with the drivers, stokers, guards, and other railway people, or with his travelling companions. But he did not conceal who he was, and the whole train knew that they had with them in his noisy person the sixth starter in the Hypperbone match.

The commodore went to a hotel near the harbour. It was too late to inquire about a ship being about to sail. To-morrow at break of day Hodge Urrican would leave his room, Turk would leave his, and if he found a vessel bound for the Straits of Florida, they would embark that very day.

In the morning at sunrise they were together on the quays of Mobile. It was not without reason that Commodore Urrican had thought that the means of getting to Key West would not fail him. Such is the importance of Mobile that at least five hundred vessels enter it in a year.

But there are people whom fate rarely spares, who cannot escape bad luck, and this time Hodge Urrican had an opportunity to be justifiably angry.

He had come to Mobile when a strike was on — a general strike of dockers declared the day before! And it threatened to last many days. And of the outward bound ships not one could go out before an agreement had been come to with the shipowners, who were resolute to resist the demands of the strikers.

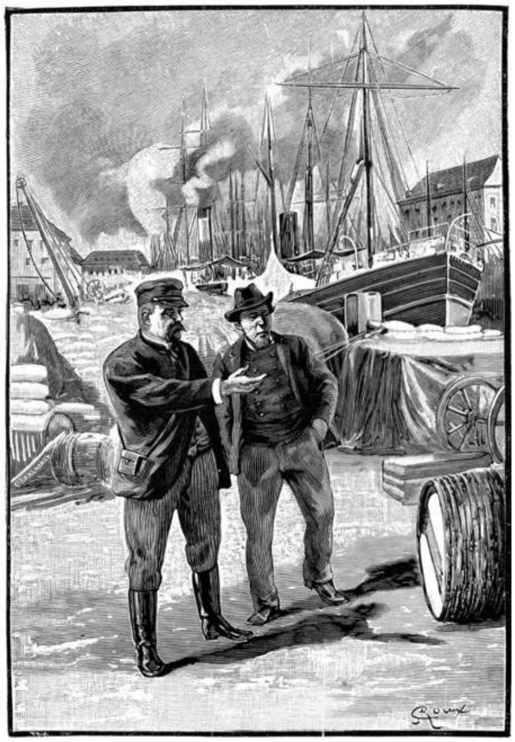

A strike was on.

And so in vain did the commodore wait during the 13th, 14th, and 15th for a ship to finish loading. The cargoes remained on the quays, the boiler fires were not lighted, the cotton bales encumbered the docks, and navigation could not have been more immobile if the Bay of Mobile had been frozen over. This abnormal position might be prolonged for a week or more. What was to be done?

The commodore’s partisans made the very reasonable suggestion that he should go to Pensacola, one of the important towns of the State of Florida, which adjoins Alabama. By going up the railroad to the north and coming down again along the coast it would be easy to reach Pensacola in twelve hours.

Hodge Urrican — it is necessary to recognize this gift — was a man of decision. On the 16th, in the morning, he was in the train with Turk, and that evening they were at Pensacola. He now had nine days, and this was more than the voyage to Key West required, even by sailing ship.

But the bad luck continued. There was no strike at Pensacola, it is true, but not a single vessel was preparing to leave the port, at least in a south-westerly direction, neither for the Antilles nor the Atlantic, and consequently none stopping at Key West.

“Decidedly,” said Hodge Urrican, biting his lips, “this will not do — ”

“And there is no one to lay the blame on,” replied his companion, throwing a fierce look around him.

“We cannot stay anchored here for a whole week.”

“No; we must get under way, cost what it may!” declared Turk.

Agreed, but how were they to transport themselves from Pensacola to Key West.

Hodge Urrican did not lose an hour, going from ship to ship, steam or sailing, obtaining only vague promises. They would sail — when they had got their goods on board, or when they had completed their cargoes. Nothing definite, except the high price the commodore offered for his passage. Then he wanted to know the reason why, as they say, of these captains, and even of the dock manager, at the risk of being given into custody.

In short, two days elapsed, until the evening of the 18th, and then he could only try by land what he could not try by sea. And what fatigue, what delays there were to be feared!

Consider! It was necessary — by railroad be it understood — to cross Florida in almost its entire breadth from west to east by Tallahassee to Live Oak and then return south to reach Tampa or Punta Gorda or the Gulf of Mexico. About six hundred miles in trains whose times nowhere fitted in.

A miserable region, barely habitable and thinly inhabited, is that portion of Florida which lies along the shore of the gulf up to Cedar Key. Would there be any means of transport — stage coaches, carriages, horses — that could take passengers to the extreme end in a few days? And supposing these could be procured at a high price, what a slow, painful, even dangerous journey, through these interminable forests, under the thick foliage of gloomy cypresses, occasionally impenetrable, half-drowned in the stagnant waters of the bayous, at the mercy of the floating meadows of the grassy pistia, through the depths of those masses of gigantic mushrooms which explode at a shock like fireworks, through the mazes of marshy plains and lakes and pools swarming with alligators and manatees, and with the most formidable serpents of the ophidian race, the trigonocephali, whose bite is fatal.

Such is this abominable country of the Everglades, the last refuge of the Seminole tribes, those handsome and ferocious Indians who, under their chief Osceola, struggled so valiantly against the Federal invasion. These natives alone could live, or rather vegetate in this warm and humid climate, so suitable for the development of marsh fevers which in a few hours will bring down men of the most vigorous constitution — even commodores of the stamp of Hodge Urrican.

If this part of Florida had been comparable to that which extends to the east about the 29th parallel, if he had only had to go from Fernandina to Jacksonville and to St. Augustine, in that country where there is no want of towns or villages or ways of communication!

It was the 19th of May. He had only six full days. And this overland route it was impossible to dream of.

That morning Commodore Urrican was accosted on the quay by one of those coasting captains, half American, half Spanish, who carry on the trade along the coast of Florida.

The said captain, named Huelcar, spoke to him with a touch of the cap to begin with.

“Still no vessel for Florida, commodore?”

“No,” replied Hodge Urrican. “And if you know of one, there are ten piastres for you.”

“I know of one.

“Which?”

“Mine!”

“Yours?”

“Yes, the *Chicola,* a smart schooner of forty-five tons, three men in the crew, which does her nine knots in anything of a breeze!”

“Of American nationality?”

“American!”

“Ready to start?”

“Ready to start, and at your orders,” replied Huelcar.

About five hundred miles from Pensacola to Key West — in a straight line it is true — with an average of five knots only and allowing for deviations from the course or unfavourable winds, that ought to be done in six days.

Ten minutes afterwards Hodge Urrican and Turk were on board the *Chicola,* which they examined as experts. She was a little coasting craft, of light draught, designed for working along the coast between the shoals, and beamy enough to carry a good spread of canvas.

Two sailors, like the commodore and the old quartermaster, were not the men to trouble themselves about the dangers of the seas. For twenty years Huelcar had been working his schooner from Mobile to the Bahamas through the Straits of Florida, and he had many times put in at Key West.

“How much for the voyage?” asked the commodore.

“A hundred piastres a day.”

“Including provisions?”

“Including provisions.”

It was dear, and Huelcar took advantage of the position.

“We will start at once,” commanded Hodge Urrican.

“As soon as your baggage is on board.”

“At what time is the ebb?”

“It is beginning, and in less than an hour we can be out at sea.”

To take passage on the *Chicola,* that was the only way of arriving at Key West, where the sixth player had to be on the 25th by noon at latest.

At eight o’clock, the hotel bill paid, Hodge Urrican and Turk embarked. Fifty minutes later the schooner went out into the bay between Forts MacRae and Pickens, formerly built by the French and Spaniards; and she was headed for the open sea.

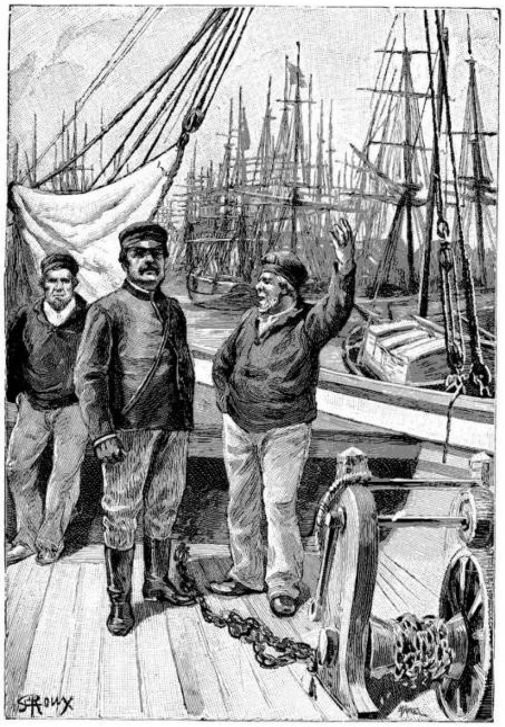

"How much for the voyage?" asked the commodore.

CHAPTER XIV

COMMODORE URRICAN’S ADVENTURES, CONTINUED

The weather was uncertain. The breeze blew rather fresh from the east. The sea, defended by the long breakwater of the Florida peninsula, was not yet affected by the long Atlantic rollers, and the *Chicola* bore herself well.

There was no fear of either the commodore or Turk being troubled by the sea-sickness of which Tom Crabbe had been such a victim; and they were ready to help Huelcar and his three men in working the schooner if she got into difficulties.

The *Chicola*, with the wind ahead, went off on the starboard tack, so as to keep in shelter of the land. The voyage would be long, no doubt; but the storms in the gulf are dangerous, and a small vessel could not venture far from the ports, bays, creeks and estuaries that are so numerous on the Florida coast, and which are accessible to vessels of small tonnage. The *Chicola* could always find a creek or a gap in which to take refuge for a few hours. This would be time lost, it is true, and Hodge Urrican had little to lose.

The breeze held all day and all night, with a tendency to weaken. If it had increased, it would have meant more speed and a better voyage. Unfortunately, on the morrow it gradually died away. On the surface of the calm white sea the *Chicola* though covered with sail, only made about twenty miles to the south-east. It was necessary to get out the sweeps, so as not to be drifted out into the gulf. Here were forty-eight hours of navigation and practically no progress whatever. The commodore, devoured with impatience, spoke to nobody — not even to Turk.

On the 22nd, however, drifting on the Gulf Stream, they were in the latitude of Tampa, a port of five or six thousand inhabitants, where vessels of a certain tonnage find safe shelter along the coast, which is strewn with reefs and shoals; but it was fifty miles to the east, and the schooner could not get near it without a good deal of delay.

Besides, after yesterday's calm, it looked, from the aspect of the sky, as though there was going to be a change in the weather.

Commodore Urrican and Turk thought the same as the crew of the schooner.

"A change of weather probably," they said that morning.

"It is bound to help us," said Turk, "if the wind settles in the west."

"The sea feels something," said Huelcar. "See the long heavy waves and the surge in the offing beginning to show green."

Then, looking attentively at the horizon, he shook his head and added:

"I do not like it when it comes from that quarter."

"But it is good," said Turk; "it can blow as hard as it likes if it sends us where we want to go."

Hodge Urrican said nothing. He was evidently uneasy at the symptoms which were becoming more marked in the west and south-west. It is all very well to have a good breeze providing you can keep afloat, but with this vessel of only forty tons, and only half-decked — No! Never will it be known what was passing in the excited mind of the commodore; and if there was bad weather out in the offing, then there was bad weather within Hodge Urrican.

In the afternoon the wind, settled in the west, came up in big squalls varied with short periods of calm. The upper sails had to be sent down. On this sea, which began to run in sharp furrows, the schooner lifted like a feather at the will of the waves.

The night was bad, in the sense that it was necessary to further reduce the sail.

Now the *Chicola* was being driven in towards the coast more than was agreeable. As there was no time to run in for safety, she had to be kept at all cost heading south-east, in the direction of the point.

The captain handled her like a seaman. Turk, at the helm, kept the schooner up as much as possible as she rolled. The commodore assisted the crew in taking in a reef in the fore-spencer and main-sail, and setting the small fore stay-sail. It was difficult to keep her out against the wind and current, which were both sending her towards the land.

And in fact, in the morning of the 23rd the coast, low as it was, appeared amid the wreathing mists of the horizon.

Huelcar and his men recognized it.

“It is Whitewater Bay” they said.

This bay is deeply cut into the coast, and is only separated from the Straits of Florida by a tongue of land defended by Fort Poinsett, at the end of Cape

Sable.

Another twelve miles before the schooner would be abreast of it.

“I am afraid we shall have to put in,” said Huelcar.

“Put in — and never be able to get out in this wind!” exclaimed Turk.

Hodge Urrican remained silent.

“If we do not run for shelter,” continued Huelcar, “and if when off Cape Sable the stream takes us into the Straits, it is not at Key West that we shall drop our anchor, but at the Bahamas, out in the Atlantic.”

The commodore continued silent, and perhaps his throat was so full and his lips so shut that he could not articulate a word.

Huelcar saw clearly enough that if she ran for Whitewater Bay the *Chicola* would be weather-bound for several days. And it was the 23rd of May, and it was necessary to reach Key West in less than forty-eight hours.

Then the crew with equal boldness and skill kept up the little ship against the squalls from the offing at the risk of bringing down the masts or splitting the sails. They tried to fetch the cape with a small fore stay-sail and a try-sail aft. The schooner lost three or four miles during that day and the following night. If the wind did not haul round to the north or south she could not keep on against it and next day she would go ashore.

And this was only too evident when, in the early morning of the 24th, the land, bristling with rocks and reefs, was sighted about five miles from the terrible crags of Cape Sable. In a few hours the *Chicola* would be driven through the Straits of Florida.

But with renewed effort, and taking advantage of the rising tide, it would be possible to get into Whitewater Bay.

“It must be” said Huelcar.

“No,” said Commodore Urrican.

“Eh! I am not going to risk my vessel and ourselves as well in obstinately trying to keep her out.”

“I will buy your boat.”

“She is not for sale.”

“A boat is always for sale when she is bought for more than she is worth.”

“How much will you give for her?”

“Two thousand piastres.”

“Agreed,” said Huelcar, enchanted at so good a bargain.

“It is double her value,” said Commodore Urrican. “There will be a thousand for her hull, and a thousand for you and your men.”

“Payable?”

“With a cheque I will give you at Key West.”

“Done, my commodore.”

“And now, Huelcar, keep her out.”

All that day the *Chicola* struggled gamely, sometimes nearly covered by the waves, her bulwarks half under water. But Turk steered her with a firm hand, and the crew handled her with as much courage as skill.

The schooner had begun to head off from the coast, owing mainly to a slight change in the wind, which had shifted a little towards the north. When night arrived the wind began to go down and a thick fog came on.

The perplexity was extreme. It had been impossible to work out the position during the day. Was the schooner in the latitude of Key West, or had she passed the assemblage of reefs which prolongs the tail of the peninsula towards the Marquesas and the Tortugas?

In Huelcar's opinion the *Chicola* was very near this string of islets.

"We should certainly see the lighthouse at Key West if it were not for the fog," said he, "and we must take care that we are not thrown on the rocks. Better wait until daylight, and if the fog disperses — "

"I will not wait," replied the commodore.

And in fact he could not wait if he wished to be at Key West by noon next day.

The *Chicola*, then, was continuing to keep to the south over a calm sea in a fog, when, at five o'clock in the morning, there was a shock, and then another shock.

The schooner had touched on a reef. Lifted for the third time by an irresistible blow from the surge, and partly smashed, with her bow driven in, she capsized on her port side.

At this moment a cry was heard.

Turk recognized the voice of the commodore.

He called and received no response.

The mists were so thick that they could not see the rocks round the schooner.

Huelcar and his three men were standing on the reef.

With them was Turk, despairing, searching, shouting all the time.

Vain the shouts, vain the search.

But perhaps the mists would disperse. And perhaps Turk would find his master still living? He dared not hope to do so. Great tears rolled down his cheeks.

Towards seven o’clock the fog began to lift a little, and the sea was visible for a few cable lengths around.

It was a mass of whitish rocks against which the *Chicola* had struck; and her boat had been crushed in and was useless. From east to west over a quarter of a mile the bank ran out in reefs divided by pools, and this surf was beating over them with violence.

The search was resumed, and one of the sailors ended by discovering the body of Commodore Urrican jammed between two points of rock. , Turk ran up; he threw himself on his master, he seized him in his arms, he lifted him up, he spoke to him without obtaining any reply.

But a gentle sigh escaped from Hodge Urrican's lips, and his heart was distinctly beating.

"He lives! he lives!" exclaimed Turk.

In truth, Hodge Urrican was in a piteous state. In falling his head had struck against an angle of the rock, but the blood had ceased to flow.

The wound, which had closed itself, was bandaged with a piece of rag, after being washed with some fresh water brought from the schooner. Then the commodore, without recovering consciousness, was carried to a higher portion of the island, which the rising sea would not cover.

The sky becoming quite clear from mist, the view extended for many miles.

It was twenty minutes past nine, and at this moment, Huelcar, stretching his arm out to the west, shouted:

"The lighthouse of Key West!"

In fact, Key West was only four miles off in that direction. If the night had been clear they would have sighted the light in time, and the schooner would not have come to be lost on those dangerous reefs.

And, now, was not the game over so far as the sixth player was concerned? He had no means of traversing the distance which separated the islet on which the *Chicola* had been wrecked from Key West, and all he could do was to wait for a passing ship.

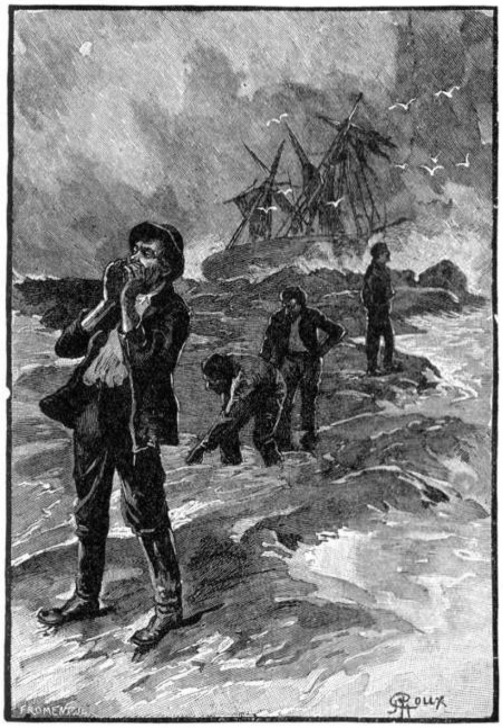

Vain the shouts, vain the search. p. 195

A melancholy position for these poor fellows, on the surface of this whitish mass which looked like a field of bones rising not more than five or six feet above the water at high tide. Around them were twined masses of seaweed of a thousand colours, gigantic phycoeans, tiny algae torn from the submarine depths by the currents of the Gulf Stream.

In the creeks swarmed a hundred species of fishes of all dimensions and all forms, sheeps’-heads, angels, wrasses, sea-wolves, klephtics of marvellous shades, garter-fishes of silver, and cavaliers striped with multicoloured bands. And also swarming there were mollusks and crustaceans — shrimps, prawns, lobsters, crabs and crawfishes.

And on every side at the top of the water, attracted by the wreck and prowling round the reefs, were multitudes of voracious, sharks — principally hammer-headed ones, from six to seven feet long, with enormous jaws, the most formidable of monsters.

In the air were innumerable flocks of birds — egrets, crab catchers, herons, gulls, grebes, terns, cormorants. A few tall pelicans stood midway in the water, fishing with as much seriousness, and perhaps more success than those who fish with the line, and calling in a cavernous voice what sounded very much like “encore”. The men need not be without food on this reef. They had only to hunt the legions of turtles either in the water or on the little sandy beaches among the islands which bear the name of these crawling reptiles.

However, time was passing, and in spite of all that could be done the unfortunate commodore seemed no nearer to recovery. The prolongation of his unconsciousness gave Turk the keenest anxiety. If he could take his master to Key West and hand him over to a doctor, he might perhaps be saved, considering his vigorous constitution. But how many days might pass before they left the island, for it was impossible to get the schooner afloat, to repair the hull, which was crushed in below, and which the first bad weather would break up.

It need scarcely be said that Turk was under no illusion as to the result of the Hypperbone match. The game was lost so far as Hodge Urrican was concerned. What a burst of rage there would be if he returned to life, and this time would it be unpardonable, considering the wretched bad luck?

It was a little after ten o’clock when the sailors of the *Chicola* on the look-out at the extremity of the rocks shouted:

“Boat ahoy!”

A fishing boat running before the easterly wind was approaching the rocks.

At once Huelcar made a signal, which was observed by the men in the boat, and half an hour afterwards the shipwrecked party were on board and on the way to Key West.

Then hope returned to Turk, and perhaps it would also have returned to Hodge Urrican if he had emerged from the state in which he knew nothing of external things.

In the freshening breeze the boat rapidly covered the four miles, and at a quarter past eleven was moored in the harbour.

The town has risen on this island of Key West — which is two leagues long and one league wide — like a vegetable grown under glass. It is already a considerable city, which is connected with the mainland by its telegraph lines, and with Havana by a submarine cable; a city with a great future, the prosperity of which is bound to increase, owing to a shipping trade of 300,000 tons; a city half Spanish, sheltered beneath magnolias and other magnificent trees of the tropical zone.

The sloop ran up to the end of the harbour, and immediately many hundred inhabitants — Key West possessed eighteen thousand at this period — surrounded the shipwrecked party. They were expecting Commodore Urrican: and in what a condition he presented himself, or rather, was presented to their eyes.

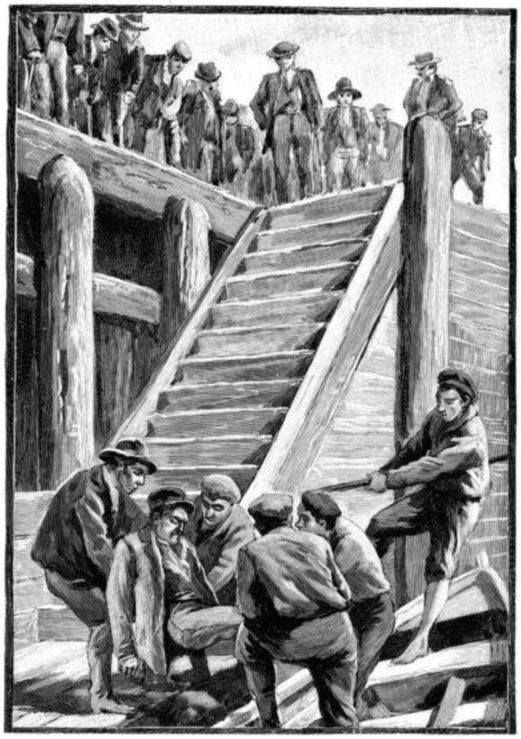

The commodore had arrived as a corpse.

Decidedly the sea was not kind to the players in the Hypperbone match. Tom Crabbe arrived in Texas as an inert mass; the commodore had arrived as a corpse, or as near to one as possible.

Hodge Urrican was taken to the harbour office, and a doctor sent for.

The sixth competitor still breathed, and though his heart beat feebly, it did not seem as though any of his organs were injured. But when he was pitched out of the schooner his head had struck against a pointed rock, and the blood had flowed abundantly, so that there might be some damage to the brain.

In spite of all that was done, and the rubbings to which he was subjected — and Turk did not spare them, as we may imagine — the commodore, although he sighed two or three times, did not recover consciousness.

The doctor suggested that he should be taken to some room in a comfortable hotel, or it would be better to take him to the hospital, where he would have every attention.

“No” replied Turk, “neither to the hospital, nor to the hotel — ”

“Where, then?”

“To the-post office.”

Turk had an idea which was understood and adopted by those around him. As Hodge Urrican had arrived before noon at Key West on this day, the 25th of May — and that against wind and tide, as it were — why should not his presence be officially notified in the very place where he ought to be found at this date?

A stretcher was procured, a mattress thrown on it, the commodore was laid on that, and away they went to the post office amid a crowd that constantly increased.

Great was the astonishment of the staff, who thought at first some mistake had been made. Had the post office been taken for a mortuary? But when they learnt that the body was that of Commodore Urrican, one of the competitors in the Hypperbone match, their astonishment gave place to emotion. He was here, then, in front of the telegraph desk, he whom the throw of the dice by five and four had sent so far — and in what a state!

Turk came forward, and in a loud voice, heard by all, inquired:

“Is there a telegram here for Commodore Urrican?”

“Not yet,” replied the clerk.

“Well, sir,” continued Turk, “will you certify that we were here before it arrived?”

And the fact was at once written down and signed by numerous witnesses.

It was then a quarter to twelve, and they could do no more than to wait for the telegram, which without doubt had been sent off that morning from Chicago.

They did not wait long.

At 11.53 the bell of the telegraphic apparatus began to ring, the mechanism to work, the paper to unroll.

As soon as the clerk could, he read the address, and said:

“A message for Commodore Hodge Urrican.”

“Present!” replied Turk for his master, in whom the doctor at this moment could not perceive the slightest sign of intelligence.

The telegram was in these words: —

“Chicago, Illinois, 8.30 a.m., 25th May. — Five by three and two, fifty-eighth square, State of California, Death Valley. — TORNBROCK.”

State of California! At the other extremity of the republic, which it would be necessary to cross from southeast to north-west!

And not only did a distance of more than two thousand miles separate California from Florida, but this fifty-eighth square was that of the Noble Game of Goose in which figures the death’s head. And after making his appearance in this square the player had to return to the first to begin the game over again.

“Well,” said Turk to himself, “better my poor master should not recover, for he will never get up again after a blow like that!”

CHAPTER XV

THE SITUATION ON THE 27TH OF MAY

IT will not have been forgotten that originally, according to the will of William J. Hypperbone, the number of players of the Noble Game of the United States of America had been fixed at six, chosen by lot. These “six,” at the instructions of Tornbrock, had figured at the funeral around the car of this eccentric personage.

Neither will it have been forgotten, that at the meeting on the 15th of April in which the notary had read the will in the Auditorium, a very unexpected codicil had brought in a seventh competitor known only under the letters XKZ. Had this new-comer come out of the urn like the rest, or had he been brought in solely at the wish of the deceased? No one knew. Whichever way it might be, the codicil was so carefully drawn that no one would think of evading it. My lord XKZ — the masked man — enjoyed the same rights as the original six, and if he gained the enormous heritage no one would think of disputing his possession of it.

It was in accordance with this clause that on the 13th of the month, at eight o’clock in the morning, Tornbrock had proceeded to a seventh throw of the dice, and the number of the points obtained, nine by six and three, obliged XKZ to go to Wisconsin. Unless the unknown player was possessed by that immoderate desire for travel and love of running about which devoured the reporter of the *Tribune,* if he had no mania for locomotion, he ought to have been satisfied. In a few hours by railway he could reach Milwaukee, and, if she were there when he arrived, Lizzie Wag would have to give place to him and begin the game again. It was not known if the masked man would hasten to get to Milwaukee as soon as he had heard the result of the seventh throw, although he had a fortnight to do so.

At first the public had been much concerned about the introduction of this new personage into the match. Who was he? A Chicago man, as the testator had only admitted to the competition people who lived in Chicago. But no more was known, and curiosity was, as a consequence, all the greater.

And so on the 13th of the month, the day of the seventh throw, there had been a crowd at the railway station when the trains departed from Chicago to Milwaukee.

They hoped to recognize this XKZ by his walk, his bearing, by some singularity or originality. They were completely deceived; they saw nothing but the usual travellers of every social rank, distinguished in no way from ordinary mortals. Each time, at the moment of departure, somebody was taken for the masked man, and, very much confused, became the object of an ovation he did not deserve.

Next day there was again a large number of inquisitive people, the day after not so many, and very few on the following days, and never was anybody noticed who looked as though he were in the running in the Hypperbone match.

One thing that could be done and was done by those who were attracted by the mysterious side of this XKZ, and desirous of venturing large sums on him, was to question Tornbrock with regard to the matter. And thus this personage was overwhelmed with questions.

“You ought to know who this XKZ is!” they said to him.

“By no means,” he replied.

“But you do know?”

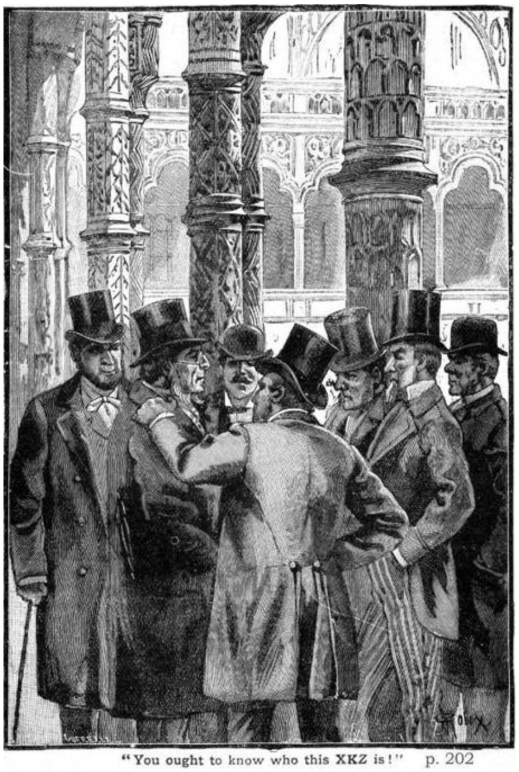

“You ought to know who this XKZ is!” p. 202

“I do not know him; and if I did know him, I should probably not be permitted to reveal his incognito.”

“But you ought to know where he lives — it he lives in Chicago or elsewhere, for you have sent him the result of the throw?”

“I have sent him nothing. Either he has learnt it from the newspapers and posters, or he heard it at the Auditorium”

“But you must send him a telegram informing him of where the dice are going to send him on the 27th of this month?”

“I will send it to him, without doubt.”

“But where?”

“Where he will be; that is to say, where he ought to be — at Milwaukee, Wisconsin.”

“But at what address?”

“Post Office, letters XKZ.”

“But if he is not there?”

“If he is not there, all the worse for him, as he will be thrown out of the game.”

To all their “buts” it will be seen Tornbrock had but one reply: he knew nothing and could tell them nothing.

It followed that the interest so greatly excited at first by the man of the codicil soon began to diminish, and it was left to the future to establish the identity of this XKZ. Besides, if he won, if he became the sole heir of Hypperbone’s millions, his name would be known all over the world. On the contrary, if he did not win, was it worth while to know if he were old or young, tall or short, stout or slim, dark or fair, rich or poor, and under what patronymic appellation he had been inscribed in the registers of his parish?

Meanwhile the vicissitudes of the game were followed with extreme attention in the world of speculation. The financial bulletins gave the position day by day, as if they were treating of the prices on the Stock Exchange.

The principal cities, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Albany, St. Louis, Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, Cincinnati, Detroit, Omaha, Denver, Salt Lake City, Savannah, Mobile, New Orleans, San Francisco, Sacramento, opened special betting agencies, whose business throve immensely. It looked as though these would double, treble, and even increase to ten times in the same proportion as the adventures caused by the dice of which Max Real, Tom Crabbe, Hermann Titbury, Harris T. Kymbale, Lizzie Wag, Hodge Urrican, and XKZ were in turn the beneficiaries or the victims. Regular markets were started, with brokers and quotations, in which there were inquiries and offers, in which people bought and sold at prices varying with the chances of one player or another.

It was inevitable that this current could not be contained within the United States of America. It passed the frontier and ramified across the Dominion by Quebec, Montreal, Toronto, and the other important towns of Canada. It had also flowed towards Mexico, towards the smaller states bathed by the waters of the Gulf. Then it overflowed down South America, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Chile. The game fever ended by becoming endemic throughout the New World.

Decidedly, if the defunct member of the Eccentric Club of Chicago had not made much noise during his lifetime, he had made a considerable stir after his death. The Honourable George B. Higginbotham and his colleagues could not but be proud at being associated with so much posthumous glory.

At the moment, who was the favourite?

It was difficult to say up to now, owing to the small number of throws, but it seemed that the fourth player, Harris T. Kymbale, had most supporters. Most of the attention was directed to him. It was of him that the newspapers most frequently spoke, for they followed him step by step, getting their information from his daily correspondence. Max Real, with the reserve that rarely left him, Hermann Titbury, who had begun by travelling under an assumed name, Lizzie Wag, whose departure had been delayed till the last day, could not approach in the public esteem the brilliant and blustering reporter of the *Tribune.*

At the same time it should be noted that Tom Crabbe, well advertised by John Milner, had a large number of supporters. It seemed natural that the enormous fortune should go to this enormous brute. Chance amuses itself with likes and unlikes, as you please, and if it has no habits, at least it has caprices, which ought to be considered.

Commodore Urrican had begun to rise in the market at first. With his throw of nine by five and four, which took him to the fifty-third square, what a magnificent beginning! But at the second throw sent to the fifty-eighth square, to California, and obliged to begin the game again, he went quite out of favour. Besides, it was known that he had been shipwrecked near Key West, that his landing had taken place under deplorable conditions, and that on the 23rd at noon he had not recovered consciousness. Would he ever be in a state to go to Death Valley, and was he not twice dead both as a man and as a player?

There remained the seventh competitor, XKZ, and there were already signs that the clever people whom some special disposition of the brain leads them to discover good things would end by supporting him. That he was not attracting much notice at the moment was because it was not known if he were on the way to Wisconsin or not. But this question would be solved when he presented himself at the Milwaukee post office to receive his telegram.

And this day was not far off. The 27th of May was approaching, the date of the fourteenth throw, which would concern the masked man. That day, after the throw, Tornbrock would send a message to Milwaukee, where the personage ought to be before noon. One can easily imagine that there would be a crowd at the office eager to see the man of letters. If they did not learn his name, at least they would see what he was like, and instantaneous photographs could taken which the newspapers would publish that very day.

It should be observed that William J. Hypperbone had distributed the different states of the Union on the board in a purely arbitrary manner. They were placed in neither alphabetical nor geographical order. Thus Florida and Georgia, which are adjacent, occupied one the twenty-eighth square, the other the fifty-third. And thus Texas and South Carolina were numbered ten and eleven, although they were separated by a distance of eight or nine hundred miles. The same with all the others. The distribution did not seem to be due to any system, and perhaps the places had been filled up by lot by the testator.

Anyhow, it was in Wisconsin that the mysterious XKZ would await the telegram announcing the result of the second throw. And as Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley had not reached Milwaukee till the 23rd, in the morning, they had to hurry up to get away again immediately, so as not to run against the seventh competitor, when he appeared at the telegraph office of the town.

At last the 27th of May arrived, and attention was recalled to this personage, who, for one knew not what motives, abstained from revealing his name to the public.

The crowd hastened, then, on this occasion, to the Auditorium, and, doubtless, would have been much greater if thousands had not taken the morning trains for Milwaukee to be present at the post office and gaze on this mysterious XKZ.

At eight o’clock, solemn as usual, surrounded by members of the Eccentric Club, Tornbrock shook the box, rolled the dice on the table, and amid the general silence proclaimed in a sonorous voice:

“Fourteenth throw; ten, by four and six.” And these were the consequences:

XKZ being at the twenty-sixth square, Wisconsin, the ten points would have sent him to the thirty-sixth, if they had not to be doubled, for this thirty-sixth square was occupied by Illinois. Thus it was to the forty-sixth square he had to betake himself after leaving Wisconsin. And on Hypperbone’s board this meant the District of Columbia.

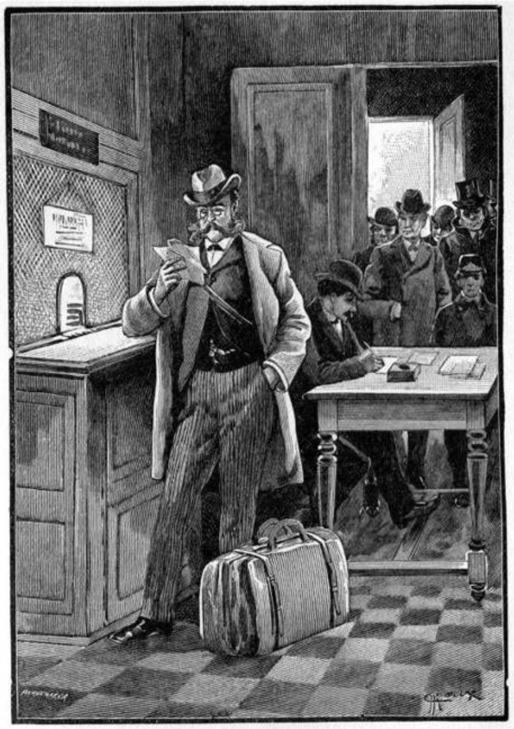

Then the seventh player took the message. p. 207

In truth, fortune singularly favoured this enigmatic personage. At the first throw, an adjacent state, at the next, three states only to cross, Indiana, Ohio and West Virginia, to reach the District of Columbia, and Washington, its capital, which is also the capital of the United States of America. What a difference to the majority of the players, who had been sent to the further ends of the country!

Assuredly such a lucky fellow was worthy of support — that is, if he existed.

This morning, at Milwaukee, there was no more doubt as to his existence. A little before noon, around and in the post office, the crowd opened their ranks to give passage to a man of medium height, of healthy appearance, greyish beard, and wearing a double eye-glass. He was in a travelling suit, and carried a Gladstone bag.

“Have you a telegram for XKZ?” he asked the clerk.

“It is here,” said the clerk.

“Then the seventh player — for it was really the man — took the message, opened it, read it, folded it again, put it into his pocket-book, without showing any sign of satisfaction or discontent, and went back through the excited and silent crowd.

They had seen him at last, this last to start on the Hypperbone match! He existed! But who he was, his name, his trade, his social position, they knew not! Arrived without noise, he had gone again without noise! It mattered not, for as he had been found that day at Milwaukee, so would he be found on the stated day at Washington! Was it, then, necessary to know all about him? No! There was no doubt he would fulfil to the letter all the conditions of the will, inasmuch as he had been nominated by the testator himself. Why trouble to know more? Supporters could put their money on him without hesitation! He might become first favourite; for, to judge by his first throws, it seemed as though the Goddess of Fortune was going to accompany him on his travels.

To sum up. On this date, the 27th of May, the state of the game was as follows: —

Max Real, on the 15th of May, had left Fort Riley, Kansas, for the twenty-eighth square, that of Wyoming.

Tom Crabbe, on the 17th of May, had left Austin, Texas, for the thirty-fifth square, that of the State of Ohio.

Hermann Titbury, having been released in time, on the 19th of May left Calais, Maine, for the fourth square, the State of Utah.

Harris T. Kymbale, on the 21st of May, left Santa Fé, New Mexico, for the twenty-second square, that of South Carolina.

Lizzie Wag, on the 23rd of May, left Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for the thirty-eighth square, the State of Kentucky.

Commodore Urrican, if he were not dead — and it was to be wished that he was not — had received two days before, the 25th of May, the message which sent him to the fifty-eighth square, the State of California, whence he would return to Chicago to recommence the game.

Finally, XKZ, on the 27th of May, had been sent to the forty-sixth square, the District of Columbia.

The universe had to wait for the further incidents and results of the succeeding throws, which were to take place every other day.

An idea started by the *Tribune* achieved a great success, and it was adopted not only in America but throughout the world.

As the players were only seven in number, why not — as was done by jockeys on the race-course — give each of them a special colour? And why not choose the seven primitive colours in the order they occupy in the rainbow?

Let Max Real have the violet, Tom Crabbe the indigo, Hermann Titbury the blue, Harris T. Kymbale the green, Lizzie Wag the yellow, Hodge Urrican the orange, and XKZ the red.? And in this way, each with their own colour, little flags were daily stuck in the squares occupied by the players in the Hypperbone match, on the board of the Noble Game of the United States of America.

CHAPTER XVI

THE NATIONAL PARK

It was at noon on the 15th of May, at the post office of Fort Riley, that Max Real had received the telegram sent that morning from Chicago. Ten, by five and five, such was the number of points at the second throw of the first player.

Reckoning from the eighth square, Kansas, with ten points, the player alighted in one of the squares of Illinois; and as the rule in such cases obliged him to double the number, he had to go on ten more to the twenty-eighth square, that of Wyoming.

“A lucky chance!” said Max Real, when he and Tommy returned to the hotel.

“If my master is pleased,” replied the boy, “I ought to be — ”

“He is,” declared Max Real, “and for two reasons: first, that the journey will not be long, for Kansas and Wyoming almost touch at one of their angles; secondly, that we shall have time to visit the most beautiful region of the United States, that marvellous National Park of the Yellowstone, which I have not yet seen. That is my lucky star, you see. To have got exactly the ten which gives me a double stride and puts Wyoming on my route! Do you understand, Tommy, do you understand?”

“No, master,” replied Tommy.

And the truth is that Tommy did not yet understand these ingenious combinations of the Noble Game of the United States of America which enchanted the young painter.

That mattered little, however, and Max Real could congratulate himself on his second throw, although he was still behind Lizzie Wag and Commodore Urrican — the latter, as we know, being condemned to begin the game again. Not only would the journey be without fatigue, but it would give the first player an opportunity of visiting this wonderful corner of Wyoming.

Wishing to devote to it as much time as possible, and having only a fortnight at his disposal, from the 15th to the 29th of May, he decided to leave the little town of Fort Riley immediately.

It was at Cheyenne, the capital of Wyoming, that he would find the next telegram sent to him — unless the game had been won before then. And if Hodge Urrican were to get a ten it would take him to the sixty-third and last square, for at the first throw he had reached the fifty-third, a great advance on his competitors.

“He is quite capable of it, this terrible man!” said Max Real, when the newspapers published the result. “Then no more of the heritage, and I cannot buy you, my poor Tommy! At any rate I shall have visited the regions of the Yellowstone! Vile slave, buckle up our bags, and let us start for the National Park!”

The vile slave, much honoured, set about the preparations for departure in all haste.

If Max Real had been obliged to go from Fort Riley to Cheyenne, he would have done the journey of four hundred and fifty miles in a single day by the railroads which unite the two towns. But as he intended to go to the north-western angle of Wyoming occupied by the National Park, he had to reckon on this distance being at least doubled.

As soon as he received the telegram, Max Real had studied the routes of the iron network in order to choose the shortest. The study resulted in his finding that the two lines of the Union Pacific were about equal as far as time was concerned.

The first runs from Kansas to Nebraska, and by Marysville, Kearney City, North Platte, Ogalalla, Antelope, reaches the south-east angle of Wyoming and leads to Cheyenne.

The second by Salina, Ellis, Oakley, Monument, Wallace, touches the frontier of Colorado at Monotony, runs on towards Denver, the State capital, and by Jersey, Brighton, La Salle, Dover, reaches the frontier of Wyoming to stop at Cheyenne.

It was to the latter route that the violet flag — this, it will be remembered, was the colour of the first player — gave the preference. When he reached Cheyenne he would work out another, so as in the shortest delay to reach the quadrilateral of the National Park.

In the afternoon of the 16th Max Real started with his painter's outfit, Tommy carrying the bag. Immense, without a ridge or a slope, are these western plains of Kansas, watered by the course of the Arkansas, which descends the White Mountains of Colorado. How easy was the making of the railways. As the rails were laid on the sleepers, the locomotive advanced on them, and in this way the line was made at the rate of several miles a day. It is true that these interminable steppes offered nothing very attractive to the eyes of an artist, but the country becomes varied, strange, and superb in the mountainous part of Colorado. During the night the train crossed the geodetic frontier between the two states, and it arrived early in the morning at Denver.

To see this town would take an hour, but Max Real had not the time. The train for Cheyenne was about to start, and to miss it meant the loss of a day. A hundred miles, leaving to the west the magnificent panorama of Snowy Ranges, dominated by the summits of Long’s Peak, and the journey was over.

What is Cheyenne? It is the name of a river and a city; it is also that of the Indians who formerly inhabited the country — or rather the “Chiens” or dogs, which the popular language corrupted into Cheyenne.

The town originated in one of the camps of the early gold-seekers. To the tents succeeded huts; to the huts, houses bordering the roads and squares. The iron network formed around it, and now Cheyenne contains nearly twelve thousand inhabitants. Built at an altitude; of six thousand feet, it is a station, and an important station, on this great Pacific railway.

Wyoming has no natural boundaries. It is reduced to that which geometry has fixed for it, namely, four straight lines forming a long square. It is a country of imposing mountains and deep valleys, among which the Colorado, the Columbia, and the Missouri have their sources. And when a region has given birth to these three rivers of so much importance in American hydrography, it is worthy of adding a star to those which shine so brilliantly in the flag of the United States.

As was customary with him, Max Real maintained the completest incognito. Cheyenne knew not that on that day it possessed one of the players in the Hypperbone match, whom it did not expect so soon, and knew it would find at his post on the 29th. He avoided the receptions, indigestible banquets, tedious ceremonies, of which he would have been the object on the part of a population, among whom would certainly have figured the women who have the right to vote in this happy State of Wyoming.

Arriving in the morning of the 16th of May, Max Real prepared to reach the National Park without delay. With more time at his disposal he would have made the journey in a carriage, in stages, stopping where fancy led him, exploring this region of the Laramie Ranges, these elevated plains of which the clayey subsoil was formerly that of an immense lake, crossing at fords the innumerable creeks, the capricious affluents of the North Fork and Platte rivers, penetrating the magnificent orographic system, the sinuous valleys, the thick forests, and the network of the tributaries of the Columbia, in short all that country dominated at more than 12,000 feet by Union Peak, Hayden Peak, Fremont Peak, and the wild Mount Ouragans of the Wide Water Mountains, whence came, perhaps, the name of Oregon, and which for its storms and squalls might perhaps rival the no less wild Commodore Urrican.

Yes, to travel in this way in a carriage, on horseback, on foot, in perfect liberty to stop at leisure in the most beautiful places, to pitch one’s tent here and there without being hurried by the hours, what could be more delightful for a painter, and with what enchantment would not Max Real have pursued the journey under such conditions! But could he forget that in him the artist was doubled by a player, that he was not his own master, that, as the plaything of chance, he was at its mercy, that he depended on a throw of the dice, that he had to manoeuvre within fixed dates, and was treated like a pawn on the chessboard!

“A pawn which fate moves at its will,” he said to himself, “I am nothing else! I have abandoned all human dignity for one chance in seven of pocketing the heritage of this eccentric defunct. I blush to my forehead when this nigger of a Tommy looks at me. I ought to have sent this Tornbrock to Jericho, and never taken part in this ridiculous game, from which it would be wise for me to retire, to the great satisfaction of the Titburys, the Crabbes, the Kymbales, and the other Urricans. I say nothing of the sweet and modest Lizzie Wag, for that girl did not seem to be particularly charmed at figuring in the group of seven. Yes — to Jericho — and I would do it this moment, and would stay in Wyoming at my convenience if it were not for my dear old mother, who would never pardon me for having deserted! Well, as I am in this extraordinary country of the Yellowstone, let us see all we can see in a dozen days!”

Thus reasoned Max Real, and it was not bad reasoning after a study of the route best adapted for the circumstances. Besides, to travel as he would have liked would have been to expose himself to delays and to dangers. These plains and valleys of central Wyoming are far from being safe when traversed without escort. Besides the possible encounters with wild bears and other carnivores which frequent them, there are reasons for fearing an attack from Indians, from the wandering Sioux who are not already settled in their reserves.

In the government expedition organized in 1870 to explore the country of the Yellowstone, Messrs. Doane, Langford and Dr. Hayden were accompanied by military to ensure their safety. And it was two years afterwards, on the 1st of March, 1872, that Congress formed as a National Park this region, worthy in more than one respect of being denominated the eighth wonder of the world.

That evening, as unknown at their departure as at their arrival, Max Real and Tommy installed themselves in the train, and crossed the long lacustrine plains of Laramie, and were in imperturbable sleep when they reached Benton City, one of those towns that spring up from the ground of the Far West like mushrooms — a little poisonous, perhaps, at their birth, but soon made antitoxic by their excellent culture. Then, without their awaking, the train left behind Laramie, Rawlins, Halville, Granger, Separation, Buttes Noires, Green River, which joins Grand River to form the Colorado; then following the course of the Muddy Fork to Aspen station, near the frontier of Utah, they entered the state of that name, and in the morning of the 27th stopped at Ogden.

There the Union Pacific, before skirting Salt Lake by its upper curve to go west, throws off a branch of 450 miles to Helena City. At the same point it throws off one towards the south uniting Ogden with Salt Lake City, the state capital, the great Mormon city which has had so much said about it, not always to its advantage.

What an opportunity had Max Real, without going more than thirty-six miles out of his way, of visiting this famous town! He refrained, however, and who knows if the chances of the game might bring him back to the City of the Saints, made illustrious by the matrimonial exploits of Brigham Young and his polygamous compatriots?

The whole of the 17th was spent in running up through Idaho, leaving to the east the frontier of Wyoming, along the base of the Bear River Mountains, by Utah Hot Springs, the train crossing the boundary of Idaho at Oxford.

Idaho belongs to the basin of the Columbia, rich in mining deposits, attracting a tumultuous crowd of gold-washers, but farmers will have utilized the southern plains in the near future. Boise City with its two thousand five hundred inhabitants is the capital of this territory, which possesses certain reserves assigned to the Blackfeet, Nez-Percés, Cœurs-d'Alene, without reckoning the Chinese mingled in such great numbers with the white population.

Montana is a country of mountains, as its name indicates. One of the largest in the Union, unfitted for culture but favourable for the raising of cattle, it is rich in deposits of gold, silver, and copper. Of all the states it is that in which the Indians occupy the largest reservations of the Far West, Flatheads, Crows, Modocks, Cheyennes, Assiniboines, whose turbulent proximity the American endures with difficulty.

Virginia City, the State capital, seemed at first to be bound to prosper, like so many other towns of these western territories; but it has been left behind by Butte City and Helena, although the first has experienced a decrease in the number of its inhabitants.

Of course, rapid and comfortable means of communication exist between the National Park and Monida station, where the first player stopped, and they are still increasing for the benefit of the legions of tourists from the old and new world invited by the Federal Government to visit the domain of the Yellowstone.

Max Real left Monida immediately in one of the coaches, and a few hours afterwards, accompanied by Tommy, he arrived at his destination.

The national parks are to the territory of the Republic what squares are to great cities. Besides the Yellowstone, others have been made, or will be made without delay — such as that of Crater Lake in the volcanic region of the North-West, such as the American Switzerland, the Garden of the Gods magnificently situated in the mountainous zone of the Colorado.

At the end of February, 1872, the Senate and the House of Representatives considered a report on a proposal to be made to Congress with regard to withdrawing from occupation and putting under the protection of the State, a part of the land of the Union measuring fifty-five miles by sixty-five miles, situated near the sources of the Yellowstone and the Missouri. This region would become henceforth a National Park whose full and complete enjoyment should be reserved to the American people.

After declaring that the space comprised within the limits indicated was not capable of productive culture, the report added:

“The proposed law would make no diminution in the revenue of the Government, and would be regarded by the entire civilized world as a step of progress and an honour to Congress and the Nation.”

The conclusions of the report were adopted. The National Park of the Yellowstone passed under the administration of the Secretary of the Interior, and if the whole world has not yet visited it, the future will probably realize the wishes of Congress.

In this privileged corner of the United States there is, it appears, nothing to be expected from culture, neither on the table-lands, nor in the valleys, nor on the plains placed at a mean altitude of seven thousand feet. Then the climate is extremely severe, there not being a month without frost. And so there is no raising of cattle, which could not stand these severe temperatures, nothing beyond the mineral yield of a soil, generally volcanic, strewn with eruptive matters, devoured by plutonian heat, and encompassed by a frame of mountains whose crests rise six thousand feet above the level of the sea.

It is thus the most useless country in the world, though one of the most celebrated, and its only value is due to its beauties, to its natural peculiarities, to which the hand of man could add nothing.

This hand has intervened, however, with the object of attracting excursionists from the five parts of the world whom the official report provides for. Communications are facilitated by carriage roads through the chaotic labyrinth. Hotels have been built, wherein elegance disputes with comfort. The whole domain can be traversed in perfect security. The fear is that it will become a thermal station, an immense watering-place, in which will swarm the invalids attracted by the hot springs of the Fire Hole and the Yellowstone.

And besides, as has been observed by Elisée Réclus, these national parks have already become great hunting-grounds for the directors of financial companies who possess the railways running to them and the principal hotels. In this way the establishment of Mammoth Terrace is the centre of a regular principality. Who would have believed it? A principality in the great North American Republic! It was there — and unfortunately at this time of the year a number of visitors encumbered the caravansary — that all the time was spent which Max Real had to dispose of. Fortunately, no one suspected him to be one of the starters in the Hypperbone match, for he would have been escorted, or rather assailed, by intruders in thousands. He could thus come and go as he liked, admiring the natural attractions, which in no way, it must be confessed, provoked the admiration of Tommy, and sketching in several canvases, which the young negro found infinitely superior to what they represented. Never would Max Real forget the unforgetable marvels of the National Park.

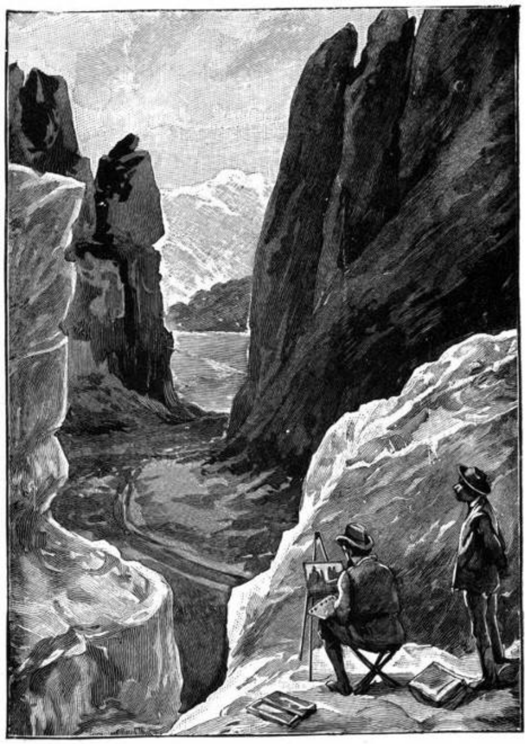

The wildest convulsions of nature.

“And suppose,” he would say to himself sometimes, “suppose I were to miss the appointment at Cheyenne on the 29th. What would my dear good mother say?”

It is truly magnificent, this Valley of the Yellowstone — marked out with basaltic masses from which a whole palace could be carved — with its slashed peaks rising around; its white summits, down which the snows run in a thousand ramifications of rios and creeks through the depths of the forests of pines; its canyons with their vertical walls closely approaching each other and forming the interminable corridors that furrow this domain. There on every side are the wildest convulsions of nature. There stretch the lava fields, the plains on which accumulates the tribute of the volcanoes. There stand the groups of columns carved in blackish cliffs, striped with red and yellow bands, and forming models for a polychrome architecture. There lie in heaps the remains of forests petrified beneath the ejections of craters now cold. There is still felt the formidable subterranean energy whose action is manifested through the soil by the escape of two thousand hot springs.

And what shall we say of the lake of the Yellowstone, with its banks strewn with obsidian, scooped in a tableland more than seven thousand feet high? This basin of water, pure as crystal, of an area of three hundred and thirty square miles, has its mountainous islands, and in many places the cloud of its vapours hangs not only over its beach but over its surface. It is a sheet of water deep and calm, where trout swarm in myriads, and is girt by an orographic system of incomparable splendour.

And so Max Real, without thinking of the hours and days that went by, secured many imperishable memories of these magnificences. He visited the environs of Yellowstone Lake, the pools of purple waves close by, with their patches of brightly-coloured algae. He went north to that startling display of basins at Mammoth Springs. He bathed in these basaltic piscinas that are arranged in a semi-circle, filled with tepid water and wreathed with vapours. He was deafened by the tumultuous uproar of the two cataracts of the Yellowstone, which for half a mile in chutes, and rapids, and cascades pour over a narrow bed rugged with volcanic rocks to end amid a vast cloud of spray in a leap of a hundred and twenty feet. He walked between the fiery hollows which border the torrent of the Fire Hole. There in the valley worn by the impetuous tributary of the Madison can be counted in hundreds springs, mud fountains, and geysers which rival the most famous ones of Iceland.

And what a panorama develops to the view along the banks of this sinuous and capricious Fire Hole, emerging from a lagoon and flowing towards the north. On every shelf of the massive strata that descend in steps to its bed, stand in succession the craters in which spout the geysers whose names are so descriptive. Here is “Old Faithful,” with its regular jets, whose fidelity begins to decrease on account of less precise intermittences. Here is the “Castle” on the banks of a marshy pool, in the form of an old donjon, whose waters are inundated by the rain of its condensed vapours. Here is the “Beehive,” a prodigious well, whose margin rises above the ground like the stump of a tower; here is the “Grand Geyser,” which has an interval of thirty-two hours between its eruptions; here is the “Giant,” with its cloud of vapour floating a hundred and twenty feet overhead, less powerful than the “Giantess” which sends up hers to more than double that height.

In the upper basin is the “Fan” with its watery bars decorated with all the shades of the rainbow, as they refract the solar rays. Not far off is “Excelsior” with its central column twenty yards through, rising to 360 feet, throwing out stones and lavas torn from the terrestrial crust. A mile away is the “Grotto” which crowns with its aqueous plumes enormous blocks that arch over the orifices of the dark caves in which the plutonian forces are constantly at work. And finally the “Blood Geyser,” spurting from a crater in the reddish clay walls, which check its outflow so that it seems to expand in a spout of blood.

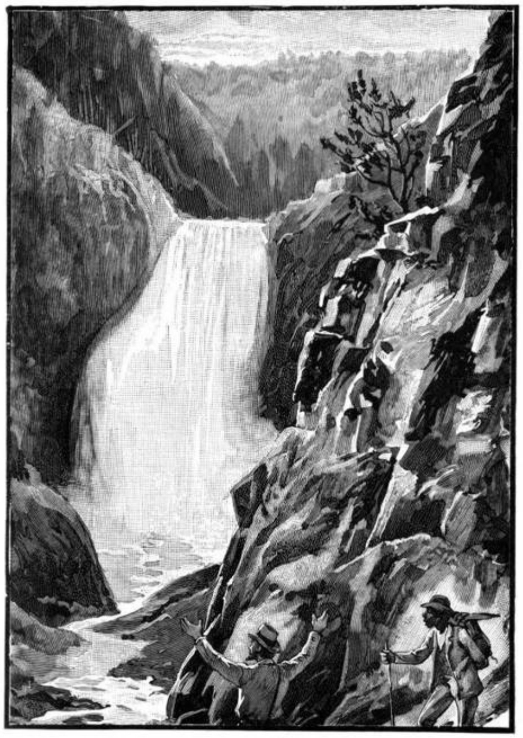

A leap of a hundred and twenty feet.

Such is the district, without arrival in this world, in which Max Real explored the valleys, the canyons, the lakes, going from marvel to marvel, from admiration to admiration. In this angle of Wyoming watered by the Fire Hole and the upper Yellowstone, where the ground thrills beneath the feet like the plates of a boiler, telluric substances mingle, amalgamate and combine under the action of internal fires inexhaustibly fed from the central furnace that utters its roar through a thousand mouths. There occur the most unexpected phenomena, like the scenic effects of a pantomime produced by the wand of the magician, amid the prodigies of this National Park of the Yellowstone, for which no equivalent can be found in no matter what other country of the globe.

CHAPTER XVII

ONE TAKEN FOR THE OTHER

“I do not believe he has arrived.” —

“And why do you not believe it?”

“Because my newspaper has said nothing about it.”

“Your newspaper is badly served, then, for in mine I have the news at length.”

“Then I shall stop my subscription.”

“And you will not do wrong.”

“Assuredly, for it is not to be permitted, when a fact occurs of this importance, that a journal should have no mention of it, and that its readers should be unaware of it.”

“It is unpardonable.”

The conversation was between two citizens of Cincinnati who were walking on the suspension bridge, 120 yards long, thrown over the Ohio near the mouth of the Licking, between the metropolis and the two suburbs of Newport and Covington, built on the shore of Kentucky.

It is the Ohio, the “Beautiful River,” which separates on the south and south-east the state of this name from Kentucky and West Virginia. Geodetic boundaries are common to it on the east with Pennsylvania, on the north with Michigan, on the west with Indiana; and the waters of Lake Erie bathe its coast.

By crossing the bridge, which is as elegant as it is strong, you get a view of the industrious city extending for nine miles along the right bank of the river, to the summit of the hills which shut it in on that side. There the view extends beyond Eden Park on the east, and over a suburb of villas and cottages almost concealed beneath their verdant foliage.

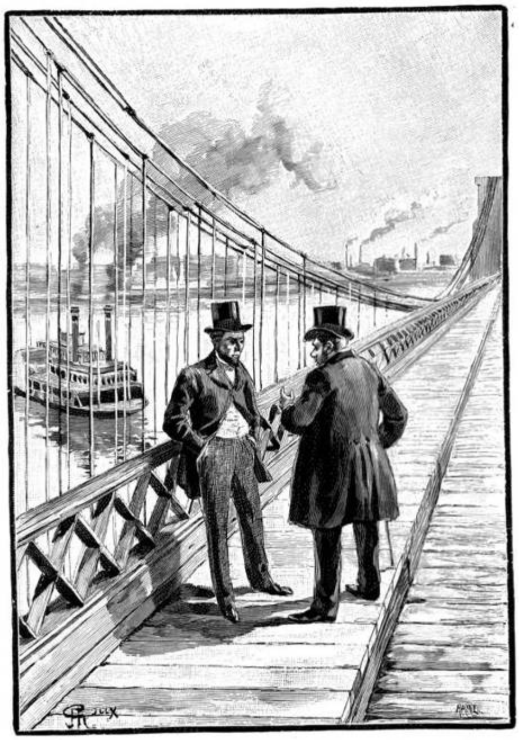

"I do not believe he has arrived."

The Ohio may justly be compared to European rivers, with its European trees and villages in the European style. Fed in its upper course by the Alleghany and the Monongahela, in its middle course by the Muskingum, the Sicoto, the two Miamis and the Licking, in its lower course by the Kentucky, the Green River, the Wabash, the Cumberland, the Tennessee and other tributaries, it flows to join the Mississippi at Cairo.

As they were talking, the two citizens, of whom posterity with regret will know neither the names nor social position, looked between the thousand bars of the bridge at the ferry-boats which ploughed the river, the steamboats, the barges that passed under the viaduct above stream, or the two viaducts below, by which the railways are put in communication with the neighbouring states.

Further, on this 28th day of May, other citizens, no less unknown than the preceding, were indulging almost everywhere in animated conversation — in the industrial and commercial quarters, in the workshops and factories, of which there are nearly seven thousand at Cincinnati, in the breweries, flour mills, refineries, slaughter-houses, in the markets, and in the precincts of the railway stations, where very noisy and demonstrative groups were stationed. But to tell the truth, it did not seem as though these worthy citizens were of any of the superior classes, or of the learned and artistic class which attends university courses and rich libraries and visits valuable collections and the museums of the metropolis. No! The excitement was chiefly noticeable in the lower part of the town, and did not extend to the sumptuous quarters, to the fashionable streets, to the squares, to the parks shaded with magnificent trees — among others the chestnuts, which have led to Ohio being called the Buckeye State.

Moving among the groups listening to the conversation, you would have heard remarks of this nature:

“Have you seen him?”

“No. He arrived very late in the evening; he was put into a closed carriage and his companion accompanied him — ”

“Where?”

“That is not known, and it would be so interesting to know — ”

“But he has not come to Cincinnati not to be shown! They will exhibit him, I suppose — ”

“Yes — the day after to-morrow — they say — at the great meeting at Spring Grove.”

“There will be a crowd.”

“Yes, a regular crush.”

But this way of judging the hero of the day was not the only one. In the vicinity of the slaughter-houses, where physical properties — the stature, the vigour, the muscular strength of individuals — are more appreciated than moral or intellectual qualities, a number of sturdy slaughtermen shrugged their shoulders.

“An exaggerated reputation,” said one.

“We know how to take it at its value,” said another.

“Over six feet, to believe the reports.”

“Six feet, but not of twelve inches, perhaps.”

“We must sec.”

“But it seems that up to now he has had the luck to beat all others.”

“Bah! They say he holds the record. A way of attracting the public. And the public is taken in — ”

“Here we shall not be taken in.”

“Is it true that he comes from Texas?” asked a big jolly fellow with massive arms spotted with the blood of the slaughter-house.

“From Texas, straight,” replied one of his comrades, quite his equal in strength.

“Then we will wait.”

“Yes — wait. There is more than one already that has come to us from a distance who had much better have stayed at home.”

“After all, if he wins! It is possible, and it would not astonish me.”

Here was a divergence of appreciations, as you see, which, on the whole, would not have satisfied John Milner, who had arrived the evening before at Cincinnati with the second player, Tom Crabbe, whom the second throw of the dice had sent from the capital of Texas to the metropolis of Ohio.

It was at Austin at noon on the 17th of May that John Milner had received telegraphic advice of the throw relative to the blue flag, the famous pugilist of Chicago.

Decidedly Tom Crabbe could say he was in great form, and even with more reason than Max Real, although the latter had made a great advance owing to his doubled number. But for Crabbe, Tornbrock had thrown twelve, the highest number obtainable by two dice; and as this twelve put him into one of the Illinois squares, he had to double it, and with twenty-four he moved from the eleventh to the thirty-fifth square. And the result was to take him across the most populous provinces of the Central States, where communications are rapid and easy, instead of sending him to the confines of the republic.

For this reason, before leaving Austin, John Milner was heartily congratulated. That day the bets grew larger. Tom Crabbe went up in the betting not only in Texas but in many another state — principally in the markets of Illinois, where the agencies quoted him at five to one; and this put him above Harris T. Kymbale, who was favourite up to then.

“And take care of him — take care of him — ” they said to John Milner; “he may have a constitution of meteoric iron and muscles of chrome steel, but do not expose him! He must get to the end without damage.”

“Depend upon me,” declared the trainer sharply. “It is not Tom Crabbe who is in the skin of Tom Crabbe, but John Milner.”

“And,” added they, “no more sea passages, neither long nor short, for sea-sickness puts him into such a state of decomposition, physical and mental — ”

“Who has not experienced it?” replied John Milner; “but have no fear. No more navigation between Galveston and New Orleans. We shall reach Ohio by the railroads leisurely, as we have a fortnight to get to Cincinnati.”

That same day, encouraged, petted, caressed by his partisans, Tom Crabbe was conducted to the railway station, hoisted into a car, and enveloped in good wraps as a precaution, considering the difference of temperature between Ohio and Texas. Then the train started for the frontier of Louisiana. The two travellers stayed a day at New Orleans, where they were welcomed more warmly than the first time. That was because the famous boxer was rising in the betting. Tom Crabbe was in demand everywhere. A delirium, a fury, had set in. The newspapers estimated that at least 1,500,000 dollars were laid on the player who was on his journey between the capital of Texas and the metropolis of Ohio. ‘

“What a success!” said John Milner to himself. “And what a welcome awaits us at Cincinnati! It ought to be a triumph. I have an idea!”

And this was John Milncr’s idea — which would not have been disavowed by the illustrious Barnum — to excite the curiosity and redouble the public enthusiasm with regard to Tom Crabbe.

It was not, as one might be led to believe, to announce with much advertisement the arrival of the Champion of the New World and to challenge the boldest boxers of Cincinnati to some contest from which Tom Crabbe would evidently emerge victorious to resume the course of his peregrinations. John Milner might try that some day. if opportunity presented itself.

What he intended was, on the contrary, to arrive in the strictest incognito, to leave the crowd without news of his favourite to the last day, to let them think he had disappeared, that he would not be in time on the 31st. And then he would produce him.

John Milner had learnt from the newspapers that there would be a great cattle show on the 30th at Cincinnati — a show at which horned cattle and others would be exhibited for the prizes to which people seemed to attach so much importance. What an opportunity for exhibiting Tom Crabbe at Spring Grove, at this meeting, when they had lost all hope of seeing him again, and that on the eve of his appearing at the post office.

Useless to say, John Milner did not consult his companion on this matter, and for a good reason. And thus it was that at night, the two, without informing anybody, got out at the first station after leaving New Orleans. What had become of them? That is what the whole town was asking next morning.

John Milner did not return by the route he had followed in leaving Illinois for Louisiana. The network of railroads is so close in these parts of the States that it seems to cover the maps of the guide books like a spider's web. And thus it was that without hurry, without the presence of Tom Crabbe being reported anywhere, travelling by night, sleeping during the day, careful not to attract attention, the blue flag and his trainer crossed Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky, and stopped on the 20th at daybreak at a modest hotel in the suburb of Covington. They had only to cross the Ohio to tread the soil of Cincinnati.

Thus John Milner's idea had been happily realized. Arrived at the gates of the metropolis, Tom Crabbe had come incognito. The newspapers and the best informed people knew not what had become of him. They had lost all trace of him after he left New Orleans. And they would have asked what it meant, and what John Milner thought, if they had had the opportunity.

Assuredly he had cause to reckon on a great effect among the population of Cincinnati, despairing of seeing him at his post on the 31st, when, on the eve of the day in question, and after they had vainly sought for news of him in all the echoes of the Union, he suddenly appeared among the crowd at Spring Grove.

But who can say that John Milner might not have done better during the two weeks from his departure from Texas in conducting his phenomenon across the territories of Ohio? Does not this state hold the fourth rank in the

North American Republic, with its population of three million seven hundred thousand? And as much from the point of view of the Hypperbone match as from that of the supporters of prize-fighting, would it not have been wiser to take him from town to town, from village to village, to exhibit him in the chief cities of Ohio? And they are numerous and prosperous, and Tom Crabbe would have received the best of welcomes.

Next morning John Milner decided to take a tour round the town, unaccompanied of course by his curious beast. Before leaving the hotel he said:

“Tom, I leave you here, and you will wait for me.”

As it was not with a view of consulting him that John Milner made this recommendation, Tom Crabbe had nothing to say.

“You will not go out of your room under any pretext,” added John Milner.

Tom Crabbe would have gone out if he had been told to go out, and when he was told not to go out he would not go out.

“If I am late in coming back,” John Milner added, “they will bring you your first breakfast, then your second, then your lunch, then your dinner, then your supper. I am going to give the orders, and you need not be uneasy about your food.”

No, certainly. Tom Crabbe would not be uneasy, and under these circumstances he would patiently await John Milner’s return. Then directing his enormous mass towards a large rocking chair, he placed himself in it, and giving a gentle balancing to his seat, retired into the vacancy of his thoughts.

John Milner descended to the office of the hotel, arranged the bill of fare of the substantial meals that were to be served to his companion, went out of the door, walked towards the Ohio through the streets of Covington, crossed the river in a ferry-boat, landed on the right bank, and with his hands in his pockets lounged up into the commercial quarter of the town.

He could not help noticing that there was great excitement about. He tried to overhear a few words of the passing conversation. He had no doubt the people were much interested in the approaching arrival of the second player.

Behold John Milner, then, going up one street and down another among the crowd, who were evidently discussing something, stopping near groups of them, in front of the shops, wherever the excitement was manifesting itself by the noisiest talk. Among the crowd were many women, and in America they are no less demonstrative than in any country of the old world.

John Milner was quite satisfied, but he would have liked to know to what a pitch of impatience they had risen at not having yet seen Tom Crabbe at Cincinnati. That was why that, noticing the worthy Dick Wolgod, pork butcher, in a tall hat, a black coat and working apron, standing at the door of his shop, he entered and asked for a ham, of which, as we know, he could easily dispose. After paying for it without bargaining at all, he said as he went out:

“The meeting is to-morrow?”

“Yes — a fine show,” replied Dick Wolgod, “and it will be a credit to the city.”

“There will be, doubtless, a great crowd at Spring Grove?” asked John Milner.

“All the town will be there, sir,” replied Dick, with that politeness which no proper pork butcher would deny to a customer who had just bought a ham. “Consider, sir, such an exhibition — ”

John Milner pricked up his ears. He was puzzled. How could anyone doubt that he intended to exhibit Tom Crabbe at Spring Grove?

And then he said:

“Then — there is no anxiety about the delays — which might occur — ”

“None.”

And as a customer entered at this moment, John Milner departed, a prey to more perplexity.

He had not gone a hundred yards when, at the corner of the fifth cross-road, he suddenly stopped, lifted his arms to the sky, and let the ham drop on the footpath.

There at the corner of a house was a poster, on which was displayed in large letters:

HE ARRIVES! HE ARRIVES!! HE ARRIVES!!!

HE HAS ARRIVED!!!!

That beat everything! How did they know that Tom Crabbe was at Cincinnati? They knew the date the Champion of the New World was to appear! Was this the explanation of the joy that animated the town and the satisfaction displayed by the pork butcher Wolgod?

Decidedly it is difficult — let us say impossible — for a celebrated man to escape the inconveniences of celebrity, and for the future he would have to give up throwing the veil of incognito over the shoulders of Tom Crabbe.

Besides, there were other posters explicitly stating not only that he had arrived, but that he had come from Texas to figure at the Spring Grove show.

“Ah! This is too strong” said John Milner. “They know my plans of bringing Tom Crabbe here! But I have not said a word about it to anybody. I must have spoken to Crabbe, and Crabbe, who never speaks, must have spoken on the way. I cannot understand it otherwise.”

Thereupon John Milner went back to Covington, entered the hotel for a second breakfast, said nothing to Crabbe of

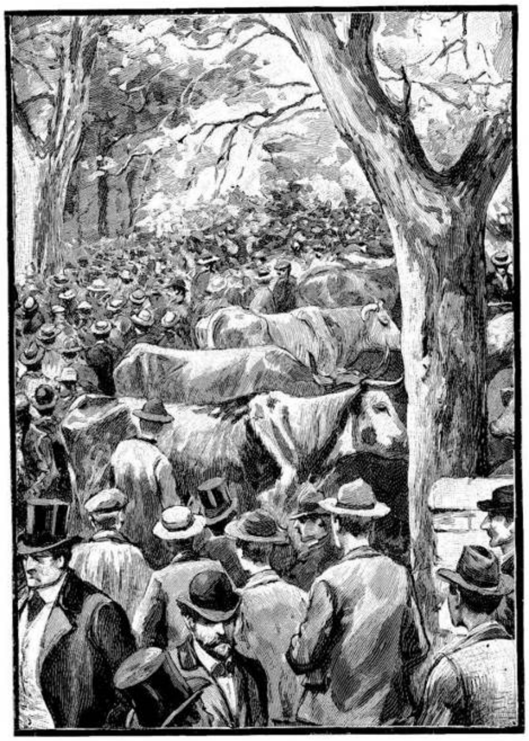

The show at Spring Grove.

the indiscretion he must have committed, and, persisting in not showing himself again, spent the rest of the day with him.

Next day at eight o’clock both of them walked to the river, crossed the suspension bridge, and went up the streets of the town.

It was in the north-west, in the enclosure of Spring Grove, that the great show of cattle was to be held. Already the people were on their way there in large numbers, and — as John Milner was obliged to notice — they showed no sign of anxiety. On all sides were crowds of joyous, noisy people, whose curiosity was soon to be gratified.

Perhaps John Milner thought that before he reached Spring Grove, Tom Crabbe would be recognized by his stature, his build, his face, which his photographs had reproduced thousands of times in the farthest villages of the Union! Well, no! Nobody took any notice of him, nobody looked round as he passed, nobody seemed to imagine that this colossus who suited his pace to that of John Milner was the celebrated pugilist as well as the competitor in the Hypperbone match whom twenty-four points had sent to the thirty-eighth square, State of Ohio, Cincinnati.

They reached Spring Grove as nine o’clock was striking. There was already a great crowd there. To the tumult of the spectators were added the lowing and bleating and grunting of the animals, of which the most favoured were to figure, to their great honour, in the official prize lists.

There were assembled splendid examples of bovine, ovine, and porcine species, a number of sheep and pigs of the best breeds, milch cows, cattle of which America in a year furnishes England with more than four hundred thousand. There paraded with the breeding kings, the cattle kings reckoned among the most worthy citizens of the United States. In the centre was a platform on which agricultural products were exhibited.

And then an idea occurred to John Milner to make his way through the crowd to reach the foot of the platform, to make his companion mount it and to shout to the crowd:

“Behold Tom Crabbe, the Champion of the New World, the second player in the Hypperbone match!”

What an effect this unexpected revelation would make in the presence of the hero of the day towering above the excited crowd!

And so, pushing Tom Crabbe in front, and as if towed by this powerful tug, he forged through the waves of the populace and reached the platform.

The place was taken! And who occupied it? A pig — an enormous pig, the colossal product of the two American breeds, the Poland, China, and the Red Jersey — a pig sold when three years old for two hundred and fifty dollars and then already weighing 1320 lbs. — a phenomenal pig, his length nearly eight feet, his height four, around the neck six, around the body seven and a half, his present weight 1954 lbs.!

And it was this specimen of the Suide family that had been brought from Texas! It was his arrival at Cincinnati that the posters announced! He it was who this day absorbed all the public attention! He it was whom his fortunate owner presented to the applause of the crowd!

Behold, then, before what new star had paled the star of Tom Crabbe! A monstrous pig that was to win a prize at the Spring Grove meeting!

John Milner, astounded, recoiled. Then, making a sign to Tom Crabbe to follow him, he returned to the hotel by the side streets, and, disappointed, humiliated, he shut himself up in his room and went out no more that day.

And if ever Cincinnati had occasion to regain its nickname of Porkopolis, which had first been taken from it by Chicago, it was on the 30th of May, 1897.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PACE OF THE TORTOISE

“Received of Mr. Hermann Titbury, of Chicago, the sum of three hundred dollars in payment of the fine to which he was sentenced on the 14th of May, instant, for infringement of the law as to alcoholic drinks.

“Calais, Maine, 19th of May, 1897.

“Walter Hoek, *“Registrar.”*

And so Hermann Titbury had had to give in, not without a long resistance that lasted to the 19th of May. Then, the amount being paid, the identity of the third player duly established, the proof given that it was Mr. and Mrs. Titbury who were travelling under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Field, Judge R. T. Ordak, after three days in prison, had remitted the rest of the sentence. It was time.

That very day, the 19th, at eight o’clock in the morning, Tornbrock had made the sixth throw of the dice, and sent the notification by wire to Calais.

The inhabitants of this little town, annoyed at one of the players in the Hypperbone match hiding himself under a false name, did not show themselves very hospitable, and even laughed at the misadventure. They had been delighted that in Maine, Calais should have been the place chosen by the late Mr. Hypperbone, and could not forgive Titbury for not making his arrival known. It follows that his real name, when it was revealed, produced no impression. As soon as the gaoler had set him at liberty, Hermann Titbury took the road to the inn. No one accompanied him, no one even turned round to look at him. And, besides, the Titburys did not care for the acclamations of the crowd, which Harris T. Kymbale sought, and they had but one wish: to leave Calais as soon as possible.

It was nine o’clock in the morning, and three hours would elapse before the time came for them to present themselves at the telegraph office. And so before the tea and toast of their breakfast, Mr. and Mrs. Titbury occupied themselves in putting their accounts in order.

“How much have we spent since our departure from Chicago?” asked the husband.

“Eighty-eight dollars and thirty-seven cents,” replied the wife.

“As much as that — ”

“Yes, and we have not wasted our money on the road.”

Without the blood of Titbury in your veins you might be astonished that the expenses had been reduced to this point. It is true that the amount had been increased by the three hundred dollars fine — which brought up the sum sufficiently to make a heavy drain on the Titburyan treasury.

“And supposing the telegram we are to receive from Chicago does not oblige us to leave for the other end of the country!” sighed Mr. Titbury.

“We shall have to pay what is necessary,” said Mrs. Titbury decidedly.

“I would rather give it up — ”

“Again!” exclaimed the imperious lady. “Let it be the last time, Hermann, that you talk of giving up this chance of winning sixty millions of dollars!”

The three hours went by, and at twenty minutes to twelve the couple, installed at the post office, waited, with what impatience can be imagined. Hardly half a dozen people had come in to look at them.

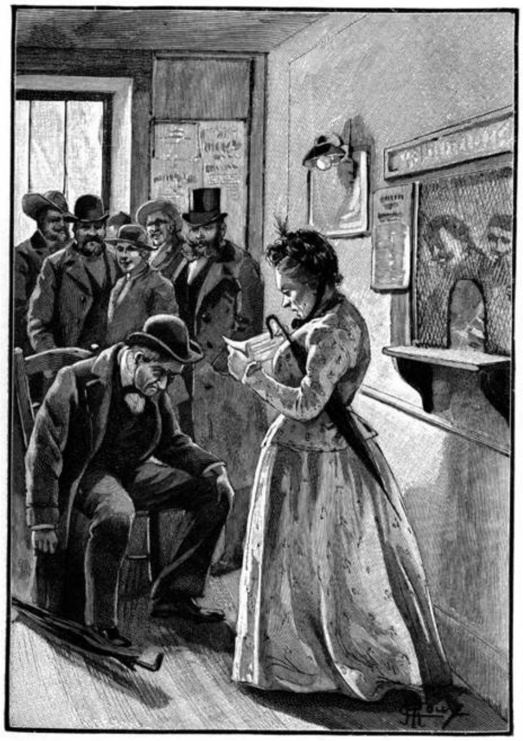

The telegram was handed to Mrs. Titbury.

What a difference to the excitement of which their competitors were the object at Fort Riley, at Austin, at Santa Fé, at Milwaukee, at Key West!

“Here is a message for Mr. Hermann Titbury, of Chicago,” said the clerk.

The personage called upon was seized with weakness at the moment his lot was about to be decided. His legs bent, his tongue was paralyzed, and he could not reply.

“Here!” said Mrs. Titbury, giving her husband a shake and pushing him by his shoulders.

“You are really the person for whom this message is intended?” asked the clerk.

“As if he were not!” exclaimed Mrs. Titbury.

“As if I were not!” replied the third competitor at last. “Go and ask Judge Ordak! It cost me dear to prevent them cheating me out of my identity!”

In fact there was no doubt on the subject. The telegram was handed to Mrs. Titbury, and opened by her, for the trembling hand of her husband could not manage it.

And this is what she read, in a voice that died away to silence before she articulated the last words:

“Hermann Titbury two, by one and one. Great Salt Lake City, Utah. —Tornbrock.”

The couple fainted amid the ill-restrained raillery of the crowd, and had to be placed on one of the seats in the room.

The first time, by one and one, sent to the second square, at the end of Maine; the second time, again by one and one, to be sent to the fourth square, that of Utah! Four points in two throws! And to crown it all, after coming from Chicago to one extremity of the Union, to go nearly to the other extremity in the west!

When they had got over the few minutes of weakness, which were quite, intelligible, it will be admitted, Mrs. Titbury recovered herself, became once again the resolute virago who dominated the household, took her husband by the arm and dragged him towards the inn.

The bad luck was indeed too pronounced! What an advance had already been made by the other players, Tom Crabbe, Max Real, Harris T. Kymbale, Lizzie Wag, without mentioning Commodore Urrican! They were running like hares, and the Titburys were going like tortoises! To the thousands of miles travelled between Chicago and Calais there would now be added the two thousand two hundred miles which separate Calais from Great Salt Lake City.

But if the Titburys were not going to abandon the match, it would not do for them to delay in Calais if they were to rest a few days in Chicago, for they had to reach Utah before the 2nd of June. And as Mrs. Titbury would not hear of giving up the game, the couple left Calais that same day by the first train, accompanied by all the good wishes of the people — for their competitors.

The unfortunate couple had no occasion to trouble themselves about their route, for they had only to go back by that which had brought them to Maine. Arrived at Chicago, they would have the Union Pacific trains which by Omaha, Granger, and Ogden run to the capital of Utah.

In the afternoon the little town was relieved of the presence of these uncongenial people who had made so sorry a figure there. And the townsfolk hoped that the chances of the Noble Game of the United States of America would never bring them there again — a hope in which they themselves shared, as may be imagined.

Two days later the Titburys stepped out of the train at Chicago, almost knocked up by these long journeys, which were ill-suited to their age and habits. They were able to stay a few days at their house in Robey Street. Mr. Titbury was seized on the road with an attack of rheumatism, which he usually treated with contempt — an economical kind of treatment very much in keeping with his native meanness. In fact he quite lost the use of his legs, and he had to be carried home from the railway station.

The newspapers, of course, announced his arrival. The reporters of the *Staats Zeitung,* who were favourable to his chance, called on him. But seeing him in such a state, they had to abandon him to his ill-luck, and the agencies found no more takers, not even at seven to one.

But all the time they reckoned without Kate Titbury, that masterful woman, and she let them see it. It was not with indifference that she treated her husband’s rheumatism, but with violence. Aided by her dragon of a servant, she rubbed him with such vigour as to leave hardly any skin on his legs. Never was horse or ass currycombed in this fashion. Needless to say, neither doctor nor druggist was called in, and perhaps the patient was no worse for it.

The delay lasted only four days. On the 23rd, arrangements were made to continue the journey. Several thousand paper dollars had to be drawn from the bank, and on the 24th, in the morning, husband and wife were off together, having all the necessary time to reach the Mormon capital.

The railroad runs direct from Chicago to Omaha; thence the Union Pacific goes off to Ogden, and under the name of the Southern Pacific continues to San Francisco. All things considered, it was fortunate that the Titburys had not been sent to California, which would have increased the journey by a thousand miles.

In the afternoon of the 28th they reached Ogden, an important station which a branch line puts in communication with Great Salt Lake City.

Then occurred a meeting — not between two trains, we hasten to say — but between two competitors, a meeting which had curious consequences.

In the afternoon, Max Real, returning from his visit to the National Park, had just entered Ogden. Thence he was going next day, the 29th, to Cheyenne to receive the result of his third throw of the dice. As he was walking along the platform of the railway station he found himself face to face with this Titbury in whose, company he had followed the funeral of William J. Hypperbone, and figured on the stage of the Auditorium during the reading of the will of the eccentric deceased.

The couple had again resolved to travel under a fictitious name. They would not again expose themselves to the inconveniences of which they had been the victims at Calais. They could keep themselves incognito during the journey and enter themselves under their real name at the hotel in Great Salt Lake City. What was the use of revealing on the journey his position as the future heir of sixty millions? It would be enough to do that in the capital of Utah, and then if anyone tried to make use of the information, Mr. Titbury would know how to defend himself.

Judge, then, of the disagreeable surprise experienced by the blue flag when, in the hearing of a large number of people who had got out of the train, he heard himself addressed in this way by the violet flag:

“If I am not mistaken, it is Mr. Hermann Titbury, of Chicago, my competitor in the Hypperbone match, to whom I have the honour of speaking?”

The couple jumped back in unison. Visibly annoyed at being signalled out for public attention, Mr. Titbury turned back and did not appear to remember having ever seen the intruder, although he recognized him at once.

“I do not know, sir,” he replied. “Are you addressing yourself to me?”

“Pardon,” continued the young painter. “It is not possible for me to be mistaken. We were together at the famous funeral — at Chicago — Max Real — the first to start — ”.

“Max Real?” said Mrs. Titbury, as if she heard the name for the first time. |

Max Real began to get impatient. “Come, sir,” he said, “are you, or are you not, Mr. Hermann Titbury, of Chicago?”

“Sir,” said the other sharply. “By what right do you permit yourself to catechize me?”

“That is how you take it,” said Max Real. “You do not wish to be Mr. Titbury, one of the seven, sent first to Maine and then to Utah — be it so! That is your affair! As for me, I am Max Real, on my return from Kansas and Wyoming! And with that, good evening!”

Then, as the train was just starting for Cheyenne, he jumped on to one of the cars with Tommy, leaving the Titburys confused at the adventure, and cursing those good-for-nothings who call themselves artists.

At this moment a man who had been looking on at this little scene, not without evident interest, approached. This individual, who was fairly well dressed, was about forty years of age, and had a frank physiognomy which could not but inspire confidence even with the most suspicious.

“There,” said he, with a. bow to Mrs. Titbury,” we have an impertinent fellow who deserved to be punished for his insolence! And if I had not been afraid of interfering in what did not concern me — ”

“I thank you, sir,” replied Mr. Titbury, flattered at seeing so distinguished a man come to his defence.

“But,” continued the man so distinguished, “is that really Max Real, your competitor?”

“Yes — I believe so — quite so,” replied Mr. Titbury,” although I scarcely know him.”

“Well,” added the traveller, “I wish him everything unpleasant for having spoken in so free and easy a way with such infinitely respectable people, and that you, sir, will beat him in this game — him and the others, be it understood!”

One would have had to be very churlish not to welcome the advances of a man of such politeness, and even such obsequiousness, a gentleman who was so much interested in the success of Mr. and Mrs. Titbury.

Who was this man? Mr. Robert Inglis, of Great Salt Lake City, who was returning there this very day — a commercial traveller on a large scale who knew the district thoroughly from having been everywhere about it for a number of years. After mentioning his name and occupation, he offered very politely to pilot the Titburys, and undertook to find a hotel that would suit them.

How could they refuse the services of Mr. Robert Inglis, who stated, in addition, that he had ventured a very heavy sum on the chances of the third partner? He took Mrs. Titbury's smaller luggage and put it in one of the cars of the train just leaving Ogden. Mr. Titbury was particularly pleased that Mr. Inglis had treated Max Real as the rascal deserved. And he could not help congratulating himself on meeting so pleasant a travelling companion to be his guide in the capital of Utah.

All was for the best. The travellers took their scats in the car, and never, it may be affirmed, did time pass more quickly for them than during this journey of about fifty miles.

Mr. Inglis was as interesting as he was inexhaustible. What appeared to please the excellent lady was that he was the forty-third child of a Mormon household, before, be it understood, polygamy had been forbidden by the decree of the President of the United States.

"Ah, my friends," he said in a voice that almost drew tears from Mrs. Titbury's eyes," if you had known Brigham Young, our venerated pope, with his hair in a tuft, his grey beard fringing his cheeks and his chin, his lynx eyes; and George Smith, cousin of the prophet and historian of the church; and Hunter, president of the bishops; and Orme Hyde, president of the twelve apostles; and Daniel Wells, second counsellor, and Eliza Snow, one of the spiritual wives of the pope — "

"Was she beautiful?" asked Mrs. Titbury.

"Abominably ugly, madame; but what is beauty in a woman?"

And she whom he addressed gave him a little smile of approval.

"What age now is the celebrated Brigham Young?" asked Mr. Titbury.

“None — for he is dead! But if he had lived he would be a hundred and two.”

“And you, sir,” asked Mrs. Titbury with a slight hesitation,” are you married?”

“My dear madame! What is the use of being married now polygamy is forbidden! One wife is more difficult to manage than fifty!”

And Mr. Inglis laughed so gaily at his repartee that the couple joined in his hilarity.

The country crossed by the Ogden branch is flat and barren, of sand and clay mingled with salts which cover it with whitish efflorescence, as in the great desert to the west of the lake. It grows little but thyme, sage, rosemary, heaths and prodigious quantities of yellow sunflowers. Towards the east rise the distant and misty summits of the Wahsatch mountains.

It was half-past seven when the train stopped at Great Salt Lake City station.

A magnificent city, Robert Inglis had said, and assuredly he would not let his new friends leave it until they had seen it, a town of fifty thousand inhabitants — he exaggerated by five thousand — a magnificent town enclosed on the east by magnificent mountains, which the magnificent Jordan puts in communication with the magnificent Salt Lake; a town healthier than all others, with its houses, its cottages surrounded by masses of verdure, their orchards, their kitchen gardens planted with pears, plums, apricots, peaches, yielding the most beautiful fruit in the world! And bordering its streets, magnificent shops, built of stone and magnificent in aspect! And its public buildings, magnificent specimens of Mormon architecture, the magnificent presidency where once resided Brigham Young, the magnificent Mormon Temple, the magnificent Tabernacle, a marvel of carpentry, in which eight thousand faithful could find places!. And formerly what magnificent ceremonies, the pope and the apostles on a magnificent platform, around them the crowd of saints. Men, women, children — oh! what a number! — assisting at the reading of the bible written by the magnificent hand of Mormon himself! In short, everything was magnificent.

The truth is that Mr. Robert Inglis, for love of his native city, allowed himself a good deal of exaggeration. The town of Great Salt Lake City does not merit such praises. It is too large for its population, and if it possesses some natural beauties it has no artistic ones. The famous Tabernacle is but an enormous dish-cover placed flat on the ground.

In any case there could be no question of visiting Great Salt Lake City that evening. The most pressing thing was to choose a hotel, and as Mr. Titbury did not wish to pay an exorbitant price, his guide proposed one out of the town, the *Cheap Hotel* The very name was attractive to the couple, and reassuring; and leaving their portmanteau at the station, to be fetched if the *Cheap Hotel* proved suitable, he followed Mr. Inglis, who had offered to carry the bag and rug of the excellent and worthy dame.

They went down towards the lower quarters of the city, of which the Titburys could see nothing, as it was alread} nearly night; they reached the right bank of a river which Mr. Inglis said was Crescent River, and they walked for nearly three miles.

Perhaps the Titburys found the walk rather long; but they thought that the hotel would be cheaper the farther it was from the town and did not complain.

At last about half-past eight, amid complete darkness, the sky being overcast, the travellers arrived in front of a house of the appearance of which they were unable to judge, A few minutes later, the hotel-keeper — a fellow of somewhat savage mien, it must be confessed — ushered them into a whitewashed room on the ground floor, furnished with a bed, a table and two chairs. That would do for them, and they thanked Mr. Inglis, who took his departure, promising to return next morning.

Very tired, Mr. and Mrs. Titbury, after sharing a few provisions that remained in the bag, went to bed. And soon asleep side by side, they dreamt that the prognostics of this obliging Mr. Inglis had come true, and that the approaching throw of the dice had put them on twenty squares.

They awoke at eight o’clock, having passed a good, restful night. They rose leisurely, having nothing to do but to wait for their guide to visit the town with him. It was not that they were inquisitive by nature — oh, no! — but how could they refuse the offers of Mr. Robert Inglis, who wished to show them the marvels of the great Mormon city?

At nine o’clock, nobody. Mr. and Mrs. Titbury, dressed, ready to go out, looked out of the window on to the main road before the *Cheap Hotel*.

This road, their obliging cicerone had told them the evening before, was the old Emigrants’ Road. It ran along by Crescent River. There formerly went the waggons laden with merchandise for the camps of the pioneers when it took many months to go from New York to the western territories.

The *Cheap Hotel* stood evidently by itself, for by leaning out of the window Mr. Titbury could see no house on either bank of the river. Nothing but the sombre masses of a pine forest that rose in terraces on the flanks of a high mountain.

At ten o’clock, still nobody. Mr. and Mrs. Titbury began to get impatient and hungry.

“Let us go out,” said one.

“Let us go out,” said the other.

And opening the door of their room, they entered a central room, the bar of a roadside inn, with the door opening on to the road.

There on the threshold were two men, shabbily dressed, of doubtful aspect, drunken-eyed, who seemed to be guarding the door.

“You cannot pass!”

Such was the injunction conveyed in a rough voice to Mr. Titbury.

“What do you mean by ‘you cannot pass’?”

“Not — without paying.”

“Paying?”

This word was evidently, in all the English language, that which pleased Mr. Titbury the least when it was addressed to him.

“Paying?” he repeated. “Paying to go out? It is a joke.”

But Mrs. Titbury, suddenly seized with anxiety, did not take matters in that way, and asked:

“How much?”

“Three thousand dollars.”

The voice she recognized. It was the voice of Robert Inglis, who appeared at the door of the hotel.

Mr. Titbury, however, less perspicacious than his wife, began to laugh.

“Eh!” he exclaimed. “There is our friend.”

“In person,” replied he.

“And always in a good humour — ”

“Always.”

“And really it is very funny, this claim for three thousand dollars.”

“What you would have, my dear sir,” answered Mr. Inglis,” that is the price for a night at the *Cheap Hotel.”*

“You speak seriously?” asked Mrs. Titbury, turning pale.

“Quite seriously, madame.”

Mr. Titbury, in a burst of anger, tried to rush through the doorway.

Two strong arms were laid heavily on his shoulders and he could not move.

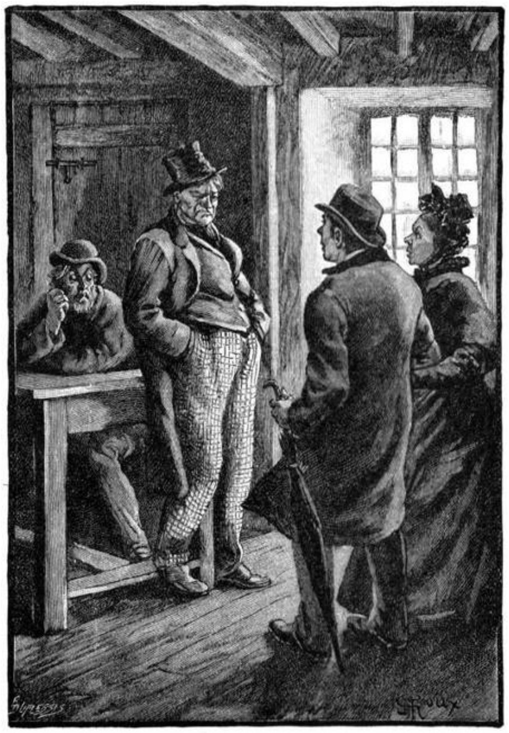

“You cannot pass!” p. 247

This Robert Inglis was simply one of those rascals of whom there are so many in the distant parts of the Union always lying in wait for opportunities which are so frequent. More than once already many a traveller had been plundered by this pretended forty-third child of a Mormon marriage, aided by accomplices such as the two individuals of this wretched *Cheap Hotel* An abominable cut-throat, or rather cut-purse, put on a good scent by the questions of Max Real, he had offered his services to the Titburys, and having learnt from them that they had with them three thousand dollars — a most imprudent admission, it must be confessed — he had brought them to this isolated dram shop, where they would be entirely at his mercy.

Mr. Titbury understood, but too late.

“Sir,” he said, “I understand that you will not let us go out just now. I have business in the town — ”

“Not until the 2nd of June, the day when the telegram should come,” said Mr. Inglis, with a smile,” and this is only the 29th of May.”

“Then do you intend to keep us here five days?”

“And even longer, and even much longer,” replied the affable gentleman, “at least until you hand me over three thousand dollars in good notes on the Bank of Chicago.”

“Wretch!”

“I am polite with you,” observed Mr. Inglis; “will you be the same with me, Mr. Blue Flag?”

“But this money — it is all that I have.”

“It will be easy for the rich Hermann Titbury to have as much sent to him from Chicago as he may require! His cash-box is well lined, this wealthy Hermann Titbury! Observe, my dear guest, that these three thousand dollars you have with you I could take out of your pocket. But, by Jonathan! we are not thieves. It is merely the amount of the *Cheap Hotel* bill, and you would do well to settle it”

“Never.”

“As you please.”

At this the door was shut, and the Titburys remained imprisoned in the low room.

And then what recriminations on this accursed journey, on the tribulations, to say nothing of the dangers, that had fallen on the travelling pair! After the fine of Calais, the robbery of Great Salt Lake City! How unlucky to have encountered this bandit Inglis!

“We owe this to that rascal Real!” said Mr. Titbury. “We did not want our name to be known until we arrived, and the beggar shouted it out at Ogden all over the platform! And it happened that this brigand overheard it! What is to be done?”

“Sacrifice the three thousand dollars,” said Mrs. Titbury.

“Never — never!”

“Hermann!” That was all that was said by the imperious and peevish woman.

But it must come to this dire extremity if Titbury remained obstinate, the scoundrels could compel him to do it. And if they wanted to seize his money, and then throw him into Crescent River, and his wife, after him, who was to bother about strangers whom nobody knew were in the town?

Yet Mr. Titbury resisted. Perhaps relief might come — a detachment of militia passing along the road, or at least some passers by he could call to his assistance. Vain hope! A minute afterwards both of them were put in a room with a window opening on to an interior court. The ferocious innkeeper brought some food. Decidedly for the price demanded it was not too much to be not only lodged but boarded at the *Cheap Hotel* Twenty-four, forty-eight hours went by in this way. The degree outrage reached by the prisoners we do not know. They had not even the opportunity of seeing Mr. Inglis, who kept away discreetly, no doubt, so as not to seem to exercise any pressure on his guests.

At last the 1st of June was inscribed on the calendars of the Union. Next day, before noon, the third player must appear in person at the post office in Great Salt Lake City. In default of his being present, he would lose all his rights to continue the game, which up to then had been so disastrous to him.

Well, no! Mr. Titbury would not give in — he would not give in. But, urged on by the delay, Mrs. Titbury intervened with rare vigour in the endeavour to impose her will upon him. Supposing Mr. Titbury had by the caprice of the teetotum been sent to the inn, to the labyrinth, to the prison, would he not have paid the fines, double or treble? Would he have hesitated to do so? No. Yet it was just as obligatory under the present circumstances, for if it is well to keep money, it is still better to keep alive, and their existence was in the hands of these rascals. So — he must pay.

Mr. Titbury resisted for seven hours in the hope of a providential succour that never came.

Exactly at half past seven Mr. Inglis came in, as amiable and polite as ever.

“To-morrow is the great day,” said he. “It will be better, my dear guest, for you to go this evening to Great Salt Lake City.”

“And who is hindering me but you?” said Mr. Titbury, almost choking with rage.

“Me?” replied Mr. Inglis, always smiling. “But all you have to do is pay your bill.”

“There it is,” said Mrs. Titbury, handing Mr. Inglis the bundle of bank notes.

Mr. Titbury nearly died when he saw this scoundrel take the bundle and count the notes. And he could make no answer when the brigand added:

It is useless for you to give me a receipt for this money — is it not so? But have no fear; I will put it to your account, my dear guest. And now it remains to me to wish you, with a sympathetic good evening, a good chance of gaining the millions of the Hypperbone match!"

The door was opened, and without hearing any more the couple rushed outside.

It was nearly night and the place was difficult to identify. How then could they inform the police of the scene of this tragi-comedy? The urgent matter was to regain Great Salt City, the lights of which they could see three miles away up Crescent River. And an hour afterwards Mr. and Mrs. Titbury reached the *New Sion,* where they went into the first hotel they came to. It could not cost them more than the *Cheap Hotel.*

Next morning, the 2nd of June, Mr. Titbury went to the sheriffs offices, so as to lay his complaint and ask for the police to be sent in search of Mr. Robert Inglis. Perhaps there might still be time for him to recover his three thousand dollars.

The sheriff — a most intelligent magistrate — listened with great interest to what the robbed had to say about the robber. Unfortunately Mr. Titbury could give but vague information regarding the whereabouts of the hotel. He had been taken there in the evening; he had left there in the evening. When he mentioned *Cheap Hotel,* on the banks of the Crescent River, the sheriff replied that he knew of no hotel of that name and that there was no Crescent River in the district. It would thus be difficult to lay hands on the thief, who, besides, had probably tied with his accomplices. As to sending a brigade of detectives after him in this country of woods and mountains, it would end in nothing.

“You say, Mr. Titbury,” asked the sheriff, “that this man calls himself — ”

“Inglis — the scoundrel — Robert Inglis — ”

“Yes — that is the name he gave you! But now I think of it I have no doubt he is the famous Bill Arrol. I recognize his style of workmanship. This is not the first time.”

“And you have not yet arrested him?” exclaimed Mr. Titbury furiously.

“Not yet,” replied the sheriff, “we have only got as far as having him under observation. He will be taken some day — or another, and he will be electrocuted — if he is not hanged.”

“But my money, sir, my money?”

“What would you have? We must apprehend this rascal, Bill Arrol, and that is not an easy thing. All I can promise you, Mr. Titbury, is to send you a piece of the rope, if he is hanged, and, supposing the game is not finished, you are sure to win with such a fetish!”

And that is all Mr. Titbury could get out of this original sheriff of the Mormon city.

CHAPTER XIX

THE GREEN FLAG

The green flag was that of Harris T. Kymbale, the flag that was assigned to the fourth player on account of the place this colour occupies in the solar spectrum. The reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune* was quite satisfied with it. Was it not the colour of hope?

It would have been in very bad taste for him to complain of the lot which had fallen to him as tourist and player. After having been, by the first throw of twelve, sent to New Mexico, his throw of ten, by four and six, had sent him to the twenty-second square, South Carolina, on the coast of the Union, and in particular to Charleston, its metropolis. He had from the 21st of May to the 4th of June to get to South Carolina, and as the journey could be done by railroad all the way after leaving Clifton Station, he had plenty of time to spare.

Harris T. Kymbale left Santa Fé, then, on the 21st, and this time he escaped with a handsome gratuity and had not to dazzle his driver’s eyes with hundreds of thousands or even hundreds of dollars. He arrived in the evening at the station at Clifton, whence the iron road, after crossing the parallel which bounds Colorado on the south, took him to Denver, the capital of the said State.

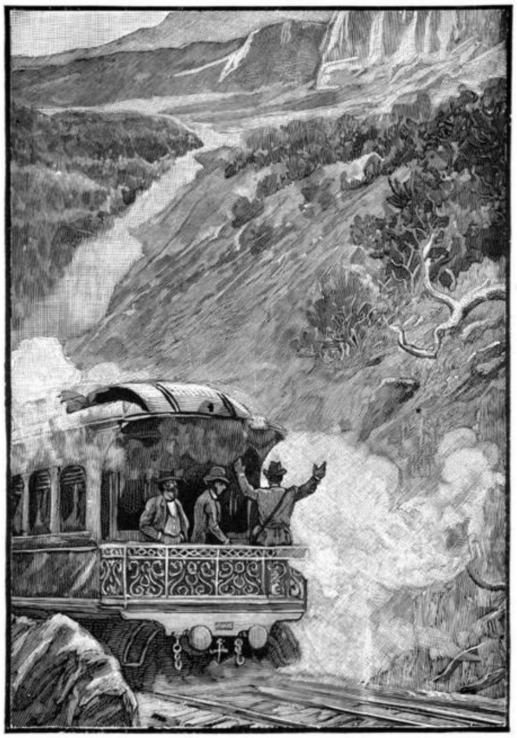

It was as beautiful as the National Park at Wyoming.

“Here I am in one of the finest States of the Union, the Rocky Mountains to the west, to the east plains of marvellous fertility, a soil paved with lead, silver, and gold, across which petroleum flows in streams, a region to which flock emigrants attracted by the natural riches and idlers invited by the luxurious watering-places, the salubrity of its climate, the purity of its atmosphere! Then I do not know this superb country and I have an opportunity of knowing it. Can I hope the chance will bring me here in the course of the game? Nothing is less likely! On the other hand, to reach South Carolina, I have to cross three or four States I have already visited. They offer nothing new to me. The best I can do is to devote to Colorado all the time I have at my disposal, and that is what I will do. Provided I am at Charleston on the 4th of June, before noon, I do not see that my backers can reproach me. Besides, I can do as I please, and those who do not like it, &c., &c.”

And that is why, instead of continuing his journey by the line which runs through Oakley, Topeka and Kansas, Harris T. Kymbale on the 21st made choice of a comfortable hotel in the capital of Colorado.

He spent but five days in the state — up to the evening of the 26th — but a reporter can do in a short time what no one else can do in double the time. It is a matter of professional training.

The afternoon of the 26th the green flag passed in the splendid capital. A reception took place in his honour at the residency. In the States, as we know, a man is valued according to his money value, and in the mind of the Coloradans Harris T. Kymbale was worth sixty millions of dollars. He beheld himself entertained, then, according to his merit by these ostentatious Americans, who have gold not only in their strong boxes, in their pockets, in their soil, but even in the names of their principal cities!

Next day, the 27th of May, the fourth player took his leave of the governor amid a great crowd of his supporters, who cheered him loudly. The train left Denver, reached the frontier at Fort Wallace, crossed Kansas from west to east, then Missouri by way of its capital, Jefferson City, and at its eastern frontier stopped at the railway station of St. Louis on the evening of the 28th.

It was not his intention to stay in this large town, which he already knew, and he hoped he would never be sent there by fate, for it was the city of the fifty-second square, and occupied the place of the prison in the Noble Game of Goose. And so he proposed to choose one of the best hotels at St. Louis to devote a night to the rest he required, and to start early in the morning by the first train.

It appeared as though nothing would hinder his journey or prevent his being at Charleston on the day named. And yet he might never have arrived, and might even never have been able to travel again, owing to an incident which no one could have foreseen.

About a quarter past seven he was walking along the platform of the railway station to ascertain when the train started, when suddenly he knocked up against, or was knocked up against by, an individual hurrying out of one of the offices.

Immediately these amenities were exchanged: —

“Booby!”

“Brute!”

“Why don’t you look where you are going?”

“Why don’t you!”

The words came like revolver bullets, for the men were both of them quick-tempered and irritable.

One of them was so in the highest degree, and you will not be surprised to hear he was Hodge Urrican.

Harris T. Kymbale recognized his competitor.

“The commodore!” he exclaimed.

“The journalist!” was the reply, in a voice as if from the mouth of a gun.

It was indeed the commodore, without his faithful Turk this time, and it was better that Turk was not there to intervene in the affair that he might have pushed to extremes.

So Hodge Urrican had not only survived his shipwreck, but he had found an opportunity of leaving Key West? In what way? Anyhow his journey must have been rapidly accomplished, for he was still in Florida on the 25th. Quite a resurrection, assuredly, and after his landing at Key West in the state we know his competitors might have imagined that the match of the Seven would go on with only six!

But here was Hodge Urrican at St. Louis in flesh and bone, as his competitor could prove by the collision, but in a humour considerably worse than usual. That could be understood. Was he not on his way to California with the obligation to return to Chicago, so as to recommence the game after paying a triple fine?

However, Harris T. Kymbale, like a good fellow, endeavoured to say something pleasant.

“My compliments, Commodore Urrican, for I see you are not dead.”

“No, sir, not even after this blow from a clumsy fool, and quite capable of burying those who would doubtless be glad at never seeing me again.”

“Do you say that to me?” asked the reporter with a frown.

“Yes, sir,” replied Hodge Urrican, looking straight into his eyes; “yes, Mr. Favourite!”

And he seemed to chew the word, to grind it between his teeth.

Harris T. Kymbale, who was never particularly patient, began to get warm, and replied:

“It does not seem to improve your politeness to have to go to California to return to Chicago — ”

This was touching the commodore in a sensitive place.

“You insult me, sir!” he exclaimed.

“You can take it as you please!”

“Well, I take it as an insult, and you shall give me satisfaction for it!”

“This very moment, if you like!”

“Yes — if I had the time,” yelled Hodge Urrican.” but I cannot”££

“Then take it.”

“What I am going to take is this train, which is off, and which I must not miss.”

The train was whistling, and in a cloud of smoke began to move. Not a second to lose. The commodore jumped on to the gangway between two of the cars, and roared out in a terrible voice:

“Mr. Journalist, you shall hear from me — you shall hear — ”

“When?”

“This very evening — at the European Hotel.”

“I will be there,” said Harris T. Kymbale.

But the train had hardly gone when he made this reflection:

“Good! That is where he makes a mistake, the animal! That is not the Omaha train he has got into! He has gone the wrong way! After all, that is his affair.”

And in fact the train in question was going east, the way Harris T. Kymbale would go to reach Charleston.

But Hodge Urrican had made no mistake. He was returning to the next station, to Herculaneum, where Turk was waiting for him. His bag had been left behind, and a lively scene had occurred between the commodore and the station-master at Herculaneum — a discussion in which Turk threatened to introduce the said station-master, all alive oh! into the furnace of one of the locomotives. His master had quieted him down, and, taking advantage of a train that was just starting, had gone off to claim the bag at St. Louis. The matter was arranged without difficulty, the bag would be telegraphed for; and it was just as Hodge Urrican was coming out of the office to return to Herculaneum that he had come into contact with the reporter.

Having seen his adversary depart, Harris T. Kymbale thought no more of the incident. He went back to the European Hotel, which happened to be the one at which he had put up. After dinner he took a long walk through the town, and as he entered the hotel on his return a letter was given him which had come from Herculaneum by the last train.

It could only have been a brain of the chemical composition of that which fermented beneath the cranium of Hodge Urrican that would have written such a letter as this from this astonishing man: —

“mr. fourth competitor, — Doubtless you have a revolver, as I have. To-morrow morning at seven o’clock I take the train leaving Herculaneum for St. Louis. I request that you will take the train leaving St. Louis for Herculaneum at the same time. This will make no change in your road or in mine. These two trains will pass each other at seventeen minutes past seven. If you are not a man who knocks up against people and then insults them without giving them satisfaction, you can be, at that precise moment, alone, on the gangway behind the last car which precedes the luggage van, as I shall be on the gangway of the last car of my train. There will then be an opportunity of exchanging a few bullets.

“hodge urrican, *Commodore.”*

There you have the man, always terrible, who had said nothing to Turk about this quarrel, nor of this challenge, for fear of making things worse.

But to find an adversary worthy of him, he could not have done better than to write to the reporter of the *Tribune,* who at once rose to the occasion.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “if this salt-water sailor imagines I am going to retreat, he is mistaken! I shall be on the gangway at the time named, seeing that he will be on his! And the Green Flag of a journalist will not strike to the Orange Flag of a commodore!”

And it may be observed that in all this there would be nothing astonishing in this astonishing country of America.

Next morning, a little before seven o’clock, Harris T. Kymbale went to the railway station to catch the train to Columbus, on the borders of Tennessee, which passes through Herculaneum. Taking his place in the last car, which communicates by a gangway with the luggage van, he sat down. Seventeen minutes were to elapse before he had to occupy his fighting post.

The weather was chilly, the wind searching, and evidently no one would be tempted to stay outside while the train was in motion. The car in which he sat had only about a dozen people in it.

When the reporter consulted his watch for the first time it was five minutes past seven. He had only twelve minutes to wait, and he waited with a calm probably much greater than that of his adversary.

At fourteen minutes past seven, he rose, went out on to the gangway, drew the revolver from his trousers pocket, examined it to see that it was fully charged, and waited.

At sixteen minutes past seven an increasing roar was heard on the other line by which the train from Herculaneum was coming towards him at full speed.

Harris T. Kymbale held up the revolver level with his eye, ready to lower it.

The engines crossed each other, leaving behind them a volume of white vapour.

Half a second afterwards two detonations were heard simultaneously.

Harris T. Kymbale felt the wind of a bullet against his cheek, to which he replied, shot for shot.

Then the trains lost each other in the distance.

It need not be supposed that on hearing these two shots the travellers in the car were in any way disturbed. No! There was nothing in it to trouble them. And so Harris T. Kymbale returned tranquilly to his seat without knowing if the commodore had been hit on the wing.

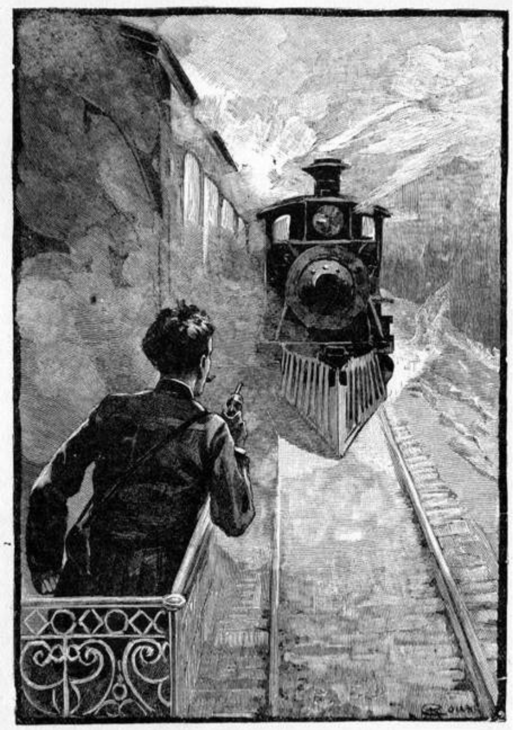

Harris T. Kymbale held up the revolver. p. 261

And then the journey continued by Nashville, the capital of Tennessee, on the Cumberland River, a commercial and industrial city of 66,000 inhabitants, by Chattanooga — a name which in Cherokee signifies Crow’s Nest — a nest of the first order at the entrance of the passes through which Sherman took the Federal army. Then the route continued through the State of Georgia, the position of which has led to its being called the “Keystone State of the South,” as Pennsylvania is known as the “Keystone State of the North.”

Since the War of Secession, Atlanta has become the capital of Georgia, in memory of its long resistance. Situated at a height of nine hundred feet on the border of the practicable gorges of the Appalachians, this town in increasing prosperity is the most populous in the State.

After crossing Georgia to the town of Augusta, on the river Savannah, in which are many cotton mills, the line ran through South Carolina by Hamburg, which is opposite Augusta, and continued to its terminus at Charleston.

It was on the 2nd of June, in the evening, that the reporter reached this famous town, after a journey of about 1500 miles from Santé Fé, in New Mexico.

Then he read in the newspapers of the arrival of the two inseparables, the commodore and Turk, at Ogden on the 31st of May, travelling express towards the distant regions of California.

“Well,” said he, “all is for the best. I am not sorry I missed him. He may be a bear, and even a sea-bear, but he is a bear in human shape all the same.”

The newspapers made no allusion to the duel on the railway, which was known only to those who took part in it, and would never be known unless one of the two spoke.

Harris T. Kymbale did not know Charleston, which had the unpleasant reputation of being the metropolis of slavery. Such is its vitality, that in spite of a series of frightful catastrophes by water, by fire, by earthquake, and by yellow fever, it has always successfully resisted these destructive influences.

It is on a low peninsula, between the estuaries of the Ashley and the Cooper, which form a roadstead with a large harbour served by two channels between the promenades and the quays, that Charleston spreads out its commercial quarters, its houses with verandahs, its umbrageous frontages of magnolias, pomegranates, and azedarachs. A little beyond on the islands and elevated points are the forts — among others Fort Moultrie, which is one of the arsenals of the Union and of South Carolina.

Always the Benjamin of luck, this reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune!* No inundation, no fire, no earthquake desolated Charleston when he arrived — not even an epidemic! The city, so well known for the urbanity of its manners, the politeness of its inhabitants, could thus appear to him in all its splendour. Never could he efface from his memory the few days his good fortune allowed him to stay there.

To say that Harris T. Kymbale was received with enthusiasm would be insufficient. There was added to it a sort of delirium for the player in whom the city saw the most promising of the seven. The others did not even count. For the Charlestonians there was only one player, the one that the throw of ten had sent them. As to the millions of the defunct Hypperbone, it seemed as though he already carried them in his travelling-bag.

For two days invitations on invitations poured in that the popular reporter could not refuse — no more than he could resist a walk in the country round, where the orange trees grow in the open air. On all the walls, covered with posters to catch the eye, the name of Harris T. Kymbale figured in huge letters and in the evening in letters lighted by electricity.

A guest so welcomed was laid under a heavy debt of gratitude to the city. And his intention — so he announced — was to found at Charleston a hospital for orphans; it being worthy of note that a number of candidates sent in their names so as to secure the first places in this charitable institution. The future winner was, it will be seen, more generous to Charleston, South Carolina, than to Denver, Colorado.

At last, amid the festivities, arrived the evening of the 3rd of June. A splendid banquet had been organized by subscription. It took place under the magnificent trees outside the town near the estuary of the Ashley. The crowd of guests walked there in procession, displaying the colours of the hero of the day.

We have no room to enlarge at length on this banquet. Suffice it to say that the principal attraction was a gigantic pie, weighing eight thousand pounds, cooked in a huge oven, and drawn to the dinner by a team of twelve horses. In the making of this pie there were used 12400 lbs. of beef, 400 lbs. of veal, 400 lbs. of mutton, 500 lbs. of pork, 120 lbs. of butter, 360 lbs. of lard, 76 rabbits, 188 fowls, 200 pigeons, 2800 lbs. of flour, and 240 head of game. The monster measured 14 ft. in width, 24 ft. in length, and 6 ft. in height. It took twenty carvers to cut it up so as to satisfy the thousands of people who also disposed of five miles of sausages!

And then resounded the acclamations which the westerly breeze carried out to sea:

“Hurrah for Harris T. Kymbale! Hurrah for the Fourth Competitor! Hurrah for the Green Flag! Hurrah for the favourite in the Hypperbone match!”

CHAPTER XX

THE CAVES OF KENTUCKY

The health of the fifth player was now thoroughly established. The second throw of twelve, by double six, was most fortunate for her, as it sent her to Kentucky, which was only a few hundred miles away, and occupied the thirty-eighth square of the board. Lizzie Wag had in two throws passed over more than half the sixty-three squares. And therefore we shall not be surprised at Jovita Foley triumphantly waving the yellow flag assigned to her friend, and seeing it already planted on the millions of William J. Hypperbone.

On the 23rd Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley had hastened to leave Milwaukee, so as not to be encountered by the mysterious XKZ, which would have compelled them to pay a fine, give up their place to the seventh competitor, and then begin the game over again. The two friends returned to Chicago in perfect health, and their return having been mentioned in the newspapers, a few reporters presented themselves at the house in Sheridan Street.

The result of their visit was that that very evening the *Chicago Herald* published an interview in which it was announced that both the girls were "in excellent form," for now they were both spoken of as being under the yellow flag — which was not greatly to the displeasure of Jovita Foley. In spite of her objurgations they remained five days at Chicago. It was useless to ruin themselves in hotel expenses, and more economic to stay at home.

It would even have been wise to remain there until the eve of the day when the telegram from Tornbrock would arrive in Kentucky. But on the 27th Jovita Foley could restrain herself no longer, and she said:

“When do we start?”

“We have plenty of time,” replied Lizzie Wag. “Think of it: we have till the 6th of June, and this is only the 27th of May. That makes ten complete days, and, you know, you can get to Kentucky in twenty-four hours.”

“That is so, Lizzie; but it is not only to Kentucky that we are going, or to Frankfort, its state capital, but to the Mammoth Caves, one of the wonders of the United States, and, I believe, of the world. What an opportunity to visit the caves, my dear, and what an excellent idea of this worthy Mr. Hypperbone to send us there.”

“He did not send us there, Jovita, but the dice with their twelve points — ”

“Come, come — did he not select Mammoth Caves in the State of Kentucky? In which I should be grateful to him for all my life and all his, if he did not rest in Oakwood Cemetery! It is true that if he were not in another world we should not be running about after his heritage — But — when are we going to start?”

“As soon as you like.”

“Then to-morrow morning.”

“All right — but,” added Lizzie Wag, “we ought to pay Mr. Marshall Field a last visit.”

“You are right, Lizzie.”

During this visit Mr. Marshall Field and his staff were profuse in their compliments and encouragements to the fifth player and her inseparable companion.

Next morning an express train took the travellers a hundred and thirty miles across Illinois to Danville, near the western frontier of Indiana. In the afternoon they crossed this frontier and ran down to dinner at Indianapolis, the capital of the State, a town of a hundred thousand inhabitants.

In the very comfortable hotel where they took up their quarters they were frequently taken, for one another. In the course of the great game that was being played, it seemed as though Jovita Foley was more suited for the part than the modest Lizzie Wag.

On the 29th, at a quarter past eight, they left by the first train for Louisville, situated on the left bank of the Ohio on the frontier between Indiana and Kentucky. During the afternoon they walked about Louisville, crossing the bridge thrown over the Ohio, uniting the city with its suburbs of New Albany and Jefferson in Indiana, but not venturing into the industrial quarters, where factories of all kinds abound.

At last, nearly tired out, though Jovita Foley would not admit it, they returned to the hotel about nine o’clock in the evening.

“Good night,” said Jovita Foley as she went to bed.

“And when do we start again?” asked Lizzie Wag.

“To-morrow morning.”

“So soon, Jovita, when a few hours will take us to the end of our journey? We have plenty of time — ”

“Never too much time when we are to see the Mammoth Caves!” replied Jovita Foley.

“Go to sleep, my dear; I will wake you to-morrow.”

And it was not surprising that in the morning of the 30th the train took them both in a southerly direction — a journey of one hundred and fifty miles to the famous caves through a not very undulating country covered with deep forests between which lay fields of cereals and, principally, plantations of tobacco. Before noon the two friends had arrived at the Mammoth Hotel, an establishment of the first class situated near the entrance to the caves amid delightful scenery.

Notwithstanding the curiosity which devoured her, Jovita Foley had to put off till next day her visit to the caves, all the guides having started before she arrived. But she could occupy her leisure in walking about the vicinity, along the charming valley, and up the shady banks of the stream which, by a thousand cascades, leaps down into Green River.

The hotel is remarkably convenient for the tourists who flock to it. It is composed of a group of cottages devoted to different purposes and comfortably furnished. A room with a window opening on to the valley was put at the disposal of the two friends, who — by no means to the displeasure of one of them — were expected with a certain impatience in this region of Kentucky.

At this time of the year a large number of excursionists were flowing in, impatient to explore the caves, and of this Jovita Foley was made aware about six o’clock in the evening, when the reverberations of the terrible gong in use in the hotels of America called them to the dining-room.

The governor of the State of Illinois, John Hamilton, who happened to be there as a tourist, asked for Lizzie Wag to be placed to his right and Jovita Foley to his left. Was that not enough to turn the head of this impressionable person? And if the Governor of Illinois, his circle, and the other visitors gave so sympathetic a welcome to the fifth player and her companion, a no less cordial welcome was given to them by the ladies who had come to visit the Kentucky caves.

The complete exploration of the caves — at least so far as they are known — takes from seven to eight days. The main artery extends for a length of ten or twelve miles, and there are two hundred paths, corridors, galleries, passages and other footways in the portion already fully explored.

Now, from the 31st of May to the morning of the 6th of June, Lizzie Wag had only six whole days; but if these were well employed, they ought to be sufficient to satisfy the most inquiring of visitors — even the excitable Jovita Foley.

The tour of the caves is accomplished on successive days in large parties under the care of the guides. Warmly clothed, for the temperature is cool underground in these vast spaces, the visitors started at nine o'clock along the footpath which winds between the rocks and leads to the caves. They arrived before a narrow opening in the side of the hill, the end of a corridor left as it was made by nature, and through which men of tall stature cannot pass without stooping.

The guides were accompanied by negroes carrying miners' lamps and torches, which were immediately lighted, and amid the luminous reflections produced by the thousand facets of the walls the visitors reached a staircase cut in the rock. This staircase, which is the continuation of a larger gallery, leads directly to the vast hall of the Rotunda.

It is from this point that ramify the numerous passages, the sinuosities of which must be well known if you wish to run the risk of wandering about without a guide. There exists no more complicated labyrinth except those of Lemnos or Crete.

By a wide corridor the tourists attained one of the most spacious caverns, to which has been given the name of the Gothic Church.

Gothic? Is it really the ogival style which characterizes the architecture? It matters little. It is marvellous, with the stalactites from the vault above, the stalagmites below, the columns fantastically moulded, the shapes taken by the terraced rocks with the crystal concretions the light puts in relief, here an altar heaped with liturgical ornaments, there an organ with the pipes rising to the ribs of the arches, there a balcony, or rather a chair from which preachers of eminence have more than once addressed congregations of five or six thousand people.

Needless to say, the party of excursionists shared in the amazement of Jovita Foley.

“See, Lizzie, do you regret the journey?”

“No, Jovita, it is very beautiful.”

“But it is all the work of nature, the hand of man did not make these caves, and we are right down underground!”

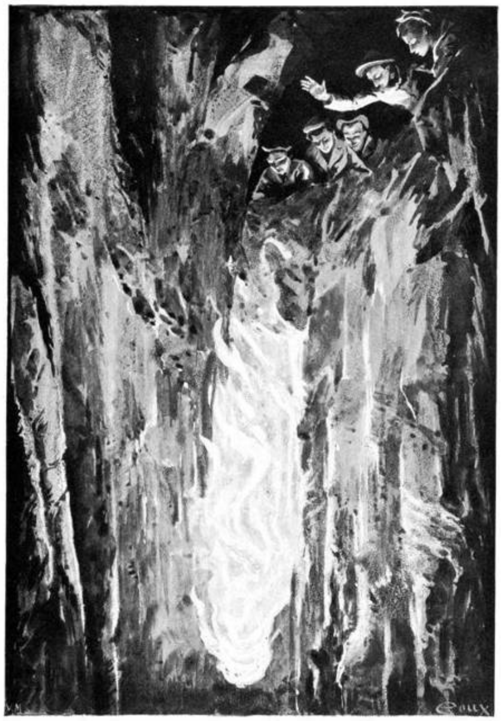

It contains an unfathomable abyss.

“And I am afraid,” said Lizzie Wag, “at the thought we might get lost — ”

“And here we should be in the Mammoth Caves and miss the telegram from good Mr. Tornbrock.”

They had already come a mile and a half from the entrance to reach the Gothic Church. Continuing the exploration, they found it many times necessary to stoop, to crawl even along narrow tunnels to reach the Hall of Apparitions. But there, to Jovita Foley’s disappointment, appeared none of the phantoms her imagination dreamt of evoking in these subterranean caverns.

In reality the Hall of Apparitions is a halting-place, lighted by torches, in which is a well-furnished bar where luncheon is served by the staff of the Mammoth Hotel.

The hall ought to be called the Sanatorium, for to it come the invalids who ascribe some therapeutic virtue to the atmosphere of the caves. They had come here for the day to the number of twenty, and had installed themselves in front of a gigantic skeleton of a mastodon from which the caves derive their name of Mammoth.

Hereabouts ended the first visit, to be followed by many others, the extreme point reached being a little chapel like a small edition of the Gothic Church. It contains an unfathomable abyss, into which the guides throw burning papers to light its gloomy depths. This is the Bottomless Pit, in the wall of which is the Devil's Chair, to which more than one legend is attached.

After this fatiguing day the tourists were glad to enter the gallery that led them back to the entrance, in preference to another outlet by the dome of Ammath, nearer the hotel, but which could only be reached by going a long way round.

An excellent dinner and a long night's rest gave the two friends the strength necessary to resume their explorations next day.

One would generously pay with fatigue to traverse these marvellous caves — a walk through the enchanted world of the Arabian Nights — even without meeting with demons or gnomes, and Jovita Foley was only too pleased to admit that the spectacle exceeded the limits of human imagination.

For five days this energetic person, exhibiting an endurance exceeding that of most of the other excursionists and of the guides themselves, imposed on herself the task of exploring all that was known of these famous caves, and regretted being unable to launch on the unknown. But what she did her friend was incapable of doing, and Lizzie Wag had to ask for mercy after the third day. Do not forget that she had recently been very ill, and that it would never do for her to be unable to continue the journey. And so Jovita Foley was not accompanied by Lizzie Wag during her last excursions.

In this way she visited the cave of the Giant Dome, which rises to a height of four hundred and fifty feet; the Starry Chamber, the walls of which seem encrusted with diamonds and other precious stones glittering in the light of the torches; Cleveland Avenue, carpeted with lace and mineral flowers; the Ball Room, with its walls as white as snow furrowed with creamy leakages; the Rocky Mountains, great masses of blocks and lofty peaks, as if the chains of Utah and Colorado extended their branches into the interior of the globe; the Fairies’ Grotto, so rich in sedimentary formations, maintained by subterranean springs, with arches, pillars, even a sort, of gigantic tree, a palm in stone which rises to the cupola of this hall situated some twelve miles from the principal entrance to the Mammoth Caves.

And what remembrances must the indefatigable visitor have had of the occasion when, entering the doorway of the dome of Goran, she embarked in a boat on the Styx, which, like the Jordan, flows into the Dead Sea. But if it is true that no fish can live in the waters of the biblical river, it is not true of this large subterranean lake. In myriads you find the siredons and cypronidons whose optical apparatus is completely atrophied, as in the eyeless species of some of the Mexican waters.

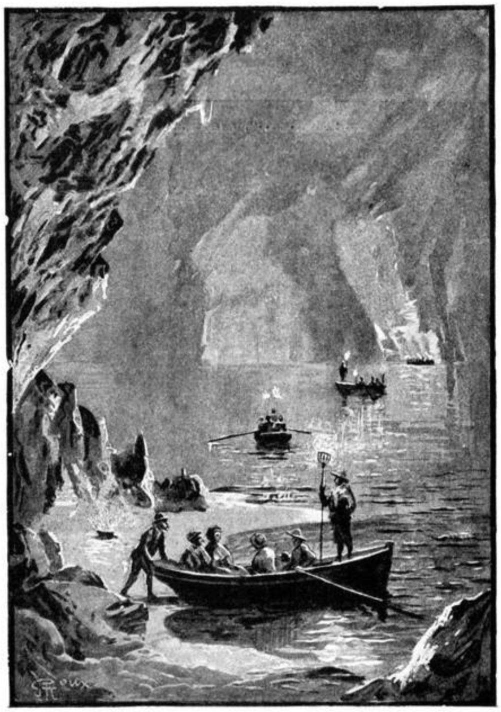

She embarked in a boat on the Styx. p. 273

Such are the incomparable wonders of these caves, which have only given up a part of their secrets. We know not what they may have in reserve, and some day may we not discover quite an extraordinary world in the bowels of the terrestrial globe?

The last hours were striking of the five days that Jovita Foley and her companion had to stay at Mammoth Caves. It was on the 6th of June that the message was to come to the office of the hotel. Owing to the interest taken by this gathering of tourists in the fifth player, the morning of the day before was spent in feverish expectation — an impatience which Lizzie Wag was perhaps the only one not to feel.

That evening the toasts were given with more enthusiasm than ever at the dinner. And how the people cheered when John Hamilton, following the rule adopted by governors in admitting ladies to their staffs, conferred on

Lizzie Wag the rank of colonel, and on Jovita Foley that of Lieutenant-colonel in the Illinois Militia.

If one of the new officers, always modest, felt herself rather embarrassed by so many honours, the other welcomed them as if she had always worn the uniform. And that night when they had both retired to their room:

“Well!” said Jovita, making the military salute, “have you had enough of it, colonel?”

“It is pure folly!” replied Lizzie Wag, “and it will end badly, I am afraid —”

“Will you be silent, my dear? or I shall forget that you are my superior officer, and may fail to treat you with respect.”

And thereupon, with a good kiss, she went to bed, and was soon dreaming she had been made a general.

From eight o’clock onwards next morning the people in the hotel crowded round the office, waiting for the message sent from Chicago by Tornbrock.

It would not be easy to depict the emotion of the sympathetic throng that surrounded the two friends. Whither was fate sending them? Were they going to the end of America? Would they go a long way ahead of their competitors?

Half an hour afterwards the bell began to ring.

A message was arriving for Lizzie Wag, Mammoth Hotel, Mammoth Caves, Kentucky.

A profound — it might almost be said a religious — silence reigned around the office.

And what was the stupefaction, the disappointment, the despair even when Jovita Foley read in a trembling voice:

“Fourteen by seven doubled, fifty-second square, St. Louis, State of Missouri. — tornbrock.”

It was the square of the prison, where, after paying a triple fine, the unfortunate Lizzie Wag would have to remain until some no less unfortunate competitor came to deliver her by taking her place.

CHAPTER XXI

DEATH VALLEY

On the 1st of June, in the morning, coming out of a little Californian town situated in the ancient lacustrine basin of the San Joaquin, a train was running at high speed towards the south-west.

The train, which consisted only of an engine, a car and a van, was not mentioned in the time-table, and had started three good hours before that which traverses the southern regions of California from Sacramento to the frontier of Arizona.

The country through which the special train was running did not seem to attract the notice of the passengers. But were there any? Yes, assuredly, for from time to time two heads would appear at the windows and then disappear immediately, two bearded faces, which might almost be called ferocious. Several times the window was lowered, and a large hairy hand passed out, holding a short pipe from which it shook the ashes, and was instantly drawn in again.

Who, then, were these indifferent travellers? Whence came they, whither went they? Were they ardent Californians suddenly called out by the discovery of new pockets of gold? were they seekers of new placers? For there is always ground for hope that the six milliards of francs extracted during forty years have not exhausted all the deposits of this auriferous soil. And it contains other valuable mines, particularly in the vicinity of the coast range, mines of cinnabar, red sulphide of mercury, native vermilion, which in the workings at New Almaden between 1850 and 1886 are said to have yielded about a hundred thousand tons.

These passengers may perhaps be originators of “bonanza farms,” members of some great syndicate for agricultural development, people formidable to the small farmers by the abundance of capital provided them by England. And why should not money be attracted there, where the vine yields grapes that weigh several pounds, and the pear-tree pears that measure a foot and a half in circumference?

Anyhow, these people ought to be very rich and very much pressed for time, for they are indulging in the luxury of a special train, although they had at their disposal the ordinary trains of the Southern Pacific. These would have cost them but half a day’s delay, and not the several thousand dollars they have not cared to save.

It was eleven o’clock in the morning when the engine began to slow a quarter of a mile before it reached the station at Keeler, where it was going to stop.

Two men jumped out on to the platform with luggage reduced to the absolutely necessary, a portmanteau and a basket of provisions which did not seem to have been opened. Each of them carried a hand-bag and had a carbine slung over his shoulders.

One of the men went along to the engine and said to the driver, “Wait,” as if he were a coachman and they had left a carriage to pay a visit.

The driver gave an affirmative gesture, and prepared to shunt into the siding so as to leave the main road clear.

The traveller, followed by his companion, went to the exit from the station and found there an individual who was awaiting his arrival.

“Is the carriage here?” he asked shortly.

“Since yesterday.”

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Let us start.”

A minute afterwards the two travellers were installed in a comfortable motor-car, driven by powerful mechanism, and were running rapidly in an easterly direction.

The travellers were Commodore Urrican and his faithful Turk, who had had no occasion to abandon themselves to their natural irascibility, the engine-driver having been punctual to the minute and the motor-car being at its post.

And now by what miracle had Hodge Urrican, half dead in the post office of Key West on the 25th of May, reappeared eight days afterwards in this little Californian town nearly 1500 miles from Florida? Under what really exceptional circumstances had he made such a journey in such limited time? How had the sixth player, pursued by such terrible ill luck, who seemed to be in no condition to continue the game, managed to get here, more resolute than ever to play it out to the end?

Shipwrecked on the *Chicola*, he had been taken without recovering consciousness to the telegraph office of Key West. The telegram sent that morning from Chicago had arrived at noon precisely. And what a deplorable result it announced. A most miserable throw — five by two and three.

By this throw the commodore was moved from the fifty-third square to the fifty-eighth, from Florida to California, the whole width of the Union to cross from south-east to north-west! And, circumstance still more disastrous, it was the square of Death which had been chosen by William J. Hypperbone, it was Death Valley to which the player had to come and pay a triple fine and then return to Chicago! And that after beginning so well!

When Hodge Urrican had been recalled to life by energetic frictions and no less energetic potions, and had been informed of the contents of the telegram, he received a shock which ended in the most terrible fit of anger that Turk had ever seen. That put him on his feet.

Fortunately for the people present, there was no one with whom the commodore could quarrel, and Turk had not, according to custom, to exceed him in violence.

Hodge Urrican uttered but one word, one only, one of those words which from their appropriateness acquire a historic value.

“Start!”

A glacial silence greeted the word. Turk had to tell his master where he was and how he was there. For the first time Hodge Urrican learnt of the shipwreck of the schooner, the transport of the passengers and crew to Key West, where no ship could be found to take them to one of the ports of Alabama or Louisiana.

The commodore was nailed like Prometheus to his rock, and his heart was to be devoured by the vulture of impatience.

He had a fortnight to travel from Florida to California and from California to Illinois. Decidedly the word “impossible” is in all languages, even in the American, although it is generally reported to have been erased from the dictionary by the audacious Yankees.

In thinking of the consequences of losing the game by being unable to leave Key West that very day, Hodge Urrican indulged in a second crisis, with vociferations, imprecations and threats that made the very windows shiver. But Turk succeeded in mastering it by betaking himself to such deeds of fury that his master had to quiet him.

Yet it was a cruel necessity and a cruel wound to a competitor’s self-respect to have to retire from the contest and lower the Orange Flag before the Violet, Indigo, Blue, Green, Yellow and Red.

Well, as we know, there is nothing but good luck and bad luck in this world! The good chances and the bad chances rustle against each other all through life, and sometimes succeed each other with electric rapidity. And in this way, by really providential intervention, the situation, desperate as it appeared, was saved.

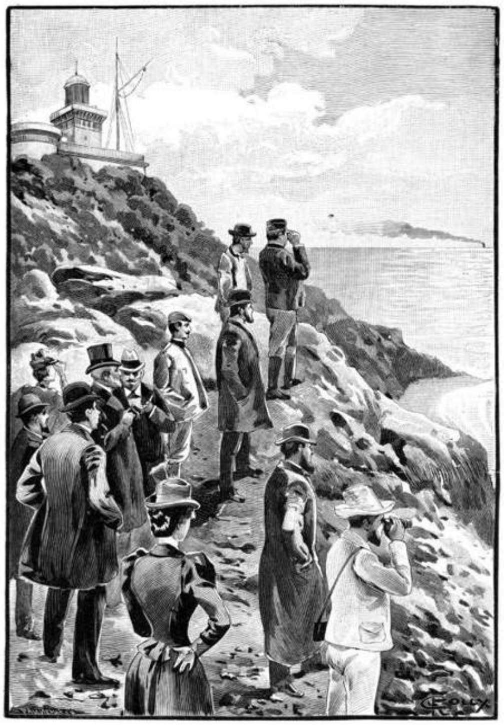

"Is that ship coming to Key West?"

At thirty-seven minutes past twelve the harbour semaphore of Key West signalled a vessel five miles out at sea.

The crowd of spectators assembled before the telegraph office ran off, Hodge Urrican and Turk at their head, to the high ground where the view embraced the open sea.

A ship was seen in the distance with her smoke drifting along the horizon in long dark clouds. And those interested said: “Is that ship coming to Key West?”

“And if she comes, will she put in, or start again this very day?”

“And if she sails again, will it be for a port in Alabama, Mississippi or Louisiana, New Orleans, Mobile, Pensacola?”

“And if her destination is one of those ports, is her speed sufficient to take her there in two days?”

Here, as will be seen, were four indispensable conditions to fulfil.

They were all fulfilled. The *President Grant* was to stop at Key West but a few hours; she was to start that very evening for Mobile; and she was a steamer of great speed, being one of the fastest in the American mercantile marine.

Needless to add that Hodge Urrican and Turk were received as passengers, that Captain Humper was as much interested in the commodore as the captain of the *Sherman* in Tom Crabbe; and that on a favouring sea with a light breeze from the north-east, the *President Grant,* at her maximum speed of twenty miles an hour, arrived at Mobile in the night of the 27th.

The passage money being generously paid, Hodge Urrican and Turk jumped into the first train, which in twenty hours covered the seven hundred miles between Mobile and St. Louis.

There occurred the incidents we know — the difficulty with the station-master at Herculaneum, the necessity for Hodge Urrican to go to St. Louis to claim his portmanteau, the meeting with Harris T. Kymbale, the return to Herculaneum, the challenge sent to the reporter, the revolver shots exchanged as the trains crossed, the arrival at St. Louis. Thence the railway took the commodore to Topeka on the 30th, thence by the Union Pacific to Ogden on the 31st, thence to Reno, whence he started at seven o’clock in the morning for Keeler.

But when the commodore was at Keeler he was not at Death Valley, the point he had to reach in the State of California.

Now if there was a more or less practicable carriage road between Keeler and Death Valley, there was no service of vehicles. No relays of horses, no stage-coaches. Could it be done on horseback in so short a time, nearly four hundred miles there and back? Considering the windings of the road in so hilly a country, it would have been impossible.

When at St. Louis, Hodge Urrican had the excellent idea of telegraphing to Sacramento if they could supply him with a motor-car and send it to Keeler to await his arrival.

The reply was in the affirmative. The motor-car was at Keeler station waiting for Commodore Urrican. Two days would suffice to reach Death Valley, two days to return, and in this way he could be at Chicago before the 8th of June. Decidedly fortune favoured this old sea-wolf.

An excellent vehicle, this motor-car from Sacramento, designed on the Adamson principle, which is most generally adopted in America. It was worked by petroleum, and could carry enough fuel for a week. The commodore and Turk were seated in a sort of comfortable coupe, the driver in front with an assistant. This time the commodore remained wrapped up in himself, and Turk could not get a word from him. He thought of nothing but the object to be obtained, hypnotized by this sixty-third square, now so distant, which he had approached so closely. He did not trouble about the money it would cost him, the expense of the special train, the hire of the motor-car, to say nothing of the triple fine, the three thousand dollars he would have to pay before beginning the game again. No! it was a question of self-respect and honour; it was the shame, yes! the shame of seeing himself distanced by six others and — it must be confessed — the fear of losing Hypperbone’s heritage.

The motor-car ran swiftly and easily along the road, which the driver knew, having been to Death Valley along it before. It passed several villages isolated beyond the ancient ramifications of the Sierra Nevada, dominated by Mount Whitney, whose summit rises nearly fourteen thousand feet in the air.

Passing several creeks at the fords, the motor-car turned off towards the south-east, crossing the river Chayopoovapah to the village of Indian Wells at the outlet of the passes of the Walker.

Up to there the country was not absolutely deserted. The farms were a long way apart, it is true. Occasionally they met labourers going from one to the other, and a few groups of Indians, who were the former owners of the district. And these people, who appear astonished at nothing, regarded without surprise the vehicle they probably saw for the first time. The ground was not yet bare of vegetation; there were still a few bushes and clumps of yuccas and giant cactuses, some of them four-and-twenty feet high. It was not the famous district of Calaveras or Mariposa with its phenomenal trees, the “Father of the Forest” and the “Mother of the Forest,” giants of a height exceeding three hundred feet.

And if, instead of being sent to Death Valley, Hodge Urrican had gone to the Yosemite Valley in the central part of the Sierra Nevada, or rather if Max Real had had the good fortune to go there, what souvenirs he would have retained — even after the National Park of Wyoming — of those natural beauties with their significant designations, the “Grand Falls” of six hundred feet, the “Vernal Fall,”

“Mirror Lake,” the “Royal Arches,” the “Cathedral’ “Washington’s Column,” so much admired by thousands of tourists.

At last the motor-car reached the desert at the end of which the depressions of Death Valley have been formed. There, nothing but an immense solitude. Men and animals do not frequent it. A burning sun falls on its extensive plains. Scarcely is there a trace of vegetable life. Neither horses nor mules can feed there, and it was fortunate that the motor-car had no want of petroleum vapours to drive it. Here and there only a few foothills, mere hillocks of moderate height, surrounded by chapparals, which are thickets of half-starved shrubs. To the fierce heat of the day succeed the Californian nights, dry and cold, whose rigours the dew never comes to soften.

It was thus that on the 3rd of June Commodore Urrican reached the southern extremity of Telescope Range, which bounds Death Valley on the west.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. The journey had taken fifty hours, without rest and without accident.

This desolate country, with its clayey soil covered in places with saline efflorescences, is appropriately named the land of Death. The valley, which terminates almost on the boundary of Nevada, is really a canyon nineteen miles wide and twenty long, pierced with abysses that go down to a hundred and eighty feet below the level of the sea. On its borders are a few under-sized poplars, willows of sickly paleness, yuccas dry and like sharp bayonets, stinking mugworts, and many tufts of that cactus known in California as petalinas, without leaves, all in branches, regular funereal candelabra placed on the field of death.

Death Valley was evidently at an earlier geological period the bed of a river which is lost to-day in Soda Lake and is now only watered by the creek of the Amargosa. Its declivities bristle with needles of salt, borax accumulates in its cavities, and a few sand-hills mingle their sandy dust with the atmospheric currents that occasionally sweep through it with extreme violence.

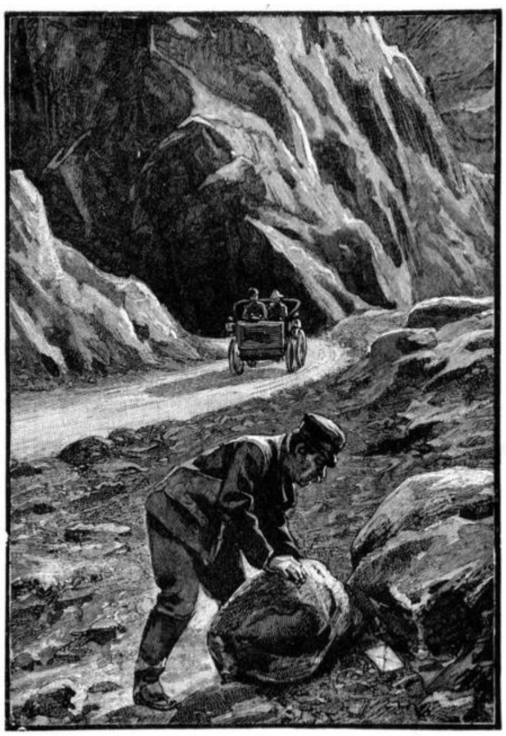

Commodore Urrican placed the document under a stone. p. 285

Yes! The Valley of Death had been well chosen by the eccentric testator to receive the unhappy player pulled up in full career at the fifty-eighth square.

Commodore Urrican had then reached the end of his difficult journey. He halted at the foot of the east of the Funeral Mountains, so called in memory of the caravans that perished in these mournful regions. It was at this spot that he took the precaution of writing a document, recording his presence in Death Valley on the 3rd of June — a document that was put under a stone after being signed by Turk and the two motor-car men.

He stayed barely an hour on the threshold of the Valley. All he had to do was to leave the place as soon as possible and return to Keeler by the same road. Then, opening his mouth for the first time, he uttered but one word:

“Start!”

And the motor-car started, favoured all the time by the weather, across the upper region of the desert and down the passes of the Nevada, and without accident reached Keeler station two days afterwards, on the 5th of June, at eleven in the morning.

In three words, but three energetic words, Commodore Urrican thanked the driver and his companion who had showed such zeal and skill in the accomplishment of their fatiguing task; and turning to Turk: “Start!” he said.

The special train was in the station awaiting the commodore’s return. Hodge Urrican went straight to the guard.

“Start!” he repeated.

And with a whistle the engine began to move on the rails, worked up quickly to its highest speed, and seven hours later reached Reno.

The Union Pacific behaved in the most correct fashion under the circumstances. The train crossed the Rocky Mountains, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, and reached Chicago on the 8th of June, at 9.37 a.m.

What a welcome was that which Commodore Urrican received from those who remained faithful to him in spite of all! And it seemed as though good luck returned to him with the throw of the dice that took place the very morning of his arrival in Chicago.

Nine by six and three, the third time the number had been scored since the match began — the first time by Lizzie Wag, the second by the unknown

XKZ, the third time by the commodore.

And after having been sent to Florida, then to California, Hodge Urrican had but a step to take to reach the twenty-sixth square, the State of Wisconsin, which adjoins Illinois, and was not then occupied by any of the players.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HOUSE IN SOUTH HALSTED STREET

ON the 1st of June the door of No. 3997, South Halsted Street, Chicago, opened at eight o'clock in the morning to a young man carrying a painter's knapsack on his shoulder and followed by a young negro, bag in hand.

What was the surprise and also the joy of Madame Real when her dear son entered the room and she could clasp him in her arms.

"You, Max — what — is it you?"

"In person, mother."

"And you are at Chicago instead of being — "

"At Richmond?" said Max Real. "Be easy, mother, I have time to get to Richmond, and as Chicago was on my road, I thought I was entitled to stay a few days here and spend them with you."

"But, my dear boy, you are running the risk of a failure — "

"Well, I should not always fail to embrace you on my way dear mother! Think, for two long weeks I have not seen you!"

"Ah, Max, I am anxious for this game to end."

"And so am I."

"To your advantage, understand!"

“Do not be anxious. It is as if I already possessed the word, of the strong-box of this worthy Hypperbone,” replied Max Real, laughing.

“Well, I am glad to see you, my dear son, very glad.”

Max Real was at Cheyenne in Wyoming, when on the 29th of May he had returned from his excursion to the National Park of the Yellowstone and received the telegram referring to his third throw — eight by five and three. Now the eighth square after the twenty-eighth occupied by Wyoming was assigned to Illinois. The eight had consequently to be doubled, and the number sixteen took the young painter to the forty-fourth square, that of Virginia, Richmond City.

Between Chicago and Richmond there was a network of railways by which the distance between the two places could be run in twenty-four hours; and as Max Real had a fortnight — from the 29th of May to the 12th of June — he could, as they say, take things easy, and stay for a week with his mother.

Leaving Cheyenne in the afternoon, he was at Omaha two days afterwards, and at Chicago the next day in excellent health — in excellent health also the anti-abolitionist Tommy, always as much embarrassed at his position as a free citizen of free America as a poor fellow whose clothes are too large for him.

During his stay Max Real proposed to finish two of the pictures he had sketched in on the road — one a view of Kansas River near Fort Riley, the other a view of the cascades of the Fire Hole in the National Park. Being sure of selling these pictures at a good price, they would enable him to discharge his liabilities if ill-luck condemned him to pay many fines in the course of his travels.

Madame Real, enchanted to have her son with her for a few days, accepted all these reasons and once again pressed Max to her heart.

They talked and laughed, and made one of those good breakfasts which have so many charms with mother and son. Although he had written many times to Madame Real, he had to begin the story of his travels from the beginning, narrating the different incidents, the adventure of the thousands of horses wandering on the plains of Kansas, the meeting with the Titburys at Ogden. Then his mother told him of the lamentable tribulations of this couple at Calais in Maine, how in consequence of the law against alcoholic drinks Mr. Titbury had been prosecuted, and what were the pecuniary consequences.

“And now,” asked Max Real, “how stands the game?”

To make it clearer to him, Madame Real took him to her room and showed him a board open on the table in which were stuck flags of different colours.

While running about the country Max Real had not thought much about his competitors, very seldom reading the newspapers at the hotels and railway stations. But he had only to look at this board and learn the colours and he could easily see how matters were. Besides, his mother had followed the vicissitudes of the Hypperbone match from the beginning.

“Who is the blue flag which is ahead?” he asked.

“That is Tom Crabbe, whom yesterday’s throw sent to the forty-seventh square, Pennsylvania.”

“That ought to please his trainer, John Milner! And this red flag?”

“That is the flag of XKZ on the forty-sixth square, District of Columbia.”

In fact, owing to a throw of ten, doubled, that is twenty, the masked man had made a leap of twenty squares from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Washington, the capital of the United States — an easy and rapid journey in this part of the country where the railway network is so close.

“Do not they suspect who this unknown is?” asked Max Real.

“Not at all, my dear boy.”

“I am sure he must figure well in the betting list and have big supporters.”

“Yes. Many people believe in his chances, and I myself am rather afraid of them.”

“That is the advantage of being a mysterious personage!” declared Max Real.

Was this XKZ at Chicago, or had he already left for the District of Columbia? Nobody could say. Washington, if it is only an administrative centre without industry, without commerce, is well worth spending a few days in; but if the last player had arrived there, no newspaper had as yet reported his presence.

“And this yellow flag?” asked Max Real, pointing to the one in the thirty-fifth square.

“That is Lizzie Wag’s flag.”

Yes, the flag was then floating on the Kentucky square, for at this date, the 1st of June, the fatal throw which sent her into prison in Missouri had not been made.

“Ah, the charming girl!” said Max Real. “I saw her all embarrassment and blushes at the funeral of William Hypperbone; then on the stage of the Auditorium! Of a certainty, if I had met her on the way I should have renewed my wishes for her final success.”

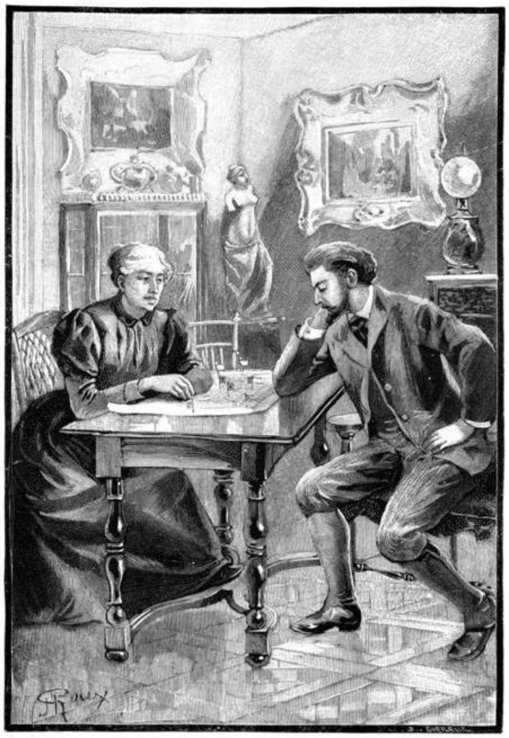

“That is Lizzie Wag’s flag.”

“And yours, Max?”

“Mine also, mother! Both winning the game! We could share it! Eh? Would that be good enough?”

“Is it to be feared?”

“No, it is not to be feared, but such extraordinary things happen in this world — ”

“You know, Max, that it was thought Lizzie Wag would not start?”

“Yes, the poor girl was ill, and there were more than one among the Seven who rejoiced at it! Oh, not I, mother! Luckily she had a friend who looked after her well and brought her through — this Jovita Foley — as resolute in her way as Commodore Urrican! And when is her next throw?”

“In five days, on the 6th of June.”

“Let us hope that my pretty competitor will avoid the dangers of the road, the labyrinth of Nebraska, the prison of Missouri, the Californian Death Valley! I wish her luck with all my heart!”

Decidedly Max Real must sometimes think of Lizzie Wag — often even, and perhaps too often, said Madame Real to herself, rather surprised at the heat with which he spoke.

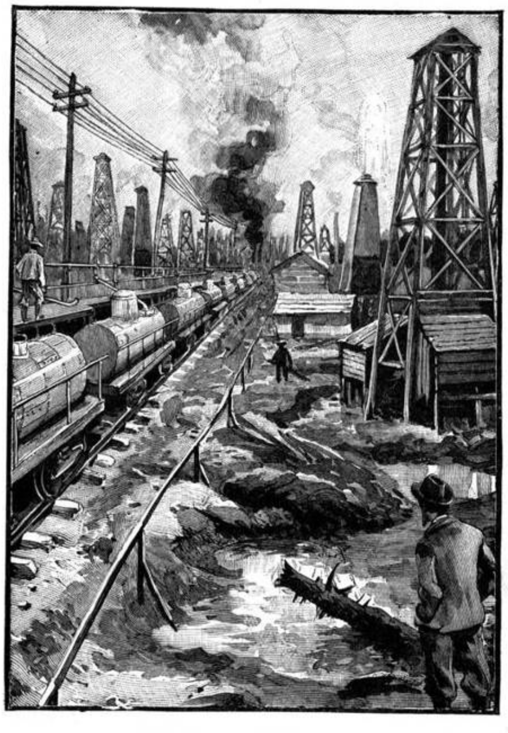

The sidings at Warren, Ohio p.297

“Do you not ask, Max, who is the green flag?”

“That on the twenty-second square?”

“That is Mr. Kymbale’s flag.”

“A good fellow, that journalist,” declared Max Real. “From what I hear he is taking advantage of the opportunity to see the country.”

“Just so, my child, and the *Tribune* publishes his letters every day.”

“Well, mother, his readers ought to be satisfied. If he goes to Oregon or Washington he will tell them curious tales.”

“But he is rather behind.”

“That is of little consequence in the game we are playing,” answered Max Real; “a lucky throw may put you right in front.”

“That is so, my son.”

“Now whose flag is this in the fourth square?”

“Hermann Titbury’s.”

“Ah! The horrible man!” exclaimed Max Real. “Let him rage at being last — and a good last!”

“He is to be pitied, Max, really to be pitied, for he has only scored four in two throws, and after being sent to Maine has had to go all the way to Utah.”

At this date, the 1st of June, it could not be known how the Titburys had been robbed of all they had after their arrival in Great Salt Lake City.

“And yet I do not pity them,” declared Max Real. “No! A pair of misers are not at all interesting, and I am sorry they have not had a heavy fine to pay — ”

“But do not forget he had to pay a fine at Calais,” said Madame Real.

“So much the better. All I wish is that he may get the minimum of points, one and one! That will take him to Niagara, and the toll of the bridge will cost him a thousand dollars!”

“You are cruel on these Titburys, Max!”

“Abominable people, mother, who got rich on usury and deserve no pity. Fortune would make a mistake in making them Hypperbone’s heirs — ”

“Everything is possible,” replied Madame Real.

“But, tell me. I do not see the flag of the famous Hodge Urrican.”

“The orange flag? No, it is nowhere on the board, for bad luck sent the commodore to Death Valley, whence he has to come back to Chicago to begin the game again.”

“Rather hard for a naval officer to have to strike his flag!” said Max. “What a storm of anger he must have got into, and how it must have made his hull shake from keel to truck!”

“That is probable.”

“And when is the throw for XKZ?”

“In nine days.”

“It was a curious idea of the dead man to conceal the name of this last of the Seven.”

Max Real now knew the position of the game. After the dice had sent him to Virginia, he knew he occupied the third place, being behind Tom Crabbe and XKZ, for whom, it is true, the third throw had not yet been made.

This did not worry him much, although Madame Real and even Tommy thought a good deal about it. While he remained in Chicago he passed some of his time in his studio, where he finished the two landscapes, the value of which would be increased in the eyes of the American amateur by the conditions under which they had been painted.

It happened then that until his approaching departure Max Real thought very little about the match, and of those whom it was hurrying about over the United States. Really he was playing the part so as not to oppose his excellent mother — no less indifferent, in fact, than Lizzie Wag, who was only participating in the game so as not to annoy Jovita Foley.

Nevertheless during his stay he necessarily heard of the three throws that took place at the Auditorium. Hermann Titbury’s was deplorable, as it took him to the nineteenth square, that is the State of Louisiana, where there was the inn in which he had to stay for two throws without playing. A throw of ten was welcomed by Harris T. Kymbale, as it was doubled by landing him in Illinois and thus took him to the forty-second square, Nebraska, whence he had to return to the thirtieth square, that occupied by the State of Washington.

At last on the 6th, at eight o’clock, Tornbrock proceeded to throw for Lizzie Wag, and that morning Max Real, who was much interested in the girl’s fate, went to the Auditorium, whence he came back in deep dejection.

Deep was his vexation when on returning to his mother he saw her stick the yellow flag in the midst of this Missouri transformed into a prison — partly by the will of the eccentric defunct, and, for Lizzie Wag, by the will of destiny. He was much concerned, and did not hide it. This throw into the prison, like that into the well, was the worst that could happen during the game. Yes! more serious than that into the Valley of Death, of which Hodge Urrican had just been the victim! At least, the commodore experienced only a delay, and was able to continue the strife. Who could say if the match would not be finished before the prisoner was rescued?

Next day, June 7th, Max Real prepared to leave Chicago. His mother renewed her warnings, and made him promise not to delay on the road.

“Let us hope,” said she, “that the telegram you are to get at Richmond will not send you to the end of the world.”

“I will come back, mother, I will come back,” replied Max. “Even from prison! Isn’t it all very ridiculous? To be exposed like a common racehorse, to be defeated by half a length! Yes! Ridiculous!”

“No, my child, no! Go, and may Heaven protect you!”

And it was quite seriously, under the sway of sincere emotion, that the excellent dame said these things.

He promised his mother to go by the most direct line to Virginia. But provided he was at Richmond on the morning of the twelfth, who could blame him for preferring to take not a straight line, but a curved line or one with a break in it? However, he had resolved not to stray from the states he had to cross — Illinois, Ohio, Maryland, Western Virginia, Virginia — to get to Richmond.

Here is a letter received by Madame Real, dated the 11th of June, four days after his departure, which summarizes the incidents of his journey. To say nothing of the observations on the countries passed through, the towns visited, the meetings that occurred, it contains certain remarks that made her reflect and caused her some anxiety as to her son's state of mind.

"Richmond, Virginia, 11th June.

"My dear and good mother, — Here am I at the end, not of this brute of a game, but of the journey forced on me by the third throw of the dice. After Fort Riley, Kansas; after Cheyenne, Wyoming; now Richmond, Virginia. So have no apprehension for the being you cherish the most in this world, and who returns your love with all his heart. He is at his post in good health.

"I wish I could say the same of Lizzie Wag, whom a prison bed awaits in the great Missourian city. I don't hide from you, mother, that although I ought to see in her only a rival, she is so charming, so interesting that I am quite sorry for her unhappy fate! The more I think of that deplorable throw — seven by three and four, doubled — the more I regret that the yellow flag so valiantly borne up to now by the intrepid Jovita Foley on account of her friend should be hoisted on the wall of this prison! And until when will it be there?

"I left you on the 7th, in the morning. The railroad runs along the southern shore of Lake Michigan and affords several beautiful views over its waters. But, between ourselves, I know that lake a little, and also the country that bounds it. Besides, in this part of the United States, as in Canada, it is permitted to be a little wearied of lakes; their blue waters which are not always blue, their sleeping waters which do not always sleep!

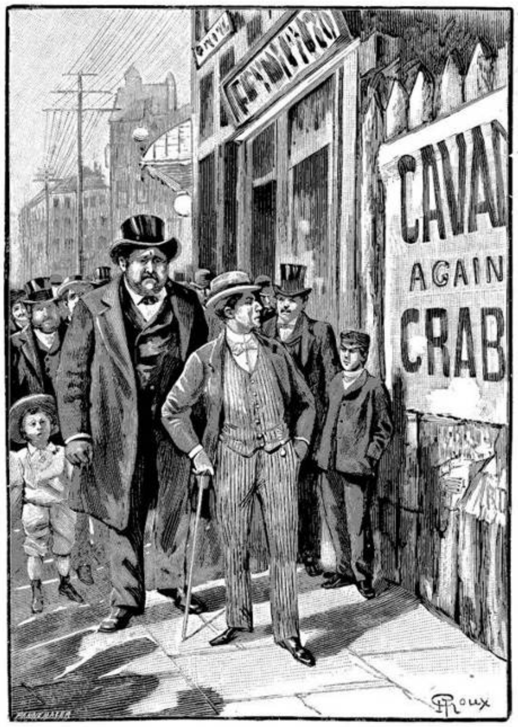

A poster had been put up by a rival.

“In part I followed the same road as Harris Kymbale when he went from Illinois to New York, from Chicago to Niagara. But on arriving at Cleveland City in Ohio, I left it to go south-east. There are railroads everywhere; a pedestrian would not know where to put his feet down.

“Do not ask me to tell you the times of my arrivals and departures during the journey. It would not interest you. I will indicate a few places where our locomotive blew off clouds of steam. In these industrial countries they are as plentiful as the cells in a beehive! But the chief ones only:

“From Cleveland I went to Warren, an important centre of Ohio, so rich in springs of petroleum that a blind man would recognize it, provided he had a nose, from its sickening atmosphere. The air would burst into flame if you lighted a match. And then what a country! On plains as far as you can see, nothing but scaffolds and pit-mouths, as also on the slopes of the hills, the borders of the creeks. Lamps all these, lamps from fifteen to twenty feet high. You only want a match.

“You see, mother, this country is not like our poetic prairies of the Far West, nor the wild valleys of Wyoming, nor the distant perspectives of the Rockies, nor the deep horizons of the great lakes and oceans. Industrial beauties are good, artistic beauties are better, natural beauties are best.

“Between ourselves, dear mother, I will confess that if I had been favoured at the last throw — favoured by the choice of country, be it understood — I would have taken you with me. Yes, Madame Real, to the Far West, for instance. It is not that there are not interesting spots in the Alleghanies’ I have crossed — but Montana, Colorado, California, Oregon, by the word of a painter, it is not to be compared with them.

“Yes, we would have travelled together, and if we had met Lizzie Wag on the way, who knows — chance? Well, you would have made her acquaintance — It is true she is now in prison, at least is on her way there, poor girl!

“Ah! If at the next throw a Titbury, a Crabbe, an Urrican comes to deliver her. Our terrible commodore, you see, after so many trials falling on to the fifty-second square! He would be capable of abandoning his Turk to the ferocious instincts of the tiger!

“Once in a way a Lizzie Wag might be sent, although it would be regrettable, to the inn, to the labyrinth! But the well, the horrible well — the prison, the horrible prison — they are for representatives of the stronger sex. Decidedly destiny forgot to be gallant on that day!

“But let us leave off divagating and continue the journey. After Warren I followed the Ring River, crossed the frontier of Ohio, and was in Pennsylvania. The first important town was Pittsburg, on the Ohio, with its annexe of Alleghany, the Iron City, the Smoky City, as it is called, in spite of the thousand miles of subterranean conduits by which it delivers its natural gas. This is the place to get dirty! You get your hands and face black in a few minutes, hands and face like a negro’s!

“I put on my window a little water in the bottom of a glass and next morning I had ink. With this chemical mixture, mother, I am writing to you now.

“I have just seen in a newspaper that Urrican’s throw on the 8th sent the thundering commodore to Wisconsin. Unfortunately, if next throw he gets twelve, even if he doubles it he will not get to the fifty-second square, where the young prisoner is in distress.

“I continued to go south-east. I passed numerous stations on each side of the road — towns, villages — and through these districts not a corner of nature that had been left to itself! Everywhere the hand of man and his noisy tools. It is true that in Illinois it is the same, and Canada is not free from it. Some day the trees will be of metal, the prairies of felt, and the beaches of iron filings. That is progress.

“Yet I have had a few pleasant hours in running through the passes of the Alleghanies. A chain, picturesque, capricious, occasionally wild, covered with blackish coniferous trees, abrupt slopes, deep gorges, sinuous valleys, tumultuous torrents which, manufacturers have not yet utilized for works and which are still allowed to form cascades with their original freedom.

“Then we skirted the small corner of Maryland watered by the Upper Potomac, to reach Cumberland, more important than its capital, modest Annapolis, which is of little account compared with invading and imperious Baltimore, in which is centred all the commercial life of the state. It rests on a base of iron and coal, and in a few strokes of the pickaxe the vegetable soil is dug through.

“Now we are in West Virginia, and — do not get uneasy, mother — Virginia is not far off. I should have been there already if the question of slavery had not divided the old state, which had to be cut in two during the Secession War. Yes! while the east attached itself more strongly to the inhuman doctrines of slavery — Tommy is asleep, be it understood — the west, on the contrary, separated from the Confederates to range itself under the Federal flag.

“It is a hilly, if not mountainous, region furrowed in its eastern part by the different chains of the Appalachians, agricultural, mining, with iron, coal, and also salt for seasoning the cookery of the whole confederation for centuries.

“I did not go to Charleston, capital of West Virginia — not to be confounded with the other great Charleston of South Carolina, where my competitor Kymbale has gone, nor with a third Charlestown of which I am about to speak. But I stopped a day at Martinsburg, the most important city of West Virginia on the eastern side.

“Yes, a whole day; and do not growl at me, dear mother, for I could get to Richmond in a few hours by railroad. Why did I stop at Martinsburg? Solely to make a pilgrimage; and if I did not take Tommy with me, it was because he would only have held in horror the hero I went to honour.

“John Brown, dear mother, John Brown, who was the first to raise the anti-slavery flag at the outset of the war of Secession! The Virginian planters trapped him like a wild beast. He had but twenty men and endeavoured to seize the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. This name is that of a little town situated on the escarpment of a hill between the Potomac and Shenandoah, a marvellous position, but more celebrated for the terrible scenes of which it was the theatre.

“It was there in 1859 that the heroic defender of the great and holy cause had taken refuge. The militia attacked him there. After prodigies of courage, seriously wounded, he was taken prisoner, dragged to the neighbouring town of Charlestown and there hanged on the 2nd of December — a death which the gallows could not make infamous, and the glorious renown of which will be perpetuated from age to age.

“It was to this martyr of liberty, of human emancipation that I wished to tender my patriotic homage.

“Finally, here I am in Virginia, mother, pre-eminently the Slave state, which was the principal theatre of the War of Secession. Richmond is a fine city, the ex-capital of separatist America, the key of Virginia, which the Federal Government eventually pocketed. It occupies a site with seven hills on the bank of James River, and at the opposite bank stretches a hand to Manchester, a double town like so many others in the United States, after the example of certain stars. I repeat it is a city to be seen, with its capitol, a sort of Greek temple from which is absent the Attic sky and the Athenian horizons of the Acropolis as is the Parthenon at Edinburgh. But there are too many factories, too many works — to my taste at least, and there are at least a hundred manufacturing tobacco. In one of the fashionable districts, Leonard Height, stands the monument to Lee, the general of the

Confederates, who deserves the honour, if not for the cause he defended, at least for his personal qualities.

“At present, dear mother, I have not visited the other towns in the state. They are, however, somewhat alike, as are all American towns. I have just read the result of the throw on the 10th of June. It is Minnesota which, with five by two and three, is assigned to our famous unknown XKZ. From the forty-sixth he jumps to the fifty-first square, and he is now ahead of us all. But who is this man? He seems to me to be singularly lucky, and it is not certain that my throw to-morrow will put me in front of him.

“With that, dear mother, I end this long letter, which cannot but interest you as it comes from your son, and I embrace you with all my heart in signing my name, which after all is only that of a racehorse on the Hypperbone turf.

“MAX REAL.”

CHAPTER XXIII

A CHALLENGE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

If anyone appeared less indicated by nature for the forty-seventh square, State of Pennsylvania, for Philadelphia, the chief city of the state, the most important city in the Union after Chicago and New York, it was assuredly this Tom Crabbe, brute by nature and boxer by trade. But instead of Max Real, Harris T. Kymbale, or Lizzie Wag, all capable of admiring the magnificence of this metropolis, it was that stupid being who had been sent there with his trainer. Never could the deceased member of the Eccentric Club have foreseen that.

It could not be helped, however. The dice had spoken in the early hours of the 31st of May. Twelve by six and six had been sent by wire from Chicago to Cincinnati, and the second player had to take measures for immediately leaving the ancient Porkopolis.

“Yes, Porkopolis!” exclaimed John Milner in a tone of the deepest contempt. “The day the celebrated Tom Crabbe was honouring it with his presence its population were going in crowds to that disgusting cattle show! To the pig the whole public attention was directed, and there was not a single cheer for the champion of the New World! Well, let us pocket Hypperbone’s big bag and I will know how to be avenged!”

How to effect this vengeance John Milner would have been embarrassed to explain. And under any circumstances it depended on his winning the game. And that is why Tom Crabbe, in conformity with the instructions in the telegram received that morning, had to take the train for Philadelphia.

He had ten times enough time to do the journey. The states of Ohio and Pennsylvania adjoin. As soon as the eastern frontier of one is passed you are in the other. Between the two cities there are hardly six hundred miles, and there were several routes for the travellers to choose between. Twenty hours would suffice for the journey. Here was good fortune such as did not fall to Commodore Urrican and would not be envied by the young painter or the *Tribune* reporter in search of long distances.

But John Milner did not complain, as he did not intend to stay a day longer than he could help in this city so partial to phenomena of the porcine race. When he stepped into the train he contemptuously shook the dust off his feet. No one had taken any notice of Tom Crabbe's presence at Cincinnati, no one had come to interview him at his hotel in Covington, and the post office was deserted when he presented himself to receive Tornbrock's telegram. But thanks to his throw of twelve he had gone three squares ahead of Max Real, and was a square ahead of the masked man.

This time public attention would not be diverted from him. He would return the man of the day. John Milner would know how to bring him into the light and force the great city to take some notice of the personage who held so considerable a place in the pugilistic world of North America.

It was about ten o'clock in the evening of the 31 st of May that Tom Crabbe made his entry into the "City of Brotherly Love," in which he and his trainer passed their first night incognito.

In the morning John Milner would see how the wind blew. Did it blow from a good quarter, and had it blown the name of the illustrious boxer to the banks of the Delaware?

As was his custom, John Milner had left Tom Crabbe at the hotel after taking the necessary measures with regard to the two breakfasts.

This time, again, as at Cincinnati, he had not entered their names and vocations in the visitors' book. A walk through the city seemed advisable. As the result of the last throw had been known since the evening before, he might discover if the populace were interested in Tom Crabbe's arrival.

You can walk through a town of the third or fourth rank in a few hours, but here was an agglomeration comprising the suburbs of Manaynac and Germanstown, Camden and Gloucester, containing two hundred thousand houses and eleven hundred thousand people. Lying from north-east to south-west along the course of the Delaware, Philadelphia is about eighteen miles in length, and its area is large, owing to the Philadelphians living in their own houses. Enormous buildings with hundreds of tenants, as in Chicago and New York, are rare there. It is pre-eminently the city of "home."

The city is, in fact, immense, magnificent also, open, airy, regularly built, with some of the streets a hundred feet wide. It has houses with frontages of brick and marble, trees that have survived since the sylvanian epoch, gardens kept up luxuriously, squares, parks — and one of the largest in the States, Fairmount Park, a bit of country of three thousand acres on the banks of the Schuylkill, in which the ravines have retained their wild aspect.

In any case, during this first day John Milner could only visit that part of the town situated on the right bank of the Delaware, and he went along towards the west, following the Schuylkill, an affluent of the river flowing from northwest to south-east. On the other side of the Delaware extends New Jersey, one of the small states of the Union to which belong the suburbs of Camden and Gloucester, which for want of bridges communicate with the city by ferry-boats.

It was not on this day that John Milner traversed the centre of the city from which radiate the principal arteries, around the Town Hall, a vast edifice of white marble built at the cost of millions, the tower of which when it is finished will support an enormous statue of William Penn six hundred feet in the air.

If during his sojourn in the city John Milner could not help noticing its monuments, he never thought of looking for them. He had not come to see Philadelphia. He was not expected to paint pictures like Max Real, or write articles like Harris T. Kymbale. His business was to take Tom Crabbe where the last throw obliged him to present himself. But he intended to get something out of the trip for the benefit of Tom Crabbe, in case he did not win the sixty millions of dollars and was obliged to continue his trade.

Patrons of this kind of sport were not wanting in Philadelphia, where there are hundreds of thousands of workmen in the various metal mines, in the machine shops, in the refineries, the chemical works, the textile factories — more than six thousand manufactories of all sorts — and also the labourers in the harbour trades employed by the exporters of coal, petroleum, grain and manufactured articles, the shipping business being only second to that of New York.

Yes, Tom Crabbe would be estimated at his true value among these people, by whom the physical qualities are more thought of than the intellectual ones. And even among the other classes claiming to be superior, how many gentlemen might not be found who knew how to appreciate a good straight hit in the face and the dislocation of a jawbone in a scientific manner!

John Milner noticed, with real satisfaction, that the market-place, which is said to be the largest in the world, was not devoted to a cattle show. In this particular his companion had no rival to fear as at Cincinnati, and the indigo flag would not have to. be lowered before the majesty of a phenomenal pig.

On this subject John Milner was relieved from anxiety at the very beginning. The Philadelphia newspapers had announced, with a good deal of fuss, that Pennsylvania might expect the approaching arrival of the second partner during the coming fortnight. The betting agencies had begun to make a stir, and Tom Crabbe had risen in the list owing to his being in front of his competitors and requiring only two lucky throws to win, &c., &c.

And when next day Tom Crabbe was taken through the more frequented streets by his trainer, he would have had every reason to be satisfied with himself if he had only been able to read.

Everywhere were huge posters, as big as those about the pig at Cincinnati, with the name of the second player in letters a foot high and marks of exclamation escorting it like a guard of honour, to say nothing of the handbills distributed by the vociferous agents of the bookmakers.

TOM CRABBE! TOM CRABBE!! TOM CRABBE!!!

The Famous Tom Crabbe, Champion of the new world!!!

The Great Favourite of the Hypperbone Match!!!

Tom Crabbe, who has beaten Fitzsimmons and Corbett!

TOM CRABBE!

Who is beating Real, Kymbale, Wag, Urrican and XKZ!!!

Tom crabbe, who leads!!!

Tom Crabbe, who is but sixteen squares from the end!

Tom Crabbe, who will hoist the indigo flag on the Heights of Illinois!!

Tom Crabbe is within our walls!!!

THREE CHEERS FOR TOM CRABBE!!!!

It will be understood how proud was John Milner when he exhibited his triumphant subject in the streets of Philadelphia, in the principal squares, at Fairmount Park, and in the market-place. What revenge for the vexations of Cincinnati! What a pledge of final success!

But on the 7th, amid this delirious joy, John Milner had a spasm of the heart, provoked by the following unexpected incident. It was the prick of the pin that threatened to burst the balloon before it rose in the air.

A poster, no less enormous, had been put up by a rival, if not an opponent in the Hypperbone match.

Cavanaugh against Crabbe.

Who was Cavanaugh? Oh, he was well known in the city. He was a prize-fighter of renown who three months before had been beaten in a memorable contest by Tom Crabbe in person without having been able to obtain his revenge in spite of his persistent attempts. And these words on the poster below the name of Cavanaugh:

challenge for the championship!

challenge!! challenge!!!

It must be admitted that Tom Crabbe had something else to do than to reply to this provocation, and that was to quietly wait for the approaching throw. But Cavanaugh — or rather those who were pitting him against the champion of the New World — did not intend to be replied to in that way. Who could say if it were not the move of some opposition agency to stop the most advanced of the players?

John Milner should have shrugged his shoulders. Tom Crabbe’s partisans even came to tell him to despise a challenge which was clearly put forward from interested motives.

But on the one hand John Milner knew the indisputable superiority of his man over Cavanaugh, and on the other he made this reflection: if at the end Tom Crabbe did not win the game, if he were not enriched by the millions of the will, if he did not continue to fight in public, would he not lose his reputation for having refused this revenge demanded under such peculiar circumstances?

In short, after a fresh lot of posters more provoking still and going so far as to impeach the honour of the champion of the New World, there could be read on the walls of Philadelphia:

THE CHALLENGE ACCEPTED!

CRABBE AGAINST CAVANAUGH!!

We can imagine the effect!

What? Tom Crabbe going to fight? Tom Crabbe at the head of the “Seven,” going to risk his position in a pugilistic revenge? Had he forgotten in what game he was engaged? Well, yes! “Besides,” said John Milner to himself, “it is not a jaw knocked out or an eye knocked in that will prevent Tom Crabbe resuming his route and making a good figure in the Hypperbone match!”

If the revenge was going to take place, the sooner it took place the better.

But it so happened that as meetings of this nature are forbidden, even in America, the Philadelphian police interfered and threatened the heroes with fine and imprisonment if the fight took place. To be confined in the Western Penitentiary, where the prisoners are obliged to learn a musical instrument and play on it all day long — and what a lovely concert it must be with the mournful accordion heard above all! — would not, it is true, be a very severe penalty, but the detention would mean the impossibility of starting on the day named, and to expose himself to the same delay as Hermann Titbury had fallen a victim to in Maine.

But there remained a method of procedure without fear of the sheriff. Would it not do to go to some spot in the district and keep the place and time secret, so as to settle this great question of the championship outside Philadelphia?

This is what was done. Only the seconds of the two boxers and a few amateurs of so-called high respectability were informed of the arrangements.

The preliminaries being arranged, the provocations by poster were put an end to and the rumour spread about that the meeting would not take place till after the match — which might lead people to believe it would not take place at all.

But, all the same, on the 9th, about eight o’clock in the morning, in the small town of Arondale, some thirty miles from Philadelphia, a certain number of people found themselves together in a room secretly hired for the event.

Photographers and cinematographists accompanied them, so as to preserve for posterity every phase of the enthralling contest.

Among the personages figured Tom Crabbe in fine form, with his arms about on the level with his adversary’s head, and Cavanaugh, though less in height, just as broad of shoulder and exceptionally strong — both men good for twenty or thirty rounds at the least. The first was looked after by John Milner, the second by his private trainer. Amateurs and professionals surrounded them, eager to criticize the action and effect of these two machines of two fist-power each.

But scarcely had the men squared up to one another than there appeared on the scene the sheriff of Arondale, Vincent Burck, accompanied by a Methodist minister, the Reverend Hugh Hunter. Accidentally hearing of what was taking place, they had both hurried down to the scene to stop the degrading encounter, one in the name of Pennsylvanian law and the other in the name of a higher law.

Naturally they were not well received, either by the champions or their friends or the spectators. They tried to speak, but no one would allow them to be heard. They tried to separate the combatants, and were thrust back. What could they do against these muscular men, who seemed strong enough to send them rolling twenty feet with a back-hander?

Doubtless the two interlopers had the strength of their official position. They represented the authorities, terrestrial and celestial, but they had not got the police, who are usually in attendance to help them.

So Tom Crabbe and Cavanaugh again put up their fists.

“Stop!” shouted Vincent Burck.

“Take care!” shouted Hugh Hunter.

No notice was taken and a few, feints were made, and — Well — and then ensued a scene that provoked the surprise and then the admiration of those who were its witnesses.

Neither the sheriff nor the clergyman was tall or of much breadth — they were thin, little men. But what they had not in strength they had — or seemed to have — in suppleness, address, and agility.

In a moment they were on the two boxers. John Milner, trying to keep back the minister, received a smack in the face that sent him staggering on to the ground, where he remained half dazed.

The next moment Cavanaugh was gratified with a nasty knock the sheriff administered to his left eye, while Mr. Hunter performed the like kind office for Tom Crabbe’s right eye.

The two professionals turned on their assailants, who, in dodging their attacks, capered and jumped about like monkeys, and luckily escaped unhit. The crowd began to applaud and then to cheer. Suddenly the minister got in his right fist on to Tom Crabbe’s left eye, and made a blind man of him for the time being.

A moment afterwards the police rushed in, and the whole assembly — principals, seconds, and spectators cleared out at a run, leaving the field to the sheriff and the minister.

And John Milner, with a swollen cheek, led back Tom Crabbe to Philadelphia. And there they hid their shame in their rooms, waiting for the arrival of the next telegram.

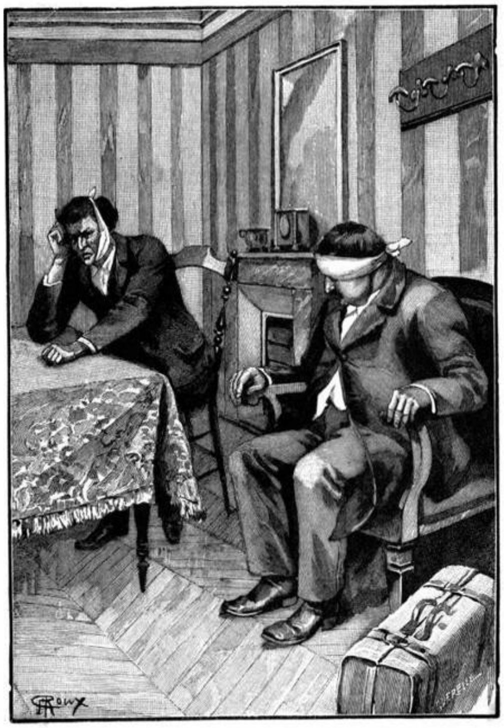

Waiting for the arrival of the next telegram. p. 313

CHAPTER XXIV

TWO HUNDRED DOLLARS A DAY

A FETISH for the Titburys? Certainly they wanted it; and if it were only the end of the rope which hanged this brigand, Bill Arrol, it would have been welcome. But, as the magistrate of Great Salt Lake City had said, he would have to be caught before he was hanged, and it did not look as though that would happen very soon.

Assuredly the fetish which would make Hermann Titbury win the game would not have been dear at the three thousand dollars he had been robbed of at the *Cheap Hotel* But meanwhile the blue flag did not possess a cent, and furious and no less disappointed at the ironical replies of the sheriff, he left the police station to rejoin Mrs. Titbury.

“Well, Hermann,” she asked, “this rascal, this wretch of an Inglis?”

“His name is not Inglis,” answered Mr. Titbury, falling back into a chair,” it is Bill Arrol — ”

“Is he arrested?”

“He will be.”

“When?”

“When they can put their hands on him.”

“And our money? Our three thousand — ”

“I would not give half a dollar for it.”

Mrs. Titbury collapsed into an arm-chair in ruins. But this masterful woman was soon herself again; she rose, and when her husband, in the last stage of dejection, said:

“What is to be done?”

“Wait.”

“Wait — for what? Till this bandit, Arrol — ”

“No — Hermann — wait for Mr. Tornbrock’s telegram, which will not be long in coming. Then we can think matters over — ”

“And the money?”

“We have time to get it sent to us even if we are sent to the end of the States.”

“That would not astonish me, with the run of bad luck that pursues us.”

“Follow me!” answered Mrs. Titbury resolutely. And they went out of the hotel to go to the telegraph office.

All the town had heard of the misadventures of the Titburys. It is true that Great Salt Lake City did not seem to have more sympathy for them than the town of Calais, from which they had arrived direct. If, then, a few persons were at the post office when the couple arrived, they were only there out of curiosity, or rather had come to laugh at the “good last,” as the unfortunate Titbury had been popularly designated.

But chaff did not trouble him, still less did it trouble Mrs. Titbury. He cared not whether he rose or fell in the betting lists, for who knew whether he might not recover at once by a superb throw? In fact, by studying the board, Mrs. Titbury had discovered that if they threw ten, they would have to double on the fourteenth square, that of Illinois, and go at a bound to the twenty-fourth, which was that of Michigan, adjoining Illinois, which would take them back towards Chicago. This would be — there was no doubt of it — the best throw they could get. Would they get it?

At forty-seven minutes past nine, with automatic regularity, the telegram came out of the instrument.

The throw was disastrous.

It will be remembered that the same day, June 2nd, Max Real, then with his mother at Chicago, had known of it immediately, as in the following days he knew the number which sent Harris T. Kymbale to Washington, Lizzie Wag to Missouri, and Commodore Urrican to Wisconsin.

Deplorable as it was for Hermann Titbury, it was none the less singular, and he must have been in a vein of terrible bad luck for it to have occurred.

The number was five, by two and three, which took him from the fourth square to the ninth. The ninth square was Illinois, and he had to double, which brought him to fourteen, another Illinois square; so he had to triple it, and that gave him in all fifteen points and put him on the nineteenth square, Louisiana, New Orleans, marked as the inn on Hypperbone’s board.

In truth it would have been impossible to be more unfortunate.

Mr. and Mrs. Titbury, returned to their hotel amid the pleasantries of the crowd, walking as if they had received a formidable blow on the head. But

Mrs. Titbury had a harder head than her husband, and did not, like him, remain overwhelmed on the spot.

“To Louisiana! To New Orleans!” repeated Mr. Titbury, seizing his hair. “Ah! Why have we been so foolish as to run about like this — ”

“And we will still run!” declared Mrs. Titbury, crossing her arms.

“What — you think — ”

“Of starting for Louisiana.”

“But it is thirteen hundred miles to do!”

“We will do it!”

“But we shall have to pay a fine of a thousand dollars — ”

“We will pay it.”

“But we shall have to remain for two throws without playing — ”

“We will not play.”

“But there will be six weeks to spend in this town, where the cost of living is very high — ”

“We will spend them.”

“But we have no more money!

“We will have some sent.”

“But I do not wish it!”

"And I do!"

Kate Titbury had a reply for everything, it will be seen. Evidently she had in her the spirit of an old gambler, and it had got the upper hand. The mirage of those sixty million dollars had attracted her, fascinated her, hypnotized her.

Hermann Titbury did not attempt to resist. It would have been of no use. The consequences he had deduced from this unfortunate throw were only too correct — a long and expensive journey, the States to be almost entirely traversed from north-west to south-east, the dearness of living in this opulent and ruinous city of New Orleans, the time that would have to be passed there, the rule that obliged him to miss two throws before resuming the game.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Titbury," luck may send one of our opponents there, and then we should have to take his old place — "

"But which one," asked Mr. Titbury," seeing they are all in front of us?"

"And why should they not be obliged to go back after passing the end — and recommence the game like that abominable Urrican?"

No doubt it might occur — but the chances were against it.

"And then," added Mr. Titbury," as the crowning misfortune, we are not allowed to choose the hotel to which we are to put up!"

In fact, after the words," nineteenth square, Louisiana, New Orleans, "the unlucky telegram added, "*Excelsior Hotel*"

There could be no discussion. Whether the hotel was of the first or twentieth class, it was that ordered by the imperious deceased.

“We will go to the *Excelsior Hotel,* that is all!” so said Mrs. Titbury.

Such was this woman, as resolute as she was avaricious. Yet, the agony she went through in thinking of the losses that had already befallen them, the three hundred dollars fine, the three thousand dollars theft, the expenses up to the present, the expenses in the future! But the heritage dazzled her eyes and made her blind.

There was plenty of time for the third player to get to his post. It was the 2nd of June, and it would suffice if the blue flag were hoisted in the metropolis of Louisiana on the 15th of July. But, as Mrs. Titbury had observed, another of the “Seven” might be sent there any day, and it was necessary for them to be in the nineteenth square to be replaced by him. Better not waste time in Great Salt Lake City, then. And so it was decided to start as soon as the money arrived that had been demanded by telegram from the bank where Mr. Titbury kept his current account.

This operation took but two days. In the morning of the 4th of June he drew from the bank in Great Salt Lake City five thousand dollars, which, alas! would never more yield interest.

On the 5th of June, Mr. and Mrs. Titbury left Great Salt Lake City amid general indifference, and unfortunately without that piece of rope which would have put them in luck if Bill Arrol had been hanged.

It was the Union Pacific — decidedly much used by the players in the Hypperbone match — which took them across Wyoming to Cheyenne, and across Nebraska to Omaha.

Thence, for the sake of cheapness — the fares by steamboat being less than by railway — the travellers went down the Missouri to Kansas, as Max Real had done at his first move; from Kansas they reached St. Louis, where Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley would soon take up their quarters to spend their time in prison.

To leave the waters of the Missouri for those of the Mississippi you require only a change of boat. Steamers are numerous on these rivers, and if you are satisfied to travel third class, the voyage can be done very cheaply. By providing your own food — easily done at the stopping places — you can still further diminish your daily expenses. And this was done by the Titburys, who spent as little as possible in preparation for the bills they would have to meet for a probably lengthened stay at the *Excelsior Hotel*.

The steamboat *Black Warrior* received them on board to take them to the Louisianan capital. They had but to follow the "Father of Waters" between the states of Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, to which the great river gives a more natural frontier than the degrees of longitude and latitude on their other sides.

Seven days after leaving Great Salt Lake City they arrived at New Orleans in the evening.

As they came down the gangway they saw a carriage superbly horsed which was evidently waiting for some of the passengers of the *Black Warrior.* Their intention was to walk to the hotel, leaving their luggage to be brought on by a porter. What was their surprise — a surprise to which was added a pang of alarm — when a footman approached, a negro of the most beautiful black, who said to them:

"Mr. and Mrs. Titbury, I think?"

“We are,” said Mr. Titbury.

Then the newspapers had announced their departure from Utah, their journey to Omaha, their voyage on board the *Black Warrior,* their imminent arrival at New Orleans. They had hoped to be left without such attentions; could they never escape the always costly inconveniences of celebrity?

“And what do you want with us?” asked Mr. Titbury gruffly.

“The carriage is waiting for you.”

“We did not order any carriage.”

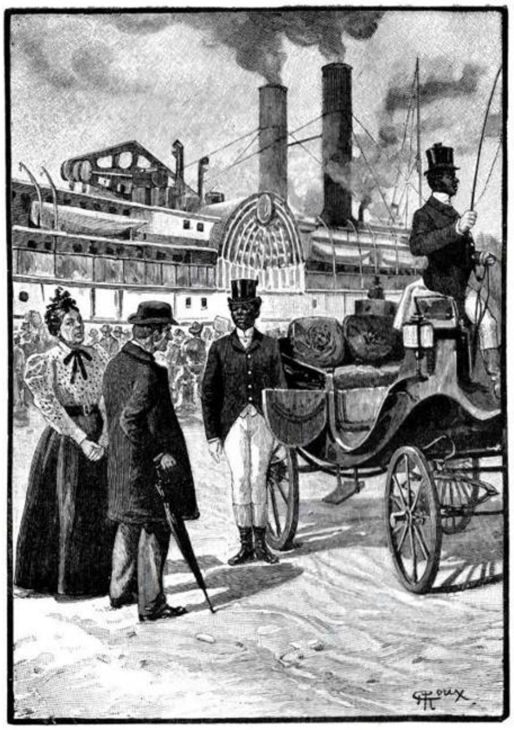

The footman hastened to open the door. p. 321

“People do not come to the *Excelsior* in any other way,” replied, with a bow, the negro of the most beautiful black.

“It begins well!” murmured Mr. Titbury with a big sigh.

But as it was not customary to go in a simpler fashion to the hotel named, the best thing to do was get into the carriage. The couple took their seats, and an omnibus took their bag and portmanteau. Arrived at Canal Street before a noble building, a palace in fact, along the front of which shone the words, EXCELSIOR HOTEL COMPANY, LIMITED, and the hall of which was resplendent with lights, the carriage stopped, and the footman hastened to open the door.

The Titburys, tired and bewildered, hardly noticed the ceremonious reception given to them by the hotel staff. A major-domo in a black suit conducted them to their rooms. Absolutely dazzled, their haggard eyes saw nothing of the magnificence which surrounded them, and they postponed till the morning the reflections that such extraordinary pomp would inspire.

In the morning, after a night spent in the calm of this comfortable room, protected by the double windows which kept out all the noise of the street, they awoke under the subdued light of an electric night-lamp. The transparent dial of an expensive timepiece showed that it was eight o’clock.

Within reach of the hand at the side of the huge bed where they had so tranquilly reposed, a series of buttons awaited but the pressure of the finger to summon the chamber-maid or the groom of the chambers. Other buttons commanded the bath, the early breakfast, the morning papers, and — what persuaded the travellers to press it — the light of day.

It was on this button that Mrs. Titbury placed her crooked finger.

Instantly the thick blinds of the windows rolled up mechanically, the sun-blinds dropped down outside and the rays of the sun flooded the room.

Mr. and Mrs. Titbury looked at one-another. They dared not utter a word for fear that every sentence would cost them a piastre a word.

The luxury of the room was beyond all reason, everything of incomparable richness, furniture, draperies, carpets, the walls hung with brocaded silk.

The couple arose and passed into an adjoining room of most marvellous comfort; washing-stands with taps for hot water, tepid water, or cold water at will, pulverizers ready to spout their perfumed sprays, soaps of different colours and odours, sponges of exceptional softness, towels as white as snow.

As soon as they were dressed, the Titburys ventured into a further series of rooms, a suite complete, dining-room with the table glittering with silver and china, reception room furnished with unheard of luxury, electrolier, brackets, pictures by famous artists, art bronzes, lamp shades ornamented with gold — madame’s boudoir, piano with music, table with fashionable novels, albums with Louisianan photographs — the gentleman’s room with American reviews, the best newspapers of the States, a case of stationery with the hotel note-heading, and even a typewriter ready to work at the touch of the traveller’s finger.

“It is the cave of Ali Baba!” exclaimed Mrs. Titbury, absolutely fascinated.

“And the forty thieves are not far off!” added Mr. Titbury.

At this moment his eyes caught sight of a notice in a golden frame, with the list of the different departments of the hotel, and the times of the meals for those who preferred not to take them in their rooms.

The suite occupied by the third player was No. 1, and had this notice against it: “Reserved for the players in the Hypperbone match by the Excelsior Hotel Company.”

“Ring, Hermann,” Mrs. Titbury contented herself with saying.

He pressed the button, and a gentleman in black coat and white cravat presented himself at the door of the reception room.

And to begin with, in studied phrase, he tendered them the compliments of the Excelsior Hotel Company and its manager, honoured at having as guest one of the most popular competitors in the great national game. As he had some time to spend in Louisiana, and especially at New Orleans, with his worthy wife, they had endeavoured to surround them with all possible comfort. The routine of the hotel, if it was convenient for them to conform to it, was early breakfast at eight o’clock, breakfast at eleven, luncheon at four, dinner at seven, evening tea at ten. The style of cookery would be English, American, or French, as they pleased. The wines were of the best foreign vintages. During the day a carriage was at the disposal of the great Chicago banker *(sic)*, an elegant steam yacht was kept ready to start for excursions to the mouth of the Mississippi or trips on Lake Borque or Lake Pontchartrain. A box had been, engaged at the opera, where one of the best French companies was then performing.

“How much?” asked Mrs. Titbury abruptly.

“A hundred dollars.”

“For the month?”

“For the day.”

“And for each, of course?” added Mrs. Titbury in a tone in which irony, contended with anger.

“Yes, madame, and the price was arranged on the most reasonable terms as soon as the newspapers informed us that the third player and Mrs. Titbury were to stay some time at the *Excelsior Hotel.*”

Hither had their ill-luck brought this unfortunate couple — and they could not go elsewhere — and Mrs. Titbury could not even install herself in some humble lodging-house! It was the hotel designated by William J. Hypperbone, and there was nothing to be surprised at in the arrangement, as he was one of the principal shareholders. Yes! two hundred dollars a day for the pair of them, six thousand dollars for thirty days if they remained the month in this tavern.

And whether they liked it or not, they had to put up with it. To leave the hotel was to leave the game, the rules of which were indisputable! It was to renounce all hope of coming back to it — and coming into the millions.

As soon as the major-domo had retired, “Let us be off!” said Mr. Titbury. “Let us get our baggage and return to Chicago. I will not remain a minute longer here — at eight dollars an hour!”

“Indeed!” replied the imperious dame.

The “Crescent City,” as they call the Louisianan metropolis, was founded in 1717 in the bend of the great river which bounds it on the south, and may be said to absorb all Louisiana. The other towns, Baton Rouge — the state capital — Donaldsonville, Shreveport, have only from eleven to twelve thousand people. Situated over 1700 miles from New York and 107 from the mouth of the Mississippi, nine railroads run into it, and fifteen hundred steamboats ply on its web of waters.

It was in this vast city of two hundred and forty-two thousand inhabitants, much diversified by the mingling of races, in which the blacks, if they rejoice in all political rights, have not gained social equality — it was amid this hybrid population of French, Spanish, English, Anglo-Americans, in the heart of Louisiana, that there had been thrust into an existence they had never even imagined, this pair of Titburys so strangely torn from Chicago. But as bad luck necessitated it, the best thing to do — unless they went home — was to get all they could for their money. At least, so said Mrs. Titbury.

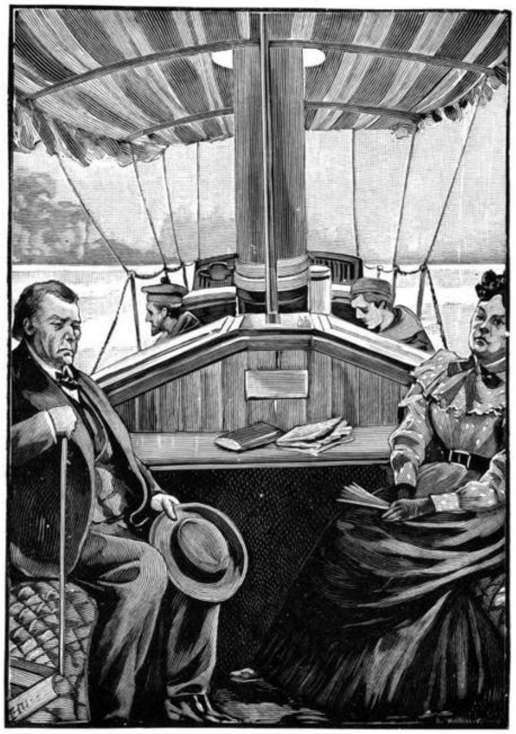

The placid waters of Lake Pontchartrain.

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And so every day their magnificent equipage took them about in great pomp. A noisy crowd accompanied them with its ironical cheers, for the people knew them to be downright misers who had been as unpopular at

Great Salt Lake City as at Calais, and as at Chicago. What did it matter? They did not notice it, and nothing occurred to lead them to think that they were not the great favourites of the match.

In this way they exhibited themselves in the northern wards, the suburbs of Lafayette, Jefferson, Carrollton, those elegant neighbourhoods in which the mansions and villas and cottages stand embowered in the foliage of the orange and magnolia and other trees then in full flower.

They drove on the substantial levee a hundred yards wide which protects the town against inundation, on the quays bordered by a four-deep row of steamers, steamboats, tugs, sailing vessels, coasting craft, which take away 1,700,000 cotton bales a year. In this way they saw Algiers and Gretna, by crossing the river to the left bank, where the workshops, factories and warehouses are mainly to be found.

In this way they drove in their gorgeous vehicle along the beautiful streets, bordered with houses of brick and stone which have taken the places of those of wood which were destroyed in the numerous fires; and often in Royal Street and St. Louis Street, which cross each other in the French quarter — and there, what charming habitations with green blinds, with their courts in which the fountains murmur in their basins and the plants flourish in their window boxes.

It was thus that they honoured with a visit the Capitol, an old building transformed during the War of Secession into a legislative palace where sat the Chambers of Senators and Deputies. Thus they visited the very architectural palace of the University, the gothic cathedral, the Custom House, the Rotunda with its immense hall. There the reader finds a collection of the best assorted reading, the lounger a promenade arranged under the open galleries, the speculators in stocks and public funds an animated exchange. Many excursions they went on their elegant steam yacht on the placid waters of Lake Pontchartrain and among the channels of the Mississippi. At the opera the admirers of the great lyric masterpieces saw them in the box placed at their disposal, trying desperately to appreciate the chords of the orchestra with ears absolutely closed to all musical comprehension.

Thus they lived as in a dream, but what an awakening there would be when they fell back into reality!

A singular phenomenon occurred in their case. Yes! These niggards, these skinflints, these misers, became accustomed to this new life, they were bewildered by this abnormal situation, they grew intoxicated, in the physical sense of the word, at this table which was always luxuriously served and of which they would not lose a crumb at the risk of future dyspepsia, for they wanted their money's worth out of those two hundred dollars a day.

Time rolled on. Their stay at the hotel was not interrupted. Thirteen throws had to take place at Chicago before they had the right to start again. Every two days the throws were announced in the Rotunda, as they had been a few minutes before in the Auditorium.

None of them took an opponent to Louisiana; neither that of the 12th, concerning Max Real, nor that of the 14th, concerning Tom Crabbe. On the 16th — the date reserved for Hermann Titbury before misfortune sent him to the nineteenth square — no throw took place. On the 18th, it was for the fourth player, Harris T. Kymbale, that Tornbrock rolled the dice on the table of the Auditorium.

The Titburys were thus apparently doomed to continue this existence which was as agreeable as ruinous to the purse and health during the six weeks of seclusion. And perhaps before they were free to move some competitor might arrive at the sixty-third square!

That, however, was the secret of the future. Meanwhile, the days rolled on, and if the match ended, all Mr. and Mrs. Titbury had to do was to return to Illinois after paying the formidable bill of the *Excelsior Hotel,* added to the previous expenses, and think of what it had cost them to figure among the “Seven” of the Hypperbone match!

CHAPTER XXV

THE PEREGRINATIONS OF HARRIS T KYMBALE

If the Titburys and Commodore Urrican had reason to complain of the bad luck that followed them, it would seem that the chief reporter of the *Tribune* had a right to do so in some measure. To begin with, he had been sent to Niagara, in New York, made to pay a fine, and sent on immediately to Santa Fe, in New Mexico. And now he was obliged to come from South Carolina to Nebraska, and then go to Washington, at the north-western extremity of the States.

At Charleston, in South Carolina, where he had been so warmly welcomed, he had received the telegram on the 4th of June. The throw was ten by six and four, and that being doubled, took him from the twenty-second square to the forty-second.

This last was Nebraska, chosen by the deceased as the labyrinth of the Noble Game of Goose. And — this was serious — when the player had got there and paid a double fine, he had to go back to the thirtieth square, which was occupied by Washington State. It is true that the itinerary from South Carolina to Washington passed through Nebraska.

When the throw was announced his partisans gathered in great numbers at the Charleston Post Office were thunderstruck, and the reporter saw himself in danger of losing his position as first favourite, which most of the agencies had given him, a little too hastily it must be admitted.

But the man, as clear-headed as he was resolute, had soon reassured those who supported him.

“Eh! my friends,” he said, “do not despair! You know I am not afraid of long journeys. From Charleston to Nebraska, from Nebraska to Washington is a matter of two strides, and I have a fortnight in which to do the four thousand miles. I shall have railroads all the way. As to the fine to pay, that concerns the cashier of the *Tribune,* and all the worse for him if he makes a face at it! The trouble is not the going from Nebraska to Washington, but the returning from the forty-second to the thirtieth square! Bah! The loss of twelve squares is not worth talking about, and I shall soon pick up what chance made me put down!”

How could people not have confidence in a man who showed himself so confident? How could they hesitate to risk putting their money on him? How could they deny him the applause to which he was so justly entitled? And they did not spare it him, and this morning saw the renewal of the triumphs of the evening at the famous Astley banquet at which had figured the monster pie that had occasioned 1577 cases of indigestion.

At the same time Harris T. Kymbale was in error in affirming that he could go all the way by railroad from Charleston to Olympia, the capital of Washington, mentioned in the telegram. No, there was a solution of continuity, which was certain to be noticed by Brennan S. Bickhorn. Half the journey, that to Nebraska, could, however, be rapidly accomplished by the lines in connection with the Union Pacific.

Nevertheless, there was no time to lose, considering the possible delays. The wise thing to do was to leave Charleston that evening, and this the Green Flag did. His enthusiastic supporters cheered him up to the minute the train started to cross the plains of South Carolina.

The first part of the route several of the “Seven” had followed when they crossed their regions, and probably some would follow it again. Harris T. Kymbale went through Tennessee, and in the evening of the 5th reached St. Louis, where Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley went to find a prison. Then, fearing to lose too much time by taking the steamboat to Omaha, he picked out the quickest trains and reached Omaha, by way of Kansas City, next evening.

He spent the night in Omaha, where, Max Real on his first journey had spent a few hours. Here a telegram reached him from the *Tribune* which told him day by day the stages and the manner in which he could reach Olympia, in Washington, in the forenoon of the 18th. This is what it said: —

“1. Leave Omaha in the morning of the 7th by Union Pacific, 8.35 train, to reach, ninety miles from there, Julesburg Junction at 6.30 in the evening.

“2. Find there a coach ready horsed, provisioned, with relays arranged along the road of a hundred miles to the Bad Lands of Nebraska. Arrive there next morning, report your presence, and return by coach to Julesburg.

“3. At Julesburg, take the 10 p.m. train to California, by Union and Southern Pacific, which reaches Sacramento in the evening of the 12th, and pass the night in that town.

“4. In the afternoon of the 12th take the line going north and stop at Shasta station, in Upper California, three hundred miles from Sacramento — repairs interrupting the traffic up to Roseburgh, in Oregon.

“5. In this mountainous country where coaches cannot run, travel the two hundred and forty miles on horseback so as to reach Roseburgh station on the 17th at latest, the journey taking four days, at 75 miles every 24 hours.

“6. In the afternoon of the 17th take the train at Roseburgh for Olympia, arriving there early next morning after a run of 350 miles.”

The message was long, but clear, explicit, and positive. The receiver had but to conform to its prescriptions and he would be at his post on the day named. It was to be hoped, however, that there would be no delay, for even half a day lost would ruin the result of the journey.

We may be sure Harris T. Kymbale was resolved to use all diligence. If he passed the night at Omaha, it was because the next train did not start till the morning. He caught it right enough, and in the evening was at Julesburg Junction, near the spot where the line skirts the frontier of Colorado, not far from the South Platte River.

This time, on leaving Charleston, the journalist had taken the precaution not to say who he was, so as to avoid receptions and their inconvenient consequences. At Julesburg he could not preserve his incognito, as the coach that had been ordered was awaiting his arrival.

His partisans assembled at the station understood that they must not delay him on any pretext, that his hours were numbered, that this excursion to the Bad Lands of Nebraska must be accomplished in the time fixed. They were the first, when the reporter got out on the platform, to advise him to start at once. And even a dozen of these Anglo-Americans who, with the emigrants and a certain number of Sioux, become citizens of the States, compose the Nebraskan population, had made arrangements to accompany him. This escort was not to be despised in these regions, where wild beasts of four legs and two legs were still to be found.

“As you please, gentlemen,” replied Harris T. Kymbale, shaking the hands extended towards him,” but on condition that the coach can hold you all.”

“Our places are taken — and we can pile in!” replied one of these enthusiasts.

The vehicle was a transcontinental coach belonging to Wells, Fargo and Co., which formerly carried the overland mails. It was painted a bright red and hung on leather straps, and contained a single compartment with nine seats, arranged in threes. The fourth player and eight of his supporters occupied the inside, ready to replace in turns the four others, two of whom sat at the back outside and two near the driver, who had a team of six horses.

Instead of roads there were only the tracks made by the waggons. But were roads necessary on these interminable plains on which the railroads have only to lay their sleepers? From time to time they crossed several creeks in the vicinity of the Raymond and Cole lagoons, the Boardman River, the Niobrara, which was crossed at the ford, and also a few hamlets where the horses of the relays were waiting.

It was in this way that on the evening of the 8th, after a forty hours’ journey in favourable weather, the coach arrived at the Bad Lands. No villages there, nothing but prairies where the horses could take their fill of pasture. Harris T. Kymbale and his companions were comfortable enough, the lockers in the coach being well filled with provisions.

After a night under a clump of trees, the coach was left in charge of the driver, and they descended the slopes of the wild, valley. William J. Hypperbone had good reason for choosing Nebraska as the labyrinth of his forty-second square.

Between the furthest undulations of the Rockies, in the neighbourhood of the Black Hills, covered with fir trees, lay this deep depression of the ground, thirty-six miles wide and eighty-five long, which extends into Dakota. On all sides rose the rings of rocks, with their thousand pyramids, needles, pinnacles; belfries, of stone. It was indeed a labyrinth, one of the most complicated, this region of the Bad Lands, where for over hundreds of square miles through strata of clays and ferruginous sands rise the earth-sculptured pillars of prismatic rock, with here and there a seeming bastion, a fort, a castle, gleaming brick-red on the white surface of the ground.

This corner of North America seems to have formed a world apart. In pre-historic times it was frequented by herds of elephants, mammoths, mastodons, whose bones are still found as fossils or reduced to dust, the hypothesis being that the depression was formerly filled with the waters coming down from the Rockies and the Black Hills which have flowed away through underground fissures, the altitude of the region being considerably above the level of the sea; and the empty reservoir became an ossuary where the fossil fragments have accumulated in surprising quantities.

There was no need to penetrate far into the sinuosities of the Bad Lands. It was enough that the fourth player was present in person at the entrance to the labyrinth, and that his presence had been certified in some authentic way. No document was left behind under a stone, as had been done by Commodore Urrican before leaving Death Valley. A paper was drawn up by Harris T. Kymbale and signed by his twelve companions, which was sufficient evidence of his arrival in this Nebraskan region. A last repast was taken under the shadow of the trees and his health was drunk with loud cheers.

“The reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune!* The favourite of the match! The heir of the sixty millions of dollars of William J. Hypperbone!”

Decidedly, Kymbale had reason to be confident. His supporters would not abandon him. They forgot, they wished to forget, that to go from Nebraska to Washington was to go back, if not on the map of the United States, at least on the board of the deceased. And when he returned to the thirtieth square he had only in front of him Max Real on the forty-fourth, XKZ on the forty-sixth, Tom Crabbe on the forty-seventh. The camp was raised at three o’clock in the afternoon, and at ten o’clock next morning the party had returned to Julesburg Junction.

An hour afterwards the Union Pacific train arrived, to stop ten minutes. Only ten minutes to stop, and if Harris T. Kymbale had missed the train, he would have imperilled the rest of his journey, for only two trains a day stop at the station — and he had not an hour to lose.

We know what States the line passes through on its way to the west. Max Real had been there on the way to Cheyenne, Hermann Titbury in going to Great Salt Lake City, Commodore Urrican in going to Death Valley. So the reporter went through Wyoming, Utah and Nevada and part of California to reach the Californian capital, during the night of the 11th, fit, cheery and confident.

He had an excellent welcome. His supporters in great numbers were there to greet them, but did not think of detaining him for an instant, the train leaving Sacramento at one o’clock in the afternoon.

Among others there to meet him out of interest or sympathy was the correspondent of the *Tribune,* Will Walter, who said to him:

“Sir, I was informed that you were to arrive to-day, and I sincerely congratulate you in having met with no delay.”

“That is so,” replied Harris T. Kymbale. “Not the least delay between Charleston and Sacramento, and I reckon it will be the same between Sacramento and Olympia.”

“There is no reason to fear it will not be,” said Will Walter. “It is a nuisance that the line should be temporarily closed, but the train will take you to Shasta station, where you will find the horses ready. A guide, who knows the country well, will take you by the shortest way to Roseburgh, and there you will get the Southern Pacific for Olympia.”

“Then all I can do is to thank you for your kindness.”

“Not at all, Mr. Kymbale; it is I who have to thank you, for I have backed you.”

“At what price?”

“Five to one.”

“Then, my dear comrade, let us have five good grips of the hand by way of gratitude — ”

“Double it, if you like; and now, Mr. Kymbale, a pleasant journey.”

The engine whistled, the train moved off, and disappeared at the curve in the direction of Marysville.

It was annoying that the train did not go faster. It stopped at every station, at Ewings, at Woodland, and so on, the gradient being a rising one all the time, so as to reach in Upper California a considerable height above sea-level. And it was not until eight o’clock in the morning of the 13th that it reached Shasta, up to time.

Beyond this, it will be remembered, the line was closed for repairs, and to resume his railway journey Harris T. Kymbale would have to ride northwards with the guide and horses provided by the *Tribune*. He had five clear days to reach Olympia, four of which must be spent on horseback, travelling about seventy-five miles a day. There was nothing impossible in this, but it meant much fatigue for both horses and riders.

Three horses were at the station, the one destined for Harris T. Kymbale, the others for the guide and a groom who accompanied him. Needless to say the reporter was accustomed to riding.

The guide, named Fred Wilmot, was a man about forty, with all the strength of his age.

“You are ready?” asked Harris T. Kymbale.

“Ready.”

“And we shall get there?”

“Yes, if you are a good horseman. By the coach it would have taken double as long.”

“I can answer for myself.”

“Then to the saddle.”

The horses went off at a swinging trot. There was no need to worry about food, for there were numerous towns and villages on the road.

The weather promised to continue fine, with a certain freshness that became more noticeable among the mountains. The day was broken by a halt of two hours, and they rested during a part of the night.

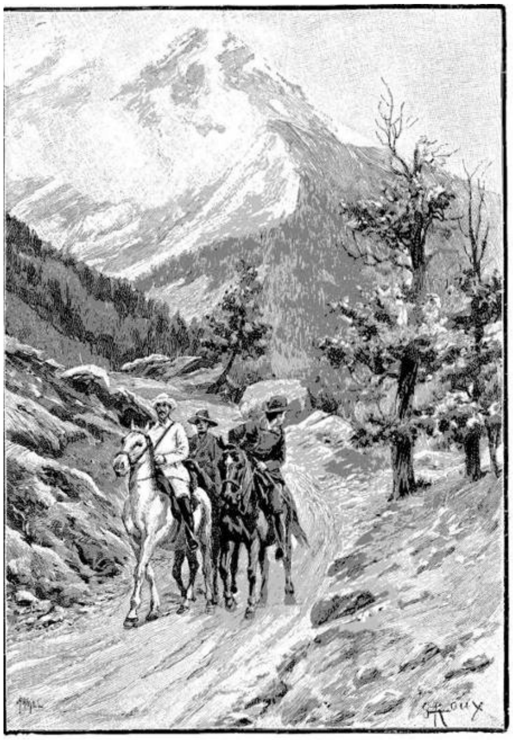

The road followed the right bank of the Sacramento.

The road followed the right bank of the Sacramento, and after stopping for a meal at a farm, they reached a country of mineral springs, of which there are so many in America. Seven hours of sleep at an inn, and the travellers were off at daybreak to lunch at Yreka. A hundred miles to the east they could see Mount Shasta, whose crater opens at more than twelve thousand feet between the two summits. Solidly seated on its base, cut deep into by verdant ravines, this mountain is considered one of the finest in the States," with its rosy lavas enamelled like glass, "as an enthusiastic traveller has said. Harris T. Kymbale had to postpone his admiration for another journey.

A grand State is this Oregon, the ninth in the Union. With very few people as yet, it possesses vast pasturages, its principal industry being salmon fishing, though the extreme fertility of its western lands is making it much sought after by farmers.

During this day the reporter had his eyes rejoiced by the sight of many magnificent landscapes. A passing look was all he could spare, to his great regret. In him the tourist was effaced by the player. In the evening, having come over Pilot Rock Pass, the men and horses, all in fair condition, rested at the town of Jackson, which should not be confused with its numerous homonyms. Next day, after a journey which rather tried the horses, and the second stage of which lasted till near midnight, the guide pointed out the lights of Roseburgh.

Thus ended the ride without an accident, without an incident, with the regularity of an express. Neither thanks nor dollars were spared to Fred Wilmot, and in the morning at daybreak Harris T. Kymbale “leapt “ — the word was used by the *Tribune* reporter — into the first train bound for Olympia.

The line passes through the principal towns and villages of this rich valley of the Villamette, Winchester, Eugene City, Harrisburg, Albany; Salem, the State capital, a basket of flowers and verdure; Oregon City, with its powerful waterfalls that work its paper mills, its sugar refineries, and its textile works; Portland, with seventy-five thousand people, the headquarters of the trade of Oregon, of which the Columbia has made a busy seaport.

At last the train crossed the river which separates Oregon from Washington and stopped on the right bank above the confluence of the Villamette at Vancouver, at eight o’clock in the morning of the 18th. This is the

Washington Vancouver, be it understood, not the Vancouver of British Columbia, which is a hundred miles further north. Harris T. Kymbale left it at 8.10 a.m. to finish the last stage of his journey.

No obstacle, no delay to fear. Nine stations and the train would arrive a little after eleven at Olympia station. The intermediate stations were successively left behind. The train ran rapidly along through this region watered by the numerous affluents of the Columbia. At last, at three minutes past eleven, it stopped at the little town of Tenino, about forty miles from the capital.

There — disagreeable news for the travellers and disastrous for Harris T. Kymbale — they were informed of an accident which the careful Bickhorn could not have foreseen. The train could not go beyond. At ten miles from the station a bridge had fallen in an hour before, and the traffic had to be stopped on that portion of the line.

A fatal blow, if ever there was one; and the fourth player could not recover from it. And yet he might!

Three young men who had got out of the train came up to him.

“Mr. Kymbale,” said one, “do you know how to ride a bicycle?”

“Yes.”

“Come along here, then.”

Nothing else was said. You see they had to go straight to the point, as became practical American men.

It was not a bicycle, but a triplet which was taken out of the luggage van and placed on the platform.

“Mr. Kymbale,” said the young man, “one of us will give you his place in the middle, the other will take the back seat, and I will take the front, and there is a chance of our getting to Olympia before twelve.”

“Your names, gentlemen?”

“Will Stanton and Robert Flock.”

“And yours, sir, you who have given up your place to me?”

“John Berry.”

“Well, Messrs. Stanton, Flock and Berry, thank you — and let us be off, and may St. Cycle, the patron of the bicyclists, protect us.”

Forty-five miles in less than an hour! The record had not yet been achieved on the road by any professional.

“Gentlemen,” said Harris T. Kymbale as they started,” I don’t know how I can ever thank — ”

“By winning,” said Stanton curtly.

“We have put our money on you,” added Flock from behind.

The triplet was a machine made by Camden and Co. of New York, which had been used in an international race at the Chicago velodrome. Will Stanton and Robert Flock were natives of Washington, and well-known long distance riders. Harris T. Kymbale on the intermediate seat had only to let himself be taken along, but he well knew how to add his muscular power to that of his trainers — that is the word — and pedal on his own account.

The departure was magnificent. The splendid machine went like greased lightning along the well-kept road, which was quite a velodrome track minus the raised corners, the country being very flat in this part of Washington bordering on the coast. The three cyclists did not speak, for their mouths were shut, the lips with a piece of quill between them, which, without allowing the air to reach the lungs too strongly, assisted the respiration through the nose.

And they did not hesitate to “scorch” from the very beginning. The wheels ran with the speed of a dynamo driven by a powerful motor, and the motor had three pairs of legs acting as connecting rods, which drove the machine with all their strength. The triplet carried a cloud of dust behind it, and when it crossed a ford it cut the water into a furrow with its wheels. The bell kept ringing to clear the road, and the people pulled up on the roadside to see the thing go by.

In the first quarter of an hour fifteen miles were run, and the rate must be kept up if the effort were not to be in vain.

It seemed as though no obstacle would arise, when, as they were running over a wide plain, a furious howling was heard.

An exclamation escaped from the mouth of Robert Flock, who dropped his quill to make it.

“Coyotes!”

Yes, coyotes, a score of prairie wolves. Mad with hunger, these ferocious animals came running faster than the cyclists, and threw themselves on their flank.

“You have a revolver?” asked Will Stanton, without slowing the triplet for a moment.

“Yes,” replied Harris T. Kymbale.

“Be ready to use it, then — you also, Flock, get yours out. I will steer. Keep on pedalling, and we may get ahead of them.”

Get ahead of them? It was soon evident that it was impossible.

The coyotes leapt after the triplet, ready to precipitate themselves on the reporter and his companions, who would be lost if they were upset.

Two shots were heard, and two wolves, mortally wounded, rolled, howling on to the road. The others in a fury flew at the machine, which could only avoid the shock by a sudden turn, which nearly threw Kymbale off his saddle.

“Pedal! pedal!” shouted Stanton, and the legs worked with such vigour that the teeth of the gearing absolutely hummed.

Another quarter of an hour, and fifteen more miles had been reeled off. But more than ever the coyotes must be settled, for they were leaping at the back wheel, and the grind of their claws could be heard against the spokes as they struck them. The revolvers had been emptied of all their shots; and twelve of the pursuers, dead or dying, had been left behind. Then Harris T. Kymbale let go the handle bar, loaded his revolver, fired; and of the shots none missed, and the coyote danger was over.

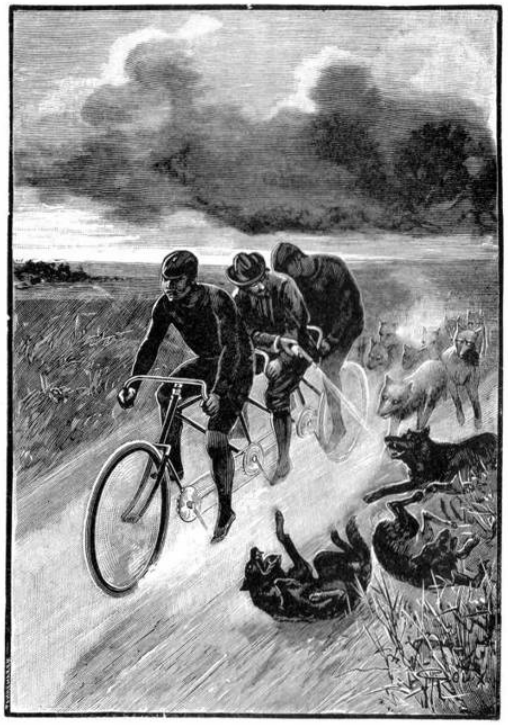

Two rolled howling on to the road. p. 341

It was ten minutes to twelve. About six miles off appeared the first houses of Olympia.

The triplet devoured the distance at the speed of an express, it reached the town, and in defiance of the police regulations, at the risk of smashing some of the five thousand inhabitants, it stopped at the post office as twelve o’clock began to strike.

Harris T. Kymbale got off. Tottering, almost breathless, he stepped through the crowd, who were expecting his arrival, and appeared before the counter as the clock was striking for the tenth time.

“Here is a telegram for Harris T. Kymbale — ” shouted the telegraph clerk.

“Here!” replied the reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune,* falling unconscious on to a seat.

The favourite of St. Cycle had arrived in time, thanks to the devotion and energy of his companions; and Will Stanton and Robert Flock, with forty-five miles in 46 minutes 33 seconds, easily beat the record, and are still unbeaten.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PRISON OF MISSOURI

IT was on the 6th of June, at the *Mammoth Hotel,* after the six days spent in the caves, that Lizzie Wag received the fatal news. Seven, by four and three; doubled, had sent her to the fifty-second square, Missouri.

The journey would be neither tiring nor long. The two States adjoined at the angle near Cairo. From Mammoth Caves to St. Louis was hardly two hundred miles, eight or ten hours by railway, not more. But what disappointment, what ruin!

“How unfortunate! How unfortunate!” said Jovita Foley.” Better to have been sent like Commodore Urrican to the end of Florida, or like Mr. Kymbale to the depths of Washington! At least, we should not have been knocked out of this abominable game — ”

“Yes, abominable, that is the word, my poor Jovita!” replied Lizzie Wag. “But why did you want to play it?”

The disconsolate damsel did not reply, and what could she have replied? Even if she went to Missouri and waited until an opponent came — by an unfortunate throw for himself but a fortunate one for her — to deliver Lizzie Wag from the prison and take her place, she could only do so by paying the triple fine to the pool which was to belong to him who came in second! And did she possess these three thousand dollars? No. Could she get them? No.

Some of the supporters of the yellow flag might have advanced the amount of the fine if her chance had not been so damaged. When Hodge Urrican got the “Death Number” he was free to begin again. Hermann Titbury could come out of the inn on the day fixed and resume his turn. Neither one nor the other was excluded from the match for an unlimited time, whereas this poor Lizzie Wag —

“How unfortunate! How unfortunate!” repeated Jovita Foley, who seemed to be unable to say anything else.

“Well — what are we to do?” asked her companion.

“Wait — wait, my poor dear.”

“Wait? What for?”

“I do not know! We have a fortnight before we need go to prison.”

“But not to pay the fine, Jovita; it is that which troubles us most.”

“Yes, Lizzie, yes! We’ll wait — ”

“Here?”

“No. Of course not.”

And the “no” came from her heart, not without reason, for the manner of the guests of the *Mammoth Hotel* had changed wonderfully towards them. Since that deplorable throw of the dice Lizzie Wag had been put in the cold. Favourite of the evening, she was no favourite of the next morning. Those who had ventured any money on her would willingly have covered her with curses. She would go to prison and the game would certainly end before she was set free. From the first hour a void opened around her. Jovita Foley saw this clearly, and it was only human, was it not?

That day most of the tourists went away, among them the governor of Illinois. And it is not unlikely that at that hour John Hamilton regretted the titular rank he had bestowed on the two friends. Colonel Wag and Lieutenant-Colonel Foley would make a sorry figure in the Illinois Militia.

In the afternoon they paid their bill at the *Mammoth Hotel*, and took the train for Louisville, there to await — what?

“My dear Jovita,” said Lizzie Wag as they were getting out of the train, “do you know what we are going to do?”

“No, Lizzie, I have lost my head! I do not know what I am about.”

“Well, let us continue the journey to Chicago, go quietly home, and go back to work at Marshall Field’s. Would not that be wise?”

“Very wise, my dear, very wise! But I would rather be deaf than hear the voice of wisdom!”

“That is madness.”

“Well — I am mad! I have been so since the game began, and I want to be so till the end.”

“Come! It is ended for us, Jovita, well ended!”

“You do not know, and I would give ten years of my life to be a month older!”

And she gave them, and she had given them so many times, that if we reckon them up we find that she had already given away 130 years of her life for nothing!

Did she still hope? In any case she obtained from Lizzie Wag, who had the weakness to listen to her, a promise not to abandon the game. They spent several days at Louisville. Had they not from the 6th to the 20th of June to get to Missouri?

It was here at a humble hotel in Louisville that they would bury their disappointment — at least, Jovita Foley would, for her companion had easily resigned herself to it, having never believed in her final success.

The 7th, the 8th, the 9th went by. There was no change in the position, and such were the insistences of Lizzie Wag that she made Jovita consent to return to Chicago.

The newspapers — even the *Chicago Herald,* who had always supported the fifth player, now "dropped" her. Jovita Foley was so enraged as she read them that she tore them up. Lizzie Wag was no longer quoted in the betting; she had fallen to zero or below it. In the morning of the 8th, the two friends had learnt that Commodore Urrican had got nine, by six and three, which sent him at a bound to Wisconsin, the twenty-sixth square.

"There is a good start for the second time!" exclaimed the unhappy Jovita.

On the 10th it was announced by telegraph that the masked man had by ten points been sent to Minnesota, the fifty-first square.

"Decidedly," she said, "he has the best chance, and he will be the heir of the millions of this Hypperbone!"

It will be noticed that the eccentric deceased had fallen considerably in her esteem since the dice had made a prisoner of dear Lizzie Wag!

At last it was agreed that that very evening the two friends would take the train to Chicago. Although the Louisville newspapers had mentioned the hotel at which the friends were staying, it is needless to add that not a single reporter had visited them. If this was to the great satisfaction of one, it was to the extreme disgust of the other, for, as she bitterly repeated,” it is as if we no longer existed.”

But it was written that they were not to return just yet. Something most unexpected occurred to allow them, perhaps, to recover their chances in the match, which they would have to abandon in default of paying the fine.

About three o’clock in the afternoon the postman presented himself at the hotel and went up to the room occupied by the two girls. As soon as the door was opened:

“Miss Lizzie Wag?” he asked.

“Yes. I am Miss Wag.”

“I have a letter addressed to you, if you will sign the receipt — ”

“Give it to me!” said Jovita Foley, her heart beating ready to break.

The signature was given; the postman retired.

“What is in the letter?” asked Lizzie Wag.

“Money, Lizzie.”

“And who could have sent it?”

“Who?” said Jovita Foley.

She broke the seals of the envelope and drew out a letter which contained a piece of folded paper.

The letter contained only these lines:

“Herein enclosed is a cheque for three thousand dollars on the Bank Of Louisville, which Miss Lizzie Wag will please accept for the payment of her fine — on behalf of Humphry Weldon.”

Jovita’s joy exploded like a firework. She jumped into the air; she laughed till she nearly choked; she spun round like a teetotum; and she shouted:

“The cheque — the cheque for three thousand dollars! It is the worthy gentleman who came to see us when you were ill, my dear! It is from Mr. Weldon!”

“But,” said Lizzie, “I do not know if I can — if I ought to accept it.”

“If you can — if you ought! Don’t you see that Mr Weldon wishes you to continue the game. There! In spite of his respectable age, I could marry him — if he would have me! Come, let us cash the cheque!”

And they went to cash the cheque, and it was paid instantly. As to thanking this worthy, this excellent, this delightful Humphry Weldon, it was impossible, as they did not know his address.

That evening Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley left Louisville without saying anything to anyone of the letter so opportunely received, and on the morning of the 11th they arrived at St. Louis.

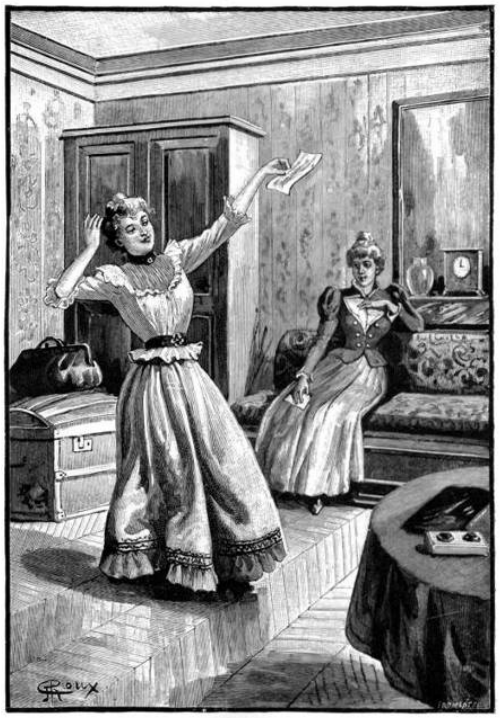

Jovita's joy exploded like a firework.

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Assuredly, it is well to remember, Lizzie Wag's position in the match was not promising, as she could take no part in the spins until one of her competitors had replaced her in the fifty-second square. But that would not fail to happen — to believe this confident, too confident, I Jovita — and anyhow, she was not excluded from the game for not paying her fine.

Here they were then in the State of Missouri, of which none of the "Seven" could think without a shudder. The first thing to do was to choose a hotel — and it was to the *Cleveland* they went, to occupy the same room, in the afternoon of the 11th of June.

"Well," said Jovita, "we are here in this horrible prison, and I confess that for a horrible prison St. Louis seems rather pleasant."

"A prison it must be, Jovita, from the moment we arc not allowed to leave it."

“Be easy, we shall get out of it, my dear!”

All her former confidence had returned to Jovita Foley — and at the same time her natural cheerfulness — since the arrival of those three thousand dollars from the excellent Humphry Weldon, which were sent off that day by cheque to the order of Mr. Tornbrock, notary, of Chicago.

The two girls employed their leisure in the afternoon in walking about the town, which a ravine parallel to the course of the Mississippi cuts into two unequal parts. Next morning Jovita’s impatience can be imagined. She was awake at sunrise, for on that day at eight o’clock Tornbrock was to proceed to another throw.

Leaving Lizzie Wag asleep, she went out of the hotel in quest of information.

Two hours. Yes! She was away for two hours, and what an awakening for the fifth player, who jumped up at the noise of a door violently thrown open and the boisterous entry of Jovita, shouting:

“Released, my dear, released!”

“What do you say?” „

“Eight by five and three. He has — ”

“He?”

“And as he was at the forty-fourth square, behold him sent to the fifty-second.”

“Who?”

“And as the fifty-second is the prison, he comes here to take our place — ”

“But who?”

“Max Real, my dear, Max Real!”

“Ah! The poor young man!” replied Lizzie Wag. “I would much rather have remained — ”

“Of course!” exclaimed the triumphant Jovita, jumping like a wild goat at the remark.

Nothing could be more correct. This throw of the dice set Lizzie Wag at liberty. She would be replaced at St. Louis by Max Real, whose place she would take at Richmond, Virginia, seven hundred and fifty miles, twenty-five to thirty hours’ journey.

To get there she had from the 12th to the 20th, more time than she required. This did not prevent her impatient companion, incapable of restraining her joy, from saying:

“Let us go.”

“No — Jovita, no!” replied Lizzie Wag decidedly.

“No. And why?”

“I think it is only right for us to wait here for Mr. Real. We at least owe that to this unfortunate young man.

And Jovita had to acquiesce, but on condition that the prisoner would not delay more than three days in crossing the threshold of her prison.

Now it was on the next day, the 13th, that Max Real arrived at St. Louis railway station. There existed, no doubt, some mysterious chain of suggestion between the first and fifth player, for if she had not wished to go until he arrived, he had wished to arrive before she went.

Poor Madame Real! In what a state that excellent mother must have been at the thought of her son thus unluckily stopped on the road to success!

Max Real knew from the newspapers that Lizzie Wag was staying at the *Cleveland Hotel* As soon as he called he was received by the two friends, while Tommy awaited his master's return in a neighbouring hotel.

Lizzie Wag, much more moved than she wished to appear, rose to greet the young painter:

"Ah! Mr. Real," she said. "We are so sorry for you — "

"From the bottom of our hearts!" added Jovita Foley, who was not the least in the world sorry, and whose eyes could not be got to express pity, though she tried.

"But no, Miss Wag," answered Max Real, when he had recovered his breath after a too rapid ascent. "No! I am not to be pitied — or rather I do not wish to be — for I have the happiness of releasing you."

"And you are right!" declared Jovita Foley, who could not restrain this reply, which was as frank as it was disagreeable.

"Excuse Jovita," said Lizzie Wag. "She does not reflect enough, Mr. Real; and for my part, believe me, I am really very sorry."

“Without a doubt,” said Jovita Foley. “Besides, do not despair, Mr. Real! What has happened to us may happen to you! It would have been preferable if some of the others had come to prison, this Tom Crabbe, for instance, or Commodore Urrican, or Titbury! We should have received their, visit with more pleasure — than yours — that is to say — well, you understand. Anyhow, they may come to release you.”

“That is possible, Miss Foley,” replied Max Real, “but we must not count on it. Believe me, I accept this mishap with great philosophy. As far as the game goes I have never thought I should win it.”

“Nor have I, Mr. Real,” Lizzie Wag hastened to say.

“But she has — she has,” interrupted Jovita, “‘or at least I have thought so for her.”

“As I also hope,” said the young man.

“And I hope you will win, Mr. Real,” said Lizzie.

“Come, come, you cannot both win!” broke in Jovita.

“It is impossible, of course,” said Max Real, laughing. “There can be only one winner.”

“Well, then,” said Jovita Foley, “if Lizzie wins, she will have the millions; and if you come in second, you will get the pool.”

“How you arrange things, my poor Jovita!” observed Lizzie.

“We must wait, and let fate do its work. If it is in your favour, Miss Wag — ”

He evidently thought her more and more charming. That was only too clear. And Jovita, who assuredly was not a fool, said to herself aside:

“Well, well, and why not? It would simplify matters, and it would then make little difference which of them won!”

Ah! how she knew the human heart, and particularly that of her friend!

The three began to talk about the circumstances of the match, the incidents during the journeys, the beauties of nature they had admired in going from one state to another, the wonders of the National Park, of the Yellowstone, which Max Real would never forget, the wonders of the caves of Kentucky, which Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley would always remember.

Then the girls told him how they had become possessed of the three thousand dollars. Without the generous remittance of Mr. Humphry Weldon, sent in terms which permitted of no refusal, Lizzie Wag would have had to retire from the game.

“And who is this Mr. Humphry Weldon?” asked Max Real, a little uneasy.

“An excellent and worthy old gentleman — who is interested in us — ” replied Jovita Foley.

“In the betting way, no doubt — ” added Lizzie.

“And one who is sure of winning his bets,” declared Jovita.

And Max Real did not say that he himself had thought of putting this sum at the disposal of the young prisoner. But in what way could she have accepted it?

This day and the next Max Real and the two friends spent together in talks and walks. If Lizzie Wag showed herself extremely grieved at Max Real's ill-luck, he appeared quite happy that she had profited by it. And in fact, within twenty-four hours, a change had taken place among the speculators with regard to the fifth partner. And reporters began to come to the *Cleveland Hotel* to interview Lizzie Wag, who refused to see any of them. The result of her return to Virginia to the forty-fourth square, vacated by Max Real, was that she had in front of her only Tom Crabbe at the forty-seventh square and XKZ at the fifty-first.

"And this individual with the letters," asked Jovita. "Who is he?"

"Nobody knows," replied the young painter, "and he remains more mysterious than ever."

It is hardly necessary to say that Max Real, Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley did not talk about nothing else than the Hypperbone match. They talked about their families — of the girl who had no parents left — of Madame Real, now residing at Chicago, and who would be pleased to see Miss Lizzie Wag if she would call — of Sheridan Street, which was not very far from South Halsted Street, &c., &c.

But at the same time Jovita tried her utmost to bring back the conversation to the game, and the throws that might happen.

"Perhaps," said she, "at the next throw you might plant the yellow flag on the last square."

"Impossible, Miss Foley, it is impossible," declared Max Real.

"And why?"

“Because Miss Wag has to take my place at the forty-fourth.”

“Well, Mr. Real?”

“Well — the greatest number Miss Wag could obtain would be ten, which, doubled, would give her twenty points, and that would take her past the sixty-third square and bring her to the sixty-second. And then she could not win with the next throw, as you cannot get a one with two dice.”

“You are. right, Mr. Real,” said Lizzie Wag. “Then, Jovita, we must resign ourselves to wait — ”

“But,” continued the artist, “there is another throw which might be very bad for Miss Wag — ”

“Which!”

“If she got eight, she would have to return to prison!”

“That! Never!” said Jovita Foley.

“However,” replied Lizzie, smiling, “I should then have the pleasure of releasing Mr. Real!”

“Most sincerely, Miss Wag,” affirmed the young man, “I do not wish it.”

“Nor I!” declared the petulant Miss Foley.

“Then, Mr. Real,” asked Lizzie Wag, “what is the best throw I can get?”

“Twelve, for it will send you to the fifty-sixth square, State of Indiana, and not to the distant regions of the Far West.”

“Capital!” declared Jovita. “And at the next throw we could reach the end.”

“Yes, with seven.”

“Seven!” said Jovita, clapping her hands. “Seven, and the first of the Seven!”

“In any case,” added Max Real, “you have only to fear the fifty-eighth square, that of Death Valley, where Commodore Urrican succumbed. But allow me once again to express the very sincere wishes regarding you that I told you at the start. That you maybe victorious is what I should like better than anything else in the world.”

Lizzie. Wag replied only by a look expressive of deep emotion.

“Decidedly,” said Jovita to herself, “he is really very nice this Mr. Real, an artist of talent with a great future. And no one can say anything against Lizzie. She is charming, really charming, and she is quite as good as the millionaires’ daughters who go hunting for titles in Europe without asking if the princes have principalities, or the dukes duchies, or if the counts are ruined, and the marquises in the bankruptcy court.”

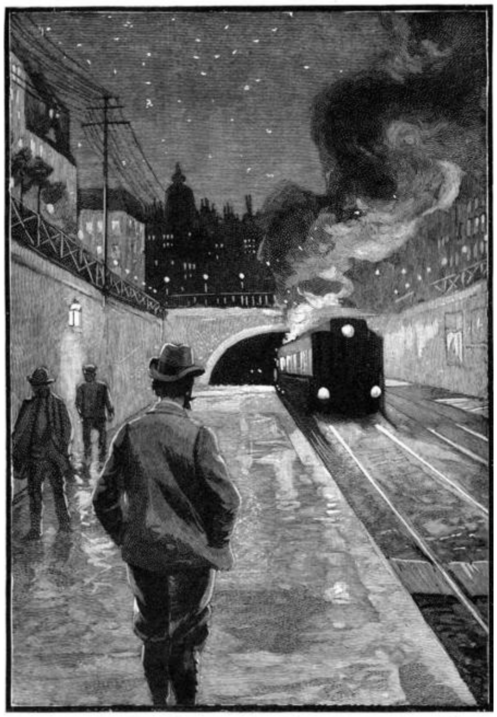

The young man remained on the platform.

Thus reasoned this judicious though rather giddy young person, and, in her wisdom, she thought that it would not do to prolong this state of things unduly. So she returned to the question of departure.

Naturally Max Real trusted that there was no hurry for them to leave St. Louis. The two friends might wait till the 26th of June before going to Richmond, and next day was only the 13th. And perhaps Lizzie thought it was going away a little too soon. But she would not say so, and so gave in to Jovita’s wish.

Max Real made no endeavour to conceal his regret at the separation. But he felt that he could say nothing more, and in the evening went to the station to see the two travellers off. There he again said:

“All my good wishes accompany you, Miss Wag.”

“Thank you — thank you,” replied Lizzie, shaking hands with him.

“And as to me?” asked Jovita. “Have you not a good word for me?”

“Yes, Miss Foley,” replied Max Real, “for you have an excellent heart! Take great care of your companion until our return to Chicago.”

The train began to move, and the young man remained on the platform until the lights of the last van disappeared in the night.

It was only too true that he was in love, and in love with this sweet and gentle Lizzie, whom his mother would adore as soon as he introduced her to her on his return. To be in serious danger of losing the game, to be imprisoned in this city with the very hypothetic hope of an early release, did not trouble him in the least.

He returned to the hotel very downhearted and lonely. Owing to his deplorable position in prison, he had been abandoned and had no more supporters; his price had gone down in the list like a barometer with a south-west wind, although he had met the demand for a triple fine.

Tommy was also in despair. His master would not win the millions of the match, and could not buy him to reduce him to the most cruel but most wished-for state of slavery.

Well, we are always wrong in not counting on chance. If it has no customs, as has been judiciously observed, it has caprices, and this observation was fully borne out on the morning of the 14th.

At nine o’clock a crowd of. spectators besieged the telegraph office at St. Louis to get the earliest possible information of the number thrown that day for the second player.

The result, which the special editions of the newspapers published immediately, was this: “Five, by three and two, Tom Crabbe.”

Now Tom Crabbe, then in Pennsylvania, occupied the forty-seventh square, and this five sent him to square fifty-two, Missouri, St. Louis, prison.

Judge the effect produced by this unexpected throw of the dice! Max Real, who had taken the place of Lizzie Wag, was at once replaced by Tom Crabbe, and had in turn to replace him in Pennsylvania. Here was an upset for the bookmakers, which sent the agents and reporters rushing to the young artist’s hotel; here was something to send him up in the world, bring back his partisans, and at this incredible piece of luck proclaim him the new great favourite of the Hypperbone match!

But what was the fury of John Milner, with whom nothing seemed to succeed! Tom Crabbe in prison at St. Louis and a triple fine to pay! Decidedly the pool was filling well, and the dollars were multiplying for the player who got in second.

Max Real was in no hurry to start. And why? Because he wished to hear of the throw on the 28th, which concerned Lizzie Wag. Perhaps she would be sent into one of the neighbouring states where it would be convenient for him *to* stay for a few days.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SENSATION FOR THE “TRIBUNE”

Harris T. Kymbale, it will be remembered, was present in the telegraph office at Olympia before noon on the 18th of June had become a thing of the past. He was at his post, knocked up with fatigue, exhausted in mind and body; and how could it be otherwise after this marvellous performance of the professional cyclists, Will Stanton and Robert Flock? He had just had time to say “Here!” when he fell unconscious on to a seat.

A few minutes later he had revived after a dose of his customary reviver, and read the telegram:

“Chicago, 8.13.

“Kymbale, Olympia, Washington, nine by five and four, South Dakota, Yankton. — tornbrock.”

So the throw had been kept for the 18th of June, although it might have taken place two days before owing to Hermann Titbury being stopped at New Orleans, where he had to remain at the rate of two hundred dollars a day at the *Excelsior Hotel.* It had appeared reasonable to Tornbrock and the members of the Eccentric Club to make no change in the dates, so as to leave unaltered the times allowed the other players for their transit from place to place.

The reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune* could have little to complain of in this last throw of the dice. He was not obliged to return through a well-known portion of the States, but could traverse a region new for him on his way to South Dakota.

But it should be remarked that Harris T. Kymbale in taking possession of the thirty-ninth square, was behind XKZ in Minnesota, Max Real in Pennsylvania, and Lizzie Wag in Virginia. He was in the fourth place, in front of Commodore Urrican, who was in Wisconsin awaiting his approaching departure. Hermann Titbury was safe in Louisiana for the next twenty-eight days, and Tom Crabbe was doomed to grow rusty in prison at St. Louis until the end of the match, if none of the others came to his rescue.

Harris T. Kymbale recovered, it need hardly be said, all his confidence in his final success, and was even more certain of it than ever, as were also his partisans. Three stones of stumbling there were still on his road: the labyrinth of Nebraska, through which he had already passed, the prison of St. Louis, and Death Valley. But of these three dangers, one menaced XKZ, and two menaced Lizzie Wag and Max Real. But then, luck played so important a part in the Hypperbone match. The two throws the reporter had to dread were that of the twelve, which would send him to Nebraska, and that of the ten doubled, which would send him to pay his respects to Tom Crabbe in the prison of Missouri.

Although he had from the 18th of June to the 2nd of July to get to South Dakota, Harris T. Kymbale would not lose a day. Without waiting this time for the route, which the obliging Bickhorn would doubtless send him at Olympia, he arranged a very satisfactory one for himself.

South Dakota and North Dakota are separated from Washington by the two States of Idaho and Montana. In crossing Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, Montana and Idaho, the Northern Pacific puts Chicago, and consequently New York, in direct communication with Olympia. From Olympia to Fargo on the eastern frontier of North Dakota is a distance of

1300 miles, and from Fargo to Yankton in the south of South Dakota is another 400 — 1700 miles in all.

In ordinary work it is no rare thing for the American trains to run a thousand miles in thirty-two hours, and some of them do the distance in twenty-four hours. But here Harris T. Kymbale had to reckon with the crossing of the Rocky Mountains, and to admit the possibility of long delays; besides, he could easily spend his leisure at Yankton while waiting for the arrival of the next telegram on the 2nd of July. And so he very wisely decided to leave Olympia next day.

Four hundred miles divide Olympia from the range of the Rockies, then come two hundred miles from west to east through them; thus six hundred miles took him to Helena, the capital of Montana. Having a fortnight to get to South Dakota, he would arrive at Yankton well before the telegram, which he had no doubt would put him in a good position. In any case, the journey would furnish excellent copy for the *Tribune*, to the great satisfaction of its readers.

Leaving Olympia, the train ran to the north-east towards Tacoma and then south-east through the chain of the Cascade Mountains by Ellensburgh and Paxo Junction, where it crossed the Columbia River.

Standing on the gangway of his car, he viewed this marvellous country of which the scenery changed at every telegraph post, across the deep gorges through which foamed the tumultuous creeks of the Cascade Mountains, and further on where, leaving Mount Stuart to the north, the train skirted the Columbia, which flows from north to south to the elbow where it turns to join the Pacific and form the southern frontier of Washington.

Idaho, which belongs to the basin of the Columbia and abuts on the north on the Canadian Dominion, is still as rich in forests and pasturages as it was before the working of its placers. Its capital, Boise City, on the river of that name, is a town of 2300 people, and its metropolis, Idaho City, on an affluent of the Snake, commands the southern portion of this district. There the Chinese form a considerable part of the population, as do also the Mormons, who are not admitted as electors until they have renounced their custom of polygamy.

Beyond Idaho, in Montana, through the indescribable region of the Rockies, Harris T. Kymbale found more to astonish him, although his eyes might have been surfeited with the natural beauties of the sierras of New Mexico and Washington. Among the ravines and gorges of this state, for which meridians and parallels serve as geodetic boundaries, there run towards the north thousands of rios, creeks, rivers, watering vast pasturages favourable for the raising of cattle, which with its mines are its chief wealth, the climate being too rigorous for agriculture.

After passing Charles Fork River and the high peaks of Wiessner and Stevens, and then Eagle Peaks, which overlook them, the line descends towards Helena, the capital of Idaho. This is a mountainous country, and assuredly it required the audacious genius of the Americans to make a railroad in this region. Unfortunately, the weather was not favourable. The sky was lowering, the electric tension of the atmosphere continued to increase for twenty-four hours. Heavy clouds were rising from the horizon, and Harris T. Kymbale was to witness the development of one of those terrible storms which are so grand in mountainous countries.

The storm soon assumed terrible proportions — one of those blizzards which blockade the inhabitants in their houses. The travellers were not free from anxiety, although the trains even at full speed are generally little exposed, the rails acting as conductors. But the frequency of the flashes, from second to second, the crashing and roaring of the thunder, repeated by the echoes in interminable rollings, the lightning striking the rocks and trees along the road, the detached masses leaping down in formidable avalanches, the scared animals, buffalo, deer, prongbuck, black bear, fleeing from all parts, formed an incomparable spectacle which the passengers could enjoy during the afternoon of the 20th.

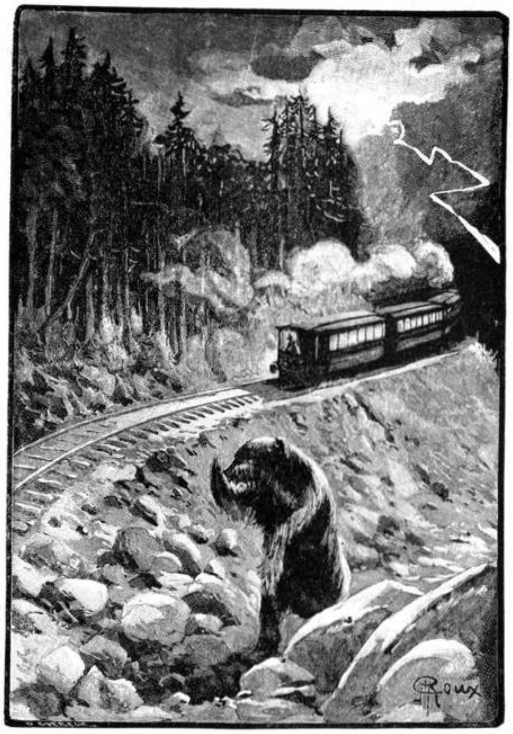

“A bear making the sign of the cross!” p. 363

And then it was that the reporter of the *Tribune* had not only the opportunity of sending his newspaper a most unexpected observation, but at the same time of recording a singular discovery regarding the zoology of the Rockies.

About five o’clock the train was slowly mounting a steep bank in the height of the storm. Harris T. Kymbale was outside on the gangway, while his companions remained inside on the seats of the car. At this moment he noticed a superb bear walking on its hind legs, troubled, no doubt, by this strife of the elements, which impresses animals so vividly. And the plantigrade, blinded by a brilliant flash raised his right paw to his forehead and drew it across.

“A bear making the sign of the — cross!” exclaimed Harris T. Kymbale. “It is not possible. My eyes must have deceived me.”

No, they had not deceived him, and several times amid the blinding flashes he saw the bear making the sign with every token of terror.

Then the train arrived at the summit of the ascent, increased in speed, and soon left the bear behind.

Immediately the reporter made this entry in his notebook:

“Grizzly, new species of plantigrade. Makes the sign of the cross during storms. Name it, for the fauna of the Rockies, *Ursus christianus.”*

And this note, amplified, figured in the letter he sent from Helena next day to the *Tribune.*

Helena, situated at an altitude of 6000 feet on the eastern slope of the Rockies, on the bank of a tributary torrent of the Missouri, forms a vast emporium for mining products of the region, and contains from fourteen to fifteen thousand inhabitants. The Northern Pacific train stays there but a couple of hours, and then descends towards the plains furrowed by the course of the Yellowstone and its numerous affluents.

This country was formerly frequented by the Flatheads, Gros-Ventres, Blackfeet, Crows, Cheyennes, Modocs, and Assiniboines, now relegated to different reservations, whose neighbourhood is a constant source of complaint among the whites.

The railroad, running south-east by Bozeman, strikes the Yellowstone River at Livingston and passes from Montana into North Dakota at the 104th degree of west longitude. It crosses the Missouri at Bismarck, the capital of the state, and further east reaches Jamestown, on the James River, where Harris T. Kymbale might have changed for the branch which runs off south of Yankton. But for some whim of his own he went on by Valley City and Casselton to Fargo, where he arrived on the 23rd, in the morning, on the western frontier of Minnesota.

It was in this State, after the throw of the dice on the 10th, that that fantastic individual, XKZ, was waiting at St. Paul, the capital, for the throw on the 24th which would send him — to what square? Doubtless near the end, if not to the end — which, in spite of all his confidence, made the reporter of the *Tribune* most uneasy.

He spent the 23rd at Fargo without making himself known. Perhaps, yielding to his tourist proclivities, he would have visited the few villages on the left bank of the Red River and those on the other bank if an unexpected incident had not led him to change his plans.

While he was walking in the afternoon in the environs of the little town, he was accosted by an individual, assuredly American, of about fifty, medium height, sharp nose, blinking eyes, and not very prepossessing.

“Sir,” said the man, “if I am not mistaken, I saw you alight this morning from the Northern Pacific train.”

“Quite so, sir,” replied Harris T. Kymbale.

“My name is Horgarth, Len Horgarth, Len William Horgarth.”

“Well, Mr. Len William Horgarth, what do you want with me, if you please?”

“It is probable that you are going to Yankton?” was the reply.

“Just so — to Yankton.”

“Then allow me to offer you my services.”

“Your services? And what for?”

“A simple question, to begin with, sir. You have come alone?”

“Alone?” replied Harris T. Kymbale, somewhat surprised. “Yes, alone.”

“Madame does not accompany you?”

“Madame?”

“Be it so; they can do without her. Here her presence is not necessary to divorce her — ”

“To divorce her, Mr. Horgarth?”

“Undoubtedly, and I will undertake all the formalities for your divorce.”

“But to be divorced you must be married, and, believe me, I am not.”

“You are not married, and you are going to Yankton?” exclaimed Len Horgarth, who seemed extremely surprised.

“Ah! Who are you, then, Mr. Horgarth?”

“I am an inquiry agent and witness in divorce cases.”

“Then I am sorry that your services are of no use to me,” said Harris T. Kymbale.

The reporter need not have been astonished at the proposals of the worthy Len William Horgarth. If in Illinois divorces are so common that passengers can be greeted with, “Chicago, ten minutes to stop, time for divorce,” it is still necessary for the dissolution of marriage to be surrounded with certain guarantees. But in South Dakota it is different. This is pre-eminently the country of divorces, it being only necessary for you to affirm by a witness that you have been domiciled there for six months to benefit by its advantages.

Hence this profession of inquiry agent and witness at the disposal of the lawyers. They pick up the client, witness in his favour, furnish him with a substitute, if he does not come in person and prefers to operate by procuration — in short, all the facilities imaginable. But Sioux Falls is even more advanced than Yankton in the record of matrimonial demolition.

“Well, sir,” added Mr. Horgarth very obligingly, “I am infinitely sorry that you are not married.”

“And so am I,” replied Harris T. Kymbale,” for I should have had an excellent opportunity of annulling my marriage.”

“But if you are going to Yankton, do not fail to be there to-morrow before three o’clock, so as to be present at a meeting that is to be held there.”

“A meeting — what about?”

“To demand that the delays of domicile should be reduced to three months, as in the State of Oklahoma, which has been an unfortunate competition for us. This meeting will be presided over by the Honourable Mr. Heldreth.”

“Indeed, Mr. Horgarth! And who is this Mr. Heldreth?”

“A respectable commercial man who has already been divorced seventeen times — and has not yet finished, it is said!”

“Mr. Horgarth, I shall not fail to be at Yankton in useful time.”

“I will leave you then, sir, putting myself at your disposal for the future.”

“That is understood, Mr. Horgarth, and I will carefully make a note of so obliging an offer.”

“One never knows when it may happen.”

“As you say, Mr. Horgarth,” replied Harris T. Kymbale.

And he took his leave, did this worthy witness and inquiry agent for Dakotan solicitors.

It remained to be seen if the meeting, presided over by the Honourable Mr. Heldreth would obtain the invaluable privileges in which Oklahoma rejoiced.

At six o’clock the following morning the reporter of the *Tribune* entered the train for South Dakota.

There is rather a complicated network of railways between the two states. But there are only two hundred and fifty miles between Fargo and Yankton, and he was sure of being there before the time of the meeting.

By good chance the last section of the line between Medary and Sioux Falls City had just been finished, and was to be open that very day. So that Harris T. Kymbale would not be under the necessity of doing by coach or on horseback a portion of the journey, as he had had to do in New Mexico and California.

It was about eleven o’clock when the train stopped near the little town of Medary on the bank of the Big Sioux River, and he saw all the passengers get out.

Addressing himself to the porter on the platform of the station, he said to him:

“Does the train stop here?”

“Yes, here,” said the porter.

“Is it not to-day that they open the section between Medary and Sioux Falls City?”

“No, sir.”

“When, then?”

“To-morrow.”

This was rather annoying to Harris T. Kymbale, for the two stations are separated by some sixty miles, and if he took a vehicle he would arrive too late to be present at the meeting.

Just then he noticed in the station a train preparing to start in the direction of Yankton.

“And this train?” he asked.

“Oh, that train — ” said the porter in a singular tone.

“Is it going to start?”

“Yes, at 12.13.”

“For Yankton?”

“Oh! Yankton!” replied the porter with a toss of his head.

But at this moment the man was called by the station-master and could not finish his reply to the reporter.

The train was not a passenger train, and it was composed of two luggage vans, drawn by an engine which seemed to have steam up.

“My word!” said Harris T. Kymbale to himself. “Here is the very thing for me. They are not going to open the line till tomorrow. A goods train will do just as well to take me from Medary to Sioux Falls City. If I can get into one of those vans without being seen, I can explain matters when I get out.”

And the confident reporter made no doubt that they would receive with perfect complaisance the explanations he would give as to being one of the celebrated players in the Hypperbone match, and offered to pay the price of this irregular trip.

His plan was favoured by the railway station being deserted at the time. All the travellers appeared to have been in a hurry to leave it. Not a porter was on the platform. There were only the driver and stoker on the engine, engaged in shovelling the coals into the fire-box.

Without being seen, Harris T. Kymbale was able to slip into a van, hide himself in a corner, and wait for the departure.

At thirteen minutes past twelve the train started with an unusual jerk.

Ten minutes elapsed, during which the speed continued to increase until it became excessive.

It was curious that when the train ran through the stations the driver did not whistle.

Harris T. Kymbale got up and looked through a little grated window in front of the van.

There was no one on the engine, which was belching out clouds of smoke and steam — no driver, no stoker.

“What does this mean?” asked Harris T. Kymbale. “Have they both fallen off — or has this wretched engine run away from the station, like a horse from his stable?”

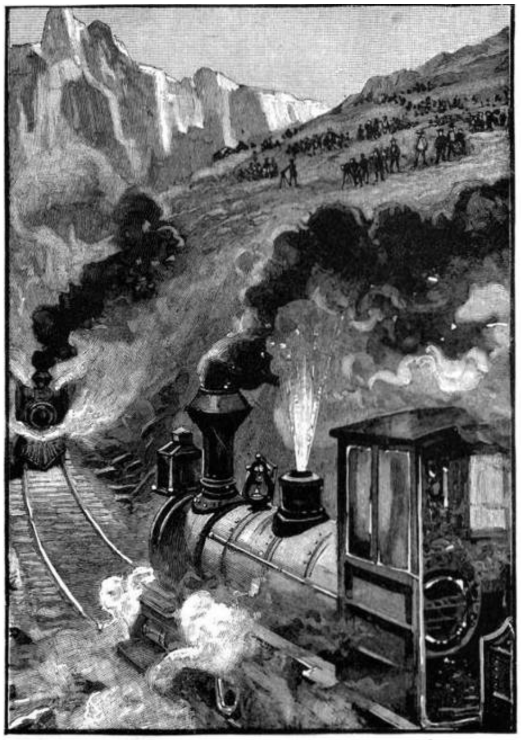

There was no one on the engine. p.369

Suddenly he uttered a cry of horror. On the same line, about two hundred yards in front, appeared another train coming in the opposite direction at equal speed.

A few seconds afterwards there was a frightful collision. The two locomotives, were telescoped with indescribable violence, smashing up the vans one against the other; and with a fearful explosion the two boilers flew in fragments into space.

And then amid the noise of the explosion came the excited cheering of thousands of people, massed on each side of the line at a safe distance from the scene of collision.

It was for the benefit of these spectators that this thrilling spectacle had been arranged at their expense, the meeting of two trains hurled against each other at full speed — a spectacle truly American if there ever was one.

And that is how the line of railroad was inaugurated between Medary and Sioux Falls City, the Eden of divorce in America.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LAST MOVES OF THE HYPPERBONE MATCH

Needless to depict Lizzie Wag’s state of mind when she separated from Max Real to take his place at Richmond. Leaving in the evening of the 13th, she could not help thinking that next day fate would do for Max Real what it had done for her — that is to say, render him his liberty and give him an opportunity of getting on the move again along the vast race-course of the United States of America.

A prey to feelings she kept to herself, she ensconced herself in a corner of the car, and Jovita Foley, sitting near her, did not attempt to worry her companion with untimely conversations.

From St. Louis to Richmond is but seven hundred miles across Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Virginia. It was in the morning of the 14th that the two travellers reached Richmond to await the approaching telegram from Tornbrock. On the other hand, we know that Max Real had resolved not to leave St. Louis until the throw of the 20th had been announced, thinking he might meet Lizzie Wag on the way when going to Philadelphia to replace Tom Crabbe.

One can easily imagine the joy of the two friends — a joy great, but reserved with one, and noisy and demonstrative with the other — when, on their arrival, the Richmond newspapers announced the deliverance of Max Real.

“Now, do you not see, my dear,” declared Jovita Foley, thrilling with excitement, “that there is a God! There are people who pretend there is not.

The fools! If there were not, would this Crabbe ever have had a throw of five? No. God knows what He does, and we ought to give thanks to Him — ”

“From the bottom of the heart!” finished Lizzie, a prey to profound emotion.

“After all,” continued Jovita, “the happiness of one is often the unhappiness of another, and I have always thought that there is on earth a certain amount of happiness at the disposal of mankind, and that one takes his part of it to the detriment of another.”

Notice this astonishing person with her philosophic views. In any case, if there had been a certain amount of gaiety to spend in this world, she would have left little for others after she had taken her share.

“There!” she continued, “now we have Crabbe in prison in place of Mr. Real. All the worse for him, unless Commodore Urrican is going to deliver him. But if that happens, I should not like to meet that bombshell on the road.”

All they had to do now was to wait without impatience for the 20th. During these six days the time could be agreeably spent in going about this Richmond of whose beauty Max Real had so justly boasted to the two friends. Undoubtedly it would have seemed still more beautiful if the young painter had accompanied them during these walks. At least Jovita Foley said so, and it is not unlikely that Lizzie Wag shared this opinion.

They remained in the hotel as little as possible. That allowed them to escape the interviewers of the Virginian journals, which had, with great fuss, announced the presence of the fifth player in Richmond. To the great annoyance of Lizzie Wag, many of the journals had published her portrait as well as that of Jovita Foley — which did not displease “her other self,” as she was called. And how did they manage to avoid replying to the marks of sympathy which greeted them during their excursions?

Yes! The two rich heiresses whom the people saluted, although they were not so far ahead as this inexplicable XKZ in whose existence numbers still refused to believe. Lizzie Wag was more and more in demand in all the betting agencies and on all the markets.

“I take Lizzie Wag!” „

“I back Kymbale against Wag.”

“I have Titbury.”

“Who wants Titbury?”

“Here is Titbury.”

“Here is Crabbe in bundles.”

“Who has Real?”

“Who has Lizzie Wag?”

Nothing was heard but that, and you can imagine the importance of the amounts ventured on the fifth player’s chances of success. In two lucky throws she might reach the end and become the chief, or, if she shared with her companion, one of the richest heiresses of the country of dollars that figure in the Golden Book of America.

When the 16th of June arrived, as it only affected Hermann Titbury, plunged for another month in the delights of the *Excelsior Hotel,* a few of those interested had issued a proposal that the draw should take place on account of the fourth partner, that is to say of Harris T. Kymbale, and that each turn should be advanced two days. But such was not the opinion of Mr. George B. Higginbotham, nor of the other members of the Eccentric Club, nor of Mr. Tornbrock, who was entrusted with interpreting the wishes of the deceased.

On the 18th, it will be remembered, the reporter-in-chief of the *Tribune* had been sent from Olympia to Yankton, and the following morning the newspapers announced that he had left the capital of Washington by the Northern Pacific. But by his move from the thirtieth to the thirty-ninth square he in no way menaced Lizzie Wag, who was at the forty-fourth.

At last, on the 20th, before eight o’clock, Jovita Foley having compelled her to go with her, they were at the Richmond post office. There, half an hour afterwards, the wire brought them the result, twelve by six and six — the highest that could be given by two dice. This was a move of twelve squares, which took them to the fifty-sixth, Indiana.

The two friends returned in all haste to the hotel to escape the too obtrusive demonstrations of the public.

“Ah! my dear!” said Jovita, “Indiana and Indianapolis, its capital! Could such luck be possible! We get near our Illinois, and now you are at the head and are five squares in front of this intruder, this XKZ, and the yellow flag beats the red. You want only, seven points to win. And why should you not get seven? Is it not that of the branches of the biblical candlestick, that of the days of the week, that of the Pleiades (she did not dare say that of the capital sins), that of the players who are running after the heritage! May

Heaven make the dice yield seven and let us win the game. You know, and you ought to know, what good use we will make of these millions — for the good — the good of all the world! We will found houses of charity, workshops, a hospital! Yes, the Wag-Foley Hospital for the sick of Chicago — in large letters! And I will have an institution for girls who cannot marry because they have no dowry, and I will be the manager, and you will see how I will administer it! Ah! of course you will never enter it, Mademoiselle Millionaire, because — oh! yes — I understand. And besides, marquises and dukes and princes will be seeking your hand!"

Positively, Jovita Foley was delirious! And she threw her arms around Lizzie Wag, who received with a vague smile all these promises of the future, and then she spun round and round and round like a whip-top.

The question now to be decided was if the fifth player should at once leave Richmond, as she had until the 4th of July to get to Indianapolis. And as she had already been in the Virginian city for six days, Jovita insisted that it would be best for them to start next morning for their new destination.

Lizzie Wag yielded to her arguments, particularly as the indiscretion of the public and the persistency of the reporters were getting more and more annoying. And as Max Real was not at Richmond, why prolong the stay there? To this argument, urged by Jovita Foley with a pertinacity that did not displease, what could Lizzie reply?

So in the morning of the 21st they went to the railway station. The train would cross Virginia, West Virginia, and Ohio, and deposit them the same evening in the capital of Indiana — a journey of four hundred and fifty miles.

But this is what happened. As they reached the platform they were spoken to by a most polite gentleman, who said to them, with a bow:

“It is to Miss Lizzie Wag and Miss Jovita Foley that I have the honour of speaking?”

“Just so,” replied the more forward of the two.

“I am the major-domo of Mrs. Migglesy Bullen, and Mrs. Migglesy Bullen would be glad if Miss Lizzie Wag and Miss Jovita Foley would come into her train to be taken to Indianapolis.”

“Come,” said Jovita Foley, without giving Lizzie Wag time to reflect.

The major-domo accompanied them to a siding in which was waiting a train consisting of an engine, bright with paint and polish, a drawing-room car, a dining car, a sleeping car, and a second van in the rear, as luxurious within as without — a real royal, imperial, or presidential train.

It was in this way that Mrs. Migglesy Bullen, one of the most opulent Americans of the States travelled. A rival of the Waitmans, Stevenses, Gerry s, Bradley s, Sloanes, Belmonts, 8&c., who only travel in their own yachts and trains, until they make their own railroads, Mrs. Migglesy Bullen was an amiable widow of fifty, the owner of inexhaustible petroleum wells.

Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley passed between a numerous domestic staff, drawn up on the platform, and were received by two lady companions, who conducted them to the drawing-room car, where they found the millionairess.

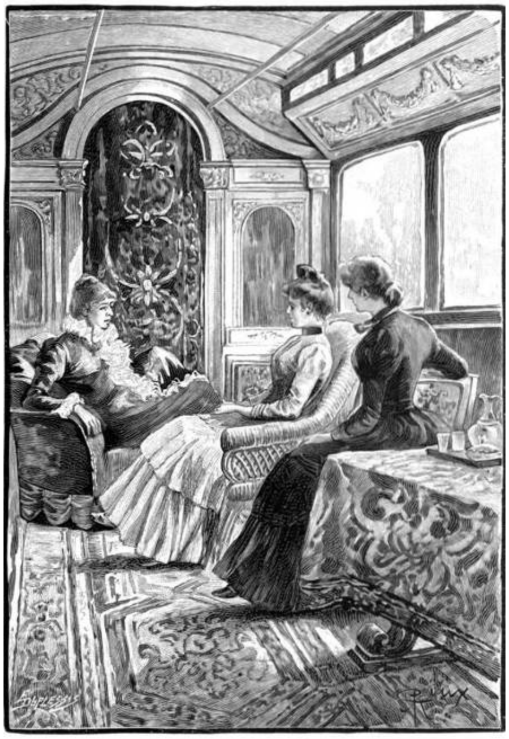

In this way travelled Mrs. Migglesy Bullen.

“Ladies,” said she very affably, “I thank you for having accepted my offer and consented to accompany me during this journey. You will travel under more agreeable conditions than in the public train, and I am happy also to show the interest I take in the fifth player, although I have no interest in the game.”

“We are infinitely honoured — by the honour you have done us, Mrs. Migglesy Bullen,” said Jovita.

“And we tender you our grateful thanks,” added Lizzie Wag.

“There is no need for that,” replied the excellent dame with a smile, “but I hope, Miss Wag, that my company will bring you good fortune!”

The journey was charming, for, in spite of her millions, Mrs. Migglesy Bullen was the best of women, and they passed a pleasant time in the drawing-room, in the dining-room, and in walking from one end of the train to the other. The luxury of the furnishing and the richness of decoration were beyond imagination.

“And think,” said Jovita Foley to Lizzie Wag at a moment when they found themselves alone, “that we may soon travel like this — in our own property — ”

“Be reasonable, Jovita!”

“You will see!”

And really it was even the opinion, absolutely disinterested, of Mrs. Migglesy Bullen that Lizzie Wag would reach the end first of the Seven.

Towards the evening the train stopped at Indianapolis, and as it was going on to Chicago the two friends had to alight. In remembrance of the journey Mrs. Migglesy Bullen begged their acceptance of a beautiful ring each, and having thanked her, not without emotion, they took their leave, much impressed by this princely hospitality.

And then as quietly as possible they went to the *Sherman Hotel,* to which they had been recommended. But this did not prevent the Indianapolis newspapers next morning announcing their presence at the said hotel.

During the fortnight they had to spare they would have time to visit the principal places in the vicinity, and make an excursion to the Wyandotte Caves, between Evansville and New Albany, which are rivals to the Mammoth Caves. But Jovita Foley preferred to remain content with the remembrance of the marvels of Kentucky. Was it not in that charming spot she had won the grade of lieutenant-colonel in the Illinois militia? She thought of it sometimes, not without a strong temptation to laugh, and she also thought of the obligation imposed on both, when they returned to Chicago, to go in military fashion and report themselves to the governor —

And when she noticed her companion not sorrowful but thoughtful, she would repeat:

“Lizzie, I do not understand you — or rather I understand you very well! He is a nice young man — sympathetic — amiable — with all the gifts — and among others that of not displeasing you! But as he is not here, for he ought to be in Philadelphia in place of that unfortunate Crabbe, who cannot even walk sideways like the crustacean that bears the name, you should be reasonable, my dear; and if you think about him, you should also think about us too — ”

“Jovita — you exaggerate.”

“Come, Lizzie, be frank! Confess that you are in love with him!”

And the girl did not reply — which was doubtless a way of replying.

On the 22nd the newspapers announced the throw relative to Commodore Urrican.

The orange flag had had to begin the game again after the return from Death Valley, and by a happy throw had gone to the twenty-sixth square, Wisconsin. But like the days, the throws followed and did not resemble each other. Assuredly Tornbrock must have had an unlucky hand that morning, for by five, composed of one and four, he had sent Hodge Urrican to the thirty-first square, Nevada. And this was where William J. Hypperbone had placed the well, at the bottom of which the unfortunate commodore would have to remain until one of the competitors came to draw him up.

“He must have done it on purpose, this Tornbrock!” shouted Hodge Urrican in a paroxysm of fearful anger. And Turk having declared that on an early occasion he would wring Tornbrock’s neck, his master made no attempt to calm him. Besides, it was a treble fine, three thousand dollars, which had to come out of the sixth player’s pocket and fall into the pool.

The good-hearted Lizzie could not help pitying the unfortunate sea-wolf.

“Pity him!” said Jovita. “Yes, just enough to hope that when Mr. Titbury leaves his hotel he may get him out by getting in with a twelve. After all, the important thing is that Mr. Real is out of prison, and I have an idea we shall see him again sooner or later.”

This perspicacious person was wiser than she thought. In fact, on returning from the walk which the two friends had taken that morning, on arriving opposite the *Sherman Hotel,* Lizzie Wag could not restrain an exclamation of surprise.

“Eh! what is the matter with you?” asked Jovita.

Then in turn she exclaimed:

“You — Mr. Real!”

The young artist was there in front of the door, and near him was Tommy. A little embarrassed, he endeavoured to excuse his presence.

“Ladies,” he said, “I am going to my post in Philadelphia, and as Indiana happened by chance to be on the road — ”

“A geographical chance,” replied Jovita, laughing. “Anyway, a happy chance.”

“And as it did not lengthen my journey — ”

“For, Mr. Real, if it did lengthen it, you should not have run the risk of failing — ”.

“Oh, I have till the 23rd, Miss Wag! Still six clear days, and — ”

“And when one has six clear days in which one does not know what to do, the best thing is to spend them with the people in whom one takes an interest — a lively interest — ”

“Jovita!” said Lizzie in an undertone.

“And chance,” continued Jovita Foley, “always this fortunate chance, led you to select this very *Sherm.an Hotel* “The newspapers said the fifth player was here with her faithful companion — ”

“And,” replied the faithful companion, “from the moment the fifth player alighted at the *Sherman Hotel* it was quite natural that the first player should alight there also. Now if it had been the second or the third — but no! — it was precisely the fifth. And in all that, mere chance — ”

“Nothing of the sort, and you know it, Miss Wag,” avowed Max Real, pressing the hand that Lizzie held out to him.

“Come, that is more frank!” said Jovita. “And frankness for frankness, we are very glad of your visit, Mr. Real, but I warn you that you shall not remain here an hour longer than you ought to, and that we shall not let you miss the train for Philadelphia.”

It is hardly necessary to remark that Max Real had waited at St. Louis until the newspapers announced the arrival of the two friends at Indianapolis, and that he intended to devote to them all the time he could.

Then they chatted “like old friends,” as Jovita Foley said; they arranged walks across the city, which, owing to Max Rears presence, would be much more interesting to visit. However, the faithful companion insisted that they must sometimes talk about the game. Lizzie Wag was now ahead, and it was not this XKZ who would make her take second place. To arrive first, at the approaching throw this fortunate individual would have to throw twelve, and this could only be done by six and six, while the seven which would plant the yellow flag of Lizzie Wag on the sixty-third square could be obtained in three different ways, by three and four, two and five, one and six. Hence three chances to one — according to Jovita Foley.

Whether this reasoning was right or not, Max Real did not trouble about it. Between Lizzie Wag and him the match was hardly mentioned. They talked about Chicago, of the return there which would come shortly, of the pleasure — Madame Real would have in receiving the young friends, and a letter from this excellent lady — doubtless from information received — affirmed this in the most agreeable terms.

“You have a good mother, Mr. Real,” said Lizzie Wag, whose eyes moistened as she read the letter.

“The best of mothers, Miss Wag; and who cannot help loving all those I love.”

“And what a no less good mother-in-law she will make!” exclaimed Jovita, exploding with laughter.

The second part of the day was spent in walking in the better quarters of the town, principally on the banks of White River. To avoid the intruders who besieged the *Sherman Hotel* — and who all wished to espouse the future heiress of William J. Hypperbone, to believe Jovita — had become a veritable necessity. Prudently, Max Real had not said who he was, for their partisans had become legion.

And so Max Real waited till night had fallen before returning to the hotel, and the last meal over — supper rather than dinner — they had only to go to rest after the fatigues of so happy a day.

At ten o’clock Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley regained their room, and Max Real retired to his, Tommy having a room close by. And while one abandoned herself to dreams “woven in silver and broidered in gold,” perhaps the others met in similar thoughts without finding sleep. Yes, two of them thought only, of the return to Chicago by the line along the White River to Spring Valley, about twenty miles from Indianapolis, and come back by a different route. The happy trio started, then; Tommy, this time, being left at the hotel.

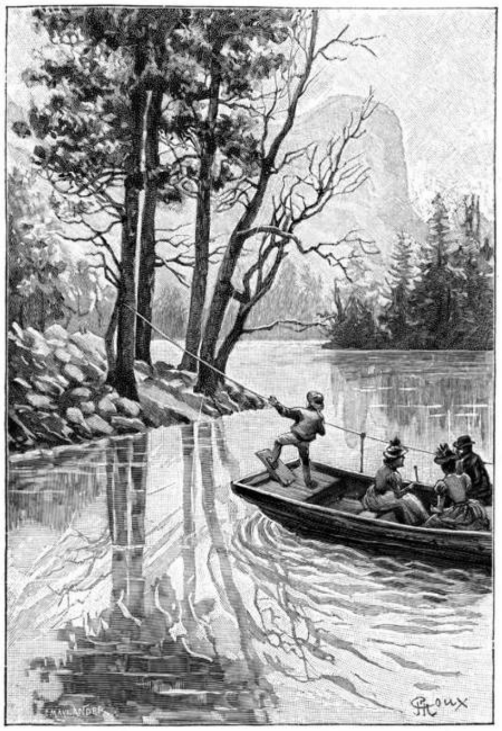

A ferry-boat took them across the White River.

Now, although Max Real and Lizzie Wag were too much occupied to notice anything, Jovita Foley had remarked that five individuals had followed them since their departure. And not only had these people accompanied them to the station, but they had got into the same train, if not into the same car, for when Max Real and the two friends alighted at Spring Valley these people also got out.

This did not otherwise attract Jovita Foley's attention, as she was looking out of the windows of the car when she was not looking towards Max Real and Lizzie Wag.

Perhaps, suspecting that they had been observed, the five individuals separated as they came out of the railway station.

To be brief, Max Real and the two friends took a road which would bring them to the bank of the White River. Was there any risk of their losing themselves? None.

For an hour they walked in this way across this fertile country, watered by the creek, here cultivated fields, there thick woods, the remains of the old forests that had fallen before the civilizing axe of the woodman.

It was a very pleasant walk owing to the mildness of the temperature. Jovita flitted about quite joyously, first in front, then behind, teasing the young couple, who heeded her not. And did she not claim the respect due to a mother,” and even a grandmother, “for was she not acting as such?

It was three o’clock when a ferry-boat took them across the White River. Beyond, under the large trees, lay a road leading to one of the numerous railroads which converge on Indianapolis. Max Real and his companions began to talk of other excursions in the vicinity of the city until the evening of the 27th, when to his disgust as well as that of his friends he would have to go by train to Philadelphia. And then — but it was better not to think of it.

After half an hour’s walk along the road shaded by beautiful trees, Jovita Foley proposed a halt of a few minutes. There was plenty of time, provided they returned to the Sherman Hotel before dinner. Just there the road curved between two clumps of trees in full shadow, in full foliage.

At that very moment five men rushed out — the same who had left the train at Spring Valley.

What did these individuals want? What they wanted — for they were not professional murderers or thieves — was to seize Lizzie Wag, drag her away to some secret place, and there keep her so that she could not be at Indianapolis post-office on July 4th, when her telegram arrived. The result would be that she would be shut out of the game, on the eve perhaps, of her becoming the winner.

To this had been led some of these gamesters, these pernicious betting people who had enormous sums, hundreds of thousands of dollars, ventured on the match. Yes! These malefactors — can you call them otherwise? — did not recoil before such acts.

Three of the men threw themselves on Max Real, so as to prevent him defending his companions. The fourth seized Jovita Foley while the fifth tried to drag Lizzie Wag into the depths of the woods, where it would be difficult to discover any trace of her.

Max Real struggled, and seizing the revolver which an American always carries with him, he fired.

One of the men fell, wounded only.

Jovita Foley and Lizzie Wag shrieked for help, though they had no hope they would be heard.

They were, however, and behind a thicket at the left there was heard a sound of voices.

A few farmers in the neighbourhood — about a dozen — were out shooting in the woods, and a providential chance had brought them on the scene.

The five men made a final attempt. A second time Max Real fired at the one who was carrying off Lizzie Wag, and made him let the girl go. But he received a stab from a knife in his chest, and with a cry fell senseless on the ground.

The farmers came in view, and the aggressors, of whom two were wounded, realized that the attempt had failed and ran off under the trees.

There was something better to do than to pursue them; it was to carry Max Real to the nearest station, to send for a doctor, and to take him back to Indianapolis if his state would permit.

Lizzie Wag, distracted and in tears, went and knelt near the young man.

Max Real breathed, his eyes opened, and he said:

“Lizzie — dear Lizzie — it will be nothing — nothing. And you — you?”

His eyes closed again. But he lived — he had recognized the girl — he had spoken to her.

In half an hour the farmers had got him to the station, where a doctor was soon in attendance. After examining the wound, he said it was not mortal, and having washed it and dressed it, he assured them that Max Real could be taken back to Indianapolis without danger. So he was placed in one of the cars of the half-past five train, with Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley on each side of him. He had recovered consciousness, he did not feel seriously hurt, and at six o’clock he was in bed in his room at the *Sherman Hotel.*

Alas! How long would he have to, remain there, and was it not only too certain that he could not be at Philadelphia post office on the 28th?

Well, Lizzie Wag would not abandon him who had been wounded in defending her. No! she would remain near him — she would look after him.

And it must be confessed, to her honour — though it meant the annihilation of all her hopes — that Jovita Foley approved of the conduct of her poor friend.

A second doctor who came to visit Max Real confirmed what his colleague had said. The lung had only been grazed by the point of the knife, but a very little more and the wound would have been fatal. He also was of opinion that Max Real would be at least a fortnight before he was able to move about again.

What did it matter? Did he dream of the fortune of William J. Hypperbone? Was Lizzie Wag vexed at sacrificing the chance she perhaps had of becoming the heiress of the eccentric deceased? No, it was of another future that both dreamed, a future of happiness quite independent of the sixty millions!

Yet, after long and bitter reflections, Jovita remarked to herself:

“After all, as this poor Mr. Real must remain here a fortnight, Lizzie will still be here on the 4th of July, at the date of her next throw, and if by good luck the seven comes — and may Heaven make it come! — she will win the game!”

This was true, and considering their past trials Heaven might very well do this for the fifth player!

It should be said that at Max Real’s request his mother was not informed of what had occurred. He had not given his name at the hotel, as we know, and when the newspapers reported the attempt, indicating the motive that inspired it, they spoke only of Lizzie Wag.

When the news was known, its effect among the speculators can be imagined, and no one was surprised at the yellow flag being applauded throughout America.

But the matter, as we shall see, was to be cleared up more promptly and in quite a different fashion to what the immense majority of the public expected.

On the 24th, at half-past eight in the morning, the newsboys were running about Indianapolis with copies of the telegram in their hands, and announcing, or rather yelling, the result of the throw that morning on behalf of the seventh player.

The throw was twelve — six and six — and as this player then occupied the fifty-first square, State of Minnesota, he it was who had won the game.

So the winner was no other than the enigmatic personage designated as XKZ.

And it was the red flag that floated over this Illinois, fourteen times repeated on the board of the Noble Game of the United States of America.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BELL AT OAKWOOD

A CLAP of thunder heard in every quarter of the terrestrial globe could not have produced more effect than the fall of the dice from the box in the hands of Tornbrock, as eight o’clock struck in the Auditorium on the 24th of June. The thousands assembled there — thinking it might be the last in the Hypperbone match — announced it all over Chicago, and thousands of telegrams spread it to the four corners of the New World and the Old.

It was, then, the masked man, the player of the last hour, the intruder of the codicil, in a word, or rather in three letters, this XKZ who had won the game, and with the game the sixty millions of dollars!

Let us see how this had been done by this favourite of fortune. While so many misfortunes had happened to the other players — one shut up in the inn, another obliged to pay toll on the bridge of Niagara, another lost in the labyrinth, another thrown into the well, three others sent to prison, all having fines to pay — XKZ had gone along at a steady pace from Illinois to Wisconsin, from Wisconsin to the District of Columbia, from the District of Columbia to Minnesota, from Minnesota to the end, without having to’ pay a single fine, and within an easy radius necessitating few fatigues and expenses during his easy journeys.

Was that not an instance of luck beyond the ordinary and even wonderful, the luck of the privileged ones with whom everything succeeds in life?

It remained to be known who was this XKZ, and he would doubtless not delay in making himself known, so as to enter into possession of his enormous heritage.

There had of course been a crowd to see him when he presented himself at the post offices of Milwaukee, Washington and Minneapolis to receive his telegram, but they had seen a middle-aged man in one place, and a man over sixty in another, and each time he had immediately disappeared, leaving no trace behind him. But now they would soon know his real name, and the States would have another millionaire in place of William J. Hypperbone.

Nine days after the final throw the following was the position of the six other players: —

To begin with, it should be said that they had all returned to Chicago. Yes, all, some in despair, others furious — we can guess which — and two quite indifferent to the result of the match, which two it is also unnecessary to mention.

The week had just ended when Max Real, nearly healed of his wound, arrived in his native city, accompanied by Lizzie Wag and Jovita Foley. He went straight to South Halsted Street, while the two friends went to Sheridan Street.

And then Madame Real, who had already heard of the attack on Lizzie Wag, learnt, like the rest of the world, the name of the young man to whom the girl owed her safety.

“Ah, my boy — my boy!” she exclaimed, pressing Max in her arms, “it was you! it was you!”

“But as I am all right again, good mother, do not weep! What I did, I did for her — you understand, for her — whom you are going to know — and whom you will love as much as I love her and she loves me!”

In the course of that day Lizzie Wag, accompanied by Jovita Foley, came to visit Madame Real. The girl greatly, pleased the excellent dame, as she pleased the girl. Madame Real overwhelmed her with caresses, without forgetting Jovita, who was so different from her friend, but just as amiable in her own way.

Thus these three people became acquainted with each other, and what it led to we must wait a few days to learn.

It was after Max Real's departure that Tom Crabbe arrived in St. Louis. In what a state of fury and shame was John Milner! So much money expended for nothing — not only the cost of the journeys, but the triple fine he had to pay in this State prison of Missouri! Then the reputation of the Champion of the New World compromised in that encounter with the no less vexed Cavanaugh, of which the true victor was the Reverend Hugh Hunter of Arondale! As to Tom Crabbe, he continued to understand nothing of the part he was made to play, and went where his trainer took him. Was not the animal in him quite satisfied from the moment he was guaranteed his six meals a day? And how many weeks would John Milner be shut up in this city? Next morning he was at ease on that score, the game was over, and all he had to do was to get back to his house in Chicago.

And that also did Hermann Titbury. For fourteen days he had occupied the rooms reserved for him at the *Excelsior Hotel* in New Orleans — fourteen days during which he and his wife had eaten well, drunk well, had a carriage and a yacht at their command, and a box at the opera at their disposal, had lived, in fact, the life of the people who enjoy large incomes and know how to spend them. It is true this kind of life cost them two hundred dollars a day, and when the bill was presented it came like a blow from a sledge-hammer. But they raised the two thousand eight hundred dollars, and adding to them the fines in Louisiana, the fine in Maine, the robbery in Utah, and the expenses on the journeys as lengthy as they were costly, their expenses amounted to nearly eight thousand dollars.

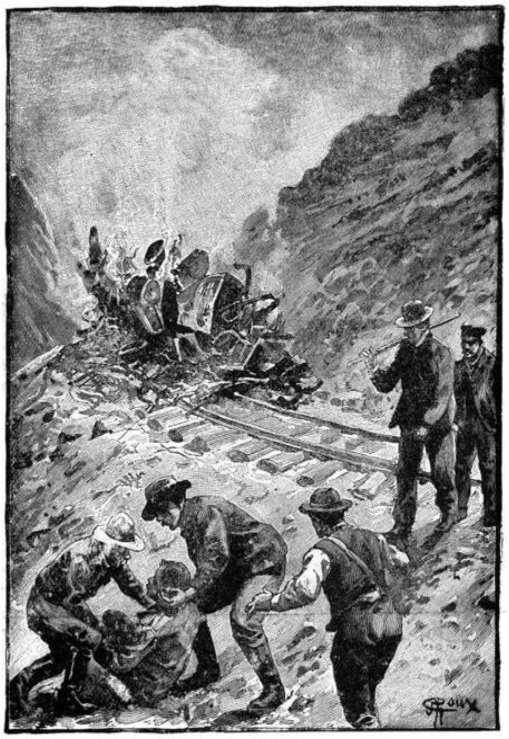

"They picked him up." p. 391

Struck in the heart, that is to say in the purse, Mr. and Mrs. Titbury were brought to their senses, and on their return to their house in Robey Street indulged in grand scenes of violence, during which the lady reproached the gentleman for having launched her on this ruinous adventure in spite of all she could say, and conclusively proved that all the wrong was on his side. And Mr. Titbury ended by being convinced, as was his custom, all the more as the terrible servant took the side of her mistress, also as was her custom. At the same time it was agreed that the expenses of the house must be further reduced. But that did not hinder the happy couple from being haunted by the remembrance of the days spent among the delights of the *Excelsior Hotel.* And what a change was there when they fell out of their dreams into the abysses of reality!

“A monster, this Hypperbone, an abominable monster!” said Mrs. Titbury occasionally.

“You should have got his millions, or not meddled with them!” added the servant.

“Yes — not meddled with them! That is exactly what I was always telling Mr. Titbury! But you cannot talk reason to people like him!”

Harris T. Kymbale? Well, Harris T. Kymbale emerged safe and sound from that collision arranged for the opening of the Medary and Sioux Falls City Railway. Before the shock he had jumped out on to the line, and, not without a bounce as if he had been made of indiarubber, he remained unconscious at the foot of a rubbish heap in shelter from the explosion of the two engines. Undoubtedly it happens, even in America, that trains collide and telescope each other, but it is rare that the event is arranged in advance while spectators at a safe distance on each side of the line are able to be present at the incomparable entertainment.

Unfortunately, Harris T. Kymbale was not in a position to enjoy it.

Three hours later, when the railway men came to clear the line, they found a man unconscious, at the foot of the heap. They picked him up, they took him to the nearest house, they called in a doctor, who brought him round, questioned him, and discovered that he was the fourth player in the Hypperbone match. Then it became known how he had taken his place in the train doomed to destruction, and they favoured him with the reproaches he deserved, they made him pay his fare — for on the American lines you pay on the road or when you arrive — they telegraphed the incident to the editor of the *Tribune,* and they despatched this imprudent reporter by the shortest road to Chicago, where on the 25th he arrived at his house in Milwaukee Avenue.

And naturally the intrepid Kymbale declared himself ready to continue his travels and to go if need be from one end of the States to the other. But having learnt that the game had ended to the profit of XKZ, he had to content himself with remaining at home and writing interesting articles on the recent incidents in which he had taken part. In any case he had wasted neither his time nor his trouble, and he would never forget his rushes through New Mexico, South Carolina, Nebraska, Washington, South Dakota, nor the original manner in which had been inaugurated the Medary and Sioux Falls City Railway.

His self-respect as a well-informed reporter was, however, touched in a sensitive part by a revelation which brought on him the jokes and jeers of the petty press. It was with regard to that bear he had met within the passes of Idaho, the grizzly which had made the sign of the cross at each clap of thunder, the *Ursus christianus* for which he had formed so appropriate a name. It turned out to be merely a native of those parts, who was taking the skin of a magnificent, plantigrade to a fur merchant. As the rain was falling in torrents he had put the skin over him, and as he was afraid, he crossed himself, like a good Catholic, at every flash.

In short, Harris T. Kymbale ended by laughing at the occurrence, but his laughter was of the colour of the flag that Jovita Foley had not been able to wave triumphantly over the sixty-third square.

As to the fifth player, we know under what circumstances she had returned to Chicago with her faithful friend, Max Real, and Tommy, as disappointed at the non-success of his master as Jovita Foley at that of Lizzie Wag.

“But you must resign yourself to it, my poor Jovita!” said Lizzie Wag. “You know well that I never expected it — ”

“But I did.”

“You were wrong.”

“After all you have nothing to complain of.”

“And I do not complain,” said Lizzie with a smile. If the Hypperbone heritage has escaped you, you are no longer a poor girl without a dowry.”

“How is that?”

“Evidently, Lizzie! After XKZ, who has got to the end first, you are the nearest to him, and the amount of the fines will come to you.”

“Well, Jovita, I never thought of that.”

“But I thought of it for you, you careless Lizzie! and there is a nice little sum of which you are the legitimate proprietor.”

In fact, the thousand dollars from Niagara Bridge, the two thousand from the inn at New Orleans, the two thousand from the Nebraska labyrinth, the three thousand from Death Valley, in California, and the nine thousand coming from the prison of St. Louis, made up seventeen thousand dollars, which incontestably belonged, by the terms of the will, to the second on the board, otherwise the fifth player. And yet, as Lizzie Wag had said, she had not thought about it, having something else to think about.

At the same time there was one person of whom Max Real could not be jealous, but of whom she did think occasionally. This person, it will be guessed, was the worthy Humphry Weldon, who had honoured her with a visit in Sheridan Street and to whom were due the three thousand dollars for the payment of the fine in the Missouri prison. Although he might be a gambler “following his money,’ as they say, he had none the less generously helped the prisoner who had always intended to repay him when she won. And so she thought of him with proper gratitude and would have been glad to meet him. But he had not been seen again.

To complete this summary of the existing state of affairs, we must recall attention to Commodore Urrican.

On the 22nd of June there took place the throw which concerned him, and he was then in Wisconsin. It will not have been forgotten that by five, made up of one and four, he had been sent to the thirty-first square, State of Nevada. Another journey of twelve hundred miles, for Nevada lies between Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Arizona, and California. And by an excess of ill-luck it was the State in which William J. Hypperbone had placed the well, to the bottom of which the unfortunate player might take a header.

The commodore’s fury was beyond all bounds. He resolved to have satisfaction from Tornbrock — and Turk declared that he would leap at the notary’s throat, strangle him with his teeth, open him up and eat his liver. But with the haste he brought to bear on everything, Hodge Urrican left Milwaukee on the 22nd, jumped into the train with his inseparable companion — after sending the notary the three thousand dollars which the last throw had cost him — and went off at full speed towards Nevada.

It was at Carson City, the capital, that the orange flag was to report himself on the 6th of July.

It should be noted that if Nevada had been chosen as the well by the testator, it was because wells there are so numerous — wells of mines; be it understood, and from the point of view of the production of gold and silver Nevada holds the fourth place in the Union. Improperly designated by the name, for the Nevada chain is beyond its boundaries, its principal towns are Virginia City, Gold Hill, Silver City — names that explain themselves. These towns are built above the silver veins, such as the Comstock Lode, and into these deposits the wells are sunk, some of them for a depth of two thousand seven hundred feet.

Wells of silver, if you please, but wells that justified the choice of the testator and also the anger of him whom fate had sent to them.

But he did not get there! At Great Salt Lake City, on the morning of the 24th, the great news reached him.

The game had ended to the advantage of XKZ, the winner of the Hypperbone match.

The commodore then returned to Chicago in a state more easily imagined than described.

It is no exaggeration to say that from the Atlantic to the Pacific people began to breathe again. And yet for all those who were interested in this national game — even platonically — there was a pardonable curiosity to satisfy.

Who was XKZ, and would he make himself known? There was no doubt about it. When one has to pocket sixty millions one does not remain incognito — one does not take refuge under letters! The fortunate winner must present himself in person, and he would so present himself.

But when and under what conditions? No time was mentioned in the will. And yet it was not likely to be long. The said XKZ was in Minnesota, at Minneapolis, when the telegram was sent to him, and he could come from Minneapolis to Chicago in half a day.

But a week elapsed, and then another, and no news of the unknown.

One of the most impatient — as a matter of course — was Jovita Foley. This nervous personage would have liked Max Real to go ten times a day for information, to remain permanently at the Auditorium, where the most fortunate of the Seven would certainly make his first appearance. But Max Real had his mind occupied with other things that interested him more.

And then Jovita Foley would exclaim:

“Oh, if I could only get hold of him!”

“Do not get so excited, my dear,” said Lizzie Wag.

“I will get excited, Lizzie, and if I get hold of him I will ask him by what right he is allowed to win the game — a man whose name we do not even know.”

“But, my dear Jovita,” replied Max Real, “if you ask him that, he will be there, and we shall have no more to know.”

We need not be surprised at the two friends not having yet returned to Marshall Field’s to resume their duties. Lizzie would have to be replaced by some one else, and Jovita intended that the whole affair should be over before she went back, as she had no head for her old work just at present.

In every way, with her impatience, she faithfully represented the public opinion of the United States. As the time went by, imagination had full play. The press — particularly the sporting press — was bewildered. Numbers of people went to Tornbrock, and always the same reply. The notary affirmed that he knew nothing about the bearer of the red flag — he did not know him — he could not say where he had gone on leaving Minneapolis, where the message had been delivered into his own hands, and when they pressed him, when they insisted on knowing: “He will come when it pleases him!” was all that Tornbrock would vouchsafe.

Then the players, with the exception of Lizzie Wag and Max Real, judged it proper to interfere, and with some reason. In fact, if the winner did not declare himself, had they not reason to declare that the game was not won, that it should be resumed?

Commodore Urrican, Hermann Titbury, and John Milner by power of attorney from Tom Crabbe, absolutely intractable, and advised by their solicitors, announced their intention of bringing an action at law against the executor of the will. The newspapers that had supported them during the match did not abandon them. In the *Tribune* Harris T. Kymbale had a most lively article against XKZ, whose existence he denied, and the *Chicago Herald Chicago Inter-Ocean, Daily News Record, Chicago Mail,* and the *Free Press* defended the cause of the players with incredible violence.

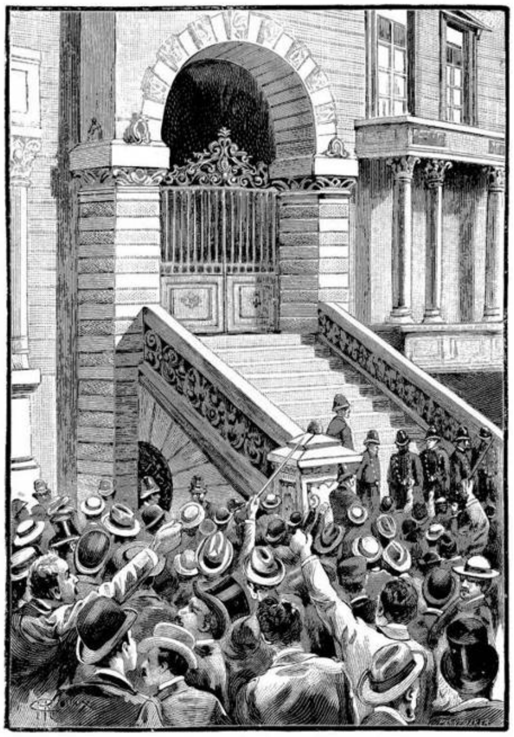

And the bell went on ringing.

All America became excited over this new matter. Besides, it was impossible to settle the bets until the identity of the winner had been certified officially, so long as it was not certain that the match was definitely over. One opinion soon came to the fore; it was that there should be a monster demonstration at the Auditorium. If XKZ did not appear shortly — Mr. Tornbrock would have to resume the throws. Tom Crabbe, Hermann Titbury, Harris T. Kymbale, Commodore Urrican, even Jovita Foley, if they would allow her to take Lizzie Wag's place, were ready to start for any of the States to which they might be sent.

At last the public, agitation attained such intensity that the authorities began to take steps — at Chicago above all. They had to afford protection to the members of the Eccentric Club and the notary whom the mob held responsible.

But on the 15th of July, three weeks after the last throw which had made the masked man the winner of the match, a most unexpected thing took place.

That day, at seventeen minutes past ten in the morning, a report spread that the bell was ringing full-swing at the, mausoleum of William J. Hypperbone in Oakwood Cemetery.

CHAPTER XXX

THE FINAL ECCENTRICITY

IT would be difficult to imagine the rapidity with which the news got about. If each house in Chicago had been in telephonic communication with the bell at Oakwood, the seventeen hundred thousand inhabitants could not have heard the news more promptly or more simultaneously.

In a few minutes the cemetery was invaded by the population of the neighbouring quarters. Then the crowd flowed in from all parts. An hour afterwards the traffic was all stopped from Washington Park onwards. The Governor of the State, John Hamilton, informed in all haste, sent a strong detachment of militia, who got into the cemetery with some trouble and cleared out a number of the crowd to leave the access clear.

And the bell went on ringing, ringing, ringing all the time in the tower of the superb monument to William J. Hypperbone.

It will be understood that George B. Higginbotham, the president of the Eccentric Club, and his colleagues and the notary, Tornbrock, had arrived in the cemetery. But how had they been able to get in front of the huge, tumultuous crowd unless they had been told beforehand? Certain it is that they were there as soon as the bell had been set going by the keeper of Oakwood.

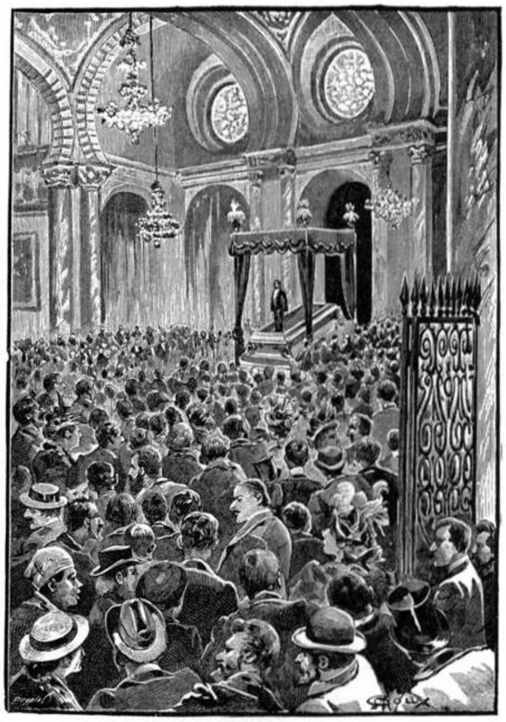

Then a man appeared, upright, alive, much alive. p. 399

Half an hour later came the six players in the Hypperbone match. That Commodore Urrican, Tom Crabbe towed by John Milner, Hermann Titbury pushed by Mrs. Titbury, and Harris T. Kymbale were in a hurry to get there was not surprising. But if Max Real and Lizzie Wag were there, and Jovita Foley with them, it was because the last had imperiously required it and they had to obey her.

All the players, then, were before the monument, guarded by a triple row of that militia which the two friends had the right to command, one as colonel, the other as lieutenant-colonel, for that rank had been conferred on them by the Governor of the State.

At last the bell stopped, and the door of the monument opened wide.

The interior hall was resplendent with the dazzling brightness of the electric lamps. Between the sconces appeared the magnificent tomb such as it had been three months and a half before, when the door was closed at the termination of the obsequies in which the whole town had taken part.

The Eccentric Club, the president at their head, entered the hall; Tornbrock in black suit, white cravat, and always with his aluminium spectacles, entered after them. The six players followed, accompanied by all the spectators the place would hold.

A profound silence reigned within as without the edifice — the sign of an emotion no less profound — and Jovita Foley was not the least moved of those present. It was vaguely felt that the word of the enigma, sought for in vain since the 24th, was at last to be pronounced, and that this word would be a name — the name of the winner of the Hypperbone match.

It was thirty-three minutes past eleven when a certain noise was heard in the interior of the hall. The noise came from the tomb, the mortuary cloth of which slipped on to the ground, as if drawn by an invisible hand.

And then, O Prodigy! while Lizzie Wag nestled against Max Real’s arm, the lid of the tomb rose, the body it contained rose.

Then a man appeared, upright, alive, much alive; and the man was no other than the. defunct William J. Hypperbone!

“Good gracious!” exclaimed Jovita Foley, the exclamation being heard only by Max Real and Lizzie Wag amid the hubbub of stupefaction that rose from the crowd.

And with her hands stretched out, she added:

“It is the venerable Mr. Humphry Weldon!”

Yes, the venerable Mr. Humphry Weldon, but of an age less venerable than when he paid his visit to Lizzie Wag.

This gentleman and William J. Hypperbone were one.

In a few words, the following is the story that in a few hours appeared in the newspapers. It explains all that seems inexplicable in this prodigious adventure.

On the 1st of April, at the club in Mohawk Street, while playing at the Noble Game of Goose, William J. Hypperbone had been seized with congestion. Carried to his house in La Salle Street, he died a few hours afterwards, or rather his doctors declared that he did.

But in spite of the doctors — and also in spite of those famous rays of Professor Frederick, of Elbing (Prussia), which corroborated their opinions — William J. Hypperbone was in a state of catalepsy, nothing more, but having every appearance of a dead man. In truth, it was fortunate that he had not wished in his will that he should be embalmed after his death, for assuredly if that operation had taken place he would never have come back.

The magnificent funeral took place as we know; and on the 3rd of April the gates of the monument were closed on the most distinguished member of the Eccentric Club.

Now in the evening, while the keeper was turning out the last lights in the hall, he heard a movement in the interior of the tomb. There were groans — and a stifled voice called him.

The keeper did not lose his head. He ran for his tools, he undid the lid of the tomb, and the first words uttered by William J. Hypperbone, awoke from his lethargic sleep, were:

“Not a word — and your fortune is made!” Then he added, with a presence of mind extraordinary in a man who had returned from so far:

“You alone must know that I am alive — you alone with my notary, Mr. Tornbrock, to whom you must go and tell him to come to me without losing an instant.”

The keeper, without other explanation, ran from the hall in all haste to the notary’s. And what was the surprise — oh! the most agreeable — of Tornbrock, when, half an hour later, he found himself again in the presence of his client, as well as he had ever been.

And this is what William J. Hypperbone had thought of since his resurrection.

As he had instituted by his will the famous game which would give rise to so many agitations, deceptions and surprises, he resolved that the game should be played out among the players designated by lot, and that he would submit to all the consequences.

“Then,” replied Tornbrock, “you will certainly be ruined, for one of the six will win. As you are not dead — on which I sincerely congratulate you — your will becomes, void and its dispositions of no effect. Then why let the game be played?”

“Because I will take part in it.”

“You?”

“Yes.”

“And how?”

“I will add a codicil to my will and introduce a seventh player, who will be William J. Hypperbone under the letters XKZ.”

“And you will play?”

“I will play like the others.”

“But you must conform to the established rules.”

“I will conform to them.”

“And if you lose — ”

“I shall lose, and all my fortune goes to the winner.”

“Is that your decision?”

“It is. As I am not distinguished by any eccentricity up to now, I will show myself eccentric under cover of my supposed death.”

We can guess what followed. The keeper of Oakwood, well rewarded, with a promise to be more so if he kept silence to the end of the adventure, had kept the secret. William J. Hypperbone, oft leaving the cemetery, went incognito to Tornbrock’s, added to his will the codicil we know, and fixed on the place to which he was to go in case the notary had any communication to address to him. Then he took his leave of this worthy man, trusting to his extraordinary luck that had never abandoned him during his life, and which was to remain faithful to him, we might say, even after his death.

We know the rest.

The game began under the conditions determined on, and William J. Hypperbone was able to form his opinions with regard to each of the six. Neither that disagreeable fellow Urrican, nor that miser Titbury, nor that brute Tom Crabbe interested him or could interest him. Perhaps he felt some sympathy with regard to Harris T. Kymbale, but if he had to choose a winner other than himself it would be either Max Real or Lizzie Wag and her faithful Jovita. Hence during the illness of the fifth player his visit under the name of Humphry Weldon and the sending of the three thousand dollars to the prison of Missouri. And what satisfaction for this generous man when the girl was released by Max Real, and the artist replaced in turn by Tom Crabbe!

As to himself, with sure and steady step he had followed the vicissitudes of the match, served by that inexhaustible luck on which he had reckoned with, reason, which did not betray him once; and here he was first at the post, he, the outsider, having beaten all the favourites in this great national race.

This is what had happened, and what he almost immediately told those present. And that is why the colleagues of this eccentric personage clasped him affectionately by the hand, why Max Real did so too, why he received the thanks of Lizzie Wag and those of Jovita Foley — who asked and obtained permission to kiss him — and why, carried by the crowd, he was borne through the great city of Chicago as triumphantly as he had been taken three months and a half before to Oakwood Cemetery.

But were the players contented with the way the game ended? Yes, some of them, not all; and yet they had to be, whether they liked it or not.

Hermann Titbury was not pleased at having uselessly spent so much money in running from one end of the States to the other. But he would do his best to get it back. Agreeing with Mrs. Titbury, who insisted on it, he decided to go into business again, in other words, to resume money-lending, and woe to the poor fellows who got into the maw of that shark!

Tom Crabbe understood hardly anything about these adventures, unless it was that he had a revenge to take, and John Milner hoped that in an approaching fight he would resume his position in the front rank of pugilists and forget that little affair at Arondale.

Harris T. Kymbale took his defeat philosophically, for he retained the remembrances of his interesting journeys. He did not, however, hold the record, having covered but about ten thousand miles, while Hodge Urrican had done more than eleven thousand — but this did not prevent him writing in the *Tribune* a most eulogistic article in favour of the dead-come-to-life-again of the Eccentric Club.

The commodore went to see William J. Hypperbone, and said to him with his usual politeness:

“It was not fair, sir — no! it was not fair! When you are dead, you are dead, and you do not send people running about after your money when you are still in this world!”

“What would you have, commodore?” said William J. Hypperbone,” courteously. “I could not help it.”

“You could, sir, and you ought to have! If, instead of burying you in a tomb, they had put you into a crematorium, this would not have happened.”

“Who knows — commodore? I am so lucky — ”

“And as you have made a fool of me, and I do not tolerate that sort of thing, you shall give me satisfaction — ”

“Where and when you please!”

As Turk had sworn by St. Jonathan he would devour Mr. Hypperbone’s liver, his master did not endeavour to calm him, but sent him to the ex-deceased to fix the hour and day for a meeting.

But could it be Turk who at the opening of his visit mildly said to William J. Hypperbone:

“You see, sir, Commodore Urrican is not so bad as he wishes to appear. At bottom he is a good fellow — whom you can manage easily — ”

“And you come from him — ”

“To tell you that he regrets his vivacity yesterday, and begs you to accept his apology!”

And there the affair rested, for Hodge Urrican soon saw that he would cover himself with ridicule. But very fortunately for Turk, this terrible man never knew in what manner he had fulfilled his mandate.

The day before Max Real and Lizzie Wag were to be married — it was the 29th of July — they received a visit, not from the venerable Humphry Weldon, a little bent with age, but from William J. Hypperbone, smarter and younger than ever, as Jovita Foley observed. Having apologized for not letting Miss Wag win the game, he told her that whether she would like it or whether she would not, or whether it pleased or displeased her husband, he had just deposited a new will with Mr. Tornbrock by which he had divided his fortune into two parts, one of which would go to Lizzie Wag.

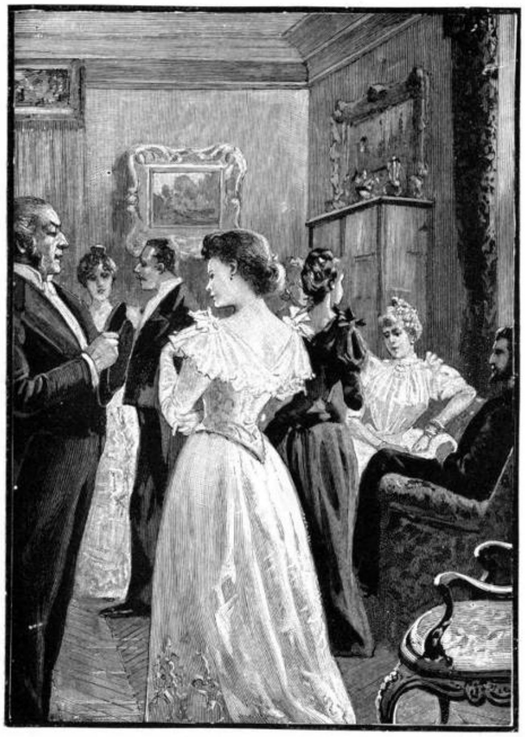

"Twenty-five is the half of fifty."

It were needless to repeat the replies to one who was as generous as he was original. At a blow Tommy was assured of being bought by his master at a reasonable price.

There remained Jovita Foley. Well, this lively, demonstrative and excellent person was in no way jealous of what had happened to her dear companion. What happiness for her to marry him who adored her, and to find in Mr. William J. Hypperbone such an excellent uncle to inherit from! As for her, after the wedding she would return to her duties as chief saleswoman at Marshall Field's.

The wedding took place next day, it might be said in the presence of the whole city. The governor, John Hamilton, and William J. Hypperbone were present at the magnificent ceremony.

When the newly-married couple and their friends had returned to Madame Real's William J. Hypperbone, addressing Jovita Foley, who made a charming bridesmaid, said:

"Miss Foley, I am fifty years old."

"You are flattering yourself, Mr. Hypperbone," she replied, laughing — as she knew how to laugh.

"No — I am fifty years old — do not disarrange my calculations — and you are twenty-five."

"Twenty-five I am."

"Now if I have not forgotten the first elements of arithmetic, twenty-five is the half of fifty."

What was this enigmatical, mathematical gentleman driving at?

"Well, Miss Foley, as you are half my age, if arithmetic is not a vain science, why should you not become half of myself?"

What could Jovita Foley say to a proposal so originally put, if it were not what any other girl would have said in her place?

And after all, in marrying this amiable and bewitching Jovita, if he proved himself as eccentric as his position as a member of the Eccentric Club required, did he not act with as much wisdom as good taste?

And to conclude, with regard to the perhaps rather unlikely events reported in this recital, will the reader kindly remember — by way of extenuating circumstances — that it all happened in America?

THE END

SECOND FATHERLAND

Also known as *The Castaways of the Flag*, this novel was first published in 1900. It is an adventure novel and the story is a sequel to Johann Wyss' *The Swiss Family Robinson*, resuming where the first novel left off.

Due to copyright restrictions on the English translation, only the French text is available in this edition.

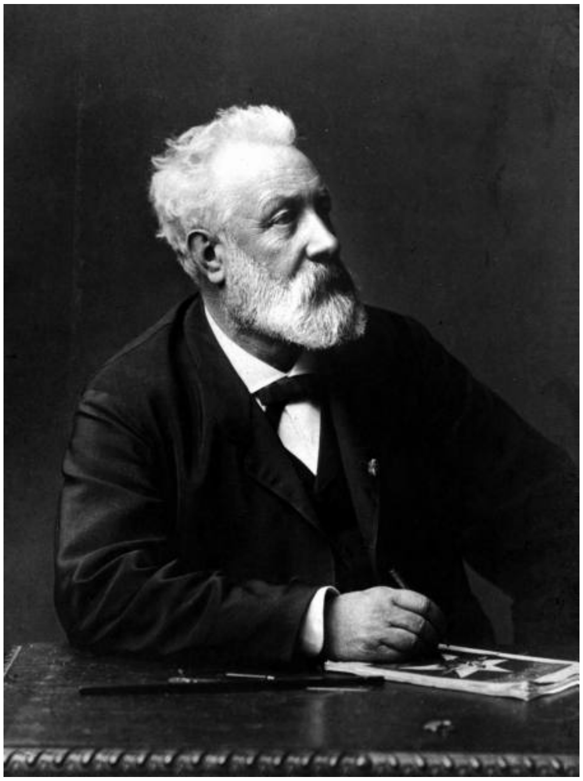

Verne, close to the time of publication

SECONDE PATRIE

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PREFACE

Pourquoi j’ai écrit seconde patrie

Les *Robinsons* ont été les livres de mon enfance, et j’en ai gardé un impérissable souvenir. Les fréquentes lectures que j’en ai faites n’ont pu que l’affermir dans mon esprit. Et même je n’ai jamais retrouvé plus tard, dans d’autres lectures modernes, l’impression de mon premier âge. Que mon goût pour ce genre d’aventures m’ait instinctivement engagé sur la voie que je devais suivre un jour, cela n’est point douteux. C’est ce qui m’a porté à écrire *l’École des Robinsons*, *l’Ile mystérieuse*, *Deux Ans de vacances*, dont les héros sont proches parents des héros de de Foë et de Wyss. Aussi personne ne sera-t-il surpris que je me sois voué tout entier à cette œuvre des *Voyages Extraordinaires*.

Les titres des ouvrages que je lisais avec tant d’avidité me reviennent à la mémoire: c’étaient *le Robinson de douze ans*, de Mme Mollar de Beaulieu, le *Robinson des sables du désert*, de Mme de Mirval. C’étaient aussi dans le même ordre d’idées les *Aventures de Robert Robert* de Louis Desnoyers que publiait le *Journal des Enfants* avec tant d’autres histoires que je ne saurais oublier. Puis vint le *Robinson Crusoë*, ce chef-d’œuvre qui n’est pourtant qu’un épisode dans le long et fastidieux récit de Daniel de Foë. Enfin, le *Cratère* de Fenimore Cooper ne put qu’accroître ma passion pour ces héros des îles inconnues de l’Atlantique ou du Pacifique.

Mais la géniale imagination de Daniel de Foë n’avait créé que l’homme seul abandonné sur une terre déserte, capable de se suffire grâce à son intelligence, son ingéniosité, son savoir, grâce également à sa confiance en

Dieu si persistante, et qui lui inspirait parfois quelque magnifique invocation.

Or, après l’être humain isolé dans ces conditions, est-ce qu’il n’y avait pas la famille à faire, la famille jetée sur une côte après naufrage, la famille étroitement unie, la famille ne désespérant pas de la Providence? Oui, et telle a été l’œuvre de Wyss, non moins durable que celle de Daniel de Foë.

Rudolph Wyss, né à Berne en 1781, mort en 1850, était professeur à l’Université. On a de lui plusieurs ouvrages sur son pays d’origine, indépendamment du *Robinson Suisse*, qui fut publié en 1812 à Zurich.

Dès l’année suivante, il en parut une première traduction française. Elle était due à Mme Isabelle de Bottens, baronne de Montolieu, née à Lausanne en 1751, morte à Bussigny en 1832, qui avait fait ses débuts dans la littérature avec le roman en deux volumes intitulé *Caroline de Lichsfield* (1781).

Peut-être y a-t-il des raisons de croire que Rudolph Wyss ne fut pas seul l’auteur du célèbre roman, lequel aurait été fait en collaboration avec son fils. C’est à tous deux, en effet, que Mme de Montolieu dédia la suite de ce roman, parue en 1824 à Paris sous ce titre: *le Robinson Suisse ou Journal d’un père de famille naufragé avec ses enfants*.

Ainsi donc, la traductrice avait eu l’idée de continuer l’ouvrage qu’elle avait traduit et j’ai été devancé par elle et bien probablement par d’autres, et je ne puis m’étonner que la pensée de le faire soit venue à plusieurs.

En effet, ce roman n’est pas terminé avec l’arrivée de la corvette la *Licorne*, et voici ce que disait déjà Mme de Montolieu dans la préface de sa traduction:

«Quatre éditions consécutives ont prouvé combien le public français a su apprécier cette production qui fait le bonheur des enfants et par conséquent de leurs parents. Mais il leur manquait une suite et une fin. Tous voulaient savoir si cette famille qui les intéressait restait dans cette île où tous les jeunes garçons désiraient aller. J'ai reçu à ce sujet une infinité de lettres, soit des enfants eux-mêmes, soit de mon libraire pour me solliciter de donner cette suite et de satisfaire leur curiosité.»

Il convient de noter que d'autres traductions de l'ouvrage de Rudolph Wyss furent faites après celle de Mme de Montolieu, entre autres celle de Pierre Blanchard en 1837. Il en résulte donc que si Mme de Montolieu n'a pas été seule à traduire le *Robinson Suisse*, elle n'aura pas été seule à en donner la suite, puisque j'ai tâché de le faire, sous le titre de *Seconde Patrie*.

Au surplus, en 1864, la maison Hetzel a publié une traduction nouvelle de cette histoire due au concours de P.-J. Stahl et E. Muller qui la revirent et lui donnèrent une allure plus moderne de composition et de style. A proprement parler, c'est même à cette édition, revue aussi au point de vue de la science, que succède la *Seconde Patrie*, offerte aux lecteurs du *Magasin d'Éducation et de Récréation*.

Et en réalité n 'était-il pas intéressant de prolonger le récit de Rudolph Wyss, de retrouver cette famille dans les conditions nouvelles qui lui étaient faites, et ces quatre garçons si bien posés, Fritz entreprenant et brave, Ernest un peu égoïste mais studieux, Jack l'espiègle et le petit François, d'observer les modifications que l'âge apporterait à leur caractère, après douze ans passés sur cette île?… Après la découverte de la Roche-Fumante, est-ce que l'introduction de Jenny Montrose dans ce petit monde ne devait pas en modifier l'existence?… Est-ce que l'arrivée de M. Wolston et des siens à bord de la *Licorne*, leur installation sur l'île n'imposaient pas une suite à cette histoire?… Est-ce qu’il n’y avait pas à la parcourir tout entière, cette île fortunée dont on ne connaissait que la partie septentrionale?… Est-ce que le départ de Fritz, de François et de Jenny Montrose pour l’Europe ne rendait pas indispensable la narration de leurs aventures jusqu’au retour dans la Nouvelle-Suisse?…

Aussi n’ai-je pas résisté au désir de continuer l’enivre de Wyss, de lui donner le dénouement définitif, qui, d’ailleurs, serait imaginé un jour ou l’autre.

Et alors, à force d’y songer, à force de m’enfoncer dans mon projet, de vivre côte à côte avec mes héros, il s’est produit un phénomène: c’est que j’en suis venu à croire qu’elle existe réellement, cette Nouvelle-Suisse, que c’est bien une île située dans le nord-est de l’océan Indien, dont j’ai fini par voir le gisement sur ma carte, que les familles Zermatt et Wolston ne sont point imaginaires, qu’elles habitent cette très prospère colonie, dont elles ont fait leur «seconde patrie»!… Et je n’ai qu’un regret, c’est que l’âge m’interdise de les y rejoindre!…

Enfin, voilà pourquoi j’ai cru qu’il fallait continuer leur histoire jusqu’au bout, voilà pourquoi j’ai fait la suite du *Robinson Suisse*.

Jules Verne

CHAPITRE I

Le retour de la belle saison. – Fritz et Jack. – Temps superbe. – Le départ du kaïak. – Visite de l’îlot du Requin. – Feu des deux pièces. – Trois coups de canon au large.

La belle saison arriva dès la seconde semaine d’octobre. Ce mois est le premier du printemps de la zone méridionale. L’hiver n’avait pas été très rigoureux sous cette latitude du dix-neuvième degré entre l’Équateur et le tropique du Capricorne. Les hôtes de la Nouvelle-Suisse allaient pouvoir reprendre leurs travaux accoutumés.

Après onze ans passés sur cette terre, ce n’était pas trop tôt de chercher à reconnaître si elle appartenait à l’un des continents que baigne l’océan Indien, ou si les géographes devaient la comprendre parmi les îles de ces parages.

Sans doute, depuis que la jeune Anglaise avait été recueillie par Fritz sur la Roche-Fumante, M. Zermatt, sa femme, ses quatre fils et Jenny Montrose étaient aussi heureux qu’on peut l’être. Il est vrai, les craintes de l’avenir et ses chances si improbables que le salut vînt du dehors, le souvenir du pays, le besoin de reprendre contact avec l’humanité, se faisaient parfois sentir, et n’est-ce pas une loi de nature qui s’impose à toute créature humaine?…

Donc, ce jour-là, de bon matin, M. Zermatt, traversant l’enclos de Felsenheim, se promenait sur la rive du ruisseau des Chacals. Fritz et Jack l’y avaient devancé, munis de leurs engins de pêche. François ne tarda pas à les rejoindre. Quant à Ernest, toujours peu matinal, ne détestant pas de rester quelques instants de plus entre les draps, il n’avait pas encore quitté son lit.

Mme Zermatt et Jenny vaquaient en ce moment à quelques occupations de l’intérieur.

«Père, dit Jack, voici une belle journée qui se prépare…

— Je le pense, mon enfant, répondit M. Zermatt. J’espère qu’elle sera suivie de bien d’autres qui ne seront pas moins belles, puisque nous sommes au début du printemps.

— Et aujourd’hui, qu’allez-vous faire?… questionna François.

— Nous allons pêcher, répondit Fritz, qui montra son filet et ses lignes.

— Dans la baie?… demanda M. Zermatt.

— Non, répondit Fritz; en remontant le ruisseau des Chacals jusqu’au barrage, nous prendrons du poisson plus qu’il ne faudra pour le déjeuner.

— Et ensuite?… ajouta Jack en s’adressant à son père.

— Ensuite, mon fils, répliqua M. Zermatt, la besogne ne nous manquera pas. Ainsi, dans l’après-midi, je compte me rendre à Falkenhorst afin de voir si notre habitation d’été nécessite quelques réparations. D’ailleurs, nous profiterons des premiers beaux jours pour visiter nos autres métairies, Waldegg, Zuckertop, l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, la villa de Prospect-Hill… Et puis il y aura les soins à donner aux animaux, l’entretien des plantations…

— C’est entendu, père, répondit Fritz. Mais, puisque nous pouvons disposer d’une heure ou deux ce matin, viens, Jack, viens, François…

— Nous sommes prêts, s’écria Jack, et je sens déjà quelque belle truite au bout de ma ligne… Hop-là!… hop-là!»

Jack fit le geste de ferrer le poisson imaginaire pris à son hameçon, et, finalement, ces mots sortirent de sa bouche en un son clair et joyeux: «En route!»

Peut-être François eût-il préféré rester à Felsenheim, où ses matinées étaient le plus souvent consacrées à l’étude. Toutefois son frère le pressa si vivement qu’il se décida à le suivre.

Les trois jeunes gens se dirigeaient vers la rive droite du ruisseau des Chacals, lorsque M. Zermatt les arrêta.

«Votre envie d’aller à la pêche, mes enfants, dit-il, vous fait oublier…

— Quoi donc?… demanda Jack.

— Ce que nous avons l’habitude de faire chaque année, dès les premiers jours de la belle saison…»

Fritz revint près de son père, et, se grattant le front:

«Qu’est-ce que cela peut être?… dit-il.

— Comment… tu ne te souviens pas, Fritz… ni toi, Jack?… reprit M. Zermatt.

— Est-ce que ce serait de ne pas t’avoir embrassé en l’honneur du printemps?… repartit Jack.

— Eh! non!… répondit Ernest, qui venait de sortir de l’enclos en se frottant les yeux et en se détirant les membres.

— Alors, c’est parce que nous partons sans avoir déjeuné, n’est-ce pas, mon gourmand d’Ernest?…» dit Jack.

C’était une allusion au péché mignon de son frère, soucieux avant tout de la question de nourriture et grand amateur de bons morceaux.

«Non, répondit Ernest, il ne s’agit pas de cela. Notre père veut seulement vous rappeler que l’habitude est de tirer chaque année, à cette époque, les deux pièces de la batterie du Requin…

— Justement», répliqua M. Zermatt.

En effet, l’un des jours de la seconde quinzaine d’octobre, après la saison des pluies, Fritz et Jack avaient coutume de gagner l’îlot à l’entrée de la baie du Salut, de rehisser le pavillon de la Nouvelle-Suisse, de le saluer de deux coups de canon que l’on entendait assez distinctement de Felsenheim. Puis, sans grand espoir, plutôt machinalement, ils parcouraient du regard la mer et le littoral… Peut-être un navire, traversant ces parages, entendrait-il les deux détonations?… Peut-être ne tarderait-il pas à venir en vue de la baie?… Peut-être même des naufragés avaient-ils été jetés sur quelque point de cette terre qu’ils devaient croire inhabitée, et ces décharges d’artillerie leur donneraient-elles l’éveil?…

«C’est exact, dit Fritz, nous allions oublier notre service… Va préparer le kaïak, Jack, et, avant une heure, nous serons de retour.»

Mais alors Ernest de dire:

«A quoi bon ce tapage d’artillerie?… Voilà nombre d’années que nous faisons feu de toutes nos pièces, et cela ne sert guère qu’à troubler les échos de Falkenhorst et de Felsenheim!… Pourquoi dépenser inutilement ces charges de poudre?…

— Je te reconnais bien là, Ernest!… s’écria Jack. Si un coup de canon coûte tant, il faut qu’il rapporte tant… ou il n’a qu’à se taire!

— Tu as eu tort de parler ainsi, dit M. Zermatt à son second fils, et je ne trouve pas que la dépense soit inutile… Arborer un pavillon sur l’îlot du Requin ne peut suffire, car il ne serait pas aperçu de la pleine mer… tandis que nos coups de canon s’entendent d’une bonne lieue au large… Il serait peu raisonnable de négliger cette chance de signaler notre présence à quelque bâtiment de passage…

— Alors, dit Ernest, il y aurait lieu de tirer tous les matins et tous les soirs…

— Assurément… comme dans les marines militaires… affirma Jack.

— Dans les marines militaires, on ne risque point d’être à court de munitions, fit observer Ernest, qui ne se rendait pas volontiers, étant de beaucoup le plus entêté des quatre frères.

— Rassure-toi, mon fils, la poudre n’est pas près de nous manquer, affirma M. Zermatt. Deux fois par an, avant et après l’hiver, deux coups de canon, ce n’est qu’une dépense insignifiante. J’estime que nous ne devons pas renoncer à cette habitude…

— Notre père a raison, reprit Jack. Si les échos de Felsenheim et de Falkenhorst ne sont pas contents d’être troublés dans leur sommeil, eh bien! Ernest leur fera une belle excuse en vers, et ils seront enchantés… Allons, Fritz.

— Auparavant, dit François, il faut prévenir notre mère…

— Et aussi notre chère Jenny… ajouta Fritz.

— J'y aurai soin, répondit M. Zermatt, car ces détonations pourraient leur causer quelque surprise et même les induire à se figurer qu'un bâtiment entre dans la baie du Salut…»

En ce moment, Mme Zermatt et Jenny Montrose, qui sortaient de la galerie, s'arrêtèrent à la porte de l'enclos.

Tout d'abord, après avoir embrasse sa mère, Fritz tendit la main à la jeune fille qui lui souriait. Et, comme elle voyait Jack se diriger vers la crique où étaient mouillées la chaloupe et la pinasse, elle dit:

«Est-ce que vous allez en mer, ce matin?…

— Oui, Jenny, répondit Jack, en revenant sur ses pas. Fritz et moi, nous faisons nos préparatifs pour une grande traversée…

— Une grande traversée?… répéta Mme Zermatt, qui s'inquiétait toujours de ces absences, quelque confiance qu'elle pût avoir dans l'habileté de ses deux fils à manœuvrer leur kaïak.

— Rassure-toi, ma chère Betsie, et vous aussi, Jenny, dit M. Zermatt. Jack plaisante… Il ne s'agit que de se rendre à l'îlot du Requin, de tirer les deux coups réglementaires en arborant le pavillon et de revenir après avoir vu si tout est en ordre.

— C'est convenu, répondit Jenny, et, tandis que Fritz et Jack gagneront l'îlot, Ernest, François et moi, nous irons tendre nos lignes… à la condition que Mme Betsie n'ait pas besoin de moi…

— Non, ma chère fille, dit Mme Zermatt, et, pendant ce temps, je vais préparer notre prochaine lessive.»

Après être d’abord descendus à l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, où Jack amena le kaïak, Fritz et lui embarquèrent. On leur souhaita bonne traversée, et la légère embarcation se lança vivement hors de la petite crique.

Le temps était beau, la mer calme, la marée favorable. Placés l’un devant l’autre, chacun dans l’étroite ouverture qui lui était ménagée, les deux frères maniaient la pagaie tour à tour et s’éloignaient rapidement de Felsenheim. Comme le courant portait un peu vers l’est, le kaïak dut se rapprocher de la côte opposée, en franchissant le goulet qui mettait la baie du Salut en communication avec la pleine mer.

A cette époque, Fritz était âgé de vingt-cinq ans. Adroit, vigoureux, rompu à tous les exercices corporels, marcheur infatigable, chasseur intrépide, cet aîné de la famille Zermatt lui faisait honneur. Son caractère un peu dur s’était assoupli. Ses frères ne souffraient plus, comme autrefois, de vivacités qui lui avaient souvent valu les remontrances de son père et de sa mère. Et puis, un autre sentiment avait contribué à modifier en mieux ses propensions naturelles.

En effet, il ne pouvait oublier la jeune fille qu’il avait ramenée de la Roche-Fumante, et Jenny Montrose ne pouvait oublier qu’elle lui devait son salut. Jenny était charmante, avec ses cheveux blonds tombant en boucles soyeuses, sa taille flexible, ses mains fines, cette fraîcheur de carnation qui se reconnaissait sous le haie de sa figure. En entrant dans cette honnête et laborieuse famille, elle lui avait apporté ce qui manquait jusqu’alors, la joie de la maison, et elle fut le bon génie du foyer domestique.

Mais, si Ernest, Jack, François ne voyaient qu’une sœur dans cette aimable personne, en était-il ainsi de Fritz?… Était-ce le même sentiment qui lui faisait battre le cœur?… Et Jenny n’éprouvait-elle pas plus que de l’amitié pour le courageux jeune homme venu à son secours?… Il s’était passé déjà près de deux ans depuis le si émouvant incident de la Roche-Fumante… Fritz n’avait pu vivre près de Jenny sans s’éprendre d’elle… Et que de fois le père, la mère causaient de ce que réservait l’avenir à cet égard!

En ce qui concerne Jack, si son caractère avait subi quelque modification, c’était dans l’accroissement de ses dispositions naturelles pour tous les exercices qui exigeaient de la force, du courage, de l’adresse, et, de ce fait, il n’avait plus rien à envier maintenant à Fritz. Il était alors âgé de vingt et un ans, de taille moyenne, bien découplé, toujours le brave garçon joyeux, plaisant, primesautier, et aussi bon, serviable, dévoué, qui n’avait jamais causé à ses parents aucune peine. Il ne laissait pas d’ailleurs de lutiner ses frères de temps à autre, et ceux-ci lui pardonnaient volontiers. N’était-ce pas le meilleur camarade que l’on pût voir?

Cependant le kaïak filait comme une flèche à la surface des eaux. Si Fritz n’avait point établi la petite voile qu’il portait lorsque le vent était favorable, c’est que la brise soufflait du large. Au retour, le mât serait dressé, l’emploi des pagaies ne deviendrait pas nécessaire pour rallier l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals.

Rien n’attira l’attention des deux frères pendant cette courte traversée de trois quarts de lieue. Du côté de l’est, le rivage, aride, désert, ne présentait qu’une succession de dunes jaunâtres. De l’autre côté, s’étendait le verdoyant littoral depuis l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals jusqu’à celle du ruisseau des Flamants, et au delà jusqu’au cap de l’Espoir-Trompé.

«Décidément, dit Fritz, notre Nouvelle-Suisse n’est point située sur la route des navires, et ces parages de l’océan Indien sont peu fréquentés…

— Eh!… fit Jack, je ne tiens pas tant que cela à ce qu’on la découvre, notre Nouvelle-Suisse!… Un bâtiment qui l’accosterait se hâterait d’en prendre possession!… S’il y plantait son pavillon, que deviendrait le nôtre?… Et, comme à coup sûr ce ne serait pas un pavillon helvétique, puisque celui de la Suisse ne court pas précisément les mers, nous serions exposés à ne plus nous sentir chez nous…

— Et l’avenir… Jack… l’avenir?… répondit Fritz.

— L’avenir?… reprit Jack, ce sera la continuation du présent… et si tu n’es pas satisfait…

— Nous… peut-être… dit Fritz. Mais tu oublies Jenny… son père qui croit qu’elle a péri dans le naufrage de la *Dorcas*?… Et ne doit-elle pas désirer de toute son âme d’être ramenée près de lui?… Elle le sait là-bas, en Angleterre, et comment l’y rejoindre si quelque navire n’arrive pas un jour…

— C’est juste», répondit Jack en souriant, car il devinait ce qui se passait dans le cœur de son frère.

Après quarante minutes de navigation, le kaïak vint accoster les basses roches de l’îlot du Requin.

Le premier soin de Fritz et de Jack devait être de le visiter à l’intérieur, puis d’en faire le tour. Il importait de reconnaître l’état des plantations faites depuis quelques années autour du monticule de la batterie.

En effet, ces plantations étaient très exposées aux vents du nord et du nord-est, qui battaient de plein fouet l'îlot avant de s'engouffrer à travers le goulet de la baie du Salut, comme dans un entonnoir. Il se formait même en cet endroit des remous atmosphériques d'une violence extrême, qui plus d'une fois déjà avaient décoiffé de sa toiture le hangar sous lequel étaient placées les deux pièces.

Heureusement, les plantations n'avaient pas trop souffert. Seuls quelques arbres dans la partie septentrionale gisaient sur la grève, et il y aurait lieu de les débiter en vue d'approvisionner Felsenheim.

Quant aux enclos dans lesquels étaient parquées les antilopes, ils avaient été si solidement aménagés que Fritz et Jack n'y remarquèrent aucun dégât. Les animaux trouvaient là une herbe abondante qui assurait leur nourriture pendant toute l'année. Ce troupeau comptait actuellement une cinquantaine de têtes, dont le nombre ne pouvait que s'accroître.

«Et que ferons-nous de toutes ces bêtes?… demanda Fritz en voyant les gracieux ruminants s'ébattre entre les haies vives des enclos.

— Nous les vendrons… répondit Jack.

— Tu admets donc qu'un jour ou l'autre des navires viendront auxquels il sera possible de les vendre?… demanda Fritz.

— Point du tout, répliqua Jack, et lorsque nous les vendrons, ce sera au franc marché de la Nouvelle-Suisse…

— Le franc marché, Jack!… A t'entendre, le moment n'est pas éloigné où la Nouvelle-Suisse aura des francs marchés…

— Sans aucun doute, Fritz, comme elle aura des villages, des bourgades, des villes et même une capitale, qui sera naturellement Felsenheim…

— Et quand cela?…

— Lorsque les districts de la Nouvelle-Suisse posséderont plusieurs milliers d’habitants…

— Des étrangers?…

— Non, Fritz, non!… affirma Jack, des Suisses, rien que des Suisses… Notre pays d’origine est assez peuplé pour nous envoyer quelques centaines de familles…

— Mais il n’a jamais eu et je doute qu’il ait jamais de colonies, Jack…

— Eh bien, Fritz… il en aura au moins une…

— Hum! Jack, nos concitoyens ne paraissent pas d’humeur à émigrer.

— Et qu’avons-nous fait, nous?… s’écria Jack. Est-ce que le goût de la colonisation ne nous est pas venu… non sans quelque profit?…

— Parce que nous y étions forcés, répondit Fritz. D’ailleurs, si jamais la Nouvelle-Suisse doit se peupler, j’ai grand’peur qu’elle ne justifie plus son nom, et que la grande majorité de ses habitants ne soit d’origine anglo-saxonne!»

Fritz avait raison, et Jack le comprenait si bien qu’il ne put se retenir de faire la grimace.

A cette époque, en effet, la Grande-Bretagne était de tous les États européens celui qui imprimait le plus grand essor à son empire colonial. Peu à peu, l’océan Indien lui livrait de nouvelles possessions. Donc, selon toute probabilité, si un bâtiment arrivait jamais en vue, il porterait à sa corne le pavillon britannique, son capitaine en prendrait possession, arborerait les couleurs de l’Angleterre sur les hauteurs de Prospect-Hill.

Lorsque la visite de l’îlot fut achevée, les deux frères gravirent le monticule et atteignirent le hangar de la batterie.

Après s’être arrêtés au bord du plateau supérieur, ils parcoururent, la lunette aux yeux, tout ce vaste segment de mer compris entre le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé et le cap qui fermait à l’est la baie du Salut.

Parages toujours déserts. Rien en vue jusqu’à l’extrême ligne de ciel et d’eau, si ce n’est, à une lieue et demie dans le nord-est, le récif sur lequel était venu s’échouer le *Landlord*.

En dirigeant leurs regards vers le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, Fritz et Jack aperçurent entre les arbres de la colline le belvédère de la villa de Prospect-Hill. Cette habitation d’été était à sa place, – ce qui rassurerait M. Zermatt, pris toujours de cette crainte qu’elle ne fût détruite par les rafales pendant la mauvaise saison.

Les deux frères pénétrèrent sous le hangar que les tempêtes avaient respecté, bien que les deux mois et demi d’hiver eussent été trop souvent troublés par les ouragans et les bourrasques.

Il s’agissait à présent de hisser, au mât planté près du hangar, le pavillon blanc et rouge, qui flotterait jusqu’à la fin de l’automne, et de l’appuyer des deux coups de canon annuels.

Tandis que Jack s’occupait de retirer le pavillon de son étui et de le fixer par les angles à la drisse du mât, Fritz examinait les deux caronades braquées en direction du large. Elles étaient en bon état, et il n’y eut qu’à les charger. Afin d’économiser la poudre, Fritz eut soin d’employer une bourre de terre mouillée, ainsi qu’il le faisait d’habitude, – ce qui augmentait l’intensité de la décharge. Puis il introduisit dans la lumière l’étoupille destinée à communiquer le feu au moment où le pavillon monterait en tête du mât.

Il était alors sept heures et demie du matin. Le ciel, dégagé des premières brumes de l’aube, se montrait dans toute sa pureté. Vers l’ouest s’arrondissaient cependant quelques volutes de nuages. Le vent indiquait une tendance à mollir. La baie, resplendissant sous l’averse des rayons solaires, allait tomber au calme plat.

Dès qu’il eut fini, Fritz demanda à son frère s’il était prêt.

«Quand tu voudras, Fritz, répondit Jack, en s’assurant que la drisse se déroulerait sans accrocher la toiture.

— Première pièce… feu!… Seconde pièce… feu!…» cria Fritz, qui prenait au sérieux son rôle d’artilleur.

Les deux coups retentirent l’un après l’autre, tandis que l’éta-mine rouge et blanche se déployait au souffle de la brise.

Fritz s’occupa de recharger les deux canons. Mais à peine avait-il introduit la gargousse dans la seconde pièce qu’il se redressa…

Une détonation lointaine venait de frapper son oreille.

Aussitôt Jack et lui de s’élancer hors du hangar.

«Un coup de canon!… s’écria Jack.

— Non… dit Fritz, ce n’est pas possible!… Nous nous sommes trompés…

— Écoutons!…» reprit Jack, qui respirait à peine.

Une seconde détonation traversa l’air, puis une troisième retentit après une minute d’intervalle.

«Oui… oui… ce sont bien des coups de canon… répéta Jack.

— Et ils viennent de l’est!…» ajouta Fritz.

Est-ce donc qu’un navire, passant en vue de la Nouvelle-Suisse, avait répondu a la double décharge partie de l’îlot du Requin, et ce navire allait-il mettre le cap sur la baie du Salut?…

CHAPITRE II

Le retour du kaïak. – L’impression produite. – Décision prise. – Trois jours de tempête. – Doublé le cap à l’est. – Le bâtiment au mouillage.

Lès que la double détonation de la batterie de l’îlot du Requin eut éclaté, les échos de Felsenheim la répercutèrent de roche en roche. A ce moment, M. et Mme Zermatt, Jenny, Ernest et François, accourant sur la grève, purent apercevoir la fumée blanchâtre des deux pièces qui se rabattait lentement vers Falkenhorst. En agitant leurs mouchoirs, ils y répondirent par un hurrah, moins bruyant sans doute, mais qui partait du cœur.

Puis, chacun se disposait à reprendre ses occupations, lorsque Jenny, regardant avec la longue-vue dans la direction de l’îlot, dit:

«Voici Fritz et Jack qui reviennent…

— Déjà?… fit Ernest. C’est à peine s’ils ont eu le temps de recharger les caronades… Pourquoi cette hâte de nous rejoindre?…

— En effet, ils semblent pressés», répondit M. Zermatt.

Nul doute, ce point mouvant que la longue-vue permettait d’apercevoir un peu à la droite de l’îlot ne pouvait être que la légère embarcation, rapidement enlevée sous l’action de ses pagaies.

«C’est au moins singulier!… fit observer Mme Zermatt. Ont-ils quelque nouvelle à nous communiquer… quelque nouvelle importante?…

— Je le pense», répondit Jenny.

Cette nouvelle serait-elle bonne, serait-elle mauvaise?… Chacun se posait cette question sans essayer de la résoudre.

Tous les regards étaient dirigés vers le kaïak, qui grossissait à vue d’oeil. En un quart d’heure, il fut à mi-chemin de l’îlot du Requin et de l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals. Fritz n’avait point hissé sa petite voile, car la brise mollissait et, rien qu’en manœuvrant leurs pagaies, les deux frères marchaient plus vite que le vent sur ces eaux à peine ridées de la baie du Salut.

Alors, il vint à la pensée de M. Zermatt d’observer si ce retour précipité n’était pas une fuite, si quelque pirogue de sauvages, poursuivant le kaïak, n’allait pas apparaître au tournant de l’îlot, ou même une embarcation de pirates venue du large… Mais, cette idée très alarmante, il ne la communiqua point. Suivi de Betsie, de Jenny, d’Ernest et de François, il se porta à l’extrémité de la crique, afin d’interroger Fritz et Jack dès qu’ils accosteraient.

Un quart d’heure plus tard, le kaïak s’arrêtait près des premières roches qui servaient de débarcadère, au fond de la crique.

«Qu’y a-t-il?…» demanda M. Zermatt.

Fritz et Jack sautèrent sur la grève. Essoufflés, le visage inondé de sueur, les bras rompus de fatigue, ils ne purent d’abord répondre que par gestes, en montrant le littoral au levant de la baie du Salut.

«Qu’y a-t-il?… redemanda François, en saisissant le bras de Fritz.

— Vous n’avez pas entendu?… interrogea enfin ce dernier, lorsqu’il eut recouvré la parole.

— Oui… les deux coups de canon que vous avez tirés de la batterie du Requin?… dit Ernest.

— Non… répondit Jack, pas les nôtres… ceux qui ont répondu…

— Quoi… dit M. Zermatt, des détonations?…

— Est-il possible… est-il possible!…» répétait Mme Zermatt.

Jenny s’était avancée près de Fritz, et, pâle d’émotion, dit à son tour:

«Vous avez entendu des détonations de ce côté?…

— Oui, Jenny, répondit Fritz, trois coups tirés à intervalles réguliers.»

Fritz parlait d’un ton si affirmatif que l’on ne pouvait croire à une erreur de sa part. D’ailleurs, Jack confirma les paroles de son frère, en ajoutant:

«Il n’est pas douteux qu’un bâtiment se trouve en vue de la Nouvelle-Suisse, et que son attention a été attirée par la décharge de nos deux caronades…

— Un navire… un navire!… murmurait Jenny.

— Et c’était bien dans la direction de l’est?… reprit en insistant M. Zermatt.

— Oui… dans la direction de l’est, déclara Fritz, et j’en conclus que la baie du Salut ne doit être séparée que d’une ou deux lieues de la haute mer.»

C’était probable; mais, on ne l’ignore pas, aucune reconnaissance n’avait encore été poussée sur ce littoral.

Après un moment de surprise, on pourrait dire de stupéfaction, il est facile d'imaginer à quels sentiments s'abandonnèrent les hôtes de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Un navire… il y avait assurément un navire en vue, un navire dont les détonations avaient été apportées par la brise jusqu'à l'îlot du Requin!… N'était-ce pas là comme un lien par lequel cette terre ignorée où depuis onze ans vivaient les naufragés du *Landlord* se rattachait au reste du monde habité?… Le canon, c'est la grande voix des navires qui traverse les longues distances, et cette voix venait de se faire entendre pour la première fois depuis que la batterie de l'îlot du Requin saluait le départ et le retour de la belle saison!… Il semblait que cette éventualité, sur laquelle ils ne comptaient plus, prît au dépourvu M. Zermatt et les siens, comme si ce bâtiment eût parlé une langue qu'ils avaient cessé de comprendre.

Cependant ils se ressaisirent et ne songèrent qu'aux bons côtés de cette situation nouvelle. Ce bruit lointain, arrivé jusqu'à eux, ce n'était plus un de ces bruits de la nature dont ils avaient depuis si longtemps l'habitude, le craquement des arbres sous la violence des bourrasques, les fracas de la mer démontée par la tempête, les éclats de la foudre pendant les puissants orages de cette zone intertropicale… Non!… Ce bruit était dû à la main de l'homme!… Le capitaine, l'équipage du bâtiment qui passait au large ne pouvaient plus croire que cette terre fût inhabitée… S'ils relâchaient dans la baie, leur pavillon saluerait le pavillon de la Nouvelle-Suisse!

Aussi tous ne virent là que la certitude d'une prochaine délivrance. Mme Zermatt se sentait exempte des craintes de l'avenir… Jenny songeait à son père qu'elle désespérait de jamais revoir… M. Zermatt et ses fils se retrouvaient au milieu de leurs semblables… Et alors tous se pressèrent dans une commune étreinte.

Ainsi, la première impression que ressentit cette famille fut celle que donne la réalisation des plus chers désirs. Ne prenant de cet événement que ce qu’il comportait d’heureux, elle fut toute à l’espoir et à la reconnaissance envers le Ciel.

«Il convient d’abord de rendre grâce à Dieu, dont la protection ne nous a jamais manqué, dit François. C’est vers lui que doivent monter nos remerciements, c’est à lui que doivent s’adresser nos prières!»

Il était naturel que François s’exprimât de la sorte. On sait de quels sentiments religieux il avait toujours été animé, et ils étaient devenus encore plus profonds avec l’âge. C’était un caractère droit, tranquille, rempli d’affection pour les siens, c’est-à-dire tout ce qui avait été pour lui l’humanité jusque-là. Le dernier des frères, il était cependant comme leur conseiller lors des bien rares froissements qui surgissaient entre les membres de cette famille si unie. Quelle aurait été sa vocation s’il eût vécu en son pays d’origine?… Sans doute, il aurait cherché dans la médecine, le droit, le sacerdoce, à satisfaire ce besoin de dévouement qui était au fond de lui-même comme l’activité physique chez Fritz et Jack, l’activité intellectuelle chez Ernest. Il adressa donc à la Providence une fervente prière à laquelle se joignirent son père, sa mère, ses frères et Jenny.

En ces circonstances, il convenait d’agir sans perdre une heure. L’hypothèse la plus probable était que ce navire, dont on ne voulait plus mettre la présence en doute, devait être mouillé dans une des anses du littoral et non qu’il passât au large de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Peut-être les détonations auxquelles il avait répondu l’engageraient-elles à opérer la reconnaissance de cette terre?… Peut-être même chercherait-il à donner dans la baie du Salut, après avoir doublé le cap qui la terminait à l’est?…

Voilà ce que fit valoir Fritz, et il acheva son argumentation en disant:

«Le seul parti à prendre, c’est d’aller au-devant de ce bâtiment, en suivant la côte orientale, qui, sans doute, court du nord au sud…

— Et qui sait si nous n’avons pas déjà trop tardé… dit Jenny.

— Je ne le pense pas, répondit Ernest. Il est impossible que le capitaine de ce navire, quel qu’il soit, ne cherche pas à se rendre compte…

— Tout ça… des mots inutiles!… s’écria Jack. Partons…

— Donne-nous le temps de préparer la chaloupe… fit observer M. Zermatt.

— Ce serait trop long, déclara Fritz, et le kaïak suffira…

— Soit!» dit M. Zermatt.

Puis il ajouta: «L’essentiel est de se conduire avec une extrême prudence… Que des sauvages malais ou australiens aient débarqué sur le littoral de l’est, cela me paraît improbable… mais l’océan Indien est fréquenté par des pirates, et il y aurait tout à redouter de leur part…

— Oui… ajouta Mme Zermatt, et mieux vaut que ce navire s’éloigne si…

— J’irai moi-même, déclara M. Zermatt. Avant d’entrer en communication avec ces étrangers, il faut savoir à qui on a affaire.»

Ce plan était sage. Il ne restait plus qu’à l’exécuter. Or, par une véritable malchance, le temps se modifia dès les premières heures de cette matinée. Après avoir molli, le vent venait de haler l’ouest et fraîchissait sensiblement. Le kaïak n’aurait pu se risquer dans la baie, même s’il ne se fût agi que de gagner l’îlot du Requin. Le ciel s’était couvert de nuages qui se levaient du couchant, – de ces nuages de bourrasque dont un marin se défie toujours.

Mais, à défaut du kaïak, fallût-il perdre une heure ou deux en préparatifs, ne pouvait-on employer la chaloupe, bien que la houle dût être violente au delà du goulet?…

A son vif désappointement, M. Zermatt dut y renoncer. Avant midi, une véritable tempête soulevait les eaux de la baie du Salut et la rendait impraticable. Si ce brusque changement de temps ne pouvait se prolonger à cette époque, du moins contrecarrait-il tous les projets, et pour peu que la tourmente durât vingt-quatre heures, ne serait-il pas trop tard pour aller à la recherche du navire?… D'ailleurs, en cas que son mouillage ne lui offrît pas un abri sûr, il le quitterait sans doute, et, avec ces vents d'ouest, il aurait rapidement perdu de vue les côtes de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

D'autre part, Ernest fit valoir cette raison: peut-être le bâtiment tenterait-il de se réfugier dans la baie du Salut, s'il venait à doubler le cap par l'est?…

«C'est possible, en effet, répondit M. Zermatt, et c'est même désirable, à la condition que nous n'ayons pas affaire à des pirates…

— Aussi nous veillerons, père, dit François. Nous veillerons toute la journée… toute la nuit…

— Et encore, si nous pouvions nous rendre à Prospect-Hill ou seulement à Falkenhorst, ajouta Jack, nous serions mieux placés pour observer le large!»

Évidemment, mais il n'y fallait pas songer. Pendant l'après-midi, le temps devint plus mauvais. La fureur des rafales redoubla. La pluie tombait si abondante que les eaux du ruisseau des Chacals débordèrent, et le pont de

Famille faillit être emporté. M. Zermatt et ses fils restèrent constamment sur le qui-vive et ils eurent fort à faire pour empêcher l'inondation d'envahir l'enclos de Felsenheim. Betsie et Jenny ne purent mettre le pied dehors. Jamais journée ne s'écoula plus tristement, et n'était-il pas trop certain que, si le bâtiment s'éloignait, il ne reviendrait pas sur ces parages!…

La nuit arrivée, les violences de la tempête s'accrurent. Sur la recommandation de M. Zermatt, que ses enfants obligèrent à prendre quelque repos, Fritz, Ernest, Jack et François se relayèrent jusqu'au jour. De la galerie, qu'ils ne quittèrent pas, ils voyaient la mer jusqu'à l'îlot du Requin. Si un feu de navire eût paru à l'entrée du goulet, ils l'auraient aperçu; si une détonation eût retenti, ils l'auraient entendue, malgré le tumulte des lames qui brisaient sur les roches de la crique avec un effroyable fracas. Lorsque la rafale s'apaisait un peu, enveloppés de leur capote cirée, tous quatre, s'avançant jusqu'à l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, s'assuraient que la chaloupe et la pinasse tenaient bon à leur mouillage.

La tourmente dura quarante-huit heures. A peine si, pendant tout ce temps, M. Zermatt et ses fils avaient pu se porter jusqu'à mi-chemin de Falkenhorst afin d'embrasser du regard un pus large horizon. La mer, toute blanche de l'écume des lames déferlantes, était déserte. En réalité, pas un bâtiment n'eût osé se risquer si près de terre pendant cette tempête.

M. et Mme Zermatt avaient déjà fait le sacrifice de leurs espérances. Ernest, Jack, François, habitués à cette existence depuis leur jeune âge, ne regrettaient pas autrement cette occasion perdue. Mais Fritz la regrettait pour eux, ou plutôt pour Jenny.

En effet, si le navire s’était éloigné, s’il ne devait pas revenir sur ces parages, quel sujet de déception pour la fille du colonel Montrose!… La possibilité d’être ramenée à son père lui échappait… Cette occasion de revenir en Europe, combien de temps s’écoulerait avant qu’elle se représentât, et même se représenterait-elle?…

«Espérons!… espérons!… répétait Fritz, que la douleur de Jenny accablait. Ce bâtiment… ou un autre… reviendra, puisqu’on va maintenant avoir connaissance de la Nouvelle-Suisse!»

Pendant la nuit du 11 au 12 octobre, le vent ayant remonté au nord, le mauvais temps prit fin. A l’intérieur de la baie du Salut, la mer tomba vite, et, dès l’aube, les lames ne roulaient plus sur la grève de Felsenheim.

Toute la famille venait de quitter l’enclos, et portait ses regards en direction de la pleine mer.

«Allons à l’îlot du Requin, proposa aussitôt Fritz… Il n’y a aucun risque pour le kaïak…

— Qu’y ferez-vous?… demanda Mme Zermatt.

— Peut-être le navire est-il encore en relâche à l’abri du littoral… et même, si la tempête l’a obligé à gagner le large, peut-être est-il revenu?… Tirons quelques coups de canon, et s’ils reçoivent une réponse…

— Oui… Fritz… oui!… répéta Jenny, qui aurait déjà voulu être de sa personne sur l’îlot.

— Fritz a raison, dit M. Zermatt… Il ne faut rien négliger… Si le bâtiment est là, il nous entendra et se fera entendre!…»

Le kaïak fut paré en quelques minutes. Mais, comme Fritz allait y prendre place, M. Zermatt lui conseilla de rester à Felsenheim avec sa mère, ses frères et Jenny. Ce serait Jack qui l'accompagnerait. Il emporterait un pavillon, afin d'indiquer s'il y avait quelque bonne nouvelle, ou si quelque danger menaçait. Dans ce dernier cas, après l'avoir secoué trois fois, il jetterait le pavillon à la mer, et alors Fritz devrait emmener toute la famille à Falkenhorst. M. Zermatt et Jack viendraient l'y rejoindre en toute hâte et, s'il le fallait, on se réfugierait soit aux métairies de Waldegg ou de Zuckertop, soit même à l'ermitage d'Eberfurt. Au contraire, si M. Zermatt, après avoir agité deux fois le pavillon, le plantait près de la batterie, c'est qu'il n'y aurait aucun motif d'inquiétude, et Fritz attendrait son retour à Felsenheim.

Il va sans dire que ces divers signaux seraient aisément aperçus de l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, en les observant avec une lunette d'approche.

Jack venait d'amener le kaïak au pied des roches. Son père et lui embarquèrent. A quelques encablures en dehors de la crique, la houle se réduisait à un léger clapotis. Enlevée par ses pagaies, l'embarcation fila rapidement vers l'îlot du Requin.

Le cœur de M. Zermatt lui battait fort, lorsqu'il accosta la pointe de l'îlot, et avec quelle hâte Jack et lui gravirent le monticule!

Arrivés devant le hangar, ils s'arrêtèrent. De là, leurs yeux parcoururent le vaste horizon compris entre le promontoire à l'est et le cap de l'Espoir-Trompé.

Aucune voile ne se montrait à la surface de la mer, toujours houleuse au large, et toujours déserte.

Au moment où ils allaient entrer dans le hangar, M. Zermatt dit une dernière fois à Jack:

«Ton frère et toi, êtes-vous bien certains d'avoir entendu…

— Absolument certains… répondit Jack. C'étaient bien des détonations qui venaient de l'est…

— Dieu le veuille!» dit M. Zermatt.

Comme les caronades avaient été rechargées par Fritz, il n'y avait plus qu'à y mettre le feu.

«Jack, dit M. Zermatt, tu vas tirer deux coups à deux minutes d'intervalle, puis, après avoir rechargé la première pièce, tu feras feu une troisième fois…

— C'est convenu, père, répondit Jack. Et toi?…

— Moi, je vais me placer au bord du plateau tourné vers le levant, et, si une détonation vient de ce côté, je serai bien placé pour l'entendre.»

Au surplus, le vent ayant passé au nord, bien qu'il fût très faible, les circonstances étaient favorables. Des décharges d'artillerie parties de l'ouest et de l'est devaient être facilement entendues, si la distance n'excédait pas une lieue et demie.

M. Zermatt alla se poster sur le côté du hangar.

Alors, en ménageant les intervalles de temps convenus, Jack fit trois fois feu de la batterie. Puis, il accourut aussitôt près de son père, et tous deux demeurèrent là, immobiles, l'oreille tendue vers l'est.

Une première détonation parvint assez distinctement jusqu’à l’îlot du Requin.

«Père… s’écria Jack, le navire est toujours là!…

— Écoutons!» répondit M. Zermatt.

Six autres détonations, à intervalles réguliers, suivirent la première. Ainsi, non seulement le bâtiment répondait, mais il semblait dire que les choses ne dussent pas en rester là.

A cet instant M. Zermatt, après avoir agité le pavillon, le planta près de la batterie.

Si les détonations du navire n’étaient pas parvenues à Felsenheim, du moins y saurait-on qu’aucun danger n’était à craindre.

Et d’ailleurs, une demi-heure après, lorsque le kaïak fut rentré dans la crique, Jack de s’écrier:

«Sept coups!… On a tiré sept coups…

— Et que le ciel soit sept fois béni!» répondit François. En proie à la plus vive émotion, Jenny saisit la main de Fritz.

Puis elle se jeta dans les bras de Mme Zermatt, qui essuya ses pleurs en la couvrant de baisers.

Donc, aucun doute sur la présence du navire, puisqu’il venait de répondre à la batterie de l’îlot du Requin. Pour une cause ou une autre, il devait être en relâche au fond d’une des baies de la côte orientale… Peut-être même n’avait-il point été contraint de la quitter pendant la tempête?… Maintenant, il ne partirait pas sans s'être mis en communication directe avec les habitants de cette terre inconnue… et le mieux n'était-il pas de ne point attendre qu'il parût en vue de la baie?…

«Non!… partons… partons… répétait Jack, partons à l'instant!…»

Mais le prudent Ernest d'émettre alors quelques réflexions auxquelles M. Zermatt donna son approbation. A quelle nationalité appartenait ce navire, comment le savoir?… N'était-il pas possible qu'il fût monté par des pirates qui, on ne l'ignore pas, étaient nombreux à cette époque dans ces parages de l'océan Indien!… Qui sait même s'il n'était pas tombé entre les mains de ces forbans?… En ce cas, à quels dangers seraient exposés M. Zermatt et sa famille?…

Toutes ces questions se posaient naturellement.

«Eh bien, déclara Fritz, il faut qu'elles soient résolues dans le plus bref délai…

— Oui… il le faut!… répéta Jenny, qui ne pouvait modérer son impatience.

— Je vais m'embarquer dans le kaïak, ajouta Fritz, et, puisque l'état de la mer le permet, je doublerai sans difficulté le cap à l'est…

— Soit, répondit M. Zermatt, car nous ne pouvons rester dans l'indécision… Toutefois, avant d'accoster ce navire, il est nécessaire d'être fixé… Fritz, je m'embarque avec toi…»

Jack intervint.

«Père, dit-il, en marchant à la pagaie, – j'en ai l'habitude, – rien que pour atteindre le cap on mettra plus de deux heures, et, au delà, la distance peut être longue encore jusqu'au mouillage du navire!… C'est à moi d'accompagner Fritz…

— Cela vaudra mieux», ajouta ce dernier.

M. Zermatt hésitait. Il lui semblait indispensable de prendre part à cette opération qui devait être conduite avec une extrême prudence.

«Oui!… que Fritz et Jack partent… intervint Mme Zermatt. Nous pouvons nous en rapporter à eux.»

M. Zermatt se rendit, et les plus instantes recommandations furent faites aux deux frères. Après avoir doublé le cap, ils devaient suivre la terre, se glisser entre les roches de cette partie de la côte, voir avant d'avoir été vus, s'assurer seulement de la situation du bâtiment, ne point monter à bord, et revenir aussitôt à Felsenheim. M. Zermatt déciderait alors ce qu'il y aurait à faire. Si Fritz et Jack pouvaient même éviter d'être aperçus, ce serait préférable à tous égards.

Peut-être aussi, – c'est ce que fit observer Ernest, – conviendrait-il que Fritz et Jack pussent être pris pour des sauvages. Pourquoi, après s'être vêtus à leur mode, ne se noirciraient-ils pas la figure, les bras et les mains, – moyen déjà employé par Fritz, lorsqu'il avait ramené Jenny à la baie des Perles? L'équipage du navire serait moins surpris de rencontrer des noirs sur cette terre de l'océan Indien…

L'avis d'Ernest était bon. Les deux frères se déguisèrent en indigènes des Nicobar, puis s'appliquèrent une couche de suie sur la figure et sur les bras.

Cela fait, ils embarquèrent et, une demi-heure plus tard, le kaïak était déjà hors du goulet.

Inutile de dire que M. et Mme Zermatt, Jenny, Ernest, François le suivirent du regard tant qu’il fut visible, et ne rentrèrent à Felsenheim qu’après l’avoir vu sortir de la baie du Salut.

A la hauteur de l’îlot du Requin, Fritz manœuvra de manière à se rapprocher du littoral opposé. Au cas où une chaloupe détachée du bâtiment eût doublé l’extrême pointe, le kaïak aurait pu se dissimuler derrière les récifs et rester en observation.

Il ne fallut pas moins de deux heures pour atteindre le cap, car la distance dépassait deux lieues. Avec la brise qui venait du nord, la petite voile n’aurait pu servir. Il est vrai, la marée descendante avait favorisé la marche de la légère embarcation.

C’était la première fois que ce cap allait être franchi depuis que la famille Zermatt avait trouvé refuge dans la baie du Salut. Quel contraste avec le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, qui se dessinait à quatre lieues de là dans le nord-ouest! Quelle aridité présentait cette partie orientale de la Nouvelle-Suisse! La côte, semée de dunes sablonneuses, hérissée de roches noirâtres, se bordait d’écueils qui se prolongeaient de plusieurs centaines de toises au delà du promontoire contre lequel la houle du large, même par beau temps, brisait toujours avec violence.

Lorsque le kaïak eut contourné les dernières roches, le littoral est se développa aux regards de Fritz et de Jack. Il descendait presque nord et sud, en limitant la Nouvelle-Suisse de ce côté. Donc, à moins que ce ne fût une île, c’était par le sud que cette terre se fût rattachée à un continent.

Le kaïak longeait le rivage, de manière à se confondre avec les roches, et il eût été difficilement aperçu.

A une lieue de là, au fond d’une baie étroite, apparut un navire, un trois-mâts, ses perroquets dépassés, en réparation à ce mouillage, et, sur la grève voisine, étaient encore dressées plusieurs tentes.

Le kaïak s’approcha à six encablures du bâtiment. Dès qu’il fut signalé, ni Fritz ni Jack ne purent se méprendre sur les signes d’amitié qu’on leur adressait du bord. Quelques phrases, prononcées en langue anglaise, arrivèrent même jusqu’à eux, et il était évident qu’on les prenait pour des sauvages.

De leur côté, ils ne pouvaient se tromper en ce qui concernait la nationalité de ce navire. Le pavillon britannique flottait à sa corne d’artimon. C’était une corvette anglaise de dix canons.

Donc, il n’y aurait eu aucun inconvénient à se mettre en communication avec le capitaine de cette corvette.

Jack l’aurait voulu, mais Fritz n’y consentit pas. Ayant promis de revenir à Felsenheim dès qu’il serait fixé sur la situation et la nationalité du navire, il entendait tenir sa promesse. Aussi le kaïak reprit-il direction vers le nord, et, après deux heures et demie de navigation, il franchissait le goulet de la baie du Salut.

CHAPITRE III

La corvette anglaise Licorne. – Les coups de canon entendus. – Arrivée de la pinasse. – La famille Zermatt. – La famille Wolston. – Projets de séparation. – Échanges divers. – Les adieux. – Départ de la corvette.

La *Licorne*, petite corvette de dix canons, portant le pavillon britannique, était en cours de navigation, allant de Sydney (Australie) au cap de Bonne-Espérance. Le commandant, lieutenant Littlestone, avait sous ses ordres un équipage d'une soixantaine d'hommes. Si, d'habitude, un navire de guerre ne prend pas de passagers, la *Licorne* avait eu l'autorisation d'embarquer une famille anglaise, dont le chef, pour raison de santé, était obligé de revenir en Europe. Cette famille se composait de M. Wolston, mécanicien-constructeur, de sa femme, Merry Wolston, de ses deux filles, Annah et Doll, âgées l'une de dix-sept ans, l'autre de quatorze. Elle comprenait, en outre, un fils, James Wolston, qui habitait alors Capetown avec sa femme et son enfant.

Au mois de juillet 1816, la *Licorne* avait quitté le port de Sydney, et, après avoir longé la côte méridionale de l'Australie, s'était dirigée vers les parages nord-est de l'océan Indien.

Au cours de cette traversée, par ordre de l'Amirauté, le lieutenant Littlestone devait croiser sous ces latitudes et rechercher, soit à la côte occidentale de l'Australie, soit dans les îles voisines, s'il existait quelques survivants de la *Dorcas* dont aucune nouvelle n'était venue depuis trente mois. On ne connaissait pas exactement le lieu du naufrage, bien qu'il n'y eût aucun doute sur la catastrophe, puisque le second maître et trois hommes de ce bâtiment, recueillis en mer, avaient été ramenés à Sydney, seuls de ceux que portait la grande chaloupe. Quant au capitaine Greenfield, aux matelots, aux passagers, – entre autres la fille du colonel Montrose, – il eût été difficile de conserver quelque espoir de les retrouver, après le récit du naufrage fait par le second maître. Cependant le gouvernement de la Grande-Bretagne avait voulu que d'autres recherches fussent effectuées aussi bien dans cette portion de l'océan Indien qu'aux approches de la mer de Timor. Là, les îles sont nombreuses, peu fréquentées des navires de commerce, et il convenait de visiter celles qui avoisinaient les parages où s'était probablement perdue la *Dorcas*.

En conséquence, dès qu'elle eut doublé le cap Loeuwin à l'extrémité sud-ouest de l'Australie, la *Licorne* s'était portée dans le nord. Après avoir inutilement relâché dans quelques-unes des îles de la Sonde, elle avait repris la route du Cap. C'est alors que, très éprouvée par de violentes tempêtes, elle dut lutter pendant une semaine, non sans faire d'assez graves avaries, et fut contrainte de chercher un point de relâche afin de se réparer.

Le 8 octobre, les vigies signalèrent en direction du sud une terre, – vraisemblablement une île, – dont les cartes les plus récentes n'indiquaient point le gisement. Le lieutenant Littlestone, ayant gouverné sur cette terre, trouva un refuge au fond d'une baie de sa côte orientale, très abritée des mauvais vents, et qui offrait un excellent mouillage.

L'équipage se mit aussitôt au travail. Quelques tentes furent dressées sur la grève au pied de la falaise. On organisa un campement, en prenant toutes les mesures que commandait la prudence. Il se pouvait que cette côte fût habitée ou fréquentée par des sauvages, et l'on sait que les naturels de l'océan Indien jouissent d'une détestable réputation très justifiée.

Or, la *Licorne* était depuis deux jours en relâche, lorsque, dans la matinée du 10 octobre, l’attention du commandant et de l’équipage fut attirée par une double détonation qui venait de l’ouest.

Cette double détonation méritait une réponse, et la *Licorne* répondit par une salve de trois coups de canon que tira la batterie de bâbord.

Le lieutenant Littlestone n’avait plus qu’à attendre. Son navire, étant en réparation, n’aurait pu appareiller pour sortir de la baie et doubler la pointe du nord-est. Il s’en fallait de quelques jours qu’il fût en état de prendre la mer. Dans tous les cas, il ne doutait pas que les détonations de la corvette eussent été entendues, puisque le vent venait du large, et il regardait comme probable la prochaine arrivée d’un navire en vue de la baie.

Des vigies furent donc placées dans la mâture. Le soir, aucune voile n’avait encore apparu. La mer était déserte au nord, – déserte également cette portion du littoral que limitait la courbure de la baie. Quant à mettre à terre un détachement, à l’envoyer en reconnaissance, le lieutenant Littlestone s’y refusa par prudence, ne se souciant pas de l’exposer à quelque mauvaise rencontre. D’ailleurs, les circonstances ne l’exigeaient pas impérieusement. Dès que la *Licorne* serait en mesure de quitter son mouillage, elle suivrait les contours de cette terre, dont on venait de relever le gisement avec une grande exactitude, – soit 19° 30’ de latitude et 114° 5’ de longitude à l’est du méridien de cette île de Fer, qui appartient au groupe des Canaries de l’océan Atlantique. Il n’était pas douteux que ce fût une île, car il n’existe aucun continent en cette partie de l’océan Indien.

Trois jours s’écoulèrent, rien de nouveau. Il est vrai, une violente tempête s’était élevée, qui troubla profondément l’espace, tout en laissant la *Licorne* en sûreté sous l’abri de la côte.

Le 13 octobre, plusieurs décharges d’artillerie retentirent dans la même direction que les premières.

A cette salve, dont chaque coup était séparé par un intervalle de deux minutes, la *Licorne* répondit par sept coups séparés avec le même intervalle de temps. Comme ces nouvelles détonations ne parurent pas être plus rapprochées que les précédentes, le commandant en conclut que le bâtiment d’où elles partaient ne devait pas avoir changé de place.

Ce jour-là, vers quatre heures de l’après-midi, le lieutenant Littlestone, en se promenant sur la dunette, sa longue-vue aux yeux, aperçut une petite embarcation. Montée par deux hommes, elle se glissait entre les roches en retour du promontoire. Ces hommes, noirs de peau, ne pouvaient être que des naturels de race malaise ou australienne. Leur présence démontrait donc que cette partie de la côte était habitée. Aussi des mesures furent-elles prises en prévision d’une attaque, toujours à craindre en ces parages de l’océan Indien.

Cependant le canot s’approchait, – une sorte de kaïak. On le laissa venir. Mais, lorsqu’il ne fut plus qu’à trois encablures de la corvette, les deux sauvages firent entendre un langage absolument incompréhensible.

Le lieutenant Littlestone et ses officiers agitèrent leurs mouchoirs, ils levèrent la main pour indiquer qu’ils étaient sans armes. Le kaïak ne parut pas disposé à s’avancer davantage. Un instant après, il s’éloignait rapidement et disparaissait derrière le promontoire.

La nuit étant close, le lieutenant Littlestone consulta ses officiers sur l’opportunité qu’il y aurait d’envoyer la grande chaloupe reconnaître la côte septentrionale. En effet, la situation voulait être éclaircie. Ce n’étaient point des indigènes qui avaient tiré les coups de canon entendus dans la matinée.

On ne pouvait mettre en doute qu’il n’y eût à l’ouest de l’île un navire peut-être en détresse et qui demandait du secours.

Il fut donc décidé qu’une reconnaissance serait effectuée le lendemain en cette direction, et la chaloupe allait être mise à la mer à neuf heures du matin, lorsque le lieutenant Littlestone arrêta la manœuvre.

A la pointe du cap venait d’apparaître non plus un kaïak ni une de ces pirogues dont les naturels font usage, mais un léger bâtiment, de construction moderne, une pinasse d’une quinzaine de tonneaux. Dès qu’elle se fut approchée de la *Licorne*, elle hissa un pavillon blanc et rouge.

Quelle surprise éprouvèrent le commandant, les officiers, l’équipage de la corvette, quand ils virent un canot se détacher de la pinasse, drapeau blanc arboré à l’arrière en signe d’amitié, et se diriger vers la corvette!

Deux hommes montèrent à bord de la *Licorne* et se firent connaître. C’étaient des Suisses, Jean Zermatt et son fils aîné Fritz, les naufragés du navire *Landlord*, dont on n’avait plus jamais eu de nouvelles.

Les Anglais ne ménagèrent pas leurs démonstrations cordiales au père et au fils. Puis, à la proposition que tous deux firent au lieutenant Littlestone de venir à bord de la pinasse, celui-ci répondit avec empressement.

Qu’on ne s’étonne pas si M. Zermatt éprouva quelque orgueil à présenter au commandant de la *Licorne* d’abord sa vaillante compagne, puis ses trois autres fils. On ne put qu’admirer leur mine résolue, leur figure intelligente, leur belle santé. Toute cette superbe famille faisait plaisir à voir. Jenny fut présentée ensuite au lieutenant Littlestone.

«Mais quelle est cette terre où vous vivez depuis douze ans, monsieur Zermatt?… demanda-t-il.

— Nous l’avons nommée Nouvelle-Suisse, répondit M. Zermatt, un nom qu’elle conservera, j’espère…

— Est-ce une île, commandant?… demanda Fritz.

— Oui… une île de l’océan Indien, qui n’était pas indiquée sur les cartes.

— Nous ignorions que ce fût une île, fit observer Ernest, car, dans la crainte de quelque mauvaise rencontre, nous n’avons jamais quitté cette partie de la côte.

— Vous avez eu raison, puisque nous avons aperçu des indigènes… répondit le lieutenant Littlestone.

— Des indigènes?… répliqua Fritz, qui ne cacha point son étonnement.

— Sans doute, affirma le commandant. Hier… dans une sorte de pirogue… ou plutôt un kaïak…

— Ces indigènes n’étaient autres que mon frère et moi, répondit Jack en riant. Nous avions noirci notre figure et nos bras, afin de passer pour des sauvages…

— Et pourquoi ce déguisement?…

— Parce que nous ne savions pas à qui nous avions affaire, commandant, et votre navire pouvait être un navire de pirates!

— Oh! dit le lieutenant Littlestone, un bâtiment de Sa Majesté le roi George III!…

— J’en conviens volontiers, répondit Fritz, mais il nous a paru préférable de regagner notre habitation de Felsenheim afin de revenir tous ensemble.

— J’ajoute, reprit M. Zermatt, que nous l’aurions fait dès le jour même. Fritz et Jack avaient remarqué que votre corvette était en réparation, et nous étions assurés de la retrouver au fond de cette baie…»

Maintenant, quel fut le bonheur de Jenny, lorsque le commandant lui apprit que le nom du colonel Montrose lui était connu. Et même, avant le départ de la *Licorne* pour la mer des Indes, les journaux avaient annoncé l’arrivée du colonel à Portsmouth, puis à Londres. Mais, depuis cette époque, comme la nouvelle s’était répandue que les passagers et l’équipage de la *Dorcas* avaient péri, moins le second maître et les trois matelots débarqués à Sydney, on juge de quel désespoir fut saisi le malheureux père à la pensée que sa fille avait trouvé la mort dans cette catastrophe. Ce chagrin ne pourrait être égalé que par sa joie, lorsqu’il apprendrait que Jenny avait survécu au naufrage de la *Dorcas*.

Cependant la pinasse se préparait à regagner la baie du Salut, où M. et Mme Zermatt comptaient offrir l’hospitalité au lieutenant Littlestone. Toutefois celui-ci voulut les retenir jusqu’à la fin de la journée. Puis, comme ils acceptèrent de passer la nuit dans la baie, on fit dresser trois tentes au pied des roches, l’une pour les quatre fils, l’autre pour le père et la mère, la troisième pour Jenny Montrose.

Et alors l’histoire de la famille Zermatt put être racontée avec détail depuis son débarquement sur cette terre de la Nouvelle-Suisse. On ne sera pas surpris si le commandant et ses officiers exprimèrent le désir d’aller visiter les aménagements de la petite colonie, les confortables installations de Felsenheim et de Falkenhorst.

Après un excellent repas qui fut servi à bord de la *Licorne*, M. et Mme Zermatt, leurs quatre fils et Jenny prirent congé du lieutenant Littlestone, et allèrent s'abriter sous les tentes au fond de la baie.

Et, lorsqu'il fut seul avec sa femme, voici ce que M. Zermatt crut devoir lui dire:

«Ma chère Betsie, une occasion nous est offerte de revenir en Europe… de revoir nos compatriotes et nos amis… Mais il faut réfléchir que notre situation est changée maintenant… La Nouvelle-Suisse n'est plus une île inconnue… D'autres navires ne tarderont pas à y relâcher…

— Où veux-tu en venir?… demanda Mme Zermatt.

— A décider si nous devons ou non mettre cette occasion à profit?…

— Mon ami, répondit Betsie, depuis hier, j'ai bien réfléchi, et voici le résultat de mes réflexions: pourquoi quitter cette terre où nous sommes si heureux?… Pourquoi vouloir renouer des relations que le temps et l'absence ont dû briser complètement?… Ne sommes-nous pas déjà arrivés à un âge où l'on aspire trop volontiers après le repos pour courir les chances d'une longue traversée?…

— Ah! chère femme, s'écria M. Zermatt, en embrassant Betsie, tu m'as compris!… Oui!… ce serait presque de l'ingratitude envers la Providence que d'abandonner notre Nouvelle-Suisse!… Mais il ne s'agit pas de nous seulement… Nos enfants…

— Nos enfants?… répondit Betsie. Qu'ils tiennent à retourner dans leur patrie, je le comprends… Ils sont jeunes… ils ont l'avenir pour eux… et bien que leur absence doive nous causer un gros chagrin, il convient de les laisser libres…

— Tu as raison, Betsie, et là-dessus je pense comme toi…

— Que nos fils s'embarquent sur la *Licorne*, mon ami… S'ils partent, ils reviendront…

— Et puis, songeons à Jenny, dit M. Zermatt. Nous ne pouvons oublier que son père, le colonel Montrose, est de retour en Angleterre depuis deux ans… que depuis deux ans il la pleure… Ce n'est que trop naturel qu'elle veuille revoir son père…

— Et ce ne sera pas sans en éprouver grande tristesse que nous verrons partir celle qui est devenue notre fille… répondit Betsie. Fritz a pour elle une affection profonde… affection qui est partagée!… Mais nous ne pouvons disposer de Jenny.»

M. et Mme Zermatt causèrent longuement de toutes ces choses. Ils comprenaient bien les conséquences qu'entraînait le changement survenu dans leur situation, et le sommeil ne leur vint qu'à une heure très avancée de la nuit.

Le lendemain, – après avoir quitté la baie, doublé le cap de l'Est et donné dans la baie du Salut, la pinasse débarquait le lieutenant Littlestone, deux de ses officiers, la famille Zermatt et la famille Wolston à l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals.

Les Anglais éprouvèrent le même sentiment d'admiration et de surprise qu'avait éprouvé Jenny Montrose, en visitant pour la première fois Felsenheim. M. Zermatt reçut ses hôtes dans l'habitation d'hiver, en attendant qu'il leur fît visiter le château Falkenhorst, la villa de Prospect-Hill, les métairies de Waldegg et de Zuckertop, et l'ermitage d'Eberfurt. Le lieutenant Littlestone et ses officiers ne pourraient qu'admirer la prospérité de cette Terre-Promise due au courage, à l'intelligence, à la commune entente d'une famille de naufragés pendant onze ans d'abandon sur cette île!… Aussi, à la fin du repas qui leur fut servi dans la grande salle de Felsenheim, ne manquèrent-ils pas de boire en l'honneur des colons de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Pendant cette journée, M. Wolston, sa femme et ses deux filles eurent l'occasion de se lier plus intimement avec M. et Mme Zermatt. Qu'on ne s'étonne donc pas si, le soir venu, avant de se séparer, M. Wolston, auquel son état de santé imposait un séjour de quelques semaines à terre, prit la parole et dit:

«Monsieur Zermatt, m'autorisez-vous à parler en toute confiance et toute sincérité?…

— Assurément…

— L'existence que vous menez sur cette île ne pourrait que me plaire, dit M. Wolston… Il me semble que je me sens déjà mieux au milieu de cette belle nature, et je m'estimerais heureux de vivre dans un coin de votre Terre-Promise, si, toutefois, vous vouliez y donner votre consentement…

— N'en doutez pas, monsieur Wolston! répondit avec empressement M. Zermatt. Ma femme et moi, nous serons enchantés de vous admettre dans notre petite colonie, de vous y faire votre part de bonheur… D'ailleurs, en ce qui nous concerne tous les deux, nous avons pris la résolution de finir nos jours sur la Nouvelle-Suisse, qui est devenue notre seconde patrie, et notre intention est de ne jamais la quitter…

— Hurrah pour la Nouvelle-Suisse!…» s’écrièrent joyeusement les convives.

Et ils vidèrent en son honneur leurs verres remplis de ce vin des Canaries que Mme Zermatt substituait au vin indigène dans les grandes occasions.

«Et vivent ceux qui veulent y demeurer quand même!…» ajoutèrent Ernest et Jack.

Fritz n’avait pas prononcé une parole, Jenny se taisait et baissait la tête.

Puis, lorsque les visiteurs furent partis dans le grand canot de la *Licorne* qui était venu les prendre, lorsque Fritz se trouva seul avec sa mère, il l’embrassa sans oser parler.

En la voyant si affectée à la pensée que son fils aîné songeait à partir:

«Non… mère…, s’écria-t-il en s’agenouillant devant elle, non!… je ne m’en irai pas!…»

Et Jenny, qui les rejoignit alors, de répéter en se jetant dans les bras de Mme Zermatt:

«Pardon… pardon… si je vais vous faire de la peine… moi qui vous aime comme ma mère!… Mais… là-bas… mon père… m’est-il permis d’hésiter?…»

Mme Zermatt et Jenny restèrent ensemble. Et, lorsque leur conversation eut pris fin, il sembla que Betsie fût presque résignée à une séparation.

M. Zermatt et Fritz rentrèrent en ce moment, et Jenny, s’adressant à M. Zermatt:

«Mon père, dit-elle, – c’était la première fois qu’elle lui donnait ce nom, – bénissez-moi comme ma mère vient de me bénir!… Laissez-moi… laissez-nous partir pour l’Europe!… Vos vous reviendront, et ne craignez pas que rien puisse jamais les séparer de vous!… Le colonel Montrose est un homme de cœur, qui voudra payer la dette de sa fille!… Que Fritz vienne le trouver en Angleterre!… Confiez-nous l’un à l’autre!… Votre fils vous répond de moi comme je vous réponds de lui!…»

Finalement, voici ce qui fut convenu après approbation du commandant de la *Licorne*. Le débarquement de la famille Wolston allait laisser des places libres à bord de la corvette. Fritz, François et Jenny s’y embarqueraient en compagnie de Doll, la plus jeune des demoiselles Wolston. Elle irait rejoindre à Capetown son frère qu’elle ramènerait à la Nouvelle-Suisse avec sa femme et son enfant. Quant à Ernest et Jack, ils entendaient ne point quitter leurs parents.

En ce qui concerne le lieutenant Littlestone, la mission dont il avait été chargé était remplie, d’abord parce qu’il avait retrouvé Jenny Montrose, seule survivante des passagers de la *Dorcas*, ensuite parce que cette île de la Nouvelle-Suisse offrait un excellent point de relâche dans l’océan Indien. Or, comme M. Zermatt, qui la possédait en sa qualité de premier occupant, désirait l’offrir à la Grande-Bretagne, le lieutenant Littlestone promit de mener à bien cette affaire et de rapporter l’acceptation du gouvernement britannique.

Il était donc à supposer que la *Licorne* reviendrait en prendre possession. Elle y reconduirait Fritz, François, Jenny Montrose, puis embarquerait, à Capetown. James Wolston, sa sœur Doll, sa femme et son enfant. En ce qui concerne Fritz, il se munirait, d’accord avec M. et Mme Zermatt, des papiers nécessaires pour son mariage, – mariage que le colonel Montrose serait heureux d’approuver, – et on ne doutait même pas qu’il ne voulût accompagner les jeunes époux à la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Oui, tout cela était convenu. Mais, enfin, ce ne serait pas sans un brisement de cœur, que les membres de la famille Zermatt se sépareraient pour quelque temps. Il est vrai, au retour de Fritz, de François, de Jenny, de son père, et peut-être de quelques colons qui auraient demandé à les suivre, il n’y aurait que du bonheur à attendre, – un bonheur que rien ne troublerait plus, et quel avenir de prospérité pour la colonie!

On s’occupa aussitôt du départ. Quelques jours encore, et la *Licorne* serait prête à sortir de cette baie du littoral est à laquelle fut donné son nom. Dès que le gréement aurait été remis en place, la corvette reprendrait la mer et se dirigerait vers le cap de Bonne-Espérance.

On ne s’étonnera pas que Jenny voulût emporter ou plutôt apporter au colonel Montrose les quelques objets qu’elle avait fabriqués de ses propres mains sur la Roche-Fumante. Chacun d’eux ne lui rappelait-il pas cette existence si courageusement supportée pendant plus de deux ans de solitude! Aussi Fritz se chargea-t-il de ces objets sur lesquels il veillerait comme sur un trésor.

M. Zermatt confia à ses deux fils tout ce qui offrait une valeur marchande et pouvait être converti en argent sur les marchés de l’Angleterre, les perles recueillies en quantité et qui produiraient une somme considérable, le corail péché le long des îlots de la baie des Nautiles, les noix muscades, les gousses de vanille dont on remplit plusieurs sacs. Avec l’argent de la vente de ces divers produits, Fritz achèterait le matériel nécessaire à la colonie, – matériel qui serait embarqué sur le premier navire où les futurs colons prendraient passage avec leur pacotille. En effet, cela constituerait une cargaison assez importante pour exiger un bâtiment de plusieurs centaines de tonneaux.

D’autre part, M. Zermatt fit certains échanges avec le lieutenant Littlestone. Il se procura ainsi plusieurs fûts d’eau-de-vie et de vin, des vêtements, du linge, des munitions, une douzaine de barils de poudre, de balles, de plomb et de boulets. Puisque la Nouvelle-Suisse suffisait aux besoins de ses habitants, il importait surtout d’assurer le service des armes à feu. Il le fallait, non seulement pour la chasse, mais aussi en vue de la défensive, dans le cas, très improbable d’ailleurs, où les colons seraient attaqués par des pirates ou même par des indigènes, si quelques tribus occupaient la partie non reconnue au delà des montagnes du sud.

En même temps, le commandant de la *Licorne* se chargea de remettre, aux familles des passagers qui avaient péri, les valeurs et les bijoux recueillis à bord du *Landlord*. Il s’agissait là de plusieurs milliers de piastres, colliers, bagues, montres d’or et d’argent, tout un stock de ces précieuses inutilités du luxe européen. Indépendamment de leur prix vénal, ces objets devaient avoir celui du souvenir pour les parents des naufragés… Quant au journal de sa vie que M. Zermatt avait tenu chaque jour au courant, Fritz devait le publier en Angleterre, afin d’assurer la place à laquelle avait droit la Nouvelle-Suisse dans la nomenclature géographique.1

Ces préparatifs furent achevés la veille du départ. Toutes les heures que ses travaux lui laissaient, le lieutenant Littlestone les avait passées dans l’intimité de la famille Zermatt. On espérait bien qu’avant un an, après avoir relâché au Cap, après avoir reçu à Londres les ordres de l’Amirauté relativement à la colonie, il reviendrait prendre possession officielle de celle-ci au nom de la Grande-Bretagne. Au retour de la *Licorne*, la famille Zermatt serait à jamais réunie.

Enfin arriva le 19 octobre.

Dès la veille, la corvette, qui avait quitté la baie de la Licorne, était venue jeter l'ancre à une encablure de l'îlot du Requin.

Triste journée pour M. et Mme Zermatt, pour Ernest et Jack, desquels Fritz, François et Jenny allaient se séparer le lendemain comme elle le fut pour M. et Mme Wolston, puisque leur fille Doll partait aussi. Il n'aurait pas fallu demander à tous ces braves cœurs une fermeté au-dessus de leurs forces, et comment auraient-ils pu retenir leurs larmes?…

M. Zermatt essaya de dissimuler son attendrissement, mais il n'y réussit guère. Quant à Betsie et à Jenny, elles pleurèrent dans les bras l'une de l'autre, – larmes de mère et de fille.

Au petit jour, la chaloupe conduisit les passagers à l'îlot du Requin. M. et Mme Zermatt, Ernest et Jack, M. et Mme Wolston et leur fille aînée les accompagnaient.

Ce fut là, sur cet îlot, à l'entrée de la baie du Salut, que s'échangèrent les derniers adieux, tandis que la chaloupe ralliait la corvette avec les bagages. On s'embrassa, on se serra dans une longue étreinte. Il ne pouvait être question de s'écrire, puisqu'aucun moyen de correspondance n'existait entre l'Angleterre et la Nouvelle-Suisse. Non! on ne parla que de se revoir, de revenir le plus vite possible, de reprendre la vie commune…

Puis le grand canot de la *Licorne* embarqua Jenny Montrose, Doll Wolston confiée à ses soins, Fritz et François, et il les conduisit à bord.

Une demi-heure après, la *Licorne* levait l'ancre, et, par une belle brise de nord-est, tout dessus, elle se dirigeait vers la haute mer, après avoir salué de trois coups de canon le pavillon de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

A ces trois coups répondirent ceux de la batterie de l’îlot du Requin, tirés par Ernest et Jack.

Une heure plus tard, les hautes voiles de la corvette avaient disparu derrière les dernières roches du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé.

CHAPITRE IV

Dix ans en arrière. – Les premières installations de la famille Zermatt sur la Nouvelle-Suisse. – Principaux incidents contenus dans le journal de M. Zermatt. – Fin de la dixième année.

Voici le résumé des dix premières années que les naufragés du *Landlord* avaient passées dans la Nouvelle-Suisse et qu'il convient de faire connaître au lecteur.

Le 7 octobre de l'année 1803 une famille était jetée sur une terre inconnue située dans l'est de l'océan Indien.

Le chef de cette famille, d'origine suisse, se nommait Jean Zermatt, sa femme se nommait Betsie. Le premier était âgé de trente-cinq ans, la seconde de trente-trois. Ils avaient quatre enfants, quatre fils, suivant cet ordre de naissance, – Fritz, quinze ans, Ernest, douze ans, Jack, dix ans, François, six ans.

C'est au septième jour d'une effroyable tempête que le *Landlord*, sur lequel avait embarqué M. Zermatt, s'était écarté de sa route au milieu de cette vaste mer. Vraisemblablement poussé vers le sud, plus que ne comportait sa route, bien au delà de Batavia, son port de destination, il vint s'échouer sur un amas de roches, à deux lieues environ de la côte.

M. Zermatt était un homme intelligent et instruit, Betsie une femme courageuse et dévouée. Leurs enfants présentaient des dissemblances de caractère: Fritz, intrépide et adroit, Ernest, le plus sérieux et le plus studieux des quatre, mais un peu personnel, Jack, très irréfléchi et très espiègle, François, presque encore un baby. C’était, en somme, une famille très unie, capable de se tirer d’affaire même dans ces terribles circonstances où la mauvaise fortune venait de la précipiter. D’ailleurs un profond sentiment religieux les animait tous. Ils possédaient cette foi simple et sincère du chrétien qui ne discute pas les enseignements de l’Église, et dont aucune doctrine ne peut troubler les croyances.

Pour quelle raison M. Zermatt, ayant réalisé les quelques biens de la famille, avait-il quitté son pays natal? C’est que son intention était de se fixer dans l’une de ces possessions hollandaises d’outre-mer, alors en pleine prospérité, et si généreuses aux hommes d’action et de travail. Or, après une heureuse navigation à travers l’Atlantique et la mer des Indes, le navire sur lequel il était avec sa famille venait de se perdre. Seuls de tout l’équipage du *Landlord* et de ses passagers, sa femme, ses enfants et lui avaient survécu au naufrage. Mais il fut nécessaire d’abandonner sans retard le bâtiment engagé entre les roches de l’écueil. Sa coque déchirée, ses mâts abattus, sa quille brisée, exposé aux lames du large, le prochain coup de vent achèverait de le démolir et en disperserait les débris.

En réunissant une demi-douzaine de cuves au moyen de cordes et de planches, M. Zermatt, aidé de ses fils, parvint à former une sorte d’embarcation dans laquelle tout son monde prit place avant la fin du jour. La mer était calme, à peine gonflée d’une lente houle, et la marée montante portait au littoral. Lorsqu’il eut laissé un long promontoire sur tribord, l’appareil flottant accosta une petite anse où se déversait un ruisseau.

En même temps que les divers objets emportés du bord furent mis à terre, on dressa une tente en cet endroit qui reçut plus tard le nom de Zeltheim.

Peu à peu le campement se compléta avec la cargaison que M. Zermatt et ses enfants allèrent, les jours suivants, retirer de la cale du *Landlord,* ustensiles, mobilier, literie, viandes conservées, graines, plants, armes de chasse, fûts de vins et de liqueurs, caisses de biscuits, de fromages, de jambons, vêtements, linge, enfin tout ce que contenait ce navire de quatre cents tonneaux affrété pour les besoins d'une colonie nouvelle.

De plus, le gibier de poil et de plume pullulait sur cette côte. On voyait passer en bandes agoutis, sorte de lièvres à tête de porc, ondatras, espèce de rats musqués, buffles, canards, flamants, outardes, coqs de bruyère, pécaris, antilopes. Dans les eaux d'une baie, qui s'arrondissait au delà de la crique, abondaient saumons, esturgeons, harengs, vingt autres espèces de poissons, des mollusques, moules, huîtres, des crustacés, homards, langoustes et crabes. Sur la campagne environnante, qui produisait le manioc, les patates, poussaient cotonniers, cocotiers, mangliers, palmiers et autres essences de la zone tropicale.

Ainsi, sur cette terre dont ils ignoraient le gisement, l'existence semblait être assurée à ces naufragés.

Il convient d'ajouter qu'un certain nombre d'animaux domestiques purent être successivement débarqués à Zeltheim. – Turc, un dogue anglais, Bill, une chienne danoise, deux chèvres, six brebis, une truie pleine, un âne, une vache, toute une basse-cour, coqs, poules, dindons, oies, canards, pigeons, qui s'acclimatèrent à la surface des mares, des marais et des prairies voisines de la côte.

Les derniers voyages au navire le vidèrent entièrement de ce qu'il contenait de précieux ou d'utilisable. Plusieurs caronades de quatre furent transportées à terre pour la défense du campement, ainsi qu'une pinasse, léger bâtiment dont les pièces numérotées purent être assemblées sans trop de peine, et auquel fut donné le nom d’*Elisabeth* en l’honneur de Betsie. M. Zermatt disposait alors d’une embarcation, gréée en brigantin, jaugeant une quinzaine de tonneaux, avec poupe carrée et tillac à l’arrière. Donc toute facilité pour reconnaître les parages vers l’est ou vers l’ouest, doubler les promontoires voisins, l’un qui se détachait vers le nord en pointe aiguë, et l’autre qui s’allongeait à l’opposé de Zeltheim.

L’embouchure du rio était encadrée de hautes roches qui en rendaient l’accès assez difficile, et il serait aisé de s’y défendre, du moins contre les fauves. Mais une question se posait: M. Zermatt et les siens avaient-ils accosté le littoral d’une île ou d’un continent que baignaient les eaux de l’océan Indien?… Voici les seuls renseignements que fournissaient à cet égard les relèvements obtenus avant le naufrage par le commandant du *Landlord*:

Le bâtiment s’approchait de Batavia, lorsqu’il fut assailli par une tempête, qui dura six jours, et le rejeta hors de sa route vers le sud-est. La veille, le capitaine avait établi le point comme suit: 13° 40’ de latitude méridionale, et 114° 5’ de longitude à l’est de l’île de Fer (Canaries). Comme le vent avait constamment soufflé du nord, il était admissible que la longitude n’eût pas sensiblement varié. Or, en maintenant le méridien au cent-quatorzième degré environ, M. Zermatt parvint à déduire d’une observation de latitude, faite avec le sextant, que le *Landlord* devait avoir dérivé de six degrés à peu près vers le sud, et que la côte de Zeltheim pouvait être comprise entre le dix-neuvième et le vingtième parallèle.1

Donc, cette terre devait être, en chiffres ronds, à trois cents lieues marines dans l’ouest de l’Australie ou Nouvelle-Hollande. Aussi, bien qu’il fût en possession de la pinasse, M. Zermatt, quelque désir qu’il eût de se rapatrier, ne se serait-il jamais décidé à exposer sa famille sur cette frêle embarcation aux violences des cyclones et des tornades, si fréquents en ces parages.

Dans les conditions où ils se trouvaient, les naufragés ne pouvaient attendre de secours que de la Providence. A cette époque, les navires à voile ne traversaient guère cette portion de l’océan Indien lorsqu’ils se dirigeaient vers les colonies hollandaises. La côte occidentale de l’Australie, presque inconnue alors, d’atterrissage très difficile, n’avait d’importance ni géographique ni commerciale.

Au début, la famille se contenta de vivre sous la tente de Zeltheim, près de la rive droite du cours d’eau, qui reçut le nom de ruisseau des Chacals, en souvenir d’une attaque de ces carnassiers. Mais, entre ces hautes roches, la chaleur, que ne tempérait point la brise de mer, devenait étouffante. Aussi M. Zermatt résolut de s’établir sur la partie de la côte qui courait sud et nord, un peu au delà de la baie du Salut, à laquelle fut attribué ce nom significatif.

Lors d’une excursion faite à l’extrémité d’un bois magnifique, non loin de la mer, M. Zermatt s’arrêta devant un énorme manglier, de l’espèce des mangliers de montagne, dont les basses branches s’étalaient à une soixantaine de pieds au-dessus du sol. C’est en la disposant sur ces branches, que le père et ses fils parvinrent à dresser une plate-forme avec les planches provenant du navire. Ainsi fut bâtie une habitation aérienne, recouverte d’une toiture solide et divisée en plusieurs chambres. Elle fut appelée Falkenhorst, «l’aire des faucons». En outre, semblable à certains saules qui ne vivent que par leur écorce, ce manglier avait perdu la partie intérieure de son noyau, occupée par de nombreux essaims d’abeilles, et on put y installer un escalier tournant pour remplacer l’échelle de corde qui donnait primitivement accès à Falkenhorst.

Entre-temps, des reconnaissances s’étendirent sur une distance de trois lieues jusqu’à l’extrémité du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, baptisé de la sorte, après que M. Zermatt eut renoncé à retrouver passagers ou matelots du *Landlord*.

A l’entrée de la baie du Salut, en face de Falkenhorst, gisait un îlot d’une demi-lieue de tour, et on le dénomma îlot du Requin, parce qu’un de ces énormes squales s’y échoua le jour où le bateau de cuves ramenait à Zeltheim les animaux domestiques.

Si un requin avait permis de désigner ainsi cet îlot, ce fut une baleine qui, à quelques jours de là, donna son nom à un îlot d’un quart de lieue de circonférence, situé devant la petite baie des Flamants, au nord de Falkenhorst. La communication entre cette demeure aérienne et Zeltheim, distants l’un de l’autre d’une lieue environ, fut facilitée par la construction du pont de Famille, auquel on substitua plus tard un pont tournant, jeté sur le ruisseau des Chacals.

Après les premières semaines passées sous la tente, le beau temps n’ayant pas pris fin avant l’achèvement de Falkenhorst, M. Zermatt s’y transporta avec les animaux domestiques. Les énormes racines du manglier, recouvertes de toiles goudronnées, servirent d’étables. Aucune trace de fauves n’avait été relevée jusqu’alors.

Cependant il fallait songer à se prémunir contre le retour de la saison hivernale, sinon froide, du moins troublée par ces violentes bourrasques de la zone intertropicale, qui durent de neuf à dix semaines. Habiter Zeltheim, où serait emmagasiné le matériel du *Landlord,* c'était risquer la précieuse cargaison sauvée du naufrage. Ce campement ne pouvait donc donner complète sécurité. Les pluies devaient grossir le cours du ruisseau, le changer en torrent, et, s'il débordait, les aménagements de Zeltheim risquaient d'être emportés.

Aussi M. Zermatt s'inquiétait-il à juste raison de trouver un abri sûr, lorsque le hasard lui vint en aide dans les circonstances suivantes.

Sur la rive droite du ruisseau des Chacals, un peu en arrière de Zeltheim, s'élevait une épaisse paroi rocheuse, dans laquelle le pic, le marteau, la mine même permettraient de creuser une grotte. Fritz, Ernest et Jack se mirent à l'œuvre, mais la besogne n'avançait guère, lorsque, un matin, l'outil de Jack traversa la roche de part en part.

«J'ai percé la montagne!» s'écria le jeune garçon.

En effet, une vaste excavation existait à l'intérieur du massif. Avant d'y pénétrer, pour en purifier l'air, des herbes allumées furent projetées au dedans, puis des grenades fournies par la caisse de l'artificier du *Landlord*. A la lumière des torches, le père, la mère, leurs fils, se sentirent pris d'admiration en contemplant les stalactites qui pendaient à sa voûte, les cristallisations de sel gemme dont elle était ornée, le tapis de sable fin qui en recouvrait le sol.

La demeure fut disposée promptement. On la munit des fenêtres provenant de la galerie du navire, de tuyaux d'échappement pour la fumée des fourneaux. A gauche se succédaient la chambre de travail, les écuries, les étables; en arrière s’ouvraient les magasins, séparés par des cloisons de planches.

A droite, trois chambres: la première, destinée au père et à la mère; la deuxième qui devait servir de salle à manger; la troisième occupée par les quatre enfants, ayant leurs hamacs suspendus à la voûte. Quelques semaines encore, et cette installation ne laisserait plus rien à désirer.

Ultérieurement, d’autres établissements se fondèrent au milieu des prairies et des bois, à l’ouest de ce littoral qui s’étendait sur trois lieues entre Falkenhorst et le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé. Puis furent créés la métairie de Waldegg, près d’un petit lac nommé lac des Cygnes; puis, un peu plus à l’intérieur, la métairie de Zuckertop; puis sur une colline près du cap, la villa de Prospect-Hill; enfin, l’ermitage d’Eberfurt à l’entrée du défilé de Cluse, qui limitait à l’ouest le district de la Terre-Promise.

La Terre-Promise, ainsi s’appela cette contrée fertile que défendait, au sud et à l’ouest, une haute barrière rocheuse allant du ruisseau des Chacals au fond d’une autre baie qui devint la des Nautiles. A l’est courait la côte comprise entre Felsenheim et le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé. Au nord se développait la pleine mer. Ce district de trois lieues de largeur sur quatre lieues de longueur aurait suffi aux besoins d’une petite colonie. C’est là que la famille pourvut à l’entretien des animaux domestiques et de ceux qu’elle avait domestiqués, un onagre, deux buffles, une autruche, un chacal, un singe, un aigle. La réussirent les plantations indigènes, les arbres fruitiers dont le *Landlord* possédait un assortiment complet, orangers, pêchers, pommiers, abricotiers, châtaigniers, cerisiers, pruniers, même des ceps de vigne, qui sous cet ardent soleil allaient produire un vin supérieur au vin de palme des zones intertropicales.

Sans doute, la nature favorisa les naufragés; mais leur part de travail, d’énergie, d’intelligence, fut considérable. Elle amena la prospérité de cette terre, à laquelle, en souvenir de leur patrie, ils donnèrent le nom de Nouvelle-Suisse.

Avant la fin de la première année, il ne restait plus rien du navire échoué sur l’écueil. Une explosion, préparée par Fritz, en dispersa les derniers débris qui furent recueillis sur divers points de la côte. Il va sans dire que, préalablement, on en avait retiré tout ce qu’il contenait de précieux, les objets destinés au commerce avec les planteurs de Port-Jackson ou les sauvages de l’Océanie, les bijoux appartenant aux passagers, montres, tabatières, bagues, colliers, et, en argent et en or, des piastres pour une somme assez considérable, mais sans valeur sur cette terre perdue de l’océan Indien. En revanche, de quelle utilité allaient être les objets rapportés du *Landlord*, barres de fer, gueuses de plomb, roues de chariot prêtes à s’ajuster, pierres à aiguiser, pics, scies, pioches, pelles, socs de charrue, paquets de fils de fer, établis, étaux, outils de menuisier, de serrurier et de forgeron, moulin à bras, moulin à scie, tout un assortiment varié de céréales, mais, avoine, etc. et de graines de plantes légumineuses, dont profita largement la Nouvelle-Suisse!

Pour résumer, il y a lieu de noter que cette première saison pluvieuse, la famille la passa dans des conditions favorables. Tout en habitant la grotte, on s’occupait de l’aménager. Les conseils de la mère furent écoutés, le ménage s’organisa sous sa direction. Les meubles du navire, sièges, armoires, consoles, divans, lits, se répartirent entre les chambres de cette habitation, et comme ce n’était plus une tente, on substitua au nom de Zeltheim celui de Felsenheim, – la maison des Roches.

Plusieurs années s’écoulèrent. Aucun bâtiment n’avait paru sur ces lointains parages. Rien, cependant, n’avait été négligé pour signaler la situation des survivants du *Landlord*. D’une batterie établie sur l’îlot du Requin, comprenant deux petites caronades de quatre, et surmontée d’un pavillon, Fritz et Jack tiraient de temps en temps des coups de canon, auxquels ne répondit jamais une détonation du large.

Du reste, il ne semblait pas que la Nouvelle-Suisse fût habitée dans les parties voisines du district. Elle devait être assez étendue, et un jour, en poussant une reconnaissance vers le sud jusqu’à la barrière rocheuse que traversait le défilé de Cluse, M. Zermatt et ses fils avaient atteint le revers d’une vallée verdoyante, la vallée de Grünthal. De là se développait aux regards un large horizon fermé par une chaîne de montagnes dont la distance pouvait être évaluée à une dizaine de lieues. Des tribus sauvages parcouraient-elles cette contrée inconnue, c’était une éventualité qui n’était pas sans causer une sérieuse inquiétude. Dans tous les cas, on n’en vit jamais aux environs de la Terre-Promise. Les seuls dangers vinrent de l’attaque de quelques fauves redoutables, en dehors du district, ours, tigres, lions, serpents, – entre autres un boa d’énorme taille, dont l’âne fut la victime, qui s’était introduit jusqu’aux environs de Felsenheim.

Voici les productions indigènes, desquelles M. Zermatt tira bon profit, car il possédait des connaissances très complètes en histoire naturelle, botanique et géologie. Un arbre, ressemblant au figuier sauvage dont l’écorce crevassée distillait une résine, donna le caoutchouc, qui permit de fabriquer, entre autres objets, des bottes imperméables. Sur certains arbustes, réunis en fourrés, du genre «myrica cerifera», on récolta une sorte de cire qui fut employée à la confection de bougies. Les noix du cocotier, sans parler de la savoureuse amande qu’elles contenaient, se changèrent en coupes et en tasses, capables de résister à tous les chocs. Du chou palmiste, on obtint une boisson rafraîchissante, connue sous le nom de vin de palme; des fèves du cacao, un chocolat assez amer, du sagoutier une moelle qui, arrosée et pétrie, produisit une farine très nourrissante que Betsie utilisa fréquemment dans ses préparations culinaires. Jamais on ne manqua de matière sucrée, grâce aux essaims d’abeilles, qui produisaient le miel en abondance. On eut du lin avec les feuilles lancéolées du «phormium tenax», dont le cardage et le filage, cependant, ne s’effectuèrent pas sans quelque difficulté. On eut du plâtre en faisant rougir et en pulvérisant des débris de roche de la paroi même de Felsenheim. On eut du coton avec les capsules pleines à crever qu’emplissait cette précieuse substance. On eut, avec la fine poussière d’une nouvelle grotte, de la terre à foulon, qui servit à fabriquer du savon. On eut de ces pommes-cannelles, désignées sous le nom de cachiment, d’une succulence merveilleuse. On eut un condiment où se mélangeaient les parfums de la muscade et du clou de girofle, avec l’écorce du «ravendsara». On eut une sorte de verre à vitre avec un mica traversé de filaments d’amiante, découvert dans une caverne du voisinage. On eut de la fourrure avec les rats-castors et les lapins angoras. On eut de la gomme d’euphorbe propre à différents usages médicinaux, de la terre à porcelaine, de l’hydromel comme boisson rafraîchissante, d’excellentes confitures d’algues marines recueillies sur l’îlot de la Baleine, que fit Mme Zermatt à l’imitation de celles du Cap.

Il faut ajouter à ces richesses les ressources que la faune de la Nouvelle-Suisse devait offrir à des chasseurs audacieux. Parmi les fauves contre lesquels il y eut, quoique rarement, l’occasion de se défendre, on comptait le tapir, le lion, l’ours, le chacal, le chat-tigre, le tigre, le crocodile, la panthère, l’éléphant et aussi les singes dont les déprédations exigèrent un massacre général. A mentionner, parmi les quadrupèdes – et quelques-uns purent être domestiqués – l’onagre, le buffle, et, au nombre des volatiles, un aigle qui devint l’oiseau de chasse de Fritz, une autruche dont Jack fit sa monture favorite.

Quant au gibier de poil et de plume, il abondait dans les bois de Waldegg et de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt. Le ruisseau des Chacals fournissait d’excellentes écrevisses. Entre les roches de la grève, foisonnaient les mollusques et les crustacés. Enfin la mer fourmillait de harengs, d’esturgeons, de saumons et autres poissons d’espèces diverses.

Quant aux explorations, pendant un séjour si prolongé, elles ne dépassèrent jamais la partie comprise entre la baie des Nautiles et la baie du Salut. Mais, au delà du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, la côte allait être reconnue sur une dizaine de lieues environ. Sans compter la pinasse, M. Zermatt possédait maintenant une chaloupe, qui fut construite sous sa direction. En outre, à la demande de Fritz, on fabriqua un de ces légers canots à la mode groënlandaise, connus sous le nom de kaïak, en utilisant pour la membrure les fanons d’une baleine qui s’était échouée à l’entrée de la baie des Flamants, et des peaux de chien de mer pour la coque. Ce canot portatif, imperméable, grâce à son calfeutrage de goudron et de mousse, était muni de deux ouvertures où deux pagayeurs pouvaient prendre place; la seconde devait être hermétiquement fermée lorsque la première était seule occupée. Après avoir été lancé dans le courant du ruisseau des Chacals qui le porta hors de la baie du Salut, il se conduisit merveilleusement.

Dix ans s’écoulèrent sans incidents graves. M. Zermatt, alors âgé de quarante-cinq ans, jouissait d’une santé inaltérable, d’une endurance morale et physique que les éventualités d’une existence si peu ordinaire n’avaient fait qu’accroître. Betsie, énergique mère de quatre fils, entrait dans sa quarante-troisième année. Ni son corps ni son cœur n’avaient faibli, ni son amour pour son époux, ni sa tendresse pour ses enfants.

Fritz, vingt-cinq ans, d’une vigueur, d’une souplesse, d’une adresse remarquables, physionomie franche, figure ouverte, regard d’une acuité prodigieuse, avait beaucoup gagné sous le rapport du caractère.

Ernest, plus sérieux que ne le comportaient ses vingt-deux ans, plus entraîné aux exercices de l’esprit qu’aux exercices du corps, contrastait avec Fritz, et s’était fort instruit en puisant à la bibliothèque rapportée du *Landlord*.

Jack pétillait sur ses vingt ans. C’était la vivacité, le mouvement perpétuel, aventureux autant que Fritz, passionné pour la chasse autant que lui.

Bien que le petit François fût devenu un grand garçon de seize ans, sa mère le caressait encore comme s’il en avait dix.

L’existence de cette famille était donc aussi heureuse que possible, et quelquefois Mme Zermatt disait à son mari:

«Ah! mon ami, ne serait-ce pas le véritable bonheur, si nous devions toujours vivre avec nos enfants, si, dans cette solitude, nous n’étions pas condamnés à disparaître l’un après l’autre, laissant aux survivants tristesse et abandon!… Oui! je bénirais le ciel qui nous a fait ce paradis sur la terre!… Mais, hélas! un jour viendra où nos yeux se fermeront…»

Telle était, telle avait toujours été la plus grave préoccupation de Betsie. Bien souvent, M. Zermatt et elle échangeaient leurs trop justes appréhensions à ce sujet. Or, cette année-là, se produisit un événement inattendu qui allait modifier leur situation présente, sinon à venir.

Le 9 avril, vers sept heures du matin, lorsque M. Zermatt sortit de sa demeure avec Ernest, Jack et François, il chercha vainement son fils aîné qu’il croyait occupé à quelques travaux du dehors.

Fritz avait l’habitude de fréquentes absences, et cela n’était pas pour inquiéter son père ni sa mère, bien que celle-ci éprouvât toujours quelque crainte lorsque son fils s’en allait au large de la baie du Salut.

Il n’était pas douteux que le hardi jeune homme ne fût en mer, puisque le kaïak n’était plus sous son abri.

Comme l’après-midi s’avançait, M. Zermatt, Ernest et Jack se rendirent avec la chaloupe à l’îlot du Requin, pour y guetter le retour de Fritz. Au besoin, afin de ne pas laisser Betsie dans l’incertitude, son mari devait tirer un coup de canon s’il tardait à revenir.

Cela ne fut pas nécessaire. A peine ses deux fils et lui avaient-ils mis le pied sur l’îlot que Fritz doublait le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé. Dès qu’ils l’aperçurent, M. Zermatt, Ernest et Jack se rembarquant, accostèrent l’anse de Felsenheim à l’instant où Fritz sautait sur la plage.

Fritz dut alors faire le récit de ce voyage qui avait duré une vingtaine d’heures. Depuis quelque temps il méditait d’effectuer la reconnaissance de la côte septentrionale. Aussi, ce matin-là, accompagné de son aigle Blitz, avait-il remis le kaïak à l’eau. Il emportait des provisions de bouche, une hache, un harpon, une gaffe, des filets, un fusil, une paire de pistolets, une gibecière, une gourde d’hydromel. Le vent de terre l’ayant rapidement conduit au-delà du cap en profitant du reflux, il avait suivi le littoral qui obliquait un peu vers le sud-ouest.

En arrière du cap, à la suite d’un énorme amas de roches entassées dans un effrayant désordre dû à quelque violente convulsion géologique, se creusait une baie spacieuse, terminée à l’opposé par un promontoire taillé à pic. Cette baie servait de refuge à toutes sortes d’oiseaux de mer qui remplissaient l’espace de leurs cris. Sur ses grèves ronflaient au soleil de volumineux amphibies, loups marins, phoques, walruss et autres, tandis que voguaient à sa surface des myriades d’élégants nautiles.

Fritz ne se souciait pas d’avoir affaire à ces redoutables mammifères, encore moins d’affronter leurs attaques dans sa faible embarcation. Aussi, passant à l’ouvert de la baie, continua-t-il à naviguer vers l’ouest.

Après avoir doublé une pointe de forme singulière, et à laquelle il donna le nom de cap Camus, Fritz s’engagea sous une arche naturelle, dont le ressac battait les piliers à leur base. Là étaient réunies des milliers d’hirondelles, dont les nids étaient accrochés ou plutôt plaqués aux moindres plis des parois et de la voûte. Fritz détacha plusieurs de ces nids d’une structure bizarre et les mit dans un sac.

«Ces nids d’hirondelles, dit M. Zermatt, en interrompant le récit de son fils, ont une grande valeur sur les marchés du Céleste-Empire.»

En dehors de l’arche, Fritz trouva une seconde baie comprise entre deux caps situés à une lieue et demie l’un de l’autre. Réunis pour ainsi dire par un semis d’écueils, ils ne laissaient qu’une étroite ouverture qui n’aurait pas livré passage à un navire de trois à quatre cents tonneaux.

En arrière de la baie s’étendaient à perte de vue des savanes que des cours d’eau arrosaient de leurs nappes claires, des bois, des marais, toute une suite de paysages très variés d’aspect. Quant à la baie, elle eût offert à des exploitants de l’Asie, de l’Amérique ou de l’Europe d’inépuisables trésors en huîtres perlières, dont Fritz rapportait des échantillons magnifiques.

Lorsqu’il eut en partie contourné la baie à l’intérieur, puis franchi l’embouchure d’une rivière verdoyante d’herbes aquatiques, le kaïak atteignit le promontoire à l’opposé de l’arche.

Fritz ne crut pas devoir pousser plus loin son excursion. L’heure avançant, il reprit la route à l’est, en se dirigeant vers le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, et il le doubla avant que le canon de l’îlot du Requin se fût fait entendre.

Voilà ce que le jeune homme raconta de ce voyage qui avait amené la découverte de la baie des Perles. Puis, lorsqu’il fut seul avec M. Zermatt, celui-ci eut grand’peine à cacher sa surprise quand son fils lui confia ce qui suit:

Parmi les nombreux oiseaux qui tourbillonnaient au-dessus du promontoire, hirondelles de mer, mouettes, frégates, se montraient aussi plusieurs couples d’albatros dont l’un tomba frappé d’un coup de gaffe.

Mais, alors qu’il tenait l’oiseau sur ses genoux, Fritz vit un morceau de forte toile qui enveloppait l’une de ses pattes, et sur lequel il lut ces lignes écrites en anglais très lisiblement:

«Qui que vous soyez à qui Dieu enverra ce message d’une infortunée, mettez-vous à la recherche d’une île volcanique que vous reconnaîtrez à la flamme qui s’échappe de l’un de ses cratères. Sauvez la malheureuse abandonnée de la Roche-Fumante!»

Ainsi, dans les parages de la Nouvelle-Suisse, depuis plusieurs années peut-être, une infortunée, femme ou fille, vivait sur un îlot, n'ayant aucune de ces ressources que le *Landlord* avait procurées à la famille naufragée!…

«Et qu'as-tu fait?… demanda M. Zermatt.

— La seule chose qu'il y eût à faire, répondit Fritz. J'essayai de ranimer l'albatros, qui était seulement étourdi par le coup de gaffe, et j'y parvins en lui versant un peu d'hydromel dans le bec. Alors, sur un morceau de mon mouchoir, j'écrivis avec le sang d'une loutre ces mots en anglais: „N'ayez confiance qu'en Dieu!… Son secours est peut-être proche." Puis, je ficelai ce morceau à la patte de l'albatros, ne doutant pas que cet oiseau fût apprivoisé et qu'il reprendrait le chemin de la Roche-Fumante en emportant mon message. Dès que je lui eus rendu la liberté, l'albatros s'envola vers le couchant d'une si rapide allure que je le perdis bientôt de vue, et le suivre m'eût été impossible.»

M. Zermatt était sous l'empire d'un trouble profond… Que faire pour sauver cette infortunée?… Où était située la Roche-Fumante?… Dans le voisinage de la Nouvelle-Suisse ou à des centaines de lieues vers l'ouest!… Les albatros, puissants et infatigables volateurs, peuvent traverser de longs espaces… Celui-ci ne venait-il pas de parages très éloignés que la pinasse ne saurait atteindre?…

Fritz fut très approuvé par son père de n'avoir confié qu'à lui seul ce secret, dont la révélation eût inutilement affecté Mme Zermatt et ses frères. A quoi eût servi de leur donner cette émotion, de leur causer cette peine?… Et, d'ailleurs, la naufragée de la Roche-Fumante existait-elle encore?… Le billet ne portait pas de date… Plusieurs années ne s'étaient-elles pas écoulées depuis qu'il avait été attaché à la patte de l'albatros?…

Le secret fut gardé, et, par malheur, il était trop évident qu’aucune tentative ne pouvait être faite pour retrouver l’Anglaise sur son îlot…

Cependant M. Zermatt avait pris la résolution d’aller reconnaître la baie des Perles et l’importance des bancs qu’elle renfermait. Betsie consentit, non sans quelque ennui, à rester avec François dans l’habitation de Felsenheim. Fritz, Ernest et Jack devaient, en effet, accompagner leur père.

Donc, le surlendemain 11 avril, la chaloupe quitta la petite anse du ruisseau des Chacals, dont le courant l’emporta rapidement vers le nord. Plusieurs des animaux domestiques étaient du voyage, le singe Knipp II, le chacal de Jack, la chienne Bill, à laquelle son âge aurait dû interdire les fatigues d’une expédition de ce genre, enfin Braun et Falb, les deux chiens dans toute leur vigueur.

Fritz devançait la chaloupe dans son kaïak, et, ayant contourné le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, il prit la direction de l’ouest, au milieu de ces roches entre lesquelles abondaient les walruss et autres amphibies de ce littoral.

Ce ne furent pourtant pas ces animaux qui attirèrent plus particulièrement l’attention de M. Zermatt, mais bien ces innombrables nautiles, déjà observés par Fritz. La baie était couverte de ces gracieux céphalopodes, leurs petites voiles tendues à la brise, toute une flottille de fleurs mouvantes.

Après un parcours de trois lieues environ depuis le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, Fritz signala vers l’extrémité de la baie des Nautiles ce cap Camus qui figurait assez exactement un nez de cette forme. Une lieue et demie plus loin s’arrondissait l’arche au delà de laquelle s’étendait la baie des Perles.

En traversant ce portique, Ernest et Jack recueillirent une certaine quantité de nids de salanganes, que ces oiseaux défendirent avec un acharnement très légitime, on en conviendra.

Lorsque la chaloupe eut franchi l’étroite passe ménagée entre l’arche et le semis de roches, la spacieuse baie, d’une circonférence de sept à huit lieues, apparut alors dans toute son étendue.

Quel plaisir ce fut de naviguer à la surface de cette magnifique nappe d’eau, de laquelle émergeaient trois ou quatre îlots boisés, encadrée de prairies verdoyantes, de massifs épais, de collines pittoresques. Le littoral, à l’ouest, livrait passage au courant d’une jolie rivière dont le lit se perdait sous les arbres.

La chaloupe accosta une petite crique, à proximité du banc d’huîtres perlières. Comme le soir approchait, M. Zermatt organisa un campement sur le bord du cours d’eau. Un foyer fut allumé, sous la cendre duquel on fit cuire quelques œufs qui, avec le pemmican, les patates, le biscuit de maïs, formèrent le menu. Puis, par prudence, chacun vint retrouver sa place dans la chaloupe, laissant à Braun et Falb le soin de défendre le campement contre les chacals dont les hurlements se faisaient entendre le long de la rivière.

Trois jours, du 12 au 14, furent employés à la pêche des huîtres, toutes agrémentées de la précieuse perle arrondie sous leur collerette nacrée. Le soir venu, Fritz et Jack allaient chasser canards et perdrix dans un petit bois sur la rive droite du cours d’eau. Il y eut quelques précautions à prendre, et même on dut faire bonne garde. Des sangliers fréquentaient ce bois, sans parler d’animaux plus redoutables.

En effet, le soir du 14, un lion et une lionne de forte taille se présentèrent, la gueule rugissante, la queue leur battant les flancs avec fureur. Après que le lion eut été frappé au cœur par une balle de Fritz, la lionne tomba à son tour, non sans avoir brisé d’un coup de griffe le crâne de cette pauvre vieille Bill, – ce qui causa un vif chagrin à son maître.

Ainsi donc, certains fauves habitaient cette partie de la Nouvelle-Suisse, au sud et à l’ouest de la baie des Perles, en dehors du district de la Terre-Promise. Que jusqu’ici aucun de ces animaux n’en eût forcé l’entrée par le défilé de Cluse, c’était une heureuse chance. Mais M. Zermatt forma le projet d’obstruer autant que possible ce défilé qui coupait le rempart rocheux.

En attendant, et d’une manière générale, recommandation fut faite, surtout à Fritz et à Jack que leur passion cynégétique entraînait parfois en d’imprudentes excursions, de se défier des mauvaises rencontres.

Cette journée fut consacrée à vider les huîtres entassées sur la grève, et comme cette quantité de mollusques commençait à dégager des miasmes peu salubres, M. Zermatt et ses trois fils décidèrent de partir le lendemain dès le lever du jour. Il convenait de retourner à Felsenheim, car Mme Zermatt devait être inquiète. La chaloupe repartit, précédée du kaïak. Toutefois, arrivé à la passe de l’arche, après avoir remis un billet à son père, Fritz s’éloigna dans la direction de l’ouest. Comment M. Zermatt aurait-il pu douter qu’il allait à la découverte de la Roche-Fumante?…

CHAPITRE V

Retour à Felsenheim. – Voyage de l'Elisabeth à la baie des Perles.

— *Un sauvage. – Une créature humaine. – Jenny Montrose. – Naufrage de la Dorcas. – Deux ans sur la Roche-Fumante. – Le récit de Fritz.*

On se représente aisément quelles inquiétudes éprouva M. Zermatt en songeant aux dangers qu'aurait à courir son fils. Comme il n'aurait pu ni l'arrêter ni le rejoindre, la chaloupe dut continuer sa route vers le cap de l'Espoir-Trompé.

De retour à Felsenheim, M. Zermatt ne voulut encore rien dire à ses enfants, ni même à sa femme, de l'excursion entreprise par Fritz. C'eût été causer d'inutiles appréhensions et créer sans doute de vaines espérances. Il ne parla que d'une reconnaissance à effectuer vers le côté ouest du littoral. Cependant, au bout de trois jours, l'absent n'ayant pas reparu, M. Zermatt, très anxieux, résolut d'aller à sa recherche.

Le 20 avril, dès l'aube, l'*Elisabeth* appareilla. Approvisionnée en vue de ce voyage, elle avait à bord le père, la mère et leurs trois fils.

On n'aurait pu souhaiter un vent plus favorable. Il soufflait du sud-est une jolie brise qui permettait de naviguer sous la terre. Dans l'après-midi, la pinasse contourna les roches de l'arche et fit son entrée dans la baie des Perles.

M. Zermatt vint jeter l'ancre près du banc d'huîtres, à l'embouchure de la rivière, où se voyaient les restes du dernier campement. Tous se préparaient à débarquer, lorsque ces mots s’échappèrent de la bouche d’Ernest:

«Un sauvage… un sauvage!»

Et, en effet, vers l’ouest de la baie, entre les îlots boisés, manœuvrait un canot, qui semblait se défier de la pinasse.

Jamais, jusqu’alors, il n’y avait eu lieu de croire que la Nouvelle-Suisse fût habitée. Aussi, en prévision d’une attaque possible, l’*Elisabeth* se mit-elle sur la défensive, caronades chargées, fusils prêts à faire feu. Mais, dès que le sauvage se fut rapproché de quelques encablures:

«C’est Fritz!» s’écria Jack.

C’était lui, seul dans son kaïak. N’ayant pas reconnu de loin la pinasse qu’il ne pouvait s’attendre à rencontrer dans ces parages, il s’avançait prudemment, ayant même eu la précaution de se noircir la figure et les mains.

Puis, lorsqu’il eut rejoint la famille, embrassé sa mère et ses frères, non sans leur avoir charbonné quelque peu les joues, il emmena son père à part:

«J’ai réussi… dit-il.

— Quoi… l’Anglaise de la Roche-Fumante?…

— Elle est là… près d’ici… sur un îlot de la baie des Perles», répondit Fritz…

Sans rien dire ni à sa femme ni à ses enfants, M. Zermatt dirigea la pinasse vers l’îlot indiqué par Fritz près du littoral à l’ouest de la baie. En l’approchant, on put apercevoir un petit bois de palmiers voisin de la grève, et, dans ce bois, une hutte construite à la mode hottentote.

Tous débarquèrent, et Fritz tira un coup de pistolet en l’air. On vit alors un jeune homme descendre d’un arbre entre les branches duquel il était abrité.

Le mystère ne tarda pas à être révélé. Cette créature humaine, – la première que les naufragés du *Landlord* eussent rencontrée depuis dix ans, – n’était pas un jeune homme. C’était une jeune fille âgée de vingt ans, revêtue d’un costume d’aspirant de marine. C’était Jenny Montrose, la jeune Anglaise de la Roche-Fumante.

Mme Zermatt, Ernest, Jack et François apprirent alors dans quelles conditions Fritz avait connu la situation de cette abandonnée sur un îlot volcanique au large de la baie des Perles, et répondu par un billet que la jeune fille ne devait jamais recevoir, car l’albatros ne revint pas à la Roche-Fumante.

Comment peindre l’accueil qui fut fait à Jenny Montrose et avec quelle tendresse Mme Zermatt la pressa dans ses bras! En attendant qu’elle racontât son histoire, Jenny savait déjà par Fritz celle de la Nouvelle-Suisse et des naufragés du *Landlord*.

La pinasse quitta aussitôt la baie des Perles avec toute la famille accrue de la jeune Anglaise. De part et d’autre, on parlait assez l’anglais et l’allemand pour se comprendre. Que de marques d’affection furent prodiguées pendant ce voyage de retour!… C’était un père, une mère, des frères, que venait de retrouver Jenny!.. C’était une fille que M. et Mme Zermatt, c’était une sœur que Fritz, Ernest, Jack et François ramenaient dans leur chère demeure de Felsenheim!

Il va sans dire que l'*Elisabeth* emportait les quelques ustensiles fabriqués par Jenny pendant son séjour sur la Roche-Fumante. N'était-il pas naturel que la pauvre abandonnée tînt à ces objets qui lui rappelaient tant de souvenirs?…

Et puis, il y avait aussi deux êtres vivants, deux compagnons fidèles dont la jeune fille n'aurait pu se séparer, – un cormoran dressé pour la pêche, un chacal apprivoisé qui ferait certainement bon ménage avec celui de Jack.

Dès son départ, l'*Elisabeth* fut favorisée par une fraîche brise qui permit d'utiliser toute sa voilure. Le temps était si sûr que M. Zermatt ne put résister au désir de relâcher aux divers établissements de la Terre-Promise, à mesure qu'ils se présentaient, lorsque la pinasse eut tourné le cap de l'Espoir-Trompé.

Et, en premier lieu, ce fut la villa de Prospect-Hill, située sur cette verdoyante colline, d'où la vue s'étendait jusqu'à Falkenhorst. On y passa la nuit, et il y avait longtemps que Jenny ne s'était reposée dans un si paisible sommeil.

Cependant Fritz et François étaient partis de très grand matin avec le kaïak, afin de tout préparer à Felsenheim pour la réception de la jeune Anglaise. Après eux, la pinasse reprit la mer et relâcha d'abord à l'îlot de la Baleine, où pullulait une colonie de lapins. M. Zermatt voulut que Jenny devînt la propriétaire de cet îlot – présent qui fut reçu avec reconnaissance.

De ce point, les passagers de l'*Elisabeth* auraient pu faire la route par terre, visiter la métairie de Waldegg et la demeure aérienne de Falkenhorst. Mais M. et Mme Zermatt désiraient laisser à Fritz le plaisir d'y conduire leur nouvelle compagne.

La pinasse continua à suivre les contours du littoral jusqu’à l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals. Lorsqu’elle atteignit l’ouvert de la baie du Salut, elle fut accueillie par une salve de trois coups de canon de la batterie de l’îlot du Requin. En même temps, Fritz et François hissaient le pavillon blanc et rouge en l’honneur de la jeune fille.

Lorsque cette salve eut été rendue par les deux petites pièces de la pinasse, M. Zermatt vint accoster au moment où le kaïak débarquait Fritz et François. Puis, la famille au grand complet remonta la grève pour gagner Felsenheim.

A quel sentiment d’admiration s’abandonna Jenny, en pénétrant dans cette galerie fraîche et verdoyante, en voyant l’aménagement et l’ameublement des diverses chambres! Et lorsqu’elle aperçut la table de la salle à manger préparée par les soins de Fritz et de son frère, les tasses de bambou, les assiettes de noix de coco, les coupes d’œufs d’autruche, auprès des ustensiles d’origine européenne provenant du *Landlord*!

Le dîner se composait de poisson frais, d’un rôti de volaille, d’un jambon de pécari, de fruits de diverses espèces, que l’hydromel et le vin des Canaries arrosèrent agréablement.

A Jenny Montrose fut réservée la place d’honneur, entre M. et Mme Zermatt. Et de nouvelles larmes coulèrent de ses yeux, larmes d’attendrissement et de joie, quand sur une banderole enguirlandée de fleurs, suspendue au-dessus de la table, elle lut ces mots:

«Vive Jenny Montrose!… Bénie soit son arrivée dans le domaine du Robinson Suisse!»

Alors elle raconta son histoire:

Jenny était la fille unique du major William Montrose, officier de l’armée des Indes, où, toute jeune encore, enfant même, elle avait suivi son père de garnison en garnison. Privée de sa mère dès l’âge de sept ans, elle fut élevée, avec une paternelle sollicitude, de manière à pouvoir soutenir les luttes de la vie, si son dernier soutien venait à lui manquer. Instruite de tout ce que doit savoir une jeune fille, grande fut la part des exercices corporels dans son éducation, – principalement l’équitation et la chasse, pour lesquelles elle montrait des dispositions peu communes à son sexe.

Au milieu de l’année 1812, le major Montrose, nommé colonel, reçut l’ordre de revenir en Europe, à bord d’un navire de guerre, chargé de rapatrier des vétérans de l’armée indoanglaise. Appelé à commander un régiment dans une expédition lointaine, toutes les probabilités étaient qu’il ne rentrerait ensuite qu’à l’âge de sa retraite. De là, nécessité pour sa fille, alors âgée de dix-sept ans, de se rendre dans son pays natal, près d’une tante, sœur du colonel, qui habitait Londres. Là elle attendrait le retour de son père, qui se reposerait enfin des fatigues d’une vie toute consacrée au service des armes.

Jenny ne pouvant embarquer sur un bâtiment affecté au transport des troupes, le colonel Montrose la confia, sous la garde d’une femme de chambre, à l’un de ses amis, le capitaine Greenfield, commandant la *Dorcas*. Ce navire partit quelques jours avant celui qui devait emmener le colonel.

Mauvaise traversée dès le début: au sortir du golfe du Bengale, tempêtes qui se déchaînèrent avec une extrême violence; puis, poursuite d’une frégate française, qui obligea la *Dorcas* à chercher refuge dans le port de Batavia.

Lorsque l’ennemi eut quitté ces parages, la *Dorcas* remit à la voile et se dirigea vers le cap de Bonne-Espérance. La navigation fut très contrariée à cette époque des gros temps. Les vents défavorables se maintinrent avec une persistance extraordinaire. La *Dorcas* fut déviée de sa route par une tourmente venue du sud-ouest. De toute une semaine, le capitaine Greenfield ne put relever sa position. Bref, il n’aurait su dire en quels parages de l’océan Indien l’avait rejeté la tempête, lorsque son navire, pendant la nuit, se heurta contre un écueil.

Une côte inconnue s’élevait à quelque distance, et tout d’abord, l’équipage, se jetant dans la première chaloupe, essaya de la gagner. Jenny Montrose, sa femme de chambre, quelques passagers descendirent dans la seconde. Déjà le navire se disloquait, et il fallait l’abandonner au plus vite.

Une demi-heure après, la seconde chaloupe chavirait sous un coup de mer, alors que la première disparaissait au milieu des ténèbres.

Quand Jenny reprit connaissance, elle se trouvait sur une grève où la houle l’avait déposée, et probablement seule survivante du naufrage de la *Dorcas*.

Combien de temps s’était écoulé depuis que la chaloupe avait été engloutie?… La jeune fille n’aurait pu le dire. Ce fut miracle qu’elle eût conservé assez de force pour se traîner à l’intérieur d’une grotte où, après avoir mangé quelques œufs, le sommeil lui procura un peu de repos.

Elle se releva enfin, et fit sécher au soleil les vêtements d’homme qu’elle avait revêtus au moment du naufrage pour être plus libre de ses mouvements, et dont la poche contenait un briquet de métal qui lui servit à faire du feu.

Une excursion le long des grèves de l’îlot ne permit pas à Jenny d’apercevoir un seul de ses compagnons. Rien que des débris du navire, quelques pièces de bois qu’elle utilisa pour l’entretien de son foyer.

Eh bien, telle était l’énergie physique et morale de cette jeune fille, la puissance de son éducation presque virile, que le désespoir n’eut point prise sur son âme. Elle organisa son installation de la grotte. Quelques clous, arrachés aux épaves de la *Dorcas*, furent ses seuls outils. Très adroite de ses mains, possédant un esprit inventif, elle sut fabriquer divers objets de première nécessité. Elle parvint à faire un arc, à tailler des flèches, pour chasser le gibier de poil et de plume assez abondant sur cette côte, et pourvoir à son alimentation quotidienne. Il y eut même de ces animaux qu’elle put apprivoiser, tels un chacal et un cormoran, qui ne la quittèrent plus.

Au centre de la petite île sur laquelle la mer avait jeté la naufragée, se dressait une montagne volcanique, dont le cratère vomissait des vapeurs et des flammes. Après l’avoir gravie jusqu’à son sommet, élevé d’une centaine de toises au-dessus du niveau de la mer, Jenny n’entrevit aucune terre à l’horizon.

La Roche-Fumante, d’une circonférence de deux lieues environ, ne présentait vers l’est qu’une étroite vallée où coulait un petit ruisseau. Des arbres de différentes espèces, abrités contre les mauvais vents, la recouvraient de leurs épaisses ramures. Et ce fut sur l’un de ces mangliers que Jenny établit sa demeure, ainsi que l’avait fait la famille Zermatt pour son habitation de Falkenhorst.

Enfin, la chasse aux environs de la vallée, la pêche dans le ruisseau et entre les roches au moyen d’hameçons fabriqués avec des clous, les gousses et les baies comestibles provenant de certains arbustes, et aussi plusieurs caisses de conserves et fûts de vin jetés sur le littoral pendant les deux ou trois jours qui suivirent le naufrage, permirent à la jeune Anglaise d’ajouter aux racines et aux coquillages qui l’avaient d’abord nourrie.

Combien de mois Jenny Montrose vécut-elle ainsi sur la Roche-Fumante jusqu'à l'heure de sa délivrance?…

Au début, elle n'avait pas eu la pensée de tenir compte du temps, ni les premiers jours, ni les premières semaines. Néanmoins, en se remémorant certains faits, en rapprochant certaines dates, elle put établir par un calcul assez approximatif que depuis la perte de la *Dorcas* il s'était écoulé deux ans et demi. Telle était dans sa pensée la durée de son séjour, et elle ne se trompait pas.

Pendant tant de semaines, les unes de la saison pluvieuse, les autres de la saison chaude, pas un jour ne se passa sans que la jeune fille interrogeât l'horizon. Jamais une voile ne se détacha sur le fond du ciel! Du plus haut point de l'île, par ciel clair, il lui sembla pourtant deux ou trois fois apercevoir une terre en direction de l'est… Mais cette distance, comment la franchir?… Cette terre, quelle était-elle?…

A cette latitude de la zone intertropicale, si le froid n'était pas redoutable, Jenny eut beaucoup à souffrir de la saison pluvieuse. Réfugiée alors au fond de la grotte, d'où elle ne pouvait sortir ni pour chasser, ni pour pêcher, il lui fallait pourvoir à sa nourriture. Heureusement, rien qu'avec les œufs, très abondants entre les rochers, les coquillages entassés au pied de la grotte, les fruits conservés pour cette période, son existence fut assurée.

Bref, plus de deux ans s'étaient écoulés, lorsque l'idée lui vint, – une inspiration d'en haut, – d'attacher à la patte d'un albatros dont elle s'était emparée un billet qui faisait connaître son abandon sur la Roche-Fumante. Quant à en désigner le gisement, elle ne le pouvait. Dès qu'elle lui eut rendu la liberté, l'oiseau prit son vol vers le nord-est, et quelle apparence qu'il dût jamais revenir à la Roche-Fumante?…

Plusieurs jours se passèrent sans qu’il eût reparu. Le faible espoir que la jeune fille avait mis dans cette tentative s’évanouit peu à peu. Pourtant elle ne voulut pas désespérer. Puisque le secours qu’elle attendait n’était pas venu de cette façon, il viendrait d’une autre.

Tel fut le récit détaillé que Jenny fit à la famille Zermatt. Plus d’une fois des pleurs coulèrent, car il était impossible de l’entendre sans être ému. Et que de baisers Betsie prodigua à sa nouvelle fille pour sécher ses larmes!

Restait à apprendre dans quelles conditions Fritz avait découvert la Roche-Fumante.

On le sait, lorsque la chaloupe quitta la baie des Perles, Fritz, qui la précédait dans son kaïak, prévint son père, par un billet, de son intention d’aller à la recherche de la jeune Anglaise. Aussi, après avoir dépassé l’arche, au lieu de suivre la côte à l’est, il s’éloigna dans le sens opposé.

Le littoral était semé de récifs et bordé de roches énormes. Au delà se massaient des arbres aussi beaux que ceux de Waldegg ou d’Eberfurt. De nombreux cours d’eau venaient se déverser au fond des petites baies. Cette côte du nord-ouest ne ressemblait pas à celle qui se déroulait entre la baie du Salut et la baie des Nautiles.

La chaleur, très forte pendant cette première journée, obligea Fritz à débarquer pour trouver un peu d’ombre. Il ne se départit pas de certaines précautions, car plusieurs hippopotames, qui se tenaient à l’embouchure des rivières, eussent facilement mis le kaïak en pièces.

Dès qu’il eut accosté la lisière d’un bois épais, Fritz traîna sa légère embarcation au pied d’un arbre. Puis, la fatigue aidant, il s’abandonna au sommeil.

Le lendemain, la navigation fut continuée jusqu’à midi. A cette relâche, Fritz eut à repousser l’attaque d’un tigre qu’il blessa au flanc, tandis que son aigle cherchait à crever les yeux du fauve. Deux coups de pistolet retendirent mort.

Mais quel chagrin pour Fritz! L’aigle, éventré d’un coup de griffe, ne respirait plus! Il fallut enterrer le pauvre Blitz dans le sable, et son maître se rembarqua, inconsolable d’avoir perdu ce fidèle compagnon de chasse.

Le deuxième jour avait été employé à suivre les contours du littoral. Aucune vapeur du large n’indiquait la présence de la Roche-Fumante. La mer étant belle, Fritz résolut de s’éloigner, afin de voir si quelque fumée ne pointait pas au-dessus de l’horizon du sud-ouest. Il lança donc son kaïak dans cette direction. Sa voile se gonflait d’une jolie brise de terre. Après deux heures de navigation, il s’apprêtait à virer de bord, lorsqu’il crut entrevoir une légère vapeur…

Fritz oublia tout alors, ses fatigues, les anxiétés que son absence prolongée causerait à Felsenheim, les risques qu’il y avait à se hasarder si loin en pleine mer. A l’aide des pagaies, le kaïak vola à la surface des flots. Une heure plus tard, il se trouvait à six encablures d’une île dominée par un mont volcanique, duquel s’échappait une fumée mêlée de flammes.

La côte orientale de l’île paraissait aride. En la contournant, il est vrai, Fritz vit qu’elle était coupée par l’embouchure d’un ruisseau au sortir d’une vallée verdoyante.

Le kaïak fut poussé au fond d’une étroite crique et tiré sur la grève.

A droite s’ouvrait une grotte à l’entrée de laquelle une créature humaine était plongée dans un profond sommeil.

Avec quelle émotion Fritz la contemplait! C’était une jeune fille de dix-sept à dix-huit ans, vêtue de toile grossière qui provenait de la voilure d’un navire, mais propre et convenablement ajustée. Ses traits étaient charmants, son visage d’une douceur infinie. Fritz n’osait la réveiller, et, cependant, c’était le salut qui l’accueillerait à son réveil!

Enfin, la jeune fille ouvrit les yeux. La vue d’un étranger lui fit jeter un cri d’effroi.

Fritz la rassura d’un geste, et lui dit en anglais:

«Ne craignez rien, miss… Je ne vous veux aucun mal… Je suis venu pour vous sauver…»

Et, ayant qu’elle eût pu répondre, il raconta comme un albatros était tombé entre ses mains, un albatros qui portait un billet demandant secours pour l’Anglaise de la Roche-Fumante… Il dit qu’à quelques lieues dans l’est il y avait une terre où vivait toute une famille de naufragés.

Alors, après s’être agenouillée pour remercier Dieu, la jeune fille lui tendit les mains et lui exprima sa reconnaissance. Puis, elle raconta brièvement son histoire et invita Fritz à visiter sa misérable installation. Fritz accepta, à la condition que cette visite fût courte. Le temps pressait, et il lui tardait de ramener la jeune Anglaise à Felsenheim.

«Demain, répondit-elle, demain nous partirons, monsieur Fritz… Laissez-moi encore passer cette soirée sur la Roche-Fumante, puisque je ne devrai plus jamais la revoir…

— Demain donc», répondit le jeune homme.

Et, avec les provisions de Jenny, jointes à celles que contenait le kaïak, tous deux partagèrent un repas pendant lequel ils se racontèrent leur histoire extraordinaire…

Enfin, sa prière faite, Jenny se retira au fond de la grotte, tandis que Fritz se couchait à l'entrée comme un fidèle chien de garde.

Le lendemain, au petit jour, on embarqua dans le kaïak les menus objets que Jenny ne voulait point abandonner, sans oublier son cormoran et son chacal. La jeune fille, qui avait revêtu son costume d'homme, prit place à l'arrière de la légère embarcation. La voile fut hissée, les pagaies fonctionnèrent, et, une heure plus tard, les dernières vapeurs de la Roche-Fumante se perdaient à l'horizon.

Fritz comptait faire directement route sur le cap de l'Espoir-Trompé. Mais le kaïak, chargé lourdement, ayant heurté une pointe, il devint nécessaire de le réparer. Fritz dut donc donner dans la baie des Perles, et conduisit sa compagne à l'îlot où la pinasse était venue la recueillir.

Tel fut le récit de Fritz.

Cependant l'existence avait suivi son cours habituel, tantôt à Falkenhorst, tantôt à Felsenheim, plus heureuse encore depuis que Jenny Montrose faisait partie de cette honnête et laborieuse famille. Les semaines s'écoulaient, très occupées par l'entretien les métairies, les soins à donner aux animaux. A présent, une belle allée d'arbres fruitiers allait du ruisseau des Chacals au château de Falkenhorst. Des embellissements s'effectuèrent à Waldegg, à Zuckertop, à l'ermitage d'Eberfurt, à Prospect-Hill. Que d'heures délicieuses se passaient dans cette villa, construite en bambous sur le modèle des chalets suisses! Du sommet de la colline, la vue pouvait s’étendre d’un côté sur une grande portion de la Terre-Promise, de l’autre sur un horizon de huit a neuf lieues, borné par la ligne du ciel et de l’eau.

Arriva la saison des pluies que le mois de juin ramena très abondantes. Il y eut nécessité de quitter Falkenhorst et de rentrer à Felsenheim. C’était toujours deux ou trois mois assez pénibles, attristés surtout par la continuité des mauvais temps. Quelques excursions aux métairies, exigées par l’entretien des animaux, quelques heures de chasse qui entraînaient Fritz et Jack aux alentours de Felsenheim, c’est à cela que se réduisaient les occupations extérieures de chaque jour.

Néanmoins, ce petit monde ne restait pas oisif. Les travaux marchaient sous la direction de Mme Zermatt. Jenny l’aidait en apportant toute son ingénieuse activité d’Anglo-Saxonne, qui différait de la méthode suisse un peu plus routinière. Et puis, si la jeune fille étudiait la langue allemande avec M. Zermatt, la famille étudiait la langue anglaise que Fritz parla couramment au bout de quelques semaines. Et comment n’eût-il pas fait des progrès rapides avec un professeur dont les leçons lui étaient si agréables?…

On ne se plaignit donc pas trop des longues journées de la saison pluvieuse. La présence de Jenny donnait aux soirées un charme nouveau. Personne n’était plus aussi pressé de regagner sa chambre. Mme Zermatt et Jenny travaillaient aux ouvrages de couture, à moins que la jeune fille ne fût priée de chanter, car elle possédait une voix charmante. Elle apprit plusieurs de ces chansons helvétiques, de ces mélodies des montagnes, qui ne savent pas vieillir, et quel ravissement de les entendre de sa bouche! A la musique succédait la lecture qu’Ernest puisait aux meilleurs ouvrages de la bibliothèque, et il semblait que l’heure du repos arrivait toujours trop vite.

Assurément, en ce milieu familial, M. Zermatt, sa femme, ses enfants, étaient aussi heureux qu'on peut l'être. Il est vrai, les craintes de l'avenir, les chances si improbables que le salut vînt du dehors, enfin le souvenir du pays, comment oublier tout cela?… Et puis, le cœur de Jenny ne se serrait-il pas, lorsqu'elle songeait à son père?… Du navire qui la ramenait, de la *Dorcas*, on n'avait plus de nouvelles, et n'était-il pas à supposer qu'il eût péri corps et biens dans quelque cyclone de la mer des Indes?… Enfin peut-il jamais être complet le bonheur de ceux qui vivent dans l'isolement, sans relations avec leurs semblables, et, en somme, qu'étaient les habitants de la Nouvelle-Suisse, si ce n'est les naufragés du *Landlord*?…

On sait quel événement inespéré avait si profondément modifié cette situation.

CHAPITRE VI

Après le départ. – Ce qui était connu de la Nouvelle-Suisse. – La famille Wolston. – Projets de nouvelles installations. – Établissement d'un canal entre le ruisseau des Chacals et le lac des Cygnes. – Fin de l'année 1816.

Pendant les premiers jours qui suivirent le départ de la *Licorne*, une profonde tristesse régna à Felsenheim. Comment en eût-il été autrement? Il semblait que la mauvaise fortune se fût abattue sur ce modeste coin de terre, comblé jusqu'alors des faveurs de la Providence! M. et Mme Zermatt ne se consolaient pas d'avoir laissé partir deux de leurs enfants, résolution qu'il n'eût pas été raisonnable de repousser pourtant, que commandaient les circonstances, et dont rien ne permettait de suspendre ou de retarder l'exécution.

Mais il ne faut pas demander au cœur d'un père et d'une mère plus qu'ils ne peuvent donner. Fritz, ce hardi jeune homme, n'était plus là, Fritz, le vaillant bras de cette famille qui voyait en lui son chef futur. Absent aussi François, qui marchait sur les traces de son aîné.

Restaient, il est vrai, Ernest et Jack. Le premier n'avait cessé de suivre ses goûts pour l'étude, et, grâce à d'excellentes lectures, son instruction était non moins sérieuse que pratique. Le second partageait les instincts de Fritz, la chasse, la pêche, l'équitation, la navigation, et, désireux de pénétrer les derniers secrets de la Nouvelle-Suisse, il remplacerait son frère dans ses aventureuses excursions. Enfin, elle n'était plus là, cette charmante et adorée Jenny, dont Betsie regrettait l'absence comme celle d'une fille chérie. Et de voir leurs places vides dans les chambres de Felsenheim, vides à la table commune, vides à la salle où l’on se rencontrait chaque soir, cela brisait le cœur. Il semblait que tous les bonheurs de ce foyer, refroidi par la séparation, se fussent éteints comme un feu que n’anime plus le souffle familial!

Tous reviendraient, sans doute, et on oublierait alors les chagrins du départ, les tristesses de l’absence. Ils reviendraient, et de nouveaux amis avec eux, – le colonel Montrose, qui ne voudrait pas se séparer de sa fille, après lui avoir donné son sauveur pour mari, puis Doll Wolston, son frère James, sa femme et son enfant, qui viendraient sans regret s’installer sur cette terre. Enfin des émigrants ne tarderaient pas à peupler cette lointaine colonie de la Grande-Bretagne.

Oui! dans un an au plus, un beau jour, au large du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, apparaîtrait un bâtiment venant de l’ouest, et ce ne serait pas pour disparaître vers le nord ou l’est! Il manœuvrerait de manière à rallier la baie du Salut. Ce serait vraisemblablement la *Licorne*. D’ailleurs, quel qu’il fût, ce navire ramènerait le colonel Montrose et sa fille, il ramènerait Fritz et François, il ramènerait les enfants de M. et de Mme Wolston!

Ainsi donc la situation avait changé du tout au tout. Les hôtes de cette Nouvelle-Suisse n’étaient plus ces naufragés du *Landlord* qui avaient trouvé refuge sur une côte inconnue, n’attendant que du hasard un secours qui trop souvent n’arrive jamais. Le gisement de cette terre était maintenant fixé en longitude et en latitude. Le lieutenant Littlestone en possédait les relèvements exacts. Il les communiquerait aux bureaux de l’Amirauté, qui donnerait les ordres nécessaires pour la prise de possession. En quittant la Nouvelle-Suisse, c’était comme un lien de plusieurs milliers de lieues qui se déroulait à l’arrière de la corvette, – un lien qui la rattachait à l’ancien continent et que rien ne pourrait rompre dans l’avenir.

Il est vrai, on ne connaissait encore qu’une partie de sa côte septentrionale, – tout au plus quinze ou seize lieues du littoral compris entre la baie de la Licorne et les parages à l’est de la Roche-Fumante. Ces trois profondes baies du Salut, des Nautiles et des Perles, la pinasse, la chaloupe et le kaïak ne les avaient pas même visitées sur toute leur étendue. Pendant ces onze années, M. Zermatt et ses fils n’avaient guère dépassé le rempart de roches au delà du défilé de Cluse. Ils s’étaient bornés à suivre le thalweg de la vallée de Grünthal sans en franchir les hauteurs opposées…

On remarquera que le départ de la *Licorne* n’avait point diminué le nombre des hôtes de Felsenheim, grâce à la présence de la famille Wolston.

M. Wolston, alors âgé de quarante-cinq ans, était un homme de forte constitution. Affaibli par des fièvres gagnées dans la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, en Australie, la salubrité du climat de la Nouvelle-Suisse, les soins dont il serait l’objet, ne tarderaient pas à lui rendre la santé. Ses connaissances et son expérience de mécanicien-constructeur ne pouvaient qu’être très utiles, et M. Zermatt se proposait bien de les utiliser à des travaux d’amélioration qu’il n’avait pu exécuter jusqu’alors. Cependant, avant tout, on laisserait se rétablir M. Wolston, vers lequel Ernest se sentait attiré par une certaine ressemblance de goûts et de caractère.

Mme Merry Wolston était de quelques années plus jeune que Betsie Zermatt. Ces deux femmes devaient se plaire, et leur amitié ne pourrait que s’accroître lorsqu’elles se connaîtraient mieux. Aucune frivolité d’esprit, mêmes instincts d’activité et d’ordre, même affection pour leurs maris et leurs enfants. Les soins du ménage les occuperaient ensemble à Felsenheim, et elles se partageraient la besogne pendant les visites aux métairies de Waldegg, de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt et de Zuckertop.

Quant à Annah Wolston, ce n’était plus une fillette à dix-sept ans. Sa santé avait été un peu ébranlée comme celle de son père, et le séjour de la Terre-Promise lui ferait certainement grand bien, en affermissant sa constitution, en rendant des couleurs à ses joues un peu pâlies. Blonde, de jolis traits, une carnation qui recouvrerait promptement sa fraîcheur, le joli regard de ses yeux bleus, son élégante démarche, elle promettait de devenir une fort agréable personne. Quel contraste entre elle et sa sœur, cette pétillante Doll, avec ses quatorze ans, son rire frais et sonore qui aurait empli toutes les chambres de Felsenheim, une brunette toujours chantant, toujours parlant, avec des reparties drôles! Eh bien, il reviendrait, cet oiseau envolé, après quelques mois trop longs sans doute, et son gazouillement recommencerait à réjouir tout ce petit monde!

Du reste, il importait de procéder à l’agrandissement de Felsenheim. Au retour de la *Licorne*, cette demeure serait insuffisante. A ne compter que le colonel Montrose et Jenny, Fritz et François, James Wolston, sa sœur, sa femme et son enfant, ils n’y pourraient loger ensemble, à moins que certaines parties de la caverne ne reçussent une affectation spéciale à leur usage. Si quelques colons les accompagnaient, il va de soi que de nouvelles habitations devraient être construites. La place ne manquerait ni sur la rive gauche du ruisseau des Chacals ni sur le littoral, en remontant vers la baie des Flamants, ni le long de cette route ombreuse qui allait de Felsenheim à Falkenhorst.

Il y eut là, entre MM. Zermatt et Wolston, un sujet d’entretiens très fréquents auxquels Ernest prenait volontiers part, et ses propositions méritaient d’être écoutées.

Pendant ce temps, Jack, chargé à lui seul des fonctions qu'il remplissait autrefois avec son frère aîné, ne cessait de pourvoir aux besoins de l'office. Suivi de ses chiens Braun et Falb, il courait chaque jour les bois et les plaines, où abondait le gibier de poil et de plume; il fouillait les marais, où canards et bécassines permettaient de varier le menu quotidien, sans parler du produit des basses-cours. Coco, le chacal de Jack, rivalisait avec les chiens dont il était le compagnon habituel dans ces excursions cynégétiques. Le jeune chasseur enfourchait tantôt son onagre Leichtfus, qui justifiait bien son nom de «Pied léger», tantôt l'autruche Brausewind, tantôt le buffle Sturm, qui passait comme un ouragan à travers les futaies. Expresse recommandation était faite à cet audacieux de ne jamais s'aventurer hors des limites de la Terre-Promise, de ne point franchir le défilé de Cluse qui s'ouvrait sur la vallée de Grünthal, où il se fût exposé à quelque rencontre de fauves. Sur les instances de sa mère, il avait dû s'engager à ne pas prolonger son absence au delà de la journée, à revenir pour le repas du soir. Toutefois, bien qu'il l'eût promis, Betsie ne dissimulait pas ses craintes, lorsqu'elle le voyait disparaître avec la rapidité d'une flèche derrière les premiers arbres de Felsenheim.

Ernest, lui, préférait aux exercices de la chasse les tranquilles occupations de la pêche. Il s'installait soit sur les bords du ruisseau des Chacals, soit au pied des roches de la baie des Flamants. Les crustacés, les mollusques, les poissons y abondaient, saumons, harengs, maquereaux, homards, écrevisses, huîtres, moules. Parfois, Annah Wolston se joignait à lui et ce n'était pas pour lui déplaire.

Inutile de dire que la jeune fille ne ménageait pas ses soins au cormoran et au chacal ramenés de la Roche-Fumante. C'était à elle que Jenny les avait confiés avant son départ, et ils étaient en bonnes mains, on peut le croire. A son retour, Jenny retrouverait en florissante santé ces deux fidèles compagnons, auxquels toute liberté était laissée d'aller et de venir dans l'enclos de Felsenheim. Il est vrai, si le cormoran s'accordait avec les hôtes de la basse-cour, le chacal s'entendait peu ou point avec celui de Jack, lequel avait essayé vainement d'en faire deux amis. Ils se montraient jaloux l'un de l'autre, et ne s'épargnaient guère les coups de patte.

«Je renonce à les mettre d'accord, dit-il un jour à Annah, et je vous les abandonne!

— Comptez sur moi, Jack, répondit Annah. Avec un peu de patience, peut-être réussirai-je à leur inspirer de meilleurs sentiments…

— Essayez donc, ma chère Annah, car, entre chacals on devrait être camarades…

— Il me semble aussi. Jack, que votre singe…

— Knips II?… Oh! celui-là ne demande qu'à mordre le protégé de Jenny!»

Knips II paraissait en effet mal disposé pour le nouveau venu, et l'entente serait difficile entre ces bêles, si apprivoisées qu'elles fussent.

Les journées s'écoulaient ainsi. Betsie et Merry n'avaient pas une heure inoccupée. Tandis que Mme Zermatt réparait les vêtements, Mme Wolston, très habile en couture, confectionnait des robes et des jupes, avec les étoffes précieusement conservées depuis le naufrage du *Landlord*.

Le temps était magnifique, la chaleur encore supportable. La brise venait de terre l'avant-midi, de mer l'après-midi. Les nuits restaient reposantes et fraîches. Cette dernière semaine d’octobre, – avril des latitudes septentrionales, – allait faire place aux semaines de novembre, ce mois du renouveau, ce mois du printemps dans l’autre hémisphère.

Les deux familles ne négligeaient pas de rendre de fréquentes visites aux métairies, tantôt à pied, tantôt dans le chariot traîné par son attelage de buffles. Le plus souvent, Ernest montait l’ânon Rash, et Jack enfourchait l’autruche. M. Wolston se trouvait bien de ces promenades. Les fièvres ne se manifestaient plus que par de rares et légers accès. On allait de Felsenheim à Falkenhorst en suivant cette belle route plantée depuis dix ans, que les châtaigniers, les noyers, les cerisiers, couvraient de leur ombrage. Quelquefois, la halte au château aérien se prolongeait pendant vingt-quatre heures, et quel ravissement, quand, après avoir gravi l’escalier intérieur, ses hôtes débouchaient sur la plate-forme, abritée sous les frondaisons de ce manglier superbe! Peut-être l’habitation était-elle un peu exiguë à présent; mais, selon l’opinion de M. Wolston, il ne fallait pas songer à l’agrandir. Et, un jour, M. Zermatt lui répondit:

«Vous avez raison, mon cher Wolston. De demeurer entre les branches d’un arbre, c’était bon pour des Robinsons, préoccupés tout d’abord de chercher un refuge contre les fauves, et c’est ce que nous avons fait dès le début de notre séjour sur l’île. Mais, à l’heure qu’il est, nous sommes des colons… de véritables colons…

— Et d’ailleurs, reprit M. Wolston, il faut prévoir le retour de nos enfants, et nous n’avons pas trop de temps pour mettre Felsenheim en état de les recevoir tous.

— Oui, dit Ernest, et, s’il y a des agrandissements à faire, c’est à Felsenheim… Où pourrions-nous trouver une demeure plus sûre pendant la saison des pluies?… Je suis de l’avis de M. Wolston, Falkenhorst est devenu insuffisant, et, pendant l’été, je pense qu’il vaudrait mieux s’installer à Waldegg ou à Zuckertop…

— Je préférerais Prospect-Hill, fit observer Mme Zermatt. Il serait facile avec des aménagements complémentaires…

— Excellent projet, mère! s’écria Jack. A Prospect-Hill, la vue est délicieuse, et s’étend sur la pleine mer jusqu’à la baie du Salut. Cette colline est tout indiquée pour porter une villa…

— Ou un fort, répondit M. Zermatt, un fort qui commanderait cette pointe de l’île…

— Un fort?… répéta Jack.

— Eh! mon fils, répondit M. Zermatt. il ne faut pas oublier que la Nouvelle-Suisse va devenir une possession anglaise, que les Anglais auront intérêt à fortifier. La batterie de l’îlot du Requin ne permettrait pas de défendre la future ville qui sera probablement fondée entre la baie des Flamants et Felsenheim. Il me paraît donc indispensable que la colline de Prospect-Hill serve prochainement à l’établissement d’un fort.

— Prospect-Hill… ou, un peu plus en avant, sur le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, dit alors M. Wolston. Dans ce cas, la villa pourrait être conservée…

— J’aimerais mieux cela… déclara Jack.

— Et moi aussi, ajouta Mme Zermatt. Tâchons de garder ces souvenirs de nos premiers jours, Prospect-Hill comme Falkenhorst… J’aurais grand chagrin à les voir disparaître!»

Sans doute, le sentiment de Betsie était bien naturel. Mais la situation avait changé. Tant que la Nouvelle-Suisse n’appartenait qu’aux naufragés du *Landlord*, il n’avait jamais été question de la mettre en état de défense. Lorsqu’elle relèverait de l’Angleterre, avec sa place marquée dans le domaine d’outremer de la Grande-Bretagne, il serait nécessaire d’y établir des batteries de côtes.

En somme, ses premiers occupants pouvaient-ils regretter les conséquences dues à l’arrivée de la *Licorne* sur les parages de la Nouvelle-Suisse?…

«Non, conclut M. Zermatt, et laissons l’avenir apporter peu à peu les diverses modifications qu’il comporte.»

Au surplus, d’autres travaux étaient plus pressants que les réfections de Falkenhorst et de Prospect-Hill. L’époque approchait où il faudrait engranger les récoltes, sans parler des soins à donner aux bêtes des enclos de Waldegg, de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt et de Zuckertop.

Et, pour le mentionner en passant, lors de leur première visite à l’îlot de la Baleine. MM. Zermatt et Wolston avaient été surpris du nombre de lapins qu’il renfermait. C’est par centaines qu’ils comptèrent ces prolifiques rongeurs. Heureusement, l’îlot produisait assez de plantes herbacées et de racines pour assurer leur nourriture. Aussi, puisque M. Zermatt avait fait don de cet îlot à la fille du colonel Montrose, Jenny le trouverait-elle en pleine prospérité à son retour.

«Et vous avez sagement fait d’y enfermer vos lapins, avait dit M. Wolston. Il y en aura des milliers un jour, et ils auraient dévoré les champs de la Terre-Promise! En Australie, d’où je viens, ces animaux menacent de devenir un fléau pire que les criquets de l’Afrique, et, si l’on ne prend pas les plus sévères mesures contre les déprédations de cette engeance, la terre australienne sera rongée sur toute sa surface!»2

Pendant les derniers mois de cette année 1816, on s'aperçut plus d'une fois que les bras de Fritz et de François faisaient défaut, bien que la famille Wolston ne ménageât pas ses peines. Cette saison des récoltes était toujours très chargée. Que de travaux nécessitaient l'entretien des champs de maïs et de manioc et de la rizière au delà du marais voisin de la baie des Flamants, la cueillette des arbres fruitiers d'essence européenne et d'essence indigène, tels les bananiers, les goyaviers, les cacaoyers, les cannelliers et autres, l'extraction et la manipulation du sagou, enfin la moisson des céréales, blé, riz, sarrasin, seigle, orge, la coupe des cannes à sucre si abondantes sur les terrains de la métairie de Zuckertop. C'était là grosse besogne pour quatre hommes, que les trois femmes pourtant aidaient avec courage. Et ce serait à recommencer dans quelques mois, ce sol étant d'une telle puissance végétative, que deux récoltes annuelles ne risquaient pas de l'épuiser.

D'autre part, il importait que Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah n'abandonnassent pas complètement leurs occupations d'intérieur, raccommodage, lavage, préparation des repas, tout ce qui constitue le ménage. Et, pour cette raison, le plus souvent, tandis que M. Wolston, M. Zermatt et ses deux fils allaient travailler au dehors, elles restaient à Felsenheim.

Si fertile que fût ce sol de la Terre-Promise, il se pouvait cependant que le rendement fût compromis par un excès de sécheresse durant l'été. Ce qui manquait, c'était un système d'irrigation convenablement disposé à la surface de cette aire de plusieurs centaines d'hectares. Il n'y existait pas d'autre cours d'eau que les ruisseaux des Chacals et de Falkenhorst à l'est, puis, à l'ouest, la rivière Orientale, dont l'embouchure s'ouvrait à l’extrémité sud de la baie des Nautiles. Ce défaut avait frappé M. Wolston, et, un jour, le 9 novembre, après le repas de midi, il amena la conversation sur ce sujet.

«Rien ne serait plus aisé, dit-il, que d’établir une roue hydraulique en utilisant la cascade du ruisseau des Chacals à une demi-lieue au-dessus de Felsenheim. Dans le matériel que vous avez retiré du *Landlord,* mon cher Zermatt, se trouvent les deux pompes du bâtiment. Eh bien, la roue, une fois établie, pourrait les actionner avec une force suffisante, élever les eaux dans un réservoir, les répandre par des conduites jusque dans les champs de Waldegg et de Zuckertop…

— Mais ces conduites, fit observer Ernest, comment les fabriquer?…

— Nous ferions en grand ce que vous avez déjà fait en petit pour amener les eaux du ruisseau des Chacals au potager de Felsenheim, répondit M. Wolston. Au lieu d’employer des bambous, nous emploierions des troncs de sagoutier vidés de leur moelle, et une telle installation ne serait pas au-dessus de nos forces.

— Parfait! déclara Jack. Lorsque nous aurons rendu nos terres encore plus fertiles, elles produiront davantage, elles produiront trop, et nous ne saurons que faire de nos récoltes, car, enfin, il n’y a pas encore de marché à Felsenheim…

— Il y en aura un, Jack, répondit M. Zermatt, comme il y aura plus tard une ville, puis des villes, non seulement dans la Terre-Promise, mais dans toute la Nouvelle-Suisse… C’est à prévoir, mon enfant…

— Et, ajouta Ernest, lorsqu’il y a des villes, c’est qu’il y a des habitants qui doivent être assurés de leur nourriture. Il faut donc obtenir du sol tout ce qu’il peut donner…

— Et nous l’obtiendrons, ajouta M. Wolston, grâce à ce système d’irrigation que j’étudierai, si vous le voulez bien.»

Jack garda le silence, et ne se rendit pas. Que la colonie anglaise comptât quelque jour une population nombreuse, sans doute d’origines diverses, cela ne lui agréait guère, et, à bien lire au fond du cœur de Mme Zermatt, peut-être eût-on déchiffré le même regret pour l’avenir…

Quoi qu’il en soit, dans les rares heures de loisir que leur laissaient parfois les travaux des champs, M. Wolston, M. Zermatt et Ernest, qui s’intéressaient fort à ce genre de travaux, étudièrent cette question d’irrigation. Après avoir relevé l’alignement et le nivellement du terrain, on reconnut que sa disposition se prêtait à l’établissement d’un canal.

En effet, à un quart de lieue dans le sud de Waldegg, s’étendait le lac des Cygnes, que les pluies remplissaient au cours de la mauvaise saison, mais dont le niveau baissait à un étiage inutilisable pendant la saison sèche. Les saignées qu’on y eût pratiquées n’auraient pas permis l’écoulement des eaux devenues trop basses alors. Or, par un emprunt fait au ruisseau des Chacals, si l’on parvenait à maintenir dans le lac un trop-plein constant, il serait facile de le déverser sur les terrains environnants, et d’y porter, avec un système de dérivation bien compris, de nouveaux éléments de fertilité.

Il est vrai, la distance entre la cascade et la pointe sud du lac était d’une bonne lieue, et d’établir une conduite de cette longueur, cela n’eût pas laissé d’être un important travail. Combien de troncs de sagoutier il aurait fallu abattre!

Heureusement, une nouvelle étude du sol faite par Ernest et M. Wolston démontra que l’on pouvait de beaucoup réduire la longueur des conduites.

Et voici ce qu’Ernest dit un soir, alors que les deux familles étaient réunies dans la salle commune, après une journée bien employée au dehors comme au dedans:

«Père. M. Wolston et moi nous avons déterminé le nivellement. Il suffira d’élever les eaux du ruisseau des Chacals à une trentaine de pieds pour les amener sur un espace de deux cents toises à l’endroit où le sol reprend sa pente vers le lac des Cygnes. A partir de cet endroit, une tranchée canalisera l’eau et l’enverra directement dans le lac.

— Bien, déclara M. Zermatt, le travail, dans ces conditions, serait très simplifié…

— Et alors, ajouta M. Wolston, c’est le lac des Cygnes qui servira de réservoir pour arroser les champs de Waldegg, de Zuckertop, même ceux de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt. Nous ne lui fournirons, d’ailleurs, que la quantité d’eau nécessaire aux irrigations, et, dans le cas où se produirait un trop-plein, on l’écoulerait aisément vers la mer.

— C’est entendu, conclut M. Zermatt, et, ce canal achevé, nous aurons droit aux remerciements des futurs colons…

— Mais non des anciens qui se contentaient de ce que la nature leur avait donné!… observa Jack. Pauvre ruisseau des Chacals, on va le fatiguer à tourner une roue… on va lui prendre une partie de lui-même… et tout cela pour enrichir des gens que nous ne connaissons seulement pas!

— Décidément, Jack n’est pas pour la colonisation!… dit Mme Wolston.

— Nos deux familles installées sur ce district, et leur existence assurée, que pourrions-nous désirer de plus, madame Wolston?…

— Bon!… les idées de Jack se modifieront avec les améliorations que vous allez apporter, dit Annah Wolston.

— Voyez-vous cela, mademoiselle!… répliqua Jack en riant.

— Et quand commencerez-vous ce grand travail?… demanda Betsie.

— Dans quelques jours, ma chère amie, déclara M. Zermatt. Nos premières récoltes terminées, nous aurons trois mois de loisir en attendant les secondes.»

Ceci résolu, il en résulta une laborieuse occupation depuis le 15 novembre jusqu'au 20 décembre, c'est-à-dire pendant cinq semaines.

Il y eut lieu de faire nombre de voyages à Prospect-Hill afin d'abattre plusieurs centaines de sagoutiers des bois voisins. Les vider ne fut pas difficile, et l'on recueillit avec soin leur moelle dans des barils de bambou. Le charroi de ces troncs constitua réellement la partie la plus pénible de cette besogne. Il échut à M. Zermatt et à Jack, aidés des deux buffles, de l'onagre et de l'ânon, qui trainèrent une sorte de fardier ou de binard, du genre de ceux dont on devait faire usage plus tard en Europe. C'est à Ernest que vint cette idée de suspendre ces lourdes pièces à l'essieu des deux roues du chariot préalablement démontées. Si ces troncs raclaient le sol, ce n'était que par une de leurs extrémités, et leur transport s'effectua dans des conditions infiniment meilleures.

Tout de même, buffles, onagre, ânon, eurent fort à faire, si bien que Jack dit un jour:

«Il est regrettable, père, que nous n’ayons pas une paire d’éléphants à notre service!… Que de fatigues seraient épargnées à nos pauvres bêtes…

— Mais non à ces dignes pachydermes, devenus nos pauvres bêtes à leur tour… répondit M. Zermatt.

— Bah! les éléphants ont pour eux la vigueur, reprit Jack, et ils traîneraient ces troncs de sagoutiers comme des allumettes!… Puisqu’il en existe dans la Nouvelle-Suisse, si nous parvenions…

— Je ne tiens pas à ce que ces animaux pénètrent sur le district de la Terre-Promise, Jack!… Ils auraient bientôt mis nos champs en un triste état!

— Sans doute, père! Mais, si l’occasion se présentait de les rencontrer dans les savanes de la baie des Perles ou dans les plaines où débouche la vallée de Grünthal…

— Nous en profiterions, répondit M. Zermatt. Toutefois, ne faisons pas naître cette occasion… C’est plus prudent.»

Tandis que M. Zermatt et son fils procédaient à ces nombreux charrois, M. Wolston et Ernest s’occupaient d’établir la machine élévatoire. Dans la fabrication de la roue hydraulique, le mécanicien déploya une grande habileté, – ce qui intéressa particulièrement Ernest, très porté aux choses de la mécanique, et il ne pouvait que profiter des leçons de M. Wolston.

Cette roue fut installée au pied de la cascade du ruisseau des Chacals, de manière à actionner les tiges des pompes du *Landlord*. L’eau, remontée à la hauteur d’une trentaine de pieds, serait emmagasinée dans un réservoir creusé entre les roches de la rive gauche, auquel viendraient s’amorcer les conduites de sagoutier, dont les premières ne tardèrent pas à être posées le long de la berge.

Bref, ce travail se fit avec régularité et méthode, si bien que, vers le 20 décembre, il était achevé, y compris la tranchée établie à la surface du sol jusqu’à l’extrémité sud du lac des Cygnes.

«Aurons-nous une fête d’inauguration?… demanda, ce soir-là, Annah Wolston.

— Je le crois bien, répondit Jack, tout comme s’il s’agissait d’inaugurer un canal dans notre vieille Suisse!… N’est-ce pas, mère?…

— Comme vous voudrez, mes enfants, répondit Betsie.

— C’est entendu, dit alors M. Zermatt, et la fête commencera demain avec la mise en mouvement de notre machine…

— Et comment se terminera-t-elle?… ajouta Ernest.

— Par un excellent repas en l’honneur de M. Wolston…

— Et de votre fils Ernest, dit ce dernier, car il ne mérite que des éloges pour son zèle et son intelligence.

— Vos compliments me font plaisir, monsieur Wolston, répondit le jeune homme, mais j’étais à bonne école.»

Le jour suivant, vers dix heures, l’inauguration du canal se fit en présence des deux familles, réunies près de la cascade. La roue, mue par la chute, tourna régulièrement, les deux pompes fonctionnèrent, et l’eau s’introduisit à l’intérieur du réservoir qui se remplit en une heure et demie. Puis, les vannes ayant été levées, cette eau coula à travers la conduite sur une longueur de deux cents toises.

Tout le monde se rendit à cet endroit et les mains battirent lorsque les premiers filets liquides inondèrent la partie du canal à ciel ouvert. Après qu'Ernest eut jeté une petite bouée, les familles montèrent dans le chariot qui attendait à cette place, et qui prit la route du lac des Cygnes, tandis que Jack volait en avant sur le dos de son autruche.

Le chariot marcha d'un si bon train que, bien qu'il eût fait un détour, il atteignit l'extrémité du canal au moment même où la bouée dérivait à la surface du lac.

Des hurrahs la saluèrent, le travail avait été mené à bonne fin. Il suffirait de quelques brèches pratiquées aux berges pour que l'eau, même au plus fort de la sécheresse, arrosât largement toute la campagne environnante pendant la période de la saison chaude.

A cette date, trois mois s'étaient écoulés depuis le départ de la *Licorne*. S'il ne survenait aucun retard, elle devait reparaître au large de la baie du Salut dans trois fois ce temps. Pas un jour ne s'était passé sans qu'il eût été parlé des absents. On les suivait dans leur voyage…. A telle date, ils étaient arrivée au cap de Bonne-Espérance où James Wolston attendait sa sœur Doll… A telle autre, la corvette remontait l'Atlantique le long de la côte africaine… A telle autre, enfin, elle arrivait à Portsmouth… Jenny, Fritz, François débarquaient et gagnaient Londres… Là, le colonel Montrose recevait dans ses bras la fille qu'il n'espérait plus revoir, et, avec elle, celui qui l'avait recueillie sur la Roche-Fumante et dont il aurait béni l'union…

Neuf mois encore, et tous seraient de retour. Aucun des leurs ne manquerait aux deux familles, et, dans un avenir prochain, peut-être seraient-elles réunies par des liens plus étroits?…

Ainsi se termina cette année 1816, qui avait été marquée par des événements dont les conséquences devaient profondément modifier la situation de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

CHAPITRE VII

Le premier jour de l’année. – Promenade à Falkenhorst. – Projet de chapelle.

— Propositions de voyage. – Discussion. – La pinasse mise en état. – Départ

du 15 mars.

Le 1er janvier, des souhaits furent échangés entre les familles Zermatt et Wolston. L’une et l’autre se firent même quelques cadeaux auxquels se rattachait plutôt une valeur morale qu’une valeur réelle, – de ces riens que le temps transforme en souvenirs. Il y eut aussi compliments et serrements de main dès l’aube de ce jour partout fêté, où l’année nouvelle

Débute sur le théâtre

Inconnu de l’avenir,

a dit un poète français en vers de sept pieds. Cette fois, il est vrai, ce jour de l’an différait des douze qui l’avaient précédé depuis l’arrivée des naufragés du *Landlord* à la grève de Zeltheim. L’émotion se mélangea d’une joie sincère. Ce fut un concert de franche gaîté, dans lequel Jack fit sa partie avec ce vif entrain qu’il mettait en toutes choses.

MM. Zermatt et Wolston s’embrassèrent. Les vieux amis qu’ils étaient déjà avaient pu s’apprécier et s’estimer dans la vie commune. Le premier eut pour Annah des caresses de père, et le second traita Ernest et Jack comme ses fils. Et il en fut pareillement des deux mères, qui confondirent leurs enfants dans les mêmes baisers.

Quant à Annah Wolston, elle dut être particulièrement touchée des compliments que lui adressa Ernest. On n’a pas oublié que ce jeune homme s’adonnait quelque peu à la poésie. Une fois déjà, à l’occasion de l’honnête baudet, après la funeste rencontre avec le monstrueux boa, n’avait-il pas orné son épitaphe de quelques rimes assez correctes?… Eh bien, en l’honneur de la jeune fille, son inspiration le servit heureusement, et les joues d’Annah se colorèrent, lorsque le jeune disciple d’Apollon la félicita d’avoir retrouvé la santé au bon air de la Terre-Promise.

«La santé… et le bonheur!» répondit-elle en embrassant Mme Zermatt.

Ce jour-là, qui était un vendredi, fut célébré comme un dimanche par des actions de grâces envers le Très-Haut dont on appela la protection sur les absents, tout en témoignant une profonde reconnaissance pour ses bontés.

Puis, voici Jack de s’écrier:

«Et nos bêtes?…

— Comment… nos bêtes?… demanda M. Zermatt.

— Oui… Turc, Falb, Braun, nos buffles Sturm et Brummer, notre taureau Brull, notre vache Blass, notre onagre Leichtfus, nos ânons Pfeil, Flink, Rash, notre chacal Coco, notre autruche Brausewind, notre singe Knips II, enfin tous nos bons amis à deux et à quatre pattes…

— Voyons, Jack, lui dit Mme Zermatt, tu n'as pas la prétention que ton frère se mette en frais de poésie pour l'étable et la basse-cour…

— Non, assurément, mère, et je ne crois pas que ces braves animaux seraient sensibles aux belles rimes!… Mais ils méritent bien qu'on leur souhaite le nouvel an avec une double ration et une litière fraîche…

— Jack a raison, dit M. Wolston, et il convient qu'aujourd'hui toutes nos bêtes…

— Sans oublier le chacal et le cormoran de Jenny! fit observer Annah Wolston.

— Bien parlé, ma fille, dit Mme Wolston. Les protégés de Jenny auront leur part…

— Et, puisque c'est aujourd'hui premier jour de l'an pour toute la terre, déclara Mme Zermatt, pensons à ceux qui nous ont quittés et qui pensent certainement à nous!…»

Et un souvenir attendri des deux familles s'envola vers les chers passagers de la *Licorne*.

Les bêtes furent traitées selon leurs mérites, et on ne leur ménagea pas plus le sucre que les caresses.

Puis les convives vinrent s'asseoir dans la salle à manger de Felsenheim, devant un succulent déjeuner, dont quelques verres du vieux vin offert par le commandant de la corvette redoublèrent la bonne humeur.

Il n'était pas question de reprendre les travaux habituels en ce jour de chômage. Aussi M. Zermatt proposa-t-il une promenade à pied jusqu'à

Falkenhorst, – petite lieue à faire, sans grande fatigue, sous les ombrages de cette belle allée, qui réunissait la demeure d'été à la demeure d'hiver.

Le temps était superbe, la chaleur forte, il est vrai. Mais la double rangée d'arbres de l'allée ne laissait pas les rayons solaires percer leur épaisse frondaison. Ce ne serait qu'une agréable excursion le long du littoral, avec la mer à droite, la campagne à gauche.

On partit vers onze heures, de manière à rester tout l'après-midi à Falkenhorst, et l'on devait en revenir pour le dîner. Cette année-là, si les familles n'avaient séjourné ni à Waldegg, ni à Prospect-Hill, ni à l'ermitage d'Eberfurt. c'est que ces métairies nécessitaient certains agrandissements qui seraient entrepris seulement au retour de la *Licorne*. Il était même à prévoir que l'arrivée de nouveaux colons modifierait le domaine actuel de la Terre-Promise.

Après avoir franchi l'enclos du potager, puis le ruisseau des Chacals sur le pont de Famille, les promeneurs suivirent l'avenue bordée d'arbres fruitiers, qui avaient pris un développement tropical.

On ne se pressait guère, car une heure devait suffire à gagner Falkenhorst. Les chiens Braun et Falb, autorises à accompagner leurs maîtres, gambadaient en avant. De chaque côté les champs de maïs, de millet, d'avoine, de blé, d'orge, de manioc et de patates, étalaient leurs richesses. La seconde récolte promettait d'être fructueuse, sans parler de ce que réservaient les terres plus au nord, arrosées par les dérivations du lac des Cygnes.

«Quelle idée d'avoir utilisé cette eau du ruisseau des Chacals, qui, jusqu'alors, se perdait sans aucun profit, puisque la mer n'en avait nul besoin!» ainsi que Jack le fit judicieusement observer à M. Wolston.

Et l’on s’arrêtait, après deux ou trois cents pas, et pendant ces haltes la causerie reprenait de plus belle. Annah se plaisait à cueillir quelques-unes des jolies fleurs dont le parfum embaumait l’avenue. Plusieurs centaines d’oiseaux battaient des ailes entre les branches lourdes de fruits et de feuilles. Le gibier filait à travers les herbages, lièvres, lapins, coqs de bruyère, gelinottes, bécasses. Ni Ernest ni Jack n’avaient eu la permission d’emporter leurs fusils, et il semblait que cette gent volatile le sût bien. On était venu pour se promener, non pour chasser.

«Je demande, avait dit au départ Mme Zermatt, appuyée par Annah Wolston, je demande qu’on épargne aujourd’hui toutes ces créatures inoffensives…»

Ernest, que les succès cynégétiques ne passionnaient pas autrement, avait consenti de bonne grâce; mais Jack s’était fait prier. A sortir sans son fusil, qui, à l’en croire, faisait partie de lui-même, il se regardait comme amputé d’un bras ou d’une jambe.

«Je peux toujours le prendre, quitte à ne pas en faire usage, avait-il dit. Quand même une compagnie de perdreaux me partirait à vingt pas, je m’engage à ne pas tirer…

— Vous ne seriez pas capable de tenir votre engagement, Jack, avait répondu la jeune fille. Avec Ernest, il n’y aurait pas a s’inquiéter… tandis qu’avec vous…

— Et si quelque fauve se montrait, panthère, ours, tigre, lion… Il y en a dans l’île…

— Pas sur la Terre-Promise, avait répliqué Mme Zermatt. Allons, Jack, fais-nous cette concession… Il te restera trois cent soixante-quatre jours dans l’année…

— Est-elle au moins bissextile?…

— Non… avait répliqué Ernest.

— Pas de chance!» s’était écrié le jeune chasseur.

Il était une heure, lorsque les familles, après avoir traversé le bois de mangliers, vinrent s’arrêter au pied de Falkenhorst.

Tout d’abord, M. Zermatt constata que l’enclos qui renfermait les animaux de basse-cour se trouvait en bon état. Ni les singes ni les sangliers ne s’étaient livrés à leurs mauvais instincts habituels de déprédation. Au vrai, Jack n’aurait pas eu l’occasion d’exercer des représailles contre ces maraudeurs.

Les promeneurs commencèrent par se reposer sur la terrasse semi-circulaire en terre glaise dressée au-dessus des racines de l’énorme manglier, et dont un mélange de résine et de goudron assurait l’imperméabilité. Chacun prit là quelques rafraîchissements que fournirent les barils d’hydromel, encavés sous la terrasse. Puis, l’escalier tournant, ménagé à l’intérieur de l’arbre, permit d’atteindre la plate-forme à quarante pieds au-dessus du sol.

Quel bonheur éprouvait toujours la famille Zermatt en se retrouvant au milieu des larges frondaisons de l’arbre… N’était-ce pas son premier nid, celui qui lui rappelait tant de souvenirs?… Avec ses deux balcons à treillis, son double plancher, ses chambres recouvertes d’une toiture d’écorces bien jointes, son léger mobilier, le nid était devenu une charmante et fraîche habitation. A présent, ce ne serait plus qu'un lieu de halte. Des installations plus spacieuses devaient être établies à Prospect-Hill. Toutefois, M. Zermatt conserverait l'ancienne «aire du Faucon» aussi longtemps que le gigantesque arbre la retiendrait dans ses branches, et, jusqu'au moment où, accablé d'années, il tomberait de vieillesse.

Cet après-midi, alors que l'on causait sur le balcon, Mme Wolston fit une proposition dont il y aurait à tenir compte. D'une piété éclairée, très pénétrée de sentiments religieux, personne ne fut surpris qu'elle s'exprimât en ces termes:

«J'ai souvent admiré, dit-elle, et j'admire encore, mes amis, tout ce que vous avez fait sur ce coin de votre île… Felsenheim, Falkenhorst, Prospect-Hill, vos métairies, vos plantations, vos champs, cela marque autant d'intelligence que de courage au travail. Mais j'ai déjà demandé à Mme Zermatt pourquoi il vous manquait…

— Une chapelle?… répondit aussitôt Betsie. Vous avez raison, ma chère Merry, et nous devons bien au Tout-Puissant de lui consacrer…

— Mieux qu'une chapelle… un temple, s'écria Jack, qui ne doutait de rien, un monument avec un clocher superbe!… Quand commençons-nous, père?… Les matériaux, il y en a à revendre… M Wolston dressera les plans… Nous les exécuterons…

— Bon! répondit M. Zermatt en souriant, si je vois le temple en imagination, je ne vois pas le pasteur… le prédicateur…

— Ce sera François à son retour, dit Ernest.

— En attendant, que cela ne vous préoccupe pas, monsieur Zermatt, répondit Mme Wolston. Nous nous contenterons de prier dans notre chapelle…

— Madame Wolston, votre idée est excellente, et il ne faut pas oublier que de nouveaux colons viendront bientôt… Aussi, pendant les loisirs de la saison pluvieuse, nous la mettrons à l'étude… Nous chercherons un emplacement convenable…

— Il me semble, mon ami, dit alors Mme Zermatt, que si Falkenhorst ne doit plus nous servir de demeure, il serait facile de le transformer en chapelle aérienne.

— Et nos prières seraient déjà à mi-chemin du ciel… comme dirait notre cher François… ajouta Jack.

— Ce serait un peu loin de Felsenheim, répondit M. Zermatt. Il me paraîtrait préférable d'élever cette chapelle à proximité de notre principale habitation, autour de laquelle se grouperont peu à peu des habitations nouvelles. Enfin, je vous le répète, nous étudierons ce projet.»

Pendant les trois ou quatre mois que devait encore durer la belle saison, les bras furent employés à des travaux urgents, et du 15 mars à la fin d'avril, il n'y eut pas un jour de chômage. M Wolston ne s'épargnait pas; mais il ne pourrait remplacer Fritz et François, pour approvisionner de fourrages les métairies, pour y assurer la nourriture de l'hiver. Moutons, chèvres, porcs étaient actuellement au nombre d'une centaine à Waldegg, à l'ermitage d'Eberfurt, à Prospect-Hill, et les étables de Felsenheim n'eussent pas suffi à loger tout ce troupeau. Passe encore pour la volaille que l'on ramenait avant le mauvais temps dans la basse-cour, où les soins quotidiens ne faisaient défaut ni aux poules, ni aux outardes, ni aux pigeons. Quant aux oies, aux canards, ils pourraient s'ébattre sur la mare, située à deux portées de fusil. Seules, les bêtes de trait, ânons et buffles, les vaches et leurs veaux, ne quittaient point Felsenheim. De cette façon, même en ne tenant pas compte de la chasse et de la pêche, qui ne cessaient pas d'être fructueuses d'avril à septembre, l'alimentation était assurée rien qu'avec les produits de la basse-cour.

Toutefois, à la date du 15 mars, il s'en fallait d'une huitaine de jours que les travaux de la campagne exigeassent le concours de tous. Cette semaine, il n'y aurait donc aucun inconvénient à l'occuper par quelque excursion en dehors des limites de la Terre-Promise. Ce fut l'objet d'une conversation à laquelle les deux familles prirent part dès le soir même. Les avis allaient être partagés d'abord, avant de se concentrer sur celui qui eut finalement l'approbation générale.

M. Wolston ne connaissait guère que la partie qui s'étendait entre le ruisseau des Chacals et le cap de l'Espoir-Trompé, comprenant les métairies de Waldegg, de l'ermitage d'Eberfurt, de Zuckertop et de Prospect-Hill.

«Et je m'étonne, mon cher Zermatt, dit-il un jour, que, depuis douze ans, ni vos enfants ni vous n'ayez essayé de pénétrer à l'intérieur de la Nouvelle-Suisse…

— Et pourquoi l'aurions-nous fait, Wolston?… répliqua M. Zermatt. Songez donc à ceci: lorsque le naufrage du *Landlord* nous eut jetés sur cette côte, mes fils n'étaient que des enfants, et incapables de me seconder dans une exploration… ma femme n'aurait pu m'accompagner, et il eût été très imprudent de la laisser seule…

— Seule avec François qui n'avait que cinq ans… ajouta Mme Betsie, et, d'ailleurs, nous n'avions pas perdu l'espoir d'être recueillis par quelque bâtiment…

— Avant tout, continua M. Zermatt, il s’agissait de pourvoir à nos besoins immédiats, en restant dans le voisinage du navire, tant que nous n’en aurions pas retiré tout ce qui pouvait nous être utile. Or, à l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, nous avions de l’eau douce, sur la rive gauche, des champs faciles à cultiver, et, non loin, des plantations toutes venues. Bientôt, le hasard nous fit découvrir cette demeure saine et sûre de Felsenheim. Devions-nous perdre du temps à satisfaire notre curiosité?…

— D’ailleurs, s’éloigner de la baie du Salut, fit observer Ernest, n’était-ce pas s’exposer à rencontrer des indigènes, tels que ceux de l’Andaman et du Nicobar, de si féroce réputation?…

— Enfin, reprit M. Zermatt, chaque jour amenait une occupation que la nécessité ne nous permettait pas de remettre… Chaque année nouvelle nous imposait les travaux de l’année précédente… Et puis, les habitudes prises, l’accoutumance au bien-être, nous enracinaient pour ainsi dire à cette place… et voilà pourquoi nous ne l’avons jamais quittée!… Ainsi se sont écoulés les ans, et il semble que nous soyons arrivés d’hier. Que voulez-vous, mon cher Wolston, nous étions bien dans ce district, et nous n’avons pas pensé qu’il fût sage d’aller chercher mieux au dehors!

— Tout cela est juste, répondit M. Wolston, mais, pour mon compte, je n’aurais pu résister pendant tant d’années au désir d’explorer la contrée vers le sud, l’est et l’ouest…

— Parce que vous êtes de sang anglais, répondit M. Zermatt. et que vos instincts vous poussent à voyager. Mais nous sommes de ces Suisses, paisibles et sédentaires, qui ne quittent qu’à regret leurs montagnes… des gens qui aiment à rester chez eux, et, sans les circonstances qui nous ont obligés d’abandonner l’Europe…

— Je proteste, père, répliqua Jack, je proteste en ce qui me concerne!… Tout Suisse que je suis, j’aurais aimé à courir le monde!

— Tu es digne d’être Anglais, mon cher Jack, déclara Ernest, et entends bien que je ne te blâme aucunement d’avoir ces goûts de locomotion. Je pense, d’ailleurs, que M. Wolston a raison. Il est nécessaire que nous opérions une reconnaissance complète de notre Nouvelle-Suisse…

— Qui est une île de l’océan Indien, nous le savons maintenant, ajouta M. Wolston, et il sera bon que cela soit fait avant le retour de la *Licorne*.

— Quand le père voudra!… s’écria Jack, toujours prêt à se lancer dans les découvertes.

— Nous reparlerons de cela après la mauvaise saison, déclara M. Zermatt. Je ne suis point opposé à un voyage dans l’intérieur… Avouons toutefois que nous avons été favorisés en abordant sur cette côte à la fois salubre et fertile!… En existe-t-il une autre qui la vaille?…

— Et qu’en sait-on?… répondit Ernest. Sans doute, lorsque nous avons doublé le cap de l’Est afin de gagner la baie de la Licorne, notre pinasse n’a longé qu’un littoral de roches dénudées, de récifs dangereux, et même, au mouillage de la corvette, il n’y avait qu’une grève sablonneuse. Au delà, en descendant vers le sud, il est probable que la Nouvelle-Suisse présente un aspect moins désolé…

— Le moyen d’être fixé à cet égard, dit Jack, c’est d’en faire le tour avec la pinasse. Nous saurons alors quelle est sa configuration…

— Mais, insista M. Wolston, si vous n’êtes allés dans l’est que jusqu’à la baie de la Licorne, vous avez suivi les côtes du nord sur une plus grande étendue…

— Oui… pendant une quinzaine de lieues environ, répondit Ernest, du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé à la baie des Perles.

— Et nous n’avons pas même eu la curiosité, s’écria Jack, de visiter la Roche-Fumante…

— Un îlot aride, fit observer Annah, et que Jenny n’a jamais eu l’envie de revoir!

— En somme, conclut M. Zermatt, le plus utile sera d’explorer les territoires qui avoisinent la baie des Perles jusqu’à la côte, car au-delà se succèdent des prairies verdoyantes, des collines accidentées, des champs de cotonniers, avec des bois touffus…

— Où l’on récolte des truffes! dit Ernest.

— Ah! le gourmand! s’écria Jack.

— Des truffes, en effet, répliqua en riant M. Zermatt, et où l’on trouve aussi ceux qui les déterrent…

— Sans oublier les panthères et les lions!… ajouta Betsie.

— Eh bien, de tout cela, déclara M. Wolston, il résulte qu’il ne faudra s’aventurer ni de ce côté ni d’un autre, sans prendre des précautions. Mais, puisque notre future colonie aura besoin de s’étendre au-delà de la Terre-Promise, il me paraît préférable d’en reconnaître l’intérieur au lieu d’en faire le tour par mer…

— Et avant que soit revenue la corvette, ajouta Ernest. A mon avis, même, le mieux sera de franchir le défilé de Cluse, de traverser la vallée de Grünthal, de manière à s’élever jusqu’aux montagnes qu’on aperçoit des hauteurs d’Eberfurt.

— Ne vous ont-elles pas paru fort éloignées?… demanda M. Wolston.

— Oui… d’une dizaine de lieues environ… répondit Ernest.

— Je suis certaine qu’Ernest a déjà fait un plan de voyage, dit Annah Wolston en souriant.

— Je l’avoue, Annah, répondit le jeune homme, et il me tarde même de pouvoir établir une carte exacte de toute notre Nouvelle-Suisse.

— Mes amis, dit alors M. Zermatt, voici ce que je propose pour donner un commencement de satisfaction à M. Wolston.

— Accepté d’avance… répliqua Jack.

— Attends donc, impatient… Une douzaine de jours s’écouleront avant que les travaux de la seconde moisson nous réclament, et, si cela vous convient, nous en consacrerons la moitié à visiter la partie de l’île qui borde le rivage de l’est…

— Et alors, objecta Mme Wolston d’un ton peu approbateur, tandis que M. Zermatt, ses deux fils et M. Wolston seront en excursion, Mme Zermatt, Annah et moi, nous resterons seules à Felsenheim?…

— Non, madame Wolston, répondit M. Zermatt, et la pinasse prendra tout le monde à bord…

— Quand partons-nous?… s’écria Jack. Aujourd’hui…

— Pourquoi pas hier?… répliqua M. Zermatt en riant.

— Puisque nous avons déjà reconnu l’intérieur de la baie des Perles, dit Ernest, il vaut mieux, en effet, suivre le rivage du levant. La pinasse se rendrait directement à la baie de la Licorne, et continuerait sa route en descendant vers le sud. Peut-être découvririons-nous l’embouchure d’une rivière, dont on essaierait de remonter le cours…

— C’est une excellente idée, affirma M. Zermatt.

— A moins, fit observer M. Wolston, qu’il ne fût préférable de faire le tour de l’île…

— Le tour?… répondit Ernest. Eh! il faudrait plus de temps que nous n’en avons, car, lors de notre première excursion à la vallée de Grünthal, on ne distinguait que l’arête bleuâtre des montagnes à l’horizon…

— Voilà précisément sur quoi il importe d’avoir un renseignement précis… insista M. Wolston.

— Et ce que nous devrions savoir depuis longtemps! déclara Jack.

— C’est entendu, conclut M. Zermatt, et peut-être ce littoral présente-t-il l’embouchure d’une rivière qu’il sera possible de remonter, sinon avec la pinasse, du moins avec le canot.»

Ce projet accepté, on fixa le départ au surlendemain.

Trente-six heures, du reste, ce n’était pas trop demander pour les préparatifs. D’abord il convenait de mettre l’*Elisabeth* en état de faire le voyage, et, en même temps, il fallait pourvoir à la nourriture des animaux domestiques pendant une absence que des circonstances imprévues prolongeraient peut-être.

Donc, besogne assez longue pour les uns comme pour les autres.

M. Wolston et Jack s'occupèrent de visiter la pinasse, qui était mouillée au fond de la crique. Elle n'avait pas pris la mer depuis son voyage à la baie de la Licorne. Certaines réparations durent être faites, et M. Wolston s'y entendait. La navigation ne lui serait pas non plus chose nouvelle, et ne pouvait-on compter sur Jack, l'intrépide successeur de Fritz, qui manœuvrait l'*Elisabeth* comme le kaïak?… Et même il y aurait lieu de réprimer son ardeur: elle risquait de le pousser à quelque imprudence.

M. Zermatt et Ernest, Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah, chargés d'approvisionner les étables et la basse-cour, s'en acquittèrent avec soin. Il restait grande quantité des récoltes précédentes. En leur qualité d'herbivores, ni les buffles, ni l'onagre, ni les ânons, ni les vaches, ni l'autruche, ne manqueraient de rien. On assurerait également la nourriture des poules, oies, canards, du cormoran de Jenny, des deux chacals, du singe et des chiens. Seraient emmenés seulement Braun et Falb, car, au cours de cette excursion, il y aurait occasion de chasser, si la pinasse relâchait sur un point de la côte.

Il va de soi que ces dispositions nécessitèrent une visite aux métairies de Waldegg, de l'ermitage d'Eberfurt, de Zuckertop, de Prospect-Hill, où étaient répartis les divers animaux. On tenait à ce qu'elles fussent toujours disposées à recevoir les visiteurs pour quelques jours. Le chariot aidant, ce délai de trente-six heures, demandé par M. Zermatt, ne fut pas dépassé.

Au vrai, il n’y avait pas de temps à perdre. Les récoltes jaunissantes touchaient à leur maturité. La moisson n’aurait pu être retardée de plus d’une douzaine de jours, et nul doute que la pinasse fût de retour avant ce délai.

Enfin, dans la soirée du 14 mars, une caisse de viande conservée, un sac de farine de manioc, un baril d’hydromel, un tonnelet de vin de palme, quatre fusils, quatre pistolets, de la poudre, du plomb, des projectiles en quantité suffisante même pour les deux petites pièces de l’*Elisabeth*, des couvertures, du linge, des vêtements de rechange, des vareuses de toile cirée, des ustensiles de cuisine étaient mis à bord.

Tout étant prêt pour le départ, il n’y avait plus qu’à profiter, aux premières lueurs de l’aube, de la brise qui soufflerait de terre afin de remonter jusqu’au cap de l’Est.

Après une nuit tranquille, dès cinq heures du matin, les familles s’embarquèrent, accompagnées des deux jeunes chiens qui se livraient à mille gambades.

Lorsque les passagers eurent pris place sur le pont, le canot fut hissé à l’arrière. Puis, la brigantine, la misaine et le foc parés, M. Zermatt à la barre, M. Wolston et Jack aux écoutes, la pinasse chercha le vent, et, au-delà de l’îlot du Requin, ne tarda pas à perdre de vue les hauteurs de Felsenheim.

CHAPITRE VIII

Navigation – Le tour de l’écueil du Landlord. – La baie de la Licorne.

— *L’Elisabeth au mouillage. – Au sommet de la falaise. – Contrée aride.*

— *La région au sud. – Projets pour le lendemain.*

Lès qu’elle eut franchi le goulet, la pinasse glissa à la surface de cette large étendue de mer comprise entre le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé et le cap de l’Est. Il faisait beau temps. Le ciel, d’un bleu gris, était tendu de quelques nuages qui tamisaient les rayons du soleil.

Le vent soufflait de terre à cette heure matinale et favorisait la marche de l’*Elisabeth*. Ce ne serait qu’après avoir doublé le cap de l’Est qu’elle sentirait la brise du large.

Le léger bâtiment avait déployé toute sa voilure de brigantin, même un foc volant et les voiles de flèche de ses deux mâts. A l’allure du grand largue, bon plein, un peu incliné sur sa hanche de tribord, son étrave fendait ces eaux aussi calmes que celles d’un lac et il filait ses huit nœuds, laissant en arrière un long sillage d’écume clapotante.

Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et sa fille, assises sur le petit tillac, se retournaient parfois. Leurs regards parcouraient le littoral depuis Falkenhorst jusqu’à la pointe de l’Espoir-Trompé, très abaissée par l’éloignement. Tous goûtaient le charme berceur de cette rapide navigation, avec les derniers souffles chargés des fraîches senteurs de la terre.

Et quelles réflexions venaient à Betsie, et quels souvenirs rappelaient à sa mémoire ces douze ans écoulés! Elle revoyait le bateau de cuves, improvisé pour le sauvetage, que le moindre faux coup eût fait chavirer… puis ce fragile appareil se dirigeant vers une côte inconnue avec tout ce qu'elle aimait, son mari, ses quatre fils dont le plus jeune avait cinq ans à peine… enfin elle débarquait à l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, et la première tente était dressée à l'endroit qui fut Zeltheim avant d'être Felsenheim. Et quelles mortelles appréhensions, lorsque M. Zermatt et Fritz retournaient au vaisseau naufragé! Et, voici qu'à présent, sur cette pinasse bien gréée, bien gouvernée, tenant bien la mer, c'était sans aucune crainte qu'elle prenait part à ce voyage de découverte sur la côte orientale de l'île. D'ailleurs, quels changements depuis cinq mois, et quels autres, plus importants peut-être, se laissaient entrevoir dans un très prochain avenir!

M. Zermatt manœuvrait de manière à utiliser le vent qui tendait à calmir, à mesure que l'*Elisabeth* s'éloignait de la terre. M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack se tenaient aux écoutes, afin de les raidir ou de les mollir suivant le besoin. 11 eût été dommage de se voir encalminé avant d'être à la hauteur du cap de l'Est, où la pinasse recevrait la brise du large.

Aussi M. Wolston de dire:

«Je crains que le vent refuse, et voici que nos voiles se dégonflent…

— En effet, répondit M. Zermatt, le vent faiblit, mais, puisqu'il vient de l'arrière, mettons la misaine d'un bord, la brigantine de l'autre!… Nous y gagnerons sans doute un peu de vitesse…

— Et dire qu'il ne faudrait pas plus d'une demi-heure pour doubler la pointe… fit observer Ernest.

— Si la brise tombe tout à fait, proposa Jack, il n’y a qu’à garnir les avirons, puis „nager” jusqu’au cap. Lorsque nous serons quatre à le faire, M. Wolston, mon père, Ernest et moi, la pinasse ne restera pas stationnaire, j’imagine…

— Et qui tiendra le gouvernail, quand vous serez tous aux avirons?… demanda Mme Zermatt.

— Toi… mère… ou Mme Wolston… ou même Annah, répliqua Jack. Eh! pourquoi pas Annah?… Je suis sûr qu’elle ne serait pas embarrassée de pousser la barre à tribord ou à bâbord comme un vieux loup de mer!…

— Pourquoi pas… répondit en riant la jeune fille, surtout si je n’ai qu’à suivre vos conseils, Jack…

— Bon! diriger un bateau, ce n’est pas plus difficile que diriger un ménage, et comme toutes les femmes s’y entendent de naissance…» répliqua Jack.

Il ne fut pas nécessaire de recourir aux avirons, ni – ce qui eût été plus simple, – de se faire remorquer par le canot. Lorsque les deux voiles eurent été disposées en ciseaux, la pinasse reçut plus docilement l’action de la brise, et elle gagna sensiblement vers le cap de l’Est.

Au surplus, à de certains indices, nul doute que le vent d’ouest ne se fît sentir au delà. De ce côté, la mer verdissait à moins d’une lieue. Parfois, de petites lames, échelonnant leurs blanches rayures, s’éclairaient de reflets luminescents. La navigation se poursuivit donc sous une allure favorable, et il était à peine huit heures et demie, lorsque l’*Elisabeth* se trouva par le travers du cap.

La voilure ayant été modifiée, le petit bâtiment prit une marche plus rapide, balancé par un léger tangage qui n’incommoda d’ailleurs ni les passagers ni les passagères.

La brise étant franchement établie, M. Zermatt proposa de remonter vers le nord-est, afin de contourner la masse rocheuse sur laquelle s’était brisé le *Landlord*.

«Nous le pouvons sans peine, répondit M. Wolston. et, pour mon compte, je serais assez curieux de voir l’écueil sur lequel la tempête vous avait jetés si en dehors de la route entre le cap de Bonne-Espérance et Batavia.

— Un naufrage qui a fait de nombreuses victimes, ajouta Mme Zermatt, dont la figure s’assombrit à ce souvenir. Seuls, mon mari, mes enfants et moi, nous avons échappé à la mort…

— Ainsi, demanda M. Wolston, on n’a jamais appris que personne de l’équipage eût été recueilli en mer ou se fût réfugié sur les terres voisines?…

— Personne, d’après ce qu’a déclaré le lieutenant Littlestone, répondit M. Zermatt, et, depuis longtemps, le *Landlord* était considéré comme perdu corps et biens.

— A ce propos, dit Ernest, il faut remarquer que l’équipage de la *Dorcas*, sur laquelle Jenny avait pris passage, s’est vu plus favorisé que le nôtre, puisque le bosseman et deux matelots ont été conduits à Sydney…

— C’est juste, répondit M. Zermatt. Mais peut-on affirmer que quelques survivants du *Landlord* n’aient pu trouver refuge sur une des côtes de l’océan Indien, et que même, après tant d’années, ils n’y seraient pas encore comme nous sommes à la Nouvelle-Suisse?…

— A cela rien d’impossible, déclara Ernest, car notre île n’est située qu’à trois cents lieues de l’Australie. Or, comme le littoral australien de l’ouest est peu fréquenté des navires européens, les naufragés n’auraient eu aucune chance d’être arrachés aux mains des indigènes.

— Ce qu’il faut conclure de tout cela, affirma M. Wolston, c’est que ces parages sont dangereux, et les tempêtes s’y déchaînent fréquemment… En quelques années, la perte du *Landlord*… la perte de la *Dorcas*…

— Sans doute, répondit Ernest. Toutefois, tenons compte qu’à l’époque de ces naufrages, le gisement de notre île n’était pas porté sur les cartes, et il n’est pas étonnant que plusieurs bâtiments se soient perdus sur les récifs qui l’entourent. Mais, très prochainement, son relèvement sera établi avec une précision aussi absolue que celui des autres îles de la mer des Indes…

— C’est tant pis… s’écria Jack, oui… tant pis que la Nouvelle-Suisse tombe dans le domaine public!»

L’*Elisabeth* évoluait alors par l’ouest de l’écueil, et comme elle avait dû serrer le vent afin de contourner les roches extrêmes, elle n’eut plus qu’à laisser porter en cette direction.

Sur le flanc opposé de cet écueil, M. Zermatt montra à M. Wolston l’étroite coupure dans laquelle une énorme lame avait introduit le *Landlord*. La brèche, ouverte sous les façons du navire par la hache d’abord, par une première explosion ensuite, avait permis de retirer les objets qu’il contenait, en attendant le jour où la destruction totale s’était accomplie au moyen d’une dernière charge de poudre. Des débris du navire, il ne resta plus rien sur l’écueil, le flot ayant tout porté à la côte, aussi bien les objets susceptibles de surnager que ceux dont le flottement avait été préalablement assuré à l’aide de tonnes vides, tels que des chaudières, des pièces de fer, de cuivre, de plomb, les caronades de quatre dont les deux de l’îlot du Requin et les autres de la batterie de Felsenheim.

En rasant les roches, les passagers de la pinasse cherchèrent à voir si quelques épaves n’apparaissaient pas sous ces eaux claires et calmes. Deux ans et demi auparavant, Fritz, embarqué sur son kaïak pour cette excursion à la baie des Perles, avait encore distingué au fond de la mer nombre de gros canons, des affûts, des boulets, des masses de fer, des fragments de quille et de cabestan, dont le repêchage eût exigé l’emploi d’une cloche à plongeur. Il est vrai, au cas même qu’il eût pu disposer de cet appareil, M. Zermatt n’y aurait pas trouvé grand profit. Actuellement, aucun de ces objets n’était visible sur le fond sous-marin, et une couche de sable, entremêlée de longues algues, recouvrait les derniers débris du *Landlord*.

Le tour de l’écueil achevé. Y *Elisabeth* obliqua vers le sud, de manière à ranger d’assez près le cap de l’Est. M. Zermatt manœuvra prudemment toutefois, car une des pointes se projetait vers le large au milieu des récifs.

Trois quarts d’heure après, au delà de cette pointe, qui marquait très probablement l’extrémité orientale de la Nouvelle-Suisse, la pinasse put suivre les contours du littoral à la distance d’une demi-lieue, en recevant le vent du nord-ouest par-dessus la terre.

Au cours de cette navigation, M. Zermatt eut à constater de nouveau quel aride aspect présentait la côte orientale de l’île. Pas un arbre sur les falaises, pas trace de végétation à leur base, pas un ruisseau affluant entre les grèves nues et désertes. Rien que des roches uniformément calcinées par le soleil. Quel contraste avec les verdoyants rivages de la baie du Salut, et leur prolongement jusqu'au cap de l'Espoir-Trompé!

Et M. Zermatt de dire:

«Si, après le naufrage du *Landlord*, nous étions arrivés sur cette côte de l'est, que serions-nous devenus, et comment aurions-nous trouvé à vivre?…

— La nécessité, répondit M. Wolston, vous eût obligés à gagner l'intérieur… En contournant la baie du Salut, vous auriez certainement atteint l'emplacement où fut plantée la tente de Zeltheim…

— C'est à croire, mon cher Wolston, répliqua M. Zermatt, mais au prix de quelles fatigues, et à quel désespoir aurions-nous été en proie pendant ces premiers jours…

— Et qui sait même, ajouta Ernest, si notre bateau de cuves ne se fût pas brisé sur ces roches!… Quelle différence avec l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, où le débarquement a pu s'effectuer sans danger ni peine!

— Le ciel vous a visiblement protégés, mes amis, affirma Mme Wolston.

— Visiblement, ma chère Merry, répondit Mme Zermatt, et je n'oublie pas de l'en remercier chaque jour.»

Vers onze heures, l'*Elisabeth* atteignit la baie de la Licorne, et, une demi-heure plus tard, elle jeta l'ancre au pied d'une roche, près de l'endroit où la corvette anglaise avait pris sa relâche.

L'intention de M. Zermatt, d'accord avec ses compagnons, était de débarquer sur ce coin de la baie, d'y passer le reste de la journée, puis d'en repartir le lendemain, au lever du jour, en continuant de longer le littoral.

Lorsque l’ancre eut été envoyée par le fond, une amarre rapprocha l’arrière de la pinasse et le débarquement s’effectua sur un sable fin et dur.

Autour de la baie se dressait une falaise calcaire qui mesurait une centaine de pieds de sa base à sa crête, à laquelle on ne pouvait accéder que par une étroite coupure ménagée en son milieu.

Les deux familles parcoururent d’abord cette grève sur laquelle se distinguaient encore les traces de campement. Çà et là, quelques empreintes conservées dans le sable au-dessus du relais de la mer, des débris de bois provenant des réparations faites à la corvette, les trous de pieux qui fixaient les tentes au sol, des morceaux de houille épars entre les galets, et les cendres des foyers.

Cet état de choses amena M. Zermatt à émettre les réflexions suivantes, très justifiées par les circonstances:

«Supposons, dit-il, que cette visite à la côte orientale de l’île, nous la fassions aujourd’hui pour la première fois. Devant ces preuves indiscutables d’un débarquement dont les traces eussent été récentes, de quels regrets, de quel chagrin aurions-nous été saisis!… Ainsi donc un navire était venu mouiller à cette place, son équipage avait campé au fond de cette baie, et nous n’en avions pas eu connaissance!… Et, après avoir quitté ce littoral si aride, pouvait-on espérer qu’il y voudrait jamais revenir?…

— Ce n’est que trop vrai, répondit Betsie. A quoi a-t-il tenu que nous ayons appris l’arrivée de la *Licorne*’?…

— A un hasard… dit Jack, un pur hasard!

— Non, mon fils, répondit M. Zermatt, et, quoi qu’en ait dit Ernest, c’est à cette habitude que nous avions de tirer à cette époque, chaque année, nos caronades de l’îlot du Requin, auxquelles ont répondu les trois détonations de la corvette.

— Je suis bien obligé de me rendre… avoua Ernest.

— Et quelles ont été nos incertitudes, nos angoisses, reprit M. Zermatt, pendant les trois jours qui ont suivi, alors que la tempête nous empêchait de retourner à l’îlot renouveler nos signaux, et quelle crainte que le bâtiment ne fût reparti avant que nous eussions pu le rejoindre!…

— Oui, mes amis, observa M. Wolston, c’eût été pour vous une affreuse déception! Constater qu’un navire avait relâché dans cette baie, sans que vous eussiez communiqué avec lui!… A mon avis, toutefois, vos chances d’être rapatriés n’en étaient pas moins très augmentées…

— Cela n’est pas douteux, déclara Ernest, puisque notre île n’était plus inconnue, puisque ce navire devait en avoir relevé le gisement qui eût figuré sur les cartes marines… Quelque bâtiment fût venu un jour ou l’autre prendre possession de cette terre…

— Enfin, et pour conclure, dit Jack, la *Licorne* est arrivée, la *Licorne* a été signalée, la *Licorne* a été visitée, la *Licorne* est partie, la *Licorne* reviendra, et, ce qui nous reste à faire, je pense, c’est…

— De déjeuner?… demanda en riant Annah Wolston.

— Précisément, répliqua Ernest.

— A table donc, s’écria Jack, car j’ai une faim à dévorer mon assiette… et un estomac à la digérer!»

Tout le monde fut d’accord pour s’installer au fond de la grève, près de la coupure, à l’abri des rayons du soleil. On alla chercher les provisions de la pinasse, conserves de viandes, jambons fumés, volailles froides, gâteaux de cassave, pain cuit de la veille. En fait de boisson, la cambuse de la pinasse possédait plusieurs fûts d’hydromel, et même quelques bouteilles du vin de Falkenhorst qui seraient débouchées au dessert.

Après le débarquement des vivres et des ustensiles, Mme Wolston, Mme Zermatt et Annah mirent le couvert sur un tapis de sable fin doublé d’épaisses touffes d’un varech très sec. Puis, chacun prit sa part d’un déjeuner copieux qui permettrait d’attendre le dîner de six heures du soir.

Assurément, débarquer sur cette grève, se rembarquer, relâcher en un autre point du littoral, puis le quitter dans les mêmes conditions, cela n’aurait point valu la peine d’avoir entrepris ce voyage. Le district de la Terre-Promise ne devait comprendre, en somme, qu’une minime portion de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Aussi, dès que le repas fut achevé, M. Wolston de dire:

«Cet après-midi, je propose de l’employer à pousser une pointe vers l’intérieur…

— Et sans perdre de temps!… s’écria Jack. Nous devrions déjà être à une bonne lieue d’ici…

— Vous n’auriez pas parlé de la sorte avant le déjeuner, lui fit observer Annah en souriant, car vous avez mangé autant que quatre…

— Et je suis prêt à faire quatre fois plus de chemin… répondit Jack, et même à aller jusqu’au bout du monde… de notre petit monde, s’entend!

— Mais si tu vas si loin, si loin, mon cher enfant, dit Mme Zermatt, il nous sera impossible de te suivre… Ni Mme Wolston, ni Annah, ni ta mère ne se risqueraient à t'accompagner…

— Décidément, déclara M. Zermatt, en frappant sur l'épaule de son fils, je ne sais plus comment m'y prendre pour calmer les impatiences de notre Jack!… Il n'y a aucun moyen de le retenir… Je crois même que jamais Fritz n'a montré tant de…

— Fritz?… riposta Jack. Eh! ne faut-il pas que je cherche à le remplacer en toutes choses?… Au retour, il ne sera plus ce qu'il était avant de partir…

— Et pourquoi?… demanda Annah.

— Parce qu'il sera marié, père de famille, papa et même grand-papa… pour peu qu'il tarde à revenir…

— Y pensez-vous, Jack?… repartit Mme Wolston. Fritz grand-père après un an d'absence!…

— Enfin… grand-père ou non, il sera marié…

— Et pourquoi ne serait-il plus le même?… reprit Annah Wolston.

— Laissez dire Jack, ma chère Annah, répondit Ernest. Son tour de faire un excellent mari arrivera comme à Fritz!…

— Comme à toi, frère, repartit Jack, en regardant Ernest et la jeune fille. Quant à moi, cela m'étonnerait, et je crois que la nature m'a spécialement créé pour être oncle… le meilleur des oncles… un oncle de la Nouvelle-Suisse!… Mais il ne s'agit pas, que je sache, d'aller se prélasser aujourd'hui en habit de noces devant le syndic de Felsenheim… Il s’agit de pousser une reconnaissance au-delà de cette falaise…

— Je pense, observa alors Mme Wolston, que Mme Zermatt, Annah et moi, nous ferons mieux de rester ici pendant votre excursion, qui sera très fatigante, si elle se prolonge jusqu’au soir. Cette grève est absolument déserte, et nous n’avons aucune mauvaise visite à craindre. D’ailleurs, il nous serait toujours facile de retourner à bord de la pinasse… De cette façon, en nous laissant au campement, vous ne risquerez ni d’être retardés ni d’être arrêtés…

— Ma chère Merry, dit M. Zermatt, je crois, en effet, que vous seriez ici en parfaite sûreté… Et, pourtant, je ne serais pas tranquille en vous quittant…

— Bon! proposa Ernest, je ne demande pas mieux que de rester… pendant que…

— Ah! s’écria Jack, voilà bien notre savant!… Rester… sans doute pour remettre le nez dans ses bouquins!… Je suis sûr qu’il a fourré un ou deux volumes à fond de cale!… Eh bien! qu’il reste, mais à la condition qu’Annah vienne avec nous…

— Et Mme Wolston et ta mère également, ajouta M. Zermatt. Toute réflexion faite, cela vaut mieux. Elles s’arrêteront, lorsqu’elles seront fatiguées…

— Et alors Ernest pourra leur tenir compagnie… s’écria Jack en riant de plus belle.

— Ne perdons pas de temps, dit M. Wolston. Le difficile eût été de gravir cette falaise, dont j’estime la hauteur à cent ou cent cinquante pieds. Par bonheur, les pentes de cette coupure ne sont pas raides, et celle-ci donne accès au plateau supérieur. Une fois sur la crête, nous déciderons ce qu’il conviendra de faire…

— En route… en route!…» répéta Jack.

Avant de partir, M. Zermatt alla vérifier l’amarrage de l’*Elisabeth*. Il s’assura que même à marée basse elle n’était point exposée à toucher, et qu’à marée haute, elle ne risquait pas de heurter les roches.

La petite troupe se dirigea donc vers la coupure. Il va sans dire que les hommes portaient chacun un fusil, un sac à plomb, une poire à poudre et les cartouches à balles préparées par Jack. En somme, le jeune chasseur comptait bien abattre quelque gibier, peut-être quelque fauve, d’espèce connue ou inconnue, en cette partie de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Braun et Falb quêtaient en avant. On les suivit par une sorte de sentier oblique, dont les sinuosités rachetaient la raideur. A la saison des pluies, la coupure devait servir de déversoir aux eaux du plateau, transformées en torrent. Mais, à cette époque, en plein été, le lit était à sec. Comme on marchait entre des roches prêtes à se précipiter en avalanches pour peu qu’un choc dérangeât leur équilibre, il y eut quelques précautions à prendre.

Il ne fallut pas moins d’une demi-heure, étant donnés les détours, pour atteindre le sommet de la falaise. Le premier qui déboucha sur la crête, – on ne saurait s’en étonner, – fut l’impatient Jack.

Devant ses yeux, vers l’ouest, une vaste plaine se développait à perte de vue.

Jack demeurait là stupéfait. Il se tournait et se retournait. Puis, lorsqu’il eut été rejoint par M. Wolston:

«En voilà un pays!… s’écria-t-il. Quelle surprise et aussi quelle déception!»

Cette déconvenue devint générale, lorsque M. Zermatt et ses compagnons eurent paru sur le plateau. Mmes Wolston et Zermatt, Annah près d’elles, s’étaient assises au pied d’un quartier de roche. Pas un arbre qui eût pu fournir un abri contre un soleil dévorant, pas un tapis de verdure pour s’étendre. Le sol pierreux, semé de blocs erratiques, impropre à toute végétation, était tapissé, par places, de ces mousses sauvages auxquelles l’humus n’est point nécessaire. On aurait dit, ainsi que le déclara M. Zermatt, un désert de l’Arabie Pétrée confinant au fertile district de la Terre-Promise.

Oui! surprenant contraste avec cette région qui se développait entre le ruisseau des Chacals et le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, cette campagne qui s’étendait au delà du défilé de Cluse, la vallée de Grünthal, les territoires limitrophes de la baie des Perles! Et, il convient de le répéter après Mme Zermatt, quelle eût été la situation de la famille naufragée, si le bateau de cuves l’avait déposée sur la côte orientale de l’île?…

Ainsi donc, depuis cette falaise jusqu’à la baie du Salut qui se dessinait à deux lieues dans l’ouest, le regard n’embrassait qu’une contrée désolée, sans verdure, sans arbres, sans un cours d’eau. Aucun quadrupède ne se montrait à sa surface. Il semblait qu’elle fût abandonnée même des oiseaux de terre et de mer.

«Voici l’excursion terminée, dit M. Zermatt, du moins dans cette partie de notre île…

— Assurément, répondit M. Wolston, et il me paraît inutile de braver cette chaleur torride pour reconnaître un pays pierreux, dont il n’y a rien à faire.

— Combien la nature est capricieuse et fantaisiste!… observa Ernest. Elle ne procède que par contrastes!… Là-bas, toutes ses forces productrices en action… Ici, la plus effroyable stérilité…

— Je pense, dit alors Mme Zermatt, que le mieux est de redescendre sur la grève et de nous rembarquer…

— C’est mon avis, ajouta Mme Wolston.

— Soit, dit Jack, mais pas avant d’avoir grimpé à la pointe des dernières roches!»

Et il montrait un entassement qui s’élevait sur la gauche d’une soixantaine de pieds au-dessus du sol. En moins de cinq minutes, il en eut atteint le sommet. Puis, après avoir promené son regard sur l’horizon environnant, il cria à M. Wolston, à son père et à son frère de venir le rejoindre.

Fallait-il en conclure qu’il avait fait une découverte dans la direction du sud-est que sa main indiquait?…

MM. Wolston et Zermatt, non sans quelque peine, se furent bientôt hissés près de lui. En cette direction, en effet, le littoral présentait un aspect tout différent.

A deux lieues de la baie de la Licorne, la falaise, se rabaissant par un angle brusque, aboutissait à une large vallée, vraisemblablement arrosée par une des principales rivières de l’île. Sur le revers opposé de cette dépression se déroulait la masse verdoyante de bois épais. Entre les intervalles et au delà, la campagne développait une végétation puissante jusqu’aux extrêmes lointains du sud et du sud-ouest.

La portion stérile paraissait se réduire à cette aire de cinq à six lieues superficielles comprise entre le cap de l’Est et la baie du Salut.

Si jamais région demandait à être explorée, c’était bien celle qui se montrait pour la première fois aux regards. Que de surprises, que d’avantages elle ménageait peut-être, bien qu’elle ne pût jamais faire oublier la Terre-Promise!

«Partons… dit Jack.

— Partons», répéta M. Wolston, prêt à s’élancer dans la direction de la nouvelle vallée.

Mais deux grandes lieues sur un sol semé de blocs, en se frayant un passage entre les roches, que de temps il aurait fallu pour les franchir, que de fatigues aussi, sans parler des risques d’insolation sur ce plateau dénudé!

Aussi M. Zermatt dut-il modérer l’impatience de M. Wolston et de Jack en disant:

«Pas aujourd’hui… La journée est trop avancée… Attendons à demain… Au lieu de traverser cette région à pied, nous nous y rendrons par mer… La vallée que nous apercevons aboutit certainement à une coupée du littoral… à une crique où se jette quelque rivière… Si la pinasse peut y trouver un bon mouillage, nous consacrerons un ou deux jours à une sérieuse reconnaissance de l’intérieur.»

C’était le parti le plus sage, et personne n’y voulut faire d’objection.

Après un dernier coup d’œil, MM. Zermatt, Wolston et Jack descendirent et firent connaître ce qui avait été résolu. L’exploration, remise au lendemain, s’effectuerait dans des conditions qui permettraient à tout le monde d’y prendre part sans dangers et sans fatigues.

Il ne restait plus qu’à dévaler le sentier à travers la coupure, et il ne fallut que quelques minutes pour atteindre le pied de la falaise.

Si le gibier manquait aux grèves de la baie de la Licorne, – ce qui motiva les plaintes de Jack, – les poissons fourmillaient dans ses eaux et les crustacés entre ses roches, – ce dont Ernest se déclara fort satisfait. Avec l’aide d’Annah, il tendit des filets et fit bonne pêche. Il y eut donc au dîner un plat supplémentaire de gros crabes à chair très fine, et une friture de petites soles de bonne qualité.

Le dîner achevé, une dernière promenade conduisit jusqu’à l’extrémité de la grève et, vers neuf heures, les passagers étaient rentrés à bord de l’*Elisabeth*.

CHAPITRE IX

Vue de la côte. – Les manchots. – Un nouveau cours d’eau. – Territoires inconnus. – La chaîne de montagnes au sud. – Projet pour le lendemain.

— *La rivière Montrose.*

le lendemain, le premier soin de M. Zermatt fut d’interroger l’horizon du côté de l’est. Derrière quelques brumes, qui ne tarderaient pas à se dissoudre, s’arrondissait le disque solaire, élargi par la réfraction. Une magnifique journée s’annonçait. Rien ne permettait de pronostiquer un changement de temps, un trouble atmosphérique quelconque. Depuis trois ou quatre jours, la colonne du baromètre oscillait autour du beau fixe. L’air était rendu un peu opaque par les poussières, non alourdies par l’humidité, qu’il tenait en suspension. En outre, la brise, assez fraîche, semblait bien établie au nord-ouest. La mer serait calme jusqu’à une lieue de terre. La pinasse pouvait donc continuer en pleine sécurité sa navigation le long du littoral.

A six heures, tout le monde sur le pont, les amarres furent larguées. Avec sa misaine, sa brigantine, ses focs amures et bordés, le petit bâtiment, dès qu’il eut dépassé la pointe, prit le large où le vent se faisait mieux sentir. Une demi-heure après, cap au sud, M. Wolston à la barre, l’*Elisabeth* suivait les méandres de la côte à la distance d’une dizaine d’encablures, de manière que le regard pût en observer les moindres détails depuis la dentelure des grèves jusqu’à l’arête des falaises rocheuses.

A l’estime, quatre à cinq lieues devaient séparer la baie de la Licorne de la vallée relevée en direction du sud. Deux ou trois heures suffiraient à franchir cette distance. La marée, qui montait depuis le lever du soleil, portait en ce sens et serait probablement étale lorsque l'*Elisabeth* arriverait à destination. On verrait alors, d'après la nature des lieux et selon les éventualités, ce qu'il conviendrait de faire.

De chaque côté de l'*Elisabeth*, par bandes rapides, filaient en se jouant de superbes esturgeons, dont quelques-uns mesuraient de sept à huit pieds. Bien que Jack et Ernest eussent le vif désir de les harponner, M. Zermatt ne put leur accorder cette permission. D'ailleurs, à quoi bon s'attarder dans cette pêche? Des maquereaux et des vives qui se prennent en marche, soit. Aussi, les lignes, mises à la traîne, ramenèrent-elles plusieurs douzaines de ces excellents poissons qui, bouillis à l'eau salée, figureraient au déjeuner de la première relâche.

L'aspect de la côte ne se modifiait pas. Toujours une succession ininterrompue de parements calcaires ou granitiques, une haute bordure, le pied dans le sable, percée de cavernes, dans lesquelles les mugissements de la mer devaient être effroyables, lorsque les lames s'y engouffraient sous la poussée des vents du large. De ce littoral se dégageait une profonde impression de tristesse.

Cependant, à mesure que l'on descendait plus au sud, se manifestait une certaine animation, grâce au vol incessant des frégates, des fous, des mouettes, des albatros, dont les cris assourdissaient. Ils s'approchaient parfois à portée de fusil. Quelle démangeaison pour Jack, et eût-il résisté à ses instincts de chasseur, si Annah n'eût demandé grâce pour ces inoffensifs volatiles?…

«Et puis, fit-elle observer, parmi ces albatros se trouve peut-être celui de Jenny… Quel chagrin, Jack, si vous donniez la mort à ce pauvre animal!…

— Annah a raison… ajouta Ernest.

— Toujours raison, répliqua Jack, et je promets de ne plus tirer un seul albatros tant qu’on n’aura pas retrouvé le messager de la Roche-Fumante.

— Eh bien, reprit Annah, voulez-vous que je vous dise ma pensée?…

— Si je le veux!… répondit Jack.

— C’est qu’un jour ou l’autre on le reverra cet albatros…

— Évidemment, puisque je ne l’aurai pas tué!»

Vers neuf heures, la pinasse était presque par le travers de la dépression formée par un brusque retour de la falaise vers l’intérieur. La crête littorale commençait à s’abaisser. De larges talus moins rudes la raccordaient avec les grèves sablonneuses, accidentées de tumescences noirâtres. Autant de récifs que recouvrait le plein de la mer, et qui se projetaient parfois de plusieurs encablures au large. L’*Elisabeth* s’en rapprocha avec prudence. M. Wolston, penché à l’avant, observait attentivement les eaux, leur bouillonnement suspect, leur changement de couleur, tout ce qui eût signalé la présence d’un écueil.

«Ah! par exemple, s’écria Jack en ce moment, on ne dira pas, du moins, que cette côte est déserte!… Il y a du monde là-bas… et du beau monde!»

Tous les regards se portèrent vers les grèves et les roches, où les yeux perçants de Jack apercevaient des êtres vivants en grand nombre.

«Explique-toi, mon fils, lui dit sa mère. Tu vois là des hommes… des sauvages… peut-être…»

Et, des sauvages de cette cruelle race indo-malaise, c’était bien ce que Mme Zermatt, non sans raison, redoutait le plus!

«Voyons… Jack… réponds donc… lui dit son père.

— Rassurez-vous… rassurez-vous! s’écria Jack. Je n’ai point parlé d’êtres humains, et, si ceux-ci ont deux pieds, ils ont aussi des plumes…

— Alors ce sont des manchots?… demanda Ernest.

— Ou des pingouins, à ton choix.

— On peut s’y tromper, Jack, répondit Ernest, puisque ces volatiles sont très voisins dans l’ordre des palmipèdes.

— Disons des espèces d’oies… pour vous mettre d’accord… répliqua M. Zermatt, et ce nom est bien celui qui convient à ces stupides oiseaux.

— C’est peut-être cela qui les a fait prendre quelquefois pour des hommes… insinua Jack.

— Le moqueur! s’écria Annah Wolston.

— Oh! de loin, seulement… ajouta M. Zermatt. Et, en effet, regardez leurs cous entourés de plumes blanches, leurs ailerons qui pendent comme deux petits bras, leurs têtes droites, leurs pieds noirs, les rangs bien alignés qu’ils présentent!… On dirait une troupe en uniforme!… Vous souvenez-vous, mes enfants, combien ces manchots étaient nombreux, autrefois, sur les rochers, à l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals?…

— Et même, rappela Ernest, je vois encore Jack se jeter au milieu de la troupe, ayant de l’eau jusqu’à la ceinture, et s’escrimer si vaillamment qu’il abattit une demi-douzaine de ces manchots à coups de bâton!

— Rien de plus exact, avoua Jack. Or, comme je n’avais que dix ans à cette époque, n’est-ce pas que je promettais?…

— Et tu as tenu ta promesse! ajouta M. Zermatt en souriant. Quant à ces pauvres bêtes que nous avions si maltraitées, elles n’ont pas tardé à fuir les grèves de la baie du Salut, et c’est sur cette côte qu’elles sont venues chercher refuge.»

Que ce fût pour cette raison ou pour une autre, la vérité est que pingouins ou manchots avaient absolument déserté les rivages de la baie dès les premiers mois de l’installation à Felsenheim.

A continuer de suivre le rivage, l’*Elisabeth* rangea d’assez près de vastes espaces sur lesquels la mer basse devait laisser à sec des nappes d’efflorescences salines. Il y aurait là, sans doute, de quoi occuper une centaine de sauniers, et la future colonie y pourrait récolter tout le sel nécessaire à ses besoins.

Au pied de la falaise, qui se terminait par un angle brusque, se prolongeait un promontoire sous-marin. Aussi la pinasse dut-elle s’écarter d’une demi-lieue au large. Puis, lorsqu’elle piqua de nouveau sur la côte, ce fut pour se diriger vers la crique où débouchait la vallée observée des hauteurs de la baie de la Licorne.

«Une rivière… il y a une rivière!…» s’écria Jack, qui s’était hissé au capelage du mât de misaine.

M. Zermatt, sa lunette aux yeux, examinait cette partie du littoral, et voici ce qui s’offrait à la vue:

A droite, – après s’être coudé brusquement, le parement de la falaise remontait les pentes de l’intérieur. A gauche, la côte se terminait par un cap très éloigné, – trois ou quatre lieues au moins, – mais la campagne était toute verdoyante de prairies et bois, étages jusqu’à l’extrême horizon. Entre ces deux points s’arrondissait la crique qui formait un port naturel, couvert par des courtines rocheuses contre les mauvais vents de l’est, et dont les passes semblaient être aisément praticables.

A travers cette crique se jetait une rivière ombragée de beaux arbres, aux eaux limpides et calmes. Elle paraissait navigable et son cours s’infléchissait vers le sud-ouest, autant qu’on en pouvait juger de cette distance.

Il était tout indiqué que la pinasse vînt relâcher en cet endroit, où s’offrait un bon mouillage. Après avoir mis le cap en ligne sur la passe qui y donnait accès, sa voilure réduite à la brigantine et au foc, elle serra le vent, amures à tribord. Le flot, ayant encore une heure à monter, l’y aidait. La mer ne se brisait nulle part. Il est vrai, peut-être au plus bas du jusant, des récifs surgissaient-ils ça et là entre les clapotis du ressac.

Du reste, aucune mesure de prudence ne fut négligée. M. Zermatt, au gouvernail, M. Wolston et Ernest, postés à l’avant, Jack, achevalé sur les barres, observaient la passe dont l’*Elisabeth* tenait le milieu. Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et sa fille étaient assises sur le tillac. Personne ne parlait sous la double impression de la curiosité et d’une vague inquiétude à l’approche de cette contrée nouvelle, où, pour la première fois sans doute, des humains allaient mettre le pied. Le silence n’était troublé que par le murmure de l’eau le long de la coque, auquel se mêlaient le battement des voiles qui faséyaient, les indications envoyées par Jack, le cri des goélands et des mouettes, fuyant d’un vol effarouché vers les rochers de la crique.

Il était onze heures lorsque l’ancre tomba près d’une sorte de quai naturel, à gauche de l’embouchure, et qui se prêtait à un facile débarquement. Un peu en arrière, de grands palmiers offraient un abri suffisant contre les rayons du soleil arrivé presque à sa culmination méridienne. Après avoir déjeuné, on verrait à organiser une reconnaissance vers l’intérieur.

Inutile de dire que l’embouchure de cette rivière paraissait être aussi déserte que l’était celle du ruisseau des Chacals, la première fois que les naufragés y abordèrent. Il ne semblait pas que jamais être humain y eût imprimé son pas. Seulement, au lieu d’un rio, étroit, sinueux, innavigable, se développait un cours d’eau qui devait remonter profondément la partie médiane de l’île.

Jack sauta à terre, dès que l’*Elisabeth* eut mouillé, et la rangea le long des roches, en halant sur une amarre fixée à l’arrière. Il ne serait donc pas nécessaire d’employer le canot pour débarquer, et bientôt tout le monde eut pris pied sur la grève. Après avoir transporté les provisions à l’ombre du bouquet d’arbres, il ne fut d’abord question que de satisfaire un appétit formidable, aiguisé par le grand air d’une navigation de plusieurs heures.

Manger, – et même dévorer, – n’empêchait pas d’ailleurs d’échanger demandes et réponses. Diverses observations furent alors présentées – entre autres celle-ci, qui vint de M. Wolston:

«Peut-être est-il regrettable que nous n’ayons pas relâché de préférence sur la rive gauche de la rivière?… De ce côté-ci, la berge est basse, tandis que de l’autre elle est dominée d’une centaine de pieds par le contrefort de la falaise…

— Et je n’aurais pas été embarrassé de grimper jusqu’à la crête… affirma Jack. De là, au moins, nous aurions pu avoir une première vue du pays…

— Rien de plus facile que de traverser la crique avec notre canot, répondit M. Zermatt. Mais y a-t-il lieu de le regretter?… Sur l’autre rive, je n’aperçois que pierre et sable, à la limite de cette région aride qui s’étend depuis le cap de l’Est jusqu’à cette baie. De ce côté, au contraire, voici de la verdure, des arbres, de l’ombrage, et, au delà, s’étend cette campagne que nous avons aperçue du large et qu’il sera facile d’explorer… A mon avis, nous ne pouvions mieux choisir…

— Et nous approuvons le choix, n’est-il pas vrai, monsieur Wolston?… dit Betsie.

— En effet, madame Zermatt, et nous pouvons passer sur l’autre rive comme il nous plaira.

— J’ajoute même que nous sommes si agréablement en cet endroit… déclara Mme Wolston.

— Que vous ne voudriez plus le quitter!… repartit Jack. Allons, c’est convenu!… Abandonnons Felsenheim… Falkenhorst… le district de la Terre-Promise, et venons fonder, à l’embouchure de ce superbe fleuve, la capitale définitive de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

— Voilà Jack parti!… répondit Ernest. Mais, malgré ses plaisanteries, il est certain que l’importance de ce cours d’eau, la profondeur de la crique où il se jette, présentent plus d’avantages pour l’établissement d’une colonie que l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals… Encore faut-il explorer cette région sur une étendue suffisante, étudier ses ressources, et s’assurer si elle n’est pas fréquentée par des carnassiers d’espèces aussi variées que redoutables.

— C’est parler en sage, dit Annah Wolston.

— Comme parle toujours Ernest, repartit son frère.

— Dans tous les cas, ajouta M. Zermatt, si magnifique, si riche que soit le pays, l’idée ne viendra à personne de nous d’abandonner la Terre-Promise…

— Non, certes, affirma Mme Zermatt. Un tel abandon me briserait le cœur…

— Je vous comprends, ma chère Betsie, répondit Mme Wolston, et je ne consentirais jamais à me séparer de vous pour habiter en cet endroit…

— Eh! fit M. Wolston, il n’est pas question de cela, mais uniquement de parcourir les environs après le déjeuner!»

La question ainsi posée, tous furent d’accord pour faire le meilleur accueil à la proposition de M. Wolston. Toutefois, sa femme, sa fille et Mme Zermatt se fussent dispensées de prendre part à une excursion qui serait assez fatigante, si, après réflexion, M. Zermatt n’eût dit:

«Je n’aimerais pas vous savoir seules en cet endroit, ne fût-ce même que pour quelques heures, et, tu le sais, Betsie, je ne me suis jamais décidé à quitter Felsenheim sans t’avoir confiée à l’un de tes fils… Pendant notre absence, en cas de danger, que deviendriez-vous?… Je ne serais pas tranquille un instant… Mais tout peut s’arranger, et puisque la rivière est navigable, pourquoi ne pas la remonter ensemble?…

— Avec le canot?… dit Ernest.

— Non… avec la pinasse, que je préfère, d’ailleurs, ne pas abandonner à ce mouillage.

— C’est convenu, répondit Betsie, et nous sommes prêtes à vous accompagner toutes les trois.

— L’*Elisabeth* pourra-t-elle refouler le courant?… demanda M. Wolston.

— Le courant sera pour nous, répliqua M. Zermatt, si nous attendons la montée du flot. La marée va bientôt renverser, et dans six heures nous pourrons en tirer profit…

— Ne sera-t-il pas trop tard pour partir alors?… observa Mme Wolston.

— Trop tard en effet, répondit M. Zermatt. Aussi me paraît-il plus sage de finir ici cette journée, de passer la nuit à bord, et d’appareiller demain avec le flot dès le point du jour.

— Et jusque-là?… demanda Jack.

— Jusque-là, répondit M. Zermatt, nous aurons le temps de visiter la crique et ses environs. Cependant, comme la chaleur est excessive, je conseille à nos dames d’attendre au campement notre retour…

— Très volontiers, répondit Mme Wolston, à la condition que vous ne vous éloigniez pas…

— Il ne s’agit que d’une promenade sur la rive droite de la rivière, dont nous ne nous écarterons pas», promit M. Zermatt, qui tenait à toujours être dans le voisinage du campement.

Ainsi, grâce à ce projet, une reconnaissance de la basse vallée aurait été faite avant que l'on eût pénétré à l'intérieur.

Il résulta de cet arrangement que MM. Zermatt et Wolston, Ernest et Jack, après avoir remonté la berge, gagnèrent de légères tumescences, qui, du côté de l'ouest, raccordaient le cours d'eau avec la campagne.

Ainsi que cela avait été reconnu du large, ce territoire présentait un aspect très fertile, – des bois dont les masses touffues se succédaient à perte de vue, des plaines tapissées d'une herbe épaisse où des milliers de ruminants eussent trouvé à se nourrir, tout un réseau de rios, dont les eaux couraient vers la rivière, et, enfin, comme une barrière à l'horizon du sud-ouest, la chaîne de montagnes déjà relevée en cette direction.

«Et, à ce propos, dit M. Zermatt, je dois reconnaître que cette chaîne est moins éloignée que nous ne l'avions cru, lorsque, pour la première fois, nous l'avons aperçue des hauteurs de la vallée de Grünthal. Un rideau de brume, sans doute, la rendait bleuâtre, et j'avais estimé sa distance à une quinzaine de lieues. Il y a eu là une illusion d'optique. Ernest s'en rend compte, j'imagine…

— En effet, père, et, ce jour-là, nous avons vu l'éloignement double de ce qu'il est. Estimer la distance de ces montagnes à sept ou huit lieues de Grünthal, c'est, je crois, être très près de la réalité…

— Je partage cet avis, déclara M. Wolston. Mais, est-ce bien la même chaîne?…

— C'est la même, répondit Ernest, et je ne pense pas que la Nouvelle-Suisse soit assez vaste pour en renfermer une autre de cette importance.

— Et pourquoi pas?… répliqua Jack. Pourquoi notre île n’égalerait-elle pas en étendue une Sicile, une Madagascar, une Nouvelle-Zélande, une Nouvelle-Hollande?…

— Et pourquoi pas un continent?… s’écria M. Wolston en riant.

— Vous semblez dire, reprit Jack, que j’ai une propension tout exagérer…

— Ne t’en défends pas, mon cher enfant, dit M. Zermatt, et, après tout, cela dénote chez toi une imagination très surexcitable… Cependant, réfléchis à ceci, c’est que si notre île avait les dimensions que tu lui supposes et que probablement tu lui souhaites, elle eût difficilement échappé jusqu’ici aux regards des navigateurs…

–… De l’Ancien ou du Nouveau Continent!… ajouta Ernest. Sa position en cette partie de l’océan Indien est trop précieuse, et, si elle eût été connue, soyez sûrs que l’Angleterre, par exemple…

— Ne vous gênez pas, mon chez Ernest, dit M. Wolston d’un ton de bonne humeur. Nous autres Anglais, nous sommes des colonisateurs, et nous avons la prétention de coloniser tout ce qui se rencontre…

— Donc, pour achever, reprit M. Zermatt, du jour où notre île aurait été découverte, elle eût figuré sur les cartes de l’Amirauté et se fût sans doute appelée Nouvelle-Angleterre au lieu de Nouvelle-Suisse.

— Dans tous les cas, déclara M. Wolston, elle n’aura rien perdu pour attendre, puisque vous, le premier occupant, vous en avez fait l’abandon à la Grande-Bretagne…

— Et que la *Licorne*, déclara Jack, va lui apporter son acte d’adoption!»

En somme, M. Zermatt avait raison de rectifier la distance primitivement assignée à la chaîne qui se déroulait vers le sud-ouest. De l’embouchure de la rivière, cette distance, à peu près égale à celle qui la séparait de la vallée de Grünthal, ne devait pas dépasser sept ou huit lieues. Restait à savoir si ladite chaîne s’élevait au centre de l’île ou à la limite de sa côte méridionale.

Ce point déterminé, Ernest aurait été à même de compléter la carte de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Ce désir si naturel justifiait donc la proposition de M. Wolston d’explorer le pays jusqu’au pied des montagnes, même d’en faire l’ascension. Mais ce projet ne pourrait être exécuté qu’au retour de la saison d’été.

Il va sans dire que les portions de l’île déjà visitées avaient été relevées par Ernest, d’après des mesures assez exactes. Le littoral septentrional se développait sur une douzaine de lieues: au levant, il dessinait une ligne presque régulière du cap de l’Est à l’ouvert de la baie du Salut; puis, ladite baie se creusait en forme d’outre pour se relier à la côte rocheuse entre la grève de Falkenhorst et les récifs du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé; à partir de ce point, en allant vers l’ouest, s’évidait la baie des Nautiles, terminée par le cap Camus, dans laquelle se jetait la rivière Orientale; enfin, largement arrondie, se découpait la grande baie des Perles, entre l’arche et le promontoire opposé, en retour duquel, à quatre lieues au large dans le sud-ouest, gisait la Roche-Fumante. Ainsi la Terre-Promise, contenue entre la mer d’un côté, la baie des Nautiles de l’autre, fermée par une longue circonvallation, qui s’étendait du goulet de la baie du Salut au fond de la baie des Nautiles, était impénétrable, si ce n’est par le défilé de Cluse sur sa limite méridionale. Cette aire de quatre lieues carrées environ renfermait le ruisseau des Chacals, le rio de Falkenhorst, le lac des Cygnes, les habitations de Felsenheim et de Falkenhorst, les métairies de Waldegg, de Zuckertop et de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt.

L’exploration se poursuivit en suivant les berges du cours d’eau, dont M. Zermatt ne voulait pas s’éloigner. Cela d’ailleurs satisfaisait Ernest, qui lui dit:

«Au retour de notre excursion, je pourrai tracer le cours d’une partie de cette rivière et de la vallée qu’elle arrose. Or, étant donnée la fertilité de ce nouveau territoire, il n’est pas douteux que notre île suffirait à nourrir plusieurs milliers de colons…

— Tant que cela!… s’écria Jack en ne dissimulant pas son dépit que «sa seconde patrie» pût être si peuplée dans l’avenir.

— J’ajoute, continua Ernest, que, puisqu’une ville trouve de grands avantages à se fonder près de l’embouchure d’une rivière, c’est probablement au fond de cette crique que les futurs habitants voudront se fixer…

— Et nous ne la leur disputerons pas, ajouta M. Zermatt. Jamais aucun de nous ne pourrait se résoudre à abandonner la Terre-Promise…

— D’autant plus que Mme Zermatt n’y consentirait pas… elle l’a formellement déclaré… fît observer M. Wolston.

— Mère a raison!… s’écria Jack. Et demandez à nos braves serviteurs empoilés et emplumés, demandez à Sturm, à Brummer, à Rash, à Blass, à Brull, à Pfeil, à Flink, à Knips II, à Leitchfus, à Brausewind, à Turc, puis à Braun et Falb, ici présents, s’ils consentiraient à déménager!… Qu’on leur donne le droit de vote, qu’on ouvre un scrutin sur la question, et, comme ils sont en majorité, je sais bien quelle décision sortira de l’urne populaire… oui! populaire!

— Sois tranquille, Jack, répondit M. Zermatt, nous n’aurons pas besoin de consulter nos bêtes…

— Qui ne sont pas si bêtes que leur nom pourrait le donner à croire!» riposta Jack, en excitant de la voix et du geste les gambades des deux jeunes chiens.

Vers six heures, M. Zermatt et ses compagnons étaient revenus au campement, après avoir suivi la côte que bordaient de longues grèves avec un arrière-plan d’arbres résineux. Le dîner fut pris sur l’herbe, et les convives s’y régalèrent d’une friture de goujons, péchés dans les eaux douces de la rivière avec les lignes qu’Ernest avait préparées pour Annah. Cette rivière paraissait très poissonneuse, et, dans les nombreux nos qui s’y jetaient en amont, fourmillaient des écrevisses, dont on se promit de recueillir quelques douzaines avant de partir.

Après le dîner, personne ne se montra pressé de rentrer à bord de la pinasse, et ce fut même faute de tente qu’on résista au désir de coucher sur la grève. Quelle soirée magnifique! Une légère brise, toute chargée des senteurs de la campagne, comme les souffles échappés d’une cassolette, parfumait et rafraîchissait l’atmosphère. A la suite de cette journée incendiée par le soleil des tropiques, quelle jouissance de respirer à pleins poumons cet air vivifiant et réparateur!

Il y avait assurance de beau temps. Une fine brume estompait l’horizon du large. Les poussières de l’espace, se tenant dans les hautes zones, adoucissaient l’étincellement des étoiles. On se promena, on causa des projets du lendemain… Puis, vers dix heures, tous revinrent à bord de l’*Elisabeth*, et chacun se disposa à regagner son cadre, sauf Ernest, qui devait prendre le premier quart.

Mais, au moment de descendre, une observation fut faite par Mme Zermatt.

«Il y a une chose que vous avez oubliée… dit-elle.

— Oubliée, Betsie?… répondit M. Zermatt.

— Oui… c’est de donner un nom à cette rivière…

— Rien de plus juste, avoua M. Zermatt, et cet oubli ne laisserait pas de gêner Ernest pour sa nomenclature géographique…

— Eh bien, répondit Ernest, il y a un nom tout indiqué… Appelons-la rivière Annah…

— Parfait, dit Jack… Voilà qui va vous faire plaisir, Annah!…

— Sans doute, répondit la jeune fille, mais j’ai un autre nom à vous proposer, et il mérite bien cet honneur…

— Lequel?… demanda Mme Zermatt.

— Celui de la famille de notre chère Jenny…»

Tous furent d’accord, et, à partir de ce jour, la rivière Montrose figura sur la carte de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

CHAPITRE X

Navigation du canot sur la Montrose. – Contrée aride. – Les cailloux du ravin. – Le barrage. – Retour au mouillage de l'Elisabeth. – Descente de la rivière.

— *Une vapeur dans le sud-est. – Rentrée à Felsenheim.*

Le lendemain, vers six heures, à mer basse, sur les bords de la crique, quelques têtes de roche découvrirent qui n'émergeaient pas la veille. On le constata, d'ailleurs, même au plus bas du jusant, les passes restaient praticables sur une largeur de quarante à cinquante toises. Donc la rivière Montrose demeurait navigable à tout instant des marées. Il en résultait que, si ce cours d'eau s'enfonçait de quelques lieues à l'intérieur du territoire, son embouchure serait assurément choisie pour un premier établissement dont l'avenir ferait peut-être une importante cité maritime. Et telle était la profondeur de l'eau au mouillage de l'*Elisabeth* près des roches, qu'elle flottait encore par cinq ou six pieds au-dessus d'un fond de sable.

Vers sept heures, des clapotements, avant-coureurs du flux, bruirent le long des roches, et la pinasse n'aurait pas tardé à éviter sur son ancre, si elle n'eût été retenue par l'amarre d'arrière.

M. Wolston et Ernest, débarqués depuis le lever du jour, revenaient en ce moment, après avoir observé l'état de la crique en aval. Ils n'eurent qu'à sauter sur le pont pour rejoindre M. et Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et sa fille. Manquait Jack, qui, suivi de ses deux chiens, s'était mis en chasse. Quelques détonations signalaient à la fois sa présence aux environs et ses succès de chasseur. Il ne tarda pas à reparaître, la gibecière gonflée de deux couples de perdrix et d'une demi-douzaine de cailles.

«Je n'ai perdu ni mon temps ni ma poudre, dit-il en jetant sur l'avant son gibier au plumage agrémenté de vives couleurs.

— Nos compliments, lui répondit son père, et maintenant ne perdons rien non plus de la marée montante… Largue l'amarre et embarque.»

Jack, ayant exécuté cet ordre, s'élança sur le pont avec ses chiens. L'ancre étant à pic déjà, il n'y eut qu'à la relever au bossoir. La pinasse fut aussitôt saisie par le flot, et, sous la poussée d'une légère brise qui soufflait du large, elle gagna l'embouchure de la rivière Montrose. Puis elle commença à remonter, vent arrière, en tenant le milieu du chenal.

La distance d'un bord à l'autre ne mesurait pas moins de deux cent cinquante à trois cents pieds. Si loin que le regard pût suivre les rives, il ne paraissait pas qu'elles tendissent à se rapprocher. A droite se continuait le parement de la falaise, qui s'abaissait, tandis que le sol haussait graduellement par une pente insensible. A gauche, au-dessus de la berge assez basse, la vue s'étendait sur des plaines coupées de bois et de bouquets aux cimes un peu jaunies à cette époque de l'année.

Après une demi-heure de navigation assez rapide, l'*Elisabeth* atteignit le premier tournant de la Montrose, qui, se coudant d'une trentaine de degrés, sinuait vers le sud-ouest.

A partir de ce tournant, les berges ne dépassaient pas une hauteur de dix à douze pieds, – qui était celle des plus fortes marées. Cela se reconnaissait aux relais d'herbes laissés entre le fouillis des roseaux acérés comme des baïonnettes. Or, à cette date du 19 mars, les marées d'équinoxe atteignaient leur maximum d’élévation. On en pouvait conclure que le lit de la rivière suffisait à contenir ses eaux, et il ne semblait pas qu’elle eût jamais à se décharger de son trop-plein sur la campagne environnante.

La pinasse filait avec une vitesse de trois à quatre lieues à l’heure, ce qui lui permettrait d’en parcourir sept à huit pendant la durée du flot.

Et Ernest, qui avait relevé cette vitesse, de faire cette observation:

«Ce serait à peu près la distance à laquelle nous estimons que se dressent les montagnes du sud.

— La remarque est juste, répondit M. Wolston, et si la rivière baigne la base de cette chaîne, il sera facile d’y arriver. Dans ce cas, nous n’aurions pas à remettre de trois ou quatre mois l’excursion projetée…

— Cela nous prendrait toujours plus de temps que nous n’en pouvons disposer actuellement, répondit M. Zermatt. Même en admettant que la Montrose nous conduisît au pied de la chaîne, nous n’aurions pas atteint notre but. Il faudrait encore la gravir jusqu’à son sommet, et il est probable que nous n’y parviendrions pas sans de longs efforts.

— Et puis, ajouta Ernest, après la question de savoir si la rivière continue à se diriger vers le sud-ouest, il y a la question de savoir si son cours n’est pas interrompu par des rapides ou barré d’obstacles infranchissables.

— Nous le verrons bien, reprit M. Zermatt. Allons tant que le flot nous poussera, et, dans quelques heures, nous prendrons une décision à cet égard.»

Au delà du coude, les deux rives, moins encaissées, laissaient observer sur une assez vaste étendue la région traversée par la Montrose. Cette région était absolument déserte. Le gibier de toute espèce foisonnait entre les herbes, entre les roseaux des berges, des outardes, des coqs de bruyère, des perdrix, des cailles. Si Jack eût envoyé ses chiens fourrager le long des rives et dans les terres voisines, ils n'eussent pas fait cent pas sans poursuivre des lapins, des lièvres, des agoutis, des pécaris, des cabiais. A ce point de vue, ce territoire valait les alentours de Falkenhorst et des métairies, – même pour l'engeance simienne qui cabriolait d'un arbre à l'autre. A quelque distance filaient aussi des bandes d'antilopes, de la même espèce que celles qui étaient parquées à l'îlot du Requin. Des troupeaux de buffles se montraient également à plus d'une lieue dans la direction de la chaîne, et, parfois, on voyait bondir au loin des troupes d'autruches, moitié courant, moitié volant. Ce jour-là, M. Zermatt et ses deux fils ne les prirent pas pour des Arabes comme les premières qu'ils avaient aperçues des hauteurs de l'ermitage d'Eberfurt.

Jack, on l'imagine sans peine, enrageait d'être cloué sur le pont de l'*Elisabeth*, de ne pouvoir sauter à terre, d'assister au passage de ces quadrupèdes et de ces volatiles sans les saluer d'un coup de fusil. Il est vrai, à quoi eût servi d'abattre ce gibier, puisque la nécessité ne le commandait pas?…

«Aujourd'hui nous ne sommes pas des chasseurs, lui répétait son père, nous sommes des explorateurs, et plus spécialement des géographes, des hydrographes en mission dans cette partie de la Nouvelle-Suisse.»

Le jeune Nemrod ne voulait pas entendre de cette oreille et il se promettait bien, dès que la pinasse serait au prochain mouillage, d'aller battre les environs avec ses chiens. Il ferait de la géographie à sa manière: il lèverait des perdrix et des lièvres au lieu de lever des points d'orientation. Ceci, c’était la besogne du savant Ernest, désireux d’ajouter sur sa carte les nouveaux territoires situés dans le sud de la Terre-Promise.

Quant aux carnassiers, à ces fauves, qui, on le sait, fréquentaient les bois et les plaines à l’extrémité de la baie des Perles et aux approches de la vallée de Grünthal, aucun ne fut signalé sur les rives de la Montrose pendant le cours de cette navigation. Fort heureusement, ni lions, ni tigres, ni panthères, ni léopards ne se montrèrent. Par exemple, les hurlements des chacals ne firent pas défaut à la lisière des bois du voisinage. On en devait conclure que ces animaux, qui appartiennent au sous-genre chien, compris entre le loup et le renard, formaient majorité dans la faune de l’île.

Ce serait un oubli que de ne pas mentionner également la présence de nombreux oiseaux aquatiques, des pilets, des canards, des sarcelles, des bécassines, qui volaient d’une berge à l’autre ou se blottissaient parmi les roseaux. De telles occasions de satisfaire ses goûts et d’exercer son adresse, jamais Jack n’eût consenti à les perdre de bon gré. Aussi tira-t-il quelques coups très heureux, et personne ne les lui reprocha, si ce n’est peut-être Annah, qui demandait toujours grâce pour les bêtes inoffensives.

«Inoffensives… mais excellentes… lorsqu’elles sont cuites à point!» répondait Jack.

Et de fait, on ne put que se féliciter de ce que le menu du déjeuner et du dîner se compléterait d’une couple de pilets et de canards sauvages que Falb alla ramasser dans le courant de la Montrose.

Il était un peu plus de onze heures, lorsque l’*Elisabeth* atteignit un second coude de la rivière, qui revenait plus à l’ouest, ainsi qu’Ernest le constata. De sa direction générale, on put déduire avec assez de probabilité qu’elle descendait de la chaîne, encore éloignée de six à sept lieues, laquelle devait lui fournir un apport considérable.

«Il est fâcheux, dit Ernest, que la marée touche à son terme, et que nous ne puissions pousser plus loin…

— Fâcheux, en effet, répondit M. Zermatt, mais voici qu’elle est étale, et le jusant ne tardera pas à se faire sentir. Or, comme nous sommes à l’époque des plus hautes mers, il est certain que le flot ne dépassera guère ce tournant de la Montrose.

— Rien de plus évident, affirma M. Wolston. Il reste donc à décider si nous mouillerons en cet endroit, ou si nous allons profiter du jusant pour revenir à la crique que la pinasse pourrait atteindre en moins de deux heures.»

L’endroit était charmant, et chacun, il faut le dire, éprouvait grande envie d’y demeurer toute la journée. La berge de gauche formait une anse, dans laquelle venait se jeter un petit affluent d’eau vive et fraîche. Au-dessus se penchaient de grands arbres, à feuillage épais, remplis de pépiements et de coups d’ailes. C’était un bouquet de ces puissants figuiers d’Inde, presque semblables aux mangliers de Falkenhorst. En arrière, des groupes de chênes verts étalaient leur large parasol que le soleil ne pouvait percer. Puis, au fond, sous le dôme des goyaviers et des cannelliers, le long du rio tributaire, se glissait une fraîche brise qui balançait les basses branches comme des éventails.

«En vérité, dit Mme Zermatt, voilà un coin délicieux, tout indiqué pour y bâtir une villa!… Il est dommage que ce soit si loin de Felsenheim…

— Oui… trop loin, ma chère amie, répondit M. Zermatt. Mais cet emplacement ne sera pas perdu, crois-le bien, et il ne faut pas tout prendre pour soi!… Ne veux-tu donc rien laisser à nos futurs concitoyens?…

— Soyez certaine, Betsie, dit Mme Wolston, que cette partie de l'île, arrosée par la rivière Montrose, sera très recherchée des nouveaux colons…

— Et, en attendant, dit Jack, je propose d'y camper jusqu'à ce soir et même jusqu'au matin…

— C'est la question à résoudre, déclara M. Zermatt. N'oublions pas que le jusant peut nous ramener à la crique en deux heures, et que nous serions rentrés demain soir à Felsenheim.

— Qu'en pensez-vous, Annah?… demanda Ernest.

— Que votre père décide, répondit la jeune fille. Cependant, je conviens volontiers que l'endroit est agréable et mérite qu'on y reste un après-midi.

— D'ailleurs, reprit Ernest, je ne serais pas fâché de prendre encore quelques relèvements…

— Et nous de prendre quelque nourriture!… s'écria Jack. Déjeunons, de grâce, déjeunons!»

Ce fut chose convenue, on resterait à ce coude de la Montrose l'après-midi et la soirée. Puis, au prochain jusant, vers une heure du matin, la nuit étant claire, – une nuit de pleine lune – la pinasse descendrait sans aucun risque le courant de la rivière. A partir de la crique, selon l'état de la mer et la direction du vent, ou elle irait relâcher à la baie de la Licorne, ou elle doublerait le cap de l'Est pour gagner Felsenheim.

La pinasse ayant été amarrée par l’avant au pied d’un arbre, son arrière se rabattit presque aussitôt vers l’aval, – preuve que le jusant commençait à s’établir.

Après le déjeuner, Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah acceptèrent de s’installer au campement, tandis que des reconnaissances seraient poussées sur la campagne environnante. En effet, il importait d’obtenir un aperçu plus complet de cette région. Voici donc ce qui fut décidé: d’un côté, M. Zermatt et Jack iraient en chasseurs le long du petit affluent sans trop s’éloigner de son embouchure, et, de l’autre, M. Wolston et Ernest, embarqués dans le canot, remonteraient la rivière aussi loin qu’ils le pourraient, de manière à être de retour à l’heure du dîner.

On ne voyait aucun danger à laisser Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah au campement. D’ailleurs, elles ne firent point d’observation à ce sujet. Dans tous les cas, si besoin était, il leur serait facile de rappeler les deux chasseurs en tirant une des petites pièces de la pinasse, chargées à poudre seulement. Et Jack ayant demandé à la jeune fille si elle n’aurait pas peur de faire tonner l’artillerie du bord, celle-ci répondit qu’elle n’en était pas à s’effrayer d’un coup de canon, et ferait feu dès que Betsie lui en donnerait l’ordre.

Au surplus, M. Zermatt et son fils ne devaient pas s’éloigner de ce tournant de la Montrose. Sous ces taillis giboyeux, l’occasion ne leur manquerait pas d’utiliser leur poudre et leur plomb dans un rayon d’une demi-lieue et les fusils seraient certainement entendus du campement.

Le canot, manœuvré à l’aviron par M. Wolston et Ernest, partit dans une direction opposée en remontant la rivière, tandis que M. Zermatt et Jack suivaient la berge du rio sinueux qui descendait du nord.

Au delà de ce coude, la Montrose obliquait vers le sud-ouest. Le canot continua de naviguer le long des rives bordées de futaies touffues, presque inabordables, tant les herbes enchevêtrées, les roseaux entrecroisés en garnissaient les talus. Il eût été impossible d'y débarquer, et ce n'était pas nécessaire. L'important était de relever la direction générale de la rivière en gagnant sur l'amont aussi loin que possible. D'autre part, le champ de vue ne tarda pas à s'élargir. A une demi-lieue de là, entre les massifs moins épais, les arbres isolés projetaient une ombre que les rayons verticaux du soleil arrondissaient à leur pied. Puis ce fut une succession de larges plaines, bossuées çà et là de tumescences rocheuses, qui semblaient se développer sans interruption jusqu'à la base des montagnes.

La surface de la Montrose, pour ainsi dire imbibée de lumière, resplendissait comme un miroir. Il y eut lieu de regretter l'abri des arbres qui la bordaient vers l'aval. En outre, au milieu d'une atmosphère embrasée, presque sans brise alors, le maniement des avirons devint pénible. Très heureusement, la force du courant n'était pas accrue de la marée descendante, puisque le flot s'arrêtait au dernier coude. Il n'y avait à refouler que l'écoulement normal des eaux, plutôt basses à cette époque de l'année. Il n'en serait pas ainsi dans quelques semaines, à la saison des pluies, lorsque la chaîne enverrait son tribut à travers l'exutoire naturel de la Montrose.

Cependant, malgré la chaleur, M. Wolston et Ernest nageaient sans se rebuter. Entre les berges assez capricieuses de la rivière au revers des pointes se produisaient des remous qu'ils choisissaient de préférence, afin d'économiser leurs efforts.

«Il ne serait pas impossible, dit M. Wolston, que nous pussions gagner le pied de la chaîne dans laquelle la Montrose doit prendre sa source.

— Vous tenez à votre idée, monsieur Wolston?… répondit Ernest en hochant la tête.

— J’y tiens, et il est à désirer qu’il en soit ainsi, mon cher enfant. Vous ne connaîtrez véritablement votre île qu’après l’avoir observée sur toute son étendue du haut de ces montagnes, qui, d’ailleurs, ne paraissent pas très élevées.

— J’estime leur hauteur à douze ou quinze cents pieds, monsieur Wolston, et de leur sommet, je le crois comme vous, le regard embrassera la Nouvelle-Suisse tout entière, à moins qu’elle ne soit plus vaste que nous ne le supposons. Au delà de cette chaîne, qu’y a-t-il?… Si nous ne le savons pas encore, c’est que, depuis douze ans, nous ne nous sommes jamais sentis à l’étroit dans la Terre-Promise…

— D’accord, mon cher Ernest, répondit M. Wolston, mais, à présent, il y a un réel intérêt à être fixé sur l’importance d’une île destinée à recevoir des colons…

— Ce sera fait, monsieur Wolston, ce sera fait au retour de la belle saison, et, n’en doutez pas, avant l’arrivée de la *Licorne*. Aujourd’hui, il me paraît sage de nous borner à cette exploration de quelques heures, qui aura suffi pour relever la direction générale de la rivière…

— Et cependant, avec un peu de persévérance, Ernest, il serait peut-être possible d’atteindre la chaîne… d’en gravir le revers septentrional…

— A la condition que les rampes ne fussent pas trop raides, monsieur Wolston…

— Oh! avec de bonnes jambes!…

— Décidément, vous auriez mieux fait d’emmener Jack à ma place, ajouta Ernest en souriant. Il ne vous aurait pas contredit, lui… Il vous aurait engagé à pousser jusqu’aux montagnes… quitte à ne revenir que demain ou après-demain… et dans quelle inquiétude ce retard eût plongé tout notre monde!

— En somme, vous avez raison, mon cher Ernest, déclara M. Wolston. Puisque nous avons promis, il faut tenir notre promesse. Encore une heure de navigation, et notre canot reviendra en s’abandonnant au courant… N’importe! je n’aurai pas de cesse que nous n’ayons planté le pavillon de la vieille Angleterre sur la plus haute cime de la Nouvelle-Suisse!»

On ne s’étonnera pas du désir exprimé en ces termes par M. Wolston. Il parlait en bon Anglais, et précisément à une époque où la Grande-Bretagne envoyait ses marins par toutes les mers du globe, afin d’accroître son domaine colonial. Mais il sentit que mieux valait remettre à plus tard cette prise de possession de l’île, et n’insista pas davantage.

La navigation continua. Toujours cette campagne largement découverte, dépourvue d’arbres, et moins fertile, à mesure qu’elle se développait vers le sud-ouest. Aux prairies succédaient peu à peu des surfaces arides, semées de pierres sèches. A peine quelques oiseaux voletaient-ils au-dessus de ce sol dénudé. Des animaux entrevus dans la matinée, buffles, antilopes, autruches, on ne voyait plus un seul. Rien que des bandes de chacals, qui ne se montraient pas, mais dont les hurlements traversaient l’air sans éveiller aucun écho.

«Jack a été bien inspiré en ne nous accompagnant pas de ce côté, fit observer Ernest.

— Assurément, répondit M. Wolston, car il n’aurait pas eu l’occasion de tirer un coup de fusil. Il a dû être plus favorisé au milieu de la futaie qu’arrosé le petit affluent de la Montrose…

— En tout cas, ce que nous rapporterons de notre excursion, monsieur Wolston, dit Ernest, c’est que cette partie de l’île ressemble à celle qui s’étend au-dessus de la baie de la Licorne… Qui sait même s’il n’en est pas ainsi au delà de la chaîne?… Très probablement, elle n’est fertile que dans le nord et le centre, depuis la baie des Perles jusqu’à la vallée de Grünthal.

— Aussi, lorsque nous entreprendrons notre grande excursion, répondit M. Wolston, le mieux, je pense, sera de marcher directement vers le sud, au lieu de suivre par l’ouest ou par l’est les contours de la côte…

— Je le pense également, monsieur Wolston, et il sera préférable de gagner la campagne en franchissant le défilé de Cluse.»

Il allait être quatre heures. Le canot se trouvait à peu près à deux lieues et demie du campement, lorsqu’un bruit d’eaux tumultueuses se fit entendre en amont. Était-ce un torrent qui se précipitait dans le lit de la Montrose?… Était-ce la rivière elle-même changée en rapide?… Un barrage de rochers la rendait-il innavigable sur son haut cours?…

A ce moment, M. Wolston et Ernest, immobilisés au milieu d’un remous, à l’abri d’une pointe, se préparaient à virer de bord. Comme le talus de la berge les empêchait de voir au delà:

«Encore quelques coups d’avirons, dit M. Wolston, et contournons la pointe…

— Décidément, répondit Ernest, il est à craindre que la Montrose ne puisse permettre à une embarcation de gagner le pied des montagnes.»

M. Wolston et Ernest se remirent à nager et déployèrent tout ce qu’il leur restait de vigueur après ces quatre heures de navigation sous un ciel de feu.

La rivière se rabattait alors vers le sud-ouest, et ce devait être sa direction générale. Quelques instants après, à plusieurs centaines de pieds en amont, son cours apparut sur une plus longue étendue. Il était barré par un entassement de roches, semées d’une rive à l’autre, qui ne laissaient entre elles que d’étroites fissures, et ses eaux se déversaient en cascades bruyantes, dont le trouble se sentait à vingt toises en aval.

«Voilà qui nous aurait arrêtés, dit Ernest, si nous avions eu l’intention de continuer…

— Peut-être eût-il été possible, répondit M. Wolston, de transporter notre canot au delà de ce barrage…

— Si ce n’est qu’un barrage, monsieur Wolston…

— Nous le saurons, mon cher Ernest, car il importe de le savoir… Débarquons.»

A gauche s’ouvrait un étroit ravin, très sec à cette époque de l’année, et qui sinuait à travers le plateau. Dans quelques semaines, sans doute, lorsque viendrait la saison des pluies, il servirait de lit à un torrent dont les eaux bruyantes se mêleraient à celles de la Montrose.

M. Wolston jeta le grappin à terre. Puis, Ernest et lui prirent pied sur la berge qu'ils remontèrent de manière à revenir obliquement vers le barrage.

Ce cheminement, qui dura un quart d'heure, se fit au milieu d'un semis de pierres, à peine fixées dans le sable par de rudes touffes d'herbes.

Ça et là s'éparpillaient aussi des cailloux de teinte brunâtre, très arrondis à leurs angles, presque semblables à des galets gros comme des noix.

Lorsque M. Wolston et Ernest furent arrivés à la hauteur du barrage, ils observèrent que la Montrose n'était plus navigable pendant une bonne demi-lieue. Son lit s'encombrait de roches, entre lesquelles bouillonnaient les eaux, et le portage d'un canot en amont n'eût pas laissé d'être très pénible.

Quant à la campagne, elle paraissait être absolument stérile jusqu'à la base de la chaîne. Pour apercevoir quelque verdure, il fallait regarder vers le nord-ouest et le nord, précisément dans la direction de la vallée de Grünthal, dont on distinguait les lointains massifs sur la limite de la Terre-Promise.

M. Wolston et Ernest n'avaient donc plus qu'à revenir sur leurs pas avec le regret que la Montrose fût obstruée dans cette partie de son cours.

Chemin faisant, en suivant les détours du ravin, Ernest ramassa quelques-uns de ces cailloux brunâtres, plus lourds que ne semblait le comporter leur volume. Aussi mit-il dans sa poche deux de ces petites pierres, en se promettant de les examiner à son retour à Felsenheim.

Ce n'était pas sans quelque ennui que M. Wolston avait dû tourner le dos à l'horizon du sud-ouest. Mais le soleil étant sur son déclin, il ne fallait pas s’attarder à cette distance du campement. Le canot reprit donc le fil de l’eau, et, sous la poussée des avirons, descendit rapidement entre les deux rives.

A six heures, tout le monde était réuni au pied du bouquet de chênes verts. M. Zermatt et Jack, très satisfaits de leur chasse, avaient rapporté une antilope, une couple de lapins, un agouti, plusieurs volatiles de diverses sortes.

Quant au petit affluent de la Montrose, il arrosait une campagne très fertile, tantôt à travers des plaines qui se prêteraient à la culture des céréales, tantôt à travers des bois très épais, aux essences variées. C’étaient aussi des territoires giboyeux, sur lesquels, sans doute, la détonation du fusil des chasseurs venait de retentir pour la première fois.

Après le récit de M. Zermatt vint celui de M. Wolston. Ce dernier raconta par le menu ce qu’avait été cette navigation de deux lieues environ en amont de la rivière. Il dit combien la région était stérile dans la partie qui s’étendait vers le sud. Il exprima quelle déconvenue Ernest et lui avaient éprouvée devant un barrage infranchissable du cours d’eau, ajoutant que, pour gagner la chaîne du sud-ouest, il faudrait choisir un autre chemin que celui de la Montrose.

Un bon dîner, préparé par Betsie, Merry et Annah attendait les excursionnistes. Il fut servi sous l’ombre des arbres, au bord du rio, dont les eaux vives murmuraient sur un lit sablonneux semé de plantes aquatiques. On fit honneur à ce repas que la conversation prolongea jusqu’à neuf heures du soir.

Puis chacun regagna son cadre à bord de l’*Elisabeth*, et là, du côté des hommes, retentit bientôt un concert de ronflements sonores à rivaliser avec les hurlements des chacals.

Il avait été décidé que la pinasse partirait dès le commencement du jusant, c’est-à-dire vers une heure du matin, afin de mettre à profit toute la durée de la marée descendante. Le temps du sommeil serait donc limité. Mais les passagers se rattraperaient la nuit prochaine, soit pendant une relâche à la baie de la Licorne, soit à Felsenheim, si l’*Elisabeth* y arrivait dans les vingt-quatre heures.

Malgré les instances de ses fils et de M. Wolston, M. Zermatt avait voulu rester sur le pont, s’engageant à les réveiller à l’heure dite. Il ne fallait jamais se départir d’une certaine prudence. La nuit venue, les fauves, qui ne se sont pas montrés durant le jour, quittent volontiers leurs tanières, attirés vers les cours d’eau par le besoin de se désaltérer.

A une heure, M. Zermatt appela M. Wolston, Jack et Ernest. En ce moment, le premier clapotis du jusant commençait à se faire entendre. Une légère brise soufflait de terre. Les voiles furent hissées, amurées, bordées, et la pinasse s’abandonna à la double action du courant et du vent.

La nuit, très claire, fourmillait d’étoiles qui semblaient suspendues comme une neige dans l’espace. La lune, presque en pleine syzygie, retombait lentement vers l’horizon du nord.

Le cours de la Montrose n’offrant aucun obstacle, il n’y avait qu’à tenir le milieu de son lit. Aussi, l’appareillage terminé, la voilure en place, suffirait-il d’être à deux pour la manœuvre. M. Wolston se mit à la barre, tandis que Jack se postait à l’avant. M. Zermatt et Ernest purent donc, l’un aller prendre, l’autre reprendre un peu de repos.

Au total, ce repos ne serait pas de longue durée. En effet, dès quatre heures du matin, alors que l’est se nuançait des premières lueurs de l’aube, l’*Elisabeth* vint retrouver près de l’embouchure de la Montrose son mouillage de la veille.

Rien n’avait troublé cette navigation nocturne, bien que des grognements d’hippopotames fussent entendus à mi-route. On sait, d’après le récit du voyage de Fritz sur la rivière Orientale, que la présence de ces monstrueux amphibies s’était déjà signalée dans les cours d’eau de l’île.

Comme le temps était superbe, la mer belle, il fut décidé que la pinasse profiterait immédiatement de la brise matinale qui se levait au large. M. Zermatt jugea, non sans une certaine satisfaction, qu’il serait possible d’être de retour à Felsenheim en une quinzaine d’heures, c’est-à-dire avant la nuit.

Afin d’aller au plus court et de rallier directement le cap de l’Est, l’*Elisabeth* s’éloigna du littoral d’une bonne demi-lieue. Ses passagers eurent alors une plus complète vue de la côte qui se développait jusqu’à trois ou quatre lieues en direction du sud.

M. Zermatt ayant donné l’ordre de raidir les écoutes, afin de serrer le vent de plus près, la pinasse, tribord amures, fit route vers le cap de l’Est.

A ce moment, M. Wolston, qui se tenait à l’avant, porta la lunette à ses yeux. Après en avoir essuyé le verre, il sembla regarder avec une extrême attention un des points du littoral.

A plusieurs reprises, l’instrument s’abaissa et remonta entre ses mains. Aussi chacun fut-il frappé de l’obstination qu’il mettait à observer l’horizon vers le sud-est.

M. Zermatt, abandonnant la barre à Jack, vint à l’avant de la pinasse dans l’intention de questionner M. Wolston, lorsque celui-ci, retirant la longue-vue de ses yeux, dit:

«Non… je me suis trompé…

— En quoi vous êtes-vous trompé, Wolston… demanda M. Zermatt, et qu’aviez-vous cru voir en cette direction?…

— Une fumée…

— Une fumée?…» répéta Ernest, qui s’était approché, inquiet de cette réponse.

En effet, cette fumée n’aurait pu provenir que d’un campement établi sur cette partie du littoral. De là, ces conséquences inquiétantes: l’île était-elle donc habitée par des indigènes ou des sauvages… Venus de la côte australienne sur leurs pirogues, avaient-ils débarqué, et ne chercheraient-ils pas à gagner l’intérieur?… A quels dangers eussent été exposés les hôtes de Felsenheim, si ces naturels mettaient jamais le pied sur la Terre-Promise…

«A quel endroit auriez-vous aperçu cette fumée?… demanda vivement M. Zermatt.

— Là… au-dessus de la dernière pointe que projette le littoral de ce côté.»

Et M. Wolston indiquait l’extrême limite de la terre, à trois lieues environ, laquelle, à partir de cette pointe, disparaissait en se recourbant vers le sud-ouest.

M. Zermatt et Ernest, saisissant la longue-vue l’un après l’autre, regardèrent très attentivement l’endroit signalé.

«Je ne vois rien… dit M. Zermatt.

— Rien…» ajouta Ernest.

Pendant quelques instants encore M. Wolston observa avec une extrême attention.

«Non… je ne distingue plus cette fumée… dit-il. Ce devait être une légère vapeur grisâtre… un petit nuage très bas, qui vient de se dissiper.»

Cette réponse fut rassurante. Toutefois, tant que cette pointe fut en vue, M. Zermatt et ses compagnons ne la quittèrent point des yeux, mais ils ne remarquèrent rien dont ils dussent prendre inquiétude.

L'*Elisabeth*, couverte de toile, filait avec rapidité sur une mer un peu clapoteuse, qui ne gênait point sa marche. A une heure de l'après-midi, elle se trouvait devant la baie de la Licorne, qui fut laissée à une lieue sur bâbord; puis, ralliant la côte, elle se dirigea en droite ligne vers le cap de l'Est.

Ce cap fut tourné à quatre heures, et comme la marée montante portait à l'ouest de la baie du Salut, une heure suffit à franchir cette distance. L'îlot du Requin doublé, l'*Elisabeth* piqua vers le ruisseau des Chacals et, trente-cinq minutes après, ses passagers débarquèrent sur la grève de Felsenheim.

CHAPITRE XI

Avant la saison des pluies. – Visite aux métairies et aux îlots. – Premières bourrasques. – Les soirées à Felsenheim. – La chapelle. – La découverte d’Ernest et l’accueil qui lui est fait. – Prolongation du mauvais temps.

— Deux coups de canon. – A l’îlot du Requin.

Ouatre jours et demi, soit cent huit heures, telle avait été la durée de l’absence des hôtes de Felsenheim. Elle aurait pu se prolonger encore d’autant sans que les animaux domestiques en eussent souffert, leurs étables étant approvisionnées pour une longue période. Pendant cette excursion. M. Wolston aurait eu le temps de conduire l’exploration à la base de la chaîne dont il n’était plus très éloigné à la hauteur du barrage de la rivière. Très probablement même, il aurait proposé à M. Zermatt de séjourner trois ou quatre jours de plus au mouillage de la Montrose, si le canot n’eût trouvé obstacle à remonter son cours.

Au total, cette exploration ne laissait pas d’avoir eu quelque résultat. La pinasse avait pu reconnaître la côte orientale sur une dizaine de lieues à partir du cap de l’Est. En y ajoutant une égale étendue du littoral visité dans le nord jusqu’à la baie des Perles, voilà ce que l’on connaissait du contour de l’île. Quant à son périmètre à l’ouest et au sud, quel aspect il présentait, s’il limitait des régions arides ou fertiles, les deux familles ne seraient fixées à cet égard qu’après un voyage de circumnavigation, à moins que l’ascension des montagnes ne permît au regard d’embrasser la Nouvelle-Suisse entière.

Il est vrai, les probabilités étaient que la *Licorne*, en reprenant la mer, en eût relevé les dimensions et la forme. Donc, en cas que l’expédition projetée par M. Wolston ne donnât pas complète connaissance de l’île, il n’y aurait qu’à attendre le retour de la corvette anglaise pour être fixé à cet égard.

Maintenant, pendant sept à huit semaines, les travaux de fenaison et de moisson, le battage des grains, la vendange, l’engrangement des récoltes allaient occuper toutes les heures. M. Zermatt et ses compagnons ne devaient pas s’accorder un seul jour de chômage, s’ils voulaient que les métairies fussent en état avant la période assez troublée qui constituait l’hiver sous cette latitude de l’hémisphère austral.

Chacun se mit donc à l’œuvre, et, en premier lieu, les familles se transportèrent à Falkenhorst. Ce déplacement les rapprochait de Waldegg, de Zuckertop et de Prospect-Hill. L’habitation d’été ne manquait ni d’espace ni de confort, depuis que de nouvelles chambres avaient été installées entre les gigantesques racines du manglier, sans parler de l’étage aérien, si agréable au milieu de la verdure. A la base de l’arbre, une cour spacieuse était destinée aux animaux, avec étables et hangars, qu’entourait une impénétrable palissade de bambous et d’arbustes épineux.

Il est inutile d’indiquer par le détail les travaux qui furent entrepris et menés à bonne fin durant ces deux mois. Il fallut se rendre d’une métairie à l’autre, emmagasiner les céréales et les fourrages, cueillir les fruits en pleine maturité, tout disposer pour que la gent emplumée des basses-cours n’eût rien à redouter des intempéries de la mauvaise saison.

A noter que, grâce aux irrigations du lac des Cygnes abondamment alimenté par le canal, le rendement cultural s’était sensiblement accru. Ce district de la Terre-Promise aurait pu assurer l’existence d’une centaine de colons, et l’on comprend que ses hôtes fussent accablés de besogne, s’ils n’en voulaient rien perdre.

En prévision des troubles atmosphériques qui allaient durer de huit à neuf semaines, il y eut lieu d’aviser à préserver les métairies des dégâts de la pluie ou du vent. Les barrières des enclos, les portes et les fenêtres des habitations furent hermétiquement fermées, calfeutrées, consolidées au moyen d’arcs-boutants; les toitures, chargées de blocs pesants, pourraient résister aux violentes rafales de l’est. Mêmes précautions furent prises en ce qui concernait les hangars, les granges, les étables, les poulaillers, dont les occupants à quatre ou deux pattes étaient trop nombreux pour être ramenés dans les communs de Felsenheim.

Il va sans dire également que les aménagements des îlots de la Baleine et du Requin furent mis en état de résister à ces redoutables bourrasques, auxquelles leur situation près du littoral les exposait plus directement.

Sur l’îlot de la Baleine, les arbres résineux, les pins maritimes à verdure persistante, formaient maintenant d’épais massifs. Les pépinières de cocotiers et autres essences, depuis que des haies d’épines les défendaient, avaient prospéré. Plus rien à redouter désormais de ces centaines de lapins qui, dans les premiers temps, dévoraient tous les germes. Les herbes marines fournissaient assez de nourriture à ces voraces rongeurs, – entre autres le *fucus saccharinus*, dont ils se montraient très friands. Assurément, Jenny ne pourrait que trouver parfaite la tenue de l’îlot dont M. Zermatt lui avait octroyé l’entière possession.

Quant à l’îlot du Requin, les plantations de mangliers, de cocotiers et de pins n’y laissaient rien à désirer. Il convint de consolider les enclos réservés aux antilopes en train de se domestiquer. Herbes et feuilles, qui forment la nourriture de ces ruminants, ne manqueraient pas durant l’hiver, – l’eau douce non plus, grâce à la source intarissable découverte à l'extrémité de l'îlot. M. Zermatt avait fait construire un hangar central en fortes planches, dans lequel étaient emmagasinées des provisions de toutes sortes. Enfin la batterie, établie sur le plateau du monticule, était abritée par une solide toiture, protégée par les arbres verts et que dominait le mât de pavillon.

Le jour de cette visite, suivant les habitudes prises au début comme au terme de la saison pluvieuse, Ernest et Jack tirèrent les deux coups de canon réglementaires. Et, cette fois, aucune détonation ne se fit entendre du large, contrairement à ce qui avait eu lieu six mois avant, après l'arrivée de la corvette anglaise.

Lorsque les deux pièces eurent reçu de nouvelles gargousses avec leurs étoupilles, Jack s'écria:

«Maintenant, ce sera notre tour de répondre à la *Licorne*, quand elle saluera la Nouvelle-Suisse, et avec quelle joie nous lui enverrons notre réponse!»

Bref, les dernières récoltes, froment, orge, seigle, riz, maïs, avoine, millet, manioc, sagou, patates, ne tardèrent pas à être rentrées dans les granges et magasins de Felsenheim. Pois, haricots, fèves, carottes, navets, poireaux, laitues, chicorées seraient fournis avec abondance par le potager, car l'assolement l'avait rendu extraordinairement productif. Pour les cannes à sucre et les arbres fruitiers, champs et plantations étaient à portée de l'habitation sur les deux rives du cours d'eau. La vendange du vignoble de Falkenhorst fut faite en temps voulu, et, en ce qui concernait l'hydromel, le miel ne manquait pas ni les épices et les gâteaux de seigle destinés à aider sa fermentation. On avait aussi abondance du vin de palmier, sans parler de la réserve du vin des Canaries. Quant à l'eau-de-vie laissée par le lieutenant Littlestone, plusieurs fûts occupaient le frais sous-sol de la cave rocheuse. Le combustible du fourneau de la cuisine était fourni par le bois sec entassé dans les bûchers, et, d’ailleurs, les bourrasques se chargeraient de semer les branches sur les grèves de Felsenheim, en outre de celles que la marée montante poussait aux plages de la baie du Salut. Au surplus, il n’était pas question d’employer ce combustible au chauffage du salon et des chambres. Entre les tropiques, sous le dix-neuvième parallèle, le froid n’est jamais à redouter. Le feu, c’était pour la cuisson, les lessives et autres opérations de ménage.

La seconde quinzaine de mai arriva, et il était temps que ces travaux fussent terminés. Aucune illusion à se faire sur les indices avant-coureurs du prochain mauvais temps. Au coucher du soleil, le ciel commençait à se couvrir de brumes qui s’épaississaient de jour en jour. Le vent tendait à s’établir dans l’est, et, lorsqu’il soufflait de cette direction, toutes les tempêtes du large se précipitaient violemment sur l’île.

Avant de venir s’enfermer à Felsenheim, M. Zermatt voulut consacrer la journée du 24 à une excursion à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, à laquelle M. Wolston et Jack prendraient part.

Il convenait de s’assurer si le défilé de Cluse était assez solidement clos pour que les fauves ne pussent le franchir. Rien de plus indispensable que de prévenir une irruption dont le résultat eût été le ravage complet des plantations.

Cette métairie, la plus éloignée sur la limite du district, se trouvait environ à trois lieues de Felsenheim.

Les visiteurs, montés sur le buffle, l’onagre et l’autruche, arrivèrent à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt en moins de deux heures. Les clôtures furent trouvées en bon état; mais il parut prudent de renforcer de quelques épaisses traverses l’entrée de Cluse. Aucune invasion de carnassiers ou de pachydermes ne serait à redouter, tant qu'ils ne pourraient pas franchir le défilé.

On ne vit, d'ailleurs, nulle trace suspecte, et, il faut l'avouer, au vif regret de Jack. L'ardent chasseur se promettait toujours de capturer au moins un jeune éléphant. Après l'avoir apprivoisé, domestiqué, employé aux gros charrois, il saurait bien l'assujettir au transport de sa propre personne.

Enfin, à la date du 25, dès que les premières pluies commencèrent à s'abattre sur l'île, les familles, ayant définitivement quitté Falkenhorst, s'étaient installées à Felsenheim.

Aucun pays n'eût offert une demeure plus sûre, à l'abri de toutes les intempéries, et aussi d'une disposition plus agréable. Que d'embellissements depuis le jour où le marteau de Jack avait «percé la montagne»! La grotte de sel était devenue une confortable habitation. A la partie antérieure du massif rocheux, toujours même arrangement des chambres en enfilade, percées de portes et de fenêtres. La bibliothèque, chère à Ernest, avec ses deux baies ouvertes vers le levant du côté du ruisseau des Chacals, était dominée par un élégant pigeonnier. Le vaste salon aux fenêtres tendues d'étoffe verte enduite d'une légère couche de caoutchouc, meublé des principaux objets, tables, chaises, fauteuils, canapés, retirés de la dunette du *Landlord*, continuait à servir d'oratoire en attendant que M. Wolston eût bâti sa chapelle.

Au-dessus des chambres régnait une terrasse, à laquelle accédaient deux sentiers, et par-devant se développait une galerie couverte d'un toit en appentis, que supportaient quatorze piliers de bambou. Le long de ces piliers serpentaient des rejetons de poivriers et autres arbustes, qui répandaient une suave odeur de vanille, entremêlés de lianes et de plantes grimpantes alors en pleine verdure.

De l’autre côté de la grotte, en remontant le cours du ruisseau, s’étendaient les jardins particuliers de Felsenheim. Entourés de haies épineuses, ils se divisaient en carrés de légumes, en corbeilles de fleurs, en plantations d’arbres à fruits, pistachiers, amandiers, noyers, orangers, citronniers, bananiers, goyaviers, toutes les essences des pays chauds. Quant aux arbres des climats tempérés de l’Europe, les cerisiers, les poiriers, les merisiers, les figuiers, il suffisait de se rendre à la grande allée pour les trouver en bordure jusqu’à Falkenhorst.

Depuis treize ans, bien des saisons pluvieuses s’étaient passées dans cette habitation, qui jamais n’avait eu à souffrir ni du vent ni de la mer. Quelques semaines allaient s’y écouler en les mêmes conditions, mais avec de nouveaux hôtes. Manqueraient, il est vrai, Fritz, François et cette aimable Jenny, la joie et l’animation de ce petit monde.

A partir du 25, les pluies ne cessèrent plus. En même temps s’abattaient les rafales cinglantes et sifflantes qui chassaient du large par-dessus les plateaux du cap de l’Est. Toute excursion fut alors interdite, et il n’y eut plus qu’à poursuivre les divers travaux de l’intérieur. Besogne importante, ces soins à donner aux animaux, buffles, onagres, vaches, veaux, ânons, aux bêtes admises dans l’intimité, le singe Knips II, le chacal Jager, puis le chacal et le cormoran de Jenny, toujours très choyés à cause d’elle. Enfin, c’étaient les détails du ménage, la confection des conserves, puis, lorsqu’une éclaircie rare et courte le permettait, la pêche à l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals et au pied des roches de Felsenheim.

Dans la première semaine de juin, il y eut redoublement de bourrasques, pluies fines qui se tendaient sur le ciel en mailles serrées, et aussi pluies d’orage qui tombaient en multiples clochettes sur le sol. Impossible de sortir sans s’être revêtu de capotes imperméables.

Tous les environs, le potager, les plants, les champs, étaient accablés sous ces torrentielles averses, et du haut des parements du massif de Felsenheim se dégorgeaient mille filets liquides avec un bruit de cascades.

Bien que personne ne mît le pied dehors, à moins que ce ne fût absolument nécessaire, les heures s’écoulaient sans ennui. Il régnait entre les familles une parfaite entente, une identité de vues qui n’occasionnait jamais de discussions. Inutile d’insister sur l’amitié sincère qu’éprouvaient l’un pour l’autre MM. Zermatt et Wolston et affirmée depuis six mois déjà dans toutes les relations de la vie commune. Il en était de même des deux mères dont les qualités et les aptitudes se complétaient. Enfin, il y avait ce boute-en-train de Jack. Toujours gai, toujours en éveil, toujours en quête d’aventures, il ne maugréait que contre l’impossibilité de satisfaire ses instincts de chasseur.

En ce qui concerne Ernest et Annah, leurs parents n’en étaient point à observer qu’un sentiment plus vif que celui de l’amitié les attirait l’un vers l’autre. La jeune fille, alors âgée de dix-sept ans, un peu sérieuse et réfléchie, devait nécessairement plaire au sérieux et réfléchi jeune homme, lequel n’aurait su lui déplaire, étant fort agréable de sa personne. Les Zermatt et les Wolston ne pouvaient envisager qu’avec plaisir cette éventualité d’une union dans un avenir plus ou moins rapproché, – union qui resserrerait les liens des deux familles. Du reste, il n’était question de rien. On laissait aller les choses. Tout cela s’arrangerait au retour de la *Licorne*, qui ramènerait Fritz et Jenny mari et femme. Si quelques malicieuses allusions se produisaient, elles venaient de ce coquin de Jack.

D’ailleurs, entêté dans ses idées de célibataire, il ne se montrait point jaloux d’Ernest.

Pendant les repas, pendant les soirées, c’étaient invariablement les absents qui faisaient l’objet de la conversation. On n’oubliait ni le colonel Montrose, ni James et Suzan Wolston, ni Doll, ni François, ni aucun de ceux qui allaient faire de la Nouvelle-Suisse leur Seconde Patrie.

Un soir, M. Zermatt établit le calcul suivant:

«Mes amis, nous voici au 15 juin. Puisque la *Licorne* est partie depuis le 20 octobre de l’année dernière, cela donne huit mois bien comptés… Elle doit donc être sur le point de quitter les mers d’Europe pour l’océan Indien.

— Qu’en penses-tu, Ernest?… demanda Mme Zermatt.

— Je pense, répondit celui-ci, en tenant compte de sa relâche au Cap, que la corvette a pu arriver en trois mois dans un port d’Angleterre. Or, elle devra employer le même temps à revenir, et puisqu’il était convenu qu’elle serait de retour dans un an, c’est qu’elle aura dû rester une demi-année en Europe. J’en conclus donc qu’elle s’y trouve encore…

— Mais sans doute sur le point de prendre la mer… fit observer Annah.

— C’est probable, ma chère Annah, répondit Ernest.

— Après tout, il serait possible qu’elle eût abrégé son séjour en Angleterre… dit Mme Wolston.

— Possible, assurément, répliqua M. Wolston, bien que six mois ne soient pas un trop long délai pour ce qu’elle avait à faire… Nos lords de l’Amirauté ne sont pas très expéditifs…

— Cependant, dit M. Zermatt, lorsqu’il s’agit d’une prise de possession…

— Ça va vite!… s’écria Jack. En somme, savez-vous que c’est un beau cadeau que nous faisons à votre pays, monsieur Wolston…

— J’en conviens, mon cher Jack.

— Et pourtant, reprit le jeune homme, quelle occasion c’était pour notre vieille Helvétie de débuter dans la carrière de l’expansion coloniale… une île qui possède toutes les richesses animales et végétales de la zone torride… une île si admirablement placée en pleine mer des Indes pour le commerce avec l’extrême Asie et le Pacifique…

— Voilà notre Jack qui s’emballe comme s’il était monté sur Brummer ou Leichtfus!… dit M. Wolston.

— Voyons, Ernest, demanda Annah, que doit-on déduire de vos calculs relativement à la *Licorne*?…

— C’est que, dans les premiers jours de juillet au plus tard, la corvette mettra à la voile pour revenir avec nos regrettés absents et les colons qui se seront décidés à les suivre. Comme elle fera relâche au Cap, ma chère Annah, cette relâche la retiendra vraisemblablement jusque vers la moitié du mois d’août. Aussi je ne m’attends pas à la voir paraître à la hauteur du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé avant la mi-octobre…

— Encore quatre interminables mois!… murmura Mme Zermatt. Que de patience quand on songe qu’ils sont sur mer, tous ceux que l’on aime!… Dieu les protège!»

Si les femmes ne perdaient pas une heure, occupées des travaux du ménage, il n’en faudrait pas conclure que les hommes fussent oisifs. Le plus souvent on entendait les grondements de la forge et les ronronnements du tour. Mécanicien fort habile, M. Wolston, aidé de M. Zermatt, parfois d’Ernest, moins souvent de Jack, qui était toujours dehors à la moindre éclaircie, fabriquait nombre d’objets d’utilité courante destinés à compléter le matériel de Felsenheim.

Un projet, discuté à fond et finalement arrêté, ce fut celui qui concernait l’érection d’une chapelle. La question de l’emplacement donna lieu à quelques débats. Pour les uns, il devait être choisi face à la mer, sur une des falaises du littoral, à moitié chemin de Felsenheim et de Falkenhorst, de manière que l’on pût s’y rendre de chacune de ces habitations sans avoir une longue route à faire. Pour les autres, la chapelle eût été trop exposée, en cet endroit, aux bourrasques du large, et il semblait préférable de l’ériger près du ruisseau des Chacals, en aval de la cascade. Mais Mmes Zermatt et Wolston trouvèrent, non sans raison, que cette place serait trop éloignée. Aussi fut-il décidé de construire la chapelle à l’extrémité du potager, sur un emplacement très abrité par la hauteur des roches.

M. Wolston émit alors l’idée d’employer des matériaux plus solides et plus durables que le bois et les bambous. Pourquoi ne pas se servir de blocs de calcaire, ou même des galets de la plage, ainsi que cela se voit dans les villages maritimes? Quant aux coquillages, aux madrépores, très nombreux sur les grèves, après avoir été portés au rouge, afin d’en chasser l’acide carbonique, ils se transformeraient en chaux. Donc, lorsque le temps le permettrait, on s’occuperait de ce travail, et deux à trois mois suffiraient pour qu’il fût terminé à la satisfaction générale.

Avec le mois de juillet, au cœur de la saison pluvieuse sous cette latitude, les troubles atmosphériques redoublèrent d’intensité. Le plus souvent, il devint impossible de se hasarder au dehors. Les grains, les rafales, fouettaient le littoral avec une impétuosité dont on ne saurait avoir l’idée. C’était comme un acharnement de mitraille, lorsque la grêle s’y mêlait. La houle se soulevait en énormes lames déferlantes, dont le fracas se répercutait dans les creux de la côte. Que de fois leurs embruns, passant par-dessus la falaise, retombèrent en épaisses nappes au pied des arbres! Il y eut certaines heures où, par la concordance du vent et de la marée, une sorte de mascaret se produisit, qui refoulait les eaux du ruisseau des Chacals jusqu’au pied de la chute. M. Zermatt ne fut pas sans inquiétude pour les champs voisins. Il fallut même couper la conduite qui reliait le ruisseau au lac des Cygnes, dont le trop-plein eût noyé les environs de Waldegg. La situation de la pinasse et de la chaloupe, au fond de la crique, inspira aussi des craintes. Maintes fois on dut s’assurer que les ancres tenaient bon et doubler les amarres, afin d’éviter tout choc avec les roches. De ce chef, il n’y eut en somme aucun dommage. Mais en quel état devaient être les métairies, principalement Waldegg, Prospect-Hill, plus exposées que les autres, eu égard à leur proximité de ce littoral que l’ouragan battait avec une effroyable fureur?

Aussi M. Zermatt, Ernest, Jack et M. Wolston voulurent-ils profiter d’un jour de répit afin de remonter jusqu’au cap de l’Espoir-Trompé.

Les craintes n’étaient que trop justifiées. Les deux métairies avaient déjà souffert, et elles exigeraient des travaux confortatifs qui ne pouvaient être entrepris à cette époque et furent remis à la fin de la mauvaise saison.

C’était dans la salle de la bibliothèque que les familles passaient d’ordinaire leurs soirées. On sait que les livres n’y manquaient pas, ni ceux qui provenaient du *Landlord*, ni les ouvrages plus modernes offerts par le lieutenant Littlestone, récits de voyages, ouvrages d’histoire naturelle, zoologie et botanique, lus et relus par Ernest, ni enfin ceux qui appartenaient à M. Wolston, manuels de mécanique, de météorologie, de physique, de chimie. Il y avait jusqu'à des histoires de chasse aux Indes et en Afrique, qui donnaient à Jack une irrésistible envie de partir pour ces pays-là!

Tandis que la tempête mugissait au dehors, la lecture se faisait à haute voix. On causait, tantôt en anglais, tantôt en allemand, – deux langues que les uns et les autres parlaient à présent d'une manière courante, non sans que les dictionnaires fussent quelquefois feuilletés. Il y avait des soirées où l'on employait uniquement soit le langage de la Grande-Bretagne, soit celui de la Suisse allemande, et aussi, mais avec moins de facilité, celui de la Suisse française. Ernest et Annah avaient fait seuls de grands progrès dans l'étude de cette belle langue, si nette, si précise, si souple, si propice à l'inspiration des poètes, et qui s'approprie avec tant de justesse à tout ce qui concerne les sciences et les arts. C'était même un plaisir d'entendre parler le français au jeune homme et à la jeune fille, bien qu'on ne les comprît pas toujours.

Il a été dit que le mois de juillet était le plus éprouvé en cette partie de l'océan Indien. Lorsque les tourmentes se modéraient, survenaient d'épais brouillards qui enveloppaient l'île entière. Un navire, passant à quelques encablures seulement, n'aurait pu apercevoir ni les hauteurs du centre ni les caps du littoral. Ces brumes devaient s'étendre bien au-delà en direction de l'est. Aussi pouvait-on craindre que quelque bâtiment vînt se perdre au milieu de ces parages, comme le *Landlord* et la *Dorcas*… L'avenir imposerait certainement aux nouveaux colons la nécessité d'éclairer les côtes de la Nouvelle-Suisse, dont l'atterrissement serait très facilité, au moins par le nord.

«Et pourquoi ne construirions-nous pas un phare?… dit Jack. Voyons… un phare sur le cap de l'Espoir-Trompé, par exemple, et un autre sur le cap de l’Est?… Avec le feu de l’îlot du Requin, les navires rallieraient sans peine la baie du Salut…

— Cela se fera, mon cher enfant, répondit M. Zermatt, car tout se fait avec le temps. Par bonheur, le lieutenant Littlestone n’a besoin ni de phares pour reconnaître notre île, ni de feux pour venir mouiller en face de Felsenheim.

— Enfin, reprit Jack, nous serions bien capables, j’imagine, d’éclairer le littoral…

— Décidément, il ne doute de rien, notre ami Jack!… ne put s’empêcher de dire M. Wolston.

— Et pourquoi douterais-je, monsieur Wolston, après tout ce que nous avons fait jusqu’ici et tout ce que nous pourrions faire encore sous votre direction?…

— Vous entendez le compliment, mon cher ami?… dit M. Zermatt.

— Et je n’oublie ni Mme Wolston, ajouta Jack, ni même Annah…

— Dans tous les cas, répondit la jeune fille, à défaut de savoir, je ne pécherais pas par manque de bonne volonté.

— Et avec de la bonne volonté… continua Ernest.

— On élève des phares de deux cents pieds au-dessus du niveau de l’Océan!… riposta Jack. Aussi je compte bien sur pour poser la première pierre…

— Quand vous voudrez, mon cher Jack!…» répondit en riant la jeune fille.

Il est opportun de rapporter ici une conversation qui fut tenue dans la matinée du 25 juillet.

M. et Mme Zermatt se trouvaient dans leur chambre, lorsque Ernest vint les y rejoindre, l’air plus sérieux encore que d’habitude, et son œil brillant d’un vif éclat.

Il désirait faire part à son père d’une découverte dont, à son avis, l’exploitation pouvait avoir dans l’avenir des résultats de la plus haute importance.

Ernest tenait à la main un objet qu’il remit à M. Zermatt, après l’avoir regardé une dernière fois.

C’était un de ces cailloux ramassés dans le ravin, lors de l’excursion entreprise avec le canot, en compagnie de M. Wolston, sur le haut cours de la rivière Montrose.

M. Zermatt prit ce caillou, dont la pesanteur l’étonna tout d’abord. Puis il demanda à son fils pour quel motif il le lui apportait avec tant de mystère.

«C’est qu’il vaut la peine qu’on ait pour lui quelques égards, répondit Ernest.

— Et à quel propos?…

— Parce que ce caillou est une pépite…

— Une pépite?…» répliqua M. Zermatt.

Et, s’approchant de la fenêtre, il se mit à la regarder en meilleur jour.

«Je suis certain de ce que j’avance, affirma Ernest. Je l’ai étudié, ce caillou, j’en ai analysé quelques parcelles, et je puis certifier qu’il est en grande partie composé d’or à l’état natif…

— Es-tu certain de ne pas te tromper, mon fils?… demanda M. Zermatt.

— Oui… père… oui!»

Mme Zermatt avait écouté ce dialogue sans prononcer une parole, sans même tendre la main pour prendre le précieux objet, dont la découverte ne semblait lui inspirer que de l’indifférence.

«Or, continua Ernest, en remontant comme en redescendant le ravin de la Montrose, j’ai remarqué nombre de cailloux de cette espèce. Il est donc constaté que les pépites abondent dans ce coin de l’île…

— Et que nous importe?…» dit Mme Zermatt.

M. Zermatt regarda sa femme, sentant tout le dédain de cette réponse.

«Mon cher Ernest, dit-il alors, tu n’as parlé à personne de ta découverte?…

— A personne.

— Je t’approuve… non pas que je n’aie confiance en ton frère en M. Wolston… Mais ce secret mérite que l’on réfléchisse de le divulguer…

— Qu’y a-t-il donc à craindre, père?… dit Ernest.

— Rien pour le présent, mais pour l’avenir de la future colonie!… Que l’on apprenne l’existence de ces terrains aurifères, que l’on sache la Nouvelle-Suisse riche de pépites, les chercheurs d’or accourront en foule et, à leur suite, se déclareront tous les maux, tous les désordres, tous les crimes qu’entraîne la conquête de ce métal!… Assurément, il est à croire que ce qui ne t’a pas échappé, Ernest, n’échappera pas à d’autres, et que les gisements de la Montrose seront un jour reconnus… Eh bien, que ce soit le plus tard possible… Tu as bien fait de garder ce secret, mon fils, et nous le garderons aussi…

— C’est sagement parler, mon ami, ajouta Mme Zermatt, et je ne puis qu’approuver tes paroles… Non! ne disons rien, et ne retournons pas à ce ravin de la Montrose… Laissons faire le hasard, ou plutôt Dieu qui dispose des trésors de ce monde et les distribue à son gré!»

Le père, la mère, le fils restèrent pensifs quelques instants, fermement résolus d’ailleurs à ne point mettre à profit cette découverte, à laisser ces cailloux sur le sol où ils gisaient. L’aride région, comprise entre l’amont de la rivière et la base de la chaîne, n’attirerait pas de longtemps les nouveaux habitants de l’île, et bien des malheurs seraient évités sans aucun doute.

La mauvaise saison battait son plein. Il fallut patienter pendant trois semaines encore. Il semblait que les beaux jours dussent être tardifs cette année. Après vingt-quatre heures de répit, les bourrasques reprenaient avec plus de force, sous l’influence des troubles atmosphériques qui bouleversaient le nord de l’océan Indien. On était maintenant en août. Si ce mois n’est que le février de l’hémisphère septentrional, à cette époque du moins, entre les tropiques et l’équateur, les pluies et les vents commencent d’ordinaire à faiblir, l’espace à se dégager des épaisses vapeurs.

«Depuis douze ans, dit un jour M. Zermatt, nous n’avons jamais éprouvé une si longue série de rafales… Et même, de mai à juillet, il y avait des semaines d’accalmie… Quant au vent d’ouest, il se rétablissait dès le début du mois d’août…

— Ma chère Merry, ajouta Mme Zermatt, vous allez prendre une fâcheuse idée de notre île…

— Rassurez-vous, Betsie, répondit Mme Wolston. En notre pays d’Angleterre, est-ce que nous ne sommes pas habitués au mauvais temps pendant la moitié de l’année?…

— N’importe, déclara Jack, c’est abominable… un mois d’août pareil dans la Nouvelle-Suisse!… Depuis trois semaines, je devrais être en chasse, et tous les matins mes chiens nie demandent ce que cela signifie!

— Cette période va bientôt prendre fin, affirma Ernest. Si j’en crois le baromètre et le thermomètre, nous ne tarderons pas à entrer dans la période des orages qui termine habituellement la saison pluvieuse.

— Quoi qu’il en soit, reprit Jack, cet abominable temps se prolonge trop… Ce n’est pas ce que nous avions promis à M. et Mme Wolston, et je suis sûr qu’Annah nous reproche de l’avoir trompée…

— Non… Jack… non…

— Et qu’elle voudrait s’en aller!»

Les yeux de la jeune fille répondirent pour elle. Ils disaient combien elle se trouvait heureuse de cette cordiale hospitalité de la famille Zermatt. Son espoir était que jamais rien ne les en séparerait, ses parents et elle!…

Ainsi que l’avait observé Ernest, cette saison des pluies s’achevait généralement par de violents orages qui duraient de cinq à six jours. Le ciel était alors tout incendié d’éclairs, suivis de coups de foudre, à faire croire que s’effondrait la voûte étoilée, et répercutés par les multiples échos du littoral.

Ce fut le 17 août que ces orages s’annoncèrent avec un relèvement de la température, un alourdissement de l’atmosphère, un amoncellement de gros nuages dans le nord-ouest, nuages livides qui dénotaient une haute tension électrique.

Felsenheim, abrité sous sa carapace rocheuse, défiait le vent et la pluie. On n’avait pas à y craindre ces chutes de foudre, si redoutables en pleine campagne ou au milieu de bois qui attirent si facilement le fluide. Sans doute, Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston, Annah n’échappaient pas à l’impression toute physique que produisent les orages, même quand on peut impunément les braver, mais elles ne s’en effrayaient pas outre mesure.

Le surlendemain, dans la soirée, l’espace fut troublé par le plus terrible de ces météores qui eût éclaté jusque-là. Tous, réunis dans la salle de la bibliothèque, se redressèrent au fracas d’un coup de tonnerre sec et déchirant qui se prolongea en longs roulements à travers les hautes zones du ciel.

Puis, après l’intervalle d’une minute, un profond silence régna au dehors.

A n’en pas douter, la foudre venait de tomber non loin de Felsenheim.

En cet instant, une détonation se fit entendre.

«Qu’est-ce donc?… s’écria Jack.

— Ce n’est pas le tonnerre… dit M. Zermatt.

— Assurément non, répondit M. Wolston, qui s’approcha de la fenêtre.

— Est-ce un coup de canon qui vient d’être tiré au large de la baie?…» demanda Ernest.

On écouta, le cœur haletant. Peut-être y avait-il erreur… une illusion d’acoustique… quelque dernier éclat de la foudre à travers l’espace?… Mais si c’était la décharge d’une bouche à feu, c’est qu’un bâtiment se trouvait en vue de l’île, poussé par la tempête, peut-être en perdition.

Un second coup retentit. C’était le même bruit, donc à la même distance, et, cette fois, aucun éclair ne l’avait précédé…

«Encore un… répéta Jack, et, pour celui-là, aucun doute, je pense…

— En effet, affirma M. Wolston, c’est un coup de canon que nous venons d’entendre!»

Aussitôt, Annah de courir vers la porte, en s’écriant, comme malgré elle:

«La *Licorne*… ce ne peut être que la *Licorne*!»

Il y eut quelques secondes d’une silencieuse stupeur. La *Licorne* en vue de l’île… demandant du secours?… Non… non!… Qu’un navire eût été poussé dans le nord-est, un navire désemparé, drossé contre les récifs du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé ou du cap de l’Est, on pouvait le supposer. Mais que ce fût la corvette anglaise, c’était inadmissible. Il aurait fallu que son départ d’Europe remontât à trois mois déjà et qu’elle eût considérablement abrégé son séjour en Angleterre… Non… non!… Et M. Zermatt l’affirmait avec tant de conviction que tous se rangèrent à son opinion: ce ne pouvait être la *Licorne*!

Toutefois il n'en était pas moins affreux de penser qu'un bâtiment était en détresse à peu de distance de l'île… que la bourrasque le chassait sur l'écueil où s'était brisé le *Landlord*… qu'il demandait vainement du secours…

MM. Zermatt et Wolston, Ernest et Jack sortirent sous la pluie et gravirent l'épaulement au revers de Felsenheim.

Tel était l'obscurcissement de l'espace que le rayon de vue se bornait à quelques toises du côté de la mer. Tous quatre durent rentrer presque aussitôt sans avoir rien aperçu à la surface de la baie du Salut.

«Et d'ailleurs, que pourrions-nous faire pour ce bâtiment?… demanda Jack.

— Rien, répondit M. Zermatt.

— Prions pour les malheureux qui sont en péril, dit Mme Wolston, et que le Tout-Puissant les protège!»

Les trois femmes s'agenouillèrent près de la fenêtre, et les hommes demeurèrent courbés près d'elles.

Comme aucune autre décharge d'artillerie ne se fit entendre, il fallut en conclure ou que le navire s'était perdu corps et biens, ou qu'il avait passé au large de l'île.

Personne, cette nuit-là, ne quitta la grande salle, et, dès que le jour reparut, l'orage ayant cessé, tous se précipitèrent hors de l'enclos de Felsenheim.

Il n’y avait aucune voile en vue, ni dans la baie du Salut, ni dans le bras de mer compris entre le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé et le cap de l’Est.

On n’apercevait rien non plus d’un navire qui se fût fracassé contre l’écueil du *Landlord*, à trois lieues de là.

«Allons à l’îlot du Requin… dit Jack.

— Tu as raison, répondit M. Zermatt. Du haut de la batterie, nos regards porteront plus loin…

— D’ailleurs, ajouta Jack, c’est ou jamais le cas de tirer quelques coups de canon!… Qui sait s’ils ne seront pas entendus au large et suivis d’une réponse?…»

La difficulté serait évidemment de gagner l’îlot du Requin, car la baie devait encore être profondément troublée. Mais, en somme, la distance n’était que d’une lieue environ, et la chaloupe pouvait s’y risquer.

Mmes Wolston et Zermatt, dévorant leurs inquiétudes, ne voulurent point s’opposer à ce projet. Il y allait, peut-être, du salut de leurs semblables.

A sept heures, la chaloupe quitta la petite crique. MM. Zermatt et Wolston, Ernest et Jack nageaient avec vigueur, aidés par le jusant. Quelques paquets de mer qu’ils reçurent par l’avant ne leur firent point rebrousser chemin.

Dès que l’îlot eut été atteint, tous les quatre prirent pied sur les basses roches.

Quel changement, quels dégâts!… Ça et là, des arbres déracinés par le vent, les enclos des antilopes renversés, les animaux effarés accourant de toutes parts!

M. Zermatt et ses compagnons arrivèrent à la base du monticule de la batterie, et Jack, naturellement, fut le premier à paraître au sommet.

«Venez… venez!…» criait-il d’une voix impatiente.

M. Zermatt, M. Wolston et Ernest se hâtèrent de le rejoindre.

Le hangar sous lequel s’allongeaient les deux pièces avait été incendié pendant la nuit, et n’offrait plus que des débris qui fumaient encore. Le mât de pavillon, fendu sur toute sa longueur, gisait au milieu d’un amas d’herbes et de broussailles à demi consumées. Quant aux arbres, dont les branchages s’entrecroisaient au-dessus de la batterie, ils étaient fracassés jusqu’aux racines, et l’on voyait la trace des flammes qui avaient dévoré leurs hautes branches.

Les deux caronades étaient sur les affûts, trop lourdes pour que la bourrasque eût pu les renverser.

Ernest et Jack avaient apporté des étoupilles, et s’étaient même munis de plusieurs gargousses, afin de pouvoir continuer à tirer, si des détonations venaient du large.

Jack, posté près de la première pièce, y mit le feu.

L’étoupille brûla jusqu’à l’orifice de la lumière, mais le coup ne partit pas.

«La charge était éventée, fît observer M. Wolston, et elle n’a pu s’enflammer…

— Changeons-la, répondit M. Zermatt. Jack, prends l’écouvillon, et tâche de débourrer la pièce… Puis tu y placeras une nouvelle gargousse.»

Mais lorsque l’écouvillon eut été introduit dans la pièce, il en atteignit le fond, à la grande surprise de Jack. L’ancienne gargousse, qui avait été placée à la fin de la belle saison, ne s’y trouvait plus. Il en était de même pour la seconde pièce.

«Elles ont donc été tirées?… s’écria M. Wolston.

— Tirées?… répéta M. Zermatt.

— Oui… toutes les deux… reprit Jack.

— Mais par qui?…

— Par qui?… répondit Ernest, après une rapide réflexion, mais par le tonnerre en personne.

— Le tonnerre?… répliqua M. Zermatt.

— Sans doute, père… Le dernier coup de foudre que nous avons entendu hier est tombé sur le monticule… Le hangar a brûlé et, quand le feu a atteint les deux pièces, les deux coups sont partis l’un après l’autre…»

Cette explication s’imposait, en présence des débris incendiés qui jonchaient le sol. Mais par quelles heures d’anxiété avaient passé les hôtes de Felsenheim pendant cette interminable nuit d’orage!

«Voyez-vous ce tonnerre qui se fait artilleur… s’écria Jack, ce Jupiter tonnant qui se mêle de ce qui ne le regarde pas!»

Les caronades ayant été rechargées, la chaloupe quitta l’îlot du Requin, où M. Zermatt aurait à reconstruire le hangar, dès que le temps le permettrait.

Ainsi donc, aucun navire n’avait paru sur les parages de l’île pendant la nuit précédente, aucun bâtiment n’était venu se perdre contre les récifs de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

CHAPITRE XII

A Falkenhorst. – A Waldegg. – A Zuckertop. – A Prospect-Hill. – La mer déserte. – Préparatifs de voyage à l’intérieur. – Ceux qui partent et ceux qui ne partent pas. – Conduite au défilé de Cluse. – Adieux.

La saison des pluies, qui s’était prolongée cette année-là, prit fin dans la dernière semaine d’août. En prévision du voyage projeté à l’intérieur de l’île, on se mit immédiatement aux travaux de labours et d’ensemencements. M. Zermatt ne comptant pas commencer l’excursion avant la seconde quinzaine de septembre, ce temps suffirait largement aux premières besognes.

Cette fois, les deux familles décidèrent de ne point s’installer à Falkenhorst. Le château aérien avait d’ailleurs subi quelques dégâts pendant les dernières tourmentes, et il serait nécessaire d’y faire des réparations. On se contenterait d’y passer quelques jours pour les semailles, la taille du vignoble, les soins à donner aux animaux, et on ne s’attarderait pas davantage à Waldegg, à Zuckertop et à Prospect-Hill.

«Considérons, fit observer M. Zermatt, qu’au retour de nos absents, à l’arrivée des nouveaux amis qu’ils nous amèneront, le colonel Montrose, votre fils James et sa femme, mon cher Wolston, et peut-être un certain nombre de colons, des agrandissements s’imposeront à Falkenhorst comme aux autres métairies. Or, des bras supplémentaires ne seront pas à dédaigner pour ces travaux qui ne laisseront pas d’être importants. Donc, aujourd’hui, ne nous occupons que de nos champs, de nos étables, de nos basses-cours. Nous aurons assez à faire, durant ces deux mois, en attendant la *Licorne*.»

Comme la présence de Mmes Zermatt et Wolston à Felsenheim était indispensable, les deux ménagères déclarèrent qu'elles se chargeaient de tout ce qui concernait l'intérieur et l'extérieur, les bestiaux, les volatiles de la mare aux Oies, les léguées du potager. Elles permirent toutefois à Annah d'accompagner son père lors de la visite des métairies, et, si la jeune fille se montra satisfaite, Ernest ne le fut pas moins. Au surplus, ce déplacement n'entraînerait pas grande fatigue, puisque le chariot, attelé des deux buffles, et les trois ânons, serviraient au transport à travers le district de la Terre-Promise. C'est dans ce véhicule que M. Zermatt, Ernest, M. Wolston et Annah prendraient place, tandis que Jack, toujours enclin à jouer le rôle d'éclaireur, les devancerait sur l'onagre Leichtfus, l'une de ses montures favorites. S'il hésita entre le taureau Brummer et l'autruche Brausewind, il finit par donner la préférence à l'onagre. Brummer et Brausewind durent se résigner à ne point quitter Felsenheim.

A la date du 25 août, la première halte se fit à Falkenhorst, dont l'enclos renfermait un certain nombre d'animaux domestiques. Il faisait beau temps avec petite brise venant de la baie du Salut. La chaleur n'était pas encore excessive. Suivre l'ombreuse allée d'arbres qui longeait le rivage, cela ressemblait plutôt à une promenade, et non des moins agréables.

Et puis, à cette époque de l'année, M. Zermatt et ses fils éprouvaient cette vive impression que leur avait toujours donnée le retour du printemps, cette influence salutaire de la nature aux premiers beaux jours, qui, ainsi que le disait le chef de la famille dans le récit de ses aventures, «revenait, comme un ami, après quelques mois d'absence, leur apporter plaisir et bénédictions».

Il n'y eut pas à s'occuper des travaux de culture pendant le séjour à Falkenhorst. Les champs à ensemencer dépendaient des autres métairies plus éloignées. Toutes les heures furent consacrées à soigner les animaux, à renouveler leur nourriture, à exécuter quelques réparations indispensables aux étables, à nettoyer et à curer le petit ruisseau qui arrosait ce domaine.

Quant aux magnifiques arbres du bois voisin, ils avaient résisté aux rudes assauts de la tourmente, non sans y avoir cependant perdu quelques branches. Il y eut donc lieu de ramasser tout ce bois mort et de l’emmagasiner dans les bûchers de l’enclos.

Il fut également constaté que l’un des plus grands mangliers avait été frappé de la foudre. Bien que celui qui supportait la demeure aérienne n’eût pas subi le même sort, l’idée vint à Ernest qu’il serait prudent de le protéger au moyen d’un paratonnerre dont la tige dépasserait ses plus hautes frondaisons et qu’un fil métallique raccorderait avec le sol. Il se proposa d’étudier cette installation, car des orages fréquents troublaient la saison d’été, et le fluide électrique aurait pu causer de graves dommages à Falkenhorst.

Ces travaux exigèrent trois jours pleins, et M. Zermatt ne revint à Felsenheim que le quatrième. Ses compagnons et lui en repartirent vingt-quatre heures après, et leurs montures, leurs attelages prirent la direction de Waldegg.

La distance qui sépare Felsenheim de cette métairie fut franchie dans la matinée. Dès l’arrivée, chacun se mit à l’ouvrage. Là se trouvait la bergerie comprenant les moutons et les chèvres, dont le nombre s’accroissait d’année en année; là, aussi, était établi un poulailler qui comptait ses hôtes par centaines. Certaines avaries durent être réparées au fenil, où les fourrages de la dernière récolte avaient été rentrés. Quant à l’habitation, on ne remarqua pas qu’elle eût souffert des mauvais temps. Ce n’était plus, il est vrai, la cabane en roseaux pliants, en perches minces et souples des premiers jours. La maisonnette, maçonnée à présent, se doublait au dehors d’un parement de sable et de terre grasse, à l’intérieur d’un enduit de plâtre, de telle sorte que l’humidité ne pouvait s’y introduire. M. Zermatt observa, d’autre part, non sans satisfaction, que les plantations de cotonniers, qui confinaient à Waldegg, présentaient bonne apparence. Il en était ainsi du marécage, transformé en une véritable rizière dont les eaux pluviales n’avaient point affouillé le sol. Du côté opposé, si le lac des Cygnes se maintenait à un étiage assez élevé, presque au niveau des rives, nulle inondation ne menaçait les champs du voisinage. D’innombrables oiseaux aquatiques animaient alors ce petit lac, des hérons, des pélicans, des bécassines, des pilets, des poules d’eau, et, les plus gracieux de tous, des cygnes au plumage entièrement noir, qui se promenaient par couples à sa surface.

Il n’y avait aucune raison pour que Jack ne choisît pas parmi ces volatiles ceux qui figuraient d’ordinaire sur la table de la ferme de Waldegg. Il abattit quelques douzaines de canards, sans parler d’un magnifique cabiai, tué sous bois, et que le chariot rapporterait à Felsenheim.

En ce qui concernait les bandes de singes, il y eut lieu d’être rassuré. On n’apercevait plus un seul de ces malfaisants quadrumanes très habiles à lancer des pommes de pin en guise de projectiles, qui infestaient autrefois les bois d’alentours, et dont les dévastations étaient si dommageables. Depuis les grandes exterminations organisées contre eux, ils avaient sagement pris le parti de déguerpir.

Ces premiers travaux terminés, on s’occupa d’ensemencer les champs de Waldegg. Cette terre si féconde ne demandait ni à être labourée ni à être ravivée par les fumures que la métairie aurait su fournir en abondance. Le passage de la herse, traînée par les ânons, suffisait à rafraîchir le sol. Cependant ces semailles exigèrent, avec un certain temps, le concours de tous, – même celui d'Annah, – et le retour à l'habitation de Felsenheim ne put s'effectuer avant le 6 septembre.

M. Zermatt et ses compagnons n'eurent qu'à féliciter Mme Wolston et Betsie du zèle et de l'activité qu'elles avaient déployés pendant leur absence. La basse-cour, les étables, étaient en parfait état; le potager avait été nettoyé, sarclé, les plants de légumes alignés d'une main sûre. Les deux ménagères avaient également procédé au complet lavage des chambres, salles et salons, au battage des literies, à tous les soins qu'exigé la bonne tenue d'une maison. Leur temps avait été bien occupé, mais elles ne cachèrent pas leur désir qu'on en finît avec ces visites aux métairies, dont elles n'étaient pas.

Il fut alors décidé qu'une dernière excursion serait faite les jours suivants aux établissements du district. Elle comprendrait à la fois les fermes de Zuckertop et de Prospect-Hill. Or, de s'élever jusqu'à la hauteur de l'Espoir-Trompé, cela demanderait certainement une huitaine de jours, et il ne fallait pas compter être de retour avant la mi-septembre.

«Quant à l'ermitage d'Eberfurt, fit observer M. Zermatt, nous aurons l'occasion de le visiter lors du voyage projeté à l'intérieur de l'île, car, pour sortir de la Terre-Promise, il n'existe pas d'autre issue que le défilé de Cluse, près de notre métairie…

— Cela va de soi, répondit M. Wolston. Toutefois, n'y a-t-il pas des travaux de culture à exécuter de ce côté, et qui souffriraient d'un retard?…

— Mon cher Wolston, déclara M. Zermatt, nous n'avons plus à attendre que l'époque où la fenaison et la moisson réclameront nos soins, et ce ne sera que dans quelques semaines. Donc finissons-en avec Zuckertop et Prospect-Hill.»

Ce projet admis, on décida qu’Annah n’accompagnerait pas son père, le voyage pouvant se prolonger au-delà d’une semaine. Mme Wolston eût trouvé trop longue cette absence. Sa fille, d’ailleurs, serait très utile à Felsenheim pour certains travaux de ménage, les grandes lessives, les grands raccommodages de vêtements et de linge. Le fer à repasser et l’aiguille prenaient alors le pas sur le râteau, la houe et la binette. Aussi Mme Wolston, sans parler de sa sollicitude maternelle, fit-elle valoir ces raisons très sérieuses, et auxquelles Annah dut se rendre à son vif regret.

Ernest, on le comprend, trouva ces raisons peu de son goût, et il en vint même à se demander si sa présence n’était pas indispensable à Felsenheim.

Eh bien, ce fut ce brave Jack qui lui donna aide avec sa bonne camaraderie habituelle. La veille du départ, lorsque tout le monde se trouvait réuni dans la salle commune, il n’hésita pas à émettre l’observation suivante:

«Père, je sais bien que Mme Wolston, sa fille et ma mère ne courent aucun risque à rester seules à Felsenheim… Mais, enfin, lorsqu’il s’agit de les y laisser toute une semaine et – qui sait?… – peut-être davantage…

— Assurément, Jack, répondit M. Zermatt, je ne serai pas une heure tranquille durant notre absence… bien qu’il n’y ait aucun danger à prévoir… Jusqu’ici nos séparations n’ont jamais duré plus de deux à trois jours, et, cette fois, ce sera la semaine entière… C’est bien long!… Pourtant, il y aurait gros embarras à partir tous ensemble…

— Si vous le voulez, dit M. Wolston, j’offre de rester a Felsenheim…

— Non, mon cher Wolston, vous moins qu’un autre, répondit M. Zermatt. Il est nécessaire que vous nous accompagniez à Zuckertop et à Prospect-Hill en prévision des travaux futurs… Mais si l’un de mes fils consent à demeurer près de sa mère, je n’aurai plus aucune inquiétude… Cela est arrivé plusieurs fois déjà… Jack, par exemple…»

Jack, qui ne se retenait guère de sourire, regarda Ernest en dessous.

«Comment, s’écria-t-il, c’est à moi que vous demandez de garder le logis!… C’est à un chasseur que vous voulez enlever cette occasion de chasser la grosse et la petite bête!… Si quelqu’un doit rester à Felsenheim, pourquoi moi plutôt qu’Ernest?…

— Ernest ou Jack, c’est tout un… répliqua M. Zermatt. N’est-il pas vrai, madame Wolston?…

— Certainement, monsieur Zermatt.

— Et, en compagnie d’Ernest, vous n’aurez pas peur, ni toi, Betsie, ni vous, ma chère Annah?…

— Pas la moindre peur, répondit la jeune fille, dont le visage se colora légèrement.

— Parle donc, Ernest, reprit Jack. Tu ne dis pas si cet arrangement te convient?…»

L’arrangement convenait à Ernest, et M. Zermatt pouvait avoir toute confiance en ce sérieux jeune homme aussi prudent que courageux.

Quant au départ, il avait été fixé au lendemain. Dès le jour levé, M. Zermatt, M. Wolston et Jack firent leurs adieux, en promettant d’abréger leur absence autant que possible.

La route la plus courte pour se rendre de Felsenheim à Zuckertop obliquait sur la gauche par rapport à celle de Waldegg, qui longeait le littoral.

Le chariot, où se placèrent MM. Zermatt et Wolston, était en outre chargé de sacs qui contenaient des semences, d’un certain nombre d’ustensiles et d’outils, de vivres et de munitions en quantité suffisante.

Jack, qui n’avait pas voulu se séparer de Leichtfus, marchait près du chariot, suivi de ses deux chiens Braun et Falb.

On prit d’abord la direction du nord-ouest, de manière à laisser le lac des Cygnes sur la droite. De vastes prairies, des pâturages naturels, s’étendaient jusqu’au canal de dérivation du ruisseau des Chacals, qui fut traversé à une lieue de Falkenhorst sur le ponceau établi dès l’origine.

En cette direction il n’existait pas de route carrossable dans le genre de celle qui conduisait à la métairie de Waldegg. Toutefois, les nombreux et pesants charrois avaient fini par aplanir le sol et détruire les herbes. Aussi, traîné par les deux robustes buffles, le véhicule avançait-il d’un bon train sans trop de peine.

La distance jusqu’à Zuckertop, qui était d’environ trois lieues, fut franchie en quatre heures.

M. Zermatt, M. Wolston et Jack arrivèrent donc à l’habitation pour le déjeuner. Après avoir mangé de grand appétit, ils se mirent aussitôt à l’ouvrage.

Il fallut d’abord relever plusieurs piquets de l’enclos dans lequel les porcs avaient passé la saison pluvieuse. Cet enclos avait été envahi par d’autres congénères de l’espèce porcine, ces tajams ou cochons musqués, déjà signalés à Zuckertop, et qui vivaient en parfaite amitié avec les autres. On se garda bien de les chasser, et pour cause. M. Zermatt savait par expérience qu’il y avait parti à tirer de la chair de ces quadrupèdes, à la condition d’enlever la poche odoriférante placée sur leur dos.

Les plantations de ce domaine, grâce à son éloignement de la mer, furent trouvées en bon état. On ne put que constater le bon état des goyaviers, des bananiers, des palmiers à choux, et principalement de ces ravendsaras, au tronc épais, à la tête pyramidale, dont l’écorce unit le goût de la cannelle à celui du girofle.

A l’époque où M. Zermatt et ses fils l’avaient visité, cet emplacement ne formait qu’un marais, qui fut alors nommé le Marais des cannes à sucre, et ils y étaient arrivés dès les premiers jours de leur débarquement sur l’île. Maintenant, de vastes champs de culture entouraient la ferme de Zuckertop, puis des herbages où paissaient quelques vaches. A la place de la simple hutte de branchages s’élevait une habitation abritée sous les arbres. Non loin se massait un épais taillis, uniquement composé de bambous dont les fortes épines pouvaient être employées en guise de clous, et quiconque l’eût traversé n’en fût sorti que les vêtements en lambeaux.

Le séjour à Zuckertop dura huit jours qui furent occupés aux semailles du millet, du froment, de l’avoine, du mais; les céréales profitaient vite dans ce sol qu’arrosait la dérivation du lac des Cygnes. De ce côté, en effet, M. Wolston avait pratiqué une saignée en entaillant la rive occidentale du lac, et, rien que par leur écoulement naturel, les eaux se dispersaient à la surface du territoire. Aussi, par suite de cette disposition, Zuckertop devait être considéré comme la plus riche des trois métairies fondées sur le district de la Terre-Promise.

Inutile de dire que, pendant le cours de cette semaine, Jack avait pu largement satisfaire ses goûts de chasseur. Dès que la besogne lui laissait quelque répit, il partait avec ses chiens. L'office fut abondamment garni de cailles, tétras, perdrix, outardes, pour la plume, de pécaris et d'agoutis, pour le poil. Quant aux hyènes déjà signalées aux environs, Jack n'en rencontra pas ni aucun autre carnassier. Décidément les fauves fuyaient devant l'homme.

En se portant du côté du lac, Jack, plus heureux que ne l'avait été son frère Fritz quelques années avant, eut l'occasion d'abattre un animal de la taille d'un gros âne, au pelage brun foncé, espèce de rhinocéros sans corne, de l'espèce des tapirs. C'était un anta, qui ne tomba pas sous la première décharge que lui envoya le jeune chasseur à vingt pas; mais, au moment où il fonçait sur Jack, une seconde balle lui traversa le cœur.

Enfin tout ce travail fut terminé à Zuckertop dans la soirée du 15 septembre. Le lendemain, après que la maison eut été hermétiquement close, l'enclos fermé d'une solide barrière, le chariot remonta vers le nord, afin de gagner Prospect-Hill, dans le voisinage du cap de l'Espoir-Trompé.

Deux lieues séparaient la métairie de cette pointe qui s'allonge comme un bec de vautour entre la baie des Nautiles et la haute mer. La plus grande partie du trajet s'effectua sur un terrain plat, d'un cheminement facile. Mais ce terrain accusa une pente assez sensible aux approches de la falaise.

Deux heures après le départ, au delà d'une verte et grasse campagne, toute rajeunie à la suite de la saison pluvieuse, M. Zermatt, M. Wolston et Jack atteignirent le bois des Singes qui ne méritait plus d'être ainsi désigné depuis la disparition de cette mauvaise engeance. Arrivés au pied de la colline, ils firent halte.

En somme, les pentes de Prospect-Hill n’étaient pas tellement raides que les buffles et l’onagre ne pussent les gravir, en suivant un lacet qui se déroulait sur ses flancs. Il y eut un fort coup de collier à donner, et le chariot atteignit le plateau.

La maison, très exposée aux vents de l’est et du nord qui battaient en plein le cap, avait souffert des dernières tourmentes. Sa toiture devrait subir des réparations immédiates, car les rafales l’avaient dégarnie en plusieurs endroits. Cependant, telle quelle, en pleine saison estivale, elle était habitable, – ce qui permit à ses hôtes de s’y installer pour quelques jours.

En ce qui concernait la basse-cour que les gallinacés animaient de leurs gloussements et de leurs ébats, il y eut à se préoccuper de divers dégâts dus aux mauvais temps; puis il fallut dégager l’orifice de la petite source fraîche qui s’épanchait presque au sommet de la colline.

A propos des plantations, et plus particulièrement des câpriers et des arbres à thé, le travail se réduisit au redressement de ceux que la violence des vents avait courbés, et dont les racines tenaient encore au sol.

Durant ce séjour, plusieurs promenades amenèrent les visiteurs à l’extrémité du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé. De cet endroit, le regard embrassait une vaste étendue de mer en direction de l’est, et une partie de la baie des Nautiles vers l’ouest. Que de fois, depuis tant d’années, les naufragés avaient guetté vainement l’apparition d’un bâtiment au large du cap!

Aussi, lorsque M. Zermatt et ses deux compagnons s’y rendirent, Jack d’émettre cette réflexion:

«Il y a douze ans, désespérés de n’avoir retrouvé aucun de nos compagnons du *Landlord*, nous l’avions à juste titre appelé le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé…

Eh bien, aujourd’hui, si la *Licorne* allait se montrer par le travers, est-ce qu’il ne conviendrait pas de lui donner le nom de cap de Bonne-Venue?…

— Assurément, mon cher Jack, répondit M. Wolston, mais le cas est improbable… La *Licorne* est encore en plein Atlantique, et il s’en faut de presque deux mois qu’elle puisse atteindre les parages de la Nouvelle-Suisse…

— On ne sait pas, monsieur Wolston, on ne sait pas… répétait Jack. Et d’ailleurs, à défaut de la *Licorne*, pourquoi un autre navire ne viendrait-il pas prendre connaissance, puis possession de l’île?… Il est vrai, son capitaine serait en droit de l’appeler l’île de l’Espoir-Trompé… puisque la possession est chose faite!…»

Du reste aucun navire n’apparaissait au large, et il n’y eut pas lieu de changer le nom de baptême du cap.

Le 21 septembre, la besogne étant achevée à la villa de Prospect-Hill, M. Zermatt décida que le départ s’effectuerait le lendemain dès la pointe du jour.

Ce soir-là, groupés en avant de la petite terrasse qui s’étendait devant l’habitation, les hôtes de Prospect-Hill purent assister à un splendide coucher de soleil sur un horizon dont aucune brume n’altérait la pureté. A quatre lieues de là, le cap de l’Est se fondait dans une ombre que ravivaient parfois les étincellements du ressac contre les basses roches de la pointe. La mer, d’une tranquillité parfaite, s’arrondissait jusqu’à la baie du Salut. Au-dessous de la colline, les prairies, ombragées de bouquets d’arbres, confondaient leur tapis verdoyant avec la tache jaunâtre des grèves. En arrière, à une huitaine de lieues, au sud, s'estompait la chaîne transversale vers laquelle s'attachaient obstinément les regards de M. Wolston, et dont les derniers rayons solaires festonnaient encore l'arête d'un liséré d'or.

Le lendemain, le chariot, après avoir redescendu les talus de Prospect-Hill, se remit en route, et, l'après-midi, il arrivait à l'enclos de Felsenheim. Avec quelle joie furent accueillis les absents dont l'exploration n'avait pas exigé moins de deux semaines! C'est peu, sans doute, mais les chagrins de la séparation ne se mesurent pas uniquement à sa durée.

Inutile d'ajouter que Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah n'avaient point perdu leur temps pendant ces quinze jours. Les travaux de lessivage étaient très avancés. C'était plaisir de voir les draps, les nappes, les serviettes, raccommodés avec soin, et dont la blancheur tranchait sur la verdure du potager, se balancer sur les cordes tendues d'un arbre à l'autre.

De son côté, Ernest n'avait pas chômé. Lorsque les ménagères n'avaient pas eu besoin de lui, il s'était enfermé dans la bibliothèque, sans dire de quelle besogne il s'occupait. Peut-être, cependant, Annah était-elle dans le secret de son travail.

Bref, ce soir-là, lorsque les deux familles furent réunies dans la grande salle, après que M. Zermatt eut fait le récit de l'excursion aux métairies, Ernest déposa sur une table une feuille de papier sur laquelle figurait un dessin à lignes coloriées.

«Eh! qu'est-ce là?… demanda Jack. Serait-ce le plan de la future capitale de la Nouvelle-Suisse?…

— Pas encore, répondit Ernest.

— Alors je ne devine pas…

— Mais c’est le projet de décoration intérieure de notre petite chapelle… dit Annah.

— Sans doute, Jack, ajouta Ernest, et il fallait bien s’en occuper, puisque les murs sont déjà à moitié de leur hauteur.»

Cette déclaration causa un vif plaisir et Ernest fut chaleureusement loué de son travail, qui fut trouvé parfait autant pour son élégance que pour sa disposition.

«Y aura-t-il un clocher?… demanda Jack.

— Assurément… répondit Annah.

— Avec une cloche?…

— Oui… la cloche du *Landlord*…

— Et, dit Ernest, c’est Annah qui aura l’honneur de la sonner la première!»

On était au 24 septembre, c’est-à-dire à l’époque où le projet de M. Wolston devait être mis à exécution. Que résulterait-il de cette reconnaissance à l’intérieur de la Nouvelle-Suisse?… Pendant une douzaine d’années, les naufragés s’étaient contentés de ce district de la Terre-Promise, et l’on sait s’il avait suffi à leur assurer l’existence et même le bien-être. Aussi, indépendamment de l’inquiétude que devait lui inspirer l’absence de quelques-uns des siens, Mme Zermatt, sans trop se l’expliquer, était-elle portée à croire que les conséquences de cette excursion seraient plutôt regrettables.

Et, ce soir-là, lorsque M. Zermatt l'eut rejointe dans leur chambre, elle s'en ouvrit à son mari, qui crut sage de lui répondre en ces termes:

«Chère amie, si nous étions encore dans les conditions où nous avons été depuis notre arrivée, je t'accorderais que cette exploration ne s'impose pas. Si même M. Wolston et sa famille avaient été jetés à la suite d'un naufrage sur notre île, je leur dirais: ce qui nous a suffi doit vous suffire, et il n'est pas nécessaire de se lancer à l'aventure, quand le profit n'est pas certain et lorsqu'il y a peut-être des dangers à courir… Mais la Nouvelle-Suisse possède à présent un statut géographique, et, dans l'intérêt de ses futurs colons, il importe que l'on connaisse son étendue, la disposition de ses côtes, quelles ressources elle peut offrir…

— Bien… mon ami… bien… répondit Mme Zermatt, mais cette exploration ne devrait-elle pas être faite par les nouveaux arrivants?

— Évidemment, répondit M. Zermatt, il n'y aurait aucun inconvénient à attendre, et l'opération pourrait être entreprise dans des conditions meilleures. Mais, tu le sais, Betsie, ce projet tient au cœur de M. Wolston, et, d'autre part, Ernest désire compléter la carte de la Nouvelle-Suisse… Je pense donc qu'il convient de satisfaire leurs désirs.

— Je ne dirais pas non, mon ami, répliqua Mme Zermatt, s'il ne s'agissait encore de se séparer…

— Une absence d'une quinzaine de jours au plus!…

— A moins que Mme Wolston, Annah et moi, ne soyons du voyage…

— Ce ne serait pas prudent, ma chère femme, déclara M. Zermatt. Cette excursion peut offrir, sinon des dangers, du moins des difficultés et de grandes fatigues… Il s’agira de cheminer à travers une région aride sous un soleil brûlant… L’ascension de cette chaîne sera pénible sans doute…

— Ainsi, Mme Wolston, Annah et moi, nous devrons rester à Felsenheim?…

— Oui, Betsie, mais je ne compte pas vous y laisser seules. Après avoir bien réfléchi, voici le parti auquel je me suis arrêté et qui recevra, je pense, l’approbation générale. C’est M. Wolston qui fera l’exploration avec nos deux fils, – Ernest chargé des relèvements, Jack qui ne consentirait jamais à sacrifier une pareille occasion d’aller à la découverte… Quant à moi, je resterai à Felsenheim… Cela te va-t-il, Betsie?…

— Quelle question, mon ami! répondit Mme Zermatt. Nous pouvons entièrement nous fier à M. Wolston. C’est un homme sérieux… qui ne se laissera pas entraîner à des imprudences… Nos deux fils ne courent aucun risque avec lui…

— J’imagine, reprit M. Zermatt, que cet arrangement satisfera Mme Wolston et Annah…

— Qui regrettera bien un peu l’absence de notre Ernest!… dit Mme Zermatt.

— Tout comme Ernest regrettera de partir sans elle, ajouta M. Zermatt. Oui! ces deux bons êtres sont attirés l’un vers l’autre, et, un jour, dans cette chapelle dont il a achevé le plan, Ernest sera uni à celle qu’il aime!… Mais nous reparlerons en temps voulu de ce mariage…

— Dont M. et Mme Wolston seront aussi heureux que nous!…» répondit Mme Zermatt.

Lorsque M. Zermatt fit connaître sa proposition, elle réunit tous les suffrages. Il fallut bien qu’Ernest et Annah se rendissent à ce projet très raisonnable. L’un admettait que des femmes ne devaient pas s’aventurer dans une expédition de ce genre, dont elles pourraient ou retarder ou même compromettre le succès, et l’autre comprenait que la présence d’Ernest était indispensable pour qu’elle fût menée à bonne fin.

La date du départ fut fixée au 25 septembre.

Dès ce jour, chacun s’occupa des préparatifs, qui allaient être promptement achevés. En effet, d’un commun accord, M. Wolston et les deux jeunes gens avaient résolu de faire ce voyage à pied. Il se pouvait, en effet, que la contrée qui confinait à la base des montagnes ne fût pas plus facile que celle que traversait le haut cours de la rivière Montrose.

On irait donc pédestrement, le bâton à la main, le fusil au dos, accompagnés de deux chiens. Que Jack fût un excellent tireur, aucun doute à ce sujet; mais ni M. Wolston ni Ernest n’étaient à dédaigner à ce point de vue, et les trois chasseurs étaient assurés de se procurer en route une nourriture abondante.

Cependant il y eut lieu de préparer le chariot et l’attelage de buffles en vue du transport des deux familles jusqu’à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt. On ne l’a pas oublié, M. Zermatt voulait profiter de l’occasion pour visiter cette métairie établie sur la limite du district de la Terre-Promise. Aussi est-ce avec satisfaction que fut accueillie l’idée d’accompagner M. Wolston, Jack et Ernest, jusqu’au delà du défilé de Cluse. Peut-être même conviendrait-il de prolonger pendant vingt-quatre ou quarante-huit heures le séjour à Eberfurt, si l’habitation exigeait des travaux auxquels tous devraient prêter la main.

Le 25, de grand matin, le chariot quitta Felsenheim suivi des chiens Braun et Falb. Tous avaient pu y prendre place. L’étape mesurait trois bonnes lieues, et les buffles ne seraient pas gênés de la franchir avant midi.

Le temps était beau, le ciel bleu pommelé. Quelques légers flocons de nuages tamisaient les rayons solaires et en adoucissaient l’ardeur.

Vers onze heures, après avoir marché obliquement à travers une fertile et verdoyante campagne, le chariot atteignit l’ermitage d’Eberfurt.

Dans le petit bois qui le précédait, on aperçut encore une douzaine de singes. D’où nécessité de les en chasser, et ils décampèrent dès les premiers coups de feu.

Lorsque le chariot eut fait halte, les familles allèrent s’installer dans l’habitation. Convenablement abritée par les arbres qui l’entouraient, elle n’avait que peu souffert des mauvais temps. Tandis que Mme Wolston, Mme Zermatt et Annah s’occupaient du déjeuner, les hommes s’éloignèrent d’une portée de fusil afin de visiter le défilé de Cluse, qui s’ouvrait sur l’intérieur de l’île.

Un important et dur travail s’imposait en cet endroit, car de puissants animaux avaient tenté de forcer la barrière, et il serait nécessaire de la consolider. Il y avait lieu de croire qu’une troupe d’éléphants avait tenté de franchir le défilé, et, s’ils y eussent réussi, que de ravages, non seulement à la métairie d’Eberfurt, mais aussi aux métairies de Zuckertop et de Waldegg! Qui sait même s’il n’y aurait pas eu à défendre Felsenheim contre les attaques de ces formidables pachydermes?…

La mise en place de nouvelles poutres et de nouveaux blocs occupa l’après-midi et la journée suivante. Ce ne fut pas trop de tous les bras pour la manœuvre de ces lourdes masses et leur solide assujettissement. Cette besogne finie, M. Zermatt eut l’assurance que la passe ne pourrait être forcée.

Inutile de dire que l’ermitage d’Eberfurt n’était plus la hutte à la mode kamtchadale, qui, prenant son point d’appui sur quatre arbres, s’élevait à vingt pieds au-dessus du sol. Non, on disposait là d’une habitation close et palissadée, qui renfermait plusieurs chambres suffisantes pour loger les deux familles. De chaque côté, de larges étables étaient ménagées sous les basses branches des mangliers et des chênes verts. C’est là que fut enfermé l’attelage des buffles auxquels le fourrage fut distribué en abondance. Ces animaux, si bien dressés, si vigoureux, pourraient donc y ruminer tout à leur aise.

Il faut mentionner en outre que le gibier pullulait aux environs, lièvres, lapins, perdrix, cabiais, agoutis, outardes, coqs de bruyère, antilopes. Il fut facile à Jack de satisfaire sa passion au profit de la table commune. D’ailleurs, une part de ce gibier, après avoir été rôtie devant la flamme pétillante du foyer, fut réservée pour les trois excursionnistes. La gibecière au côté, le sac au dos, munis d’amadou pour allumer du feu, se contentant de viandes grillées, de gâteaux de cassave, poudre et plomb en abondance, gourdes pleines d’eau-de-vie, ils ne devaient concevoir ni laisser concevoir aucune inquiétude à l’égard de la nourriture quotidienne. Et puis, à travers ces plaines fertiles, déjà entrevues soit au delà de la vallée de Grünthal, soit dans le sud de la baie des Perles, les racines comestibles ou les fruits demandaient-ils d’autre peine que de les déterrer ou de les cueillir?…

Le 27 septembre, dès la première heure, tout le monde se rendit au défilé de Cluse, où se firent les derniers adieux. Pendant une quinzaine de jours, on serait sans nouvelles des absents!… Combien le temps paraîtrait long!

«Sans nouvelles?… dit alors Ernest. Non, mère, non, ma chère Annah, et vous en recevrez…

— Par courrier?… demanda Jack.

— Oui… par courrier aérien, répondit Ernest. Ne voyez-vous pas ce pigeon que j'ai apporté dans sa petite cage?… Pensez-vous que c'était pour le laisser à Eberfurt?… Non, nous le lâcherons du haut de la chaîne, et il vous apportera des nouvelles de la caravane.»

Chacun applaudit à cette bonne idée, et Annah se promit bien de guetter chaque jour l'arrivée du messager d'Ernest.

M. Wolston et les deux frères franchirent une étroite issue ménagée entre les poutres du défilé de Cluse. Elle fut soigneusement refermée derrière eux; et ils disparurent bientôt au tournant de la barrière rocheuse.

CHAPITRE XIII

Au sortir de la vallée de Grünthal. – La région des plaines. – La région

des forêts. – Encore les singes. – Au pied de la chaîne. – La nuit à l’intérieur d’une grotte. – La première et la deuxième zone de la montagne. – A la base

du cône.

Le voyage à pied est par excellence le voyage du touriste. Il permet de tout voir, il autorise les détours, il justifie les haltes, il permet les retards. Le piéton se contente de sentiers, lorsqu’il n’y a plus de route. Il peut cheminer à sa fantaisie, passer là où ne passeraient ni le plus léger véhicule ni la monture la mieux dressée, franchir les talus et s’élever jusqu’à la cime des montagnes.

Aussi M. Wolston et les deux jeunes gens n’avaient-ils pas hésité, au risque d’avoir à supporter d’extrêmes fatigues, à se lancer pédestrement au milieu de ces contrées inconnues de l’intérieur, surtout en prévision de l’ascension projetée au sommet de la chaîne.

Le projet, on le sait, ne devait comprendre qu’un parcours de sept à huit lieues, à la condition d’atteindre en ligne droite la base des montagnes. Il ne s’agissait donc pas d’un long voyage; mais il allait s’effectuer à travers une contrée nouvelle, qui réservait peut-être d’importantes et utiles découvertes aux trois excursionnistes.

Le plus surexcité, on ne s’étonnera pas que ce fût Jack. Avec son tempérament aventureux, s’il ne s’était pas embarqué sur la *Licorne* pour ces pays d’Europe qu’il avait quittés tout enfant, c’est qu’il comptait bien se dédommager un jour, lorsque la situation de sa famille serait définitivement assurée. En attendant, quelle satisfaction pour lui de dépasser les limites de la Terre-Promise, de parcourir ces vastes plaines dont il ne connaissait rien au delà du défilé de Cluse et de la vallée de Grünthal! Par bonheur, il n’avait entre les jambes ni l’onagre Leichtfus, ni le taureau Brummer, ni son autruche Brausewind et n’avait emmené que son chien Falb. Aussi M. Wolston serait-il plus à même de contenir sa fougue habituelle.

Et d’abord, au sortir du défilé, tous trois se dirigèrent vers la petite hauteur qui portait le nom de Tour Arabe en souvenir de cette bande d’autruches dans laquelle M. Zermatt et ses enfants avaient cru voir une bande de Bédouins à cheval, lors de leur première visite à la vallée de Grünthal. A partir de cette tour, ils se rabattirent vers la grotte des Ours, où il s’en était fallu de peu, quelques années auparavant, qu’Ernest ne fût étouffé dans l’embrassement de l’un de ces trop étreignants plantigrades!

D’ailleurs il n’y eut pas à remonter le cours de la rivière Orientale, qui descendait du sud à l’ouest. Prendre cette direction c’eût été allonger l’itinéraire, puisque les pentes de la chaîne se dessinaient vers le sud.

Et à ce propos Ernest de dire:

«Ce qui n’est pas à faire avec la rivière Orientale l’aurait été avec la rivière Montrose… Certainement, nous aurions eu plus court à suivre l’une ou l’autre de ses rives…

— Et je me demande, ajouta Jack, pourquoi la pinasse ne nous a pas conduits à son embouchure?… De là, le canot eût navigué jusqu’au barrage, c’est-à-dire à cinq ou six lieues au plus de la chaîne…

— Rien n’aurait été plus aisé, mon cher Jack, répondit M. Wolston. Mais cette aride contrée que traverse la Montrose ne présente aucun intérêt. Mieux vaut donc parcourir la région comprise entre la baie du Salut et les montagnes.»

Le cheminement continua en descendant la vallée de Grünthal qui s’étendait sur une longueur de deux lieues environ, parallèlement à la barrière limitative de la Terre-Promise. Large de mille toises, cette vallée renfermait des massifs de bois, des bouquets isolés, des prairies étagées sur ses talus. Elle livrait aussi passage à un cours d’eau qui murmurait sous les roseaux, et devait se jeter soit dans la rivière Orientale, soit dans la baie des Nautiles.

Il tardait à M. Wolston et aux deux frères d’avoir atteint l’extrémité de la vallée de Grünthal, afin de prendre un premier aperçu de la contrée qui se développait au sud. Autant qu’il le pouvait, Ernest relevait l’orientation au moyen de sa boussole de poche et la notait en même temps que les distances parcourues.

Vers midi, on fit halte à l’ombre d’un groupe de goyaviers, non loin de champs où les euphorbes poussaient en abondance. Plusieurs couples de perdrix, que Jack avait abattues chemin faisant, furent plumées, vidées, rôties à la flamme, et composèrent le menu de ce déjeuner avec des gâteaux de cassave. Le rio fournit une eau limpide, à laquelle on mêla quelques gouttes de l’eau-de-vie des gourdes, et les goyaves, en pleine maturité, figurèrent avantageusement au dessert.

Repus et reposés, les trois excursionnistes se remirent aussitôt en route. L’extrémité de la vallée s’engageait entre deux hauts parements rocheux. A travers cette gorge plus resserrée, le ruisseau se transformait en torrent, et le débouché apparut.

Un pays presque plat, qui offrait toute la luxuriante fertilité des zones tropicales, se développait jusqu'aux premières assises de la chaîne, – pays verdoyant. Quelle différence avec les territoires arrosés par le cours supérieur de la Montrose! A une lieue en direction du sud-est roulait un ruban liquide, qui resplendissait sous le soleil, et, vraisemblablement, affluait au lit de la Montrose.

Vers le sud, en gagnant la base des montagnes, sur un espace de six à sept lieues, se succédaient les plaines et les futaies. La marche fut souvent embarrassée. Le sol était hérissé d'herbes hautes de cinq à six pieds, de grands roseaux à panaches épineux, et aussi de cannes à sucre que la brise balançait à perte de vue. Nul doute qu'il n'y eût possibilité d'exploiter fructueusement ces productions naturelles qui, à cette époque, formaient la principale richesse des colonies d'outre-mer.

Lorsque M. Wolston et les deux jeunes gens eurent quatre heures de marche dans les jambes:

«Je propose de faire halte, dit Ernest.

— Déjà?… s'écria Jack, qui pas plus que son chien Falb ne demandait à se reposer.

— Je suis de l'avis d'Ernest, déclara M. Wolston. Cet endroit me paraît convenable, et nous pourrons passer la nuit sur la lisière de ce petit bois de micocouliers.

— Va pour le campement, répondit Jack, et aussi pour le dîner, car j'ai l'estomac creux…

— Faudra-t-il allumer un feu et l’entretenir jusqu’au jour?… demanda Ernest.

— Ce sera prudent, déclara Jack, et c’est encore le meilleur moyen d’écarter les fauves.

— Sans doute, répondit M. Wolston, mais il serait nécessaire de veiller à tour de rôle, et je crois qu’il vaut mieux dormir… Nous n’avons rien à craindre, il me semble…

— Non, déclara Ernest, je n’ai relevé aucune trace suspecte, et pas un hurlement ne s’est fait entendre depuis que nous avons quitté la vallée de Grünthal. Autant vaut s’épargner la fatigue de veiller l’un après l’autre…»

Jack n’insista pas, et les excursionnistes se mirent en mesure d’apaiser leur faim.

La nuit promettait d’être magnifique, – une de ces nuits où la nature s’endort paisible, et dont aucun souffle ne trouble la tranquillité. Pas une feuille ne remuait aux arbres, pas un craquement n’interrompait le silence de la plaine. Le chien ne donnait point signe d’inquiétude. Du lointain il ne venait pas même un seul de ces rauques aboiements de chacals, bien que ces carnassiers fussent si nombreux sur l’île. Au total, ce ne serait point faire acte d’imprudence que de s’endormir à la belle étoile. M. Wolston et les deux frères dînèrent du reste du déjeuner, de quelques œufs de petites tortues découverts par Ernest et durcis sous la cendre, auxquels ils ajoutèrent les noix fraîches de ces pins pignons qui abondaient dans le voisinage, et dont l’amande a le goût de la noisette.

Le premier à fermer les yeux fut Jack, par cette raison qu’il était le plus fatigué de tous. En effet, il n’avait cessé de battre les halliers et les buissons, souvent même à de telles distances, que M. Wolston s’était vu maintes fois contraint de le rappeler à l’ordre. Mais, ayant été le premier à s’endormir, il fut aussi le premier à s’éveiller dès le lever du jour.

Aussitôt, M. Wolston et les deux frères se remirent en route. Une heure après, ils durent traverser à gué un petit cours d’eau, qui se jetait peut-être deux ou trois lieues plus loin dans le lit de la rivière Montrose. Du moins, étant donnée sa direction vers le sud-est, Ernest le pensait-il.

Toujours de spacieuses prairies, de vastes plantations de cannes à sucre, puis dans les parties humides du sol, maint bouquet de ces arbres à cire, dont une tige porte les fleurs et l’autre les fruits. Enfin apparurent des futaies épaisses au lieu de ces arbres qui poussaient isolément sur les flancs de la vallée de Grünthal, cannelliers, palmiers de diverses sortes, figuiers, manguiers, et aussi nombre de ceux qui ne produisent pas de fruits comestibles, sapins, chênes verts, chênes maritimes, tous de venue superbe. Sauf aux quelques places où se montraient les arbres à cire, cette région n’offrait aucun terrain marécageux. Du reste, le sol ne cessait de remonter, – ce qui enlevait à Jack tout espoir de rencontrer des bandes d’oiseaux aquatiques. Il devrait se contenter du gibier de plaine et de bois.

Entre-temps, M. Wolston crut bon de faire cette observation à son jeune compagnon:

«Il est évident, mon cher Jack, que nous ne serons pas très à plaindre pour en être réduits aux poules sultanes, aux perdrix, aux cailles, aux outardes, aux coqs de bruyère, sans compter les antilopes, les cabiais et les agoutis. Mais il me paraît sage de ne s’approvisionner qu’au moment de faire halte afin de ne point trop alourdir nos gibecières.

— Vous avez raison, monsieur Wolston, répondit l’enragé chasseur. Pourtant, il est bien difficile de résister, et quand une pièce de gibier passe à bonne portée de fusil…»

En fin de compte, Jack suivit le conseil de M. Wolston. Ce fut seulement à onze heures que plusieurs détonations donnèrent l’assurance que le menu du premier repas venait de se compléter. Sans doute, ceux qui aiment la viande un peu faisandée ne se fussent point accommodés de ces deux coqs et de ces trois bécasses que Falb venait de ramasser au milieu des broussailles. Il est vrai, à la Nouvelle-Suisse on n’en était pas arrivé à cette dégénérescence du goût, et on ne laisserait rien de ces pièces qui furent rôties devant un feu de bois sec. Quant au chien, il se régala des carcasses qui lui furent généreusement abandonnées.

Toutefois, l’après-midi, quelques décharges ne parurent pas inutiles, lorsqu’il fallut tenir à l’écart certains animaux redoutables tout au moins par leur supériorité numérique. Il y eut lieu de faire parler les trois fusils afin de mettre en fuite une bande de chats sauvages, de cette espèce déjà signalée sur les limites de la Terre-Promise, lors de la première excursion à la vallée de Grünthal. La bande décampa avec nombre de blessés, poussant des cris atroces qui tenaient à la fois du miaulement et du hurlement. Peut-être conviendrait-il de se garder soigneusement contre leurs attaques à la prochaine halte de nuit.

Au surplus, sans parler du gibier de plume, si ces territoires abondaient en oiseaux, perroquets, perruches, aras d’un rouge éclatant, toucas minuscules aux ailes vertes rehaussées d’or, grands geais bleus de Virginie, flamants de haute taille, ils étaient en outre fréquentés par les antilopes, les élans, les couguars, les onagres, les buffles. Du plus loin qu’elles sentaient la présence de l’homme, ces bêtes détalaient avec une incroyable rapidité et il eût été impossible de les rejoindre.

Jusqu’alors, à monter toujours du côté de la chaîne, le pays n’avait rien perdu de sa fertilité, comparable à celle du district de la partie septentrionale de l’île. M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack ne devaient pas tarder à rencontrer une zone très boisée. En approchant de la base des montagnes, on distinguait une successions de hautes futaies qui paraissaient fort épaisses. Donc, le lendemain, il fallait s’attendre aux fatigues d’un chemin plus difficile.

Ce soir-là, les affamés se régalèrent de gelinottes, dont chacun avait tiré sa part au milieu d’une compagnie que Falb fit lever entre le fouillis des hautes herbes. Le campement fut établi sur la lisière d’une superbe forêt de sagoutiers, arrosée par un petit cours d’eau dont la déclivité du sol faisait un torrent, en l’envoyant vers le sud-ouest.

M. Wolston, cette fois, voulut organiser une active surveillance aux abords du campement. Il y avait lieu de les protéger par un feu qui serait entretenu jusqu’à l’aube. De là, nécessité de se relayer auprès de ce foyer pendant la nuit qui fut troublée par des hurlements à courte distance.

Le lendemain, le départ se fit dès la première heure. Encore trois lieues et le pied des montagnes serait atteint – peut-être même dans la seconde étape de cette journée, si aucun obstacle ne venait retarder la marche. En supposant que les flancs de la chaîne fussent praticables sur son revers septentrional, l’ascension n’exigerait que les premières heures de la matinée suivante.

Quelle différence présentait maintenant cette région avec celle qui apparaissait au sortir de la vallée de Grünthal! Des bois s’étageaient à droite et à gauche. Presque uniquement formés de ces essences résineuses qui se plaisent à la surface des zones élevées, ils étaient arrosés par des rios tapageurs qui coulaient vers l’est. Tributaires ou sous-tributaires de la Montrose, ces rios ne tarderaient pas à s’assécher avec les chaleurs estivales, et on pouvait déjà les franchir en ne se mouillant qu’à mi-jambe.

Au cours de la matinée, M. Wolston crut plus pratique de contourner quelques-uns de ces bois entre lesquels s’étendaient de petites plaines. Si le parcours s’allongeait un peu, du moins le cheminement n’était pas retardé comme il l’eût été à travers ces futaies hérissées de broussailles et de lianes.

L’excursion se poursuivit de la sorte jusqu’à onze heures. Halte fut faite alors autant pour le repos que pour le repas, après cette étape assez fatigante.

Le gibier n’avait pas manqué depuis le départ. Jack venait même d’abattre une jeune antilope, dont il rapporta les meilleurs morceaux, et les gibecières reçurent ce qui en restait pour le dîner du soir.

On eut à se féliciter d’avoir pris cette précaution, car, pendant l’après-midi, le poil et la plume firent entièrement défaut. Or, si adroit chasseur que l’on soit, encore est-il nécessaire que l’occasion s’offre de tirer quelques coups de fusil à bonne portée.

Cette halte de la méridienne se passa au pied d’un énorme pin maritime près duquel Ernest alluma un feu de bois mort. Et, tandis que rôtissait un quartier d’antilope sous l’œil vigilant de Jack, son frère et M. Wolston s’éloignèrent de plusieurs centaines de pas, afin d’examiner la contrée.

«Si cette région forestière s’étend jusqu’à la chaîne, dit Ernest, il est probable qu’elle en couvre les premières pentes. C’est, du moins, ce que j’ai cru reconnaître ce matin, lorsque nous avons quitté notre campement.

— Dans ce cas, répondit M. Wolston, il faudra se résigner à traverser ces futaies… On ne pourrait les contourner sans allonger considérablement la route et peut-être même faudrait-il s’avancer jusqu’au littoral de l’est…

— Et ce littoral, monsieur Wolston, en admettant que mon estime soit exacte, dit Ernest, doit se trouver à une dizaine de lieues… Je parle de cette partie de la côte où nous a conduits la Pinasse à l’embouchure de la Montrose… Oui! une dizaine de lieues…

— S’il en est ainsi, mon cher Ernest, nous ne pouvons songer à gagner les montagnes par l’est. Quant à l’ouest…

— C’est l’inconnu, monsieur Wolston, et, d’ailleurs, lorsque des hauteurs de Grünthal on observe la chaîne, elle paraît s’étendre à perte de vue du côté du couchant…

— Donc, puisque nous n’avons pas le choix, déclara M. Wolston, risquons-nous à travers cette forêt, et frayons-nous un passage jusqu’à son extrême lisière. S’il est impossible de l’atteindre en un jour, nous en mettrons deux… nous en mettrons trois… mais arrivons au but.»

Les deux frères partageaient l’avis de M. Wolston, étant aussi résolus que lui à pousser l’exploration jusqu’aux montagnes; il n’y eut aucune discussion à ce sujet.

La chair d’antilope, grillée à point sur des braises, quelques gâteaux de manioc, une demi-douzaine des fruits cueillis aux arbres voisins, bananes, goyaves, pommes de cannellier, tel fut le menu de ce repas, lequel ne nécessita qu’une heure de halte. Puis, armes et gibecières replacées sur l’épaule et sur le dos, en se dirigeant au moyen de la boussole, M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack s’engagèrent sous le couvert de la forêt.

En réalité, entre ces sapins aux troncs droits et espacés, le sol assez uni, tapissé d’une herbe ou plutôt d’une sorte de mousse rare, peu fourni de ronces ou de broussailles, se prêtait mieux à la marche. Il n’en eût pas été de même dans les autres forêts aux essences enchevêtrées de parasites et rattachées les unes aux autres par des lianes. En cette vaste sapinière comme en toutes ses pareilles, la circulation ne rencontrait pas de sérieux obstacles. Sans doute, on n’y pouvait suivre aucun sentier frayé, même par le pied des animaux; mais, tout en obligeant à faire quelques crochets, les arbres laissaient un libre passage.

En somme, si aucun cours d’eau infranchissable – un torrent, par exemple – ne venait barrer la route, il n’y aurait pas lieu de se plaindre. M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack cheminaient sous l’abri d’un impénétrable plafond de verdure, bien qu’il fût verticalement frappé des rayons du soleil. Grand avantage, on en conviendra, pour de simples piétons, que revivifiaient d’autre part les pénétrantes senteurs de la forêt.

Si le gibier était devenu rare, Jack, M. Wolston et même Ernest n’en furent pas moins contraints à faire le coup de feu pendant cette étape. Il ne s’agissait pas de ces carnassiers, lions, tigres, panthères, couguars, déjà rencontrés à proximité de la Terre-Promise ou dans les territoires limitrophes de la baie des Perles. Mais quelle engeance aussi nombreuse que malfaisante!

«Ah! les gueux!… s’écria Jack. On dirait qu’ils se sont tous réfugiés dans cette forêt depuis qu’on les a chassés des bois de Waldegg et de

Zuckertop!…»

Et, après avoir reçu en pleine poitrine plusieurs pommes de pin lancées d'un bras vigoureux, il s'empressa de tirer les deux coups de son fusil.

Il fallut continuer cette fusillade durant une heure, au risque d'épuiser les munitions du voyage. Une vingtaine de quadrumanes, grièvement ou mortellement blessés, gisaient sur le sol. Lorsqu'ils dégringolaient de branche en branche, Falb se jetait sur ceux qui n'avaient plus la force de s'enfuir, et il les achevait en les étranglant.

«Encore, fit observer Jack, si c'étaient des noix de cocos que ces coquins nous envoyaient en guise de projectiles, il n'y aurait que demi-mal…

— Diable! répondit M. Wolston, je préfère les pommes de pin aux noix de cocos… C'est moins dur…

— Oui… mais ça ne nourrit pas, répliqua Jack, tandis que le coco, ça donne à boire et à manger!

— En tout cas, conclut Ernest, mieux vaut savoir ces singes à l'intérieur de l'île qu'aux abords de nos métairies… Nous avons eu assez de peine à nous préserver de leurs dévastations, à les détruire avec des pièges et des gluaux!… Que ceux-ci restent dans leur sapinière et ne reviennent jamais à la Terre-Promise, c'est tout ce qu'on leur demande…

— Et même poliment!» ajouta Jack, en appuyant sa politesse d'une dernière décharge.

Bref, lorsque cette agression eut pris fin, on se remit en route, et la seule difficulté consistait à se maintenir en bonne direction vers la chaîne.

En effet, le dôme des sapinières se prolongeait, épais et imperméable, sans aucune déchirure, sans laisser voir quel point occupait le soleil dans sa courbe déclinante. Pas une seule clairière, pas un arbre abattu. M. Wolston dut s’applaudir de n’avoir amené ni chariot ni monture. L’attelage des buffles, l’onagre de Jack, n’auraient pu franchir certaines passes où les sapins se pressaient presque à s’enchevêtrer les uns les autres, et il eût été nécessaire de rebrousser chemin.

Vers sept heures du soir, M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack atteignirent la limite méridionale de la sapinière. Telle était la montée du sol que la forêt s’étageait sur les premières ramifications orographiques et les sommets apparurent au moment où le soleil s’abaissait derrière les contreforts qui coupaient l’horizon de l’ouest.

Là s’accumulaient les roches, les débris tombés du haut de la montagne. Là aussi se dégorgeaient de multiples ruisseaux, qui formaient peut-être la source de la rivière Montrose, et que la déclivité du sol envoyait vers le levant.

Commencer l’ascension le jour même et peut-être y consacrer la nuit, c’eût été dangereux. Aussi, malgré leur désir d’atteindre le but, ni M. Wolston ni les deux frères n’en eurent la pensée. Ils cherchèrent et trouvèrent une excavation rocheuse, où ils pourraient se mettre à l’abri jusqu’au jour. Puis, tandis qu’Ernest s’occupait du repas, M. Wolston et Jack allèrent ramasser au pied des derniers arbres des brassées d’herbes sèches, qui furent étalées sur le sable de la grotte. On mangea une couple de tétras, sorte de coqs de bruyère, qui venaient d’être tués, et, la fatigue l’emportant, il n’y eut plus qu’à songer au repos.

Toutefois quelques mesures de prudence durent être prises. Avec la tombée du jour, des hurlements assez rapprochés se faisaient entendre, et il sembla bien qu’il s’y mêlait des rugissements sur la nature desquels il eût été difficile de se méprendre.

Un feu, allumé à l’entrée de la grotte, dut être entretenu toute la nuit avec le bois sec dont M. Wolston et Jack firent un gros tas.

Enfin Ernest le premier, Jack le second, M. Wolston le dernier, se relayant de trois en trois heures, veillèrent jusqu’au lever du soleil.

Le lendemain, dès l’aube, tous trois furent sur pied, et Jack de s’écrier de sa voix sonore:

«Eh bien, monsieur Wolston, voilà le grand jour arrivé!… Dans quelques heures, votre vœu le plus cher va être accompli!… Vous aurez définitivement planté notre pavillon au point culminant de la Nouvelle-Suisse…

— Quelques heures… oui… si l’excursion n’offre pas trop de difficultés… fit observer Ernest.

— Dans tous les cas, répondit M. Wolston, que ce soit aujourd’hui ou demain, nous saurons probablement à quoi nous en tenir sur les dimensions de l’île…

— A moins, dit Jack, qu’elle ne s’étende au sud et à l’ouest hors de la portée du regard!…

— Ce qui n’est point impossible… ajouta Ernest.

— Je ne le pense pas, répondit M. Wolston, car elle n’eût pas échappé jusqu’ici aux navigateurs qui fréquentent cette partie de l’océan Indien…

— On verra, répliqua Jack, on verra!»

Après un déjeuner de venaison froide, le reste fut réservé, car le gibier ferait assurément défaut sur ces arides talus que Falb ne semblait pas pressé de gravir. En dehors de la grotte, une attaque des fauves n'étant plus à redouter, les fusils furent mis en bandoulière. Alors, Jack en tête, Ernest le suivant, M. Wolston fermant la marche, tous trois commencèrent à s'élever sur les premières rampes.

Suivant l'estime d'Ernest, la hauteur de la chaîne pouvait être e onze à douze cents pieds. Un cône, qui se dressait presque en face de la sapinière, dominait d'une centaine de toises la ligne de faîte. C'était à la cime de ce cône que M. Wolston voulait planter un pavillon.

A cent pas de la grotte finissait brusquement la zone forestière de cette région. Au-dessus se dessinaient encore quelques champs de verdure, des prairies semées de bouquets d'arbrisseaux, aloès, lentisques, myrtes, bruyères, jusqu'à six a sept cents pieds d'élévation, – ce qui constituait la deuxième zone. Mais telle était la raideur des talus qu'en de certains endroits, elle dépassait cinquante degrés. De là, nécessité d'allonger le parcours, en obliquant à droite et à gauche.

Ce qui, il est vrai, favorisait l'ascension, c'est que le flanc offrait un solide point d'appui. Il n'y avait pas encore lieu de s'accrocher avec les mains ni de recourir à des mouvements de reptation. Le pied tenait ferme sur cette verdure, bossuée de racines et de pointes rocheuses. Des chutes n'étaient pas à craindre, et l'on en eût été quitte, en somme, pour une dégringolade de quelques pas sur un épais tapis de mousse.

L’ascension put donc s’effectuer sans aucun arrêt, en zigzags, de manière à diminuer l’angle d’inclinaison, bien qu’il en résultât une certaine fatigue. Le sommet ne serait pas atteint, sans que les ascensionnistes n’eussent été astreints à une ou deux haltes pour reprendre haleine. Si Ernest et Jack, jeunes, vigoureux, entraînés journellement, rompus aux exercices corporels, n’éprouvaient pas trop de lassitude, M. Wolston, vu son âge, ne pouvait fournir une telle dépense de souplesse et de force. Cependant, il se déclarerait satisfait, si, avant l’heure du déjeuner, ses compagnons et lui étaient campés à la base du cône. Une heure ou deux suffiraient alors pour en atteindre l’extrême pointe.

A maintes reprises, Jack fut invité à ne point se risquer comme un chamois, puisque la nature ne l’avait pas classé parmi cette espèce des grimpeurs. On continuait à s’élever, et, en ce qui le concernait. M. Wolston était bien décidé à ne pas demander grâce, tant qu’il ne serait pas à la base du cône, où finissait la deuxième zone de la chaîne. Mais que le plus difficile fût fait alors, cela ne semblait pas absolument démontré. Or, à cette hauteur, si le regard s’étendait vers le nord, l’ouest et l’est, on ne pourrait du moins rien voir de la contrée qui se développait vers le sud. Il serait nécessaire de monter à l’extrême sommet. Quant à la campagne, en direction de la vallée de Grünthal, elle était connue dans la partie comprise entre l’embouchure de la Montrose et le promontoire de la baie des Perles. La très naturelle et très légitime curiosité ne devrait donc être satisfaite que si les ascensionnistes parvenaient à la cime du cône, ou, en cas que l’ascension fût impraticable, s’ils parvenaient à le tourner.

Enfin, la seconde zone franchie, il y eut lieu de stationner sur la limite. Un repos s’imposait après une si grande dépense d’efforts. Il était midi, et, le déjeuner achevé, on commencerait à remonter la pente la plus allongée du cône. D’ailleurs, ‘es estomacs exigeaient impérieusement quelque nourriture. Ce n’est pas, pourtant, que ces éreintements physiques leur soient très favorables, et ils nuisent dans une certaine mesure à l’accomplissement des fonctions digestives. Mais, sans s’inquiéter de savoir s’ils digéraient bien ou mal un repas réduit aux derniers morceaux de l’antilope, comme plat de résistance, le plus pressé était de les remplir.

Une heure plus tard, Jack se releva, sauta d’un bond sur les premières roches du talus en dépit des recommandations de M. Wolston, et cria:

«Qui m’aime me suive!

— Tâchons de lui donner cette preuve d’affection, mon cher Ernest, répondit M. Wolston, et surtout d’empêcher ses imprudences!»

CHAPITRE XIV

L’arrivée à la cime du cône. – Regards portés en toutes directions.

— Ce que l’on voit au nord, à l’est et à l’ouest. – La région du sud.

— Un navire à l’horizon. – Le pavillon britannique.

Cette hauteur de six cents pieds dépasse d’un tiers environ celle de la grande pyramide d’Égypte. Cette pyramide, il est vrai, est garnie sur ses flancs de marches gigantesques qui facilitent l’ascension, et sans lesquelles il serait pour ainsi dire impossible d’atteindre l’extrême pointe du monument pharaonique de Gizeh. Or l’angle que formaient les lignes obliques du cône avec la perpendiculaire était encore plus ouvert que celui de la grande pyramide.

En réalité, ce n’était qu’un monstrueux entassement de roches à peine en équilibre, ou, si l’on veut, un énorme tas de pierres accumulées sans ordre. Il présentait cependant des rebords, des arêtes, des ressauts, des bourrelets, sur lesquels le pied pouvait trouver un point d’appui. Toujours en avant, Jack s’assurait de leur solidité, tâtonnait à gauche, à droite, et c’est en le suivant, sans trop de hâte, que M. Wolston et Ernest se hissèrent graduellement de bloc en bloc.

Quelle aridité désolante à la surface de cette troisième zone! On n’apercevait aucune trace du règne végétal, si ce n’étaient, çà et là, certaines touffes de ces maigres pariétaires auxquelles suffisent quelques pincées d’humus, et aussi de larges plaques de lichen sec qui coloraient les roches d’un vert grisâtre.

Le difficile était de ne point glisser le long de ce flanc, parfois aussi lisse qu’un miroir. Les chutes eussent été mortelles, car on aurait dévalé à la base du cône. Il fallait se garder aussi de provoquer avec le déplacement des agrégats jetés là pêle-mêle des avalanches qui auraient roulé jusqu’au pied de la chaîne.

Du reste, granit et calcaire entraient seuls dans la composition de cette puissante ossature de la montagne. Rien n’y trahissait une origine volcanique, de nature à menacer la Nouvelle-Suisse d’éruptions ou de tremblements de terre.

M. Wolston, Jack et Ernest parvinrent à mi-hauteur du cône sans accidents. En gravissant les endroits praticables, ils n’avaient pas toujours pu éviter des éboulements.

Trois ou quatre gros blocs, après avoir furieusement rebondi sur les pentes, allèrent se perdre dans les profondeurs de la forêt, avec un bruit de tonnerre, que répercutèrent les nombreux échos de la montagne.

A cette altitude planaient encore quelques volatiles, uniques représentants de la vie animale de cette troisième zone, sur laquelle ils ne cherchaient pas à se reposer. Ce n’était point de ces oiseaux de petite taille, qui ne quittaient pas les massifs de la sapinière. Quelques couples de puissants volateurs à large envergure, battant l’air à lents coups d’aile, dépassaient parfois la cime du cône. Quelle tentation éprouva Jack de les tirer, et avec quelle joie il eût frappé d’une balle ces vautours de l’espèce «umbu» et ces gigantesques condors que la présence de l’homme surprenait au milieu de ces mornes solitudes.

Aussi plus d’une fois le jeune chasseur fit-il le mouvement d’épauler son fusil.

«A quoi bon?… lui criait M. Wolston.

— Comment… à quoi bon?… répondait Jack, mais à…»

Et, sans achever sa phrase, après avoir remis son arme en bandoulière, il s’élançait sur les roches.

Ainsi fut épargnée la vie d’un superbe aigle de Malabar. D’ailleurs, au lieu de l’abattre, mieux eût valu s’en emparer. Il aurait pu remplacer le fidèle compagnon de Fritz, qui avait succombé dans le combat avec le tigre lors du voyage à la découverte de la Roche-Fumante.

A mesure que le talus montait vers la crête supérieure, il se faisait de plus en plus roide, – un véritable pain de sucre. M. Wolston se demandait même s’il y aurait place pour trois personnes sur sa pointe. Il fallait maintenant s’entr’aider les uns les autres, ou plutôt l’un l’autre. Jack commençait par attirer Ernest, qui attirait ensuite M. Wolston. En vain avaient-ils cherché à contourner la base du cône. C’était par le côté nord, en somme, que l’ascension présentait les moindres difficultés.

Enfin, vers deux heures de l’après-midi, une voix vibrante se fit entendre, – la voix de Jack, – la première sans doute qui eût jamais résonné à cette cime:

«Une île… c’est bien une île!»

Un dernier effort de M. Wolston et d’Ernest les éleva jusqu’à Jack. Là, sur un étroit espace de deux toises carrées, harassés, époumonés, presque incapables de parler, ils s’étendirent pour reprendre haleine.

Que la Nouvelle-Suisse fût une île, la question était résolue depuis l’arrivée de la *Licorne*. Mais si la mer l’entourait de toutes parts, c’était à des distances inégales de la montagne. Très développée vers le sud, plus restreinte vers l’est et l’ouest, réduite à une simple bordure bleuâtre vers le nord, elle resplendissait sous les rayons du soleil, qui se trouvait à quelques degrés au-dessous de son point de culmination.

Tout d’abord, Ernest dut constater que la chaîne n’occupait pas la partie centrale de l’île. En s’élevant au contraire sur sa portion méridionale, elle suivait une courbe assez régulière, tracée du levant au couchant.

De ce point haut de quinze cents pieds au-dessus du niveau de l’Océan, le rayon de vue mesurait environ dix-sept à dix-huit lieues jusqu’à l’horizon. Mais il s’en fallait que la Nouvelle-Suisse comprît une telle superficie.

Aussi, lorsque M. Wolston lui posa une question à ce sujet, Ernest répondit:

«A mon estime, notre île doit avoir de soixante à soixante-dix lieues de circonférence… Ce qui serait une aire déjà considérable et supérieure à celle du canton de Lucerne.

— Et quelle serait approximativement son étendue?… demanda M. Wolston.

— Autant que je puis l’évaluer, en tenant compte de sa configuration, sorte d’ovale qui se dessine de l’est à l’ouest, répondit Ernest, elle pourrait mesurer quatre cents lieues carrées, soit moitié moins que la Sicile…

— Eh!… fit Jack, il y a nombre d’îles des plus qualifiées qui ne la valent pas…

— Très juste, reprit Ernest, et entre autres, si mes souvenirs sont exacts, l’une des principales de la Méditerranée… qui, d’une importance capitale pour l’Angleterre, n’a que neuf lieues de longueur sur quatre de large.

— Laquelle?…

— Malte.

— Malte!… s’écria M. Wolston, dont tout le «britannisme» fut surexcité à ce nom. Eh bien, pourquoi la Nouvelle-Suisse ne deviendrait-elle pas la Malte de l’océan Indien?…»

Et Jack de faire à part lui cette trop naturelle réflexion, c’est que la vieille Suisse aurait bien pu la garder pour elle et fonder là une belle colonie helvétique.

Le ciel était très clair, l’atmosphère absolument dégagée de brumes jusqu’aux extrêmes limites. On ne sentait pas trace d’humidité dans l’air ambiant, et le relief du sol s’accusait avec une netteté parfaite.

Comme la descente devait exiger trois fois moins de temps que la montée, M. Wolston et les deux frères pouvaient disposer de quelques heures avant que le moment fût venu de regagner la sapinière. Aussi, en se passant tour à tour la longue-vue, observèrent-ils avec soin la vaste campagne qui se déployait à leurs pieds.

Ernest, son carnet et son crayon à la main, traçait les lignes de cet ovale que traversaient le dix-neuvième parallèle de l’hémisphère méridional sur une longueur de vingt-quatre lieues environ, et le cent quatorzième méridien est sur une longueur de dix-neuf.

Voici ce qu’il était aisé de reconnaître dans la direction du nord, à une distance qui pouvait se mesurer par dix ou onze lieues à vol d’oiseau.

D’abord, au delà du littoral, une étroite marge de mer baignait la partie comprise entre le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé et le promontoire qui fermait la baie des Perles à l’ouest.

«Non, aucune erreur n’est possible, répétait Jack, et je n’ai pas besoin de lunette pour reconnaître la Terre-Promise puis la côte jusqu’à la baie du Salut!…

— En effet, ajouta M. Wolston, et à l’extrémité de cet angle opposé, voici le cap de l’Est qui couvre la baie de la Licorne.

— Par malheur, reprit Jack, même avec l’excellente longue-vue d’Ernest, on ne peut rien voir de la partie qui avoisine le ruisseau des Chacals…

— Cela tient, répondit Ernest, à ce qu’elle est cachée par la lisière de roches qui la limite au sud. Puisque de Felsenheim et de Falkenhorst on n’aperçoit pas le sommet de la chaîne, du haut de la chaîne on ne peut apercevoir ni Felsenheim ni Falkenhorst… C’est logique… je suppose…

— Tout à fait, triple logicien que tu es!… répondit Jack. Mais cela devrait être également vrai du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, et cependant, c’est bien lui, ce promontoire qui s’avance au nord, et puisque nous l’apercevons…

— Bien qu’il soit certain, répondit Ernest, que de ce cap, et même de Prospect-Hill, on voie le cône, la première condition pour voir, c’est de regarder. Or, il est probable que nous ne l’avons jamais fait avec assez d’attention…

— De tout cela, ajouta M. Wolston, il faut conclure que la chaîne proprement dite ne peut être aperçue que des hauteurs de la vallée de Grünthal…

— C’est cela même, monsieur Wolston, déclara Ernest, et ces hauteurs cachent Felsenheim à nos regards.

— Je le regrette, ajouta Jack, car je suis sûr qu’on aurait distingué mon père, ma mère, Mme Wolston et Annah… Et s’ils avaient eu l’idée de se rendre à Prospect-Hill, je gage que nous aurions pu les reconnaître… avec la longue-vue, s’entend… Car, enfin, ils sont là-bas, parlant de nous, comptant les heures, se disant: nos absents devaient être hier au pied de la montagne, et aujourd’hui, ils doivent être à sa cime… Et ils se demandent quelle est l’étendue de la Nouvelle-Suisse… et si elle fait bonne figure dans la mer des Indes…

— Bien parlé, mon cher enfant, c’est comme si nous les entendions… dit M. Wolston.

— Et comme si nous les voyions… affirma Jack. N’importe! je persiste à regretter que ces rochers nous cachent le ruisseau des Chacals et notre habitation de Felsenheim…

— Regrets superflus, dit Ernest, auxquels il faut bien se résigner!

— Aussi c’est la faute de ce cône! dit Jack. Pourquoi n’est-il pas plus élevé?… S’il montait encore de quelques centaines de pieds dans les airs, nos familles nous verraient de là-bas… elles nous feraient des signaux…, elles hisseraient un pavillon au pigeonnier de Felsenheim!… Nous leur dirions bonjour avec le nôtre…

— Voilà Jack parti!… répliqua M. Wolston.

— Et je suis sûr qu’Ernest verrait Annah…

— Mais je la vois toujours…

— C’est entendu… même sans lorgnette, s’écria Jack. Hein! comme ça porte loin, les yeux du cœur!»

En somme, on ne pouvait apercevoir aucun détail de la Terre-Promise. Dans ces conditions, il ne restait donc aux observateurs qu’à prendre une vue exacte de l’île en relevant ses contours et sa configuration géologique.

La côte vers le levant, au revers de la baie de la Licorne, présentait une bordure rocheuse qui encadrait toute cette partie aride, précédemment reconnue lors du premier voyage de la pinasse. Puis les falaises se rabaissaient, le littoral s’exhaussait vers l’embouchure de la rivière Montrose pour finir en un promontoire aigu, et il se recourbait à l’endroit où la chaîne prenait naissance au sud-est.

On entrevoyait, comme un filet lumineux, les sinuosités de la Montrose. Dans son cours d’aval, la rivière arrosait une région boisée et verdoyante, – région dénudée dans son cours d’amont. Alimentée par de nombreux rios descendus des derniers étages de la sapinière, elle faisait de nombreux détours. Au-delà des futaies épaisses entre les massifs et les bouquets d’arbres, se succédaient des plaines, des prairies, jusqu’aux extrêmes limites occidentales de l’île, là où se dressait un morne très élevé auquel s’appuyait l’autre extrémité de la chaîne à la distance de cinq ou six lieues.

En plan géométral, l’île représentait assez exactement le dessin d’une feuille d’arbre, plus large que longue, dont le pétiole aurait été allongé vers le sud, ses nervures ligneuses dessinées par des arêtes de roches, son tissu cellulaire représenté par cette verte campagne qui occupait la plus grande partie de sa surface.

Dans l’ouest scintillaient sous les rayons solaires d’autres cours d’eau, qui constituaient un important système hydrographique, plus complet que celui du nord et de l’est, réduit à la Montrose et à la rivière Orientale.

Donc, pour résumer, la Nouvelle-Suisse, sur les cinq sixièmes à tout le moins de sa surface au nord de la chaîne montrait une admirable fertilité et elle suffirait à nourrir plusieurs milliers d’habitants.

Quant à sa situation au milieu de ces parages de l’océan Indien, il était évident qu’elle ne se rattachait à aucun groupe insulaire, à aucun archipel. La longue-vue ne relevait aucune apparence de terre jusqu’à l’extrême horizon au large. C’était à trois cents lieues qu’il fallait chercher la côte la plus rapprochée et, on le sait, celle de la Nouvelle-Hollande.

Toutefois, si l’île ne possédait pas un cortège d’îlots détachés de son littoral, un point rocheux émergeait à quatre lieues environ dans l’ouest de la baie des Perles. Jack braqua son instrument dans cette direction:

«La Roche-Fumante… qui ne fume pas… s’écria-t-il, et je vous certifie que Fritz n’aurait pas eu besoin de lunette pour la reconnaître!…»

Ainsi la Nouvelle-Suisse, en sa plus grande étendue, pouvait convenir à l’établissement d’une importante colonie. Toutefois, ce qu’offraient le nord, l’est et l’ouest, il n’aurait pas fallu le demander au midi.

En s’arrondissant comme un arc, les deux extrémités de la chaîne venaient s’appuyer sur le littoral, à une distance presque égale de la base du cône qui en occupait le centre. La partie encadrée de cet arc était limitée par une succession de falaises dont on ne pouvait apercevoir la base, et qui semblaient taillées à pic.

Quel contraste entre cette sixième partie de l’île et les cinq autres, si largement favorisées de la nature! Là s’étalait la profonde désolation d’un désert, toute l’horreur du chaos. La zone supérieure de la chaîne se continuait jusqu’à l’extrémité méridionale de l’île, – zone qui semblait être infranchissable. Il était possible, cependant, qu’elle se raccordât de ce côté à la marge littorale par des défilés, des ravins, des gorges, des escarènes, – ainsi appelle-t-on les pentes très raides fortement ravinées. Quant au rivage, grèves sablonneuses ou rocheuses qui eussent permis de débarquer, ne se réduisait-il pas à quelque estran, – étroite bande qui découvre à mer basse?…

M. Wolston, Ernest, Jack, subissant la navrante impression qui se dégageait de cette contrée, restèrent silencieux tandis qu’ils la parcouraient du regard. Et l’on ne s’étonnera pas qu’Ernest fût amené à faire cette réflexion:

«Si, après le naufrage du *Landlord*, nous avions été jetés sur cette côte, notre bateau de cuves s’y serait brisé, et quelle mort nous attendait… la mort par la faim!

— Vous avez raison, mon cher Ernest, répondit M. Wolston, et, sur ce littoral, il n’y aurait guère eu de salut à espérer… Il est vrai, si vous étiez parvenus à débarquer quelques lieues plus au nord, la terre productive, la campagne giboyeuse se fût offerte à vos yeux… Il est à craindre, pourtant, que cette affreuse région n’ait aucune communication avec l’intérieur, et je ne sais s’il aurait été possible d’y descendre par le revers méridional de la chaîne…

— Ce n’est pas probable, ajouta Jack, mais, en contournant la côte, nous aurions certainement rencontré l’embouchure de la rivière Montrose et la partie fertile de l’île…

— Oui… répondit Ernest, à la condition que notre bateau eût pu remonter vers l’est ou vers l’ouest… Or la côte sud ne lui aurait pas offert une baie comme la baie du Salut, où il est venu atterrir sans trop de peine!»

Il était heureux, assurément, que les naufragés du *Landlord* eussent été poussés vers le rivage septentrional de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Sans cette circonstance, comment auraient-ils pu échapper à la plus horrible des morts, au pied de ce monstrueux entassement de roches?…

M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack voulurent demeurer à la pointe du cône jusqu’à quatre heures de l’après-midi. Ils prirent tous les relèvements nécessaires pour établir la carte de la Nouvelle-Suisse, – carte qui resterait incomplète dans la partie du sud, puisque cette partie échappait à leurs regards. Mais le travail s’achèverait à l’arrivée de la *Licorne*, lorsque le lieutenant Littlestone aurait terminé la reconnaissance hydrographique de l’île.

A ce moment, après avoir détaché une feuille de son carnet, Ernest y traça les lignes suivantes:

«Aujourd’hui, 30 septembre 1817, quatre heures du soir, à la cime du cône de…»

S’interrompant alors:

«Comment l’appellerons-nous, ce cône?… demanda-t-il. Il me semble d’ailleurs que pic vaudrait mieux que cône…

— Soit… le pic des Regrets, répondit Jack, puisque nous n’avons pu apercevoir Felsenheim…

— Non… le pic Jean-Zermatt en l’honneur de votre père, mes enfants…» proposa M. Wolston.

Cette proposition fut acceptée avec joie. Jack tira une tasse de sa gibecière. M. Wolston et Ernest en firent autant. Quelques gouttes de l’eau-de-vie des gourdes y furent versées, puis bues après un triple hurrah.

Ernest put continuer d’écrire:

«… à la cime du pic Jean-Zermatt, c’est à vous, mes chers parents, à vous, madame Wolston, à vous, ma chère Annah, que nous adressons ce billet, confié à notre fidèle messager, lequel, plus favorisé que nous, sera bientôt de retour à Felsenheim.

«Notre Nouvelle-Suisse, isolée dans ces parages de l’océan Indien, peut mesurer de soixante à soixante-dix lieues de circonférence. Très fertile sur la plus grande partie de sa surface, elle est stérile et paraît être inhabitable au revers méridional de la chaîne.

«Dans deux fois vingt-quatre heures, comme le retour se fera plus vite, il est possible que nous soyons près de tous ceux que nous aimons, et avant trois semaines, avec la permission de la Providence, il y a lieu d’espérer que nous aurons revu nos absents si impatiemment attendus.

«De la part de M. Wolston, de mon frère Jack et de votre respectueux fils, compliments pour vous, chers parents, pour Mme Wolston et pour ma chère Annah,

«ERNEST.»

Le pigeon fut tiré de sa petite cage, et, après que le billet eut été attaché à sa patte gauche, Ernest le laissa prendre son vol.

Tout d'abord, l'oiseau s'éleva de trente à quarante pieds au-dessus du cône, comme s'il eût voulu porter son regard à une plus grande distance. Puis, servi par ce merveilleux instinct de l'orientation, – ce sixième sens dont chaque animal semble être pourvu, – il partit à rapides coups d'aile dans la direction nord et ne tarda pas à disparaître.

Il ne restait plus maintenant qu'à arborer sur la cime du pic Jean-Zermatt le pavillon, qui aurait pour mât le long bâton de M. Wolston planté entre les dernières roches.

Cette opération achevée, il ne resterait plus qu'à dévaler au pied de la chaîne, à gagner la grotte, à s'y réconforter d'un bon repas dont la chasse fournirait les éléments, et enfin à jouir d'un repos bien dû après une journée si fatigante.

Le départ s'effectuerait le lendemain, dès l'aube. A suivre la route déjà connue, il n'était pas impossible d'atteindre Felsenheim en moins de quarante-huit heures.

M. Wolston et Jack s'occupèrent donc d'enfoncer le bâton assez solidement pour qu'il résistât aux rafales extrêmement violentes à cette hauteur.

«L'essentiel, fit observer Jack, c'est que notre pavillon se maintienne à cette place jusqu'à l'arrivée de la *Licorne*, afin que le lieutenant Littlestone puisse l'apercevoir dès que la corvette sera en vue de l'île… Voilà qui fera battre le cœur de Fritz et de Jenny, de François, de vos enfants, monsieur

Wolston, et aussi le nôtre, quand nous entendrons les vingt et un coups de canon qui salueront le pavillon de la Nouvelle-Suisse!»

Entre les interstices des roches il fut aisé d’assujettir le bâton en l’y coinçant avec de petites pierres.

Au moment où il allait fixer le pavillon à son extrémité, M. Wolston, tourné vers l’est, regarda dans cette direction. Il Parut le faire assez obstinément pour que Jack lui demandât:

«Qu’y a-t-il donc, monsieur Wolston?…

— J’ai cru encore voir… répondit celui-ci, en appliquant l’oculaire de la longue-vue à son œil.

— Voir?… répéta Ernest.

— Une fumée au-dessus du rivage, répondit M. Wolston, à moins que ce ne soit une vapeur comme celle que j’avais aperçue, lorsque la pinasse se trouvait par le travers de la rivière Montrose.

— Eh bien, dit Ernest, se dissipe-t-elle?…

— Non… affirma M. Wolston… et ce doit être à la même place… à l’extrémité de la chaîne… Est-ce que, depuis plusieurs semaines, des naufragés ou des sauvages seraient campés sur cette partie de la côte?…»

Ernest observa à son tour l’endroit indiqué, mais n’aperçut plus rien en cette direction.

«Eh, monsieur Wolston, ce n’est pas de ce côté-là qu’il faut regarder… c’est par ici… vers le sud…»

Et Jack tendit la main vers la mer au delà des énormes falaises qui dominaient le littoral.

«Mais c’est une voile… dit Ernest.

— Oui… une voile!… répéta Jack.

— Un bâtiment passe en vue de l’île, reprit Ernest et il paraît avoir le cap sur elle…»

M. Wolston, prenant la longue-vue, reconnut très distinctement un trois-mâts qui, toute toile dehors, faisait route à deux ou trois lieues au large.

Et alors Jack de s’écrier en gesticulant:

«C’est la *Licorne*!… ce ne peut être que la *Licorne*!… Elle ne devait arriver que vers la moitié du mois d’octobre, et elle arrive à la fin de septembre, en avance de quinze jours…

— Il n’y a rien d’impossible à cela, répondit M. Wolston. Néanmoins, avant de se prononcer, faudrait-il savoir exactement de quel côté ce bâtiment se dirige…

— Il se dirige vers la Nouvelle-Suisse, affirma Jack. Demain matin, il paraîtra à l’ouest de la baie du Salut, et nous ne serons pas là pour le recevoir!… Partons… monsieur Wolston… marchons toute la nuit…»

Une dernière observation d’Ernest arrêta Jack, qui se préparait à se laisser glisser sur le flanc du cône.

«Non, dit-il, regardez bien, monsieur Wolston… Ce bâtiment n’a pas le cap sur l’île…

— En effet, déclara celui-ci, après avoir suivi quelques instants le déplacement du navire.

— Alors… ce ne serait pas la *Licorne*?… s’écria Jack.

— Non, affirma Ernest.

— D’ailleurs, ajouta M. Wolston, la *Licorne* accosterait par le nord-ouest, tandis que ce bâtiment marche vers le sud-est et s’éloigne de l’île.»

Il n’y avait point à s’y tromper… le trois-mâts signalé faisait route à l’est et ne cherchait même point à prendre connaissance de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

«Soit, répondit Jack, mais la *Licorne* ne tardera plus à venir, et du moins nous serons là pour faire les saluts réglementaires à la corvette de Sa Majesté George III!»

Le pavillon, hissé à la pointe du pic Jean-Zermatt, se déploya sous la brise, tandis que Jack, déchargeant deux fois son fusil, lui rendait les honneurs.

CHAPITRE XV

L’attente à Felsenheim. – Retard inquiétant. – Départ pour l’ermitage d’Eberfurt. – M. Wolston et Ernest. – Ce qui est arrivé. – A la poursuite des éléphants. – Proposition de M. Wolston. – Vents contraires. – Jack!

Le soir de ce même jour, M. Zermatt et sa femme, Mme Wolston et sa fille, étaient réunis dans la salle de la bibliothèque, après une bonne journée de travail.

Ces quatre personnes causaient près de la fenêtre qui s’ouvrait sur la rive droite du ruisseau des Chacals, et de quoi auraient-elles parlé, si ce n’est des absents partis depuis trois jours? Ce qui les rassurait sur l’issue de cette exploration à l’intérieur de l’île, c’était que le temps l’eût favorisée, la chaleur n’étant pas insoutenable au début de la belle saison.

«Où M. Wolston et nos deux fils doivent-ils être en ce moment?… demanda Mme Zermatt.

— A mon avis, ils doivent avoir atteint le sommet de la chaîne, répondit M. Zermatt. S’ils n’ont pas eu de retards, trois jours leur auront suffi pour en gagner la base, et le quatrième a dû être employé à faire l’ascension…

— Au prix de bien des fatigues… de bien des dangers… qui sait?… dit Annah.

— Des dangers, non, ma chère enfant, répliqua M. Zermatt. Quant aux fatigues, votre père est encore dans la force de l’âge, et mes enfants en ont supporté d’autres!

— Ernest n’a pas l’endurance de son frère… ne put s’empêcher de répondre la jeune fille.

— Pas tout à fait, répliqua Mme Zermatt, et il a toujours préféré l’étude aux exercices corporels…

— Voyons, Betsie, dit M. Zermatt, ne fais pas de ton fils une femmelette ni même une hommelette!… S’il a travaillé de la tête, il a non moins travaillé des bras et des jambes!… Je pense donc que cette excursion n’aura été qu’une promenade de touristes… Si ce n’avait été la crainte de vous laisser seules à Felsenheim. Mme Wolston, Annah, et toi, ma chère amie, je serais parti d’un bon pied, malgré mes quarante-sept ans, et j’aurais pris part à ce voyage de découverte.

— Attendons à demain, dit Mme Wolston. Peut-être le pigeon qu’Ernest a emporté reviendra-t-il dans la matinée avec une lettre à notre adresse…

— Pourquoi pas ce soir?… interrompit Annah. Le pigeon saurait bien retrouver son pigeonnier même la nuit… n’est-il pas vrai, monsieur Zermatt?…

— Cela n’est pas douteux, Annah. La vitesse de cet oiseau est si considérable, – une vingtaine de lieues à l’heure, dit-on, – que la distance qui nous sépare des montagnes pourrait être franchie par lui en quarante ou cinquante minutes!

— Si je guettais son retour jusqu’au matin?… proposa la jeune fille.

— Eh! fit Mme Zermatt, notre chère enfant est bien pressée d’avoir des nouvelles de son père…

— Et aussi de Jack et d’Ernest, madame Zermatt, ajouta Annah en l’embrassant.

— Ce qui est regrettable, fit observer Mme Wolston, c’est que cette chaîne ne soit pas visible du haut de Felsenheim. Peut-être, avec une longue-vue, aurions-nous déjà pu nous assurer si le pavillon flotte au sommet du pic…

— Regrettable, en effet, madame Wolston, répondit M. Zermatt. C’est pourquoi, si le pigeon n’est pas revenu dans la matinée de demain, j’ai l’intention de seller Leichtfus, et d’aller jusqu’à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt d’où l’on aperçoit la chaîne…

— C’est convenu, mon ami, dit Mme Zermatt, mais ne formons pas de projets prématurés, et puisqu’il est l’heure de dîner, allons nous mettre à table… Qui sait si, dès ce soir, avant que nous n’ayons regagné nos lits, ce pigeon ne sera pas revenu avec un petit mot d’Ernest…

— Eh! répliqua M. Zermatt, ce n’est pas la première fois que nous aurons correspondu de la sorte!… Tu t’en souviens, Betsie, il y a longtemps déjà, lorsque nos fils nous ont envoyé des nouvelles de Waldegg, de Prospect-Hill et de Zuckertop, – de mauvaises nouvelles, par exemple, les dévastations de ces maudits singes et autres bêtes malfaisantes, – c’est par pigeon que nous les avons reçues… J’espère que, cette fois, le messager nous en apportera de meilleures…

— Le voici!… dit Annah, qui se leva d’un bond et courut à la fenêtre.

— Tu viens de le voir?… demanda sa mère.

— Non… mais je l’ai entendu rentrer au pigeonnier…» répondit la jeune fille.

En effet, un bruit sec venait d’attirer son attention. C’était celui de la petite trappe qui se refermait à la base du pigeonnier, au-dessus de la bibliothèque.

M. Zermatt sortit aussitôt, suivi d’ Annah, de Mme Zermatt et Mme Wolston. Arrivé au pied du pigeonnier, il appliqua une échelle contre la roche, y monta vivement, puis, après avoir regardé à l’intérieur:

«Il est revenu… dit-il.

— Prenez-le… prenez-le… monsieur Zermatt!» répéta Annah tout impatiente.

Dès que le pigeon fut entre ses mains, elle mit un baiser sur sa petite tête bleuâtre, et, après avoir détaché le billet fixé à sa patte, elle l’embrassa une seconde fois. L’oiseau fut alors relâché et rentra dans sa logette, où l’attendait une poignée de graines.

Annah lut le billet d’Ernest à haute voix. Les quelques lignes qu’il contenait devaient rassurer sur le compte des absents et annonçaient la réussite de leur excursion. Chacun y trouvait quelque chose d’affectueux pour soi, et, on le sait, Annah en avait sa bonne part.

Avec l’heureuse pensée que le retour s’effectuerait en quarante-huit heures, M. et Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et sa fille se retirèrent dans leurs chambres. On avait reçu le message, les nouvelles étaient excellentes, on remercia Dieu, et chacun dormit d’un tranquille sommeil jusqu’au lever du soleil.

Cette journée-là fut employée à des travaux de ménage. Il va de soi que, grâce à l’arrivée du pigeon, M. Zermatt avait renoncé à son projet de se rendre sur les hauteurs du défilé de Cluse. En admettant qu’une forte lunette eût permis d’apercevoir le pavillon qui flottait à la pointe du pic, cela n’eût rien appris de nouveau. Il n’y avait pas à douter que M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack ne fussent déjà en route pour Felsenheim.

Le jour suivant, il y eut, d’ailleurs, grosse besogne qui n’aurait pu être remise. Une bande de saumons vint s’engager dans l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, dont ces poissons remontaient d’habitude le cours à cette époque de l’année. Certes ce fut bien le cas de regretter les absents, et leurs bras firent grand défaut. Il en résulta que la pêche ne produisit pas tout ce qu’elle aurait pu produire.

Pendant l’après-midi, M. et Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah abandonnèrent leur travail, traversèrent le pont de Famille, et se portèrent sur la route dans la direction de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt. M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack devaient avoir atteint le défilé de Cluse, et, en deux heures au plus, ils pouvaient franchir la distance qui séparait la métairie de Felsenheim.

Toutefois la journée s’avançait, et rien ne signalait leur approche, ni les aboiements des chiens qui eussent senti leurs maîtres, ni les coups de fusil que Jack ne manquerait pas de tirer pour annoncer son retour.

A six heures, le dîner était préparé – un dîner copieux et substantiel, de nature à satisfaire les plus formidables appétits. On attendit les excursionnistes et, comme ils n’arrivaient pas, personne n’eut la pensée de se mettre à table.

Une dernière fois, M. et Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah s’avancèrent d’un quart de lieue sur la route en amont du ruisseau des Chacals. Turc et Braun, qui les accompagnaient, restèrent tranquilles et muets, Dieu sait pourtant qu’ils se fussent dépensés en aboiements et gambades, si les deux frères n’eussent été qu’à quelques centaines de pas!

Il y eut lieu de rentrer à Felsenheim, non sans inquiétude, tout en se disant que le retard ne pouvait se prolonger. On se mit à table, tristement, l’oreille tendue vers le dehors, et c’est à peine si les uns ou les autres touchèrent à ces plats, dont les absents n’eussent certainement rien laissé.

«Voyons… un peu de calme… finit par dire M. Zermatt. Tâchons de ne point exagérer… Puisqu’il a fallu trois jours pour gagner la base de la montagne, pourquoi n’en faudrait-il pas autant pour revenir?…

— Vous avez raison, monsieur Zermatt, répondit Annah, cependant le billet d’Ernest n’indique-t-il pas qu’il suffira de quarante-huit heures…

— J’en conviens, ma chère enfant, ajouta Mme Zermatt. Mais ce brave garçon a tant d’envie de nous revoir qu’il aura promis plus qu’il ne pouvait tenir…»

En somme, il n’y avait pas encore à se tourmenter sérieusement. M. Zermatt l’affirmait non sans justesse. Et cependant, cette nuit-là, aucun des hôtes de Felsenheim ne retrouva le tranquille sommeil de la nuit précédente.

Enfin, ce qui ne devait être, après tout, qu’appréhension, devint trouble et même angoisse le lendemain, 3 octobre, lorsque le soir fut arrivé. Ni M. Wolston, ni Ernest, ni Jack n’avaient paru. Un tel retard, n’était-ce pas inexplicable de la part de ces robustes et infatigables marcheurs?… Conclure à quelque accident, cela s’imposait presque à l’esprit…

D’obstacles, il n’avait pas dû s’en rencontrer plus au retour qu’à l’aller, et la route était connue… Est-ce donc qu’ils avaient décidé d’en suivre une autre plus difficile… plus longue?…

«Non… non!… répétait Annah. S’ils avaient dû prendre un autre chemin, Ernest n’aurait pas annoncé qu’ils seraient ici dans les quarante-huit heures!»

A cela que répondre?… Betsie et Mme Wolston commençaient à perdre espoir. Annah ne retenait plus ses larmes, et qu’aurait pu dire M. Zermatt pour les consoler?…

Il fut alors convenu que, si les absents n’étaient pas rentrés à Felsenheim le lendemain, on se rendrait à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, leur retour devant nécessairement s’effectuer par le défilé de Cluse. En allant au-devant d’eux, on pourrait les embrasser deux heures plus tôt.

Le soir vint, la nuit s’écoula. De M. Wolston, d’Ernest et de Jack, aucune nouvelle! Alors rien n’aurait pu retenir à Felsenheim ceux qui les y attendaient au milieu de mortelles angoisses et comment, à présent, pouvaient-elles être taxées d’exagération?…

Les préparatifs furent rapidement faits dans la matinée. On attela le chariot, on y mit quelques provisions, tous y prirent place. L’attelage partit, précédé de Braun. Après avoir traversé le ruisseau des Chacals, il longea les bois et les champs qui bordaient la route d’Eberfurt, en marchant avec toute la vitesse possible.

Le chariot était arrivé à une lieue de là, près du ponceau jeté sur le canal de dérivation qui aboutissait au lac des Cygnes, lorsque M. Zermatt donna le signal d’arrêt.

Braun, dont les rapides aboiements redoublaient, s’était lancé en avant.

«Les voilà… les voilà!» s’écria Mme Wolston.

En effet, à trois cents pas, au détour d’un bouquet d’arbres, deux hommes apparurent…

C’étaient M. Wolston et Ernest.

Où donc était Jack?… Il ne pouvait être loin… à quelques portées de fusil en arrière sans doute…

Des cris de joie accueillirent M. Wolston et Ernest. Mais comme ils n’avaient pas fait un pas de plus, on courut vers eux.

«Et Jack?…» demanda Mme Zermatt.

Ni Jack ni son chien Falb n’étaient là.

«Ce qu’est devenu notre pauvre Jack, nous ne le savons», dit M. Wolston.

Et voici ce que raconta M. Wolston, – un récit souvent interrompu par les sanglots de ses auditeurs.

La descente, depuis la pointe du pic jusqu’au pied de la chaîne, s’était effectuée en deux heures… Le premier arrivé, Jack abattit quelque gibier aux abords de la sapinière… On soupa devant la grotte, on laissa le feu allumé au dehors, on se retira au dedans… L’un veillait à l’ouverture, tandis que les deux autres dormaient à poings fermés…

La nuit ne fut troublée que par les hurlements lointains des bêtes fauves.

Le lendemain, M. Wolston et les deux frères se mirent en marche dès l’aube.

Du haut du pic, Ernest avait remarqué que la forêt semblait s’éclaircir vers l’est, et, sur sa proposition, tous trois se dirigèrent de ce côté. Le cheminement s’opérerait plus vite, et la route ne serait allongée que d’une lieue à peine entre la chaîne et la vallée de Grünthal.

A onze heures, on fit halte… Le déjeuner achevé, tous trois se dirigèrent au milieu de ces futaies moins serrées, où la circulation était plus facile.

Vers deux heures, un tumulte de lourds piétinements se fit entendre, et, en même temps, passèrent entre les arbres de souffles d’une sonorité claironnante…

Il n’y avait pas à s’y méprendre… Une troupe d’éléphants traversait la sapinière.

Une troupe?… non… Seulement trois de ces pachydermes se montrèrent, dont deux énormes, le père et la mère, l’autre, un éléphanteau qui les suivait…

On ne l’a pas oublié, le plus vif désir de Jack avait toujours été de capturer un de ces animaux et de le domestiquer. Le hardi garçon voulut profiter de l’occasion qui s’offrait, et ce fut ce qui causa sa perte.

En prévision d’une attaque, M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack s’étaient mis sur la défensive, leurs armes en état, très peu rassurés, en somme, sur l’issue d’une lutte avec ces formidables bêtes.

Lorsque les trois éléphants furent arrivés au débouché de la clairière, ils s’arrêtèrent. De là, apercevant trois hommes, ils s’engagèrent vers la gauche, sans presser le pas, et s’enfoncèrent dans les profondeurs de la futaie.

Tout danger avait donc cessé, lorsque Jack, emporté par son irrésistible passion, disparut à la suite des éléphants, suivi de son chien Falb.

«Jack… Jack!… cria M. Wolston.

— Reviens… Jack… reviens!…» cria Ernest.

Ou l’imprudent n’entendit pas, ou – ce qui est plus probable – il ne voulut pas entendre.

Une fois encore on l’entrevit à travers les halliers, puis on le perdit de vue.

Très inquiets, M. Wolston et Ernest se jetèrent sur ses traces, et, en quelques instants, ils eurent atteint la clairière…

Elle était déserte…

A ce moment, le bruit de piétinement se reproduisit en cette direction, mais aucune détonation ne se fit entendre…

Jack n’avait-il pas encore voulu se servir de son fusil, ou ne l’avait-il pu?

En tout cas, il serait difficile de le rejoindre, et il était impossible de retrouver l’empreinte de ses pas sur ce sol semé de branches mortes et de feuilles sèches…

Alors le tumulte se tut peu à peu dans l’éloignement, quelques branches qui s’étaient agitées redevinrent immobiles, et rien ne troubla plus le silence de la forêt.

M. Wolston et Ernest fouillèrent jusqu’au soir les alentours de la clairière, ils se glissèrent au plus épais des fourrés, ils appelèrent Jack de toutes leurs forces… Le malheureux avait-il été victime de son imprudence?… N’avait-il pu éviter l’attaque des éléphants?… Gisait-il, sans mouvement, sans vie, en quelque coin de l’obscure futaie?…

Aucun cri, aucun appel ne retentit aux oreilles de M. Wolston et d’Ernest… Des coups de fusil, qu’ils tirèrent à plusieurs reprises, demeurèrent sans réponse…

La nuit faite, tous deux, épuisés de fatigue, accablés d’inquiétude, tombèrent au pied d’un arbre, écoutant toujours, cherchant à surprendre le moindre bruit. Ils avaient allumé un grand feu, avec l’espoir que Jack, se guidant sur les lueurs du foyer, pourrait les rejoindre, et ils ne fermèrent pas l’œil jusqu’au jour.

Et, pendant ces longues heures, des hurlements ne cessèrent d’indiquer la présence de fauves à une distance assez rapprochée. La pensée vint alors que, si Jack n’avait pas eu à se défendre contre les éléphants, il avait pu succomber dans une attaque plus dangereuse, contre des tigres, des lions, des pumas…

On ne pouvait l’abandonner cependant. Toute la journée suivante fut employée à rechercher ses traces à travers la sapinière. Ce fut peine inutile. M. Wolston et Ernest reconnurent bien, en relevant quelques pesantes foulées sur le sol, le passage des éléphants, des herbes piétinées, des basses branches rompues, des broussailles écrasées. Mais, de Jack, rien, ni aucun des objets dont il était porteur, ni son fusil ni son carnier… rien non plus indiquant qu’il eût été blessé… pas une trace de sang, pas une empreinte qui eût permis de se mettre sur sa piste.

Alors, après ces vaines tentatives, quelque déchirante que fût la pensée de revenir sans lui, il fallut prendre un parti. M. Wolston essaya de faire comprendre à Ernest que, dans l’intérêt même de son frère, il était indispensable de retourner à Felsenheim, d’où l’on reviendrait afin de recommencer ces recherches dans des conditions plus favorables…

Ernest n’aurait pas eu la force de discuter… il sentait bien que M. Wolston avait raison, et il le suivit presque inconscient de ce qu’il faisait…

Tous deux parcoururent une dernière fois cette portion de la sapinière qu’ils eurent franchie le soir même… Ils cheminèrent toute la nuit et toute la journée… Au matin, ils étaient arrivés à l’entrée du défilé de Cluse…

«Mon fils… mon pauvre fils!…» avait maintes fois répété Mme Zermatt.

Puis ces mots s’échappèrent encore de ses lèvres, lorsqu’elle retomba entre les bras de Mme Wolston et de sa fille, agenouillées près d’elle.

M. Zermatt et Ernest, abîmés dans leur douleur, ne pouvaient plus prononcer une parole.

«Voici ce qu’il faut faire sans perdre une heure», dit enfin M. Wolston d’un ton résolu.

M. Zermatt alla vers lui.

«Quoi?… demanda-t-il.

— Nous allons regagner Felsenheim, et nous en repartirons aujourd’hui même pour retrouver les traces de Jack… J’ai bien réfléchi à tout cela, mon cher Zermatt, et je vous supplie d’adopter ma proposition…»

Oui! on s’en rapporterait à M. Wolston. Lui seul avait conservé assez de sang-froid pour donner un sage conseil, et il n’y aurait qu’à le suivre aveuglément.

«C’est dans la partie de la forêt voisine du littoral que Jack a disparu, reprit-il. Donc, c’est de ce côté que nous devrons nous diriger tout d’abord, et par le plus court… Reprendre la route au delà du défilé de Cluse, ce serait trop long!… Embarquons dans la pinasse… Le vent est favorable pour doubler le cap de l’Est, et, ensuite, la brise du large nous déhalera le long du littoral… En partant dès ce soir, nous atteindrons avant le jour l’embouchure de la rivière Montrose. nous la dépasserons, et nous irons relâcher sur la partie de la côte où s’appuie l’extrémité de la chaîne!… C’est dans cette direction, en traversant la sapinière, que Jack a disparu… A nous y rendre par mer, nous aurons gagné deux jours!…»

La proposition fut acceptée sans discussion. Puisqu’elle offrait l’avantage d’économiser le temps, il n’y avait pas à hésiter, si l’on voulait profiter du vent qui, en deux ou trois bordées, mettrait l’*Elisabeth* par le travers du cap de l’Est.

Les deux familles remontèrent donc dans le chariot, et l’attelage fut si vivement mené qu’il s’arrêta une heure et demie après à l’entrée de Felsenheim.

Le premier soin fut de mettre la pinasse en état de prendre immédiatement la mer en vue d’un voyage de plusieurs jours auquel se joindraient Mme

Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah. Elles eussent refusé de rester à Felsenheim, et M. Zermatt n'eut même pas la pensée de le leur proposer.

Dans l'après-midi, la nourriture des animaux étant assurée pour une semaine, la pinasse allait partir, lorsqu'un malheureux contretemps l'en empêcha.

Vers trois heures, le vent, qui avait molli, après avoir haie l'est, souffla bientôt en grande brise. Cependant, bien que la mer dût être forte dehors, l'*Elisabeth* n'aurait pas hésité à se risquer au delà du cap de l'Est. Mais comment s'élever jusqu'à ce cap contre les violentes lames qui venaient du large?… Rien que pour quitter son mouillage, elle aurait d'extrêmes difficultés, et dépasser l'îlot du Requin lui eût été sans doute impossible.

Ce fut désespérant!… Attendre, attendre, quand du moindre retard résulterait peut-être l'insuccès des recherches!… Et si ces vents contraires persistaient, si, dans la soirée, si, dans la nuit, l'état atmosphérique ne se modifiait pas, s'il empirait même…

«Eh bien! dit M. Wolston en répondant à ces questions qui venaient à l'esprit de tous, ce que nous ne pourrons tenter par mer, nous le tenterons par terre… Le chariot au lieu de la pinasse!… Tenons-le prêt à reprendre la route d'Eberfurt.»

On fit les préparatifs en vue de cette éventualité. Si le voyage s'effectuait avec le chariot, il y aurait lieu de se diriger vers le sud-est, afin de contourner la sapinière. L'attelage n'aurait pu y pénétrer, du moins dans la partie que M. Wolston et Ernest avaient explorée en avant de la chaîne. Dès lors, on chercherait à gagner l'extrémité orientale de la futaie, c'est-à-dire le point où devrait accoster l'*Elisabeth*, si un changement de vent lui permettait d’appareiller. Par malheur, le retard serait d’au moins trente-six heures, mais comment l’éviter?…

L’espoir d’un changement de temps ne se réalisa pas. La brise ne cessa de souffler du nord-est en fraîchissant toujours. Le soir venu, de grosses lames battaient les grèves de Felsenheim. La nuit menaçait d’être mauvaise, et, devant cet état de choses, le projet de navigation dut être abandonné.

M. Wolston fit donc décharger les provisions qui avaient été mises à bord, et on les transporta sur le chariot. En même temps, les derniers soins furent donnés aux deux buffles et à l’onagre en vue d’un départ dès l’aube.

Mme Zermatt faisait pitié, et ses lèvres ne s’entr’ouvraient que pour laisser échapper quelques mots:

«Mon fils… mon pauvre fils!»

Tout à coup, vers huit heures, les chiens Turc et Braun commencèrent à montrer certains signes d’agitation. M. Wolston, qui les observait, fut très frappé en les voyant courir devant la galerie à travers l’enclos. Braun, surtout, ne pouvait tenir en place.

Deux minutes après, un aboiement lointain se fit assez distinctement entendre.

«C’est Falb!…» s’écria Ernest.

Falb… le chien de Jack!… Braun et Turc le reconnurent aussi, car ils lui répondirent à pleine voix.

M. et Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston, Annah, tous s’élancèrent hors de la galerie…

Presque aussitôt, Jack apparaissait à la porte d’entrée et se précipitait dans les bras de sa mère.

«Oui… sauvé… s’écria-t-il, mais peut-être un grand danger nous menace-t-il!…

— Un danger?… lequel?… demanda M. Zermatt, en attirant son fils, en le serrant sur sa poitrine.

— Les sauvages… répondit Jack, des sauvages qui ont débarqué sur l’île!»

CHAPITRE XVI

Récit de Jack. – Perdu dans la forêt. – Les sauvages sur l'île. – Inquiétudes croissantes. – Le retard de la *Licorne*. – Trois semaines d'attente. – A la petite chapelle de Felsenheim.

Les deux familles rentrèrent dans la salle à manger, le cœur débordant de joie, en dépit de la très inquiétante nouvelle apportée par Jack!… On ne songeait qu'à ceci: Jack était de retour!

Et pourtant aurait-on pu imaginer un événement plus grave!… Des sauvages fréquentaient la côte de la Nouvelle-Suisse!… Et, ainsi qu'il y eut lieu de le reconnaître, cette légère vapeur entrevue par M. Wolston, lorsque la pinasse avait quitté l'embouchure de la rivière Montrose, puis, lorsqu'il se trouvait à la cime du pic, c'était la fumée d'un campement établi sur cette partie du littoral…

Jack tombait d'inanition. Il dut d'abord se refaire des forces en prenant place à la table où tous s'étaient assis, et voici en quels termes il raconta ses aventures:

«Mes chers parents, – je vous demande pardon du chagrin que je vous ai causé… je me suis laissé entraîner par l'envie de capturer un jeune éléphant… je n'ai écouté ni M. Wolston ni Ernest, qui me rappelaient, et c'est miracle que je sois revenu sain et sauf!… Mais mon imprudence aura eu cela de bon, du moins, qu'elle va nous permettre d'organiser une sérieuse défense pour le cas où ces sauvages s'avanceraient jusqu'à la Terre-Promise et découvriraient Felsenheim…

«Je m’étais donc enfoncé au plus épais de la sapinière à la poursuite des trois éléphants, sans trop savoir, je l’avoue, comment je parviendrais à m’emparer du plus petit. Le père et la mère marchaient tranquillement, s’ouvrant passage entre les buissons, et ne s’apercevaient pas que je les suivais. Il est vrai, nie dérobais du mieux possible à leur vue et j’allais, ne songeant guère à me demander en quelle direction ils m’entraînaient avec Falb, non moins fou que moi, ni comment s’effectuerait mon retour!… Une force irrésistible me poussait en avant, et je continuai ainsi de m’éloigner pendant plus de deux heures, cherchant en vain le moyen d’attirer l’éléphanteau à l’écart.

«En effet, si j’eusse essayé d’abattre le père et la mère, combien de balles m’aurait-il fallu user avant d’y parvenir, et le seul résultat n’eût-il pas été de mettre les deux bêtes en fureur… de les tourner contre moi?…

«Cependant je m’enfonçai de plus en plus dans les profondeurs de la sapinière, ne tenant compte ni du temps écoulé, ni de la distance parcourue, ni des difficultés que j’aurais pour rejoindre M. Wolston et Ernest, ni – qu’ils ne m’en veuillent pas trop – de l’embarras où je les mettais s’ils se lançaient à ma recherche.

«J’estime que je dus faire ainsi deux grandes lieues vers l’est et pour rien… Peut-être alors le sentiment de la situation me revint-il?… Cette sagesse me venait un peu tard; mais, puisque les éléphants ne manifestaient point l’intention de s’arrêter, je me dis que le mieux serait de rebrousser chemin.

«Il était quatre heures environ. Autour de moi, la forêt était moins épaisse… les arbres s’espaçaient, ménageant entre eux de larges clairières. Et, pour le noter en passant, mon opinion est qu’il convient de se diriger franchement vers le sud-est, lorsqu’il s’agit d’atteindre le pic Jean-Zermatt…

— Oui… le billet d’Ernest nous l’a appris… vous lui avez donné mon nom… dit M. Zermatt.

— Père, répondit Ernest, c’est sur la proposition de M. Wolston que nous l’avons fait…

— N’est-il pas naturel, mon ami, ajouta M. Wolston, que le plus haut sommet de la Nouvelle-Suisse ait reçu le nom du chef de la famille?…

— Va donc pour le pic Jean-Zermatt, répondit M. Zermatt, en serrant la main de M. Wolston. Mais que Jack continue son récit et nous parle des sauvages…

— Ils ne sont pas loin… affirma Jack.

— Pas loin?… s’écria Mme Wolston.

— Dans mon histoire… dans mon histoire, chère mère, car, en réalité, ils doivent encore être éloignés de Felsenheim d’une bonne dizaine de lieues.»

Cette réponse était rassurante dans une certaine mesure, et Jack reprit en ces termes:

«Je me trouvais alors devant une assez vaste éclaircie de la sapinière, et j’allais faire halte, bien résolu à ne pas aller au delà, lorsque les éléphants s’arrêtèrent également. Aussitôt je retins Falb qui voulait s’élancer sur eux.

«Était-ce donc là, en cette partie de la futaie, que ces animaux gîtaient d’habitude? Justement en cet endroit, un rio coulait entre les hautes herbes… Les miens… – je dis les miens! – commencèrent à s’y désaltérer en puisant l’eau avec leurs trompes.

«Que voulez-vous, lorsque je les vis immobiles et sans défiance, mes instincts reprirent le dessus… Une irrésistible envie me vint d’isoler le petit, après avoir abattu les deux autres, dusse-je brûler jusqu’à ma dernière cartouche… D’ailleurs peut-être suffirait-il de deux balles, si elles frappaient au bon endroit, et quel est le chasseur qui ne croit pas aux coups heureux?… Quant à la question de capturer l’éléphanteau, après la mort du mâle et de la femelle, quant à me demander comment je parviendrais à le conduire à Felsenheim, je n’y songeais même pas… J’armai mon fusil qui était chargé à balles… Une double détonation retentit, et, si les éléphants furent touchés ce ne fut pas grièvement, paraît-il, car ils se contentèrent de secouer leurs oreilles, et de se verser une dernière gorgée d’eau dans le gosier…

«Bref, ils ne se détournèrent même pas pour voir de quel côté le coup était parti, et ne s’inquiétèrent aucunement des aboiements de Falb… Avant que j’eusse pu tirer une seconde fois, ils s’étaient remis en marche, et, cette fois, d’un pas si rapide, presque le galop d’un cheval, que je dus renoncer à les suivre…

«Pendant une minute, ces masses se montrèrent entre les arbres, par-dessus les broussailles, leurs trompes redressées brisant les basses branches, puis ils disparurent.

«Il s’agissait, à présent, de revenir sur mes pas, et, tout d’abord, de déterminer quelle direction il convenait de prendre. Le soleil déclinait rapidement, et l’obscurité ne tarderait pas à envelopper la sapinière. Qu’il fallût marcher vers le couchant, cela allait de soi, mais que ce fût plutôt à gauche qu’à droite, rien ne pouvait me l’indiquer… Je n’avais point la boussole d’Ernest ni cette sorte de sens de l’orientation dont il est doué… comme un véritable Chinois… Donc, grand embarras…

«Enfin peut-être ne me serait-il pas impossible de découvrir quelques traces de mon passage, ou plutôt celles des éléphants. Il est vrai, ce qui devait rendre cette reconnaissance très difficile, c’est que la forêt s’assombrissait peu à peu. D’ailleurs, de nombreuses foulées se croisaient de toutes parts. En outre, j’entendais au loin certains appels de clairon, et, sans doute, c était sur les bords de ce ruisseau que le troupeau des éléphants se réunissait chaque soir.

«Je compris que je ne parviendrais point à retrouver mon chemin avant le retour du soleil, et Falb lui-même, malgré son instinct, ne s’y reconnaissait plus.

«Pendant une heure, j’errai ainsi au hasard, ne sachant pas si je me rapprochais du littoral ou si je m’en éloignais… Oh! chère mère, crois-le bien, je me blâmais de mon imprudence, et, ce qui me causait grande peine, c’était de penser que M. Wolston et Ernest, n’ayant pu se résoudre à m’abandonner, me cherchaient en vain!… Ce serait moi qui aurais retardé leur rentrée à Felsenheim, et que penseriez-vous de ce retard?… Quelles inquiétudes vous éprouveriez, en ne nous voyant pas revenir dans les délais indiqués par le billet d’Ernest?… Enfin il y aurait encore de nouvelles fatigues pour M. Wolston et lui, et tout cela par ma faute…

— Oui… ta faute, mon enfant, dit M. Zermatt, et si tu n’avais pas songé à toi, en les quittant, tu aurais dû songer à eux… et à nous…

— C’est entendu, répondit Mme Zermatt en embrassant son fils, il a commis une grosse imprudence… elle aurait pu lui coûter la vie… Mais puisqu’il est là, pardonnons-lui…

— J’arrive maintenant, reprit Jack, à la partie de mes aventures, où la situation s’est aggravée.

«Certainement, jusqu’alors, je n’avais couru aucun danger sérieux… Avec mon fusil, j’étais certain de pourvoir à ma nourriture, dusse-je mettre une semaine à retrouver le chemin de Felsenheim… Rien qu’en suivant la côte, j’y serais arrivé tôt ou tard… Quant aux fauves, qui doivent être nombreux dans cette partie de l’île, j’espérais, en cas d’attaque, avoir raison des plus redoutables, comme cela s’est fait en mainte occasion déjà…

«Non!… ce qui m’irritait contre moi-même, c’était de penser que M. Wolston et Ernest se désespéraient à chercher inutilement ma piste… Ils devaient, selon moi, avoir pris direction à travers cette portion orientale de la forêt qui était moins épaisse… En ce cas, il se pouvait qu’ils ne fussent point éloignés de l’endroit où je venais de m’arrêter… Le pire, c’est que la nuit ne tarderait pas à se faire. Je pensai alors que le mieux serait de camper à cette place, puis d’y allumer un feu, d’abord parce que M. Wolston et Ernest pourraient l’apercevoir, ensuite parce que sa clarté servirait à éloigner les animaux dont les hurlements retentissaient dans le voisinage…

«Mais, auparavant, j’appelai à plusieurs reprises, en me tournant en tous les sens…

«Aucune réponse.

«Restait la ressource de tirer quelques coups de fusil, et je le fis par deux fois…

«Aucune détonation ne me répondit.

«Toutefois, il me sembla entendre, sur la droite, une sorte de glissement qui se produisait entre les herbes… J’écoutais et fus sur le point de crier… Mais la réflexion me vint que ce n’étaient ni M. Wolston ni mon frère qui venaient de ce côté… Ils m’eussent appelé, et nous aurions été déjà dans les bras les uns des autres.

«Il y avait donc là des animaux qui s’approchaient… des carnassiers… peut-être quelque serpent…

«Je n’eus pas le temps de me mettre sur la défensive… Quatre corps surgirent dans l’ombre… quatre créatures humaines… non des singes, comme je le crus au premier instant… En bondissant sur moi, ils vociféraient en une langue que je ne pouvais comprendre, et il ne fut que trop certain que j’avais affaire à des sauvages.

«Des sauvages sur notre île!… En un instant, je fus renversé, et je sentis deux genoux s’appuyer sur ma poitrine… Puis, on me lia les mains, on me fit relever, on me tint par les épaules, on me poussa en avant, et il me fallut marcher d’un pas rapide.

«Un de ces hommes s’était emparé de mon fusil, l’autre de ma gibecière… Il ne semblait pas qu’on en voulût à ma vie… à cette heure du moins…

«Toute la nuit, nous allâmes ainsi… En quelle direction, je ne parvenais pas à m’en rendre compte… Ce que je remarquai seulement, c’est que la futaie s’éclaircissait de plus en plus… La lumière de la lune arrivait jusqu’au sol, et, assurément, nous devions nous rapprocher de la côte…

«Ah! je ne songeais guère à moi, mes chers parents, mes chers amis!… Je songeais à vous, aux dangers qui résultaient de la présence de ces naturels sur notre île!… Ils n’auraient qu’à remonter le littoral jusqu’à la rivière Montrose et à la franchir pour atteindre le cap de l’Est, et redescendre à Felsenheim!… S’ils y arrivaient avant que la *Licorne* fût de retour, vous ne seriez pas en force pour les repousser!…

— Mais ne viens-tu pas de dire, Jack, demanda M. Zermatt, que ces sauvages devaient être fort éloignés de la Terre-Promise?…

— En effet, mon père, à cinq ou six lieues dans le sud de la Montrose… donc à une dizaine d’ici…

— Eh bien, avant quinze jours, avant huit peut-être, la *Licorne* sera mouillée dans la baie du Salut, fit observer M. Zermatt, et nous n’aurons plus rien à craindre… Mais achève ton récit.»

Jack continua en ces termes:

«Ce fut dans la matinée seulement, après une longue étape, sans avoir pris un instant de repos, que nous arrivâmes aux falaises qui dominent la côte.

«Au pied était établi un campement occupé par une centaine de ces coquins d’un noir d’ébène… rien que des hommes à demi nus, blottis dans les grottes creusées au bas de la falaise… C’étaient des pêcheurs, – je l’imaginai, du moins, – qui avaient dû être entraînés vers notre île par les vents d’est, et dont les pirogues étaient tirées sur le sable… Tous accoururent au-devant de moi… Ils me considéraient avec autant de surprise que de curiosité, comme si c’était la première fois qu’ils voyaient un homme blanc… D’ailleurs, il n’y a pas à s’en étonner, puisque les navires d’Europe ne traversent guère cette partie de l’océan Indien.

«Au surplus, après m’avoir examiné de très près, ils reprirent l’indifférence qui leur est naturelle… Je ne fus pas maltraité… On me donna quelques poissons grillés que je mangeai avidement, car je mourais de faim, et je calmai ma soif avec l’eau d’un rio qui descendait de la falaise.

«J’éprouvai une certaine satisfaction en voyant que mon fusil, dont ces sauvages ne connaissaient pas l’usage, et ma gibecière qu’ils avaient laissée intacte, avaient été déposés au pied d’une roche… Aussi, je me promis bien, si l’occasion s’en présentait, de régaler ces moricauds de quelques coups de feu… Une circonstance inattendue ne devait pas tarder à changer la situation.

«Vers neuf heures du soir, sur la lisière de la forêt, qui confinait aux falaises, se produisit un grand tumulte qui eut bientôt jeté l’épouvante parmi les naturels… Et quelle fut ma surprise en reconnaissant que ce tumulte était dû à l’arrivée d’une troupe d’éléphants, – une trentaine à tout le moins, – qui suivaient d’un pas tranquille le lit du rio vers la plage.

«Oui! ce fut de l’épouvante!… Il n’était pas douteux que les sauvages se trouvaient pour la première fois en présence de ces énormes animaux… des bêtes avec des nez d’une longueur… et une sorte de main au bout…

«Et lorsque les trompes se relevèrent, se recourbèrent, s’entrechoquèrent, lorsqu’il s’en échappa des éclats de trompette, il y eut un sauve-qui-peut général… Les uns détalèrent à travers les roches, les autres essayèrent de remettre à flot leurs pirogues, tandis que les éléphants assistaient bonassement à toute cette débandade…

«Moi, je ne vis là qu’une occasion dont il y avait urgence à profiter, et, sans demander mon reste, sans chercher à savoir ce qu’il adviendrait de cette rencontre entre les éléphants et les naturels, je courus vers la falaise, je remontai le ravin, et je me lançai sous bois, où je rencontrai mon brave Falb qui errait en m’attendant… Il va de soi que je m’étais emparé de mon fusil et de ma gibecière, qui devaient m’être de première utilité.

«Je marchai toute la nuit, toute la journée suivante, chassant pour vivre, ne m’arrêtant que pour préparer et dévorer mon gibier, et c’est après vingt-quatre heures que j’atteignis la rive droite de la rivière Montrose, non loin du barrage…

«Alors je savais où j’étais… je descendis jusqu’au ruisseau dont mon père et moi nous avions remonté le cours… Il y eut des plaines et des bois à franchir dans la direction de la vallée de Grünthal, où j’arrivai aujourd’hui même dans l’après-midi… Je passai le défilé de Cluse, et quel eût été mon chagrin, mes chers parents, mes chers amis, si vous eussiez été déjà partis à ma recherche en suivant le littoral… si je ne vous avais pas retrouvés à Felsenheim!»

Tel fut le récit assez circonstancié que fit Jack, – récit qui avait provoqué deux ou trois interruptions, dont il convenait de tenir compte.

Et, d’abord, quels étaient ces naturels?… D’où venaient-ils?… Évidemment de la côte occidentale de l’Australie, la plus rapprochée en ces parages, – à moins qu’il n’existât quelque groupe d’îles aussi inconnues en cette portion de l’océan Indien que l’était la Nouvelle-Suisse avant l’arrivée de la corvette anglaise… Si ces sauvages étaient des Australiens, s’ils appartenaient à cette race placée au dernier degré de l’échelle humaine, on s’expliquait difficilement qu’ils eussent accompli une traversée de trois cents lieues à bord de leurs pirogues… Il se pouvait, toutefois, que des mauvais temps les eussent entraînés à une telle distance…

Et, maintenant ils avaient rencontré Jack, ils savaient que l’île était habitée par des hommes d’une autre race que la leur… Que feraient-ils?… Devait-on craindre que leurs pirogues ne reprissent la mer en longeant le littoral, qu’ils finissent par découvrir la baie du Salut et la demeure de Felsenheim?…

Il est vrai, l’arrivée de la *Licorne* ne devait plus tarder… Dans une ou deux semaines au plus tard, ses canons se feraient entendre… Et, lorsqu’elle serait mouillée à quelques encablures, aucun danger à redouter…

En effet, à cette date du 5 octobre, près d’un an s’était écoulé depuis le départ de la corvette. Or, il avait été convenu que son absence ne se prolongerait pas au delà d’une année. Aussi, chaque jour, s’attendait-on à la voir apparaître au large, et la batterie de l’îlot du Requin se tenait prête à répondre aux saluts que le lieutenant Littlestone adresserait au pavillon arboré sur la pointe du pic Zermatt.

Il semblait donc que des préparatifs de défense contre une attaque des sauvages ne s’imposaient pas immédiatement. Il se pouvait, en outre, que, dans cet effroi causé par la vue des éléphants, ils se fussent rembarques, afin de regagner la côte australienne ou toute autre île de ces parages. Dans ces conditions, il n’y avait rien à changer aux habitudes des deux familles, et on se contenterait de surveiller la mer au large de Felsenheim.

Aussi, dès le lendemain, après cette alerte de quelques jours, les travaux furent-ils repris, et particulièrement ceux qui allaient achever la chapelle.

Tout le monde se mit à l’œuvre. Il importait qu’elle fût prête pour l’arrivée de la *Licorne*. Les quatre murs s’élevaient déjà à la hauteur du toit, et, au fond, une baie circulaire éclairait le chevet. M. Wolston s’occupa d’installer la charpente, et elle fut recouverte de bambous que les plus violentes averses ne pourraient percer. Quant à l’intérieur de la chapelle, Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston et Annah s’étaient chargées de l’orner comme il convenait, et on pouvait s’en fier à leur bon goût.

Ces occupations se continuèrent jusqu'au 15 octobre, date à laquelle avait été fixé le retour de la *Licorne*. Étant donnée la longueur de la traversée, si cette date variait de huit ou quinze jours, il n'y aurait pas lieu d'en concevoir quelque inquiétude. De l'impatience, oui! mais rien que de l'impatience! Et, il faut l'avouer, elle ne fit que grandir à Felsenheim.

Vint le 19, et aucune détonation n'avait signalé la corvette. Aussi, Jack, montant l'onagre, se rendit-il à Prospect-Hill, puis de là au cap de l'Espoir-Trompé.

Il en fut pour son déplacement. La mer était déserte jusqu'aux extrêmes limites de l'horizon.

Cette excursion, renouvelée le 27, ne donna aucun résultat…

Alors, – qu'on ne s'en étonne pas, – l'inquiétude commença de se substituer à l'impatience.

«Voyons… voyons… répétait M. Zermatt, qui voulait rassurer son petit monde, quinze jours, trois semaines même, ne constituent pas un retard sérieux…

— D'ailleurs, ajoutait M. Wolston, sommes-nous certains que la *Licorne* ait pu quitter l'Angleterre à l'époque convenue?…

— Cependant, remarqua assez ingénument Mme Zermatt, l'Amirauté devait avoir hâte de prendre possession de sa nouvelle colonie…»

Et M. Wolston de sourire à cette pensée que l'Amirauté pût jamais être pressée de faire quelque chose!

Néanmoins, tout en observant la mer du côté du cap de l'Espoir-Trompé, on ne négligeait pas de l'observer aussi du côté du cap de l'Est. Plusieurs fois par jour, les longues-vues étaient braquées dans la direction de la baie des Éléphants, – nom qui fut attribué à cette partie de la côte où campaient les sauvages.

Mais, jusqu'alors, aucune pirogue n'avait été aperçue. Si les naturels n'avaient point remis à la voile, il semblait, tout au moins, qu'ils ne s'étaient pas avisés de quitter leur campement. D'ailleurs, si, contrairement à tout espoir, ils se montraient à la pointe du cap de l'Est et se dirigeaient vers la baie du Salut, ne serait-il pas possible de les arrêter avec la batterie de l'îlot du Requin et les pièces établies sur les hauteurs de Felsenheim?… Dans tous les cas, mieux valait avoir à se défendre contre eux du côté de la mer que du côté de la terre. Et le plus grand danger était qu'ils vinssent de l'intérieur, après avoir forcé le défilé de Cluse.

En effet, l'envahissement d'une centaine de ces noirs, l'assaut qu'ils eussent donné à Felsenheim, n'auraient probablement pas pu être repoussés. Peut-être alors eût-il fallu se réfugier sur l'îlot du Requin, où la résistance pourrait être maintenue jusqu'à l'arrivée de la corvette anglaise.

Et la *Licorne* qui n'apparaissait pas, et la fin d'octobre qui approchait. Chaque matin, M. Zermatt, Ernest, Jack, s'attendaient à être réveillés par quelques salves d'artillerie. Le temps était superbe. Les transparentes brumes de l'horizon se fondaient dès le lever du soleil. Aussi loin que la vue pût s'étendre au large, les regards cherchaient la *Licorne*…

Le 7 novembre, après une excursion à Prospect-Hill à laquelle tous prirent part, il fallut bien reconnaître que pas une voile ne passait au large de la baie… En vain le regard parcourut-il l'horizon à l'ouest, à l'est, au nord!…

N’était-ce pas du côté du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé qu’on attendait la réalisation des plus vifs désirs, et du côté du cap de l’Est que pouvait venir le désastre?…

Aussi tous demeurèrent-ils silencieux, au sommet de la colline, sous l’empire d’un sentiment où se mélangeaient la crainte et l’espérance.

CHAPITRE XVII

La chaloupe encalminée. – Abandonnés depuis huit jours. – Ce que se disent

le capitaine Harry Gould et le bosseman John Block. – Une trouée dans

les brumes du sud. – Un cri: «Terre… terre!»

Il faisait nuit, – très noire. A peine eût-on distingué le ciel de l’eau. De ce ciel chargé de nuages bas, lourds, écrasés, déchirés, s’échappait parfois un éclair que suivaient des roulements étouffés, comme si l’espace eût été impropre à reproduire les sons. A ces rares intervalles, l’horizon s’illuminait un instant, toujours désert, toujours lugubre. Nulle lame ne déferlait à la surface de la mer. Rien que le balancement régulier et monotone de la houle avec les rides d’un clapotis qui scintillait alors. Aucun souffle ne passait au-dessus de cette immense plaine océanique, pas même l’haleine chaude des orages. Mais tant de fluide électrique s’était emmagasiné dans l’espace qu’il se déchargeait en lueurs phosphorescentes, accrochant des langues du feu Saint-Elme aux agrès de l’embarcation. Bien que le soleil fût couché depuis quatre ou cinq heures, la chaleur dévorante du jour se maintenait à son maximum d’intensité.

Deux hommes causaient à voix basse, à l’arrière d’une grande chaloupe, pontée jusqu’au pied du mât. Sa misaine et son foc battaient aux monotones secousses du roulis.

L’un de ces hommes, tenant la barre sous son bras, essayait d’éviter les brutales embardées qui se produisaient d’un bord à l’autre. C’était un marin, âgé d’une quarantaine d’années, trapu et vigoureux, corps de fer sur lequel ni la fatigue ni les privations ni surtout le découragement n’avaient jamais eu prise. De nationalité anglaise, ce bosseman s'appelait Block, – John Block.

L'autre, plus jeune, – il comptait à peine dix-huit ans, – ne semblait pas appartenir à la catégorie des gens de mer.

Au fond de la chaloupe, sous le tillac ou sous les bancs, n'ayant plus la force de manier les avirons, étaient couchées un certain nombre de créatures humaines, parmi elles, un enfant de cinq ans, – un pauvre petit, dont les gémissements se faisaient entendre, et que sa mère essayait de calmer par de vagues paroles entrecoupées de baisers.

A l'avant du mât, sur le tillac, près de l'étai de foc, deux personnes, immobiles, silencieuses, la main dans la main, s'abandonnaient aux plus tristes réflexions, et si profonde était l'obscurité qu'elles ne pouvaient s'entrevoir qu'à la lueur des éclairs.

Du fond de l'embarcation s'élevait quelquefois une tête qui se rabaissait aussitôt.

A ce moment, voici ce que le bosseman dit au jeune homme étendu près de lui:

«Non… non… j'ai observé l'horizon au coucher du soleil… il n'y avait en vue aucune terre, aucune voile… Mais ce que je n'ai pas aperçu ce soir se montrera peut-être au jour levant…

— Il faut pourtant, bosseman, répondit son compagnon, que nous ayons atterri quelque part avant quarante-huit heures, ou le dernier de nous aura succombé…

— D’accord… d’accord… il est nécessaire que la terre apparaisse… déclara John Block. C’est même pour donner asile aux braves gens que sont faits les continents et les îles, et l’on finit toujours par accoster.

— A la condition, bosseman, que le vent vous y aide…

— Il n’a même été inventé que pour cela, répliqua John Block. Aujourd’hui, par malheur, il était occupé autre part, dans le fond de l’Atlantique ou du Pacifique, car il n’en a pas soufflé de quoi remplir mon bonnet!… Oui! mieux vaudrait une bonne tempête, qui nous pousserait du bon côté…

— Ou qui nous engloutirait, Block…

— Pas de ça… non… pas de ça!… De toutes les façons de terminer la chose, ce serait la plus mauvaise…

— Qui sait, bosseman?…»

Les deux hommes restèrent quelques minutes sans échanger une parole. On n’entendait qu’un léger clapotis sur les flancs de l’embarcation.

«Et notre capitaine?… reprit le plus jeune.

— Harry Gould, le digne homme, il ne va pas bien… répondit John Block. Comme ces coquins l’ont arrangé!… Et cette blessure à la tête qui lui fait pousser des cris de douleur!… Et, quand j’y songe, c’est un officier dans lequel il avait toute confiance qui a excité ces malheureux!… Non! un beau matin, ou dans l’après-midi, ou encore au coucher du soleil, si ce gueux de Borupt ne va pas grimacer sa dernière grimace au bout d’une vergue…

— Le misérable… le misérable!… répéta le jeune homme, dont les poings se crispaient d’indignation. Mais le pauvre Harry Gould… c’est vous, Block, qui l’avez pansé ce soir…

— Justement, et lorsque je l’ai rentré sous le tillac, après avoir mis des compresses d’eau sur sa tête, il a pu me parler… Oh! d’une voix si faible!… „Merci, Block, merci”, m’a-t-il dit, comme si j’avais besoin de ses remerciements!… „Et la terre… la terre?…” a-t-il demandé… – „Soyez certain, mon capitaine, ai-je affirmé, qu’elle est quelque part, et peut-être pas très loin!…” Il m’a regardé, et ses yeux se sont fermés…»

Puis le bosseman de murmurer à part:

«La terre… la terre!… Ah!… Borupt et ses complices savaient bien ce qu’ils faisaient!… Pendant tout le temps que nous avons été tenus à fond de cale, ils ont changé la route… ils s’en sont éloignés de quelques centaines de lieues avant de nous abandonner dans cette chaloupe… au milieu de parages où il ne passe guère de navires, sans doute…»

Le jeune homme venait de se relever, le corps penché, l’oreille tournée du côté de bâbord.

«Vous n’avez rien entendu, Block?… demanda-t-il.

— Rien… rien… répondit le bosseman, et la houle ne fait pas plus de bruit que si on lui eût filé de l’huile!»

Le jeune homme n’ajouta pas un mot et se rassit, les deux bras ramenés sur sa poitrine.

En cet instant, un des passagers reprit place sur un des bancs, et, après un geste de désespoir, il s’écria:

«Oui, c’est à désirer que cette chaloupe soit défoncée d’un coup de mer… qu’elle nous engloutisse tous avec elle plutôt que d’être livrés aux horreurs de la faim!… Demain, nous aurons épuisé nos dernières provisions!… Il ne nous restera plus rien…

— Demain… c’est demain, monsieur Wolston… répliqua le bosseman. Si la chaloupe chavirait, il n’y aurait plus de demain… et tant qu’il y a demain…

— John Block a bien parlé, répondit son jeune compagnon… Il ne faut pas désespérer, James!… Quelques dangers qui nous menacent, nos jours appartiennent à Dieu, qui seul en dispose comme il lui convient… Sa main est dans tout ce qui arrive, et il ne nous est pas permis de dire qu’il l’a retirée de nous…

— Oui… murmura James en baissant la tête, mais on n’est pas toujours maître…»

A ce moment, un autre passager, âgé d’une trentaine d’années, – celui qui se tenait à l’avant de l’embarcation, – s’approcha de John Block et dit:

«Bosseman, depuis que notre infortuné capitaine a été embarqué avec nous dans cette chaloupe… et voilà huit jours déjà… c’est vous qui le remplacez… Notre salut est donc entre vos mains… Avez-vous quelque espoir?…

— Si j’en ai! répondit John Block. Oui… je vous assure!… J’espère que ces satanés calmes ne tarderont pas à prendre fin, et que le vent nous conduira à bon port…

— A bon port?… reprit le passager en cherchant à percer du regard cette nuit profonde.

— Eh! que diable! affirma John Block, il y en a un quelque part!… Il ne s’agit que de mettre le cap dessus, avec vent sous vergues!… Bon Dieu! si j’était le Créateur, comme je ferais pointer autour de nous quelques demi-douzaines d’îles à notre convenance!

— Nous ne lui en demandons pas tant, bosseman… répondit le passager qui ne put s’empêcher de sourire à cette réflexion.

— En effet, répliqua John Block, qu’il pousse notre chaloupe vers une de celles qui existent déjà, cela suffira, et il n’est pas nécessaire qu’il fabrique des îles exprès, quoique, à vrai dire, il s’en montre avare dans ces parages!…

— Mais où sommes-nous?…

— Je ne saurais le dire, même à quelques centaines de lieues près, répliqua John Block. Huit jours… huit longs jours, nous sommes restés renfermés dans la cale sans avoir pu observer quelle route suivait le navire, s’il allait au sud ou au nord… Dans tous les cas, il devait venter ferme, et la mer n’épargnait pas les coups de roulis et de tangage!

— Je le crois, John Block, et nous devons avoir fait longue route, il est vrai… en quelle direction?…

— De cela je ne puis rien savoir, déclara le bosseman. Le trois-mâts a-t-il été emporté vers les régions du Pacifique, au lieu de remonter vers la mer des Indes?… Le jour de la rébellion, nous étions par le travers de Madagascar… Mais, depuis, comme le vent a toujours soufflé de l’ouest, qui sait s’il ne nous a pas entraînés à des centaines de lieues de là, du côté des îles Saint-Paul et Amsterdam…

— Où ne se rencontrent que des sauvages de la pire espèce… repartit James Wolston. Après tout, ceux qui nous ont abandonnés ne valent pas mieux…

— Ce qui est certain, affirma John Block, c’est que ce misérable Borupt a dû changer la direction du *Flag* et s’aventurer vers les mers où il pourra plus facilement échapper au châtiment, y exercer le métier de pirate avec ses compagnons!… Je pense donc que nous étions déjà loin de notre itinéraire, lorsque cette chaloupe a été laissée en dérive… Mais, au moins, qu’il se rencontre une île sur ces parages… une île déserte… peu importe!… Avec la chasse, avec la pêche, on se nourrirait… on s’abriterait dans quelque caverne… Pourquoi ne ferions-nous pas de cette île ce que les naufragés du *Landlord* ont fait de la Nouvelle-Suisse?… Avec de bons bras… de l’intelligence… du courage…

— Sans doute, répondit James Wolston, mais le *Landlord* n’a pas manqué à ses passagers… Ils ont pu sauver sa cargaison… tandis que nous n’aurons jamais rien de la cargaison du *Flag*!»

La conversation fut interrompue. Une voix, empreinte de douleur, venait de se faire entendre, et ces mots étaient prononcés:

«A boire… à boire!

— C’est Harry Gould! s’écria l’un des passagers… La fièvre le dévore… Heureusement, l’eau ne manque pas… et…

— Cela me regarde, dit le bosseman. Que l’un de vous prenne la barre… Je sais où est le bidon, et quelques gorgées procureront un soulagement à notre capitaine.»

Aussitôt, quittant le banc d’arrière, John Block se dirigea vers l’avant de la chaloupe.

Les trois autres passagers demeurèrent silencieux en attendant le retour du bosseman.

Après une absence de deux à trois minutes, John Block vint reprendre sa place.

«Eh bien?… lui demanda-t-on.

— J’avais été devancé, répondit John Block. Un de nos bons anges était déjà auprès du malade… lui versait un peu d’eau fraîche entre les lèvres… et baignait son front trempé de sueur… M. Gould avait-il sa connaissance, je ne sais… oui et non… C’était comme du délire… Il parlait de la terre. „La terre, elle devrait être là!” répétait-il, et sa main vacillait comme la flamme d’un grand mât, lorsqu’elle tourne à tous les vents. Je lui ai répondu: „Oui, mon capitaine, oui!… La terre est quelque part!… Nous l’accosterons bientôt!… Je la sens… dans le nord!” Et c’est que c’est vrai… Nous autres, vieux marins, nous sentons ces choses-là… Et j’ai ajouté: „Ne craignez rien, mon capitaine, tout va bien!… Nous avons une solide chaloupe, et je la tiendrai en bonne route!… Il doit y avoir par ici des îles à n’en savoir que faire!… L’embarras du choix!… Nous en trouverons une à notre convenance, – une île habitée qui nous accueillera et d’où nous serons rapatriés!…” Il m’entendait, le pauvre homme, j’en suis sûr, et lorsque j’approchai le fanal de sa figure, il m’a souri… quel sourire triste!… et au bon ange aussi!… Puis, ses yeux se sont refermés, et il n’a pas tardé à s’assoupir!… Quant à moi, j’ai peut-être fait de gros mensonges en lui parlant de la terre comme si elle était à quelques milles de nous!… – Est-ce que j’ai eu tort?…

— Non, John Block, répondit le plus jeune des passagers, et ce sont des mensonges que Dieu permet…»

L’entretien finit là, le silence ne fut plus troublé que par les battements de la voile contre le mât, lorsque la chaloupe roulait d’un bord sur l’autre. La plupart de ceux qu’elle portait, écrasés de fatigue, affaiblis par les privations, oubliaient dans un lourd sommeil les menaces de l’avenir.

Et pouvait-on appeler avenir ce qui se réduisait peut-être à quelques jours? Si ces malheureux avaient de quoi étancher leur soif, ils ne sauraient plus, les jours suivants, comment apaiser leur faim… Des quelques livres de viande salée jetées au fond de la chaloupe au moment de la séparation, il ne restait rien… Ils en étaient réduits à un sac de biscuit de mer, pour onze personnes… Et comment faire, si le calme continuait!… Or, depuis quarante-huit heures, pas un souffle de brise n’avait traversé cette étouffante atmosphère, pas même une de ces risées intermittentes qui ressemblent aux derniers soupirs d’un agonisant!… C’était donc, à bref délai, la mort par la faim.

A cette époque, la navigation à vapeur n’existait pas encore. Il était donc probable que, faute de vent, aucun navire n’apparaîtrait sur ces parages, et, faute de vent, la chaloupe ne pourrait arriver en vue d’une terre quelconque, île ou continent.

Il fallait en vérité avoir une absolue confiance en Dieu pour résister au désespoir, ou posséder cette inaltérable philosophie du bosseman, qui consistait à ne voir les choses que par leur bon côté. Et l’on eût pu l’entendre se répéter à lui-même:

«Je sais bien… un moment viendra où le dernier biscuit aura été mangé… mais tant qu’on a gardé un estomac, il ne faut pas trop se plaindre, n’eût-on rien à mettre dedans!… Ah! si l’on n’avait plus d’estomac, eût-on de quoi le remplir, voilà qui serait véritablement grave!»

Tandis que John Block était à la barre, les passagers avaient repris leur place entre les bancs. Ils ne prononçaient plus une parole. Les gémissements de l’enfant, les plaintes inconscientes du capitaine Gould troublaient seuls le silence.

Deux heures s’écoulèrent. L’embarcation ne s’était pas déplacée d’une encablure, ne ressentant d’autre mouvement que celui de la houle. Or, la houle ne se déplace pas; elle ne fait qu’onduler la surface de la mer. Plusieurs petits morceaux de bois, jetés par-dessus le bord depuis la veille, flottaient toujours à proximité, et la voile ne s’était pas tendue une seule fois pour en écarter la chaloupe.

A naviguer dans ces conditions, il eût été bien inutile de demeurer au gouvernail, qui ne pouvait avoir aucun effet. Toutefois le bosseman n’avait pas voulu quitter son poste. La barre sous le bras, il essayait du moins de parer aux embardées qui menaçaient de rejeter l’embarcation sur tribord ou sur bâbord, et d’éviter à ses compagnons de trop violentes secousses.

Il était environ trois heures du matin, lorsque John Block sentit un léger souffle passer sur ses joues, si durcies qu’elles fussent par le hâle de la mer.

«Est-ce que le vent voudrait se lever?…» murmura-t-il en se redressant.

Aussitôt, après s’être tourné du côté du sud, il tendit son index mouillé de salive. Pas de doute, une certaine sensation de fraîcheur se produisit par évaporation, en même temps que se faisait entendre un clapotis lointain.

S’adressant alors au passager assis sur le banc du milieu près de l’une des passagères:

«Monsieur Fritz!…» dit-il.

Celui-ci releva la tête, et se penchant:

«Que me voulez-vous, bosseman?… demanda-t-il.

— Regardez là-bas… dans la direction de l’est…

— Que voyez-vous donc?…

— Si je ne me trompe, il y a comme une bande d’éclaircie au ras de la mer…»

En effet, de ce côté, une ligne moins sombre s’étendait au-dessus de l’horizon. Le périmètre du ciel et de l’eau se dégageait avec une certaine netteté. On eût dit que la voûte des vapeurs venait de se fendre en cet endroit, et peut-être les courants atmosphériques pénétreraient-ils par cette fissure qui s’élargissait peu à peu.

«C’est du vent!…» affirma le bosseman.

Il est vrai, ne pouvait-il se faire que les vapeurs se fussent un instant écartées aux premières lueurs de l’aube?…

«N’est-ce pas seulement le jour qui va poindre?… observa le passager.

— Possible que ce soit le jour, qui serait bien matinal alors, répondit John Block, possible aussi que ce soit la brise!… J’en ai déjà senti quelque chose aux poils de ma barbe, et, tenez, ils en frétillent encore!… Sans doute, je sais bien que ce n’est point une brise à rentrer les perroquets, mais c’est plus que nous n’en avons eu depuis quarante-huit heures… Monsieur Fritz, prêtez l’oreille, écoutez bien… vous entendrez ce que j’ai cru entendre…

— Vous avez raison, répondit le passager, après s’être courbé sur le plat-bord, c’est la brise…

— Et nous sommes prêts à la recevoir, répliqua le bosseman. La misaine est à bloc… il n’y a plus qu’à raidir l’écoute pour ne rien perdre du vent qui se lève…

— Mais où nous conduira-t-il?…

— Où il voudra, répondit le bosseman, et je ne lui demande que de nous déhaler de ces maudits parages!»

Vingt minutes s’écoulèrent. Le souffle, presque insensible d’abord, ne tarda pas à s’accentuer. Le clapotis devint plus perceptible à l’arrière. La chaloupe éprouvait certains mouvements un peu rudes, qui n’étaient plus ceux d’une houle lente et affadissante. Quelques plis de la voile se détendirent, se refermèrent, se rouvrirent, et l’écoute battit contre son taquet. Il est vrai, le vent n’avait pas la force de gonfler les grosses toiles de la misaine et du foc. Il fallut patienter en orientant l’embarcation du mieux possible au moyen de la godille.

Un quart d’heure plus tard, la marche s’accusait par un léger sillage.

A ce moment, l’un des passagers couché à l’avant, après s’être levé, regarda la lézarde entre les nuages de l’est. Puis, passant de banc en banc, il rejoignit le bosseman.

«La brise?… dit-il.

— Oui, répondit John Block. Je crois que nous la tenons, cette fois, comme un oiseau que l’on tient dans la main… et nous ne la laisserons pas échapper!»

Le vent commençait à se propager régulièrement à travers la trouée, par laquelle devaient se glisser les premiers rayons du jour. Cependant, depuis le sud-est jusqu’au sud-ouest, sur les trois quarts du périmètre dans les profondeurs du zénith, les vapeurs accumulaient encore leurs masses épaisses. La vue se limitait à quelques encablures de l’embarcation, au-delà desquelles un navire n’aurait pu être aperçu.

La brise ayant fraîchi, il fallut raidir l’écoute, étarquer la misaine dont la drisse avait molli, et arriver de quelques points afin de donner prise au foc.

«Nous la tenons… nous la tenons!» répétait le bosseman, tandis que la chaloupe, légèrement inclinée sur tribord, piquait un peu du nez contre les premières lames.

Peu à peu, la déchirure des vapeurs s’agrandit en gagnant vers le zénith. Le fond du ciel prenait des teintes rougeâtres. On en devait induire que le vent se fixerait pour une certaine durée dans cette direction. De là aussi cette conclusion que la période des calmes avait cessé en cette région océanique.

L’espoir revint alors de rallier une terre plus ou moins rapprochée, ou de rencontrer un bâtiment qui, après avoir été encalminé pendant quelques jours, aurait pu reprendre sa route.

A cinq heures, la déchirure s’encadra d’un bourrelet de vapeurs d’une coloration très vive. C’était le jour qui se manifestait avec cette rapidité spéciale aux basses latitudes de la zone intertropicale. Bientôt des lueurs pourpres émergèrent de l’horizon, comme les lamelles d’un éventail. Le bord du disque solaire, surélevé par la réfraction, effleura la ligne périmétrique, nettement tracée à la limite du ciel et de la mer. Presque aussitôt ces jets lumineux accrochèrent les petits nuages qui pendaient au zénith, nuancés de toute la gamme du rouge. Obstinément arrêtés par les épaisses vapeurs accumulées vers le nord, ils ne parvinrent pas à les percer. Aussi le rayon de vue, très étendu en arrière, était-il toujours très limité en avant. Quant à la chaloupe, elle laissait une traînée de sillage qui se détachait en blanc sur la surface verdâtre des eaux.

En ce moment, le soleil déborda tout entier, très élargi à son diamètre horizontal. Aucune vapeur n’en voilait l’éclat qui devenait insoutenable aux yeux. Ce ne fut donc pas vers lui que se tournèrent les regards. Les passagers ne cherchaient qu’à observer le nord où les portait le vent. Ce que cachait l’écran de brumes en cette direction, voilà ce qu’il importait de reconnaître. La force du soleil parviendrait-elle à les dissiper?…

Enfin, un peu avant six heures et demie, l’un des passagers, après avoir saisi la drisse de misaine, se hissa lestement jusqu’à la vergue, au moment où, du côté de l’est, le ciel venait de s’éclairer des premiers rayons du soleil.

Et alors d’une voix forte:

«Terre!…» cria-t-il.

CHAPITRE XVIII

Le départ de la *Licorne*. – Le cap de Bonne-Espérance. – James Wolston et sa famille. – Adieux de Doll. – Portsmouth et Londres. – Séjour en Angleterre. – Le mariage de Fritz Zermatt et de Jenny Montrose. — Retour à Capetown.

C’est à la date du 20 octobre que la *Licorne* avait quitté la Nouvelle-Suisse afin de rentrer en Angleterre. Au retour, après une courte relâche au cap de Bonne-Espérance, elle devait ramener Fritz et François Zermatt, Jenny Montrose et Doll Wolston, lorsque l’Amirauté enverrait prendre possession de cette nouvelle colonie de l’océan Indien. Les places, laissées à bord par la famille Wolston maintenant installée sur l’île, les deux frères les occupaient. Une cabine confortable avait été mise à la disposition de Jenny et de Doll, sa jeune compagne, qui allait rejoindre à Capetown James Wolston, sa femme et leur enfant.

Après avoir doublé le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, la *Licorne*, cinglant vers l’ouest, redescendit au sud en laissant sur tribord l’îlot de la Roche-Fumante. Avant de perdre de vue la Nouvelle-Suisse, il entrait dans la pensée du lieutenant Littlestone d’en reconnaître la côte orientale, de s’assurer que c’était bien une île isolée sur ces parages, d’évaluer approximativement l’importance d’une colonie qui ne tarderait pas à prendre rang dans le domaine insulaire de la Grande-Bretagne. Cette reconnaissance effectuée, la corvette, servie par une bonne brise, laissa dans le nord-ouest l'île dont on n'avait que vaguement entrevu au milieu des brumes la partie méridionale.

Les premières semaines de navigation furent favorisées. Les passagers et les passagères de la *Licorne* n'eurent qu'à se féliciter des conditions atmosphériques, non moins que du bon accueil dont ils furent l'objet de la part du commandant et de ses officiers. Lorsqu'ils étaient réunis à la table du carré ou sous la tente de la dunette, la conversation portait d'ordinaire sur les merveilles de cette Nouvelle-Suisse. Et on la reverrait avant un an, si la corvette ne subissait aucun retard ni au cours de sa double traversée ni du fait des autorités anglaises.

Fritz et Jenny, dans leurs causeries quotidiennes, parlaient surtout du colonel Montrose, de l'immense joie qu'il aurait en pressant dans ses bras cette fille qu'il n'espérait plus revoir. Depuis trois années on était sans nouvelles de la *Dorcas*, dont les survivants, recueillis à Sydney, avaient confirmé la perte corps et biens. Et avec quel sentiment, plus vif que celui de la reconnaissance, Jenny présenterait à son père celui qui l'avait sauvée, avec quel bonheur elle lui demanderait de bénir leur union!

En ce qui concerne François et la fillette de quatorze ans qu'était Doll Wolston, ce serait un gros chagrin pour l'un de laisser l'autre à Capetown, et combien il lui tarderait de venir l'y rechercher!

Dès que la *Licorne* eut coupé le Tropique, à peu près à la hauteur de l'île de France, elle rencontra des vents moins favorables. Aussi ne lui permirent-ils pas d'atteindre sa relâche avant le 17 décembre, soit près de deux mois après son départ de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

La corvette, qui devait passer une huitaine de jours à Capetown, vint mouiller dans le port.

L’un des premiers qui montèrent à bord fut James Wolston. Il savait que son père, sa mère et ses deux sœurs, en quittant l’Australie, avaient pris passage sur la *Licorne*. Quel désappointement lorsqu’il n’eut que sa sœur à recevoir! Doll lui présenta Fritz et François Zermatt, puis Jenny Montrose, et voici ce que Fritz dit à James Wolston:

«Votre père, votre mère et votre sœur Annah, monsieur James, habitent actuellement la Nouvelle-Suisse, – une île inconnue où notre famille fut jetée il y a douze ans, après le naufrage du *Landlord*. Ils ont décidé d’y rester et vous y attendent. En revenant d’Europe, la *Licorne* vous conduira avec votre femme et votre enfant dans notre île, si vous consentez à nous y accompagner…

— A quelle époque la corvette doit-elle revenir au Cap?… demanda James Wolston.

— Dans huit ou neuf mois, répondit Fritz, et de là elle regagnera la Nouvelle-Suisse où flottera le pavillon britannique. Mon frère François et moi, nous avons profité de cette occasion pour ramener à Londres la fille du colonel Montrose, lequel ne refusera pas, nous l’espérons, de venir se fixer avec elle dans notre seconde patrie.

— Et avec vous, mon cher Fritz, qui serez devenu son fils… ajouta Jenny en tendant la main au jeune homme.

— Ce sera la réalisation de mon vœu le plus ardent, ma chère Jenny… dit Fritz.

— Comme le nôtre, James, et celui de nos parents, ajouta Doll Wolston, est que ta famille et toi veniez vous établir à la Nouvelle-Suisse.

— Et insistez bien sur ce point, Doll, déclara François, que notre île est la plus merveilleuse des îles qui aient jamais paru à la surface des mers…

— James sera le premier à en convenir, lorsqu'il l'aura vue, répondit Doll. Une fois qu'on a mis le pied sur la Nouvelle-Suisse… qu'on a habité Felsenheim…

— Et perché à Falkenhorst, n'est-ce pas, Doll?… dit Jenny en riant.

— Oui… perché, reprit la fillette, eh bien, on ne voudrait plus la quitter, cette Nouvelle-Suisse, et, si on la quitte, c'est dans la ferme intention d'y revenir…

— Vous entendez, monsieur James?… dit Fritz.

— J'entends, monsieur Zermatt, répondit James Wolston. M'installer sur votre île, y créer les premières relations commerciales avec la Grande-Bretagne, cette proposition est bien faite pour me séduire. Ma femme et moi nous causerons à ce sujet, et, s'il y a lieu, nos affaires réglées, nous nous tiendrons prêts à embarquer sur la *Licorne* dès son retour à Capetown. Suzan, j'en suis sûr, n'hésitera pas…

— Je ferai ce que voudra mon mari, ajouta Mme Wolston, et il ne me trouvera jamais opposée à ses desseins. Partout où il voudra aller, je le suivrai avec la plus entière confiance.»

Fritz et François pressèrent cordialement la main de James Wolston, tandis que Doll donnait deux baisers à sa belle-sœur, à laquelle Jenny Montrose n'épargna ni les compliments ni les caresses.

«Pendant la relâche de la corvette, dit alors James Wolston, nous comptons bien que la fille du colonel Montrose, Fritz et François Zermatt recevront l’hospitalité dans notre maison. Ce sera la meilleure façon de nouer connaissance, et tout ce temps, nous l’emploierons à causer de la Nouvelle-Suisse.»

Il va de soi que les passagers de la *Licorne* acceptèrent cette agréable invitation avec autant d’empressement qu’elle leur avait été faite.

Une heure après, M. et Mme James Wolston accueillirent leurs hôtes. Fritz et François furent logés dans la même chambre. Jenny partagea celle qui était destinée à Doll, comme elle avait partagé sa cabine pendant la traversée.

Mme James Wolston était une jeune femme de vingt-quatre ans, douce, bonne, intelligente, dont toute l’existence se concentrait en une ardente affection pour son mari. Celui-ci, travailleur sérieux et actif, rappelait volontiers son père par ses traits physiques et ses qualités morales. Les deux époux avaient un enfant de cinq ans, Bob, qu’ils adoraient. Mme Wolston, d’origine anglaise, appartenait à une famille de commerçants établie depuis longtemps déjà dans la colonie. Orpheline, elle n’avait plus aucun parent lors de son mariage avec James Wolston, actuellement âgé de vingt-sept ans.

Le comptoir Wolston, fondé cinq années auparavant à Capetown, était prospère. Anglais très méthodique, très pratique. James devait réussir dans la capitale de cette colonie, devenue possession britannique en 1805, – cent soixante-quatre ans après sa découverte par les Hollandais, et dont la possession fut définitivement confirmée en 1815 à la Grande-Bretagne.

Du 17 au 27 décembre, pendant les dix jours que dura la relâche de la *Licorne*, il ne fut question que de la Nouvelle-Suisse, des événements dont elle avait été le théâtre, des divers travaux entrepris, des multiples installations faites durant onze années par la famille Zermatt, ensuite avec le concours de la famille Wolston. On ne tarissait pas sur ce sujet. Il fallait entendre Doll raconter toutes ces belles choses, et François l'y encourager, lui reprochant même de ne pas dire assez de bien de leur merveilleuse île. Puis, Jenny Montrose renchérissait au vif plaisir de Fritz. Quelle satisfaction pour elle, après avoir revu son père, si elle le décidait, – et elle n'en doutait pas, – à venir habiter l'une des métairies de la la Terre-Promise! Quel bonheur de se joindre aux fondateurs de cette colonie, assurée d'un si magnifique avenir!

Bref, le temps s'écoula rapidement, et il suffira de mentionner sans y insister autrement, que James Wolston, après entente avec sa femme, avait résolu de quitter Le Cap pour la Nouvelle-Suisse. Durant le voyage d'aller et de retour de la corvette, il s'occuperait de liquider ses affaires, et réaliserait sa fortune; il serait prêt à partir dès que reparaîtrait la *Licorne*; il figurerait parmi les premiers émigrants qui iraient compléter l'œuvre des Zermatt et des Wolston. Cette détermination fut une cause d'extrême joie pour les deux familles.

Le départ de la *Licorne* était fixé au 27. La durée de cette relâche parut bien courte aux hôtes de James Wolston. Le jour dit, personne ne put croire qu'il fût arrivé, et que le lieutenant Littlestone fit ses préparatifs d'appareillage.

Il fallut pourtant en venir aux derniers adieux, avec cette consolante pensée, d'ailleurs, que dans huit à neuf mois on se retrouverait à Capetown et que tous ensemble prendraient la mer à destination de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Néanmoins, la séparation ne laissa pas d'être pénible. Les baisers de Jenny

Montrose et de Suzan Wolston furent mélangés de larmes auxquelles se joignirent celles de Doll. La fillette était très affligée du départ de François, lequel avait le cœur gros, tant il éprouvait de sincère affection pour elle. Son frère et lui, en serrant la main de James Wolston, purent se dirent qu'ils laissaient là un ami véritable.

La *Licorne* mit en mer le 27 dans la matinée, par un temps assez couvert. Sa traversée ne fut ni courte ni longue. Les vents moyens varièrent du nord-ouest au sud-ouest pendant plusieurs semaines. La corvette eut successivement connaissance de Sainte-Hélène, de l'Ascension, des îles du Cap-Vert à la hauteur des possessions françaises de l'Afrique occidentale. Puis, après avoir passé en vue des Canaries et des Açores, au large des côtes de Portugal et de France, elle donna dans la Manche, contourna l'île de Wight, et, le 14 février 1817, jeta l'ancre à Portsmouth.

Jenny Montrose voulut partir immédiatement pour Londres, ou demeurait sa tante, une belle-sœur de son père. Si le colonel était en service, elle ne l'y trouverait pas, puisque la campagne pour laquelle il avait été rappelé de l'Inde anglaise devait durer plusieurs années. Mais, s'il avait sa retraite, il se serait retiré près de sa belle-sœur, et c'était là qu'il reverrait enfin celle qu'il croyait victime du naufrage de la *Dorcas*.

Fritz et François offrirent à Jenny de la conduire à Londres où leurs affaires les appelaient aussi, et l'on sait si Fritz avait hâte de se rencontrer avec le colonel Montrose. Jenny accepta de grand cœur. Tous trois partirent le soir même et arrivèrent à Londres dans la matinée du 23.

Un grand chagrin frappa Jenny Montrose. Ce fut de sa tante qu'elle apprit que le colonel était mort au cours de sa dernière campagne, sans avoir su que sa fille tant pleurée vivait encore! Revenue des lointains parages de l’océan Indien pour embrasser son père, pour ne plus se séparer de lui, pour lui présenter son sauveur, pour lui demander de consentir à leur union et de la bénir, Jenny ne devait plus le revoir.

On comprend ce que dut être sa douleur en présence d’un malheur si imprévu!… En vain sa tante ne cessa-t-elle de lui prodiguer les plus affectueuses consolations… En vain Fritz joignait-il ses larmes aux siennes!… Le coup était trop rude, et jamais il ne lui serait venu à la pensée que si son père n’était pas en Angleterre, lorsqu’elle y arriverait, c’est que la mort le lui aurait ravi!…

Mais aussi quelle désolation et quelle douleur pour Fritz! Il n’attendait que le consentement du colonel Montrose pour épouser Jenny, et le colonel Montrose n’était plus de ce monde…

Quelques jours après, dans un entretien mêlé de larmes et de regrets, Jenny lui tint ce langage:

«Fritz, mon cher Fritz, nous venons d’éprouver le plus grand des malheurs, vous et moi. Si rien n’est changé à vos dispositions…

— Oh! ma chère Jenny!… s’écria Fritz.

— Oui, je sais, répéta Jenny, et mon père eût été heureux de vous appeler son fils… Par ce que je connaissais de son affection pour moi, je ne doute pas qu’il eût voulu nous suivre et partager notre existence dans la nouvelle colonie anglaise… Mais il me faut renoncer à ce bonheur!… Maintenant je suis seule au monde, et je ne dépends plus que de moi-même!… Seule… non!… Vous êtes là, Fritz…

— Jenny, dit le jeune homme avec l’accent de la plus vive tendresse, toute ma vie sera consacrée à votre bonheur…

— Comme la mienne au vôtre, mon cher Fritz. Mais puisque mon père n’est plus là pour nous donner son consentement, puisque je n’ai plus de parents directs, puisque je n’aurai plus d’autre famille que la vôtre…

— La mienne… dont vous faites partie depuis trois ans déjà, ma chère Jenny, depuis le jour où je vous ai retrouvée à la Roche-Fumante…

— Une famille qui m’aime et que j’aime, Fritz!… Eh bien, dans quelques mois, nous l’aurons rejointe, nous serons de retour…

— Mariés… Jenny?…

— Oui… Fritz… si vous le désirez, puisque vous avez le consentement de votre père, et que ma tante ne me refusera pas le sien…

— Jenny, ma chère Jenny, s’écria Fritz, en tombant à ses genoux. Rien ne sera changé à nos projets, et c’est ma femme que je ramènerai à mon père et à ma mère.»

Jenny Montrose ne quitta plus la maison de sa tante, où Fritz et François venaient la voir chaque jour. Entre-temps, toutes les dispositions furent prises pour que la célébration du mariage s’effectuât dans les délais légaux.

D’autre part, il y eut lieu de s’occuper d’affaires d’une certaine importance, affaires qui avaient motivé le voyage des deux frères en Europe.

Et d’abord, il fallut procéder à la vente des objets de prix recueillis sur l’île, le corail fourni par l’îlot de la Baleine, les perles pêchées dans la baie de ce nom, les noix muscades, la vanille en quantité importante. M. Zermatt ne s’était point trompé sur leur valeur marchande, qui se chiffra par une somme considérable, soit huit mille livres.

Et si l’on considère que les bancs de la baie des Perles avaient été effleurés seulement, que le corail se rencontrerait en mainte partie du littoral, que les noix muscades et la vanille promettaient d’abondantes récoltes, sans parler des autres richesses de la Nouvelle-Suisse, on admettra que la colonie fût appelée à un degré de prospérité qui la mettrait au premier rang parmi les possessions d’outre-mer de la Grande-Bretagne.

Suivant les instructions de M. Zermatt, une portion de la somme provenant de ces ventes allait être employée à l’acquisition d’objet destinés à compléter le matériel de Felsenheim et des métairies de la Terre-Promise. Quant au reste – environ les trois quarts – ainsi que les dix mille livres provenant de l’héritage du colonel Montrose, ils furent placés à la banque d’Angleterre, d’où, suivant les futurs besoins, M. Zermatt pourrait en disposer, grâce aux communications qui allaient être établies avec la métropole.

Il ne faut pas oublier de dire que restitution fut faite des divers bijoux et sommes d’argent qui appartenaient aux familles des naufragés du *Landlord*, et dont, à la suite de quelques recherches, on put retrouver la trace.

Enfin, un mois après l’arrivée de Fritz Zermatt et de Jenny Montrose, leur mariage fut célébré à Londres par le chapelain de la corvette. La *Licorne* les avait amenés fiancés, elle les ramènerait époux à la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Ces événements eurent un retentissement considérable dans la Grande-Bretagne. On se passionna pour cette famille abandonnée depuis douze ans sur une île inconnue de l’océan Indien, pour les aventures de Jenny et son séjour à la Roche-Fumante. Le récit, qui avait été rédigé par Jean Zermatt, parut dans les journaux de l’Angleterre et de l’étranger. Sous le nom de ROBINSON SUISSE, il était destiné à la célébrité déjà acquise par l’œuvre impérissable de Daniel de Foe.

Il suit de là que, sous la pression de l’opinion publique, si puissante dans le Royaume-Uni, la prise de possession de la Nouvelle-Suisse fut décidée par l’Amirauté. Cette possession, d’ailleurs, présentait des avantages très sérieux. L’île occupait dans l’est de l’océan Indien une position importante, presque à l’entrée des mers de la Sonde, sur les routes de l’extrême Asie. Trois cents lieues au plus la séparaient de la côte occidentale de l’Australie. Cette sixième partie du monde, découverte par les Hollandais en 1605, visitée par Abel Tasman en 1644, puis par le capitaine Cook en 1774, allait devenir l’un des principaux domaines de l’Angleterre dans l’hémisphère méridional, entre la mer des Indes et les mers du Pacifique. L’Amirauté ne pouvait donc que se féliciter d’acquérir une île à proximité de ce continent.

Aussi l’envoi de la *Licorne* en ces parages fut-il admis. La corvette repartirait dans quelques mois sous le commandement du lieutenant Littlestone, promu capitaine à cette occasion. Fritz et Jenny Zermatt s’y embarqueraient avec François, sans parler de quelques colons, en attendant que des émigrants en plus grand nombre allassent sur d’autres navires à même destination.

Il était également convenu que la corvette relâcherait au Cap et recevrait James, Suzan et Doll Wolston à son bord.

Si le séjour de la *Licorne* à Portsmouth eut une assez longue durée, c’est que des réparations importantes avaient été indispensables, après cette traversée de Sydney en Europe.

Fritz et François ne restèrent pas tout ce temps à Londres et en Angleterre. Les deux époux et François pensèrent que c'était un devoir pour eux de visiter la Suisse, afin de rapporter à M. et Mme Zermatt des nouvelles de leur pays natal.

Ils se rendirent donc en France, à Paris, et employèrent une huitaine de jours à visiter la capitale. A cette époque, l'Empire avait pris fin en même temps que les longues guerres avec la Grande-Bretagne.

Fritz et François arrivèrent en Suisse, ce pays dont ils avaient à peine gardé le souvenir, l'ayant quitté jeunes encore, et de Genève ils se rendirent dans le canton d'Appenzell.

De leur famille il ne restait plus que quelques parents éloignés, avec lesquels M. et Mme Zermatt n'avaient jamais eu de rapports suivis. Cependant l'arrivée des deux jeunes gens fit sensation dans la République helvétique. On connaissait maintenant l'histoire des naufragés du *Landlord*, on savait quelle île leur avait offert refuge. Aussi, bien que leurs compatriotes fussent peu enclins aux déplacements, peu portés à courir les chances de l'émigration, plusieurs manifestèrent-ils l'intention de compter parmi ces colons auxquels la Nouvelle-Suisse assurait bon accueil.

Ce ne fut pas sans un serrement de cœur que Fritz et François quittèrent leur pays d'origine. S'ils pouvaient espérer qu'ils y reviendraient dans l'avenir, c'était un espoir que M. et Mme Zermatt, déjà âgés, ne réaliseraient jamais sans doute.

Après avoir traversé la France, Fritz, Jenny et François rentrèrent en Angleterre.

Les préparatifs de départ de la *Licorne* tiraient à leur terme, et la corvette serait prête à mettre à la voile dans les derniers jours de juin.

Il va sans dire que Fritz et François furent reçus avec empressement par les Lords de l'Amirauté. L'Angleterre était reconnaissante à Jean Zermatt d'avoir, de son plein gré, offert au capitaine Littlestone la possession immédiate de son île.

On le sait, à l'époque où la corvette avait quitté la Nouvelle-Suisse, la plus grande partie en était encore inconnue, sauf le district de la Terre-Promise, le littoral du nord, une portion du littoral de l'est jusqu'à la baie de la Licorne. Le capitaine Littlestone devrait donc en compléter le relèvement tant sur les côtes ouest et sud qu'à l'intérieur. Il convient d'ajouter en outre que, dans quelques mois, plusieurs navires se disposaient à transporter, avec des émigrants, le matériel nécessaire aux besoins de la colonisation et à la mise en défense de l'île. Ce serait à dater de cette époque que des communications régulières s'établiraient entre la Grande-Bretagne et ces parages de l'océan Indien.

Le 27 juin, la *Licorne*, prête à appareiller, n'attendait plus que Fritz, Jenny et François. Le 28, tous trois arrivèrent à Portsmouth, où les avait précédés la pacotille acquise au compte de la famille Zermatt.

Ils furent cordialement accueillis à bord de la corvette par le capitaine Littlestone qu'ils avaient eu l'occasion de rencontrer deux ou trois fois à Londres. Quelle joie à la pensée de revoir à Capetown James et Suzan Wolston, et aussi la gentille Doll que François n'avait pas laissée sans nouvelles et bonnes nouvelles de tout le monde!

Le 29 juin, dès le matin, la *Licorne* sortit de Portsmouth par belle brise, portant à sa corne le pavillon anglais qu'elle allait arborer sur les rivages de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

CHAPITRE XIX

Le deuxième voyage de la *Licorne*. – Nouveaux passagers et officiers.

— Relâche au Cap. – Le second Borupt. – Navigation contrariée.

— Révolte à bord. – Huit jours à fond de cale. – Abandonnés en mer.

Si la *Licorne*, au lieu d'être un navire de guerre, eût été un bâtiment de commerce à destination de la Nouvelle-Suisse, elle aurait embarqué un nombre assez considérable d'émigrants. Cette île, sur laquelle l'attention publique venait d'être si vivement attirée, ne chômerait pas de colons. Les probabilités étaient même qu'ils se recruteraient principalement dans la population irlandaise que ses instincts et aussi la nécessité excitent à chercher en dehors de son pays des moyens d'existence. Là-bas, d'ailleurs, ce seraient autant d'hommes vigoureux et résolus auxquels le travail ne manquerait pas.

A bord de la *Licorne*, une cabine avait été réservée pour Fritz et sa femme, et, contiguë à celle-ci, une autre pour François, lesquels prendraient leurs repas à la table du capitaine Littlestone.

La navigation n'offrit rien de très particulier. Ce furent les incidents habituels des traversées, mer assez inconstante, contrariétés provenant de l'instabilité des vents, calmes qui, sous les tropiques, semblent ne devoir jamais finir, quelques rudes assauts de gros temps que la corvette, bien manœuvrée, supporta sans grand dommage. On croisa plusieurs bâtiments dans l'Atlantique sud, qui durent rapporter des nouvelles de la *Licorne* en Europe. A cette époque d'apaisement, après de si longues et si redoutables guerres, les mers étaient très sûres, et les navires ne couraient aucun danger sous ce rapport.

Fritz et François firent plus complète connaissance avec le chapelain qui avait connu le colonel Montrose aux Indes. A quel meilleur confident Jenny eût-elle pu parler de son père, si ce n'est celui qui avait eu avec le colonel d'étroites relations d'amitié? C'est de cet excellent homme qu'elle apprit ce qu'il avait souffert lors de son retour en Angleterre, ses inquiétudes d'abord en attendant l'arrivée de la *Dorcas*, partie quelques jours avant le bâtiment qui allait le ramener en Europe. Quels tourments, puis quel désespoir, lorsqu'il fut malheureusement acquis que la *Dorcas* s'était perdue corps et biens! Puis le colonel était parti, le cœur brisé, pour cette campagne d'où il ne devait pas revenir…

Cependant la *Licorne*, qui n'avait pas été très éprouvée dans sa traversée de l'Atlantique, rencontra de très mauvais temps au milieu des parages sud de l'Afrique. Une violente tempête l'assaillit dans la nuit du 19 août et les rafales la rejetèrent au large. La tourmente devenant de plus en plus violente, il fallut fuir par impossibilité de tenir la cape. Le capitaine Littlestone, bien secondé de ses officiers et de son équipage, déploya une grande habileté dans ces circonstances. Mais, à la suite de graves avaries qui la compromirent, la *Licorne* risqua d'engager. On dut couper le mât d'artimon et une voie d'eau s'étant déclarée à l'arrière, on ne parvint pas à l'aveugler sans peine. Enfin le vent ayant calmi, le capitaine Littlestone put reprendre sa route, ayant hâte de se réparer dans le port de Capetown.

Dès la matinée du 10 septembre furent signalées les premières hauteurs de la Table, cette montagne qui se dresse au fond de la baie de ce nom.

Aussitôt que la *Licorne* eut choisi son poste de mouillage, James Wolston, Suzan, Doll, amenés par un canot, montèrent sur le pont de la corvette.

Quel accueil reçurent Fritz, Jenny et François! Quelle joie, à cet instant! Les deux jeunes femmes étaient si heureuses de se revoir!… Et cette charmante Doll, qui rendit à Fritz le baiser que celui-ci fit retentir sur ses joues si fraîches!… Et d'imaginer que François fut moins bien partagé que son frère, non! personne ne voudrait le croire!… Et enfin, quelle hâte tous avaient d'avoir définitivement fixé leur existence dans cette seconde patrie où les attendaient avec tant d'impatience les familles Zermatt et Wolston!

Depuis bientôt dix mois, en effet, aucune nouvelle n'avait pu leur arriver. Bien qu'il n'y eût pas à concevoir d'inquiétude sur le sort des hôtes de Felsenheim, l'absence ne laissait pas de paraître longue, interminable même. Avec quel bonheur tous se retrouveraient en vue de la Nouvelle-Suisse, dont le capitaine Littlestone connaissait la situation en longitude et en latitude! De parler à toute heure de M. et de Mme Zermatt, d'Ernest et de Jack, de M. et Mme Wolston et d'Annah, cela ne diminuait pas les distances, cela ne valait pas le bonheur de se retrouver sur la Terre-Promise!

Pour ce qui était des affaires de James Wolston, elles avaient pu être liquidées dans des conditions avantageuses.

Mais alors on se trouva en face d'une impossibilité de reprendre immédiatement la mer. Les avaries de la *Licorne* étaient assez graves pour exiger une longue relâche dans le port de Capetown. Deux ou trois mois seraient nécessaires pour les réparer, après avoir opéré le déchargement de la corvette. Elle ne pourrait faire voile pour la Nouvelle-Suisse avant la fin d'octobre.

C'eût été un très regrettable contretemps, si l'occasion ne se fût présentée aux passagers de la *Licorne* d'abréger leur séjour au Cap.

Il y avait dans le port un bâtiment qui devait appareiller dans une quinzaine de jours. C'était le *Flag*, trois-mâts anglais de cinq cents tonneaux, capitaine Harry Gould, en partance pour Batavia dans les îles de la Sonde. Relâcher à la Nouvelle-Suisse l'écarterait très peu de sa route, et s'il voulait les prendre à bord, Fritz et sa femme, James et Suzan Wolston avec leur enfant, François et Doll étaient prêts à payer d'un bon prix le passage.

Cette proposition, faite au capitaine Gould, fut acceptée et les passagers de la *Licorne* transportèrent leurs bagages sur le *Flag*, où des cabines étaient mises à leur disposition.

Les préparatifs du trois-mâts furent achevés dans l'après-midi du 29 septembre. Ce soir-là, James Wolston, sa femme, sa sœur et le petit Bob vinrent occuper leurs cabines. Puis on prit, non sans quelque émotion, congé du capitaine Littlestone en lui promettant de guetter vers la fin de novembre l'arrivée de la *Licorne* à l'ouvert de la baie du Salut.

Le lendemain, le *Flag* mit en mer par un vent de sud-ouest très favorable, et avant le soir de cette première journée, les hauts sommets du Cap, reculés d'une quinzaine de lieues, disparurent à l'horizon.

Harry Gould était un excellent marin, dont le sang-froid égalait la résolution. Alors dans toute la force de l'âge, n'ayant pas dépassé quarante-deux ans, il avait fait ses preuves comme officier d'abord, puis en qualité de capitaine. Ses armateurs pouvaient avoir toute confiance en lui.

Cette confiance, le second du *Flag*, Robert Borupt, ne l'eût pas méritée. Du même âge que Harry Gould, d'un caractère jaloux, vindicatif, dominé par des passions violentes, il ne se croyait jamais récompensé suivant son mérite. Déçu dans son espoir de commander le *Flag*, il gardait au fond de l'âme, contre son capitaine, une sourde haine qu'il savait dissimuler. Mais cette disposition n’avait pu échapper au bosseman, John Block, homme intrépide et sûr, dévoué de cœur et d’âme à son chef. Or, l’équipage du *Flag*, comprenant une vingtaine de matelots, n’était pas de premier choix, et Harry Gould ne l’ignorait point. Le bosseman ne voyait pas sans déplaisir l’indulgence que Robert Borupt accordait trop souvent à certains matelots dont il y avait à se plaindre dans le service. Tout cela lui paraissait suspect, et il ne cessait d’observer le second, décidé à prévenir Harry Gould, qui écoutait volontiers ce brave et honnête marin.

Du 22 août au 9 septembre, la navigation ne présenta aucune particularité. L’état de la mer, l’orientation du vent, bien qu’il ne soufflât qu’en petite brise, l’avaient assez favorisée. Il suffisait que le trois-mâts se maintînt à cette moyenne de vitesse pour avoir rallié les parages de la Nouvelle-Suisse vers la mi-octobre, c’est-à-dire dans les délais prévus.

Alors, il y eut lieu de reconnaître que des symptômes d’insubordination se manifestaient parmi l’équipage. Il semblait même que le relâchement de la discipline fût entretenu par le second et le troisième officier au mépris de tous leurs devoirs. Robert Borupt, poussé par sa nature jalouse et perverse, ne prenait aucune mesure pour enrayer le désordre. Bien au contraire, il l’autorisait par des propos indignes de ses fonctions, une faiblesse voulue envers les hommes, évitant de sévir, fermant les yeux sur des actes répréhensibles. Bref, on sentait peu à peu s’organiser la révolte.

Cependant le *Flag* continuait à gagner vers le nord-est. A la date du 9 septembre, le point ayant donné 20° 17’ en latitude et 80°45’ en longitude, il se trouvait à peu près au milieu de l’océan Indien, sur la limite du tropique du Capricorne qu’il allait franchir.

Pendant la nuit précédente, des menaces de mauvais temps s’étaient produites, baisse brusque du baromètre, formation de nuages orageux, autant d’indices de ces redoutables tempêtes qui désolent trop souvent ces mers.

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, un grain se leva si subitement que le bâtiment fut sur le point d’engager. Grave éventualité pour un navire qui, après s’être couché sur le flanc, n’obéit plus au gouvernail et risque de ne pouvoir se relever qu’à la condition de couper sa mâture. Et alors, une fois désemparé, incapable d’opposer résistance aux lames en prenant la cape, il est livré à toutes les fureurs de l’Océan.

Inutile de dire que, dès le début de cette tempête, les passagers avaient dû se renfermer dans leur cabines, car le pont était balayé par les coups de mer. Seuls, Fritz et François étaient restés en haut afin de donner la main à l’équipage.

Dès les premiers instants, Harry Gould avait pris son poste sur le banc de quart, le bosseman à la barre, tandis que le second et le troisième officier veillaient sur le gaillard d’avant. L’équipage se tenait prêt à exécuter les ordres du capitaine, car il s’agissait de vie ou de mort. La plus légère erreur de manœuvre, alors que les lames déferlaient contre le *Flag* à demi couché sur bâbord, eût entraîné sa perte. Tous les efforts devaient tendre à le redresser, puis à orienter sa voilure de manière qu’il pût se mettre debout aux rafales.

Et pourtant, cette erreur fut commise, sinon volontairement, puisque le navire risquait de sombrer, mais sans doute par une fausse interprétation des ordres du capitaine, qu’un officier n’aurait pas dû commettre, pour peu qu’il eût l’instinct d’un marin.

C’est au second, Robert Borupt, et à nul autre que lui qu’en revenait la responsabilité. Sous l’action du petit hunier, orienté mal à propos, le bâtiment engagea davantage, et un énorme paquet de mer embarqua par le couronnement.

«Ce maudit Borupt veut donc nous faire chavirer!… s’écria Harry Gould.

— Il a fait tout ce qu’il fallait pour cela!» répondit le bosseman en essayant de mettre la barre à tribord.

Le capitaine se précipita sur le pont et se porta jusqu’à l’avant, au risque d’être déhalé par les lames et, après mille efforts, il atteignit le gaillard.

«A votre cabine, cria-t-il d’une voix courroucée au second, à votre cabine et n’en sortez plus!»

La faute de Robert Borupt était si évidente qu’aucun des gens de l’équipage, prêts à se ranger autour de lui s’il leur en eût donné l’ordre, n’osa élever la voix. Le second obéit sans protester et regagna la dunette.

Tout ce qu’il était possible de faire, Harry Gould le fit alors. Par une juste orientation de ce que le *Flag* pouvait porter de toile, il parvint à le redresser, sans avoir été contraint d’abattre la mâture, et le navire ne présenta plus son travers à la houle.

Durant trois jours il fallut fuir devant cette tempête, au milieu de dangers qui furent heureusement évités par le capitaine et le bosseman. Presque tout ce temps, Suzan, Jenny et Doll durent se confiner dans leurs cabines, tandis que Fritz, François et James prenaient part aux diverses manœuvres.

Enfin, le 13 septembre, on put prévoir un prochain apaisement de ces troubles atmosphériques. Le vent mollit, et si la mer ne tomba pas immédiatement, du moins les lames ne balayèrent plus le pont du *Flag*.

Les passagères s’empressèrent alors de quitter leurs cabines. Elles savaient ce qui s’était passé entre le capitaine et le second, pourquoi celui-ci avait été démonté de ses fonctions. Quant au sort de Robert Borupt, il en serait décidé au retour devant un conseil maritime.

Il y eut de nombreuses avaries à réparer dans la voilure, et John Block, en dirigeant ce travail, vit clairement que l’équipage ne demandait qu’à se révolter.

Cet état de choses ne put échapper à Fritz, à François, à James Wolston, et leur inspira peut-être plus d’inquiétudes que ne leur en avait causé la tempête. Sans doute, le capitaine Gould n’hésiterait pas à sévir contre les mutins, quels qu’ils fussent, mais n’était-il pas trop tard?…

Pendant les huit jours qui suivirent, il ne se produisit aucun fait contre la discipline. Comme le *Flag* avait été rejeté à plusieurs centaines de milles dans l’est, il était nécessaire de revenir vers l’ouest, afin de se retrouver en longitude avec la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Le 20 septembre, vers dix heures, à la surprise de tous, puisque ses arrêts n’avaient point été levés, Robert Borupt reparut sur le pont.

Les passagers, réunis sur la dunette, eurent le pressentiment que la situation, déjà grave, allait s’aggraver encore.

Dès que le capitaine Gould vit le second se diriger vers l’avant, il le rejoignit.

«Lieutenant Borupt, dit le capitaine, vous êtes consigné… Que venez-vous faire ici?… Répondez…

— Oui… s’écria Borupt, et voici ma réponse!…»

Se tournant alors vers l’équipage:

«A moi, camarades!… commanda-t-il.

— Hurrah pour Robert Borupt!» tels furent les cris qui retentirent de l’avant à l’arrière du navire.

Harry Gould rentra dans sa cabine, et ressortit un pistolet à la main. Il n’eut pas le temps d’en faire usage. Un coup de feu, tiré par un des matelots qui entouraient Robert Borupt, le blessa à la tête, et il tomba entre les bras du bosseman.

Contre tout un équipage révolté, poussé par le second et le troisième officier, il n’y avait aucune résistance possible. Vainement, John Block, Fritz, François, James Wolston, rangés près d’Harry Gould, voulurent-ils soutenir la lutte. En un instant, accablés par le nombre, ils furent dans l’impossibilité de se défendre, et dix matelots les descendirent dans le faux pont avec le capitaine.

Quant à Jenny, à Doll, à Suzan, elles furent, avec l’enfant, renfermées dans leurs cabines, dont les portes allaient être gardées par ordre de Robert Borupt, seul maître à bord.

Que l’on se figure la situation des prisonniers du faux pont où régnait une demi-obscurité, celle du malheureux capitaine en proie aux souffrances de cette blessure à la tête qui ne put être pansée qu’au moyen de compresses d’eau. Il est vrai, le bosseman ne lui épargna pas ses soins. Mais à quelle inquiétude furent en proie Fritz, François et James Wolston!… Les trois passagères, à la merci des révoltés du *Flag*!… Quelles angoisses les torturaient à la pensée qu'ils étaient réduits à l'impuissance!…

Plusieurs jours s'écoulèrent. Par deux fois, matin et soir, le panneau du faux pont se relevait, et les prisonniers recevaient quelque nourriture. Aux questions que leur adressait John Block, les matelots ne répondaient que par des paroles brutales et menaçantes. Au sujet des passagères, Fritz, François et James n'obtenaient que de grossières injures.

Toutefois, à diverses reprises, le bosseman et ses compagnons tentèrent de recouvrer leur liberté en forçant le panneau. Ce panneau était surveillé jour et nuit, et, d'ailleurs, en cas qu'ils fussent parvenus à le soulever, à maîtriser leurs gardiens, à monter sur le pont, quelles chances avaient-ils contre cet équipage, et quel traitement leur eût infligé Robert Borupt?…

«Le misérable!… le misérable!… répétait Fritz en songeant à sa femme, à Suzan, à Doll…

— Oui… le plus abominable des coquins, répétait John Block, et s'il n'est pas pendu un jour ou l'autre, c'est qu'il n'y aurait plus de justice en ce monde!»

Mais pour punir les rebelles, pour appliquer à leur chef le châtiment qu'il méritait, il eût fallu qu'un bâtiment de guerre se fût emparé du *Flag*. Or Robert Borupt ne commit pas la faute de le diriger vers des parages fréquentés, où ses complices et lui auraient couru le risque d'être poursuivis. Il devait l'avoir rejeté hors de son itinéraire, préférablement dans l'est, de manière à s'éloigner aussi bien des côtes d'Afrique que des côtes de l'Australie. Et chaque jour ajoutait cinquante, soixante lieues à la distance qui séparait le *Flag* du méridien de la Nouvelle-Suisse! Harry Gould et le bosseman pouvaient reconnaître à la bande que donnait le navire, toujours incliné sur bâbord, qu’il marchait à grande vitesse. Les craquements qui se produisaient à l’emplanture des mâts indiquaient que le second forçait de toile. Lorsque le *Flag* aurait atteint ces lointains parages de l’océan Pacifique, propices aux pirateries, que deviendraient les prisonniers et les prisonnières?… On ne pourrait les garder… Les jetterait-on sur quelque île déserte?… Ah! tout vaudrait mieux que de rester sur ce bâtiment entre les mains de Robert Borupt et de ses complices!

Ainsi, vers l’époque prévue, à défaut de la *Licorne*, retardée au Cap, le *Flag* n’arriverait pas en vue de la Nouvelle-Suisse!… On l’attendrait des semaines, des mois, et il n’apparaîtrait pas… Quelles seraient les inquiétudes des familles Zermatt et Wolston!… Et, lorsque la *Licorne* viendrait enfin mouiller dans la baie du Salut, en apprenant que le *Flag* avait fait route pour la colonie, qu’en faudrait-il conclure, si ce n’est qu’il avait dû périr corps et biens?…

Une semaine s’était écoulée depuis que Harry Gould et ses compagnons avaient été renfermés dans le faux pont, sans aucune nouvelle des passagères. Or, ce jour-là, 27 septembre, il sembla que la vitesse du trois-mâts avait diminué, soit qu’il fût encalminé, soit qu’il eût mis en panne.

Vers huit heures du soir, une escouade de matelots s’introduisit près des prisonniers.

Ceux-ci n’eurent qu’à obéir aux ordres de le suivre que leur intima le troisième officier.

Que se passait-il en haut?… Allait-on les rendre à la liberté?… Un parti s’était-il formé contre Robert Borupt dans le but de restituer au capitaine Gould le commandement du *Flag*!…

Remontés sur le pont en présence de tout l’équipage, ils virent Robert Borupt qui les attendait au pied du grand mât. En vain, Fritz et François jetèrent-ils un regard à l’intérieur de la dunette, dont la porte centrale était ouverte. Aucune lampe, aucun fanal n’y projetait la moindre clarté.

Cependant, en s’approchant des bastingages de tribord, le bosseman put apercevoir l’extrémité d’un mât qui se balançait contre le flanc du navire.

Évidemment la grande chaloupe avait été mise à la mer.

Robert Borupt s’apprêtait-il donc à y embarquer le capitaine et ses compagnons, à les abandonner sur ces parages, à les livrer à tous les hasards de la mer, sans qu’ils pussent savoir s’ils se trouvaient à proximité d’un continent ou d’une île?…

Et alors, ces malheureuses femmes, est-ce qu’elles allaient rester à bord, exposées à tant de périls?…

A la pensée qu’ils ne les reverraient plus, Fritz, François, James voulurent tenter un dernier effort pour les délivrer, quitte à se faire tuer sur place.

Fritz s’élança du côté de la dunette en appelant Jenny. Mais on l’arrêta, comme on arrêta François, comme on arrêta James qui n’entendit pas Suzan répondre à son appel. Ils furent aussitôt maîtrisés, et, malgré leur résistance, affalés avec Harry Gould et John Block par-dessus les bastingages dans la chaloupe que sa bosse maintenait le long du navire.

Quelles ne furent pas leur surprise et leur joie… oui! leur joie… Dans l’embarcation se trouvaient déjà les êtres chéris qu’ils avaient inutilement appelés!… Les passagères venaient d’être descendues quelques instants avant que les prisonniers eussent quitté le faux pont. Elles attendaient, en proie à des transes terribles, ignorant si leurs compagnons allaient être abandonnés avec elles au milieu de cette portion du Pacifique, vers laquelle Robert Borupt avait sans doute entraîné le *Flag*!…

Il y eut alors des scènes d'attendrissement, des pleurs versés!… Il leur semblait que d'être réunis, c'était la plus grande grâce que le Ciel eût pu leur faire!…

Et pourtant, quels dangers les menaçaient à bord de cette embarcation! On n'y avait jeté que quatre sacs de biscuit et de viande conservée, trois barils d'eau douce, divers ustensiles de cuisine, un paquet de vêtements et de couvertures pris au hasard dans les cabines, – à peine de quoi résister aux assauts des mauvais temps, aux tortures de la faim et de la soif!…

Mais ils étaient ensemble… La mort seule pourrait les séparer désormais…

Du reste, ils n'eurent pas le temps de réfléchir. Dans peu d'instants, avec le vent qui fraîchissait, le *Flag* se serait éloigné de quelques milles…

Le bosseman s'était placé à la barre, Fritz et François au pied du mât, prêts à hisser la voile, dès que la chaloupe ne serait plus à l'abri du navire.

Quand au capitaine Gould, il avait été déposé sous le tillac de l'avant. Hors d'état de se soutenir, étendu sur des couvertures, Jenny lui donnait ses soins.

A bord du *Flag*, les matelots, penchés au-dessus des bastingages, regardaient silencieusement. Pas un d'entre eux ne se sentait pris de pitié pour les victimes de Robert Borupt, et l'on voyait leurs yeux ardents luire dans l'obscurité.

En ce moment, une voix s’éleva, – la voix d’Harry Gould, à qui l’indignation rendit quelque force. Après s’être dégagé dû tillac, il venait de se traîner de banc en banc, et, à demi redressé:

«Misérables, s’écria-t-il, vous n’échapperez pas à la justice des hommes!…

— Ni à la justice de Dieu! dit François.

— Largue!…» cria Robert Borupt.

La bosse retomba en dehors, la chaloupe resta seule, et le navire disparut au milieu des ombres de la nuit.

Chapitre XX

Un cri de François. – Quelle est cette côte? – Les passagers de la chaloupe.

— Terre disparue dans les brumes. – Temps menaçant. – Terre reparue.

— Rafales du sud. – A la côte.

Ce cri de: «Terre, terre!», c’était François qui venait de le jeter comme un cri de salut. Debout sur le tillac, il avait cru apercevoir confusément les profils d’une côte à travers une déchirure des brumes. Aussitôt, saisissant la drisse, il s’était hissé en tête du mât, puis achevalé sur la vergue, et, de là, il tenait obstinément son regard dans la direction relevée.

Près de dix minutes s’écoulèrent avant qu’il eût revu cet indice de terre vers le nord, et il se laissa glisser au pied du mât.

«Tu as aperçu la côte?… demanda Fritz.

— Oui!… là… sous le bord de ce gros nuage, qui cache maintenant l’horizon…

— Ne vous êtes-vous pas trompé, monsieur François?… dit John Block.

— Non, bosseman, non!… Le nuage s’est rabaissé sur l’horizon, mais la terre est derrière… Je l’ai vue… j’affirme l’avoir vue…»

Jenny venait de se relever et, saisissant le bras de son mari:

«Il faut croire ce que dit François, déclara-t-elle. Sa vue est perçante… Il n’a pu faire erreur…

— Je ne me suis pas trompé, affirma de nouveau François. Croyez-moi comme me croit Jenny… J’ai parfaitement distingué une hauteur… Elle a été visible pendant près d’une minute dans la fente des nuages… Se continuait-elle au delà à l’est et à l’ouest, il n’était pas possible de le reconnaître… Mais, île ou continent, la terre est là!»

Comment mettre en doute ce que François disait en des termes si affirmatifs? Et puis, le besoin de croire à la réalisation de ce qu’on a tant espéré ne disposait-il pas les esprits à la confiance?… Aussi ces infortunés voulurent-ils s’unir dans la prière que François adressa au Tout-Puissant.

Et maintenant, à quelle terre appartenait cette côte, on le saurait peut-être, lorsque la chaloupe l’aurait atteinte. En tout cas, ses passagers, soit cinq hommes, Fritz, François, James, le capitaine Harry Gould, le bosseman John Block, trois femmes, Jenny, Doll, Suzan et son enfant, débarqueraient sur son littoral, quel qu’il fût.

S’il n’offrait aucune ressource, s’il était inhabitable, si la présence des indigènes le rendait dangereux, la chaloupe reprendrait la mer après s’être ravitaillée du mieux possible.

Harry Gould fut aussitôt mis au courant, et, malgré sa faiblesse, malgré ses souffrances, il exigea qu’on le transportât à l’arrière de l’embarcation.

Et voici les observations que Fritz crut devoir émettre relativement à la terre signalée.

«Ce qui nous intéresse en ce moment, c’est sa distance. Or, étant donnée la hauteur d’où elle a été observée, et aussi l’état assez brumeux de l’atmosphère, cette distance ne peut être supérieure à cinq ou six lieues…»

Signe d’approbation du capitaine Gould que le bosseman accompagna d’un hochement de tête.

«Donc, reprit Fritz, avec bonne brise, en portant vers le nord, il nous suffirait de deux heures pour accoster…

— Malheureusement, dit François, la brise est incertaine et paraît avoir une tendance à remonter. Si elle ne tombe pas tout à fait, il est à craindre qu’elle ne nous contrarie…

— Et les avirons?… répondit Fritz. Ne pouvons-nous prendre les avirons, mon frère, James et moi, tandis que vous tiendriez la barre, bosseman?… Nous ne serions pas à bout de forces pour avoir nagé quelques heures…

— Aux avirons!…» commanda Harry Gould, d’une voix qu’on entendit à peine.

Et il était fâcheux que le capitaine ne fût pas en état de gouverner, car à quatre, les passagers eussent fait meilleure besogne.

Il est vrai, Fritz, François, James, quoique dans toute la force de la jeunesse, le bosseman encore vigoureux, tous endurcis aux travaux manuels, étaient alors très affaiblis par les privations et les fatigues. Huit jours venaient de s’écouler depuis que le *Flag* les avait laissés à l’abandon. De leurs provisions, cependant ménagées avec une extrême parcimonie, il ne restait plus que pour vingt-quatre heures. Trois ou quatre fois la pêche avait procuré un peu de poisson, au moyen de longues lignes mises à la traîne. Un petit fourneau, une petite chaudière, une bouilloire, voilà les seuls ustensiles qu’ils possédaient avec leurs couteaux de poche. Et si cette terre n’était qu’un îlot rocheux, s’il fallait que la chaloupe reprît pendant de longs jours cette pénible navigation à la recherche d’un continent ou d’une île, où l’existence serait possible…

Néanmoins, tous avaient senti se réveiller leur espoir, après que le cri de François se fut fait entendre. Il faut avoir passé par de telles épreuves pour comprendre à quels riens peuvent se rattacher des créatures humaines!… C’est le naufragé qui rencontre un bout de planche flottant à sa portée!… Au lieu de cette embarcation menacée par les rafales, ballottée par les lames, à demi remplie par des coups de mer, ils fouleraient du pied une terre solide!… On s’installerait dans quelque caverne à l’abri du mauvais temps… on trouverait peut-être un sol fertile, de la verdure, des racines comestibles, nombre de ces fruits si communs des zones intertropicales… Là, enfin, on pourrait attendre, sans avoir à redouter ni la faim ni la soif, le passage d’un navire!… Ce navire apercevrait les signaux… il viendrait au secours des abandonnés!… Oui! tout cela leur apparaissait à travers les mirages de l’espérance!…

Quant à cette côte entrevue, appartenait-elle à quelque groupe des îles situées au delà du tropique du Capricorne?… C’était là ce dont le bosseman et Fritz parlaient à voix basse. Jenny et Doll avaient repris leur place au fond de l’embarcation, et le petit garçon dormait entre les bras de Mme Wolston. Il avait fallu reporter sous le tillac le capitaine Gould dévoré de fièvre. Là Jenny imbibait d’eau fraîche les compresses de sa tête.

Et alors, Fritz de se livrer à des hypothèses, peu rassurantes en somme. Il ne doutait pas que le *Flag*, depuis que la révolte avait éclaté à bord, n’eût fait longue route vers l’est durant ces huit jours. Dans ce cas, la chaloupe aurait été mise à la mer sur cette portion de l’océan Pacifique, où les cartes n’indiquent que de rares îles, Amsterdam et Saint-Paul, ou, plus au sud, l’archipel des Kerguelen. Mais enfin, même en ces îles, les unes désertes, les autres habitées, la vie serait assurée, le salut certain, et qui sait?… le rapatriement dans un temps plus ou moins éloigné.

D’ailleurs, si, depuis le 27 septembre, la chaloupe avait remonté vers le nord, poussée par la brise du sud, il était possible que cette terre appartînt au continent australien et, par bonne chance, soit à la Tasmanie, soit aux provinces de Victoria ou de l’Australie méridionale. A gagner Hobart-Town, Melbourne ou Adélaïde, on eût été sauvé… Mais si l’embarcation atterrissait sur la partie sud-ouest, à la baie du Roi-Georges ou au cap Leuwin, fréquentés par des peuplades féroces, la situation ne serait-elle pas pire?… Du moins, à la surface de cette mer, y aurait-il chance de rencontrer un navire à destination de l’Australie ou des îles du Pacifique?…

«Dans tous les cas, ma Jenny, dit Fritz à sa femme qui avait repris place près de lui, nous devons être bien éloignés de la Nouvelle-Suisse… à des centaines de lieues…

— Sans doute, répondit Jenny, mais c’est déjà quelque chose qu’une terre soit là!… Ce que ta famille a fait dans votre île, ce que j’ai pu faire sur la Roche-Fumante, pourquoi ne le ferions-nous pas encore?… Après avoir subi de telles épreuves, mon ami, nous avons le droit de compter sur notre énergie… Ce ne sont pas les deux fils de Jean Zermatt qui peuvent se décourager…

— Chère femme, répondit Fritz, si jamais j’éprouvais quelque défaillance, il me suffirait de t’entendre!… Non… nous ne faiblirons pas, et j’ajoute que nous serons bien secondés!… Le bosseman est un homme sur lequel il est permis de compter!… Quant à notre pauvre capitaine…

— Il en reviendra, il guérira, mon cher Fritz, affirma Jenny. Cette fièvre qui le brûle finira par tomber… A terre, là-bas, il sera mieux soigné, il reprendra ses forces, et nous retrouverons en lui notre chef…

— Ah! ma Jenny, s’écria Fritz, en la pressant sur son cœur, fasse le Ciel que cette terre nous offre les ressources dont nous avons besoin!… Je ne lui demande pas tout ce que nous a donné la Nouvelle-Suisse… elle n’est pas située sur ces parages où l’on peut tout attendre de la nature, presque sans efforts!… Le pire serait d’être accueilli par des sauvages, contre lesquels nous serions impuissants, et qu’il fallût reprendre la mer, sans avoir renouvelé nos provisions!… Et mieux vaudrait débarquer sur une côte aride, ne fût-ce que celle d’un îlot!… Il y aura du poisson dans ses eaux, des coquillages sur ses grèves, peut-être des bandes de volatiles, comme il s’en trouvait à notre arrivée sur le rivage de Felsenheim!… Nous parviendrons à nous ravitailler, et, après une ou deux semaines, remis de nos fatigues, les forces revenues au capitaine, nous ferions voile à la découverte d’une côte plus hospitalière!… Cette chaloupe est solide, et nous avons un bon marin pour la diriger… La mauvaise saison n’est pas prochaine… Après avoir déjà supporté des coups de vent, nous en supporterions encore… Des vivres, que cette terre, quelle qu'elle soit, nous les procure, et Dieu aidant…

— Cher Fritz, répondit Jenny, en pressant les mains de son mari dans les siennes, il faut dire tout cela à nos compagnons!… Qu'ils t'entendent, et ils ne perdront pas confiance!…

— La confiance ne leur a pas manqué un instant, ma chère femme, dit Fritz, et s'ils venaient à faiblir, c'est toi la plus énergique, la plus résolue, la jeune Anglaise de la Roche-Fumante, qui leur rendrais l'espoir!»

Ce que disait Fritz, tous le pensaient de cette vaillante Jenny. Pendant qu'elles étaient renfermées dans leurs cabines, n'était-ce pas d'elle que Doll et Suzan avaient reçu des encouragements qui les avaient sauvées du désespoir?…

Il y avait de plus un avantage que présentait cette terre. H n'en était pas d'elle comme de la Nouvelle-Suisse, dont les navires de commerce ne traversaient jamais les parages. Au contraire, que ce fût la côte méridionale de l'Australie ou de la Tasmanie, même une île appartenant aux archipels de l'océan Pacifique, sa situation était déterminée sur les cartes marines.

Mais, en admettant que le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons eussent l'espoir d'y être recueillis un jour, comment ne pas être saisi d'une profonde tristesse, en songeant à la distance qui les séparait de la Nouvelle-Suisse… des centaines de lieues, sans doute, puisque le *Flag* s'était porté pendant huit jours vers l'est?… Et, si là où ils allaient, la mauvaise chance les condamnait à vivre aussi longtemps que la famille Zermatt sur son île, si la chaloupe ne pouvait suffire à une longue navigation, si enfin, malgré tant d'épreuves, leur confiance venait à fléchir, dans quel désespoir seraient plongés ceux qui les attendaient là-bas!…

C’est à cela que Fritz et Jenny, François, James, sa femme, sa sœur ne cessaient de songer, oubliant même les dangers qui les menaçaient pour ne penser qu’à leurs parents et à leurs amis.

En effet, on était au 13 octobre. Depuis près d’un an déjà, la *Licorne* avait quitté l’île, à laquelle elle devait revenir vers la présente époque. A Felsenheim, M. et Mme Zermatt, Ernest et Jack, M. et Mme Wolston, leur fille Annah comptaient maintenant les jours et les heures…

Oui… tous devaient guetter l’arrivée de la corvette au tournant du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, s’annonçant par des coups de canon auxquels répondrait la batterie de l’îlot du Requin… Et, dans un mois, dans deux mois, que se diraient-ils!… Tout d’abord que les vents contraires retardaient la *Licorne,* peut-être qu’elle n’avait pu partir d’Angleterre à la date prévue, peut-être que quelque guerre maritime troublait les mers et gênait la navigation… Jamais ils ne voudraient admettre que le navire se fût perdu corps et biens!…

Or, dans quelques semaines, après sa relâche à Capetown, la *Licorne* paraîtrait dans les eaux de la Nouvelle-Suisse… Les familles Zermatt et Wolston apprendraient alors que les absents avaient pris passage à bord du *Flag*, qui n’avait pas reparu… Serait-il possible de douter qu’il eût péri corps et biens dans une de ces fréquentes tempêtes de l’océan Indien, et pourrait-on espérer revoir ses passagers?…

Enfin, c’était l’avenir, cela, et le présent offrait encore assez d’éventualités redoutables pour que l’on fût tout à lui.

Depuis l’instant où François avait signalé la terre, le bosseman s’appliquait à gouverner en direction du nord, ce qui ne laissait pas d’être difficile, faute d’une boussole. Le relèvement indiqué par François n’avait pu être qu’approximatif. Si les vapeurs se dissipaient, si l’horizon s’éclaircissait au moins dans sa partie septentrionale, il serait aisé de marcher vers la côte. Par malheur, l’épais rideau continuait à cacher cette ligne qui, pour des observateurs placés à la surface de la mer, devait être encore à quatre ou cinq lieues.

Cependant les avirons avaient été bordés. Fritz, François et James nageaient avec toute la vigueur dont ils étaient capables.

Mais, presque épuisés, ils ne pouvaient enlever cette chaloupe lourdement chargée, et il leur faudrait la journée entière pour franchir la distance qui les séparait du littoral.

Et plût au Ciel que le vent ne vînt pas contrarier leurs efforts! Au total, mieux valait que le calme se maintînt jusqu’au soir. Avec brise de nord, l’embarcation eût été repoussée loin de ces parages…

A midi, c’est à peine si la route parcourue depuis le matin mesurait une lieue. D’ailleurs, le bosseman fut amené à croire qu’un courant portait dans le sens opposé. Peut-être n’était-ce qu’un simple effet de marée. S’il se fût agi d’un courant régulièrement établi, on aurait dû renoncer à remonter contre lui.

Vers deux heures de l’après-midi, John Block, qui s’était relevé, s’écria:

«La brise va venir, je la sens… Rien que notre foc fera plus que nos avirons!»

Le bosseman ne se trompait pas. Quelques instants après, de légères risées commencèrent à verdir la surface de la mer du côté du sud-est, et un clapotis blanchâtre se propagea jusqu’aux flancs de la chaloupe.

«Voici qui vous donne raison, Block, dit Fritz. Néanmoins cette brise est si faible qu’il ne faut pas cesser de nager…

— Ne cessons pas, monsieur Fritz, répondit le bosseman, et souquons ferme jusqu’au moment où les voiles pourront nous haler vers la côte.

— Où est-elle?… demanda Fritz, qui cherchait vainement à percer le rideau de brumes.

— Devant nous… pour sûr!

— Est-ce certain, Block?… ajouta François.

— Où voulez-vous donc qu’elle soit, répondit le bosseman, si ce n’est derrière ces maudites vapeurs du nord?…

— Nous le voulons, dit James Wolston, mais il ne suffit pas de le vouloir!»

Enfin, on ne serait fixé qu’à la condition que le vent vînt à fraîchir.

Cela tarda, et il était plus de trois heures, lorsque les battements de la voile à demi carguée indiquèrent qu’elle pourrait servir.

Les avirons rentrés, Fritz et François, après avoir hissé la misaine à bloc, l’étarquèrent de toutes leurs forces, tandis que le bosseman retenait l’écoute qui battait sur le plat-bord.

N’était-ce donc qu’une brise folle, dont les souffles intermittents ne parviendraient même pas à dissiper la brume?…

Encore vingt minutes d’hésitation, et la houle s’accentua en prenant par le travers la chaloupe que le bosseman parvint à redresser avec la godille. Puis, la misaine et le foc se remplirent, en tendant leurs écoutes.

Quant à la direction qu’il convenait de suivre, c’était celle du nord en attendant que le vent eût pris assez pour dégager l’horizon.

Il y avait lieu d’espérer que cela se produirait dès que la brise l’atteindrait. Aussi, tous les regards s’obstinaient-ils de ce côté. La terre n’apparût-elle qu’un seul instant, John Block n’en demandait pas davantage et gouvernerait sur elle.

Le rideau, pourtant, ne s’entr’ouvrait pas, bien que le vent semblât prendre de la force au déclin du soleil. L’embarcation filait avec une certaine rapidité. Fritz et le bosseman en étaient même à se demander si elle n’avait pas dépassé l’île, – si c’était une île, – ou doublé ce continent par l’est ou par l’ouest, – si c’était un continent.

Et alors les doutes revinrent à l’esprit… François ne s’était-il pas trompé?… Avait-il réellement aperçu une terre dans la direction du nord?…

Oui, et il l’affirma encore de la façon la plus positive. Bien qu’il eût été seul à la voir, il l’avait vue… de ses yeux vue…

«C’était une côte élevée, déclara-t-il de nouveau, une sorte de falaise, presque horizontale à sa crête, impossible à confondre avec un nuage…

— Cependant, depuis que nous portons sur elle, dit Fritz, nous devrions l’avoir accostée. Elle ne devait pas être alors à plus de cinq ou six lieues…

— Êtes-vous certain, John Block, reprit François, que la chaloupe ait toujours eu le cap dessus, et qu'elle fût exactement située dans le nord?…

— Il est possible que nous ayons fait fausse route, déclara le bosseman. Aussi je crois préférable d'attendre que l'horizon se soit éclairci, dussions-nous rester toute la nuit à cette place…»

Peut-être était-ce le meilleur parti. Pour peu que la chaloupe fût à proximité du littoral, il ne fallait pas la risquer au milieu des récifs, qui le bordaient sans doute…

Aussi tous, l'oreille tendue, cherchèrent-ils à surprendre quelque bruit de ressac, car le plus grand malheur aurait été de se jeter à la côte.

Rien… on n'entendait rien de ces longs et sourds roulements de la mer, lorsqu'elle se brise contre un semis de roches ou déferle sur une grève.

Il convenait donc d'agir avec une extrême prudence. C'est pourquoi, vers cinq heures et demie, le bosseman donna l'ordre d'amener la misaine. Quant au foc, il resta bordé, afin d'aider à l'action de la barre.

Rien de plus sage, en effet, que de modérer la vitesse de la chaloupe tant que la situation ne serait pas déterminée avec exactitude, et elle ne saurait l'être qu'à l'instant où l'on apercevrait la terre.

Il est vrai, la nuit venue, au milieu d'une obscurité profonde, quel danger ne courait-on pas à s'aventurer dans le voisinage d'une côte? A défaut de vent, les contre-courants menaceraient d'y drosser. En de telles conditions, un navire n'eût pas attendu le soir pour chercher la sécurité de la pleine mer, à regagner le large. Mais ce qui est facilement exécutable pour un bâtiment ne l'est pas pour une simple embarcation. Louvoyer contre le vent du sud qui fraîchissait, c’eût été, sans parler de rudes fatigues, s’exposer à trop s’éloigner…

L’embarcation resta donc rien qu’avec son foc, se déplaçant à peine, cap au nord.

Enfin toute erreur, toute hésitation disparut, lorsque, vers six heures du soir, le soleil se montra un instant avant de disparaître sous les flots.

En effet, le 21 septembre, son disque s’était couché exactement à l’ouest, et, au 13 octobre, vingt-trois jours après l’équinoxe, il se couchait un peu au-dessus dans l’hémisphère méridional. Or, à ce moment, les vapeurs s’étant dissipées de ce côté, Fritz put le voir s’approcher de l’horizon. Dix minutes plus tard, le disque enflammé affleurait la ligne du ciel et de l’eau.

«Là est le nord!» dit Fritz, en indiquant de la main un point un peu plus à gauche que celui vers lequel la chaloupe s’était dirigée.

Presque aussitôt un cri lui répondit, – un cri que tous poussèrent à la fois!

«Terre!… terre!»

Les vapeurs venaient de s’évanouir, et le littoral se dessinait à moins d’une demi-lieue. Dominé par une falaise assez élevée, il était impossible de reconnaître s’il se prolongeait vers l’est et vers l’ouest.

Le bosseman mit le cap dessus. La misaine rehissée se gonfla sous les derniers souffles de la brise.

Une demi-heure après, la chaloupe avait accosté une grève sablonneuse, et elle fut amarrée derrière une longue pointe rocheuse à l’abri du ressac.

CHAPITRE XXI

A terre. – Une conversation de Fritz et du bosseman. – Nuit tranquille.

— Aspect de la côte. – Impression décourageante. – Excursion. – Les cavernes.

— Le ruisseau. – Le promontoire. – Installation.

Ils avaient enfin pris terre, ces abandonnés. Durant une pénible et périlleuse navigation de deux semaines, pas un d’eux n’avait succombé à la fatigue, aux privations, et il fallait en remercier le Ciel. Seul, le capitaine Gould souffrait cruellement, accablé par la fièvre. Toutefois, malgré son état d’épuisement, sa vie ne paraissait pas en danger, et peut-être quelques jours de repos suffiraient-ils à le remettre.

A présent que Fritz et ses compagnons avaient heureusement atterri, qu’ils ne se trouvaient plus à la merci des tempêtes, qu’ils n’allaient plus à l’aventure, se posait cette question: sur quelle terre avaient-ils débarqué?…

Quelle qu’elle fût, hélas! ce n’était pas la Nouvelle-Suisse, où, sans la révolte de Robert Borupt et de l’équipage, le *Flag* serait arrivé dans les délais prévus! Au lieu du bien-être de Felsenheim, qu’offrirait ce rivage inconnu?…

En somme, ce n’était pas l’heure de s’attarder aux raisonnements et aux hypothèses. La nuit, assez obscure, ne permettait pas de rien distinguer, sauf une grève fermée au fond d’une haute falaise et, latéralement, par un épaulement rocheux. Aussi, dans ces conditions, on convint de demeurer à bord jusqu’au lever du soleil. Fritz et le bosseman resteraient de quart jusqu'au matin. Il était possible que cette côte fût fréquentée par des indigènes, et il importait de veiller avec soin. Que ce fût continent australien ou île du Pacifique, la prudence commandait de se tenir sur ses gardes, et, en cas d'agression, il y aurait lieu de fuir au large.

Jenny, Doll et Suzan reprirent donc leur place près du capitaine Gould, qui savait que la chaloupe avait enfin accosté. François et James s'étendirent entre les bancs, prêts à se relever au premier appel du bosseman. Mais, à bout de forces, ils ne tardèrent pas à succomber au sommeil.

Fritz et John Block vinrent s'asseoir à l'arrière, et s'entretinrent à voix basse.

«Nous voici donc au port, monsieur Fritz, dit le bosseman, et je savais bien que nous finirions par l'atteindre… A proprement parler, si ce n'est point dans un port que nous sommes, vous en conviendrez, c'est toujours mieux que d'avoir mouillé au milieu des roches… Notre embarcation est en sûreté pour la nuit… Demain, nous aviserons…

— J'envie votre résignation, mon brave Block, répondit Fritz. Ces parages ne m'inspirent aucune confiance, et notre situation est loin d'être rassurante près d'une côte dont on ne connaît même pas le gisement…

— Cette côte est une côte, monsieur Fritz. Elle a des criques, des plages et des rochers, elle est faite comme les autres et ne va pas s'effondrer sous nos pieds, j'imagine!… Quant à la question de l'abandonner ou de s'y installer, nous la résoudrons plus tard.

— Dans tous les cas, Block, j'espère bien ne pas être forcé de reprendre la mer avant qu'un peu de repos ait procuré quelque soulagement à notre capitaine. Si donc l'endroit est désert, s'il nous offre des ressources, si nous n’y sommes pas exposés à tomber entre les mains des indigènes, il faudra y demeurer un certain temps…

— Désert, il l’est jusqu’à présent, répondit le bosseman, et, à mon avis, c’est préférable qu’il le soit…

— Je le pense, Block, et je pense aussi que la pêche, à défaut de la chasse, nous permettra de refaire nos provisions…

— Comme vous dites, monsieur Fritz. Puis, si le gibier se réduit ici à des oiseaux de mer dont on ne peut se nourrir, la chasse dans les forêts et les plaines de l’intérieur viendra compléter la pêche… Il est vrai, sans fusils…

— Ces misérables, Block, qui ne nous ont pas même laissé une arme à feu!

— Ils ont bien fait… dans leur intérêt, s’entend!… répliqua le bosseman. Avant de démarrer, je n’aurais pas résisté à l’envie de casser la tête à ce coquin de Borupt… à ce traître…

— Traîtres aussi, ajouta Fritz, ceux qui sont devenus ses complices!…

— Une trahison qu’ils paieront un jour ou l’autre, déclara John Block.

— Vous n’avez rien entendu, bosseman?… demanda Fritz en prêtant l’oreille.

— Non… ce bruit, c’est celui du clapotis le long de la grève… Jusqu’ici, rien de suspect, et, bien qu’il fasse noir comme à fond de cale, j’ai de bons yeux…

— Ne les fermez pas un instant, Block, et tenons-nous prêts à tout…

— L’amarre est parée à larguer, répondit le bosseman. Au besoin, il n’y aura qu’à prendre les avirons, et, d’un coup de gaffe, je me charge d’envoyer la chaloupe à vingt pieds des roches.»

Cependant, à plusieurs reprises, Fritz et le bosseman furent mis en éveil. Il leur semblait entendre une sorte de reptation sur le sable de la plage; mais, en somme, ils n’eurent point sujet de s’alarmer sérieusement.

Un calme profond régnait aux alentours. La brise était tom bée, la mer aussi. Un léger ressac se laissait seul entendre ai pied des roches. A peine si quelques oiseaux, mouettes et goélands, venus du large, cherchaient à regagner les creux de la falaise. Rien ne troubla la première nuit passée sur ce littoral.

Le lendemain, dès le petit jour, tous furent sur pied, et quel serrement de cœur ils éprouvèrent, en observant cette côte où ils avaient trouvé refuge!

La veille, alors qu’elle n’était plus qu’à une demi-lieue, Fritz avait pu la reconnaître en partie. Vue de cette distance, elle se développait sur quatre à cinq lieues entre l’est et l’ouest. Du promontoire au pied duquel était mouillée la chaloupe, on n’en voyait que le cinquième au plus, compris entre deux angles, au-delà desquels se déroulait la mer, claire à droite, encore sombre à gauche. La plage, mesurant de huit à neuf cents toises, s’encadrait latéralement de hauts contreforts, et une falaise à parois noirâtres la fermait en arrière sur toute son étendue.

Cette falaise devait mesurer de huit à neuf cents pieds d’altitude au-dessus de la grève qui remontait en pente accentuée vers sa base. Son élévation s’accroissait-elle au delà?… Pour résoudre cette question, il serait indispensable de se hisser jusqu’à sa crête par les contreforts, dont l’un, celui de l’est, présentait des profils moins raides, grâce à son allongement vers le large. Cependant, même de ce côté, sans doute, l’ascension serait très difficile, pour ne pas dire impossible.

Ce que le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons éprouvèrent d’abord, ce fut une impression de découragement devant l’aspect sauvage et désolé de ce tapis de sable, crevé ça et là de têtes rocheuses. Pas un arbre, pas un arbuste, pas trace de végétation, – l’aridité dans toute sa tristesse et toute son horreur. Pour unique verdure, de maigres lichens, ce produit rudimentaire de la nature, sans racines, sans tiges, sans feuilles, sans fleurs, ressemblant à des plaques dartreuses appliquées sur le flanc des roches et nuancées depuis le jaune passé jusqu’au rouge vif. Puis, çà et là, des moisissures visqueuses, dues aux humides apports des vents du sud qui dominaient en cette région. Au rebord de la falaise, il ne poussait pas un brin d’herbe, ni à ses parois granitiques une de ces plantes lapidaires auxquelles il faut si peu d’humus, cependant! Devait-on en conclure que cet humus manquait au plateau supérieur?… La chaloupe n’avait-elle accosté qu’un de ces arides îlots qui n’ont pas de dénomination géographique?…

«L’endroit n’est certes pas gai… murmura le bosseman à l’oreille de Fritz.

— Peut-être eussions-nous été plus favorisés en atterrissant du côté de l’est ou de l’ouest?…

— Peut-être, reprit John Block, mais, ici, du moins, nous n’aurons pas à rencontrer des sauvages.»

En effet, aucune créature, fût-ce de celles qui sont placées au plus bas de l’échelle humaine, n’aurait pu vivre sur cet infertile rivage.

Jenny, François et Doll, James et sa femme, assis sur les bancs, promenaient leurs regards à la surface de ce littoral, si différent des rivages verdoyants de la Terre-Promise, l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, la baie du Salut, le littoral de Falkenhorst!… Et même l'îlot de la Roche-Fumante, d'aspect si triste pourtant, n'avait-il pas offert à Jenny Montrose ses productions naturelles, l'eau vive de son ruisseau, le gibier de ses bois et de ses plaines?… Ici rien que la pierre et le sable, un banc de coquillages qui se dessinait sur la gauche, de longues traînées de plantes marines à la limite du relais de mer, enfin une terre de désolation!

Le règne animal se réduisait à quelques oiseaux marins, des goélands, des macreuses, des mouettes, des hirondelles, que la présence de l'homme troublait dans leur solitude et qui poussaient des cris assourdissants. Plus haut, à travers l'espace, passaient à grands coups d'aile des frégates, des alcyons et des albatros.

«Voyons, dit alors le bosseman, si cette grève ne vaut pas celles de la Nouvelle-Suisse, ce n'est pas une raison pour n'y pas débarquer…

— A terre! répondit Fritz. J'espère que nous trouverons un abri à la base de la falaise.

— Débarquons… dit Jenny.

— Chère femme, dit Fritz, je te conseille de rester à bord avec Mme Wolston et sa sœur pendant notre excursion. Il n'y a pas apparence de danger, et vous n'avez rien à craindre…

— D'ailleurs, ajouta le bosseman, il est probable qu'on ne se perdra pas de vue.»

Fritz sauta sur le sable, suivi de ses compagnons, après que Doll eut dit d’un ton enjoué:

«Tâchez, François, de nous rapporter quelque chose pour le déjeuner… Nous comptons sur vous…

— C’est plutôt sur vous que nous devons compter, Doll, répondit François. Tendez les lignes au pied de ces roches. Vous êtes si adroite, si patiente…

— Oui… mieux vaut ne pas débarquer, convint Mme Wolston. Jenny, Doll et moi, nous ferons de notre mieux pendant votre absence.

— L’essentiel, fit observer Fritz, c’est de conserver le peu qui nous reste de biscuit pour le cas où nous serions obligés de reprendre la mer…

— Allons, madame Fritz, s’écria John Block, préparez le fourneau. Nous ne sommes pas gens à nous contenter d’une soupe au lichen ou de galets à la coque, et nous vous promettons un bon plat de résistance.»

Le temps était assez beau. Quelques rayons de soleil filtraient à travers les nuages de l’est.

Fritz, François, James et le bosseman suivirent ensemble le bord de la grève sur le sable humide de la dernière marée.

Plus haut, à une dizaine de pieds, se dessinait le zigzag des algues déposées le long de ce rivage dont la pente était assez prononcée. Ces algues appartenaient à la famille des goémons ou varechs pour la plupart, mêlés de laminaires rougeâtres festonnées à leur pointe, et aussi de longs fucus filiformes, avec ces grappes de raisins dont les gros grains éclatent sous le pied.

Il est de ces fucus qui contiennent un peu de substance nutritive. Aussi John Block de s’écrier:

«Mais ça se mange… quand on n’a pas autre chose!… Dans mon pays, dans les ports de la mer d’Irlande, on en fait des confitures.»

Après trois ou quatre cents pas en cette direction, Fritz et ses compagnons atteignirent le pied du contrefort de l’ouest. Formé de blocs énormes à surfaces lisses, taillé à pic, il s’enfonçait droit sous ces eaux claires à peine troublées d’un léger ressac, et qui laissaient apercevoir sa base à sept ou huit toises de profondeur.

Il était impossible de s’élever le long de ce contrefort qui se dressait verticalement, – circonstance regrettable, car il serait nécessaire de monter sur la falaise, afin de voir si le plateau supérieur ne présentait pas des terrains moins arides. En outre, s’il fallait renoncer à gravir ce contrefort, il fut reconnu qu’on ne pourrait le tourner sans employer la chaloupe. Du reste, ce qui s’imposait en ce moment, c’était de chercher quelque anfractuosité où l’on s’abriterait pendant le séjour sur cette côte.

Tous remontèrent donc vers le fond de la grève en longeant le pied du contrefort.

En ce moment, de nombreuses bandes d’oiseaux s’enfuirent vers le large pour ne revenir qu’à la nuit tombante.

Parvenus à l’angle de la falaise, Fritz, François, James et le bosseman rencontrèrent d’épaisses couches de varechs en complet état de siccité. Comme les derniers relais de la marée montante se dessinaient à plus de cent toises au-dessous, ces végétaux, étant donnée la déclivité de la plage, devaient avoir été reportés jusqu’à cette place, non par le flot, mais par les vents du sud, très violents sur ces parages.

«A défaut de bois, fît observer Fritz, si nous étions forcés d’hiverner ici, ces varechs nous fourniraient assez longtemps du combustible…

— Un combustible qui brûle vite! ajouta le bosseman. Il est vrai, avant d’avoir épuisé de pareilles masses… Enfin nous avons toujours de quoi faire bouillir la marmite aujourd’hui!… Reste à mettre quelque chose dedans!

— Cherchons», répondit François.

La falaise était formée de strates irrégulières dont les lignes transversales se dessinaient obliquement vers l’est. Il fut facile de reconnaître la nature cristalline de ces roches, où s’agrégeaient le feldspath et le gneiss, énorme masse granitique, d’origine plutonienne, et, comme telle, d’une extrême dureté.

Cette disposition ne rappelait donc en rien à Fritz et à François les bordures littorales de leur île, depuis la baie du Salut jusqu’au cap de l’Espoir-Trompé où se rencontrait uniquement le calcaire, facile à entamer par le marteau et le pic. Ainsi avait été aménagée la grotte de Felsenheim. En plein granit, un tel travail eût été impossible.

Très heureusement, il n’y aurait pas eu lieu de l’entreprendre. En effet, à une centaine de pas du contrefort, derrière les amas de goémons, s’arrondissaient plusieurs orifices. Semblables aux cellules d’une immense ruche, ils donnaient peut-être accès à l’intérieur du massif.

En effet, plusieurs anfractuosités s’évidaient à la base de cette falaise.

Si les unes n’offraient que des réduits étroits, les autres étaient profondes, obscures, il est vrai, obstruées par les tas de varechs. Mais probablement, dans la partie opposée moins exposée aux vents du large, s’ouvrait quelque caverne où l’on pourrait transporter le matériel de la chaloupe.

En cherchant à se rapprocher le plus possible du mouillage, Fritz et ses compagnons se dirigeaient vers le contrefort de l’est. Peut-être moins infranchissable que l’autre, grâce au profil allongé de sa partie inférieure, parviendrait-on à le contourner. S’il se découpait verticalement à sa partie supérieure, il obliquait vers le milieu pour finir en pointe du côté de la mer.

L’attente ne fut pas trompée. Précisément, dans l’angle formé par ce contrefort s’ouvrait une caverne d’un accès facile. Abritée contre les vents de l’est, du nord et du sud, son orientation ne lui permettait d’être battue que par ceux de l’ouest, qui règnent moins fréquemment en ces parages.

Fritz, François, James et John Block pénétrèrent à l’intérieur de cette cavité, assez éclairée pour leur permettre de la voir tout entière. Haute de onze à douze pieds, large d’une vingtaine, profonde de cinquante à soixante, elle comprenait divers réduits inégaux qui formaient comme autant de chambres séparées autour d’une salle commune. Un sable fin, sans trace d’humidité, formait tapis. On y entrait en franchissant une ouverture qui pourrait être aisément fermée.

«Foi de bosseman, nous n’aurions pu trouver mieux!… déclara John Block.

— Je suis de cet avis, répondit Fritz. Toutefois, ce qui m’inquiète, c’est que cette plage est absolument aride, et il est à craindre que le plateau supérieur ne le soit autant…

— Commençons par prendre possession de la caverne, et nous verrons ensuite…

— Hélas! dit François, ce n’est pas là notre habitation de Felsenheim, et je n’aperçois même pas un ruisseau d’eau douce, qui puisse remplacer le ruisseau des Chacals!…

— Patience… patience!… répliqua le bosseman. Nous finirons bien par rencontrer quelque source au milieu des roches ou quelque rio qui tombera du haut de la falaise…

— Quoi qu’il en soit, déclara Fritz, il ne faut pas songer à s’établir sur cette côte… Si nous ne parvenons pas à dépasser la base des contreforts, nous irons avec notre chaloupe la reconnaître au delà… Dans le cas où nous aurions atterri sur un îlot, nous n’y resterons que le temps nécessaire au rétablissement du capitaine Gould… Une quinzaine de jours suffiront, je pense…

— Enfin, nous avons toujours la maison… ajouta John Block. Quant au jardin, qui nous dit qu’il n’est pas près d’ici… de l’autre côté de ce promontoire?…»

Après être ressortis, tous redescendirent à travers la plage, de manière à contourner le contrefort.

Depuis l’angle rentrant dans lequel se creusait la caverne, on comptait une centaine de toises jusqu’à la limite des premières roches qui baignaient dans la mer à mi-jusant. De ce côté, il n’y avait aucun amoncellement de ces plantes marines rencontrées sur la gauche de la grève. De lourdes masses, qui paraissaient s’être détachées du haut de la falaise, formaient ce promontoire. Près de la grotte, il n’eût pas été possible de le franchir, mais, à proximité du mouillage de la chaloupe, il s'abaissait assez pour livrer passage à des piétons.

Il ne fut pas même nécessaire d'atteindre son extrémité, et, d'ailleurs, l'attention du bosseman ne tarda pas à être attirée par un bruit d'eau courante.

En effet, à cent pas de la grotte, un ruisseau murmurait entre les roches et s'épanchait en filets liquides.

Un écartement des pierres permit de monter jusqu'au lit d'un petit rio alimenté par une cascade, qui rebondissait et allait se perdre dans la mer.

«La voilà… voilà… la bonne eau douce!… s'écria John Block, après avoir puisé à pleines mains dans le rio.

— Fraîche et limpide… affirma François, qui venait de s'y mouiller les lèvres.

— Et pourquoi n'existerait-il pas quelque végétation sur le plateau de la falaise, fit observer John Block, bien que ce ne soit là qu'un ruisseau…

— Ruisseau à cette époque, dit Fritz, et qui doit même tarir pendant les grandes chaleurs, mais torrent sans doute à la saison des pluies…

— Qu'il continue de couler quelques jours encore, observa judicieusement le bosseman, nous ne lui en demandons pas davantage.»

Fritz et ses compagnons disposaient à présent d'une caverne où l'installation serait facile, d'un ruisseau qui permettrait de remplir d'eau douce les barils de l'embarcation. Quant à s'assurer la nourriture quotidienne avec les produits du sol, soit sur le plateau, soit de l’autre côté du promontoire, c’était la question qu’il importait de résoudre.

Cette question ne le fut pas à l’avantage des explorateurs. Après avoir traversé le ruisseau, ils éprouvèrent une nouvelle et profonde déception.

Au delà du promontoire s’arrondissait une crique, large de trois quarts de lieue, bordée d’une plage de sable, limitée en arrière par la falaise. A son extrême pointe se dressait un morne, coupé à pic, dont le pied trempait dans la mer.

Cette plage, en outre, présentait la même aridité que l’autre. Le règne végétal s’y réduisait aux plaques de lichen et au relais des plantes marines apportées par le flot. Était-ce donc sur un îlot rocheux, isolé, inhabitable, que la chaloupe avait atterri dans les parages de l’océan Pacifique?… Il y avait lieu de le croire, il y avait lieu de le craindre.

Il parut inutile de pousser l’excursion jusqu’au morne qui limitait la crique. Aussi tous se préparaient-ils à redescendre au mouillage, lorsque James, étendant la main vers la plage, s’écria:

«Qu’est-ce que je vois là-bas… sur le sable?… Regardez… ces points mouvants… On dirait des rats…»

De fait, à cette distance, il semblait qu’une bande de rongeurs fût en marche vers la mer.

«Des rats?… répondit François. Mais le rat est un gibier, quand il appartient au genre ondatras… Te rappelles-tu, Fritz, ceux que nous avons tués par centaines pendant notre expédition à la recherche du boa?…

— Parfaitement, François, répondit Fritz, et je me rappelle aussi que nous fûmes très peu régalés de cette chair qui sent trop le marécage.

— Bon! déclara le bosseman, convenablement préparées, ça se mange, ces bêtes-là… Au surplus, il n’y a pas à discuter… Ces points noirs ne sont pas des rats.

— Et vous croyez, Block?… demanda Fritz.

— Que ce sont des tortues…

— Puissiez-vous ne pas vous tromper!»

Le bosseman ne faisait point erreur et l’on pouvait s’en fier à ses bons yeux. C’était effectivement une troupe de tortues qui rampaient sur le sable de la plage.

Aussi, tandis que Fritz et James demeuraient en observation sur le promontoire, John Block et François se laissèrent glisser de l’autre côté des roches, afin de couper la route à la bande des chéloniens.

Ces tortues, de petite dimension, ne mesurant que douze à quinze pouces, longues de queue, appartenaient à l’espèce qui se nourrit principalement d’insectes. On en comptait une cinquantaine, en marche, non vers la mer, mais vers l’embouchure du ruisseau, où trempaient quelques visqueuses laminaires, abandonnées par la marée descendante.

De ce côté, le sol était bossue de légères tumescences, sortes de renflements sablonneux, dont François reconnut aussitôt la destination.

«Il y a là-dessous des œufs de tortue… s’écria-t-il.

— Eh bien, déterrez les œufs, monsieur François, répliqua John Block… Moi, je me charge d'amarrer les poules!… Décidément, cela vaudra mieux que mes galets à la coque, et si la jeune Doll n'est pas contente…

— Les œufs seront bien reçus, n'en doutez pas, Block, affirma François.

— Et aussi les tortues qui sont d'excellentes bêtes, – excellentes pour faire du bouillon, s'entend!»

Un instant après, le bosseman et François en avaient retourné sur le dos une vingtaine qui seraient forcées d'attendre dans cette position très désagréable, surtout pour des chéloniens. Puis, chargés d'une demi-douzaine, avec le double d'œufs, ils revinrent vers la chaloupe.

Le capitaine Gould prêta la plus vive attention au récit que lui fit John Block. Depuis qu'il n'avait plus à subir les secousses de la mer, sa blessure le faisait moins souffrir, la fièvre tendait à diminuer et, très certainement, un repos d'une semaine suffirait à lui rendre ses forces. On ne l'ignore point, lorsqu'elles ne présentent pas une extrême gravité, les blessures à la tête guérissent facilement et à court délai. La balle n'avait atteint que la face latérale du crâne, après avoir déchiré une partie de la joue; mais il s'en était fallu de peu qu'elle n'eût brisé la tempe. On devait donc compter sur une prompte amélioration dans l'état du blessé, grâce au repos qui ne lui manquerait pas plus que les soins.

Harry Gould apprit, non sans une vive satisfaction, que les tortues fréquentaient cette baie, laquelle pour cette raison fut nommée baie des Tortues. C'était une nourriture saine et abondante dont on était assuré, fût-ce pour longtemps. Il serait même possible d'en conserver dans le sel une certaine quantité et d'en charger la chaloupe, lorsque le moment arriverait de reprendre la mer.

En effet, il faudrait bien se résoudre à chercher vers le nord une terre plus hospitalière, si le plateau de la falaise était aussi infertile que la baie des Tortues, s'il ne présentait ni bois ni plaines, si cette terre sur laquelle les passagers du *Flag* avaient trouvé refuge n'était qu'un entassement de roches.

«Eh bien, Doll, et vous aussi, Jenny, demanda François, lorsqu'il fut de retour, êtes-vous satisfaites?… La pêche a-t-elle réussi pendant notre absence?…

— Un peu… répondit Jenny en montrant plusieurs poissons étendus sur le tillac.

— Et puis… ajouta gaîment Doll, nous avons mieux que cela à vous offrir…

— Qu'est-ce donc?… demanda Fritz.

— Des moules qui se trouvent en abondance au pied du promontoire, répondit la fillette. Voyez celles qui cuisent déjà dans la chaudière…

— Tous nos compliments… en attendant les vôtres, Jenny… dit François, car nous ne revenons pas les mains vides, et voici quelques œufs…

— De poule?… s'écria Bob…

— De tortue, répondit François.

— Des tortues?… répliqua Doll. Vous avez rencontré des tortues?…

— Toute une compagnie, ajouta le bosseman, et il y en a encore… et il y en aura assez pour le temps que nous resterons en relâche dans cette baie…

— Je pense, dit alors le capitaine Gould, qu’avant de l’abandonner, il faudra pousser une reconnaissance sur la côte ou monter au sommet de la falaise…

— Nous l’essaierons, mon capitaine, répondit John Block. Toutefois, n’y mettons pas plus de hâte qu’il n’est nécessaire, puisqu’il est possible de vivre ici, sans toucher à ce qui nous reste de biscuit…

— Je le comprends ainsi, Block.

— Ce que nous désirons, capitaine, ajouta Fritz, c’est que la santé vous revienne avec le repos, c’est que votre blessure guérisse, c’est que vous repreniez vos forces… Une ou deux semaines, ce n’est rien à passer en cet endroit… Lorsque vous serez sur pied, vous verrez les choses par vous-même, et vous déciderez ce qu’il conviendra de faire.»

Pendant la matinée, on procéda au débarquement des objets que contenait l’embarcation, le sac de biscuit, les barils, le combustible, les ustensiles, les vêtements, et le tout fut transporté à l’intérieur de la caverne. Le petit fourneau, installé dans l’angle du contrefort, allait servir à la confection du bouillon de tortue.

Quant au capitaine Gould, ce fut aux bras de Fritz et du bosseman qu’il se rendit à la grotte, où l’attendait un bon lit de goémons secs préparé par Jenny et Doll, et sur lequel il put prendre quelques heures de sommeil.

CHAPITRE XXII

L’installation. – Première nuit sur cette côte. – Fritz et Jenny. – Amélioration dans l’état du capitaine Gould. – Discussions. – Ascension de la falaise impossible. – La nuit du 26 au 27 octobre.

Il eût été difficile de trouver meilleure installation que dans cette caverne. Les différents réduits qui l’évidaient à l’intérieur permettraient à chacun de s’isoler suivant sa convenance.

Que ces réduits, de profondeur inégale, fussent assez sombres pendant le jour, que la caverne demeurât même dans une demi-obscurité, peu importait, en somme. A moins de mauvais temps, elle ne serait occupée que la nuit. Dès la pointe du jour, Harry Gould se ferait transporter au dehors, afin de respirer l’air salin et vivifiant, mélangé de rayons de soleil.

Au dedans, Jenny s’arrangea pour occuper avec son mari une des anfractuosités latérales. James Wolston, sa femme et le petit Bob prirent possession d’un évidement plus large, suffisant pour les loger tous trois. François se contenterait d’un coin dans la salle commune, en compagnie d’Harry Gould et du bosseman. La place ne manquait donc pas dans cette excavation naturelle, dont on ne connaissait pas encore toute la profondeur.

Le reste de la journée fut entièrement consacré au repos. Après les multiples émotions de cette dernière semaine, les passagers de la chaloupe avaient à se remettre de tant d’épreuves si courageusement supportées. Et puis, il convenait de s’accoutumer à la nouvelle situation. Au total, la résolution de passer une quinzaine de jours au fond de cette baie où l’existence matérielle paraissait assurée pour un certain temps était acte de sagesse. Quand même l’état du capitaine ne l’eût point exigé, John Block n’aurait pas conseillé un départ immédiat. Il ne fallait songer qu’au présent, on songerait plus tard à l’avenir.

Et cependant, quelles éventualités réservait-il, si ce n’était là qu’un îlot perdu de l’océan Pacifique, si l’on devait le quitter et affronter sur une frêle embarcation les fréquentes tempêtes de ces parages?… Quel serait le dénouement de cette nouvelle tentative?…

Le soir, après un second repas dont le bouillon, la chair et les œufs de tortue firent les frais, François adressa au Ciel la prière commune, et chacun regagna la caverne. Harry Gould, grâce aux soins de Jenny et de Doll, ne tremblait plus de fièvre. Sa blessure, qui tendait à se cicatriser, le faisait moins souffrir. Il y avait tout lieu d’espérer qu’il marchait vers une prompte guérison.

Il ne fut pas nécessaire de veiller pendant la nuit. Rien à craindre, ni des sauvages ni des fauves, sur cette plage déserte. Ces mornes et tristes solitudes, aucun être humain ne les avait encore visitées sans doute. Seul le cri rude et mélancolique des oiseaux de mer, qui regagnaient les cavités de la falaise, troublait le silence. Puis, la brise tomba peu à peu, et aucun souffle ne traversa l’espace jusqu’au lever du soleil.

Les hommes sortirent dès l’aube. Tout d’abord John Block descendit la grève en longeant le promontoire et se dirigea vers la chaloupe. Elle flottait en ce moment, mais le jusant ne tarderait pas à la laisser à sec sur le sable. Retenue par ses amarres de chaque bord, elle n’avait pas touché contre les roches, même au plus haut de la marée, et, tant que le vent soufflerait de l’est, elle ne courrait aucun risque. Dans le cas où la brise halerait le sud, on verrait s’il n’y aurait pas lieu de chercher un autre mouillage. Du reste, le temps paraissait être sérieusement établi, et l’on était dans la belle saison.

A son retour, le bosseman vint trouver Fritz et l’entretint de cette question.

«C’est que ça vaut la peine d’y penser, dit-il. Notre embarcation avant tout… Une grotte bien close, c’est parfait… Mais on ne navigue pas à bord d’une grotte, et, lorsque le moment sera venu de partir… s’il vient… il importe que nous ne soyons pas empêchés de le faire.

— C’est entendu, Block, répondit Fritz, et nous prendrons nos précautions pour que la chaloupe n’éprouve aucune avarie… Peut-être même y a-t-il un meilleur mouillage de l’autre côté du promontoire?…

— Nous verrons, monsieur Fritz, et puisque tout va bien de ce côté, je vais aller de l’autre donner la chasse aux tortues… Vous ne m’accompagnez pas?…

— Non, Block, allez seul… je retourne près du capitaine… Cette bonne nuit de repos a dû calmer sa fièvre… Lorsqu’il s’éveillera, il voudra causer de la situation… Je veux être là afin de le mettre au courant…

— Vous avez raison, monsieur Fritz, et répétez-lui bien qu’il n’y a rien à craindre pour le moment.»

Le bosseman gagna l’extrémité du promontoire, sauta de roche en roche sur la crique, et se dirigea vers l’endroit où, la veille, François et lui avaient rencontré les tortues.

Fritz revint vers la caverne près de laquelle François et James s’occupaient de rapporter des brassées de goémons. Mme Wolston faisait la toilette du petit Bob. Jenny et Doll étaient encore près du capitaine. Dans l’angle du promontoire le feu pétillait sous le fourneau, la chaudière commençait à ronfler, et une vapeur blanche s’en échappait.

Lorsque Fritz eut terminé son entretien avec Harry Gould, Jenny et lui descendirent sur la grève. Après avoir fait une cinquantaine de pas, ils se retournèrent du côté de cette haute falaise qui les enfermait comme un mur de prison.

Et alors Fritz de dire d’une voix émue:

«Chère femme, il faut que je laisse déborder mon cœur, car il est plein de tout ce qui s’est passé depuis que j’ai eu le bonheur de te recueillir sur la Roche-Fumante!… Je nous revois dans ce kaïak, à la baie des Perles… Puis c’est la rencontre de la pinasse, le retour de la famille à Felsenheim!… Deux années heureuses se sont écoulées avec toi, la joie, le charme de notre existence, dont rien ne troublait la tranquillité!… Nous étions si habitués à vivre dans ces conditions, qu’il semblait que le monde n’existait pas en dehors de notre île… Et s’il n’y avait pas eu le souvenir de ton père, ma bien-aimée Jenny, peut-être ne serions-nous pas partis à bord de la *Licorne*… peut-être n’aurions-nous jamais quitté la Nouvelle-Suisse…

— Où veux-tu en venir, mon cher Fritz?… demanda Jenny, qui cherchait à contenir son émotion.

— A te dire combien mon cœur est oppressé depuis que la mauvaise fortune s’est déclarée contre nous!… Oui! j’ai un remords de t’avoir exposée à la partager avec moi!…

— Cette mauvaise fortune, répondit Jenny, tu ne dois pas la craindre!… Un homme de ton courage, Fritz, un homme de ton énergie, doit-il s’abandonner au désespoir?…

— Laisse-moi achever ce que je désirais te dire, Jenny… Là-bas, un jour, la *Licorne* a paru sur les parages de la Nouvelle-Suisse… Elle est repartie, et nous a conduits en Europe… Depuis lors, le malheur n’a cessé de te frapper… Le colonel Montrose était mort sans avoir revu sa fille…

— Mon pauvre père!… dit Jenny, en donnant libre cours à sa douleur. Oui! cette joie lui a été refusée de me presser entre ses bras, de récompenser mon sauveur en mettant ma main dans la sienne… Dieu ne l’a pas voulu, Fritz, et il faut se soumettre…

— Eh bien, chère Jenny, reprit Fritz, quoi qu’il en soit, tu étais de retour en Angleterre… tu avais revu ton pays… tu pouvais y rester près d’une parente… y trouver la tranquillité… le bonheur…

— Le bonheur… sans toi, Fritz?…

— Et alors, ma Jenny, tu n’aurais plus couru de nouveaux périls, après tous ceux auxquels tu avais échappé par miracle… Et, cependant, tu as consenti à me suivre pour retourner dans notre île…

— Oublies-tu donc, Fritz, que j’étais ta femme?… Aurais-je pu hésiter à quitter l’Europe, à revoir là-bas tous ceux que j’aime, ta famille, mon Fritz, qui est désormais la mienne?…

— Jenny… Jenny… il n’en est pas moins vrai que je t’ai entraînée à de nouveaux périls, et tels que je n’y puis songer sans épouvante… oui!… épouvante, dans la situation où nous sommes!… Et, pourtant, tu avais déjà eu ta part, ta grande part d’épreuves en ce monde!… Ah! ces rebelles, qui en sont la cause… qui nous ont abandonnés… toi, déjà victime du naufrage de la *Dorcas*, te voilà jetée sur une terre inconnue, plus inhabitable que ton îlot de la Roche-Fumante…

— Mais je n'y suis pas seule, j'y suis avec toi, avec ton frère, avec nos amis, avec des hommes résolus, et je ne tremble ni devant les dangers présents ni devant ceux à venir!… Je sais aussi que tu feras tout pour le salut commun…

— Tout, ma bien-aimée, s'écria Fritz, et bien que la pensée que tu es là doive redoubler mon courage, cette pensée me fait tant de mal que j'ai envie de tomber à tes genoux… de te demander pardon!… C'est ma faute, si…

— Fritz, répondit la jeune femme, en se pressant sur le cœur de son mari, personne ne pouvait prévoir les éventualités qui se sont produites… une révolte à bord… et les conséquences de cette révolte, notre abandon en mer… Mieux vaut oublier les mauvaises chances et n'envisager que les bonnes!… Nous pouvions être massacrés par l'équipage du *Flag*, être condamnés dans cette chaloupe à souffrir les tortures de la faim et de la soif, périr dans quelque tempête… et rien de tout cela n'est arrivé… Nous avons atteint une terre qui n'est pas dépourvue de ressources et qui nous offre un abri suffisant!… Si nous ne savons quelle est cette terre, nous chercherons à la reconnaître, et nous la quitterons s'il est nécessaire de la quitter…

— Pour aller où, ma pauvre Jenny?…

— Pour aller ailleurs, comme dirait notre brave bosseman, pour aller où Dieu voudra nous conduire!… J'ai confiance en lui, mon cher Fritz, comme en tous nos compagnons…

— Ah! chère femme! s'écria Fritz, tes paroles m'ont rendu courage… Mais j'avais besoin d'épancher mon cœur dans le tien!… Oui!… nous lutterons, nous ne céderons pas au désespoir… Nous songerons aux existences précieuses qui nous sont confiées… Nous les sauverons… nous les sauverons… avec l'aide du Ciel…

— Que l'on n'invoque jamais en vain!… dit François, qui venait d'entendre les derniers mots prononcés par son frère. Ayons confiance, et il ne nous abandonnera pas!…»

Jenny lui avait répondu avec tant d'assurance que Fritz reprit toute son énergie. La situation pourrait être sauvée à force de dévouement, et ses compagnons étaient prêts à se dépenser comme lui en efforts surhumains.

Vers dix heures, le temps était beau, le capitaine Gould put venir s'étendre au soleil, à l'extrémité du promontoire. Le bosseman revenait alors de l'excursion qu'il avait poussée autour de la crique jusqu'au pied du morne de l'est. Quant à aller au-delà, c'était impossible. Même à mer basse, on eût tenté vainement de tourner le pied de l'énorme masse que les courants fouettaient d'un violent ressac.

John Block avait été rejoint par James sur la crique, et tous deux rapportaient tortues et œufs. C'était par centaines que ces chéloniens fréquentaient la plage. En prévision d'un prochain embarquement, on pourrait s'approvisionner largement de cette chair, qui assurerait la nourriture des passagers.

Après le déjeuner, on causa de choses et d'autres, tandis que Jenny, Doll et Suzan s'occupaient de laver le linge de rechange dans l'eau du ruisseau. Grâce à la température élevée, en l'exposant aux rayons du soleil, ce linge sécherait vite. Puis, on procéderait au raccommodage des vêtements, de manière que chacun fût prêt à se rembarquer le jour où le départ serait résolu.

Quant au gisement de cette terre, quel était-il?… Était-il possible sans instruments de le relever, à quelques degrés près, en se basant sur la hauteur méridienne du soleil?… Cette observation comporterait bien des incertitudes. Cependant, ce jour même, elle parut confirmer l'opinion déjà émise par le capitaine Gould, que ladite terre devait être située entre les quarantième et trentième parallèles. Mais quel méridien la traversait du nord au sud, il n'y avait aucun moyen de le déterminer, bien que le *Flag* eût dû rallier les parages occidentaux du Pacifique.

Revint alors le projet d'atteindre le plateau supérieur. En attendant la guérison du capitaine, ne fallait-il pas être fixé sur la question de savoir si la chaloupe avait accosté un continent, une île ou un îlot?… D'une hauteur de sept à huit cents pieds, qui sait si une autre terre ne se montrerait pas à quelques lieues au large?… Aussi, Fritz, François, le bosseman étaient-ils bien décidés à s'élever jusqu'à la crête de la falaise.

Plusieurs jours s'écoulèrent sans apporter aucun changement à la situation. Tous comprenaient la nécessité d'en sortir par un moyen quelconque, non sans la sérieuse crainte de la voir s'empirer. Le temps continuait à se tenir au beau. La chaleur était forte, mais non orageuse.

A plusieurs reprises, John Block, Fritz et François avaient parcouru la baie depuis le contrefort de l'ouest jusqu'au morne. En vain avaient-il cherché une gorge, une entaille, une pente moins raide qui eût donné accès au plateau. La muraille verticale se dressait comme la paroi d'une courtine.

Cependant le moment approchait où le capitaine serait entièrement guéri. Sa blessure, maintenant cicatrisée, n'était plus recouverte que d'une simple bandelette. Après s'être éloignés graduellement, les accès de fièvre avaient pris fin. Quant aux forces, elles ne revenaient qu'avec une certaine lenteur. Cependant Harry Gould se promenait à présent sur la plage sans le secours d’un bras. Il ne cessait d’ailleurs de s’entretenir avec Fritz et le bosseman des chances que présentait une nouvelle traversée en direction du nord. Dans la journée du 25, il put même se rendre jusqu’au pied du morne, et il acquit *de visu* la certitude qu’il était impossible d’en contourner la base.

Fritz, qui l’accompagnait avec François et John Block, proposa alors de se jeter à la mer afin de gagner la partie du littoral qui se développait au-delà. Mais, bien qu’il fût excellent nageur, un tel courant régnait au pied du morne, que le capitaine dut empêcher le hardi jeune homme de mettre ce dangereux projet à exécution. Une fois emporté par le courant, qui sait si Fritz aurait pu revenir à la côte?…

«Non, dit Harry Gould, ce serait une imprudence, et il est inutile de s’exposer… C’est avec la chaloupe que nous irons reconnaître cette partie du littoral, et, en nous écartant de quelques encablures, nous pourrons l’observer sur une plus grande étendue… Par malheur, je crains bien qu’il n’offre partout que la même aridité…

— C’est donc, conclut François, que nous sommes sur une sorte d’îlot?…

— Il y a lieu de le supposer, répondit Harry Gould.

— Soit, ajouta Fritz, mais peut-être cet îlot n’est-il point isolé?… Peut-être se rattache-t-il à un groupe d’îles, au nord, à l’est ou à l’ouest?…

— Quel groupe, mon cher Fritz?… répliqua le capitaine. Si, comme tout le porte à croire, ces parages sont ceux de l’Australie ou de la Nouvelle-Zélande, il n’existe aucun groupe dans cette partie de l’océan Pacifique…

— De ce que les cartes n’en indiquent pas, repartit Fritz, s’ensuit-il qu’il n’en existe aucun?… On ne connaissait pas non plus le gisement de la

Nouvelle-Suisse, et cependant…

— Sans doute, répondit Harry Gould, et cela tenait à ce qu'elle est en dehors des routes maritimes… Très rarement, jamais même, les bâtiments ne traversent la portion de l'océan Indien où elle est située, tandis que, dans le sud de l'Australie, les mers sont très fréquentées, et une île, un groupe de quelque importance, n'aurait pu échapper aux navigateurs.

— Reste toujours l'hypothèse, reprit François, que nous soyons à proximité de la Nouvelle-Hollande…

— C'est possible, répondit le capitaine, et je ne serais pas étonné que ce fût à son extrémité sud-ouest, aux environs du cap Leuwin. Dans ce cas, nous aurions tout à craindre des Australiens féroces qui l'occupent.

— Aussi, répondit le bosseman, est-il préférable d'être sur un îlot, où l'on est sûr de ne point rencontrer de cannibales…

— Et c'est ce que nous saurions selon toute probabilité, ajouta François, si nous avions pu monter sur la falaise…

— Oui, répondit Fritz, et il n'y a pas un endroit qui permette de le faire…

— Pas même en gravissant le promontoire?… demanda le capitaine Gould.

— Jusqu'à mi-hauteur, non sans grandes difficultés pourtant, il est praticable, répondit Fritz, mais les parois supérieures sont absolument verticales. Il faudrait employer des échelles, et encore n'est-il pas prouvé que l'on réussirait… A travers une coupure, en se hissant avec des cordes, peut-être aurait-on pu atteindre le plateau, mais il n'en existe nulle part…

— Alors nous emploierons la chaloupe à reconnaître la côte… dit Harry Gould.

— Seulement lorsque vous serez entièrement rétabli, capitaine, et pas avant, déclara Fritz. Nous ne sommes pas à quelques jours près…

— Je vais mieux, mon cher Fritz, affirma Harry Gould, et comment en serait-il autrement avec les soins dont j'ai été entouré!… Mme Wolston, votre femme, Doll m'auraient guéri rien qu'en me regardant… Aussi, dans quarante-huit heures au plus tard, nous prendrons la mer…

— Par l'ouest ou par l'est?… demanda Fritz.

— Selon le vent… répondit le capitaine.

— Et j'ai l'idée, ajouta le bosseman, que cette excursion ne sera pas sans profit.»

Afin de n'y plus revenir, – il convient d'insister sur ce point, – Fritz, François et John Block avaient déjà fait l'impossible pour s'élever sur le promontoire. Jusqu'à la hauteur de deux cents pieds, bien que la pente fût très raide, en se glissant d'une roche à l'autre au milieu des éboulis, en déployant une souplesse, une agilité de chamois ou d'isard, ils s'étaient arrêtés au tiers de sa hauteur. Très périlleuse tentative, en somme, et pendant laquelle le bosseman avait failli se rompre les os. Mais, en cet endroit, tous les efforts furent vains pour continuer l'ascension. Le promontoire se terminait par un pan vertical qui ne présentait plus que des drèches, c'est-à-dire des surfaces plates. Nulle part un point d'appui pour le pied, nulle part une saillie à laquelle on eût pu accrocher les amarres de la chaloupe. Et il restait encore de six à sept cents pieds jusqu’au rebord de la falaise.

Revenu à la caverne, le capitaine Gould fit connaître la décision qui avait été prise. Dans deux jours, à la date du 27 octobre, l’embarcation quitterait son mouillage afin de longer le littoral. S’il se fût agi d’une excursion de quelques jours, tous auraient pris passage dans la chaloupe. Mais, en vue d’une reconnaissance sommaire, mieux vaudrait n’en charger que le capitaine, Fritz et le bosseman. Ils suffiraient à manœuvrer l’embarcation et ne s’éloigneraient pas au nord plus qu’il ne serait nécessaire. Si ce littoral ne limitait qu’un îlot isolé, qui ne mesurait que deux ou trois lieues de circonférence, ils en feraient le tour, et seraient revenus après une absence de vingt-quatre heures.

Il est vrai, cette séparation, si courte qu’elle dût être, ne laisserait pas d’inquiéter. James Wolston et sa femme, François, Jenny et Doll ne verraient pas partir leurs compagnons sans un serrement de cœur. Savait-on à quelles éventualités ils s’exposaient?… Et s’ils étaient attaqués par les sauvages… et s’ils tardaient à revenir… et s’ils ne revenaient pas?…

Jenny fit valoir ces arguments avec l’énergie qu’elle mettait dans toutes ses pensées comme dans tous ses actes. Elle demanda qu’on n’ajoutât pas à tant d’appréhensions celles qui naîtraient d’une absence dont la durée pouvait se prolonger. Fritz comprit ces raisons, Harry Gould les adopta, et, finalement, il fut convenu que tous prendraient part à la reconnaissance projetée.

Cette décision résolue à la satisfaction générale, John Block eut à s’occuper de mettre la chaloupe en état. Non point qu’elle exigeât des réparations, car elle avait peu souffert depuis son abandon en mer, mais il convenait de l’aménager pour le cas où il y aurait lieu de poursuivre la navigation jusqu’à quelque autre terre du voisinage. Aussi le bosseman s’ingénia-t-il à la rendre plus confortable en fermant le tillac de l’avant, afin que les passagères, tout au moins, fussent à l’abri des rafales et des coups de houle.

Il n’y avait donc plus qu’à attendre et à s’approvisionner aussi en vue d’une traversée qui s’allongerait peut-être. D’ailleurs, s’il fallait quitter définitivement la baie des Tortues, la prudence commandait de le faire sans retard, de mettre à profit la belle saison, presque à son début en ces régions de l’hémisphère méridional. Comment ne pas s’épouvanter à la pensée d’un hivernage?… Certes, la caverne offrait un abri sûr contre les tempêtes du sud qui sont terribles en ces parages du Pacifique… Le froid, on pourrait le braver sans doute, car le combustible ne ferait pas défaut, grâce à l’énorme amoncellement des plantes marines au pied de la falaise… mais les tortues ne finiraient-elles pas par manquer?… En serait-on réduit aux seuls produits de la mer?… Et la chaloupe, où la mettre en sûreté, hors d’atteinte des lames qui devaient déferler pendant la saison d’hiver jusqu’au fond de la grève?… La pourrait-on haler au-delà des plus hautes marées?… Harry Gould, Fritz et les autres n’avaient que leurs bras, pas un outil, pas un levier, pas un cric, et l’embarcation était assez lourde pour résister à tous leurs efforts!…

A cette époque de l’année, par bonheur, on n’avait à craindre que les orages passagers. Et puis, les quinze jours qu’ils venaient de passer à terre avaient rendu à tous la force morale et physique, en même temps que la confiance.

Les préparatifs furent achevés dans la matinée du 26. Vers midi. Fritz n’observa pas sans inquiétude certains nuages qui commençaient à se lever du sud. Très éloignés encore, ils prenaient une couleur blafarde. A peine si la brise se faisait sentir. Cependant la lourde masse montait tout d’un bloc. Cet orage, s’il éclatait, battrait directement la baie des Tortues.

Jusqu’alors, les extrêmes roches du promontoire avaient couvert la chaloupe contre les vents de l’est. Même de l’autre côté, les vents de l’ouest n’auraient pu l’atteindre, et, solidement tenue par ses amarres, elle eût évité de trop rudes chocs. Mais si les lames déchaînées se précipitaient du large, l’abri lui manquerait, et elle serait mise en pièces?…

Essayer d’un autre mouillage au revers du morne ou du contrefort, comment y songer, puisque, même par temps calme, la mer y brisait avec violence…

«Que faire?…» demandait Fritz au bosseman, qui ne savait que lui répondre.

Un espoir restait, c’était que l’orage se dissipât avant d’assaillir la côte. Toutefois, en prêtant l’oreille, on entendait des rumeurs lointaines, bien que le vent fût assez faible. Nul doute, la mer grondait au loin, et déjà quelques risées intermittentes, qui lui donnaient une teinte livide, couraient à sa surface.

Harry Gould vint observer l’horizon.

«Nous sommes menacés d’un mauvais coup… lui dit Fritz.

— Je le crains, avoua Harry Gould, et du plus mauvais que nous puissions redouter!…

— Mon capitaine, déclara le bosseman, ce n’est pas le moment de se croiser les poignets… Il faut au contraire filer de l’huile de bras, comme on dit entre matelots…

— Essayons de haler la chaloupe au fond de la grève, reprit Fritz, qui appela James et son frère.

— Essayons, répondit Harry Gould. La marée monte et nous aidera… En attendant, commençons par alléger notre embarcation le plus possible.»

Il n’y avait pas autre chose à tenter. Tous s’attelèrent à la besogne. Les voiles furent envoyées sur le sable, le mât amené, le gouvernail démonté, les bancs, les espars, débarqués et transportés à l’intérieur de la caverne.

Au moment où la marée fut étale, la chaloupe avait pu être remontée d’une dizaine de toises. Cela ne suffisait pas, et il fallait la rehaler du double pour la mettre à l’abri des lames.

Faute d’appareil, le bosseman dut passer des planches sous sa quille, afin d’en faciliter le glissement, et on s’unit pour la pousser par l’avant, par l’arrière. Efforts inutiles, la lourde embarcation, engagée dans le sable, ne gagna pas d’un pied au delà du dernier relais de la mer.

Avec le soir, le vent menaça de tourner à l’ouragan. Des épais nuages accumulés au zénith sortaient des éclairs rapides, et de violents coups de tonnerre éclataient, que les échos de la falaise répercutaient en éclats formidables.

Bien que le jusant eût laissé la chaloupe à sec, les lames, qui devenaient de plus en plus fortes, ne tardèrent pas à la soulever de l’arrière.

En cet instant, la pluie tomba en grosses gouttes chargées de l’électricité atmosphérique, et qui semblaient exploser en frappant le sable de la plage.

«Ma chère Jenny, dit Fritz, tu ne peux rester plus longtemps dehors… Je t’en prie, rentre dans la grotte… vous aussi, Doll… vous aussi, madame Wolston.»

Jenny n’aurait pas voulu quitter son mari. Mais Harry Gould intervint alors:

«Rentrez, madame Fritz, dit-il.

— Et vous, capitaine, observa la jeune femme, il ne faut pas encore vous exposer…

— Je n’ai plus rien à craindre, répondit Harry Gould.

— Jenny… je te le répète, rentre… il n’est que temps!» dit Fritz.

Jenny, Doll et Suzan se réfugièrent dans la caverne au moment où la pluie, mêlée de grêlons, s’abattait comme une mitraille.

Harry Gould, le bosseman, Fritz, François, James, restés près de l’embarcation, avaient grand’peine à résister aux rafales qui balayaient la grève. Déjà, en déferlant, les lames jetaient leur embrun sur toute l’étendue de la baie.

Le danger était grand. Serait-il possible de maintenir la chaloupe contre les chocs qui la faisaient violemment rouler d’un flanc sur l’autre?… Et, pourtant, si elle venait à se briser, comment Harry Gould et ses compagnons pourraient-ils s’éloigner de cette côte avant l’hiver?…

Ils étaient tous les cinq, et quand la mer, poussée plus avant, soulevait l’embarcation, ils s’accrochaient à ses flancs afin de l’immobiliser.

Bientôt l’orage fut dans toute sa force. En vingt endroits se déchaînaient de larges éclairs. Lorsque la foudre frappait les contreforts, on entendait les débris tomber sur le lit de goémons. Ah! s’ils avaient pu l’éventrer, cette falaise, y faire brèche comme le boulet dans une courtine, – une brèche qui eût permis de s’élever jusqu’à son sommet!…

En ce moment, une lame monstrueuse, haute de vingt-cinq à trente pieds, soulevée par l’ouragan, se précipita sur la grève comme une trombe.

Saisis par cette sorte de mascaret, Harry Gould et ses compagnons furent repoussés jusqu’aux tas de varechs, et c’est miracle si cette lame monstrueuse ne les entraîna pas, lorsqu’elle redescendit vers la mer!

Le malheur tant redouté s’était produit. La chaloupe, arrachée de sa souille, déhalée d’abord au fond de la grève, puis ramenée contre les extrêmes roches du promontoire, s’était fracassée et ses débris, après avoir flotté un instant sur l’écume des remous, disparurent au tournant du morne.

CHAPITRE XXIII

Situation aggravée. – Jenny et Fritz ne perdent pas espoir. – Pêches fructueuses. – Tentative pour reconnaître la côte vers l’est. – L’albatros

de la Roche-Fumante. –Triste fin d’année.

La situation, pire que jamais, menaçait de s’aggraver encore. Alors qu’ils étaient dans l’embarcation, exposés à tous les dangers de la mer, le capitaine Gould et les passagers couraient du moins la chance d’être recueillis par un navire ou d’atteindre une terre. Le navire, ils ne l’avaient point rencontré. S’ils avaient accosté la terre, cette terre était inhabitable et maintenant on devait renoncer à tout espoir de la quitter.

«Il est vrai, ainsi que le dit John Block à Fritz, si nous avions attrapé pareille tempête au large, notre chaloupe serait par le fond et nous avec!»

Fritz ne répondit rien et, sous un déluge de pluie et de grêle, vint se réfugier près de Jenny, Doll, Suzan en proie aux plus vives inquiétudes. Grâce à son orientation dans l’angle du promontoire, la grotte n’avait pas été inondée à l’intérieur.

Vers minuit, lorsque la pluie eut cessé, le bosseman disposa à l’entrée un tas de goémons secs qu’il retira d’une des cavités de la falaise. Un feu vif y eut bientôt séché les habits trempés par les rafales et les lames.

Jusqu’à l’heure où les violences de l’orage s’apaisèrent, le ciel ne cessa d’être en feu. Les roulements de la foudre diminuèrent bientôt avec le déplacement des nuages chassés vers le nord. Mais, tandis que la baie continuait à s’illuminer d’éclairs lointains, le vent continua de souffler avec force, soulevant la houle qui déferlait tumultueusement sur la grève.

Dès l’aube, les hommes sortirent de la grotte. Des nuées échevelées passaient au-dessus de la falaise. Quelques-unes, plus basses, couraient à sa surface. Pendant la nuit, la foudre l’avait frappée à deux ou trois endroits. D’énormes débris de roches gisaient à sa base. D’ailleurs on n’y put apercevoir ni une fissure ni une lézarde par lesquelles il eût été possible de s’introduire et de gagner le plateau supérieur.

Harry Gould, Fritz et John Block inventorièrent ce qui restait du matériel de l’embarcation. Il comprenait le mât, la misaine et le foc, les agrès, les amarres, le gouvernail, les avirons, le grappin et sa chaîne, les planches des bancs et les barils d’eau douce. De la plupart de ces objets à demi brisés, on ne saurait sans doute faire usage.

«Le malheur nous a cruellement éprouvés!… dit Fritz. Si, encore, nous n’avions pas ces pauvres femmes avec nous… trois femmes et un enfant!… Quel sort les attend au fond de cette grève que nous ne pouvons plus même abandonner!»

François, quelle que fût sa confiance en Dieu, garda le silence, cette fois, et qu’aurait-il pu dire?…

Cependant John Block se demandait si la tempête n’avait pas causé d’autres désastres aux naufragés, – ne méritaient-ils pas ce nom?… N’était-il pas à craindre que les tortues n’eussent été détruites par les lames, leurs œufs écrasés dans les affouillements du sable?… Quelle irréparable perte si cette ressource venait à manquer!

Le bosseman, ayant fait signe à François de le rejoindre, lui dit quelques mots à voix basse. Puis tous deux, franchissant le promontoire, redescendirent sur la crique qu'ils voulaient visiter jusqu'au morne.

Tandis que le capitaine Gould, Fritz et James, parcourant la grève, se dirigeaient vers le contrefort de l'ouest, Jenny, Doll et Suzan avaient repris leurs occupations habituelles, – ce que l'on pourrait appeler les soins du ménage, si ce mot eût été juste en cette déplorable situation. Le petit Bob, indifférent, jouait sur le sable, attendant que sa mère lui préparât un peu de biscuit amolli dans l'eau bouillante. Et quelle désolation, quelles angoisses, lorsque Suzan songeait aux misères que son enfant n'aurait pas la force de supporter!

Après avoir mis tout en ordre à l'intérieur de la caverne, Jenny et Doll vinrent retrouver Mme Wolston, et bien tristement se mirent à causer…

De quoi, si ce n'est du présent si aggravé depuis la veille? Doll et Suzan, plus accablées que la jeune femme, osaient à peine envisager l'avenir, et leurs yeux se mouillaient de grosses larmes.

«Que deviendrons-nous?… dit Suzan.

— Ne perdons pas confiance, répondit Jenny, et ne décourageons pas nos compagnons…

— Et, cependant, ajouta Doll, il n'est plus possible de partir… Et lorsque la mauvaise saison sera venue…

— A toi, ma chère Doll, comme à Suzan, reprit Jenny, je répète que se décourager ne mène à rien!

— Puis-je conserver le moindre espoir?… s’écria Mme Wolston, qui se sentait défaillir.

— Vous le devez… oui! c’est votre devoir! dit Jenny. Pensez à votre mari… à James… dont vous redoubleriez les peines s’il vous voyait pleurer…

— Tu es forte, Jenny, reprit Doll, tu as déjà lutté contre le malheur!… Mais nous…

— Vous?… répondit Jenny. Oublies-tu donc que le capitaine Gould, Fritz, François, James, John Block feront tout ce qu’il sera possible pour nous sauver tous…

— Et que pourront-ils?… demanda Suzan.

— Je ne sais, Suzan, mais ils y réussiront, à la condition que nous ne les affaiblirons pas en nous abandonnant au désespoir!

— Mon enfant… mon enfant…» murmurait la pauvre femme, que les sanglots étouffaient…

A cet instant, à la vue de sa mère qui pleurait, Bob resta tout interdit, ses yeux grands ouverts.

Ce fut Jenny qui l’attira près d’elle et le prit sur ses genoux en disant:

«Ta maman a été inquiète, mon chéri!… Elle t’avait appelé… Tu ne répondais pas, et alors… Tu étais à jouer sur le sable… n’est-ce pas?…

— Oui… répondit Bob, avec le bateau que m’a fait mon ami Block… Mais je voudrais aussi lui mettre une petite voile blanche pour qu’il navigue… Il y a dans le sable des trous tout pleins d’eau où je le mettrai… Tante Doll m’a promis de me faire une voile…

— Oui, mon Bob… tu l’auras aujourd’hui, dit Doll.

— Alors, deux voiles… reprit l’enfant, deux voiles comme à la chaloupe qui nous a amenés ici…

— C’est entendu, répondit Jenny. Tante Doll te fera une belle voile… et moi je t’en ferai une aussi.

— Merci, merci, madame Jenny, répondit Bob en battant des mains. Mais où est donc notre grand bateau?… Je ne le vois plus!…

— Il est allé… à la pêche, répondit Jenny, il reviendra bientôt… avec de beaux poissons!… D’ailleurs… tu as le tien… celui de ton ami Block…

— Oui… mais je lui dirai de m’en construire un autre, où je pourrai embarquer… avec papa et maman… et tante Doll… et madame Jenny… et tout le monde!…»

Pauvre petit! il disait bien là ce qu’il aurait fallu… remplacer la chaloupe… et comment le faire?…

«Retourne jouer, mon chéri, lui dit Jenny, et ne t’éloigne pas de nous…

— Non… là… tout près, madame Jenny!»

Puis, après avoir embrassé sa mère, il partit en sautillant ainsi que font les enfants de son âge.

«Ma chère Suzan, ma chère Doll, dit alors Jenny, Dieu ne peut vouloir que ce petit être ne soit pas sauvé!… Non, il ne peut le vouloir… et son salut, c’est le nôtre!… Je vous en prie, pas de faiblesse, pas de larmes… Soyez confiantes comme je le suis, comme je l’ai toujours été dans la Providence!»

Ainsi parla Jenny, et ce qu’elle disait lui venait d’un cœur résolu. C’était son âme intrépide qui lui inspirait ces choses, et, quoi qu’il arrivât, elle ne désespérerait pas. Si la mauvaise saison s’ouvrait avant que les naufragés eussent quitté cette côte, – et comment à moins qu’un navire ne les y recueillît? – on prendrait des dispositions pour un hivernage. La grotte offrait un abri sûr contre les gros temps… L’amas des plantes marines fournirait du combustible contre le froid… La pêche, la chasse même suffiraient sans doute à procurer la nourriture… Dans ces conditions, il était permis de garder quelque espoir…

Et, tout d’abord, il importait de savoir si les craintes de John Block relativement aux chéloniens étaient fondées. Non… par bonheur. Après une heure d’absence, le bosseman et François revinrent avec leur charge habituelle de tortues, qui avaient trouvé refuge sous le tas de varechs. Par exemple, pas un seul œuf.

«Mais elles pondront, les bonnes bêtes, déclara John Block, et répondront à la confiance que nous avons en elles!»

On ne put s’empêcher de sourire à cette plaisanterie du bosseman.

Lors de leur promenade jusqu’au contrefort, le capitaine Gould, Fritz, James, avaient reconnu l’impossibilité d’en contourner la base autrement que par mer. Les courants s’y propageaient avec une extrême impétuosité dans un sens comme dans l’autre. Même par temps calme, le violent ressac n’aurait pas permis à une embarcation de s’en approcher, et le meilleur nageur eût été entraîné au large ou se fût brisé contre les roches.

La nécessité d’atteindre le plateau de la falaise par quelque autre moyen s’imposait donc plus que jamais.

«Comment?… dit un jour Fritz, son regard impatiemment attaché à cette crête inaccessible.

— On ne s’échappe pas d’une prison dont les murs sont hauts de mille pieds, répondit James.

— A moins de les percer… reprit Fritz.

— Percer cette masse de granit… plus épaisse peut-être qu’elle n’est haute?… dit James.

— Nous ne pouvons pas cependant rester dans cette prison!… s’écria Fritz pris d’un mouvement de colère impuissante dont il ne fut pas maître.

— Sois patient et aie confiance, répéta François, qui voulait calmer son frère.

— De la patience, je puis en avoir, répliqua Fritz, mais de la confiance…»

Et sur quoi se fût-elle appuyée, cette confiance?… Le salut ne pouvait venir que d’un navire passant au large de la baie!… S’il apparaissait, apercevrait-il les signaux que le bosseman lui ferait en allumant un grand feu sur la plage ou sur la pointe du promontoire?…

Quinze jours s’étaient écoulés depuis que la chaloupe avait accosté le littoral, et plusieurs semaines s’écoulèrent encore sans que la situation eût subi aucun changement. En ce qui concernait la nourriture, le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons en étaient réduits aux tortues et à leurs œufs, aux crustacés, crabes et homards, dont John Block put capturer quelques-uns. D’ordinaire, c’était lui qui s’occupait de la pêche, non sans succès, avec le concours de François. Des lignes, munies, en guise d’hameçons, de clous recourbés qui provenaient des planches de la chaloupe, avaient permis de prendre diverses sortes de poissons, des dorades, longues de douze à quinze pouces, d’une belle couleur rougeâtre et de chair excellente, des bars ou perches de mer. Même un esturgeon de grande taille fut appréhendé au moyen d’un nœud coulant qui le hala sur le sable.

Quant aux chiens de mer, assez abondants en ces parages, ils laissaient à désirer au point de vue alimentaire. Ce qu’on en tira, c’est une graisse qui fut employée à fabriquer de grossières chandelles, pourvues d’une mèche de laminaires sèches. Si inquiétante que dût être cette perspective d’un hivernage, ne fallait-il pas y songer et se précautionner contre les longs et sombres jours de la mauvaise saison?…

Il n’y avait pas lieu de compter sur les saumons, qui remontaient en si grande abondance à certaines époques le ruisseau des Chacals de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Toutefois, un jour, un banc de harengs vint s’échouer à l’embouchure du petit rio. On en prit plusieurs centaines, qui, après avoir été fumés au-dessus d’un feu de goémons secs, fournirent une importante réserve.

«Ne dit-on pas que le hareng porte son beurre avec lui?… observa John Block. Eh bien, si cela est, en voici qui sont tout accommodés… et je me demande ce que nous ferons de tant de si bonnes choses!…»

Pendant ces six semaines, à plusieurs reprises, on essaya d’escalader le promontoire pour gagner le plateau de la falaise. Comme toutes ces tentatives furent infructueuses, Fritz résolut de contourner le morne de l’est. Mais il se garda bien de confier son projet à personne, sauf à John Block. Aussi, dans la matinée du 7 décembre, tous deux se dirigèrent-ils vers la crique sous prétexte de ramasser des tortues à sa pointe orientale.

Là, au pied de l’énorme masse rocheuse, la mer brisait avec rage et, à vouloir la doubler, assurément Fritz exposerait sa vie.

En vain le bosseman voulut l’en détourner… Il n’obtint rien, et n’eut plus qu’à lui prêter son aide.

Après s’être déshabillé, Fritz s’attacha autour des reins une longue corde, – la drisse de la chaloupe, – dont John Block devait garder l’autre bout, et il entra dans l’eau.

Double était le risque, soit d’être saisi par le ressac et jeté contre la base du morne, soit d’être entraîné par le courant si la corde venait à casser.

A deux fois, Fritz tenta inutilement de se dégager des lames. Il ne réussit qu’à la troisième à se maintenir de manière à porter ses regards au delà du morne, et John Block, non sans peine, dut le ramener vers la pointe!

«Eh bien… demanda le bosseman, qu’y a-t-il, au delà?

— Rien que des roches et des rochers!… répondit Fritz, dès qu’il eut repris haleine. Je n’ai aperçu qu’une suite de criques et de caps… La falaise se continue en remontant vers le nord…

— Je n’en suis pas autrement étonné…» se borna à répondre John Block.

Lorsque le résultat de cette tentative fut connu – et avec quelle émotion l’apprit Jenny! – il sembla bien que tout espoir venait de s’évanouir. Ce n’était décidément qu’un amas inhabitable et inhabité, cet îlot dont le capitaine Gould et les siens ne pouvaient plus sortir!…

Et de quels regrets poignants se compliquait cette situation! Sans la révolte, depuis deux mois déjà les passagers du *Flag* seraient arrivés en ce fertile domaine de la Terre-Promise!… Et à quelles angoisses devaient être en proie ceux qui les attendaient et ne les voyaient point venir!… Comment les deux familles expliqueraient-elles un tel retard?… La corvette avait-elle donc péri corps et biens?… Ne reverraient-ils plus jamais Fritz, Jenny, François, James, Suzan, Doll… Et si la *Licorne* avait fait naufrage, était-ce pendant la traversée de l’île en Europe, avant ou après sa relâche à Capetown?…

En vérité, ces parents, ces amis étaient plus à plaindre que le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons!… Au moins, ceux-ci les savaient-ils en sûreté dans la Nouvelle-Suisse!

L’avenir débordait donc d’inquiétudes, étant donnée une situation dont on ne pouvait prévoir le terme.

Puis, quel nouveau sujet de craintes se fût ajouté à tant d’autres, s’ils eussent su ce que Harry Gould et le bosseman étaient seuls à savoir: c’est que le nombre des tortues diminuait sensiblement, par suite de la consommation qui s’en faisait chaque jour!…

«Peut-être, fit observer cependant John Block, cela tient-il à ce que ces bêtes ont connaissance de quelque passage souterrain qui leur donne accès sur les criques de l’est ou de l’ouest, et quel malheur que nous ne puissions les suivre…

— Dans tous les cas, Block, répliqua Harry Gould, n’en parle à personne…

— Soyez tranquille, mon capitaine, et si je vous l’ai dit, c’est que l’on peut tout vous dire…

— Et on le doit, Block.»

Le bosseman, dès lors, eut donc à s’occuper plus particulièrement de la pêche, car la mer ne refuserait jamais ce que la terre allait bientôt refuser. Il est vrai, à se nourrir exclusivement de poissons, de mollusques, de crustacés, la santé générale finirait par en souffrir… Et si des maladies se déclaraient, ne serait-ce pas le comble de tant de misères?…

La dernière semaine de décembre était arrivée. Temps toujours beau, sauf quelques orages qui n’eurent point la violence du premier. La chaleur, parfois excessive, aurait été difficile à supporter, si la falaise n’eût projeté sa grande ombre sur la grève, l’abritant du soleil, qui traçait sa courbe diurne au-dessus de l’horizon du nord.

A cette époque, nombre d’oiseaux fréquentaient ces parages, et ce n’étaient pas seulement les goélands, les macreuses, les mouettes, les frégates, hôtes habituels des grèves. De temps à autre, passèrent des bandes de grues et de hérons. Cela rappelait à Fritz ses heureuses chasses sur le lac des Cygnes et aux abords des métairies de la Terre-Promise. A la cime du morne parurent également des cormorans, semblables à celui de Jenny, actuellement l’hôte de la basse-cour de Felsenheim, et des albatros, semblables à celui dont elle avait fait le messager de la Roche-Fumante!

D’ailleurs, ces oiseaux se tenaient hors de portée. Lorsqu’ils venaient se poser sur le promontoir, en vain essayait-on de les approcher, et ils s’envolaient à tire-d’aile au-dessus de cette Crête infranchissable.

Un jour, le capitaine Gould, Fritz, François, tous et toutes furent appelés sur la plage par un cri du bosseman.

«Voyez… voyez donc!… répétait John Block, en montrant de la main l’arête du plateau supérieur.

— Qu’y a-t-il?… demanda Fritz.

— Comment, reprit John Block, vous n’apercevez pas cette rangée de points noirs?…

— Ce sont des pingouins, répondit François.

— Des pingouins, en effet, affirma Harry Gould, et s’ils ne nous paraissent pas plus gros que des corneilles, c’est à cause de la hauteur où ils sont perchés…

— Eh bien, fit observer Fritz, puisque ces oiseaux ont pu s’élever sur le plateau, c’est donc que les pentes sont praticables de l’autre côté de la falaise!…»

Il y avait lieu de le croire, car les pingouins, très gauches, très lourds, n’ayant pour ailes que des moignons rudimentaires, n’auraient pu voler jusqu’à cette crête. Si donc l’ascension n’était pas praticable par le sud, très probablement elle l’était par le nord. Or, faute d’une embarcation qui eût permis de remonter le long du littoral, il fallait renoncer à atteindre le sommet de la falaise.

Triste, bien triste fut le Noël de cette funeste année!… Et quelle désolation à la pensée de ce qu’eut été le Christmas dans la grande salle de

Felsenheim, au milieu des deux familles, en compagnie du capitaine Gould et de John Block! Il sembla que les douleurs de l'abandon en fussent accrues, et cette fête se réduisit à des prières où il n'y avait plus guère d'espoir!

Et pourtant, il fallait tenir compte de ce que, malgré tant d'épreuves, la santé de ce petit monde n'en était pas encore affectée. Quant au bosseman, les misères, pas plus que les déceptions, n'avaient prise sur lui.

«J'engraisse, répétait-il, oui… j'engraisse!… Voilà ce que c'est que de passer son temps à ne rien faire!»

Rien faire, hélas! et, malheureusement, dans cette situation, il n'y avait rien à faire!

L'après-midi du 29, il se produisit un incident qui, d'ailleurs, ne pouvait apporter aucun changement, bien qu'il rappelât le souvenir de temps plus heureux.

Un oiseau vint se poser sur la partie du promontoire dont l'accès était praticable.

C'était un albatros, qui arrivait de loin, sans doute, et paraissait très fatigué. Il s'étendit sur une roche, les pattes allongées, les ailes repliées.

Fritz voulut essayer de capturer cet oiseau. Habile à manier le lasso, on le sait, peut-être y réussirait-il, en formant un nœud coulant avec la drisse de la chaloupe?

La longue corde fut préparée par le bosseman, et Fritz, le plus doucement possible, commença à gravir le promontoire.

Tous le suivaient du regard.

L’oiseau ne bougeant pas, Fritz put s’approcher à quelques toises, et lança son lasso qui s’enroula autour du corps de l’albatros.

C’est à peine si l’albatros tenta de se débattre, lorsque Fritz, qui l’avait pris entre ses bras, l’apporta sur la grève.

A cet instant, Jenny ne put retenir un cri de surprise.

«C’est lui, répétait-elle, en caressant l’oiseau… c’est lui… je le reconnais…

— Quoi… s’écria Fritz, ce serait?…

— Oui… Fritz… c’est bien mon albatros… mon compagnon de la Roche-Fumante… celui auquel j’avais attaché ce billet qui est tombé entre tes mains…»

Était-ce possible?… Jenny ne faisait-elle pas erreur?… Après trois années, cet albatros, qui n’était jamais revenu à l’îlot, aurait volé jusqu’à cette côte?…

Jenny ne se trompait pas, et l’on en eut la certitude, lorsqu’elle montra un bout de ficelle qui entourait encore l’une des pattes de l’oiseau. Quant au morceau de toile sur lequel Fritz avait tracé quelques lignes de réponse, il n’en restait plus rien.

Et si cet albatros était venu de si loin, c’est que ces puissants volateurs peuvent franchir d’énormes distances. A n’en pas douter, celui-ci s’était transporté de l’est de l’océan Indien à ces parages du Pacifique, éloignés d’un millier de lieues peut-être!…

Inutile d’insister sur les soins, sur les caresses que reçut le messager de la Roche-Fumante. N’était-ce pas comme un lien qui rattachait les naufragés à leurs parents, à leurs amis de la Nouvelle-Suisse?…

Deux jours après s’achevait cette année 1817, qui avait été si malheureuse pendant ses derniers mois, et que réservait l’année nouvelle?…

CHAPITRE XXIV

Entretiens à propos de l’albatros. – Bonne camaraderie entre le petit Bob et l’oiseau. – Fabrication des chandelles. – Un nouveau sujet de douleur. — Recherches inutiles et désespoir. – Un cri de l’albatros.

Si le capitaine Gould ne se trompait pas en ce qui concernait le gisement de l’îlot, la saison d’été ne devait plus avoir que trois mois à courir. Après ces trois mois arriverait le redoutable hiver, avec ses froides rafales, ses tempêtes furieuses. Cette faible chance d’apercevoir quelque navire au large, de l’attirer par des signaux, aurait disparu, car, à cette époque de l’année, les marins fuient ces dangereux parages. Mais, auparavant, peut-être se présenterait-il quelque circonstance qui modifierait la situation, bien qu’il fût téméraire de l’espérer.

L’existence continua donc d’être ce qu’elle avait été depuis le 26 octobre, ce jour funeste où la chaloupe fut détruite. Quelle monotonie, quel désœuvrement, et combien l’impossibilité de rien entreprendre paraissait dure à des hommes si actifs! Réduits à errer au pied de cette falaise qui les emprisonnait, leurs yeux se fatiguant à observer la mer toujours déserte, il leur fallait une extraordinaire force d’âme pour ne point succomber au découragement.

Les journées, si longues, se passaient en conversations que Jenny était toujours la première à provoquer. La courageuse jeune femme animait tout son monde, s’ingéniait à le distraire, discutait des projets sur la valeur desquels elle ne se méprenait guère. Fritz et elle échangeaient leurs pensées, même sans qu'ils eussent besoin de parler. Le plus souvent, le capitaine Gould et John Block s'entretenaient de l'avenir. Et parfois ils se demandaient si le gisement de l'îlot était bien tel qu'ils le supposaient dans l'ouest du Pacifique. Le bosseman émettait quelque doute à cet égard.

«Est-ce l'arrivée de l'albatros qui te donne à réfléchir?… lui demanda un jour le capitaine.

— Je l'avoue, répondit John Block, et ce n'est pas sans quelque raison, je pense.

— Et tu veux en conclure, Block, que cet îlot serait situé plus au nord que nous ne le supposons?…

— Oui, mon capitaine… et qui sait?… à proximité de l'océan Indien… Un albatros peut plus facilement franchir des centaines de lieues sans se reposer que des milliers…

— Je le sais… répondit Harry Gould, mais je sais aussi que Borupt avait intérêt à entraîner le *Flag* vers les mers du Pacifique! De quel côté a soufflé le vent pendant les huit jours de notre séquestration, dans la cale, il m'a bien semblé, et à toi aussi, que c'était de l'ouest…

— J'en conviens, répondit le bosseman, et, pourtant, cet albatros… Est-il venu de près?… Est-il venu de loin?…

— Et quand cela serait, Block, quand nous nous serions trompés sur le gisement de cet îlot, s'il ne se trouvait qu'à quelques lieues de la Nouvelle-Suisse, n'est-ce pas comme s'il en était à des centaines, puisque nous ne pouvons pas le quitter!»

La conclusion du capitaine Gould n’était, hélas! que trop juste. D’ailleurs tout donnait à croire que le *Flag* avait dû se diriger vers les mers du Pacifique, loin, bien loin des parages de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Et pourtant, ce que pensait John Block, d’autres le pensaient également. On le répète, il semblait que l’oiseau de la Roche-Fumante eût apporté quelque espoir avec lui.

Inutile de dire que l’oiseau, promptement revenu de ses fatigues, ne se montrait ni craintif ni farouche. L’apprivoiser fut très aisé, et il ne tarda pas à parcourir la grève, se nourrissant de baies de varechs ou de poissons qu’il péchait adroitement, sans manifester aucune envie de s’envoler.

Quelquefois, par exemple, après s’être élevé le long du promontoire, il allait se percher sur la crête de la falaise en poussant de petits cris.

«Hein! disait alors le bosseman, il nous invite à monter!… Si seulement il pouvait me prêter ses ailes, je me chargerais bien de voler jusque-là… et de voir de l’autre côté… Il est vrai, ce côté-là ne vaut probablement pas mieux que celui-ci, mais enfin on serait fixé!…»

Fixé!… Ne l’était-on pas depuis que Fritz n’avait aperçu au delà du morne que les mêmes roches arides, les mêmes infranchissables hauteurs?

Un des meilleurs amis de l’albatros fut le petit Bob. La camaraderie s’établit promptement entre l’enfant et l’oiseau. Ils jouaient sur le sable. Pas à craindre de taquineries de la part de l’un, ni coups de bec de la part de l’autre. Lorsqu’il faisait mauvais temps, tous deux rentraient dans la grotte, où l’albatros avait son coin qu’il occupait chaque soir.

Enfin, sauf cet incident, qui n’autorisait aucune hypothèse, rien ne vint tirer le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons de cette monotone existence.

Toutefois la prudence exigeait que l'on songeât sérieusement à l'éventualité d'un prochain hivernage. A moins d'une de ces très heureuses chances auxquelles les naufragés n'étaient pas habitués, ils auraient à subir quatre ou cinq mois de mauvaise saison. A cette latitude, au milieu des mers du Pacifique, les tourmentes se déchaînent avec une extraordinaire violence, et peuvent provoquer un sérieux abaissement de la température.

Le capitaine Gould, Fritz et John Block causaient parfois à ce sujet. Puisqu'ils ne pouvaient écarter les menaces de l'avenir, mieux valait les regarder en face. Résolus à lutter, ils ne ressentaient plus rien du découragement qu'avait d'abord provoqué la destruction de la chaloupe.

«Ah! si la situation n'était pas aggravée par la présence de ces trois femmes et de cet enfant, répétait Harry Gould, si nous n'étions ici que des hommes…

— Raison de faire plus encore que nous n'aurions fait», répondait Fritz.

En prévision de l'hiver, une grave éventualité se posait: si les froids devenaient rigoureux, s'il fallait entretenir un foyer jour et nuit, le combustible ne viendrait-il pas à manquer?…

Il n'y avait pas lieu de le craindre, du moment que l'on se contentait des varechs, régulièrement déposés sur la grève par chaque marée montante et que le soleil séchait vite. Toutefois, comme la combustion de ces plantes marines produisait une acre fumée, on ne pourrait les employer au chauffage de la grotte dont l'atmosphère deviendrait irrespirable. Aussi conviendrait-il d'en fermer l'entrée avec les voiles de la chaloupe, et assez solidement pour résister aux rafales qui assaillaient le pied de la falaise pendant la période hivernale.

Resterait alors la nécessité d'éclairer l'intérieur, lorsque le temps interdirait les travaux du dehors.

Le bosseman et François, aidés de Jenny et de Doll, s'occupèrent donc à fabriquer un grand nombre de grossières chandelles avec la graisse des chiens de mer qui fréquentaient la crique, et dont la capture n'offrait aucune difficulté.

Ainsi que cela s'était pratiqué à Felsenheim, John Block, par la fonte de cette graisse, obtint une sorte d'huile qui devait se coaguler en refroidissant. Comme il n'avait pas à sa disposition le coton que récoltait M. Zermatt, il dut se contenter de la fibre des laminaires marines, lesquelles fournirent des mèches utilisables.

En outre, il y avait la question des vêtements dont chacun était peu fourni, et comment les renouveler si le séjour se prolongeait sur cette plage?…

«Décidément, dit un jour le bosseman, lorsqu'un naufrage vous jette sur une île déserte, il est prudent d'avoir à sa disposition un navire dans lequel se trouve tout ce dont on a besoin… Sans cela c'est une mauvaise affaire!»

Oui, et c'est bien ce qu'avait été le *Landlord* pour les hôtes de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Dans l'après-midi du 17, un incident, dont personne n'aurait pu prévoir les conséquences, causa les plus vives inquiétudes.

On sait que Bob trouvait grand plaisir à jouer avec l'albatros. Lorsqu'il s'amusait sur la grève, sa mère ne cessait de le surveiller, afin qu'il ne s'éloignât pas, car il aimait à gravir les basses roches du promontoire comme à courir au-devant des lames. Mais, lorsque l’oiseau et lui restaient dans la grotte, il n’y avait aucun inconvénient à les laisser seuls.

Il était trois heures environ. James Wolston aidait le bosseman à disposer les espars destinés à supporter la portière de grosse toile qui devait être tendue devant l’entrée. Jenny, Suzan et Doll, assises dans l’angle, près du fourneau sur lequel bouillonnait la petite chaudière, travaillaient à réparer leurs vêtements.

L’instant approchait où Bob prenait d’habitude son goûter quotidien.

Aussi Mme Wolston fit-elle quelques pas du côté de la grotte en appelant l’enfant.

Bob ne répondit pas.

Suzan descendit vers la plage et appela d’une voix plus forte, sans obtenir de réponse.

Alors le bosseman de crier:

«Bob… Bob!… c’est l’heure de manger!»

L’enfant ne parut point, et on ne le voyait pas courir sur la grève.

«Il était ici… près de nous… il n’y a qu’un moment… affirma James.

— Où diable peut-il être?…» se demanda John Block en remontant vers le promontoire.

Le capitaine Gould, Fritz et François se promenaient alors au pied de la falaise.

Bob n’était pas avec eux.

Le bosseman, en se faisant un porte-voix de sa main, cria à plusieurs reprises: «Bob… Bob!»

L’enfant restait invisible.

James rejoignit le capitaine et les deux frères.

«Vous n’avez pas vu Bob?… questionna-t-il d’un ton d’extrême inquiétude.

— Non, répondit François.

— Je l’ai aperçu il y a une demi-heure, déclara Fritz, et il jouait avec l’albatros…»

Et tous de se mettre à l’appeler en se tournant dans tous les sens.

Ce fut inutile.

Aussitôt Fritz et James se dirigèrent vers le promontoire, dont ils gravirent les premières roches, et promenèrent leurs regards sur toute l’étendue de la crique.

Personne, ni l’enfant, ni l’oiseau.

Tous deux rejoignirent leurs compagnons près de Jenny, de Doll et de Mme Wolston, pâle d’inquiétude.

«Mais l’avez-vous cherché dans la grotte?…» demanda le capitaine Gould.

Bob, en effet, pouvait y être rentré. Comment n’en était-il pas sorti depuis qu’on l’appelait?…

Fritz ne fit qu'un bond vers la grotte, en visita tous les coins et reparut sans ramener l'enfant.

Mme Wolston, éperdue, allait et venait comme une folle. Il se pouvait que le petit garçon eût glissé entre les roches, qu'il fût tombé dans la mer… Enfin les plus alarmantes suppositions étaient permises, puisqu'on n'avait pas trouvé Bob.

Il fallait donc continuer, sans perdre un instant, les recherches sur la plage et jusqu'à la crique.

«Fritz… James… dit le capitaine Gould, venez avec moi et suivons le pied de la falaise… Peut-être Bob est-il enfoui sous un tas de varechs?…

— Faites, répondit le bosseman, tandis que M. François et moi, nous allons visiter la crique…

— Et le promontoire, ajouta François. Il est possible que Bob se soit avisé d'y grimper et qu'il ait roulé dans quelque trou…»

On se sépara, les uns se dirigeant vers la droite, les autres vers la gauche. Jenny, Doll étaient restées près de Mme Wolston, dont elles essayaient de calmer les angoisses.

Une demi-heure plus tard, tous étaient de retour après d'inutiles recherches. Personne sur tout le périmètre de la baie. On n'avait signalé aucune trace de l'enfant et les appels n'avaient produit aucun résultat.

Le désespoir de Suzan éclata alors en sanglots. Prise de spasmes qui lui déchiraient la poitrine, il fallut l'emporter, malgré elle, dans la grotte. Son mari, qui l’accompagnait, ne pouvait prononcer une parole.

Au dehors, Fritz disait:

«Il n’est pas admissible que cet enfant soit perdu!… Je vous le répète, je l’ai vu sur la grève, il y a une heure à peine, courant, sautant, et non du côté de la mer… Il tenait une corde à la main, avec un galet au bout… L’albatros et lui jouaient ensemble…

— Mais, au fait, où donc est l’oiseau?… demanda François en se retournant.

— Oui… où est-il?…» répéta John Block.

On n’y avait pas prêté attention, tout d’abord, et le bosseman dut constater l’absence de l’albatros.

«Est-ce qu’ils auraient disparu tous les deux?… fit observer le capitaine Gould.

— On peut le croire», répondit Fritz.

Les regards se portaient en toutes directions et principalement vers les roches, où l’oiseau avait coutume de se percher…

On ne l’aperçut pas, on n’entendit pas son cri, si reconnaissable entre ceux des macreuses, des goélands et des mouettes.

Que l’albatros se fût envolé au-dessus de la falaise, qu’il eût gagné quelque autre hauteur de la côte, à cela rien d’impossible, bien qu’il fût si habitué à cette plage, à ceux qui y vivaient, et plus particulièrement à Jenny. Dans tous les cas, le petit garçon n’avait pu s’envoler, lui… Tout au plus eût-il été capable de remonter le long du promontoire à la suite de l’oiseau. D’ailleurs, après les recherches de François et du bosseman, rien ne permettait d’admettre cette explication.

Néanmoins, comment ne pas faire un rapprochement entre la disparition de Bob et celle de l’albatros? D’ordinaire, ils ne se quittaient guère, et voici qu’on ne les revoyait plus!… C’était au moins très extraordinaire.

Avec le soir qui s’approchait, devant l’inexprimable douleur du père et de la mère, à la vue de Suzan, dont les paroles incohérentes faisaient craindre pour sa raison, Jenny, Doll, le capitaine Gould, ses compagnons, ne savaient plus que tenter. A la pensée que, si l’enfant était tombé dans quelque trou, il allait y rester ainsi toute la nuit, on reprit les recherches. Un feu de goémons fut allumé à l’extrémité du promontoire afin de guider le petit, en cas qu’il eût gagné le fond de la crique. Après avoir été sur pied jusqu’aux dernières heures de la soirée, il fallut renoncer à l’espoir de retrouver Bob, et y avait-il une chance que le lendemain on fût plus heureux que la veille?…

Tous étaient rentrés dans la grotte, non pour y dormir, – l’auraient-ils pu?… Tantôt l’un, tantôt l’autre ressortait, regardait, prêtait l’oreille au milieu des clapotis du ressac, et revenait s’asseoir sans prononcer une parole.

Quelle nuit, la plus douloureuse, la plus désespérante, de toutes celles que le capitaine Gould et les siens eussent passées sur cette côte déserte!

Vers deux heures du matin, le ciel, brillant d’étoiles jusqu’alors, commença à se voiler. La brise avait sauté au nord, et les nuages, venus de cette direction, s’accumulaient dans l’espace. S’ils n’étaient pas très épais, ils chassaient du moins avec une vitesse croissante, et, assurément, à l’est et à l’ouest de la falaise, la mer devait être démontée.

C’était l’heure à laquelle le flot ramenait sur la grève les lames de la marée montante.

A ce moment, Mme Wolston se releva, et, avant qu’on eût pu la retenir, elle s’élança hors de la grotte, en proie au délire, criant d’une voix effrayante:

«Mon enfant… mon enfant!»

Il fallut employer la force pour la reconduire. James, qui avait rejoint sa femme, la prit dans ses bras, et la ramena plus morte que vive.

La malheureuse mère resta étendue sur le tas de varechs, où d’habitude Bob reposait près d’elle. Jenny et Doll essayèrent de la ranimer, mais ce ne fut pas sans grande peine qu’elle reprit ses sens.

Pendant le reste de la nuit le vent ne cessa de raser en rugissant le plateau supérieur de la falaise. Vingt fois Fritz, François, Harry Gould, le bosseman, explorèrent la plage, avec cette crainte que la marée montante ne déposât un petit cadavre sur le sable…

Rien, pourtant, rien!… Est-ce donc que l’enfant avait été emporté au large par les lames?…

Vers quatre heures, après l’étalé de la mer, alors que le jusant venait de s’établir, quelques blancheurs se montrèrent à l’horizon de l’est.

A ce moment, Fritz, accoté contre le fond de la grotte, crut entendre une sorte de cri derrière la paroi. Il prêta l’oreille, et, craignant de s’être trompé, il rejoignit le capitaine.

«Suivez-moi…» lui dit-il.

Sans savoir ce que voulait Fritz, sans même le demander, Harry Gould l’accompagna.

«Écoutez…» dit Fritz.

Le capitaine Gould tendit l’oreille.

«C’est un cri d’oiseau que j’entends… dit-il.

— Oui!… un cri d’oiseau!… affirma Fritz.

— Il existe donc une cavité derrière la paroi…

— Sans doute, et peut-être quelque couloir qui communique avec le dehors… car comment expliquer?…

— Vous avez raison, Fritz.»

John Block, qui venait de s’approcher, apprit ce qui en était. Après avoir appliqué son oreille contre la paroi, il déclara:

«C’est le cri de l’albatros… je le reconnais…

— Et si l’albatros est là… dit Fritz, le petit Bob doit y être aussi…

— Mais par où auraient-ils pu s’introduire tous deux?… demanda le capitaine.

— Ça… nous le saurons!» répliqua John Block.

François, Jenny, Doll furent aussitôt mis au courant. James et sa femme reprirent un peu d’espoir.

«Il est là… il est là!…» répétait Suzan.

John Block avait allumé une des grosses chandelles. Que l'albatros fût derrière cette paroi, on ne pouvait le mettre en doute, puisque son cri continuait de se faire entendre.

Toutefois, avant de rechercher s'il ne s'était pas glissé par quelque issue extérieure, il convenait de bien constater que la paroi du fond ne présentait pas un orifice.

La chandelle à la main, le bosseman vint examiner l'état de cette paroi.

John Block n'observa à sa surface que quelques fissures trop étroites pour que l'albatros et, à plus forte raison, Bob eussent pu y passer. Il est vrai, à sa partie inférieure, un trou d'un diamètre de vingt à vingt-cinq pouces était creusé dans le sol, et, par conséquent, assez large pour avoir livré passage à l'oiseau et à l'enfant.

Cependant, le cri de l'albatros ayant cessé, tous eurent cette appréhension que le capitaine Gould, le bosseman, Fritz avaient dû faire erreur.

Jenny prit alors la place de John Block et, se baissant au ras du trou, appela plusieurs fois l'oiseau, qui était habitué à sa voix comme à ses caresses.

Un cri lui répondit, et, presque aussitôt, l'albatros sortit par le trou.

«Bob… Bob!» répéta Jenny.

L'enfant ne répondit ni ne parut… N'était-il donc pas avec l'oiseau derrière la paroi?… Sa mère ne put retenir un cri de désespoir…

«Attendez…», dit le bosseman.

Il s’accroupit, il agrandit le trou en rejetant le sable derrière lui. Quelques minutes suffirent à lui donner une dimension assez grande pour qu’il pût s’y introduire…

Une minute après, il rapportait le petit Bob évanoui, qui ne tarda pas à reprendre connaissance sous les baisers de sa mère.

CHAPITRE XXV

La seconde grotte. – Espoir déçu. – La chandelle de Fritz. – A travers le massif. – Plusieurs haltes. – Le plateau supérieur. – Rien au sud, ni à l’est, ni

à l’ouest. – Au moment de redescendre…

Le la terrible secousse qu’elle venait d’éprouver, Mme Wolston allait être quelque temps à se remettre. Mais enfin Bob lui était rendu, et est-il meilleur remède aux souffrances d’une mère que les caresses de son enfant!

Ce qui s’était passé, on le devine. En jouant avec l’albatros, Bob le suivit au fond de la grotte. L’oiseau s’étant engagé à travers cet étroit couloir, Bob y pénétra après lui. Au delà s’ouvrait une assez sombre excavation, de laquelle, lorsqu’il le voulut, le petit ne parvint pas à ressortir. Tout d’abord, il appela… Ses appels ne furent point entendus… Il perdit connaissance, et on ne sait trop ce qui serait arrivé, si, par la plus heureuse des chances, le cri de l’albatros n’eût frappé l’oreille de Fritz.

«Eh bien, dit le bosseman, maintenant que Bob est dans les bras de sa maman, tout est pour le mieux… C’est grâce à lui que nous avons découvert une seconde grotte… Il est vrai, nous n’en avons que faire… La première nous suffisait, et même nous ne demandons qu’à en déloger…

— Cependant, fit observer Harry Gould, je tiens à savoir si elle ne se prolonge pas…

— Jusqu’à l’autre côté de la falaise, mon capitaine?…

— Qui sait, Block?…

— Soit, répondit le bosseman. Mais, en admettant qu’elle traverse le massif, que trouverions-nous au delà?… Du sable, des roches, des criques, des promontoires, et pas grand comme mon chapeau de terre végétale pu de verdure…

— C’est probable, déclara Fritz. Néanmoins, il est indispensable de voir…

— On verra, monsieur Fritz, on verra, et, ainsi qu’on dit, la vue n’en coûtera rien!»

Or, de cet examen pouvaient résulter de précieuses conséquences, il y avait donc lieu de procéder sans retard, et la reconnaissance commença à l’instant même.

Le capitaine, Fritz, François retournèrent au fond de la grotte. Le bosseman, qui s’était muni de plusieurs grosses chandelles, marchait derrière eux. Afin de faciliter le passage, les premiers agrandirent l’ouverture en retirant encore quelques-unes des pierres qui s’étaient éboulées.

Il ne fallut pas plus d’un quart d’heure pour que l’orifice fût jugé suffisant. D’ailleurs, ni Harry Gould ni ses compagnons n’avaient précisément engraissé depuis leur débarquement sur l’îlot. Trois mois de cette pénible existence, ce n’était pas fait pour les pousser à l’embonpoint, à moins que la nature ne les eût disposés, à l’exemple du bosseman, en dépit de toutes les misères, à gagner quelques livres depuis qu’il avait quitté le *Flag*…

Lorsque tous eurent franchi l’ouverture, les chandelles donnèrent assez de lumière pour permettre d’examiner cette seconde excavation.

Elle était plus profonde que la première, de beaucoup moins large, mais longue d’une centaine de pieds. A proprement parler, c’était plutôt une sorte de couloir d’un diamètre de dix à douze pieds et de hauteur à peu près égale. Peut-être d’autres, embranchés sur celui-ci, formaient-ils à l’intérieur du massif une sorte de labyrinthe dont les branches se ramifiaient en diverses directions. Et, alors, – ainsi l’avait pensé Harry Gould, – pourquoi une de ces branches ne conduirait-elle pas, sinon au plateau supérieur, du moins à l’une des autres faces latérales de la falaise, au delà soit du morne, soit du contrefort?… Et, comme le capitaine Gould insistait de nouveau sur cette circonstance:

«C’est possible, après tout, répondit John Block, et ce que nous n’avons pu faire à l’extérieur, qui sait si par l’intérieur nous n’atteindrons pas le plateau?…»

Lorsqu’ils se furent avancés d’une cinquantaine de pas à travers ce couloir qui se rétrécissait peu à peu, le capitaine Gould, le bosseman, Fritz atteignirent une paroi rocheuse devant laquelle ils durent s’arrêter.

Après avoir promené la lumière à sa surface depuis le sol jusqu’à la voûte, John Block ne rencontra que d’étroites fissures entre lesquelles la main n’aurait pu se glisser. Donc tout espoir s’effaçait de s’enfoncer plus profondément à travers le massif.

Quant aux parois latérales du couloir, elles ne présentaient aucun orifice sur toute leur longueur. Cette seconde excavation au delà de la première grotte, telle était la seule découverte qui résultait de cet incident.

«Allons, dit Harry Gould, ce n’est pas encore par là que nous franchirons la falaise…

— Ni que nous monterons dessus!» ajouta le bosseman.

Ceci constaté, il ne restait plus qu'à revenir.

En somme, s'il y avait eu déception sur le point de rencontrer un passage intérieur, personne n'avait pu croire sérieusement que ce fût possible.

Et, cependant, quand le capitaine Gould, John Block, Fritz furent revenus, il leur sembla qu'ils étaient plus enfermés que jamais sur cette grève!

Les jours suivants, le temps, qui avait été très beau jusqu'alors, indiqua quelque tendance à se modifier. Le ciel s'obscurcit de nuages assez légers qui ne tardèrent pas à s'épaissir. Cette fois, c'est par-dessus le plateau supérieur que les poussait une brise du nord, qui, dans la soirée du 22 janvier, s'accentua et souffla en grand frais.

Cette direction ne donnait rien à craindre pour la baie des Tortues. Sous l'abri de la falaise, elle ne serait point exposée aux coups de houle, comme à l'époque de cette furieuse tempête qui avait occasionné la perte de la chaloupe. La mer demeurerait calme le long du rivage, elle ne ressentirait les poussées du vent qu'à une grande demi-lieue au large, et il n'y aurait rien à en redouter, lors même qu'il se déchaînerait un ouragan.

Un fort orage se déclara dans la nuit du 22 au 23. Vers une heure du matin, tous furent brusquement réveillés par un coup de tonnerre tel qu'une pièce d'artillerie, tirée à l'entrée de la grotte, ne l'eût pas emplie d'un fracas plus formidable.

Fritz, François, le bosseman, sautant hors de leurs réduits, se précipitèrent vers l'entrée.

«La foudre est tombée près d'ici… dit François.

— Sur la crête, sans doute», répondit John Block, en s’avançant de quelques pas à l’extérieur.

Suzan et Doll, toujours très impressionnées pendant ces orages qui affectent si profondément les personnes nerveuses, avaient suivi Jenny hors de la grotte.

«Eh bien?… demanda Doll.

— Il n’y a aucun danger, ma chère Doll, répondit François. Rentrez et fermez les yeux et les oreilles…»

Mais, en ce moment, Jenny de dire à son mari qu’elle venait de rejoindre:

«Comme cela sent la fumée, Fritz…

— Eh! ce n’est pas étonnant… Il y a le feu… là-bas… s’écria le bosseman.

— Où?… demanda le capitaine Gould.

— A ce tas de varechs, qui est au pied de la falaise.»

En effet, l’éclair avait enflammé cet amoncellement d’herbes sèches. Quelques instants suffirent pour que l’incendie se communiquât à la masse des plantes marines accumulées à la base du massif. Elles brûlèrent comme de la paille, pétillant au souffle de la brise, tourbillonnant en feux follets, répandant une acre fumée sur toute l’étendue de la plage.

Heureusement, l’entrée de la grotte était dégagée et le feu ne pouvait l’atteindre.

«Voilà notre réserve qui brûle!… s’écria John Block.

— N’en peut-on rien sauver?… dit Fritz.

— C’est impossible», répondit le capitaine Gould.

Et les flammes se propageaient avec une telle rapidité qu’elles n’eussent pas permis de faire la part du feu, de mettre en sûreté ces amas qui formaient l’unique combustible des naufragés.

Certes, les apports de la mer étaient inépuisables. Il en reviendrait de ces goémons, de ces laminaires, mais que de temps il faudrait pour en réunir une telle quantité! La marée montante n’en déposait que quelques brassées, deux fois par vingt-quatre heures. Ce qu’il y avait sur la plage, c’était l’œuvre de nombreuses années. Et qui sait si, pendant les quelques semaines précédant la mauvaise saison, le flot en aurait ramené assez pour les besoins de l’hivernage?…

Or, en moins d’un quart d’heure, la ligne de feu eut cerné le pourtour de la grève, et, sauf quelques tas le long du promontoire, il ne resta plus rien.

Ce nouveau coup de la mauvaise fortune aggravait la situation déjà si inquiétante.

«Décidément… ça ne va pas!»

Et dans la bouche du bosseman, si confiant d’habitude, ces mots prenaient une exceptionnelle valeur.

Mais les murailles de cette prison ne s’écrouleraient donc pas pour permettre aux prisonniers de s’enfuir!…

Le lendemain, 23 janvier, le temps, bien qu’il ne fût plus orageux, resta troublé, et le vent du nord continua de balayer violemment le plateau.

La première occupation fut de reconnaître si les herbes marines, entassées le long du contrefort, avaient été respectées par l’incendie. Oui, en partie. Aussi John Block, Fritz, François et James se mirent-ils à la besogne, et en rapportèrent plusieurs brassées qui suffiraient durant une semaine, sans compter sur ce que les marées apporteraient quotidiennement.

Il est vrai, tant que le vent soufflerait du nord, ces masses flottantes seraient repoussées au large.

Dès qu’il reviendrait au sud, la récolte s’effectuerait avec plus d’abondance.

Toutefois, le capitaine Gould fit observer qu’il y aurait certaines mesures à prendre pour l’avenir.

«Vous avez raison, mon capitaine, répondit John Block. et il conviendrait de mettre à l’abri ce qui reste de varechs… en prévision d’un hivernage…

— Et, ajouta Fritz, pourquoi ne pas l’emmagasiner dans la seconde grotte que nous venons de découvrir?…»

Cela était tout indiqué, et, ce jour-là, avant midi, Fritz voulut y retourner afin de mieux en reconnaître la disposition intérieure. Muni d’une chandelle, il franchit l’étroite ouverture qui mettait en communication les deux grottes. Qui sait si la seconde n’avait pas quelque sortie au delà du massif?…

Or, il arriva qu’au moment où il atteignait l’extrémité du long couloir, Fritz sentit un souffle plus frais, en même temps que son oreille percevait un sifflement continu.

«Le vent… murmura-t-il, c’est le vent!…»

Il approcha son front de la paroi, et sa main y rencontra quelques fissures.

«Le vent, répétait-il… c’est bien le vent!… Il vient jusqu’ici lorsqu’il souffle du nord!… Il existe donc un passage, soit sur le flanc, soit sur le sommet de la falaise!… Mais alors, de ce côté, il y aurait une communication avec le revers septentrional?…»

A cet instant, la chandelle, que Fritz promenait le long de la paroi, s’éteignit brusquement sous un souffle plus vif qui traversait l’une des fissures.

Fritz n’en demanda pas davantage, sa conviction était faite. En franchissant cette paroi, on aurait libre accès au dehors.

Revenir à tâtons vers la caverne où tous l’attendaient, leur faire part de sa découverte, les ramener avec lui, s’assurer qu’il n’avait point fait erreur, cela n’exigea pas une minute.

Quelques instants après, Fritz, le capitaine Gould à sa suite, John Block, François, James passaient de la première cavité dans la seconde, en s’éclairant de plusieurs chandelles que l’on prit la précaution, cette fois, de ne pas approcher trop près de la paroi du fond.

Fritz ne s’était point trompé. Un souffle frais courait à travers le couloir.

Alors, le bosseman, projetant la lumière au ras du sol, observa que le couloir n’était fermé que par un amas de pierres, tombées sans doute le long d’une sorte de puits naturel.

«La porte… s’écria-t-il, voilà la porte!… Et pas besoin de clef pour l’ouvrir!… Ah! mon capitaine, c’est vous qui aviez raison contre nous…

— A la besogne… à la besogne!…» se contenta de répondre Harry Gould.

Il fut facile de dégager le passage, obstrué de pierres. On se les passa de main en main en assez grande quantité, car le tas s’élevait de cinq ou six pieds au-dessus du sol. A mesure que s’avançait le travail, le courant d’air s’accentuait davantage. Assurément, il existait une sorte de gorge creusée à l’intérieur du massif.

Un quart d’heure suffit à désobstruer totalement le passage.

Fritz le franchit le premier, et, suivi de ses compagnons, il remonta pendant dix à douze pas une pente très raide, éclairée d’un jour vague.

Il n’y avait point là de puits vertical. A ciel ouvert, entre deux murailles dont les parements se perdaient à une grande hauteur, sinuait une gorge large de cinq à six pieds, au-dessus de laquelle plafonnait une bande de ciel. C’est le long de cette gorge que s’engouffrait le vent qui se glissait à travers les fissures de la paroi au fond du couloir.

Ainsi donc la falaise était fendue sur toute son épaisseur… Mais où aboutissait cette fente?…

On ne le saurait qu’après l’avoir parcourue jusqu’à son extrémité, en admettant que cela fût possible.

Inutile d’insister sur l’impression que causa cette découverte. Tous étaient là comme des prisonniers devant lesquels venait de s’ouvrir la porte de leur prison!

Il était à peine huit heures du matin alors et le temps ne manquerait pas. Il ne fut pas même question d’envoyer en avant soit Fritz, soit le bosseman. Chacun voulut remonter le passage sans perdre un instant.

«Au moins, fit observer Jenny, emportons quelques vivres… Qui sait si notre absence ne se prolongera pas?…

— Et d’ailleurs, dit François, savons-nous où nous allons?…

— Dehors…» répliqua le bosseman.

Et ce simple mot, qui exprimait si bien le sentiment général, répondait à tout.

Cependant le capitaine Gould exigea que l’on prit le premier repas préalablement, et, en prévision de retard, on se munirait de provisions pour plusieurs jours.

Ce déjeuner fut rapidement expédié. On mettait les morceaux doubles, on parlait à peine afin de manger plus vite. Après quatre mois passés au fond de cette baie, comment Harry Gould et ses compagnons n’auraient-ils pas eu hâte de savoir si leur situation était améliorée, et peut-être modifiée du tout au tout!…

D’ailleurs, il serait toujours temps de revenir, si le plateau supérieur était aussi aride que le littoral, s’il ne se prêtait pas à une installation de quelque durée, si de son plus haut sommet on n’apercevait aucune terre dans le voisinage. Si les abandonnés du *Flag* avaient atterri sur un îlot ou sur une île, ils regagneraient la grotte, et prendraient des dispositions en vue de l'hivernage.

Sans doute, avant de remonter cette gorge, qui aboutissait on ne savait où, il eût été plus raisonnable de laisser Harry Gould, Fritz, le bosseman, reconnaître si elle avait une issue praticable soit sur le plateau ou sur les flancs de la falaise. Mais, on le répète, personne n'y eût consenti. Un secret pressentiment les poussait tous à cette tentative. Jenny, Doll, Suzan Wolston n'étaient pas les moins ardentes; puisqu'il n'y avait aucun inconvénient à partir ensemble, on ne discuta même pas à ce sujet.

Le repas achevé, les hommes se chargèrent de quelques provisions. La première grotte fut abandonnée, et, suivis de l'albatros qui marchait près de Jenny, tous franchirent l'orifice du couloir.

Arrivés à l'entrée de la gorge, Fritz, François passèrent d'abord. Après eux vinrent Jenny, Doll, Suzan tenant le petit Bob par la main.

Le capitaine Gould et James suivirent, tandis que John Block fermait la marche.

A sa naissance, la gorge était assez resserrée pour qu'il y eût nécessité d'aller en file. Si elle s'élargissait plus haut ou plus loin, on irait par deux ou trois.

En réalité, il n'y avait là qu'une fente du massif, se dirigeant vers le nord, entre deux parois verticales qui montaient à huit ou neuf cents pieds.

Au-delà d'une centaine de pas presque en droite ligne, le sol présenta une pente assez accusée. Dans ces conditions, l'ascension ne serait pas très pénible. Il est vrai, le chemin serait allongé, car, en admettant qu'il aboutît au plateau, il aurait dû racheter cette différence de quatre-vingts toises environ qui existait entre le niveau de la grève et la partie supérieure de la falaise. En outre, ce qui ne tarda pas à accroître sensiblement le trajet, ce furent les sinuosités. On eût dit les brusques et capricieux détours d'un labyrinthe à l'intérieur du massif. Toutefois, d'après la lumière qui se propageait d'en haut, Harry Gould avait lieu de croire que la direction générale de la gorge était du sud au nord. Quant à ses parements latéraux, ils s'écartaient peu à peu, – ce qui rendait la marche plus facile.

Vers dix heures, il y eut nécessité de faire halte afin que chacun pût reprendre haleine. On s'arrêta dans une sorte d'évasement semi-circulaire, au-dessus duquel apparaissait une plus large tranche du ciel.

Harry Gould estimait à deux centaines de pieds seulement l'altitude de cet endroit au-dessus du niveau de la mer.

«A ce compte-là, fit-il observer, il faudra de cinq à six heures pour gagner le plateau…

— Eh bien, répondit Fritz, il sera grand jour encore lorsque nous y arriverons, et, au besoin, nous aurons le temps de redescendre avant la nuit.

— Vous avez raison, Fritz, répliqua Harry Gould, mais sommes-nous assurés que cette gorge ne s'allongera pas par de nombreux détours?…

— Et qu'elle donne accès sur la falaise?… ajouta François.

— Que ce soit au sommet ou sur les côtés de la falaise, repartit le bosseman, acceptons les choses comme elles viennent!… En haut si c'est en haut, en bas si c'est en bas, peu importe, après tout!»

Assurément, mais quelle déception et de quel découragement elle serait suivie, si, fermé par un obstacle infranchissable, le passage n’offrait pas d’issue au dehors…

Après une demi-heure de repos, on se remit en marche. La gorge, de plus en plus sinueuse, qui mesurait alors de dix à douze pieds de large, était tapissée d’un sol sablonneux, semé de petites pierres, sans aucune trace de végétation. Une réflexion venait alors à l’esprit, c’est que le sommet devait être aride, car quelque graine, quelque germe, entraînés par les pluies, eussent végété, et rien… pas même une touffe de lichen ou de mousse!

Vers deux heures de l’après-midi une seconde halte s’imposa, non seulement pour le repos, mais aussi pour le réconfort. Chacun s’assit au fond d’une sorte de clairière dont les parois s’évasaient et au-dessus de laquelle passait le soleil en déclinant vers l’ouest. A l’estime, la hauteur atteinte devait être alors de sept à huit cents pieds depuis le départ, d’où cet espoir que l’on pourrait atteindre le plateau supérieur.

Lorsque le repas fut terminé, Fritz dit:

«Ma Jenny, je te demande de rester ici avec Mme Wolston et Doll… François voudra bien demeurer avec vous… Le capitaine Gould, John Block et moi, nous essayerons d’arriver au sommet de la falaise… Il n’y a pas à craindre de s’égarer… Nous vous retrouverons à cette place… Ce sera vous épargner des fatigues peut-être inutiles…»

Mais Jenny, qui fut appuyée par Doll et Suzan, pria si instamment son mari, qu’il dut retirer sa proposition, bien que Harry Gould l’eût approuvée.

A trois heures, le cheminement fut repris, et, dès le début, il y eut lieu de reconnaître que les difficultés devenaient de plus en plus grandes. Pente très raide, sol jonché d’éboulis qui rendaient l’ascension très pénible, pierres qui glissaient en rebondissant, Harry Gould et Fritz prenaient d’extrêmes précautions, maintenant que la gorge, largement ouverte, formait un ravin dont les talus se haussaient encore à deux ou trois cents pieds. Il fallait s’aider les uns les autres, se tirer par les bras. D’ailleurs, tout donnait à croire que le plateau serait atteint. Voici même que l’albatros, déployant ses ailes, s’éleva d’un bond comme pour inviter à le suivre… Et que ne pouvait-on l’accompagner dans son vol!…

Enfin, après des efforts inouïs, un peu avant cinq heures, tous étaient sur la falaise.

Rien en vue ni vers le sud, ni vers l’est, ni vers l’ouest… Rien que la vaste mer!…

En s’étendant au nord, je plateau développait une étendue qu’il était impossible d’estimer, car on n’en voyait pas l’arête terminale. De ce côté présentait-il quelque paroi à pic, dressée face au large?… Faudrait-il aller jusqu’à son extrémité pour retrouver l’horizon de mer?…

En somme, c’était une déception pour ceux qui espéraient mettre le pied sur une région fertile, verdoyante, boisée! Même aridité, même désolation qu’à la baie des Tortues, qui était moins triste, sinon moins stérile, puisque des mousses la tapissaient ça et là, et les plantes marines ne manquaient pas à sa marge sablonneuse. Puis, lorsque l’on se retournait vers le levant ou le couchant, en vain cherchait-on les linéaments d’un continent ou d’une île. Tout indiquait un îlot isolé au milieu de ces parages.

Il est vrai, puisque la mer n’apparaissait pas en direction du nord, c’est que le plateau se développait sur une distance de plusieurs lieues… Et cette distance, il serait nécessaire de la franchir pour se retrouver en vue du large en cette direction.

Pas une parole ne fut prononcée ni par le capitaine Gould ni par ses compagnons devant cet anéantissement de leur dernière espérance. Ces affreuses solitudes n’offrant aucune ressource, il n’y avait plus qu’à reprendre la route du ravin, regagner cette grève, réintégrer la grotte, s’y installer durant les longs mois d’un hivernage, et n’attendre le salut que du dehors!…

Il était cinq heures alors, et avant que le soir n’obscurcît l’espace, il n’y avait pas de temps à perdre. Sans doute, on mettrait moins de temps à redescendre qu’on n’en avait mis à monter, mais, au milieu de l’ombre, le cheminement ne serait pas facile.

Cependant, puisqu’il restait à reconnaître la partie septentrionale du plateau, convenait-il de le faire pendant qu’il faisait jour encore?… Devait-on même y camper la nuit entre les quartiers de roches dispersés à sa surface?… Cela n’eût pas été prudent… Si le temps venait à changer, où trouver un abri?… La sagesse exigeait que l’on revînt sans retard.

C’est alors que Fritz fit cette proposition:

«Chère Jenny, dit-il, que François te ramène à la grotte avec Doll, Mme Wolston et le petit… Vous ne pouvez passer la nuit sur la falaise… Le capitaine Gould, John Block et moi, nous y resterons, et demain, dès qu’il fera jour, nous en achèverons la reconnaissance…»

Jenny ne répondit pas, tandis que Suzan et Doll semblaient la consulter du regard.

«Ce que Fritz propose est prudent, ajouta François, et d’ailleurs que pouvons-nous espérer en nous attardant ici?…»

Jenny continuait à garder le silence, observant cette immense mer qui se déployait sur les trois quarts de l’horizon, cherchant peut-être un navire en vue, se disant qu’un feu allait peut-être briller au large…

Déjà le soleil déclinait rapidement entre les nuages que le vent chassait du nord, et il y aurait au moins deux heures de marche au milieu d’une profonde obscurité pour atteindre la baie des Tortues…

Fritz reprit:

«Jenny, je t’en prie… va!… La journée de demain nous suffira sans doute… Nous serons de retour pour le soir… et s’il y a lieu de revenir… nous reviendrons…»

Jenny porta une dernière fois ses regards autour d’elle. Tous étaient levés, prêts à partir. Quant au fidèle albatros, il voltigeait de roche en roche, alors que les autres oiseaux, mouettes, goélands, macreuses, regagnaient, en poussant leurs derniers cris, les trous de la falaise.

La jeune femme comprenait bien qu’il fallait suivre le conseil de son mari, et, non sans regret:

«Partons… dit-elle.

— Partons», dit François.

Soudain, le bosseman se releva d’un bond, et, faisant de sa main un cornet, il tendit l’oreille dans la direction du nord.

Une détonation, très assourdie par la distance, venait de se faire entendre.

«Un coup de canon!» s’écria John Block.

CHAPITRE XXVI

Personne ne veut quitter la place. – La nuit sur le plateau. – En marche vers le nord. – Le mât du pavillon. – Les couleurs britanniques. – Le rideau de brumes. – Un cri de Fritz.

Tous immobiles, le cœur étreint par l'émotion, les regards dirigés vers l'horizon du nord, écoutaient, respiraient à peine. Qu'ils eussent été dupes d'une illusion… non… ce n'était pas admissible… Quelques décharges éloignées retentirent encore, apportées par les faibles souffles de la brise.

«C'est un bâtiment qui passe au large de cette côte!… dit enfin Harry Gould.

— Oui… ces détonations ne peuvent venir que d'un navire, répondit John Block, et, lorsque la nuit sera faite, qui sait si nous n'apercevrons pas ses feux…

— Cependant ces coups de canon… fit observer Jenny, pourquoi ne viendraient-ils pas de terre?…

— De terre, ma chère Jenny?… répondit Fritz. Il y aurait donc une terre voisine de cet îlot?…

— Je crois plutôt qu'un bâtiment se trouve au large dans le nord… répéta le capitaine Gould.

— A quel propos aurait-il tiré le canon?… demanda James.

— En effet… pourquoi?…» répéta Jenny.

En acceptant cette dernière hypothèse, il fallait conclure que le navire ne devait pas être très éloigné du littoral. Peut-être, en pleines ténèbres, distinguerait-on la lueur des décharges d’artillerie, si elles reprenaient?… Peut-être aussi ne tarderait-on pas à voir ses feux de position?… Il est vrai, puisque les coups entendus arrivaient du nord, il se pouvait que ce bâtiment ne pût être aperçu, puisqu’on ne voyait pas la mer de ce côté.

Et maintenant, il n’était plus question ni de s’engager à travers le ravin, ni de regagner la baie des Tortues… Quelque temps qu’il fît, tous resteraient à cette place jusqu’au jour… Par malheur, en cas qu’un navire descendît par l’ouest ou par l’est, il ne serait pas possible, faute de bois, d’allumer un feu sur le sommet de la falaise afin de se mettre en communication avec lui…

Ce qui est certain, c’est que ces détonations lointaines avaient remué jusqu’au plus profond de leur être ceux qui venaient de les entendre. Il semblait qu’elles les eussent rattachés à leurs semblables, que cet îlot parût maintenant moins isolé sur ces parages…

Et alors un irrésistible besoin les prit de discuter les nouvelles chances qu’offrait cette éventualité dans laquelle ils voyaient leur salut… Ce qu’ils auraient voulu, sans attendre au lendemain, c’eût été de gagner l’extrémité du plateau, d’observer en direction du nord cette partie de mer d’où étaient partis les coups de canon… Mais le soir s’avançait, la nuit ne tarderait pas à tomber, – une nuit sans lune, sans étoiles, épaissie par les nuages bas que la brise chassait vers le sud… Puis, au milieu de l’ombre, comment se risquer entre les roches?… Ce qui serait déjà bien difficile le jour était impossible au milieu des ténèbres.

Il y eut donc lieu de s’installer à cette place, et c’est ce dont chacun dut s’occuper. Après maintes recherches, le bosseman finit par découvrir une sorte de réduit, un entre-deux de blocs, où Jenny, Suzan, Doll et le petit garçon pourraient se blottir, à défaut de sable ou de varechs pour s’étendre. N’importe! il y aurait là un abri contre le vent s’il fraîchissait, un abri contre la pluie même si les nuages crevaient sur ces hauteurs.

Et, tout d’abord, les provisions furent tirées des sacs, et chacun mangea du mieux qu’il put. Il y avait des vivres pour quelques jours, et peut-être ne serait-il pas nécessaire de retourner à la grotte pour les renouveler… Et puis toute appréhension ne devait-elle pas être bannie au sujet d’un hivernage sur la baie des Tortues?…

La nuit était close, – une interminable nuit dont personne n’oublierait jamais les longues heures, si ce n’est le petit Bob qui s’endormit entre les bras de sa mère. Il régnait une profonde obscurité, et, du côté de la mer, le feu d’un navire eût été visible à plusieurs lieues au large.

Le capitaine Gould et les siens, pour la plupart, persistèrent à demeurer sur pied jusqu’au lever de l’aube. Leurs regards fouillaient incessamment l’est, l’ouest, le sud, dans l’espoir qu’un bâtiment vînt à passer au large de l’îlot, non sans la crainte qu’il le laissât en arrière pour n’y plus revenir. S’ils eussent été en ce moment à la baie des Tortues, ils auraient allumé un feu sur la pointe du promontoire… Ici c’était impossible.

Aucune lueur ne brilla avant le retour de l’aube, aucune détonation ne vint troubler le silence de cette nuit, aucun navire ne se montra en vue de l’îlot.

Aussi le capitaine Gould, Fritz, François, le bosseman se demandaient s’ils ne s’étaient pas trompés, s’ils n’avaient pas pris pour des décharges d’artillerie ce qui pouvait n’être qu’un bruit lointain d’orage…

«Non… non… assurait Fritz, nous n’avons point fait erreur!… C’est bien le canon qui a retenti dans la direction du nord, à une distance assez éloignée…

— J’en ai la conviction, répondait le bosseman.

— Mais à quel propos ces coups de canon?… répétait James Wolston.

— Pour le salut ou pour la défense!… répliquait Fritz. Je ne connais pas d’autre circonstance où l’on ait à faire usage de l’artillerie…

— Peut-être, observa François, y a-t-il eu descente et attaque de sauvages sur cet îlot…

— En tout cas, répondit le bosseman, ce ne sont pas des sauvages qui ont tiré ces coups de canon.

— L’îlot serait donc habité par des Américains ou des Européens?… dit James.

— D’abord… n’est-ce qu’un îlot?… répondit le capitaine Gould. Savons-nous ce qu’il y a au delà de cette falaise?… Ne sommes-nous point sur une île… une grande île…

— Une grande île dans ces parages du Pacifique?… demanda Fritz. Laquelle?… je ne vois pas…

— M’est avis, fit observer John Block, non sans quelque bon sens, qu’il est inutile de discuter là-dessus… La vérité est que nous ignorons si c’est un îlot ou une île du Pacifique ou de l’océan Indien!… Un peu de patience jusqu’au jour qui ne tardera pas à se lever, et nous irons voir ce qu’il y a du côté du nord…

— Peut-être tout… peut-être rien… dit James.

— Eh bien, repartit le bosseman, ce sera déjà quelque chose que de le savoir!»

Vers cinq heures du matin, les premières lueurs de l’aube commencèrent à poindre. Le levant blanchit au ras de l’horizon. Le temps était très calme, le vent ayant tombé dans la seconde partie de la nuit. Aux nuages que poussait la brise s’était substitué un rideau de brumes que le soleil finit par percer. L’espace se dégagea peu à peu. La raie de feu, nettement tracée à l’est, s’étendit, s’arrondit sur la ligne du ciel et de l’eau. Le disque apparut, en projetant de longues traînées lumineuses à la surface de la mer.

Les regards se portèrent avidement sur toute la partie visible de l’Océan.

Aucun navire, immobilisé par le calme du matin, ne se montrait au large.

A cet instant, le capitaine Gould fut rejoint par Jenny, Doll et Suzan Wolston qui tenait la main de son enfant.

L’albatros, allant et venant, sautait d’une roche à l’autre, s’éloignait parfois dans la direction du nord, comme s’il indiquait la route…

«Il nous montre le chemin… semble-t-il… dit Jenny.

— Il faut le suivre… s’écria Doll.

— Pas avant d’avoir pris notre premier repas, répondit Harry Gould. Peut-être aurons-nous quelques heures de marche, et il convient de prendre des forces.»

On partagea rapidement les provisions, tant l’impatience était grande, et, avant sept heures, tous s’étaient mis en route en remontant vers le nord.

Le cheminement fut des plus pénibles entre les roches. On franchissait les petites, on contournait les grosses. En avant, le capitaine Gould et le bosseman indiquaient les passages praticables. Venaient ensuite Fritz aidant Jenny, François aidant Doll, James aidant Suzan et le petit Bob. Nulle part le pied ne rencontrait herbe ou sable. Il n’y avait là qu’un entassement chaotique, ce qu’eut été un vaste champ de blocs erratiques ou de moraines. Au-dessus passaient des oiseaux, frégates, mouettes, hirondelles de mer, auxquels l’albatros mêlait parfois son vol.

On marcha ainsi une heure au prix d’extrêmes fatigues, ayant à peine gagné une lieue toujours en montant. Ni l’aspect ni la nature du plateau ne se modifiaient.

Il fut indispensable de faire halte afin de prendre un peu de repos.

Fritz proposa alors de se porter en avant avec le capitaine Gould et John Block. Cela épargnerait aux autres de nouvelles fatigues si elles devaient être inutiles.

Cette proposition fut unanimement rejetée… On ne se séparerait pas… Tous voulaient être là au moment où la mer apparaîtrait au nord, si elle devait apparaître.

La marche reprit vers neuf heures. La brume tempérait les ardeurs du soleil. A cette époque de l’année, elles eussent été insoutenables à la surface de ce champ pierreux, que les rayons frapperaient presque perpendiculairement au moment de la méridienne.

Tout en se développant vers le nord, le plateau s’élargissait vers l’est et vers l’ouest, et la mer, qui jusqu’alors était restée visible en ces deux directions, finirait par n’être plus visible. Au surplus, pas un arbre, pas trace de végétation, même stérilité, même solitude. Quelques tumescences se dessinaient çà et là en avant.

A onze heures, une sorte de cône montra sa cime dénudée qui dominait cette partie du plateau de trois cents pieds environ.

«C’est ce sommet qu’il faut atteindre… dit Jenny.

— Oui… répondit Fritz, et de là, notre regard s’étendra sur un plus large horizon… Mais peut-être l’ascension sera-t-elle rude!…»

Oui, sans doute, mais tel était l’irrésistible désir d’être fixé sur la situation, que personne n’eût voulu demeurer en arrière, quelle que dût être la fatigue. Qui sait, cependant, si ces pauvres gens n’allaient pas à une dernière déception, où se dissiperait leur dernier espoir?…

On reprit la route en gagnant vers le cône, distant alors de trois quarts de lieue. Que de difficultés à chaque pas et combien la marche fut lente à travers ces centaines de blocs qu’il fallait tourner ou franchir. Ce fut une escalade de chamois plutôt qu’un cheminement de piétons. Le bosseman voulut absolument se charger de Bob, que lui confia sa mère. Fritz et Jenny, François et Doll, James et Suzan se tenaient l’un près de l’autre afin de s’entr’aider dans les passages dangereux.

Bref, il était plus de deux heures de l’après-midi, lorsque la base du cône fut atteinte. Il y eut nécessité de se reposer, car on n’avait pas mis moins de trois heures à franchir quinze cents toises depuis la précédente halte. L’arrêt fut de courte durée, et, après vingt minutes l’ascension commença.

Assurément, le capitaine Gould avait eu la pensée de contourner le cône, afin d’éviter une montée très fatigante. Mais on reconnut que la base en était impraticable. Après tout, il ne s’agissait que de trois cents pieds à gravir.

Au début, entre les roches, le pied put prendre appui sur un sol où végétaient de maigres plantes, des touffes de pariétaires, auxquelles la main pouvait s’accrocher.

Une demi-heure suffit à gagner la moitié du cône. Mais alors Fritz, qui tenait la tête, laissa échapper un cri de surprise.

Tous s’arrêtèrent, les yeux tournés vers lui:

«Qu’y a-t-il donc là?…» dit-il, en désignant de la main l’extrême pointe.

A cette place, en effet, se dressait un bâton, long de cinq à six pieds, entre les dernières roches.

«Serait-ce une branche d’arbre dépouillée de ses feuilles?… dit François.

— Non… ce n’est pas une branche… déclara le capitaine Gould.

— C’est un bâton… un bâton de voyage… affirma Fritz… un bâton qui a été planté à cette place…

— Et auquel on a fixé un pavillon… ajouta le bosseman, et le pavillon y est encore!»

Un pavillon à la cime de ce cône!…

Oui… et la brise commençait à développer ce pavillon, dont, de cette distance, on ne pouvait reconnaître les couleurs.

«Il y a donc des habitants sur cet îlot?… s'écria François.

— Pas de doute… il est habité… affirma Jenny.

— Ou s'il ne l'est pas, déclara Fritz, il est certain, du moins, qu'on en a pris possession…

— Mais quel est donc cet îlot?… demanda James Wolston.

— Ou plutôt quel est donc ce pavillon?… ajouta Harry Gould.

— Pavillon anglais!… cria le bosseman. Voyez… l'étamine rouge avec le yacht au coin!…»

Le vent venait de le déployer, et c'était bien le pavillon de la Grande-Bretagne.

Et alors, tous de s'élancer de roches en roches! Cent cinquante pieds les séparaient encore de la pointe, mais ils ne sentaient plus la fatigue, ils ne cherchaient même pas à reprendre haleine, ils montaient sans s'arrêter, entraînés par une force surhumaine…

Enfin, avant trois heures, le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons étaient réunis à la pointe du cône…

Quel désappointement ils éprouvèrent, lorsque leurs regards se portèrent dans la direction du nord!

Une épaisse brume s'étendait à perte de vue. Impossible de reconnaître si le plateau se terminait de ce côté par une falaise verticale comme à la baie des Tortues, ou s'il se prolongeait au delà. On n'apercevait rien à travers ce brouillard opaque. Au-dessus de la zone des vapeurs, le ciel s'éclairait encore des rayons du soleil qui déclinait vers l'ouest.

Eh bien, on ne quitterait pas cette place, fallût-il y rester jusqu'au lendemain, on y camperait, on attendrait que la brise eût chassé ce brouillard!… Non! personne ne reviendrait en arrière, sans avoir observé l'îlot dans sa partie septentrionale!…

Le pavillon britannique n'était-il pas là, qui flottait au souffle de la brise?… Ne disait-il pas que cette terre avait rang dans la nomenclature géographique, qu'elle devait maintenant figurer en latitude et en longitude sur les cartes anglaises?…

Et ces coups de canon entendus la veille, qui sait s'ils ne provenaient pas de navires qui saluaient ce pavillon au passage! Qui sait s'il n'existait pas un port de relâche sur cette portion du littoral, si quelques bâtiments n'y étaient pas au mouillage!…

Enfin, même en cas que cette terre ne fût qu'un îlot, y aurait-il lieu de s'étonner que la Grande-Bretagne en eût pris possession, puisque son gisement le plaçait sur les limites de l'océan Indien et de l'océan Pacifique?… Et même, si c'était une terre, pourquoi n'appartiendrait-elle pas au continent australien dans cette partie peu connue qui se rattachait au domaine britannique?…

Toutes ces hypothèses se présentaient à l'esprit, on les exposait, on les discutait, et avec quelle impatience chacun attendait le moment où la vérité se ferait jour!

A cet instant, un cri d’oiseau retentit, suivi d’un rapide battement d’ailes.

C’était l’albatros de Jenny, qui venait de s’envoler et filait au-dessus des brumes en se dirigeant vers le nord.

Où allait-il ainsi cet oiseau?… Était-ce vers quelque rivage éloigné?…

Son départ produisit un sentiment de tristesse et même d’angoisse… Il semblait que ce fût comme un abandon…

Cependant l’heure s’avançait, et les souffles intermittents de la brise ne parvenaient pas à dissiper ce brouillard dont les grosses volutes roulaient au pied du cône. La nuit arriverait-elle avant que l’horizon du nord se fût révélé aux regards?…

Non, tout espoir n’était pas perdu. Comme les vapeurs commençaient à s’abaisser, Fritz put constater que le cône dominait, non point une falaise, mais de longues pentes qui, probablement, se développaient jusqu’au niveau de la mer…

Puis le vent prit de la force, les plis du pavillon se raidirent et au ras des brumes chacun put observer le talus sur une centaine de pieds.

Ce n’était plus un amoncellement de roches, c’était un revers de montagnes, où réapparaissait une végétation que les yeux n’avaient pas aperçue depuis de long mois!…

Aussi, avec quelle avidité tous regardaient ces larges pans de verdure, ces arbustes, des aloès, des lentisques, des myrtes, qui poussaient ça et là! Assurément, on n’attendrait pas que le brouillard se fût tout à fait dissipé, et il fallait avoir atteint la base de cette montagne avant que la nuit ne l’eût enveloppée d’ombres!…

Mais voici qu’à huit ou neuf cents pieds au-dessous, entre les déchirures des vapeurs, émergèrent les hautes frondaisons d’une forêt qui s’étendait sur plusieurs lieues; puis, toute une plaine fertile, semée de bouquets et de massifs d’arbres avec de larges champs, de vastes prairies, traversés de cours d’eau dont le principal se dirigeait à l’est vers une baie du littoral…

En même temps, au levant et au couchant, la mer se continuait jusqu’à l’extrême périmètre de l’horizon. Elle ne manquait plus que vers le nord pour faire de cette terre, non un îlot, mais une île… une grande île!…

Enfin, à plus grande distance, se dessinaient les vagues linéaments d’un rempart rocheux qui courait de l’ouest à l’est. Était-ce la bordure d’une côte?…

«Partons… partons!… s’écria Fritz.

— Oui… partons… répéta François. Nous serons en bas avant la nuit…

— Et nous la passerons à l’abri des arbres…» ajouta le capitaine Gould.

Jenny allait se joindre à Fritz et demander que l’on ne s’attardât pas plus longtemps, lorsque les dernières vapeurs se dissipèrent. L’Océan apparut alors dans toute son immensité à une distance qui pouvait être de sept à huit lieues.

Une île… c’était bien une île!

On vit alors que la côte septentrionale s’échancrait de trois baies d’étendue inégale, la plus considérable au nord-ouest, la moyenne au nord, la plus petite ouverte au nord-est, plus profondément entaillée que les deux autres. Le bras de mer qui y donnait accès se terminait par deux caps lointains, dont l'un s'appuyait à un promontoire assez élevé.

Au large, aucune autre terre… Pas une voile ne se gonflait à l'horizon.

En redescendant vers le sud, le regard était arrêté à deux lieues environ par l'extrême crête de cette falaise qui fermait la baie des Tortues.

Quel contraste entre l'aride région que le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons venaient de parcourir et celle qui s'étendait sous leurs yeux! Ce qu'ils voyaient, c'était une campagne fertile et variée, ici en forêts, là en plaine, présentant partout cette végétation exubérante des zones tropicales!… D'ailleurs, nulle part, ni hameau, ni village, ni habitation…

Et alors, un cri… un cri de révélation soudaine qu'il n'aurait pu retenir, s'échappa de la poitrine de Fritz, tandis que ses bras se tendaient vers le nord:

«La Nouvelle-Suisse!…

— Oui… la Nouvelle-Suisse… s'écria François à son tour.

— La Nouvelle-Suisse!» répétèrent d'une voix brisée par l'émotion Jenny et Doll.

Ainsi, devant eux, au delà de cette forêt, au delà de ces prairies, c'était la barrière rocheuse qu'ils apercevaient, le rempart où s'ouvrait le défilé de Cluse sur la vallée de Grünthal!… Au delà, c'était la Terre-Promise, ses bois, ses métairies, le ruisseau des Chacals!… C'était Falkenhorst au milieu de son massif de mangliers, puis Felsenheim, et les arbres de son enclos!… Cette baie, à gauche, c'était la baie de Perles, et, plus loin, comme un point noirâtre, la Roche-Fumante, couronnée de vapeurs volcaniques, puis la baie des Nautiles, d’où se projetait le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, puis la baie du Salut, défendue par l’îlot du Requin!… Et pourquoi ne serait-ce pas sa batterie dont on avait entendu les détonations la veille, car il n’y avait aucun navire ni dans la baie ni au large?…

Et, pénétrés d’une indicible joie, le cœur palpitant, les yeux mouillés des larmes de la reconnaissance, tous s’unirent à François dans la prière qui s’éleva vers le Ciel!

CHAPITRE XXVII

Une grotte au pied de la chaîne. – Retour sur le passé. – A travers la forêt.

— Capture d’une antilope. – La rivière Montrose. – La vallée de Grünthal.

— Le défilé de Cluse. – Une nuit à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt.

La grotte dans laquelle M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack avaient passé la nuit, quatre mois auparavant, lors de leur excursion aux montagnes, la veille du jour où le pavillon anglais fut arboré au sommet du pic Jean-Zermatt, s’emplissait ce soir-là de la plus vive et de la plus légitime animation. La joie y débordait. Si personne, la nuit venue, n’y dormait d’un tranquille sommeil, cette insomnie ne serait pas due aux mauvais rêves, mais à l’agitation des esprits, au tumulte des pensées provoquées par les derniers événements.

Après leur élan d’actions de grâces, le capitaine Gould, Fritz, François, James, le bosseman, Jenny, Doll et Suzan Wolston n’avaient pas voulu s’attarder une minute à la cime du cône. Deux heures allaient s’écouler avant que le jour eût remplacé la nuit, et ce temps devait suffire à gagner le pied de la chaîne.

«Il serait bien étonnant, observa Fritz, que nous n’y trouvions pas quelque cavité assez grande pour nous abriter tous…

— Et, d’ailleurs, répliqua François, nous coucherons sous les arbres… sous les arbres de la Nouvelle-Suisse… de la Nouvelle-Suisse!…»

Et François ne pouvait se retenir de répéter ce cher nom, béni de tous.

«Mais redites-le donc avec moi, ma chère Doll, reprit-il, redites-le donc que je l’entende encore…

— Oui… la Nouvelle-Suisse!… dit la fillette, dont les yeux brillaient de joie.

— La Nouvelle-Suisse!» répéta à son tour Jenny, sa main dans la main de Fritz.

Et il n’y eut pas jusqu’à Bob qui ne fît écho. Il en avait plein sa petite bouche, ce qui lui valut nombre de baisers.

«Mes amis, dit alors le capitaine Harry Gould, si l’on décide de redescendre au pied de la montagne, nous n’avons pas de temps à perdre…

— Et manger?… répliqua John Block, et pourvoir à notre nourriture en route?…

— Dans quarante-huit heures, nous serons à Felsenheim, affirma François.

— D’ailleurs, reprit Fritz, est-ce que le gibier n’abonde pas sur les plaines de la Nouvelle-Suisse?…

— Et comment chasser sans fusil?… demanda Harry Gould. Si adroits que soient Fritz et François, je n’imagine pas qu’en faisant seulement le geste de tirer…

— Bah! répondit Fritz, nous avons des jambes!… Vous verrez cela, capitaine!… Demain, avant midi, nous aurons de la bonne et vraie viande, au lieu de cette chair de tortue…

— Fritz, ne disons pas de mal des tortues… ne fût-ce que par reconnaissance… déclara Jenny.

— Tu as raison, chère femme, mais partons!… Bob ne veut pas rester plus longtemps ici… n’est-ce pas, Bob?…

— Non… non… répondit l’enfant, et si papa et maman viennent avec moi…

— Oui… ils viendront, lui assura Jenny, et ils ne seront pas les derniers à se mettre en route…

— Partons… partons!…»

Tel fut le cri général.

«Et dire, fit observer d’un ton malicieux le bosseman, dire que nous avons là-bas… dans le sud… une belle plage où abondent tortues et mollusques… une belle grotte où il y a des provisions pour plusieurs semaines… et dans cette grotte, une belle literie de varechs… et que nous allons abandonner tout cela pour…

— Nous reviendrons plus tard rechercher nos trésors, promit Fritz.

— Cependant… insista John Block.

— Veux-tu bien te taire, maudit John!… ordonna Harry Gould en riant.

— Je me tais, mon capitaine, et je ne demande qu’à ajouter encore deux mots.

— Lesquels?…

— En route!…»

Suivant son habitude, Fritz prit la tête. Les autres se groupèrent comme ils l’avaient fait déjà. Après avoir descendu sans difficultés sur les flancs du cône, ils atteignirent le pied de la chaîne. Un heureux instinct, un véritable sens de l’orientation, leur avait fait prendre le chemin que M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack avaient suivi, et il était à peine huit heures, lorsqu’ils furent sur la limite de la vaste sapinière.

Enfin, par un hasard non moins heureux, – et pourquoi s’en étonner puisqu’on était entré dans la période des bonnes chances? – le bosseman découvrit la grotte dans laquelle M. Wolston et les deux frères avaient trouvé abri. Qu’elle fût étroite, peu importait, du moment qu’elle suffirait à Jenny, à Doll, à Suzan et au petit Bob, tandis que les hommes dormiraient à la belle étoile. On reconnut, d’ailleurs, aux cendres blanches d’un foyer, qu’elle avait été occupée précédemment. Ainsi, M. Zermatt, M. Wolston, Ernest, Jack, peut-être même les deux familles, étaient venus à travers cette forêt, puis avaient gravi le cône sur lequel se dressait le pavillon britannique!… Et, en cas de retard des uns et d’avance des autres, ils auraient pu se rencontrer en cet endroit.

Après le repas, lorsque Bob fut endormi dans un coin de la grotte, la conversation, malgré les fatigues de cette journée, se reporta sur les incidents du *Flag*.

Oui!… pendant les huit jours que le capitaine Gould, le bosseman, Fritz, François, James avaient été emprisonnés, le navire s’était dirigé vers le nord. Cela ne pouvait s’expliquer que par la persistance de vents contraires, car l’intérêt de Robert Borupt et de l’équipage était assurément de rallier les lointaines mers du Pacifique. S’ils ne l’avaient pas fait, c’est que le temps ne leur avait pas permis de le faire. Tout indiquait que le *Flag* avait été drossé vers les parages de l’océan Indien, à proximité de la Nouvelle-Suisse. En tenant compte du temps écoulé et de la direction suivie depuis que la chaloupe fut abandonnée, il ressortait incontestablement que, ce jour-là, Harry Gould et ses compagnons ne devaient pas se trouver à plus d’une centaine de lieues de l’île dont ils se croyaient si éloignés, puisque, après une semaine de navigation, la chaloupe accostait la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Il est vrai, c’était sur cette partie sud du littoral que Fritz et François ne connaissaient pas, derrière cette chaîne de montagnes qu’ils avaient aperçue pour la première fois en débouchant sur la vallée de Grünthal. Et qui eût pu imaginer qu’une telle différence au point de vue de la nature du sol et de ses productions existât entre la riche contrée située au nord de cette chaîne et ce plateau aride qui s’étendait depuis le cône jusqu’à la mer?…

De cette façon s’expliquait également l’arrivée de l’albatros sur le revers de la falaise. Après le départ de Jenny Montrose, cet oiseau était probablement revenu à la Roche-Fumante, d’où il s’envolait parfois jusqu’aux rivages de la Nouvelle-Suisse, sans avoir jamais atteint Falkenhorst ou Felsenheim. Mais, au total, quelle part ce fidèle oiseau avait eue dans le salut commun!… N’était-ce pas à lui qu’on devait la découverte de cette seconde grotte où l’avait accompagné le petit Bob, et, par suite, celle du passage qui aboutissait au plateau de la falaise?…

Oui! tel était cet enchaînement de circonstances, cette succession de faits, où des cœurs reconnaissants sentaient l’intervention providentielle. Et, d’ailleurs, malgré tant d’épreuves, tant de misères, même devant les menaces d’un hivernage, avaient-ils jamais perdu leur confiance en Dieu?…

On comprendra que cette conversation se fût prolongée fort avant dans la nuit. Mais enfin, la fatigue l’emportant, les dernières heures s’écoulèrent dans le sommeil. Puis, dès l’aube, ayant pris quelque nourriture, tous se mirent en route avec non moins de gaîté que d’impatience.

Du reste, après les restes du foyer de la grotte, la petite troupe allait rencontrer d’autres traces à travers la forêt et la campagne. En ce qui concerne les foulées d’herbes, les brisures de branches, elles étaient dues au passage des animaux, ruminants pu fauves, mais en retrouvant certains vestiges de campement, il était impossible de se tromper.

«Et puis, fit observer Fritz, quels autres que mon père, mes frères, M. Wolston, auraient pu planter le pavillon au sommet de ce cône?…

— A moins qu’il ne soit allé s’y planter tout seul!… répondit en riant le bosseman.

— Ce qui ne serait pas étonnant de la part d’un pavillon anglais!… répliqua François sur le même ton, car ils sont nombreux, les endroits où il semble avoir poussé tout seul!»

Le capitaine Gould ne put que sourire à cette boutade. Toutefois, si doué de qualités végétatives que soit le pavillon de la Grande-Bretagne, nul doute que celui du cône eût été arboré de main d’homme. Donc, M. Zermatt et les siens avaient fait une excursion jusqu’à la chaîne en gagnant par le plus court, et le plus simple serait de suivre leurs traces.

Guidés par Fritz, ses compagnons descendirent les premières pentes que la forêt recouvrait en partie.

Qu’il y eût des obstacles à surmonter, des dangers à courir sur le parcours entre cette chaîne et la Terre-Promise, cela ne semblait guère probable.

Quant à la distance entre ces deux points, on pouvait l’estimer à une huitaine de lieues. A faire quatre lieues par jour, coupées d’une halte de midi à deux heures, en se reposant la nuit, il serait possible d’atteindre le lendemain soir le défilé de Cluse.

De ce défilé à Felsenheim ou à Falkenhorst, ce serait l’affaire de quelques heures.

«Ah! disait François, si nous avions seulement nos deux braves buffles Sturm et Brummer, ou Rash, l’onagre de Fritz, ou Brausewind, l’autruche de Jack, il ne nous faudrait pas une journée pour arriver en vue de Felsenheim!

— Je suis sûre, répondit Jenny en plaisantant, que François aura oublié de mettre à la poste la lettre par laquelle nous demandions de nous les envoyer…

— Comment, François, ajouta Fritz, toi… un homme si sérieux… si attentif!…

— Eh non! répliqua François, c’est Jenny qui a négligé d’attacher un billet à la patte de son albatros, avant qu’il ne prît son vol…

— Étourdie que je suis!… répondit la jeune femme.

— Mais, dit Doll, il n’est pas certain que le messager aurait porté le message à son adresse…

— Et qui sait?… répondit François. Tout ce qui nous arrive maintenant est si extraordinaire…

— Eh bien, conclut le capitaine Gould, puisque nous ne devons compter ni sur Sturm, ni sur Brummer, ni sur Rash, ni sur Brausewind, le mieux est de ne compter que sur nos jambes…

— Et d’allonger le pas», acheva John Block.

On partit avec l’intention de ne s’arrêter que pour la halte de midi. De temps en temps, James, François, le bosseman, se chargeaient de Bob, bien que l’enfant voulût absolument marcher. Il n’y eut donc pas de retard pendant la traversée de la forêt.

Tout en cheminant, James et Suzan Wolston, qui ne connaissaient rien des merveilles de la Nouvelle-Suisse, ne cessaient d’admirer cette végétation puissante, très supérieure à celle de la colonie du Cap.

Et ils n’étaient que dans la partie de l’île abandonnée à elle-même, celle que la main de l’homme n’avait pas transformée! Que serait-ce donc lorsqu’ils visiteraient la région cultivée du district, les métairies de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, de Zuckertop, de Waldegg, de Prospect-Hill, ce riche domaine de la Terre-Promise!…

Le gibier abondait, des agoutis, des pécaris, des cabiais, des antilopes, des lapins, et aussi outardes, perdrix, coqs de bruyère, gelinottes, pintades, canards. Assurément, Fritz et François eurent quelque raison de regretter que le fusil de chasse leur fit défaut… Ah!… si les chiens Braun et Falb et même le vieux Turc eussent gambadé à leurs côtés!… Et même, si l’aigle de Fritz ne fût pas mort et eût rejoint son maître, celui-ci n’aurait pas tardé à rapporter une demi-douzaine de belles pièces!… Mais comme les cabiais, les pécaris, les agoutis, ne se laissèrent point approcher, toutes les tentatives ne donnèrent aucun résultat pendant la première étape, et l’on serait probablement réduit à dévorer, au prochain repas, le reste des provisions.

Or, voici comment la question de nourriture fut résolue par un incident des plus heureux.

Vers onze heures, Fritz, qui marchait en avant, fit un signal d’arrêter sur la limite d’une petite clairière, traversée d’un étroit rio, au bord duquel se désaltérait un animal d’assez grande taille.

C’était une antilope, et quelle chair saine et réconfortante on se procurerait, à la condition de s’emparer du ruminant par un moyen quelconque!

Le plus simple, en somme, parut être de cerner la clairière, sans se laisser voir, et, dès que l’antilope essayerait d’en sortir, de lui barrer la route, – au risque d’en recevoir quelques coups de corne, – puis de la maîtriser et de l’abattre.

C’est que le difficile allait précisément être d’exécuter cette opération sans donner l’éveil à un animal dont la vue est si perçante, l’ouïe si fine, l’odorat si subtil.

Cependant, tandis que Jenny, Suzan, Doll et Bob se tenaient à l’écart derrière un buisson, Fritz, François, James, le capitaine Gould, le bosseman, qui ne possédaient pour toute arme que leurs couteaux de poche, commencèrent à contourner la clairière, en s’abritant le long des fourrés.

L’antilope continuait à boire au ruisseau, sans donner aucun signe d’inquiétude, lorsque Fritz surgit brusquement en poussant un grand cri.

Aussitôt l’animal de se redresser, de tendre le cou, de se lancer vers le fourré qu’il saurait franchir d’un seul bond.

C’était du côté où se tenaient François et John Block, le couteau à la main. S’ils ne pouvaient l’empêcher de passer par-dessus leur tête, l’antilope serait rapidement hors de portée.

La bête sauta, mais, ayant mal pris son élan, retomba, renversa le bosseman, et chercha à se relever afin de fuir à travers la forêt, où l’on aurait perdu toute chance de la capturer.

A cet instant arriva Fritz, qui, se jetant sur l’antilope, parvint à lui enfoncer son couteau dans le flanc. Mais ce coup n’eût pas suffi, si Harry Gould n’eût réussi à la frapper à la gorge.

Cette fois, l’animal resta sans mouvement au milieu des branches, tandis que le bosseman se dressait lestement.

«Satanée bête! s’écria John Block, qui en était quitte pour quelques contusions. J’ai reçu plus d’un paquet de mer dans ma vie, mais jamais aucun ne m’a fait faire pareille culbute!»

James, Jenny, Doll et Suzan venaient d’accourir.

«J’espère que tu n’as pas grand mal, Block?… demanda Harry Gould.

— Non… des écorchures, et ça ne compte pas, mon capitaine… Ce qui est désagréable et même humiliant, c’est d’avoir été bousculé de la sorte…

— Eh bien, pour votre peine, répondit Jenny, on vous réservera le meilleur morceau.

— Non, madame Fritz, non… et je préfère celui qui m’a flanqué par terre… et comme c’était sa tête, à cet animal, je demande à manger sa tête!»

On se mit en mesure de dépecer l’antilope et d’en retirer les parties comestibles. Quant à la nourriture, puisqu’elle serait assurée jusqu’au lendemain soir, il n’y aurait donc plus à s’en préoccuper avant l’arrivée au défilé de Cluse.

Fritz et François n’en étaient pas à apprendre la manière d’opérer, lorsqu’il s’agissait de préparer un gibier quelconque. N’avaient-ils pas acquis théorie et pratique pendant douze années de chasse à travers les champs et les bois de la Terre-Promise? En outre, le bosseman n’était pas maladroit à cette besogne. Il semblait, d’ailleurs, qu’il éprouvait un certain plaisir à se venger de la bête en la dépouillant. En moins d’un quart d’heure, les cuissots, les côtelettes et autres morceaux savoureux furent prêts à être grillés sur la braise.

Comme il était près de midi, il parut convenable de camper dans la clairière, dont le rio fournirait une eau limpide et fraîche. Harry Gould et James allumèrent un feu de bois sec au pied d’un manglier. Puis, sur des charbons ardents, Fritz plaça les meilleures parties de l’antilope, laissant à Suzan et Doll le soin de surveiller les grillades.

Par un heureux hasard, Jenny venait de découvrir quantité de ces racines qui se cuisent sous la cendre. De nature à satisfaire des estomacs affamés, elles compléteraient fort agréablement le menu de ce déjeuner.

Or, rien n’est plus délicat que la chair de l’antilope, à la fois parfumée et tendre, et ce fut un vrai régal pour tout le monde.

«Que c’est bon, s’écria John Block, de manger enfin de la viande sérieuse, qui a marché de son vivant… au lieu de ramper lourdement sur le sol!…

— Ne disons pas de mal des tortues, répliqua le capitaine, même pour célébrer les mérites de l’antilope.

— Monsieur Gould a raison, ajouta Jenny. Sans ces excellentes bêtes, qui nous ont nourris depuis notre arrivée sur l’île, que serions-nous devenus?…

— Alors, vivent les tortues! cria le bosseman, mais redonnez-moi une troisième côtelette.»

Ce réconfortant repas terminé, on se remit en route. Il n’y avait pas une heure à perdre pour que l’étape de l’après-midi complétât la moyenne de quatre lieues à la journée.

Assurément, si Fritz et François eussent été seuls, ils n’auraient pas compté avec la fatigue. C’eût été tout d’une traite, en marchant la nuit, qu’ils se fussent dirigés vers le défilé de Cluse. Peut-être même en eurent-ils l’idée, et c’était bien tentant, puisque, dans l’après-midi du lendemain, ils fussent arrivés à Felsenheim. Mais ils ne se hasardèrent pas à faire cette proposition d’aller en avant, sachant bien que personne ne les laisserait partir.

D’ailleurs, quelle joie d’arriver tous au but tant désiré, de se jeter ensemble dans les bras de ces parents, de ces amis, qui les attendaient depuis si longtemps, qui désespéraient peut-être de les revoir!… Et avec quelle émotion, quelle explosion de joie, ils s’écrieraient:

«Nous voilà… nous voilà!»

Cette seconde étape s’effectua donc dans les mêmes conditions que la première, de façon à ménager les forces de Jenny, de Doll et de Suzan Wolston.

Aucun incident ne se produisit, et, vers quatre heures de l’après-midi, la lisière de la forêt fut atteinte.

Une fertile campagne se développait au delà. Sa végétation était due à la seule puissance productive du sol, des prairies verdoyantes, des bois ou des bouquets d’arbres, qui s’espaçaient jusqu’à l’entrée de la vallée de Grünthal.

Quelques bandes de cerfs, de daims passaient au loin. Il ne fut pas question de leur donner la chasse. On aperçut aussi de nombreuses troupes d’autruches, dont la présence rappela à la mémoire de Fritz et de François leur expédition aux environs de la tour des Arabes.

Plusieurs éléphants apparurent également; ils longeaient d’épais massifs d’un pas tranquille, et quels regards d’envie leur aurait jetés Jack, s’il eût été là!

«Pendant notre absence, dit Fritz, pourquoi Jack ne serait-il pas parvenu à capturer un éléphant… à l’apprivoiser… à le dresser!… comme nous l’avions fait pour Sturm, Brummer et Leichtfus?…

— C’est très possible, mon ami, répondit Jenny. Après quatorze mois d’absence, il faut s’attendre à trouver du nouveau dans la Nouvelle-Suisse…

— Notre seconde patrie! dit François.

— Je me figure déjà, s’écria Doll, qu’elle possède d’autres habitations… d’autres métairies… peut-être un village…

— Eh! fît le bosseman, je me contenterais très bien de ce que nous voyons… et je n’imagine pas qu’il y ait dans votre île une plus belle campagne que celle-ci…

— Ce n’est rien auprès de la Terre-Promise, monsieur Block… affirma Doll.

— Rien, ajouta Jenny, et si M. Zermatt l’a nommée de ce nom biblique, c’est qu’elle le mérite, et, plus favorisés que les Hébreux, nous allons mettre le pied sur la terre de Chanaan.»

John Block dut se laisser convaincre que ces éloges n’étaient nullement exagérés.

A six heures, Fritz organisa la halte de nuit, et pourtant, il lui en coûta, ainsi qu’à son frère, qui eussent volontiers doublé l’étape jusqu’à la vallée de Grünthal.

A cette époque de l’année, le temps ne menaçait pas de se modifier, et le froid n’était pas à craindre. Le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons avaient plutôt souffert de la chaleur pendant la journée, malgré l’abri des grands arbres aux heures de la méridienne. Au delà, quelques bois isolés avaient permis de cheminer à l’ombre, sans trop s’écarter de la ligne droite, et, par conséquent, sans subir aucun retard.

Devant le foyer garni de bois sec et pétillant, le repas fut préparé comme l’avait été celui du matin. Sans doute, cette nuit ne se passerait pas à l’intérieur d’une grotte; mais, la fatigue aidant, le sommeil n’eût fait défaut à personne.

Toutefois, par prudence, Fritz, François et le bosseman voulurent veiller tour à tour. Avec l’obscurité, des rugissements se laissaient entendre au loin, et rappelaient que des fauves fréquentaient cette partie de l’île.

Le lendemain, départ dès la pointe de l’aube. On pouvait avoir franchi le défilé de Cluse à la seconde étape, s’il ne se présentait aucun obstacle sur cette route où se relevaient toujours des empreintes de fraîche date.

La marche n’offrit pas plus de difficultés ce jour-là que la veille. On gagnait, pour ainsi dire, de massifs en massifs, de manière à se garantir des rayons solaires.

Après le repas de midi au bord d’une rivière au cours rapide, large de neuf à dix toises, qui s’enfuyait vers le nord, il n’y eut qu’à en suivre la rive gauche.

Ni Fritz ni François ne connaissaient cette rivière, puisque leurs excursions ne les avaient jamais amenés sur la partie centrale de l’île. Ils ne se doutaient guère, en vérité, qu’elle eût déjà reçu un nom, qu’elle s’appelât la Montrose, pas plus qu’ils ne connaissaient le nouveau nom de pic Jean-Zermatt, sur lequel flottait le pavillon britannique. Et quelle satisfaction pour Jenny, lorsqu’elle apprendrait que ce cours d’eau, l’un des plus importants de la Nouvelle-Suisse, portait le nom de sa famille!

Après une heure de marche, on abandonna la Montrose, qui obliquait brusquement vers l’est. Deux heures plus tard, Fritz, François, qui avaient pris les devants, mettaient enfin le pied sur une région déjà connue d’eux.

«La vallée de Grünthal!» s’écrièrent-ils, en la saluant d’un hurrah.

C’était bien la vallée de Grünthal, et il n’y avait plus qu’à la remonter jusqu’au rempart qui fermait la Terre-Promise pour se trouver au défilé de Cluse.

Cette fois, aucune considération, faim ou fatigue, n’aurait pu les retenir ni les uns ni les autres! A la suite de Fritz et de François, tous avançaient d’un pas rapide, bien que le chemin fût raide. Ils étaient comme poussés en avant, à l’approche de ce but qu’ils avaient désespéré de jamais atteindre!

Ah! par une bonne fortune extraordinaire, si M. Zermatt et M. Wolston étaient à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, si leurs familles les y avaient accompagnés, ainsi que c’était l’habitude pendant la belle saison…

Mais, comme on dit, «c’eût été trop de bonheur», et John Block lui-même n’aurait pas voulu l’espérer.

Enfin l’extrémité nord-ouest de la vallée de Grünthal apparut près de la barrière des roches, et Fritz se dirigea vers le défilé.

Les poutres de l’entrée étaient en place, solidement engagées entre les interstices du roc, de manière à résister aux efforts des plus vigoureux quadrupèdes.

«Voilà notre porte… s’écria Fritz.

— Oui, dit Jenny, la porte de cette Terre-Promise, où vivent tous ceux que nous aimons!»

Il n’y avait qu’un madrier à déplacer, ce qui ne demanda que quelques minutes.

Enfin le défilé fut franchi, et chacun eut le sentiment qu'il rentrait chez soi, – ce chez-soi dont, il y avait trois jours, on se croyait encore à des centaines et des centaines de lieues!…

Fritz, François et John Block rajustèrent la poutre dans son entaille, afin de ne laisser l'entrée libre ni aux fauves ni aux pachydermes.

Vers sept heures et demie, la nuit tombait avec cette rapidité particulière aux zones tropicales lorsque Fritz et ses compagnons atteignirent l'ermitage d'Eberfurt.

Personne dans la métairie, et, s'il y avait lieu de le regretter, il ne fallait cependant pas en être surpris.

La maisonnette était en bon état. Après que la porte et les fenêtres eurent été ouvertes, on procéda à une installation qui ne devait durer qu'une dizaine d'heures.

Suivant l'habitude de M. Zermatt, l'habitation était prête à recevoir les deux familles qui la visitaient plusieurs fois par an. Les couchettes furent destinées à Jenny, Doll, Suzan, au petit Bob et au capitaine Gould. Le sol du hangar, couvert d'herbes sèches, suffirait aux autres pour cette dernière nuit qui précédait leur retour.

En outre, Eberfurt était toujours muni de provisions pour une semaine.

Jenny n'eut que la peine d'ouvrir de grands paniers d'osiers renfermant des conserves de diverses sortes, du sagou, de la cassave ou farine de manioc, de la viande et du poisson salés. En fait de fruits, figues, mangles, bananes, poires, pommes, il n'y avait qu'un pas à faire pour les cueillir aux arbres, et aussi pour récolter les légumes dans le potager.

Il va sans dire que la cuisine et l’office étaient garnis de leurs ustensiles. Dès qu’un bon feu de bois pétilla dans l’âtre, la marmite fut placée sur son trois-pieds. On puisa l’eau à une dérivation de la rivière Orientale, qui alimentait le réservoir de la métairie. D’ailleurs, ce qui réjouit particulièrement, ce fut de pouvoir s’offrir quelques verres d’un vin de palme, provenant des tonneaux du cellier.

«Eh! eh! s’écria le bosseman, il y a longtemps que nous étions au régime de l’eau claire…

— Aussi, nous allons vous faire raison, mon brave Block, s’écria Fritz.

— Tant que vous voudrez, répondit le bosseman. Rien d’agréable comme de boire à la santé les uns des autres avec ce bon vin de pays!…

— Buvons donc, répondit François, au bonheur de revoir nos parents et nos amis à Falkenhorst ou à Felsenheim!»

Au choc des verres, trois hurrahs furent poussés en l’honneur des familles Zermatt et Wolston.

«En vérité, fit observer John Block, il y a en Angleterre et ailleurs bien des auberges qui ne valent pas celle de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt…

— Et remarquez, Block, répondit Fritz, qu’ici l’hospitalité ne coûte rien!»

Le repas achevé, Jenny, Doll, Suzan et l’enfant dans une chambre, le capitaine Gould dans l’autre, Fritz, François, James et le bosseman sous le hangar, allèrent prendre un repos dont ils avaient grand besoin après une si longue étape.

Cette nuit se passa dans les meilleures conditions de sécurité, et tous ne firent qu’un somme jusqu’au lever du soleil.

CHAPITRE XXVIII

Départ pour Falkenhorst. – Le canal. – Inquiétudes. – La cour dévastée.

— La demeure aérienne. – A la cime de l'arbre. – Désespoir. – Une fumée au-dessus de Felsenheim. – Alerte!

Le lendemain, dès sept heures, après un premier repas composé des restes de la veille, sans compter le coup du départ, – un verre de vin de palme, – Fritz et ses compagnons quittèrent l'ermitage d'Eberfurt.

Très impatients, ils se proposaient d'enlever en moins de trois heures les trois lieues qui séparaient la métairie de Falkenhorst.

C'était en effet vers Falkenhorst que Fritz avait, non sans raison, résolu de se diriger.

Il existait bien une seconde route, celle qui rejoignait la ferme de Waldegg à la pointe du lac des Cygnes, mais elle eût quelque peu allongé l'étape. Le plus court était de marcher en droite ligne sur Falkenhorst, d'où l'on redescendrait à Felsenheim en suivant la belle avenue qui longeait le rivage jusqu'à l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals.

«Il est possible, fit observer Fritz, que nos familles soient actuellement installées dans leur demeure aérienne…

— Et si cela est, mon ami, ajouta Jenny, nous aurons la joie de les embrasser une grande heure plus tôt…

— Et peut-être davantage, répondit Doll, si nous avons la bonne chance de les rencontrer en route!

— Pourvu qu’elles ne soient pas en villégiature à Prospect-Hill! observa François. Nous serions alors obligés de remonter jusqu’au cap de l’Espoir-Trompé…

— N’est-ce pas ce cap, demanda le capitaine Gould, d’où M. Zermatt doit guetter l’arrivée de la *Licorne*!…

— C’est bien de là, capitaine, répondit Fritz, et, comme la corvette a sans doute achevé ses réparations, elle ne peut tarder à être en vue de l’île.

— Quoi qu’il en soit, dit le bosseman, ce qu’il y a de mieux à faire, je pense, c’est de partir… S’il n’y a personne à Falkenhorst, nous irons à Felsenheim, et s’il n’y a personne à Felsenheim, nous irons à Prospect-Hill ou ailleurs… Mais, en route!»

Si les ustensiles de cuisine, si les outils de culture ne manquaient pas à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, Fritz y avait inutilement cherché des armes et des munitions de chasse. Lorsque son père et ses frères venaient à la métairie, ils emportaient leurs fusils, mais, par prudence, ne les y laissaient jamais. D’ailleurs, à traverser le district de la Terre-Promise, du moment que tigres, lions, panthères, ne pouvaient franchir le défilé de Cluse, il n’y aurait rien à craindre. Assurément, le voyage offrait plus de dangers entre le pic Jean-Zermatt et la vallée de Grünthal.

Un sentier carrossable, – et que de fois déjà le chariot attelé des buffles et de l’onagre l’avait aplani! – se dessinait entre les champs cultivés en pleine végétation et les massifs en pleine verdure. Toute cette prospérité réjouissait le regard. Le capitaine Gould et le bosseman, James et Suzan Wolston qui entrevoyaient pour la première fois cette région, étaient émerveillés. Oui! les colons pouvaient y venir, elle suffirait à en nourrir plusieurs centaines, comme l’île plusieurs milliers!

Après une heure et demie de marche, presque à mi-chemin de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt à Falkenhorst, Fritz fit halte quelques instants devant un rio dont il ne connaissait pas l’existence en cette partie du district.

«Voilà du nouveau… dit-il.

— Assurément, répondit Jenny, et je ne me rappelle pas qu’il y eût un cours d’eau en cet endroit…

— Ce rio ressemble plutôt à un canal!» fit observer le capitaine Gould.

C’était, en effet, un canal creusé de main d’homme.

«Vous avez raison, capitaine, déclara Fritz. M. Wolston aura eu la pensée de dériver les eaux du ruisseau des Chacals afin d’alimenter le lac des Cygnes et maintenir son étiage pendant la saison chaude, ce qui permet d’arroser les alentours de Waldegg…»

Fritz ne se trompait pas, on le sait.

«Oui, continua François, ce doit être votre père… votre père, ma chère Doll, qui a eu cette idée-là et l’a mise à exécution…»

François ne se trompait pas non plus.

«Oh! fit Doll, je pense que votre frère Ernest doit y être pour quelque chose!

— Sans doute… notre savant Ernest… ajouta Fritz.

— Et pourquoi pas l’intrépide Jack… et aussi M. Zermatt?… demanda le capitaine Gould.

— Alors toute la famille!… dit en riant Jenny.

— Oui… les deux familles, qui maintenant n’en font plus qu’une!» répondit Fritz.

Le bosseman intervint, suivant sa coutume, par une observation des plus justes:

«Si celui ou ceux qui ont établi ce canal, répliqua-t-il, ont bien fait, celui ou ceux qui ont permis de le traverser en y jetant un ponceau méritent tout autant d’éloges… Passons donc et continuons notre route.»

Le ponceau franchi, on s’engagea sur la partie plus boisée, d’où sourdait le petit rio qui se déversait près de Falkenhorst, un peu au-dessous de l’îlot de la Baleine.

Pour être véridique, il convient de noter que Fritz et François, l’oreille tendue, cherchaient à percevoir quelque lointain aboiement ou quelque coup de fusil. Que faisait donc Jack, l’enragé chasseur, s’il ne chassait pas pendant cette belle matinée?… Précisément, le gibier se levait en toutes les directions, fuyait à travers les fourrés, se dispersait d’arbres en arbres… Si les deux frères avaient eu des fusils, ils auraient fait coup double à maintes reprises. Il leur semblait que le poil et la plume n’avaient jamais été plus abondants dans le district, à ce point que leurs compagnons en témoignaient une véritable surprise.

Mais, sauf le pépiement des petits oiseaux, le cri des perdrix et des outardes, le jacassement des perruches, parfois aussi le hurlement des chacals, c’était tout ce qu’on entendait, sans qu’il s’y mêlât jamais ni la détonation d’une arme à feu ni la voix d’un chien en quête.

Il est vrai, Falkenhorst se trouvait encore éloigné d’une bonne lieue, et il se pouvait que les familles fussent encore installées à Felsenheim.

Enfin, au delà du ruisseau de Falkenhorst, il n’y eut qu’à en suivre la rive droite jusqu’à la lisière du bois, à l’extrémité duquel s’élevait le gigantesque manglier dont les basses branches supportaient la demeure aérienne. Une demi-heure suffirait à traverser ce bois dans sa longueur.

Très probablement, ni M. et Mme Zermatt, ni Ernest et Jack, ni M. Wolston, ni sa femme, ni sa fille ne devaient être à Falkenhorst. Il semblait impossible que leur présence ne fût pas signalée déjà. Turc, Falb, Braun n’auraient-ils pas senti leurs jeunes maîtres?… N’eussent-ils pas annoncé par de joyeux aboiements le retour des absents?…

Un profond silence régnait sous ces grands arbres, – un silence qui ne laissait pas de causer une vague inquiétude. Lorsque Fritz regardait Jenny, il lisait dans ses yeux un sentiment d’anxiété que rien ne justifiait cependant. François, en proie à une certaine nervosité, allait en avant, revenait sur ses pas. Cette sorte de malaise moral était ressentie de chacun. Dans dix minutes, on serait à Falkenhorst… Dix minutes?… N’était-ce pas comme si on y était arrivé?…

«Bien sûr, déclara le bosseman, qui voulut réagir contre ce trouble des esprits, bien sûr, nous serons obligés de redescendre par votre belle allée jusqu’à Felsenheim!… Un retard d’une heure, voilà tout… Et qu’est-ce-là, après une si longue absence?…»

On pressa le pas. Quelques instants plus tard, apparurent la lisière du bois, puis le gigantesque manglier au milieu de la cour, fermée de palissades, que bordait une haie vive.

Fritz et François coururent vers la porte ménagée dans la baie…

Cette porte était ouverte, et il fut même constaté qu’elle avait été à demi arrachée de ses gonds.

Les deux frères pénétrèrent dans la cour et s’arrêtèrent près du petit bassin central…

L’habitation était déserte.

De la basse-cour et des étables établies contre la palissade ne s’échappait aucun bruit, bien que d’ordinaire vaches, moutons, volaille en fussent les hôtes pendant la saison d’été. Sous les hangars, divers objets, caisses, paniers, instruments de culture, étaient dans un désordre qui contrastait avec les habitudes soigneuses de Mme Zermatt, de Mme Wolston et de sa fille.

François courut aux étables…

Elles ne contenaient que quelques brassées d’herbes sèches dans les râteliers…

Est-ce donc que les animaux avaient forcé les portes de la clôture?… Erraient-ils à travers la campagne?… Non… puisqu’on n’en avait pas vu un seul aux environs de Falkenhorst… Il se pouvait, après tout, que, pour une raison ou pour une autre, ils eussent été parqués dans les autres fermes, et cependant, cela ne s’expliquait guère…

On le sait, la métairie de Falkenhorst comprenait deux habitations, l’une disposée entre les branches du manglier, l’autre entre les racines qui s’arc-boutaient à sa base. Au-dessus de celle-ci, construite en cannes de bambous qui soutenaient la toiture en mousse goudronnée, régnait une terrasse avec garde-fou. Cette terrasse recouvrait plusieurs chambres séparées par des cloisons fixées aux racines, et assez vastes pour que les deux familles pussent s’y loger ensemble.

Cette première habitation était aussi silencieuse que les annexes de la cour.

«Entrons!» dit Fritz d’une voie altérée.

Tous le suivirent, et un cri leur échappa, – car ils n’auraient pu prononcer une parole…

Le mobilier était bouleversé, les chaises et les tables renversées, les coffres ouverts, la literie gisant sur le plancher, les ustensiles jetés dans les coins. On eût dit que les chambres avaient été livrées au pillage et pour le plaisir de piller. Des réserves de vivres, tenues ordinairement au complet à Falkenhorst, il ne restait rien. Dans le fenil, plus de foin; dans le cellier, vides les barils de vin, de bière et de liqueurs. Pas une arme, si ce n’est un pistolet chargé que le bosseman ramassa et mit à sa ceinture. D’ordinaire, pourtant, carabines et fusils étaient toujours laissés à Falkenhorst pendant la saison des chasses.

Fritz, François, Jenny, tous demeuraient atterrés devant ce désastre si inattendu… En était-il donc de même à Felsenheim, à Waldegg, à Zuckertop, à Prospect-Hill?… Des diverses métairies, celle de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt avait-elle été seule épargnée par les pillards, et ces pillards, quels étaient-ils?…

«Mes amis, dit le capitaine Gould, un malheur est arrivé… mais peut-être n’est-il pas aussi grand que vous semblez le craindre…»

Personne ne répondit, et qu’auraient pu répondre Fritz, François, Jenny, le cœur brisé? Après avoir mis le pied sur la Terre-Promise, la joie dans l’âme, que trouvaient-ils à Falkenhorst?… La ruine et l’abandon!

Que s’était-il donc passé?… La Nouvelle-Suisse avait-elle été envahie par une bande de ces pirates si nombreux à cette époque dans l’océan Indien, où les îles Andaman et Nicobar leur offraient un refuge assuré?… Les familles avaient-elles pu quitter à temps Felsenheim, se retirer en quelque autre partie du district ou même s’enfuir de l’île?… Étaient-elles tombées entre les mains de ces pirates… ou n’avaient-elles pas succombé en essayant de se défendre?…

Enfin, dernière question, cet événement remontait-il à quelques mois, à quelques semaines, à quelques jours, et eût-il été possible de le prévenir, si la *Licorne* fût arrivée dans les délais convenus sur ces parages?…

Jenny s’efforçait de retenir ses larmes, tandis que Suzan et Doll sanglotaient. François voulait se lancer à la recherche de son père, de sa mère, de ses frères, et il fallut que Fritz le retînt. Harry Gould et le bosseman, après être sortis plusieurs fois de la chambre afin de visiter les approches de la palissade, étaient revenus, n’ayant rien aperçu, rien entendu de nature à les éclairer.

Il s’agissait cependant de prendre un parti. Convenait-il de rester à Falkenhorst, d’y attendre les événements, ou de descendre vers Felsenheim sans savoir à quoi s’en tenir?… Devait-on effectuer une reconnaissance en laissant Jenny, Doll, Suzan Wolston sous la garde de James, tandis que Fritz, François, Harry Gould, John Block iraient à la découverte, soit par l’avenue du littoral, soit en s’engageant à travers la campagne?…

Dans tous les cas, il fallait sortir de cette incertitude, dût la vérité ne plus laisser aucun espoir!

Et, sans doute, Fritz crut répondre au sentiment général, lorsqu’il dit:

«Essayons de gagner Felsenheim…

— Et partons, s’écria François.

— Je vous accompagnerai, déclara le capitaine Gould.

— Moi aussi… ajouta John Block.

— Soit, répondit Fritz, mais James restera avec Jenny, Doll et Suzan, qui se mettront en sûreté dans le haut de Falkenhorst…

— Montons tous, d’abord, proposa John Block, et de là, peut-être, verrons-nous…»

C’était bien ce qu’il y avait de plus indiqué avant d’aller en reconnaissance au dehors. De la demeure aérienne et surtout de la cime du manglier, la vue embrassait une partie de la Terre-Promise et de la mer à l’est, et aussi trois lieues du littoral compris entre la baie du Salut et le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé.

«En haut… en haut!…» répondit Fritz à la proposition du bosseman.

L’habitation, établie entre les branches de l’arbre, avait-elle échappé à la dévastation, grâce à l’épaisse frondaison du manglier, qui la cachait aux regards, c’était admissible, en somme. La porte, donnant accès sur l’escalier qui se déroulait à l’intérieur du tronc, ne portait aucune trace de violence, étant peu visible, d’ailleurs, au fond de la dernière chambre.

François essaya d’ouvrir cette porte, qui était fermée et il en fit sauter la serrure dont le pêne se dégagea.

En peu d’instants, tous eurent gravi l’escalier, éclairé par les étroites meurtrières de l’arbre, et mirent le pied sur le balcon circulaire, largement abrité derrière un rideau de feuillage.

Fritz et François, arrivés sur la plate-forme, se hâtèrent de pénétrer à l’intérieur de la première chambre.

Ni cette chambre ni celles qui y attendaient ne présentaient le moindre désordre, literie en bon état, meubles en place. Il y eut donc lieu de reconnaître que l’ancienne aire du Faucon avait été respectée. Cela venait en confirmation de ce fait que les pillards n’avaient point dû découvrir la porte du bas. Quant à l’habitation, on le répète, dissimulée entre les branches du manglier, la frondaison s’était tant épaissie depuis douze ans autour d’elle, que, de la cour du bas non plus que de la lisière du bois voisin, il n’eût été possible de l’apercevoir.

En une minute, Jenny eut visité avec Doll et Suzan ces chambres qu’elle connaissait bien, qu’elle avait habitées plusieurs fois avec la famille.

Il semblait vraiment que Mmes Zermatt et Wolston eussent tout rangé de la veille. On y reconnut en viande sèche, en farine, en riz, en conserves, en liquides, pour une semaine de provisions suivant l’habitude prise à

Falkenhorst, comme aux autres métairies de Waldegg, de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, de Prospect-Hill et de Zuckertop.

Il est vrai, personne, en cette situation, ne songeait à la question des vivres. Ce qui préoccupait, ce qui désespérait, c’était l’abandon dans lequel se trouvait Falkenhorst, en pleine saison d’été, c’était cet affreux pillage dont les bâtiments de la cour n’avaient été que trop visiblement le théâtre!

Dès qu’ils furent revenus sur le balcon, Fritz et le bosseman se hissèrent jusqu’aux branches supérieures du manglier, afin d’étendre leur vue aussi loin que possible.

Vers le nord se développait la ligne côtière depuis le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé jusqu’à la colline où s’élevait Prospect-Hill. Mais, en cette direction, le regard, arrêté par les massifs, ne pouvait dépasser la ferme de Waldegg. Rien de suspect ne fut aperçu sur cette partie du district.

Vers l’ouest, au delà du canal qui mettait en communication le ruisseau des Chacals et le lac des Cygnes, se développait la contrée arrosée par le rio de Falkenhorst, que Fritz et ses compagnons avaient traversée après avoir franchi le ponceau. Elle était non moins déserte que celle qui se continuait à l’ouest jusqu’au défilé de Cluse.

Au levant s’élargissait le vaste bras de mer compris entre le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé et le cap de l’Est, derrière lequel s’arrondissait la baie de la Licorne. On ne voyait pas une seule voile au large, pas une embarcation le long du littoral. Rien que la plaine liquide d’où émergeait, au nord-est, l’écueil sur lequel s’était autrefois brisé le *Landlord*.

Lorsque les yeux se tournaient vers le sud, ils ne pouvaient distinguer à la distance d’une lieue environ que l’entrée de la baie du Salut, près du rempart qui abritait l'habitation de Felsenheim.

Il est vrai, de cette habitation et de ses dépendances, on n'apercevait rien, si ce n'est la cime verdoyante des arbres du potager, puis, en remontant vers le sud-ouest, une ligne lumineuse, qui indiquait le cours du ruisseau des Chacals.

Fritz et John Block redescendirent sur le balcon, après une dizaine de minutes consacrées à ce premier examen. En se servant de la longue-vue que M. Zermatt laissait toujours à Falkenhorst, ils avaient attentivement regardé dans la direction de Felsenheim et du littoral.

Personne ne s'y montrait… C'était à croire que les deux familles n'étaient plus dans l'île.

Cependant il était possible que M. Zermatt et les siens eussent été conduits par les pillards en quelque métairie de la Terre-Promise, ou même sur une autre partie de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Toutefois, à cette hypothèse, Harry Gould fit une objection à laquelle il eût été malaisé de répondre:

«Ces pillards, quels qu'ils soient, dit-il, ont dû venir par mer, et même accoster par la baie du Salut… Or, nous n'avons remarqué aucune de leurs embarcations… Il faudrait donc en conclure qu'ils sont repartis… entraînant peut-être…»

Personne n'osa répondre au capitaine Gould. D'ailleurs, ce qui ne laissait pas d'être fort grave, c'est que Felsenheim ne paraissait plus être habité. Du haut de l'arbre, on ne voyait aucune fumée se dégager des plantations du potager.

Harry Gould émit alors cette idée que les deux familles avaient quitté la Nouvelle-Suisse volontairement, puisque la *Licorne* n’avait pas paru à l’époque fixée…

«Et comment?… demanda Fritz, qui eût voulu pouvoir se rattacher à cet espoir.

— A bord d’un navire arrivé sur ces parages… répondit Harry Gould, soit un de ceux qui ont dû être expédiés d’Angleterre, soit tout autre bâtiment que les hasards de la navigation auraient conduit en vue de l’île…»

Cette explication était admissible dans une certaine mesure. Et pourtant, que de sérieuses raisons pour que l’abandon de la Nouvelle-Suisse ne fût pas dû à cette circonstance!

Fritz dit alors:

«Il n’y a plus à hésiter… allons en reconnaissance…

— Allons!» répondit François.

Au moment où Fritz se préparait à redescendre, Jenny l’arrêta, disant:

«Une fumée… il me semble voir une fumée qui s’élève au-dessus de Felsenheim…»

Fritz saisit la longue-vue, la braqua dans la direction du sud, et pendant plus d’une minute son œil resta collé à l’oculaire de l’instrument…

Jenny avait raison. Une fumée, visible alors, car elle venait de s’épaissir, dépassait le rideau de verdure, au-dessus des roches qui fermaient Felsenheim en arrière.

«Ils sont là… ils sont là… s'écria François, et nous devrions déjà être près d'eux!»

Cette affirmation ne fut mise en doute par personne. On avait tant besoin de se reprendre à quelque espoir, que tout fut oublié, et l'état de solitude des environs de Falkenhorst, et le pillage de la cour, et l'absence des animaux domestiques, et le vide des étables, et la dévastation des chambres au pied du manglier…

Toutefois, la froide raison revint, du moins au capitaine Gould et à John Block. Évidemment, – cette fumée en témoignait, – Felsenheim était habité en ce moment… Mais n'était-ce point par les pillards?… Aussi convenait-il d'en approcher avec une extrême prudence. Peut-être même le mieux serait-il de ne point suivre l'avenue qui descendait au ruisseau des Chacals. A travers champs, et, autant que faire se pourrait, en allant de massifs en massifs, il y avait des chances d'arriver au pont tournant sans avoir été découverts.

Enfin tous se disposaient à quitter la demeure aérienne, lorsque Jenny de dire, en abaissant la longue-vue qu'elle venait de promener du côté de la baie:

«Et la preuve que les deux familles sont toujours là… qu'elles n'ont point quitté leur île… c'est que le pavillon flotte sur l'îlot du Requin!»

C'était vrai, on n'avait pas encore aperçu ce pavillon blanc et rouge aux couleurs de la Nouvelle-Suisse, qui cependant se déployait au-dessus de la batterie. Mais, en somme, cela donnait-il la certitude que M. Zermatt, M.

Wolston, leurs femmes, leurs enfants n’eussent pas quitté l’île?… Est-ce que, d’habitude, le pavillon ne flottait pas toujours à cette place?…

On ne voulut pas discuter… Tout s’expliquerait à Felsenheim… avant une heure…

«Partons… partons!… répétait François, et il se dirigea vers l’escalier.

— Arrêtez… arrêtez!…» dit soudain le bosseman en baissant la voix.

On le vit ramper sur le balcon du côté de la baie du Salut. Puis, après avoir écarté les feuilles, il passa sa tête et la retira précipitamment.

«Qu’y a-t-il?… demanda Fritz.

— Les sauvages…» répondit John Block.

CHAPITRE XXIX

Diverses hypothèses. – Ce qu'il faut faire. – Un coup de canon. – L'îlot

du Requin. – Reconnaissance jusqu'à la grève. – Un canot abandonné.

— L'embarquement. – «Ne tirez pas!…»

Il était alors deux heures et demie du soir. Le feuillage du manglier était si épais que les rayons du soleil, presque perpendiculaires, ne parvenaient pas à le percer. Fritz et ses compagnons ne couraient donc pas le risque d'être signalés dans l'habitation aérienne de Falkenhorst, encore inconnue des sauvages qui avaient débarqué sur l'île.

Une troupe de cinq hommes, demi-nus, à peau noire comme les naturels de l'Australie occidentale, armés d'arcs et de flèches, s'avançait en suivant l'allée. Qu'ils eussent été vus, et même que la Terre-Promise comptât d'autres habitants que ceux de Felsenheim, ils ne pouvaient s'en douter. Mais qu'étaient devenus M. Zermatt et les siens?… Avaient-ils pu s'enfuir?… Avaient-ils succombé dans une lutte inégale?…

En effet, il n'était pas à supposer, ainsi le fit observer John Block, que le nombre des indigènes arrivés sur l'île fût réduit à cette demi-douzaine d'hommes. Avec une telle infériorité numérique, ils n'auraient pas eu raison de M. Zermatt, de ses deux fils et de M. Wolston, même dans le cas d'une surprise… C'était toute une bande, montée sur une flottille de pirogues, qui avait dû envahir la Nouvelle-Suisse… Cette flottille était sans doute à présent mouillée dans la crique avec la chaloupe et la pinasse… Si on ne l'apercevait pas du haut de Falkenhorst, c'est que, de ce côté-là, la vue était arrêtée par la pointe de la baie du Salut…

Et alors où étaient les familles Zermatt et Wolston?… De ce qu’on ne les avait rencontrées ni à Falkenhorst ni aux environs, fallait-il en conclure qu’elles fussent prisonnières à Felsenheim… qu’elles n’avaient eu ni le temps ni la possibilité de chercher refuge dans les autres métairies… ou qu’elles avaient été massacrées?…

Ainsi tout s’expliquait, les dévastations constatées à Falkenhorst, l’abandon où se trouvait la partie de la Terre-Promise entre le canal du lac des Cygnes et le littoral!… Fritz, François, Jenny venaient d’être frappés du plus affreux malheur qui pût les accabler!… De même James, sa femme et sa sœur!… Et comment conserver quelque espérance qui ne fût du moins bien faible?… Aussi, tandis que Harry Gould et le bosseman ne perdaient pas de vue les naturels, donnaient-ils libre cours à leurs larmes, à leur désespoir.

Cependant une dernière hypothèse: était-il possible que les deux familles se fussent réfugiées dans l’ouest, en une partie de l’île, au delà de la baie des Perles?… En cas qu’elles eussent vu de loin les pirogues à travers la baie du Salut, n’avaient-elles pas eu le temps de fuir avec le chariot, emportant des provisions et des armes?… Mais ni les uns ni les autres n’osaient y croire!…

Harry Gould et John Block continuaient à observer l’approche des sauvages.

Se préparaient-ils à pénétrer dans la cour, puis dans l’habitation déjà visitée et pillée?… N’y avait-il pas lieu de craindre qu’ils ne découvrissent la porte de l’escalier?… En ce cas, il est vrai, puisqu’ils n’étaient que cinq ou six, on s’en débarrasserait sans peine. Lorsqu’ils paraîtraient sur la plate-forme, surpris un à un, ils seraient jetés par-dessus la balustrade, une chute de quarante à cinquante pieds…

«Et, comme le déclara le bosseman, si, après cette culbute, il leur reste des jambes pour aller à Felsenheim, c'est que ces animaux-là tiendraient plus encore du chat que du singe!»

Cependant, lorsqu'ils eurent atteint l'extrémité de l'avenue, les cinq hommes s'étaient arrêtés. Maintenant Fritz, Harry Gould, John Block, ne perdaient pas un seul de leurs mouvements. Que venaient-ils faire à Falkenhorst?… Si l'habitation aérienne avait jusqu'ici échappé à leurs regards, n'allaient-ils pas la découvrir, et aussi ceux qui l'occupaient?… Et, alors ne reviendraient-ils pas en plus grand nombre, et le moyen de résister à l'attaque d'une centaine d'indigènes…

Tout d'abord, la clairière franchie, ils se dirigèrent vers la palissade dont ils firent le tour. Trois d'entre eux s'introduisirent à l'intérieur de la cour, sous un des hangars de gauche, et ils ressortirent presque aussitôt, portant quelques-uns des engins de pêche déposés en cet endroit.

«Pas gênés, ces gueux!… murmura le bosseman. Ils ne vous demandent seulement pas la permission.

— Ont-ils donc un canot sur la grève… et vont-ils pêcher le long du littoral?… dit Harry Gould.

— Nous ne tarderons pas à le savoir, mon capitaine», répliqua John Block.

En effet, les trois hommes venaient de rejoindre leurs compagnons. Puis, prenant un petit sentier bordé d'une forte haie d'épines, qui longeait la droite du rio de Falkenhorst, ils descendirent vers la mer.

On ne les perdit de vue qu’au moment où ils atteignirent la coupée par laquelle s’écoulait le ruisseau jusqu’à son embouchure sur la baie des Flamants.

Mais, dès qu’ils eurent tourné à gauche, ils ne furent plus visibles, et ne pourraient être revus que s’ils gagnaient le large. Qu’il y eût une embarcation sur la grève, c’était probable, – probable aussi qu’ils s’en servaient habituellement pour la pêche à proximité de Falkenhorst.

Tandis que Harry Gould et John Block restaient en observation, Jenny, maîtrisant la douleur qui, chez Doll, chez Suzan, se manifestait par des soupirs et des larmes, dit à Fritz:

«Mon ami… que faut-il faire?»

Fritz regarda sa femme, ne sachant que répondre:

«Ce qu’il faut faire… déclara le capitaine Gould, nous allons en décider… Mais, d’abord, il est inutile de rester sur ce balcon, où nous risquerions d’être découverts.»

Dès que tous furent réunis dans la chambre, tandis que Bob, fatigué de la longue étape, dormait dans un petit cabinet y attenant, voici ce que Fritz dit, en réponse à la demande que sa femme venait de lui adresser:

«Ma chère Jenny, non… tout espoir n’est pas perdu de retrouver nos familles… Il est possible… très possible qu’elles n’aient point été surprises… Mon père et M. Wolston auront vu de loin leurs pirogues… Peut-être ont-ils eu le temps de se réfugier dans une des métairies, même au fond des bois de la baie des Perles, où ces sauvages n’ont pas dû s’aventurer… En quittant l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, après avoir traversé le canal, nous n’avons trouvé aucune trace de leur passage… Mon opinion est qu’ils n’ont pas cherché à s’éloigner du littoral…

— Je le pense aussi, ajouta Harry Gould, et à mon avis, M. Zermatt et M. Wolston se sont enfuis avec leurs familles…

— Oui… je l’affirmerais!… déclara Jenny. Ma chère Doll, et vous, Suzan, ne désespérez pas… ne pleurez plus!… Vous reverrez votre père, votre mère, comme nous reverrons les tiens, Fritz, les vôtres, James!…»

La jeune femme s’exprimait avec une telle conviction qu’à l’entendre, l’espoir revenait, et François lui prit la main, en disant:

«C’est Dieu qui parle par votre bouche, ma chère Jenny!» Du reste, à bien réfléchir, ainsi que le fît valoir le capitaine Gould, il était peu supposable que Felsenheim eût été surpris par l’attaque des naturels, puisque les pirogues ne pouvaient atterrir de nuit sur cette côte qu’ils ne connaissaient pas. C’est pendant le jour qu’elles avaient dû arriver, soit de l’est, soit de l’ouest, en se dirigeant vers la baie du Salut. Or, étant donnée la disposition de ce bras de mer entre le cap de l’Est et le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, comment M. Zermatt, M. Wolston, Ernest ou Jack ne les auraient-ils pas aperçues d’assez loin pour avoir eu le temps de se réfugier en quelque autre partie de l’île?…

«Et même, ajouta Fritz, si le débarquement de ces naturels est récent, peut-être nos familles n’étaient-elles pas à Felsenheim… Est-ce que ce n’est pas l’époque où nous visitions d’ordinaire les métairies?… Si, la nuit dernière, nous ne les avons pas rencontrées, à l’ermitage d’Eberfurt, il se peut qu’elles soient à Waldegg, à Prospect-Hill, à Zuckertop, au milieu de ces bois épais…

— Rendons-nous d’abord à Zuckertop… proposa François.

— C’est à faire, répondit John Block, mais pas avant la nuit…

— Si… à l’instant… à l’instant!… répéta François, qui ne voulait rien entendre. Je puis aller seul… Deux lieues et demie pour aller, autant pour revenir, je serai de retour en trois heures, et nous saurons à quoi nous en tenir…

— Non, François, non!… dit Fritz. Je te demande de ne pas nous séparer… ce serait imprudent… et, s’il le faut, comme ton aîné, je te l’ordonne!…

— Fritz… tu veux m’empêcher?…

— Je veux t’empêcher de commettre une imprudence…

— François… François… dit Doll d’une voix suppliante, écoutez votre frère!… François… je vous prie!…»

François s’était buté à cette idée de partir, et il se préparait à descendre.

«Soit! dit le bosseman, qui crut devoir intervenir… Puisqu’il y a des recherches à faire, faisons-les sans attendre la nuit… Seulement, pourquoi ne pas aller tous ensemble à Zuckertop?…

— Venez… dit François.

— Mais, reprit le bosseman, en s’adressant à Fritz, est-ce bien vers Zuckertop qu’il faut se diriger?…

— Où… si ce n’est là?… demanda Fritz.

— A Felsenheim!» répondit John Block.

Ce nom, inopinément jeté dans le débat, eut pour résultat d’en changer le cours.

A Felsenheim?… Et, au total, si MM. Zermatt et Wolston, leurs femmes, leurs enfants étaient tombés entre les mains des naturels, si leur vie avait été épargnée, c’était là qu’ils se trouvaient, puisque cette fumée indiquait que Felsenheim était habité… C’était là qu’il importait de leur apprendre le retour de Fritz, de François, de Jenny, de Doll, de James et de Suzan Wolston…

«Aller à Felsenheim… bien… répondit le capitaine Gould, mais y aller tous?…

— Tous?… non… déclara Fritz, à deux ou trois, et lorsque la nuit sera venue…

— La nuit?… reprit François, plus obstiné que jamais à son idée. Je vais à Felsenheim…

— Et, pendant qu’il fait jour, espères-tu donc échapper à ces sauvages qui rôdent aux environs?… répliqua Fritz. Et si tu leur échappes, comment entreras-tu à Felsenheim, s’ils l’occupent en ce moment?…

— Je n’en sais rien, Fritz… mais je parviendrai bien à savoir si nos familles sont là… puis je reviendrai!…

— Mon cher François, répondit Harry Gould, je comprends votre impatience et je la partage!… Cependant rendez-vous à nos avis qui sont dictés par la prudence… Si ces sauvages s’emparaient de vous, l’éveil donné… ils se mettraient à notre recherche… nous ne serions plus en sûreté ni à Waldegg, ni ailleurs…»

En effet, la situation serait absolument compromise, et là où se réfugieraient Fritz et ses compagnons, les indigènes finiraient par les découvrir.

Fritz parvint à faire entendre raison à son frère, et François dut se soumettre devant l’autorité de celui qui était peut-être le chef de la famille…

On attendrait, et dès que l’obscurité le permettrait, François et le bosseman quitteraient Falkenhorst. Mieux valait effectuer à deux cette reconnaissance qui présentait bien des dangers. En se glissant le long de la haie vive bordant l’avenue, tous deux essayeraient d’atteindre le ruisseau des Chacals. Si le pont tournant était replié sur l’autre rive, ils passeraient le ruisseau à la nage, et tenteraient de pénétrer par le verger dans l’enclos de Felsenheim. Il serait facile de voir par l’une des fenêtres si les familles y étaient renfermées. Si elles n’y étaient pas, François et John Block reviendraient aussitôt à Falkenhorst, et l’on aviserait à gagner Zuckertop avant le lever du jour.

Donc, il convenait d’attendre, et avec quelle lenteur s’écoulèrent les heures! Jamais le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons n’avaient été plus profondément accablés, – même après l’abandon de la chaloupe sur ces parages inconnus, même quand l’embarcation se fut brisée contre les roches de la baie des Tortues, même lorsque les naufragés, et avec eux trois femmes et un enfant, se virent menacés d’un hivernage sur cette côte aride, au fond de cette prison dont ils ne pouvaient sortir!

Du moins, au milieu de tant d’épreuves avaient-ils alors cette consolation d’être sans inquiétude pour ceux qui habitaient la Nouvelle-Suisse!… Et voici qu’ils venaient de retrouver l’île au pouvoir d’une bande de naturels…

et ils ne savaient ce qu’étaient devenus leurs parents, leurs amis… et ils pouvaient craindre qu’ils n’eussent péri dans un massacre…

Cependant la journée s’avançait. De temps en temps, l’un ou l’autre, plus particulièrement Fritz et le bosseman, se hissait entre les branches du manglier, afin d’observer la campagne et la mer. Ce dont ils s’inquiétaient, c’était de savoir si les sauvages occupaient les environs de Falkenhorst, ou s’ils avaient repris le chemin de Felsenheim.

Ils n’apercevaient rien, si ce n’est, dans la direction du sud, vers l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, la petite colonne de fumée qui montait au-dessus des roches.

Jusqu’à quatre heures de l’après-midi, aucun incident n’avait modifié la situation. Le repas fut préparé avec les réserves de l’habitation.

Après le retour de François et de John Block, qui sait s’il n’y aurait pas nécessité de partir pour Zuckertop? Et ce serait une longue étape!…

A cet instant, une détonation se fit entendre.

«Qu’est-ce donc?… demanda Jenny que Fritz retint en la voyant se diriger vers une des fenêtres.

— Serait-ce un coup de canon?… répondit François.

— Un coup de canon!… s’écria le bosseman.

— Mais qui l’aurait tiré?… dit Fritz.

— Quelque bâtiment en vue de l’île?… demanda James.

— La *Licorne* peut-être!… s’écria Jenny.

— Alors, elle serait très rapprochée de l’île, fit observer John Block, car cette détonation n’est pas venue de loin…

— A la plate-forme… à la plate-forme!… répéta François, en s’élançant vers le balcon…

— Tâchons de ne pas être aperçus, car la bande doit être en éveil…» recommanda le capitaine Gould.

Tous les regards se portèrent vers la mer.

Aucun navire n’apparaissait qui, d’après la proximité de la détonation, aurait dû être à la hauteur de l’îlot de la Baleine. Au large, le bosseman ne signala qu’un canot, monté par deux hommes, qui cherchait à rallier la grève de Falkenhorst.

«Si c’étaient Ernest et Jack?… murmura Jenny.

— Non… répondit Fritz, ces deux hommes sont des naturels, et le canot est une pirogue…

— Mais pourquoi se sauvent-ils?… demanda François. Est-ce qu’ils sont poursuivis?…»

Fritz poussa un cri – un cri qui tenait à la fois de la joie et de la surprise!

L’éclat d’une vive lumière au milieu d’un jet de vapeur blanche était arrivé à ses yeux, et presque aussitôt retentit une seconde détonation que répercutèrent les échos du littoral.

En même temps, un projectile, rasant la surface de la baie, fit jaillir une gerbe d'eau à deux brasses de l'embarcation, qui continua de fuir à toute vitesse vers Falkenhorst.

«Là… là!… s'écria Fritz. Mon père… M. Wolston… tous les nôtres sont là…

— A l'îlot du Requin?… dit Jenny.

— A l'îlot du Requin!»

En effet, c'était de cet îlot qu'étaient parties la première détonation, puis la seconde avec le boulet lancé contre la pirogue… Nul doute, M. Zermatt, M. Wolston, leurs familles, avaient pu s'y réfugier sous la protection de cette batterie dont les sauvages n'osaient approcher. Au-dessus se déployait le pavillon blanc et rouge de la Nouvelle-Suisse, tandis que le drapeau britannique flottait sur le plus haut pic de l'île!

Rien ne saurait peindre la joie, – plus que la joie, – le délire auquel s'abandonnèrent Fritz, François, Jenny, Doll, James et Suzan… Puisque leurs parents avaient pu gagner l'îlot du Requin, il n'y aurait à les rechercher ni à Zuckertop ni en aucune autre métairie de la Terre-Promise!… Et, ces sentiments, on l'imaginera sans peine, étaient partagés par le capitaine Harry Gould, le bosseman, si unis de cœur et d'âme aux passagers du *Flag*!

Il n'était plus question d'aller à Felsenheim, et on ne quitterait Falkenhorst que pour se rendre, – comment? on ne savait, – à l'îlot du Requin. Ah! si du haut du manglier, il eût été possible de communiquer par des signaux, d'arborer un pavillon qui répondrait à celui de la batterie!… Il est vrai, cela n'eût pas été prudent, non plus que de tirer des coups de feu avec le pistolet, qui, s’ils eussent été entendus de M. Zermatt, auraient pu l’être aussi des sauvages, s’ils rôdaient encore aux environs de Falkenhorst.

Or, l’essentiel était que la présence du capitaine Gould et des siens ne fût point connue d’eux, dans l’impossibilité où ils étaient de résister à une attaque à laquelle aurait pris part toute la bande déjà maîtresse de Felsenheim.

«Notre situation est bonne maintenant, fit observer Fritz, ne la compromettons pas…

— Sans doute, répondit Harry Gould, puisque nous n’avons pas été découverts, ne risquons pas de l’être!… Attendons la nuit avant d’agir…

— Comment sera-t-il possible d’atteindre l’îlot du Requin?… demanda Jenny.

— A la nage… déclara Fritz. Oui… je saurai bien le gagner à la nage… Et puisque c’est avec la chaloupe que mon père a dû s’y réfugier, je ramènerai la chaloupe pour vous prendre tous…

— Fritz… mon ami, ne put s’empêcher de dire Jenny, traverser ce bras de mer…

— Un jeu pour moi, chère femme, un jeu!… répondit l’intrépide jeune homme.

— Et puis… qui sait?… ajouta John Block, peut-être le canot de ces moricauds-là sera-t-il sur la grève?…»

Le soir approchait, et, un peu après sept heures, il faisait déjà sombre, la nuit succédant au jour presque sans crépuscule sous cette latitude.

Vers huit heures, le moment étant arrivé, il fut décidé que Fritz, François et le bosseman descendraient dans la cour. Après s'être assurés que les indigènes n'étaient plus aux environs, ils s'aventureraient jusqu'au littoral. Dans tous les cas, le capitaine Gould, James Wolston, Jenny, Doll, Suzan attendraient au pied de l'arbre un signal pour les rejoindre.

Tous trois prirent donc l'escalier en tâtonnant, car ils n'avaient point voulu allumer un fanal dont la lumière aurait risqué de les trahir.

Dans l'habitation du bas, personne, ni sous les hangars. Les hommes venus dans la journée avaient-ils repris le chemin de Felsenheim, ou se trouvaient-ils sur la plage vers laquelle s'était dirigée la pirogue, c'est là ce qu'il importait de reconnaître.

Mais il importait surtout de ne point se départir de la prudence observée jusqu'alors. C'est pourquoi Fritz et John Block résolurent de gagner seuls le rivage, tandis que François resterait en observation à l'entrée de la cour, prêt à remonter, si quelque danger menaçait Falkenhorst.

Fritz et le bosseman franchirent la palissade, traversèrent la clairière à laquelle aboutissait l'avenue de Felsenheim. Puis, se glissant d'arbre en arbre pendant deux centaines de pas, écoutant, regardant, épiant, ils arrivèrent à l'étroite coupée des dernières roches que baignaient les lames.

La grève était déserte, comme la mer, jusqu'au cap, dont on entrevoyait à peine le profil à l'est. Aucune lumière ne se montrait ni dans la direction de Felsenheim ni à la surface de la baie du Salut. Seul, un massif se détachait à trois quarts de lieue au large.

C'était l'îlot du Requin.

«Allons… dit Fritz. – Allons», répondit John Block.

Tous deux se dirigèrent vers la lisière sablonneuse que la marée descendante, presque au plus bas, découvrait encore.

Quel cri de joie leur aurait échappé, s’ils n’eussent été si maîtres d’eux-mêmes! Un canot était là, gîté sur le flanc.

C’était cette pirogue que la batterie avait saluée de deux coups de canon.

«Fameuse chance, que les boulets l’aient manquée!… s’écria John Block. Sans cela, elle serait maintenant par le fond… Si c’est M. Jack ou M. Ernest qui ont été si maladroits, nous leur en ferons nos compliments!»

Cette petite embarcation, de construction australienne, qui se manœuvrait à la pagaie, ne pouvait contenir que cinq à six personnes. Or, le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons étaient huit, plus un enfant, à embarquer pour l’îlot du Requin. Il est vrai, la distance ne mesurait que trois quarts de lieue.

«Eh bien, on se tassera, dit John Block, et il ne faut pas faire deux voyages…

— Au surplus, ajouta Fritz, dans une heure, le flot se fera sentir, et comme il porte vers la baie du Salut, sans trop s’éloigner de l’îlot du Requin, nous n’aurons pas besoin d’un grand effort pour y arriver…

— Tout est pour le mieux, répondit le bosseman, et cela commence à se débrouiller.»

Il ne fut pas question de pousser l’embarcation à la mer, et elle s’y remettrait d’elle-même dès que le flot l’aurait soulevée. John Block s’assura qu’elle était solidement amarrée et ne risquait pas de se déhaler au large.

Tous deux remontèrent la grève, reprirent l’avenue, et rejoignirent François qui les attendait dans la cour.

Lorsque celui-ci eut été mis au courant, il ne put que se réjouir. Mais, comme il convenait d’attendre que le flot fût établi avant de s’embarquer, Fritz le laissa avec le bosseman afin de surveiller les approches de la cour.

On juge si les nouvelles qu’il apporta là-haut furent reçues avec satisfaction!

Vers neuf heures et demie, tous étaient descendus au pied du manglier.

François et John Block n’avaient rien aperçu de suspect. Les abords de Falkenhorst demeuraient silencieux. Le moindre bruit se fût fait entendre, car aucun souffle ne traversait l’espace.

Après avoir franchi la cour et la clairière, Fritz, François et Harry Gould en avant, les autres défilèrent sous le couvert des arbres de l’avenue et atteignirent la grève.

Elle était aussi déserte que deux heures auparavant.

Déjà le flot avait soulevé l’embarcation qui flottait au bout de sa bosse. Il n’y avait plus qu’à s’y embarquer, à la démarrer, puis à la pousser dans le courant.

Aussitôt, Jenny, Doll, Suzan et l’enfant prirent place à l’arrière. Leurs compagnons se blottirent entre les bancs, Fritz et François se mirent aux pagaies.

Il était, en ce moment, près de dix heures, et, par une nuit sans lune, on pouvait espérer de passer sans être aperçu.

Il va de soi que, malgré l’obscurité assez profonde, il ne serait pas difficile de se diriger vers l’îlot.

Dès que la pirogue eut été saisie par le courant, elle fut entraînée de ce côté.

Chacun gardait le silence. Pas un mot n’était échange, même à voix basse. Tous les cœurs se serraient en proie à une inexprimable émotion. Que les familles Zermatt et Wolston fussent sur cet îlot, nul doute… Cependant, si quelqu’un des leurs était resté prisonnier… ou avait succombé en se défendant…

Il n’y avait pas à compter sur le flot pour gagner directement l’îlot du Requin. A une demi-lieue du rivage, il s’en détournait pour remonter vers l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals et s’étendre jusqu’au fond de la baie du Salut.

Fritz et François nagèrent donc avec vigueur en direction du sombre massif, duquel ne s’échappaient ni un bruit ni une lueur.

Mais M. Zermatt ou M. Wolston, Ernest ou Jack devaient être en surveillance dans la batterie. Toutefois, la pirogue ne risquait-elle pas d’être signalée et de recevoir quelque projectile, car ils croiraient à une tentative des sauvages pour prendre possession de l’îlot à la faveur de la nuit?…

Précisément, dès que l’embarcation ne fut plus qu’à cinq ou six encablures, une lumière brilla à l’endroit où s’élevait le hangar de la batterie…

Était-ce la flamme d’une amorce, et l’air n’allait-il pas être ébranlé par une détonation?…

Et alors, ne craignant plus de se faire entendre, le bosseman se releva et cria d’une voix de stentor:

«Ne tirez pas… ne tirez pas!…

— Amis… ce sont des amis!… ajouta le capitaine Harry Gould.

— C’est nous… c’est nous… c’est nous!…» répétèrent Fritz et François.

Et, au moment où ils accostaient le pied des roches, M. Zermatt, M. Wolston, Ernest, Jack les reçurent dans leurs bras.

CHAPITRE XXX

Enfin réunis! – Très succinctement ce qui s'est passé depuis le départ de la *Licorne*. – Les familles dans la désolation. – Plus d'espoir. – L'apparition des pirogues.

Quelques minutes plus tard, les deux familles – au complet cette fois, – le capitaine Harry Gould et le bosseman étaient ensemble dans le magasin installé au centre de l'îlot, à cinq cents pas du monticule de la batterie sur lequel se déployait le pavillon de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

Vouloir donner une idée de ce que fut cette scène d'attendrissement et d'actions de grâces, Fritz, François, Jenny que M. et Mme Zermatt, Ernest et Jack pressaient sur leur cœur et couvraient de baisers, James, Doll, Suzan et Bob qui ne pouvaient s'arracher aux étreintes d'Annah de M. et Mme Wolston, et les serrements de mains échangés avec le capitaine Gould et le bosseman, vouloir décrire avec des mots ce qui n'était qu'un mélange de cris de joie, de larmes, de caresses, ce serait impossible, et mieux vaut ne point s'y essayer.

Puis, lorsque cette première émotion fut calmée, il y avait à se raconter les uns aux autres l'histoire de ces quinze mois, depuis le jour où la *Licorne*, emportant Jenny Montrose, Fritz, François et Doll, disparut derrière les hauteurs du cap de l'Espoir-Trompé.

Mais, avant de revenir sur ces faits du passé, – il importait de s'arrêter au présent.

En somme, quoiqu’elles fussent maintenant réunies, les deux familles ne s’en trouvaient pas moins dans une situation très grave, très menacée… Cet îlot, les sauvages finiraient par en devenir maîtres, lorsque les munitions ou les provisions viendraient à manquer… Et, en effet, d’où M. Zermatt et les siens auraient-ils pu attendre un secours?…

Tout d’abord, en quelques mots, Fritz dut parler de la *Licorne*, demeurée en relâche au Cap, de la révolte à bord du *Flag*, de l’abandon de la chaloupe en mer, de son arrivée sur la partie aride d’une île inconnue, des circonstances dans lesquelles le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons reconnurent que cette île était la Nouvelle-Suisse, du cheminement qu’ils effectuèrent jusqu’au district de la Terre-Promise, de la halte à Falkenhorst, de l’apparition des naturels…

«Et où sont-ils?… demanda Fritz en terminant.

— A Felsenheim, répondit M. Zermatt.

— En grand nombre?…

— Une centaine au moins, qui sont venus sur une quinzaine de pirogues… et probablement de la côte australienne…

— Et, le Ciel en soit béni, vous avez pu leur échapper!… s’écria Jenny.

— Oui, ma chère fille, répondit M. Zermatt. Dès que nous avons aperçu les pirogues qui, après avoir doublé le cap de l’Est, se dirigeaient vers la baie du Salut, nous nous sommes réfugiés à l’îlot du Requin, dans la pensée qu’il serait possible de se défendre contre leur attaque…

— Père, fit observer François, les sauvages savent maintenant que vous êtes sur cet îlot…

— Ils le savent, répondit M. Zermatt, mais, grâce à Dieu, jusqu'ici ils n'ont pu y débarquer, et notre vieux pavillon y flotte toujours!»

Voici très succinctement, d'ailleurs, ce qui s'était passé depuis l'époque à laquelle s'est terminée la première partie de ce récit.

Au retour de la belle saison, après les excursions qui amenèrent la découverte de la rivière Montrose, une reconnaissance fut poussée jusqu'à la chaîne de montagnes, où M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack arborèrent le drapeau britannique à la pointe du pic Jean-Zermatt. Or, cela s'était passé une douzaine de jours avant l'accostage de la chaloupe sur la côte méridionale de l'île, et si cette excursion eût été continuée au delà de la chaîne, il s'en serait fallu de peu qu'on eût rencontré le capitaine Gould à la baie des Tortues. Et si cette rencontre avait eu lieu, que de chagrins, que d'inquiétudes, que de tourments auraient été épargnés de part et d'autre!… Mais M. Wolston et les deux frères, on le sait, ne s'aventurèrent pas à travers l'aride plateau qui s'étendait au sud et ils reprirent la direction de la vallée de Grünthal.

Ce que l'on sait également, c'est que Jack, emporté par son furieux désir de capturer un jeune éléphant, était tombé au milieu d'un campement de sauvages, lesquels le firent prisonnier. Après s'être échappé de leurs mains, il avait rapporté cette grave nouvelle qu'une bande d'indigènes avait débarqué sur la côte orientale de l'île.

Ce que furent les craintes des familles, les résolutions auxquelles on s'arrêta en prévision d'une attaque contre Felsenheim, la surveillance qui dut être organisée jour et nuit, il n'y a pas lieu de revenir là-dessus.

Du reste, pendant trois mois, aucune alerte ne se produisit. Les sauvages ne parurent ni du côté du cap de l’Est, ni par l’intérieur de la Terre-Promise. On pouvait même croire qu’ils avaient définitivement quitté l’île.

Toutefois, ce qui ne laissait pas d’être aussi inquiétant, c’est que la *Licorne*, qui aurait dû arriver en septembre ou en octobre, n’apparaissait pas au large de la Nouvelle-Suisse. Vainement Jack alla-t-il plusieurs fois guetter le retour de la corvette du haut de Prospect-Hill… Il dut chaque fois rentrer à Felsenheim sans l’avoir aperçue.

Or, ce qu’il importe de mentionner et pour n’y plus revenir, c’est que ce navire, observé par M. Wolston, Ernest et Jack, alors qu’ils se trouvaient à la pointe du pic Jean-Zermatt, c’était le *Flag*, et cela put être constaté par la concordance des dates. Oui! c’était le trois-mâts, tombé entre les mains de Robert Borupt, qui, après s’être rapproché de l’île, avait rallié l’océan Pacifique par les parages de la Sonde, et dont on ne devait plus jamais entendre parler.

Enfin les dernières semaines de l’année se passèrent dans une tristesse qui devint bientôt du désespoir. Après quinze mois, MM. Zermatt et Wolston, Ernest et Jack ne conservaient plus aucune espérance de revoir la *Licorne*. Mme Zermatt, Mme Wolston, Annah ne cessaient de pleurer les absents… Aucun d’eux n’avait plus de courage à rien… Et leur pensée était celle-ci:

«A quoi bon travailler à la prospérité de notre île?… Pourquoi fonder d’autres métairies, ensemencer d’autres champs, améliorer sans cesse un domaine déjà trop grand pour nous, trop considérable pour nos besoins?… Nos enfants, nos frères, nos sœurs, nos amis ne reviendront plus sur cette seconde patrie où les attendait tant de bonheur, où nous avions été si heureux, où nous aurions pu l’être longtemps encore!…»

C’est qu’alors, après une si longue absence, ils ne mettaient pas en doute que la *Licorne* n’eût fait naufrage, qu’elle ne se fût perdue corps et biens, qu’on n’eût plus de ses nouvelles ni en Angleterre ni à la Terre-Promise!…

En effet, si la corvette avait accompli sans accident son voyage d’aller, après avoir relâché quelques jours au cap de Bonne-Espérance, elle fût arrivée en trois mois à Portsmouth, son port d’attache. De là, quelques mois plus tard, elle serait repartie à destination de la Nouvelle-Suisse, et bientôt plusieurs navires d’émigrants auraient été expédiés à la colonie anglaise. Or, puisqu’aucun bâtiment n’avait visité cette portion de l’océan Indien, c’est que la *Licorne* avait sombré dans ces dangereuses mers comprises entre l’Australie et l’Afrique, avant même d’avoir atteint sa première relâche à Capetown, c’est que l’existence de l’île était toujours ignorée et ne serait désormais connue que si les hasards de la navigation conduisaient quelque navire jusqu’à ces lointains parages que ne traversaient point à cette époque les routes maritimes.

Oui! il n’était que trop juste, cet enchaînement de faits, elles n’étaient que trop logiques, les conséquences qu’il convenait d’en tirer, et dont la dernière était que la Nouvelle-Suisse ne figurait pas encore dans le domaine colonial des Iles-Britanniques!

Pendant cette première moitié de la belle saison, MM. Zermatt et Wolston n’avaient pas songé à quitter Felsenheim. D’habitude, ils donnaient la plus belle partie de l’année à Falkenhorst, réservant une semaine aux métairies de Waldegg, de Zuckertop, de Prospect-Hill, de l’ermitage d’Eberfurt. Cette fois, ils se bornèrent aux courtes visites qu’exigeait le soin des animaux. Ils ne cherchèrent pas à reconnaître les autres portions de l’île en dehors du district de la Terre-Promise. Ni la pinasse ni la chaloupe ne doublèrent le cap de l’Est ou le cap de l’Espoir-Trompé pour aller à la découverte. Ni la baie des Nautiles ni la baie des Perles ne furent explorées jusqu’à leur extrême limite. A peine si Jack fit quelques excursions en kaïak à travers la baie du Salut, et il se contenta de chasser aux environs de Felsenheim, laissant reposer Brausewind, Sturm et Brummer. Divers travaux, dont M. Wolston avait l’idée, et auxquels le portaient ses instincts d’ingénieur, ne furent pas entrepris. A quoi bon?… oui!… En ces trois mots se résumait le découragement des deux familles si durement éprouvées.

Aussi, le 25 décembre, lorsqu’elles se réunirent pour la fête du Christmas, – cette fête célébrée en pleine joie depuis tant d’années, – ce furent des larmes qui coulèrent de tous les yeux, mêlées aux prières pour ceux qui n’étaient pas là!…

Ainsi débuta l’année 1817. En cette splendide saison de l’été, jamais la nature ne s’était montrée plus prodigue de ses biens. Mais sa générosité dépassait les besoins de ce foyer domestique où ne s’asseyaient plus que sept personnes. La grande habitation semblait vide, après avoir été remplie de tant d’animation, morte après avoir été si vivante!…

Et combien M. et Mme Zermatt, M. et Mme Wolston durent se repentir maintenant d’avoir consenti au départ de leurs enfants, de l’avoir même encouragé!… Ne pouvait-on se contenter d’un bonheur si persistant jusqu’alors?… Était-il sage de chercher à l’accroître, et n’était-ce pas se montrer ingrat envers le Ciel qui, depuis nombre d’années, avait si visiblement protégé les survivants du *Landlord*!…

Et, pourtant, ce que M. et Mme Zermatt avaient fait pour leurs deux fils, c’était à faire. Jenny avait pour devoir de rejoindre son père. Fritz avait pour devoir d’accompagner celle qui serait sa femme et dont il allait demander la main au colonel Montrose… François avait le devoir de conduire Doll au Cap, de la remettre entre les mains de James Wolston, puis, au retour de la

Licorne, de les ramener à leur famille… Enfin M. Zermatt avait le devoir d'attirer les émigrants en aussi grand nombre que le comportaient les ressources de la Nouvelle-Suisse!…

Oui, tous avaient sagement agi… Et qui eût prévu que la corvette ne reviendrait pas de ce voyage et que l'on dût renoncer à espérer son retour!…

Cependant y avait-il à se dire que tout fût irrémédiablement perdu?… Ne pouvait-on s'expliquer ce retard de la *Licorne* autrement que par un naufrage où elle aurait péri corps et biens?… Peut-être avait-elle prolongé son séjour en Europe?… Peut-être fallait-il aller guetter son arrivée au large du cap de l'Espoir-Trompé ou du cap de l'Est… Peut-être ne tarderait-on pas à voir se dessiner ses hautes voiles et se dérouler la longue flamme de son grand mât?…

Ce fut dans la seconde semaine de janvier de cette année funeste, que Jack aperçut une flottille de pirogues, au moment où elle doublait la pointe du cap de l'Est, en se dirigeant vers la baie du Salut. D'ailleurs, il n'y avait point lieu d'être surpris de cette apparition, puisque, depuis que Jack était tombé entre leurs mains, les sauvages ne devaient plus ignorer que cette île fût habitée…

Quoi qu'il en soit, avant deux heures, poussées par le flot, les pirogues auraient atteint l'embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals. Probablement montées par une centaine d'hommes, car toute la bande débarquée sur l'île avait dû prendre part à cette expédition, comment pourrait-on leur opposer une sérieuse résistance?… Convenait-il de se réfugier à Falkenhorst, à Waldegg, à Prospect-Hill, à Zuckertop, même à l'ermitage d'Eberfurt?…

Les familles y seraient-elle plus en sûreté?… Dès qu'ils auraient mis le pied sur ce riche domaine de la Terre-Promise, les envahisseurs sauraient bien le parcourir tout entier!… Faudrait-il enfin chercher un abri plus secret dans les régions inconnues de l'île, et aurait-on la certitude de n'y être pas découvert?…

Ce fut en ces circonstances que M. Wolston proposa d'abandonner Felsenheim pour l'îlot du Requin. En s'embarquant dans la chaloupe derrière la pointe de la baie du Salut, en longeant le rivage de Falkenhorst, peut-être atteindrait-on l'îlot avant l'arrivée des pirogues?… Là, du moins, sous la protection des deux caronades de la batterie, il y aurait possibilité de se défendre, si les naturels tentaient de prendre pied sur l'îlot.

D'ailleurs, si le temps manquait pour transporter le matériel et les provisions nécessaires à un long séjour, le magasin, pourvu de lits, pouvait loger les deux familles. En outre, M. Zermatt chargerait la chaloupe des objets de première nécessité. De plus, on ne l'ignore pas, l'îlot du Requin, planté de mangliers, de cocotiers et autres arbres, servait de parc à un troupeau d'antilopes, et une source limpide y assurait de l'eau en abondance, même durant les fortes chaleurs.

Donc rien à craindre pour la nourriture pendant quelques mois. Quant aux deux canons de quatre, suffiraient-ils à repousser la flottille si elle marchait tout entière contre l'îlot du Requin, qui l'eût pu dire!… Il est vrai, les naturels devaient ignorer la puissance de ces armes à feu, dont les détonations jetteraient parmi eux l'épouvante, sans parler des boulets et des balles que les deux pièces et les carabines ne leur épargneraient pas. Mais si une cinquantaine parvenaient à débarquer sur l'îlot…

La proposition de M. Wolston acceptée, il n'y avait pas un instant à perdre. Jack et Ernest amenèrent la chaloupe à l'embouchure du ruisseau des

Chacals. On y transporta des caisses de conserves, de cassave, de riz, de farine, et aussi des armes et des munitions. M. et Mme Zermatt, M. et Mme Wolston, Ernest et Annah s’y embarquèrent, tandis que Jack prenait place dans son kaïak, qui permettrait, en cas de besoin, d’établir la communication entre l’îlot et le littoral. Il fallut laisser les animaux à Felsenheim, sauf les deux chiens qui suivirent leurs maîtres. En liberté, le chacal, l’autruche, l’aigle sauraient pourvoir à leur nourriture.

Enfin, la chaloupe quitta l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals, alors que les pirogues se montraient déjà par le travers de l’îlot de la Baleine. Mais elle ne courait pas le risque d’être aperçue dans cette portion de mer comprise entre Felsenheim et l’îlot du Requin.

M. Wolston et Ernest s’étaient mis aux avirons, et M. Zermatt gouvernait de manière à profiter de certains remous qui firent gagner sans trop de peine contre la marée montante. Toutefois, pendant un mille, il y eut à lutter vigoureusement pour ne pas être ramené vers la baie du Salut, et trois quarts d’heure après son départ, l’embarcation, se glissant entre les roches, mouillait au pied même du monticule de la batterie.

Aussitôt s’effectua le débarquement des caisses, des armes, des divers objets apportés de Felsenheim, qui furent déposés dans le magasin. Quant à M. Wolston et à Jack, ils montèrent au hangar de la batterie, et s’y postèrent de manière à surveiller les approches de l’îlot.

Il va sans dire que le pavillon qui flottait au mât de signal fut immédiatement amené. Néanmoins, il était à redouter que les sauvages ne l’eussent aperçu, alors que leurs pirogues n’étaient plus qu’à un mille de distance.

Il fallait donc se tenir sur la défensive en prévision d’une attaque immédiate.

Cette attaque n’eut pas lieu. Les pirogues, arrivées à la hauteur de l’îlot, se dirigèrent vers le sud, et le courant les conduisit vers l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals. Après le débarquement, elles allèrent s’abriter dans la petite crique où était mouillée la pinasse.

Voici où en étaient les choses. Depuis une quinzaine de jours, les sauvages occupaient Felsenheim, et il ne semblait pas qu’ils eussent saccagé cette habitation. Il n’en avait pas été ainsi de Falkenhorst, et, du haut du monticule, M. Zermatt les vit chasser les animaux après avoir dévasté les chambres et les magasins de la cour.

Cependant, que cette bande eût découvert que l’îlot du Requin servait de refuge aux habitants de l’île, il n’y eut bientôt plus lieu d’en douter. A plusieurs reprises, une demi-douzaine de pirogues traversèrent la baie du Salut, et se dirigèrent vers l’îlot. Plusieurs projectiles, envoyés par Ernest et Jack, en coulèrent une ou deux, et mirent les autres en fuite. Mais, à partir de ce moment, il y eut nécessité de veiller nuit et jour. Ce qu’on devait surtout craindre, ce qu’il serait difficile de repousser, c’eût été une attaque nocturne.

Voilà pourquoi, depuis que leur retraite était connue, M. Zermatt avait rehissé le pavillon au sommet du monticule, pour le cas – bien improbable – où un navire passerait en vue de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

CHAPITRE XXXI

Retour du matin. – Installation dans le magasin central. – Quatre jours

se passent. – Apparition des pirogues. – Espoir déçu. – Attaque nocturne.

— Les dernières cartouches. – Coup de canon au large.

Les dernières heures de cette nuit du 24 au 25 janvier s’écoulèrent en conversations. Tant de choses que les familles avaient à se dire, tant de souvenirs à évoquer, tant de craintes pour l’avenir! Personne ne songea à dormir et personne ne dormit, si ce n’est le petit Bob. Il va de soi que, jusqu’à l’aube, M. Zermatt et ses compagnons ne se départirent pas d’une sévère surveillance, et restèrent en se relayant près des deux caronades, chargées, l’une à boulet, l’autre à mitraille.

En effet, on le répète, ce qu’il y avait de plus dangereux, c’eût été une attaque de nuit, si les naturels parvenaient à débarquer avant d’être signalés.

L’îlot du Requin, plus étendu que celui de la Baleine situé à une lieue au nord à l’ouvert de la baie des Flamants, formait un ovale de deux mille six cents pieds de longueur sur une largeur de sept cents, soit un périmètre de trois quarts de lieue environ. Le jour, la surveillance y avait été assez facile, et, comme il importait qu’elle fût non moins efficace entre le coucher et le lever du soleil, on décida, sur la proposition du capitaine Gould, que des rondes seraient faites le long des grèves.

Lorsque l’aube reparut, aucune alerte ne s’était produite. Si les sauvages n’ignoraient pas que l’îlot fût pourvu d’une petite garnison, ils n’auraient pu du moins se douter que, renforcée depuis la veille, elle fût en état de leur opposer une plus sérieuse résistance. Toutefois, ils ne tarderaient pas à s’apercevoir qu’une de leurs pirogues avait disparu, – précisément celle qui avait conduit le capitaine Gould et ses compagnons de la grève de Falkenhorst à l’îlot du Requin.

«Peut-être penseront-ils, fit observer Fritz, que ce canot a été entraîné par la marée descendante…

— Dans tous les cas, mes amis, répondit M. Zermatt, veillons avec soin. Tant que l’îlot ne sera pas envahi, nous n’avons rien à craindre. Bien que nous soyons quinze ici, notre nourriture y est assurée pour longtemps avec les réserves du magasin, sans parler du troupeau d’antilopes. La source d’eau douce est inépuisable, et quant aux munitions, à moins d’attaques souvent réitérées, nous en sommes pourvus…

— Que diable! s’écria John Block, ces singes sans queues ne resteront pas éternellement sur l’île…

— Qui sait?… répondit Mme Zermatt. S’ils se sont installés à Felsenheim, ils ne s’en iront plus!… Ah! notre chère demeure, préparée pour vous recevoir tous, mes enfants, maintenant en leur pouvoir!…

— Mère, répondit Jenny, je ne pense pas qu’ils aient rien détruit à Felsenheim, car ils n’ont aucun intérêt à le faire!… Nous retrouverons notre habitation en bon état, et nous y reprendrons la vie commune… et avec l’aide de Dieu…

— De Dieu, ajouta François, qui ne nous abandonnera pas, après nous avoir réunis comme par miracle…

— Ah! si j’étais capable d’en faire un!… s’écria Jack.

— Lequel feriez-vous, monsieur Jack… demanda le bosseman.

— D’abord, répondit le jeune homme, je saurais bien obliger ces gueux à décamper ayant qu’ils eussent essayé de débarquer sur l’îlot, tous tant qu’ils sont…

— Et ensuite?… questionna Harry Gould.

— Ensuite, capitaine, s’ils persistaient à infester notre île de leur présence, je ferais apparaître au bon moment la *Licorne* ou les autres navires qui ne peuvent tarder à montrer leurs pavillons à l’ouvert de la baie du Salut…

— Mais cela, mon cher Jack, fit observer Jenny, ce ne serait pas un miracle, et cette éventualité se produira tout naturellement… Un de ces jours, nous entendrons le canon saluer la nouvelle colonie anglaise…

— Il est même étonnant qu’aucun bâtiment ne soit déjà en vue… dit M. Wolston.

— Patience, répondit John Block, et laissons courir!… Toute chose arrive à son heure…

— Dieu le veuille!» dit en soupirant Mme Zermatt, dont la confiance était ébranlée par ces rudes épreuves.

Ainsi donc, après avoir organisé leur existence sur la Nouvelle-Suisse, après avoir si largement puisé à ses ressources naturelles, après l’avoir rendue plus riche encore par leur travail et leur intelligence, voici que les deux familles en étaient réduites à recommencer sur un îlot qui dépendait de cette île! Combien de temps y seraient-ils prisonniers, et ne tomberaient-ils pas entre les mains ennemies, si un secours n’arrivait pas du dehors?…

On procéda à une installation qui durerait des semaines, peut-être des mois, le magasin étant assez vaste pour loger quinze personnes. Mmes Zermatt et Wolston, Jenny, Suzan et son enfant, Annah, Doll coucheraient dans les lits du second compartiment, et les hommes occuperaient le premier.

D’ailleurs, en pleine belle saison, les nuits étaient encore tièdes après des journées chaudes. Quelques brassées d’herbes, séchées au soleil, il n’en faudrait pas davantage au capitaine Gould et au bosseman, à MM. Zermatt et Wolston, à Fritz, à ses frères et à James, qui, du soir au matin, devaient se relayer de manière à surveiller les abords de l’îlot.

Quant à la nourriture, ainsi que l’avait affirmé M. Zermatt, il n’y avait pas à s’inquiéter. En riz, manioc, farine, en conserves de viandes fumées, de poissons secs, saumons et harengs, sans parler du poisson frais qui serait péché au pied des roches, les réserves suffiraient aux besoins quotidiens de six mois. Les mangliers et les cocotiers de l’îlot donnaient des fruits en abondance. Deux fûts permettraient d’additionner de quelques gouttes de brandy l’eau fraîche et limpide de la source.

Ce qui risquait de faire défaut, – et cela ne laissait pas d’être assez grave – c’était l’approvisionnement des munitions, bien que la chaloupe en eût apporté une certaine quantité. Par suite de fréquentes attaques, si la poudre, les boulets et les balles venaient à manquer, la défense deviendrait impossible.

Pendant l’installation dont s’occupaient M. Zermatt et Ernest, M. Wolston, Harry Gould, le bosseman, Fritz, Jack, François parcoururent l’îlot du Requin. Sur presque tous les côtés, il était aisément abordable par les grèves qui s’étendaient entre les pointes du littoral. La partie te mieux défendue était celle que dominait le monticule de la batterie, élevé à l’extrémité sud-ouest, en regard de la baie du Salut. Au pied s’entassaient d’énormes blocs, sur lesquels il eût été très difficile de débarquer. Partout ailleurs, il est vrai, des embarcations légères, des pirogues, trouveraient assez d’eau pour accoster. Il y avait donc obligation de tenir en surveillance les approches de l’îlot.

En le visitant, Fritz et François purent constater le bon état des plantations. Les mangliers, les cocotiers, les pins, étaient en plein rapport. Une herbe épaisse tapissait les pâtures où le troupeau d’antilopes se livrait à ses cabriolants ébats. De nombreux oiseaux, voletant d’un arbre à un autre, emplissaient l’air de mille cris. Un ciel magnifique versait sa lumière et sa chaleur sur la mer environnante. Combien eût paru délicieuse la fraîcheur des ombrages de Falkenhorst et de Felsenheim!

Le lendemain du jour où les familles s’étaient réfugiées sur l’îlot, un oiseau y avait reçu le meilleur accueil. C’était l’albatros de la Roche-Fumante, celui que Jenny avait retrouvé à la baie des Tortues, et qui, du haut du pic Jean-Zermatt, s’était envolé vers la Terre-Promise. A son arrivée, le bout de ficelle qui entourait encore une de ses pattes avait attiré l’attention de Jack, qui l’avait pris sans peine. Mais, cette fois, hélas! l’oiseau n’apportait aucune nouvelle!

Fritz, François, le capitaine Gould, M. Wolston, Jack et le bosseman montèrent à la batterie. Du haut du monticule, la vue, que ne gênait aucun obstacle, s’étendait au nord jusqu’au cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, à l’est jusqu’au cap de l’Est, au sud jusqu’aux dernières limites de la baie du Salut. En direction de l’ouest, à la distance de trois quarts de lieue, se développait la longue rangée d’arbres qui bordait le rivage entre l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals et le bois de Falkenhorst. Au delà, il eût été malaisé de reconnaître si les naturels parcouraient ou non la campagne à travers le district de la Terre-Promise.

En ce moment, à l’entrée de la baie du Salut, quelques pirogues, conduites à la pagaie, prenaient le large, sans s’aventurer à portée des pièces de la batterie. Les sauvages n’ignoraient plus à quel danger ils s’exposaient en s’approchant de l’îlot du Requin, et, assurément, s’ils tentaient d’y débarquer, ce ne serait que par une nuit obscure.

En observant la haute mer vers le nord, on ne voyait qu’une immensité déserte, et c’est de ce côté que la *Licorne* ou tout autre navire expédié d’Angleterre aurait pu apparaître…

Fritz, François, Harry Gould, John Block, après s’être assurés que la batterie était prête à faire feu de ses deux caronades, se préparaient à redescendre, lorsque le capitaine Gould demanda:

«Est-ce qu’il ne se trouve pas un dépôt de poudre à l’habitation de Felsenheim?…

— En effet, répondit Jack, et plût à Dieu qu’il fût ici au lieu d’être là-bas!… Ce sont précisément les trois barils que nous avait laissés la *Licorne*…

— Et où sont-ils?…

— Dans une anfractuosité qui nous sert de poudrière, au fond du verger…

— Et, probablement, demanda le bosseman, qui avait deviné la pensée de son capitaine, les coquins ont dû découvrir cette poudrière?…

— Cela est à craindre, répliqua M. Wolston.

— Ce qui est à craindre surtout, déclara le capitaine Gould, c'est que, dans leur ignorance, ils commettent quelque imprudence et fassent sauter l'habitation…

— Et eux avec!… s'écria Jack. Eh bien, dût Felsenheim périr dans l'explosion, ce serait une solution, – du moins, et ce qui resterait de ces vilains animaux sur notre île décamperait, j'imagine, sans esprit de retour!»

Il y avait lieu de le croire. Mais était-il à désirer que cette éventualité se réalisât, même pour débarrasser la Nouvelle-Suisse de ses envahisseurs?…

Laissant le bosseman de garde à la batterie, tous revinrent au magasin. Le premier repas fut pris en commun, et quelle joie y aurait présidé si les convives eussent été réunis dans la grande salle de Felsenheim!

Il n'est pas nécessaire de s'étendre sur la monotonie des jours qui suivirent, les 25, 26, 27 et 28 janvier. Ils n'apportèrent aucun changement à la situation. Sauf en ce qui concernait la surveillance de l'îlot, on ne savait comment occuper les longues heures. Ah! quelle différence, et dans quel enchantement aurait vécu tout ce petit monde, si la *Licorne* n'eût pas été dans l'obligation de relâcher à Capetown pour réparer ses avaries, – ce qui amena l'embarquement de ses passagers sur le *Flag*… Depuis plus de deux mois déjà, parents et amis auraient été installés à Felsenheim!… Et maintenant le mariage de Fritz et de Jenny étant fait, qui sait si un second n'eût pas été sur le point d'être célébré, celui d'Ernest et d'Annah que le chapelain de la corvette aurait béni dans la chapelle de Felsenheim!… Et, probablement aussi, il aurait été question d’une troisième cérémonie de ce genre… plus tard… lorsque Doll aurait atteint ses dix-huit ans, cérémonie dans laquelle François eût joué le principal rôle, à l’extrême satisfaction des deux familles qui, décidément, n’en feraient plus qu’une…

Mais la réalisation de ces projets si ardemment désirée, y pouvait-on songer dans les circonstances actuelles?… Comment envisager sans effroi les dangers qu’amenait la présence des naturels sur l’île, et lorsqu’on en était réduit à cet îlot dont ils ne tarderaient peut-être pas à s’emparer?…

Cependant chacun luttait contre le découragement. John Block, lui, n’avait rien perdu de sa bonne humeur naturelle. On faisait de longues promenades sous les plantations. On surveillait la baie du Salut, bien qu’il n’y eût aucune attaque à redouter des pirogues, alors que le soleil se déplaçait d’un horizon à l’autre. Puis, avec la nuit revenaient toutes les inquiétudes, en prévision d’une attaque qui aurait le nombre pour elle.

Aussi, tandis que les femmes étaient retirées dans le second compartiment du magasin, les hommes faisaient-ils des rondes le long des grèves, prêts à se concentrer au pied du monticule, si les agresseurs s’approchaient de l’îlot.

Le 29 janvier, pendant la matinée, il n’y eut rien à noter encore. Le soleil s’était levé sur un horizon dégagé de brumes. La journée serait très chaude, et c’est à peine si la légère brise de mer tiendrait jusqu’au soir.

Après le repas de midi, Harry Gould et Jack, quittant le magasin, vinrent relever Ernest et M. Wolston qui étaient de faction au poste de la batterie.

Ces derniers allaient redescendre, lorsque le capitaine Gould les arrêta, en disant:

«Voici plusieurs pirogues qui se montrent à l’embouchure du ruisseau des Chacals…

— Elles vont probablement à la pêche comme tous les jours, répondit Ernest, et auront soin de passer hors de portée de nos caronades.

— Eh! s’écria Jack, qui, la longue-vue aux yeux, observait ce côté de la baie, les pirogues sont nombreuses cette fois… Tenez… cinq… six… neuf… Encore deux qui sortent de la crique… onze… douze!… Ah ça! est-ce que toute la flottille s’en va à la pêche?…

— Ou plutôt ne se disposent-elles pas à nous attaquer?… dit M. Wolston.

— Peut-être… répondit Ernest.

— Soyons sur nos gardes, recommanda Harry Gould, et prévenons nos compagnons…

— Voyons d’abord de quel côté se dirigent ces pirogues, répondit M. Wolston.

— En tout cas, nous sommes prêts à faire feu de toute notre artillerie», ajouta Jack.

Pendant les quelques heures que Jack était demeuré entre les mains des sauvages dans la baie des Éléphants, il avait observé que le nombre des pirogues s’élevait à une quinzaine pouvant porter de sept à huit hommes chacune. Or, précisément, il y eut lieu de reconnaître qu’une douzaine de ces embarcations venaient de doubler la pointe de la crique. Il semblait aussi, la longue-vue aidant, qu’elles avaient pris à bord toute la bande, et qu’il ne devait plus rester un seul indigène à Felsenheim.

«Déguerpiraient-ils enfin?… s'écria Jack.

— Ce n'est pas probable, répondit Ernest, et ils vont plutôt rendre visite à l'îlot du Requin…

— A quelle heure commence le jusant?… demanda le capitaine Gould.

— A une heure et demie, répondit M. Wolston.

— Alors il ne tardera pas à se faire sentir, et comme il favorisera la marche des pirogues, nous saurons bientôt à quoi nous en tenir.»

Entre temps, Ernest alla mettre M. Zermatt, ses frères, le bosseman au courant, et tous vinrent prendre poste sous le hangar de la batterie.

Il était un peu plus d'une heure, et, au début de la marée descendante, les pirogues n'avançaient que lentement le long du littoral de l'est. De la sorte, elles restaient aussi éloignées que possible de l'îlot, afin d'éviter les projectiles, dont elles connaissaient maintenant la portée et la puissance.

«Et pourtant… si c'était un départ définitif!… répétait François.

— Bon voyage!… s'écria Jack.

— Et au plaisir de ne jamais les revoir!» ajouta John Block.

Personne n'eût encore osé se prononcer ni admettre une si heureuse éventualité… Les pirogues n'attendaient-elles pas que le jusant fût bien établi pour rallier l'îlot?…

Fritz et Jenny, l'un près de l'autre, regardaient sans prononcer une parole, n'osant croire que la situation touchât à un dénouement si prochain.

Mmes Zermatt et Wolston, Suzan, Annah et Doll murmuraient tout bas quelque prière.

Enfin, il parut bientôt que les pirogues sentaient l'action de la marée descendante. Leur vitesse s'accéléra, sans qu'elles eussent cessé de longer la côte, comme si le projet des naturels était de doubler le cap de l'Est.

A trois heures et demie, la flottille se trouvait à mi-chemin de la baie du Salut et du cap. A six heures, plus le moindre doute à conserver. Après avoir contourné ce cap, la dernière embarcation disparaissait derrière la pointe.

Ni M. Zermatt ni aucun des siens n'avaient un instant quitté le monticule.

Quel soulagement lorsqu'il n'y eut plus une seule pirogue en vue!… L'île était enfin délivrée de leur présence… Les familles allaient pouvoir réintégrer Felsenheim… Peut-être n'y aurait-il que d'insignifiants dommages à réparer?… On ne s'occuperait que de guetter l'arrivée de la *Licorne*… Les dernières appréhensions étaient oubliées, et, en somme, tous étaient là… tous… après avoir surmonté tant d'épreuves!

«Partons-nous pour Felsenheim?… s'écria Jack, dans son impatience de quitter l'îlot.

— Oui… oui…, répondit Doll, non moins impatiente et à laquelle se joignit François.

— Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux attendre à demain?… fit observer Jenny. – Qu'en penses-tu, mon cher Fritz?…

— Ce que pensent M. Wolston, le capitaine Gould et mon père, répondit Fritz: c'est assurément de passer encore la nuit prochaine sur l'îlot…

— En effet, ajouta M. Zermatt, et, avant de regagner Felsenheim, il faut avoir toute certitude que les sauvages ne songent point à y revenir…

— Eh! ils sont déjà au diable, s'écria Jack, et le diable ne lâche plus ce qu'il tient dans ses griffes!… N'est-ce pas, brave John Block?…

— Si… quelquefois», répondit le bosseman.

Bref, malgré les instances de Jack, on décida de remettre le départ au lendemain, et le dernier repas, qui allait être pris à l'îlot du Requin, réunit tout le monde.

Il fut très gai, et, la soirée achevée, chacun ne songea plus qu'à se livrer au repos.

D'ailleurs, tout donnait à croire que cette nuit du 29 au 30 janvier serait aussi calme que tant d'autres passées dans les tranquilles habitations de Felsenheim et de Falkenhorst.

Cependant ni M. Zermatt ni ses compagnons ne voulurent se départir de leurs habitudes de prudence, bien que tout danger parût écarté depuis le départ des pirogues. Il fut donc convenu que les uns effectueraient les rondes nocturnes, tandis que les autres resteraient en surveillance au poste de la batterie.

Dès que Mmes Zermatt et Wolston, Jenny, Doll, Annah, Suzan et Bob furent rentrés dans le magasin, Jack, Ernest, François, John Block, le fusil en bandoulière, gagnèrent l'extrémité nord de l'îlot. Quant à Fritz et au capitaine Gould, ils gravirent le monticule, et s'installèrent sous le hangar, leur faction devant durer jusqu'au lever du soleil.

M. Wolston, M. Zermatt et James restèrent dans le magasin où il leur serait loisible de dormir jusqu’à l’aube.

La nuit était sombre, sans lune. L’espace s’emplissait des vapeurs que lui restituait la terre échauffée par les chaleurs du jour. La brise venait de tomber avec le soir. Un profond silence régnait. On n’entendait plus que le ressac de la marée montante, qui s’était fait sentir vers huit heures.

Harry Gould et Fritz, assis l’un près de l’autre, reportaient leurs souvenirs sur tous ces événements heureux ou malheureux qui s’étaient succédé depuis l’abandon du *Flag*. De temps en temps, l’un ou l’autre sortait, et, contournant le plateau de la batterie, dirigeait ses regards plus particulièrement vers le sombre bras de mer compris entre les deux caps.

Rien n’avait troublé cette profonde solitude jusqu’à deux heures après minuit, lorsque le capitaine et Fritz furent tirés de leur causerie par le bruit d’une détonation.

«Un coup de feu!… dit Harry Gould.

— Oui… et il a été tiré de ce côté, répondit Fritz, en indiquant le nord-est de l’îlot.

— Que se passe-t-il donc?…» s’écria le capitaine Gould. Tous deux, se précipitant hors du hangar, cherchèrent à distinguer quelque lueur au milieu de cette profonde obscurité.

Deux autres détonations éclatèrent alors, et, cette fois, à une distance moindre que la première.

«Les pirogues sont revenues…» dit Fritz.

Et, laissant Harry Gould à la batterie, il descendit en toute hâte vers le magasin.

MM. Zermatt et Wolston, qui avaient entendu ces détonations, étaient déjà sur le seuil.

«Qu’y a-t-il?… demanda M. Zermatt.

— Je crains, mon père, répondit Fritz, que les sauvages aient essayé de débarquer…

— Et ils y ont réussi, les gueux!… s’écria Jack, qui parut avec Ernest et le bosseman.

— Ils sont sur l’îlot?… répéta M. Wolston.

— Leurs pirogues ont accosté la pointe du nord-est, au moment où nous y arrivions, dit Ernest, et nos décharges n’ont pu les éloigner!… Il ne reste plus…

— Qu’à se défendre!» répondit le capitaine Gould. Jenny, Doll, Annah, Suzan, Mmes Zermatt et Wolston venaient de quitter leur chambre. Sous la crainte d’une attaque immédiate, il fallut emporter ce que l’on pourrait d’armes, de munitions, de provisions, et gagner la batterie au plus vite.

Ainsi donc, ce départ des pirogues n’était qu’une ruse. Les naturels voulaient laisser croire qu’ils avaient définitivement abandonné l’île. Puis, profitant de la marée montante, ils étaient revenus vers l’îlot du Requin qu’ils espéraient surprendre. La manœuvre avait eu plein succès. Bien que leur présence fût connue et qu’ils eussent été accueillis à coups de fusil, ils occupaient la pointe, d’où il leur serait facile de gagner le magasin central.

La situation était donc gravement empirée, et même désespérée, puisque les pirogues avaient pu y débarquer toute la bande. Que M. Zermatt et ses compagnons fussent en état d’opposer une sérieuse résistance, de tenir tête à un aussi grand nombre d’assaillants, c’était impossible. Qu’ils dussent succomber, lorsque les munitions et les provisions viendraient à leur manquer, ce n’était que trop certain, et ils ne se faisaient aucune illusion à cet égard!…

Quoi qu’il en soit, il n’y avait qu’à se réfugier sur le monticule dans le poste de la batterie. C’était là seulement que l’on pouvait se défendre.

Mmes Zermatt et Wolston, Jenny, Annah, Doll, Suzan et son enfant vinrent s’abriter sous le hangar qui abritait les deux canons. Elles ne laissaient pas échapper une plainte, elles s’efforçaient de contenir leurs angoisses.

Un instant, M. Zermatt eut la pensée de les transporter au rivage de Falkenhorst avec la chaloupe. Mais que deviendraient ces pauvres femmes, après que l’îlot serait envahi, et si leurs compagnons ne pouvaient les rejoindre?… D’ailleurs, elles n’eussent jamais consenti à se séparer d’eux.

Il était un peu plus de quatre heures, lorsqu’un vague bruit de pas signala la présence des sauvages à une centaine de toises. Le capitaine Gould, MM. Zermatt et Wolston, Ernest, François, James, le bosseman, armés de carabines, se tinrent prêts à faire feu, tandis que Fritz et Jack, la mèche allumée près des deux petites pièces, n’attendaient que le moment de couvrir de mitraille les approches du monticule.

Lorsque les ombres noires se dessinèrent au milieu des premières lueurs du jour, le capitaine Gould commanda à voix basse de tirer dans cette direction.

Sept à huit détonations éclatèrent, suivies d’horribles cris, preuve que plus d’une balle avait porté dans la masse. Après cet accueil, bien fait pour les arrêter, les assaillants allaient-ils prendre la fuite ou se précipiter à l’assaut de la batterie?… Dans tous les cas, les fusils, immédiatement remis en état, les accableraient de balles auxquelles se joindrait la mitraille des caronades, s’ils franchissaient l’espace qui les séparait encore du monticule.

Jusqu’au lever du soleil, il y eut trois tentatives à repousser. La dernière permit à une vingtaine de ces naturels de gagner la crête du monticule. Bien qu’un certain nombre des leurs eussent été frappés mortellement, les carabines ne suffisaient plus à les arrêter, et, sans une double décharge d’artillerie, le poste de la batterie eût été probablement enlevé dans la dernière attaque.

Avec le jour, la bande s’était retirée sous les arbres, près du magasin, et peut-être attendrait-elle la prochaine nuit avant de recommencer l’assaut.

Par malheur, M. Zermatt et les siens avaient largement dépensé les cartouches. Lorsqu’on en serait réduit aux projectiles des canons, qui ne pouvaient être braqués vers la base du monticule, comment en atteindre le sommet?…

Un conseil fut tenu afin d’étudier la situation sous toutes ses faces. S’il était impossible de prolonger longtemps la résistance dans ces conditions, n’y avait-il pas possibilité de quitter l’îlot du Requin, de débarquer sur la grève de Falkenhorst, de chercher refuge à l’intérieur de la Terre-Promise ou en quelque autre partie de l’île, et tous, cette fois, tous?… Ou bien y aurait-il avantage à se jeter au milieu des sauvages, à profiter de la supériorité des carabines sur les arcs et les flèches pour les obliger à reprendre la mer?… Mais M. Zermatt et ses compagnons n’étaient que neuf contre la centaine d’hommes qui entouraient le monticule.

En ce moment, comme une réponse à cette dernière proposition, l’espace s’emplit d’un sifflement de flèches, dont quelques-unes vinrent s’implanter dans la toiture du hangar, heureusement sans blesser personne.

«L’attaque va recommencer… dit John Block.

— Soyons prêts!» répondit Fritz.

Cette agression fut alors des plus violentes, car les naturels, pris de rage, ne craignaient plus de s’exposer aux balles et à la mitraille. En outre, les munitions allaient bientôt manquer, et le feu se ralentit. Aussi plusieurs de ces forcenés, grimpant le long du monticule, parvinrent-ils jusqu’au hangar. Une décharge des deux pièces, à bout portant, nettoya la place de quelques-uns, tandis que Fritz, Jack, François, James, John Block, luttaient corps à corps avec les autres. Ils revinrent tous alors, passant sur les cadavres qui jonchaient la base du monticule. Ils ne faisaient pas usage de leurs arcs, mais d’une sorte d’arme, moitié hache, moitié massue, redoutable entre leurs mains…

Il fut évident que la lutte touchait à son terme. Les dernières balles avaient été tirées, et le nombre devait vaincre. M. Zermatt et ses compagnons essayaient de résister autour du hangar, qui ne tarderait pas à être envahi. Aux prises avec plusieurs naturels, Fritz, François, Jack, Harry Gould risquaient d’être entraînés au bas du monticule. La lutte se terminerait en quelques instants, et la victoire, ce serait le massacre de tous, car on ne pouvait attendre aucune pitié de la part de ces féroces ennemis.

En cet instant, – il était exactement huit heures vingt-cinq, – une détonation, apportée par le vent du nord qui fraîchissait, retentit au large de l’île.

Les assaillants l’avaient entendue, car les plus avancés s’arrêtèrent.

Fritz, Jack et les autres remontèrent aussitôt vers le hangar, quelques-uns d’entre eux blessés légèrement.

«Un coup de canon!… s’écria François.

— Et un coup de canon de marine… ou je ne m’y connais pas!… déclara le bosseman.

— Il y a un navire en vue… dit M. Zermatt.

— C’est la *Licorne*… répondit Jenny.

— Et c’est Dieu qui l’envoie!…» murmura François.

Les échos de Falkenhorst répercutèrent une seconde détonation, plus rapprochée, et, cette fois, les sauvages reculèrent jusque sous le couvert des arbres.

Alors Jack de s’élancer vers le mât de pavillon, et, leste comme un gabier de hune, il en atteignit l’extrémité.

«Navire… navire!» cria-t-il.

Tous les regards se portèrent dans la direction du nord.

Au-dessus du cap de l’Espoir-Trompé, en arrière de sa pointe, se dessinaient les hautes voiles d’un bâtiment, gonflées par la brise matinale…

Un trois-mâts, amures à bâbord, manœuvrait pour doubler ce cap, qui fut appelé depuis le cap de la Délivrance.

A la corne d’artimon de ce navire battait le pavillon de la Grande-Bretagne.

Mmes Zermatt et Wolston, Jenny, Annah, Doll, Suzan venaient de sortir du hangar, levant les mains vers le ciel dans un élan de reconnaissance.

«Et ces bandits?… demanda Fritz.

— En fuite!… répondit Jack, qui venait de se laisser glisser le long du mât de pavillon.

— Oui… en fuite, ajouta John Block, et s’ils ne détalent pas assez vite, aidons-les avec nos derniers boulets de quatre!…»

En effet, surpris par les détonations venues du nord, épouvantés à l’apparition du navire qui tournait la pointe, les sauvages s’étaient précipités du côté de la mer où les attendaient leurs pirogues. Dès qu’ils s’y furent embarqués, elles débordèrent à grands coups de pagaies et prirent le large en se dirigeant vers le cap de l’Est.

Le bosseman et Jack rentrés sous le hangar braquèrent les deux pièces en cette direction, et trois pirogues, coupées en deux, coulèrent sur place.

Au moment où le bâtiment, donnant à pleines voiles dans le bras de mer, laissait porter sur l’îlot du Requin, les projectiles de ses grosses pièces se joignirent à ceux de la batterie. La plupart des pirogues essayèrent en vain d’y échapper, et deux seulement parvinrent à disparaître derrière le cap pour ne plus jamais revenir.

CHAPITRE XXXII

La *Licorne*. – Prise de possession au nom de l'Angleterre. – Aucune nouvelle du *Flag*. – Retour à Felsenheim. – Un mariage célébré à la chapelle.

— Plusieurs années. – Prospérité de la colonie de la Nouvelle-Suisse.

C'était bien la *Licorne* qui venait de jeter l'ancre à l'entrée de la baie du Salut. Ses avaries réparées, le capitaine Littlestone, ayant quitté Capetown après une relâche de plusieurs mois, arrivait enfin à la Nouvelle-Suisse, dont il devait prendre officiellement possession au nom de l'Angleterre.

Le capitaine Littlestone apprit alors de la bouche même d'Harry Gould les événements dont le *Flag* avait été le théâtre.

Quant à ce qu'était devenu ce navire, si Robert Borupt se livrait à la piraterie sur ces mers mal famées de l'océan Pacifique, ou si ses complices et lui avaient péri dans quelque furieux tornados de ces parages, on ne devait jamais le savoir, ainsi qu'il a été dit, et il n'y a plus lieu de s'en occuper.

Quelle satisfaction pour les deux familles, lorsqu'elles constatèrent que l'habitation de Felsenheim n'avait pas été saccagée! Il était probable que les naturels, ayant l'intention de se fixer définitivement sur l'île, comptaient s'y installer. Aucun dégât dans les chambres à coucher ni dans les salles, aucune trace de pillage dans les annexes et magasins, aucune déprédation dans le verger ni dans les champs voisins.

Dès le retour des hôtes de Felsenheim, les chiens, Turc, Braun et Falb accoururent, témoignant de leur joie par force aboiements et gambades.

Puis, on retrouva les animaux domestiques qui s’étaient dispersés aux environs de l’enclos, les buffles Sturm et Brummer, l’autruche Brausewind, le singe Knips, l’onagre Leichtfus, la vache Blass et ses compagnons de pâture, le taureau Brull et ses compagnons d’étable, les ânons Rash, Pfeil et Flink, le chacal, l’albatros de Jenny qui avait franchi le bras de mer entre l’îlot du Requin et Felsenheim.

Comme plusieurs navires expédiés d’Angleterre ne pouvaient tarder à amener de nouveaux colons avec leur matériel, il convenait de choisir l’emplacement des constructions nouvelles. Il fut décidé qu’elles seraient établies sur les deux rives du ruisseau des Chacals, en remontant vers la cascade. Felsenheim formerait ainsi le premier village de la colonie, en attendant qu’il devînt une ville. L’avenir lui réservait sans doute le rang de capitale de la Nouvelle-Suisse, car elle serait la plus importante des bourgades qui s’élèveraient à l’intérieur comme à l’extérieur de la Terre-Promise.

Du reste, la *Licorne* devait prolonger sa relâche dans la baie du Salut jusqu’à l’arrivée des émigrants. Aussi, quelle animation sur cette côte en remontant les grèves de Falkenhorst!

Trois semaines ne s’étaient pas écoulées, lorsqu’une cérémonie, à laquelle on voulut donner tout l’éclat possible, réunit le commandant Littlestone, ses officiers et l’équipage de la corvette, puis le capitaine Harry Gould, le bosseman, puis les familles Zermatt et Wolston au complet, qui allaient se rattacher l’une à l’autre par des liens plus étroits.

Ce jour-là, le chapelain de la *Licorne* procéda dans la chapelle de Felsenheim à la célébration du mariage d'Ernest Zermatt et d'Annah Wolston. C'était le premier qui s'accomplissait sur cette île de la Nouvelle-Suisse, lequel, dans l'avenir, serait suivi de bien d'autres.

Et, en effet, à deux ans de là, François devint le mari de Doll Wolston. Cette fois, ce ne fut pas dans l'humble chapelle que le pasteur de la colonie bénit cette union tant désirée. La cérémonie eut lieu dans une église élevée à mi-chemin de l'avenue entre Felsenheim et Falkenhorst, et dont le clocher, pointant hors des arbres, était visible de trois milles en mer.

Il serait oiseux de s'étendre davantage sur les destinées de la Nouvelle-Suisse. L'heureuse île vit s'accroître, d'année en année, le nombre de ses habitants. La baie du Salut, abritée contre les vents et les houles du large, offrait d'excellents mouillages aux bâtiments, entre lesquels la pinasse *Elisabeth* ne faisait point mauvaise figure.

Il va de soi que les communications avaient été régulièrement établies avec la métropole. Cela donna naissance à une fructueuse exportation des produits de la colonie, aussi bien ceux du district de la Terre-Promise que ceux de la campagne que limitait la chaîne de montagnes au sud, de l'embouchure de la rivière Montrose à la côte occidentale. On comptait alors quatre principales bourgades, Waldegg, Zuckertop, Prospect-Hill, l'ermitage d'Eberfurt. Un port fut créé à l'embouchure de la rivière Montrose, un autre à la baie de la Licorne qu'une route carrossable mettait en communication avec le fond de la baie du Salut.

A cette époque, c'est-à-dire trois ans après la prise de possession par l'Angleterre, le chiffre de la population dépassait deux mille. Le gouvernement britannique ayant laissé son autonomie à la Nouvelle-Suisse,

M. Zermatt avait été élevé au rang de gouverneur de la colonie. Fasse le Ciel que ceux qui lui succéderont vaillent cet excellent et digne homme!

Il convient de noter aussi qu'un détachement des troupes de l'Inde vint prendre garnison sur l'île, après que des forts eurent été construits au cap de l'Est et au cap de la Délivrance (ancien cap de l'Espoir-Trompé), de manière à commander le bras de mer qui donnait accès dans la baie du Salut.

Certes, ce n'étaient pas les sauvages qu'il y avait à craindre, ni ceux des îles Andaman ou Nicobar, ni ceux de la côte australienne. Mais la position de la Nouvelle-Suisse en ces parages, outre qu'elle facilitait la relâche des navires, avait une réelle importance au point de vue militaire à l'entrée des mers de la Sonde et de l'océan Indien. Il importait donc qu'elle fût pourvue de moyens de défense en rapport avec cette situation.

Telle est la complète histoire de cette île depuis le jour où la tempête y jeta un père, une mère et leurs quatre enfants. Pendant douze années, cette famille intelligente et courageuse avait travaillé sans relâche, mis en œuvre toutes les forces d'un sol vierge, que fécondait le puissant climat des zones tropicales. Aussi sa prospérité n'avait-elle cessé de s'accroître, son bien-être d'augmenter jusqu'au jour où l'arrivée de la *Licorne* lui permit d'établir ses relations avec le reste du monde.

Une seconde famille, on le sait, était venue volontairement joindre ses destinées à la sienne, et, matériellement comme moralement, jamais existence n'avait été plus heureuse que sur ce fertile domaine de la Terre-Promise.

Mais, alors, commencèrent les dures épreuves. Le mauvais sort s'acharna contre ces braves gens. Ils eurent la crainte de ne plus revoir ceux qu'ils attendaient, et le malheur d’être assaillis par une bande de sauvages!

Il faut dire, cependant, que, même aux plus mauvaises heures de cette période, soutenus par une piété sincère que rien n’aurait pu ébranler, ils n’avaient jamais désespéré de la Providence.

Enfin les beaux jours revinrent, et les mauvais ne sont plus à redouter pour cette seconde patrie des deux familles.

A présent, la Nouvelle-Suisse est florissante, et elle deviendra trop petite pour recevoir tous ceux qu’elle attire. Son commerce trouve des débouchés en Europe comme en Asie, grâce à la proximité de l’Australie, de l’Inde et des possessions néerlandaises. Très heureusement, – on doit s’en féliciter, – les pépites rencontrées dans le ravin de la rivière Montrose étaient extrêmement rares, et la colonie ne fut pas envahie par ces chercheurs d’or qui ne laissent après eux que désordre et misère!

Quant aux mariages qui avaient uni les familles Zermatt et Wolston, ils ont été bénis du Ciel. Les grands-pères, les grand’mères, ne tardèrent pas à se sentir revivre dans leurs petits-enfants. Seul, Jack s’est contenté d’avoir des neveux et des nièces qui lui grimpaient aux jambes. Ayant, comme il le disait, pour vocation d’être oncle, il s’acquittait avec succès de cette fonction sociale.

Désormais la prospérité de l’île est assurée, et, bien qu’elle soit entrée dans le domaine colonial de la Grande-Bretagne, l’Angleterre, de même qu’elle l’a fait pour la Nouvelle-Hollande, lui a laissé son nom de Nouvelle-Suisse en l’honneur de la famille Zermatt.

FIN

THE VILLAGE IN THE TREETOPS

This 1901 novel explores themes of Darwinism and human development. The story concerns the members of a safari in the Congo, who discover what appears to be a colony of natives living in the trees.

Due to the scarcity of this novel in English translation, only the French text is available in this edition.

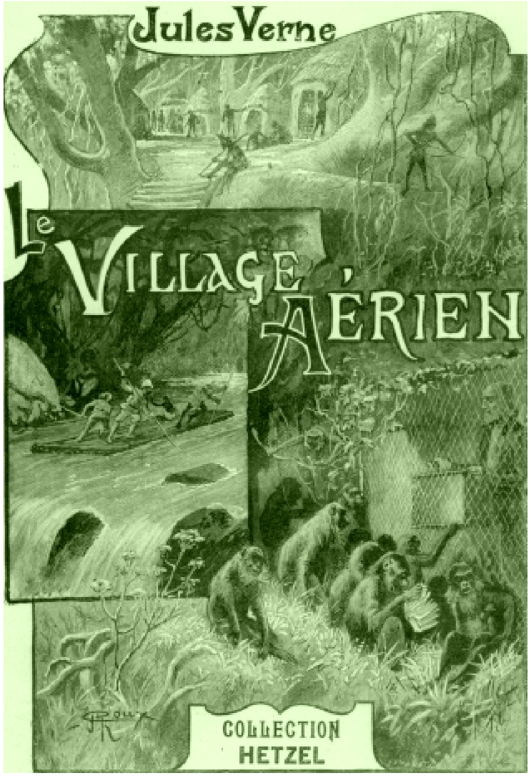
Jules Verne
Le Village Aérien
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An original illustration

LE VILLAGE AÉRIEN

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CHAPITRE I

Après une longue étape

«Et le Congo américain, demanda Max Huber, il n’en est donc pas encore question?…

— À quoi bon, mon cher Max?… répondit John Cort. Est-ce que les vastes espaces nous manquent aux États-Unis?… Que de régions neuves et désertes à visiter entre l’Alaska et le Texas!… Avant d’aller coloniser au dehors, mieux vaut coloniser au dedans, je pense…

— Eh! mon cher John, les nations européennes finiront par s’être partagé l’Afrique, si les choses continuent — soit une superficie d’environ trois milliards d’hectares!… Les Américains les abandonneront-ils en totalité aux Anglais, aux Allemands, aux Hollandais, aux Portugais, aux Français, aux Italiens, aux Espagnols, aux Belges?…

— Les Américains n’en ont que faire — pas plus que les Russes, répliqua John Cort, et pour la même raison…

— Laquelle?

— C’est qu’il est inutile de se fatiguer les jambes, lorsqu’il suffit d’étendre le bras…

— Bon! mon cher John, le gouvernement fédéral réclamera, un jour ou l’autre, sa part du gâteau africain… Il y a un Congo français, un Congo belge, un Congo allemand, sans compter le Congo indépendant, et celui-ci n’attend que l’occasion de sacrifier son indépendance!… Et tout ce pays que nous venons de parcourir depuis trois mois…

— En curieux, en simples curieux, Max, non en conquérants…

— La différence n’est pas considérable, digne citoyen des États- Unis, déclara Max Huber. Je le répète, en cette partie de l’Afrique, l’Union pourrait se tailler une colonie superbe… On trouve là des territoires fertiles qui ne demandent qu’à utiliser leur fertilité, sous l’influence d’une irrigation généreuse dont la nature a fait tous les frais. Ils possèdent un réseau liquide qui ne tarit jamais…

— Même par cette abominable chaleur, observa John Cort, en épongeant son front calciné par le soleil tropical.

— Bah! n’y prenons plus garde! reprit Max Huber. Est-ce que nous ne sommes pas acclimatés, je dirai négrifiés, si vous n’y voyez pas d’inconvénient, cher ami?… Nous voici en mars seulement, et parlez-moi des températures de juillet, d’août, lorsque les rayons solaires vous percent la peau comme des vrilles de feu!…

— N’importe, Max, nous aurons quelque peine à devenir Pahouins ou Zanzibarites, avec notre léger épiderme de Français et d’Américain! J’en conviens, cependant, nous allons achever une belle et intéressante campagne que la bonne fortune a favorisée… Mais il me tarde d’être de retour à Libreville, de retrouver dans nos factoreries un peu de cette tranquillité, de ce repos qui est bien dû à des voyageurs après les trois mois d’un tel voyage…

— D’accord, ami John, cette aventureuse expédition a présenté quelque intérêt. Pourtant, l’avouerai-je, elle ne m’a pas donné tout ce que j’en attendais…

— Comment, Max, plusieurs centaines de milles à travers un pays inconnu, pas mal de dangers affrontés au milieu de tribus peu accueillantes, des coups de feu échangés à l’occasion contre des coups de sagaies et des volées de flèches, des chasses que le lion numide et la panthère libyenne ont daigné honorer de leur présence, des hécatombes d’éléphants faites au profit de notre chef Urdax, une récolte d’ivoire de premier choix qui suffirait à fournir de touches les pianos du monde entier!… Et vous ne vous déclarez pas satisfait…

— Oui et non, John. Tout cela forme le menu ordinaire des explorateurs de l’Afrique centrale… C’est ce que le lecteur rencontre dans les récits des Barth, des Burton, des Speke, des Grant, des du Chaillu, des Livingstone, des Stanley, des Serpa Pinto, des Anderson, des Cameron, des Mage, des Brazza, des Gallieni, des Dibowsky, des Lejean, des Massari, des Wissemann, des Buonfanti, des Maistre…»

Le choc de l’avant-train du chariot contre une grosse pierre coupa net la nomenclature des conquérants africains que déroulait Max Huber. John Cort en profita pour lui dire:

«Alors vous comptiez trouver autre chose au cours de notre voyage?…

— Oui, mon cher John.

— De l’imprévu?…

— Mieux que de l’imprévu, lequel, je le reconnais volontiers, ne nous a pas fait défaut…

— De l’extraordinaire?…

— C’est le mot, mon ami, et, pas une fois, pas une seule, je n’ai eu l’occasion de la jeter aux échos de la vieille Libye, cette énorme qualification de _portentosa Africa _due aux blagueurs classiques de l’Antiquité…

— Allons, Max, je vois qu’une âme française est plus difficile à contenter…

— Qu’une âme américaine… je l’avoue, John, si les souvenirs que vous emportez de notre campagne vous suffisent…

— Amplement, Max.

— Et si vous revenez content…

— Content… surtout d’en revenir!

— Et vous pensez que des gens qui liraient le récit de ce voyage s’écrieraient: «Diable, voilà qui est curieux!»

— Ils seraient exigeants, s’ils ne le criaient pas!

— À mon avis, ils ne le seraient pas assez…

— Et le seraient, sans doute, riposta John Cort, si nous avions terminé notre expédition dans l’estomac d’un lion ou dans le ventre d’un anthropophage de l’Oubanghi…

— Non, John, non, et, sans aller jusqu’à ce genre de dénouement qui, d’ailleurs, n’est pas dénué d’un certain intérêt pour les lecteurs et même pour les lectrices, en votre âme et conscience, devant Dieu et devant les hommes, oseriez-vous jurer que nous ayons découvert et observé plus que n’avaient déjà observé et découvert nos devanciers dans l’Afrique centrale?…

— Non, en effet, Max.

— Eh bien, moi, j’espérais être plus favorisé…

— Gourmand, qui prétend faire une vertu de sa gourmandise! répliqua John Cort. Pour mon compte, je me déclare repu, et je n’attendais pas de notre campagne plus qu’elle n’a donné…

— C’est-à-dire rien, John.

— D’ailleurs, Max, le voyage n’est pas encore terminé, et, pendant les cinq ou six semaines que nécessitera le parcours d’ici à Libreville…

— Allons donc! s’écria Max Huber, un simple cheminement de caravane…, le trantran ordinaire des étapes… une promenade en diligence, comme au bon temps…

— Qui sait?…» dit John Cort.

Cette fois, le chariot s’arrêta pour la halte du soir au bas d’un tertre couronné de cinq ou six beaux arbres, les seuls qui se montrassent sur cette vaste plaine, illuminée alors des feux du soleil couchant.

Il était sept heures du soir. Grâce à la brièveté du crépuscule sous cette latitude du neuvième degré nord, la nuit ne tarderait pas à s’étendre. L’obscurité serait même profonde, car d’épais nuages allaient voiler le rayonnement stellaire, et le croissant de la lune venait de disparaître à l’horizon de l’ouest.

Le chariot, uniquement destiné au transport des voyageurs, ne contenait ni marchandises ni provisions. Que l'on se figure une sorte de wagon disposé sur quatre roues massives, et mis en mouvement par un attelage de six boeufs. À la partie antérieure s'ouvrait une porte. Éclairé de petites fenêtres latérales, le wagon se divisait en deux chambres contiguës que séparait une cloison. Celle du fond était réservée à deux jeunes gens de vingt- cinq à vingt-six ans, l'un américain, John Cort, l'autre français, Max Huber. Celle de l'avant était occupée par un trafiquant portugais nommé Urdax, et par le «foreloper» nommé Khamis. Ce foreloper, — c'est-à-dire l'homme qui ouvre la marche d'une caravane, — était indigène du Cameroun et très entendu à ce difficile métier de guide à travers les brûlants espaces de l'Oubanghi.

Il va de soi que la construction de ce wagon-chariot ne laissait rien à reprendre au point de vue de la solidité. Après les épreuves de cette longue et pénible expédition, sa caisse en bon état, ses roues à peine usées au cercle de la jante, ses essieux ni fendus ni faussés, on eût dit qu'il revenait d'une simple promenade de quinze à vingt lieues, alors que son parcours se chiffrait par plus de deux mille kilomètres.

Trois mois auparavant, ce véhicule avait quitté Libreville, la capitale du Congo français. De là, en suivant la direction de l'est, il s'était avancé sur les plaines de l'Oubanghi plus loin que le cours du Bahar-el-Abiad, l'un des tributaires qui versent leurs eaux dans le sud du lac Tchad.

C'est à l'un des principaux affluents de la rive droite du Congo ou Zaïre que cette contrée doit son nom. Elle s'étend à l'est du Cameroun allemand, dont le gouverneur est le consul général d'Allemagne de l'Afrique occidentale, et elle ne saurait être actuellement délimitée par un trait précis sur les cartes, même les plus modernes. Si ce n'est pas le désert, — un désert à végétation puissante, qui n'aurait aucun point de ressemblance avec le Sahara, — c'est du moins une immense région, sur laquelle se disséminent des villages à grande distance les uns des autres. Les peuplades y guerroient sans cesse, s'asservissent ou s'entre- tuent, et s'y nourrissent encore de chair humaine, tels les Moubouttous, entre le bassin du Nil et celui du Congo. Et, ce qui est abominable, les enfants servent d'ordinaire à l'assouvissement de ces instincts du cannibalisme. Aussi, les missionnaires se dévouent-ils pour sauver ces petites créatures, soit en les enlevant par force, soit en les rachetant, et ils les élèvent chrétiennement dans les missions établies le long du fleuve Siramba. Qu'on ne l'oublie pas, ces missions ne tarderaient pas à succomber faute de ressources, si la générosité des États européens, celle de la France en particulier, venait à s'éteindre.

Il convient même d'ajouter que, dans l'Oubanghi, les enfants indigènes sont considérés comme monnaie courante pour les échanges du commerce. On paye en petits garçons et en petites filles les objets de consommation que les trafiquants introduisent jusqu'au centre du pays. Le plus riche indigène est donc celui dont la famille est la plus nombreuse.

Mais, si le Portugais Urdax ne s'était pas aventuré à travers ces plaines dans un intérêt commercial, s'il n'avait pas eu à faire de trafic avec les tribus riveraines de l'Oubanghi, s'il n'avait eu d'autre objectif que de se procurer une certaine quantité d'ivoire en chassant l'éléphant qui abonde en cette contrée, il n'était pas sans avoir pris contact avec les féroces peuplades congolaises. En plusieurs rencontres même, il dut tenir en respect des bandes hostiles et changer en armes défensives contre les indigènes celles qu'il destinait à poursuivre les troupeaux de pachydermes.

Au total, heureuse et fructueuse campagne qui ne comptait pas une seule victime parmi le personnel de la caravane.

Or, précisément aux abords d’un village, près des sources du Bahar-el-Abiad, John Cort et Max Huber avaient pu arracher un jeune enfant à l’affreux sort qui l’attendait et le racheter au prix de quelques verroteries. C’était un petit garçon, âgé d’une dizaine d’années, de constitution robuste, intéressante et douce physionomie, de type nègre peu accentué. Ainsi que cela se voit chez quelques tribus, il avait le teint presque clair, la chevelure blonde et non la laine crépue des noirs, le nez aquilin et non écrasé, les lèvres fines et non lippues. Ses yeux brillaient d’intelligence, et il éprouva bientôt pour ses sauveurs une sorte d’amour filial. Ce pauvre être, enlevé à sa tribu, sinon à sa famille, car il n’avait plus ni père ni mère, se nommait Llanga. Après avoir été pendant quelque temps instruit par les missionnaires qui lui avaient appris un peu de français et d’anglais, une mauvaise chance l’avait fait retomber entre les mains des Denkas, et quel sort l’attendait, on le devine. Séduits par son affection caressante, par la reconnaissance qu’il leur témoignait, les deux amis se prirent d’une vive sympathie pour cet enfant; ils le nourrirent, ils le vêtirent, ils l’élevèrent avec grand profit, tant il montrait d’esprit précoce. Et, dès lors, quelle différence pour Llanga! Au lieu d’être, comme les malheureux petits indigènes, à l’état de marchandise vivante, il vivrait dans les factoreries de Libreville, devenu l’enfant adoptif de Max Huber et de John Cort… Ils en avaient pris la charge et ne l’abandonneraient plus!… Malgré son jeune âge, il comprenait cela, il se sentait aimé, une larme de bonheur coulait de ses yeux chaque fois que les mains de Max Huber ou de John Cort se posaient sur sa tête.

Lorsque le chariot eut fait halte, les boeufs, fatigués d’une longue route par une température dévorante, se couchèrent sur la prairie. Aussitôt Llanga, qui venait de cheminer à pied pendant une partie de l’étape, tantôt en avant, tantôt en arrière de l’attelage, accourut au moment où ses deux protecteurs descendaient de la plate-forme.

«Tu n'es pas trop fatigué, Llanga?… demanda John Cort, en prenant la main du petit garçon.

— Non… non!… bonnes jambes… et aime bien à courir, répondit

Llanga, qui souriait des lèvres et des yeux à John Cort comme à

Max Huber.

— Maintenant, il est temps de manger, dit ce dernier.

— Manger… oui… mon ami Max!»

Puis, après avoir baisé les mains qui lui étaient tendues, il alla se mêler aux porteurs sous la ramure des grands arbres du tertre.

Si ce chariot ne servait qu'au transport du Portugais Urdax, de Khamis et de leurs deux compagnons, c'est que colis et charges d'ivoire étaient confiés au personnel de la caravane, — une cinquantaine d'hommes, pour la plupart des noirs du Cameroun. Ils avaient déposé à terre les défenses d'éléphants et les caisses qui assuraient la nourriture quotidienne en dehors de ce que fournissait la chasse sur ces giboyeuses contrées de l'Oubanghi.

Ces noirs ne sont que des mercenaires, rompus à ce métier, et payés d'un assez haut prix, que permet de leur accorder le bénéfice de ces fructueuses expéditions. On peut même dire qu'ils n'ont jamais «couvé leurs oeufs», pour employer l'expression par laquelle on désigne les indigènes sédentaires. Habitués à porter dès l'enfance, ils porteront tant que leurs jambes ne leur feront pas défaut. Et, cependant, le métier est rude, quand il faut l'exercer sous un tel climat. Les épaules chargées de ce pesant ivoire ou des lourds colis de provisions, la chair souvent mise à vif, les pieds ensanglantés, le torse écorché par le piquant des herbes, car ils sont à peu près nus, ils vont ainsi entre l'aube et onze heures du matin et ils reprennent leur marche jusqu'au soir lorsque la grande chaleur est passée. Mais l'intérêt des trafiquants commande de les bien payer, et ils les payent bien; de les bien nourrir, et ils les nourrissent bien; de ne point les surmener au delà de toute mesure, et ils ne les surmènent pas. Très réels sont les dangers de ces chasses aux éléphants, sans parler de la rencontre possible des lions et des panthères, et le chef doit pouvoir compter sur son personnel. En outre, la récolte de la précieuse matière achevée, il importe que la caravane retourne heureusement et promptement aux factoreries de la côte. Il y a donc avantage à ce qu'elle ne soit arrêtée ni par des retards provenant de fatigues excessives, ni par les maladies — entre autres la petite vérole, dont les ravages sont les plus à craindre. Aussi, pénétré de ces principes, servi par une vieille expérience, le Portugais Urdax, en prenant un soin extrême de ses hommes, avait-il réussi jusqu'alors dans ces lucratives expéditions au centre de l'Afrique équatoriale.

Et telle était cette dernière, puisqu'elle lui valait un stock considérable d'ivoire de belle qualité, rapporté des régions au delà du Bahar-el-Abiad, presque sur la limite du Darfour.

Ce fut sous l'ombrage de magnifiques tamarins que s'organisa le campement, et, lorsque John Cort, après que les porteurs eurent commencé le déballage des provisions, interrogea le Portugais, voici la réponse qu'il obtint, en cette langue anglaise qu'Urdax parlait couramment:

«Je pense, monsieur Cort, que le lieu de la halte est convenable, et la table est toute servie pour nos attelages.

— En effet, ils auront là une herbe épaisse et grasse… dit John

Cort.

— Et on la brouterait volontiers, ajouta Max Huber, si on possédait la structure d’un ruminant et trois estomacs pour la digérer!

— Merci, répliqua John Cort, mais je préfère un quartier d’antilope grillé sur les charbons, le biscuit dont nous sommes largement approvisionnés, et nos quartauts de madère du Cap…

— Auquel on pourra mélanger quelques gouttes de ce rio limpide qui court à travers la plaine», observa le Portugais. Et il montrait un cours d’eau, — affluent de l’Oubanghi, sans doute, — qui coulait à un kilomètre du tertre.

Le campement s’acheva sans retard. L’ivoire fut empilé par tas à proximité du chariot. Les attelages vaguèrent autour des tamarins. Des feux s’allumèrent çà et là avec le bois mort tombé des arbres. Le foreloper s’assura que les divers groupes ne manquaient de rien. La chair d’élan et d’antilope, fraîche ou séchée, abondait. Les chasseurs la pouvaient renouveler aisément. L’air se remplit de l’odeur des grillades, et chacun fit preuve d’un appétit formidable que justifiait cette demi-journée de marche.

Il va sans dire que les armes et les munitions étaient restées dans le chariot, — quelques caisses de cartouches, des fusils de chasse, des carabines, des revolvers, excellents engins de l’armement moderne, à la disposition du Portugais, de Khamis, de John Cort et de Max Huber, en cas d’alerte.

Le repas devait prendre fin une heure après. L’estomac apaisé, et la fatigue aidant, la caravane ne tarderait pas à être plongée dans un profond sommeil.

Toutefois, le foreloper la confia à la surveillance de quelques- uns de ses hommes, qui devaient se relever de deux heures en deux heures. En ces lointaines contrées, il y a toujours lieu de se garder contre les êtres malintentionnés, à deux pieds comme à quatre pattes. Aussi, Urdax ne manquait-il pas de prendre toutes les mesures de prudence. Âgé de cinquante ans, vigoureux encore, très entendu à la conduite des expéditions de ce genre, il était d’une extraordinaire endurance. De même, Khamis, trente-cinq ans, leste, souple, solide aussi, de grand sang-froid et de grand courage, offrait toute garantie pour la direction des caravanes à travers l’Afrique.

Ce fut au pied de l’un des tamarins que les deux amis et le Portugais s’assirent pour le souper, apporté par le petit garçon, et que venait de préparer un des indigènes auquel étaient dévolues les fonctions de cuisinier.

Pendant ce repas, les langues ne chômèrent pas plus que les mâchoires. Manger n’empêche point de parler, lorsqu’on n’y met pas trop de hâte. De quoi s’entretint-on?… Des incidents de l’expédition durant le parcours vers le nord-est?… Point. Ceux qui pouvaient se présenter au retour étaient d’un intérêt plus actuel. Le cheminement serait long encore jusqu’aux factoreries de Libreville — plus de deux mille kilomètres — ce qui exigerait de neuf à dix semaines de marche. Or, dans cette seconde partie du voyage, qui sait? avait dit John Cort à son compagnon, auquel il fallait mieux que de l’imprévu, de l’extraordinaire.

Jusqu’à cette dernière étape, depuis les confins du Darfour, la caravane avait redescendu vers l’Oubanghi, après avoir franchi les gués de l’Aoukadébé et de ses multiples affluents. Ce jour-là, elle venait de s’arrêter à peu près sur le point où se croisent le vingt-deuxième méridien et le neuvième parallèle.

«Mais, maintenant, dit Urdax, nous allons suivre la direction du sud-ouest…

— Et cela est d’autant plus indiqué, répondit John Cort, que, si mes yeux ne me trompent pas, l’horizon au sud est barré par une forêt dont on ne voit l’extrême limite ni à l’est ni à l’ouest.

— Oui… immense! répliqua le Portugais. Si nous étions obligés de la contourner par l’est, des mois s’écouleraient avant que nous l’eussions laissée en arrière!…

— Tandis que par l’ouest…

— Par l’ouest, répondit Urdax, et sans trop allonger la route, en suivant sa lisière, nous rencontrerons l’Oubanghi aux environs des rapides de Zongo.

— Est-ce que de la traverser n’abrégerait pas le voyage?… demanda Max Huber.

— Oui… d’une quinzaine de journées de marche.

— Alors… pourquoi ne pas nous lancer à travers cette forêt?…

— Parce qu’elle est impénétrable.

— Oh! impénétrable!… répliqua Max Huber d’un air de doute.

— Pas aux piétons, peut-être, observa le Portugais, et encore n’en suis-je pas sûr, puisque aucun ne l’a essayé. Quant à y aventurer les attelages, ce serait une tentative qui n’aboutirait pas.

— Vous dites, Urdax, que personne n’a jamais essayé de s’engager dans cette forêt?…

— Essayé… je ne sais, monsieur Max, mais qu’on y ait réussi… non… et, dans le Cameroun comme dans le Congo, personne ne s’aviserait de le tenter. Qui aurait la prétention de passer là où il n’y a aucun sentier, au milieu des halliers épineux et des ronces?… Je ne sais même si le feu et la hache parviendraient à déblayer le chemin, sans parler des arbres morts, qui doivent former d’insurmontables obstacles…

— Insurmontables, Urdax?…

— Voyons, cher ami, dit alors John Cort, n’allez pas vous emballer sur cette forêt, et estimons-nous heureux de n’avoir qu’à la contourner!… J’avoue qu’il ne m’irait guère de m’aventurer à travers un pareil labyrinthe d’arbres…

— Pas même pour savoir ce qu’il renferme?…

— Et que voulez-vous qu’on y trouve, Max?… Des royaumes inconnus, des villes enchantées, des eldorados mythologiques, des animaux d’espèce nouvelle, des carnassiers à cinq pattes et des êtres humains à trois jambes?…

— Pourquoi pas, John?… Et rien de tel que d’y aller voir!…»

Llanga, ses grands yeux attentifs, sa physionomie éveillée, semblait dire que, si Max Huber se hasardait sous ces bois, il n’aurait pas peur de l’y suivre.

«Dans tous les cas, reprit John Cort, puisque Urdax n’a pas l’intention de la traverser pour atteindre les rives de l’Oubanghi…

— Non, certes, répliqua le Portugais. Ce serait s’exposer à n’en pouvoir plus sortir!

— Eh bien, mon cher Max, allons faire un somme, et permis à vous de chercher à découvrir les mystères de cette forêt, de vous risquer en ces impénétrables massifs… en rêve seulement, et encore n’est-ce pas même très prudent…

— Riez, John, riez de moi à votre aise! Mais je me souviens de ce qu’a dit un de nos poètes… je ne sais plus lequel:

Fouiller dans l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau.

— Vraiment, Max?… Et quel est le vers qui rime avec celui-là?

— Ma foi… je l’ai oublié, John!

— Oubliez donc le premier comme vous avez oublié le second, et allons dormir.»

C’était évidemment le parti le plus sage et sans s’abriter dans le chariot. Une nuit au pied du tertre, sous ces larges tamarins dont la fraîcheur tempérait quelque peu la chaleur ambiante, si forte encore après le coucher du soleil, cela n’était pas pour inquiéter des habitués de «l’hôtel de la *Belle-Étoile*», quand le temps le permettait. Ce soir-là, bien que les constellations fussent cachées derrière d’épais nuages, la pluie ne menaçant pas, il était infiniment préférable de coucher en plein air.

Le jeune indigène apporta des couvertures. Les deux amis, étroitement enveloppés, s’étendirent entre les racines d’un tamarin, — un vrai cadre de cabine, — et Llanga se blottit à leur côté, comme un chien de garde.

Avant de les imiter, Urdax et Khamis voulurent une dernière fois faire le tour du campement, s’assurer que les boeufs entravés ne pourraient divaguer par la plaine, que les porteurs se trouvaient à leur poste de veille, que les foyers avaient été éteints, car une étincelle eût suffi à incendier les herbes sèches et le bois mort. Puis tous deux revinrent près du tertre.

Le sommeil ne tarda pas à les prendre — un sommeil à ne pas entendre Dieu tonner. Et peut-être les veilleurs y succombèrent- ils, eux aussi?… En effet, après dix heures, il n’y eut personne pour signaler certains feux suspects qui se déplaçaient à la lisière de la grande forêt.

CHAPITRE II

Les feux mouvants

Une distance de deux kilomètres au plus séparait le tertre des sombres massifs au pied desquels allaient et venaient des flammes fuligineuses et vacillantes. On aurait pu en compter une dizaine, tantôt réunies, tantôt isolées, agitées parfois avec une violence que le calme de l’atmosphère ne justifiait pas. Qu’une bande d’indigènes eût campé en cet endroit, qu’elle s’y fût installée en attendant le jour, il y avait lieu de le présumer. Toutefois, ces feux n’étaient pas ceux d’un campement. Ils se promenaient trop capricieusement sur une centaine de toises, au lieu de se concentrer en un foyer unique d’une halte de nuit.

Il ne faut pas oublier que ces régions de l’Oubanghi sont fréquentées par des tribus nomades, venues de l’Adamaoua ou du Barghimi à l’ouest, ou même de l’Ouganda à l’est. Une caravane de trafiquants n’aurait pas été assez imprudente pour signaler sa présence par ces feux multiples, se mouvant dans des ténèbres. Seuls, des indigènes pouvaient s’être arrêtés à cette place. Et qui sait s’ils n’étaient pas animés d’intentions hostiles à l’égard de la caravane endormie sous la ramure des tamarins?

Quoi qu’il en soit, si, de ce chef, quelque danger la menaçait, si plusieurs centaines de Pahouins, de Foundj, de Chiloux, de Bari, de Denkas ou autres n’attendaient que le moment de l’assaillir avec les chances d’une supériorité numérique, personne, — jusqu’à dix heures et demie du moins, — n’avait pris aucune mesure défensive. Tout le monde dormait au campement, maîtres et serviteurs, et, ce qui était plus grave, les porteurs chargés de se relever à leur poste de surveillance étaient plongés dans un lourd sommeil.

Très heureusement, le jeune indigène se réveilla. Mais nul doute que ses yeux ne se fussent refermés à l’instant s’ils ne s’étaient dirigés vers l’horizon du sud. Sous ses paupières demi-closes il sentit l’impression d’une lumière qui perçait cette nuit très noire. Il se détira, il se frotta les yeux, il regarda avec plus de soin… Non! il ne se trompait pas: des feux épars se mouvaient sur la lisière de la forêt.

Llanga eut la pensée que la caravane allait être attaquée. Ce fut de sa part tout instinctif plutôt que réfléchi. En effet, des malfaiteurs se préparant au massacre et au pillage n’ignorent pas qu’ils accroissent leurs chances lorsqu’ils agissent par surprise. Ils ne se laissent pas voir avant, et ceux-ci se fussent signalés?…

L’enfant, ne voulant pas réveiller Max Huber et John Cort, rampa sans bruit vers le chariot. Dès qu’il fut arrivé près du foreloper, il lui mit la main sur l’épaule, le réveilla et, du doigt, lui montra les feux de l’horizon.

Khamis se redressa, observa pendant une minute ces flammes en mouvement, et, d’une voix dont il ne songeait point à adoucir l’éclat:

«Urdax!» dit-il.

Le Portugais, en homme habitué à se dégager vivement des vapeurs du sommeil, fut debout en un instant.

«Qu’y a-t-il, Khamis?…

— Regardez!»

Et, le bras tendu, il indiquait la lisière illuminée au ras de la plaine.

«Alerte!» cria le Portugais de toute la force de ses poumons.

En quelques secondes, le personnel de la caravane se trouva sur pied, et les esprits furent tellement saisis par la gravité de cette situation, que personne ne songea à incriminer les veilleurs pris en défaut. Il était certain que, sans Llanga, le campement eût été envahi pendant que dormaient Urdax et ses compagnons.

Inutile de mentionner que Max Huber et John Cort, se hâtant de quitter l’entre-deux des racines, avaient rejoint le Portugais et le foreloper.

Il était un peu plus de dix heures et demie. Une profonde obscurité enveloppait la plaine sur les trois quarts de son périmètre, au nord, à l’est et à l’ouest. Seul le sud s’éclairait de ces flammes falotes, jetant de vives clartés lorsqu’elles tourbillonnaient, et dont on ne comptait pas alors moins d’une cinquantaine.

«Il doit y avoir là un rassemblement d’indigènes, dit Urdax, et probablement de ces Boudjos qui fréquentent les rives du Congo et de l’Oubanghi.

— Pour sûr, ajouta Khamis, ces flammes ne se sont pas allumées toutes seules…

— Et, fit observer John Cort, il y a des bras qui les portent et les déplacent!

— Mais, dit Max Huber, ces bras doivent tenir à des épaules, ces épaules à des corps, et de ces corps nous n’apercevons pas un seul au milieu de cette illumination…

— Cela vient de ce qu’ils sont un peu en dedans de la lisière, derrière les arbres…observa Khamis.

— Et remarquons, reprit Max Huber, qu’il ne s’agit pas d’une bande en marche sur le contour de la forêt… Non! si ces feux s’écartent à droite et à gauche, ils reviennent toujours au même endroit…

— Là où doit être le campement de ces indigènes, affirma le foreloper.

— Votre opinion?… demanda John Cort à Urdax.

— Est que nous allons être attaqués, affirma celui-ci, et qu’il faut, à l’instant, faire nos préparatifs de défense…

— Mais pourquoi ces indigènes ne nous ont-ils pas assaillis avant de se montrer?

— Des noirs ne sont pas des blancs, déclara le Portugais. Néanmoins, pour être peu avisés, ils n’en sont pas moins redoutables par leur nombre et par leurs instincts féroces…

— Des panthères que nos missionnaires auront bien du mal à transformer en agneaux!… ajouta Max Huber.

— Tenons-nous prêts!» conclut le Portugais.

Oui, se tenir prêts à la défense, et se défendre jusqu’à la mort. Il n’y a aucune pitié à espérer de ces tribus de l’Oubanghi. À quel point elles sont cruelles, on ne saurait se le figurer, et les plus sauvages peuplades de l’Australie, des Salomon, des Hébrides, de la Nouvelle-Guinée, soutiendraient difficilement la comparaison avec de tels indigènes. Vers le centre de la région, ce ne sont que des villages de cannibales, et les Pères de la Mission, qui bravent la plus épouvantable des morts, ne l’ignorent pas. On serait tenté de classer ces êtres, fauves à face humaine, au rang des animaux, en cette Afrique équatoriale où la faiblesse est un crime, où la force est tout! Et de fait, même à l’âge d’homme, combien de ces noirs ne possèdent pas les notions premières d’un enfant de cinq à six ans.

Et, ce qu’il est permis d’affirmer, — les preuves abondent, les missionnaires ont été souvent les témoins de ces affreuses scènes, — c’est que les sacrifices humains sont en usage dans le pays. On tue les esclaves sur la tombe de leurs maîtres, et les têtes, fixées à une branche pliante, sont lancées au loin dès que le couteau du féticheur les a tranchées. Entre la dixième et la seizième année, les enfants servent de nourriture dans les cérémonies d’apparat, et certains chefs ne s’alimentent que de cette jeune chair.

À ces instincts de cannibales se joint l’instinct du pillage. Il les entraîne parfois à de grandes distances sur le chemin des caravanes, qu’ils assaillent, dépouillent et détruisent. S’ils sont moins bien armés que les trafiquants et leur personnel, ils ont le nombre pour eux, et des milliers d’indigènes auront toujours raison de quelques centaines de porteurs. Les forelopers ne l’ignorent pas. Aussi leur principale préoccupation est-elle de ne point s’engager entre ces villages, tels Ngombé Dara, Kalaka Taimo et autres compris dans la région de l’Aoukadépé et du Bahar- el-Abiad, où les missionnaires n’ont pas encore fait leur apparition, mais où ils pénétreront un jour. Aucune crainte n’arrête le dévouement de ces derniers lorsqu’il s’agit d’arracher de petits êtres à la mort et de régénérer ces races sauvages par l’influence de la civilisation chrétienne.

Depuis le commencement de l’expédition le Portugais Urdax n’avait pas toujours pu éviter l’attaque des indigènes, mais il s’en était tiré sans grand dommage et il ramenait son personnel au complet. Le retour promettait de s'accomplir dans des conditions parfaites de sécurité. Cette forêt contournée par l'ouest, on aurait atteint la rive droite de l'Oubanghi, et on descendrait cette rivière jusqu'à son embouchure sur la rive droite du Congo. À partir de l'Oubanghi, le pays est fréquenté par les marchands, par les missionnaires. Dès lors il y aurait moins à craindre du contact des tribus nomades que l'initiative française, anglaise, portugaise, allemande, refoule peu à peu vers les lointaines contrées du Darfour.

Mais, lorsque quelques journées de marche devaient suffire à atteindre le fleuve, la caravane n'allait-elle pas être arrêtée sur cette route, aux prises avec un tel nombre de pillards qu'elle finirait par succomber?… Il y avait lieu de le craindre. Dans tous les cas, elle ne périrait pas sans s'être défendue, et, à la voix du Portugais, on prit toutes mesures pour organiser la résistance.

En un instant, Urdax, le foreloper, John Cort, Max Huber, furent armés, carabines à la main, revolvers à la ceinture, la cartouchière bien garnie. Le chariot contenait une douzaine de fusils et de pistolets qui furent confiés à quelques-uns des porteurs dont on connaissait la fidélité.

En même temps, Urdax donna l'ordre à son personnel de se poster autour des grands tamarins, afin de se mieux abriter contre les flèches, dont la pointe empoisonnée occasionne des blessures mortelles.

On attendit. Aucun bruit ne traversait l'espace. Il ne semblait pas que les indigènes se fussent portés en avant de la forêt. Les feux se montraient incessamment, et, çà et là, s'agitaient de longs panaches de fumée jaunâtre.

«Ce sont des torches résineuses qui sont promenées sur la lisière des arbres…

— Assurément, répondit Max Huber, mais je persiste à ne pas comprendre pourquoi ces gens-là le font, s'ils ont l'intention de nous attaquer…

— Et je ne le comprends pas davantage, ajouta John Cort, s'ils n'ont pas cette intention.»

C'était inexplicable, en effet. Il est vrai, de quoi s'étonner, du moment qu'il s'agissait de ces brutes du haut Oubanghi?…

Une demi-heure s'écoula, sans amener aucun changement dans la situation. Le campement se tenait sur ses gardes. Les regards fouillaient les sombres lointains de l'est et de l'ouest. Tandis que les feux brillaient au sud, un détachement pouvait se glisser latéralement pour attaquer la caravane grâce à l'obscurité.

En cette direction, la plaine était certainement déserte. Si profonde que fût la nuit, un parti d'agresseurs n'aurait pu surprendre le Portugais et ses compagnons, avant que ceux-ci eussent fait usage de leurs armes.

Un peu après, vers onze heures, Max Huber, se portant à quelques pas du groupe que formaient Urdax, Khamis et John Cort, dit d'une voix résolue:

«Il faut aller reconnaître l'ennemi…

— Est-ce bien utile, demanda John Cort, et la simple prudence ne nous commande-t-elle pas de rester en observation jusqu'au lever du jour?…

— Attendre… attendre… répliqua Max Huber, après que notre sommeil a été si fâcheusement interrompu… attendre pendant six à sept heures encore, la main sur la garde du fusil!… Non! il faut savoir au plus tôt à quoi s'en tenir!… Et, somme toute, si ces indigènes n'ont aucune mauvaise intention, je ne serais pas fâché de me reblottir jusqu'au matin dans ce cadre de racines où je faisais de si beaux rêves!

— Qu'en pensez-vous?… demanda John Cort au Portugais qui demeurait silencieux.

— Peut-être la proposition mérite-t-elle d'être acceptée, répliqua-t-il, mais n'agissons pas sans précautions…

— Je m'offre pour aller en reconnaissance, dit Max Huber, et fiez-vous à moi…

— Je vous accompagnerai, ajouta le foreloper, si M. Urdax le trouve bon…

— Cela vaudra certes mieux, approuva le Portugais.

— Je puis aussi me joindre à vous…, proposa John Cort.

— Non… restez, cher ami, insista Max Huber. À deux, nous suffirons… D'ailleurs, nous n'irons pas plus loin qu'il ne sera nécessaire… Et, si nous découvrons un parti se dirigeant de ce côté, nous reviendrons en toute hâte…

— Assurez-vous que vos armes sont en état…, recommanda John

Cort.

— C'est fait, répondit Khamis, mais j'espère que nous n'aurons pas à nous en servir pendant cette reconnaissance. L'essentiel est de ne pas se laisser voir…

— C’est mon avis», déclara le Portugais.

Max Huber et le foreloper, marchant l’un près de l’autre, eurent vite dépassé le tertre des tamarins. Au delà, la plaine était un peu moins obscure. Un homme, cependant, n’y eût pu être signalé à la distance d’une centaine de pas. Ils en avaient fait cinquante à peine, lorsqu’ils aperçurent Llanga derrière eux. Sans rien dire, l’enfant les avait suivis en dehors du campement.

«Eh! pourquoi es-tu venu, petit?… dit Khamis.

— Oui, Llanga, reprit Max Huber, pourquoi n’es-tu pas resté avec les autres?…

— Allons… retourne…, ordonna le foreloper.

— Oh! monsieur Max, murmura Llanga, avec vous… moi… avec vous…

— Mais tu sais bien que ton ami John est là-bas…

— Oui… mais mon ami Max… est ici…

— Nous n’avons pas besoin de toi!… dit Khamis d’un ton assez dur.

— Laissons-le, puisqu’il est là! reprit Max Huber. Il ne nous gênera pas, Khamis, et, avec ses yeux de chat sauvage, peut-être découvrira-t-il dans l’ombre ce que nous ne pourrions y voir…

— Oui… je regarderai… je verrai loin!… assura l’enfant.

— C’est bon!… Tiens-toi près de moi, dit Max Huber, et ouvre l’oeil!»

Tous trois se portèrent en avant. Un quart d'heure après, ils étaient à moitié chemin entre le campement et la grande forêt.

Les feux développaient toujours leurs clartés au pied des massifs et, moins éloignés, se manifestaient par de plus vifs éclats. Mais si pénétrante que fût la vue du foreloper, si bonne que fût la lunette que Max Huber venait d'extraire de son étui, si perçants que fussent les regards du jeune «chat sauvage», il était impossible d'apercevoir ceux qui agitaient ces torches.

Cela confirmait cette opinion du Portugais, que c'était sous le couvert des arbres, derrière les épaisses broussailles et les larges troncs, que se mouvaient ces lueurs. Assurément, les indigènes n'avaient pas dépassé la limite de la forêt, et peut- être ne songeaient-ils pas à le faire.

En réalité, c'était de plus en plus inexplicable. S'il ne se trouvait là avant l'intention de se remettre en route au point du jour, pourquoi cette illumination de la lisière?… Quelle cérémonie nocturne les tenait éveillés à cette heure?…

«Et je me demande même, fit observer Max Huber, s'ils ont reconnu notre caravane, et s'ils savent qu'elle est campée autour des tamarins…

— En effet, répondit Khamis, il est possible qu'ils ne soient arrivés qu'à la tombée de la nuit, lorsqu'elle enveloppait déjà la plaine, et, comme nos foyers étaient éteints, peut-être ignorent- ils que nous sommes campés à courte distance?… Mais, demain, dès l'aube, ils nous verront…

— À moins que nous ne soyons repartis, Khamis.»

Max Huber et le foreloper reprirent leur marche en silence.

Un demi-kilomètre fut franchi de telle sorte que, à ce moment, la distance jusqu’à la forêt se réduisait à quelques centaines de mètres.

Rien de suspect à la surface de ce sol traversé parfois du long jet des torches. Aucune silhouette ne s’y découpait, ni au sud, ni au levant, ni au couchant. Une agression ne semblait pas imminente. En outre, si rapprochés qu’ils fussent de la lisière, ni Max Huber, ni Khamis, ni Llanga ne parvinrent à découvrir les êtres qui signalaient leur présence par ces multiples feux.

«Devons-nous nous approcher davantage?… demanda Max Huber, après un arrêt de quelques instants.

— À quoi bon?… répondit Khamis. Ne serait-ce pas imprudent?… Il est possible, après tout, que notre caravane n’ait point été aperçue, et si nous décampons cette nuit…

— J’aurais pourtant voulu être fixé!… répéta Max Huber. Cela se présente dans des conditions si singulières…»

Et il n’en fallait pas tant pour surexciter une vive imagination de Français.

«Retournons au tertre», répliqua le foreloper.

Cependant il dut s’avancer plus près encore, à la suite de Max Huber, que Llanga n’avait pas voulu quitter… Et, peut-être, tous les trois se fussent-ils portés jusqu’à la lisière, lorsque Khamis s’arrêta définitivement.

«Pas un pas de plus!» dit-il à voix basse.

Était-ce donc devant un danger imminent que le foreloper et son compagnon suspendirent leur marche?… Avaient-ils entrevu un groupe d’indigènes?… Allaient-ils être attaqués?… Ce qui était certain, c’est qu’un brusque changement venait de se manifester dans la disposition des feux sur le bord de la forêt.

Un moment ces feux disparurent derrière le rideau des premiers arbres, confondus dans une obscurité profonde.

«Attention!… dit Max Huber.

— En arrière!…» répondit Khamis.

Convenait-il de rétrograder dans la crainte d’une agression immédiate?… Peut-être. En tout cas, mieux valait ne pas battre en retraite sans être prêt à répondre coup pour coup. Les carabines armées remontèrent à l’épaule, tandis que les regards ne cessaient de fouiller les sombres massifs de la lisière.

Soudain, de cette ombre, les clartés ne tardèrent pas à jaillir de nouveau au nombre d’une vingtaine.

«Parbleu! s’écria Max Huber, cette fois-ci, si ce n’est pas de l’extraordinaire, c’est tout au moins de l’étrange!»

Ce mot semblera justifié pour cette raison que les torches, après avoir brillé naguère au niveau de la plaine, jetaient alors de plus vifs éclats entre cinquante et cent pieds au-dessus du sol.

Quant aux êtres quelconques qui agitaient ces torches, tantôt sur les basses branches, tantôt sur les plus hautes, comme si un vent de flamme eût traversé cette épaisse frondaison, ni Max Huber, ni le foreloper, ni Llanga ne parvinrent à en distinguer un seul.

«Eh! s'écria Max Huber, ne seraient-ce que des feux follets se jouant dans les arbres?…»

Khamis secoua la tête. L'explication du phénomène ne le satisfaisait point.

Qu'il y eût là quelque expansion d'hydrogène en exhalaisons enflammées, une vingtaine de ces aigrettes que les orages accrochent aussi bien aux branches des arbres qu'aux agrès d'un navire, non, certes, et ces feux, on ne pouvait les confondre avec les capricieuses furolles de Saint-Elme. L'atmosphère n'était point saturée d'électricité, et les nuages menaçaient plutôt de se résoudre en une de ces pluies torrentielles qui inondent fréquemment la partie centrale du continent noir.

Mais, alors, pourquoi les indigènes campés au pied des arbres s'étaient-ils hissés, les uns jusqu'à leur fourche, les autres jusqu'à leurs extrêmes branches?… Et à quel propos y promenaient-ils ces brandons allumés, ces flambeaux de résine dont la déflagration faisait entendre ses craquements à cette distance?…

«Avançons… dit Max Huber.

— Inutile, répondit le foreloper. Je ne crois pas que notre campement soit menacé cette nuit, et il est préférable d'y revenir afin de rassurer nos compagnons…

— Nous serons plus en mesure de les rassurer, Khamis, lorsque nous saurons à quoi nous en tenir sur la nature de ce phénomène…

— Non, monsieur Max, ne nous aventurons pas plus loin… Il est certain qu'une tribu est réunie en cet endroit… Pour quelle raison ces nomades agitent-ils ces flammes?… Pourquoi se sont- ils réfugiés dans les arbres?… Est-ce afin d’éloigner des fauves qu’ils ont entretenu ces feux?…

— Des fauves?… répliqua Max Huber. Mais panthères, hyènes, boeufs sauvages, on les entendrait rugir ou meugler, et l’unique bruit qui nous arrive, c’est le crépitement de ces résines, qui menacent d’incendier la forêt!… Je veux savoir…»

Et Max Huber s’avança de quelques pas, suivi de Llanga, que Khamis rappelait vainement à lui.

Le foreloper hésitait sur ce qu’il devait faire dans son impuissance à retenir l’impatient Français. Bref, ne voulant pas le laisser s’aventurer, il se disposait à l’accompagner jusqu’aux massifs, bien que, à son avis, ce fût une impardonnable témérité.

Soudain, il fit halte, à l’instant même où s’arrêtaient Max Huber et Llanga. Tous trois se retournèrent, dos à la forêt. Ce n’étaient plus les clartés qui attiraient leur attention. D’ailleurs, comme au souffle d’un subit ouragan, les torches venaient de s’éteindre, et de profondes ténèbres enveloppaient l’horizon.

Du côté opposé, une rumeur lointaine se propageait à travers l’espace, ou plutôt un concert de mugissements prolongés, de ronflements nasards, à faire croire qu’un orgue gigantesque lançait ses puissantes ondes à la surface de la plaine.

Était-ce un orage qui montait sur cette partie du ciel, et dont les premiers grondements troublaient l’atmosphère?…

Non!… Il ne se produisait aucun de ces météores, qui désolent si souvent l’Afrique équatoriale d’un littoral à l’autre. Ces mugissements caractéristiques trahissaient leur origine animale et ne provenaient pas d’une répercussion des décharges de la foudre échangées dans les profondeurs du ciel. Ils devaient sortir plutôt de gueules formidables, non de nuages électriques. Au surplus, les basses zones ne se zébraient point des fulgurants zigzags qui se succèdent à courts intervalles. Pas un éclair au-dessus de l’horizon du nord, aussi sombre que l’horizon du sud. À travers les nues accumulées, pas un trait de feu entre les cirrus, empilés comme des ballots de vapeurs.

«Qu’est-ce cela, Khamis?… demanda Max Huber.

— Au campement…, répondit le foreloper.

— Serait-ce donc?…» s’écria Marc Huber.

Et, l’oreille tendue dans cette direction, il percevait un claironnement plus distinct, strident parfois comme un sifflet de locomotive, au milieu des larges rumeurs qui grandissaient en se rapprochant.

«Détalons, dit le foreloper, et au pas de course!»

CHAPITRE III

Dispersion

Max Huber, Llanga et Khamis ne mirent pas dix minutes à franchir les quinze cents mètres qui les séparaient du tertre. Ils ne s’étaient pas même retournés une seule fois, ne s’inquiétant pas d’observer si les indigènes, après avoir éteint leurs feux, cherchaient à les poursuivre. Non, d’ailleurs, et, de ce côté, régnait le calme, alors que, à l’opposé, la plaine s’emplissait d’une agitation confuse et de sonorités éclatantes.

Le campement, lorsque les deux hommes et le jeune enfant y arrivèrent, était en proie à l’épouvante, — épouvante justifiée par la menace d’un danger contre lequel le courage, l’intelligence ne pouvaient rien. Y faire face, impossible! Le fuir?… En était- il temps encore?…

Max Huber et Khamis avaient aussitôt rejoint John Cort et Urdax, postés à cinquante pas en avant du tertre.

«Une harde d’éléphants!… dit le foreloper.

— Oui, répondit le Portugais, et, dans moins d’un quart d’heure, ils seront sur nous…

— Gagnons la forêt, dit John Cort.

— Ce n’est pas la forêt qui les arrêtera…, répliqua Khamis.

— Que sont devenus les indigènes?… s’informa John Cort.

— Nous n’avons pu les apercevoir…, répondit Max Huber.

— Cependant, ils ne doivent pas avoir quitté la lisière!…

— Assurément non!»

Au loin, à une demi-lieue environ, on distinguait une large ondulation d’ombres qui se déplaçait sur l’étendue d’une centaine de toises. C’était comme une énorme vague dont les volutes échevelées se fussent déroulées avec fracas. Un lourd piétinement se propageait à travers la couche élastique du sol, et ce tremblotement se faisait sentir jusqu’aux racines des tamarins. En même temps, le mugissement prenait une intensité formidable. Des souffles stridents, des éclats cuivrés, s’échappaient de ces centaines de trompes, — autant de clairons sonnés à pleine bouche.

Les voyageurs de l’Afrique centrale ont pu justement comparer ce bruit à celui que ferait un train d’artillerie roulant à grande vitesse sur un champ de bataille. Soit! mais à la condition que les trompettes eussent jeté dans l’air leurs notes déchirantes. Que l’on juge de la terreur à laquelle s’abandonnait le personnel de la caravane, menacé d’être écrasé par ce troupeau d’éléphants!

Chasser ces énormes animaux présente de sérieux dangers. Lorsqu’on parvient à les surprendre isolément, à séparer de la bande à laquelle il appartient un de ces pachydermes, lorsqu’il est possible de le tirer dans des conditions qui assurent le coup, de l’atteindre, entre l’oeil et l’oreille, d’une balle qui le tue presque instantanément, les dangers de cette chasse sont très diminués. En l’espèce, la harde ne se composât-elle que d’une demi-douzaine de bêtes, les plus sévères précautions, la plus extrême prudence sont indispensables. Devant cinq ou six couples d’éléphants courroucés, toute résistance est impossible, alors que — dirait un mathématicien — leur masse est multipliée par le carré de leur vitesse.

Et, si c’est par centaines que ces formidables bêtes se jettent sur un campement, on ne peut pas plus les arrêter dans leur élan qu’on n’arrêterait une avalanche, ou l’un de ces mascarets qui emportent les navires dans l’intérieur des terres à plusieurs kilomètres du littoral.

Toutefois, si nombreux qu’ils soient, l’espèce finira par disparaître. Comme un éléphant rapporte environ cent francs d’ivoire, on les chasse à outrance.

Chaque année, d’après les calculs de M. Foa, on n’en tue pas moins de quarante mille sur le continent africain, qui produisent sept cent cinquante mille kilogrammes d’ivoire expédiés en Angleterre. Avant un demi-siècle, il n’en restera plus un seul, bien que la durée de leur existence soit considérable. Ne serait-il pas plus sage de tirer profit de ces précieux animaux par la domestication, puisqu’un éléphant est capable de porter la charge de trente-deux hommes et de faire quatre fois plus de chemin qu’un piéton? Et puis, étant domestiqués, ils vaudraient, comme dans l’Inde, de quinze cents à deux mille francs, au lieu des cent francs que l’on tire de leur mort.

L’éléphant d’Afrique forme, avec l’éléphant d’Asie, les deux seules espèces existantes. On a établi quelque différence entre elles. Si les premiers sont inférieurs par la taille à leurs congénères asiatiques, si leur peau est plus brune, leur front plus convexe, ils ont les oreilles plus larges, les défenses plus longues, ils montrent une humeur plus farouche, presque irréductible.

Pendant cette expédition, le Portugais n’avait eu qu’à se féliciter et aussi les deux amateurs de ce sport. On le répète, les pachydermes sont encore nombreux sur la terre libyenne. Les régions de l’Oubanghi offrent un habitat qu’ils recherchent, des forêts et des plaines marécageuses qu’ils affectionnent. Ils y vivent par troupes, d’ordinaire surveillées par un vieux mâle. En les attirant dans des enceintes palissadées, en leur préparant des trappes, en les attaquant lorsqu’ils étaient isolés, Urdax et ses compagnons avaient fait bonne campagne, sans accidents sinon sans dangers ni fatigues. Mais, sur cette route du retour, ne semblait- il pas que la troupe furieuse, dont les cris emplissaient l’espace, allait écraser au passage toute la caravane?…

Si le Portugais avait eu le temps d’organiser la défensive, lorsqu’il croyait à une agression des indigènes campés au bord de la forêt, que ferait-il contre cette irruption?… Du campement, il ne resterait bientôt plus que débris et poussière!… Toute la question se réduisait à ceci: le personnel parviendrait-il à se garer en se dispersant sur la plaine?… Qu’on ne l’oublie point, la vitesse de l’éléphant est prodigieuse, et un cheval au galop ne saurait la dépasser.

«Il faut fuir… fuir à l’instant!… affirma Khamis en s’adressant au Portugais.

— Fuir!…» s écria Urdax.

Et le malheureux trafiquant comprenait bien que ce serait perdre, avec son matériel, tout le produit de l’expédition.

D’ailleurs, à demeurer au campement, le sauverait-il et n’était-ce pas insensé que de s’obstiner à une résistance impossible?…

Max Huber et John Cort attendaient qu’une résolution eût été prise, décidés à s’y soumettre, quelle qu’elle fût.

Cependant la masse se rapprochait, et avec un tel tumulte qu’on ne parvenait guère à s’entendre.

Le foreloper répéta qu’il fallait s’éloigner au plus tôt.

«En quelle direction? demanda Max Huber.

— Dans la direction de la forêt.

— Et les indigènes?…

— Le danger est moins pressant là-bas qu’ici», répondit Khamis.

Que cela fût sûr, comment l’affirmer?… Toutefois, il y avait, du moins, certitude qu’on ne pouvait rester à cette place. Le seul parti, pour éviter l’écrasement, c’était de se réfugier à l’intérieur de la forêt.

Or, le temps ne manquerait-il pas?… Deux kilomètres à franchir, alors que la harde n’était qu’à la moitié tout au plus de cette distance!…

Chacun réclamait un ordre d’Urdax, ordre qu’il ne se résolvait pas à donner.

Enfin il s’écria:

«Le chariot… le chariot!… Mettons-le à l’abri derrière le tertre… Peut-être sera-t-il protégé…

— Trop tard, répondit le foreloper.

— Fais ce que je te dis!… commanda le Portugais.

— Comment?…» répliqua Khamis.

En effet, après avoir brisé leurs entraves, sans qu’il eût été possible de les arrêter, les boeufs de l’attelage s’étaient sauvés, et, affolés, couraient même au-devant de l’énorme troupeau qui les écraserait comme des mouches.

À cette vue, Urdax voulut recourir au personnel de la caravane:

«Ici, les porteurs!… cria-t-il.

— Les porteurs?… répondit Khamis. Rappelez-les donc, car ils prennent la fuite…

— Les lâches!» s’écria John Cort.

Oui, tous ces noirs venaient de se jeter dans l’ouest du campement, les uns emportant des ballots, les autres chargés des défenses. Et ils abandonnaient leurs chefs en lâches et aussi en voleurs!

Il n’y avait plus à compter sur ces hommes. Ils ne reviendraient pas. Ils trouveraient asile dans les villages indigènes. De la caravane restaient seuls le Portugais et le foreloper, le Français, l’Américain et le jeune garçon.

«Le chariot… le chariot!…» répéta Urdax, qui s’entêtait à le garer derrière le tertre.

Khamis ne put se retenir de hausser les épaules. Il obéit cependant et, grâce au concours de Max Huber et de John Cort, le véhicule fut poussé au pied des arbres. Peut-être serait-il épargné, si la harde se divisait en arrivant au groupe de tamarins?…

Mais cette opération dura quelque temps, et, lorsqu’elle fut terminée, il était manifestement trop tard pour que le Portugais et ses compagnons pussent atteindre la forêt.

Khamis le calcula, et ne lança que ces deux mots:

«Aux arbres!»

Une seule chance s’offrait: se hisser entre les branches des tamarins afin d’éviter le premier choc tout au moins.

Auparavant Max Huber et John Cort s’introduisirent dans le chariot. Se charger de tous les paquets de cartouches qui restaient, assurer ainsi le service des carabines s’il fallait en faire usage contre les éléphants, et aussi pour la route du retour, ce fut fait en un instant avec l’aide du Portugais et du foreloper, lequel songea à se munir de sa hachette et de sa gourde. En traversant les basses régions de l’Oubanghi, qui sait si ses compagnons et lui ne parviendraient pas à gagner les factoreries de la côte?…

Quelle heure était-il à ce moment?… Onze heures dix-sept, — ce que constata John Cort, après avoir éclairé sa montre à la flamme d’une allumette. Son sang-froid ne l’avait pas abandonné, ce qui lui permettait de juger la situation, très périlleuse, à son avis, et sans issue, si les éléphants s’arrêtaient au tertre, au lieu de se porter vers l’est ou l’ouest de la plaine.

Max Huber, plus nerveux, ayant également conscience du danger, allait et venait près du chariot, observant l’énorme masse ondulante, qui se détachait, plus sombre, sur le fond du ciel.

«C’est de l’artillerie qu’il faudrait!…» murmura-t-il.

Khamis, lui, ne laissait rien voir de ce qu’il éprouvait. Il possédait ce calme étonnant de l’Africain, au sang arabe, ce sang plus épais que celui du blanc, moins rouge aussi, qui rend la sensibilité plus obtuse et donne moins prise à la douleur physique. Deux revolvers à sa ceinture, son fusil prêt à être épaulé, il attendait.

Quant au Portugais, incapable de cacher son désespoir, il songeait plus à l’irréparable dommage dont il serait victime qu’aux dangers de cette irruption. Aussi gémissait-il, récriminait-il, prodiguant les plus retentissants jurons de sa langue maternelle.

Llanga se tenait près de John Cort et regardait Max Huber. Il ne témoignait aucune crainte, n’ayant pas peur, du moment que ses deux amis étaient là.

Et pourtant l’assourdissant vacarme se propageait avec une violence inouïe, à mesure que s’approchait la chevauchée formidable. Le claironnement des puissantes mâchoires redoublait. On sentait déjà un souffle qui traversait l’air comme les vents de tempête. À cette distance de quatre à cinq cents pas, les pachydermes prenaient, dans la nuit, des dimensions démesurées, des apparences tératologiques. On eût dit d’une apocalypse de monstres, dont les trompes, comme un millier de serpents, se convulsaient dans une agitation frénétique.

Il n’était que temps de se réfugier entre les branches des tamarins, et peut-être la harde passerait-elle sans avoir aperçu le Portugais et ses compagnons.

Ces arbres dressaient leur cime à une soixantaine de pieds au- dessus du sol. Presque semblables à des noyers, très caractérisés par la capricieuse diffusion de leurs rameaux, les tamarins, sortes de dattiers, sont très répandus sur les diverses zones de l’Afrique. En même temps que les nègres fabriquent avec la partie gluante de leurs fruits une boisson rafraîchissante, ils ont l’habitude de mêler les gousses de ces arbres au riz dont ils se nourrissent, surtout dans les provinces littorales.

Les tamarins étaient assez rapprochés pour que leur basse frondaison fût entrelacée, ce qui permettrait de passer de l’un à l’autre. Leur tronc mesurait à la base une circonférence de six à huit pieds, et de quatre à cinq près de la fourche. Cette épaisseur présenterait-elle une résistance suffisante, si les animaux se précipitaient contre le tertre?

Les troncs n’offraient qu’une surface lisse jusqu’à la naissance des premières branches étendues à une trentaine de pieds au-dessus du sol. Étant donnée la grosseur du fût, atteindre la fourche eût été malaisé si Khamis n’avait eu à sa disposition quelques «chamboks». Ce sont des courroies en cuir de rhinocéros, très souples, dont les forelopers se servent pour maintenir les attelages de boeufs.

Grâce à l’une de ces courroies, Urdax et Khamis, après l’avoir lancée à travers la fourche, purent se hisser à l’un des arbres. En employant de la même façon une courroie semblable, Max Huber et John Cort en firent autant. Dès qu’ils furent achevalés sur une branche, ils envoyèrent l’extrémité du chambok à Llanga qu’ils enlevèrent en un tour de main.

La harde n’était plus qu’à trois cents mètres. En deux ou trois minutes, elle aurait atteint le tertre:

«Cher ami, êtes-vous satisfait?… demanda ironiquement John Cort à son camarade.

— Ce n’est encore que de l’imprévu, John!

— Sans doute, Max, mais ce qui serait de l’extraordinaire, c’est que nous parvinssions à sortir sains et saufs de cette affaire!

— Oui… à tout prendre, John, mieux eût valu ne point être exposé à cette attaque d’éléphants dont le contact est parfois brutal…

— C’est vraiment incroyable, mon cher Max, comme nous sommes du même avis!» se contenta de répondre John Cort.

Ce que répliqua Huber, son ami ne put l’entendre. À cet instant éclatèrent des beuglements d’épouvante, puis de douleur, qui eussent fait tressaillir les plus braves.

En écartant le feuillage, Urdax et Khamis reconnurent ce qui se passait à une centaine de pas du tertre.

Après s’être sauvés, les boeufs ne pouvaient plus fuir que dans la direction de la forêt. Mais ces animaux, à la marche lente et mesurée, y parviendraient-ils avant d’avoir été atteints?… Non, et ils furent bientôt repoussés… En vain se défendirent-ils à coups de pieds, à coups de corne, ils tombèrent. De tout l’attelage il ne restait plus qu’un seul boeuf qui, par malheur, vint se réfugier sous le branchage des tamarins.

Oui, par malheur, car les éléphants l’y poursuivirent et s’arrêtèrent par un instinct commun. En quelques secondes, le ruminant ne fut plus qu’un tas de chairs déchirées, d’os broyés, débris sanglants piétines sous les pieds calleux aux ongles d’une dureté de fer.

Le tertre était alors entouré et il fallut renoncer à la chance de voir s’éloigner ces bêtes furieuses.

En un moment, le chariot fut bousculé, renversé, chaviré, écrasé sous les masses pesantes qui se refoulaient contre le tertre. Anéanti comme un jouet d’enfant, il n’en resta plus rien ni des roues, ni de la caisse.

Sans doute, de nouveaux jurons éclatèrent entre les lèvres du Portugais, mais cela n’était pas pour arrêter ces centaines d’éléphants, non plus que le coup de fusil qu’Urdax tira sur le plus rapproché, dont la trompe s’enroulait autour de l’arbre. La balle ricocha sur le dos de l’animal sans pénétrer dans ses chairs.

Max Huber et John Cort le comprirent bien. En admettant même qu’aucun coup ne fût perdu, que chaque balle fît une victime, peut-être aurait-on pu se débarrasser de ces terribles assaillants, les détruire jusqu’au dernier, s’ils n’avaient été qu’un petit nombre. Le jour n’aurait plus éclairé qu’un amoncellement d’énormes cadavres au pied des tamarins. Mais trois cents, cinq cents, un millier de ces animaux!… Est-il donc rare de rencontrer de pareilles agglomérations dans les contrées de l’Afrique équatoriale, et les voyageurs, les trafiquants, ne parlent-ils pas d’immenses plaines que couvrent à perte de vue les ruminants de toute sorte?…

«Cela se complique…, observa John Cort.

— On peut même dire que ça se corse!» ajouta Max Huber.

Puis, s’adressant au jeune indigène achevalé près de lui:

«Tu n’as pas peur?… demanda-t-il.

— Non, mon ami Max… avec vous…, non!» répondit Llanga.

Et, cependant, il était permis non seulement à un enfant, mais à des nommes aussi, de se sentir le coeur envahi d’une irrésistible épouvante.

En effet, nul doute que les éléphants n’eussent aperçu, entre les branches des tamarins, ce qui restait du personnel de la caravane.

Et, alors, les derniers rangs poussant les premiers, le cercle se rétrécit autour du tertre. Une douzaine d’animaux essayèrent d’accrocher les basses branches avec leurs trompes en se dressant sur les pattes de derrière. Par bonne chance, à cette hauteur d’une trentaine de pieds, ils ne purent y réussir.

Quatre coups de carabine éclatèrent simultanément, — quatre coups tirés au juger, car il était impossible de viser juste sous la sombre ramure des tamarins.

Des cris plus violents, des hurlements plus furieux, se firent entendre. Il ne sembla pas, pourtant, qu’aucun éléphant eût été mortellement atteint par les balles. Et, d’ailleurs, quatre de moins, cela n’eût pas compté!

Aussi, ce ne fut plus aux branches inférieures que les trompes essayèrent de s’accrocher. Elles entourèrent le fût des arbres en même temps que ceux-ci subissaient la poussée puissante des corps. Et, de fait, si gros que fussent ces tamarins à leur base, si solidement que leurs racines eussent mordu le sol, ils éprouvèrent un ébranlement auquel, sans doute, ils ne pourraient résister.

Des coups de feu retentirent encore — deux cette fois — tirés par le Portugais et le foreloper, dont l’arbre, secoué avec une extraordinaire violence, les menaçait d’une chute prochaine.

Le Français et son compagnon, eux, n’avaient point déchargé leurs carabines, bien qu’ils fussent prêts à le faire.

«À quoi bon?… avait dit John Cort.

— Oui, réservons nos munitions, répondit Max Huber. Plus tard, nous pourrions nous repentir d’avoir brûlé ici notre dernière cartouche!»

En attendant, le tamarin auquel étaient cramponnés Urdax et Khamis fut tellement ébranlé qu’on l’entendit craquer sur toute sa longueur.

Évidemment, s’il n’était pas déraciné, il se briserait. Les animaux l’attaquaient à coups de défenses, le courbaient avec leurs trompes, l’ébranlaient jusque dans ses racines.

Rester plus longtemps sur cet arbre, ne fût-ce qu’une minute, c’était risquer de s’abattre au pied du tertre:

«Venez!» cria à Urdax le foreloper, essayant de gagner l’arbre voisin.

Le Portugais avait perdu la tête et continuait à décharger inutilement sa carabine et ses revolvers, dont les balles glissaient sur les peaux rugueuses des pachydermes comme sur une carapace d’alligator.

«Venez!…» répéta Khamis.

Et au moment où le tamarin était secoué avec plus de violence, le foreloper parvint à saisir une des branches de l’arbre occupé par Max Huber, John Cort et Llanga, moins compromis que l’autre, contre lequel s’acharnaient les animaux:

«Urdax?… cria John Cort.

— Il n’a pas voulu me suivre, répondit le foreloper, il ne sait plus ce qu’il fait!…

— Le malheureux va tomber…

— Nous ne pouvons le laisser là…, dit Max Huber.

— Il faut l’entraîner malgré lui…, ajouta John Cort.

— Trop tard!…» dit Khamis.

Trop tard, en effet. Brisé dans un dernier craquement, le tamarin s’abattit au bas du tertre.

Ce que devint le Portugais, ses compagnons ne purent le voir; ses cris indiquaient qu’il se débattait sous les pieds des éléphants, et comme ils cessèrent presque aussitôt, c’est que tout était fini.

«Le malheureux… le malheureux! murmura John Cort.

— À notre tour bientôt… dit Khamis.

— Ce serait regrettable! répliqua froidement Max Huber.

— Encore une fois, cher ami, je suis bien de votre avis», déclara

John Cort.

Que faire?… Les éléphants, piétinant le tertre, secouaient les autres arbres, agités comme sous le souffle d’une tempête. L’horrible fin d’Urdax n’était-elle pas réservée à ceux qui lui auraient survécu quelques minutes à peine?… Voyaient-ils la possibilité d’abandonner le tamarin avant sa chute?… Et, s’ils se risquaient à descendre, pour gagner la plaine, échapperaient- ils à la poursuite de cette harde?… Auraient-ils le temps d’atteindre la forêt?… Et, d’ailleurs, leur offrirait-elle toute sécurité?… Si les éléphants ne les y poursuivaient pas, ne leur auraient-ils échappé que pour tomber au pouvoir d’indigènes non moins féroces?…

Cependant, que l’occasion se présentât de chercher refuge au-delà de la lisière, il faudrait en profiter sans une hésitation. La raison commandait de préférer un danger non certain à un danger certain.

L’arbre continuait à osciller, et, dans une de ces oscillations, plusieurs trompes purent atteindre ses branches inférieures. Le foreloper et ses deux compagnons furent sur le point de lâcher prise tant les secousses devinrent violentes. Max Huber, craignant pour Llanga, le serrait de son bras gauche, tandis qu’il se retenait du bras droit. Avant de très courts instants, ou les racines auraient cédé, ou le tronc serait brisé à sa base… Et la chute du tamarin, c’était la mort de ceux qui s’étaient réfugiés entre ses branches, l’épouvantable écrasement du Portugais Urdax!…

Sous de plus rudes et de plus fréquentes poussées, les racines cédèrent enfin, le sol se souleva, et l’arbre se coucha plutôt qu’il ne s’abattit le long du tertre.

«À la forêt… à la forêt!…» cria Khamis.

Du côté où les branches du tamarin avaient rencontré le sol, le recul des éléphants laissait le champ libre. Rapidement, le foreloper dont le cri avait été entendu, fut à terre. Les trois autres le suivirent aussitôt dans sa fuite.

Tout d’abord, acharnés contre les arbres restés debout, les animaux n’avaient pas aperçu les fugitifs. Max Huber, Llanga entre ses bras, courait aussi vite que le lui permettaient ses forces. John Cort se maintenait à son côté, prêt à prendre sa part de ce fardeau, prêt également à décharger sa carabine sur le premier de la harde qui serait à sa portée.

Le foreloper, John Cort et Max Huber avaient à peine franchi un demi-kilomètre, lorsqu’une dizaine d’éléphants, se détachant de la troupe, commencèrent à les poursuivre.

«Courage… courage!… cria Khamis. Conservons notre avance!…

Nous arriverons!…»

Oui, peut-être, et encore importait-il de ne pas être retardé.

Llanga sentait bien que Max Huber se fatiguait.

«Laisse-moi… laisse-moi, mon ami Max!… J'ai de bonnes jambes… laisse-moi!…»

Max Huber ne l'écoutait pas et tâchait de ne point rester en arrière.

Un kilomètre fut enlevé, sans que les animaux eussent sensiblement gagné de l'avance. Par malheur, la vitesse de Khamis et de ses compagnons se ralentissait, la respiration leur manquait après cette formidable galopade.

Cependant la lisière ne se trouvait plus qu'à quelques centaines de pas, et n'était-ce point le salut probable, sinon assuré, derrière ces épais massifs au milieu desquels les énormes animaux ne pourraient manoeuvrer?…

«Vite… vite!… répétait Khamis. Donnez-moi Llanga, monsieur

Max…

— Non, Khamis… j'irai jusqu'au bout!»

Un des éléphants ne se trouvait plus qu'à une douzaine de mètres. On entendait la sonnerie de sa trompe, on sentait la chaleur de son souffle. Le sol tremblait sous ses larges pieds qui battaient le galop. Une minute, et il aurait atteint Max Huber, qui ne se maintenait pas sans peine près de ses compagnons.

Alors John Cort s'arrêta, se retourna, épaula sa carabine, visa un instant, fit feu et frappa, paraît-il, l'éléphant au bon endroit. La balle lui avait traversé le coeur, il tomba foudroyé.

«Coup heureux!» murmura John Cort, et il se reprit à fuir.

Les autres animaux, arrivés peu d'instants après, entourèrent la masse étendue sur le sol. De là un répit dont le foreloper et ses compagnons allaient profiter.

Il est vrai, après avoir abattu les derniers arbres du tertre, la harde ne tarderait pas à se précipiter vers la forêt.

Aucun feu n'avait reparu ni au niveau de la plaine ni aux cimes des arbres. Tout se confondait sur le périmètre de l'obscur horizon.

Épuisés, époumonés, les fugitifs auraient-ils la force d'atteindre leur but?…

«Hardi… hardi!…» criait Khamis.

S'il n'y avait plus qu'une centaine de pas à franchir, les éléphants n'étaient que de quarante en arrière…

Par un suprême effort — celui de l'instinct de la conservation — Khamis, Max Huber, John Cort se jetèrent entre les premiers arbres, et, à demi inanimés, tombèrent sur le sol.

En vain la harde voulut franchir la lisière. Les arbres étaient si pressés qu'elle ne put se frayer passage, et ils étaient de telle dimension qu'elle ne parvint pas à les renverser. En vain les trompes se glissèrent à travers les interstices, en vain les derniers rangs poussèrent les premiers…

Les fugitifs n'avaient plus rien à craindre des éléphants, auxquels la grande forêt de l'Oubanghi opposait un insurmontable obstacle.

CHAPITRE IV

Parti à prendre, parti pris

Il était près de minuit. Restaient six heures à passer en complète obscurité. Six longues heures de craintes et de dangers!… Que Khamis et ses compagnons fussent à l’abri derrière l’infranchissable barrière des arbres, cela semblait acquis. Mais si la sécurité était assurée de ce chef, un autre danger menaçait. Au milieu de la nuit, est-ce que des feux multiples ne s’étaient pas montrés sur la lisière?… Est-ce que les hautes ramures ne s’étaient pas illuminées d’inexplicables lueurs?… Pouvait-on douter qu’un parti d’indigènes ne fût campé en cet endroit?… N’y avait-il pas à craindre une agression contre laquelle aucune défense ne serait possible?…

«Veillons, dit le foreloper, dès qu’il eut repris haleine après cette époumonante course, et lorsque le Français et l’Américain furent en état de lui répondre.

— Veillons, répéta John Cort, et soyons prêts à repousser une attaque!… Les nomades ne sauraient être éloignés… C’est sur cette partie de la lisière qu’ils ont fait halte, et voici les restes d’un foyer, d’où s’échappent encore quelques étincelles…»

En effet, à cinq ou six pas, au pied d’un arbre, des charbons brûlaient en jetant une clarté rougeâtre.

Max Huber se releva et, sa carabine armée, se glissa sous le taillis.

Khamis et John Cort anxieux se tenaient prêts à le rejoindre s’il le fallait.

L’absence de Max Huber ne dura que trois ou quatre minutes. Il n’avait rien entrevu de suspect, rien entendu qui fût de nature à inspirer la crainte d’un danger immédiat.

«Cette portion de la forêt est actuellement déserte, dit-il. Il est certain que les indigènes l’ont quittée…

— Et peut-être même se sont-ils enfuis lorsqu’ils ont vu apparaître les éléphants, observa John Cort.

— Peut-être, car les feux que nous avons aperçus, monsieur Max et moi, dit Khamis, se sont éteints dès que les mugissements ont retenti dans la direction du nord. Était-ce par prudence, était-ce par crainte?… Ces gens devaient se croire en sûreté derrière les arbres… Je ne m’explique pas bien…

— Ce qui est inexplicable, reprit Max Huber, et la nuit n’est pas favorable aux explications. Attendons le jour, et, je l’avoue, j’aurais quelque peine à rester éveillé… mes yeux se ferment malgré moi…

— Le moment est mal choisi pour dormir, mon cher Max, déclara

John Cort.

— On ne peut pas plus mal, mon cher John, mais le sommeil n’obéit pas, il commande… Bonsoir et à demain!»

Un instant après, Max Huber, étendu au pied d’un arbre, était plongé dans un profond sommeil.

«Va te coucher près de lui, Llanga, dit John Cort. Khamis et moi, nous veillerons jusqu’au matin.

— J’y suffirai, monsieur John, répondit le foreloper. C’est dans mes habitudes, et je vous conseille d’imiter votre ami.»

On pouvait s’en rapporter à Khamis. Il ne se relâcherait pas une minute de sa surveillance.

Llanga alla se blottir près de Max Huber. John Cort, lui, voulut résister. Pendant un quart d’heure encore, il s’entretint avec le foreloper. Tous deux parlèrent de l’infortuné Portugais, auquel Khamis était attaché depuis longtemps, et dont ses compagnons avaient apprécié les qualités au cours de cette campagne:

«Le malheureux, répétait Khamis, a perdu la tête en se voyant abandonné par ces lâches porteurs, dépouillé, volé…

— Pauvre homme!» murmura John Cort.

Ce furent les deux derniers mots qu’il prononça. Vaincu par la fatigue, il s’allongea sur l’herbe et s’endormit aussitôt.

Seul, l’oeil aux aguets, prêtant l’oreille, épiant les moindres bruits, sa carabine à portée de la main, fouillant du regard l’ombre épaisse, se relevant parfois afin de mieux sonder les profondeurs du sous-bois au ras du sol, prêt enfin à réveiller ses compagnons, s’il y avait lieu de se défendre, Khamis veilla jusqu’aux premières lueurs du jour.

À quelques traits, le lecteur a déjà pu constater la différence de caractère qui existait entre les deux amis français et américain.

John Cort était d’un esprit très sérieux et très pratique, qualités habituelles aux hommes de la Nouvelle-Angleterre. Né à Boston, et bien qu’il fût Yankee par son origine, il ne se révélait que par les bons côtés du Yankee.

Très curieux des questions de géographie et d'anthropologie, l'étude des races humaines l'intéressait au plus haut degré. À ces mérites, il joignait un grand courage et eût poussé le dévouement à ses amis jusqu'au dernier sacrifice.

Max Huber, un Parisien resté tel au milieu de ces contrées lointaines où l'avaient transporté les hasards de l'existence, ne le cédait à John Cort ni par la tête ni par le coeur. Mais, de sens moins pratique, on eût pu dire qu'il «vivait en vers» alors que John Cort «vivait en prose». Son tempérament le lançait volontiers à la poursuite de l'extraordinaire. Ainsi qu'on a dû le remarquer, il aurait été capable de regrettables témérités pour satisfaire ses instincts d'imaginatif, si son prudent compagnon eût cessé de le retenir. Cette heureuse intervention avait eu plusieurs occasions de s'exercer depuis le départ de Libreville.

Libreville est la capitale du Congo français. Fondée en 1849 sur la rive gauche de l'estuaire du Gabon, elle compte actuellement de quinze à seize cents habitants. Le gouverneur de la colonie y réside, et il ne faudrait pas y chercher d'autres édifices que sa propre maison. L'hôpital, l'établissement des missionnaires, et, pour la partie industrielle et commerciale, les parcs à charbon, les magasins et les chantiers constituent toute la ville.

À trois kilomètres de cette capitale se trouve une annexe, le village de Glass, où prospèrent des factoreries allemandes, anglaises et américaines.

C'était là que Max Huber et John Cort s'étaient connus cinq ou six ans plus tôt et liés d'une solide amitié. Leurs familles possédaient des intérêts considérables dans la factorerie américaine de Glass. Tous deux y occupaient des emplois supérieurs. Cet établissement se maintenait en pleine fortune, faisant le trafic de l'ivoire, des huiles d'arachides, du vin de palme, des diverses productions du pays: telle la noix du gourou, apéritive et vivifiante; telle la baie de kaffa, d’arôme si pénétrant et d’énergie si fortifiante, l’une et l’autre largement expédiées sur les marchés de l’Amérique et de l’Europe.

Trois mois auparavant, Max Huber et John Cort avaient formé le projet de visiter la région qui s’étend à l’est du Congo français et du Cameroun. Chasseurs déterminés, ils n’hésitèrent pas à se joindre au personnel d’une caravane sur le point de quitter Libreville pour cette contrée où les éléphants abondent au-delà du Bahar-el-Abiad, jusqu’aux confins du Baghirmi et du Darfour. Tous deux connaissaient le chef de cette caravane, le Portugais Urdax, originaire de Loango, et qui passait, à juste titre, pour un habile trafiquant.

Urdax faisait partie de cette Association des chasseurs d’ivoire que Stanley, en 1887-1889, rencontra à Ipoto, alors qu’elle revenait du Congo septentrional. Mais le Portugais ne partageait pas la mauvaise réputation de ses confrères, lesquels, pour la plupart, sous prétexte de chasser l’éléphant, se livrent au massacre des indigènes, et, ainsi que le dit l’intrépide explorateur de l’Afrique équatoriale, l’ivoire qu’ils rapportent est teint de sang humain.

Non! un Français et un Américain pouvaient, sans déchoir, accepter la compagnie d’Urdax, et aussi celle du foreloper, le guide de la caravane, ce Khamis, qui ne devait en aucune circonstance ménager ni son dévouement ni son zèle.

La campagne fut heureuse, on le sait. Très acclimatés, John Cort et Max Huber supportèrent avec une remarquable endurance les fatigues de cette expédition. Un peu amaigris, sans doute, ils revenaient en parfaite santé, lorsque la mauvaise chance leur barra la route du retour. Et, maintenant, le chef de la caravane leur manquait, alors qu'une distance de plus de deux mille kilomètres les séparait encore de Libreville.

La «Grande Forêt», ainsi l'avait qualifiée Urdax, cette forêt d'Oubanghi dont ils avaient franchi la limite, justifiait cette qualification.

Dans les parties connues du globe terrestre, il existe de ces espaces, couverts de millions d'arbres, et leurs dimensions sont telles que la plupart des États d'Europe n'en égalent point la superficie.

On cite, parmi les plus vastes du monde, les quatre forêts qui sont situées dans l'Amérique du Nord, dans l'Amérique du Sud, dans la Sibérie et dans l'Afrique centrale.

La première, se prolongeant en direction septentrionale jusqu'à la baie d'Hudson et la presqu'île de Labrador, couvre, dans les provinces de Québec et de l'Ontario, au nord du Saint-Laurent, une aire dont la longueur mesure deux mille sept cent cinquante kilomètres sur une largeur de seize cents.

La seconde occupe dans la vallée de l'Amazone, au nord-ouest du Brésil, une étendue de trois mille trois cents kilomètres en longueur et de deux mille en largeur.

La troisième, avec quatre mille huit cents kilomètres d'une part et deux mille sept cents de l'autre, hérisse de ses énormes conifères, d'une hauteur de cent cinquante pieds, une portion de la Sibérie méridionale, depuis les plaines du bassin de l'Obi, à l'ouest, jusqu'à la vallée de l'Indighiska, à l'est, contrée qu'arrosent l'Yenisséi, l'Olamk, la Lena et la Yana.

La quatrième s’étend depuis la vallée du Congo jusqu’aux sources du Nil et du Zambèze, sur une superficie encore indéterminée, qui dépasse vraisemblablement celle des trois autres. Là, en effet, se développe l’immense étendue de région ignorée que présente cette partie de l’Afrique parallèle à l’équateur, au nord de l’Ogoué et du Congo, sur un million de kilomètres carrés, près de deux fois la surface de la France.

On ne l’a point oublié, il entrait dans la pensée du Portugais Urdax de ne pas s’aventurer à travers cette forêt, mais de la contourner par le nord et l’ouest. D’ailleurs, comment le chariot et son attelage auraient-ils pu circuler au milieu de ce labyrinthe? Quitte à accroître l’itinéraire de quelques journées de marche, la caravane suivrait, le long de la lisière, un chemin plus facile qui conduisait à la rive droite de l’Oubanghi, et, de là, il serait aisé de regagner les factoreries de Libreville.

À présent, la situation était modifiée. Plus rien des *impedimenta* d’un nombreux personnel, des charges d’un matériel encombrant. Plus de chariot, plus de boeufs, plus d’objets de campement. Seulement trois hommes et un jeune enfant, auxquels manquaient les moyens de transport à cinq cents lieues du littoral de l’Atlantique.

Quel parti convenait-il de prendre? En revenir à l’itinéraire indiqué par Urdax, mais dans des conditions peu favorables, ou bien essayer, en piétons, de franchir obliquement la forêt, où les rencontres de nomades seraient moins à redouter, route qui abrégerait le parcours, jusqu’aux frontières du Congo français?…

Telle serait l’importante question à traiter, puis à résoudre, dès que Max Huber et John Cort se réveilleraient à l’aube prochaine.

Durant ces longues heures, Khamis était resté de garde. Aucun incident n’avait troublé le repos des dormeurs ni fait pressentir une agression nocturne. À plusieurs reprises, le foreloper, son revolver à la main, s’était éloigné d’une cinquantaine de pas, rampant entre les broussailles, lorsque se produisait aux alentours quelque bruit de nature à inquiéter sa vigilance. Ce n’étaient qu’un craquement de branche morte, le coup d’aile d’un gros oiseau à travers les ramures, le piétinement d’un ruminant autour du lieu de halte et aussi ces vagues rumeurs forestières, lorsque, sous le vent de la nuit, frissonnent les hautes frondaisons.

Dès que les deux amis rouvrirent les yeux, ils furent sur pied.

«Et les indigènes?… demanda John Cort.

— Ils n’ont point reparu, répondit Khamis.

— N’ont-ils pas laissé des traces de leur passage?…

— C’est à supposer, monsieur John, et probablement près de la lisière…

— Voyons, Khamis.»

Tous trois, suivis de Llanga, se glissèrent du côté de la plaine. À trente pas de là, les indices ne manquèrent point: empreintes multiples, herbes foulées au pied des arbres, débris de branches résineuses consumées à demi, tas de cendres où pétillaient quelques étincelles, ronces dont les plus sèches dégageaient encore un peu de fumée. D’ailleurs aucun être humain sous bois, ni sur les branches, entre lesquelles, cinq ou six heures auparavant, s’agitaient les flammes mouvantes.

«Partis…, dit Max Huber.

— Ou du moins éloignés, répondit Khamis, et il ne me semble pas que nous ayons à craindre…

— Si les indigènes se sont éloignés, fit observer John Cort, les éléphants n’ont pas pris exemple sur eux!…»

Et, de fait, les monstrueux pachydermes rôdaient toujours aux abords de la forêt. Plusieurs s’entêtaient vainement à vouloir renverser les arbres par de vigoureuses poussées. Quant au bouquet de tamarins, Khamis et ses compagnons purent constater qu’il était abattu. Le tertre, dépouillé de son ombrage, ne formait plus qu’une légère tumescence à la surface de la plaine.

Sur le conseil du foreloper, Max Huber et John Cort évitèrent de se montrer, dans l’espoir que les éléphants quitteraient la plaine.

«Cela nous permettrait de retourner au campement, dit Max Huber, et de recueillir ce qui reste du matériel… peut-être quelques caisses de conserves, des munitions…

— Et aussi, ajouta John Cort, de donner une sépulture convenable à ce malheureux Urdax…

— Il n’y faut pas songer tant que les éléphants seront sur la lisière, répondit Khamis. Au surplus, pour ce qui est du matériel, il doit être réduit à des débris informes!»

Le foreloper avait raison, et, comme les éléphants ne manifestaient point l’intention de se retirer, il n’y eut plus qu’à décider ce qu’il convenait de faire. Khamis, John Cort, Max Huber et Llanga revinrent donc sur leurs pas.

En chemin, Max Huber fut assez heureux pour tuer une belle pièce, qui devait assurer la nourriture pour deux ou trois jours.

C’était un inyala, sorte d’antilope à pelage gris mélangé de poils bruns, animal de grande taille, celui-ci un mâle, armé de cornes spiralifères, dont une fourrure épaisse garnissait la poitrine et la partie inférieure du corps. La balle l’avait frappé à l’instant où sa tête se glissait entre les broussailles.

Cet inyala devait peser de deux cent cinquante à trois cents livres. En le voyant tomber, Llanga avait couru comme un jeune chien. Mais, on l’imagine, il n’aurait pu rapporter un tel gibier, et il y eut lieu de lui venir en aide.

Le foreloper, qui avait l’habitude de ces opérations, dépeça la bête et en garda les morceaux utilisables, lesquels furent rapportés près du foyer. John Cort y jeta une brassée de bois mort, qui pétilla en quelques minutes; puis, dès qu’un lit de charbons ardents fut formé, Khamis y déposa plusieurs tranches d’une chair appétissante.

Des conserves, des biscuits, dont la caravane possédait nombre de caisses, il ne pouvait plus être question, et, sans doute, les porteurs en avaient enlevé la plus grande partie. Très heureusement, dans les giboyeuses forêts de l’Afrique centrale, un chasseur est toujours sûr de se suffire, s’il sait se contenter de viandes rôties ou grillées.

Il est vrai, ce qui importe, c’est que les munitions ne fassent pas défaut. Or, John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis étaient munis chacun d’une carabine de précision et d’un revolver. Ces armes adroitement maniées devaient leur rendre service, mais encore fallait-il que les cartouchières fussent convenablement remplies. Or, tout compte fait, et bien qu’avant de quitter le chariot ils eussent bourré leurs poches, ils n’avaient plus qu’une cinquantaine de coups à tirer. Mince approvisionnement, on l’avouera, surtout s’ils étaient obligés de se défendre contre les fauves ou les nomades, pendant six cents kilomètres jusqu’à la rive droite de l’Oubanghi. À partir de ce point, Khamis et ses compagnons devaient pouvoir se ravitailler sans trop de peine, soit dans les villages, soit dans les établissements des missionnaires, soit même à bord des flottilles qui descendent le grand tributaire du Congo.

Après s’être sérieusement repus de la chair d’inyala, et rafraîchis de l’eau limpide d’un ruisselet qui serpentait entre les arbres, tous trois délibérèrent sur le parti à prendre.

Et, en premier lieu, John Cort s’exprima de la sorte:

«Khamis, jusqu’ici Urdax était notre chef… Il nous a toujours trouvés prêts à suivre ses conseils, car nous avions confiance en lui… Cette confiance, vous nous l’inspirez par votre caractère et votre expérience… Dites-nous ce que vous jugez à propos de faire dans la situation où nous sommes, et notre acquiescement vous est assuré…

— Certes, ajouta Max Huber, il n’y aura jamais désaccord entre nous.

— Vous connaissez ce pays, Khamis, reprit John Cort. Depuis nombre d’années vous y conduisez des caravanes avec un dévouement que nous avons été à même d’apprécier… C’est à ce dévouement comme à votre fidélité que nous faisons appel, et je sais que ni l’un ni l’autre ne nous manqueront…

— Monsieur John, monsieur Max, vous pouvez compter sur moi…», répondit simplement le foreloper.

Et il serra les mains qui se tendirent vers lui, auxquelles se joignit celle de Llanga.

«Quel est votre avis?… demanda John Cort. Devons-nous ou non renoncer au projet d’Urdax de contourner la forêt par l’ouest?…

— Il faut la traverser, répondit sans hésiter le foreloper. Nous n’y serons pas exposés à de mauvaises rencontres: des fauves, peut-être; des indigènes, non. Ni Pahouins, ni Denkas, ni Founds, ni Boughos ne se sont jamais risqués à l’intérieur, ni aucune peuplade de l’Oubanghi. Les dangers sont plus grands pour nous en plaine, surtout de la part des nomades. Dans cette forêt où une caravane n’aurait pu s’engager avec ses attelages, des hommes à pied ont la possibilité de trouver passage. Je le répète, dirigeons-nous vers le sud-ouest, et j’ai bon espoir d’arriver sans erreur aux rapides de Zongo.»

Ces rapides barrent le cours de l’Oubanghi à l’angle que fait la rivière en quittant la direction ouest pour la direction sud. À s’en rapporter aux voyageurs, c’est là que la grande forêt prolonge son extrême pointe. De là, il n’y a plus qu’à suivre les plaines sur le parallèle de l’équateur, et, grâce aux caravanes très nombreuses en cette région, les moyens de ravitaillement et de transport seraient fréquents.

L’avis de Khamis était donc sage. En outre, l’itinéraire qu’il proposait devait abréger le cheminement jusqu’à l’Oubanghi. Toute la question tenait à la nature des obstacles que présenterait cette forêt profonde. De sentier praticable, il ne fallait pas espérer qu’il en existât: peut-être quelques passées d’animaux sauvages, buffles, rhinocéros et autres lourds mammifères. Quant au sol, il serait embarrassé de broussailles, ce qui eût nécessité l’emploi de la hache, alors que le foreloper en était réduit à sa hachette et ses compagnons à leurs couteaux de poche. Néanmoins, il n’y aurait pas à subir de longs retards pendant la marche.

Après avoir soulevé ces objections, John Cort n’hésita plus. Relativement à la difficulté de s’orienter sous les arbres dont le soleil perçait à peine le dôme épais, même à son zénith, inutile de s’en préoccuper.

En effet, une sorte d’instinct, semblable à celui des animaux, — instinct inexplicable et qui se rencontre chez quelques races d’hommes, — permet aux Chinois entre autres, comme à plusieurs tribus sauvages du Far-West, de se guider par l’ouïe et par l’odorat plus encore que par la vue, et de reconnaître la direction à de certains indices. Or Khamis possédait cette faculté d’orientation à un degré rare; il en avait maintes fois donné des preuves décisives. Dans une certaine mesure, le Français et l’Américain pourraient s’en rapporter à cette aptitude plutôt physique qu’intellectuelle, peu sujette à l’erreur, et sans avoir besoin de relever la position du soleil.

Quant aux autres obstacles qu’offrait la traversée de la forêt, voici ce que répondit le foreloper:

«Monsieur John, je sais que nous ne trouverons pour tout sentier qu’un sol obstrué de ronces, de bois mort, d’arbres tombés de vieillesse, enfin d’obstacles peu aisés à franchir. Mais admettez- vous qu’une si vaste forêt ne soit pas arrosée de quelques cours d’eau, lesquels ne peuvent être que des affluents de l’Oubanghi?…

— Ne fût-ce que celui qui coule à l’est du tertre, fit observer Max Huber. Il se dirige vers la forêt, et pourquoi ne deviendrait- il pas rivière?… Dans ce cas, un radeau que nous construirions… quelques troncs liés ensemble…

— N’allez pas si vite, cher ami, dit John Cort, et ne vous laissez pas emporter par votre imagination à la surface de ce rio… imaginaire…

— Monsieur Max a raison, déclara Khamis. Vers le couchant, nous rencontrerons ce cours d'eau qui doit se jeter dans l'Oubanghi…

— D'accord, répliqua John Cort, mais nous les connaissons, ces rivières de l'Afrique, pour la plupart innavigables…

— Vous ne voyez que les difficultés, mon cher John…

— Mieux vaut les voir avant qu'après, mon cher Max!»

John Cort disait vrai. Les rivières et les fleuves de l'Afrique n'offrent pas les mêmes avantages que ceux de l'Amérique, de l'Asie et de l'Europe. On en compte quatre principaux: le Nil, le Zambèze, le Congo, le Niger, que de nombreux affluents alimentent, et le réseau liquide de leur bassin est considérable. Malgré cette disposition naturelle, ils ne facilitent que médiocrement les expéditions à l'intérieur du continent noir. D'après les récits des voyageurs que leur passion de découvreurs a conduits à travers ces immenses territoires, les fleuves africains ne sauraient être comparés au Mississippi, au Saint-Laurent, à la Volga, à l'Iraouaddy, au Brahmapoutre, au Gange, à l'Indus. Le volume de leurs eaux est de beaucoup moins abondant, si leur parcours égale celui de ces puissantes artères, et, à quelque distance en amont des embouchures, ils ne peuvent porter des navires de tonnage moyen. En outre, ce sont des bas-fonds qui les interceptent, des cataractes ou des chutes qui les coupent d'une rive à l'autre, des rapides d'une telle violence qu'aucune embarcation ne se risque à les remonter. Là est une des raisons qui rendent l'Afrique centrale si réfractaire aux efforts tentés jusqu'ici.

L'objection de John Cort avait donc sa valeur, Khamis ne pouvait la méconnaître. Mais, en somme, elle n'était pas de nature à faire rejeter le projet du foreloper, qui, d'autre part, présentait de réels avantages.

«Si nous rencontrons un cours d’eau, répondit-il, nous le

descendrons tant qu’il ne sera pas interrompu par des obstacles…

S’il est possible de tourner ces obstacles, nous les tournerons…

Dans le cas contraire, nous reprendrons notre marche…

— Aussi, répliqua John Cort, ne suis-je pas opposé à votre proposition, Khamis, et je pense que nous avons tout bénéfice à nous diriger vers l’Oubanghi en suivant un de ses tributaires, si faire se peut.»

Au point où la discussion était arrivée, il n’y avait plus que deux mots à répondre:

«En route!…» s’écria Max Huber.

Et ses compagnons les répétèrent après lui.

Au fond, ce projet convenait à Max Huber: s’aventurer à l’intérieur de cette immense forêt, impénétrée jusqu’alors, sinon impénétrable… Peut-être y rencontrerait-il enfin cet extraordinaire que, depuis trois mois, il n’avait pas trouvé dans les régions du haut Oubanghi!

CHAPITRE V

Première journée de marche

Il était un peu plus de huit heures lorsque John Cort, Max Huber,

Khamis et l’enfant prirent direction vers le sud-ouest.

À quelle distance apparaîtrait le cours d’eau qu’ils comptaient suivre jusqu’à son confluent avec l’Oubanghi?… Aucun d’eux ne l’eût pu dire. Et si c’était celui qui paraissait couler vers la forêt, après avoir contourné le tertre des tamarins, n’obliquait- il pas à l’est sans la traverser?… Et, enfin, si les obstacles, roches ou rapides, encombraient son lit au point de le rendre innavigable?… D’autre part, si cette immense agglomération d’arbres était dépourvue de sentiers ou du moins de passées ouvertes par les animaux entre les halliers, comment des piétons pourraient-ils s’y frayer une route sans employer le fer ou le feu?… Khamis et ses compagnons trouveraient-ils, dans les parties fréquentées par les gros quadrupèdes, le sol dégagé, les broussailles piétinées, les lianes rompues, le cheminement libre?…

Llanga, comme un agile furet, courait en avant, bien que John Cort lui recommandât de ne pas s’éloigner. Mais, lorsqu’on le perdait de vue, sa voix perçante ne cessait de se faire entendre.

«Par ici… par ici!» criait-il.

Et tous trois marchaient vers lui, en suivant les percées dans lesquelles il venait de s’engager.

Lorsqu’il fallut s’orienter à travers ce labyrinthe, l’instinct du foreloper intervint utilement. D’ailleurs, par l’interstice des frondaisons, il était possible de relever la position du soleil. En ce mois de mars, à l’heure de sa culmination, il montait presque au zénith, qui, pour cette latitude, occupe la ligne de l’équateur céleste.

Cependant le feuillage s’épaississait à ce point que c’est à peine si un demi-jour régnait sous ces milliers d’arbres. Par les temps couverts, ce devait être presque de l’obscurité, et, la nuit, toute circulation deviendrait impossible. Il est vrai, l’intention de Khamis était de faire halte entre le soir et le matin, de choisir un abri au pied de quelque tronc en cas de pluie, de n’allumer de feu que juste pour cuire le gibier abattu dans l’avant ou l’après-midi. Quoique la forêt ne dût pas être fréquentée par les nomades, — et on n’avait pas relevé trace de ceux qui avaient campé sur la lisière, — mieux valait ne point signaler sa présence par l’éclat d’un foyer. Au surplus, quelques braises ardentes, disposées sous la cendre, devaient suffire à la cuisine, et il n’y avait rien à craindre du froid à cette époque de la saison africaine.

En effet, la caravane avait déjà eu à souffrir des chaleurs en parcourant les plaines de la région intertropicale. La température y atteignait un degré excessif. Sous l’abri de ces arbres, Khamis, Max Huber, John Cort seraient moins éprouvés, les conditions étant plus favorables au long et pénible parcours que leur imposaient les circonstances. Il va de soi que pendant ces nuits, imprégnées des feux du jour, à la condition que le temps fût sec, il n’y avait aucun inconvénient à coucher en plein air.

La pluie, c’était là ce qui était le plus à craindre dans une contrée où les saisons sont toutes pluvieuses. Sur la zone équinoxiale soufflent les vents alizés qui s’y neutralisent. De ce phénomène climatérique il résulte que, l’atmosphère étant généralement calme, les nuages épanchent leurs vapeurs condensées en d’interminables averses. Toutefois, depuis une semaine, le ciel s’était rasséréné au retour de la lune, et, puisque le satellite terrestre paraît avoir une influence météorologique, peut-être pouvait-on compter sur une quinzaine de jours que ne troublerait pas la lutte des éléments.

En cette partie de la forêt qui s’abaissait en pente peu sensible vers les rives de l’Oubanghi, le terrain n’était pas marécageux, ce qu’il serait sans doute plus au sud. Le sol, très ferme, était tapissé d’une herbe haute et drue qui rendait le cheminement lent et difficile, lorsque le pied des animaux ne l’avait pas foulée.

«Eh! fit observer Max Huber, il est regrettable que nos éléphants n’aient pas pu foncer jusqu’ici!… Ils auraient brisé les lianes, déchiré les broussailles, aplani le sentier, écrasé les ronces…

— Et nous avec… répliqua John Cort.

— Assurément, affirma le foreloper. Contentons-nous de ce qu’ont fait les rhinocéros et les buffles… Où ils ont passé, il y aura pour nous passage.»

Khamis, d’ailleurs, connaissait ces forêts de l’Afrique centrale pour avoir souvent parcouru celles du Congo et du Cameroun. On comprendra, dès lors, qu’il ne fût point embarrassé de répondre relativement aux essences forestières si diverses, qui foisonnaient dans celle-ci. John Cort s’intéressait à l’étude de ces magnifiques échantillons du règne végétal, à ces phanérogames dont on a catalogué tant d’espèces entre le Congo et le Nil.

«Et puis, disait-il, il en est d’utilisables, susceptibles de varier le monotone menu des grillades.»

Sans parler des gigantesques tamarins réunis en grand nombre, les mimosas d’une hauteur extraordinaire et les baobabs dressaient leurs cimes à une altitude de cent cinquante pieds. À vingt et trente mètres s’élevaient certains spécimens de la famille des euphorbiacées, à branches épineuses, à feuilles larges de six à sept pouces, doublées d’une écorce à substance laiteuse, et dont la noix, lorsque le fruit est mûr, fait explosion en projetant la semence de ses seize compartiments. Et, s’il n’eût possédé l’instinct de l’orientation, Khamis n’aurait-il pu s’en rapporter aux indications du *sylphinum lacinatum*, puisque les feuilles radicales de cet arbuste se tordent de manière à présenter leurs faces l’une à l’est, l’autre à l’ouest.

En vérité, un Brésilien perdu sous ces profonds massifs se serait cru au milieu des forêts vierges du bassin de l’Amazone. Tandis que Max Huber pestait contre les buissons nains qui hérissaient le sol, John Cort ne se lassait pas d’admirer ces tapis verdoyants de haute lisse, où se multipliaient le phrynium et les aniômes, les fougères de vingt sortes qu’il fallait écarter. Et quelle variété d’arbres, les uns de bois dur, les autres de bois mou! Ceux-ci, ainsi que le fait remarquer Stanley, — *Voyage dans les ténèbres de l’Afrique*, — remplacent le pin et le sapin des zones hyperboréennes. Rien qu’avec leurs larges feuilles, les indigènes se construisent des cabanes pour une halte de quelques jours. En outre, la forêt possédait encore en grand nombre des teks, des acajous, des coeurs-verts, des arbres de fer, des campêches de nature imputrescible, des copals de venue superbe, des manguiers arborescents, des sycomores qui pouvaient rivaliser avec les plus beaux de l’Afrique orientale, des orangers à l’état sauvage, des figuiers dont le tronc était blanc comme s’il eût été chaulé, des «mpafous» colossaux et autres arbres de toutes espèces.

En réalité, ces multiples produits du règne végétal ne sont pas assez pressés pour nuire au développement de leur ramure sous l’influence d’un climat à la fois chaud et humide. Il y aurait eu passage même pour les chariots d'une caravane, si des câbles, mesurant jusqu'à un pied d'épaisseur, n'eussent été tendus entre leurs bases. C'étaient d'interminables lianes qui s'enroulaient autour des fûts comme des fouillis de serpents. De toutes parts s'enchevêtraient un enguirlandement de branchages dont on ne saurait se faire une idée, des tortis capricieux, des festons ininterrompus allant des massifs aux halliers. Pas un rameau qui ne fût rattaché au rameau voisin! Pas un tronc qui ne fût relié par ces longues chaînes végétales, dont quelques-unes pendaient jusqu'à terre comme des stalactites de verdure! Pas une rugueuse écorce qui ne fût tapissée de mousses épaisses et veloutées sur lesquelles couraient des milliers d'insectes aux ailes pointillées d'or!

Et des moindres amalgames de ces frondaisons s'échappait un concert de gazouillements, de hululements, ici des cris, là des chants, qui s'éparpillaient du matin au soir.

Les chants, c'étaient des myriades de becs qui les lançaient en roulades, rossignolades, trilles plus variés et plus aigus que ceux d'un sifflet de quartier-maître à bord d'un navire de guerre. Et comment n'être point assourdi par ce monde ailé des perroquets, des huppes, des hiboux, des écureuils volants, des merles, des perruches, des tette-chèvres, sans compter les oiseaux-mouches, agglomérés comme un essaim d'abeilles entre les hautes branches?…

Les cris, c'étaient ceux d'une colonie simienne, un charivarique accord de babouins à poil grisâtre, de colobes encamaillés, de grenuches à fourrure noire, de chimpanzés, de mandrilles, de gorilles, les plus vigoureux et les plus redoutables singes de la faune africaine. Jusqu'alors, ces quadrumanes, bien qu'ils fussent en bandes, ne s'étaient livrés à aucune manifestation hostile contre Khamis et ses compagnons, les premiers hommes, sans doute, qu’ils apercevaient au fond de cette forêt de l’Afrique centrale. Il y avait lieu de croire, en effet, que jamais êtres humains ne s’étaient aventurés sous ces massifs. De là, chez la gent simienne, plus de curiosité que de colère. En d’autres parties du Congo et du Cameroun, il n’en eût pas été de même. Depuis longtemps, l’homme y a fait son apparition. Les chasseurs d’ivoire, auxquels des centaines de bandits, indigènes ou non, prêtent leur concours, n’en sont plus à étonner des singes, depuis longtemps témoins des ravages que ces aventuriers exercent, et qui coûtent tant de vies humaines.

Après une première halte au milieu de la journée, une seconde fut faite à six heures du soir. Le cheminement avait présenté parfois de réelles difficultés en présence d’inextricables réseaux de lianes. Les couper ou les rompre exigeait un pénible travail. Toutefois, sur une grande étendue du parcours s’ouvraient des sentiers fréquentés plus particulièrement par les buffles, dont quelques-uns furent entrevus derrière les buissons, — entre autres des onjas de forte taille.

Ces ruminants ne laissent point d’être redoutables, grâce à leur force prodigieuse, et les chasseurs doivent éviter, quand ils les attaquent, d’être chargés par eux. Les tirer entre les deux yeux, pas trop bas, afin que la blessure soit foudroyante, c’est le plus sûr moyen de les abattre.

John Cort et Max Huber n’avaient jamais eu l’occasion d’exercer leur adresse contre ces onjas, qui s’étaient tenus hors de portée. D’ailleurs, la chair d’antilope ne manquant pas encore, il importait de ménager les munitions. Aucun coup de fusil ne devait retentir pendant cette traversée, à moins qu’il ne s’agît de la défense personnelle ou de la nécessité de pourvoir à la nourriture quotidienne.

Ce fut au bord d’une petite clairière que, le soir venu, Khamis donna le signal d’arrêt, au pied d’un arbre qui dépassait la futaie environnante. À six mètres du sol s’étendait son feuillage d’un vert tirant sur le gris, entremêlé de fleurs d’un duvet blanchâtre tombant en neige autour d’un tronc à l’écorce argentée. C’était un de ces cotonniers d’Afrique, dont les racines sont disposées en arcs-boutants, et sous lesquelles on peut s’abriter.

«Le lit est tout fait!… s’écria Max Huber. Pas de sommier élastique, sans doute, mais un matelas de coton, et nous en aurons l’étrenne!»

Le feu allumé avec le briquet et l’amadou dont Khamis était amplement approvisionné, ce repas fut semblable au premier du matin et au deuxième de la méridienne. Par malheur, — mais comment ne point s’y résigner? — manque absolu de ce biscuit qui avait remplacé le pain pendant la campagne. On se contenta donc des grillades, lesquelles satisfirent l’appétit dans une large mesure.

Le souper fini, avant d’aller s’étendre entre les racines du cotonnier, John Cort dit au foreloper:

«Si je ne me trompe, nous avons toujours marché dans le sens du sud-ouest…

— Toujours, répondit Khamis. Chaque fois que j’ai pu apercevoir le soleil, j’ai relevé la route…

— À combien de lieues estimez-vous nos étapes pendant cette journée?…

— Quatre à cinq, monsieur John, et, si nous continuons de la sorte, en moins d’un mois nous aurons atteint les bords de l’Oubanghi.

— Bon, reprit John Cort, n’est-il pas prudent de compter avec les mauvaises chances?…

— Et aussi avec les bonnes, repartit Max Huber. Qui sait si nous ne découvrirons pas quelque cours d’eau, qui nous permettra de descendre sans fatigue…

— Jusqu’ici il ne semble pas, mon cher Max…

— C’est que nous ne sommes pas assez avancés en direction de l’ouest, affirma Khamis, et je serais très surpris si demain… ou après-demain…

— Faisons comme si nous ne devions pas rencontrer une rivière, répliqua John Cort. Somme toute, un voyage d’une trentaine de jours, si les difficultés ne sont pas plus insurmontables que pendant cette première journée, ce n’est pas pour effrayer des chasseurs africanisés comme nous le sommes!

— Et encore, ajouta Max Huber, je crains bien que cette mystérieuse forêt ne soit totalement dépourvue de mystère!

— Tant mieux, Max!

— Tant pis, John! — Et, maintenant, Llanga, allons dormir…

— Oui, mon ami Max», répondit l’enfant, dont les yeux se fermaient de sommeil, après les fatigues d’une longue route pendant laquelle il n’était jamais resté en arrière.

Aussi fallut-il le transporter entre les racines du cotonnier et l’accoter dans le meilleur coin.

Le foreloper s’était offert à veiller toute la nuit. Ses compagnons n’y voulurent point consentir. On se relayerait de trois heures en trois heures, bien que les entours de la clairière ne parussent pas suspects. Mais la prudence commandait d’être sur ses gardes jusqu’au lever du jour.

Ce fut Max Huber qui prit la première faction, tandis que John

Cort et Khamis s’étendaient sur le blanc duvet tombé de l’arbre.

Max Huber, sa carabine chargée à portée de la main, appuyé contre une des racines, s’abandonna au charme de cette tranquille nuit. Dans les profondeurs de la forêt, tous les bruits du jour avaient cessé. Il ne passait entre les ramures qu’une haleine régulière, la respiration de ces arbres endormis. Les rayons de la lune, très élevée vers le zénith, glissaient par les interstices du feuillage et zébraient le sol de zigzags argentés. Au-delà de la clairière, les dessous s’illuminaient aussi du scintillement des irradiations lunaires.

Très sensible à cette poésie de la nature, Max Huber la goûtait, l’aspirait, pourrait-on dire, croyait rêver parfois, et cependant ne dormait point. Ne lui semblait-il pas qu’il fût le seul être vivant au sein de ce monde végétal?…

Monde végétal, c’était bien ce que son imagination faisait de cette grande forêt de l’Oubanghi!

«Et, pensait-il, si l’on veut pénétrer les derniers secrets du globe, faut-il donc aller jusqu’aux extrémités de son axe, pour découvrir ses derniers mystères?… Pourquoi, au prix d’effroyables dangers et avec la certitude de rencontrer des obstacles peut-être infranchissables, pourquoi tenter la conquête des deux pôles?… Qu’en résulterait-il?… La solution de quelques problèmes de météorologie, d’électricité, de magnétisme terrestre!… Cela vaut-il que l’on ajoute tant de noms aux nécrologies des contrées australes et boréales?… Est-ce qu’il ne serait pas plus utile, plus curieux, au lieu de courir les mers arctiques et antarctiques, de fouiller les aires infinies de ces forêts et de vaincre leur farouche impénétrabilité?… Comment! il en existe de telles en Amérique, en Asie, en Afrique, et aucun pionnier n’a eu jusqu’ici la pensée d’en faire son champ de découvertes, ni le courage de se lancer à travers cet inconnu? Personne n’a encore arraché à ces arbres le mot de leur énigme comme les anciens aux vieux chênes de Dodone?… Et n’avaient-ils pas eu raison, les mythologistes, de peupler leurs bois de faunes, de satyres, de dryades, d’hamadryades, de nymphes imaginaires?… D’ailleurs, pour se restreindre aux données de la science moderne, ne peut-on admettre, en ces immensités forestières, l’existence d’êtres inconnus, appropriés aux conditions de cet habitat? À l’époque druidique, est-ce que la Gaule transalpine n’abritait pas des peuplades à demi sauvages, des Celtes, des Germains, des Ligures, des centaines de tribus, des centaines de villes et de villages, ayant leurs coutumes particulières, leurs moeurs personnelles, leur originalité native, à l’intérieur de ces forêts dont la toute-puissance romaine ne parvint pas sans grands efforts à forcer les limites?…»

Ainsi songeait Max Huber.

Or, précisément, en ces régions de l’Afrique équatoriale, est-ce que la légende n’avait pas signalé des êtres à un degré inférieur de l’humanité, des êtres quasi fabuleux?… Est-ce que cette forêt de l’Oubanghi n’avoisinait pas, à l’est, les territoires reconnus par Schweinfurth et Junker, le pays des Niam-Niam, ces hommes à queue, qui, il est vrai, ne possédaient aucun appendice caudal?… Est-ce que Henry Stanley, dans les contrées au nord de l’Itouri, n’avait pas rencontré des pygmées hauts de moins d’un mètre, parfaitement constitués, à peau luisante et fine, aux grands yeux de gazelle, et dont le missionnaire anglais Albert Lhyd a constaté l’existence entre l’Ouganda et la Cabinda, plus de dix mille, abrités sous la ramure ou perchés sur les grands arbres, ces Bambustis, ayant un chef auquel ils obéissaient?… Est-ce que dans les bois de Ndouqourbocha, après avoir quitté Ipoto, il n’avait pas traversé cinq villages, abandonnés de la veille par leur population lilliputienne? Est-ce qu’il ne s’était pas trouvé en présence de ces Ouambouttis, Batinas, Akkas, Bazoungous, dont la stature ne dépassait pas cent trente centimètres, réduite même, pour certains d’entre eux, à quatre-vingt-douze, et d’un poids inférieur à quarante kilogrammes? Et, cependant, ces tribus n’en étaient pas moins intelligentes, industrieuses, guerrières, redoutables, avec leurs petites armes, aux animaux comme aux hommes, et très craintes des peuplades agricoles des régions du haut Nil?…

Aussi, emporté par son imagination, son appétit des choses extraordinaires, Max Huber s’obstinait-il à croire que la forêt de l’Oubanghi devait renfermer des types étranges, dont les ethnographes ne soupçonnaient pas l’existence… Pourquoi pas des humains qui n’auraient qu’un oeil comme les Cyclopes de la Fable, ou dont le nez, allongé en forme de trompe, permettrait de les classer, sinon dans l’ordre des pachydermes, du moins dans la famille des proboscidiens?…

Max Huber, sous l’influence de ces rêveries scientifico-

fantaisistes, oubliait tant soit peu son rôle de sentinelle.

L’ennemi se fût approché sans avoir été signalé à temps pour que

Khamis et John Cort pussent se mettre sur la défensive…

Une main se posa sur son épaule.

«Eh!… quoi? fit-il en sursautant.

— C’est moi, lui dit son compagnon, et ne me prenez pas pour un sauvage de l’Oubanghi! — Rien de suspect?…

— Rien…

— Il est l’heure à laquelle il est convenu que vous iriez reposer, mon cher Max…

— Soit, mais je serai bien étonné si les rêves que je vais faire en dormant valent ceux que j’ai faits sans dormir!»

La première partie de cette nuit n’avait point été troublée, et le reste ne le fut pas davantage, lorsque John Cort eut remplacé Max Huber, et lorsque Khamis eut relevé John Cort de sa faction.

CHAPITRE VI

Après une longue étape

Le lendemain, à la date du 11 mars, parfaitement remis des fatigues de la veille, John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis, Llanga se disposèrent à braver celles de cette seconde journée de marche.

Quittant l'abri du cotonnier, ils firent le tour de la clairière, salués par des myriades d'oiseaux qui remplissaient l'espace de trilles assourdissants et de points d'orgue à rendre jaloux les Patti et autres virtuoses de la musique italienne.

Avant de se mettre en route, la sagesse commandait de faire un premier repas. Il se composa uniquement de la viande froide d'antilope, de l'eau d'un ruisseau qui serpentait sur la gauche, et auquel fut remplie la gourde du foreloper.

Le début de l'étape se fit à droite, sous les ramures que perçaient déjà les premiers rayons du soleil, dont la position fut relevée avec soin.

Évidemment ce quartier de la forêt devait être fréquenté par de puissants quadrupèdes. Les passées s'y multipliaient dans tous les sens. Et de fait, au cours de la matinée, on aperçut un certain nombre de buffles, et même deux rhinocéros qui se tenaient à distance. Comme ils n'étaient point d'humeur batailleuse, sans doute, il n'y eut pas lieu de dépenser les cartouches à repousser une attaque.

La petite troupe ne s'arrêta que vers midi, ayant franchi une bonne douzaine de kilomètres.

En cet endroit, John Cort put abattre un couple d’outardes de l’espèce des korans qui vivent dans les bois, volatiles au plumage d’un noir de jais sous le ventre. Leur chair, très estimée des indigènes, inspira cette fois la même estime à un Américain et à un Français au repas de midi.

«Je demande, avait toutefois dit Max Huber, que l’on substitue le rôti aux grillades…

— Rien de plus facile», s’était hâté de répondre le foreloper.

Et une des outardes, plumée, vidée, embrochée d’une baguette, rôtie à point devant une flamme vive, pétillante, fut dévorée à belles dents.

Khamis et ses compagnons se remirent en route dans des conditions plus pénibles que la veille.

À descendre au sud-ouest, les passées se présentaient moins fréquemment. Il fallait se frayer un chemin entre les broussailles, aussi drues que les lianes dont les cordons durent être tranchés au couteau. La pluie vint à tomber pendant plusieurs heures, — une pluie assez abondante. Mais telle était l’épaisseur des frondaisons que c’est à peine si le sol en recevait quelques gouttes. Toutefois, au milieu d’une clairière, Khamis put remplir la gourde presque vidée déjà, et il y eut lieu de s’en féliciter. En vain le foreloper avait-il cherché quelque filet liquide sous les herbes. De là, probablement, la rareté des animaux et des sentiers praticables.

«Cela n’annonce guère la proximité d’un cours d’eau», déclara John

Cort, lorsque l’on s’installa pour la halte du soir.

D’où cette conséquence s’imposait: c’est que le rio qui coulait non loin du tertre aux tamarins ne faisait que contourner la forêt.

Néanmoins, la direction prise jusqu’alors ne devrait pas être modifiée, et avec d’autant plus de raison qu’elle aboutirait au bassin de l’Oubanghi.

«D’ailleurs, observa Khamis, à défaut du cours d’eau que nous avons aperçu avant-hier au campement, ne peut-il s’en rencontrer un autre dans cette direction?»

La nuit du 11 au 12 mars ne s’écoula pas entre les racines d’un cotonnier. Ce fut au pied d’un arbre non moins gigantesque, un bombax, dont le tronc symétrique s’élevait tout d’un jet à la hauteur d’une centaine de pieds au-dessus de l’épais tapis du sol.

La surveillance établie comme d’habitude, le sommeil n’allait être troublé que par quelques lointains beuglements de buffles et de rhinocéros. Il n’était pas à craindre que le rugissement du lion se mêlât à ce concert nocturne. Ces redoutables fauves n’habitent guère les forêts de l’Afrique centrale. Ils sont les hôtes des régions plus élevées en latitude, soit au delà du Congo vers le sud, soit sur la limite du Soudan vers le nord, dans le voisinage du Sahara. Les épais fourrés ne conviennent pas au caractère capricieux, à l’allure indépendante du roi des animaux, — roi d’autorité et non roi constitutionnel. Il lui faut de plus grands espaces, des plaines inondées de soleil où il puisse bondir en toute liberté.

Si les rugissements ne se firent pas entendre, il en fut de même des grognements de l’hippopotame, — ce qui était regrettable, convient-il de noter, car la présence de ces mammifères amphibies eût indiqué la proximité d'un cours d'eau.

Le lendemain, départ dès l'aube par temps sombre, et coup de carabine de Max Huber, qui abattit une antilope de la taille d'un âne, ou plus exactement d'un zèbre, type placé entre l'âne et le cheval. C'était un oryx, à robe de couleur vineuse, présentant quelques zébrures régulièrement dessinées. L'oryx est rayé d'une bande noire depuis la nuque jusqu'à l'arrière-train, orné de taches noires aux jambes, dont le poil est blanchâtre, agrémenté d'une queue noire qui balaye largement le sol, échantillonné d'un bouquet de fourrure noire à sa gorge. Bel animal, aux cornes longues d'un mètre, garnies d'une trentaine d'anneaux à leur base, s'incurvant avec élégance, et présentant une symétrie de forme dont la nature donne peu d'exemples.

Chez l'oryx, la corne est une arme défensive qui, dans les contrées du nord et du midi de l'Afrique, lui permet de résister même à l'attaque du lion. Mais, ce jour-là, l'animal visé par le chasseur ne put échapper à la balle qui lui fut joliment envoyée, et, le coeur traversé, tomba du premier coup.

C'était l'alimentation assurée pour plusieurs jours. Khamis s'occupa de dépecer l'oryx, travail qui prit une heure. Puis, se partageant cette charge, dont Llanga réclama sa part, ils commencèrent une nouvelle étape.

«Eh! ma foi! dit John Cort, on se procure par ici de la viande à bon marché, puisqu'elle ne coûte qu'une cartouche…

— À la condition d'être adroit…, répliqua le foreloper.

— Et heureux surtout», ajouta Max Huber, plus modeste que ne le sont d'habitude ses confrères en haute vénerie.

Mais jusqu’alors, si Khamis et ses compagnons avaient pu épargner leur poudre et économiser leur plomb, s’ils ne les avaient employés qu’à tuer le gibier, la journée ne devait pas finir sans que les carabines eussent à servir pour la défensive.

Pendant un bon kilomètre, le foreloper crut même qu’il aurait à repousser l’attaque d’une troupe de singes. Cette troupe se démenait à droite et à gauche d’une longue passée, les uns sautant entre les branches d’arbre en arbre, les autres gambadant et franchissant les fourrés par des bonds prodigieux à faire envie aux plus agiles gymnastes.

Là se montraient plusieurs espèces de quadrumanes de haute stature, des cynocéphales de trois couleurs, jaunes comme des Arabes, rouges comme des Indiens du Far-West, noirs comme des indigènes de la Cafrerie, et qui sont redoutables à certains fauves. Là grimaçaient divers types de ces colobes, les véritables dandys, les petits-maîtres les plus élégants de la race simienne, sans cesse occupés à brosser, à lisser de la main cette pèlerine blanche qui leur a valu le nom de colobes à camail.

Cependant cette escorte, qui s’était rassemblée après le repas de midi, disparut vers deux heures, alors que Max Huber, John Cort, Khamis et Llanga arpentaient un assez large sentier qui se poursuivait à perte de vue.

S’ils avaient lieu de se féliciter des avantages de cette route aisément praticable, ils eurent à regretter la rencontre des animaux qui la fréquentaient.

C’étaient deux rhinocéros, dont le ronflement prolongé retentit un peu avant quatre heures à courte distance. Khamis ne s’y trompa point et ordonna à ses compagnons de s’arrêter:

«Mauvaises bêtes, ces rhinocéros!… dit-il en ramenant la carabine qu'il portait en bandoulière.

— Très mauvaise, répliqua Max Huber, et, pourtant, ce ne sont que des herbivores…

— Qui ont la vie dure! ajouta Khamis.

— Que devons-nous faire?… demanda John Cort.

— Essayer de passer sans être vus, conseilla Khamis, ou tout au moins nous cacher sur le passage de ces malfaisantes bêtes… Peut-être ne nous apercevront-elles pas?… Néanmoins, soyons prêts à tirer, si nous sommes découverts, car elles fonceront sur nous!»

Les carabines furent visitées, les cartouches disposées de manière à être renouvelées rapidement. Puis, s'élançant hors du sentier, tous quatre disparurent derrière les épaisses broussailles qui le bordaient a droite.

Cinq minutes après, les mugissements s'étant accrus, apparurent les monstrueux pachydermes, de l'espèce ketloa, presque dépourvus de poils. Ils filaient grand trot, la tête haute, la queue enroulée sur leur croupe.

C'étaient des animaux longs de près de quatre mètres, oreilles droites, jambes courtes et torses, museau tronqué armé d'une seule corne, capable de formidables coups. Et telle est la dureté de leurs mâchoires qu'ils broyent impunément des cactus aux rudes piquants comme les ânes mangent des chardons.

Le couple fit brusquement halte. Khamis et les autres ne doutaient pas qu'ils ne fussent dépistés.

L’un des rhinocéros — un monstre à peau rugueuse et sèche — s’approcha des broussailles.

Max Huber le mit en joue.

«Ne tirez pas à la culotte… à la tête…», lui cria le foreloper.

Une détonation, puis deux, puis trois, retentirent. Les balles pénétraient à peine ces épaisses carapaces et ce furent autant de coups en pure perte.

Les détonations ne les intimidèrent ni ne les arrêtèrent et ils se disposèrent à franchir le fourré.

Il était évident que cet amas de ronces et de broussailles ne pourrait opposer un obstacle à de si puissantes bêtes. En un instant, tout serait ravagé, saccagé, écrasé. Après avoir échappé aux éléphants de la plaine, Khamis et ses compagnons échapperaient-ils aux rhinocéros de la grande forêt?… Que les pachydermes aient le nez en trompe ou le nez en corne, ils s’égalent en vigueur… Et, ici, il n’y aurait pas cette lisière d’arbres qui avait arrêté les éléphants lancés à fond de train. Si le foreloper, John Cort, Max Huber, Llanga, tentaient de s’enfuir, ils seraient poursuivis, ils seraient atteints. Les réseaux de lianes retarderaient leur course, alors que les rhinocéros passeraient comme une avalanche.

Cependant, parmi les arbres de ce fourré, un baobab énorme pouvait offrir un refuge si l’on parvenait à se hisser jusqu’à ses premières branches. Ce serait renouveler la manoeuvre exécutée au tertre des tamarins, dont l’issue avait été funeste, d’ailleurs. Et y avait-il lieu de croire qu’elle aurait plus de succès?…

Peut-être, car le baobab était de taille et de grosseur à résister aux efforts des rhinocéros.

Il est vrai, sa fourche ne s’ouvrait qu’à une cinquantaine de pieds au-dessus du sol, et le tronc, renflé en forme de courge, ne présentait aucune saillie à laquelle la main pût s’accrocher ni le pied trouver un point d’appui.

Le foreloper avait compris qu’il n’y avait pas à essayer d’atteindre cette fourche. Aussi Max Huber et John Cort attendaient-ils qu’il prît un parti.

En ce moment, le fouillis des broussailles en bordure du sentier remua, et une grosse tête apparut.

Un quatrième coup de carabine éclata.

John Cort ne fut pas plus heureux que Max Huber. La balle, pénétrant au défaut de l’épaule, ne provoqua qu’un hurlement plus terrible de l’animal, dont l’irritation s’accrut avec la douleur. Il ne recula pas, au contraire, et d’un élan prodigieux se précipita contre le fourré, tandis que l’autre rhinocéros, à peine effleuré d’une balle de Khamis, se préparait à le suivre.

Ni Max Huber, ni John Cort, ni le foreloper n’eurent le temps de recharger leurs armes. Fuir en directions diverses, s’échapper sous le massif; il était trop tard. L’instinct de la conservation les poussa tous trois, avec Llanga, à se réfugier derrière le tronc du baobab, qui ne mesurait pas moins de six mètres périphériques à la base.

Mais lorsque le premier animal contournerait l’arbre, lorsque le second se joindrait à lui, comment éviter leur double attaque?…

«Diable!… fit Max Huber.

— Dieu plutôt!» s’écria John Cort.

Et assurément il fallait renoncer à tout espoir de salut, si la

Providence ne s’en mêlait pas.

Sous un choc d’une effroyable violence, le baobab trembla jusque dans ses racines à faire croire qu’il allait être arraché du sol.

Le rhinocéros, emporté dans son élan formidable, venait d’être arrêté soudain. À un endroit où s’entr’ouvrait l’écorce du baobab, sa corne, entrée comme le coin d’un bûcheron, s’y était enfoncée d’un pied. En vain fit-il les plus violents efforts pour la retirer. Même en s’arc-boutant sur ses courtes pattes, il ne put y réussir.

L’autre, qui saccageait le fourré furieusement, s’arrêta, et ce qu’était leur fureur à tous deux, on ne saurait se l’imaginer!

Khamis, se glissant alors autour de l’arbre, après avoir rampé au ras des racines, essaya de voir ce qui se passait:

«En fuite… en fuite!» cria-t-il presque aussitôt.

On le comprit plus qu’on ne l’entendit.

Sans demander d’explication, Max Huber et John Cort, entraînant Llanga, détalèrent entre les hautes herbes. À leur extrême surprise, ils n’étaient pas poursuivis par les rhinocéros, et ce ne fut qu’après cinq minutes d’une course essoufflante que, sur un signe du foreloper, ils firent halte.

«Qu’est-il donc arrivé?… questionna John Cort, dès qu’il eut repris haleine.

— Le rhinocéros n’a pu retirer sa corne du tronc de l’arbre…, dit Khamis.

— Tudieu! s’écria Max Huber, c’est le Milon de Crotone des rhinocéros…

— Et il finira comme ce héros des jeux olympiques!» ajouta John

Cort.

Khamis, se souciant peu de savoir ce qu’était ce célèbre athlète de l’antiquité, se contenta de murmurer:

«Enfin… sains et saufs… mais au prix de quatre ou cinq cartouches brûlées en pure perte!

— C’est d’autant plus regrettable que cette bête-là, … ça se mange, si je suis bien informé, dit Max Huber.

— En effet, affirma Khamis, quoique sa chair ait un fort goût de musc… Nous laisserons l’animal où il est…

— Se décorner tout à son aise!» acheva Max Huber.

Il n’eût pas été prudent de retourner au baobab. Les mugissements des deux rhinocéros retentissaient toujours sous la futaie. Après un détour qui les ramena au sentier, tous quatre reprirent leur marche. Vers six heures, la halte fut organisée au pied d’une énorme roche.

Le jour qui suivit n’amena aucun incident. Les difficultés de route ne s’accrurent pas, et une trentaine de kilomètres furent franchis dans la direction du sud-ouest. Quant au cours d’eau si impatiemment réclamé par Max Huber, si affirmativement annoncé par Khamis, il ne se montrait pas.

Ce soir-là, aussitôt achevé un repas dont une antilope, dite *antilope des brousses,* fournit le menu peu varié, on s’abandonna au repos. Par malheur, cette dizaine d’heures de sommeil fut troublée par le vol de milliers de chauves-souris de petite et de grande taille, dont le campement ne fut débarrassé qu’au lever du jour.

«Trop de ces harpies, beaucoup trop!… s’écria Max Huber, lorsqu’il se remit sur pied, tout bâillant encore après une si mauvaise nuit.

— Il ne faut pas se plaindre… dit le foreloper.

— Et pourquoi?…

— Parce que mieux vaut avoir affaire aux chauves-souris qu’aux moustiques, et ceux-ci nous ont épargnés jusqu’ici.

— Ce qui serait le mieux, Khamis, ce serait d’éviter les uns comme les autres…

— Les moustiques… nous ne les éviterons pas, monsieur Max…

— Et quand devons-nous être dévorés par ces abominables insectes?…

— Aux approches d’un rio…

— Un rio!… s’écria Max Huber. Mais, après avoir cru au rio,

Khamis, il ne m’est plus possible d’y croire!

— Vous avez tort, monsieur Max, et peut-être n’est-il guère éloigné!…»

Le foreloper, en effet, avait déjà remarqué quelques modifications dans la nature du sol, et, dès trois heures de l’après-midi, son observation tendit à se confirmer. Ce quartier de la forêt devenait sensiblement marécageux.

Çà et là se creusaient des flaques hérissées d’herbes aquatiques. On put même abattre des gaugas, sortes de canards sauvages dont la présence indiquait la proximité d’un cours d’eau. Également, à mesure que le soleil déclinait à l’horizon, le coassement des grenouilles se faisait entendre.

«Ou je me trompe fort… ou le pays des moustiques n’est pas loin…», dit le foreloper.

Pendant le reste de l’étape, la marche s’effectua sur un terrain difficile, embarrassé de ces phanérogames innombrables dont un climat humide et chaud favorise le développement. Les arbres, plus espacés, étaient moins tendus de lianes.

Max Huber et John Cort ne pouvaient méconnaître les changements que présentait cette partie de la forêt en s’étendant vers le sud- ouest.

Mais, en dépit des pronostics de Khamis, le regard, en cette direction, ne saisissait encore aucun miroitement d’eau courante.

Toutefois, en même temps que s’accusait la pente du sol, les fondrières devenaient plus nombreuses. Il fallait une extrême attention pour ne point s’y enliser. Et puis, à s’en retirer, on ne le ferait pas sans piqûres.

Des milliers de sangsues fourmillaient dans les trous et, à leur surface, couraient des myriapodes gigantesques, répugnants articulés de couleur noirâtre, aux pattes rouges, bien faits pour provoquer un insurmontable dégoût.

En revanche, quel régal pour les yeux, ces innombrables papillons aux teintes chatoyantes, ces gracieuses libellules dont tant d’écureuils, de civettes, de bengalis, de veuves, de genettes, de martins-pêcheurs, qui se montraient sur le bord des flaques, devaient faire une consommation prodigieuse!

Le foreloper remarqua en outre que non seulement les guêpes, mais encore les mouches tsé-tsé abondaient sur les buissons. Heureusement, s’il faut se préserver de l’aiguillon des premières, il n’y a pas à se préoccuper de la morsure des secondes. Leur venin n’est mortel qu’aux chevaux, aux chameaux, aux chiens, non à l’homme, pas plus qu’aux bêtes sauvages.

La petite troupe descendit ainsi vers le sud-ouest jusqu’à six heures et demie du soir, étape à la fois longue et fatigante. Déjà Khamis s’occupait de choisir un bon emplacement de halte pour la nuit, lorsque Max Huber et John Cort furent distraits par les cris de Llanga.

Selon son habitude, le jeune garçon s’était porté en avant, furetant de côté et d’autre, quand on l’entendit appeler à toute voix. Était-il aux prises avec quelque fauve?…

John Cort et Max Huber coururent dans sa direction, prêts à faire feu… Ils furent bientôt rassurés.

Monté sur un énorme tronc abattu, tendant sa main vers une large clairière, Llanga répétait de sa voix aiguë:

«Le rio… le rio!»

Khamis venait de les rejoindre, et John Cort de lui dire simplement:

«Le cours d’eau demandé.»

À un demi-kilomètre, sur un large espace déboisé, serpentait une limpide rivière où se reflétaient les derniers rayons du soleil.

«C’est là qu’il faut camper, à mon avis…, proposa John Cort.

— Oui… là…, approuva le foreloper, et soyez sûrs que ce rio nous conduira jusqu’à l’Oubanghi.»

En effet, il ne serait pas difficile d’établir un radeau et de s’abandonner au courant de cette rivière.

Il y eut, avant d’atteindre sa rive, à franchir un terrain très marécageux.

Le crépuscule n’ayant qu’une très courte durée en ces contrées équatoriales, l’obscurité était déjà profonde lorsque le foreloper et ses compagnons s’arrêtèrent sur une berge assez élevée.

En cet endroit, les arbres étaient rares et présentaient des masses plus épaisses en amont et en aval.

Quant à la largeur de la rivière, John Cort crut pouvoir l’évaluer à une quarantaine de mètres. Ce n’était donc pas un simple ruisseau, mais un affluent d’une certaine importance dont le courant ne semblait pas très rapide.

Attendre au lendemain pour se rendre compte de la situation, c’est ce que la raison indiquait. Le plus pressé étant de trouver un abri sec afin d’y passer la nuit, Khamis découvrit à propos une anfractuosité rocheuse, sorte de grotte évidée dans le calcaire de la berge, qui suffirait à les contenir tous quatre.

On décida d’abord de souper des restes du gibier grillé. De cette façon, il ne serait pas nécessaire d’allumer un feu dont l’éclat aurait pu provoquer l’approche des animaux. Crocodiles et hippopotames abondent dans les cours d’eau de l’Afrique. S’ils fréquentaient cette rivière, — ce qui était probable, — autant ne pas avoir à se défendre contre une attaque nocturne.

Il est vrai, un foyer entretenu à l’ouverture de la grotte, donnant force fumée, aurait dissipé la nuée des moustiques qui pullulaient au pied de la berge. Mais, entre deux inconvénients, mieux valait choisir le moindre et braver plutôt l’aiguillon des maringouins et autres incommodes insectes que l’énorme mâchoire des alligators.

Pour les premières heures, John Cort se tint en surveillance à l’orifice de l’anfractuosité, tandis que ses compagnons dormaient d’un gros sommeil en dépit du bourdonnement des moustiques.

Pendant sa faction, s’il ne vit rien de suspect, du moins à plusieurs reprises crut-il entendre un mot qui semblait articulé par des lèvres humaines sur un ton plaintif…

Et ce mot, c’était celui de «ngora», lequel signifie «mère» en langue indigène.

CHAPITRE VII

La cage vide

Comment ne pas se féliciter de ce que le foreloper eût si à propos découvert une grotte, due à une disposition naturelle de la berge? Sur le sol, un sable fin, très sec. Aucune trace d’humidité, ni aux parois latérales ni à la paroi supérieure. Grâce à cet abri, ses hôtes n’avaient pas eu à souffrir d’une pluie intense qui ne cessa de tomber jusqu’à minuit. Donc refuge assuré audit endroit pour tout le temps qu’exigerait la construction d’un radeau.

Du reste, un vent assez vif soufflait du nord. Le ciel s’était nettoyé aux premiers rayons du soleil. Une journée chaude s’annonçait. Peut-être Khamis et ses compagnons en viendraient-ils à regretter l’ombrage des arbres sous lesquels ils cheminaient depuis cinq jours.

John Cort et Max Huber ne cachèrent point leur bonne humeur. Cette rivière allait les transporter sans fatigue, sur un parcours de quatre cents kilomètres environ, jusqu’à son embouchure sur l’Oubanghi, dont elle devait être tributaire. Ainsi seraient franchis les trois derniers quarts du trajet dans des conditions plus favorables.

Ce calcul fut établi avec une suffisante exactitude par John Cort, d’après les relèvements que lui fournit le foreloper.

Leur regard se porta alors vers la droite et vers la gauche, c’est-à-dire au nord et au sud.

En amont, le cours d’eau, qui s’étendait presque en ligne directe, disparaissait, à un kilomètre, sous le fouillis des arbres.

En aval, la verdure se massait à une distance plus rapprochée de cinq cents mètres, où la rivière faisait un coude brusque au sud- est. C’est à partir de ce coude que la forêt reprenait son épaisseur normale.

À vrai dire, c’était une large clairière marécageuse qui occupait cette portion de la rive droite. Sur la berge opposée, les arbres se pressaient en rangs serrés. Une futaie très dense s’étageait à la surface d’un terrain assez mouvementé, et ses cimes, éclairées par le soleil levant, se découpaient en un lointain horizon.

Quant au lit de la rivière, une eau transparente, au courant tranquille, l’emplissait à pleins bords, charriant de vieux troncs, des paquets de broussailles, des tas d’herbes arrachées aux deux berges rongées par le courant.

Tout d’abord, sa mémoire rappela à John Cort qu’il avait entendu le mot «ngora» prononcé à proximité de la grotte pendant la nuit. Il chercha donc à voir si quelque créature humaine rôdait aux environs.

Que des nomades s’aventurassent parfois à descendre cette rivière pour rejoindre l’Oubanghi, c’était chose admissible, et sans en tirer cette conclusion que l’immense aire de la forêt développée vers l’est jusqu’aux sources du Nil fût fréquentée par les tribus errantes ou habitée par des tribus sédentaires.

John Cort n’aperçut aucun être humain aux abords du marécage, ni sur les rives du cours d’eau.

«J’ai été dupe d’une illusion, pensait-il. Il est possible que je me sois endormi un instant, et c’est dans un rêve que j’ai cru entendre ce mot.»

Aussi ne dit-il rien de l’incident à ses compagnons.

«Mon cher Max, demanda-t-il alors, avez-vous fait à notre brave Khamis toutes vos excuses pour avoir douté de l’existence de ce rio, dont il n’a jamais douté, lui?…

— Il a eu raison contre moi, John, et je suis heureux d’avoir eu tort, puisque le courant va nous véhiculer sans fatigue aux rives de l’Oubanghi…

— Sans fatigue… je ne l’affirme pas, repartit le foreloper.

Peut-être des chutes… des rapides…

— Ne voyons que le bon côté des choses, déclara John Cort. Nous cherchions une rivière, la voici… Nous songions à construire un radeau, construisons-le…

— Dès ce matin, je vais me mettre à la besogne, dit Khamis, et, si vous voulez m’aider, monsieur John…

— Certainement, Khamis. Pendant notre travail, Max voudra bien s’occuper de nous ravitailler…

— C’est d’autant plus urgent, insista Max Huber, qu’il ne reste plus rien à manger… Ce gourmand de Llanga a tout dévoré hier soir…

— Moi… mon ami Max!… se défendit Llanga, qui, le prenant au sérieux, parut sensible à ce reproche.

— Eh, gamin, tu vois bien que je plaisante!… Allons, viens avec moi… Nous suivrons la berge jusqu’au tournant de la rivière. Avec le marécage d’un côté, l’eau courante de l’autre, le gibier aquatique ne manquera ni à droite ni à gauche, et, qui sait?… quelque beau poisson pour varier le menu…

— Défiez-vous des crocodiles… et même des hippopotames, monsieur Max, conseilla le foreloper.

— Eh! Khamis, un gigot d’hippopotame rôti à point n’est pas à dédaigner, je pense!… Comment un animal d’un caractère si heureux… un cochon d’eau douce après tout… n’aurait-il pas une chair savoureuse?…

— D’un caractère heureux, c’est possible, monsieur Max, mais, quand on l’irrite, sa fureur est terrible!

— On ne peut pourtant pas lui découper quelques kilogrammes de lui-même sans s’exposer à le fâcher un peu…

— Enfin, ajouta John Cort, si vous aperceviez le moindre danger, revenez au plus vite. Soyez prudent…

— Et vous, soyez tranquille, John. — Viens, Llanga…

— Va, mon garçon, dit John Cort, et n’oublie pas que nous te confions ton ami Max!»

Après une telle recommandation, on pouvait tenir pour certain qu’il n’arriverait rien de fâcheux à Max Huber, puisque Llanga veillerait sur sa personne.

Max Huber prit sa carabine et vérifia sa cartouchière.

«Ménagez vos munitions, monsieur Max… dit le foreloper.

— Le plus possible, Khamis. Mais il est vraiment regrettable que la nature n’ait pas créé le cartouchier comme elle a créé l’arbre à pain et l’arbre à beurre des forêts africaines!… En passant, on cueillerait ses cartouches comme on cueille des figues ou des dattes!»

Sur cette observation d’une incontestable justesse, Max Huber et Llanga s’éloignèrent en suivant une sorte de sentier en contre-bas de la berge, — et ils furent bientôt hors de vue.

John Cort et Khamis s’occupèrent alors de chercher des bois propres à la construction d’un radeau. Si ce ne pouvait être qu’un très rudimentaire appareil, encore fallait-il en rassembler les matériaux.

Le foreloper et son compagnon ne possédaient qu’une hachette et leurs couteaux de poche. Avec de tels outils, comment s’attaquer aux géants de la forêt ou même à leurs congénères de stature plus réduite?… Aussi Khamis comptait-il employer les branches tombées, qu’il relierait par des lianes et sur lesquelles serait établi une sorte de plancher doublé de terre et d’herbes. Avec douze pieds de long, huit de large, ce radeau suffirait au transport de trois hommes et d’un enfant, qui, d’ailleurs, débarqueraient aux heures des repas et des haltes de nuit.

De ces bois, dont la vieillesse, le vent, quelque coup de foudre avaient provoqué la chute, il se trouvait quantité sur le marécage où certains arbres d’essence résineuse se dressaient encore. La veille, Khamis s’était promis de ramasser à cette place les diverses pièces nécessaires à la construction du radeau. Il fit part à John Cort de son intention et celui-ci se déclara prêt à l’accompagner.

Un dernier regard jeté sur la rivière, en amont et en aval, tout paraissant tranquille aux environs du marécage, John Cort et Khamis se mirent en route.

Ils n’eurent qu’une centaine de pas à faire pour rencontrer un amas de pièces flottables. La plus sérieuse difficulté serait, sans doute, de les traîner jusqu’au pied de la berge. En cas qu’elles fussent trop lourdes à manier pour deux personnes, on ne l’essayerait qu’après le retour des chasseurs.

En attendant, tout portait à croire que Max Huber faisait bonne chasse. Une détonation venait de retentir, et l’adresse du Français permettait d’affirmer que ce coup de fusil ne devait pas avoir été perdu. Très certainement, avec des munitions en quantité suffisante, l’alimentation de la petite troupe eût été assurée pendant ces quatre cents kilomètres qui la séparaient de l’Oubanghi et même pour un plus long parcours.

Or, Khamis et John Cort s’occupaient à choisir les meilleurs bois, lorsque leur attention fut attirée par des cris venant de la direction prise par Max Huber.

«C’est la voix de Max… dit John Cort.

— Oui, répondit Khamis, et aussi celle de Llanga.»

En effet, un fausset aigu se mêlait à une voix mâle.

«Sont-ils donc en danger?…» demanda John Cort.

Tous deux retraversèrent le marécage et atteignirent la légère tumescence sous laquelle s’évidait la grotte. De cette place, en portant les yeux vers l’aval, ils aperçurent Max Huber et le petit indigène arrêtés sur la berge. Ni êtres humains ni animaux aux alentours. Du reste, leurs gestes n’étaient qu’une invitation à les rejoindre et ils ne manifestaient aucune inquiétude.

Khamis et John Cort, après être descendus, franchirent rapidement trois à quatre cents mètres, et, lorsqu’ils furent réunis, Max Huber se contenta de dire:

«Peut-être n’aurez-vous pas la peine de construire un radeau,

Khamis…

— Et pourquoi?… demanda le foreloper.

— En voici un tout fait… en mauvais état, il est vrai, mais les morceaux en sont bons.»

Et Max Huber montrait dans un enfoncement de la rive une sorte de plate-forme, un assemblage de madriers et de planches, retenu par une corde à demi pourrie dont le bout s’enroulait à un piquet de la berge.

«Un radeau!… s’écria John Cort.

— C’est bien un radeau!…» constata Khamis.

En effet, sur la destination de ces madriers et de ces planches, aucun doute n’était admissible.

«Des indigènes ont-ils donc déjà descendu la rivière jusqu’à cet endroit?… observa Khamis.

— Des indigènes ou des explorateurs, répondit John Cort. Et pourtant, si cette partie de la forêt d’Oubanghi eût été visitée, on l’aurait su au Congo ou au Cameroun.

— Au total, déclara Max Huber, peu importe, la question est de savoir si ce radeau ou ce qui en reste peut nous servir…

— Assurément.»

Et le foreloper allait se glisser au niveau de la crique, lorsqu’il fut arrêté par un cri de Llanga.

L’enfant, qui s’était éloigné d’une cinquantaine de pas en aval, accourait, agitant un objet qu’il tenait à la main.

Un instant après il remettait à John Cort ledit objet. C’était un cadenas de fer, rongé par la rouille, dépourvu de sa clef, et dont le mécanisme, d’ailleurs, eût été hors d’état de fonctionner.

«Décidément, dit Max Huber, il ne s’agit pas des nomades congolais ou autres, auxquels les mystères de la serrurerie moderne sont inconnus!… Ce sont des blancs que ce radeau a transportés jusqu’à ce coude de la rivière…

— Et qui, s’en étant éloignés, n’y sont jamais revenus!» ajouta

John Cort.

Juste conséquence à tirer de l’incident. L’état d’oxydation du cadenas, le délabrement du radeau, démontraient que plusieurs années s’étaient écoulées depuis que l’un avait été perdu et l’autre abandonné au bord de cette crique.

Deux déductions ressortaient donc de ce double fait logique et indiscutable. Aussi, lorsqu’elles furent présentées par John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis n’hésitèrent pas à les accepter:

1° Des explorateurs ou des voyageurs non indigènes avaient atteint cette clairière, après s’être embarqués soit au-dessus, soit au- dessous de la lisière de la grande forêt;

2° Lesdits explorateurs ou voyageurs, pour une raison ou pour une autre, avaient laissé là leur radeau, afin d’aller reconnaître cette portion de la forêt située sur la rive droite.

Dans tous les cas, aucun d’eux n’avait jamais reparu. Ni John Cort ni Max Huber ne se souvenaient qu’il eût été question, depuis qu’ils habitaient le Congo, d’une exploration de ce genre.

Si ce n’était pas là de l’extraordinaire, c’était tout au moins de l’inattendu, et Max Huber devrait renoncer à l’honneur d’avoir été le premier visiteur de la grande forêt, considérée à tort comme impénétrable.

Cependant, très indifférent à cette question de priorité, Khamis examinait avec soin les madriers et les planches du radeau. Ceux- là se trouvaient en assez bon état, celles-ci avaient souffert davantage des intempéries et trois ou quatre seraient à remplacer. Mais, enfin, construire de toutes pièces un nouvel appareil, cela devenait inutile. Quelques réparations suffiraient. Le foreloper et ses compagnons, non moins satisfaits que surpris, possédaient le véhicule flottant qui leur permettrait de gagner le confluent du rio.

Tandis que Khamis s’occupait de la sorte, les deux amis échangeaient leurs idées au sujet de cet incident:

«Il n’y a pas d’erreur, répétait John Cort, des blancs ont déjà reconnu la partie supérieure de ce cours d’eau, — des blancs, ce n’est pas douteux… Que ce radeau, fait de pièces grossières, eût pu être l’oeuvre des indigènes, soit!… Mais il y a le cadenas…

— Le cadenas révélateur… sans compter d’autres objets que nous ramasserons peut-être…, observa Max Huber.

— Encore… Max?…

— Eh! John, il est possible que nous retrouvions les vestiges d’un campement, dont il n’y a pas trace en cet endroit, car il ne faut pas regarder comme tel la grotte où nous avons passé la nuit. Elle ne paraît point avoir déjà servi de lieu de halte, et je ne doute pas que nous n’ayons été les seuls jusqu’ici à y chercher refuge…

— C’est l’évidence, mon cher Max. Allons jusqu’au coude du rio…

— Cela est d’autant plus indiqué, John, que là finit la clairière, et je ne serais pas étonné qu’un peu plus loin…

— Khamis?» cria John Cort.

Le foreloper rejoignit les deux amis.

«Eh bien, ce radeau?… demanda John Cort.

— Nous le réparerons sans trop de peine… Je vais rapporter les bois nécessaires.

— Avant de nous mettre à la besogne, proposa Max Huber, descendons le long de la rive. Qui sait si nous ne recueillerons pas quelques ustensiles, ayant une marque de fabrication qui indiquerait leur origine?… Cela viendrait à propos pour compléter notre batterie de cuisine par trop insuffisante!… Une gourde et pas même une tasse ni une bouilloire…

— Vous n’espérez pas, mon cher Max, découvrir office et table où le couvert serait mis pour des hôtes de passage?…

— Je n’espère rien, mon cher John, mais nous sommes en présence d’un fait inexplicable… Tâchons de lui imaginer une explication plausible.

— Soit, Max. — Il n’y a pas d’inconvénient, Khamis, à s’éloigner d’un kilomètre?…

— À la condition de ne pas dépasser le tournant, répondit le foreloper. Puisque nous avons la facilité de naviguer, épargnons les marches inutiles…

— Entendu, Khamis, répliqua John Cort. Et, tandis que le courant entraînera notre radeau, nous aurons tout le loisir d’observer s’il existe des traces de campement sur l’une ou l’autre rive.»

Les trois hommes et Llanga suivirent la berge, une sorte de digue naturelle entre le marécage et la rivière.

Tout en cheminant, ils ne cessaient de regarder à leurs pieds, cherchant quelque empreinte, un pas d’homme, ou quelque objet qui eût été laissé sur le sol.

Malgré un minutieux examen, autant sur le haut qu’au bas de la berge, on ne trouva rien. Nulle part ne furent relevés des indices de passage ou de halte. Lorsque Khamis et ses compagnons eurent atteint la première rangée d’arbres, ils furent salués par les cris d’une bande de singes. Ces quadrumanes ne parurent pas trop surpris de l’apparition d’êtres humains. Ils s’enfuirent cependant. Qu’il y eût des représentants de la gent simienne à s’ébattre entre les branches, on ne pouvait s’en étonner. C’étaient des babouins, des mandrills, qui se rapprochent physiquement des gorilles, des chimpanzés et des orangs. Comme toutes les espèces de l’Afrique, ils n’avaient qu’un rudiment de queue, cet ornement étant réservé aux espèces américaines et asiatiques.

«Après tout, fit observer John Cort, ce ne sont pas eux qui ont construit le radeau, et, si intelligents qu'ils soient, ils n'en sont pas encore à faire usage de cadenas…

— Pas plus que de cage, que je sache… dit alors Max Huber.

— De cage?… s'écria John Cort. À quel propos, Max, parlez-vous de cage?…

— C'est qu'il me semble distinguer… entre les fourrés… à une vingtaine de pas de la rive… une sorte de construction…

— Quelque fourmilière en forme de ruche, comme en élèvent les fourmis d'Afrique… répondit John Cort.

— Non, M. Max ne s'est pas trompé, affirma Khamis. Il y a là… oui… on dirait même une cabane construite au pied de deux mimosas, et dont la façade serait en treillis…

— Cage ou cabane, répliqua Max Huber, voyons ce qu'il y a dedans…

— Soyons prudents, dit le foreloper, et défilons-nous à l'abri des arbres…

— Que pouvons-nous craindre?…» reprit Max Huber, qu'un double sentiment d'impatience et de curiosité éperonnait, suivant son habitude.

Du reste, les environs paraissaient être déserts. On n'entendait que le chant des oiseaux et les cris des singes en fuite. Aucune trace ancienne ou récente d'un campement n'apparaissait à la limite de la clairière. Rien non plus à la surface du cours d'eau, qui charriait de grosses touffes d'herbes. De l'autre côté, même apparence de solitude et d'abandon. Les cent derniers pas furent rapidement franchis le long de la berge qui s'infléchissait alors pour suivre le tournant de la rivière. Le marécage finissait en cet endroit, et le sol s’asséchait à mesure qu’il se surélevait sous la futaie plus dense.

L’étrange construction se montrait alors de trois quarts, appuyée aux mimosas, recouverte d’une toiture inclinée qui disparaissait sous un chaume d’herbes jaunies. Elle ne présentait aucune ouverture latérale, et les lianes retombantes cachaient ses parois jusqu’à leur base.

Ce qui lui donnait bien l’aspect d’une cage, c’était la grille, ou plutôt le grillage de sa façade, semblable à celui qui, dans les ménageries, sépare les fauves du public.

Cette grille avait une porte — une porte ouverte en ce moment.

Quant à la cage, elle était vide.

C’est ce que reconnut Max Huber qui, le premier, s’était précipité à l’intérieur.

Des ustensiles, il en restait quelques-uns, une marmite en assez bon état, un coquemar, une tasse, trois ou quatre bouteilles brisées, une couverture de laine rongée, des lambeaux d’étoffe, une hache rouillée, un étui à lunettes à demi pourri sur lequel ne se laissait plus lire un nom de fabricant.

Dans un coin gisait une boite en cuivre dont le couvercle, bien ajusté, avait dû préserver son contenu, si tant est qu’elle contint quelque chose.

Max Huber la ramassa, essaya de l’ouvrir, n’y parvint pas. L’oxydation faisait adhérer les deux parties de la boîte. Il fallut passer un couteau dans la fente du couvercle qui céda.

La boite renfermait un carnet en bon état de conservation, et, sur le plat de ce carnet, étaient imprimés ces deux mots que Max Huber lut à haute voix:

Docteur JOHAUSEN

CHAPITRE VIII

Le docteur Johausen

Si John Cort, Max Huber et même Khamis ne s’exclamèrent pas à entendre prononcer ce nom, c’est que la stupéfaction leur avait coupé la parole.

Ce nom de Johausen fut une révélation. Il dévoilait une partie du mystère qui recouvrait la plus fantasque des tentatives scientifiques modernes, où le comique se mêlait au sérieux, — le tragique aussi, car on devait croire qu’elle avait eu un dénouement des plus déplorables.

Peut-être a-t-on souvenir de l’expérience à laquelle voulut se livrer l’Américain Garner dans le but d’étudier le langage des singes, et de donner à ses théories une démonstration expérimentale. Le nom du professeur, les articles répandus dans le *Hayser’s Weekly*, de New York, le livre publié et lancé en Angleterre, en Allemagne, en France, en Amérique, ne pouvaient être oubliés des habitants du Congo et du Cameroun, — particulièrement de John Cort et de Max Huber.

«Lui, enfin, s’écria l’un, lui, dont on n’avait plus aucune nouvelle…

— Et dont on n’en aura jamais, puisqu’il n’est pas là pour nous en donner!…» s’écria l’autre.

Lui, pour le Français et l’Américain, c’était le docteur Johausen. Mais, devançant le docteur, voici ce qu’avait fait M. Garner. Ce n’est pas ce Yankee qui aurait pu dire ce que Jean-Jacques Rousseau dit de lui-même au début des *Confessions:* «Je forme une entreprise qui n’eut jamais d’exemple et qui n’aura point d’imitateurs.» M. Garner devait en avoir un.

Avant de partir pour le continent noir, le professeur Garner s’était déjà mis en rapport avec le monde des singes, — le monde apprivoisé, s’entend. De ses longues et minutieuses remarques il retira la conviction que ces quadrumanes parlaient, qu’ils se comprenaient, qu’ils employaient le langage articulé, qu’ils se servaient de certain mot pour exprimer le besoin de manger, de certain autre pour exprimer le besoin de boire. À l’intérieur du Jardin zoologique de Washington, M. Garner avait fait disposer des phonographes destinés à recueillir les mots de ce vocabulaire. Il observa même que les singes — ce qui les distingue essentiellement des hommes — ne parlaient jamais sans nécessité. Et il fut conduit à formuler son opinion en ces termes:

«La connaissance que j’ai du monde animal m’a donné la ferme croyance que tous les mammifères possèdent la faculté du langage à un degré qui est en rapport avec leur expérience et leurs besoins.»

Antérieurement aux études de M. Garner, on savait déjà que les mammifères, chiens, singes et autres, ont l’appareil laryngo- buccal disposé comme l’est celui de l’homme et la glotte organisée pour l’émission de sons articulés. Mais on savait aussi, — n’en déplaise à l’école des simiologues, — que la pensée a précédé la parole. Pour parler, il faut penser, et penser exige la faculté de généraliser, — faculté dont les animaux sont dépourvus. Le perroquet parle, mais il ne comprend pas un mot de ce qu’il dit. La vérité, enfin, est que, si les bêtes ne parlent pas, c’est que la nature ne les a pas dotées d’une intelligence suffisante, car rien ne les en empêcherait. Au vrai, ainsi que cela est acquis, «pour qu’il y ait langage, a dit un savant critique, il faut qu’il y ait jugement et raisonnement basés, au moins implicitement, sur un concept abstrait et universel». Toutefois, ces règles, conformes au bon sens, le professeur Garner n’en voulait tenir aucun compte.

Il va de soi que sa doctrine fut très discutée. Aussi prit-il la résolution d’aller se mettre en contact avec les sujets dont il rencontrerait grand nombre et grande variété dans les forêts de l’Afrique tropicale. Lorsqu’il aurait appris le gorille et le chimpanzé, il reviendrait en Amérique et publierait, avec la grammaire, le dictionnaire de la langue simienne. Force serait alors de lui donner raison et de se rendre à l’évidence.

M. Garner a-t-il tenu la promesse qu’il avait faite à lui-même et au monde savant?… C’était la question, et, nul doute à cet égard, le docteur Johausen ne le croyait pas, ainsi qu’on va pouvoir en juger.

En l’année 1892, M. Garner quitta l’Amérique pour le Congo, arriva

à Libreville le 12 octobre, et élut domicile dans la factorerie

John Holtand and Co. jusqu’au mois de février 1894.

Ce fut à cette époque seulement que le professeur se décida à commencer sa campagne d’études. Après avoir remonté l’Ogoué sur un petit bateau à vapeur, il débarqua à Lambarène, et, le 22 avril, atteignit la mission catholique du Fernand-Vaz.

Les Pères du Saint-Esprit l’accueillirent hospitalièrement dans leur maison bâtie sur le bord de ce magnifique lac Fernand-Vaz. Le docteur n’eut qu’à se louer des soins du personnel de la mission, qui ne négligea rien pour lui faciliter son aventureuse tâche de zoologiste.

Or, en arrière de l’établissement, se massaient les premiers arbres d’une vaste forêt dans laquelle abondaient les singes. On ne pouvait imaginer de circonstances plus favorables pour se mettre en communication avec eux. Mais, ce qu’il fallait, c’était vivre dans leur intimité et, en somme, partager leur existence.

C’est à ce propos que M. Garner avait fait fabriquer une cage de fer démontable. Sa cage fut transportée dans la forêt. Si l’on veut bien l’en croire, il y vécut trois mois, la plupart du temps seul, et put étudier ainsi le quadrumane à l’état de nature.

La vérité est que le prudent Américain avait simplement installé sa maison métallique à vingt minutes de la mission des Pères, près de leur fontaine, en un endroit qu’il baptisa du nom de Fort- Gorille, et auquel on accédait par une route ombreuse. Il y coucha même trois nuits consécutives. Dévoré par des myriades de moustiques, il ne put y tenir plus longtemps, démonta sa cage et revint demander aux Pères du Saint-Esprit une hospitalité qui lui fut accordée sans rétribution. Enfin, le 18 juin, abandonnant définitivement la mission, il regagna l’Angleterre et revint en Amérique, rapportant pour unique souvenir de son voyage deux petits chimpanzés qui s’obstinèrent à ne point causer avec lui.

Voilà quel résultat avait obtenu M. Garner. Au total, ce qui ne paraissait que trop certain, c’est que le patois des singes, s’il existait, restait encore à découvrir, ainsi que les fonctions respectives qui jouaient un rôle dans la formation de leur langage.

Assurément, le professeur soutenait qu’il avait surpris divers signes vocaux ayant une signification précise, tels: «whouw», nourriture; «cheny», boisson; «iegk», prends garde, et autres relevés avec soin. Plus tard même, à la suite d’expériences faites au Jardin zoologique de Washington, et grâce à l’emploi du phonographe, il affirmait avoir noté un mot générique se rapportant à tout ce qui se mange et à tout ce qui se boit; un autre pour l’usage de la main; un autre pour la supputation du temps. Bref, selon lui, cette langue se composait de huit ou neuf sons principaux, modifiés par trente ou trente-cinq modulations, dont il donnait même la tonalité musicale, l’articulation se faisant presque toujours en *la* dièse. Pour conclure, et d’après son opinion, en conformité de la doctrine darwinienne sur l’unité de l’espèce et la transmission par hérédité des qualités physiques, non des défauts, on pouvait dire: «Si les races humaines sont les dérivés d’une souche simiesque, pourquoi les dialectes humains ne seraient-ils point les dérivés de la langue primitive de ces anthropoïdes?» Seulement, l’homme a-t-il eu des singes pour ancêtres?… Voilà ce qu’il aurait fallu démontrer, et ce qui ne l’est pas.

En somme, le prétendu langage des singes, surpris par le naturaliste Garner, n’était que la série des sons que ces mammifères émettent pour communiquer avec leurs semblables, comme tous les animaux: chiens, chevaux, moutons, oies, hirondelles, fourmis, abeilles, etc. Et, suivant la remarque d’un observateur, cette communication s’établit soit par des cris, soit par des signes et des mouvements spéciaux, et, s’ils ne traduisent pas des pensées proprement dites, du moins expriment-ils des impressions vives, des émotions morales, — telles la joie ou la terreur.

Il était donc de toute évidence que la question n’avait pu être résolue par les études incomplètes et peu expérimentales du professeur américain. Et c’est alors que, deux années après lui, il vint à l’esprit d’un docteur allemand de recommencer la tentative en se transportant, cette fois, en pleine forêt, au milieu du monde des quadrumanes, et non plus à vingt minutes d’un établissement de missionnaires, dût-il devenir la proie des moustiques, auxquels n’avait pu résister la passion simiologique de M. Garner.

Il y avait alors au Cameroun, à Malinba, un certain savant du nom de Johausen. Il y demeurait depuis quelques années. C’était un médecin, plus amateur de zoologie et de botanique que de médecine. Lorsqu’il fut informé de l’infructueuse expérience du professeur Garner, la pensée lui vint de la reprendre, bien qu’il eût dépassé la cinquantaine. John Cort avait eu l’occasion de s’entretenir plusieurs fois avec lui à Libreville.

S’il n’était plus jeune, le docteur Johausen jouissait du moins d’une excellente santé. Parlant l’anglais et le français comme sa langue maternelle, il comprenait même le dialecte indigène, grâce à l’exercice de sa profession. Sa fortune lui permettait d’ailleurs de donner ses soins gratuitement, car il n’avait ni parents directs, ni collatéraux au degré successible. Indépendant dans toute l’acception du mot, sans compte à rendre à personne, d’une confiance en lui-même que rien n’eût pu ébranler, pourquoi n’aurait-il pas fait ce qu’il lui convenait de faire? Il est bon d’ajouter que, bizarre et maniaque, il semblait bien qu’il y eût ce qu’on appelle en France «une fêlure» dans son intellectualité.

Il y avait au service du docteur un indigène dont il était assez satisfait. Lorsqu’il connut le projet d’aller vivre en forêt au milieu des singes, cet indigène n’hésita point à accepter l’offre de son maître, ne sachant trop à quoi il s’engageait.

Il suit de là que le docteur Johausen et son serviteur se mirent à la besogne. Une cage démontable, genre Garner, mieux conditionnée, plus confortable, commandée en Allemagne, fut apportée à bord d’un paquebot qui faisait l’escale de Malinba. D’autre part, en cette ville, on trouva sans peine à rassembler des provisions, conserves et autres, des munitions, de manière à n’exiger aucun ravitaillement pendant une longue période. Quant au mobilier, très rudimentaire, literie, linge, vêtements, ustensiles de toilette et de cuisine, ces objets furent empruntés à la maison du docteur, et aussi un vieil orgue de Barbarie dans la pensée que les singes ne devaient pas être insensibles au charme de la musique. En même temps, il fit frapper un certain nombre de médailles en nickel, avec son nom et son portrait, destinées aux autorités de cette colonie simienne qu'il espérait fonder dans l'Afrique centrale.

Pour achever, le 13 février 1896, le docteur et l'indigène s'embarquèrent à Malinba avec leur matériel sur une barque du Nbarri et ils en remontèrent le cours afin d'aller…

D'aller où?… C'est ce que le docteur Johausen n'avait dit ni voulu dire à personne. N'ayant pas besoin d'être ravitaillé de longtemps, il serait de la sorte à l'abri de toutes les importunités. L'indigène et lui se suffiraient à eux-mêmes. Il n'y aurait aucun sujet de trouble ou de distraction pour les quadrumanes dont il voulait faire son unique société, et il saurait se contenter des délices de leur conversation, ne doutant pas de surprendre les secrets de la langue macaque.

Ce que l'on sut plus tard, c'est que la barque, ayant remonté le Nbarri pendant une centaine de lieues, mouilla au village de Nghila; qu'une vingtaine de noirs furent engagés comme porteurs, que le matériel s'achemina dans la direction de l'est. Mais, à dater de ce moment, on n'entendit plus parler du docteur Johausen. Les porteurs, revenus à Nghila, étaient incapables d'indiquer avec précision l'endroit où ils avaient pris congé de lui.

Bref, après deux ans écoulés, et malgré quelques recherches qui ne devaient pas aboutir, aucune nouvelle du docteur allemand ni de son fidèle serviteur.

Ce qui s’était passé, John Cort et Max Huber allaient pouvoir le reconstituer — en partie tout au moins.

Le docteur Johausen avait atteint, avec son escorte, une rivière dans le nord-ouest de la forêt de l’Oubanghi; puis, il procéda à la construction d’un radeau dont son matériel fournit les planches et les madriers; enfin, ce travail achevé et l’escorte renvoyée, son serviteur et lui descendirent le cours de ce rio inconnu, s’arrêtèrent et montèrent la cabane à l’endroit où elle venait d’être retrouvée sous les premiers arbres de la rive droite.

Voilà quelle était la part de la certitude dans l’affaire du professeur. Mais que d’hypothèses au sujet de sa situation actuelle!…

Pourquoi la cage était-elle vide?… Pourquoi ses deux hôtes l’avaient-ils quittée?… Combien de mois, de semaines, de jours fut-elle occupée?… Était-ce volontairement qu’ils étaient partis?… Nulle probabilité à cet égard… Est-ce donc qu’ils avaient été enlevés?… Par qui?… Par des indigènes?… Mais la forêt de l’Oubanghi passait pour être inhabitée… Devait-on admettre qu’ils avaient fui devant une attaque de fauves?… Enfin le docteur Johausen et l’indigène vivaient-ils encore?…

Ces diverses questions furent rapidement posées entre les deux amis. Il est vrai, à chaque hypothèse ils ne pouvaient faire de réponses plausibles et se perdaient dans les ténèbres de ce mystère.

«Consultons le carnet…, proposa John Cort.

— Nous en sommes réduits là, dit Max Huber. Peut-être, à défaut de renseignements explicites, rien que par des dates, sera-t-il possible d’établir…»

John Cort ouvrit le carnet, dont quelques pages adhéraient par humidité.

«Je ne crois pas que ce carnet nous apprenne grand’chose…, observa-t-il.

— Pourquoi?…

— Parce que toutes les pages en sont blanches… à l’exception de la première…

— Et cette première page, John?…

— Quelques bribes de phrases, quelques dates aussi, qui, sans doute, devaient servir plus tard au docteur Johausen à rédiger son journal.»

Et John Cort, assez difficilement d’ailleurs, parvint à déchiffrer les lignes suivantes écrites au crayon en allemand et qu’il traduisait à mesure:

29 juillet 1896. — Arrivé avec l’escorte à la lisière de la forêt d’Oubanghi… Campé sur rive droite d’une rivière… Construit notre radeau.

3 août. — Radeau achevé… Renvoyé l’escorte à Nghila… Fait disparaître toute trace de campement… Embarqué avec mon serviteur.

9 août. — Descendu le cours d’eau pendant sept jours, sans obstacles… Arrêt à une clairière… Nombreux singes aux environs… Endroit qui paraît convenable.

10 août. — Débarqué le matériel… Place choisie pour remonter la cabane-cage sous les premiers arbres de la rive droite, à l’extrémité de la clairière… Singes nombreux, chimpanzés, gorilles.

13 août. — Installation complète… Pris possession de la cabane… Environs absolument déserts… Nulle trace d’êtres humains, indigènes ou autres… Gibier aquatique très abondant… Cours d’eau poissonneux… Bien abrités dans la cabane pendant une bourrasque.

25 août. — Vingt-sept jours écoulés… Existence organisée régulièrement… Quelques hippopotames à la surface de la rivière, mais aucune agression de leur part… Élans et antilopes abattus… Grands singes venus la nuit dernière à proximité de la cabane… De quelle espèce sont-ils? cela n’a pu être encore reconnu… Ils n’ont pas fait de démonstrations hostiles, tantôt courant sur le sol, tantôt juchés dans les arbres… Cru entrevoir un feu à quelque cent pas sous la futaie… Fait curieux à vérifier: il semble bien que ces singes parlent, qu’ils échangent entre eux quelques phrases… Un petit a dit: «Ngora!… Ngora!… Ngora!…» mot que les indigènes emploient pour désigner la mère.

Llanga écoutait attentivement ce que lisait son ami John, et, à ce moment, il s’écria:

«Oui… oui… ngora… ngora… mère… ngora… ngora!…»

À ce mot relevé par le docteur Johausen et répété par le jeune garçon, comment John Cort ne se serait-il pas souvenu que, la nuit précédente, il avait frappé son oreille? Croyant à une illusion, à une erreur, il n’avait rien dit à ses compagnons de cet incident. Mais, après l’observation du docteur, il jugea devoir les mettre au courant. Et comme Max Huber s’écriait:

«Décidément, est-ce que le professeur Garner aurait eu raison?…

Des singes qui parlent…

— Tout ce que je puis dire, mon cher Max, c’est que j’ai, moi aussi, entendu ce mot de «ngora!», affirma John Cort.

Et il raconta en quelles circonstances ce mot avait été prononcé d’une voix plaintive pendant la nuit du 14 au 15, tandis qu’il était de garde.

«Tiens, tiens, fit Max Huber, voilà qui ne laisse pas d’être extraordinaire…

— N’est-ce pas ce que vous demandez, cher ami?…» répliqua John

Cort.

Khamis avait écouté ce récit. Vraisemblablement, ce qui paraissait intéresser le Français et l’Américain le laissait assez froid. Les faits relatifs au docteur Johausen, il les accueillait avec indifférence. L’essentiel, c’était que le docteur eût construit un radeau dont on disposerait, ainsi que des objets que renfermait sa cage abandonnée. Quant à savoir ce qu’étaient devenus son serviteur et lui, le foreloper ne comprenait pas qu’il y eût lieu de s’en inquiéter, encore moins que l’on pût avoir la pensée de se lancer à travers la grande forêt pour découvrir leurs traces, au risque d’être enlevé comme ils l’avaient été sans doute. Donc, si Max Huber et John Cort proposaient de se mettre à leur recherche, il s’emploierait à les en dissuader, il leur rappellerait que le seul parti à prendre était de continuer le voyage de retour en descendant le cours d’eau jusqu’à l’Oubanghi.

La raison, d’ailleurs, indiquait qu’aucune tentative ne saurait être faite avec chance de succès… De quel côté se fût-on dirigé pour retrouver le docteur allemand?… Si encore quelque indice eût existé, peut-être John Cort eût-il regardé comme un devoir d’aller à son secours, peut-être Max Huber se fût-il considéré comme l’instrument de son salut, désigné par la Providence?… Mais rien, rien que ces phrases morcelées du carnet et dont la dernière figurait sous la date du 25 août, rien que des pages blanches qui furent vainement feuilletées jusqu'à la dernière!…

Aussi John Cort de conclure:

«Il est indubitable que le docteur est arrivé en cet endroit un 9 août et que ses notes s'arrêtent au 25 du même mois. S'il n'a plus écrit depuis cette date, c'est que, pour une raison ou pour une autre, il avait quitté sa cabane où il n'était resté que treize jours…

— Et, ajouta Khamis, il n'est guère possible d'imaginer ce qu'il a pu devenir.

— N'importe, observa Max Huber, je ne suis pas curieux…

— Oh! cher ami, vous l'êtes à un rare degré…

— Vous avez raison, John, et pour avoir le mot de cette énigme…

— Partons», se contenta de dire le foreloper.

En effet, il n'y avait pas à s'attarder. Mettre le radeau en état de quitter la clairière, descendre le rio, cela s'imposait. Si, plus tard, on jugeait convenable d'organiser une expédition au profit du docteur Johausen, de s'aventurer jusqu'aux extrêmes limites de la grande forêt, cela se pourrait faire dans des conditions plus favorables, et libre aux deux amis d'y prendre part.

Avant de sortir de la cage, Khamis en visita les moindres coins. Peut-être y trouverait-il quelque objet à utiliser. Ce ne serait pas là acte d'indélicatesse, car, après deux ans d'absence, comment admettre que leur possesseur reparût jamais pour les réclamer?…

La cabane, en somme, solidement construite, offrait encore un excellent abri. La toiture de zinc, recouverte de chaume, avait résisté aux intempéries de la mauvaise saison. La façade antérieure, la seule qui fût treillagée, regardait l’est, moins exposée ainsi aux grands vents. Et, probablement, le mobilier, literie, table, chaises, coffre, eût été retrouvé intact, si on ne l’avait emporté, et, pour tout dire, cela semblait assez inexplicable.

Cependant, après ces deux années d’abandon, diverses réparations auraient été nécessaires. Les planches des parois latérales commençaient à se disjoindre, le pied des montants jouait dans la terre humide, des indices de délabrement se manifestaient sous les festons de lianes et de verdure.

C’était une besogne dont Khamis et ses compagnons n’avaient point à se charger. Que cette cabane dût jamais servir de refuge à quelque autre amateur de simiologie, c’était fort improbable. Elle serait donc laissée telle qu’elle était.

Et, maintenant, n’y recueillerait-on pas d’autres objets que le coquemar, la tasse, l’étui à lunettes, la hachette, la boîte du carnet que les deux amis venaient de ramasser? Khamis chercha avec soin. Ni armes, ni ustensiles, ni caisses, ni conserves, ni vêtements. Aussi le foreloper allait-il ressortir les mains vides, lorsque dans un angle du fond, à droite, le sol, qu’il frappait du pied, rendit un son métallique.

«Il y a quelque chose là…, dit-il.

— Peut-être une clef?… répondit Max Huber.

— Et pourquoi une clef?… demanda John Cort.

— Eh! mon cher John…, la clef du mystère!»

Ce n’était point une clef, mais une caisse en fer-blanc qui avait été enterrée à cette place et que retira Khamis. Elle ne paraissait pas avoir souffert, et, non sans une vive satisfaction, il fut constaté qu’elle contenait une centaine de cartouches!

«Merci, bon docteur, s’écria Max Huber, et puissions-nous reconnaître un jour le signalé service que vous nous aurez rendu!»

Service signalé, en effet, car ces cartouches étaient précisément du même calibre que les carabines du foreloper et de ses deux compagnons.

Il ne restait plus qu’à revenir au lieu de halte, et à remettre le radeau en état de navigabilité.

«Auparavant, proposa John Cort, voyons s’il n’existe aucune trace du docteur Johausen et de son serviteur aux environs… Il est possible que tous deux aient été entraînés par les indigènes dans les profondeurs de la forêt, mais il est possible aussi qu’ils aient succombé en se défendant… et si leurs restes sont sans sépulture…

— Notre devoir serait de les ensevelir», déclara Max Huber.

Les recherches dans un rayon de cent mètres ne donnèrent pas de résultat. On devait en conclure que l’infortuné Johausen avait été enlevé — et, par qui si ce n’est pas les indigènes, ceux-là mêmes que le docteur prenait pour des singes et qui causaient entre eux?… Quelle apparence, en effet, que des quadrumanes fussent doués de la parole?…

«En tout cas, fit observer John Cort, cela indique que la forêt de l’Oubanghi est fréquentée par des nomades, et nous devons nous tenir sur nos gardes…

— Comme vous dites, monsieur John, approuva Khamis. Maintenant, au radeau…

— Et ne pas savoir ce qu’est devenu ce digne Teuton!… répliqua

Max Huber. Où peut-il être?…

— Là où sont les gens dont on n’a plus de nouvelles, dit John

Cort.

— Est-ce une réponse cela, John?…

— C’est la seule que nous puissions faire, mon cher Max.»

Lorsque tous furent de retour à la grotte, il était environ neuf heures. Khamis s’occupa d’abord de préparer le déjeuner. Puisqu’il disposait d’une marmite, Max Huber demanda que l’on substituât la viande bouillie à la viande rôtie ou grillée. Ce serait une variante au menu ordinaire. La proposition acceptée, on alluma le feu, et, vers midi, les convives se délectèrent d’une soupe à laquelle il ne manquait que le pain, les légumes et le sel.

Mais, avant le déjeuner, tous avaient travaillé aux réparations du radeau comme ils y travaillèrent après. Très heureusement, Khamis avait trouvé derrière la cabane quelques planches qui purent remplacer celles de la plate-forme, pourries en plusieurs endroits. Grosse besogne d’évitée, étant donné le manque d’outils. Cet ensemble de madriers et de planches fut rattaché au moyen de lianes aussi solides que des ligaments de fer, ou tout au moins que des cordes d’amarrage. L’ouvrage était terminé lorsque le soleil disparut derrière les massifs de la rive droite du rio.

Le départ avait été remis au lendemain dès l'aube. Mieux valait passer la nuit dans la grotte. En effet, la pluie qui menaçait se mit à tomber avec force vers huit heures.

Ainsi donc, après avoir retrouvé l'endroit où était venu s'installer le docteur Johausen, Khamis et ses compagnons partiraient sans savoir ce que ledit docteur était devenu!… Rien… rien!… Pas un seul indice!… Cette pensée ne cessait d'obséder Max Huber, alors qu'elle préoccupait assez peu John Cort et laissait le foreloper tout à fait indifférent. Il allait rêver de babouins, de chimpanzés, de gorilles, de mandrilles, de singes parlants, tout en convenant que le docteur n'avait pu avoir affaire qu'à des indigènes!… Et alors — l'imaginatif qu'il était! — la grande forêt lui réapparaissait avec ses éventualités mystérieuses, les invraisemblables hantises que lui suggéraient ses profondeurs, peuplades nouvelles, types inconnus, villages perdus sous les grands arbres…

Avant de s'étendre au fond de la grotte:

«Mon cher John, et vous aussi, Khamis, dit-il, j'ai une proposition à vous soumettre…

— Laquelle, Max?…

— C'est de faire quelque chose pour le docteur…

— Se lancer à sa recherche?… se récria le foreloper.

— Non, reprit Max Huber, mais donner son nom à ce cours d'eau, qui n'en a pas, je présume…»

Et voilà pourquoi le rio Johausen figurera désormais sur les cartes modernes de l'Afrique équatoriale.

La nuit fut tranquille, et, tandis qu’ils veillaient tour à tour, ni John Cort, ni Max Huber, ni Khamis n’entendirent un seul mot frapper leur oreille.

CHAPITRE IX

Au courant du rio Johausen

Il était six heures et demie du matin, lorsque, à la date du 16 mars, le radeau démarra, s’éloigna de la berge et prit le courant du rio Johausen.

À peine faisait-il jour. L’aube se leva rapidement. Des nuages couraient à travers les hautes zones de l’espace sous l’influence d’un vent vif. La pluie ne menaçait plus, mais le temps demeurerait couvert pendant toute la journée.

Khamis et ses compagnons n’auraient pas à s’en plaindre, puisqu’ils allaient descendre le courant d’une rivière d’ordinaire largement exposée aux rayons perpendiculaires du soleil.

Le radeau, de forme oblongue, ne mesurait que sept à huit pieds de large, sur une douzaine en longueur, tout juste suffisant pour quatre personnes et quelques objets qu’il transportait avec elles. Très réduit, d’ailleurs, ce matériel: la caisse métallique de cartouches, les armes, comprenant trois carabines, le coquemar, la marmite, la tasse. Quant aux trois revolvers, d’un calibre inférieur à celui des carabines, on n’aurait pu s’en servir que pour une vingtaine de coups en comptant les cartouches restant dans les poches de John Cort et de Max Huber. Au total il y avait lieu d’espérer que les munitions ne feraient point défaut aux chasseurs jusqu’à leur arrivée sur les rives de l’Oubanghi.

À l’avant du radeau, sur une couche de terre soigneusement tassée, était disposé un amas de bois sec, aisément renouvelable, pour le cas où Khamis aurait besoin de feu en dehors des heures de halte. À l’arrière, une forte godille, faite avec l’une des planches, permettrait de diriger l’appareil ou tout au moins de le maintenir dans le sens du courant.

Entre les deux rives, distantes d’une cinquantaine de mètres, ce courant se déplaçait avec une vitesse d’environ un kilomètre à l’heure. À cette allure, le radeau emploierait donc de vingt à trente jours à franchir les quatre cents kilomètres qui séparaient le foreloper et ses compagnons de l’Oubanghi. Si c’était à peu près la moyenne obtenue par la marche sous bois, le cheminement s’effectuerait presque sans fatigues.

Quant aux obstacles qui pourraient barrer le cours du rio Johausen, on ne savait à quoi s’en tenir. Ce qui fut constaté au début, c’est que la rivière était profonde et sinueuse. Il y aurait lieu d’en surveiller attentivement le cours. Si des chutes ou des rapides l’embarrassaient, le foreloper agirait suivant les circonstances.

Jusqu’à la halte de midi, la navigation s’opéra aisément. En manoeuvrant, on évita les remous aux pointes des berges. Le radeau ne toucha pas une seule fois, grâce a l’adresse de Khamis qui rectifiait la direction d’un bras vigoureux.

John Cort, posté à l’avant, sa carabine près de lui, observait les berges dans un intérêt purement cynégétique. Il songeait à renouveler les provisions. Que quelque gibier de poil ou de plume arrivât à sa portée, il serait facilement abattu. Ce fut même ce qui survint vers neuf heures et demie. Une balle tua raide un waterbuck, espèce d’antilope qui fréquente le bord des rivières.

«Un beau coup! dit Max Huber.

— Coup inutile, déclara John Cort, si nous ne pouvons prendre possession de la bête…

— Ce sera l’affaire de quelques instants», répliqua le foreloper.

Et, appuyant sur la godille, il rapprocha le radeau de la rive, près d’une petite grève où gisait le waterbuck. L’animal dépecé, on en garda les morceaux utilisables pour les repas prochains.

Entre-temps, Max Huber avait mis à profit ses talents de pêcheur, bien qu’il n’eût à sa disposition que des engins très rudimentaires, deux bouts de ficelle trouvés dans la cage du docteur, et, pour hameçons, des épines d’acacia amorcées avec de petits morceaux de viande. Les poissons se décideraient-ils à mordre, parmi ceux que l’on voyait apparaître à la surface du rio?…

Max Huber s’était agenouillé à tribord du radeau, et Llanga, à sa droite, suivait l’opération non sans un vif intérêt.

Il faut croire que les brochets du rio Johausen ne sont pas moins voraces que stupides, car l’un d’eux ne tarda guère à avaler l’hameçon. Après l’avoir «pâmé», — c’est le mot, — ainsi que les indigènes font de l’hippopotame pris dans ces conditions, Max Huber fut assez adroit pour l’amener au bout de sa ligne. Ce poisson pesait bien de huit à neuf livres, et l’on peut être certain que les passagers n’attendraient pas au lendemain pour s’en régaler.

À la halte de midi, le déjeuner se composa d’un filet rôti de waterbuck et du brochet dont il ne resta que les arêtes. Pour le dîner, il fut convenu que l’on ferait la soupe avec un bon quartier de l’antilope. Et, comme cela nécessiterait plusieurs heures de cuisson, le foreloper alluma le foyer à l’avant du radeau, assujettit la marmite sur le feu. Puis la navigation reprit sans interruption jusqu’au soir.

La pêche ne donna aucun résultat pendant l’après-midi. Vers six heures, Khamis s’arrêta le long d’une étroite grève rocheuse, ombragée par les basses branches d’un gommier de l’espèce krabah. Il avait heureusement choisi le lieu de halte.

En effet, les bivalves, moules et ostracées, abondaient entre les pierres. Aussi les unes cuites, les autres crues, complétèrent agréablement le menu du soir. Avec trois ou quatre morceaux de biscuit et une pincée de sel, le repas n’eût rien laissé à désirer.

Comme la nuit menaçait d’être sombre, le foreloper ne voulut point s’abandonner à la dérive. Le rio Johausen chaînait parfois des troncs énormes. Un abordage eût pu être très dommageable pour le radeau. La couchée fut donc organisée au pied du gommier sur un amas d’herbes. Grâce à la garde successive de John Cort, de Max Huber et de Khamis, le campement ne reçut aucune mauvaise visite. Seulement les cris des singes ne discontinuèrent pas depuis le coucher du soleil jusqu’à son lever.

«Et j’ose affirmer que ceux-là ne parlaient pas!» s’écria Max Huber, lorsque, le jour venu, il alla plonger dans l’eau limpide du rio sa figure et ses mains que les malfaisants moustiques n’avaient guère épargnées.

Ce matin-là, le départ fut différé d’une grande heure. Il tombait une violente pluie. Mieux valait éviter ces douches diluviennes que le ciel verse si fréquemment sur la région équatoriale de l’Afrique. L’épais feuillage du gommier préserva le campement dans une certaine mesure non moins que le radeau accosté au pied de ses puissantes racines. Au surplus, le temps était orageux. À la surface de la rivière, les gouttes d’eau s’arrondissaient en petites ampoules électriques. Quelques grondements de tonnerre roulaient en amont sans éclairs. La grêle n'était point à craindre, les immenses forêts de l'Afrique ayant le don d'en détourner la chute.

Cependant l'état de l'atmosphère était assez alarmant pour que

John Cort crût devoir émettre cette observation:

«Si cette pluie ne prend pas fin, il sera préférable de demeurer où nous sommes… Nous avons maintenant des munitions… nos cartouchières sont pleines, mais ce sont les vêtements de rechange qui manquent…

— Aussi, répliqua Max Huber en riant, pourquoi ne pas nous habiller à la mode du pays… en peau humaine?… Voilà qui simplifie les choses!… Il suffit de se baigner pour laver son linge et de se frotter dans la brousse pour brosser ses habits!…»

La vérité est que, depuis une huitaine de jours, les deux amis avaient dû chaque matin procéder à ce lavage, faute de pouvoir se changer.

Cependant, l'averse fut si violente qu'elle ne dura pas plus d'une heure. On mit ce temps à profit pour le premier déjeuner. À ce repas figura un plat nouveau, — le très bien venu: des oeufs d'outarde pondus fraîchement, dénichés par Llanga et que Khamis fit durcir à l'eau bouillante du coquemar. Cette fois encore, Max Huber se plaignit, non sans raison, que dame nature eût négligé de mettre dans les oeufs le grain de sel dont ils ne sauraient se passer.

Vers sept heures et demie, la pluie cessa, bien que le ciel restât orageux. Aussi le radeau regagna-t-il le courant au milieu de la rivière.

Les lignes mises à la traîne, plusieurs poissons eurent l’obligeance de mordre à temps pour figurer au menu du repas de midi.

Khamis proposa de ne point faire la halte habituelle, afin de rattraper le retard du matin. Sa proposition acceptée, John Cort alluma le feu, et la marmite chanta bientôt sur les charbons ardents. Comme il y avait encore une suffisante réserve de waterbuck, les fusils demeurèrent muets. Et pourtant Max Huber fut tenté plus d’une fois par quelques belles pièces, rôdant par couples sur les rives.

Cette partie de la forêt était très giboyeuse. Sans parler des volatiles aquatiques, les ruminants y abondaient. Fréquemment, des têtes de pallahs et de sassabys, qui sont une variété d’antilopes, dressèrent leurs cormes entre les herbes et les roseaux des berges. À plusieurs reprises s’approchèrent des élans de forte taille, des daims rouges, des steimbocks, gazelles de petite taille, des koudous, de l’espèce des cerfs de l’Afrique centrale, des cuaggas, même des girafes, dont la chair est très succulente. Il eût été facile d’abattre quelques-unes de ces bêtes, mais à quoi bon, puisque la nourriture était assurée jusqu’au lendemain?… Et puis, inutile de surcharger et d’encombrer le radeau. C’est ce que John Cort fit justement observer à son ami.

«Que voulez-vous, mon cher John? avoua Max Huber. Mon fusil me monte de lui-même à la joue, lorsque je vois de si beaux coups à ma portée.»

Toutefois, comme ce n’eût été que tirer pour tirer, et bien que cette considération ne soit pas pour arrêter un vrai chasseur, Max Huber intima l’ordre à sa carabine de se tenir tranquille, de ne point s’épauler d’elle-même. Les alentours ne retentirent donc pas de détonations intempestives, et le radeau descendit paisiblement le cours du rio Johausen.

Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber eurent d’ailleurs lieu de se dédommager dans l’après-midi. Les armes à feu durent faire entendre leur voix — la voix de la défensive, sinon celle de l’offensive.

Depuis le matin, une dizaine de kilomètres avaient été franchis. La rivière dessinait alors de capricieuses sinuosités, bien que sa direction générale se maintînt toujours vers le sud-ouest. Ses berges, très accidentées, présentaient une bordure d’arbres énormes, principalement des bombax, dont le parasol plafonnait à la surface du rio.

Qu’on en juge! Quoique la largeur du Johausen n’eût pas diminué, qu’elle atteignît parfois de cinquante à soixante mètres, les basses branches de ces bombax se rejoignaient et formaient un berceau de verdure sous lequel murmurait un léger clapotis. Quantité de ces branches enchevêtrées à leur extrémité, se rattachaient au moyen de lianes serpentantes, — pont végétal sur lequel des clowns agiles, ou tout au moins des quadrumanes, auraient pu se transporter d’une rive à l’autre.

Les nuages orageux n’ayant pas encore abandonné les basses zones de l’horizon, le soleil embrasait l’espace et ses rayons tombaient à pic sur la rivière.

Donc Khamis et ses compagnons ne pouvaient qu’apprécier cette navigation sous un épais dôme de verdure. Elle leur rappelait le cheminement au milieu du sous-bois, le long des passes ombreuses, sans fatigue cette fois, sans les embarras d’un sol embroussaillé de siziphus et autres herbes épineuses.

«Décidément, c’est un parc, cette forêt de l’Oubanghi, déclara John Cort, un parc avec ses massifs arborescents et ses eaux courantes!… On se croirait dans la région du Parc-National des États-Unis, aux sources du Missouri et de la Yellowstone!…

— Un parc où pullulent les singes, fit observer Max Huber. C’est à croire que toute la gent simienne s’y est donné rendez-vous!… Nous sommes en plein royaume de quadrumanes, où chimpanzés, gorilles, gibbons, règnent en toute souveraineté!»

Ce qui justifiait cette observation, c’était l’énorme quantité de ces animaux qui occupaient les rives, apparaissaient sur les arbres, couraient et gambadaient dans les profondeurs de la forêt. Jamais Khamis et ses compagnons n’en avaient tant vu, ni de si turbulents, ni de si contorsionnistes. Aussi que de cris, que de sauts, que de culbutes, et quelle série de grimaces un photographe aurait pu saisir avec son objectif!

«Après tout, ajouta Max Huber, rien que de très naturel!… Est-ce que nous ne sommes pas au centre de l’Afrique!… Or, entre les indigènes et les quadrumanes congolais, — en exceptant Khamis, bien entendu, — j’estime que la différence est mince…

— Elle est tout juste, répliqua John Cort, de ce qui distingue l’homme de l’animal, l’être pourvu d’intelligence de l’être qui n’est soumis qu’aux impersonnalités de l’instinct…

— Celui-ci infiniment plus sûr que celle-là, mon cher John!

— Je n’y contredis pas, Max. Mais ces deux facteurs de la vie sont séparés par un abîme et, tant qu’on ne l’aura pas comblé, l’école transformiste ne sera pas fondée à prétendre que l’homme descend du singe…

— Juste, répondit Max Huber, et il manque toujours un échelon à l'échelle, un type entre l'anthropoïde et l'homme, avec un peu moins d'instinct et un peu plus d'intelligence… Et si ce type fait défaut, c'est sans doute parce qu'il n'a jamais existé… D'ailleurs, lors même qu'il existerait, la question soulevée par la doctrine darwinienne ne serait pas encore résolue, à mon avis du moins…»

En ce moment, il y avait mieux à faire qu'à essayer de résoudre, en vertu de cet axiome que la nature ne procède pas par sauts, la question de savoir si tous les êtres vivants se raccordent entre eux. Ce qui convenait, c'était de prendre des précautions ou des mesures contre les manifestations hostiles d'une engeance redoutable par sa supériorité numérique. Il eût été d'une rare imprudence de la traiter en quantité négligeable. Ces quadrumanes formaient une armée recrutée dans toute la population simienne de l'Oubanghi. À leurs démonstrations, on ne pouvait se tromper, et il faudrait bientôt se défendre à outrance.

Le foreloper observait cette bruyante agitation non sans sérieuse inquiétude. Cela se voyait à son rude visage auquel le sang affluait, ses épais sourcils abaissés, son regard d'une vivacité pénétrante, son front où se creusaient de larges plis.

«Tenons-nous prêts, dit-il, la carabine chargée, les cartouches à portée de la main, car je ne sais trop comment les choses vont tourner…

— Bah! un coup de fusil aura bientôt fait de disperser ces bandes…», repartit Max Huber.

Et il épaula sa carabine.

«Ne tirez pas, monsieur Max!… s’écria Khamis. Il ne faut point attaquer… il ne faut pas provoquer!… C’est assez d’avoir à se défendre!

— Mais ils commencent…, répliqua John Cort.

— Ne ripostons que si cela devient nécessaire!…» déclara

Khamis.

L’agression ne tarda pas à s’accentuer. De la rive partaient des pierres, des morceaux de branches, lancés par ces singes dont les grands types sont doués d’une force colossale. Ils jetaient même des projectiles de nature plus inoffensive, entre autres les fruits arrachés aux arbres.

Le foreloper essaya de maintenir le radeau au milieu du rio, presque à égale distance de l’une et de l’autre berge. Les coups seraient moins dangereux, étant moins assurés. Le malheur était de n’avoir aucun moyen de s’abriter contre cette attaque. En outre, le nombre des assaillants s’accroissait, et plusieurs projectiles avaient déjà atteint les passagers, sans trop leur faire de mal, il est vrai.

«En voilà assez…», finit par dire Max Huber.

Et, visant un gorille qui se démenait entre les roseaux, il l’abattit du coup.

Au bruit de la détonation répondirent des clameurs assourdissantes. L’agression ne cessa point, les bandes ne prirent pas la fuite. Et, en somme, à vouloir les exterminer, ces singes, l’un après l’autre, les munitions n’y pourraient suffire. Rien qu’à une balle par quadrumane, la réserve serait vite épuisée. Que feraient, alors, les chasseurs, la cartouchière vide?

«Ne tirons plus, ordonna John Cort. Cela ne servirait qu’à surexciter ces maudites bêtes! Nous en serons quittes, espérons- le, pour quelques contusions sans importance…

— Merci!» riposta Max Huber, qu’une pierre venait d’atteindre à la jambe.

On continua donc de descendre, suivi par la double escorte sur les rives, très sinueuses en cette partie du rio Johausen. En de certains rétrécissements, elles se rapprochaient à ce point que la largeur du lit se réduisait d’un tiers. La marche du radeau s’accroissait alors avec la vitesse du courant.

Enfin, à la nuit close, peut-être les hostilités prendraient-elles fin. Peut-être les assaillants se disperseraient-ils à travers la forêt. Dans tous les cas, s’il le fallait, au lieu de s’arrêter pour la halte du soir, Khamis se risquerait à naviguer toute la nuit. Or, il n’était que quatre heures, et, jusqu’à sept, la situation resterait très inquiétante.

En effet, ce qui l’aggravait, c’est que le radeau n’était pas à l’abri d’un envahissement. Si les singes, pas plus que les chats, n’aiment l’eau, s’il n’y avait pas à craindre qu’ils se missent à la nage, la disposition des ramures au-dessus de la rivière leur permettait, en divers endroits, de s’aventurer par ces ponts de branches et de lianes, puis de se laisser choir sur la tête de Khamis et de ses compagnons. Cela ne serait qu’un jeu pour ces bêtes aussi agiles que malfaisantes.

Ce fut même la manoeuvre que cinq ou six grands gorilles tentèrent vers cinq heures, à un coude de la rivière où se joignait le branchage des bombax. Ces animaux, postés à cinquante pas en aval, attendaient le radeau au passage.

John Cort les signala, et il n’y avait pas à se méprendre sur leurs intentions.

«Ils vont nous tomber dessus, s’écria Max Huber, et si nous ne les forçons pas à décamper…

— Feu!» commanda le foreloper.

Trois détonations retentirent. Trois singes, mortellement touchés, après avoir essayé de se raccrocher aux branches, s’abattirent dans le rio.

Au milieu de clameurs plus violentes, une vingtaine de quadrumanes s’engagèrent entre les lianes, prêts à se précipiter.

On dut prestement recharger les armes et tirer sans perdre un instant. Une fusillade assez nourrie s’ensuivit. Dix ou douze gorilles et chimpanzés furent blessés avant que le radeau se trouvât sous le pont végétal et, découragés, leurs congénères s’enfuirent sur les rives.

Une réflexion qui vint à l’esprit, c’est que, si le professeur Garner se fût installé dans ces profondeurs de la grande forêt, son sort aurait été celui du docteur Johausen. En admettant que ce dernier eût été accueilli par la population forestière de la même façon que Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber, en fallait-il davantage pour expliquer sa disparition? Toutefois, en cas d’agression, on eût dû en retrouver les témoignages non équivoques. Grâce aux instincts destructeurs des singes, la cage ne serait pas restée intacte, et il n’y en aurait eu que les débris à la place qu’elle occupait.

Après tout, à cette heure, le plus urgent n’était pas de s’inquiéter du docteur allemand, mais de ce qu’il adviendrait du radeau. Précisément, la largeur du rio diminuait peu à peu. À cent pas sur la droite, en avant d’une pointe, l’eau tourbillonnante indiquait un fort remous. Si le radeau y tombait, ne subissant plus l’action du courant détourné par la pointe, il serait drossé contre la berge. Khamis pouvait bien avec sa godille le maintenir au fil de l’eau, mais l’obliger à s’écarter du remous, ce serait difficile. Les singes de la rive droite viendraient l’assaillir en grand nombre. Aussi les mettre en fuite à coups de fusil s’imposait-il. Les carabines se mirent donc de la partie au moment où le radeau commençait à tourner sur lui-même.

Un instant après, la bande avait disparu. Ce n’étaient pas les balles, ce n’étaient pas les détonations qui l’avaient dispersée. Depuis une heure, un orage montait vers le zénith. Les nuages blafards couvraient maintenant le ciel. À ce moment, les éclairs embrasèrent l’espace, et le météore se déchaîna avec cette prodigieuse rapidité, particulière aux basses latitudes. À ces formidables éclats de la foudre, les quadrumanes ressentirent ce trouble instinctif que produit sur tous les animaux l’influence électrique. Ils prirent peur, ils allèrent chercher sous de plus épais massifs un abri contre ces coruscations aveuglantes, ce formidable déchirement des nues. En quelques minutes, les deux berges furent désertes, et, de cette bande, il ne resta qu’une vingtaine de corps, sans vie, étendus entre les roseaux des berges.

CHAPITRE X

Ngora!

Le lendemain, le ciel rasséréné — on pourrait dire épousseté par le puissant plumeau des orages — arrondissait sa voûte d’un bleu cru au-dessus de la cime des arbres. Au lever du soleil, les fines gouttelettes des feuilles et des herbes se volatilisèrent. Le sol, très rapidement asséché, se prêtait au cheminement en forêt. Mais il n’était pas question de reprendre à pied la route du sud-ouest. Si le rio Johausen ne s’écartait pas de cette direction, Khamis ne doutait plus d’atteindre en une vingtaine de jours le bassin de l’Oubanghi.

Le violent trouble atmosphérique, ses milliers d’éclairs, ses roulements prolongés, ses chutes de foudre, n’avaient cessé qu’à trois heures du matin. Après avoir accosté la berge à travers le remous, le radeau avait trouvé un abri. En cet endroit se dressait un énorme baobab dont le tronc, évidé à l’intérieur, ne tenait plus que par son écorce. Khamis et ses compagnons, en se serrant, y auraient place. On y transporta le modeste matériel, ustensiles, armes, munitions, qui n’eut point à souffrir des rafales et dont le rembarquement s’effectua à l’heure du départ.

«Ma foi, il est venu à propos, cet orage!» observa John Cort, qui s’entretenait avec Max, tandis que le foreloper disposait les restes du gibier pour ce premier repas.

Tout en causant, les deux jeunes gens s’occupaient à nettoyer leurs carabines, travail indispensable après la fusillade très vive de la veille.

Entre temps, Llanga furetait au milieu des roseaux et des herbes, à la recherche des nids et des oeufs.

«Oui, mon cher John, l’orage est venu à propos, dit Max Huber, et fasse le ciel que ces abominables bêtes ne s’avisent pas de reparaître maintenant qu’il est dissipé!… Dans tous les cas, tenons-nous sur nos gardes.»

Khamis n’était pas sans avoir eu cette crainte qu’au lever du jour les quadrumanes ne revinssent sur les deux rives. Et tout d’abord il fut rassuré: on n’entendait aucun bruit suspect à mesure que l’aube pénétrait le sous-bois.

«J’ai parcouru la rive sur une centaine de pas, et je n’ai aperçu aucun singe, assura John Cort…

— C’est de bon augure, répondit Max Huber, et j’espère utiliser désormais nos cartouches autrement qu’à nous défendre contre des macaques!… J’ai cru que toute notre réserve allait y passer…

— Et comment aurions-nous pu la renouveler? reprit John Cort… Il ne faut pas compter sur une seconde cage pour se ravitailler de balles, de poudres et de plomb…

— Eh! s’écria Max Huber, quand je songe que le docteur voulait établir des relations sociales avec de pareils êtres!… Le joli monde!… Quant à découvrir quels termes ils emploient pour s’inviter à dîner et comment ils se disent bonjour ou bonsoir, il faut vraiment être un professeur Garner, comme il y en a quelques- uns en Amérique… ou un docteur Johausen, comme il y en a quelques-uns en Allemagne, et peut-être même en France…

— En France, Max?…

— Oh! si l’on cherchait parmi les savants de l’Institut ou de la

Sorbonne, on trouverait bien quelque idio…

— Idiot!… répéta John Cort en protestant.

— Idiomographe, acheva Max Huber, qui serait capable de venir dans les forêts congolaises recommencer les tentatives du professeur Garner et du docteur Johausen!

— En tout cas, mon cher Max, si l’on est rassuré sur le compte du premier, qui paraît avoir rompu tout rapport avec la société des macaques, il n’en est pas ainsi du second, et je crains bien que…

— Que les babouins ou autres ne lui aient rompu les os!… poursuivit Max Huber. À la façon dont ils nous ont accueillis hier, on peut juger si ce sont des êtres civilisés et s’il est possible qu’ils le deviennent jamais!

— Voyez-vous, Max, j’imagine que les bêtes sont destinées à rester bêtes…

— Et les hommes aussi!… répliqua Max Huber en riant. N’empêche que j’ai un gros regret de revenir à Libreville sans rapporter des nouvelles du docteur…

— D’accord, mais l’important pour nous serait d’avoir pu traverser cette interminable forêt…

— Ça se fera…

— Soit, mais je voudrais que ce fût fait!»

Du reste, le parcours ne présentait plus que des chances assez heureuses, puisque le radeau n’avait qu’à s’abandonner au courant. Encore convenait-il que le lit du rio Johausen ne fût pas embarrassé de rapides, coupé de barrages, interrompu par des chutes. C’est ce que redoutait surtout le foreloper.

En ce moment, il appela ses compagnons pour le déjeuner. Llanga revint presque aussitôt, rapportant quelques oeufs de canard, qui furent réservés pour le repas de midi. Grâce au morceau d’antilope, il n’y aurait pas lieu de renouveler la provision de gibier avant la halte de la méridienne.

«Eh! j’y songe, suggéra John Cort, pour ne pas avoir inutilement dépensé nos munitions, pourquoi ne pas se nourrir de la chair des singes?…

— Ah! pouah! fit Max Huber.

— Voyez ce dégoûté!…

— Quoi, mon cher John, des côtelettes de gorille, des filets de gibbons, des gigots de chimpanzés… toute une fricassée de mandrilles…

— Ce n’est pas mauvais, affirma Khamis. Les indigènes ne font point fi d’une grillade de ce genre.

— Et j’en mangerais au besoin…, dit John Cort.

— Anthropophage! s’écria Max Huber. Manger presque son semblable…

— Merci, Max!…»

En fin de compte, on abandonna aux oiseaux de proie les quadrumanes tués pendant la bataille. La forêt de l’Oubanghi possédait assez de ruminants et de volailles pour que l’on ne fît pas aux représentants de l’espèce simienne l’honneur de les introduire dans un estomac humain.

Khamis éprouva de sérieuses difficultés à tirer le radeau du remous et à doubler la pointe.

Tous donnèrent la main à cette manoeuvre, qui demanda près d’une heure. On avait dû couper de jeunes baliveaux, puis les ébrancher afin d’en faire des espars au moyen desquels on s’écarta de la berge. Le remous y maintenant le radeau, si la bande fût revenue à cette heure, il n’aurait pas été possible d’éviter son attaque en se rejetant dans le courant. Sans doute, ni le foreloper ni ses compagnons ne fussent sortis sains et saufs de cette lutte trop inégale.

Bref, après mille efforts, le radeau dépassa l’extrémité de la pointe et commença à redescendre le cours du rio Johausen.

La journée promettait d’être belle. Aucun symptôme d’orage à l’horizon, aucune menace de pluie. En revanche, une averse de rayons solaires tombait d’aplomb, et la chaleur aurait été torride sans une vive brise du nord, dont le radeau se fût fort aidé, s’il eût possédé une voile.

La rivière s’élargissait graduellement à mesure qu’elle se dirigeait vers le sud-ouest. Plus de berceau s’étendant sur son lit, plus de branches s’enchevêtrant d’une rive à l’autre. En ces conditions, la réapparition des quadrumanes sur les deux berges n’aurait pas présenté les mêmes dangers que la veille. D’ailleurs, ils ne se montrèrent pas.

Les bords du rio, cependant, n’étaient pas déserts. Nombre d’oiseaux aquatiques les animaient de leurs cris et de leurs vols, canards, outardes, pélicans, martins-pêcheurs et multiples échantillons d’échassiers.

John Cort abattit plusieurs couples de ces volatiles, qui servirent au repas de midi, avec les oeufs dénichés par le jeune indigène. Au surplus, afin de regagner le temps perdu, on ne fit pas halte à l'heure habituelle et la première partie de la journée s'écoula sans le moindre incident.

Dans l'après-midi, il se produisit une alerte, non sans sérieux motifs:

Il était quatre heures environ lorsque Khamis, qui tenait la godille à l'arrière, pria John Cort de le remplacer, et vint se poster debout à l'avant.

Max Huber se releva, s'assura que rien ne menaçait ni sur la rive droite ni sur la rive gauche et dit au foreloper:

«Que regardez-vous donc?

— Cela.»

Et, de la main, Khamis indiquait en aval une assez violente agitation des eaux.

«Encore un remous, dit Max Huber, ou plutôt une sorte de maëlstrom de rivière!… Attention, Khamis, à ne point tomber là dedans…

— Ce n'est pas un remous, affirma le foreloper.

— Et qu'est-ce donc?…»

À cette demande répondit presque aussitôt une sorte de jet liquide qui monta d'une dizaine de pieds au-dessus de la surface du rio.

Et Max Huber, très surpris, de s'écrier:

«Est-ce que, par hasard, il y aurait des baleines dans les fleuves de l’Afrique centrale?…

— Non… des hippopotames», répliqua le foreloper.

Un souffle bruyant se fit entendre à l’instant où émergeait une tête énorme avec des mâchoires armées de fortes défenses, et, pour employer des comparaisons singulières, mais justes, «un intérieur de bouche semblable à une masse de viande de boucherie, et des yeux comparables à la lucarne d’une chaumière hollandaise!» Ainsi se sont exprimés dans leurs récits quelques voyageurs particulièrement imaginatifs.

De ces hippopotames, on en rencontre depuis le cap de Bonne- Espérance jusqu’au vingt-troisième degré de latitude nord. Ils fréquentent la plupart des rivières de ces vastes régions, les marais et les lacs. Toutefois, suivant une remarque qui a été faite, si le rio Johausen eût été tributaire de la Méditerranée, - - ce qui ne se pouvait, — il n’y aurait pas eu à se préoccuper des attaques de ces amphibies, car ils ne s’y montrent jamais, sauf dans le haut Nil.

L’hippopotame est un animal redoutable, bien que doux de caractère. Pour une raison ou pour une autre, lorsqu’il est surexcité, sous l’empire de la douleur, à l’instant où il vient d’être harponné, il s’exaspère, il se précipite avec fureur contre les chasseurs, il les poursuit le long des berges, il fonce sur les canots, qu’il est de taille à chavirer, et de force à crever, avec ses mâchoires assez puissantes pour couper un bras ou une jambe.

Certes, aucun passager du radeau — pas même Max Huber, si enragé qu’il fût de prouesses cynégétiques — ne devait avoir la pensée de s’attaquer à un tel amphibie. Mais l’amphibie voudrait peut- être les assaillir, et s’il atteignait le radeau, s’il le heurtait, s’il l’accablait de son poids qui va parfois à deux mille kilogrammes, s’il l’encornait de ses terribles défenses, que deviendraient Khamis et ses compagnons…

Le courant était rapide alors, et peut-être valait-il mieux se contenter de le suivre, au lieu de se rapprocher de l’une des rives: l’hippopotame s’y fût dirigé après lui. À terre, il est vrai, ses coups auraient été plus facilement évités, puisqu’il est impropre à se mouvoir rapidement avec ses jambes courtes et basses, son ventre énorme qui traîne sur le sol. Il tient plus du cochon que du sanglier. Mais, à la surface du rio, le radeau serait à sa merci. Il le mettrait en pièces, et, à supposer que les passagers eussent, en nageant, gagné les berges, quelle fâcheuse éventualité que celle d’être obligés à construire un second appareil flottant!

«Tâchons de passer sans être vus, conseilla Khamis. Étendons-nous, ne faisons aucun bruit, et soyons prêts à nous jeter à l’eau si c’est nécessaire…

— Je me charge de toi, Llanga», dit Max Huber.

On suivit le conseil du foreloper, et chacun se coucha sur le radeau que le courant entraînait avec une certaine rapidité. Dans cette position, peut-être y avait-il chance de ne point être aperçus par l’hippopotame.

Et ce fut un grand souffle, une sorte de grognement de porc, que tous quatre entendirent quelques instants après, quand les secousses indiquèrent qu’ils franchissaient les eaux troublées par l’énorme animal.

Il y eut quelques secondes de vive anxiété. Le radeau allait-il être soulevé par la tête du monstre ou immergé sous sa lourde masse?…

Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber ne furent rassurés qu’au moment où l’agitation des eaux eut cessé, en même temps que diminuait l’intensité du souffle dont ils avaient senti les chaudes émanations au passage. Ils se relevèrent alors et ne virent plus l’amphibie qui s’était replongé dans les basses couches du rio.

Certes, des chasseurs habitués à lutter contre l’éléphant, qui venaient de faire campagne avec la caravane d’Urdax, n’auraient pas dû s’effrayer de la rencontre d’un hippopotame. Plusieurs fois ils avaient attaqué ces animaux au milieu des marais du haut Oubanghi, mais dans des conditions plus favorables. À bord de ce fragile assemblage de planches dont la perte eût été si regrettable, on admettra leurs appréhensions, et ce fut heureux qu’ils eussent évité les attaques de la formidable bête.

Le soir, Khamis s’arrêta à l’embouchure d’un ruisseau de la rive gauche. On n’eût pu mieux choisir pour la nuit, au pied d’un bouquet de bananiers, dont les larges feuilles formaient abri. À cette place, la grève était couverte de mollusques comestibles, qui furent recueillis et mangés crus ou cuits, suivant l’espèce. Quant aux bananes, leur goût sauvage laissait à désirer. Heureusement, l’eau du ruisselet, mélangée du suc de ces fruits, fournit une boisson assez rafraîchissante.

«Tout cela serait parfait, dit Max Huber, si nous étions certains de dormir tranquillement… Par malheur, il y a ces maudits insectes qui se garderont bien de nous épargner… Faute de moustiquaire, nous nous réveillerons pointillés de piqûres!»

Et, en vérité, c’est ce qui serait arrivé si Llanga n’avait trouvé le moyen de chasser ces myriades de moustiques réunis en nuées bourdonnantes.

Il s’était éloigné en remontant le long du ruisseau, lorsque sa voix se fit entendre à courte distance.

Khamis le rejoignit aussitôt et Llanga lui montra sur la grève des tas de bouses sèches, laissées par les ruminants, antilopes, cerfs, buffles et autres, qui venaient d'habitude se désaltérer à cette place.

Or, de mêler ces bouses à un foyer flambant — ce qui produit une épaisse fumée d'une âcreté particulière — c'est le meilleur moyen et peut-être le seul d'éloigner les moustiques. Les indigènes l'emploient toutes les fois qu'ils le peuvent et s'en trouvent bien.

L'instant d'après, un gros tas s'élevait au pied des bananiers. Le feu fut ravivé avec du bois mort. Le foreloper y jeta plusieurs bouses. Un nuage de fumée se dégagea et l'air fut aussitôt nettoyé de ces insupportables insectes.

Le foyer dut être entretenu pendant toute la nuit par John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis, qui veillèrent tour à tour. Aussi, le matin venu, bien remis grâce à un bon sommeil, ils reprirent dès le petit jour la descente du rio Johausen.

Rien n'est variable comme le temps sous ce climat de l'Afrique du centre. Au ciel clair de la veille succédait un ciel grisâtre qui promettait une journée pluvieuse. Il est vrai, comme les nuages se tenaient dans les basses zones, il ne tomba qu'une pluie fine, simple poussière liquide, néanmoins fort désagréable à recevoir.

Par bonheur, Khamis avait eu une excellente idée. Ces feuilles de bananier, de l'espèce «enseté», sont peut-être les plus grandes de tout le règne végétal. Les noirs s'en servent pour la toiture de leurs paillotes. Rien qu'avec une douzaine, on pouvait établir une sorte de taud au centre du radeau, en liant leurs queues au moyen de lianes. C'est ce que le foreloper avait fait avant de partir. Les passagers se trouvaient donc à couvert contre cette pluie ténue, qui glissait sur les feuilles d'enseté.

Pendant la première partie de la journée se montrèrent quelques singes le long de la rive droite, une vingtaine de grande taille, qui semblaient enclins à reprendre les hostilités de l’avant- veille. Le plus sage était d’éviter tout contact avec eux, et on y parvint en maintenant le radeau le long de la rive gauche, moins fréquentée par les bandes de quadrumanes.

John Cort fit judicieusement observer que les relations devaient être rares entre les tribus simiennes des deux rives, puisque la communication ne s’établissait que par les ponts de branchages et de lianes, malaisément praticables même à des singes.

On «brûla» la halte de la méridienne, et, dans l’après-midi, le radeau ne s’arrêta qu’une seule fois, afin d’embarquer une antilope sassaby que John Cort avait abattue derrière un fouillis de roseaux, près d’un coude de la rivière.

À ce coude, le rio Johausen, obliquant vers le sud-est, modifiait presque à angle droit sa direction habituelle. Cela ne laissa pas d’inquiéter Khamis de se voir ainsi rejeté à l’intérieur de la forêt, alors que le terme du voyage se trouvait à l’opposé, du côté de l’Atlantique. Évidemment, on ne pouvait mettre en doute que le rio Johausen fût un tributaire de l’Oubanghi, mais d’aller chercher ce confluent à quelques centaines de kilomètres, au centre du Congo indépendant, quel immense détour! Heureusement, après une heure de navigation, le foreloper, grâce à son instinct d’orientation, — car le soleil ne se montrait pas, — reconnut que le cours d’eau reprenait sa direction première. Il était donc permis d’espérer qu’il entraînerait le radeau jusqu’à la limite du Congo français, d’où il serait aisé de gagner Libreville.

À six heures et demie, d’un vigoureux coup de godille, Khamis accosta la rive gauche, au fond d’une étroite crique, ombragée sous les larges frondaisons d’un cailcédrat d’une espèce identique à l’acajou des forêts sénégaliennes.

Si la pluie ne tombait plus, le ciel ne s’était pas dégagé de ces brumailles dont le soleil n’avait pu percer l’épaisseur. Il n’en faudrait pas inférer que la nuit serait froide. Un thermomètre eût marqué de vingt-cinq à vingt-six degrés centigrades. Le feu pétilla bientôt entre les pierres de la crique, et ce fut uniquement pour les exigences culinaires, le rôtissage d’un quartier de sassaby. Cette fois, Llanga eût vainement cherché des mollusques afin de varier le menu, ou des bananes pour édulcorer l’eau du rio Johausen, lequel, malgré une certaine ressemblance de nom, ainsi que le fit observer Max Huber, ne rappelait en aucune façon le johannisberg de M. de Metternich. En revanche, on saurait se débarrasser des moustiques par le même procédé que la veille.

À sept heures et demie, il ne faisait pas encore nuit. Une vague clarté se reflétait dans les eaux de la rivière. À sa surface flottaient des amas de roseaux et de plantes, des troncs d’arbres, arrachés des berges.

Tandis que John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis préparaient la couchée, entassant des brassées d’herbes sèches au pied de l’arbre, Llanga allait et venait sur le bord, s’amusant à suivre cette dérive d’épaves flottantes.

En ce moment apparut en amont, à une trentaine de toises, le tronc d’un arbre de taille moyenne, pourvu de toute sa ramure. Il avait été brisé à cinq ou six pieds au-dessous de sa fourche, où la cassure était fraîche. Autour de ces branches, dont les plus basses traînaient dans l’eau, s’entortillait un feuillage assez épais, quelques fleurs, quelques fruits, toute une verdure qui avait survécu a la chute de l’arbre.

Très probablement, cet arbre avait été frappé d’un coup de foudre du dernier orage. De la place où s’implantaient ses racines, il était tombé sur la berge, puis, glissant peu à peu, dégagé des roseaux, saisi par le courant, il dérivait avec les nombreux débris à la surface du rio.

De telles réflexions, il ne faudrait pas s’imaginer que Llanga les eût faites ou fût capable de les faire. Ce tronc, il ne l’aurait pas plus remarqué que les autres épaves animées du même mouvement, si son attention, n’eût été attirée d’une façon toute spéciale.

En effet, dans l’interstice des branches, Llanga crut apercevoir une créature vivante, qui faisait des gestes comme pour appeler au secours. Au milieu de la demi-obscurité, il ne put distinguer l’être en question. Était-il d’origine animale?…

Très indécis, il allait appeler Max Huber et John Cort, lorsque se produisit un nouvel incident.

Le tronc n’était plus qu’a une quarantaine de mètres, en obliquant vers la crique, où était accosté le radeau.

À cet instant, un cri retentit, — un cri singulier, ou plutôt une sorte d’appel désespéré, comme si quelque être humain eût demande aide et assistance. Puis, alors que le tronc passait devant la crique, cet être se précipita dans le courant avec l’évidente intention de gagner la berge.

Llanga crut reconnaître un enfant, d’une taille inférieure à la sienne. Cet enfant avait dû se trouver sur l’arbre au moment de sa chute. Savait-il nager?… Très mal dans tous les cas et pas assez pour atteindre la berge. Visiblement ses forces le trahissaient. Il se débattait, disparaissait, reparaissait, et, par intervalles, une sorte de gloussement s’échappait de ses lèvres.

Obéissant à un sentiment d’humanité, sans prendre le temps de prévenir, Llanga se jeta dans le rio, et gagna la place où l’enfant venait de s’enfoncer une dernière fois.

Aussitôt, John Cort et Max Huber, qui avaient entendu le premier cri, accoururent sur le bord de la crique. Voyant Llanga soutenir un corps à la surface de la rivière, ils lui tendirent la main pour l’aider à remonter sur la berge.

«Eh?… Llanga, s’écria Max Huber, qu’es-tu allé repêcher là?…

— Un enfant… mon ami Max… un enfant… Il se noyait…

— Un enfant?… répéta John Cort.

— Oui, mon ami John.»

Et Llanga s’agenouilla près du petit être qu’il venait de sauver assurément.

Max Huber se pencha, afin de l’observer de plus près.

«Eh!… ce n’est pas un enfant!… déclara-t-il en se relevant.

— Qu’est-ce donc?… demanda John Cort.

— Un petit singe… un rejeton de ces abominables grimaciers qui nous ont assaillis!… Et c’est pour le tirer de la noyade que tu as risqué de te noyer, Llanga?…

— Un enfant… si… un enfant!… répétait Llanga.

— Non, te dis-je, et je t’engage à l’envoyer rejoindre sa famille au fond des bois.»

Était-ce donc qu’il ne crût pas à ce qu’affirmait son ami Max, mais Llanga s’obstinait à voir un enfant dans ce petit être qui lui devait la vie, et qui n’avait pas encore repris connaissance. Aussi, n’entendant pas s’en séparer, il le souleva entre ses bras. Au total, le mieux était de le laisser faire à sa guise. Après l’avoir rapporté au campement, Llanga s’assura que l’enfant respirait encore, il le frictionna, il le réchauffa, puis il le coucha sur l’herbe sèche, attendant que ses yeux se rouvrissent.

La veillée ayant été organisée comme d’habitude, les deux amis ne tardèrent pas à s’endormir, tandis que Khamis resterait de garde jusqu’à minuit. Llanga ne put se livrer au sommeil. Il épiait les plus légers mouvements de son protégé; étendu près de lui, il lui tenait les mains, il écoutait sa respiration… Et quelle fut sa surprise, lorsque, vers onze heures, il entendit ce mot prononcé d’une voix faible: «Ngora… ngora!» comme si cet enfant eût appelé sa mère!

CHAPITRE XI

La journée du 19 Mars

À cette halte, on pouvait estimer à deux cents kilomètres le parcours effectué moitié à pied, moitié avec le radeau. En restait-il encore autant pour atteindre l'Oubanghi?… Non, dans l'opinion du foreloper, et cette seconde partie du voyage se ferait rapidement, à la condition que nul obstacle n'arrêtât la navigation.

On s'embarqua dès le point du jour avec le petit passager supplémentaire, dont Llanga n'avait pas voulu se séparer. Après l'avoir transporté sous le taud de feuillage, il voulut demeurer près de lui, espérant que ses yeux allaient se rouvrir.

Que ce fût un membre de la famille des quadrumanes du continent africain, chimpanzés, orangs, gorilles, mandrilles, babouins et autres, cela ne faisait pas doute dans l'esprit de Max Huber et de John Cort. Ils n'avaient même guère songé à le regarder de plus près, à lui accorder une attention particulière. Cela ne les intéressait pas autrement. Llanga l'avait sauvé, il désirait le garder, comme on garde un pauvre chien recueilli par pitié, soit! Qu'il s'en fît un compagnon, rien de mieux, et cela témoignait de son bon coeur. Après tout, puisque les deux amis avaient adopté le jeune indigène, il était bien permis à celui-ci d'adopter un petit singe. Vraisemblablement, dès qu'il trouverait l'occasion de filer sous bois, ce dernier abandonnerait son sauveur avec cette ingratitude dont les hommes n'ont point le monopole.

Il est vrai, si Llanga était venu dire à John Cort, à Max Huber, même à Khamis: «Il parle, ce singe!… Il a répété trois ou quatre fois le mot «ngora», peut-être leur attention eût-elle été éveillée, leur curiosité aussi!… Peut-être l’eussent-ils examiné avec plus de soin, ce petit animal!… Peut-être auraient-ils découvert en lui quelque échantillon d’une race inconnue jusqu’alors, celle des quadrumanes parlants?…

Mais Llanga se tut, craignant de s’être trompé, d’avoir mal entendu. Il se promit d’observer son protégé, et, si le mot «ngora» ou tout autre s’échappait de ses lèvres, il préviendrait aussitôt son ami John et son ami Max.

C’est donc une des raisons pour lesquelles il demeura sous le taud, essayant de donner un peu de nourriture à son protégé, qui semblait affaibli par un long jeûne. Sans doute, le nourrir serait malaisé, les singes étant frugivores. Or, Llanga n’avait pas un seul fruit à lui offrir, rien que de la chair d’antilope dont il ne s’accommoderait pas. D’ailleurs une fièvre assez forte ne lui eût pas permis de manger et il demeurait dans une sorte d’assoupissement.

«Et comment va ton singe?… demanda Max Huber à Llanga, lorsque celui-ci se montra, une heure après le départ.

— Il dort toujours, mon ami Max.

— Et tu tiens à le garder?…

— Oui… si vous le permettez…

— Je n’y vois aucun inconvénient, Llanga… Mais prends garde qu’il ne te griffe…

— Oh, mon ami Max!

— Il faut se défier!… C'est mauvais comme des chats, ces bêtes- là!…

— Pas celui-ci!… Il est si jeune!… Il a une petite figure si douce!…

— À propos, puisque tu veux en faire ton camarade, occupe-toi de lui donner un nom…

— Un nom?… Et lequel?…

— Jocko, parbleu!… Tous les singes s'appellent Jocko!»

Il est probable que ce nom ne convenait pas à Llanga. Il ne répondit rien et retourna auprès de son protégé.

Pendant cette matinée, la navigation fut favorisée et on n'eut point trop à souffrir de la chaleur. La couche de nuages était assez épaisse pour que le soleil ne pût la traverser. Il y avait lieu de s'en féliciter, puisque le rio Johausen coulait parfois à travers de larges clairières. Impossible de trouver abri le long des berges, où les arbres étaient rares. Le sol redevenait marécageux. Il eût fallu s'écarter d'un demi-kilomètre à droite ou à gauche pour atteindre les plus proches massifs. Ce que l'on devait craindre, c'est que la pluie ne reprît avec sa violence habituelle, mais le ciel s'en tint à des menaces.

Toutefois, si les oiseaux aquatiques volaient par bandes au-dessus du marécage, les ruminants ne s'y montraient guère, d'où vif déplaisir de Max Huber. Aux canards et aux outardes des jours précédents, il eût voulu substituer des antilopes sassabys, inyalas, waterbucks ou autres. C'est pourquoi, posté à l'avant du radeau, sa carabine prête, comme un chasseur à l'affût, fouillait- il du regard la rive dont le foreloper se rapprochait suivant le caprice du courant.

On dut se contenter des cuisses et ailes des volatiles pour le déjeuner de midi. En somme, rien d'étonnant à ce que ces survivants de la caravane du Portugais Urdax se sentissent fatigués de leur alimentation quotidienne. Toujours de la viande rôtie, bouillie ou grillée, toujours de l'eau claire, pas de fruits, pas de pain, pas de sel. Du poisson, et si insuffisamment accommodé! Il leur tardait d'arriver aux premiers établissements de l'Oubanghi, où toutes ces privations seraient vite oubliées, grâce à la généreuse hospitalité des missionnaires.

Ce jour-là, Khamis chercha vainement un emplacement favorable pour la halte. Les rives, hérissées de gigantesques roseaux, semblaient inabordables. Sur leur base, à demi détrempée, comment effectuer un débarquement? Le parcours y gagnait, d'ailleurs, puisque le radeau n'interrompit point sa marche.

On navigua ainsi jusqu'à cinq heures. Entre temps, John Cort et Max Huber causaient des incidents du voyage. Ils s'en remémoraient les divers épisodes depuis le départ de Libreville, les chasses intéressantes et fructueuses dans les régions du haut Oubanghi, les grands abattages d'éléphants, les dangers de ces expéditions, dont ils s'étaient si bien tirés pendant deux mois, puis le retour opéré sans encombre jusqu'au tertre des tamarins, les feux mouvants, l'apparition du formidable troupeau de pachydermes, la caravane attaquée, les porteurs en fuite, le chef Urdax écrasé après la chute de l'arbre, la poursuite des éléphants arrêtée sur la lisière de la grande forêt…

«Triste dénouement à une campagne si heureuse jusque-là!… conclut John Cort. Et qui sait s'il ne sera pas suivi d'un second non moins désastreux?…

— C'est possible, mais, à mon avis, ce n'est pas probable, mon cher John…

— En effet, j’exagère peut-être…

— Certes, et cette forêt n’a pas plus de mystère que vos grands bois du Far West!… Nous n’avons pas même une attaque de Peaux- Rouges à redouter!… Ici, ni nomades, ni sédentaires, ni Chiloux, ni Denkas, ni Monbouttous, ces féroces tribus qui infestent les régions du nord-est en criant: «Viande! viande!» comme de parfaits anthropophages qu’ils n’ont jamais cessé d’être!… Non, et ce cours d’eau auquel nous avons donné le nom du docteur Johausen, dont j’aurais tant désiré de retrouver la trace, ce rio, tranquille et sûr, nous conduira sans fatigues à son confluent avec l’Oubanghi…

— L’Oubanghi, mon cher Max, que nous eussions également atteint en contournant la forêt, en suivant l’itinéraire de ce pauvre Urdax, et cela dans un confortable chariot où rien ne nous eût manqué jusqu’au terme du voyage!

— Vous avez raison, John, et cela eût mieux valu!… Décidément, cette forêt est des plus banales et ne mérite pas d’être visitée!… Ce n’est qu’un bois, un grand bois, rien de plus!… Et, pourtant, elle avait piqué ma curiosité au début… Vous vous rappelez ces flammes qui éclairaient sa lisière, ces torches qui brillaient à travers les branches de ses premiers arbres!… Puis, personne!… Où diable ont pu passer ces négros?… Je me prends parfois à les chercher dans la ramure des baobabs, des bombax, des tamarins et autres géants de la famille forestière!… Non… pas un être humain…

— Max… dit en ce moment John Cort.

— John?… répondit Max Huber.

— Voulez-vous regarder dans cette direction… en aval, sur la rive gauche?…

— Quoi?… Un indigène?…

— Oui… mais un indigène à quatre pattes!… Là-bas, au-dessus des roseaux, une magnifique paire de cornes recourbées en carène…»

L’attention du foreloper venait d’être attirée de ce côté.

«Un buffle…, dit-il.

— Un buffle! répéta Max Huber en saisissant sa carabine. Voilà un fameux plat de résistance, et si je le tiens à bonne portée!…»

Khamis donna un vigoureux coup de godille. Le radeau s’approcha obliquement de la berge. Quelques instants après il ne s’en trouvait pas éloigné d’une trentaine de mètres.

«Que de beefsteaks en perspective!… murmura Max Huber, la carabine appuyée sur son genou gauche.

— À vous le premier coup, Max, lui dit John Cort, et à moi le second… s’il est nécessaire…»

Le buffle ne semblait pas disposé à quitter la place. Arrêté sous le vent, il reniflait l’air à pleines narines, sans avoir le pressentiment du danger qu’il courait. Comme on ne pouvait pas le viser au coeur, il fallait le viser à la tête, et c’est ce que fit Max Huber, dès qu’il fut assuré de le tenir dans sa ligne de mire.

La détonation retentit, la queue de l’animal tournoya en arrière des roseaux, un douloureux mugissement traversa l’espace, et non pas le meuglement habituel aux buffles, preuve qu’il avait reçu le coup mortel.

«Ça y est!» s’écria Max Huber en lançant, avec l’accent du triomphe, cette locution éminemment française.

En effet, John Cort n’eut point à doubler, ce qui économisa une seconde cartouche. La bête, tombée entre les roseaux, glissa au pied de la berge, lançant un jet de sang qui rougit le long de la rive l’eau si limpide du rio Johausen.

Afin de ne pas perdre cette superbe pièce, le radeau se dirigea vers l’endroit où le ruminant s’était abattu, et le foreloper prit ses dispositions pour le dépecer sur place afin d’en retirer les morceaux comestibles.

Les deux amis ne purent qu’admirer cet échantillon des boeufs sauvages d’Afrique, d’une taille gigantesque. Lorsque ces animaux franchissent les plaines par troupes de deux à trois cents, on se figure quelle galopade furieuse au milieu des nuages de poussière soulevés sur leur passage!

C’était un onja, nom par lequel le désignent les indigènes, un taureau solitaire, plus grand que ses congénères de l’Europe, le front plus étroit, le mufle plus allongé, les cornes plus comprimées. Si la peau de l’onja sert à fabriquer des buffleteries d’une solidité supérieure, si ses cornes fournissent la matière des tabatières et des peignes, si ses poils rudes et noirs sont employés à rembourrer les chaises et les selles, c’est avec ses filets, ses côtelettes, ses entrecôtes qu’on obtient une nourriture aussi savoureuse que fortifiante, qu’il s’agisse des buffles de l’Asie, de l’Afrique, ou du buffle de l’Amérique. En somme, Max Huber avait eu là un coup heureux. À moins qu’un onja ne tombe sous la première balle, il est terrible quand il fonce sur le chasseur.

Sa hachette et son couteau aidant, Khamis procéda à l’opération du dépeçage, à laquelle ses compagnons durent l’aider de leur mieux. Il ne fallait pas charger le radeau d’un poids inutile, et vingt kilogrammes de cette chair appétissante devaient suffire à l’alimentation pendant plusieurs jours.

Or, tandis que s’accomplissait ce haut fait, Llanga, si curieux d’ordinaire des choses qui intéressaient son ami Max et son ami John, était resté sous le taud, et voici pour quel motif.

Au bruit de la détonation produite par la carabine, le petit être s’était tiré de son assoupissement. Ses bras avaient fait un léger mouvement. Si ses paupières ne s’étaient pas relevées, du moins, de sa bouche entr’ouverte, de ses lèvres décolorées s’était de nouveau échappé l’unique mot que Llanga eût surpris jusqu’alors:

«Ngora… ngora!»

Cette fois, Llanga ne se trompait pas. Le mot arrivait bien à son oreille, avec une articulation singulière et une sorte de grasseyement provoqué par l’*r* de «ngora».

Ému par l’accent douloureux de cette pauvre créature, Llanga prit sa main brûlante d’une fièvre qui durait depuis la veille. Il remplit la tasse d’eau fraîche, il essaya de lui en verser quelques gouttes dans la bouche sans y parvenir. Les mâchoires, aux dents d’une blancheur éclatante, ne se desserrèrent pas. Llanga, mouillant alors un peu d’herbe sèche, bassina délicatement les lèvres du petit et cela parut lui faire du bien. Sa main pressa faiblement celle qui la tenait, et le mot «ngora» fut encore prononcé.

Et, qu’on ne l’oublie pas, ce mot, d’origine congolaise, les indigènes l’emploient pour désigner la mère… Est-ce donc que ce petit être appelait la sienne?…

La sympathie de Llanga se doublait d’une pitié bien naturelle, à la pensée que ce mot allait peut-être se perdre dans un dernier soupir!… Un singe?… avait dit Max Huber. Non! ce n’était pas un singe!… Voilà ce que Llanga, dans son insuffisance intellectuelle, n’aurait pu s’expliquer.

Il demeura ainsi pendant une heure, tantôt caressant la main de son protégé, tantôt lui imbibant les lèvres, et il ne le quitta qu’au moment où le sommeil l’eut assoupi de nouveau.

Alors, Llanga, se décidant à tout dire, vint rejoindre ses amis, tandis que le radeau, repoussé de la berge, retombait dans le courant.

«Eh bien, redemanda Max Huber en souriant, comment va ton singe?…»

Llanga le regarda, comme s’il eût hésité à répondre. Puis, posant sa main sur le bras de Max Huber:

«Ce n’est pas un singe…, dit-il.

— Pas un singe?… répéta John Cort.

— Allons, il est entêté notre Llanga!… reprit Max Huber. Voyons! tu t’es mis dans la tête que c’était un enfant comme toi?…

— Un enfant… pas comme moi… mais un enfant…

— Écoute, Llanga, reprit John Cort, et plus sérieusement que son compagnon, tu prétends que c’est un enfant?…

— Oui… il a parlé… cette nuit.

— Il a parlé?…

— Et il vient de parler tout à l’heure…

— Et qu’a-t-il dit, ce petit prodige?… demanda Max Huber.

— Il a dit «ngora»…

— Quoi!… ce mot que j’avais entendu?… s’écria John Cort qui ne cacha pas sa surprise.

— Oui… «ngora», affirma le jeune indigène.

Il n’y avait que deux hypothèses: ou Llanga avait été dupe d’une illusion, ou il avait perdu la tête.

«Vérifions cela, dit John Cort, et, pourvu que cela soit vrai, ce sera tout au moins de l’extraordinaire, mon cher Max!»

Tous deux pénétrèrent sous le taud et examinèrent le petit dormeur.

Certes, à première vue, on aurait pu affirmer qu’il devait être de race simienne. Ce qui frappa tout d’abord John Cort, c’est qu’il se trouvait en présence non d’un quadrumane, mais d’un bimane. Or, depuis les dernières classifications généralement admises de Blumenbach, on sait que seul l’homme appartient à cet ordre dans le règne animal. Cette singulière créature ne possédait que deux mains, alors que tous les singes, sans exception, en ont quatre, et ses pieds paraissaient conformés pour la marche, n’étant point préhensifs, comme ceux des types de la race simienne.

John Cort, en premier lieu, le fit remarquer à Max Huber.

«Curieux… très curieux!» répliqua celui-ci.

Quant à la taille de ce petit être, elle ne dépassait pas soixante-quinze centimètres.

Il semblait, d’ailleurs, dans son enfance et ne pas avoir plus de cinq à six ans. Sa peau, dépourvue de poils, présentait un léger duvet roux. Sur son front, son menton, ses joues, aucune apparence de système pileux, qui ne foisonnait que sur sa poitrine, les cuisses et les jambes. Ses oreilles se terminaient par une chair arrondie et molle, différentes de celles des quadrumanes, lesquelles sont dépourvues de lobules. Ses bras ne s’allongeaient pas démesurément. La nature ne l’avait point gratifié du cinquième membre, commun à la plupart des singes, cette queue qui leur sert au tact et à la préhension. Il avait la tête de forme ronde, l’angle facial d’environ quatre-vingts degrés, le nez épaté, le front peu fuyant. Si ce n’étaient pas des cheveux qui garnissaient son crâne, c’était du moins une sorte de toison analogue à celle des indigènes de l’Afrique centrale. Évidemment, ce type se réclamait plus de l’homme que du singe par sa conformation générale, et très probablement aussi par son organisation interne.

À quel degré d’étonnement arrivèrent Max Huber et John Cort, on l’imaginera, en présence d’un être absolument nouveau qu’aucun anthropologiste n’avait jamais observé, et qui, en somme, paraissait tenir le milieu entre l’humanité et l’animalité!

Et puis, Llanga avait affirmé qu’il parlait, — à moins que le jeune indigène n’eût pris pour un mot articulé ce qui n’était qu’un cri ne répondant point à une idée quelconque, un cri dû à l’instinct, non à l’intelligence.

Les deux amis restaient silencieux, espérant que la bouche du petit s’entr’ouvrirait, tandis que Llanga continuait de lui bassiner le front et les tempes. Sa respiration, cependant, était moins haletante, sa peau moins chaude, et l’accès de fièvre touchait à son terme. Enfin ses lèvres se détendirent légèrement.

«Ngora… ngora!…» répéta-t-il.

«Par exemple, s’écria Max Huber, voilà bien qui passe toute raison!»

Et ni l’un ni l’autre ne voulaient croire à ce qu’ils venaient d’entendre.

Quoi! cet être quel qu’il fût, qui n’occupait certainement pas le degré supérieur de l’échelle animale, possédait le don de la parole!… S’il n’avait prononcé jusqu’alors que ce seul mot de la langue congolaise, n’était-il pas à supposer qu’il en employait d’autres, qu’il avait des idées, qu’il savait les traduire par des phrases?…

Ce qu’il y avait à regretter, c’était que ses yeux ne s’ouvrissent pas, qu’on ne pût y chercher ce regard où la pensée se reflète et qui répond à tant de choses. Mais ses paupières restaient fermées, et rien n’indiquait qu’elles fussent prêtes à se relever…

Cependant, John Cort, penché sur lui, épiait les mots ou les cris qui auraient pu lui échapper. Il soutenait sa tête sans qu’il se réveillât, et quelle fut sa surprise, quand il vit un cordon enroulé autour de ce petit cou.

Il fit glisser ce cordon, fait d’une tresse de soie, afin de saisir le noeud d’attache, et presque aussitôt il disait:

«Une médaille!…

— Une médaille?…» répéta Max Huber.

John Cort dénoua le cordon.

Oui! une médaille en nickel, grande comme un sou, avec un nom gravé d’un côté, un profil gravé de l’autre.

Le nom, c’était celui de Johausen; le profil, c’était celui du docteur.

«Lui!… s’écria Max Huber, et ce gamin, décoré de l’ordre du professeur allemand, dont nous avons retrouvé la cage vide!»

Que ces médailles eussent été répandues dans la région du Cameroun, rien d’étonnant à cela, puisque le docteur Johausen en avait maintes fois distribué aux Congolaises et aux Congolais. Mais qu’un insigne de ce genre fût attaché précisément au cou de cet étrange habitant de la forêt de l’Oubanghi…

«C’est fantastique, déclara Max Huber, et, à moins que ces mi- singes mi-hommes n’aient volé cette médaille dans la caisse du docteur…

— Khamis?…» appela John Cort.

S’il appelait le foreloper, c’était pour le mettre au courant de ces choses extraordinaires, et lui demander ce qu’il pensait de cette découverte.

Mais, au même moment, se fit entendre la voix du foreloper, qui criait:

«Monsieur Max… monsieur John!…»

Les deux jeunes gens sortirent du taud et s’approchèrent de

Khamis.

«Écoutez», dit celui-ci.

À cinq cents mètres en aval, la rivière obliquait brusquement vers la droite par un coude où les arbres réapparaissaient en épais massifs. L’oreille, tendue dans cette direction, percevait un mugissement sourd et continu, qui ne ressemblait en rien à des beuglements de ruminants ou des hurlements de fauves. C’était une sorte de brouhaha qui s’accroissait à mesure que le radeau gagnait de ce côté…

«Un bruit suspect… dit John Cort.

— Et dont je ne reconnais pas la nature, ajouta Max Huber.

— Peut-être existe-t-il là-bas une chute ou un rapide?… reprit le foreloper. Le vent souffle du sud, et je sens que l’air est tout mouillé!»

Khamis ne se trompait pas. À la surface du rio passait comme une vapeur liquide qui ne pouvait provenir que d’une violente agitation des eaux.

Si la rivière était barrée par un obstacle, si la navigation allait être interrompue, cela constituait une éventualité assez grave pour que Max Huber et John Cort ne songeassent plus à Llanga ni à son protégé.

Le radeau dérivait avec une certaine rapidité, et, au delà du tournant, on serait fixé sur les causes de ce lointain tumulte.

Le coude franchi, les craintes du foreloper ne furent que trop justifiées.

À cent toises environ, un entassement de roches noirâtres formait barrage d’une rive à l’autre, sauf à son milieu, où les eaux se précipitaient en le couronnant d’écume. De chaque côté, elles venaient se heurter contre une digue naturelle et, à certains endroits, bondissaient par-dessus. C’était, à la fois, le rapide au centre, la chute latéralement. Si le radeau ne ralliait pas l’une des berges, si on ne parvenait pas à l’y fixer solidement, il serait entraîné et se briserait contre le barrage, à moins qu’il ne chavirât dans le rapide.

Tous avaient gardé leur sang-froid. D’ailleurs, pas un instant à perdre, car la vitesse du courant s’accentuait.

«À la berge… à la berge!» cria Khamis.

Il était alors six heures et demie, et, par ce temps brumeux, le crépuscule ne laissait déjà plus qu’une douteuse clarté, qui ne permettait guère de distinguer les objets.

Cette difficulté, ajoutée à tant d’autres, compliquait la manoeuvre.

Ce fut en vain que Khamis essaya de diriger le radeau vers la berge. Ses forces n’y suffisaient pas. Max Huber se joignit à lui afin de résister au courant qui portait en droite ligne vers le centre du barrage. À deux, ils obtinrent un certain résultat, et auraient réussi à sortir de cette dérive, si la godille ne se fût rompue.

«Soyons prêts à nous jeter sur les roches, avant d’être engagés dans le rapide… commanda Khamis.

— Pas autre chose à faire!» répondit John Cort.

À tout ce bruit, Llanga venait de quitter le taud. Il regarda, il comprit le danger… Au lieu de songer à lui, il songea à l’autre, au petit. Il vint le prendre dans ses bras, et s’agenouilla à l’arrière.

Une minute après, le radeau était repris par le rapide. Toutefois, peut-être ne heurterait-il pas le barrage et descendrait-il sans chavirer?…

La mauvaise chance l’emporta, et ce fut contre un des rochers de gauche que le fragile appareil butta avec une violence extrême. En vain Khamis et ses compagnons essayèrent-ils de s’accrocher au barrage, sur lequel ils parvinrent à lancer la caisse de cartouches, les armes, les ustensiles…

Tous furent précipités dans le tourbillon à l’instant où s’écrasait le radeau, dont les débris disparurent en aval au milieu des eaux mugissantes.

CHAPITRE XII

Sous bois

Le lendemain, trois hommes étaient étendus près d’un foyer dont les derniers charbons achevaient de se consumer. Vaincus par la fatigue, incapables de résister au sommeil, après avoir repris leurs vêtements séchés devant ce feu, ils s’étaient endormis.

Quelle heure était-il et même faisait-il jour ou faisait-il nuit?… Aucun d’eux ne l’eût pu dire. Cependant, à supputer le temps écoulé depuis la veille, il semblait bien que le soleil dût être au-dessus de l’horizon. Mais dans quelle direction se plaçait l’est?… Cette demande, si elle eût été faite, fût restée sans réponse.

Ces trois hommes étaient-ils donc au fond d’une caverne, en un lieu impénétrable à la lumière diurne?…

Non, autour d’eux se pressaient des arbres en si grand nombre qu’ils arrêtaient le regard à la distance de quelques mètres. Même pendant la flambée, entre les énormes troncs et les lianes qui se tendaient de l’un à l’autre, il eût été impossible de reconnaître un sentier praticable à des piétons. La ramure inférieure plafonnait à une cinquantaine de pieds seulement. Au-dessus, si dense était le feuillage, jusqu’à l’extrême cime, que ni la clarté des étoiles ni les rayons du soleil ne passaient au travers. Une prison n’aurait pas été plus obscure, ses murs n’eussent pas été plus infranchissables, et ce n’était pourtant qu’un des sous-bois de la grande forêt.

Dans ces trois hommes, on eût reconnu John Cort, Max Huber et

Khamis.

Par quel enchaînement de circonstances se trouvaient-ils en cet endroit?… Ils l’ignoraient. Après la dislocation du radeau contre le barrage, n’ayant pu se retenir aux roches, ils avaient été précipités dans les eaux du rapide, et ne savaient rien de ce qui avait suivi cette catastrophe. À qui le foreloper et ses compagnons devaient-ils leur salut?… Qui les avait transportés jusqu’à cet épais massif avant qu’ils eussent repris connaissance?…

Par malheur, tous n’avaient pas échappé à ce désastre. L’un d’eux manquait, l’enfant adoptif de John Cort et de Max Huber, le pauvre Llanga, et aussi le petit être qu’il avait sauvé une première fois… Et qui sait si ce n’était pas en voulant le sauver une seconde qu’il avait péri avec lui?…

Maintenant, Khamis, John Cort, Max Huber, ne possédaient ni munitions ni armes, aucun ustensile, sauf leurs couteaux de poche et la hachette, que le foreloper portait à sa ceinture. Plus de radeau, et d’ailleurs de quel côté se fussent-ils dirigés pour rencontrer le cours du rio Johausen?…

Et la question de nourriture, comment la résoudre? Les produits de la chasse allaient faire défaut?… Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber en seraient-ils réduits aux racines, aux fruits sauvages, insuffisantes ressources et très problématiques?… N’était-ce pas la perspective de mourir de faim à bref délai?…

Délai de deux ou trois jours, toutefois, car l’alimentation serait du moins assurée pour ce laps de temps. Ce qui restait du buffle avait été déposé en cet endroit. Après s’en être partagé les quelques tranches déjà cuites, ils s’étaient endormis autour de ce feu prêt à s’éteindre.

John Cort se réveilla le premier au milieu d'une obscurité que la nuit n'aurait pas rendue plus profonde. Ses yeux s'accoutumant à ces ténèbres, il aperçut vaguement Max Huber et Khamis couchés au pied des arbres. Avant de les tirer de leur sommeil, il alla ranimer le foyer en rapprochant les bouts de tisons qui brûlaient sous la cendre. Puis il ramassa une brassée de bois mort, d'herbes sèches, et bientôt une flamme pétillante jeta ses lueurs sur le campement.

«À présent, dit John Cort, avisons à sortir de là, mais comment?…»

Le pétillement du foyer ne tarda pas à réveiller Max Huber et Khamis. Ils se relevèrent presque au même instant. Le sentiment de la situation leur revint, et ils firent ce qu'il y avait à faire: ils tinrent conseil.

«Où sommes-nous?… demanda Max Huber.

— Où l'on nous a transportés, répondit John Cort, et j'entends par là que nous ne savons rien de ce qui s'est passé depuis…

— Depuis une nuit et un jour peut-être…, ajouta Max Huber. Est- ce hier que notre radeau s'est brisé contre le barrage?… Khamis, avez-vous quelque idée à ce sujet?…»

Pour toute réponse, le foreloper se contenta de secouer la tête. Impossible de déterminer le compte du temps écoulé, ni de dire dans quelles conditions s'était effectué le sauvetage.

«Et Llanga?… demanda John Cort. Il a certainement péri puisqu'il n'est pas avec nous!… Ceux qui nous ont sauvés n'ont pu le retirer du rapide…

— Pauvre enfant! soupira Max Huber, il avait pour nous une si vive affection!… Nous l'aimions… nous lui aurions fait une existence si heureuse!… L’avoir arraché aux mains de ces Denkas, et maintenant… Pauvre enfant!»

Les deux amis n’eussent pas hésité à risquer leur vie pour Llanga… Mais, eux aussi, ils avaient été bien près de périr dans le tourbillon, et ils ignoraient à qui était dû leur salut…

Inutile d’ajouter qu’ils ne songeaient plus à la singulière créature recueillie par le jeune indigène, et qui s’était noyée avec lui, sans doute. Bien d’autres questions les préoccupaient à cette heure, — questions autrement graves que ce problème d’anthropologie relatif à un type moitié homme et moitié singe.

John Cort reprit:

«Lorsque je fais appel à ma mémoire, je ne me rappelle plus rien des faits qui ont suivi la collision contre le barrage… Un peu avant, il m’a semblé voir Khamis debout, lançant les armes et les ustensiles sur les roches…

— Oui, dit Khamis, et assez heureusement pour que ces objets ne soient pas tombés dans le rio… Ensuite…

— Ensuite, déclara Max Huber, au moment où nous avons été engloutis, j’ai cru… oui… j’ai cru apercevoir des hommes…

— Des hommes… en effet…, répondit vivement John Cort, des indigènes qui en gesticulant, en criant, se précipitèrent vers le barrage…

— Vous avez vu des indigènes?… demanda le foreloper, très surpris.

— Une douzaine environ, affirma Max Huber, et ce sont eux, suivant toute probabilité, qui nous ont retirés du rio…

— Puis, ajouta John Cort, sans que nous eussions repris connaissance, ils nous ont transportés en cet endroit… avec ce reste de provisions… Enfin, après avoir allumé ce feu, ils se sont hâtés de disparaître…

— Et ont même si bien disparu, ajouta Max Huber, que nous n'en retrouvons pas trace!… C'est montrer qu'ils tenaient peu à notre gratitude…

— Patience, mon cher Max, répliqua John Cort, il est possible qu'ils soient autour de ce campement… Comment admettre qu'ils nous y eussent conduits pour nous abandonner ensuite?…

— Et en quel lieu!… s'écria Max Huber. Qu'il y ait dans cette forêt de l'Oubanghi des fourrés si épais, cela passe l'imagination!… Nous sommes en pleine obscurité…

— D'accord… mais fait-il jour?…» observa John Cort.

Cette question ne tarda pas à se résoudre affirmativement. Si opaque que fût le feuillage, on percevait au-dessus de la cime des arbres, hauts de cent à cent cinquante pieds, les vagues lueurs de l'espace. Il ne paraissait pas douteux que le soleil, en ce moment, éclairât l'horizon. Les montres de John Cort et de Max Huber, trempées des eaux du rio, ne pouvaient plus indiquer l'heure. Il faudrait donc s'en rapporter à la position du disque solaire, et encore ne serait-ce possible que si ses rayons pénétraient à travers les ramures.

Tandis que les deux amis échangeaient ces diverses questions auxquelles ils ne savaient comment répondre, Khamis les écoutait sans prononcer une parole. Il s'était relevé, il parcourait l'étroite place que ces énormes arbres laissaient libre, entourée d'une barrière de lianes et de sizyphus épineux. En même temps, il cherchait à découvrir un coin de ciel dans l'intervalle des branches; il tentait de retrouver en lui ce sens de l'orientation qui n'aurait jamais occasion pareille de s'exercer utilement. S'il avait déjà traversé les bois du Congo ou du Cameroun, il ne s'était pas engagé à travers des régions si impénétrables. Cette partie de la grande forêt ne pouvait être comparée à celle que ses compagnons et lui avaient franchie depuis la lisière jusqu'au rio Johausen. À partir de ce point, ils étaient généralement dirigés vers le sud-ouest. Mais de quel côté était maintenant le sud- ouest, et l'instinct de Khamis le fixerait-il à cet égard?…

Au moment où John Cort, devinant son hésitation, allait l'interroger, ce fut lui qui demanda:

«Monsieur Max, vous êtes certain d'avoir aperçu des indigènes près du barrage?…

— Très certain, Khamis, au moment où le radeau se fracassait contre les roches.

— Et sur quelle rive?…

— Sur la rive gauche.

— Vous dites bien la rive gauche?…

— Oui… la rive gauche.

— Nous serions donc à l'est du rio?…

— Sans doute, et, par conséquent, ajouta John Cort, dans la partie la plus profonde de la forêt… Mais à quelle distance du rio Johausen?…

— Cette distance ne peut être considérable, déclara Max Huber. L’estimer à quelques kilomètres, ce serait exagérer. Il est inadmissible que nos sauveteurs, quels qu’ils soient, nous aient transportés loin…

— Je suis de cet avis, affirma Khamis, le rio ne peut pas être éloigné… aussi avons-nous intérêt à le rejoindre, puis à reprendre notre navigation au-dessous du barrage, dès que nous aurons construit un radeau…

— Et comment vivre jusque-là, puis pendant la descente vers l’Oubanghi?… objecta Max Huber. Nous n’avons plus les ressources de la chasse…

— En outre, fit remarquer John Cort, de quel côté chercher le rio Johausen?… Que nous ayons débarqué sur la rive gauche, je l’accorde… Mais, avec l’impossibilité de s’orienter, peut-on affirmer que le rio soit dans une direction plutôt que dans une autre?…

— Et d’abord, demanda Max Huber, par où, s’il vous plaît, sortir de ce fourré?…

— Par là», répondit le foreloper.

Et il montrait une déchirure du rideau de lianes à travers laquelle ses compagnons et lui avaient dû être introduits en cet endroit. Au-delà se dessinait une sente obscure et sinueuse qui semblait praticable.

Où cette sente conduisait-elle?… Était-ce au rio?… Rien de moins certain… Ne se croisait-elle pas avec d’autres?… Ne risquait-on pas de s’égarer dans ce labyrinthe?… D’ailleurs, avant quarante-huit heures, ce qui restait du buffle serait dévoré… Et après?… Quant à étancher sa soif, les pluies étaient assez fréquentes pour écarter toute crainte à cet égard.

«Dans tous les cas, observa John Cort, ce n’est pas en prenant racine ici que l’on se tirera d’embarras, et il faut au plus tôt quitter la place…

— Mangeons d’abord», dit Max Huber.

Environ un kilogramme de viande fut partagé en trois parts, et chacun dut se contenter de ce mince repas!…

«Et dire, reprit Max Huber, que nous ne savons même pas si c’est un déjeuner ou un dîner…

— Qu’importe! répliqua John Cort, l’estomac n’a que faire de ces distinctions…

— Soit, mais il a besoin de boire, l’estomac, et quelques gouttes du rio Johausen, je les accueillerais comme le meilleur cru des vins de France!…»

Tandis qu’ils mangeaient, ils étaient redevenus silencieux. De cette obscurité se dégageait une vague impression d’inquiétude et de malaise. L’atmosphère, imprégnée des senteurs humides du sol, s’alourdissait sous ce dôme de feuillage. En ce milieu qui semblait même impropre au vol des oiseaux, pas un cri, pas un chant, pas un battement d’aile. Parfois le bruit sec d’une branche morte dont la chute s’amortissait au contact du tapis de mousses spongieuses étendu d’un tronc à l’autre. Par instants, aussi, un sifflement aigu, puis le froufrou entre les feuilles sèches d’un de ces serpenteaux des brousses, longs de cinquante à soixante centimètres, heureusement inoffensifs. Quant aux insectes, ils bourdonnaient comme d’habitude et n’avaient point épargné leurs piqûres.

Le repas achevé, tous trois se levèrent.

Après avoir ramassé le morceau de buffle, Khamis se dirigea vers le passage que laissaient entre elles les lianes.

En cet instant, à plusieurs reprises et d’une voix forte, Max

Huber jeta cet appel:

«Llanga!… Llanga!… Llanga!…»

Ce fut en vain, et aucun écho ne renvoya le nom du jeune indigène.

«Partons», dit le foreloper.

Et il prit les devants.

À peine avait-il mis le pied sur la sente qu’il s’écria:

«Une lumière!…»

Max Huber et John Cort s’avancèrent vivement.

«Les indigènes?… dit l’un.

— Attendons!» répondit l’autre.

La lumière — très probablement une torche enflammée — apparaissait en direction de la sente à quelques centaines de pas. Elle n’éclairait la profondeur du bois que dans un faible rayon, piquant de vives lueurs le dessous des hautes ramures.

Où se dirigeait celui qui portait cette torche?… Était-il seul?… Y avait-il lieu de craindre une attaque, ou était-ce un secours qui arrivait?…

Khamis et les deux amis hésitaient à s’engager plus avant dans la forêt.

Deux ou trois minutes s’écoulèrent.

La torche ne s’était pas déplacée.

Quant à supposer que cette lueur fût celle d’un feu follet, non assurément, étant donnée sa fixité.

«Que faire?… demanda John Cort.

— Marcher vers cette lumière, puisqu’elle ne vient pas à nous, répondit Max Huber.

— Allons», dit Khamis.

Le foreloper remonta la sente de quelques pas. Aussitôt la torche de s’éloigner. Le porteur s’était-il donc aperçu que ces trois étrangers venaient de se mettre en mouvement?… Voulait-on éclairer leur marche sous ces obscurs massifs de la forêt, les ramener vers le rio Johausen ou tout autre cours d’eau tributaire de l’Oubanghi?…

Ce n’était pas le cas de temporiser. Il fallait d’abord suivre cette lumière, puis tenter de reprendre la route vers le sud- ouest.

Et les voici suivant l’étroit sentier, sur un sol dont les herbes étaient refoulées depuis longtemps, les lianes rompues, les broussailles écartées par le passage des hommes ou des animaux.

Sans parler des arbres que Khamis et ses compagnons avaient déjà rencontrés, il en était d’autres d’espèce plus rare, tel le gura crepitans à fruits explosibles, qui ne s’était encore trouvé qu’en Amérique dans la famille des euphorbiacées, dont l’écorce tendre renferme une substance laiteuse, et dont la noix éclate à grand bruit en lançant au loin sa semence;

tel le tsofar, l’arbre siffleur, entre les branches duquel le vent sifflait comme à travers une fente, et qui n’avait été signalé que dans les forêts nubiennes.

John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis marchèrent ainsi pendant trois heures environ, et, lorsqu’ils firent halte après cette première étape, la lumière s’arrêta au même instant…

«Décidément, c’est un guide, déclara Max Huber, un guide d’une parfaite complaisance!… Si nous savions seulement où il nous mène…

— Qu’il nous sorte de ce labyrinthe, répondit John Cort, et je ne lui en demande pas davantage!… Eh bien, Max, tout cela, est-ce assez extraordinaire?…

— Assez… en effet!…

— Pourvu que cela ne le devienne pas trop, cher ami!» ajouta John

Cort.

Pendant l’après-midi, le sinueux sentier ne cessa de courir sous les frondaisons de plus en plus opaques. Khamis se tenait en tête, ses compagnons derrière lui, en file indienne, car il n’y avait passage que pour une seule personne. S’ils pressaient parfois le pas, afin de se rapprocher de leur guide, celui-ci, pressant également le sien, maintenait invariablement sa distance.

Vers six heures du soir, d’après l’estime, quatre à cinq lieues avaient dû être franchies depuis le départ. Cependant, l’intention de Khamis, en dépit de la fatigue, était de suivre la lumière, tant qu’elle se montrerait, et il allait se remettre en marche, lorsqu’elle s’éteignit soudain.

«Faisons halte, dit John Cort. C’est évidemment une indication qui nous est donnée…

— Ou plutôt un ordre, observa Max Huber.

— Obéissons donc, répliqua le foreloper, et passons la nuit en cet endroit.

— Mais demain, ajouta John Cort, la lumière va-t-elle reparaître?…»

C’était la question.

Tous trois s’étendirent au pied d’un arbre. On se partagea un morceau de buffle, et, heureusement, il fut possible de se désaltérer à un petit filet liquide qui serpentait sous les herbes. Bien que les pluies fussent fréquentes dans cette région forestière, il n’était pas tombé une seule goutte d’eau depuis quarante-huit heures.

«Qui sait même, remarqua John Cort, si notre guide n’a pas précisément choisi cet endroit parce que nous y trouverions à nous désaltérer?…

— Délicate attention», avoua Max Huber, en puisant un peu de cette eau fraîche au moyen d’une feuille roulée en cornet.

Quelque inquiétante que fût la situation, la lassitude l’emporta, le sommeil ne se fit pas attendre. Mais John Cort et Max Huber ne s’endormirent pas sans avoir parlé de Llanga… Le pauvre enfant! S’était-il noyé dans le rapide?… S’il avait été sauvé, pourquoi ne l’avait-on pas revu?… Pourquoi n’avait-il pas rejoint ses deux amis, John et Max?…

Lorsque les dormeurs se réveillèrent, une faible lueur, perçant les branchages, indiqua qu’il faisait jour. Khamis crut pouvoir conclure qu’ils avaient suivi la direction de l’est. Par malheur, c’était aller du mauvais côté… En tout cas, il n’y avait qu’à reprendre la route.

«Et la lumière?… dit John Cort.

— La voici qui reparaît, répondit Khamis.

— Ma foi, s’écria Max Huber, c’est l’étoile des rois Mages… Toutefois elle ne nous conduit pas vers l’occident, et quand arriverons-nous à Bethléem?…»

Aucune aventure ne marqua cette journée du 22 mars. La torche lumineuse ne cessa de guider la petite troupe toujours en direction de l’est.

De chaque côté de la sente, la futaie paraissait impénétrable, des troncs serrés les uns contre les autres, un inextricable entrelacement de broussailles. Il semblait que le foreloper et ses compagnons fussent engagés à travers un interminable boyau de verdure. Sur plusieurs points cependant, quelques sentiers, non moins étroits, coupaient celui que choisissait le guide, et, sans lui, Khamis n’aurait su lequel prendre.

Pas un seul ruminant ne fut aperçu, et comment des animaux de grande taille se seraient-ils aventurés jusque-là? Plus de ces passées dont le foreloper avait profité avant d’atteindre les rives du rio Johausen.

Aussi, lors même que les deux chasseurs auraient eu leurs fusils, combien inutiles, puisqu’il ne se présentait pas une seule pièce de gibier!

C’était donc avec une appréhension très justifiée que John Cort, Max Huber et le foreloper voyaient leur nourriture presque entièrement épuisée. Encore un repas, et il ne resterait plus rien. Et si, le lendemain, ils n’étaient pas arrivés à destination, c’est-à-dire au terme de cet extraordinaire cheminement à la suite de cette mystérieuse lumière, que deviendraient-ils?…

Comme la veille, la torche s’éteignit vers le soir, et, comme la précédente, cette nuit se passa sans trouble.

Lorsque John Cort se releva le premier, il réveilla ses compagnons en s’écriant:

«On est venu ici pendant que nous dormions!»

En effet, un feu était allumé, quelques charbons ardents formaient braise, et un morceau d’antilope pendait à la basse branche d’un acacia au-dessus d’un petit ruisseau.

Cette fois, Max Huber ne fit pas même entendre une exclamation de surprise.

Ni ses compagnons ni lui ne voulaient discuter les étrangetés de cette situation, ce guide inconnu qui les conduisait vers un but non moins inconnu, ce génie de la grande forêt dont ils suivaient les traces depuis l’avant-veille…

La faim se faisant vivement sentir, Khamis fit griller le morceau d’antilope, qui suffirait pour les deux repas de midi et du soir.

À ce moment, la torche redonna le signal du départ.

Marche reprise et dans les mêmes conditions. Toutefois, l’après- midi, on put constater que l’épaisseur de la futaie diminuait peu à peu. Le jour y pénétrait davantage, tout au moins à travers la cime des arbres. Pourtant, il fut encore impossible de distinguer l’être quelconque qui cheminait en avant.

Ainsi que la veille, de cinq à six lieues, toujours à l’estime, furent franchies pendant cette journée. Depuis le rio Johausen, le parcours pouvait être d’une soixantaine de kilomètres.

Ce soir-là, à l’instant où s’éteignit la torche, Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber s’arrêtèrent. Il faisait nuit, sans doute, car une obscurité profonde enveloppait ce massif. Très fatigués de ces longues étapes, après avoir achevé le morceau d’antilope, après s’être désaltérés d’eau fraîche, tous trois s’étendirent au pied d’un arbre et s’endormirent…

Et — en rêve assurément — est-ce que Max Huber ne crut pas entendre le son d’un instrument qui jouait au-dessus de sa tête la valse si connue du *Freyschutz* de Weber!…

CHAPITRE XIII

Le village aérien

Le lendemain, à leur réveil, le foreloper et ses compagnons observaient, non sans grande surprise, que l’obscurité était plus profonde encore en cette partie de la forêt. Faisait-il jour?… ils n’auraient pu l’affirmer. Quoi qu’il en soit, la lumière qui les guidait depuis soixante heures ne reparaissait pas. Donc nécessité d’attendre qu’elle se montrât pour reprendre la marche.

Toutefois, une remarque fut faite par John Cort — remarque dont ses compagnons et lui déduisirent aussitôt certaines conséquences:

«Ce qui est à noter, dit-il, c’est que nous n’avons point eu de feu ce matin et personne n’est venu pendant notre sommeil nous apporter notre ordinaire…

— C’est d’autant plus regrettable, ajouta Max Huber, qu’il ne reste plus rien…

— Peut-être, reprit le foreloper, cela indique-t-il que nous sommes arrivés…

— Où?… demanda John Cort.

— Où l’on nous conduisait, mon cher John!»

C’était une réponse qui ne répondait pas; mais le moyen d’être plus explicite?…

Autre remarque: si la forêt était plus obscure, il ne semblait pas qu’elle fût plus silencieuse. On entendait comme une sorte de bourdonnement aérien, une rumeur désordonnée, qui venait des ramures supérieures. En regardant, Khamis, Max Huber et John Cort distinguaient vaguement comme un large plafond étendu à une centaine de pieds au-dessus du sol.

Nul doute, il existait à cette hauteur un prodigieux enchevêtrement de branches, sans aucun interstice par lequel se fût glissée la clarté du jour. Une toiture de chaume n’aurait pas été plus impénétrable à la lumière. Cette disposition expliquait l’obscurité qui régnait sous les arbres.

À l’endroit où tous les trois avaient campé cette nuit-là, la nature du sol était très modifiée. Plus de ces ronces entremêlées, de ces sizyphus épineux qui l’obstruaient en dehors de la sente. Une herbe presque rase, et aucun ruminant n’eût pu «y tondre la largeur de sa langue». Que l’on se figure une prairie dont ni les pluies ni les sources n’arroseraient jamais la surface.

Les arbres, laissant entre eux des intervalles de vingt à trente pieds, ressemblaient aux bas piliers d’une substruction colossale et leurs ramures devaient couvrir une aire de plusieurs milliers de mètres superficiels.

Là, en effet, s’agglroméraient ces sycomores africains dont le tronc se compose d’une quantité de tiges soudées entre elles; des bombax au fût symétrique, aux racines gigantesques et d’une taille supérieure à celle de leurs congénères; des baobabs, reconnaissables à la forme de courge qu’ils prennent à leur base, d’une circonférence de vingt à trente mètres, et que surmonte un énorme faisceau de branches pendantes; des palmiers doum à tronc bifurqué; des palmiers deleb à tronc gibbeux; des fromagers à tronc évidé en une série de cavités assez grandes pour qu’un homme puisse s’y blottir; des acajous donnant des billes d’un mètre cinquante de diamètre et que l’on peut creuser en embarcations de quinze à dix-huit mètres, d’une capacité de trois à quatre tonnes; des dragonniers aux gigantesques dimensions; des bauhinias, simples arbrisseaux sous d’autres latitudes, ici les géants de cette famille de légumineuses. On imagine ce que devait être l'épanouissement des cimes, de ces arbres à quelques centaines de pieds dans les airs.

Une heure environ s'écoula. Khamis ne cessait de promener ses regards en tous sens, guettant la lueur conductrice… Et pourquoi eût-il renoncé à suivre le guide inconnu?… Il est vrai, son instinct, joint à de certaines observations, l'incitait à penser qu'il s'était toujours dirigé vers l'est. Or, ce n'était pas de ce côté que se dessinait le cours de l'Oubanghi, ce n'était pas le chemin du retour… Où donc les avait entraînés cette étrange lumière?…

Puisqu'elle ne reparaissait pas, que faire?… Quitter cet endroit?… Pour aller où?… Y demeurer?… Et se nourrir en route?… On avait déjà faim et soif…

«Cependant, dit John Cort, nous serons bien forcés de partir, et je me demande s'il ne vaudrait pas mieux se mettre tout de suite en marche…

— De quel côté?…» objecta Max Huber.

C'était la question, et sur quel indice pouvait-on s'appuyer pour la résoudre?…

«Enfin, reprit John Cort impatienté, nos pieds ne sont pas enracinés ici, que je sache!… La circulation est possible entre ces arbres, et l'obscurité n'est pas si profonde qu'on ne puisse se diriger…

— Venez!…» ordonna Khamis.

Et tous trois allèrent en reconnaissance sur une étendue d'un demi-kilomètre. Ils foulaient invariablement le même sol débroussaillé, le même tapis nu et sec, tel qu'il eût été sous l'abri d'une toiture impénétrable à la pluie comme aux rayons du soleil. Partout les mêmes arbres, dont on ne voyait que les basses branches. Et toujours aussi cette rumeur confuse qui semblait tomber d'en haut et dont l'origine demeurait inexplicable.

Ce dessous de forêt était-il absolument désert?… Non, et, à plusieurs reprises, Khamis crut apercevoir des ombres se glisser entre les arbres. Était-ce une illusion?… Il ne savait trop que penser. Enfin, après une demi-heure infructueusement employée, ses compagnons et lui vinrent s'asseoir près du tronc d'un bauhinia.

Leurs yeux commençaient à se faire à cette obscurité, qui s'atténuait d'ailleurs. Grâce au soleil montant, un peu de clarté se propageait sous ce plafond tendu au-dessus du sol. Déjà on pouvait distinguer les objets à une vingtaine de pas.

Et voici que ces mots furent prononcés à mi-voix par le foreloper:

«Quelque chose remue là-bas…

— Un animal ou un homme?… demanda John Cort en regardant dans cette direction.

— Ce serait un enfant, en tout cas, fit observer Khamis, car il est de petite taille…

— Un singe, parbleu!» déclara Max Huber.

Immobiles, ils gardaient le silence, afin de ne point effrayer ledit quadrumane. Si l'on parvenait à s'en emparer, eh bien malgré la répugnance manifestée pour la chair simienne par Max Huber et John Cort… Il est vrai, faute de feu, comment griller ou rôtir?… À mesure qu'il s'approchait, cet être ne témoignait aucun étonnement. Il marchait sur ses pattes de derrière, et s’arrêta à quelques pas.

Quelle fut la stupéfaction de John Cort et de Max Huber, lorsqu’ils reconnurent cette singulière créature que Llanga avait sauvée, le protégé du jeune indigène!…

Et ces mots de s’échanger:

«Lui… c’est lui…

— Positivement…

— Mais alors, puisque ce petit est ici, pourquoi Llanga n’y serait-il pas?…

— Êtes-vous sûrs de ne pas vous tromper?… demanda le foreloper.

— Très sûrs, affirma John Cort, et, d’ailleurs, nous allons bien voir!»

Il tira de sa poche la médaille enlevée au cou du petit et, la tenant par le cordon, la balança comme un objet que l’on présente aux yeux d’un enfant pour l’attirer.

À peine celui-ci eut-il aperçu la médaille, qu’il s’élança d’un bond. Il n’était plus malade, à présent!… Pendant ces trois jours d’absence, il avait recouvré la santé et, en même temps, sa souplesse naturelle. Aussi fonça-t-il sur John Cort avec l’évidente intention de reprendre son bien.

Khamis le saisit au passage, et alors ce ne fut plus le mot «ngora» qui s’échappa de la bouche du petit, ce furent ces mots nettement articulés:

«Li-Maï!… Ngala… Ngala!…»

Ce que signifiaient ces mots d’une langue inconnue même à Khamis, ses compagnons et lui n’eurent pas le temps de se le demander. Brusquement apparurent d’autres types de la même espèce, hauts de taille ceux-là, n’ayant pas moins de cinq pieds et demi des talons à la nuque.

Khamis, John Cort, Max Huber n’avaient pu reconnaître s’ils avaient affaire à des hommes ou à des quadrumanes. Résister à ces sylvestres de la grande forêt d’une douzaine eût été inutile. Le foreloper, Max Huber, John Cort, furent appréhendés par les bras, poussés en avant, contraints à s’acheminer entre les arbres, et, entourés de la bande, ils ne s’arrêtèrent qu’après un parcours de cinq à six cents mètres.

À cet endroit, l’inclinaison de deux arbres, assez rapprochés l’un de l’autre, avait permis d’y fixer des branches transversales, disposées comme des marches. Si ce n’était pas un escalier, c’était mieux qu’une échelle. Cinq ou six individus de l’escorte y grimpèrent, tandis que les autres obligeaient leurs prisonniers à suivre le même chemin, sans les brutaliser toutefois.

À mesure que l’on s’élevait, la lumière se laissait percevoir à travers les frondaisons. Entre les interstices filtraient quelques rayons de ce soleil dont Khamis et ses compagnons avaient été privés depuis qu’ils avaient quitté le cours du rio Johausen.

Max Huber aurait été de mauvaise foi s’il se fût refusé à convenir que, décidément, cela rentrait dans la catégorie des choses extraordinaires.

Lorsque l’ascension prit fin, à une centaine de pieds environ du sol, quelle fut leur surprise! Ils voyaient se développer devant eux une plate-forme largement éclairée par la lumière du ciel. Au- dessus s’arrondissaient les cimes verdoyantes des arbres. À sa surface étaient rangées dans un certain ordre des cases de pisé jaune et de feuillage, bordant des rues. Cet ensemble formait un village établi à cette hauteur sur une étendue telle qu’on ne pouvait en apercevoir les limites.

Là allaient et venaient une foule d’indigènes de type semblable à celui du protégé de Llanga. Leur station, identique à celle de l’homme, indiquait qu’ils avaient l’habitude de marcher debout, ayant ainsi droit à ce qualificatif d’*erectus* donné par le docteur Eugène Dubois aux pithécanthropus trouvés dans les forêts de Java, — caractère anthropogénique que ce savant regarde comme l’un des plus importants de l’intermédiaire entre l’homme et les singes conformément aux prévisions de Darwin.

Si les anthropologistes ont pu dire que les plus élevés des quadrumanes dans l’échelle simienne, ceux qui se rapprochent davantage de la conformation humaine, en diffèrent cependant par cette particularité qu’ils se servent de leurs quatre membres quand ils fuient, il semblait bien que cette remarque n’aurait pu s’appliquer aux habitants du village aérien.

Mais Khamis, Max Huber, John Cort, durent remettre à plus tard leurs observations à ce sujet. Que ces êtres dussent se placer ou non entre l’animal et l’homme, leur escorte, tout en conversant dans un idiome incompréhensible, les poussa vers une case au milieu d’une population qui les regardait sans trop s’étonner. La porte fut refermée sur eux et ils se virent bel et bien emprisonnés dans ladite case.

«Parfait!… déclara Max Huber. Et, ce qui me surprend le plus, c’est que ces originaux-là n’ont pas l’air de nous prêter attention!… Est-ce qu’ils ont déjà vu des hommes?…

— C’est possible, reprit John Cort, mais reste à savoir s’ils ont l’habitude de nourrir leurs prisonniers…

— Ou s’ils n’ont pas plutôt celle de s’en nourrir!» ajouta Max

Huber.

Et, en effet, puisque, dans les tribus de l’Afrique, les Monbouttous et autres se livrent encore aux pratiques du cannibalisme, pourquoi ces sylvestres, qui ne leur étaient guère inférieurs, n’auraient-ils pas eu l’habitude de manger leurs semblables — ou à peu près?…

En tout cas, que ces êtres fussent des anthropoïdes d’une espèce supérieure aux orangs de Bornéo, aux chimpanzés de la Guinée, aux gorilles du Gabon, qui se rapprochent le plus de l’humanité, cela n’était pas contestable. En effet, ils savaient faire du feu et l’employer à divers usages domestiques: tel le foyer au premier campement, telle la torche que le guide avait promenée à travers ces sombres solitudes. Et l’idée vint alors que ces flammes mouvantes, signalées sur la lisière, pouvaient avoir été allumées par ces étranges habitants de la grande forêt.

À vrai dire, on suppose que certains quadrumanes font emploi du feu. Ainsi Émir Pacha raconte que les bois de Msokgonie, pendant les nuits estivales, sont infestés par des bandes de chimpanzés, qui s’éclairent de torches et vont marauder jusque dans les plantations.

Ce qu’il convenait également de noter, c’est que ces êtres, d’espèce inconnue, étaient conformés comme les humains au point de vue de la station et de la marche. Aucun autre quadrumane n’eût été plus digne de porter ce nom d’orang, qui signifie exactement «homme des bois».

«Et puis ils parlent… fit remarquer John Cort, après diverses observations qui furent échangées au sujet des habitants de ce village aérien.

— Eh bien, s’ils parlent, s’écria Max Huber, c’est qu’ils ont des mots pour s’exprimer, et ceux qui veulent dire: «Je meurs de faim!… Quand se met-on à table?…» je ne serais pas fâché de les connaître!…»

Des trois prisonniers, Khamis était le plus abasourdi. Dans sa cervelle, peu portée aux discussions anthropologistes, il ne pouvait entrer que ces êtres ne fussent pas des animaux, que ces animaux ne fussent pas des singes. C’étaient des singes qui marchaient, qui parlaient, qui faisaient du feu, qui vivaient dans des villages, mais enfin des singes. Et même il trouvait déjà assez extraordinaire que la forêt de l’Oubanghi renfermât de pareilles espèces dont on n’avait encore jamais eu connaissance. Sa dignité d’indigène du continent noir souffrait de ce que ces bêtes-là «fussent si rapprochées de ses propres congénères par leurs facultés naturelles».

Il est des prisonniers qui se résignent, d’autres qui ne se résignent pas. John Cort et le foreloper — et surtout l’impatient Max Huber — n’appartenaient point à la seconde catégorie. Outre le désagrément d’être claquemuré au fond de cette case, l’impossibilité de rien voir à travers ses parois opaques, l’inquiétude de l’avenir, l’incertitude touchant l’issue de cette aventure, étaient bien pour préoccuper. Et puis la faim les pressait, le dernier repas remontant à une quinzaine d’heures.

Il y avait cependant une circonstance sur laquelle pouvait se fonder quelque espoir, vague, sans doute: c’était que le protégé de Llanga habitait ce village — son village natal probablement — et au milieu de sa famille, en admettant que ce qu’on appelle la famille existât chez ces forestiers de l’Oubanghi.

«Or, ainsi que le dit John Cort, puisque ce petit a été sauvé du tourbillon, il est permis de penser que Llanga l'a été également… Ils ne doivent point s'être quittés, et si Llanga apprend que trois hommes viennent d'être amenés dans ce village, comment ne comprendrait-il pas qu'il s'agit de nous?… En somme, on ne nous a fait aucun mal jusqu'ici, et il est probable qu'on n'en a point fait à Llanga…

— Évidemment, le protégé est sain et sauf, admit Max Huber, mais le protecteur l'est-il?… Rien ne prouve que notre pauvre Llanga n'ait pas péri dans le rio!…»

Rien en effet.

En ce moment, la porte de la case, qui était gardée par deux vigoureux gaillards, s'ouvrit, et le jeune indigène parut.

«Llanga… Llanga!… s'écrièrent à la fois les deux amis.

— Mon ami Max… mon ami John!… répondit Llanga, qui tomba dans leurs bras.

— Depuis quand es-tu ici?… demanda le foreloper.

— Depuis hier matin…

— Et comment es-tu venu?…

— On m'a porté à travers la forêt…

— Ceux qui te portaient ont dû marcher plus vite que nous,

Llanga?…

— Très vite!…

— Et qui t’a porté?…

— Un de ceux qui m’avaient sauvé… qui vous avaient sauvés aussi…

— Des hommes?…

— Oui… des hommes… pas des singes… non! pas des singes.»

Toujours affirmatif, le jeune indigène. En tout cas, c’étaient des types d’une race particulière, sans doute, affectés du signe «moins» par rapport à l’humanité… Une race intermédiaire de primitifs, peut-être des spécimens de ce genre d’anthropopithèques qui manquent à l’échelle animale…

Et alors, Llanga de raconter sommairement son histoire, après avoir, à plusieurs reprises, baisé les mains du Français et de l’Américain, retirés comme lui au moment où les entraînait le rapide et qu’il n’espérait plus revoir.

Lorsque le radeau heurta les roches, ils avaient été précipités dans le tourbillon, lui et Li-Maï…

«Li-Maï?… s’écria Max Huber.

— Oui… Li-Maï… c’est son nom… Il m’a répété en se désignant: «Li-Maï… Li-Maï…»

— Ainsi il a un nom?… dit John Cort.

— Évidemment, John!… Quand on parle, n’est-il pas tout naturel de se donner un nom?…

— Est-ce que cette tribu, cette peuplade, comme on voudra, demanda John Cort, en a un aussi?…

— Oui… les Wagddis… répondit Llanga. J’ai entendu Li-Maï les appeler Wagddis!»

En réalité, ce mot n’appartenait pas à la langue congolaise. Mais, Wagddis ou non, des indigènes se trouvaient sur la rive gauche du rio Johausen, lorsque la catastrophe se produisit. Les uns coururent sur le barrage, ils se lancèrent dans le torrent au secours de Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber, les autres au secours de Li-Maï et de Llanga. Celui-ci, ayant perdu connaissance, ne se souvenait plus de ce qui s’était passé ensuite et croyait que ses amis s’étaient noyés dans le rapide.

Lorsque Llanga revint à lui, il était dans les bras d’un robuste Wagddi, le père même de Li-Maï, qui, lui, était dans les bras de la «ngora», sa mère! Ce qu’on pouvait admettre, c’est que, quelques jours avant qu’il eût été rencontré par Llanga, le petit s’était égaré dans la forêt et que ses parents s’étaient mis à sa recherche. On sait comment Llanga l’avait sauvé, comment, sans lui, il eût péri dans les eaux de la rivière.

Bien traité, bien soigné, Llanga fut donc emporté jusqu’au village wagddien. Li-Maï ne tarda pas à reprendre ses forces, n’étant malade que d’inanition et de fatigue. Après avoir été le protégé de Llanga, il devint son protecteur. Le père et la mère de Li-Maï s’étaient montrés reconnaissants envers le jeune indigène. La reconnaissance ne se rencontre-t-elle pas chez les animaux pour les services qui leur sont rendus, et dès lors pourquoi n’existerait-elle pas chez des êtres qui leur sont supérieurs?…

Bref, ce matin même, Llanga avait été amené par Li-Maï devant cette case. Pour quelle raison?… il l’ignorait alors. Mais des voix se faisaient entendre, et, prêtant l'oreille, il avait reconnu celles de John Cort et de Max Huber.

Voilà ce qui s'était passé depuis la séparation au barrage du rio

Johausen.

«Bien, Llanga, bien!… dit Max Huber, mais nous mourons de faim, et, avant de continuer tes explications, si tu peux, grâce à tes protections sérieuses…»

Llanga sortit et ne tarda pas à rentrer avec quelques provisions, un fort morceau de buffle grillé, salé à point, une demi-douzaine de fruits de l'acacia adansonia, dits pain de singe ou pain d'homme, des bananes fraîches et, dans une calebasse, une eau limpide, additionnée du suc laiteux de lutex, que distille une liane à caoutchouc de l'espèce «landolphia africa».

On le comprend, la conversation fut suspendue. John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis avaient un trop formidable besoin de nourriture pour se montrer difficiles sur la qualité. Du morceau de buffle, du pain et des bananes, ils ne laissèrent que les os et les épluchures.

John Cort, alors, questionna le jeune indigène, s'informant si ces

Wagddis étaient nombreux.

«Beaucoup… beaucoup…! J'en ai vu beaucoup… dans les rues, dans les cases… répondit Llanga.

— Autant que dans les villages du Bournou ou du Baghirmi?…

— Oui…

— Et ils ne descendent jamais?…

— Si… si… pour chasser… pour récolter des racines, des fruits… pour puiser de l’eau…

— Et ils parlent?…

— Oui… mais je ne comprends pas… Et pourtant… des mots parfois… des mots… que je connais… comme en dit Li-Maï.

— Et le père… la mère de ce petit?…

— Oh! très bons pour moi… et ce que je vous ai apporté là vient d’eux…

— Il me tarde de leur en exprimer tous mes remerciements… déclara Max Huber.

— Et ce village dans les arbres, comment l’appelle-t-on?…

— Ngala.

— Et, dans ce village, y a-t-il un chef?… demanda John Cort.

— Oui…

— Tu l’as vu?…

— Non, mais j’ai entendu qu’on l’appelait Msélo-Tala-Tala.

— Des mots indigènes!… s’écria Khamis.

— Et que signifient ces mots?…

— Le père Miroir», répondit le foreloper.

En effet, c’est ainsi que les Congolais désignent un homme qui porte des lunettes.

CHAPITRE XIV

Les Wagddis

Sa Majesté Msélo-Tala-Tala, roi de cette peuplade des Wagddis, gouvernant ce village aérien, voilà, n’était-il pas vrai, ce qui devait suffire à réaliser les _desiderata _de Max Huber. Dans la furia française de son imagination, n’avait-il pas entrevu, sous les profondeurs de cette mystérieuse forêt de l’Oubanghi, des générations nouvelles, des cités inconnues, tout un monde extraordinaire dont personne ne soupçonnait l’existence?… Eh bien, il était servi à souhait.

Il fut le premier à s’applaudir d’avoir vu si juste et ne s’arrêta que devant cette non moins juste observation de John Cort:

«C’est entendu, mon cher ami, vous êtes, comme tout poète, doublé d’un devin, et vous avez deviné…

— Juste, mon cher John, mais quelle que soit cette tribu demi- humaine des Wagddis, mon intention n’est pas de finir mon existence dans leur capitale…

— Eh! mon cher Max, il faut y séjourner assez pour étudier cette race au point de vue ethnologique et anthropologique, afin de publier là-dessus un fort in-quarto qui révolutionnera les instituts des deux continents…

— Soit, répliqua Max Huber, nous observerons, nous comparerons, nous piocherons toutes les thèses relatives à la question de l’anthropomorphie, à deux conditions toutefois…

— La première?…

— Qu’on nous laissera, j’y compte bien, la liberté d’aller et de venir dans ce village…

— Et la seconde?

— Qu’après avoir circulé librement, nous pourrons partir quand cela nous conviendra…

— Et à qui nous adresser?… demanda Khamis.

— À Sa Majesté le père Miroir, répondit Max Huber. Mais, au fait, pourquoi ses sujets l’appellent-ils ainsi?…

— Et en langue congolaise?… répliqua John Cort.

— Est-ce donc que Sa Majesté est myope ou presbyte… et porte des lunettes? reprit Max Huber.

— Et, d’abord, ces lunettes, d’où viendraient-elles?… ajouta

John Cort.

— N’importe, continua Max Huber, lorsque nous serons en état de causer avec ce souverain, soit qu’il ait appris notre langue, soit que nous ayons appris la sienne, nous lui offrirons de signer un traité d’alliance offensive et défensive avec l’Amérique et la France et il ne pourra faire moins que de nous nommer grands-croix de l’ordre wagddien…»

Max Huber ne se prononçait-il pas trop affirmativement, en comptant qu’ils auraient toute liberté dans ce village, puis qu’ils le quitteraient à leur convenance? Or, si John Cort, Khamis et lui ne reparaissaient pas à la factorerie, qui s’aviserait de venir les chercher dans ce village de Ngala au plus profond de la grande forêt?… En ne voyant plus revenir personne de la caravane, qui douterait qu’elle n’eût péri tout entière dans les régions du haut Oubanghi?…

Quant à la question de savoir si Khamis et ses compagnons resteraient ou non prisonniers dans cette case, elle fut presque aussitôt tranchée. La porte tourna sur ses attaches de liane et Li-Maï parut.

Tout d’abord, le petit alla droit à Llanga et lui prodigua mille caresses que celui-ci rendit de bon coeur. John Cort avait donc l’occasion d’examiner plus attentivement cette singulière créature. Mais, comme la porte était ouverte, Max Huber proposa de sortir et de se mêler à la population aérienne.

Les voici donc dehors, guidés par le petit sauvage — ne peut-on le qualifier ainsi? — qui donnait la main à son ami Llanga. Ils se trouvèrent alors au centre d’une sorte de carrefour où passaient et repassaient des Wagddiens «allant à leurs affaires».

Ce carrefour était planté d’arbres ou plutôt ombragé de têtes d’arbres dont les robustes troncs supportaient cette construction aérienne. Elle reposait à une centaine de pieds au-dessus du sol sur les maîtresses branches de ces puissants bauhinias, bombax, baobabs. Faite de pièces transversales solidement reliées par des chevilles et des lianes, une couche de terre battue s’étendait à sa surface, et, comme les points d’appui étaient aussi solides que nombreux, le sol factice ne tremblait pas sous le pied. Et, même alors que les violentes rafales soufflaient à travers ces hautes cimes, c’est à peine si le bâti de cette superstructure en ressentait un léger frémissement.

Par les interstices du feuillage pénétraient les rayons solaires. Le temps était beau, ce jour-là. De larges plaques de ciel bleu se montraient au-dessus des dernières branches. Une brise, chargée de pénétrantes senteurs, rafraîchissait l'atmosphère.

Tandis que déambulait le groupe des étrangers, les Wagddis, hommes, femmes, enfants, les regardaient sans manifester aucune surprise. Ils échangeaient entre eux divers propos, d'une voix rauque, phrases brèves prononcées précipitamment et mots inintelligibles. Toutefois, le foreloper crut entendre quelques expressions de la langue congolaise, et il ne fallait pas s'en étonner, puisque Li-Maï s'était plusieurs fois servi du mot «ngora». Cela pourtant semblait inexplicable. Mais, ce qui l'était bien davantage, c'est que John Cort fut frappé par la répétition de deux ou trois mots allemands, — entre autres celui de «vater«, et il fit connaître cette particularité à ses compagnons.

«Que voulez-vous, mon cher John?… répondit Max Huber. Je m'attends à tout, même à ce que ces êtres-là me tapent sur le ventre, en disant: «Comment va… mon vieux?»

De temps en temps, Li-Maï, abandonnant la main de Llanga, allait à l'un ou à l'autre, en enfant vif et joyeux. Il paraissait fier de promener des étrangers à travers les rues du village. Il ne le faisait pas au hasard, — cela se voyait, — il les menait quelque part, et il n'y avait qu'à le suivre, ce guide de cinq ans.

Ces primitifs — ainsi les désignait John Cort — n'étaient pas complètement nus. Sans parler du pelage roussâtre qui leur couvrait en partie le corps, hommes et femmes se drapaient d'une sorte de pagne d'un tissu végétal, à peu près semblable, quoique plus grossièrement fabriqué, à ceux d’agoulie en fils d’acacia, qui s’ourdissent communément à Porto-Novo dans le Dahomey.

Ce que John Cort remarqua spécialement, c’est que ces têtes wagddiennes, arrondies, réduites aux dimensions du type microcéphalique très rapprochées de l’angle facial humain, présentaient peu de prognathisme. En outre, les arcades sourcilières n’offraient aucune de ces saillies qui sont communes à toute la race simienne. Quant à la chevelure, c’était la toison lisse des indigènes de l’Afrique équatoriale, avec la barbe peu fournie.

«Et pas de pied préhensif…, déclara John Cort.

— Et pas d’appendice caudal, ajouta Max Huber, pas le moindre bout de queue!

— En effet, répondit John Cort, et c’est déjà un signe de supériorité. Les singes anthropomorphes n’ont ni queue, ni bourses à joues, ni callosités. Ils se déplacent horizontalement ou verticalement à leur gré. Mais une observation a été faite, c’est que les quadrumanes qui marchent debout ne se servent point de la plante du pied et s’appuient sur le dos des doigts repliés. Or, il n’en est pas ainsi des Wagddis, et leur marche est absolument celle de l’homme, il faut bien le reconnaître.»

Très juste, cette remarque, et, nul doute, il s’agissait d’une race nouvelle. D’ailleurs, en ce qui concerne le pied, certains anthropologistes admettent qu’il n’y a aucune différence entre celui du singe et celui de l’homme, et ce dernier aurait même le pouce opposable si le sous-pied n’était déformé par l’usage de la chaussure.

Il existe en outre des similitudes physiques entre les deux races. Les quadrumanes qui possèdent la station humaine sont les moins pétulants, les moins grimaçants, en un mot, les plus graves, les plus sérieux de l’espèce. Or, précisément, ce caractère de gravité se manifestait dans l’attitude comme dans les actes de ces habitants de Ngala. De plus, lorsque John Cort les examinerait attentivement, il pourrait constater que leur système dentaire était identique à celui de l’homme.

Ces ressemblances ont donc pu jusqu’à un certain point engendrer la doctrine de la variabilité des espèces, l’évolution ascensionnelle préconisée par Darwin. On les a même regardées comme décisives, par comparaison entre les échantillons les plus élevés de l’échelle simienne et les primitifs de l’humanité. Linné a soutenu cette opinion qu’il y avait eu des hommes troglodytes, expression qui, en tous cas, n’aurait pu s’appliquer aux Wagddis, lesquels vivent dans les arbres. Vogt a même été jusqu’à prétendre que l’homme est sorti de trois grands singes: l’orang, type brachycéphale au long pelage brun, serait d’après lui l’ancêtre des négritos; le chimpanzé, type dolichocéphale, aux mâchoires moins massives, serait l’ancêtre des nègres; enfin, du gorille, spécialisé par le développement du thorax, la forme du pied, la démarche qui lui est propre, le caractère ostéologique du tronc et des extrémités, descendrait l’homme blanc. Mais, à ces similitudes, on peut opposer des dissemblances d’une importance capitale dans l’ordre intellectuel et moral, — dissemblances qui doivent faire justice des doctrines darwiniennes.

Il convient donc, en prenant les caractères distinctifs de ces trois quadrumanes, sans admettre toutefois que leur cerveau possède les douze millions de cellules et les quatre millions de fibres du cerveau humain, de croire qu’ils appartiennent à une race supérieure dans l’animalité. Mais on n’en pourra jamais conclure que l’homme soit un singe perfectionné ou le singe un homme en dégénérescence.

Quant au microcéphale, dont on veut faire un intermédiaire entre l'homme et le singe, espèce vainement prédite par les anthropologistes et vainement cherchée, cet anneau qui manque pour rattacher le règne animal au règne «hommal«, y avait-il lieu d'admettre qu'il fût représenté par ces Wagddis?… Les singuliers hasards de leur voyage avaient-ils réservé à ce Français et à cet Américain de le découvrir?…

Et, même si cette race inconnue se rapprochait physiquement de la race humaine, encore faudrait-il que les Wagddis eussent ces caractères de moralité, de religiosité spéciaux à l'homme, sans parler de la faculté de concevoir des abstractions et des généralisations, de l'aptitude pour les arts, les sciences et les lettres. Alors seulement, il serait possible de se prononcer d'une façon péremptoire entre les thèses des monogénistes et des polygénistes.

Une chose certaine, en somme, c'est que les Wagddis parlaient. Non bornés aux seuls instincts, ils avaient des idées, — ce que suppose l'emploi de la parole, — et des mots dont la réunion formait le langage. Mieux que des cris éclairés par le regard et le geste, ils employaient une parole articulée, ayant pour base une série de sons et de figures conventionnels qui devaient avoir été légués par atavisme.

Et c'est ce dont fut le plus frappé John Cort. Cette faculté, qui implique la participation de la mémoire, indiquait une influence congénitale de race.

Cependant, tout en observant les moeurs et les habitudes de cette tribu sylvestre, John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis s'avançaient à travers les rues du village.

Était-il grand, ce village?… En réalité, sa circonférence ne devait pas être inférieure à cinq kilomètres.

«Et, comme le dit Max Huber, si ce n’est qu’un nid, c’est du moins un vaste nid!»

Construite de la main des Wagddis, cette installation dénotait un art supérieur à celui des oiseaux, des abeilles, des castors et des fourmis. S’ils vivaient dans les arbres, ces primitifs, qui pensaient et exprimaient leurs pensées, c’est que l’atavisme les y avait poussés.

«Dans tous les cas, fit remarquer John Cort, la nature, oui ne se trompe jamais, a eu ses raisons pour porter ces Wagddis à adopter l’existence aérienne. Au lieu de ramper sur un sol malsain que le soleil ne pénètre jamais de ses rayons, ils vivent dans le milieu salutaire des cimes de cette forêt.»

La plupart des cases, fraîches et verdoyantes, disposées en forme de ruches, étaient largement ouvertes. Les femmes s’y adonnaient avec activité aux soins très rudimentaires de leur ménage. Les enfants se montraient nombreux, les tout jeunes allaités par leurs mères. Quant aux hommes, les uns faisaient entre les branches la récolte des fruits, les autres descendaient par l’escalier pour vaquer à leurs occupations habituelles. Ceux-ci remontaient avec quelques pièces de gibier, ceux-là rapportaient les jarres qu’ils avaient remplies au lit du rio.

«Il est fâcheux, dit Max Huber, que nous ne sachions pas la langue de ces naturels!… Jamais nous ne pourrons converser ni prendre une connaissance exacte de leur littérature… Du reste, je n’ai pas encore aperçu la bibliothèque municipale… ni le lycée de garçons ou de filles!»

Cependant, puisque la langue wagddienne, après ce qu’on avait entendu de Li-Maï, se mélangeait de mots indigènes, Khamis essaya de quelques-uns des plus usuels en s’adressant à l’enfant.

Mais, si intelligent que parût Li-Maï, il sembla ne point comprendre.

Et pourtant, devant John Cort et Max Huber, il avait prononcé le mot «ngora», alors qu’il était couché sur le radeau. Et, depuis, Llanga affirmait avoir appris de son père que le village s’appelait Ngala et le chef Msélo-Tala-Tala.

Enfin, après une heure de promenade, le foreloper et ses compagnons atteignirent l’extrémité du village. Là s’élevait une case plus importante. Établie entre les branches d’un énorme bombax, la façade treillissée de roseaux, sa toiture se perdait dans le feuillage.

Cette case, était-ce le palais du roi, le sanctuaire des sorciers, le temple des génies, tels qu’en possèdent la plupart des tribus sauvages, en Afrique, en Australie, dans les îles du Pacifique?…

L’occasion se présentait de tirer de Li-Maï quelques renseignements plus précis. Aussi, John Cort, le prenant par les épaules et le tournant vers la case, lui dit:

«Msélo-Tala-Tala?…»

Un signe de tête fut toute la réponse qu’il obtint.

Donc, là demeurait le chef du village de Ngala, Sa Majesté

Wagddienne.

Et, sans autre cérémonie, Max Huber se dirigea délibérément vers la susdite case.

Changement d’attitude de l’enfant, qui le retint en manifestant un véritable effroi.

Nouvelle insistance de Max Huber, qui répéta à plusieurs reprises:

«Msélo-Tala-Tala?…»

Mais, au moment où Max Huber allait atteindre la case, le petit courut à lui, l’empêcha d’aller plus avant.

Il était donc défendu d’approcher de l’habitation royale?…

En effet, deux sentinelles Wagddis venaient de se lever et, brandissant leurs armes, une sorte de hache en bois de fer et une sagaie, défendirent l’entrée.

«Allons, s’écria Max Huber, ici comme ailleurs, dans la grande forêt de l’Oubanghi comme dans les capitales du monde civilisé, des gardes du corps, des cent-gardes, des prétoriens en faction devant le palais, et quel palais… celui d’une Majesté homo- simienne.

— Pourquoi s’en étonner, mon cher Max?…

— Eh bien, déclara celui-ci, puisque nous ne pouvons voir ce monarque, nous lui demanderons une audience par lettre…

— Bon, répliqua John Cort; s’ils parlent, ces primitifs, ils n’en sont pas arrivés à savoir lire et écrire, j’imagine!… Encore plus sauvages que les indigènes du Soudan et du Congo, les Founds, les Chiloux, les Denkas, les Monbouttous, ils ne semblent pas avoir atteint ce degré de civilisation qui implique la préoccupation d’envoyer leurs enfants à l’école…

— Je m’en doute un peu, John. Au surplus, comment correspondre par lettre avec des gens dont on ignore la langue?…

— Laissons-nous conduire par ce petit, dit Khamis.

— Est-ce que tu ne reconnais pas la case de son père et de sa mère?… demanda John Cort au jeune indigène.

— Non, mon ami John, répondit Llanga, mais… sûrement… Li-Maï nous y mène… Il faut le suivre.»

Et alors, s’approchant de l’enfant et tendant la main vers la gauche:

«Ngora… ngora?…» répéta-t-il.

À n’en pas douter, l’enfant comprit, car sa tête s’abaissa et se releva vivement.

«Ce qui indique, fit observer John Cort, que le signe de dénégation et d’affirmation est instinctif et le même chez tous les humains… une preuve de plus que ces primitifs touchent de très près à l’humanité…»

Quelques minutes après, les visiteurs arrivaient dans un quartier du village plus ombragé où les cimes enchevêtraient étroitement leur feuillage.

Li-Maï s’arrêta devant une paillote proprette, dont le toit était fait des larges feuilles de l’enseté, ce bananier si répandu dans la grande forêt, ces mêmes feuilles que le foreloper avait employées pour le taud du radeau. Une sorte de pisé formait les parois de cette paillote à laquelle on accédait par une porte ouverte en ce moment.

De la main, l’enfant la montra à Llanga qui la reconnut.

«C’est là», dit-il.

À l’intérieur, une seule chambre. Au fond, une literie d’herbes sèches, qu’il était facile de renouveler. Dans un coin, quelques pierres servant d’âtre où brûlaient des tisons. Pour uniques ustensiles, deux ou trois calebasses, une jatte de terre pleine d’eau et deux pots de même substance. Ces sylvestres n’en étaient pas encore aux fourchettes et mangeaient avec leurs doigts. Çà et là, sur une planchette fixée aux parois, des fruits, des racines, un morceau de viande cuite, une demi-douzaine d’oiseaux plumés pour le prochain repas et, pendues à de fortes épines, des bandes d’étoffe d’écorce et d’agoulie.

Un Wagddi et une Wagddienne se levèrent au moment où Khamis et ses compagnons pénétrèrent dans la paillote.

«Ngora!… ngora!… Lo-Maï… La-Maï!» dit l’enfant.

Et le premier d’ajouter, comme s’il eût pensé qu’il serait mieux compris:

«Vater… vater!…»

Ce mot de «père», il le prononçait en allemand, fort mal. D’ailleurs, quoi de plus extraordinaire qu’un mot de cette langue dans la bouche de ces Wagddis?…

À peine entré, Llanga était allé près de la mère et celle-ci lui ouvrait ses bras, le pressait contre elle, le caressait de la main, témoignant toute sa reconnaissance pour le sauveur de son enfant.

Voici ce qu’observa plus particulièrement John Cort:

Le père était de haute taille, bien proportionné, d’apparence vigoureuse, les bras un peu plus longs que n’eussent été des bras humains, les mains larges et fortes, les jambes légèrement arquées, la plante des pieds entièrement appliquée sur le sol.

Il avait le teint presque clair de ces tribus d’indigènes qui sont plus carnivores qu’herbivores, une barbe floconneuse et courte, une chevelure noire et crépue, une sorte de toison qui lui recouvrait tout le corps. Sa tête était de moyenne grosseur, ses mâchoires peu proéminentes; ses yeux, à la pupille ardente, brillaient d’un vif éclat.

Assez gracieuse, la mère, avec sa physionomie avenante et douce, son regard qui dénotait une grande affectuosité, ses dents bien rangées et d’une remarquable blancheur, et — chez quels individus du sexe faible la coquetterie ne se manifeste-t-elle pas? — des fleurs dans sa chevelure, et aussi — détail en somme inexplicable — des grains de verre et des perles d’ivoire. Cette jeune Wagddienne rappelait le type des Cafres du Sud, avec ses bras ronds et modelés, ses poignets délicats, ses extrémités fines, des mains potelées, des pieds à faire envie à plus d’une Européenne. Sur son pelage laineux était jetée une étoffe d’écorce qui la serrait à la ceinture. À son cou pendait la médaille du docteur Johausen, semblable à celle que portait l’enfant.

Converser avec Lo-Maï et La-Maï n’était pas possible, au vif déplaisir de John Cort. Mais il fut visible que ces deux primitifs cherchèrent à remplir tous les devoirs de l’hospitalité wagddienne. Le père offrit quelques fruits qu’il prit sur une tablette, des matofés de pénétrante saveur et qui proviennent d’une liane.

Les hôtes acceptèrent les matofés et en mangèrent quelques-uns, à l’extrême satisfaction de la famille.

Et alors il y eut lieu de reconnaître la justesse de ces remarques faites depuis longtemps déjà: c’est que la langue wagddienne, à l’exemple des langues polynésiennes, offrait des parallélismes frappants avec le babil enfantin, — ce qui a autorisé les philologues à prétendre qu’il y eut pour tout le genre humain une longue période de voyelles antérieurement à la formation des consonnes. Ces voyelles, en se combinant à l’infini, expriment des sens très variés, tels *ori oriori*, *oro oroora, orurna*, etc… Les consonnes sont le *k*, le _t, _le *p*, les nasales sont *ng* et *m*. Rien qu’avec les voyelles *ha*, *ra*, on forme une séné de vocables, lesquels, sans consonances réelles, rendent toutes les nuances d’expression et jouent le rôle des noms, prénoms, verbes, etc.

Dans la conversation de ces Wagddis, les demandes et les réponses étaient brèves, deux ou trois mots, qui commençaient presque tous par les lettres *ng*, *mgou*, ms, comme chez les Congolais. La mère paraissait moins loquace que le père et probablement sa langue n’avait pas, ainsi que les langues féminines des deux continents, la faculté de faire douze mille tours à la minute.

À noter aussi — ce dont John Cort fut le plus surpris — que ces primitifs employaient certains termes congolais et allemands, presque défigurés d’ailleurs par la prononciation.

Au total, il est vraisemblable que ces êtres n’avaient d’idées que ce qu’il leur en fallait pour les besoins de l’existence et, de mots, que ce qu’il en fallait pour exprimer ces idées. Mais, à défaut de la religiosité, qui se rencontre chez les sauvages les plus arriérés et qu’ils ne possédaient pas, sans doute, on pouvait tenir pour sûr qu’ils étaient doués de qualités affectives. Non seulement ils avaient pour leurs enfants ces sentiments dont les animaux ne sont pas dépourvus tant que leurs soins sont nécessaires à la conservation de l’espèce, mais ces sentiments se continuaient au-delà, ainsi que le père et la mère le montraient pour Li-Maï. Puis la réciprocité existait. Échange entre eux de caresses paternelles et filiales… La famille existait.

Après un quart d’heure passé à l’intérieur de cette paillote, Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber en sortirent sous la conduite de Lo-Maï et de son enfant. Ils regagnèrent la case où ils avaient été enfermés et qu’ils allaient occuper pendant… Toujours cette question, et peut-être ne s’en rapporterait-on pas à eux seuls pour la résoudre.

Là, on prit congé les uns des autres. Lo-Maï embrassa une dernière fois le jeune indigène et tendit, non point sa patte comme l’eût pu faire un chien, ou sa main comme l’eût pu faire un quadrumane, mais ses deux mains que John Cort et Max Huber serrèrent avec plus de cordialité que Khamis.

«Mon cher Max, dit alors John Cort, un de vos grands écrivains a prétendu que dans tout homme il y avait moi et l’autre… Eh bien, il est probable que l’un des deux manque à ces primitifs…

— Et lequel, John?…

— L’autre, assurément… En tout cas, pour les étudier à fond, il faudrait vivre des années parmi eux!… Or, dans quelques jours, j’espère bien que nous pourrons repartir…

— Cela, répondit Max Huber, dépendra de Sa Majesté, et qui sait si le roi Msélo-Tala-Tala ne veut pas faire de nous des chambellans de la cour wagddienne?»

CHAPITRE XV

Trois semaines d'études

Et, maintenant, combien de temps John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis et Llanga resteraient-ils dans ce village?… Un incident viendrait- il modifier une situation qui ne laissait pas d'être inquiétante?… Ils se sentaient très surveillés, ils n'auraient pu s'enfuir. Et, d'ailleurs, à supposer qu'ils parvinssent à s'évader, au milieu de cette impénétrable région de la grande forêt, comment en rejoindre la lisière, comment retrouver le cours du rio Johausen?…

Après avoir tant désiré l'extraordinaire, Max Huber estimait que la situation perdrait singulièrement de son charme à se prolonger. Aussi allait-il se montrer le plus impatient, le plus désireux de revenir vers le bassin de l'Oubanghi, de regagner la factorerie de Libreville, d'où John Cort et lui ne devaient attendre aucun secours.

Pour son compte, le foreloper enrageait de cette malchance qui les avait fait tomber entre les pattes — dans son opinion, c'étaient des pattes — de ces types inférieurs. Il ne dissimulait pas le parfait mépris qu'ils lui inspiraient, parce qu'ils ne se différenciaient pas sensiblement des tribus de l'Afrique centrale. Khamis en éprouvait une sorte de jalousie instinctive, inconsciente, que les deux amis apercevaient très bien. À vrai dire, il était non moins pressé que Max Huber de quitter Ngala, et, tout ce qu'il serait possible de faire à ce propos, il le ferait.

C'était John Cort qui marquait le moins de hâte. Étudier ces primitifs l'intéressait de façon toute spéciale. Approfondir leurs moeurs, leur existence dans tous ses détails, leur caractère ethnologique, leur valeur morale, savoir jusqu'à quel point ils redescendaient vers l'animalité, quelques semaines y eussent suffi. Mais pouvait-on affirmer que le séjour chez les Wagddis ne durerait pas au-delà — des mois, des années peut-être?… Et quelle serait l'issue d'une si étonnante aventure?…

En tout cas, il ne semblait pas que John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis fussent menacés de mauvais traitements. À n'en pas douter, ces sylvestres reconnaissaient leur supériorité intellectuelle. En outre, inexplicable singularité, ils n'avaient jamais paru surpris en voyant des représentants de la race humaine. Toutefois, si ceux-ci voulaient employer la force pour s'enfuir, ils s'exposeraient à des violences que mieux valait éviter.

«Ce qu'il faut, dit Max Huber, c'est entrer en pourparlers avec le père Miroir, le souverain à lunettes, et obtenir de lui qu'il nous rende la liberté.»

En somme, il ne devait pas être impossible d'avoir une entrevue avec S. M. Msélo-Tala-Tala, à moins qu'il ne fût interdit à des étrangers de contempler son auguste personne. Mais, si l'on arrivait en sa présence, comment échanger demandes et réponses?… Même en langue congolaise, on ne se comprendrait pas!… Et puis qu'en résulterait-il?… L'intérêt des Wagddis n'était-il pas, en retenant ces étrangers, de s'assurer le secret de cette existence d'une race inconnue dans les profondeurs de la forêt oubanghienne?

Et pourtant, à en croire John Cort, cet emprisonnement au village aérien avait des circonstances atténuantes, puisque la science de l'anthropologie comparée en retirerait profit, que le monde savant serait ému par cette découverte d'une race nouvelle. Quant à savoir comment cela finirait…

«Du diable, si je le sais!» répétait Max Huber, qui n’avait pas en lui l’étoffe d’un Garner ou d’un Johausen.

Lorsque tous trois, suivis de Llanga, furent rentrés dans leur case, ils remarquèrent plusieurs modifications de nature à les satisfaire.

Et, d’abord, un Wagddi était occupé à «faire la chambre», si l’on peut employer cette locution trop française. Au surplus, John Cort avait déjà noté que ces primitifs avaient des instincts de propreté dont la plupart des animaux sont dépourvus. S’ils faisaient leur chambre, ils faisaient aussi leur toilette. Des brassées d’herbes sèches avaient été déposées au fond de la case. Or, comme Khamis et ses compagnons n’avaient jamais eu d’autre literie depuis la destruction de la caravane, cela ne changerait rien à leurs habitudes.

En outre, divers objets étaient placés à terre, le mobilier ne comprenant ni tables ni chaises, — seulement quelques ustensiles grossiers, pots et jarres de fabrication wagddienne. Ici des fruits de plusieurs sortes, là un quartier d’oryx qui était cuit. La chair crue ne convient qu’aux animaux carnivores, et il est rare de trouver au plus bas degré de l’échelle des êtres dont ce soit invariablement la nourriture.

«Or, quiconque est capable de faire du feu, déclara John Cort, s’en sert pour la cuisson de ses aliments. Je ne m’étonne donc pas que les Wagddis se nourrissent de viande cuite.»

Aussi la case possédait-elle un âtre, composé d’une pierre plate, et la fumée se perdait à travers le branchage du cail-cédrat qui l’abritait.

Au moment où tous quatre arrivèrent devant la porte, le Wagddi suspendit son travail.

C’était un jeune garçon d’une vingtaine d’années, aux mouvements agiles, à la physionomie intelligente. De la main, il désigna les objets qui venaient d’être apportés. Parmi ces objets, Max Huber, John Cort et Khamis — non sans une extrême satisfaction — aperçurent leurs carabines, un peu rouillées, qu’il serait aisé de remettre en état.

«Parbleu, s’écria Max Huber, elles sont les bienvenues… et à l’occasion…

— Nous en ferions usage, ajouté John Cort, si nous avions notre caisse à cartouches…

— La voici», répondit le foreloper.

Et il montra la caisse métallique disposée à gauche près de la porte.

Cette caisse, ces armes, on se le rappelle, Khamis avait eu la présence d’esprit de les lancer sur les roches du barrage, au moment où le radeau venait s’y heurter, et hors de l’atteinte des eaux. C’est là que les Wagddis les trouvèrent pour les rapporter au village de Ngala.

«S’ils nous ont rendu nos carabines, fit observer Max Huber, est- ce qu’ils savent à quoi servent les armes à feu?…

— Je l’ignore, répondit John Cort, mais ce qu’ils savent, c’est qu’il ne faut pas garder ce qui n’est pas à soi, et cela prouve déjà en faveur de leur moralité.»

N’importe, la question de Max Huber ne laissait pas d’être importante.

«Kollo… Kollo!…»

Ce mot, prononcé clairement, retentit à plusieurs reprises, et, en le prononçant, le jeune Wagddi levait la main à la hauteur de son front, puis se touchait la poitrine, semblant dire:

«Kollo… c’est moi!»

John Cort présuma que ce devait être le nom de leur nouveau domestique, et, lorsqu’il l’eut répété cinq ou six fois, Kollo témoigna sa joie par un rire prolongé.

Car ils riaient, ces primitifs, et il y avait lieu d’en tenir compte au point de vue anthropologique. En effet, aucun être ne possède cette faculté, si ce n’est l’homme. Parmi les plus intelligents, — chez le chien par exemple, — si l’on surprend quelques indices du rire ou du sourire, c’est seulement dans les yeux, et peut-être aux commissures des lèvres. En outre, ces Wagddis ne se laissaient point aller à cet instinct, commun à presque tous les quadrupèdes, de flairer leur nourriture avant d’y goûter, de commencer par manger ce qui leur plaît le plus.

Voici donc en quelles conditions allaient vivre les deux amis, Llanga et le foreloper. Cette case n’était pas une prison. Ils en pourraient sortir à leur gré. Quant à quitter Ngala, nul doute qu’ils en seraient empêchés — à moins qu’ils n’eussent obtenu cette autorisation de S. M. Msélo-Tala-Tala.

Donc, nécessité, provisoirement peut-être, de ronger son frein, de se résigner à vivre au milieu de ce singulier monde sylvestre dans le village aérien.

Ces Wagddis semblaient d’ailleurs doux par nature, peu querelleurs, et — il y a lieu d’y insister — moins curieux, moins surpris de la présence de ces étrangers que ne l’eussent été les plus arriérés des sauvages de l’Afrique et de l’Australie. La vue de deux blancs et de deux indigènes congolais ne les étonnait pas autant qu’elle eût étonné un indigène de l’Afrique. Elle les laissait indifférents, et ils ne se montraient point indiscrets. Chez eux aucun symptôme de badaudisme ni de snobisme. Par exemple, en fait d’acrobatie, pour grimper dans les arbres, voltiger de branche en branche, dégringoler l’escalier de Ngala, ils en eussent remontré aux Billy Hayden, aux Joe Bib, aux Foottit, qui détenaient à cette époque le record de la gymnastique circenséenne.

En même temps qu’ils déployaient ces qualités physiques, les Wagddis montraient une extraordinaire justesse de coup d’oeil. Lorsqu’ils se livraient à la chasse des oiseaux, ils les abattaient avec de petites flèches. Leurs coups ne devaient pas être moins assurés quand ils poursuivaient les daims, les élans, les antilopes, et aussi les buffles et les rhinocéros dans les futaies voisines. C’est alors que Max Huber eût voulu les accompagner — autant pour admirer leurs prouesses cynégétiques que pour tenter de leur fausser compagnie.

Oui! s’enfuir, c’est à cela que les prisonniers songent sans cesse. Or, la fuite n’était praticable que par l’unique escalier, et, sur le palier supérieur, se tenaient en faction des guerriers dont il eût été difficile de tromper la surveillance.

Plusieurs fois, Max Huber eut le désir de tirer les volatiles qui abondaient dans les arbres, sou-mangas, tête-chèvres, pintades, huppes, griots, et nombre d’autres, dont ces sylvestres faisaient grande consommation. Mais ses compagnons et lui étaient quotidiennement fournis de gibier, particulièrement de la chair de diverses antilopes, oryx, inyalas, sassabys, waterbucks, si nombreux dans la forêt de l’Oubanghi. Leur serviteur Kollo ne les laissait manquer de rien; il renouvelait chaque jour la provision d’eau fraîche pour les besoins du ménage, et la provision de bois sec pour l’entretien du foyer.

Et puis, à faire usage des carabines comme armes de chasse, il y aurait eu l’inconvénient d’en révéler la puissance. Mieux valait garder ce secret et, le cas échéant, les utiliser comme armes offensives ou défensives.

Si leurs hôtes étaient pourvus de viande, c’est que les Wagddis s’en nourrissaient aussi, tantôt grillée sur des charbons, tantôt bouillie dans les vases de terre fabriqués par eux. C’était même ce que Kollo faisait pour leur compte, acceptant d’être aidé par Llanga, sinon par Khamis, qui s’y fût refusé dans sa fierté indigène.

Il convient de noter — et cela au vif contentement de Max Huber - - que le sel ne faisait plus défaut. Ce n’était pas ce chlorure de sodium qui est tenu en dissolution dans les eaux de la mer, mais ce sel gemme fort répandu en Afrique, en Asie, en Amérique et dont les efflorescences devaient couvrir le sol aux environs de Ngala. Ce minéral, — le seul qui entre dans l’alimentation, — rien que l’instinct eût suffi à en apprendre l’utilité aux Wagddis comme à n’importe quel animal.

Une question qui intéressa John Cort, ce fut la question du feu. Comment ces primitifs l’obtenaient-ils? Était-ce par le frottement d’un morceau de bois dur sur un morceau de bois mou d’après la méthode des sauvages?… Non, ils ne procédaient pas de la sorte, et employaient le silex, dont ils tiraient des étincelles par le choc. Ces étincelles suffisaient à allumer le duvet du fruit du rentenier, très commun dans les forêts africaines, qui jouit de toutes les propriétés de l’amadou.

En outre, la nourriture azotée se complétait, chez les familles wagddiennes, par une nourriture végétale dont la nature faisait seule les frais. C’étaient, d’une part, des racines comestibles de deux ou trois sortes, de l’autre, une grande variété de fruits, tels que ceux que donne l’acacia andansonia, qui porte indifféremment le nom justifié de *pain d’homme* ou de *pain de singe* — tel le karita, dont la châtaigne s’emplit d’une matière grasse susceptible de remplacer le beurre, — tel le kijelia, avec ses baies d’une saveur un peu fade, que compense leur qualité nourrissante et aussi leur volume, car elles ne mesurent pas moins de deux pieds de longueur, — tels enfin d’autres fruits, bananes, figues, mangues, à l’état sauvage, et aussi ce tso qui fournit des fruits assez bons, le tout relevé de gousses de tamarin en guise de condiment. Enfin, les Wagddis faisaient également usage du miel, dont ils découvraient les ruches en suivant le coucou indicateur. Et, soit avec ce produit si précieux, soit avec le suc de diverses plantes — entre autres le lutex distillé par une certaine liane — mêlé à l’eau de la rivière, ils composaient des boissons fermentées à haut degré alcoolique. Qu’on ne s’en étonne point; n’a-t-on pas reconnu que les mandrilles d’Afrique, qui ne sont que des singes cependant, ont un faible prononcé pour l’alcool?…

Il faut ajouter qu’un cours d’eau, très poissonneux, qui passait sous Ngala, contenait les mêmes espèces que celles trouvées par Khamis et ses compagnons dans le rio Johausen. Mais était-il navigable, et les Wagddis se servaient-ils d’embarcations?… c’est ce qu’il eût été important de savoir en cas de fuite.

Or, ce cours d’eau était visible de l’extrémité du village opposée à la case royale. En se postant près des derniers arbres, on apercevait son lit, large de trente à quarante pieds. À partir de ce point, il se perdait entre des rangées d’arbres superbes, bombax à cinq tiges, magnifiques mparamousis à tresses noueuses, admirables msoukoulios, dont le tronc s’enrobait de lianes gigantesques, ces épiphytes qui l’étreignaient dans leurs replis de serpents.

Eh bien, oui, les Wagddis savaient construire des embarcations, — un art qui n’est pas ignoré même des derniers naturels de l’Océanie. Leur appareil flottant, c’était plus que le radeau, moins que la pirogue, un simple tronc d’arbre creusé au feu et à la hache. Il se dirigeait avec une pelle plate, et, lorsque la brise soufflait du bon côté, avec une voile tendue sur deux espars et faite d’une écorce assouplie par un battage régulier au moyen de maillets d’un bois de fer extrêmement dur.

Ce que John Cort put constater, toutefois, c’est que ces primitifs ne faisaient point usage des légumes ni des céréales dans leur alimentation. Ils ne savaient cultiver ni sorgho, ni millet, ni riz, ni manioc, — ce qui est de travail ordinaire chez les peuplades de l’Afrique centrale. Mais il ne fallait pas demander à ces types ce qui se rencontrait dans l’industrie agricole des Denkas, des Founds, des Monbouttous, qu’on peut à juste titre classer dans la race humaine.

Enfin, toutes ces observations faites, John Cort s’inquiéta de reconnaître si ces Wagddis avaient en eux le sentiment de la moralité et de la religiosité.

Un jour, Max Huber lui demanda quel était le résultat de ses remarques à ce sujet.

«Une certaine moralité, une certaine probité, ils l’ont, répondit- il. Ils distinguent assurément ce qui est bien de ce qui est mal. Ils possèdent aussi le sentiment de la propriété. Je le sais, nombre d’animaux en sont pourvus, et les chiens, entre autres, ne se laissent pas volontiers prendre ce qu’ils sont en train de manger. Dans mon opinion, les Wagddis ont la notion du tien et du mien. Je l’ai remarqué à propos de l’un d’eux qui avait dérobé quelques fruits dans une case où il venait de s’introduire.

— L’a-t-on cité en simple police ou en police correctionnelle?… demanda Max Huber.

— Riez, cher ami, mais ce que je dis a son importance, et le voleur a été bel et bien battu par le volé, auquel ses voisins ont prêté main-forte. J’ajoute que ces primitifs se recommandent par une institution qui les rapproche de l’humanité…

— Laquelle?…

— La famille, qui est constituée régulièrement chez eux, la vie en commun du père et de la mère, les soins donnés aux enfants, la continuité de l’affection paternelle et filiale. Ne l’avons-nous pas observé chez Lo-Maï?… Ces Wagddis ont même des impressions qui sont d’ordre humain. Voyez notre Kollo… Est-ce qu’il ne rougit pas sous l’action d’une influence morale?… Que ce soit par pudeur, par timidité, par modestie ou par confusion, les quatre éventualités qui amènent la rougeur sur le front de l’homme, il est incontestable que cet effet se produit chez lui. Donc un sentiment…, donc une âme!

— Alors, demanda Max Huber, puisque ces Wagddis possèdent tant de qualités humaines, pourquoi ne pas les admettre dans les rangs de l’humanité!…

— Parce qu’ils semblent manquer d’une conception qui est propre à tous les hommes, mon cher Max.

— Et vous entendez par là?…

— La conception d’un être suprême, en un mot, la religiosité, qui se retrouve chez les plus sauvages tribus. Je n’ai pas constaté qu’ils adorassent des divinités… Ni idoles ni prêtres…

— À moins, répondit Max Huber, que leur divinité ne soit précisément ce roi Msélo-Tala-Tala dont ils ne nous laissent pas voir le bout du nez!…»

C’eût été le cas, sans doute, de tenter une expérience concluante: Ces primitifs résistaient-ils à l’action toxique de l’atropine, à laquelle l’homme succombe alors que les animaux la supportent impunément?… Si oui, c’étaient des bêtes, sinon, c’étaient des humains. Mais l’expérience ne pouvait être faite, faute de ladite substance. Il faut ajouter, en outre, que, durant le séjour de John Cort et de Max Huber à Ngala, il n’y eut aucun décès. La question est donc indécise de savoir si les Wagddis brûlaient ou enterraient les cadavres, et s’ils avaient le culte des morts.

Toutefois, si des prêtres, ou même des sorciers ne se rencontraient pas, au milieu de cette peuplade wagddienne, on y voyait un certain nombre de guerriers, armés d’arcs, de sagaies, d’épieux, de hachettes, — une centaine environ, choisis parmi les plus vigoureux et les mieux bâtis. Étaient-ils uniquement préposés à la garde du roi, ou s’employaient-ils soit à la défensive, soit à l’offensive?… Il se pouvait que la grande forêt renfermât d’autres villages de même nature, de même origine, et, si ces habitants s’y comptaient par milliers, pourquoi n’eussent-ils pas fait la guerre à leurs semblables comme la font les tribus de l’Afrique?

Quant à l’hypothèse que les Wagddis eussent déjà pris contact avec les indigènes de l’Oubanghi, du Baghirmi, du Soudan, ou les Congolais, elle était peu admissible, ni même avec ces tribus de nains, les Bambustis, que le missionnaire anglais Albert Lhyd rencontra dans les forêts de l’Afrique centrale, industrieux cultivateurs dont Stanley a parlé dans le récit de son dernier voyage. Si le contact avait eu lieu, l’existence de ces sylvestres se fût révélée depuis longtemps, et il n’aurait pas été réservé à John Cort et à Max Huber de la découvrir.

«Mais, reprit ce dernier, pour peu que les Wagddis s’entre-tuent, mon cher John, voilà qui permettrait sans conteste de les classer parmi l’espèce humaine.»

Du reste, il était assez probable que les guerriers wagddiens ne s’abandonnaient pas à l’oisiveté et qu’ils organisaient des razzias dans le voisinage. Après des absences qui duraient deux ou trois jours, ils revenaient, quelques-uns blessés, rapportant des objets divers, ustensiles ou armes de fabrication wagddienne.

À plusieurs reprises, des tentatives furent faites par le foreloper pour sortir du village: tentatives infructueuses. Les guerriers qui gardaient l’escalier intervinrent avec une certaine violence. Une fois surtout, Khamis aurait été fort maltraité si LoMaï, que la scène attira, ne fût accouru à son secours.

Il y eut, d’ailleurs, forte discussion entre ce dernier et un solide gaillard qu’on nommait Raggi. Au costume de peau qu’il portait, aux armes qui pendaient à sa ceinture, aux plumes qui ornaient sa tête, il y avait lieu de croire que ce Raggi devait être le chef des guerriers. Rien qu’à son air farouche, à ses gestes impérieux, à sa brutalité naturelle, on le sentait fait pour le commandement.

À la suite de ces tentatives, les deux amis avaient espéré qu’ils seraient envoyés devant Sa Majesté, et qu’ils verraient enfin ce roi que ses sujets cachaient avec un soin jaloux au fond de la demeure royale… Ils en furent pour leur espoir. Probablement, Raggi avait toute autorité, et mieux valait ne point s’exposer à sa colère en recommençant. Les chances d’évasion étaient donc bien réduites, à moins que les Wagddis, s’ils attaquaient quelque village voisin, ne fussent attaqués à leur tour, et, à la faveur d’une agression, que l’occasion ne s’offrît de quitter Ngala… Mais après, que devenir?

Au surplus, le village ne fut point menacé pendant ces premières semaines, si ce n’est par certains animaux que Khamis et ses compagnons n’avaient pas encore rencontrés dans la grande forêt. Si les Wagddis passaient leur existence à Ngala, s’ils y rentraient la nuit venue, ils possédaient cependant quelques huttes sur les bords du rio. On eût dit d’un petit port fluvial où se réunissaient les embarcations de pêche, qu’ils avaient à défendre contre les hippopotames, les lamantins, les crocodiles, en assez grand nombre dans les eaux africaines.

Un jour, à la date du 9 avril, un violent tumulte se produisit. Des cris retentissaient dans la direction du rio. Était-ce une attaque dirigée contre les Wagddis par des êtres semblables à eux!… Sans doute, grâce à sa situation, le village était à l’abri d’une invasion. Mais, à supposer que le feu fût mis aux arbres qui le soutenaient, sa destruction eût été l’affaire de quelques heures. Or, les moyens que ces primitifs avaient peut- être employés contre leurs voisins, il n’était pas impossible que ceux-ci essayassent de les employer contre eux.

Dès les premières clameurs, Raggi et une trentaine de guerriers, se portant vers l’escalier, descendirent avec une rapidité simiesque. John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis, guidés par Lo-Maï, gagnèrent le côté du village d’où l’on apercevait le cours d’eau.

C’était une invasion contre les huttes établies en cet endroit. Une bande, non pas d’hippopotames, mais de chéropotames ou plutôt de potamochères, qui sont plus particulièrement les cochons de fleuve, venaient de s’élancer hors de la futaie et brisaient tout sur leur passage.

Ces potamochères, que les Boers appellent «bosch-wark», et les Anglais «bush-pigs», se rencontrent dans la région du cap de Bonne-Espérance, en Guinée, au Congo, au Cameroun, et y causent de grands dommages. De moindre taille que le sanglier européen, ils ont le pelage plus soyeux, la robe brunâtre tirant sur l’orange, les oreilles pointues terminées par un pinceau de poils, la crinière noire mêlée de fils blancs, qui leur court le long de l’échine, le grouin développé, la peau soulevée entre le nez et l’oeil par une protubérance osseuse chez les mâles. Ces porcins sont redoutables, et ceux-ci l’étaient d’autant plus qu’ils se trouvaient dans des conditions de supériorité numérique.

En effet, ce jour-là, on en eût bien compté une centaine qui se précipitaient sur la rive gauche du rio. Aussi la plupart des huttes avaient-elles été déjà renversées, avant l’arrivée de Raggi et de sa troupe.

À travers les branches des derniers arbres, John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis et Llanga purent être témoins de la lutte. Elle fut courte, mais non sans danger. Les guerriers y déployèrent un grand courage. Se servant des épieux et des hachettes de préférence aux arcs et aux sagaies, ils foncèrent avec une ardeur qui égalait la fureur des assaillants. Ils les attaquèrent corps à corps, les frappant à la tête à coups de hache, leur trouant les flancs de leurs épieux. Bref, après une heure de combat, ces animaux étaient en fuite, et des ruisseaux de sang se mêlaient aux eaux de la petite rivière.

Max Huber avait bien eu la pensée de prendre part à la bataille. Rapporter sa carabine et celle de John Cort, les décharger du haut du village sur la bande, accabler d’une grêle de balles ces potamochères, à l’extrême surprise des Wagddis, ce n’eût été ni long ni difficile. Mais le sage John Cort, appuyé du foreloper, calma son bouillant ami.

«Non, lui dit-il, réservons-nous d’intervenir dans des circonstances plus décisives… Quand on dispose de la foudre, mon cher Max…

— Vous avez raison, John, il ne faut foudroyer qu’au bon moment… Et, puisqu’il n’est pas encore temps de tonner, remisons notre tonnerre!»

CHAPITRE XVI

Sa Majesté Msélo-Tala-Tala

Cette journée — ou plutôt cet après-midi du 15 avril — allait amener une dérogation aux habitudes si calmes des Wagddis. Depuis trois semaines, aucune occasion ne s'était offerte aux prisonniers de Ngala de reprendre à travers la grande forêt le chemin de l'Oubanghi. Surveillés de près, enfermés dans les limites infranchissables de ce village, ils ne pouvaient s'enfuir. Certes, il leur avait été loisible — et plus particulièrement à John Cort — d'étudier les moeurs de ces types placés entre l'anthropoïde le plus perfectionné et l'homme, d'observer par quels instincts ils tenaient à l'animalité, par quelle dose de raison ils se rapprochaient de la race humaine. C'était là tout un trésor de remarques à verser dans la discussion des théories darwiniennes. Mais, pour en faire bénéficier le monde savant, encore fallait-il regagner les routes du Congo français et rentrer à Libreville…

Le temps était magnifique. Un puissant soleil inondait de chaleur et de clarté les cimes qui ombrageaient le village aérien. Après avoir presque atteint le zénith à l'heure de sa culmination, l'obliquité de ses rayons, bien qu'il fût trois heures passées, n'en diminuait pas l'ardeur.

Les rapports de John Cort et de Max Huber avec les Mai avaient été fréquents. Pas un jour ne s'était écoulé sans que cette famille ne fût venue dans leur case ou qu'ils ne se fussent rendus dans la leur. Un véritable échange de visites! Il n'y manquait que les cartes! Quant au petit, il ne quittait guère Llanga et s'était pris d'une vive affection pour le jeune indigène.

Par malheur, il y avait toujours impossibilité de comprendre la langue wagddienne, réduite à un petit nombre de mots qui suffisaient au petit nombre d'idées de ces primitifs. Si John Cort avait pu retenir la signification de quelques-uns, cela ne lui permettait guère de converser avec les habitants de Ngala. Ce qui le surprenait toujours, c'était que diverses locutions indigènes figuraient dans le vocabulaire wagddien — une douzaine peut-être. Cela n'indiquait-il pas que les Wagddis avaient eu des rapports avec les tribus de l'Oubanghi, — ne fût-ce qu'un Congolais qui ne serait jamais revenu au Congo?… Hypothèse assez plausible, on en conviendra. Et puis, quelque mot d'origine allemande s'échappait parfois des lèvres de Lo-Maï, toujours si incorrectement prononcé qu'on avait peine à le reconnaître.

Or, c'était là un point que John Cort tenait pour absolument inexplicable. En effet, à supposer que les indigènes et les Wagddis se fussent rencontres déjà, était-il admissible que ces derniers eussent eu des relations avec les Allemands du Cameroun? Dans ce cas, l'Américain et le Français n'auraient pas eu les prémices de cette découverte. Bien que John Cort parlât assez couramment la langue allemande, il n'avait jamais eu l'occasion de s'en servir, puisque Lo-Maï n'en connaissait que deux ou trois mots.

Entre autres locutions empruntées aux indigènes, celle de Msélo- Tala-Tala, qui s'appliquait au souverain de cette tribu, était le plus souvent employée. On sait quel désir d'être reçus par cette Majesté invisible éprouvaient les deux amis Il est vrai, toutes les fois qu'ils prononçaient ce nom, Lo-Maï baissait la tête en marque de profond respect. En outre, lorsque leur promenade les amenait devant la case royale, s'ils manifestaient l'intention d'y pénétrer, Lo-Maï les arrêtait, les poussait de côte, les entraînait à droite ou à gauche. Il leur faisait comprendre à sa manière que nul n’avait le droit de franchir le seuil de la demeure sacrée.

Or, il arriva que, dans cet après-midi, un peu avant trois heures, le ngoro, la ngora et le petit vinrent trouver Khamis et ses compagnons.

Et, tout d’abord, il y eut à remarquer que la famille s’était parée de ses plus beaux vêtements — le père, coiffé d’un couvre- chef à plumes et drapé dans son manteau d’écorce, — la mère, enjuponnée de cette étoffe d’agoulie de fabrication wagddienne, quelques feuilles vertes dans les cheveux, au cou un chapelet de verroteries et de menues ferrailles — l’enfant, un léger pagne ceint à sa taille — «ses habits du dimanche», dit Max Huber.

Et, en les voyant si «endimanchés» tous trois:

«Qu’est-ce que cela signifie?… s’écria-t-il. Ont-ils eu la pensée de nous faire une visite officielle?…

— C’est sans doute jour de fête, répondit John Cort. S’agit-il donc de rendre hommage à un dieu quelconque? Ce serait le point intéressant qui résoudrait la question de religiosité.»

Avant qu’il eût achevé sa phrase, Lo-Maï venait de prononcer comme une réponse:

«Msélo-Tala-Tala…

— Le père aux lunettes!» traduisit Max Huber.

Et il sortit de la case avec l’idée que le roi des Wagddis passait en ce moment.

Complète désillusion! Max Huber n’entrevit pas même l’ombre de Sa Majesté! Toutefois, il fallut bien constater que Ngala était en mouvement. De toutes parts affluait une foule aussi joyeuse, aussi parée que la famille Maï. Grand concours de populaire, les uns suivant processionnellement les rues vers l’extrémité ouest du village, ceux-ci se tenant par la main comme des paysans en goguette, ceux-là cabriolant comme des singes d’un arbre à l’autre.

«Il y a quelque chose de nouveau…, déclara John Cort en s’arrêtant sur le seuil de la case.

— On va voir», répliqua Max Huber.

Et, revenant à Lo-Maï:

«Msélo-Tala-Tala?… répéta-t-il.

— Msélo-Tala-Tala!» répondit Lo-Maï en croisant ses bras, tandis qu’il inclinait la tête.

John Cort et Max Huber furent conduits à penser que la population wagddienne allait saluer son souverain, lequel ne tarderait pas à apparaître dans toute sa gloire.

Eux, John Cort, Max Huber, n’avaient pas d’habits de cérémonie à mettre. Ils en étaient réduits à leur unique costume de chasse, bien usé, bien sali, à leur linge qu’ils tenaient aussi propre que possible. Par conséquent, aucune toilette à faire en l’honneur de Sa Majesté, et, comme la famille Mai sortait de la case, ils la suivirent avec Llanga.

Quant à Khamis, peu soucieux de se mêler à tout ce monde inférieur, il «resta seul à la maison». Il s’occupa de ranger les ustensiles, de veiller à la préparation du repas, de nettoyer les armes à feu. Ne convenait-il pas d'être prêt à toute éventualité, et l'heure approchait peut-être où il serait nécessaire d'en faire usage.

John Cort et Max Huber se laissèrent donc guider par Lo-Maï à travers le village plein d'animation. Il n'existait pas de rues, au vrai sens de ce mot. Les paillotes, distribuées à la fantaisie de chacun, se conformaient à la disposition des arbres ou plutôt des cimes qui les abritaient.

La foule était assez compacte. Au moins un millier de Wagddis se dirigeaient maintenant vers la partie de Ngala à l'extrémité de laquelle s'élevait la case royale.

«Il est impossible de ressembler davantage à une foule humaine!… remarqua John Cort. Mêmes mouvements, même manière de témoigner sa satisfaction par les gestes, par les cris…

— Et par les grimaces, ajouta Max Huber, et c'est ce qui rattache ces êtres bizarres aux quadrumanes!»

En effet, les Wagddis, d'ordinaire sérieux, réservés, peu communicatifs, ne s'étaient jamais montrés si expansifs ni si grimaçants. Et toujours cette inexplicable indifférence envers les étrangers, auxquels ils ne semblaient prêter aucune attention — attention qui eût été gênante et obsédante chez les Denkas, les Monbouttous et autres peuplades africaines.

Cela n'était pas très «humain»!

Après une longue promenade, Max Huber et John Cort arrivèrent sur la place principale, que bornaient les ramures des derniers arbres du côté de l'ouest, et dont les branches verdoyantes retombaient autour du palais royal.

En avant étaient rangés les guerriers, toutes armes dehors, vêtus de peaux d’antilope rattachées par de fines lianes, le chef coiffé de têtes de steinbock dont les cornes leur donnaient l’apparence d’un troupeau. Quant au «colonel» Raggi, casqué d’une tête de buffle, l’arc sur l’épaule, la hachette à la ceinture, l’épieu à la main, il paradait devant l’armée wagddienne.

«Probablement, dit John Cort, le souverain s’apprête à passer la revue de ses troupes…

— Et, s’il ne vient pas, repartit Max Huber, c’est qu’il ne se laisse jamais voir à ses fidèles sujets!… On ne se figure pas ce que l’invisibilité donne de prestige à un monarque, et peut-être celui-ci…»

S’adressant à Lo-Maï, dont il se fit comprendre par un geste:

«Msélo-Tala-Tala doit-il sortir?…»

Signe affirmatif de Lo-Maï, qui sembla dire:

«Plus tard… plus tard…

— Peu importe, répliqua Max Huber, pourvu qu’il nous soit permis de contempler enfin sa face auguste…

— Et, en attendant, répondit John Cort, ne perdons rien de ce spectacle.»

Voici ce que tous deux furent à même d’observer alors de plus curieux:

Le centre de la place entièrement dégagé d’arbres, restait libre sur un espace d’un demi-hectare. La foule l’emplissait dans le but, sans doute, de prendre part à la fête jusqu’au moment où le souverain paraîtrait au seuil de son palais. Se prosternerait-elle alors devant lui?… Se confondrait-elle en adorations!…

«Après tout, fit remarquer John Cort, il n’y aurait pas à tenir compte de ces adorations au point de vue de la religiosité, car, en somme, elles ne s’adresseraient qu’à un homme…

— À moins, répliqua Max Huber, que cet homme ne soit en bois ou en pierre… Si ce potentat n’est qu’une idole du genre de celles que révèrent les naturels de la Polynésie…

— Dans ce cas, mon cher Max, il ne manquerait plus rien aux habitants de Ngala de ce qui complète l’être humain… Ils auraient le droit d’être classés parmi les hommes tout autant que ces naturels dont vous parlez…

— En admettant que ceux-ci le méritent! répondit Max Huber, d’un ton assez peu flatteur pour la race polynésienne.

— Certes, Max, puisqu’ils croient à l’existence d’une divinité quelconque, et jamais il n’est venu ni ne viendra à personne l’idée de les classer parmi les animaux, fût-ce même ceux qui occupent le premier rang dans l’animalité!»

Grâce à la famille de Lo-Maï, Max Huber, John Cort et Llanga purent se placer de manière à tout voir.

Lorsque la foule eut laissé libre le centre de la place, les jeunes Wagddis des deux sexes se mirent en danse, tandis que les plus âgés commençaient à boire, comme les héros d’une kermesse hollandaise.

Ce que ces sylvestres absorbaient, c’étaient des boissons fermentées et pimentées tirées des gousses du tamarin. Et elles devaient être extrêmement alcooliques, car les têtes ne tardèrent pas à s’échauffer et les jambes à tituber d’une façon inquiétante.

Ces danses ne rappelaient en rien les nobles figures du passe-pied ou du menuet, sans aller cependant jusqu’au paroxysme des déhanchements et des grands écarts en honneur dans les bals- musettes des banlieues parisiennes. Au total, il se faisait plus de grimaces que de contorsions, et aussi plus de culbutes. En un mot, dans ces attitudes chorégraphiques, on retrouvait moins l’homme que le singe. Et, qu’on l’entende bien, non point le singe éduqué pour les exhibitions de la foire, non… le singe livré à ses instincts naturels.

En outre, les danses ne s’exécutaient pas avec accompagnement des clameurs publiques. C’était au son d’instruments des plus rudimentaires, calebasses tendues d’une peau sonore et frappées à coups redoublés, tiges creuses, taillées en sifflet, dans lesquelles une douzaine de vigoureux exécutants soufflaient à se crever les poumons. Non!… jamais charivari plus assourdissant ne déchira des oreilles de blancs!

«Ils ne paraissent pas avoir le sentiment de la mesure…, remarqua John Cort.

— Pas plus que celui de la tonalité, répondit Max Huber.

— En somme, ils sont sensibles à la musique, mon cher Max.

— Et les animaux le sont aussi, mon cher John, — quelques-uns, du moins. À mon avis, la musique est un art inférieur qui s’adresse à un sens inférieur. Au contraire, qu’il s’agisse de peinture, de sculpture, de littérature, aucun animal n’en subit le charme, et on n’a jamais vu même les plus intelligents se montrer émus devant un tableau ou à l’audition d’une tirade de poète!»

Quoi qu’il en soit, les Wagddis se rapprochaient de l’homme, non seulement parce qu’ils ressentaient les effets de la musique, mais parce qu’ils mettaient eux-mêmes cet art en pratique.

Deux heures se passèrent ainsi, à l’extrême impatience de Max Huber. Ce qui l’enrageait, c’est que S. M. Msélo-Tala-Tala ne daignait pas se déranger pour recevoir l’hommage de ses sujets.

Cependant la fête continuait avec redoublement de cris et de danses. Les boissons provoquaient aux violences de l’ivresse, et c’était à se demander quelles scènes de désordre menaçaient de s’ensuivre, lorsque, soudain, le tumulte prit fin.

Chacun se calma, s’accroupit, s’immobilisa. Un silence absolu succéda aux bruyantes démonstrations, au fracas assourdissant des tam-tams, au sifflet suraigu des flûtes.

À ce moment, la porte de la demeure royale s’ouvrit, et les guerriers formèrent la haie de chaque côté.

«Enfin! dit Max Huber, nous allons donc le voir, ce souverain de sylvestres.»

Ce ne fut point Sa Majesté qui sortit de la case. Une sorte de meuble, recouvert d’un tapis de feuillage, fut apporté au milieu de la place. Et quelle fut la bien naturelle surprise des deux amis, lorsqu’ils reconnurent dans ce meuble un vulgaire orgue de Barbarie!… Très probablement, cet instrument sacré ne figurait que dans les grandes cérémonies de Ngala, et les Wagddis en écoutaient sans doute les airs plus ou moins variés avec un ravissement de dilettantes!

«Mais c’est l’orgue du docteur Johausen! dit John Cort.

— Ce ne peut être que cette mécanique antédiluvienne, répliqua Max Huber. Et, à présent, je m’explique comment, dans la nuit de notre arrivée sous le village de Ngala, j’ai eu la vague impression d’entendre l’impitoyable valse du *Freyschütz* au- dessus de ma tête!

— Et vous ne nous avez rien dit de cela, Max?…

— J’ai cru que j’avais rêvé, John.

— Quant à cet orgue, ajouta John Cort, ce sont certainement les

Wagddis qui l’ont rapporté de la case du docteur…

— Et après avoir mis à mal ce pauvre homme!» ajouta Max Huber.

Un superbe Wagddi — évidemment le chef d’orchestre de l’endroit - - vint se poser devant l’instrument et commença à tourner la manivelle.

Aussitôt la valse en question, à laquelle manquaient bien quelques notes, de se dévider au très réel plaisir de l’assistance.

C’était un concert qui succédait aux exercices chorégraphiques. Les auditeurs l’écoutèrent en hochant la tête, — à contre-mesure, il est vrai. De fait, il ne semblait pas qu’ils subissent cette impression giratoire qu’une valse communique aux civilisés de l’ancien et du nouveau monde.

Et, gravement, comme pénétré de l’importance de ses fonctions, le

Wagddi manoeuvrait toujours sa boîte à musique.

Mais, à Ngala, savait-on que l’orgue renfermât d’autres airs?… C’est ce que se demandait John Cort. En effet, le hasard n’aurait pu faire découvrir à ces primitifs par quel procédé, en poussant un bouton, on remplaçait le motif de Weber par un autre.

Quoi qu’il en soit, après une demi-heure consacrée à la valse du *Freyschütz*, voici que l’exécutant poussa un ressort latéral, ainsi que l’eût fait un joueur des rues de l’instrument suspendu par sa bretelle.

«Ah! par exemple… c’est trop fort, cela!…» s’écria Max Huber.

Trop fort, en vérité, à moins que quelqu’un n’eût appris à ces sylvestres le secret du mécanisme, et comment on pouvait tirer de ce meuble barbaresque toutes les mélodies renfermées dans son sein!…

Puis la manivelle se remit aussitôt en mouvement. Et alors à l’air allemand succéda un air français, l’un des plus populaires, la plaintive chanson de la *Grâce de Dieu*.

On connaît ce «chef-d’oeuvre» de Loïsa Puget. Personne n’ignore que le couplet se déroule en la mineur pendant seize mesures, et que le refrain reprend en la majeur, suivant toutes les traditions de l’art à cette époque.

«Ah! le malheureux!… Ah! le misérable!… hurla Max Huber, dont les exclamations provoquèrent les murmures très significatifs de l’assistance.

— Quel misérable?… demanda John Cort. Celui qui joue de l’orgue?…

— Non! celui qui l’a fabriqué!… Pour économiser les notes, il n’a fourré dans sa boîte ni les *ut* ni les *sol* dièzes!… Et ce refrain qui devrait être joué en la majeur:

Va, mon enfant, adieu, À la grâce de Dieu…

voilà qu’on le joue en *ut* majeur!

— Ça… c’est un crime!… déclara en riant John Cort.

— Et ces barbares qui ne s’en aperçoivent point… qui ne bondissent pas comme devrait bondir tout être doué d’une oreille humaine!…»

Non! cette abomination, les Wagddis n’en ressentaient pas toute l’horreur!… Ils acceptaient cette criminelle substitution d’un mode à l’autre!… S’ils n’applaudissaient pas, bien qu’ils eussent d’énormes mains de claqueurs, leur attitude n’en décelait pas moins une profonde extase!

«Rien que cela, dit Max Huber, mérite qu’on les ramène au rang des bêtes!»

Il y eut lieu de croire que cet orgue ne contenait pas d’autres motifs que la valse allemande et la chanson française. Invariablement elles se remplacèrent une demi-heure durant. Les autres airs étaient vraisemblablement détraqués. Par bonheur, l’instrument, possédant les notes voulues en ce qui concernait la valse, ne donnait pas à Max Huber les nausées que lui avait fait éprouver le couplet de la romance.

Lorsque ce concert fut achevé, les danses reprirent de plus belle, les boissons coulèrent plus abondantes que jamais à travers les gosiers wagddiens. Le soleil venait de s’abaisser derrière les cimes du couchant, et quelques torches s’allumaient entre les ramures, de manière à illuminer la place que le court crépuscule allait bientôt plonger dans l’ombre.

Max Huber et John Cort en avaient assez, et ils songeaient à regagner leur case, lorsque Lo-Maï prononça ce nom:

«Msélo-Tala-Tala.»

Était-ce vrai?… Sa Majesté allait-elle venir recevoir les adorations de son peuple?… Daignait-elle enfin sortir de sa divine invisibilité?… John Cort et Max Huber se gardèrent bien de partir.

En effet, un mouvement se faisait du côté de la case royale, auquel répondit une sourde rumeur de l’assistance. La porte s’ouvrit, une escorte de guerriers se forma, et le chef Raggi prit la tête du cortège.

Presque aussitôt apparut un trône, — un vieux divan drapé d’étoffes et de feuillage, — soutenu par quatre porteurs, et sur lequel se pavanait Sa Majesté.

C’était un personnage d’une soixantaine d’années, couronné de verdure, la chevelure et la barbe blanches, d’une corpulence considérable, et dont le poids devait être lourd aux robustes épaules de ses serviteurs.

Le cortège se mit en marche, de manière à faire le tour de la place.

La foule se courbait jusqu’à terre, silencieuse, comme hypnotisée par l’auguste présence de Msélo-Tala-Tala.

Le souverain semblait fort indifférent, d’ailleurs, aux hommages qu’il recevait, qui lui étaient dus, dont il avait probablement l’habitude. À peine s’il daignait remuer la tête en signe de satisfaction. Pas un geste, si ce n’est à deux ou trois reprises pour se gratter le nez, — un long nez que surmontaient de grosses lunettes, — ce qui justifiait son surnom de «Père Miroir».

Les deux amis le regardèrent avec une extrême attention, lorsqu'il passa devant eux.

«Mais… c'est un homme!… affirma John Cort.

— Un homme?… répliqua Max Huber.

— Oui… un homme… et… qui plus est… un blanc!…

— Un blanc?…»

Oui, à n'en pas douter, ce qu'on promenait là sur sa *sedia gestatoria*, c'était un être différent de ces Wagddis sur lesquels il régnait, et non point un indigène des tribus du haut Oubanghi… Impossible de s'y tromper, c'était un blanc, un représentant qualifié de la race humaine!…

«Et notre présence ne produit aucun effet sur lui, dit Max Huber, et il ne semble même pas nous apercevoir!… Que diable! nous ne ressemblons pourtant pas à ces demi-singes de Ngala, et, pour avoir vécu parmi eux depuis trois semaines, nous n'avons pas encore perdu, j'imagine, figure d'hommes!…»

Et il fut sur le point de crier:

«Hé!… monsieur… là-bas… faites-nous donc l'honneur de regarder…»

À cet instant, John Cort lui saisit le bras et, d'une voix qui dénotait le comble de la surprise:

«Je le reconnais… dit-il.

— Vous le reconnaissez?

— Oui!… C’est le docteur Johausen!»

CHAPITRE XVII

En quel état le docteur Johausen!

John Cort avait autrefois rencontré le docteur Johausen à Libreville. Il ne pouvait faire erreur: c'était bien ledit docteur qui régnait sur cette peuplade wagddienne!

Son histoire, rien de plus aisé que d'en résumer le début en quelques lignes, et même de la reconstituer tout entière. Les faits s'enchaînaient sans interruption sur cette route qui allait de la cage forestière au village de Ngala.

Trois ans avant, cet Allemand, désireux de reprendre la tentative peu sérieuse et, dans tous les cas, avortée du professeur Garner, quitta Malinba avec une escorte de noirs, emportant un matériel, des munitions et des vivres pour un assez long temps. Ce qu'il voulait faire dans l'est du Cameroun, on ne l'ignorait pas. Il avait formé l'invraisemblable projet de s'établir au milieu des singes afin d'étudier leur langage. Mais de quel côté il comptait se diriger, il ne l'avait confié à personne, étant très original, très maniaque et, pour employer un mot dont les Français se servent fréquemment, à demi toqué.

Les découvertes de Khamis et de ses compagnons pendant leur voyage de retour prouvaient indubitablement que le docteur avait atteint dans la forêt l'endroit où coulait le rio baptisé de son nom par Max Huber. Il avait construit un radeau et, après avoir renvoyé son escorte, s'y était embarqué avec un indigène demeuré à son service. Puis, tous deux descendirent la rivière jusqu'au marécage à l'extrémité duquel fut établie la cabane treillagée sous le couvert des arbres de la rive droite.

Là s'arrêtaient les données certaines relatives aux aventures du docteur Johausen. Quant à ce qui avait suivi, les hypothèses se changeaient maintenant en certitudes.

On se souvient que Khamis, en fouillant la cage vide alors, avait mis la main sur une petite boîte de cuivre qui renfermait un carnet de notes. Or, ces notes se réduisaient à quelques lignes tracées au crayon, à diverses dates, depuis celle du 27 juillet 1894 jusqu'à celle du 24 août de la même année.

Il était donc démontré que le docteur avait débarqué le 29 juillet, achevé son installation le 13 août, habité sa cage jusqu'au 25 du même mois, soit, au total, treize jours pleins.

Pourquoi l'avait-il abandonnée?… Était-ce de son propre gré?… Évidemment, non. Que les Wagddis s'avançassent parfois jusqu'aux rives du rio, Khamis, John Cort et Max Huber savaient à quoi s'en tenir à cet égard. Ces feux qui illuminaient la lisière de la forêt à l'arrivée de la caravane, n'étaient-ce pas eux qui les promenaient d'arbre en arbre?… De là cette conclusion que ces primitifs découvrirent la cabane du professeur, qu'ils s'emparèrent de sa personne et de son matériel, que le tout fut transporté au village aérien.

Quant au serviteur indigène, il s'était enfui sans doute à travers la forêt. S'il eût été conduit à Ngala, John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis l'eussent déjà rencontré, lui qui n'était pas roi et qui n'habitait point la case royale. D'ailleurs, il aurait figuré dans la cérémonie de ce jour auprès de son maître en qualité de dignitaire, et pourquoi pas de premier ministre?…

Ainsi, les Wagddis n’avaient pas traité le docteur Johausen plus mal que Khamis et ses compagnons. Très probablement frappés de sa supériorité intellectuelle, ils en avaient fait leur souverain, — ce qui eût pu arriver à John Cort ou à Max Huber, si la place n’eût été prise. Donc, depuis trois ans, le docteur Johausen, le père Miroir — c’est lui qui avait dû apprendre cette locution à ses sujets — occupait le trône wagddien sous le nom de Msélo- Tala-Tala.

Cela expliquait nombre de choses jusqu’alors assez inexplicables: comment plusieurs mots de la langue congolaise figuraient dans le langage de ces primitifs, et aussi deux ou trois mots de la langue allemande, comment le maniement de l’orgue de Barbarie leur était familier, comment ils connaissaient la fabrication de certains ustensiles, comment un certain progrès s’était peut-être étendu aux moeurs de ces types placés au premier degré de l’échelle humaine.

Voilà ce que se dirent les deux amis lorsqu’ils eurent réintégré leur case.

Aussitôt Khamis fut mis au courant.

«Ce que je ne puis m’expliquer, ajouta Max Huber, c’est que le docteur Johausen ne se soit point inquiété de la présence d’étrangers dans sa capitale… Comment? il ne nous a point fait comparaître devant lui… et il ne semble même pas s’être aperçu, pendant la cérémonie, que nous ne ressemblions pas à ses sujets!… Oh! mais, pas du tout!…

— Je suis de votre avis, Max, répondit John Cort, et il m’est impossible de comprendre pourquoi Msélo-Tala-Tala ne nous a pas encore mandés à son palais…

— Peut-être ignore-t-il que les Wagddis ont fait des prisonniers dans cette partie de la forêt?… observa le foreloper.

— C’est possible, mais c’est au moins singulier, déclara John Cort. Il y a là quelque circonstance qui m’échappe et qu’il faudra éclaircir…

— De quelle façon?… demanda Max Huber.

— En cherchant bien, nous y parviendrons!…» répondit John Cort.

De tout ceci il résultait que le docteur Johausen, venu dans la forêt de l’Oubanghi afin de vivre parmi les singes, était entre les mains d’une race supérieure à l’anthropoïde et dont on ne soupçonnait pas l’existence. Il n’avait pas eu la peine de leur apprendre à parler, puisqu’ils parlaient; il s’était borné à leur enseigner quelques mots de la langue congolaise et de la langue allemande. Puis, en leur donnant ses soins comme docteur, sans doute, il avait dû acquérir une certaine popularité qui l’avait porté au trône!… Et, à vrai dire, John Cort n’avait-il pas déjà constaté que les habitants de Ngala jouissaient d’une santé excellente, qu’on n’y comptait pas un malade et, ainsi que cela a été dit, que pas un Wagddi n’était décédé depuis l’arrivée des étrangers à Ngala?

Ce qu’il y avait lieu d’admettre, en tout cas, c’est que, bien qu’il y eût un médecin dans ce village, — un médecin dont on avait fait un roi, — il ne semblait pas que la mortalité s’y fût accrue. Réflexion quelque peu irrévérencieuse pour la Faculté, et que se permit Max Huber.

Et, maintenant quel parti prendre?… La situation du docteur Johausen à Ngala ne devait-elle pas modifier la situation des prisonniers?… Ce souverain de race teutonne hésiterait-il à leur rendre la liberté, s’ils paraissaient devant lui et lui demandaient de les renvoyer au Congo?…

«Je ne puis le croire, dit Max Huber, et notre conduite est toute tracée… Il est très possible que notre présence ait été cachée à ce docteur-roi… J’admets même, quoique ce soit assez invraisemblable, que pendant la cérémonie il ne nous ait pas remarqués au milieu de la foule… Eh bien, raison de plus pour pénétrer dans la case royale…

— Quand?… demanda John Cort.

— Dès ce soir, et, puisque c’est un souverain adoré de son peuple, son peuple lui obéira, et, lorsqu’il nous aura rendu la liberté, on nous reconduira jusqu’à la frontière avec les honneurs dus aux semblables de Sa Majesté wagddienne.

— Et s’il refuse?…

— Pourquoi refuserait-il?…

— Sait-on, mon cher Max?… répondit John en riant. Des raisons diplomatiques, peut-être!…

— Eh bien, s’il refuse, s’écria Max Huber, je lui dirai qu’il était tout au plus digne de régner sur les plus inférieurs des macaques et qu’il est au-dessous du dernier de ses sujets!»

En somme, débarrassée de ses agréments fantaisistes, la proposition valait la peine d’être prise en considération.

L’occasion était propice, d’ailleurs. Si la nuit allait interrompre la fête, ce qui se prolongerait, à n’en pas douter, c’était l’état d’ébriété dans lequel se trouvait la population du village… Ne fallait-il pas profiter de cette circonstance, qui ne se renouvellerait peut-être pas de longtemps?… De ces Wagddis à demi ivres, les uns seraient endormis dans leurs paillotes, les autres dispersés à travers les profondeurs de la forêt… Les guerriers eux-mêmes n'avaient pas craint de déshonorer leur uniforme en buvant à perdre la tête… La demeure royale serait moins sévèrement gardée, et il ne devait pas être difficile d'arriver jusqu'à la chambre de Msélo-Tala-Tala…

Ce projet ayant eu l'approbation de Khamis, toujours de bon conseil, on attendit que la nuit fût close et l'ivresse plus complète dans le village. Il va de soi que Kollo, autorisé à se joindre au festival, n'était pas rentré.

Vers neuf heures, Max Huber, John Cort, Llanga et le foreloper sortirent de leur case.

Ngala était sombre, étant dépourvue de tout éclairage municipal. Les dernières lueurs des torches résineuses, disposées dans les arbres, venaient de s'éteindre. Au loin, comme au-dessous de Ngala, se propageaient des rumeurs confuses, du côté opposé à l'habitation du docteur Johausen.

John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis, prévoyant le cas où il leur serait possible de fuir ce soir même avec ou sans l'agrément de Sa Majesté, s'étaient munis de leurs carabines et toutes les cartouches de la caisse garnissaient leurs poches. En effet, s'ils étaient surpris, peut-être serait-il nécessaire de faire parler les armes à feu, — un langage que les Wagddis ne devaient pas connaître.

Tous les quatre, ils allèrent ainsi entre les cases, dont la plupart étaient vides. Lorsqu'ils furent sur la place plongée dans les ténèbres, elle était déserte.

Une seule clarté sortait de la fenêtre de la case du souverain.

«Personne», observa John Cort.

Personne effectivement, pas même devant la demeure de Msélo-Tala-

Tala.

Raggi et ses guerriers avaient abandonné leur poste, et, cette nuit-là, le souverain ne serait pas bien gardé.

Il se pouvait, cependant, qu’il y eût quelques «chambellans de service» près de Sa Majesté et qu’il fût malaisé de tromper leur surveillance.

Toutefois, Khamis et ses compagnons estimaient l’occasion trop tentante. Une heureuse chance leur avait permis d’atteindre l’habitation royale sans avoir été aperçus, et ils se disposèrent à y pénétrer.

En rampant le long des branches, Llanga put s’avancer jusqu’à la porte et il constata qu’il suffirait de la pousser pour pénétrer à l’intérieur. John Cort, Max Huber et Khamis le rejoignirent aussitôt. Pendant quelques minutes, avant d’entrer, ils prêtèrent l’oreille, prêts à battre en retraite, s’il le fallait.

Aucun bruit ne se faisait entendre ni au dedans ni au dehors.

Ce fut Max Huber qui, le premier, franchit le seuil. Ses compagnons le suivirent et refermèrent la porte derrière eux.

Cette habitation comprenait deux chambres contiguës, formant tout l’appartement de Msélo-Tala-Tala.

Personne dans la première, absolument obscure.

Khamis appliqua son oeil à la porte qui communiquait avec la seconde chambre, — porte assez mal jointe à travers laquelle filtraient quelques lueurs.

Le docteur Johausen était là, à demi couché sur un divan.

Évidemment, ce meuble et quelques autres qui garnissaient la chambre provenaient du matériel de la cage et avaient été apportés à Ngala en même temps que leur propriétaire.

«Entrons», dit Max Huber.

Au bruit, qu'ils firent, le docteur Johausen, tournant la tête, se redressa… Peut-être venait-il d'être tiré d'un profond sommeil… Quoi qu'il en soit, il ne parut pas que la présence des visiteurs eût produit sur lui aucun effet.

«Docteur Johausen, mes compagnons et moi, nous venons offrir nos hommages à Votre Majesté!…» dit John Cort en allemand.

Le docteur ne répondit rien… Est-ce qu'il n'avait pas compris?… Est-ce qu'il avait oublié sa propre langue, après trois ans de séjour chez les Wagddis?…

«M'entendez-vous? reprit John Cort. Nous sommes des étrangers qui avons été amenés au village de Ngala…»

Aucune réponse.

Ces étrangers, le monarque wagddien semblait les regarder sans les voir, les écouter sans les entendre. Il ne faisait pas un mouvement, pas un geste, comme s'il eût été en état de complète hébétude.

Max Huber s'approcha, et, peu respectueux envers ce souverain, de l'Afrique centrale, il le prit par les épaules et le secoua vigoureusement.

Sa Majesté fit une grimace que n’eût pas désavouée le plus grimacier des mandrilles de l’Oubanghi.

Max Huber le secoua de nouveau.

Sa Majesté lui tira la langue.

«Est-ce qu’il est fou?… dit John Cort.

— Tout ce qu’il y a de plus fou, pardieu!… fou à lier!…» déclara Max Huber.

Oui… le docteur Johausen était en absolue démence. À moitié déséquilibré déjà lors de son départ du Cameroun, il avait achevé de perdre la raison depuis son arrivée à Ngala. Et qui sait même si ce n’était pas cette dégénérescence mentale qui lui avait valu d’être proclamé roi des Wagddis?… Est-ce que, chez les Indiens du Far West, chez les sauvages de l’Océanie, la folie n’est pas plus honorée que la sagesse, et le fou ne passe-t-il pas, aux yeux de ces indigènes, pour un être sacré, un dépositaire de la puissance divine?…

La vérité est que le pauvre docteur était dépourvu de toute intellectualité. Et voilà pourquoi il ne se préoccupait pas de la présence des quatre étrangers au village, comment il n’avait pas reconnu en deux d’entre eux des individus de son espèce, si différente de la race wagddienne!

«Il n’y a qu’un parti à prendre, dit Khamis. Nous ne pouvons pas compter sur l’intervention de cet inconscient pour nous rendre la liberté…

— Assurément non!… affirma John Cort.

— Et ces animaux-là ne nous laisseront jamais partir…, ajouta

Max Huber. Donc, puisque l’occasion s’offre de fuir, fuyons…

— À l’instant, dit Khamis. Profitons de la nuit…

— Et de l’état où se trouve tout ce monde de demi-singes…, déclara Max Huber.

— Venez, dit Khamis en se dirigeant vers la première chambre.

Essayons de gagner l’escalier et jetons-nous à travers la forêt…

— Convenu, répliqua Max Huber, mais… le docteur…

— Le docteur?… répéta Khamis.

— Nous ne pouvons pas le laisser dans sa souveraineté wagddienne… Notre devoir est de le délivrer…

— Oui, certes, mon cher Max, approuva John Cort. Mais ce malheureux n’a plus sa raison… il résistera peut-être… S’il refuse de nous suivre?…

— Tentons-le toujours», répondit Max Huber en s’approchant du docteur.

Ce gros homme — on l’imagine — ne devait pas être facile à déplacer, et, s’il ne s’y prêtait pas, comment réussir à le pousser hors de la case?…

Khamis et John Cort, se joignant à Max Huber, saisirent le docteur par le bras.

Celui-ci, très vigoureux encore, les repoussa et se recoucha tout de son long en gigotant comme un crustacé qu’on a retourné sur le dos.

«Diable! fit Max Huber, il est aussi lourd à lui seul que toute la

Triplice…

— Docteur Johausen?…» cria une dernière fois John Cort.

Sa Majesté Msélo-Tala-Tala, pour toute réponse, se gratta de la façon la plus simiesque…

«Décidément, dit Max Huber, rien à obtenir de cette bête humaine!… Il est devenu singe… qu’il reste singe et continue à régner sur des singes!»

Il n’y eut plus qu’à quitter la demeure royale. Par malheur, tout en grimaçant, Sa Majesté s’était mise à crier, et si fort qu’elle devait avoir été entendue, si des Wagddis se trouvaient dans le voisinage.

D’autre part, perdre quelques secondes, c’était s’exposer à manquer une occasion si favorable… Raggi et ses guerriers allaient peut-être accourir… La situation des étrangers, surpris dans la demeure de Msélo-Tala-Tala, s’aggraverait, et ils devraient renoncer à tout espoir de recouvrer leur liberté…

Khamis et ses compagnons abandonnèrent donc le docteur Johausen et, rouvrant la porte, ils s’élancèrent au dehors.

CHAPITRE XVIII

Brusque dénouement

La chance se déclarait pour les fugitifs. Tout ce tapage à l’intérieur de l’habitation n’avait attiré personne. Déserte la place, désertes les rues qui y débouchaient. Mais la difficulté était de se reconnaître au milieu de ce dédale obscur, de circuler entre les branchages, de gagner par le plus court l’escalier de Ngala.

Soudain, un Wagddi se présenta devant Khamis et ses compagnons.

C’était Lo-Maï, accompagné de son enfant. Le petit, qui les avait suivis pendant qu’ils se rendaient à la case de Msélo-Tala-Tala, était venu prévenir son père. Celui-ci, redoutant quelque danger pour le foreloper et ses compagnons, se hâta de les rejoindre. Comprenant alors qu’ils cherchaient à s’enfuir, il s’offrit à leur servir de guide.

Ce fut heureux, car aucun d’eux n’aurait pu retrouver le chemin de l’escalier.

Mais, lorsqu’ils arrivèrent en cet endroit, quel fut leur désappointement!

L’entrée était gardée par Raggi et une douzaine de guerriers.

Forcer le passage, à quatre, serait-ce possible avec espoir de succès?…

Max Huber crut le moment venu d’utiliser sa carabine.

Raggi et deux autres venaient de se jeter sur lui…

Max Huber, reculant de quelques pas, fit feu sur le groupe.

Raggi, atteint en pleine poitrine, tomba raide mort.

Assurément, les Wagddis ne connaissaient ni l’usage des armes à feu ni leurs effets. La détonation et la chute de Raggi leur causèrent une épouvante dont on ne saurait donner une idée. Le tonnerre foudroyant la place pendant la cérémonie de ce jour les eût moins terrifiés. Cette douzaine de guerriers se dispersa, les uns rentrant dans le village, les autres dégringolant l’escalier avec une prestesse de quadrumanes.

Le chemin devint libre en un instant.

«En bas!…» cria Khamis.

Il n’y avait qu’à suivre Lo-Maï et le petit, qui prirent les devants. John Cort, Max Huber, Llanga, le foreloper, se laissèrent pour ainsi dire glisser, sans rencontrer d’obstacle. Après avoir passé sous le village aérien, ils se dirigèrent vers la rive du rio, l’atteignirent en quelques minutes, détachèrent un des canots et s’embarquèrent avec le père et l’enfant.

Mais alors des torches s’allumèrent de toutes parts, et de toutes parts accoururent un grand nombre de ces Wagddis qui erraient aux environs du village. Cris de colère, cris de menace furent appuyés d’une nuée de flèches.

«Allons, dit John Cort, il le faut!»

Max Huber et lui épaulèrent leurs carabines, tandis que Khamis et

Llanga manoeuvraient pour écarter le canot de la berge.

Une double détonation retentit. Deux Wagddis furent atteints, et la foule hurlante se dissipa.

En ce moment, le canot fut saisi par le courant, et il disparut en aval sous le couvert d’une rangée de grands arbres.

****

Il n’y a point à rapporter — en détail du moins — ce que fut cette navigation vers le sud-ouest de la grande forêt. S’il existait d’autres villages aériens, les deux amis ne devaient rien savoir à cet égard. Comme les munitions ne manquaient pas, la nourriture serait assurée par le produit de la chasse, et les diverses sortes d’antilopes abondaient dans ces régions voisines de l’Oubanghi.

Le lendemain soir, Khamis amarra le canot à un arbre de la berge pour la nuit.

Pendant ce parcours, John Cort et Max Huber n’avaient point épargné les témoignages de reconnaissance à Lo-Maï, pour lequel ils éprouvaient une sympathie tout humaine.

Quant à Llanga et à l’enfant, c’était entre eux une véritable amitié fraternelle. Comment le jeune indigène aurait-il pu sentir les différences anthropologiques qui le mettaient au-dessus de ce petit être?…

John Cort et Max Huber espéraient bien obtenir de Lo-Maï qu’il les accompagnerait jusqu’à Libreville. Le retour serait facile en descendant ce rio, qui devait être un des affluents de l’Oubanghi. L’essentiel était que son cours ne fût obstrué ni par des rapides ni par des chutes.

C’était le soir du 16 avril que l’embarcation avait fait halte, après une navigation de quinze heures. Khamis estimait que de quarante à cinquante kilomètres venaient d’être parcourus depuis la veille.

Il fut convenu que la nuit se passerait en cet endroit. Le campement organisé, le repas terminé, Lo-Maï veillant, les autres s’endormirent d’un sommeil réparateur qui ne fut troublé en aucune façon.

Au réveil, Khamis fit les préparatifs de départ, et le canot n’avait plus qu’à se lancer dans le courant.

En ce moment, Lo-Maï, qui tenait son enfant d’une main, attendait sur la berge.

John Cort et Max Huber le rejoignirent et le pressèrent de les suivre.

Lo-Maï, secouant la tête, montra d’une main le cours du rio et de l’autre les épaisses profondeurs de la forêt.

Les deux amis insistèrent, et leurs gestes suffisaient à les faire comprendre. Ils voulaient emmener Lo-Maï et Li-Maï avec eux, à Libreville…

En même temps, Llanga accablait l’enfant de ses caresses, l’embrassant, le serrant entre ses bras… Il cherchait à l’entraîner vers le canot…

Li-Maï ne prononça qu’un mot:

«Ngora!»

Oui… sa mère qui était restée au village, et près de laquelle son père et lui voulaient retourner… C’était la famille que rien ne pouvait séparer!…

Les adieux définitifs furent faits, après que la nourriture de Lo-

Maï et du petit eut été assurée pour leur retour jusqu’à Ngala.

John Cort et Max Huber ne cachèrent pas leur émotion à la pensée qu’il ne reverraient jamais ces deux créatures affectueuses et bonnes, si inférieure que fût leur race…

Quant à Llanga, il ne put se retenir de pleurer, et de grosses larmes mouillèrent aussi les yeux du père et de l’enfant.

«Eh bien, dit John Cort, croirez-vous maintenant, mon cher Max, que ces pauvres êtres se rattachent à l’humanité?…

— Oui, John, puisqu’ils ont, de même que l’homme, le sourire et les larmes!»

Le canot prit le fil du courant et, au coude de la rive, Khamis et ses compagnons purent envoyer un dernier adieu à Lo-Maï et à son fils.

Les journées des 18, 19, 20 et 21 avril furent employées à descendre la rivière jusqu’à son confluent avec l’Oubanghi. Le courant étant très rapide, il y eut lieu d’estimer à près de trois cents kilomètres le parcours fait depuis le village de Ngala.

Le foreloper et ses compagnons se trouvaient alors à la hauteur des rapides de Zongo, à peu près à l’angle que forme le fleuve en obliquant vers le sud. Ces rapides, il eût été impossible de les franchir en canot, et, pour reprendre la navigation en aval, un portage allait devenir nécessaire. Il est vrai, l’itinéraire permettait de suivre à pied la rive gauche de l’Oubanghi dans cette partie limitrophe entre le Congo indépendant et le Congo français. Mais, à ce cheminement pénible, le canot devait être infiniment préférable. N’était-ce pas du temps gagné, de la fatigue épargnée?…

Très heureusement, Khamis put éviter cette dure opération du portage.

Au-dessous des rapides de Zongo, l’Oubanghi est navigable jusqu’à son confluent avec le Congo. Les bateaux ne sont pas rares qui font le trafic de cette région où ne manquent ni les villages, ni les bourgades, ni les établissements de missionnaires. Ces cinq cents kilomètres qui les séparaient du but, John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis et Llanga les franchirent à bord d’une de ces larges embarcations auxquelles le remorquage à vapeur commence à venir en aide.

Ce fut le 26 avril qu’ils s’arrêtèrent près d’une bourgade de la rive droite. Remis de leurs fatigues, bien portants, il ne leur restait plus que cent kilomètres pour atteindre Libreville.

Une caravane fut aussitôt organisée par les soins du foreloper et, marchant directement vers l’ouest, traversa ces longues plaines congolaises en vingt-quatre jours.

Le 20 mai, John Cort, Max Huber, Khamis et Llanga faisaient leur entrée dans la factorerie, en avant de la bourgade, où leurs amis, très inquiets d’une absence si prolongée, sans nouvelles d’eux depuis près de six mois, les reçurent à bras ouverts.

Ni Khamis ni le jeune indigène ne devaient plus se séparer de John Cort et de Max Huber. Llanga n’était-il pas adopté par eux, et le foreloper n’avait-il pas été leur dévoué guide pendant cet aventureux voyage?…

Et le docteur Johausen?… Et ce village aérien de Ngala, perdu sous les massifs de la grande forêt?…

Eh bien, tôt ou tard une expédition devra prendre avec ces étranges Wagddis un contact plus intime, dans l'intérêt de la science anthropologique moderne.

Quant au docteur allemand, il est fou, et, en admettant que la raison lui revienne et qu'on le ramène à Malinba, qui sait s'il ne regrettera pas le temps où il régnait sous le nom de Msélo-Tala- Tala, et si, grâce à lui, cette peuplade de primitifs ne passera pas un jour sous le protectorat de l'empire d'Allemagne?…

Cependant, il serait possible que l'Angleterre…

FIN

THE YARNS OF JEAN-MARIE CABIDOULIN

Also known as *The Sea Serpent*, this adventure novel was first published in 1901. It tells the story of an old seaman, who sets sail on a final voyage hoping to catch a glimpse of the ‘Sea Serpent’ that has eluded him all his life.

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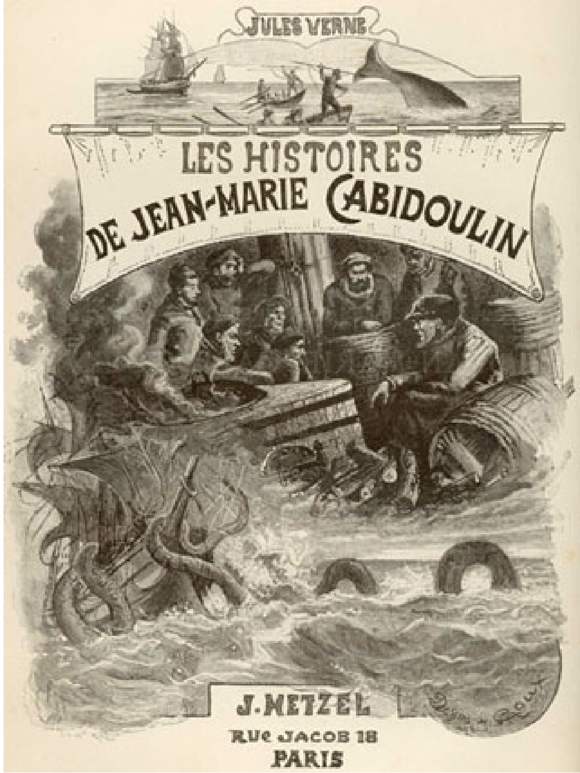
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DE JEAN-MARIE CABIDOULIN
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An original illustration

LES HISTOIRES DE JEAN-MARIE CABIDOULIN

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CHAPITRE I

Un départ retardé

“Eh! capitaine Bourcart, ce n’est donc pas aujourd’hui le départ?…

— Non, monsieur Brunel, et je crains que nous ne puissions partir ni demain… ni même dans huit jours…

— Cela est contrariant…

— Et surtout inquiétant, déclara M. Bourcart en secouant la tête. Le Saint-Enoch devrait être en mer depuis la fin du mois dernier afin d’arriver en bonne saison sur les lieux de pêche… Vous verrez qu’il se laissera distancer par les Anglais et les Américains…

— Et ce sont toujours ces deux hommes qui vous manquent à bord?…

— Toujours… monsieur Brunel… l’un dont je ne puis me passer, l’autre dont je me passerais à la rigueur, n’étaient les règlements qui me l’imposent…

— Et celui-ci n’est pas le tonnelier, sans doute?… demanda M. Brunel.

— Non… ayez la bonté de m’en croire, non!… À mon bord, le tonnelier est aussi indispensable que la mâture, le gouvernail ou la boussole, puisque j’ai deux mille barils dans ma cale…

— Et combien d’hommes compte le Saint-Enoch, capitaine Bourcart?…

— Nous serions trente-quatre, monsieur Brunel, si j’étais au complet. Voyez-vous, il est plus utile d’avoir un tonnelier pour soigner les barils que d’avoir un médecin pour soigner les hommes!… Des barils, cela exige sans cesse des réparations, tandis que les hommes…, ça se répare tout seul! D’ailleurs, est-ce qu’on est jamais malade à la mer?…

— Évidemment on ne devrait pas l’être en si bon air, capitaine Bourcart… et, pourtant, quelquefois…

— Monsieur Brunel, j’en suis encore à avoir un malade sur le Saint-Enoch…

— Tous mes compliments, capitaine. Mais que voulez-vous? Un navire est un navire, et, comme tel, il est soumis aux règlements maritimes… Lorsque son équipage atteint un certain nombre d’officiers et de matelots, il faut qu’il embarque un médecin… c’est formel. Or vous n’en avez pas…

— Et c’est bien pour cette raison que le Saint-Enoch ne se trouve pas aujourd’hui par le travers du cap Saint-Vincent, où il devrait être!”

Cette conversation entre le capitaine Bourcart et M. Brunel se tenait sur la jetée du Havre, vers onze heures du matin, dans cette partie un peu relevée qui va du sémaphore au musoir.

Ces deux hommes se connaissaient de longue date, l’un ancien capitaine au cabotage, devenu officier de port, l’autre commandant le trois-mâts Saint-Enoch. Et, ce dernier, avec quelle impatience il attendait d’avoir pu compléter son rôle d’équipage pour prendre le large!

Bourcart (Évariste-Simon), âgé d’une cinquantaine d’années était avantageusement connu sur la place du Havre, son port d’attache. Célibataire, sans famille, sans proches parents, ayant navigué dès sa prime enfance, il avait été mousse, novice, matelot et maître au service de l’État.

Après de multiples voyages comme lieutenant et second dans la marine marchande, il commandait depuis dix ans le Saint-Enoch un baleinier qui lui appartenait par moitié avec la maison Morice frères.

Excellent marin, à la fois prudent, hardi et résolu, il gardait toujours, contrairement à tant d'autres de ses collègues, une extrême politesse dans ses fonctions, ne jurant pas, donnant ses ordres avec une parfaite urbanité. Sans doute, il n'allait pas jusqu'à dire à un gabier: “Prenez la peine de larguer les ris du petit perroquet!” ou au timonier: “Ayez l'extrême obligeance de mettre la barre à tribord, toute!” Mais il passait pour être le plus poli des capitaines au long cours.

À noter, en outre, que M. Bourcart, favorisé dans ses entreprises avait eu des campagnes constamment heureuses, des traversées invariablement excellentes. Aucune plainte de ses officiers, aucune récrimination de ses matelots. Donc, si l'équipage du Saint-Enoch, cette fois, n'était pas au complet, et si son capitaine ne parvenait pas à le compléter, il ne fallait point voir là un indice de défiance ou de répugnance de la part du personnel maritime.

M. Bourcart et M. Brunel venaient de s'arrêter près du support métallique de la cloche sur la terrasse demi-circulaire qui termine la jetée. Le marégraphe marquait alors le plus bas du jusant, et le mât de signaux ne déroulait ni pavillon ni flamme. Aucun navire ne se préparait à entrer ou sortir, et les chaloupes de pêche n'auraient pas même trouvé assez d'eau dans le chenal à cette marée de nouvelle lune. C'est pourquoi les curieux n'affluaient pas comme au moment des pleines mers. Les bateaux de Honfleur, de Trouville, de Caen et de Southampton restaient amarrés à leurs pontons. Jusqu'à trois heures de l'après-midi, il ne se ferait aucun mouvement dans l'avant-port.

Pendant quelques instants, les yeux du capitaine Bourcart, dirigés vers le large, parcoururent ce vaste secteur compris entre les lointaines hauteurs d’Ouistreham et les massives falaises des phares de la Hève. Le temps était incertain, le ciel tendu de nuages grisâtres dans les hautes zones. Le vent soufflait du nord-est, — une petite brise capricieuse, qui fraîchirait au début de la marée montante.

Quelques bâtiments traversaient la baie, les uns arrondissant leur voilure sur l’horizon de l’est, les autres sillonnant l’espace de leurs vapeurs fuligineuses. Assurément, ce devait être un regard d’envie que lançait M. Bourcart à ses collègues plus favorisés qui avaient quitté le port. Il va de soi que, même à cette distance, il s’exprimait en termes convenables, et il ne se fût pas permis de les traiter comme l’aurait fait un loup de mer.

“Oui, dit-il à M. Brunel, ces braves gens font bonne route, vent sous vergue, tandis que moi, je suis encore au bassin et ne puis en démarrer…

Voyez-vous, c’est ce que j’appelle proprement de la mauvaise chance, et c’est la première fois qu’elle s’attaque au Saint-Enoch…

— Prenez patience, monsieur Bourcart, puisqu’il vous est impossible de prendre la mer!… répondit en riant M. Brunel…

— Eh! n’est-ce pas ce que je fais depuis quinze longs jours?… s’écria le capitaine, non sans quelque aigreur.

— Bon!… votre navire porte bien la toile, et vous aurez vite regagné le temps perdu… À onze noeuds, par belle brise, on fait de la route!… Mais, dites-moi, monsieur Bourcart, il ne va donc pas mieux, le docteur Sinoquet?…

— Non, hélas! rien de grave, l’excellent docteur… Des rhumatismes qui le clouent sur son lit, et il en a pour plusieurs semaines!… Qui aurait jamais cru cela de la part d’un homme si habitué à la mer, et qui, pendant une dizaine d’années, a couru avec moi tous les parages du Pacifique…

— Eh! insinua l’officier du port, c’est peut-être de tant de voyages qu’il a rapporté ses infirmités…

— Non, par exemple! affirma le capitaine Bourcart. Des rhumatismes gagnés à bord du Saint-Enoch!… Pourquoi pas le choléra ou la fièvre jaune!… Comment pareille idée a-t-elle pu vous venir, monsieur Brunel?…”

Et M. Bourcart laissait tomber ses bras cassés par la stupéfaction que lui causait une pareille énormité. Le Saint-Enoch… un navire si supérieurement aménagé, si confortable, si impénétrable à l’humidité!… Des rhumatismes!… On en attraperait plutôt dans la salle du Conseil de l’Hôtel de Ville, dans les salons de la Sous-Préfecture que dans les cabines ou le carré du Saint-Enoch!… Des rhumatismes!… Est-ce qu’il en avait jamais eu, lui?… Et, cependant, il ne quittait son navire, ni lorsqu’il était en relâche, ni lorsqu’il l’avait amarré dans le port du Havre!… Un appartement en ville, allons donc! quand on a son logement à bord!… Et il ne l’aurait pas changé pour la plus confortable des chambres de l’Hôtel de Bordeaux ou du Terminus!… Des rhumatismes!… Non, pas même des rhumes!… Et l’avait-on jamais entendu éternuer à bord du Saint-Enoch?…

Puis, s’animant, le digne homme eût longtemps continué de plus belle, si M. Brunel ne l’avait interrompu en disant:

“C’est convenu, monsieur Bourcart, les rhumatismes du docteur Sinoquet ne viennent que des séjours qu’il a faits à terre! Enfin il les a, voilà le vrai, et il ne peut embarquer…

— Et le pire, déclara M. Bourcart, c’est que je ne lui trouve pas de remplaçant, malgré toutes mes démarches…

— Patience, je vous le répète, patience, capitaine!… Vous finirez bien par mettre la main sur quelque jeune médecin désireux de courir le monde, avide de voyages… Quoi de plus tentant que de débuter par une superbe campagne de pêche à la baleine à travers les mers du Pacifique…

— Certes, monsieur Brunel, je ne devrais avoir que l’embarras du choix… Pourtant il n’y a pas foule, et j’en suis toujours à n’avoir personne pour manier la lancette et le bistouri ou le davier et la doloire!

— À propos, demanda l’officier de port, ce ne sont point les rhumatismes qui vous privent de votre tonnelier?…

— Non; à vrai dire, ce brave père Brulard n’a plus l’usage de son bras gauche, qui est ankylosé, et il éprouve de violentes douleurs dans les pieds et les jambes…

— Les articulations sont-elles donc prises?… s’informa M. Brunel.

— Oui, paraît-il, et Brulard n’est vraiment pas en état de naviguer!… Or, vous le savez, monsieur Brunel, un bâtiment armé pour la baleine ne peut pas plus se passer d’un tonnelier que de harponneurs, et il me faut m’en procurer un à tout prix!”

M. Brunel voulut bien admettre que le père Brulard n’était pas perclus de rhumatismes, puisque le Saint-Enoch valait un sanatorium et que son équipage y naviguait dans les meilleures conditions hygiéniques, à en croire le capitaine. Mais il n’en était pas moins certain que le docteur Sinoquet et le tonnelier Brulard étaient incapables de prendre part à cette campagne.

En cet instant, M. Bourcart, s’entendant interpeller, se retourna:

“Vous, Heurtaux?… dit-il en serrant amicalement la main de son second. Enchanté de vous voir, et, cette fois, est-ce un bon vent qui vous amène?…

— Peut-être, capitaine, répondit M. Heurtaux, peut-être… Je viens vous prévenir qu’une personne s’est présentée à bord… il y a une heure.

— Un tonnelier… un médecin?… demanda vivement le capitaine Bourcart.

— Je ne sais, capitaine… En tout cas, cette personne a paru contrariée de votre absence…

— Un homme d’âge?…

— Non… un jeune homme, et il va bientôt revenir… Je me suis donc mis à votre recherche… et comme je pensais vous rencontrer sur la jetée.

— Où l’on me rencontre toujours, Heurtaux, quand je ne suis pas à bord…

— Je le sais… Aussi ai-je mis le cap sur le mât de signaux…

— Vous avez sagement fait, Heurtaux, reprit M. Bourcart, et je ne manquerai pas au rendez-vous. — Monsieur Brunel, je vais vous demander la permission de prendre congé…

— Allez donc, mon cher capitaine, répondit l’officier de port, et j’ai le pressentiment que vous ne tarderez pas à être tiré d’embarras…

— À moitié seulement, monsieur Brunel, et encore faut-il que ce visiteur soit un docteur ou un tonnelier!”

Là-dessus, l’officier de port et le capitaine Bourcart échangèrent une cordiale poignée de main. Puis celui-ci, accompagné de son second, remonta le quai, traversa le pont, atteignit le bassin du Commerce et s’arrêta devant la passerelle qui donnait accès au Saint-Enoch.

Dès qu’il eut mis le pied sur le pont, M. Bourcart regagna sa cabine, dont la porte s’ouvrait sur le carré et la fenêtre sur l’avant de la dunette. Après avoir donné ordre de le prévenir de l’arrivée du visiteur, il attendit, non sans quelque impatience, le nez dans un journal de la localité.

L’attente ne fut pas longue. Dix minutes plus tard, le jeune homme annoncé se présentait à bord et était introduit dans le carré, où le capitaine Bourcart vint le rejoindre.

À tout prendre, si le visiteur ne devait point être un tonnelier, il n’était pas impossible que ce fût un médecin, — un jeune médecin, âgé de vingt-six à vingt-sept ans.

Les premières politesses échangées, — et l’on peut être assuré que M. Bourcart ne fut pas en reste avec la personne qui l’honorait de sa visite, — le jeune homme s’exprima en ces termes:

“J’ai appris, d’après ce qu’on disait à la Bourse, que le départ du Saint-Enoch était retardé par suite du mauvais état de santé de son médecin habituel…

— Ce n’est que trop vrai, monsieur…

— Monsieur Filhiol… Je suis le docteur Filhiol, capitaine, et je viens vous offrir de remplacer le docteur Sinoquet à bord de votre navire.”

Le capitaine Bourcart apprit alors que ce jeune visiteur, originaire de Rouen, appartenait à une famille d’industriels de cette ville. Son désir était d’exercer sa profession dans la marine de commerce. Toutefois, avant d’entrer au service de la Compagnie transatlantique, il serait heureux de prendre part à une campagne de baleinier et de débuter par la rude navigation des mers du Pacifique. Il pouvait fournir les meilleures références. Le capitaine Bourcart n’aurait qu’à se renseigner sur son compte chez tels ou tels négociants ou armateurs du Havre.

M. Bourcart avait très attentivement observé le docteur Filhiol de physionomie franche et sympathique. Nul doute qu’il n’eût une constitution vigoureuse, un caractère résolu. Le capitaine s’y connaissait, ce n’était pas celui-là, bien bâti, bien portant, qui contracterait des rhumatismes à son bord. Aussi répondit-il:

“Monsieur, vous venez fort à propos, je ne vous le cache point, et si, ce dont je suis certain d’avance, mes informations vous sont favorables, ce sera chose faite. Vous pourrez, dès demain, procéder à votre installation sur le Saint-Enoch et vous n’aurez pas lieu de vous en repentir…

— J’en ai l’assurance, capitaine, répondit le docteur Filhiol. Avant que vous ayez à prendre des renseignements sur moi, je vous avouerai que j’en ai pris sur vous…

— Et c’était sage, déclara M. Bourcart. S’il ne faut jamais s’embarquer sans biscuit, il ne faut pas inscrire son nom sur le rôle d’un bâtiment sans savoir à qui on a affaire.

— Je l’ai pensé, capitaine.

— Vous avez eu raison, monsieur Filhiol, et, si je comprends bien, les renseignements que vous avez recueillis ont été tout à mon avantage…

— Entièrement, et j’aime à croire que ceux que vous allez prendre le seront au mien.”

Décidément, le capitaine Bourcart et le jeune médecin, s’ils se valaient en franchise, s’égalaient en urbanité.

“Une seule question, cependant, reprit alors

M. Bourcart. Avez-vous déjà voyagé sur mer, docteur?…

— Quelques courtes traversées à travers la Manche…

— Et… pas malade?…

— Pas malade… et j’ai même lieu de croire que je ne le serai jamais…

— C’est à considérer pour un médecin, vous en conviendrez…

— En effet, monsieur Bourcart…

— Maintenant, je ne dois pas vous le cacher, elles sont pénibles, dangereuses, nos campagnes de pêche!… Les misères, souvent les privations, ne nous y sont point épargnées, et c’est un dur apprentissage de la vie de marin…

— Je le sais, capitaine, et, cet apprentissage, je ne le redoute pas…

— Et non seulement nos campagnes sont périlleuses, monsieur Filhiol, mais elles sont longues parfois… Cela dépend de circonstances plus ou moins favorables… Qui sait si le Saint-Enoch ne sera pas deux ou trois ans sans revenir?…

— Il reviendra quand il reviendra, capitaine, et l’essentiel, c’est que tous ceux qu’il emmène reviennent au port avec lui!”

M. Bourcart ne pouvait qu’être très satisfait de ces sentiments exprimés de cette façon et, certainement, il s’entendrait en tous points avec le docteur Filhiol si les références indiquées permettaient de signer avec lui.

“Monsieur, lui dit-il, je n’aurai, je crois, qu’à me féliciter d’être entré en rapport avec vous, et, dès demain, après avoir pris mes informations, j’espère que votre nom sera inscrit sur le livre de bord.

— À vous revoir donc, capitaine, répondit le docteur, et, quant au départ…

— Le départ pourrait s’effectuer dès demain, à la marée du soir, si j’étais parvenu à remplacer mon tonnelier comme j’ai remplacé mon médecin…

— Ah! vous n’avez pas encore votre équipage au complet, capitaine?…

— Non, par malheur, monsieur Filhiol, et il est impossible de compter sur ce pauvre Brulard…

— Il est malade?…

— Oui… si c’est être malade que d’avoir des rhumatismes qui vous paralysent bras et jambes… Et, cependant, croyez bien que ce n’est point en naviguant sur le Saint-Enoch qu’il les a attrapés…

— Mais j’y pense, capitaine, je puis vous indiquer un tonnelier…

— Vous?…”

Et le capitaine Bourcart allait se dépenser comme d’habitude en remerciements prématurés à l’adresse de ce providentiel jeune docteur. Il semblait qu’il entendait déjà résonner les coups du maillet sur les douves des barils de sa cale. Hélas! sa joie fut de courte durée, et il secoua la tête lamentablement lorsque M. Filhiol eut ajouté:

“Vous n’avez donc pas songé à maître Cabidoulin?…

— Jean-Marie Cabidoulin… de la rue des Tournettes?… s’écria M. Bourcart.

— Lui-même!… Est-ce qu’il peut y avoir un autre Cabidoulin au Havre et même ailleurs?…

— Jean-Marie Cabidoulin!… répétait le capitaine Bourcart.

— En personne…

— Et comment connaissez-vous Cabidoulin?…

— Parce que je l’ai soigné…

— Alors… lui aussi… malade?… Mais il y a donc épidémie sur les tonneliers?…

— Non, rassurez-vous, capitaine… une blessure au pouce, maintenant guérie, et qui ne l’empêche point de manier la doloire… C’est un homme de bonne santé, de bonne constitution, encore robuste pour son âge, à peine la cinquantaine, et qui ferait bien votre affaire…

— Sans doute, sans doute, répondit M. Bourcart. Par malheur, si vous connaissez Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, je le connais aussi, et je ne pense pas qu’aucun capitaine consentirait à l’embarquer…

— Pourquoi?…

— Oh! il sait bien son métier et il en a fait des campagnes de pêche… Sa dernière remonte à cinq ou six ans déjà…

— M’apprendrez-vous, monsieur Bourcart, pour quelle raison on ne voudrait pas de lui?…

— Parce que c’est un prophète de malheur, monsieur Filhiol, parce qu’il est sans cesse à prédire sinistres et catastrophes… parce que, à l’entendre, quand on entreprend un voyage sur mer, ce doit être le dernier et on n’en reviendra pas!… Et puis des histoires de monstres marins qu’il prétend avoir rencontrés… et qu’il rencontrerait encore!… Voyez-vous, monsieur Filhiol, cet homme-là est capable de démoraliser tout un équipage!…

— Est-ce sérieux, capitaine?…

— Très sérieux!

— Voyons… à défaut d’autre, et puisque vous avez besoin d’un tonnelier…

— Oui… je sais bien… à défaut d’autre!… Et pourtant, celui-là jamais je n’y aurais songé!… Enfin, quand on ne peut mettre le cap au nord, on le met au sud… Et si maître Cabidoulin voulait… mais il ne voudra pas…

— On peut toujours essayer…

— Non… c’est inutile… Et puis, Cabidoulin… Cabidoulin!… répétait M. Bourcart.

— Si nous allions le voir?…” proposa M. Filhiol.

Le capitaine Bourcart, très hésitant, très perplexe, croisa, décroisa ses bras, se consulta, pesa le pour et le contre, secoua la tête comme s’il fût au moment de s’engager dans une mauvaise affaire. Enfin, le désir de mettre au plus tôt en mer l’emportant sur toute considération:

“Allons!” répondit-il.

Un instant après, tous deux avaient quitté le bassin du Commerce et se dirigeaient vers la demeure du tonnelier.

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin était chez lui, dans sa chambre du rez-de-chaussée, au fond d’une cour. Un homme vigoureux, âgé de cinquante-deux ans, vêtu de son pantalon de velours à côte et de son gilet à bras, coiffé de sa casquette de loutre et ceint du grand tablier brunâtre. L’ouvrage ne donnait pas fort et, s’il n’avait pas eu quelques économies, il n’aurait pu faire chaque soir sa partie de manille au petit café d’en face avec un vieux retraité de la marine, ancien gardien des phares de la Hève.

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin était, d’ailleurs, au courant de tout ce qui se passait au Havre, entrées et sorties des navires à voile ou à vapeur, arrivées et départs des transatlantiques, tournées de pilotages, nouvelles de mer, enfin de tout ce qui éclosait de potins sur la jetée pendant les marées de jour.

Maître Cabidoulin connaissait donc et de longue date le capitaine Bourcart. Aussi, dès qu’il l’aperçut au seuil de sa boutique:

“Eh! eh! s’écria-t-il, toujours amarré au quai, le Saint-Enoch, toujours bloqué dans le bassin du Commerce… comme s’il était retenu par les glaces…

— Toujours, maître Cabidoulin, répondit un peu sèchement le capitaine Bourcart.

— Et pas de médecin?…

— Présent… le médecin…

— Tiens… c’est vous, monsieur Filhiol?…

— Moi-même, et, si j’ai accompagné M. Bourcart, c’était pour vous demander d’embarquer avec nous…

— Embarquer… embarquer?… répétait le tonnelier en brandissant son maillet.

— Oui, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin…, reprit le capitaine Bourcart. Est-ce que ce n’est pas tentant… un dernier voyage… sur un bon navire… en compagnie de braves gens?…

— Par exemple, monsieur Bourcart, si je m’attendais à une pareille proposition!… Vous le savez bien, je suis à la retraite… Je ne navigue plus qu’à travers les rues du Havre, où il n’y a ni abordages ni coups de mer à craindre… Et vous voulez…

— Voyons, maître Cabidoulin, réfléchissez… Vous n’êtes pas d’un âge à moisir sur votre bouée, à rester affourché comme un vieux ponton au fond d’un port!…

— Levez l’ancre, Jean-Marie, levez l’ancre!” ajouta en riant M. Filhiol pour se mettre à l’unisson de M. Bourcart.

Maître Cabidoulin avait pris un air de profonde gravité — probablement son air de “prophète de malheur” — et, d’une voix sourde, il répondit:

“Écoutez-moi bien, capitaine, et vous aussi, docteur Filhiol… Une idée que j’ai toujours eue… qui ne me sortira jamais de la tête…

— Et laquelle?… demanda M. Bourcart.

— C’est que, à force de naviguer, on finit nécessairement par faire naufrage tôt ou tard! Certes, le Saint-Enoch a un bon commandant… il a un bon équipage… je vois qu’il aura un bon médecin… mais j’ai la conviction que, si je m’embarquais, il m’arriverait des choses qui ne me sont pas encore arrivées…

— Par exemple!… s’écria M. Bourcart.

— C’est comme je vous le dis, affirma maître Cabidoulin, des histoires épouvantables!… Aussi me suis-je promis de terminer tranquillement ma vie en terre ferme!…

— Pure imagination, cela, déclara le docteur Filhiol. Tous les navires ne sont pas destinés à périr corps et biens…

— Non, sans doute, répliqua le tonnelier, mais, que voulez-vous, c’est comme un pressentiment… si je prenais la mer, je ne reviendrais pas…

— Allons donc, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, répliqua le capitaine Bourcart, ce n’est pas sérieux…

— Très sérieux, et puis, entre nous, je n’ai plus de curiosité à satisfaire. Est-ce que je n’ai pas tout vu du temps que je naviguais… les pays chauds, les pays froids, les îles du Pacifique et de l’Atlantique, les ice-bergs et les banquises, les phoques, les morses, les baleines?…

— Mes compliments, vous n’êtes pas à plaindre, dit M. Filhiol.

— Et savez-vous ce que je finirais par voir?…

— Quoi donc, maître Cabidoulin?…

— Ce que je n’ai jamais vu… quelque terrible monstre… le grand serpent de mer…

— Que vous ne verrez jamais…, affirma M. Filhiol.

— Et pourquoi?…

— Parce qu’il n’existe pas!… J’ai lu tout ce qu’on a écrit sur ces prétendus monstres marins, et, je le répète, votre serpent de mer n’existe pas!…

— Il existe!” s’écria le tonnelier d’un ton si convaincu qu’il eût été inutile de discuter à ce sujet.

Bref, à la suite de pressantes instances, décidé finalement par les hauts gages que lui offrit le capitaine Bourcart, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin se résolut à faire une dernière campagne de pêche, et, le soir même, il portait son sac à bord du Saint-Enoch!

CHAPITRE II

Le “Saint-Enoch”

Le lendemain 7 novembre 1863, le Saint-Enoch quittait le Havre, remorqué par l’Hercule qui le sortit à l’heure de la pleine mer. Il faisait un assez mauvais temps. Des nuages bas et déchirés couraient à travers l’espace, poussés par une forte brise du sud-ouest.

Le bâtiment du capitaine Bourcart, jaugeant environ cinq cent cinquante tonneaux, était pourvu de tous les appareils communément employés pour cette difficile pêche à la baleine sur les lointains parages du Pacifique. Quoique sa construction datât d’une dizaine d’années déjà, il tenait bien la mer sous les diverses allures. L’équipage s’était toujours appliqué à ce qu’il fût en parfait état, voilure et coque, et il venait de refaire son carénage à neuf.

Le Saint-Enoch, un trois-mâts carré, portait misaine, grande voile et brigantine, grand et petit hunier, grand et petit perroquet et perroquet de fougue, grand et petit cacatois, perruche, trinquette, grand foc, petit foc, clinfoc, bonnettes et voiles d’étais. En attendant le départ, M. Bourcart avait fait mettre en place les appareils pour virer les baleines. Quatre pirogues étaient à leur poste: à bâbord, celles du second, du premier et du deuxième lieutenant; à tribord, celle du capitaine. Quatre autres de rechange étaient disposées sur les espars du pont. Entre le mât de misaine et le grand mât, en avant du grand panneau, on avait installé la cabousse qui sert à fondre le gras. Elle se composait de deux pots en fer maçonnés l’un contre l’autre, entourés d’une ceinture de briques. À l’arrière des pots, deux trous, pratiqués à cet effet, servaient à l’échappement de la fumée, et, sur l’avant, un peu plus bas que la gueule des pots, deux fourneaux permettaient d’entretenir le feu en dessous.

Voici l’état des officiers et des gens de l’équipage embarqués sur le Saint-Enoch:

Le capitaine Bourcart (Évariste-Simon), cinquante ans;

Le second Heurtaux (Jean-François), quarante ans;

Le premier lieutenant Coquebert (Yves), trente-deux ans;

Le deuxième lieutenant Allotte (Romain), vingt-sept ans;

Le maître d’équipage Ollive (Mathurin), quarante-cinq ans;

Le harponneur Thiébaut (Louis), trente-sept ans;

Le harponneur Kardek (Pierre), trente-deux ans;

Le harponneur Durut (Jean), trente-deux ans;

Le harponneur Ducrest (Alain), trente et un ans;

Le docteur Filhiol, vingt-sept ans;

Le tonnelier Cabidoulin (Jean-Marie), cinquante-deux ans;

Le forgeron Thomas (Gille), quarante-cinq ans;

Le charpentier Ferut (Marcel), trente-six ans;

Huit matelots;

Onze novices;

Un maître d’hôtel;

Un cuisinier.

Au total trente-quatre hommes, personnel ordinaire d’un baleinier du tonnage du Saint-Enoch.

L’équipage se composait par moitié à peu près de matelots normands et bretons. Seul, le charpentier Ferut était originaire de Paris, faubourg de Belleville, ayant fait le métier de machiniste dans divers théâtres de la capitale.

Les officiers avaient déjà été en cours de navigation à bord du Saint-Enoch et ne méritaient que des éloges. Ils possédaient toutes les qualités qu’exige le métier. Dans la campagne précédente, ils avaient parcouru les parages nord et sud du Pacifique. Voyage heureux s’il en fut, puisque, pendant sa durée de quarante-quatre mois, il ne s’était produit aucun incident grave; voyage fructueux aussi, puisque le navire avait rapporté deux mille barils d’huile qui furent vendus à un prix avantageux.

Le second, Heurtaux, se montrait très entendu à tout ce qui concernait le détail du bord. Après avoir servi en qualité d’enseigne auxiliaire dans la marine de l’État, embarqué au commerce, il naviguait en attendant un commandement. Il passait avec raison pour un bon marin, très sévère en matière de discipline.

Du premier lieutenant Coquebert et du second lieutenant Allotte, excellents officiers, eux aussi, il n’y avait rien à dire, si ce n’est qu’ils déployaient une ardeur extraordinaire, imprudente même, à la poursuite des baleines; ils luttaient de vitesse et d’audace; ils cherchaient à se devancer et risquaient aventureusement leurs pirogues, malgré les recommandations et les injonctions formelles du capitaine Bourcart. Mais l’ardeur du pêcheur à la pêche, c’est l’ardeur du chasseur à la chasse, — un irrésistible entraînement, une passion instinctive. Les deux lieutenants ne la communiquaient que trop à leurs hommes, — surtout Romain Allotte.

Quelques mots sur le maître d’équipage, Mathurin Ollive. Ce petit homme, sec et nerveux, très dur à la fatigue, très à son affaire bons yeux et bonnes oreilles, possédait les qualités particulières qui distinguent le capitaine d’armes de la marine de guerre. C’était assurément, de tous les gens du bord, celui qui s’intéressait le moins à l’amarrage des baleines. Qu’un bâtiment fût armé spécialement pour ce genre de pêche ou pour le transport d’une cargaison quelconque d’un port à un autre, c’était avant tout un navire, et maître Ollive ne prenait goût qu’aux choses de la navigation. Le capitaine Bourcart lui accordait une grande confiance: il la justifiait.

Quant aux huit matelots, la plupart avaient fait la dernière campagne du Saint-Enoch et constituaient un équipage très sûr et très exercé. Parmi les onze novices, on n’en comptait que deux à débuter dans ce rude apprentissage de la grande pêche. Ces garçons, de quatorze à dix-huit ans, ayant déjà la pratique de la marine de commerce, seraient employés, conjointement avec les matelots, à l’armement des pirogues.

Restaient le forgeron Thomas, le tonnelier Cabidoulin, le charpentier Ferut, le cuisinier, le maître d’hôtel. Sauf le tonnelier, tous faisaient partie du personnel depuis trois ans et étaient au courant du service. Il convient d’ajouter que maître Ollive et maître Cabidoulin se connaissaient de longue date, ayant navigué ensemble. Aussi, le premier, sachant à quoi s’en tenir sur les manies du second, l’avait-il accueilli par ces mots:

“Eh! vieux… te voilà donc?…

— Me voilà, dit l’autre.

— Tu vas en tâter encore?…

— Comme tu vois.

— Et toujours avec ta satanée idée que ça finira mal?…

— Très mal, répondit sérieusement le tonnelier.

— Bon, reprit Mathurin Ollive, j’espère que tu nous épargneras tes histoires…

— Tu peux compter que non!

— Alors, à ton aise, mais s’il nous arrive malheur…

— C’est que je ne me serai pas trompé!” répliqua Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

Et qui sait si le tonnelier n’éprouvait pas déjà quelque regret d’avoir accepté les offres du capitaine Bourcart?

Dès que le Saint-Enoch eut doublé les jetées, le vent ayant une tendance à fraîchir, ordre fut donné de larguer les huniers, dans lesquels le maître d’équipage fit prendre deux ris. Puis, aussitôt que l’Hercule eut largué sa remorque, les huniers furent hissés ainsi que le petit foc et l’artimon, en même temps que le capitaine Bourcart faisait amurer la misaine. Dans ces conditions, le trois-mâts allait pouvoir louvoyer vers le nord-est de manière à contourner l’extrême pointe de Barfleur.

La brise obligea le Saint-Enoch à garder le plus près. D’ailleurs il tenait bien la mer sous cette allure et même à cinq quarts du vent, filait à raison de dix noeuds.

Il y eut lieu de courir des bords pendant trois jours, avant de débarquer le pilote à la Hougue. À partir de ce moment, la navigation s’établit régulièrement en descendant la Manche. Les bons vents prirent alors le dessus à l’état de belle brise. Le capitaine Bourcart, ayant fait établir perroquets, cacatois, voiles d’étais, put constater que le Saint-Enoch n’avait rien perdu de ses qualités nautiques. Du reste, son gréement avait été réinstallé presque tout entier en vue de ces lointaines campagnes dans lesquelles un navire supporte d’excessives fatigues.

“Beau temps, mer maniable, bon vent, dit M. Bourcart au docteur Filhiol, qui se promenait avec lui sur la dunette. Voici une traversée qui commence heureusement, et c’est assez rare, lorsqu’il faut sortir de la Manche à cette époque!

— Mes compliments, capitaine, répondit le docteur, mais nous ne sommes qu’au début du voyage.

— Oh! je sais, monsieur Filhiol, il ne suffit pas de bien commencer, il importe de bien finir!…

N’ayez crainte, nous avons un bon navire sous les pieds, et, s’il n’est pas lancé d’hier, il n’en est pas moins solide de coque et d’agrès… Je prétends même qu’il offre plus de garantie qu’un bâtiment neuf, et croyez que je suis édifié sur ce qu’il vaut.

— J’ajouterai, capitaine, qu’il ne s’agit pas seulement de faire une excellente navigation. Il convient que celle-ci donne des avantages sérieux, et cela ne dépend ni du navire, ni de ses officiers, ni de son équipage…

— Comme vous dites, répliqua le capitaine Bourcart. La baleine vient ou ne vient pas… Ça, c’est la chance, comme en toute chose et la chance ne se commande point… On s’en retourne les barils pleins ou les barils vides, c’est entendu!… Mais le Saint-Enoch en est à sa cinquième campagne depuis qu’il est sorti des chantiers de Honfleur, et les précédentes se sont toujours balancées à son profit…

— C’est de bon augure, capitaine. Et comptez-vous attendre d’être arrivé dans le Pacifique pour vous mettre en pêche?…

— Je compte, monsieur Filhiol, saisir toutes les occasions, et, si nous rencontrons des baleines dans l’Atlantique avant de doubler le Cap, nos pirogues s’empresseront de leur donner la chasse… Le tout, c’est qu’on les aperçoive à courte distance et qu’on parvienne à les amarrer sans trop se retarder en route.”

Quelques jours après le départ du Havre, M. Bourcart organisa le service des vigies: deux hommes constamment en observation dans la mâture, l’un au mât de misaine, l’autre au grand mât. Aux harponneurs et aux matelots revenait cette tâche, tandis que les novices étaient à la barre.

En outre, afin d’être en état, chaque pirogue reçut une baille de bigue, ainsi que l’armement nécessaire à la pêche. Si donc une baleine venait à être signalée à proximité du navire, il n’y aurait qu’à amener les embarcations, — ce qui s’effectuerait en quelques instants. Toutefois, ces éventualités ne s’offriraient pas avant que le Saint-Enoch fût en plein Atlantique.

Dès qu’il eut relevé les extrêmes terres de la Manche, le capitaine Bourcart donna la route à l’ouest, de manière à doubler Ouessant par le large. Au moment où la terre de France allait disparaître, il l’indiqua au docteur Filhiol.

“Au revoir!” dirent-ils.

En adressant à leur pays ce salut de la dernière heure, tous deux se demandèrent sans doute combien de mois, d’années peut-être, se passeraient avant qu’ils dussent le revoir…

Le vent étant franchement établi au nord-est, le Saint-Enoch n’eut plus qu’à mollir ses écoutes pour se mettre en direction du cap Ortegal, à la pointe nord-ouest de l’Espagne. Il ne serait pas nécessaire de s’engager à travers le golfe de Gascogne, où la situation d’un voilier court grands risques, quand la bise souffle du large et le drosse vers la côte. Que de fois les navires, incapables de gagner au vent, sont obligés de chercher refuge dans les ports français ou espagnols!

Lorsque le capitaine et les officiers étaient réunis à l’heure des repas, ils causaient, comme de juste, des aléas de cette nouvelle campagne. Elle débutait dans des conditions favorables. Le navire se trouverait en pleine saison sur les parages de pêche, et M. Bourcart montrait une telle confiance qu’elle eût gagné les plus réservés.

“Si ce n’est, déclara-t-il un jour, que notre départ a été reculé d’une quinzaine et que nous devrions être maintenant à la hauteur de l’Ascension ou de Sainte-Hélène, ce serait grosse injustice de se plaindre…

— À la condition, répliqua le lieutenant Coquebert, que le vent tienne du bon côté pendant un mois, nous aurons facilement réparé le temps perdu…

— Tout de même, ajouta M. Heurtaux, il est fâcheux que notre jeune docteur n’ait pas eu plus tôt cette excellente idée d’embarquer sur le Saint-Enoch…

— Et je le regrette, répliqua gaiement M. Filhiol, car je n’aurais nulle part trouvé meilleur accueil ni meilleure compagnie…

— Inutile de récriminer, mes amis!… déclara M. Bourcart. Les bonnes idées ne viennent point quand on veut…

— Pas plus que les baleines, s’écria Romain Allotte. Aussi, quand on les signale, il faut être prêt à les piquer…

— D’ailleurs, fit remarquer le docteur, ce n’était pas seulement le médecin qui manquait au personnel du Saint-Enoch, c’était aussi le tonnelier…

— Juste, répondit le capitaine Bourcart, et n’oublions pas que c’est vous, mon cher Filhiol, qui m’avez parlé de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin… Assurément, sans votre intervention, je n’aurais jamais eu la pensée de m’adresser à lui…

— Enfin il est à bord, conclut M. Heurtaux, et c’est l’essentiel. Mais, tel que je le connais, je n’aurais jamais cru qu’il aurait consenti à quitter sa boutique et ses tonnes… À plusieurs reprises, malgré les avantages qu’on lui offrait, il avait refusé de reprendre la mer, et il faut que vous ayez été assez persuasif…

— Eh bien, dit le capitaine Bourcart, je n’ai pas eu à subir trop de résistance… À l’entendre, il était fatigué de la navigation… Il avait eu l’heureuse chance de s’en tirer jusqu’ici… Pourquoi tenter le sort?… On finit toujours par y rester… Il faut savoir se déhaler à temps… Bref, vous connaissez les litanies du brave homme!… Et puis cette prétention qu'il avait vu tout ce que l'on peut voir au cours d'une campagne de pêche…

— On n'a jamais tout vu, déclara le lieutenant Allotte, et, pour mon compte, je m'attends sans cesse à quelque chose de nouveau… d'extraordinaire…

— Ce qui serait extraordinaire, je dirai même absolument invraisemblable, mes amis, affirma M. Bourcart, ce serait que la fortune abandonnât le Saint-Enoch… Ce serait que cette campagne ne valût pas celles qui l'ont précédée et dont nous avons tiré grand bénéfice!… Ce serait qu'il nous tombât quelque mauvais coup de chien!… Ce serait que notre navire ne rapportât pas son plein chargement de fanons et d'huile!… Or je suis bien tranquille à ce sujet!… Le passé garantit l'avenir, et, lorsque le Saint-Enoch rentrera au bassin du Commerce, il aura ses deux mille barils remplis jusqu'à la bonde!"

Et, ma foi, s'il l'eût entendu parler avec cette imperturbable confiance, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin lui-même se fût peut-être dit que pour cette campagne tout au moins, on ne courait aucun risque tant il était chanceux, le navire du capitaine Bourcart!

Après avoir relevé dans le sud-est les hauteurs du cap Ortegal, le Saint-Enoch, favorisé par les conditions atmosphériques, se dirigea sur Madère, de façon à passer entre les Açores et les Canaries. Sous cette latitude, l'équipage retrouva un excellent climat, une température moyenne, dès que le Tropique eut été franchi, avant les îles du Cap-Vert.

Ce qui ne laissait pas d'étonner quelque peu le capitaine Bourcart, ses officiers et ses matelots, c'est que jusqu'alors aucune baleine n'avait pu être poursuivie. Si deux au trois furent aperçues, elles soufflaient à une telle distance qu’on ne jugea pas utile d’amener les pirogues. Il y aurait eu temps, fatigues, dépensés en pure perte, et, à tout prendre, mieux valait rallier les lieux de pêche le plus vite passible, soit sur les mers très exploitées à cette époque de la Nouvelle-Zélande, soit sur celles du Pacifique septentrional. Il importait donc de ne point s’attarder en route.

Lorsqu’ils ont à se rendre des ports de l’Europe à l’océan Pacifique, les bâtiments peuvent le faire, — traversée presque égale, — soit en doublant le cap de Bonne-Espérance à l’extrémité de l’Afrique, soit en doublant le cap Horn à l’extrémité de l’Amérique. Il en sera ainsi tant que le canal de Panama n’aura pas été ouvert. Mais, en ce qui concerne la voie du cap Horn, il y a nécessité de descendre jusqu’au cinquante-cinquième parallèle de l’hémisphère méridional où règnent les mauvais temps. Sans doute, il est loisible à un steamer de s’engager à travers les sinuosités du détroit de Magellan et d’éviter ainsi les formidables bourrasques du cap. Quant aux voiliers, ils ne sauraient s’y aventurer sans d’interminables retards, surtout lorsqu’il s’agit de franchir ce détroit de l’est à l’ouest.

Au total, il est donc plus avantageux de chercher la pointe de l’Afrique, de suivre les routes de l’océan Indien et de la mer du Sud, où les nombreux ports de la côte australienne offrent de faciles relâches jusqu’à la Nouvelle-Zélande.

C’est bien ainsi qu’avait toujours procédé le capitaine Bourcart lors de ses précédents voyages, et ce qu’il fit encore cette fois. Il n’eut pas même à s’écarter notablement dans l’ouest, étant servi par une brise constante, et, après avoir dépassé les îles du Cap-Vert, il eut bientôt connaissance de l’Ascension, puis, quelques jours après, de Sainte- Hélène.

À cette époque de l’année, au delà de l’Équateur, ces parages de l’Atlantique sont très animés. Quarante-huit heures ne se passaient pas sans que le Saint-Enoch croisât soit quelque steamer filant à toute vapeur, soit quelques-uns de ces rapides et fins clippers qui peuvent lutter de vitesse avec eux. Mais le capitaine Bourcart n’avait guère le loisir de les “raisonner” les uns ou les autres. Le plus souvent, ils ne se montraient que pour hisser le pavillon indiquant leur nationalité, n’ayant de nouvelles maritimes ni à donner ni à recevoir.

De l’île de l’Ascension, passant entre elle et la grande terre, le Saint-Enoch n’avait pu apercevoir les sommets volcaniques qui la dominent. Arrivé en vue de Sainte- Hélène, il la laissa sur tribord à une distance de trois ou quatre milles. De tout l’équipage, le docteur Filhiol était seul à ne l’avoir jamais vue, et, pendant une heure, ses regards ne purent se détacher du pic de Diane au-dessus du ravin occupé par la prison de Longwood.

Le temps, assez variable, bien que la direction du vent fût constante, favorisait la marche du navire, qui, sans changer ses amures, n’avait qu’à diminuer ou à larguer ses voiles.

Les vigies, postées sur les barres, faisaient toujours bonne garde. Et pourtant les baleines n’apparaissaient pas; elles se tenaient probablement plus au sud, à quelques centaines de milles du Cap.

“Diable de diable, capitaine, disait parfois le tonnelier, ce n’était pas la peine de m’embarquer, puisque je n’ai pas d’ouvrage à bord…

— Cela viendra… cela viendra… répétait M. Bourcart…

— Ou ça ne viendra pas, reprenait le tonnelier en hochant la tête, et nous n’aurons pas un baril plein en arrivant à la Nouvelle-Zélande…

— Possible, maître Cabidoulin, mais c’est là qu’on les remplira… La besogne ne vous manquera pas, soyez-en sûr!

— J’ai vu un temps, capitaine, où les souffleurs abondaient dans cette partie de l’Atlantique…

— Oui… j’en conviens, et il est certain qu’ils deviennent de plus en plus rares, — ce qui est regrettable!”

C’était vrai, et à peine les vigies eurent-elles à signaler deux ou trois baleines franches, — l’une de belle grosseur. Par malheur, relevées trop près du navire, elles sondèrent aussitôt et il fut impossible de les revoir. Avec l’extrême vitesse dont ils sont doués, ces cétacés peuvent franchir une grande distance avant de revenir à la surface de la mer. Amener les pirogues pour leur donner la chasse, c’eût été s’exposer à d’extrêmes fatigues sans sérieuses chances de réussite.

Le cap de Bonne-Espérance fut atteint vers le milieu du mois de décembre. À cette époque, les approches de la côte d’Afrique étaient très fréquentées par les bâtiments à destination de l’importante colonie anglaise. Il était rare que l’horizon ne fût sillonné de quelque fumée de steamer.

Plusieurs fois déjà, pendant ses voyages précédents, M. Bourcart avait fait relâche dans le port de Capetown, lorsque le Saint-Enoch effectuait son retour et devait y trouver le placement d’une partie de la cargaison.

Il n’y eut donc pas lieu de prendre contact avec la terre. Aussi le trois-mâts contourna-t-il l’extrême pointe de l’Afrique, dont les dernières hauteurs lui restèrent à cinq milles sur bâbord.

Ce n’est pas sans raison que le cap de Bonne-Espérance s’était appelé primitivement le cap des Tempêtes. Cette fois, il justifia son ancien nom, bien que, dans l’hémisphère méridional, on fût en pleine saison d’été.

Le Saint-Enoch eut à supporter de redoutables coups de vent, qui l’obligèrent à tenir la cape. Toutefois il s’en tira avec un léger retard et quelques avaries sans grande importance, dont Jean-Marie Cabidoulin n’aurait pu mal augurer. Puis, après avoir profité du courant antarctique qui se dirige vers l’est avant de s’infléchir aux approches des îles Kerguelen, il continua sa navigation dans des conditions favorables.

Ce fut le 30 janvier, un peu après le lever du soleil, que l’une des vigies, Pierre Kardek, cria des barres de misaine:

“Terre sous le vent.”

Le point du capitaine Bourcart le plaçait sur le soixante-seizième degré de longitude à l’est du méridien de Paris et sur le trente-septième degré de latitude sud, c’est-à-dire dans le voisinage des îles Amsterdam et Saint-Paul.

À deux milles de cette dernière, le Saint-Enoch mit en panne. Les pirogues du second Heurtaux et du lieutenant Allotte furent envoyées près de terre avec lignes et filets, car la pêche est généralement fructueuse sur les côtes de cette île.

En effet, dans l’après-midi, elles revinrent avec un chargement de poissons de bonne qualité et de langoustes non moins excellentes, qui fournirent le menu de plusieurs jours.

À partir de Saint-Paul, après avoir obliqué vers le quarantième parallèle, enlevé par une brise qui lui assurait de soixante-dix à quatre-vingts lieues par vingt-quatre heures, le Saint-Enoch, dans la matinée du 15 février, eut connaissance des Snares, à la pointe sud de la Nouvelle-Zélande.

CHAPITRE III

Sur la côte est de la Nouvelle-Zélande

Depuis environ une trentaine d’années, les baleiniers exploitent ces parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande où la pêche est particulièrement fructueuse. À cette époque, c’était peut-être la partie du Pacifique dans laquelle les baleines franches se montraient en plus grand nombre. Seulement elles y sont dispersées, et il est rare de les rencontrer à courte distance du navire. Toutefois, le rendement de cette espèce de cétacés est si avantageux que les capitaines ne veulent point regarder aux fatigues ni aux dangers que comporte cette difficile capture.

C’est ce que M. Bourcart expliquait au docteur Filhiol, lorsque le Saint-Enoch arriva en vue de Tawai-Pounamou, la grande île méridionale du groupe néo-zélandais.

“Certes, ajouta-t-il, un bâtiment comme le nôtre, si la chance le favorisait, pourrait faire ici son plein en quelques semaines… Mais il faudrait que le temps fût constamment beau, et, sur ces côtes, on est à la merci de coups de vent quotidiens, qui sont d’une violence extrême.

— N’y a-t-il pas de ports dans lesquels il est facile de se réfugier?… demanda M. Filhiol.

— Sans doute, mon cher docteur, et rien que sur le littoral de l’est se trouvent Dunedin, Oamaru, Akaroa, Christchurch, Blenheim, pour ne citer que les principaux. Il est vrai, ce n’est pas au milieu des ports que les souffleurs viennent prendre leurs ébats et on doit les aller chercher à quelques milles au large…

— N’importe, capitaine, ne comptez-vous pas relâcher dans l’un d’eux avant de mettre votre équipage à la besogne?…

— C’est mon intention… trois ou quatre jours, afin de renouveler une partie de nos provisions, surtout en viande fraîche, ce qui variera notre ordinaire de salaison.

— Et sur quel point de la côte le Saint-Enoch ira-t-il jeter l’ancre?…

— Au havre d’Akaroa.

— Où il arrivera?…

— Demain dans la matinée…

— Vous y avez déjà fait relâche?…

— Plusieurs fois… J’en connais les passes, et, en cas de gros temps, je suis assuré d’y trouver un excellent abri.”

Cependant, si bon pratique que fût M. Bourcart des parages d’Akaroa, il ne put que très difficilement atteindre le port. Lorsqu’il fut en vue de terre, le Saint-Enoch, ayant vent debout, dut louvoyer par forte brise. Puis, au moment où il n’avait plus à tirer que deux bordées pour donner dans le chenal, son amure de grand foc cassa pendant le virement, et il fallut revenir au large.

D’ailleurs, le vent fraîchissait, la mer devenait extrêmement dure et, l’après-midi, il fut impossible de gagner Akaroa. Ne voulant pas être de nuit trop près de terre, le capitaine Bourcart fit vent arrière jusqu'à six heures du soir, puis revint au plus près et boulina sous petite toile en attendant le jour.

Le lendemain, 17 février, le Saint-Enoch put enfin suivre cette espèce de canal sinueux, encaissé entre des collines assez élevées qui conduit à Akaroa. Sur le rivage apparaissaient quelques fermes et, au flanc des collines, bœufs et vaches paissaient en pleins pâturages.

Après avoir navigué sur une longueur de huit milles et demi toujours en louvoyant, le Saint-Enoch laissa tomber son ancre un peu avant midi.

Akaroa appartient à la presqu'île de Banks, qui se détache de la côte de Tawai-Pounamou au-dessous du quarante-quatrième parallèle. Elle forme une annexe de la province de Canterbury, l'une des deux grandes divisions de l'île. La ville n'était encore qu'un modeste village, bâti à droite du détroit, en face de montagnes échelonnées sur l'autre rive à perte de vue. De ce côté habitaient les naturels, les Maoris, au milieu de magnifiques bois de sapins, qui fournissent d'excellentes mâtures à la construction maritime.

Le village comprenait alors trois petites colonies d'Anglais, d'Allemands, de Français, qui y furent amenés en 1840 par le navire Robert-de-Paris. Le Gouvernement concéda à ces colons une certaine quantité de terres, dont il leur abandonnait le profit qu'ils en sauraient tirer. Aussi des champs de blé, des jardins autour de nombreuses maisons en planches, occupent-ils le sol riverain, qui produit diverses espèces de légumes et de fruits, — principalement les pêches, non moins abondantes que savoureuses.

À l'endroit où mouilla le Saint-Enoch se dessinait une sorte de lagon, du milieu duquel émergeait un îlot désert. Quelques navires s'y trouvaient en relâche, entre autres un américain, le Zireh-Swif, qui avait déjà capturé quelques baleines. M. Bourcart vint à bord de ce navire acheter une caisse de tabac, sa provision commençant à diminuer. En somme, tout le temps de la relâche fut employé à renouveler les réserves d'eau et de bois, puis à nettoyer la coque du navire. L'eau douce, on la puisait près de la colonie anglaise à même un petit courant limpide. Le bois, on allait le couper sur la rive du détroit fréquentée par les Maoris. Cependant ces indigènes finirent par s'y opposer, prétendant obtenir une indemnité. Il parut donc préférable de se fournir sur l'autre rive, où le bois ne coûtait que la peine de l'abattre et de le débiter. Quant à la viande fraîche, le cuisinier s'en procurait aisément, et plusieurs bœufs, dépecés ou vivants, devaient être embarqués au moment du départ.

Le surlendemain de l'arrivée du Saint-Enoch, un baleinier français, le Caulaincourt, entra dans le port d'Akaroa, son pavillon à la corne. Une politesse vaut une politesse. Quand le capitaine Bourcart voulut hisser le sien, on s'aperçut qu'il était tout noir de la poussière de charbon de bois dont les coffres avaient été recouverts afin de détruire les rats qui s'étaient abominablement multipliés depuis le départ du Havre et empestaient le navire.

Il est vrai, Marcel Ferut assurait qu'il fallait bien se garder de détruire ces intelligentes bêtes.

“Et pourquoi?… lui demanda un jour l'un des novices.

— Parce que, si le Saint-Enoch courait danger de se perdre, ils nous préviendraient…

— Ces rats…

— Oui… ces rats… en se sauvant…

— Et comment?

— À la nage, parbleu, à la nage…” répliqua ce farceur de charpentier.

Dans l’après-midi, M. Bourcart, toujours le plus poli des hommes, envoya M. Heurtaux à bord du Caulaincourt, pour s’excuser de n’avoir pu rendre son salut avec un pavillon qui de tricolore était devenu unicolore; et quelle couleur, le pavillon noir!

La relâche du Saint-Enoch dura quatre jours. En dehors des heures de travail, le capitaine Bourcart avait jugé bon de laisser descendre à terre, bien qu’il y eût risque de désertion. Cela tient à ce qu’en ce pays il se fait un métier fort lucratif, celui de scieur de long.

Les forêts y sont inépuisables, ce qui excite les matelots à quitter le bord. Cette fois, pourtant, l’équipage était au complet à l’heure réglementaire, et pas un ne manquait à l’appel le jour du départ.

Si les hommes n’avaient guère d’argent de poche, ils s’étaient du moins régalés gratuitement de ces pêches que les colons français leur permettaient de cueillir et d’un agréable petit vin fabriqué avec ces fruits.

Le 22 février, M. Bourcart fit prendre les dispositions pour l’appareillage. Il n’avait pas l’intention de revenir à ce mouillage d’Akaroa, à moins d’y être obligé par le mauvais temps et en cas que son navire ne pût tenir la mer.

Du reste, ce matin-là, s’entretenant avec le second, les deux lieutenants, le docteur Filhiol et le maître d’équipage:

“Notre campagne, si les circonstances ne s’y opposent pas, dit-il, comprendra deux parties. En premier lieu, nous pêcherons sur les parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande pendant cinq ou six semaines. En second lieu, le

Saint-Enoch fera voile pour les côtes de la Basse-Californie, où, à cette époque, il sera facile, je l’espère, de compléter la cargaison.

— Eh! fit observer M. Heurtaux, ne peut-il arriver que nous fassions plein chargement d’huile dans les mers de la Nouvelle-Zélande?…

— Je ne le crois pas, répondit M. Bourcart. J’ai causé avec le capitaine du navire américain… Selon lui, les baleines cherchent déjà à regagner des parages plus nord…

— Et là où elles iront, là nous saurons les amarrer!… déclara le lieutenant Coquebert. Je me charge de leur filer de la ligne tant qu’elles en voudront…

— Et vous pouvez compter, capitaine, ajouta Romain Allotte, que je ne resterai pas en arrière de mon camarade…

— Je compte surtout, mes amis, reprit M. Bourcart, que l’ambition de vous surpasser l’un l’autre ne vous fera pas commettre d’imprudences! Donc, c’est convenu, après les parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande, les parages de la Basse-Californie, où j’ai plus d’une fois déjà fait bonne pêche… Ensuite… on verra d’après les circonstances. Qu’en penses-tu, Ollive?…

— Je pense, capitaine, répondit celui-ci, que le Saint-Enoch se rendra où il vous plaira de le conduire, fût-ce jusqu’à la mer de Behring. Quant aux baleines, je vous en souhaite par douzaines. Mais cela regarde les chefs de pirogues et les harponneurs, et non le maître d’équipage.

— Entendu, mon vieux compagnon, répliqua en souriant M. Bourcart, et, puisque c’est ton idée, reste dans ta partie comme Jean-Marie Cabidoulin reste dans la sienne!… Les choses n’en iront pas plus mal…

— C’est mon avis, déclara Ollive.

— À propos, le tonnelier et toi, vous êtes toujours en dispute?…

— Toujours, capitaine. Avec sa manie de prédire des malheurs, Cabidoulin finirait par vous mettre la mort dans l’âme!… Je le connais de longtemps et je devrais y être habitué!… C’est d’autant plus bête de sa part qu’il s’est toujours tiré d’affaire au cours de ses navigations!… Vrai! il eût mieux fait de demeurer au mouillage dans sa boutique, au milieu de ses tonnes…

— Laisse-le remuer la langue, Ollive, répondit le capitaine Bourcart. Des mots que tout cela! Jean-Marie Cabidoulin n’en est pas moins un brave homme!”

Dans l’après-midi, le Saint-Enoch louvoyait sous bonne brise à quatre milles d’Akaroa, lorsqu’une première baleine fut signalée par le harponneur Louis Thiébault.

Il était deux heures, et ce cétacé de forte taille soufflait à petite distance.

M. Bourcart fit aussitôt mettre en panne. Puis, deux des quatre pirogues furent amenées, celle du premier lieutenant Coquebert et celle du second lieutenant Allotte. Ces officiers y descendirent et se placèrent à l’arrière. Les harponneurs Durut et Ducrest se tinrent à l’avant sur le tillac. Un des matelots prit la godille, et quatre hommes étaient aux avirons.

Avec la passion qui les animait, les deux lieutenants arrivèrent presque en même temps à portée de piquer la baleine, c’est-à-dire de lui lancer le harpon.

À ce harpon est attachée une ligne mesurant environ trois cents brasses qui est soigneusement lovée dans une baille placée à peu près au milieu de l’embarcation, de façon que rien ne gêne son filage.

Les deux harponneurs envoyèrent leurs harpons. Atteinte au flanc gauche, la baleine s’enfuit avec une extrême rapidité. À cet instant et malgré toutes précautions, la ligne du lieutenant Coquebert s’embrouilla et on fut obligé de la couper. Romain Allotte resta seul sur l’animal, dont son camarade, non sans regret, dut abandonner la poursuite.

Cependant la pirogue, irrésistiblement entraînée, volait à la surface, tandis que la godille la maintenait contre les embardées. Lorsque la baleine sonda, autrement dit plongea pour la première fois, on lui fila de la ligne en attendant qu’elle reparût à la surface.

“Attention!… attention! cria le lieutenant Allotte. Dès qu’elle reviendra, une lance à vous, Ducrest, et à moi l’autre…

— On est paré, lieutenant”, répondit le harponneur accroupi sur le tillac.

À bord des pirogues, il est d’usage de toujours avoir à tribord, en même temps que deux harpons de rechange, trois lances affilées comme des rasoirs. À bâbord sont disposés la gaffe et le louchet qui sert à couper les artères lorsqu’elle court avec une telle rapidité qu’il serait impossible de garder sa remorque sans compromettre la sécurité de l’embarcation. Alors, disent les gens du métier, on “la travaille à la lance”.

Au moment où la baleine remontait à petite distance, la pirogue se hala dessus. Des coups de lance lui furent portés par le lieutenant et le harponneur. Comme ces coups n’atteignirent pas les organes essentiels, la baleine, au lieu de souffler le sang, souffla blanc comme à l’ordinaire, en filant vers le nord-est. Il y avait donc certitude qu’elle n’était pas mortellement blessée.

À bord du Saint-Enoch, le capitaine et l’équipage suivaient avec le plus vif intérêt les péripéties de cette chasse, qui pouvait se prolonger. Il n’était pas impossible, en effet, que l’animal continuât à se dérober pendant plusieurs heures. Aussi M. Bourcart remit-il son navire au plus près, afin de rejoindre la pirogue, dont deux bons milles le séparaient alors.

Cette embarcation courait avec une prodigieuse vitesse. Tel que l’on connaissait le second lieutenant, on savait qu’il ne se résignerait point à abandonner sa proie, malgré les conseils de prudence qui lui avaient été donnés.

Quant à Yves Coquebert, après avoir débrouillé sa ligne, il se préparait à rejoindre son camarade.

Une demi-heure encore, il fut aisé de constater que la baleine commençait à s’épuiser. Ses plongeons ne duraient que quelques minutes, preuve que la respiration lui manquait.

Romain Allotte, profitant de ce que sa marche se ralentissait, fit haler sur la ligne, et, lorsqu’il fut rallié par la pirogue du lieutenant Coquebert, le harponneur Ducrest parvint à trancher un des ailerons de la baleine avec son louchet, et d’autres coups lui furent portés au flanc. Après une dernière immersion, elle reparut, battant l’eau avec une violence telle qu’une des pirogues faillit chavirer. Enfin sa tête se dressa au-dessus de l’eau, et elle souffla rouge, ce qui indiquait sa fin prochaine.

Néanmoins, il fallait se défier des dernières convulsions d’un si puissant animal. C’est à cet instant que les pirogues sont le plus exposées, et un coup de sa queue suffit à les mettre en pièces. Cette fois, les deux lieutenants furent assez adroits pour l’éviter, et, après s’être retourné sur le flanc, il flotta immobile à la surface de la mer.

Les deux embarcations se trouvaient alors de plus d’un mille et demi au large du Saint-Enoch, qui manœuvra de manière à leur épargner de la route. La houle s’accentuait sous une brise de nord-ouest. D’ailleurs, la baleine capturée, — une baleine franche, — était d’un tel volume que les hommes auraient eu grand’peine à la déhaler.

Il arrive parfois que les pirogues ont été entraînées à plusieurs lieues du bâtiment. Dans ce cas, si le courant est contraire, elles sont obligées de mouiller sur la baleine en y portant une petite ancre, et l’on ne la remorque qu’à l’heure où le courant prend une direction inverse.

En cette occasion, il ne fut pas nécessaire d’attendre. Vers quatre heures, le Saint-Enoch avait pu se rapprocher à quelques encâblures. Les deux pirogues le rejoignirent, et, avant cinq heures, la baleine fut amarrée au long du bord.

Le lieutenant Allotte et ses hommes reçurent les félicitations de tout l’équipage. L’animal était vraiment de belle grosseur. Il mesurait près de vingt-deux mètres sur une douzaine de circonférence en arrière des nageoires pectorales, ce qui lui assignait un poids d’au moins soixante-dix mille kilogrammes.

“Mes compliments, Allotte, mes compliments!… répétait M. Bourcart. Voilà un heureux coup de début, et il ne faudrait pas beaucoup de baleines de cette taille pour emplir notre cale.

— Qu’est-ce que vous en pensez, maître Cabidoulin?…

— M’est avis, répondit le tonnelier, que cette bête-là nous vaudra au moins cent barils d’huile, et, si je me trompe d’une dizaine, c’est que je n’ai plus l’œil juste!”

Et, sans doute, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin s’y entendait assez pour ne point commettre une erreur d’appréciation.

“Aujourd’hui, dit alors le capitaine Bourcart, il est trop tard. La mer tombe, le vent aussi, et nous resterons sous petite voilure. Amarrez solidement la baleine… Demain on s’occupera du dépeçage.”

La nuit fut calme, et le Saint-Enoch n’eut pas à louvoyer. Dès que le soleil parut à l’horizon, l’équipage se distribua le travail, et, en premier lieu, les hommes passèrent les garants d’appareils, afin de virer la baleine au guindeau.

Une chaîne fut alors engagée sous la nageoire du dehors, puis baguée dessus de manière à ne point déraper. Dès que les harponneurs eurent décollé l’autre nageoire, les matelots se mirent aux barres du guindeau afin de haler l’animal. Dans ces conditions, il ne demandait qu’à tourner sur lui-même, et l’opération s’accomplirait sans difficulté.

Cela fait, la tête s’amena en quatre morceaux: les lippes, qui furent coupées et accrochées à un énorme croc; la gorge et la langue, qui tombèrent ensemble sur le pont par-dessus les bastingages; puis l’extrémité du mufle, à laquelle sont fixés les fanons, dont le nombre n’est jamais inférieur à cinq cents.

Cette besogne exigea le plus de temps, car, pour avoir ce dernier fragment de la tête, il est nécessaire de scier l’os, assez gros et très dur, qui l’attache au corps.

Au surplus, maître Cabidoulin surveillait tout ce travail, et l’équipage n’y était point novice.

Dès que les quatre morceaux de la tête eurent été déposés sur le pont, on s’occupa de virer le gras de la baleine, après l’avoir découpé en tranches larges d’une brasse et d’une longueur variant entre huit et neuf pieds.

Lorsque la plus grande partie fut à bord, les matelots purent couper la queue et se débarrasser de ce qui restait de la carcasse du côté du large.

On eut ensuite successivement les divers moignons dont il fut aisé de décoller le gras, lorsqu’ils gisèrent sur le pont, et plus aisément que si le corps eût été amarré au flanc du navire.

L’entière matinée, pendant laquelle on ne perdit pas un instant, fut consacrée à cette pénible besogne, et M. Bourcart ne la fit reprendre que vers une heure, après le repas de midi.

Les matelots attaquèrent alors la monstrueuse tête. Lorsque les harponneurs en eurent chaviré les quatre portions, ils détachèrent à la hache les fanons, qui sont plus ou moins longs suivants leur grosseur. De ces lames fibreuses et cornées, les premières, courtes et étroites, s’élargissent en se rapprochant du milieu de la mâchoire, et diminuent ensuite jusqu’au fond de la bouche.

Rangées avec une parfaite régularité, emboîtées les unes dans les autres, elles forment une espèce de treillis ou de nasse qui retient les animalcules, les myriades de petits articulés dont se nourrissent les souffleurs.

Lorsque les fanons eurent été enlevés, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin les fit transporter au pied de la dunette. Il n’y aurait plus qu’à les gratter pour en décoller le blanc qui, provenant des gencives, est de qualité supérieure. Quant au gras contenu dans le cerveau, il fut détaché et mis en réserve. Enfin, la tête entièrement vidée de toutes les parties utilisables, les tronçons furent rejetés à la mer.

Le reste de la journée et la journée suivante, l’équipage procéda à la fonte du gras. Comme les vigies n’avaient signalé aucune autre baleine, il n’y eut pas occasion d’amener les pirogues et tout le monde s’employa au travail.

Maître Cabidoulin fit ranger un certain nombre de bailles sur le pont entre le grand mât et le gaillard d’avant. Après avoir été introduit par morceaux dans les bailles, le gras, soumis à la pression d’une mécanique, forma des fragments assez minces pour entrer dans les pots de la cabousse, où ils allaient fondre sous l’action de la chaleur.

Cela fait, ce qui restait, le résidu, l’escrabe comme on l’appelle, servirait à entretenir le feu pendant le temps que fonctionnerait la cabousse, c’est-à-dire jusqu’au moment où tout le gras serait converti en huile. L’opération terminée, il n’y aurait plus qu’à envoyer cette huile aux barils de la cale.

Cette manutention ne présente aucune difficulté. Elle consiste à laisser couler le liquide dans une baille placée à l’intérieur, à travers un petit panneau, au moyen d’une manche en toile pourvue d’un robinet à son extrémité.

L’ouvrage est alors achevé, et on le recommencera dans les mêmes conditions, lorsque les pirogues auront amarré d’autres baleines.

Le soir venu, après que l’huile eut été emmagasinée, M. Bourcart demanda à maître Cabidoulin s’il ne s’était pas trompé sur le rendement de l’animal.

“Non, capitaine, déclara le tonnelier. La bête nous a valu cent quinze barils…

— Tout autant… s’écria le docteur Filhiol. Eh bien, il faut l’avoir vu pour le croire!…

— J’en conviens, répondit M. Heurtaux, et, si je ne me trompe, cette baleine-là est une des plus grosses que nous ayons jamais harponnées…

— Un coup heureux du lieutenant Allotte! ajouta le capitaine Bourcart. S’il le recommence une dizaine de fois, nous serons bien près d’avoir complet chargement!”

On le voit, les bons pronostics de M. Bourcart semblaient devoir l’emporter sur les mauvais pronostics de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

Ces parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande sont à juste raison très recherchés. Avant l’arrivée du Saint-Enoch, plusieurs navires anglais et américains avaient déjà fait une excellente campagne. Les baleines franches se laissent plus facilement capturer que les autres. Comme elles ont l’ouïe moins fine, il est possible de les approcher sans éveiller leur attention. Par malheur, les tourmentes sont si fréquentes, si terribles en ces mers que, chaque nuit, il y a lieu de tenir le large sous petite voilure afin d’éviter de se mettre à la côte.

Pendant les quatre semaines que M. Bourcart passa dans le voisinage de la Nouvelle-Zélande, l’équipage amarra onze baleines. Deux furent prises par le second Heurtaux, trois par le lieutenant Coquebert, quatre par le lieutenant Allotte, deux par le capitaine. Mais elles n’égalaient point la première en volume, et le rendement en fut moins avantageux. D’ailleurs, les souffleurs commençaient à regagner de hautes latitudes. Aussi le Saint-Enoch, n’ayant en totalité que neuf cents barils d’huile, devait-il chercher d’autres parages de pêche.

Le capitaine Bourcart eut alors la pensée de se rendre à la baie des Îles, colonie anglaise établie sur le littoral est d’Ika-Na-Maoui, l’île septentrionale du groupe. Peut-être pourrait-il doubler son chargement avant de rallier les côtes occidentales de l’Amérique?…

Dans cette baie, le Saint-Enoch s’approvisionnerait de pommes de terre, et plus facilement qu’aux environs d’Akaroa, où ces légumes ne font pas l’objet d’une très abondante culture.

Le navire appareilla dans la soirée du 29 mars, et, le surlendemain, on eut connaissance de la baie des Îles.

L’ancre fut envoyée par un fond de dix brasses à courte distance de terre.

Dans le port étaient en relâche plusieurs baleiniers qui se préparaient à quitter la Nouvelle-Zélande.

Dès que les voiles eurent été serrées, le capitaine Bourcart s’informa de l’endroit où il pourrait se fournir de pommes de terre. On lui indiqua une ferme éloignée d’une douzaine de milles vers l’intérieur. Les deux lieutenants partirent aussitôt sous la direction d’un Anglais choisi pour guide.

Les pirogues remontèrent une rivière sinueuse entre de hautes collines.

Le long des rives s’élevaient des habitations mahories, bâties en bois, entourées de jardins riches en légumes que les indigènes échangent volontiers contre des vêtements de fabrication européenne.

À l’extrémité de la rivière était établie cette ferme où les pommes de terre abondaient, et dont on emplit plusieurs sacs en natte. Revenues le soir même à bord, les embarcations rapportaient en outre une provision d’huîtres d’excellente qualité, ramassées sur les roches des berges. Un régal pour le carré comme pour le poste de l’équipage.

Le lendemain, le maître d'hôtel du Saint-Enoch put se procurer quantité d'oignons provenant des jardins mahoris. Suivant la coutume, ces oignons furent payés de la même monnaie que les pommes de terre, en pantalons, en chemises, en étoffes, dont le navire possédait une pacotille.

Au surplus, les indigènes se montraient fort obligeants, au moins sur les territoires de la baie des Îles. À cette époque, il est vrai, les agressions n'étaient que trop fréquentes en d'autres points de l'archipel. Les colons devaient lutter contre les Néo-Zélandais, et, ce jour même, un aviso anglais venait de quitter le port pour aller réprimer quelques tribus hostiles.

Quant aux officiers et aux matelots du Saint-Enoch, ils n'eurent point à se plaindre durant cette relâche. Reçus partout hospitalièrement, ils entraient dans les cases, on leur offrait des rafraîchissements, non point de la limonade ou de la bière — les indigènes n'en font pas usage, — mais d'excellentes pastèques, dont les jardins regorgeaient, et aussi des figues non moins bonnes qui pendaient à les rompre aux branches des arbres.

M. Bourcart ne séjourna que trois jours dans la baie des Îles. Sachant que les baleines délaissaient ces parages, il prit ses dispositions en vue d'une assez longue traversée qui ne compterait pas moins de quatre mille milles.

En effet, c'était à la baie Sainte-Marguerite, sur la côte de la Basse-Californie, que le Saint-Enoch irait achever cette campagne, si heureuse à son début.

Et, lorsqu'on le répétait au tonnelier:

"Le commencement est le commencement…, murmurait entre ses dents Jean-Marie Cabidoulin. Attendons la fin…

— Attendons la fin.” répondait maître Ollive, en haussant les épaules.

CHAPITRE IV

À travers le Pacifique

Le 3 avril, à la première heure, le Saint-Enoch abandonna le mouillage de la baie des Îles. Il ne manquait plus à son approvisionnement que des noix de coco, de la volaille et des porcs. N'ayant pu s'en procurer aux deux dernières relâches à la Nouvelle-Zélande, le capitaine Bourcart se proposait de toucher à l'une des îles de l'archipel des Navigateurs, où ces objets de consommation ne font pas défaut.

Le vent soufflait en bonne direction, et les neuf cents milles qui séparent Ika-Na-Maoui du tropique du Capricorne furent franchis en une huitaine de jours, grand largue, amures à bâbord.

Ce jour-là, 12 avril, en réponse à une question que lui posait le docteur Filhiol, M. Bourcart dit:

"Oui, c'est peut-être à cette place, par le vingt-troisième parallèle et le cent soixante-quinzième méridien, que l'océan Pacifique accuse ses plus grandes profondeurs. Au cours de sondages qui ont été exécutés à bord du Penguin, on a dévidé quatre mille neuf cents brasses de ligne sans atteindre le fond…

— Je croyais, fit observer M. Filhiol, que les fonds les plus considérables se rencontraient dans les mers du Japon…

— Erreur! déclara le capitaine Bourcart. Ils l'emportent ici de deux cent quarante-cinq brasses, ce qui donne, au total, neuf mille mètres…

— Eh! répondit le docteur Filhiol, c’est l’altitude des montagnes de l’Himalaya: huit mille six cents mètres, le Dhwalagiri du Nepal; neuf mille, le Chamalari du Boutan…

— Voilà, mon cher docteur, une comparaison de chiffres qui ne laisse pas d’être instructive…

— Elle démontre, capitaine, que les plus hauts reliefs de la terre n’égalent point ses abîmes sous- marins. À l’époque de formation, lorsque notre globe tendait à prendre sa figure définitive, les dépressions ont acquis plus d’importance que les soulèvements, et peut-être ne seront-elles jamais déterminées avec quelque exactitude.”

À trois jours de là, 15 avril, ayant eu connaissance des Samoa, archipel des Navigateurs, le Saint-Enoch vint jeter l’ancre à quelques encâblures de l’île Savai, qui est une des plus considérables de ce groupe.

Une douzaine d’indigènes, accompagnant leur roi, se rendirent à bord avec un Anglais qui servait d’interprète. Ces naturels, très incivilisés, étaient à peu près nus. Sa Majesté elle-même ne se montrait guère autrement vêtue que ses sujets. Mais une chemise d’indienne, dont le capitaine Bourcart lui fit présent, et dans les manches de laquelle le souverain s’obstina tout d’abord à passer ses jambes, ne tarda pas à voiler la nudité royale.

Les pirogues, envoyées à terre sur le conseil de l’Anglais, rapportèrent un chargement de noix fraîches.

Le soir, à la tombée du crépuscule, le Saint-Enoch vira de bord, par crainte de rester trop près de la terre, et il louvoya toute la nuit.

Dès l’aube naissante, le capitaine Bourcart reprit son mouillage de la veille. Les indigènes fournirent au maître d’hôtel une vingtaine de tortues de belle espèce, autant de cochons de petite taille, de la volaille en quantité. Ces provisions furent payées en objets de pacotille dont les Samoans font le plus grand cas, — principalement de mauvais couteaux à cinq sols pièce.

Trois jours après le départ, les vigies signalèrent une troupe de cachalots, qui s’ébattait à quatre ou cinq milles par bâbord devant. La brise soufflait faiblement, et le Saint-Enoch gagnait à peine vers le large. Il était déjà tard, près de cinq heures. Cependant le capitaine Bourcart ne voulut pas perdre cette occasion de donner la chasse à un ou plusieurs de ces animaux.

Deux pirogues furent amenées sur-le-champ, celle du second Heurtaux et celle du lieutenant

Coquebert. Ces officiers, leurs harponneurs, leurs matelots, y prirent place. À force d’avirons, la mer n’étant gonflée que d’une longue houle, elles se dirigèrent vers le troupeau.

Du haut de la dunette, le capitaine Bourcart et le docteur Filhiol allaient suivre non sans intérêt les péripéties de cette pêche.

“Elle est plus difficile que la pêche de la baleine, fit observer M. Bourcart, et aussi moins fructueuse. Dès que l’un de ces cachalots a été harponné, on est souvent contraint de larguer la ligne, car il plonge à de grandes profondeurs avec une extrême rapidité. En revanche, si la pirogue a pu se tenir sur la ligne pendant la durée du premier plongeon, on a la presque certitude de capturer l’animal. Une fois remonté à la surface, le louchet et la lance l’ont bientôt achevé.”

C’est ce qui se produisit en cette circonstance. Les deux pirogues ne purent amarrer qu’un seul cachalot de moyenne taille, et il en est dont la longueur dépasse celle de la baleine franche. La nuit commençait à venir, et, comme des nuages se levaient à l’est, il eût été imprudent de s’attarder. Aussi, pendant la soirée, l’équipage s’occupa-t-il de virer l’animal.

Le surlendemain, il n’y eut pas lieu de se remettre en pêche. Les cachalots avaient disparu, et le Saint-Enoch, servi par une fraîche brise, reprit sa route au nord-est.

Ce jour-là apparut un navire qui suivait la même direction à trois ou quatre milles sous le vent. C’était un trois-mâts-barque, dont il eût été impossible de reconnaître la nationalité à cette distance. Néanmoins la forme de sa coque, quelques détails de la voilure permirent de croire qu’il devait être anglais.

Vers le milieu de la journée se produisit une de ces rapides sautes de vent de l’ouest à l’est, qui sont très dangereuses par leur violence, sinon leur durée, et risquent de mettre un navire en perdition, s’il n’est pas préparé à les recevoir.

En un instant, la mer fut démontée, des paquets de houle tombèrent à bord. Le capitaine Bourcart dut prendre la cape afin de tenir tête à la rafale sous le grand hunier, la misaine, le perroquet de fougue et le petit foc.

Au cours de la manœuvre, le matelot Gastinet, s’étant paumoyé jusqu’au bout-dehors du grand foc pour dégager une des écoutes manqua des deux mains.

“Un homme à la mer!” cria un de ses camarades qui, du gaillard d’avant, venait de le voir s’enfoncer sous les eaux.

Tout le monde fut sur le pont, et M. Bourcart gagna précipitamment la dunette afin de diriger le sauvetage.

Si Gastinet n’eût pas été bon nageur, il aurait été perdu. La mer brisait avec trop de violence pour que l’on pût déhaler une embarcation. Il ne restait donc, comme moyen de secours, que de jeter des bouées, ce qui fut rapidement fait.

Par malheur, Gastinet était tombé au vent, et, comme le navire dérivait, les bouées ne pouvaient arriver jusqu’à sa portée. Aussi cherchait-il à les atteindre en nageant d’un bras vigoureux.

“À larguer la misaine et le perroquet de fougue!” commanda le capitaine Bourcart.

Et, en virant, le Saint-Enoch se rapprocherait de l’homme qui se débattait au milieu des lames. D’ailleurs Gastinet ne tarda pas à saisir une des bouées, et, à la condition de s’y maintenir, il était sûr d’être recueilli lorsque le bâtiment aurait viré de bord.

Mais voici que la situation se compliqua effroyablement.

“Un requin… un requin!” venaient de crier quelques matelots postés sur la dunette.

Un de ces formidables squales apparaissait et disparaissait sous le vent du navire, après avoir passé à l’arrière.

On connaît la voracité extraordinaire, la force prodigieuse de ces monstres, — rien que mâchoires et estomac, a-t-on justement pu dire. Et si le malheureux était happé par ce requin… s’il n’avait pu être hissé à bord auparavant…

Or, bien que le squale ne fût plus qu'à une centaine de pieds de lui, Gastinet ne l'avait pas aperçu. Il n'avait pas même entendu le cri jeté du haut de la dunette, et il ne se doutait pas du danger qui le menaçait.

À ce moment, plusieurs coups de feu éclatèrent. Le second Heurtaux et Romain Allotte, ayant décroché leurs carabines au râtelier du carré, venaient de tirer sur l'animal.

Celui-ci avait-il été atteint?… On ne savait. Toutefois il plongea, et sa tête n'émergea plus du creux des lames.

Cependant, la barre dessous, le navire commençait à lofer. Mais, par une mer aussi forte, parviendrait-il à faire son abattée?… S'il manquait à virer, — ce qui était à craindre dans ces mauvaises conditions, — la manœuvre aurait été inutile…

Il y eut un instant de terrible anxiété. Le Saint-Enoch, tandis que ses voiles ralinguaient et détonaient avec violence, eut quelques secondes d'hésitation. Enfin ses focs prirent, et il dépassa la ligne du vent en donnant une bande telle que ses dallots engagèrent.

Alors, les écoutes solidement raidies, il se maintint au plus près et gagna vers la bouée, à laquelle se cramponnait le matelot. On put lui envoyer un bout de grelin qu'il saisit vigoureusement et il fut halé à la hauteur des bastingages, au moment où le squale, se retournant, les mâchoires ouvertes, allait lui couper la jambe.

Lorsque Gastinet eut été déposé sur le pont, il perdit connaissance. D'ailleurs, le docteur Filhiol n'eut pas grand'peine à le ranimer.

Entre temps, le harponneur Ducrest avait lancé au monstre un croc garni d’un morceau de carcasse de bœuf.

Mais peut-être le requin avait-il pris la fuite, car on ne le voyait plus…

Soudain une violente secousse se produisit, qui aurait entraîné la ligne, si elle n’eût été solidement tournée à l’un des taquets du bastingage. Le croc s’était enfoncé dans la gueule du requin et ne larguerait pas. Six hommes se mirent sur la ligne et le sortirent de l’eau. Puis, sa queue saisie par un noeud coulant, on le hissa au moyen d’un palan, et il retomba sur le pont, où quelques coups de hache l’eurent bientôt éventré.

D’habitude, les matelots veulent savoir ce que contient l’estomac de ces monstres, dont le nom, à ce que l’on prétend, très significatif, n’est que le mot latin requiem.

Voici ce qui fut retiré du ventre de ce squale, où il y aurait encore eu de la place pour le pauvre Gastinet: quantité d’objets tombés à la mer, une bouteille vide, trois boîtes de conserves, vides également, plusieurs brasses de bitord, un morceau de faubert, des débris d’os, un surouët de toile cirée, une vieille botte de pêcheur, et un montant de cage à poules.

On le comprend, cet inventaire intéressa particulièrement le docteur Filhiol.

“C’est la boîte aux ordures de la mer!…” s’écria-t-il.

De fait, on n’aurait pu imaginer une expression plus juste. Et il ajouta:

“Il n’y a plus maintenant qu’à le jeter par-dessus le bord…

— Non point, mon cher Filhiol, déclara M. Bourcart.

— Et que voulez-vous faire de ce requin, capitaine?

— Le dépecer pour en conserver tout ce qui a de la valeur! Et, rien qu’en ce qui vous concerne, docteur, on tire de ces squales une huile qui ne se fige jamais et qui a toutes les qualités médicinales de l’huile de foie de morue. Quant à la peau, après avoir été séchée et polie, elle sert aux bijoutiers pour fabriquer des objets de fantaisie, aux relieurs pour faire du chagrin, aux menuisiers pour faire des râpes à bois…

— Eh! capitaine, demanda le docteur Filhiol, allez-vous me dire aussi que la chair de requin se mange?…

— Sans doute, et ses ailerons sont tellement recherchés sur les marchés du Céleste-Empire qu’ils coûtent jusqu’à sept cents francs la tonne… Si nous ne sommes pas assez Chinois pour nous en régaler, nous faisons de cette chair une colle de poisson qui est supérieure, pour la clarification des vins, des bières et des liqueurs, à celle que donne l’esturgeon. Au surplus, à qui ne répugne pas sa saveur huileuse, un filet de requin ne laisse pas d’être fort agréable… Vous voyez donc que celui-ci vaut son pesant d’or!”

C’est à la date du 25 avril que M. Bourcart eut à noter sur le livre de bord le passage de la Ligne.

À neuf heures du matin, ce jour-là, par un temps clair, il avait obtenu au sextant une première opération, afin d’avoir la longitude, c’est-à-dire l’heure du lieu, — et il la compléterait lorsque le soleil passerait au méridien et en tenant compte, avec le loch, de la distance parcourue entre les deux observations.

À midi, cette seconde opération lui indiqua sa latitude par la hauteur du soleil au-dessus de l’horizon, et il détermina définitivement l’heure par le chronomètre.

Le temps était favorable, l’atmosphère pure. Aussi ces résultats furent-ils tenus pour très exacts, et M. Bourcart dit, après ses calculs:

“Mes amis, nous venons de franchir l’Équateur, et voici le Saint-Enoch revenu dans l’hémisphère septentrional.”

Comme le docteur Filhiol — le seul à bord qui n’eût point passé la Ligne — n’avait pas été soumis au baptême en descendant l’Atlantique, cette fois encore on lui épargna les cérémonies plus ou moins désagréables du bonhomme Tropique. Les officiers se contentèrent de boire au succès de la campagne dans le carré, aussi bien que l’équipage dans le poste. Les hommes avaient reçu double ration d’eau-de-vie — ce qui se faisait chaque fois qu’on avait amarré une baleine.

Il fallut même, en dépit de ses interminables grognements, que Jean-Marie Cabidoulin choquât sa tasse contre la tasse de maître Ollive:

“Un bon coup à travers le gosier, ça ne se refuse pas…, lui dit son camarade.

— Non, certes! répliqua le tonnelier, mais ce n’est pas ça qui changera ma manière de voir.

— Change pas, vieux, mais bois tout de même!”

Sur cette partie du Pacifique, les vents sont d’ordinaire très faibles à cette époque de l’année, et le Saint-Enoch fut à peu près encalminé. C’est alors que les journées semblent longues! Sans faire route, du soir au matin et du matin au soir, un bâtiment est le jouet de la houle. On cherche donc à se distraire par la lecture, par la conversation, à moins de demander au sommeil l’oubli des heures au milieu de ces chaleurs accablantes des Tropiques.

Un après-midi, le 27 avril, M. Bourcart, les officiers, le docteur Filhiol, et aussi maître Ollive et maître Cabidoulin, abrités sous la tente de la dunette, causaient de choses et d’autres.

Et alors, le second, s’adressant au tonnelier, de lui dire:

“Voyons, Cabidoulin, avouerez-vous que d’avoir déjà neuf cents barils d’huile dans sa cale, c’est un bon début pour une saison de pêche?…

— Neuf cents barils, monsieur Heurtaux, répondit le tonnelier, ce n’est pas deux mille, et les onze cents autres ne se rempliront peut-être pas comme on remplit sa tasse à la cambuse!…

— C’est donc, observa en riant le lieutenant Coquebert, que nous ne rencontrerons plus une seule baleine…

— Et que le grand serpent de mer les aura toutes avalées?… ajouta sur le même ton le lieutenant Allotte.

— C’est possible…, répondit le tonnelier, qui se gardait bien de plaisanter.

— Maître Cabidoulin, demanda le capitaine Bourcart, vous y croyez donc toujours, à ce monstre des monstres?…

— S’il y croit, le têtu!… déclara maître Ollive. Mais il ne s’arrête pas d’en causer sur le gaillard d’avant…

— Et il en causera encore! affirma le tonnelier.

— Bon! dit M. Heurtaux, ça n’a pas grand inconvénient pour la plupart de nos hommes, et ils ne donnent pas dans les contes de Cabidoulin!… Mais, pour ce qui est des novices, c’est autre chose, et je ne suis pas sûr qu’ils ne finissent par s’effrayer…

— Alors… ayez soin de retenir votre langue, Cabidoulin, ordonna M. Bourcart.

— Et pourquoi, capitaine?… répondit le tonnelier. Au moins l’équipage sera-t-il prévenu, et lorsqu’il apercevra le serpent de mer… ou tout autre monstre marin…

— Comment, demanda M. Heurtaux, vous avez l’idée que nous le verrons, ce fameux serpent de mer?…

— Pas de doute à cela.

— Et pourquoi?

— Pourquoi?… Voyez-vous, monsieur Heurtaux, c’est une conviction que j’ai, et les plaisanteries de maître Ollive n’y feront rien…

— Cependant… en quarante ans de navigation à travers l’Atlantique et le Pacifique, vous ne l’avez point vu, que je sache, cet animal fantastique?…

— Et je comptais bien ne point le voir, puisque j’avais pris ma retraite, répondit le tonnelier. Mais M. Bourcart est venu me relancer, et, cette fois, je n’y échapperai pas!

— Eh bien, je ne serai pas fâché de la rencontre!… s’écria le lieutenant Allotte.

— Ne dites pas cela, lieutenant, ne dites pas cela!… répliqua le tonnelier d’une voix grave.

— Allons, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, reprit M. Bourcart, ce n’est pas sérieux!… Le grand serpent de mer!… Je vous le répète pour la centième fois… personne ne l’a jamais vu… personne ne le verra jamais… pour cette bonne raison qu’il n’existe pas et ne peut exister…

— Il existe si bien, capitaine, s’obstina à répondre le tonnelier, que le Saint-Enoch fera sa connaissance avant la fin de la campagne… et qui sait même si ce n’est pas de la sorte qu’elle finira!”

Et, pour tout avouer, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin était si affirmatif que non seulement les novices du bord, mais les matelots en venaient à croire aux menaçantes prédictions du tonnelier. Qui sait si le capitaine Bourcart parviendrait à clore la bouche d’un homme si convaincu?…

C’est alors que le docteur Filhiol, interrogé par M. Bourcart sur ce qu’il pouvait savoir relativement au prétendu serpent de mer, répondit:

“J’ai lu à peu près tout ce qu’on a écrit là-dessus et je n’ignore point les plaisanteries que s’est attirées le Constitutionnel en donnant ces légendes pour des réalités… Or, remarquez, capitaine, qu’elles ne sont pas nouvelles! On les voit apparaître dès le début de l’ère chrétienne! Déjà la crédulité humaine accordait des dimensions gigantesques à des poulpes, à des calmars, à des encornets, à des céphalopodes, qui ordinairement ne mesurent pas plus de soixante-dix à quatre-vingts centimètres, compris leurs tentacules. Il y a loin de là à ces géants de l’espèce, agitant des bras de trente, de soixante, de cent pieds, et qui n’ont jamais vécu que dans les imaginations!… Et n’a-t-on pas été jusqu’à parler d’un kraken, long d’une demi-lieue, lequel entraînait les bâtiments dans les profonds abîmes de l’Océan!”

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin prêtait une extrême attention au docteur, mais il ne cessait, en remuant la tête, de protester contre ses affirmations.

“Non, reprit M. Filhiol, pures fables, auxquelles les anciens croyaient peut-être, puisque, du temps de Pline, il était question d’un serpent amphibie, à large tête de chien, aux oreilles repliées en arrière, au corps recouvert d’écailles jaunissantes, qui se jetait sur les petits navires et les mettait en perdition… Puis, dix ou douze siècles plus tard, l’évêque norvégien Pontoppidan affirma l’existence d’un monstre marin dont les cornes ressemblaient à des mâts armés de vergues, et, lorsque les pêcheurs se croyaient sur de grands fonds, ils les trouvaient à quelques pieds seulement, parce que l’animal flottait sous la quille de leur chaloupe!… Et, à les en croire, l’animal possédait une énorme tête de cheval, des yeux noirs, une crinière blanche et, dans ses plongeons, il déplaçait un tel volume d’eau que la mer se déchaînait en tourbillons pareils à ceux du Maël-Strom!…

— Et pourquoi ne l’aurait-on pas dit, puisqu’on avait vu?… observa le tonnelier.

— Vu… ou cru voir, mon pauvre Cabidoulin… répondit le capitaine Bourcart.

— Et même, ajouta le docteur Filhiol, ces braves gens n’étaient point d’accord, les uns affirmant que le prétendu monstre avait le museau pointu et qu’il rejetait l’eau par un évent, les autres soutenant qu’il était muni de nageoires en forme d’oreilles d’éléphant… Et puis ce fut la grande baleine blanche des côtes du Groenland, la fameuse Moby Dick, que les baleiniers écossais pourchassèrent pendant plus de deux siècles sans parvenir à l’atteindre, pour cette bonne raison qu’ils ne l’avaient jamais aperçue…

— Ce qui n’empêchait pas d’admettre son existence…, ajouta M. Bourcart en riant.

— Naturellement, déclara M. Filhiol, tout comme celle du non moins légendaire serpent, lequel, il y a quelque quarante ans, vint se livrer à de formidables ébats, une première fois en pleine baie de Glocester, une seconde fois à trente milles au large de Boston, dans les eaux américaines.”

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin fut-il convaincu par les arguments du docteur? Non, assurément, et il aurait pu répondre: Puisque la mer renferme d’extraordinaires végétaux, des algues longues de huit cents à mille pieds, pourquoi ne recèlerait-elle pas des monstres de prodigieuses dimensions, organisés pour vivre dans ces profondeurs qu’ils n’abandonneraient qu’à de rares intervalles?…

Ce qui est certain, c’est que, en 1819, le sloop Concordia, se trouvant à quinze milles de Race-Point, rencontra une sorte de reptile émergeant de cinq à six pieds, à peau noirâtre, à tête de cheval, mais ne mesurant qu’une cinquantaine de pieds, donc inférieur aux cachalots et aux baleines.

En 1848, à bord du Péking, l’équipage crut voir une bête énorme de plus de cent pieds de longueur, qui se mouvait à la surface de la mer. Vérification faite, ce n’était qu’une algue démesurée couverte de parasites marins de toutes sortes.

En 1849, dans le goulet qui sépare l’île Osterssen du continent, le capitaine Schielderup déclara avoir rencontré un serpent de six cents pieds, endormi sur les eaux.

En 1857, les vigies du Castillan signalèrent la présence d’un monstre à grosse tête en forme de tonneau, dont la longueur pouvait être évaluée à deux cents pieds.

En 1862, le commandant Bouyer, de l’aviso Alecton…

“Pardon de vous interrompre, monsieur Filhiol, dit maître Cabidoulin, je connais un matelot qui était à bord…

— À bord de l’Alecton?… demanda M. Bourcart.

— Oui…

— Et ce matelot aurait vu ce qu’a raconté le commandant de l’aviso?…

— Comme je vous vois, monsieur Bourcart, et c’est bien un véritable monstre que l’équipage a hissé à bord…

— Soit, répondit le docteur Filhiol, mais ce n’était qu’un énorme céphalopode couleur bistre rouge, yeux à fleur de tête, bouche en bec de perroquet, corps fusiforme, renflé au milieu, nageoires arrondies en deux lobes charnus placés à l’extrémité postérieure, huit bras s’échevelant autour de sa tête… Cette masse de chair molle ne pesait pas moins de deux mille kilogrammes, bien que l’animal n’eût pas plus de cinq à six mètres de la tête à la queue… Ce n’était donc point un serpent de mer…

— Quand il existe des poulpes, des encornets de cette espèce, répondit le tonnelier, je me demande pourquoi le serpent de mer n’existerait pas?…”

Voici, d’ailleurs, les découvertes qui allaient être faites plus tard au sujet des spécimens de tératologie que recèlent les profondeurs de la mer:

En 1864, à quelque cent milles au large de San-Francisco, le navire hollandais Cornélis entra en collision avec un poulpe dont l’un des tentacules, chargé de ventouses, vint s’enrouler autour des sous-barbes de beaupré et le fit enfoncer jusqu’au ras de l’eau. Lorsque ce tentacule eut été tranché à coups de hache, deux autres s’accrochèrent aux caps de mouton des haubans de misaine et au cabestan. Puis, après amputation, il fallut encore couper huit autres tentacules qui faisaient donner au bâtiment une forte bande sur tribord.

Quelques années après, dans le golfe du

Mexique, on aperçut un batracien à tête de grenouille, aux yeux saillants, pourvu de deux bras glauques et dont les larges mains saisirent le plat-bord d’une embarcation. Six balles de revolver firent à peine lâcher prise à cette “manta”, dont les bras se reliaient au corps par une membrane semblable à celle des chauves-souris, et qui jeta l’épouvante dans ces parages du golfe.

En 1873, c’est le cutter Lida, qui, dans le détroit de Sleat, entre l’île de Skye et la terre ferme, rencontre une masse vivante par le travers de son sillage. C’est le Nestor qui, entre Malacca et Penang passe non loin d’un géant océanique long de deux cent cinquante pieds, large de cinquante, à tête carrée, zébré de bandes noires et jaunes, ressemblant à une salamandre.

Enfin, en 1875, à vingt milles du cap San-Roque, pointe nord-est du Brésil, le commandant de la Pauline, George Drivor, croit apercevoir un énorme serpent enroulé autour d’une baleine comme un boa constrictor. Ce serpent, à couleur de congre, qui devait mesurer de cent soixante à cent soixante-dix pieds de longueur, jouait avec sa proie et finit par l’entraîner dans l’abîme.

Tels sont les derniers faits relevés depuis une trentaine d’années dans les rapports des capitaines. Peuvent-ils laisser des doutes sur l’existence de certains animaux marins tout au moins fort extraordinaires? En faisant la part de l'exagération, en refusant d'admettre que les océans soient fréquentés par des êtres dont le volume serait dix fois, cent fois celui des plus puissantes baleines, il est très probable qu'il faut accorder quelque créance aux récits rapportés ci-dessus.

Quant à prétendre avec Jean-Marie Cabidoulin que la mer renferme des serpents, des poulpes, des calmars d'une telle grosseur et d'une telle vigueur qu'ils parviendraient à couler des navires de moyen tonnage, non assurément. Si nombre de bâtiments disparaissent sans qu'on n'en ait plus de nouvelles, c'est qu'ils ont péri par collision, c'est qu'ils se sont brisés sur les récifs, c'est qu'ils ont sombré sous voile au milieu des cyclones. Il y a assez, il y a trop de causes de naufrages, sans faire intervenir, comme le faisait l'entêté tonnelier, ces pythons, ces chimères, ces hydres extra-naturels.

Cependant les calmes se prolongeaient, au grand ennui des officiers et de l'équipage du Saint-Enoch. Rien ne permettait d'en prévoir la fin, lorsque, le 5 mai, les conditions atmosphériques se modifièrent brusquement. Une fraîche brise verdit la surface de la mer et le navire reprit sa route vers le nord-est.

Ce jour-là, un bâtiment, qui avait été déjà signalé comme suivant la même direction, reparut et se rapprocha même à moins d'un mille.

Personne à bord ne mit en doute que ce ne fût un baleinier. Ou il n'avait pas encore commencé sa campagne de pêche, ou elle n'avait pas été heureuse, car il semblait assez lège et sa cale devait être à peu près vide.

“Je croirais volontiers, dit M. Bourcart, que ce trois-mâts cherche à rallier comme nous les côtes de la basse Californie… peut-être la baie

Marguerite…

— C’est possible, répondit M. Heurtaux, et, si cela est, nous pourrions faire route de conserve…

— Est-il américain, allemand, anglais, norvégien?… demanda le lieutenant Coquebert.

— On peut le “raisonner”, dit le capitaine Bourcart. Hissons notre pavillon, il hissera le sien, et nous saurons à quoi nous en tenir.”

Un instant après, les couleurs françaises flottaient à la corne d’artimon du Saint-Enoch.

Le navire en vue n’eut pas la politesse de répondre.

“Pas de doute, s’écria alors le lieutenant Allotte, c’est un Anglais!”

Et, à bord, tout le monde fut de cet avis qu’un navire qui ne saluait pas le pavillon de la France ne pouvait être qu’un “English d’Angleterre”!

CHAPITRE V

Baie Marguerite

Depuis la reprise du vent favorable, M. Bourcart pensait, avec raison, que le Saint-Enoch n’avait plus à craindre les calmes dans le voisinage du tropique du Cancer. Il atteindrait sans nouveaux retards la baie Marguerite, il est vrai, en fin de saison. Les baleines qui fréquentent cette baie n’y viennent d’ordinaire qu’au moment de la naissance des baleineaux, puis regagnent les parages du Pacifique septentrional.

Toutefois, le Saint-Enoch ayant déjà sa demi-cargaison d’huile, il était probable que les occasions ne lui manqueraient pas d’y ajouter quelques centaines de barils. Mais si le navire anglais rencontré n’avait pas, comme on le supposait, commencé sa campagne; si comme on le supposait également, il comptait débuter dans la baie Marguerite, il était probable, vu l’époque déjà avancée, qu’il n’y pourrait faire son plein chargement.

La côte américaine fut relevée le 13 mai, à la hauteur du Tropique. Dès les premières heures, on eut connaissance du cap Saint-Lucas, à l’extrémité sud de cette presqu’île de la Vieille-Californie qui borde l’étroit golfe de ce nom, dont la rive opposée forme le littoral de la Sonora mexicaine.

En prolongeant cette côte, le Saint-Enoch passa devant plusieurs îles uniquement habitées par des cabris, des loups marins, des oiseaux de mer en bandes innombrables. La pirogue envoyée à terre avec M. Heurtaux, qui était bon chasseur, ne revint pas vide. Les loups marins, on les dépouilla pour conserver la peau; les cabris on les dépeça pour en retirer la chair, qui, au point de vue comestible, est de qualité excellente.

En continuant de remonter le littoral, à petite distance, servi par une légère brise du sud-ouest, le Saint-Enoch laissa sur bâbord la baie de la Tortue. À l’extrémité de cette baie, on aperçut au mouillage un certain nombre de bâtiments qui devaient chasser aux éléphants de mer.

Le 7 mai, à sept heures du soir, le capitaine Bourcart se trouvait à l’ouvert de la baie Marguerite, dans laquelle il comptait jeter l’ancre. Par mesure de prudence, la nuit ne devant pas tarder à venir, il fit mettre cap au large et louvoya sous petits bords, de sorte que le lendemain, dès le lever du soleil, il était de retour à l’entrée de la passe.

Le courant descendait alors contre le vent, ce qui produisait un clapotis comparable à celui des bas-fonds. On pouvait craindre que l’eau n’y fût pas assez profonde. Aussi M. Bourcart envoya-t-il deux pirogues avec des lignes de sonde afin d’effectuer un brassiage exact. Il fut rassuré, d’ailleurs, lorsque les sondes accusèrent une moyenne de quinze à vingt brasses. Le navire s’engagea donc à travers la passe, et il eut bientôt donné dans la baie Marguerite.

Les vigies n’avaient point revu le trois-mâts anglais. Peut-être, après tout, ce navire cherchait-il d’autres lieux plus fréquentés par les souffleurs. Personne ne regretta de ne plus marcher de conserve avec lui.

Comme la baie est embarrassée de bancs de sable, le Saint-Enoch n’avança pas sans d’extrêmes précautions. Sans doute, M. Bourcart avait déjà visité cette baie; mais, les bancs étant sujets à se déplacer, il importait de reconnaître la direction du chenal. Aussi vint-il mouiller au milieu d’une petite anse très abritée.

Dès que les voiles furent serrées, l’ancre envoyée par le fond, les trois pirogues de bâbord se rendirent à terre, afin de rapporter des palourdes, excellents coquillages en abondance sur les rochers et les grèves. Du reste, ces parages fourmillent de poissons de plusieurs espèces, mulets, saumons, vieilles et autres. Ni les loups marins ni les tortues n’y font défaut, les requins pas davantage. On peut aussi se procurer facilement du bois dans les épaisses forêts qui bordent la mer.

La baie Marguerite mesure de trente à trente- cinq milles, soit une douzaine de lieues. Pour y naviguer sans avarie, il est nécessaire de suivre sur toute sa longueur un chenal qui, par endroits, n’a pas plus de quarante à cinquante mètres de large entre les bancs ou les roches.

Afin d’assurer sa route, le capitaine Bourcart fit ramasser quelques gros cailloux auxquels une corde fut amarrée par un bout, tandis que l’autre se rattachait à un baril bien fermé. C’étaient autant de bouées que les hommes placèrent de chaque côté du chenal afin d’en indiquer les sinuosités.

Il ne fallut pas moins de quatre jours, le jusant obligeant à mouiller deux fois par vingt-quatre heures, pour atteindre une lagune profonde d’au moins deux lieues.

Pendant ces arrêts, M. Heurtaux, accompagné des deux lieutenants, prenait terre et allait chasser aux environs. Ils tuèrent plusieurs couples de cabris et aussi quelques chacals, fort nombreux dans les bois du voisinage. Pendant ce temps, les matelots faisaient provision d’huîtres très savoureuses et se livraient à la pêche.

Enfin, le 11 mai, dans l’après-midi, le Saint-Enoch atteignit son mouillage définitif.

L’emplacement de ce mouillage occupait à trois encâblures du fond une crique que des buttes boisées dominaient dans sa partie nord. Des autres rives plates, toutes en grèves sablonneuses, se détachaient deux langues de terre arrondies, semées de roches noirâtres d'un grain très dur. Cette crique s'ouvrait dans le littoral ouest de la lagune, et il y restait toujours assez d'eau, même à mer basse, pour que le bâtiment n'eût pas à craindre d'échouer. Au surplus, ainsi que dans ces mers du Pacifique, les marées n'étaient pas très fortes. Ni en pleine ni en nouvelle lune, elles ne donnaient une différence de plus de deux brasses et demie entre le plus haut du flot et le plus bas du jusant.

Cet emplacement avait été heureusement choisi. L'équipage n'aurait point à s'éloigner pour faire du bois. Un ruisseau, qui sinuait entre les buttes, formait une aiguade à laquelle il serait facile de s'approvisionner d'eau douce.

Il va de soi que le Saint-Enoch ne s'était pas mis là à poste fixe. Lorsque les embarcations seraient amenées sur une baleine, soit à travers la lagune, soit en dehors, il aurait vite fait d'appareiller pour appuyer la chasse, si le vent soufflait du bon côté.

Quarante-huit heures après son arrivée, un trois-mâts se montra à quatre milles au large. L'équipage reconnut sans peine le navire anglais. Ainsi qu'on l'apprit par la suite, c'était le Repton, de Belfast, capitaine King, second Strok, qui venait commencer sa campagne dans la baie Marguerite.

Ce bâtiment ne cherchait point à prendre son mouillage dans la crique où se trouvait le Saint-Enoch. Il se dirigeait, au contraire, vers le fond de la lagune et laissa tomber son ancre près du rivage. Comme il n'était distant que de deux milles et demi, on ne devait pas le perdre de vue.

Et, cette fois, le pavillon français ne le salua pas à son passage.

Quant aux autres bâtiments de nationalité américaine, ils croisaient sur les divers parages de la baie Marguerite, et on en pouvait tirer cette conclusion que les souffleurs ne l’avaient point définitivement quittée.

Dès le premier jour, en attendant que l’occasion s’offrît d’amener les pirogues, maître Cabidoulin, le charpentier Ferut et le forgeron Thomas, accompagnés de quelques matelots, vinrent s’installer à la lisière de la forêt, afin d’abattre des arbres. Il était urgent de renouveler la provision de bois, tant pour les besoins de la cuisine que pour alimenter le fourneau de la cabousse. C’est là un travail de grande importance que ne négligent jamais les capitaines baleiniers. Ce travail allait être favorisé, bien que la chaleur fût déjà forte. On ne saurait s’en étonner, puisque la baie Marguerite est à peu près traversée par le vingt-cinquième parallèle, et, dans l’hémisphère septentrional, cette latitude est celle du nord de l’Inde et de l’Afrique.

Le 25 mai, une heure avant le coucher du soleil, le harponneur Kardek, qui se tenait dans les barres du mât de misaine, aperçut plusieurs cétacés à deux milles de la crique, sans doute à la recherche de hauts-fonds convenables pour les baleineaux.

Il fut donc décidé que, le lendemain, dès la première heure, les pirogues seraient parées et, probablement, les autres navires prendraient aussi leurs dispositions pour la pêche.

Ce soir-là, lorsque M. Filhiol demanda au capitaine Bourcart si cette pêche s’effectuerait dans les mêmes conditions qu’à la Nouvelle-Zélande, il en reçut cette réponse:

“Pas tout à fait, mon cher docteur, et il convient d’avoir plus de circonspection… Ici, nous aurons affaire à des femelles qui, si elles donnent plus d’huile que les mâles, sont plus redoutables… Lorsque l’une d’elles s’aperçoit qu’on veut les poursuivre, elle ne tarde pas à prendre la fuite, et, non seulement elle quitte la baie pour n’y plus revenir de toute la saison, mais elle entraîne les autres… Allez donc les retrouver au large à travers le Pacifique.

— Et lorsqu’elles sont suivies de leur baleineau, capitaine?…

— C’est alors, dit M. Bourcart, que les pirogues ont toute facilité de réussir… La baleine, qui prend part aux ébats du petit, est sans défiance… On peut l’approcher à portée de louchet et la blesser aux nageoires… Si le harpon l’a manquée, il suffit de se lancer à sa poursuite, dût-on s’y entêter pendant plusieurs heures… En effet, le baleineau retarde sa marche, il se fatigue, il s’épuise… Or, comme la mère ne veut pas l’abandonner, il y a chance de se trouver dans de bonnes conditions pour la piquer…

— Capitaine, ne disiez-vous pas que ces femelles sont plus dangereuses que les mâles?…

— Oui, monsieur Filhiol, et il convient que le harponneur fasse grande attention à ne point blesser le baleineau… La mère deviendrait furieuse et ferait grand dégât, se jetant sur les pirogues, les frappant à coups de queue, les mettant en pièces… De là de très graves accidents… Aussi, après une campagne de pêche dans la baie Marguerite, n’est-il pas rare de rencontrer nombreux débris d’embarcations, et plus d’un homme a payé de sa vie l’imprudence ou la maladresse du harponneur!”

Avant sept heures du matin, l’équipage était prêt à donner la chasse aux cétacés aperçus la veille. Sans compter les harpons, lances et louchets, le capitaine Bourcart, le second, les deux lieutenants s’étaient munis de fusils lance-bombe, toujours employés avec avantage lorsqu’il s’agit de capturer ce genre de baleine.

À un demi-mille de la crique se montrait une femelle avec son petit, et les pirogues hissèrent leurs voiles afin de l'accoster sans éveiller son attention.

Naturellement, Romain Allotte avait pris l'avance, et il arriva le premier à sept brasses de l'animal. Celui-ci, qui se préparait à sonder, devait apercevoir la pirogue.

Aussitôt Ducrest brandit son harpon et le lança avec une telle force qu'il s'enfonça jusqu'à la douille.

À cet instant rejoignirent les trois autres pirogues, prêtes à tourner la baleine afin de l'amarrer. Mais, par une fatalité qui n'est point rare, le harpon se rompit, et, suivie de son baleineau, elle prit la fuite.

Ce fut alors un acharnement extraordinaire. Le cétacé précédait les embarcations de soixante à quatre-vingts brasses. Son souffle — de la vapeur d'eau condensée en pluie fine — s'élevait à huit ou dix mètres, et, comme il soufflait blanc, c'est qu'il n'avait pas été mortellement blessé.

Cependant les matelots souquaient ferme sur leurs avirons. Pendant deux heures, il fut impossible d'être à portée de lancer le harpon. Peut-être eût-on pu frapper le baleineau, si le capitaine ne s'y fût opposé par prudence.

Le docteur Filhiol, désireux de ne rien perdre des détails de cette pêche, avait pris place à l'arrière dans l'embarcation de M. Bourcart. Lui aussi partageait l'ardeur qui animait ses compagnons et exprimait sa crainte qu'ils ne fussent épuisés avant d'avoir rejoint l'animal.

En effet, la baleine se dérobait avec rapidité, plongeant et reparaissant après quelques minutes. Elle ne s'était pas très éloignée de la crique — trois à quatre milles — et s’en rapprochait maintenant. Il semblait même que sa vitesse devait se ralentir, puisque le baleineau ne restait pas en arrière.

Vers onze heures et demie, un second harpon fut jeté de l’embarcation de M. Heurtaux.

Cette fois, on n’eut que peu de ligne à filer. Les autres pirogues rallièrent, non sans se défier des coups de queue. Dès qu’elles l’eurent attaqué avec le louchet et la lance, l’animal souffla le sang et expira à la surface de la mer, tandis que le baleineau disparaissait sous les eaux.

Le courant étant favorable, la baleine fut aisément remorquée à bord du Saint-Enoch, où M. Bourcart fit disposer les apparaux pour la virer dans l’après-midi.

Le lendemain vint à bord un Espagnol, qui demandait à parler au capitaine. C’était un de ces hommes désignés sous le nom de carcassiers, et auxquels on abandonne le gras qui reste à l’intérieur des carcasses.

Lorsqu’il eut examiné la baleine suspendue au flanc du navire, il dit:

“C’est vraiment l’une des plus grosses qui aient été pêchées dans la baie Marguerite depuis trois mois…

— Est-ce que la saison a été bonne?… interrogea M. Bourcart.

— Assez médiocre, répondit l’Espagnol, et je n’ai eu qu’une demi-douzaine de carcasses à travailler… Aussi je vous prie de me céder celle-ci…

— Volontiers.”

Pendant les quarante-huit heures qui suivirent, l’Espagnol demeura à bord et assista à toutes les opérations nécessitées par la fonte du gras. Cette baleine ne donna pas moins de cent vingt-cinq barils d’huile d’excellente qualité. Quant à sa carcasse, l’Espagnol la fit conduire à son établissement, situé sur le littoral de la lagune, deux milles au delà de la crique.

Lorsqu’il fut parti, le docteur Filhiol dit au capitaine:

“Savez-vous, monsieur Bourcart, ce que cet homme retire des débris d’une baleine?…

— Quelques jarres d’huile, tout au plus, docteur…

— Détrompez-vous, et je tiens de lui-même que le dépeçage procure parfois une quinzaine de barils…

— Une quinzaine, monsieur Filhiol!… Eh bien! c’est la dernière fois que j’y aurai été pris, et, dorénavant, nous carcasserons nous-mêmes!”

Le Saint-Enoch séjourna jusqu’au 17 juin dans la baie Marguerite afin de compléter son chargement.

Pendant ce temps, l’équipage put amarrer plusieurs baleines, entre autres des mâles très difficiles, sinon très dangereux à piquer tant ils se montraient farouches.

L’un d’eux fut capturé par le lieutenant Coquebert à l’entrée de la baie. Il ne fallut pas moins d’un jour et d’une nuit pour l’amener dans la crique. Pendant la durée du courant contraire, les pirogues mouillaient sur l’animal avec de petites ancres et les hommes dormaient en attendant le renversement de la marée.

Il va sans dire que les autres navires se livraient également à la poursuite des cétacés jusqu'aux extrêmes limites de la baie. Les Américains, plus particulièrement, furent assez satisfaits de leur campagne.

Le capitaine de l'un de ces bâtiments, l'Iwing, de San-Diego, vint rendre visite à M. Bourcart à bord du Saint-Enoch.

“Capitaine, lui dit-il après avoir échangé quelques compliments, je vois que vous avez réussi à souhait sur les côtes de la Nouvelle Zélande…

— En effet, reprit M. Bourcart, et j'espère achever ici ma campagne… Cela me permettra de retourner en Europe plus tôt que je ne comptais et d'arriver au Havre avant trois mois…

— Je vous en félicite, capitaine, mais, puisque la chance vous favorise, pourquoi revenir directement au Havre?

— Que voulez-vous dire?…

— J'entends que vous pourriez placer avantageusement votre cargaison, sans abandonner les mers du Pacifique. Cela vous permettrait de recommencer la pêche aux îles

Kouriles ou dans la mer d'Okhotsk, précisément pendant les mois favorables…

— Expliquez-vous, monsieur… Où pourrais-je vendre ma cargaison?

— À Vancouver.

— À Vancouver?…

— Oui… sur le marché de Victoria. En ce moment, l’huile est très demandée par des maisons américaines et vous livreriez à des prix très avantageux.

— Ma foi, répondit M. Bourcart, c’est une idée, et sans doute une excellente idée… Je vous remercie du renseignement, capitaine, et il est probable que je le mettrai à profit.”

L’île de Vancouver, située dans les eaux américaines à la hauteur de la Colombie anglaise, n’est qu’à vingt-cinq degrés environ au nord de la baie Marguerite. Par bon vent, le Saint-Enoch pouvait l’atteindre en une quinzaine de jours.

Décidément la fortune souriait à M. Bourcart. Jean-Marie Cabidoulin en serait pour ses histoires et ses prophéties de malheur. Après la campagne de la Nouvelle-Zélande et de la baie Marguerite, la campagne des îles Kouriles et de la mer d’Okhotsk, tout cela dans la même année!…

C’est, du reste, à Vancouver que se fussent rendus les baleiniers américains, et probablement aussi le Repton, s’ils avaient eu leur plein, puisque les cours étaient très en hausse.

Lorsque M. Bourcart demanda au capitaine de l’Iwing s’il avait eu quelques rapports avec ce Repton, la réponse fut négative. Le navire anglais se tenait toujours à l’écart, et peut-être ne saluait-il pas plus le pavillon étoilé des États-Unis qu’il ne saluait le pavillon tricolore.

À plusieurs reprises, cependant, il advint que la poursuite des cétacés dans la lagune ou au milieu de la baie, mit en présence les pirogues anglaises et les pirogues françaises. Du reste elles n’étaient pas amenées sur la même baleine, — ce qui aurait pu provoquer des contestations, ainsi que cela arrive parfois. Et, certainement, dans la disposition d’esprit où l’on se trouvait de part et d’autre, les contestations auraient pu mal tourner. Aussi M. Bourcart ne cessait-il de recommander à ses hommes d’éviter tout contact avec l’équipage du Repton, soit en mer, lorsqu’ils croisaient sur les mêmes parages, soit à terre, lorsque les embarcations allaient faire du bois ou pêcher entre les roches.

En somme, on ne savait pas si le Repton réussissait ou non, et pour tout dire, on ne s’en inquiétait guère. Le Saint-Enoch l’avait rencontré dans sa traversée entre la Nouvelle-Zélande et la côte américaine. Quand il aurait quitté la baie, il ne le reverrait sans doute plus au cours de cette campagne.

Avant le départ, un cachalot fut encore signalé à trois milles en dehors de la lagune. C’était le plus gros que l’on eût jamais rencontré, et, cette fois, les embarcations du Repton se mirent en chasse, tardivement, il est vrai.

Afin de ne point donner l’éveil à ce cachalot, la pirogue du lieutenant Allotte, filant par jolie petite brise, manœuvra de manière à ne point effaroucher l’animal. Toutefois, quand on fut à bonne portée, celui-ci sonda et on dut attendre qu’il remontât à la surface de la mer.

Trente-cinq minutes s’étant écoulées à partir de son dernier plongeon, il resterait donc à peu près le même temps sous l’eau, et il n’y eut qu’à le guetter.

Son apparition s’effectua dans le temps prévu, à sept ou huit encâblures de la pirogue, qui se lança de toute sa vitesse.

Le harponneur Ducrest était debout sur le tillac, Romain Allotte tenait son louchet à la main. Mais, en ce moment, le cachalot sentant le danger, battit la mer avec une telle violence qu’une lame remplit à moitié l’embarcation.

Comme le harpon l’avait atteint à droite, sous la nageoire pectorale, l’animal s’enfonça et la ligne dut lui être filée avec une telle rapidité qu’il fallut l’arroser pour qu’elle ne prît pas feu. Lorsqu’il reparut, il soufflait le sang et quelques coups de lance l’achevèrent sans trop de peine.

Donc la besogne fut terminée avant l’arrivée des pirogues anglaises, qui n’eurent plus qu’à retourner au Repton.

Après la fonte du gras, maître Cabidoulin porta au compte de ce cachalot quatre-vingts barils d’huile.

L’appareillage avait été fixé au 17 juin. M. Bourcart, se conformant à l’avis du capitaine américain, allait faire voile pour l’île de Vancouver.

Le Saint-Enoch possédait alors dix-sept cents barils d’huile et cinq mille kilogrammes de fanons. Lorsqu’il les aurait livrés à Victoria, le capitaine n’hésiterait pas à entreprendre une seconde campagne dans le nord-est du Pacifique. Cent cinquante jours s’étaient écoulés depuis son départ du Havre, et la relâche à la baie Marguerite avait duré du 9 mai au 19 juin. Sa coque et son gréement se trouvaient en bon état, et, à Vancouver, il pourrait refaire ses approvisionnements.

La surveille du départ, une occasion se présenta pour l’équipage d’entrer en communication avec les hommes du Repton. Voici dans quelles circonstances.

Les pirogues du second et du lieutenant Coquebert, envoyées à terre, devaient rapporter un reste du bois abattu et faire de l’eau à l’aiguade.

MM. Heurtaux, Coquebert et ses matelots étaient déjà sur la grève, lorsque l’un d’eux s’écria: “Baleine!… baleine!”

En effet, une femelle de forte taille, accompagnée de son baleineau, passait à un demi-mille de la crique en gagnant vers le fond de la baie.

Certes, il y eut unanime regret de ne pouvoir lui donner la chasse. Mais les deux pirogues, commandées pour un autre service n’étaient pas en état, n’ayant ni harpon ni ligne. Il en était de même à bord du Saint-Enoch, qui, ses garants dégarnis, son matériel de virage démonté, se tenait prêt à lever l’ancre.

Or, au détour de l’une des pointes de la crique, deux embarcations apparurent.

C’étaient les pirogues du Repton, qui poursuivaient la baleine signalée.

Comme elles se rapprochaient dans l’intention de prendre l’animal à revers, on ne les perdrait pas de vue.

Elles s’avançaient, sans bruit, séparées par la distance d’un bon mille, l’une étant partie bien après l’autre. La première venait de mettre son pavillon à l’arrière pour annoncer qu’elle se préparait à attaquer. Quant au Repton, il attendait, sous petite voilure, à trois milles dans l’est.

MM. Heurtaux, Coquebert et leurs hommes gravirent une butte en arrière du ruisseau, d’où le regard pouvait s’étendre sur toute la lagune.

Il était deux heures et demie, quand le harponneur de la première embarcation se vit à bonne portée.

La baleine, qui jouait avec son petit, ne l’avait pas encore aperçu, lorsque le harpon traversa l’air.

Certes, les Anglais n’ignoraient point qu’il est dangereux d’attaquer un baleineau. Or, c’est celui-ci qui, en passant le long de la pirogue, reçut le coup de harpon à la lippe.

Il était mortellement touché, et, après quelques convulsions, il resta immobile à la surface de la mer. Comme le manche du harpon se redressait, il avait, au dire des matelots, l’air de fumer sa pipe, la poussière liquide qui s’échappait de sa bouche imitant à s’y méprendre la fumée du tabac.

La baleine fut prise alors d’un accès de fureur. Sa queue battait l’eau, qui rejaillissait comme une trombe. Elle se précipita sur la pirogue. Les hommes eurent beau scier pour revenir en arrière, ils ne purent éviter son attaque. En vain essayèrent-ils de la frapper avec le louchet et les lances, en vain l’officier déchargeait-il sur elle le fusil lance-bombe…

La seconde embarcation, se trouvant encore à trois cents toises sous le vent, ne pouvait arriver en temps utile au secours de la première.

Celle-ci, qui venait d’être atteinte d’un formidable coup de queue, coula immédiatement avec les matelots qui la montaient. Si quelques-uns d’entre eux reparaissaient, en admettant qu’ils ne fussent que blessés, qui sait si l’autre embarcation pourrait les recueillir?…

“Embarque… embarque!…” cria M.

Heurtaux, en faisant signe au lieutenant de le suivre.

Leurs hommes, voyant des gens en danger de périr, bien qu’ils appartinssent à l’équipage du Repton, n’hésitèrent pas à leur porter secours.

En quelques instants, tous eurent descendu la butte, traversé la grève, largué les amarres, et les pirogues, vigoureusement enlevées par les avirons, sortirent de la crique.

À l’endroit où la baleine se débattait toujours avec rage, des neuf hommes précipités sous les eaux, sept seulement venaient de remonter à la surface.

Deux manquaient.

Quant à la baleine, après s’être dirigée vers le baleineau, que le courant avait entraîné à une encâblure sous le vent, elle disparut dans les profondeurs de la lagune.

Le second et le lieutenant étaient prêts à embarquer quelques-uns des Anglais, lorsque l’officier du Repton, qui venait d’arriver, cria d’une voix très dépitée:

“Au large!… Nous n’avons besoin de personne!… Au large!”

Et, qu’on n’en doute pas, s’il regrettait la mort de deux de ses hommes, cet officier ne regrettait pas moins d’avoir manqué cette magnifique proie.

Lorsque MM. Heurtaux et Allotte furent de retour à bord, ils racontèrent au capitaine Bourcart et au docteur Filhiol comment les choses s’étaient passées.

M. Bourcart les félicita de s’être portés au secours de l’embarcation du Repton, et, quand il connut la réponse de l’officier:

“Allons, dit-il, nous ne nous étions pas trompés… c’étaient bien des Anglais… et ils sont bien anglais…

— Pour sûr, déclara le maître d’équipage, mais du diable s’il est permis de l’être à ce point-là!”

CHAPITRE VI

Vancouver

L’île de Vancouver, sur la côte occidentale de l’Amérique du Nord, longue de cinq cents kilomètres, large de cent trente, est comprise entre le quarante-huitième et le cinquante et unième parallèle. Elle fait partie de la Colombie anglaise, voisine du Dominion of Canada, dont la frontière la borne à l’est.

Il y a quelque cent ans, la Compagnie de la Baie d’Hudson avait fondé un poste de trafiquants sur la pointe sud-ouest de l’île, près de l’ancien port de Cardoba, le Camosin des Indiens. C’était déjà une prise de possession de ladite île par le gouvernement britannique. Cependant, en 1789, l’Espagne s’en empara. Mais, peu de temps après, elle fut restituée à l’Angleterre par un traité intervenu entre l’officier espagnol Quadra et l’officier anglais Vancouver, dont le nom figure seul dans la cartographie moderne.

Le village ne devait pas tarder à devenir ville, grâce à la découverte de filons d’or dans le bassin du Fraser, l’un des cours d’eau de l’île. Devenu Victoria-City, il fut capitale officielle de la Colombie britannique. Puis d’autres villes se fondèrent, telle Nanaimo, à vingt-quatre lieues de là, sans parler du petit port San-Juan, qui s’ouvre à la pointe méridionale.

À l’époque où se déroule cette histoire, Victoria était loin d’avoir le développement qu’elle possède aujourd’hui. L’île Vancouver n’était point desservie par ce chemin de fer, de quatre-vingt-seize kilomètres, qui rattache la capitale à Nanaimo. C’est l’année suivante seulement, en 1864, qu’une expédition allait être entreprise par le docteur Brow, d’Edimbourg, l’ingénieur Leech et Frédéric Wymper à l’intérieur de l’île.

Le capitaine Bourcart devait trouver à Victoria toutes facilités pour ses transactions et aussi les ressources qu’exigerait sa nouvelle campagne de pêche. Aucune inquiétude à ce sujet.

Dès la première heure, le Saint-Enoch avait quitté son mouillage de la lagune. Aidé du jusant, il descendit le chenal de la baie Marguerite et il donna en pleine mer.

Des vents propices, soufflant de l’est au sud-est, lui permirent de prolonger la côte avec l’abri de la terre, à quelques milles de cette longue presqu’île de la Vieille-Californie.

M. Bourcart n’avait point envoyé de vigies dans la mâture, puisqu’il ne s’agissait pas de chasser la baleine. Le plus pressé, c’était d’atteindre Vancouver, afin de profiter des hauts cours.

Du reste, on ne signala que trois ou quatre souffleurs à grande distance et dont la poursuite eût été difficile par une mer assez forte. L’équipage se contenta de leur assigner un rendez-vous aux îles Kouriles et à la mer d’Okhotsk.

On compte environ quatorze cents milles jusqu’au détroit de Juan de Fuca, qui sépare l’île de Vancouver des territoires du Washington, à l’extrémité des États-Unis. Avec une moyenne de quatre-vingt-dix milles par vingt-quatre heures, la traversée du Saint-Enoch ne durerait qu’une quinzaine de jours, et il porta toute la toile possible, bonnettes, flèches, voiles d’étais.

Toujours la continuation des heureuses chances qui avaient marqué le cours de cette première campagne.

À peu près au tiers de sa navigation, le navire boulinait à la hauteur de San-Diego, la capitale de la Basse-Californie. Quatre jours plus tard, il était par le travers de San-Francisco, au milieu de nombreux bâtiments à destination de ce grand port américain.

“Peut-être est-il regrettable, dit ce jour-là M. Bourcart à son second, que nous ne puissions traiter à San-Francisco ce que nous allons traiter à Victoria…

— Sans doute, répondit M. Heurtaux, puisque nous serions à destination… Mais le chemin fait est le chemin fait… Si nous devons recommencer la pêche aux approches des Kouriles, nous serons très avancés vers le nord…

— Vous avez raison, Heurtaux, et d’ailleurs les informations du capitaine de l’Iwing sont formelles… À son avis, le Saint-Enoch pourra aisément se réparer à Victoria et se réapprovisionner pour plusieurs mois.”

Cependant le vent, qui marquait une certaine tendance à faiblir en halant le sud, ne tarda pas à souffler du large. La vitesse du Saint-Enoch fut donc un peu ralentie. Cela ne laissa point de causer quelque impatience à bord. En somme, on n’en était pas à quarante-huit heures près, et, d’ailleurs, dans la matinée du 3 juillet, la vigie signala le cap Flattery, à l’entrée du détroit de Juan de Fuca.

La traversée avait donc duré seize jours, — un de plus que ne l’avait estimé M. Bourcart, — le bâtiment n’ayant pas atteint la moyenne de quatre-vingt-dix milles.

“Eh bien… vieux… déclara maître Ollive à maître Cabidoulin, nous voici à l’entrée du port… et pourtant tu ne cesses de geindre…

— Moi?… répliqua le tonnelier.

— Oui, toi!

— Je ne dis rien…

— Tu ne dis rien… mais c’est tout comme!…

— Vraiment?…

— Vraiment… et j’entends que ça te grouille dans la poitrine!… Tu grognes en dedans…

— Et je grognerai en dehors quand ça me plaira!” riposta Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

Après les formalités de santé et de douane, le Saint-Enoch vint s’amarrer contre un appontement qui faciliterait le déchargement de sa cargaison.

De toutes façons, son séjour à Victoria durerait une quinzaine. Il ne pouvait repartir avant que son équipage eût procédé à quelques réparations en vue, soit d’une nouvelle campagne dans les régions septentrionales du Pacifique, soit d’un retour en Europe.

Le second, les deux lieutenants, les maîtres auraient donc assez d’occupation pour qu’il fût nécessaire d’y consacrer tout leur temps. Il ne s’agirait de rien moins que de mettre à terre les dix-sept cents barils d’huile. En outre, le capitaine Bourcart devrait surveiller ses hommes de près. Les désertions sont à craindre en ces contrées fréquentées des chercheurs d’or, des exploiteurs de placers, dans l’île de Vancouver et sur les plaines du Caribou de la Colombie britannique.

Il y avait précisément dans le port de Victoria deux bâtiments, le Chantenay de Nantes, et le Forward de Liverpool, que la désertion d’un certain nombre de matelots laissait en grand embarras.

Toutefois M. Bourcart se croyait, autant qu’on peut l’être, sûr de ses hommes… Est-ce qu’ils ne seraient pas retenus par l’espoir de participer aux bénéfices de cette campagne aussi fructueuse pour eux que pour les armateurs du Saint-Enoch?… Néanmoins, une surveillance assez sévère s’imposait, et les permissions de quitter le navire ne devraient être que rarement accordées. Mieux valait incontestablement donner double ration à bord, après une pénible journée de travail, que de voir l’équipage courir les taps et les bars, où ils ont bientôt fait de mauvaises connaissances.

Quant à M. Bourcart, il eut, en premier lieu, à s’occuper de placer sa cargaison sur le marché de Victoria. Aussi, dès qu’il eut débarqué, se rendit-il chez M. William Hope, l’un des principaux courtiers de marchandises.

Le docteur Filhiol, n’ayant aucun malade à soigner, aurait tout loisir de visiter la ville et les environs. Peut-être eût-il entrepris de parcourir toute l’île, si les moyens de communication n’eussent manqué. Point de routes, à peine des sentiers à travers les forêts épaisses de l’intérieur. Il serait donc contraint de restreindre le cercle de ses explorations.

Au total, la ville lui parut intéressante comme toutes celles qui prospèrent si rapidement sur le sol de l’Amérique et auxquelles le terrain permet de s’étendre indéfiniment. Bâtie avec régularité, sillonnée de rues qui se coupaient à angles droits, ombragée de beaux arbres, elle possédait un vaste parc; et quelle est la cité américaine qui n’en a pas un et même plusieurs?…

Quant à l’eau douce, elle lui était fournie par un réservoir établi à quatre lieues de là, et qui s’alimentait aux meilleures sources de l’île.

Le port de Victoria, abrité au fond d’une petite baie, est situé dans les conditions les plus favorables. C’est le point où viennent se raccorder les détroits de Juan de la Fuca et de la Reine-Charlotte. Les navires peuvent le chercher soit par l’ouest, soit par le nord-ouest. Son mouvement maritime, destiné à s’accroître dans l’avenir, comprendra toute la navigation de ces parages.

Il est juste d’ajouter que, à cette époque déjà, le port offrait d’amples ressources aux bâtiments obligés de se réparer après de longues traversées, la plupart fort pénibles. Un arsenal largement fourni, des entrepôts pour les marchandises, un bassin de carénage, étaient à leur disposition.

Le capitaine de l’Iwing avait donné des renseignements exacts à M. Bourcart. Les cours des huiles marines étaient en hausse. Le Saint-Enoch arrivait à propos pour en profiter. Les demandes affluaient non seulement à Vancouver, mais aussi à New-Westminster, importante cité de la Colombie, située sur le golfe de Géorgie, un peu au nord-est de Victoria. Deux baleiniers, l’américain Flower, le norvégien Fugg, avaient déjà vendu leur chargement, et — ce qu’allait faire le Saint-Enoch — ils étaient repartis pour la pêche dans le nord du Pacifique.

Les affaires du Saint-Enoch purent donc être rapidement traitées entre le courtier Hope et le capitaine Bourcart. La vente de la cargaison se fit à des prix qui n’avaient jamais été atteints et qu’elle n’eût point obtenus sur les marchés d’Europe. Il ne s’agissait plus que de débarquer les barils et de les transporter à l’entrepôt, où ils seraient livrés à l’acheteur.

Et, lorsque M. Bourcart fut de retour à bord:

“Heurtaux, dit-il au second, l’affaire est terminée, et il n’y a qu’à se féliciter d’avoir suivi les conseils de cet honnête capitaine de l’Iwing!…

— Huile et fanons, monsieur Bourcart?…

— Huile et fanons vendus à une compagnie colombienne de New-Westminster.

— Alors nos hommes peuvent se mettre à la besogne?…

— Dès aujourd’hui, et je compte que le navire devra être en mesure de repartir dans un mois au plus, après avoir passé au bassin de carénage.

— En haut tout le monde!” commanda le second, dont maître Ollive vint recevoir les ordres.

Dix-sept cents barils à débarquer, c’est un travail qui ne demande pas moins d’une huitaine de jours, même s’il s’effectue avec méthode et activité. Les appareils furent dressés au-dessus des panneaux et la moitié des matelots se répartit dans la cale, tandis que l’autre moitié s’occupait sur le pont. On pouvait compter sur leur bon vouloir et sur leur zèle, ce qui dispenserait de recourir aux ouvriers du port.

Par exemple, si quelqu’un eut fort à faire, ce fut Jean-Marie Cabidoulin. Il ne laissait pas hisser un baril sans l’avoir examiné, vérifié qu’il sonnait le plein et qu’il ne donnerait lieu à aucune réclamation. Il se tenait en permanence près de l’appontement, son maillet à la main, et frappait chaque baril d’un coup sec. Quant à l’huile, il n’y avait pas à s’en inquiéter, elle était de qualité supérieure.

Bref, le débarquement s’opéra avec toutes les garanties possibles et le travail se poursuivit pendant toute la semaine.

Du reste, la besogne de maître Cabidoulin ne serait pas achevée avec le débarquement de la cargaison. Il faudrait remplacer les barils pleins par le même nombre de barils vides en vue de la nouvelle campagne. Heureusement M. Bourcart trouva dans l’entrepôt de Victoria un stock qu’il se procura à bon compte. Toutefois, il y eut à les réparer, à les remettre en état. Gros travail auquel les journées suffisaient à peine, et si le tonnelier ne cessa de murmurer en dedans et même en dehors, il le fit au bruit des mille coups de maillet que le forgeron Thomas et le charpentier Férut frappaient à ses côtés.

Lorsque le dernier baril eut été débarqué, on procéda à un complet nettoyage de la cale et du vaigrage intérieur.

Le Saint-Enoch, déhalé de l’appontement, avait été conduit au bassin de carénage. Il importait de visiter l’extérieur de sa coque, de s’assurer s’il n’avait pas souffert dans ses œuvres vives. Le second et le maître d’équipage procédèrent à cette inspection — M. Bourcart s’en rapportait à leur expérience.

Il n’existait pas à proprement parler d’avaries sérieuses, seulement quelques réparations, deux ou trois bandes du doublage en cuivre à remplacer, ainsi que quelques gournables dans le bordage et la membrure, les coutures à regarnir d’étoupe, les hauts à recouvrir de peinture fraîche. Cette besogne s’effectua sans arrêt, et, certainement, la relâche à Vancouver ne se prolongerait pas au delà des délais prévus.

Aussi comprendra-t-on que M. Bourcart ne cessât de manifester sa satisfaction, et le docteur Filhiol de lui répéter:

“Votre chance, capitaine… c’est votre bonne chance!… Pour peu qu’elle continue…

— Elle continuera, monsieur Filhiol. Savez-vous même ce qui pourrait arriver?…

— Veuillez me l’apprendre…

— Ce serait que, dans deux mois, après sa seconde campagne, le Saint-Enoch revînt à Victoria vendre une nouvelle cargaison aux mêmes cours!… Si les baleines des îles Kouriles ou de la mer d’Okhotsk ne sont pas trop farouches…

— Comment donc, capitaine!… Est-ce qu’elles trouveraient jamais meilleure occasion de livrer leur huile à des prix plus avantageux?…

— Je ne le pense pas, répondit en riant M. Bourcart, je ne le pense pas.”

Il a été dit que le docteur Filhiol n’avait pu pousser ses excursions hors de la ville aussi loin qu’il l’eût désiré. Dans le voisinage du littoral, il rencontra parfois quelques indigènes. Ce ne sont pas précisément les plus beaux types de cette race de Peaux-Rouges dont il existe encore de remarquables spécimens dans le Far-West. Non: des êtres grossiers, épais de tournure, laids de visage, énormes têtes mal conformées, yeux petits, bouches larges, nez abominables dont les ailes sont traversées d’anneaux de métal ou de brochettes de bois. Et, comme si cette laideur naturelle ne leur suffisait point, n’ont-ils pas l’habitude, lors des cérémonies et fêtes, de s’appliquer sur le visage un masque de bois plus hideux encore et qui fait, au moyen de ficelles, d’horribles grimaces?…

En cette partie de l’île et à l’intérieur, les forêts sont superbes, très riches en pins et en cyprès surtout. Il fut facile de s’y procurer du bois pour le Saint-Enoch. Rien que la peine de le débiter et de le transporter. Quant au gibier, il abondait. M. Heurtaux, accompagné du lieutenant Allotte, put abattre plusieurs couples de daims, dont le cuisinier tira bon parti pour les tables du carré et du poste. Là pullulaient également les loups, les renards, les hermines, très fuyardes et difficiles à capturer, recherchées cependant pour la valeur de leur fourrure, et aussi de très nombreux écureuils à queue touffue.

La plus longue excursion du docteur Filhiol le conduisit jusqu’à Nanaimo, et c’est par mer qu’il s’y rendit sur un petit côtre affecté au service entre les deux villes. Là s’élevait une bourgade assez prospère dont le port offre aux navires d’excellents mouillages.

Le trafic de Nanaimo tend à s’accroître chaque année. Son charbon, d’excellente qualité, s’exporte à San-Francisco, dans tous les ports de l’Ouest-Pacifique, même jusqu’en Chine et à l’archipel des Sandwich. Depuis longtemps déjà, ces riches gisements étaient exploités par la compagnie de la baie d’Hudson.

La houille, — d’ailleurs plus que l’or — c’est la grande, on pourrait dire l’inépuisable richesse de l’île. Nul doute que de riches dépôts ne soient encore découverts. Quant à ceux de Nanaimo, ils n’exigent qu’un travail facile, et lui assurent une réelle prospérité.

Au surplus, l’or de cette région du Caribou, de la Colombie britannique, coûte cher à récolter, et, pour avoir un dollar, il faut, prétendent les mineurs, en dépenser deux.

Lorsque le docteur Filhiol revint de cette excursion, la coque du Saint-Enoch était revêtue d’une nouvelle couche de peinture jusqu’au liston formé d’une raie blanche. Quelques réparations avaient été faites à la voilure et aux agrès, aux pirogues si rudement malmenées parfois par les coups de queue des baleines. Bref, le navire, après son passage au bassin, vint prendre mouillage au milieu du port, et le départ fut définitivement fixé au 19 juillet.

Deux jours auparavant, un navire américain entra dans la baie de Victoria et jeta l’ancre à une demi-encâblure du Saint-Enoch. C’était l’Iwing, retour de la baie Marguerite. On n’a pas oublié les bons rapports établis entre son capitaine et le capitaine Bourcart, non moins cordiaux entre les officiers et les équipages.

Dès que l’Iwing eut été affourché, le capitaine Forth se fit conduire au Saint-Enoch, où il reçut un excellent accueil en reconnaissance de ses avis dont on s’était bien trouvé.

M. Bourcart, toujours heureux de faire une politesse, voulut le retenir à dîner. L’heure approchait de se mettre à table, et, sans autre façon, M. Forth accepta l’invitation qu’il comptait rendre le lendemain à bord de l’Iwing.

La conversation fut très suivie dans le carré, où se réunirent M. Bourcart, M. Heurtaux, les deux lieutenants, le docteur Filhiol et le capitaine américain. Elle porta d’abord sur les incidents de navigation pendant la traversée des deux navires de la baie Marguerite à l’île Vancouver. Puis, après avoir dit dans quelles conditions avantageuses il avait vendu sa cargaison, M. Bourcart demanda au capitaine de l’Iwing si la pêche avait été bonne après le départ du Saint-Enoch.

“Non, répondit M. Forth, une campagne des plus médiocres, et pour ma part, je n’ai pas rempli le quart de mes barils… Les baleines n’ont jamais été si rares…

— Cela s’explique peut-être, observa M. Heurtaux, par le motif qu’à cette époque de l’année les petits n’ont plus besoin de leurs mères, et celles-ci comme ceux-là abandonnent la baie pour gagner le large…

— C’est une raison, sans doute, répondit M.

Forth. Cependant j’ai souvent fait la pêche dans la baie, et je ne me souviens pas de l’avoir vue si désertée à la fin de juin… Des journées entières se passaient sans qu’il y eût lieu d’amener les pirogues, bien que le temps fût beau et la mer assez calme. Il est heureux, monsieur Bourcart, que vous ayez débuté sur les parages de la Nouvelle Zélande… Vous n’auriez pas fait votre plein dans la baie Marguerite…

— Très heureux, déclara M. Bourcart, d’autant plus que nous n’y avons guère aperçu que des souffleurs de moyenne taille…

— Et nous de petite taille, répliqua M. Forth. Nous en avons piqué qui n’ont pas rendu trente barils d’huile!…

— Dites-moi, capitaine, demanda M. Bourcart, avez-vous l’intention de vendre sur le marché de Victoria?…

— Oui… si les cours sont toujours favorables…

— Toujours, et ce n’est pas cette mauvaise saison de la baie Marguerite qui les fera baisser… D’autre part, on n’attend encore aucun arrivage des Kouriles, de la mer d’Okhotsk ou du détroit de Behring.

— En effet, dit M. Heurtaux, puisque la pêche ne prendra pas fin avant six semaines ou deux mois…

— Et nous espérons bien en avoir eu notre part!… déclara Romain Allotte.

— Mais, capitaine Forth, reprit le lieutenant Coquebert, est-ce que les autres baleiniers de la baie Marguerite ont été plus favorisés que vous?…

— Pas davantage, affirma M. Forth. Aussi, lorsque l’Iwing a mis à la voile, la plupart se préparaient-ils à appareiller pour gagner la haute mer.

— Vont-ils rallier les côtes nord-est de l’Asie?… interrogea M. Heurtaux.

— Je le pense.

— Eh! on sera en nombre là-bas!… s’écria le lieutenant Coquebert.

— Tant mieux!… répliqua Romain Allotte. Voilà qui vous excite, lorsqu’on est deux ou trois navires sur une baleine… lorsqu’on appuie la chasse à briser les avirons!… Et quel honneur pour la pirogue qui pique la première…

— Du calme, mon cher lieutenant, du calme!… interrompit M. Bourcart. Il n’y a pas de baleine en vue…

— Alors, reprit M. Forth, vous êtes décidé à faire une seconde campagne?…

— Absolument.

— Et quand partez-vous?…

— Après-demain.

— Déjà?…

— Le Saint-Enoch n’a plus qu’à lever l’ancre.

— Je me félicite donc d’être arrivé à temps pour renouveler connaissance, capitaine, dit M. Forth, et nous serrer encore une fois la main…

— Et nous nous félicitons aussi d’avoir pu reprendre nos bonnes relations, répondit M. Bourcart. Si l’Iwing fût entré dans la baie de Victoria au moment où le Saint-Enoch en sortait, cela nous aurait fait grosse peine.”

Là-dessus, la santé du capitaine Forth fut portée par le capitaine Bourcart et ses officiers en termes qui témoignaient d’une vive sympathie pour la nation américaine.

“Après tout, observa alors M. Heurtaux, même sans nous être revus à Victoria, peut-être le Saint-Enoch et l’Iwing auraient-ils fait de conserve une seconde campagne dans les parages des Kouriles?…

— Est-ce que votre intention, capitaine, demanda M. Bourcart, n’est pas de tenter fortune au nord du Pacifique?…

— Je ne le pourrais, messieurs, répondit M. Forth. L’Iwing arriverait un peu tard sur les lieux de pêche… Dans deux mois les premières glaces commenceront à se former au détroit de Behring comme à la mer d’Okhotsk, et je ne suis point en état de remettre immédiatement en mer. Les réparations de l’Iwing exigeront de trois à quatre semaines…

— Nous vous en exprimons nos sincères regrets, monsieur Forth, déclara M. Bourcart. Mais je voudrais revenir sur un fait dont vous avez parlé, et qui exigerait quelques explications…

— De quoi s’agit-il, capitaine?…

— Vers la fin de votre séjour dans la baie Marguerite, n’avez-vous pas remarqué que les baleines devenaient rares, et même qu’elles montraient une hâte singulière à gagner le large?…

— Cela est certain, déclara le capitaine Forth, et elles s’enfuyaient dans des conditions qui ne sont pas habituelles… Je ne crois pas exagérer en affirmant que les souffleurs semblaient redouter quelque danger extraordinaire, qu’ils obéissaient à je ne sais quel sentiment d’épouvante, comme s’ils eussent été pris de panique… Ils bondissaient à la surface des eaux, ils poussaient des gémissements tels que je n’en ai jamais entendu…

— C’est fort étrange, à n’en pas douter, convint M. Heurtaux, et vous ne savez pas à quoi attribuer…

— Non, messieurs… répondit M. Forth, à moins que quelque monstre formidable…

— Eh! capitaine, répliqua le lieutenant Coquebert, si maître Cabidoulin, notre tonnelier, vous entendait: “C’est le grand serpent de mer!” s’écrierait-il.

— Ma foi, lieutenant, répliqua M. Forth, que ce soit ou non un serpent qui les ait effrayées, les baleines se sont sauvées en toute précipitation…

— Et, repartit Romain Allotte, on n’a pas pu leur barrer le chenal de la baie Marguerite… en piquer quelques douzaines?…

— Je vous avoue que personne n’y a songé, répondit M. Forth. Nos pirogues ne s’en seraient pas tirées sans grand dommage et peut-être sans perte d’hommes… Je le répète, il s’est passé là quelque chose d’extraordinaire.

— À propos, demanda M. Bourcart, qu’est devenu ce navire anglais, le Repton?… A-t-il fait meilleure pêche que les autres?…

— Non… autant que j’ai pu le savoir…

— Pensez-vous qu’il soit resté dans la baie Marguerite?…

— Il se préparait à partir lorsque l’Iwing a mis à la voile…

— Pour aller?…

— Pour aller, d’après ce que l’on disait, continuer sa campagne dans le nord-ouest Pacifique.

— Eh bien, ajouta M. Heurtaux, puissions-nous ne pas le rencontrer!”

La nuit venue, le capitaine Forth regagna son bord, où il reçut le lendemain M. Bourcart et ses officiers. Il fut encore question des événements dont la baie Marguerite avait été le théâtre. Puis, lorsque les deux capitaines se séparèrent, ce fut avec l’espoir que le Saint-Enoch et l’Iwing se reverraient quelque jour sur les parages de pêche.

CHAPITRE VII

Seconde campagne

Le capitaine Bourcart appareilla dans la matinée du 19 juillet. L’ancre levée, il n’évolua pas sans peine pour sortir de la baie. Le vent, qui, soufflant du sud-est, le contrariait alors, deviendrait favorable dès que le Saint-Enoch, ayant doublé les dernières pointes de Vancouver, serait de quelques milles au large.

Du reste le navire ne redescendit pas le détroit de Juan de Fuca qu’il avait suivi pour gagner le port. Il remonta au nord par le détroit de la Reine-Charlotte et le golfe de Georgie. Le surlendemain, après avoir contourné la côte septentrionale de l’île, il se dirigea vers l’ouest, et, avant le soir, perdait la terre de vue.

La distance entre Vancouver et l’archipel des Kouriles est estimée à treize cents lieues environ. Lorsque les circonstances s’y prêtent, un voilier peut la franchir aisément en moins de cinq semaines, et M. Bourcart comptait n’y pas employer plus de temps si sa bonne chance persévérait.

Ce qui est certain, c’est que la navigation débuta dans des conditions excellentes. Une fraîche brise bien établie, une mer gonflée de longues houles, permirent au Saint-Enoch de se couvrir de toile… Ce fut tout dessus, amures à bâbord, qu’il tint le cap à l’ouest-nord-ouest. Si cette direction allongeait un peu sa route, elle lui évitait du moins le courant du Pacifique, qui porte à l’est en s’arrondissant le long des îles Aléoutiennes.

En somme, cette traversée s’effectuait sans contrariétés. De temps à autre, seulement, les écoutes à mollir ou à raidir. Aussi l’équipage serait-il frais et dispos pour la pénible campagne de pêche qui l’attendait dans la mer d’Okhotsk.

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin était toujours le plus occupé du bord, rangement définitif des barils dans la cale, disposition des appareils, manches et bailles, pour envoyer l’huile en bas. Si l’occasion se présentait de piquer quelque baleine avant l’arrivée du Saint-Enoch à la côte sibérienne, le capitaine Bourcart ne la laisserait pas échapper.

“C’est à désirer, monsieur Filhiol, dit-il un jour au docteur. La saison est avancée et notre pêche ne pourra se prolonger dans la mer d’Okhotsk au delà de quelques semaines… Les glaces ne tarderont pas à se former et la navigation y deviendra difficile.

— Aussi, observa le docteur, je m’étonne que les baleiniers, toujours pressés par le temps, en soient encore à procéder d’une façon si primitive… Pourquoi n’emploient-ils pas des bâtiments à vapeur, des pirogues à vapeur, et surtout des engins de destruction plus perfectionnés?… Les campagnes donneraient de plus grands profits…

— Vous avez raison, monsieur Filhiol, et cela viendra quelque jour, n’en doutez pas. Si nous sommes restés fidèles à nos vieux errements, cette seconde moitié de siècle ne finira pas sans qu’on obéisse au progrès qui s’impose en toutes choses!…

— Je le crois, capitaine, et la pêche sera organisée par des moyens plus modernes… à moins qu’on n’en arrive, puisque les baleines deviennent rares, à les parquer…

— Un parc à baleines!… s'écria M. Bourcart.

— Je plaisante, déclara le docteur Filhiol, et, pourtant, j'ai connu un ami qui avait eu cette idée-là…

— Est-ce possible?…

— Oui… parquer des baleines dans une baie comme on parque les vaches dans un champ… Là, elles n'auraient rien coûté à nourrir, et on eût pu vendre leur lait à bon marché…

— Vendre leur lait, docteur?…

— Qui vaut le lait de vache, paraît-il.

— Bon… mais comment les traire?…

— Voilà ce qui embarrassait mon ami!… Aussi a-t-il abandonné ce projet mirifique…

— Et il a sagement fait, conclut M. Bourcart en riant de bon cœur. Mais, pour en revenir au Saint-Enoch, je vous ai dit qu'il ne pourra prolonger sa campagne dans le nord du Pacifique et nous serons forcés de repartir dès le commencement d'octobre.

— Où le Saint-Enoch ira-t-il hiverner en quittant la mer d'Okhotsk?… demanda M. Filhiol.

— C'est ce que je ne sais pas encore.

— Vous ne savez pas, capitaine?…

— Non… cela dépendra des circonstances, mon cher docteur… Arrêter d’avance un plan, c’est s’exposer à des déboires…

— N’avez-vous pas déjà fait la pêche dans les parages au delà du détroit de Behring?…

— Oui… et j’y ai rencontré plus de phoques que de baleines… D’ailleurs, l’hiver de l’océan Arctique est précoce, et, dès les premières semaines de septembre, la navigation y est gênée par les glaces… Je ne songe donc pas cette année à dépasser le soixantième degré de latitude.

— Entendu, capitaine; en admettant que la

Non, docteur, reprit M. Bourcart, et il sera préférable, à mon avis, d’aller vendre mon huile à Vancouver, puisque les cours y sont élevés. pêche ait été fructueuse dans la mer d’Okhotsk, le Saint-Enoch reviendra-t-il en Europe?…

— Et c’est là que vous passeriez l’hiver?…

— Vraisemblablement — de manière à me trouver sur les lieux de pêche au début de la saison prochaine.

— Cependant, reprit M. Filhiol, il faut tout prévoir… Si le Saint-Enoch ne réussit pas dans la mer d’Okhotsk, votre intention serait-elle d’y attendre le retour de la belle saison?…

— Non… bien qu’on puisse hiverner à Nicolaïew ou à Okhotsk… Dans ce cas, je me déciderais plutôt à regagner la côte américaine ou même la Nouvelle-Zélande.

— Ainsi, capitaine, quoi qu'il arrive, nous ne devons pas compter revenir cette année en Europe?…

— Non, mon cher docteur, et cela ne saurait vous étonner… Il est rare que nos campagnes ne durent pas de quarante à cinquante mois… L'équipage sait à quoi s'en tenir à ce sujet…

— Croyez bien, capitaine, répondit M. Filhiol, que le temps ne me paraîtra pas long, et, quelle que soit la durée de sa campagne, je ne regretterai jamais d'avoir embarqué à bord du Saint-Enoch!"

Il va de soi que, dès les premiers jours de la traversée, les vigies avaient repris leur poste. La mer était surveillée avec soin. Deux fois dans la matinée, deux fois dans l'après-midi, le lieutenant Allotte se hissait aux barres de perroquet et y restait en observation. Parfois apparaissaient quelques jets annonçant la présence des cétacés, mais à une distance trop grande pour que M. Bourcart songeât à amener les pirogues.

La moitié du parcours s'était accomplie sans aucun incident, en dix-sept jours de navigation, lorsque, à la date du 5 août, vers dix heures du matin, le capitaine Bourcart eut connaissance des îles Aléoutiennes.

Ces îles, qui appartiennent aujourd'hui à l'Amérique du Nord, faisaient partie à cette époque de l'empire russe, qui possédait toute l'immense province de l'Alaska, dont les Aléoutiennes ne sont en réalité que le prolongement naturel. Ce long chapelet, qui se développe sur près de dix degrés, ne compte pas moins de cinquante et un grains. Il est divisé en trois groupes: les Aléoutes propres, les Andreanov, les Lisii. Là vivent quelques milliers d'habitants, rassemblés sur les plus importantes îles de l'archipel, où ils s'adonnent à la chasse, à la pêche et au commerce des pelleteries.

Ce fut l’une des grandes, Oumanak, que le Saint-Enoch releva à cinq milles dans le nord, et dont on aperçut le volcan Chicaldinskoï, haut de neuf mille pieds, qui était en pleine éruption. M. Bourcart ne jugea pas à propos de s’en approcher davantage, craignant, avec ces vents d’ouest, de rencontrer une mer furieuse.

Ce groupe des Aléoutiennes ferme au sud le bassin de Behring, que l’Amérique avec le littoral de l’Alaska, l’Asie avec le littoral du Kamtchatka, limitent à l’est et à l’ouest. Ce groupe présente cette particularité de décrire une courbe dont la convexité est tournée vers la haute mer — particularité qu’offrent aussi, dans leur disposition géométrale, les Kouriles, les Liou-Khieou, les Philippines et l’ensemble des terres de l’empire du Japon.

Au cours de cette navigation, le docteur Filhiol put suivre du regard les capricieux contours de cet archipel, hérissé de monts volcaniques, et dont les abords sont extrêmement dangereux durant la mauvaise saison.

En longeant cette convexité, le Saint-Enoch avait évité les courants contraires. Favorisé par une brise constante, il n’aurait plus qu’à franchir une des branches du Kouro-Sivo, qui, dans le voisinage des Kouriles, remonte obliquement au nord-est vers le détroit de Behring.

Lorsque le Saint-Enoch eut dépassé le dernier îlot des Aléoutiennes, il trouva des vents de la partie nord-est. C’était une circonstance très avantageuse pour un navire qui allait mettre le cap au sud-ouest, en direction des Kouriles. Après avoir traversé ce groupe, M. Bourcart espérait relever l’extrême pointe du Kamtchatka avant une quinzaine de jours.

Mais, à l’ouvert de la mer de Behring, se déchaîna un terrible coup de vent, auquel un bâtiment moins solidement construit, moins habilement manœuvré, n’eût pas résisté peut-être. Quant à chercher un abri au fond d’une crique des Aléoutiennes, la prudence l’eût déconseillé, ses ancres n’auraient pu tenir, et il se fût brisé sur les récifs.

Cette tourmente, accompagnée d’éclairs, mêlée de grêle et de pluie, dura quarante-huit heures. Pendant la première nuit, le navire faillit engager. Cependant, comme la rafale rugissait avec une violence croissante, la voilure avait été réduite autant que possible — rien que la misaine et le grand hunier au bas ris.

Durant cette redoutable tempête, le docteur Filhiol ne put qu’admirer le sang-froid du capitaine Bourcart, le courage de ses officiers, l’adresse et le dévouement de l’équipage. Il n’y eut que des éloges à donner à maître Ollive pour la promptitude et l’habileté qu’il apportait à l’exécution des manœuvres. Peu s’en fallut que les embarcations de tribord, bien qu’elles eussent été rentrées en dedans, ne fussent écrasées lorsque les embardées amenaient une telle bande que la mer entrait par ses dallots.

En de telles conditions, on le comprend, le Saint-Enoch n’aurait pu se tenir en cape courante. Ce fut vent arrière qu’il dut fuir, et même, toute une demi-journée, à sec de toile. C’est là une très dangereuse allure, car le bâtiment risque d’être “mangé par la mer”. Lorsqu’il court dans le sens du vent et aussi vite, sa barre n’ayant plus d’action, il est difficile de l’empêcher de se jeter tantôt sur bâbord, tantôt sur tribord. Alors les coups de mer sont le plus à craindre, parce qu’ils assaillent non par l’avant, fait pour leur résister, mais par l’arrière, mal disposé pour recevoir l’assaut des lames.

Il arriva donc que plusieurs trombes liquides balayèrent en grand le pont du Saint-Enoch. L’équipage fut sur le point de défoncer les pavois afin de faciliter l’écoulement. Heureusement les dallots suffirent et les panneaux, solidement assujettis, résistèrent. Les hommes, placés au gouvernail sous la surveillance de maître Ollive, purent conserver le cap à l'ouest.

Le Saint-Enoch parvint à s'en tirer sans avaries graves. Le capitaine Bourcart n'eut à regretter que la perte d'un tourmentin qu'on avait essayé d'installer à l'arrière et dont il ne resta bientôt plus que des lambeaux, qui claquaient comme coups de fouet sous les violences de la rafale.

Et ce fut après cette inutile tentative pour se mettre à la cape que le capitaine avait décidé de fuir vent arrière.

La tempête diminua graduellement dans la nuit du 10 au 11 août. Presque au lever de l'aube, maître Ollive put installer une voilure convenable. Ce que l'on devait redouter, c'était que le vent ne se fixât à l'ouest, alors que le Saint-Enoch était encore à près de huit cents milles de la terre d'Asie. Il aurait été forcé de lutter contre le vent, et sa marche eût été considérablement retardée. Louvoyer, d'autre part, c'était courir le risque de tomber dans le rapide courant de Kouro-Sivo, d'être emporté vers le nord-est, ce qui eût peut-être compromis cette campagne de la mer d'Okhotsk.

C'était la grande perplexité du capitaine Bourcart. Confiant dans la solidité de son navire, confiant dans le mérite de ses officiers et de son équipage, il n'avait eu d'autre appréhension que de voir se produire cette saute de vent, qui eût retardé son arrivée aux Kouriles.

“Est-ce que la bonne chance nous abandonnerait, en justifiant les prévisions de ce mauvais augure de Cabidoulin?… répétait-il quelquefois.

— Il ne sait pas ce qu'il dit, répliquait maître Ollive, et il ferait mieux d'avaler sa langue!… Mais ça lui sort par la bouche comme le souffle d'une baleine par ses évents!… Seulement, c’est toujours rouge qu’il souffle, l’animal!”

Et, ma foi, s’il fut enchanté de cette réponse, le brave maître d’équipage, on ne saurait trop s’en étonner.

Toutefois, un retard, ne fût-il que d’une quinzaine de jours, aurait été préjudiciable. Vers le commencement de septembre, les premières glaces se forment dans la mer d’Okhotsk, et, généralement, les baleiniers ne s’y donnent rendez-vous qu’à la fin de l’hiver.

Malgré tout, la tempête passée, on oublia vite que le Saint-Enoch s’était une ou deux fois trouvé en perdition. Aussi les plaisanteries de redoubler à l’égard de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

“Vois-tu, vieux, lui dit maître Ollive, c’est toi qui nous as valu ce coup de chien, et, si nous manquons la campagne, ce sera encore de ta faute!…

— Eh bien, répondit le tonnelier, il ne fallait pas venir me relancer dans ma boutique de la rue des Tourettes, et m’embarquer sur le Saint-Enoch…

— Pour sûr, Cabidoulin, pour sûr!… Mais, si j’étais le capitaine Bourcart, je sais bien ce que je ferais…

— Et que ferais-tu?…

— Je te mettrais un boulet à chaque pied, et t’enverrais par-dessus le bord!

— C’est peut-être ce qui pourrait m’arriver de plus heureux!… répondit Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, d’une voix grave.

— Le diable le déhale!… s’écria maître Ollive, c’est qu’il parle sérieusement…

— Parce que c’est sérieux, et tu verras comment finira la campagne…

— Aussi bien qu’elle a commencé, vieux… à une condition, pourtant… c’est qu’on te débarque en pleine mer!”

Du reste, que l’avenir dût ou non donner raison à Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, ce ne fut pas au cours de cette traversée entre Vancouver et les Kouriles que l’équipage eut l’occasion d’allumer sa cabousse. Les vigies en furent pour leurs peines. Les cétacés, extrêmement rares, ne se montraient qu’à de grandes distances. Et pourtant, à cette époque de l’année, ils fréquentent volontiers les approches de la mer de Behring, baleinoptères gigantesques, jubartes parfois longues de trente mètres, culammaks et umgulliks qui en mesurent une cinquantaine. D’où provenait cette rareté?… Ni M. Bourcart, ni

M. Heurtaux ne parvenaient à se l’expliquer. Est-ce donc que ces animaux, trop vivement poursuivis dans les mers arctiques, cherchaient déjà refuge, ainsi que cela devait se produire plus tard, jusque dans les mers antarctiques?…

“Eh! non!… Eh! non… criait le lieutenant Allotte. Ce que nous ne trouvons pas en-deçà des Kouriles, nous le trouverons au-delà!… C’est dans la mer d’Okhotsk que nous attendent les baleines. Et on la remplirait tout entière rien qu’avec leur huile!…”

Que les fantaisistes prédictions du lieutenant dussent se réaliser, il n’en était pas moins certain qu’il n’y eut pas lieu une seule fois d’amener les pirogues. À noter également qu’on ne voyait aucun bâtiment, et, cependant, en ce mois d’août, il n’est pas d’habitude que les baleiniers aient abandonné ces parages. Peut-être, après tout, étaient-ils déjà en pêche dans la mer d’Okhotsk, où devaient pulluler les souffleurs, au dire de Romain Allotte… Et qui sait si, parmi eux, ne s’y voyait pas le Repton, lequel, d’après les informations du capitaine Forth, avait quitté la baie Marguerite pour rallier les parages nord-ouest du Pacifique?

“Bon! si heureuse qu’ait pu être sa campagne, disaient les hommes, il n’aura pas tout pris, et il restera bien quelques baleines pour le Saint-Enoch!”

Cependant les craintes d’un changement de brise ne s’étaient point réalisées. À la suite d’une accalmie de vingt-quatre heures, le vent avait repiqué au sud-est. Plusieurs jours s’écoulèrent. Déjà les oiseaux de mer, — de ceux qui s’aventurent à quelque centaine de milles au large, — éparpillés autour du navire, se reposaient parfois à l’extrémité des vergues. Le navire filait tout dessus, bâbord amures, avec une vitesse moyenne de dix à onze noeuds. La traversée s’accomplissait de telle façon que M. Bourcart eût été mal fondé à se plaindre.

Le 21 août, d’après la double observation de dix heures et de midi par un temps très clair, le point donna cent soixante-cinq degrés trente-sept minutes en longitude et quarante-neuf degrés treize minutes en latitude.

À une heure, le capitaine et les officiers étaient réunis sur la dunette. Le Saint-Enoch, incliné sur tribord, laissait derrière lui un sillage plat et se dérobait rapidement à la lame.

Soudain, le second de dire:

“Qu’est-ce que je vois là-bas?…”

Tous les regards se portèrent au vent du navire, vers une longue bande noirâtre qui paraissait animée d’un singulier mouvement de reptation.

Cette bande, observée au moyen des lunettes, semblait mesurer de deux cent cinquante à trois cents pieds.

“Tiens! s’écria le lieutenant Allotte en plaisantant, est-ce que ce serait le grand serpent de mer de maître Cabidoulin?…”

Et, précisément, du gaillard d’avant, la main au-dessus des yeux, le tonnelier regardait en cette direction sans prononcer une parole. Le docteur Filhiol venait de monter sur la dunette, et le capitaine Bourcart dit en lui passant sa longue-vue:

“Voyez… je vous prie…

— Cela ressemble à un écueil au-dessus duquel voltigent de nombreux oiseaux… déclara M. Filhiol, après quelques minutes d’attention.

— Je ne connais pas d’écueil en cet endroit… déclara M. Bourcart.

— Et d’ailleurs, ajouta le lieutenant Coquebert, il est certain que cette bande se déplace…”

Cinq ou six matelots entouraient le tonnelier, qui n’ouvrait pas la bouche, s’il ouvrait les yeux.

Le maître d’équipage lui dit alors:

“Eh bien… vieux… est-ce donc?…”

Pour toute réponse, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin fit un geste qui signifiait: peut-être!

Le monstre, — si c’était un monstre, — le serpent, — si c’était un serpent, — ondulait à la surface des eaux, près de trois milles au vent du Saint-Enoch. Sa tête énorme — si c’était une tête — paraissait pourvue d’une épaisse crinière, telle que les légendes norvégiennes ou autres l’ont toujours donnée aux krakens, aux calmars et aux divers spécimens de la tératologie marine.

Assurément, aucune baleine, même des plus vigoureuses, n’aurait pu résister aux attaques d’un tel géant océanique. Et, au fait, sa présence n’expliquait-elle pas qu’elles eussent déserté cette partie du Pacifique?… Un navire de cinq à six cents tonnes aurait-il pu se dégager des replis d’un si prodigieux animal?…

En ce moment, il n’y eut qu’un cri dans tout l’équipage:

“Le serpent de mer… le serpent de mer!”

Et les regards ne quittèrent plus le monstre en question.

“Capitaine, demanda le lieutenant Allotte, est-ce que vous n’êtes pas curieux de savoir si cette bête-là fournirait autant d’huile qu’une baleine franche?… Je parie pour deux cent cinquante barils, si nous parvenons à l’amarrer!”

Depuis l’instant où l’animal avait été signalé, il s’était rapproché d’un demi-mille sous l’action du courant, sans doute. On distinguait mieux ses anneaux, qui se déroulaient par un mouvement vermiculaire, sa queue en longs zigzags, dont l’extrémité se relevait parfois, sa formidable tête à crinière hérissée, dont il ne s’échappait aucun souffle d’air et d’eau.

À la demande formulée, puis renouvelée par le lieutenant, de mettre les pirogues à la mer, le capitaine Bourcart n'avait pas encore répondu. Cependant MM. Heurtaux et Coquebert s'étant joints à lui, M. Bourcart, après une hésitation assez naturelle, donna l'ordre d'amener deux pirogues, non pour attaquer le monstre, mais afin de l'observer de plus près, car le Saint-Enoch n'aurait pu s'en approcher sans courir de longs bords.

Lorsque le tonnelier vit les hommes occupés à déhaler les embarcations, il s'avança vers le capitaine Bourcart, et il lui dit non sans quelque émotion:

"Capitaine… capitaine Bourcart… vous voulez…

— Oui… maître Cabidoulin, je veux savoir à quoi nous en tenir une bonne fois…

— Est-ce… prudent?…

— En tout cas, c'est à faire!

— Va avec eux!…" ajouta maître Ollive.

Le tonnelier gagna le gaillard sans répondre. Après tout, on s'était si souvent moqué de "son serpent de mer" que peut-être ne regrettait-il pas cette rencontre qui allait lui donner raison.

Les deux pirogues, chacune avec quatre matelots aux avirons, dans l'une le lieutenant Allotte et le harponneur Ducrest, dans l'autre le second Heurtaux et le harponneur Kardek, ayant largué leur amarre, se dirigeaient vers l'animal. Les recommandations du capitaine étaient formelles: on ne devait agir qu'avec la plus absolue prudence.

M. Bourcart, M. Coquebert, le docteur Filhiol et maître Ollive restèrent en observation sur la dunette, après que le navire eut été mis en panne. Le tonnelier, le forgeron, le charpentier, les deux autres harponneurs, le maître d'hôtel, le cuisinier, les matelots, se tenaient à l'avant. Quant aux novices, penchés sur les bastingages, leur curiosité se mélangeait d'une certaine appréhension.

Tous les yeux suivaient les embarcations. Elles s'avançaient en douceur, et ne furent bientôt plus qu'à une demi-encâblure du prodigieux animal, et chacun s'attendait à ce qu'il se relevât brusquement…

Le monstre demeurait immobile et sa queue ne battait pas la mer.

Alors on vit les pirogues le longer, puis lui jeter les amarres sans qu'il eût fait un mouvement, puis le prendre à la remorque afin de le ramener au navire.

Ce n'était qu'une algue gigantesque dont la racine figurait une tête, un végétal semblable à cet immense ruban que le Péking avait rencontré, en 1848, dans les mers du Pacifique.

Et lorsque maître Ollive dit au tonnelier, en ne lui épargnant pas ses moqueries:

“La voilà, ta bête… le voilà, ton fameux serpent de mer!… Un paquet d'herbes… une sargasse… Eh bien… y crois-tu encore, vieux?…

— Je crois ce que je crois, répondit Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, et on sera forcé de me croire un jour ou l'autre!”

CHAPITRE VIII

La mer d’Okhotsk

Les Kouriles, moins nombreuses que les Aléoutiennes, sont pour la plupart des îlots inhabités. Trois ou quatre, cependant, peuvent être considérés comme des îles: telles Paramouchir, Owekotan, Ouchichir, Matoua. Assez boisées, elles possèdent un sol productif. Les autres, rocheuses et sablonneuses, impropres à toute culture sont frappées de stérilité.

Une partie de ce groupe est tributaire de l’empire du Japon, dont il prolonge le domaine. L’autre partie septentrionale relève de la province russe du Kamtchatka. Ses habitants, petits, velus, sont désignés sous le nom de Kamtchadales.

M. Bourcart ne songeait point à relâcher au milieu de ce groupe où il n’avait que faire. Il lui tardait d’avoir franchi cette barrière qui limite la mer d’Okhotsk au sud et au sud-est afin de commencer sa seconde campagne.

Ce fut en doublant le cap Lopatka, à l’extrémité de la presqu’île kamtchadale et en laissant Paramouchir sur bâbord, que le Saint-Enoch pénétra dans les eaux sibériennes le 23 août, après trente-six jours de navigation depuis Vancouver.

Ce vaste bassin d’Okhotsk, très protégé par cette longue bande des Kouriles, comprend une superficie trois ou quatre fois supérieure à celle de la mer Noire. Tout comme un océan, il a ses tempêtes, parfois d’une extrême impétuosité.

Le passage du Saint-Enoch à travers le détroit fut marqué par un accident peu grave, mais qui aurait pu l’être.

Le bâtiment se trouvait à l’endroit le plus resserré de l’inlet, lorsque, sous l’action d’un courant, son étrave vint à heurter un haut-fond dont la position était inexactement indiquée sur la carte.

Le capitaine Bourcart était alors sur la dunette, près de l’homme de barre, et le second près du bastingage de bâbord, en observation.

Dès le choc, qui fut assez léger, ce commandement se fit entendre:

“À masquer les trois huniers!”

Aussitôt l’équipage se mit sur les bras des vergues, et elles furent orientées de telle sorte que, le vent prenant sa voilure à revers, le Saint-Enoch put se dégager en culant.

Mais le capitaine Bourcart vit que cette manœuvre serait insuffisante. Il serait nécessaire d’élonger une ancre à l’arrière pour se haler dessus.

À l’instant même, le canot fut lancé à la mer avec une ancre à jet, et le lieutenant Coquebert, accompagné de deux novices, s’occupa de la mouiller à un endroit convenable.

Le choc, on le répète, n’avait pas été rude. Un navire aussi solidement construit que le Saint-Enoch devait s’en tirer sans aucun dommage.

Au surplus, comme il avait touché à mer basse, vraisemblablement, dès que la marée se ferait sentir, son ancre l’empêchant de s’engraver davantage, il se relèverait de lui-même.

Le premier soin de M. Bourcart avait été d’envoyer le maître d’équipage et le charpentier à la pompe. Tous deux reconnurent que le bâtiment ne faisait point eau. Nulle apparence d’avaries ni dans le bordé ni dans la membrure.

Il ne s’agissait plus que d’attendre le flot, ce qui ne tarda guère et, après quelques râclements de sa quille, le Saint-Enoch se retira du bas-fond. Ses voiles furent aussitôt orientées, et, une heure après, il donnait dans la mer d’Okhotsk.

Les vigies reprirent alors leur poste sur les barres du grand mât et du mat de misaine, afin de signaler les souffleurs qui passeraient à bonne distance. Personne ne doutait de réussir ici comme à la baie Marguerite ou à la Nouvelle-Zélande. Avant deux mois, le Saint-Enoch, de retour à Vancouver, aurait écoulé son second chargement à des prix non moins avantageux que le premier.

Le ciel était très pur. Il ventait une jolie brise du sud-est. La mer se gonflait en longues houles sans déferler, et les embarcations ne risquaient pas d’être gênées dans leur marche.

Il y avait un certain nombre de navires en vue, — des baleiniers pour la plupart. Probablement ils exploitaient ces parages depuis quelques semaines, et poursuivraient leur campagne jusqu’à l’hiver. Les autres bâtiments étaient à destination de Nicolaïevsk, d’Okhotsk, d’Ayan, les principaux ports de cette région, ou ils en sortaient pour regagner le large.

À cette époque déjà, Nicolaïevsk, capitale de la province de l’Amour, située presque à l’embouchure du grand fleuve de ce nom, formait une ville importante dont le commerce prenait d’année en année une plus grande extension. Elle offrait un port très abrité sur le détroit de Tartarie, qui sépare le littoral de la longue île de Sakhalin.

Peut-être, dans l’esprit de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, l’échouage du Saint-Enoch avait-il ouvert l’ère des mauvaises chances. Non point que le tonnelier se fût expliqué à ce sujet d’une façon catégorique; mais il n’aurait pas fallu le pousser très vivement.

À noter toutefois que le début de cette campagne dans la mer d’Okhotsk ne fut pas heureux.

Pendant la matinée, une baleine souffla à deux milles environ, — une baleine franche, sur laquelle M. Bourcart fit amener les quatre pirogues. En vain se mirent-elles à sa poursuite. Impossible de la revoir, après qu’elle eut plongé à trois reprises, et tout à fait hors de portée.

Le lendemain, même tentative, même insuccès. Les embarcations revinrent à bord sans que les harponneurs eussent lancé le harpon.

Ce n’étaient donc pas les baleines qui manquaient dans cette mer. Quelques autres furent encore signalées par les vigies. Mais très farouches ou très effarouchées, elles ne se laissaient pas rejoindre. Les navires en vue étaient-ils plus favorisés?… Il n’y avait pas lieu de le croire.

On se figure aisément que l’équipage en concevait un très légitime dépit. Plus que quiconque enrageait le lieutenant Allotte, et on pouvait craindre que, le cas échéant, il ne s’abandonnât à quelque imprudence, malgré les recommandations réitérées du capitaine Bourcart.

Celui-ci prit alors la résolution de conduire le Saint-Enoch aux îles Chantar, où il avait déjà passé deux saisons dans des conditions excellentes.

Trois mois plus tôt, les baleiniers de la mer d’Okhotsk eussent rencontré les dernières glaces de l’hiver. Non encore désagrégées ou fondues, elles auraient rendu la pêche moins facile. Les navires sont contraints d'élonger les ice-fields, afin d'en contourner l'extrémité. Souvent même, deux ou trois jours s'écoulent avant qu'ils découvrent une clairière qui permette de faire bonne route.

Mais, au mois d'août, la mer est entièrement libre, même en sa partie septentrionale. Ce qu'il y avait plutôt à craindre, c'était la formation des "young-ices", les jeunes glaces, avant que la seconde campagne du Saint-Enoch eût pris fin.

Le 29, on eut connaissance des îles Chantar, groupées au fond de la baie, dans cette crique resserrée qui échancre plus profondément le littoral de la province de l'Amour.

Au-delà s'ouvre une seconde baie, nommée baie Finisto ou du Sud-Ouest, qui n'offre pas beaucoup de fond. M. Bourcart la connaissait et vint y reprendre son ancien mouillage.

Là se produisit un nouvel accident — très grave cette fois.

Au moment où l'ancre touchait, deux matelots venaient de se hisser à la vergue du petit hunier afin de dégager une des manœuvres du mat de misaine.

Lorsque la chaîne de l'ancre fut raide, maître Ollive reçut l'ordre de faire amener les huniers. Par malheur, on oublia de crier aux matelots de se défier et de bien se tenir.

Or, à l'instant où, les drisses larguées, la voile retombait à la hauteur du chouque, l'un des matelots avait une jambe sur les haubans, l'autre sur le marchepied de la vergue. Surpris dans cette position, il n'eut pas le temps de s’accrocher par les mains aux haubans, et, lâchant prise, il tomba sur le bord de la pirogue du second, puis fut rejeté à la mer.

Cette fois, cet infortuné, — il se nommait Rollat et n’avait pas trente ans, — moins heureux que son camarade qui, on ne l’a pas oublié, avait été sauvé dans des circonstances identiques sur les parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande, disparut sous les flots.

Aussitôt le canot fut mis dehors en même temps que des bouées étaient lancées par-dessus les bastingages.

Sans doute, Rollat s’était grièvement blessé, peut-être un bras ou une jambe cassés. Il ne remonta pas à la surface, et c’est en vain que ses camarades essayèrent de le retrouver.

C’était la première victime de cette campagne du Saint-Enoch, le premier de ceux qui ne reviennent pas toujours au port.

L’impression que causa cet accident fut profonde. Rollat, ce bon matelot, très apprécié de ses chefs, très aimé de tous, on ne le reverrait plus.

Ce qui amena le charpentier à dire au maître d’équipage:

“Est-ce que, décidément, cela va aller mal?…”

Plusieurs jours s’écoulèrent, et, si quelques baleines furent aperçues, aucune ne put être amarrée. Le capitaine d’un navire norvégien, qui vint en relâche dans la baie Finisto, déclara que, de mémoire d’homme, on n’avait jamais vu saison si mauvaise. Selon lui, la mer d’Okhotsk ne tarderait pas à être abandonnée comme lieu de pêche.

Ce matin-là, au moment où un bâtiment passait à l’ouvert de la baie, le lieutenant Coquebert de s’écrier:

“Eh!… mais… le voilà!…

— Qui?… demanda M. Heurtaux.

— Le Repton!”

En effet, le baleinier anglais, cap au nord-est, se montrait à moins de deux milles.

S’il avait été reconnu du Saint-Enoch, nul doute qu’il n’eût également reconnu le trois-mâts français. D’ailleurs, pas plus cette fois que la première, le capitaine King ne chercha à entrer en communication avec le capitaine Bourcart.

“Eh! qu’il aille au diable!… s’écria Romain Allotte.

— Il ne paraît pas avoir été plus heureux dans la mer d’Okhotsk que dans la baie Marguerite… fit observer M. Heurtaux.

— En effet, déclara le lieutenant Coquebert, il n’est pas lourdement chargé, et s’il a le quart de ses barils pleins, cela m’étonnerait…

— Après tout, dit alors M. Bourcart, les autres bâtiments ne semblent pas avoir fait meilleure pêche cette année… Doit-on en conclure que, pour une cause ou une autre, les baleines ont abandonné ces parages pour n’y jamais revenir?”

Dans tous les cas, il était douteux qu’il fût possible au Saint-Enoch de faire bonne campagne avant l’apparition des glaces.

En cet endroit même, sans parler des quelques ports qu'elle possède, la côte n'est point tout à fait déserte. Les habitants descendent fréquemment des montagnes de l'intérieur, et il n'y a pas à s'inquiéter autrement de leur présence.

Mais, lorsque les hommes vont à terre pour couper du bois, s'ils n'ont rien à craindre des bipèdes, ils doivent prendre des précautions contre certains quadrupèdes fort dangereux. Les ours, nombreux dans la province, sortent en bandes des forêts voisines, attirés par les carcasses de baleines échouées sur la grève, et dont ils paraissent très amateurs.

Aussi les gens du Saint-Enoch, en corvée, se munissaient-ils de lances, afin de se défendre contre les agressions de ces plantigrades.

C'est d'une autre façon que procèdent les Russes. En présence d'un ours, ils opèrent avec une adresse toute particulière. Attendant l'animal de pied ferme, agenouillés sur le sol, ils mettent les deux mains sur leur tête en tenant un couteau. Dès que l'ours s'est précipité sur eux, il s'enferre de lui-même, et, le ventre traversé, tombe à côté de son courageux adversaire.

Cependant, presque chaque jour, après avoir levé l'ancre, le Saint-Enoch louvoyait hors de la baie Finisto à la recherche des souffleurs, et il rentrait le soir à son mouillage sans avoir réussi.

D'autres fois, servi par un bon vent, sous ses trois huniers, sa misaine, ses focs, il prenait le large, les vigies en observation, les pirogues prêtes. Mais c'est à peine si un cétacé était signalé par vingt-quatre heures, et à de telles distances qu'on ne pouvait songer à le poursuivre.

Le Saint-Enoch vint alors en vue d'Ayan, petit port de la côte occidentale, où le commerce des pelleteries a pris une grande importance.

Là, l’équipage put ramener à bord un baleineau de moyenne taille — de l’espèce de ceux que les Américains nomment “krampsess”. Il flottait mort et ne rendit que six barils d’une huile à peu près semblable à celle des cachalots.

On le voit, les résultats de cette campagne dans le nord du Pacifique menaçaient d’être nuls.

“Et encore, répétait M. Heurtaux au docteur Filhiol, si nous étions en hiver, on se rabattrait sur les loups marins… À partir d’octobre, ils fréquentent les glaces de la mer d’Okhotsk, et leurs fourrures se vendent assez cher.

— Par malheur, monsieur Heurtaux, l’hiver n’arrivera pas avant quelques semaines, et, à cette époque, le Saint-Enoch aura quitté ces parages…

— Alors, monsieur Filhiol, nous reviendrons, la cale… autant dire le ventre vide!”

Il est très vrai que, dès la formation des premières glaces, ces amphibies, loups marins ou autres, apparaissent par centaines, si ce n’est même par milliers, à la surface des ice-fields. Tandis qu’ils se chauffent au soleil, il est facile de les capturer, à la condition de les surprendre endormis. Les pirogues s’approchent à la voile. Quelques hommes débarquent, saisissent l’animal par les pattes de derrière et le transportent dans l’embarcation. D’ailleurs, ces loups marins, très défiants, ont l’ouïe extrêmement fine, le regard d’une acuité surprenante. Aussi, dès que l’éveil est donné à l’un d’eux, les voilà tous en rumeur, et la bande a vite fait de s’enfuir sous les glaces.

Le 4 septembre, le lieutenant Coquebert rencontra encore une baleine morte. Après lui avoir passé l’amarre de queue, il la ramena à bord, où elle fut mise en position d’être virée le lendemain.

On alluma donc la cabousse, et la journée entière fut employée à fondre le lard. Ce qu’il y eut à remarquer, c’est que cet animal récemment blessé au flanc, n’avait certainement pas été frappé d’un coup de harpon. La blessure était due à la morsure de quelque squale. Au total, cette baleine ne donna que quarante-cinq barils d’huile.

D’ordinaire, lors des pêches dans la mer d’Okhotsk, on procède autrement que sur les autres parages. Les pirogues, envoyées loin du navire, restent cinq à six jours parfois avant de revenir à bord. Ne pas en conclure qu’elles demeurent tout ce temps à la mer. Au soir, après avoir regagné la côte, elles sont tirées à sec afin que la marée ne les enlève pas. Puis les hommes construisent des huttes de branchages, prennent leur repas, restent jusqu’à l’aube, en se gardant contre l’attaque des ours, et se remettent en chasse.

Plusieurs jours s’écoulèrent avant que le Saint-Enoch eût repris son mouillage de la baie Finisto. Il remonta même au nord jusqu’en vue de la bourgade d’Okhotsk, port fréquenté du littoral, mais il n’y fit point relâche.

M. Bourcart, qui ne perdait pas tout espoir, voulut pousser du côté de la presqu’île kamtchadale, où les souffleurs s’étaient peut-être réfugiés en attendant l’époque de refranchir les passes des Kouriles.

Or, c’était précisément ce qu’avait fait le Repton, après avoir mis à bord quelques centaines de barils.

Le Saint-Enoch, profitant d’une bonne brise du sud-ouest, se dirigea vers cette étroite portion de la mer d’Okhotsk, comprise entre la presqu’île et la côte sibérienne.

Son ancrage choisi à deux ou trois milles de terre, presque à la hauteur du petit port de Yamsk, le capitaine Bourcart décida d'envoyer trois pirogues à la recherche des baleines, sans leur fixer un délai de retour, à la condition de ne point se séparer.

Les pirogues du second et des deux lieutenants furent désignées pour naviguer de conserve, avec les harponneurs Kardek, Durut et Ducrest, quatre hommes, deux novices, et les engins nécessaires, lances, fusils lance-bombes et louchets.

Parties à huit heures, les pirogues se dirigèrent vers le nord-ouest en longeant la côte. Une légère brise favorisait leur marche, et elles eurent bientôt perdu de vue, au revers d'une pointe, le lieu du mouillage.

La matinée écoulée, aucun cétacé n'avait été aperçu au large. C'était à se demander si, pour la même cause peut-être, ils n'avaient point déserté la mer d'Okhotsk comme la baie Marguerite.

Cependant, vers quatre heures après midi, plusieurs jets s'élevèrent à trois milles dans le nord-est, — des souffles blancs d'une intermittence régulière. Des baleines s'ébattaient à la surface de la mer, bien vivantes celles-ci.

Par malheur, la journée était trop avancée pour permettre de s'amener dessus. Déjà le soleil déclinait vers les montagnes sibériennes de l'ouest. Le soir serait venu avant qu'il eût été possible de lancer le harpon, et la prudence commandait de ne point demeurer la nuit en mer.

M. Heurtaux fit donc signal aux deux pirogues qui se trouvaient à un demi-mille au vent, et lorsqu'elles furent toutes trois bord à bord:

“À terre! ordonna-t-il. Demain, dès le petit jour, nous pousserons au large.”

Peut-être Romain Allotte eût-il préféré continuer la chasse; mais il dut obéir. Au total, la résolution de M. Heurtaux était sage. À courir dans ces conditions, jusqu’où les embarcations risquaient-elles d’être entraînées?… Et ne fallait-il pas tenir compte de la distance de onze ou douze milles qui les séparait alors du Saint-Enoch?…

Lorsqu’elles eurent rallié la terre au fond d’une anse étroite, les hommes les halèrent sur le sable. Pour sept ou huit heures à relâcher sur la côte, M. Heurtaux ne jugea point qu’il fût indispensable de construire une hutte. On mangea sous les arbres, un groupe de grands chênes très touffus; puis on se coucha à terre pour dormir.

Toutefois, M. Heurtaux prit la précaution de mettre un homme de garde. Armé d’une lance et d’un harpon, il serait relevé de deux heures en deux heures, afin de défendre le campement contre l’attaque des ours.

“Et voilà comment, ainsi que le dit le lieutenant Allotte, faute de pêcher à la baleine, on pêche à l’ours!”

La nuit ne fut aucunement troublée, si ce n’est par des hurlements lointains, et, dès les primes lueurs de l’aube, tout le monde était sur pied.

En quelques instants, les matelots eurent déhalé les trois pirogues, qui prirent le large.

Temps de brume — ce qui est assez fréquent en ce mois sous cette latitude. Aussi le regard se limitait-il à la distance, d’un demi-mille. Très probablement ce brouillard se dissiperait après quelques heures de soleil.

Cette éclaircie survint dans la matinée, et, bien que le ciel restât brouillé dans ses hautes zones, la vue put s'étendre jusqu'à l'horizon.

Les pirogues s'étaient dirigées vers le nord-est, chacune ayant sa liberté de mouvement, et on ne s'étonnera pas que le lieutenant Allotte, stimulant ses hommes, eût tenu la tête. Il fut donc le premier à signaler une baleine qui soufflait à trois milles au vent, et toutes les mesures furent prises pour l'amarrer.

Les trois embarcations commencèrent à manœuvrer de manière à rejoindre l'animal. Il fallait, autant que possible, éviter de lui donner l'éveil. D'ailleurs, il venait de plonger, d'où nécessité d'attendre qu'il reparût.

Lorsqu'il revint à la surface, le lieutenant Coquebert était à meilleure distance pour le piquer. Le harponneur Durut, debout à l'avant, tandis que les matelots appuyaient sur les avirons, se tint prêt à lancer le harpon d'une main vigoureuse.

Ce baleinoptère de grande taille, la tête tournée au large, ne soupçonnait pas le danger. En se retournant, il passa si près de l'embarcation que Durut, très adroitement, put le frapper de ses deux harpons au-dessous des nageoires pectorales.

L'animal ne fit aucun mouvement, comme s'il n'eût pas senti le coup. Ce fut heureux, car, à ce moment, la moitié de son corps étant engagée sous l'embarcation, il eût suffi d'un coup de queue pour la mettre en pièces.

Soudain il sonda, mais si brusquement et à une telle profondeur que la ligne échappa des mains du lieutenant, et celui-ci n'eut que le temps de fixer sa bouée au bout.

Lorsque le baleinoptère émergea, M. Heurtaux en était très rapproché. Kardek lança son harpon, et, cette fois, il ne fut pas nécessaire de filer de la ligne.

Les deux autres pirogues arrivèrent alors. Des coups de lance furent portés. Le louchet trancha une des nageoires du cétacé, qui, après avoir soufflé rouge, expira sans s'être trop violemment débattu.

Il s'agissait maintenant de le remorquer jusqu'au Saint-Enoch. Or, la distance était assez considérable — cinq milles au moins. Ce serait là une grosse besogne.

Aussi M. Heurtaux de dire au premier lieutenant:

“Coquebert, larguez votre amarre et profitez de la brise pour rallier le mouillage de Yamsk… Le capitaine Bourcart se hâtera d'appareiller, et il coupera notre route en mettant le cap au nord-est…

— C'est entendu, répondit le lieutenant.

— Je pense que vous aurez rejoint le Saint-Enoch avant la nuit, reprit M. Heurtaux. Dans tous les cas, s'il faut attendre jusqu'au jour, nous attendrons. Avec une masse pareille à la remorque, nous ne gagnerons guère un mille à l'heure.”

C'est ce qu'il y avait de mieux à faire. Aussi la pirogue, après avoir hissé sa voile et garni ses avirons, prit-elle direction vers la côte.

Quant aux deux autres embarcations, le courant les favorisant, lentement, il est vrai, elles suivirent la même direction.

Dans ces conditions, il ne pouvait être question de passer la nuit sur le littoral, éloigné de plus de quatre milles. D’ailleurs, si le lieutenant Coquebert n’était pas retardé, peut-être le Saint-Enoch serait-il arrivé avant le soir.

Malheureusement, vers cinq heures, les brumes commencèrent à s’épaissir, le vent tomba, et le rayon de vue se restreignit à une centaine de toises:

“Voici un brouillard qui va gêner le capitaine Bourcart…, dit M. Heurtaux.

— En admettant que la pirogue ait pu retrouver son mouillage… fit observer le harponneur Kardek.

— Pas d’autre parti à prendre que de rester sur la baleine…, ajouta le lieutenant Allotte.

— En effet”, répondit M. Heurtaux.

Les provisions furent tirées des sacs, viande salée et biscuit, eau douce et tafia. Les hommes mangèrent et s’étendirent pour dormir jusqu’au lever du jour. Cependant la nuit ne fut pas absolument tranquille. Vers une heure du matin, les pirogues, secouées par un violent roulis, risquèrent de rompre leurs amarres et il fallut les doubler.

D’où venait cette étrange agitation de la mer?… Personne ne put en donner l’explication. M. Heurtaux eut la pensée que quelque grand steamer passait à petite distance et en même temps la crainte d’être abordé au milieu des brumes.

Aussitôt un des matelots donna nombre de coups de cornet, auxquels il ne fut pas répondu. On n’entendit ni les patouillements d’une hélice, ni les échappements de vapeur qui accompagnent un steamer en marche, pas plus qu’on n’entrevit la lueur des fanaux.

Cette tumultueuse agitation se prolongea pendant quarante minutes, et fut si forte par instants que M. Heurtaux songeait presque à abandonner le baleinoptère.

Cependant cet état de choses prit fin et la nuit s’acheva tranquillement.

Quelle avait été la cause de ce trouble des eaux? Ni M. Heurtaux, ni le lieutenant Allotte ne pouvaient l’imaginer. Un steamer?… Mais, dans ce cas, le trouble n’eût pas duré si longtemps. Et puis, il semblait qu’on avait entendu de formidables hennissements, des ronflements très différents de ceux que produit la vapeur à travers les soupapes.

Au jour, le brouillard se leva comme la veille. Le Saint-Enoch n’apparaissait pas encore. La brise soufflait à peine, il est vrai. Toutefois, vers neuf heures, le vent ayant fraîchi, un des harponneurs le signala dans le sud-ouest, en bonne route.

Lorsqu’il ne fut plus qu’à une demi-encâblure, M. Bourcart mit en panne, et les pirogues amenèrent le baleinoptère, auquel on passa l’amarre de queue dès qu’il fut contre le bord.

Il fallut presque la journée entière pour le virer, car il était énorme. Le lendemain, la cabousse s’alluma, et, après un travail qui exigea quarante-huit heures, le tonnelier Cabidoulin chiffra à cent vingt-cinq barils la quantité d’huile envoyée en bas.

Quelques jours plus tard, le Saint-Enoch alla prendre un nouveau mouillage près de la côte kamtchadale. Les pirogues recommencèrent leurs recherches. Ce fut sans grand succès: deux baleines piquées, de petit volume, trois autres rencontrées mortes, les flancs ouverts, les entrailles déchirées, et dont il n’y eut rien à tirer. Avaient-elles succombé dans quelque violente attaque?… C’était inexplicable.

Décidément, la bonne chance ne se prononçait plus pour le Saint-Enoch, et, sans aller jusqu’aux fâcheux pronostics de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, tout portait à croire que cette seconde campagne serait peu fructueuse.

En effet, la saison touchait à sa fin. Jamais les baleiniers ne la prolongeaient au delà de septembre dans les eaux sibériennes. Déjà le froid piquait et les hommes avaient dû prendre leurs vêtements d’hiver. La colonne thermométrique oscillait autour de zéro. Avec l’abaissement de la température, les gros mauvais temps régneraient sur la mer d’Okhotsk. Les glaces commençaient à se former le long du littoral. Puis l’ice-field gagnerait peu à peu vers le large, et, dans ces conditions, on sait combien la pêche est difficile, pour ne pas dire impossible.

Au surplus, si le Saint-Enoch n’avait pas été favorisé, il ne semblait pas que les autres baleiniers l’eussent été davantage, à s’en rapporter aux informations recueillies par le capitaine Bourcart soit aux îles Chantar, soit à Ayan, soit à Yamsk. Aussi la plupart des bâtiments cherchaient-ils à regagner quelque lieu d’hivernage.

Il en fut de même du Repton, que la vigie signala dans la matinée du 31. Toujours lège, il filait à pleines voiles vers l’est, afin sans doute de franchir la barrière des Kouriles. Très probablement le Saint-Enoch serait le dernier à quitter la mer d’Okhotsk. Le jour était venu de le faire, ou il eut couru le risque d’être bloqué.

D’après les relevés de maître Cabidoulin, le chargement n’atteignait pas alors cinq cent cinquante barils — à peine le tiers de ce que pouvait contenir la cale.

“Je pense, dit M. Heurtaux, qu’il n’y a plus rien à tenter ici, et nous ne devons pas nous attarder…

— C’est mon avis, répondit M. Bourcart, et profitons de ce que les passes des Kouriles sont encore ouvertes…

— Votre intention, capitaine, demanda le docteur Filhiol, est-elle de retourner à Vancouver?…

— Probablement, répondit M. Bourcart. Mais, avant cette longue traversée, le Saint-Enoch ira relâcher au Kamtchatka.”

Cette relâche était tout indiquée en vue de renouveler les provisions de viande fraîche. Au besoin même, on aurait pu hiverner à Pétropavlosk.

Le Saint-Enoch appareilla donc et, le cap au sud-est, descendit le long de la côte kamtchadale. Après avoir doublé la pointe Lopatka, il remonta vers le nord et, le 4 octobre dans l’après-midi, se trouva en vue de Pétropavlosk.

CHAPITRE IX

Au Kamtchatka

Le Kamtchatka, cette longue péninsule sibérienne, arrosée par la rivière de ce nom, se développe entre la mer d’Okhotsk et l’océan Glacial arctique. Elle ne mesure pas moins de treize cent cinquante kilomètres sur une largeur de quatre cents.

Cette province appartient aux Russes depuis 1806. Après avoir fait partie du gouvernement d’Irkoutsk, elle forme une des huit grandes divisions dont se compose la Sibérie au point de vue administratif.

Le Kamtchatka est relativement peu peuplé. À peine un habitant par kilomètre superficiel, et il est visible que la population ne tend pas à s’accroître. En outre, le sol paraît peu susceptible de culture bien que la température moyenne y soit moins froide qu’en d’autres parties de la Sibérie. Il est semé de laves, de pierres poreuses, de cendres provenant des déjections volcaniques. Son ossature est principalement indiquée par une grande chaîne découpée qui court au nord et au sud, plus rapprochée du littoral de l’est et dont plusieurs sommets sont fort élevés. Cette chaîne ne s’arrête pas sur l’extrême limite de la presqu’île. Au delà du cap Lopatka, elle se prolonge à travers le chapelet des Kouriles jusqu’au voisinage des terres du Japon.

Les ports ne manquent point à la côte occidentale en remontant l’isthme qui réunit le Kamtchatka au continent asiatique, Karajinsk, Chalwesk, Swaschink, Chaljulinsk, Osernowsk. Le plus important est, sans contredit, Petropavlovsk, situé à deux cent cinquante kilomètres environ du cap Lopatka.

C’est dans ce port que le Saint-Enoch vint mouiller vers cinq heures du soir, à la date du 4 octobre. L’ancre tomba aussi près de terre que le permit son tirant d’eau, au fond de cette baie d’Avatcha, assez vaste pour contenir toutes les flottes du monde.

Le Repton s’y trouvait déjà en relâche.

Si le docteur Filhiol avait jamais formé le rêve de visiter la capitale du Kamtchatka, il allait le réaliser dans les conditions les plus favorables. Sous ce climat salubre, d’où se dégage un air sain et humide, il est rare que l’horizon soit parfaitement net. Ce jour-là, pourtant, dès l’entrée du navire dans la baie d’Avatcha, on put suivre du regard le long profil de ce magnifique panorama de montagnes.

Des volcans nombreux s’ouvrent dans cette chaîne: le Schiwelusch, le Schiwelz, le Kronosker, le Kortazker, le Powbrotnaja, l’Asatschinska, et enfin, en arrière de la bourgade si pittoresquement encadrée, le Koriatski, blanc de neige, dont le cratère vomissait des vapeurs fuligineuses mêlées de flammes.

Quant à la ville, encore à l’état rudimentaire, elle ne se composait que d’une agglomération d’habitations en bois. Au pied des hautes montagnes, on eût dit un de ces jouets d’enfant dont les maisonnettes sont éparpillées sans ordre. De ces diverses pièces, la plus curieuse est une petite église du culte grec, de couleur vermillon, à toiture verte, et son clocher distant d’une cinquantaine de pas.

Deux navigateurs, l’un Danois, l’autre Français, sont honorés de monuments commémoratifs, à Pétropavlosk: Behring et le commandant de Lapérouse; une colonne pour le premier, une construction octogonale, blindée de plaques de fer, pour le second.

Ce n’est pas dans cette province que le docteur Filhiol eût rencontré des établissements agricoles de quelque importance. Grâce à l’humidité persistante, le sol est surtout riche par ses pâturages, et il donne jusqu’à trois coupes annuelles. Quant aux graminées, elles sont peu abondantes, et les légumes y réussissent médiocrement exception faite pour les choux-fleurs, qui atteignent des proportions colossales. On n’y voit que des champs d’orge et d’avoine, peut-être plus productifs que dans les autres parties de la Sibérie septentrionale, le climat étant moins rude entre les deux mers qui baignent la presqu’île.

M. Bourcart ne comptait séjourner à Pétropavlosk que le temps de s’y procurer de la viande fraîche. En réalité, la question n’était pas encore résolue à propos de l’hivernage du Saint-Enoch.

Ce fut l’objet d’une conversation entre M. Heurtaux et lui, — conversation dans laquelle il s’agissait de prendre une décision définitive.

Et voici ce que dit le capitaine Bourcart:

“Je ne crois pas, en tout cas, que nous devions passer l’hiver dans le port de Pétropavlovsk, bien qu’un navire n’ait rien à y craindre des glaces, puisque la baie d’Avatcha reste toujours libre même par les plus grands froids.

— Capitaine, demanda le second, est-ce que vous songeriez à regagner Vancouver?…

— Probablement, ne fût-ce que pour y vendre ce que nous avons d’huile dans nos barils?…

— Un tiers de chargement… tout au plus!… répondit le second.

— Je le sais, Heurtaux, mais pourquoi ne pas profiter de l’élévation des cours, et qui sait s’ils tiendront jusqu’à l’année prochaine?…

— Ils ne baisseront pas, capitaine, si les baleines, comme il semble, veulent abandonner ces parages du Pacifique septentrional.

— Il y a là quelque chose de vraiment inexplicable, répondit M. Bourcart, et peut-être les baleiniers ne seront-ils plus tentés de revenir dans la mer d’Okhotsk…

— Si nous retournons à Victoria, reprit M. Heurtaux, le Saint-Enoch y passera-t-il l’hiver?…

— C’est ce que nous déciderons plus tard… La traversée de Pétropavlosk à Victoria durera de six à sept semaines, pour peu qu’elle soit contrariée, et qui sait si nous n’aurons pas en route occasion d’amarrer deux ou trois baleines!… Enfin… il faut bien qu’elles soient quelque part, puisqu’on ne les rencontre ni dans la mer d’Okhotsk ni dans la baie Marguerite…

— Il est possible qu’elles recherchent le détroit de Behring, capitaine…

— Cela peut être, Heurtaux, mais la saison est trop avancée pour nous élever si haut en latitude… Nous serions bientôt arrêtés par la banquise… Non… pendant la traversée, tâchons de donner quelques coups de harpon…

— À propos, fit observer le second, ne serait-il pas préférable de retourner dans la Nouvelle-Zélande au lieu d’hiverner à Victoria?…

— J’y ai songé, répondit M. Bourcart. Toutefois, pour se décider, attendons que le Saint-Enoch ait relâché à Vancouver.

— En somme, capitaine, il n’est point question de revenir en Europe?…

— Non… pas avant d’avoir fait une complète saison l’année prochaine…

— Ainsi, demanda M. Heurtaux en terminant, nous ne tarderons pas à quitter Pétropavlovsk!…

— Dès que nos approvisionnements seront achevés”, répondit M. Bourcart.

Ces projets, portés à la connaissance de l’équipage, reçurent l’approbation générale, — moins celle du tonnelier.

Aussi, ce jour-là, lorsque maître Ollive le tint dans un des cabarets de la bourgade devant une bouteille de vodka:

“Eh bien… vieux… ton opinion sur les résolutions du capitaine?… lui dit-il.

— Mon opinion, répondit Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, est que le Saint-Enoch ferait mieux de ne pas retourner à Vancouver…

— Et pourquoi?…

— Parce que la route n’est pas sûre!

— Tu voudrais hiverner à Pétropavlovsk?…

— Pas davantage.

— Alors?…

— Alors le mieux serait de mettre cap au sud pour revenir en Europe…

— C’est ton idée?…

— C’est mon idée… et c’est la bonne!”

Le Saint-Enoch, sauf quelques réparations peu importantes, n’avait qu’à renouveler ses vivres frais et sa provision de combustible. C’était une indispensable besogne dont l’équipage s’occupa sans retard.

On vit, d’ailleurs, que le Repton le faisait également, ce qui indiquait les mêmes desseins. Il semblait donc probable que le capitaine King appareillerait sous peu de jours. Pour quelle destination?… M. Bourcart n’avait pu le savoir.

Quant au docteur Filhiol, il consacra les loisirs de cette relâche à visiter les environs, ainsi qu’à Victoria, il est vrai, dans un rayon infiniment plus restreint. Au point de vue de la facilité des déplacements, le Kamtchatka n’en était pas encore où en était l’île de Vancouver.

Quant à sa population, elle présentait un type très différent de celui des Indiens qui habitent l’Alaska et la Colombie anglaise. Ces indigènes ont les épaules larges, les yeux saillants, les mâchoires accusées, les lèvres épaisses, la chevelure noire, — des gens robustes, mais d’une caractéristique laideur. Et combien la nature s’est montrée sage en leur ayant donné aussi peu que possible de nez dans un pays où les débris de poissons, laissés en plein air, affectent si désagréablement le nerf olfactif!

Les hommes ont le teint d’un brun jaunâtre et il est blanc chez les femmes, autant qu’on peut en juger. D’habitude, ces coquettes se couvrent le visage d’une baudruche fixée à la colle et se fardent d’un rouge de varech mélangé de graisse de poisson.

Quant à l’habillement, il se compose de peaux teintes en jaune avec l’écorce du saule, de chemises en toile de Russie ou de Boukhara, de pantalons que revêtent les deux sexes. À tout prendre, les Kamtchadales, sous ce rapport, seraient aisément confondus avec les habitants de l’Asie septentrionale.

Au surplus, les coutumes locales, la manière de vivre sont les mêmes qu’en Sibérie sous la puissante administration moscovite, et c’est la religion orthodoxe que professe la population.

Il convient d’ajouter que, grâce à la salubrité du climat, les Kamtchadales jouissent d’une santé excellente, et les maladies sont rares dans le pays.

“Les médecins n’y feraient pas fortune!” dut se dire le docteur Filhiol, en voyant ces hommes, ces femmes, doués d’une remarquable vigueur, d’une souplesse peu ordinaire, dues à la pratique constante des exercices physiques, et qui ne grisonnent jamais avant l’âge de soixante ans.

Du reste, la population de Pétropavlovsk se montrait bienveillante, hospitalière, et, s’il y a un défaut à lui reprocher, c’est de n’aimer que le plaisir.

Et, en réalité, pourquoi s’astreindre au travail, lorsqu’on peut se nourrir à peu de frais? Le poisson, le saumon surtout, sans parler des dauphins, abonde sur ce littoral, et les chiens eux-mêmes s’en nourrissent presque exclusivement. Ces chiens maigres et robustes, on les emploie au tirage des traîneaux. Un instinct très sûr leur permet de s’orienter au milieu de si fréquentes tempêtes de neige. À noter que les Kamtchadales ne sont pas seulement pêcheurs. Les quadrupèdes ne manquent point, zibelines, hermines, loutres, rennes, loups, moutons sauvages, dont la chasse est assez fructueuse.

Les ours noirs se rencontrent également en grand nombre dans les montagnes de la presqu’île. Aussi redoutables que leurs congénères de la baie d’Okhotsk, il faut prendre certaines précautions. Lorsqu’on s’aventure aux environs de Pétropavlovsk, des agressions sont toujours à craindre.

La capitale du Kamtchatka ne comptait pas alors plus de onze cents habitants. Sous Nicolas Ier, elle fut entourée de fortifications que, pendant la guerre de 1855, les flottes combinées anglo-françaises détruisirent en partie. Ces fortifications se relèveront, sans doute, car Pétropavlovsk est un point stratégique de grande importance, et il importe de garantir cette superbe baie d’Avatcha contre toute attaque.

L’équipage du Saint-Enoch s’occupa aussi de refaire la provision de bois en vue d’une longue traversée, et pour le cas où l’on pêcherait quelque baleine. Mais se procurer ce combustible sur le littoral du Kamtchatka ne fut pas aussi facile que sur le littoral de la mer d’Okhotsk.

Les hommes durent s’éloigner de trois ou quatre milles pour se rendre à une forêt qui couvre les premières rampes du volcan de Koroatski. Il y eut donc nécessité d’organiser un transport par traîneaux attelés de chiens, afin de rapporter le bois à bord.

Dès le 6 octobre, maître Cabidoulin, le charpentier Thomas et six matelots, munis de scies et de haches, montèrent dans un traîneau, loué par le capitaine Bourcart, et que dirigeait son conducteur indigène avec l’adresse d’un véritable moujik.

Au sortir de la ville, le traîneau suivit un chemin, plutôt sentier que route, qui sinuait entre les champs d’avoine et d’orge. Puis il s’engagea à travers de vastes pâturages dont la dernière coupe venait d’être faite et qu’arrosaient nombre de creeks. Ce trajet rapidement enlevé par les chiens, la forêt fut atteinte vers sept heures et demie.

Ce n’était, à vrai dire, qu’une futaie de pins, de mélèzes et autres arbres résineux à verdure permanente. Une douzaine de baleiniers auraient eu peine à s’y approvisionner à leur suffisance.

Aussi le charpentier Thomas de dire:

“Décidément, ce n’est point le Kamtchatka qui ferait bouillir les cabousses!…

— Il y a là plus de bois que nous n’en brûlerons…, répondit maître Cabidoulin.

— Et pourquoi?…

— Parce que les baleines sont allées au diable, et il est bien inutile de couper des arbres quand on n’aura pas de feu à entretenir sous les pots!…

— Soit, reprit le charpentier, mais d’autres ne sont pas de cet avis et comptent encore sur quelques coups de harpon!”

En effet, à cet endroit, une équipe travaillait sur la lisière du sentier.

C’étaient précisément une demi-douzaine de matelots du Repton qui, depuis la veille, avaient commencé cette besogne sous la direction du second, Strok. Peut-être le navire anglais devait-il faire voile pour Vancouver comme le Saint-Enoch?…

Après tout, n’y eût-il là qu’une centaine d’arbres, les deux baleiniers en auraient leur suffisance. Les hommes ne viendraient donc pas à se disputer une racine ou une branche. Ni la cabousse de l’Anglais, ni la cabousse du Français ne chômeraient, faute de combustible.

Au surplus, par prudence, le charpentier ne conduisit pas son équipe du côté occupé par les gens du Repton. On ne s’était pas fréquenté sur mer, on ne se fréquenterait pas sur terre. Avec juste raison, M. Bourcart avait recommandé, le cas échéant, d’éviter tout contact entre les deux équipages. Aussi les matelots du Saint-Enoch se mirent-ils au travail à l’autre extrémité du sentier, et, dès le premier jour, deux stères de bois furent rapportés à bord.

Mais il arriva ceci: le dernier jour, malgré les conseils du capitaine Bourcart, les équipes du Repton et du Saint-Enoch finirent par se rencontrer et se quereller à propos d’un arbre.

Les Anglais n’étaient point endurants, les Français pas davantage, et on ne se trouvait là ni en France ni en Angleterre, — terrain neutre, s’il en fût.

Bientôt, des propos malséants commencèrent à s’échanger, et des propos aux coups il n’y a pas loin entre matelots de nationalité différente. On le sait, la rancune de l’équipage du Saint-Enoch datait déjà de quelques mois.

Or, pendant la dispute que ni maître Cabidoulin ni Thomas ne purent empêcher, le matelot Germinet fut brutalement poussé par le charpentier du Repton. Cet être grossier, à demi ivre de whisky et de gin, vomit toute la série d’injures qui sortent si abondamment d’une bouche saxonne.

Aussitôt les deux équipes de s’avancer l’une vers l’autre. Il ne parut pas, d’ailleurs, que le second Strok fit le moindre effort pour retenir les siens, et peut-être allait-on en venir aux mains.

En premier lieu, Germinet, n’étant pas d’humeur à garder la bourrade qu’il avait reçue, sauta d’un bond sur l’Anglais, lui arracha son surouet et le piétina en s’écriant:

“Si le Repton n’a pas salué le Saint-Enoch, du moins cet English-là aura mis chapeau bas devant nous!…

— Bien envoyé!” ajoutèrent ses camarades.

De ces deux équipes en nombre égal, on ne pouvait dire laquelle l’emporterait dans la lutte. Ces matelots, dont l’animation s’accroissait, étaient armés de haches et de couteaux. S’ils se jetaient les uns sur les autres, il y aurait du sang répandu, et peut-être mort d’homme.

Aussi, tout d’abord, le charpentier et maître Cabidoulin cherchèrent-ils à calmer leurs compagnons, qui allaient prendre l’offensive. De son côté, le second Strok, comprenant la gravité d’une rixe, parvint à retenir les gens du Repton.

Bref, il n’y eut que des injures échangées en deux langues, et les Français se remirent au travail. D’ailleurs l’abattage fut terminé ce jour-là, et les équipages n’auraient plus l’occasion de se rencontrer.

Deux heures après, le tonnelier, le charpentier et leurs hommes étaient de retour à bord avec le traîneau. Et lorsque M. Bourcart apprit ce qui s’était passé:

“Heureusement, le Saint-Enoch ne tardera pas à lever l’ancre, dit-il, car cela finirait mal!”

En effet, il y avait à craindre que les matelots des deux navires de plus en plus surexcités, ne fussent amenés à se battre dans les rues de Pétropavlovsk, au risque d’être appréhendés par la police russe. Aussi, désireux d’éviter une collision et ses suites dans les cabarets, le capitaine Bourcart et le capitaine King ne donnèrent-ils plus permission de descendre à terre.

Il est vrai, le Saint-Enoch et le Repton étant mouillés à moins d’une encâblure l’un de l’autre, les provocations partaient et s’entendaient des deux bords. Donc, le mieux serait de hâter les préparatifs, d’embarquer les dernières provisions, d’appareiller le plus tôt possible, puis, une fois en mer, de ne point naviguer de conserve et surtout de ne pas se diriger vers le même port.

Entre-temps un incident se produisit qui était de nature à retarder le départ du navire français et du navire anglais.

Dans l’après-midi du 8 octobre, bien qu’il régnât une petite brise du large très favorable à la pêche, on fut très surpris de voir les chaloupes kamtchadales forcer de voile pour regagner le port. Telle avait été la précipitation de cette fuite que plusieurs rentraient sans leurs filets, abandonnés à l’ouvert de la baie d’Avatcha.

Et voici ce dont la population de Pétropavlovsk ne tarda pas à avoir connaissance:

À un demi-mille au large de la baie, toute cette flottille de pêche venait d’être frappée d’épouvante à la vue d’un monstre marin de taille gigantesque. Ce monstre glissait à la surface des eaux que sa queue battait avec une incroyable violence. Sans doute, il fallait faire la part des imaginations surexcitées, de la peur bien naturelle dont tous ces pêcheurs furent saisis. À les entendre, cet animal ne mesurait pas moins de trois cents pieds de long sur une grosseur variant de quinze à vingt, la tête pourvue d'une crinière, le corps très renflé en son milieu, et — ajoutaient quelques-uns — armé de pinces formidables comme un énorme crustacé.

Décidément, si ce n'était pas le serpent de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, et à la condition que ce ne fût pas une illusion, cette partie de mer, au large de la baie d'Avatcha, avait été ou était encore fréquentée par un de ces animaux prodigieux auxquels il ne serait plus possible d'attribuer une origine légendaire. Que ce fût une immense algue, de l'espèce de celle que le Saint-Enoch avait rencontrée au delà des Aléoutiennes, non, et pas d'erreur à ce sujet. Il s'agissait bien d'un être vivant, ainsi que l'affirmaient les cinquante ou soixante pêcheurs qui venaient de rentrer au port. D'une telle taille, il devait avoir une telle puissance qu'un bâtiment de la grandeur du Repton ou du Saint-Enoch n'aurait pu lui résister.

Et alors, M. Bourcart, ses officiers, son équipage, de se demander si ce n'était pas la présence dudit monstre dans ces parages du Pacifique-Nord qui avait provoqué la fuite des baleines, si ce n'était pas ce géant océanique qui les avait chassées de la baie Marguerite d'abord, de la mer d'Okhotsk ensuite… celui dont le capitaine de l'Iwing avait parlé et qui, après avoir traversé cette partie de l'Océan, venait d'être signalé dans les eaux kamtchadales…

Voilà ce que chacun se demandait à bord du

Saint-Enoch, et n'était-ce pas Jean-Marie Cabidoulin qui avait raison contre tout le monde en affirmant l'existence du grand serpent de mer ou autre monstrueuse bête de ce genre?…

Il y eut donc grosses et passionnées discussions à ce sujet dans le carré comme dans le poste.

Les pêcheurs, sous l’empire d’une panique, n’avaient-ils point cru voir ce qu’ils n’avaient pas vu?…

C’était l’opinion de M. Bourcart, du second, du docteur Filhiol et de maître Ollive. Quant aux deux lieutenants, ils se montraient moins affirmatifs. En ce qui concernait l’équipage, la grande majorité n’admettait point l’erreur. Pour eux, l’apparition du monstre ne faisait aucun doute.

“Après tout, dit M. Heurtaux, que ce soit vrai ou faux, que cet animal extraordinaire existe ou non, nous n’allons point remettre notre départ, je pense…

— Je n’y songe pas, répondit M. Bourcart, et il n’y a pas lieu de rien changer à nos projets.

— Que diable! s’écria Romain Allotte, le monstre, si monstrueux qu’il soit, n’avalera pas le Saint-Enoch comme fait un requin d’un quartier de lard!…

— D’ailleurs, dit le docteur Filhiol, dans l’intérêt général, mieux vaut savoir à quoi s’en tenir…

— C’est mon avis, répondit M. Bourcart, et, après-demain, nous mettrons en mer.”

Au total, on approuva la résolution du capitaine. Et quelle gloire pour le bâtiment et l’équipage qui parviendraient à purger ces parages d’un pareil monstre!

“Eh bien… vieux… dit maître Ollive au tonnelier, on partira tout de même, et si l’on s’en repent…

— Il sera trop tard… répondit Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

— Alors… il faudrait ne plus jamais naviguer?…

— Jamais.

— Ta tête déménage… vieux!…

— Avoueras-tu que, de nous deux, celui qui avait raison, c’est moi?…

— Allons donc!… répliqua maître Ollive en haussant les épaules.

— Moi… te dis-je… puisqu’il est là… le serpent de mer…

— Nous verrons bien…

— C’est tout vu!”

Et, au fond, le tonnelier se trouvait entre la crainte que devait inspirer l’apparition du monstre et la satisfaction d’avoir toujours cru à son existence.

En attendant, la terreur régnait dans cette bourgade de Pétropavlovsk. On l’imaginera volontiers, ce n’était pas cette population superstitieuse qui eût mis en doute d’abord l’arrivée de l’animal dans les eaux sibériennes. Personne n’aurait admis que les pêcheurs se fussent trompés. Ce n’étaient point des Kamtchadales qui se seraient montrés sceptiques devant les plus invraisemblables légendes de l’Océan.

Donc, les habitants ne cessaient de surveiller la baie d’Avatcha, redoutant que le terrible animal y cherchât refuge. Quelque énorme lame se soulevait-elle au large, c’était lui qui troublait l’Océan jusque dans ses profondeurs!… Quelque formidable rumeur traversait-elle l’espace, c’était lui qui battait les airs de sa puissante queue!… Et il s’avançait jusqu’au port, si, à la fois ophidien et saurien, cet amphibie s’élançait hors des eaux et se jetait sur la ville?… Il ne serait pas moins redoutable sur terre que sur mer!… Et comment lui échapper?…

Cependant le Saint-Enoch et le Repton activaient leurs préparatifs. Quelles que fussent les idées des Anglais au sujet de cet être apocalyptique, ils allaient mettre à la voile, probablement le même jour que le navire français. Puisque le capitaine King et son équipage n’hésitaient pas à partir, le capitaine Bourcart et le sien pouvaient-ils ne point suivre son exemple?…

Il résulte de là que, le 10 octobre, dans la matinée, les deux bâtiments levèrent l’ancre à la même heure pour profiter de la marée. Puis, le pavillon à la corne, servis par une petite brise de terre, ils traversèrent la baie d’Avatcha, cap à l’est, comme s’ils naviguaient de conserve.

Après tout, en prévision d’une redoutable rencontre, qui sait malgré leurs antipathies, s’ils ne seraient pas conduits à se prêter assistance?…

Quant à la population de Pétropavlovsk, en proie à l’épouvante, son seul espoir était que le monstre, après s’être acharné contre le Repton et le Saint-Enoch, s’éloignerait des eaux sibériennes!

CHAPITRE X

Coup double

Tandis que les deux navires gagnaient le large, à six ou sept encâblures l’un de l’autre, les eaux furent surveillées avec autant d’attention que d’inquiétude. Il est vrai, plus de quarante-huit heures s’étaient écoulées, et, depuis la rentrée hâtive des pêcheurs kamtchadales, la tranquillité de la baie n’avait point été troublée. Cependant la terreur des habitants de Pétropavlovsk ne devait se calmer de longtemps. Ce n’est point l’hiver qui les défendrait contre les attaques du monstre, puisque cette baie d’Avatcha n’est jamais prise par les glaces. D’ailleurs, vînt-elle à se congeler, pour peu que ledit monstre fût apte à se mouvoir sur terre comme sur mer, la bourgade n’eût pas été à l’abri de ses agressions.

Le certain, c’est que les équipages ne virent rien de suspect ni à bord du Saint-Enoch ni, sans doute, à bord du Repton. Les longues-vues s’étaient dirigées vers tous les points de l’horizon et du littoral… Pas une seule fois la surface des eaux ne révéla quelque agitation intérieure. Sous l’action de la brise, la mer se gonflait en longues houles, et c’est à peine si les lames déferlaient du côté du large.

Le Saint-Enoch, — sa conserve, également, s’il est permis de lui donner ce nom, — portait voiles hautes et basses, amures à bâbord. Le capitaine Bourcart se trouvait au vent du capitaine King, et, en lofant d’un quart, il ne tarda pas à accroître la distance qui séparait les deux navires.

Au sortir de la baie, mer absolument déserte. Ni fumées ni voiles à l’horizon. Probablement nombre de semaines s’écouleraient avant que les pêcheurs de la baie d’Avatcha voulussent se risquer au dehors. Et qui sait si ces parages du Nord-Pacifique ne seraient pas délaissés pendant toute la durée de l’hiver?…

Trois jours se passèrent. La navigation ne fut signalée par aucun incident ou accident. Les vigies du Saint-Enoch n’aperçurent rien qui indiquât la présence du géant océanique dont s’épouvantait Pétropavlovsk. Et, pourtant, elles avaient fait bonne garde, — trois harponneurs dans les barres du grand mât, du mât de misaine et du mât d’artimon.

Mais si le grand serpent de mer ne se montra point, M. Bourcart n’eut pas l’occasion, non plus, d’amener ses pirogues. Ni cachalots ni baleines. Aussi l’équipage se dépitait-il en constatant que les résultats de cette seconde campagne seraient nuls.

“En vérité, ne cessait de répéter M. Bourcart, tout cela est inexplicable!… Il y a quelque chose dont on ne peut se rendre compte! À cette époque de l’année, dans le nord du Pacifique, les souffleurs abondent d’ordinaire, et on les chasse jusqu’à la mi-novembre… Nous n’en voyons pas un seul… et même, comme s’ils avaient fui ces parages, il n’y a pas plus de baleiniers que de baleines!

— Cependant, faisait observer le docteur

Filhiol, si les cétacés ne sont pas ici, ils sont ailleurs, car je ne suppose pas que vous en soyez à croire que l’espèce ait disparu…

— À moins que le monstre ne les ait avalés jusqu’au dernier!… répondit le lieutenant Allotte…

— Ma foi, reprit M. Filhiol, en quittant Pétropavlovsk, je ne croyais guère à l’existence de cet animal extraordinaire, et maintenant je n’y crois pas du tout… Les pêcheurs ont été le jouet d’une illusion… Ils auront aperçu quelque poulpe à la surface des eaux, et leur épouvante lui aura donné des dimensions gigantesques!… Un serpent de mer long de trois cents pieds, c’est une légende qu’il aurait fallu envoyer à l’ancien Constitutionnel!”

Toutefois, telle n’était pas l’opinion à bord du Saint-Enoch. Les novices, la plupart des matelots, écoutaient le tonnelier qui ne cessait de les effrayer par ses histoires à faire dresser les cheveux sur la tête des chauves… comme le disait le charpentier Férut. Et pourtant, à force de ne rien voir, ne finirait-on pas par ne rien croire?…

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin ne se rendait pas. À son avis, les pêcheurs de Pétropavlovsk n’avaient point fait erreur. Le monstre marin existait en réalité, et non dans l’imagination de ces pauvres gens. Le tonnelier n’avait pas eu besoin de cette nouvelle rencontre pour être édifié, et aux quelques plaisanteries qui lui furent faites, ce jour-là, il répondit:

“Le Saint-Enoch n’aurait pas connaissance de l’animal, il ne le trouverait pas sur sa route, que cela ne changerait rien aux choses… Les Kamtchadales l’ont vu, d’autres le verront encore et ne s’en tireront peut-être pas à bon compte… Et je suis certain que nous mêmes…

— Quand?… demanda maître Ollive.

— Plus tôt que tu ne penses, déclara le tonnelier, et pour notre malheur…

— Bouteille de tafia, vieux, que nous n’en verrons pas même le bout de la queue, de ton serpent, avant l’arrivée du Saint-Enoch à Vancouver?…

— Tu peux bien en parier deux… et trois… et la demi-douzaine…

— Pourquoi?…

— Parce que tu n’auras jamais à les payer… ni à Victoria… ni ailleurs!”

Et, dans l’esprit de cet entêté de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, sa réponse signifiait que le Saint-Enoch ne reviendrait pas de ce dernier voyage.

Pendant la matinée du 13 octobre, les deux navires se perdirent de vue. Depuis vingt-quatre heures, ils ne suivaient plus la même direction, et le Repton, ayant serré le vent, se trouvait plus haut en latitude.

Le temps ne cessait de se maintenir avec une mer assez belle. La brise variait du sud-ouest au nord-ouest, par conséquent très favorable à cette navigation vers les terres d’Amérique. Les observations de M. Bourcart le mettaient alors à quatre cents lieues du littoral asiatique, c’est-à-dire environ au tiers de la traversée.

Le Pacifique était absolument désert, depuis que le baleinier anglais gagnait vers le nord. Aussi loin que se prolongeait le regard, rien n’apparaissait sur toute l’étendue des eaux, à peine troublées par le sillage. Les oiseaux de grand vol ne se transportaient plus à cette distance de la côte. Si le vent tenait, le Saint-Enoch ne tarderait pas à prendre connaissance des Aléoutiennes.

Il était à remarquer que, depuis le départ, les lignes mises à la traîne ne ramenaient aucun poisson. Aussi la nourriture se réduisait-elle aux seuls approvisionnements du bord. D’habitude, cependant, en cette partie de l’Océan, les navires font bonne pêche. C’est par centaines qu’ils prennent des bonites, des congres, des roussettes, des anges, des spares, des dorades et autres espèces. Ils naviguent même au milieu des bandes de squales, de marsouins, de dauphins, d’espadons. Or, — ce qui ne laissait pas d’être singulier, — il semblait que tout être vivant eût fui ces parages.

Du reste, les vigies ne signalaient point la présence d’un animal exceptionnel par sa forme ou ses dimensions. Et, certes, il n’aurait pas échappé aux yeux vigilants de Jean-Marie

Cabidoulin. Assis sur l’emplanture du beaupré, s’abritant de sa main afin de mieux voir, toujours en observation, il ne répondait même pas à qui lui adressait la parole. Ce que les matelots entendaient murmurer entre ses dents, c’était pour lui, non pour les autres.

Vers trois heures, dans l’après-midi du 13, à l’extrême étonnement des officiers et de l’équipage, voici que ce cri tomba des barres du grand mât:

“Baleine par tribord derrière!”

Le harponneur Durut venait d’apercevoir un cétacé au large du Saint-Enoch. En effet, en direction du nord-est, une masse noirâtre se berçait aux ondulations de la houle.

Aussitôt toutes les longues-vues de se porter vers la masse en question…

Et, d’abord, le harponneur ne s’était-il pas trompé? S’agissait-il d’une baleine ou de la coque d’un bâtiment naufragé?… Et de part et d’autre s’échangèrent les propos suivants:

“Si c’est une baleine, fit observer le lieutenant

Allotte, elle est absolument immobile…

— Peut-être, répondit le lieutenant Coquebert, se prépare-t-elle à plonger?…

— À moins qu’elle ne soit endormie…, répliqua M. Heurtaux.

— Dans tous les cas, reprit Romain Allotte, sachons ce qui en est, si le capitaine veut donner des ordres…”

M. Bourcart ne répondait pas et, sa longue-vue aux yeux, ne cessait d’observer l’animal…

Près de lui, appuyé contre la rambarde, le docteur Filhiol regardait avec une égale attention, et finit par dire:

“Il se pourrait que ce fût encore une de ces baleines mortes comme nous en avons déjà rencontré…

— Morte?… s’écria le lieutenant Allotte…

— Et même que ce ne soit pas une baleine…, ajouta le capitaine Bourcart.

— Que serait-ce donc?… demanda le lieutenant Coquebert.

— Une épave…, un navire abandonné…”

Il eût été d’ailleurs difficile de se prononcer, car la masse flottait à non moins de six milles du Saint-Enoch.

“Capitaine?… reprit le lieutenant Allotte.

— Oui”, répondit M. Bourcart, qui comprenait l’impatience du jeune officier.

Aussitôt il commanda de mettre la barre dessous et de raidir les écoutes. Le navire, changeant légèrement sa direction, mit le cap au nord-est.

Avant quatre heures, le Saint-Enoch n’était plus qu’à la distance d’un demi-mille.

Impossible de se tromper, ce n’était pas une coque en dérive, c’était bien un cétacé de grande taille dont on ne pouvait encore dire qu’il fût mort ou vivant.

Et alors M. Heurtaux de laisser retomber sa longue-vue en déclarant:

“Si cette baleine-là est endormie, nous n’aurons pas grand’peine à la piquer!”

Les pirogues du second et des deux lieutenants furent amenées sur l’animal. S’il était vivant, on lui donnerait la chasse; s’il était mort, on le remorquerait au Saint-Enoch. Il rendrait sans doute une centaine de barils, car M. Bourcart en avait rarement rencontré d’une telle taille.

Les trois embarcations démarrèrent, tandis que le bâtiment mettait en panne.

Cette fois, les officiers, laissant de côté tout amour-propre, ne cherchèrent point à se devancer. Voiles hissées, les pirogues marchèrent de conserve et n’armèrent les avirons qu’un quart de mille avant d’accoster la baleine. Elles se séparèrent alors de manière à lui couper la route, en cas qu’elle voulût prendre la fuite.

Tant de précautions n’étaient point nécessaires, et le second de crier presque aussitôt:

“Pas à craindre qu’elle s’enfuie ou s’enfonce… celle-là!…

— Ni qu’elle se réveille!… ajouta le lieutenant Coquebert. Elle est morte…

— Décidément, répliqua Romain Allotte, il n’y a plus que des baleines crevées dans ces parages!…

— Amarrons-la tout de même, répondit M. Heurtaux, car elle en vaut la peine!”

C’était un énorme baleinoptère, qui ne semblait pas être en état de décomposition avancée, et sa mort ne devait guère remonter qu’à vingt-quatre heures. Il ne se dégageait aucune fétide émanation de cette masse flottante.

Par malheur, lorsque les pirogues eurent contourné l’animal, on vit une large déchirure à son flanc gauche. Les entrailles traînaient à la surface de l’eau. Une portion de la queue manquait. La tête présentait les traces d’une forte collision, et la bouche grande ouverte était dégarnie de ses fanons, qui, décollés des gencives, avaient coulé. Quant au gras de ce corps déchiqueté et imbibé, il n’offrait plus aucune valeur.

“Dommage, dit M. Heurtaux, qu’il n’y ait rien à tirer de cette carcasse!…

— Alors, demanda le lieutenant Allotte, ce n’est pas la peine de la prendre en remorque?…

— Non, répondit le harponneur Kardek, et elle est dans un tel état que nous en laisserions la moitié en route.

— Au Saint-Enoch”, commanda M. Heurtaux.

Les trois pirogues, ayant vent debout, garnirent leurs avirons. Mais, comme le bâtiment, après avoir éventé ses voiles, se rapprochait, elles l'eurent bientôt rejoint et furent hissées à bord.

Lorsque M. Bourcart eut entendu le rapport du second:

“Ainsi, dit-il, c'était un baleinoptère?…

— Oui, monsieur Bourcart.

— Et il n'avait pas été piqué?…

— Non, certes, déclara M. Heurtaux, et des coups de harpon ne font pas de telles blessures… Il semblerait plutôt que celui-ci aurait été écrasé…

— Écrasé… par qui?…”

Il n'aurait pas fallu le demander à Jean-Marie Cabidoulin. Ce qu'il aurait répondu, on le devine.

Avait-il donc eu raison contre tous, et ces parages étaient-ils dévastés par un monstre marin de dimensions extraordinaires et de vigueur prodigieuse?…

La navigation continua, et ce n'est pas du temps que M. Bourcart aurait pu se plaindre. Jamais traversée ne fut mieux favorisée par le vent, et elle serait de courte durée. Si les conditions atmosphériques ne se modifiaient pas, le Saint-Enoch n'emploierait, pour regagner Vancouver, que les trois quarts du temps qu'il avait mis à se rendre aux Kouriles. Qu'il eût fait heureuse pêche dans ces parages, et il serait arrivé en bonne époque pour écouler son huile sur le marché de Victoria.

Par malchance, la campagne n’avait point été fructueuse ni dans la mer d’Okhotsk ni depuis le départ de Pétropavlovsk. Les hommes n’avaient pas une seule fois allumé la cabousse, et les deux tiers des barils restaient vides.

Il fallait donc faire contre mauvaise fortune bon cœur, se résigner avec l’espoir que, dans quelques mois, on se dédommagerait sur les parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande.

Aussi maître Ollive répétait-il aux novices, qui n’avaient pas l’expérience des matelots:

“Voyez-vous, les gars, c’est comme cela, le métier!… Une année on réussit, une année on ne réussit pas, et il n’y a ni à faire l’étonné ni à perdre confiance!… Ce ne sont point les baleines qui courent après le navire, c’est le navire qui court après les baleines, et quand elles ont filé au large, la fine malice est de savoir où les retrouver!… Donc approvisionnez-vous de patience… fourrez-la dans votre sac, mettez votre mouchoir par-dessus… et attendez!”

Paroles sages, s’il en fut, et mieux valait écouter maître Ollive que maître Cabidoulin, avec lequel le premier terminait invariablement ses conversations en disant:

“Bouteille de tafia tient toujours?…

— Toujours!…” répliquait le tonnelier.

En vérité, il semblait que plus on allait, plus les choses donnaient raison à Jean-Marie Cabidoulin. Si le Saint-Enoch ne rencontra plus une seule baleine, du moins des débris furent parfois aperçus à la surface de la mer, des restes de pirogues, des coques de navires en dérive. Et, ce qui était à noter, c’est que ces navires paraissaient avoir péri à la suite de collisions… S’ils avaient été abandonnés de leurs équipages, c’est qu’ils ne pouvaient plus tenir la mer.

Dans la journée du 20 octobre, la monotonie de cette traversée fut interrompue. Une occasion s’offrit enfin au Saint-Enoch de remplir une partie des barils de sa cale.

Le vent ayant un peu molli depuis la veille, M. Bourcart avait dû faire établir les voiles d’étais et les bonnettes. Un beau soleil éclairait le ciel sans nuages, et l’horizon se dessinait purement sur tout son périmètre.

Vers trois heures, le capitaine Bourcart, le docteur Filhiol et les officiers étaient en train de causer sous la tente de la dunette, lorsque ce cri retentit de nouveau:

“Baleine… baleine!”

C’était des barres du grand mât que le harponneur Ducrest venait de pousser ce cri.

“En quelle direction?… lui fut-il immédiatement demandé par le maître d’équipage.

— À trois milles sous le vent à nous.”

Nul doute, cette fois, car un jet s’élevait en cette direction au-dessus de la mer. L’animal, ayant remonté à la surface après sa plongée, c’était au moment même où s’échappait cette colonne d’air et d’eau que Ducrest l’avait aperçu. Un second jet ne tarda pas à suivre le premier.

On ne s’étonnera pas que le lieutenant Allotte eût fait à l’instant cette remarque:

“Enfin… elle n’est pas morte, celle-là!…

— Non, répliqua M. Heurtaux, et elle ne doit même pas avoir été blessée, puisqu’elle souffle blanc!…

— À la mer, les trois pirogues!” ordonna M. Bourcart.

Jamais circonstances plus favorables ne s’étaient offertes pour donner chasse, mer plate, petite brise de quoi remplir la voile des embarcations, encore plusieurs heures de jour qui permettraient de prolonger la poursuite.

En quelques minutes, les pirogues du second et des lieutenants furent à la mer avec leur armement habituel. Dans chacune prirent place MM. Heurtaux, Coquebert, Allotte, un matelot à la barre, quatre aux avirons, les harponneurs Kardek, Durut et Ducrest à l’avant. Puis elles prirent rapidement la direction du nord-est.

M. Heurtaux recommanda aux deux lieutenants d’observer une extrême prudence. Il importait de ne point effaroucher la baleine et de la surprendre. Elle semblait être de forte taille, et, parfois, l’eau, battue d’un formidable coup de sa queue, rejaillissait à une grande hauteur.

Le Saint-Enoch sous petite voilure, huniers et trinquette, se rapprochait lentement.

Les trois pirogues marchaient sur la même ligne et, expresse recommandation de M. Bourcart, ne devaient point chercher à se dépasser. Mieux valait qu’elles fussent réunies au moment d’attaquer l’animal.

Donc, le lieutenant Allotte dut modérer son impatience. Ce ne fut pas sans peine, et, de temps en temps, M. Heurtaux était obligé de lui crier:

“Pas si vite… pas si vite, Allotte, et restez dans le rang!”

Lorsque la baleine avait été aperçue, elle émergeait à trois milles environ du navire, — distance que les embarcations enlevèrent aisément en une demi-heure.

Les voiles furent alors amenées, et les mats couchés sous les bancs, de manière à ne point gêner la manœuvre. Chaque harponneur avait à sa disposition deux harpons, dont l’un de rechange. Les lances bien apointées, les louchets bien aiguisés, étaient à portée de la main. On s’assura que les lignes, lovées dans leurs bailles, ne s’embrouilleraient pas à travers l’engougeure garnie de plomb de l’avant, et seraient facilement tournées sur le montant fixé derrière le tillac. Si l’animal, une fois amarré, fuyait à la surface de la mer ou plongeait dans ses profondeurs, on lui filerait de la ligne.

C’était un baleinoptère ne mesurant pas moins de vingt-huit à vingt-neuf mètres, de l’espèce des culammaks. Avec des nageoires pectorales longues de trois mètres et une caudale triangulaire de six à sept, il devait peser près de cent tonnes.

Ce culammak, ne donnant aucun signe d’inquiétude, se laissait aller aux balancements d’une houle allongée, son énorme tête tournée au large des embarcations. Pour sûr, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin eût déclaré qu’on en retirerait au minimum deux cents barils d’huile.

Les trois pirogues, une sur chaque flanc, la dernière en arrière, prête à se porter à droite ou à gauche, étaient arrivées sans avoir donné l’éveil.

Durut et Ducrest, debout sur le tillac, balançaient le harpon, attendant le moment de le lancer au-dessous des nageoires de la baleine, de manière à la blesser mortellement. Si elle était atteinte d’un double coup, sa capture n’en serait que plus certaine. En cas qu’une des lignes vînt à se rompre, on la tiendrait du moins avec l’autre, sans craindre de la perdre pendant la durée de son plongeon.

Mais, au moment où la pirogue du lieutenant Allotte allait l’accoster, le culammak, avant que le harponneur eût pu le piquer, se retourna brusquement au risque d’écraser l’embarcation, puis sonda, après avoir frappé la mer d’un si violent coup de queue que l’eau rejaillit à vingt mètres.

Aussitôt les matelots de s’écrier:

“Satanée bête!…

— La voilà en fuite!…

— Pas même un coup de lance dans le gras!…

— Et pas de ligne à lui filer!…

— Et quand remontera-t-elle?…

— Et où remontera-t-elle?…”

Ce qu’il y avait de certain, c’est que ce ne serait pas avant une demi-heure, temps égal à celui qui s’était écoulé depuis son premier souffle.

Après le tumultueux remous produit par le coup de queue, la mer était redevenue calme. Les trois pirogues venaient de se rejoindre. M.

Heurtaux et les deux lieutenants étaient bien résolus à ne point abandonner une si belle proie.

Maintenant, il n’y avait qu’à attendre la remontée du culammak qu’il était impossible de suivre à bout de ligne. Ce qu’il y avait à désirer, c’était qu’il se relevât sous le vent, afin que les pirogues pussent le poursuivre à l’aviron et à la voile.

Du reste, aucun autre cétacé ne se montrait en ces parages.

Il était un peu plus de quatre heures, lorsque le culammak apparut de nouveau. À cet instant, s’échappèrent deux jets énormes qui sifflèrent comme une mitraille.

Un demi-mille seulement le séparait des pirogues et sous le vent.

“Hissez les voiles, armez les avirons, et cap dessus…”, cria M. Heurtaux.

Une minute après, les embarcations filaient dans la direction indiquée.

Cependant l’animal continuait à s’éloigner vers le nord-est et, son dos émergeant, nageait avec une certaine vitesse.

La brise ayant quelque peu fraîchi, les pirogues ne laissaient pas de gagner sensiblement sur lui.

De son côté, le capitaine Bourcart, craignant que celles-ci ne fussent entraînées très loin, fit orienter les voiles, afin de ne point les perdre de vue. La route qu’il ferait au nord-est, ce serait cela d’épargné en temps et en fatigues, lorsque les embarcations chercheraient à regagner le bord avec l’animal à la remorque.

La chasse se poursuivit dans ces conditions. Le culammak fuyait toujours, et les harponneurs ne parvenaient pas à l’approcher d’assez près pour le piquer.

Il est certain que les pirogues, réduites à leurs seuls avirons n’auraient pu se tenir si longtemps à cette allure. Heureusement le vent leur vint en aide, et la mer se prêtait à une marche rapide. Toutefois, la nuit n’obligerait-elle pas M. Heurtaux et ses hommes à revenir au Saint-Enoch?… Ils n’étaient point assez munis de vivres pour rester au large jusqu’au lendemain…

Si le baleinoptère n’avait pas été rejoint avant la tombée du jour, force serait de renoncer à continuer la chasse.

Or, il semblait bien qu’il en serait ainsi, et il était près de six heures et demie, lorsque le harponneur Durut, resté debout sur le tillac, cria:

“Navire par l’avant.”

M. Heurtaux se redressa au moment où les lieutenants Coquebert et Allotte cherchaient à apercevoir le bâtiment signalé.

Un trois-mâts, tout dessus, serrant le vent d’aussi près que possible, venait d’apparaître à quatre milles en direction du nord-est.

Que ce fût un baleinier, on n’en pouvait douter. Peut-être même ses vigies avaient-elles vu le culammak qui se trouvait à mi-chemin entre les pirogues et lui.

Soudain, Romain Allotte de s’écrier en baissant sa longue-vue:

“C’est le Repton…

— Oui… le Repton!… répondit M. Heurtaux. Il semble vouloir nous couper la route…

— Avec ses amures à bâbord… ajouta Yves Coquebert.

— C’est pour venir nous saluer!” répliqua ironiquement le lieutenant Allotte.

Huit jours s’étaient écoulés depuis que le bâtiment anglais et le bâtiment français s’étaient séparés, après avoir quitté ensemble Pétropavlovsk. Le Repton avait mis le cap plus au nord, probablement dans l’intention de gagner la mer de Behring, et voici qu’il reparaissait sans avoir doublé les extrêmes pointes des îles Aléoutiennes.

Le capitaine King voulait-il donc, lui aussi, courir sur l’animal que les pirogues du Saint-Enoch poursuivaient depuis trois longues heures?…

Il y eut certitude à cet égard, lorsque le harponneur Kardek dit à M. Heurtaux:

“Les voici qui mettent leurs embarcations à la mer…

— Évidemment… c’est pour amarrer la baleine…, déclara le lieutenant Coquebert.

— Ils ne l’auront pas!” répondit résolument Romain Allotte.

Et tous ses compagnons de faire chorus, ce qui ne saurait surprendre.

Cependant, bien que la mer commençât à s’obscurcir, les pirogues du Repton filaient à toute vitesse vers le culammak, maintenant immobile, comme s’il hésitait à fuir du côté de l’est ou du côté de l’ouest. Quant aux matelots du Saint-Enoch, ils forçaient sur leurs avirons pour les devancer, car, le vent étant tombé, il avait fallu amener les voiles.

“Hardi, les enfants, hardi!…” répétaient M. Heurtaux et les lieutenants, qui stimulaient leurs hommes de la voix et du geste.

Et ceux-ci de crier en souquant ferme:

“Non!… ils ne l’auront pas… ils ne l’auront pas!”

En fait, la distance à franchir était à peu près égale. Il y avait tout lieu de croire que les pirogues atteindraient le baleinoptère en même temps, à moins qu’il ne disparût dans une dernière plongée.

Cela va sans dire, il ne s’agissait plus de rester dans le rang ainsi que l’avait ordonné M. Heurtaux. Chaque embarcation poussait pour son propre compte. Comme d’habitude, le lieutenant Allotte se maintenait en avant et ne cessait de répéter:

“Hardi, mes enfants, hardi!”

De leur côté, les Anglais gagnaient rapidement et même le culammak tendait à se rapprocher d’eux.

D’ailleurs, avant dix minutes, la question serait résolue: ou l’animal aurait été piqué, ou il aurait disparu sous les eaux.

À quelques instants de là, les six pirogues se trouvèrent en face les unes des autres à moins d’une encâblure. Qu’allait-il arriver, étant donnée l’animation des équipages?…

“Mais cette bête-là veut donc porter son huile aux English!” s’écria un des matelots de la pirogue Coquebert, en la voyant évoluer vers le Repton.

Non; le culammak s’arrêta lorsque les embarcations n’en étaient plus qu’à une centaine de pieds. Afin d’échapper plus sûrement peut-être se préparait-il à s’enfoncer…

En ce moment, Ducrest, de la pirogue Allotte, brandissant son harpon, le lança, tandis que le harponneur de la pirogue Strok, du Repton, lançait le sien.

Le culammak fut atteint. Un jet de sang jaillit de ses évents. Il souffla rouge, battit la mer d’un dernier coup de queue, et, après s’être retourné sur le ventre, demeura immobile.

Mais, dans ce coup double, quel était celui des deux harponneurs qui l’avait frappé mortellement?…

CHAPITRE XI

Entre Anglais et Français

Si jamais les dispositions hostiles qui surexcitaient les deux équipages du Repton et du Saint-Enoch eurent l’occasion de se manifester, ce fut bien, on l’avouera, en la présente circonstance.

Que la baleine eût été d’abord aperçue par les vigies du Saint-Enoch, que les Français se fussent les premiers mis à sa poursuite, cela ne pouvait être contesté. Il était de toute évidence que, trois heures auparavant, les pirogues du second et des lieutenants avaient été amenées en vue de chasser le culammak. S’il eût été frappé sur place, on ne l’aurait jamais signalé à bord du bâtiment anglais, qui ne se montrait pas encore au large. Mais il avait fui dans la direction du nord-est, là où, deux heures après, allait apparaître le Repton. Aussi le capitaine King, bien que l’animal fût déjà poursuivi par les embarcations françaises, avait-il mis ses pirogues à la mer. Toutefois, si les deux harpons avaient frappé simultanément celui de l’Anglais n’avait touché le culammak que dans la partie arrière du corps, à la naissance de la queue, tandis que celui de Ducrest avait atteint la nageoire de gauche, pénétré jusqu’au cœur et forcé le culammak à souffler rouge.

Du reste, en admettant qu’il fût juste de faire égale part entre les deux bâtiments, chacun d’eux n’aurait qu’à se féliciter de cette capture. Ni le Saint-Enoch ni le Repton n’avaient capturé pendant cette dernière saison un baleinoptère qui pût être comparé à celui-ci.

Il va de soi que, chez les Français comme chez les Anglais, personne n’entendait consentir à un partage. Sans doute, l’un des harpons avait fait une blessure telle que la mort s’en était suivie, — coup très heureux et très rare, — mais l’autre avait également atteint l’animal.

Il résulte de cette circonstance que, au moment où les hommes de M. Heurtaux prenaient leurs dispositions pour passer une remorque autour de la queue, les hommes de M. Strok se préparaient à les imiter.

Et alors, les Anglais, en une sorte de baragouin que les Français comprenaient suffisamment, de s’écrier:

“Au large… les canots du Saint-Enoch, au large!”

Aussitôt, le lieutenant Allotte de répliquer:

“Au large vous-mêmes!…

— Cette baleine nous appartient de droit…, déclara le second du Repton.

— Non… à nous… et elle est de bonne prise!… déclara M. Heurtaux.

— Amarre… amarre!” commanda M. Strok, ordre qui fut à l’instant répété par le second du Saint-Enoch.

En même temps, la pirogue du lieutenant Allotte accosta l’énorme bête et l’amarra, ce qui fut fait aussi par les matelots du Repton.

Et si les trois pirogues des Anglais et les trois pirogues des Français se mettaient à haler, non seulement l’animal ne serait amené ni au Saint-Enoch ni au Repton, mais les remorques ne tarderaient pas à se rompre sous cette double traction en sens contraire.

C’est bien ce qui arriva, après plusieurs efforts simultanés.

Alors, d’accord en cela sur ce point, les pirogues renoncèrent à cette besogne, manœuvrèrent pour se rejoindre, et se trouvèrent presque bord à bord.

Dans la disposition d’esprit où ils étaient, il y avait lieu de croire que les équipages en viendraient aux coups. Les armes ne manquaient pas, harpons de rechange, lances, louchets, sans compter le couteau de poche dont un matelot ne se sépare guère. Le conflit dégénérerait en bataille. Il y aurait effusion de sang, en attendant que les navires eussent pris fait et cause pour leurs pirogues.

À ce moment, le second Strok, d’un geste menaçant, d’une voix irritée, s’adressant à M.

Heurtaux, dont il parlait couramment la langue, dit:

“Avez-vous donc la prétention de contester que cette baleine doive nous appartenir?… Je vous préviens que nous ne souffrirons pas…

— Et sur quoi fondez-vous votre prétention?… répliqua M. Heurtaux, après avoir fait signe aux deux lieutenants de le laisser parler.

— Vous demandez sur quoi elle est fondée?… reprit le second du Repton.

— Je le demande!…

— Sur ce que la baleine venait de notre côté, et vous n’auriez pu la rejoindre, si nous ne lui avions barré la route…

— Et moi, j’affirme que, depuis plus de deux heures, nos pirogues avaient été amenées sur elle…

— Après les nôtres, monsieur!… déclara M. Heurtaux.

— Non…, s’écria M. Strok.

— En tout cas, c’est à bord du Saint-Enoch qu’elle a été signalée pour la première fois, alors que votre navire n’était pas même en vue…

— Et qu’importe, puisque vous n’aviez pu l’approcher d’assez près pour la piquer!…

— Tout cela, des mots!… répliqua M. Heurtaux, qui commençait à s’échauffer. Après tout, une baleine n’est pas à celui qui la voit, mais à celui qui la tue…

— Notre harpon, ne l’oubliez pas, a été lancé avant le vôtre!… affirma M. Strok.

— Oui… oui! crièrent les Anglais, qui brandissaient leurs armes.

— Non… non!…” ripostèrent les Français en menaçant les hommes du Repton.

Cette fois, M. Heurtaux n’aurait pu leur imposer silence. Peut-être même ne serait-il pas maître de les retenir…

En effet, les hommes étaient prêts à tomber les uns sur les autres.

M. Heurtaux, voulant tenter un dernier effort, dit au second du Repton:

“En admettant, ce qui n’est pas, que votre harpon eût été lancé le premier, il n’a pu faire une blessure mortelle, et c’est le nôtre qui a causé la mort…

— Cela est plus facile à dire qu’à prouver!…

— Ainsi… vous ne voulez pas céder?…

— Non!” hurlèrent les Anglais.

Arrivés à ce degré de colère, les équipages n’avaient plus qu’à se battre.

Une circonstance allait mettre les matelots du Repton en état d’infériorité, sinon pour commencer, du moins pour continuer la lutte. À en venir aux mains, les Français auraient fini par les obliger à battre en retraite.

En effet, le Repton, déhalé sous le vent, n’avait pu se rapprocher avec cette faible brise. Il était encore à un mille et demi, tandis que le Saint-Enoch mettait en panne à quelques encablures des pirogues. C’est bien ce qu’avait remarqué M. Strok, et ce qui le fit hésiter à entamer la bataille.

Et, au total, en gens très pratiques, les Anglais comprirent qu’ils ne pouvaient réussir à l’emporter dans ces conditions désavantageuses. Tout l’équipage du Saint-Enoch tomberait sur eux, et ils seraient battus avant que le Repton eût pu leur venir en aide. D’ailleurs, le capitaine Bourcart lançait déjà sa première pirogue à la mer, et c’était un renfort d’une dizaine d’hommes prêt à arriver.

Aussi M. Strok de commander à ses matelots, qui se voyaient mal pris:

“À bord!”

Toutefois, avant d’abandonner la baleine, il ajouta, et d’un ton où la colère le disputait au dépit:

“Nous nous retrouverons!…

— Quand il vous plaira”, répondit M. Heurtaux.

Et ses compagnons ne se gênaient pas pour répéter:

“Enfoncés… les English… enfoncés!”

Les pirogues de M. Strok, à force d’avirons, se dirigèrent vers le Repton, distant alors d’un bon mille.

Restait à savoir si M. Strok n’avait proféré que de vaines menaces, ou si l’affaire n’allait pas se régler définitivement entre les deux navires.

Le capitaine Bourcart, qui avait embarqué dans la quatrième pirogue, survint en ce moment.

Il fut aussitôt mis au courant, et, après avoir approuvé la conduite de M. Heurtaux, il se contenta de répondre:

“Si le Repton vient “raisonner” le Saint-Enoch, le Saint-Enoch lui donnera des raisons!… En attendant, mes amis, amarrez la baleine.”

Cela se rapportait si bien au sentiment général, que l’équipage poussa de bruyants hurrahs que les Anglais purent entendre. Ah! le Repton ne les avait pas salués!… Eh bien, ils le saluaient de plaisanteries non moins salées que les eaux du Pacifique!

Le baleinoptère fut alors pris en remorque, et tel était son poids que les matelots des quatre embarcations durent souquer vigoureusement pour le conduire au Saint-Enoch.

Maître Ollive, le charpentier Férut, le forgeron Thomas s’étaient portés sur le gaillard d’avant. Quant à Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, son avis fut qu’on tirerait deux cents barils du culammak. Avec ce que le Saint-Enoch avait déjà dans sa cale, cela lui ferait une demi-cargaison.

“Eh bien, qu’en dis-tu, vieux?… demanda maître Ollive en interpellant le tonnelier.

— Je dis que ce sera de la bonne huile à filer pendant la prochaine tempête…, répliqua Cabidoulin.

— Allons donc!… il ne nous manquera pas un seul baril en arrivant à Vancouver!… Bouteille va toujours?…

— Bouteille!”

Un des novices venait de piquer sept heures et demie du soir. Il était trop tard pour virer la baleine. On se contenta donc de l’amarrer contre le flanc du bâtiment. Le lendemain, dès l’aube, l’équipage procéderait au dépècement, puis à la fonte du gras, et il ne faudrait pas moins de deux jours pleins pour mener cette besogne à bonne fin.

En somme, il convenait de se féliciter. La traversée de Pétropavlovsk à Victoria permettrait à M. Bourcart de ramener une demi-cargaison. C’était mieux qu’on ne pouvait espérer en ces circonstances. Comme il était probable que les cours n’avaient pas fléchi sur le marché de Victoria, cette seconde campagne donnerait encore d’assez beaux bénéfices.

D’autre part, le Saint-Enoch n’avait fait aucune mauvaise rencontre. Au lieu du monstre marin signalé par les pêcheurs kamtchadales, c’était ce magnifique culammak qui était venu se faire amarrer!…

La nuit close, ses voiles sur les cargues, le trois-mâts n’eut plus qu’à attendre le lever du soleil.

Avec le soir, la brise se sentait à peine. La mer était au calme blanc. Le roulis s’accentuait si peu qu’il n’y avait point à craindre pour les amarres qui retenaient la baleine. Quelle perte, et quels regrets, en cas que, pendant la nuit, elle s'en fût allée par le fond!

Il y eut à prendre quelques mesures de précaution ou tout au moins de surveillance. Qui sait si le capitaine King ne voudrait pas donner suite aux menaces de son second, et tenter d'enlever le culammak en attaquant le Saint-Enoch?…

"Cette agression est-elle réellement à craindre?… demanda le docteur Filhiol.

— Ma foi…, lieutenant Coquebert, avec des Anglais on ne sait jamais sur quoi compter…

— Ce qui est certain, ajouta M. Heurtaux, c'est qu'ils sont partis fort en colère…

— Je le comprends, s'écria le lieutenant Allotte. Un si beau morceau qui leur échappe!…

— Aussi, reprit M. Heurtaux, je ne serais pas autrement surpris s'ils venaient…

— Qu'ils viennent!… répondit le capitaine Bourcart. Nous serons prêts à les recevoir!"

Et, s'il parlait ainsi, c'est qu'il était sûr de tout son équipage. Ce ne serait pas la première fois que des disputes auraient surgi entre baleiniers au sujet d'un coup de harpon contesté, — disputes souvent aggravées des plus regrettables violences.

Une sévère surveillance fut donc établie à bord du Saint-Enoch et les hommes de quart firent bonne garde. Si, faute de vent, le Repton aurait eu grand'peine à rejoindre le Saint-Enoch, il pouvait envoyer ses embarcations, et il convenait de ne point se laisser surprendre à la faveur de la nuit.

Du reste, ce qui assura la sécurité du navire français, c'est que, vers dix heures, une brume assez épaisse enveloppa ces parages. Il eût été malaisé de retrouver la place où le Saint-Enoch se tenait en panne.

Les heures se passèrent sans alerte. Lorsque le soleil revint, le brouillard, qui ne se dissipa point, aurait caché le Repton même à la distance d'un demi-mille. Mais peut-être les Anglais n'avaient-ils pas renoncé à mettre leurs menaces à exécution, et tenteraient-ils une attaque, si les brumes venaient à se lever. Ce ne serait pas le vent qui les aiderait cependant. Aucun souffle ne traversait l'espace, et l'état atmosphérique ne se modifia pas de toute la matinée. L'équipage du

Saint-Enoch put se remettre aux travaux du bord sans être troublé.

Dès l'aube, — 21 octobre, — M. Bourcart avait fait procéder au virage de la baleine, avec ordre de pousser vivement la besogne. Deux garants d'appareils furent passés, et les hommes se relayèrent au guindeau.

Préalablement, maître Ollive, aidé de quelques matelots, avait bagué une chaîne sur la nageoire du dehors, et l'animal tourna sur lui-même, ce qui devait en faciliter le dépècement. La tête fut alors détachée, et, non sans grands efforts, il fallut la mater pour la déposer sur le pont. On s'occupa d'en couper les lippes, la langue, les fanons, opération qui devint facile, après qu'elle eut été divisée en quatre morceaux.

La cabousse allumée, le bois ne manquant pas grâce à l'approvisionnement embarqué à Pétropavlovsk, le cuisinier put entretenir le feu sous les deux pots.

Ce fut dans ces pots que l'on fondit d'abord le gras retiré de la tête, de la langue et des lippes, qui est de qualité plus fine. Puis on procéda au dépeçage du corps par morceaux de huit à neuf brasses, réduits à deux pieds pour être introduits dans la cabousse.

Toute la matinée et une partie de l'après-midi avaient été consacrées à cet ouvrage. C'est à peine si, vers trois heures, le brouillard s'était quelque peu éclairci. Les vapeurs, à l'état vésiculaire, empêchaient le regard de s'étendre à plus d'un demi-mille autour du Saint-Enoch.

Du Repton, aucune nouvelle. Il n'aurait pu se rapprocher, faute de brise, à moins d'être remorqué par ses embarcations, ce qui eût occasionné une grosse fatigue.

Cependant M. Bourcart demeura toujours sur le qui-vive. La pirogue du lieutenant Allotte fut même envoyée en reconnaissance vers le nord-est. Elle revint sans avoir rien à signaler, ne s'étant pas aventurée d'une demi-lieue en direction du nord.

Au fond, peut-être, l'équipage n'eût-il pas été fâché d'en venir aux mains avec les Anglais. C'est de tradition chez les Français et surtout chez les marins. Ils songent encore à la revanche de Waterloo, ces braves gens! Mais probablement, cette fois, le canon du Mont Saint-Jean ne se ferait pas entendre, et Wellington battrait en retraite vers la haute mer.

La besogne se continua dans d'excellentes conditions. M. Bourcart comptait que la moitié serait fondue pendant cette journée. Il avait donc l'espoir, si le vent se levait, de pouvoir appareiller dès le surlendemain avec deux cents barils de plus dans sa cale.

Une fois, cependant, vers quatre heures, il se produisit une alerte.

Le forgeron Thomas, embarqué dans le petit canot, était en train de consolider une des conassières du gouvernail, lorsqu’il crut entendre une sorte de clapotis du côté de l’ouest.

Était-ce un bruit d’avirons annonçant l’approche des pirogues du Repton?… Les Anglais avaient-ils découvert la position du Saint-Enoch?…

Le forgeron remonta aussitôt et prévint M. Bourcart. Qui sait si le moment n’était pas venu de décrocher les fusils au râtelier du carré, de se mettre sur la défensive?

On suspendit le travail et les hommes occupés au dépeçage durent rembarquer.

À défaut des yeux, qui ne pouvaient rendre aucun service au milieu des vapeurs, les oreilles se tendirent. Un absolu silence régnait à bord. On laissa même tomber le feu de la cabousse, qui pétillait. Le plus léger bruit venu du large se fût fait entendre.

Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent. Aucune pirogue ne parut, et, de la part du capitaine King, c’eût été vraiment grande audace que de tenter l’attaque du Saint-Enoch dans ces conditions. Bien que le brouillard, s’il gênait les Anglais, leur eût permis de s’approcher sans être aperçus, ceux-ci devaient supposer que M. Bourcart se tiendrait sur ses gardes. Mais, répétait volontiers maître Ollive:

“Rien ne m’étonnerait de la part de John Bull!”

Cependant, on ne tarda pas à le reconnaître, c'était une fausse alerte. Le clapotis ne pouvait provenir que de l'une de ces risées capricieuses qui passent à travers les brumes sans avoir la force de les dissiper. Il y eut même à constater que la brise cherchait à se lever, tout en ne se propageant que par souffles intermittents, sans direction fixe. À moins qu'elle ne fraîchît, le ciel resterait brouillé jusqu'au lever du soleil. À ces calmes, assez rares en cette saison et dans cette portion septentrionale de l'océan Pacifique, succéderaient probablement de grands mauvais temps. Il était à craindre que la navigation ne fût pas aussi favorisée qu'elle l'avait été en quittant Pétropavlovsk. Toutefois, comme le trois-mâts s'était toujours bien comporté pendant maintes tempêtes, sans jamais avoir éprouvé d'avaries graves, Jean-Marie Cabidoulin eût été mieux avisé en épargnant ses menaçantes histoires au Saint-Enoch, du Havre, capitaine Évariste-Simon Bourcart!

Après tout, pourquoi le navire ne retrouverait-il pas ses bonnes chances de la première campagne, et ne rencontrerait-il pas d'autres baleines qui permettraient de compléter le chargement avant de mouiller à Vancouver?…

L'après-midi s'avançait. Vraisemblablement, cette nuit serait aussi obscure que la précédente. En tout cas, les précautions étaient prises, et, au retour du lieutenant Allotte, les pirogues avaient été rehissées à bord.

En somme, pour la besogne qui restait à faire, mieux valait que le Saint-Enoch fût encalminé pendant vingt-quatre heures encore, à la condition qu'un bon vent le poussât vers la côte américaine.

Soudain, un peu avant cinq heures, des sifflements d'une extrême violence déchirèrent l'espace. En même temps, la mer fut extraordinairement troublée jusque dans ses couches profondes. Une immense nappe d’écume blanchit sa surface. Le Saint-Enoch, élevé sur le dos d’une énorme lame, fut secoué d’un roulis et d’un tangage des plus violents. Les voiles, qui pendaient sur leurs cargues, claquèrent à grand bruit, et l’équipage put craindre que toute la mâture ne vînt en bas.

Par bonne chance, le corps de la baleine, fortement maintenu le long du bord, ne se détacha pas, et ce fut miracle, tant la bande du navire avait été prononcée.

“Qu’est-ce donc?…” s’était écrié M. Bourcart en s’élançant hors de sa cabine.

Puis il monta sur la dunette, où le second et les lieutenants se hâtèrent de le rejoindre.

“Ce doit être un raz de marée, déclara M. Heurtaux, et j’ai vu le moment où le Saint-Enoch allait engager…

— Oui… un raz de marée, répéta maître Ollive, car il n’y a pas de vent de quoi remplir mon chapeau…

— Mais, comme il pourrait être accompagné d’un grain, reprit le capitaine Bourcart, faites serrer toute la toile, Heurtaux… Il ne faut pas se laisser surprendre!”

C’était prudent, et même opportun, et même pressant. En effet, à quelques minutes de là, le vent fraîchissait avec assez d’impétuosité pour refouler une partie des brumes vers le sud.

“Navire par bâbord derrière!”

Ce cri, poussé par un des matelots accrochés dans les haubans de misaine, fit tourner tous les regards de ce côté.

Le navire signalé était-il le Repton?…

C’était le navire anglais, à trois milles environ du Saint-Enoch.

“Toujours à la même place…, observa le lieutenant Coquebert.

— Comme nous à la nôtre…, répondit M. Bourcart.

— On dirait qu’il se prépare à larguer ses voiles…, remarqua le lieutenant Allotte.

— Pas de doute… il va appareiller…, déclara M. Heurtaux.

— Serait-ce donc pour venir sur nous?… demanda le docteur Filhiol.

— Il en est bien capable!… s’écria maître Ollive.

— Nous verrons bien”, se contenta de dire le capitaine Bourcart.

Et, sa longue-vue aux yeux, il ne cessait de la tenir en direction du baleinier anglais.

Il y avait tout lieu de croire que le capitaine King voulait profiter de la brise qui soufflait alors de l’est et lui permettrait de se rapprocher du Saint-Enoch. On voyait les hommes se paumoyer sur les vergues. Bientôt les huniers, la misaine, la brigantine, furent établis, amures à tribord, puis le grand et le petit foc qui facilitèrent l’abattée du Repton.

La question était de savoir s’il allait continuer sa route vers l’est en serrant le vent, afin de gagner quelque port de la Colombie britannique.

Non, telle n’était pas l’intention du capitaine King, à laquelle il eût été impossible de se méprendre. Le Repton, au lieu de mettre cap à l’est, marchait de manière à couper la route du Saint-Enoch.

“C’est à nous qu’il en a!… s’écria Romain Allotte. Il entend réclamer sa part de baleine!… Eh bien… il n’en aura pas même un bout de queue!…”

Ce que disait le lieutenant fut répété par l’équipage. Si le Repton venait attaquer le Saint-Enoch, il trouverait à qui parler!… On lui répondrait comme il convenait de répondre, à coups de fusil, de pistolet et de hache!…

Il était alors six heures et quelques minutes. Le soleil déclinait rapidement vers l’horizon un peu dans le sud-ouest. La mer restait dégagée de vapeurs du côté d’où soufflait la brise. On ne perdait pas un des mouvements du Repton, qui s’avançait à moyenne vitesse. En moins d’une demi-heure, il serait bord à bord avec le Saint-Enoch, à moins qu’il ne changeât sa barre.

En prévision d’une attaque, ordre fut donné de préparer les armes. On chargea les deux pierriers dont les baleiniers sont armés généralement. Si le capitaine King lui envoyait quelques boulets de cinq à six livres, le capitaine Bourcart lui en adresserait autant et de même poids.

Le Repton n’était plus qu’à trois quarts de mille, lorsque l’état de la mer se modifia soudain, sans aucun changement dans les conditions atmosphériques. Le vent n’avait pas forcé, le ciel ne s’était pas chargé. Nul nuage menaçant ne se levait à l’horizon. Calme absolu dans les hautes et basses zones de l’espace.

Et, en effet, le phénomène extraordinaire qui se préparait devait se localiser en cette partie de l’Océan.

Soudain, au milieu d’horribles mugissements, dont personne à bord du Saint-Enoch ne reconnut ni la nature ni la cause, la mer bouillonna, se blanchit d’écume, se dénivela comme si une éruption sous-marine en eût troublé les dernières profondeurs. C’était précisément à la place occupée par le baleinier anglais, alors que le baleinier français ne ressentait pas encore les effets de cette inexplicable agitation.

Le capitaine Bourcart et ses compagnons, tout d’abord surpris, observaient le Repton, et, ce qu’ils virent, après la surprise, les jeta en pleine épouvante.

Le Repton venait de se soulever sur le dos d’une énorme lame, puis de disparaître derrière elle. De cette lame jaillissaient de puissants jets liquides, tels qu’ils eussent pu s’échapper des évents d’un gigantesque monstre dont la tête aurait été engagée sous le navire, et dont la queue eût battu la mer à une demi-encâblure, soit près de cent mètres…

Lorsque le navire reparut, il était désemparé, sa mâture en bas, ses agrès rompus, sa coque chavirée sur bâbord, assaillie par de formidables coups de mer…

Une minute plus tard, après avoir été une dernière fois roulé par la monstrueuse lame, il s’engloutissait dans les abîmes du Pacifique.

Le capitaine Bourcart, ses officiers, son équipage, poussèrent un cri d’horreur, stupéfaits en présence de cet inexplicable et épouvantable cataclysme…

Mais peut-être les hommes du Repton n’avaient-ils pas tous péri avec le navire?… Peut-être quelques-uns avaient-ils pu fuir dans les pirogues à temps pour ne point être entraînés dans le gouffre?… Peut-être pourrait-on sauver un certain nombre de ces infortunés avant que la nuit se fût étendue sur la mer?…

Toutes causes d’inimitiés s’oublient devant pareilles catastrophes!… Il y avait un devoir d’humanité à remplir, on le remplirait…

“À la mer, les embarcations!…” cria le capitaine Bourcart.

Deux minutes à peine s’étaient écoulées depuis la disparition du Repton et il était encore temps de porter secours aux survivants du naufrage…

Soudain, avant que les pirogues eussent été amenées, un choc qui ne fut pas très rude, se produisit. Le Saint-Enoch, soulevé de sept à huit pouces par l’arrière, comme s’il eût heurté un écueil, donna la bande à tribord et demeura immobile.

CHAPITRE XII

Échouage

Le vent qui soufflait de l’est vers cinq heures du soir, et dont le Repton avait voulu profiter, ne s’était pas maintenu. Après le soleil couché, il calmit et finit par tomber tout à fait. L’agitation de la mer se réduisit à un léger clapotis de surface. Alors revinrent les épaisses brumes qui enveloppaient depuis quarante-huit heures cette portion du Pacifique.

Quant au Saint-Enoch, c’était au moment où son équipage allait lancer les embarcations qu’il avait touché. Est-ce donc à un accident de même nature qu’il fallait attribuer la perte du Repton?… Et, moins heureux que le Saint-Enoch, le navire anglais s’était-il défoncé contre un écueil?…

Quoi qu’il en soit, s’il n’avait pas coulé à pic, le Saint-Enoch n’en était pas moins échoué. Or, comme il risquait à chaque instant d’être englouti, il fut impossible d’employer les pirogues au sauvetage des marins anglais.

Tout d’abord, la première impression de M. Bourcart et de ses compagnons avait été celle de la stupeur.

À quelle cause attribuer cet échouage?… Le Saint-Enoch avait à peine subi l’action de cette légère brise qui s’était levée vers cinq heures du soir… Pour être venu talonner contre cet écueil, avait-il subi l’action d’un courant dont personne ne soupçonnait l’existence, et sans qu’il eût été possible de s’en apercevoir?…

Il existait là certaines circonstances des plus inexplicables, et d’ailleurs, l’heure n’était pas aux explications.

La secousse, on l’a dit, avait été plutôt faible. Mais, après deux coups de talon, qui ne démontèrent point son gouvernail, le navire reçut un énorme paquet de mer. Par bonheur, sa mâture ne s’ébranla point, ses étais et ses haubans résistèrent. Sans avaries dans ses fonds, il ne semblait pas qu’il fût menacé de sombrer comme le Repton. Peut-être même ne lui manquait-il que quelques pouces d’eau pour retrouver sa flottaison, et se dégagerait-il au plein de la mer?…

Seulement le choc eut pour premier résultat de rompre les amarres qui retenaient la baleine, et le courant entraîna cette carcasse.

Il y avait autre chose à faire qu’à s’inquiéter de la perte d’une centaine de barils d’huile. Le Saint-Enoch échoué, il s’agissait de le tirer de cette fâcheuse situation.

À la suite de cet accident, maître Ollive se fût bien gardé d’interpeller Jean-Marie Cabidoulin. Le tonnelier aurait eu beau jeu pour lui répondre:

“Va… ce n’est que le commencement de la fin!”

Cependant M. Bourcart et le second conféraient sur la dunette.

“Il existe donc des bas-fonds dans cette partie du Pacifique?… dit M. Heurtaux.

— Je ne sais que penser… déclara M. Bourcart.

Ce qui est certain c’est que les cartes n’en indiquent aucun entre les Kouriles et les Aléoutiennes!”

En effet, les plus modernes ne portaient ni bas-fonds ni récifs dans cette partie de l’Océan où le cent-vingtième et le cent-soixantième méridien croisent le cinquantième parallèle. Il est vrai, depuis soixante heures, les brumes avaient empêché le capitaine Bourcart de prendre hauteur. Mais la dernière observation le mettait à plus de deux cents milles de l’archipel aléoutien. Or, il n’était pas admissible que, depuis le calcul du 19 octobre, le vent ou les courants eussent porté le Saint-Enoch à cette distance.

Et, pourtant, ce n’était que sur les extrêmes récifs des Aléoutiennes qu’il aurait pu se mettre au plein.

Après être descendu dans le carré, M. Bourcart avait étalé ses cartes sur la table, il les étudiait, il relevait à la pointe du compas la position que son navire occupait en évaluant à l’estime la route parcourue en trois jours. Et même en l’étendant à deux cents milles en cette direction, c’est-à-dire jusqu’aux îles Aléoutiennes, il ne rencontrait aucun écueil…

“Cependant, observa le docteur Filhiol, ne peut-il se faire que postérieurement à l’établissement de ces cartes, un soulèvement se soit produit à cette place?…

— Un soulèvement du fond?…” répondit M. Bourcart, qui ne sembla pas rejeter une pareille hypothèse.

Et, faute d’une autre, était-il déraisonnable de l’admettre?… Pourquoi, par une poussée lente ou par un brusque exhaussement dus à l’action des forces plutoniennes, le seuil sous-marin ne se serait-il pas relevé à la surface de la mer?… Manquent-ils donc les exemples de ces phénomènes telluriques dans les régions où se manifeste encore le travail éruptif?… Et, précisément, ces parages ne sont-ils pas voisins d’un archipel volcanique?… Deux mois et demi auparavant, en les traversant, n’avait-on pas aperçu dans le nord les flammes du Chichaldinskol sur l’île Ounimak?…

Bien que cette explication ne laissât pas d'être plausible dans une certaine mesure, la majorité de l'équipage devait la repousser, ainsi qu'on le verra bientôt.

Après tout, à quelque cause qu'il fût dû, l'échouage du Saint-Enoch était indiscutable. En sondant à l'avant, puis à l'arrière, maître Ollive ne trouva pas plus de quatre à cinq pieds d'eau sous la quille.

Le premier soin du capitaine Bourcart avait été de procéder à la visite de la cale. Jean-Marie Cabidoulin et le charpentier Férut s'étaient rendu compte que la mer n'avait pas pénétré à travers le bordage, et, assurément, aucune voie d'eau ne s'était déclarée à la suite de la collision.

En somme, il convenait d'attendre au lendemain afin de déterminer la nature de cet écueil inconnu du Pacifique, et peut-être parviendrait-on, avant l'arrivée des mauvais temps, à déhaler le Saint-Enoch…

La nuit parut interminable. Ni les officiers ne regagnèrent leur cabine, ni les hommes le poste de l'équipage. Il fallait se tenir prêt à tout événement. Parfois se produisaient des tiraillements de la quille sur le récif… N'allait-elle pas, sous l'influence d'un courant, se détacher de ce lit de roches?… Ne pouvait-il se faire que le navire glissât du côté où il donnait la gîte et retrouvât sa ligne de flottaison?…

D'ailleurs, par précaution, le capitaine Bourcart avait mis les pirogues à la mer, avec la plus grande quantité de vivres possible, en cas qu'il fût nécessaire d'abandonner le Saint-Enoch. Qui sait s'il ne deviendrait pas nécessaire de s'y embarquer pour rallier les terres les plus rapprochées? Et ce devaient être les îles de l'archipel Aléoutien, à moins que, par suite de circonstances absolument incompréhensibles, le navire eût été rejeté hors de sa route… D’ailleurs, il ne menaçait pas de chavirer, ce qui fût peut-être arrivé si la baleine eût encore été suspendue à son flanc.

Entre autres éventualités qui pourraient amener le dégagement du Saint-Enoch, M. Bourcart ne laissait pas de compter sur la mer montante. Les marées sont généralement faibles sur toute l’étendue du Pacifique, il ne l’ignorait pas. Mais qui sait si un relèvement de quelques pouces n’amènerait pas le renflouage?… Il ne semblait pas que le bâtiment se fût engagé très avant sur l’écueil, auquel il n’adhérait que par son talon.

Le flux avait commencé à se faire sentir à onze heures et la mer serait pleine vers les deux heures du matin. Le capitaine et ses officiers suivirent donc avec soin les progrès de la marée, annoncée par un clapotis de courant que l’oreille percevait au milieu de cette nuit si calme.

Par malheur, le moment venu, lorsque la mer fut étale, aucun changement ne se produisit. Peut-être le Saint-Enoch éprouva-t-il quelques faibles secousses, peut-être sa quille roula-t-elle légèrement sur le seuil marin… À cette date du mois d’octobre, les marées d’équinoxe étant déjà passées, les chances de se déhaler diminueraient avec les lunaisons prochaines.

Et maintenant, lorsque le jusant s’accentuerait, ne devait-on pas craindre que la situation ne vînt à empirer?… La bande ne s’accuserait-elle pas à mesure que l’eau se retirerait, et le navire ne risquait-il pas de chavirer à mer basse?…

Ce grave sujet d’inquiétude ne cessa que vers quatre heures et demie du matin. D’ailleurs, en vue de parer à tout événement, le capitaine Bourcart avait fait préparer des béquilles avec les vergues de perroquet, mais il n’y eut pas lieu de les mettre en place.

Un peu avant sept heures, une lueur rougit les vapeurs de l’est. Le soleil, qui débordait de l’horizon, ne put les dissoudre, et les agrès se chargèrent d’humidité.

On le pense bien, les officiers sur la dunette, les matelots sur le gaillard d’avant, cherchaient à percer ce brouillard du côté où gîtait le navire, en attendant que les pirogues pussent en faire le tour. Ce que chacun s’inquiétait de reconnaître, c’était la disposition de l’écueil. S’étendait-il sur un large espace?… Formait-il un bas-fond unique?… Des têtes de roches émergeraient-elles au large à basse mer?

Impossible de voir même à quelques mètres en dehors des bastingages. Toutefois, on ne percevait aucun bruit de ce ressac que le courant produit sur des rochers à fleur d’eau.

Donc, rien à faire avant que la brume se fût dissipée, et peut-être se dissoudrait-elle comme les jours précédents, lorsque le soleil approcherait de la méridienne. Alors, si les circonstances le permettaient, M. Bourcart essaierait-il de déterminer sa position au sextant et au chronomètre.

Il y eut lieu de procéder à une visite plus complète de la cale. Maître Cabidoulin et le charpentier Férut s’assurèrent de nouveau, en déplaçant un certain nombre de barils de l’arrière, que l’eau ne l’avait point envahie. Ni la membrure ni le bordage n’avaient cédé au moment de l’échouage. Donc aucune avarie grave. Mais, en maniant ses barils, le tonnelier ne se disait-il pas qu’il faudrait sans doute les hisser sur le pont, les jeter à la mer, les pleins et les vides, afin d’alléger le navire?…

Cependant la matinée s’avançait, et le ciel ne se dégageait pas. Une reconnaissance, faite par M. Bourcart et le second autour du Saint-Enoch dans un rayon d’une demi-encâblure, ne révéla rien touchant la nature et la position de l’écueil.

Avant tout, il eût fallu constater s’il se trouvait à proximité d’une terre où les embarcations pourraient accoster, en cas qu’il devînt nécessaire d’abandonner le navire. Il est vrai, qu’il se rencontrât un continent ou un archipel en ces parages, M. Bourcart ne pouvait l’admettre, et, au docteur qui l’interrogeait à cet égard:

“Non, monsieur Filhiol, non, répondit-il d’un ton affirmatif, il y a quelques jours, j’ai obtenu une bonne observation, je le répète… Je viens de revoir mes calculs, ils sont exacts et nous devons être à deux cents milles au moins de l’extrême pointe des Kouriles.

— J’en reviens donc à mon explication…, reprit le docteur Filhiol. Il a dû se produire un exhaussement du sous-sol marin, contre lequel s’est heurté le Saint-Enoch…

— C’est possible, répliqua M. Bourcart, et je me refuse à croire qu’une erreur ou une déviation de route nous aient rejetés à une telle distance dans le nord.”

C’était vraiment une déplorable malchance que le vent ne parût pas devoir se lever. D’abord il aurait balayé les vapeurs et dégagé l’horizon. Puis, s’il avait soufflé de la partie ouest, l’équipage, en coiffant les voiles sur les mâts, eût peut-être obligé le Saint-Enoch à s’arracher du seuil rocheux…

“Attendons… attendons, mes amis!… répétait le capitaine Bourcart, qui sentait s’accroître l’impatience et aussi l’inquiétude de ses hommes. J’espère que ce brouillard se lèvera dans l’après-midi, et nous serons fixés sur cette situation, dont, je l’espère, nous sortirons sans grand dommage!”

Mais, lorsque les matelots et les novices regardaient Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, ils le voyaient hocher sa grosse tête ébouriffée, signe qu'il ne partageait point cet optimisme, et cela n'était pas pour les rassurer.

Entre temps, afin d'empêcher la mer montante, en venant de l'est, de pousser le navire plus avant sur l'écueil, M. Bourcart d'accord avec le second, décida de mouiller une ancre à jet par l'arrière.

Maître Ollive et deux matelots parèrent une des pirogues afin de procéder à cette prudente opération sous la direction du lieutenant Allotte.

La pirogue déborda, tandis que le grelin de l'ancre lui était filé du Saint-Enoch.

Suivant les ordres du capitaine Bourcart, le lieutenant fit envoyer un coup de sonde, alors qu'il se trouvait à une cinquantaine de pieds du navire. À sa grande surprise, même après avoir largué une vingtaine de brasses, il ne trouva pas de fond.

L'opération, recommencée à plusieurs places de ce côté, donna un résultat identique, et le plomb ne toucha nulle part.

En ces conditions, mouiller une ancre eût été inutile, puisqu'elle n'aurait pu mordre. Ce qu'il fallait en conclure, c'est que, de ce bord tout au moins, les flancs de l'écueil étaient coupés à pic.

La pirogue revenue, le lieutenant Allotte fit son rapport au capitaine.

M. Bourcart se montra assez surpris. Dans sa pensée, le récif devait plutôt descendre en pentes latérales très allongées, l'échouage s'étant produit presque sans secousse, comme si le navire eût glissé à la surface d'un seuil peu incliné.

On dut effectuer alors des sondages autour du Saint-Enoch, de manière à déterminer autant que possible l’étendue de l’écueil et la profondeur de l’eau à sa surface. Le capitaine Bourcart embarqua dans la pirogue avec le second, le maître d’équipage et deux matelots. Ils emportaient un plomb dont la ligne mesurait deux cents brasses.

Après avoir repris l’opération du lieutenant Allotte, on dut reconnaître que l’extrémité de la ligne n’atteignait pas le fond. Il fallut donc renoncer à mouiller une ancre par l’arrière, ce qui eût permis de déhaler le navire en virant au guindeau.

“Capitaine, dit M. Heurtaux, nous ferions bien de sonder à quelques pieds seulement de la carène…

— C’est mon avis”, répondit M. Bourcart.

Maître Ollive crocha la gaffe dans un des porte-haubans, et rangea la pirogue de manière à contourner la coque à cinq ou six pieds au plus. De trois mètres en trois mètres, le second laissait filer la ligne. Nulle part elle ne rencontra le seuil, même à deux cents brasses.

Ainsi, l’écueil n’occupait qu’une étendue très restreinte à une ou deux toises au-dessous de la surface de la mer. Autant dire que le Saint-Enoch s’était échoué à la pointe d’un cône sous-marin non indiqué en ces parages.

Cependant l’heure s’avançait, et rien n’annonçait une levée des brumes. Aussi M. Bourcart voulut-il tenter, au moment où la marée atteindrait sa plus grande hauteur, de déhaler son navire avec les pirogues. En le tirant par l’arrière, il était possible que l’on parvînt à le renflouer au plein de la mer.

Cette manœuvre s’exécuta dans les conditions les plus favorables. Les six pirogues se réunirent en un effort commun, et les matelots souquèrent de toute leur vigueur sur les avirons. Le bâtiment fit-il un léger mouvement de recul?… un pied à peine. Ce fut tout ce qu’on obtint, et, finalement, l’équipage perdit l’espoir de l’arracher de cet écueil.

Or, ce que n’avaient pu faire les embarcations, si le vent ne le faisait pas, que deviendrait le Saint-Enoch aux premiers gros temps?… Il serait roulé à la surface de ce bas-fond, il n’en resterait bientôt que d’informes débris… Et, à cette époque de l’année, tarderaient-elles à se déchaîner, les tempêtes qui troublent si formidablement cette portion du Pacifique?…

Une opération restait à tenter pour se remettre à flot. Le capitaine Bourcart, après y avoir mûrement réfléchi, après en avoir causé avec les officiers et les maîtres, dut s’y résoudre, mais en l’ajournant de quelques heures, puisqu’il ne semblait pas qu’un changement de temps fût à craindre. Ladite opération aurait pour but d’alléger le navire en jetant sa cargaison à la mer. Déchargé de huit à neuf cents barils d’huile, peut-être se relèverait-il assez pour flotter à l’étale du flot…

On attendit en comptant que, ce jour-là comme la veille, le brouillard se dissiperait dans l’après-midi.

C’était une des raisons pour lesquelles M. Bourcart ne donna pas immédiatement suite à son projet de sacrifier la cargaison. En effet, que le navire vînt à se renflouer, eût-il été possible de le diriger au milieu des brumes?… De ce que les sondages avaient accusé de grandes profondeurs autour de l’écueil, s’ensuivait-il qu’il n’existait pas à proximité d’autres récifs où le Saint-Enoch risquerait de s’échouer à nouveau?… Est-ce que, à moins d’un mille, le Repton n’avait pas touché, et même si malheureusement qu’il s’était englouti presque aussitôt?…

Cette réflexion, que chacun se faisait, ramena les conversations sur le baleinier anglais. N’y avait-il pas à se demander si quelques hommes avaient survécu au naufrage?… Ses pirogues ne tentaient-elles pas de retrouver le Saint-Enoch?… Aussi M. Bourcart et l’équipage se tenaient-ils aux écoutes…

Aucun cri n’arrivait, et, sans doute, pas un des matelots du Repton n’avait pu échapper à cette épouvantable catastrophe…

Trois heures s’écoulèrent. La marée se retirant alors, inutile d’espérer que le navire se dégagerait de lui-même. D’ailleurs la différence entre le plus haut du flot et le plus bas du jusant allait être assez faible. Cet écueil ne devait jamais découvrir, si ce n’est peut-être dans les syzygies. M. Heurtaux put même constater que l’eau n’avait pas sensiblement baissé par rapport aux repères tracés sur la coque, et, quand on sondait autour, les lances atteignaient le fond rugueux à une profondeur constante de cinq pieds.

Telle était la situation. Comment se dénouerait-elle?… Le Saint-Enoch reprendrait-il le cours de sa navigation?… Les hommes ne seraient-ils pas contraints de l’abandonner avant qu’une tempête l’eût anéanti?… Ils étaient trente-trois à bord et pourraient trouver place dans les embarcations avec des vivres pour quelques jours… Mais, à quelle distance se rencontrerait la côte la plus rapprochée?… Et s’il fallait franchir des centaines de milles?…

M. Bourcart se décida à sacrifier le chargement. Peut-être le navire, soulagé de plusieurs centaines de tonnes, se soulèverait-il assez au plein de la mer pour que l’équipage pût le déhaler!…

Cette décision prise, les hommes se mirent à la besogne, non sans maudire la mauvaise chance qui leur ferait perdre les profits de cette dernière campagne!…

Maître Ollive activa le travail. Au moyen de palans frappés au-dessus des deux panneaux, les barils furent hissés sur le pont, puis jetés à la mer. Quelques-uns coulaient immédiatement. D’autres brisés dans la chute contre l’écueil, se vidaient de leur contenu, qui remontait à la surface de la mer. Le Saint-Enoch fut bientôt entouré d’une couche grasse, comme s’il eût filé de l’huile pour calmer les lames d’une tempête. Jamais la mer n’avait été plus tranquille. Pas même le plus léger ressac à la surface ou sur le périmètre du bas-fond, bien que M. Heurtaux eût constaté l’existence d’un courant venant du nord-est.

La marée ne devait pas tarder. Toutefois le délestement du navire ne produirait son effet qu’à l’instant où le flot atteindrait son maximum. Comme on disposait de trois heures, l’opération serait terminée au moment voulu. En somme, pas de temps à perdre, ou le Saint-Enoch resterait échoué jusqu’à la nuit prochaine, et mieux valait qu’il pût s’éloigner de l’écueil pendant le jour. Près de huit cents barils à remonter de la cale, cela exige du temps, sans parler de la fatigue.

Vers cinq heures, une moitié de la besogne était faite. La marée ayant déjà gagné de trois à quatre pieds, il semblait bien que le Saint-Enoch, en partie allégé, aurait dû s’en ressentir, et aucun mouvement ne fut senti…

“On dirait, le diable soit!… que notre navire est cloué à cette place!… dit maître Ollive.

— Et ce n’est pas toi qui le décloueras!… murmura Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

— Tu dis…, vieux?…

— Rien!…” répliqua le tonnelier en lançant un des barils vides à la mer.

D’autre part, l’espoir auquel on s’était attaché que les vapeurs se dissiperaient ne s’était pas réalisé. La nuit menaçait d’être doublée de brumes. Si donc son navire ne se dégageait qu’à la marée prochaine, le capitaine Bourcart serait fort gêné pour le sortir de ces dangereux parages.

Un peu après six heures, alors qu’une demi-obscurité envahissait déjà l’espace, des cris se firent entendre en direction de l’ouest éclairé de vagues lueurs.

Maître Ollive, posté sur le gaillard d’avant, rejoignit M. Bourcart au pied de la dunette.

“Capitaine… écoutez… écoutez…, dit-il. Tenez… par là… il semble bien…

— Oui… on appelle!…” ajouta le lieutenant Coquebert.

Un peu de tumulte se produisit parmi l’équipage.

“Silence!” ordonna M. Bourcart.

Et chacun de prêter l’oreille.

En effet, des appels, encore éloignés, arrivaient jusqu’à bord. Nul doute qu’ils ne fussent adressés au Saint-Enoch.

Une clameur leur répondit aussitôt sur un signe du capitaine Bourcart!

“Ohé!… ohé!… par ici…”

Étaient-ce les indigènes d’une terre ou d’une île du voisinage venus sur leurs embarcations?… Ne s’agissait-il pas plutôt des survivants du Repton?… Leurs pirogues ne cherchaient-elles pas depuis la veille, au milieu de cet intense brouillard, à rallier le baleinier français?…

Cette hypothèse, la plus vraisemblable, était la vraie.

Quelques minutes plus tard, guidées par les cris et par des détonations d’armes à feu, deux embarcations vinrent élonger le Saint-Enoch.

C’étaient les pirogues du Repton, montées par vingt-trois hommes, compris le capitaine King.

Ces pauvres gens, exténués de fatigue, tombaient d’inanition, n’ayant pas pu embarquer des vivres, tant la catastrophe avait été soudaine. Après avoir erré pendant vingt-quatre heures, ils mouraient de faim et de soif…

Les survivants du Repton furent recueillis et accueillis par M. Bourcart avec cette politesse dont il ne se départait jamais, et bien qu’il n’eût point à se louer de leurs procédés antérieurs. Avant d’interroger le capitaine King, avant de lui demander dans quelles circonstances son navire s’était perdu, avant de lui faire connaître la situation du Saint-Enoch, M. Bourcart donna ordre de servir à manger et à boire à ses nouveaux passagers.

Le capitaine King fut conduit au carré, les matelots descendirent dans le poste.

Treize hommes manquaient à l’équipage du capitaine King, treize, engloutis dans le naufrage du Repton!

CHAPITRE XIII

Un écueil qui remue

Lorsque le capitaine King et ses compagnons avaient accosté le Saint-Enoch, la brume était si épaisse que, si les cris de ceux qui montaient les pirogues n’eussent point été entendus, celles-ci auraient passé au large de l’écueil. À descendre vers le sud, les Anglais ne pouvaient rencontrer ni la côte asiatique ni la côte américaine. En admettant même que le vent eût dissipé le brouillard, comment eurent-elles franchi des centaines de milles vers l’est ou vers l’ouest?… Et, d’ailleurs, sans biscuit pour apaiser leur faim, sans eau douce pour apaiser leur soif, avant quarante-huit heures il ne serait pas resté vivant un seul des naufragés du Repton!…

Le Repton, en officiers et matelots, avait un total de trente-six hommes. Vingt-trois seulement s’étaient jetés dans les embarcations, et, en les ajoutant au personnel du Saint-Enoch, diminué depuis la mort du matelot Rollat, on obtenait le chiffre de cinquante-six. En cas qu’il ne parvînt pas à renflouer son bâtiment, quel serait le sort du capitaine Bourcart, de ses anciens et de ses nouveaux compagnons?… Même dans l’hypothèse qu’une terre, continent ou île, ne fût pas très éloignée, les embarcations du bord ne pourraient les prendre tous!… Au premier coup de vent, — et ils sont fréquents en ces parages du Pacifique, — le Saint-Enoch, assailli par les lames monstrueuses qui se briseraient sur cet écueil, serait démoli en quelques minutes!… Il faudrait donc l’abandonner… Alors les vivres, que M. Bourcart comptait renouveler à Vancouver, ne s’épuiseraient-ils pas à nourrir un équipage accru presque du double depuis l’arrivée des naufragés du Repton?…

Les montres du bord marquaient huit heures. Aucun symptôme de vent au coucher du soleil, sous l’épais rideau de brumes. La nuit, qui se faisait peu à peu, serait calme, et aussi profondément obscure. Il n’y avait pas à espérer que le navire pût se dégager au plein du flot, la prochaine marée perdant encore sur la précédente, et il n’était pas possible de l’alléger davantage, à moins de sacrifier sa mâture.

C’est ce que le capitaine King apprit, lorsqu’il fut dans le carré avec M. Bourcart, M. Heurtaux, le docteur Filhiol et les deux lieutenants. Si ses compagnons et lui avaient trouvé refuge à bord, ce n’était pas leur salut assuré. À bref délai, l’avenir ne réservait-il pas au Saint-Enoch le sort du Repton?…

Il importait de connaître en quelles conditions s’était produit le naufrage du bâtiment anglais. Et voici ce que raconta le capitaine King:

Le Repton était encalminé au milieu des brouillards, quand, la veille, une éclaircie laissa voir le Saint-Enoch à trois milles sous le vent. Pourquoi le Repton se dirigea-t-il vers lui?… Était-ce dans une intention plus ou moins hostile de régler cette question de la baleine harponnée par les deux équipages?… Le capitaine King ne se prononça pas à ce sujet. D’ailleurs, ce n’était pas le moment de récriminer. Il se borna à dire que le Repton, alors qu’un mille seulement séparait les deux navires, éprouva un choc des plus violents. Sa coque crevée dans ses fonds sur bâbord, la mer l’envahit. Le second Strok et douze hommes de l’équipage furent, les uns précipités par-dessus le bord, les autres écrasés par la chute des mâts. Le capitaine King et ses compagnons auraient péri comme eux, si deux des pirogues qui étaient à la mer ne les eussent recueillis au nombre de vingt-trois. Pendant plus de vingt-quatre heures, les survivants du Repton errèrent à l’aventure, sans vivres d’aucune sorte, cherchant à découvrir le Saint-Enoch, et ce fut le hasard qui les amena sur le lieu de l’échouage.

“Mais, ajouta le capitaine King, qui parlait couramment le français, ce que je ne m’explique pas, c’est qu’il existe un écueil en ces parages!… J’étais certain de ma position en latitude et en longitude.

— Comme moi de la mienne, répondit M. Bourcart, et à moins qu’un soulèvement sous-marin ne se soit récemment produit…

— C’est évidemment la seule hypothèse admissible, déclara M. Heurtaux.

— En tout cas, capitaine, reprit M. King, le Saint-Enoch a été moins malheureux que le Repton…

— Sans doute, avoua M. Bourcart, mais comment et quand pourra-t-il remettre à la voile?…

— Il n’a pas d’avaries graves?…

— Non, et sa coque est intacte… Mais il semble qu’elle soit rivée à cet écueil, et, même après avoir sacrifié toute sa cargaison, il n’a pu se renflouer à l’étale de la mer!…

— Quel parti prendre?…” demanda le capitaine King, dont le regard s’était fixé successivement sur M. Bourcart et sur ses officiers.

Cette question resta sans réponse. Ce que l’équipage venait de tenter jusqu’ici pour rendre au Saint-Enoch sa ligne de flottaison n’avait point donné de résultat. Les éléments feraient-ils ce que les hommes n’avaient pu faire?… Quant à embarquer dans les pirogues, n’était-ce pas courir à une perte certaine?… Au nord, comme à l’est, comme à l’ouest, des centaines de milles séparaient les terres les plus rapprochées, soit les Kouriles, soit les Aléoutiennes. La fin d’octobre approchait… Les mauvais temps allaient se déchaîner bientôt. De faibles embarcations seraient à leur merci… Elles ne résisteraient pas à la première rafale… D’ailleurs, cinquante-six hommes n’y sauraient trouver place… Et ceux qui resteraient, quelle chance auraient-ils d’être sauvés, à moins qu’un bâtiment ne les recueillît en traversant cette partie du Pacifique!…

Ce fut alors que le docteur Filhiol posa au capitaine King la question suivante:

“Lorsque nous avons quitté ensemble Pétropavlovsk, vous aviez appris, sans doute, que les pêcheurs venaient de signaler au large la présence d’un monstre marin, devant lequel ils avaient fui en toute hâte?…

— Effectivement, répondit le capitaine King, et je conviendrai que l’équipage du Repton en concevait une réelle épouvante…

— Ils croyaient à l’existence de ce monstre?… reprit M. Heurtaux.

— Ils croyaient que c’était un calmar, un kraken, un poulpe gigantesque, et je ne vois pas trop pourquoi ils n’y auraient point cru…

— Par la raison, répondit le docteur, que ces poulpes, ces krakens, ces calmars n’existent pas, capitaine…

— Ne soyons pas si affirmatifs, monsieur Filhiol, fit observer Romain Allotte.

— Entendons-nous, mon cher lieutenant. On a bien rencontré des spécimens de ces monstres, on en a poursuivi quelques-uns, on en a même hissé à bord… Mais ils n’avaient point les dimensions colossales qu’on leur prête, et qui sont de pure imagination… Des géants de l’espèce, si l’on veut, qui auraient pu détruire une embarcation, passe encore, mais capables d’entraîner un navire de quelques cents tonneaux dans les profondeurs de la mer… non… non!…

— C’est absolument mon avis, confirma M. Bourcart, et des monstres d’une telle puissance sont à reléguer parmi les animaux légendaires…

— Cependant, insista le lieutenant Coquebert, les pêcheurs de Pétropavlovsk parlaient d’une sorte d’énorme serpent de mer qu’ils avaient aperçu…

— Et, ajouta le capitaine King, tel a été leur effroi qu’ils sont rentrés précipitamment au port…

— Eh bien, depuis votre départ de Pétropavlovsk, demanda le docteur Filhiol, il vous est apparu, ce Briarée aux cinquante têtes, aux cent bras, ce descendant du fameux géant de l’antiquité qui menaçait le ciel et que Neptune enferma sous le mont Etna?…

— Non, monsieur, déclara le capitaine King. Toutefois, le Saint-Enoch, comme le Repton, aura sans doute rencontré des épaves à la surface de la mer, des débris de pirogues, des corps de baleines qui ne semblaient point avoir été harponnées… Et ne peut-il se faire que ce soit le monstre marin signalé à Pétropavlovsk qui ait dévasté ces parages?…

— Non seulement c’est possible, mais c’est infiniment probable, déclara le lieutenant Allotte, n’en déplaise à M. Bourcart et à M. Filhiol…

— Que voulez-vous, lieutenant! répliqua le docteur; tant que je n’aurai pas vu… de mes yeux vu… je resterai incrédule…

— Dans tous les cas, reprit M. Bourcart en s’adressant au capitaine King, ce n’est pas à l’attaque de ce kraken, calmar ou serpent, que vous attribuez la perte du Repton?…

— Non, répondit le capitaine King, non… et pourtant, à en croire quelques-uns de mes hommes, notre malheureux navire aurait été saisi par des bras gigantesques, des pinces formidables, puis chaviré, puis entraîné dans l’abîme… Ils causaient de cela pendant que nos pirogues cherchaient le Saint-Enoch…

— Eh! fit M. Bourcart, les dires de vos matelots trouveront écho à mon bord!… En grande majorité, notre équipage est persuadé que ces monstres existent… Le tonnelier n’a cessé de lui servir toutes sortes d’histoires à ce sujet… À son avis, la destruction du Repton est due à quelque animal extraordinaire, qui tiendrait à la fois du serpent, du poulpe… Il est vrai, jusqu’à preuve du contraire, j’affirmerai que nos navires se sont échoués sur des récifs de formation récente que n’indiquent point les cartes du Pacifique…

— Cela n’est pas douteux, à mon avis, ajouta le docteur Filhiol, et il faut laisser raisonner et déraisonner là-dessus Jean-Marie Cabidoulin!”

Il était neuf heures du soir. L’espoir que le Saint-Enoch se dégagerait la nuit ne pouvait guère être conservé. Le flot, on le sait devait même atteindre une hauteur moindre qu’à la marée précédente. Cependant, ne voulant rien négliger, le capitaine Bourcart fit mettre les embarcations dehors, après les avoir chargées des plus lourds espars. Inutile de songer à soulager davantage son navire, à moins d’amener ses mâts de hune et de perroquet avec leurs agrès, leurs voiles et leurs vergues. Ce serait là une grosse besogne, et, en admettant que le Saint-Enoch vînt à se renflouer, que deviendrait-il en cas que le mauvais temps le surprît alors qu’il serait presque désemparé?… Enfin, le lendemain, si la brume se levait, si le soleil permettait une bonne observation, si la situation pouvait être déterminée avec exactitude, on verrait ce qu’il y aurait à faire.

Du reste, le capitaine Bourcart ni les officiers ne pensaient à prendre du repos. Les hommes, étendus sur le pont, n’avaient point regagné le poste. L’inquiétude les tenait éveillés. Seuls, quelques-uns des novices avaient lutté vainement contre le sommeil. Les éclats de la foudre ne les en eussent pas tirés, — ni la plupart des matelots du Repton, accablés de fatigue. Maître Ollive, lui, arpentait la dunette, tandis qu’un groupe de cinq à six hommes entourait le tonnelier, et, ce que racontait Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, il est trop facile de l’imaginer.

La conversation, qui se poursuivit dans le carré, devait amener cet habituel résultat que chacun s’entêterait davantage dans ses idées sur l’existence ou la non-existence du monstre marin. La discussion commençait même à s’échauffer entre le docteur Filhiol et le lieutenant Allotte.

Soudain un incident vint y mettre terme.

“Attention… attention! s’écria M. Heurtaux qui s’était redressé d’un bond.

— Le navire est renfloué…, ajouta le lieutenant Coquebert.

— Il va flotter… il flotte!…” affirma Romain Allotte, dont le pliant, glissant sur le plancher, avait failli se dérober sous lui.

Quelques secousses venaient d’ébranler la coque du Saint-Enoch… Il semblait que la quille se fût dégagée en raclant la surface rocheuse de l’écueil. Un certain balancement s’était produit de tribord à bâbord, et la bande que le navire donnait n’était plus aussi accentuée…

En un instant M. Bourcart et ses compagnons furent hors du carré.

Au milieu de cette nuit noire, que le brouillard rendait plus obscure encore, pas une lueur, pas un scintillement!… Aucun souffle ne traversait l’espace!… La mer se gonflait à peine d’une molle houle, et le ressac ne murmurait même pas à l’accore de l’écueil…

Avant que M. Bourcart eût paru sur le pont, les matelots s’étaient relevés en toute hâte. Eux aussi, à ressentir les secousses, se disaient que le navire allait se renflouer… Après plusieurs balancements de roulis, le Saint-Enoch s’était redressé légèrement… Le gouvernail s’ébranlait au point que maître Ollive dut faire amarrer la roue…

Et alors les cris de l’équipage de se joindre à ceux du lieutenant Allotte:

“Il flotte… il flotte!”

Le capitaine Bourcart et le capitaine King, penchés au-dessus du bastingage, essayaient d’observer la sombre surface de la mer. Et, ce qui devait surtout les étonner, ce qui étonna tous ceux qui en firent la réflexion, c’est que le jusant était presque au plus bas. Donc le relèvement du navire sur sa quille ne pouvait être attribué à l’action de la marée.

“Que s’est-il passé?… demanda M. Heurtaux, en s’adressant à maître Ollive.

— Le navire s’est soulagé certainement…, répondit celui-ci, et je crains qu’il ne soit démonté de son gouvernail…

— Et maintenant?…

— Maintenant, monsieur Heurtaux… nous sommes aussi immobiles qu’avant!”

M. Bourcart, le docteur Filhiol, les lieutenants montèrent sur la dunette, et un matelot apporta deux fanaux allumés, qui permirent au moins de se voir.

Peut-être le capitaine eut-il la pensée d’envoyer du monde dans les embarcations afin de tenter un nouvel effort pour déhaler le Saint-Enoch. Mais, le navire ayant repris son immobilité, il comprit que la manœuvre serait inutile. Mieux valait attendre la prochaine marée de jour, et l’on essaierait de se dégager, si les secousses se reproduisaient.

Quant à la cause de ces secousses, comment l’expliquer, et quel en avait été le résultat? La quille du bâtiment s’était-elle quelque peu dégagée de ce fond rocheux où elle semblait plus fortement adhérer par son talon, ce qu’indiquait le démontage probable du gouvernail?…

“Cela doit être, dit M. Bourcart à son second, et, nous le savons, la mer est profonde autour de l’écueil…

— Aussi, capitaine, répondit M. Heurtaux, suffirait-il peut-être d’un recul de quelques pieds pour que le renflouage s’effectuât… Mais ce recul… comment l’obtenir?…

— Ce qu’il y a de certain, reprit M. Bourcart, c’est que la position du navire s’est modifiée, et qui sait si, cette nuit ou demain, à l’étale de la mer, il ne se dégagera pas de lui-même?

— Je n’ose y compter, capitaine, car la marée, au lieu de gagner, va perdre au contraire!… Et s’il faut attendre la nouvelle lune?…

— Ce serait une huitaine de jours à passer dans ces conditions, Heurtaux… Par mer calme, le Saint-Enoch ne courrait pas grands dangers… Il est vrai, le temps ne peut tarder à changer, et ce sont généralement de violentes rafales qui succèdent à ces brumes…

— Le plus regrettable, observa le second, c’est de ne pas savoir où nous sommes…

— Que le soleil se montre demain dans la matinée, ne fût-ce qu’une heure, déclara M. Bourcart, je ferai le point et nous serons fixés sur notre situation!… En tout cas, soyez sûr, mon cher Heurtaux, que nous étions en bonne route lorsque l’échouage s’est produit… Non! les courants ne nous ont pas drossés plus au nord qu’il ne fallait… J’en reviens donc à l’explication qui me semble la plus acceptable… Puisqu’il est inadmissible que les cartes n’aient pas mentionné la position de cet écueil, c’est qu’il est de formation récente…

— Je le pense aussi, capitaine, et le malheur a voulu que le Saint-Enoch se soit mis précisément dessus…

— Tout comme le Repton sur un écueil de même nature, conclut M. Bourcart. Grâce à Dieu, du moins, notre navire n’a pas coulé à pic, et j’ai toujours espoir de le tirer de là.”

Telle était l’explication que donnait M. Bourcart, et à laquelle se ralliaient volontiers M. Heurtaux, le docteur Filhiol, le maître d’équipage, peut-être aussi le capitaine King. Les deux lieutenants ne se prononçaient pas à ce sujet. Quant à l’équipage, son opinion se fit bientôt jour dans les circonstances que voici.

Les hommes, groupés au pied du grand mât, causaient entre eux. Ils ne voyaient qu’une chose, c’est que les secousses n’avaient pu être occasionnées ni par la mer, puisqu’elle était au calme plat, ni par la marée, puisque le jusant avait ramené moins d’eau sur le bas-fond. Puis, ces secousses avaient complètement cessé, et si le Saint-Enoch s’était un peu relevé sur bâbord, il gardait maintenant une complète immobilité. C’est ce que faisait observer le harponneur Pierre Kardek, en disant pour conclure:

“Il faut donc que ce soit l’écueil… oui… l’écueil lui-même qui ait bougé…

— L’écueil? s’écrièrent deux ou trois de ses compagnons…

— Voyons, Kardek, répliqua le forgeron Gilles Thomas, est-ce que tu nous prends pour des terriens dont le gosier est capable d’avaler de pareilles bourdes?…”

Et cette réplique parut joliment envoyée!… Un écueil qui remuerait comme une bouée, qui roulerait ou tanguerait comme un bâtiment à la houle!… Voilà qui n’était point à dire en présence de braves marins très au courant des choses de la mer!… Et, assurément, pas un seul n’eût admis qu’un mouvement sous-marin eût agité en cet endroit le seuil du Pacifique!…

“À d’autres!… s’écria le charpentier Férut. J’en ai vu déjà de toutes les couleurs dans mon ancien métier de machiniste… mais nous ne sommes pas ici sur la scène de l’Opéra ou du Châtelet!… Il n’y a pas d’équipe capable de mettre un écueil en branle… s’il n’est pas en carton ou en toile peinte…

— Bien répondu, ajouta le harponneur Louis Thiébaut, et pas un novice à bord ne goberait de telles imaginations!”

Non, certes, et, plutôt que d’accepter cette explication, assez naturelle, en somme, tous étaient disposés à en admettre de bien plus invraisemblables!…

À ce moment, le harponneur Jean Durut dit assez haut pour que M. Bourcart pût l’entendre de la dunette, sur laquelle il se trouvait encore:

“Ça n’est pas tout ça… Que l’écueil ait gigoté ou non, parviendra-t-on à se renflouer?…”

Cette observation devait répondre à la préoccupation générale. Mais, on le comprend, aucune réponse ne pouvait être faite.

“Allons, les gars…, reprit Férut en ricanant, ne parlons pas tous à la fois!… Est-ce que le Saint-Enoch va rester sempiternellement accroché comme une huître à sa roche?…

— Non, répondit une voix que l’équipage connaissait bien.

— C’est vous, maître Cabidoulin, qui avez dit “non”?… demanda Jean Kardek.

— Moi…

— Et vous nous assurez que notre bâtiment finira par démarrer d’ici?…

— Oui…

— Quand?…

— Quand le monstre le voudra…

— Quel monstre?… s’écrièrent à la fois plusieurs matelots et novices.

— Le monstre qui a saisi le Saint-Enoch, qui le retient dans ses bras ou dans ses pinces… le monstre qui l’entraînera au bout… à moins que ce ne soit au fin fond du Pacifique!”

Ce n’est pas à cette heure que l’équipage eût songé à plaisanter Jean-Marie Cabidoulin sur ses krakens et autres serpents de mer! Il lui semblait bien que le tonnelier avait raison contre le capitaine Bourcart, le second, le docteur Filhiol, contre tous ceux qui, jusqu’alors, se refusaient à partager sa manière de voir.

Maître Ollive de s’écrier alors:

“As-tu fini… vieux radoteur?…”

Mais un murmure s’éleva, et il fut visible que l’équipage tenait pour le tonnelier.

Oui! à tous ceux qui l’écoutaient, cela parut être l’évidence même… Un monstre gigantesque désolait ces parages, et, sans doute, celui-là qui avait été signalé par les pêcheurs de Pétropavlovsk!… C’est lui qui a brisé les embarcations, les coques de navires dont on a rencontré les épaves!… C’est lui qui a éventré les baleines rencontrées à la surface de la mer!… C’est lui qui s’est jeté sur le Repton et l’a entraîné par le fond!… C’est lui qui a saisi le Saint-Enoch et le retient dans une formidable étreinte!…

M. Bourcart, ayant entendu maître Cabidoulin, se demandait si sa déclaration n’allait pas déterminer une panique. Son second, ses officiers et lui descendirent de la dunette.

Il était temps… peut-être même était-il trop tard!…

Oui! l'épouvante ne permettrait plus à ces hommes de conserver leur sang-froid… La pensée qu'ils se trouvaient à la merci d'un formidable animal les rendrait rebelles aux observations, aux ordres de leur capitaine… Ils n'écouteraient plus rien, et ils cherchaient déjà à se jeter dans les embarcations!… Quelques-uns des maîtres, qui ne se possédaient plus, donnaient l'exemple!…

“Arrêtez… arrêtez! cria le capitaine Bourcart. Le premier qui essaie de quitter le bord, je lui casse la tête!…”

Et, à travers la fenêtre de sa cabine, il saisit un revolver déposé sur la table.

M. Heurtaux, les lieutenants Coquebert et Allotte se joignirent à leur chef. Maître Ollive se précipita au milieu des matelots afin de maintenir l'ordre. Quant au capitaine King, il ne serait plus écouté des siens!…

Comment arrêter ces gens affolés à cette pensée que le monstre pouvait les entraîner dans les gouffres de l'Océan…

Et, voici même que de nouvelles secousses ébranlèrent le navire. Des oscillations le portèrent tantôt sur bâbord, tantôt sur tribord. La coque sembla se disloquer. Les mâts gémirent dans leur emplanture. Quelques galhaubans larguèrent. La barre du gouvernail fut repoussée si brusquement qu'un des rabans cassa net, et la roue dévira avec une telle force que deux timoniers n'auraient pu la maintenir.

“Aux embarcations!… aux embarcations!”

Ce fut le cri général, et, cependant, tous n'auraient pu y trouver place!…

M. Bourcart comprit qu'il ne serait plus maître à bord s'il ne sévissait contre l'auteur de ce désordre. Aussi, allant au tonnelier debout au pied du grand mât:

“C’est à vous, Cabidoulin, s’écria-t-il, que je m’en prends de ce qui arrive!…

— À moi… capitaine?…

— Oui!… à vous!…”

Et s’adressant à maître Ollive:

“Mets-le aux fers… à fond de cale!…”

Des protestations s’élevèrent. Et, alors, le tonnelier de répondre d’une voix calme:

“Moi… aux fers, capitaine!… Est-ce donc parce que j’ai dit la vérité?…

— La vérité?…. s’écria M. Bourcart.

— Oui!… la vérité!” répéta Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

Et, comme pour appuyer ce qu’il venait de dire, voici que le navire se soulève de l’avant à l’arrière dans un violent mouvement de tangage. En même temps, des mugissements terribles se font entendre à quelques encâblures en direction du sud. Puis une énorme lame se dresse contre le Saint-Enoch, et, au milieu des ténèbres, il est emporté avec une incalculable vitesse à la surface du Pacifique.

CHAPITRE XIV

Vers le nord

Où allait ainsi le Saint-Enoch sous l’action d’un moteur d’une puissance prodigieuse attaché à ses flancs, le cap tantôt au nord-est, tantôt au nord-ouest?

Au milieu de l’obscurité profonde, impossible de rien distinguer. Le capitaine Bourcart et ses officiers cherchaient vainement à reconnaître la direction. L’équipage était au paroxysme de l’épouvante. Il ne restait plus une seule des embarcations dans lesquelles on eût pu se réfugier, les amarres ayant cassé au moment où le navire s’était remis en marche.

Cependant le Saint-Enoch fuyait avec une telle rapidité, que les hommes eussent été renversés par la résistance de l’air. Ils durent s’étendre le long des parois, se coucher au pied des mâts, s’accrocher aux taquets, abandonner la dunette pour ne point être envoyés par-dessus le bord. La plupart des matelots s’affalèrent dans le poste ou sous le gaillard d’avant. Quant à M. Bourcart, au capitaine King, au docteur Filhiol, au second, aux lieutenants, ils s’abritèrent à l’intérieur du carré. Il y aurait eu danger à se tenir sur le pont, car la mâture risquait de venir en bas.

Et puis qu’y aurait-il eu à faire?… Au milieu de cette nuit noire on ne se voyait pas, on ne s’entendait même pas. L’espace se remplissait de mugissements continus, auxquels s’ajoutaient les sifflements de l’air à travers les agrès, bien qu’il ne passât pas un souffle. Si le vent se fût déchaîné avec cette fureur, il eût dissipé l’intense brouillard, et, à travers les déchirures de nuages, on aurait aperçu quelques étoiles.

“Non…, dit M. Heurtaux, le temps n’a pas cessé d’être calme, et la violence de ces rafales ne provient que de notre vitesse!

— Il faut donc que la force de ce monstre, s’écria le lieutenant Allotte, soit extraordinaire…

— Monstre… monstre!” répétait M. Bourcart.

Et, malgré ce qui paraissait être l’évidence, tout comme le docteur Filhiol, le second et maître Ollive, il se refusait encore à admettre l’existence d’un animal, serpent gigantesque ou saurien colossal, capable d’emporter un navire de cinq cents tonneaux avec cette invraisemblable impétuosité. Un mascaret provoqué par quelque commotion sous-marine, un raz de marée d’une puissance infinie, tout ce que l’on voudrait, excepté de croire aux absurdes histoires de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

La nuit s’écoula dans ces conditions. Ni la direction ni la position du navire ne s’étaient modifiées. Aux premières lueurs de l’aube, le capitaine Bourcart et ses compagnons voulurent observer l’état de la mer. À supposer que le tonnelier eût raison, qui sait si l’animal ne montrerait pas certaines parties de son corps, si même il ne serait pas possible de le blesser mortellement, de délivrer le navire de ses formidables étreintes?… Appartenait-il à ce genre de céphalopodes connus sous le nom de poulpes, avec une tête de cheval, un bec de vautour, des tentacules qui se fussent étroitement enlacés autour de la coque du Saint-Enoch?… Ne se rangeait-il pas plutôt dans cette classe des articulés, recouverts d’une épaisse carapace, ichthyosaures, plésiosaures, crocodiles géants?… Était-ce un de ces calmars, des ces krakens, de ces “mantas” déjà rencontrés sur certains parages de l’Atlantique ou du Pacifique, de dimensions telles que l’imagination n’aurait pu les rêver?…

Le jour était venu, jour blafard à travers un brouillard opaque. Rien ne laissait prévoir qu'il dût se dissoudre ni même perdre de son extraordinaire intensité.

Telle était la vitesse du Saint-Enoch que l'air cinglait les visages comme une mitraille. Il fut encore impossible de se tenir sur le pont. M. Bourcart et ses officiers durent donc rentrer dans le carré. Maître Ollive, qui essaya de ramper jusqu'aux bastingages, n'y put parvenir et fut si brutalement repoussé qu'il faillit s'écraser contre l'escalier de la dunette:

“Vingt mille diables! s'écria-t-il lorsque les deux lieutenants l'eurent relevé, j'ai bien cru que je ne serais plus en état de payer bouteille à cette vieille bête de Cabidoulin.”

Ce que le capitaine Bourcart avait constaté, cependant, c'est que le Saint-Enoch, pris par le travers, donnait une bande sur bâbord à faire croire qu'il allait chavirer.

Il va de soi que l'équipage n'avait point quitté le poste ni le gaillard d'avant. Il eût été difficile, surtout au milieu des brumes, de communiquer de l'arrière à l'avant du navire. Heureusement la cambuse contenait assez de vivres, biscuits ou conserves, pour assurer la nourriture du bord.

“Que faire?… dit le second.

— Nous verrons, Heurtaux…, répondit M. Bourcart. Cette situation ne peut se prolonger…

— À moins que nous ne soyons emportés jusqu'à la mer Glaciale! répliqua le lieutenant Allotte.

— Et que le Saint-Enoch ait pu résister!…” ajouta le lieutenant Coquebert.

En ce moment, aux mugissements qui semblaient s’échapper des basses zones de l’Océan se joignit un fracas effroyable.

Aussitôt, maître Ollive, qui se traîna vers la porte de la dunette de s’écrier:

“La mâture vient de s’affaler!”

C’était une chance que personne n’eût pu s’aventurer sur le pont. Haubans, galhaubans, étais, avaient largué aux secousses du tangage et du roulis. Mâts de perroquet et mâts de hune s’étaient abattus en grand avec leurs vergues. Quelques-uns étaient retenus en dehors par leurs agrès, au risque de défoncer le bordage. Il ne restait plus que les bas mâts avec leurs hunes, contre lesquels battaient les voiles déferlées, qui ne tardèrent pas à s’envoler par lambeaux. Le navire, ainsi désemparé, ne perdit rien de sa vitesse, et les épaves le suivaient dans cet irrésistible entraînement vers le nord du Pacifique.

“Ah! mon pauvre Saint-Enoch!”

Ces paroles désolées échappèrent au capitaine

Bourcart.

Jusqu’alors, il n’avait point perdu l’espoir que son bâtiment pourrait reprendre sa navigation, lorsqu’il se retrouverait dans des conditions normales. En effet, l’existence d’un monstre marin admise, il était évident que ce monstre, si puissant qu’il fût, n’avait pas la force d’entraîner le Saint-Enoch dans l’abîme… Il l’eût déjà fait… Donc, il finirait par se fatiguer d’une telle charge et n’irait pas se fracasser avec lui contre quelque littoral de la côte asiatique ou de la côte américaine…

Oui!… M. Bourcart avait jusque-là espéré que le navire en sortirait sain et sauf!… Mais, à présent, sans mâts ni voiles, et dans l’impossibilité de réparer ses avaries, quelles ressources offrait-il?…

Situation extraordinaire, en vérité, et il n’avait pas tort, Jean Marie Cabidoulin, lorsqu’il disait:

“On n’a jamais tout vu des choses de la mer, et il en reste toujours à voir!”

Cependant le capitaine Bourcart et ses officiers n’étaient pas de ces hommes sur lesquels le désespoir a prise. Tant que cette coque serait sous leurs pieds, ils ne croiraient pas avoir perdu toute chance de salut… Seulement pourraient-ils réagir contre la terreur à laquelle l’équipage s’abandonnait?…

Les chronomètres marquaient alors huit heures du matin. Il y en avait donc environ douze d’écoulées depuis que le Saint-Enoch s’était remis en marche.

Évidemment, la force de traction, quelle qu’elle fût, devait être prodigieuse, non moins prodigieuse la vitesse imprimée au bâtiment. Du reste, certains savants ont calculé, — que n’ont-ils pas calculé et que ne calculeront-ils pas dans l’avenir! — la puissance des grands cétacés. Une baleine, longue de vingt-trois mètres, pesant environ soixante-dix tonnes, possède la force de cent quarante chevaux-vapeur, soit quatre cent vingt chevaux de trait, force que ne développent point encore les locomotives les plus perfectionnées. Aussi, comme le disait le docteur Filhiol, peut-être, un jour, les navires se feront-ils remorquer par un attelage de baleines, et les ballons par un attelage d’aigles, de condors ou de vautours?… Or, d’après ces chiffres, l’on juge de ce que pouvait être la valeur mécanique d’un monstre marin qui devait mesurer de quatre à cinq cents pieds de longueur!

Lorsque le docteur Filhiol demanda au capitaine Bourcart à combien il estimait la marche du Saint-Enoch, — marche qui, d’ailleurs, semblait uniforme:

“Elle ne peut être moindre de quarante lieues à l’heure, répondit M. Bourcart.

— Nous aurions fait alors près de cinq cents lieues depuis douze heures?…

— Oui!… près de cinq cents lieues!”

Que cela soit pour surprendre, il est certain qu’il existe des exemples de rapidité même supérieure. Et, précisément, dans l’océan Pacifique, voici le phénomène qui avait été signalé, quelques années avant, par un commandant des stations navales.

À la suite d’un violent tremblement de terre sur les côtes du Pérou, une immense ondulation de l’Océan s’étendit jusqu’au littoral australien. Ce fut par bonds précipités que cette lame, longue de deux lieues, parcourut près du tiers du globe avec une vitesse vertigineuse estimée à cent quatre-vingt-trois mètres par seconde, soit six cent cinquante-huit kilomètres par heure. Lancée contre les nombreux archipels du Pacifique, précédée d’une lointaine oscillation sous-marine, son arrivée s’annonçait par un grand bruissement aux abords des terres; et, l’obstacle franchi ou tourné, se déplaçait plus rapidement encore.

Ce fait précisément rapporté dans le Journal du Havre, M. Bourcart le connaissait et, après l'avoir cité à ses compagnons, il ajouta:

"Je ne serais donc pas étonné que nous fussions témoins et victimes d'un phénomène de ce genre… Une poussée volcanique se sera produite au fond de l'Océan, et de là l'origine de cet écueil inconnu sur lequel s'est échoué le Saint-Enoch… Puis, de même qu'à la suite du tremblement de terre du Pérou, une énorme lame, un extraordinaire raz de marée aura pris naissance, et, après nous avoir arrachés à l'écueil, c'est lui qui nous entraîne vers le nord…

— À mon avis, déclara M. Heurtaux, en voyant le capitaine King faire un signe approbatif, voilà qui paraît autrement admissible que l'existence d'un monstre marin…

— Et quel monstre, ajouta le docteur Filhiol, capable de transporter notre navire avec une vitesse de quarante lieues à l'heure!

— Bon! répondit maître Ollive, allez dire cela à Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, et vous verrez s'il abandonne son kraken, son calmar ou son serpent de mer!"

Peu importait, en somme, que le tonnelier s'entêtât à ses histoires fantastico-marines. L'essentiel eût été de reconnaître jusqu'à quelle latitude le Saint-Enoch pouvait s'être élevé ce jour-là.

M. Bourcart prit sa carte et chercha à établir la position. Très vraisemblablement, la direction suivie s'était maintenue vers le nord. Il y avait donc lieu d'admettre que le navire, après avoir franchi le long semis des Kouriles au large de la dernière île, avait traversé la mer de Behring. Autrement, il se fût déjà fracassé soit contre cet archipel, soit contre celui des Aléoutiennes plus à l’est. À la surface de ce bassin aucune terre n’émergeait qui eût pu lui faire obstacle. Il devait même, étant donnée sa vitesse, avoir franchi ce détroit à peine large d’une quinzaine de lieues. Or, en le franchissant, il eût suffi que l’immense lame obliquât de quelques milles à l’est ou à l’ouest pour se jeter sur le cap Orient de la terre d’Asie ou sur le cap du Prince de Galles de la terre d’Amérique. Mais, puisque cet écart ne s’était pas produit, pouvait-on douter que le Saint-Enoch ne fût déjà en plein océan Arctique?…

Et alors le docteur Filhiol de demander à M. Bourcart:

“À quelle distance de cet écueil se trouvait donc située la mer polaire?

— Dix-sept degrés environ, répondit le capitaine, ce qui, à vingt-cinq lieues par degré, donne près de quatre cent vingt-cinq lieues…

— Ainsi, déclara M. Heurtaux, nous ne devons pas être éloignés du soixante-dixième parallèle!”

Le soixante-dixième parallèle, c’est celui qui limite l’océan Arctique, et, à cette époque de l’année, la banquise polaire devait être proche!

Les cinquante-six hommes, embarqués sur le Saint-Enoch, couraient vraisemblablement à la plus épouvantable des catastrophes. Ce serait au milieu des solitudes hyperboréennes que se perdrait leur navire. À cette latitude se rencontreraient les glaces déjà immobilisées au delà du détroit de Behring, les ice-fields, les icebergs, et l’infranchissable banquise arctique…

Et que deviendrait l’équipage, en admettant qu’il ne fût pas englouti à la suite d’une violente collision?… Qu’il parvînt à se réfugier sur un champ de glaces, sur l’un des archipels de ces parages, la Nouvelle-Sibérie, la terre de

Wrangel ou quelque autre groupe insulaire, à plusieurs centaines de milles des côtes de l’Asie et de l’Amérique, sur une de ces îles inhabitées et inhabitables, sans vivres, et sans abri, exposé à ces froids excessifs qui, dès octobre, enveloppent les régions de la mer Glaciale, quel sort l’y attendait?… Il n’y saurait hiverner, et comment atteindre les provinces de la Sibérie ou de l’Alaska?…

Il est vrai, au sortir du détroit de Behring, l’énorme ondulation océanique, ayant un plus large espace pour s’étendre, devait perdre en force et en vitesse. Et puis ne fallait-il pas compter avec la baisse qu’indiquait la colonne barométrique? Au milieu des rafales sur une mer démontée, alors que le vent soufflerait en tempête, peut-être le phénomène épuisé rendrait-il sa liberté au Saint-Enoch!… Toutefois, désemparé, sous le coup des tourmentes à ce début de l’hiver arctique, comment résisterait-il et que deviendrait-il?… Et quelle affreuse perspective pour le capitaine Bourcart et ses compagnons, sur ce navire dont ils ne seraient plus maîtres, perdu au fond de ces lointains parages!…

Telle était la situation que ni l’énergie, ni l’intelligence, ni le courage ne seraient en état de modifier.

La matinée s’écoula. Le Saint-Enoch continuait à être emporté tantôt par le travers, tantôt par l’arrière ou par l’avant, comme une épave abandonnée au caprice de la mer. Ce qui rendait cette situation plus effrayante, c’est que le regard ne parvenait pas à percer ce rideau de brumes. D’ailleurs, étant donnée l’impossibilité de se tenir sur le pont, c’est seulement à travers les étroites fenêtres du carré que M. Bourcart et ses officiers eussent pu observer le large. Ils ne savaient donc pas si le navire passait en vue de terre, à proximité de l’une ou l’autre rive du détroit de Behring, si quelque île des archipels arctiques se montrait contre laquelle l’extraordinaire ondulation fût venue se briser, et le Saint-Enoch avec elle!…

Dans tous les cas, le dénouement ne pouvait être qu’un naufrage à bref délai auquel ne survivrait sans doute pas un seul homme de l’équipage!…

“Mais crève donc, maudit brouillard, crève donc!” s’écriait le lieutenant Allotte.

Le brouillard se dissipa dans l’après-midi sous l’influence de la baisse barométrique. Ses volutes remontèrent vers les hautes zones, et, si le soleil ne fut pas visible, du moins le regard put-il s’étendre jusqu’à l’horizon.

Vers quatre heures du soir, la vitesse du Saint-Enoch sembla diminuer. Allait-il se dégager enfin?… Ce ne serait qu’un navire désemparé; mais, si le capitaine Bourcart réussissait à établir quelque voile de fortune, peut-être parviendrait-il à revenir vers le sud…

“Tout… dit M. Heurtaux, tout plutôt que d’aller s’écraser contre la banquise!”

À ce moment, maître Ollive essaya de sortir du carré. La résistance de l’air étant moins forte, il y parvint. M. Bourcart, le capitaine King, le docteur Filhiol, les lieutenants, le suivirent et vinrent s’accoter contre le bastingage de tribord, en se retenant aux taquets.

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, le charpentier, le forgeron, les harponneurs, une douzaine de matelots, tant Anglais que Français, remontèrent du poste et se placèrent en observation sur la coursive entre les pavois et la cabousse.

Le Saint-Enoch présentait alors le cap au nord-nord-est, emporté sur le dos de cette large ondulation dont la hauteur s’abaissait en même temps que décroissait sa rapidité.

Aucune terre en vue.

Quant à ce monstre marin auquel le navire eût été attaché depuis une vingtaine d’heures, il ne se laissait pas apercevoir, quoi que pût dire le tonnelier.

Et tous d’espérer, tous de se raffermir aux encourageantes paroles que fit entendre le capitaine Bourcart. Aussi maître Ollive crut-il opportun de plaisanter Jean-Marie Cabidoulin sur son crocodile poulpo-krako-kraque.

“Tu as perdu ta bouteille… vieux!… dit-il en lui frappant sur l’épaule.

— Je l’ai gagnée, répliqua maître Cabidoulin, mais ni toi ni moi ne serons là pour la boire…

— Quoi!… tu prétends que ton monstre…

— Est toujours là… et, en regardant bien, on distingue tantôt sa queue… tantôt sa tête!…

— Tout ça… des imaginations de ta sacrée caboche!…

— Et il nous tient dans ses pinces… et il ne nous lâchera pas… et je sais bien où il nous mène…

— Il nous mène là d’où nous reviendrons, vieux!… riposta maître Ollive. Et, après bouteille de tafia, bouteille de rhum que nous nous en tirerons sains et saufs!…”

Jean-Marie Cabidoulin haussa les épaules, et jamais il n’avait jeté un plus méprisant regard sur son camarade! Penché au-dessus de la lisse, c’est qu’il croyait réellement voir la tête du monstre, une sorte de tête de cheval à bec énorme, sortant d’une épaisse crinière, puis, à quelques centaines de pieds, sa queue monstrueuse battant avec fureur les eaux dénivelées sur une large étendue!… Et, pour tout dire, novices et matelots voyaient tout cela par les yeux de l’entêté tonnelier.

Cependant, si aucune terre ne se relevait au nord, des glaces flottantes se déplaçaient alors sur un vaste espace. Aucun doute, le Saint-Enoch traversait les parages polaires au delà du détroit. De combien de degrés au-dessus du soixante-dixième parallèle, cela n’aurait pu être établi que par une observation impossible à cette heure avancée du jour.

Au surplus, moins de dix minutes après, le matelot Gastinet, qui venait de se hisser à la hune de misaine, criait d’une voix retentissante:

“Banquise par bâbord devant!”

Un ice-field apparaissait à la distance de trois milles vers le nord. Plat comme un miroir, il réverbérait les derniers rayons du soleil. Au fond, les premiers blocs de la banquise, dont la crête se profilait à une centaine de toises au-dessus du niveau de la mer. Sur l’ice-field, tout un monde d’oiseaux, mouettes, guillemots, manchots frégates, tandis que les phoques, par couples nombreux, rampaient sur ses bords.

La banquise pouvait être éloignée de trois à quatre milles, et le vent, qui fraîchissait, y portait directement. La mer était assurément plus houleuse que ne le comportait la brise, ce qui tenait à ce que l’énorme lame courait encore au milieu des glaçons entrechoqués. Et, sans doute, elle viendrait se tuer contre l’inébranlable barrière arctique.

Aussi de lourds paquets de mer tombaient-ils sur le pont du Saint-Enoch dont les pavois furent défoncés par le travers du mât de misaine. À un moment, le navire donna une telle bande que l'eau l'envahit jusqu'à la dunette. Si les panneaux de la cale n'eussent résisté, il aurait coulé à pic.

À mesure que tombait le jour, la tourmente s'accentuait et se déchaînait en effroyables rafales mélangées de neige.

Enfin, vers sept heures du soir, le Saint-Enoch, une dernière fois soulevé, fut précipité sur l'ice-field, le traversa en glissant à sa surface et vint buter contre les blocs de la banquise.

CHAPITRE XV

Dénouement

En quelle partie de la mer arctique le Saint-Enoch avait-il été entraîné depuis le moment où il s’était détaché de l’écueil, c’est-à-dire depuis vingt-quatre heures environ?…

À la levée du brouillard, M. Bourcart avait observé que son navire se dirigeait vers le nord-nord-ouest. S’il ne s’était point écarté de cette direction à la sortie du détroit de Behring, ses compagnons et lui pourraient peut-être rallier la terre ferme en se portant vers le littoral de la Sibérie ou les îles avoisinantes. Le rapatriement s’effectuerait alors moins péniblement qu’à travers les interminables espaces de l’Alaska américaine.

La nuit était arrivée, — une nuit obscure et glaciale, avec un froid de dix degrés centigrades au-dessous de zéro.

La collision avait été assez violente pour que les bas mâts du navire se fussent rompus en même temps que se défonçait sa coque.

Ce fut un miracle si personne ne fut grièvement blessé — quelques contusions seulement. Les hommes, projetés contre les bastingages purent prendre pied sur le champ de glace, où M. Bourcart et les officiers les rejoignirent aussitôt.

Il n’y avait plus qu’à attendre le jour. Toutefois, au lieu de rester au plein air pendant de longues heures, mieux valait remonter à bord. Aussi le capitaine en donna-t-il l’ordre. S’il n’était possible de faire du feu ni dans le carré ni dans le poste presque entièrement démolis, du moins l’équipage y trouverait abri contre les rafales de neige qui se déchaînaient avec fureur. Dès l’aube, M. Bourcart aviserait aux mesures qu’il conviendrait d’adopter.

Le Saint-Enoch s’était redressé en heurtant la base de la banquise. Mais quelles avaries irréparables!… Coque ouverte en plusieurs endroits au-dessous de la ligne de flottaison, pont défoncé ou disjoint, cloisons intérieures des cabines disloquées. Cependant, les officiers purent s’installer à l’intérieur de la dunette tant bien que mal, les matelots dans la cale et dans le poste.

Tel avait été le dénouement de cette situation, en ce qui concernait du moins le phénomène provoqué par un irrésistible mouvement du seuil océanique entre le cinquantième et le soixante dixième parallèle.

Maintenant, qu’allaient devenir les naufragés du Saint-Enoch et du Repton.

M. Bourcart et le second avaient pu retrouver leurs cartes au milieu des débris du carré. Éclairés par la lueur d’un fanal, ils cherchaient à établir la position du Saint-Enoch.

“C’est depuis le soir du 22 jusqu’au soir du 23 octobre, dit M. Bourcart, que cette lame l’a emporté vers le nord-ouest de la mer polaire…

— Et avec une vitesse qu’on ne peut estimer à moins de quarante lieues à l’heure!… répondit M. Heurtaux.

— Aussi, déclara le capitaine, je ne serais pas surpris que nous ayons atteint les parages de la terre de Wrangel.”

Si M. Bourcart ne faisait point erreur, si la banquise s’appuyait sur cette terre voisine de la côte sibérienne, il n’y aurait qu’à traverser le détroit de Long pour gagner le pays des Tchouktchis, dont la pointe la plus avancée sur l’océan Glacial est le cap Nord. Mais peut-être était-il regrettable que le Saint-Enoch n’eût pas été rejeté plus à l’ouest sur l’archipel de la Nouvelle-Sibérie. À l’embouchure de la Léna, le rapatriement aurait pu s’accomplir dans des conditions meilleures, et les bourgades ne manquent pas en cette région des Yacoutes que traverse le cercle polaire.

À tout prendre, la situation n’était pas désespérée. Les naufragés n’étaient pas sans avoir des chances de salut. Il est vrai, que de fatigues, que de privations, que de misères!… Cheminer pendant des centaines de milles sur ces ice-fields, sans abri, exposés à toutes les rigueurs de ce climat dans la saison hivernale!… Et encore fallait-il que le détroit de Long fût solidifié par le froid dans toute sa largeur pour permettre d’atteindre la côte sibérienne.

“Le plus grand malheur, fit observer M. Heurtaux, est que les avaries du Saint-Enoch ne soient pas réparables!… Il eût été possible de creuser un canal à travers le champ de glaces, et notre navire aurait pu reprendre la mer…

— Et, ajouta M. Bourcart, nous n’avons pas même une seule embarcation!… En construire avec les débris du Saint-Enoch, pouvant contenir une cinquantaine d’hommes, y parviendrons-nous, les vivres ne nous manqueraient-ils pas avant qu’elles eussent été achevées?…”

Le jour reparut, et c’est à peine si le soleil montra son disque blafard, sans chaleur, presque sans lumière, au-dessus de l’horizon.

L’ice-field se développait à perte de vue vers l’ouest et vers l’est. Au sud s’ouvrait ce détroit de Long, encombré de glaçons, dont l’hiver allait faire une surface ininterrompue jusqu’au littoral asiatique. Il est vrai, tant que ces parages ne seraient pas pris sur toute leur étendue, M. Bourcart et ses compagnons ne pourraient les franchir pour gagner le continent.

Tous quittèrent le bord et le capitaine fit procéder à la visite du Saint-Enoch.

Il n’y eut à se faire aucune illusion. Coque écrasée contre la banquise, varangues fracassées, membrures rompues, bordages largués, quille détachée au talon, gouvernail démonté, étambot faussé, autant d’avaries impossibles à réparer, ainsi que le déclarèrent, après examen, le charpentier Férut et le forgeron Thomas.

Il n’y aurait donc à choisir qu’entre deux partis:

Ou se mettre en route le jour même, en se chargeant de tout ce qui restait de vivres, et remonter à l’ouest, vers cette partie de la mer peut-être prise par les glaces jusqu’au littoral sous l’influence du courant polaire.

Ou établir un campement au pied de la banquise et l’occuper en attendant que le passage du détroit de Long devînt praticable à des piétons.

Le pour et le contre se rencontraient dans ces deux projets. En tous cas, il ne pouvait être question d’hiverner à cette place jusqu’au retour de la saison chaude. En admettant que l’on parvînt à creuser une retraite dans le soubassement de la banquise, ainsi que l’ont fait quelques baleiniers, comment vivre pendant sept à huit mois encore?… Ne point oublier qu’il s’agissait de nourrir cinquante-six hommes, dont l’alimentation n’était assurée que pendant une quinzaine de jours, — trois semaines au plus, même en se réduisant au strict nécessaire. Compter sur la chasse ou la pêche eût été trop incertain. Puis, comment organiser le chauffage, si ce n’est en brûlant les débris du navire?… Et après que deviendraient les naufragés?…

Quant à l’arrivée d’un bâtiment en vue de la banquise, les deux tiers de l’année s’écouleraient avant que ces parages redevinssent navigables!…

Le capitaine Bourcart prit donc la résolution de partir dès que serait achevée la construction de traîneaux, auxquels, à défaut de chiens, s’attelleraient les hommes.

Il convient de dire que ce projet, adopté par l’équipage du Saint-Enoch, le fut également et sans discussion par le personnel du Repton.

Peut-être, cependant, les Anglais eussent-ils préféré se mettre séparément en route. Mais, faute de vivres, ils ne l’auraient pu, et le capitaine Bourcart n’eût jamais consenti à leur en fournir dans ces conditions.

Et, d’ailleurs, les naufragés étaient-ils exactement fixés sur la position de l’ice-field?… Avaient-ils la certitude de se trouver dans le voisinage de la terre de Wrangel?… Aussi, lorsque le docteur Filhiol posa cette question au capitaine:

“Je ne puis vous répondre d’une façon positive… déclara M. Bourcart. Avec mes instruments, j’aurais su relever notre position, s’ils n’eussent été brisés… Je pense pourtant que cet ice-field doit être à proximité de la terre de Wrangel, à moins qu’il ne subisse l’action d’un courant qui porterait à l’ouest ou à l’est du détroit de Behring.”

L’hypothèse était plausible. Or, sans points de repère, comment reconnaître si le champ de glace était immobilisé ou s’il dérivait avec la banquise…

En effet, deux forts courants traversent ces parages. L’un vient du nord-ouest en contournant le cap Orient de la presqu’île des Tchouktschis, l’autre vient du nord pour se réunir au premier qui remonte le long de la côte alaskienne jusqu’à la pointe de Barrow.

Quoi qu’il en soit, le départ était décidé. Aussi, sur l’ordre du capitaine, maître Cabidoulin, le charpentier et le forgeron se mirent-ils à la besogne. Il s’agissait de construire trois traîneaux avec les planches et les espars retirés du Saint-Enoch, dont la coque continuerait à servir d’abri. Quant au combustible, dont il faudrait emporter le plus possible, les mâts et les vergues le fourniraient en abondance.

Ce travail devait durer trois jours, à la condition de ne pas perdre son temps. Les Anglais offrirent leurs services, et M. Bourcart comptait surtout y recourir pendant le cheminement. Ce ne serait pas trop de tous les bras pour enlever ces lourds traîneaux au cours d’un si long voyage.

Plusieurs fois, les deux capitaines, les lieutenants et le docteur Filhiol montèrent à la crête de la banquise, dont les pentes étaient assez praticables. De cette hauteur de trois cents pieds, le rayon de visibilité mesurait environ cinquante kilomètres. Aucune terre n’apparut dans le champ des longues-vues. En direction du sud, c’était toujours la mer charriant des glaces et non l’ice-field ininterrompu!… Il était à supposer que quelques semaines s’écouleraient encore avant que le détroit de Long fût pris sur toute son étendue… si c’était bien le détroit de Long qui s’ouvrait de ce côté…

Durant ces trois jours, le campement ne fut point troublé par la visite des ours blancs. Deux ou trois de ces animaux, qui ne laissent pas d’être redoutables, après s’être montrés entre les glaçons, se retirèrent dès qu’on voulut les poursuivre.

Enfin, à la date du 26 octobre, dans la soirée, la construction des traîneaux fut achevée. On les chargea des caisses de conserves, viandes, légumes et biscuits, d’une forte provision de bois, d’un paquet de voiles destinées à l’établissement de tentes, lorsque les tempêtes de neige rendraient le cheminement impossible.

Le lendemain, après une dernière nuit passée dans le poste et le carré, après un dernier repas à bord, M. Bourcart et ses compagnons, le capitaine King et les siens, se mirent en marche.

Ce départ ne se fit pas sans une vive émotion, sans un profond serrement de cœur!… Cette épave, qui avait été le Saint-Enoch, les yeux ne la quittèrent qu’au moment où elle disparut derrière les hauteurs de la banquise!…

Et comme maître Ollive, toujours plein de confiance, disait au tonnelier:

“Eh bien… vieux… on s’en tirera tout de même!… On reverra la jetée du Havre…

— Nous… qui sait?… mais pas le Saint-Enoch”, se contenta de répondre Jean-Marie

Cabidoulin.

Il n’y a pas lieu de rapporter par le détail les incidents de ce voyage à la surface de l’ice-field. Le plus grand danger était que les vivres et le combustible vinssent à faire défaut si le cheminement venait à se prolonger.

La petite caravane marchait en ordre régulier. Les deux lieutenants tenaient la tête. Ils s’éloignaient parfois d’un ou deux milles afin de reconnaître la route, lorsque les blocs la barraient. Il fallait alors contourner de hauts ice-bergs, ce qui accroissait d’autant les étapes.

Quant à la température, elle oscillait entre vingt et trente degrés au-dessous de zéro, — moyenne ordinaire à cette latitude au début de la période hivernale.

Et les jours se succédaient, et au sud de l’ice-field se développait invariablement la mer, couverte de glaces flottantes. M. Bourcart observait, d’ailleurs, qu’un courant assez rapide entraînait ces glaces dans la direction de l’ouest, c’est-à-dire vers le détroit de Long, dont les traîneaux avaient déjà dû dépasser l’entrée occidentale. Au sud se développait probablement ce large bras de mer que bornent les îles Liakhov et l’archipel de la Nouvelle-Sibérie.

Au sujet des éventualités à prévoir, lorsqu’il en causait avec ses officiers, le capitaine Bourcart exprimait la crainte d’être obligé de remonter jusqu’à ces îles, que plusieurs centaines de milles séparent du continent asiatique. Or, c’est à peine si la caravane pouvait en faire une douzaine par vingt-quatre heures, dont douze étaient réservées au repos de la nuit. Et, même, comme les jours d’octobre sont de courte durée sous cette haute latitude, comme le soleil ne décrit au-dessus de l’horizon qu’une courbe de plus en plus rétrécie, c’était au milieu d’une demi-obscurité que le cheminement s’effectuait au prix de fatigues excessives.

Cependant ces hommes courageux ne se plaignaient pas. Il n’y avait rien à reprocher aux Anglais qui prenaient leur part du traînage. Lorsque M. Bourcart donnait le signal de halte, on formait des tentes au moyen de voiles disposées sur des espars, on distribuait la nourriture, on allumait le fourneau, on préparait quelque boisson chaude, grog ou café, et tous s’endormaient jusqu’au départ.

Mais quelles souffrances, lorsque les rafales se déchaînaient avec une violence inouïe, lorsque le chasse-neige balayait le champ de glace, lorsque la marche s’opérait à contre-vent au milieu d’une épaisse et aveuglante poussière blanche! On ne se voyait pas à quelques mètres. La direction ne pouvait être relevée qu’à la boussole dont l’aiguille, affolée, ne donnait plus d’indications suffisantes. M. Bourcart, — et il ne l’avouait qu’à M. Heurtaux, — se sentait égaré à travers ces immenses solitudes… Il en était réduit à longer la lisière de l’ice-field que battaient les lames du large, au lieu de piquer droit au sud. Or, la mer s’étendait toujours de ce côté… Faudrait-il donc s’embarquer sur ces glaçons en dérive… s’en remettre au hasard pour atteindre la côte sibérienne?… Non, à mesure que la température s’abaisserait, ces glaçons, pressés les uns contre les autres, finiraient par ne former qu’un champ solide de la surface du bassin polaire. Mais si des semaines s’écoulaient avant que la mer ne se fût solidifiée, les vivres, malgré toute l’économie qu’on apportait, le bois, dont la consommation se réduisait à la cuisson des aliments, ne manqueraient-ils pas?…

Déjà plusieurs des novices étaient à bout de forces, et le docteur Filhiol les soignait de son mieux. Ah! que de fatigues eussent été évitées si les traîneaux avaient eu un de ces attelages de chiens habitués aux plaines sibériennes ou kamtchadales! Doués d’un merveilleux instinct, ces animaux savent s’orienter au milieu des tourbillons de neige, alors que leurs maîtres sont réduits à l’impuissance…

Enfin, on alla ainsi jusqu’au 19 novembre.

Vingt-quatre jours s’étaient écoulés depuis le départ. Il n’avait pas été possible de descendre vers le sud-ouest, là où M. Bourcart espérait rencontrer les points avancés du continent aux approches des îles Liakhov.

Les vivres étaient presque épuisés et, avant quarante-huit heures les naufragés n’auraient plus qu’à s’arrêter à leur dernier campement, à y attendre la plus horrible des morts!…

“Navire… navire!…”

Enfin ce cri, dans la matinée du 20 novembre, fut poussé par Romain Allotte, et à tous les regards apparut le bâtiment que le lieutenant venait de signaler.

C’était un trois-mâts-barque, un baleinier qui, toutes voiles dehors, par fraîche brise du nord-ouest, se dirigeait vers le détroit de Behring.

M. Bourcart et ses compagnons, abandonnant les traîneaux, retrouvèrent assez de forces pour courir vers la lisière de l’ice-field.

Là des signaux furent faits, des coups de fusil tirés…

Ils avaient été aperçus et entendus… Le bâtiment mit aussitôt en panne, et deux embarcations s’en détachèrent…

Une demi-heure après, les naufragés étaient à bord… sauvés par cette intervention, on peut dire providentielle.

Ce navire, le World de Belfast, capitaine Morris, après avoir terminé tardivement sa campagne de pêche, se rendait en Nouvelle-Zélande.

Inutile de dire que l’accueil réservé à l’équipage du Saint-Enoch comme à celui du Repton fut des plus généreux. Et, lorsque les deux capitaines racontèrent dans quelles extraordinaires circonstances s’étaient perdus leurs navires, il fallut pourtant bien les croire!

À un mois de là, le World débarquait à Dunedin les survivants de ce sinistre maritime.

Et alors, le capitaine King de dire au capitaine Bourcart en prenant congé:

“Vous nous avez recueillis à bord du Saint-Enoch, et je vous ai remercié…

— Comme nous remercions votre compatriote, le capitaine Morris, de nous avoir recueillis à bord du World…, répondit M. Bourcart.

— Aussi sommes-nous quittes… déclara l’Anglais.

— Comme il vous plaira…

— Bonsoir…

— Bonsoir!”

Et ce fut tout.

Quant au kraken, kalmar, céphalopode, serpent de mer, selon qu’on voudra l’appeler, le World, en dépit des pronostics dont maître Cabidoulin continuait à ne point se montrer avare, fut assez heureux pour ne point le rencontrer pendant sa traversée de la mer polaire à la Nouvelle-Zélande. D’autre part, ni M. Bourcart ni ses compagnons ne l’aperçurent pendant leur traversée de la Nouvelle-Zélande en Europe. Les lieutenants Coquebert et Allotte se rendaient enfin compte que c’était une lame énorme, douée d’une incomparable vitesse, qui avait emporté le Saint-Enoch jusqu’à la banquise.

Quant à Jean-Marie Cabidoulin, avec la majorité de l’équipage il tenait toujours pour son prodigieux monstre marin…

En tout cas, il n’y a pas certitude que les océans renferment de tels animaux. Aussi, en attendant que les ichthyologistes aient constaté leur existence et décidé en quelle famille, quel genre, quelle espèce, il conviendra de les classer, mieux vaut reléguer ce qu’on en rapporte au rang des légendes.

Le capitaine Bourcart et ses compagnons rentrèrent donc au Havre. Cette fois, ce ne fut pas à bord de leur navire.

Cependant, grâce à la vente de la première cargaison à Victoria de Vancouver, la campagne donna des bénéfices, et, quant au Saint-Enoch, la perte en fut couverte par les assureurs. Mais les larmes venaient aux yeux du capitaine, lorsqu’il songeait à son pauvre bâtiment abandonné au pied de la banquise arctique!

En ce qui concerne maître Ollive et maître Cabidoulin, ils s’offrirent réciproquement les bouteilles de tafia et de rhum pariées gagnées, perdues, au cours du voyage. Et, lorsque le premier dit au second:

“Eh bien… vieux… est-ce que tu y crois toujours?…

— Si j’y crois… après ce qui nous est arrivé!…

— Ainsi, tu affirmes avoir vu la bête?…

— Comme je te vois.

— Entend-tu par là que j’en sois une?…

— Oui… puisque tu ne veux pas y croire!…

— Merci!”

On le voit, le tonnelier n’a point changé d’opinion. Il persiste à admettre l’existence du monstre, et dans ses sempiternelles histoires revient sans cesse le récit des aventures du Saint-Enoch!…

Mais, qu’on en soit sûr, cette campagne aura été le dernière de Jean-Marie Cabidoulin.

THE KIP BROTHERS

This 1902 adventure novel concerns two brothers, who are convicted of a murder and condemned to a penal colony. They escape and seek the evidence that will clear their name.

Unfortunately, this novel was first published in English in 2007, and so is not available in this edition due to copyright restrictions. The original French text has been provided in its place.

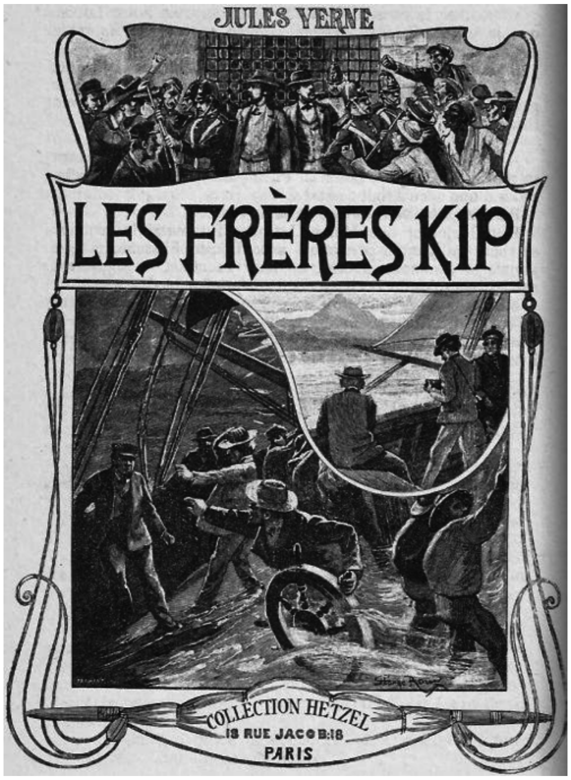
JULES VERNE
LES FRÈRES KIP
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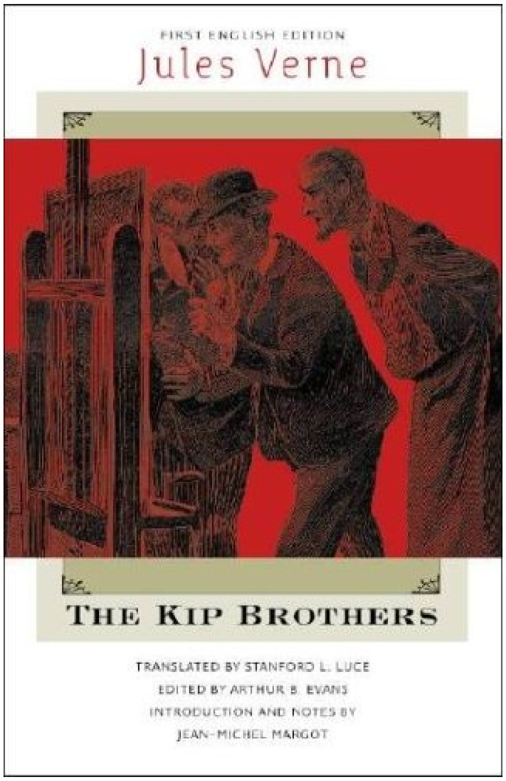
FIRST ENGLISH EDITION
Jules Verne
THE KIP BROTHERS
TRANSLATED BY STANFORD L. LUCE
EDITED BY ARTHUR B. EVANS
INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
JEAN-MICHEL MARGOT

The first English translation, 2007 – 105 years after the French publication

LES FRÈRES KIP

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PREMIÈRE PARTIE

I - La taverne des “Three-Magpies”

À cette époque, - 1885, - quarante-six ans après avoir été occupée par la Grande-Bretagne, qui en fit une dépendance de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, trente-deux ans après son établissement en colonie détachée de la Couronne et se gouvernant elle-même, la Nouvelle-Zélande était encore dévorée par la fièvre endémique de l’or. Les désordres qu’engendre cette fièvre ne furent pas aussi destructeurs qu’ils l’avaient été en certaines provinces du continent australien. Cependant il en résulta des troubles regrettables dont se ressentit l’esprit de la population des deux îles. La province d’Otago, qui comprend la partie méridionale de Tawaï-Pounamou, fut envahie par les chercheurs de places. Les gisements de la Clutha attirèrent nombre d’aventuriers. On s’en rendra compte par ce fait que le rendement des gîtes aurifères de la Nouvelle-Zélande, entre 1864 et 1889, s’éleva à douze cents millions de francs.

Les Australiens, les Chinois ne furent pas seuls à s’abattre comme une volée d’oiseaux de proie sur ces riches territoires. Américains, Européens y affluèrent. Et s’étonnera-t-on que les équipages des navires de commerce à destination d’Auckland, de Wellington, de Christchurch, de Napier, d’Invercargill, de Dunedin, ne fussent assez fermes pour résister à cette attraction dès leur arrivée au port?... En vain les capitaines essayaient-ils de retenir les matelots; en vain les autorités maritimes leur prêtaient-elles concours!... La désertion sévissait, et les rades s’encombraient de bâtiments qui, faute d’hommes, ne pouvaient partir.

Parmi ceux-ci, à Dunedin, on remarquait le brick anglais James-Cook.

Des huit matelots appartenant au personnel du bâtiment, quatre seulement n’avaient point abandonné le bord, les quatre autres ayant décampé avec la ferme volonté de ne pas rembarquer.

Douze heures après leur disparition, ils devaient être déjà loin de Dunedin, se dirigeant vers les gisements de la province. En relâche depuis une quinzaine de jours, son chargement terminé, son navire prêt à prendre la mer, le capitaine n’avait pas pu remplacer les manquants. Ni l’appât de gages plus élevés, ni la perspective d’un voyage de quelques mois seulement ne lui avaient amené des recrues, et encore craignait-il que les hommes restés à bord ne fussent tentés de rejoindre leurs camarades. Aussi, tandis qu’il cherchait de son côté, le maître d’équipage du James-Cook, Flig Balt, cherchait du sien dans les tavernes, dans les taps ou chez les logeurs, à compléter l’équipage.

Dunedin est située sur la côte sud-est de cette île du Sud que le détroit de Cook sépare de l’île du Nord, - en langue indigène Tawaï-Pounamou et Ika-na-Maoui, dont se compose la Nouvelle-Zélande. En 1839, à la place occupée par la cité, Dumont d’Urville n’avait trouvé que quelques huttes maories là où l’on voit actuellement des palais, des hôtels, des places, des squares en pleine verdure, des rues sillonnées de tramways, des gares, des entrepôts, des marchés, des banques, des églises, des collèges, des hôpitaux, des quartiers actifs, des faubourgs qui s’accroissent sans cesse. C’est une ville industrielle et commerçante, riche et luxueuse, d’où rayonnent des multiples railways en toutes directions. Elle compte près de cinquante mille habitants, population moins nombreuse que celle d’Auckland, la capitale de l’île du Nord, mais plus nombreuse que celle de Wellington, le siège du gouvernement de la colonie néo-zélandaise.

Au pied de la ville, disposée en amphithéâtre sur une colline, s’arrondit le port, dans lequel les navires de tout tonnage ont accès depuis qu’un chenal a été aménagé à partir de Fort-Chalmers.

Parmi les tavernes qui foisonnent en ce bas quartier, l’une des plus bruyantes, l’une des plus achalandées, était celle d’Adam Fry, l’hôtelier des Three-Magpies. Cet homme corpulent, haut en couleur, ne valait guère mieux que les boissons de son comptoir, juste autant que ses clients habituels, tous chenapans et ivrognes.

Ce soir-là, deux consommateurs étaient attablés dans un coin devant deux verres et une pinte de gin à demi vidée qu’ils auraient épuisée jusqu’à la dernière goutte avant de quitter la taverne. C’étaient des marins du James-Cook, le maître d’équipage Flig Balt, en compagnie d’un matelot nommé Vin Mod.

“Tu as donc toujours soif, Mod?... demanda Flig Balt en remplissant le gobelet de son invité.

- Toujours entre les repas, monsieur Balt, répondit le matelot. Le gin après le wisky, le wisky après le gin!... Ça n’empêche pas de causer, d’écouter et d’observer!... Les yeux n’en voient que plus clair, les oreilles n’en sont que plus fines, et la langue n’en est que mieux pendue!...”

On peut être assuré que, chez Vin Mod, ces divers organes fonctionnaient avec une merveilleuse aisance au milieu du brouhaha de la taverne.

Un individu de petite taille, âgé de trente-cinq ans, ce matelot, maigre, souple, musculeux, figure de fouine, nez pincé, yeux vifs où semblait briller une flamme alcoolique, museau pointu, pourrait-on dire, dents de rat, physionomie rusée, intelligente. Parfaitement capable d’aider à un mauvais coup, comme son compagnon qui le savait bien, ils se valaient et pouvaient compter l’un sur l’autre.

“Il faut pourtant en finir... dit Flig Balt d’une voix dure, en frappant la table du poing.

- Il n’y a qu’à choisir dans le tas!” répliqua Vin Mod.

Et il montrait les groupes buvant, chantant, sacrant à travers les vapeurs d’alcool et de tabac qui épaississaient l’atmosphère de cette salle.

On se fût grisé rien qu’en respirant.

Flig Balt, âgé de trente-huit à trente-neuf ans, était de taille moyenne, large d’épaules, la tête forte, la membrure vigoureuse. Sa figure, on n’aurait pu l’oublier, ne l’eût-on vue qu’une fois: grosse verrue à la joue gauche, yeux d’une effrayante dureté, sourcils épais et frisottants, barbiche rougeâtre à l’américaine, sans moustaches, bref la physionomie d’un homme haineux, jaloux, vindicatif. À son premier voyage sur le James-Cook, il avait embarqué comme maître quelques mois auparavant. Originaire de Queenstown, un port du Royaume-Uni, ses papiers le déclaraient Irlandais de naissance. Mais, courant les mers depuis une vingtaine d’années, on ne lui connaissait pas de parents. Et combien de ces marins n’ont d’autre famille que les compagnons de bord, d’autre pays que le bâtiment en cours de navigation! Il semble que leur nationalité change avec celle du navire. En ce qui concernait son service, Flig Balt le faisait sévèrement, ponctuellement, et, tout en n’étant que maître d’équipage, il remplissait à bord les fonctions de second. Aussi le capitaine Gibson croyait-il pouvoir s’en rapporter à lui touchant le détail, se réservant la haute main pour le commandement du brick.

En réalité, Flig Balt n’était qu’un misérable en quête de quelque mauvais coup, très poussé par ce Vin Mod dont il subissait la détestable influence et l’incontestable supériorité. Et peut-être allait-il trouver l’occasion de mettre à exécution ses criminels projets...

“Je vous répète, dit le matelot, que, dans la taverne des Three-Magpies, il n’y a qu’à prendre, les yeux fermés... Nous rencontrerons ici les hommes qu’il nous faut, et disposés à faire le commerce pour leur propre compte...

- Encore convient-il, observa Flig Balt, de savoir d’où ils viennent...

- C’est inutile, pourvu qu’ils aillent où nous voudrons, maître Balt!... Du moment qu’on les recrute dans la clientèle d’Adam Fry, il n’y a qu’à se fier à eux!”

Et, au total, la réputation de ce cabaret de bas étage n’était plus à discuter. La police y pouvait jeter ses filets sans risquer d’attraper quelqu’un d’honnête et qui n’eût déjà eu des démêlés avec elle. Bien que le capitaine Gibson fût dans la nécessité de compléter n’importe comment son équipage, il ne se serait pas adressé aux clients des Three-Magpies. Aussi Flig Balt s’était-il gardé de lui dire qu’il irait embaucher dans cette taverne.

L’unique salle, meublée de tables, de bancs, d’escabeaux, d’un comptoir au fond derrière lequel se tenait l’hôtelier, de rayons encombrés de flacons et de bouteilles, prenait jour, par deux fenêtres garnies de barreaux de fer, sur une étroite rue aboutissant au quai. On y entrait par une porte à grosse serrure et à gros verrous, au-dessus de laquelle pendait l’enseigne, où trois pies peinturlurées se déchiraient à coups de bec, - enseigne digne de l’établissement. Au mois d’octobre, la nuit est faite dès huit heures et demie du soir, même au début de la belle saison, par quarante-cinq degrés de latitude sud. Quelques lampes de métal, approvisionnées de pétrole aux infectes émanations, brûlaient, suspendues au-dessus du comptoir et des tables. Celles qui filaient, on les laissait filer; celles dont la mèche, presque entièrement consumée, grésillait, on les laissait grésiller. Ce vague éclairage suffisait. Quand il s’agit de boire sec, pas n’est besoin de voir clair. Les verres trouvent sans peine le chemin de la bouche.

Une vingtaine de matelots occupaient les bancs et les escabeaux, - des gens de tous pays, Américains, Anglais, Irlandais, Hollandais, la plupart déserteurs, les uns prêts à partir pour les placers, les autres en revenant et dépensant sans compter leurs dernières pépites.

Ils péroraient, ils chantaient, ils hurlaient à ce point que des coups de revolver n’eussent pas été entendus au milieu de ce tumultueux et assourdissant tapage. La moitié de ces gens étaient ivres de cette ivresse morne des alcools frelatés que leurs gosiers absorbaient machinalement et dont ils ne sentaient plus les âcres brûlures. Quelques-uns se levaient, titubaient, retombaient. Adam Fry, aidé du garçon, un vigoureux indigène, les relevait, les tirait, les jetait dans un coin “en pagale”, pour employer une expression de l’argot maritime. La porte de la rue grinçait sur ses gonds. Il y en avait qui sortaient, se cognant aux murailles, se heurtant aux bornes, s’étalant dans le ruisseau. Il y en avait qui entraient et venaient s’asseoir sur les bancs libres. Des reconnaissances s’opéraient, des propos grossiers s’échangeaient avec poignées de main à briser les os. Des camarades se revoyaient après une longue bordée à travers les gisements de l’Otago. Parfois aussi, c’étaient des mots malsonnants, des plaisanteries grossières, des injures, des provocations qui fusaient d’une table à l’autre. Vraisemblablement la soirée ne se terminerait pas sans quelque rixe personnelle, qui dégénérerait en bataille générale. Cela n’aurait rien de très nouveau, d’ailleurs, pour le patron et les habitués des Three-Magpies.

Flig Balt et Vin Mod ne cessaient d’observer curieusement tout ce monde avant de prendre langue, suivant les circonstances.

“En somme, de quoi s’agit-il?... dit le matelot, accoudé de manière à se rapprocher du maître d’équipage. Il s’agit de remplacer par quatre hommes les quatre qui nous ont lâchés... Eh bien, ceux-là, il ne faut pas les regretter... ils ne nous auraient pas suivis!...

Je vous le répète, nous trouverons ici notre affaire... Et que le chanvre m’étrangle s’il est un de ces lascars qui répugne à s’emparer d’un bon navire, à courir le Pacifique au lieu de revenir à Hobart-Town... car cela tient toujours?...

- Cela tient, répondit Flig Balt.

- Alors comptons, reprit Vin Mod. Quatre de ces braves garçons, le cuisinier Koa, vous et moi, contre le capitaine, les trois autres et le mousse, c’est plus qu’il ne faut pour en avoir raison!... Un matin, on entre dans la cabine de M. Gibson... plus personne!... On fait l’appel de l’équipage... il manque trois hommes!... Quelque coup de mer les aura emportés pendant leur quart de nuit... Cela arrive même par temps calme... Et puis le James-Cook ne reparaît plus... Il a péri corps et biens en plein Pacifique... Il n’en est jamais question... et, sous un autre nom... un joli nom... le Pretty-Girl, par exemple, il s’en va d’îles en îles, faisant son honnête trafic, capitaine Flig Balt, maître Vin Mod... Il complète son équipage de deux ou trois solides lurons comme il n’en manque guère dans les relâches de l’est ou de l’ouest... Et chacun y fait sa petite fortune au lieu d’une maigre paye, qui est généralement bue avant d’avoir été touchée!”

Que le bruit empêchât parfois les paroles de Vin Mod d’arriver à l’oreille de Flig Balt, peu importait. Celui-ci n’avait pas besoin de l’entendre. Tout ce que disait son compagnon, il se le disait à lui-même. Parti pris, il ne cherchait plus qu’à en assurer l’exécution. Aussi la seule observation qu’il fit fut-elle la suivante:

“Les quatre nouveaux, toi et moi, six contre cinq, compris le mousse... soit! Mais oublies-tu que nous devons embarquer à Wellington l’armateur Hawkins et le fils du capitaine?...

- En effet... si nous allons à Wellington en quittant Dunedin... Mais si nous n’y allons pas...

- C’est l’affaire de quarante-huit heures avec bon vent, reprit maître Balt, et il n’est pas sûr que nous ayons réussi à faire le coup dans la traversée...

- Qu’importe!... s’écria Vin Mod. Ne vous inquiétez pas, même si M. Hawkins et le fils Gibson sont à bord!... Ils auront passé par-dessus le bastingage avant d’avoir pu s’y reconnaître!... L’essentiel c’est de recruter des camarades qui ne se soucient pas plus de la vie d’un homme que d’une vieille pipe hors d’usage... des braves que n’effraye pas la corde... et nous devons les trouver ici...

- Trouvons”, répondit maître Balt.

Tous deux se mirent à dévisager plus attentivement les clients d’Adam Fry, dont quelques-uns d’ailleurs les regardaient avec une certaine insistance.

“Tenez, dit Vin Mod, celui-ci... un gaillard taillé en boxeur... avec cette tête énorme... S’il n’a pas déjà fait dix fois plus qu’il ne faut pour mériter d’être pendu...

- Oui, répondit maître Balt, il me revient assez...

- Et celui-là... qui n’a qu’un œil... et quel œil!... Soyez sûr qu’il n’a pas perdu l’autre dans une bataille où il avait raison...

- Ma foi, s’il accepte, Vin...

- Il acceptera...

- Cependant, fit observer Flig Balt, nous ne pouvons pas leur dire d’avance...

- On ne leur dira pas, et, le moment venu, ils ne bouderont pas à la besogne!...

Et regardez-moi cet autre qui entre!... Rien qu’à la manière dont il a fait claquer la porte, on jugerait qu’il sent les policemen à ses trousses...

- Offrons-lui à boire... dit maître Balt.

- Et je parie ma tête contre une bouteille de gin qu’il ne refusera pas!... Puis, là-bas... cette espèce d’ours avec son surouët de travers, m’est avis qu’il a dû naviguer plus souvent à fond de cale que sur le gaillard d’avant, et qu’il a eu plus souvent les pieds entravés que les mains libres!...”

Le fait est que les quatre individus désignés par Vin Mod présentaient le type de déterminés chenapans. Aussi, en cas que Flig Balt les recrutât, on était fondé à se demander si le capitaine Gibson consentirait à embarquer des matelots de cette envergure!... Inutile, au surplus, d’exiger leurs papiers: ils n’en produiraient pas, et pour cause.

Restait à savoir si ces hommes étaient disposés à contracter un engagement, s’ils ne venaient pas précisément de déserter leur bord, s’ils ne se préparaient pas à échanger la vareuse du matelot contre la veste du chercheur d’or. Après tout, ils ne s’offriraient pas d’eux-mêmes, et quel accueil feraient-ils à la proposition d’embarquer sur le James-Cook?... On ne le saurait qu’après en avoir causé en arrosant l’entretien de gin ou de wisky, à leur choix.

“Eh... l’ami... un verre... dit Vin Mod, qui attira le nouvel arrivant vers la table.

- Deux... si vous voulez... répondit le matelot, qui fit claquer sa langue.

- Trois... quatre... la demi-douzaine... et même la douzaine, si tu as le gosier sec!”

Len Cannon, - c’était son nom ou le nom qu’il se donnait, - s’assit sans plus de façon et de manière à prouver qu’il irait facilement jusqu’à la douzaine.

Puis, comprenant bien qu’on ne le désaltérait pas, - en admettant que ce fût possible, - pour ses beaux yeux et sa belle tournure:

“Qu’est-ce qu’il y a?...” demanda-t-il d’une voix éraillée par l’abus de l’alcool.

Vin Mod expliqua la chose: le brick James-Cook en partance... de gros gages... une navigation de quelques mois... simple cabotage d’îles en îles... bonne nourriture... boisson abondante et de bonne qualité... un capitaine qui s’en rapportait à son maître d’équipage, Flig Balt, ici présent, pour ce qui concernait le bien-être des hommes... port d’attache Hobart-Town, enfin tout ce qui peut séduire un matelot qui aime à se divertir pendant les relâches... et pas de papiers à montrer au commissaire de marine... On appareillerait le lendemain, dès l’aube, si l’on était au complet... et pour peu que l’homme eût quelque ami dans l’embarras, en quête d’un embarquement, il suffirait de le désigner, s’il se trouvait à cette heure dans la taverne des Three-Magpies...

Len Cannon regarda maître Flig Balt et son compagnon en fronçant le sourcil. Que signifiait au juste cette proposition?... Que cachait-elle?... Enfin, si avantageuse qu’elle parût être, Len Cannon ne répondit qu’un mot:

“Non...

- Tu as tort!... dit Vin Mod.

- Possible... mais peux pas embarquer...

- Pourquoi?

- Je vais me marier!...

- Allons donc!...

- Oui... Kate Verdax... une veuve...

- Eh! l’ami, riposta Vin Mod en lui frappant sur l’épaule, si jamais tu te maries, ce ne sera pas avec Kate Verdax, mais avec Kate Gibbet... la veuve potence!...”

Len Cannon se mit à rire et vida son verre d’une seule lampée. Toutefois, malgré les instances de maître Balt, il maintint son refus, se leva et rejoignit un groupe bruyant où s’échangeaient de violentes provocations.

“À un autre!” dit Vin Mod, qu’un premier échec n’était pas pour décourager.

Cette fois, laissant maître Balt, il alla s’attabler près d’un matelot assis dans un coin de la salle. Pas meilleure figure que Cannon, celui-là, et d’aspect moins communicatif, n’aimant à causer sans doute qu’avec sa bouteille, - interminable conversation qui paraissait lui suffire.

Vin Mod entra tout de suite en matière:

“Est-ce qu’on peut savoir ton nom?

- Mon nom?... répondit le matelot après une certaine hésitation.

- Oui...

- Et quel est le tien?...

- Vin Mod.

- Et c’est?...

- Celui d’un marin du brick James-Cook en relâche à Dunedin...

- Et pourquoi Vin Mod veut-il savoir mon nom?...

- Pour le cas où il y aurait à l’inscrire sur notre rôle d’équipage...

- Kyle... mon nom... répondit le matelot, mais je le garde pour une meilleure occasion...

- S’il s’en trouve, l’ami...

- On en trouve toujours!”

Et Kyle tourna le dos à Vin Mod, que ce second refus rendit peut-être moins confiant.

C’était comme une Bourse, cette taverne d’Adam Fry, et les demandes l’emportaient de beaucoup sur les offres, - ce qui laissait peu de chances d’aboutir.

En effet, vis-à-vis de deux autres clients, en longue dispute pour le règlement de leur dernière pinte avec leur dernier schelling, le résultat fut identique. Sexton, un Irlandais, Bryce, un Américain, iraient à pied en Amérique et en Irlande plutôt que d’embarquer, fût-ce sur le yacht de Sa Gracieuse Majesté ou sur le meilleur croiseur des États-Unis...

Quelques essais d’embauchage, même avec l’appui d’Adam Fry, ne purent réussir, et Vin Mod revint assez penaud à la table de Flig Balt.

“Rien de fait?... demanda celui-ci.

- Rien à faire, maître Balt.

- N’y a-t-il pas d’autres tavernes que les Three-Magpies dans le voisinage?...

- Il y en a, répondit Vin Mod, mais, du moment que nous n’avons pas recruté ici, nous ne recruterons pas ailleurs!”

Flig Balt ne put retenir un juron accompagné d’un rude coup de poing qui fit tressauter verres et bouteilles. Son projet menaçait-il d’échouer?... Ne parviendrait-il pas à introduire quatre hommes de choix dans l’équipage du James-Cook?... Serait-on réduit à le compléter avec de braves matelots qui tiendraient pour le capitaine Gibson?... Il est vrai, les bons faisaient défaut tout comme les mauvais, et des semaines s’écouleraient sans doute avant que le brick, par insuffisance du personnel, pût reprendre la mer.

Cependant, il fallait voir autre part. Les cabarets à matelots ne manquent point dans le quartier, et, comme disait Vin Mod, il y en a plus que d’églises ou de banques.

Flig Balt se disposait donc à payer les consommations, lorsqu’un tumulte plus accentué s’éleva à l’autre extrémité de la salle.

La discussion de Sexton et de Bryce, à propos du règlement de la dépense, prenait une tournure inquiétante. Tous deux avaient certainement bu plus que ne le permettait l’état de leurs finances. Or, Adam Fry n’était pas homme à faire crédit, ne fût-ce que de quelques pences. Ils en avaient pour deux schellings, et ils paieraient les deux schellings ou les policemen interviendraient et les bloqueraient là où ils avait été bloqués plus d’une fois pour coups, injures et méfaits de diverses sortes.

L’hôte des Three-Magpies, prévenu par le garçon, était en train de réclamer son dû, dont Sexton et Bryce n’auraient pu s’acquitter, quand on eût fouillé jusqu’au fond de leurs poches, aussi vides de monnaie qu’ils étaient pleins de wisky et de gin. Peut-être, en cette occasion, l’intervention de Vin Mod, argent en main, serait-elle efficace, et les deux matelots accepteraient-ils quelques piastres à titre d’avance sur les gages futurs?... Il tenta le coup, et fut proprement envoyé au diable... Partagé entre le désir d’être payé et le désagrément de perdre deux clients s’ils embarquaient dès le lendemain sur le James-Cook, Adam Fry ne lui vint même point en aide, comme il l’espérait.

Alors, quand il vit cela, maître Balt, comprenant qu’il fallait en finir, dit à Vin Mod:

“Partons...

- Oui... répondit Vin Mod... il n’est encore que neuf heures!... Allons aux Old-Brothers ou au Good-Seeman... c’est à deux pas et que je sois pendu si nous revenons bredouille à bord!”

On le voit, la pendaison, comme terme comparatif ou métaphorique, revenait fréquemment dans la conversation de l’honnête Vin Mod, et peut-être s’imaginait-il que c’était la fin naturelle de l’existence en ce bas monde!

Cependant, des plus virulentes réclamations, Adam Fry en arrivait aux menaces. Sexton et Bryce payeraient ou ils iraient coucher au poste de police. Le garçon reçut même ordre d’aller quérir les agents, qui ne sont point rares en ce quartier du port. Flig Balt et Vin Mod se préparaient donc à partir avec lui, lorsque trois ou quatre vigoureux gaillards vinrent se placer devant la porte, non moins pour empêcher de sortir que pour empêcher d’entrer.

Évidemment, ces matelots ne demandaient qu’à prendre fait et cause pour leurs camarades. Les choses ne tarderaient pas à se gâter, et la soirée finirait par des violences, comme tant d’autres.

Adam Fry et le garçon n’en étaient pas à cela près, et ils allaient simplement recourir à la force publique, ainsi qu’ils en avaient l’habitude en ces circonstances. Aussi, voyant la porte défendue, essayèrent-ils de gagner par derrière la ruelle qui longeait la cour du fond.

On ne leur en laissa pas le temps. Toute la bande fut contre eux. Précisément Kyle et Sexton, Len Cannon et Bryce s’interposèrent. Il n’y eut à ne point figurer dans la bagarre qu’une demi-douzaine d’ivres-morts, incapables de se tenir debout.

Il suit de là que ni maître Balt ni Vin Mod ne purent quitter la salle.

“Il faut pourtant filer... dit le premier. Il n’y a que des horions à recevoir ici...

- Qui sait? répondit l’autre. Laissons faire... Peut-être y a-t-il profit à tirer de la bataille!”

Et comme tous deux, s’ils voulaient en avoir le profit, ne désiraient pas en avoir les pertes, ils se tinrent à l’abri derrière le comptoir.

La lutte était engagée à l’arme blanche, si cette expression peut s’appliquer aux pieds et aux poings des combattants.

Sans doute, les couteaux ne tarderaient pas à jouer, et ce ne serait pas la première fois - ni la dernière - que le sang coulerait dans la salle des Three-Magpies. Il semblait qu’Adam Fry et le garçon auraient dû être écrasés sous le nombre, et ils eussent été réduits à l’impuissance, si quelques-uns des clients ne se fussent déclarés pour eux. En effet, cinq ou six Irlandais, dans la pensée de se ménager un crédit futur, vinrent repousser les assaillants.

Ce fut un tapage infernal. Maître Balt et Vin Mod, tout en s’abritant du mieux possible, eurent grand’peine à éviter d’être atteints, lorsque gobelets et bouteilles commencèrent à voler de toutes parts. On frappait, on vociférait, on hurlait. Les lampes renversées s’éteignirent, et la salle ne fut plus éclairée que par la lumière de la lanterne extérieure, encastrée dans l’imposte de l’entrée.

En somme, les quatre plus acharnés, Len Cannon, Kyle, Sexton, Bryce, après avoir attaqué, durent se défendre. D’abord, l’hôtelier et le garçon n’en étaient pas à leurs débuts dans la pratique de la boxe. De terribles ripostes venaient de renverser Kyle et Bryce, la mâchoire à demi brisée; mais ils se relevèrent pour secourir leurs compagnons que les Irlandais acculaient dans un coin.

L’avantage était tantôt pour les uns, tantôt pour les autres, et la victoire ne pourrait être décidée que par une intervention du dehors. Les cris: “Au secours! à l’aide!” dominaient au milieu du vacarme. Toutefois, les voisins ne s’inquiétaient guère de ce qui troublait la taverne des Three-Magpies, de ces batailles entre matelots passées à l’état chronique. Inutile, n’est-il pas vrai, de se risquer en de pareilles bagarres.

C’est l’affaire des policemen, et, comme on dit, ils sont payés pour cela.

La bagarre continuait donc plus acharnée à mesure que la colère tournait à la rage.

Les tables avaient été culbutées. On s’assommait avec les escabeaux. Les couteaux sortirent des poches, les revolvers des ceintures, et des détonations éclatèrent au milieu de l’horrible tumulte.

Cependant, l’hôtelier manœuvrait toujours pour gagner soit la porte de la rue, soit la sortie sur la cour, lorsqu’une douzaine d’agents firent irruption, précisément par le derrière de la maison. Il n’avait pas été nécessaire de courir à leur bureau sur le quai. Dès qu’ils eurent été prévenus par des passants qu’on se cassait la tête dans la taverne d’Adam Fry, ils s’y rendirent, sans trop se presser, et, de ce pas d’ordonnance qui distingue le policier anglais, ils arrivèrent en assez grand nombre pour assurer l’ordre public. Au surplus, entre ceux qui attaquaient et ceux qui résistaient, il est probable qu’ils ne verraient aucune différence. Ils savaient que les uns ne valaient pas mieux que les autres. En arrêtant tout le monde, ils étaient assurés de faire bonne besogne.

Du reste, bien que la salle ne fût que vaguement éclairée, les policemen reconnurent tout d’abord, parmi les plus violents, Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle et Bryce, pour les avoir déjà fourrés en prison. Aussi, ces quatre chenapans, prévoyant ce qui les attendait, ne cherchèrent plus qu’à déguerpir en traversant la petite cour. Il est vrai, où iraient-ils, et ne seraient-ils pas repris dès le lendemain?...

Vin Mod intervint au bon moment, comme il avait dit à maître Balt, et, tandis que les autres s’acharnaient contre les policemen afin de favoriser la fuite des plus compromis, il rejoignit Len Cannon et lui dit:

“Tous les quatre au James-Cook!...”

Sexton, Bryce et Kyle avaient entendu.

“Quand part-il?... demanda Len Cannon.

- Demain, dès le jour.”

Et, malgré les agents contre lesquels, par commune entente, s’était tournée toute la bande, malgré Adam Fry qui tenait plus particulièrement à les faire arrêter, Len Cannon et ses trois camarades, suivis de Flig Balt et de Vin Mod, parvinrent à s’échapper.

Un quart d’heure après, le canot du brick les transportait à bord, et ils se trouvaient en sûreté dans le poste de l’équipage.

II - Le brick “James-Cook”

Le brick James-Cook jaugeait deux cent cinquante tonneaux, un solide navire, forte voilure, le coffre assez large, ce qui assurait sa stabilité, l’arrière très dégagé, l’avant relevé, d’excellente tenue sous toutes les allures, sa mâture peu inclinée. Très ardent au plus près, se dérobant vite à la lame, évitant ainsi les coups de mer, il filait sans se gêner ses onze nœuds à l’heure par fraîche brise.

Son personnel - on le sait d’après la conversation relatée ci-dessus - comprenait un capitaine, un maître, huit hommes d’équipage, un cuisinier et un mousse. Il naviguait sous pavillon britannique, ayant pour port d’attache Hobart-Town, capitale de la Tasmanie qui dépend du continent australien, l’une des plus importantes colonies de la Grande-Bretagne.

Depuis une dizaine d’années déjà, le James-Cook faisait le grand cabotage dans l’ouest du Pacifique, entre l’Australie, la Nouvelle-Zélande et les Philippines, voyages heureux et lucratifs, grâce à l’habileté manœuvrière et commerciale de son capitaine, un bon marin doublé d’un bon trafiquant.

Le capitaine Harry Gibson, âgé à cette époque de cinquante ans, n’avait jamais quitté le brick depuis sa sortie des chantiers de Brisbane. Il y était intéressé pour un quart, les trois autres quarts appartenant à M. Hawkins, armateur d’Hobart-Town. Leurs affaires prospéraient, et les débuts de ce voyage permettaient de compter sur de gros bénéfices.

Les familles du capitaine et de l’armateur étaient étroitement unies de longue date, Harry Gibson ayant toujours navigué pour la maison Hawkins. Elles habitaient à Hobart-Town le même quartier. M. et Mrs Hawkins n’avaient point d’enfants.

M. et Mrs Gibson n’avaient qu’un fils, âgé de vingt et un ans, qui se destinait au commerce. Les deux femmes se voyaient chaque jour, ce qui leur rendait la séparation moins pénible, car l’armateur se trouvait alors à Wellington, où il venait de fonder un comptoir avec Nat Gibson, le fils du capitaine. C’est de là que le James-Cook devait les ramener à Hobart-Town, après avoir complété sa cargaison dans les archipels voisins de la Nouvelle-Guinée, au nord de l’Australie, à travers les parages de l’Équateur.

Le maître d’équipage, Flig Balt, inutile maintenant de dire ce qu’il était et ce qu’il valait, ni quels projets méditait ce scélérat. À ses instincts qui le poussaient au crime, à sa jalousie envers son capitaine, il joignait une hypocrisie dont celui-ci était dupe depuis le commencement du voyage. Grâce à des certificats qui parurent authentiques, il avait été admis comme maître à bord du brick, en même temps que Vin Mod y embarquait comme matelot. Ces deux hommes se connaissaient de longue date, ils avaient couru les mers ensemble, passant d’un navire à l’autre, désertant lorsqu’ils se voyaient dans l’impossibilité de tenter quelque mauvais coup, et ils espéraient bien parvenir à leurs fins pendant la dernière traversée du James-Cook avant son retour à Hobart-Town.

En effet, Flig Balt inspirait toute confiance au capitaine Gibson, que trompaient son affectation de zèle et ses protestations de dévouement. En rapport permanent avec l’équipage, il s’était ingénié à prendre de l’influence sur le personnel du bord. Pour tout ce qui concernait la navigation et la partie commerciale, Harry Gibson ne s’en rapportait qu’à lui-même. D’ailleurs, n’ayant pas l’occasion de se montrer, peut-être Flig Balt n’était-il pas aussi bon marin qu’il prétendait l’être, quoiqu’il assurât avoir déjà navigué en qualité de second.

Il est même permis de croire que le capitaine Gibson conservait quelques doutes à ce sujet. Après tout, le service ne laissant rien à désirer, il n’avait jamais eu aucun reproche à faire à son maître d’équipage. Aussi le voyage du brick se fût-il probablement effectué dans les meilleures conditions, si la désertion de quatre des matelots ne l’eût retenu à Dunedin depuis une quinzaine de jours.

Les hommes qui n’avaient point suivi l’exemple de leurs camarades, Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, appartenaient à cette catégorie de braves gens, disciplinés et courageux, sur lesquels un capitaine peut entièrement compter. Quant aux déserteurs, il n’y aurait pas eu lieu de les regretter, s’ils n’eussent été remplacés par les coquins que Vin Mod venait de recruter à la taverne des Three-Magpies. On sait ce qu’ils sont, on les verra à l’œuvre.

L’équipage comprenait encore un mousse et un cuisinier.

Le mousse Jim était un garçon de quatorze ans, d’une famille d’honnêtes ouvriers qui demeurait à Hobart-Town. Elle l’avait confié au capitaine Gibson. C’était un bon sujet, aimant le métier, agile et brave, qui ferait un vrai marin. M. Gibson le traitait paternellement, sans rien lui passer cependant, et Jim lui témoignait une grande affection. Au contraire, Jim éprouvait, par instinct, une sorte de répugnance pour le maître Flig Balt. Celui-ci, qui s’en était aperçu, cherchait toujours à le prendre en faute, - ce qui amena plus d’une fois l’intervention de M. Gibson.

Quant au cuisinier Koa, il était de ce type d’indigènes qui appartient à la seconde race des Néo-Zélandais, individus de taille moyenne, au teint de mulâtre, robustes, musculeux et souples, aux cheveux crépus, dont se compose généralement la classe du peuple chez les Maoris.

À la fin de ce premier voyage qu'il faisait à bord du brick en qualité de maître-coq, Harry Gibson entendait congédier cet être sournois, vindicatif, méchant, - en outre malpropre, - sur lequel les réprimandes et les punitions ne produisaient aucun effet. Du reste, Flig Balt avait raison de le ranger parmi ceux qui n'hésiteraient pas à se révolter contre le capitaine. Vin Mod et lui s'entendaient bien. Le maître d'équipage le ménageait, l'excusait, ne le punissait que lorsqu'il ne pouvait faire autrement. Koa savait qu'il serait débarqué dès l'arrivée à Hobart-Town, et, plus d'une fois, il avait menacé de se venger. Donc, Flig Balt, Vin Mod et lui, aidés des quatre nouveaux introduits à bord, c'étaient sept hommes en face de M. Gibson, des trois autres matelots et du mousse. Il est vrai, M. Hawkins, l'armateur, et Nat Gibson devaient prendre passage sur le brick à Wellington, et la proportion serait moins inégale. Mais il était possible que Flig Balt parvînt à s'emparer du navire entre Dunedin et Wellington pendant la traversée, de si courte durée qu'elle dût être. Si l'occasion se présentait, Vin Mod ne la laisserait pas perdre.

Le James-Cook, en cours de cabotage depuis quatre mois, était chargé pour différents ports, où il avait débarqué et embarqué ses cargaisons avec des frets avantageux. Après avoir successivement touché à Malikolo, à Merèna et à Eromanga des Nouvelles-Hébrides, puis à Vanoua Linon des Fidji, il regagnerait Wellington, où M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson l'attendaient. Puis il ferait voile pour les archipels de la Nouvelle-Guinée, bien pourvu d'objets de pacotille destinés aux indigènes, et il en rapporterait de la nacre et du coprah pour une valeur de dix à douze mille piastres.

C'est de là que s'effectuerait le retour à Hobart-Town, avec relâches à Brisbane ou à Sydney, si les circonstances l'exigeaient. Encore deux mois, et le brick serait rentré à son port d'attache.

On conçoit donc combien les retards subis à Dunedin avaient contrarié M. Gibson. M. Hawkins savait à quoi s'en tenir à cet égard, grâce aux lettres et télégrammes échangés entre Dunedin et Wellington, et par lesquels il pressait le capitaine de reformer son équipage. Il parlait même de venir à Dunedin, s'il le fallait, bien que les affaires exigeassent sa présence à Wellington. M. Gibson, on l'a vu, n'avait rien négligé, ayant hâte de lui donner satisfaction, et on n'oublie pas à quelles difficultés il s'était heurté, nombre d'autres capitaines se trouvant dans le même embarras. Enfin Flig Balt avait réussi, et, lorsque les quatre matelots de la taverne des Three-Magpies furent à bord, il fit hisser les embarcations afin qu'ils ne pussent décamper pendant la nuit.

Le soir même, Flig Balt raconta au capitaine comment les choses s'étaient passées, comment il avait profité d'une bagarre pour soustraire Len Cannon et trois autres aux recherches de la police. Ce qu'ils valaient, on le verrait bien... Le plus souvent, ces mauvaises têtes se calment quand le navire est en mer... Les tapageurs en bordée font la plupart du temps d'excellents matelots... En somme, le maître d'équipage croyait avoir agi pour le mieux.

“Je les verrai demain, dit M. Gibson.

- Oui... demain, répondit maître Balt, et mieux vaut, capitaine, les laisser cuver leur gin jusqu'au matin...

- C'est entendu. D'ailleurs, les embarcations sont sur les palans, et, à moins qu'ils ne se jettent par-dessus le bord...

- Impossible, capitaine...

Je les ai envoyés dans la cale et ils n'en sortiront qu'au moment du départ...

- Mais, le jour venu, Balt?...

- Oh! le jour venu, la crainte de tomber entre les mains des policemen les retiendra à bord.

- À demain donc”, répondit M. Gibson.

La nuit s’écoula, et, sans doute, il eût été inutile d’enfermer Len Cannon et ses camarades. Ils ne songeaient guère à se sauver et dormirent bruyamment du sommeil de l’ivrogne.

Le lendemain, dès l’aube, le capitaine Gibson fit les préparatifs d’appareillage. Ses papiers étant en règle, il n’eut pas besoin de retourner à terre. C’est alors qu’il fut nécessaire d’appeler les nouvelles recrues sur le pont.

Vin Mod ouvrit le grand panneau, et les quatre matelots montèrent pour la manœuvre. Parfaitement dégrisés, ils ne manifestaient aucunement l’intention de s’enfuir.

Toutefois, lorsqu’ils comparurent devant le capitaine, si M. Gibson fut assez maître de lui pour cacher l’impression que produisit la vue de ces hommes - impression qui ne laissa pas d’être des plus désagréables -, il les observa attentivement, puis demanda leurs noms, afin de les inscrire sur le rôle de l’équipage.

En donnant ces noms, ils indiquèrent également leur nationalité: deux Anglais, un Irlandais et un Américain. Quant au domicile, ils n’en avaient pas d’autre que les tavernes du port, dont les tenanciers sont en même temps des logeurs. En ce qui concernait leurs effets, et tout ce qui est d’ordinaire contenu dans le sac du matelot, ils n’avaient pu les emporter.

D’ailleurs, Flig Balt mettrait à leur disposition les vêtements, linge et ustensiles que les déserteurs ne viendraient jamais réclamer. Il n’y aurait donc pas lieu de les envoyer chercher leurs sacs, et ils n’insistèrent pas.

Lorsque Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle et Bryce eurent regagné l’avant, M. Gibson dit, en hochant la tête:

“Mauvaises pratiques, Balt, et je ne crois pas que vous ayez eu la main heureuse...

- C’est à voir, capitaine... à voir à la besogne...

- Il faudra les surveiller, ces gens-là, et de près!...

- Assurément, monsieur Gibson. Pourtant, ils ne sont pas maladroits, d’après le dire d’un officier du West-Pound, ici en relâche.

- Vous les aviez donc déjà en vue?...

- Oui... depuis quelques jours.

- Et cet officier les connaissait?...

- Ils ont navigué avec lui au long cours, et, à l’en croire, ce sont de bons marins.”

Le maître d’équipage mentait effrontément. Aucun officier ne lui avait parlé de ces quatre hommes; mais son assertion ne pouvait plus être contrôlée, et M. Gibson n’avait aucune raison d’en suspecter la valeur.

“On aura soin de ne pas les mettre de quart ensemble, dit le capitaine: les deux Anglais avec Hobbes et Wickley, l’Irlandais et l’Américain avec Burnes et Vin Mod... Ce sera plus sûr...

- Compris, capitaine; et, je vous le répète, une fois en mer, ils ne bouderont pas au travail... C’est seulement en relâche, et particulièrement à Wellington, qu’ils seront à surveiller...

Pas de permission, si vous m’en croyez, ou ils pourraient bien ne pas revenir à bord...

- N’importe, Balt, ils ne m’inspirent point confiance, et, à Wellington, si je puis les remplacer...

- On les remplacera”, répondit le maître d’équipage.

Flig Balt ne voulut pas insister plus qu’il ne convenait, ni paraître tenir à ces marins d’occasion.

“Après tout... ajouta-t-il, j’ai fait pour le mieux, capitaine, et je n’avais pas grand choix!...”

M. Gibson revint vers l’arrière, près de l’homme de barre, tandis que Flig Balt se rendait à l’avant, afin de faire virer l’ancre et la ramener à poste, dès que les voiles seraient orientées.

Le capitaine regarda le compas de l’habitacle posé devant la roue du gouvernail, puis la girouette à la pointe du grand mât, puis le pavillon britannique que le vent déployait à la corne de brigantine.

Le James-Cook se balançait sur sa chaîne au milieu du port. La brise, soufflant du nord-ouest, devait favoriser sa sortie. Après avoir descendu le chenal jusqu’à Port-Chalmers, il trouverait bon vent pour remonter de la côte orientale de la Nouvelle-Zélande jusqu’au détroit qui sépare les deux îles. Toutefois, il lui faudrait, après avoir appareillé, prendre du tour pour éviter quelques navires mouillés à l’entrée du chenal et se rapprocher du quai qui borde le port à droite.

M. Gibson donna ses ordres. Les deux huniers, la trinquette, les focs et la brigantine furent successivement établis. Pendant cette manœuvre, il parut constant que Len Cannon et ses camarades connaissaient le métier, et, lorsqu’ils eurent à monter jusqu’aux barres des perroquets, ils le firent en hommes qui n’ont plus rien à apprendre du service de gabiers.

L’ancre, étant à pic, fut hissée au moment où les écoutes étaient raidies pour mettre le brick en bonne direction.

Flig Balt et Vin Mod purent échanger quelques mots pendant la manœuvre.

“Eh! fit celui-ci, nos recrues vont bien...

- Assez proprement, Mod...

- Encore trois lascars de cette sorte, et nous aurions l’équipage qu’il nous faut...

- Et le navire qu’il nous faudrait... ajouta Flig Balt à mi-voix.

- Et le capitaine qu’il nous faudrait!...” déclara Vin Mod, en portant la main à son béret, comme s’il se fût tenu devant son chef.

Flig Balt l’arrêta du geste, craignant que ces imprudentes paroles pussent être entendues du mousse, occupé à tourner l’écoute du petit foc. Puis il allait regagner le rouf, lorsque Vin Mod lui demanda comment M. Gibson avait trouvé les quatre habitués des Three-Magpies.

“Il a paru médiocrement satisfait... répondit Flig Balt.

- Le fait est que nos recrues ne payent pas de mine! répliqua Vin Mod.

- Je ne serais pas surpris qu’il voulût les débarquer à Wellington... dit Flig Balt.

- Pour débarquer à Wellington, ajouta Vin Mod en haussant les épaules, il faut aller à Wellington... Mais j’espère que nous n’irons pas à Wellington et on n’y débarquera personne.

- Pas d’imprudence, Mod!

- Enfin... Flig Balt, le capitaine n’est pas content?...

- Non.

- Qu’importe, si nous le sommes!”

Le maître d’équipage revint vers l’arrière.

“Tout est paré?... lui demanda M. Gibson.

- Tout, capitaine.”

Le James-Cook évoluait alors en se rapprochant du quai dont il allait contourner la pointe à moins d’une demi-encablure.

Là s’était formé un groupe, marins et badauds, que la vue d’un navire sous voiles intéresse toujours. Et d’ailleurs, depuis plusieurs semaines, on était privé de ce spectacle, puisque les bâtiments n’avaient pu quitter leur mouillage.

Or, dans ce groupe se voyaient quelques policemen dont l’attention paraissait très attirée sur le James-Cook. Cela se devinait à leurs gestes, à leur attitude. Même deux ou trois de ces agents se détachèrent et coururent vers l'extrémité du quai que le brick ne tarderait pas à ranger.

Précisément, - ni Flig Balt ni Vin Mod ne purent s'y tromper, - ces policemen étaient de ceux qu'ils avaient vus la veille dans la taverne d'Adam Fry. Len Cannon et ses camarades risquaient donc d'être reconnus, et qui sait si le James-Cook, hélé au passage et recevant l'ordre de s'arrêter, ne serait pas mis en demeure de livrer les matelots des Three-Magpies?...

Après tout, le capitaine Gibson, quitte à ne point se départir d'une extrême surveillance, trouvait son avantage à les conserver, ce qui lui permettait de mettre en mer, et il eût été fort embarrassé s'il avait dû les rendre à la police. Aussi, après deux mots que lui dit Flig Balt, approuva-t-il que Vin Mod fît descendre dans le poste Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle et Bryce avant qu'ils eussent été aperçus par les agents.

“En bas... en bas!...” leur souffla Vin Mod.

Ils jetèrent un rapide regard vers le quai, comprirent, s'affalèrent à travers le panneau.

D'ailleurs, leur présence n'était plus indispensable sur le pont, et l'homme de barre suffisait à diriger le James-Cook vers l'entrée du chenal, sans qu'il fût nécessaire de brasser les voiles.

Le brick continua à se rapprocher de la pointe et plus que ne le font d'ordinaire les navires, car il lui fallut éviter un steamer américain dont les vigoureux sifflets déchiraient l'air.

Les policemen eurent alors toute facilité pour observer les matelots du bord et, assurément, si Len Cannon et les autres ne se fussent déhalés, ils auraient été reconnus et débarqués sur l'heure. Mais les agents ne les virent point, et le brick put donner dans le chenal, dès que le steamer en eut laissé l'entrée libre.

Il n'y avait plus rien à craindre: les quatre matelots remontèrent sur le pont.

Du reste, leur concours s'imposait. Le chenal, qui va du sud-ouest au nord-est, est assez sinueux, et il y a lieu de filer ou de raidir les écoutes à chaque détour.

Le James-Cook, servi par la brise, navigua sans difficulté entre les rives verdoyantes, semées de villas et de cottages, et dont l'une est parcourue par le railway qui met en communication Dunedin et Port-Chalmers.

Il était à peine huit heures lorsque le brick passa devant ce port et, tout dessus, donna en pleine mer. Puis, ses amures à bâbord, il remonta le long de la côte, laissant dans le sud le phare d'Otago et le cap Saunders.

III - Vin Mod à l’œuvre

La distance entre Dunedin et Wellington, à travers le détroit qui sépare les deux grandes îles, est inférieure à quatre cents milles. Si la brise de nord-ouest se maintenait, la mer resterait belle le long de la côte, et, à raison de dix milles par heure, le James-Cook arriverait le surlendemain à Wellington.

Pendant cette courte traversée, Flig Balt parviendrait-il à exécuter ses projets, à s’emparer du brick, après s’être débarrassé du capitaine et de ses compagnons, à l’entraîner vers ces lointains parages du Pacifique, où toute sécurité et toute impunité lui seraient offertes?...

On sait comment Vin Mod entendait procéder: M. Gibson et les hommes qui lui étaient fidèles seraient surpris et jetés par-dessus le bord avant d’avoir pu se défendre. Mais, dès à présent, il fallait mettre Len Cannon et ses camarades dans le complot, - ce qui ne serait sans doute pas difficile, - les tâter préalablement à ce sujet et s’assurer leur concours. C’est ce que comptait faire Vin Mod pendant cette première journée de navigation, afin d’agir pendant la nuit prochaine. Pas de temps à perdre. En quarante-huit heures, le brick, rendu à Wellington, recevrait comme passagers M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson. Donc, cette nuit ou la suivante, il importait que le James-Cook fût tombé au pouvoir de Flig Balt et de ses complices. Sinon, les chances de réussite seraient infiniment diminuées, et pareille occasion ne se représenterait peut-être pas.

Du reste, que Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle et Bryce consentissent, Vin Mod ne pensait pas que cela pût faire question avec de tels individus, sans foi ni loi, sans conscience ni scrupules, alléchés par la perspective de fructueuses campagnes en ces régions du Pacifique, où la justice ne saurait les atteindre.

L’île méridionale de la Nouvelle-Zélande, Tawaï-Pounamou, affecte la forme d’un long rectangle, renflé à sa partie inférieure, qui se dessine un peu obliquement du sud-ouest au sud-est. Au contraire, c’est sous la forme d’un triangle irrégulier, terminé par une étroite langue de terre projetée jusqu’à la pointe du Cap Nord, que se présente Ika-na-Maoui, l’île septentrionale.

La côte que suivait le brick est fort déchiquetée, relevée de rochers énormes à silhouettes bizarres, qui ressemblent de loin à quelques gigantesques mastodontes échoués sur les grèves. Çà et là une succession d’arcades figure le pourtour d’un cloître, où la houle, même par beau temps, se précipite furieusement avec un bruit formidable. Un navire qui se mettrait au plein sur le littoral serait irrémédiablement perdu, et trois ou quatre coups de mer suffiraient à le démolir. Heureusement, s’il est poussé par la tempête, soit qu’il vienne de l’est, soit qu’il vienne de l’ouest, il a chance de pouvoir doubler les extrêmes promontoires de la Nouvelle-Zélande. D’ailleurs, il existe deux détroits où il est possible de trouver abri si l’on manque l’entrée des ports: celui de Cook, qui sépare les deux îles, et celui de Foveaux, ouvert entre Tavaï-Pounamou et l’île de Stewart, à son extrémité méridionale. Mais il faut se garder des dangereux récifs des Snares, où se heurtent les flots de l’océan Indien et ceux de l’océan Pacifique, parages trop féconds en sinistres maritimes.

En arrière de la côte se déroule un puissant système orographique, creusé de cratères, sillonné de chutes qui alimentent des rivières considérables malgré leur étendue restreinte. Sur le versant des montagnes montent des étages de forêts dont les arbres sont parfois démesurés, pins hauts de cent pieds et d’un diamètre de vingt, cèdres à feuilles d’olivier, le “koudy” résineux, le “kaïkatea” à feuilles résistantes et à baies rouges, dont les troncs sont dépourvus de branches entre le pied et la cime.

Si Ika-na-Maoui peut s’enorgueillir de la richesse de son sol, de la puissance de sa fertilité, de cette végétation qui rivalise en certaines parties avec les plus brillantes productions de la flore tropicale, Tavaï-Pounamou est tenue à moins de reconnaissance envers la nature. C’est tout au plus la dixième partie du territoire qui est susceptible d’être livrée à la culture. Mais, dans les endroits privilégiés, les indigènes peuvent encore récolter un peu de blé d’Inde, différentes plantes herbacées, des pommes de terre en abondance, puis à profusion cette racine de fougère, le “pteris esculenta”, dont ils font leur principale nourriture.

Le James-Cook, parfois, approchait de si près la côte, dont Harry Gibson connaissait bien les sondes, que le chant des oiseaux arrivait distinctement jusqu’à bord, entre autres celui du “pou”, des plus mélodieux. Il s’y mêlait aussi le cri guttural des perroquets de diverses sortes, des canards à bec jaune, jambes et pattes d’un rouge écarlate, sans parler des autres nombreuses espèces aquatiques, dont les plus hardis représentants voltigeaient à travers les agrès du navire. Et, aussi, lorsque son étrave troublait leurs ébats, avec quelle rapidité se dispersaient les cétacés, ces éléphants, ces lions de mer, ces multitudes de phoques, recherchés pour leur graisse huileuse, pour leur fourrure épaisse et dont deux centaines suffisent à produire près de cent barils d’huile!

Le temps se maintenait. Si la brise tombait, ce ne serait pas avant le soir, puisqu’elle venait de terre, et, en s’abaissant, rencontrerait l’obstacle de la chaîne intérieure.

Sous l’influence d’un beau soleil, elle parcourait les hautes zones et poussait rapidement le brick, qui portait ses voiles d’étai et ses bonnettes de tribord.

À peine s'il y avait lieu de mollir les écoutes, de modifier la barre. Aussi les nouveaux embarqués pouvaient-ils apprécier en marins les qualités nautiques du James-Cook.

Vers onze heures, le mont Herbert, un peu avant le port d'Oamaru, montra sa cime ballonnée, qui s'élève à cinq mille pieds au-dessus du niveau de la mer.

Pendant la matinée, Vin Mod chercha vainement à causer avec Len Cannon, qu'il considérait justement comme le plus intelligent et le plus influent des quatre recrues de Dunedin. M. Gibson, on le sait, avait ordonné que ces matelots ne fussent point réunis dans le même quart. Mieux valait, en effet, qu'on les tînt séparés les uns des autres. Au surplus, n'ayant point à manœuvrer, le capitaine laissait au maître d'équipage la surveillance du navire et il s'occupait dans sa cabine à la mise en état de ses comptes de bord.

À ce moment, Hobbes était à la banc. Flig Balt se promenait depuis le grand mât jusqu'à l'arrière, de chaque côté du rouf. Deux autres matelots, Burne et Bryce, allaient et venaient le long du bastingage, sans échanger une parole. Vin Mod et Len Cannon se trouvaient ensemble sous le vent, et leur conversation ne pourrait être entendue de personne.

Lorsque Jim, le mousse, s'approchait d'eux, on le congédiait assez brutalement, et même, par prudence, maître Balt l'envoya frotter les cuivres de l'habitacle.

Quant aux deux autres camarades de Len Cannon, Sexton et Kyle, qui n'étaient point de quart, ils préféraient le plein air à l'atmosphère échauffée du poste. Le cuisinier Koa, sur le gaillard d'avant, les y amusait de ses grosses plaisanteries et de ses abominables grimaces.

Il fallait voir à quel point cet indigène se montrait fier des tatouages de sa figure, de son torse et de ses membres, ce moko des Néo-Zélandais qui sillonne profondément la peau au lieu de l’entamer, ainsi que cela se fait chez les autres peuplades du Pacifique. Cette opération du moko n’est pas pratiquée sur tous les naturels. Non! les koukis ou esclaves n’en sont point dignes, ni les gens de basse classe, à moins qu’ils ne se soient distingués à la guerre par quelque action d’éclat.

Aussi Koa en tirait-il une extraordinaire vanité.

Et, - ce qui paraissait intéresser fort Sexton et Kyle, - il entendait leur donner toute explication sur son tatouage, il racontait dans quelles circonstances sa poitrine avait été décorée de tel ou tel dessin, il signalait celui du front, représentant son nom gravé en caractères ineffaçables et que, pour rien au monde, d’ailleurs, il n’eût voulu effacer.

Au reste, chez les indigènes, le système cutané, grâce à ces opérations qui s’étendent à toute la surface du corps, gagne beaucoup en épaisseur et en solidité. De là une résistance plus grande aux froidures de ce climat pendant l’hiver, aux piqûres des moustiques, et combien d’Européens, à ce prix, se féliciteraient de pouvoir braver les attaques de ces maudits insectes!

Tandis que Koa, se sentant instinctivement poussé par une sympathie toute naturelle vers Sexton et son camarade, jetait ainsi les bases d’une étroite amitié, Vin Mod “travaillait” Len Cannon, lequel, de son côté, ne demandait qu’à le voir venir:

“Eh! ami Cannon, dit Vin Mod, te voici donc à bord du James-Cook... Un bon navire, n’est-ce pas? et qui vous file ses onze nœuds sans qu’on ait besoin de lui donner la main...

- Comme tu dis, Mod.

- Et, avec une belle cargaison dans le ventre, il vaut cher...

- Tant mieux pour l’armateur.

- L’armateur... ou un autre!... En attendant, nous n’avons qu’à nous croiser les bras pendant qu’il fait bonne route...

- Aujourd’hui, ça va bien, répondit Len Cannon, mais demain... qui sait?...

- Demain... après-demain... toujours!... s’écria Vin Mod en frappant sur l’épaule de Len Cannon. Et n’est-ce pas préférable que d’être resté à terre?... Où seriez-vous, les camarades et toi, à présent... si vous n’étiez pas ici?...

- Aux Three-Magpies, Mod...

- Non... et Adam Fry vous aurait mis à la porte, après la façon dont vous l’avez traité... Puis, les policemen vous auraient empoignés tous les quatre... et comme vous n’en êtes pas, je le suppose, à débuter devant le tribunal de police, on vous aurait gratifiés d’un ou deux bons mois de repos dans la prison de Dunedin...

- Prison en ville ou bâtiment en mer, c’est tout un... répliqua Len Cannon, qui ne semblait pas résigné à son sort.

- Comment... s’écria Vin Mod, des marins qui parlent de la sorte!...

- Ce n’était pas notre idée de naviguer... déclara Len Cannon. Sans cette méchante bagarre d’hier, nous serions déjà loin sur les routes d’Otago...

- À peiner... à trimer... à crever de faim et de soif, l’ami, et pour quoi faire?...

- Faire fortune!... riposta Len Cannon.

- Faire fortune... dans les placers?... répondit Vin Mod. Mais il n’y a plus rien à pêcher là-bas...

Est-ce que tu n’as pas vu ceux qui en reviennent?... Des cailloux, tant qu’on en veut, et l’on peut s’en lester pour ne point revenir les poches vides!... Quant à des pépites, la récolte est finie, et ça ne repousse pas du jour au lendemain... ni même d’une année à l’autre!...

- J’en connais qui ne regrettent pas d’avoir lâché leur bâtiment pour les gisements de la Clutha...

- Et moi... j’en connais... quatre, qui ne regretteront pas de s’être embarqués sur le James-Cook au lieu d’avoir filé à l’intérieur!

- C’est pour nous que tu dis cela?...

- Pour vous et deux ou trois autres bons lurons de ton espèce...

- Et tu cherches à me fourrer dans la tête qu’un matelot gagne de quoi rire, manger et boire le restant de ses jours, à faire le cabotage pour le compte d’un capitaine et d’un armateur?

- Non, certes... répliqua Vin Mod, à moins qu’il ne le fasse pour son propre compte!...

- Et le moyen... quand on n’est pas propriétaire du navire?...

- On peut quelquefois le devenir...

- Eh! crois-tu donc que mes camarades et moi nous ayons de l’argent à la banque de Dunedin pour l’acheter?...

- Non, l’ami... et, si vous avez jamais eu des économies, elles ont plutôt passé par les mains des Adam Fry et autres banquiers de cette sorte!...

- Eh bien, Mod, pas d’argent, pas de navire... et je ne pense pas que M. Gibson soit d’humeur à nous faire cadeau du sien...

- Non... mais enfin un malheur peut survenir... Si M. Gibson venait à disparaître... un accident, une chute à la mer... cela arrive aux meilleurs capitaines...

Un coup de lame, il n’en faut pas plus pour vous déhaler... et, la nuit... sans qu’on s’en aperçoive... Puis le matin, plus personne...”

Len Cannon regardait Vin Mod, les yeux dans les yeux, se demandant s’il comprenait bien ce langage.

L’autre continua:

“Et alors, que se passe-t-il?... On remplace le capitaine, et, dans ce cas, c’est le second qui prend le commandement du navire, ou, s’il n’y a pas de second, c’est le lieutenant...

- Et, s’il n’y a pas de lieutenant... ajouta Len Cannon en baissant la voix, après avoir poussé du coude son interlocuteur, s’il n’y a pas de lieutenant... c’est le maître d’équipage...

- Comme tu dis, l’ami, et, avec un maître d’équipage comme Flig Balt, on va loin...

- Pas où l’on devait aller?... insinua Len Cannon, en coulant un regard de côté.

- Non... mais où l’on veut aller... répondit Vin Mod, là où se font de bons coups de commerce... de bonnes cargaisons... de la nacre, du coprah, des épices... tout cela dans la cale du Little-Girl.

- Comment... le Little-Girl?...

- Ce serait le nouveau nom du James-Cook... un joli nom, n’est-ce pas, et qui doit porter bonheur!”

Enfin, que ce fût ce nom ou un autre, - bien que Vin Mod parût y tenir tout particulièrement, - il y avait une affaire en perspective. Len Cannon était assez intelligent pour comprendre à demi-mot que cela s’adressait à ses camarades des Three-Magpies comme à lui-même.

Ce n’étaient certes pas les scrupules qui les retiendraient. Toutefois, avant de s’engager, il convient de connaître les choses à fond et de quel côté sont les chances. Aussi, après quelques moments de réflexion, Len Cannon, qui jeta les yeux autour de lui pour s’assurer que personne ne pouvait les entendre, dit à Vin Mod:

“Lâche tout!”

Vin Mod le mit alors au courant de l’affaire convenue avec Flig Balt. Len Cannon, très accessible à des propositions de ce genre, ne montra aucune surprise à les entendre, aucune répugnance à les débattre, aucune hésitation à les accepter. Se débarrasser du capitaine Gibson et des matelots qui eussent refusé d’entrer en rébellion contre lui, s’emparer du brick, en changer le nom et, au besoin, la nationalité, trafiquer à travers le Pacifique à parts égales dans les profits, cela était bien pour séduire ce coquin. Néanmoins, il voulait des garanties, il entendait avoir l’assurance que le maître d’équipage connivait avec Vin Mod.

“Ce soir, après le quart de huit heures, pendant que tu seras à la barre, Flig Balt te parlera, Len... Ouvre l’oreille...

- Et c’est lui qui commandera le James-Cook?... demanda Len Cannon, qui eût sans doute préféré n’être sous les ordres de personne.

- Eh oui... mille diables!... répliqua Vin Mod. Il faut bien avoir un capitaine!... Seulement, c’est toi, Len, tes camarades et nous tous qui serons les armateurs...

- Convenu, Mod... Dès que je serai seul avec Sexton, Bryce et Kyle, je leur toucherai deux mots de l’affaire...

- C’est que cela presse...

- Tant que cela?...

- Oui... cette nuit, et, une fois les maîtres à bord, on prendrait le large!...”

Et alors Vin Mod expliqua pourquoi le coup devait être exécuté avant l’arrivée à Wellington, où embarqueraient M. Hawkins et le fils Gibson...

Avec deux hommes de plus, la partie serait moins sûre... Dans tous les cas, si ce n’était pas cette nuit, il fallait que ce fût l’autre. Pas plus tard... ou il y aurait moins de chance de réussir.

Len Cannon comprit ces raisons. Le soir venu, il préviendrait ses camarades dont il répondait comme de lui. Du moment que le maître d’équipage ordonnerait, ils obéiraient au maître d'équipage... Mais, d'abord, Flig Balt devrait confirmer tout ce que venait de dire Vin Mod... Deux mots suffiraient et une poignée de main pour sceller le pacte... Et, par saint Patrick! Len Cannon n'exigerait pas une signature... Ce qui serait promis serait tenu... etc.

Bref, ainsi que l'avait indiqué Vin Mod, vers huit heures, tandis que Len Cannon était à la barre, Flig Balt, en sortant du rouf, se dirigea vers l'arrière. Le capitaine s'y trouvant alors, il y avait lieu d'attendre qu'il eût regagné sa cabine, après avoir donné ses ordres pour la nuit.

La brise de nord-ouest tenait encore, bien qu'elle eût un peu molli au coucher du soleil. La mer promettait d'être belle jusqu'au matin, et il ne serait pas nécessaire de changer la voilure; peut-être seulement devrait-on amener le grand et le petit perroquet. Le brick resterait alors sous ses huniers, ses basses voiles et ses focs. D'ailleurs il serrait de moins près le vent, en attendant de mettre le cap au nord-est.

En effet, le James-Cook, au large du port de Timaru, allait traverser la vaste baie qui échancre la côte, connue sous le nom de Canterbury-Bight.

Afin de doubler la presqu'île de Banks qui la ferme, il lui faudrait arriver de deux quarts et naviguer sous l'allure du largue.

M. Gibson fit donc brasser les vergues et filer les écoutes de manière à suivre cette direction. Lorsque le jour reviendrait, à condition que la brise ne tombât pas tout à fait, il comptait avoir laissé en arrière les Pompey's Pillars et se trouver par le travers de Christchurch.

Ses ordres exécutés, Harry Gibson, au grand ennui de Flig Balt, demeura sur le pont jusqu'à dix heures, tantôt échangeant quelques paroles avec lui, tantôt assis sur le couronnement. Le maître d'équipage, prévenu par Vin Mod, était dans l'impossibilité d'entretenir Len Cannon.

Enfin, tout allait bien à bord. Le brick n'aurait à modifier sa route qu'à trois ou quatre heures du matin, lorsqu'il serait en vue du port d'Akaroa. Aussi M. Gibson, un dernier coup d'œil donné à l'horizon et à la voilure, regagna-t-il sa cabine qui prenait jour sur l'avant du rouf.

Il n'y en eut pas long à dire entre Flig Balt et Len Cannon. Le maître d'équipage confirma les propositions de Vin Mod. Pas de demi-mesures... On jetterait le capitaine par-dessus le bord, après l'avoir surpris dans sa cabine, et, comme on ne pouvait compter sur Hobbes, Wickley et Burnes, on les enverrait le rejoindre... Len Cannon n'avait donc qu'à s'assurer du concours de ses trois camarades, autrement dit à les avertir: ce n'est pas de leur part que viendraient les objections.

“Et quand?... demanda Len Cannon.

- Cette nuit, répondit Vin Mod, qui avait pris part à l'entretien.

- Quelle heure?

- Entre onze heures et minuit, répondit Flig Balt.

À ce moment, Hobbes sera de quart avec Sexton, Wickley à la barre... Il n'y aura pas à les tirer du poste, et, après que nous serons débarrassés de ces honnêtes matelots...

- Entendu”, répondit Len Cannon, sans éprouver plus d'hésitation que de scrupule.

Puis, abandonnant la roue à Vin Mod, il se dirigea vers l’avant afin de mettre Sexton, Bryce et Kyle au courant de l’affaire.

Arrivé au pied du mât de misaine, c’est inutilement qu’il chercha Sexton et Bryce. Ils auraient dû être de quart, et ni l’un ni l’autre n’étaient là.

Wickley, qu’il interrogea, se contenta de hausser les épaules.

“Où sont-ils? demanda Len Cannon.

- Dans le poste... ivres morts... tous les deux!

- Ah! les brutes! murmura Len Cannon. Les voilà soûls pour toute la nuit, et rien à en faire!”

Une fois descendu, il trouva ses camarades vautrés sur leurs cadres. Il les secoua... Des brutes, en vérité!... Ils avaient volé une bouteille de gin dans la cambuse, ils l’avaient vidée jusqu’à la dernière goutte... Impossible de les tirer de cette ivresse, d’où ils ne sortiraient qu’au matin... Impossible de leur communiquer les projets de Vin Mod!... Impossible de compter sur eux pour les mettre à exécution avant le lever du soleil, car, sans eux, la partie était trop inégale!...

Lorsque Flig Balt eut été prévenu, on se figure aisément ce que fut sa colère. Vin Mod ne le calma pas sans peine, et lui aussi vouait à la potence ces misérables ivrognes!... Mais enfin, rien n’était perdu...

Ce qui ne pouvait se faire cette nuit se ferait la nuit prochaine... On veillerait sur Kyle et Sexton... On les empêcherait de boire... Dans tous les cas, Flig Balt se garderait bien de les dénoncer au capitaine, ni pour la soûlerie, ni pour le vol de la bouteille... M. Gibson les enverrait à fond de cale jusqu’à l’arrivée du brick à Wellington, les remettrait entre les mains des autorités maritimes et débarquerait peut-être par surcroît Len Cannon et Kyle, ainsi que le fit observer Vin Mod... C'était parler sagement. D'autre part, les matelots ne se dénoncent pas entre eux. Ni Hobbes, ni Wickley, ni Burnes, ni même le mousse ne parleraient, et le capitaine n'aurait point à intervenir.

La nuit s'écoula, et la tranquillité ne fut point troublée à bord du James-Cook.

Lorsque Harry Gibson monta de grand matin sur le pont, il constata que les hommes de quart étaient à leur poste, et le brick en bonne direction par le travers de Christchurch, après avoir doublé la presqu'île de Banks.

Cette journée du 27 s'annonça bien. Le soleil déborda d'un horizon dont les brumes se dissipèrent promptement. Un instant on put croire que la brise s'établirait au large; mais, dès sept heures, elle vint de terre, et, sans doute, se maintiendrait au nord-ouest comme la veille. En pinçant le vent, le James-Cook pourrait atteindre le port de Wellington sans changer ses amures.

“Rien de nouveau?... demanda M. Gibson à Flig Balt, lorsque le maître d'équipage sortit de sa cabine, où il avait passé les dernières heures de la nuit.

- Rien de nouveau, monsieur Gibson, répondit-il.

- Qui est à la barre?...

- Le matelot Cannon.

- Vous n'avez pas eu à reprendre les nouvelles recrues dans le service?...

- En aucune façon, et je crois ces gens-là meilleurs qu’ils ne paraissent.

- Tant mieux, Balt, car j’ai idée qu’à Wellington, comme à Dunedin, les capitaines doivent être à court d’équipages.

- C’est probable, monsieur Gibson...

- Et, somme toute, si je pouvais m’arranger de ceux-ci...

- Ce serait pour le mieux!” répondit Flig Balt.

Le James-Cook, en remontant vers le nord, prolongeait la côte à trois ou quatre milles seulement. Les détails en apparaissaient avec netteté sous l’embrasement des rayons solaires. Les hautes chaînes du Kaikoura qui sillonnent la province de Malborough dessinaient leurs capricieuses arêtes à une hauteur de dix mille pieds. Sur leurs flancs s’étageaient les épaisses forêts dorées par la lumière, en même temps que les cours d’eau s’épanchaient vers le littoral.

Cependant, la brise montrait une tendance à calmir, et le brick, ce jour-là, ferait moins de route que la veille. D’où probabilité qu’il n’arriverait pas la nuit à Wellington.

Vers cinq heures de l’après-midi, on avait seulement connaissance des hauteurs du Ben More, dans le sud du petit port de Flaxbourne. Il faudrait encore de cinq à six heures pour se trouver à l’ouvert du détroit de Cook. Comme ce passage s’oriente du sud au nord, il ne serait pas nécessaire de modifier l’allure du navire.

Flig Balt et Vin Mod étaient donc assurés d’avoir toute la nuit pour accomplir leurs projets.

Il va sans dire que le concours de Len Cannon et de ses camarades était acquis. Sexton et Bryce, leur ivresse dissipée, Kyle déjà prévenu, n’avaient fait aucune observation.

Vin Mod ayant appuyé Len Cannon, on n’attendait plus que le moment d’agir. Voici dans quelles conditions.

Entre minuit et une heure du matin, tandis que le capitaine serait endormi, Vin Mod et Len Cannon pénétreraient dans sa cabine, le bâillonneraient, l’enlèveraient et le jetteraient à la mer avant qu’il eût le temps de pousser un cri. À ce moment, Hobbes et Burnes, étant de quart, seraient saisis par Kyle, Sexton, Bryce, et subiraient le même sort. Resterait Wickley dans le poste; Koa et Flig Balt en auraient facilement raison, ainsi que du mousse. L’exécution faite, il n’y aurait plus à bord que les auteurs du crime, pas un seul témoin, et le James-Cook, larguant ses écoutes, gagnerait à toutes voiles les parages du Pacifique dans l’est de la Nouvelle-Zélande.

Toutes les chances étaient donc pour que cet abominable complot réussît. Avant le lever du jour, sous le commandement de Flig Balt, le brick serait déjà loin de ces parages.

Il était environ sept heures, lorsque le cap Campbell fut relevé au nord-est. C’est à proprement parler l’extrême pointe qui limite le détroit de Cook au sud, ayant pour pendant, à une distance de cinquante milles environ, le cap Palliser, extrémité de l’île Ika-na-Maoui.

Le brick suivait alors le littoral à moins de deux milles, tout dessus, même ses bonnettes, car la brise faiblissait avec le soir. La côte était franche, bordée de roches basaltiques qui forment les premières assises des montagnes de l’intérieur. La cime du mont Weld se détachait comme une pointe de feu sous les rayons du soleil couchant. Bien que les marées du

Pacifique soient peu importantes, un courant de terre portait vers le nord et favorisait la marche du James-Cook en direction du détroit.

C’était à huit heures que le capitaine devait rentrer dans sa cabine, après avoir laissé le quart au maître d’équipage.

Il n’y aurait qu’à surveiller le passage des navires à l’ouvert du détroit. Au reste, la nuit serait claire, et aucune voile ne paraissait à l’horizon.

Avant huit heures, cependant, une fumée fut signalée par tribord arrière, et on ne tarda pas à voir un steamer qui doublait le cap Campbell.

Vin Mod et Flig Balt n’en prirent point ombrage. Assurément, étant donnée sa marche, il aurait bientôt dépassé le brick.

C’était un aviso de l’État qui n’avait pas encore amené ses couleurs. Or, à cet instant, un coup de fusil se fît entendre, et le pavillon britannique descendit de la corne de brigantine.

Harry Gibson était resté sur le pont. Allait-il donc y demeurer tant que serait en vue cet aviso, qui faisait la même route que le James-Cook, soit qu’il eût l’intention de traverser le détroit, soit qu’il fût à destination de Wellington?...

Voilà ce que se demandaient Flig Balt et Vin Mod, non sans une certaine appréhension, et même une certaine impatience, tant il leur tardait d’être seuls sur le pont.

Une heure s’écoula. M. Gibson, assis près du rouf, ne paraissait point songer à rentrer. Il échangeait quelques mots avec l’homme de barre, Hobbes, et observait l’aviso, qui ne se trouvait pas à un mille du brick.

Que l’on juge donc du désappointement de Flig Balt, de ses complices, un désappointement qui tournait à la rage. Le bâtiment anglais ne marchait plus qu’à petite vitesse et sa vapeur fusait par le tuyau d’échappement. Il se berçait aux ondulations de la longue houle, troublant à peine les eaux des battements de son hélice, ne faisant pas plus de sillage que le James-Cook.

Pourquoi cet aviso avait-il donc ralenti sa marche?...

Était-ce quelque accident survenu à sa machine?... Ou plutôt ne voulait-il pas entrer de nuit dans le port de Wellington, dont les passes sont assez difficiles?...

Enfin, pour une de ces raisons, sans doute, il semblait devoir rester jusqu’à l’aube sous petite vapeur, et, par conséquent, en vue du brick.

Cela était bien pour désappointer Flig Balt, Vin Mod et les autres, pour les inquiéter aussi.

En effet, Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle, Bryce eurent d’abord la pensée que cet aviso avait été envoyé de Dunedin à leur poursuite; que la police, ayant appris leur embarquement et leur départ sur le brick, cherchait à les reprendre. Craintes exagérées et vaines, assurément. Il eût été plus simple d’envoyer par télégraphe l’ordre de les arrêter dès leur arrivée à Wellington. On ne détache pas un navire de l’État pour s’emparer de quelques matelots tapageurs, lorsqu’il est facile de les pincer au port.

Len Cannon et ses camarades ne tardèrent pas à être rassurés. L’aviso ne fit aucun signal pour entrer en communication avec le brick, et ne mit point d’embarcation à la mer. Le James-Cook ne serait pas l’objet d’une perquisition, et les recrues des Three-Magpies pouvaient être tranquilles à bord.

Mais, si toute crainte fut bannie de ce chef, on imagine aisément la colère qu'éprouvèrent le maître d'équipage et Vin Mod. Impossible d'agir cette nuit, et le lendemain le brick serait à son mouillage de Wellington. Se jeter sur le capitaine Gibson, sur les trois matelots, cela ne se ferait pas sans bruit. Ils résisteraient, ils se défendraient, ils crieraient, et leurs cris seraient entendus de l'aviso, qui ne se trouvait plus qu'à deux ou trois encablures...

La révolte ne pouvait éclater dans ces conditions... Elle eût été promptement réprimée par le bâtiment anglais, qui, en quelques tours d'hélice, eût accosté le brick.

“Malédiction!... grommelait Vin Mod. Rien à faire!... On risquerait d'être envoyé à bout de vergues de ce damné bateau...

- Et demain, ajouta Flig Balt, l'armateur et Nat Gibson seront à bord!”

Il aurait fallu s'éloigner de l'aviso, et peut-être le maître d'équipage l'eût-il tenté, si le capitaine, au lieu de regagner sa cabine, ne fût demeuré la plus grande partie de la nuit sur le pont. Impossible de prendre le large... Donc, nécessité de renoncer au projet de s'emparer du brick.

Le jour revint de bonne heure. Le James-Cook avait passé à l'ouvert de Blenheim, situé sur le littoral de Tawaï-Pounamou, côté ouest du détroit; puis il s'était rapproché de la pointe Nicholson, qui se projette à l'entrée de la baie de Wellington. Enfin, à six heures du matin, il pénétrait dans cette baie en même temps que l'aviso et venait mouiller au milieu du port.

IV - À Wellington

La ville de Wellington est bâtie à la pointe sud-ouest de l’île du Nord, au fond d’une baie disposée en fer à cheval. Très abritée contre les vents du large, elle offre d’excellents mouillages. Le brick avait été favorisé par le temps, mais il n’en est pas toujours ainsi. La navigation, le plus souvent, présente des difficultés dans le détroit de Cook, sillonné de courants dont la vitesse atteint parfois une dizaine de nœuds, bien que les marées du Pacifique ne soient jamais fortes. Le marin Tasman, auquel on doit la première découverte de la Nouvelle-Zélande, - décembre 1642, - y courut de grands dangers, risques d’échouage, risques d’attaque de la part des indigènes. De là ce nom de “Baie du Massacre” qui figure dans la nomenclature géographique du détroit. Le navigateur hollandais y perdit quatre de ses hommes, que dévorèrent les cannibales du littoral, et, cent ans après lui, le navigateur anglais James Cook laissait entre leurs mains l’équipage de l’un des canots de sa conserve, commandée par le capitaine Furneaux. Enfin, à deux ans de là, le navigateur français Marion du Frêne et seize de ses gens y trouvaient la mort dans une agression de la plus effroyable sauvagerie.

En 1840, au mois de mars, Dumont d’Urville, avec l’Astrolabe et la Zélée, donne dans la baie Otago de l’île du Sud, visite les îles Snares et l’île Stewart, à l’extrémité méridionale de Tawaï-Pounamou. Puis il séjourne au port d’Akaroa, sans avoir à se plaindre de ses rapports avec les naturels. Le souvenir du passage de cet illustre marin est marqué par l’île qui porte son nom. Uniquement habitée par des tribus de pingouins et d’albatros, elle est séparée de la grande terre du Sud par la “French pass”, où la mer est si furieuse que les navires ne s’y aventurent pas volontiers à la sortie du détroit.

Actuellement, sous les plis du pavillon britannique, du moins en ce qui concerne les Maoris, toute sécurité est assurée dans les parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande.

Les dangers qui venaient des hommes ont été conjurés. Seuls, ceux de la mer subsistent, et encore sont-ils moindres, grâce aux travaux hydrographiques et à l’établissement du gigantesque phare que porte un roc isolé en avant de la baie Nicholson, au fond de laquelle apparaît Wellington.

C’est en 1849, au mois de janvier, que la New-Zealand Land Company envoya l’Aurora déposer les premiers colons sur le littoral de ces terres lointaines. La population des deux îles ne compte pas moins de huit cent mille habitants, et Wellington, capitale de la colonie, en possède une trentaine de mille pour sa part.

La ville est agréablement située, régulièrement construite, rues larges et proprement entretenues. La plupart des maisons sont bâties en bois, par crainte des tremblements de terre, fréquents dans la province méridionale, même les édifices publics, entre autres le palais du gouvernement, au milieu de son joli parc, et la cathédrale, que son caractère religieux ne met point à l’abri des cataclysmes terrestres. Cette cité, moins importante, moins industrielle, moins commerçante que deux ou trois de ses rivales en Nouvelle-Zélande, les égalera sans doute quelque jour sous l’impulsion du génie colonisateur de la Grande-Bretagne. En tout cas, avec son Université, sa Chambre législative composée de cinquante-quatre membres, dont quatre Maoris nommés par le gouverneur, sa Chambre des représentants issus directement du suffrage populaire, ses collèges, ses écoles, son musée, ses laborieuses usines pour les viandes frigorifiées, sa prison modèle, ses places, ses jardins publics où l’électricité va se substituer au gaz, Wellington jouit d’un confort exceptionnel que pourraient envier nombre de villes de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Monde.

Si le James-Cook n’avait point porté ses amarres à quai, c’était pour cette raison que le capitaine Gibson voulait rendre plus difficile la désertion des hommes.

La fièvre de l’or exerçait autant de ravages à Wellington qu’à Dunedin et dans les autres ports néo-zélandais. Plusieurs navires se trouvaient dans l’impossibilité d’appareiller. M. Gibson devait donc prendre toutes précautions pour garder son équipage au complet, même ces recrues des Three-Magpies qu’il eût cependant et très volontiers échangées contre d’autres. D’ailleurs, sa relâche à Wellington allait être de très courte durée - à peine vingt-quatre heures.

Les premières personnes qui reçurent sa visite furent M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson. Le capitaine s’était fait mettre à terre dès son arrivée, et huit heures sonnaient lorsqu’il se présenta au comptoir de M. Hawkins, situé à l’extrémité d’une des rues qui débouchent sur le port.

“Mon père!...

- Mon ami!”

Ainsi Harry Gibson fut-il accueilli à son entrée dans le bureau. Il avait devancé son fils et M. Hawkins, qui se disposaient à descendre sur le quai, ce qu’ils faisaient chaque matin, pour voir si le James-Cook ne serait pas enfin signalé par la vigie du sémaphore.

Le jeune homme s’était d’abord jeté au cou de son père, puis l’armateur pressa celui-ci dans ses bras.

M. Hawkins, âgé de cinquante ans à cette époque, était un homme de moyenne taille, cheveux grisonnants, les yeux clairs et doux, bonne santé, bonne constitution, très ingambe, très actif, très entendu au commerce, très hardi en affaires. On sait que sa situation à Hobart-Town donnait toute sécurité, et il aurait déjà pu se retirer, fortune faite. Mais il ne lui eût pas convenu, après une existence si laborieuse, de rester oisif.

Aussi, dans le but de développer ses armements, qui comprenaient plusieurs autres navires, venait-il de fonder ce comptoir à Wellington avec un associé, M. Balfour. Nat Gibson deviendrait le principal employé à part d’intérêt, dès que le James-Cook aurait achevé sa campagne.

Le fils du capitaine Gibson, alors âgé de vingt et un ans, d’intelligence vive, d’esprit sérieux, ressentait pour son père et pour sa mère une affection profonde, et aussi pour M. Hawkins. Il est vrai, ce dernier et le capitaine étaient liés si intimement que Nat Gibson pouvait les confondre dans la même amitié. Ardent, enthousiaste, aimant les belles choses, il était artiste tout en montrant des dispositions pour les affaires commerciales. D’une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, les yeux noirs, les cheveux et la barbe châtains, la démarche élégante, l’attitude aisée, la physionomie sympathique, il plaisait dès le premier abord, et on ne lui connaissait que des amis. D’un autre côté, pas de doute qu’il ne dût devenir, avec l’âge, résolu, énergique. D’un tempérament plus décidé que son père, il tenait de Mrs Gibson.

En ses loisirs, Nat Gibson s’occupait avec plaisir et goût de photographie, cet art déjà si en progrès grâce à l’emploi des substances accélératrices qui portent les épreuves instantanées au dernier degré de la perfection. Son appareil ne le quittait guère, et l’on peut imaginer s’il s’en était servi au cours de ce voyage: sites pittoresques, portraits d’indigènes, des clichés de toutes sortes.

Pendant son séjour à Wellington, il avait pris nombre de vues de la ville et des environs. M. Hawkins lui-même s’y intéressait. Souvent on les voyait partir tous les deux, leur bagage de photographes en bandoulière, et ils revenaient de ces excursions avec de nouvelles richesses pour leur collection.

Après avoir présenté le capitaine à M. Balfour, M. Hawkins rentra dans son bureau, où le suivirent M. Gibson et son fils. Et là, tout d’abord, on parla d’Hobart-Town. Les nouvelles ne manquaient pas, grâce aux services réguliers entre la Tasmanie et la Nouvelle-Zélande. La veille même était arrivée une lettre de Mrs Hawkins, et celles de Mrs Gibson attendaient depuis quelques jours le James-Cook à Wellington.

Le capitaine prit connaissance de sa correspondance. Tout le monde allait bien là-bas. Ces dames étaient en bonne santé. Il est vrai, l’absence leur semblait longue et leur espoir était qu’elle ne se prolongerait pas. Le voyage devait toucher à son terme.

“Oui, dit M. Hawkins, encore cinq ou six semaines, et nous serons de retour à Hobart-Town...

- Chère mère, s’écria Nat Gibson, quel bonheur elle aura à nous revoir, autant que nous en avons eu, père, à t’embrasser!...

- Et que j’en ai, moi, cher enfant!

- Mon ami, dit M. Hawkins, j’ai toute raison de croire que la traversée du James-Cook sera maintenant de peu de durée...

- C’est mon avis, Hawkins.

- Même à moyenne vitesse, reprit l’armateur, la navigation est assez courte entre la Nouvelle-Zélande et la Nouvelle-Irlande...

- En cette saison surtout, répondit le capitaine. La mer est belle jusqu’à l’Équateur, les vents sont réguliers, et je pense comme toi que nous n’aurons aucun retard à subir, si notre relâche à Port-Praslin ne doit pas se prolonger...

- Il n’en sera rien, Gibson. J’ai reçu de notre correspondant, M. Zieger, une lettre très rassurante à ce sujet.

Il y a dans l’archipel un gros stock de marchandises en nacre, en coprah, et le chargement du brick pourra s’effectuer sans difficultés.

- M. Zieger est-il prêt à prendre livraison de nos marchandises?... demanda le capitaine.

- Oui, mon ami, et, je te le répète, j’ai l’assurance qu’il n’y aura aucun retard de ce chef.

- N’oublie pas, Hawkins, qu’après Port-Praslin le brick devra se rendre à Kerawara...

- C’est l’affaire de vingt-quatre heures, Gibson.

- Eh bien, père, dit Nat Gibson, nous pouvons être fixés sur la durée du voyage. Combien de jours notre relâche à Port-Praslin et à Kerawara?...

- Trois semaines environ.

- Et de Wellington à Port-Praslin?

- Tout autant.

- Et le retour en Tasmanie?...

- À peu près un mois.

- Ainsi, dans deux mois et demi, il est possible que le James-Cook soit revenu à Hobart-Town...

- Oui... plutôt moins que plus.

- Bon, répondit Nat Gibson, je vais écrire à ma mère aujourd'hui même, car le courrier pour l'Australie lève l'ancre après-demain... Je lui demanderai encore deux mois et demi de patience, dont Mme Hawkins voudra bien prendre sa part, n'est-ce pas, monsieur Hawkins?...

- Oui, mon cher enfant.

- Et, au commencement de l'année, les deux familles seront réunies...

- Deux familles qui n'en font qu'une!" répondit M. Hawkins.

Les mains de l'armateur et du capitaine se pressèrent affectueusement.

"Mon cher Gibson, dit alors M. Hawkins, nous déjeunerons ici avec M. Balfour...

- C'est entendu, Hawkins.

- As-tu affaire en ville?...

- Non, répondit le capitaine, mais il faut que je retourne à bord.

- Eh bien, au James-Cook! s’écria Nat Gibson. Cela me fera plaisir de revoir notre brick avant d’y transporter nos bagages de passagers.

- Oh! répondit M. Hawkins, il va bien rester quelques jours à Wellington?...

- Vingt-quatre heures au plus, répondit le capitaine. Je n’ai point d’avaries à réparer, point de cargaison à débarquer ni à embarquer... Des provisions à renouveler seulement, et un après-midi me suffira... C’est à ce sujet que je veux donner des ordres à Balt.

- Tu es toujours content de ton maître d’équipage?...

- Toujours... C’est un homme zélé et qui connaît bien le service.

- Et l’équipage?...

- Des anciens matelots, rien à dire.

- Et ceux que tu as engagés à Dunedin?...

- Ils ne m’inspirent guère de confiance, mais je n’ai pas trouvé mieux.

- Ainsi le James-Cook partira?...

- Dès demain, s’il ne nous arrive pas ici ce qui nous est arrivé à Dunedin. En ce moment, il n’est pas bon pour les capitaines du commerce de relâcher dans les ports de la Nouvelle-Zélande!

- Tu veux parler de la désertion qui décime les équipages?... demanda M. Hawkins.

- Et qui fait plus que les décimer, répliqua M. Gibson, puisque, sur huit matelots, j’en ai perdu quatre, dont je n’ai plus eu aucune nouvelle...

- Tu as raison, Gibson, prends garde à ce qu’il n’en soit pas à Wellington comme il en a été à Dunedin...

- Aussi ai-je eu la précaution de ne permettre à personne de débarquer sous aucun prétexte... pas même au cuisinier Koa...

- C’est prudent, père, ajouta Nat Gibson... Il y a dans le port une demi-douzaine de navires qui ne peuvent prendre la mer faute de matelots.

- Cela ne m’étonne pas, répondit Harry Gibson. Aussi je compte mettre à la voile dès que nous aurons embarqué nos provisions, et assurément nous serons parés demain dès la première heure.”

Au moment où le capitaine prononça le nom du maître d’équipage, M. Hawkins n’avait pu retenir un geste assez significatif.

“Si je t’ai parlé de Flig Balt, reprit-il alors, c’est qu’il ne m’avait pas fait très bonne impression quand nous l’avons engagé à Hobart-Town.

- Oui... je sais, répondit le capitaine, mais tes préventions ne sont point justifiées... Il remplit ses fonctions avec zèle, les hommes savent qu’il faut lui obéir, et, je te le répète, le service du bord n’a rien laissé à désirer.

- Tant mieux, Gibson, je préfère m’être trompé à son égard, et du moment qu’il t’inspire confiance...

- D’ailleurs, Hawkins, lorsqu’il s’agit de la manœuvre, je ne m’en rapporte qu’à moi seul, tu le sais, et j’abandonne volontiers le reste à mon maître d’équipage.

Depuis notre départ, je n’ai pas eu un reproche à lui adresser, et s’il veut rembarquer sur le brick à son prochain voyage...

- Cela te regarde, après tout, mon cher ami, répondit M. Hawkins. Tu es le meilleur juge de ce qu’il convient de faire.”

On le voit, la confiance que Flig Balt inspirait à Harry Gibson, confiance fort mal placée, était entière, tant ce fourbe avait su jouer son jeu comme Vin Mod. C’est pourquoi, lorsque M. Hawkins demanda encore si le capitaine était sûr des quatre matelots qui n’avaient point déserté:

“Vin Mod, Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes sont de bons marins, répondit-il, et ce qu’ils n’ont pas fait à Dunedin, ils n’auraient pas cherché à le faire ici.

- On leur en tiendra compte au retour, déclara l’armateur.

- Aussi, reprit le capitaine, ce n’est pas pour eux que j’ai défendu aux hommes de descendre à terre... c’est à propos des quatre recrues.”

Et M. Gibson fit connaître dans quelles conditions Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle, Bryce étaient venus à bord, ayant hâte d’échapper aux policemen de Dunedin, après une bataille dans la taverne des Three-Magpies.

“De véritables pratiques?... dit l’armateur.

- Assurément, mon ami, mais tu sais en quel embarras j’étais, et comment j’y ai été retardé d’une quinzaine de jours!... J’en étais même à me demander s’il ne me faudrait pas attendre des mois pour compléter mon équipage!... Que veux-tu! on prend ce qu’on trouve...

- Et on se sépare de ce qu’on a trouvé dès que cela est possible... répliqua M. Hawkins.

- Comme tu dis, Hawkins. C’est même ce que j’aurais fait ici, à Wellington, si les circonstances l’avaient permis, et c’est ce que je ferai à Hobart-Town...

- Nous avons le loisir d’y songer, père! observa Nat Gibson. Le brick restera bien quelques mois en désarmement, n’est-ce pas, monsieur Hawkins? et nous passerons ce temps en famille jusqu’au jour où je reviendrai moi-même à Wellington.

- Tout cela s’arrangera, Nat”, répondit l’armateur.

M. Hawkins, M. Gibson et son fils quittèrent le comptoir, descendirent sur le quai, hélèrent une des embarcations employées au service du port et se firent conduire à bord du brick.

Ce fut le maître d’équipage qui les reçut, toujours obséquieux, toujours empressé, et auquel M. Hawkins, rassuré par les déclarations du capitaine, réserva bon accueil.

“Je vois que vous êtes en bonne santé, monsieur Hawkins... lui dit Flig Balt.

- En bonne santé... je vous remercie...”, répondit l’armateur.

Les trois matelots, Hobbes, Wickley et Burnes, qui naviguaient depuis plusieurs années sur le James-Cook, sans avoir donné aucun sujet de plainte, obtinrent les félicitations de M. Hawkins.

Quant à Jim, l’armateur l’embrassa sur les deux joues, et le jeune homme témoigna une grande joie de le revoir.

“J’ai d’excellentes nouvelles de ta mère, lui dit M. Hawkins, et elle espère bien que le capitaine est satisfait de toi...

- Entièrement, déclara M. Gibson.

- Je vous remercie, monsieur Hawkins, dit Jim, et vous me faites grand plaisir!

- Et moi?... dit Nat Gibson en l’attirant, il n’y a rien pour moi?...

- Oh, si! monsieur Nat, répondit Jim, qui se jeta à son cou.

- Et quelle bonne mine tu as!... ajouta Nat. Si ta mère te voyait, elle serait contente, la brave femme!... Aussi, Jim, je ferai ta photographie avant de partir...

- Bien ressemblante?...

- Oui... si tu ne bouges pas...

- Je ne bougerai pas, monsieur Nat, je ne bougerai pas!”

Il faut dire que M. Hawkins, après avoir parlé à Hobbes, Wickley et Burnes, de leurs familles, qui habitaient Hobart-Town, adressa quelques paroles à Vin Mod. Celui-ci se montra très sensible à cette attention. Il est vrai, l’armateur le connaissait moins que ses camarades, et c’était son premier voyage à bord du James-Cook.

Quant aux recrues, M. Hawkins se contenta de les saluer d’un simple bonjour.

Il y a lieu de l’avouer, d’ailleurs, leur vue ne fit pas sur lui meilleure impression que sur M. Gibson. Au reste, on aurait pu, sans inconvénient, leur permettre de descendre à terre. Ils n’auraient pas eu l’idée de déserter après ces quarante-huit heures de navigation, et ils fussent certainement rentrés avant le départ du brick. Vin Mod les avait travaillés, et, malgré la présence de M. Hawkins et de Nat Gibson, ils comptaient bien que quelque occasion se présenterait de s’emparer du navire. Ce serait un peu plus difficile.

Mais qu’y a-t-il d’impossible à des gens sans foi ni loi, décidés à ne reculer devant aucun crime?

Après une heure, pendant laquelle M. Hawkins et M. Gibson examinèrent ensemble les comptes du voyage, le capitaine annonça que le brick mettrait en mer le lendemain au lever du jour. L’armateur et Nat Gibson reviendraient dans la soirée prendre possession de leur cabine, où ils auraient préalablement fait transporter les bagages.

Cependant, avant de regagner le quai, M. Gibson demanda à Flig Balt s’il n’avait pas besoin de se rendre à terre:

“Non, capitaine, répondit le maître d’équipage. Je préfère rester à bord... c’est plus prudent... et surveiller les hommes...

- Vous avez raison, Balt, dit M. Gibson. Il faut toutefois que le cuisinier aille aux provisions...

- Je l’y enverrai, capitaine, et, s’il est nécessaire, deux matelots avec lui.”

Tout étant convenu, le canot qui avait amené l’armateur et ses compagnons les reconduisit à quai. De là, ils revinrent au comptoir, où demeurait M. Balfour, qui se réunit à eux pour le déjeuner.

Pendant le repas, on causa d’affaires. Jusqu’ici le voyage en cours du James-Cook avait été des plus favorisés et donnait de beaux bénéfices.

Le grand cabotage, en effet, tendait remarquablement à se développer sur cette partie du Pacifique. La prise de possession des archipels voisins de la Nouvelle-Guinée par l'Allemagne ouvrait de nouveaux débouchés. Ce n'était pas sans raison que M. Hawkins avait noué des relations avec M. Zieger, son correspondant de la Nouvelle-Irlande, actuellement le Neumeklenburg.

Le comptoir qu'il venait de fonder à Wellington devait plus spécialement entretenir ces relations par les soins de M. Balfour et de Nat Gibson, qui serait installé près de lui dans quelques mois.

Le déjeuner achevé, M. Gibson voulut s'occuper des approvisionnements du brick que le cuisinier viendrait chercher dans l'après-midi: conserves, volailles, porcs, farine, légumes secs, fromages, bière, gin et sherry, café et épiceries de diverses sortes.

“Père, tu ne sortiras pas d'ici avant que j'aie fait ton portrait!... déclara Nat.

- Comment... encore!... s'écria le capitaine.

- Voilà, mon ami, ajouta M. Hawkins, nous sommes tous les deux possédés du démon de la photographie, et nous ne laissons aucun repos aux gens tant qu'ils n'ont pas posé devant notre objectif!... Ainsi il faut te soumettre de bonne grâce!...

- Mais j'en ai déjà deux ou trois de ces portraits, chez moi, à Hobart-Town!...

- Eh bien, cela fera un de plus, répondit Nat Gibson, et, puisque nous partons demain, M. Balfour se chargera de l'expédier à ma mère par le prochain courrier.

- C’est entendu, dit M. Balfour.

- Vois-tu, père, reprit le jeune homme, un portrait, c’est comme un poisson... Il n’a de valeur que lorsqu’il est frais!... Songe donc, tu as maintenant dix mois de plus qu’à l’époque de ton départ d’Hobart-Town, et je suis sûr que tu ne ressembles pas à ta dernière photographie, celle qui est placée sur la cheminée de ta chambre...

- Nat a raison, confirma M. Hawkins en riant.

C’est à peine si je t’ai reconnu ce matin!

- Par exemple!... s’écria M. Gibson.

- Non... je t’assure!... Il n’y a rien qui vous change comme dix mois de navigation!...

- Fais donc, mon enfant, répondit le capitaine, me voici prêt au sacrifice...

- Et quelle attitude vas-tu prendre?... demanda plaisamment l’armateur... celle du marin qui part ou celle du marin qui arrive?... Sera-ce la posture du commandant... le bras étendu vers l’horizon... la main tenant le sextant ou la longue-vue... la pose du maître après Dieu?...

- Celle que tu voudras, Hawkins...

- Et puis, pendant que tu seras campé devant notre appareil, tâche de penser à quelque chose!... Cela donne plus d’expression à la physionomie!... À quoi penseras-tu?...

- Je penserai à ma chère femme, répondit M. Gibson, à mon fils... et à toi... mon ami...

- Alors, nous obtiendrons une magnifique épreuve!”

Nat Gibson possédait un de ces appareils portatifs perfectionnés qui donnent le négatif en quelques secondes. M. Gibson fut très réussi, paraît-il, à ce que dit son fils, lorsqu’il eut examiné le cliché, dont l’épreuve serait laissée aux soins de M. Balfour.

M. Hawkins, le capitaine et Nat quittèrent alors le comptoir afin de se procurer tout ce qu’exigeait une navigation de neuf à dix semaines. Les entrepôts ne manquent point à Wellington, et on y trouve les divers approvisionnements maritimes: produits alimentaires, engins de bord, agrès, poulies, cordages, ustensiles, voiles de rechange, instruments de pêche, barils de brai et de goudron, outils de calfat et de charpentier.

Mais, sauf quelques glènes de filin à remplacer, les besoins du brick se bornaient à ce qui concernait la nourriture des passagers et de l’équipage. Cela fut vite acheté, réglé, puis expédié au James-Cook, dès que les matelots Wickley, Hobbes et le maître-coq furent arrivés.

En même temps, M. Gibson remplit les formalités qui sont obligatoires pour tout bâtiment à son entrée et à sa sortie. Donc rien n’empêcherait le brick d’appareiller dès l’aube, plus heureux que d’autres navires de commerce que la désertion de leurs hommes retenait en relâche à Wellington.

Pendant ces courses à travers la ville, au milieu d’une population très affairée, M. Hawkins et ses compagnons rencontrèrent un certain nombre de Maoris de la campagne environnante. Leur importance numérique a bien diminué en Nouvelle-Zélande, comme celle des Australiens en Australie, et surtout celle des Tasmaniens en Tasmanie, puisque les derniers spécimens de cette race ont à peu près disparu. On ne compte actuellement qu’une quarantaine d’indigènes dans l’île du Nord et à peine deux mille dans l’île du Sud. Ces Maoris s’occupent plus spécialement de cultures maraîchères, et principalement de la culture des arbres fruitiers, dont les produits sont très abondants et d’excellente qualité.

Les hommes sont d’un beau type, qui dénote un caractère énergique, une constitution robuste et endurante. Les femmes paraissent leur être inférieures. En tout cas, il faut s’habituer à voir le sexe faible se promener dans les rues la pipe à la bouche et fumer plus immodérément que le sexe fort. On ne s’étonnera donc pas que cela gêne l’échange de politesses avec les dames maories, puisque, d’après les coutumes, il ne s’agit pas seulement de se donner le bonjour ou de se presser la main, mais de se frotter nez contre nez.

Ces indigènes sont, paraît-il, d’origine polynésienne, et il est même possible que les premiers immigrants en Nouvelle-Zélande soient sortis de l’archipel de Tonga-Tabou, qui est situé à quelque douze cents milles dans le nord.

Il y a, en somme, deux raisons pour que cette population soit en voie de décroissance et destinée à disparaître dans l’avenir. La première cause de destruction, c’est la maladie et particulièrement la phtisie pulmonaire, qui exerce de grands ravages dans les familles. La seconde, plus terrible encore, c’est l’ivrognerie, et il est à noter que les femmes tiennent le premier rang dans cet effroyable abus des liqueurs alcooliques.

D’autre part, il y a lieu d’observer que le régime d’alimentation s’est profondément modifié chez les Maoris. Grâce aux missionnaires, l’influence du christianisme est devenue dominante. Les indigènes étaient anthropophages autrefois, et qui oserait dire que cette nourriture ultra-azotée ne convenait pas à leur tempérament?... Quoi qu’il en soit, mieux vaut qu’ils disparaissent plutôt que de se manger entre eux, “bien, a pu dire un touriste très observateur, que le cannibalisme n’eût jamais qu’un seul but, la bataille: dévorer les yeux et le cœur de l’ennemi, afin de s’inspirer de son courage et d’acquérir sa sagacité”!

Ces Maoris résistèrent à l’envahissement britannique jusqu’en 1875, et c’est à cette époque que le dernier roi de King-Country se soumit à l’autorité de la Grande-Bretagne.

Vers six heures, M. Hawkins, le capitaine et Nat Gibson rentrèrent au comptoir pour dîner; puis, après avoir pris congé de M. Balfour, ils se firent conduire à bord du brick, qui serait prêt à lever l’ancre dès les premières lueurs du jour.

V - Quelques jours de navigation

Il était six heures du matin lorsque le James-Cook appareilla toutes voiles dehors. Le capitaine dut évoluer pour se dégager de la baie et sortir par le sinueux goulet. Après avoir contourné la pointe Nicholson, grâce à de multiples virements de bord, il donna dans le détroit, où le vent contraire soufflait du nord. Mais, quand il fut à la hauteur d’Orokiva, la brise plus marine de l’ouest lui permit de traverser au plus près la vaste échancrure qui creuse le littoral d’Ika-na-Maoui, entre Wellington et New-Plymouth, au-delà du cap Egmont.

Le James-Cook, coupant obliquement cette baie, s’était donc éloigné de la terre, et il ne devait la retrouver qu’en latitude du cap susdit.

La distance à parcourir le long de la côte occidentale de l’île du Nord était d’environ cent milles. Avec une brise persistante, elle pouvait être franchie en trois jours. Du reste, étant donnée la direction du vent, il serait impossible de rester en vue du littoral, dont Harry Gibson connaissait parfaitement le relevé hydrographique, et il n’y aurait aucun danger pour le brick de s’en tenir à quelque distance.

Cette première journée s’écoula dans des conditions agréables. M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson, assis près du rouf, s’abandonnaient à cette impression délicieuse de la marche d’un navire. Un peu incliné sous le vent, il se dérobe rapidement aux longues houles et laisse à l’arrière un onduleux sillage d’écume. Le capitaine allait et venait, jetant un rapide regard sur l’habitacle placé devant l’homme de barre, et échangeant quelques paroles avec ses passagers. Une moitié de l’équipage était de quart à l’avant; l’autre se reposait dans le poste, après avoir reçu la ration du matin.

Plusieurs lignes avaient été mises à la traîne, et, à l’heure du repas de midi, elles ne remonteraient point sans ramener quelques-uns de ces poissons si multipliés en ces mers.

Il faut savoir aussi que les parages de la Nouvelle-Zélande sont très fréquentés des baleines. Cette pêche s’y exerce avec grand succès. Autour du brick, dans cette vaste baie, apparurent un certain nombre de souffleurs qu’il eût été facile d’amarrer.

Ce qui conduisit M. Hawkins à dire au capitaine, tandis qu’ils regardaient s’ébattre ces énormes mammifères:

“J’ai toujours eu le désir de mener de pair la pêche et le cabotage, Gibson, et je pense qu’il y a autant de bénéfice à tirer de l’une que de l’autre.

- Possible, répondit le capitaine, et les baleiniers qui visitent ces mers remplissent aisément leur cales de barils d’huile, de lard et de fanons.

- On racontait à Wellington, fit observer Nat Gibson, que les baleines se laissent capturer plus aisément ici que partout ailleurs...

- C’est vrai, dit le capitaine, et cela tient à ce qu’elles n’ont pas l’ouïe aussi exercée que celles des autres espèces. Il est donc possible de les approcher à portée de harpon. En somme, toute baleine signalée est baleine prise, à moins que le mauvais temps ne s’en mêle. Par malheur, les coups de vent sont non moins nombreux que terribles dans ces mers...

- Entendu, répondit M. Hawkins, un jour ou l’autre, nous armerons en pêche...

- Avec un autre capitaine, alors, mon ami! Chacun son métier, et je ne suis pas baleinier...

- Avec un autre capitaine, soit, Gibson, et avec un autre navire, car il faut une installation spéciale que notre James-Cook ne comporterait pas.

- Sans doute, Hawkins, un bâtiment qui puisse embarquer deux mille barils d'huile pendant une campagne dont la durée va jusqu'à deux ans quelquefois, et des pirogues pour la poursuite des animaux, et un équipage qui occupe de trente à quarante hommes, harponneurs, tonneliers, forgeron, charpentier, matelots, novices, au moins trois officiers et un médecin...

- Père, affirma Nat Gibson, M. Hawkins ne négligerait rien de ce que nécessite ce genre d'armement...

- Grosse affaire, mon enfant, répondit le capitaine, et, à mon avis, en cette partie du Pacifique, le cabotage donne des bénéfices plus assurés... Il est telles de ces campagnes de pêche qui ont été ruineuses... J'ajoute que les baleines, trop pourchassées, tendent à s'éloigner vers les mers polaires. Il faut aller les chercher jusque dans les parages du détroit de Behring, du côté des îles Kouriles, ou dans les mers antarctiques, voyages longs et périlleux dont plus d'un navire n'est jamais revenu.

- Après tout, mon cher Gibson, dit l'armateur, ceci n'est qu'un projet... Nous verrons plus tard... Tenons-nous-en au cabotage, puisqu'il a toujours été heureux, et ramenons le brick à Hobart-Town avec une belle cargaison dans sa cale."

Vers six heures du soir, le James-Cook eut connaissance de la côte par le travers de la baie Waimah, à la hauteur des petits ports d'Ohawe. Quelques nuages se levant à l'horizon, le capitaine fit amener les perroquets et prendre les ris dans les huniers. C'est d'ailleurs une précaution qui s'impose à tous les bâtiments dans ces parages, où les coups de vent sont aussi subits que violents, et, chaque soir, l’équipage diminue la voilure par crainte d’être surpris.

Et, en effet, le brick fut passablement secoué jusqu’au matin. Il dut gagner de quelques milles au large, après avoir relevé les feux du cap Egmont.

Le jour venu, il laissa arriver, repiqua vers la terre, dont M. Gibson ne voulait pas s’éloigner, et vint passer à l’ouverture de New-Plymouth, une des villes importantes de l’île du Nord.

La brise avait plutôt fraîchi pendant la nuit. Il ventait grand frais. On ne put rétablir les perroquets qui avaient été serrés la veille, et M. Gibson dut se contenter de larguer les ris des huniers. Le brick filait à la vitesse de douze milles à l’heure, incliné sur tribord, soulevé longuement par la houle du large. Parfois les lames, heurtant sa joue, le couvraient d’embruns à l’avant. Son étrave plongeait jusqu’à noyer la figure de proue, puis il se relevait aussitôt.

Ces coups de tangage et de roulis n’étaient point pour gêner M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson. Ayant déjà navigué, l’accoutumance ne leur manquait pas, et le mal de mer n’avait pas prise sur eux. Ils respiraient avec volupté cet air vivifiant, imprégné des salures marines, dont les poumons peuvent si largement s’emplir. En même temps, leurs regards prenaient plaisir à contempler ces sites infiniment variés de la côte occidentale.

Cette côte est peut-être plus curieuse que celle de l’île du Sud. Ika-na-Maoui - ce nom signifie en langue polynésienne “le Poisson de Maoui” - se montre plus riche en criques, en baies, en ports que Tawaï-Pounamou, nom que les indigènes donnent au lac dans lequel se recueille le jade vert. Du large, la vue s’étend sur la chaîne montagneuse, toute verdoyante, d’où jaillissaient autrefois les éruptions volcaniques. Elle forme la charpente osseuse ou plutôt la colonne vertébrale de l'île, dont la largeur moyenne est d'une trentaine de lieues. Au total, la surface de la Nouvelle-Zélande n'est pas inférieure à celle des Iles-Britanniques, et c'est comme une seconde Grande-Bretagne que le Royaume-Uni possède à ses antipodes dans le Pacifique.

Seulement, si l'Angleterre n'est séparée de l'Écosse que par cet étroit fleuve de la Tweed, c'est un bras de mer qui sépare l'île du Nord de l'île du Sud.

Depuis que le James-Cook avait quitté le port de Wellington, les chances de pouvoir s'en emparer étaient assurément diminuées. Flig Balt et Vin Mod s'entretenaient souvent à ce sujet. Et, ce jour-là, à l'heure du déjeuner, qui réunissait dans le rouf M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson et le capitaine, ils en causèrent encore. Vin Mod tenait la barre et ils ne couraient pas le risque d'être entendus des matelots de quart à l'avant.

“Ah! cet aviso de malheur!... ne cessait de répéter Vin Mod. C'est lui qui a empêché le coup!... Pendant vingt-quatre heures ce satané bâtiment est resté par notre travers!... Si son commandant est jamais envoyé à bout de vergue, je demande à haler sur la corde qui lui serrera le cou!... Ne pouvait-il donc pas continuer sa route au lieu de marcher de conserve avec le brick?... Sans lui, le James-Cook serait maintenant débarrassé du capitaine et de ses hommes!... Il rallierait les mers de l'Est, avec une bonne cargaison pour les Tonga ou les Fidji...

- Tout ça... c'est des mots! observa Flig Balt.

- On se soulage comme on peut!... répondit Vin Mod.

- La question est de savoir, reprit le maître d’équipage, si la présence à bord de l’armateur et du fils Gibson ne nous oblige pas à renoncer...

- Jamais! s’écria Vin Mod. Nos compagnons n’entendent pas ce refrain-là!... Len Cannon et les autres auraient bien trouvé le moyen de filer à Wellington, s’ils avaient pensé que le brick reviendrait tranquillement à Hobart-Town!...

Ce qu’ils veulent, c’est naviguer pour leur propre compte, et non pour le compte de M. Hawkins!

- Tout ça... des mots, je le répète... dit Flig Balt, qui haussait les épaules. Pouvons-nous espérer que l’occasion se présentera?...

- Oui!... oui!... affirma Vin Mod, que la colère prenait à voir le découragement du maître d’équipage, et l’on saura bien en profiter!... Et, si ce n’est pas aujourd’hui ni demain... plus tard... dans ces parages de la Papouasie... au milieu de ces archipels où la police ne vous gêne guère!... Une supposition, par exemple... l’armateur et quelques autres, le fils Gibson, deux ou trois matelots ne reviennent pas à bord un soir... On ignore ce qu’ils sont devenus... Le brick repart, n’est-ce pas?...”

Et ces criminelles pensées, Vin Mod, parlant à voix basse, les soufflait pour ainsi dire dans l’oreille de Flig Balt. Décidé à ne point le laisser faiblir, résolu à le pousser jusqu’au bout, il ne put retenir un formidable juron, lorsque le maître d’équipage lui envoya pour la troisième fois sa peu encourageante réponse:

“Des mots, tout ça... rien que des mots!”

Vin Mod lança encore un horrible juron qui, cette fois, se fit entendre jusque dans la salle du rouf. M. Gibson, se levant de table, parut à la porte de l’arrière.

“Qu’y a-t-il donc?... demanda-t-il.

- Rien, monsieur Gibson, répondit Flig Balt, une embardée qui a failli étaler Vin Mod sur le pont...

- J’ai cru que j’allais être envoyé par-dessus les bastingages!... ajouta le matelot.

- Le vent est vif, la mer dure, dit M. Gibson, après avoir examiné d’un rapide coup d’œil la voilure du brick.

- La brise tend à haler l’est, fit observer Flig Balt.

- En effet, arrive un peu, Mod... Il n’y a pas d’inconvénient à se rapprocher de terre.”

Puis, cet ordre donné et exécuté, M. Gibson rentra dans le rouf.

“Ah! murmura Vin Mod, si vous commandiez le James-Cook, maître Balt, au lieu de laisser porter, il loferait plutôt...

- Oui... mais je ne suis pas le capitaine! répondit Flig Balt, qui se dirigea vers l’avant.

- Il le sera, cependant, se répétait Vin Mod. Il faut qu’il le soit...quand je devrais être pendu!”

Durant cette journée, on vit moins de baleines que la veille, ce qui expliquait la rareté des baleiniers dans ces parages. C’est plutôt le long du littoral de l’est qu’on cherche à les amarrer, du côté d’Akaroa et de la baie des îles de Tawaï-Pounamou. Mais la mer n’était point déserte. Un certain nombre de caboteurs descendaient ou remontaient, abrités par la terre, à travers et au delà de la baie Taranaki.

Dans l’après-midi, toujours servi par une forte brise, ayant perdu de vue la cime du Whare-Orino, haut de deux mille pieds, dont la base trempe dans la mer, le James-Cook passa devant les ports de Kawhia et d’Aotca, où rentrait une flottille de bateaux de pêche qui ne pouvait plus tenir le large.

M. Gibson dut alors prendre un ris dans les huniers tout en conservant la misaine, la grande voile, la brigantine et les focs. Si la mer devenait plus dure, si le vent tournait à la tempête, il aurait toujours un refuge pour la nuit, puisque, vers six heures du soir, le bâtiment serait à l’ouvert d’Auckland.

Aussi préféra-t-il ne point s’écarter de sa route.

À supposer que le James-Cook eût été contraint de chercher un abri contre le mauvais temps du large, il l’aurait trouvé sans peine à Auckland. La baie, dont cette ville occupe le fond vers le nord, est l’une des plus sûres de cette partie du Pacifique. Lorsqu’un navire a franchi son étroit goulet entre les roches de Parera et le “Manukan hafen”, il navigue à l’intérieur d’une rade protégée sur tout son périmètre. Nulle nécessité même de gagner le port. Cette rade suffit, et des flottes y prendraient partout bon mouillage.

Avec de tels avantages pour le commerce maritime, on ne s’étonnera pas que la cité ait rapidement conquis une grande importance. En y comprenant ses faubourgs, elle compte environ soixante mille âmes. Étagée sur les collines du côté méridional de la baie, elle est très variée d’aspect. Superbement aménagée avec ses squares et ses jardins que décore la flore tropicale, ses rues larges et propres, bordées d’hôtels et de magasins, cette curieuse ville, industrielle et commerçante, peut exciter l’envie de Dunedin et de Wellington.

Si M. Gibson se fût réfugié dans son port, il y aurait rencontré cent navires en arrivage et en partance. En cette portion nord de la Nouvelle-Zélande, l’attraction des mines d’or se faisait moins sentir que sur la partie méridionale d’Ika-na-Maoui et surtout que dans les provinces de Tawaï-Pounamou. Là le brick eût pu sans trop de peine se débarrasser des recrues embarquées à Dunedin et les remplacer par quatre ou cinq matelots à choisir parmi ceux que le désarmement des navires laisse libres d’engagement. Il n’est pas moins douteux, tant il prisait peu Len Cannon et ses camarades, que le capitaine s’y fût décidé, au grand ennui de Flig Balt et de Vin Mod, s’il eût jeté l’ancre à Auckland.

Mais, pour éviter de nouveaux retards, il crut bon de rester sous petite voilure pendant toute la nuit. Quelquefois, même, il se mit en cape courante afin de faire tête aux lames de l’ouest et s’éloigner de la côte dont les feux lui paraissaient trop rapprochés sur tribord.

Bref, le James-Cook se comporta à merveille, grâce à l’habile manœuvrier qui le dirigeait. Il n’éprouva d’avaries sérieuses ni dans sa coque ni dans sa mâture.

Le lendemain 2 novembre, par un vent plus modéré et une mer plus maniable, le brick passait grand largue à l’ouvert d’une autre rade, plus vaste que celle d’Auckland, la rade de Kaipara, au fond de laquelle s’est fondé Port-Albert.

Enfin, vingt-quatre heures plus tard, car la brise avait notablement calmi, les hauteurs des Mannganni-Bluff, la baie Hokianga, la pointe Beef, le cap

Van Diemen, après un parcours de soixante-dix à quatre-vingts milles, restaient en arrière. On laissait sur la gauche les récifs des Three-Kings. La mer s'ouvrait librement devant l'étrave jusqu'au fouillis de ces archipels des Tonga, des Hébrides, des Salomon, qui sont compris entre l'Équateur et le Tropique du Capricorne.

Il n'y avait donc plus qu'à mettre le cap au nord-ouest sur les terres de la Nouvelle-Guinée, encore éloignée de dix-neuf cents milles, pour avoir connaissance des Louisiades, et, au-delà, des groupes actuellement entrés dans le domaine colonial de l'Allemagne.

Si le vent et la mer le favorisaient, M. Gibson comptait effectuer cette traversée dans le plus court délai. À remonter vers la ligne équinoxiale, les mauvais temps sont moins fréquents, moins redoutables que dans les parages de l'Australie et de la Nouvelle-Zélande.

D'autre part, il est vrai, un bâtiment est exposé à des calmes qui peuvent retarder pendant de longs jours la navigation à voile, alors qu'ils rendent si rapide et si sûre la navigation à vapeur. Mais celle-ci est trop coûteuse, et, quand il s'agit du grand et du petit cabotage en ces lointaines mers du Pacifique, mieux vaut user de la toile que de dépenser du charbon.

Quoi qu'il en soit, la brise, faible et intermittente, menaçait de réduire à deux ou trois milles à l'heure la vitesse du brick. Cependant il avait tout dessus, jusqu'à ses voiles d'étai, ses ailes de pigeon, ses bonnettes. Mais si le calme blanc survenait, calme sans un souffle qui puisse rider la surface de la mer, alors que les longues houles bercent un navire et ne le déplacent pas, tout son échafaudage de voilure ne lui servirait à rien. M. Gibson ne pourrait s'aider que des courants qui portent généralement vers le nord en cette portion du Pacifique.

Toutefois, le vent ne tomba pas complètement. Un grand soleil semblait mettre la mer en ébullition, comme si elle eût été surchauffée dans ses couches inférieures. Les hautes voiles se gonflaient et le James-Cook laissait un léger sillage derrière lui.

Et, dans la matinée, comme M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson et le capitaine causaient de ce dont il est si naturel de s’entretenir en cours de navigation, du temps qu’il fait et du temps qu’il fera, M. Gibson dit:

“Je ne crois pas que cela dure...

- Et pourquoi?... demanda l’armateur.

- Je vois à l’horizon certains nuages qui nous donneront bientôt du vent... ou je me trompe fort.

- Mais ils ne s’élèvent pas, ces nuages, fit observer M. Hawkins, ou, s’ils montent un peu, ils se dissipent...

- N’importe, mon ami, ils finiront par prendre corps, et les nuages, c’est de la brise...

- Qui nous serait favorable, ajouta Nat Gibson.

- Oh! fit le capitaine, nous n’avons pas besoin d’une brise à trois ris!... Seulement de quoi remplir nos bonnettes et arrondir nos basses voiles...

- Et que dit le baromètre?... demanda M. Hawkins.

- Il a une légère tendance à baisser, répondit Nat Gibson, après avoir consulté l’appareil placé dans la salle du rouf.

- Qu’il baisse donc, dit le capitaine, mais lentement, et ne fasse pas des bonds de singe qui grimpe puis dégringole sur son cocotier!... Si les calmes sont ennuyeux, les coups de vent sont redoutables, et je crois qu’il est, en somme, préférable...

- Je vais te dire ce qui serait préférable, Gibson, déclara M. Hawkins: ce serait d’avoir à bord une petite machine auxiliaire, quinze à vingt chevaux, par exemple... Cela servirait à faire de la route lorsqu’il n’y a plus un souffle dans l’espace, puis à entrer dans les ports et à en sortir...

- On s’en est passé jusqu’à présent, et l’on s’en passera longtemps encore, répondit le capitaine.

- C’est que tu es resté, mon ami, le marin de l’ancienne marine de commerce...

- En effet, Hawkins, et je ne suis pas pour ces navires mixtes!... S’ils sont bien construits pour la vapeur, ils sont mal construits pour la voile, et inversement...

- En tout cas, père, dit Nat Gibson, voici là-bas une fumée qu’il ne serait pas désagréable d’avoir en ce moment à notre bord.”

Le jeune homme montrait de la main un long panache noirâtre allongé au-dessus de l’horizon du nord-ouest. On ne pouvait le confondre avec un nuage. C’était la fumée d’un steamer qui marchait rapidement dans la direction du brick. Avant une heure les deux bâtiments seraient par le travers l’un de l’autre.

La rencontre d’un navire est toujours chose intéressante à la mer. On cherche à en reconnaître la nationalité par les formes de sa coque, la disposition de sa mâture, en attendant qu'il ait hissé son pavillon en signe de salut. Harry Gibson avait donc sa longue-vue aux yeux, et, une vingtaine de minutes après que le steamer eut été signalé, il se crut en mesure d'affirmer que c'était un français.

Il ne se trompait pas, et, alors que le bâtiment n'était plus qu'à deux milles du James-Cook, le pavillon tricolore monta à la corne de sa brigantine.

Le brick répondit aussitôt en arborant le pavillon du Royaume-Uni.

Ce steamer de huit à neuf cents tonneaux, très probablement un charbonnier, devait être à destination de l'un des ports de la Nouvelle-Hollande.

Vers onze heures et demie, il se trouvait à quelques encablures du brick, et il s'en approcha davantage, comme s'il avait l'intention de le "raisonner". Du reste, la mer très calme favorisait cette manœuvre, qui ne présentait aucun danger. À bord du bâtiment, on ne se préparait pas à mettre une embarcation à la mer et les demandes et réponses s'échangeraient au moyen du porte-voix, suivant l'usage.

Et voici ce qui fut dit entre le steamer et le brick, en anglais:

"Le nom du navire?...

- James-Cook, d'Hobart-Town.

- Capitaine?...

- Capitaine Gibson.

- Entendu.

- Et vous?...

- L’Assomption, de Nantes, capitaine Foucault.

- Vous allez?

- À Sydney, Australie.

- Entendu.

- Et vous?...

- À Port-Praslin, Nouvelle-Irlande.

- Et vous venez d’Auckland?...

- Non, de Wellington.

- Entendu.

- Et vous?...

- D’Amboine des Moluques.

- Bonne navigation?...

- Bonne... Un renseignement. À Amboine, on est très inquiet de la goélette Wilhelmina, de Rotterdam, qui devait être arrivée depuis un mois, venant d’Auckland. Vous n’en avez eu aucune nouvelle?...

- Aucune.

- J’ai fait route par l’ouest à travers la mer de Corail, déclara le capitaine Foucault, et je ne l’ai pas rencontrée... Est-ce que vous comptez chercher par l’est la Nouvelle-Irlande?...

- C’est notre intention.

- Il est possible que la Wilhelmina se trouve désemparée à la suite de quelque tempête...

- Possible, en effet.

- On vous prie de veiller en traversant ces parages...

- Nous veillerons.

- Et, maintenant, bon voyage, capitaine Gibson.

- Bon voyage, capitaine Foucault!”

Une heure après, le James-Cook, qui avait perdu de vue le steamer, remontait cap au nord-nord-ouest, en se dirigeant vers l’île Norfolk.

VI - En vue de l’île Norfolk

Un quadrilatère presque régulier sur trois de ses côtés, dont le littoral s’arrondit, se relève et modifie vers le nord-ouest la régularité; à ses quatre angles les pointes Howe, Nord-Est, Rocs et Rochy; plus excentriquement un pic, le Pitt-Mount, qui dresse sa cime à environ onze cents pieds d’altitude: telle est la figure géométrique de l’île Norfolk, située en ces parages du Pacifique par 29° 02’ de latitude sud et 105° 42’ de longitude est.

Cette île n’a que six lieues de périmètre, et de même que toutes ses pareilles de ce vaste océan, elle est entourée d’un anneau de corail qui la défend comme une muraille défend une ville forte. Les houles du large ne rongeront jamais sa base de craie jaunâtre qu’un léger ressac suffirait à détruire, puisque les lames se brisent contre les roches coralligènes avant de l’atteindre. Aussi les navires ne peuvent-ils que difficilement l’accoster en se glissant à travers d’étroites et dangereuses passes, exposés à toutes les surprises des tourbillons et des remous. De port, proprement dit, il n’en existe pas à Norfolk. C’est au sud seulement, dans la baie Sydney, que des pénitenciers furent établis. Par sa situation isolée, par la difficulté d’y débarquer, par la difficulté d’en sortir, il semble, en effet, que la nature ait destiné cette île à n’être qu’une prison.

Il convient même d’observer qu’au sud, dans la direction des îlots Nepcan et Philips, qui complètent le petit groupe Norfolk, ces récifs de corail se prolongent jusqu’à six ou sept lieues du littoral.

C’est pourtant, en ses dimensions restreintes, une riche parcelle du domaine colonial de la Grande-Bretagne. Lorsque Cook la découvrit en 1774, il fut tout d’abord frappé de son admirable végétation sous ce climat à la fois doux et chaud des tropiques.

On eût dit une corbeille détachée des campagnes de la Nouvelle-Zélande, ornée de plantes identiques. Là se multiplie un lin de qualité supérieure, le “phormium tenax”, et une sorte de pin de toute beauté appartenant au genre des araucarias. Puis, à perte de vue s’étendent des plaines verdoyantes où poussent sans culture l’oseille sauvage et le fenouil. Déjà, au commencement du siècle, le gouvernement britannique avait transporté dans l’île une colonie de convicts. Grâce au travail de ces malheureux, des défrichements s’effectuèrent, des travaux agricoles furent entrepris et le rendement du maïs devint tel que les boisseaux s’y comptèrent par milliers. Il y avait là comme un grenier d’abondance, placé entre l’Australie et la Nouvelle-Zélande. Mais trop de récifs et de brisants en occupent les approches, empêchant d’y puiser dans des conditions pratiques.

Aussi rétablissement pénitentiaire, en présence de ces obstacles, dut être une première fois abandonné. Il est vrai que, sur cette île, on pouvait si aisément tenir sous un joug de fer les plus endurcis criminels de la Tasmanie et de la Nouvelle-Galles, que la colonie pénale fut réorganisée. Elle compta jusqu’à cinq cents convicts surveillés par cent vingt-quatre militaires, et une administration de cent cinquante employés. Une ferme publique y fut créée, mise en valeur, et la récolte du maïs assura la consommation en céréales.

Du reste, l’île Norfolk était inhabitée à l’époque où le grand navigateur en détermina la situation géographique. Aucun indigène, maori ou malais, n’y avait été attiré malgré les richesses du sol. Elle n’eut jamais d’autre population que ces condamnés introduits par le gouvernement britannique.

Déserte elle était au temps de sa découverte, et déserte elle est redevenue. En 1842, pour la seconde et, sans doute, la dernière fois, l'Angleterre abandonna cet établissement pénitentiaire, qui fut transporté à Port-Arthur, sur la côte méridionale de la Tasmanie.

Quatre jours après avoir perdu de vue les extrêmes pointes de la Nouvelle-Zélande, le James-Cook eut connaissance de l'île Norfolk. Avec un vent moyen, il avait fait quatre-vingts milles pendant la journée du 2, cent vingt pendant la journée du 3, autant pendant la journée du 4 et, la brise ayant molli, seulement soixante-dix pendant la journée du 5. Vers le soir, il avait donc franchi la distance de quatre cents milles environ qui sépare les deux îles.

Dans l'après-midi, la vigie signala une hauteur qui se dessinait dans le nord-est. C'était la cime du Pitt-Mount, et, vers cinq heures, le bâtiment se tenait par le travers de la pointe nord-est de l'île Norfolk.

Au cours de cette navigation, M. Gibson avait fait attentivement surveiller cette partie du Pacifique. Aucune épave ne s'était rencontrée sur la route du James-Cook, et le mystère de la disparition du navire hollandais Wilhelmina restait toujours à découvrir.

À mesure que le soleil déclinait derrière les hauteurs de l'île, le vent tombait, la mer prenait une apparence laiteuse, les rides disparaissaient de sa surface à peine gonflée par la longue houle. Assurément, le jour revenu, le brick serait encore en vue de l'île. Il n'en était qu'à deux milles et, par prudence, il évitait de s'en approcher davantage, car les bancs de coraux s'allongent dangereusement au large. D'ailleurs, le James-Cook était presque aussi immobile que s'il eût été mouillé sur son ancre.

Aucun courant ne le déplaçait; les voiles pendaient sur leurs cargues en gros plis. Si la brise se levait, il n’y aurait qu’à les laisser retomber pour faire route.

M. Gibson et ses passagers n’avaient donc qu’à jouir de cette soirée magnifique sous un ciel pur de toute vapeur.

Après le dîner, M. Hawkins, le capitaine et M. Gibson vinrent s’asseoir à l’arrière.

“Nous voici en calme blanc, dit M. Gibson, et, par malheur, je ne découvre aucun symptôme qui puisse indiquer le retour de la brise.

- Cela ne saurait durer, à mon avis, fit observer M. Hawkins.

- Et pourquoi?... demanda le capitaine.

- Parce que nous ne sommes pas en pleine saison chaude, Gibson, et le Pacifique n’a point la réputation de justifier le nom qui lui a été donné un peu à la légère...

- J’en conviens, mon ami. Toutefois, même à cette époque, des navires restent enchaînés plusieurs jours, et cela arriverait au James-Cook que je n’en serais pas autrement surpris.

- Très heureusement, répliqua l’armateur, nous ne sommes plus au temps où l’île Norfolk renfermait une population de bandits... Alors il n’eût pas été prudent de stationner dans son voisinage.

- En effet, et il y aurait eu lieu de veiller avec grand soin.

- Dans mon enfance, reprit M. Hawkins, j’ai entendu parler de ces forcenés qu’aucun châtiment, aucune discipline des maisons de correction n’avaient pu réduire, et dont le gouvernement s’était avisé de transporter toute une colonie à l’île Norfolk...

- Ils devaient y être bien gardés, d’une part, dit Nat Gibson, et, de l’autre, comment s’enfuir d’une île dont les navires ne sauraient s’approcher?...

- Bien gardés... oui, ils l’étaient, mon cher enfant, répondit M. Hawkins. Fuite difficile, oui encore!... Mais, pour des criminels qui ne reculent devant rien quand il s’agit de recouvrer leur liberté, tout est possible, même ce qui ne paraît pas l’être.

- Y a-t-il donc eu de fréquentes évasions, monsieur Hawkins?...

- Oui, Nat, et même incroyables! Ou les convicts parvenaient à s’emparer de quelque embarcation de l’État, ou ils en construisaient secrètement avec des lambeaux d’écorce, et ils n’hésitaient pas à gagner le large...

- Ayant quatre-vingt-dix chances sur cent de périr, déclara M. Gibson.

- Sans doute, répondit M. Hawkins. Aussi, lorsqu’ils rencontraient dans les eaux de l’île quelque navire comme le nôtre, ils avaient bientôt fait de sauter à bord et de se débarrasser de l’équipage... Puis ils s’en allaient pirater à travers les archipels polynésiens, où il n’était pas aisé de retrouver leurs traces...

- Enfin, cela n’est plus à craindre maintenant”, affirma le capitaine Gibson.

On le remarquera, tout ce que venait de dire M. Hawkins, et ce qui était vrai, coïncidait avec les projets formés par Flig Balt et Vin Mod. Bien qu’ils ne fussent pas enfermés à l’île Norfolk, ils avaient les criminels instincts des convicts; ils ne demandaient qu’à faire ce que ceux-ci eussent fait à leur place, à changer l’honnête brick de la maison Hawkins, de Hobart-Town, en un bâtiment de pirates, puis à exercer leurs brigandages précisément au milieu des parages du Pacifique central, où il est si difficile de les réprimer.

Donc, si le James-Cook n’avait plus rien à redouter actuellement aux approches de l’île Norfolk, puisque le pénitencier avait été transporté à Port-Arthur, il n’en était pas moins menacé par la présence des recrues de Dunedin, résolues à seconder les desseins de Vin Mod et du maître d’équipage.

“Eh bien, dit alors Nat Gibson, il n’y a pas de danger, père, me permets-tu de prendre le canot?...

- Et que veux-tu faire?...

- Pêcher au pied des roches... Nous avons encore deux heures de jour... C’est le bon moment, et je serai toujours en vue du brick.”

Il n’y avait aucun inconvénient à satisfaire le désir du jeune homme. Deux matelots et lui suffiraient pour tendre des lignes à l’accore des bancs de corail. Ces eaux étant très poissonneuses, ils ne reviendraient pas sans avoir fait bonne pêche.

D’ailleurs, M. Gibson crut devoir mouiller à cette place. Le courant portant plutôt vers le sud-est, il envoya son ancre avec trente-cinq brasses de chaîne sur un fond de sable.

Le canot paré, Hobbes et Wickley se disposèrent à accompagner Nat Gibson. C’étaient, on ne l’ignore pas, deux honnêtes marins auxquels le capitaine pouvait se fier.

“Va donc, Nat, dit-il à son fils, et ne t’attarde pas jusqu’à la nuit...

- Je te le promets, père.

- Et rapporte-nous une bonne friture pour le déjeuner de demain, ajouta M. Hawkins... et aussi un peu de brise, s’il en reste encore sur la côte!”

L’embarcation déborda et, sous la vigoureuse poussée des avirons, elle eut bientôt franchi les deux milles qui séparaient le brick des premières roches coralligènes.

Des lignes furent mises dehors, Nat Gibson n’avait pas eu besoin de lancer son grappin sur les récifs. Pas de courant, pas même de ressac. Le canot demeura stationnaire, dès que les avirons eurent été rentrés.

Du côté de l’île, les bancs s’étendaient à un demi-mille environ, et, par conséquent, moins que dans le sud, direction des îles Philips, et bien que la côte ne fût plus éclairée par le soleil, que cachaient les masses du Pitt-Mount, le regard en pouvait distinguer les détails:

étroites grèves entre les roches de calcaire jaunâtre, criques fermées, pointes rocheuses, nombreux rios s’écoulant vers la mer, et on les compte par milliers à travers les épaisses forêts et les verdoyantes plaines de l’île. Tout ce littoral était absolument désert. Pas une cabane sous les arbres, pas une fumée se dégageant des frondaisons, pas une pirogue mouillée au revers des pointes ou tirée sur le sable.

L’animation de la vie ne manquait pas cependant à la région comprise entre la crête des bancs et la terre. Mais elle était uniquement due à la présence des oiseaux aquatiques, qui emplissaient l’air de leurs cris discordants, corbeaux à duvet blanchâtre, coucals à plumage vert, martins-pêcheurs dont le corps est couleur d’aigue-marine, stournes aux yeux de rubis, hirondelles de mer, échenilleurs, gobe-mouches, sans parler des frégates qui passaient à tire-d’aile.

Si Nat Gibson eût apporté son fusil, il aurait fait quelques beaux coups, en pure perte, il est vrai, car ce gibier n’est point comestible. Mieux valait, en prévision du prochain repas, demander à la mer ce que l’air ne pouvait donner, et, en somme, elle se montra généreuse.

Après une heure au pied des bancs, le canot était en mesure de rapporter de quoi nourrir l’équipage pendant deux jours. Le poisson abonde au milieu de ces eaux claires, dont les fonds se hérissent de plantes marines, sous lesquelles fourmillent les crustacés, les mollusques, les coquillages, langoustes, crabes, palémons, crevettes, tridaines, scarabes, hélives, ovules, patelles, et il faut qu’il soit inépuisable, puisque les amphibies, phoques et autres, en font une énorme consommation.

Parmi les poissons que prirent les lignes et qui présentent une extraordinaire variété d’espèces, rivalisant par l’éclat de leurs couleurs, Nat Gibson et les deux matelots purent ramener plusieurs couples de blennies.

Le blennie est un animal bizarre, yeux ouverts au sommet de la tête, mâchoires jugulées, couleur gris de lin, qui vit dans l’eau, court les grèves et saute sur les roches avec des mouvements de sarigue ou de kangourou.

Il était sept heures. Le soleil venait de disparaître, et sa dernière lueur empourprée s’éteignait à la pointe de Pitt-Mount.

“Monsieur Nat, dit Wickley, n’est-il pas temps de retourner à bord?...

- C’est prudent, ajouta Hobbes. Il se lève parfois, le soir, une petite brise de terre, et, si le brick peut en profiter, il ne faut pas le faire attendre.

- Rentrez les lignes, répondit le jeune homme, et retournons au James-Cook. Mais je crains bien de ne point rapporter à M. Hawkins le vent qu’il m’a commandé...

- Non, déclara Hobbes, pas de quoi remplir un béret!...

- Du côté du large, aucun nuage ne se lève... ajouta Wickley.

- Débordons...”, ordonna Nat Gibson.

Mais, avant de s’éloigner du banc, il se leva à l’arrière de l’embarcation et parcourut du regard toute la bordure des récifs qui s’arrondissait autour de la pointe du nord-est. La disparition de la goélette dont on n’avait plus de nouvelles lui revenait à l’esprit... N’apercevrait-il pas quelque débris de la Wilhelmina, quelque épave que les courants auraient portée vers l’île?... Ne pouvait-il se faire que, la coque du bâtiment n’ayant pas été entièrement démolie, une partie de la carcasse fût encore visible au nord ou au sud de la pointe?...

Aussi les deux matelots observèrent-ils la côte sur une étendue de plusieurs milles.

Ce fut inutilement. Ils ne virent aucun reste de la goélette signalée par le steamer.

Wickley et Hobbes allaient donc se mettre aux avirons, lorsque, sur une des roches détachées du littoral, Nat Gibson crut distinguer une forme humaine. Comme il s’en trouvait à une distance d’environ un mille, et au moment où le crépuscule commençait à obscurcir l’horizon, il se demanda s’il faisait ou non erreur. Était-ce un homme que l’arrivée du canot avait attiré sur le rivage?... Cet homme n’agitait-il pas les bras pour appeler du secours?... Il était à peu près impossible de se prononcer.

“Voyez”, dit Nat Gibson aux deux matelots.

Wickley et Hobbes regardèrent en cette direction.

À cet instant, l’ombre envahissant cette portion du littoral, la forme humaine, si forme humaine il y avait, disparut.

“Je n’ai rien vu... dit Wickley.

- Ni moi... déclara Hobbes.

- Cependant, reprit Nat Gibson, je crois bien ne pas m’être trompé... Un homme était là... tout à l’heure...

- Vous croyez avoir aperçu un homme?... demanda Wickley.

- Oui... là... au sommet de cette roche, et il faisait des gestes... Il devait même appeler... mais sa voix ne pouvait parvenir jusqu’ici...

- On rencontre souvent des phoques sur ces grèves au coucher du soleil, observa Hobbes, et, lorsqu’un d’eux se dresse, on peut le confondre avec un homme...

- J’en conviens, répondit Nat Gibson, et, à cette distance... il est possible que j’aie mal vu...

- Est-ce que l’île Norfolk est habitée maintenant?... demanda Hobbes.

- Non, répondit le jeune homme. Elle ne renferme pas d’indigènes... Cependant des naufragés peuvent avoir été contraints d’y chercher refuge...

- Et, s’il y a là des naufragés, ajouta Wickley, seraient-ce ceux de la Wilhelmina?...

- À bord! commanda Nat Gibson. Il est probable que demain le brick sera encore à cette place, et, avec nos longues-vues, nous parcourrons le littoral, qui sera en pleine lumière au lever du jour.”

Les deux matelots appuyèrent sur les avirons. En vingt minutes, le canot eut rallié le James-Cook. Puis, le capitaine, se défiant toujours d’une partie de son équipage, eut soin de faire remonter l’embarcation à son poste.

La pêche fut bien accueillie par M. Hawkins, et, comme il s’intéressait à l’histoire naturelle, il put à loisir étudier ces blennies, dont il n’avait jamais eu aucun échantillon entre les mains.

Nat Gibson fit part à son père de ce qu’il croyait avoir aperçu au moment où il se déhalait des bancs de corail.

Le capitaine et l’armateur prêtèrent grande attention au récit du jeune homme. Ils n’ignoraient pas que, depuis l’abandon de l’île comme lieu de détention, elle devait être déserte, et les indigènes des archipels voisins, Australiens, Maoris ou Papouas, n’avaient jamais eu la pensée de s’y fixer.

“Il est possible, toutefois, que des pêcheurs soient sur ces parages, fit remarquer Flig Balt, qui prenait part à la conversation.

- En effet, répondit l’armateur, et ce ne serait pas étonnant à cette époque de l’année...

- Est-ce que tu as vu quelque embarcation en dedans des récifs?... demanda le capitaine à son fils.

- Aucune, père.

- Je pense alors, reprit le maître d’équipage, que M. Nat se sera trompé... La soirée était déjà sombre... Donc, à mon avis, capitaine, si le vent se lève cette nuit, nous ferions bien d’appareiller.”

On le comprend, Flig Balt, déjà très contrarié de la présence de M. Hawkins et de Nat Gibson à bord du brick, ne devait rien craindre tant que l’embarquement de nouveaux passagers. En ces conditions, il serait contraint de renoncer à ses projets - ce qu’il n’entendait pas faire. Ses complices et lui étaient formellement résolus à s’emparer du navire avant son arrivée à la Nouvelle-Irlande.

“Cependant, reprit le capitaine, si Nat n’a point commis une erreur, s’il y a des naufragés sur cette côte de Norfolk, - et pourquoi ne seraient-ce pas ceux de la Wilhelmina?... - il faut leur porter secours... Je croirais manquer à mes devoirs d’homme et de marin si je remettais à la voile avant de m’être assuré...

- Tu as raison, Gibson, approuva M. Hawkins. Mais, j’y songe, cet homme que Nat a cru apercevoir ne serait-il pas plutôt quelque convict échappé du pénitencier et resté sur l’île?...

- Alors, cet homme aurait grand âge, répondit le capitaine, car l’évacuation date de 1842, et s’il était déjà au bagne à cette époque, puisque nous sommes en 1885, il serait plus que septuagénaire!...

- Tu as raison, Gibson, et j’en reviendrai plutôt à l’idée que les naufragés de la goélette hollandaise ont pu être jetés sur Norfolk, si toutefois Nat ne s’est pas trompé...

- Non... non! affirma le jeune homme.

- Alors, dit M. Hawkins, ces pauvres gens se trouveraient là depuis une quinzaine de jours, car il est probable que le naufrage ne remonte pas à une date plus éloignée...

- Oui, d’après ce que nous a déclaré le capitaine de l’Assomption, répondit M. Gibson. Aussi, demain, ferons-nous tout ce que nous pouvons faire, tout ce que nous devons faire... Si, comme Nat n’en doute pas, un homme se trouve sur cette partie de la côte, il restera jusqu’au jour à observer le brick, et, malgré la distance, nous le verrons avec nos lunettes...

- Mais, capitaine, insista le maître d’équipage, je le répète, peut-être que la brise, une brise favorable, se lèvera la nuit...

- Qu’elle se lève ou non, Balt, le James-Cook demeurera sur son ancre, et nous n’appareillerons pas sans avoir envoyé un canot en reconnaissance... Je ne quitterai l’île Norfolk qu’après avoir visité les environs d’East-North-Point, dussions-nous y consacrer une journée...

- Bien, père, et, cette journée, j’ai la conviction qu’elle ne sera pas perdue...

- N’est-ce pas ton avis, Hawkins? demanda le capitaine en se retournant vers l’armateur.

- Absolument”, répondit M. Hawkins.

Et, en vérité, il n’y aurait pas même eu à féliciter M. Gibson de sa résolution. Agir de la sorte, n’était-ce pas remplir un devoir d’humanité?...

Lorsque Flig Balt eut regagné l’avant, il raconta à Vin Mod ce qui venait d’être dit et ce qui venait d’être décidé. Le matelot ne fut pas plus satisfait que le maître d’équipage.

Après tout, peut-être Nat Gibson s’était-il trompé... Peut-être même aucun des naufragés de la Wilhelmina ne s’était-il réfugié sur cette côte... La question serait tranchée avant une douzaine d’heures.

La nuit arriva, nuit assez obscure, nuit de nouvelle lune. Un rideau de hautes brumes voilait les constellations. Néanmoins, la terre se montrait confusément dans l’ouest, une masse un peu plus sombre au pied de cet horizon.

Vers neuf heures, une légère brise provoqua quelques clapotis autour du James-Cook, qui évolua d’un quart sur son ancre. Cette brise eût pu servir à gagner le nord, puisqu’elle halait le sud-ouest. Mais le capitaine ne revint point sur sa détermination, et le brick resta au mouillage.

D’ailleurs, ce n’étaient que des souffles intermittents qui effleuraient la crête du Pitt-Mount, et la mer retomba au calme.

M. Hawkins, M. Gibson et son fils étaient assis à l’arrière. Peu pressés de rentrer dans leurs cabines, ils aspiraient l’air plus frais du soir, après les chaleurs du jour.

Or, il était neuf heures vingt-cinq, lorsque Nat Gibson, se relevant et regardant du côté de la terre, fit quelques pas à bâbord:

“Un feu!... il y a un feu!... dit-il.

- Un feu?... répéta l’armateur.

- Oui, monsieur Hawkins.

- Et dans quelle direction?...

- Dans la direction de la roche où j’ai aperçu l’homme...

- En effet, déclara le capitaine.

- Vous voyez bien que je n’avais point fait erreur!” s’écria Nat Gibson.

Un feu brillait de ce côté, un feu de bois qui donnait de grandes flammes au milieu de tourbillons d’une fumée épaisse.

“Gibson, affirma M. Hawkins, c’est bien un signal qu’on nous fait...

- Pas de doute!... répondit le capitaine. Il y a des naufragés sur l’île!”

Des naufragés ou autres, mais assurément des êtres humains qui demandaient secours; et quelle anxiété ils devaient éprouver, et quelle crainte que ce brick n’eût déjà levé l’ancre!...

Il convenait donc de les rassurer, et c’est ce qui fut fait à l’instant.

“Nat, dit-il, prends ton fusil, et réponds à ce signal.”

Le jeune homme rentra dans le rouf et en ressortit avec une carabine.

Trois détonations éclatèrent, dont le littoral renvoya les échos au James-Cook.

En même temps, un des matelots agita par trois fois un fanal, qui fut hissé en tête du mât de misaine.

Il n’y avait plus maintenant qu’à attendre le retour de l’aube, et le James-Cook se mettrait en communication avec ce point de l’île Norfolk.

VII - Les deux frères

Au lever de l’aube, une brumaille assez dense couvrait l’horizon de l’ouest. Du littoral de l’île Norfolk on distinguait à peine la ligne rocheuse. Sans doute, ces vapeurs ne tarderaient pas à se dissiper. La cime du Pitt-Mount se montrait au-dessus de ce brouillard, déjà baignée des rayons du soleil.

Au surplus, le ou les naufragés ne devaient pas être inquiets. Bien que le brick fût encore invisible, n’avaient-ils pas entendu et aperçu pendant la nuit ses signaux en réponse aux leurs?... Le navire ne pouvait avoir quitté son mouillage, et, dans une heure, son canot serait envoyé à terre.

Du reste, avant de mettre une embarcation à la mer, M. Gibson préférait, non sans raison, que la pointe se fût dégagée des brumes. C’était là que le feu avait été allumé, c’était là que se montreraient les abandonnés qui réclamaient l’assistance du James-Cook. Évidemment, ils ne possédaient pas même une pirogue, car ils seraient déjà venus à bord.

La brise du sud-est commençait à s’établir. Quelques nuages, allongés sur la ligne du ciel et de l’eau, indiquaient que le vent fraîchirait dans la matinée. Sans le motif qui le retenait sur son ancre, M. Gibson eût donné des ordres pour l’appareillage.

Un peu avant sept heures, le pied du banc coralligène, le long duquel écumait un ressac blanchâtre, se dessina sous la brume. Les volutes de vapeurs roulèrent les unes après les autres, et la pointe apparut.

Nat Gibson, monté sur le rouf, sa longue-vue aux yeux, la promenait vers la côte. Il fut le premier à s’écrier:

“Il est là... ou plutôt... ils sont là!...

- Plusieurs hommes?... demanda l’armateur.

- Deux, monsieur Hawkins.”

Celui-ci prit la longue-vue à son tour:

“Oui, s’écria-t-il, et ils nous font des signaux... en agitant un morceau de toile au bout d’un bâton!”

L’instrument passa aux mains du capitaine, qui constata la présence de deux individus debout sur les dernières roches à l’extrémité de la pointe. Le brouillard, dissous alors, permettait de les distinguer même à l’œil nu. Qu’il y eût là celui des deux hommes que Nat Gibson avait aperçu la veille, cela ne pouvait plus faire l’objet d’un doute.

“Le grand canot à la mer!” commanda le capitaine.

Et, en même temps, par son ordre, Flig Balt hissa le pavillon britannique à la corne de brigantine en réponse aux signaux.

Si M. Gibson avait dit de parer le grand canot, c’était en cas qu’il y eût à embarquer plus de deux personnes. Il était possible, en effet, que d’autres naufragés se fussent réfugiés sur l’île, en admettant qu’ils appartinssent à l’équipage de la Wilhelmina. Il y avait même lieu de souhaiter que tous eussent gagné cette côte après avoir abandonné la goélette.

L’embarcation descendue, le capitaine et son fils y prirent place, celui-ci à la barre. Quatre matelots se mirent aux avirons. Vin Mod était parmi eux, et, au moment où il enjambait la lisse, il fit au maître d’équipage un geste qui témoignait de son irritation.

Le canot se dirigea vers le banc de corail. La veille, en pêchant le long de ce banc, Nat Gibson avait remarqué une étroite ouverture qui permettrait de franchir la barrière des récifs.

Jusqu’à la pointe il ne resterait plus qu’une distance de sept à huit encablures.

En moins d’un quart d’heure, l’embarcation atteignit la passe. On aperçut les dernières fumées du foyer qui avait été entretenu toute la nuit et près duquel se tenaient les deux hommes.

À l’avant du canot, Vin Mod, impatient, se retournait pour les voir, si bien qu’il entravait le mouvement des avirons.

“Attention à nager, Mod!... lui cria le capitaine. Tu auras le temps de satisfaire ta curiosité quand nous serons à terre...

- Oui... le temps!” murmura le matelot, qui, de rage, aurait cassé son aviron.

La passe sinuait entre les têtes de coraux qu’il eût été dangereux d’aborder. Ces arêtes aiguës, coupantes comme acier, eussent vite fait d’endommager la coque d’une embarcation. Aussi M. Gibson ordonna-t-il de modérer la vitesse. Il n’y eut, d’ailleurs, aucune difficulté à rallier l’extrémité de la pointe. La mer, qui sentait la brise du large, poussait l’embarcation. Un assez fort ressac écumait à la base des roches.

Le capitaine et son fils regardaient les deux hommes. La main dans la main, immobiles, silencieux, ils ne faisaient pas un geste, ils ne proféraient pas un cri. Lorsque le canot évolua pour ranger la pointe, Vin Mod put facilement les apercevoir.

L’un devait être âgé de trente-cinq ans, l’autre de trente. Vêtus d’habits en lambeaux, tête nue, rien n’indiquait qu’ils fussent des marins. À peu près de même taille, ils se ressemblaient assez pour que l’on pût reconnaître en eux deux frères, blonds de cheveux, barbe inculte.

En tout cas, ce n’étaient point des indigènes polynésiens.

Et alors, avant même que le débarquement fut effectué, lorsque le capitaine était encore assis sur le banc d’arrière, le plus âgé de ces deux hommes s’avança à l’extrémité de la pointe, et en anglais, mais avec un accent étranger, il cria:

“Merci pour être venus à notre secours... merci!

- Qui êtes-vous?... demanda M. Gibson dès qu’il accosta.

- Des Hollandais.

- Naufragés?...

- Naufragés de la goélette Wilhelmina...

- Seuls sauvés?...

- Seuls, ou du moins, après le naufrage, seuls arrivés sur cette côte...”

Au ton suspensif de ces derniers mots, il fut évident que cet homme ignorait s’il avait trouvé refuge sur un continent ou sur une île.

Le grappin du canot fut envoyé à terre, et, quand un des matelots l’eut ajusté dans un creux de roche, M. Gibson et ses compagnons débarquèrent.

“Où sommes-nous?... demanda le plus âgé.

- À l’île Norfolk, répondit le capitaine.

- L’île Norfolk”, répéta le plus jeune.

Les naufragés apprenaient alors en quel endroit ils se trouvaient: une île isolée de cette portion de l’ouest du Pacifique. Ils y étaient seuls, d’ailleurs, de tous ceux que la goélette hollandaise comptait à son bord.

Sur la question de savoir ce qu’était devenue la Wilhelmina, si elle avait péri corps et biens, ils ne purent répondre d’une façon formelle à l’interrogatoire de M. Gibson. Quant aux causes du naufrage, voici ce qu’ils racontèrent:

Quinze jours avant, la goélette avait été abordée pendant la nuit, - ce devait être à trois ou quatre milles dans l’est de l’île Norfolk.

“En sortant de notre cabine, dit l’aîné des deux frères, nous avons été entraînés dans un tourbillon... La nuit était obscure et brumeuse... Nous nous sommes accrochés à une cage à poules qui, heureusement, passait à notre portée... Trois heures après, le courant nous portait au banc de corail et nous avons gagné cette côte à la nage...

- Ainsi, demanda M. Gibson, voilà deux semaines que vous êtes sur l’île?...

- Deux semaines.

- Et vous n’y avez rencontré personne?...

- Personne, répondit le plus jeune, et nous sommes fondés à croire qu’il n’y a pas un être humain sur cette terre, ou, du moins, que cette partie du littoral est inhabitée.

- Vous n’avez pas eu la pensée de remonter vers l’intérieur?... dit Nat Gibson.

- Si, répondit l’aîné, mais il eût fallu s’aventurer à travers des forêts épaisses, au risque de s’y perdre, et dans lesquelles nous n’aurions peut-être pas trouvé à subsister.

- Et puis, reprit l’autre, où cela nous aurait-il conduits puisque, vous venez de nous l’apprendre, nous étions sur une île déserte?... Mieux valait encore ne point abandonner le rivage... C’eût été renoncer à toute chance d’être aperçus, si un navire venait en vue, et d’être sauvés, comme nous le sommes...

- Vous avez eu raison.

- Et ce brick... quel est-il?... demanda le plus jeune frère.

- Le brick anglais James-Cook.

- Et son capitaine?...

- C’est moi, répondit M. Gibson.

- Eh bien, capitaine, dit l’aîné en serrant la main de M. Gibson, vous voyez que nous avons bien fait de vous attendre sur cette pointe!”

En effet, à contourner la base du Pitt-Mount, ou même à vouloir atteindre sa cime, les naufragés, éprouvant des difficultés insurmontables, seraient tombés d’épuisement et de fatigue au milieu des infranchissables forêts de l’intérieur.

“Mais comment avez-vous pu vivre dans ces conditions de dénuement?... reprit alors M. Gibson.

- Notre nourriture consistait en quelques produits végétaux, répondit l’aîné, des racines déterrées çà et là, des choux-palmistes coupés à la tête des arbres, de l’oseille sauvage, du laiteron et du fenouil marin, des pommes de pin de l’araucaria... Si nous avions eu des lignes ou pu en fabriquer, il n’aurait pas été difficile de se procurer du poisson, car il abonde au pied des roches...

- Et du feu?... Comment avez-vous pu en faire?...

- Les premiers jours, répondit le plus jeune, il a fallu s’en passer... Pas d’allumettes, ou plutôt des allumettes mouillées et hors d’usage... Par bonheur, en remontant vers la montagne, nous avons trouvé une solfatare qui jette encore quelques flammes... Des couches de soufre l’entouraient, ce qui nous a permis de cuire les racines et les légumes.

- Et c’est ainsi, reprit le capitaine, que vous avez vécu pendant quinze jours?...

- C’est ainsi, capitaine.

Mais, je l’avoue, nos forces s’en allaient, et nous étions désespérés, lorsque, en revenant hier de la solfatare, j’ai aperçu un navire mouillé à deux milles de la côte.

- Le vent avait refusé, dit M. Gibson, et comme le courant menaçait de nous ramener vers le sud-est, je fus obligé de jeter l’ancre.

- Il était déjà tard, reprit l’aîné. À peine restait-il une heure de jour, et nous étions encore à plus d’une demi-lieue dans l’intérieur... Après avoir couru à toutes jambes vers la pointe, nous aperçûmes un canot qui se préparait à regagner le brick... J’ai appelé... J’ai, par gestes, réclamé secours...

- J’étais dans ce canot, dit alors Nat Gibson, et il m’a bien semblé voir un homme - rien qu’un - sur cette roche, au moment où l’obscurité commençait à se faire...

- C’était moi, répondit l’aîné. J’avais dévancé mon frère... et quelle fut ma déception lorsque le canot s’éloigna sans que j’eusse été aperçu!... Nous avons cru que toute chance de salut nous échappait!... Il se levait un peu de brise... Le brick n’allait-il pas appareiller pendant la nuit?... Le lendemain ne serait-il pas déjà au large de l’île?...

- Pauvres gens!... murmura M. Gibson.

- La côte était plongée dans l’ombre, capitaine... On ne voyait plus rien du navire... Les heures s’écoulaient... C’est alors que nous vint l’idée d’allumer un feu sur la pointe... Des herbes desséchées, du bois sec, nous en apportâmes par brassées, et des charbons ardents du foyer que nous entretenions sur cette grève... Bientôt s’éleva une lueur éclatante... Si le bâtiment était toujours à son mouillage, elle ne pouvait échapper à la vue des hommes de quart!...

Ah! quelle joie, lorsque, vers dix heures, nous entendîmes une triple détonation!... Un fanal brilla dans la direction du brick!... Nous avions été vus... Nous étions sûrs maintenant que le navire attendrait le jour avant de partir, et que nous serions recueillis dès l’aube... Mais il était temps, capitaine, oui!... il était temps, et, comme à votre arrivée, je vous répète: Merci... merci!...”

Visiblement les naufragés paraissaient être à bout: alimentation insuffisante, forces épuisées, dénuement complet sous les haillons qui les recouvraient à peine, et l'on comprendra qu'ils eussent hâte d'être à bord du James-Cook.

“Embarquez... dit M. Gibson. Vous avez besoin de nourriture et de vêtements... Puis, nous verrons ce que nous pourrons faire.”

Les survivants de la Wilhelmina n'avaient point à retourner sur le littoral. On leur fournirait tout leur nécessaire. Ils n'auraient plus à remettre le pied sur cette île!

Dès que M. Gibson, son fils et les deux frères eurent pris place à l'arrière, le grappin fut ramené et le canot se dirigea à travers la passe.

M. Gibson avait observé en les écoutant, à la manière dont ils s'exprimaient, que ces deux hommes étaient supérieurs à la classe où se recrutent d'ordinaire les matelots. Toutefois, il avait voulu attendre qu'ils fussent en présence de M. Hawkins pour s'informer de leur situation.

De son côté, à son vif déplaisir, Vin Mod s'était aussi rendu compte qu'il ne s'agissait point de ces marins prêts à tout comme Len Cannon et ses camarades de Dunedin, ni même de ces aventuriers dont la rencontre est trop fréquente en ces parages du Pacifique.

Les deux frères ne faisaient point partie de l'équipage de la goélette.

Ils étaient donc des passagers, et les seuls très probablement qui se fussent tirés sains et saufs de cet abordage. Aussi Vin Mod revenait-il plus irrité encore à la pensée que ses projets ne pourraient être mis à exécution.

Le canot accosta. M. Gibson, son fils, les naufragés, montèrent sur le pont. Ces derniers furent aussitôt présentés à M. Hawkins, qui ne dissimula point son émotion, à voir en quel état misérable ils se trouvaient. Après leur avoir tendu la main:

“Soyez les bienvenus, mes amis!” dit-il.

Les deux frères, non moins impressionnés, avaient voulu se jeter à ses genoux: il les en empêcha.

“Non... reprit-il, non!... nous sommes trop heureux...”

Les mots lui manquaient, à cet excellent homme, et il ne put qu’approuver Nat Gibson qui cria: “À manger... qu’on leur donne à manger!... Ils meurent de faim!”

Les deux frères furent conduits dans le carré, où le premier déjeuner était servi, et là ils purent se refaire, après quinze longs jours de privations et de souffrance.

Alors M. Gibson mit à leur disposition une des cabines latérales où étaient déposés des vêtements choisis dans la rechange de l’équipage. Puis, leur toilette achevée, ils revinrent à l’arrière, et là, en présence de M. Hawkins, du capitaine et de son fils, ils racontèrent leur histoire.

Ces hommes étaient Hollandais, originaires de Groningue. Ils s’appelaient Karl et Pieter Kip. Karl, l’aîné, officier de la marine marchande des Pays-Bas, avait fait déjà de nombreuses traversées en qualité de lieutenant, puis de second à bord des navires de commerce.

Pieter, le cadet, était associé dans un comptoir d’Amboine, l’une des Moluques, correspondant de la maison Kip, de Groningue.

Cette maison faisait le gros et le demi-gros des produits de cet archipel, qui appartient à la Hollande, et plus particulièrement des noix du muscadier et des clous du giroflier, très abondants en cette colonie. Si ladite maison ne comptait pas parmi les plus importantes de la ville, du moins son chef jouissait-il d'une excellente réputation dans le monde commercial.

M. Kip père, veuf depuis quelques années, était mort cinq mois auparavant. Ce fut un coup grave pour les affaires du comptoir, et il y eut lieu de prendre des mesures afin d'empêcher une liquidation qui se fût faite dans des conditions désavantageuses. Avant tout, il fallait que les deux frères revinssent à Groningue.

Karl Kip avait alors trente-cinq ans. Bon marin, en passe de devenir capitaine, il attendait un commandement et ne devait pas tarder à l'obtenir. Peut-être d'une intelligence moins aiguisée que son frère, moins homme d'affaires, moins propre à la direction d'une maison de commerce, il le dépassait en résolution, en énergie comme en force et en endurance physique. Son plus gros chagrin venait de ce que la situation financière de la maison Kip ne lui avait jamais permis de posséder un navire. Karl Kip eût alors fait la navigation de long cours pour son compte. Mais il aurait été impossible de rien distraire des fonds engagés dans le commerce, et le désir du fils aîné n'avait pu être réalisé.

Karl et Pieter étaient unis d'une étroite amitié qu'aucun désaccord n'avait jamais altérée, encore plus liés par la sympathie que par le sang.

Entre eux, pas un ombrage, pas un nuage de jalousie ou de rivalité. Chacun restait dans sa sphère. À l'un les lointains voyages, les émotions, les dangers de la mer. À l'autre le travail dans le comptoir d'Amboine et les rapports avec celui de Groningue. La famille leur suffisait. Ils n'avaient point cherché à s'en créer une seconde, à se donner des liens nouveaux qui les eussent séparés peut-être. C’était déjà trop que le père fût en Hollande, Karl en cours de navigation, Pieter aux Moluques. Quant à celui-ci, intelligent, ayant le sens du négoce, il se consacrait entièrement aux affaires. Son associé, Hollandais comme lui, s’appliquait à les développer. Ne désespérant pas d’accroître le crédit de la maison Kip, il n’y épargnait ni son temps ni son zèle.

À la mort de M. Kip, Karl était dans le port d’Amboine à bord d’un trois-mâts hollandais de Rotterdam, sur lequel il remplissait les fonctions de second. Les deux frères furent douloureusement frappés de ce coup, qui les privait d’un père pour lequel ils éprouvaient une profonde affection. Et ils ne se trouvaient pas même là pour recueillir ses dernières paroles, son dernier soupir!

Alors cette résolution fut prise entre les deux frères: Pieter se séparerait de son associé d’Amboine, et reviendrait à Groningue diriger la maison paternelle.

Or, précisément, le trois-mâts Maximus, sur lequel Karl Kip était venu aux Moluques - navire déjà vieux, en mauvais état -, fut déclaré impropre au voyage de retour. Très éprouvé par des mauvais temps pendant sa traversée entre la Hollande et les îles, il n’était plus bon qu’à démolir. Aussi son capitaine, ses officiers, ses matelots devaient-ils être rapatriés en Europe par les soins de la maison Hoppers, de Rotterdam, à laquelle il appartenait.

Or, ce rapatriement allait exiger, sans doute, un séjour assez prolongé à Amboine, s’il fallait attendre que l’équipage pût embarquer sur quelque bâtiment à destination de l’Europe, et les deux frères avaient hâte d’être revenus à Groningue.

Karl et Pieter Kip décidèrent donc de prendre passage sur le premier navire en partance, soit d'Amboine, soit de Ceram, soit de Ternate, autres îles de l'archipel des Moluques.

À cette époque arriva le trois-mâts goélette Wilhelmina, de Rotterdam, dont la relâche serait de courte durée. C'était un navire de cinq cents tonneaux, qui allait regagner son port d'attache en faisant escale à Wellington, d'où son commandant, le capitaine Roebok, ferait voile vers l'Atlantique, en doublant le cap Horn.

Si la place de second eût été vacante, nul doute que Karl Kip ne l'eût obtenue. Mais le personnel était au complet, et aucun des matelots du Maximus ne put s'y engager. Karl Kip, ne voulant pas perdre cette occasion, retint une cabine de passager sur la Wilhelmina.

Le trois-mâts mit en mer le 23 septembre. Son équipage comprenait le capitaine, M. Roebok, le second, Stourn, deux maîtres et dix matelots, tous Hollandais d'origine.

La navigation fut très favorisée sur le parcours de la mer des Arafura, si étroitement enfermée entre la côte septentrionale de l'Australie, la côte méridionale de la Nouvelle-Guinée, et le groupe des îles de la Sonde, à l'ouest, qui la défend contre la houle de l'océan Indien. À l'est, elle n'offre pas d'autre issue que le détroit de Torrès, que termine le cap d'York.

À l'entrée de ce détroit, le navire rencontra des vents contraires qui le retardèrent quelques jours. Ce ne fut que le 6 octobre qu'il parvint à se dégager des nombreux récifs et à débouquer dans la mer de Corail.

Devant la Wilhelmina s'ouvrait alors l'immense Pacifique jusqu'au cap Horn, qu'elle devait rallier après une courte relâche à Wellington, de la

Nouvelle-Zélande.

La route était longue, mais les frères Kip n’avaient pas eu le choix.

Dans la nuit du 19 au 20 octobre, tout allait bien à bord, les matelots de quart à l’avant, lorsque se produisit un épouvantable accident que la plus sérieuse vigilance n’aurait pu éviter.

De lourdes brumes, très obscures, enveloppaient la mer, absolument calme, ainsi qu’il en est presque toujours dans ces conditions atmosphériques.

La Wilhelmina avait ses feux réglementaires, vert à tribord, rouge à bâbord. Par malheur, ils n’auraient point été vus à travers cet épais brouillard, même à la distance d’une demi-encablure.

Soudain, sans que les mugissements d’une sirène se fissent entendre, avant qu’un feu de position eût été relevé, le trois-mâts fut abordé par le lof de bâbord à la hauteur du rouf de l’équipage. Un choc terrible provoqua la chute immédiate du grand mât et du mât de misaine.

Au moment où Karl et Pieter Kip s’élançaient hors de la dunette, ils n’entrevirent qu’une énorme masse, vomissant fumée et vapeur, qui passait comme une bombe, après avoir coupé en deux la Wilhelmina.

Pendant une demi-seconde, un feu blanc avait apparu au grand étai de ce bâtiment. Le navire abordeur était un steamer, mais c’était tout ce qu’on en devait savoir.

La Wilhelmina, l’avant d’un côté, l’arrière de l’autre, coula aussitôt. Les deux passagers n’eurent pas même le temps de rejoindre l’équipage. À peine aperçurent-ils quelques matelots accrochés aux agrès. Utiliser les embarcations, impossible, puisqu’elles étaient déjà submergées. Quand au second et au capitaine, ils n’avaient sans doute pu quitter leur cabine.

Les deux frères, demi-vêtus, étaient déjà dans l’eau jusqu’à mi-corps.

Ils sentaient s’engloutir ce qui restait de la Wilhelmina, et allaient être entraînés dans le tourbillon qui se creusait autour du navire.

“Ne nous séparons pas!... cria Pieter.

- Compte sur moi!” répondit Karl.

Tous deux étaient bons nageurs. Mais y avait-il une terre à proximité?... Quelle position occupait le trois-mâts au moment de la collision en cette partie du Pacifique comprise entre l’Australie et la Nouvelle-Zélande, au-dessous de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, signalée vers l’est quarante-huit heures avant, dans la dernière observation du capitaine Roebok?

Il va sans dire que le steamer abordeur devait être loin déjà, à moins qu’il n’eût stoppé après le choc. S’il avait mis des embarcations à la mer, comment, au milieu du brouillard, celles-ci retrouveraient-elles les survivants de cette catastrophe?...

Karl et Pieter Kip se crurent perdus. Une obscurité profonde enveloppait la mer. Aucun sifflet de machine, aucun appel de sirène n’indiquait la présence d’un navire, ni ce mugissement qu’eussent produit les échappements de vapeur, s’il fût resté sur le lieu du sinistre... Pas une seule épave à portée de la main des deux frères...

Pendant une demi-heure ils se soutinrent, l’aîné encourageant le plus jeune, lui prêtant l’appui de son bras lorsqu’il faiblissait. Mais le moment approchait où tous deux seraient à bout de forces, et, après une dernière étreinte, un suprême adieu, ils s'engloutiraient dans l'abîme...

Il était environ trois heures du matin, lorsque Karl Kip parvint à saisir un objet qui flottait près de lui.

C'était une des cages à poules de la Wilhelmina, à laquelle ils s'accrochèrent.

L'aube perça enfin les jaunâtres volutes du brouillard, la brume ne tarda pas à se lever, et un clapotis de lames reprit au souffle de la brise.

Karl Kip promena son regard jusqu'à l'horizon.

Dans l'est, mer déserte. Dans l'ouest, la côte d'une terre assez élevée, voilà ce qu'il aperçut tout d'abord.

Cette côte ne se trouvait pas à plus de trois milles. Le courant et le vent y portaient. Il y avait certitude de pouvoir l'atteindre, si la houle ne devenait pas trop forte.

À quelque terre, île ou continent qu'elle appartînt, cette côte assurait le salut des naufragés.

Le littoral, qui se déroulait à l'ouest, était dominé par un pic dont les premiers rayons du soleil doraient l'extrême pointe.

“Là!... là!...” s'écria Karl Kip.

Là, en effet, car, au large, on eût vainement cherché une voile ou les feux d'un navire. De la Wilhelmina, il ne restait aucun vestige. Elle s'était perdue corps et biens. Rien non plus du steamer abordeur, qui, plus heureux sans doute, ayant survécu à la collision, se trouvait maintenant hors de vue.

En se soulevant à demi, Karl Kip n’aperçut ni débris de coque ni débris de mâture. Seule surnageait cette cage à poules, à laquelle ils se tenaient.

Épuisé, engourdi, Pieter aurait coulé par le fond si son frère ne lui eût relevé la tête. Vigoureusement, Karl nageait, en poussant la cage vers un semis de récifs dont le ressac blanchissait la ligne irrégulière.

Cette première frange de l’anneau coralligène se prolongeait devant la côte.

Il ne fallut pas moins d’une heure pour l’atteindre. Avec la houle qui les balayait, il eût été difficile d’y prendre pied. Les naufragés se glissèrent à travers une étroite passe, et il était un peu plus de sept heures lorsqu’ils purent se hisser sur la pointe où le canot du James-Cook venait de les recueillir.

C’était sur cette île inconnue, inhabitée, que les deux frères, à peine vêtus, sans un outil, sans un engin, sans un ustensile, allaient pendant quinze jours mener la plus misérable existence.

Tel fut le récit que fit Pieter Kip, tandis que son frère, écoutant en silence, se bornait à le confirmer du geste.

On savait à présent pourquoi la Wilhelmina, attendue à Wellington, n’y arriverait jamais, pourquoi le navire français Assomption n’avait pas rencontré d’épave sur sa route. Le trois-mâts gisait dans les profondeurs de la mer, à moins que les courants n’en eussent entraîné quelques débris plus au nord.

L’impression produite par le récit des naufragés était tout en leur faveur. Naturellement, personne n’eût songé à mettre en doute sa véracité. Ils se servaient de la langue anglaise avec une facilité qui témoignait d’une instruction et d’une éducation convenables. Leur attitude n’était point celle de tant de ces aventuriers qui pullulent sur ces parages, et l’on sentait chez Pieter Kip, surtout, une inébranlable confiance en Dieu.

Aussi M. Hawkins ne cacha-t-il point la bonne impression qu’il éprouvait.

“Mes amis, dit-il, vous voici à bord du James-Cook, et vous y resterez...

- Soyez remercié, monsieur, répondit Pieter Kip.

- Mais il ne vous reconduira pas en Europe... ajouta l’armateur.

- Peu importe, répondit Karl Kip.

Nous avons enfin quitté cette île Norfolk où nous étions sans ressources, et nous n’en demandons pas davantage.

- En quelque endroit que nous débarquions, ajouta Pieter Kip, nous trouverons les moyens de nous faire rapatrier...

- Et je vous y aiderai, dit M. Gibson.

- Quelle est la destination du James-Cook? reprit Karl Kip.

- Port-Praslin, de la Nouvelle-Irlande, répondit le capitaine.

- Il doit y séjourner?...

- Trois semaines environ.

- Puis il revient en Nouvelle-Zélande?...

- Non, en Tasmanie... à Hobart-Town, son port d'attache.

- Eh bien, capitaine, déclara Karl Kip, il nous sera tout aussi facile de prendre passage sur un navire à Hobart-Town qu'à Dunedin, à Auckland ou à Wellington...

- Certainement, assura M. Hawkins, et si vous embarquez sur un steamer qui revient en Europe par le canal de Suez, votre retour s'effectuera plus rapidement.

- Ce serait à désirer, répondit Karl Kip.

- En tout cas, monsieur Hawkins, et vous, capitaine, dit Pieter Kip, puisque vous voulez bien nous accepter comme passagers...

- Non point des passagers, mais des hôtes, dit M. Hawkins, et nous sommes heureux de vous offrir l'hospitalité du James-Cook!"

De nouvelles poignées de main furent échangées. Puis, les deux frères se retirèrent dans leur cabine afin d'y goûter quelque repos, car ils avaient veillé toute la nuit près du foyer de la pointe.

Cependant, la petite brise qui avait dissipé les brumes commençait à fraîchir.

Les calmes paraissaient être à leur fin, et la mer verdissait dans le sud-est de l'île.

Il convenait d'en profiter; M. Gibson donna ses ordres pour l'appareillage. Les voiles, qui étaient restées sur leurs cargues, furent amurées. On vira au cabestan, et le brick, grand largue, remonta dans la direction du nord-nord-ouest.

Deux heures après, la plus haute cime de l’île Norfolk avait disparu, et le James-Cook mettait le cap au nord-est, de manière à prendre connaissance des terres de la Nouvelle-Calédonie sur la limite de la mer de Corail.

VIII - La mer de Corail

Quatorze cents milles environ séparent l’île Norfolk de la Nouvelle-Irlande. Après en avoir fait cinq cents, la première terre que devait relever le James-Cook serait cette possession française de la Nouvelle-Calédonie dont se complète le petit groupe des îles Loyalty dans l’est.

Si le vent et la mer favorisaient la marche du brick, cinq jours suffiraient à la première partie de cette traversée, une dizaine à la seconde.

La vie du bord suivait sa régularité habituelle. Les quarts succédaient aux quarts, avec cette monotonie des belles navigations, qui n’est pas sans charme. Marins ou passagers s’intéressent au moindre incident de mer - un navire qui fait route, une bande d’oiseaux qui volent autour des agrès, une troupe de cétacés qui se jouent dans le sillage du bâtiment.

Le plus souvent les frères Kip, assis à l’arrière, s’abandonnaient, en compagnie de M. Hawkins, à de longues conversations auxquelles le capitaine et son fils se mêlaient volontiers. Ils ne pouvaient dissimuler leurs inquiétudes relativement à la situation de la maison de Groningue. Combien il était urgent que Pieter Kip eût repris la direction des affaires peut-être déjà très compromises! Ni l’un ni l’autre ne cachaient leur appréhension, lorsqu’ils s’entretenaient avec l’armateur à ce sujet.

M. Hawkins ne cessait de répondre par des paroles d’encouragement. Les deux frères trouveraient du crédit... La liquidation, s’il fallait en arriver là, s’effectuerait sans doute dans de meilleures conditions qu’ils ne l’espéraient... Mais les inquiétudes de Karl et Pieter Kip n’étaient que trop justifiées par le retard que leur aurait imposé le naufrage de la Wilhelmina.

On n’a point oublié quelle impression Karl et Pieter avaient produite dans l’esprit de Vin Mod.

Qu’il n’eût point à compter sur leur connivence pour servir ses projets, c’était l’évidence même. Les naufragés n’étaient point des aventuriers sans remords ni scrupules. Supérieurs à la classe où se recrutent les matelots, leur présence à bord rendait irréalisable toute tentative de révolte.

Aussi se figure-t-on aisément quelles réflexions échangèrent Flig Balt et Vin Mod, dès leur premier entretien, auquel prit part Len Cannon.

Relativement aux frères Kip, l’opinion du maître d’équipage fut que, le cas échéant, ils se rangeraient du côté de l’armateur et du capitaine.

Toutefois, Len Cannon, jugeant les autres d’après lui-même, ne parut pas être de cet avis:

“Sait-on au juste ce que sont ces Hollandais?... déclara-t-il. A-t-on vu leurs papiers?... Non, n’est-ce pas, et pourquoi les croire sur parole?... Et puisqu’ils ont perdu tout ce qu’ils possédaient dans le naufrage, ils auraient tout à gagner!... J’en ai connu plus d’un qui payait de mine et ne faisait point de manières lorsqu’il s’agissait de quelque bon coup...

- Est-ce toi qui les tâteras?... demanda Flig Balt en haussant les épaules.

- Moi... non... bien sûr! répondit Len Cannon. Les matelots n’ont jamais l’occasion de se mettre en rapport avec les passagers... puisque ce sont des passagers, ces malvenus-là!...

- Len a raison, affirma Vin Mod, ce n’est ni lui ni moi qui pourrions marcher sur ce terrain...

- Alors... ce serait moi?... demanda le maître d’équipage.

- Non... pas même vous, Flig Balt.

- Et qui donc?...

- Le nouveau capitaine du James-Cook.

- Comment... le nouveau capitaine?... dit le maître d’équipage.

- Qu’entends-tu par là, Mod?... reprit Len Cannon.

- J’entends, répondit Vin Mod, qu’on doit être au moins capitaine pour pouvoir causer avec ces beaux messieurs Kip... Et alors, il faudrait... et tant que cela ne sera pas...

- Et quoi donc?... s’écria Flig Balt, impatienté de ces réticences.

- Il faudrait, répéta Vin Mod, une circonstance... oui... j’en reviens toujours à mon idée... Une supposition... M. Gibson tombe à la mer... pendant la nuit... un accident... Qui commanderait à bord?... Évidemment maître Balt... L’armateur et le garçon ne connaissent rien en marine... et alors, au lieu de conduire le brick à Port-Praslin... et surtout de le ramener à Hobart-Town... enfin qui sait?...”

Puis, sans autrement insister et ne voulant pas encore renoncer au projet primitif, le matelot ajouta:

“Vraiment, c’est avoir eu trop de mauvaise chance!... Une première fois, cet aviso qui reste par notre travers!... Une deuxième, M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson qui embarquent à Wellington!... Une troisième, ces deux Hollandais qui prennent passage à bord!... Quatre hommes de plus... juste autant que nous en avons racolé à Dunedin dans la taverne des Three-Magpies... Des bons, ceux-là... Les voilà maintenant huit contre nous six... et huit bouts de corde je leur souhaite!”

Flig Balt écoutait toujours plus qu’il ne parlait.

Nul doute que cette perspective de commander le navire ne fût de nature à le tenter. Provoquer un accident qui ferait disparaître M. Gibson, cela vaudrait mieux que d’engager une lutte contre les passagers du James-Cook et la moitié de son équipage.

Mais Len Cannon répondait à cela que six hommes résolus doivent avoir raison de huit qui ne sont pas sur leurs gardes, si on les surprend avant qu’ils aient eu le temps de se reconnaître... Il suffirait tout d’abord de s’être débarrassé de deux, n’importe lesquels, pour que la partie fût égale... et il termina sur ces mots:

“Il faut faire le coup la nuit prochaine. Que maître Balt dise oui... je préviens les autres, et, demain, le brick aura le cap au large...

- Voyons, maître Balt, que répondez-vous?...” demanda Vin Mod.

Le maître d’équipage se taisait encore devant cette formelle mise en demeure.

“Eh bien... est-ce convenu?...” reprit en insistant Len Cannon.

En ce moment, M. Gibson, qui se trouvait à l’arrière, appela Flig Balt. Celui-ci alla le rejoindre.

“Il ne veut donc pas marcher?... demanda Len Cannon à Vin Mod.

- Il marchera, répondit le matelot, sinon la nuit prochaine, du moins quand l’occasion se présentera...

- Et si elle ne se présente pas?...

- On la fera naître, Cannon!

- Alors, déclara le matelot, que ce soit avant l’arrivée en Nouvelle-Irlande!... Mes camarades et moi, nous n’avons pas embarqué à bord du brick pour naviguer sous les ordres du capitaine Gibson, et, je te préviens, Mod, si l’affaire n’est pas faite d’ici là, à Port-Praslin nous filerons...

- Entendu, Len...

- Entendu, Mod...

Ce n’est pas nous qui ramènerons le James-Cook à Hobart-Town, où nous n’avons que faire de traîner nos pattes!”

En somme, Vin Mod s’inquiétait surtout des hésitations de Flig Balt. Il connaissait sa nature cauteleuse qui le portait plutôt à l’astuce qu’à l’audace. Aussi s’était-il toujours avisé qu’il faudrait l’engager un jour ou l’autre de manière qu’il ne pût plus reculer. Mais il entendait que toutes chances de réussite fussent de son côté, et revenait invariablement à cette idée de voir le commandement du brick passer entre les mains du maître d’équipage. En outre, il se promit de contenir Len Cannon, dont les impatiences pouvaient compromettre l’affaire.

La navigation se continua dans des conditions excellentes. Vent favorable allant jusqu’au grand frais pendant la journée et calmissant avec le soir. Les nuits étaient si belles, si rafraîchissantes, après les chaleurs diurnes qui s’accroissaient à mesure que le brick gagnait vers le Tropique du

Capricorne. Aussi M. Hawkins, M. Gibson et son fils, Karl et Pieter Kip, causant et fumant, prolongeaient-ils la sieste du soir et restaient même sur le pont jusqu'aux premières lueurs de l'aube. La plupart des matelots, alors même qu'ils n'étaient pas de quart, préféraient le plein air à la température étouffante du poste. Dans ces conditions, il eût été impossible de surprendre Hobbes, Burnes, Wickley. En un instant ils eussent été tous les trois sur la défensive.

Le Tropique fut atteint dans l'après-midi du 7 novembre. Presque aussitôt on eut connaissance de l'île des Pins et des hautes terres de la Nouvelle-Calédonie.

La grande île Balade - tel était son nom canaque - n'a pas moins de deux cents milles de longueur du sud-est au nord-ouest sur vingt-cinq à trente de largeur.

Ses dépendances se composent des îles des Pins, Beaupré, Botanique et Hohohana, puis, au levant, du groupe des Loyalty, dont la plus méridionale est l'île Britannia.

On le sait, cet archipel néo-calédonien appartient au domaine colonial de la France. C'est un lieu de déportation, où les condamnés pour crimes de droit commun séjournent en grande majorité. Bien qu'on ait eu à enregistrer un certain nombre d'évasions, il n'est pas facile de quitter ce pénitencier des antipodes. Pour y réussir, il faut être aidé du dehors par quelque navire frété à cette intention, ainsi que cela s'est fait à différentes reprises au profit de déportés politiques. Dans tous les cas, lorsque les fugitifs, privés d'embarcations, doivent rejoindre un bâtiment à la nage, ils sont exposés à la dent des formidables squales qui fourmillent entre les récifs.

Du reste, sauf au port de Nouméa, la capitale de l’île, il est presque impossible d’accoster cet archipel que défendent des bancs madréporiques sur lesquels la houle brise avec fureur.

Le James-Cook, en remontant vers le nord, se tint donc au large de la côte. À la distance de deux à trois milles, le regard pouvait embrasser tout le développement de la grande île, les collines littorales disposées en amphithéâtre, tellement nues et arides que l’on serait tenté de conclure à l’infertilité de ce groupe. Et, en 1774, le capitaine Cook y fut tout d’abord trompé, lorsqu’il découvrit ces nouvelles îles, dont l’amiral français d’Entrecasteaux compléta le relevé hydrographique en 1792 et 1793.

Il n’en est rien, cependant. La population néo-calédonienne, évaluée à soixante mille habitants, voit son existence assurée rien que par les produits du sol, qui est très riche: ignames, cannes à sucre, taro, hibiscus, pins en abondance, bananiers, orangers, cocotiers, arbres à pain, figuiers, gingembriers.

À l’intérieur se massent ces forêts profondes dont les arbres atteignent des dimensions prodigieuses.

Pendant la journée du 9, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson et les deux frères purent observer en arrière du littoral cette haute chaîne qui forme l’ossature de l’île.

Sillonnée de torrents, elle est dominée par certains sommets, le mont Kogt, le mont Nu, le mont Arago, l’Homedebua, dont l’altitude dépasse quinze cents mètres. La nuit venue, on n’aperçut plus que les feux des Canaques campés au fond des criques, et qui finirent par s’éteindre.

Eux aussi, Flig Balt, Vin Mod, Len Cannon et ses camarades observaient cette île, mais dans une tout autre disposition d’esprit. Pouvaient-ils oublier qu’elle renfermait plusieurs centaines de condamnés dont ils eussent volontiers introduit une demi-douzaine à bord?...

“Il y a là, répétait Vin Mod, un tas de braves gens qui ne demanderaient pas mieux que de s’emparer d’un bon navire pour courir le Pacifique!... Si seulement quelques-uns avaient l’idée de s’enfuir cette nuit... si leur embarcation accostait le brick... s’ils se précipitaient sur le pont sans en demander la permission ni à M. Hawkins ni au capitaine... nous aurions vite fait de nous entendre avec eux...

- Sans doute, répondit Len Cannon, mais cela n’arrivera pas.”

Cela n’arriva pas, en effet. D’ailleurs, le cas échéant, à moins qu’ils n’y fussent montés par surprise, des fugitifs de Nouméa n’eussent pas été accueillis comme l’avaient été les naufragés de la Wilhelmina. Un honnête navire ne favorise pas l’évasion de criminels!...

Le lendemain, 8, si la Nouvelle-Calédonie déroulait encore sa partie septentrionale, les derniers récifs qui s’étendent d’une centaine de lieues vers le nord furent laissés en arrière dans l’après-midi, et le James-Cook donnait à pleines voiles à travers la mer de Corail.

En une dizaine de jours, avec belle brise, le brick pourrait avoir franchi la distance de neuf cents milles qui sépare la Nouvelle-Calédonie de la Nouvelle-Irlande.

Cette mer de Corail est peut-être, au dire des navigateurs, l’une des plus dangereuses du globe. Sur une étendue de deux degrés en latitude, au-dessus et au-dessous de sa surface, elle est hérissée de pointes madréporiques, barrée de bancs de coraux, sillonnée de courants irréguliers et mal connus. Nombre de navires s'y sont perdus corps et biens. Il conviendrait vraiment qu'elle fût balisée à l'exemple des baies de l'Amérique ou de l'Europe. Pendant la nuit du 10 juin 1770, malgré l'avantage d'un bon vent et d'un brillant clair de lune, l'illustre Cook faillit y faire naufrage.

Il fallait espérer que M. Gibson ne se mettrait pas en perdition. La coque de son brick ne s'ouvrirait pas sur une de ces pointes, et, comme l'avait fait le navigateur anglais, il n'en serait pas réduit à passer une voile sous sa quille pour aveugler une voie d'eau. Toutefois, l'équipage dut apporter jour et nuit la plus extrême attention afin de parer les écueils. À cette époque, grâce à des études hydrographiques faites avec une certaine précision, on pouvait se fier aux cartes du bord. En outre, Harry Gibson n'en était pas à sa première navigation à travers la mer de Corail, et il en connaissait tous les dangers.

Karl Kip lui-même avait déjà fréquenté ces difficiles parages, soit que son navire eût été chercher par l'est l'entrée du détroit de Torrès, soit qu'il en fût sorti en quittant la mer des Alfouras pendant ses campagnes en extrême Orient. La surveillance ne ferait pas défaut à bord du brick.

En somme, le temps favorisait la traversée du James-Cook, et il filait rapidement sous la brise constante des alizés du Pacifique, sans que les hommes eussent à manœuvrer.

Ces parages sont, en général, peu visités. Pour rallier les mers d'Europe, la marine marchande a diminué de beaucoup son parcours à revenir des Philippines, des Moluques, des îles de la Sonde et de l'Indo-Chine par l'océan Indien, le canal de Suez et la Méditerranée. À moins qu'ils ne soient à destination des ports de l'Ouest-Amérique, les steamers ne s'aventurent point sur la mer de Corail. Elle n'est guère fréquentée que par les voiliers, qui préfèrent la route du cap Horn à celle du cap de Bonne-Espérance, ou par ceux qui, comme le James-Cook, font le grand cabotage entre l’Australie, la Nouvelle-Zélande et les archipels du nord. Il est donc rare que quelque voile se montre à l’horizon. De là une navigation monotone à laquelle doivent se résigner sinon les équipages, peu soucieux de distraction, du moins les passagers auxquels ces traversées semblent interminables.

Dans l’après-midi du 9 novembre, Nat Gibson, penché sur la lisse à l’avant, appela le capitaine, qui venait de quitter le rouf, et il lui indiqua une sorte de masse noirâtre à deux milles par bâbord.

“Père, dit-il, est-ce que ce serait un écueil?...

- Je ne le pense pas, répondit M. Gibson. J’ai fait une bonne observation à midi, je suis sûr de ma position...

- Aucun récif n’est porté sur la carte?...

- Aucun, Nat.

- Il y a cependant là quelque chose...”

Après avoir observé cette masse avec la longue-vue, le capitaine répondit:

“Je ne me rends pas bien compte...”

Les deux frères venaient d’arriver ainsi que M. Hawkins.

Ils regardèrent attentivement cette masse de forme irrégulière, qu’il eût été possible de prendre pour une roche coralligène.

“Non, dit Karl Kip, après s’être servi de la longue-vue, ce n’est point un écueil...

- Il semble même que cela flotte et s’élève à la lame”, dit M. Hawkins.

Et, en effet, l’objet en question n’était pas immobile à la surface de la mer, et obéissait aux mouvements de la houle.

“Et, de plus, dit Karl Kip, on n’aperçoit aucun ressac sur ses bords...

- On dirait même qu’il dérive!” fit remarquer Nat Gibson.

Le capitaine cria alors à Hobbes, qui était à la barre:

“Lofe légèrement, de manière à nous tenir plus près...

- Oui, capitaine”, répondit le matelot, en donnant un tour à la roue du gouvernail.

Dix minutes après, le brick s’était assez rapproché pour que Karl Kip pût dire:

“C’est une épave...

- Oui... une épave”, affirma M. Gibson.

Plus de doute, c’était une carcasse de navire qui flottait par le travers du James-Cook.

“Est-ce que ce serait ce qui reste de la Wilhelmina?...” demanda M. Hawkins.

Rien d’impossible, en somme. Vingt jours après la collision, il n’y aurait pas lieu de s’étonner que les débris du trois-mâts eussent été entraînés dans ces parages.

“Capitaine, dit alors Pieter Kip, permettez que nous visitions cette épave...

Si elle provient de la Wilhelmina, il se peut que nous y retrouvions quelques objets...

- Et, ajouta M. Hawkins, qui sait si des naufragés, qu’il serait temps de sauver peut-être...”

Il n’y avait pas à insister, et ordre fut envoyé de venir au vent afin de mettre en panne à deux ou trois encablures de l’épave.

Les voiles bordées, ses cacatois ralinguant déjà, le brick courut pendant quelques minutes.

Et alors, Karl Kip de s’écrier:

“Oui... c’est bien la Wilhelmina... les débris de son arrière et de sa dunette...”

Flig Balt et Vin Mod, l’un près de l’autre, se parlaient à voix basse.

“Il ne manquerait plus que d’en embarquer encore... un ou deux!...”

Le maître d’équipage se contenta de hausser les épaules. Qu’il y eût des naufragés sur cette épave, c’était peu probable.

De fait, personne n’apparaissait. S’il s’y fût trouvé un ou plusieurs hommes, à moins d’être à demi morts de souffrance, ils se seraient montrés, ils auraient fait des signaux au brick depuis longtemps déjà... et... personne.

“Le canot à la mer!” commanda M. Gibson en se tournant vers Flig Balt.

L’embarcation fut aussitôt déhalée des portemanteaux. Trois matelots prirent place aux avirons, Vin Mod, Wickley, Hobbes. Nat Gibson embarqua avec les deux frères, et Karl Kip se mit au gouvernail.

C’était bien la partie arrière de la Wilhelmina, dont la dunette presque entière avait surnagé après l’abordage.

Tout l’avant manquait, ayant vraisemblablement coulé sous le poids de la cargaison, à moins que le courant ne l’eût entraîné au loin. Le mousse Jim, envoyé en tête du grand mât, cria qu’il n’apercevait aucune autre épave à la surface de la mer.

Au tableau d’arrière, encore intact, se lisaient ces deux noms:

Wilhelmina - Rotterdam.

Le canot accosta. La dunette, fortement inclinée sur le côté gauche, flottait au-dessus de cette partie de la cale réservée à la cambuse, immergée dans toute sa profondeur. Du mât d’artimon, qui traversait le carré, il ne restait qu’un tronçon de deux ou trois pieds, brisé à la hauteur des taquets, et d’où pendaient quelques bouts de drisses. Plus rien du gui arraché dans la collision.

D’ailleurs, il serait facile de pénétrer dans la dunette. La porte en était défoncée, et la houle en se gonflant la balayait à l’intérieur.

Ce qu’il y avait à faire, c’était donc de prendre pied sur l’épave, de visiter les cabines du carré, entre autres celle des deux frères placée en abord.

Quant aux cabines du capitaine et du second, qui occupaient la partie avant de la dunette, elles étaient entièrement démolies.

Karl Kip rangea le canot le long de l'épave, de manière à pouvoir débarquer, et Vin Mod tourna son amarre à un des montants du bastingage de tribord.

La mer, assez calme en ce moment, ne noyait pas le carré, fluait et refluait sur le bout du pont. Parfois le tangage découvrait la cale, vidée de tout ce qu'elle avait contenu.

Karl et Pieter Kip, Nat Gibson et Vin Mod, laissant l'embarcation à la garde des matelots, s'introduisirent à l'intérieur du carré.

Et, en premier lieu, il fallait s'assurer s'il y avait quelque survivant de la Wilhelmina.

N'était-il pas impossible que des hommes de l'équipage eussent trouvé refuge dans la dunette, alors que s'engloutissait l'autre partie du navire?...

Ni vivants ni morts sur cette épave. Le capitaine et le second étaient-ils parvenus à sortir de leurs cabines? On ne le saurait jamais, sans doute, ni si la partie avant du navire avait pu se maintenir à la surface de la mer avec une partie de l'équipage. Il était plutôt probable que le James-Cook venait de rencontrer tout ce qui subsistait de la Wilhelmina.

On comprit quelle avait été la violence du choc, lorsque l'un des deux bâtiments s'était jeté sur l'autre. Le steamer, lancé à toute vitesse au milieu du brouillard, avait passé comme un projectile à travers la coque du trois-mâts, peut-être sans en avoir éprouvé de graves avaries qui l'eussent empêché de continuer sa route. Avait-il pu stopper ensuite, mettre ses embarcations à la mer, recueillir quelques naufragés?...

Les deux frères, Nat Gibson et Vin Mod, ayant de l'eau jusqu'à mi-jambe, visitèrent le carré.

Dans leur cabine, Karl et Pieter Kip retrouvèrent divers objets plus ou moins détériorés, des vêtements, du linge, des ustensiles de toilette, deux paires de chaussures. Les cadres superposés contenaient encore leur literie, qui fut retirée et rapportée au canot.

Il eût été très désirable que les deux frères eussent pu remettre la main sur les papiers, surtout ceux qui concernaient le comptoir d'Amboine et la maison de Groningue. Leur disparition était de nature à gêner le règlement des affaires. Mais il n'y en avait pas trace, et la mer, en pénétrant dans la cabine, avait fait son œuvre de destruction.

Il en fut de même pour une somme de mille piastres appartenant à Pieter Kip, et qui avait disparu, la petite armoire où elle était renfermée, sous le cadre inférieur, ayant été brisée dans la collision.

“Rien... rien!” dit-il.

Tandis que l'on visitait le carré, Vin Mod, - on ne s'en étonnera pas, - poussé par ses instincts de pillage, ne cessait de fureter dans tous les coins, et, sans être aperçu, pénétra dans la cabine des deux frères.

Et c'est alors que, sous le cadre inférieur de cette cabine, où s'ouvrait le tiroir, il trouva un objet qui avait échappé aux recherches de Karl et de Pieter Kip.

C’était un poignard de fabrication malaise, un de ces kriss à dents de scie, qui s’était glissé dans l’interstice de deux planches disjointes. Cette arme, assez commune chez les indigènes du Pacifique, n’avait pas grand prix et n’eût servi qu’à compléter la panoplie d’un amateur.

Vin Mod agissait-il sous une certaine pensée en s’appropriant cette arme?... Dans tous les cas, il saisit le kriss, le fourra sous sa vareuse sans avoir été vu, et son intention était de le cacher dans son sac, dès qu’il serait de retour à bord du brick

On peut en être assuré, si, au lieu de cette arme, il eût retrouvé le millier de piastres de Pieter Kip, il ne se fût fait aucun scrupule de l’emporter.

Il n’y avait plus rien à recueillir à bord du bâtiment naufragé. Les effets, habits, linge, literie, furent transportés dans le canot. D’ailleurs l’épave ne devait pas tarder à se disloquer entièrement. Le plancher du carré, rongé par l’eau, cédait sous le pied.

Au premier mauvais temps, il ne flotterait plus que d’informes débris à la surface de la mer.

Le brick était en panne par le travers de l’épave, et le courant commençait à l’éloigner. La brise fraîchissait, la houle s’accentuait, et il convenait de revenir à bord. À plusieurs reprises, le porte-voix du maître d’équipage se fit entendre, hélant les gens de l’embarcation.

“On nous commande de rentrer, dit Nat Gibson, et puisque nous avons pris tout ce qu’il y avait à prendre...

- Allons... répondit Karl Kip.

- Pauvre Wilhelmina!” murmura Pieter Kip.

Tous deux ne cherchaient point à cacher l’émotion qu’ils éprouvaient!... S’ils avaient espéré retrouver une partie de ce qu’ils possédaient, il leur fallait maintenant renoncer à cet espoir!

Le canot largua son amarre. Ce fut Nat Gibson qui se mit au gouvernail, tandis que Karl et Pieter Kip, tournés vers l’arrière, regardaient encore les restes de la Wilhelmina.

Dès que l’embarcation eut été rehissée à son poste, le brick éventa ses voiles, et, sous l’allure du largue, servi par une belle brise, gagna rapidement en direction du nord-ouest.

Pendant cinq jours, la navigation ne présenta aucun incident, et, dès la matinée du 14, la vigie signalait les premières hauteurs de la Nouvelle-Guinée.

IX - À travers la Louisiade

Au lendemain, 15 novembre, une trentaine de milles, ce fut tout ce que le James-Cook avait gagné vers le nord-est depuis la veille. La brise était tombée au déclin du jour. Nuit calme et chaude, que passagers et équipage passèrent sur le pont. Dormir dans les cabines par cette température étouffante, cela n’eût pas été possible, même une heure.

Au surplus, le navire suivait alors des parages dangereux, et la surveillance ne devait pas se ralentir un instant.

M. Gibson avait fait établir à l’avant du rouf une tente fixée à des montants le long de la lisse. C’est à l’abri de cette tente que se prenaient les repas, plus agréablement qu’à l’intérieur du carré.

Ce matin-là, pendant le déjeuner, la conversation porta sur ces îles des Louisiades au milieu desquelles le brick devait effectuer la partie périlleuse de sa traversée. Son point le plaçait à quatre cent cinquante milles environ du groupe de la Nouvelle-Irlande. Dans quatre jours, si les calmes ne le retardaient pas - ce qui arrive fréquemment au cours de la saison chaude entre le Tropique et l’Équateur -, il laisserait tomber l’ancre au mouillage de Port-Praslin.

“Vous ayez plusieurs fois parcouru cet archipel des Louisiades?... demanda Pieter Kip en s’adressant au capitaine.

- Oui... plusieurs fois, lorsque j’allais prendre cargaison à la Nouvelle-Irlande, répondit M. Gibson.

- N’est-ce pas une navigation difficile?... ajouta Karl Kip.

- Difficile, en effet, monsieur Kip. Vous n’avez jamais eu l’occasion de visiter cette partie du Pacifique?...

- Jamais, monsieur Gibson, et je n’ai pas encore dépassé en latitude la Papouasie.

- Eh bien, affirma M. Gibson, un capitaine qui serait imprudent ou inattentif risquerait de jeter son navire sur les innombrables récifs de ces parages.

Figurez-vous des bancs madréporiques longs de deux cents milles et larges d’une centaine... À moins d’être bon pratique, on y laisserait son doublage et même sa coque...

- Est-ce que vous avez quelquefois relâché dans les principales îles?... reprit Pieter Kip.

- Non, répondit M. Gibson. D’ailleurs, quel commerce ferait-on avec Rossel, Saint-Aignan, Trobriant, Entrecasteaux... à moins qu’on ne voulût remplir sa cale de noix de coco, car ce sont ces îles qui possèdent les plus beaux cocotiers de toute la terre?...

- Cependant, fit observer M. Hawkins, si les navires ne vont pas charger aux Louisiades, ce n’est point que l’archipel soit inhabité...

- En effet, mon ami, déclara M. Gibson. On y trouve une population farouche et cruelle... peut-être même cannibale, malgré les efforts des missionnaires.

- Est-ce qu’il y a eu récemment des scènes d’anthropophagie?... demanda Pieter Kip.

- Il n’est que trop vrai, affirma le capitaine, des scènes épouvantables. Aussi un bâtiment qui ne se tiendrait pas sur ses gardes risquerait-il d’être attaqué par ces indigènes...

- Et non seulement par les naturels de la Louisiade, mais aussi par ceux de la Nouvelle-Guinée, déclara Karl Kip. Je crois les Papouas non moins redoutables...

- Tous ces sauvages se valent, répondit le capitaine, également fourbes et sanguinaires!... Voilà plus de trois cents ans que ces terres ont été découvertes par le Portugais Serrano, puis visitées en 1610 par le Hollandais Shouten et en 1770 par James Cook, qui y fut reçu à coups de javelines...

Enfin le Français Dumont d’Urville, lors du voyage de l’Astrolabe, en 1827, dut répondre par des coups de feu aux démonstrations hostiles de ces Polynésiens... Eh bien, depuis cette époque, la civilisation n’a fait aucun progrès chez ces peuplades...

- Et il en est de même, ajouta Nat Gibson, dans toute la partie du Pacifique comprise entre la Nouvelle-Guinée et les îles Salomon. Il n’y a qu’à se rappeler les voyages de Carteret, de Hunter, de l’Américain Morrel, qui faillit y perdre son navire Australie!... Une de ces îles est nommée “île des Massacres”, et nombre d’autres mériteraient de porter le même nom...

- Ma foi, conclut M. Hawkins, c’est à vous, messieurs les Hollandais, de civiliser ces indigènes... Votre pavillon flotte sur les terres voisines... Il abrite l’archipel des Moluques, et l’on vous saura gré d’y avoir assuré la navigation du commerce.

- Aussi, répondit Karl Kip, le gouvernement de Batavia ne cesse-t-il de s’en préoccuper. Pas une année ne s’écoule sans qu’un bâtiment soit envoyé à la baie de Triton, sur la côte nord de la Nouvelle-Guinée, où nous avons fondé une colonie...

- Et nous chercherons à en fonder d’autres, ajouta Pieter Kip. N’est-ce pas notre intérêt évident depuis que l’Allemagne a mis la main sur les archipels du nord?...

- Vraiment, toutes les puissances maritimes auraient intérêt à vous y aider, observa Nat Gibson. Est-ce qu’elles n’ont pas, la plupart, un pied dans cette portion du Pacifique?... Regardez ces noms inscrits sur les cartes: Nouvelle-Calédonie, Nouvelle-Zélande, Nouvelles-Hébrides, Nouveau-Hanovre, Nouvelle-Bretagne, Nouvelle-Irlande, sans parler de l’Australie, qui s’est appelée Nouvelle-Hollande, et dont l’Angleterre a l’exclusive possession!”

Très juste, cette remarque.

Les pavillons de toutes couleurs flottent sur ce domaine colonial, et sa civilisation devrait faire de rapides progrès.

Ce qui n’est pas moins exact, c’est que ledit domaine est insuffisamment protégé jusqu’ici. Principalement entre les Salomon, les Hébrides, la Papouasie et les groupes du nord, la navigation ne s’effectue pas sans grands risques.

On ne s’étonnera donc pas que le James-Cook, destiné à cette navigation, fût armé d’une petite pièce de cuivre qui portait un boulet de quinze livres à six cents mètres, et que le râtelier du rouf possédât une demi-douzaine de fusils et de revolvers. Si quelques pirogues suspectes s’approchaient, on saurait les tenir à distance.

Ces Papouas, ou Papous, ou Negritos d’origine, constituent une race intermédiaire entre les Malais et les nègres. Ils se divisent en Alfakis, qui sont des montagnards, et en Papouas proprement dits, qui occupent le littoral. Ces indigènes, ni agriculteurs ni pasteurs, forment des tribus isolées, sous le commandement de vieux chefs, auxquels est attribué le nom de “capitans”. Ils n’habitent que des huttes misérables. Ils sont à peine vêtus de peaux de bêtes ou de pagnes en écorce. Du reste, la vie est facile sur ces territoires de la Nouvelle-Guinée et des Louisiades. L’alimentation s’y voit largement assurée: des tortues, des poissons, des taros, des ignames, des coquillages en abondance, des cannes à sucre, des bananes, des noix de coco, du sagou, des choux-palmistes. Dans les magnifiques forêts de l’intérieur, riches en muscadiers, lataniers, bambous, ébéniers, pullulent les cochons, les kangourous, les pigeons kalaos, les ramiers d’espèce comestible. Là aussi se rencontre, par excellence, l’habitat du monde ornithologique: kakatois, perroquets, koukals, loris, perruches, tourterelles, gouras, nikobars, martins-pêcheurs, ménares-lyres.

À citer, entre tous, les plus remarquables spécimens des oiseaux de Paradis, huit espèces admirables, depuis le grand émeraude jusqu’au manucode royal, recherchés à de beaux prix par les marchands de l’Asie orientale. De là vient qu’un voyageur a pu appeler cette région l’Eldorado de l’Océanie, auquel ne manquent ni les bois précieux, ni l’or, ni les perles de grande valeur.

Il n’était pas question que le James-Cook visitât les points principaux de la Nouvelle-Guinée, le havre Dori, le golfe Mac Cluer, la baie Geelwink, la baie Humboldt, la baie du Triton, où les Hollandais ont quelques établissements. Il se contenterait de doubler le cap Rodney, à l’extrémité la plus orientale de la grand île, en prenant du large, afin d’éviter ses innombrables récifs.

Cela se fit dans la journée du 15 novembre. De cette distance on put apercevoir la chaîne de l’Astrolabe, élevée de trois à quatre mille pieds, et les pitons qui la dominent, le Simpson, le Sucking. Puis, sous une voilure réduite, rapidement manœuvrable, toujours prête à être masquée ou éventée, le brick donna dans cette mer hérissée d’écueils, comprise entre l’archipel des Salomon et la longue pointe que la Papouasie détache vers le sud-est.

Il n’y avait aucun navire en vue, aucune embarcation indigène ne se montrait de ce côté.

Pendant la nuit, tout le monde à bord s’imposa une extrême vigilance. Les hautes voiles avaient été carguées, bien que la brise fut molle, et le James-Cook ne navigua que sous ses deux huniers, sa trinquette, son grand foc et sa brigantine.

Au-delà du cap Rodney, des feux assez nombreux furent aperçus le long de la côte, au revers de la pointe papouasienne et sur l’île d’Entrecasteaux, qu’un détroit de quelques milles sépare du cap.

L’obscurité était profonde, le temps couvert. Pas une étoile au ciel. Une heure après le coucher du soleil, le croissant de la lune avait disparu derrière les nuages de l’horizon.

Peut-être, entre onze heures et minuit, les hommes de quart entrevirent-ils quelques pirogues à proximité du James-Cook; mais ils n’auraient pu l’affirmer. Dans tous les cas, il n’y eut pas lieu de se mettre sur la défensive et la nuit s’écoula sans incidents.

Le lendemain, le vent, qui avait fraîchi au lever du jour, tomba soudain. La mer prit une apparence huileuse. Comme les nuages se dissipèrent vers dix heures, il fallait s’attendre à subir une haute température, ces parages étant situés à dix degrés seulement de l’Équateur, et le mois de novembre correspondant au mois de mai de l’hémisphère septentrional.

Un peu avant midi, par le travers de l’île d’Entrecasteaux laissée sur bâbord, la vigie signala l’approche d’une pirogue. Cette embarcation venait probablement de la grande terre, après avoir contourné le sud de l’île, et marchait en direction du James-Cook, immobilisé par le calme.

Dès que Karl Kip eut aperçu la pirogue, il dit à M. Hawkins:

“Ou je me trompe fort, ou cette embarcation cherche à nous accoster...

- Je le crois comme vous”, répondit l’armateur.

M. Gibson, son fils, et Pieter Kip, sortis du rouf, se dirigèrent sur l’avant.

La pirogue, faite d’écorce d’arbre, non munie de balancier, était de petite dimension. Elle marchait à la pagaie, sans trop de hâte, manœuvrant entre les têtes de roches qui s’étendent au sud-est de l’île d’Entrecasteaux.

Dès qu’il l’eut observée avec sa longue-vue:

“Elle n’est montée que par deux hommes, déclara M. Gibson.

- Deux hommes?... répéta M. Hawkins. Eh bien, si leur intention est de venir à bord, je ne crois pas qu’il y ait grand inconvénient à les recevoir...

- Et je serais curieux, ajouta Nat Gibson, d’examiner d’un peu près le type papoua...

- Laissons approcher, répondit le capitaine. Dans dix minutes, la pirogue sera bord à bord, et nous saurons ce que veulent ces indigènes.

- Trafiquer sans doute... dit M. Hawkins.

- Il n’y a pas d’autre embarcation en vue?... demanda Pieter Kip.

- Aucune”, répliqua M. Gibson, qui venait d’examiner la mer du côté du large, puis au nord et au sud de l’île d’Entrecasteaux.

La pirogue gagnait vers le brick, poussée par la double pagaie dont les palettes se levaient et s’abaissaient avec une régularité mécanique.

Lorsqu’elle ne fut plus qu’à une cinquantaine de pieds du James-Cook, un des indigènes se redressa et cria ce mot:

“Éboura... éboura!”

Le capitaine, penché au-dessus du bastingage, se retourna vers ses compagnons et dit:

“C’est un mot qui signifie “oiseau” dans le langage des naturels de la Nouvelle-Irlande, et je suppose que les Papouas de la Nouvelle-Guinée lui donnent la même signification.”

M. Gibson ne se trompait pas. Le sauvage tenait de la main droite un oiseau qui valait sans doute la peine de figurer dans une collection ornithologique.

C’était, en effet, un paridisier de l’espèce manucode, comme on le vit bientôt, le paradisier royal, plumage rouge brun velouté, tête partiellement couleur orange, tache noirâtre à l’angle de l’œil, gorge mordorée, traversée d’une raie brunâtre et d’une raie d’un vert métallique, le reste du corps d’une parfaite blancheur, le flanc garni de plumes émeraude à leur extrémité, les unes rouges, les autres jaunes, avec filets cornés, armés de fines barbules, enroulés à leurs pointes. Cet oiseau, d’une longueur d’environ six pouces, est de ceux, prétend-on, qui ne perchent nulle part et dont les indigènes n’ont jamais pu découvrir le nid. C’est l’un des plus curieux, des plus intéressants en ce pays papoua, où ils se rencontrent en grand nombre.

“Ma foi, dit M. Hawkins, je ne serais pas fâché de me procurer un de ces paradisiers, dont Gibson m’a parlé si souvent...

- Ce sera facile, répondit Pieter Kip, car ce sauvage vient certainement pour l’échanger...

- Qu’il monte à bord”, ordonna le capitaine.

Un des matelots déploya l’échelle de corde. La pirogue accosta et l’indigène, son oiseau à la main, s’élança lestement sur le pont, répétant:

“Éboura... éboura...”

Son compagnon était resté dans la pirogue, dont la bosse fut tournée à un taquet, et il ne cessa de regarder attentivement le brick sans répondre aux signes que lui faisaient les matelots.

Le naturel qui venait d’embarquer présentait le type distinctif de cette race de papouas-malais qui occupent les parties littorales de la Nouvelle-Guinée: taille moyenne, corps trapu, constitution vigoureuse, nez grossièrement épaté, large bouche aux lèvres épaisses, traits anguleux, cheveux rudes et droits, peau d’un jaune sale à coloration peu foncée, physionomie dure, mais non dépourvue d’intelligence et même d’astuce.

Cet homme, dans l’opinion de M. Gibson, devait être un capitan, un chef de tribu. Âgé d’une cinquantaine d’années, à peu près nu, il n’avait pour tout vêtement qu’une peau de kangourou autour des reins, un pagne d’écorce sur les épaules.

Comme M. Hawkins n’avait pu retenir un geste admiratif à la vue de l’oiseau, ce fut à lui que l’indigène s’adressa tout d’abord. Après avoir élevé le paradisier à la hauteur de sa tête, il le balança et le retourna pour le montrer sous toutes ses faces.

M. Hawkins, très décidé à faire l’acquisition de ce magnifique manucode, se demandait ce qu’il pourrait donner en échange. Très probablement le Papoua ne serait point sensible à l’offre d’une piastre dont il ne connaissait sans doute pas la valeur.

Celui-ci l’eut bientôt tiré d’embarras, en répétant, la bouche grande ouverte:

“Wobba... wobba!”

Ce mot, M. Gibson le traduisit par: “À boire! à boire!...” et il fit monter de la cambuse une bouteille de wisky.

Le capitan la prit, s’assura qu’elle était pleine du liquide blanchâtre qu’il connaissait bien, et, sans la déboucher, il la mit sous son bras. Puis, le voici qui arpente le pont du brick de l’avant à l’arrière, regardant moins l’acastillage et les agrès que les matelots, les passagers et le capitaine. On eût dit qu’il cherchait à se rendre compte du nombre de personnes qui se trouvaient à bord. C’est ce que crut remarquer Karl Kip, et il en toucha un mot à son frère.

Nat Gibson eut alors l’idée de photographier ce type. Non point qu’il songeât à lui faire cadeau de son portrait, car le temps lui aurait manqué pour obtenir l’épreuve.

Il voulait enrichir sa collection en y introduisant un Papoua authentique.

“C’est une bonne idée, dit M. Hawkins; mais comment empêcher ce diable-là de bouger?...

- Essayons”, répondit Nat Gibson.

Il prit donc l’indigène par le bras afin de le conduire à l’arrière. Et comme celui-ci, ne comprenant pas ce qu’on attendait de lui, opposait quelque résistance:

“Assaï”, lui dit M. Gibson.

Ce mot est le vocatif du verbe “venir” dans le langage papouasien, et le capitan y répondit en se dirigeant vers le rouf.

Nat Gibson apporta son appareil à l’arrière et le déposa sur le trépied. Puis, avant de le braquer sur le sauvage, il chercha à placer celui-ci dans une pose convenable de manière à obtenir un bon cliché.

Mais le capitan, fort agité, fort démonstratif, se mit à remuer la tête, les bras, et comment l’obliger à rester tranquille pendant les quelques secondes nécessaires à l’opération?... Par bonheur, lorsqu’il eut vu Nat Gibson disparaître sous le voile noir de l’objectif, la surprise lui donna une immobilité complète.

Cet instant suffit pour la pose, et, l’opération terminée, le capitan, sa bouteille à la main, gagna aussitôt vers l’échelle de tribord.

Mais, en passant sur l’avant du rouf, dont la porte était ouverte, il y entra comme pour s’assurer qu’il ne s’y trouvait personne. Et ce fut le même sentiment qui le conduisit jusqu’au poste de l’équipage, dont le capot était rabattu. Enfin ses regards s’arrêtèrent sur la petite pièce de cuivre braquée à l’avant, et dont il n’ignorait pas la puissance, car il s’écria:

“Mera... mera!”

Mot du vocabulaire indigène qui signifie tonnerre, comme “oura” signifie éclair ou lumière vive.

À ce moment, l’œil du capitan brilla d’une flamme qui s’éteignit presque soudain, et sa physionomie reprit cette insignifiance qui distingue les représentants de la race andamène.

Revenu enfin près de l’échelle, le Papoua franchit le bastingage, descendit dans la pirogue, promena une dernière fois son regard de l’avant à l’arrière du brick, et saisit une des pagaies, tandis que son compagnon saisissait l’autre. L’embarcation, rapidement manœuvrée, ne tarda pas à disparaître au tournant de l’île d’Entrecasteaux pour rallier la pointe de la grande terre.

“Avez-vous vu, demanda alors Karl Kip, avec quelle attention cet homme observait le James-Cook, et surtout son équipage?...

- Cela m’a frappé”, répondit M. Hawkins.

De son côté, le capitaine Gibson avait fait la même remarque. Toutefois, que le Papoua fût venu à bord se rendre compte des forces dont le brick disposait, rien de moins certain. Il avait un oiseau à vendre, il l’avait vendu, on le lui avait payé d’une bouteille de wisky, il s’en été montré satisfait, la pirogue l’avait reconduit là d’où il venait... Avant une heure il serait ivre mort, et on ne le reverrait plus.

Soit, mais, en somme, il était à regretter que le James-Cook fût à peu près encalminé à cette place par le travers de l’île d’Entrecasteaux. La brise ne se faisait plus sentir qu’en souffles intermittents. Les dernières rides de la mer s’effaçaient, et sa surface se gonflait à peine d’une longue houle.

M. Gibson se demandait donc s’il n’y aurait pas lieu de mouiller avec cinquante brasses de chaîne. En se rapprochant de l’île, il trouverait une bonne tenue et pourrait attendre la reprise des vents du sud-est.

Il s’entretint à ce sujet avec le maître d’équipage, qui ne vit aucun inconvénient à jeter l’ancre.

Flig Balt avait ses raisons pour approuver le capitaine, ou, plutôt, Vin Mod lui avait dit:

“Le temps est couvert, la nuit sera pluvieuse, une de ces pluies sans vent qui tombent du soir jusqu’au matin... Il est probable que M. Hawkins, les deux Hollandais, le fils Gibson iront dormir dans leurs cabines... Il ne restera sur le pont que le capitaine et les hommes de quart... Lorsque viendra le tour de Len Cannon, de Sexton, de Kyle et de Bryce, les autres seront dans le poste... C’est peut-être l’occasion qui nous a manqué jusqu’ici de surprendre M. Gibson, de nous débarrasser de lui, et, si nous ne parvenons pas à nous emparer du brick, d’avoir du moins Flig Balt pour capitaine...”

Tel avait été préalablement le sujet d’une conversation entre Vin Mod et Len Cannon, à laquelle prirent part Kyle, Sexton et Bryce. Oui... tout d’abord, en finir avec le capitaine Gibson, puis on aviserait...

Or, les circonstances allaient être favorables, si le brick jetait l’ancre au lieu de passer la nuit sous voiles. M. Gibson serait seul à veiller sans doute, et, par accident, il aurait disparu...

Or, ce qui déjoua les plans de Vin Mod, c’est que le capitaine Gibson voulut avoir l’avis de Karl Kip sur la convenance de mouiller ou non jusqu’au lever du jour.

Et Karl Kip lui répondit sans hésiter:

“Je n’en ferais rien à votre place, monsieur Gibson... Ces parages ne sont pas sûrs... Une attaque des indigènes est toujours à craindre... Si cela arrive, mieux vaut ne pas être au mouillage et, pour peu que la brise se déclare, pouvoir s’éloigner sans perdre du temps à lever l’ancre et à hisser les voiles.”

Le capitaine, comprenant la justesse de ces raisons, s’y rendit. Donc, à l’extrême mécontentement du maître d’équipage et de ses complices, le James-Cook conserva sa voilure de nuit, lorsque le soleil fut couché, et il demeura en vue de l’île d’Entrecasteaux, distante de deux à trois milles.

D’autre part, la pluie, qui avait commencé vers cinq heures du soir, ne dura pas. L’orage se manifestait par des éclairs de chaleur et de lointains roulements. La température était très élevée, le thermomètre Farenheit marquant quatre-vingt-dix degrés [32° 22 centigrades.]. Aussi, ni M. Hawkins, ni Nat Gibson, ni Karl et Pieter Kip n’allèrent-ils occuper leurs cabines. Tous, comme les matelots qui n’étaient pas de quart, s’étendirent sur le pont.

Décidément, la malchance se déclarait une fois de plus contre Flig Balt, Vin Mod et leurs partisans.

Il va sans dire que M. Gibson avait donné des ordres et pris ses mesures pour que les approches du brick fussent surveillées avec le plus grand soin. Les hommes durent se tenir à l’avant et à l’arrière. Quoi qu’eut dit M.

Hawkins, l’observation de Karl Kip subsistait. Le capitan n’était-il venu à bord que dans le but d’échanger son oiseau de Paradis contre un objet quelconque, ou pour reconnaître les forces du James-Cook?...

Précisément, devant le rouf, on causa de l’incident, tout d’abord, puis de choses et autres.

La tente avait été serrée afin de donner plus d’air. Un profond silence régnait autour du navire. Au large, pas un feu n’attirait les regards, ni du côté de l’île d’Entrecasteaux, certainement inhabitée.

Puis la conversation tomba peu à peu. Les paupières s’alourdirent, et, sans doute, le sommeil allait vaincre les plus résistants, lorsqu’une voix se fit entendre, - la voix de Jim, qui se promenait le long de la coursive.

“Pirogues... pirogues!” criait le mousse.

Tous furent immédiatement sur pied, capitaine, passagers, équipage, et se portèrent du côté de bâbord.

C’était dans cette direction, en effet, que Jim avait aperçu ou cru apercevoir des embarcations en marche vers le brick.

Au milieu de cette obscure nuit, peut-être s’était-il trompé?...

On le pensa au premier moment. Un trouble des eaux, tel qu’en produit une pagaie, eut bientôt montré que le mousse n’avait point fait erreur, et Nat Gibson de s’écrier à son tour:

“Là... là... des embarcations!”

Un des matelots projeta alors la lumière d’un fanal en cette direction, ce qui permit de distinguer plusieurs pirogues à une trentaine de pieds du navire. Sans la vigilance de Jim, le brick eût été surpris par une brusque attaque, et on n’aurait pas eu le temps de se mettre sur la défensive.

“Aux fusils... aux revolvers!” ordonna aussitôt M. Gibson.

Les matelots accoururent vers le rouf, les armes furent distribuées. Chacun reçut un fusil ou un revolver avec cartouches de rechange, et alla se poster le long du bastingage de bâbord, de manière à repousser ceux des assaillants qui tenteraient de s’élancer sur le pont.

Au large, d’ailleurs, à l’opposé de l’île d’Entrecasteaux, on n’apercevait rien de suspect, on n’entendait aucun bruit de pagaies. Pas la moindre agitation à la surface de la mer, et il n’était pas probable que d’autres embarcations vinssent de l’est.

Les indigènes, cependant, voyant la lumière du fanal braquée sur eux, comprirent qu’ils étaient découverts. Plus de surprise possible. Aussi l’attaque commença-t-elle à l’instant. Une volée de flèches et une pluie de pierres, lancées à la fronde, vinrent s’abattre contre les flancs du brick ou passèrent au-dessus du pont entre les agrès.

Personne ne fut touché, mais, à la quantité des projectiles, il fallut bien reconnaître que les assaillants devaient être nombreux. Et, de fait, ils n’étaient pas moins d’une soixantaine, embarqués sur une dizaine de grandes pirogues. Or le capitaine ne disposait que d’une quinzaine d’hommes, en comptant le mousse Jim.

“Feu!” commanda-t-il.

Et de multiples coups de feu, répondant à l’agression des Papouas, accueillirent les embarcations. Nul doute que plusieurs balles n’eussent atteint leur but. Des cris de blessés s’élevèrent, en même temps qu’une seconde nuée de flèches tombait sur le navire.

“Attendons maintenant, dit le capitaine. Ne tirez plus qu’à bout portant sur les premiers de ces coquins qui voudront franchir le bastingage!”

Cela ne tarda guère. Un instant après, les pirogues heurtaient la coque du brick. Puis les Papouas, s’accrochant aux armatures des haubans, essayèrent de se hisser jusqu’à la lisse, afin d’envahir le pont et d’y engager une lutte corps à corps.

Évidemment, dans ces conditions, une fois à bord, les indigènes ne pourraient plus employer ni l’arc ni la fronde.

Mais ils ne seraient pas désarmés. Leurs bras brandissaient cette sorte de couperet de fer, nommé “parang” en langue insulaire, qu’ils savent manier avec autant de vigueur que d’habileté.

Donc, nécessité de repousser l’assaut à coups de fusil, à coups de revolver, à coups de coutelas, nécessité de rejeter les sauvages à la mer, avant qu’ils eussent pu mettre le pied sur le pont.

En premier lieu, les Papouas parurent à la hauteur de la lisse, en s’arc-boutant aux porte-haubans du grand mât et du mât de misaine. Aussitôt repoussés, ils retombèrent au fond des pirogues.

Du reste, à la lueur des détonations, on avait reconnu l’un d’eux. C’était le capitan, chef de toute cette bande, venu à bord en vue de cette attaque.

Cependant le nombre des assaillants était si considérable, les forces si disproportionnées, que la situation ne laissait pas d'être des plus graves. Si le capitan et les Papouas envahissaient le pont, le personnel du James-Cook, malgré la supériorité de ses armes, finirait par être accablé. Réduit à se réfugier à l'intérieur du rouf à l'arrière, ou dans le poste à l'avant, il y serait bientôt forcé. Un massacre s'ensuivrait dans lequel tous succomberaient. Impossible d'employer la petite pièce d'artillerie. Excellente lorsqu'il s'agissait de tirer à distance sur une pirogue, elle était sans utilité du moment que les pirogues se trouvaient bord à bord.

D'ailleurs, ils se défendirent avec autant de vigueur que de courage, les passagers et les matelots du James-Cook. Au début, cinq ou six indigènes avaient pu se hisser contre la coque. Les pieds appuyés sur le liston, ils tentèrent d'enjamber le bastingage; mais, revolvers et coutelas aidant, ils furent contraints de s'abattre, les uns dans les embarcations, les autres dans la mer.

Il est vrai, du côté des assaillis, quelques-uns ne tardèrent pas à être blessés - entre autres Pieter Kip et le matelot Burnes, atteints d'un coup de parang, celui-ci au bras, celui-là à l'épaule. Ces blessures, légères fort heureusement, ne les obligèrent même pas à abandonner leur poste. En somme les armes à feu firent des ravages plus sérieux parmi les indigènes.

Le combat ne dura qu'une dizaine de minutes, et les Papouas ne parvinrent pas à prendre possession du brick. Pendant un instant, le capitan et deux sauvages, le couperet en main, étaient parvenus à se hisser par les porte-haubans, et ils allaient franchir la lisse, tandis que deux ou trois pirogues se dirigeaient vers l'arrière. Alors Karl Kip, secondé par Nat Gibson, s'élançant sur le capitan, lui troua la poitrine de deux balles, tandis que le jeune homme tirait sur les embarcations.

Lorsque les Papouas virent tomber leur chef, dont le corps disparut sous les eaux, ils ralentirent l'attaque et parurent disposés à l'abandonner. N'ayant pu surprendre le navire, ils se rendaient compte qu'elle ne réussirait pas, bien qu'ils fussent au moins quatre contre un. Ceux qui voulaient encore sauter sur le pont, soit par la proue, soit par le couronnement, ne tardèrent pas à lâcher pied. Obligés de se défendre à leur tour, ils tentèrent de se rembarquer dans les pirogues. Quelques-uns, grièvement frappés, se noyèrent. Et si deux ou trois matelots furent encore blessés à coups de parang, du moins n'y eut-il pas un mort de leur côté.

Il était à peine dix heures et quart lorsque les embarcations commencèrent à s'éloigner du brick.

Alors les derniers coups furent dirigés sur elles, tant qu'on put les apercevoir.

À ce moment, sans doute par la faute d'un maladroit, - et la profonde obscurité eût été son excuse, - une balle vint frôler la tête de M. Gibson de si près que son chapeau fut emporté jusqu'à l'arrière du rouf.

Le capitaine ne s'en inquiéta pas autrement, bien que la balle eût failli lui traverser la tête. Il se précipita vers l'avant, suivi de son fils, qu'il venait d'appeler, et tous deux eurent rapidement mis en position la petite pièce de cuivre.

Les pirogues, à une encablure du James-Cook, présentaient encore une masse confuse vers laquelle le matelot Hobbes dirigea la lumière du fanal.

La pièce, chargée, étoupillée, était prête à faire feu par le sabord, qui fut relevé de ce côté.

Le coup partit, et des hurlements répondirent à la détonation.

Si on ne le vit pas, aucun doute que l'un des canots n'eût été atteint par le projectile et coulé avec les Papouas qui le montaient.

La pièce fut aussitôt rechargée, non pour servir une seconde fois, mais en prévision d'un retour offensif qui ne se produisit pas.

Le faisceau lumineux du fanal, promené dans la direction de l'ouest, n'éclairait plus qu'une surface de mer absolument déserte, et déjà les pirogues s'étaient abritées derrière l'île d'Entrecasteaux.

Maintenant le James-Cook n'avait plus rien à craindre, ou du moins il ne serait pas surpris. Les précautions seraient maintenues, et l'on veillerait, toutes armes en état, jusqu'au lever du jour.

Les blessures de Pieter Kip, de Burnes et de trois autres des matelots furent alors visitées.

M. Hawkins, qui s'y connaissait, put assurer qu'elles ne présentaient aucune gravité. La pharmacie du bord permit de leur appliquer un premier pansement et aucun des blessés ne songea même à regagner ni sa cabine, ni le poste d'équipage.

Lorsque Flig Balt et Vin Mod se retrouvèrent seuls à l'avant du brick, le matelot dit à voix basse:

“Manqué... on l'a manqué!”

Et, si Flig Balt, suivant son habitude, ne répondit pas, Vin Mod savait bien ce que signifiait ce silence...

“Que voulez-vous, maître Balt, ajouta-t-il, au milieu d’une nuit si noire, on ajuste mal!... Après tout, il n’a même pas l’air de s’en être aperçu!... Une autre fois... on sera plus heureux!”

Puis, se penchant à l’oreille de son compagnon:

“Fâcheux, tout de même!... murmura-t-il. À cette heure, Flig Balt serait le capitaine du brick, et Vin Mod son maître d’équipage!”

X - En remontant vers le nord

Lorsque les dernières ombres de la nuit se furent dissipées, tous les regards se portèrent autour du brick. Le James-Cook occupait encore la même place que la veille, à trois milles dans l’est d’Entrecasteaux, comme s’il fût resté sur son ancre. Aucun courant ne se faisait sentir, aucun souffle ne ridait la surface de la mer, à peine soulevée par une molle et longue houle qui ne le déplaçait pas.

Point de pirogue en vue, seulement les débris de celle que le projectile avait fracassée, qui flottaient çà et là. Quant à ceux qui la montaient, ou ils avaient pu être recueillis à bord des autres embarcations, ou l’abîme s’était refermé sur eux.

M. Gibson promena sa longue-vue sur le littoral de l’île, puis à travers le semis des récifs de coraux qui entourent la pointe méridionale. Des milliers d’oiseaux volaient au-dessus à grands coups d’aile. On n’aperçut ni un canot, ni un homme. Personne ne mit en doute que les indigènes n’eussent regagné au-delà du détroit quelque village riverain de la Nouvelle-Guinée.

Néanmoins, il importait de fuir ces parages dès que le départ serait possible. À certains indices, M. Gibson reconnut que la brise ne tarderait pas à reprendre.

Ce fut aussi l’opinion de Karl Kip, lorsque le soleil se leva au milieu des vapeurs empourprées de l’horizon. La mer “sentait quelque chose” en cette direction, et un léger clapotis se laissait déjà entendre.

“Je serais surpris, dit le capitaine, si nous n’avons pas bon vent dans une heure ou deux...

- Et, s’il tient pendant seulement quatre jours, affirma M. Hawkins, nous arriverons à destination.

- En effet, répondit M. Gibson, c’est à peine si trois cents milles nous séparent de la Nouvelle-Irlande.”

À supposer qu’il en fût ainsi, que le calme prît fin dans la matinée, la navigation du James-Cook serait assurément favorisée. Il se trouverait alors en pleine zone des alizés du sud-est, qui règnent de mai à novembre et auxquels succède la mousson pendant les autres mois de l’année.

M. Gibson était donc prêt à hisser ses hautes voiles dès que la brise les pourrait remplir. Ce ne serait pas trop tôt s’éloigner de cette dangereuse région de la Papouasie et de la Louisiade. Appuyé d’un bon vent, tout dessus et grand largue, ce n’étaient pas les pirogues à pagaies ou à balancier qui parviendraient à rejoindre le James-Cook, si les indigènes prétendaient renouveler leur attaque.

Du reste, ils ne reparurent pas. Aussi les armes, fusils et revolvers, furent-elles rentrées dans le rouf. On retira la petite pièce du sabord d’avant. Le brick n’aurait plus à se tenir sur la défensive.

Et, à ce propos, M. Gibson fit allusion à la balle maladroite qui l’avait effleuré la veille, au moment où Karl Kip repoussait le capitan et le précipitait à la mer.

“Comment!... s’écria M. Hawkins, très étonné, tu as failli...

- Être atteint... mon ami, et il ne s’en est pas fallu d’un demi-pouce que je n’eusse la tête traversée.

- Nous l’ignorions, déclara Pieter Kip. Mais êtes-vous sûr que ce soit un coup de feu?... N’est-ce pas plutôt une javeline ou une zagaie que vous aurait lancée un de ces sauvages?...

- Non, répondit Nat Gibson.

Voici le chapeau de mon père, et vous voyez qu’il a été percé d’une balle.”

Il n’y eut aucun doute après l’examen du chapeau. En somme, il n’était pas surprenant que, pendant la lutte, au milieu de cette profonde obscurité, un des revolvers eût été mal dirigé, et l’on n’y pensa plus.

Vers sept heures et demie, la brise avait acquis assez de force et de régularité pour que le brick pût se mettre en route avec cap au nord-ouest. Perroquets et cacatois, bonnettes et voiles d’étai, qui portent bien sous l’allure du largue, furent hissés. Puis, l’appareillage terminé, le James-Cook reprit sa navigation interrompue depuis une vingtaine d’heures.

Avant midi, l’extrémité septentrionale de l’île d’Entrecasteaux était doublée. Au-delà apparut une dernière fois la grande terre, où se profilait l’arête capricieuse des hautes montagnes qui dominent la côte orientale de la Nouvelle-Guinée.

Aussi loin que la vue pouvait s’étendre, la mer était déserte. Toute crainte d’une seconde agression devait disparaître. Du côté de l’est se développait l’immense plaine liquide, limitée au périmètre de la mer et du ciel.

Cependant, à défaut des naturels dont il n’y avait plus à se défier, il fallait compter avec les brusques coups de vent qui désolent cette portion du Pacifique resserrée entre la Papouasie, les îles Salomon et les archipels du nord. Ils ne durent pas, d’ailleurs, et ne sont redoutables que pour le capitaine négligent ou inexpérimenté, qu'ils surprennent. On les appelle des “grains noirs”. Un navire qui n'est pas sur ses gardes risque de chavirer sous voiles.

Pendant cette journée et la nuit qui suivit, il n'y eut point à parer un de ces grains.

La direction du vent ne se modifia aucunement. Lorsque le James-Cook eut laissé sur bâbord l'île Monyon, aride et inhabitée, qui se dresse au milieu de son anneau coralligène, il rencontra une mer moins encombrée de bancs madréporiques et put maintenir sa vitesse à une moyenne de dix milles.

Dans ces conditions, on comprendra que l'occasion toujours attendue de Flig Balt, de Vin Mod et des autres ne se fût pas offerte. M. Gibson, son fils, l'armateur, les frères Kip, ne passaient point les nuits dans leurs cabines, ni les matelots Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes et Jim le mousse, dans le poste. Donc, impossibilité de se débarrasser du capitaine... par accident, puisqu'il n'était jamais seul.

Bien que l'on fût à l'époque de l'année où le grand cabotage peut s'effectuer avec quelque sécurité à travers les mers mélanésiennes, le brick ne rencontrait aucun navire sur sa route. Cela tenait à ce que les comptoirs ne sont pas encore assez nombreux, assez importants dans ces archipels situés entre l'Équateur et la côte septentrionale de la Papouasie. Ils ne donnent point lieu à ce trafic constant que l'avenir développera sans doute. M. Gibson, arrivé au Port-Praslin, n'y trouverait probablement aucun autre bâtiment et il en repartirait sans avoir pris langue avec des voiliers anglais ou allemands.

Voici, d'ailleurs, comment les archipels sont distribués au double point de vue politique et géographique.

Depuis nombre d’années, suivant son habitude, l’Angleterre, plus ou moins légalement, étendait son protectorat sur ces îles, voisines de la Nouvelle-Guinée, lorsque, en 1884, une convention intervint entre l’Allemagne et le Royaume-Uni.

Par suite de cette convention, toutes les îles qui occupaient les parages au nord-est de la Papouasie, jusqu’au cent quarante et unième degré de longitude à l’est du méridien de Greenwich, furent déclarées possession germanique.

C’était une population évaluée à cent mille âmes, qui accroissait le domaine colonial de l’Allemagne, dont le souci allait être d’y attirer des émigrants.

Or il convient de provoquer plus spécialement l’attention du lecteur sur le groupe principal, en ce qui concerne ce récit.

Les deux îles les plus importantes de ce groupe sont Tombara ou Nouvelle-Irlande, et Birara ou Nouvelle-Bretagne. Elles affectent toutes deux la forme d’une étroite courbure. La première est séparée de la Nouvelle-Guinée par le détroit de Dampier. Le canal Saint-Georges se dessine entre la pointe sud et la pointe nord-est de la seconde, au milieu de nombreux récifs coralligènes.

Les cartes indiquent ensuite, mais de moindre étendue, l’île Neu-Hanover, l’île York, et quelques autres, habitées ou désertes, d’une contenance totale de quinze cent quatre-vingts kilomètres carrés.

Qu’on ne s’étonne pas si, après le traité de partage de deux puissances, aux dénominations anglaises ou mélanésiennes furent substituées des dénominations allemandes: ainsi Tombara ou Nouvelle-Irlande est devenue Neu-Mecklenburg; Biraba ou Nouvelle-Bretagne est devenue Neu-

Pommern ou Nouvelle-Poméranie; York est devenue Neu-Leminburg. Seul Neu-Hanover a gardé son nom, et pour cause, puisqu'il était déjà germanisé.

Restait à baptiser l'ensemble de ces îles qui constitue une possession assez importante en cette partie du Pacifique. Actuellement, ce groupe figure sur les cartes sous le nom d'archipel Bismarck.

Lorsque Pieter Kip demanda à M. Hawkins dans quelles circonstances et dans quelles conditions il se trouvait en rapport commercial avec cet archipel, et plus spécialement avec la Nouvelle-Irlande:

“J'étais, répondit l'armateur, le correspondant d'une maison de Wellington en Nouvelle-Zélande, qui faisait des affaires avec Tombara.

- Avant le traité de partage, monsieur Hawkins?...

- Une dizaine d'années avant, monsieur Kip; et, lorsque cette maison a liquidé, j'ai pris la suite de ses affaires. Puis, après la convention de 1884 entre l'Angleterre et l'Allemagne, je suis entré en relation avec les nouveaux comptoirs fondés par les colons allemands. C'est même le James-Cook qui fut plus particulièrement affecté à ces voyages, dont les bénéfices tendent à s'accroître.

- Est-ce que le commerce a gagné plus d'extension depuis le traité?...

- Assurément, monsieur Kip, et je crois qu'il se développera encore... La race teutonne émigre volontiers dans l'espoir de faire fortune.

- Et qu'exporte surtout l'archipel?...

- De la nacre, qui est abondante, et, comme on trouve en quantité sur ces îles les plus beaux cocotiers du monde, ainsi que vous pourrez en juger, elles fournissent des cargaisons de ce coprah[1], dont nous devons embarquer précisément trois cents tonnes à Port-Praslin.

- Et comment, demanda Karl Kip, l’Allemagne a-t-elle établi sa domination sur cet archipel?...

- Tout simplement, répondit M. Hawkins, en affermant les différentes îles à une Compagnie commerciale, laquelle détient aussi l’autorité politique.

Mais, en réalité, son pouvoir n’est pas très étendu, et son action sur les indigènes est peu considérable. Elle se borne à assurer la sécurité des émigrants et la sûreté des transactions.

- D’ailleurs, comme le dit M. Hawkins, ajouta Nat Gibson, tout porte à croire que la prospérité de l’archipel augmentera. On a pu constater de grands progrès, surtout à Tombara, dont la découverte fut faite en 1616 par le Hollandais Shouten. C’est un de vos compatriotes, monsieur Kip, qui s’est aventuré le premier à travers ces mers si dangereuses.

- Je le sais, monsieur Nat, répondit Karl Kip. Au surplus, la Hollande a laissé son empreinte dans les parages mélanésiens, et ses marins s’y sont illustrés à plusieurs reprises.

- C’est exact, déclara M. Gibson.

[1] Le coprah, c’est l’amande de la noix de coco, lorsque, concassée et séchée sur le sable à l’ardeur du soleil, elle est prête à être envoyée au moulin pour en extraire l’huile dont on fait du savon.

- Cependant elle n’a pas conservé toutes ses découvertes, fit observer M. Hawkins.

- Non, sans doute, mais, en gardant les Moluques, il lui en est resté une grosse part, et elle abandonne volontiers à l’Allemagne son archipel Bismarck”.

C’était, en effet, le navigateur Shouten qui, au commencement du XVIIe siècle, avait reconnu la bande orientale de la Nouvelle-Irlande. Les premiers rapports avec les indigènes furent hostiles, attaques de pirogues à coups de fronde, ripostes à coups de mousquets, et ce début de la campagne fut marqué par la mort d’une douzaine de sauvages.

Après Shouten, c’est encore un Hollandais, Tasman, celui qui devait donner son nom à la Tasmanie, appelée également la Diémanie, du nom d’un autre Hollandais, Van Diemen, lequel releva cette côte en 1643.

Après eux viennent les Anglais, et entre autres Dampier, dont le nom est attribué au détroit qui sépare la Nouvelle-Guinée de Birara. Dampier releva la côte du nord au sud, prit terre sur plusieurs points, eut à repousser l’agression des insulaires dans une baie qu’il nomma baie des Frondeurs.

En 1767, Carteret, un navigateur anglais, visita la partie sud-ouest de l’île et fit relâche à Port-Praslin, puis au havre qui porte son nom dans l’anse aux Anglais.

En 1768, au cours de son voyage autour du monde, Bougainville mouilla, lui aussi, à Port-Praslin et l’appela ainsi en l’honneur du ministre de la marine, le promoteur du premier voyage des Français autour du monde.

En 1792, d’Entrecasteaux se dirigea vers la partie occidentale de l’île, inconnue jusqu’alors, en détermina les contours et passa une semaine au havre Carteret.

Enfin, en 1823, Duperrey conduisit son navire à Port-Praslin, dont le levé hydrographique fut fait par ses soins. Il eut des rapports fréquents avec les indigènes que les pirogues amenaient du village de Like-Like, établi sur le revers oriental de la Nouvelle-Irlande.

Dans la matinée du 18, la direction du brick dut être modifiée pendant quelques heures. Le vent, qui soufflait avec la constance habituelle des alizés, vint à refuser presque subitement. Les voiles faséyèrent, battirent contre les mâts, et le James-Cook ne gouverna plus.

Cette modification météorique, un capitaine prudent avait à en tenir compte, et c’est bien ce que fit M. Gibson, qui ne se laisserait pas prendre au dépourvu.

Or, à ce moment même, Karl Kip, observant l’horizon, lui montra un nuage à l’ouest, une sorte de ballon de vapeurs, aux flancs arrondis, dont la marche devait être rapide, car il grossissait à vue d’œil.

“Un grain noir va tomber à bord... dit M. Gibson.

- Il ne sera sans doute pas de longue durée... répondit Karl Kip.

- Non, mais il peut être de grande violence”, ajouta le capitaine.

Et, sur son ordre, l’équipage mit aussitôt la main à la manœuvre. Cacatois, perroquets, bonnettes, voiles d’étai, furent amenés en une minute. On cargua la misaine, la grande voile et la brigantine. Le James-Cook resta sous ses huniers au bas ris, sa trinquette et son second foc.

Il était temps. À peine le brick se trouvait-il sous cette voilure réduite, que le grain se déchaîna avec une extraordinaire impétuosité.

Tandis que les matelots se tenaient à leur poste, le capitaine devant le rouf, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, Pieter Kip avaient gagné l'arrière. Karl Kip s'était mis à la barre, et, entre ses mains, le James-Cook serait habilement gouverné.

On le comprend, lorsque le grain l'assaillit avec cette fougue, le navire fut secoué comme dans un abordage. Il s'inclina tellement sur tribord que l'extrémité de sa grande vergue trempa dans la mer toute blanche d'écume. Un coup de barre le releva, et le maintint. Plutôt que de prendre la cape pour faire tête à la rafale, M. Gibson préféra fuir devant elle, sachant par expérience que ces grains passent comme des météores et ne se prolongent pas.

Cependant c'était à se demander si le brick n'allait pas être entraîné jusqu'aux Salomon, s'il n'aurait pas tout au moins connaissance de l'île Bougainville, la première de ce groupe, qui s'étend dans le nord-est des Louisiades. Il n'en était pas alors éloigné d'une trentaine de milles.

Au total, il est possible que cette île ait pu être un instant visible.

Elle présente une haute masse du côté du nord-est, et, si cela était, c'est que le James-Cook aurait été drossé jusqu'au cent cinquante-troisième degré de longitude orientale.

Vraisemblablement, Flig Balt et Vin Mod n'éprouvèrent aucun regret à le voir ainsi jeté hors de sa route. Tout leur allait de ce qui contribuait à retarder l'arrivée à la Nouvelle-Irlande. Cet archipel des Salomon est propice aux coups de main. Les aventuriers y abondent, et il a été fréquemment le théâtre de scènes criminelles. Le maître d’équipage pouvait rencontrer, à l’île Rossel ou autres, quelques vieilles connaissances qui ne se refuseraient pas à seconder ses projets. Puis, en quels parages du Pacifique Vin Mod n’avait-il pas traîné son sac, et ne retrouverait-il pas là, lui aussi, d’anciens camarades, prêts à tout?...

D’ailleurs, ce qui excitait le maître d’équipage et son âme damnée, c’est que Len Cannon et ses compagnons les talonnaient sans cesse. Ils n’entendaient pas continuer à naviguer dans ces conditions, et ils s’entêtaient à répéter:

“Si le coup n’est pas fait avant l’arrivée à Port-Praslin, nous ne rembarquerons pas au départ... C’est une chose résolue...

- Mais que deviendrez-vous en Nouvelle-Irlande?... observait Vin Mod.

- On nous gardera comme colons, répondait Len Cannon. Les Allemands ont besoin de bras... Nous attendrons quelque bonne occasion qui ne se présenterait pas en Tasmanie, et nous n’irons jamais à Hobart-Town.”

Cette résolution était bien pour mettre en rage Flig Balt et son complice. Faute des quatre recrues, ils devaient renoncer à leurs projets.

Décidément, est-ce qu’ils ne retireraient pas de cette campagne du James-Cook ce qu’ils en avaient espéré?...

Il est vrai, si, à Port-Praslin, Len Cannon, Kyle, Sexton, Bryce désertaient, le capitaine serait très embarrassé pour reprendre la mer. Recruter d’autres matelots en cette île de Tombara, il ne fallait guère l’espérer. Port-Praslin n’était ni Dunedin ni Wellington ni Auckland, où pullulent d’ordinaire les marins en quête d’embarquement.

Ici, rien que des colons installés pour leur propre compte, ou des employés dans les maisons de commerce. De là, aucune possibilité de compléter un équipage.

Mais M. Gibson ignorait ce dont il était menacé, comme il ignorait le complot ourdi contre lui et contre son navire. Les recrues ne donnaient même lieu à aucune plainte. Quant à Flig Balt, toujours flatteur, toujours obséquieux, il ne pouvait exciter les soupçons. S'il avait également trompé M. Hawkins, du moins les frères Kip, auxquels il n'inspirait pas confiance, s'étaient-ils sans cesse tenus sur la réserve avec lui, - ce qu'il avait remarqué. Vraiment, c'était jouer de malheur que d'avoir sauvé ces naufragés de l'île Norfolk!... Et si encore le James-Cook les eût débarqués à Port-Praslin!... Non, il devait les ramener à Hobart-Town!...

Pour en revenir à Len Cannon et à ses compagnons, l'espoir qu'ils avaient pu concevoir d'être entraînés jusqu'à l'archipel des Salomon fut de courte durée. Après trois heures pendant lesquelles il se déchaîna avec une violence inouïe, le grain prit fin subitement, et la girouette, en tête du grand mât, n'obéit plus qu'aux secousses de la houle. Sous la main de Karl Kip, le navire s'était admirablement comporté et n'avait même reçu aucun de ces coups de mer si redoutables, lorsque l'on fuit vent arrière.

Alors un bâtiment ne gouverne pas ou gouverne mal, et rien de difficile comme de parer les embardées qui le jettent sur un bord ou sur l'autre. Karl Kip avait eu là l'occasion de montrer son habileté, son sang-froid. Pas un homme de l'équipage n'aurait mieux tenu la barre pendant la tourmente.

Si le vent tomba soudain, il n'en fut pas ainsi de cette mer effroyablement démontée. Les lames s'entre-choquaient à faire croire que le brick naviguait au milieu de brisants ou à l'accore de bancs madréporiques. Toutefois le calme régnait dans l'atmosphère, et, après la pluie torrentielle qui avait accompagné le grain et vidé les nuages venus de l’ouest, les alizés reprirent presque aussitôt leur direction normale.

M. Gibson fit alors larguer les ris des huniers, rétablir la misaine, la grande voile et la brigantine, les perroquets et les cacatois. On ne hissa pas les bonnettes, car il ventait fraîche brise, et il ne fallait pas surcharger la mâture. Le brick, ses amures à tribord, fit si bonne route que le lendemain 19, après avoir enlevé cent cinquante milles environ depuis l’île Bougainville, il se trouva par le travers de ce canal Saint-Georges, étroitement découpé entre les doubles hauteurs de la Nouvelle-Irlande et de la Nouvelle-Bretagne.

Le canal ne mesure en largeur que quelques milles. La navigation n’y est point aisée et de dangereux récifs se rencontrent sur toute sa longueur, mais il abrège la distance d’une bonne moitié. Il est vrai, pour les navires qui peuvent rallier directement l’extrémité occidentale de Tombara au lieu de prolonger la côte méridionale de Birara afin de chercher le passage de Dampier, il faut des pratiques aussi excellents que le capitaine Gibson.

Du reste, il n’y avait pas à le faire, puisque Port-Praslin est situé dans la partie sud de la Nouvelle-Irlande, sur ce littoral qui fait face au Pacifique, près du cap Saint-Georges, presque à l’entrée du détroit.

Comme le James-Cook fut à peu près encalminé aux approches de la terre, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les frères Kip eurent tout le loisir d’observer cette partie de la côte.

L’ossature de l’île est formée par une double chaîne de montagnes d’une altitude moyenne de six mille pieds, qui prend naissance sur ce point du littoral. Des forêts les hérissent jusqu’à leurs cimes. Impénétrables aux rayons solaires, il s’en dégage une humidité constante et la température est plus supportable qu’en ces autres contrées voisines de l’Équateur, où l’air est aussi sec que brûlant. Cette circonstance atténue très heureusement la chaleur qui règne d’ordinaire dans l’archipel Bismarck, et il est rare que la colonne thermométrique s’élève au-dessus de quatre-vingt-huit degrés Farenheit [Trente degrés centigrades.].

Pendant cette journée, le brick ne croisa que quelques pirogues sans balanciers, gréées de voiles quadrangulaires. Elles filaient le long du rivage et ne cherchèrent point à le rejoindre. Du reste, il n’y a rien à craindre de ces naturels de la Nouvelle-Irlande ou plutôt du Neu-Mecklenburg, depuis que l’archipel s’abrite sous le pavillon de l’Allemagne.

Aucun incident de mer ou autre ne troubla la nuit. Lorsque la brise revint après vingt-quatre heures de calme, il fallut manœuvrer sous petite voilure entre les bancs madréporiques et les récifs coralligènes, plus nombreux aux approches de Port-Praslin. Un navire doit se défier et éviter des avaries qui ne seraient pas aisément réparables. Tout l’équipage resta donc sur le pont, et il fut nécessaire de brasser souvent les vergues.

Inutile de le dire, ces côtes ne sont point encore éclairées entre le coucher et le lever du soleil, et les points de relèvement font défaut dans l’obscurité. Mais M. Gibson connaissait parfaitement ces approches de Port-Praslin.

Lorsque le jour revint, la vigie signala l’entrée de la rade, couverte par les hautes montagnes de Lanut. Le James-Cook s’engagea à travers les passes, navigables au plein de la mer. Vers neuf heures du matin, il prenait son mouillage sur deux ancres au milieu du port.

XI - Port-Praslin

Le premier visiteur qui se présenta à bord du brick fut M. Zieger, négociant de la Nouvelle-Irlande, en relations commerciales avec la maison Hawkins. Encore dans la force de l’âge, installé depuis une douzaine d’années à Port-Praslin, M. Zieger avait fondé ce comptoir avant même que le traité de partage eût imposé à l’île le nom de Neu-Mecklenburg et à la réunion des groupes insulaires celui d’archipel Bismarck.

Les rapports de M. Hawkins et de M. Zieger ne cessèrent jamais d’être excellents. Ils ne se bornaient pas aux seuls échanges de marchandises entre Hobart-Town et Port-Praslin. Plusieurs fois déjà, M. Zieger s’était rendu dans la capitale de la Tasmanie, où l’armateur avait eu grand plaisir à le recevoir. Ces deux commerçants professaient une véritable estime l’un pour l’autre. Nat Gibson n’était pas non plus un étranger pour M. Zieger, ni même pour Mme Zieger, qui accompagnait son mari lors de ses voyages. Tous allaient être très heureux de passer ensemble le temps de la relâche en Nouvelle-Irlande.

Quant au capitaine et à M. Zieger, c’étaient d’anciennes connaissances, des amis, qui se serrèrent affectueusement la main, comme s’ils se fussent quittés de la veille.

M. Zieger, qui parlait couramment la langue anglaise, dit à l’armateur:

“Je compte bien, monsieur Hawkins, vous voir accepter l’hospitalité que Mme Zieger et moi nous entendons vous offrir dans notre maison de Wilhelmstaf...

- Vous voulez que nous abandonnions notre James-Cook?... répondit l’armateur.

- Assurément, monsieur Hawkins.

- À la condition, monsieur Zieger, que nous ne serons pas une gêne...

- En aucune façon, je vous assure.

Votre chambre est déjà préparée, et j’ajoute qu’il y en a une aussi pour Gibson et son fils.”

L’offre était faite de si bon cœur que l’on ne pouvait y répondre par un refus. D’ailleurs, M. Hawkins, peu habitué de vivre dans l’étroit carré d’un navire, ne demandait pas mieux que d’échanger sa cabine contre une confortable chambre de la villa Wilhelmstaf.

Cette proposition fut également acceptée par Nat Gibson. Toutefois, le capitaine la déclina, ainsi qu’il l’avait toujours fait jusqu’alors.

“Nous nous verrons chaque jour, mon cher Zieger, dit-il. Toutefois, ma présence est nécessaire à bord, et j’ai pour principe de ne point quitter mon navire pendant toute la durée des relâches.

- Comme il vous plaira, Gibson, répondit M. Zieger. Mais il est entendu que nous nous rencontrerons à ma table matin et soir...

- C’est entendu, dit M. Gibson. Dès aujourd’hui, j’irai rendre visite avec Hawkins et Nat à Mme Zieger, et je prendrai ma part de votre déjeuner de famille.”

Puis, présentation fut faite des deux naufragés, dont l’armateur raconta l’histoire en quelques mots. M. Zieger accueillit les frères Kip avec grande sympathie et exprima le désir de les recevoir le plus souvent possible à Wilhelmstaf. S’il n’avait pas de chambrer à leur offrir, ils trouveraient à

Port-Praslin une auberge convenablement tenue, et ils pourraient s’y loger, s’ils le désiraient, jusqu’au départ du James-Cook.

Pieter Kip répondit alors:

“Nos ressources sont bornées ou plutôt nulles... Nous avons perdu dans ce naufrage tout ce que nous possédions, et, puisque M. Hawkins a bien voulu nous accepter comme passagers, il est préférable que nous restions à bord...

- Vous êtes chez vous, mes amis, déclara l’armateur. Le brick est toujours en cours de navigation... J’ajouterai même que, si vous avez besoin de vous procurer des vêtements, du linge, je me mets à votre disposition...

- Moi aussi, messieurs, dit M. Zieger.

- Nous vous remercions, répondit Karl Kip, et, dès notre retour en Hollande, nous vous ferons adresser...

- Il n’est pas question de cela maintenant, reprit M. Hawkins. On s’arrangera plus tard, et il ne faut pas vous en préoccuper.”

M. Gibson demanda au négociant combien de temps, à son avis, le brick devrait séjourner à Port-Praslin pour décharger la cargaison et en recevoir une nouvelle.

“Trois semaines environ, affirma M. Zieger, si une suffit à débarquer vos marchandises que je me charge de placer avantageusement dans la colonie.

- Certes... une semaine suffira, dit M. Gibson, à la condition que nos trois cents tonnes de coprah soient prêtes...

- J’en ai cent cinquante ici dans les magasins du comptoir, déclara M. Zieger. Quant aux cent cinquante autres, on les embarquera à Kerawara...

- Entendu, répliqua le capitaine. La traversée est courte. Nous irons à Kerawara, puis le James-Cook reviendra à Port-Praslin compléter sa cargaison...

- Les caisses de nacre sont préparées, mon cher Gibson, dit M. Zieger, et, de ce chef, vous n’aurez aucun retard à subir...

- Il y a plaisir à traiter les affaires avec votre maison, monsieur Zieger, ajouta M. Hawkins, et je vois que notre relâche ne se prolongera pas au-delà de trois semaines.

- Nous sommes au 20 novembre, conclut M. Gibson. Le brick n’a point d’avaries à réparer, et, le 14 décembre, il sera en mesure de mettre à la voile.

- Et, pendant ce temps, monsieur Hawkins, vous pourrez visiter les environs de Port-Praslin. Ils en valent la peine. D’ailleurs, Mme Zieger et moi nous ferons tout notre possible pour que le temps ne vous semble pas trop désagréable.”

M. Hawkins, les frères Kip et Nat Gibson débarquèrent, laissant à ses occupations le capitaine, qui retrouverait tout le monde à l’habitation de Wilhelmstaf pour l’heure du déjeuner.

Ainsi que l’avait pensé M. Gibson, aucun bâtiment n’était mouillé en ce moment à Port-Praslin, ni attendu avant la nouvelle année. On n’y voyait que les embarcations appartenant aux factoreries et des pirogues indigènes. Les navires sous pavillon allemand séjournaient de préférence au chef-lieu des archipels germaniques, à l'île Kerawara, qui est située dans le sud de l'île d'York, actuellement île de Neu-Lauenburg.

Cependant Port-Praslin est très abrité au fond de sa baie. Il offre d'excellents ancrages aux bâtiments de fort tonnage. La profondeur de l'eau y est égale partout. Au surplus, entre Birara et Tombara, les ondes accusent jusqu'à quatorze cents mètres. Le brick avait pu mouiller par trente brasses. La tenue était bonne - un de ces fonds de sable madréporique, semés de débris de coquilles, où les ancres mordent solidement.

Port-Praslin ne renfermait à cette époque qu'une centaine de colons, en grande majorité d'origine allemande, et quelques émigrants de nationalité anglaise.

Ils occupaient des habitations disséminées à l'est et à l'ouest du port, sous les magnifiques ombrages riverains du littoral.

La maison de M. Zieger était bâtie à un mille environ plus à l'ouest en remontant la côte. Mais le comptoir et les magasins se groupaient sur une petite place irrégulière au fond du port, où d'autres commerçants avaient établi leurs factoreries et leurs bureaux.

Les indigènes de la Nouvelle-Irlande vivent à part de la population coloniale. Leurs villages sont de simples agglomérations de cases élevées la plupart sur pilotis. Ils fréquentent assez volontiers Port-Praslin et les agents qui représentent l'autorité dans la Mélanésie allemande. Aussi, en débarquant, M. Hawkins et ses compagnons rencontrèrent-ils plusieurs de ces indigènes.

Bien que ces naturels soient peu travailleurs de leur nature, que la plupart passent la journée à ne rien faire, l'envie de gagner quelques piastres les prend parfois. Il n’est pas rare alors qu’ils se proposent pour aider au chargement et au déchargement des navires. On les y emploie volontiers et, à la condition de les surveiller d’un peu près, car ils sont enclins au vol, on n’a pas lieu de le regretter.

Le Néo-Irlandais n’est pas de haute taille, une moyenne de cinq pieds deux pouces seulement. Il est brun jaunâtre de peau, et non pas noir comme le nègre. Son ventre est proéminent, ses membres sont plutôt grêles. Sa chevelure est laineuse et il la laisse retomber sur ses épaules en nattes frisées, en tire-bouchons folâtres, coiffure qui, dans les pays plus civilisés, est l’apanage du sexe féminin. À noter que, chez ces indigènes, le front est rétréci, le nez épaté, la bouche large, la denture rongée par l’abus du bétel.

À la cloison et aux ailes du nez comme aux lobes des oreilles, percés de trous, pendent des bâtonnets auxquels sont attachées des dents d’animaux, des touffes de plumes, sans compter nombre d’ustensiles d’un usage courant. Ces indigènes sont à peine vêtus de pagnes en étoffe, qu’ils ont depuis quelques années substitués aux pagnes d’écorce. Pour compléter cet habillement, ils recourent à la peinture sur diverses parties de leur corps. Avec l’ocre, délayée dans l’huile de coco, ils se teignent les joues, le front, l’extrémité nasale, le menton, les épaules, la poitrine et le ventre. Il en est peu qui ne soient tatoués, et ce tatouage est obtenu, non par piqûres, mais par entailles au moyen de pierres et de coquilles coupantes. Toute cette ornementation ne parvient pas à dissimuler la lèpre qui affecte leur épiderme, malgré les frictions huileuses auxquelles ils se soumettent, ni les cicatrices de blessures reçues dans des combats fréquents, surtout avec leurs voisins de Birara.

Que les naturels de cet archipel aient été anthropophages, nul doute à cet égard. Qu’ils le soient encore à l’occasion, cela peut être. Quoi qu’il en soit, les pratiques du cannibalisme ont beaucoup diminué, grâce aux missionnaires qui se sont installés à l’île Roon, dans le sud-ouest de Neu-Pommern.

Les naturels, groupés sur le quai, appartenaient au sexe fort. Aucune femme ne les accompagnait, aucun enfant. C’est dans les villages et dans la campagne, où les Néo-Irlandaises sont occupées aux travaux des champs, que l’on peut les rencontrer, car elles viennent rarement aux abords des factoreries.

“Nous ferons quelques excursions à l’intérieur, dit M. Zieger, et vous aurez le loisir d’étudier ces peuplades.

- Ce sera très volontiers, acquiesça M. Hawkins.

- En attendant, ajouta M. Zieger, j’ai hâte de vous présenter à Mme Zieger, qui doit être quelque peu impatiente...

- Nous vous suivons”, répondit l’armateur.

Très ombragée, la route qui côtoyait le littoral dans la direction de Wilhelmstaf. Les plantations, étagées vers l’intérieur, ne s’arrêtaient qu’à la limite même du ressac sur les extrêmes roches des criques. À droite, d’épaisses forêts montaient jusqu’aux dernières cimes de la chaîne centrale, que dominent les deux ou trois pics des Lanut. Lorsqu’un obstacle, rio ou marécage, obligeait à s’écarter du rivage, on s’engageait sous bois, le long de sentes à peine frayées. Là abondaient les areks, les pandanus, les baringtonias, les figuiers-banians. Un filet de lianes, quelques-unes d’un jaune éclatant comme de l’or, entouraient le tronc de ces arbres, s’entortillaient à leurs branches, grimpaient jusqu’à leur sommet. Il fallait prendre garde aux épines déchirantes, et M. Zieger de répéter à ses hôtes:

“Faites attention, je vous le recommande, sinon vous arriverez à la maison demi-nus, ce qui n’est pas convenable, même en Neu-Mecklenburg.”

Il y avait vraiment lieu d’admirer, et pour leur diversité et pour leur magnifique venue, les essences de ces forêts néo-irlandaises. À perte de vue se massaient les hibiscus, dont le feuillage rappelle celui du tilleul, des palmiers enguirlandés de festons volubiles, des callophyllums dont le tronc mesurait jusqu’à trente pieds de circonférence, des rotangs, des poivriers, des cycas à stipe droit, dont les indigènes recueillent la moelle pour fabriquer une sorte de pain, des lobélias à demi plongés dans l’eau, des pancratiums aux hampes agrémentées de corolles blanches, entre les feuilles desquels va se nicher le scarabe, qui n’est point un oiseau, mais un coquillage.

Tout ce domaine forestier affectait des proportions colossales, cocotiers, sagoutiers, arbres à pain, muscadiers, lataniers, areks, dont le bourgeon terminal se coupe comme le chou-palmiste, comestible autant que lui; puis d’innombrables plantes arborescentes, fougères au léger feuillage, épidendrons parasites, inocarpes d’une taille supérieure à celle que leurs similaires acquièrent dans les autres îles du Pacifique et dont les racines, émergeant du sol, forment des cabanes naturelles où cinq ou six personnes peuvent trouver place.

Parfois s’étendaient des clairières, bordées d’énormes buissons, arrosées de rios aux eaux claires, qui sont réservées à la culture; des champs de cannes à sucre, de patates douces, de taros, soigneusement entretenus, où travaillaient plusieurs femmes indigènes.

Il n’y avait, d’ailleurs, à s’inquiéter ni des fauves ni d’autres animaux dangereux, pas même de venimeux reptiles. La faune était moins variée que la flore. Rien que des porcs sauvages, moins redoutables que ne le sont les sangliers, et pour la plupart réduits à l’état domestique, des chiens désignés sous le nom de “poulls” en langue tombarienne, des couscous, des sarigues, des larcertins, et aussi une multitude de rats de petite espèce. Enfin pullulaient ces termites ou fourmis blanches qui suspendent leurs nids spongieux aux branches, entre lesquelles sont parfois tendues, comme un filet, des toiles tissées par des légions d’araignées aux couleurs pourpre et azur.

“Est-ce que je n’entends pas des chiens?... fut amené à demander Nat Gibson, à un moment où ses oreilles furent frappées par des aboiements lointains.

- Non, répondit M. Zieger, ce ne sont pas des chiens qui aboient, mais des oiseaux qui crient...

- Des oiseaux?... reprit M. Hawkins, assez surpris de cette réponse.

- Oui, dit M. Zieger, un corbeau qui est spécial à l’archipel Bismarck.”

Nat Gibson et M. Hawkins s’y étaient trompés comme l’avait été Bougainville, la première fois qu’il s’engagea à travers les forêts néo-irlandaises. En effet, ce corbeau imite, à s’y méprendre, les aboiements du chien.

Du reste, dans ces îles, l’ornithologie compte de nombreux et curieux représentants, des “mains”, pour employer le mot indigène.

De tous côtés voltigent des loris, sortes de perroquets écarlates, des papous, à la voix aussi rauque que celle des Papouas, des perruches de diverses espèces, des pigeons Nicobar, des corneilles à duvet blanc et à plumage noir que les naturels nomment “cocos”, des loucals, des perroquets teints d’un vert lustré, des colombes-pinons, la tête et le cou gris rose, les ailes et le dos vert doré en dessous, avec reflets de cuivre et dont la chair est extrêmement savoureuse.

Lorsque M. Zieger et ses compagnons se rapprochaient du rivage, il s’envolait des troupes de stournes et d’hirondelles, des martins-pêcheurs de plusieurs espèces, entre autres l’alcyon, auquel les indigènes ont donné le nom de “kiou-kiou”, tête de dos vert brun, ailes aigue-marine et queue de même couleur, longue de six pouces; puis s’échappaient aussi des souismangas olivâtres à queue jaune, des échenilleurs, des chevaliers gris, des gobe-mouches, “conice, tenouri, kine et roukine”, suivant la dénomination mélanésienne.

Et, tandis que les tortues rampaient sur le sable, les crocodiles bicarénés, les requins à ailerons se mouvaient entre les passes, et les aigles océaniques planaient dans les airs, leurs larges ailes presque immobiles.

Quant aux grèves, couvertes ou découvertes suivant l’heure des marées dont la hauteur est peu considérable, elles eussent fourni aux conchyliologues d’intarissables richesses en crustacés ou en mollusques, cancres, palémons, crevettes, paqures, ocypodes, cônes, éponges, madrépores, tubipores, disques, casques, trocheus, tridacnes, hyppopes, porcelaines, ovules, haliondes, murex, patelles, huîtres, moules, et, en fait de zoophytes, des holoturies, des actinies, des salpas, des méduses, des acalèphes d’une espèce remarquable.

Mais les coquillages dignes d’attirer plus spécialement l’attention de M. Hawkins et de Nat Gibson furent le scarabe, qui se réfugie de préférence entre les feuilles humides du pancratium, sur le bord des criques; le bulime et l’hélice, qui recherchent également l’abri des branchages, et une nérite fluviatile dont on retrouve parfois les échantillons à une grande distance des cours d’eau, attachés aux rameaux les plus élevés des pandanus.

Et Nat Gibson de répondre à M. Zieger, à propos de l’un de ces coquillages voyageurs:

“Mais, ce me semble, il est un poisson qui pourrait accompagner la nérite dans ses promenades terrestres, et que MM. Kip ont vu à l’île Norfolk, si je ne me trompe...

- Vous voulez parler du blennie sauteur... répondit M. Zieger.

- Précisément, confirma M. Hawkins.

- Eh bien, déclara M. Zieger, ils ne manquent point ici, et vous rencontrerez, dans la baie de Port-Praslin, des amphibies qui vivent sous les eaux douces et les eaux salées, qui courent sur les grèves en sautant comme une sarigue, qui grimpent aux arbrisseaux comme des insectes!”

L’habitation de M. Zieger apparut au tournant d’une petite futaie. C’était une sorte de villa, bâtie en bois, au milieu d’un vaste enclos de haies vives, dans lequel s’alignaient des orangers, des cocotiers, des bananiers et nombre d’autres arbres. Ombragée sous leurs hautes frondaisons, Wilhelmstaf ne se composait que d’un rez-de-chaussée surmonté d’une toiture en toile goudronnée, nécessité par la fréquence de ces pluies qui rendent très supportable le climat d’un archipel presque situé sous l’Équateur.

Mme Zieger était une femme de quarante ans environ, Allemande comme son mari. Dès que la porte de l’enclos eut été ouverte, elle s’empressa de venir au-devant de ses invités et de ses hôtes:

“Ah! monsieur Hawkins, s’écria-t-elle en tendant la main à l’armateur, que je suis heureuse de vous voir...

- Et moi tout autant, chère dame, répondit M. Hawkins, qui embrassa Mme Zieger sur les deux joues. Votre dernier voyage à Hobart-Town date de quatre ans déjà...

- De quatre ans et demi, monsieur Hawkins!

- Eh bien, déclara l’armateur en souriant, malgré ces six mois de plus, je vous retrouve telle que vous étiez...

- Je ne dirai pas cela de Nat Gibson, reprit Mme Zieger. Il est changé, lui!... Ce n’est plus un jeune garçon... c’est un jeune homme.

- Qui vous demandera la permission d’imiter M. Hawkins, répliqua Nat Gibson en l’embrassant à son tour.

- Et votre père?... demanda Mme Zieger.

- Il est resté à bord, répondit M. Hawkins, mais il ne manquera pas d’être ici pour l’heure du déjeuner.”

M. et Mme Zieger n’avaient point d’enfant. Ils habitaient seuls cette villa de Wilhelmstaf avec leurs domestiques, un ménage, allemand comme eux, et une famille de colons logée dans un bâtiment annexe. Ces cultivateurs faisaient valoir le domaine agricole, auquel on employait aussi des femmes indigènes. Champs de cannes à sucre, de patates, de taros et d’ignames avaient une étendue d’un mille carré.

Devant la maison, le sol se tapissait d’une pelouse verdoyante semée de bouquets de casuarinas et de lataniers, arrosée d’un filet d’eau douce qui se détachait d’un rio du voisinage. En arrière des communs, très ombragés également, une basse-cour et une volière, celle-ci renfermant les plus beaux oiseaux de l’archipel, celle-là peuplée de pigeons, de colombes, et de ces poules domestiques auxquelles les indigènes donnent le nom de “coq”, par onomatopée, en raison de leur cri guttural.

Il va sans dire que M. Hawkins et ses compagnons trouvèrent des rafraîchissements préparés dans le salon de la villa.

Karl et Pieter Kip avaient été présentés à Mme Zieger, et celle-ci fut très émue en apprenant dans quelles conditions les deux frères avaient été recueillis à bord du James-Cook. L’excellente dame se mit à leur disposition en tout ce qui pourrait être utile à l’un ou à l’autre, et ils la remercièrent de son sympathique accueil.

M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson allèrent visiter les chambres qui leur étaient destinées, garnies simplement de gros meubles de fabrication allemande, confortables comme le salon et la salle à manger.

Mme Zieger s’excusa de ne pouvoir offrir l’hospitalité aux deux Hollandais. Mais il était convenu, on le sait, et sur leur demande, qu’ils ne quitteraient point leur cabine du brick.

Un peu avant midi, arriva M. Gibson, accompagné du matelot Burnes. Celui-ci portait différents objets offerts par M. Hawkins à Mme Zieger, des étoffes, de la lingerie, un joli bracelet, qui lui fit grand plaisir. Inutile de dire que le capitaine fut reçu, lui aussi, à bras ouverts.

On se mit à table, et ce déjeuner, bien servi, fut particulièrement goûté de convives doués d’un furieux appétit. Les plats de résistance, c’étaient la basse-cour et la baie de Port-Praslin qui les avaient fournis. Quant aux légumes: choux-palmistes, ignames, patates douces, laka, succulent produit de l’inocarpe, et aux fruits: bananes, oranges, noix de coco, c’est de l’enclos même qu’ils venaient. Pour les boissons fermentées, il n’y avait eu qu’à les monter d’une bonne cave, qu’alimentaient de vins de France et d’Allemagne les navires à destination de Neu-Mecklenburg.

On fit compliment à Mme Zieger sur l’excellence de sa table, qui pouvait rivaliser avec les meilleures d’Hobart-Town, et l’aimable hôtesse parut très sensible à ces compliments.

“Il n’y a qu’un mets que je ne puisse plus vous offrir, mes chers amis, dit M. Zieger, parce qu’on ne le fabrique plus dans le pays...

- Et lequel? s’informa M. Hawkins.

- Un pâté composé de sagou, de noix de coco et de cervelle humaine...

- Et c’était bon?... s’écria Nat Gibson.

- Le roi des pâtés!

- Vous en avez mangé?... demanda en riant M. Hawkins.

- Jamais, et je n’aurai plus jamais l’occasion de le faire...

- Voilà ce que c’est, s’écria le capitaine, que d’avoir détruit le cannibalisme dans l’archipel!...

- Comme vous dites, mon cher Gibson!” répondit M. Zieger.

Le capitaine devait retourner à bord du James-Cook dès que le déjeuner serait terminé. Il n’aimait pas s’absenter, bien qu’il eût confiance en son maître d’équipage. Sa grande crainte était toujours d’être embarrassé par des désertions nouvelles, et il faisait peu de fond sur les matelots recrutés à Dunedin.

Et, de fait, la question fut encore reprise ce jour-là par Len Cannon dans une conversation que ses camarades et lui eurent avec Flig Balt et Vin Mod. Ils en revenaient toujours à leur résolution de débarquer. En vain Vin Mod employait-il son éloquence en faisant intervenir le gibet, suivant son habitude... Il ne parvenait point à les persuader... Ces entêtés persistaient à vouloir quitter le bord.

“Enfin, dit-il, à bout d’arguments, ce n’est pas le navire qui vous déplaît?...

- Si, répondit Len Cannon, du moment qu’il est commandé par son capitaine...

- Et si ce capitaine venait à disparaître?...

- C’est la vingtième fois que tu nous chantes ce refrain, Mod, riposta le matelot Kyle, et nous voici à Port-Praslin, et dans trois semaines on en repartira pour Hobart-Town...

- Où nous ne voulons pas aller, dit Bryce.

- Et, déclara Sexton, nous sommes décidés à filer dès ce soir.

- Attendez au moins quelques jours, dit alors Flig Balt... jusqu’au départ du brick!... On ne sait ce qui peut arriver...

- Et puis, observa Vin Mod, déserter, c’est très bien... mais qu’est-ce que vous deviendrez ici?”

En ce moment, le mousse Jim, qui se défiait de ces conciliabules entre le maître d’équipage et les recrues, s’approcha du groupe. Flig Balt, qui l’aperçut, lui cria aussitôt:

“Que fais-tu là, mousse?...

- Je venais pour le déjeuner...

- Tu déjeuneras plus tard!

- Et je suis sûr, ajouta Vin Mod, que la cabine des frères Kip n’est pas encore rangée!... Tu finiras par la potence, méchant moussaillon!...

- Va-t’en au carré, ordonna le maître d’équipage, et à ta besogne!”

Vin Mod regarda partir le jeune garçon, et fit à Flig Balt un signe que celui-ci comprit sans doute. Puis, l’entretien reprit son cours.

Quant à Jim, sans répondre, il se rendit à l’arrière et, comme il était en effet chargé des cabines, entra dans celle des frères Kip.

Le premier objet qui frappa sa vue, fut un poignard malais déposé sur l’un des cadres et qu’il n’avait jamais aperçu jusqu’alors.

C’était précisément celui que Vin Mod avait volé sur l’épave de la Wilhelmina, et que les deux frères ne savaient pas être en sa possession.

Était-ce donc intentionnellement que ce kriss avait été placé là, de manière que le mousse ne pût ne point le voir?...

Jim prit le poignard, en examina la lame dentelée, la poignée ornée de clous de cuivre, et le remit sur la tablette de la cabine.

Ce qui lui vint à l’idée, c’est que l’un des frères avait rapporté ce kriss avec les quelques objets recueillis sur l’épave, et, sans y attacher plus d’importance, il acheva sa besogne.

Cependant Flig Balt, Vin Mod et les autres continuaient à discuter, mais de manière à n’être entendus ni de Wickley ni de Hobbes, que le maître d’équipage avait envoyés dans la mâture. Burnes, on le sait, avait accompagné M. Gibson à la villa Wilhelmstaf.

Len Cannon s’obstinait, Vin Mod essayait de le convaincre. Au moins pendant la relâche du brick, ses compagnons et lui ne manqueraient de rien... Il serait toujours temps de débarquer... Durant la traversée du James-Cook de Port-Praslin à Kerawara pour compléter sa cargaison, peut-être une occasion se présenterait-elle?... Il était possible que ni M. Hawkins ni Nat Gibson ne fussent du voyage... Qui sait même si les frères Kip... Et alors...

Bref, Len Cannon, Kyle, Sexton, Bryce, consentirent à rester jusqu’au jour où le brick mettrait à la voile pour Hobart-Town.

Et, lorsque Flig Balt et Vin Mod furent seuls:

“Ça n’a pas été sans peine!... dit celui-ci.

- Nous n’en sommes pas plus avancés!... répondit l’autre.

- Patience, conclut Vin Mod du ton d’un homme dont la résolution est prise, et lorsque le capitaine Balt fera choix d’un maître d’équipage, je compte bien qu’il n’oubliera pas Vin Mod!”

XII - Trois semaines dans l’archipel

Les jours suivants furent employés au déchargement du brick. Len Cannon et ses compagnons ne refusèrent pas d’y donner la main. M. Gibson n’eut aucun soupçon de leurs projets.

Quelques indigènes se joignirent à l’équipage, - une demi-douzaine, - des hommes robustes et pas maladroits. Aussi la besogne s’effectua dans d’excellentes conditions.

Jim n’avait point parlé aux frères Kip du poignard malais. Ils ignoraient donc que cette arme se trouvait sur l’un des cadres de leur cabine.

En effet, Vin Mod avait eu soin de reprendre ce poignard avant leur retour à bord, et le kriss était maintenant caché dans son sac, où personne n’aurait pu le découvrir. Il lui suffisait sans doute qu’il eût été vu par le mousse. Quant à ce qu’il en voulait faire, peut-être Flig Balt lui-même ne le savait-il pas.

Tandis que le capitaine restait à surveiller le déchargement, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, Karl et Pieter Kip, accompagnés de M. et Mme Zieger, passaient le temps en intéressantes promenades aux alentours de Port-Praslin. Ils visitèrent les principales factoreries établies sur cette partie de la côte. Les unes appartenaient à des colons allemands, les autres étaient encore entre les mains de maisons anglaises, fondées avant le traité de partage.

Toutes faisaient d’assez bonnes affaires. Le mouvement d’importation et d’exportation, à l’ancienne Tombara comme à l’ancienne Birara, s’accroissait au profit de la Mélanésie germanique.

Partout, les hôtes de M. Zieger reçurent un excellent accueil. Cet honnête négociant occupait une situation prépondérante à la Compagnie commerciale qui exerçait l’autorité politique.

Il était, par ce fait, revêtu d’un certain pouvoir judiciaire que les indigènes ne se refusaient point à reconnaître. Jamais, d’ailleurs, une année ne s’écoulait sans qu’un navire de guerre vînt relâcher à l’une des îles de l’archipel Bismarck, et rendît aux couleurs allemandes les honneurs réglementaires, lorsque M. Zieger les faisait hisser au mât de pavillon de Port-Praslin.

Au surplus, le gouvernement impérial avait laissé aux naturels leur indépendance presque complète. Les tribus n’ont pour ainsi dire pas de chefs. Si quelque autorité est dévolue aux vieillards, du moins tous les membres de la peuplade vivent-ils sur le pied d’égalité. Il n’existe plus d’esclaves, même dans les villages de l’intérieur, et tous les travailleurs sont libres. C’est à ce titre, moyennant un salaire payé en objets manufacturés ou de consommation, qu’ils s’emploient dans les fabriques ou à la culture des champs. D’ailleurs, avant la suppression de l’esclavage, les esclaves étaient convenablement traités par leurs maîtres.

Ce début de civilisation est certes dû au zèle, au dévouement des missionnaires qui se sont fixés sur différents points de l’archipel. Ils le parcourent sans cesse, l’Évangile à la main. À Port-Praslin existe une chapelle protestante, que deux de ces pasteurs desservent et qui suffit aux besoins du culte.

Ce fut pendant une excursion vers la partie centrale de l’île, à trois milles environ du port, que M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, et les frères Kip, guidés par M. Zieger, visitèrent un village tombarien.

Ce village n’était que l’agglomération d’une cinquantaine de cases en bois, et, bien que le sol ne fût point marécageux, elles s’élevaient sur pilotis.

Ces naturels appartenaient sans aucun doute à la race papouasienne, peu différents de ceux de la Nouvelle-Guinée.

Ce village en contenait cent soixante environ, hommes, femmes, vieillards, enfants, répartis en familles. Il va de soi qu’ils connaissaient M. Zieger et se soumettaient à son autorité, quoiqu’il n’eût que rarement à l’exercer parmi les tribus de l’intérieur.

Ses compagnons et lui furent accueillis par deux personnages âgés qui mettaient leur dignité à paraître impassibles et indifférents. Les femmes et les enfants se tenaient dans les cases, et il fut difficile de les approcher. De vrai, on n’est pas encore bien fixé sur la constitution des familles, ni sur l’état social des diverses peuplades mélanésiennes.

Le temps n’était plus où ces sauvages allaient à peu près nus, ou seulement vêtus d’un pagne d’écorce de vakoi, coupée en longs filaments rassemblés par une couture de fibres. Grâce aux cotonnades anglaises et allemandes, maintenant répandues dans le pays, les étoffes rayées habillaient les hommes et aussi les femmes. Cette décence doit être considérée comme un commencement des réformes civilisatrices.

M. Zieger put donner des renseignements précis et précieux sur les habitudes de ces indigènes, dont les sens de la vue, de l’odorat et de l’ouïe sont extraordinairement développés. Aussi se montrent-ils d’une adresse et d’une souplesse incomparables à tous les exercices du corps. Mais, pour se livrer à un travail quelconque, il faut qu’ils y soient excités par le besoin, la nécessité de se nourrir. De caractère indolent, ils aiment le repos par-dessus tout. Dans ce village, la plupart des habitants étaient étendus en dehors de leurs cases. S’abandonnant à une complète nonchalance, les jambes croisées l’une sur l’autre, les mains ramenées à la poitrine, regardant mais ne parlant guère, ils mâchaient sans cesse le bétel, comme les Orientaux fument de l’opium, comme les Occidentaux fument le tabac.

Ce bétel est composé de chaux obtenue par la calcination des madrépores, et d’un fruit à épiderme rouge dont le nom mélanésien est “kamban”. C’est un sialagogue d’une extrême énergie, dont les substances très âcres possèdent une saveur enivrante, avec un goût qui n’a rien de désagréable. Son inconvénient est de noircir les dents, de les corroder, de rendre sanguinolentes les muqueuses de la bouche. Par une coutume qui n’est jamais enfreinte, les jeunes gens n’ont pas droit à cette jouissance si recherchée, et c’est aux indigènes d’un certain âge qu’il est permis de mâcher le bétel.

Quant à l’industrie des Néo-Irlandais, elle se borne au tissage des nattes en feuilles de pandanus et à la fabrication de divers objets, de grossières poteries. Et encore est-ce aux femmes, moins paresseuses que les hommes, qu’est dévolu ce soin, sans parler des travaux agricoles ni de la préparation quotidienne de la nourriture.

L’alimentation exige d’ailleurs peu de science culinaire. Les naturels ne mangent point à heure fixe, ou plutôt ils mangent à toute heure. Aussi un voyageur a-t-il pu dire:

“Quel que soit l’animal qui tombe sous la main du sauvage, il est aussitôt jeté sur des charbons ardents, rôti, dévoré, sans même qu’on ait pris la peine de le dépouiller si c’est un quadrupède, ou de le plumer si c’est un oiseau.”

Poissons, tortues marines, poulpes, coquillages de toutes sortes, langoustes, crabes énormes nommés koukiavars, reptiles, lézards, insectes peu ragoûtants, ils s’en nourrissent avec un appétit de gloutons. En fait de fruits, ce sont ceux du mapé et du laka, sorte de châtaignes de l’inocarpe très abondantes, des noix de coco ou lamacs dont le larime est la coque ligneuse et le kaouro le lait émulsif, les ounis ou bananes, les nios ou ignames, les tos ou cannes à sucre, les bercos ou fruits à pain sauvages.

Comme quadrupèdes, les indigènes n’élèvent que des cochons et ne chassent que les couscous, animaux qui appartiennent au sous-genre des phalangers.

Les Néo-Irlandais, cependant, ne se montrent point réfractaires à des tentatives de civilisation. Les missionnaires tâchent de les convertir à la religion chrétienne. Mais, chez eux, le paganisme a des attaches très tenaces et se mélange de croyances musulmanes qui leur viennent des relations avec les Malais. Il est même à présumer que ces sauvages sont polygames. Dans chaque village est édifié le tambou, la case publique, la maison d’idoles, dont les vieillards ont l’entretien et la garde.

M. Hawkins et ses compagnons n’éprouvèrent aucune difficulté à visiter ce tambou, dont les portes, moins fermées que celles des habitations, s’ouvrirent devant M. Zieger. Ils trouvèrent à l’intérieur de cette vaste case plusieurs statues d’argile, grossièrement exécutées, peinturlurées de blanc, de noir, de rouge, dont les yeux, faits d’une lentille de nacre, étincelaient comme braises. Bakoui, tel est le nom que portent ces idoles. Entre autres objets déposés autour d’elles, on remarquait deux tam-tams qu’un indigène fit résonner à grand bruit sur l’ordre d’un vieillard à longue barbe, couverte de poussière d’ocre. Il y avait aussi un ornement attaché à ces statues, le prapraghan en bois finement sculpté, qui décore d’ordinaire l’avant des pirogues.

Nat Gibson s’était muni de son appareil photographique. Il obtint, de l’intérieur et de l’extérieur de ce tambou, des clichés très réussis qui allaient enrichir la collection de M. Hawkins.

Pendant cette visite au village tombarien, l’après-midi s’était écoulé.

Le soir s’annonçait déjà, lorsque M. Zieger et ses hôtes reprirent le chemin de Wilhelmstaf à travers la forêt. Si les étoiles célestes brillaient au-dessus du dôme des grands arbres par milliers, c’était par millions que des étoiles terrestres projetaient leur lumière phosphorescente au milieu des frondaisons, entre les herbes du sol. Autant de ces vers luisants, qu’on appelle “kallottes” en langue mélanésienne et dont le sous-bois s’illuminait. Il semblait que les pieds foulaient un gazon lumineux, tandis qu’une nuée d’étincelles brillaient entre les ramures.

Ainsi s’écoulaient les journées en intéressantes excursions, le long du littoral et à l’intérieur de l’île. Un jour même, Karl Kip, Nat Gibson et M. Hawkins, guidés par un des hommes de la factorerie, firent l’ascension de la montagne en arrière de la villa. Il y eut là quelques heures de fatigues, bien que la marche s’effectuât sous l’épais ombrage des forêts.

Cette montagne ne compte pas parmi les plus hautes de la chaîne centrale - cinq mille pieds environ. Mais cette altitude permet au regard de s’étendre sur le canal de Saint-Georges, entre la Nouvelle-Bretagne et la Nouvelle-Irlande. Au-delà apparaissent d’autres hauteurs. Au sud se développe le Neu-Pommern, dont les profils se dessinent à perte de vue.

Il va de soi que M. et Mme Zieger, comme des propriétaires qui ne font pas grâce d’un morceau de leur domaine, n’eurent garde d’oublier un des sites les plus pittoresques qui puissent solliciter l’admiration des touristes dans l’est de Port-Praslin. C’était cette merveilleuse cascade, à laquelle le Français Duperrey donna le nom du Français Bougainville.

Les sources que la montagne envoie vers la mer tombent d’une cinquantaine de pieds en cet endroit.

Elles jaillissent du flanc de la chaîne en écumant à la surface de cinq gradins superposés entre les verdoyantes cimes. Ces eaux, chargées d’une forte proportion de sel, bordent de stalactites calcaires les strates de chaux carbonatée le long desquelles se glisse leur écoulement. Aussi ne peut-on que constater la justesse de la relation du capitaine Duperrey, lorsqu’il parle de ces “groupes saillants dont les graduations presque régulières précipitent et diversifient la chute de cette cascade, et des massifs variés qui forment cent bassins inégaux, où sont reçues les nappes de cristal, coloriées par des arbres immenses dont quelques-uns plongent leur pied dans le bassin même”. Cette excursion valut à M. Hawkins de nouvelles photographies, et les plus belles qui eussent été faites jusqu’à ce jour de la cascade de Bougainville.

Le déchargement du James-Cook fut terminé dans l’après-midi du 25 novembre. Toute la pacotille consignée au comptoir Zieger avait trouvé un placement immédiat, étant composée d’objets d’un usage courant des produits manufacturés de l’Allemagne et de l’Angleterre.

Le brick allait recevoir maintenant sa cargaison de retour qui consistait, on le sait, en tonnes de coprah et caisses de nacre à destination de Hobart-Town. Des trois cents tonnes de coprah, cent cinquante devaient être livrées à Port-Praslin par la maison Zieger et cent cinquante à Kerawara, l’un des îlots situés au sud de l’île d’York ou Neu-Lauenburg.

Le capitaine, d’accord avec MM. Hawkins et Zieger, décida que le chargement de Kerawara serait le premier mis à bord. Le James-Cook irait en prendre livraison et reviendrait à Port-Praslin compléter sa cargaison.

Toutefois, si le brick n’avait point d’avaries à réparer, il était nécessaire que sa carène reçût un sérieux nettoyage et que ses hauts fussent repeints de l’avant à l’arrière.

Ce travail demanderait de trois à quatre jours. L’équipage se mit aussitôt à la besogne, qui s’acheva dans les délais prévus, et le départ fut fixé au 29 matin.

On ne l’a point oublié, Flig Balt et Vin Mod avaient espéré que les passagers du brick resteraient à Port-Praslin pendant ce voyage à Kerawara, que le capitaine serait seul à bord, et qu’ils pourraient profiter de cette circonstance pour accomplir leurs desseins. Une fois les maîtres du navire, ils mettraient le cap au nord-est, et M. Hawkins attendrait vainement que le James-Cook reparût dans les eaux de la Nouvelle-Irlande.

Le maître d’équipage et ses complices devaient être déçus. Non seulement MM. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les frères Kip seraient de cette courte traversée, mais M. Zieger proposa de les accompagner, et sa proposition fut acceptée avec empressement.

Flig Balt et Vin Mod eurent quelque peine à dissimuler leur fureur. La possibilité de s’emparer du James-Cook, ou tout au moins l’éventualité sur laquelle ils comptaient leur échappait encore.

“Le diable protège ce capitaine de malheur!... s’écria Vin Mod, lorsqu’il connut cette résolution.

- Tu verras, Mod, qu’il reviendra à Hobart-Town!... ajouta le maître d’équipage.

- Non, maître Balt, déclara Vin Mod. Si on ne s’en défait pas sur son navire... peut-être pourrait-on...

- Et les autres, que vont-ils faire?...” répondit Flig Balt.

Les autres, c’étaient Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle, Bryce. Allaient-ils immédiatement quitter le bord, ou feraient-ils le voyage de Kerawara avant de reprendre leurs sacs?...

S’ils ne devaient réussir à rien au cours de cette traversée, pourquoi continueraient-ils leur service?...

Il est vrai, pendant cette relâche à Port-Praslin, la conviction leur était venue qu’il ne serait pas facile de trouver à vivre sur l’île, et cela leur avait donné à réfléchir. C’est ce que fit valoir Vin Mod, et il obtint d’eux qu’ils viendraient à Kerawara, quitte à débarquer au retour.

Le brick partit dans la matinée du 29. Vingt-quatre heures pour rallier l’île d’York, deux jours pour charger les cent cinquante tonnes de coprah, vingt-quatre heures pour revenir à Port-Praslin, le voyage ne devait pas durer plus de quatre à cinq jours.

Le chef-lieu politique et commercial de l’archipel de Bismarck avait d’abord été la petite île de Mioko, au sud de l’île d’York. Il occupait un point intermédiaire entre les deux grandes îles de l’archipel de Bismarck. Puis, pour des raisons d’insalubrité, il fut transporté à l’île Matupi, née au milieu d’un cratère de cette Baie-Blanche qui est située à l’extrémité septentrionale de Birara. Là, des tremblements de terre ayant compromis sa sécurité, le gouvernement établit définitivement le chef-lieu dans l'îlot de Kerawara.

La navigation s'accomplit à travers le canal Saint-Georges, non sans quelque lenteur, par suite de vents contraires à la surface de cette vaste baie, où les sondes accusent jusqu'à quatre mille pieds de profondeur. Elle est formée par les îles Tombara et Birara, qui rapprochent leurs pointes sud-est et nord-est. Toutefois, il ne fut donné ni à M. Hawkins ni à Nat Gibson de débarquer, à leur vif regret, car Birara mérite d'être visitée.

Entourée d'un amphithéâtre de cônes volcaniques, - tels la Mère, la Fille du Nord, la Fille du Sud, - c'est la plus considérable de l'archipel, la plus montagneuse, la plus forestière et aussi la plus riche en cocotiers. Puis, quelles particularités ethnologiques lui font une originalité toute spéciale! En quel autre endroit du monde trouverait-on une île où jamais un gendre n'ose adresser la parole à sa belle-mère et se cache même quand il la rencontre, une île dont les habitants passent pour avoir les doigts de pied réunis par une membrane, une île enfin où la légende veut qu'il existe des indigènes pourvus d'un appendice caudal, autrement dit des hommes à queue!...

Mais, si le brick ne devait pas y relâcher, il devait du moins la longer en traversant le canal Saint-Georges pour rallier l'île d'York.

Ce fut Carteret qui, en 1707, lui imposa ce nom d'York à la place de son nom mélanésien d'Amakata. Vue en 1791 par Hunter, en 1792 par d'Entrecasteaux, en 1823 par Duperrey, on connaît très exactement sa situation géographique entre 150°2' et 150°7' de longitude et 4°5' et 4° 10' de latitude sud. Son étendue comprend huit milles du nord-est au sud-ouest, sur cinq milles de largeur, et son altitude moyenne au-dessus de la mer est assez considérable.

Cependant, si populeuse qu’elle soit, et si sûrs ses mouillages, elle ne possède pas le chef-lieu de l’archipel. Nombres d’îlots l’entourent: Makada, Burnan, Ulu, Utuan, Kabokon, Muarlin, Mioko, Kerawara. C’est sur ce dernier, situé plus au sud, que s’est définitivement fixé le choix du gouvernement germanique.

Le 30, dès les premières heures, la vigie signala le cap Brown de l’îlot Makada.

Le James-Cook, piquant au sud, reconnut le cap Makukar de la grande île, pointa à l’ouvert du passage du nord-ouest entre elle et l’île d’Uln, prit connaissance de l’îlot Kabokon et vint au mouillage de Kerawara.

Cet îlot, qui affecte la forme d’une serpe, ne mesure pas plus de trois milles de l’ouest à l’est. Doté d’un port très sûr, il offre aux navires tous les avantages d’une excellente relâche.

Le principal agent germanique, M. Hamburg, qui remplit les fonctions de gouverneur de l’archipel Bismarck, avait de fréquents rapports avec M. Zieger. Il était à la tête d’une des plus importantes factoreries du groupe, et sa maison devait livrer au James-Cook les cent cinquante tonnes de coprah. Ce stock serait mis à bord en quarante-huit heures. Le séjour à Kerawara n’aurait donc qu’une très courte durée.

Pendant que l’équipage, sous la surveillance du capitaine, s’occupait de cette opération, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les frères Kip, eurent tout le loisir de visiter l’îlot.

C’est, à vrai dire, une vaste forêt où se rencontrent les diverses essences de la Nouvelle-Irlande. Des collines, dont la plus haute mesure de sept à huit cents pieds, la dominent. Ce chef-lieu de l’archipel comptait alors un millier d’habitants, dont le quart était européen et le reste d’origine mélanésienne. Ces indigènes ne sont pas absolument sédentaires. Pour la plupart, établis sur l’île d’York ou les îlots voisins, ils viennent à Kerawara suivant leurs affaires. Les canaux de ce petit groupe, sans cesse sillonnés par leurs pirogues remarquablement construites, présentent une grande animation.

M. Hamburg put donner d’intéressants détails sur ledit groupe.

Le choix de l’îlot de Kerawara comme chef-lieu politique lui paraissait très justifié. Les relations étaient faciles avec la Nouvelle-Bretagne et la Nouvelle-Irlande.

Il se trouvait en ce moment dans le port deux bâtiments de commerce, portant, l’un le pavillon allemand, l’autre le pavillon britannique, occupés à décharger leur cargaison. En attendant le départ à destination, le premier de Sydney, de l’Australie, le second d’Auckland, de la Nouvelle-Zélande, leur relâche à Kerawara devait se prolonger trois semaines encore. MM. Hawkins et Gibson connaissaient le capitaine anglais, qu’ils avaient vu quelquefois à Hobart-Town, et ils furent heureux de lui serrer la main.

L’habitation de M. Hamburg était située à mi-colline, au milieu de la forêt, que traversait un large sentier bordé d’épais buissons. Un demi-mille la séparait de son comptoir du port.

Le gouverneur avait invité à dîner pour le lendemain M. Hawkins, M. Gibson et son fils. L’embarquement des cent cinquante tonnes de coprah serait terminé dans cet après-midi du 2 décembre, et le James-Cook, dès le 3, reprendrait la mer à destination de Port-Praslin.

Les frères Kip étaient compris dans l’invitation faite par M. Hamburg, mais ils l’avaient déclinée avec la réserve de gens qui ne veulent point s’imposer.

Ils profiteraient de cette soirée pour faire une dernière promenade aux environs du port. Quant à l'équipage du brick, comme la désertion n'était point à craindre, il avait l'autorisation de descendre à terre et ne se ferait pas faute de fraterniser avec les matelots des autres bâtiments.

La soirée finirait peut-être par quelque griserie dans la principale taverne de Kerawara. Cela était difficile à empêcher, et M. Gibson se borna à recommander de ne pas laisser les choses aller trop loin.

Flig Balt affirma au capitaine qu'il pouvait compter sur lui. Mais, en parlant avec son obséquiosité habituelle, pourquoi ne parvint-il pas à dissimuler le trouble qui l'agitait?... Aussi M. Gibson, qui s'en aperçut, lui dit-il:
“Qu'avez-vous donc, Balt?...

- Rien, monsieur Gibson, rien... répondit le maître d'équipage. Je suis un peu fatigué, voilà tout.”

Et ses regards, se détournant du capitaine, se reportèrent sur Vin Mod, qui l'observait.

Vers cinq heures, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, M. Zieger se trouvaient à l'habitation de M. Hamburg, où le dîner allait être servi à six heures et demie. Le capitaine, retenu à bord pour ses dernières formalités, n'arriverait guère qu'à ce moment-là. Il devait apporter une somme de deux mille piastres en or, règlement de la cargaison maintenant rangée dans la cale du James-Cook.

En l'attendant, les invités du gouverneur visitèrent la propriété, entretenue avec soin et l'une des plus belles de Kerawara. Nat Gibson prit quelques vues photographiques de l'habitation et des alentours de la terrasse. Le regard, passant au-dessus des massifs d'arbres, s'étendait jusqu'au large. Ils voyaient se détacher vers le nord-ouest l’extrême promontoire du grand îlot d’Ulu, vers l’ouest l’extrême pointe du petit îlot Kabokon, au-delà duquel le soleil se coucha sous un horizon magnifiquement empourpré de nuages à la limite du ciel et de la mer.

Lorsque sonna la demie de six heures, le capitaine n’avait pas paru.

M. Hamburg et ses hôtes restèrent dans le jardin en guettant son arrivée.

La soirée était superbe, l’atmosphère quelque peu rafraîchie par le vent qui se levait aux approches de la nuit. On respirait délicieusement cet air embaumé du parfum des orangers.

Cependant le temps s’écoulait. À sept heures M. Gibson n’avait pas encore été signalé.

“Mon père aura été retenu au dernier moment... dit Nat Gibson. Je ne peux m’expliquer autrement ce retard...

- Est-ce qu’il ne devait pas aller à vos bureaux, monsieur Hamburg?... demanda l’armateur.

- En effet, mais uniquement pour prendre ses papiers.

- Cela a pu exiger quelque temps...

- Patience, dit le gouverneur. Nous ne sommes pas à trente minutes près...”

Lorsqu’une demi-heure se fut écoulée, M. Hawkins, M. Zieger et Nat Gibson commencèrent à être inquiets.

“Gibson, dit M. Zieger, se serait-il égaré en route?...

- Ce n’est pas probable, répondit M. Hamburg. Le chemin est tout droit, et il le connaît, car il est venu plusieurs fois à l’habitation...

- Si nous allions au-devant de mon père?... proposa Nat Gibson en se levant.

- Allons”, dit M. Hawkins.

M. Hamburg appela un des serviteurs, qui se munit d’un fanal, et, accompagné de ses invités, il sortit de l’enclos pour s’engager sous la forêt.

L’obscurité était déjà profonde à l’abri de ces épaisses frondaisons qui formaient berceau au-dessus du sentier.

On écouta si quelques pas se faisaient entendre dans la direction du port...

Aucun bruit.

On appela...

Aucune réponse.

Cette partie de la forêt semblait être absolument déserte.

Enfin, après un demi-mille, tous débouchèrent sur la place de Kerawara. De la principale taverne, vivement éclairée, sortait tout un tapage de buveurs. Si une partie de l’équipage du brick avait déjà regagné le bord, quelques matelots étaient encore attablés dans cette taverne, et, parmi eux, Len Cannon et ses camarades.

Quant à Pieter et à Karl Kip, qui venaient de rentrer, ils étaient assis à l’arrière du James-Cook.

Un peu avant eux, Flig Balt et Vin Mod avaient également rembarqué, après une absence d’environ une demi-heure.

Arrivé au quai, Nat Gibson héla d’une voix inquiète:

“Et le capitaine?...

- Le capitaine, monsieur Gibson?... répondit Vin Mod. Est-ce qu’il n’est pas chez M. Hamburg?...

- Non... répondit le gouverneur.

- Il a cependant quitté le brick pour s’y rendre... déclara le matelot Burnes.

- Et je l’ai vu prendre le sentier... ajouta Hobbes.

- Depuis quand est-il parti?... demanda M. Zieger.

- Depuis une heure à peu près, répondit Vin Mod.

- Il est arrivé un malheur!...” s’écria M. Hawkins.

Et alors ses compagnons et lui de se répandre dans les rues du port, d’aller de comptoir en comptoir, de visiter les tavernes...

La présence du capitaine ne fut constatée nulle part.

Il fallut alors diriger les recherches dans un large rayon à travers la forêt.

Peut-être M. Gibson avait-il gagné l’habitation du gouverneur en faisant quelque détour?...

Ce fut peine inutile. Après plusieurs heures, MM. Hamburg, Zieger, Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les frères Kip, qui s’étaient joints à eux, durent revenir à bord.

En quelles transes se passa la nuit! Le capitaine ne reparaissait pas. Le sentier entre le port et l'habitation de M. Hamburg fut sans cesse parcouru, avec des fanaux, avec des torches... Harry Gibson ne se retrouva nulle part...

Nat Gibson s'abandonnait au désespoir. M. Hawkins, non moins désespéré, ne parvenait pas à calmer le jeune homme, éperdu à cette pensée qu'il ne reverrait plus son père...

Ce pressentiment ne le trompait pas.

Au point du jour, la nouvelle se répandit que le cadavre du capitaine Gibson venait d'être découvert dans la forêt, à un demi-mille du port.

XIII - L’assassinat

Voici ce qui s’était passé:

Dès qu’il eut donné ses dernières instructions pour que le James-Cook fût prêt à appareiller le lendemain au jour levant, le capitaine Gibson débarqua et se rendit d’abord au comptoir.

Une petite sacoche qu’il portait contenait la somme de deux mille piastres en or, qu’il devait verser entre les mains de M. Hamburg.

Une partie de l’équipage avait quitté le brick après lui, et les frères Kip étaient déjà en promenade aux environs du port.

Lorsque M. Gibson arriva au comptoir, un des employés lui remit des papiers de diverses sortes, son connaissement et autres.

Le soleil, durant deux heures encore, allait éclairer les hauteurs de l’îlot Kabokon. Le capitaine connaissait bien la route qui conduisait à la villa, et il ne pouvait craindre de s’égarer.

Une fois engagé sous bois au fond du port, M. Gibson marcha pendant un demi-mille, et il se disposait à obliquer vers la gauche, lorsqu’il fut violemment projeté à terre.

Deux hommes venaient de se précipiter sur lui, et l’un d’eux l’étreignait à la gorge.

Étourdi d’un coup violent qui lui avait été porté à la poitrine, il ne les reconnut pas, ayant presque aussitôt perdu l’usage de ses sens.

Ces deux hommes le prirent alors par les épaules et par les pieds, et le transportèrent à cinq cents pas à travers le bois.

Après s’être arrêtés au bord d’une clairière, les malfaiteurs déposèrent leur victime à terre, et l’un d’eux dit:

“Il faut l’achever...”

À ce moment, les yeux de M. Gibson se rouvrirent:

“Flig Balt!... Vin Mod!” prononça-t-il.

C’étaient le maître d’équipage et Vin Mod qui avaient commis ce crime. Vin Mod serait enfin délivré d’Harry Gibson avec l’espoir assez justifié que Flig Balt obtiendrait le commandement du navire. Alors, sous la direction du nouveau capitaine, au lieu de faire voile pour Hobart-Town, le brick se jetterait hors de sa route, et, sans que M. Hawkins pût s’en apercevoir, il gagnerait vers l’est les parages des îles Salomon. Là, on verrait à se débarrasser de l’armateur, de Nat Gibson, des frères Kip, de ceux des hommes qui ne voudraient pas s’associer à une campagne de piraterie. Ce qui n’avait pas été fait entre la Nouvelle-Zélande et l’archipel Bismarck se ferait après le départ de Port-Praslin.

Après que M. Gibson eut crié le nom des deux assassins, ces mots s’échappèrent de ses lèvres:

“Misérables... misérables!”

Il voulut se relever, il voulut se défendre, et que pouvait-il, lui sans armes, contre deux hommes vigoureux et armés?...

“Au secours!” cria-t-il encore.

Vin Mod se précipita sur le malheureux, et de la main lui ferma la bouche, tandis que Flig Balt, du poignard qui avait été volé à bord de la Wilhelmina par son complice, le frappait en pleine poitrine.

Harry Gibson poussa un suprême gémissement; puis ses yeux grands ouverts, d'où jaillissait un regard d'épouvante, se fixèrent une dernière fois sur ses meurtriers. La lame du poignard l'avait atteint au cœur, et, après une seconde d'angoisse, il retomba mort.

“Capitaine Balt... salut!” dit Vin Mod en portant la main à son béret.

Le maître d'équipage, terrifié, reculait devant les yeux de sa victime, qui, vivement éclairés par un rayon de soleil, le regardaient toujours.

Vin Mod, ayant conservé tout son sang-froid, fouilla la poche du capitaine, où il trouva les papiers de bord et la sacoche, de laquelle il retira les deux mille piastres.

“Agréable surprise!” s'écria-t-il.

Puis, tapant sur l'épaule du maître d'équipage, toujours immobilisé sous le regard du cadavre:

“Filons!” dit-il.

Et, laissant le corps à cette place, où il ne serait probablement pas découvert avant le départ du brick, tous deux, regagnant le sentier, se dirigèrent rapidement vers le port.

Un quart d'heure plus tard, ils mettaient le pied sur le pont du James-Cook. Flig Balt réintégra sa cabine. Vin Mod descendit au poste de l'équipage, vide alors, et cacha au fond de son sac les papiers du capitaine Gibson, les piastres volées et le poignard qui avait servi à l’assassinat.

Une demi-heure s’était écoulée, lorsque Karl et Pieter rentrèrent à bord, et, en attendant le retour des invités de M. Hamburg, ils vinrent s’asseoir à l’arrière du rouf.

Quant à Vin Mod, le misérable remonta vers l’avant-pont. Affectant même une extrême gaieté, il se mit à causer avec les matelots Hobbes et Wickley, qui n’étaient point descendus à terre.

Ainsi avait été commis le crime.

Ce fut l’employé d’une factorerie qui, le lendemain, traversant la clairière, découvrit le corps du capitaine Gibson.

Il revint en toute hâte au comptoir, et le bruit du meurtre se répandit aussitôt.

À cette nouvelle, Nat Gibson fut comme foudroyé. On sait quel lien d’affection unissait le père et le fils. M. Hawkins, aussi terriblement frappé que le malheureux jeune homme, n’aurait pu lui donner des soins. Les frères Kip durent le transporter dans sa cabine, où il finit par reprendre connaissance. Tous deux, d’ailleurs, témoignaient de la plus vive douleur et de la plus profonde indignation.

L’équipage était atterré. Jim pleurait à grosses larmes. Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, ne pouvaient croire à la mort de leur capitaine. Flig Balt et Vin Mod se répandaient en violentes menaces contre le meurtrier.

Seules les recrues de Dunedin montrèrent une complète indifférence. On ne l’ignore pas, Len Cannon et les autres avaient décidé de débarquer ce jour-là - ce qui eût compromis et même peut-être empêché le départ du brick. Mais, M. Gibson disparu, leurs dispositions allaient sans doute être modifiées. À plusieurs reprises, Len Cannon jeta à Vin Mod un regard interrogateur. Celui-ci détournait la tête, comme pour ne pas le comprendre.

Cependant Nat Gibson, dès qu'il fut revenu à lui, s'élança hors de sa cabine:

“Mon père!... s'écria-t-il. Je veux revoir mon père!...”

Karl Kip tenta de le retenir. Nat le repoussa et se précipita sur le pont.

M. Hamburg, qui avait regagné son habitation, s'était hâté d'accourir dès qu'il eut été informé du meurtre. Il arriva même à bord au moment où Nat Gibson cherchait à débarquer, et il lui dit:

“Je vous accompagne.”

Il était huit heures. MM. Hamburg et Zieger, M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson, les frères Kip, quelques employés de la factorerie, prirent à travers la forêt pour atteindre la clairière, ce qui ne demanda que dix minutes à peine.

Le corps était dans l'état où les meurtriers l'avaient laissé, étendu sur le sol, les yeux toujours démesurément ouverts, comme si la vie ne l'eût pas encore quitté.

Nat Gibson s'agenouilla près de son père. Il l'embrassait, l'appelait, et appelait aussi sa mère... Lorsque Mme Gibson apprendrait cet horrible malheur, y survivrait-elle, la malheureuse femme!...

Cependant M. Hamburg, auquel incombait le soin de faire une enquête, examinait les traces laissées sur l'herbe, et il crut reconnaître, à des empreintes de pas récentes, que le meurtre avait eu deux hommes pour auteurs. Puis, après avoir entrouvert les vêtements de M. Gibson, il constata à la poitrine une plaie produite par une lame dentelée, plaie ayant peu saigné. Quant à l’argent et aux papiers que portait le capitaine, ils avaient disparu.

Il était donc certain que le vol avait été le mobile du crime. Mais qui l’avait commis?... Quelque colon de Kerawara?... Cela semblait tout d’abord douteux... N’étaient-ce pas plutôt des indigènes?... et, en réalité, ils sont assez suspects... Mais comment et où découvrir les assassins?... Le meurtre accompli, n’avaient-ils pas immédiatement quitté Kerawara sur leur pirogue pour regagner l’île d’York?... En quelques heures, ils avaient pu se mettre à l’abri de toute poursuite...

Il était donc probable que ce crime demeurerait impuni, comme tant d’autres dont ces parages, depuis la Nouvelle-Guinée jusqu’à l’archipel des Salomon, ont été le théâtre.

À présent, il fallait transporter le corps à la factorerie.

M. Hamburg avait fait apporter une civière, sur laquelle on déposa le mort. Puis tous, Nat Gibson au bras de M. Hawkins, reprirent le chemin du port.

Le cadavre fut placé dans une salle du comptoir, en attendant que M. Hamburg eût terminé son enquête. Quant à l’inhumation, cette triste cérémonie s’accomplirait dès le lendemain, car la décomposition s’opère rapidement sous ce brûlant climat des Tropiques.

Le missionnaire qui se trouvait alors à Kerawara vint s’agenouiller et prier près de la victime.

M. Zieger reconduisit à bord Nat Gibson qui, dans un inquiétant état de prostration, resta couché sur le cadre de sa cabine.

Entre-temps, M. Hamburg ne cessait de prendre des renseignements de nature à le mettre sur la trace des meurtriers. Après qu'il eut ramené MM. Hawkins et Zieger à la factorerie, il s'entretint avec eux à ce sujet, et lorsqu'ils lui demandèrent quels pouvaient, à son avis, être les auteurs du crime:

"Assurément des indigènes, répondit-il.

- Pour voler le pauvre M. Gibson?... demanda M. Hawkins.

- Oui... Ils auront appris qu'il devait rapporter une somme d'argent... ils l'auront guetté, suivi dans la forêt, attaqué, dépouillé...

- Mais comment les découvrir?... dit M. Zieger.

- Ce sera presque impossible, déclara M. Hamburg. Sur quels indices s'appuyer pour commencer les recherches?...

- Il y aurait une chose à faire, observa M. Zieger, ce serait de photographier la plaie faite par l'arme du meurtrier, et, si l'on retrouvait cette arme, peut-être apprendrait-on à qui elle appartenait...

- Vous avez raison, répondit M. Hamburg, et je demande à monsieur Hawkins de procéder à cette opération.

- Oui... oui! approuva M. Hawkins, dont l'émotion faisait trembler la voix, et que ce crime affreux ne reste pas impuni!"

M. Zieger alla chercher l’appareil à bord et revint quelques minutes après. La poitrine du capitaine Gibson mise à nu, on fit un nouvel examen très minutieux de la blessure. Elle ne mesurait qu’un demi-pouce de largeur, et, d’un côté, ses bords présentaient une dentelure, comme si la peau eût été sciée.

Et alors M. Hamburg de dire:

“Vous le voyez, c’est avec une arme indigène que le coup a été porté... un de ces kriss à lame dentelée dont se servent les naturels.”

Deux clichés furent obtenus avec une extrême précision. L’un reproduisait la poitrine d’Harry Gibson, l’autre sa tête. Ses yeux étaient encore largement ouverts, et M. Hawkins les referma ensuite. Il fut convenu que ces photographies seraient laissées entre les mains de M. Hamburg pour son enquête. Quant aux clichés, que conserverait M. Hawkins, ils lui serviraient à tirer d’autres épreuves. L’image de son malheureux ami, mort à Kerawara, serait rapportée dans sa ville natale.

Il fallut, dans l’après-midi, procéder à la mise en bière. Les obsèques se feraient le lendemain matin. Une place fut choisie dans le petit cimetière de Kerawara. C’eût été trop tarder que d’attendre le retour à Port-Praslin pour creuser la fosse destinée à recevoir le corps.

Cette triste journée s’acheva au milieu de la désolation générale. Vint la nuit, que Nat Gibson, étouffé de sanglots, passa sans avoir pu trouver un instant de sommeil.

Le lendemain, les funérailles eurent le concours de toute la population anglaise et allemande de Kerawara.

Le pavillon du James-Cook étant en berne, les autres navires hissèrent le leur à mi-mât en signe de deuil.

Le cercueil, recouvert du drapeau national, fut porté par quatre hommes du brick. Nat Gibson, le gouverneur, M. Hawkins, M. Zieger marchaient derrière, suivis de Flig Balt et du reste de l’équipage auquel s’étaient joints les matelots des autres bâtiments.

Le missionnaire anglican, précédant le cercueil, récitait les prières liturgiques.

Le funèbre cortège atteignit le cimetière, et là, devant la tombe, M. Hamburg prononça quelques paroles en souvenir du capitaine Gibson.

La douleur de Nat faisait pitié. M. Hawkins pouvait à peine le soutenir. Une dernière fois, le jeune homme voulut se jeter sur le cercueil de son père. Puis la bière fut descendue dans la fosse, sur laquelle M. Hamburg fit placer une croix de bois avec cette inscription:

AU CAPITAINE HARRY GIBSON

d’Hobart-Town,

Assassiné le 2 décembre 1885,

Son fils, ses amis, son équipage,

et la population de Kerawara.

Dieu reçoive son âme!

Les recherches auxquelles s’était livré M. Hamburg n’avaient point donné de résultat. Le crime accompli, les meurtriers s’étaient sans doute hâtés de quitter Kerawara pour se réfugier chez les tribus du Neu-Lauenburg.

Dans ces conditions, comment espérer jamais les découvrir, puisque les pirogues indigènes circulaient jour et nuit entre l’îlot et l’île?... Retrouverait-on l’arme qui avait servi à l’assassinat et celui à qui elle appartenait?... Seul le hasard pouvait intervenir en cette affaire, et interviendrait-il?...

Le brick ne prolongea pas son séjour à Kerawara. Le matin même où se répandit la nouvelle du meurtre, il était prêt à prendre la mer pour revenir à Port-Praslin.

Aussi, d’accord avec M. Zieger, M. Hawkins fit-il venir le maître d’équipage dans le carré, et il lui dit:

“Flig Balt, le James-Cook a perdu son capitaine...

- Et c’est un grand malheur, répondit Flig Balt, dont la voix tremblait d’une émotion qui n’était pas celle de la douleur.

- Je sais, poursuivit M. Hawkins, combien mon malheureux ami avait confiance en vous... et, cette confiance, je suis disposé à vous la continuer.”

Le maître d’équipage, les yeux baissés, s’inclina sans prononcer une seule parole.

“Demain, Flig Balt, reprit l’armateur, le James-Cook appareillera, et vous le reconduirez à Port-Praslin. Là nous achèverons le chargement, et, dès que l’opération sera terminée, il fera voile pour Hobart-Town.

- À vos ordres, monsieur Hawkins”, répondit Flig Balt en se retirant.

M. Hawkins avait bien dit que le maître d’équipage remplacerait M. Gibson dans la direction du navire, mais non qu’il en serait le capitaine. Peut-être même ne songeait-il pas à lui donner officiellement ce titre et trouvait-il suffisant qu’il en remplît les fonctions pendant la traversée de l’archipel Bismarck à la Tasmanie.

Le maître d’équipage l’avait bien remarqué. Aussi s’en expliqua-t-il avec Vin Mod quelques instants après:

“Eh qu’importe! répartit le matelot. Reconduisons d’abord le brick à Port-Praslin... Que vous soyez ensuite le capitaine ou le second, c’est tout un, maître Balt!... Lorsque nous serons en possession du navire, c’est nous qui vous en nommerons le capitaine, et que je sois pendu si cette nomination ne vaut pas celle de M. Hawkins!”

Du reste, Len Cannon et ses compagnons, s’ils ignoraient que Flig Balt et Vin Mod fussent les assassins de M. Gibson, étaient assurés maintenant que le brick ne reviendrait pas à Hobart-Town, et ils ne parlèrent plus de débarquer.

Le lendemain, 5 décembre, M. Hawkins prit congé du gouverneur. M. Hamburg serra Nat Gibson dans ses bras et lui promit de faire toute diligence pour découvrir les meurtriers de son père. S’il y parvenait, la justice allemande serait sans pitié pour eux!... Ils payeraient de leur tête cet abominable crime.

Puis M. Hawkins, M. Zieger, Karl et Pieter Kip firent leurs adieux - et combien tristes! - au gouverneur et aux autres agents des factoreries de Kerawara.

L’appareillage s’effectua sous les ordres de Flig Balt.

Une heure après, le brick, sorti des bancs madréporiques, marchait au sud-est, perdait de vue le cap Barard, la pointe la plus avancée de l’île d’York, et se dirigeait vers l’entrée du canal Saint-Georges.

La traversée allait être rapide et ne demander que vingt-quatre heures. Flig Balt n’eut pas à se plaindre de l’équipage, dont le service s’accomplit régulièrement.

Point de manœuvres à exécuter, d’ailleurs, avec ce vent favorable qui n’exigeait aucun changement d’amures. Que Flig Balt fût ou ne fût pas un bon marin, cette courte navigation n’aurait pas permis d’en juger. Il convenait d’attendre qu’il eût ramené le navire à Hobart-Town. Du reste, il n’occupait point la cabine du capitaine et garda la sienne à l’entrée du poste.

Pendant la nuit, à Len Cannon, qui l’interrogeait, alors qu’ils étaient tous deux de quart, Vin Mod répondit de façon à satisfaire ses compagnons et lui. Le James-Cook ne retournerait pas en Tasmanie... Capitaine ou non, Flig Balt saurait le rejeter hors de sa route... Une fois dans les parages des Salomon, il ne serait pas difficile d’en finir avec les passagers du bord... N’y a-t-il pas toujours par là d’honnêtes matelots en quête d’aventures qui, au besoin, s’empresseraient de leur prêter main-forte?... Len Cannon et les autres n’avaient donc aucune raison de quitter le James-Cook, dont ils ne tarderaient pas à devenir maîtres.

Les hauteurs de Lanut furent aperçues dans la matinée du 6 décembre. Avant midi, le bâtiment serait à son ancrage devant le comptoir de M. Zieger.

Comme il arrivait avec son pavillon en berne, on comprit, à Port-Praslin, qu’il y avait un malheur.

Et quelle fut la désolation générale, lorsque l’on sut en quelles conditions M. Gibson était mort! Mme Zieger, qui était accourue sur le quai, reçut Nat Gibson dans ses bras à l’instant où il débarquait. Les sanglots la suffoquaient, et, dès qu’elle put parler:

“Mon pauvre Nat... mon pauvre enfant... et votre mère... votre mère!...” répéta-t-elle, tandis que ses yeux se noyaient de larmes.

Nat Gibson dut accepter de passer à Wilhelmstaf les derniers jours de la relâche, M. Hawkins également. C’est ainsi que tous deux reprirent leurs chambres et s’assirent à la table de cette hospitalière maison où M. Gibson ne devait plus revenir!

M. Zieger ne voulut laisser à personne le soin de surveiller l’embarquement des cent cinquante tonnes de coprah en complément de la cargaison du brick. Il y fut aidé, d’ailleurs, par Karl et Pieter Kip, qui ne quittèrent pas le navire, même une heure. L’aîné des deux frères s’entendait parfaitement à ces arrimages, et, au surplus, Flig Balt s’en fût tiré sans peine, tant l’équipage le secondait avec zèle.

Le coprah mis en cale, on répartit à l’avant et à l’arrière les caisses de nacre à destination de Hobart-Town. En outre, comme, avant son voyage à Kerawara, le capitaine avait fait procéder aux travaux de nettoyage et de peinture, le départ ne fut pas retardé de ce chef.

Tout était terminé dans l’après-midi du 9.

Ce soir-là, M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson, accompagnés de M. et Mme Zieger, rentrèrent à bord, afin que le James-Cook pût mettre à la voile dès l’aube.

Lorsqu’ils arrivèrent, ils furent reçus par Flig Balt, qui se tenait à l’échelle. M. Hawkins lui dit alors:

“Tout est paré?...

- Oui, monsieur Hawkins.

- Eh bien, Flig Balt, demain, nous prendrons la mer... Vous avez conduit le brick de Kerawara à Port-Praslin, conduisez-le de Port-Praslin à Hobart-Town...

Vous le commandez désormais...

- Je vous remercie, monsieur Hawkins”, répondit Flig Balt, tandis que l’équipage laissait entendre un murmure approbatif.

L’armateur serra la main du nouveau capitaine, mais ne s’aperçut pas qu’elle tremblait dans la sienne.

M. et Mme Zieger firent leurs adieux à Nat Gibson, à M. Hawkins, et n’oublièrent pas les frères Kip, pour lesquels ils éprouvaient une vive sympathie. Puis, sur la promesse d’aller passer, dès qu’ils le pourraient, quelques semaines en Tasmanie près des deux familles, ils regagnèrent leur habitation.

Le lendemain, dès cinq heures du matin, le capitaine Balt fit ses préparatifs d’appareillage.

Une heure après être sorti des passes de Port-Praslin, le James-Cook, cap au sud-est, se trouvait au large de la Nouvelle-Irlande.

XIV - Incidents

La distance entre l’archipel Bismarck et la Tasmanie est évaluée à deux mille quatre cents milles environ. Avec vent favorable, une moyenne de cent milles par vingt-quatre heures, le James-Cook n’emploierait pas plus de trois semaines à la franchir.

La période des vents alizés touchait à sa fin, et la mousson des Tropiques allait bientôt lui succéder. En effet, la brise régulière ne tarda pas à s’établir dans l’ouest, après un calme de courte durée...

Le brick serait donc avantageusement servi pour traverser les parages difficiles des Louisiades et donner dans la mer de Corail.

Le temps n’était plus maintenant où les passagers du James-Cook, au cours d’un agréable voyage, s’intéressaient aux choses de la navigation. Ils ne s’abandonnaient pas à ces joyeuses impressions du retour qu’ils eussent éprouvées, si leur séjour à Kerawara ne se fût terminé par un effroyable malheur.

Lorsque Nat Gibson quittait sa cabine, il venait s’asseoir à l’arrière, M. Hawkins près de lui. Rien ne pouvait les distraire de leur douleur. Ils songeaient à la prochaine arrivée au port, à Mme Gibson qui attendait si impatiemment le James-Cook, et la pauvre femme apprendrait qu’il ne ramenait pas son capitaine...

Les frères Kip, désireux de respecter cette affliction que l’éloignement n’avait pas encore adoucie, se tenaient le plus souvent à l’écart. Toutefois, sans trop en avoir l’air, Karl surveillait la marche du navire. La maître d’équipage ne lui avait jamais inspiré confiance. En diverses circonstances, ces qualités qui font le vrai marin lui avaient semblé assez incomplètes. À deux ou trois reprises, lorsque M. Gibson était dans sa cabine, quelques manœuvres mal dirigées lui faisaient douter que Flig Balt fût homme de mer.

Mais, au total, cela ne le regardant pas, il s’était tu à ce sujet. Or, ce qui ne présentait pas de très graves inconvénients sous le commandement d’Harry Gibson, en avait maintenant que Flig Balt était le capitaine du James-Cook.

Ce jour-là, Karl Kip fit part de ses craintes à son frère.

“Ainsi, tu penses que ce Flig Balt n’est point à la hauteur de ses fonctions?...

- Il est permis de le penser, Pieter... Durant le grain noir que nous avons attrapé dans la mer de Corail, j’ai acquis la certitude qu’il ne savait pas bien son métier...

- Alors, Karl, ton devoir est de surveiller cet homme, et, si quelque manœuvre te semble dangereuse, n’hésite pas à faire des observations...

- Que Flig Balt recevra, Pieter, en me priant de ne point me mêler de la direction du navire...

- N’importe, Karl, tu le dois, et, dans le cas où tes conseils seraient mal accueillis, adresse-toi directement à M. Hawkins... Il est de grand sens, il t’écoutera, il s’en expliquera avec l’ex-maître d’équipage, et, assurément, il te donnera raison contre lui...

- Nous verrons, Pieter. Par malheur, je n’ai pas les cartes du bord à ma disposition, et il m’est difficile de contrôler la route...

- Fais pour le mieux, mon cher Karl. Le James-Cook a été assez éprouvé déjà pour qu’on lui épargne d’autres épreuves!”

On le voit, ne croyant pas encore qu’il y eût mauvais vouloir chez Flig Balt, Karl Kip le tenait pour un médiocre marin.

Aussi, sans que celui-ci pût s’en apercevoir, le surveillait-il le plus possible. Du reste, la présence de Karl Kip ne laissait pas de causer au nouveau capitaine certaine inquiétude, et il entendait agir avec prudence, en dépit des impatiences de Vin Mod, quand il essayerait de modifier la route de manière à rallier l’archipel des Salomon.

Après avoir passé à l’ouvert du canal Saint-Georges, le brick perdit de vue à la fois les extrêmes terres de la Nouvelle-Irlande et de la Nouvelle-Bretagne. À travers cette portion de mer, Flig Balt eut raison de mettre le cap au sud, car il ne voulait pas se rapprocher de la Nouvelle-Guinée. Mieux valait, quitte à allonger le parcours d’une cinquantaine de milles, se tenir au large de l’île Entrecasteaux. Il ne fallait point exposer le navire à une seconde attaque de ces Papouas, qu’on n’eût peut-être pas repoussée aussi heureusement que la première l’avait été.

Ce fut dans la journée du 15 que le James-Cook atteignit les limites de la Louisiade. La traversée s’était accomplie sans incidents. Après avoir laissé dans l’ouest l’île Rossel, la principale du groupe, la mer de Corail s’ouvrit largement devant lui sur le douzième degré de latitude méridionale.

À partir de ce parallèle, la direction serait imperturbablement conservée au sud, afin de reconnaître la côte orientale de l’Australie à la hauteur de Brisbane. Avec un vent qui soufflait régulièrement de l’ouest, le James-Cook pourrait obtenir son maximum de vitesse sous l’allure du largue.

Or, c’était précisément sur cette limite de la mer de Corail que Flig Balt devrait modifier sa direction en courant vers l’est, s’il voulait venir en vue de l’île Mangara, située à la queue des Salomon.

Mais, comme cela eût comporté dans la route du brick un changement notable dont on aurait pu s’apercevoir, Flig Balt se contenta d’obliquer vers le sud-sud-est.

Néanmoins, ce changement frappa Karl Kip, qui, après avoir observé la boussole, dit au capitaine:

“Vous laissez porter, monsieur Balt...

- Oui... de deux quarts...

- Vous trouveriez pourtant la mer belle à l’abri de la côte australienne.

- Possible... répliqua Flig Balt, qui commençait à regarder le Hollandais de travers.

- Alors, reprit celui-ci, pourquoi ne gardez-vous pas votre direction?...

- Parce que les rafales de nord-est sont toujours à redouter, et je ne veux pas me drosser le long de terre.

- Oh! il y a de l’espace, interrompit Karl Kip, et vous auriez le temps...

- Ce n’est pas mon avis”, déclara sèchement Flig Balt.

Et lorsqu’il rapporta à Vin Mod ces quelques paroles échangées entre eux:

“De quoi se mêle ce Groningois de Groningue, répliqua Vin Mod, et quand serons-nous débarrassés de tous ces gens-là?...”

D’ailleurs, l’ancien projet qui consistait à envoyer par-dessus le bord les passagers du brick devait toujours être mis à exécution, si l’occasion se présentait. Or, à le faire aux approches des Salomon, peut-être même avec le concours des malfaiteurs qui fourmillent en ces parages, les chances de succès seraient singulièrement accrues.

Au total, cette modification de route, remarquée par Karl Kip, n’était pas importante, et, sans se justifier d’une manière absolue, elle était acceptable dans une certaine mesure.

En effet, à supposer qu’une tempête s’élevât du large, un navire est moins exposé, lorsqu’il n’est pas à proximité d’une côte, quand il a devant lui “de la fuite”, pour employer l’expression maritime.

Karl Kip ne crut donc pas devoir prévenir M. Hawkins. Toutefois, en dépit de Flig Balt, qui s’en apercevait, il ne cessa de surveiller la direction donnée à l’homme de barre.

Au surplus, Flig Balt et ses complices ne tardèrent pas à être servis par les circonstances.

Dans la soirée du 17, le temps changea. Le soleil venait de se coucher sur un horizon chargé de nuages lourds. La mer, qui sentait quelque chose, devenait houleuse. Toute la journée, la chaleur avait été accablante. À plusieurs reprises, la brise ayant refusé, les voiles battirent sur les mâts.

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, le thermomètre Fahrenheit avait accusé cent trois degrés à l’ombre [39° 44 centigrades.] et, vers cinq heures, le baromètre était tombé à vingt-sept pouces [730 millimètres.]. Ce rapide abaissement de la colonne mercurielle indiquait un profond trouble atmosphérique.

Du reste, la houle très mouvementée, quelques lames qui déferlaient déjà, annonçaient que le vent faisait rage dans l’ouest.

Ce trouble atmosphérique fut précédé d’un violent orage. Vers neuf heures, après de lointains roulements de foudre, l’horizon s’embrasa d’éclairs si ardents, si multipliés, que la mer, en les réverbérant, paraissait rouler des vagues de feu. Quand ils ne se déchargeaient pas à sa surface, ils s’échangeaient d’un nuage à l’autre sans discontinuité.

Les éclats du tonnerre devinrent tels que l’oreille en était assourdie, comme les yeux étaient éblouis par les fulgurantes décharges électriques.

Vers onze heures, l’orage atteignit sa plus haute intensité. La foudre atteignit plusieurs fois l’extrémité de la mâture, sans causer de dommage, et s’écoula par les fils des paratonnerres.

On pouvait être assuré maintenant que cet orage serait suivi d’un coup de vent d’une grande violence, et il fallait être prêt à le recevoir.

Actuellement, il n’y aurait point à risquer de s’affaler vers une côte, comme l’avait dit Flig Balt. Bien au contraire, et, à moins de courir vers l’archipel des Salomon, le brick ne trouverait aucun obstacle dans l’est.

MM. Hawkins, Flig Balt, Karl Kip, groupés devant le rouf, ne pouvaient se méprendre sur l’imminence de la tempête, et l’armateur dit:

“L’ouragan va tomber à bord...

- Cela est certain, répondit Flig Balt, et, cette fois, il ne s’agit pas d’un de ces grains noirs qui ne durent que quelques heures!...

- C’est à craindre, répondit M. Hawkins.

- Il sera nécessaire de fuir au large... observa Flig Balt.

- Et pourquoi ne pas tenir tête à la bourrasque?... demanda Karl Kip. En se mettant à la cape...

- Et le pourrait-on?... interrompit Flig Balt. Un navire chargé comme le James-Cook, et qui garde à peine sa ligne de flottaison, est-ce qu’il s’élèverait à la lame?... Est-ce qu’il ne serait pas balayé en grand?...

- Un marin doit toujours essayer de conserver sa route, répondit Karl Kip, et ne fuit que s’il ne peut faire autrement...

- C’est mon avis, déclara M. Hawkins, car nous pourrions être entraînés loin dans l’est...

- Et même dans le nord-est!... ajouta Karl Kip. Voici les nuages qui commencent à chasser du sud-ouest, et, vent arrière, nous tomberions dans les parages des Salomon...”

Assurément, et c’était bien ainsi que l’entendaient Flig Balt et Vin Mod.

Cependant il eût été difficile à l’ex-maître d’équipage de ne pas reconnaître que le Hollandais parlait en marin. D’autre part, laisser échapper cette occasion de changer la direction du James-Cook, cela ne pouvait lui convenir. Aussi dit-il:

“J’ai la responsabilité d’un capitaine, M. Hawkins le comprendra, et je n’ai pas d’ordres à recevoir de M. Kip...

- Ce ne sont point des ordres, ce sont des conseils que je vous donne... répondit Karl Kip, que cette obstination ne laissa pas de surprendre.

- Des ordres dont je n’ai pas besoin... répliqua Flig Balt, très irrité de l’opposition qui lui était faite.

- Messieurs, intervint M. Hawkins, je désire que cette discussion finisse... Je remercie M. Kip d’avoir apporté son avis... Mais, puisque le capitaine Flig ne juge pas à propos de le suivre, qu’il agisse à son gré... Je lui ai confié le commandement du navire, et c’est son droit de revendiquer la responsabilité de ses actes.”

Karl Kip s’inclina et vint rejoindre son frère, auquel il dit:

“Ce Flig me paraît incapable, et je crains qu’il ne mette le navire en perdition!... Après tout, il est le capitaine!”

Dans tous les cas, il n’y avait plus un instant à hésiter.

La force du vent s’accroissait de minute en minute et les effrayantes rafales qui tombaient à bord risquaient d’emporter la voilure.

Par ordre de Flig Balt, la barre dessus, le brick commença son abattée, non sans éprouver de rudes secousses. Les mâts jouaient, les haubans et galhaubans menaçaient de se rompre. À deux reprises on put craindre de manquer l’évolution. Elle s’acheva enfin, et le James-Cook, sous son tourmentin à l’arrière, son petit hunier au bas ris, prit la fuite, cap au nord-est.

Pendant une demi-heure environ, la navigation se poursuivit dans des conditions à peu près normales. La seule difficulté, c’était d’empêcher le brick d’embarder sur tribord et sur bâbord. Il gouvernait à peine au milieu de ces lames qui couraient aussi vite que lui. À chaque instant il risquait d’être devancé, de venir en travers. Sa situation eût été des plus critiques, car il aurait été exposé aux dangereux coups de mer par le flanc.

Et, pourtant, impossibilité absolue d’augmenter la voilure. Un des focs que Flig Balt fit hisser, afin de rendre la barre plus sensible et plus efficace, fut mis en lambeaux. Le hunier détonnait à se déchirer. Il y eut lieu de se demander s’il ne faudrait pas fuir à sec de toile. Et autant dire qu’un navire est alors comme désemparé, incapable de suivre aucune direction, qu’il est devenu le jouet des lames.

Un peu après minuit, le plus ignorant matelot du bord aurait reconnu que le James-Cook ne pouvait conserver cette allure. Ses embardées se succédaient sans interruption. Il était littéralement mangé par la mer. Les lames ayant le double de sa vitesse, il ne gouvernait plus.

M. Hawkins ne cachait pas l’inquiétude qui le dévorait.

Il s’agissait non point du navire et de sa cargaison, qu’on eût jetée par-dessus le bord en cas de nécessité, mais de la vie des passagers et de l’équipage. Que Flig Balt eût l’entière responsabilité du commandement, lui, l’armateur, avait cette responsabilité de l’avoir nommé capitaine du James-Cook. Et si l’ex-maître d’équipage n’était pas à la hauteur de ses nouvelles fonctions; si par son impéritie, la sécurité du brick venait à être compromise, et si Karl Kip, un marin, en somme, avait raison contre lui...

Toutes ces pensées, ces incertitudes, s’agitaient dans l’esprit de M. Hawkins. Il les communiquait à Nat Gibson, qui partageait ses appréhensions et marquait peu de confiance dans Flig Balt.

De temps à autre, lorsque celui-ci s’approchait, M. Hawkins l’interrogeait, le pressait de questions auxquelles il ne répondait que par des phrases inintelligibles, incohérentes, dénotant un trouble profond, une insuffisance notoire devant les périls de cette situation.

Et, à la lueur des derniers éclairs, quand M. Hawkins se retournait vers Karl Kip, il l’apercevait debout, près de son frère, lui parlant à voix basse, dans l’attitude d’un homme en proie aux plus violentes obsessions et ayant peine à se contenir. Oui! c’était à croire qu’il allait, lui, Karl, se précipiter sur la barre et remettre le brick en direction contraire!...

D’ailleurs, à s’obstiner dans cette route, en admettant que le navire ne reçût pas quelque mauvais coup de mer, qu’il ne fût pas couché sur le flanc, qu’on n’en vînt pas à cette extrémité de couper sa mâture, où finirait-il par arriver?...

Au sein de ces parages des Salomon, entre ces îles où les récifs fourmillent, et contre lesquels il se perdrait corps et biens!...

Flig Balt le comprenait. Vin Mod et les hommes le comprenaient aussi. C’était la perte certaine du brick, si la tempête durait quarante-huit heures encore. La prudence la plus élémentaire commandait donc de revenir à tout prix vers l’ouest, tant qu’un lambeau de toile pourrait tenir.

Flig Balt voulut l’essayer. C’était une manœuvre des plus périlleuses sur une mer démontée, et peut-être serait-il impossible de changer la direction cap pour cap.

La barre fut mise dessous et on largua la brigantine pour aider le gouvernail.

À ce moment, le brick se coucha sur bâbord, et le bout de sa grande vergue disparut sous l’écume des lames.

Alors un homme s’élança vers M. Hawkins et ne dit que ces mots:

“Laissez-moi faire...

- Faites”, répondit l’armateur.

Et l’on vit de quoi est capable un vrai marin, ayant tout son sang-froid, et ce qu’il était, comparé à l’ex-maître d’équipage.

Au commandement de Karl Kip, à sa voix impérieuse, à la clarté des ordres qu’il donna, l’équipage manœuvra avec ensemble et décision. Le James-Cook se releva peu à peu en conservant sa mâture, et, profitant de rapides embellies, Karl Kip parvint à le remettre debout à la lame. Les coups de mer, quoique d’une extraordinaire impétuosité, furent moins dangereux, puisqu’ils assaillaient par l’avant et non plus par l’arrière. On hissa, non sans grandes difficultés, un foc de gros temps, capable de résister aux rafales.

Sous son tourmentin et son petit hunier, dont Karl Kip fit larguer un ris, et qui furent orientés au plus près, le brick tint la cape, tandis que le matelot Burnes, excellent timonier, maintenait imperturbablement le James-Cook en bonne route.

À un moment, Vin Mod, s’approchant de Flig Balt, lui dit, furieux:

“Tout est manqué avec le capitaine Kip au lieu du capitaine Balt!”

Le lendemain, 21 décembre, contrairement à ce qui semblait probable, la violence de cette tempête diminua d’une manière très sensible. Cela tenait à ce que le vent avait remonté de cinq quarts environ, en halant l’ouest-nord-ouest.

Très heureuse circonstance: il importait que le brick ne continuât pas à courir sur la terre et reprît direction vers le sud.

C’est ce que fit Karl Kip, dès que le vent le permit, en même temps qu’il larguait le grand hunier, la trinquette et la brigantine. Sous cette voilure, par fraîche brise, le James-Cook regagnerait rapidement ce qu’il avait perdu vers l’est.

Il est vrai, la mer ne devait pas tomber aussi vite que le vent. Elle resterait dure et creuse plusieurs heures encore. Aussi le brick fut-il horriblement secoué par les coups de roulis et de tangage.

Vers dix heures, le soleil ayant reparu, Karl Kip prit hauteur. Son point, qui fut complété par l’observation de midi, lui donna exactement la position du navire, soit 150°, 17 de longitude ouest et 13°, 27 de latitude sud.

À ce moment, M. Hawkins le rejoignit et lui dit:

“Je vous remercie, monsieur Kip.”

Karl Kip s’inclina sans répondre.

“Oui... je vous remercie, reprit l’armateur, en mon nom et au nom de tout l’équipage...

- Je n’ai fait que ce que tout marin eût fait à ma place, répondit Karl Kip. Je ne mérite aucun remerciement pour cela... et je vais remettre le commandement au capitaine...

- Non, déclara M. Hawkins d’une voix ferme que tous purent entendre. D’accord avec Nat Gibson, je vous prie de conserver le commandement de notre navire...”

Karl Kip voulant refuser d’un geste, M. Hawkins reprit:

“À celui qui l’a sauvé de le conduire!... À vous, capitaine Kip, de le ramener à Hobart-Town!”

Cependant Flig Balt, au dernier degré de la colère, s’avança vers M. Hawkins et protesta en ces termes:

“Vous m’avez nommé capitaine du James-Cook, et j’ai la prétention de le rester jusqu’à l’arrivée à destination...

- Balt, répondit M. Hawkins, dont la résolution était irrévocablement prise, il n’y a de capitaine que celui dont je fais choix, comme armateur et propriétaire de ce navire... J’ai jugé que vous n’étiez pas à la hauteur de vos fonctions... Désormais, c’est le capitaine Kip qui est le maître à bord... maître après Dieu...

- Je ferai valoir mes droits devant les autorités maritimes à Hobart-Town... répliqua Flig Balt.

- Comme il vous plaira, répondit l’armateur.

- J’ai été régulièrement nommé, et...

- Assez, Flig Balt, dit Karl Kip.

Pas une parole de plus!... À votre poste!... Quant à vous, matelots, je compte sur votre dévouement et votre obéissance!”

Ainsi finit le commandement de l’ex-maître d’équipage, ainsi lui échappa cette dernière chance de s’emparer du bâtiment. Dès cet instant, les matelots comprirent qu’ils avaient affaire à un capitaine énergique, résolu, marin dans l’âme, qui ne souffrirait aucune résistance à ses ordres. M. Hawkins ne put que s’applaudir de la résolution qu’il venait de prendre dans l’intérêt du James-Cook.

Et, maintenant, Vin Mod, Len Cannon et ses camarades se résigneraient-ils à l’abandon de leurs projets?... Ne tenteraient-ils pas un dernier coup de force avant l’arrivée en Tasmanie?...

Dans tous les cas, ils seraient surveillés de près. Karl Kip, mis en défiance, maintiendrait sévèrement la discipline à son bord.

La navigation n’offrit rien de particulier du 20 au 27 décembre. Le brick s’était rapproché de la côte australienne. Sous l’abri des hautes terres, il fut favorisé d’un vent très maniable. À cette date, une bonne observation le plaça par le travers de Sydney, un peu au-dessus du trente-quatrième parallèle sud. Il enlevait aisément ses cent milles par vingt-quatre heures. Aussi, l’après-midi du 30, se trouvait-il à l’ouvert du détroit de Bass, qui sépare la Tasmanie du continent australien.

Si les circonstances restaient bonnes, le James-Cook, à trois ou quatre jours de là, serait en vue d’Hobart-Town, au grand déplaisir de Flig Balt, de Vin Mod... surtout de Len Cannon et des autres recrues de Dunedin.

On comprendra que l’irritation du maître d’équipage et de ses complices fût portée au comble.

Un irrésistible esprit de révolte les dominait, non point une révolte sourde qui veut procéder par surprise et dans l’ombre. Non! une révolte ouverte, avant d’arriver au port, et dans laquelle ils joueraient le tout pour le tout...

Karl Kip n’ignorait pas que la rébellion fermentait chez une partie de l’équipage; mais il saurait en triompher comme il avait triomphé de la tempête à travers les parages des Salomon.

D’ailleurs, sans parler de M. Hawkins, de Nat Gibson, de son frère, Karl Kip pouvait entièrement compter sur les trois matelots Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, honnêtes et dévoués. Quant à Vin Mod, grâce à son habitude de lancer les autres, puis de se défiler à temps, peut-être le nouveau capitaine éprouvait-il une certaine indécision. En revanche, son opinion était faite à l’égard de Len Cannon, de Kyle, de Sexton, de Bryce et du cuisinier Koa.

Karl Kip ne fut donc pas surpris quand, dans la soirée du 30, la rébellion éclata à bord du James-Cook. Flig Balt, entraînant ses complices, voulut forcer l’entrée du rouf pour s’emparer des armes. Ils se jetteraient ensuite sur les frères Kip, et, après s’être débarrassés d’eux, ils forceraient M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les trois matelots à se rendre, ils les mettraient hors d’état de résister: ils deviendraient maîtres du navire...

L’attitude, la décision de Karl Kip déjouèrent promptement cette tentative. Il se précipita au milieu des rebelles, il saisit à la gorge Len Cannon, qui s’élançait sur lui, il le menaça de son revolver. Un geste de plus, et le misérable était renversé sur le pont.

Au même moment, Nat Gibson, M. Hawkins, Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, s’emparaient des autres recrues, tandis que Pieter Kip, ayant renversé Flig Balt, lui arrachait le coutelas dont il s’était armé.

La lutte ne dura pas une minute.

Six hommes, - Vin Mod s’étant tenu prudemment en arrière, - pouvaient-ils avoir raison des sept qu’ils n’avaient pas surpris?...

Karl Kip se trouvait en état de légitime défense. Brûler la cervelle au maître d'équipage, c'était son droit, et peut-être l'eût-il fait sans l'intervention de M. Hawkins. Celui-ci l'arrêta, préférant livrer Flig Balt à la justice maritime dès l'entrée du brick au port d'Hobart-Town.

Flig Balt fut donc envoyé à fond de cale, puis mis aux fers avec deux des révoltés qui s'étaient montrés les plus violents, Len Cannon et Kyle. La sécurité du brick était maintenant assurée jusqu'au terme du voyage.

D'ailleurs la traversée allait se terminer en moins de soixante heures, et Karl Kip n'aurait vraisemblablement pas besoin des bras de ces trois hommes. Au surplus, ces parages sont très fréquentés. Les petits caboteurs ne cessent de naviguer le long de cette côte orientale de la Tasmanie, et l'on rencontre des flottilles d'embarcations par le travers du détroit de Bass. Donc, s'il le fallait, en les payant à la journée, on se procurerait facilement quelques matelots de manière à reformer l'équipage dans le cas où Karl Kip serait contraint de sévir contre les autres compagnons de Len Cannon, très suspects pour la part qu'ils avaient prise à la révolte.

Du reste, Karl Kip leur interdit toute communication avec les prisonniers. Ceux-ci ne quitteraient la cale du James-Cook que pour la prison maritime d'Hobart-Town. On ne les laissait monter sur le pont que pendant deux heures de l'après-midi, et il était défendu de leur adresser la parole. Quant à la nourriture, c'était Jim qui la leur apportait, et il n'y avait pas à se défier du jeune mousse, si affectionné envers M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson.

Il suit de là que Vin Mod ne put communiquer avec Flig Balt, bien qu'il en eût le vif désir, soit qu'il eût quelque recommandation à lui faire, quelque plan à lui exposer avant sa comparution devant le Conseil. Mais il se sentait particulièrement surveillé. À la moindre démarche douteuse, il serait emprisonné, et, sans doute, son plan exigeait qu’il eût la liberté d’agir dès le débarquement à Hobart-Town.

La navigation continua dans des conditions excellentes, avec vent et mer favorables. Karl Kip ne fut même pas obligé de prendre des matelots supplémentaires pour conduire son navire à bon port.

En somme, M. Hawkins ne put que s’applaudir d’avoir remplacé l’indigne maître d’équipage par un capitaine tel que Karl Kip.

Lorsque le brick eut relevé le cap Pillar, à l’extrémité la plus méridionale de la Tasmanie, il dut serrer le vent et même louvoyer, afin de doubler cette pointe d’abord, puis, plus à l’ouest, le cap Raoul. Vingt-quatre heures furent employées à gagner Storm-Bay, qui échancre si profondément cette partie de la côte tasmanienne.

La configuration des hautes terres modifie souvent le sens des courants atmosphériques. Aussi le James-Cook trouva-t-il à l’ouvert de Storm-Bay une assez fraîche brise du sud-est. Ce fut donc à pleines voiles qu’il traversa la baie du sud au nord, en gagnant l’embouchure de la rivière Derwent, et le 2 janvier, vers trois heures de l’après-midi, il jetait l’ancre dans le port d’Hobart-Town.

SECONDE PARTIE

I - Hobart-Town

La Tasmanie, découverte en 1642 par le Hollandais Abel Tasman, souillée du sang du Français Manon en 1772, visitée par Cook en 1784 et par d’Entrecasteaux en 1793, fut enfin reconnue être une île par M. Bass, chirurgien de la colonie australienne. Elle porta d’abord le nom de Terre de Van Diemen, en l’honneur du gouverneur de Batavia, chef-lieu du domaine colonial des Pays-Bas dans cette partie de l’Extrême-Orient.

Ce fut en 1804 que la Tasmanie passa sous la domination de la Grande-Bretagne, à l’époque où les émigrants anglais fondèrent Hobart-Town, sa capitale.

Après avoir appartenu au territoire politique de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, l’une des provinces de l’Australie méridionale, dont elle n’est séparée que par les cent cinquante milles du détroit de Bass, la Terre de Van Diemen s’en détacha définitivement. Depuis ce temps, elle a conservé son autonomie, tout en relevant de la Couronne, ainsi que la plupart des possessions britanniques d’outre-mer.

C’est une île presque triangulaire, que traversent le quarante-troisième parallèle sud et le cent quarante-septième méridien à l’est de Greenvich. Elle est vaste, - fertile, car on y récolte en abondance toutes les productions de la zone tempérée. Divisée en neuf districts, elle possède deux villes principales, Hobart-Town et Lanwceston, autrefois Port-Dalrympe. L’une sur la côte septentrionale, l’autre sur la côte méridionale, sont réunies par une route superbe que construisirent les convicts australiens.

Ce furent, en effet, des déportés qui devinrent les premiers habitants de la Tasmanie, où se fondèrent d’importants établissements pénitentiaires, tel celui de Port-Arthur.

Actuellement, grâce au génie colonisateur de l’Angleterre, c’est un pays d’hommes libres où la civilisation a jeté des racines profondes et règne là où régnait jadis la plus complète sauvagerie.

Du reste, la population indigène a entièrement disparu. On a pu montrer en 1884, comme une curiosité ethnologique, le dernier Tasmanien ou plutôt la dernière Tasmanienne, une vieille femme du pays. De ces nègres stupides et farouches, placés au plus bas échelon de l’humanité, il n’existe plus un seul représentant, et, sans doute, c’est le sort qui attend leurs frères de l’Australie sous la puissante main de la Grande-Bretagne.

Hobart-Town est bâtie à neuf milles de l’embouchure de la rivière Derwent, au fond de la petite baie de Sullivan-Cove. Régulièrement aménagée, - trop régulièrement peut-être, - à l’exemple des cités américaines, toutes ses rues se coupent à angles droits; mais ses environs sont extrêmement pittoresques, avec leurs vallées profondes, leurs forêts épaisses, dominées par de hautes montagnes. D’ailleurs, l’extraordinaire déchiqueture du littoral autour de Storm-Bay, les multiples franges de Cookville-Island, les capricieuses indentations de la presqu’île de Tasman, disent ce que fut la violence des forces telluriques pendant la période plutonienne de formation.

Le port d’Hobart-Town est très abrité contre les vents du large. Les eaux y sont profondes, l’ancrage y est très sûr en pleine rade. Il est défendu par une longue jetée qui rompt la houle comme le ferait un brise-lames, et le James-Cook y retrouva sa place habituelle en face du comptoir de la maison Hawkins.

Hobart-Town ne compte guère que de vingt-cinq à vint-six mille habitants.

Tous se connaissent dans cette société d'armateurs, de négociants, d'agents maritimes, la plus considérable de cette ville essentiellement commerçante. Et, bien que le goût des études scientifiques, artistiques et littéraires soit développé en cette cité très vivante, comment le commerce n'y tiendrait-il pas le premier rang? Le territoire tasmanien est d'une remarquable fertilité, les forêts aux nombreuses essences y sont pour ainsi dire inépuisables. Quant aux productions du sol, sous une latitude qui est celle de l'Espagne dans l'hémisphère septentrional, que ne donne-t-il pas, les céréales, le café, le thé, le sucre, le tabac, le fil, la laine, le coton, le vin, la bière? L'élevage du bétail réussit sur toutes les parties de l'île, et telle est l'invraisemblable abondance de ses fruits, qu'on a pu dire: la Tasmanie suffirait à fournir de conserves tout le reste du monde.

M. Hawkins occupait une situation très honorable dans le haut commerce de Hobart-Town, on le sait. Si sa maison, à laquelle M. Gibson était attaché en qualité d'associé et de capitaine au grand cabotage, jouissait de l'estime et de la sympathie publiques. Le malheur qui venait de le frapper devait donc avoir un douloureux retentissement. Et, avant que le James-Cook eût porté ses amarres à terre, la ville avait la certitude qu'une catastrophe s'était produite à bord.

Cependant, dès que le brick fut signalé, à l'ouvert de Sullivan-Cove, un des employés du comptoir alla prévenir Mme Hawkins. Cette dame, accompagnée de son amie Mme Gibson, s'empressa d'accourir au port. Toutes deux voulaient être là lorsque le James-Cook accosterait le quai.

Mais déjà quelques personnes purent le regretter.

En effet, il n’y avait pas à s’y tromper, le pavillon britannique, au lieu d’être hissé à l’extrémité de la corne, flottait à mi-drisse, en berne.

Plusieurs marins, qui se tenaient sur la jetée, échangeaient les propos suivants:

“Il est arrivé un malheur!...

- Quelque matelot qui aura succombé pendant la traversée...

- Sûr qu’il y a eu un décès en mer!...

- Pourvu que ce ne soit pas le capitaine!

- Le James-Cook avait des passagers?...

- Oui... d’après ce qu’on a dit, il a dû prendre à Wellington M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson.

- Est-ce qu’on mettrait le pavillon en berne pour un homme de l’équipage?...

- Tout de même!”

Mme Hawkins et Mme Gibson n’étaient pas assez au courant des usages maritimes pour avoir observé ce qui frappait les gens du port. On se gardait, d’ailleurs, d’appeler leur attention à ce sujet. C’eût été les inquiéter sans raison peut-être.

Mais, lorsque le brick fut à quai, lorsque Mme Gibson ne reconnut pas son mari dans le capitaine qui commandait la manœuvre, lorsqu’elle ne vit pas son fils s’élancer pour la serrer dans ses bras, lorsqu’elle l’aperçut, assis à l’arrière, les traits tirés, osant à peine se tourner vers elle, et, près de lui, M. Hawkins, dans l’attitude de la douleur, ce cri lui échappa:

“Harry!... Où est Harry?”

Un instant après, Nat Gibson était à son côté et la pressait sur son cœur, l’étouffant de baisers au milieu de ses sanglots.

Et alors elle comprit l’effroyable malheur qui la frappait, elle murmura quelques mots, elle fût tombée si M. Hawkins ne l’eût retenue!

“Mort!... dit-il.

- Mort?... répéta Mme Hawkins épouvantée.

- Mort... assassiné!”

On fit avancer une voiture où fut déposée Mme Gibson, évanouie, près de Mme Hawkins. M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson prirent place en face d’elles. Puis la voiture, contournant le port, se dirigea vers cette maison où revenait le fils et dans laquelle le père ne devait plus jamais revenir. La malheureuse veuve fut transportée dans sa chambre sans avoir recouvré connaissance. Il se passa plus d’une heure avant qu’elle pût répondre par des larmes aux sanglots de son fils.

Cette funeste nouvelle courut aussitôt toute la ville. La consternation fut profonde, tant la sympathie de tous était acquise à cette honnête famille Gibson. Et puis, est-il rien de plus attristant que le retour au port d’attache d’un bâtiment qui ne ramène pas son capitaine?...

Avant de partir, l’armateur avait demandé à Karl Kip de continuer ses fonctions pendant le déchargement jusqu’au désarmement du James-Cook.

Cela n’exigerait que quelques jours, et les deux frères pourraient demeurer à bord. Cela ne les empêcherait pas de chercher un navire à destination de l’Europe, et M. Hawkins les tiendrait au courant des départs maritimes.

Karl et Pieter Kip acceptèrent volontiers la proposition de l’armateur qui, dès le lendemain, les mettrait en rapport avec sa maison de commerce.

Le premier soin de Karl Kip fut de mander l’officier de port, afin de prendre des mesures en ce qui concernait Flig Balt et ses complices.

Cet officier ne tarda pas à se présenter, et apprenant qu’il y avait eu révolte à bord du brick dans les conditions que l’on sait:

“Le maître d’équipage est aux fers?... demanda-t-il.

- Avec deux des matelots qui avaient été recrutés à Dunedin, répondit Karl Kip.

- Et le reste des hommes?...

- Sauf trois ou quatre que je débarquerai, je puis compter sur eux.

- Bien, monsieur, dit l’officier, je vais vous envoyer un piquet de constables, et les rebelles seront enfermés dans la prison du port.”

Un quart d’heure plus tard arrivaient plusieurs agents, qui se placèrent à l’avant, près du panneau.

Flig Balt, Len Cannon et Kyle furent alors extraits de la cale et conduits sur le pont.

Le maître d’équipage, les dents serrées, sans prononcer une parole, se borna à lancer sur Karl Kip un regard de haine et de vengeance. Len Cannon, plus démonstratif, le menaça du poing et le salua d’une bordée d’injures telles qu’un des constables dut le bâillonner.

Pendant ce temps, Vin Mod, tapi derrière le cabestan, se redressant jusqu’à l’oreille de Flig Balt, lui dit de manière à n’être entendu de personne:

“Tout n’est pas fini... Faites ce qui est convenu... On trouvera les papiers et l’argent...”

Évidemment, Vin Mod, en dépit des précautions prises depuis l’incarcération du maître d’équipage, avait pu communiquer avec lui. Un plan était arrêté entre eux, auquel Flig Balt n’aurait qu’à se conformer. Aussi, aux quelques mots prononcés par son complice, répondit-il d’un geste affirmatif.

Lorsque les constables se préparèrent à emmener les trois prisonniers, des murmures se produisirent dans le groupe que formaient Sexton, Bryce et le cuisinier Koa.

Mais ces murmures furent aussitôt réprimés, et il s’en fallut de peu que Karl Kip n’envoyât les deux recrues rejoindre leurs compagnons.

Un instant après, Flig Balt, Len Cannon, Kyle, débarquaient sur le quai, et, suivis d’une foule bruyante, ils étaient conduits à la prison du port, où ils seraient écroués jusqu’au jour de leur comparution devant le Conseil maritime.

Du reste, presque aussitôt après leur départ, Karl Kip fit appeler Vin Mod, Sexton, Bryce et le cuisinier. Puis, sans plus d’explications, il les congédia avec défense de reparaître à bord, n’importe sous quel prétexte. Ils pouvaient se rendre aux bureaux du comptoir Hawkins, où l’on réglerait leur dû.

Vin Mod s’attendait à cette mesure, et, sans doute, elle le satisfaisait. Il descendit dans le poste et remonta sur le pont avec son sac. Quant à Sexton et à Bryce, on se rappelle dans quelles conditions ils avaient embarqué à Dunedin pour échapper à la police après les incidents de la taverne des Three-Magpies, et, tout leur équipement, ils le portaient sur eux.

“Venez”, leur dit Vin Mod.

Et ils suivirent le matelot, qui les mena d’abord aux bureaux de l’armateur, puis chez un logeur de sa connaissance, où tous trois prirent gîte.

Maintenant, avec Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, Jim, Karl Kip n’avait plus rien à craindre. Ces braves gens suffiraient au service du bord. Puis, la cargaison mise à terre, le James-Cook entrerait en désarmement.

Ce que fut cette nuit que Nat Gibson passa près de sa mère, on ne saurait le peindre. Mme Hawkins n’avait pas voulu quitter la malheureuse femme, et quels soins auraient été plus dévoués que les siens, quelles amitiés plus consolantes!...

Il fallut lui raconter toute cette douloureuse histoire... Il fallut lui dire dans quelles circonstances l’infortuné capitaine avait été frappé, sans qu’on eût pu se mettre sur les traces de l’assassin... Il fallut lui indiquer en quel coin du petit cimetière de Kerawara reposait son mari... Il fallut enfin lui montrer la photographie que M. Hawkins avait faite... Elle insista pour la voir, et comment se refuser à son désir!... Et lorsqu’elle vit l’image fidèle du capitaine, sa poitrine déchirée au cœur par la lame du poignard, ses yeux démesurément ouverts, dont le regard semblait se fixer sur elle, une crise la saisit, et l’on dut la veiller pendant cette interminable nuit!...

Le lendemain, un médecin fut appelé. Ses soins rendirent un peu de calme à madame Gibson. Mais quelle existence l’attendait au milieu des tristesses de cette maison!

Quelques jours s’écoulèrent. Sous la direction de Karl Kip, on avait achevé le débarquement de la cargaison du brick. Les trois cents tonnes de coprah et les caisses de nacre étaient déposées dans les magasins du comptoir. Actuellement, les matelots s’occupaient à désarmer le navire, à déverguer les mâts, à dépasser les drisses et autres manœuvres courantes, à procéder au nettoyage complet de la cale, du poste, du rouf et du pont. Le James-Cook ne devait pas reprendre la mer avant plusieurs mois. Puis, après que l’équipage eut touché sa paye, on conduisit le brick au fond du port, où il demeura sous la surveillance d’un gardien.

Les frères Kip durent alors prendre domicile à terre. Inutile de dire qu’ils avaient eu des rapports quotidiens avec l’armateur. Ils s’étaient plus d’une fois assis à sa table.

Mme Hawkins, qui partageait les sentiments de son mari à leur égard, ne cessait de leur donner des témoignages de sa sympathie.

Mme Gibson ne recevait personne. Une ou deux fois, cependant, elle fit exception pour les deux frères qui, respectant sa douleur, observèrent une extrême réserve vis-à-vis d’elle. Quant à Nat Gibson, il se rendit souvent à bord, et ne put que joindre ses remerciements à ceux de M. Hawkins.

Le 7 janvier, avant que Karl et Pieter Kip eussent quitté le bâtiment, l’armateur vint s’entretenir avec eux de leur situation, et on ne s’étonnera pas s’il fit les propositions suivantes:

“Monsieur Karl, dit-il, je n’ai eu qu’à me louer de votre dévouement et de votre zèle dans les tristes circonstances où s’est trouvé notre navire... Nous vous devons son salut et celui de son équipage... Sans vous, il eût peut-être péri corps et biens pendant cette tempête sur la mer de Corail...

- Je suis heureux, monsieur Hawkins, d’avoir pu vous être utile...

- Et je vous en suis reconnaissant, reprit l’armateur. Si donc le James-Cook eût dû prochainement repartir, je vous aurais offert d’en garder le commandement...

- Vous êtes trop bon, monsieur Hawkins, et je suis très honoré de votre proposition... Aussi n’aurais-je pas hésité à l’accepter, si de pressantes et graves affaires ne nous obligeaient, mon frère et moi, à nous rendre le plus tôt possible...

- En effet, monsieur Hawkins, ajouta Pieter Kip, et nous allons nous enquérir d’un bâtiment en partance pour l’Europe...

- Je le comprends, messieurs, déclara M. Hawkins, et ce n’est pas sans un véritable chagrin que nous nous séparerons... peut-être pour ne plus nous revoir...

- Qui sait, monsieur Hawkins?... dit Karl Kip. Les affaires arrangées à Groningue, où notre présence est indispensable, pourquoi des rapports commerciaux ne s’établiraient-ils pas entre nos deux maisons?...

- Je le souhaite vivement, affirma l’armateur, et je serais heureux qu’il en fût ainsi...

- Nous de même, répondit Karl Kip. Quant à moi, je compte chercher un embarquement, dès que notre liquidation sera achevée à Groningue, et il est possible que je revienne à Hobart-Town...

- Où vous serez reçu en ami, assura M. Hawkins du ton le plus cordial. Il est bien entendu, messieurs, que ma caisse vous est ouverte... Vous avez perdu ce que vous possédiez dans le naufrage de la Wilhelmina, et tout ce dont vous aurez besoin à Hobart-Town... Nous compterons plus tard, n’est-ce pas?...

- Nous vous remercions de votre bienveillance, monsieur Hawkins, répondit Karl Kip; et j’espère que nous n’aurons point à en user... Peut-être trouverai-je l’occasion de remplir les fonctions de second sur le navire qui nous ramènera en Europe, et mes émoluments serviront à payer le passage de mon frère...

- Soit, monsieur Karl Kip; mais, si cette occasion ne se présentait pas, souvenez-vous que je me mets à votre disposition.”

Les deux frères ne répondirent que par une bonne poignée de main.

“Dans tous les cas, reprit l’armateur, les honoraires de capitaine vous sont acquis, monsieur Karl Kip, pour cette dernière partie de la traversée du James-Cook, et je ne pourrais accepter un refus à cet égard...

- Comme il vous plaira, monsieur Hawkins, répondit Karl Kip; mais nous ne pouvons oublier l’accueil que nous avons reçu à votre bord...

Vous vous êtes conduit en homme de cœur vis-à-vis de deux naufragés, et, quoi qu’il arrive, nous serons toujours vos débiteurs.”

Alors M. Hawkins promit qu’il aiderait de son côté les deux frères à trouver un navire. Il les tiendrait au courant des départs, il s’emploierait à procurer une place de second à Karl Kip, ce qui leur permettrait de retourner en Europe sans recourir à personne, puisque tel était leur désir.

Puis, l’armateur et les frères Kip se séparèrent après avoir encore échangé les plus chaleureuses protestations.

Karl et Pieter Kip s’occupèrent donc de faire choix d’un modeste hôtel, où ils séjourneraient jusqu’à leur départ d’Hobart-Town. Ce fut pour eux prétexte à visiter cette ville où les hasards de ses voyages au long cours n’avaient jamais amené l’aîné des deux frères.

Que la capitale de la Tasmanie mérite l’admiration des touristes, cela n’est pas douteux. C’est l’une des plus jolies cités de l’Australasie britannique. Ses rues sont larges, aérées, bien entretenues, égayées de verdure et rafraîchies d’ombrages, ses maisons petites mais agréablement disposées. Les squares ne lui font pas défaut, et elle possède un magnifique parc d’une contenance de quatre cents hectares, que domine à l’ouest le mont Wellington dont les cimes neigeuses se perdent entre les nuages.

Pendant ces promenades, Karl et Pieter Kip rencontrèrent assez souvent quelques matelots du James-Cook, entre autres Vin Mod et Bryce. Ces matelots étaient-ils en quête d’un embarquement, ou se proposaient-ils de rester un certain temps à terre?... Dans tous les cas, il semblait bien que ces deux hommes ne devaient guère se séparer, car on les voyait courir la ville ensemble.

Mais, ce dont Karl et Pieter Kip ne s’aperçurent pas, c’est que Vin Mod et Bryce n’avaient cessé de les suivre alors qu’ils cherchaient un logement.

Que les deux matelots prissent intérêt à cette question, les frères Kip n’en eussent pas douté, s’ils avaient entendu l’un répéter maintes fois à l’autre:

“Ils n’en finiront donc pas!... Ils sont donc bien exigeants dans le choix d’un hôtel!...

- Leur poche est pourtant vide, ou à peu près... faisait observer Bryce.

- À moins que cet animal d’armateur - que le diable étrangle - n’ait eu soin de la remplir...

- Et pourvu qu’il ne leur offre pas de les héberger!... reprenait Bryce.

- Non, par exemple, non!... s’écriait Vin Mod. Je leur paierais plutôt n’importe où une belle chambre à dix schillings par jour!”

Ces propos, échangés entre Vin Mod et Bryce, prouvaient deux choses: d’abord qu’ils s’inquiétaient de savoir où les frères Kip iraient demeurer, après le désarmement du brick, ensuite que, si M. Hawkins leur offrait l’hospitalité dans sa maison, cela ne laisserait pas de contrarier leurs projets.

Lesquels?... Assurément, quelque mauvais coup qu’ils préparaient contre Karl et Pieter Kip, et il importait vraisemblablement que ces deux misérables pussent s’introduire chez eux...

Or, ce qui, à la rigueur, serait possible s’ils logeaient dans un hôtel, ne l’eût pas été s’ils allaient demeurer chez M. Hawkins jusqu’à leur départ.

Ce fut donc la raison de cet espionnage auquel ils soumirent les deux frères, sans trop même s’inquiéter d’être vus ou non.

D’ailleurs, dès le 8 janvier, ils eurent lieu d’être satisfaits.

Dans la matinée, le matelot Burnes, portant la caisse sauvée sur l’épave de la Wilhelmina, qui contenait tout ce qu’ils possédaient, accompagna Karl et Pieter Kip dans une des rues voisines du port.

C’était là, non dans un hôtel, mais dans une auberge de modeste apparence, proprement tenue toutefois, qu’ils avaient fait choix d’une unique chambre au premier étage.

Vin Mod put s’en assurer quelques instants après, et, dès qu’il eut rejoint Bryce qui l’attendait sur le quai:

“Fleet-street, dit-il, auberge du Great-Old-Man... Nous les tenons!”

II - Projets d’avenir

La catastrophe qui venait de frapper si cruellement la famille Gibson allait avoir pour résultat, tout d’abord, de modifier les projets formés par M. Hawkins.

On ne l’a point oublié, désireux de donner plus d’extension à ses affaires, l’armateur s’était rendu en Nouvelle-Zélande, afin de fonder un comptoir avec M. Balfour, un des honorables négociants de Wellington. Nat Gibson, qui l’accompagnait dans ce voyage, devait être plus tard l’associé de M. Balfour. À une date prochaine, des rapports commerciaux seraient établis plus spécialement avec l’archipel Bismarck. M. Zieger, consulté pendant la relâche du James-Cook à Tombara, ne demandait qu’à entrer en correspondance avec le nouveau comptoir auquel il assurerait un courant sérieux d’affaires. Un des navires de la maison Hawkins ferait le grand cabotage entre Wellington et Port-Praslin.

On se le rappelle aussi, c’est à Wellington que le capitaine Gibson vint rejoindre son fils et M. Hawkins afin de les ramener à Hobart-Town, après avoir été prendre cargaison aux îles de l’archipel Bismarck. Ce serait seulement dès son retour en Tasmanie que Nat Gibson irait se fixer à poste fixe dans la capitale de la Nouvelle-Zélande.

M. Gibson étant mort dans les circonstances qui ont été rapportées, il ne fut plus question de donner suite à ces projets. Mme Gibson n’aurait pu se faire à cette idée de se séparer de son fils. Nat Gibson n’eût point consenti à abandonner sa mère, seule dans cette maison où le veuvage venait de créer un si grand vide. Toute l’amitié, tout le dévouement de M. et Mme Hawkins, n’auraient pu suffire à Mme Gibson. Il fallait que son fils demeurât près d’elle, qu’elle se reprit à ses soins, à ses tendresses.

L’armateur fut le premier à le comprendre. Il s’entendrait avec M. Balfour, il lui trouverait un autre associé, et Nat Gibson le seconderait au comptoir d’Hobart-Town.

“Nat, lui dit-il, en l’attirant sur son cœur, je t’ai toujours considéré comme mon enfant, et, maintenant, je veux que tu le sois plus encore qu’autrefois!... Non... je n’oublierai jamais mon malheureux ami...

- Mon père... mon pauvre père!... murmura le jeune homme. Et ne pas connaître ceux qui l’ont tué!...”

Dans sa douleur, à travers ses sanglots, dominait cette soif de vengeance qu’il n’avait pu assouvir.

“Les misérables! ajouta-t-il, on ne saura donc pas un jour qui ils sont... et cet abominable assassinat ne sera donc pas vengé!...

- Attendons le prochain courrier de Port-Praslin, répondit M. Hawkins. Peut-être l’enquête de MM. Hamburg et Zieger procurera-t-elle quelque résultat sérieux!... Peut-être ont-ils recueilli de nouveaux indices!... Non, je ne puis croire que ce crime demeure impuni...

- Et si les meurtriers sont retrouvés, s’écria Nat Gibson, j’irai là-bas... oui! j’irai... et je...”

Il ne put achever, tant sa voix tremblait de colère.

Cependant, avant que cet attentat fût jugé, s’il devait l’être, un autre procès allait se dérouler devant le Conseil maritime, - le procès des révoltés du James-Cook.

Karl Kip, en sa qualité de capitaine du brick, avait déposé son rapport entre les mains des autorités. Flig Balt, comme chef, Len Cannon, comme complice, encouraient des peines extrêmement graves, car les lois anglaises sont très dures dans les cas de cette espèce, qui intéressent la discipline à bord des bâtiments de commerce.

Depuis le jour de l'incarcération, les détenus n'avaient eu aucune relation avec leurs compagnons.

Sexton, Kyle et Bryce ne figureraient qu'en qualité de témoins au procès. Le rapport ne mettait pas en jeu leur responsabilité dans cette tentative de rébellion, si vite réprimée, grâce à l'énergie du nouveau capitaine. Il était même possible qu'ils ne fussent plus à Hobart-Town lorsque l'affaire viendrait devant le Conseil, s'ils avaient trouvé un embarquement, et, sans doute, cela leur aurait mieux convenu.

Pour ce qui concerne Vin Mod, qui, en somme, avait été l'âme de la révolte, cet astucieux personnage, dont le maître d'équipage subissait la détestable influence, c'était autre chose. Il ne cherchait point à se dérober par la fuite aux conséquences de ses agissements, dont l'instruction ferait la preuve. Qui sait, même, si Flig Balt ne parlerait pas, si, pressé de questions, se voyant perdu, il ne dévoilerait pas la complicité de Vin Mod?... Et, d'ailleurs, n'étaient-ils pas liés l'un à l'autre, comme deux forçats, par le sang versé, le sang du malheureux Harry Gibson?...

Aussi, se défiant de la faiblesse du maître d'équipage, Vin Mod avait-il tout intérêt à le tirer d'affaire, et peut-être en possédait-il les moyens. Très intelligent, très fertile en ressources, il savait que Flig Balt comptait sur lui. Qu'il parvînt à détourner le bras de la justice dans l'affaire du James-Cook, et ni l'un ni l'autre n'auraient plus rien à craindre!... Qui eût soupçonné qu'ils fussent les auteurs de ce meurtre commis dans les lointaines régions de la Nouvelle-Irlande?... En attendant, Vin Mod pouvait rester à Hobart-Town en toute sécurité, et même, avec l’argent volé au capitaine, il n’avait point à s’inquiéter actuellement des besoins de l’existence.

Enfin ce fourbe devait avoir déjà combiné un plan d’accord avec Flig Balt, - plan qu’il tenterait de mettre à exécution, puisqu’il jouissait de sa complète liberté.

Mais, dans l’impossibilité de le communiquer au maître d’équipage, il se disait, tout en ruminant son idée, en étudiant son projet, de manière à ne rien laisser d’imprévu:

“M’aura-t-il bien compris?... C’est simple, cependant... Cela expliquerait cette révolte, et cela l’excuserait!... Ah! si j’étais à sa place!... Il est vrai, je ne serais pas à la mienne, et j’ai besoin d’y être!... Par malheur, ce n’est pas un homme à saisir à demi-mot!... Il faut lui enfoncer les choses dans la tête!... Voyons... n’y aurait-il pas moyen de s’introduire près de lui... moi... ou un autre... Kyle, Sexton, et de lui dire: “C’est fait!...” Mais il faut que cela soit fait... et à la veille seulement du Conseil... Les frères n’auraient qu’à s’apercevoir trop tôt... Enfin... j’y songerai... Avant tout, il importe de le tirer de là... et on se vengera de ce damné capitaine d’occasion... Par exemple, si, celui-là, je ne le vois pas danser un pas de deux à côté de son frère au bout d’une corde!...”

Et, tandis que Vin Mod raisonnait ainsi, sa figure pâlissait, ses yeux s’injectaient de sang, toute sa physionomie dénotait une haine impitoyable.

Il suit donc de là que Vin Mod tramait quelque sombre machination contre les frères Kip. Or, par le rapprochement de certains faits, nul doute que le crime de Kerawara n’eût été commis de manière à pouvoir les y impliquer. Aussi, depuis l’arrivée du brick, depuis leur débarquement, Vin Mod s’était-il surtout préoccupé de ce qu’allaient faire Karl et Pieter Kip. Qu’ils eussent hâte de quitter le plut tôt possible Hobart-Town pour retourner en Europe, il savait à quoi s’en tenir à ce sujet. Mais il fallait trouver un navire prêt à prendre la mer, et, à moins d’une chance toute particulière, ces occasions ne se rencontrent pas d’un jour à l’autre.

D’ailleurs, Vin Mod n’ignorait pas que Karl Kip cherchait une place de second, avec le concours de M. Hawkins. Or, c’était encore là une cause de retard, et, assurément, les deux frères n’auraient pas pris le large avant que le Conseil maritime eût jugé les révoltés du James-Cook, - ce qui eût compromis les agissements de Vin Mod.

Et d’ailleurs, est-ce que la présence de Karl Kip n’était pas nécessaire aux débats de ce procès?... Que l’on pût à la rigueur se passer de son frère, puisque M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson et les matelots du brick seraient appelés à déposer, cela était de toute évidence. Mais la déposition du capitaine devait être la plus importante, et comment se dispenserait-il de comparaître devant le Conseil en qualité de témoin principal?...

Au surplus, Vin Mod entendait ne plus perdre de vue les deux frères pendant leur séjour à Hobart-Town. Dès qu’il eut constaté qu’ils logeaient à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man, Fleet street, après s’être rendu méconnaissable au moyen d’une barbe postiche, il vint retenir une chambre pour lui-même et paya une quinzaine d’avance en se faisant inscrire sous le faux nom de Ned Pat. Puis ce fut son vrai nom de Vin Mod qu’il donna à l’auberge des Fresh-Fishs, où étaient descendus Sexton, Kyle et Bryce dans un autre quartier du port. Il en sortait de bonne heure, n’y rentrait que tard, n’y prenait point ses repas. Tout cela tendait à ce que Karl et Pieter Kip ne fussent point au courant de ce qu’il faisait. En réalité, ses mesures furent telles qu’ils ne se rencontrèrent jamais, et, d’ailleurs, les deux frères ne l’auraient point reconnu.

Vin Mod avait eu soin de choisir une chambre voisine de celle qu’ils occupaient au Great-Old-Man, et par les fenêtres, s’ouvrant sur un balcon commun, il lui serait ainsi facile de s’introduire chez eux.

Il pouvait même entendre la conversation de Karl et de Pieter Kip, lorsque, la nuit venue, il se glissait sur le balcon. Ceux-ci, ne se sachant pas épiés, ne parlant que d’affaires personnelles et nullement compromettantes, ne prenaient point la précaution de s’entretenir à voix basse. Le plus souvent même, à cause de l’excessive chaleur, la fenêtre était entrebâillée derrière les persiennes du balcon.

Et, dans la soirée du 13, voici ce qu’il put entendre, tout en ayant soin de ne point être aperçu. L’obscurité était profonde, la chambre éclairée seulement par la faible lumière d’une lampe à pétrole. Vin Mod était à même, non seulement d’écouter mais de voir à l’intérieur. Cette chambre ne renfermait qu’un modeste mobilier, deux lits en fer accotés aux angles, une armoire grossière, une table au milieu, une toilette à trépied, trois chaises de bois courbe. Dans la cheminée se dressait un foyer plein de vieilles cendres.

Un escabeau supportait la malle recueillie sur l’épave de la Wilhelmina. Elle contenait tout ce qui appartenait aux deux frères: ce qui leur restait du naufrage, ce qu’ils s’étaient procuré à Hobart-Town, du linge et autres objets achetés avec l’argent versé par la caisse de la maison Hawkins. Quelques habits, acquis dans les mêmes conditions, étaient accrochés à un portemanteau à droite de la porte d’entrée, laquelle s’ouvrait sur un couloir commun à plusieurs chambres, - entre autres celle occupée par Vin Mod.

Pieter Kip, assis devant la table, compulsait les différents papiers relatifs au comptoir d’Amboine, lorsque son frère entra et s’écria d’une voix satisfaite:

“J’ai réussi, Pieter... j’ai réussi!... Notre retour est maintenant assuré!...”

Pieter Kip comprit que ces paroles se rapportaient à certaines démarches commencées depuis plusieurs jours, en vue d’obtenir la place de second officier sur un des navires hollandais qui se préparaient à quitter prochainement Hobart-Town pour un port de l’Europe.

Pieter Kip saisit les mains de son frère, les serra affectueusement et dit:

“Ainsi la maison Arnemniden t’accepte comme second du Skydnam?...

- Oui, Pieter, et grâce à la pressante recommandation de M. Hawkins...

- L’excellent homme à qui nous devons tant déjà...

- Et qui m’a donné là un fameux coup d’épaule! déclara Karl Kip.

- Oui!... nous pouvons compter sur lui en toutes circonstances, mon cher Karl!... S’il te doit quelque reconnaissance pour ta conduite à bord du James-Cook, que ne lui devons-nous pas pour tout ce qu’il a fait jusqu’ici?... Tu vois comme nous avons été accueillis dans sa famille, et aussi dans la famille Gibson, malgré le terrible malheur qui l’a frappée...

- Pauvre capitaine! s’écria Karl Kip, et pourquoi m’a-t-il fallu le remplacer!... M. Hawkins est inconsolable de la mort de son malheureux ami!... Ah! puissent ces misérables assassins être découverts et châtiés...

- Ils le seront... Ils le seront!” répondit Pieter Kip.

Et, à cette déclaration qui lui parut sans doute trop affirmative, Vin Mod se contenta de hausser les épaules en murmurant:

“Oui... ils seront châtiés... et plus tôt que tu ne le penses, Karl Kip!”

Pieter Kip reprit alors:

“Tu as été présenté au capitaine du Skydnam...

- Ce soir même, Pieter, et je n’ai eu qu’à me louer de lui. C’est un Hollandais d’Amsterdam... Il m’a paru être un homme avec lequel je m’entendrai facilement. Au courant de ce qui s’est passé à bord du James-Cook, il sait comment j’ai rempli les fonctions de capitaine, lorsque Flig Balt a été démonté de son commandement...

- Ce qui ne suffit pas, Karl, et il faut que l’ex-maître d’équipage soit sévèrement puni!... Après avoir failli perdre le brick par son impéritie, avoir voulu le livrer aux rebelles, s’être mis à la tête de la révolte...

- Aussi, Pieter, le Conseil ne le ménagera-t-il pas, sois-en sûr..

- Je me demande, Karl, si tu n’as pas eu tort de ne faire arrêter que Flig Balt et Len Cannon... Les camarades de celui-ci, recrutés à Dunedin, ne valent pas mieux, et tu sais que le capitaine Gibson n’avait aucune confiance en eux...

- C’est vrai, Pieter.

- Et j’ajoute, Karl, que, pour mon compte, je me suis toujours défié de ce Vin Mod, qui me paraît être un maître en matière de fourberie. Son attitude m’a semblé des plus louches en plusieurs circonstances... Bien qu’il ait su ne point se compromettre, il devait être derrière Flig Balt... Si la révolte n’eût pas été comprimée, je suis certain qu’il serait devenu le second du nouveau capitaine...

- C’est possible, répondit Karl Kip. Aussi tout n’est-il pas dit dans cette affaire, et il est probable que les débats nous réservent quelques surprises!...

Comme les matelots du James-Cook seront appelés à déposer, qui sait ce que révéleront leurs témoignages?... On interrogera Vin Mod, on le pressera de questions... S’il était de connivence avec le maître d’équipage, peut-être celui-ci laissera-t-il échapper la vérité!... Et puis, ces honnêtes marins, Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, parleront, et s’ils chargent Vin Mod...

- C’est ce que nous verrons, murmura Vin Mod, qui ne perdait pas un mot de cette conversation, et cela tournera autrement que vous ne l’espérez, Hollandais du diable!”

En ce moment, Karl Kip s’approcha de la fenêtre et Vin Mod dut se retirer vivement, afin de n’être point surpris. Mais, quelques instants après, il put reprendre sa place. En vérité, l’entretien l’intéressait assez pour qu’il désirât l’entendre jusqu’au bout, de manière à en tirer bon profit.

Du reste, les deux frères s’étaient remis devant la table en face l’un de l’autre, et, tandis que Pieter Kip rassemblait les papiers qu’il compulsait, son frère disait:

“Ainsi, Pieter, je suis engagé comme second sur le Skydnam, et c’est déjà une heureuse circonstance... Mais il en est une autre non moins heureuse...

- Est-ce donc, frère, que la bonne chance nous reviendrait, après tous les malheurs qui nous ont accablés?... Est-ce que nous en aurions fini avec ces épreuves?...

- Peut-être, et voici ce qu’il y aurait lieu d’attendre dans l’avenir. Je sais que le capitaine Fork, qui commande le Skydnam, en est à son dernier voyage. C’est un homme déjà âgé, dont la position est faite, et il doit se retirer dès son retour en Hollande.

Or, si, pendant la traversée, j’ai donné satisfaction à la maison Arnemniden, il n’est pas impossible que je sois appelé à remplacer M. Fork dans les fonctions de capitaine, lorsque le Skydnam reprendra la mer. Dans ce cas, je n’aurais plus rien à ambitionner...

- Et ce qui serait heureux pour toi, frère, répondit Pieter Kip, le serait sans doute aussi pour nos affaires...

- Je le pense, affirma Karl Kip. D’ailleurs, je n’ai pas encore perdu tout espoir, et pourquoi les choses ne s’arrangeraient-elles pas mieux que nous n’avons pu le penser?... Nous avons de bons amis à Groningue... notre père y a laissé la réputation d’un honnête homme...

- Et, en outre, ajouta Pieter Kip, nous nous sommes créé ici quelques relations... L’appui de M. Hawkins ne nous fera pas défaut... Qui sait si, grâce à lui, nous ne pourrons pas établir des rapports commerciaux avec Hobart-Town... et avec Wellington par M. Hamburg... et avec l’archipel Bismarck par M. Zieger?...

- Ah! cher frère! s’écria Karl Kip, voilà que tu t’envoles à tire-d’aile vers l’avenir...

- Oui... oui... Karl, et j’espère bien éviter une chute trop rude dans le présent... Je ne crois pas me faire illusion... Il y a là un enchaînement de bonnes chances dont nous devons tirer parti... Et, en somme, la meilleure pour le début, c’est que tu sois le second du Skydnam... Le crédit nous reviendra, et nous rendrons plus florissante qu’elle ne l’a jamais été la maison Kip de Groningue.

- Dieu t’entende, Pieter!...

- Et il m’entendra, car j’ai toujours mis mon espoir en lui!”

Puis, après un instant de silence:

“Mais, une question, Karl: est-ce que le départ du Skydnam est prochain?...

- J’ai lieu de croire qu’il s’effectuera vers le 15 de ce mois...

- Dans une douzaine de jours?...

- Oui, Pieter, car, d’après ce que j’ai constaté moi-même, son chargement sera terminé à cette époque.

- Et que doit durer la traversée?...

- Si nous sommes servis par les circonstances, le Skydnam n’emploiera pas plus de six semaines pour son trajet de Hobart-Town à Hambourg.”

En effet, ce temps devait suffire à un steamer d’excellente marche qui suivrait la route de l’ouest par l’océan Indien, la mer Rouge, le canal de Suez, la Méditerranée et l’Atlantique. Il n’aurait ni à prendre connaissance du cap de Bonne-Espérance, ni à doubler le cap Horn, après avoir traversé l’océan Pacifique.

Pieter Kip demanda alors à son frère s’il allait immédiatement remplir les fonctions de second à bord du Skydnam.

“Dès demain matin, répondit Karl Kip, j’ai rendez-vous avec le capitaine Fork, qui me présentera à l’équipage.

- Est-ce que ton intention, mon cher Karl, est de t’installer à bord aussitôt?...”

Cette question était bien pour intéresser Vin Mod d’une façon toute spéciale, eu égard à ses projets. Ne serait-il pas dans l’impossibilité de les mettre à exécution si les deux frères quittaient l’auberge du Great-Old-Man?...

“Non, répondit Karl Kip, les réparations dureront une dizaine de jours encore. Je n’embarquerai pas avant le 23, et, à cette époque, Pieter, tu pourras aussi venir prendre possession de ta cabine. Je t’ai retenu une des meilleures, voisine de la mienne...

- Volontiers, frère, car, je te l’avoue, j’ai quelque hâte d’avoir quitté cette auberge...”

Et il ajouta en riant:

“Elle n’est vraiment plus digne de l’officier qui commande en second le Skydnam...

- Et encore moins, répondit Karl Kip sur le même ton, du chef de la maison Kip frères de Groningue!”

Et ils étaient heureux, ces deux braves cœurs! La confiance leur revenait, et, de fait, n’était-ce pas une première bonne chance que Karl Kip eût trouvé un embarquement dans des conditions si avantageuses?... Aussi, cette nuit, pour la première fois depuis longue date, leur sommeil ne serait pas troublé par les inquiétudes de l’avenir.

Dix heures venaient de sonner, et ils se levèrent pour les préparatifs du coucher.

La conversation étant finie, Vin Mod allait regagner sa chambre, en se glissant le long du balcon, lorsqu'une dernière question de Pieter Kip le ramena près de la fenêtre.

“Tu dis, Karl, que le départ du Skydnam aura lieu vers le 25 du mois...

- Oui, frère, tout sera paré à cette date... à un ou deux jours près, bien entendu.

- Mais est-ce que Flig Balt ne doit pas être jugé quelques jours avant?...

- C'est le 21 que Len Cannon et lui seront traduits devant le Conseil maritime, et nous y aurons comparu à titre de témoins avec M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson et les hommes de l'équipage.

- C'est parfait, répondit Pieter Kip, et tout cela s'arrange au mieux, car, en somme, ta présence au procès est tout à fait indispensable...

- Assurément, et mon témoignage, je pense, permettra au Conseil de se montrer impitoyable contre ce maître d'équipage, qui n'a pas craint de pousser ses hommes à la révolte!

- Oh! fit Pieter Kip, en pareil cas, les lois anglaises ne pardonnent guère... Il s'agit de garantir la sécurité de la navigation au commerce, et je serais très surpris si Flig Balt s'en tirait à moins d'une dizaine d'années de bagne au pénitencier de Port-Arthur...”

Et Vin Mod, entre ses dents qui grinçaient de colère, de murmurer:

“Ce n’est pas dix ans de bagne qui vous attendent, messieurs Kip, et, avant d’être envoyé à Port-Arthur... s’il doit y aller... Flig Balt vous aura vu pendre tous les deux au plus haut gibet de Hobart-Town!...”

Pieter Kip posa encore une question à son frère:

“Est-ce que M. Hawkins sait que tu es nommé second du Skydnam?...

- J’ai voulu lui apprendre cette bonne nouvelle, répondit Karl Kip, mais il était déjà tard, et il n’était plus à son comptoir.

- Nous irons demain, Karl...

- Oui... dès la première heure.

- Et maintenant, bonne nuit, frère...

- Bonne nuit.”

Quelques instants après, la chambre était plongée dans l’obscurité, et Vin Mod n’avait plus qu’à se retirer.

Dès qu’il fut rentré, avant de quitter suivant son habitude l’auberge du Great-Old-Man pour regagner l’auberge des Fresh-Fishs, il ferma soigneusement l’armoire qui contenait ses papiers et divers autres objets, - entre autres le kriss trouvé par lui sur l’épave de la Wilhelmina. Puis il sortit et se dirigea vers le port.

Et, chemin faisant, il se disait:

“Ce n’est pas avant le 22 qu’ils comptent s’installer à bord du Skydnam...

Bien!... C’est le 21 que Flig Balt doit passer devant le Conseil... Bien!... N’embrouillons pas les dates!... Dans la soirée du 20 l’affaire sera dans le sac... Mais il faut que Flig Balt soit prévenu... et comment le prévenir?...”

III - Dernière manœuvre

La satisfaction de M. Hawkins fut complète, lorsqu'il reçut le lendemain la visite de Karl et de Pieter Kip. Il était heureux que son intervention près de la maison Arnemniden eût réussi. Cela ne méritait pas tant de remerciements... Tout son crédit, toute son influence, il les mettait au service des deux frères... N'était-il pas leur obligé?... Enfin, l'excellent homme félicita Karl Kip d'avoir été nommé second du Skydnam, et aussi chaudement que s'il n'eût pas été pour quelque chose dans cette nomination.

Nat Gibson, qui se trouvait à ce moment chez M. Hawkins, ne put que joindre ses félicitations à celles de l'armateur. Il avait déjà la position d'associé dans la maison de commerce. Mais la préoccupation des affaires, son travail très assidu, ne parvenaient pas à le détourner des tristes souvenirs du passé. L'image de son père était toujours devant ses yeux, et il ne rentrait chez lui que pour mêler ses larmes aux larmes de sa mère. À ce chagrin s'ajoutait encore l'insurmontable horreur à l'égard de meurtriers que l'on ne connaissait pas et qui probablement ne seraient jamais ni atteints ni châtiés.

Ce jour-là même, Karl Kip, accompagné de son frère, vint prendre les fonctions de second à bord du Skydnam, où le capitaine Fork leur réserva le meilleur accueil.

Le Skydnam, un steamer de douze cents tonneaux et de six cents chevaux, faisait des voyages réguliers entre Hambourg et les différents ports du littoral australien. Il apportait du charbon, il remportait des blés. Sa cargaison était à terre depuis quelques jours. On s'occupait de quelques réparations et appropriations de la cale et de la dunette, du nettoyage des chaudières et des machines, et d’avaries survenues à la mâture.

“Certainement, affirma le capitaine Fork, tout sera terminé à la fin de cette semaine, et nous n’aurons plus qu’à embarquer notre chargement...

Ce sera un peu votre affaire, monsieur Kip...

- Je ne perdrai ni un jour ni une heure, capitaine, répondit le nouveau second, et mon regret est de ne pouvoir, dès maintenant, occuper ma cabine...

- Sans doute, répondit M. Fork, mais, vous le voyez, nous sommes livrés aux ouvriers, aux menuisiers, aux peintres. Ce ne sera pas trop d’une dizaine de jours pour qu’ils aient terminé leur besogne... Ni votre cabine ni la mienne ne sont en état de nous recevoir...

- Peu importe, après tout, capitaine, déclara Karl Kip. Je serai à bord au lever du soleil, et j’y resterai jusqu’au soir... Il ne dépendra pas de moi que le Skydnam ne soit prêt à la date du 24 ou du 25...

- C’est entendu, monsieur Kip, répondit le capitaine Fork. Je laisse donc le navire à vos soins, et, si vous avez besoin de moi, vous me trouverez le plus souvent aux bureaux de la maison Arnemniden.”

De cet arrangement il résultait que Karl Kip passait toutes ses journées à bord du steamer. De son côté, Pieter Kip chercherait à se créer des relations sur la place d’Hobart-Town. Il se proposait de rendre visite aux principaux négociants avec la référence de M. Hawkins. Autant de bonnes semences, qui assureraient sans doute la récolte de l’avenir.

Cependant l’affaire des révoltés du James-Cook suivait son cours. L’instruction, confiée au rapporteur du Conseil, s’effectuait selon les règlements spéciaux du code maritime.

Enfermé dans la prison du port avec Len Cannon, Flig Balt n’avait point été mis au secret. Il communiquait librement avec les autres détenus.

Du reste, cette prison ne servait qu’aux matelots arrêtés soit pour insubordination, soit pour délits de droit commun. En outre on y bloquait pour la nuit les marins en état d’ivresse, les batailleurs ramassés par les rues ou dans les tavernes de ce quartier, non moins bruyant, non moins troublé que celui de Dunedin, où Vin Mod recruta Len Cannon et ses camarades.

Ceux-ci, d’ailleurs, Sexton, Kyle, Bryce, quelque désir qu’ils en eussent, n’avaient pas encore quitté Hobart-Town. Il leur répugnait de partir en laissant Len Cannon aux mains de la justice sous une grave inculpation. Or, précisément, s’ils étaient cités comme témoins dans l’affaire du James-Cook, Vin Mod entendait leur dicter quelque bon témoignage au dernier moment. Il les rencontrait chaque jour, car ils avaient pris logement aux Fresh-Fishs, un affreux “tap” où Vin Mod, on le sait, était descendu sous son véritable nom. Celui-ci, lorsque les trois matelots auraient mangé et surtout bu la paye touchée à l’arrivée du brick, interviendrait, les tirerait d’embarras, et, déjà même, il avait répondu pour eux au patron de l’auberge. Aussi Sexton, Kyle et Bryce ne se préoccupaient-ils pas d’obtenir un embarquement.

“Attendez... attendez!... leur répétait Vin Mod. Rien ne presse... Que diable!... l’ami Balt vous fera venir comme témoins et nous clorons le bec à ceux qui voudront le charger, lui et votre camarade Len Cannon!... Est-ce que ce n’était pas notre droit de renvoyer ce damné Hollandais à sa cabine de passager... de rendre le commandement du brick au brave Anglais qui en était le capitaine?... Si... n’est-ce pas?... Eh bien, c’est ce qu’a voulu faire Flig Balt, et on le condamnerait pour cela!...

C’est ce qu’a voulu faire Len Cannon... c’est ce que nous voulions tous faire!... Croyez-moi, les amis, notre ancien maître d’équipage sera acquitté, et Len Cannon sortira de prison en même temps que lui!...

- Mais, observait Bryce, est-ce qu’il n’y a pas danger qu’on nous arrête... qu’on nous loge à la même enseigne que Len Cannon?...

- Non, déclarait Vin Mod, vous êtes des témoins... rien que des témoins... et lorsque Len Cannon embarquera pour retourner en Nouvelle-Zélande ou ailleurs, vous embarquerez ensemble... C’est moi qui vous trouverai un navire... un bon... en compagnie de l’ami Balt... et nous réussirons peut-être mieux qu’à bord du James-Cook!”

C’est ainsi que Vin Mod retenait à Hobart-Town les camarades de Len Cannon, peut-être avec l’idée qu’ils auraient un rôle à jouer dans ce procès dont il voulait tirer un acquittement au profit du maître d’équipage.

Tandis qu’il préparait ses sourdes menées, qui, si elles réussissaient, devaient perdre les frères Kip, ceux-ci, ne soupçonnant rien, étaient tout à leurs affaires.

Le chargement du Skydnam s’opérait méthodiquement sous la direction du second, les réparations suivaient leur cours avec l’aide des ouvriers du port, et le départ s’effectuerait à la date fixée.

La maison Arnemniden ne pouvait qu’apprécier le zèle et l’intelligence de l’officier dont elle avait fait choix. Le capitaine Fork ne marchandait pas ses éloges, après avoir reconnu que Karl Kip possédait une complète entente de ces détails si compliqués du bord qui regardent le second. Aussi quelles félicitations, quels remerciements M. Hawkins recevait à ce propos!

“Et pourvu que votre protégé soit habile manœuvrier, lui dit un jour le capitaine Fork, je le proclame un marin accompli...

- N’en doutez pas, capitaine, répondit l’armateur, n’en doutez pas!... Est-ce que nous ne l’avons pas jugé à bord du James-Cook?... Est-ce qu’il n’a pas fait ses preuves, quand il a pris de lui-même, par instinct, le commandement de notre navire?... Est-ce que j’ai eu à me repentir un instant de l’avoir nommé à la place de ce misérable Flig Balt qui nous avait mis en perdition?... Oui... Karl Kip est un vrai marin!...

- Nous le verrons à l’œuvre, monsieur Hawkins, répondit le capitaine Fork, et, comme je n’en doute pas, si Karl Kip justifie pendant cette traversée la bonne opinion que nous avons de lui, la maison Arnemniden en tiendra compte, et son avenir est assuré...

- Oui, il la justifiera, déclara M. Hawkins d’un ton convaincu, il la justifiera!”

On le voit, l’armateur était, non sans raison, tout acquis aux deux frères. Ce qu’il pensait de l’aîné, il le pensait du cadet, ayant reconnu chez Pieter Kip une remarquable entente des affaires commerciales. Aussi tenait-il pour certain qu’il replacerait sur un bon pied la maison de Groningue, grâce aux relations qui s’établiraient avec la Tasmanie et la Nouvelle-Zélande.

On comprend de quels sentiments de gratitude les deux frères étaient animés envers M. Hawkins, qui leur rendait de tels services. Ils le voyaient le plus souvent possible, et, parfois, la journée achevée, s’asseyaient à sa table. Mme Hawkins partageait les sentiments sympathiques de son mari pour ces hommes d’intelligence et de cœur.

Elle aimait à s’entretenir avec eux, à causer de leurs projets d’avenir. De temps en temps, Nat Gibson venait passer la soirée dans cette hospitalière maison. Il s’intéressait vivement aux démarches de Pieter Kip... Dans quelques jours, le Skydnam aurait pris la mer... L’année ne s’écoulerait pas sans qu’il fût de retour à Hobart-Town... Ce serait une satisfaction de se revoir...

“Et, disait M. Hawkins, c’est le capitaine Kip, commandant le Skydnam, que nous recevrons alors, et avec quel plaisir!... Oui!... le digne Fork a droit à sa retraite dès l’arrivée en Europe... Vous le remplacerez, Karl Kip, et, entre vos mains, le Skydnam sera ce qu’a été... ce qu’était le James-Cook!”

Par malheur, ce nom évoquait toujours les plus tristes souvenirs. M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les deux frères, se revoyaient en Nouvelle-Irlande, à Port-Praslin, à Kerawara, au milieu de cette forêt où est tombé l’infortuné Gibson, devant ce modeste cimetière où reposait le capitaine.

Et, lorsque ce nom était prononcé, Nat pâlissait soudain. Tout son sang lui refluait au cœur, sa voix tremblait de colère, et il s’écriait:

“Mon père... mon pauvre père... tu ne seras donc pas vengé!”

M. Hawkins essayait de calmer le jeune homme... Il fallait attendre les nouvelles qui arriveraient de l’archipel Bismarck par le premier courrier... M. Hamburg, M. Zieger auraient peut-être découvert les coupables... Il est vrai, les communications ne sont pas fréquentes entre la Tasmanie et la Nouvelle-Irlande... Qui sait si des mois ne s’écouleraient pas avant que l’on connût les résultats de l’enquête?...

On était au 19 janvier.

Dans quarante-huit heures, le procès des révoltés du James-Cook viendrait devant le Conseil, et, sans doute, à moins d’incidents imprévus, les débats seraient terminés le jour même...

Trois jours après, le Skydnam prendrait la mer, et les frères Kip auraient quitté Hobart-Town à destination de Hambourg.

Le lendemain, pendant l’après-midi, on aurait pu voir Vin Mod rôder autour de la prison du port. Assez agité, bien qu’il fût d’ordinaire très maître de lui, il marchait d’un pas rapide, évitant les regards, laissant échapper des lambeaux de phrases entrecoupés de gestes inquiets et qu’il eût été sans doute très intéressant d’entendre.

Qu’espérait-il donc en passant à plusieurs reprises devant la porte de la prison?... Cherchait-il à s’y introduire pour rencontrer Flig Balt?... Non! il ne pouvait avoir cette idée, et, assurément, il lui serait impossible de franchir cette porte...

Était-il à supposer, d’autre part, qu’il parviendrait à apercevoir le maître d’équipage par quelque haute fenêtre du bâtiment dont le dernier étage dominait les murs d’enceinte?... C’eût été improbable, à moins que, de son côté, Flig Balt, sachant que le procès devait venir le lendemain, n’eût cette pensée que Vin Mod tenterait de communiquer avec lui, n’importe par quel moyen... Et cela même n’était-il pas convenu d’avance, en raison d’un plan arrêté entre eux?...

Mais, dans ces conditions, l’un dehors, l’autre dedans, tous deux en eussent été réduits à de simples signes pour correspondre, un mouvement de la tête, un geste de la main, et parviendraient-ils à se comprendre?...

Quoi qu’il en soit, Vin Mod n’aperçut pas Flig Balt, et Flig Balt n’aperçut pas Vin Mod.

Celui-ci, lorsque le soir arriva, après un dernier regard jeté au sombre édifice, revint lentement vers son auberge.

Et alors, toujours plongé dans ses réflexions, il se disait:

“Oui... c’est le seul moyen de le prévenir, et s’il échoue... Eh bien, après tout, je suis appelé comme témoin... je parlerai... et ce que Flig Balt ne dira peut-être pas... je le dirai, moi... oui!... je le dirai... et ils y passeront, les frères Kip!...”

Ce ne fut pas au tap des Fresh-Fishs que se rendit ce soir-là Vin Mod, mais à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man.

Il était sept heures. Une pluie fine et pénétrante tombait depuis midi. Le quartier se noyait dans une obscurité profonde que perçait à peine la lumière du gaz.

Vin Mod, sans avoir été vu, prit l’allée qui conduisait à sa chambre, monta l’escalier, se glissa sur le balcon, regarda à travers la fenêtre, dont les persiennes n’avaient pas été refermées.

Après avoir écouté, n’entendant aucun bruit à l’intérieur, il eut la certitude que la chambre était vide en ce moment.

Précisément, ce soir-là, Karl et Pieter Kip dînaient chez M. Hawkins, et ne devaient pas regagner leur logis avant dix ou onze heures.

Ainsi, Vin Mod était servi par les circonstances, le temps ne lui manquerait pas pour agir, et il ne courait point le risque d’être surpris.

Il revint donc dans sa chambre, et, ouvrant une armoire, en retira différents papiers, auxquels il joignit une certaine quantité de piastres, valant environ de trois à quatre livres malaises, puis le kriss avec lequel Flig Balt avait frappé le capitaine Gibson.

Quelques instants après, Vin Mod pénétrait dans le logement des deux frères, sans avoir eu à briser un carreau de la fenêtre, restée entrouverte.

Cette chambre, il en connaissait bien la disposition pour y avoir maintes fois plongé ses regards, lorsqu'il venait surprendre la conversation de Karl et de Pieter Kip. Il n'eut même pas besoin de s'éclairer, ce qui aurait pu le trahir. Il savait comment étaient rangés les meubles, où se trouvait placée sur un escabeau la valise qui avait été retirée de la Wilhelmina.

Cette valise, Vin Mod n'eut qu'à en desserrer les courroies. Après en avoir soulevé le linge qu'elle contenait, il y glissa les papiers, les piastres, le poignard, et la referma.

“C'est fait!” murmura-t-il.

Il sortit par la fenêtre, dont il ramena les battants derrière lui, suivit le balcon et rentra dans sa chambre.

Un instant plus tard, Vin Mod redescendait l'escalier, atteignait la rue, et se dirigeait vers l'auberge des Fresh-Fishs, où devaient l'attendre Sexton, Kyle et Bryce.

Sept heures et demie sonnaient lorsqu'il pénétra dans la salle commune, où il rejoignit ses compagnons en train de boire...

Sexton et Bryce avaient déjà vidé un certain nombre de verres, wisky et gin. Ivres, non pas d'une ivresse bruyante et batailleuse, mais d'une ivresse morne et abêtie, ils eussent été incapables de comprendre ce que leur aurait dit Vin Mod, si celui-ci avait eu besoin d'eux.

Seul Kyle, prévenu sans doute, et avec lequel il s'entretenait plus volontiers d'habitude, avait à peine touché aux flacons déposés sur la table.

Aussi, lorsque Vin Mod parut dans la salle, il se leva pour aller à lui.

Vin Mod lui fit signe de ne pas bouger, et tous deux s'assirent l'un près de l'autre.

Il y avait là une vingtaine de buveurs, - presque tous matelots en bordée, attablés sous les lampes, au milieu d'une étouffante atmosphère.

À chaque moment, des entrées et des sorties de clients avinés. Il se faisait assez de tapage pour qu'il fût facile de se parler à l'oreille sans courir le risque d'être entendu. D'ailleurs, la table de Kyle occupait le plus sombre coin de la salle.

Voici ce que Vin Mod dit à son camarade, en se rapprochant de lui:

“Il y a déjà une heure que vous êtes ici?...

- Oui... en t'attendant, comme il était convenu.

- Et les autres n'ont pas pu résister à l'envie de boire?...

- Non... songe donc... une heure!...

- Et toi?...

- Moi... j'ai seulement rempli mon verre, et il est encore plein...

- Tu ne t’en repentiras pas, Kyle, car j’ai besoin que tu aies toute ta tête...

- Je l’ai, Mod.

- Eh bien... si tu n’as pas bu, tu vas boire maintenant...

- À ta santé!” répondit Kyle, qui saisit son verre et le porta à sa bouche.

Vin Mod, lui saisissant le bras, l’obligea à reposer le verre sur la table sans y avoir trempé ses lèvres.

- Non... mais je veux que tu fasses semblant de boire, et que tu aies l’air d’avoir trop bu...

- Et pourquoi, Mod?...

- Parce que, feignant d’être ivre, tu vas te lever, parcourir la salle, chercher querelle aux uns et aux autres, menacer de tout casser, si bien que le tavernier appellera les agents afin qu’ils t’emmènent et te fourrent en prison...

- En prison?...”

Et, vraiment, Kyle ne savait guère où Vin Mod voulait en venir. Feindre de boire, cela ne lui allait qu’à moitié, se faire mettre en prison pour tapage nocturne, cela ne lui allait pas du tout.

“Écoute, lui dit Vin Mod. J’ai besoin de toi pour une affaire... qui te rapportera gros, si tu réussis... si tu remplis adroitement ton rôle...

- Et rien à risquer?...

- Peut-être quelques bourrades, plus cinq ou six livres à gagner...

- Cinq ou six livres?...” répéta Kyle, très allumé par cette proposition.

Puis, montrant ses camarades:

“Et les autres?... demanda-t-il.

- Rien pour eux, répondit Vin Mod. Tu les vois, ils ne sont pas plus en état de comprendre que d’agir!”

En effet, aucun d’eux n’avait même reconnu Vin Mod, lorsque celui-ci était venu s’asseoir. Ils n’entendaient ni ne voyaient. Leurs bras soulevaient machinalement les verres et retombaient sur la table. Sexton murmurait d’incohérentes paroles d’ivrogne ou chantonnait quelque refrain de bord, en l’accompagnant de coups de poing lancés dans le vide. Bryce, la tête baissée, les épaules arrondies, les yeux à moitié clos, ne tarderait pas à s’endormir du sommeil de la brute.

Cependant le tapage grandissait, des cris, des appels d’un groupe à l’autre, et parfois des provocations à propos de rien.

Le tavernier, très habitué à ce genre de clientèle, allait et venait, versant à la ronde ses abominables boissons.

“Eh bien, reprit Kyle en s’approchant plus près encore de son interlocuteur, qu’y a-t-il?...

- Il y a, répondit Vin Mod, que j’ai deux mots à faire dire à l’ami Flig Balt... et comme Flig Balt est en prison, il faut l’y rejoindre...

- Ce soir?...

- Ce soir... parce que demain se réunit le Conseil et il serait trop tard. Aussi, pas de temps à perdre, et je compte que tu vas jouer l'ivrogne...

- Sans avoir bu...

- Sans avoir bu, Kyle. Cela ne sera pas difficile... Tu vas te lever... crier... hurler... t'en prendre aux autres buveurs... au besoin taper dessus...

- Et si j'attrape quelques mauvais coups au milieu de la bagarre...

- Je doublerai la somme", répondit Vin Mod.

Et cette réponse sembla lever toutes les hésitations de Kyle, qui n'en était pas à une bourrade près. Il ne fit qu'une réflexion, celle-ci:

"S'il est nécessaire de communiquer avec Flig Balt, pourquoi est-ce moi, et non toi, qui cherche à le rejoindre?...

- Pas tant de mots, Kyle!... répliqua Vin Mod qui commençait à s'impatienter. J'ai besoin d'être libre... d'être là quand on jugera Flig Balt... Une fois en prison, on en a pour vingt-quatre heures au moins, et, je te le répète, il importe que je sois là..."

Et, comme dernier argument, Vin Mod, fouillant la poche de sa vareuse, en tira une livre et la glissa dans la main du matelot.

"Comme acompte... dit-il, le reste dès que tu seras relâché...

- Et... lorsque j'aurai été relâché... je te retrouverai...

- Ici... chaque soir.

- Convenu, répondit Kyle.

Maintenant, un verre de gin pour me mettre en train... Je n’en ferai que mieux l’ivrogne!”

Il leva son verre rempli de la brûlante et corrosive liqueur et le vida d’un trait.

“Il est temps, reprit alors Vin Mod, et écoute bien... Ce que j’ai à dire à Flig Balt, j’aurais pu l’écrire... un bout de papier que tu lui aurais remis de ma part... Mais, si on le trouvait sur toi, l’affaire serait manquée... D’ailleurs, quelques mots suffiront et tu les retiendras... Dès que les policemen t’auront fourré en prison, tâche de rencontrer Flig Balt... Si tu n’y parvenais pas ce soir, que ce soit demain avant qu’on vienne le chercher pour le conduire au Conseil...

- C’est entendu, Mod, répondit Kyle, et que lui dirai-je de ta part?...

- Tu lui diras... que l’affaire est faite... et qu’il peut accuser hardiment.

- Qui?...

- Il le sait!...

- Bon... et pas autre chose?...

- Pas autre chose...

- Bien, Mod, répondit Kyle, et me voici, cette fois, ivre comme le plus ivrogne des sujets de la Reine!”

Kyle se leva, titubant, tombant, s’accrochant aux tables. Il menaçait les buveurs, qui lui répondaient par de vigoureuses poussées. Il injuriait le tavernier qui lui refusait à boire, et, d’un coup de tête en pleine poitrine, il l’envoya rouler jusque dans la rue à travers la porte à demi entrouverte.

Le tavernier, hors de lui - et de chez lui - appela à l’aide. Deux ou trois policemen accoururent, se jetèrent sur Kyle, qui n’opposa d’ailleurs qu’une faible résistance pour éviter les coups.

Finalement, il fut appréhendé, maintenu, puis conduit au milieu des clameurs de la rue et enfermé dans la prison du port.

Vin Mod l’avait suivi, et, après s’être assuré par lui-même que les portes s’étaient refermées sur Kyle, il revint au tap des Fresh-Fishs.

IV - Devant le Conseil maritime

Les tristes événements qui s’étaient produits à bord du James-Cook au cours de son dernier voyage, on ne s’étonnera pas s’ils avaient eu grand retentissement à Hobart-Town. D’une part, l’assassinat du capitaine Harry Gibson, commis dans des circonstances mystérieuses, de l’autre, la tentative de révolte faite par Flig Balt et maîtrisée par Karl Kip, il n’en fallait pas tant pour provoquer une émotion générale.

De l’assassinat, on ne savait rien de plus qu’au jour où le brick, son pavillon en berne, était rentré au port.

Quant à la révolte, les autorités maritimes allaient se prononcer sur la culpabilité de Flig Balt et de son complice. D’après l’opinion publique, le maître d’équipage serait sévèrement condamné, étant donnée sa situation à bord, qui constituait une aggravation, et il ne s’en tirerait pas à moins de dix à quinze ans de bagne.

Les principaux témoins, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, Karl et Pieter Kip, les matelots Hobbes, Wickley et Burnes, le mousse Jim avaient déjà été entendus dans l’enquête. Les autres, cités par l’accusé: Vin Mod, Sexton, Kyle, Bryce, le cuisinier Koa, devaient être appelés comme témoins à décharge.

Du reste, à moins d’incidents imprévus, l’affaire, rapidement conduite, n’occuperait qu’une seule audience.

Il y eut affluence, ce jour-là, dans la salle du Conseil maritime. Dès neuf heures du matin, la foule envahit le prétoire mis à la disposition du public, des négociants, des armateurs, des officiers de la marine marchande, des journalistes; puis, tout au fond, nombre de matelots sortis des tavernes du voisinage et probablement très favorables aux accusés.

M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson, arrivés au début de l’audience, s’assirent sur les sièges réservés aux témoins.

Les frères Kip pénétrèrent dans la salle quelques instants après, et échangèrent avec eux de sympathiques poignées de main.

Ce jour-là, la présence de Karl Kip n’était pas indispensable à bord du Skydnam. L’embarquement des marchandises venait d’être achevé la veille. En fait de réparations, il n’y avait plus que des raccords à faire. Le charbon remplissait les soutes; la machine était en état; l’équipage avait pris son service. Dans trois jours, au lever du soleil, le steamer ferait ses préparatifs d’appareillage.

Aussi, dès ce soir même, Karl et Pieter Kip, se proposant de venir occuper leurs cabines, devaient-ils quitter la chambre de l’auberge du Great-Old-Man.

Sur un banc, derrière eux, les matelots Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, avaient pris place, également le mousse Jim, auquel M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson donnèrent un amical bonjour.

Puis, sur un autre banc étaient rangés Vin Mod, Sexton, Bryce, le cuisinier Koa, dont l’énorme face noire grimaçait et qui s’étonnait sans doute de ne pas figurer parmi les accusés.

Seul, Kyle manquait. Kyle n’avait pas été relâché et il ne le serait pas avant quarante-huit heures, ayant trop accentué son rôle de faux ivrogne en se débattant contre les policemen.

Au surplus, sa déposition n’aurait eu aucune importance; mais ce dont s’inquiétait Vin Mod, c’était de savoir si Kyle avait pu communiquer dans la prison avec Flig Balt, s’il lui avait dit ce qu’il devait lui dire de sa part.

Peut-être, après tout, cette inquiétude se dissiperait-elle, dès que le maître d’équipage et lui se trouveraient en présence l’un de l’autre. Si Flig Balt avait été prévenu, un signe presque imperceptible, un regard suffirait, et, lorsque l’instant serait venu, Flig Balt, d’accusé, deviendrait accusateur.

En attendant l’entrée des membres du Conseil, M. Hawkins causait avec les frères Kip et leur apprenait que, le matin même, des nouvelles étaient arrivées de la Nouvelle-Irlande.

“Une lettre de M. Zieger?... demanda Pieter Kip.

- Non... une dépêche qui m’est envoyée par mon correspondant M. Balfour. Un navire a relâché hier à Wellington, venant de Kerawara, un navire anglais qui a quitté l’archipel Bismarck dix jours après le James-Cook, apportant une lettre de M. Zieger. Aussitôt M. Balfour m’a câblé le contenu de cette lettre, et le télégramme m’est parvenu le matin...

- Et, demanda Karl Kip, que dit M. Zieger relativement à l’enquête?...

- Rien... répondit Nat Gibson, rien... Les meurtriers n’ont pas encore été découverts.

- Ce n’est que trop vrai!... ajouta M. Hawkins. M. Zieger et M. Hamburg ont fait toute diligence, sans avoir obtenu aucun résultat...

- Ils n’ont pas recueilli un seul indice qui permette de diriger les recherches avec quelques chances?... reprit Pieter Kip.

- Non, répondit M. Hawkins, et les soupçons ne se portent sur personne... Il n’est que trop certain, le crime a été commis par des indigènes, qui ont eu le temps de s’enfuir sur l’île York, où il sera bien difficile de les découvrir...

- Il ne faut pas, cependant, que M. Gibson perde tout espoir, déclara Karl Kip.

Si les papiers volés ont pu être détruits, reste cette somme en piastres qui n’a pas disparu, et, si les assassins veulent en disposer, ils se feront certainement prendre...

- Je retournerai à Kerawara, dit Nat Gibson. Oui... j’y retournerai!...”

Et qui sait si Nat ne mettrait pas ce projet à exécution!

Cette conversation fut suspendue à l’entrée des membres du Conseil maritime, qui vinrent se placer sur l’estrade: un commodore, un capitaine et un lieutenant, assistés du rapporteur qui avait rédigé l’acte d’accusation.

L’audience ouverte, le président donna l’ordre d’introduire les accusés.

Flig Balt et Len Cannon, conduits par des agents, allèrent s’asseoir l’un près de l’autre sur le banc à gauche du tribunal.

Le maître d’équipage paraissait être très sûr de lui, la figure calme, la physionomie froide, le regard indifférent. Mais s’il parvenait à réfréner les sentiments qui l’agitaient sans doute, toute sa personne dénotait une profonde astuce.

Et ce fut comme une révélation qui s’opéra dans l’esprit de M. Hawkins. Il voyait pour la première fois Flig Balt tel qu’il était réellement. Oui!... comment le capitaine Gibson et lui-même avaient-ils pu être aveuglés à ce point d’avoir mis toute leur confiance en cet homme, de s’être laissé prendre aux manières obséquieuses de ce fourbe!...

Mais ce qui étonnait M. Hawkins n’était pas pour étonner les frères Kip. On ne l’a point oublié, le maître d’équipage leur avait toujours inspiré une réelle antipathie, ce dont celui-ci n’avait pas été sans s’apercevoir.

Quant à Len Cannon, son attitude ne prévenait guère en sa faveur.

Il jetait des regards sournois à droite et à gauche, tantôt à Vin Mod, tantôt à Sexton ou à Bryce, se demandant peut-être pourquoi ils n’étaient pas assis sur ce banc, puisqu’ils en avaient fait tout autant que lui...

Si donc, - ainsi que le pensa Vin Mod, - Len Cannon paraissait moins rassuré que Flig Balt, c’est que Flig Balt ne lui avait rien dit de la communication dont Kyle était chargé. Mais cette communication avait-elle été faite, ou Flig Balt ne savait-il rien encore?... C’est à cela que pensait très anxieusement Vin Mod.

En réalité, Kyle avait réussi. Flig Balt et lui s’étaient rencontrés le matin même. Le maître d’équipage pouvait accuser. À un regard interrogateur que lui adressa Vin Mod, il répondit par un geste qui ne laissa plus aucun doute à celui-ci.

“Et maintenant, se dit-il, la mèche est allumée... gare la bombe!”

Le président donna la parole au rapporteur. Ce rapport résuma brièvement toute l’affaire. Il indiqua dans quelles circonstances Flig Balt avait reçu le commandement du James-Cook; dans quelles conditions ce commandement avait dû lui être retiré; comment, pour cause d’incapacité notoire, Flig Balt, fut remplacé par le marin hollandais Karl Kip, passager à bord; comment il avait poussé l’équipage à la rébellion contre le nouveau capitaine, et s’était mis à la tête des rebelles, assurément dans le but de s’emparer du navire.

En ce qui concernait Len Cannon, il était impossible de ne pas voir en lui un complice de Flig Balt. C’était lui, grâce à son influence sur ses camarades recrutés à Dunedin, qui les avait entraînés... De plus, il s’était signalé dès le début de la révolte par ses excitations et ses violences...

Après s’être jeté, un couteau à la main, sur Karl Kip, il n’avait reculé qu’au moment où le revolver de celui-ci se posait sur sa poitrine... Il n’y avait donc pas à mettre en question sa complicité et sa culpabilité.

Lorsque le rapporteur eut achevé sa lecture, il réclama le maximum de la peine contre les accusés.

À ce moment, les témoins quittèrent l’audience et se retirèrent dans une salle voisine.

Le président, interrogeant Flig Balt, lui demanda ce qu’il avait à répondre au sujet de l’accusation portée contre lui.

“Rien, déclara simplement le maître d’équipage.

- Vous reconnaissez les faits qui sont mentionnés dans le rapport?...

- Je les reconnais.”

Ces quelques mots furent prononcés d’une voix très nette qui surprit l’auditoire.

“Vous n’avez rien à ajouter pour votre défense?... reprit le président.

- Pas un mot”, répondit Flig Balt, et, considérant son interrogatoire comme terminé, il se rassit.

Vin Mod qui regardait ne fut pas sans ressentir une certaine appréhension.

Est-ce que Flig Balt n’avait pas laissé passer l’instant de tout dire?... Et lui, Vin Mod, ne s’était-il pas trompé au signe que lui avait fait le maître d’équipage?... Celui-ci n’aurait pas compris ni même reçu la communication de Kyle... Eh! qu’importait, après tout!...

Si Flig Balt ne parlait pas, Vin Mod parlerait, lorsqu’il serait appelé à déposer.

Len Cannon, interrogé à son tour, ne fit que des réponses évasives, feignant de ne point comprendre les interrogations du président, et, sans doute, Flig Balt lui avait recommandé de parler le moins possible.

Vin Mod eut alors la pensée que le maître d’équipage voulait laisser s’étendre les débats, les témoignages se produire, - entre autres celui de Karl Kip. En prévision de l’accusation qu’il s’apprêtait à lancer contre eux, mieux valait que les deux frères se fussent expliqués devant le Conseil.

Et Vin Mod de se dire:

“Oui... il a raison... Flig Balt... et il leur enverra cela au bon moment!”

L’interrogatoire du principal accusé et de son complice étant terminé, le premier témoin rentra et fut invité à faire sa déposition.

C’était Karl Kip, et une légère rumeur courut à travers l’assistance, lorsqu’il se présenta à la barre.

Karl Kip donna ses nom et prénoms, fit connaître sa nationalité: un Hollandais originaire de Groningue; sa qualité, officier de la marine marchande, après avoir exercé pendant quelques semaines les fonctions de capitaine à bord du James-Cook; actuellement second à bord du steamer Skydnam à destination de Hambourg.

Ces préliminaires terminés, Karl Kip s’exprima en ces termes, avec un tel accent de sincérité que sa bonne foi ne pouvait être l’objet d’un doute:

“Mon frère et moi, dit-il, passagers de la Wilhelmina, nous avons été recueillis sur l’île Norfolk où nous avions trouvé refuge, après naufrage, par M. Hawkins et le capitaine Gibson. Je tiens à rendre ici un public hommage à ces hommes humains et généreux, qui ont tout fait pour nous et méritent notre profonde reconnaissance.

“Pendant la traversée du James-Cook de Norfolk à Port-Praslin, j’eus maintes fois l’occasion d’observer les manières du maître d’équipage.

Il m’inspira une défiance trop justifiée par la suite. Je m’étonnai même que l’armateur et le capitaine s’y fussent laissé prendre. En somme, cela ne me regardait pas, et je ne leur fis jamais aucune observation à cet égard. Mais ce que je constatai aussi, c’est que Flig Balt n’était pas à la hauteur des fonctions qu’il remplissait. Lorsque le capitaine Gibson s’en remettait à lui pour certaines manœuvres qui sont du ressort du maître d’équipage, elles furent souvent si mal commandées que je fus sur le point d’intervenir. Cependant, comme ces manœuvres ne compromettaient pas la sécurité du navire, je m’abstins d’en parler au capitaine.

“À la date du 20 novembre, le James-Cook mouillait à Port-Praslin pour y débarquer sa cargaison et s’y réparer. Sa relâche dura neuf jours, puis il se rendit à Kerawara, la capitale de l’archipel Bismarck.

“Ce fut là, dans la soirée du 2 décembre, que le malheureux capitaine Gibson tomba sous les coups d’assassins qui sont restés inconnus jusqu’à ce jour...”

Ces paroles étaient empreintes d’une telle douleur que l’auditoire ne put retenir les marques de son émotion.

À ce moment, Flig Balt, qui écoutait la tête baissée, se redressa sur son banc, se leva même, dans l’attitude d’un homme incapable se contenir.

Le président lui demanda alors s’il avait quelque chose à dire au Conseil.

“Rien!...”, répondit le maître d’équipage.

Et il se rassit, après avoir rapidement jeté l’œil du côté de Vin Mod, qui, très énervé, commençait à témoigner d’une vive impatience.

À cet instant aussi, Karl Kip lança un regard si pénétrant sur Flig Balt que celui-ci baissa les yeux.

Karl Kip reprit sa déposition.

Harry Gibson mort, il fallait remettre à un autre le commandement du navire. Il ne se trouvait ni à Port-Praslin ni à Kerawara aucun capitaine anglais qui pût le remplacer. Il était donc tout indiqué que ces fonctions fussent confiées au maître d’équipage. Mais, dans la pensée de Karl Kip, le James-Cook serait remis entre les mains d’un homme incapable et malhonnête.

“Cependant, ajouta-t-il, M. Hawkins n’aurait pu s’en dispenser, et Flig Balt fut tout d’abord chargé de reconduire le brick à Port-Praslin. Son chargement achevé à Kerawara, le James-Cook reprit la mer et vint compléter sa cargaison.

“Ce fut là que les fonctions de capitaine furent régulièrement attribuées au maître d’équipage. À la date du 10 décembre, le brick appareilla et quitta l’archipel. Pendant les premiers jours, en traversant les parages des Louisiades, la navigation ne présenta rien de particulier. Le vent était favorable, il n’y aurait point à manœuvrer. Seulement, je remarquai que le James-Cook s’écartait peu à peu vers l’est au lieu de suivre la route directe vers le sud.

“Cela ne laissa pas de me paraître singulier. J’en fis l’observation à mon frère. Pieter m’engagea à prévenir M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson, car il partageait, lui aussi, ma défiance envers le capitaine... Je ne m’y décidai pas, cependant, tant les dénonciations me répugnent... Mais je ne cessai de contrôler avec soin la direction du brick autant que cela me fut possible... Assurément, Flig Balt s’en aperçut, et peut-être cela gêna-t-il dans une certaine mesure quelque projet...”

Et, comme Karl Kip semblait hésiter à compléter sa pensée, le président crut devoir lui dire:

“Vous avez observé, monsieur Kip, que Flig Balt paraissait vouloir modifier sa route...

Dans quel but l’aurait-il fait?...

- Je ne saurais préciser, répondit Karl Kip; mais, pour moi, l’intention n’était pas douteuse... Flig Balt cherchait à rejeter le brick dans l’est, du côté de ces archipels mal famés où l’on a toujours lieu de craindre pour la sécurité d’un navire... Or, puisque Flig Balt a tenté de provoquer une révolte à bord, je me demande si son intention n’était pas déjà de s’emparer du James-Cook...”

Devant ce coup direct l’accusé parut indifférent, et il se borna à un léger haussement d’épaules.

“Quoi qu’il en soit, reprit Karl Kip, une tempête qui nous assaillit sur la limite de la mer de Corail pouvait aider à ce projet, en repoussant le navire au large. À mon avis, d’ailleurs, et comme marin, j’estimais qu’il convenait de faire tête à ces vents furieux de l’ouest et de tenir la cape. Ce ne fut pas l’opinion du nouveau capitaine. Il prit la fuite dans la direction de ces dangereux parages des îles Salomon, et sous une allure qui compromettait la sûreté du brick... Je vis le moment où il allait être dévoré par la mer, car les lames le couvraient en grand, et il ne gouvernait plus... J’eus le sentiment qu’il était perdu, si je n’intervenais pas... Je me précipitai vers la barre... L’équipage était comme affolé... Flig Balt s’épuisait en ordres incohérents. “Laissez-moi faire!” criai-je. M. Hawkins m’avait compris, et, sans hésiter: “Faites!” me dit-il. Je commandai... les matelots m’obéirent... je parvins à changer le brick cap pour cap, et, le lendemain, la tempête ayant diminué, nous n’avions plus qu’à chercher l’abri de la terre.

“C’est alors que M. Hawkins me confia le commandement du James-Cook, après l’avoir enlevé à Flig Balt.

Celui-ci protesta: je le réduisis à l’obéissance. N’était-ce pas pour moi l’occasion de m’acquitter, envers M. Hawkins, par mon dévouement et mon zèle?

“Dès que cela fut possible, le James-Cook reprit sa route vers le sud, et nous étions par le travers de Sydney, lorsque dans la soirée du 30 décembre la révolte éclata à bord... Avec les rebelles marchait l’indigne maître d’équipage... Il entraînait ses complices vers le rouf, afin de s’emparer des armes... Len Cannon se précipita sur moi pour me frapper... J’avais saisi un revolver, et je le menaçai de lui briser la tête... Mon attitude en imposa à ces hommes... De braves matelots s’étaient rangés de notre côté... Les autres retournèrent vers l’avant... Je fis saisir Flig Balt et Len Cannon, qui furent mis aux fers.

“Une seconde tentative n’était plus à craindre. La navigation continua dans des circonstances favorables. Le 31 décembre, le James-Cook doublait le cap Pillar et le surlendemain arrivait au mouillage d’Hobart-Town.

“Voilà ce que j’avais à dire, ajouta Karl Kip, et je n’ai rien dit qui ne soit la vérité.”

Sa déposition achevée, il regagna le banc des témoins, avec la certitude qu’on accordait une foi entière à son témoignage. Lorsqu’il fut revenu près de M. Hawkins et de Nat Gibson, tous deux lui serrèrent affectueusement la main.

“Accusé, qu’avez-vous à dire?... demanda le président.

- Rien!” répondit encore Flig Balt.

Les autres témoins comparurent successivement à la barre, et leurs dépositions ne firent que confirmer celle de Karl Kip.

M. Hawkins avoua ses erreurs au sujet du maître d’équipage, - erreurs entièrement partagées par Harry Gibson, qui avait dans Flig Balt une confiance absolue.

Aussi, après le meurtre commis à Kerawara, n’hésita-t-il pas à lui confier le commandement du brick pour le voyage de retour. En majorité, l’équipage semblait l’avoir approuvé. Mais, lorsque la tempête assaillit le navire dans le nord de la mer de Corail, il fallut bien reconnaître que le nouveau capitaine était incapable de remplir ses fonctions... Il perdit tout sang-froid, et le James-Cook eût assurément sombré sans l’intervention de Karl Kip, auquel M. Hawkins a voulu publiquement témoigner sa reconnaissance.

Nat Gibson, qui fut mandé à la barre après l’armateur, ne put que confirmer cette déposition. Mais, lorsqu’il eut à parler de son père, on sentit de quelle colère il était animé contre les assassins!...

Pieter Kip reprit en l’abrégeant le récit que son frère venait de faire devant le Conseil. Il remit en lumière les défiances que leur avait toujours inspirées le maître d’équipage, et les soupçons dont ils furent pénétrés lorsque Karl Kip observa le changement de direction imprimé au navire. Il ne doutait pas que cela ne se fit dans une intention criminelle, maintenant dévoilée par la tentative de révolte.

Quant aux dépositions des matelots Wickley, Hobbes, Burnes, du mousse Jim, elles concordèrent. On constata qu’ils avaient été poussés à se mettre en rébellion. S’ils furent surpris par la scène du 30 décembre - avant d’avoir pu prévenir le capitaine Kip, - du moins se rangèrent-ils de son côté.

Aussi le président leur adressa-t-il les éloges que méritait leur conduite en ces circonstances.

Les dépositions des témoins à charge étant terminées, on procéda donc à la comparution des autres, plus ou moins compromis dans l’affaire, et qui ne devaient pas être sans quelque inquiétude sur la manière dont elle tournerait pour eux.

Vin Mod fut le premier interrogé sur ce qu’il savait.

Il n’y avait aucune franchise à attendre d’un homme si astucieux. Il parla de façon à dégager toute sa responsabilité... Il ne pensait pas que Flig Balt eût jamais eu l’intention de modifier la route du brick comme le supposait Karl Kip... Flig Balt était un bon marin... il avait fait ses preuves... on ne pouvait qu’approuver sa manœuvre pendant la tempête, et c’était injustice de l’avoir démonté de son commandement...

“Assez!” dit le président, que révoltaient le ton et l’attitude de Vin Mod.

Celui-ci regagna sa place, non sans avoir lancé un regard significatif à Flig Balt, qui répondit d’un geste imperceptible. Et ce regard voulait dire:

“Parle... il est temps!”

Les dépositions de Sexton et de Kyle furent sans importance. Encore mal remis des libations de la veille, sous l’influence d’une demi-ivresse, à peine comprirent-ils ce qu’on leur demandait.

Le président ordonna alors à Flig Balt de se lever. Les débats allaient s’achever, et, avant que le Conseil se retirât pour délibérer, le maître d’équipage pourrait une dernière fois prendre la parole:

“Vous savez de quel crime vous êtes accusé, Flig Balt... lui dit-il. Vous avez entendu les charges portées contre vous... Avez-vous à répondre?...

- Oui!” déclara le maître d’équipage, d’un ton bien différent de celui avec lequel il avait accentué le mot “rien” de ses dernières réponses.

Le plus profond silence régnait dans la salle.

Le public sentait qu’un incident allait se produire - peut-être une révélation qui modifierait les conditions du procès.

Flig Balt, debout, tourné vers les juges, les yeux encore baissés, la bouche contractée légèrement, attendait que le président lui posât une question précise.

Et c’est ce qui fut fait en ces termes:

“Flig Balt, comment vous défendez-vous des faits relevés contre vous par l’accusation?...

- En accusant à mon tour”, répondit le maître d’équipage.

M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les frères Kip, se regardèrent, non point inquiets, mais surpris. Aucun d’eux ne pouvait imaginer où Flig Balt voulait en venir, ni contre qui il entendait porter une accusation.

Flig Balt dit alors:

“J’étais le capitaine du James-Cook, ayant reçu ma commission régulière de M. Hawkins... Je devais conduire le brick à Hobart-Town, et, quoi qu’on ait pu penser, je l’eusse conduit à Hobart-Town, lorsqu’un nouveau capitaine fut nommé à ma place... Et qui?... un étranger... un Hollandais!... Or, des Anglais... à bord d’un navire anglais... ne peuvent consentir à naviguer sous les ordres d’un étranger... Voilà ce qui nous a poussés à nous révolter contre Karl Kip...

- Contre votre capitaine, affirma le président, et malgré tout droit, car il occupait légalement ce poste, et vous lui deviez obéissance...

- Soit, répondit Flig Balt d’un ton plus décisif. J’admets que nous soyons coupables de ce chef... Mais voici ce que j’ai à dire: Si Karl Kip m’accuse de m’être révolté contre lui... s’il m’accuse, sans preuves d’ailleurs, d’avoir voulu rejeter le James-Cook hors de sa route pour m’en emparer... je l’accuse, moi, d’un crime dont il ne pourra se disculper, lui!...”

Devant cette déclaration si grave, bien qu’on ne sût encore sur quelle base elle reposait, Karl et Pieter Kip s’étaient brusquement levés de leur place comme pour se porter vers le banc d’où les regardait effrontément Flig Balt.

M. Hawkins et Nat Gibson les retinrent tous deux au moment où ils allaient donner libre cours à leur colère.

Pieter Kip reprit le premier son sang-froid. Il avait saisi la main de son frère, il ne l’abandonna plus, et, alors, d’une voix difficilement maîtrisée:

“De quoi nous accuse cet homme?... dit-il.

- Du crime de meurtre, répondit Flig Balt.

- De meurtre!... s’écria Karl Kip. Nous!...

- Oui... vous... les assassins du capitaine Gibson!”

Il serait impossible de peindre l’émotion de l’auditoire. Ce fut un sentiment d’horreur qui courut à travers la salle... mais d’horreur envers le maître d’équipage, qui avait osé formuler une pareille accusation contre les frères Kip.

Cependant, comme par un irrésistible instinct, Nat Gibson - cela se comprend dans l’état de son esprit - s’était vivement reculé; M. Hawkins avait en vain essayé de le retenir...

Pieter et Karl Kip, un instant paralysés devant cette accusation abominable, allaient prendre la parole dans un terrible mouvement d’indignation, lorsque le président les prévint, en disant:

“Flig Balt... Votre audace passe toutes les bornes... et vous en imposez à la justice...

- Je dis la vérité.

- Et pourquoi, si c’est la vérité, ne l’avoir pas dite tout d’abord?...

- Parce que je ne l’ai connue que pendant la traversée du retour... On m’a arrêté à l’arrivée du James-Cook, et j’ai dû attendre ce procès pour accuser publiquement ceux qui me faisaient poursuivre!”

Karl Kip était hors de lui, et, d’une voix éclatante, comme la voix d’un capitaine au milieu des rafales, il s’écria:

“Misérable... misérable calomniateur!... Quand on porte de telles accusations, il faut les appuyer sur des preuves...

- J’en ai!... La justice peut en avoir quand elle le voudra... répondit Flig Balt.

- Et lesquelles?...

- Que l’on visite la valise que les frères Kip ont retrouvée sur la Wilhelmina... On y saisira les papiers et l’argent du capitaine Gibson!”

V - Les suites de l’affaire

L’effet de cette dernière déclaration du maître d’équipage ne saurait se décrire. Dans l’auditoire une longue et pénible rumeur se prolongea que le président eut quelque peine à réprimer. Tous les regards étaient fixés vers les deux frères, maintenant sous le coup d’une accusation capitale. Karl et Pieter Kip, immobiles, conservaient l’attitude d’hommes dont la surprise égale l’horreur. L’aîné, de tempérament impétueux, menaçait du geste l’odieux Flig Balt. Le plus jeune, la figure pâle, l’œil humide, les bras croisés, se contentait de hausser les épaules, en signe du plus profond mépris pour son accusateur.

Puis, tous deux, sur l’ordre du président, quittant le banc des témoins, s’avancèrent jusqu’au pied de l’estrade, accompagnés d’agents chargés de les garder à vue.

M. Hawkins, Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, le mousse Jim, après un premier murmure de protestation qu’ils n’avaient pu retenir, restaient silencieux, tandis que Sexton, Bryce et Koa échangeaient quelques mots à voix basse.

Nat Gibson, la tête inclinée, les mains fébriles, les traits convulsés, se cramponnait à son banc. Et, lorsque ses yeux se relevaient vers les frères Kip, il s’en échappait un regard de haine. Est-ce donc que l’absolue conviction de leur culpabilité s’était déjà faite en lui!...

Quant à Vin Mod, impassible, il attendait le résultat de la dénonciation du maître d’équipage contre Karl et Pieter Kip.

Lorsque l’assistance, si profondément troublée, eut recouvré un peu de calme, le président donna la parole à Flig Balt, afin qu’il pût compléter sa déclaration.

Flig Balt le fit très nettement, très brièvement aussi, et en des termes qui ne laissèrent pas de produire une impression favorable.

Le 25 décembre, vers le soir, alors qu'il n'avait plus le commandement du brick, il se trouvait dans le rouf.

La porte de la cabine occupée par les frères Kip n'était point fermée. À ce moment, un violent coup de roulis secoua le navire, et une valise fut projetée jusque dans le carré. C'était celle qui avait été rapportée de l'épave de la Wilhelmina. En glissant, cette valise s'était ouverte et des papiers s'en échappèrent ainsi qu'une poignée de piastres qui s'éparpillèrent sur le plancher.

Le bruit des pièces d'or attira l'attention de Flig Balt en même temps qu'il excitait son étonnement. On n'ignorait pas que Pieter et Karl Kip avaient perdu tout ce qu'ils possédaient d'argent dans le naufrage. Quoi qu'il en fût, Flig Balt, après avoir ramassé ces pièces, allait les remettre dans la valise avec les papiers, lorsqu'il reconnut ceux du James-Cook, le connaissement et la charte-partie que le capitaine Gibson portait sur lui le jour de l'assassinat et qu'on n'avait plus jamais retrouvés.

Flig Balt, épouvanté de cette découverte, sortit du rouf. Il ne pouvait plus mettre en doute que les frères Kip ne dussent être les coupables. Son premier mouvement fut de courir à M. Hawkins, de lui dire: “Voici ce que j'ai découvert...” de rejoindre Nat Gibson, et de lui crier: “Voilà les assassins de votre père!...”

Oui... et c'est ce que le maître d'équipage aurait dû faire... Il n'en fit rien... Il ne parla même plus à personne du secret qu'il venait de surprendre... Mais rester sous les ordres d'un criminel, du meurtrier de son capitaine, il ne put s'y résoudre... Il voulut lui arracher ce commandement dont lui, Flig

Balt, avait été si injustement dépouillé, et il entraîna les matelots à la révolte...

Sa tentative ne réussit pas...

Désarmé, réduit à l’impuissance, il fut enfermé à fond de cale par ordre du misérable qui avait trompé la confiance de M. Hawkins... Pourtant, il résolut de taire ce qu’il savait jusqu’à l’arrivée du navire à Hobart-Town, et d’attendre les poursuites qui seraient ordonnées contre lui... Ce serait publiquement, alors, devant le Conseil maritime, qu’il dénoncerait les auteurs du crime de Kerawara...

Après cette déposition formelle, qui fut suivie d’un long mouvement parmi l’assistance, le président ne crut pas devoir continuer les débats. L’audience levée, les agents reconduisirent Flig Balt et Len Cannon à la prison du port. On verrait s’il y aurait lieu de donner suite à leur affaire. Quant à Karl et Pieter Kip, arrêtés séance tenante, ils furent emmenés à la prison de la ville.

Avant de quitter la salle du Conseil, Karl Kip, ne pouvant contenir son indignation, avait protesté violemment contre l’homme qui les accusait. Pieter s’était contenté de lui dire:

“Laisse, mon pauvre frère, laisse à la justice le soin de proclamer notre innocence!”

Et ils étaient partis, et aucune main - pas même celle de M. Hawkins - ne se tendit vers eux...

Sans doute, Karl et Pieter Kip devaient croire que rien dans l’enquête ne parviendrait à établir leur culpabilité... Cet abominable crime, ils ne l’avaient point commis... Ces piastres, ces papiers que Flig Balt déclarait avoir vus dans leur valise, on ne les y trouverait pas, lors de la perquisition... Ils pouvaient attendre sans crainte le résultat d’une descente de police qui allait être faite dans leur chambre à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man...

La seule déclaration du maître d’équipage ne suffirait pas à les convaincre de vol et d’assassinat.

Aussi quelle fut leur stupeur, et quel fut également le sentiment d’horreur qui courut toute la ville, lorsque, ce jour même, se répandit le bruit que la perquisition confirmait le dire de Flig Balt!...

Les agents s’étaient rendus à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man... La valise, désignée par le maître d’équipage, avait été ouverte et visitée...

Sous le linge qu’elle renfermait on avait saisi, avec une somme de soixante livres en piastres, les papiers du James-Cook volés au capitaine Gibson...

Et puis - preuve peut-être plus concluante encore - dans la valise était cachée une arme... un poignard malais... un kriss à lame dentelée... Or, les constatations relevées à Kerawara, la photographie prise par M. Hawkins, démontraient indubitablement que la blessure du capitaine avait été faite avec une arme de ce genre...

Ce n’étaient donc plus de simples présomptions qui s’élevaient contre les frères Kip, mais des preuves formelles, des preuves matérielles, telles que l’avait annoncé Flig Balt en pleine audience... Et, ce qui ne permettait pas de contester la véracité du maître d’équipage, c’est qu’il n’avait même rien dit de ce kriss malais, c’est qu’il ne le savait pas en la possession des deux frères, car il en eût parlé comme il avait fait des papiers et des piastres d’Harry Gibson...

Mais, on s’en souvient, Jim l’avait vu, ce poignard, placé sur une tablette de la cabine par Vin Mod, et que celui-ci retira aussitôt après la sortie du mousse. Et qui sait si le jeune garçon ne devrait pas déposer de ce fait dans le procès Kip, joignant ce témoignage accablant à celui du maître d’équipage?...

On le voit, la trame ourdie par ce misérable Vin Mod était forte et résistante.

Tous les moyens employés pour compromettre, pour perdre les deux frères avaient réussi. Pourraient-ils jamais éclaircir cette obscure affaire, et détruire la terrible accusation qui pesait sur eux?...

Dans tous les cas, cet incident si grave, - Vin Mod y comptait, - amena l’abandon des poursuites contre Flig Balt et Len Cannon. Qu’était cette tentative de révolte à bord du James-Cook auprès de la révélation qui venait de se produire?... Le maître d’équipage ne paraîtrait plus comme un accusé, mais comme un témoin devant la justice!...

Il est inutile d’insister sur la violence, - c’est le mot, - avec laquelle Nat Gibson se lança sur cette piste!... Ils étaient enfin connus et ils seraient punis, les assassins de Kerawara!... Qu’on ne soit pas autrement surpris, si, dans son état d’esprit, le malheureux jeune homme oublia tout ce qui aurait pu être invoqué à la décharge des frères Kip: leur attitude depuis le jour où le James-Cook les avait recueillis sur l’île Norfolk, leur conduite pendant l’attaque des Papouas de la Nouvelle-Guinée, la douleur qu’ils manifestèrent à la mort du capitaine Gibson, puis, au cours de la traversée du retour, cette intervention de Karl Kip qui sauva le brick en perdition au plus fort de la tempête, son énergie en face de la révolte suscitée par le maître d’équipage!... Nat Gibson ne se souvint plus de la vive sympathie que lui avaient jusqu’alors inspirée les naufragés de la Wilhelmina!... Tous ces sentiments s’effacèrent devant sa haine contre les meurtriers que tout accusait, devant l’impérieux besoin de venger son père!...

Du reste, il faut en convenir, à Hobart-Town, le revirement de l’opinion fut complet.

Autant on s’était intéressé aux frères Kip en les aidant, l’un à se procurer un embarquement comme second, l’autre à préparer pour la maison de Groningue des relations commerciales avec la Tasmanie, autant ils furent voués à l’exécration publique. En revanche, Flig Balt devint une sorte de héros... Quelle force de caractère!... Garder son secret jusqu’au jour de la comparution devant le Conseil maritime!... Et n’y avait-il pas lieu d’excuser tout au moins cette tentative de révolte dans le but de soustraire le James-Cook au commandement d’un assassin, - révolte où le maître d’équipage risquait sa vie, en somme?... Et, maintenant, ces honnêtes matelots Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, entraînés dans ce revirement général, ne gardaient plus souvenir de l’estime qu’ils avaient éprouvée pour leur nouveau capitaine, du dévouement qu’ils lui témoignaient en toutes circonstances.

Et, assurément, ce dont on ne voulait plus douter à Hobart-Town ne laisserait pas naître le moindre doute à Port-Praslin et à Kerawara. Ni M. Zieger ni M. Hamburg n’auraient à continuer une enquête devenue inutile.

Mme Gibson, elle, était bien plus à la douleur d’avoir perdu son mari qu’au regret de savoir sa mort sans vengeance. Mais qu’aurait-elle pu dire à son fils qui eût été de nature à jeter une hésitation dans son esprit?... Pour elle, comme pour tant d’autres, comme pour tous, après la déclaration si justifiée de Flig Balt, après les preuves produites, les deux frères n’étaient-ils pas les seuls, les vrais assassins d’Harry Gibson?...

Pour tous?... Non, peut-être, et M. Hawkins ne se prononçait pas encore. Bien que sa confiance à l'égard de Karl et de Pieter Kip fût ébranlée, il ne se sentait pas absolument convaincu de leur culpabilité.

Se faire à cette idée que ces hommes pour lesquels il professait tant d'estime fussent les auteurs d'un tel forfait lui répugnait... Les mobiles de cet attentat échappaient, d'ailleurs... Fallait-il les chercher dans le désir de s'approprier les quelques milliers de piastres du capitaine Gibson, ou dans l'espoir qu'aurait eu Karl Kip de lui succéder au commandement du brick?... Cela ne satisfaisait pas le sens si net de M. Hawkins, et lorsque Mme Hawkins, influencée par ses objections, lui répétait:

“Les preuves sont là, les preuves matérielles... cet argent... ces papiers du bord... et enfin ce poignard!... Peut-on admettre que notre malheureux Gibson n'ait pas été frappé avec cette arme?...

- Je sais... répondait M. Hawkins, je sais... Il y a ces preuves, et elles paraissent accablantes... Mais tant de souvenirs s'élèvent en moi!... Je doute... et à moins que ces infortunés ne soient amenés à confesser leur crime...

- Mon ami, reprenait Mme Hawkins, est-ce que tu tiendrais ce langage devant Nat?...

- Non... il ne comprendrait pas... À quoi bon intervenir dans l'état de surexcitation où il vit!... Attendons le procès... Qui sait si Karl et Pieter Kip ne parviendront pas à se disculper!... Et, même s'ils sont condamnés, je dirai: Attendons l'avenir!”

Après la perquisition effectuée dans la chambre de l'auberge du Great-Old-Man, l'affaire n'avait plus qu'à suivre son cours régulier devant la juridiction criminelle. Elle serait rapidement instruite, d’ailleurs. Les seuls témoins qui pussent être appelés séjournaient à Hobart-Town. Quant aux informations à recueillir en Hollande sur la famille des deux frères, sur leur situation personnelle, sur leurs antécédents, le télégraphe pouvait les apporter en vingt-quatre heures.

L’enquête n’exigerait ni lointaines recherches, ni longues documentations.

Trois jours s’écoulèrent, et le 25, à la date fixée, le Skydnam mit en mer, après que le capitaine Fork eut fait choix d’un autre second. Ni Karl, ni Pieter Kip n’étaient à bord, et M. Hawkins eut le cœur déchiré en assistant à ce départ!

On l’imaginera sans peine, Flig Balt et Vin Mod croyaient n’avoir plus rien à craindre au sujet du crime de Kerawara. Qui eût pu pénétrer dans cette épouvantable machination où deux innocents venaient d’être englobés, qui les enserrait de ses liens, dont il leur serait impossible de se dégager?...

En effet, seuls le maître d’équipage et son complice avaient combiné cette odieuse manœuvre. Ni Sexton, ni Bryce, ni le cuisinier Koa n’en avaient le plus léger soupçon, et ils ne furent pas les moins étonnés devant ce coup de théâtre, qui éclata à l’audience du Conseil maritime. Quant à Kyle, - lequel avait été relâché après quarante-huit heures, - bien qu’il eût servi d’intermédiaire entre Vin Mod et Flig Balt, rien ne lui donnerait à penser que tous deux eussent commis le meurtre, et que les frères Kip fussent tombés dans un guet-apens. De son côté, Len Cannon n’en savait pas plus que les autres. Mais ces matelots de rebut n’avaient qu’à s’applaudir de la tournure que prenait l’affaire. Flig Balt, maintenant hors de prison, était libre de chercher un embarquement avec eux... Et même, si cela eût été en leur pouvoir, ils ne feraient rien en faveur des deux frères... Dans la soirée du 25, après le départ du Skydnam, Flig Balt et Vin Mod, s’entretenant sur le quai, alors désert, qui borde le port à l’ouest, purent causer sans courir le risque d’être entendus.

“Bon voyage au Skydnam, dit Vin Mod, bon voyage, puisqu’il n’emmène pas ces deux Hollandais en Hollande!...

Ah! Karl Kip avait pris votre place à bord du James-Cook, maître Balt!... Eh bien! il vient de la prendre une seconde fois sous les verrous de la justice, et, ces verrous-là, ça ferme bien...

- Notre coup a réussi, répondit le maître d’équipage, et peut-être plus facilement, plus complètement que je ne l’espérais...

- Oh! les mesures étaient préparées de longue main!... Aussi les deux Kip ne parviendront-ils pas à s’en dépêtrer...

- Attendons le dénouement, Mod.

- Il est connu d’avance, maître Balt!... Hein! cette figure qu’ils auront faite en apprenant qu’on avait saisi leur valise!... Eh! il est heureux que nous ayons rencontré en mer l’épave de la Wilhelmina, et que ladite valise n’ait pas été par le fond!... Et ne voilà-t-il pas qu’ils avaient en leur possession les papiers et l’argent du capitaine!... Les imprudents!... Par exemple, j’ai dû sacrifier une centaine de piastres, mais il ne faut pas le regretter...

- Et il nous en reste?... demanda Flig Balt.

- Près de deux mille encore... Donc point d’embarras pour filer, quand cela nous conviendra!...

- Après le procès...

- Comme de juste!... Ne pas oublier que Flig Balt, ex-commandant du James-Cook, est le principal témoin, et j'espère qu'il ne se coupera pas...

- Ne crains rien, Mod.

- À propos, maître Balt, il est très heureux qu'à l'audience, au moment de votre déclaration, vous n'ayez parlé que des papiers et des piastres!... De sorte que, dès qu'on a mis la main sur le kriss, vous avez vu l'effet de cette découverte!...

Plus moyen de douter!... Et, vous le verrez, les Kip auront beau affirmer qu'ils ignoraient que ce poignard eût été ramassé sur l'épave, personne ne les croira, et, d'ailleurs, il leur faudra bien avouer qu'il leur appartient!... Ne pas oublier, non plus, que ce sont d'honnêtes gens, incapables de mentir!... Vrai!... je ne serai pas fâché de voir quelle grimace font d'honnêtes gens au bout d'une potence!"

Et le misérable riait de ses plaisanteries, sans parvenir cependant à égayer le maître d'équipage. Celui-ci, toujours préoccupé, ne parvenait pas à se délivrer de certaines inquiétudes. Assurément, l'affaire avait été bien menée; mais sait-on jamais si certains incidents ne viendront pas à se produire!...

"Oui... Vin Mod, je ne croirai que tout est fini et bien fini qu'après la condamnation, lorsque nous aurons quitté Hobart-Town pour aller chercher fortune loin d'ici, au bout du monde, au diable...

- Vous voilà bien, maître Balt!... Il vous est impossible d'avoir l'esprit en repos... C'est dans votre nature...

- Je ne dis pas non, Mod!...

- Parce que vous ne voyez pas les choses comme elles sont!... Je vous le répète, rien à craindre en ce qui nous concerne!... Nous avouerions, à présent, que nous avons fait le coup... j’en suis sûr, on ne nous croirait pas!...

- Dis-moi, Mod, reprit le maître d’équipage, personne ne t’a jamais aperçu à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man?...

- Personne... Ni connu, ni reconnu!... Ce n’est pas Vin Mod qui a logé là, c’est un certain Ned Pat, qui ne me ressemble pas du tout...

- C’était risqué... ce que tu as fait là...

- Point, et vous ne vous imaginez pas combien ça me change de porter toute ma barbe... une belle barbe roussâtre qui monte jusqu’aux yeux... D’ailleurs, je ne venais que le soir, à l’heure de me coucher, et je décampais avant le jour...

- Et tu n’as pas encore quitté cette auberge?... demanda Flig Balt.

- Pas encore et mieux vaut y rester quelques jours de plus!... Si j’étais parti dès que les frères Kip ont été arrêtés, cela n’eût-il pas paru singulier?... On aurait pu faire un rapprochement... Aussi, par excès de précaution, je ne m’en irai qu’après la condamnation des assassins de notre pauvre capitaine Gibson.

- Enfin, Mod, l’important est que tu ne sois pas reconnu plus tard...

- Soyez tranquille, maître Balt, et tenez... trois ou quatre fois, quand je me rendais à l’auberge, j’ai croisé dans la rue Sexton, Kyle et Bryce... Ils ne se sont jamais doutés que leur camarade passait près d’eux... Vous-même, maître Balt, vous n’auriez pas dit: “Tiens... Vin Mod!...”

On le voit, toutes les précautions ayant été prises, rien ne permettrait de découvrir que Vin Mod, sous le nom de Ned Pat, avait occupé, au Great-Old-Man, la chambre voisine de celle des frères Kip.

Cependant l'enquête se poursuivait par les soins du magistrat chargé de l'instruction. Personne, d'ailleurs, ne mettait en doute la culpabilité de ces deux Hollandais, si nettement accusés, chez lesquels on avait saisi les papiers et l'argent du capitaine. Il était de toute évidence que ces objets n'avaient pu être volés que par les assassins d'Harry Gibson, lequel, au moment du meurtre, les portait sur lui.

Puis, sous le linge contenu dans la valise, les agents avaient également saisi un poignard.

Mais une première question se posait:

cette arme était-elle bien celle qui avait frappé le capitaine Gibson?...

Or, à cet égard, comment hésiter à répondre par l'affirmative? La blessure, découpée en dents de scie, ne pouvait provenir que d'un de ces kriss de fabrication malaise. Il serait facile, au surplus, de le constater sur la photographie que possédait M. Hawkins.

Il est vrai, en Mélanésie, ces kriss sont d'un usage courant. Les indigènes de Kerawara et de l'île York, ceux de la Nouvelle-Zélande et de la Nouvelle-Bretagne, s'en servent d'habitude comme arme de combat avec les zagaies et les javelines. Était-il donc certain que ce fut le kriss, appartenant à Karl Kip, qui eût été l'instrument du crime?...

Oui... et la certitude matérielle de ce fait ne tarda pas à être établie.

Dans la matinée du 15 février, un trois-mâts anglais, le Gordon, de Sydney, vint jeter l'ancre dans le port d'Hobart-Town.

Trois semaines avant, ce navire avait quitté l'archipel Bismarck, après différentes relâches à Kerawara et à Port-Praslin.

Le courrier du Gordon contenait une lettre, accompagnée d'une petite boîte postale, à l'adresse de M. Hawkins.

Cette lettre venait de Port-Praslin. C'était M. Zieger qui l'avait écrite postérieurement aux nouvelles déjà parvenues à Wellington et transmises à M. Hawkins par son correspondant, M. Balfour, - nouvelles qui ne révélaient aucun incident nouveau relatif à l'enquête.

Cette lettre était rédigée en ces termes:

"Port-Praslin, 22 janvier.

"MON CHER AMI,

"Je profite du départ du Gordon pour vous écrire en vous priant tout d'abord de me rappeler au souvenir de Mme Hawkins, et de dire à Mme Gibson et à son fils toute la part que Mme Zieger et moi prenons à leur douleur.

"M. Hamburg d'un côté, à Kerawara, moi du mien, à Neu-Mecklenburg, nous avons fait de très sévères recherches relativement au meurtre, sans avoir obtenu aucun résultat. Les investigations parmi les tribus indigènes de l'île York n'ont point amené la découverte des papiers qui appartenaient au capitaine Gibson, ni de l'argent qu'il portait sur lui. Il serait donc possible que le crime n’eût pas été commis par les indigènes de l’île York, car on aurait fini par retrouver entre leurs mains une somme aussi importante en piastres et d’un écoulement bien difficile dans l’archipel.

“Mais il y a autre chose. Hier, par hasard, dans la forêt de Kerawara, à droite du sentier qui conduit à l’habitation de M. Hamburg, précisément au lieu où fut perpétré le meurtre, un des employés de la factorerie a ramassé une virole en cuivre, qui a dû se détacher du poignard au moment où le meurtrier s’en servait pour frapper notre malheureux ami.

“Si je vous fais parvenir cette virole, je n’imagine pas qu’elle puisse devenir pièce à conviction, puisqu’on n’a point retrouvé l’instrument du crime. Cependant je crois devoir le faire, et puisse cet abominable forfait ne pas rester impuni!

“Je vous renouvelle, mon cher ami, toutes nos amitiés pour Mme Gibson et Nat, pour Mme Hawkins et vous. Si j’apprenais quelque chose de nouveau, vous en seriez instruit, et je vous prie de nous tenir au courant.

“Bien affectueusement votre

“R. ZIEGER.”

Or, ce qu’ignorait M. Zieger, c’est que les magistrats d’Hobart-Town avaient en leur possession l’arme dont s’étaient vraisemblablement servis les assassins du capitaine.

Et, ce qui fut constaté, c’est que la virole qui en terminait la poignée manquait au kriss saisi chez les deux frères...

Et, lorsque cette virole fut ajustée, on constata qu’elle s’y adaptait parfaitement.

Aussi, après ce nouveau témoignage, lorsque Nat Gibson se fut rendu chez l’armateur et lui eut dit:

“À présent, monsieur Hawkins, douterez-vous encore de la culpabilité de ces misérables?...”

Pour toute réponse, M. Hawkins baissa la tête.

VI - Le verdict

L’enquête allait prendre fin. Les frères Kip avaient été interrogés et confrontés avec le maître d’équipage, leur principal, ou, pour mieux dire, leur unique accusateur jusqu’ici, le seul qui eût découvert dans leur cabine du James-Cook des pièces absolument probantes. Ils ne lui avaient répondu que par les plus formelles dénégations. Mais qu’une ordonnance de non-lieu pût être prononcée en leur faveur, comment auraient-ils eu cet espoir, lorsque tant de charges les accablaient, lorsqu’on leur opposait tant de preuves matérielles du crime, impossibles à récuser.

Du reste, ils n’eurent pas l’occasion de préparer ensemble leurs moyens de défense, ni la consolation de se soutenir, de se réconforter, de s’entretenir pendant les longues heures de prison. Séparés l’un de l’autre, ils ne communiquaient qu’avec l’avocat choisi pour les défendre. Lorsque le magistrat procédait à leur interrogatoire, ils ne se rencontraient même pas en sa présence, et ne devaient se revoir que le jour où l’affaire viendrait devant la cour criminelle.

La lettre de M. Zieger, l’envoi qui l’accompagnait, étaient maintenant connus du public. Les journaux d’Hobart-Town avaient rapporté cet incident. Il n’était plus contestable que le poignard saisi dans la valise ne fût l’arme dont s’étaient servis les meurtriers, et de ce fait ressortait le bien-fondé de l’accusation portée contre les frères Kip. Le verdict du jury ne pourrait donc être qu’une condamnation, et une condamnation capitale, étant données les circonstances aggravantes de ce crime.

Et, cependant, à mesure que s’approchait le jour de l’audience, M. Hawkins sentait s’accroître le trouble de ses idées.

Nombre de souvenirs se réveillaient dans son esprit. Quoi! ces deux hommes qui lui avaient inspiré tant de sympathie auraient commis cet épouvantable forfait!... Sa conscience refusait à le croire... son cœur se révoltait à cette pensée!... Il apercevait en cette affaire des points obscurs, inexpliqués, inexplicables peut-être!... Mais, en somme, ses incertitudes ne reposaient que sur des raisons purement morales, alors que la matérialité des faits acquis à l’enquête se dressait devant lui comme un infranchissable mur.

D’ailleurs, M. Hawkins évitait de s’entretenir de cette affaire avec Nat Gibson, dont rien n’eût ébranlé la conviction. Une ou deux fois, en visite chez Mme Gibson, il avait été conduit à émettre quelques idées relatives à l’innocence des frères Kip, et aussi l’espoir qu’ils parviendraient à démontrer leur innocence. Mme Gibson, sans répondre, se réfugiant dans un silence obstiné, il n’était que trop visible qu’elle partageait les idées de son fils. Elle, au surplus, n’avait jamais été à même, comme M. Hawkins, d’apprécier le caractère des naufragés de la Wilhelmina, de pénétrer dans leur passé, de s’intéresser à leur avenir... La veuve ne devait voir en eux que des criminels, les réels assassins du capitaine.

Quant à Mme Hawkins, comment n’eût-elle pas eu confiance dans la droiture d’esprit, dans la sûreté de jugement de son mari? Puisqu’il n’était pas convaincu, elle ne pouvait l’être. Aussi en était-elle venue à partager ses doutes, - car il ne s’agissait que de doutes. Mais, vraisemblablement, à Hobart-Town, ils furent seuls à penser de cette façon. Au fond de leur prison, les accusés n’eussent pu imaginer à quel point l’opinion publique était montée contre eux, et les journaux ne cessaient de la surexciter dans des articles d’une inconcevable violence.

L’affaire devait venir le 17 février.

Or, comme vingt-cinq jours s’étaient déjà écoulés depuis l’audience du Conseil maritime où Flig Balt avait dénoncé Karl et Pieter Kip, Vin Mod ne crut pas nécessaire de prolonger plus longtemps son séjour à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man. Il donna donc congé de la chambre qu’il y occupait sous le nom de Ned Pat et régla son compte. Puis, n’ayant plus besoin de recourir à un déguisement, il vint partager au tap des Fresh-Fishs le logement du maître d’équipage. C’est de là que ces coquins allaient suivre les péripéties d’une machination si habilement préparée et dont le dénouement devait assurer leur sécurité personnelle.

En ce qui concerne les autres matelots du James-Cook, ils avaient trouvé gîte chez les logeurs du voisinage, en attendant l’occasion d’embarquer.

Les débats de l’affaire s’ouvrirent dans la matinée du 17 février devant la Cour criminelle d’Hobart-Town. Cette Cour se composait d’un président assisté de deux magistrats, et d’un attorney général. Le jury comprenait douze jurés qui ne devaient se séparer que lorsque tous seraient d’accord sur le verdict.

Il y eut foule à l’intérieur de la salle, foule dans les rues avoisinantes. Des cris de vengeance accueillirent les accusés dès leur sortie de la prison. À cet instant, ils avaient à peine pu se serrer la main. Les agents les séparèrent aussitôt et durent les protéger jusqu’à leur arrivée au palais de justice. Ils sentaient bien qu’ils n’avaient rien à attendre de l’opinion publique.

Les divers témoins qui figuraient au procès du Conseil maritime se retrouvèrent devant la Cour, M. Hawkins, Nat Gibson, les matelots du James-Cook.

Mais c’était sur Flig Balt, sur ses dires que s’échafaudait toute l’accusation, et comment y répondraient les deux frères, c’est là que l’intérêt allait se concentrer.

Karl et Pieter Kip étaient pourvus d’un défenseur, dont la tâche serait difficile, puisque, aux allégations du maître d’équipage, appuyées de preuves matérielles, il n’aurait à opposer que des dénégations.

Suivant la loi anglaise, le président se borna à leur demander s’ils plaidaient coupables ou non coupables[1].

“Non coupables!” répondirent-ils ensemble et d’une voix forte.

Et alors ils n’eurent qu’à reprendre la déposition qu’ils avaient faite au premier procès, à redire ce que fut leur conduite en cours de navigation depuis l’embarquement à l’île Norfolk jusqu’au débarquement en rade d’Hobart-Town.

Ils affirmèrent que la valise rapportée à bord du brick ne contenait qu’un peu de linge et quelques vêtements. Quant au poignard malais, ils ne l’avaient point retrouvé sur l’épave et ne pouvaient s’expliquer comment il était en leur possession. À l’affirmation de Flig Balt, déclarant que ladite valise renfermait les papiers et l’argent du capitaine Gibson, ils opposaient le démenti le plus formel. Ou le maître d’équipage se trompait, ou il altérait sciemment la vérité.

“Dans quel but!... demanda le président.

- Dans le but de nous perdre, déclara Karl Kip, et pour se venger!”

Ces paroles furent accueillies par une rumeur peu sympathique de l’auditoire.

[1] Guilty or not guilty.

C’était maintenant à l’attorney général, simple avocat qui remplissait les fonctions d’avocat volontaire de la Reine, d’interroger les témoins, d’examiner leurs dépositions.

Puis ce serait au défenseur de procéder à un contre-examen.

Et alors, Flig Balt, interpellé, répondit:

“Oui... pendant la traversée de retour, je venais d’entrer dans le carré... À ce moment, un violent coup de mer rejeta la valise hors de la cabine des frères Kip dont la porte était ouverte... Des pièces d’or roulèrent sur le plancher du rouf, des piastres, en même temps que des papiers s’échappaient de la valise, et ces papiers, c’étaient ceux du bord, qui avaient disparu depuis l’assassinat du capitaine.”

Quant au poignard, si Flig Balt n’en avait pas parlé, c’est qu’il ne l’avait point vu. Il ignorait même que cette arme appartînt aux accusés... Mais, à présent, il ne s’étonnait plus que la police l’eût saisie dans la chambre de l’auberge de Great-Old-Man, puisque c’était celle qui avait frappé Harry Gibson... D’ailleurs, si les frères Kip n’hésitaient point à déclarer l’avoir achetée aux Moluques, à Amboine, ils ne mettaient pas en doute qu’elle eût disparu dans le naufrage de la Wilhelmina... Ce qu’ils affirmaient, c’était que jamais ni l’un ni l’autre ne l’avaient rapportée à bord du James-Cook, et ne pouvaient comprendre qu’elle eût été retrouvée dans leur valise.

Pieter Kip se contenta d’objecter:

“On voit dans les archipels mélanésiens des kriss de cette espèce en grand nombre... Il est peu d’indigènes qui n’en possèdent un... C’est l’arme qui leur est familière... Il est donc possible que celui que vous affirmez avoir été l’instrument du crime ne soit pas le nôtre, car tous ces kriss se ressemblent, étant de fabrication malaise...”

Cette réponse provoqua encore des murmures que dut réprimer le président.

Puis, l’attorney de faire observer que ce poignard était bien l’arme ayant servi au meurtre, puisque la virole qui lui manquait, envoyée par M. Zieger, s’y adaptait parfaitement...

“J’ajouterai, dit alors Pieter Kip, que personne du bord n’a jamais vu cette arme entre nos mains, et si nous l’avions retrouvée sur l’épave, il est probable que nous l’aurions montrée soit à M. Hawkins, soit à Nat Gibson...”

Mais son frère et lui sentirent bien que cette argumentation ne portait pas. Il n’était pas douteux que ce poignard leur appartînt, il n’était pas douteux que la blessure eût été faite par sa lame dentelée, il n’était pas douteux enfin que sa virole fût celle qui avait été ramassée sur le lieu du crime dans la forêt de Kerawara.

Aussi Pieter Kip se borna-t-il à faire cette dernière déclaration:

“Mon frère et moi, nous sommes victimes de circonstances vraiment inexplicables!... Nous, avoir frappé le capitaine Gibson, l’homme auquel nous devions notre sauvetage... notre salut!... Cette accusation est aussi odieuse qu’injuste, et nous n’y répondrons plus!”

Cette phrase, prononcée d’une voix qui ne trahissait aucun trouble, parut produire une certaine émotion sur le public. Mais les convictions étaient déjà faites, et l’on ne voulut voir dans cette déclaration qu’un procédé de défense. Si les frères Kip se refusaient à répondre désormais aux questions qui leur seraient posées, n’était-ce pas impossibilité de le faire?...”

On entendit les autres témoins, et d’abord Nat Gibson. Celui-ci, incapable de se contenir, accabla Karl et Pieter Kip, qui jetaient sur lui un regard de pitié...

Et s’ils avaient pris la parole, c’eût été pour dire:

“Nous comprenons votre douleur, pauvre jeune homme, et nous n’avons pas la force de vous en vouloir!”

Lorsque M. Hawkins se présenta à la barre, son attitude fut celle d’un homme visiblement troublé par ses souvenirs. Pouvait-il admettre que les naufragés de la Wilhelmina, les hôtes du James-Cook, eussent reconnu par le plus abominable des crimes la générosité, les bontés du capitaine?... Ils lui devaient la vie, et ils l’auraient assassiné pour le voler alors qu’ils les savaient, Harry Gibson et lui-même, disposés à leur venir en aide?... Oui... sans doute, des charges accablantes s’élevaient contre eux!... M. Hawkins ne comprenait pas... et, brisé par l’émotion, il ne put parler davantage.

Rien de spécial à relever dans les dépositions des matelots du James-Cook, Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes, ni dans celles de Len Cannon, Sexton, Kyle, Bryce et Koa.

Quant à Vin Mod, ses réponses à l’attorney furent très affirmatives en ce qui concernait Flig Balt. Quelques jours avant que la tentative de révolte éclatât à bord du brick, le maître d’équipage lui avait paru en proie à de sourdes colères... Était-ce seulement parce que Karl Kip l’avait remplacé dans le commandement du brick?... Vin Mod avait toujours pensé que Flig Balt devait avoir quelque autre grave motif...

“Enfin, il ne vous en a rien confié?... demanda l’attorney.

- Rien”, répondit Vin Mod.

Il restait cependant une considération toute en faveur des deux accusés: c’est que jamais le poignard n’avait été vu entre leurs mains pendant la traversée.

Cela résultait même de la déclaration de Flig Balt, et c’était avec une certaine raison que Pieter Kip put de nouveau déclarer:

“Si ce kriss eût été retrouvé par nous sur l’épave, si nous l’eussions rapporté à bord du brick, nous ne l’aurions pas plus caché que nous n’avons caché les autres objets contenus dans notre valise... Y a-t-il un témoin qui ait vu ce poignard en notre possession?... Non, pas un seul!... Il est vrai, au cours de la perquisition à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man, les agents l’ont saisi avec l’argent et les papiers du capitaine... Eh bien, nous l’affirmons, puisqu’il y était, c’est qu’on l’y avait mis en notre absence et à notre insu!”

À ce moment, les débats furent marqués par un incident des plus graves, incident de nature à détruire tout incertitude dans l’esprit des jurés, s’il en existait encore au profit des accusés.

Le mousse Jim fut appelé à faire sa déposition.

“Jim, lui dit le président, tu dois dire tout ce que tu sais et rien que ce dont tu es sûr...

- Oui... monsieur le président”, répondit Jim.

Et il semblait que son regard inquiet cherchait celui de M. Hawkins.

L’armateur ne fut point sans s’en apercevoir, et il eut le pressentiment qu’une révélation très importante allait être faite par le jeune garçon, quelque chose dont Jim n’avait peut-être pas osé déposer jusqu’ici. Et lorsque l’attorney l’eut interrogé:

“Il s’agit du poignard... que personne n’aurait vu à bord... répondit-il... de ce kriss qui appartenait à MM. Kip...”

Après avoir prononcé ces paroles, Jim troublé s’arrêta, et il parut bien qu’il hésitait à continuer sa déposition.

Mais le président l’encouragea, et il finit par déclarer:

“Ce poignard... moi... je l’ai vu!”

Les frères Kip avaient redressé la tête. Est-ce que la dernière planche de salut à laquelle ils se rattachaient allait leur échapper?...

Le kriss fut présenté à Jim.

“C’est bien ce poignard?... lui demanda l’attorney.

- Oui... je le reconnais...

- Et tu affirmes l’avoir vu à bord?...

- Oui.

- Où?...

- Dans la cabine de MM. Kip...

- Dans leur cabine?...

- Oui...

- Et quand?...

- Pendant que le James-Cook était à sa première relâche de Port-Praslin!”

Et Jim raconta dans quelles circonstances il avait aperçu cette arme, comment elle avait attiré son attention, comment il l’avait maniée puis remise ensuite à l’endroit où elle était placée...

On ne l’a pas oublié, le poignard avait été déposé dans la cabine par Vin Mod, quelques instants avant que Flig Balt y eût envoyé le mousse, précisément pour être vu de Jim; puis Vin Mod l’avait repris et ensuite caché dans son sac.

Cette déclaration du jeune garçon produisit un effet extraordinaire, et même une émotion à laquelle ni les juges, ni les jurés, ni l’assistance ne purent se soustraire. Devait-il rester maintenant un doute dans les esprits?... Les frères Kip affirmaient que jamais le kriss n’avait été apporté à bord, et on l’y avait vu, et il venait d’être retrouvé dans leur valise à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man.

“Le kriss avait-il sa virole, lorsque tu l’as tenu entre tes mains? demanda l’attorney au mousse.

- Oui, répondit Jim, et il n’y manquait rien!”

Donc il était absolument établi que cette virole avait dû se détacher du poignard pendant la lutte des assassins avec le capitaine Gibson, puisqu’elle avait été ramassée quelque temps après dans la forêt de Kerawara.

À cette déposition de Jim il n’y avait rien à répondre, et les accusés ne répondirent pas.

Il n’est pas jusqu’à M. Hawkins qui ne se sentit alors très ébranlé. Et comment eût-il pu imaginer que les frères Kip étaient victimes d’un guet-apens préparé par Vin Mod... que ce misérable avait secrètement rapporté le poignard à bord... qu’il l’avait un instant laissé voir au mousse dans la cabine des accusés avant de l’employer à l’assassinat... que les meurtriers du capitaine Gibson, c’étaient son complice Flig Balt et lui, associés dans cette épouvantable machination pour perdre deux innocents!...

À cet instant, Nat Gibson demanda la parole. Il voulait appeler l’attention du jury sur un fait dont il n’avait pas été parlé jusqu’alors, fait qu’il importait cependant de relever.

Et, sur l’autorisation du président, il s’exprima en ces termes:

“Messieurs les juges, messieurs les jurés, vous n’ignorez pas que, pendant la traversée de la Nouvelle-Zélande à l’archipel Bismarck, le James-Cook eut à subir et à repousser l’attaque des Papouas à la hauteur des Louisiades. Officiers, passagers, équipage, tous concoururent à la défense du brick. Mon père était au premier rang. Or, au plus fort de la lutte, un coup de feu fut tiré, on ne sait par qui, et une balle vint effleurer la tête du capitaine Gibson!...

Eh bien, messieurs, jusqu’ici, j’ai pu croire que c’était un coup malheureux, qui s’expliquait au milieu d’une profonde obscurité et dans l’ardeur de la défense... Mais je ne pense plus ainsi... J’ai lieu de croire maintenant, et je crois que ce fut un attentat prémédité, dirigé contre mon père, dont la mort était déjà résolue, et par qui, si ce n’est pas par ceux qui devaient l’assassiner plus tard?...”

Sous la violence de cette nouvelle accusation, Karl Kip se redressa, le regard ardent, la voix frémissante de colère:

“Nous... nous!... s’écria-t-il... Nat Gibson... vous osez dire!...”

Karl était hors de lui. Mais son frère, lui prenant la main, le calma, et il se rassit, la poitrine haletante, gonflée de sanglots.

Il n’y eut personne dans la salle que cette émouvante scène n’eût profondément remué, et quelques larmes coulèrent des yeux de M. Hawkins.

Quant à Vin Mod, il pressait du genou le maître d’équipage, il le regardait en dessous et semblait dire:

“Ma foi... je n’avais pas songé à cela!... Lui... il ne l’a pas oublié, le fils au capitaine!”

La tâche de l’accusateur ne devait plus être que trop facile. Les antécédents des frères Kip furent portés à la connaissance des jurés, leur situation embarrassée, la liquidation qui menaçait la maison de Groningue... Ils avaient perdu tout ce qu’ils possédaient dans le naufrage de la Wilhelmina... L’argent qu’ils rapportaient d’Amboine... nul doute qu’ils ne l’eussent retrouvé sur l’épave, sans en rien dire, ainsi que ce poignard dont ils se servirent à quelques semaines de là!...

Puis ils avaient dépouillé le malheureux capitaine de ces quelques mille piastres dont une partie seulement avait été saisie dans leur valise... Et, enfin, qui sait si Karl Kip n’avait pas déjà la pensée de lui succéder dans le commandement du James-Cook - ce qui arriva d’ailleurs?...

Dans quelles conditions le crime avait-il été commis? Les jurés ne l’ignoraient plus... Lorsque Harry Gibson débarqua pour se rendre chez M. Hamburg, les deux frères n’étaient plus à bord... Ils l’attendaient, il l’épiaient, ils le suivirent à travers la forêt de Kerawara, ils l’attaquèrent, ils le traînèrent hors du sentier, ils le dépouillèrent, et, après leur retour au James-Cook, personne ne put les soupçonner... Et, le lendemain, ils ne craignaient pas de se joindre au cortège qui accompagnait le capitaine à sa dernière demeure, et de mêler leurs larmes aux larmes de son fils!

Aussi, ce que l’accusation demandait au jury, c’était d’être sans pitié pour de tels criminels... c’était un verdict qui fût affirmatif sur toutes les questions... c’était la peine capitale contre Karl et Pieter Kip.

Le défenseur prit alors la parole, et il ne faillit pas à sa tâche. Mais pouvait-il espérer que ses efforts seraient couronnés de succès?... Ne sentait-il pas que la conviction des juges et du public était faite?... Aux preuves matérielles relevées contre les accusés, qu’allait-il opposer?... Rien que des présomptions morales, qui ne pèseraient guère dans le plateau de la balance!... Il parla du passé de ses clients, de l’honorabilité de leur vie, reconnue de tous ceux qui furent en rapport avec eux!... Que la maison de Groningue ne fût pas dans une situation prospère, qu’ils eussent perdu leurs dernières ressources dans le naufrage de la Wilhelmina, ce n’était que trop vrai!...

Et, pour se procurer une somme relativement minime, deux ou trois mille piastres, ils auraient attenté à la vie du capitaine Gibson!... Ils auraient tué leur bienfaiteur!... Ce n’était pas admissible!... Les frères Kip étaient victimes d’une inexplicable fatalité... Il y avait des doutes qui devaient leur profiter... entraîner l’acquittement.

Les débats terminés, le jury se retira dans la salle des délibérations.

Nat Gibson resta au banc des témoins, la tête entre ses mains. Mais qu’on ne se figure pas que l’avocat des accusés eût réussi à glisser une hésitation dans sa conscience!... Non! pour lui, Karl et Pieter Kip étaient bien les assassins de son père.

M. Hawkins se tenait à l’écart, le cœur brisé, regardant cette place vide que les deux accusés reviendraient occuper pour entendre le prononcé du jugement.

À cet instant, le mousse Jim s’approcha et, d’une voix tremblante:

“Monsieur Hawkins... dit-il, je ne pouvais pas déposer autrement... n’est-ce pas?...

- Tu ne le pouvais pas, mon enfant!” répondit M. Hawkins.

Cependant, la délibération se prolongeait. Peut-être la culpabilité ne paraissait-elle pas démontrée d’une façon absolue?... Peut-être le jury accorderait-il le bénéfice des circonstances atténuantes, dû à la très digne attitude des deux frères, qui n’avait pas laissé de causer une certaine impression au cours des débats?...

Entre-temps, deux hommes ne parvenaient guère à dissimuler leur impatience. C’était le maître d’équipage et Vin Mod, assis l’un près de l’autre, n’osant même pas proférer quelques paroles à voix basse...

Mais ils n’avaient pas besoin de parler pour se comprendre, pour échanger leurs pensées... Ce qu’ils espéraient, ce qu’il fallait pour assurer leur sécurité, c’était la condamnation capitale, c’était l’exécution des frères Kip!... Eux morts, affaire finie!... Eux vivants, même au fond d’un bagne, ils protesteraient de leur innocence, et qui sait si quelque hasard ne mettrait pas la justice sur la trace des vrais coupables?...

Après trente-cinq minutes de délibération la sonnette retentit, et le jury ne tarda pas à revenir prendre place dans la salle d’audience. Leur verdict avait donc réuni l’unanimité.

Le public afflua aussitôt, s’étouffant, s’écrasant, au milieu d’une rumeur et d’une agitation portées à leur comble.

Presque aussitôt, les magistrats reparurent, et le président fit annoncer la reprise de l’audience.

Le chef du jury fut invité à donner connaissance du verdict.

Affirmatif sur tous les points, il n’accordait pas les circonstances atténuantes aux accusés.

Karl et Pieter rentrèrent alors, remontèrent à leur banc, et se tinrent debout.

Le président et ses assesseurs délibérèrent quelques instants sur la peine qui devait être appliquée, le crime étant celui de l’assassinat, c’est-à-dire du meurtre avec préméditation.

Karl et Pieter Kip furent condamnés à mort, et, au prononcé de cette condamnation, quelques applaudissements se firent entendre.

Les deux frères, après un douloureux regard, s’étaient pris la main, leurs bras s’ouvrirent, et, sans prononcer une parole, ils se serrèrent cœur contre cœur.

VII - En attendant l’exécution

Ainsi donc, les frères Kip n’avaient plus rien à attendre de la justice des hommes: elle s’était prononcée contre eux, sans même admettre des circonstances atténuantes pour le crime qu’on leur imputait. Aucun des arguments présentés par la défense n’avait touché le jury. Ni l’attitude à la fois si ferme et si digne des accusés au cours des débats, ni la colère de Karl Kip, qui s’échappait parfois en paroles indignées, ni les explications plus calmes de Pieter Kip, n’avaient rien pu contre les faits allégués, contre les charges si traîtreusement accumulées sur leur tête, contre les déclarations de ce misérable Flig Balt, appuyées par la dernière déposition du mousse Jim!

Et, en effet, tant que Karl et Pieter Kip avaient pu affirmer que l’instrument du meurtre ne s’était jamais trouvé entre leurs mains, et soutenir, non sans apparence de raison, que le kriss étant l’arme le plus en usage chez les naturels de la Mélanésie, celui auquel s’ajustait la virole devait appartenir à un indigène de Kerawara, de l’île York ou des îlots voisins, une certaine hésitation paraissait admissible. Mais ce poignard était bien celui qu’ils avaient repris sur l’épave et rapporté à bord du James-Cook sans le montrer à personne, et comment mettre en doute la déclaration du mousse qui l’avait vu dans leur cabine?...

Cette condamnation eut tout d’abord pour effet de donner satisfaction à la population d’Hobart-Town. Dans cette haine générale vouée aux assassins du capitaine Harry Gibson, il entrait une grande part de cet égoïsme si indiqué chez les races saxonnes, et dont la preuve n’est plus à faire. C’était un Anglais qui avait été tué, c’étaient des étrangers, des Hollandais, qui l’avaient frappé...

Et, en présence d’un tel crime, qui eût osé concevoir la moindre pitié pour leurs auteurs?... Aussi personne, dans le public, pas même un seul des nombreux journaux de la Tasmanie, n’éleva-t-il la voix dans le but d’obtenir une commutation de la peine.

Que l’on ne reproche pas au fils de la victime l’horreur que lui inspiraient les frères Kip. Il croyait à leur culpabilité, comme il croyait en Dieu, - une culpabilité basée, non sur des présomptions, mais sur des preuves matérielles. Dénégations, protestations, c’était tout ce que les accusés avaient opposé aux témoignages concordants et précis. Après avoir longtemps désespéré de retrouver les meurtriers de son père, il les tenait enfin, ces deux monstres qui devaient leur salut au capitaine et qui, à sa bonté, à sa générosité, avaient répondu par le plus lâche des assassinats! Des quelques raisons, plus ou moins probantes, qui eussent milité en faveur de leur innocence, il ne voulait rien voir, il ne pouvait rien voir à travers cet épais voile de l’indignation et de la douleur.

Aussi, le jour où la sentence fut rendue par la cour criminelle, lorsqu’il rentra dans la maison de Mme Gibson:

“Mère, dit-il d’une voix que l’émotion faisait trembler, ils payeront ce crime de leur tête, et mon père sera vengé!...

- Dieu ait pitié!... murmura Mme Gibson.

- Pitié de ces misérables?... s’écria Nat Gibson, qui comprit dans ce sens la réponse de sa mère.

- Non... pitié de nous, mon enfant!” répondit Mme Gibson, en attirant son fils vers elle, en le pressant sur son cœur.

Voilà les premières paroles que Nat Gibson avait prononcées, dès qu’il eut franchi la porte de la maison paternelle.

Voici, maintenant, ce que dit l’armateur, lorsqu’il se retrouva en présence de Mme Hawkins, à l’issue de l’audience:

“Condamnés...

- Condamnés?...

- À mort, les malheureux!... Fasse le Ciel que la justice humaine ne se soit pas trompée!...

- Tu doutes toujours, mon ami?...

- Toujours!”

On le voit, par pressentiment plutôt que par raison, M. Hawkins se refusait encore à reconnaître la culpabilité des frères Kip. Il ne parvenait pas à les croire coupables d’un crime si odieux envers leur bienfaiteur, auquel ils avaient toujours témoigné tant de reconnaissance! Le mobile, un mobile incontestable, lui échappait... En somme, que leur eût rapporté la mort de M. Gibson? Quelques milliers de piastres; et, quant à cet espoir de le remplacer au commandement du brick, comment eût-il été réalisable, puisque, le maître d’équipage remplissant les fonctions de second, il était indiqué qu’il en devînt le capitaine?...

Pour tout dire, M. Hawkins n’avait pas laissé d’être ébranlé après la déposition du mousse Jim. Il était certain que le poignard, saisi dans la chambre des deux frères à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man, avait été vu par Jim dans leur cabine à bord du James-Cook... Karl ou Pieter Kip l’avaient rapporté de leur visite à l’épave de la Wilhelmina, et, s’ils ne l’avaient montré à personne, c’est qu’il ne leur convenait pas de le faire... Aussi l’accusation en concluait-elle que l’idée du crime avait déjà germé dans leur esprit.

Toutefois, qu’en de telles occurrences les opinions aient été souvent divisées, les uns tenant pour l’innocence, les autres pour la culpabilité d’un accusé, ce n’est pas ce qui se passait à Hobart-Town et autres villes de Tasmanie.

Qui eût jamais pu entrevoir qu’un revirement s’effectuerait en faveur des frères Kip?... M. Hawkins n’ignorait pas que tout le monde serait contre lui. Cela pourtant n’était pas de nature à le décourager. Il avait la foi, et que ne peut-on espérer du temps, qui est souvent le grand réformateur des erreurs humaines?...

Il est vrai, ce serait peut-être le temps qui ferait défaut. Le pourvoi que les frères Kip avaient formé contre leur condamnation ne tarderait pas à être rejeté. Il n’existait aucun motif de cassation, et l’on prévoyait que l’exécution de la sentence aurait lieu dans la seconde quinzaine de mars, un mois après le prononcé du verdict.

Et, il faut bien en convenir, cette exécution, on l’attendait avec une impatience véritablement féroce chez la partie de cette population toujours portée aux actions brutales, toujours prête aux pires excès, celle qui ne demande qu’à se substituer aux agents de la justice, celle qui veut lyncher les coupables ou ceux qu’elle croit tels. Et c’est peut-être ce qui serait arrivé à Hobart-Town, si le jury n’eût pas donné satisfaction à ces déplorables instincts de la foule, si une condamnation capitale n’eût été prononcée par la cour criminelle. Le jour de l’expiation, on la verrait, cette foule, grouiller autour de la prison.

Ils y seraient aussi, au premier rang, ces abominables coquins, Flig Balt et Vin Mod! Ils voudraient, de leurs propres yeux, s’assurer que Karl et Pieter Kip avaient payé de la vie ce crime dont ils étaient, eux, les auteurs!... Et, alors, ils pourraient partir en toute sécurité, se lancer dans d’autres aventures, sans avoir rien à craindre de l’avenir!...

Après l’audience, les deux frères avaient été ramenés à la prison, et qu’on ne s’étonne pas si leur passage provoqua ces ignobles insultes dont la tourbe lâche est surtout prodigue, et contre laquelle il fallut les protéger.

À ces outrages, ils ne répondirent que par l’attitude la plus digne, le silence le plus dédaigneux.

Lorsque les portes de la prison se furent refermées derrière eux, le gardien chef ne les reconduisit point aux chambres qu’ils avaient occupées séparément depuis leur incarcération, mais dans la cellule des condamnés à mort. Du moins, au milieu de tant de misères, eurent-ils cette consolation d’être réunis! Durant ces derniers jours de leur existence, ils allaient se rattacher par une pensée commune aux souvenirs du passé, et ils auraient vécu l’un près de l’autre jusqu’au pied du gibet.

Il est vrai, dans cette cellule, ce ne fut pas la solitude à deux dont ils eussent si ardemment voulu jouir. Les gardiens ne devaient les quitter ni jour ni nuit, les surveillant, les écoutant. Il y aurait toujours, entre leurs épanchements les plus intimes, la présence de ces tiers farouches, auxquels ils n’inspiraient aucune pitié sans doute.

Il y a lieu d’observer que, si Karl Kip donna plus d’une fois large cours à son indignation, devant cette abominable injustice de deux innocents envoyés à la mort, son frère, qui essayait vainement de se contenir, se montrait plus calme et plus résigné à son sort.

Du reste, Pieter Kip ne se faisait aucune illusion sur le pourvoi que, déférant aux conseils de leur avocat, tous deux avaient signé. Que Karl, au fond de l'âme, eût conservé l'espoir que l'arrêt fût cassé, que l'affaire serait jugée à nouveau, que le temps gagné ainsi permettrait à la vérité d'apparaître dans tout son éclat, lui ne conservait aucune espérance. En songeant à l'énormité des charges qui pesaient sur eux, d'où leur serait venu un secours?...

Quelle intervention eût été assez forte pour les sauver, sinon une intervention providentielle?...

Puis, leur esprit se reportait en arrière, ils songeaient à tous ces coups de la mauvaise fortune qui les avait conduits là où ils étaient... Ah! mieux eût valu que le James-Cook ne fût pas venu les recueillir sur l'île de Norfolk!... Mieux eût valu que le capitaine Gibson n'eût point aperçu leur signaux!... Sans doute ils auraient péri de misère et de faim sur cette côte déserte!... Mais ce n'eût pas été du moins cette mort infamante du gibet, de la mort réservée aux assassins!...

“Pieter!... Pieter!... s'écriait Karl Kip. Notre pauvre père, s'il vivait encore... s'il voyait son nom déshonoré!... Cette honte le tuerait...

- Peux-tu donc penser qu'il nous aurait crus coupables, Karl?...

- Non... frère, jamais!... jamais!”

Et alors, ils en venaient à parler de ceux dont ils avaient partagé la vie commune pendant quelques semaines, de ces généreux sauveurs qui leur avaient témoigné une si vive sympathie, auxquels ils devaient tant de reconnaissance!... Que, dans l'excès de sa douleur, Nat Gibson eût pris contre eux une attitude si accusatrice, ils le comprenaient, ils faisaient la part de sa situation, à lui, le fils de la victime!... Mais comment lui pardonner qu'il voulût voir en eux les meurtriers de son père!...

En ce qui concerne M. Hawkins, rien qu'à la manière réservée dont sa déposition était faite, ils sentaient bien qu'un doute laissait quelque ombre dans son esprit. Ils se disaient que le cœur de cet excellent homme ne leur était peut-être pas entièrement fermé.

Aux témoignages si affirmatifs du maître d'équipage et du mousse Jim, s'il n'avait pu opposer que des présomptions morales, du moins les avait-il présentées au jury suivant l'inspiration de sa conscience.

Quant aux divers témoins, auraient-ils pu déposer autrement qu'ils ne l'avaient fait?... Pour Flig Balt, les deux frères ne voyaient dans la conduite de ce misérable que la satisfaction de sa haine, un acte de vengeance contre le nouveau commandant du James-Cook, contre le capitaine dont l'énergie avait comprimé la révolte et envoyé son chef à fond de cale. Relativement aux papiers d'Harry Gibson, au poignard qui leur appartenait, s'ils se trouvaient dans leur valise, c'est qu'ils y avaient été mis dans le but de perdre les deux frères par celui qui les avait volés!... Et comment eussent-ils pu supposer que l'un des assassins de Kerawara fût précisément le maître d'équipage?...

Lui, non plus, M. Hawkins, bien qu'il cherchât de nouvelles pistes, ne parvenait pas à en suivre une avec quelque chance de succès. Dans sa pensée, d'ailleurs, l'attentat devait avoir pour auteurs les indigènes de l'île York, et qui sait si les autorités allemandes ne finiraient pas par les découvrir un jour?...

Cependant le jour, l'heure approchaient où deux hommes, deux frères allaient subir le dernier supplice pour un crime qu'ils n'avaient pas commis, qu’ils n’avaient pu commettre!

M. Hawkins, de plus en plus obsédé de cette conviction que Karl et Pieter Kip étaient innocents, quoiqu’il lui fût impossible d’apporter une preuve de leur innocence, avait entrepris certaines démarches en leur faveur.

Le gouverneur de la Tasmanie était particulièrement connu de M. Hawkins.

Celui-ci tenait Son Excellence Sir Edward Carrigan pour un homme de grand sens et d’un jugement très sûr. Aussi se résolut-il à lui demander audience à bref délai et, dans la matinée du 25 février, s’étant rendu à l’hôtel de la résidence, il fut à l’instant reçu.

Le gouverneur ne se doutait guère du motif qui amenait M. Hawkins en sa présence. Après avoir suivi avec intérêt les débats de l’affaire Kip comme tout le monde, il ne mettait pas en doute la culpabilité des condamnés.

La surprise de Son Excellence ne laissa donc pas d’être profonde, lorsque M. Hawkins lui eut fait connaître son opinion.

Comme il lui prêtait d’ailleurs toute attention, M. Hawkins s’abandonna sans réserve. Il parla avec tant de chaleur de ces deux victimes d’une erreur judiciaire, il mit en relief avec une si franche logique les points obscurs, indécis, ou du moins inexpliqués de leur cause, que le gouverneur se sentit ébranlé dans une certaine mesure.

“Je vois, mon cher Hawkins, déclara-t-il, que, durant cette traversée à bord du James-Cook, vous avez conçu une grande estime pour Karl et Pieter Kip... et qu’ils s’en étaient toujours montrés dignes...

- Je les considérais et je les considère encore comme d’honnêtes gens, monsieur le gouverneur, affirma M. Hawkins d’un ton convaincu. Je ne puis vous fournir de preuves matérielles à l’appui de ma conviction, parce qu’elles m’échappent jusqu’ici, et peut-être même nous échapperont-elles toujours... Mais rien de ce qui a été dit au cours des débats, pas un des témoignages qui ne sont produits n’a pu affaiblir la certitude que j’ai de l’innocence de ces deux infortunés.

Et, Votre Excellence le remarquera, ces témoignages se réduisent à un seul, celui du maître d’équipage, que j’ai maintenant des raisons de regarder comme très suspect!... C’est par haine qu’il agit, c’est par vengeance qu’il accuse les frères Kip d’un meurtre dont ils ne sont pas coupables, et que j’attribue à quelque indigène de Kerawara...

- Mais il y a un autre témoignage que celui de Flig Balt, mon cher Hawkins...

- Le témoignage du mousse Jim, monsieur le gouverneur, et je l’accepte tel qu’il a été fait, car ce jeune garçon est incapable de mentir... Oui! Jim a vu, dans la cabine de Karl et de Pieter Kip, ce poignard qu’ils ne savaient pas être en leur possession... Mais est-ce bien l’arme qui a servi au meurtre, et ce fait de la virole n’est-il pas dû à une coïncidence toute fortuite!...

- Il a pourtant sa valeur, et ne convenait-il pas d’en tenir compte, mon cher Hawkins?...

- Assurément, monsieur le gouverneur, et il a dû déterminer la conviction du jury... Cependant, je le répète, tout le passé des frères Kip plaide en leur faveur... Pour vous parler ainsi, il faut que j’oublie la douleur que m’a causée la mort de mon pauvre ami Gibson, et qui aurait pu me mettre un bandeau sur les yeux, comme à son fils que je plains et que j’excuse!... Moi... moi... je perçois la vérité au milieu des obscurités de cette affaire, et j’ai l’entière conviction qu’elle éclatera un jour!”

Il fut visible que le gouverneur se sentait très impressionné par les déclarations de M. Hawkins, dont il connaissait la nature probe et droite. Sans doute, son argumentation ne reposait que sur une base morale, mais, enfin, dans les causes de ce genre, les preuves matérielles ne sont pas tout, et il convient de tenir compte des autres.

Sir Edward Carrigan, après quelques instants de silence, répondit en ces termes:

“Je comprends... je saisis, mon cher Hawkins, toute la valeur de votre opinion... Et maintenant, je vous demanderai...: Qu’attendez-vous de moi?...

- Que vous vouliez bien intervenir... du moins pour sauver la vie de ces malheureux...

- Intervenir?... répondit le gouverneur. Ignorez-vous donc que la seule intervention possible était de se pourvoir contre l’arrêt qui a été prononcé? Or, ce pourvoi, vous savez qu’il a été introduit en temps utile... et il ne reste d’espoir qu’en son admission... dans un délai très court...”

Tandis que parlait Son Excellence, M. Hawkins n’avait pu retenir des gestes de dénégation, et il dit à son tour:

“Monsieur le gouverneur, je ne me fais aucune illusion au sujet du pourvoi... Les formes de la justice ont été régulièrement suivies dans cette affaire... Il n’y a aucun motif qui permette de casser l’arrêt, et le pourvoi sera rejeté...”

Le gouverneur se taisait, sachant bien que M. Hawkins avait raison.

“Il sera rejeté, je vous le répète, reprit celui-ci, et alors, monsieur le gouverneur, vous seul pourriez tenter un dernier effort pour sauver la tête des condamnés...

- Me demandez-vous de solliciter un recours en grâce?...

- Oui... un recours en grâce près de la Reine... Une dépêche peut être envoyée par vous au lord chief-justice afin que la peine soit commuée, ce qui nous réserverait l’avenir... ou tout au moins que l’on sursoie à l’exécution de la sentence...

Et alors... je ferai de nouvelles démarches... je retournerai, s’il le faut, à Port-Praslin... à Kerawara... je seconderai M. Hamburg et M. Zieger... et nous finirons par découvrir les vrais coupables, en ne ménageant ni l’argent ni les peines!... Si j’insiste avec cette passion, monsieur le gouverneur, c’est que j’y suis poussé par une force irrésistible, c’est que, la vérité enfin reconnue, la justice n’aura pas à se reprocher plus tard la mort de deux innocents!...”

M. Hawkins prit alors congé du gouverneur, non sans que celui-ci ne l’eût invité à revenir le voir à ce sujet. Et c’est bien ce que fit chaque jour cet homme dévoué. Aussi, grâce à son dévouement, la cause des deux frères gagna-t-elle dans l’esprit de Son Excellence, qui voulut s’associer à cette œuvre de réparation.

Toutefois, le secret de ces démarches fut gardé entre le gouverneur et M. Hawkins. Nul ne sut que, sans attendre la décision relative au pourvoi, Edward Carrigan avait envoyé en Angleterre par télégramme officiel une proposition de recours en grâce auprès de Sa Majesté.

Le 7 mars, le bruit se répandit par la ville que le pourvoi formé par les frères Kip avait été rejeté. La nouvelle était vraie; elle ne provoqua aucun sentiment de surprise. Depuis le début de l'affaire, on s'attendait à une condamnation, même à une condamnation capitale, et personne n'eût mis en doute qu'elle ne fût suivie d'une exécution.

D'ailleurs, personne ne pensait que le gouverneur de la Tasmanie dût intervenir près de la Reine, ni que M. Hawkins eût fait près de lui de si pressantes démarches à cet effet.

La population d'Hobart-Town comptait donc que l'exécution serait prochaine, et l'on sait combien, chez les races saxonnes comme chez les races latines, ces supplices provoquent d'irrésistibles et malsaines curiosités.

Si, d'après les lois anglaises, la pendaison des condamnés n'est pas faite en place publique, mais seulement en présence de personnes désignées, c'est déjà un progrès. Toutefois la foule ne s'en amasse pas moins aux abords de la prison.

Aussi, à partir du 7 mars, avant le lever du soleil, et même dès les premières heures après minuit, d'innombrables curieux affluaient-ils pour voir hisser le pavillon noir qui marque l'instant du supplice.

Et, parmi eux, s'étonnera-t-on que Flig Balt et Vin Mod fussent là, et aussi Len Cannon et ses camarades, qui n'avaient pas quitté Hobart-Town?... Oui! c'était de leurs propres yeux que le maître d'équipage et son complice voulaient voir redescendre le pavillon, après l'exécution de la sentence!... Ils seraient alors certains que d'autres avaient payé pour eux la dette de leur crime!... Il n'y aurait plus lieu de revenir sur cette affaire, et ces deux misérables retourneraient avec leurs compagnons au tap des Fresh-Fishs, où les piastres volées s’écouleraient en wisky et en gin.

Quant à Mme Gibson, ni son fils ni elle ne devaient être ce jour-là à Hobart-Town, et ils ne reviendraient qu’après que justice serait faite. Lorsque Nat fit part de ce projet à M. Hawkins, celui-ci se contenta de répondre:

“Tu as raison, Nat... cela vaut mieux!”

Depuis la condamnation, l’armateur avait rencontré plusieurs fois les matelots Hobbes, Wickley, Burnes et aussi le mousse Jim. Ces braves gens ne s’étaient pas encore occupés de chercher un embarquement, et peut-être leur intention était-elle d’attendre que le James-Cook fût réarmé sous un autre capitaine.

Ils savaient, du reste, qu’ils pouvaient compter sur M. Hawkins, lorsqu’il reformerait l’équipage du brick, ou même d’un autre navire de sa maison.

Inutile d’ajouter qu’ils avaient rompu tout rapport avec Flig Balt, Vin Mod et leurs autres camarades de l’ancien équipage du brick.

On était au 19 mars, et la ville commençait à s’étonner que l’ordre d’exécution ne fût pas déjà arrivé - ce dont Flig Balt et Vin Mod ne laissaient pas de s’inquiéter dans leur intérêt personnel. Ils étaient bien résolus, du reste, s’il y avait sursis, à quitter Hobart-Town, et, en cette prévision, ils cherchaient un navire en partance.

Or, dans la journée du 25, une dépêche arriva de Londres, envoyée par le lord chief-justice à Son Excellence le gouverneur de la Tasmanie.

Le recours en grâce avait été admis par Sa Majesté, Reine d’Angleterre, Impératrice des Indes, et la peine de mort, prononcée contre les frères Kip, était commuée en celle des travaux forcés à perpétuité.

VIII - Port-Arthur

Un mois après ce jour où les condamnés à mort avaient bénéficié de la commutation de leur peine, deux hommes travaillaient sous le fouet des argousins dans le pénitencier de Port-Arthur.

Ces deux forçats n'appartenaient pas à la même escouade. Séparés l'un de l'autre, ne pouvant échanger ni une parole ni un regard, ils ne partageaient ni la même gamelle ni le même cabanon. Ils allaient, chacun de son côté, vêtus de l'ignoble vareuse du galérien, accablés sous les injures et les coups de la chiourme, au milieu de cette tourbe de bandits que la Grande-Bretagne expédie à ses colonies d'outre-mer. Le matin, ils quittaient le bagne et n'y rentraient que le soir, épuisés de fatigues, insuffisamment soutenus par une grossière nourriture. Ils y reprenaient le lit de camp, côte à côte avec un compagnon de chaîne, cherchant en vain l'oubli dans quelques heures de sommeil. Puis, le jour revenu, alors sous les chaleurs étouffantes de l'été, plus tard sous les terribles froids de l'hiver, ils iraient ainsi jusqu'à l'heure où la mort tant souhaitée les délivrerait de cette abominable existence.

Ces deux hommes étaient les frères Kip, qui, trois semaines avant, avaient été transportés au pénitencier de Port-Arthur.

Jusqu'au milieu du XVIIe siècle, on le sait, la Tasmanie ne fut habitée que par les plus misérables peuplades du globe, des indigènes placés, pourrait-on dire, sur cette limite qui sépare l'animalité de l'humanité. Or, les premiers Européens qui devaient prendre pied sur cette grande île ne valaient guère mieux, sans doute, que ces sauvages. Mais, après eux, vinrent les émigrants, lesquels, avec leur concours et le temps aidant, en firent une colonie des plus florissantes.

À cette époque, la Grande-Bretagne avait déjà fondé un établissement de ce genre à Botany-Bay, sur la côte orientale de l'Australie, alors dénommée Nouvelle-Galles du Sud.

Comme elle put supposer chez les Français l'intention de créer un bagne similaire en terre tasmanienne, elle se hâta de les y devancer, ainsi qu'elle le fit plus tard en Nouvelle-Zélande.

Vers le milieu de l'année 1803, John Bowin, quittant Sydney avec un détachement de troupes coloniales, débarqua sur la rive gauche de la rivière Derwent, à vingt milles au-dessus de son embouchure, au lieu dit "Ridens". Il emmenait un certain nombre de convicts, dont le chiffre monta à quatre cents l'année suivante, sous le lieutenant-colonel Collins.

Cet officier, abandonnant Ridens, jeta les fondements d'Hobart-Town sur l'autre rive du Derwent, en un endroit où une petite rivière fournissait l'eau douce, au fond de la baie de Sullivan-Cove dans laquelle les navires, même d'un tonnage élevé, trouvaient d'excellents mouillages. La nouvelle ville ne tarda pas à prendre de l'extension, et, entre les bâtiments civils qu'elle compta bientôt, l'un des premiers construits fut le bagne, enfermé de quatre hautes murailles en pierres dures comme le granit.

Trois éléments ont contribué à former la population en Tasmanie: les hommes libres, ce sont les émigrants, les colons, qui ont volontairement quitté le Royaume-Uni; les émancipés, ce sont les déportés, auxquels il a été accordé une remise de peine en raison de leur bonne conduite ou dont la condamnation a pris fin; les convicts, ce sont les déportés qui, à leur débarquement, passent sous la surveillance du surintendant ou commissaire des chiourmes.

Ces convicts comprenaient trois catégories:

1° les condamnés aux peines les plus graves, qui deviennent les hôtes du bagne et, sous la direction des constables, sont employés aux travaux de force, et particulièrement à l'établissement des routes; 2° les condamnés pour fautes plus légères, - les magistrats anglais ont souvent la main lourde, - qui obtiennent la faveur d'entrer au service des colons sans aucun salaire, mais à la condition d'être convenablement logés, nourris suivant la ration réglementaire, mis à même de remplir chaque dimanche leurs devoirs religieux; 3° les condamnés qui, grâce à leur bonne conduite, ont la liberté de travailler pour leur compte, et, de ceux-là, il en est quelques-uns qui sont arrivés à la fortune, à l'indépendance. Il est vrai, en dépit des efforts tentés par les gouverneurs, aucun d'eux ne peut reprendre rang dans la société des hommes libres.

Telles furent donc les premières mesures adoptées au début de la colonie pour l'organisation pénale, et telles étaient les différentes catégories de convicts, aussi bien hommes que femmes. D'après ce que note Dumont d'Urville, lors de son arrivée en Tasmanie, vers 1840, les peines infligées étaient graduées ainsi qu'il suit suivant la gravité des délits: réprimande, condamnation à tourner la roue d'un moulin pendant un temps limité, travaux forcés le jour et emprisonnement solitaire la nuit, travaux forcés sur les grands chemins, travaux forcés dans les escouades enchaînées, envoi à l'établissement pénal de Port-Arthur.

À propos de ce dernier établissement, il convient de rappeler qu'en 1768 un pénitencier avait été fondé sur l'île Norfolk, - cette île où furent recueillis par le James-Cook Karl et Pieter Kip, les naufragés de la Wilhelmina. Mais, dès 1805, le gouvernement le fit évacuer, parce que, faute de port, il était très difficile d'y débarquer. L'île, cependant, redevint plus tard siège de colonie pénale, et c'est là que l'administration déportait les criminels les plus redoutables de la Tasmanie et de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud.

Plus tard, en 1842, il fut abandonné définitivement et remplacé par celui de Port-Arthur [Actuellement Port-Arthur est désaffecté et l’établissement pénal n’existe plus en Tasmanie.].

Ainsi, sans parler du bagne d’Hobart-Town, la Tasmanie en possédait un second, dont il convient de faire connaître la situation avec quelque détail.

La grande île, profondément entaillée dans sa partie méridionale par Storm-Bay, est limitée à l’ouest par le littoral très découpé, que traverse le Dervent, dont Hobart-Town occupe la rive droite. À l’est, elle a pour frontière la presqu’île de Tasman qui, de l’autre côté, est battue par les longues houles du Pacifique. Au nord, cette presqu’île se rattache par un isthme très resserré à la péninsule de Forestier, qui elle-même ne tient au district de Panbroke que par une étroite langue de terre. Au sud, vers le large, se projettent les pointes aiguës du cap du Sud-Ouest et du cap Pillar.

Depuis l’isthme qui relie les presqu’îles Forestier et Tasman jusqu’au cap Pillar, on compte environ six milles, et ce fut dans une petite baie de la côte méridionale que l’administration fonda l’établissement de Port-Arthur.

La presqu’île de Tasman est couverte de forêts épaisses, très riches en essences propres à la construction maritime, entre autres un bois dur qui présente l’apparence et les qualités du teck. Nombre de ces arbres, déjà vieux d’un siècle, se reconnaissent à leur tronc gigantesque, sans aucune pousse latérale, et dont la frondaison ne s’étale qu’à leur cime.

La petite ville de Port-Arthur se développe en amphithéâtre sur la colline du fond de la baie. Son port, bien aménagé avec môle de débarquement, abrité par les hauteurs environnantes, offre toute sécurité aux navires, dont les terribles rafales du nord-ouest empêchent souvent l’entrée dans les eaux de Storm-Bay.

Du reste, sauf pour les besoins du pénitencier, ils n’y viennent guère qu’en relâche forcée. La raison en est que le commerce est nul dans ce port, auquel l’avenir réserve une certaine prospérité si sa destination vient à changer.

En effet, la population de Port-Arthur est de composition toute spéciale: les employés du gouvernement, les constables, les soldats des deux compagnies d’infanterie. Ce personnel, placé sous l’autorité d’un capitaine-commandant, est préposé au fonctionnement et à la garde de l’établissement pénal. Ce chef, le capitaine Skirtle, en résidence à Port-Arthur, occupait alors une confortable habitation, bâtie sur une pointe élevée du littoral, d’où la vue s’étendait jusqu’à la pleine mer.

À cette époque, l’établissement comprenait deux divisions, affectées à deux catégories de convicts très distinctes.

Le premier se voyait sur la gauche en entrant dans le havre. Son nom de Point-Puer indiquait qu’il était destiné à de jeunes détenus, - plusieurs centaines d’enfants compris entre douze et dix-huit ans. Trop souvent déportés pour des délits en somme peu graves, ils occupaient des baraques de bois aménagées en ateliers et en dortoirs. C’est là qu’on tentait de les ramener au bien par le travail, par l’instruction moralisatrice que les règlements imposaient, par les leçons qu’ils recevaient d’un ministre chargé de diriger les pratiques religieuses. Enfin, c’est de là qu’ils sortaient parfois bons ouvriers, en cordonnerie, en menuiserie, en charpentage et autres métiers manuels qui pourraient leur assurer une honnête existence. Mais on leur faisait la vie dure, à ces jeunes reclus, sous la menace des punitions en usage, l’internement en cellule, la mise au pain et à l’eau, le fouet incessamment brandi par la main des constables contre les récalcitrants.

Au total, de ceux qui quittent le pénitencier à l’expiration de leur peine, les uns restent dans la colonie comme ouvriers et les autres retournent en Europe. Dans le premier cas, ils gardent surtout trace des bonnes leçons qu’ils ont reçues; mais, dans le second, ils ne tardent guère à les oublier. Rejetés sur la route du crime, ils sont de nouveau condamnés à la déportation, lorsqu’ils ne finissent pas par le gibet, et c’est dans le pénitencier des hommes qu’ils sont enfermés alors, quelquefois pour la vie, et soumis à toutes les rigueurs d’une discipline de fer.

L’autre division de Port-Arthur contenait environ huit cents convicts. C’est, ainsi qu’on l’a pu justement dire, la “lie des bandits d’Angleterre”, tombés au dernier échelon de la dépravation humaine. Tels étaient autrefois les déportés de l’île Norfolk, avant qu’ils eussent été évacués sur la Tasmanie. Pas un qui n’eût un casier judiciaire chargé d’assassinats ou de vols. Pour la plupart, - à la limite du châtiment suprême, ils n’avaient plus qu’une seule pénalité à encourir, - la mort.

On ne s’étonnera pas si toutes précautions ont été prises à Port-Arthur pour empêcher les évasions. C’est par mer qu’elles offrent les meilleures chances de réussite, à la condition que les fugitifs aient pu s’emparer d’une embarcation qui les déposera sur un point du littoral, en dehors de la presqu’île de Tasman. Toutefois ces occasions sont rares. Les convicts n’ont point accès dans le port, ou, s’ils y sont employés à certains travaux, on les tient en rigoureuse surveillance.

Mais, s’il est difficile de s’échapper par mer, n’est-il pas possible de s’échapper par terre, puisque, en réalité, les déportés ne sont plus enfermés dans une île comme ils l’étaient à Norfolk?...

Oui, des fugitifs ont pu quelquefois s’évader du pénitencier, se réfugier dans les bois environnants, se soustraire à toute poursuite, en se condamnant à une vie plus épouvantable que celle du bagne, et la plupart meurent de misère ou d’inanition. D’ailleurs, que de chances ils ont d’être repris au milieu de ces forêts, où l’on a multiplié les postes, relevés de deux heures en deux heures, et que les patrouilles parcourent jour et nuit!

Il faudrait que les fugitifs pussent quitter la presqu’île de Tasman, et cela, c’est impossible.

En effet, l’isthme qui la rattache à la presqu’île Forestier, l’Eagle-Hawk-Neck, - l’isthme de l’Aigle-Épervier, - ne mesure pas plus de cent pas en largeur dans sa partie la plus étroite. Sur cette grève, qui ne présente aucun abri, l’administration a fait planter des poteaux assez rapprochés les uns des autres. À ces poteaux sont attachés des chiens dont les chaînes peuvent se croiser - une cinquantaine de dogues, féroces comme des fauves. Quiconque tenterait de forcer cette ligne serait en un instant dévoré. Puis, en cas qu’un évadé y fût parvenu, d’autres chiens, enfermés dans des niches élevées sur pilotis, signaleraient sa présence le long de la grève, où sont échelonnées des sentinelles toujours en éveil. Dans de telles conditions, il semble donc que les déportés doivent renoncer à tout espoir de s’enfuir.

Tel était ce pénitencier de Port-Arthur, réservé aux malfaiteurs les plus intraitables, les plus endurcis. C’est là que Karl et Pieter Kip furent transportés quinze jours après la commutation de leur peine. Pendant la nuit, un canot, les prenant à l’extrémité du port, les mit à bord du petit aviso qui fait le service de l’établissement pénal.

Cet aviso traversa Storm-Bay, doubla le cap du Sud-Ouest, donna dans le havre et vint accoster le môle. Les deux frères furent aussitôt incarcérés en attendant le moment de comparaître devant le capitaine-commandant de Port-Arthur.

Le capitaine Skirtle, âgé de cinquante ans, possédait l’énergie qu’exigeaient ses difficiles fonctions, impitoyable lorsqu’il fallait l’être, mais juste et bon envers les misérables qui méritaient sa justice et sa bonté. S’il punissait avec la dernière rigueur les fautes graves contre la discipline, il ne tolérait pas l’abus de la force chez les agents soumis à son autorité. Les sévérités du règlement qu’il appliquait aux déportés, il les appliquait également aux constables chargés de leur surveillance.

Le capitaine Skirtle résidait à Port-Arthur depuis une dizaine d’années déjà avec Mme Skirtle, sa femme, âgée de quarante ans, son fils William et sa fille Belly, dans leur quatorzième et leur douzième année. Habitant la villa dont il a été question, Mme Skirtle et ses enfants n’avaient jamais aucun rapport avec le personnel des pénitenciers. Seul le capitaine arrivait chaque matin, pour la plus grande partie de la journée, et ne revenait à la villa que le soir. Chaque mois, il faisait quelques tournées d’inspection à l’intérieur de la presqu’île jusqu’à l’isthme d’Eagle-Hawk-Neck, visitant les différents postes, passant en revue les escouades employées au travail des routes. Quant à sa famille, en outre des promenades effectuées autour de Port-Arthur, à travers les admirables forêts environnantes, l’aviso les transportait à Hobart-Town, quand elle le désirait, et ses relations n’étaient pas interrompues avec la capitale tasmanienne.

Dès son arrivée au pénitencier de Point-Puer, le commandant se faisait amener les enfants qui avaient commis quelque méfait la veille, il les admonestait, il leur appliquait les peines réglementaires.

Et que l’on juge du degré de perversion auquel atteignaient parfois ces petits monstres! L’un deux, qui en voulait à un constable, répondait, lorsqu’on lui faisait entrevoir la potence dans un prochain avenir s’il ne s’amendait pas: “Eh bien! mon père et ma mère m’auront montré le chemin, et, avant d’être pendu, je tuerai ce constable!”

Après la visite à Point-Puer, M. Skirtle se rendait au pénitencier des hommes, et ce fut là, le matin du 5 avril, que Karl et Pieter Kip comparurent devant lui.

Le capitaine était au courant de ce procès dont le retentissement avait été considérable, - procès terminé par la condamnation à mort des accusés. Que la Reine leur eût fait grâce de la vie, le crime d’assassinat, et dans des conditions qui le rendaient plus odieux encore, n’en pesait pas moins sur eux. Ils devraient donc être traités avec une sévérité extrême, et aucun adoucissement ne saurait être apporté à leur situation.

Et, cependant, le commandant ne put qu’être frappé de l’attitude que les deux frères eurent en sa présence. Après avoir répondu aux questions qui leur furent posées, Karl Kip ajouta d’une voix ferme:

“La justice des hommes nous a condamnés, monsieur le commandant, mais nous sommes innocents de l’assassinat dont le capitaine Gibson a été victime!”

Ils s’étaient encore pris par la main, comme ils l’avaient fait devant la Cour criminelle, et ce fut la dernière fois qu’ils purent ainsi échanger une fraternelle étreinte.

Les agents les emmenèrent séparément, ordre ayant été donné de ne plus les laisser l’un avec l’autre. Incorporés chacun dans une escouade, avec l’impossibilité de jamais se parler, ils auraient à peine l’occasion de s’entrevoir.

Alors commença pour eux, puis se poursuivit cette épouvantable existence du forçat, sous l’accoutrement jaune, spécial au pénitencier de Port-Arthur. Ils n’étaient pas accouplés, ainsi que cela se fait en d’autres pays, à un compagnon dont ils eussent partagé la chaîne. À l’honneur de la Grande-Bretagne, cette torture, plus morale que physique, n’a jamais été imposée dans les colonies anglaises. Mais une chaîne longue de trois pieds environ entrave les jambes du condamné, et, pour marcher, il lui faut la relever jusqu’à la ceinture. Cependant, si l’accouplement continu n’existe pas à Port-Arthur, quelquefois, par mesure disciplinaire, les forçats d’une même escouade sont rattachés ensemble et travaillent ainsi au transport des fardeaux.

Les frères Kip ne furent point soumis à cette horrible peine de la “chain-gang”. Durant de longs mois, sans avoir pu, même une seule fois, s’adresser la parole, ils s’occupèrent, dans des escouades séparées, à l’établissement des routes que le gouvernement faisait ouvrir à travers la presqu’île de Tasman.

La plupart du temps, la journée faite, ils rentraient dans les dortoirs du pénitencier, où les convicts sont enfermés par bandes de quarante. Ah! quel adoucissement à tant de misères, si, à ce moment, il leur eût été permis de se rencontrer, de reposer l’un près de l’autre, ou même sur les chantiers, lorsqu’ils y passaient toute la nuit en plein air!

Un seul jour de la semaine, le dimanche, Karl et Pieter Kip avaient cette joie de s’entrevoir, lorsque les forçats se réunissaient dans la chapelle que desservait un ministre méthodiste. Et que devaient-ils penser de la justice des hommes, eux innocents, dans la promiscuité de ces criminels dont les chaînes bruissaient lamentablement entre les chants et les prières?...

Ce qui brisait le cœur de Karl Kip, ce qui provoquait en lui des mouvements de révolte dont les conséquences eussent été graves, c’était que son frère fût assujetti à de si pénibles besognes.

Lui, d’une santé de fer, d’une vigueur exceptionnelle, il aurait la force de les supporter, bien que la ration du bagne suffît à peine à le nourrir: trois quarts de livre de viande fraîche ou huit onces de viande salée, une demi-livre de pain ou quatre onces de farine, une demi-livre de pommes de terre. Mais Pieter, de constitution moins forte, n’y succomberait-il pas?... Après les dernières chaleurs d’un climat presque tropical, uniquement vêtus de la mauvaise défroque jaune du bagne, ils allaient souffrir de la bise intense, des froids, des rafales glaciales et des neiges épaisses. Le travail, il faudrait le continuer sous les menaces des constables, sous le fouet des gardes-chiourme. Aucun repos, si ce n’est aux courts instants du repas vers le milieu de la journée, en attendant le retour au pénitencier. Puis, à la moindre velléité de résistance, les punitions disciplinaires de s’abattre sur ces malheureux, l’emprisonnement dans les cachots, le supplice de la “chain-gang”, enfin, le plus terrible de tous après la mort et qui l’amenait quelquefois, la fustigation du coupable, déchiré par les lanières du cat!

Certes, une telle existence devait faire naître chez les convicts le furieux, l’irrésistible désir de s’évader. Aussi quelques-uns l’essayaient-ils, bien qu’ils eussent, avec tant de dangers à braver, si peu de chances d’y réussir. Et lorsque les fugitifs étaient repris dans les forêts de la presqu’île, c’était ce cat qui les châtiait devant tout le personnel du pénitencier. Le fouet à neuf branches, manié par un bras vigoureux, cinglait les reins du patient mis à nu, et sillonnait de zébrures les chairs transformées en une sorte de boue sanglante.

Cependant, si Karl Kip était parfois sur le point de se révolter contre les rigueurs de la discipline, son frère Pieter se soumettait, espérant que la vérité aurait raison un jour, qu’un fait, un incident, une découverte ferait éclater leur innocence.

Il acceptait donc, si pénible, si déshonorante qu’elle fût, cette vie du bagne, et, s’il ne possédait pas la vigueur physique de son frère, du moins son énergie morale lui permettait-elle de la supporter, soutenu d’ailleurs par son entière confiance en Dieu. Ce qui le tourmentait surtout, c’était cette crainte que Karl ne parvînt pas à se maîtriser, qu’il ne s’abandonnât à quelque violence. Assurément, Karl ne chercherait point à s’enfuir, il ne voudrait pas le laisser seul dans le pénitencier, d’où tous deux ne sortiraient qu’ensemble!.. Mais, dans une heure de désespoir, Karl ne s’emporterait-il pas, alors que lui, Pieter, n’était pas là pour le calmer, pour le retenir?...

Aussi, dévoré par ces inquiétudes, Pieter crut-il devoir tenter une démarche, et, un jour, pendant l’inspection du capitaine-commandant, se hasarda-t-il à lui adresser la parole. Et, ce qu’il demanda d’une voix suppliante, ce fut, non point d’être réuni à son frère, de travailler dans la même escouade, mais la faveur de passer quelques moments auprès de lui.

Le capitaine Skirtle laissa parler Pieter Kip, l’observant non sans une vive attention, dans laquelle perçait peut-être un certain intérêt. Est-ce donc parce que Karl et Pieter Kip appartenaient à une classe sociale où se recrutent rarement les hôtes d’un bagne?... Est-ce donc que M. Hawkins, avec l’appui du gouverneur, avait poursuivi ses démarches en leur faveur?... Est-ce donc qu’après la commutation de peine obtenue par lui, cet excellent homme continuait ses démarches afin d’obtenir pour eux quelque adoucissement au régime du bagne?...

D’ailleurs, M. Skirtle ne laissa rien voir de ce qu’il pensait.

Les frères Kip n’étaient et ne pouvaient être à ses yeux que deux hommes condamnés pour crime d’assassinat. C’était déjà beaucoup que la pitié de la Reine leur eût épargné le dernier supplice. Plus tard, il pourrait peut-être faire droit à la demande de Pieter Kip, mais il n’y avait pas encore lieu d’y accéder.

Pieter Kip, le cœur gonflé, étouffé par les sanglots, n’aurait pas eu la force d’insister. Il comprit que ce serait inutile, et il rentra dans le rang.

Près de six mois s’étaient écoulés depuis l’arrivée des deux frères au pénitencier de Port-Arthur. La fin de l’hiver approchait. Il avait été dur pour ces malheureux, et comment eussent-ils entrevu la possibilité qu’un changement quelconque pût modifier leur situation?... C’est ce qui se produisit, pourtant, et voici dans quelles circonstances.

Le 15 septembre, par une belle matinée, M. Skirtle, sa femme, son fils et sa fille, venaient de faire une longue excursion à travers la forêt. Arrivés à l’isthme d’Eagle-Hawk-Neck, ils étaient descendus de voiture.

En cet endroit, quelques convicts s’occupaient à creuser un canal d’irrigation, et le capitaine-commandant avait voulu inspecter ces aménagements.

Or, les escouades auxquelles appartenaient Karl et Pieter Kip y travaillaient ensemble, mais à une certaine distance l’une de l’autre. Les deux frères n’avaient pas même eu cette consolation de s’apercevoir, tant les arbres formaient une épaisse lisière à l’amorce même de Eagle-Hawk-Neck.

Sa visite achevée, M. Skirtle et sa famille se disposaient à remonter en voiture, lorsque des cris éclatèrent dans la direction de la palissade qui fermait l’isthme.

Presque aussitôt s’y joignirent des aboiements furieux.

Ces aboiements étaient ceux des chiens attachés aux poteaux de la grève, à moins de trois cents pas de la lisière.

L’un de ces animaux, ayant rompu sa chaîne, s’était élancé du côté de la forêt, au milieu des cris des constables, et des hurlements de toute la bande. On eût dit que le dogue voulait se jeter sur les convicts dont le costume lui était bien connu. Mais, épouvanté de leurs vociférations, ce fut vers la forêt qu’il bondit avant que les gardiens eussent pu le reprendre.

Ce que le capitaine avait à faire, c’était de remonter en voiture et de quitter la place avant que l’animal eût effrayé les chevaux. Par malheur, ceux-ci prirent peur, et, malgré les efforts du cocher, s’enfuirent en direction de Port-Arthur.

“Venez... venez!...” cria M. Skirtle à sa femme et à ses enfants, qu’il entraînait vers un fourré où ils espéraient trouver refuge.

Soudain, le chien parut, la gueule écumante, les yeux enflammés. Il poussait des rugissements de bête fauve, et, d’un bond, il se précipita sur le jeune Skirtle qu’il renversa, après lui avoir sauté à la gorge.

Les cris des constables, qui accouraient de la lisière, se faisaient entendre.

M. Skirtle, à la vue du danger que courait son fils, allait se jeter sur l’animal, lorsqu’il fut saisi par deux bras vigoureux qui le repoussèrent.

Un instant après, le jeune Skirtle était sauvé, et le chien se débattait contre son sauveur dont il avait pris le bras gauche entre ses crocs sanglants, et qu’il déchirait avec rage...

Cet homme tenait à la main un fer de pioche, et il le plongea dans le corps du dogue qui retomba pantelant sur le sol.

Mme Skirtle tenait son fils dans ses bras et le couvrait de caresses, tandis que le capitaine se retournait vers l’homme, - un galérien dans son costume jaune.

C’était Karl Kip. Il travaillait à cent pas de là, il avait entendu les cris des constables, il avait aperçu le chien lâché à travers la forêt. Et alors, sans songer au danger, il s’était précipité sur les traces de l’animal.

Le commandant reconnut cet homme, dont le sang coulait d’une horrible blessure. Il allait s’avancer vers lui pour le remercier, pour lui faire donner des soins, lorsqu’il fut devancé par Pieter Kip.

Aux cris poussés en deçà de la lisière, les escouades s’étaient portées de ce côté en même temps que les constables.

Les derniers arbres dépassés, Pieter Kip, voyant son frère étendu près du corps de l’animal, courut à lui en criant:

“Karl... Karl!...”

En vain les gardiens auraient-ils voulu le retenir. D’ailleurs, sur un signe du capitaine vers qui Mme Skirtle tendait les mains et dont le fils implorait la pitié pour son sauveur, il fit signe aux constables de s’écarter. Et, pour la première fois, depuis sept longs mois de séparation, de misères, de désespoir, Karl et Pieter Kip pleuraient dans les bras l’un de l’autre.

IX - Ensemble

Karl Kip, après avoir été transporté dans la voiture du capitaine-commandant au pénitencier de Port-Arthur, fut déposé dans une des salles de l’infirmerie où son frère, autorisé à rester près de lui, ne tarda pas à le rejoindre.

De quels sentiments de reconnaissance envers cet homme devaient être pénétrés M. et Mme Skirtle! Grâce à son courage, la plus horrible des morts avait été épargnée à leur fils! Au premier moment, dans un irrésistible élan de cœur, le jeune garçon s’était jeté aux genoux de son père, répétant d’une voix coupée de sanglots:

“Grâce pour lui... père... grâce pour lui!”

Mme Skirtle s’était unie à son fils, et tous deux suppliaient le capitaine, comme s’il eût pu faire droit à leur demande, comme s’il eût été le maître de rendre la liberté à Karl Kip!

Et, d’ailleurs, pouvait-on oublier pour quel crime les deux frères, après une peine capitale, étaient enfermés à perpétuité dans le bagne de Port-Arthur?... Ne sachant rien des manœuvres de Flig Balt et de Vin Mod, comment M. Skirtle eût-il mis en doute la culpabilité des condamnés?... De ce que l’un d’eux venait, en risquant sa vie, de sauver celle du jeune garçon, n’en étaient-ils pas moins les assassins d’Harry Gibson et châtiés comme tels?... Cet acte de dévouement, si beau qu’il fût, pouvait-il racheter un aussi épouvantable forfait?...

“Mon ami, dit Mme Skirtle, dès que son mari fut rentré à la villa, après avoir remis le blessé entre les mains du médecin, que sera-t-il possible de faire pour ce malheureux?...

- Rien... répondit le capitaine, rien si ce n’est de le recommander à la bienveillance de l’administration, afin qu’il bénéficie à l’avenir d’un régime moins sévère... qu’il soit exempt des travaux de force...

- Eh bien! il faut informer dès aujourd’hui le gouverneur de ce qui s’est passé...

- Il le saura avant ce soir, répondit M. Skirtle. Mais tout se bornera à obtenir un adoucissement et non une diminution de la peine. Karl Kip et son frère ont été déjà l’objet d’une faveur, - et quelle faveur! - puisqu’il leur a été fait grâce de la vie...

- Et j’en remercie le Ciel, comme je le remercie, l’infortuné, puisqu’il a sauvé notre pauvre enfant...

- Ma chère amie, répondit le capitaine, je ferai tout ce qui sera possible par reconnaissance pour Karl Kip. D’ailleurs, depuis que les deux frères sont arrivés à Port-Arthur, leur conduite a été irréprochable, et ils n’ont jamais eu à encourir les sévérités du règlement. Peut-être, je le répète, obtiendrai-je de l’administration supérieure qu’ils ne soient plus astreints aux travaux du dehors, plus pénibles encore pour des hommes de leur condition, et de les occuper dans les bureaux du pénitencier... Ce serait un grand soulagement dans leur situation de convicts... Mais tu sais pour quel crime ils ont été traduits devant la Cour, et sur quelles indiscutables preuves s’est fondée la conviction du jury...

- Mon ami, s’écria Mme Skirtle, comment celui qui a été capable d’un tel acte pourrait-il être un meurtrier?...

- Et, cependant... il n’y a aucun doute à ce sujet... Jamais les frères Kip n’ont pu établir leur innocence...

- Tu n’ignores pas, mon ami, insista Mme Skirtle, quelle est l’opinion de M. Hawkins...

- Je la connais...

Cet excellent homme ne les croit pas coupables, mais il est influencé par ses souvenirs, et il n’a rien pu obtenir pour eux, si ce n’est une commutation de peine par l’intermédiaire du gouverneur...

- Songe donc, reprit Mme Skirtle, combien cette condamnation lui paraîtra plus injuste encore, lorsqu’il apprendra ce que vient de faire Karl Kip...”

Le capitaine ne répondit pas, car il avait été déjà très impressionné de ce que lui avait déclaré M. Hawkins relativement aux deux frères. Mais, à la réflexion, en présence des preuves matérielles, les papiers d’Harry Gibson en la possession de Karl et de Pieter Kip, le kriss, instrument du crime, découvert dans la valise, était-il permis de douter?...

“Dans tous les cas, mon ami, reprit Mme Skirtle, j’ai une grâce à te demander... une grâce qui ne dépend que de toi, et que tu ne me refuseras pas...

- Cette grâce, c’est que les deux frères ne soient plus séparés l’un de l’autre désormais?...

- Oui... tu m’as comprise!... Dès aujourd’hui, tu autoriseras Pieter Kip à rester près de son frère... à lui donner ses soins...

- Je le ferai assurément, déclara M. Skirtle.

- Et moi aussi, je le visiterai, reprit Mme Skirtle. Je veillerai à ce que ce malheureux ne manque de rien... Et qui sait... plus tard?...”

En attendant, le vœu des deux frères allait être comblé, et, ce qu’ils avaient désiré avec le plus d’ardeur, ils ne seraient point séparés.

Donc, à partir de ce jour, Karl et Pieter Kip se virent à toute heure.

Puis, à trois semaines de là, lorsque, sa blessure presque cicatrisée, Karl Kip eut pu quitter l’infirmerie, tous deux se promenaient dans la cour du pénitencier. Ils occupaient maintenant la même salle, ils couchaient dans le même dortoir, ils travaillaient dans la même escouade. Enfin, ils furent employés à des travaux de l’intérieur, avec l’espoir d’être bientôt affectés aux bureaux de Port-Arthur.

On imaginera aisément tout ce que les deux frères avaient à se dire, quel sujet de conversation revenait sans cesse entre eux, et comment ils envisageaient l’avenir.

Et, lorsque le plus jeune voyait son aîné s’abandonner à la crainte que la vérité ne fût jamais reconnue, il lui répétait:

“Ne pas espérer, frère, ce serait manquer à Dieu!... Puisque notre vie a été épargnée, c’est que la Providence veut que les assassins soient découverts un jour... que notre réhabilitation soit proclamée publiquement...

- Le Ciel t’entende, Pieter, répondait Karl Kip, et je t’envie d’avoir cette confiance!... Mais, enfin, quels peuvent être les meurtriers du capitaine Gibson?... Évidemment des indigènes de Kerawara ou de l’île d’York; peut-être même de quelque autre île de l’archipel Bismarck!... Et comment les découvrir au milieu de cette population mélanésienne, dispersée sur tous les points du territoire?...”

Ce serait difficile, Pieter Kip en convenait. N’importe! il avait la foi... Quelque fait inattendu se produirait... M. Zieger, M. Hamburg obtiendraient de nouvelles informations...

“Et, d’ailleurs, dit-il un jour, en voyant son frère en proie au désespoir, est-il sûr que les assassins soient des indigènes?...”

Karl Kip lui avait saisi les mains et s’écriait en le regardant les yeux dans les yeux:

“Que veux-tu dire?... Explique-toi!... Penses-tu donc que quelque colon... quelque employé des factoreries aurait pu commettre ce crime?...

- Non... frère... non!

- Alors... qui?... Des matelots?... Oui!... Plusieurs navires se trouvaient dans le port de Kerawara...

- Et il y avait aussi notre brick, le James-Cook... répondit Pieter.

- Le James-Cook!...”

Et Karl Kip, répétant ce nom, interrogeait son frère.

Alors, Pieter lui fit connaître les soupçons dont son esprit était hanté. Est-ce que l’équipage du brick ne comptait pas des hommes très suspects, entre autres ces matelots recrutés à Dunedin et qui prirent part à la révolte soulevée par Flig Balt?... Est-ce que, parmi ces hommes, Len Cannon - pour en citer un - n’a pu savoir que le capitaine Gibson emportait, non seulement des papiers du bord, mais aussi une somme de plusieurs milliers de piastres à l’habitation de M. Hamburg?... Précisément, dans cet après-midi, Len Cannon et ses camarades étaient descendus à terre... N’avaient-ils pu épier

Harry Gibson, le suivre à travers la forêt de Kerawara, l’attaquer, l’assassiner, le dévaliser?...

Karl écoutait son frère avec une anxieuse et dévorante attention. Il semblait que toute une révélation se fît dans son esprit. Jamais il ne lui était venu à la pensée d’expliquer l’assassinat autrement que par l’intervention des indigènes... Et voici que Pieter lui signalait, comme pouvant être les coupables, ce Len Cannon ou autres recrues du bord!...

Après quelques moments de réflexion, il reprit:

“Mais, en admettant que les meurtriers doivent être recherchés parmi ces hommes, il n’en est pas moins certain que le capitaine Gibson a été frappé avec un poignard malais...

- Oui... Karl... et j’ajoute avec le nôtre...

- Le nôtre?...

- Cela n’est que trop certain, affirma Pieter Kip, et c’est bien le nôtre dont on a retrouvé la virole dans le bois de Kerawara...

- Et comment ce poignard aurait-il pu être en la possession des meurtriers?...

- Parce qu’il a été volé, Karl...

- Volé?...

- Oui... sur l’épave de la Wilhelmina... pendant que nous la visitions...

- Volé... par qui?...

- Par l’un des matelots qui conduisaient le canot et qui, comme nous, ont pris pied sur l’épave...

- Mais quels étaient ces matelots?... Te le rappelles-tu, Pieter?... Leurs noms?...

- Assez vaguement, frère... Il y avait d’abord Nat Gibson, qui avait voulu nous accompagner... Quant aux hommes désignés par le capitaine, je ne me souviens plus...

- Est-ce que le maître d’équipage n’était pas avec eux?... demanda Karl Kip.

- Non, frère... Je crois pouvoir assurer que Flig Balt était resté à bord.

- Et Len Cannon?...

- Oui... je crois bien... Il me semble encore le voir sur l’épave. Peut-être... mais je ne suis pas sûr... Enfin, lui ou un autre a pu entrer dans notre cabine, et, même après nous, y découvrir le kriss que nous n’aurions pas aperçu en quelque coin...

Et plus tard, lorsque ces misérables ont eu la pensée du crime, ils se sont servis de cette arme pour le commettre, puis ils l’ont replacée dans notre valise...

- Mais nous l’y aurions trouvée, Pieter!

- Non... s’ils ne l’y ont mise qu’au dernier moment!”

On voit à quel point Pieter Kip se rapprochait de la vérité. Seulement, il faisait erreur en ce qui concernait les véritables assassins. Si ses soupçons se portaient sur Len Cannon ou quelque autre des recrues, très capables d’être soupçonnés, ils n’atteignaient ni Flig Balt ni Vin Mod. Ce qui était sûr, d’ailleurs, c’est que le maître d’équipage n’avait point embarqué dans le canot pour se rendre à l’épave; mais ce qui ne l’était pas moins, c’est que Vin Mod s’y trouvait, - ce dont Karl ni Pieter Kip ne se souvenaient plus. On sait comment le fourbe avait opéré, et avec assez d’adresse et d’astuce pour n’avoir jamais été l’objet d’aucune suspicion.

Telle est donc la conversation qu’auraient déjà eue les deux frères, sans doute, s’ils n’eussent été toujours séparés, d’abord dans la prison d’Hobart-Town, ensuite dans le pénitencier de Port-Arthur.

Il est vrai, ce qui se faisait certitude pour eux, puisqu’ils n’étaient pas les auteurs du crime, ne serait que présomption pour toute autre personne. Comment parviendraient-ils à établir avec preuves évidentes que le kriss avait été pris sur l’épave par un des matelots du James-Cook, puis que ce matelot s’en était servi pour frapper le capitaine Gibson?... On en conviendra, - ils le comprenaient, - les apparences étaient contre eux. Que les hypothèses de Pieter Kip fussent logiques, d’accord; mais elles ne pouvaient être admises que par eux, qui se savaient innocents...

Et voilà bien ce qui les désespérait, et plus particulièrement Karl Kip, - désespoir contre lequel Pieter, soutenu par sa foi inébranlable en la justice divine, avait tant de peine à réagir!

Entre-temps, après les démarches faites par le capitaine Skirtle, le gouverneur et l’administration pénale du Royaume-Uni avaient autorisé l’admission des frères Kip dans les bureaux de Port-Arthur. Ce fut un grand adoucissement au régime qui leur avait été imposé jusqu’alors. Ils n’appartenaient plus aux escouades affectées à la construction des routes ou au creusement des canaux. Ils étaient occupés à la comptabilité, ou même, sous la surveillance des agents, à la préparation des travaux sur les divers points de la presqu'île. Toutefois, - mesure bien pénible, - la nuit venue, ils devaient rentrer dans les dortoirs communs, sans pouvoir se soustraire à l'horrible promiscuité du bagne.

Or, il arriva que cette situation nouvelle excita de furieuses jalousies. Des assassins, des condamnés à mort, dont la peine avait été commuée, et qui jouissaient de pareilles faveurs!... Est-ce que le service rendu par Karl Kip à la famille du capitaine-commandant valait cela?... S'être jeté sur un chien au risque de quelques morsures, qui n'en eût fait autant?... Les frères Kip eurent donc à se défendre contre ces brutes, et il ne fallut pas moins que la vigueur de Karl pour les mettre à la raison.

Cependant, au milieu de ce ramassis de galériens avec lesquels ils vivaient dans les salles communes, deux convicts avaient pris fait et cause pour eux, et les défendaient contre les violences de leurs compagnons.

C'étaient deux hommes de trente-cinq à quarante ans, deux Irlandais, nommés l'un O'Brien, l'autre Macarthy.

Pour quel crime ils avaient été condamnés, jamais ils ne s'étaient expliqués là-dessus. Autant que possible, ils se tenaient toujours à l'écart, et, doués d'une force exceptionnelle, ils avaient su imposer le respect pour leur personne. Assurément, ce n'étaient point de vulgaires condamnés, et ils avaient reçu une instruction supérieure à celle des hôtes ordinaires des bagnes. Aussi, révoltés sans doute de voir leurs compagnons se mettre une vingtaine contre les frères Kip, ils les avaient aidés à se protéger contre leurs odieuses brutalités.

Il était donc à prévoir, bien que ces Irlandais fussent très sombres, très farouches, d'un caractère peu communicatif, qu'une certaine intimité se serait établie entre eux et les frères Kip, lorsqu'une nouvelle décision de l’administration ne leur laissa plus que de rares occasions de se rencontrer dans la vie courante de Port-Arthur.

En effet, M. Skirtle n’avait pas tardé à connaître la conduite de quelques-uns des convicts, et des plus intraitables. Il sut que Karl et Pieter Kip avaient été l’objet d’attaques personnelles, et qu’ils étaient exposés aux pires traitements, lorsque la nuit les réunissait dans les mêmes dortoirs que leurs compagnons de bagne.

D’autre part, Mme Skirtle, qui n’avait point cessé de s’intéresser aux deux frères, faisait tout ce qui dépendait d’elle pour adoucir leur sort. Après avoir maintes fois parlé d’eux lorsqu’elle visitait M. et Mme Hawkins à Hobart-Town, elle se sentait prise de certains doutes, et, sans aller jusqu’à admettre qu’ils pussent être innocents du crime de Kerawara, du moins les preuves de leur culpabilité ne lui semblaient pas absolument décisives.

Et puis, comment eût-elle oublié ce qu’elle devait au courage de Karl Kip?... C’est pourquoi cette reconnaissante femme, poursuivant ses instantes démarches près du gouverneur de la Tasmanie, finit-elle par obtenir que, la nuit, les deux frères occuperaient une cellule particulière.

Avant d’être installés dans cette cellule, Karl et Pieter Kip voulurent une dernière fois remercier O’Brien et Macarthy de leurs bons offices.

Les Irlandais ne répondirent que froidement à cette démarche. Ils n’avaient fait que leur devoir, après tout, en défendant les deux frères contre des forcenés. Et, lorsque ceux-ci leur tendirent la main, au moment de se séparer, ils ne la prirent pas.

Et, quand ils se retrouvèrent seuls, Karl Kip de s’écrier:

“Je ne sais pour quel crime ces deux hommes ont été condamnés, mais ce n’est pas pour assassinat, puisqu’ils ont refusé de toucher la main des deux assassins que nous sommes!...”

Et, la colère l’emportant, il ajouta:

“Nous... nous... des meurtriers!... Et rien... rien... pour prouver que nous ne le sommes pas!...

- Espère, mon pauvre Karl... répondit Pieter. Justice nous sera rendue un jour!”

Au mois de mars 1887, un an s’était écoulé depuis que les deux frères avaient été déportés à Port-Arthur. Qu’auraient-ils pu obtenir de plus que l’adoucissement en leur faveur du régime du pénitencier?... Aussi, quelle que fût la confiance de Pieter Kip dans l’avenir, ne devaient-ils pas craindre de rester à jamais les victimes de cette erreur judiciaire?...

Et, cependant, ils n’étaient pas si abandonnés qu’ils devaient le croire. Au dehors, sinon des amis, du moins des protecteurs, n’avaient cessé de prendre le plus sérieux intérêt à leur situation. Que Nat Gibson, égaré par son chagrin, se refusât à admettre qu’il y eût des présomptions en leur faveur, M. Hawkins, lui, continuait ses démarches relatives à cette malheureuse affaire. Il entretenait une correspondance fréquente avec M. Zieger à Port-Praslin, et avec M. Hamburg à Kerawara. Il les pressait de poursuivre l’enquête, d’étendre leurs informations à la Nouvelle-Irlande comme à la Nouvelle-Bretagne. S’ils ne parvenaient à constater que le crime eût été commis par les indigènes, n’avait-il pas des étrangers pour auteurs, - quelques ouvriers des factoreries, quelques matelots des bâtiments qui se trouvaient à cette époque dans les ports de l’archipel?...

Engagé dans cette voie, M. Hawkins en venait à se demander s'il ne fallait pas chercher les meurtriers jusque dans l'équipage du James-Cook, ainsi que le faisaient Karl et Pieter Kip... N'y avait-il pas lieu de suspecter Len Cannon et ses camarades... d'autres peut-être?... Et, parfois, le nom de Flig Balt traversait son esprit... Mais, il faut en convenir, ce n'étaient là que de pures hypothèses que n'appuyaient ni les dépositions des témoins entendus dans l'affaire, ni les preuves matérielles produites aux débats.

M. Hawkins eut alors la pensée de se rendre à Port-Arthur. Ce fut comme un irrésistible besoin qu'il éprouva de revoir ses protégés, une sorte de pressentiment instinctif, qui le conduisit à l'établissement pénitentiaire.

On imaginera sans peine l'extrême surprise et aussi l'indicible émotion dont furent saisis les frères Kip, lorsque, dans la matinée du 19 mars, appelés au bureau du capitaine-commandant, ils se trouvèrent en présence de l'armateur.

Celui-ci ne fut pas moins ému à revoir les naufragés de la Wilhelmina sous leur accoutrement de galériens.

Dans un premier mouvement, Karl Kip allait s'élancer vers son bienfaiteur... Son frère le retint. Et comme M. Hawkins - il s'imposait une réserve que l'on comprendra - ne fit aucun pas vers eux, ils restèrent immobiles et muets, en attendant qu'on leur adressât la parole.

M. Skirtle se tenait à l'écart, indifférent en apparence. Il voulait laisser M. Hawkins libre de donner à cette entrevue le caractère qu'il jugerait convenable, et à cet entretien le cours qu'il devait avoir.

“Messieurs...” dit l'armateur.

Et ce mot fut comme le relèvement moral de ces deux malheureux qui n’étaient plus que des numéros de bagne!

“Messieurs Kip, je suis venu à Port-Arthur pour vous mettre au courant de choses qui vous intéressent et dont je me suis occupé...”

Les deux frères eurent la pensée que cette déclaration devait se rapporter à l’affaire de Kerawara... Ils se trompaient. Ce n’était pas la preuve de leur innocence qu’apportait M. Hawkins, qui continua en ces termes:

“Il s’agit de votre maison de commerce de Groningue. J’ai voulu entrer en correspondance avec divers négociants de cette ville où, je dois vous le dire, il semble bien que l’opinion publique vous ait toujours été favorable...

- Nous sommes innocents!... s’écria Karl Kip, incapable de retenir la révolte de son cœur.

- Mais, reprit M. Hawkins, qui avait quelque peine à garder sa réserve, vous n’étiez pas en situation de pouvoir mettre ordre à vos affaires... Elles souffraient déjà de votre absence... Il importait que la liquidation fût rapidement menée, et j’ai pris vos intérêts en main...

- Monsieur Hawkins, répondit Pieter Kip, nous vous remercions, et c’est un bienfait ajouté à tant d’autres!

- Je désirais donc vous apprendre, poursuivit l’armateur, que cette liquidation s’est faite dans des conditions plus avantageuses qu’on ne l’espérait... Les cours étaient en hausse, et les marchandises ont trouvé preneur à de hauts prix... Il s’en est suivi que le bilan présente une balance de compte à votre profit.”

La plus vive satisfaction se peignit sur la pâle figure de Pieter Kip. Au milieu des tourments qui l'accablaient dans cette abominable existence du bagne, que de fois il songeait à ses affaires en souffrance, à sa maison de commerce réduite à la faillite, à cette nouvelle honte qui atteindrait le nom de leur père!... Et voici que M. Hawkins venait lui apprendre qu'une liquidation avait réglé heureusement leurs intérêts.

Karl Kip dit alors:

“Monsieur Hawkins, nous ne savons comment vous témoigner notre reconnaissance!... Après tout ce que vous aviez déjà fait pour nous, après l'estime que vous nous aviez montrée, dont nous étions dignes, dont nous sommes dignes encore, je le jure!... grâce à vous, l'honneur de notre maison est sauvé!... Et ce n'est pas nous qui l'aurons voué à l'infamie... Non... nous sommes innocents du crime pour lequel nous avons été condamnés!... Nous ne sommes pas les assassins du capitaine Gibson!”

Et, comme ils l'avaient fait devant la Cour, les deux frères, se tenant la main, attestaient le Ciel.

M. Skirtle les observait avec attention, avec émotion, et il se sentait pénétré par la dignité de leur attitude, par l'accent de sincérité dont leur voix était empreinte.

Et alors, M. Hawkins de s'abandonner, incapable de retenir tout ce qu'il avait sur le cœur... et il le fit avec une chaleur communicative.

Non! il ne croyait pas à la culpabilité des frères Kip... il n'y avait jamais cru!... Par malheur, l'enquête poursuivie à Port-Praslin, à Kerawara, sur les autres îles de l'archipel Bismarck, n'avait point abouti... C'est vainement que la trace des meurtriers fut recherchée parmi les tribus indigènes!...

Néanmoins, il ne désespérait pas de réussir, et d'arriver à la révision de l'affaire...

Révision!... Ce mot venait d'être prononcé pour la première fois devant les deux condamnés, qui n'espéraient plus l'entendre... la révision, qui les renverrait devant de nouveaux juges, qui permettrait d'apporter de nouvelles preuves!...

Mais, à ces nouveaux juges, à ces nouvelles preuves, il faudrait un fait nouveau indiscutable, laissant pressentir quelque erreur judiciaire, pour qu'un autre accusé pût être substitué à ceux qui avaient été condamnés pour lui!... Le véritable auteur du crime, parviendrait-on à le retrouver pour le mettre en face des deux frères devant le jury d'Hobart-Town?...

Alors M. Hawkins et eux reprirent les principaux points de l'accusation. Oui!... le capitaine Gibson fut frappé avec le poignard saisi dans la chambre des deux frères, et qui leur appartenait... Ils ne l'avaient pas retrouvé sur l'épave de la Wilhelmina... ils ne l'avaient point rapporté à bord du brick... S'il fut vu par Jim dans leur cabine, c'est qu'un autre l'y avait mis, et si on y trouva les papiers du capitaine, c'est qu'un autre les y avait déposés... Or, cet autre ne pouvait être que celui qui les avait volés avec l'argent d'Harry Gibson, après l'avoir assassiné dans la forêt de Kerawara!...

Oui!... cela était la vérité même, bien que les preuves fissent défaut!

Dans ces conditions, les soupçons ne devaient se porter que sur les matelots du James-Cook.

L'un d'eux avait pu seul s'emparer du kriss dans la cabine de la Wilhelmina... un de ceux que le canot y avait amenés...

Aussitôt Karl Kip de s’écrier:

“Est-ce que Flig Balt se trouvait parmi eux?...

- Non... répondit Pieter, non!... Ma mémoire ne me trompe pas... Flig Balt n’a pas mis le pied sur l’épave...

- En effet... je me souviens... il n’avait pas quitté le bord... déclara l’armateur.

- Quels étaient donc les hommes qui avaient pris place dans le canot?... demanda Karl Kip.

- Hobbes et Wickley, répondit M. Hawkins. J’ai eu l’occasion de les interroger sur ce point, et ils sont certains d’y avoir embarqué avec Nat Gibson et vous...

- Len Cannon n’y était pas?... reprit Pieter Kip.

- Ils m’ont affirmé que non.

- Je l’avais cru...

- Mais, reprit Karl Kip, Hobbes et Wickley ne peuvent être soupçonnés...

- Non assurément, répondit M. Hawkins. Ce sont d’honnêtes matelots... Mais un troisième était avec eux...

- Et qui donc, monsieur Hawkins?...

- Vin Mod...

- Vin Mod!... s’écria Karl Kip... Vin Mod... ce fourbe... ce coquin...

- Vin Mod, ajouta Pieter Kip, que j’ai toujours considéré comme l’âme damnée de Flig Balt!...”

À cette époque, ni le maître d’équipage ni Vin Mod n’étaient plus à Hobart-Town, et où aurait-on pu maintenant retrouver leurs traces?...

X - Les fenians

Ce fut en 1867, et dans le but d’arracher l’Irlande à l’insoutenable domination de la Grande-Bretagne, que se forma l’association politique du fenianisme.

Déjà, deux siècles avant, les sujets catholiques de la Verte Erin avaient enduré de graves persécutions, lorsque les soldats de Cromwell, aussi intolérants que féroces, voulurent imposer aux populations irlandaises le joug de la réforme. Les persécutés résistèrent noblement, fidèles à leur foi religieuse comme à leur foi politique. Les années s’écoulèrent, la situation ne s’améliora pas, et l’Angleterre fit plus durement sentir sa main brutale. Aussi, à la fin du dix-huitième siècle, en 1798, éclata une révolte, bientôt comprimée, qui amena la suppression du parlement irlandais, défenseur naturel des libertés irlandaises.

En 1829, un protecteur apparut, dont le nom retentit dans le monde entier. O’Connell vint siéger dans la Chambre des Communes. Là, sa voix puissante protesta contre les violences britanniques en faveur de sept millions de catholiques sur huit millions d’habitants que comptait l’Irlande.

À quel degré d’appauvrissement et de misère en était arrivé le malheureux pays, on en jugera par ce seul fait que, sur cinq millions d’hectares labourables, quinze cent mille, abandonnés du cultivateur sans ressources, restaient en friche.

Il n’y a pas lieu d’insister sur cette période de troubles qui allait provoquer les représailles du fenianisme, et il ne faut le prendre que dans ses rapports avec cette histoire [Cette période de l’histoire irlandaise a déjà été traitée dans la série des Voyages extraordinaires avec le roman de P’tit Bonhomme.].

O’Connell était mort en 1847, avant d’avoir pu achever son œuvre, sans même avoir entrevu le succès dans un avenir plus ou moins éloigné.

Cependant les efforts individuels continuèrent à se manifester, et, en 1867, le gouvernement du Royaume-Uni se trouva en présence d’une nouvelle révolte qui éclata, non plus dans une ville d’Irlande, mais dans une ville d’Angleterre. Manchester vit se lever pour la première fois le drapeau des fenians, dont le nom vient sans doute des Gaels de l’ancien temps, et il flotta pour la cause de l’indépendance.

Cette révolte fut réduite comme l’avait été la première, et avec la même implacable rigueur. La police s’empara de ses principaux chefs, Allen, Kelly, Deary, Laskin, Gorld. Emprisonnés, traduits devant la Cour criminelle, les trois premiers, condamnés à la peine capitale, furent exécutés le 23 novembre à Manchester.

À cette époque se place une autre tentative, due à l’énergique ténacité de Burke et de Casey, lesquels, arrêtés à Londres, furent enfermés dans la prison de Clerkenwell. Leurs amis, leurs complices, ne devaient pas les abandonner. Résolus à les délivrer, le 13 décembre, ils firent sauter les murs de la prison, - explosion qui compta une quarantaine de victimes, tuées ou blessées. Burke, n’ayant pu s’échapper, fut condamné à quinze ans de travaux forcés pour crime de haute trahison.

Sept fenians avaient été arrêtés: William et Timothy Desmond, English, O’Keeffe, Michel Baret, et une femme, Anna Justice.

Devant la Cour, ces rebelles eurent le célèbre Bright pour les défendre, comme il avait déjà défendu, devant le Parlement, les droits de l’Irlande.

Les efforts du grand orateur échouèrent en partie. On traduisit les accusés en avril 1868 devant la Cour criminelle centrale.

Il y eut une condamnation à mort prononcée contre l’un d’eux, Michel Baret, âgé de vingt-sept ans, dont Bright ne put empêcher l’exécution.

Cependant, si, depuis l’explosion de Clerckenwell, le fenianisme avait perdu dans l’opinion publique, les poursuites n’étaient pas pour enrayer ses représailles. On pouvait toujours craindre que la cause de l’Irlande ne poussât à quelque tentative désespérée les hommes qui la soutenaient. Aussi, grâce à l’énergie de Bright devant la Chambre des Lords et la Chambre des Communes, un pas en avant fut-il fait avec le bill de 1869. Ce bill mit sur le pied d’égalité les églises irlandaise et anglicane, en attendant une loi relative à la propriété foncière, rendue dans un esprit d’équité qui justifierait le nom de Royaume-Uni que portent l’Angleterre, l’Écosse et l’Irlande.

Néanmoins, la police ne se relâcha pas, et les fenians se virent traqués sans merci. Elle parvint à déjouer plusieurs complots dont les auteurs furent poursuivis et condamnés à la déportation.

Parmi eux, après une tentative à Dublin en 1879, se trouvaient les Irlandais O’Brien et Macarthy. Ils appartenaient tous les deux à la famille de ce Farcy qui fut compromis dans l’affaire de 1867.

Les révoltés ayant été dénoncés, la police les arrêta avant qu’ils eussent pu mettre leurs projets à exécution.

O’Brien et Macarthy ne voulurent jamais compromettre leurs complices. Ils assumèrent sur eux seuls la responsabilité de cette conspiration. La Cour se montra d’une excessive sévérité. Elle les condamna à la déportation perpétuelle et ils furent envoyés au pénitencier de Port-Arthur.

Ce n’étaient pourtant que des condamnés politiques; mais, de ces condamnés, Port-Arthur en renfermait déjà lorsque Dumont d’Urville le visita en 1840.

Et ne sont-elles pas justes, les protestations du navigateur français contre ce régime barbare, lorsqu’il s’écrie: “Les peines encourues par les voleurs, les faussaires, elles n’ont pas été trouvées assez dures contre les condamnés politiques; on les a jugés indignes de vivre parmi eux et on les a jetés au milieu d’assassins, de misérables déclarés incorrigibles.”

C’était donc là, en 1879, depuis huit longues années, que les deux Irlandais O’Brien et Macarthy avaient été transportés. Le régime du bagne, ils le subissaient dans toute sa rigueur, au milieu de cette tourbe immonde.

O’Brien était un ancien contremaître d’une fabrique de Dublin, Macarthy un ouvrier du port. Tous deux d’une rare énergie, ils avaient reçu quelque instruction. Des liens de famille, des souvenirs, des exemples les avaient enrôlés sous le drapeau du fenianisme. Ils y avaient risqué leur vie, ils y avaient perdu leur liberté. Pouvaient-ils espérer qu’après un certain temps cette condamnation aurait un terme, qu’une grâce leur permettrait de quitter le bagne?... Non, ils n’y comptaient pas, et, sans doute, traîneraient jusqu’à la fin cette affreuse existence, s’ils ne parvenaient à s’échapper.

Une telle éventualité se produirait-elle?... Les évasions de cette presqu’île de Tasman ne sont-elles pas impossibles?...

Non, à la condition que le secours vienne du dehors, et, depuis plusieurs années déjà, les fenians d’Amérique avaient combiné divers moyens pour arracher leurs frères aux horreurs de Port-Arthur.

Vers la fin de la présente année, O’Brien et Macarthy étaient prévenus qu’une tentative serait faite par des amis de San Francisco en vue de leur délivrance.

Le moment arrivé, un nouvel avis leur parviendrait afin qu’ils fussent prêts à cette évasion.

Comment avaient-ils reçu ce premier avertissement au pénitencier?... Comment le second serait-il porté à leur connaissance?... Et comment la surveillance se relâcherait-elle à leur égard, puisque jour et nuit ils étaient, au dedans, au dehors, sous la garde des constables?...

Il y avait alors, parmi ces constables, un Irlandais qui se trouvait en rapport avec ses compatriotes. Par dévouement à la cause du fenianisme, pour en sauver les dernières victimes, envoyé d’Amérique en Tasmanie, cet Irlandais - de son nom Farnham - s’était fait admettre comme gardien au pénitencier de Port-Arthur, dans le but de concourir à l’évasion des prisonniers. Sans doute, il risquait gros jeu, si la tentative échouait, si l’on découvrait qu’il eût été de connivence avec O’Brien et son compagnon de bagne. Mais il s’est maintes fois rencontré de ces dévouements. Entre les fenians existe une solidarité qui va jusqu’au sacrifice de la vie. Quelques années auparavant, six de ces déportés politiques ne s’étaient-ils pas échappés d’Australie, grâce à des relais établis de distance en distance, qui leur permirent de gagner la côte et d’embarquer sur le Catalpa, lequel, après un combat avec le bateau de la police, les transporta en Amérique?...

Or, depuis environ dix-huit mois, Farnham remplissait les fonctions de constable à la satisfaction des chefs, alors que ses compatriotes y étaient enfermés depuis six ans déjà. Bientôt il se fit admettre parmi les gardiens de leur escouade, de telle sorte qu’ils fussent toujours sous sa surveillance et qu’il pût les accompagner au dehors.

Ce qui lui donna quelque peine, n’étant pas connu d’eux, ce fut de leur inspirer confiance et de ne point être pris pour un faux frère. Il y parvint, et un parfait accord s’établit entre eux.

Le grand souci de Farnham avait été de ne point donner lieu aux soupçons. Aussi dut-il se montrer non moins impitoyable pour les convicts de son escouade que ne l’étaient les autres gardiens. Personne n’aurait remarqué qu’il traitât O’Brien et Macarthy avec quelque indulgence. Il est vrai, tous deux se soumettaient sans protester à la rude discipline du pénitencier, et Farnham n’eut jamais l’occasion de sévir en ce qui les concernait.

D’autre part, en plusieurs occasions, il n’avait pu échapper aux frères Kip que ce constable se distinguait des autres par des manières moins communes, moins grossières. Toutefois cette observation ne les avait pas conduits à penser que Farnham se disposait à jouer un rôle. D’ailleurs, ils n’avaient jamais appartenu à l’escouade que celui-ci dirigeait, et ils le rencontraient à peine depuis leur entrée dans les bureaux.

S’ils apprirent ce qui concernait les O’Brien et Macarthy, ce fut par les pièces qu’ils eurent à compulser, les états du personnel de Port-Arthur passant par leurs mains. C’est ainsi que la cause de la condamnation des deux fenians leur fut révélée, - condamnation purement politique, qui leur imposait l’abominable promiscuité des plus vils criminels.

Et alors Karl Kip de dire à son frère, lorsqu’ils surent ce qu’étaient O’Brien et Macarthy:

“Voilà donc pourquoi ils ont refusé la main que nous leur tendions!...

- Et je le comprends, répondit Pieter Kip.

- Oui... frère... nous ne sommes pour eux que des condamnés à mort, des assassins, auxquels on a daigné épargner la potence!...

- Pauvres gens! reprit Pieter Kip, en songeant aux deux Irlandais renfermés dans ce bagne...

- Nous y sommes bien!... s'écria Karl Kip dans un de ces mouvements de colère qu'il ne pouvait contenir, et dont son frère redoutait toujours les conséquences.

- Sans doute, répondit Pieter, mais nous sommes, nous, les victimes d'une erreur judiciaire qui sera réparée un jour, tandis que ces deux hommes sont condamnés à perpétuité, et pour avoir voulu l'indépendance de leur pays!"

Toutefois, si les fonctions de Farnham au pénitencier étaient de nature à faciliter l'évasion des fenians, il ne semblait pas que l'occasion fût près de se présenter. Depuis plus d'un an, les deux Irlandais savaient par lui que des amis d'Amérique s'occupaient de préparer cette évasion, et aucun avis ne leur était parvenu. Aussi O'Brien et Macarthy commençaient-ils à désespérer, lorsque, dans la soirée du 20 avril, Farnham leur avait fait la communication suivante:

Il revenait de Port-Arthur au pénitencier, quand un individu s'approcha de lui, l'appela de son nom, lui donna le sien, - Walter, - et le mot de passe convenu entre les fenians de San Francisco et lui. Puis il le prévint que la tentative d'évasion allait être prochainement faite dans les conditions que voici: avant une quinzaine de jours, le steamer Illinois, parti de San Francisco pour la Tasmanie, arriverait à Hobart-Town et resterait sur rade.

Là il attendrait des circonstances favorables pour traverser Storm-Bay et se rapprocher de la presqu’île.

Le jour et le point de la côte où il enverrait son embarcation seraient indiqués par un avis ultérieur. Cet avis, en cas que Farnham et son interlocuteur, lorsqu’ils se reverraient, ne pussent se parler, serait un billet enveloppé d’une feuille verte que Walter laisserait tomber au pied d’un arbre, où Farnham pourrait le ramasser sans être vu. Il n’y aurait plus qu’à se conformer aux derniers renseignements contenus dans ce billet.

On se figure quelle fut l’émotion et aussi la joie des deux Irlandais à la suite de cette communication. Avec quelle impatience ils allaient attendre l’arrivée de l’Illinois en rade d’Hobart-Town, espérant que sa traversée ne serait retardée par aucun incident de mer. Dans l’hémisphère méridional, avril n’est pas encore le mois où les tempêtes du Pacifique se déchaînent avec violence. Une quinzaine de jours, avait dit Walter, et le steamer serait là, et qu’étaient-ce quinze jours de patience après six années passées dans cet enfer de Port-Arthur!

On l’a vu, comme Walter ne pouvait songer à franchir les murs du pénitencier, ce serait au dehors qu’il chercherait à rencontrer Farnham lorsqu’il aurait à le prévenir. C’est alors qu’il lui indiquerait le jour où les fugitifs devraient quitter le bagne, et l’endroit où irait les prendre le canot de l’Illinois. Peut-être même, ce jour-là, au moment où leur escouade, occupée aux travaux extérieurs, se préparerait à revenir à Port-Arthur, parviendraient-ils à gagner le littoral... On verrait, on agirait suivant les circonstances... L’important était que Farnham fût averti à temps, qu’il reçût le dernier avis d’une façon ou d’une autre... Bien qu’il n’eût vu Walter qu’une fois, il le reconnaîtrait sans peine...

Donc, pendant les jours qui allaient suivre, il devrait incessamment rester sur le qui-vive et, si Walter ne parvenait pas à s’aboucher directement avec lui, surveiller son approche, être toujours prêt à surprendre le moindre signe... Puis, lorsque Walter aurait laissé tomber son billet au pied d’un arbre, quelles précautions il prendrait pour le ramasser, et ensuite pour en faire connaître le contenu aux deux Irlandais!...

“On réussira... ajouta-t-il. Toutes les mesures ont été bien combinées... L’arrivée de l’Illinois ne peut exciter les soupçons... Il mouillera à Hobart-Town comme un navire venu en relâche, et, lorsqu’il regagnera le large à travers la baie, les autorités maritimes n’auront aucune défiance!... Une fois en mer...

- Nous serons sauvés, Farnham, s’écria O’Brien, sauvés par toi, qui reviendras avec nous en Amérique...

- Frères, répondit Farnham, je n’aurai fait pour vous que ce que vous auriez fait pour l’Irlande!”

Une semaine s’écoula, et Farnham n’avait pas revu Walter qui, sans doute, guettait à Hobart-Town le steamer américain.

De leur côté, les frères Kip n’entendaient plus parler de M. Hawkins. Cette révision dont il leur avait parlé, ils y pensaient sans cesse, ils ne vivaient que dans cet espoir, ne voulant même pas se demander sur quels motifs elle pourrait s’appuyer!... Leur conviction était pour ainsi dire faite sur le rôle que Flig Balt et probablement Vin Mod, son instigateur, avaient joué dans le drame de Kerawara, sur la part qu’ils avaient eue dans l’assassinat du capitaine Harry Gibson... Mais ces deux misérables avaient quitté Hobart-Town il y avait près d’un an déjà, et, ce qu’ils étaient devenus, personne n’eût pu le dire.

Aussi, lorsqu’il envisageait cette situation, à la voir se prolonger, Karl Kip s’abandonnait parfois à d’irrésistibles impatiences.

Il songeait à s’évader, il proposait à son frère de tout risquer pour s’enfuir... Mais, sans le concours du dehors, toute évasion était à peu près impossible.

Le 3 mai, quinze jours venaient de s’écouler depuis l’avis donné par Walter à Farnham. Ces deux hommes ne s’étaient point revus. À moins de retards dans sa traversée, il semblait bien que l’Illinois aurait dû être en rade d’Hobart-Town, et, assurément, il n’y était pas, car les deux Irlandais eussent été prévenus.

Aussi, dans quelle anxiété ils vivaient! Et, lorsque leur escouade se rapprochait du littoral, avec quelle avidité leurs yeux se dirigeaient vers la mer, cherchant parmi les navires à l’ouvert de Storm-Bay celui qui devait les emporter loin de cette terre maudite!

Ils restaient là, immobiles, regardant quelque fumée chassée par le vent du sud-est, qui signalait l’approche d’un steamer, avant qu’il se fût dégagé de la pointe du cap Pillar. Puis le navire apparaissait et contournait la pointe pour donner dans la baie...

“Est-ce lui!... est-ce lui?... répétait O’Brien.

- Peut-être, répondait Macarthy, et, dans ce cas, il ne se passera pas quarante-huit heures sans que Farnham ait été averti...”

Et ils demeuraient pensifs.

Alors la rude voix du chef des constables les rappelait au travail, et, pour ne point éveiller les soupçons, Farnham ne les ménageait pas.

Quant à lui, son service terminé, il quittait le pénitencier, il se rendait à la ville, il errait à travers ses rues, sur le port, avec l’espoir de rencontrer Walter.

Vainement. Après tout, ce n’était pas à Port-Arthur, mais à Hobart-Town que Walter devait attendre l’Illinois, et il ne reparaîtrait aux environs du pénitencier qu’après l’arrivée du steamer, afin de donner les dernières instructions à Farnham.

Ce jour-là, dans l’après-midi, plusieurs escouades, - entre autres celle à laquelle appartenaient les fenians, - furent envoyées à cinq milles, dans la direction du sud-ouest. Là, sur la lisière de la forêt, se faisait un grand abattage d’arbres pour l’établissement d’une ferme dont l’administration avait décidé la création, à un demi-mille seulement de la côte.

Or, comme il s’agissait de délimiter l’emplacement de cette ferme, les frères Kip furent joints à l’escouade. On les avait chargés de surveiller l’exécution des plans auxquels ils avaient travaillé dans les bureaux.

Les convicts, dont le nombre s’élevait à une centaine, marchaient sous la surveillance d’une vingtaine de constables et de leur chef.

Comme d’habitude, les condamnés portaient la chaîne rivée au pied et rattachée à la ceinture. Toutefois, depuis leur entrée dans les bureaux du pénitencier, Karl et Pieter Kip, exemptés de cette lourde entrave, n’avaient du forçat que l’accoutrement jaune de Port-Arthur.

Du jour où ils échangèrent quelques paroles, quelques remerciements avec O’Brien et Macarthy, ils n’avaient eu que très rarement l’occasion de les rencontrer. Maintenant, d’ailleurs, connaissant l’histoire de ces fenians, déportés pour cause politique, ils s’oubliaient eux-mêmes pour s’apitoyer sur le sort de ces patriotes irlandais.

Dès que le troupeau humain fut sur l’emplacement de la future ferme, les travaux commencèrent.

À la limite de la clairière qui devait être ménagée en cette partie de la forêt, Karl et Pieter Kip, sous la conduite d’un des gardiens, allèrent marquer les arbres destinés à l’abattage, suivant les indications du plan.

Il faisait un temps assez frais. L’hiver approchant, nombre de branches mortes jonchaient déjà le sol au milieu des feuilles sèches. Seules, les essences à verdure persistaient; des chênes verts, des pins maritimes, avaient conservé leur frondaison. Le vent du large, qui soufflait de l’ouest, passait à travers tout le cliquetis des ramures. À l’air embaumé du parfum des espèces résineuses se mêlaient de puissantes senteurs marines. On entendait aussi les grondements du ressac contre les roches du littoral, au-dessus duquel s’éparpillèrent des bandes d’oiseaux de nuit.

Assurément, O’Brien et Macarthy devaient penser que, dans ces conditions, aucun canot n’aurait pu accoster le littoral. Quant à Farnham, après s’être hissé jusqu’à la crête de la falaise, il avait constaté que pas un bâtiment ne se montrait sur cette partie de Storm-Bay. Donc, ou l’Illinois n’était pas encore arrivé, ou il se trouvait encore sur rade.

Depuis quelques mois, en prévision des travaux de la ferme, une route avait été ouverte entre Port-Arthur et cette portion de la presqu’île, - route assez fréquentée, car elle desservait d’autres établissements agricoles. Aussi plusieurs passants s’arrêtaient-ils parfois, regardant les déportés à l’ouvrage. Il va de soi qu’on les tenait à distance, et qu’il ne leur eût pas été permis de communiquer avec les convicts.

Parmi ces passants, O’Brien et Macarthy ne furent pas sans observer les allures d’un individu qui remonta et redescendit la route à plusieurs reprises.

Était-ce Walter?...

Ils ne le connaissaient point, mais Farnham le reconnut, et, tout en évitant de commettre la moindre imprudence, il ne le perdit pas des yeux. En même temps, un signe qu’il fît aux deux fenians leur indiqua que c’était bien l’homme attendu. Que venait-il faire, et pourquoi cherchait-il à se rapprocher de Farnham, si ce n’est pour lui donner avis de l’arrivée du steamer, pour convenir du jour et de l’endroit où l’évasion devrait s’effectuer?

Le chef des constables, qui dirigeait les escouades, était un homme brutal, soupçonneux, d’une extrême sévérité dans le service. Sans paraître suspect, Farnham n’aurait pu entrer en conversation avec Walter. Celui-ci l’avait compris, et, après plusieurs tentatives inutiles, il se décida à procéder selon ce qui avait été préalablement convenu.

Dans sa poche, un billet tout préparé contenait les indications suffisantes. L’ayant montré de loin à Farnham, il alla vers un des arbres qui bordaient la route, à une cinquantaine de pas de là, et cueillit une feuille, dont il enveloppa le billet qu’il déposa au pied de l’arbre.

Walter, faisant alors un dernier geste, qui fut compris de Farnham, redescendit vivement la route, et disparut dans la direction de Port-Arthur.

Les fenians n’avaient pas perdu un seul des mouvements de cet homme. Mais que faire?... Ce billet, ils ne pouvaient le ramasser sans risquer d’être vus...

C’était donc à Farnham d’agir, non sans d’extrêmes précautions. Aussi dut-il attendre que les convicts eussent achevé leur travail de ce côté de la clairière.

Or, par mauvaise chance, le chef des constables venait précisément d’y envoyer une des escouades, et ce n’était pas celle que surveillait Farnham.

On imagine aisément ce que devait être son inquiétude et celle de ses compatriotes.

Ils se trouvaient à plus de deux cents pas de la route, dont les autres convicts occupaient la lisière!

Parmi ceux-ci, Karl et Pieter Kip procédaient au marquage des arbres, entre autres celui près duquel Walter s’était un instant arrêté. Il y avait donc lieu de craindre que la feuille dont il était enveloppé ne laissât voir le billet, qui serait ramassé et remis entre les mains du chef.

Aussitôt l’éveil serait donné... Dès le retour des escouades à Port-Arthur, une surveillance sévère s’organiserait à l’intérieur et à l’extérieur du pénitencier... On consignerait les convicts, qui ne reprendraient leurs travaux que dans quelques jours... La tentative d’évasion serait manquée... Lorsque l’Illinois enverrait son canot pour embarquer les deux fenians, il ne trouverait personne à l’endroit convenu. Après une attente de quelques heures, il n’aurait plus qu’à regagner la haute mer...

Cependant le soleil commençait à décliner. La masse des vapeurs s’accumulait sur l’horizon de l’ouest. À six heures, le chef des constables donnerait le signal de retraite, afin que les escouades fussent rentrées à Port-Arthur avant la nuit. Or, il ne suffisait pas que Farnham pût se rendre au pied de l’arbre, il fallait qu’il fit assez jour encore pour qu’il aperçût la feuille roulée autour du billet. S’il ne parvenait pas à la ramasser aujourd’hui, il serait ensuite trop tard. Le vent, la pluie qui menaçait, auraient détrempé et chassé les feuilles tombées sur le sol.

Les Irlandais ne quittaient pas Farnham des yeux.

“Qui sait, murmurait O’Brien à l’oreille de son compagnon, qui sait si ce n’était pas aujourd’hui que nos amis projetaient de nous enlever?...”

Aujourd’hui?... Non, ce n’était pas probable. Ne fallait-il pas laisser à Farnham le temps de prendre les dernières mesures, et aux Irlandais le temps de gagner le littoral au point indiqué?... Mais, dans quarante-huit heures au plus, sans doute, l’embarcation de l’Illinois serait à son poste...

Les derniers rayons glissaient alors au ras de terre. Si Farnham pouvait atteindre l’arbre, il ferait encore assez clair pour qu’il pût ramasser la feuille à son pied. Il manœuvra donc de manière à se rapprocher de l’endroit où s’était arrêté Walter, et cela ne fut remarqué de personne, si ce n’est des deux Irlandais, qui osaient à peine tourner la tête de ce côté.

Une fois près de l’arbre, Farnham se baissa. Entre les feuilles mortes qui jonchaient le sol, se distinguait une seule feuille verte, à demi froissée, à demi déchirée, - celle même qui devait envelopper le billet déposé par Walter...

Le billet n’y était plus... Peut-être le vent l’avait-il emporté?... - Peut-être même avait-il été pris déjà et remis au chef des constables...

Lorsque Farnham rejoignit son escouade, O’Brien et Macarthy l’interrogèrent du regard... Ils devinèrent qu’il n’avait pas réussi... Et, après la rentrée au pénitencier, que ne devaient-ils pas craindre, lorsque Farnham leur eut appris que le billet de Walter avait disparu!

XI - Le billet

Voici ce que contenait ce billet:

“Après-demain 5 mai, dès que l’occasion se présentera pendant les travaux du dehors, gagner tous trois la pointe Saint-James sur la côte ouest de Storm-Bay, où le navire enverra son canot. Si le temps ne lui a pas permis de quitter la rade d’Hobart-Town et de traverser la baie, attendre qu’il soit en vue de la pointe, et veiller depuis le coucher jusqu’au lever du soleil.

“Dieu protège l’Irlande et vienne en aide à vos amis d’Amérique!”

Ce billet ne portait aucun nom, ni celui des destinataires, ni celui de ceux qui l’avaient rédigé en termes aussi concis que formels. Il ne donnait pas même le nom du steamer envoyé d’Amérique à Hobart-Town, et dont la destination demeurait inconnue.

Toutefois, le nom de l’Irlande était écrit en toutes lettres. Donc, nul doute qu’il fût à l’adresse des fenians de Port-Arthur. S’il tombait sous les yeux du capitaine-commandant, celui-ci ne s’y tromperait pas: le projet d’évasion concernait O’Brien et Macarthy, projet qui deviendrait inexécutable.

Mais ce billet déposé par Walter, qui renfermait des indications si précises et donnait rendez-vous aux fugitifs à quarante-huit heures de là sur la pointe Saint-James, qui donc en avait eu connaissance?...

C’étaient les frères Kip.

On ne l’a point oublié, ils avaient remarqué les allées et venues de Walter sur la route. Peut-être pensèrent-ils alors que cet homme cherchait à se mettre en rapport avec l’un des convicts. Toutefois, cela n’avait pas tenu leur attention en éveil au même degré que Farnham et ses compatriotes.

Ils n’avaient point vu Walter détacher une feuille de l’arbre, y rouler un papier, la jeter sur le sol. Si donc ce billet était tombé en leur possession, c’était par pur hasard.

En effet, tandis que les escouades s’occupaient de l’abattage, Karl et Pieter Kip allaient et venaient sur la route pour y marquer les arbres en bordure.

Lorsque Pieter Kip, qui devançait son frère, se trouva près de l’arbre, il en fit le tour avant de lever sa serpe pour en entailler le tronc.

Or, à ce moment il aperçut entre deux racines une feuille verte à demi roulée de laquelle sortait un bout de papier. Après l’avoir ramassée, il reconnut qu’elle renfermait un billet portant quelques lignes d’écriture.

En un instant Pieter Kip eut lu ce billet. Puis s’étant, d’un rapide coup d’œil, assuré que personne ne l’avait vu, il le glissa dans sa poche.

Son frère le rejoignit; tandis que tous deux procédaient à leur travail, il le mit au courant:

“Il s’agit d’une évasion... oui!... une évasion!... murmura Karl Kip... des condamnés qui vont recouvrer leur liberté... des criminels... tandis que nous...

- Karl, ce ne sont ni des assassins ni des voleurs!... répondit Pieter Kip. Il s’agit des deux Irlandais... O’Brien et Macarthy... Des amis ont préparé leur fuite!...”

Et, de fait, ce billet n’avait pu être adressé qu’aux Irlandais déportés à Port-Arthur.

“Mais, reprit Karl Kip, ils ne sont que deux fenians au pénitencier, et, si tu as bien lu... si j’ai bien compris... il est question de trois fugitifs...”

Évidemment, cela devait être inexplicable pour les deux frères, qui ne connaissaient pas, qui ne soupçonnaient même pas la connivence de Farnham et de ses compatriotes...

“Trois?... répétait Karl Kip. Quel est donc celui qui doit s’évader avec eux?...

- Le troisième, répondit Pieter Kip, c’est peut-être le porteur de ce billet!... Et, j’y pense, ne serait-ce pas cet homme que nous avons vu rôder sur la route?... Il cherchait probablement à se rapprocher de O’Brien ou de Macarthy...”

À ce moment, Pieter Kip aperçut les deux Irlandais qui échangeaient quelques rapides paroles avec un des constables, celui qui dirigeait leur escouade... Son esprit fut traversé d’une lueur soudaine... Ce constable, Farnham, était Irlandais comme eux... Serait-ce donc lui?...

Il était alors six heures du soir, et le chef des constables ayant donné le signal de retraite, la colonne, reformée sous la direction des gardiens, se mit en marche par rangs de deux en remontant vers Port-Arthur. Les frères Kip étaient à la queue de cette colonne, tandis que les Irlandais s’avançaient en tête. Et quelles étaient leurs mortelles inquiétudes que partageait Farnham!... Nul doute que le billet eût été déposé par Walter, nul doute qu’il eût été perdu ou pris!...

Sept heures sonnaient lorsque les convicts rentrèrent au pénitencier, et, le dernier repas achevé, Karl et Pieter Kip réintégraient leur cellule.

Faute de lumière, ils n’auraient pu relire le billet, mais ce n’était pas nécessaire. Pieter Kip en avait retenu les phrases mot pour mot.

Oui! une évasion était préparée!...

Oui! il s’agissait de O’Brien, de Macarthy, et aussi du constable Farnham!... Celui-ci devait faciliter leur fuite, leur fournir l’occasion, dans la soirée du 5 mai, soit dans trente-six heures, de gagner la pointe Saint-James... Là, dès que l’obscurité le permettrait, une embarcation accosterait, - l’embarcation du bâtiment venu d’Hobart-Town... Si l’état de la mer l’avait empêché de quitter la rade, il faudrait attendre au lendemain... au surlendemain peut-être, et qui sait si les fugitifs ne seraient pas découverts, repris, ramenés au bagne?...

“N’importe, déclara Karl Kip, ils ont des chances de réussir!... Ils n’auront pas à se cacher dans la forêt, au risque d’être poursuivis par les gardiens des postes!... Ils n’auront pas à franchir les palissades de l’isthme au risque d’être dévorés par les chiens de garde!... Non!... la côte n’est qu’à cinq milles... et précisément leurs travaux les en rapprochent!... Un navire viendra... son canot ira les prendre... en quelques heures il aura doublé le cap Pillar... tandis que nous... nous...

- Frère, observa alors Pieter Kip, tu oublies que ni O’Brien ni Macarthy ni même Farnham ne savent rien de ce que tu viens de dire!...

- C’est vrai, les pauvres gens!...

- Qu’un billet ait été jeté au pied de cet arbre, ils ne l’ignorent pas, je pense, et je me rappelle même avoir vu Farnham se diriger après nous de ce côté... Or, ce billet, il ne l’a plus trouvé et peut craindre qu’il ait été ramassé par un des constables, puis remis entre les mains du gouverneur!... Et alors des mesures seront ordonnées, qui rendront toute évasion impossible...

- Mais, s’écria Karl Kip, personne n’a trouvé ce billet, si ce n’est toi, Pieter... personne n’en connaît le contenu, si ce n’est nous... et rien ne s’oppose à ce que la tentative d’évasion s’effectue...

- Oui, Karl, à la condition que O’Brien et Macarthy soient avertis, et ils ne le sont pas!...

- Ils le seront, Pieter... ils le seront!... Nous n’oublierons pas qu’ils ont pris notre défense... Nous n’oublierons pas qu’il s’agit d’arracher à ce bagne des patriotes dont tout le crime est d’avoir rêvé l’indépendance de leur pays...

- Demain, Karl, répondit Pieter Kip, dès demain, nous trouverons le moyen de leur remettre ce billet...

- Et, dit Karl Kip en saisissant les mains de son frère, pourquoi ne fuirions-nous pas avec eux?...”

C’était bien cette proposition qu’attendait Pieter Kip. Pour sa part, il n’était pas sans y avoir songé, sans y avoir réfléchi, sans en avoir pesé le pour et le contre. Oui!... l’occasion venue, lorsqu’il donnerait ce billet aux deux Irlandais, lorsque ceux-ci en auraient connaissance, lorsqu’ils apprendraient que tout était prêt pour leur évasion, que le navire allait rallier la pointe Saint-James, qu’un canot les y attendrait dans la soirée du 5, eh bien! si Pieter Kip leur disait alors: “Nous vous demandons de fuir avec vous”, est-ce qu’ils pourraient leur répondre par un refus?... Est-ce qu’ils les repousseraient comme indignes de les suivre?...

Et cependant, pour ces fenians, les frères Kip étaient des criminels qui ne méritaient aucune pitié[1], et, les associer à leur fuite, ne serait-ce pas rendre la liberté aux assassins du capitaine Gibson?...

Pieter Kip avait pensé à tout cela et, en même temps, aux démarches que M. Hawkins ne cessait de faire pour obtenir la révision de leur procès...

Et qu’il leur fût permis de fuir, il ne pouvait se faire à cette idée!...

Mais, d’autre part, s’il avait confiance dans l’avenir, Karl partageait-il cette confiance?... Non, et attendre une réhabilitation, incertaine ou lointaine, il n’aurait pu s’y résoudre!... Et pourtant ce que Pieter lui dit alors l’impressionna vivement. Le cœur frémissant, l’âme troublée, il l’écoutait, il se sentait peu à peu faiblir...

“Frère, écoute-moi... J’ai bien réfléchi!... J’admets... oui!... après ce que nous aurons fait pour eux... j’admets que O’Brien et Macarthy ne puissent nous refuser de partir avec eux... bien qu’ils ne voient en nous que des assassins...

- Que nous ne sommes pas!... s’écria Karl Kip.

- Que nous sommes à leurs yeux... comme pour tant d’autres... comme pour tous, sauf M. Hawkins, peut-être!... Eh bien, si nous parvenons à nous échapper du pénitencier, à rejoindre le navire, à nous réfugier en Amérique, qu’y aurons-nous gagné?...

- La liberté, Pieter, la liberté!...

[1] Dans l’édition de référence: “piété”.

- Et sera-ce donc la liberté, lorsque nous serons obligés de nous cacher sous un faux nom, lorsque nous aurons été dénoncés à la police de tous les pays... lorsque nous serons toujours sous la menace d’une extradition?... Ah! mon pauvre Karl, quand je songe à ce que sera notre existence dans ces conditions, je me demande s’il ne vaut pas mieux rester au bagne, et s’il n’est pas préférable d’attendre ici que notre innocence ait été reconnue...”

Karl Kip demeurait muet. Un terrible combat se livrait en lui.

Il comprenait la force, la justesse des raisons que faisait valoir son frère. L’évasion accomplie, leur vie là-bas serait abominable avec le sceau du crime sur leur front!... Aux yeux des fenians et de leurs compagnons, les frères Kip n’auraient pas cessé d’être les meurtriers du capitaine Gibson!...

Toute la nuit, Karl et Pieter Kip s’entretinrent ainsi, et Karl Kip finit par se rendre. Oui! pour tout le monde, - même pour M. Hawkins, - la fuite serait comme un aveu de culpabilité.

De leur côté, O’Brien, Macarthy et Farnham étaient dévorés d’inquiétude. Car, enfin, pas de doute... Farnham ne s’était pas trompé... L’homme qui allait et venait sur la route était bien ce Walter de qui il tenait le premier avis... Un billet, enveloppé d’une feuille, avait été déposé par lui au pied de l’arbre... Si le billet ne s’y trouvait plus, il avait été remis au capitaine-commandant!... M. Skirtle ne savait-il pas, dès à présent, qu’une tentative d’évasion avait été préparée dans des conditions que l’avis révélait... qu’il s’agissait des deux Irlandais, de complicité avec leur compatriote Farnham?... Et alors de nouvelles rigueurs seraient exercées contre eux et ils devraient renoncer à l’espoir de jamais recouvrer leur liberté!...

Aussi, jusqu’au jour, ces malheureux s’attendirent-ils à ce que les constables vinssent les enfermer dans les cachots du pénitencier...

Le lendemain était un dimanche, jour où les convicts ne sont pas envoyés aux travaux du dehors. Le règlement les astreint à suivre les exercices religieux, et, après l’office, ils restent consignés dans les cours.

Lorsque sonna l’heure de se rendre à la chapelle, O’Brien et Macarthy sentirent diminuer leurs appréhensions.

Aucune mesure n’ayant été prise contre eux, ils en conclurent que le capitaine-commandant n’avait pas eu connaissance du billet.

Dès que les convicts eurent occupé leur place habituelle, l’office fut célébré par le ministre. Nul incident ne vint l’interrompre. Les deux Irlandais étaient l’un près de l’autre à leur rang, observant Farnham dont le regard signifiait clairement: rien de nouveau.

M. Skirtle assistait à cet office, ainsi qu’il le faisait chaque dimanche par ordre de l’administration supérieure. Son attitude n’indiquait aucune préoccupation, et il n’en eût pas été ainsi, en cas que le projet d’évasion se fût ébruité.

En outre, ni Farnham, ni O’Brien, ni Macarthy ne remarquèrent qu’ils fussent l’objet d’une attention spéciale. Donc, ce qu’il y avait plutôt lieu de croire, c’était que le billet avait été balayé par le vent, et il serait impossible d’en retrouver trace.

Lorsque le ministre eut achevé l’allocution par laquelle il terminait l’office, les convicts quittèrent la chapelle et regagnèrent les salles pour le premier repas. Puis ils se répandirent à travers les cours ou cherchèrent abri sous les préaux, car la pluie commençait à tomber.

Ce que Pieter Kip se proposait, c’était de rencontrer O’Brien ou Macarthy dans les cours, - où les convicts formaient des groupes séparés, ce qui serait plus facile que dans les salles, puis de leur remettre le billet en disant:

“Voici un billet que j’ai ramassé... Personne autre que mon frère et moi n’en a eu connaissance... À vous de voir ce que vous avez à faire!”

Puis Pieter Kip se retirerait.

Or, comme il n’était point interdit aux convicts de causer entre eux, il ne semblait pas que le projet de Pieter Kip pût entraîner quelques risques.

Il ne s’agissait, après tout, que de glisser le billet entre les mains d’O’Brien ou de son compagnon, en leur indiquant sa provenance.

Par malheur, ce qui eût été facile lorsque les convicts se groupaient à travers les cours le serait moins s’ils se réfugiaient sous les préaux ou dans les salles communes. Là, ces huit ou neuf cents prisonniers étaient plus étroitement entassés sous la surveillance des constables.

Et c’est précisément ce qu’une succession d’averses violentes les obligea de faire avant la fin de l’après-midi. Les salles durent être réintégrées, et, pas un instant, ni Karl ni Pieter Kip ne trouvèrent l’occasion de se rapprocher des deux Irlandais.

Et, cependant, il importait qu’O’Brien et Macarthy fussent mis au courant ce jour même.

On était au 4 mai, et le billet indiquait la date du lendemain pour le rendez-vous à la pointe Saint-James, où l’embarcation devait attendre les fugitifs.

Quant à gagner l'endroit convenu, voici comment les frères Kip comprenaient que cela pourrait se faire: le lendemain, les convicts devaient être employés dans la partie de la forêt que l'administration faisait défricher. Ces travaux se prolongeaient d'ordinaire jusqu'à six heures du soir. Ce serait ce moment-là, sans doute, avant la concentration des diverses escouades pour le retour à Port-Arthur, que Farnham, sous un prétexte quelconque, choisirait pour accompagner les deux Irlandais à la limite de la clairière. On ne soupçonnerait rien, on ne s'étonnerait même pas, puisqu'ils seraient sous la garde d'un constable. Puis, très probablement, lorsque les escouades se mettraient en route, personne n'aurait encore constaté l'absence d'O'Brien, de Macarthy et de Farnham.

Il va de soi que si, par malchance, cette absence était signalée, le chef des constables donnerait aussitôt l'alarme. Il est vrai, grâce à la nuit tombante, au milieu de cette épaisse forêt, il serait difficile de retrouver la piste des fugitifs.

D'autre part, si leur fuite n'était constatée qu'après la rentrée des escouades à Port-Arthur, le canon serait tiré aussitôt. L'alarme serait donnée à toute la presqu'île. Mais, comme la côte ne se trouvait qu'à un demi-mille de la clairière, les fugitifs auraient déjà eu le temps de gagner la pointe Saint-James. Or, si l'embarcation les y attendait, il ne leur faudrait que quelques coups d'aviron pour être en sûreté à bord de l'Illinois. Le bâtiment aurait toute la nuit pour sortir de Storm-Bay, et, au lever du soleil, il serait d'une dizaine de milles au large du cap Pillar.

Toutefois, on le répète, il fallait que les Irlandais fussent prévenus à temps, et dès le lendemain au plus tard, s'ils ne l'avaient pas été ce jour même. Donc, si Pieter Kip ne parvenait pas à communiquer avec eux avant le soir, il serait impossible de le faire la nuit, puisque son frère et lui occupaient une cellule séparée d’où ils ne pouvaient sortir.

Telle était alors la situation, - inquiétudes pour les fenians au sujet du billet disparu, impatience des frères Kip de n’avoir pas réussi à prévenir soit O’Brien, soit Macarthy!... Et le temps passait, et l’heure approchait où tous les convicts seraient enfermés dans les dortoirs...

À la rigueur, cependant, ne suffirait-il pas que les deux Irlandais fussent avertis dès le matin?... N’auraient-ils pas le temps de s’évader vers la fin du jour?...

D’ailleurs ils n’auraient possibilité de gagner la côte qu’à la condition d’être hors du pénitencier... Or, pendant la journée prochaine, au cours des travaux, est-ce que Karl et Pieter Kip ne trouveraient pas enfin l’occasion de s’approcher des Irlandais, puisque son frère et lui jouissaient d’une certaine liberté pour procéder au marquage des arbres?...

Vers six heures du soir, après une journée pluvieuse, le ciel se rasséréna au moment où le soleil allait disparaître. Un vent vif relevait les nuages. Les convicts purent sortir quelques instants des préaux, avant de regagner leurs dortoirs, et, sous la conduite des constables, ils se dispersèrent à travers les cours.

Peut-être l’occasion de rencontrer O’Brien ou Macarthy allait-elle enfin s’offrir?... C’était Pieter Kip qui possédait le billet, c’était lui qui tenterait de le remettre aux deux fenians.

À sept heures, réglementairement, les convicts regagnaient les dortoirs par chambrées de cinquante environ. Puis, l’appel fait, on les enfermait jusqu’au lendemain, et les frères Kip réintégraient leur cellule.

Divers groupes s’étaient formés çà et là, suivant cette camaraderie du bagne, cette attraction des condamnés les uns pour les autres. Ce n’est point du passé qu’ils causent entre eux... à quoi bon?... ni du présent... que pourraient-ils y changer?... mais plutôt de l’avenir! et, dans cet avenir, qu’entrevoient-ils?... Quelque adoucissement du régime pénitentiaire, parfois une remise de leur peine, peut-être aussi la réussite d’une évasion?...

On le sait, les frères Kip et les deux Irlandais ne se fréquentaient pas d’habitude.

Depuis le jour où O’Brien et Macarthy avaient reçu avec une froideur voulue les remerciements de Karl et de Pieter Kip, ils ne s’étaient jamais adressé la parole. Aussi, n’étant point réunis dans les escouades de travail, ne pouvaient-ils guère se rencontrer que pendant les matinées et les après-midi du dimanche et des jours fériés.

Cependant l’heure s’avançait. Il importait que les Irlandais fussent seuls à l’instant où leur serait remis le billet de Walter, et, précisément, Farnham, rôdant autour d’eux, semblait ne point les quitter du regard.

Sans doute, il y avait tout lieu de croire que Farnham était dans le secret de la tentative et qu’il devait accompagner les prisonniers dans leur fuite. Mais, enfin, si cette hypothèse reposait sur une erreur, si Farnham surprenait les frères Kip en conversation avec les fenians, tout serait perdu... Et, cependant, non!... Pieter Kip ne s’y trompait pas... Des regards de connivence s’échangeaient entre ces trois hommes, des regards où l’impatience le disputait à l’inquiétude!... Leur trouble ne leur permettait même pas de rester en place.

À cet instant, appelé par le chef des constables, Farnham dut, sur un ordre qu’il reçut, quitter la cour. En passant, il n’avait pas même pu dire un mot à ses compatriotes, dont les appréhensions redoublèrent. Dans la disposition d'esprit où ils se trouvaient, tout leur paraissait suspect. Que voulait-on à Farnham?... Qui l'avait fait appeler?... Était-ce le capitaine-commandant à propos du billet?... Sa complicité était-elle découverte?...

En proie à une émotion qu'ils ne parvenaient pas à dissimuler, O'Brien et Macarthy firent quelques pas en se dirigeant vers la porte de la cour, comme pour guetter la rentrée de Farnham, se demandant s'ils n'allaient pas être appelés à leur tour...

À l'endroit sombre et désert où ils s'étaient arrêtés, il semblait qu'il n'y eût aucun risque ni d'être vu, ni d'être entendu...

Pieter Kip s'avança d'un pas rapide, rejoignit les Irlandais, et d'un mouvement prompt saisit la main d'O'Brien que celui-ci voulut tout d'abord retirer...

À l'instant, O'Brien sentit qu'un papier se glissait entre ses doigts, tandis que Pieter Kip disait à voix basse:

"C'est un billet qui vous concerne... Hier, je l'ai ramassé près de la route au pied d'un arbre... Personne n'en a eu connaissance que mon frère et moi... Je n'ai pu vous le remettre plus tôt... Mais il est encore temps... Ce n'est que pour demain... Vous verrez ce que vous avez à faire!"

O'Brien avait compris, mais telle était son émotion qu'il ne put répondre.

Et alors, Karl Kip, qui venait de s'approcher, se penchant entre Macarthy et lui, ajouta:

"Nous ne sommes pas des assassins, messieurs, et vous voyez que nous ne sommes pas des traîtres!"

XII - La pointe Saint-James

Le lendemain soir, un peu après sept heures, à quelques minutes d’intervalle, trois éclairs illuminèrent successivement la haute muraille du pénitencier, en arrière de Port-Arthur. Trois violentes détonations les avaient suivis. C’était le canon d’alarme dont les éclats, propagés à la surface de la presqu’île de Tasman, allaient la mettre tout entière en éveil. Les postes se relieraient entre eux par des patrouilles, les chiens seraient tenus à bout de chaîne le long des palissades de l’isthme d’Eagle-Hawk-Neck. Aucun hallier, aucun fourré de la forêt n’échapperait aux recherches des constables.

Ces trois coups de canon signalaient une évasion qui venait d’être à l’instant constatée, et des mesures furent immédiatement prises pour empêcher les fugitifs de quitter la presqu’île.

D’ailleurs, le temps était si mauvais qu’il serait impossible de s’échapper par mer. Aucune embarcation n’aurait pu accoster le littoral, aucun bâtiment s’approcher de la côte. Donc, puisqu’ils ne pourraient franchir les palissades de l’isthme, les évadés seraient contraints de se cacher dans la forêt, et vraisemblablement ne tarderaient pas à être ramenés au bagne.

En effet, il ventait un fort coup de vent de sud-ouest, qui démontait la mer dans Storm-Bay et au large de la presqu’île.

Ce soir-là, après la rentrée au pénitencier, on avait constaté l’absence de deux déportés de la cinquième escouade. Tandis qu’il les ramenait à Port-Arthur, le chef des constables, qui se tenait en tête de la colonne, ne s’était pas aperçu de leur disparition, cette cinquième escouade étant sous la surveillance de Farnham que personne ne soupçonnait.

C’est donc à l’appel du soir que l’on connut l’évasion, et le capitaine-commandant fut aussitôt informé.

Comme il s’agissait des Irlandais O’Brien et Macarthy, deux condamnés politiques, il était probable que le concours de quelques amis du dehors leur avait été assuré. Mais dans quelles conditions s’était effectuée cette évasion?... Les fugitifs avaient-ils déjà pu quitter l’île?... Se cachaient-ils encore en un endroit convenu?... C’est ce que les recherches allaient peut-être apprendre, maintenant que les trois coups de canon venaient de mettre sur pied tout le personnel de la presqu’île.

En ce qui concerne Farnham, lorsqu’il avait été demandé la veille, ce n’était que pour affaire de service. Aucune suspicion ne planait sur lui, et même, lorsque son absence fut aussi constatée, elle ne l’atteignit pas tout d’abord. M. Skirtle et le chef des constables durent plutôt croire que les Irlandais avaient pu se débarrasser de lui avant de prendre la fuite.

Ainsi qu’il a été dit, il était inadmissible qu’O’Brien et Macarthy se fussent échappés sur une embarcation, étant donné l’état de la mer. Aussi, sur l’ordre de M. Skirtle, un détachement de constables se porta-t-il immédiatement vers l’isthme, que l’on surveillait depuis les trois coups de canon. On s’était assuré que les dogues des palissades faisaient bonne garde, et, quant aux autres chiens, ils furent aussitôt lâchés sur les grèves de Eagle-Hawk-Neck.

Une tentative d’évasion a toujours chez le personnel d’un pénitencier un retentissement considérable. Les déportés de Port-Arthur n’ignoraient plus que deux de leurs compagnons venaient de s’évader, ni qu’il s’agissait des Irlandais O’Brien et Macarthy. Et combien cette tentative devait exciter l’envie de ces misérables! Eux, condamnés de droit commun, ils se mettaient au même rang que les condamnés politiques!...

C’étaient des prisonniers comme eux, ces fenians, et ils avaient pu s’évader!... Avaient-ils réussi à quitter la presqu’île, à franchir les palissades de l’isthme?... Étaient-ils cachés dans la forêt, en attendant qu’un secours leur vînt du dehors?...

Ce qui se disait dans les dortoirs se disait aussi dans la cellule des frères Kip. Mais ceux-ci savaient ce qu’on ne savait pas: un navire devait recueillir les fugitifs... une embarcation devait les prendre sur la pointe de Saint-James... Or, l’embarcation s’y était-elle trouvée à l’heure dite?...

“Non... ce n’est pas possible!... affirma Karl Kip en répondant aux questions de son frère. Le vent souffle en rafale dans Storm-Bay!... Aucun canot ne pourrait accoster!... Un bâtiment, même un steamer, ne se hasarderait pas si près du littoral...

- Alors, observa Pieter Kip, ces malheureux seront obligés de passer la nuit sur la pointe?...

- La nuit et le lendemain, Pieter, puisque l’évasion ne peut se faire le jour... Et qui sait si cette tempête aura pris fin dans vingt-quatre heures?...”

Pendant ces longues heures, ni l’un ni l’autre des deux frères ne purent dormir. Tandis que la tourmente fouettait l’étroite fenêtre de leur cellule, ils écoutaient... Quelque bruit ne se produisait-il pas, un va-et-vient de constables indiquant que les deux Irlandais, arrêtés dans leur fuite, rentraient au pénitencier?...

Voici dans quelles conditions, ce jour-là, s’était effectuée l’évasion d’O’Brien et de Macarthy, avec la complicité de leur compatriote Farnham.

Il était près de six heures.

Les escouades achevaient leur travail de défrichement. Déjà la forêt se perdait dans l’ombre. Encore cinq ou six minutes, le chef des constables donnerait l’ordre de reprendre le chemin de Port-Arthur.

À ce moment, les deux frères observèrent que Farnham, s’approchant des Irlandais, leur dit un mot à voix basse. Puis, ceux-ci le suivirent jusqu’à la limite de la clairière, où ils s’arrêtèrent devant un des arbres marqués pour l’abattage.

Le chef des constables ne s’inquiéta pas autrement de les voir s’éloigner dans cette direction sous la surveillance d’un constable, et ils restèrent en cet endroit jusqu’à l’heure où les escouades se formèrent en colonne pour regagner Port-Arthur.

Ainsi que cela a été dit, personne ne s’aperçut alors que ni O’Brien ni Macarthy ni Farnham n’avaient rejoint leurs compagnons. Ce fut seulement après l’appel fait dans la cour du pénitencier que l’on constata leur absence.

Profitant de l’obscurité croissante, les trois fugitifs avaient pu s’éloigner sans être vus. Afin d’éviter une patrouille qui retournait au poste voisin, ils durent se blottir au fond d’un fourré, en ayant soin de ne point se trahir par le cliquetis de la chaîne qu’O’Brien et Macarthy portaient au pied et à la ceinture.

La patrouille passée, tous trois se relevèrent; puis, s’arrêtant parfois, prêtant l’oreille au moindre bruit, ils parvinrent à gagner la crête de cette falaise, au pied de laquelle s’étendait la pointe de Saint-James.

L’obscurité enveloppait alors toute la presqu’île de Tasman, - obscurité d’autant plus profonde que des nuages très épais, poussés par le vent d’ouest, emplissaient l’espace.

Il était près de six heures et demie lorsque les fugitifs firent halte pour observer la baie.

“Pas de navire!” dit O’Brien.

Et, en effet, il semblait bien que la baie fût déserte, car, à défaut de sa silhouette, invisible dans l’ombre, un bâtiment eût été signalé par ses feux de bord.

“Farnham, demanda Macarthy, nous sommes bien à la falaise de Saint-James?...

- Oui... déclara Farnham, mais je doute qu’une embarcation ait accosté!”

Et comment eussent-ils osé l’espérer, en entendant la mer mugir au large, tandis que l’embrun des lames, soulevé par la rafale, s’éparpillait jusqu’à la crête!...

Farnham et ses compagnons se portèrent alors vers la gauche, puis descendirent sur la grève, de manière à gagner l’extrémité de la pointe.

C’était une sorte de cap étroit, encombré de roches, troué de flaques, qui se prolongeait de deux à trois cents pieds et dont la courbure formait une petite crique ouverte vers le nord. Une embarcation y eût trouvé des eaux plus tranquilles si elle eût réussi à se dégager des récifs contre lesquels la mer brisait avec une extraordinaire violence.

Parvenus à cette extrémité, après avoir eu à lutter contre la tourmente, les fugitifs se mirent à l’abri d’une haute roche. Le billet apporté par Walter leur prescrivait de se trouver à cette date sur la pointe Saint-James, et ils y étaient, bien qu’ils n’eussent pas l’espoir d’être recueillis, ce soir-là du moins. D’ailleurs, les termes du billet prévoyaient ce retard, et leur mémoire les conservait mot pour mot:

“Si le temps n’a pas permis au navire de quitter la rade d’Hobart-Town et de traverser la baie, attendre qu’il arrive en vue de la pointe, et veiller depuis le coucher jusqu’au lever du soleil.”

Il n’y avait qu’à suivre ces prescriptions.

“Cherchons un abri, dit O’Brien, quelque trou de la falaise où nous puissions passer la nuit et la journée de demain...

- Sans nous éloigner de la pointe, fit observer Macarthy.

- Venez”, répondit Farnham.

En prévision de mauvais temps, celui-ci avait eu soin de visiter cette grève sauvage et déserte pendant sa dernière sortie du dimanche. Peut-être à sa base la falaise offrirait-elle quelque anfractuosité où les trois fugitifs sauraient se cacher jusqu’à l’arrivée de l’embarcation?... Farnham ayant découvert cette anfractuosité dans un angle à l’amorce même de la pointe, y avait déposé quelques vivres, biscuits secs, viande conservée, achetés à Port-Arthur, plus une cruche qu’il remplit d’eau fraîche à un rio voisin.

Au milieu des ténèbres, sous le coup des aveuglantes rafales, il ne fut pas très aisé de retrouver cette excavation, et les fugitifs n’y parvinrent qu’après avoir traversé la grève, dont la déclivité était peu sensible.

“C’est là...”, dit Farnham.

Et, en un instant, tous trois s’étaient introduits dans une cavité profonde au plus de cinq à six pieds, où ils seraient à l’abri de la tempête. Seulement, à mer haute, poussé par le vent qui battait de plein fouet, peut-être le flot s’étendrait-il jusqu’à son ouverture. Quant aux vivres, qui suffiraient pendant quarante-huit heures, Farnham les retrouva à leur place.

À peine ses deux compatriotes et lui s’étaient-ils installés qu’une détonation trois fois répétée, dominant les fracas de la tourmente, se fit entendre.

C’était le canon de Port-Arthur.

“L’évasion est connue!... s’écria Macarthy.

- Oui, on sait qu’ils sont évadés!... ajouta O’Brien.

- Mais ils ne sont pas pris... dit Farnham.

- Et ils ne se laisseront pas prendre!...” déclara O’Brien.

Tout d’abord, il convenait que les deux Irlandais se délivrassent de leur chaîne, en cas qu’il fût nécessaire de fuir. Farnham s’était muni d’une lime qui servit à couper le maillon du pied.

Après six ans déjà passés dans ce bagne, O’Brien et Macarthy n’étaient plus rivés à ces lourdes entraves du galérien.

Il était évident que, pendant cette nuit, aucun canot n’atterrirait en un point quelconque de la côte. Et, d’ailleurs, comment un navire eût-il risqué de se mettre au plein sur cette formidable rangée de récifs qui s’étend du fond de Storm-Bay au cap Pillar?...

Néanmoins, tant leur surexcitation était grande, les fugitifs ne résistèrent pas au besoin d’observer les approches de la pointe. Plusieurs fois, ne craignant pas d’être aperçus, ils quittèrent leur abri, ils se traînèrent sur la grève, cherchant en vain au milieu de cette obscurité un feu de navire!...

Puis, rentrés dans l’anfractuosité, ils s’entretenaient d’une situation, qui, le jour venu, serait assurément des plus dangereuses.

En effet, après avoir fouillé les environs de Port-Arthur, visité la forêt jusqu’à l’isthme, les constables n’étendraient-ils pas leurs recherches jusqu’au littoral?... Les chiens, habitués à se lancer sur la trace des convicts, ne découvriraient-ils pas ce trou où étaient blottis Farnham et ses compagnons?...

Et, tandis qu’ils envisageaient ces redoutables éventualités, le nom des frères Kip fut prononcé par O’Brien.

Rappelant le service que les deux frères leur avaient rendu:

“Non, s’écria-t-il, non!... Ce ne sont pas des assassins!... Ils l’ont dit!... Je les crois!...

- Et ce sont de grands cœurs, ajouta Macarthy. En nous dénonçant, ils auraient peut-être pu espérer qu’on leur en tiendrait compte... et ils ne l’ont pas fait!...

- J’ai entendu plusieurs fois parler de cette affaire à Hobart-Town, reprit alors Farnham, cet assassinat du capitaine Gibson du James-Cook... Quelques personnes se sont intéressées aux frères Kip, et pourtant on ne croit pas qu’ils aient été injustement condamnés...

- Ils sont innocents!... ils le sont!... répétait O’Brien. Et quand je songe que j’ai refusé de leur serrer la main!... Ah! les pauvres gens!... Non! ils ne sont pas coupables, et, dans ce bagne de Port-Arthur, au milieu de ce monde de criminels, ils doivent souffrir... ce que nous-mêmes avons souffert!... Mais nous... c’était pour avoir voulu arracher notre pays aux oiseaux de proie de l’Angleterre!... Et, au dehors, des amis se sont occupés de préparer notre délivrance... Mais Karl et Pieter Kip... c’est pour la vie qu’ils sont enfermés là!... Ah! tenez, lorsqu’ils sont venus à nous, lorsqu’ils nous ont remis le billet trouvé par eux... j’aurais dû leur dire: “Fuyons ensemble!... Nos compatriotes vous accueilleront comme des frères!...”

La nuit s’avançait, toujours pluvieuse et glaciale. Les fugitifs souffraient du froid, et, cependant, ce n’était pas sans les plus vives appréhensions qu’ils attendaient le jour. Des aboiements qui arrivaient parfois à leur oreille indiquaient que les chiens avaient été lâchés à travers la presqu’île.

Habitués à flairer de loin les convicts, à reconnaître l’accoutrement du bagne, ces animaux ne découvriraient-ils pas l’anfractuosité où se cachaient Farnham et ses compatriotes?...

Un peu après minuit, la grève était entièrement couverte par la marée montante sous la poussée des vents d’ouest. La mer se gonfla au point que la base de la falaise fut battue par le flot. Pendant une demi-heure, les fugitifs furent inondés jusqu’à mi-jambe. Heureusement, le niveau ne s’éleva pas au-delà, et le jusant entraîna les eaux malgré la résistance de la rafale.

Avant le lever du jour, la tempête montra une tendance à diminuer. Le vent peu à peu halait le nord, rendant la baie plus praticable. Farnham, O’Brien et Macarthy pouvaient donc espérer que la mer ne tarderait pas à tomber. Lorsque le jour revint, l’amélioration était sensible. Si les lames déferlaient encore au-delà des récifs, une embarcation aurait sans trop de peine accosté la pointe Saint-James à son revers.

D’ailleurs, il fallait attendre le soir avant de s’aventurer sur la grève.

Farnham fit trois parts des aliments qu’il avait apportés, le pain et la viande sèche. Il convenait de les ménager, en prévision de nouveaux retards au-delà de quarante-huit heures, dans l’impossibilité de les renouveler. Quant à l’eau douce, le soir même, il serait facile de remplir la cruche au ruisseau.

Une partie de la matinée s’écoula dans ces conditions et ne fut marquée par aucun incident. La tourmente prit décidément fin, et le soleil reparut entre les derniers nuages de l’est.

“Le navire, qui est en rade d’Hobart-Town, dit alors O’Brien, va pouvoir traverser Storm-Bay et il aura gagné la presqu’île dans la soirée...

- Mais, sans doute, répondit Macarthy, on va surveiller plus soigneusement la côte...

- Raisonnons, reprit O’Brien. Personne ne sait à Port-Arthur ni qu’un bâtiment est arrivé d’Amérique pour nous prendre à son bord, ni que rendez-vous nous a été donné à la pointe Saint-James... Dès lors, que doit-on supposer?... C’est que nous sommes cachés dans la forêt, et, les premiers jours du moins, c’est là que se continueront les recherches plutôt que sur le littoral...

- J’y pense, fit observer Farnham, et Walter?... C’est, il y a deux jours, samedi, que nous l’avons rencontré sur la route de Port-Arthur... Est-il donc retourné à Hobart-Town?... Cela me paraît probable... Après être revenu à bord du steamer, il aura informé le capitaine que nous serions à la pointe Saint-James dans la soirée de lundi...

- Assurément, répondit Macarthy, car, si Walter n’était pas retourné à Hobart-Town, il nous aurait rejoints cette nuit!... Au milieu de l’obscurité, il ne lui eût pas été difficile de dépister les patrouilles...

- Je suis de cet avis, déclara O’Brien, et, dès dimanche, Walter a dû quitter Port-Arthur sur un des vapeurs qui font le service de la baie...

- Et nous sommes certains, ajouta Farnham, qu’il pressera le départ du steamer... Aussi n’avons-nous plus qu’à patienter... Dès qu’il fera nuit, le canot accostera la pointe...

- Dieu le veuille!” répondit O’Brien.

Vers une heure de l’après-midi, se produisit une vive alerte. Des voix furent distinctement entendues sur le rebord de la falaise, à cent pieds à peine au-dessus de l’anfractuosité qui abritait les trois fugitifs. En même temps éclataient des aboiements de chiens surexcités par leurs maîtres!

“Les constables... les dogues! s’écria Farnham. Voilà le plus grand danger!”

Il était à craindre, en effet, que ces animaux ne descendissent sur la grève, où les constables les suivraient par le sentier que Farnham avait pris la veille. Là, ces chiens se mettraient en quête... leur instinct les guiderait vers le bas de la falaise... ils finiraient par découvrir l’anfractuosité... Et quelle résistance O’Brien, Macarthy, Farnham, pourraient-ils opposer à une douzaine d’hommes armés, alors qu’eux étaient sans armes?... On aurait vite fait de les saisir, de les reconduire au pénitencier... Et ils ne savaient que trop quel sort les y attendait!... La double chaîne et le cachot pour O’Brien et Macarthy!... La mort pour Farnham, convaincu d’avoir favorisé leur fuite!

Tous trois restaient immobiles au fond de la cavité. En sortir n'était plus possible, sans être vu. Et, où se réfugier ailleurs que sur les dernières roches de la pointe?... Alors, pour ne pas retourner au bagne, ils n'auraient qu'à se jeter à la mer!... Oui! tout plutôt que de retomber entre les mains des constables!...

Cependant les voix arrivaient jusqu'à eux. Ils entendaient les propos échangés sur la crête de la falaise, les cris de ceux qui les poursuivaient, et auxquels se mêlait le furieux aboiement des dogues.

“Par ici... par ici!... répétait l'un.

- Lâchez les chiens, dit l'autre, et fouillons cette grève avant de retourner au poste...

- Et que seraient-ils venus faire ici?... fut-il répondu précisément par ce brutal chef d'escouade dont Farnham reconnut la voix. Ils n'ont pas pu se sauver à la nage, et c'est dans la forêt qu'il faut reprendre les recherches!”

O'Brien avait saisi la main de ses compagnons.

Après cette observation de leur chef, il était probable que les constables allaient s'éloigner. Mais l'un d'eux de répondre:

“On peut toujours voir!... Descendons le sentier qui conduit à la grève... Qui sait si tous les trois ne sont pas cachés dans quelque trou?...”

Tous les trois?... On ne doutait donc pas à Port-Arthur que Farnham, complice des deux Irlandais, dans cette tentative d'évasion, ne fût alors avec eux?...

À présent, si les propos s’entendaient moins distinctement, preuve que les constables se dirigeaient vers le sentier, les hurlements des chiens se rapprochèrent.

Une heureuse circonstance allait peut-être empêcher les fugitifs d’être découverts. La mer, haute en ce moment, inondait la grève jusqu’au pied de la falaise, et les dernières ondulations du ressac baignaient l’excavation. Il eût été impossible d’apercevoir l’ouverture à moins de contourner le contrefort de ce côté. Quant à la pointe Saint-James, elle ne montrait plus que ses extrêmes roches sous l’écume du flot. Il faudrait au moins deux heures de jusant pour que la grève redevînt praticable. Aussi n’était-il pas probable que les constables s’attarderaient à cette place, étant pressés de se jeter sur une meilleure piste.

Cependant les chiens aboyaient plus violemment, et sans doute l’instinct les poussait le long de la falaise. L’un d’eux se lança même à travers le tourbillon des lames, mais les autres ne l’imitèrent point.

Presque aussitôt, d’ailleurs, le chef des constables donnait ordre de reprendre le sentier. Bientôt tout ce tumulte, tout ce bruit d’aboiements et de voix diminua.

On n’entendit plus que le mugissement de la mer battant à grand fracas le pied de la falaise.

XIII - L’évasion

Le danger était éloigné, non conjuré. Après la forêt, les poursuites porteraient sur tous les points du littoral.

Il convient de le redire, au pénitencier de Port-Arthur, si les évasions ont quelquefois réussi, c’est à la condition d’avoir été effectuées par mer. Ou les convicts parviennent à s’emparer d’une embarcation, ou ils l’ont construite eux-mêmes et peuvent ainsi gagner quelque autre point de Storm-Bay. Quant à tenter de traverser l’isthme, cette tentative était considérée comme impossible. Aussi, ceux des fugitifs qui se cachèrent dans les bois furent-ils toujours repris, après quelques semaines. Le capitaine-commandant ne l’ignorait pas, et la recherche des évadés était toujours dirigée à travers la forêt, lorsque le temps empêchait la fuite par mer.

Or, puisque la tourmente s’apaisait, puisque le littoral de la presqu’île allait redevenir accostable, les détachements de constables en visiteraient les criques dès le lendemain sans doute.

C’est bien ce que répétaient O’Brien, Macarthy, Farnham, avec quelles appréhensions, avec quelles impatiences! Combien les heures de cet après-midi leur parurent interminables, sans une alerte, écoutant les bruits du dehors, croyant entendre des pas sur la grève, les aboiements de ces féroces limiers, craignant à chaque instant de voir apparaître un de ces chiens qui se précipiterait sur eux!...

Puis, parfois, ils reprenaient confiance. Sans se risquer au dehors, ils pouvaient embrasser du regard une vaste étendue de la baie, guetter les navires qui passaient au large. Quelques voiliers se montraient, depuis que le vent avait halé le nord à l’état de petite brise.

Plusieurs rentraient en louvoyant, après avoir doublé le cap Pillar. Farnham, suivant la première communication de Walter, savait que le bâtiment américain, arrivé en rade d'Hobart-Town, était le steamer Illinois. C'était donc une fumée que ses compagnons et lui cherchaient à l'horizon, une fumée qui se rabattrait vers le sud, une fumée qui annoncerait l'approche du navire attendu au milieu de tels périls!...

Et, cependant, il était trop tôt encore. On ne compte qu'une vingtaine de milles entre Hobart-Town et la pointe Saint-James. Il suffirait que l'Illinois quittât la rade vers six heures du soir. Il ne serait pas assez imprudent pour s'approcher de la pointe, tant que la nuit ne lui permettrait pas d'y envoyer son canot pour recueillir les fugitifs.

“Mais, à bord, sait-on si nous avons pu nous échapper?... demanda Macarthy.

- N'en doutez pas, répondit Farnham. Voici déjà vingt-six heures que nous sommes à l'endroit convenu, et, depuis ce matin, la nouvelle de l'évasion aura été transmise à Hobart-Town... Le gouverneur a dû en être avisé par dépêche, et, d'ailleurs, à mon avis, Walter se sera hâté de rejoindre l'Illinois. Si le steamer n'a pu partir hier à cause du mauvais temps, il ne tardera pas à faire route vers la presqu'île...

- Il est déjà cinq heures, observa O'Brien, et, dans une heure et demie, l'obscurité rendra difficile de distinguer la pointe Saint-James... Comment le capitaine de l'Illinois pourra-t-il y envoyer une embarcation?...

- Je ne doute pas, répliqua Farnham, qu'il n'ait pris ses mesures en conséquence!... Il connaît... ou quelque matelot du bord connaît tout le littoral de la presqu'île...

Même la nuit, il ne sera pas embarrassé de...

- Une fumée!” s’écria Macarthy.

Dans la direction du nord-ouest apparaissait l’extrême volute d’une fumée au-dessus de l’horizon dont les nuages empourprés voilaient le soleil.

“Est-ce lui?... Est-ce l’Illinois?...” répétait O’Brien, qui se fût élancé sur la grève, si Farnham, par prudence, ne l’eût aussitôt retenu.

Storm-Bay, d’habitude, est fréquentée par un grand nombre de bâtiments, principalement des navires à vapeur. Celui qui venait d’être signalé ne chercherait-il pas à mettre cap au sud-est pour sortir de la baie et donner en pleine mer?... Rien encore n’autorisait à affirmer qu’il se dirigeait vers la côte.

Aussi, jamais l’émotion des fugitifs n’avait été plus vive, même alors que les constables descendaient le sentier de la falaise, alors que les chiens menaçaient de se précipiter sur la grève! Jamais, d’autre part, ils ne s’étaient senti plus d’espoir! Cette fumée gagnait visiblement vers le sud-est. Avant une demi-heure, tandis qu’il faisait encore jour, ils devaient voir le navire se détacher sur la ligne du ciel et de la mer. À sa fumée peu intense, il ne semblait pas qu’il forçât sa marche. Si c’était l’Illinois, en effet, pourquoi aurait-il filé à toute vapeur?... La nuit faite, il était assuré de se trouver à quelques encablures de la pointe Saint-James... Et alors le canot déborderait sans risquer d’être aperçu...

Soudain, O’Brien de jeter ce cri désespéré:

“Ce n’est pas lui... ce n’est pas l’Illinois!...

- Et pourquoi?... demanda Farnham.

- Voyez!”

Le steamer venait de changer sa direction et ne se rapprochait plus de la presqu’île... Il manœuvrait comme le font les bâtiments qui cherchent à relever le cap Pillar pour sortir de Storm-Bay.

Et, après cette mortelle attente de toute une journée, voici que la nuit tombait!... Évanoui cet espoir que l’heure du salut était proche, que ce navire les prendrait à son bord!... Il s’éloignait de la presqu’île et gagnait la pleine mer!...

Ainsi, ce n’était pas l’Illinois, annoncé par Walter, dont les fugitifs apercevaient la fumée!... Le steamer américain était resté sur la rade d’Hobart-Town... Mais il était temps encore!... Peut-être arriverait-il au milieu de la nuit?...

Eh bien, on l’attendrait, on le guetterait! Dès que l’obscurité serait faite, O’Brien, Farnham, Macarthy traverseraient la grève, se porteraient à l’extrémité de la pointe Saint-James, se blottiraient entre les dernières roches... Et, si un steamer s’approchait, ils entendraient dans l’ombre les halètements de sa machine et les bouillonnements de son hélice... Et, s’il envoyait une de ses embarcations, ils la héleraient, et elle se dirigerait à travers les récifs de la crique... Enfin, si le ressac l’empêchait d’atterrir, ils se jetteraient à la mer, ils seraient recueillis, et transportés à bord de l’Illinois!... Oui! ainsi que l’avait dit O’Brien, dussent-ils y perdre la vie, tout plutôt que de retourner au bagne!

Le soleil venait de disparaître derrière l’horizon. À cette époque de l’année, l’espace ne serait que peu de temps éclairé par les derniers reflets du crépuscule.

La baie et le littoral ne tarderaient point à se confondre dans les ombres de la nuit. La lune, alors en son dernier quartier, ne se lèverait pas avant trois heures du matin. Sous un ciel sans étoiles, voilé de nuages immobiles, la nuit serait obscure.

En ce moment, un profond silence régnait au large. La brise, ayant calmi vers le soir, ne passait plus que par souffles intermittents. Du côté de la baie, même à la distance de deux à trois milles, les fugitifs eussent entendu le bruit d’un steamer en marche vers la côte, et, même à cinq ou six encablures, le bruit d’un canot poussé par ses avirons.

O’Brien, ne tenant plus en place, voulut, malgré ses compagnons, gagner la pointe Saint-James.

C’était imprudent, car il faisait un peu jour encore, et, du haut de la falaise, des constables auraient pu l’apercevoir. Il semblait bien toutefois que cette partie du littoral fût déserte.

En rampant sur le sable, O’Brien atteignit l’endroit où la pointe Saint-James se soude à la grève. Là s’entassaient d’énormes roches tapissées de varechs, dont le prolongement, découvert à mer basse, s’avançait de deux à trois cents pieds au large en se recourbant vers le nord.

À cet instant, la voix d’O’Brien parvint jusqu’à Farnham, blotti près de Macarthy au fond de l’anfractuosité.

“À la pointe... à la pointe!” criait-il.

Avait-il aperçu une embarcation, ou tout au moins surpris quelque bruit d’avirons?... Dans tous les cas, il fallait le rejoindre sans hésiter. C’est ce que Farnham et Macarthy firent aussitôt, en se traînant à travers la grève.

Lorsque tous trois furent réunis au pied des premières roches, O’Brien dit:

“J’ai cru... oui... je crois... Un canot vient...

- De quel côté?... demanda Macarthy.

- De celui-ci.”

Et O’Brien indiquait le nord-ouest.

C’était précisément la direction que devait suivre une embarcation qui eût cherché à pénétrer dans la crique au dedans des récifs.

Macarthy et Farnham écoutèrent. Eux aussi ils saisirent des coups rythmés. Nul doute, un canot venait du large, s’avançant avec lenteur, comme incertain de sa route.

“Oui... oui!... répéta Farnham. C’est le choc des avirons contre les tollets... Un canot est là...

- Et c’est celui de l’Illinois!...” répondit O’Brien.

En effet, ce ne pouvait être que l’embarcation envoyée par le steamer à l’endroit convenu. Mais, au milieu de l’obscurité croissante, c’est en vain que les fugitifs tâchaient d’apercevoir le navire. Peut-être se tenait-il à un bon mille au large, autant pour ne point être signalé à proximité du littoral que pour ne pas approcher de trop près cette côte semée de récifs.

Il n’y avait donc qu’à se porter à l’extrémité de la pointe, pour y guetter le canot, le héler au besoin, lui indiquer la direction, entre les récifs, puis sauter dedans dès qu’il aurait accosté les dernières roches...

Or, voici que des aboiements retentirent sur le haut de la falaise, et des cris s’y joignirent aussitôt.

La crête était alors occupée par un détachement de constables, accompagnés d’une douzaine de chiens. Après avoir longé la lisière de la forêt, ils étaient revenus vers la côte.

Non loin de là, les escouades qui travaillaient sur la clairière se préparaient à regagner Port-Arthur.

Aux cris poussés par les constables, O’Brien, Macarthy, Farnham, comprirent qu’ils étaient découverts. On les avait aperçus tandis qu’ils traversaient la grève... Peut-être même l’appel d’O’Brien les avait-il trahis?...

Maintenant, leur unique chance de salut, c’était l’arrivée du canot, et il ne dépendait pas d’eux de la hâter!... Et s’ils ne s’étaient pas trompés, si l’embarcation s’approchait, pourrait-elle les recueillir avant que les constables les eussent rejoints à l’extrémité de la pointe?... Et puis les matelots qui la montaient oseraient-ils accoster en entendant le bruit d’une lutte?... D’ailleurs, seraient-ils en force pour attaquer les constables, pour leur arracher les prisonniers et les mettre en sûreté à bord de l’Illinois?...

“Les chiens... les chiens!” cria en ce moment Macarthy.

Après avoir dévalé le sentier de la falaise, ces dogues bondissaient sur la grève, - quatre à cinq de ces animaux dressés à donner la chasse aux convicts, et dont les aboiements retentissaient avec fureur.

Presque aussitôt apparurent une douzaine de constables, le revolver à la main, en s’appelant:

“Par ici... par ici!...

- Ils sont là... tous trois...

- À la pointe... à la pointe!...

- Voici un canot qui s’approche!...”

O’Brien n’avait pas fait erreur. Une embarcation tentait de donner dans la petite crique... Si ses compagnons et lui n’avaient pu l’apercevoir, c’est qu’elle n’était pas visible du pied de la falaise. Mais l’attention des constables, postés sur la crête, avait été attirée par ce canot, qui, après avoir longé la côte, essayait de se glisser entre les récifs.

Ils ne mettaient pas en doute que ce ne fût pour prendre les Irlandais. Puis, en observant le large, ils finirent par constater la présence très suspecte d’un bâtiment à travers cette partie de la baie.

C’est aussi ce qu’avaient remarqué deux convicts, occupés sur la limite de la clairière, et qui avaient gagné le sommet de la falaise.

C’étaient Karl et Pieter Kip.

On imagine aisément de quelles obsessions les deux frères avaient été assaillis pendant toute cette journée!... Ils savaient bien que le mauvais temps de la veille n’aurait pas permis au navire américain de rallier la presqu’île Tasman... Ils se disaient que les trois fugitifs, après avoir atteint la pointe Saint-James, avaient dû se cacher dans quelque excavation pendant toute la nuit et toute la journée suivante!... Et comment s’étaient-ils procuré un peu de nourriture?...

Il est vrai, la tempête avait pris fin depuis une quinzaine d’heures, laissant la baie praticable. Ce qui n’avait pu être la veille se ferait probablement le soir même, lorsque l’obscurité le permettrait.

Comme d’habitude, dès le matin, les frères Kip avaient quitté le pénitencier pour les travaux du dehors. Revenus à proximité de la falaise, avec quelle anxiété ils cherchaient à apercevoir, vers l’ouest ou le long de la côte, les volutes d’une fumée indiquant l’approche d’un steamer!...

La journée s’écoula, et, dix minutes avant que le signal du départ eût été donné, voici que des cris retentirent du côté du littoral.

“Les malheureux... ils sont découverts!...” s’écria Karl Kip.

C’est à ce moment que dix à douze constables, abandonnant la garde des escouades à leurs camarades, coururent dans cette direction, et les frères Kip purent les suivre sans avoir été vus.

Arrivés sur la crête, ils se couchèrent à plat ventre et regardèrent au-dessous d’eux.

Oui! un canot se glissait, en rasant la côte, vers la pointe Saint-James.

“Il ne sera plus temps!... dit Karl Kip.

- Les pauvres gens vont être repris!... ajouta son frère.

- Et ne pouvoir leur venir en aide!...”

À peine ces paroles avaient-elles été prononcées, que Karl Kip, saisissant Pieter par le bras:

“Suis-moi!” dit-il.

Une minute plus tard, tous deux dévalaient le sentier et ils rampaient sur la grève.

Le canot de l’Illinois tournait alors les roches de la crique. Bien qu’ils eussent vu les constables accourir, l’officier américain et ses matelots n’avaient pas eu la pensée de s’arrêter, ne doutant plus que les fugitifs ne fussent là depuis la veille. Alors, appuyant les avirons, au risque de se briser contre les récifs au milieu de l’ombre, ils firent un dernier effort pour atteindre la pointe avant les constables.

Mais, lorsque l’embarcation eut accosté, il était trop tard. O’Brien, Macarthy et Farnham, malgré leur résistance, étaient déjà ramenés vers la falaise.

“En avant... en avant!” cria l’officier.

Ses matelots, armés de coutelas et de revolvers, se précipitèrent à sa suite, et, dès qu’ils eurent pris pied, s’élancèrent pour délivrer les fugitifs.

Il y eut lutte acharnée. Les Américains n’étaient que huit, l’officier, l’homme de barre et six hommes.

Même en comptant Farnham, Macarthy et O’Brien, cela ne faisait que onze contre une vingtaine de constables, d’autres, dès les premiers cris, ayant rejoint leurs camarades sur la grève.

En outre, les dogues féroces ne seraient pas de moins dangereux adversaires.

Aussi est-ce aux chiens que les matelots envoyèrent leurs premiers coups de revolver. Des détonations éclatèrent soudain. Deux de ces animaux, frappés de plusieurs balles, furent tués, et les autres s’enfuirent en déchirant l’air de leurs hurlements.

Les combattants s’attaquèrent alors avec une extrême violence au milieu de l’ombre. Mais Macarthy et Farnham, qui n’avaient pu se dégager, allaient être entraînés, lorsque deux hommes barrèrent la route aux constables.

Karl Kip et son frère, qui venaient de se jeter sur eux, parvinrent à arracher les prisonniers de leurs mains.

À la suite de nouveaux coups de feu, quelques hommes furent grièvement atteints des deux parts. Or, sur cette étroite pointe, il était impossible que la lutte se prolongeât à l’avantage des Américains. L’officier et les matelots de l’Illinois contraints d’abandonner la partie, les fugitifs leur échapperaient, et qui sait si eux-mêmes ne paieraient pas de leur liberté dans les prisons d’Hobart-Town cette généreuse tentative en faveur des Irlandais?

Heureusement, si les détonations, si les cris, si les aboiements s’étaient fait entendre jusqu’à la clairière, ils furent aussi entendus du large. À bord de l’Illinois, on comprit qu’il y avait un combat acharné entre les matelots et les constables, combat dans lequel il fallait immédiatement intervenir.

Aussi le commandant s’approcha-t-il à moins de deux encablures, et une seconde embarcation fut mise à la mer, avec une douzaine de matelots.

En quelques instants ce renfort arriva sur la pointe, et les choses changèrent à l’instant. Les constables, n’étant plus en force, durent relâcher les prisonniers et se retirer en emportant leurs blessés. Quant à l’officier et aux matelots, ils n’eurent qu’à rembarquer dans les deux canots avec les trois fugitifs, après un dernier échange de coups de feu.

À cet instant, Karl Kip et son frère, appelant O’Brien, lui dirent...

“Sauvés... vous êtes sauvés!...

- Et vous aussi!” s’écria l’Irlandais.

Avant qu’ils eussent eu le temps de se reconnaître, les deux frères, sur un signe d’O’Brien, étaient déposés par les matelots dans l’une des embarcations qui rejoignirent le steamer.

Aussitôt l’Illinois, se dirigeant vers l’entrée de Storm-Bay, doubla le cap Pillar, et, la nuit venue, il marchait à toute vapeur en plein Pacifique.

XIV - Suites de l’affaire

À Hobart-Town, depuis quelques mois déjà, on reparlait avec un vif intérêt de l’affaire Kip. Qu’il se fût fait un revirement dans les esprits, que le public eût la pensée que Karl et Pieter Kip n’étaient pas les assassins du capitaine Gibson, non! Pour ces deux victimes d’une erreur judiciaire, l’opinion n’en était pas encore là. Mais on savait que M. Hawkins croyait à leur innocence. Personne n’ignorait plus qu’il poursuivait son enquête, qu’il multipliait ses démarches près du gouverneur de la Tasmanie, que Son Excellence Sir Edward Carrigan l’écoutait volontiers. Aussi quelques-uns répétaient-ils déjà:

“Pourtant... si M. Hawkins avait raison!”

Toutefois, - il y a lieu d’y insister, - la culpabilité des frères Kip ne faisait pas doute pour la grande majorité de la population, et, assurément, l’affaire eût été oubliée depuis longtemps, si l’armateur n’eût mis tant d’énergie à en demander la révision.

On l’imaginera aisément, la visite que M. Hawkins avait faite à Port-Arthur n’avait pu que renforcer sa conviction. Ses entretiens avec le capitaine-commandant, la conduite des deux frères au pénitencier, l’acte de courage qui leur avait valu quelque adoucissement, leur attitude si digne lorsqu’il les interrogea, cette pensée qui leur fut commune de rechercher les véritables auteurs du crime parmi l’équipage du James-Cook, les soupçons que les louches façons de Flig Balt et de Vin Mod autorisaient à concevoir, enfin la profonde reconnaissance que lui avaient témoignée Karl et Pieter, auxquels il laissait entrevoir quelque espérance, tout avait été de nature à le fortifier. Comment, d’ailleurs, eût-il oublié ses premiers rapports avec les naufragés hollandais, depuis la rencontre sur l’île Norfolk, leur intervention pendant l’attaque des Papouas et enfin ce que le James-Cook devait à Karl Kip pour l’avoir sauvé du naufrage et des mains de Flig Balt?...

Non, M. Hawkins ne se laisserait pas ébranler. Il se consacrerait à cette tâche, fût-il seul, d’arracher à l’affaire son dernier secret, de faire éclater l’innocence des condamnés, de les délivrer du pénitencier de Port-Arthur!

Mme Hawkins partageait les convictions de son mari, sinon son espoir dans l’issue de l’entreprise. Elle l’y encourageait, bien que l’opinion publique fût très réfractaire. Elle souffrait à le voir, confiant un jour, désespéré un autre, passer par toutes ces phases. Et, de son côté, elle ne cessait de l’appuyer dans leur petite société d’amis, au milieu des personnes de son entourage. Mais le plus grand nombre ne se rendait pas, tant cet épouvantable assassinat, suivi d’une condamnation capitale, avait profondément impressionné les esprits, même convaincu ceux qui, au cours du procès, conservaient encore quelques doutes.

Or, ce fut précisément sur Mme Gibson, dans l’étroite intimité qui les unissait, que Mme Hawkins eut le plus d’empire. La malheureuse veuve s’était d’abord refusée à l’entendre. En son immense douleur, elle ne voyait qu’une chose: c’est que son mari n’était plus, quels que fussent les auteurs du meurtre. Cependant Mme Hawkins se montrait si affirmative à l’égard des frères Kip qu’elle finit par l’écouter. Elle entrevit cette possibilité qu’ils ne fussent point les assassins, et s’effraya à la pensée que des innocents étaient détenus dans cet enfer de Port-Arthur.

“Ils en sortiront!... répétait Mme Hawkins. Tôt ou tard, la vérité se fera jour, et les véritables meurtriers seront punis..!”

Toutefois, si Mme Gibson subissait l’influence de Mme Hawkins, son fils, obstinément convaincu, croyait à la culpabilité des frères Kip.

Quelque déférence qu’il eût pour l’armateur, pour la sûreté habituelle de son jugement, il n’avait jamais voulu se rendre à ses raisons, - raisons toutes morales d’ailleurs. Nat Gibson s’en tenait aux faits matériels relevés par l’enquête, établis par l’instruction, d’accord avec la presque unanimité de la population d’Hobart-Town. Aussi, lorsque M. Hawkins lui parlait des soupçons dont Flig Balt et Vin Mod étaient l’objet de sa part, il se bornait à répondre:

“Monsieur Hawkins, les papiers et l’argent de mon père, l’arme qui a servi à le frapper, ont été retrouvés dans la valise et dans la chambre des deux frères... Il faudrait donc prouver que Flig Balt ou Vin Mod ont pu les y mettre, et cela ne se prouvera pas...

- Qui sait, mon pauvre Nat, répondait M. Hawkins, qui sait?...”

Oui... qui sait? car c’était bien ainsi que les choses s’étaient passées. Mais Vin Mod avait agi avec tant d’adresse qu’il eût été impossible de constater sa présence à l’auberge du Great-Old-Man.

En effet, lorsque M. Hawkins, à plusieurs reprises, interrogea l’hôtelier à cet égard, il n’obtint aucun résultat. Cet homme ne se rappelait même pas si, à l’époque où les frères Kip demeuraient dans sa maison, la chambre voisine de la leur avait été occupée. En tout cas, Vin Mod n’était jamais venu dans son auberge, et personne n’aurait pu affirmer l’y avoir vu.

Telle était donc la disposition des esprits, telles étaient les démarches que poursuivait M. Hawkins en vue de provoquer la révision du procès et avec une ténacité que plus d’un prenait pour de la monomanie.

Or, dans la matinée du 7 mai, une nouvelle très inattendue se répandit à travers la ville.

Le gouverneur était prévenu télégraphiquement qu’une évasion venait de se produire à Port-Arthur.

Deux déportés politiques, deux fenians et un des constables, leur compatriote et leur complice, étaient parvenus à s’enfuir, et avaient été recueillis par un steamer, certainement envoyé par leurs amis d’Amérique. En même temps, deux autres convicts, profitant de l’occasion, s’étaient enfuis avec eux.

Ces convicts, condamnés pour crime de droit commun, étaient les Hollandais Karl et Pieter Kip.

En effet, pendant la lutte entre les matelots américains et les constables sur la pointe Saint-James, les deux frères, alors qu’ils se portaient au secours des trois fugitifs, avaient été reconnus. Qu’ils eussent été embarqués malgré eux, c’est bien ce qui était arrivé. Mais à qui eût-on fait croire qu’ils ne fussent d’accord avec les fenians pour cette évasion?... Non... tout cela était convenu d’avance.

C’est ce que déclarèrent les constables, dès leur rentrée au pénitencier, où l’absence de Karl et de Pieter Kip était déjà connue. C’est ce que dut admettre le capitaine-commandant, lorsqu’il fut informé de cette quintuple évasion, et c’est ce qu’il mentionna dans son rapport adressé le jour même à Son Excellence Edward Carrigan.

Inutile d’insister sur l’effet de cette nouvelle à Hobart-Town et dans toute la Tasmanie. M. Hawkins en eut connaissance un des premiers par le gouverneur, qui le fit mander à la résidence. La dépêche expédiée de Port-Arthur, mise sous ses yeux, lui tomba des mains. Il ne pouvait croire ce qu’il avait lu, il regardait Son Excellence, il balbutiait, il répétait, la voix brisée:

“Ils se sont échappés... ils se sont échappés!...

- Oui, répondit Sir Edward Carrigan, et il n’est pas douteux qu’ils ne fussent de connivence avec les deux condamnés politiques et leur complice...

- Ceux-ci... ceux-ci, s’écria M. Hawkins dans une agitation extraordinaire, oui!... je les comprends... je comprends qu’ils aient voulu recouvrer leur liberté... Je comprends que des amis leur soient venus en aide... qu’on ait préparé leur fuite... je l’approuve même...

- Que dites-vous là, mon cher Hawkins?... Oubliez-vous qu’il s’agit d’ennemis de l’Angleterre...

- C’est vrai... c’est vrai... et je ne devrais pas parler ainsi en votre présence, monsieur le Gouverneur. Mais enfin, ces fenians, ces condamnés politiques, n’avaient aucune grâce à attendre!... C’était pour la vie qu’ils étaient enfermés à Port-Arthur, tandis que Karl et Pieter Kip... Non! je ne puis croire qu’ils se soient associés à cette évasion!... Qui sait si ce n’est pas une fausse nouvelle?...

- Non, répondit le gouverneur, et le fait n’est que trop certain...

- Et pourtant, reprit M. Hawkins, Karl et Pieter Kip connaissaient les démarches que l’on faisait pour obtenir la révision!... Ils savaient que Votre Excellence s’intéressait à eux... que leur affaire, je l’avais faite mienne...

- Sans doute, mon cher Hawkins, mais ils ont dû penser que vous ne réussiriez pas, et, une occasion de s’enfuir s’étant présentée...

- Il faudrait donc admettre, dit alors M. Hawkins, que ces fenians ne les considéraient pas, eux non plus, comme des criminels. Ils n’auraient jamais consenti à prêter la main aux meurtriers du capitaine Gibson... ni le commandant du navire américain à recevoir des assassins à son bord!...

- Je ne sais trop comment expliquer cela!... répondit Son Excellence. Peut-être l’apprendra-t-on plus tard...

Ce qui n’est pas douteux, c’est que les frères Kip se sont enfuis de Port-Arthur... et vous n’avez plus à vous occuper d’eux, mon cher Hawkins.

- Si... bien au contraire!...

- Même après cette évasion, vous croyez encore à leur innocence?...

- Absolument, monsieur le Gouverneur, répondit M. Hawkins du ton d’une inébranlable conviction. Oh! je m’y attends... on dira que je suis fou... que je refuse de me rendre à l’évidence... que cette fuite, c’est un aveu formel de leur culpabilité... qu’ils ne comptaient pas sur le résultat d’une révision, puisqu’ils se savaient coupables... qu’ils ont préféré s’évader dès que s’est offerte l’occasion de le faire...

- En vérité, déclara le gouverneur, il serait difficile d’interpréter autrement la conduite de vos protégés...

- Eh bien, non... non!... reprit M. Hawkins, cette fuite n’est pas un aveu... Dans tout cela, je le répète, il y a quelque chose d’inexplicable que l’avenir expliquera... Je croirais plutôt... oui!... je croirais que Karl et Pieter Kip ont été enlevés malgré eux...

- Personne ne voudra l’admettre...

- Personne que moi... soit! Mais cela me suffit, et je n’abandonnerai pas leur cause... Et comment, monsieur le Gouverneur, pourrais-je oublier l’attitude de ces deux infortunés lorsque je les ai visités à Port-Arthur... la résignation de Pieter surtout... leur confiance dans mes démarches... oublier aussi ce qu’ils ont été à bord du James-Cook... oublier ce qu’a fait Karl Kip au pénitencier?...

Je ne les abandonnerai pas, et la vérité éclatera!... Non!... cent fois non!... Karl et Pieter Kip n’ont pas versé le sang du capitaine Gibson!... Ce ne sont pas des assassins!...”

Sir Edward Carrigan ne voulut pas insister davantage ni rien dire qui fût de nature à affliger M. Hawkins. Il se borna à lui communiquer les informations qu’il avait reçues de l’office du port d’Hobart-Town:

“D’après le rapport qui m’a été fait, dit-il, un navire américain, le steamer Illinois, dont on ne s’expliquait guère la relâche, est arrivé sur rade. Tout porte à croire, puisqu’il est parti dans la matinée d’hier, qu’il a recueilli les fugitifs sur un point convenu de la presqu’île. Assurément c’est en Amérique qu’il les conduit. Or, dans ce pays, si les deux fenians et leur complice ont toute sécurité comme déportés politiques pour lesquels l’extradition n’est pas admise dans les traités internationaux, il n’en sera pas ainsi des deux Hollandais, qui sont des condamnés de droit commun. Donc, si l’on parvient à découvrir les frères Kip, leur extradition sera demandée, elle sera obtenue, et ils seront ramenés à Port-Arthur, d’où ils ne s’échapperont pas une seconde fois...

- À la condition, monsieur le Gouverneur, conclut M. Hawkins, que je n’aie pas réussi auparavant à découvrir les véritables auteurs du crime!”

À quoi eût servi d’argumenter contre un tel parti pris? Ce qui était certain, c’est que les apparences donnaient plutôt raison au gouverneur, bien que M. Hawkins refusât d’en convenir. Et ce fut l’opinion générale. Les défenseurs des frères Kip devinrent plus rares, et même se réduisirent à un seul.

Leur fuite s’interpréta contre eux. Évidemment, ils ne comptaient pas sur la révision de l’affaire, ou du moins sur les résultats que cette révision donnerait, puisqu’ils s’étaient enfuis... Aussi, l’occasion de recouvrer la liberté leur ayant été offerte, ils s’étaient hâtés d’en profiter...

Telles furent les conséquences de cette évasion, qui tourna contre les deux frères et devint un nouveau témoignage de leur culpabilité.

Du reste, comprenant combien M. Hawkins, loin de paraître s’en affecter, semblait au contraire plus attaché à ses convictions, Nat Gibson évitait tout entretien à ce sujet. Mais il ne pouvait s’habituer à cette pensée que les assassins de son père se fussent échappés de Port-Arthur, que des déportés politiques les eussent acceptés pour compagnons, et que l’Amérique consentît à leur donner asile. L’extradition permettrait de les ramener au pénitencier, et ils y subiraient leur peine dans toute sa rigueur.

Une vingtaine de jours s’écoulèrent. Le Lloyd ne donnait aucune nouvelle de l’Illinois dans ses correspondances maritimes. Pas un navire ne l’avait rencontré pendant sa navigation à travers le Pacifique. On ne mettait pas en doute, d’ailleurs, que le steamer américain ne se fût prêté à l’enlèvement des Irlandais. D’après l’enquête faite par ordre du gouverneur, un seul bâtiment avait quitté la rade après la tempête du 5 mai: c’était l’Illinois. D’autre part, les sémaphores du cap Pillar n’eurent point à signaler de navire venant du large pour Storm-Bay. Donc les cinq fugitifs devaient se trouver à bord de l’Illinois, en route pour l’Amérique. Mais vers quel port des États-Unis le steamer se dirigeait-il?...

Où seraient déposés les prisonniers en rupture de ban?... Cela, personne ne parvenait à le savoir, et comment faire arrêter les frères Kip à leur débarquement sur le Nouveau Continent?...

Le 25 mai, M. et Mme Hawkins eurent le très vif plaisir de recevoir une visite qui leur avait été annoncée depuis quelque temps. M. et Mme Zieger, ayant formé le projet de passer plusieurs semaines à Hobart-Town, avaient quitté Port-Praslin sur le steamer allemand Faust. Après une rapide traversée, ils venaient de débarquer dans la capitale de la Tasmanie, où leurs amis les attendaient.

Comme aux voyages précédents, M. et Mme Zieger descendirent chez M. Hawkins, et une chambre était prête à les recevoir. Leur première visite fut pour la veuve du capitaine et son fils. Nat Gibson et sa mère éprouvèrent une très vive émotion en présence de M. et Mme Zieger, et de quoi purent-ils parler en pleurant, si ce ne fut du terrible drame de Kerawara?...

À son arrivée, M. Zieger ignorait que les frères Kip se fussent évadés du pénitencier de Port-Arthur. Lorsqu'il l'apprit, il vit là, comme tant d'autres, une nouvelle preuve que la justice n'avait commis aucune erreur en les condamnant.

Toutefois, on ne s'étonnera pas si, dès les premiers jours, M. Hawkins voulut s'entretenir de l'affaire avec son correspondant de Port-Praslin. Il lui en refit tout l'historique, il lui rappela les circonstances mystérieuses de l'attentat et il ajouta:

“Et d'abord, mon cher Zieger, lorsque vous avez su que les deux frères avaient été accusés d'être les auteurs du crime, lorsque vous avez appris leur condamnation, est-ce que vous avez pu y croire?...

- Non, assurément, mon ami.

Que Karl et Pieter Kip fussent des assassins... cela paraissait inadmissible!... J’avais toujours vu en eux des hommes aussi intelligents qu’honnêtes, ayant une profonde reconnaissance pour le capitaine Gibson et pour vous, n’oubliant pas qu’ils étaient les naufragés de la Wilhelmina recueillis par le James-Cook!... Non!... jamais je n’aurais pu penser qu’ils fussent coupables.

- Et s’ils ne l’étaient pas?... répondit M. Hawkins qui regardait en face M. Zieger.

- Vous avez des doutes à ce sujet... après ces débats qui ont mis en évidence?...

- J’ai la conviction qu’ils ne sont pas les auteurs du crime, en attendant que j’en aie la preuve!...”

Devant une si formelle déclaration, M. Zieger dit:

“Écoutez, mon cher Hawkins, M. Hamburg, à Kerawara, moi, à Port-Praslin et dans toute la Nouvelle-Irlande, nous nous sommes livrés à une enquête des plus minutieuses. Il n’est pas de tribu de l’archipel où nous n’ayons recueilli des informations dont l’exactitude fût contrôlée. Nulle part, non plus que dans la Nouvelle-Bretagne, aucun indigène n’a pu être soupçonné d’avoir pris part au meurtre du capitaine Gibson...

- Je ne dis pas, mon cher Zieger, que le crime doive être attribué à un indigène de l’archipel Bismarck, mais je dis qu’il n’a pas été commis par les frères Kip...

- Par qui alors?... demanda M. Zieger... Des colons... des matelots?...

- Oui... des matelots...

- Et de quel équipage, mon cher Hawkins?... À cette époque, il n’y avait que trois navires dans le port de Kerawara, et pas un seul à Port-Praslin...

- Si... un...

- Lequel?...

- Le James-Cook...

- Quoi!... vous pensez qu’un ou plusieurs hommes du brick seraient les assassins?...

- Oui, Zieger, et ceux-là mêmes qui ont trouvé sur l’épave de la Wilhelmina l’arme dont s’est servi le meurtrier... ceux-là qui plus tard l’ont introduite dans la valise des frères Kip, où ils avaient déjà mis les papiers et l’argent de Gibson...

- Y avait-il donc dans l’équipage du James-Cook des hommes capables... demanda M. Zieger.

- Il y en avait, déclara M. Hawkins, et entre autres ces hommes que le maître Balt avait embarqués à Dunedin, et qui se sont révoltés contre le nouveau capitaine...

- Et c’est un d’eux qui serait l’assassin?...

- Non... et j’accuse Flig Balt de ce crime...

- Le maître d’équipage?...

- Oui... celui que j’avais nommé au commandement du brick en quittant Port-Praslin, et qui, par son impéritie, l’eût perdu, corps et biens, sans l’intervention de Karl Kip!...”

Et il ajouta que Flig Balt devait avoir eu un complice, le matelot Vin Mod.

M. Zieger, très ému de cette affirmation, pressa plus vivement M. Hawkins. Ses soupçons s’étayaient-ils de quelques preuves matérielles?... Ne reposaient-ils pas que sur des présomptions, dont rien ne permettait d’établir la réalité?... Il faudrait donc admettre que le maître d’équipage, aidé de Vin Mod, résolu à faire disparaître le capitaine Gibson, eût de longue date préparé cette machination qui faisait retomber le crime sur la tête des frères Kip?...

Et, cependant, si Flig Balt avait eu à exercer quelque vengeance contre eux, ce ne devait être qu’après la nomination de Karl Kip comme capitaine, ou lorsque Karl eut comprimé la révolte suscitée par lui...

Ce raisonnement d’une indiscutable valeur s’était certainement présenté à l’esprit de M. Hawkins. Mais, intraitable dans son indéracinable conviction, il l’avait repoussé et le repoussait encore.

“Mon cher Zieger, répondit-il, lorsque Flig Balt et Vin Mod ont eu la pensée du crime, ils étaient déjà possesseurs du poignard qui appartenait aux frères Kip... C’est alors que l’idée leur est venue de s’en servir afin que ces malheureux pussent être accusés plus tard d’avoir assassiné le capitaine Gibson... À vous, cela ne paraît qu’hypothétique... Pour moi, cela est certain...”

Et, en somme, l’explication que donnait M. Hawkins, c’était la vraie.

“Par malheur, ajouta-t-il, Flig Balt et Vin Mod ont quitté Hobart-Town depuis près d’un an... Je n’ai pas eu le temps de les surveiller, de me procurer contre eux des preuves accablantes qui eussent déjà amené la révision du procès... Il m’a même été impossible de savoir ce qu’ils sont devenus...

- Mais, je le sais, moi, je le sais!... répondit M. Zieger.

- Vous le savez?... s’écria M. Hawkins, qui saisit les mains de son ami.

- Sans doute... Flig Balt, Vin Mod et les recrues du James-Cook... je les ai vus...

- Où...

- À Port-Praslin...

- Quand?...

- Il y a trois mois...

- Et ils y sont encore?...

- Non... ils étaient embarqués à bord d’un trois-mâts allemand, le Kaiser, et, après une relâche de quinze jours, ils sont partis de Port-Praslin...

- Pour?...

- Pour l’archipel des Salomon, et, depuis, je n’en ai plus eu de nouvelles.”

Ainsi Flig Balt et Vin Mod, Len Cannon et ses camarades avaient trouvé un embarquement. Dans quel port?... on l’ignorait, mais ils formaient une partie de l’équipage du Kaiser. Ce trois-mâts avait relâché quelques semaines auparavant à Port-Praslin. Si donc le maître d'équipage et Vin Mod étaient les assassins du capitaine Gibson, ils n'avaient pas craint de reparaître sur cet archipel, théâtre de leur crime, ainsi que le fit observer M. Zieger.

Et, maintenant, ils étaient partis, partis pour ces parages dangereux où ils voulaient entraîner le brick, et, avec l'aide de leurs compagnons, ils feraient sans doute du Kaiser ce qu'ils n'avaient pu faire du James-Cook!...

Comment désormais retrouver leurs traces à bord d'un navire dont ils auraient changé le nom, sans doute?... Comment remettre la main sur eux. Leur absence ne rendait-elle pas impossible la révision de l'affaire Kip?...

Les choses en étaient là, lorsque, quelques jours après, le 20 juin, le Lloyd mentionna dans ses nouvelles maritimes l'arrivée de l'Illinois à San Francisco, Californie, États-Unis d'Amérique. C'était le 30 mai - environ trois semaines après son départ de Storm-Bay - qu'il venait de débarquer O'Brien, Macarthy, Farnham, auxquels leurs frères politiques réservaient le plus chaleureux, le plus enthousiaste accueil sur cette terre de liberté.

Les journaux célébrèrent à grand fracas le succès de cette évasion, tout à l'honneur de ceux qui l'avaient préparée, comme une revanche du fenianisme.

En même temps, on apprenait que les deux Hollandais, Karl et Pieter Kip, avaient disparu dès le débarquement.

Étaient-ils restés cachés à San Francisco pour éviter de tomber entre les mains de la police américaine?... N'avaient-ils pas plutôt gagné l'intérieur des États-Unis?... Comment le savoir?... Et, à présent, lorsque interviendrait la demande d'extradition, il serait trop tard.

Cette information eut pour effet de confirmer dans leur opinion les accusateurs des frères Kip, et pour résultat de mettre un terme aux doutes que pouvait avoir jusqu’alors soulevés cette affaire. M. Hawkins, lui-même, tout en gardant des convictions que rien ne saurait ébranler, ralentit ses démarches. À quoi bon une révision, puisque les frères Kip, évadés du pénitencier de Port-Arthur, s’étaient réfugiés en Amérique, d’où probablement ils ne reviendraient jamais?...

On allait donc cesser de s’occuper du drame de Kerawara, lorsque, dans la matinée du 25 juin, une nouvelle, à laquelle, tout d’abord, personne ne voulut accorder croyance, se répandit par la ville.

Karl et Pieter Kip, arrivés la veille, venaient d’être arrêtés et incarcérés dans la prison d’Hobart-Town.

XV - Le fait nouveau

Non! ce ne devait être qu’un de ces faux bruits qui prennent naissance on ne sait où, qui se répandent on ne sait comment, et dont le bon sens public a bientôt fait justice.

Était-il admissible que les frères Kip, après avoir eu cette chance inespérée de s’enfuir en Amérique, fussent revenus en Tasmanie?... Eux, les assassins du capitaine Gibson, - eux de retour?... Est-ce donc que le navire sur lequel ils avaient pris passage en quittant San Francisco avait été contraint de relâcher sur rade d’Hobart-Town?... Et, alors, reconnus, dénoncés, appréhendés, ils auraient été conduits en prison en attendant de réintégrer le pénitencier où l’on saurait bien empêcher toute nouvelle tentative de fuite?... Quant à penser qu’ils fussent revenus d’eux-mêmes, qu’ils eussent commis une pareille imprudence, c’était inadmissible.

Quoi qu’il en soit, - et les plus impatients purent s’en convaincre dès le matin, - Karl et Pieter Kip étaient enfermés dans la prison depuis la veille. Toutefois, le gardien chef ne consentait point à dire dans quelles conditions ils y avaient été amenés, ni de quelle manière s’était effectuée leur arrestation.

Cependant, si ce fait paraissait inexplicable, il y eut un homme auquel sa conviction en suggéra l’explication véritable. Une révélation se produisit dans son esprit, - il serait plus juste de dire dans son cœur. Ce fut la solution du problème qu’il se posait depuis l’invraisemblable évasion des frères Kip.

“Ils n’ont pas fui!... s’écria M. Hawkins, ils ont été enlevés de Port-Arthur!... Oui!... ils sont revenus de plein gré... revenus parce qu’ils sont innocents, parce qu’ils veulent faire éclater leur innocence au grand jour!”

C’était la vérité.

En effet, la veille, un steamer américain, le Standard de San Diego, avait mouillé sur rade avec une cargaison à destination d’Hobart-Town. Karl et Pieter Kip se trouvaient à bord en qualité de passagers.

Au cours de la traversée de l’Illinois entre Port-Arthur et San Francisco, les deux frères s’étaient d’abord tenus sur une extrême réserve vis-à-vis de leurs compagnons de bagne. Ils avaient même protesté contre l’enlèvement. D’ailleurs, lorsqu’ils affirmèrent de nouveau qu’ils n’étaient pas les meurtriers du capitaine Gibson, ni O’Brien, ni Macarthy, ni Farnham, ni personne ne mit cette affirmation en doute. Et, s’ils regrettaient cette évasion, c’est qu’on s’occupait de la révision de leur procès, révision qui pouvait ainsi se trouver compromise.

D’autre part, bien que ce fût le hasard, le hasard seul, qui eût amené les frères Kip sur la pointe Saint-James, ils n’avaient pu hésiter à lutter contre les constables. Et, dès lors, quoi de plus naturel que les fenians eussent profité de cette circonstance pour les entraîner à bord du navire américain?... Après le service que Karl et Pieter Kip venaient de rendre aux Irlandais, n’était-ce pas là un acte de reconnaissance, et pouvaient-ils se repentir de l’avoir accompli?... Non, et, en somme, ce qui était fait était fait.

À l’arrivée de l’Illinois au port de San Francisco, les frères Kip prirent congé des Irlandais, qui essayèrent en vain de les retenir. Où allaient-ils se réfugier? Ils ne leur dirent point. Seulement, étant sans ressources, ils ne refusèrent pas d’accepter quelques centaines de dollars à rembourser dès que cela serait possible. Après un dernier adieu, ils se séparèrent d’O’Brien, de Macarthy et de Farnham.

Très heureusement pour eux, aucune demande d'extradition n'avait été encore adressée aux autorités américaines par le consul de la Grande-Bretagne, et la police n'avait pu les arrêter à leur débarquement.

À dater de ce jour, on ne rencontra plus jamais les deux frères dans les rues de San Francisco, et il y eut lieu de croire qu'ils avaient quitté la ville.

Effectivement, quarante-huit heures après avoir pris terre, Karl et Pieter Kip descendaient dans une modeste auberge de San Diego, capitale de la Basse-Californie, où ils espéraient trouver un navire en partance pour l'un des ports du continent australien.

Leur ferme intention était de revenir au plus tôt à Hobart-Town, de se livrer à cette justice qui les avait si injustement condamnés!... Si la fuite avait dû être interprétée comme un aveu de culpabilité, le retour crierait au monde entier l'innocence... Non! ils n'accepteraient pas de vivre à l'étranger, sous le coup d'une accusation criminelle, avec l'incessante crainte d'être reconnus, dénoncés, repris!... Ce qu'ils voulaient, c'était la révision de leur procès, c'était la réhabilitation publique.

Et c'est bien de ce projet, de sa mise à exécution, que Karl et Pieter Kip n'avaient cessé de s'entretenir à bord de l'Illinois. Peut-être y eut-il chez Karl comme un instinct de révolte... Se sentir libre et renoncer à la liberté!... S'en remettre à la justice des hommes, à la faillibilité humaine!... Mais il s'était rendu aux observations de son frère.

Ils étaient donc à San Diego, cherchant un embarquement et, autant que possible, sur un navire à destination de la Tasmanie. Les circonstances les servirent. Le Standard, précisément en charge pour Hobart-Town, prenait des passagers de différentes classes. Karl et Pieter Kip, se contentant de la dernière, arrêtèrent leurs places sous un nom d'emprunt. Le lendemain, le steamer faisait route, cap au sud-ouest. Après une assez longue traversée, contrariée par les mauvais temps du Pacifique, il doubla l'extrême pointe de Port-Arthur et jeta l'ancre en rade d'Hobart-Town.

Tout ce qui vient d'être rapporté en quelques lignes, la ville en fut instruite dès les premières heures.

Un revirement soudain se produisit en faveur des frères Kip; et qui aurait pu s'en étonner?... Ils étaient donc les victimes d'une erreur judiciaire?... Ce n'était pas volontairement qu'ils avaient fui le pénitencier, et, dès qu'ils avaient eu l'occasion de quitter l'Amérique, ils étaient revenus en Tasmanie!... Et, maintenant, ne serait-il pas possible d'établir leur innocence sur des bases moins fragiles que de simples présomptions?...

Aussitôt que cette nouvelle lui parvint, M. Hawkins se transporta à la prison, dont les portes lui furent tout de suite ouvertes. Un instant après, il se trouvait en présence des deux frères enfermés dans la même cellule.

Là, devant l'armateur, ils se levèrent, l'un tenant la main de l'autre.

“Monsieur Hawkins, dit Pieter Kip, ce n'est pas à vous que notre retour apporte un nouveau témoignage... Vous connaissiez la vérité depuis longtemps, et vous ne nous avez jamais crus coupables... Mais, cette vérité, il fallait la rendre évidente aux yeux de tous, et voilà pourquoi le Standard nous a ramenés à Hobart-Town.”

M. Hawkins était tellement ému que les paroles lui manquaient. Des larmes coulaient de ses yeux, et, enfin:

“Oui... dit-il, oui... messieurs... c'est bien... c'est grand ce que vous avez fait!... C'est la réhabilitation qui vous attend ici... avec la sympathie de tous les honnêtes gens!... Vous ne deviez pas rester des évadés de Port-Arthur!... Les efforts que j’ai faits, les démarches que je vais reprendre aboutiront!... Votre main, Pieter Kip!... Votre main, capitaine du James-Cook!”

Et, en redonnant ce titre à Karl Kip, le digne M. Hawkins ne lui rendait-il pas toute son estime?

Alors, tous trois revinrent sur l’affaire, sur les soupçons que le maître d’équipage et Vin Mod leur avaient inspirés. Les deux frères apprirent alors que Flig Balt, Vin Mod, Len Cannon et ses camarades s’étaient embarqués sur le Kaiser, comment, après leur passage à Port-Praslin, ils étaient partis pour l’archipel des Salomon. Et, à l’heure actuelle, qui sait si, déjà maîtres de ce bâtiment, ils ne se livraient pas à la piraterie dans cette partie du Pacifique où il serait impossible de les retrouver?...

“Et, d’ailleurs, fit observer Pieter Kip, lors même que Flig Balt et ses anciens compagnons du James-Cook seraient amenés devant la cour criminelle, quelles preuves pourrions-nous produire contre eux?... Ils accuseraient encore, et quel moyen de prouver que les assassins du capitaine Gibson ce sont eux, et non pas nous?...

- On nous croira!... s’écria Karl Kip. On nous croira, puisque nous sommes revenus pour attester notre innocence!...”

Peut-être, mais quels faits nouveaux invoquer pour obtenir la révision du procès?...

Inutile d’insister sur l’effet que produisit dans les deux familles le retour de Karl et de Pieter Kip. Mme Gibson, prise des doutes les plus terribles en ce qui les concernait, ne parvint pas à ébranler la conviction de son fils. Et qu’on n’en soit pas étonné puisque, depuis si longtemps, depuis les faits qui furent révélés au procès de Flig Balt, les meurtriers n’étaient pour Nat Gibson, ne pouvaient être que les deux frères!... Sa pensée le ramenait sans cesse sur le théâtre du crime!...

Il revoyait son malheureux père attaqué dans la forêt de Kerawara, frappé par la main même de ceux qu’il avait recueillis sur l’île Norfolk, assassiné par les naufragés de la Wilhelmina!... Oui!... toutes les preuves étaient contre eux, et que leur opposait-on?... De vagues et incertaines présomptions à l’égard du maître d’équipage et de son complice!... Et, pourtant, ils étaient revenus à Hobart-Town!... ils y étaient revenus d’eux-mêmes!

Il va de soi que M. Hawkins avait aussitôt demandé une audience à sir Edward Carrigan. Le gouverneur, très impressionné, résolut de faire tout ce qui dépendrait de lui pour réparer cette erreur judiciaire, pour provoquer une révision qui permettrait de réhabiliter les frères Kip. Et quel pas en avant dans cette voie, si l’on avait pu mettre la main sur Flig Balt, Vin Mod et leurs compagnons!

On comprendra que la population d’Hobart-Town, sous le coup d’une surexcitation, se fût déclarée en faveur de Karl et de Pieter Kip. Y a-t-il lieu d’être surpris de cette mobilité des foules?... Quoi de plus naturel?... Cette fois, d’ailleurs, tout ce qui s’était passé depuis l’arrestation des deux frères ne justifiait-il pas ce revirement des esprits?...

Cependant, un des juges de la Cour criminelle venait d’être désigné pour reprendre ou plutôt recommencer une enquête, interroger de nouveau les deux condamnés, citer au besoin d’autres témoins. Qui sait si un fait nouveau ne permettrait pas de présumer l’innocence et de conclure à la révision?...

Et, en effet, si cette enquête ne parvenait pas à démontrer qu’un autre ou d’autres que les frères Kip devaient être les meurtriers du capitaine Gibson, force serait de tenir l’affaire pour bien jugée, et il n’y aurait pas lieu de procéder à une réhabilitation.

La justice fut donc régulièrement saisie, et l’instruction allait suivre son cours.

Mais, étant données les circonstances, l’éloignement du théâtre du crime, la difficulté des recherches en ce qui concernait Flig Balt, Vin Mod, Len Cannon et les autres embarqués sur le Kaiser, il se pourrait qu’elle fût de longue durée.

Aussi, en cette prévision, le régime de la prison allait-il être, dès ce jour, adouci pour les prisonniers. Ils ne furent pas tenus au secret. On n’interdit point leur cellule à ceux qui s’intéressaient à leur sort, entre autres M. Hawkins et aussi M. Zieger, dont les encouragements les soutenaient au milieu de ces rudes épreuves.

Le lord chief-justice du Royaume-Uni avait été mis au courant de cette passionnante affaire. Comme on attachait grande importance à retrouver le Kaiser, des ordres furent donnés de le rechercher dans cette portion du Pacifique qui comprend la Nouvelle-Guinée, l’archipel Bismarck, les Salomon et les Nouvelles-Hébrides. De son côté, le gouvernement allemand avait prescrit les mêmes mesures, en prévision de ce que le Kaiser était peut-être tombé entre les mains de pirates dans ces parages où l’Angleterre et l’Allemagne étendent leur double protection.

Cependant, à Hobart-Town, le magistrat enquêteur, avec le concours officieux de M. Hawkins, connaissant les démarches déjà faites, procéda à l’interrogatoire de nouveaux témoins. Les deux frères avaient été interrogés au sujet de leur séjour dans l’auberge de Great-Old-Man. S’étaient-ils aperçus que la chambre voisine de la leur eût été occupée?... Ils n’avaient rien pu répondre à ce sujet, car ils quittaient l’auberge dès le matin et n’y rentraient que pour se coucher.

Le magistrat et M. Hawkins, après s’être transportés à cette auberge, se rendirent compte que le balcon intérieur de la cour donnait accès sur la chambre voisine. Mais l’hôtelier, chez lequel passaient tant d’hôtes d’une nuit, ne se rappelait pas par qui cette seconde chambre avait été occupée.

D’autre part, lorsque le tenancier des Fresh-Fishs fut mandé devant le juge, il put affirmer, - et c’était vrai, - que Vin Mod et les autres avaient toujours logé dans son établissement dès l’arrivée du James-Cook à Hobart-Town jusqu’au jour de l’arrestation des frères Kip.

On était au 20 juillet. Près d’un mois venait de s’écouler depuis que Karl et Pieter Kip s’étaient remis entre les mains de la justice. Et l’enquête n’amenait aucun résultat... La base sur laquelle se fût appuyée la révision manquait toujours... M. Hawkins ne faiblissait pas; mais que de chagrin il éprouvait à constater son impuissance!

Malgré les réconfortantes paroles de M. Hawkins, Karl Kip, lui aussi, se laissait aller parfois à un complet découragement contre lequel son frère ne réagissait pas sans peine. Qui sait même s’il ne reprochait pas à Pieter d’avoir voulu revenir d’Amérique en Tasmanie pour se représenter devant cette justice qui les avait condamnés une première fois?...

“Et qui nous condamnera peut-être une seconde!... dit un jour Karl Kip.

- Non... frère, non..! s’écria Pieter. Dieu ne le permettrait pas...

- Il a bien permis qu’on nous ait condamnés à mort comme assassins et que notre nom soit voué à l’infamie!

- Aie confiance, pauvre frère, aie confiance!”

Pieter Kip ne pouvait répondre autre chose.

D’ailleurs, cette confiance, rien ne l’eût ébranlée en lui... Elle était aussi absolue que la conviction de M. Hawkins en leur innocence!

À cette époque, M. Zieger, dont le séjour à Hobart-Town ne devait pas se prolonger au-delà d’une quinzaine, s’occupait de trouver un embarquement sur un steamer allemand ou anglais à destination de Port-Praslin.

Ces quelques semaines, les deux familles venaient de les passer ensemble dans la plus complète intimité. Depuis le retour des frères Kip, elles partageaient les mêmes idées, les mêmes espérances. Quant à Mme Gibson, la pensée que deux innocents eussent été victimes d’une erreur la troublait profondément, et elle souffrait à voir se prolonger cette situation.

En effet, l’affaire restait toujours au même point en ce qui concernait la demande de révision. De nouvelles informations prises en Hollande, relativement aux frères Kip, n’avaient fait que confirmer les premières. Dans le pays où survivaient les souvenirs de leur famille, ils n’étaient pas nombreux ceux qui avaient tout d’abord admis la culpabilité, et, après que leur retour eut été connu à Groningue, l’erreur ne faisait plus de doute pour personne.

Mais, en somme, ce n’étaient là que des sentiments, et le magistrat n’obtenait rien de ce qui était juridiquement exigé pour déclarer recevable une demande en révision de l’affaire.

Enfin, à propos du navire allemand le Kaiser, depuis son départ de Port-Praslin, les nouvelles de mer ne signalaient son passage ni aux Salomon ni dans les archipels voisins. Impossible de savoir ce qu’étaient devenus Flig Balt, Vin Mod et autres qui pouvaient être impliqués dans le crime de Kerawara.

Aussi, au vif désespoir de M. Hawkins, le magistrat allait-il renoncer à continuer l’enquête.

Et alors, c’était la condamnation définitive, c’était la réintégration des deux frères au pénitencier de Port-Arthur, à moins qu’une grâce royale ne vînt mettre fin à de si terribles épreuves.

“Plutôt mourir que de rentrer au bagne!... s’écriait Karl Kip.

- Ou d’être l’objet d’une grâce déshonorante!...” répondait Pieter Kip.

Telle était la situation. On comprendra qu’elle fût de nature à troubler profondément les esprits, et même à provoquer quelque acte d’indignation publique.

Le départ de M. et Mme Zieger devait s’effectuer le 5 août suivant à bord d’un steamer anglais, chargé pour l’archipel Bismarck. On se souvient que, le lendemain même du crime de Kerawara, M. Hawkins avait fait en double épreuve la photographie du capitaine Gibson, représenté nu à mi-corps, la poitrine trouée par le kriss malais.

Or, avant de retourner à Port-Praslin, M. Zieger voulut que M. Hawkins lui fît une reproduction agrandie de la tête du capitaine, afin de la placer dans le salon de Wilhelmstaf.

L’armateur consentit volontiers au désir de M. Zieger. Il serait tiré plusieurs épreuves de ce nouveau cliché, qui resteraient entre les mains des familles Gibson, Hawkins et Zieger.

Le 27 juillet, dans la matinée, M. Hawkins procéda à cette opération dans son atelier, pourvu des meilleurs appareils, qui dès cette époque, grâce aux substances accélératrices, permettaient d’obtenir de véritables œuvres d’art. Voulant opérer dans les conditions les plus favorables, il se servit du cliché négatif fait à Kerawara, et sur lequel il ne prit que la tête du capitaine Gibson.

Après avoir placé ce cliché dans la chambre d’agrandissement, il mit son appareil au point de manière à obtenir une épreuve de grandeur naturelle.

Comme le jour était excellent, quelques instants suffirent, et la nouvelle photographie fut disposée dans un cadre placé sur un chevalet au milieu de l’atelier.

L’après-midi, M. Zieger et Nat Gibson, prévenus par M. Hawkins, se rendirent chez lui.

Il serait difficile de peindre leur émotion, lorsqu’ils se trouvèrent devant cette fidèle image d’Harry Gibson, le vivant portrait de l’infortuné capitaine.

C’était bien lui, sa figure sérieuse et sympathique tout empreinte d’une mortelle angoisse, tel qu’il avait été au moment où les meurtriers venaient de le frapper au cœur... à l’instant où il les regardait de ses yeux démesurément ouverts...

Nat Gibson s’était approché du chevalet, la poitrine gonflée de sanglots, en proie à une douleur que partageaient M. Hawkins et M. Zieger, tant il leur semblait que le capitaine fût là vivant devant eux...

Puis le fils se courba pour baiser le front de son père...

Soudain il s’arrête, il s’approche plus près encore, ses yeux dans les yeux du portrait...

Qu’a-t-il donc vu ou cru voir?... Sa figure est convulsée... sa physionomie bouleversée... Il est pâle comme un mort... On dirait qu’il veut parler et ne le peut... Ses lèvres sont contractées... la voix lui manque...

Enfin il se retourne... il saisit sur une table une de ces fortes loupes dont les photographes se servent pour retoucher les détails d’une épreuve... Il la promène sur la photographie, et le voici qui s’écrie d’une voix épouvantée:

“Eux!... eux!... les assassins de mon père!”

Et, au fond des yeux du capitaine Gibson, sur la rétine agrandie, apparaissaient, dans toute leur férocité, les figures de Flig Balt et de Vin Mod!

XVI - Conclusion

Depuis un certain temps déjà, depuis les curieuses expériences ophtalmologiques qui ont été entreprises par d'ingénieux savants, observateurs de grand mérite, il est démontré que les objets extérieurs, qui impressionnent la rétine de l'œil, peuvent s'y conserver indéfiniment. L'organe de la vision contient une substance particulière, le pourpre rétinien, sur laquelle se fixent précisément ces images. On parvient même à les y retrouver, avec une netteté parfaite, lorsque l'œil, après la mort, est enlevé et plongé dans un bain d'alun.

Or, ce que l'on savait relativement à cette fixation des images allait recevoir dans ces circonstances une indiscutable confirmation.

Au moment où le capitaine Gibson rendait le dernier souffle, son suprême regard - un regard d'effroi et d'angoisse, - s'était porté sur les meurtriers, et au fond de ses yeux se fixaient les figures de Flig Balt et de Vin Mod. Aussi, lorsque M. Hawkins prit la photographie de la victime, les moindres détails de la physionomie se reproduisirent sur la plaque de l'objectif. Rien qu'avec la première épreuve, en l'examinant à la loupe, on aurait pu retrouver, au fond de l'orbite, la face des deux assassins, et, de fait, on l'y retrouvait encore.

Mais, à ce moment, comment cette pensée fût-elle venue à M. Hawkins, à M. Zieger, à M. Hamburg?... Non! il avait fallu le concours de toutes ces circonstances, le désir exprimé par M. Zieger d'emporter à Port-Praslin la photographie agrandie du capitaine Gibson, cet agrandissement obtenu dans l'atelier de l'armateur. Et lorsque Nat Gibson s'est approché pour baiser le portrait de son père, voici qu'il a cru apercevoir au fond des yeux deux points brillants...

Il a pris une loupe, et, distinctement, il a vu, il a reconnu la figure du maître d’équipage et celle de son complice...

Maintenant M. Hawkins, M. Zieger les ont vues, les ont reconnues après lui!... Ce n’étaient pas Karl et Pieter Kip dont l’œil du mort avait conservé l’image... c’était Flig Balt, c’était Vin Mod!

Il existait donc, enfin, le fait nouveau, l’indiscutable présomption de l’innocence des accusés, qui permettrait de faire la révision du procès!... Aurait-on pu mettre en doute l’authenticité de la première épreuve faite à Kerawara?... Non, car elle avait déjà figuré au dossier criminel, et l’agrandissement qui venait d’être obtenu n’en était que la fidèle reproduction?...

“Ah! les malheureux!... les malheureux!... s’écria Nat Gibson. Innocents... et moi, tandis que vous les croyiez injustement condamnés... et vouliez les sauver...

- Mais c’est toi qui les sauves, Nat!... répondit M. Hawkins. Oui... toi... qui viens de voir ce que personne de nous n’aurait vu peut-être!...”

Une demi-heure après, muni de la grande et de la petite épreuve, l’armateur se présentait à la résidence et demandait à être reçu immédiatement par Son Excellence.

Sir Edward Carrigan donna ordre d’introduire M. Hawkins dans son cabinet.

Dès qu’il eut été mis au courant, le gouverneur déclara qu’il ressortait de ce fait une preuve matérielle d’une indiscutabilité absolue. L’innocence des frères Kip, l’injustice de la condamnation qui les avait frappés, tout cela était l’évidence même, et le magistrat n’hésiterait pas à introduire la demande en révision.

Ce fut aussi l’opinion de ce magistrat au bureau duquel se transporta M. Hawkins en quittant la résidence.

Il avait voulu faire ces deux visites avant de se rendre à la prison avec M. Zieger et Nat Gibson. Il ne s’agissait plus, à présent, de présomptions, mais de certitudes. C’était justement que tout le passé des deux frères protestait contre la sentence de la Cour criminelle!... Les auteurs de l’attentat étaient connus... C’était la victime qui les avait désignés elle-même... l’ancien maître d’équipage du James-Cook et le matelot Vin Mod!...

Comment cette nouvelle se répandit-elle dans toute la ville?... Où prit-elle naissance?... Qui fut le premier à raconter la découverte faite dans l’atelier de M. Hawkins?... On l’ignore!...

Mais, ce qui est certain, c’est que cela fut connu avant même que l’armateur se fût rendu à la Résidence. Aussi une foule aussi bruyante que passionnée s’amassa-t-elle bientôt devant la prison.

Du fond de leur cellule, Karl et Pieter Kip crurent entendre un gros tumulte, de longs cris qui traversaient l’air, et au milieu de ces cris leurs noms mille fois répétés...

Ils se rapprochèrent tous les deux de l’étroite fenêtre grillée qui s’ouvrait sur une cour intérieure. Ils écoutaient, en proie à la plus vive anxiété. Mais, de cette fenêtre, impossible de rien voir de ce qui se passait dans les rues voisines.

“Qu’y a-t-il donc?... demanda Karl Kip. Vient-on nous chercher pour nous ramener au bagne?... Ah! plutôt que d’aller reprendre cette vie épouvantable...”

Pieter Kip ne répondit rien, cette fois.

En ce moment, des pas précipités résonnèrent à travers le couloir.

La porte de la cellule s’ouvrit.

Nat Gibson parut sur le seuil, accompagné de M. Hawkins et de M. Zieger.

Nat Gibson s’arrêta, à demi courbé, les mains tendues vers les deux frères...

“Karl... Pieter... s’écria-t-il, pardonnez-moi... pardonnez-moi!...”

Ceux-ci ne comprenaient pas... ils ne pouvaient comprendre... Le fils du capitaine Gibson qui les suppliait... qui implorait leur pardon...

“Innocents!... cria alors par trois fois M. Hawkins. Nous avons enfin la preuve de votre innocence...

- Et moi qui ai pu croire!...” reprit Nat Gibson en tombant dans les bras que lui ouvrait Karl Kip.

Cette affaire de révision ne prit d’autre temps que celui des formalités légales. Il fut maintenant facile de rétablir les faits de la cause: c’était sur l’épave de la Wilhelmina qu’avait été trouvé le poignard malais appartenant aux frères Kip... C’était Vin Mod qui l’y avait volé et rapporté à bord... C’était cette arme dont Flig Balt ou lui s’étaient servis pour commettre le crime, et avec l’intention que ce crime pût être attribué aux deux passagers du James-Cook... C’étaient eux qui, plus tard, avaient laissé voir ce kriss au mousse Jim dans la cabine des deux frères... Quant aux papiers, à l'argent, au kriss saisis dans la chambre de l'auberge du Great-Old-Man, ils y avaient été déposés la veille du jour où Flig Balt allait être traduit devant le tribunal maritime... Cela n'avait pu être fait que par le complice du maître d'équipage, resté libre, par le matelot Vin Mod...

Et alors, plus de doute que l'homme qui avait, à cette époque, occupé dans l'auberge la chambre voisine de celle des frères Kip ne fût Vin Mod...

Dès l'arrivée du James-Cook, après s'être assuré que Karl et Pieter Kip logeraient en cette auberge, il était venu y retenir une chambre... Déguisé probablement afin de n'être point reconnu, en attendant le moment d'exécuter son projet, il avait glissé les papiers, les piastres, le kriss dans la valise où on les retrouva le lendemain, lors de la descente de police...

Et c'est bien ainsi qu'avait été perpétrée cette abominable machination.

Évidemment, les soupçons de M. Hawkins s'étaient depuis longtemps portés sur le maître d'équipage et sur son complice Vin Mod; mais il convenait que ces soupçons devinssent des certitudes. Aussi n'avait-il fallu rien moins que cette dernière révélation dont le public eut connaissance par les journaux d'Hobart-Town, ce qui provoqua un revirement aussi unanime que justifié.

À deux jours de là, les magistrats déclarèrent recevable la demande de révision. Appuyée sur un fait nouveau, elle permettait de présumer une erreur judiciaire, et les frères Kip furent renvoyés devant la Cour criminelle.

Aux débats de ce second procès, la foule fut plus nombreuse qu'au premier, mais, cette fois, entièrement favorable aux deux frères. Assurément il y eut lieu de regretter que certains témoins ne pussent être à la barre, d'où ils auraient passé sur le banc des accusés... Mais, entre autres, est-ce que Flig Balt et Vin Mod n’étaient pas là... au fond des yeux démesurément ouverts de leur victime?...

L’affaire dura à peine une heure. Elle se termina par la réhabilitation de Karl et de Pieter Kip, qui fut hautement proclamée aux applaudissements de l’auditoire.

Puis, dès qu’ils eurent été mis en liberté, lorsqu’ils se trouvèrent dans le salon de M. Hawkins, au milieu des familles Gibson et Zieger, c’est alors qu’ils furent payés là de toutes les misères, de toutes les hontes qui les avaient si longtemps, si durement accablés.

Inutile d’ajouter que des offres de service leur vinrent non seulement par M. Hawkins, mais par tous ses amis. Si Karl Kip voulait reprendre la mer, il trouverait un commandement à Hobart-Town... Si Pieter Kip voulait se remettre aux affaires, il trouverait les négociants prêts à lui venir en aide... Et n’était-ce pas ce que tous deux avaient de mieux à faire, maintenant que la maison de Groningue avait été liquidée à leur avantage?... Aussi, dès que le James-Cook fut réarmé, il repartit sous le commandement du capitaine Kip, avec les braves matelots de son ancien équipage.

Pour achever cette histoire, il convient de dire que plusieurs mois s’écoulèrent avant que la justice reçût des nouvelles du Kaiser, sur lequel étaient embarqués Flig Balt, Vin Mod et leurs camarades ou plutôt leurs complices. On apprit alors que ce navire, qui exerçait la piraterie dans les parages des Salomon et des Nouvelles-Hébrides, venait d’être capturé par un aviso anglais. Les matelots du Kaiser, tous gens de sac et de corde, se défendirent comme se défendent les misérables que la potence attend en cas de défaite. Nombre de ces malfaiteurs furent tués, - parmi eux Flig Balt et

Len Cannon. Quant à Vin Mod, il était parvenu à gagner une des îles de l’archipel avec quelques autres, et l’on ignorait ce qu’il était devenu.

Tel est le dénouement de cette cause célèbre, - exemple fort rare, d’ailleurs, des erreurs judiciaires, - et qui eut un si grand retentissement sous le nom de “l’Affaire des frères Kip”.

TRAVELING SCHOLARSHIPS

This 1903 adventure novel has sadly never been translated into English. The novel is set in Antilian School, a renowned London college, which hosts only young European people born in the Caribbean. Nine of its students are to be awarded travel grants offered by the school’s sponsor, a wealthy Barbados woman.

Harry Markel, a pirate, has been captured and transferred to England, but he escapes along with companion John Carpenter and the rest of his accomplices — known collectively as the “Pirates of the Halifax” — and takes the Alert, a three-masted ship leaving, after having massacred the captain and crew. It is precisely the ship that’s just embarking the winners, accompanied by their mentor Horatio Patterson, the bursar of the school.

The original French text has been provided in this edition.

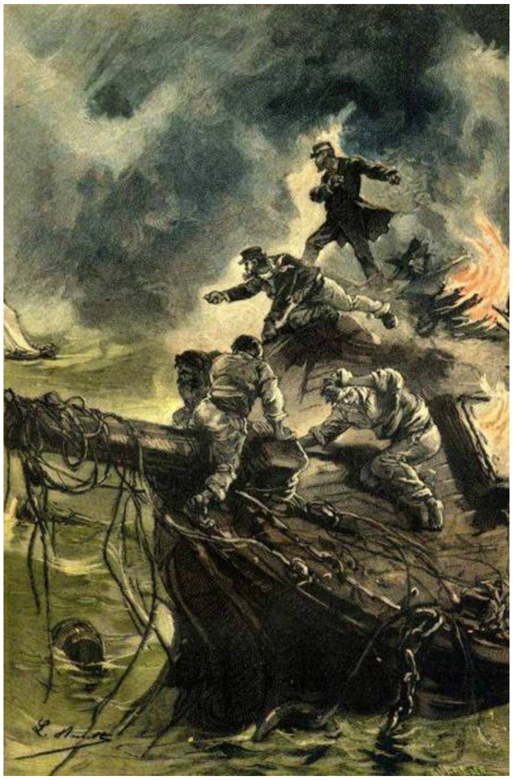

One of the original illustrations from the French edition

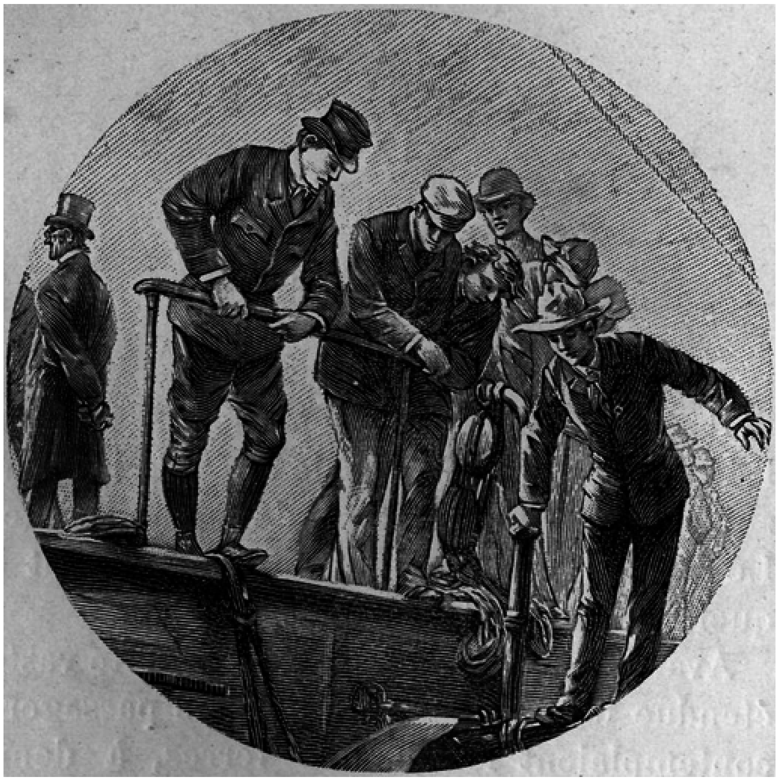

Une illustration originale

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PREMIERE PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

I

Le concours

“Premiers classés: ex aequo, Louis Clodion et Roger Hinsdale”, proclama, d’une voix retentissante, le directeur, Julian Ardagh.

Et les bruyants vivats, les hurrahs multiples d’accueillir avec force battements de mains les deux lauréats de ce concours.

Puis, du haut d’une estrade élevée au milieu de la grande cour d’Antilian School, continuant à lire la liste placée devant ses yeux, le directeur fit connaître les noms suivants:

“Deuxième classé: Axel Wickborn.

“Troisième classé: Albertus Leuwen.”

Nouvelle salve d’applaudissements, moins nourrie que la précédente, mais qui venait toujours d’un auditoire très sympathique.

M. Ardagh reprit:

“Quatrième classé: John Howard.

“Cinquième classé: Magnus Anders.

“Sixième classé: Niels Harboe.

“Septième classé: Hubert Perkins.”

Et, l’élan étant donné, les bravos se prolongèrent, grâce à la vitesse acquise.

Il restait un dernier nom à proclamer, ce concours très spécial devant comprendre neuf lauréats.

Ce nom fut alors lancé à l’assistance par le directeur:

“Huitième classé: Tony Renault.”

Bien que ledit Tony Renault arrivât au dernier rang, les bravos et les hips ne lui furent point ménagés. Bon camarade, aussi serviable que dégourdi, nature de primesaut, il ne comptait que des amis parmi les pensionnaires d’Antilian School.

À l’appel de son nom, chacun des lauréats était monté sur l’estrade pour recevoir le shake hand de M. Ardagh; puis il avait été reprendre sa place au milieu de ses camarades moins favorisés, qui l’acclamaient de grand coeur.

On n’est pas sans avoir remarqué la diversité des noms des neuf lauréats, qui indiquait des origines différentes au point de vue de la nationalité. Cette diversité s’expliquera par cela seul que l’établissement que dirigeait M. Julian Ardagh à Londres, Oxford street, 314, était connu, et très avantageusement, sous la dénomination d’Antilian School.

Depuis une quinzaine d’années, cet établissement avait été fondé pour les fils de colons originaires des grandes et petites Antilles, — de l’Antilie, comme on dit actuellement. C’était là que les élèves venaient commencer, continuer ou achever leurs études en Angleterre. Ils y restaient généralement jusqu’à leur vingt et unième année, et recevaient une instruction très pratique, mais aussi très complète, à la fois littéraire, scientifique, industrielle, commerciale. Antilian School comptait alors une soixantaine de pensionnaires, qui payaient un prix assez élevé.

Ils en sortaient aptes à toutes les carrières, soit qu’ils dussent rester en Europe, soit qu’ils dussent retourner en Antilie, si leurs familles n’avaient point abandonné cette partie des Indes occidentales.

Il était rare, au cours de l’année scolaire, qu’il ne s’y rencontrât pas, en nombre inégal, d’ailleurs, des Espagnols, des Danois, des Anglais, des Français, des Hollandais, des Suédois; même des Venizolans, tous originaires de cet archipel des îles du Vent et des îles sous le Vent dont les puissances européennes ou américaines se partageaient la possession.

Cette école internationale, uniquement affectée aux jeunes Antilians, était alors dirigée, avec le concours de professeurs très distingués, par M. Julian Ardagh. Âgé de cinquante ans, sérieux et prudent administrateur, il méritait avec juste raison toute la confiance des familles. Il avait un personnel enseignant d’une incontestable valeur, fonctionnant sous sa responsabilité, qu’il s’agît des lettres ou des sciences ou des arts. On ne négligeait pas non plus, à Antilian School, ces entraînements physiques, ces exercices de sport si recommandés, si pratiqués dans le Royaume-Uni, le cricket, la boxe, les joutes, le crocket, le foot-ball, la natation, la danse, l’équitation, le bicyclisme, le canotage, enfin toutes les branches de la gymnastique moderne.

M. Ardagh s’appliquait aussi à resserrer, à fusionner les divers tempéraments, les caractères si mélangés que présentait une réunion de jeunes garçons de nationalités différentes, à faire autant que possible de ses pensionnaires “des Antilians”, à leur inspirer une sympathie durable les uns pour les autres. Il n’y réussissait pas toujours comme il l’aurait voulu. L’instinct de race, plus puissant que le bon exemple et les bons conseils, l’emportait parfois. Enfin, ne restât-il que quelques traces de cette fusion au sortir de l’école, et cela dût-il avoir quelque résultat dans l’avenir, ce système de co-éducation valait d’être approuvé et faisait honneur à l’établissement d’Oxford street.

Il va de soi que les multiples langues en usage dans les Indes occidentales étaient courantes entre pensionnaires, M. Ardagh avait même eu l’heureuse idée de les imposer à tour de rôle pendant les classes et les récréations. Une semaine, on parlait l’anglais, une autre, on parlait le français, le hollandais, l’espagnol, le danois, le suédois. Sans doute les pensionnaires de race anglo-saxonne se trouvaient en majorité dans cet établissement, et peut-être tendaient-ils à y imposer une sorte de domination physique et morale. Mais les autres îles de l’Antilie y étaient représentées en proportion suffisante. Même cette île de Saint-Barthélemy, la seule qui dépendît des États scandinaves, possédait plusieurs élèves, entre autres Magnus Anders, placé au cinquième rang dans le concours.

À tout prendre, la tâche de M. Ardagh et de ses collaborateurs n’était pas exempte de certaines difficultés pratiques. Ne fallait-il pas un véritable esprit de justice, une méthode sûre et continue, une main habile et ferme, pour empêcher, parmi ces fils de familles aisées, des rivalités de se produire lorsqu’elles perçaient malgré la volonté de les contenir.

Or, précisément, à propos de ce concours, on aurait pu craindre que les ambitions personnelles eussent amené quelque désordre, des réclamations, des jalousies, lorsque les lauréats seraient proclamés. En fin de compte, le résultat avait été satisfaisant, un Français et un Anglais occupaient le premier rang, ayant obtenu le même nombre de points. Il est vrai, si c’était un sujet de la reine Victoria qui venait à l’avant-dernier rang, c’était un citoyen de la République française qui figurait au dernier, Tony Renault, dont aucun des pensionnaires ne se fût montré jaloux. Intermédiairement, aux autres places se succédaient divers natifs des Antilles anglaises, françaises, danoises, hollandaises, suédoises. Pas de Venizolans, ni d'ailleurs d'Espagnols, bien que le personnel scolaire de l'établissement en comptât une quinzaine à cette époque. Il y a lieu d'observer, au surplus, que, cette année-là, les élèves originaires de Cuba, de Saint-Domingue, de Porto-Rico, les grandes Antilles, compris entre douze et quinze ans, se trouvaient parmi les plus jeunes et n'avaient pas été en état de prendre part à ce concours qui exigeait au moins dix-sept ans d'âge.

En effet, le concours avait porté non seulement sur les matières scientifiques et littéraires, mais aussi, — on ne saurait s'en étonner — sur les questions ethnologiques, géographiques, commerciales, qui se rattachaient à l'archipel des Antilles, son histoire, son passé, son présent, son avenir, ses relations avec les divers États européens, qui, après le hasard des premières découvertes, en avaient relié une part à leur empire colonial.

Et, maintenant, voici quel était le but dudit concours, quels avantages devaient en résulter pour les lauréats: il s'agissait de mettre à leur disposition des bourses de voyage et de leur permettre de satisfaire pendant quelques mois ce goût des explorations, des déplacements, si naturel à des jeunes garçons n'ayant pas encore dépassé la vingt et unième année.

Ainsi donc, ils étaient neuf qui, grâce à leur rang, allaient pouvoir, non point courir le monde entier, comme la plupart d'entre eux l'auraient voulu, mais visiter quelque intéressante contrée de l'ancien ou même du nouveau continent.

Et qui avait eu l'idée de fonder ces bourses de voyage?… C'était une riche Antilienne d'origine anglaise, Mrs Kethlen Seymour, qui habitait la Barbade, une des colonies britanniques de l'archipel, dont le nom fut alors prononcé pour la première fois par M. Ardagh.

Que l’on juge si ce nom fut salué par les hurrahs de l’assistance et avec quel entrain ces cris retentirent:

“Hip!… hip!… hip!… pour mistress Seymour!”

Toutefois, si le directeur d’Antilian School avait révélé le nom de la bienfaitrice, de quel voyage s’agissait-il? Ni lui ni personne ne le savaient encore. Mais, avant vingt-quatre heures, on serait fixé à cet égard. Le directeur allait câbler à la Barbade le résultat du concours, et Mrs Kethlen Seymour lui répondrait par un télégramme indiquant tout au moins en quelle région les boursiers effectueraient ce voyage.

Et l’on imaginera volontiers avec quelle vivacité les propos s’échangèrent entre ces pensionnaires qui s’envolaient déjà en idée vers les plus curieux pays de ce monde sublunaire, les plus lointains comme les plus inconnus. Sans doute, selon leur tempérament ou leur caractère, ils s’abandonnaient ou se réservaient, mais la vérité est que c’était un emballement général.

“J’aime à croire, disait Roger Hinsdale, anglais jusqu’au bout des ongles, que nous irons visiter quelque portion du domaine colonial de l’Angleterre, et il est assez vaste pour qu’on y puisse choisir…

— Ce sera l’Afrique centrale, affirmait Louis Clodion, la fameuse portentosa Africa, comme dirait notre brave économe, et nous pourrions marcher sur les traces des grands découvreurs!…

— Non… une exploration dans les régions polaires, disait Magnus Anders, qui eût volontiers marché sur les traces de son glorieux compatriote Nansen…

— Je demande que ce soit l'Australie, disait John Howard, et, même après Tasman, Dampier, Burs, Vancouver, Baudin, Dumont d'Urville, il reste bien des découvertes à faire, peut-être de nouvelles mines d'or à exploiter…

— C'est plutôt quelque belle contrée de l'Europe, souhaitait Albertus Leuwen que son caractère de Hollandais ne portait point aux exagérations. Qui sait, même, une simple excursion en Écosse ou en Irlande…

— Allons donc! s'écriait cet exubérant Tony Renault. Je parie, à tout le moins, pour un voyage autour du monde…

— Voyons, déclarait le sage Axel Wickborn, nous ne disposerons que de sept à huit semaines, et l'exploration ne pourra être que restreinte aux pays voisins."

Il avait raison, le jeune Danois. D'ailleurs, les familles n'eussent pas accepté une absence de plusieurs mois, qui aurait exposé leurs enfants aux dangers d'une expédition lointaine, et M. Ardagh n'en eût pas pris la responsabilité.

Alors, après avoir discuté sur les intentions de Mrs Kethlen Seymour relativement à l'excursion projetée, autre discussion sur la manière dont s'accomplirait le voyage.

"Est-ce que nous le ferons à pied, en touristes, sac au des, bâton à la main?… demanda Hubert Perkins.

— Non, en voiture… en mail-coach!… prétendit Niels Harboe.

— En chemin de fer, répliqua Albertus Leuwen, avec billets circulaires et sous les auspices de l'agence Cook…

— Je crois plutôt qu'il s'effectuera à bord d'un paquebot, peut-être un transatlantique, déclara Magnus Anders, qui se voyait déjà en plein océan.

— Non, en ballon, s'écria Tony Renault, et en route pour le pôle Nord!"

Et la discussion de continuer de plus belle, inutilement on en conviendra, mais avec la fougue si naturelle à de jeunes garçons, bien que Roger Hinsdale et Louis Clodion y missent plus de réserve, personne d'ailleurs ne voulant démordre de son opinion.

Le directeur dut donc intervenir, sinon pour

les mettre d'accord, du moins pour leur intimer d'attendre la réponse qui serait faite au télégramme expédié à la Barbade.

"Patience! dit-il. J'ai envoyé à mistress Kethlen Seymour le nom des lauréats, leur classement, l'indication de leur nationalité, et cette généreuse dame nous fera connaître ses intentions relativement à l'emploi des bourses de voyage. Si elle répond par dépêche, dès aujourd'hui, dans quelques heures, nous saurons à quoi nous en tenir. Si elle répond par lettre, il y aura lieu d'attendre six ou sept jours. Et, maintenant, à l'étude, et soignez vos devoirs…

— Six jours!… répondit ce diable de Tony Renault. Jamais je ne pourrai vivre jusque-là!"

Et peut-être exprimait-il sous cette forme l'état d'âme de quelques-uns de ses camarades, Hubert Perkins, Niels Harboe, Axel Wickborn, de tempérament presque aussi vif que le sien. Louis Clodion et Roger

Hinsdale, les deux ex aequo du concours, montraient plus de calme. Quant au Suédois et au Hollandais, ils ne se départissaient pas de leur flegme originel. Mais si Antilian School eût possédé des pensionnaires américains, très probablement ce n’est pas à ceux-ci qu’aurait été décerné le prix de patience.

En réalité, la surexcitation de ces jeunes esprits s’expliquait. Ne pas savoir en quelle partie du monde Mrs Kethlen Seymour allait les envoyer! Il faut remarquer, d’ailleurs, qu’on n’était qu’à la mi-juin, et, si le temps qui serait consacré au voyage devait être celui des vacances, le départ ne s’effectuerait guère avant six semaines.

Et cela était supposable, ainsi que le pensait M. Ardagh, d’accord à ce sujet avec la majorité d’Antilian School. Dans ces conditions, l’absence des jeunes boursiers ne durerait pas plus de deux mois. Ils seraient de retour pour la rentrée des classes en octobre, ce qui satisferait à la fois les familles et le personnel de l’établissement.

Donc, étant donnée la durée des vacances, il ne pouvait s’agir d’une expédition en des régions lointaines. Aussi les plus sages se gardaient-ils bien de voyager en imagination à travers les steppes de la Sibérie, les déserts de l’Asie centrale, les forêts de l’Afrique ou les pampas de l’Amérique. Sans quitter l’ancien continent ni même l’Europe, que d’intéressantes contrées à visiter en dehors du Royaume-Uni, l’Allemagne, la Russie, la Suisse, l’Autriche, la France, l’Italie, l’Espagne, la Hollande, la Grèce! Que de souvenirs à noter sur l’album du touriste et quelle nouveauté d’impressions pour ces jeunes Antilians, dont la plupart n’étaient encore que des enfants lorsqu’ils avaient traversé l’Atlantique en venant d’Amérique en Europe. Même réduit aux États voisins de l’Angleterre, ce voyage devait exciter dans une large mesure leur impatience et leur curiosité.

Enfin, comme le télégramme n’arriva ni ce jour-là ni les jours suivants, c’est que celui du directeur aurait une lettre pour réponse, une lettre partie de la Barbade à l’adresse de M. Julian Ardagh, Antilian School, 314, Oxford street, London, Royaume-Uni, Great Britain.

Et, un mot explicatif à propos du mot Antilian, qui figurait au-dessus de la porte de l’institution.

Nul doute qu’il n’eût été fabriqué tout exprès. En effet, dans la nomenclature de la géographie britannique, les Antilles sont appelées Carribee Islands. Sur les cartes du Royaume-Uni comme sur les cartes de l’Amérique, on ne les désigne pas autrement. Mais Carribee Islands, cela signifie îles des Caraïbes, et ce mot rappelle trop fâcheusement les farouches indigènes de l’archipel, les scènes de massacre et de cannibalisme qui désolèrent les Indes occidentales. Voit-on sur les prospectus de l’établissement cet abominable titre: École des Caraïbes?… N’aurait-il pas donné à penser qu’on y enseignait l’art de s’entretuer avec les recettes de la cuisine de chair humaine?… Aussi “Antilian School” avait-il paru plus convenable pour des jeunes garçons originaires des Antilles et auxquels il ne s’agissait que de fournir une éducation purement européenne.

Donc, à défaut de dépêche, c’était une lettre qu’il fallait attendre, — à moins que ce concours pour bourses de voyage ne fût qu’une mystification de mauvais goût. Mais non! une correspondance avait été échangée entre Mrs

Kethlen Seymour et M. Ardagh. La généreuse dame n’était point un être imaginaire, elle habitait la Barbade, on l’y connaissait de longue date, et elle passait pour l’une des plus riches propriétaire de l’île.

Et, maintenant, il ne restait plus qu’à faire bonne provision de patience, en guettant chaque matin et chaque soir l’heure du courrier de l’étranger. Cela va de soi, c’étaient plus particulièrement les neuf lauréats qui se mettaient aux fenêtres donnant sur Oxford street afin d’apercevoir le facteur du quartier. Du plus loin que se montrait sa tunique rouge — et l’on sait si le rouge est visible à grande distance, — les intéressés descendaient l’escalier quatre à quatre, se précipitaient dans la cour, couraient vers la grande porte, interpellaient le facteur, l’étourdissaient de leurs questions, et, pour un peu, eussent fait main basse sur sa boîte.

Non! aucune lettre des Antilles, aucune! Dès lors, n’y avait-il pas lieu d’envoyer un second câblogramme à Mrs Kethlen Seymour, afin de s’assurer si le premier était bien parvenu à son adresse, et en la pressant de télégraphier sa réponse?…

Et, alors, en ces vives imaginations surgissaient mille craintes dans le but d’expliquer cet inexplicable retard. Est-ce que le paquebot qui fait le service postal entre les Antilles et l’Angleterre avait été désemparé par quelque gros temps?… Est-ce qu’il avait sombré, à la suite d’une collision?… Est-ce qu’il s’était échoué sur quelque bas-fond inconnu?… Est-ce que la Barbade avait disparu dans un de ces tremblements de terre qui sont si terribles aux Indes occidentales?… Est-ce que la généreuse dame avait péri dans l’un de ces cataclysmes?… Est-ce que la France, la Hollande, le Danemark, la Suède, le Royaume-Uni venaient de perdre les plus beaux fleurons de leur empire colonial dans le Nouveau-Monde?…

“Non, non, répétait M. Ardagh, une telle catastrophe serait connue!… Tous les détails en seraient arrivés aux journaux!…

— Voilà! répondait Tony Renault. Si les transatlantiques emportaient des pigeons, on saurait toujours s'ils font bonne route!"

Très juste, mais le service des colombogrammes ne fonctionnait pas encore à cette époque, au grand regret des pensionnaires d'Antilian School.

Cependant cet état de choses ne pouvait durer. Les professeurs ne parvenaient pas à réduire le trouble des esprits. On ne travaillait plus ni dans les classes ni dans les salles d'étude. Non seulement les primés du concours, mais leurs camarades, pensaient à tout autre chose qu'à leurs devoirs.

Pure exagération, on en conviendra. Quant à M. Ardagh, il ne ressentait aucune inquiétude. N'était-il pas assez naturel que Mrs Kethlen Seymour n'eût pas répondu par un télégramme qui n'aurait point été assez explicite? Seule une lettre, et une lettre détaillée, pouvait contenir les instructions auxquelles il y aurait lieu de se conformer, faire connaître ce que serait ce voyage, dans quelles conditions il s'effectuerait, à quelle époque il devrait être entrepris, combien de temps il durerait, comment les dépenses en seraient réglées, à quel chiffre s'élèveraient les bourses mises à la disposition des neuf lauréats. Ces explications, à tout le moins, exigeraient bien deux ou trois pages et ne pouvaient se formuler dans ce langage négrogrammatique que parlent encore les noirs des colonies indiennes.

Mais toutes ces justes observations demeurèrent sans effet et le trouble ne se calmait pas. Et puis, voici que les pensionnaires qui ne bénéficiaient pas des avantages du concours, jaloux au fond du succès de leurs camarades, commençaient à les plaisanter, à les "blaguer", pour employer un mot qui figurera bientôt en bonne place dans le dictionnaire de l'Académie française. C'était là une mystification complète… Il n'y avait ni un centime ni un farthing dans ces prétendues bourses de voyage… Ce Mécène en jupons, qui avait nom Kethlen Seymour n’existait même pas!… Le concours n’était qu’un de ces “humbugs” importés d’Amérique, leur pays d’origine par excellence!…

Enfin M. Ardagh s’arrêta à ce projet: il attendrait l’arrivée à Liverpool du prochain paquebot qui apportait le courrier des Antilles, annoncé pour le 23 courant. Ce jour-là s’il n’y avait pas une lettre de Mrs Kethlen Seymour à son adresse, il lui enverrait une seconde dépêche.

Ce ne fut pas nécessaire. Le 23, dans le courrier de l’après-midi, vint une lettre timbrée de la Barbade. Cette lettre était de la main même de Mrs Kethlen Seymour, et, suivant les intentions de cette dame — ce que l’on tenait surtout à savoir, — les bourses étaient affectées à un voyage aux Antilles.

CHAPITRE II

II

Les idées de Mrs Kethlen Seymour

Un voyage à diverses îles des Indes occidentales, voilà donc ce que réservait la générosité de Mrs Kethlen Seymour! Eh bien, semble-t-il, les lauréats avaient lieu de se déclarer satisfaits.

Sans doute on devait renoncer aux perspectives de ces lointaines explorations à travers l’Afrique, l’Asie, l’Océanie, dans les contrées peu connues du nouveau continent, comme dans les régions du pôle sud ou du pôle nord!

Cependant, s’il y eut un premier sentiment de légère déception, s’il fallut revenir du pays des rêves plus vite qu’on n’y était allé, s’il ne s’agissait que d’un voyage en Antilie, c’était néanmoins un agréable emploi des prochaines vacances, et M. Ardagh en fit aisément comprendre tous les avantages aux élus du concours.

En effet, ces Antilles, n’était-ce pas leur terre natale?… La plupart, ils les avaient quittées, encore enfants, pour venir faire leur éducation en Europe… C’est à peine s’ils avaient foulé le sol de ces îles qui les avaient vus naître, à peine si leur mémoire en avait conservé quelque souvenir!…

Bien que leurs familles eussent abandonné cet archipel, — à l’exception d’une seule, — sans avoir la pensée d’y revenir, il en était parmi eux qui retrouveraient là des parents, des amis, et, tout considéré, pour de jeunes Antilians, c’était un beau voyage en perspective.

On en jugera d’après la situation personnelle de chacun des neuf lauréats, auxquels étaient attribuées les bourses de voyage.

Et d’abord ceux qui étaient d’origine anglaise, et en plus grand nombre, à Antilian School:

Roger Hinsdale, de Sainte-Lucie, vingt ans, dont la famille, retirée des affaires avec une belle aisance, habitait Londres;

John Howard, de la Dominique, dix-huit ans, dont les parents étaient venus se fixer à Manchester comme industriels;

Hubert Perkins, d’Antigoa, dix-sept ans, dont la famille, comprenant son père, sa mère, ses deux jeunes sœurs, n’avait jamais quitté l’île natale, et qui, son éducation terminée, devra y revenir pour entrer dans une maison de commerce.

Voici, maintenant, pour les Français, au nombre d’une douzaine à Antilian School:

Louis Clodion, de la Guadeloupe, vingt ans, appartenant à une famille d’armateurs, établie à Nantes depuis quelques années;

Tony Renault, de la Martinique, dix-sept ans, l’aîné de quatre enfants, famille de fonctionnaires, qui demeurait à Paris.

Au tour des Danois:

Niels Harboe, de Saint-Thomas, dix-neuf ans, n’ayant plus ni père ni mère, et dont le frère, plus

âgé que lui de six ans, était toujours aux Antilles;

Axel Wickborn, de Sainte-Croix, dix-neuf ans, dont la famille faisait le commerce des bois au Danemark, à Copenhague.

Les Hollandais étaient représentés par Albertus Leuwen, de Saint-Martin, vingt ans, fils unique, dont les parents habitaient les environs de Rotterdam.

Quant à Magnus Anders, Suédois d’origine, né à Saint-Barthélemy, dix-neuf ans, sa famille était venue récemment s’installer à Gotteborg, en Suède, et n’avait pas renoncé à retourner aux Antilles, après fortune faite.

On l’avouera, ce voyage, qui les ramènerait pendant quelques semaines au pays d’origine, était de nature à satisfaire ces jeunes Antilians, et qui sait si la plupart d’entre eux eussent été destinés à le jamais revoir! Seuls, Louis Clodion avait un oncle, frère de sa mère, à la Guadeloupe; Niels Harboe, un frère à Saint-Thomas, et Hubert Perkins toute sa famille à Antigoa. Mais leurs camarades ne conservaient plus aucune attache de parenté avec les autres îles de l’Antilie, abandonnées sans esprit de retour.

Les plus âgés des boursiers étaient Roger Hinsdale, un peu hautain de caractère; Louis Clodion, garçon sérieux et laborieux, sympathique à tous; Albertus Leuwen, dont le sang hollandais ne s’était point réchauffé au soleil des Antilles. Après eux venaient Niels Harboe, dont la vocation ne se déclarait pas encore; Magnus Anders, très passionné pour les choses de la mer, et qui se préparait à entrer dans la marine marchande; Axel Wickborn, que ses goûts porteraient à servir dans l’armée danoise; puis, à citer par rang d’âge, John Howard, un peu moins britannisé que son compatriote Roger Hinsdale; enfin les deux plus jeunes, Hubert Perkins, destiné au commerce, ainsi qu’il a été dit, et Tony Renault, à qui ses goûts de canotage pourraient bien donner pour l’avenir celui de la navigation.

À présent, question d’une certaine importance, est-ce que ce voyage allait comprendre toutes les Antilles, grandes et petites, celles du Vent et celles sous le Vent?… Mais une complète exploration de l’archipel aurait exigé plus que les quelques semaines dont les lauréats disposeraient. En effet, on ne compte par moins de trois cent cinquante îles ou îlots dans cet archipel des Indes occidentales, et, en admettant que cela fût possible, rien qu’à en visiter une ou un par jour, il eût fallu consacrer à cette très sommaire visite une année entière.

Non! telles n’étaient pas les intentions de Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Les pensionnaires d’Antilian School devaient se borner à passer quelques jours chacun dans son île, à revoir les parents ou amis qui s’y trouvaient alors, à remettre encore une fois le pied sur le sol natal.

Dans ces conditions, on le voit, il y aurait à éliminer tout d’abord de l’itinéraire les grandes Antilles, Cuba, Haïti, Saint-Domingue, Porto-Rico, puisque les pensionnaires espagnols n’avaient point été classés dans le concours, la Jamaïque, puisque aucun des lauréats n’était originaire de cette colonie britannique, et Curaçao, la hollandaise, pour pareille raison. De même les petites Antilles, qui sont sous la domination vénézolane, ne seraient pas visitées, ni Tortigos, ni Marguerite, ni Tortuga, ni Blanquilla, ni Ordeilla, ni Avas. Donc, les seules îles de la Micro-Antilie où aborderaient les titulaires des bourses de voyage seraient Sainte-Lucie, la Dominique, Antigoa — anglaises, — la Guadeloupe, la Martinique, françaises, — Saint-Thomas, Sainte-Croix, danoises, — Saint-Barthélemy, suédoise, et Saint-Martin qui appartient par moitié à la Hollande et à la France.

Ces neuf îles étaient comprises dans l’ensemble géographique des îles du Vent, auxquelles feraient successivement relâche les neuf pensionnaires d’Antilian School.

Toutefois, personne ne s’étonnera qu’à cet itinéraire il eût été ajouté une dixième île, qui, sans doute, recevrait la plus longue et aussi la plus légitime visite.

C’était la Barbade, du même groupe des îles du Vent, l’une des plus importantes du domaine colonial que le Royaume-Uni possède en ces parages.

Là, en effet, résidait Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

C’était bien le moins, et par un très naturel sentiment de gratitude, que ses obligés dussent lui rendre hommage.

On imaginera sans peine que, si cette généreuse Anglaise tenait à recevoir les neuf lauréats d’Antilian School, ceux-ci, de leur côté, éprouvaient le plus vif désir de connaître l’opulente indigène de la Barbade et de lui exprimer leur reconnaissance.

Ils ne le regretteraient pas, d’ailleurs, et un post-scriptum de la lettre, qui fut communiquée par M. Julian Ardagh, montra jusqu’où Mrs Kethlen Seymour poussait la générosité.

En effet, en dehors des dépenses qu’occasionnerait ce voyage, — dépenses qu’elle prenait entièrement à sa charge, — une somme de sept cents livres1 serait remise à chacun d’eux au départ de la Barbade.

Quant à la durée dudit voyage, le temps des vacances y suffirait-il?… Oui, à la condition d’en devancer d’un mois le début réglementaire, — ce

1 17 500 francs. qui permettrait de franchir l’Atlantique en belle saison à l’aller comme au retour.

Au total, rien de plus acceptable que ces conditions, qui furent accueillies avec enthousiasme. Il n’y avait point à craindre que les familles fissent des objections à un déplacement si agréable et si profitable à tous les points de vue. De sept à huit semaines, c’était la limite que l’on pouvait lui assigner en tenant compte des retards possibles, et les jeunes boursiers reviendraient en Europe, le coeur plein des inoubliables souvenirs de leurs chères îles du Nouveau-Continent.

Enfin, une dernière question se posait sur laquelle les familles furent bientôt fixées.

Est-ce que les lauréats seraient livrés à eux-mêmes, eux dont les plus âgés n’avaient point encore dépassé leur vingtième année?… En somme, lorsque la main d’un maître ne serait plus là pour les rapprocher, pour les contenir?… Lorsqu’ils visiteraient cet archipel appartenant aux divers États européens, n’y avait-il pas à craindre des jalousies, des heurts, si quelque question de nationalité se soulevait?… Oublieraient-ils que tous étaient d’origine antilienne, pensionnaires de la même école, alors que l’intervention du sagace et prudent M. Ardagh ne pourrait plus se produire?…

C’était un peu aux difficultés de ce genre que songeait le directeur d’Antilian School, et, s’il ne lui était pas loisible d’accompagner ses élèves, il se demandait qui saurait le remplacer dans une tâche parfois difficile?…

Du reste, ce côté de la question n’avait point échappé à l’esprit très pratique de Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Aussi verra-t-on comment elle l’avait résolu, car la prudente dame n’eût jamais admis que ces jeunes garçons fussent soustraits à toute autorité pendant ce voyage.

Maintenant, comment s’effectuerait-il à travers l’Atlantique?… Serait-ce à bord de l’un des paquebots qui font un service régulier entre l’Angleterre et les Antilles?… Des places y seraient-elles prises, des cabines retenues, au nom de chacun des neuf lauréats?…

On le répète, ils ne devaient point voyager à leurs frais, et même aucune dépense de cette sorte ne devait être imputée sur les sept cents livres qui leur seraient remises, lorsqu’ils quitteraient la Barbade pour revenir en Europe.

Or, dans la lettre de Mrs Kethlen Seymour se trouvait un paragraphe qui répondait à cette question et dans les termes suivants:

“Le transport à travers l’océan sera payé de mes propres deniers. Un navire, frété pour les Antilles, attendra ses passagers dans le port de Cork, Queenstown, Irlande. Ce navire, c’est l’Alert, capitaine Paxton, qui est prêt à prendre la mer et dont le départ est fixé au 30 juin. Le capitaine Paxton compte recevoir ses passagers à cette date, et il lèvera l’ancre dès leur arrivée.”

Décidément, ces jeunes boursiers allaient voyager sinon en princes, tout au moins en yachtmen. Un navire à leur disposition, qui les conduirait aux Indes occidentales et les ramènerait en Angleterre! Mrs Kethlen Seymour faisait bien les choses! Elle pourvoyait à tout magnifiquement, cette Mécène albionesque! En vérité, si les millionnaires employaient toujours les millions à de si belles œuvres, il n’y aurait qu’à leur souhaiter d’en posséder beaucoup, et même davantage!

Il arriva donc ceci dans ce petit monde d’Antilian School, c’est que, si les lauréats étaient déjà enviés de leurs camarades lorsqu’on ignorait encore les dispositions de la généreuse dame, cette envie s’éleva au plus haut degré lorsqu’on apprit dans quelles conditions d’agrément et de confort s’effectuerait ce voyage.

Pour eux, ils étaient enchantés. La réalité atteignait à la hauteur de leurs rêves. Après avoir traversé l’Atlantique, ce serait à bord de leur yacht qu’ils visiteraient les principales îles de l’archipel antilien.

“Et quand partons-nous?… disaient-ils.

— Dès demain…

— Dès aujourd’hui…

— Non… nous avons encore six jours… faisaient observer les plus sages.

— Ah! que ne sommes-nous déjà embarqués sur l’Alert!… répétait Magnus Anders.

— À notre bord!” s’écriait Tony Renault.

Et ils ne voulaient pas admettre qu’il y eût quelques préparatifs à faire en vue de ce voyage d’outre-mer!

Or, en premier lieu, il fallait consulter les parents, demander et obtenir leur consentement, puisqu’il s’agissait d’envoyer les lauréats, non pas dans l’autre monde, mais tout au moins dans le nouveau. M. Julian Ardagh dut donc se mettre en mesure à ce sujet. En outre, cette exploration, qui durerait peut-être deux mois et demi, obligeait à prendre certaines dispositions indispensables, à se pourvoir de vêtements et plus particulièrement d’effets de mer, bottes, surouets, capotes cirées, en un mot tout l’accoutrement du marin.

Puis, le directeur aurait à choisir la personne de confiance à laquelle incomberait la responsabilité de ces jeunes garçons. Qu'ils fussent assez grands pour se conduire eux-mêmes, assez raisonnables pour se passer d'un surveillant, d'accord. Mais il était sage de leur adjoindre un mentor qui eût autorité sur eux.

Telle était bien l'intention de la sage Mrs Kethlen Seymour, exprimée dans sa lettre, et il fallait s'y conformer.

Inutile de dire que les familles seraient priées de donner leur acquiescement aux propositions que M. Ardagh leur ferait connaître. Parmi ces jeunes garçons, quelques-uns retrouveraient aux Antilles des parents qu'ils n'avaient pas vus depuis quelques années, Hubert Perkins à Antigoa, Louis Clodion à la Guadeloupe, Niels Harboe à Saint-Thomas. Ce serait une occasion très inattendue de se revoir, et dans des conditions exceptionnellement agréables.

Du reste, ces familles avaient été tenues au courant par le directeur d'Antilian School. Elles savaient déjà qu'un concours devait mettre en rivalité les divers pensionnaires pour l'obtention de bourses de voyage. Après communication du résultat, lorsqu'elles apprendraient que les lauréats allaient visiter les Indes occidentales, M. Ardagh n'en doutait pas, ce serait réaliser leurs plus vifs désirs.

En attendant, M. Ardagh réfléchissait au choix qu'il avait à faire, le choix du chef qui serait à la tête de cette classe ambulante, du mentor dont les conseils maintiendraient la bonne harmonie au milieu de ces Télémaques en herbe. Cela ne laissait pas de lui causer quelque perplexité. S'adresserait-il à celui des professeurs d'Antilian School qui paraîtrait remplir toutes les conditions exigées en cette circonstance? Mais l'année scolaire n'avait pas pris fin. Impossible d’interrompre des cours avant les vacances. Le personnel enseignant devait rester au complet.

Ce fut même pour cette raison que M. Ardagh crut ne pas pouvoir accompagner les neuf boursiers. Sa présence était nécessaire pendant les derniers mois de scolarité, et il importait qu’il assistât de sa personne à la distribution des prix du 7 août.

Or, les professeurs et lui exceptés, n’avait-il pas sous la main précisément celui qu’il fallait, un homme sérieux et méthodique par excellence, qui remplirait consciencieusement ses fonctions, qui méritait toute confiance, qui inspirait une générale sympathie, et que les jeunes voyageurs accepteraient volontiers pour mentor?

Restait la question de savoir si ledit personnage consentirait à faire ce voyage, s’il lui conviendrait de s’aventurer au-delà des mers…

Le 24 juin, cinq jours avant la date fixée pour le départ de l’Alert, dans la matinée, M. Ardagh fit prier M. Patterson de venir dans son cabinet pour une communication importante.

M. Patterson, l’économe d’Antilian School, était occupé, suivant son invariable habitude, à régler ses comptes de la veille, lorsqu’il fut demandé par M. Ardagh.

Aussitôt, M. Patterson, faisant remonter ses lunettes à son front, répondit au domestique, qui se tenait sur le pas de la porte:

“Je vais, sans perdre un instant, me rendre à l’invitation de M. le directeur.”

Et, rabaissant ses lunettes, M. Patterson reprit sa plume pour achever la queue d’un 9, qu’il était en train de mouler au bas de la colonne des dépenses sur son grand-livre. Puis, de sa règle d’ébène, il tira une barre sous la colonne des chiffres, dont il venait d’achever l’addition. Ensuite, après avoir secoué légèrement sa plume au-dessus de l’encrier, il la plongea à plusieurs reprises dans le godet de grenaille qui en assurait la propreté, l’essuya avec un soin extrême, la posa près de la règle le long de son pupitre, tourna la pompe de l’encrier afin d’y faire rentrer l’encre, plaça la feuille de papier brouillard sur la page des dépenses, en ayant bien soin de ne point altérer la queue du 9, ferma le registre, l’introduisit dans sa case spéciale à l’intérieur du bureau, remit dans leur boîte le grattoir, le crayon et la gomme élastique, souffla sur son buvard pour en chasser quelques grains de poussière, se leva en repoussant son fauteuil à rond de cuir, retira ses manches de lustrine et les pendit à une patère près de la cheminée, donna un coup de brosse à sa redingote, à son gilet et à son pantalon, saisit son chapeau dont il lustra le poil brillant avec son coude, le mit sur sa tête, enfila ses gants de peau noire, comme s’il allait rendre quelque visite officielle à un haut personnage de l’Université, jeta un dernier regard à la glace, s’assura que tout était irréprochable dans sa toilette, prit des ciseaux et coupa un brin de ses favoris qui dépassait la ligne réglementaire, vérifia si son mouchoir et son portefeuille se trouvaient dans sa poche, ouvrit la porte du cabinet, en franchit le seuil et la referma soigneusement avec l’une des dix-sept clefs qui tintinnabulaient à son trousseau, descendit l’escalier aboutissant à la grande cour, la traversa d’un pas lent et mesuré dans une direction oblique, afin de gagner le corps de logis où était le cabinet de M. Ardagh, s’arrêta devant la porte, pressa le bouton électrique dont la tremblotante sonnerie résonna à l’intérieur, et attendit.

Ce fut à cet instant seulement que M. Patterson se demanda, en se grattant le front du bout de son index:

“Qu’est-ce donc que M. le directeur peut avoir à me dire?”

En effet, à cette heure de la matinée, l'invitation de se rendre au cabinet de M. Ardagh devait paraître anormale à M. Patterson dont l'esprit s'emplissait d'hypothèses diverses.

Qu'on en juge! La montre de M. Patterson n'indiquait encore que neuf heures quarante-sept, et l'on pouvait s'en rapporter aux indications de cet instrument de précision qui ne variait pas d'une seconde par jour, et dont la régularité égalait celle de son propriétaire. Or, jamais, non, jamais! M. Patterson ne se rendait près de M. Ardagh avant onze heures quarante-trois pour lui faire son rapport quotidien sur la situation économique d'Antilian School, et il était sans exemple qu'il ne fût pas arrivé entre la quarante-deuxième et la quarante-troisième minute.

M. Patterson devait dès lors supposer, et il supposa qu'il se produisait une circonstance toute particulière, puisque le directeur le mandait avant qu'il eût balancé les dépenses et les recettes de la veille. Il le ferait à son retour, d'ailleurs, et, on peut en être certain, aucune erreur n'aurait été occasionnée par ce dérangement insolite.

La porte s'ouvrit au moyen du cordon de tirage relié à la loge du concierge. M. Patterson fit quelques pas — cinq suivant son habitude — dans le couloir, et frappa un coup discret sur le panneau d'une deuxième porte, où se lisaient ces mots: Cabinet du directeur.

"Entrez", fut-il aussitôt répondu.

M. Patterson ôta son chapeau, secoua les grains de poussière égarés sur ses bottines, rajusta ses gants et pénétra à l'intérieur du cabinet, éclairé par deux fenêtres à stores demi-baissés, qui donnaient sur la grande cour. M. Ardagh, différents papiers sous ses yeux, était assis devant son bureau, muni de plusieurs boutons électriques. Après avoir relevé la tête, il adressa un signe amical à M. Patterson.”

“Vous m’avez fait demander à votre cabinet, monsieur le directeur?… dit M. Patterson.

— Oui, monsieur l’économe, répondit M. Ardagh, et pour vous entretenir d’une affaire qui vous concerne très personnellement.”

Puis, montrant une chaise placée près du bureau:

“Veuillez vous asseoir”, ajouta-t-il.

M. Patterson s’assit, après avoir soigneusement relevé les pans de sa longue redingote, une main étendue sur son genou, l’autre ramenant son chapeau sur sa poitrine.

M. Ardagh prit la parole:

“Vous savez, monsieur l’économe, dit-il, quel a été le résultat du concours ouvert entre nos pensionnaires, en vue d’obtenir des bourses de voyage…

— Je le sais, monsieur le directeur, répondit M. Patterson, et ma pensée est que cette généreuse initiative de l’une de nos compatriotes coloniales est tout à l’honneur d’Antilian School.”

M. Patterson parlait posément, faisant valoir les syllabes des mots choisis qu’il employait, et les accentuant, non sans quelque préciosité, lorsqu’ils s’échappaient de ses lèvres.

“Vous savez aussi, reprit M. Ardagh, quel est l’emploi qui doit être fait de ces bourses de voyage…

— Je ne l’ignore pas, monsieur le directeur, répondit M. Patterson, qui, s’inclinant, sembla saluer de son chapeau quelque personne au-delà des océans. Mrs Kethlen Seymour est une dame dont le nom trouvera un écho sonore dans la postérité. Il me paraît difficile de mieux disposer des richesses que la naissance ou le travail lui ont départies, en faveur d’une jeunesse avide de déplacements lointains…

— C’est aussi mon avis, monsieur l’économe. Mais allons au but. Vous savez également dans quelles conditions doit se faire ce voyage aux Antilles?…

— J’en suis informé, monsieur le directeur. Un navire attendra nos jeunes voyageurs, et j’espère pour eux qu’ils n’auront point à supplier Neptune de jeter son célèbre Quos ego aux flots courroucés de l’Atlantique!

— Je l’espère aussi, monsieur Patterson, puisque les traversées d’aller et retour vont s’effectuer pendant la belle saison.

— En effet, répondit l’économe, juillet et août sont les mois de repos préférés de la capricieuse Téthys…

— Aussi, ajouta M. Ardagh, cette navigation sera-t-elle non moins agréable pour mes lauréats que pour la personne qui doit les accompagner pendant le voyage…

— Personne, dit M. Patterson, qui aura de plus l’aimable tâche de présenter à Mrs Kethlen Seymour les respectueux hommages et la sympathique reconnaissance des pensionnaires d’Antilian School.

— Or, reprit le directeur, j’ai le regret que cette personne ne puisse être moi. Mais, en fin de l’année scolaire, à la veille des examens que je dois présider, mon absence est impossible…

— Impossible, monsieur le directeur, répondit l’économe, et il ne sera pas à plaindre, celui qui sera appelé à prendre votre place.

— Assurément, et je n’aurais eu que l’embarras du choix. Or, il me fallait un homme de toute confiance, sur lequel je pusse entièrement compter et qui serait agréé sans conteste par les familles de nos jeunes boursiers… Eh bien, cet homme, je l’ai trouvé dans le personnel de l’établissement…

— Je vous en félicite, monsieur le directeur.

C’est, sans doute, un des professeurs de sciences ou de lettres…

— Non, car il ne peut être question d’interrompre les études avant les vacances. Mais il m’a paru que cette interruption présenterait moins d’inconvénients pour ce qui concerne la situation financière de l’école, et c’est vous, monsieur l’économe, dont j’ai fait choix pour accompagner nos jeunes garçons aux Antilles…”

M. Patterson n’avait pu réprimer un mouvement de surprise. Se relevant tout d’une pièce, il avait ôté ses lunettes.

“Moi… monsieur le directeur?… dit-il d’une voix un peu troublée.

— Vous-même, monsieur Patterson, et je suis certain que la comptabilité de ce voyage de boursiers sera aussi régulièrement tenue que celle de l’école.”

M. Patterson, du coin de son mouchoir, essuya le verre de ses lunettes légèrement brouillé par la buée de ses yeux.

“J’ajoute, dit M. Ardagh, que, grâce à la munificence de Mrs Kethlen Seymour, une prime de sept cents livres est également réservée au mentor qui sera honoré de ces fonctions importantes… Je vous prierai donc, monsieur Patterson, d’être prêt à partir dans cinq jours.”

CHAPITRE III

III

Mr et Mrs Patterson

Si M. Horatio Patterson occupait la place d’économe à Antilian School, c’est qu’il avait abandonné la carrière du professorat pour celle de l’administration. Latiniste convaincu, il regrettait qu’en Angleterre la langue de Virgile et de Cicéron n’eût pas la considération dont elle jouit en France, où un haut rang lui est réservé dans le monde universitaire. La race française, il est vrai, peut revendiquer une origine latine à laquelle ne prétendent point les fils d’Albion, et peut-être, dans ce pays, le latin résistera-t-il aux envahissements de l’enseignement moderne?

Mais, s’il ne professait plus, M. Patterson n’en restait pas moins fidèle, dans le fond de son coeur, à ces maîtres de l’antiquité romaine dont il avait le culte. Tout en se remémorant nombre de citations de Virgile, d’Ovide ou d’Horace, il consacrait ses qualités de comptable exact et méthodique à l’administration des finances d’Antilian School. Avec la précision, la minutie même qui le caractérisaient, il donnait l’impression d’un économe modèle, qui n’ignore rien des mystères du doit et avoir ni des plus menus détails de la comptabilité. Après avoir été jadis primé aux examens des langues anciennes, il aurait pu l’être actuellement dans un concours pour la tenue des livres ou l’établissement d’un budget scolaire.

Très vraisemblablement, d’ailleurs, c’était M. Horatio Patterson qui prendrait la direction d’Antilian School, lorsque M. Ardagh se retirerait, après fortune faite, car l’institution se trouvait en état de parfaite prospérité, et elle ne péricliterait pas entre des mains si dignes de recueillir cette importante succession.

M. Horatio Patterson n’avait dépassé que de quelques mois la quarantaine. Homme d’étude plus qu’homme de sport, il jouissait d’une excellente santé qu’il n’avait jamais ébranlée par aucun excès: bon estomac, coeur admirablement réglé, bronches de qualité supérieure. C’était un personnage discret et réservé, en équilibre constant, ayant toujours su ne point se compromettre ni par ses actes ni par ses paroles, tempérament théorique et pratique à la fois, incapable de désobliger personne, d’une parfaite tolérance, et, pour lui appliquer une locution qui ne saurait lui déplaire, très sui compos.

M. Horatio Patterson, d’une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, sans carrure, les épaules un peu fuyantes, était plutôt gauche dans sa démarche et sans élégance dans son attitude. Un geste naturellement emphatique accompagnait sa parole d’une articulation légèrement prétentieuse. Bien que de physionomie grave, il ne dédaignait pas de sourire à l’occasion. Il avait les yeux bleu pâle, à demi éteints du myope, ce qui l’obligeait à porter des lunettes d’un fort numéro, qu’il posait sur le bout de son nez proéminent. En somme, et plus souvent embarrassé de ses longues jambes, il marchait les talons trop rapprochés, il s’asseyait maladroitement à faire craindre qu’il ne glissât de son siège, et, s’il s’étendait bien ou mal dans le lit, il n’y avait que lui à le savoir.

Il existait une Mrs Patterson, alors âgée de trente-sept ans, une femme assez intelligente, sans prétention ni coquetterie. Son mari ne lui semblait pas ridicule, et il savait apprécier ses services, lorsqu’elle l’aidait dans ses travaux de comptabilité. D’ailleurs, de ce que l’économe d’Antilian School était un homme de chiffres, il ne faudrait pas s’imaginer qu’il fût négligé dans sa tenue, peu soucieux de sa toilette. On ferait erreur. Non! il n’y avait rien de mieux disposé que le noeud de sa cravate blanche, de mieux ciré que ses bottines à bout de cuir verni, de plus empesé que sa chemise si ce n’est sa personne, de plus irréprochable que son pantalon noir, de plus fermé que son gilet semblable à celui d’un clergyman, de plus boutonné que son ample redingote qui lui descendait à mi-jambes.

M. et Mrs Patterson occupaient dans les bâtiments de l’école un appartement confortable. Les fenêtres prenaient jour d’un côté sur la grande cour, de l’autre sur le jardin, planté de vieux arbres, dont les pelouses étaient entretenues dans un agréable état de fraîcheur. Il se composait d’une demi-douzaine de pièces situées au premier étage.

C’est dans cet appartement que rentra M. Horatio Patterson, après sa visite au directeur. Il ne s’était point hâté, désireux de donner à ses réflexions pleine maturité. Sans doute, elles ne seraient plus vieilles que des quelques minutes dont il aurait prolongé son absence. Néanmoins, avec un personnage habitué à voir juste, à observer les choses sous leur véritable aspect, à balancer dans une question le pour et le contre, comme il balançait le doit et l’avoir sur son grand-livre, le parti serait vite et définitivement pris. Cette fois, cependant, il convenait de ne pas s’embarquer, — c’est le mot, — à la légère dans cette aventure.

Aussi, avant de rentrer, M. Horatio Patterson fit-il les cent pas dans la cour, vide à cette heure-là, toujours droit comme un paratonnerre, raide comme un pieu, s’arrêtant, reprenant sa marche, tantôt les mains derrière le dos, tantôt les bras croisés sur la poitrine, le regard perdu en quelque horizon lointain, bien au-delà des murs d’Antilian School.

Puis, avant d’aller conférer avec Mrs Patterson, il ne résista pas au désir de regagner son bureau, afin de terminer ses comptes de la veille. Et alors, une dernière vérification faite, l’esprit absolument libre, il pourrait discuter sans préoccupation d’aucune sorte les avantages ou inconvénients de la communication qu’il avait reçue de son directeur.

En somme, tout cela n’exigea que peu de temps, et, quittant son bureau situé au rez-de-chaussée, il remonta au premier étage à l’instant où les pensionnaires descendaient des classes.

Aussitôt, çà et là, se formèrent différents groupes, et, entre autres, celui des neuf lauréats. En vérité, on aurait dit qu’ils étaient déjà à bord de l’Alert, à quelques milles au large des côtes de l’Irlande! Et ce dont ils causaient avec plus ou moins de volubilité, il n’est pas difficile de l’imaginer.

Toutefois, si la question de ce voyage aux Antilles était résolue, il y en avait une autre qui pour eux ne l’était pas encore. Seraient-ils ou non accompagnés depuis le départ jusqu’à l’arrivée?… Au total, il leur semblait assez indiqué qu’on ne les laisserait pas aller seuls à travers l’Atlantique… Mais Mrs Kethlen Seymour avait-elle désigné spécialement quelqu’un, ou s’en était-elle remise de ce soin à M. Ardagh?… Or, il semblait difficile que le directeur de l’établissement pût s’absenter à cette époque… Dès lors, à qui seraient confiées ces fonctions, et M. Ardagh avait-il déjà fait son choix?…

Peut-être vint-il à l’idée de quelques-uns que ce serait précisément M. Patterson. Il est vrai, l’économe, tranquille et casanier, n’ayant jamais quitté le foyer domestique, consentirait-il à changer toutes ses habitudes, à se séparer pendant plusieurs semaines de Mrs Patterson?… Accepterait-il ces fonctions avec la responsabilité qu’elles entraînaient?… Cela paraissait improbable.

Assurément, si M. Horatio Patterson éprouva quelque étonnement lorsque le directeur lui eut fait la communication susdite, on comprendra que Mrs Patterson devrait être non moins surprise, lorsque son mari la mettrait au courant. Jamais il ne serait venu à l'idée de personne que deux éléments si étroitement unis, — on pourrait dire si chimiquement combinés l'un avec l'autre, — pussent être séparés, dissociés, ne fût-ce que pendant quelques semaines. Et, pourtant, il était inadmissible que Mrs Patterson fût du voyage.

C'est bien de ces diverses considérations que se préoccupait M. Patterson, tout en regagnant son appartement. Mais, ce qu'il convient d'ajouter, c'est que sa résolution était prise et bien prise, lorsqu'il franchit la porte du salon où l'attendait Mrs Patterson.

Et, tout d'abord, celle-ci, n'ignorant pas que l'économe avait été appelé près du directeur, dit dès son entrée:

“Eh bien, monsieur Patterson, qu'y a-t-il donc?…

— Du nouveau, madame Patterson, du très nouveau…

— On a décidé, je pense, que c'est M. Ardagh qui accompagnera nos jeunes lauréats aux Antilles?…

— En aucune façon, et il lui est impossible de quitter l'institution à cette époque de l'année.

— Alors il a fait un choix?…

— Oui…

— Et qui a-t-il choisi?…

— Moi.

— Vous… Horatio?…

— Moi.”

Mrs Patterson revint sans trop de peine de l’étonnement que lui causa cette riposte. Femme de tête, sachant se faire une raison, elle ne se dépensait pas en récriminations vaines, enfin la digne compagne de M. Patterson.

Celui-ci, cependant, après avoir échangé ces quelques phrases avec elle, s’était rapproché de la fenêtre, et de quatre doigts de sa main gauche tambourinait sur une des vitres.

Mrs Patterson vint bientôt se placer près de lui:

“Vous avez accepté?… dit-elle.

— J’ai accepté.

— Mon avis est que vous avez bien fait.

— C’est aussi le mien, madame Patterson. Du moment que notre directeur me donnait ce témoignage de confiance, je ne pouvais refuser.

— Cela vous était impossible, monsieur Patterson, et je ne regrette qu’une chose…

— Laquelle?…

— C’est qu’il s’agisse, non pas d’un voyage terrestre, mais d’un voyage maritime, et qu’il y ait nécessité de traverser la mer…

— Nécessité, en effet, madame Patterson. Toutefois cette perspective d'une traversée de deux à trois semaines n'est pas pour m'effrayer… Un bon navire est mis à notre disposition… À cette époque de l'année, entre juillet et septembre, la mer nous sera douce, la navigation favorable… Et puis, il y a aussi une prime pour le chef de l'expédition… autrement dit le mentor, titre qui me sera attribué…

— Une prime?… répéta Mrs Patterson, qui n'était point insensible aux avantages de cette nature.

— Oui, répondit M. Patterson, une prime égale à celle que doit toucher chaque boursier…

— Sept cents livres?…

— Sept cents livres.

— La somme en vaut la peine."

M. Horatio Patterson déclara être de cet avis.

"Et à quand le départ?… demanda Mrs Patterson, qui n'avait plus aucune objection à présenter.

— Le 30 juin, et il faut que, dans cinq jours, nous soyons rendus à Cork, où nous attend l'Alert… Donc, pas de temps à perdre, et, dès aujourd'hui, nous commencerons les préparatifs…

— Je me charge de tout, Horatio, répliqua Mrs Patterson.

— Vous n'oublierez rien…

— Soyez tranquille!

— Des habits légers, car nous sommes appelés à voyager dans des pays chauds, qui rôtissent sous les feux d'un soleil tropical…

— Les habits légers seront prêts.

— De couleur noire, pourtant, car il ne conviendrait ni à ma situation ni à mon caractère de revêtir le costume fantaisiste du tourisme.

— Rapportez-vous-en à moi, monsieur Patterson, et je n'oublierai pas non plus la formule Wergall contre le mal de mer, ni les ingrédients dont elle conseille l'usage…

— Oh! le mal de mer!… fit M. Patterson avec dédain.

— N'importe, ce sera prudent, reprit Mrs Patterson. Ainsi, c'est bien convenu, il ne s'agit que d'un voyage de deux mois et demi…

— Deux mois et demi, c'est dix à onze semaines, madame Patterson… Il est vrai, dans ce laps de temps, que d'aléas peuvent se produire!… Ainsi que l'a dit un sage, si l'on sait quand on part, on ne sait pas quand on revient…

— L'important est qu'on revienne, dit très justement Mrs Patterson. Il ne faudrait pas m'effrayer, Horatio… Je me résigne, sans récriminations intempestives, à une absence de deux mois et demi, à l'idée d'un voyage sur mer… Je connais les périls qu'il présente… J'ai lieu de croire que vous saurez les éviter avec votre prudence habituelle… Mais ne me laissez pas sous cette fâcheuse impression que ce voyage puisse se prolonger…

— Les observations que j'ai cru devoir faire, répondit M. Patterson, en se défendant par un geste d'avoir dépassé les limites permises, ces observations n’ont point pour but de jeter le trouble dans votre âme, madame Patterson… Je désirais simplement vous mettre en garde contre toute inquiétude en cas que le retour pût être retardé, sans qu’il y eût lieu d’en concevoir de sérieuses alarmes…

— Soit, monsieur Patterson, mais il est question d’une absence de deux mois et demi, et je veux croire qu’elle ne dépassera pas ce terme…

— Je veux le croire aussi, répondit M. Patterson. En somme, de quoi s’agit-il?… D’une excursion dans une contrée délicieuse, d’une promenade d’îles en îles à travers les Indes occidentales… Et, quand nous ne reviendrions en Europe que quinze jours plus tard…

— Non, Horatio”, répliqua l’excellente dame qui s’entêtait plus que d’ordinaire.

Et, ma foi, on ne sait trop pour quelle raison, voici que M. Patterson s’entête aussi, — ce qui n’était guère dans ses habitudes. Avait-il donc un intérêt à exciter les appréhensions de Mrs Patterson?…

Ce qui est certain, c’est qu’il insista encore et avec force sur les dangers qu’offre un voyage quel qu’il soit, surtout un voyage au-delà des mers. Et lorsque Mrs Patterson se refusa à admettre ces dangers, qu’il dépeignait avec périodes et gestes emphatiques:

“Je ne vous demande pas de les voir, déclara-t-il, seulement de les prévoir, et, comme conséquence de cette prévision, j’ai à prendre quelques mesures indispensables…

— Lesquelles, Horatio?…

— En premier lieu, madame Patterson, je songe à faire mon testament…

— Votre testament…

— Oui… en bonne et due forme…

— Mais vous voulez donc me mettre la mort au coeur!… s’écria Mrs Patterson, qui commençait à envisager ce voyage sous une perspective effrayante.

— Non, madame Patterson, non!… je veux uniquement me conduire avec sagesse et prudence. Je suis de ces hommes qui croient raisonnable de prendre leurs dernières dispositions avant de monter en railway, et, à plus forte raison, lorsqu’il s’agit de s’aventurer sur la plaine liquide des océans.”

Tel était cet homme, et même se bornerait-il à ces dispositions testamentaires? Sans doute, et qu’imaginer de plus?… Quoi qu’il en fût, ce fut bien pour impressionner au dernier degré Mrs Patterson, la pensée que son mari allait régler ces questions d’héritage, si délicates toujours, puis la vision des périls d’une traversée de l’Atlantique, les collisions, les échouages, les naufrages, les abandons sur quelque île à la merci des cannibales…

Alors M. Patterson sentit qu’il avait peut-être été trop loin, et il employa ses phrases les mieux arrondies à rassurer Mrs Patterson, cette moitié de lui-même, ou plutôt l’un des termes de cette vie en partie double qui s’appelle le mariage. Enfin il parvint à lui démontrer qu’un excès de précautions ne pouvait jamais avoir de conséquences nuisibles ou regrettables, et que, se garantir contre toute éventualité, ce n’était pas dire un éternel adieu aux joies de la vie…

“Cet aeternum vale, ajouta-t-il, qu’Ovide met dans la bouche d’Orphée, lorsqu’il perdit pour la seconde fois sa chère Eurydice!”

Non! Mrs Patterson ne perdrait pas M. Patterson, pas même une première fois. Mais cet homme minutieux tenait à ce que tout fût réglé. Il n’abandonnerait pas cette idée de faire son testament. Le jour même, il se rendrait chez un notaire, et l’acte serait rédigé conformément à la loi, de manière qu’il ne donnât lieu, en cas qu’il fût procédé à son ouverture, à aucune interprétation douteuse.

Après cela, on s’imaginera aisément que

M. Patterson avait pris toutes les précautions possibles, si la fatalité voulait que l’Alert se perdit corps et biens en plein océan, et que l’on dût renoncer à jamais à avoir de nouvelles de son équipage et de ses passagers.

Tel n’était pas, sans doute, l’avis de M. Patterson, car il ajouta:

“Et puis, il y aura peut-être une autre mesure plus…

— Laquelle, Horatio?…” demanda Mrs Patterson.

M. Patterson ne crut pas devoir parler d’une manière explicite en ce moment.

“Rien… rien… nous verrons!…” se contenta-t-il de répondre.

Et, s’il ne voulut pas en dire davantage, c’était, on peut le croire, pour ne point effrayer de nouveau Mrs Patterson. Et peut-être n’eût-il pas réussi à lui faire adopter son idée, même en l’appuyant de quelque autre citation latine, et il ne les lui ménageait guère d’habitude…

Enfin, pour terminer cet entretien, il conclut en ces termes:

“Et, maintenant, occupons-nous de ma valise et de mon carton à chapeaux.”

Il est vrai, le départ ne devait s’effectuer que dans cinq jours, mais ce qui est fait est fait et n’est plus à faire.

Bref, en ce qui concerne M. Patterson, comme aussi les jeunes lauréats, il ne fut désormais question que des préparatifs de voyage.

D’ailleurs, si le départ de l’Alert était fixé au 30 juin, des cinq jours qui restaient, il faudrait déduire vingt-quatre heures pour se rendre de Londres à Cork. En effet, le railway transporterait d’abord les voyageurs à Bristol. Là, ils s’embarqueraient sur le steamer qui fait le service quotidien entre l’Angleterre et l’Irlande; ils descendraient la Severn, ils traverseraient le canal Bristol, puis le canal Saint-Georges, et débarqueraient à Queenstown, à l’entrée de la baie de Cork, sur la côte sud-ouest de la verte Erin. Une journée, c’est tout ce qu’exigeait la navigation entre la Grande-Bretagne et l’Irlande, et, dans la pensée de M. Patterson, cela suffirait à son apprentissage de la mer.

Quant aux familles des jeunes boursiers, qui avaient été consultées, les réponses ne tardèrent pas à parvenir, soit par télégrammes, soit par lettres. Pour Roger Hinsdale, cela se fit le jour même, puisque ses parents habitaient Londres, et ce fut le lauréat en personne qui alla leur faire connaître les intentions de Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Les autres réponses arrivèrent successivement de Manchester, de Paris, de Nantes, de Copenhague, de Rotterdam, de Gotteborg, et un télégramme fut câblé d’Antigoa par la famille d’Hubert Perkins.

La proposition avait reçu l’accueil le plus favorable, avec les remerciements très sincères pour Mrs Kethlen Seymour, de la Barbade.

Tandis que Mrs Patterson s’occupait des préparatifs du voyage en ce qui concernait son mari, M. Patterson mettait la dernière main à la comptabilité générale d’Antilian School. On peut être assuré qu’il ne laisserait ni une facture en souffrance, ni une écriture incomplète. Puis il demanderait décharge à qui de droit de sa gestion arrêtée au 28 juin de la présente année.

D’ailleurs, en même temps, il ne négligeait rien de ses affaires personnelles, et, sans doute, il régla comme il l’entendait celle à laquelle il tenait tout particulièrement, et dont il dut parler à Mrs Patterson plus explicitement qu’il ne l’avait fait lors de leur premier entretien.

À ce sujet, toutefois, un silence absolu fut gardé par les intéressés. Apprendrait-on dans l’avenir ce dont il s’agissait?… Oui, si, par malheur, M. Horatio Patterson ne revenait pas du Nouveau Monde.

Ce qui est certain, c’est que les deux époux firent plusieurs visites à un homme de loi, un solicitor, et que même ils se présentèrent devant les magistrats compétents. Et, ce qui fut parfaitement observé par le personnel d’Antilian School, c’est que chaque fois que Mr et Mrs Patterson revenaient ensemble à leur appartement, lui avait toujours l’air plus grave, plus réservé que d’habitude, tandis que sa digne épouse avait tantôt les yeux rouges, comme si elle venait déverser un flot de larmes, tantôt l’attitude décidée de quelqu’un qui a mené à bonne fin une énergique résolution.

D’ailleurs, et malgré les formes différentes qu’ils prirent chez chacun d’eux, ces sentiments de tristesse parurent très justifiés dans la circonstance.

Le 28 juin arriva. Le départ devait se faire dans la soirée. À neuf heures, le mentor et ses jeunes compagnons prendraient le train pour Bristol.

Dans la matinée, M. Julian Ardagh eut une dernière entrevue avec M. Patterson. En même temps qu’il lui recommandait de tenir avec une parfaite régularité la comptabilité du voyage, recommandation inutile, il lui fit sentir toute l’importance de la tâche qui lui était confiée, et combien il se reposait sur lui pour maintenir la bonne harmonie parmi les pensionnaires d’Antilian School.

À huit heures et demie du soir, les adieux s’échangèrent dans la grande cour. Roger Hinsdale, John Howard, Huber Perkins, Louis Clodion, Tony Renault, Niels Harboe, Axel Wickborn, Albertus Leuwen, Magnus Anders, serrèrent la main du directeur, des professeurs et de leurs camarades qui ne les voyaient pas partir sans quelque envie, bien naturelle.

M. Horatio Patterson avait pris congé de Mrs Patterson dont il emportait la photographie, et il s’était exprimé en phrases émues, avec la conscience d’un homme pratique, qui s’est mis en garde contre toutes les éventualités.

Puis, se retournant vers les neuf boursiers, au moment où ils allaient monter dans le break qui devait les conduire à la gare, il dit, en scandant toutes les syllabes de ce vers d’Horace:

Crae ingena iterabimus aequor.

Maintenant ils sont partis. Dans quelques heures le train les aura déposés à Bristol. Demain ils traverseront le canal de Saint-George que M. Horatio Patterson a qualifié d’ingens aequor… Bon voyage aux lauréats du concours d’Antilian School!

CHAPITRE IV

IV

La taverne du “Blue-Fox”

Cork s’est d’abord appelé Coves, nom qui provient d’un terrain marécageux, — le Corroch en langue gaélique. Après avoir modestement débuté comme village, Cork est devenu bourgade, et, actuellement, capitale du Munster, cette cité tient le troisième rang en Irlande.

Ville industrielle d’une certaine importance, peut-être sa valeur maritime l’emporte-t-elle, grâce au port de Queenstown, — l’ancien Coves, — en aval de la rivière de Lee. Là sont établis les chantiers, les magasins, les usines. Un port de ravitaillement et de relâche reçoit les navires, principalement ces voiliers auxquels la Lee n’offre pas une profondeur suffisante.

En arrivant tard à Cork, le mentor et les boursiers n’auraient point le temps de le visiter, ni de parcourir cette charmante île qui communique par deux ponts avec les deux rives de la Lee, ni de se promener à travers les délicieux jardins des îles voisines, ni d’explorer ses annexes. Tout cet ensemble municipal ne comprend pas moins de quatre-vingt-neuf mille habitants, — soixante-dix-neuf mille pour Cork et dix mille pour Queenstown.

Mais, de ces excursions qui font passer agréablement quelques heures, ne se préoccupaient guère trois individus attablés, dans la soirée du 29 juin, au fond de l’une des salles de la taverne de Blue-Fox. À demi-perdus en ce coin sombre, ils s’entretenaient à voix basse devant des gobelets souvent remplis et vidés. Rien qu’à leur mine farouche, à leur attitude inquiète, un observateur eût reconnu des gens de la pire espèce, des coquins probablement traqués par la police. Aussi, que de regards défiants et soupçonneux ils jetaient sur quiconque entrait dans cette auberge louche, ce tap mal fréquenté de Blue-Fox!

Du reste, les tavernes ne manquent point en ce quartier maritime, et ces individus à la recherche d’un refuge n’auraient eu que l’embarras du choix.

Si Cork est une ville élégante, il n’en va pas ainsi de Queenstown, très fréquentée, et l’un des ports les plus importants de l’Irlande. Avec un mouvement maritime annuel de quatre mille cinq cents navires jaugeant douze cent mille tonnes, on imaginera sans peine quelle population flottante s’y déverse chaque jour. De là ces nombreuses auberges, où pullulent les habitués les moins exigeants au point de vue de la tranquillité, de la propreté, du confort. Les matelots étrangers y coudoient les indigènes. Et ce contact n’est pas sans amener de fréquentes et brutales rixes qui nécessitent l’intervention des policemen.

Si, ce jour-là, la police eût pénétré dans la salle basse de Blue-Fox, elle aurait pu s’emparer d’une certaine bande de malfaiteurs recherchés depuis quelques heures et qui s’étaient échappés de la prison de Queenstown.

Voici dans quelles circonstances:

Huit jours auparavant, un bâtiment de guerre de la marine britannique ramenait à Queenstown l’équipage du trois-mâts anglais Halifax, récemment poursuivi et capturé dans les mers du Pacifique. Durant six mois, ce navire avait écumé les parages de l’ouest entre les Salomon, les Nouvelles-Hébrides et les archipels de la Nouvelle-Bretagne. Cette capture allait mettre fin à une série de pirateries et de brigandages dont les nationaux anglais étaient particulièrement victimes.

À la suite des crimes que leur reprochait la justice, — crimes établis autant par les faits que par les témoignages, — un châtiment exemplaire serait prononcé contre eux. C’était la condamnation à mort, la potence, du moins pour les chefs les plus compromis, le capitaine et le maître d’équipage de l’Halifax.

Cette bande comprenait dix individus, pris à bord du navire. Les sept autres, complétant son personnel, après s’être sauvés dans une embarcation, s’étaient réfugiés en quelque île où il serait difficile de les atteindre. Mais enfin les plus redoutables se trouvaient entre les mains de la police anglaise à leur arrivée et, en attendant le jugement, on les avait enfermés dans la prison maritime de Queenstown.

Imaginer l’audace du capitaine Harry Markel, de son bras droit, le maître d’équipage John Carpenter, cela eût été impossible. Aussi, profitant de certaines circonstances, avaient-ils réussi à s’échapper la veille même du jour où ils s’étaient cachés dans cette taverne du Blue-Fox, l’une des plus mal famées du port. Immédiatement les escouades de policemen furent mises en campagne. Ces malfaiteurs, capables de tous les crimes, ne pouvaient avoir quitté Cork ou Queenstown, et des recherches furent opérées dans les divers quartiers de ces deux villes.

Cependant, par précaution, un certain nombre d’agents gardaient les environs du littoral sur plusieurs milles autour de la baie de Cork. En même temps, des perquisitions commençaient, qui devaient s’étendre à tous les “taps” du quartier maritime.

Ce sont là de vrais lieux de refuge où les bandits parviennent trop souvent à se soustraire aux poursuites. Pourvu qu'on leur montre quelque argent, les tenanciers reçoivent quiconque leur demande asile, sans s'inquiéter de ce que sont les gens ni d'où ils viennent.

D'ailleurs, il faut l'observer, ces matelots de l'Halifax étaient originaires des divers ports de l'Angleterre et de l'Écosse. Aucun d'eux n'avait habité l'Irlande. Personne ne les eût reconnus ni à Cork ni à Queenstown, — ce qui rendait leur capture improbable. Toutefois, comme la police possédait le signalement de chacun, ils se sentaient très menacés. Bien entendu, leur intention n'était pas de prolonger un séjour si périlleux dans la ville. Ils profiteraient de la première occasion qui s'offrirait de s'enfuir, soit en gagnant la campagne, soit en reprenant la mer.

Or, peut-être cette occasion allait-elle se présenter, et dans des conditions favorables. On en jugera par la conversation des trois attablés, qui occupaient le plus sombre coin de Blue-Fox, où ils pouvaient causer à l'abri de toute oreille indiscrète.

Harry Markel était bien le digne chef de cette bande, qui n'avait pas hésité à lui prêter son concours, lorsqu'il avait fait du trois-mâts Halifax, qu'il commandait pour le compte d'une maison de Liverpool, un bâtiment de pirates dans les extrêmes mers du Pacifique.

Âgé de quarante-cinq ans, taille moyenne, corps robuste, santé à toute épreuve, physionomie farouche, il ne reculait devant aucune cruauté. De beaucoup plus instruit que ces compagnons, bien que sorti du rang des matelots, il s'était graduellement élevé à la situation de capitaine de la marine marchande. Connaissant à fond son métier, il aurait pu se faire une carrière honorable, si des passions terribles, un féroce appétit de l'argent, la volonté d'être son seul maître ne l'eussent jeté dans la voie du crime. Du reste, habile à dissimuler ses vices sous la rudesse d'un homme de mer, et servi par une chance assez persistante, il n'avait jamais inspiré aucune défiance aux armateurs pour lesquels il commandait.

Le maître d'équipage, John Carpenter, quarante ans, plus petit de taille, d'une remarquable vigueur, contrastait avec Harry Markel par son apparence sournoise, ses manières hypocrites, son habitude de flatter les gens, une fourberie instinctive, une remarquable puissance de dissimulation, qui le rendait plus dangereux encore. À tout prendre, non moins cupide, non moins cruel que son chef, il exerçait sur lui une détestable influence, que Harry Markel subissait volontiers.

Quant au troisième individu assis à la même table, c'était le cuisinier de l'Halifax, Ranyah Cogh, d'origine indo-saxonne. Entièrement dévoué au capitaine, ainsi que tous ses compagnons d'ailleurs, il eût, comme eux, mérité cent fois la corde pour les crimes auxquels ils avaient pris part pendant les trois dernières années passées dans le Pacifique.

Ces trois hommes s'entretenaient à voix basse, tout en buvant, et voici ce que disait John Carpenter:

“Nous ne pouvons rester ici!… Il faut avoir quitté la taverne et la ville cette nuit même… La police est à nos trousses… et, au jour, nous serions repris!”

Harry Markel ne répondait pas; mais son opinion était bien que ses compagnons et lui devraient s'être enfuis de Queenstown avant le lever du soleil.

“Will Corty tarde bien!… fît observer Ranyah Gogh.

— Eh! laisse-lui le temps d’arriver!… répondit le maître d’équipage. Il sait que nous l’attendons au Blue-Fox et il nous y trouvera…

— Si nous y sommes encore, répliqua le cuisinier, en jetant un regard inquiet vers la porte de la salle, et si les constables ne nous ont pas obligés à déguerpir!…

— N’importe, déclara Harry Markel, il est prudent de rester ici!… Si la police vient fouiller cette taverne comme toutes les autres du quartier, nous ne nous laisserons ni surprendre ni prendre. Il y a une issue par derrière, et nous décamperons à la moindre alerte!”

Pendant quelques instants le capitaine et ses deux compagnons se contentèrent de vider leurs verres remplis de grog au wisky. Ils étaient à peu près invisibles en cette partie de la salle, éclairée seulement de trois becs de gaz. De toutes parts s’élevait un brouhaha de voix, un bruit de bancs remués, que dominait parfois quelque rude interpellation au tenancier et à son aide, qui s’empressaient pourtant de servir leur grossière clientèle. Puis, çà et là, éclataient des disputes violentes suivies d’un échange de coups. C’était ce que Harry Markel redoutait le plus. Ce tapage eût attiré les policemen de garde dans le quartier, et ces malfaiteurs auraient alors couru le sérieux risque d’être reconnus.

La conversation reprenant entre ces trois hommes, John Carpenter dit:

“Pourvu que Corty ait pu trouver un canot et s’en emparer!

— Ce doit être fait à cette heure, répondit le capitaine. Dans un port il y a toujours quelque embarcation qui traîne au bout de son amarre… Il n’est pas difficile de sauter dedans… et Corty doit l’avoir conduite en un endroit sûr…

— Les sept autres?… demanda Ranyah Cogh, auront-ils pu le rejoindre!…

— Certainement, répliqua Harry Markel, puisque c'était convenu, et ils resteront à surveiller le canot jusqu'au moment de nous y embarquer…

— Ce qui m'inquiète, fit observer le cuisinier, c'est que nous sommes ici depuis une heure, et que Corty n'est pas encore là!… L'aurait-on arrêté?…

— Et ce qui m'inquiète bien davantage, déclara John Carpenter, c'est de savoir si le navire est à son mouillage toujours…

— Il doit y être, répondit Harry Markel, prêt à lever l'ancre!"

Nul doute que le projet du capitaine et de ses compagnons ne fût de quitter le Royaume-Uni, où ils couraient tant de dangers, et même l'Europe, pour chercher asile de l'autre côté de l'océan. Mais dans quelles conditions espéraient-ils mettre ce projet à exécution et comment parviendraient-ils à s'introduire sur un bâtiment en partance?… Il semblait bien, d'après ce que venait de dire Harry Markel, qu'ils comptaient rejoindre ce bâtiment avec l'embarcation préparée par leur camarade Corty. Avaient-ils donc l'intention de se cacher à bord?…

C'était là une grosse difficulté. Ce qui est peut-être possible à un ou deux hommes ne l'est plus à dix. Se fussent-ils glissés dans la cale, en admettant qu'ils l'eussent fait sans être aperçus, on n'aurait pas tardé à les découvrir et leur présence serait immédiatement signalée à Queenstown.

Aussi Harry Markel devait-il avoir en vue une autre manière de procéder plus pratique et plus sûre. Laquelle?… Avait-il pu s'assurer la complicité de quelques matelots de ce navire à la veille de prendre la mer?… Ses compagnons et lui étaient-ils certains d'avance d'y trouver refuge?

Du reste, dans la conversation qui se tenait entre ces trois hommes, pas un mot n'avait été prononcé qui eût permis de connaître leur projet.

Comme ils se taisaient dès qu'un des clients du Blue-Fox s'approchait de leur table, ils ne se fussent pas laissé surprendre.

Cependant, après avoir répondu ainsi qu'il a été dit au maître d'équipage, Harry Markel était redevenu taciturne. Il réfléchissait à leur situation si dangereuse, dont le dénouement approchait, quel qu'il fût. Sûr des renseignements qui lui étaient parvenus, il reprit:

“Non… le bâtiment ne peut pas être parti… Il ne doit appareiller que demain… En voilà la preuve…”

Harry Markel tira de sa poche un morceau de journal, et, à la rubrique des nouvelles maritimes, il lut ce qui suit:

“L'Alert est toujours à son mouillage de la baie de Cork, dans l'anse Farmar, prêt à appareiller. Le capitaine Paxton n'attend plus que l'arrivée de ses passagers pour les Antilles. Le voyage, d'ailleurs, ne subira aucun retard, puisque le départ n'aura pas lieu avant le 30 courant. Les lauréats d'Antilian School embarqueront à cette date et l'Alert mettra immédiatement à la voile, si le temps le permet.”

Ainsi donc c'était du navire frété par les soins et au compte de Mrs Kethlen Seymour qu'il s'agissait! C'était à bord de l'Alert que Harry Markel et ses compagnons avaient résolu de s'enfuir! C'était avec lui qu'ils comptaient prendre la mer, dès cette nuit, pour échapper aux recherches des constables!… Mais les circonstances se prêtaient-elles à l’exécution de leur projet?… Des complices, ils ne pouvaient en compter parmi les hommes du capitaine Paxton!… Tenteraient-ils donc de s’emparer du navire par surprise, puis de se débarrasser de son équipage par force?…

À coup sûr, on devait tout attendre de malfaiteurs si déterminés, et pour lesquels il y allait de la vie. Ils étaient dix, et l’Alert ne comptait sans doute pas un plus grand nombre de matelots. En ces conditions, l’avantage serait pour eux.

Après avoir achevé sa lecture, Harry Markel remit dans sa poche le fragment de ce journal, tombé entre ses mains à la prison de Queenstown, et il ajouta:

“Nous sommes aujourd’hui le 29… C’est demain seulement que l’Alert doit lever l’ancre, et, cette nuit, il sera encore à son mouillage de l’anse Farmar, même si les passagers sont déjà arrivés… ce qui n’est pas probable, et nous n’aurons affaire qu’à l’équipage.”

Il convient d’observer que, même en cas que les pensionnaires d’Antilian School fussent déjà à bord, ces bandits n’auraient pas renoncé à s’emparer du navire. Il y aurait plus de sang répandu, voilà tout, et ils n’en étaient pas à quelques gouttes près, au lendemain de leurs campagnes de pirates.

Le temps s’écoulait, et Corty, si impatiemment attendu, ne paraissait pas. En vain le trio dévisageait-il les gens devant lesquels s’ouvrait la porte de Blue-Fox,

“Pourvu qu’il ne soit pas tombé dans les mains des policemen!… dit Ranyah Cogh.

— S’il était arrêté, nous ne tarderions pas à l’être… répondit John Carpenter.

— Peut-être, déclara Harry Markel, non point pourtant parce que Corty nous aurait livrés!… La tête dans le noeud coulant, il ne nous trahirait pas…

— Ce n’est pas ce que j’ai voulu dire, répliqua John Carpenter. Mais il pourrait se faire qu’il eût été reconnu par les constables, et suivi lorsqu’il se dirigeait vers la taverne!… Dans ce cas, toutes les issues seraient gardées, et il deviendrait impossible de fuir!”

Harry Markel ne répondit pas, et il se fit un silence de quelques minutes.

“Qu’un de nous aille à sa rencontre?… dit le cuisinier.

— Je me risque, si l’on veut, proposa le maître d’équipage.

— Va, dit Harry Markel, et ne t’éloigne pas… Corty peut arriver d’un moment à l’autre… Si tu aperçois les policemen à temps, rentre aussitôt, et nous filerons par derrière, avant qu’ils n’aient pénétré dans la salle…

— Mais alors, fit observer Ranyah Cogh, Corty ne nous trouvera plus ici…

— Il n’y a pas autre chose à faire”, déclara le capitaine.

La situation était des plus embarrassantes. Somme toute, l’important était de ne pas se laisser prendre. Si le coup de l’Alert venait à manquer, si Harry Markel, John Carpenter, Ranyah Cogh, ne parvenaient pas à rejoindre leurs camarades pendant la nuit, ils aviseraient. Peut-être une autre occasion se présenterait-elle?… Au total, ils ne se croiraient en sûreté qu’après avoir quitté Queenstown.

Le maître d’équipage vida une dernière fois son verre, jeta un rapide regard à travers la salle, et, se faufilant entre les groupes, gagna la porte, qui se referma derrière lui.

À huit heures et demie, il ne faisait pas encore nuit. Le solstice approchait, et c’est à cette époque que s’écoulent les plus longs jours de l’année.

Cependant le ciel était assez couvert. De gros nuages lourds, presque immobiles, s’accumulaient à l’horizon, de ces nuages qui, par les fortes chaleurs, peuvent amener quelque violent orage. La nuit serait sombre, le croissant de la lune ayant déjà disparu vers l’ouest.

John Carpenter n’était pas parti depuis cinq minutes, que la porte de Blue-Fox se rouvrit, et il reparut.

Un homme l’accompagnait, celui qu’on attendait, un matelot de petite taille, vigoureux et trapu, son béret enfoncé presque sur les yeux. Le maître d’équipage l’avait rencontré à cinquante pas de là, comme il se dirigeait vers la taverne, et tous deux étaient immédiatement venus rejoindre Harry Markel.

Corty paraissait avoir fait une longue course à pas précipités. La sueur perlait sur ses joues. Avait-il donc été poursuivi par les agents, et était-il parvenu à les dépister?

John Carpenter, d’un signe, lui indiqua le coin où se trouvaient Harry Markel et Ranyah Cogh. Il vint aussitôt s’asseoir à la table, et d’un trait avala un verre de wisky.

Évidemment, Corty aurait eu quelque peine à répondre aux questions du capitaine, et il fallait lui permettre de souffler. D’ailleurs, il ne semblait point rassuré, et ses regards ne quittaient pas la porte de la rue, comme s’il se fût attendu à voir paraître une escouade de policemen.

Enfin, lorsqu’il eut repris haleine, Harry Markel lui dit à voix basse:

“Est-ce que tu as été suivi?…

— Je ne crois pas, répondit-il.

— Ya-t-il des constables dans la rue?…

— Oui… une douzaine!… Ils fouillent les auberges et ne tarderont pas à visiter Blue-Fox…

— En route”, dit le cuisinier.

Harry Markel le força de se rasseoir et dit à Corty:

“Tout est prêt?…

— Tout.

— Le navire est toujours au mouillage?…

— Toujours, Harry; et, en traversant le quai, j’ai entendu dire que les passagers de l’Alert étaient arrivés à Queenstown…

— Eh bien, répondit Harry Markel, il faut que nous soyons à bord avant eux…

— Comment?… demanda Ranyah Cogh.

— Les autres et moi, répliqua Corty, nous avons pu nous emparer d’un canot…

— Où est-il?… dit Harry Markel.

— À cinq cents pas de la taverne, le long du quai, au bas d’un appontement.

— Et nos compagnons?…

— Ils nous attendent… Pas un instant à perdre.

— Partons”, répondit Harry Markel.

La dépense étant réglée déjà, il n’y avait point à faire venir le patron de l’auberge. Les quatre malfaiteurs pourraient même quitter la salle sans être autrement remarqués, au milieu de l’infernal tumulte.

À ce moment, un grand bruit éclata au dehors, le bruit de gens qui crient et se bousculent.

En homme prudent, qui ne veut point exposer sa clientèle à de fâcheuses surprises, le tavernier entrouvrit la porte et dit:

“Gare… les constables!”

Sans doute, plusieurs des habitués du Blue-Fox ne désiraient point se trouver en contact avec la police, car il se fit un violent remue-ménage. Trois ou quatre se dirigèrent vers l’issue de derrière.

Un instant après, une douzaine d’agents pénétraient dans la taverne et en refermaient la porte sur eux.

Quant à Harry Markel et à ses trois compagnons, avant d’avoir été aperçus, ils avaient pu quitter la salle.

CHAPITRE V

V

Coup d’audace

Coup d’audace, s’il en fut jamais, que Harry Markel et ses compagnons allaient risquer pour échapper aux poursuites de la police! Cette nuit même, en pleine baie de Cork, à quelques milles de Queenstown, ils tenteraient de s’emparer d’un navire à bord duquel se trouvaient le capitaine et son équipage, au complet sans doute. En admettant que deux ou trois des hommes fussent restés à terre, ils ne tarderaient pas à revenir, puisque la soirée s’avançait. Peut-être les malfaiteurs n’auraient-ils pas pour eux la supériorité du nombre?…

Il est vrai, certaines circonstances devaient assurer la pleine réussite de ce projet. Si l’équipage de l’Alert comptait douze hommes, compris le capitaine, tandis que la bande n’en comptait que dix, compris Harry Markel, celle-ci aurait l’avantage de la surprise. Le bâtiment ne pouvait être sur ses gardes, au fond de cette anse Farmar. Des cris n’y seraient point entendus. L’équipage aurait été égorgé, jeté à la mer sans avoir eu le temps de se défendre. Puis, Harry Markel lèverait l’ancre, et l’Alert, toutes voiles dehors, n’aurait plus qu’à débouquer de la baie, à franchir le canal de Saint-George pour donner dans l’Atlantique.

À Cork, personne évidemment ne s’expliquerait pourquoi le capitaine Paxton serait parti dans ces conditions avant même que les pensionnaires d’Antilian, pour lesquels l’Alert avait été spécialement affrété, eussent pris passage à bord… Et que diraient M. Horatio Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons, qui venaient d’arriver, ainsi que l’avait annoncé Corty, lorsqu’ils ne trouveraient plus le navire à son mouillage de l’anse Farmar?… Or, une fois le bâtiment en mer, il serait difficile de le rencontrer, de capturer ces bandits qui venaient d’en massacrer l’équipage. D’ailleurs, Harry Markel, non sans raison, ne pensait pas que les passagers voulussent embarquer avant le lendemain, et l’Alert serait alors au large de l’Irlande.

Dès qu’ils furent hors de la taverne, après avoir franchi la cour dont la porte s’ouvrait sur une étroite ruelle, Harry Markel et Corty prirent d’un côté, John Carpenter et Ranyah Cogh de l’autre, estimant que mieux valait se séparer, afin de dépister les policemen en redescendant vers le port. Ils avaient rendez-vous à l’endroit où le canot les attendait près de l’appontement avec leurs six camarades, endroit que le maître d’équipage connaissait, car il avait plusieurs fois relâché à Queenstown.

Harry Markel et Corty remontèrent, et firent bien, puisque la rue était barrée par les constables à son extrémité inférieure, là où elle s’amorçait au quai. Déjà nombre d’agents occupaient cette rue au milieu d’une foule grossissante. Hommes et femmes de ce quartier populeux voulaient assister à l’arrestation de ces pirates de l’Halifax qui s’étaient échappés de la prison maritime.

En quelques minutes, Harry Markel et Corty eurent atteint l’autre bout de la rue, libre de ce côté, mal éclairée d’ailleurs. Puis, ils s’engagèrent à travers une rue parallèle, en redescendant vers le port.

Ils ne passaient pas sans entendre les propos échangés dans cette foule, et, bien qu’il y eût là toute la population flottante d’une ville maritime, ces propos étaient des plus désobligeants pour des malfaiteurs si dignes d’être pendus. Mais ils ne se souciaient guère de l’opinion publique, on ne s’en étonnera point. Ils ne songeaient qu'à éviter la rencontre des constables, sans trop avoir l'air de gens qui s'enfuient, puis à gagner le lieu du rendez-vous.

En sortant de la taverne, Harry Markel et Corty avaient marché isolément à travers le quartier, étant sûrs d'atteindre le quai en continuant de suivre la rue. Arrivés à son extrémité, ils se rejoignirent et coupèrent vers l'appontement.

Ce quai était à peu près désert, vaguement éclairé de quelques becs de gaz. Aucune chaloupe de pêche ne rentrait ni ne rentrerait avant deux ou trois heures. Le flot ne commençait point à se faire sentir. Le canot ne risquait donc pas d'être rencontré lorsqu'il traverserait la baie de Cork.

“Par ici, dit Corty, en montrant la gauche, du côté où brillaient un feu de port, et, plus loin, sur une hauteur, le phare qui marquait l'entrée de Queenstown.

— Est-ce loin?… demanda Harry Markel.

— Cinq ou six cents pas.

— Mais je n'aperçois ni John Carpenter, ni Ranyah Cogh…

— Peut-être n'ont-ils pu sortir par le bas de la rue pour gagner le quai?…

— Ils ont eu à faire un détour… ils vont nous retarder…

— À moins, répondit Corty, qu'ils ne soient déjà à l'appontement…

— Allons”, dit Harry Markel.

Et tous deux reprirent leur marche, en ayant soin d’éviter les rares passants qui se dirigeaient vers le quartier toujours empli des rumeurs de la foule aux abords de Blue-Fox.

Une minute après, Harry Markel et son compagnon s’arrêtaient sur le quai.

Les six autres étaient là, étendus dans l’embarcation, qu’ils avaient tenue toujours à flot, même au plus bas de la marée. Aussi pouvait-on facilement y prendre place.

“Vous n’avez vu ni John Carpenter, ni Ranyah Cogh?… demanda Corty.

— Non, répondit un des matelots, qui se leva en halant sur l’amarre.

— Ils ne peuvent être loin, dit Harry Markel. Restons ici et attendons.”

L’endroit était obscur, et ils ne risquaient point d’être aperçus.

Six minutes s’écoulèrent. Ni le maître d’équipage ni le cuisinier ne paraissaient. Cela devenait très inquiétant. Étaient-ils arrêtés déjà?… On ne pouvait songer à les abandonner… D’ailleurs, Harry Markel n’avait pas trop de tout son monde pour tenter l’aventure, et, au besoin, lutter contre l’équipage de l’Alert, s’il ne se laissait pas surprendre.

Il était près de neuf heures. Soirée très obscure, sous un ciel de plus en plus chargé de nuages bas et immobiles. S’il ne pleuvait plus, une sorte de brume tombait à la surface de la baie, — circonstance favorable pour les fugitifs, bien qu’ils dussent avoir quelque peine à découvrir le mouillage de l’Alert.

“Où est le navire?… demanda Harry Markel.

— Là”, répondit Corty en tendant la main vers le sud-est.

Il est vrai, lorsque le canot s’en approcherait, on distinguerait, sans doute, le fanal suspendu à l’étai de misaine.

Pris d’impatience et d’inquiétude, Corty remonta d’une cinquantaine de pas vers les maisons en bordure du quai, dont plusieurs fenêtres étaient éclairées. Il se rapprocha ainsi de l’une des rues par lesquelles devaient déboucher John Carpenter et le cuisinier. Lorsque quelque individu en sortait, Corty se demandait si ce n’était pas l’un d’eux, en cas qu’ils eussent dû se séparer. Alors, le maître d’équipage aurait attendu son compagnon, celui-ci ne sachant quelle direction suivre pour rejoindre l’embarcation au pied de l’appontement.

Corty ne s’avançait qu’avec la plus extrême prudence. Il se défilait le long des murailles, prêtant l’oreille au moindre bruit. À chaque instant pouvait se produire une irruption de constables. Après avoir inutilement perquisitionné les tavernes, la police continuerait assurément ses recherches sur le port et visiterait les canots amarrés au quai. À ce moment, Harry Markel et les autres, mis en alerte, durent croire que la chance allait tourner contre eux.

En effet, à l’extrémité de la rue du Blue-Fox, éclata un bruyant tumulte. La foule reflua au milieu des cris et des bourrades. À cette heure, un bec de gaz éclairait l’angle des premières maisons, et l’endroit était moins obscur.

En restant au bord du quai, Harry Markel put voir ce qui se passait. D’ailleurs, Corty ne tarda pas à revenir, ne se souciant guère de figurer dans la bagarre, où il aurait risqué d’être reconnu.

Au milieu du tumulte, les constables avaient arrêté deux hommes qu’ils maintenaient solidement et conduisaient vers l’autre côté du quai.

Ces deux hommes se débattaient et opposaient une vive résistance aux agents. À leurs cris s’ajoutaient ceux d’une vingtaine d’individus, qui prenaient parti pour ou contre eux. Or, que ces hommes fussent le maître d’équipage et le cuisinier, il y avait lieu de le croire.

C’est bien ce que pensèrent les compagnons d’Harry Markel, et l’un d’eux de répéter:

“Ils sont pris… ils sont pris…

— Et comment les tirer de là?… répondit un des camarades.

— Couchez-vous!” commanda Harry Markel.

Prudente mesure, car, si John Carpenter et le cuisinier étaient entre les mains des policemen, ceux-ci en concluraient que les autres ne devaient pas être loin. On aurait l’assurance qu’ils n’avaient pas quitté la ville. On les chercherait jusqu’au fond du port. On visiterait les navires mouillés en rade, après leur avoir fait défense de mettre en mer. Pas une des embarcations, pas une chaloupe de pêche ne serait exceptée, et les fugitifs ne tarderaient pas à être découverts.

Harry Markel ne perdit pas la tête.

Lorsque ses compagnons se furent étendus dans le canot, de manière qu’on ne pût les apercevoir, grâce à l’obscurité, quelques minutes s’écoulèrent qui parurent longues. Le tumulte redoublait sur le quai. Les individus empoignés résistaient toujours. Des huées de la foule les accablaient, et il semblait bien qu’elles ne devaient s’adresser qu’à des malfaiteurs, tels ceux de la bande Markel. Parfois Harry s’imaginait entendre et reconnaître les voix de John Carpenter et de Ranyah Cogh. Est-ce qu’ils étaient ramenés vers l’appontement?… Est-ce que les constables savaient que leurs complices étaient là cachés au fond d’une embarcation?… Est-ce que tous allaient être capturés et reconduits à la prison, d’où ils ne s’échapperaient pas une seconde fois?…

Enfin les clameurs s’apaisèrent. L’escouade s’éloignait avec les individus pris dans la rue du Blue-Fox, et elle remontait la partie opposée du quai.

Harry Markel et les sept autres n’étaient plus menacés pour l’instant.

À présent, que faire?… Le maître d’équipage et le cuisinier, arrêtés ou non, n’étaient pas là… Avec deux de moins, dans ces conditions d’infériorité, Harry Markel pouvait-il donner suite à son projet, se porter vers l’Alert, essayer de surprendre le navire à son mouillage, faire à huit ce qu’il était déjà si audacieux de faire à dix?… En tout cas, il fallait profiter du canot pour s’éloigner, gagner un point de la baie et se jeter à travers la campagne.

Avant de se décider, Harry Markel remonta sur l’appontement.

Ne voyant personne le long du quai, il se préparait à rembarquer afin de pousser au large, lorsque deux hommes se montrèrent au tournant de l’une des rues, sur la droite de celle qu’avaient suivie Corty et Harry Markel.

C’étaient John Carpenter et Ranyah Cogh. Ils se dirigèrent à pas rapides vers l’appontement. Aucun policeman à leurs trousses, d’ailleurs. Ceux qui avaient été arrêtés étaient deux matelots qui venaient d’en frapper un troisième, précisément dans la taverne du Blue-Fox.

En quelques mots, Harry Markel fut mis au courant. Une escouade barrant la rue, lorsque le maître d’équipage et le cuisinier arrivèrent à l’entrée, impossible d’atteindre le quai par cette issue. Tous deux durent rebrousser chemin jusqu’à la ruelle déjà occupée par d’autres constables et fuir vers le haut du quartier. De là, ce retard qui avait failli tout compromettre.

“Embarque!” se borna à dire Harry Markel.

En un instant, John Carpenter, Ranyah et lui eurent pris place dans le canot. Quatre se tenaient à l’avant, leurs avirons parés. L’amarre fut larguée aussitôt. Le maître d’équipage tenait la barre, ayant près de lui Harry Markel et les autres.

La mer baissait encore. Avec le jusant qui durerait une demi-heure, le canot aurait le temps d’atteindre l’anse Farmar, distante de deux milles au plus. Les fugitifs finiraient bien par apercevoir l’Alert à son mouillage, et il ne serait pas impossible de surprendre le navire, avant qu’il eût pu se mettre en état de défense.

John Carpenter connaissait la baie. Même au milieu de cette profonde obscurité, en se dirigeant vers le sud-sud-est, il était assuré d’atteindre l’anse. Certainement, on apercevrait alors le feu réglementaire que tout navire hisse à son avant, lorsqu’il est à l’ancre dans une baie ou dans un port.

À mesure que marchait l’embarcation, les dernières lumières de la ville se noyaient dans la brume. Pas un souffle d’air ne se faisait sentir. Aucune houle à la surface de la baie. Le calme le plus complet devait régner au large.

Vingt minutes après avoir quitté l’appontement, le canot s’arrêta.

John Carpenter, se relevant à demi:

“Un feu de navire… là…”, dit-il.

Une lumière blanche brillait à une quinzaine de pieds au-dessus de l’eau, à une distance de cent toises.

Le canot, se rapprochant de la moitié de cette distance, resta immobile.

Nul doute que ce navire fût l’Alert, puisque, d’après les informations, aucun autre n’était alors mouillé dans l’anse Farmar. Il s’agissait donc de l’accoster sans donner l’éveil. Que l’équipage se tint en bas par ce temps de bruine, c’était probable. Mais, tout au moins, un homme serait de garde sur le pont. Il fallait éviter d’attirer son attention. Aussi, les avirons levés, le courant devrait suffire à porter l’embarcation sur le flanc de l’Alert.

En effet, en moins d’une minute, Harry Markel et ses compagnons raseraient la hanche de tribord du navire. Ni aperçus ni entendus, il ne leur serait pas difficile de se hisser par-dessus les bastingages et de se débarrasser du matelot de quart avant qu’il eût pu donner l’éveil.

Le navire venait d’éviter sur son ancre. Le premier flot se faisait sentir, sans amener la brise avec lui. Dans ces conditions, l’Alert présentait son avant vers l’entrée de la baie, son arrière tourné vers le fond de l’anse Farmar, que fermait une pointe au sud-est. Cette pointe, il serait nécessaire de la contourner pour gagner le large et se mettre en direction à travers le canal de Saint-George.

Donc, à ce moment, au milieu d’une profonde obscurité, le canot allait accoster le bâtiment par son flanc de tribord. Seul, au-dessus du gaillard d’avant, brillait le fanal, suspendu à l’étai de misaine, et qui parfois s’éclipsait lorsque la bruine tombait plus épaisse.

Aucun bruit ne se faisait entendre, et l’approche de Harry Markel et de ses compagnons n’avait pas attiré l’attention du matelot de garde.

Cependant ceux-ci purent croire que leur présence allait être signalée. Probablement, un léger clapotis parvint à l'oreille du matelot, dont on entendit le pas le long du bastingage. Sa silhouette se dessina un instant sur la dunette; puis, se penchant au-dessus de la rambarde, il tourna la tête à droite et à gauche, comme un homme qui cherche à voir…

Harry Markel et les autres s'étaient couchés sur les bancs du canot. Il est vrai, lors même que le matelot ne les apercevrait pas, il distinguerait le canot, il appellerait ses camarades sur le pont, ne fût-ce que pour amarrer une embarcation en dérive. Ceux-ci chercheraient à la saisir au passage, et il ne serait plus possible de surprendre le navire.

Eh bien, même en ce cas, Harry Markel n'abandonnerait pas ses projets. S'emparer de l'Alert était pour ses compagnons et lui une question de vie ou de mort. Aussi ne chercheraient-ils point à s'éloigner. Ils s'élanceraient sur le pont, ils joueraient du coutelas, et comme ce seraient eux qui porteraient les premiers coups, ils auraient probablement tout l'avantage.

D'ailleurs, les circonstances allaient les favoriser. Après être resté quelques instants sur la dunette, le matelot revint à son poste à l'avant. On ne l'entendit point appeler. Il n'avait pas même vu l'embarcation qui se glissait dans l'ombre.

Une minute après, le canot rangeait le flanc du navire, et s'arrêtait par le travers du grand mât, où l'escalade serait facile en se servant des porte-haubans.

Du reste, l'Alert ne s'élevait que de six pieds au-dessus de sa ligne de flottaison, qui dépassait à peine le doublage en cuivre de sa coque. En deux bonds, se hissant des pieds et des mains, Harry Markel et les siens retomberaient sur le pont.

Dès que le canot eut été amarré, afin que le flot ne pût le ramener dans la baie, les coutelas furent passés aux ceintures — coutelas que les fugitifs avaient pu voler après leur évasion. Corty fut le premier à franchir la lisse. Ses camarades le suivirent avec tant d'adresse et de prudence, que l'homme de service ne les entendit ni ne les aperçut.

Rampant alors le long de la coursive, ils se glissèrent vers le gaillard d'avant. Le matelot était assis là, appuyé contre le cabestan, presque endormi déjà. Ce fut John Carpenter qui, arrivé le premier près de lui, le frappa d'un coup en pleine poitrine.

Le malheureux ne poussa pas un cri, et, le coeur atteint, tomba sur le pont, où, après quelques convulsions, il rendit le dernier soupir. Quant à Harry Markel et aux deux autres, Corty et Ranyah Cogh, ils avaient gagné la dunette, et Corty dit à voix basse:

“Au capitaine, maintenant.”

La cabine du capitaine Paxton occupait sous la dunette l'angle de bâbord. On y pénétrait par une porte qui s'ouvrait à l'angle du carré.

Une fenêtre donnant sur le pont l'éclairait, et, par cette fenêtre, munie d'un rideau, filtrait la lueur de la lampe, suspendue à son double cercle.

À cette heure, le capitaine Paxton n'était pas encore couché. Il rangeait les papiers de bord en prévision du départ dès la marée du matin, après l'arrivée de ses passagers.

Soudain, la porte de sa cabine s’ouvrit brusquement, et, avant qu’il eût le temps de se reconnaître, il râlait sous le coutelas d’Harry

Markel, criant:

“À moi!… à moi!…”

Aussitôt que ces cris parvinrent au poste de l’équipage, cinq ou six matelots s’élancèrent hors du capot.

Corty et les autres les attendaient à l’entrée et à mesure qu’ils sortaient, ils étaient frappés, sans avoir pu se mettre en défense.

En quelques instants, six matelots furent étendus sur le pont. Mortellement blessés, quelques-uns poussaient des cris d’épouvante et de douleur. Mais, ces cris, qui les eût entendus, et comment un secours serait-il arrivé au fond de cette anse où l’Alert se trouvait seul au mouillage, au milieu de cette profonde obscurité de la nuit?…

Six hommes et le capitaine ne composaient pas tout l’équipage. Trois ou quatre devaient être dans le poste d’où ils n’osaient sortir…

On les en tira, malgré leur résistance, et, en un instant, le pont fut rouge du sang de onze cadavres.

“Les corps à la mer!…” cria Corty.

Et il se préparait à jeter les cadavres par dessus le bord.

“Tiens bon!… lui dit Harry Markel. Le flot les ramènerait vers le port. Attendons la marée descendante, et elle les entraînera au large.”

CHAPITRE VI

VI

Maîtres à bord

Le coup avait réussi. Cette du drame s’était accomplie dans toute son horreur et en des conditions d’extraordinaire audace.

Après l’Halifax, Harry Markel était maître de l’Alert. Personne ne pourrait rien soupçonner du drame qui venait de se passer, personne ne saurait dénoncer le crime commis dans l’un des ports les plus fréquentés du Royaume-Uni, à l’entrée de cette baie de Cork, où relâchent les nombreux navires qui mettent en communication l’Europe et l’Amérique.

À présent, ces malfaiteurs n’avaient plus à redouter la police anglaise. Elle n’irait pas les dépister à bord de l’Alert. À eux toute facilité de reprendre le cours de leurs pirateries dans les lointains parages du Pacifique. Ils n’avaient plus qu’à lever l’ancre, à prendre le large. En quelques heures, ils seraient hors du canal de Saint-George.

Il est vrai, lorsque les pensionnaires d’Antilian School arriveraient pour embarquer sur l’Alert dans la matinée du lendemain, l’Alert ne serait plus à son mouillage, et c’est en vain qu’on le rechercherait dans la baie de Cork ou dans le port de Queenstown.

Et alors, cette disparition reconnue, quelle explication imaginer?… Quelles hypothèses se présenteraient à l’esprit?… Le capitaine Paxton et son équipage avaient-ils été forcés de mettre à la voile, sans même attendre leurs passagers?… Mais pour quelle raison?… Ce n’était pas le mauvais temps qui avait contraint le navire à quitter l’anse Farmar… La brise du large se faisait à peine sentir aux approches de la baie… Les bâtiments à voiles y étaient encalminés… Seuls, depuis quarante-huit heures, quelques steamers avaient pu y entrer ou en sortir… La veille encore, l’Alert avait été vu à cette place, et, quant à supposer que, pendant la nuit il eût été abordé, qu’il eut péri dans une collision sans qu’il en restât une épave, cela était par trop invraisemblable.

Il était donc à croire que la vérité ne serait pas connue de sitôt, qu’elle ne le serait jamais peut-être, à moins que quelque cadavre, retrouvé sur une des grèves, ne vînt révéler le mystère de cet épouvantable massacre.

Mais il importait que Harry Markel abandonnât au plus tôt le mouillage de l’anse Farmar, que l’Alert ne fût plus à ce mouillage au lever du jour. Si les circonstances le favorisaient au sortir du canal de Saint-George, au lieu de mettre le cap au sud-ouest, en direction des Antilles, l’Alert mettrait le cap au sud. Harry Markel aurait soin de se tenir hors de vue de toute terre, de s’éloigner des routes maritimes d’ordinaire suivies par les bâtiments qui descendent vers l’Équateur. Dans ces conditions, son avance lui éviterait d’être repris, en cas qu’on envoyât un aviso à sa recherche. Rien, d’ailleurs, n’autoriserait à penser que le capitaine Paxton et son équipage ne fussent pas à bord du navire frété par Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Pour quelles raisons il avait pris la mer, on ne saurait, et le mieux serait d’attendre quelques jours au moins.

Ainsi, Harry Markel avait pour lui toutes les chances. Ses neuf hommes suffiraient aisément à manœuvrer l’Alert. C’étaient, on l’a dit, de très bons marins, et ils avaient dans leur capitaine une confiance absolue et méritée.

Ainsi tout concordait pour assurer le succès de cette entreprise. À quelques jours de là, le navire n’ayant pas reparu dans la baie de Cork, les autorités seraient induites à penser qu'après avoir pris la mer pour une raison inconnue, il avait péri corps et biens en plein Atlantique. Jamais il ne viendrait à l'idée de personne que les échappés de la prison de Queenstown s'en fussent emparés. La police continuerait ses enquêtes, elle les étendrait aux environs de la ville. Le comté serait soumis à une surveillance très minutieuse. On donnerait l'éveil à la campagne. Bref, que cette bande de malfaiteurs fût reprise à court délai, il n'y aurait certainement pas à en douter.

Il est vrai, ce qui allait aggraver la situation, c'est que les circonstances ne se prêtaient pas à un appareillage immédiat.

En effet, le temps ne s'était point modifié et ne paraissait pas devoir changer. Toujours cette épaisse brume qui tombait lentement des basses zones du ciel. Les nuages immobilisés semblaient s'abaisser jusqu'à la surface de la mer. Par instants, les éclats du phare, à l'entrée de la baie, ne se laissaient plus même apercevoir. Au milieu de cette profonde obscurité, aucun navire à vapeur ne tenterait d'entrer ou de sortir. C'eût été courir le risque de se mettre au plein, faute d'avoir pu relever les feux de la côte et du canal de Saint-George. Quant aux voiliers, ils devaient être encalminés à quelques milles au large.

Du reste, la mer "ne sentait rien". À peine les eaux de la baie ondulaient-elles sous l'action de la marée montante. À peine un léger clapotis murmurait-il sur les flancs de l'Alert. À peine le canot se balançait-il à l'arrière au bout de son amarre.

"Pas de vent de quoi remplir mon chapeau!" s'écria John Carpenter, en accompagnant cette remarque des plus effroyables jurons.

Il ne fallait donc pas songer à l'appareillage.

Les voiles inertes auraient pendu le long des mâts, et le navire, entraîné par le flot, eût dérivé à travers la baie jusqu'au port de Queenstown.

En général, lorsque la marée commence à se faire sentir, les eaux du large amènent un peu de brise, et, bien que cette brise eût été contraire, Harry Markel, en louvoyant, aurait essayé de sortir. Le maître d'équipage connaissait assez ces parages pour ne point compromettre sa marche, et, une fois dehors, l'Alert aurait pu se tenir en bonne position pour profiter des premiers souffles. À plusieurs reprises, John Carpenter se bissa dans la mâture. Peut-être l'anse, abritée par de hautes falaises, arrêtait-elle le vent… Non, rien, et la girouette du grand mât demeurait immobile.

Cependant tout espoir n'était pas perdu, même si le vent ne reprenait point avant le jour. Il était dix heures à peine. Après minuit, la marée renverserait. À ce moment, profitant du jusant, Harry Markel ne tenterait-il pas de donner en mer?… Aidé de ses embarcations, montées par tous les hommes et qui le prendraient à la remorque, l'Alert parviendrait-il à sortir de la baie?… Et sans doute Harry Markel et John Carpenter avaient songé à cet expédient. Il est vrai, qu'arriverait-il si le bâtiment restait encalminé?… Lorsque les passagers ne trouveraient plus le navire, ils reviendraient au port… On apprendrait que l'Alert avait appareillé… On le chercherait dans la baie… Et si le bureau maritime envoyait une chaloupe à vapeur pour le rejoindre au-delà de Radio-Point. Quels périls courraient alors Harry Markel et ses compagnons?… Leur navire immobilisé serait reconnu, accosté, visité… C'était l'arrestation immédiate… C'était la police mise au courant du drame sanglant qui avait coûté la vie au capitaine Paxton et à son équipage!…

On le voit, il y avait un réel danger à partir, puisque l'Alert n'était pas assuré de faire route; mais il y en avait un non moins réel à stationner dans l’anse Farmar. À cette époque de l’année, en effet, les calmes se prolongent parfois durant plusieurs jours.

Dans tous les cas, il fallait prendre un parti.

Si la brise ne se levait pas dans la nuit, si tout appareillage était impossible, Harry Markel et ses compagnons devraient-ils abandonner le navire, embarquer dans le canot, gagner le fond de l’anse, se jeter à travers la campagne avec l’espoir d’échapper aux recherches de la police, et, ce coup manqué, en tenter un autre?… Peut-être, après s’être réfugiés dans quelque anfractuosité du littoral pour la journée, devraient-ils attendre la reprise du vent, et, la nuit venue, retourner à bord?… Mais lorsque les passagers, dans la matinée du lendemain, trouveraient le bâtiment abandonné, ils reviendraient à Queenstown. On enverrait immédiatement des hommes saisir l’Alert et le ramener au port.

C’était donc de ces diverses questions que Harry Markel, le maître d’équipage et Corty s’entretenaient, tandis que les autres restaient groupés sur le gaillard d’avant.

“Chienne de brise! répétait John Carpenter. On en a trop quand on n’en veut pas, et pas assez quand on en veut!…

— Et si le flot n’amène pas de vent, ajouta Corty, ce n’est pas avec le jusant qu’il soufflera de terre…

— Et le canot qui va embarquer demain matin son chargement de passagers!… s’écria le maître d’équipage. Faudra-t-il les attendre?

— Qui sait, John?…

— Après tout, déclara John Carpenter, ils ne sont qu’une dizaine… suivant ce qu’a dit le journal… des jeunes garçons avec leur professeur!… Nous avons bien su nous débarrasser de l’équipage de l’Alert, et nous saurions bien…”

Corty remuait la tête, non point qu’il désapprouvât John Carpenter et il crut devoir faire cette réflexion:

“Ce qui a été facile pendant la nuit le serait moins pendant le jour… Et puis ces passagers auront été amenés par des gens du port qui connaissent peut-être le capitaine Paxton!… Que leur répondre quand ils demanderont pourquoi il n’est pas à bord?…

— On leur dira qu’il est allé à terre, répliqua le maître d’équipage… Ils embarqueront… leur canot retournera à Queenstown… et alors…”

Il est certain qu’au fond de cette anse déserte de Farmar, à un moment où aucun navire ne serait en vue, ces misérables auraient aisément raison des passagers. Ce n’était pas devant ce nouveau crime qu’ils reculeraient… M. Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons seraient massacrés sans avoir même pu se défendre, comme l’avaient été les hommes de l’Alert.

Cependant, suivant son habitude, Harry Markel laissait parler. Il réfléchissait à ce qu’exigeait cette situation très menaçante où les mettait l’impossibilité de gagner le large. Il n’hésiterait pas mais peut-être serait-il nécessaire d’attendre la prochaine nuit… encore une vingtaine d’heures… Et puis, il y avait toujours cette grave complication: c’est que le capitaine Paxton fût connu de l’un d’eux, et comment expliquer son absence le jour même, on peut dire à l’heure même où devait appareiller l’Alert?…

Non, ce qui valait le mieux, c’était que le temps permit de mettre à la voile et de s’éloigner, pendant l’obscurité, d’une vingtaine de milles dans le sud de l’Irlande. La malchance était vraiment grande, qui empêchait de déraper pour se soustraire à toute poursuite.

Après tout, peut-être ne s’agissait-il que de prendre patience. Il n’était pas encore onze heures. Une modification des conditions atmosphériques ne se produirait-elle pas avant l’aube? Oui, peut-être, bien que Harry Markel et ces gens de mer, habitués à observer le temps, n’entrevissent aucun symptôme favorable. Cette brume persistante leur causait de très légitimes inquiétudes. Cela indiquait une atmosphère pure de toute électricité, un de ces “temps pourris”, disent les marins, desquels il n’y a rien à espérer, et qui peuvent durer pendant plusieurs jours.

Quoi qu’il en fût, le seul parti, pour l’instant, c’était d’attendre, c’est ce que Harry Markel se contenta de répondre. Le moment venu, on déciderait s’il conviendrait ou non d’abandonner l’Alert et de se réfugier sur quelque point de l’anse Farmar, afin de gagner la campagne. En tous cas, les fugitifs se précautionneraient de vivres, après avoir fait main basse sur l’argent renfermé dans les tiroirs du capitaine ou dans les sacs de ses matelots. On revêtirait les habits de l’équipage, déposés dans le poste, — tenue moins suspecte que celle des échappés de Queenstown. Ainsi, munis d’argent et de provisions, qui sait s’ils ne parviendraient pas à déjouer les recherches de la police, à s’embarquer dans quelque autre port de l’Irlande, à se mettre en sûreté sur un autre point du continent?…

Donc, il y avait cinq ou six heures à passer avant de prendre une décision. Harry Markel et sa bande, traqués par les constables, étaient rompus de fatigue, lorsqu’ils arrivèrent à bord de l’Alert. En outre, ils mouraient de faim. Aussi, dès qu’ils furent les maîtres du navire, leur premier soin fut-il de se procurer quelque nourriture.

Celui d’entre eux qui était naturellement désigné pour cette besogne, c’était Ranyah Cogh, il alluma un fanal, il visita la cuisine, puis la cambuse, située sous le carré, à laquelle on accédait par un capot. D’ailleurs, la cale, approvisionnée largement en vue du voyage d’aller et retour, suffirait même à la traversée de l’Alert jusqu’aux mers du Pacifique.

Ranyah Cogh trouva tout ce qu’il fallait pour calmer la faim de ses compagnons, leur soif aussi: le brandy, le wisky et le gin ne manquaient point.

Cela fait, Harry Markel, qui avait pris sa part du repas, donna l’ordre à John Carpenter et aux autres d’échanger leurs habits contre ceux des matelots dont les corps gisaient sur le pont. Puis ils iraient dormir en quelque coin, en attendant qu’on les réveillât s’il y avait lieu de hisser les voiles et de lever l’ancre.

Quant à Harry Markel, il ne songea guère à se reposer. Ce qui lui paraissait urgent, c’était de consulter les papiers du bord, d’où il pourrait sans doute tirer certains renseignements. Il entra dans la cabine du capitaine, alluma la lampe, ouvrit les tiroirs avec les clefs prises dans les poches du malheureux Paxton; puis, après avoir retiré divers papiers, il s’assit devant la table, gardant tout ce sang-froid dont il avait donné tant de preuves au cours de sa vie d’aventures.

Ces papiers divers, on le comprendra, étaient en règle, puisque l’appareillage devait s’effectuer le lendemain. En consultant le rôle d’équipage, Harry Markel put s’assurer que tous les matelots étaient présents lorsque le navire avait été surpris. Il n’y avait donc pas à craindre que quelques-uns d’entre eux, en corvée ou en permission à Queenstown, ne revinssent à bord. L’équipage avait bien été massacré jusqu’au dernier homme.

Harry Markel, en vérifiant le livre de la cargaison, constata également qu’en viande conservée, en légumes secs, en biscuits, en salaisons, en farine, etc. le navire était approvisionné pour au moins trois mois de navigation. Quant à la somme d’argent que contenait la caisse de la cabine, elle s’élevait en chiffres ronds à six cents livres1.

Maintenant, Harry Markel pensa qu’il avait intérêt à connaître les voyages du capitaine

1 13 000 francs.

Paxton sur l’Alert. En effet, au cours de ses traversées futures, il importait que le bâtiment ne fut pas ramené aux ports dans lesquels il avait déjà fait relâche et où son commandant pouvait être connu. Avec sa volonté de tout prévoir, Harry Markel n’était point homme à se départir de la plus extrême prudence.

L’examen des livres le renseigna à cet égard.

L’Alert était un navire de trois ans, construit à Birkenhead, aux chantiers de Simpson and C°. Il n’avait encore fait que deux voyages aux Indes, à destination de Bombay, de Ceylan et de Calcutta, d’où il était revenu directement à Liverpool, son port d’attache. Comme il n’avait jamais fréquenté les mers du Pacifique, Harry Markel devait être entièrement rassuré sur ce point. Au besoin, il eût même pu se faire passer pour le capitaine Paxton.

Du reste, des voyages antérieurs du capitaine, relatés sur son livre de bord, il résultait qu'il n'avait jamais fait de voyage aux Antilles, ni françaises, ni anglaises, ni hollandaises, ni danoises, ni espagnoles. S'il avait été choisi par Mrs Kethlen Seymour pour y conduire les boursiers d'Antilian School, si l'Alert venait d'être affrété pour ce voyage, c'était sur la recommandation d'un correspondant établi à Liverpool, et qui répondait à la fois du navire et du capitaine.

À minuit et demi, Harry Markel, sortant de la cabine, monta sur la dunette, où il rencontra John Carpenter.

“Toujours du calme?… demanda-t-il.

— Toujours, répondit le maître d'équipage, et pas apparence que le temps change!”

En effet, même bruine tombant de nuages bas, immobilisés d'un horizon à l'autre, même obscurité à la surface de la baie, et aussi même silence que ne rompait pas le plus léger clapotis du courant. On était dans les marées de quadrature, peu fortes à cette époque de l'année. Aussi le flot ne se propageait qu'avec lenteur à travers le goulet jusqu'à Cork et ne remontait que de deux milles seulement dans la rivière de la Lee.

Or, cette nuit-là, la mer devait être étale vers trois heures du matin, et c'est alors que le jusant se ferait sentir.

Certes, John Carpenter avait de bonnes raisons pour pester contre la mauvaise chance. Avec la marée descendante, si peu qu'eût soufflé la brise, et de quelque côté qu'elle fût venue, l'Alert aurait pu mettre à la voile, contourner la pointe de l'anse Farmar, donner dans le goulot, et, même en courant quelques bordées, se trouver avant le lever du soleil au large de la baie de Cork… Non! il était là, sur son ancre, immobile comme une bouée ou un corps-mort, et n’ayant rien à espérer d’un appareillage effectué dans ces conditions!

Donc, attendre en rongeant son frein et sans espoir que la situation se modifierait lorsque le soleil déborderait des hauteurs de l’anse Farmar!

Deux heures se passèrent. Ni Harry Markel ni John Carpenter ni Corty n’avaient songé à prendre un instant de sommeil, tandis que leurs compagnons dormaient pour la plupart, étendus à l’avant le long des bastingages. L’aspect du ciel ne se modifiait point. Les nuages ne se déplaçaient pas. Si parfois un léger souffle arrivait du large, il cessait presque aussitôt, et rien n’indiquait que la brise dût prochainement s’établir, soit du côté de la mer, soit du côté de la terre.

À trois heures vingt-sept, alors que quelques lueurs commençaient à blanchir l’horizon de l’est, le canot, au bout de sa bosse, drossé par le jusant, vint heurter la coque de l’Alert, qui ne tarda pas à éviter sur son ancre et présenta l’arrière au large.

Peut-être pouvait-on espérer que la mer descendante amènerait un peu de vent du nord-ouest, ce qui eût permis au navire de quitter son mouillage pour donner dans le canal de Saint-George; mais cet espoir fut bientôt déçu. La nuit s’achèverait sans qu’il eût été possible de lever l’ancre.

Il s’agissait maintenant de se débarrasser des cadavres. Auparavant, John Carpenter voulut s’assurer si un remous ne les retiendrait pas au milieu de l’anse Farmar. Corty et lui descendirent dans le canot et constatèrent que le courant portait vers la pointe qui séparait l’anse du goulet, puisque le jusant entraînait les eaux dans cette direction.

Le canot revint, se rangea le long du bord par le travers du grand mât, et, l’un après l’autre, les corps y furent déposés.

Puis, pour plus de précaution, le canot les transporta jusqu’au revers de la pointe, contre laquelle le courant aurait pu les jeter sur la grève.

Alors, John Carpenter et Corty les précipitèrent l’un après l’autre dans cette eau tranquille dont le clapotis se faisait à peine entendre. Ces cadavres coulèrent d’abord, puis remontèrent à la surface, et, saisis par le jusant, allèrent se perdre au large dans les profondeurs de la mer.

CHAPITRE VII

VII

Le trois-mâts “Alert”

L’Alert, trois-mâts barque, de quatre cent cinquante tonneaux, sorti, comme il a été dit, des chantiers de Birkenhead, doublé et chevillé en cuivre, coté numéro 1 au Bureau Veritas, battant pavillon britannique, se préparait à effectuer son troisième voyage.

Après avoir, pendant ses deux premières traversées, franchi l’Atlantique, tourné la pointe de l’Afrique, parcouru l’océan Indien, il allait, cette fois, mettre le cap directement au sud-ouest, à destination des Antilles, au compte de Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

L’Alert, bon marcheur, portant bien la toile, possédant les remarquables qualités des clippers de grande vitesse sous toutes les allures, n’emploierait pas plus de trois semaines à franchir la distance qui sépare l’Irlande de l’Antilie, si les calmes ne lui occasionnaient pas de retard.

Dès son premier voyage, l’Alert avait eu pour commandant le capitaine Paxton, pour second le lieutenant Davis, pour équipage, neuf hommes, personnel suffisant à manœuvrer un voilier de ce tonnage. Lors de la deuxième traversée, de Liverpool à Calcutta, ce personnel n’avait reçu aucune modification: mêmes officiers, mêmes matelots. Tel il avait été, tel il serait pour cette campagne entre l’Europe et l’Amérique. Entière confiance devait être accordée à ce capitaine Paxton, excellent marin, consciencieux et prudent, au sujet duquel les meilleures références avaient été fournies à Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Les jeunes boursiers et leur mentor trouveraient à bord de l'Alert, en vue de cette destination, tout le confort et aussi toute la sécurité que pouvaient désirer leurs familles. L'aller et le retour s'effectueraient pendant la belle saison, et l'absence des neuf pensionnaires d'Antilian School ne devait pas durer plus de deux mois et demi…

Par malheur, l'Alert n'était plus sous le commandement du capitaine Paxton. Son équipage venait d'être massacré au mouillage de l'anse Farmar. Le navire était entre les mains de la bande des pirates de l'Halifax.

Aux primes lueurs du jour, Harry Markel et John Carpenter examinèrent en détail le bâtiment dont ils s'étaient rendus maîtres. Dès le premier coup d'oeil ils en reconnurent les qualités nautiques: finesse de ses formes, excellent tracé de ses lignes d'eau, élancement de l'avant, dégagement de l'arrière, hauteur de sa mature, large croisure de ses vergues, profondeur de son tirant d'eau qui lui permettait de déployer une grande surface de toile. Assurément, même avec petite brise, s'il fût parti la veille dès neuf heures, il eût franchi le canal Saint-George pendant la nuit, et, au point du jour, il aurait été à une trentaine de milles des côtes de l'Irlande.

Dès l'aube, le ciel se montra couvert de ces nuages bas, ou plutôt de ces brumailles qu'un peu de vent eût dissipées en quelques minutes. Les vapeurs et les eaux se confondaient à moins de trois encablures de l'Alert. En l'absence de brise, ce brouillard humide fondrait-il lorsque le soleil aurait pris plus de force, c'était douteux. D'ailleurs, l'appareillage étant impossible, Harry Markel devait préférer que le brouillard rendît le navire invisible à son mouillage.

Ce ne fut point ce qui se produisit. Vers sept heures, et sans que l'on sentît un souffle ni de la terre ni du large, ces vapeurs commencèrent à s'éclaircir sous l’influence des rayons solaires, ce qui annonçait une journée chaude que la brise ne rafraîchirait pas. Bientôt la baie se dégagea entièrement.

À deux milles de l’anse Farmar tout le panorama du port de Queenstown, puis, plus au fond, les premières maisons de la ville apparurent. En avant du port se voyaient nombre de voiliers mouillés çà et là, la plupart, faute de vent, dans l’impossibilité de prendre la mer.

Tant que l’Alert était perdu au milieu des brumes, Harry Markel et ses compagnons ne couraient aucun danger en demeurant à bord. Mais lorsqu’elles commencèrent à se dissiper, n’eût-il pas été prudent de débarquer, de se réfugier à terre?… Dans une heure ou deux, ne devraient-ils pas recevoir les passagers de l’Alert, puisque, d’après les propos recueillis la veille, les voyageurs venaient d’arriver à Queenstown?… Serait-il temps aussi, quand ils auraient pris terre au fond de l’anse Farmar, de se jeter à travers la campagne?…

John Carpenter, Corty et les autres étaient, à ce moment, réunis autour d’Harry Markel, n’attendant qu’un ordre pour embarquer des provisions dans le canot. En quelques coups d’aviron, ils eussent atteint une grève sablonneuse au fond de l’anse.

Mais, à la question posée par le maître d’équipage:

“Nous sommes à bord, restons-y!…” se contenta de répondre Harry Markel.

Ses hommes, ayant confiance en lui, n’en demandèrent pas davantage. Sans doute, Harry Markel avait ses raisons pour parler ainsi.

Entre temps, la baie prenait une certaine animation. À défaut de voiliers, plusieurs steamers se préparaient à lever l’ancre. Cinq ou six chaloupes à vapeur allaient de l’un à l’autre, rentraient au port ou en sortaient, laissant derrière elles un long sillage d’écume. Aucune d’ailleurs ne se dirigeait vers l’anse Farmar. Donc, rien à craindre pour l’Alert.

Vers huit heures, il est vrai, il y eut lieu d’être sur ses gardes.

Un steamer venait de pénétrer dans la baie, et il évoluait à l’ouvert de l’anse Farmar, lorsqu’il appuya sur tribord, comme s’il avait cherché un mouillage non loin de l’Alert. Ce steamer avait-il l’intention de jeter l’ancre en cet endroit, au lieu de se rendre aux appontements de Queenstown, et était-il seulement en relâche pour quelques heures ou quelques jours?… Assurément, des embarcations du port ne tarderaient pas à l’accoster, et ce va-et-vient aurait pu avoir de fâcheuses conséquences pour Harry Markel et ses compagnons.

Le bâtiment en question, le pavillon britannique se déployant à sa corne, était un de ces grands cargo-boats qui, après avoir porté du charbon aux colonies anglaises, reviennent chargés de blé ou de nickel.

Cependant, après avoir dépassé la pointe de l’anse, il ne marchait plus qu’à petite vitesse. Harry Markel se demanda s’il n’allait pas stopper, ou s’il manoeuvrait pour embouquer l’anse Farmar.

Le Concordia — on put bientôt distinguer son nom — ne cherchait évidemment pas à gagner en ligne droite le port de Queenstown. Au contraire, il se rapprocha de l’Alert, et stoppa lorsqu’il n’en fut plus qu’à une demi-encablure. Seulement rien n’indiquait qu’il fît ses préparatifs pour mouiller en cet endroit.

Que voulait le capitaine du Concordia?… Pourquoi cette manœuvre?… Avait-il reconnu l’Alert, lu son nom au tableau d’arrière?… Avait-il eu des rapports avec le capitaine Paxton et désirait-il communiquer avec lui?… Allait-il mettre une de ses embarcations à la mer et venir à bord du trois-mâts?…

On imaginera sans peine à quelles inquiétudes furent en proie Henry Markel, John Carpenter, Corty et leurs complices. Décidément mieux eût valu abandonner le navire pendant la nuit, puisqu'il n'avait pu prendre le large, se disperser à travers la campagne, atteindre une partie du comté plus sûre que les environs de Queenstown, où les constables devaient être à la poursuite des fugitifs.

À présent, il était trop tard.

Toutefois, Harry Markel, prenant la précaution de ne point se montrer sur la dunette, se tint à la porte du carré, de façon à être caché par les bastingages.

En ce moment, l'Alert fut hélé en ces termes par un des matelots du Concordia:

“Ohé!… de l'Alert… Le capitaine est-il à bord?…”

À cette demande, Harry Markel ne se hâta point de répondre. Nul doute que ce fût au capitaine Paxton que le Concordia eût affaire.

Mais, presque aussitôt, cette seconde question fut envoyée par le porte-voix:

“Qui commande l'Alert?…”

Évidemment on ne connaissait du trois-mâts que son nom et on ne savait pas qui le commandait.

Donc, dans une certaine mesure, Harry Markel devait se rassurer. Aussi, comme un plus long silence aurait pu paraître suspect, il questionna à son tour, après être monté sur la dunette:

“Qui commande le Concordia?…

— Le capitaine James Brown! fut-il répondu par l’officier lui-même, debout sur la passerelle, et reconnaissable à son uniforme.

— Que veut le capitaine James Brown?… demanda Harry Markel.

— Savez-vous si les nickels sont en hausse ou en baisse à Cork?…

— Dis-lui qu’ils sont en baisse, et il va s’en aller… suggéra Corty.

— En baisse, répondit Harry Markel.

— De combien?…

— Trois shillings six pence… souffla Corty.

— Trois shillings six ponce… répéta Harry Markel.

— Alors… rien à faire ici, reprit James Brown. Merci, capitaine…

— À votre service!

— Pas de commissions pour Liverpool?…

— Non.

— Bon voyage à l’Alert!

— Bon voyage au Concordia!”

Ces renseignements obtenus, — et l’on peut juger s’il convenait d’y ajouter foi, — le steamer manoeuvra pour sortir de l’anse Farmar. Dès qu’il fut en dehors de la pointe, il se mit en vitesse, et, cap au nord-est, prit direction vers Liverpool.

À ce moment, John Carpenter fit cette réflexion très naturelle:

“Pour nous remercier de l’avoir si exactement informé du cours des nickels, le capitaine du Concordia aurait bien dû nous donner la remorque et nous sortir de cette maudite baie!”

Du reste, lors même que la brise se serait levée, il était trop tard pour en profiter. Maintenant, il se faisait grand mouvement entre Queenstown et le goulet. Des barques de pêche se croisaient, et plusieurs se disposaient précisément à tendre leurs lignes au revers de la pointe, à quelques encablures du navire. Aussi Harry Markel et ses compagnons, par prudence, ne se montraient guère. Si d’ailleurs l’Alert eût appareillé avant l’arrivée de ses passagers qui étaient attendus d’une heure à l’autre, ce départ inexplicable eût paru suspect. Le mieux était encore de ne point faire route avant la nuit, en admettant que ce fût possible.

On le comprend, la situation ne laissait pas d’être des plus inquiétantes: le moment approchait où le mentor et ses jeunes compagnons de voyage se rendraient à bord de l’Alert.

Il ne faut pas oublier que le départ avait été fixé au 30 juin, par Mrs Kethlen Seymour, d’accord avec le directeur d’Antilian School. Or, on était au 30 juin. M. Patterson, débarqué la veille au soir, ne voudrait pas se retarder d’une heure. En homme aussi minutieux qu’exact, il ne se donnerait même pas le loisir de visiter ni Cork, ni Queenstown, bien qu’il ne connût aucune de ces deux villes. Après une bonne nuit, pendant laquelle il se serait remis des fatigues de la traversée, il se lèverait, il éveillerait tout son monde, il se rendrait au port, on lui indiquerait le mouillage de l'Alert, et une embarcation s'offrirait à l'y conduire.

Ces réflexions, et bien qu'il ne connût pas l'homme qu'était M. Patterson, venaient naturellement à l'esprit d'Harry Markel. Tout en ayant soin de ne pas paraître sur la dunette, par crainte d'être aperçu des pêcheurs, il ne laissait pas de surveiller attentivement la baie. À travers une des fenêtres du carré de l'arrière, Corty, de son côté, une longue-vue aux yeux, observait tout le mouvement qui se faisait dans le port, dont il distinguait parfaitement les quais et les maisons à cette distance de deux milles. Le ciel, en effet, était devenu très clair. Le soleil montait sur un horizon très pur, dont il avait dissipé les dernières brumes. Mais, nulle apparence de vent, pas même au large, et les signaux des sémaphores indiquaient calme plat en pleine mer.

“Décidément, s'écriait John Carpenter, prison pour prison, autant valait celle de Queenstown!… Au moins avons-nous pu nous en échapper… tandis qu'ici…

— Attends”, lui répondit Harry Markel.

Un peu avant dix heures et demie, Corty reparut à la porte de la dunette et dit:

“Il me semble bien avoir aperçu un canot, portant une dizaine de personnes, qui vient de quitter le port…

— Ce doit être le canot qui nous amène les passagers!” s'écria le maître d'équipage.

Harry Markel et lui rentrèrent aussitôt dans le carré et braquèrent leurs longues-vues sur l’embarcation signalée par Corty.

Bientôt il ne fut plus douteux que cette embarcation se dirigeait vers l’Alert, aidée par le courant de la marée descendante. Menée par deux matelots, un troisième tenait la barre. Au milieu et à l’arrière étaient assises une dizaine de personnes, entre lesquelles on distinguait un certain nombre de colis et de valises.

Il y avait tout lieu de croire que c’étaient les passagers de l’Alert qui se rendaient à bord.

Moment décisif s’il en fut et qui allait peut-être voir s’écrouler cet échafaudage élevé par Harry Markel!

Tout, d’ailleurs, reposait sur cette seule éventualité que M. Patterson ou que l’un des jeunes garçons connussent le capitaine Paxton. Cela semblait au moins fort improbable, et c’était sur cette improbabilité qu’avait tablé Harry Markel pour l’exécution de son projet. Mais ne pouvait-il se faire que le capitaine de l’Alert fût connu des marins du port qui conduisaient l’embarcation, et que diraient-ils lorsque lui, Harry Markel se présenterait aux lieu et place dudit Paxton?…

Ce qu’il fallait cependant observer, c’est que, pour la première fois, l’Alert venait de relâcher dans le port de Queenstown, ou plutôt dans la baie de Cork. Que son capitaine se fût rendu à terre pour remplir les formalités imposées à tout navire, à l’arrivée comme au départ, nul doute.

Mais on pouvait admettre, sans trop se hasarder, que les marins du canot ne l’eussent point rencontré à Queenstown.

“Dans tous les cas, dit John Carpenter, en terminant la conversation qu’il venait d’avoir à ce sujet avec ses compagnons, ne laissons pas ces hommes monter à bord…

— C’est plus prudent… déclara Corty. Nous donnerons la main pour embarquer les bagages…

— Chacun à son poste”, commanda Harry Markel.

Et, tout d’abord, il prit la précaution de faire disparaître le canot dont ils s’étaient emparés la veille pour gagner l’anse Farmar. Les embarcations de l’Alert leur suffiraient, s’ils voulaient s’enfuir. Quelques coups de hache défoncèrent ce canot qui coula par le fond.

Aussitôt Corty se rendit à l’avant, prêt à jeter une amarre, dès que l’embarcation accosterait.

“Allons, dit John Carpenter à Harry Markel, il y a là un danger à courir…

— Nous en avons couru… nous en courrons bien d’autres, John!

— Et nous nous en sommes toujours tirés, Harry!… Après tout, on n’est pas pendu deux fois… Il est vrai, c’est déjà trop d’une!”

Cependant l’embarcation approchait, en se tenant à petite distance du littoral, de manière à donner en dedans de la pointe qui couvre l’anse Farmar. Elle n’était plus qu’à une centaine de toises. On apercevait distinctement ses passagers.

La question serait donc décidée dans quelques instants. Si les choses marchaient comme le désirait, comme l’espérait Harry Markel, si la disparition du capitaine Paxton n’était point constatée, il agirait d’après les circonstances. Après avoir accueilli les boursiers de Mrs Kethlen Seymour comme ils devaient l’être, comme l’eût fait le capitaine de l’Alert, il procéderait à leur installation, et sans qu’ils eussent la pensée de quitter le bord.

En effet, voyant que, faute de vent, le trois-mâts ne pourrait lever l’ancre, peut-être M. Patterson et les jeunes garçons demanderaient-ils à être reconduits à

Queenstown. Ils n’avaient certainement eu le temps de visiter ni la ville industrielle ni la ville maritime, et, puisqu’ils en auraient le loisir, il était possible qu’ils en fissent la proposition.

Or, c’eût été là un vrai danger qu’il importait d’éviter. Après avoir mis les passagers à bord, le canot qui les aurait transportés retournerait au port et ce serait une des embarcations de l’Alert qui devrait les reconduire — une embarcation montée par deux ou trois des hommes d’Harry Markel.

Eh bien, n’était-il pas à craindre que les constables, ayant inutilement fouillé les tavernes du quartier, ne continuassent leurs recherches dans les rues et sur les quais?… Que l’un des fugitifs fût reconnu, tout serait découvert… Une chaloupe à vapeur se rendrait immédiatement dans l’anse Farmar avec une escouade de police, les agents prendraient possession de l’Alert, et toute la bande retomberait entre leurs mains…

Aussi, quand les passagers seraient à bord, on ne leur permettrait plus de débarquer, dût le retard se prolonger pendant quelques jours.

D’ailleurs, dès la nuit prochaine, qui sait si Harry Markel ne parviendrait pas à se débarrasser d’eux comme il s’était débarrassé du capitaine Paxton et de son équipage?…

Harry Markel fit alors les dernières recommandations. Ses compagnons ne devaient pas l’oublier: ils n’étaient plus les gens de l’Halifax, les échappés de la prison de Queenstown… ils étaient les matelots de l’Alert, pour cette journée tout au moins. Ils auraient à se surveiller, à ne pas prononcer une parole imprudente, à prendre l’allure d’honnêtes marins, à “avoir de la tenue”, comme le dit John Carpenter, à faire honneur à cette généreuse Mrs Kethlen Seymour!… Tous comprirent bien le rôle qu’ils avaient à jouer.

En attendant, et jusqu’au moment où l’embarcation serait repartie, ordre leur fut donné de ne se montrer que le moins possible… Ils resteraient dans le poste… Le maître d’équipage et Corty suffiraient à l’embarquement des bagages, à l’installation des passagers.

Quant au déjeuner, la table serait servie dans le carré, — un bon déjeuner dont la cambuse de l’Alert fournirait le menu. C’était l’affaire de Ranyah Cogh, et il se proposait d’étonner par ses talents culinaires.

Le moment était venu d’opérer ainsi que l’eussent fait le capitaine Paxton et son équipage. Le canot n’était plus qu’à quelques toises, et, comme il ne fallait pas que personne ne fût là pour recevoir les passagers, Harry Markel s’avança vers l’échelle de tribord.

Il va sans dire qu’il avait revêtu l’uniforme de l’infortuné capitaine, et que tous ses compagnons portaient les habits trouvés dans le poste.

L’Alert fut alors hélé par les marins de l’embarcation, et Corty envoya une amarre, qui fut attrapée à la gaffe, puis tournée à l’avant.

Tony Renault et Magnus Anders, se hissant les premiers par l’échelle de corde, sautèrent sur le pont. Leurs camarades les suivirent. Puis ce fut le tour de M. Horatio Patterson, que John Carpenter aida très obligeamment à franchir la coupée.

On s’occupa aussitôt de transporter les bagages, simples valises peu lourdes et peu encombrantes, — affaire de quelques instants.

Les marins du canot ne montèrent donc pas à bord. Déjà réglés par M. Patterson et gratifiés d’un bon pourboire, ils débordèrent et reprirent la direction du port.

En ce moment, le mentor, toujours correct, s’inclina, disant:

“Le capitaine Paxton?…

— C’est moi, monsieur”, répondit Harry Markel.

M. Patterson fit un second salut empreint d’une exquise politesse, et ajouta:

“Capitaine Paxton, j’ai l’honneur de vous présenter les pensionnaires d’Antilian School, et de vous offrir l’assurance de ma parfaite considération et de mes plus respectueux hommages…

— Signé Horatio Patterson”, murmura à l’oreille de Louis Clodion ce loustic de Tony Renault, qui salua avec tous ses camarades le capitaine de l’Alert.

CHAPITRE VIII

VIII

À bord

Le trajet de M. Patterson et des pensionnaires d’Antilian School s’était effectué dans de bonnes conditions. Ils avaient pris un vif intérêt aux moindres incidents de la route. Une véritable échappée d’oiseaux hors de leur cage, — des oiseaux parfaitement apprivoisés et qui devaient y revenir! Et cela ne faisait que commencer.

Assurément ces jeunes garçons n’en étaient pas à leur premier voyage en chemin de fer ou en bateau. Tous avaient même franchi l’océan Atlantique, lorsqu’ils étaient venus des Antilles en Europe. Mais de là à dire que la mer n’avait plus de secrets pour eux, non! C’était à peine s’il leur restait souvenir de cette traversée. Le plus âgé d’entre eux avait au plus une dizaine d’années, lorsqu’il avait mis le pied en

Angleterre. La navigation à bord de l’Alert serait donc chose nouvelle pour eux. Quant au mentor, c’était la première fois qu’il allait s’aventurer sur le perfide élément, à son extrême satisfaction.

“Hoc erat in votis!” répétait-il, dix-huit cents ans après Horace.

En descendant du train à Bristol, la petite troupe, dès cinq heures, prit le paquebot qui effectue un service régulier entre l’Angleterre et l’Irlande, un parcours de deux cents milles environ.

Ce sont de beaux navires, ces paquebots, bien aménagés, de marche rapide, enlevant leurs dix-sept milles à l’heure. On se trouvait dans une période de calme. Rien qu’une légère brise. D’ordinaire, l’entrée du canal de Saint-George, lorsqu’on a dépassé Milford Haven et les extrêmes pointes du pays de Galles, est assez dure. Il est vrai, on est à peu près à moitié route, mais les passagers n’en sont pas moins éprouvés pendant une demi-journée encore. Cette fois, ils se seraient crus en partie de yachtmen sur les tranquilles eaux du lac Lomond ou du lac Katrine au pays de Rob Roy, en pleine Écosse.

M. Horatio Patterson n’avait point souffert dans le canal de Saint-George, et il en tirait les plus favorables augures pour l’avenir. À l’entendre, d’ailleurs, un homme bien constitué, prudent, énergique, n’avait rien à redouter du mal de mer.

“Une question de volonté, répétait-il, pas autre chose!”

Ce fut dans ces bonnes dispositions de corps et d’âme que le mentor et les lauréats arrivèrent au port de Queenstown. Très vraisemblablement, ils n’auraient pas le loisir de visiter cette ville, non plus que Cork, sa métropole.

On le comprend, tous ressentaient le plus violent désir d’être à bord de l’Alert, d’avoir mis le pied sur ce bâtiment frété pour eux, — autant dire un yacht de plaisance, — de prendre possession de leur cabine, de se promener du gaillard d’avant au gaillard d’arrière, d’entrer en rapport avec le capitaine Paxton et son équipage, de faire leur premier repas à la table du carré, d’assister à toutes les manœuvres d’un appareillage auquel ils prêteraient la main, pour peu que cela fût nécessaire.

Il ne fut donc pas question de déambuler par les rues de Queenstown, et si l’Alert eût été mouillé dans le port, M. Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons s’y fussent immédiatement embarqués. Or, il était tard, près de neuf heures du soir. Le lendemain, on se rendrait à l’anse Farmar.

Il y eut là une légère déception, car tous espéraient bien passer cette première nuit à bord, blottis dans leurs cadres superposés “comme les tiroirs d’une commode”, disait Tony Renault, et quelle satisfaction de dormir au fond de ces tiroirs!

Mais il fallait remettre l’embarquement au matin.

Cependant, dès le soir même, Louis Clodion et John Howard prirent heure avec un marin du port, qui promit de les mener dans son canot au mouillage de l’Alert. Sur les demandes qui lui furent posées, il indiqua la situation de l’anse Farmar à l’entrée de la baie, distante d’environ deux milles. Si même ils l’eussent voulu, on les y aurait conduits dès leur arrivée, et les plus impatients se montrèrent d’avis d’accepter la proposition. Une promenade nocturne à travers la baie, par ce temps chaud et calme, cela ne pouvait être que très agréable.

M. Patterson ne crut pas devoir y consentir. On ne serait pas en retard en se présentant le lendemain au capitaine Paxton, puisque le départ avait été fixé au 30 juin. Très certainement, les lauréats n’étaient point attendus avant cette date.

Puis la soirée s’avançait… Dix heures sonnaient aux horloges de Queenstown… Nul doute que le capitaine Paxton et son équipage ne fussent couchés déjà… À quoi bon les réveiller?…

“Eh! s’écria Tony Renault, si nous étions à bord, peut-être l’Alert lèverait-il l’ancre cette nuit même?…

— N’en croyez rien, mon jeune monsieur, déclara le marin. Il est impossible d’appareiller, et qui sait si ces calmes ne dureront pas quelques jours encore…

— Vous pensez, monsieur l’homme de mer?… demanda M. Patterson.

— C’est à craindre…

— Eh bien, dans ce cas, reprit M. Patterson, mieux vaudrait peut-être nous installer dans un hôtel de Cork ou de Queenstown jusqu’au moment où un vent favorable gonflerait nos voiles…

— Oh! monsieur Patterson… monsieur Patterson!… s’écrièrent Magnus Anders et quelques autres, ne pouvant réprimer un mouvement de dépit.

— Cependant… chers élèves…”

On discuta, et le résultat de la discussion fut que l’on irait à l’hôtel pour la nuit, et que dès l’aube, à la marée descendante, l’embarcation retenue transporterait les passagers à l’anse Farmar.

En outre, M. Patterson fit cette réflexion, on ne peut plus naturelle chez un comptable: à s’installer à bord, les dépenses d’hôtel seraient évitées, et cela en valait la peine. Au surplus, rien n’empêcherait de revenir à Queenstown et à Cork, si le départ devait être reculé de quelques jours, faute de vent.

M. Patterson et les lauréats se firent donc conduire à un hôtel situé sur le quai. Ils se couchèrent, ils dormirent d’un bon sommeil, et, le lendemain, après un premier déjeuner, thé et sandwiches, ils prirent place dans le canot qui devait les conduire à bord de l’Alert.

On ne l’a point oublié, la brume s’était dissipée à ce moment. Aussi, dès que l’embarcation se fut avancée d’un mille, l’anse Farmar apparut au détour d’une pointe qui la limitait au nord.

“L’Alert… s’écria Tony Renault, montrant le seul bâtiment qui fût alors à ce mouillage.

— Oui… mon jeune monsieur, l’Alert… répondit le patron du canot. Un joli navire, je vous assure!

— Vous connaissez le capitaine Paxton?… demanda Louis Clodion.

— Je ne le connais point, et il est rarement venu à terre. Mais il passe pour un excellent marin, et il a un bon équipage sous ses ordres.

— Quel beau trois-mâts!… s’écriait Tony Renault, dont l’admiration était largement partagée par son camarade Magnus Anders.

— C’est un véritable yacht!” dit Roger Hinsdale dont l’amour-propre fut flatté que Mrs Kethlen Seymour eût mis ce superbe bâtiment à leur disposition.

Un quart d’heure après, le canot accostait l’Alert au bas de l’échelle de tribord.

On le sait, ainsi que cela avait été convenu, le patron et ses deux hommes étaient restés dans le canot, qui reprit aussitôt la direction du port.

On sait aussi dans quelles conditions les présentations furent faites, comment Harry Markel reçut les voyageurs sous le nom du capitaine Paxton. Après cela, John Carpenter, en qualité de maître d'équipage, offrit ses services et proposa aux passagers de les conduire au carré, où leurs cabines étaient préparées.

Auparavant, M. Patterson crut devoir se dépenser en nouveaux compliments à l'adresse du capitaine. Il se félicitait que Mrs Kethlen Seymour eût confié le sort de sa jeune troupe d'excursionnistes à un commandant aussi distingué et de si excellente réputation dans le monde maritime… Sans doute, puisqu'ils se hasardaient à fouler le sein de Téthys, ils s'exposaient à quelques dangers… Mais, avec le capitaine Paxton, sur un aussi bon navire que l'Alert, avec un équipage aussi expérimenté, on pouvait braver les colères de Neptune…

Harry Markel restait froid, impassible, devant ce débordement de congratulations. Il se contenta de répondre que ses hommes et lui s'emploieraient de leur mieux pour que les passagers de l'Alert eussent toute satisfaction pendant ce voyage.

Et, maintenant, il s'agissait de visiter le navire "depuis le fond de la cale jusqu'à la pomme des mâts", ainsi que le répétait Tony Renault.

Que cela dût intéresser au plus haut point ces jeunes garçons, on ne saurait s'en étonner. N'était-ce pas la demeure, la ville flottante qui leur avait été choisie pour une saison de trois mois?… N'était-ce pas comme une partie d'Antilian School, détachée du Royaume-Uni, qu'ils allaient habiter durant ce voyage?…

Ce fut, en premier lieu, le carré, à l'intérieur de la dunette, où devaient être pris les repas en commun, la table de roulis au milieu, les bancs avec leurs dossiers mobiles, les lampes et leurs suspensions à la cardan, les divers ustensiles accrochés à la partie du mât d’artimon qui traversait la table, la claire-voie grillagée que pénétrait largement la lumière du dehors, l’office, dans lequel assiettes, carafes, verres et autres objets étaient assujettis contre le roulis et le tangage.

Puis, en abord, de chaque côté, s’ouvraient les cabines des passagers, pourvues de leurs cadres, de leur toilette, de leur petite armoire, éclairées par un hublot à verre lenticulaire percé dans les parois de la dunette. C’était en ces cabines que seraient groupés les boursiers par nationalité: — à bâbord, Hubert Perkins et John Howard dans la première, Roger Hinsdale seul dans la seconde,

Louis Clodion et Tony Renault dans la troisième, — à tribord, Niels Harboe et Axel Wickborn dans la quatrième, dans la cinquième, Albertus Leuwen, et, dans la sixième, Magnus Anders.

Quant à la cabine réservée à M. Horatio Patterson, qui faisait pendant à celle du capitaine, à droite en entrant dans le carré, elle prenait vue sur le devant de la dunette, un peu plus spacieuse que celles de ses jeunes compagnons. À la rigueur, il aurait pu se considérer comme le second de l’Alert, et aurait eu le droit de porter deux galons sur les manches de sa redingote.

Il va sans dire que la prévoyance de Mrs Kethlen Seymour n’avait rien oublié de ce qui pouvait assurer le confort et l’hygiène des jeunes Antilians. Qu’il n’y eût point de médecin à bord, soit, et vraiment il n’y avait lieu de prévoir ni maladie ni aucun accident grave pendant cette traversée. Le mentor saurait bien réprimer les imprudences des plus audacieux de la bande. Cependant la pharmacie de l’Alert était amplement fournie des drogues d’un usage courant. Et puis, en cas de mauvais temps, vent et rafales, les passagers pourraient se vêtir en matelots. Ni les surouets ni les capotes et pantalons de toile cirée ne manquaient dans chaque cabine.

On ne s’étonnera pas si Tony Renault et quelques autres voulurent se “mateloter” dès leur arrivée à bord. Pour ce qui concerne M. Horatio Patterson, fidèle au chapeau de haute forme, fidèle à la redingote noire, fidèle à la cravate blanche, il eût cru indigne de son caractère et de sa respectabilité d’endosser la vareuse marine et de se coiffer du surouet traditionnel.

Ce n’était pas, du reste, par ce temps calme, sur les tranquilles eaux de cette baie de Cork, alors que le trois-mâts ne ressentait même pas les ondulations de la houle, qu’il y avait lieu de rien changer à ses habitudes. À la condition que Mrs Patterson se fût trouvée près de lui, il ne lui aurait pas semblé qu’il eût quitté son appartement d’Antilian School. Peut-être même ne voyait-il pas grande différence entre l’anse Farmar et Oxford Street, si ce n’est que les passants y étaient en moins grand nombre.

Le carré visité, les valises mises en place dans chaque cabine, commença l’inspection du navire, dont John Carpenter fit les honneurs, répondant à toutes les questions que lui posaient plus particulièrement Tony Renault et Magnus Anders. Sur la dunette, la roue du gouvernail et l’habitacle furent regardés par eux avec une extrême attention, et, sans doute, à ces futurs marins, la main leur démangeait-elle de prendre la barre, de mettre le cap au nord-nord-est quart d’est ou au sud-sud-ouest demi-quart de sud. Redescendus sur le pont, les jeunes garçons le parcoururent, examinant les deux canots suspendus aux porte-pistolets, et la yole hissée à l’arrière. En avant du mât de misaine était la cuisine, dans laquelle chauffait déjà le déjeuner sous la direction de Ranyah Cogh, lequel fut complimenté par M. Horatio Patterson pour la beauté de son type africain. Enfin, le poste de l’équipage, dont les hommes n’inspirèrent aucune défiance, le gaillard d’avant, le cabestan, l’une des ancres traversée au bossoir de tribord, celle de bâbord étant mouillée, tout cela arrêta l’attention de cette curieuse jeunesse.

Il restait maintenant à explorer la cale, pour terminer la visite du navire.

Qu’on ne soit point surpris si M. Patterson ne se hasarda pas à suivre ses pensionnaires dans ces sombres profondeurs du bâtiment. En effet, pas d’escalier, simplement des entailles creusées le long des épontilles, et dans lesquelles il fallait introduire le pied. Il ne s’y aventura point, pas plus qu’il ne se risquerait à gravir les enfléchures pour grimper dans les hunes et aux barres du grand mat ou du mat de misaine, même en passant par le trou du chat. Mais les jeunes garçons s’affalèrent prestement à l’intérieur de l’Alert, là où la cargaison était remplacée par des gueuses de fer qui assuraient la stabilité du navire. La cale fut parcourue depuis l’avant, qui communiquait par une échelle avec le poste de l’équipage, jusqu’à l’arrière, où une cloison étanche métallique la séparait de la cambuse, placée sous la dunette. Il y avait là des voiles, des agrès, des espars de rechange, et aussi un certain nombre de caisses de conserves, des barils de vin et des fûts d’eau-de-vie, des sacs de farine. Véritablement, l’Alert était pourvu comme s’il eût dû faire le tour du monde.

Cette visite achevée, tous remontèrent et vinrent rejoindre sur la dunette le mentor en compagnie du capitaine. Tous deux s’entretenaient de choses et d’autres, M. Patterson avec sa faconde habituelle, Harry Markel se contentant de répondre brièvement. Un brave marin, sans doute, mais décidément peu communicatif.

Et alors, Tony Renault de tourner autour de la barre, d’examiner l’habitacle qui renfermait le compas, de mettre la main sur la roue, de la mouvoir dans un sens et dans l’autre, comme eût fait un timonier, et de dire enfin:

“Capitaine… vous nous permettrez bien… de temps en temps… de gouverner un peu… quand il fera beau…

— Eh!… fit le mentor, je ne sais si cela serait prudent…

— Soyez tranquille, monsieur Patterson, nous ne vous ferons pas sombrer sous voiles!” déclara Tony Renault.

Harry Markel s’était borné à faire un geste affirmatif.

À quoi pensait-il, cet homme?… Quelque pitié s’était-elle glissée dans son âme, en voyant ces jeunes garçons si heureux, si joyeux d’être embarqués à bord de l’Alert?… Non! et, la nuit prochaine, aucun d’eux ne trouverait grâce devant lui.

En ce moment, la cloche retentit à l’avant du navire. Un des matelots venait de piquer les quatre coups de onze heures.

“C’est le déjeuner, dit Louis Clodion.

— Eh bien, nous y ferons honneur!… répondit M. Horatio Patterson. J’ai une faim de loup…

— De loup de mer… ajouta Tony Renault.

— Lupus maritimus”, traduisit M. Patterson.

C’était, en effet, l’heure du déjeuner, que Harry Markel s’excusa de ne point présider, ayant l’habitude, déclara-t-il, de prendre ses repas dans sa cabine.

Ce déjeuner était servi dans le carré, et chacun trouva place autour de la table. Des œufs, de la viande froide, du poisson frais pêché, du biscuit, du thé, tout cela fut reconnu excellent. D’ailleurs, ces jeunes estomacs, affamés par leur promenade matinale, ne se seraient pas montrés difficiles, et il faut convenir que M. Patterson mangea deux fois plus qu’il n’eût fait au réfectoire d’Antilian School.

Après le déjeuner, tous rejoignirent sur la dunette Harry Markel.

Et, d’après ce qui venait d’être convenu entre eux, Louis Clodion s’adressant à lui:

“Capitaine, demanda-t-il, pensez-vous pouvoir bientôt mettre à la voile?…

— Dès que le vent sera levé, répondit Harry Markel, qui prévit le but de cette question, et cela peut se produire d’un instant à l’autre.

— Et… s’il est contraire?… fit observer M. Horatio Patterson.

— Cela n’empêcherait pas d’appareiller et de faire route. Ce qu’il nous faut, c’est la brise, d’où qu’elle souffle…

— Oui… s’écria Tony Renault, en tirant des bordées.

— Au plus près… ajouta Magnus Anders.

— Comme vous dites, messieurs”, répliqua Harry Markel.

Et, en réalité, est-il une plus jolie allure que celle d’un bâtiment qui serre le vent, tribord ou bâbord amure, lorsque toutes ses voiles portent?…

“Enfin, capitaine, demanda Niels Harboe, y a-t-il lieu de croire que la brise va reprendre…

— Dans l’après-midi?… ajouta John Howard.

— Je l’espère, répondit Harry Markel. Voici près de soixante heures que durent ces calmes, et, assurément, ils vont cesser.

— Capitaine, interrogea Roger Hinsdale, nous désirerions savoir s’il y a quelque chance que l’Alert parte aujourd’hui?…

— Je vous répète, messieurs, que je n’en serais nullement étonné, car le baromètre baisse un peu… toutefois, je ne saurais l’affirmer…

— Dans ce cas, dit Louis Clodion, nous pourrions peut-être aller à terre passer l’après-midi?

— Oui… oui!…” répétèrent ensemble tous ses camarades.

Or, c’était précisément cette proposition à laquelle Harry Markel ne voulait point acquiescer. Jamais il n’enverrait personne à terre, ni des passagers ni de l’équipage. C’eût été compromettre une situation déjà si dangereuse.

Et alors, M. Horatio Patterson d’appuyer la demande avec quelques citations très opportunes. Ses jeunes compagnons et lui ne connaissaient ni Cork… ni Queenstown… Ils n’avaient pu la veille visiter ces deux villes… On en disait les environs très curieux… particulièrement le village de Blarney, qui a donné son nom aux gasconnades irlandaises… puis le château, dont une des pierres, dit-on, brouille à jamais avec la vérité ceux qui en approchent leurs lèvres…

On le comprend, tous appuyèrent

M. Patterson. En une demi-heure, l’un des canots de l’Alert, avec deux hommes, les aurait conduits au port, et ils promettaient d’être revenus avant le soir.

“Voyons, capitaine, reprit M. Patterson, c’est au maître après Dieu que nous adressons notre supplique…

— Ce serait bien volontiers que j’y consentirais, répondit Harry Markel d’un ton un peu rude. Mais je ne le puis… Nous sommes au jour fixé pour le départ… Si peu qu’il y ait de vent, et même, s’il le faut, rien qu’avec la marée descendante, j’espère sortir de la baie de Cork…

— Cependant, fit observer Louis Clodion, puisque nous ne pourrons faire route, une fois dehors?…

— Nous mouillerons près de terre pour éviter le flot, répondit Harry Markel, et, du moins, l’Alert aura quitté l’anse Farmar… Si le vent se lève, comme je le pense, c’est en mer que nous le rencontrerons plutôt que dans cette anse, qui est très abritée…”

Ces raisons étaient assez plausibles, et, en somme, il convenait de s’en rapporter au capitaine.

“Je vous prie donc, messieurs, ajouta-t-il, de renoncer à votre projet d’aller à terre… ce serait risquer peut-être de perdre une marée.

— C’est entendu, capitaine, répondit M. Patterson, et nous n’insisterons pas davantage.”

Les jeunes garçons eurent bientôt pris leur parti. D’ailleurs, au moins deux ne tenaient pas autrement à s’en aller. C’étaient, on le devine, Magnus Anders et Tony Renault. La joie d’être à bord leur suffisait. Embarqués sur l’Alert, ils prétendaient n’en débarquer que dans un des ports de l’Antilie. Voit-on la brise se lever, tandis que leurs camarades visiteraient Cork ou Queenstown, et le navire empêché d’appareiller, parce que ses passagers ne seraient pas de retour!… Et qui sait si de plus longs retards ne compromettraient pas le voyage?… Et que dirait Mrs Kethlen Seymour?… Et que penserait le directeur d’Antilian School… Et quelle responsabilité pour le mentor qui comprit toute la gravité de cette argumentation?…

La question était vidée, on resterait à bord. Puis, dans la conversation qui se prolongea et à laquelle Harry Markel ne put refuser de prendre part, on causa du voyage. Roger Hinsdale demanda si l’Alert avait déjà fait la traversée de l’Angleterre aux Antilles.

“Non, monsieur, répondit Harry Markel. Notre navire n’a effectué jusqu’ici que deux voyages dans la mer des Indes.

— Mais, vous, capitaine, demanda Hubert Perkins, connaissez-vous les Antilles?…

— Je ne les connais pas.

— Alors, fit observer M. Horatio Patterson, il est possible à un marin d’aller tout droit là où il n’a jamais été…

— Comment donc, s’écria Tony Renault, mais les yeux fermés…

— Non, répondit Harry Markel, les yeux ouverts, en faisant son point, en consultant les cartes, en relevant la direction…

— Et nous verrons tout cela?… dit Magnus Anders.

— Tout cela, mais à la condition d’être en mer au lieu de moisir au fond d’une baie!”

Louis Clodion et ses camarades se résignèrent donc. Du reste, de ce qu’ils auraient à passer la journée entière à bord de l’Alert, sans avoir eu la permission de débarquer, il ne faudrait pas déduire que cette journée leur paraîtrait longue. Non! il ne leur viendrait même pas à l’idée de se faire conduire aux grèves voisines, — ce que Harry Markel eût accordé sans doute, car il ne pouvait en résulter aucun danger pour lui. S’asseoir sur les bancs de la dunette, se balancer sur les rocking-chairs, se promener sur le pont, monter aux hunes ou aux barres, est-ce que cela ne suffirait pas à remplir l’après-midi, sans s’être ennuyé un instant?…

Et puis, bien que la baie de Cork fût au calme, elle ne présentait pas moins une certaine animation. Le mouvement du port de Queenstown n’était pas interrompu parce que la brise persistait à ne point se lever. Aussi les lorgnettes des jeunes pensionnaires et la longue-vue considérable — deux pieds quatre pouces — de M. Horatio Patterson fonctionnaient-elles sans cesse. Il ne fallait rien perdre du va-et-vient des embarcations en train de pêcher dans la baie, des chaloupes à vapeur qui faisaient le service du littoral, des tugs qui donnaient la remorque aux voiliers, pressés de mettre dehors, des transatlantiques et autres qui entraient ou sortaient, et le nombre en est grand chaque jour dans cette baie de Cork.

D’ailleurs, après le dîner de cinq heures, qui valut le déjeuner, et à propos duquel le mentor fit à Ranyah Cogh des compliments très mérités, lorsque les passagers remontèrent sur la dunette, Harry Markel leur annonça que la brise de terre commençait à se faire sentir. Très probablement, pour peu qu’elle tint une heure encore, il se déciderait à appareiller.

Que l’on juge si cette nouvelle fut bien accueillie!

En effet, vers le nord-est apparaissaient des nuages qui permettaient de croire à un changement de temps. Sans doute, ils se levaient de terre, et mieux eût valu qu’ils vinssent du large. Mais, enfin, l’Alert pouvait quitter son mouillage, et, une fois au-delà de Roche-Pointe, on agirait suivant les circonstances.

“Tout le monde sur le pont, commanda Harry Markel, et paré à lever l’ancre.”

Quelques hommes vinrent au guindeau, aidés des jeunes garçons qui voulurent leur donner la main. Pendant ce temps, les voiles étaient larguées, les vergues hissées à bloc. Puis, lorsque l’ancre fut à pic, tandis qu’elle remontait au bossoir, le trois-mâts prit de l’erre sous sa misaine, ses focs, ses huniers, ses perroquets, sa brigantine, et, en quelques instants, il eut contourné l’extrême pointe de l’anse Farmar.

Et, aux dernières nouvelles, les journaux du soir annoncèrent que le trois-mâts Alert, capitaine Paxton, ayant à bord les lauréats du concours d’Antilian School, venait de prendre la mer à destination des Antilles.

CHAPITRE IX

IX

En vue de terre

Il était à peu près sept heures lorsque l’Alert débouqua de la baie de Cork, laissant sur bâbord le promontoire de Roche-Pointe. Le littoral du comté de Cork lui restait à quelques milles dans l’ouest.

Avant de porter leurs yeux vers cette vaste étendue de mer sans limites, les passagers contemplaient les hautes terres, à demi noyées d’ombre, de la côte méridionale de l’Irlande. Installés sur la dunette, dont la tente avait été serrée pour la nuit, ils regardaient, sans se défendre d’une certaine émotion, si naturelle à leur âge. À peine avaient-ils conservé le souvenir des traversées précédemment faites, lorsqu’ils étaient venus des Antilles en Europe.

Et leurs vives imaginations travaillaient en songeant à ce grand voyage qui les ramenait au pays natal. Dans leur pensée foisonnaient ces mots magiques: excursions, explorations, aventures, découvertes, qui appartiennent à la nomenclature des touristes. Les récits qu’ils avaient lus, et plus particulièrement durant les derniers jours passés à Antilian School, leur revenaient à l’esprit. Et ce qu’ils avaient dévoré de voyages alors qu’ils ne connaissaient pas encore la destination de l’Alert!… Ce qu’ils avaient feuilleté d’atlas et consulté de cartes!…

Il faut donc se rendre compte de l’état de ces jeunes cerveaux singulièrement surexcités, avec leur trop plein de désirs et de souhaits. Et, maintenant, bien que n’ignorant plus le but de ce voyage, très simple et très facile, en somme, ils étaient toujours sous l’impression de leurs lectures. Ils suivaient les grands découvreurs lors de leurs expéditions lointaines, ils prenaient possession de terres nouvelles, ils y arboraient le pavillon de leur pays!… Ils étaient Christophe Colomb en Amérique, Vasco de Gama aux Indes, Magellan à la Terre de Feu, Jacques Cartier au Canada, James Cook aux îles du Pacifique,

Dumont d’Urville à la Nouvelle-Zélande et aux contrées antarctiques, Livingstone et Stanley en Afrique, Hudson Parry et James Ross aux régions du pôle nord!… Ils répétaient avec Chateaubriand que le globe terrestre est trop petit, puisqu’on en a fait le tour, et ils regrettaient que ce monde n’eût que cinq parties et non une douzaine!… Ils se voyaient déjà loin… loin, bien que l’Alert ne fût qu’au début de sa traversée et encore dans les eaux anglaises!…

Il est vrai, d’autre part, que chacun d’eux eût été heureux, au moment de quitter l’Europe, de saluer son pays une dernière fois, Louis Clodion et Tony Renault la France, Niels Harboe et Axel Wickborn le Danemark, Albertus Leuwen la Hollande, Magnus Anders la Suède: il n’y fallait point songer.

Seuls, Roger Hinsdale, John Howard, Hubert Perkins auraient cette satisfaction d’envoyer un dernier adieu à cette Irlande qui, avec la Grande-Bretagne, complète la trinité du Royaume-Uni.

Et, à partir du lendemain, après avoir franchi le canal de Saint-George, ils ne rencontreraient pas un continent, avant l’arrivée dans les mers d’Amérique, où chacun d’eux retrouverait un peu de ce qu’il laissait en Europe.

Du reste, on va le voir, un certain temps se passerait sans que les côtes britanniques eussent disparu sous l’horizon.

En effet, la brise qui venait de se lever avait permis à l’Alert de quitter son mouillage de l’anse Farmar. Mais, ainsi qu’on pouvait le craindre, cette brise de terre, sans force ni durée, mourait à quelques milles au large.

Pour prendre direction au sortir du canal de Saint-George, l’Alert devait mettre le cap au sud-ouest, et c’est bien ce qu’eût fait le capitaine Paxton. Et, s’il avait pu pousser jusqu’à une centaine de milles, peut-être aurait-il rencontré le vent mieux établi en pleine mer. Telle n’était pas l’intention d’Harry Markel: ce serait vers le sud qu’il donnerait la route en sortant du canal.

Au surplus, — ce qui aurait favorisé ses abominables projets, — c’eût été de s’éloigner le plus possible de la côte pendant la nuit, de se déhaler des nombreux bâtiments qui la fréquentent et que retenait le défaut de brise.

Or, la mer était au calme blanc. Aucune ride à sa surface, pas même un clapotis, ni à la côte, ni aux flancs du navire. La mer d’Irlande vidait tranquillement ses eaux dans l’océan Atlantique.

Il suit de là que l’Alert était aussi immobile qu’il l’eût été entre les rives d’un lac ou d’une rivière. On ne sentait pas à bord le plus léger roulis, grâce à l’abri de la terre. M. Horatio Patterson se félicitait, à la pensée qu’il aurait le temps de s’acclimater et de se faire le pied marin.

Les passagers prenaient donc cet état de choses en patience, et, d’ailleurs, quel moyen d’y remédier? Mais que d’inquiétudes pour Harry Markel et son équipage dans ce voisinage de la terre! Il était toujours à craindre qu’un aviso de l’État vînt mouiller à l’ouvert du canal de Saint-George, avec ordre de visiter tous les bâtiments qui sortiraient de la baie de Cork.

À cette inquiétude se mêlait aussi la colère. Harry Markel se demandait s’il pourrait en empêcher la manifestation. Corty et les autres montraient des figures dont les passagers finiraient peut-être par s’effrayer.

John Carpenter et lui essayaient vainement de les modérer. On ne se fût pas expliqué une telle irritation par les contrariétés du temps. Si ce retard était désobligeant, c’était surtout pour M. Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons, non pour des matelots indifférents à ces habituels désagréments de la mer.

Harry Markel et John Carpenter causaient, en arpentant le pont du navire, et, finalement, John Carpenter dit:

“Voyons, Harry, la nuit va venir, et ce que nous avons fait dans l’anse Farmar, en nous débarrassant des gens de l’Alert, est-il donc impossible de le faire à un ou deux milles de la côte?… Il me semble que c’était encore plus risqué dans la baie de Cork…

— Tu oublies, John, répondit Harry Markel, que nous ne pouvions agir autrement, puisqu’il fallait à tout prix s’emparer du navire.

— Eh bien, Harry, lorsque les passagers seront endormis dans leurs cabines, qui nous empêchera d’en finir avec eux?…

— Qui nous en empêcherait, John?…

— Oui, reprit John Carpenter. Ils sont embarqués, maintenant… L’Alert est hors de la baie… Je n’imagine pas que personne leur rende visite jusqu’ici…

— Personne?… répliqua Harry Markel. Et, à Queenstown, lorsque les sémaphores annonceront que le navire est retenu par les calmes, es-tu sûr que des amis ne viendront pas leur apporter un dernier adieu?… Et que se passerait-il, quand on ne les trouverait plus à bord?…

— Avoue, Harry, que c’est assez improbable!”

Improbable, en effet; possible, après tout! Que, le lendemain, l’Alert fût encore sous la terre, pourquoi ne serait-il pas accosté par quelque embarcation de promeneurs?… Cependant les compagnons d’Harry Markel ne semblaient point devoir se rendre à ces raisons. Et la nuit ne s’achèverait pas sans avoir amené le dénouement de cet épouvantable drame.

La soirée s’avançait et sa fraîcheur reposait des accablantes chaleurs d’une chaude journée. Après huit heures, le soleil disparaîtrait sous un horizon sans nuages, et rien ne permettait de croire à une prochaine modification dans l’état de l’atmosphère.

Les jeunes garçons étaient réunis sur la dunette, peu pressés de descendre dans le carré. Dès qu’il leur eut souhaité le bonsoir, M. Patterson regagna sa cabine et procéda minutieusement à sa toilette de nuit.

S’étant déshabillé méthodiquement, il accrocha ses vêtements à la place qu’ils occuperaient pendant le voyage; il se coiffa d’un bonnet de soie noire; il s’allongea sur son cadre. Puis son ultime pensée, avant de s’endormir, fut celle-ci;

“Excellente madame Patterson!… Ma dernière précaution lui a bien causé quelque peine!… Mais c’était agir en homme sage, et tout sera réparé au retour.”

Cependant, si le calme de la mer égalait le calme de l’espace, l’Alert subissait toujours l’action des courants, très prononcés à l’entrée du canal de Saint-George. Le flot qui arrivait du large tendait à le rapprocher de terre. Outre que Harry Markel pouvait craindre de se mettre au plein s’il n’immobilisait pas son navire, il n’aurait voulu pour rien au monde être entraîné plus au nord jusqu’à la mer d’Irlande. D’autre part, si l’Alert venait à s’échouer sur le littoral, bien que le sauvetage n’eût offert aucune difficulté par une mer si tranquille, quelle situation périlleuse pour ces fugitifs, obligés de prendre terre, alors que la police devait diriger ses recherches aux environs de Queenstown et de Cork!

Du reste, nombre de bâtiments se trouvaient en vue de l’Alert — une centaine au moins — voiliers qui ne pouvaient gagner le port. Tels ils étaient ce soir-là, tels ils seraient sans doute le lendemain, la plupart ayant mouillé pour étaler la marée de nuit.

À dix heures, le trois-mâts n’était séparé de la côte que d’un demi-mille. Il avait un peu dérivé vers l’ouest jusqu’au travers de Roberts-Cove.

Harry Markel jugea qu’il ne fallait pas attendre pour envoyer l’ancre par le fond, et il appela ses hommes.

Lorsque Louis Clodion, Roger Hinsdale et les autres l’entendirent, ils s’empressèrent de quitter la dunette.

“Est-ce que vous allez mouiller, capitaine Paxton?… demanda Tony Renault.

— À l’instant, répondit Harry Markel. Le flot prend de la force… Nous sommes trop près de terre… et je craindrais de m’échouer…

— Ainsi, questionna Roger Hinsdale, il n’y a pas apparence que la brise se lève?…

— Pas apparence.

— Cela commence à devenir contrariant, fit observer Niels Harboe.

— Très contrariant.

— À pleine mer, il est possible que le vent s’élève, dit Magnus Anders.

— Aussi serons-nous prêts à en profiter, car l’Alert ne sera mouillé que sur une ancre, répondit Harry Markel.

— Dans ce cas, vous nous préviendrez, capitaine, pour vous donner la main à l’appareillage?… demanda Tony Renault.

— Je vous le promets.

— Oui!… vous serez réveillés à temps!” murmura ironiquement John Carpenter.

Les dispositions pour le mouillage furent prises à un quart de mille de la côte, qui se recourbait par une pointe projetée à l’ouest.

L’ancre de bâbord envoyée par le fond et sa chaîne raidie, l’Alert présenta l’amure au littoral.

Cette opération achevée, les passagers regagnèrent leurs cabines, où chacun d’eux ne tarda pas à s’endormir d’un tranquille sommeil.

À présent, qu’allait faire Harry Markel?… se rendrait-il aux désirs de son équipage?… Le massacre s’accomplirait-il cette nuit même?… La prudence ne lui commandait-elle pas d’attendre des circonstances plus favorables?…

Évidemment, puisque l’Alert, au lieu d’être isolé sur les parages de Roberts-Cove, comme il l’avait été à l’anse Farmar, se trouvait au milieu de ces nombreux navires encalminés à l’entrée ouest du canal de Saint-George. Pour la plupart, à l’exemple de l’Alert, ils avaient mouillé afin de résister au flot qui les poussait à la côte. Il en était même deux ou trois qui stationnaient dans le voisinage du trois-mâts, à une demi-encablure au plus. Dès lors, comment se hasarder à jeter les passagers par-dessus le bord?… Bien qu’il fût facile de les surprendre en plein sommeil, était-on assuré qu’ils ne chercheraient pas à se défendre, qu’ils n’appelleraient pas au secours, que leurs cris ne seraient pas entendus des hommes de quart des autres bâtiments?…

C’est ce que Harry Markel, non sans peine, fit comprendre à John Carpenter, à Corty, à tous ces misérables pressés d’en finir, et ils durent se rendre. Mais si l’Alert eût été seulement de quatre à cinq milles au large, nul doute que cette nuit eût été la dernière pour M. Horatio Patterson et les jeunes lauréats d’Antilian School.

Le lendemain, dès cinq heures, Louis Clodion, Roger Hinsdale et leurs camarades allaient et venaient sur la dunette, tandis que moins impatient, moins vif, M. Patterson continuait à se prélasser dans son cadre.

Ni Harry Markel ni le maître d’équipage n’étaient encore levés. Leur entretien s’était continué très avant dans la nuit. Ils guettaient l’arrivée de la brise, qui ne soufflait ni de la terre ni du large. N’y en eût-il que de quoi remplir les voiles hautes, ils n’auraient pas hésité à lever l’ancre, en prenant garde de réveiller les dormeurs, et ils se fussent dégagés de cette flottille qui les entourait. Mais, vers quatre heures du matin, la marée étant basse, le flot prêt à remonter, ils avaient dû renoncer à tout espoir de s’éloigner de

Roberts-Cove. Aussi avaient-ils réintégré, l’un sa cabine, sous la dunette, l’autre, la sienne, près du poste de l’équipage, afin d’y reposer quelques heures.

Les jeunes garçons ne rencontrèrent donc que Corty à l’arrière, tandis que deux des matelots faisaient le quart à l’avant.

Ils adressèrent à cet homme la seule question qu’il fût naturel de faire:

“Et le temps?…

— Trop beau.

— Et le vent?…

— Pas de quoi éteindre une chandelle!”

Le soleil débordait alors de l’horizon, au large du canal de Saint-George, au milieu d’une buée de vapeurs chaudes. Ces brumes se dissipèrent presque aussitôt, et la mer étincela sous les premiers rayons de cette matinée.

À sept heures, Harry Markel, ouvrant la porte de sa cabine, rencontra M. Patterson, qui sortait de la sienne. Il y mit, d’une part, un aimable bonjour, formulé dans les termes les meilleurs, et, de l’autre, une simple inclination de tête.

Le mentor monta sur la dunette, où il trouva tout son monde.

“Eh bien! jeunes lauréats, déclama-t-il, est-ce aujourd’hui que nous allons labourer de notre proue ardente l’immensité liquide?…

— Je crains plutôt que nous ne perdions encore cette journée, monsieur Patterson… répondit Roger Hinsdale, en montrant cette mer calme que la longue houle gonflait à peine.

— Alors, le soir venu, diem perdidi, pourrai-je m’écrier comme Titus…

— Sans doute, répliqua Louis Clodion; mais c’était parce que Titus n’avait pu faire le bien, et nous, ce sera parce que nous n’aurons pu partir!”

En ce moment, Harry Markel et John Carpenter, causant à l’avant, furent interrompus par Corty, qui leur dit à voix basse:

“Attention…

— Qu’y a-t-il?… demanda le maître d’équipage.

— Regardez… mais ne vous montrez pas”, répondit Corty, en indiquant du doigt une partie de la côte dominée par de hautes falaises.

Sur la crête, s’avançait une troupe d’une vingtaine d’hommes. Ils circulaient, observant tantôt du côté de la campagne, tantôt du côté de la mer.

“Ce sont les constables… dit Corty.

— Oui… fit Harry Markel.

— Et je sais bien ce qu’ils cherchent!… ajouta le maître de l’équipage.

— Tous les hommes dans le poste”, ordonna Harry Markel.

Les matelots, réunis près du gaillard d’avant, redescendirent aussitôt.

Harry Markel et les deux autres restèrent sur le pont en se rapprochant du bastingage de bâbord, de manière à ne point être aperçus, tout en guettant les policemen.

C’était en effet une escouade d’agents à la poursuite des fugitifs. Après avoir inutilement fouillé le port et la ville, ils s’étaient mis en quête le long du littoral, et il sembla qu’ils examinaient l’Alert avec une obstination particulière.

Mais, qu’ils eussent cette pensée que la bande d’Harry Markel se fût réfugiée à bord du trois-mâts, après s’en être emparée la veille dans l’anse Farmar, cela paraissait fort improbable. Tant de navires étaient réunis devant Roberts-Cove, qu’ils auraient été dans l’impossibilité de les visiter tous. Il est vrai, il ne se fût agi que des bâtiments sortis la nuit de la baie de Cork et les constables ne devaient pas ignorer que l’Alert était un de ceux-là.

La question se posait donc de savoir s’ils allaient redescendre sur la grève, réquisitionner une embarcation de pêcheurs et se faire conduire à bord.

Harry Markel et ses compagnons attendaient en proie à une anxiété facile à comprendre.

D’autre part, l’attention des passagers avait été attirée par la présence de cette escouade, qu’ils reconnurent à son uniforme. Assurément, ce n’était pas là une simple promenade sur la crête de la falaise. Ces policemen opéraient quelque recherche aux environs de Cork et de Queenstown, et ils surveillaient le littoral. Peut-être un débarquement suspect qu’ils voulaient empocher, quelques marchandises de contrebande…

“Oui… ce sont des constables… déclara Axel Wickborn.

— Et même armés de revolvers”, assura Hubert Perkins, après les avoir observés, sa lorgnette aux yeux.

Du reste, la distance qui séparait le trois-mâts de la falaise n’était au plus que de deux cents toises. De telle sorte que, si du bord on distinguait parfaitement tout ce qui se passait à terre, de la terre on voyait parfaitement tout ce qui se passait à bord.

Et c’est bien cette circonstance qui, à bon droit, causait tant d’appréhensions à Harry Markel, — appréhensions qui auraient disparu, si le navire eût été d’un quart de mille en mer. Avec une longue-vue, le chef des agents les aurait reconnus sans peine, et l’on sait ce qui s’en serait suivi. L’Alert ne pouvait se déplacer, et, d’ailleurs, la marée montante l’eût plutôt porté à la côte. Quant à se jeter dans un des canots du bord, en quelque endroit qu’ils eussent débarqué, Harry Markel et ses complices auraient été certainement repris. Aussi ne se montraient-ils pas, les uns cachés dans le poste, les autres se dissimulant derrière les bastingages, tout en se gardant d’éveiller les soupçons des jeunes passagers.

Il est vrai, comment ceux-ci eussent-ils pu soupçonner qu’ils étaient tombés entre les mains des échappés de la prison de Queenstown?…

Aussi, Tony Renault, plaisantant, déclara-t-il qu’il ne s’agissait pas de recherches effectuées par la police.

“Ces braves constables ont été envoyés là pour voir si l’Alert a pu appareiller, afin d’annoncer son départ à nos familles…

— Tu te moques?… lui répondit John Howard, qui prit l’observation au sérieux.

— Mais non, John, mais non!… Allons le demander au capitaine Paxton.”

Tous de descendre alors sur le pont et de gagner l’avant du navire.

Harry Markel, John Carpenter, Corty, ne les virent point venir sans quelque inquiétude. Quant à leur intimer l’ordre de rester sur la dunette, pourquoi? Et ne pas répondre à leurs questions, pourquoi encore?…

Ce fut Louis Clodion qui prit la parole:

“Voyez-vous ce groupe sur la falaise, capitaine Paxton?…

— Oui… dit Harry Markel, et je ne sais ce que ces hommes sont venus faire en cet endroit…

— Est-ce qu’ils n’observent pas l’Alert?… ajouta Albertus Leuwen.

— Pas plus l’Alert que les autres bâtiments… répondit John Carpenter.

— Mais ce sont des constables?… demanda Roger Hinsdale.

— Je le pense, dit Harry Markel.

— Est-ce qu’ils seraient à la recherche de malfaiteurs?… ajouta Louis Clodion.

— Des malfaiteurs?… répliqua le maître d’équipage.

— Sans doute, poursuivit Louis Clodion. N’avez-vous pas entendu dire que les pirates de l’Halifax, après avoir été capturés dans les mers du Pacifique, ont été ramenés en Angleterre, à Queenstown, pour y être jugés et qu’ils sont parvenus à s’échapper de la prison?…

— Nous l’ignorions, déclara John Carpenter du ton le plus naturel, le plus indifférent aussi.

— Pourtant, dit Hubert Perkins, avant-hier, à notre arrivée, en débarquant du paquebot, nous n’avons entendu parler que de cela…

— C’est possible, mais ni avant-hier ni hier nous n’avons quitté le bord un instant, et nous ne sommes pas au courant de ces nouvelles,

— Cependant, demanda Louis Clodion, vous aviez bien entendu dire que l’équipage de l’Halifax avait été ramené en Europe?…

— En effet… répondit John Carpenter, qui ne voulut point passer pour plus ignorant qu’il ne fallait… D’ailleurs, nous ne savions pas que ces gens-là s’étaient évadés de la prison de Queenstown…

— Cette évasion a pourtant eu lieu, assura Roger Hinsdale, et la veille du jour où ces misérables allaient être jugés…

— Puis condamnés!… s’écria Tony Renault. Espérons que la police parviendra à retrouver leur piste…

— Et, ajouta Louis Clodion, qu’ils n’échapperont point au châtiment que méritent leurs abominables crimes…

— Comme vous dites”, se borna à répondre Harry Markel.

Au surplus, les craintes, si justement éprouvées par Harry Markel et ses compagnons, eurent bientôt pris fin. Après un quart d’heure de halte au sommet de la falaise, l’escouade continua de suivra la crête du littoral dans la direction du sud-ouest. Les agents ne tardèrent pas à disparaître, et Corty de murmurer, en donnant du jeu à ses poumons:

“Enfin… je respire!…

— D’accord, répondit John Carpenter, mais, si les constables sont venus, le vent, lui, est resté au diable!… S’il ne se lève pas avant le soir, il faudra, coûte que coûte, nous déhaler pendant la nuit…

— On se déhalera, n’est-ce pas, Harry?… demanda Corty. Nos embarcations remorqueront l’Alert… Les passagers ne refuseront pas de se mettre aux avirons pour nous venir en aide…

— Bien, déclara le maître d’équipage, et, quand le jusant nous aura emportés à trois ou quatre milles de la terre, nous ne courrons plus autant de dangers qu’ici…

— Et, conclut Corty, nous pourrons faire ce qui nous reste à faire…”

CHAPITRE X

X

La brise du nord-est

Penchés au-dessus de la rambarde, les jeunes passagers observaient avec attention aussi loin que leur permettait le regard. Avec quelle impatience il leur tardait d’avoir quitté ce mouillage et de ne plus être en vue de terre.

Le ciel laissait alors prévoir une modification prochaine dans l’état de l’atmosphère. Quelques nuages se levaient à l’est, et il était possible que la brise vint de la côte avant la fin du jour.

Eh bien, on en profiterait, dût-elle même souffler en tempête, pourvu qu’elle entraînât l’Alert à vingt milles de là, en plein Atlantique.

Mais cet espoir ne serait-il pas déçu?… Ces nuages ne se dissiperaient-ils pas avec les derniers rayons du soleil!… Harry Markel en viendrait-il donc à se servir de ses embarcations pour gagner la haute mer?…

Cependant, abrités sous la tente de la dunette, les jeunes garçons suivaient le mouvement qui s’effectuait à l’entrée du canal de Saint-George. Non seulement montaient et descendaient des steamers, les uns vers l’Atlantique, les autres vers les parages de l’Irlande, mais plusieurs voiliers se faisaient remorquer par les tugs de Queenstown.

Ah! si Harry Markel l’eût osé, il aurait hélé un de ces tugs; il aurait traité pour être conduit au large, et il eût payé d’un bon prix son remorquage!…

Tony Renault proposa même d’employer ce moyen. À cinq ou six milles plus à l’ouvert du canal, n’était-on pas assuré de rencontrer les brises du large?…

À cette proposition, Harry Markel opposa un refus catégorique, et d’un ton sec qui ne laissa pas de surprendre. Après tout, un capitaine sait ce qu’il doit faire: il ne demande l’avis de personne.

En effet, Harry Markel, quelque intérêt qu’il eût à s’éloigner d’une côte si dangereuse pour ses compagnons et lui, n’eût jamais consenti à prendre un remorqueur. Que serait-il arrivé si le patron de ce tug, connaissant le capitaine Paxton ou l’un de ses hommes, ne les eût pas retrouvés à bord de l’Alert?… Non! mieux valait encore attendre.

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, d’épaisses fumées se montrèrent dans le sud-ouest. Quelle intéressante distraction d’observer l’approche du steamer qui venait d’être signalé!

Ce bâtiment marchait à grande vitesse. Aussi, une demi-heure après, eut-on la certitude que c’était un navire de guerre se dirigeant vers le canal.

Toutes les lorgnettes furent braquées de ce côté. Tony Renault et les autres se disputaient à qui découvrirait le premier la nationalité de ce steamer.

Ce fut Louis Clodion qui l’eut, cette bonne fortune, et, après avoir assez distinctement reconnu la flamme déroulée à la pomme du mât militaire:

“C’est un français, s’écria-t-il, un navire de l’État…

— Si c’est un français, s’écria Tony Renault, nous le saluerons au passage!”

Et il alla demander à Harry Markel la permission de rendre honneur à la France, représentée par un de ses bâtiments de guerre.

Harry Markel, n’ayant aucune raison de refuser, donna son consentement et ajouta même que, très certainement, on répondrait au salut de l’Alert. N’est-ce pas l’usage dans toutes les marines?…

Ce bâtiment était un croiseur cuirassé de deuxième rang qui jaugeait de sept à huit mille tonnes, portant deux mâts militaires. Le pavillon tricolore flottait à sa poupe, il avançait rapidement sur cette mer si calme, que coupait son étrave effilée, et laissait après lui un long sillage plat, dû à la perfection de ses lignes d’eau.

Grâce aux lorgnettes, le nom de ce cuirassé put être lu au moment où il passa devant l’Alert.

C’était le Jemmapes, l’un des plus beaux types de la flotte française.

Louis Clodion et Tony Renault étaient postés sur la dunette, à la drisse de la corne d’artimon. Lorsque le Jemmapes ne fut plus qu’à un quart de mille, ils halèrent sur la drisse, et le pavillon britannique fut par trois fois amené aux cris de “Vive la France!” Tous, Anglais, Danois, Hollandais, poussèrent ce cri en l’honneur de leurs camarades, tandis que le pavillon du Jemmapes descendait et remontait le long de sa hampe.

Une heure plus tard, même honneur fut rendu aux couleurs anglaises, lorsqu’elles apparurent à la corne d’un transatlantique.

C’était le City-of-London, de la ligne Cunard, établie entre Liverpool et New-York. Suivant l’habitude, il allait déposer ses dépêches à Queenstown, ce qui fait gagner à celle-ci une demie journée sur l’arrivée des paquebots.

Le City-of-London salua l’Alert, dont le pavillon avait été hissé par John Howard et Hubert Perkins, au milieu des hurras des jeunes passagers.

Vers cinq heures environ, il fut constaté que les nuages avaient grossi dans le nord-est et dominaient les hauteurs qui s’élèvent en arrière de la baie de Cork. Notable différence entre l’aspect du ciel et celui qu’il présentait à la même heure pendant les journées précédentes.

Si, ce soir-là, le soleil se couchait encore sur un horizon pur, il était à prévoir qu’il reparaîtrait le lendemain derrière ces lourdes vapeurs.

Harry Markel et John Carpenter s’entretenaient à l’avant. Par précaution, ils ne voulaient point se montrer sur la dunette, où ils auraient pu être aperçus et reconnus, soit de la falaise, soit même du rivage, bordé d’un semis de roches noirâtres.

“Il y a du vent là-dedans!… dit le maître d’équipage, en tendant la main dans la direction de Roche-Pointe.

— Je le crois… répondit Harry Markel.

— Eh bien, s’il se décide à souffler, nous n’en perdrons pas une prise… capitaine Paxton… oui, capitaine Paxton!… Ne faut-il pas que je m’habitue à t’appeler ainsi… au moins pour quelques heures?… Demain… cette nuit même, j’espère bien que tu redeviendras définitivement le capitaine Markel, commandant… Ah! à propos, je chercherai un nom pour notre navire!… Ce n’est pas l’Alert qui recommencera nos campagnes dans les mers du Pacifique!…”

Harry Markel, qui n’avait point interrompu son compagnon, demanda:

“Tout est prêt pour l’appareillage?…

— Tout, capitaine Paxton, répliqua le maître d'équipage. Il n'y a qu'à lever l'ancre et à larguer les voiles! Il ne faudra pas grande brise à un navire aussi fin de l'avant, aussi relevé de l'arrière pour se déhaler rapidement…

— Ce soir, déclara Harry Markel, si nous ne sommes pas à cinq ou six milles dans le sud de Roberts-Cove, j'en serai bien surpris…

— Et moi, plus vexé que surpris! répliqua John Carpenter. Mais voici deux de nos passagers qui viennent te parler…

— Qu'ont-ils à me dire?…" murmura Harry

Markel.

Magnus Anders et Tony Renault — les deux novices, comme les désignaient leurs camarades — venaient de quitter la dunette, se dirigeant vers le gaillard d'avant, au bas duquel causaient Harry Markel et John Carpenter.

Ce fut Tony Renault qui prit la parole et dit:

"Capitaine Paxton, mes camarades nous envoient, Magnus et moi, vous demander s'il n'y a pas d'indices d'un changement de temps…

— Assurément, répondit Harry Markel.

— Alors il est possible que l'Alert appareille ce soir?… dit Magnus Anders.

— C'est possible, et c'est même de cela que nous parlions, John Carpenter et moi.

— Mais, reprit Tony Renault, ce ne serait que dans la soirée sans doute?…

— Dans la soirée, répondit Harry Markel. Les nuages montent très lentement, et, si le vent se déclare, ce ne sera pas avant deux ou trois heures…

— Nous avons remarqué, continua Tony Renault, que ces nuages ne sont pas coupés, et ils doivent descendre très bas, au-dessous de l’horizon… C’est, sans doute, ce qui vous fait penser, capitaine Paxton, que le changement de temps est probable?…”

Harry Markel fit un signe de tête affirmatif, et alors le maître d’équipage d’ajouter:

“Oui, mes jeunes messieurs, je crois que nous tenons le vent cette fois!… Ce sera le bon, puisqu’il nous poussera dans l’ouest… Encore un peu de patience, et l’Alert aura enfin quitté la côte d’Irlande!… En attendant, vous avez le temps de dîner, Ranyah Cogh a mis toute sa cuisine en branle pour votre dernier repas… le dernier en vue de terre, s’entend!…”

Harry Markel fronçait le sourcil, comprenant bien les abominables allusions de John Carpenter. Mais il était difficile d’enrayer les bavardages de ce bandit qui avait la férocité plaisante ou la plaisanterie féroce, comme on voudra.

“Bien, fit Magnus Anders, nous nous mettrons à table quand le dîner sera prêt…

— Et, insista Tony Renault, si vous appareillez avant qu’il soit fini, ne craignez pas de nous déranger!… Nous voulons être tous à notre poste pour l’appareillage.”

Cela convenu, les deux jeunes garçons regagnèrent la dunette. Là ils continuèrent de causer, en examinant l’état du ciel jusqu’au moment où un des matelots nommé Wagah vint les prévenir que le dîner les attendait.

Ce Wagah avait été affecté au service de la dunette. À lui revenait tout ce qui concernait le carré et les cabines, comme s’il eût été le steward du bord.

C’était un homme de trente-cinq ans, et la nature avait fait erreur en lui donnant une physionomie franche, une figure sympathique: il ne valait pas mieux que ses compagnons. Son obséquiosité n’eût peut-être point paru exempte de fourberie, et il n’avait pas l’habitude de regarder les gens bien en face.

Ces détails devaient échapper aux passagers trop jeunes encore, trop inexpérimentés pour découvrir ces indices de la perversité humaine.

Il va sans dire que Wagah avait particulièrement séduit M. Horatio Patterson, sinon moins jeune, mais aussi inexpérimenté que Louis Clodion et ses camarades.

En effet, par sa minutie dans le service, par le zèle qu’il affectait, Wagah devait plaire à un homme, on peut le dire, aussi naïf que l’économe d’Antilian School. Harry Markel avait eu la main heureuse en le choisissant pour ces fonctions de steward. Personne n’avait mieux joué son rôle. Eût-il eu à le continuer pendant toute la traversée que M. Horatio Patterson n’aurait jamais soupçonné ce misérable. Or, on ne le sait que trop, ce rôle allait prendre fin dans quelques heures.

Donc, le mentor était enchanté de son steward. Il lui avait déjà indiqué la place de ses divers ustensiles de toilette et de ses habits dans la cabine. Il se disait que, s'il était éprouvé par le mal de mer, — éventualité peu probable puisqu'il avait fait ses preuves pendant la traversée de Bristol à Queenstown, — Wagah lui rendrait les meilleurs services. Aussi parlait-il déjà de la bonne gratification qu'il comptait prélever sur la caisse du voyage pour reconnaître tant d'empressement à lui être agréable et à prévenir ses moindres désirs en toutes choses.

Le jour même, causant avec lui, s'inquiétant de tout ce qui concernait l'Alert et son personnel, M. Patterson avait été amené à parler d'Harry Markel. Peut-être trouvait-il "le commandant" — c'est ainsi qu'il le désignait — un peu froid, un peu réservé, et d'un caractère peu communicatif, en somme.

"C'est justement observé, monsieur Patterson, lui avait répondu Wagah. Il est vrai, ce sont là des qualités sérieuses pour un marin… Le capitaine Paxton est tout à son affaire… Il sait quelle est sa responsabilité, et ne pense qu'à bien remplir ses fonctions… Vous le verrez à l'œuvre, si l'Alert est aux prises avec le mauvais temps!… C'est un des meilleurs manoeuvriers de notre flotte marchande, et il serait capable de commander un bâtiment de guerre tout autant que sa Seigneurie le premier lord de l'Amirauté…

— Juste réputation dont il jouit à bon droit,

Wagah, avait répondu M. Horatio Patterson, et c'est en ces termes élogieux qu'on nous l'a dépeint! Lorsque l'Alert a été mis à notre disposition par la généreuse Mrs Kethlen Seymour, nous avons appris ce que valait le capitaine Paxton, ce Deus, je ne dirais pas ex machina, mais ce Deus machinae, le Dieu de cette merveilleuse machine qu'est le navire capable de résister à toutes les fureurs de la mer!"

Ce qu’il y eut de particulier, et ce qui causa un sensible plaisir à M. Horatio Patterson, c’est que le steward avait l’air de le comprendre, même lorsqu’il lui échappait quelque citation latine. Aussi ne tarissait-il pas en éloges sur ledit Wagah, et il n’y avait aucune raison pour que ses jeunes compagnons ne le crussent pas sur parole.

Le dîner fut aussi joyeux que le déjeuner l’avait été, et, on voudra bien l’admettre, aussi bon que convenablement servi. De là, nouveaux éloges à l’adresse du cuisinier Ranyah Cogh, où les mots de potus et cibus s’entremêlèrent dans les superbes phrases de M. Horatio Patterson.

Du reste, il faut l’avouer, malgré les observations du digne économe, Tony Renault, que son impatience rendait instable, quitta fréquemment le carré afin de voir ce qui se passait sur le pont où s’occupait l’équipage. La première fois, ce fut pour observer si le vent se maintenait en bonne direction, la seconde pour s’assurer s’il prenait de la force ou tendait à calmir, la troisième pour voir si l’on commençait les préparatifs de l’appareillage, la quatrième pour rappeler au capitaine Paxton la promesse de les prévenir lorsque le moment serait venu de virer au cabestan.

Inutile de dire que Tony Renault rapportait toujours une réponse favorable à ses camarades, non moins impatients que lui. Le départ de l’Alert s’effectuerait sans autre retard, mais pas avant sept heures et demie, au renversement de la marée, et le jusant le porterait rapidement au large.

Ainsi, les passagers avaient tout le temps de dîner sans être obligés de mettre les morceaux doubles, — ce qui eût vivement contrarié

M. Horatio Patterson. Non moins soucieux de la bonne administration de ses affaires que de celle de son estomac, il conduisait ses repas avec une sage lenteur, ne mangeant qu'à petites bouchées, ne buvant qu'à petites gorgées, ayant toujours soin de bien mâcher les aliments avant de les laisser s'introduire dans le canal musculo-membraneux du pharynx.

Et souvent il répétait, à l'édification des pensionnaires d'Antilian School:

"C'est à la bouche qu'est dévolue la tâche du premier travail… Elle a des dents faites pour la mastication, tandis que l'estomac en est privé… À la bouche de broyer, à l'estomac de digérer, et l'économie vitale en ressentira les plus heureux effets!"

Rien d'aussi juste, et M. Patterson ne pouvait avoir qu'un regret: c'est que ni Horace ni Virgile ni aucun poète de l'ancienne Rome n'eussent rédigé cet aphorisme en vers latins.

Ainsi se passa ce dîner au dernier mouillage de l'Alert et dans des conditions qui n'avaient point obligé Wagah à installer la table de roulis.

C'est pourquoi, au dessert, Roger Hinsdale, s'adressant à ses camarades, porta la santé du capitaine Paxton, en regrettant qu'il ne dût point présider aux repas du carré. Quant à Niels Harboe, il émit le voeu que l'appétit ne leur manquât pas pendant toute la traversée…

"Et pourquoi l'appétit nous ferait-il défaut?… répliqua le mentor, un peu animé par un verre de porto. Est-ce qu'il ne sera pas incessamment renouvelé par le grand air salin des océans?…

— Eh! oh! dit Tony Renault, en le regardant d'un oeil ironique, ne faut-il pas compter avec le mal de mer!…

— Peuh… fit John Howard, on en est quitte pour quelques nausées.

— D’ailleurs, observa Albertus Leuwen, on ne sait encore si le meilleur moyen, pour le braver, est d’avoir l’estomac plein ou vide…

— Vide… assura Hubert Perkins.

— Plein… assura Axel Wickborn.

— Mes jeunes amis, intervint M. Horatio Patterson, croyez-en ma vieille expérience, le mieux est de s’accoutumer aux mouvements alternatifs du navire. Comme nous l’avons pu faire pendant le trajet de Bristol à Queenstown, il est probable que nous n’avons plus à craindre ce mal!… Rien de tel que de s’habituer, et tout est habitude en ce bas monde!”

C’était évidemment la sagesse qui parlait par la bouche de cet homme incomparable, et il ajouta:

“Tenez, mes jeunes amis, je n’oublierai jamais un exemple qui vient à l’appui de ma thèse…

— Citez… citez… s’écria toute la table.

— Je cite, poursuivit M. Patterson, en renversant un peu la tête en arrière. Un savant ichtyologiste, dont le nom m’échappe, a fait, au point de vue de l’habitude, une expérience des plus concluantes sur les poissons. Il possédait un vivier, et, dans ce vivier, une carpe, qui y passait son existence exempte de tout souci. Un jour, ledit savant eut l’idée d’accoutumer ladite carpe à vivre hors de l’eau. Il la retira du vivier, quelques secondes d’abord, quelques minutes ensuite, puis quelques heures, puis quelques jours, si bien que l’intelligente bête finit par respirer à l’air libre…

— Ce n’est pas croyable!… dit Magnus Anders.

— Les faits sont là, affirma M. Patterson, et ils ont une valeur scientifique.

— Alors, fit observer Louis Clodion très en défiance, en suivant ces procédés, l’homme arriverait à vivre dans l’eau?…

— C’est infiniment probable, mon cher Louis.

— Mais, questionna Tony Renault, peut-on savoir ce qu’est devenue cette intéressante carpe?… Vit-elle toujours?…

— Non, elle est morte, après avoir servi à cette magnifique expérience, conclut M. Patterson, morte par accident, et c’est peut-être ce qu’il y a de plus curieux… Un jour, elle retomba par mégarde dans le vivier et s’y noya!… Sans cette maladresse, elle eût vécu cent ans comme ses pareilles!…”

À cet instant, un ordre se fit entendre.

“Tout le monde sur le pont!”

Ce commandement d’Harry Markel interrompit le mentor, au moment où les hurras allaient accueillir sa véridique histoire. Aucun des passagers ne se fût dispensé d’assister aux manœuvres de l’appareillage.

Le vent paraissait bien établi, une brise moyenne qui soufflait du nord-est.

Déjà quatre hommes étaient au cabestan, prêts à virer, et les passagers se placèrent aux barres pour leur venir en aide. De son côté, John Carpenter et plusieurs matelots s’occupaient à larguer les huniers, les perroquets, les focs, les basses voiles, puis à hisser les vergues, afin de les amurer et les border dès que l’on serait à pic.

“Dérapez”, ordonna un moment après Harry Markel.

Les derniers tours du cabestan firent remonter l’ancre à son bossoir, où elle fut traversée.

“Amurez et bordez partout, commanda Harry Markel, puis cap au sud-ouest.”

L’Alert, ayant pris de l’erre, commença à s’éloigner de Roberts-Cove, tandis que les jeunes garçons arboraient le pavillon britannique en le saluant de leurs hurras.

M. Horatio Patterson se trouvait alors près de Harry Markel devant l’habitacle. Et, après avoir déclaré qu’il était enfin commencé, le grand voyage, il ajouta:

“Grand et fructueux, capitaine Paxton!… Grâce à la générosité princière de Mrs Kethlen Seymour, il assure à chacun de nous une prime de sept cents livres à notre départ de la Barbade!”

Harry Markel, qui ne connaissait rien de cette disposition, regarda M. Patterson, et s’éloigna sans prononcer une parole.

Il était huit heures et demie. Les passagers apercevaient encore les lumières de Kinsale-Harbour et le feu de Corrakilly-Bay.

À ce moment, John Carpenter, s’approchant de Harry Markel, lui dit:

“C’est bien cette nuit?…

— Ni cette nuit ni les autres!… répondit Harry Markel. Nos passagers vaudront chacun sept cents livres de plus au retour!”

CHAPITRE XI

XI

En mer

Le lendemain, le soleil, ce ponctuel factotum de l’univers, — a dit Charles Dickens, — se leva sur un horizon épuré par une jolie brise. L’Alert n’avait plus aucune terre en vue.

Ainsi donc, Harry Markel s’était décidé à retarder l’exécution de ses criminels projets.

À tout prendre, il lui avait été facile de se donner pour le capitaine Paxton, puisque celui-ci n’était pas connu de ses futurs passagers, et qu’il ne restait pas à bord un seul homme de l’ancien équipage. Débarrassé de M. Patterson et de ses compagnons, il n’aurait plus rien eu à redouter, et l’Alert pourrait sans risques gagner les parages du Pacifique.

Mais voici que le plan de cet audacieux malfaiteur venait d’être tout à coup modifié. Ce qu’il voulait, à présent, c’était conduire le trois-mâts à destination, naviguer dans les mers antiliennnes, accomplir jusqu’au bout le voyage projeté, laisser ces jeunes garçons toucher, à la Barbade, la prime qui complétait leur bourse de voyage, et ne les jeter à la mer qu’après le départ des Antilles.

Il y avait cependant grand danger à procéder de la sorte. Ce fut l’avis de quelques-uns, entre autres celui de Corty, bien qu’il se montrât très sensible à l’apport de l’argent. Ne se pouvait-il pas que le capitaine Paxton fût connu dans quelque île de l’Antilie, ou du moins l’un des hommes?… Il est vrai, du reste, c’était chose admissible que l’équipage de l’Alert eût subi des changements avant son départ pour le voyage des Antilles.

“Soit, fit observer Corty, un ou deux matelots… Mais, le capitaine Paxton… comment, expliquer son absence?…

— Ce serait impossible, en effet, répondit Harry Markel. Heureusement, en lisant les papiers de Paxton, je me suis assuré qu’il n’est jamais allé aux Indes occidentales, ni sur l’Alert ni sur un autre navire. Il est donc permis de croire qu’il n’y est point connu… D’ailleurs, que nous ayons quelque danger à courir, je l’accorde, et cela en vaut la peine, cette somme promise par Mrs Kethlen Seymour aux boursiers d’Antilian School…

— Je pense comme Harry, dit alors John Carpenter. C’est un coup à risquer!… L’important était de quitter Queenstown, et nous en voici déjà à une trentaine de milles… Quant à la prime que doivent toucher M. Patterson et chacun de ces gentlemen…

— Chacun de nous la touchera tout entière, répondit Harry Markel, puisque nous ne sommes que dix, comme ils sont dix.

— Bien calculé, déclara le maître d’équipage, et, en y ajoutant la valeur du trois-mâts, bonne affaire!… Je me charge d’en faire comprendre les avantages à nos compagnons…

— Qu’ils comprennent ou non, répondit Harry Markel, c’est résolu. Que chacun veille à remplir son rôle pendant la traversée et ne se compromette ni en actes ni en paroles! J’y tiendrai la main!”

Finalement, Corty se rendit aux arguments d’Harry Markel, et, peu à peu, ses inquiétudes se calmeraient, en songeant aux bénéfices futurs. Puis, ainsi que l’avait dit John Carpenter, les prisonniers de Queenstown étaient maintenant à l’abri de la police, et, en mer, ils n’avaient à craindre aucune poursuite.

Bref, le plan d’Harry Markel, si audacieux qu’il fût, reçut l’approbation générale, et il n’y eut plus qu’à laisser marcher les choses.

Pendant la matinée, Harry Markel voulut encore revoir les papiers du bord, et plus spécialement ceux du capitaine Paxton en ce qui concernait le voyage et l’exploration des Antilles, conformément au programme.

Sans doute, à tous égards, il eût été préférable de rallier directement la Barbade, où les passagers devaient rencontrer Mrs Kethlen Seymour et recevoir la prime en question. Alors, au lieu d’aller d’îles en îles, Harry Markel, en quittant la Barbade, aurait mis le cap au large… Dans la nuit, les passagers eussent été jetés à la mer. Puis l’Alert se fût dirigé vers le sud-est, afin de doubler le cap de Bonne-Espérance.

Mais Mrs Kethlen Seymour avait tracé un itinéraire auquel il fallait se conformer en tous points. M. Horatio Patterson et ses compagnons de voyage le connaissaient, et, à son tour, Harry Markel en dut prendre connaissance.

Cet itinéraire avait été logiquement établi, puisque l’Alert devait atteindre l’Antilie par le nord et suivre le long chapelet des îles du Vent, en descendant vers le sud.

La première escale se ferait à Saint-Thomas et la seconde à Sainte-Croix, où Niels Harboe et Axel Wickborn mettraient le pied sur les possessions danoises.

La troisième escale permettrait à l’Alert de mouiller au port de l’île Saint-Martin, qui est à la fois française et hollandaise, et dans laquelle était né Albertus Leuwen.

La quatrième escale s’effectuerait à Saint-

Barthélemy, seule possession suédoise des Antilles, lieu de naissance de Magnus Anders. À la cinquième escale, Hubert Perkins visiterait l’île anglaise d’Antigoa, et, à la sixième, Louis Clodion, l’île française de la Guadeloupe.

Enfin l’Alert débarquerait, pendant les dernières escales, John Howard à l’île anglaise de la Dominique, Tony Renault à l’île française de la Martinique et Roger Hinsdale à l’île anglaise de Sainte-Lucie.

Après ces neuf relâches, le capitaine Paxton devait mettre le cap sur l’île anglaise de la Barbade, où résidait Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Là, M. Horatio Patterson présenterait les neuf lauréats d’Antilian School à leur bienfaitrice. C’est là qu’ils la remercieraient de ses bontés; c’est de là qu’ils repartiraient pour revenir en Europe.

Tel était le programme destiné à être suivi de point en point par le capitaine de l’Alert et auquel Harry Markel aurait à se conformer. Il importait même, dans l’intérêt de ces malfaiteurs, qu’il ne subit aucune modification. À la seule condition que l’infortuné Paxton ne fût pas connu aux Antilles — ce qui était plus que probable — les projets d’Harry Markel avaient grande chance de réussir, et nul ne soupçonnerait l’Alert d’être tombé entre les mains des pirates de l’Halifax.

Quant à la traversée de l’Atlantique sur un bon navire, à cette époque de l’année où les alizés traversent la zone tropicale, il y avait lieu de croire qu’elle s’accomplirait dans les conditions les plus favorables.

En quittant les eaux anglaises, Harry Markel avait donné la route au sud-ouest au lieu du sud-est — ce qu’il aurait fait si ses passagers eussent disparu pendant la nuit précédente. L’Alert aurait cherché à gagner la mer des Indes, puis l’océan Pacifique dans le plus court délai. Maintenant, il s’agissait de rallier les parages de l’Antilie en coupant le Tropique du Cancer à peu près sur le soixante-dixième méridien. Aussi le trois-mâts, tout dessus, même ses cacatois, ses flèches et ses voiles d’étais, cinglait-il, tribord amures, sous une brise fraîchissante, qui lui valait ses onze milles à l’heure.

Cela va sans dire, personne ne souffrait du mal de mer. Très soutenu par sa voilure qui l’appuyait sur bâbord, à la surface de cette houle longue et régulière, l’Alert roulait à peine et s’élançait d’une lame à l’autre avec tant de légèreté que le tangage y était presque insensible.

Toutefois, et quoi qu’il y en eût, dans l’après-midi, M. Patterson ne laissa pas de ressentir un certain malaise. Il est vrai, grâce à la prudence de Mrs Patterson, et conformément à la fameuse formule Vergall, sa valise renfermait divers ingrédients qui, à en croire les gens les mieux informés, permettent de combattre avec succès ledit mal de mer qu’il appelait savamment “pélagalgie”.

Et, en outre, pendant la dernière semaine passée à Antilian School, le prévoyant économe n’avait point négligé de recourir à des purgations variées et progressives, afin de se trouver dans les meilleures conditions sanitaires pour résister aux taquineries de Neptune. C’est, dit-on, une précaution préparatoire tout indiquée par l’expérience, et le futur passager de l’Alert l’avait scrupuleusement prise.

Ensuite — recommandation infiniment plus agréable, celle-ci — M. Horatio Patterson, avant de quitter Queenstown pour embarquer sur l’Alert, avait fait un excellent déjeuner en compagnie des jeunes boursiers, qui lui portèrent les toasts les plus rassurants.

Du reste, M. Patterson savait que l’endroit du bord où les secousses sont le moins ressenties est le centre du navire. Le tangage et le roulis les rendent plus violentes, soit à l’avant, soit à l’arrière. Aussi, dès le début, pendant les premières heures de navigation, il crut pouvoir demeurer sur la dunette. On le vit donc s’y promener de long en large, les jambes écartées, en vrai marin, de manière à mieux assurer son équilibre, et ce digne homme conseilla à ses compagnons de suivre son exemple. Mais, paraît-il, ceux-ci dédaignaient ces précautions, que n’exigeaient ni leur tempérament ni leur âge.

Ce jour-là, M. Horatio Patterson ne sembla pas prendre sa part du déjeuner avec autant d’appétit que la veille, bien que le maître coq eut fait convenablement les choses. Puis, au dessert, n’éprouvant pas le besoin de se promener, il s’assit sur un des bancs de la dunette, regardant Louis Clodion et ses camarades, qui allaient et venaient autour de lui. Après le dîner, auquel il ne toucha que du bout des lèvres, Wagah le reconduisit à sa cabine et l’étendit dans son cadre, la tête un peu relevée, les yeux clos avant le sommeil.

Le lendemain, M. Patterson quitta son lit, assez peu dispos, et prit place sur un pliant à la porte du carré.

Lorsque Harry Markel passa près de lui:

“Rien de nouveau, capitaine Paxton?… demanda-t-il d’une voix un peu affaiblie.

— Rien de nouveau, monsieur, répondit Harry Markel.

— Même temps?…

— Même temps et même brise.

— Vous ne prévoyez pas de changement?…

— Non, si ce n’est que le vent a une certaine tendance à fraîchir.

— Alors… tout va bien?…

— Tout va bien.”

Peut-être M. Patterson pensa-t-il en son for intérieur que tout n’allait pas aussi bien que la veille. Peut-être ferait-il mieux de se donner quelque mouvement. Donc, après s’être remis sur pied, et s’appuyant de la main droite contre la lisse, il marcha de la dunette au grand mât. C’était une recommandation, parmi tant d’autres, de la formule Vergall, dont un passager doit tenir compte au début d’une traversée. En se maintenant dans la partie centrale du navire, il espérait supporter sans trop d’inconvénient ces mouvements de tangage, plus désagréables que les mouvements de roulis, ceux-ci presque nuls, puisque l’Alert présentait une bande assez prononcée sur bâbord.

Tandis que M. Patterson déambulait ainsi d’un pas incertain, il se croisa à plusieurs reprises avec Corty, qui crut devoir lui dire:

“Voulez-vous me permettre de vous octroyer un conseil?…

— Octroyez, mon ami.

— Eh bien… c’est de ne pas regarder au large… Cela trouble moins…

— Cependant, répondit M. Patterson, en se retenant à un taquet de tournage, j’ai lu dans les instructions à l’usage des voyageurs… qu’il est recommandé de fixer les yeux sur la mer…”

En effet, cette dernière recommandation se trouve dans la formule, mais la première également, bien qu’elles paraissent se contredire. Au surplus, M. Patterson était résolu à les suivre toutes, quelles qu’elles fussent. C’est pourquoi Mrs Patterson l’avait muni d’une ceinture de flanelle rouge qui faisait trois fois le tour de son corps et le sanglait comme un baudet.

En dépit de ces précautions, pourtant, le mentor se sentait de moins en moins à son aise. Il lui semblait que son coeur se déplaçait, oscillait dans sa poitrine comme un pendule, et, lorsque Wagah piqua l’heure du déjeuner, laissant les jeunes garçons se rendre dans le carré, il resta au pied du grand mât.

Et alors Corty, affectant un sérieux qu’il n’avait point, de lui dire:

“Voyez-vous, monsieur, si vous n’êtes point tout à fait dans votre assiette, c’est que vous n’obéissez pas aux balancements du navire, lorsque vous êtes assis…

— Cependant, mon ami, il serait difficile d’obéir…

— Si… monsieur… Regardez-moi…”

Et Corty prêcha d’exemple, se penchant en arrière, lorsque l’Alert donnait du nez dans la lame, se penchant en avant, lorsque son arrière se plongeait dans l’écume du sillage.

M. Patterson se leva alors, mais ne parvint point à garder son équilibre, et murmura:

“Non… impossible… Aidez-moi à me rasseoir… La mer est trop mauvaise…

— Mauvaise… la mer… Mais c’est de l’huile… monsieur… c’est de l’huile!” affirma Corty.

Il va de soi que les passagers n’abandonnaient point M. Patterson à son malheureux sort. Ils venaient à chaque instant s’enquérir de son état…

Ils essayaient de le distraire en causant… Ils lui donnaient des conseils, en rappelant que la formule indiquait encore nombre de prescriptions pour prévenir le mal de mer, et, docile, M. Patterson ne se refusait point à en essayer.

Hubert Perkins alla dans le carré chercher un flacon de rhum. Puis il remplit un petit verre de cette liqueur, si efficace pour remettre le coeur, et M. Patterson but à petites gorgées.

Une heure après, ce fut de l’eau de mélisse qu’Axel Wickborn lui apporta et dont il avala une grande cuillerée.

Les troubles continuaient cependant, descendant jusqu’à la cavité stomacale, et le morceau de sucre imbibé de kirsch ne put les apaiser.

Le moment approchait donc où M. Patterson, de jaune devenu pâle, serait contraint de réintégrer sa cabine, où il était à craindre que le mal ne vînt à empirer. Louis Clodion lui demanda s’il avait bien observé toutes les précautions indiquées dans la formule.

“Oui… oui!… balbutia-t-il en n’ouvrant la bouche que le moins possible. J’ai même sur moi un petit sachet que m’a confectionné Mrs Patterson et qui renferme quelques pincées de sel marin…”

Et, vraiment, si le sachet en question n’amenait aucun résultat, si, après la ceinture de flanelle, le sel marin restait inefficace, il n’y aurait plus rien à faire!

Les trois jours qui suivirent, pendant lesquels il venta fraîche brise, M. Patterson fut abominablement malade. Malgré de pressantes invitations, il ne voulut point quitter sa cabine, retourna ad vomitum, — ainsi dit l’Écriture, — et ce qu’il eût dit sans doute, s’il avait eu la force d’émettre une citation latine.

Il lui revint alors à la mémoire que Mrs Patterson lui avait préparé un sac contenant des noyaux de cerises. Toujours à s’en rapporter à la formule de Vergall, il suffisait de garder dans sa bouche un de ces noyaux hygiéniques pour empêcher le mal de mer ou de se produire ou de se continuer. Or, comme il en avait au moins une centaine, le mentor pourrait remplacer ledit noyau s’il venait à l’avaler.

M. Patterson pria donc Louis Clodion d’ouvrir le sac aux noyaux de cerise et d’en extraire un, qu’il plaça entre ses lèvres. Hélas! presque aussitôt, dans un violent hoquet, le noyau s’échappa comme la balle d’une sarbacane.

Que faire, décidément?… N’y avait-il plus de prescriptions à suivre?… Avait-on épuisé toute la série des moyens prohibitifs ou curatifs?… Est-ce qu’il n’était pas recommandé de manger un peu?… Oui, comme aussi de ne pas manger du tout…

Les jeunes garçons ne savaient plus comment traiter M. Patterson arrivé au dernier degré de prostration. Et, pourtant, ils restaient près de lui le plus possible, ils évitaient de le laisser seul. Ils le savaient, on recommande bien de distraire le malade, de chasser la mélancolie à laquelle il s’abandonne… Or, la lecture même des auteurs favoris de M. Patterson n’aurait pu amener ce résultat.

Au surplus, comme c’était de l’air frais qu’il lui fallait surtout, et qu’il en eût manqué dans sa cabine, Wagah lui prépara un matelas sur le pont à l’avant de la dunette.

Et ce fut là que se coucha M. Horatio Patterson, convaincu, cette fois, que l’énergie et la volonté ne valaient pas mieux contre le mal de mer que les différentes prescriptions énumérées dans la formule thérapeutique.

“En quel état il est, notre pauvre économe!… dit Roger Hinsdale.

— C’est à croire qu’il a sagement fait en prenant ses dispositions testamentaires!” répondit John Howard.

Pure exagération, d’ailleurs, car on ne meurt pas de ce mal-là.

Enfin, l’après-midi, comme les nausées reprenaient de plus belle, intervint l’obligeant steward qui dit:

“Monsieur, je connais encore un remède qui réussit quelquefois…

— Eh bien… que ce soit cette fois-ci, murmura M. Patterson, et indiquez-le s’il en est temps encore!

— C’est de tenir un citron à la main pendant toute la traversée… jour et nuit…

— Donnes-moi un citron”, remurmura M. Patterson, d’une voix entrecoupée de spasmes.

Wagah n’inventait rien et ne plaisantait pas. Le citron figure dans la série des remèdes imaginés par les spécialistes contre le mal de mer.

Par malheur, celui-ci ne fut pas moins inefficace que les autres! M. Patterson, plus jaune que le fruit de cette famille des arrantiacées, eut beau le tenir dans sa main, le presser de ses cinq doigts à en faire jaillir le jus, il n’éprouva aucun soulagement, et son coeur continua d’osciller dans sa poitrine.

Après cette dernière tentative, M. Patterson essaya des lunettes dont les verres avaient été teintés d’une légère couche de vermillon. Cela ne réussit pas davantage, et il semblait que la pharmacie du bord fût épuisée. Tant que

M. Patterson aurait la force d’être malade, il le serait, sans doute, et il n’y avait plus rien à attendre que de la seule nature.

Cependant, après le steward, Corty vint encore proposer un suprême remède à son tour:

“Avez-vous du courage, monsieur Patterson?” demanda-t-il.

D’un signe de tête, M. Patterson répondit qu’il n’en savait rien.

“De quoi s’agit-il?… s’informa Louis Clodion, qui se défiait de cette thérapeutique marine.

— Tout simplement d’avaler un verre d’eau de mer… répondit Corty. Cela produit souvent des effets… extraordinaires!

— Voulez-vous essayer, monsieur Patterson?… reprit Hubert Perkins.

— Tout ce qu’on voudra! gémit l’infortuné.

— Bon, fit Tony Renault, ce n’est pas la mer à boire.

— Non… un verre seulement”, déclara Corty, qui envoya une baille par-dessus le bord et la rehissa pleine d’une eau dont la limpidité ne laissait rien à désirer.

M. Patterson, — et il faut convenir qu’il y mettait une véritable énergie, — ne voulant point mériter le reproche de ne pas avoir tout essayé, se releva à demi sur son matelas, prit le verre d’une main tremblotante, le porta à ses lèvres et avala une bonne gorgée.

Ce fut la coup de grâce. Jamais nausées ne furent accompagnées de pareils spasmes, de pareilles contractions, de pareilles convulsions, de pareilles distorsions, de pareilles expectorations, et si tous ces mots n’ont pas une signification identique, ce jour-là, du moins, s’accordèrent-ils pour enlever au patient la connaissance des choses extérieures.

“Impossible de le laisser dans cet état, et il sera mieux dans sa cabine… dit Louis Clodion.

— C’est un homme à fourrer sur son cadre, déclara John Carpenter, dût-on ne l’en tirer qu’à l’arrivée à Saint-Thomas!”

Et peut-être le maître d’équipage pensait-il que, si M. Patterson rendait le dernier soupir avant d’arriver aux Antilles, ce seraient sept cents livres de moins à partager entre ses compagnons et lui…

Aussitôt il appela Wagah pour aider Corty à transporter le malade, lequel fut couché sans avoir conscience de ce qu'on faisait de sa machine humaine.

Et, maintenant, puisque les remèdes intérieurs avaient été inefficaces, on résolut d'appliquer les remèdes extérieurs, qui ne seraient peut-être pas sans effet. Roger Hinsdale suggéra l'idée de s'en tenir, entre toutes les prescriptions de la fameuse formule, à la seule dont on n'eût pas encore usé, et dont on pourrait attendre d'heureuses conséquences.

M. Patterson, qui n'aurait même pas fait un geste de protestation, si on l'eut écorché vif, fut dépouillé de ses vêtements jusqu'à la ceinture, et l'on soumit son estomac à des frictions réitérées avec un linge imbibé de collodion liquide.

Et il ne faudrait pas s'imaginer qu'il fût l'objet d'un frottement doux et régulier, dû à une main caressante! Loin de là!… Le vigoureux Wagah — à tour de bras, pourrait-on dire — s'acquitta de cette tâche avec telle conscience, que le mentor ne serait que juste en triplant sa gratification à la fin du voyage…

Bref, pour une raison ou pour une autre, peut-être parce que, là où il n'y a plus rien, la nature perd ses droits comme le plus puissant des souverains, peut-être parce que le patient était tellement vidé que ce vide lui faisait horreur, le mentor fit signe qu'il en avait assez. Puis, se retournant sur le flanc, son estomac appuyé contre le bord du cadre, il tomba dans une complète insensibilité.

Ses compagnons le laissèrent reposer, prêts à venir au premier appel. Après tout, rien d'impossible à ce que M. Patterson reprit le dessus avant la fin de la traversée, et qu'il eût recouvré la plénitude de ses facultés morales et physiques lorsqu'il mettrait le pied sur la première île de l'archipel antilian.

Mais, assurément, cet homme sérieux et pratique aurait le droit de tenir pour erronée, pour trompeuse, cette formule Vergall, qui lui inspirait tant de confiance et ne comptait pas moins de vingt-huit prescriptions!…

Et qui sait?… N'était-ce pas la vingt-huitième à laquelle il fallait ajouter foi, et dont voici les termes exacts:

“Ne rien faire pour se préserver du mal de mer!”

CHAPITRE XII

XII

À travers l’Atlantique

La navigation se poursuivit dans des conditions assez favorables, et il fut même reconnu que l’état de M. Horatio Patterson n’empirait pas, au contraire. Inutile de dire qu’il avait renoncé à tenir un citron entre ses doigts. Décidément, les frictions au collodion, exécutées par Wagah, ne manquaient point d’une certaine efficacité. Le cœur du mentor reprenait sa régularité chronométrique, comme battait l’horloge de l’économat d’Antilian School.

De temps en temps, passèrent quelques grains, qui secouaient violemment l’Alert. Le navire les supportait sans peine. Du reste, l’équipage manoeuvrait si habilement sous les ordres d’Harry Markel, que les jeunes passagers en étaient émerveillés — surtout Tony Renault et Magnus Anders. Ils donnaient la main, soit pour amener les voiles hautes, soit pour brasser les vergues, soit pour prendre des ris, — opération que l’installation de doubles huniers rendait plus facile. Si M. Patterson n’était pas là pour recommander la prudence, il se rassurait, sachant que John Carpenter veillait sur ses jeunes gabiers avec une sollicitude toute paternelle… et pour cause.

Au surplus, les troubles atmosphériques n’allèrent pas jusqu’à la tempête. Le vent tenait dans l’est, et l’Alert faisait bonne route.

Entre autres distractions que leur procurait cette traversée de l’Atlantique, les boursiers se livraient au plaisir de la pêche, non sans passion ni succès. Les longues lignes qu’ils mettaient à la traîne, en leur prêtant cette attention spéciale qui caractérise les disciples de ce grand art, ramenaient à chaque hameçon des poissons de toutes sortes. C’étaient le froid Albertus Leuwen et le patient Hubert Perkins qui montraient le plus de goût et déployaient le plus de zèle pour cet exercice. Le menu des repas s’en ressentait agréablement, grâce à ces poissons de pleine mer, bonites, dorades, esturgeons, morues, thons, dont se régalait aussi l’équipage.

Assurément, M. Patterson eût pris le plus vif plaisir à suivre les péripéties de ces pêches; mais, s’il quittait sa cabine, ce n’était encore que pour respirer l’air frais de l’espace. Certes, il ne se fût pas moins intéressé à observer les ébats des marsouins, des dauphins, qui s’élançaient et plongeaient sur les flancs de l’Alert, à entendre les cris des jeunes passagers, admirant les prodigieuses culbutes et cabrioles de ces “clowns océaniques”!

“En voici deux que l’on aurait pu tirer au vol!… déclarait l’un.

— Et ceux-ci, qui vont se heurter contre l’étrave!” s’écriait l’autre.

Ces souples et agiles animaux se rencontraient parfois en bandes de quinze ou vingt, tantôt à l’avant, tantôt dans le sillage du navire. Et ils marchaient plus vite que lui; ils apparaissaient d’un côté et, à l’instant, ils se montraient de l’autre, après avoir passé sous la quille; ils faisaient des bonds de trois à quatre pieds; ils retombaient en décrivant des courbes gracieuses, et l’oeil pouvait les entrevoir jusque dans les profondeurs de ces eaux verdâtres, si claires et si transparentes.

À plusieurs reprises, sur la demande des passagers, John Carpenter et Corty essayèrent de capturer un de ces marsouins, de les frapper avec des harpons. Ils n’y réussirent pas, tant ces poissons sont agiles.

Il n’en fut pas de même des énormes squales qui fréquentent ces parages de l’Atlantique. Leur voracité est telle qu’ils se jettent sur n’importe quel objet tombé à la mer, chapeau, bouteille, morceau de bois, bout de filin. Tout est comestible à leurs formidables estomacs, et ils gardent ce qu’ils n’ont pu digérer.

Dans la journée du 7 juillet, un requin fut pris, qui ne mesurait pas moins de douze pieds de longueur. Lorsqu’il eut avalé le croc amorcé d’un débris de viande, il se débattit avec une telle violence que l’équipage eut grand-peine à le hisser sur le pont. Louis Clodion et ses camarades étaient là, regardant, non sans quelque effroi, le gigantesque monstre, et, sur la recommandation de John Carpenter, ils se gardèrent de l’approcher de trop près, car les coups de sa queue eussent été terribles.

Le squale fut aussitôt attaqué avec la hache, et, l’estomac ouvert, il essayait encore de se déhaler par des bonds formidables qui l’envoyaient d’un bord à l’autre.

M. Horatio Patterson ne put assister à cette intéressante capture. Ce fut dommage, car il en aurait soigneusement inséré le récit dans ses notes de voyage, et eût, sans doute, donné raison au naturaliste Roquefort, qui fait dériver par corruption le mot requin du latin requiem.

Ainsi s’écoulaient les journées, et on ne les trouvait point monotones. À chaque instant, — distraction nouvelle, — des bandes d’oiseaux de mer croisaient leur vol autour des vergues. Quelques-uns furent tués par Roger

Hinsdale et Louis Clodion, qui se servirent fort adroitement des carabines du bord.

Il convient de noter que, sur les ordres formels d’Harry Markel, ses compagnons n’avaient aucun rapport avec les passagers de l’Alert. Seuls, le maître d’équipage, Corty, Wagah, chargé du service du carré, se départaient de cette réserve. Harry Markel lui-même restait toujours l’homme froid, peu communicatif, qu’il s’était montré dès le premier jour.

Assez fréquemment passaient en vue du trois-mâts des voiliers, des steamers, à une trop grande distance pour qu’il fût possible de les raisonner. D’ailleurs — ce qui devait échapper à ces jeunes garçons — Harry Markel cherchait plutôt à s’écarter des bâtiments en vue, et, lorsque l’un d’eux, courant à contre-bord, se rapprochait, il laissait porter ou lofait d’un ou deux quarts, afin de s’en éloigner.

Cependant, le 18, vers trois heures de l’après-midi, l’Alert fut gagné par un steamer de grande marche qui faisait route au sud-ouest, c’est-à-dire en même direction.

Ce steamer, un américain, le Portland, de San-Diégo, revenait d’Europe en Californie par le détroit de Magellan.

Lorsque les deux navires ne furent plus qu’à une encablure l’un de l’autre, les questions d’usage s’échangèrent entre les capitaines:

“Tout va bien à bord?…

— Tout va bien.

— Rien de nouveau depuis le départ?…

— Rien de nouveau.

— Vous allez?…

— Aux Antilles… Et vous?

— À San-Diégo.

— Alors, bon voyage!

— Bon voyage!”

Le Portland, après avoir un peu ralenti sa vitesse, se remit à toute vapeur, et les yeux purent longtemps suivre sa fumée, qui se perdit enfin sous l’horizon.

Ce dont Tony Renault et Magnus Anders s’inquiétèrent, après quinze jours de navigation, fut de relever sur la carte la première terre qui serait signalée par les vigies du bord.

Cette terre, d’après la route tenue, devait être l’archipel des Bermudes.

Ce groupe, situé par soixante-quatre degrés de longitude ouest et trente et un degrés de latitude nord, appartient à l’Angleterre. Placé sur la route que suivent les navires pour aller d’Europe au golfe du Mexique, il ne comprend pas moins de quatre cents îles ou îlots, dont les principaux sont Bermude, Saint-George, Cooper, Somerset. Ils offrent de nombreuses relâches, et les bâtiments y trouvent tout ce qui leur est nécessaire, soit pour se réparer, soit pour se ravitailler. Grand avantage dans ces parages fréquemment assaillis par les coups de vent les plus redoutables de l’Atlantique.

L’Alert en était encore à une soixantaine de milles pendant la journée du 19 juillet, lorsque les lorgnettes du bord commencèrent à parcourir l’horizon en direction de l’ouest. Toutefois, pour des yeux inhabitués, il était facile de confondre ces hautes terres avec les nuages à la limite de la mer et du ciel.

Cependant les Bermudes pouvaient être déjà aperçues dans la matinée, — ce que fit observer John Carpenter à Tony Renault et à Magnus Anders, les plus impatients de la bande.

“Là… regardez… dit-il, par tribord devant…

— Vous distinguez des cimes de montagnes?… demanda Magnus Anders.

— Oui, mon jeune monsieur… Elles pointent même au-dessus des nuages, et vous ne tarderez pas à les reconnaître.”

En effet, avant le coucher du soleil, des masses arrondies se dessinèrent assez confuses vers le couchant, et, le lendemain, l’Alert passait en vue de l’île Saint-David, la plus orientale de l’archipel.

Du reste, il fallut tenir tête à de violents grains. Certaines rafales, entremêlées d’éclairs, qui tombaient du sud-est, contraignirent l’Alert à prendre la cape. Toute la journée et la nuit suivante, la mer fut démontée. Sous ses huniers au bas ris, le trois-mâts dut faire la route contraire; il n’aurait pu s’exposer sans danger aux lames qui l’eussent couvert en grand.

Peut-être Harry Markel eût-il fait acte de marin prudent et sage, en cherchant refuge dans quelque port de l’archipel, et, plus particulièrement, à Saint-George. Mais, on le comprend, plutôt compromettre son navire que de rallier une colonie anglaise, où le capitaine Paxton pouvait être connu. Il garda donc le large, manoeuvrant d’ailleurs avec une extrême habileté.

L’Alert ne subit que des avaries sans importance, quelques voiles déchirées, un coup de mer qui faillit enlever l’embarcation de tribord.

Si M. Patterson supporta mieux que l’on ne devait l’espérer ces soixante heures de mauvais temps, plusieurs de ses jeunes compagnons, sans avoir passé par toutes les phases du terrible mal dont il avait été victime, furent cependant assez éprouvés: John Howard, Niels Harboe, Albertus Leuwen. Mais Louis Clodion, Roger Hinsdale, Hubert Perkins, Axel Wickborn résistèrent et purent admirer, en toute sa magnifique horreur, cette lutte des éléments déchaînés pendant deux jours de tempête.

Quant à Tony Renault et à Magnus Anders, ils avaient décidément des cœurs de marins, cet aes triplex que M. Patterson ne possédait pas et qu’il enviait au navigateur d’Horace.

Au cours de cette bourrasque, l’Alert fut rejeté d’une centaine de milles hors de sa route. De là un retard qui ne serait pas complètement regagné, même si le navire atteignait sans nouveaux incidents les parages où dominent les alizés qui soufflent de l’est à l’ouest. Par malheur, Harry Markel ne retrouva pas les brises régulières qui l’avaient favorisé depuis son départ de Queenstown. Entre les Bermudes et la terre d’Amérique, le temps fut extrêmement variable: parfois des calmes, et le trois-mâts n’enlevait pas un mille à l’heure, parfois des grains qui obligeaient l’équipage à carguer les voiles hautes, à prendre des ris dans les huniers et la misaine.

Il était donc certain, dès maintenant, que les passagers ne débarqueraient point à Saint-Thomas sans un retard de quelques jours. Il en résulterait une inquiétude assez justifiée sur le sort de l’Alert. Les câblogrammes devaient avoir fait connaître à la Barbade le départ du capitaine

Paxton, à quelle date le bâtiment était sorti de la baie de Cork. Plus de vingt jours écoulés, et l'on n'aurait encore aucune nouvelle.

Il est vrai, de ces appréhensions, Harry Markel et ses compagnons n'éprouvaient nul souci. Eux, c'était l'impatience qui les rongeait, — l'impatience d'en avoir fini avec cette exploration à travers les Antilles, de n'avoir plus rien à craindre en cinglant vers le cap de Bonne-Espérance.

Dans la matinée du 20 juillet, le trois-mâts coupa le Tropique du Cancer à la hauteur du canal de Bahama, par lequel, en partant du détroit de la Floride, se déversent dans l'océan les eaux du golfe du Mexique.

Si l'Alert, au cours de sa navigation, avait eu à franchir l'équateur, Roger Hinsdale et ses camarades n'auraient point négligé de fêter le passage de la ligne. Ils se fussent très volontiers soumis aux exigences de cette cérémonie traditionnelle en payant les frais du baptême en gratifications. Mais l'équateur est plus au sud de vingt-trois degrés, et il n'y eut pas lieu de célébrer le passage du vingt-troisième parallèle.

Il va sans dire que M. Horatio Patterson, à la condition d'être valide, eût mis la plus parfaite bonne grâce à recevoir les compliments du bonhomme Tropique et de son cortège carnavalesque. Il l'aurait fait, sans nul doute, avec toute la bienveillance et aussi toute la dignité qui convenaient à l'économe d'Antilian School.

Cependant, s'il n'y eut pas cérémonie, Harry Markel, à la demande des jeunes passagers, accorda double ration à l'équipage.

Le point calculé ce jour-là plaçait l'Alert à deux cent cinquante milles de la plus rapprochée des Antilles au nord-est de l'archipel. Peut-être le navire serait-il un peu retardé lorsqu'il rencontrerait, à l'ouvert du canal de

Bahama, le Gulf-Stream, ce courant chaud qui se propage jusqu’aux régions septentrionales de l’Europe, sorte de fleuve océanien dont les eaux ne se confondent point avec les eaux de l’Atlantique. D’ailleurs, il serait alors servi par les vents alizés, régulièrement établis en ces parages, et, avant trois jours, assurément, la vigie signalerait les hauteurs de Saint-Thomas, où s’effectuerait la première relâche.

Et maintenant, à mesure qu’ils approchaient des Antilles, en songeant à cette exploration de l’archipel, qui durerait plusieurs semaines, et non sans danger pour lui, l’équipage ne pouvait se défendre des plus sérieuses appréhensions.

John Carpenter et Corty causaient souvent entre eux à ce propos. C’était véritablement jouer gros jeu, si la mauvaise chance s’en mêlait. Sans doute, il y avait cette somme de sept mille livres à toucher, et elle valait la peine que l’on courût quelque risque… Mais enfin, si, pour tout avoir, on allait tout perdre — même la vie?… Si les pirates de l’Halifax, les fugitifs de Queenstown, venaient à être reconnus, s’ils retombaient entre les mains de la justice?… Et l’on répétait qu’il était encore temps de se mettre hors de danger… La nuit prochaine, il suffirait d’appréhender les passagers sans défiance et sans défense, et de les jeter à la mer… Puis l’Alert virerait cap pour cap.

Il est vrai, à toutes ces raisons, à toutes ces craintes que manifestaient ses compagnons, Harry Markel se contentait de répondre:

“Fiez-vous à moi!…”

Tant de confiance en lui-même, appuyée sur tant d’audace, finissait par les gagner, et ils disaient en langage de marin:

“Bon!… Laisse courir!…”

Dans la journée du 25 juillet, les Antilles ne restaient plus qu’à une soixantaine de milles à l’ouest-sud-ouest. Avec la fraîche brise qui le poussait, nul doute que l’Alert n’aperçût les hauteurs de Saint-Thomas avant le coucher du soleil.

Aussi Tony Renault et Magnus Anders passèrent-ils cet après-midi, l’un sur les barres du grand mât, l’autre sur les barres du mât de misaine, et c’était à qui des deux crierait le premier:

“Terre!… terre!”

CHAPITRE XIII

XIII

L’aviso “Essex”

Vers quatre heures du soir, un cri retentit, jeté par Tony Renault.

Ce cri ne fut point celui de: Terre! mais celui de: Navire!

Par bâbord devant, à une distance de cinq ou six milles, une fumée se montrait dans l’ouest au-dessus de l’horizon.

Un steamer venait à contre-bord, et, assurément, il marchait à grande vitesse. Une demi-heure après, sa coque était visible, et, une demi-heure ensuite, il ne se trouvait qu’à un quart de mille par le travers de l’Alert.

Les passagers, réunis sur la dunette, échangeaient leurs observations.

“C’est un navire de l’État… disait l’un.

— Comme tu dis… répondait l’autre, puisqu’une flamme se déroule en tête de son grand mât…

— Et, de plus, un anglais… reprenait celui-ci.

— Qui se nomme l’Essex”, ajoutait celui-là.

De fait, à l’aide de la lorgnette, on pouvait lire ce nom sur le tableau d’arrière, au moment où le bâtiment évoluait.

“Tiens!… s’écria Tony Renault, je parie qu’il manœuvre pour nous accoster!”

Et il semblait bien que ce fût l’intention de l’Essex, aviso de cinq à six cents tonnes, qui venait de hisser son pavillon.

Harry Markel ni les autres ne se méprirent à ce sujet. Nul doute, l’Essex voulait communiquer avec l’Alert et continuait à se rapprocher sous petite vapeur.

Les transes que ces misérables éprouvèrent, on les devine, on les comprend. N’était-il pas possible que, depuis quelques jours, une dépêche fût arrivée dans une des Antilles anglaises; que, d’une façon ou d’une autre, on eût connaissance de ce qui s’était passé à Queenstown avant le départ de l’Alert, sa prise par la bande Markel, le massacre du capitaine Paxton et de ses hommes, que l’Essex eût été envoyé pour s’emparer de ces malfaiteurs?…

Et pourtant, toute réflexion faite, non! cela ne pouvait être. Comment, Harry Markel, qui certainement n’aurait pas plus épargné les passagers qu’il n’avait épargné l’équipage du capitaine Paxton, aurait fait route pour les Antilles?… Il eût poussé l’audace jusqu’à conduire l’Alert à destination au lieu de s’enfuir?… Une telle imprudence était inadmissible.

Cependant, Harry Markel attendait avec plus de sang-froid que John Carpenter et Corty. Si le commandant de l’Essex entrait en communication avec lui, il verrait. Du reste, l’aviso avait stoppé à quelques encablures seulement, et, sur un signal qui fut envoyé, l’Alert dut mettre en panne. Ses vergues brassées et orientées de manière que le jeu des voiles se contrariât, il demeura à peu près immobile.

Dans tous les cas, puisque l’Essex avait hissé son pavillon, l’Alert dut hisser le sien.

Il va de soi que, si Harry Markel n’eût pas voulu obéir aux injonctions qui lui étaient faites par un bâtiment de l’État, il y aurait été contraint. Impossible d’échapper aux poursuites de cet aviso qui avait pour lui la vitesse et la force. Quelques coups de canon eussent en un instant réduit l’Alert à l’impuissance.

D’ailleurs, on le répète, Harry Markel n’y songeait point. Si le commandant de l’aviso lui ordonnait de se rendre à son bord, il s’y rendrait.

Quant à M. Patterson, à Louis Clodion, à Roger Hinsdale, à leurs camarades, l’arrivée de l’Essex, l’ordre de communiquer avec le trois-mâts, devaient les intéresser au plus haut point.

“Est-ce que ce navire de guerre est envoyé au-devant de l’Alert pour nous recevoir à son bord et nous débarquer plus tôt à l’une des Antilles?…”

Cette réflexion ne pouvait naître que dans un esprit toujours aventureux, tel celui de Roger

Hinsdale. Il convient d’ajouter que cette opinion lui fut absolument personnelle.

En ce moment, un des canots de l’Essex ayant été mis à la mer, deux officiers y prirent aussitôt place.

En quelques coups d’aviron, l’embarcation eut accosté.

Les officiers montèrent par l’échelle de tribord, et l’un d’eux dit:

“Le capitaine?…

— Me voici, répondit Harry Markel,

— Vous êtes le capitaine Paxton?…

— Lui-même.

— Et ce navire est bien l’Alert, qui a quitté le port de Queenstown à la date du 30 juin dernier?…

— À cette date, en effet.

— Ayant comme passagers les lauréats d’Antilian School?…

— Ici présents”, répondit Harry Markel, en montrant sur la dunette M. Patterson et ses compagnons, qui ne perdaient pas un mot de cette conversation.

Les officiers les rejoignirent, suivis d’Harry Markel, et celui qui avait parlé — un lieutenant de la marine britannique, — après avoir répondu à leur salut, s’exprima en ces termes, de ce ton froid et bref qui caractérise l’officier anglais:

“Capitaine Paxton, le commandant de l’Essex est heureux d’avoir rencontré l’Alert, et nous le sommes aussi de vous trouver tous en bonne santé.”

Harry Markel s’inclina, attendant que le lieutenant voulût bien lui faire connaître la raison de sa visite.

“Vous avez eu bonne traversée, demanda l’officier… et le temps a été favorable?…

— Très favorable, répliqua Harry Markel, à l’exception d’un coup de vent que nous avons attrapé par le travers des Bermudes.

— Et qui vous a retardé?…

— Nous avons dû tenir la cape pendant quarante-huit heures…”

Le lieutenant se retourna à cet instant vers le groupe des passagers, et s’adressant au mentor:

“Monsieur Patterson… d’Antilian School, sans doute?… dit-il.

— En personne, monsieur l’officier”, répondit l’économe qui salua avec tout le cérémonial de sa politesse habituelle.

Puis il ajouta:

“J’ai l’honneur de vous présenter mes jeunes compagnons de voyage, en vous priant d’agréer l’assurance de ma très distinguée et très respectueuse considération…

— Signé: Horatio Patterson”, murmura Tony Renault.

De sympathiques shake hands furent alors échangés avec cette précision automatique spéciale aux poignées de main anglo-saxonnes.

Le lieutenant, se retournant alors vers Harry Markel, lui demanda à voir son équipage — ce qui ne laissa pas de paraître très suspect et très inquiétant à John Carpenter. Pourquoi donc cet officier prétendait-il les passer en revue?…

Toutefois, sur l’ordre d’Harry Markel, il fit monter ses hommes sur le pont, et ceux-ci se rangèrent au pied du grand mât. En dépit des efforts que ces bandits firent pour se donner l’apparence d’honnêtes gens, peut-être les officiers pensèrent-ils qu’ils avaient une mine peu rassurante.

“Vous n’avez que neuf matelots?… interrogea le lieutenant.

— Neuf, répondit Harry Markel.

— Cependant, nous avions été informés que l’équipage de l’Alert en comprenait dix… sans vous compter, capitaine Paxton…”

Question assez embarrassante, à laquelle Harry Markel évita tout d’abord de répondre, en disant:

“Monsieur l’officier… puis-je savoir pour quel motif j’ai l’honneur de vous avoir à mon bord?…”

Il était naturel, en somme, que le lieutenant fût questionné à ce sujet, et il répondit:

“Tout simplement l’inquiétude où l’on était, à la Barbade, par suite du retard de l’Alert… Aux Antilles, comme en Europe, les familles se sont préoccupées de ce retard. Mrs Kethlen Seymour a fait des démarches auprès du gouverneur, et Son Excellence a expédié l’Essex au-devant de l’Alert. Voilà les seules raisons de notre présence en ces parages, et, je le répète, nous sommes très heureux que nos craintes aient été vaines!”

Devant ce témoignage d’intérêt et de sympathie, M. Horatio Patterson ne pouvait rester à court. Au nom des jeunes passagers comme au sien, il remercia avec grande dignité et le commandant de l’Essex, et ses officiers, et l’excellente Mrs Kethlen Seymour, et Son Excellence le gouverneur général des Antilles anglaises.

Cependant Harry Markel crut devoir faire remarquer qu’un retard de quarante-huit heures n’aurait pas dû donner lieu à de telles appréhensions et motiver l’envoi de l’aviso.

“Ces inquiétudes étaient justifiées par suite d’une circonstance que je vais vous faire connaître”, répondit le lieutenant.

John Carpenter et Corty se regardèrent assez surpris. Peut-être regrettèrent-ils même que Harry Markel eût poussé si loin ses questions.

“C’est bien le 30 juin, dans la soirée, que l’Alert a mis à la voile?…

— En effet, répondit Harry Markel, qui, d’ailleurs, avait tout son sang-froid. Nous avons levé l’ancre vers sept heures et demie du soir. Une fois dehors, le vent a refusé, et l’Alert est resté encalminé toute la journée du lendemain sous la terre, à la pointe de Roberts-Cove.

— Eh bien, capitaine Paxton, reprit le lieutenant, le lendemain, un cadavre a été retrouvé sur cette partie de la côte où l’avait porté le courant… Or, aux boutons de ses vêtements, on a reconnu que c’était un des matelots de l’Alert.”

John Carpenter et les autres se sentirent pris d’un involontaire frisson. Ce cadavre ne pouvait être que celui d’un des malheureux massacrés la veille.

Alors le lieutenant de l’Essex de déclarer que les autorités de la Barbade avaient été prévenues de cet incident par dépêche, — d’où légitimes inquiétudes en ne voyant point arriver l’Alert. Puis il ajouta:

“Vous avez donc perdu un de vos hommes, capitaine Paxton?…

— Oui, monsieur, le matelot Bob… Ce matelot est tombé à la mer, alors que nous étions mouillés à l’anse Farmar, et, malgré toutes les recherches, on n’a pu ni le sauver, ni le retrouver.”

Cette explication, qui fut admise sans éveiller aucun soupçon, indiquait en même temps pourquoi un matelot manquait à l’équipage du trois-mâts.

Cependant les passagers durent, à bon droit, s’étonner que cet accident n’eût point été porté à leur connaissance. Quoi! un des hommes s’était noyé avant leur arrivée à bord, et ils n’en avaient rien su?…

Mais, à la question que M. Horatio Patterson posa à ce sujet, Harry Markel répondit que, s’il avait caché ce malheur aux jeunes boursiers, c’est qu’il avait tenu à ne point leur laisser prendre la mer sous une impression fâcheuse.

Cette réponse, fort plausible, ne provoqua aucune autre observation.

Il y eut seulement un sentiment de surprise, mêlé d’une certaine émotion, lorsque le lieutenant ajouta:

“La dépêche envoyée de Queenstown à la Barbade mentionnait en outre que le cadavre trouvé sur la côte — probablement celui du matelot Bob — avait une blessure en pleine poitrine.

— Une blessure!…” s’écria Louis Clodion, tandis que M. Patterson prenait l’attitude d’un homme qui semble ne plus rien comprendre.

Harry Markel ne voulut point rester sans réponse, et, toujours très maître de lui, il dit:

“C’est de la hune de misaine que le matelot Bob est tombé sur le cabestan, contre lequel il a dû se blesser, et, de là, il a rebondi à la mer. Aussi n’a-t-il pas pu se soutenir sur l’eau, et voilà pourquoi nos recherches ont été inutiles.”

Explication qui n’aurait pas paru moins admissible que les précédentes, si le lieutenant n’eût complété son information en ces termes:

“La blessure relevée sur le cadavre ne provenait point d’un choc… Elle était due à un coup de coutelas qui avait atteint le cœur!”

Nouvelles transes, bien naturelles, on en conviendra, chez John Carpenter et ses compagnons. Ils ne savaient plus comment cela allait finir. Est-ce que le commandant de l’Essex avait ordre de saisir l’Alert, de le conduire à la Barbade, où se ferait une enquête qui eût sans doute tourné fort mal pour eux?… Elle aurait amené la constatation de leur identité… On les aurait reconduits en Angleterre. Cette fois, ils n’eussent pas échappé au châtiment de leurs crimes… Et surtout ils n’auraient pu accomplir celui qu’ils commettraient lorsque l’Alert aurait quitté les parages des Indes occidentales!…

La chance continuait à les favoriser, Harry Markel n’eut pas même à s’expliquer sur le fait du coup de poignard.

En effet, M. Horatio Patterson s’était écrié, en levant les mains au ciel:

“Quoi! cet infortuné aurait été frappé d’un fer homicide par une main criminelle?…”

Et, alors, le lieutenant de répondre comme suit:

“La dépêche ajoutait que le matelot avait dû arriver vivant sur la côte, où se trouvait alors une bande de malfaiteurs échappés de la prison de Queenstown… Là, il sera tombé entre leurs mains, et aura été frappé d’un coup de coutelas.

— Alors, observa Roger Hinsdale, il s’agit de la bande des pirates de l’Halifax, qui venait de s’évader, lorsque nous sommes arrivés à Queenstown…

— Les misérables!… s’écria Tony Renault. Et ils n’ont pas été repris, monsieur le lieutenant?…

— D’après les dernières nouvelles, on n’avait pas retrouvé leurs traces, répondit l’officier. Toutefois il n’est pas possible qu’ils aient quitté l’Irlande, et tôt ou tard ils seront arrêtés…

— C’est à désirer, monsieur”, déclara Harry Markel, de ce ton calme dont il ne s’était pas départi un seul instant.

Et, lorsque John Carpenter revint vers l’avant avec Corty, il lui dit à voix basse:

“Un maître homme, notre capitaine…

— Oui, répondit Corty, et à suivre partout où il voudra nous mener!”

Les officiers transmirent à M. Patterson et aux lauréats les compliments dont Mrs Kethlen Seymour les avait chargés. Cette dame se faisait une grande joie de les recevoir, et son vif désir serait de les garder le plus longtemps possible à la Barbade, s’ils voulaient bien ne pas trop s’attarder dans les autres Antilles, où ils étaient impatiemment attendus.

Au nom de ses camarades, Roger Hinsdale répondit en priant les officiers d’offrir à Mrs Kethlen Seymour le témoignage de leur reconnaissance de ce qu’elle avait fait pour Antilian School. Puis M. Horatio Patterson termina l’entrevue par un de ces speechs à la fois abondants et émus dont il avait le secret, et à la fin duquel, par une inadvertance bien rare chez un tel homme, il entremêla un vers d’Horace et un vers de Virgile.

Les officiers, après avoir pris congé du capitaine et des passagers, furent conduits à l’échelle et embarquèrent dans leur canot. Mais, avant de démarrer:

“Je pense, capitaine Paxton, dit le lieutenant, que l’Alert sera demain à Saint-Thomas, puisqu’il n’en est plus qu’à une cinquantaine de milles?…

— Je le pense aussi…. répondit Harry Markel.

— Alors nous vous annoncerons par dépêche, dès notre arrivée à la Barbade…

— En vous remerciant, monsieur, et en vous priant de présenter mes devoirs au commandant de l’Essex.”

Le canot poussa du bord, et, en moins d’une minute, il eut franchi la distance qui le séparait de l’aviso.

Harry Markel et les passagers saluèrent alors le commandant qui se tenait sur la passerelle et ce salut leur fut rendu.

L’embarcation hissée, des sifflets aigus retentirent, et l’Essex se remit en marche à toute vapeur, cap au sud-ouest. Une heure après, on ne voyait plus que son panache de fumée à l’horizon.

Quant à l’Alert, ses vergues brassées, ses voiles orientées sous l’allure du grand largue, tribord amures, il prit direction sur Saint-Thomas.

Ainsi Harry Markel et ses complices étaient rassurés, en ce qui concernait cette visite de l’Essex. Personne, ni en Angleterre ni aux Antilles, ne soupçonnait qu’ils eussent pu s’enfuir sur un navire, et que ce navire fût précisément l’Alert… Il semblait donc que la chance les suivrait jusqu’au bout!… Ils allaient effrontément parcourir cet archipel, ils seraient reçus avec honneur, ils iraient d’île en île, n’ayant même plus la crainte d’être reconnus, ils achèveraient cette exploration par une dernière relâche à la Barbade, et ce n’est pas la route de l’Europe qu’ils reprendraient alors!… Le lendemain du départ, l’Alert ne serait plus l’Alert… Harry Markel ne serait plus le capitaine Paxton, et il n’aurait plus à bord ni M. Patterson ni aucun de ses jeunes compagnons de voyage!… L’audacieuse entreprise aurait réussi, et c’est en vain que la police rechercherait en Irlande les pirates de l’Halifax!…

Cette dernière partie de la traversée s’effectua dans les conditions les meilleures. Un temps magnifique, sous le souffle constant des alizés, permettait de porter toute la voilure, même les bonnettes.

Décidément, M. Horatio Patterson était aguerri. À peine si, parfois, un coup de roulis ou de tangage un peu plus violent lui causait quelque malaise. Il avait même pu réoccuper sa place à table et se débarrasser du noyau de cerise qu’il persistait à garder dans sa bouche.

“Vous avez raison… monsieur, lui répétait Corty. Il n’y a encore que cela contre le mal de mer…

— Je le pense, mon ami, répondait le mentor, et, par bonheur, je suis abondamment pourvu de ces noyaux antipélagalgiques, grâce à la prévoyante Mrs Patterson.”

La journée s’acheva ainsi. Après avoir éprouvé les impatiences du départ, les jeunes lauréats éprouvaient les impatiences de l’arrivée. Il leur tardait d’avoir mis le pied sur la première île des Antilles.

Du reste, aux approches de l’archipel, des navires assez nombreux, steamers ou voiliers, animaient la mer: ceux qui cherchaient à gagner le golfe du Mexique à travers le détroit de la Floride, et ceux qui en sortaient pour rallier les ports de l’Ancien Continent. Pour ces jeunes garçons, quelle joie de les signaler, de les croiser, d’échanger des saluts avec les pavillons anglais, américains, français, espagnols, les plus habitués de ces parages!

Avant le coucher du soleil, l’Alert courait sur le dix-septième parallèle, en latitude de Saint-Thomas, dont il n’était plus séparé que par une vingtaine de milles. C’eût été l’affaire de quelques heures.

Mais, non sans raison, Harry Markel ne voulait pas s’aventurer de nuit au milieu du semis d’îlots et d’écueils qui borde les limites de l’archipel, et, par son ordre, John Carpenter dut diminuer la voilure. Le maître d’équipage fît amener les cacatois, les perroquets, la flèche d’artimon, la brigantine, et l’Alert resta sous ses doux huniers, sa misaine et ses focs.

La nuit ne fut aucunement troublée. La brise avait plutôt calmi, et le soleil, le lendemain, se leva sur un horizon très pur.

Vers neuf heures, on entendit un cri dans les barres du grand mât.

C’était Tony Renault qui répétait d’une voix éclatante et joyeuse:

“Terre par tribord devant… terre, terre!”

CHAPITRE XIV

XIV

Saint-Thomas et Sainte-Croix

Il a été précédemment exposé que les Indes occidentales ne comprennent pas moins de trois cents îles et îlots. En réalité le nom d’îles n’est dû qu’à quarante-deux, soit pour leurs dimensions, soit pour leur importance géographique. De ces quarante-deux îles, neuf seulement devaient recevoir la visite des lauréats d’Antilian School.

Toutes appartiennent au groupe désigné sous le nom de petites Antilles, et, de façon plus particulière, îles du Vent. Les Anglais en font deux parts: la première, qui se développe au nord depuis les îles Vierges jusqu’à la Dominique, ils l’appellent Leeward Islands; la seconde, qui s’étend depuis la Martinique jusqu’à la Trinidad, ils la nomment Windward Island.

Il n’y a pas lieu d’adopter cette dénomination.

Cet ensemble insulaire que limite à l’ouest la Méditerranée américaine, mérite le nom d’îles du Vent puisqu’il reçoit le premier souffle des alizés qui se propagent de l’est à l’ouest.

C’est à travers le réseau de ces îles que s’échangent les eaux de l’Atlantique et de la mer antilienne. Élisée Reclus a pu les comparer aux piles d’un immense pont entre lesquelles vont et viennent les courants qui sillonnent le golfe du Mexique.

Il importe de ne pas confondre ce golfe avec la mer proprement dite des Antilles: ce sont deux bassins très distincts, ayant leur conformation spéciale et d’inégale superficie, le premier mesurant quinze cent mille kilomètres carrés, le second, près de dix-neuf cent mille.

On n’ignore pas que Christophe Colomb découvrit en 1493 Cuba, la plus grande des Antilles, après avoir d’abord reconnu les îles Conception, Ferdinandina et Isabelle, sur lesquelles le navigateur génois arbora le pavillon espagnol.

Mais il croyait alors que ses caravelles venaient d’aborder aux terres extrêmes de l’Asie, au pays des Épices, et il mourut sans avoir su qu’il avait mis le pied sur le nouveau continent.

Depuis lors, diverses puissances européennes, au prix de guerres sanglantes, d’épouvantables massacres, de luttes incessamment renouvelées, se sont disputé le domaine antilian, et il n’est pas certain même que les résultats définitifs soient présentement acquis1.

Quoi qu’il en soit, on peut actuellement établir le compte suivant:

Île indépendante: Haïti-Saint-Domingue;

Îles appartenant à l’Angleterre: dix-sept;

Îles appartenant à la France: cinq, plus une moitié de Saint-Martin;

Îles appartenant à la Hollande: cinq, plus l’autre moitié de Saint-Martin;

Îles appartenant à l’Espagne: deux;

Îles appartenant au Danemark: trois;

[1] On sait ce que sont devenues ces deux îles, Cuba et Porto-Rico, depuis la guerre hispano-américaine de 1898.

Îles appartenant au Venezuela: six;

Îles appartenant à la Suède: une.

Quant à ce nom d'Indes occidentales donné aux Antilles, il vient de l'erreur qui fut commise par Christophe Colomb à propos de ses découvertes.

En réalité, cet archipel, depuis l'îlot de Sombrero au nord, jusqu'aux Barbades au sud, qui forme l'ensemble des Petites-Antilles, s'étend sur six mille quatre cent huit kilomètres carrés. L'Angleterre en possède trois mille cinq cent cinquante, la France deux mille sept cent soixante-dix-sept, la Hollande, quatre-vingt-un.

La population totale de ces îles est de sept cent quatre-vingt-douze mille habitants, dont quatre cent quarante-huit mille pour l'Angleterre, trois cent trente-six mille pour la France, huit mille deux cents pour la Hollande.

Les possessions danoises appartiennent plutôt au groupe des îles Vierges, avec une superficie de trois cent cinquante-neuf kilomètres carrés et trente-quatre mille habitants pour le Danemark, cent soixante-cinq kilomètres carrés et cinq mille deux cents habitants pour l'Angleterre.

En somme, ces îles Vierges peuvent être considérées comme faisant partie de la micro-Antilie. Occupées par les Danois dès l'année 1671, elles figurent, pour la plupart, dans leur domaine des Indes occidentales. Elles sont désignées sous les noms de Saint-Thomas, Saint-Jean, Sainte-Croix. Dans la première était né l'un des jeunes boursiers, le sixième lauréat du concours d'Antilian School, Niels Harboe.

C’est devant cette île que Harry Markel allait jeter l’ancre le matin du 20 juillet, après une heureuse traversée dont la durée avait été de vingt-cinq jours. À partir de ce point, l’Alert n’aurait plus qu’à descendre vers le sud pour relâcher dans les autres îles.

Si Saint-Thomas est de dimensions restreinte, son port est excellent d’abri et de tenue. Cinquante navires de grand tonnage peuvent y mouiller à l’aise. Aussi les flibustiers anglais et français ne laissèrent-ils de se le disputer à l’époque où les marines européennes luttaient sur ces parages et se prenaient, se reprenaient, s’arrachaient les îles de l’Antilie, comme des fauves voraces font d’une proie qui excite leur convoitise.

Christian Harboe habitait Saint-Thomas, et les deux frères n’avaient pas eu l’occasion de se revoir depuis plusieurs années. Avec quelle impatience tous deux attendaient l’arrivée de l’Alert, on le comprend.

Christian Harboe était l’aîné de onze ans. Seul parent que Niels eût dans l’île, il comptait parmi les plus riches négociants, nature très sympathique, montrant cette réserve charmante qui caractérise les races du nord. Ayant fixé sa résidence dans la colonie danoise, il avait pris la suite de l’importante maison de son oncle, un frère de sa mère, maison d’objets de consommation usuelle, vivres, étoffes, etc.

L’époque n’était pas encore éloignée où tout le commerce de Saint-Thomas se trouvait entre les mains des Israélites. Il se faisait sur une grande échelle, alors que la guerre troublait incessamment ces parages, et surtout après que la traite des noirs eut été définitivement interdite. Son port, Charlotte-Amalia, ne tarda pas à être déclaré port franc, ce qui accrut sa prospérité. Il offrait de sérieux avantages à tous les navires, de quelque nationalité qu’ils fussent. Ils y rencontraient un abri sûr contre les alizés et les tempêtes du golfe, grâce aux hauteurs de l’île, à une langue de terre où se brisait la houle du large, à un îlot sur lequel sont établis des quais et installés des magasins à charbon.

Lorsque l’Alert, signalé par les sémaphores, eut relevé les pointes Covell et Molhenters, doublé l’extrémité de la langue, contourné l’îlot, laissé sur la gauche le Signal, il donna dans un bassin circulaire, ouvert au nord, au fond duquel s’élèvent les premières maisons de la ville. Après qu’on eut filé sept à huit brasses de chaîne, le trois-mâts resta sur une profondeur de quatre à cinq mètres.

Reclus a observé que la position de Saint-Thomas est excellente entre toutes, puisque l’île occupe un point favorable sur la grande courbe des Antilles, à l’endroit même où “la distribution doit se faire le plus facilement vers toutes les parties de l’archipel”.

Aussi comprendra-t-on que, dès le début, ce port naturel ait attiré l’attention et obtenu la préférence des flibustiers. Il devint donc le principal entrepôt du trafic de contrebande avec les colonies espagnoles, et bientôt le plus important marché “du bois d’ébène”, c’est-à-dire des nègres achetés sur le littoral africain et importés aux Indes occidentales. C’est pourquoi il passa vite sous la domination danoise et n’en fut jamais distrait, après sa cession par une Compagnie financière qui l’avait acquis de l’électeur de Brandebourg, dont l’héritier fut précisément le roi de Danemark.

Dès que l’Alert eut pris son mouillage, Christian Harboe se fit conduire à bord, et les deux frères tombèrent dans les bras l’un de l’autre. Puis, ayant échangé de cordiales poignées de main avec M. Horatio Patterson et ses compagnons de voyage, le négociant dit:

“Mes amis, je compte que vous serez mes hôtes pendant votre séjour à Saint-Thomas…

Combien doit durer la relâche de l’Alert?…

— Trois jours, répondit Niels Harboe.

— Seulement?…

— Pas davantage, Christian, et à mon grand regret, car il y a si longtemps que nous ne nous sommes embrassés…

— Monsieur Harboe, dit alors le mentor, nous acceptons avec empressement vos obligeantes propositions… Nous serons vos hôtes pendant notre séjour à Saint-Thomas… qui ne peut se prolonger…

— En effet, monsieur Patterson, un itinéraire vous est imposé.

— Oui… par Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

— Est-ce que vous connaissez cette dame, monsieur Harboe?… demanda Louis Clodion.

— Non, répondit le négociant; mais j’ai souvent entendu parler d’elle et, aux Antilles, on vante son inépuisable charité.”

Puis, se tournant vers Harry Markel:

“Quant à vous, capitaine Paxton, vous me permettrez de vous adresser, au nom de toutes les familles de ces jeunes passagers, de sincères remerciements pour les soins…

— Remerciements légitimement dus au capitaine Paxton, se hâta d’ajouter M. Patterson. Quoique la mer nous ait éprouvés, moi plus que personne, horresco referens! il faut reconnaître que notre brave capitaine a fait tout ce qui dépendait de lui pour nous rendre la traversée aussi douce qu’agréable…”

Il n’était pas dans la nature d’Harry Markel de se dépenser en compliments et politesses. Peut-être même, M. Christian Harboe, dont le regard s’attachait à lui, le gênait-il. Aussi, faisant une légère inclination de tête, il se contenta de répondre:

“Je ne vois aucun empêchement à ce que les passagers de l’Alert acceptent l’hospitalité que vous leur offrez, monsieur, à la condition toutefois de ne point prolonger la relâche au-delà du délai fixé…

— C’est entendu, capitaine Paxton, reprit M. Christian Harboe. Et maintenant, dès aujourd’hui, si vous voulez bien venir dîner à la maison avec mes hôtes…

— Je vous remercie, monsieur, dit Harry Markel. J’ai quelques réparations à exécuter, et je ne puis perdre même une heure. D’ailleurs, je préfère ne quitter mon bord que le moins possible.”

M. Christian Harboe parut surpris du ton froid de cette réponse. Assurément, parmi les gens de mer, et, très souvent, chez les capitaines de la marine marchande anglaise, se rencontrent des natures rudes, des hommes peu éduqués, dont les manières ne se sont point affinées dans l’exercice de leur profession au contact de matelots grossiers. Nul doute que son impression n’eût point été favorable au premier abord, lorsqu’il fit la connaissance de Harry Markel et de son équipage. Après tout, l’Alert avait été bien commandé pendant le voyage, la traversée heureuse, et c’était le principal.

Une demi-heure après, les passagers débarquèrent sur le quai de Charlotte-Amalia, et se dirigèrent vers la maison de M. Christian

Harboe.

Dès qu’ils furent partis:

“Eh bien, Harry, il me semble que tout s’arrange à merveille jusqu’ici?… observa John Carpenter.

— Comme tu dis… répliqua Harry Markel. Mais il faut, durant nos relâches, redoubler de prudence…

— On sera prudent, Harry, et personne de nous n’a envie de compromettre le succès de cette campagne… Elle a bien commencé et elle finira de même…

— Sûr, John, du moment que Paxton n’est connu de personne à Saint-Thomas. D’ailleurs, tu veilleras à ce qu’aucun de nos gens ne descende à terre!”

Il avait raison, Harry Markel, d’empêcher son équipage de quitter le bord. À courir les tavernes et les taps, à boire outre mesure, — ce qui leur arrivait toutes les fois qu’on les abandonnait à eux-mêmes, — ces matelots auraient pu laisser échapper quelque parole suspecte, et mieux valait les consigner rigoureusement sur l’Alert.

“Juste, Harry, reprit John Carpenter, et, s’ils ont tant envie de boire, on leur donnera double ou triple ration… Maintenant, les passagers sont à terre pour trois jours, et, si nos gens avalent un coup de trop à bord, peu importe!”

Au surplus, l’équipage de l’Alert, quoique enclin à s’abandonner aux excès, à se dédommager dans les ports des abstinences de la navigation, comprenait ce que la situation avait de grave. À la condition de se tenir, ils ne la compromettraient point. Pour cela, il fallait se résoudre à éviter tout contact avec la population de l’île, avec ces marins de diverses nationalités, qui hantent les cabarets du port, ne pas s’exposer enfin à ce que l’un des pirates de l’Halifax pût être reconnu de ces aventuriers qui ont couru toutes les mers. Donc, ordre formel d’Harry Markel que personne ne descendrait à terre, d’une part, et, de l’autre, qu’on ne laisserait aucun étranger venir à bord.

La maison de négoce de M. Christian Harboe était située sur le quai. C’est en ce quartier commerçant que se traitent des affaires considérables, puisque, rien qu’à l’importation, leur chiffre s’élève à cinq millions six cent mille francs, pour une population de douze millions d’âmes.

Dans cette île, les jeunes passagers n’eussent pas été embarrassés “de prendre langue” puisqu’on y parle l’espagnol, le danois, le hollandais, l’anglais, le français, et ils pourraient encore se croire dans les classes d’Antilian School, sous la direction de M. Ardagh.

L’habitation familiale de M. Christian Harboe était située en dehors de la ville, à un mille environ, sur la pente de la montagne qui s’élève en amphithéâtre au bord de la mer.

Là sont disposées, dans une situation délicieuse, les villas des riches colons de l’île, au milieu de ces arbres magnifiques de la zone tropicale. Celle de M. Christian Harboe était l’une des plus confortables et des plus élégantes.

Sept ans auparavant, M. Christian Harboe avait épousé une jeune Danoise appartenant à l’une des meilleures familles de la colonie, et deux petites filles étaient nées de ce mariage. Quel accueil la jeune femme fit à son beau-frère, qu’elle ne connaissait pas encore, et aux camarades de celui-ci qui lui furent présentés! Quant à Niels, jamais oncle n’embrassa et ne caressa ses nièces avec tant de plaisir et de si bon cœur!

“Sont-elles gentilles!… Sont-elles gentilles!… répétait-il.

— Et comment ne le seraient-elles pas? déclara M. Horatio Patterson, talis pater… talis mater… quales filiae!”

Et la citation eut l’approbation générale.

Les jeunes passagers et lui furent donc installés dans la villa, assez vaste pour leur offrir à tous de confortables chambres. Là ils purent se refaire, en de plantureux repas, des menus du bord, peu variés malgré tout le talent de Ranyah Cogh. Et quelles agréables siestes pendant les heures chaudes de la journée, au milieu des jardins ombreux qui entouraient l’habitation de M. Christian Harboe! Au cours de ces causeries quotidiennes on parlait fréquemment des familles laissées en Europe, de Niels Harboe, qui, n’ayant plus de parents, viendrait rejoindre son frère lorsque son éducation serait terminée. Il travaillerait dans sa maison de commerce, et même M. Christian Harboe songeait à établir un comptoir à l’île Saint-Jean, voisine de Saint-Thomas, que les Danois avaient jadis offerte aux États-Unis pour la somme de cinq millions de piastres, — offre qui n’avait point été acceptée1.

Là s’étaient fixés les colons, au début, lorsque Saint-Thomas parut insuffisante au développement des affaires. Mais, comme l’île de Saint-Jean ne mesure que trois lieues de longueur sur deux de largeur, elle fut bientôt jugée trop petite, et ils débordèrent sur Sainte-Croix.

Plusieurs fois, M. Christian Harboe reparla du capitaine de l'Alert, de son équipage, et les quelques préventions qu'il avait pu concevoir disparurent lorsque M. Patterson l'assura que le personnel du bord méritait les plus justes éloges.

1 Actuellement on s'occupe de la cession des trois îles danoises aux États-Unis, et la question se discute dans les Chambres.

Il va sans dire que l'on fit des excursions à travers Saint-Thomas, qui vaut la peine d'être visitée par les touristes. C'est une île porphyritique, très accidentée dans sa partie septentrionale, et enrichie par des mornes superbes dont le plus haut s'élève à quatorze cents pieds au-dessus du niveau de la mer.

Les jeunes excursionnistes voulurent monter à la cime de ce morne, et les fatigues de cette ascension furent largement payées par la beauté du spectacle qui s'offrit à leurs regards. La vue s'étendait jusqu'à Saint-Jean, semblable à un gros poisson flottant à la surface de la mer antiliane, au milieu des îlots qui l'environnent, Hans Lellik, Loango, Buck, Saba, Savana et, au-delà, la plaine liquide, resplendissant sous les rayons solaires.

Au total, Saint-Thomas n'est qu'une île de quatre-vingt-six kilomètres carrés, soit, ainsi que le fit observer Louis Clodion, cent soixante-douze fois à peine la superficie du Champ-de-Mars de Paris.

Après les trois jours réglementaires à la villa Harboe, les passagers rejoignirent l'Alert, où tout était prêt pour le départ. M. et Mme Harboe les reconduisirent à bord. Ils y reçurent les remerciements de M. Patterson pour leur aimable hospitalité, et les deux frères s'embrassèrent une dernière fois.

Dès le soir du 28 juillet, le trois-mâts leva l’ancre, éventa ses voiles, et, profitant de la brise de nord-est, mit le cap au sud-ouest sur l’île de Sainte-Croix, où devait se faire la seconde relâche.

Les soixante milles qui séparent les deux îles furent franchis en trente-six heures.

Lorsque, comme cela a été mentionné, les colons, trop à l’étroit dans Saint-Thomas et dans Saint-Jean, voulurent s’établir à Sainte-Croix, dont l’étendue est de deux cent dix-huit kilomètres carrés, ils trouvèrent cette île aux mains des flibustiers anglais qui s’y étaient fixés depuis le milieu du XVIIe siècle. De là nécessité d’entrer en lutte, combats multiples et sanglants qui tournèrent à l’avantage des aventuriers de la Grande-Bretagne. Mais, depuis leur arrivée, ces gens, plutôt pirates que colons, ne s’adonnant qu’à la course en ces parages, avaient négligé toute culture dans l’île.

C’est en 1750 que les Espagnols parvinrent à s’emparer de Sainte-Croix, après avoir chassé les Anglais.

Ils ne devaient pas la conserver, et, quelques mois après, la faible garnison qui défendait l’île fut contrainte de se retirer devant un corps français.

C’est à cette époque que Sainte-Croix fut livrée à la culture. Toutefois, avant de la défricher, il fallut incendier les épaisses forêts de l’intérieur, incendies qui dégagèrent et enrichirent le sol.

Grâce à ces travaux, continués depuis un siècle et demi, l’Alert relâcha dans une île remarquablement cultivée et de grand rapport agricole.

Il va sans dire qu'il ne s'y rencontrait plus ni les Caraïbes qui la peuplaient avant la découverte, ni les Anglais qui la peuplèrent au début, ni les Espagnols qui leur succédèrent, ni les Français qui firent les premières tentatives de colonisation. Au milieu du XVIIe siècle, on n'y aurait même plus trouvé personne. Privés de trafic et des bénéfices de la contrebande, les colons s'étaient décidés à abandonner l'île.

Sainte-Croix resta inhabitée pendant trente-sept ans, jusqu'en 1733. La France la vendit alors au Danemark pour la somme de sept cent cinquante mille livres, et, depuis cette date, elle est colonie danoise.

Lorsque l'Alert fut en vue de l'île, Harry Markel manœuvra de manière à gagner le port de Barnes, sa capitale, ou, en langue danoise, Christiantoed. Il est situé au fond d'un petit golfe, sur la côte septentrionale. Quant à la seconde ville de Sainte-Croix, Frederichstoed, jadis incendiée par les noirs en pleins révolte, elle a été bâtie sur la côte occidentale.

C'est à Frederichstoed qu'était né Axel Wickborn, le deuxième lauréat du concours. À cette époque, il n'y avait plus aucun parent. Depuis une douzaine d'années, sa famille, après avoir vendu les propriétés qu'elle possédait dans l'île, habitait Copenhague.

Pendant cette relâche, si les passagers ne furent donc les hôtes de personne, d'anciens amis de la famille de Wickborn leur firent bon accueil. Ils restèrent la plus grande partie du temps à terre, et, chaque soir, ils revenaient coucher à bord.

Cette île, qu'ils parcoururent en voiture, est fort intéressante à visiter. Tant que dura la période de l'esclavage, les planteurs y firent de grandes fortunes, et Sainte-Croix put être considérée comme la plus riche des Antilles. Une culture progressive utilisa le sol jusqu'au sommet des collines. Elle possède trois cent cinquante plantations de cent cinquante arpents chacune, administrées avec un ordre parfait et par un personnel très exercé. Les deux tiers du territoire sont consacrés à la production du sucre, et, année moyenne, on récolte par arpent seize quintaux, sans compter les mélasses.

Après le sucre, le coton donne annuellement huit cents balles expédiées en Europe.

Les touristes suivirent de belles routes, plantées de palmiers, qui mettaient chaque village en communication avec la capitale. Le terrain, incliné en pentes douces vers le nord, se relevait graduellement en gagnant le littoral du nord-ouest jusqu’au mont Eagle, dont l’altitude cote quatre cents mètres.

Il faut l’avouer, à voir cette île si belle, si fertile, Louis Clodion et Tony Renault ne purent éprouver qu’un vif regret: c’était que la France ne l’eût point conservée dans son riche domaine des Antilles. En revanche, Niels Harboe et Axel Wickborn, estimèrent que le Danemark avait fait là une très heureuse acquisition, et ils ne formaient qu’un voeu: c’était que Sainte-Croix, après avoir appartenu aux Anglais, aux Français, aux Espagnols, fût définitivement acquise à leur pays.

En somme, par sa situation en Europe, le Danemark, sauf pendant le blocus continental, où Copenhague fut bombardé par la flotte anglaise, eut la bonne fortune de n’être pas ensuite mêlé aux longues et sanglantes luttes du commencement du siècle entre la France et l’Angleterre. Puissance secondaire, son territoire ne souffrit point de l’invasion des armées européennes. Le résultat de cet état de choses fut que les colonies danoises de l’Antilie n’éprouvèrent pas de ces formidables guerres le contrecoup qui se fit sentir au-delà de l’océan Atlantique. Elles purent travailler en paix et s’assurer un avenir prospère.

Cependant l’émancipation des noirs, proclamée en 1862, provoqua tout d’abord certains troubles, que l’autorité coloniale dut réprimer avec vigueur. Les libérés, les affranchis, eurent à se plaindre en ce sens que les promesses qui leur avaient été faites ne furent pas tenues, — entre autres, l’attribution d’une certaine quantité de terres en toute propriété. De là vinrent des réclamations qui ne produisirent aucun résultat, et enfin un soulèvement des nègres qui alluma l’incendie sur plusieurs points de l’île.

Lorsque l’Alert visita le port de Christiantoed, les rapports entre colons et libérés n’étaient pas définitivement réglés. Toutefois l’île jouissait d’une complète tranquillité et les touristes ne furent jamais gênés dans leurs excursions. Un an plus tard, ils fussent tombés en pleine émeute, et si grave, que la ville natale d’Axel Wickborn fut brûlée par les nègres.

Il convient de remarquer, d’ailleurs, que, depuis sept ou huit ans déjà, la population de Sainte-Croix avait diminué par suite d’une émigration continue qui l’a réduite d’un cinquième.

Pendant la relâche, le gouverneur danois, qui réside alternativement six mois à Saint-Thomas et six mois à Sainte-Croix, séjournait à Saint-Jean, où l’on craignait des troubles. Il ne put donc faire aux jeunes Antilians l’accueil qui les attendait dans toutes les Antilles. Mais il avait recommandé que toutes facilités leur fussent assurées pour l’exploration de l’île, et ses recommandations furent largement suivies.

Aussi, avant de partir, une lettre rédigée par M. Horatio Patterson, et de sa plus belle écriture, — lettre signée des neuf lauréats, — transmit-elle à Son Excellence les plus vifs témoignages de gratitude.

Ce fut le 1er août que l’Alert sortit du port de

Christiantoed. Puis, une fois hors des passes, par petite brise et sous l'allure du plus près, il mit le cap à l'est en se dirigeant vers Saint-Martin.

CHAPITRE XV

XV

Saint-Martin et Saint-Barthélemy

En tenant le cap à l’est, l’Alert allait faire route vers la haute mer. En effet, Saint-Martin et les îles Sombrero, Anguille, Barboude, Antigoa, sont les points les plus avancés de la chaîne antiliane dans le nord-est des îles du Vent.

Après avoir perdu l’abri des terres de Sainte-Croix, le trois-mâts rencontra les alizés qui soufflaient avec une certaine force. Il fallut louvoyer sur une mer assez dure. Néanmoins l’Alert put conserver ses basses voiles, ses huniers et ses perroquets. Il y eut fréquemment à virer de bord. Plusieurs fois, Tony Renault et Magnus Anders eurent permission de tenir la barre, ce dont ils ne laissèrent pas d’être très fiers.

La distance entre Sainte-Croix et Saint-Martin ne dépasse guère deux cents milles marins. Dans les circonstances les plus favorables, un voilier peut la franchir en vingt-quatre heures, lorsqu’il est de grande marche. Mais, avec vent contraire, et à refouler le courant qui se propage vers le golfe du Mexique la traversée fut allongée du triple.

Au surplus, l’Alert avait presque toujours en vue de nombreux navires à vapeur ou à voiles. Ces parages sont très fréquentés, et la navigation est active entre les îles depuis Saint-Thomas jusqu’à la Trinité.

Quant à Harry Markel, il ne se départissait pas de sa prudence habituelle; il évitait de passer à portée de la voix ou de la vue de ces bâtiments; il préférait se tenir sous le vent, afin d’éviter toute communication avec eux. Cette prudence ne faisait que donner satisfaction à son équipage. Après s’être heureusement tiré des relâches de Saint-Thomas et de Sainte-Croix, n’y avait-il pas lieu d’espérer qu’il en serait de même dans les autres îles?… Aussi John Carpenter, Corty, les autres également, étaient-ils revenus de leurs premières appréhensions, et la confiance que leur inspirait leur chef se montrait-elle plus grande que jamais. Il leur tardait néanmoins d’en avoir fini avec cette exploration des Antilles!

Au cours de cette navigation contre le vent et la mer, M. Patterson ressentit bien quelque malaise; mais, le noyau de cerise aidant, il n’eut point trop à se plaindre.

Au surplus, en ces mois de juillet et d’août, les gros mauvais temps ne sont point à redouter, — seulement des orages dus aux fortes chaleurs de la zone tropicale. Le climat de l’Antilie jouit d’une égalité remarquable et les oscillations de la colonne thermométrique ne comprennent que vingt degrés. Sans doute la variation est plus considérable pour les pluies que pour la température, et, s’il est rare que la grêle les accompagne, elles tombent fréquemment avec une torrentielle abondance.

En réalité, les îles de l’archipel exposées aux vents du large ont le plus à souffrir des perturbations atmosphériques. Les autres, telles Sainte-Croix, Saint-Eustache, Saint-Christophe, les Grenadines, baignées par les eaux de la mer des Caraïbes, sont moins visitées par les tempêtes. Du reste, la plupart des ports des îles du Vent s’orientent vers l’ouest ou le sud-ouest, et ils offrent de sûrs abris contre les fortes houles du large.

La soirée du 3 août était déjà avancée, lorsque l’Alert, retardé par les alizés, parut en vue de Saint-Martin.

Cependant, quatre à cinq milles avant d’arriver au mouillage, les jeunes lauréats avaient pu apercevoir le plus haut piton de l’île, dont l’altitude atteint cinq cent quatre-vingt-cinq mètres, et que doraient encore les derniers rayons du soleil.

On le sait, Saint-Martin appartient à la Hollande et à la France. Il en résulte que les Français et les Hollandais de l’Alert retrouveraient chacun un morceau de leur pays dans les Indes occidentales. Mais, si Albertus Leuwen allait mettre le pied sur le sol natal, il n’en serait pas ainsi de Louis Clodion et de Tony Renault, originaires, l’un de la Guadeloupe, l’autre de la Martinique. C’était à Philsburg, capitale de l’île, qu’était né le jeune Hollandais, et ce serait dans ce port que le trois-mâts irait jeter l’ancre.

Si Saint-Martin est à présent franco-hollandaise, elle a pour sentinelle avancée au nord-ouest la petite île d’Anguilla, on pourrait dire un îlot, rangé avec Saint-Christophe et Nevis sous une même présidence. Elles ne sont séparées que par un étroit canal dont la profondeur ne dépasse guère vingt-cinq à trente mètres. Il n’est donc pas impossible que le fond sous-marin, qui est de nature coralligène, ne se hausse, par le travail persévérant des infusoires, jusqu’à la surface de la mer, soit même par suite d’un soulèvement plutonique. Dans ces conditions, Saint-Martin et Anguilla ne formeraient plus qu’une même île.

Que deviendra alors cette Antille franco-anglo-hollandaise?… Les trois nations y vivront-elles en bonne intelligence? Méritera-t-elle mieux que la dernière de la chaîne antiliane de s’appeler Trinité, et est-ce la paix qui régnera à l’ombre des trois pavillons?…

Le lendemain, un pilote embarqua à bord du trois-mâts, et le conduisit à travers les passes dans le port de Philsburg.

Cette ville occupe l’étroite plage que sépare une baie semi-circulaire d’une saline d’assez grande étendue, siège d’une exploitation très importante. Les marais salants, principale richesse de l’île, sont tellement productifs qu’on n’estime pas à moins de trois millions six cent mille hectolitres leur rapport annuel.

Il est vrai, un certain nombre de ces marais exigent un entretien continu. L’évaporation est telle qu’ils seraient rapidement à sec. Aussi, — et entre autres pour la saline de Philsburg, — est-il nécessaire de couper quelquefois la langue de terre qui la limite du côté du littoral, et d’y introduire, dans une forte mesure, les eaux de la mer.

Albertus Leuwen n’avait aucun membre de sa famille à Saint-Martin. Tous habitaient Rotterdam en Hollande depuis une quinzaine d’années. Lui-même avait quitté Philsburg si jeune pour venir en Europe, qu’il ne conservait aucun souvenir de l’île. De tous ces lauréats antilians, il n’était que Hubert Perkins dont les parents fussent restés dans la colonie anglaise d’Antigoa. Ce ne serait donc pour Albertus Leuwen qu’une occasion de remettre le pied, et la dernière fois sans doute, sur le sol natal.

Si Saint-Martin se partage entre la France et la Hollande, il ne faudrait pas croire que l’élément britannique n’y fût pas représenté. Sur une population de sept mille âmes environ, on compte trois mille cinq cents Français; mais les Anglais sont au nombre de trois mille quatre cents, ce qui établit à peu près l’égalité numérique.

On voit ce qu’il peut rester de Hollandais.

La liberté du trafic est grande à Saint-Martin, et l’autonomie administrative presque complète. De là une véritable prospérité. Que les salines de l’île soient entre les mains d’une compagnie franco-hollandaise, peu importe.

Les Anglais ont d’autres branches de commerce à exploiter, plus spécialement tout ce qui concerne les objets de consommation, et leurs comptoirs, bien fournis, sont toujours bien achalandés.

La relâche de l’Alert à Saint-Martin ne dura que vingt-quatre heures, du moins au mouillage de Philsburg.

Là, ni Harry Markel ni aucun des siens n’avaient à craindre d’être reconnus. À tout prendre, ce danger serait plus à redouter aux Antilles anglaises, Sainte-Lucie, Antigoa, la Dominique, où ils devaient se rendre, et plus particulièrement peut-être à la Barbade, résidence de Mrs Kethlen Seymour, où se prolongerait assurément le séjour des boursiers d’Antilian School.

M. Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons n’eurent qu’à se promener dans la longue rue que forme cette ville de Philsburg, dont les maisons s’élèvent sur l’étroite plage de l’ouest, au bord de la mer.

Il semblait que, la visite d’Albertus Leuwen accomplie, l’Alert n’aurait plus eu qu’à remettre à la voile. Mais, en leur qualité de Français, Louis Clodion et Tony Renault désiraient vivement faire acte de présence sur la partie française de l’île située dans la zone septentrionale, et qui occupe à peu près les deux tiers de sa surface totale.

Marigot en est la capitale, — un nom qui n’a rien de hollandais, on le voit. Aussi comprendra-t-on que Louis Clodion et Tony Renault eussent grande envie de passer une journée au moins à Marigot.

Le mentor fut pressenti à cet égard, et cette excursion ne modifierait en rien l’itinéraire.

Que l’on ne s’étonne pas si le digne homme estima la réponse toute naturelle.

“Puisque Albertus a foulé ici le sol de la Hollande, dit-il, pourquoi Louis et Tony, Arcades ambo, n’y fouleraient-ils pas le sol de la France?”

En conséquence, M. Horatio Patterson alla trouver Harry Markel et lui fit connaître la proposition, qu’il appuya de sa haute autorité:

“Quel est votre avis, capitaine Paxton?…” demanda-t-il.

Harry Markel, et pour cause, eût préféré ne point multiplier les points de relâche. Mais, cette fois, il n’aurait eu aucune bonne raison à refuser de conduire ses passagers sur un autre point de l’île. En partant le soir, l’Alert serait le lendemain à Marigot, d’où, après quarante-huit heures, il partirait pour Saint-Barthélemy,

Ainsi fut-il fait. Le 5, à neuf heures du soir, le trois-mâts mit dehors sous la direction d’un pilote de Philsburg. La nuit était claire, la lune presque pleine, la mer belle, couverte par les hauteurs de l’île dont on peut longer le littoral à moins d’un quart de mille. La brise favorable permettait de naviguer grand largue.

Les passagers restèrent sur le pont jusqu’à minuit sous le charme de cette traversée nocturne; puis ils regagnèrent leurs cabines et ne se réveillèrent qu’au moment où l’Alert prenait son mouillage.

Marigot est une ville plus commerçante que Philsburg. Elle s’élève sur le bord d’un bayon qui établit la communication entre la baie et l’étang de Simpson. Cet ensemble constitue un port très sûr, bien défendu contre la houle du large. Là fréquentent en grand nombre les navires de long cours ou de cabotage, attirés par les franchises que Marigot leur assure. C’est la ville la plus importante de Saint-Martin.

Au reste les passagers ne devaient point avoir à regretter le voyage. Ils eurent leur part de l’excellent accueil que les colons français firent à deux de leurs compatriotes. La sympathie qu’ils témoignaient ne tint aucun compte des nationalités diverses, et, au banquet qui serait offert par les autorités de la ville, on ne verrait que des Antilians, réunis autour de la même table.

Ce fut un des principaux négociants de la ville, M. Anselme Guillon, qui organisa cette réception. Elle comprendrait une quarantaine de personnes, et, naturellement, dans sa pensée, le capitaine de l’Alert serait invité à figurer, parmi les convives.

M. Guillon se rendit à bord et pria Harry Markel de prendre part à ce banquet qui aurait lieu le jour même dans la salle communale.

Cependant, si audacieux qu’il fût, Harry Markel ne voulut point accepter l’invitation. En vain, M. Patterson joignit-il ses instances à celles de M. Guillon. Tous deux échouèrent devant l’inébranlable résolution que leur opposa le capitaine de l’Alert. Pas plus à Saint-Martin qu’à Saint-Thomas ou à Sainte-Croix, il n’entendait quitter son bord, et il ne permettrait à aucun de ses hommes de descendre à terre.

“Nous regretterons votre absence, capitaine Paxton, déclara M. Guillon. Le bien que nous ont dit de vous ces jeunes gens, les soins dont ils sont l’objet pendant cette campagne de l’Alert, le désir qu’ils avaient de vous témoigner publiquement leur reconnaissance, ces motifs m’ont encouragé à insister près de vous, et je suis fâché de ne point avoir réussi.”

Pour conclure, Harry Markel s’inclina froidement, et le négociant se fit reconduire au quai.

Il faut avouer que, de même qu’à M. Christian Harboe, le capitaine de l’Alert ne lui laissa pas une impression favorable. Cette physionomie dure et farouche, où toute une existence de violences et de forfaits avait laissé son empreinte, cela était bien pour inspirer l’antipathie sinon la défiance. Mais comment ne pas s’en rapporter aux dires des passagers et de M. Horatio Patterson, lorsqu’ils faisaient l’éloge du capitaine Paxton?… N’avait-il pas été choisi par Mrs Kethlen Seymour?… Cette dame ne s’était certainement pas décidée sans sérieuses informations et bonnes références…

Au surplus, il s’en était fallu de bien peu que la situation de Harry Markel et de sa bande n’eût été compromise et même perdue. Il est vrai, cette circonstance ne put qu’accréditer la confiance que M. Guillon et les notables de Marigot devaient avoir dans le capitaine et son équipage.

En effet, la veille de l’arrivée de l’Alert, le brick Fire-Fly, de nationalité anglaise, se trouvait encore à Marigot. Son capitaine connaissait intimement M. Paxton, dont il vantait les qualités comme homme privé et comme marin. S’il avait su que l’Alert allait venir, nul doute qu’il l’eut attendu, et avec quel plaisir il aurait serré la main de son vieil ami. Mais le Fire-Fly était en partance, et, pendant la nuit, il est très probable qu’il se croisa avec l’Alert sur les parages occidentaux de l’île.

Dans sa conversation M. Guillon avait parlé à Harry Markel du capitaine du Fire-Fly, et on imagine de quelle appréhension fut saisi ce misérable en songeant au danger qu’il eût couru en présence d’un ami du capitaine Paxton.

À présent, le brick était au large à destination de Bristol, et il n’y avait aucune chance de le rencontrer pendant la campagne à travers les Antilles.

Et, lorsque Harry Markel eut mis John Carpenter et Corty au courant, ceux-ci ne purent cacher leur impression:

“Nous l’avons échappé belle!… répétait le maître d’équipage.

— N’en parlez pas aux autres, ajouta Harry Markel. Inutile de les effrayer, et qu’ils soient plus prudents que jamais…

— Ce qu’il me tarde d’en avoir fini avec ces maudites Antilles! déclara Corty. Il me semble voir pendre une corde à toutes les branches d’arbres!”

Il avait raison, ce Corty, et, si le brick Fire-Fly eût été dans le port de Marigot le jour où arrivait l’Alert, c’en était fait d’Harry Markel et de ses compagnons.

Le banquet, aussi bien servi qu’il avait été joyeusement accepté, eut lieu le soir. Des toasts n’en furent pas moins portés en l’honneur du capitaine Paxton. On parla de la du voyage, accomplie dans des conditions favorables. On exprima le voeu que la seconde n’aurait rien à envier à la première. Les jeunes Antilians emporteraient de leur visite aux Indes occidentales d’inoubliables souvenirs, après avoir respiré un peu de l’air natal.

Au dessert, Louis Clodion, se levant, lut un compliment très agréablement tourné à M. Anselme Guillon et aux notables de la colonie pour leur sympathique accueil, et il unit la France, l’Angleterre, le Danemark, la Hollande, la Suède, représentés à cette table, dans un même concert de fraternité.

Puis ce fut le tour de M. Horatio Patterson, qui ne laissait pas d'avoir fait raison plus que d'habitude aux nombreux, aux trop nombreux toasts portés après chaque service. Le mentor se redressa donc, le verre à la main, et prit la parole.

Tout ce que l'on peut introduire de citations latines au milieu de phrases bien senties, s'exhala de la bouche de l'orateur. Il parla des souvenirs que lui laisserait cette fête épulatoire, plus durable que le bronze, aere perennius avec Horace, de la fortune qui favorisait les audacieux, audentes fortuna juvat avec Virgile. Il était heureux d'énoncer ses compliments en public, coram populo. Cependant, il ne pouvait oublier sa patrie dont tout un océan le séparait alors, et dulces reminiscetur Argos, mais il n'oublierait pas davantage les satisfactions d'amour-propre qu'il rencontrait aux Antilles, et, à son heure dernière, pourrait répéter: Et in Arcadia ego, car les Antilles auraient été un morceau de cette Arcadie qui fut le séjour de l'innocence et du bonheur. Enfin, il avait toujours désiré visiter ce splendide archipel, hoc erat in votis, répétait-il avec Horace, déjà cité, et dans lequel, si parva licet componere magnis — Virgile déjà nommé, — lui, l'économe d'Antilian School, il venait de mettre le pied près de quatre cents ans après Christophe Colomb.

Que l'on juge du succès qu'obtint M. Horatio Patterson, et des bravos qui l'accueillirent quand il se fut rassis. Puis, tous remplirent une dernière fois leur verre en l'honneur de Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Des poignées de main furent échangées, et les boursiers reprirent le chemin du port.

Lorsqu'ils furent rentrés à bord, vers dix heures du soir, bien que la mer fût tranquille comme un lac, peut-être sembla-t-il à M. Patterson que l'Alert éprouvait quelques mouvements de roulis et de tangage. Convaincu qu'il les ressentirait moins dans la position horizontale, il regagna sa cabine, se déshabilla avec l’aide du complaisant Wagah et s’endormit d’un gros sommeil.

Le lendemain, toute la journée fut consacrée à des promenades dans la ville et aux environs.

Deux voitures attendaient les touristes, auxquels M. Anselme Guillon avait voulu servir de guide. Ce qu’ils désiraient visiter, c’était l’endroit même où avait été signé, en 1648, le partage de l’île entre la France et la Hollande.

Il s’agissait de gagner un morne, situé dans l’est de Marigot, et qui porte le nom significatif de montagne des Accords.

Arrivés à destination, les excursionnistes mirent pied à terre au bas du morne et ils en firent l’ascension, sans difficulté d’ailleurs. Et, alors, quelques bouteilles de Champagne, retirées de la caisse des voitures, furent débouchées, puis vidées en souvenir du traité de 1648.

Il est entendu qu’une parfaite union régnait entre ces jeunes Antilians. Peut-être, au fond de l’âme, Roger Hinsdale pensait-il que Saint-Martin et aussi les autres îles devraient être ou seraient un jour colonies anglaises. Mais ce fut une poignée de main fraternelle que se donnèrent Albertus Leuwen, Louis Clodion et Tony Renault, en souhaitant aux deux nations un perpétuel accord.

Puis, après que les deux Français eurent bu à la santé de Sa Majesté Guillaume III, roi de Hollande, le Hollandais leva son verre en l’honneur du Président de la République française. Ces deux toasts furent salués par les vivats et les hurrahs de tous leurs camarades.

Il est à noter que M. Horatio Patterson ne prit point la parole pendant cet échange de souhaits et de compliments. La veille, sans doute, il avait épuisé les trésors de sa faconde naturelle, ou, tout au moins, il convenait de lui donner quelque repos. Il est vrai, sinon des lèvres, du cœur assurément, il s'unit à cette manifestation internationale.

Après une visite aux sites les plus curieux de cette partie de l'île, après avoir déjeuné sur la grève et dîné sous les arbres d'une forêt superbe avec les provisions emportées pour cette excursion, les touristes revinrent à Marigot. Puis, prenant congé de M. Anselme Guillon, auquel les remerciements ne furent point épargnés, ils rentrèrent à bord.

Tous, — et M. Patterson fut du nombre, — eurent le temps d'écrire à leurs parents. Au surplus, ceux-ci connaissaient depuis le 26 juillet l'arrivée de l'Alert à Saint-Thomas. Elle leur avait été annoncée par dépêche, et les inquiétudes dues au retard de quelques jours étaient maintenant dissipées. Cependant il s'agissait de tenir les familles au courant, et les lettres écrites ce soir-là, mises le lendemain à la poste, partiraient dans vingt-quatre heures par le courrier d'Europe.

Aucun incident durant la nuit. Rien ne troubla le sommeil de ces jeunes garçons après une telle journée de fatigue. Mais peut-être John Carpenter et Corty rêvèrent-ils que des avaries obligeaient le Fire-Fly à revenir au port… ce qui ne se produisit point, heureusement pour eux.

Le lendemain, dès huit heures, profitant de la marée descendante, l'Alert sortit du port de Marigot à destination de Saint-Barthélemy.

Si la mer était un peu dure, le navire, tant qu'il se tiendrait sous l'abri de l'île, ne serait pas trop secoué. Il est vrai, après avoir repassé devant Philsburg, l'Alert ne serait plus défendu par les hautes falaises de Saint-

Martin contre les houles du large. Aussi, à l’ouvert entre les deux îles, reçut-il la lame par le travers, et il y eut même lieu de réduire la voilure afin de ne point trop donner la bande.

Cependant, si la traversée était retardée, elle ne le serait que de quelques heures, et assurément le trois-mâts paraîtrait le lendemain en vue de l’île Saint-Barthélemy au lever du jour.

Comme d’habitude, les passagers prenaient part à la manœuvre, lorsqu’il s’agissait de mollir ou de raidir les écoutes. Il n’y eut point lieu de courir des bords et de virer vent devant. Tony Renault et Magnus Anders tinrent la barre chacun à son tour, — deux véritables timoniers, bien à leur affaire, ne laissant point le navire embarder d’un côté ni de l’autre, l’oeil fixé sur la ligne de foi de la boussole.

Vers cinq heures du soir, un navire fut signalé dans le sud-ouest, courant de manière à dépasser l’Alert, dont il suivait la direction.

À ce moment, Corty se mit au gouvernail, l’intention d’Harry Markel étant bien d’éviter l’approche de ce steamer. L’Alert arriva donc d’un quart, afin de n’être pas coupé de sa route.

Ce steamer, de nationalité française, — on le reconnut à la flamme que le vent déroulait à son grand mât, — était un navire de guerre appartenant à la catégorie des petits croiseurs de l’État. Louis Clodion et Tony Renault eussent été heureux de le saluer au passage et de recevoir son salut. Mais, comme la plus courte distance qui sépara les deux bâtiments, grâce à la manœuvre d’Harry Markel, ne fut pas inférieure à un bon mille, il n’y eut pas lieu de hisser le pavillon.

En ce qui concerne ce croiseur, qui marchait à toute vitesse cap au nord-ouest, il semblait être à destination de l'une des Antilles. Il était possible, d'ailleurs, qu'il se rendit à l'un des ports méridionaux des États-Unis, Key West, par exemple, à l'extrémité de la Floride, et qui est un point de relâche pour les bâtiments de toute nationalité.

Du reste, le croiseur eut bientôt laissé l'Alert en arrière, et, avant le coucher du soleil, ses dernières fumées avaient disparu à l'horizon.

“Bon voyage, dit John Carpenter, et au plaisir de ne jamais se revoir!… Je n'aime pas à naviguer de conserve avec des navires de guerre…

— Pas plus qu'à me trouver au milieu d'une escouade de constables!… ajouta Corty. Ces gens-là ont l'air de vous demander d'où vous venez, où vous allez, et il ne convient pas toujours de le dire!”

L'île Saint-Barthélemy, — la seule que possède la Suède dans les Indes occidentales, — occupe l'extrémité du banc que forme l'île anglaise d'Anguilla et l'île franco-hollandaise de Saint-Martin. Ainsi qu'on l'a remarqué, il suffirait d'un soulèvement de quatre-vingts pieds environ pour que les trois îles n'en fissent qu'une seule dont la longueur totale serait de soixante-quinze kilomètres. Or, avec ces fonds sous-marins de nature plutonienne, il ne serait pas surprenant que ce soulèvement se produisit dans l'avenir.

Et, à ce propos même, Roger Hinsdale fit observer que cet exhaussement pourrait s'étendre à l'ensemble des Antilles, aussi bien les îles du Vent que les îles sous le Vent. Voit-on, à une époque, très reculée sans doute, ces îles réunies les unes aux autres, et formant une sorte de vaste continent à l'entrée du golfe du Mexique, et, qui sait! se rattachant aux terres américaines?… En quelles conditions se trouverait-il, alors que l’Angleterre, la France, la Hollande, le Danemark prétendraient y maintenir leur pavillon national?…

Très probablement, le principe de la doctrine de Monroe interviendrait pour mettre les puissances d’accord, en tranchant la question au profit des États-Unis. Toute l’Amérique aux Américains, et rien qu’aux Américains! Ils auraient bientôt ajouté une nouvelle étoile aux cinquante qui, à cette époque, constellaient le drapeau de l’Union!

Quant à l’île Saint-Barthélemy, ses dimensions très restreintes ne lui mériteraient que la qualification d’îlot, puisque sa longueur ne dépasse pas deux lieues et demie, avec une superficie de vingt et un kilomètres carrés.

Saint-Barthélemy est défendue par le fort Gustav. Gustavia, sa capitale, une ville de faible importance, peut en acquérir, puisqu’elle est située au point de vue du cabotage entre les petites Antilles de ces parages. C’est là que, dix-neuf ans auparavant, naquit Magnus Anders, dont la famille était fixée depuis une quinzaine d’années à Gotteborg, en Suède.

Cette île s’était successivement abritée sous des pavillons divers. Elle fut française de 1648 à 1784. À cette époque, la France la céda à la Suède en échange d’une concession d’entrepôt sur le Cattégat, précisément à Gotteborg, et de quelques autres avantages politiques. Mais, bien qu’elle fût devenue scandinave à la suite de ce traité, ayant été jadis peuplée par les Normands, elle était demeurée française par ses aspirations, par ses goûts, par ses moeurs, et il est vraisemblable qu’elle le sera toujours.

Lorsque le soleil eut disparu derrière l’horizon, Saint-Barthélemy n’était pas encore en vue. Comme une vingtaine de milles au plus l’en séparaient, nul doute que l’Alert y prit son mouillage dès l’aube, bien que le vent eût calmi le soir, et qu’on ne dût faire que peu de route pendant la nuit.

Néanmoins, dès quatre heures du matin, le jeune Suédois quittait sa cabine, et, gravissant les enfléchures du grand mât, il se hissa jusqu'aux barres du grand perroquet.

Magnus Anders voulait être le premier à signaler son île, et il aperçut un peu avant six heures le principal massif calcaire, qui la domine au centre, d'une hauteur de trois cent deux mètres. Aussi cria-t-il d'une voix si retentissante: “Terre!… Terre!” que ses camarades se précipitèrent sur le pont.

L'Alert se dirigea immédiatement vers la côte occidentale de Saint-Barthélemy, de manière à se présenter devant le port du Carénage, le principal, ou, pour mieux dire, le seul de l'île.

Bien que la brise fût modérée et qu'il fallût tenir le plus près, le trois-mâts gagnait assez rapidement, et, à mesure qu'il avançait, trouvait des eaux plus calmes.

Un peu après sept heures, un groupe de quelques personnes fut distinctement aperçu sur le sommet du morne, à l'endroit où la colonie arborait les couleurs suédoises:

“C'est la cérémonie réglementaire de chaque matin, déclara Tony Renault, et le pavillon suédois va être appuyé d'un coup de canon…

— Ce qui m'étonne, observa Magnus Anders, c'est que cela ne soit pas déjà fait!… D'habitude, c'est au lever du soleil, et voilà déjà trois heures qu'il est sur l'horizon!”

L'observation était juste, et, au total, on pouvait se demander si c'était bien de la cérémonie en question qu'il s'agissait.

Le port de Gustavia offre aux navires, tirant de deux à trois mètres, d’excellents mouillages, abrités par des bancs contre lesquels vient se briser la houle du large.

Ce qui attira tout d’abord l’attention des jeunes passagers, ce fut la présence du croiseur qu’ils avaient rencontré la veille. Il était à l’ancre au milieu du port, ses feux éteints, ses voiles serrées, comme un navire pour quelque temps en relâche. Cela fit plaisir à Louis Clodion et à Tony Renault qui se promettaient de se rendre à bord certains d’y être bien accueillis. Mais la vue de ce croiseur ne laissa pas d’être très désagréable à

Harry Markel, comme à ses compagnons, et peut-être inquiétante.

L’Alert n’était plus qu’à un quart de mille du port, et, quand même il l’eût voulu, quelle raison Harry Markel aurait-il imaginée pour ne pas y entrer, puisque Saint-Barthélemy était une des étapes ou escales de l’itinéraire?… Donc, bon gré, mal gré, — en somme, moins alarmé que John Carpenter et les autres, — il évoluait pour suivre la passe, lorsqu’un coup de canon retentit.

En même temps, un pavillon montait au sommet du morne.

Quelle fut leur surprise, — surprise qui se changea en stupéfaction chez Magnus Anders, — lorsque ses camarades et lui reconnurent que ce n’étaient point les couleurs suédoises, c’était le pavillon français aux trois couleurs nationales!

Quant à Harry Markel et à l’équipage, s’ils montrèrent quelque étonnement, que leur importait que le pavillon fût de tel ou tel pays?…

Ils n’en connaissaient qu’un, le pavillon noir des pirates, celui sous lequel naviguerait l’Alert, lorsqu’ils écumeraient les parages du Pacifique:

“Le pavillon français!… s’était écrié Tony Renault.

— Le pavillon français?… répétait Louis Clodion.

— Est-ce que le capitaine Paxton se serait trompé, fit observer Roger Hinsdale, et aurait fait fausse route sur la Guadeloupe ou la Martinique?”

Harry Markel n’avait point commis une pareille erreur. C’était bien Saint-Barthélemy que l’Alert venait d’atteindre, et ce fut dans le port de Gustavia qu’il prit son mouillage, trois quarts d’heure après.

Magnus Anders ne laissait pas d’être assez chagriné. Jusqu’ici, à Saint-Thomas, à Sainte-Croix, à Saint-Martin, Danois et Français avaient vu flotter le drapeau de leur pays, et voici que le jour même où il allait mettre le pied sur la colonie suédoise, le pavillon suédois n’y flottait plus…

Tout s’expliqua. L’île Saint-Barthélemy venait d’être cédée à la France moyennant la somme de deux cent soixante-dix-sept mille cinq cents francs.

Cette cession avait été approuvée par les colons, presque tous d’origine normande, et, sur trois cent cinquante et un votants, trois cent cinquante s’étaient prononcés pour l’annexion.

Le pauvre Magnus Anders n’était point en situation de réclamer, n’est-il pas vrai, et il existait de sérieuses raisons, sans doute, pour que la Suède abandonnât sa seule possession dans l’archipel des Indes occidentales. Aussi ne put-il que faire contre fortune bon cœur, et, se penchant à l’oreille de son camarade Louis Clodion:

“À tout prendre, dit-il, et puisqu’il a fallu passer sous un autre pavillon, mieux vaut que ce pavillon soit celui de la France!”

DEUXIÈME PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

I

Antigoa

Cette dépossession de Saint-Barthélemy, au profit de la France, qui enlevait à la Suède sa seule colonie antiliane, il n’était pas à craindre qu’elle se produisît en ce qui concernait Antigoa au détriment du Royaume-Uni. Si Magnus Anders n’avait plus retrouvé son île natale sous la dénomination scandinave, Hubert Perkins allait retrouver la sienne dans le domaine colonial de la Grande-Bretagne.

L’Angleterre ne se dessaisit pas volontiers de ses possessions: elle a la dent longue et est plutôt disposée, autant par instinct que par intérêt, à s’attribuer les conquêtes des autres, insulaires ou continentales. C’était elle, d’ailleurs, qui détenait et détient encore le plus grand nombre des Indes Occidentales, et qui sait si l’avenir n’en montrera pas quelque autre abritée sous le pavillon des Îles-Britanniques?…

Cependant Antigoa n’a pas toujours appartenu à l’ambitieuse Albion. Habitée d’abord par les Indiens Caraïbes jusqu’au début du XVIIe siècle, elle tomba entre les mains des Français.

Mais la raison qui avait enfin décidé les indigènes à l’abandonner fut aussi celle qui décida les Français, après quelques mois d’occupation, à regagner l’île Saint-Christophe d’où ils venaient. Il y a manque absolu de rivières à Antigoa. À peine y rencontre-t-on des rios que les eaux fluviales alimentent un instant. Or, en vue des besoins de la colonie, il eût fallu, pour recueillir ces eaux, construire de vastes citernes.

Voilà ce que comprirent et firent les Anglais en 1632, lorsqu'ils s'installèrent sur Antigoa. Ces réservoirs furent établis dans les conditions les plus avantageuses. La campagne put être largement irriguée, et, comme le sol se prêtait à la culture du tabac, c'est à cette culture que s'adonnèrent principalement les planteurs — ce qui, dès cette époque, assura la prospérité de l'île.

En 1668, éclata la guerre entre l'Angleterre et la France. Une expédition, organisée à la Martinique, fit voile pour Antigoa. Les envahisseurs détruisirent les plantations, emmenèrent les noirs, et, pendant toute une année, l'île fut aussi déserte que si elle n'eût jamais possédé un seul habitant.

Un riche propriétaire de la Barbade, le colonel Codington, ne voulut pas que les travaux exécutés à Antigoa fussent perdus. Il s'y transporta avec un nombreux personnel, il attira des colons, et, joignant la culture du sucre à celle du tabac, il lui rendit son ancienne prospérité.

Le colonel Codington fut alors nommé capitaine général de toutes les îles Sous-le-Vent qui dépendaient de l'Angleterre. Administrateur énergique, il imprima une grande activité à l'industrie agricole et au commerce des colonies anglaises, activité qui ne devait pas se ralentir après lui.

Ainsi, en y arrivant à bord de l'Alert, Hubert Perkins reverrait une Antigoa aussi florissante qu'au jour où il l'avait quittée, cinq ans auparavant, pour venir faire son éducation en Europe.

La distance entre Saint-Barthélemy et Antigoa n’est au plus que de soixante-dix à quatre-vingts milles. Mais, lorsque l’Alert eut pris le large, des calmes persistants, auxquels succéda une brise assez faible, retardèrent sa marche. Il passa en vue de Saint-Christophe, cette île qui fut livrée aux compétitions anglaises, françaises, espagnoles, et dont la paix d’Utrecht, en 1713, assura aux Anglais la possession définitive. Et, si elle porte ce nom de Christophe, il lui vient de Colomb, qui la découvrit après la Désirade, la Dominique, la Guadeloupe et Antigoa. C’est la signature du grand navigateur génois sur cette magnifique page des Indes Occidentales.

Saint-Christophe, disposée en forme de guitare, que les indigènes appelèrent “la fertile”, fut, pour les Français et les Anglais, “la mère des Antilles”. Les jeunes passagers ne purent qu’admirer ses beautés naturelles en longeant le littoral à moins d’un quart de mille. Saint-Kitts, sa capitale, est bâti au pied du mont des Singes, sur une baie de la rive occidentale, au milieu des jardins et des palmeraies. Un volcan, dont le nom de Misery s’est changé pour celui de Liberty depuis l’émancipation des noirs, élève à quinze cents mètres sa masse dont les flancs rejettent des fumerolles de gaz sulfureux. Au fond de deux cratères éteints sont emmagasinées les pluies qui assurent la fertilité de l’île. Sa superficie comprend cent soixante-seize kilomètres carrés, sa population environ trente mille habitants, et l’on y cultive principalement la canne, dont le sucre est de qualité supérieure.

Certes, il eût été fort agréable de relâcher pendant vingt-quatre heures à Saint-Christophe, d’en visiter les pâturages et les cultures. Mais, outre que Harry Markel n’y tenait aucunement, il fallait se conformer à l’itinéraire, et, de fait, aucun des pensionnaires d’Antilian School n’était originaire de cette île.

Dans la matinée du 12 avril, l’Alert fut signalé par les sémaphores d’Antigoa, nom que lui donna Christophe Colomb en souvenir d’une des églises de Valladolid. On n’avait pu l’apercevoir à grande distance, car elle émerge médiocrement, et son point culminant ne dépasse pas deux cents soixante-dix mètres. Quant aux dimensions d’Antigoa, elles sont relativement considérables, comparées à celles des autres Antilles, soit deux cent soixante-dix-neuf milles superficiels.

Lorsqu’il aperçut le pavillon britannique à l’entrée du port, Hubert Perkins le salua d’un vigoureux hurrah, auquel se joignirent ceux de ses camarades.

C’est par le côté nord que l’Alert se présenta pour accoster Antigoa, où s’ouvrent le port et la ville.

Harry Markel connaissait bien ces parages. Aussi ne réclama-t-il point les services d’un pilote. Quoiques difficiles que fussent les abords de la baie, il y entra hardiment, laissa le fort James à bâbord, la pointe Lobloly à tribord, et vint jeter l’ancre là où les navires trouvent d’excellents mouillages, à la condition de ne pas tirer plus de quatre à cinq mètres.

Au fond de cette baie apparaît la capitale, Saint-John, dont la population compte seize mille habitants. Cette ville, en échiquier, avec ses rues qui se coupent à angle droit, est d’aspect agréable et s’étale en pleine verdure au milieu des magnificences de la zone tropicale.

À peine l’Alert eut-il paru à l’entrée de la baie, qu’une embarcation se détacha de l’appontement du port, et, enlevée par quatre avirons, se dirigea vers le trois-mâts.

Il va sans dire que Harry Markel et ses compagnons éprouvèrent en ce moment de nouvelles inquiétudes, assez justifiées en somme. Ne pouvaient-ils craindre que la police anglaise eût été mise au courant de ce sanglant drame dont l’Alert avait été le théâtre dans l’anse Farmar, que d’autres cadavres eussent été découverts, peut-être même celui du capitaine Paxton?… Et alors, quel était l’homme qui remplissait ses fonctions à bord de l’Alert?…

Tous furent vite rassurés. Cette embarcation amenait la famille du jeune passager. Son père, sa mère, ses deux petites sœurs n’avaient pas eu la patience d’attendre le débarquement. Depuis plusieurs heures, ils guettaient l’arrivée du navire, ils montèrent à bord avant même que l’Alert eût pris son mouillage, et Hubert Perkins tomba dans les bras de ses parents.

L’île d’Antigoa, au point de vue administratif, est le chef-lieu d’une Présidence qui comprend les îles Barbuda et Redonda, ses voisines. En même temps, elle a rang de capitale au milieu de ce groupe des Antilles anglaises relié sous le nom de Lieward-Islands, c’est-à-dire des îles du Vent, depuis les îles Vierges jusqu’à la Dominique.

C’est à Antigoa que résident le gouverneur, les présidents des Conseils exécutif et législatif, nommés moitié par la Couronne, moitié par les censitaires. À noter que l’on y compte moins d’électeurs libres que de fonctionnaires. On le remarquera, cette composition du corps électoral n’est donc pas spéciale aux colonies françaises.

M. Perkins, un des membres du Conseil exécutif, descendait des anciens colons qui suivirent le colonel Codington, et sa famille n’avait jamais quitté l’île. Après avoir conduit son fils en Europe, il était rentré à sa résidence d’Antigoa.

Comme de juste, les présentations furent faites dès que Hubert Perkins eut embrassé son père, sa mère et ses sœurs. M. Horatio Patterson, avant tous autres, reçut la poignée de main de M. Perkins, et ses jeunes compagnons furent honorés de la même faveur. Mais ce qui valut au mentor les compliments de Mrs Perkins, ce fut l’état de florissante santé des passagers de l’Alert, — compliments dont le mentor crut devoir reporter une bonne part au capitaine Paxton.

Harry Markel les accepta, d’ailleurs, avec sa froideur habituelle. Puis, après avoir salué, il vint à l’avant prendre ses dispositions pour affourcher le navire.

M. Perkins demanda tout d’abord à M. Patterson combien de temps devait durer la relâche à Antigoa.

“Quatre jours, monsieur Perkins, déclara M. Patterson. Nos jours sont comptés, comme on dit généralement de la vie humaine, et nous sommes soumis à un programme dont il ne faut pas s’écarter.

— C’est bien court, fit observer Mrs Perkins.

— Sans doute, ma chère amie, reprit M. Perkins, mais le temps du voyage est limité, et il y a encore nombre d’Antilles sur l’itinéraire…

— Ara longa, vita brevis, ajouta M. Patterson, qui crut l’occasion opportune pour placer ce proverbe latin.

— Quoi qu’il en soit, dit M. Perkins, M. Patterson et les camarades de mon fils seront nos hôtes durant leur séjour…

— Monsieur Perkins, fit alors observer Roger Hinsdale, nous sommes dix à bord…

— Et assurément, ajouta M. Perkins, mon habitation serait trop petite pour vous héberger tous, mes jeunes amis!… Aussi on retiendra des chambres à l’hôtel, et vous viendrez vous asseoir à notre table.

— Dans ce cas, proposa Louis Clodion, peut-être vaudrait-il mieux rester sur l’Alert, sauf Hubert, monsieur Perkins?… Pendant la journée, nous vous appartiendrons depuis le lever jusqu’au coucher du soleil.”

Cette combinaison, étant la meilleure, eut l’approbation de M. Patterson. Mais, évidemment, Harry Markel aurait préféré que les passagers prissent logement à terre. Le bâtiment eût été moins exposé à recevoir des visiteurs, dont il redoutait toujours l’arrivée.

Au surplus, le capitaine fut également invité à la table de famille dans l’habitation de M. Perkins. Il s’excusa comme d’habitude, et Hubert fit comprendre à son père qu’il n’y avait pas lieu d’insister.

L’embarcation partie avec Hubert, les passagers s’occupèrent de mettre leurs affaires en ordre, puis d’écrire quelques lettres qu’emporterait le soir même le courrier d’Europe. Parmi elles, il convient de citer l’enthousiaste missive de M. Horatio Patterson que Mrs Patterson recevrait dans une vingtaine de jours. Il y en eut une également à l’adresse du directeur d’Antilian School, 213, Oxford-Street, London, Great Britain, dans laquelle M. Julian Ardagh trouverait des informations aussi exactes qu’instructives relativement aux boursiers de Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

Entre temps, Harry Markel terminait ses manœuvres, ayant eu soin, comme aux relâches précédentes, de mouiller l’Alert vers le milieu du port. Les hommes qui conduiraient les passagers n’auraient, point la permission de débarquer. Lui-même, il n’irait à terre que le jour de l’arrivée et le jour du départ, en raison des formalités à remplir au bureau maritime.

Vers onze heures, le grand canot fut paré.

Deux matelots aux avirons, Corty à la barre, déposèrent sur le quai les invités de M. et Mrs Perkins.

Un quart d’heure après, réunis dans une confortable habitation de la haute ville, tous s’asseyaient devant une table abondamment servie, et la conversation porta sur les divers incidents du voyage.

Âgé de quarante-cinq ans, M. Perkins, dont la barbe et les cheveux grisonnaient, avait une attitude digne, un abord sympathique, un regard affectueux, toutes qualités qui se retrouveraient un jour chez son fils. Personne n’était plus honoré que lui dans la colonie, ne fût-ce que pour les services qu’il rendait comme membre du Conseil exécutif. En même temps, homme de goût, très instruit en tout ce qui concernait l’histoire des Indes occidentales, il pourrait fournir à M. Horatio Patterson des notes précises, des documents authentiques à ce sujet. Qu’on en soit assuré, celui-ci ne se ferait pas faute de recourir à M. Perkins, et d’enrichir ainsi son carnet de voyage qu’il tenait avec autant de méthode que ses livres de comptabilité.

Mrs Perkins, d’origine créole, touchait à la quarantaine. Cette femme, aimable, attentionnée, charitable, se consacrait tout entière à l’éducation de ses deux fillettes, Bertha et Mary, âgées de dix et douze ans. On s’imagine quelle avait été la joie de cette excellente mère en revoyant son fils, en le pressant dans ses bras, après quatre années d’absence. Mais, ainsi que cela fut dit au déjeuner, le moment approchait où Hubert reviendrait à Antigoa, que sa famille n’avait jamais voulu quitter. Dans un an son temps d’Antilian School serait achevé.

“Nous le regretterons, déclara John Howard, qui avait encore deux années à passer dans l’Institution d’Oxford Street. Hubert est un bon camarade…

— Dont nous garderons excellent souvenir, ajouta Clodion.

— Qui sait si vous n’aurez pas l’occasion de vous rencontrer plus tard?… observa M. Perkins. Peut-être quelques-uns de vous, mes jeunes amis, rentreront-ils aux Antilles?… Lorsque Hubert sera dans une maison de commerce d’Antigoa, nous le marierons…

— Le plus tôt possible, observa Mrs Perkins.

— Hubert marié!… s’écria Tony Renault. Ah! je voudrais voir cela!…

— Eh! pourquoi ne serais-tu pas mon témoin?… répondit Hubert en riant.

— Ne plaisantons pas, jeunes gens, opina dogmatiquement M. Patterson. Base de toute société, le mariage est la plus respectable des institutions de ce monde.”

Il n’y avait pas à discuter sur ce sujet. Mais Mrs Perkins fut naturellement conduit à parler de

Mrs Patterson. Elle demanda des nouvelles de cette dame. Le mentor répondit avec une parfaite convenance. Il lui tardait d’avoir une lettre d’elle, et peut-être en recevrait-il une à la Barbade, avant de s’embarquer pour la traversée de retour. Et alors, tirant de sa poche une photographie qui ne le quittait jamais, il la montra non sans quelque orgueil.

“C’est le portrait d’une bonne et charmante femme, dit Mrs Perkins.

— Et la digne épouse de M. Horatio Patterson, ajouta M. Perkins.

— Elle est la compagne de ma vie, répondit M. Patterson, légèrement ému, et tout ce que je demande au ciel, c’est de la retrouver à mon retour…

ce qu’elle est hic et nunc!…”

Ce qu’entendait par ces derniers mots. M. Patterson, qui l’eût pu dire?… Il les avait prononcés en baissant la voix, et l’on n’y prêta pas autrement attention.

Le déjeuner terminé, il fut question de visiter Saint-John, puis de faire une promenade aux environs. On s’accorda toutefois une heure de sieste dans le beau jardin sous les grands arbres de la villa. M. Perkins fournit à M. Patterson d’intéressants renseignements sur l’abolition de l’esclavage à Antigoa. C’est en 1834 que l’Angleterre proclama l’acte d’émancipation, et, contrairement à ce qui se passa dans d’autres colonies, sans mesures transitoires, sans que les noirs eussent fait l’apprentissage de cette nouvelle existence.

L’acte avait bien imposé certaines obligations qui devaient en atténuer le contrecoup; mais les nègres, presque aussitôt affranchis de ces obligations, eurent tous les avantages et tous les inconvénients d’une entière liberté.

Il est vrai, ce brusque changement fut facilité par la situation des maîtres et des esclaves qui formaient de véritables familles. Aussi, bien que l’acte d’abolition rendit immédiatement libres trente-quatre mille nègres, alors que la colonie ne comptait que deux mille blancs, il n’y eut aucun excès à regretter, aucune scène de violence à déplorer. D’un côté comme de l’autre s’établit une parfaite entente, et les affranchis ne demandèrent qu’à rester sur les plantations comme domestiques ou gens à gages. Il convient d’ajouter que les colons se montrèrent très soucieux du bien-être des anciens esclaves. Ils assurèrent leur existence par un travail régulier et rémunérateur; ils construisirent pour eux des habitations plus confortables que les cases d’antan. Ces noirs, mieux vêtus, au lieu d’être nourris presque uniquement de racines et de poissons salés, firent usage de la viande fraîche, et leur régime alimentaire subit d'heureuses améliorations.

Si le résultat fut excellent pour les gens de couleur, il ne le fut pas moins pour la colonie dont la prospérité s'accrut dans une sérieuse proportion. Les revenus du trésor public ne cessèrent d'augmenter, alors que les dépenses administratives tendaient à s'abaisser pour tous les services.

Lors de leurs excursions à travers l'île, M. Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons s'émerveillèrent à voir les champs remarquablement cultivés. Quelle fertilité à la surface des plateaux de strate de calcaire! Partout des fermes bien entretenues, au courant de tous les progrès de l'agriculture!

On n'a pas oublié que le réseau hydrographique étant insuffisant à Antigoa, il avait fallu établir de vastes citernes pour recueillir les eaux pluviales. À ce sujet, M. Perkins eut occasion de dire que si les indigènes avaient donné à l'île le nom de Yacama, "la Ruisselante", ce devait être dans un sens ironique. Actuellement, ses réservoirs suffisent aux divers besoins de la ville et de la campagne.

Le drainage des eaux, intelligemment combiné, s'accomplit à la satisfaction générale. En même temps que la salubrité d'Antigoa est assurée, il garantit l'île à l'avenir contre cette disette qui, par deux fois, en 1770 et en 1784, produisit d'incalculables désastres. Les colons furent dans la situation de ces naufragés qui ne peuvent plus calmer les tortures de la soif, et ce fut par milliers que les bestiaux, sinon les habitants, périrent sur l'île.

C'est ce que raconta M. Perkins, tandis qu'il montrait à ses hôtes, non sans une légitime satisfaction, ces citernes d'une contenance de deux millions cinq cent mille mètres cubes, qui fournissent à Saint-John une moyenne supérieure à celle de plus d'une grande cité européenne.

Les excursions, entreprises sous la direction de M. Perkins, ne se bornèrent pas aux environs de la capitale. D’ailleurs, elles furent toujours combinées de manière que, chaque soir, les passagers pussent regagner l’Alert.

C’est ainsi que les touristes visitèrent l’autre port d’Antigoa, English-Harbour, situé sur la côte méridionale. Ce port, mieux abrité que celui de Saint-John, fut autrefois pourvu de bâtiments militaires, casernes, arsenaux, destinés à la défense d’Antigoa. Il est en réalité formé d’un groupe de cratères, dont le niveau s’est peu à peu abaissé, et qui ont été envahis par les eaux de la mer.

Tant en promenades qu’en repas et siestes dans la villa Perkins, les quatre jours affectés à la relâche s’écoulèrent rapidement. Dès le matin, on se mettait en route, et, bien que la chaleur fût grande à cette époque, les jeunes garçons n’eurent point trop à en souffrir. Puis, alors que Hubert Perkins restait chez ses parents, ses camarades revenaient à bord se refaire de leurs fatigues dans les cadres des cabines. D’ailleurs, Tony Renault prétendait que si Hubert ne rentrait pas comme eux, c’est qu’il y avait “quelque chose”, — par exemple, son mariage avec une jeune créole de la Barbade, et que les fiançailles seraient célébrées avant le départ pour l’Europe…

On riait de ses fantaisies que le grave M. Patterson ne laissait pas de prendre au sérieux.

La veille du départ, le 15 août, Harry Markel eut une alerte dans les circonstances que voici.

L’après-midi, un canot vint accoster le navire, après avoir débordé d’un brick anglais, le Flag, qui arrivait de Liverpool. Un des matelots du brick monta sur le pont et demanda à parler au capitaine.

Il eût été difficile de lui répondre que le capitaine n’était pas en ce moment à bord, puisque, depuis son mouillage, Harry Markel n’avait débarqué qu’une fois.

Harry Markel observa cet homme à travers la fenêtre de sa cabine. Il l’entendit même et se garda bien de se montrer. D’ailleurs, il ne le connaissait pas et n’en était vraisemblablement pas connu. Mais il se pouvait que ce matelot, ayant navigué avec le capitaine Paxton, commandant l’Alert, eût voulu lui rendre visite.

Là était le danger, — danger de toutes les relâches, — et il ne prendrait fin que le jour où l’Alert, ayant quitté la Barbade, n’aurait plus à rallier aucune des Antilles.

Ce fut Corty qui reçut ce matelot, dès qu’il eut pris pied sur le pont.

“Vous voulez parler au capitaine Paxton?… demanda-t-il.

— Oui, camarade, répondit le matelot, si c’est bien lui qui commande l’Alert, de Liverpool?…

— Vous le connaissez?…

— Non, mais j’ai un ami qui doit faire partie de son équipage…

— Ah! et il se nomme?…

— Forster… John Forster.”

Harry Markel, ayant entendu ces propos, sortit alors, aussi rassuré que Corty lui-même.

“Je suis le capitaine Paxton, dit-il.

— Capitaine?… fit le matelot en portant la main à son béret.

— Que voulez-vous?…

— Serrer la main à un camarade…

— Qui s’appelle?…

— John Forster.”

Harry Markel eut un instant la pensée de répondre que John Forster s’était noyé dans la baie de Cork. Mais il se souvint d’avoir attribué le nom de Bob au malheureux dont le cadavre était venu à la côte. Deux matelots perdus avant le départ, cela eût sans doute paru suspect aux passagers de l’Alert.

Harry Markel se contenta donc de dire:

“John Forster n’est pas à bord…

— Il n’y est pas?… répéta le matelot assez étonné. Je croyais bien l’y trouver, pourtant…

— Il n’y est pas, vous dis-je, ou plutôt il n’y est plus…

— Lui est-il arrivé quelque malheur?…

— Il était malade au moment de partir, et a dû débarquer.”

Corty ne put qu’admirer la présence d’esprit de son chef. Mais, si le matelot du Flag eût connu le capitaine Paxton, les choses auraient sans doute mal tourné pour Harry Markel et ses compagnons.

Le matelot n’ajouta donc rien, si ce n’est: “Merci, capitaine!” et il redescendit dans le canot, très chagriné de n’avoir pas rencontré son camarade.

Et, lorsqu’il fut au large:

“Décidément, s’écria Corty, c’est un jeu trop périlleux que nous jouons là!…

— Possible, mais qui en vaut la peine!

— N’importe!… De par tous les diables, Harry, il me tarde d’être en plein Atlantique!… Là, pas d’indiscret à craindre…

— Cela viendra, Corty… Demain l’Alert reprendra la mer…

— Pour?…

— Pour la Guadeloupe, et, en somme, une colonie française est moins dangereuse pour nous qu’une colonie anglaise!”

CHAPITRE II

II

La Guadeloupe

La distance qui sépare Antigoa de la Guadeloupe, ou pour mieux dire du groupe d’îles compris sous ce nom, n’est que de cent à cent vingt milles.

Dans des conditions ordinaires, l’Alert, servi par les vents alizés en quittant le port de Saint-John le matin du 16 août, aurait pu être à destination en vingt-quatre heures.

Louis Clodion devait donc espérer que, dès le lendemain, au lever du jour, les premières hauteurs de l’Antille française se dessineraient à l’horizon.

Il n’en fut pas ainsi. Des calmes, ou plutôt la faiblesse de la brise, retardèrent la marche du bâtiment, bien qu’il eût toute sa toile dehors.

D’autre part, il rencontra une lame courte et résistante, malgré l’insuffisance du vent. Cela tenait à ce que cette partie de la mer, très ouverte au large, n’est plus protégée par les îles. La houle, troublée par certains contre-courants, déferle, avant d’aller se briser sur les roches de Montserrat. Même si l’Alert eût été appuyé par une fraîche brise, il n’aurait pas évité les brutales secousses de cette traversée. Il en résulta que M. Horatio Patterson émit quelques doutes sur l’efficacité des noyaux de cerise comme préservatifs du mal de mer.

À la rigueur, Harry Markel aurait pu passer en dedans de Montserrat, où la houle était moins forte. Mais il se fût exposé à de trop fréquentes rencontres de navires, ce dont il se gardait le plus possible. Puis, la route se serait allongée d’une trentaine de milles. Il aurait fallu redescendre jusqu’à l’extrémité méridionale de la Guadeloupe, et, après l’avoir doublée, remonter peut-être vent debout en vue de la Pointe-à-Pitre.

La Guadeloupe se compose de deux grandes îles.

L’ile de l’ouest est la Guadeloupe proprement dite, que les Caraïbes appelaient Curucuera. Officiellement désignée sous le nom de Basse-Terre, bien que son relief soit le plus prononcé du groupe, ce nom lui vient de sa situation par rapport aux alizés.

L’île de l’est, sur les cartes, prend la dénomination de Grande-Terre, quoique sa contenance superficielle soit inférieure à l’autre. L’étendue totale des deux îles se chiffre par seize cent trois kilomètres carrés et leur population par cent trente-six mille habitants.

La Basse-Terre et la Grande-Terre sont séparées par une rivière aux eaux salées, dont la largeur varie de trente à cent vingt mètres, et que franchissent les navires d’un tirant de sept pieds environ. L’Alert n’aurait pu suivre ce passage, qui est le plus direct, qu’au plein de la marée, et encore ce n’eût pas été le fait d’un capitaine prudent. Aussi Harry Markel prit-il le large, à l’est du groupe. Cette navigation dura quarante heures au lieu de vingt-quatre, et ce fut seulement dans la matinée du 18 août que le trois-mâts parut à l’entrée de la baie où se jette la rivière salée, et dont le fond est occupé par la Pointe-à-Pitre.

Il y eut tout d’abord à dépasser la bordure d’îlots disposée autour du bassin qui forme le port et auquel on accède par un chenal étroit et sinueux.

Cinq ans s’étaient écoulés depuis que la famille de Louis Clodion avait quitté les Antilles, sauf le frère de sa mère resté à la Pointe-à-Pitre. Avec leurs enfants, ses parents s’étaient fixés en France, à Nantes, où M. Clodion dirigeait une importante maison d’armements au long cours. Aussi le jeune Louis avait conservé le souvenir de son île natale, d’où il n’était parti qu’à l’âge de quinze ans, et il comptait en faire les honneurs à ses camarades.

En venant par l’est, l’Alert reconnut premièrement la pointe de la Grande-Vigie sur la Grande-Terre, la plus septentrionale du groupe, puis la pointe des Gros-Caps, puis la pointe de l’Anse aux Loups, puis l’anse Sainte-Marguerite, et, tout à fait à l’extrémité sud-ouest de la Grande-Terre, la pointe des Châteaux.

Louis Clodion avait pu montrer sur la côte orientale cette ville du Moule, la troisième de la colonie par son importance, avec ses dix mille habitants. C’est là que les navires, chargés de sucre, attendent une occasion favorable pour prendre la mer. Ils y sont très à l’abri contre les mauvais temps, et contre ces formidables raz de marée qui causent tant de désastres sur ces parages.

Avant de doubler la pointe au sud-est de la Grande-Terre, les passagers eurent connaissance de la Désirade, autre Antille française, la première qui est signalée à bord des navires venant d’Europe et dont le morne, haut de deux cent soixante-dix-huit mètres, est visible à une grande distance.

Laissant alors la Désirade sur bâbord, l’Alert longea la pointe des Châteaux et, de là, on put entrevoir dans le sud une autre île, la Petite-Terre, qui fait partie du groupe de la Guadeloupe.

Mais, pour avoir un complet aperçu de l’ensemble, il eût fallu descendre plus au sud jusqu’à Marie-Galante, d’une étendue superficielle de cent soixante-trois kilomètres carrés, avec une population de quatorze mille âmes, puis en visiter les principales villes, Gros-Bourg, Saint-Louis, Vieux-Fort. Enfin, en poussant vers l’ouest, presque à la même latitude, se rencontre le petit archipel des Saintes, peuplé d’environ deux mille habitants, d’une étendue de quatorze kilomètres carrés. Formé de sept îles ou îlots distincts, dominé par le Chameau, d’une altitude de trois cent seize mètres, il est considéré comme le plus salubre sanatorium des Antilles.

Administrativement, la Guadeloupe est divisée en trois arrondissements. Ils comprennent la partie de Saint-Martin qui est restée mitoyenne avec la partie hollandaise, l’île Saint-Barthélemy que la Suède venait de céder à la France, les Saintes qui relèvent de l’arrondissement de Basse-Terre, ville principale de l’île de ce nom, la Désirade qui dépend de l’arrondissement de la Pointe-à-Pitre, Marie-Galante, le chef-lieu du troisième arrondissement.

Ce département colonial est représenté au conseil général par trente-six conseillers, et au parlement par un sénateur et deux députés. Son commerce présente un chiffre d’exportation de cinquante millions et un chiffre d’importation de trente-sept millions, — commerce qui se fait presque en totalité avec la France.

Quant au budget local, — cinq millions de francs, — il est alimenté par les droits à la sortie des denrées coloniales et un impôt qui frappe la consommation des spiritueux.

L’oncle de Louis Clodion, frère de sa mère, M. Henry Barrand, était un des riches et influents planteurs de la Guadeloupe. Il habitait la Pointe-à-Pitre et possédait de vastes propriétés aux environs de la ville. Sa fortune, son entregent, son caractère très communicatif, sa personnalité très sympathique, son originalité amusante, sa bonne humeur habituelle, lui faisaient des amis de tous ceux qui l’approchaient. Âgé de quarante-six ans, grand chasseur, grand amateur de sport, il parcourait à cheval ses vastes plantations, aimant la bonne chère, vrai gentilhomme campagnard, si cette qualification peut être appliquée à un colon des Antilles, et, brochant sur le tout, célibataire, oncle à héritage, oncle d'Amérique, sur lequel ses neveux et nièces devaient compter.

On devine avec quelle joie, avec quelle émotion même, il serra Louis Clodion dans ses bras dès l'arrivée de l'Alert.

“Sois le bienvenu, mon cher Louis, s'écria-t-il, et quel bonheur de te revoir après cinq ans d'absence!… Si je ne suis pas changé autant que toi, si je ne suis pas devenu un vieillard, tandis que tu devenais un jeune homme, ça va bien!…

— Mon oncle, affirma Louis Clodion en l'entraînant, vous êtes toujours le même!

— Alors c'est parfait! reprit M. Barrand qui se retourna vers les passagers réunis sur la dunette. Soyez les bienvenus, vous aussi, jeunes camarades de mon neveu, et tenez pour certain que la colonie éprouve grande satisfaction à recevoir les pensionnaires d'Antilian School!”

Puis l'excellent homme pressa toutes les mains qui lui furent tendues, et, revenant à Louis:

“Le père, la mère, les enfants, tout ce monde va bien là-bas… à Nantes?…

— Tout le monde, mon oncle, mais c'est peut-être à vous qu'il faut demander de leurs nouvelles…

— En effet, j'ai eu une lettre de ma sœur avant-hier… La smala est en excellente santé!… Et l'on me recommande de bien te recevoir!… La bonne recommandation de cette chère sœur!… J’irai la voir l’hiver prochain, elle et sa maisonnée…

— Ah! que vous nous ferez plaisir, mon oncle, car, à cette époque, mes études seront finies et je serai sans doute à Nantes…

— À moins que tu ne sois ici, mon neveu, pour partager mon existence!… J’ai des idées là-dessus… On verra plus tard!”

À ce moment s’avança M. Patterson qui s’inclina cérémonieusement devant M. Barrand, et dit:

“Vous me permettez, monsieur, de vous présenter mes chers pensionnaires…

— Eh! s’écria le planteur, c’est… ce doit être M. Patterson… Comment ça va-t-il, monsieur

Patterson?…

— Aussi bien que possible, après une traversée qui n’a pas laissé d’être quelque peu tangante et roulante…

— Je vous connais, allez, interrompit M. Barrand, comme je connais tous ces élèves d’Antilian School dont vous êtes l’aumônier.

— Pardon, monsieur Barrand, l’économe…

— Économe, aumônier, c’est la même chose! repartit le planteur avec un joyeux éclat de rire. L’un tient les comptes d’ici-bas… l’autre tient les comptes de là-haut!… Et pourvu que la comptabilité soit en règle!…”

En parlant ainsi, M. Barrand allait et venait de l’un à l’autre, et, finalement, il pressa la main de M. Horatio Patterson avec une telle vigueur que, s’il eût été aumônier, le mentor n’aurait pu de deux jours bénir les pensionnaires d’Antilian School!

Et l’exubérant colon de continuer:

“Préparez-vous à débarquer, mes amis!… Vous logerez chez moi, tous!… Ma maison est grande, et, quand vous seriez cent fois plus nombreux, vous ne dévoreriez pas mes plantations… Et vous accompagnerez ces jeunes gens, monsieur Patterson… et vous aussi, si le cœur vous en dit, capitaine Paxton!…”

L’invitation fut naturellement refusée comme toujours. Mais M. Barrand, n’aimant pas à se répéter, n’insista pas.

“Pourtant, monsieur Barrand, observa alors le mentor, tout en vous remerciant d’une hospitalité offerte avec tant de… comment dirais-je?…

— Ne dites pas… Ça vaudra mieux, monsieur Patterson.

— Si nous allions vous gêner…

— Me gêner… moi!… Est-ce que j’ai l’air d’un homme que l’on gêne… et qui se gêne?… D’ailleurs, je le veux!”

Devant cette impérieuse formule, il n’y avait qu’à obéir.

Puis, lorsque M. Patterson voulut faire en règle les présentations des passagers:

“Mais je les connais tous, ces jeunes garçons!… s’écria le planteur. Les journaux ont donné leurs noms, et je parie ne pas me tromper!… Tenez, voici les Anglais, Roger Hinsdale, John Howard, Hubert Perkins… et j’ai été en relation avec leurs familles à Sainte-Lucie, à la Dominique, à Antigoa…”

Les trois Anglais ne purent qu’être flattés de cette déclaration.

“Et puis, reprit M. Barrand, ce grand blond-là… c’est Albertus Leuwen, de Saint-Martin…

— Précisément, monsieur, répondit le jeune Hollandais en saluant.

— Et ces deux braves à bonne figure, qui se tiennent à l’écart, c’est Niels Harboe de Saint-Thomas, et c’est Axel Wickborn de Sainte-Croix… Vous voyez, je n’en manquerai pas un!… Et toi, là-bas, le petit, à l’oeil vif, qui ne peux rester un moment en place, que le diable m’emporte si tu n’as pas les veines pleines de sang français…

— Jusqu’à la dernière goutte, déclara Tony Renault, mais je suis né à la Martinique.

— Eh bien… tu as eu tort!…

— Comment… tort?…

— Oui!… Quand on naît Français aux Antilles, il faut que cela soit à la Guadeloupe et non ailleurs, parce que la Guadeloupe… c’est la Guadeloupe!…

— On naît où on peut… s’écria Tony Renault, en partant d’un éclat de rire.

— Bien répondu, le gaillard, répliqua M. Barrand, et ne crois pas que je t’en veuille pour cela…

— Quelqu’un en vouloir à Tony, dit Louis Clodion, cela ne serait pas possible!

— Et ne croyez pas non plus, ajouta le planteur, que je veuille déprécier la Martinique, la Désirade ou autres îles françaises! Mais enfin, je suis de la Guadeloupe, et c’est tout dire!… Quant à ce grand secco… là-bas… avec sa chevelure blonde… ce doit être Magnus Anders…

— Lui-même, mon oncle, répondit Louis Clodion, et qui, en arrivant à Saint-Barthélemy, n’a plus trouvé son île, ou, du moins, elle avait cessé d’être suédoise…

— En effet, répondit M. Barrand, nous avons appris cela par les feuilles!… La Suède nous a cédé sa colonie!… Eh bien, Anders, il ne faut pas se faire tant de chagrin!… Nous vous traiterons en frère et vous finirez par reconnaître que la Suède n’a pas de meilleure amie que la France!…”

Tel était M. Henry Barrand, tel l’oncle de Louis Clodion. Dès cette première entrevue, les jeunes passagers le connaissaient comme s’ils eussent vécu sur ses plantations depuis leur naissance.

Avant de se retirer, M. Barrand ajouta:

“À onze heures le déjeuner… et un bon déjeuner pour tous!… Vous entendez, monsieur Patterson?… Je n’admettrais pas dix minutes de retard…

— Comptez, monsieur, sur mon exactitude chronométrique”, répondit M. Patterson.

M. Barrand emmena son neveu dans le canot qui l’avait conduit à bord dès l’arrivée de l’Alert.

Peut-être Basse-Terre se présente-t-elle dans de meilleures conditions que la Pointe-à-Pitre. Située à l’embouchure de la Rivière-aux-Herbes, près de la pointe extrême de l’île, peut-être provoque-t-elle plus vivement l’admiration des visiteurs avec ses maisons disposées en amphithéâtre, les jolies collines qui l’entourent. Il est probable, pourtant, que M. Henry Barrand n’aurait pas voulu en convenir, car, s’il faisait de la Guadeloupe la première des Antilles françaises, il faisait de la Pointe-à-Pitre la première ville de la Guadeloupe. Seulement, il n’aimait pas à se rappeler que la Guadeloupe capitula devant les Anglais en 1759, qu’elle repassa sous la domination anglaise en 1794, puis en 1810, et ne fut réellement restituée à la France que par le traité de paix du 30 mai 1814.

Après tout, la Pointe-à-Pitre méritait la visite des jeunes voyageurs. M. Barrand saurait bien en faire valoir les beautés avec une conviction qui les pénétrerait. Ce serait l’objet d’une promenade spéciale, et ses invités ne firent que traverser la ville dans les voitures mises à leur disposition. En un quart d’heure, ils eurent atteint l’habitation de

Rose-Croix où les attendaient Louis Clodion et son oncle.

Ce qui les attendait aussi dans la grande salle à manger de cette superbe villa, c’était un déjeuner excellent, plutôt solide que recherché. Et quel accueil lui fit toute cette jeunesse affamée: quartiers de viande de boucherie, poissons, gibier, légumes récoltés sur la plantation, fruits cueillis aux arbres des vergers, café de premier choix, et qui, pour être de la Guadeloupe, n’en fut pas moins déclaré supérieur au Martinique, par cela seul qu’il provenait des caféiers de Rose-Croix! Et toujours l’éloge de la Guadeloupe, plus particulièrement celui de la Pointe-à-Pitre, avec nombreux toasts et santés portés par l’intarissable amphitryon auquel il fallait les rendre.

Cependant, quoi qu’il en soit, la nature a fait plus pour la Basse-Terre que pour la Grande-Terre. C’est une région accidentée, à laquelle les forces plutoniennes ont donné un relief pittoresque, la Grosse-Montagne, haute de sept cent vingt mètres, les trois Manilles qui la dépassent de cinquante, le Caraïbe qui atteint presque cette altitude; puis, au centre, la fameuse Soufrière dont l’extrême sommet est coté à près de quinze cents mètres.

Et comment la Grande-Terre, si ce n’est dans l’imagination impétueuse de M. Barrand, pourrait-elle se mettre en comparaison avec cette contrée si riche en beautés naturelles, une petite Suisse antiliane?… C’est une région plate, une suite de plateaux peu relevés, de plaines à perte de vue, d’ailleurs, elle n’est pas moins favorable que sa voisine à la production agricole.

Aussi, M. Horatio Patterson de faire cette observation assez juste:

“Ce que je ne comprends pas, monsieur Barrand, c’est que ce soit précisément cette Basse-Terre que le formidable forgeron Vulcain a forgée sur son enclume mythologique — si cette métaphore peut passer…

— Avec un verre de vin, tout passe, monsieur Patterson!… répondit le planteur en levant son verre.

— Je m’étonne, disais-je, reprit le mentor, que cette Basse-Terre ait été épargnée par les convulsions sismiques, alors que la Grande-Terre, plutôt sortie des mains caressantes du dieu Neptune, y est particulièrement exposée…

— Bien observé, monsieur l’économe! répliqua M. Barrand. De vrai, c’était la Basse-Terre que ces cataclysmes auraient dû éprouver et non la Grande-Terre, car la première est posée comme une marmite sur un foyer ardent!… Et pourtant, des deux îles, c’est la nôtre qui a le plus souffert?… Que voulez-vous?… La nature commet de ces erreurs, et, puisque l’homme n’y peut rien, il faut les accepter. Aussi, je répéterai en vous priant de me faire écho par un dernier toast: À la santé de la Grande-Terre, à la prospérité de la Pointe-à-Pitre…

— Et en l’honneur de notre généreux hôte!” ajouta M. Patterson.

Au surplus, ces souhaits étaient déjà réalisés. La Pointe-à-Pitre a toujours prospéré depuis sa fondation, malgré les agressions et invasions qui ont désolé l’île, malgré les incendies dont la ville a été victime, malgré le terrible tremblement de terre de 1843, qui, en soixante-dix secondes, fit cinq mille victimes. Il ne restait plus debout que quelques pans de murs et la façade d’une église avec son horloge arrêtée à dix heures trente-cinq minutes du matin. Cette catastrophe s’étendit à la ville du Moule, aux bourgs de Saint-François, de Sainte-Anne, du Port-Louis, de Sainte-Rose, de l’anse Bertrand, de Joinville, même à Basse-Terre, moins abîmée cependant que la Pointe-à-Pitre. Peu de temps après, les maisons étaient reconstruites, basses, isolées. À présent, des chemins de fer, qui rayonnent autour de la capitale, se raccordent avec les usines à sucre et autres établissements industriels. Et puis, de tous côtés, ont surgi des forêts d’eucalyptus qui, absorbant l’humidité du sol, en assurent la parfaite salubrité.

Quel plaisir tous ces invités firent à leur hôte en visitant son domaine, si remarquablement entretenu, et dont il se montrait si fier! Grâce à un système d’irrigations ingénieusement conduites, les vastes plaines de cannes à sucre promettaient une fructueuse récolte.

Des plantations de caféiers qui réussissent si bien sur les coteaux de l’île, entre deux cents et six cents mètres de hauteur, répétait M. Barrand, y produisaient un café qui l’emportait sur celui de la Martinique. Puis, on parcourut les champs autour de l’habitation, les pâturages que le réseau hydraulique maintenait en fraîche verdure, de riches plants d’aloès karata et de cotonniers d’une importance restreinte encore, mais dont le succès ne faisait pas doute, des cultures de ce tabac, le pétun, réservé à la consommation locale, et qui, au dire du digne planteur, valait n’importe quel autre des Antilles; enfin les champs de manioc, ignames, patates, les vergers où abondaient les arbres à fruits des meilleures espèces.

Il va de soi que M. Barrand avait à son service un nombreux personnel libre, profondément dévoué, qui eût sacrifié tous les bénéfices de l’affranchissement plutôt que de quitter le domaine de Rose-Croix.

Cependant, si exclusif que fût l’oncle de Louis Clodion, il n’aurait pas voulu priver les passagers de l’Alert du plaisir de visiter quelques points curieux de la Guadeloupe proprement dite, la voisine de l’ouest. Aussi, le surlendemain de leur arrivée, le 20 août, un petit steamboat, frété exprès, qui les attendait dans le port de la Pointe-à-Pitre, les conduisit-il à Basse-Terre, sur la côte méridionale.

Basse-Terre, tout en étant un chef-lieu politique du groupe, n’occupe que le troisième rang parmi les villes de la colonie. Mais, quoique M. Barrand n’en voulût point convenir, aucune autre ne peut lui être comparée. Bâtie à l’embouchure de la Rivière-aux-Herbes, elle se dispose en amphithéâtre sur la colline, ses maisons groupées au milieu d’arbres magnifiques, ses villas éparses aux alentours, incessamment rafraîchies par les saines brises du large. Si leur hôte n’avait point accompagné les jeunes garçons dans cette excursion, du moins Louis Clodion, qui connaissait Basse-Terre, remplit-il à merveille son rôle de cicérone. Ni le Jardin Botanique, qui est célèbre aux Antilles, ni ce sanatorium du camp de Jacob, aussi salubre que celui des Saintes, ne furent oubliés.

Ainsi s’écoulèrent ces quatre jours, en promenades, en explorations, qui ne laissèrent pas une heure inoccupée. Et quels repas plantureux, et quelle perspective, au moins pour M. Horatio Patterson, de gastrites et de dilatations d’estomac, si la relâche eût duré quelques jours de plus!… Il est vrai, le moment arrivait de reprendre la mer. Cette hospitalité si facile, si large, si cordiale, si française en un mot, les passagers de l’Alert la retrouveraient sans doute à la Martinique. Mais ce n’était pas une raison pour ne point conserver un excellent souvenir de la Guadeloupe, une reconnaissance sincère pour l’accueil de M. Henry Barrand.

Par exemple, il ne fallait pas exciter sa verve jalouse en lui parlant de la Martinique, et, la veille du départ, il disait encore à M. Patterson:

“Ce qui m’enrage, c’est que le gouvernement français semble avoir des préférences pour cette rivale!

— Quelles sont donc les faveurs qu’il lui réserve?… demanda M. Patterson.

— Eh! entre autres, répondit M. Barrand, sans chercher à dissimuler son mécontentement, n’a-t-il point choisi Fort-de-France pour tête de ligne de ses paquebots transatlantiques?… Est-ce que la Pointe-à-Pitre n’était pas naturellement tout indiquée pour devenir leur port d’arrivée?…

— Assurément, répondit M. Patterson, et je pense que les Guadeloupiens auront le droit de réclamer…

— Réclamer, s’écria le planteur, et qui se chargerait de leurs réclamations?…

— N’avez-vous donc pas des représentants au Parlement français?…

— Un sénateur… deux députés… répondit M. Barrand, et ils font tout ce qu’ils peuvent pour défendre les intérêts de la colonie!…

— C’est leur devoir”, répondit le mentor.

Dans la soirée du 21 août, M. Barrand reconduisit ses hôtes à bord de l’Alert. Puis, après avoir embrassé une dernière fois son neveu et serré la main à tous ses camarades:

“Voyons, dit-il, au lieu d’aller à la Martinique, ne feriez-vous pas mieux de passer huit jours encore à la Guadeloupe?…

— Et mon île?… s’écria Tony Renault.

— Ton île, mon garçon, elle ne s’en ira pas à la dérive, et tu la retrouverais à un autre voyage!

— Monsieur Barrand, objecta M. Patterson, vos offres nous touchent infiniment… et nous vous remercions de grand cœur… Mais il faut se conformer au programme de Mrs Kethlen Seymour…

— Soit!… allez donc à la Martinique, mes jeunes amis! répondit M. Barrand. Et surtout prenez garde aux serpents!… Il y en a par milliers, et ce sont les Anglais, dit-on, qui les ont importés avant de rendre l’île à la France…

— Est-il possible?… répondit le mentor. Non! jamais je ne croirai à semblable méchanceté de la part de mes compatriotes…

— C’est de l’histoire, monsieur Patterson, c’est de l’histoire! répliqua le planteur. Et, si vous vous laissez mordre là-bas, ce sera du moins par un serpent britannique…

— Britannique ou non, déclara Louis Clodion, on s’en défiera, mon oncle!

— À propos, demanda M. Barrand, au moment où il allait quitter le bord, avez-vous un bon capitaine?…

— De premier ordre, répondit M. Patterson, et dont nous avons tout lieu d’être satisfaits… Mrs Kethlen Seymour n’aurait pu faire un meilleur choix…

— Tant pis, répondit très sérieusement M. Barrand en hochant la tête.

— Tant pis?… Et pourquoi, de grâce?…

— Parce que, si vous aviez eu un mauvais capitaine, peut-être l’Alert se fût-il mis à la côte en sortant du port, et j’aurais eu la bonne chance de vous garder à Rose-Croix pendant quelques semaines!”

CHAPITRE III

III

La Dominique

Lorsque le trois-mâts fut hors de la baie de la Pointe-à-Pitre, une petite brise d’est se leva, favorable à la direction qu’il devait suivre pour rallier la Dominique, une centaine de milles plus au sud. Couvert de toile, l’Alert glissa comme une mouette à la surface de cette mer étincelante. Avec un vent bien établi, il aurait pu franchir cette distance en vingt-quatre heures. Mais le baromètre montait lentement, — ce qui faisait présager des calmes et une traversée plus longue du double.

C’était un bon navire, l’Alert, et, il convient de le répéter, commandé par un capitaine qui connaissait à fond son métier, disposant d’un équipage qui n’en était plus à faire ses preuves. Les souhaits de M. Henry Barrand ne risquaient donc point de se réaliser. Même par mauvais temps, Harry Markel eût pris la mer sans craindre de se jeter sur les rochers de la baie, et les passagers n’auraient pas à profiter des hospitalières offres du planteur de Rose-Croix.

Si la navigation devait être lente, étant données les circonstances atmosphériques, elle débutait du moins dans les conditions les plus heureuses.

En quittant la Pointe-à-Pitre, cap au sud, le bâtiment passa en vue du groupe des Saintes, que domine un morne de trois cents mètres. On aperçut très visiblement le fort qui le couronne, sur lequel flottait le drapeau français.

Les Saintes sont toujours en état de défense, comme une citadelle avancée qui protège de ce côté les approches de la Guadeloupe.

Entre tous, Tony Renault et Magnus Anders ne cessaient de se distinguer, lorsqu'il s'agissait de manœuvrer. Ils faisaient le quart en vrais matelots, même le quart de nuit, quoi qu'eût pu dire le mentor, toujours inquiet de l'imprudence de ces hardis garçons.

“Je vous les recommande, capitaine Paxton… répétait-il à Harry Markel. Songez donc, s'il leur arrivait un accident!… Lorsque je les vois grimper à la mâture, il me semble qu'ils vont être… comment dirai-je?…

— Déralingués…

— Oui… c'est le mot, déralingués par un coup de roulis ou de tangage, et s'ils tombaient à la mer!… Pensez à ma responsabilité, capitaine!”

Et quand Harry Markel avait répondu qu'il ne leur laisserait pas commettre d'imprudence, que sa responsabilité était non moins engagée que celle de M. Patterson, celui-ci le remerciait en termes émus qui ne dégelaient guère la froideur du faux Paxton.

Alors c'étaient des recommandations sans fin au jeune Suédois et au jeune Français, qui répondaient:

“N'ayez peur, monsieur Patterson… Nous nous tenons solidement…

— Mais si vos mains venaient à lâcher prise, vous dégringoleriez…

— De branchâ in brancham dégringolat alque facil pouf! comme dit Virgile!… déclama Tony Renault.

— Jamais le cygne de Mantoue n’a commis un pareil hexamètre!… répliqua M. Patterson en levant les bras au ciel.

— Eh bien, il aurait dû le faire, riposta cet irrespectueux Tony Renault, car la chute en est superbe: atque facit pouf!”

Et les deux camarades d’éclater de rire.

Toutefois, le digne mentor pouvait se rassurer, Tony Renault et Magnus Anders, s’ils étaient hardis comme des pages, étaient adroits comme des singes. D’ailleurs, John Carpenter les surveillait, ne fût-ce que par crainte de voir leurs primes disparaître avec eux. Et puis, il ne fallait pas qu’un accident obligeât l’Alert à quelque longue relâche dans l’une des Antilles, et, si l’un ou l’autre de ces deux garçons se fût cassé quelque membre, le départ aurait été retardé.

À noter, d’autre part, que l’équipage se mettait rarement en rapport avec les passagers. Ceux-ci eussent pu même remarquer que les hommes se tenaient le plus souvent à l’écart, ne cherchaient point à se familiariser, ce que font d’ordinaire et si volontiers les matelots. Seuls Wagah et Corty liaient conversation, les autres gardant la réserve que leur avait imposée Harry Markel. Si, parfois, Roger Hinsdale et Louis Clodion avaient été surpris de cette attitude, si, à diverses reprises, ils avaient observé que les hommes se taisaient à leur approche, c’était tout, et ils ne pouvaient avoir aucun soupçon.

Quant à M. Patterson, il eût été incapable de faire aucune remarque à ce sujet. Il trouvait que le voyage s’accomplissait dans les plus agréables conditions — chose vraie d’ailleurs — et se félicitait maintenant d’arpenter le pont sans s’accrocher à chaque pas, pede maritimo.

Les calmes ayant persisté, ce fut seulement le matin du 24 août, vers cinq heures, que l'Alert, servi par une petite brise du nord-ouest, parut en vue de la Dominique.

La capitale de la colonie, nommée Ville-des-Roseaux, possède environ cinq mille habitants.

Elle est située sur la côte orientale de l'île, dont les hauteurs la défendent de la violence trop fréquente des alizés. Mais le port n'est pas suffisamment abrité contre les houles du large, surtout à l'époque des grandes marées, et la tenue n'y est pas sûre. Un navire est exposé à chasser sur ses ancres, et les équipages sont toujours prêts à changer de mouillage au premier indice de mauvais temps.

Aussi, puisque l'Alert devait séjourner plusieurs jours à la Dominique, Harry Markel préféra-t-il, non sans raison, ne point relâcher à Ville-des-Roseaux. De même orientation, vers l'extrémité de l'île, s'ouvre une rade excellente, la rade de Portsmouth, où les bâtiments n'ont rien à craindre des ouragans ni des cyclones qui désolent si fréquemment ces parages.

C'était dans cette dernière ville, qu'était né, dix-huit ans auparavant, John Howard, le quatrième lauréat du concours, et il allait retrouver une cité en voie d'agrandissement, dont l'avenir fera un important centre de commerce.

Ce fut un dimanche que les passagers mirent pied sur la Dominique et, s'ils l'eussent fait le 3 novembre, c'eût été l'anniversaire de sa découverte par Christophe Colomb, en 1493. Le célèbre navigateur l'avait nommée Dominique en l'honneur de ce jour sanctifié à bord de ses caravelles.

La Dominique forme une importante colonie anglaise, puisqu'elle comprend sept cent cinquante-quatre kilomètres superficiels, soit douze lieues de long sur six lieues de large. Actuellement, elle est peuplée de trente mille habitants, qui ont remplacé les Caraïbes du temps de la conquête. Tout d'abord, les Espagnols ne cherchèrent point à s'y établir, bien que les vallées de l'île fussent fertiles, les eaux excellentes, les forêts riches en bois de construction.

De même que ses sœurs des Indes occidentales, la Dominique a successivement passé aux mains de diverses puissances européennes. Elle fut française, au début du XVIIe siècle. Les premiers colons y introduisirent la culture du café et du coton, et, en 1622, leur nombre était de trois cent quarante-neuf, auxquels s'ajoutaient trois cent trente-huit esclaves d'origine africaine.

Au début, les Français vécurent en bonne intelligence avec les Caraïbes, dont le total ne dépassait pas un millier. Ces indigènes provenaient d'une race forte, laborieuse, non point celle des Peaux-Rouges, mais plutôt celle des Indiens qui peuplèrent les Guyanes et ces régions septentrionales de l'Amérique du Sud.

Il est à remarquer que, dans tout l'archipel antilian, la langue que parlent les femmes n'est pas absolument identique à celle dont se servent les hommes. Ce sont deux idiomes dont l'un est, pour la partie féminine, l'aronaque, et l'autre, pour la partie masculine, le galibe. Ces indigènes, cruels et inhospitaliers, bien que possédant certaines notions religieuses, ont laissé une réputation de cannibalisme trop justifiée, et, peut-être, ce nom de Caraïbe est-il synonyme d'anthropophage. Cela ne saurait excuser, bien entendu, les férocités qu'exercèrent contre eux les conquérants espagnols.

Cependant, comme ces Caraïbes se livraient à des excursions hostiles sur les diverses îles de l'archipel avec leurs pirogues creusées à la hache dans des troncs d'arbres, comme les Indiens étaient principalement victimes de leur cruauté, il fallut les détruire. Aussi, depuis la découverte des Antilles, ont-ils presque entièrement disparu, et, de cette race supérieure à celle du nord, il ne reste plus qu’un petit nombre de types à la Martinique, à Saint-Vincent. Quant à la Dominique, où ils ont été moins durement pourchassés, leur nombre se réduit à une trentaine de familles.

Toutefois, si les Européens avaient juré la destruction des Caraïbes, ils ne se refusaient pas à les employer dans leurs luttes personnelles. À plusieurs reprises, les Anglais et les Français s’en firent de redoutables auxiliaires, utilisant leurs instincts belliqueux, quitte à les anéantir plus tard.

Bref, dès les premiers temps de la conquête, la Dominique acquit une suffisante importance coloniale pour exciter les convoitises et attirer les flibustiers.

Après les Français, qui y avaient fondé les premiers établissements, l’île tomba sous la domination des Anglais, puis des Hollandais. Il était donc possible que Roger Hinsdale, John Howard, Hubert Perkins, Louis Clodion, Tony Renault, Albertus Leuwen, pussent s’y réclamer d’ancêtres respectifs, qui s’étaient entre-tués deux ou trois siècles auparavant.

En 1745, lorsque éclata la guerre entre l’Angleterre et la France, la Dominique passa entre les mains des Anglais. En vain le gouvernement français protesta-t-il avec énergie, demandant la restitution de cette colonie pour laquelle on avait fait tant de sacrifices d’hommes et d’argent. Il ne parvint pas même à obtenir qu’elle lui fût rendue par le traité de Paris de 1763, et elle resta sous le pavillon aux trop larges plis de la Grande-Bretagne.

Néanmoins, la France ne devait pas accepter ces conditions sans tenter une revanche. En 1778, le marquis de Bouille, gouverneur de la Martinique, prit la mer avec une escadrille, s'empara de la Ville-des-Roseaux, et conserva sa conquête jusqu'en 1783. Mais les Anglais parurent en force, et la Dominique rentra sous l'autorité britannique, cette fois d'une façon définitive.

Que l'on se rassure, ce n'étaient point les jeunes lauréats anglais, hollandais, français de l'Alert, qui allaient renouveler les luttes de jadis, et réclamer pour leurs pays la possession de cette île. M. Horatio Patterson, homme éminemment respectueux des droits acquis, bien qu'il fût anglo-saxon, n'eut pas à intervenir dans une question de ce genre, qui aurait risqué d'ébranler l'équilibre européen.

Il y avait au plus six années que la famille de John Howard, après avoir quitté la ville de Portsmouth, habitait Manchester dans le comté de Lancastre.

Le jeune garçon n'avait pas perdu tout souvenir de l'île, puisqu'il était déjà âgé de douze ans, à l'époque où M. et Mme Howard abandonnèrent la colonie sans y laisser aucun parent. John Howard n'y retrouverait ni un frère comme Niels Harboe à Saint-Thomas, ni un oncle comme Louis Clodion à la Guadeloupe. Mais peut-être y rencontrerait-il quelque ami de sa famille qui s'empresserait de faire bon accueil aux élèves d'Antilian School.

Il est vrai, même à défaut d'amis, ou tout au moins de personnes qui avaient été en relations d'affaires avec M. Howard, son fils s'était bien promis, à l'arrivée à Portsmouth, de faire une visite qui lui tenait au cœur. Il ne s'agirait plus là de la réception si cordiale de M. Christian Harboe à Saint-Thomas ni de l'opulente hospitalité d'Henry Barrand à la Guadeloupe. Mais John Howard et ses camarades n'en seraient pas moins accueillis par un couple de braves gens.

Là, à Portsmouth, vivait encore, avec son vieux mari, une vieille négresse qui avait été au service de la famille Howard et dont la modeste existence était assurée par elle.

Et, qui serait enchantée, plus qu'enchantée, profondément émue en revoyant ce grand garçon qu'elle avait autrefois porté dans ses bras?… Ce serait bien Kate Grindah. Ni son mari ni elle ne s'attendaient à cette visite… Ils ne savaient guère que l'Alert relâcherait à la Dominique, et que le petit John se trouvait à bord, et qu'il se hâterait de venir leur rendre visite.

Dès que l'Alert eut effectué son mouillage, les passagers se firent mettre à terre. Pendant ces quarante-huit heures de séjour à la Dominique, ils devaient rentrer chaque soir, et se borneraient à des excursions autour de la ville. Une des embarcations les irait chercher pour les ramener à bord.

En effet, Harry Markel préférait qu'il en fût ainsi, afin d'éviter toute relation avec les gens de Portsmouth, sauf pour ce qui concernait les formalités maritimes. Dans un port anglais, il y avait lieu de redouter, plus qu'en tout autre, la rencontre de personnes qui auraient connu le capitaine Paxton ou quelque matelot de son équipage. Harry Markel affourcha l'Alert à une certaine distance du quai et interdit de descendre à terre. D'autre part, n'ayant point à renouveler ses provisions, sauf en farine et en viande fraîche, il prendrait ses mesures pour que cela se fit le plus prudemment possible.

John Howard, ayant conservé de Portsmouth un souvenir assez précis, pourrait servir de guide à ses camarades. Ceux-ci connaissaient son intention d'aller tout d'abord embrasser les vieux Grindah dans leur petite maisonnette Aussi, dès qu'ils eurent débarqué, ils traversèrent la ville et se dirigèrent vers le faubourg dont les dernières habitations débordent sur la campagne.

La promenade ne fut pas longue. Après un quart d’heure, tous s’arrêtaient devant une modeste case, d’apparence propre, entourée d’un jardin planté d’arbres à fruits, et terminé par une basse-cour où picoraient les volailles.

Le vieux travaillait dans ce jardin, la vieille était à l’intérieur, et elle sortait au moment où John Howard poussait la porte de l’enclos.

Quel cri de joie ne put retenir Kate, en reconnaissant l’enfant qu’elle n’avait pas vu depuis six ans!… Y en eût-il eu vingt, elle l’aurait reconnu tout de même, cet aîné de la famille!… Ce n’est pas avec les yeux que cela se fait, c’est avec le cœur!

“Toi… toi… John! répétait-elle en pressant le jeune garçon dans ses bras.

— Oui… moi… bonne Kate… moi!”

Et le vieux d’intervenir:

“Lui… John!… Tu te trompes!… Ce n’est pas lui, Kate…

— Si… c’est lui…

— Oui… c’est moi!”

Et impossible de dire autre chose! Puis, voici que les camarades de John Howard entourent les deux époux, et les embrassent à leur tour.

“Oui… répétait Tony Renault… c’est bien nous… Est-ce que vous ne nous reconnaissez pas?…”

Il fallut tout expliquer, et dire pourquoi l’Alert était venu à la Dominique… uniquement pour la vieille négresse et son mari!… La preuve, c’est que la première visite avait été pour eux!… Et jusqu’à M. Horatio Patterson, qui, ne cachant point son émotion, serra cordialement les mains des deux vieillards!…

Alors les admirations de Kate pour “son enfant” de reprendre de plus belle! Comme il avait grandi!… Comme il était changé!… Quel beau garçon!… Elle l’avait bien reconnu tout de même!… Et le vieux qui hésitait, lui!… Elle l’attirait, dans ses bras… elle pleurait de joie et d’attendrissement.

Il y eut alors à donner des nouvelles de toute la famille Howard, le père, la mère, les frères, les sœurs!… Tout le monde allait bien.

On parlait souvent là-bas de Kate et de son mari?… On ne les oubliait ni l’un ni l’autre… Aussi John Howard leur remit-il à chacun un joli cadeau apporté tout exprès. Enfin, pendant la relâche de l’Alert, John Howard ne laisserait passer ni une soirée ni une matinée sans venir embrasser ces bonnes gens. Puis, après avoir accepté un petit verre de tafia, du rhum de la Jamaïque, on se sépara.

Les quelques excursions que John Howard et ses camarades effectuèrent aux environs de Portsmouth les amenèrent au pied du mont Diablotin, dont ils firent l’ascension. Du sommet, la vue s’étendait sur l’île entière. Assez éreinté, lorsqu’il s’assit sur sa pointe, le mentor crut devoir emprunter cette citation aux Géorgiques de Virgile:

… Velut stabuli custos in montibus olim considit scopulo…

Ainsi que le fit remarquer ce loustic de Tony Renault, à part que M. Patterson ne se trouvait point sur une véritable montagne, qu’il n’était pas un berger, un custos stabuli, la citation pouvait être admise.

Du haut du Diablotin les regards embrassaient une campagne bien cultivée, qui assure un important trafic de fruits, sans parler du soufre que l'île fournit en abondance. La culture du caféier, actuellement en progrès sensible, deviendra la principale richesse de la Dominique.

Le lendemain, les jeunes voyageurs visitèrent Ville-des-Roseaux, peuplée de cinq mille âmes, peu commerçante, d'aspect fort agréable, mais que le gouvernement anglais "a frappée de paralysie", pour employer l'expression en usage.

Le départ de l'Alert, on le sait, avait été fixé au lendemain, 26 août. Aussi, vers cinq heures, tandis que les jeunes touristes faisaient une dernière promenade sur le littoral au nord de la ville, John Howard alla-t-il revoir une dernière fois la vieille Kate.

Au moment où il prenait une des rues qui aboutissent au quai, il fut accosté par un homme d'une cinquantaine d'années, un marin à la retraite, qui lui dit, en montrant l'Alert au milieu du port:

"Un joli navire, mon jeune monsieur, et, pour un matelot, c'est plaisir de le regarder!

— En effet, répondit John Howard, navire aussi bon que joli, et qui vient de faire une heureuse traversée d'Europe aux Antilles.

— Oui! je sais… je sais, répondit le marin, comme je sais que vous êtes le fils de M. Howard, chez qui servaient la vieille Kate et son mari…

— Vous les connaissez?…

— Nous sommes voisins, monsieur John.

— Eh bien, je vais leur faire mes adieux, car nous partons demain…

— Demain… déjà?…

— Oui… Nous avons encore à visiter la Martinique, Sainte-Lucie, la Barbade…

— Je sais… je sais… je sais… Mais, dites-moi, monsieur John, qui commande l'Alert?…

— Le capitaine Paxton.

— Le capitaine Paxton?… répéta le matelot. Eh! je le connais… je le connais.

— Vous le connaissez?…

— Si Ned Butlar le connaît?… Je le crois bien!… Nous avons navigué ensemble sur le Northumberland dans les mers du sud… il y a une quinzaine d'années de cela… lorsqu'il n'était que second, un homme d'une quarantaine d'années, n'est-ce pas?…

— Environ, répondit John Howard.

— Un peu ramassé de taille?…

— Non, plutôt grand et fort…

— Les cheveux roux?…

— Non… noirs.

— C’est singulier!… déclara le matelot. Je me le rappelle pourtant comme si je le voyais…

— Eh bien, reprit John Howard, puisque vous connaissez le capitaine Paxton, allez le voir… Il sera heureux de serrer la main à un ancien compagnon de voyage…

— C’est ce que je ferai, monsieur John…

— Aujourd’hui alors, et même tout de suite… l’Alert doit partir demain dès la première heure…

— Merci pour votre conseil, monsieur John, et, certainement, je ne laisserai pas appareiller l’Alert sans avoir rendu visite au capitaine Paxton.”

Tous deux se séparèrent, et John Howard se dirigea vers le haut quartier de la ville.

Quant au marin, il sauta dans un canot et se fit conduire à bord du trois-mâts.

C’était là un sérieux danger pour Harry Markel et son équipage. Ce Ned Butlar connaissait le capitaine Paxton, puisqu’ils avaient navigué deux ans ensemble, et que dirait-il, que penserait-il, lorsqu’il se trouverait en présence d’Harry Markel, lequel, évidemment, n’avait aucune ressemblance avec l’ancien second du Northumberland.

Quand le matelot fut arrivé à l’échelle de tribord, Corty, qui se promenait sur le pont, intervint:

“Eh! camarade, cria-t-il, qu’est-ce que vous voulez?…

— Parler au capitaine Paxton.

— Vous le connaissez?… demanda vivement Corty, toujours sur le qui-vive.

— Si je le connais!… Nous avons fait campagne ensemble dans les mers du sud…

— Ah! vraiment… Et que lui voulez-vous, au capitaine Paxton?…

— Échanger un bout de conversation avec lui, avant qu'il parte… Ça fait toujours plaisir de se revoir, n'est-ce pas, camarade?…

— Comme vous dites!

— Alors je vais embarquer…

— Le capitaine Paxton n'est pas à bord en ce moment…

— Je l'attendrai…

— C'est inutile… Il ne doit revenir que très tard dans la soirée…

— Pas de chance! dit le matelot.

— Non… pas de chance!

— Mais… demain… avant que l'Alert ne lève l'ancre…

— Peut-être… si vous y tenez!…

— Certes… je tiens à voir le capitaine Paxton, autant qu'il tiendrait à me voir, s'il savait que je suis ici…

— Je n’en doute pas… répondit ironiquement Corty.

— Annoncez-lui, camarade, que Ned Butlar… Ned Butlar du Northumberland, est venu pour lui souhaiter le bonjour…

— Ce sera fait…

— Alors… à demain?…

— À demain!”

Et Ned Butlar, repoussant le canot, se fit ramener au quai.

Dès qu’il se fut éloigné, Corty se rendit à la cabine d’Harry Markel et le mit au courant.

“Il est de toute évidence que ce marin connaît le capitaine Paxton… dit-il.

— Et qu’il reviendra demain dans la matinée… ajouta Corty.

— Qu’il revienne!… Nous n’y serons plus…

— L’Alert ne doit partir qu’à neuf heures, Harry…

— L’Alert partira quand il devra partir!… répondit Harry Markel. Mais pas un mot de cette visite aux passagers…

— Entendu, Harry! N’importe, je donnerais ma part des primes pour avoir quitté ces parages, où il ne fait guère bon pour nous…

— Encore quinze jours de patience et de prudence, Corty, il n’en faut pas davantage!”

Lorsque M. Horatio Patterson et ses compagnons rentrèrent à bord, il était déjà dix heures. John Howard avait fait ses adieux à la vieille Kate et à son mari. S’il avait été bien et bien embrassé, s’il avait été chargé de bons souhaits pour la famille, on le croira sans peine.

Après une journée fatigante, les passagers éprouvaient un grand besoin de s’étendre sur leurs cadres et ils allaient se retirer dans les cabines, lorsque John Howard demanda s’il n’était pas venu un matelot du nom de Ned Butlar, qui désirait renouveler connaissance avec le capitaine Paxton.

“Oui… répondit Corty, mais le capitaine était à terre au bureau maritime…

— Alors ce Butlar reviendra demain, sans doute, avant le départ de l’Alert?…

— C’est convenu”, répondit Corty.

Un quart d’heure après, le carré retentissait des plus sonores ronflements qu’une bande de dormeurs éreintés eût jamais fait entendre, et parmi lesquels dominait le souffle barytonant de M. Patterson.

Les passagers n’entendirent donc rien du bruit qui se fit, lorsque, vers trois heures du matin, l’Alert manœuvra pour sortir de Portsmouth.

Et, six heures après, lorsqu’ils reparurent sur le pont, déjà à cinq ou six milles de la Dominique, Magnus Anders, Tony Renault, de s’écrier:

“Quoi… partis?…

— Et on a appareillé sans nous?… ajouta Tony Renault.

— Je craignais un changement de temps, répondit Harry Markel, et j’ai voulu profiter de la brise de terre.

— Bon! dit John Howard, et ce brave Butlar qui tenait tant à vous voir, capitaine Paxton…

— Oui… Butlar… je me rappelle… nous avons navigué ensemble, répondit Harry Markel… mais je ne pouvais attendre!…

— Le pauvre homme, dit John Howard, cela lui fera de la peine! Je ne sais, d’ailleurs, s’il vous aurait reconnu… Il faisait de vous un homme gros et court, avec une barbe rousse…

— Un vieux qui n’a plus de mémoire! se contenta d’observer Harry Markel.

— Ce que nous avons bien fait de déraper!… murmura Corty à l’oreille du maître d’équipage.

— Oui, répliqua John Carpenter, et en double… quand même il aurait fallu filer la chaîne par le bout!”

CHAPITRE IV

IV

La Martinique

Ce danger, Harry Markel venait d’y échapper. Par trois fois encore, à la Martinique, à Sainte-Lucie et à la Barbade, il y serait exposé. Pourrait-il toujours s’y soustraire?… Une chance extraordinaire l’avait accompagné pendant la de son existence de pirate jusqu’au jour où ses compagnons et lui furent arrêtés à bord de l’Halifax, puis s’était manifestée de nouveau avec l’évasion de la prison de Queenstown, avec la capture de l’Alert. Depuis lors, elle avait continué, elle continuait même par ce fait que Harry Markel avait pu éviter la rencontre de Ned Butlar. Quant au portrait, si différent du sien, que ce matelot avait fait du capitaine Paxton, il n’attachait à cela aucune importance. Les passagers n’y songeaient déjà plus. Il avait foi dans son étoile, il irait jusqu’au bout de son aventureuse et criminelle campagne.

Ce matin-là, on l’a dit, la Dominique, dont on n’apercevait que les dernières hauteurs, restait à cinq ou six milles dans le sud, et n’aurait plus même été visible, si la brise eût fraîchi.

La distance entre cette île et la Martinique est à peu près égale à celle qui sépare la Guadeloupe de la Dominique. Or, ses montagnes sont assez élevées, et, par beau temps, se voient d’une soixantaine de milles. Rien d’impossible à ce qu’elles fussent aperçues avant le coucher du soleil. Dans ce cas, dès le lendemain, l’Alert serait à Fort-de-France, la capitale, vers laquelle il se dirigeait.

Divisée en neuf cantons et vingt-neuf communes, l’île comprend les deux arrondissements de Saint-Pierre et de Fort-de-France.

Le ciel était magnifique, la mer resplendissante, tout imprégnée de rayons solaires. Pas un nuage ne voilait l’espace. À peine si l’on ressentait cette houle longue et régulière qui venait du large. Le baromètre se tenait au beau fixe.

Dans ces conditions, il était donc à supposer que l’Alert ne gagnerait pas plus de cinq à six milles à l’heure. Aussi Harry Markel fit-il établir les bonnettes du grand mât, du mât de misaine, les voiles d’étai, en un mot complète voilure d’un trois-mâts.

Tony Renault et Magnus Anders ne furent pas les derniers à grimper par les haubans, à gagner les hunes, en s’aidant des hampes de revers, sans même passer par le trou du chat, à se hisser jusqu’aux barres de perroquet, à pousser les bouts des bonnettes, tandis que leurs camarades s’occupèrent à les amurer, puis à raidir leurs écoutes.

En vérité, la manœuvre achevée, ces hardis garçons consentiraient-ils à redescendre sur le pont, et ne préféreraient-ils pas rester dans la mâture?

Sur la dunette, assis dans un confortable fauteuil d’osier doublé d’un moelleux coussin, le mentor paraissait fier de ses jeunes compagnons.

Non point qu’il fût sans inquiétude à les voir se promener sur les vergues, à gravir les enfléchures et qu’il négligeât de leur crier de bien se tenir. Enfin tout cela l’enchantait. Ah! si son directeur, M. Julian Ardagh, eût été là près de lui, s’ils avaient pu échanger quelques propos, quels pompeux éloges ils eussent faits des pensionnaires d’Antilian School! Et tout ce que M. Patterson aurait à raconter, à son retour, lorsqu’il remettrait le registre où figureraient les comptes de ce merveilleux voyage!

Et s’étonnera-t-on si, à un moment où Tony Renault et Magnus Anders atteignaient en haut des mâts, cette citation lui échappa en présence de John Carpenter:

“Sic itur ad astra…

— Qu’est-ce que ça veut dire, monsieur?… demanda le maître d’équipage.

— Ça veut dire qu’ils s’élèvent vers le ciel.

— Et qui a enfilé ces mots-là les uns au bout des autres?…

— Le divin Virgile.

— J’ai connu un individu de ce nom, un nègre, qui était soutier à bord des transatlantiques…

— Ce n’était pas lui, mon ami…

— Eh bien, tant mieux pour votre Virgile, car le mien a été pendu!”

Au cours de cette journée, l’Alert croisa plusieurs de ces navires qui font le cabotage entre les Antilles, mais il ne s’en approcha pas.

Ce que craignait alors Harry Markel, c’était d’être encalminé pendant quelques jours, ce qui eût retardé d’autant son arrivée à la Martinique.

Cependant, si la brise indiqua une tendance à calmir, elle ne tomba pas tout à fait avec le soir. Quoique faible, elle parut devoir se maintenir toute la nuit. Venant du nord-est, elle serait favorable à l’Alert, qui n’amena point ses hautes voiles, bien que cela se fasse d’ordinaire entre le coucher et le lever du soleil.

Ce fut vainement, avant que l’obscurité eût rempli l’espace, que les passagers cherchèrent à apercevoir la cime du mont Pelé, qui s’élève à treize cent cinquante-six mètres au-dessus du niveau de la mer. Aussi, vers neuf heures, regagnèrent-ils leurs cabines, dont les portes restèrent ouvertes à cause de la chaleur.

Jamais nuit ne leur avait paru plus tranquille, et, dès cinq heures du matin, tous étaient sur le pont.

Et alors Tony Renault de s’écrier, en montrant une hauteur vers le sud:

“Le mont Pelé, le voilà!… C’est lui… je le reconnais!…

— Tu le reconnais?… répliqua Roger Hinsdale, d’un ton qui marquait une certaine incrédulité…

— Sans doute!… Pourquoi aurait-il changé depuis cinq ans?… Tenez… les trois pitons du Carbet…

— Il faut avouer, Tony, que tu as de bons yeux…

— Excellents!… Je vous affirme que c’est le mont Pelé… qui n’est pas pelé du tout… Il est vert et boisé comme toutes les montagnes de mon île!… Et vous en verrez bien d’autres dans mon île… si nous gravissons la montagne du

Vauclin!… Et, que vous le veuillez ou non, il faudra bien admirer mon île… la plus belle des Antilles!”

On le laissa s’emballer, car il avait la riposte vive, ce pétulant garçon.

Toute exagération à part, Tony Renault ne s’aventurait pas en vantant la Martinique. Par sa superficie, cette île occupe le second rang de la chaîne antiliane, soit neuf cent quatre-vingt-sept kilomètres carrés, et ne compte pas moins de cent soixante-dix-sept mille habitants, soit dix mille blancs, quinze mille asiatiques, cent cinquante mille noirs et gens de couleur pour la plupart d’origine martiniquaise. Elle est entièrement montagneuse et couverte de magnifiques forêts jusqu’à ses plus hautes cimes. Quant au réseau hydrographique, nécessaire à la fertilité de son sol, il permet de lutter contre les chaleurs de la zone tropicale. La plupart de ses rivières sont navigables, et ses ports sont accessibles aux bâtiments de fort tonnage.

Pendant cette journée, la brise continua de souffler faiblement. Elle ne fraîchit un peu que dans l’après-midi, et les vigies relevèrent alors la pointe Macouba à l’extrémité septentrionale de la Martinique.

La nuit, vers une heure, le vent prit plus de force, et l’Alert, qui avait conservé toute sa voilure, put faire bonne route en contournant l’île par l’ouest.

Aux premières heures de l’aube apparut le morne Jacob, moins éloigné du centre que le mont Pelé, dont la cime se dégagea bientôt des basses vapeurs du matin.

Vers sept heures, une ville se montra sur le littoral presque à l’extrémité nord-ouest de l’île.

Tony Renault de s’écrier à ce moment:

“Saint-Pierre Martinique!”

Et il chanta à pleine voix le refrain de la vieille chanson française:

“C’est le pays qui m’a donné le jour!”

C’était à Saint-Pierre, en effet, qu’était né Tony Renault. Mais, en quittant la Martinique pour venir se fixer en France, sa famille n’y avait laissé aucun parent.

Fort-de-France, situé plus au sud sur le même littoral, à l’entrée de la baie de ce nom, après s’être primitivement appelé Fort-Roque, est la capitale de la Martinique. Cependant le commerce n’y a pas pris un développement aussi considérable qu’à Saint-Pierre, dont la population est de vingt-six mille habitants, celle de Fort-de-France étant moindre de deux cinquièmes. Les autres principales villes de la Martinique sont, sur la côte ouest, le bourg de Laurentin; plus au sud, le bourg du Saint-Esprit, le bourg du Diamant, le bourg du Menu et, à l’extrémité de l’île, le bourg de la Trinité.

À Saint-Pierre, le chef-lieu administratif de la colonie, les échanges ne sont pas aussi contrariés par les règlements militaires qu’à Fort-de-France, qui, avec les forts du Tribut et du Mouillage, puissamment armés, assure la défense de l’île1.

1 Il convient de rappeler ici le désastre qui, quelques années plus tard, allait frapper la Martinique, dans la matinée du 8 mai 1902; tremblement de terre et éruptions ont détruit une partie de l’île. Saint-Pierre, située à vingt-deux kilomètres de Fort-de-France, fut ravagée par les vapeurs et les cendres que vomissait le

Neuf heures du matin sonnaient, lorsque l’Alert vint jeter l’ancre dans la baie circulaire où s’ouvre le port. Au fond, la ville, qu’une petite rivière guéable divise en deux parties, est abritée contre les vents de l’est par une haute montagne.

Élysée Reclus rapporte volontiers ce que l’historien Dutertre a dit de Saint-Pierre, “une de ces villes que l’étranger n’oublie point. La façon d’être du pays est si agréable, la température si bonne, et l’on y vit dans une liberté si honnête que je n’ai pas vu un seul homme ni une seule femme, qui, après en être revenus, n’aient eu une grande passion d’y retourner”.

Et il est vraisemblable que Tony Renault éprouvait un peu de cette passion-là, car il se montrait plus agité, plus démonstratif que jamais. Ses camarades pouvaient compter sur lui pour leur faire les honneurs de son île natale. Que la relâche, d’après le programme, ne dût s’y cratère de la montagne Pelée. Des milliers d’habitants périrent par l’asphyxie due à l’inhalation de l’air chaud. D’ailleurs, l’île ne fut ravagée que du côté faisant face à la Mer des Caraïbes, qui est franchement volcanique. prolonger que quatre jours, peu importait! Avec de l’activité, le désir de tout voir et de bonnes jambes, sous la direction d’un guide tel que Tony Renault, les excursions succéderaient aux excursions, et s’étendraient jusqu’à la capitale de la Martinique. Ne point le faire, ce serait avoir parcouru la France sans visiter Paris, ou, comme le dit Tony Renault, “aller à Dieppe sans voir la mer”!

De tels projets exigeaient une complète liberté de mouvements. Il ne fallait pas s’astreindre à revenir chaque soir coucher dans sa cabine. On passerait la nuit où l’on se trouverait. Il en résulterait quelques dépenses, sans doute, mais l’économe d’Antilian School les surveillerait avec autant de soin qu’il mettrait à les inscrire sur son carnet. Et puis, en prévision de la prime que chacun des boursiers devait toucher à la Barbade, y avait-il lieu d'y regarder de si près?…

Le premier jour fut consacré à Saint-Pierre. Après avoir admiré du large l'aspect amphithéâtral de la ville, son heureuse disposition, au milieu des magnifiques bouquets de palmiers et autres arbres tropicaux, sur les pointes de la montagne qui lui sert d'arrière-plan, on visita l'intérieur, digne de l'extérieur. Peut-être, les maisons basses, peintes en jaune, n'ont-elles pas grand air; mais on a dû se résoudre à les rendre solides et sûres, à les prémunir contre les tremblements de terre, si fréquents aux Antilles, contre les ouragans formidables, tel celui de 1776 qui causa tant de désastres et étendit ses ravages à toute la surface de l'île.

Tony Renault n'oublia pas de faire à ses camarades les honneurs de la maison où il naissait, dix-sept ans auparavant, et qui était devenue un entrepôt de denrées coloniales.

Jusqu'en 1635, les Caraïbes furent les seuls habitants de la Martinique. À cette époque, le Français d'Esnambue, gouverneur de Saint-Christophe, qui vint s'y établir avec une centaine d'hommes, obligea les indigènes à se retirer dans les montagnes et au fond des bois. Toutefois, les Caraïbes n'entendaient pas être dépossédés sans résistance; ils firent appel aux Indiens des îles voisines et, au début, parvinrent chasser les étrangers. Mais ceux-ci, appelant des renforts, reprirent la campagne et, dans un dernier engagement, les indigènes perdirent sept à huit cents des leurs.

Une autre tentative fut encore faite par les Caraïbes pour reconquérir l'île, guerre de guets-apens et de surprises, d'assassinats isolés. On décida alors d'en finir avec cette redoutable race, et, après un massacre général, les Français demeurèrent maîtres de la Martinique.

À partir de cette époque, les travaux de culture furent conduits avec méthode et activité. Le coton, le roucou, le tabac, l’indigo, la canne à sucre, puis, dès la fin du XVIIe siècle, les cacaoyers, devinrent les principales richesses de l’île.

À ce propos, voici la petite histoire que raconta Tony Renault, et dont M. Patterson prit bonne note:

“En 1718, un ouragan, d’une extrême violence, détruisit tous les cacaoyers. Or, à Paris, le jardin botanique possédait quelques-uns de ces arbres qui lui venaient de Hollande. Le naturaliste

Desclieux fut chargé d’apporter à la Martinique deux rejetons de cacaoyers. Pendant la traversée, l’eau vint presque entièrement à manquer. Mais, sur les quelques gouttes de sa ration, Desclieux en attribua une part à ses rejetons, qui, arrivés à bon port, reconstituèrent les plantations de l’île.

— N’est-ce pas ce que Jussieu a fait pour le cèdre que l’on admire au Jardin des Plantes de Paris?… demanda Louis Clodion.

— Oui… et c’est beau… c’est très beau, déclara M. Patterson, et la France est une grande nation!”

Cependant, en 1794, la Martinique tomba au pouvoir des Anglais, et elle ne fut définitivement restituée qu’au traité de 1816.

C’est alors que la colonie se trouva aux prises avec une situation que rendit très difficile la supériorité numérique des esclaves par rapport à leurs maîtres. Une révolte éclata, provoquée surtout par les nègres marrons. Il fallut recourir à l’affranchissement et trois mille esclaves furent libérés. Ces gens de couleur jouirent du complet exercice de leurs droits civils et politiques. Dès

1828, on comptait dix-neuf mille nègres libres à la Martinique, et beaucoup d'entre eux, travaillant pour leur propre compte, devinrent propriétaires d'une partie du sol.

Le lendemain, les touristes firent l'ascension du mont Pelé, à travers les épaisses forêts qui tapissent ses flancs. Et si cette ascension ne laissa pas d'occasionner quelque fatigue, Tony Renault et ses camarades en furent récompensés. La vue s'étendait sur l'île entière, découpée comme une feuille d'arbre, qui semblait flotter à la surface de cette mer si bleue des Antilles. Vers le sud-est, un étroit isthme, mesurant à peine deux kilomètres entre les marécages riverains, réunit ces deux parties de la Martinique. La première projette sur l'Atlantique la presqu'île des Caravelles, entre le havre de la Trinité et la baie du Gabion. La seconde, très accidentée, se relève jusqu'à l'altitude de cinq cents mètres avec le Vauclin. Quant aux autres mornes du Robert, des François, de Constant, de la Plaine, ils accentuent pittoresquement le relief de l'île. Enfin, du côté du littoral, vers le sud-ouest, s'arrondit l'anse du Diamant, et, au sud-est, se dessine la pointe des

Salines, qui forme comme le pédoncule de cette feuille flottante.

Et leurs regards furent si charmés que les jeunes voyageurs eurent d'abord l'admiration muette. M. Horatio Patterson lui-même ne retrouva pas dans sa mémoire un seul vers latin pour formuler son admiration.

“Qu'est-ce que je vous avais dit?… Qu'est-ce que je vous avais dit?…” répétait Tony Renault.

Du haut de ce mont Pelé, on pouvait constater la fertilité de l’île, qui est en même temps l’une des terres les plus peuplées du globe, soit cent soixante-dix-huit habitants par kilomètre carré.

Si l’exploitation des cacaoyers et des bois de teinture a conservé son importance, la production du café s’est beaucoup amoindrie et va presque jusqu’à l’abandon. Quant aux champs de cannes à sucre, ils n’occupent pas moins de quarante mille hectares et, annuellement, produisent pour dix-huit à vingt millions de sucre, rhum et tafia.

Bref, l’importation se chiffre par vingt-deux millions de francs, l’exportation par vingt et un millions, et près de dix-neuf cents navires impriment au commerce de la Martinique un mouvement considérable.

Du reste, l’île est desservie par plusieurs chemins de fer industriels et agricoles qui mettent les ports en communication avec les usines centrales. En outre, elle possède un réseau de voies carrossables dont la longueur dépasse neuf cents kilomètres.

Le lendemain, 30 août, par un temps magnifique, sur une route bien entretenue, les touristes se rendirent à Fort-de-France. Un break contenait toute cette troupe de joyeux garçons, au teint fortement hâlé par les brises de l’Atlantique, et dont la gaieté était débordante.

Après un substantiel déjeuner dans un bon hôtel, ils parcoururent la capitale de l’île, assise au fond de la grande baie du même nom, et que domine la masse imposante du Fort-Royal. Il y eut à visiter l’arsenal et le port militaire, qui enlèvent à cette cité tout caractère industriel ou commercial. Là, comme en Amérique, comme en Europe, il est difficile que l’esprit militaire et l’esprit civil progressent parallèlement. Aussi, grande différence entre Saint-Pierre et Fort-de-France.

Cette ville n’a point échappé aux deux fléaux qui occasionnent tant de ravages dans les Indes Occidentales. Éprouvée par le tremblement de terre de 1839, qui fit de nombreuses victimes1, elle s’est relevée, et, actuellement, de superbes promenades s’allongent jusque sur les collines environnantes. Il fallait voir la bande bruyante déambuler à travers cette magnifique allée de la Savane qui aboutit au fort Saint-Louis, puis faire le tour de la place horizontale, plantée de palmiers, au centre de laquelle se dresse la statue en marbre blanc de l’impératrice Joséphine, la créole couronnée, dont le souvenir est resté si cher à la Martinique.

Après la ville, les environs, et c’est à peine si Tony Renault laissait à ses camarades le temps de respirer. Ils durent le suivre sur une hauteur voisine au camp de Balata, puis à ce sanatorium

1 Un incendie en a détruit la plus grande partie en 1890. affecté aux troupes qui vont s’y acclimater en arrivant d’Europe. Enfin, l’excursion s’étendit jusqu’aux sources thermales des environs. Et, en passant, il faut remarquer que, jusqu’alors, si nombreux que soient les serpents à la Martinique, le mentor et ses compagnons n’avaient pas rencontré un seul de ces venimeux reptiles.

Le jeune cicérone ne fit même pas grâce à ses camarades d’une excursion au bourg de Lamentin à travers les forêts qui recouvrent cette partie de l’île. Et ce fut à cette occasion que se produisit un incident digne d’être rapporté avec quelque détail, car rien de ce qui concerne M. Horatio Patterson ne saurait être tenu dans l’ombre.

Le 31 août, la veille du jour fixé pour le départ de l’Alert, les excursionnistes, après une bonne nuit de repos, se dirigèrent vers l’isthme qui réunit les deux moitiés de l’île. La route se fit gaiement, comme toujours. Les voitures avaient emporté quelques provisions; chacun ayant sa gourde pleine, on déjeunerait dans les bois voisins de l'isthme.

Après un trajet de quelques heures, Tony

Renault et les autres descendirent de voiture, s'engagèrent sous bois et atteignirent, à un demi-kilomètre de là, l'orée d'une clairière qui leur parut toute désignée pour une halte, avant de gagner plus profondément à travers la forêt.

M. Patterson, moins ingambe, était resté d'une centaine de pas en arrière. On ne s'en préoccupa pas, et, assurément, il ne tarderait pas à rejoindre.

Cependant, après dix minutes d'attente, comme le mentor ne reparaissait pas, Louis Clodion, se relevant, appela d'une voix forte:

“Monsieur Patterson!… Par ici, monsieur Patterson!”

Aucune réponse de l'absent, qu'on n'apercevait pas entre les arbres.

“Est-ce qu'il s'est égaré?… demanda Roger Hinsdale, en se levant à son tour.

— Il ne peut être loin…”, répondit Axel Wickborn.

Et, alors, tous de crier ensemble:

“Monsieur Patterson… monsieur Patterson!”

Pris d'une certaine anxiété, les jeunes garçons décidèrent de se mettre à la recherche du mentor. La forêt était assez épaisse pour qu'il fût possible, et, par là même, imprudent de s'y égarer. Et puis, si les fauves ne sont pas à craindre, puisqu'on n'en rencontre pas aux Antilles, on risque de se trouver inopinément en présence de quelque redoutable ophidien, un de ces trigonocéphales dont la morsure est mortelle.

Véritablement, il y eut lieu d’être très inquiet, lorsque les recherches poursuivies pendant une demi-heure n’eurent donné aucun résultat. En vain le nom de M. Patterson avait-il été cent fois lancé en toutes directions… Aucune trace de M. Patterson.

Tous étaient arrivés au plus profond de la forêt, lorsqu’ils aperçurent une cabane, sorte de pavillon de chasse, enfouie sous les arbres, au milieu d’un inextricable entrelacement de lierres.

Était-ce là, et pour un motif ou un autre, que M. Patterson avait cherché refuge? En tout cas, la cabane était fermée et sa porte avait été assujettie extérieurement par une barre de bois.

“Il ne peut être là… dit Niels Harboe.

— Voyons toujours”, dit Magnus Anders.

La barre fut retirée, la porte ouverte.

La cabane était vide. Elle ne contenait que quelques bottes d’herbe sèche, un couteau de chasse dans sa gaine accroché à l’une des parois, un carnier, plusieurs peaux de quadrupèdes et d’oiseaux pendues dans un coin.

Louis Clodion et Roger Hinsdale, qui étaient entrés dans cette cabane, en sortirent presque aussitôt aux cris de leurs camarades.

“Le voilà… le voilà!” répétaient-ils.

En effet, à vingt pas en arrière, au pied d’un arbre, M. Patterson, étendu tout de son long, le chapeau à terre, la figure convulsée, les bras contractés, présentait l’apparence d’un homme qui n’a plus un souffle de vie.

Louis Clodion, John Howard, Albertus Leuwen, se précipitèrent vers M. Patterson… Son cœur battait… il n’était pas mort…

“Que lui est-il arrivé?… s’écriait Tony Renault. Est-ce qu’il a été mordu par un serpent?…”

Oui, peut-être M. Patterson avait-il été aux prises avec un de ces trigonocéphales, ces “fers de lance” si communs à la Martinique et à deux autres des petites Antilles. Ces dangereux reptiles, dont quelques-uns ont six pieds de long, ne diffèrent que par la couleur de leur peau et se confondent facilement avec les racines entre lesquelles ils se cachent. Il est donc difficile d’éviter leurs attaques aussi rapides que soudaines.

Mais, enfin, puisque M. Patterson respirait, il fallait tout faire pour qu’il reprit connaissance. Louis Clodion, écartant ses vêtements, s’assura qu’il ne portait aucune trace de morsure sur le corps. Dès lors, comment donc expliquer qu’il se trouvait en cet état, l’épouvante encore peinte sur le visage?…

On lui releva la tête, on l’appuya avec précaution contre un arbre, on lui bassina les tempes avec l’eau fraîche d’un rio qui coulait vers le marécage, on lui introduisit quelques gouttes de rhum entre les lèvres.

Ses yeux se rouvrirent enfin, et de sa bouche s’échappèrent ces mots presque inarticulés:

“Le serpent… le serpent?…

— Monsieur Patterson… monsieur Patterson… répondit Louis Clodion, en lui prenant les mains.

— Le serpent… est-il en fuite?…

— Quel serpent?…

— Celui que j’ai aperçu au milieu des branches de cet arbre…

— Quelles branches?… Quel arbre?…

— Voyez… là… là… Prenez garde!…”

Bien que M. Patterson ne fît entendre que des phrases incohérentes, on finit par comprendre qu’il s’était trouvé en face d’un énorme reptile, enroulé à la fourche d’un arbre… qui le fascinait comme un oiseau… Il résistait… il résistait… mais le serpent l’attirait malgré lui, et, quand il en fut à le toucher, poussé par l’instinct de la défensive, il le frappa de son bâton au moment où l’horrible bête allait s’élancer!… Maintenant, qu’est-il devenu, ce serpent?… A-t-il été tué?… Ne se glisse-t-il pas sous les herbes… latet anugis in herba?”

Les jeunes garçons rassurèrent M. Patterson. Non… aucune trace de serpent…

“Si… si!…” s’écria-t-il.

Il venait de se redresser, et sa main tendue:

“Là… là…” répétait-il d’une voix épouvantée.

Tous les regards se portèrent du côté qu’indiquait M. Patterson, qui criait:

“Je le vois… je le vois!”

En effet, de l’une des basses branches d’un arbre, pendait le corps d’un trigonocéphale de la plus grande espèce, les yeux brillants encore, la langue fourchue hors de la gueule, mais flasque, immobile, retenu seulement par sa queue, et ne donnant plus signe de vie.

Décidément, le coup de bâton de M. Patterson avait été heureux. Il fallait qu’il l’eût asséné avec une rare vigueur pour tuer un reptile de cette taille. Il est vrai, après ce coup si violent, M. Patterson ne savait plus ce qui s’était passé… et il était tombé évanoui au pied de l’arbre.

Le triomphateur n’en fut pas moins félicité, et on ne s’étonnera pas qu’il voulût emporter l’objet de son triomphe à bord de l’Alert, dans l’intention de le faire empailler à l’une des prochaines relâches.

Aussitôt John Howard, Magnus Anders et Niels Harboe de décrocher le serpent, qui fut ramené à la clairière. Là les touristes se restaurèrent copieusement, en buvant à la santé de M. Patterson, puis ils allèrent visiter l’isthme. Trois heures plus tard, ils remontèrent dans leurs voitures, où le serpent fut déposé, et rentrèrent à Saint-Pierre vers huit heures du soir.

Lorsque les passagers eurent embarqué, John Carpenter et Corty firent hisser à bord et placer dans le carré le superbe ophidien sur lequel M. Patterson ne cessait de jeter des regards de terreur et de satisfaction. Quel récit de cette aventure il ferait à Mrs Patterson, et quelle place d’honneur, dans la bibliothèque d’Antilian School, on réserverait à ce remarquable et terrifiant échantillon des trigonocéphales de la Martinique! C’est en ces termes que devait s’exprimer le mentor dans sa prochaine lettre à M. Julian Ardagh.

Après une journée si bien remplie — dies notunda lapillo, ainsi que le dit Horace et le redit Horatio, — il n’y avait plus qu’à se refaire, d’abord par un bon dîner, ensuite par un bon sommeil, en attendant le départ du lendemain.

C’est ainsi que les choses se passèrent. Toutefois, avant de rentrer dans sa cabine, ne voilà-t-il pas que Tony Renault, prenant ses camarades à part, leur dit, en ayant soin de ne point être entendu de M. Patterson:

“Eh bien… elle est drôle, celle-là!…

— Qu’est-ce qui est drôle?… demanda Hubert Perkins.

— La découverte que je viens de faire…

— Et qu’as-tu découvert?…

— Qu’il ne sera pas nécessaire de faire empailler le serpent de M. Patterson…

— Et pourquoi?…

— Parce qu’il l’est déjà!”

Rien de plus vrai, et c’est ce que venait de constater Tony Renault en manipulant l’animal. Oui! ce serpent n’était qu’un trophée de chasse enroulé aux branches de l’arbre, près de la cabane!… C’était un serpent déjà mort qu’avait tué l’intrépide M. Patterson!…

Mais il fut convenu qu’on le ferait soi-disant empailler chez un préparateur de Sainte-Lucie pour ne pas chagriner l’excellent homme et lui laisser tout le bénéfice de sa victoire!

Le lendemain, au point du jour, l’Alert leva l’ancre, et, dans la matinée, les passagers avaient perdu de vue les hauteurs de l’île.

On a pu dire de la Martinique que “c’est le pays des revenants”, puisqu’on a toujours l’envie d’y revenir, et peut-être l’un ou l’autre des pensionnaires d’Antilian School y songeait-il, sans se douter du sort qui les attendait tous!

CHAPITRE V

V

Sainte-Lucie

La traversée entre la Martinique et Sainte-Lucie s'effectua avec autant de régularité que de rapidité. Le vent soufflait du nord-est en fraîche brise, et l'Alert, tout dessus, enleva dans la journée les quatre-vingts milles qui séparent Saint-Pierre de Castries, le principal port de l'île anglaise, sans avoir changé ses amures.

Toutefois, Harry Markel, ne devant arriver en vue de Sainte-Lucie qu'à la tombée du jour, comptait mettre en panne pour donner dans le chenal au lever du soleil.

Pendant les premières heures de la matinée, les plus hauts sommets de la Martinique se montraient encore. Le mont Pelé, que Tony Renault avait salué à son arrivée, reçut de lui un dernier adieu.

Le port de Castries se présente sous belle apparence entre d'imposantes falaises. C'est une sorte de vaste cirque dans lequel la mer a fait irruption. Les navires, même de fort tonnage, y trouvent des mouillages très sûrs. La ville, bâtie en amphithéâtre, étage gracieusement ses maisons jusqu'aux crêtes environnantes. Elle est, ainsi que la plupart des villes de l'Antilie, orientée au couchant, de manière à être abritée contre les vents du large et les plus violentes perturbations atmosphériques.

On ne s'étonnera pas que Roger Hinsdale regardât son île comme très supérieure à toutes les autres du groupe. Ni la Martinique ni la Guadeloupe ne lui paraissaient dignes d’une comparaison. Ce jeune Anglais, tout rempli de la morgue britannique, d’attitude un peu hautaine, excipait à toute occasion de sa nationalité, ce qui faisait sourire ses camarades. À bord, toutefois, il ne laissait pas d’être soutenu par John Howard et Hubert Perkins, moins “britannisés” que lui, sans doute. Mais, lorsque le sang anglo-saxon coule dans les veines, il faut admettre que ses globules ont des vertus spéciales, et ne pas autrement s’en étonner.

Du reste, à l’exemple de Louis Clodion et de Tony Renault, et peut-être par un sentiment chez lui très naturel, il se promettait de faire les honneurs de Sainte-Lucie, où ses parents avaient occupé une haute situation parmi les notables de l’île.

D’ailleurs, la famille Hinsdale y possédait encore des propriétés importantes, plantations et sucreries, des établissements agricoles en état de grande prospérité. Ces propriétés étaient administrées pour son compte par un gérant, M. Edward Falkes, qui, prévenu de la prochaine arrivée du jeune héritier des Hinsdale, devait se mettre à sa disposition pour toute la durée de la relâche.

Il a été dit que Harry Markel ne chercherait pas à entrer de nuit dans le port. Aussi, lorsque la mer fut étale, avant que le jusant commençât à se faire sentir, alla-t-il mouiller à l’intérieur d’une petite crique, afin de ne point être entraîné au large.

Le matin venu, Harry Markel vit qu’il serait nécessaire d’attendre quelques heures pour appareiller. La brise étant tombée après minuit, elle reprendrait sans doute de l’ouest, lorsque le soleil aurait atteint quelques degrés au-dessus de l’horizon.

Néanmoins, dès l’aube, Roger Hinsdale, le premier, M. Patterson, le dernier, tous apparaissaient sur la dunette afin de respirer un air plus frais que celui des cabines. Ils avaient hâte de contempler en pleine lumière ce littoral entrevu la veille à travers les ombres du soir. Et, s’ils n’avaient connu l’histoire de Sainte-Lucie, c’est qu’ils n’auraient pas écouté Roger Hinsdale avec l’attention qu’y mit le mentor.

De fait, il faut bien l’avouer, l’histoire de Sainte-Lucie ne différait guère de celle des autres îles des Indes Occidentales.

Après avoir été habitée par les Caraïbes, Sainte-Lucie, déjà livrée aux travaux de culture, fut découverte par Christophe Colomb à une date qui n’est pas plus précisée que celle à laquelle arrivèrent les premiers colons. Ce qui est certain, c’est que les Espagnols n’y fondèrent aucun établissement avant l’année 1639. Quant aux Anglais, ils n’en gardèrent la possession que durant dix-huit mois, au milieu du XVIIe siècle.

Cependant, lorsque les Caraïbes furent emmenés par eux de la Dominique, ainsi que cela a été mentionné, les îles voisines se révoltèrent. En 1640, les indigènes fanatisés se jetèrent sur la colonie naissante. La plupart des colons furent assassinés, et seuls échappèrent au massacre ceux qui purent s’embarquer et fuir.

Dix ans après quarante Français, conduits par un certain Rousselan, homme de résolution, vinrent s’établir à Sainte-Lucie. Rousselan épousa même une Indienne, s’attacha les indigènes par son intelligence, son habileté, et, pendant quatre ans, jusqu’à sa mort, assura la tranquillité du pays.

Les colons qui lui succédèrent se montrèrent moins habiles. À force de vexations et d’injustices, ils provoquèrent les représailles des Caraïbes, qui se vengèrent par des tueries et des pillages. Les Anglais jugèrent alors l’heure favorable à une intervention. Flibustiers et aventuriers envahirent Sainte-Lucie, qui put espérer retrouver le calme au traité d’Utrecht, par lequel l’île fut déclarée neutre.

“Enfin, demanda Niels Harboe, est-ce depuis cette époque que Sainte-Lucie appartient aux Anglais?…

— Oui et non, répondit Roger Hinsdale.

— Je dis non, précisa Louis Clodion, qui avait lu tout ce qui concernait cette île des Antilles où devait relâcher l’Alert. Non, car, après le traité d’Utrecht, la concession fut donnée au maréchal d’Estrées, qui y envoya des troupes en 1718 pour protéger la colonie française.

— Sans doute, répliqua Roger Hinsdale. Toutefois, sur les réclamations de l’Angleterre, cette concession fut annulée au profit du duc de Montagne…

— D’accord, riposta Louis Clodion; mais, sur de nouvelles réclamations de la France, cette concession fut également annulée…

— Et qu’importait puisque les colons anglais y restèrent?…

— S’ils y restèrent, il n’en est pas moins vrai qu’au traité de Paris de 1763, la souveraineté pleine et entière de cette colonie fut attribuée à la France!”

C’était la vérité, et Roger Hinsdale, très résolu à défendre sa cause, dut le reconnaître. Puis, pendant la période qui suivit, Sainte-Lucie vit sa prospérité s’accroître avec le nombre des établissements fondés par les colons voisins de Grenade, de Saint-Vincent, de la Martinique. En 1709, l’île comptait près de treize mille habitants, esclaves compris, et, en 1772, plus de quinze mille.

Toutefois, Sainte-Lucie n’en avait pas fini avec les puissances qui se disputaient sa possession, et Roger Hinsdale put ajouter:

“En 1779, l’île fut reprise par le général Abercrombie et repassa sous la domination britannique…

— Je le sais, répondit Louis Clodion, qui s’entêtait de son côté, mais le traité de 1783 la rendit encore une fois à la France…

— Pour redevenir anglaise en 1794, déclara Roger Hinsdale, qui ripostait date pour date.

— Allons!… s’écria Tony Renault, tiens bon, Louis, et dis-nous que Sainte-Lucie a revu flotter le pavillon français…

— Assurément, Tony, puisqu’elle est reconnue colonie française en 1802…

— Pas pour longtemps, affirma Roger Hinsdale. À la rupture de la paix d’Amiens, en 1803, elle fut restituée à l’Angleterre, et, cette fois, définitivement, il faut le croire…

— Oh! définitivement!… s’écria Tony Renault en faisant une pirouette assez dédaigneuse.

— Décidément, Tony, répondit Roger Hinsdale, qui s’échauffait et voulut mettre dans sa réponse toute l’ironie possible, est-ce que tu aurais la prétention de la reprendre à toi tout seul?…

— Pourquoi pas?…” répliqua Tony Renault en se donnant des attitudes de conquérant.

Il est certain que Niels Harboe, Axel Wickborn, Albertus Anders, n’avaient aucun intérêt dans cette discussion entre Anglais et

Français. Ni le Danemark ni la Hollande n’avaient jamais réclamé une part de cette colonie si disputée. Et, peut-être, Magnus Anders aurait-il pu les mettre d’accord en la réclamant pour la Suède, qui ne possédait plus même un îlot dans l’archipel.

Mais, comme la discussion menaçait de s’aggraver, M. Horatio Patterson intervint par un opportun quos ego renouvelé de Virgile, et que n’aurait point désavoué Neptune.

Puis, plus doucement:

“Du calme, mes jeunes amis, dit-il. Est-ce que vous allez partir en guerre?… La guerre, ce fléau humain!… la guerre… Bella matribus detestata; ce qui signifie…

— En bon français, s’écria Tony Renault, “détestables belles-mères!”

Et, sur cette repartie, toute la bande d’éclater de rire, tandis que le mentor se voilait la face.

Bref, tout cela finit par un serrement de main, un peu contraint de la part de Roger Hinsdale, très franc de la part de Louis Clodion. Puis il fut stipulé entre les deux nations que Tony Renault ne ferait aucune tentative pour arracher Sainte-Lucie à la domination anglaise. Seulement, ce que Louis Clodion aurait eu le droit d’ajouter, les passagers de l’Alert allaient bientôt le constater de visu et de auditu, c’est que, si Sainte-Lucie arbore actuellement le pavillon britannique, elle n’en conserve pas moins et de façon indélébile la marque française par ses moeurs, ses traditions, ses instincts. Débarqués à Sainte-Lucie, Louis Clodion et Tony Renault seraient fondés à croire qu’ils foulaient le sol de la Désirade, de la Guadeloupe ou de la Martinique.

Un peu après neuf heures, la brise se leva et, ainsi que l’espérait Harry Markel, elle venait du large. Bien qu’il s’agisse de l’ouest, cette expression est juste en ce qui concerne Sainte-Lucie, qui n’est couverte ni au levant ni au couchant. Absolument isolée entre la mer des Antilles et l’océan Atlantique, elle est exposée des deux côtés aux violences des vents et de la houle.

L’Alert fit aussitôt ses préparatifs d’appareillage. Dès que l’ancre fut remontée au bossoir, le trois-mâts, sous son grand hunier, sa misaine, sa brigantine, prit de l’erre pour quitter ce mouillage et contourner l’une des pointes qui ferment le port de Castries.

Ce port a nom le Carénage, il est l’un des meilleurs de l’archipel antilian. Ainsi s’explique l’entêtement de la France et de l’Angleterre à s’en disputer la possession. Dès cette époque, on s’occupait d’achever la construction des quais, d’établir les cales et les appontements, de manière à satisfaire tous les besoins du service maritime. Il n’est pas douteux que le Carénage ne soit destiné à un grand avenir. C’est là, en effet, que les steamers viennent s’approvisionner de charbons importés d’Angleterre, dans les vastes entrepôts, incessamment ravitaillés par les navires du Royaume-Uni.

Quant à Sainte-Lucie, si elle n’égale pas en étendue superficielle les plus grandes des îles du Vent, elle ne comprend pas moins six cent quatorze kilomètres carrés, et sa population se chiffre par quarante-cinq mille habitants, dont cinq mille figurent au compte de Castries, sa capitale.

Sans doute, Roger Hinsdale eût été heureux que la relâche se fût prolongée plus de temps que dans les autres Antilles déjà visitées. Il aurait voulu montrer l’île en détail à ses camarades. Mais le programme du voyage ne lui accordait que trois jours, et il fallait s’y conformer.

D’ailleurs, il ne s’y trouvait plus aucun membre de la famille Hinsdale définitivement installée à Londres. Toutefois les propriétés qu’elle y possédait étaient considérables, et il allait être là comme un jeune landlord qui vient parcourir son domaine.

Après que l’Alert eut mouillé au Carénage, vers dix heures, Roger Hinsdale et ses camarades, accompagnés de M. Patterson, se firent mettre à terre.

La ville leur sembla proprement entretenue, avec des places spacieuses, des rues larges, des ombrages toujours si désirables sous ce climat brûlant des Antilles. Toutefois ils ressentirent cette impression dont il a été parlé plus haut: elle leur parut plus française qu’anglaise.

Aussi Tony Renault ne put retenir cette observation que Roger Hinsdale accueillit avec un certain dédain:

“Décidément… nous sommes en France… ici!”

Les passagers avaient été reçus à l’appontement par le gérant qui devait les guider pendant leurs excursions. M. Edward Falkes ne négligerait pas de leur faire admirer les superbes plantations de la famille, principalement ces champs de cannes si renommés à Sainte-Lucie, et dont les productions rivalisent avec celles de Saint-Christophe, où se récolte le meilleur sucre de l’Antilie.

Dans la colonie, le chiffre des blancs était alors assez limité, à peine un millier. Les gens de couleur et les noirs l’occupaient en majorité, leur nombre s’étant surtout accru depuis l’abandon des travaux du canal de Panama, qui les laissa sans ouvrage.

L’ancienne habitation Hinsdale, où demeurait

M. Edward Falkes, était vaste et confortable. Située à l’extrémité de la ville, elle pouvait aisément loger les passagers de l’Alert. Roger, qui tenait à en faire les honneurs, leur proposa de s’y installer pendant la durée de la relâche. Chacun aurait sa chambre et M. Patterson occuperait la plus belle de toutes. Il va de soi que les repas seraient pris en commun dans la grande salle à manger, et que les voitures du domaine seraient à la disposition des touristes.

La proposition de Roger Hinsdale fut acceptée avec empressement, car, en dépit de sa morgue originelle, le jeune Anglais était généreux et serviable, bien qu’il agît toujours avec une certaine ostentation vis-à-vis de ses camarades.

Du reste, s’il ressentait quelque jalousie, c’était plus particulièrement envers Louis Clodion. À Antilian School, toujours rivaux, ils se disputaient les premières places. On n’a point oublié qu’ils étaient arrivés tous deux en tête du concours pour les bourses de voyage, “dead heat”, comme on dit sur les champs de course; ex aequo, — disait Tony Renault, — ce qu’il traduisait par “le même cheval” en jouant sur les mots equus et aequus, au grand scandale du susceptible mentor.

Dès le premier jour, les excursions commencèrent à travers les plantations. Les forêts superbes de cette île, l'une des plus salubres des Antilles, n'en couvrent pas moins des quatre cinquièmes. On fit l'ascension du morne Fortuné, haut de deux cent trente-quatre mètres, sur lequel sont établies les casernes, des mornes Asabot et du Chazeau, — rien que des noms français, on le voit, — et où est installé le sanatorium. Puis, vers le centre, les touristes visitèrent les Aiguilles de Sainte-Alousie, cratères endormis qui pourraient bien se réveiller un jour, car les eaux des étangs voisins s'y maintiennent en ébullition constante.

Ce soir-là, de retour à l'habitation, Roger Hinsdale dit à M. Patterson:

"À Sainte-Lucie, il faut aussi se défier des trigonocéphales comme à la Martinique… Il y a des serpents dans notre île… et non moins dangereux…

— Je n'en suis plus à les craindre, déclara M. Patterson, qui prit une attitude superbe, et je vais même faire empailler le mien pendant notre relâche!…

— Vous avez raison!…" répondit Tony Renault, qui eut peine à garder son sérieux.

Aussi, le lendemain, M. Falkes fit-il porter le terrible reptile chez un naturaliste de Castries auquel, après l'avoir pris à part, Tony Renault expliqua ce dont il s'agissait. Le serpent était empaillé déjà et depuis de longues années… On n'en voulait rien dire à M. Patterson… La veille du départ, l'empailleur ferait rapporter le serpent à bord de l'Alert.

Précisément, le soir même, avant de se mettre au lit, M. Patterson écrivit une seconde lettre à Mrs Patterson. Que, de sa plume, nombre de citations d’Horace, de Virgile ou d’Ovide eussent coulé sur le papier, on ne saurait en être surpris, et d’ailleurs l’excellente dame y était habituée.

Cette lettre, qui partirait le lendemain par le courrier d’Europe, rapportait avec sa scrupuleuse exactitude les détails de ce merveilleux voyage.

M. Patterson, plus précis que dans sa première lettre, relatait les moindres incidents, accompagnés de réflexions toutes personnelles. Il racontait comment s’était faite l’heureuse traversée du Royaume-Uni aux Indes occidentales, comment il était parvenu à dompter le mal de mer, quelle consommation il avait faite de ces noyaux de cerises dont Mrs Patterson l’avait si intelligemment pourvu. Il parlait des réceptions à Saint-Thomas, à Sainte-Croix, à Saint-Martin, à Antigoa, à la Guadeloupe, à la Dominique, à la Martinique, à Sainte-Lucie, en attendant celle que leur réservait cette généreuse et magnanime Mrs Kethlen Seymour à la Barbade. Il prévoyait que la traversée de retour s’effectuerait aussi dans les conditions les plus favorables. Non! pas de collisions, pas de naufrages à craindre!… L’océan Atlantique serait clément aux passagers de l’Alert, et les outres d’Éole ne videraient pas sur eux le souffle des tempêtes!… Mrs Patterson n’aurait donc point à ouvrir le testament que son époux avait cru devoir libeller avant le départ, ni à profiter des autres dispositions si prévoyantes qui avaient été prises en vue d’une éternelle séparation… Lesquelles?… c’est ce que ce couple si original était seul à connaître.

Puis M. Patterson narrait la grande excursion à l’isthme de la Martinique, l’apparition du trigonocéphale entre les branches d’un arbre, la violence du coup qu’il avait porté à ce monstre, monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui la lumière n’avait pas été enlevée, mais la vie!… Et maintenant, bourré de paille, les yeux ardents, la gueule ouverte, dardant sa triple langue ophidienne, il n’en était pas moins des plus inoffensifs!… On voit l’effet que produirait ce superbe reptile lorsqu'il serait en bonne place dans la bibliothèque d'Antilian School.

Il convient d'ajouter, entre parenthèses, que les dessous de cette affaire ne devaient jamais être révélés. Le secret en fut religieusement gardé, même par Tony Renault, bien que l'envie de tout dire dût plus d'une fois lui venir aux lèvres. Et la gloire que l'intrépide mentor avait acquise, en cette mémorable rencontre, avec un serpent empaillé, resterait entière!

M. Patterson terminait cette longue lettre par un éloge bien appuyé, bien senti, du capitaine de l'Alert et de son équipage. Il n'avait qu'à se louer de l'excellent steward auquel était confié le service du carré, et dont il entendait récompenser les soins par une haute gratification. Quant au capitaine Paxton, jamais chef de navire, ni dans la marine de l'État ni dans la marine de commerce, n'avait mieux mérité d'être appelé Dominus secundum Deum, le maître après Dieu!

Enfin, après avoir tendrement embrassé Mrs Patterson, M. Patterson mettait, sous les dernières lignes de la lettre, cette signature à paraphes compliqués, qui dénotait chez ce digne homme un véritable talent calligraphique.

Ce serait le lendemain matin seulement que les touristes rentreraient à bord vers huit heures. Ils passèrent donc cette soirée dans l'habitation dont Roger Hinsdale tenait à leur faire les honneurs jusqu'au dernier moment.

Quelques amis de M. Edward Falkes avaient été invités à prendre place à la table, et, comme d'habitude, après les toasts à la santé de chacun, chaque convive but à Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Dans quelques jours, les jeunes boursiers auraient fait la connaissance de cette grande dame… La Barbade n’était plus loin… La Barbade, la dernière relâche dans ces Antilles dont les lauréats garderaient un éternel souvenir!

Cependant, cet après-midi-là, il s’était produit un incident d’une telle gravité que l’équipage put croire que la situation allait être irrémédiablement compromise.

On le sait, Harry Markel ne laissait descendre ses hommes à terre que pour les besoins du bord. La plus simple prudence lui commandait d’en agir ainsi.

Mais, vers trois heures, il fut nécessaire de prendre livraison de viande fraîche et de légumes, dont le cuisinier Ranyah Cogh avait fait acquisition sur le marché de Castries.

Harry Markel fit donc armer une des embarcations pour conduire le cuisinier au quai avec un des matelots, nommé Morden.

Le canot poussa, et, quelques minutes après, il était revenu à l’arrière de l’Alert.

À quatre heures, lorsque le maître d’équipage l’eut renvoyé à terre, quarante minutes s’écoulèrent avant son retour.

De là, vives inquiétudes d’Harry Markel, que John Carpenter et Corty partagèrent. Qu’était-il arrivé?… Pourquoi ce retard?… Des nouvelles venues d’Europe faisaient-elles planer des soupçons sur le capitaine et l’équipage de l’Alert?…

Enfin, un peu avant cinq heures, l’embarcation se dirigea vers le bord.

Mais, avant qu’elle eût accosté, Corty s’écria:

“Ranyah revient seul!… Morden n’est pas avec lui…

— Où peut-il être? demanda John Carpenter.

— Dans quelque cabaret, où il sera tombé ivre-mort!… ajouta Corty.

— Ranyah aurait dû le ramener quand même, dit Harry Markel. Ce damné Morden est capable de parler plus qu’il ne faut sous l’excitation du brandy ou du gin!…”

C’était probablement ce qui était arrivé, et ce fut ce que l’on apprit de la bouche même de Ranyah Cogh. Tandis qu’il s’occupait des acquisitions au marché de la ville, Morden l’avait quitté sans rien dire. Poussé par ses goûts d’ivrognerie qu’il ne pouvait satisfaire à bord, en ce moment, sans doute, il était échoué dans quelque cabaret. Le cuisinier chercha à retrouver son compagnon. Ce fut en vain qu’il visita les tavernes du quartier maritime! Impossible de remettre la main sur ce maudit Morden, qu’il eût amarré au fond du canot.

“Il faut à tout prix le retrouver… s’écria John Carpenter.

— Et nous ne pouvons le laisser à Sainte-Lucie!… Il bavarderait… Il ne sait plus ce qu’il dit quand il a bu, et nous aurions bientôt un aviso à nos trousses!…”

Ces craintes n’étaient que trop sérieuses, et jamais Harry Markel n’avait couru un danger plus grand!

Donc nécessité de réclamer Morden. C’était d’ailleurs le droit et le devoir du capitaine… Il ne pouvait laisser à la côte un homme de l’équipage, et on le lui rendrait dès qu’il aurait établi son identité. Pourvu qu’il n’eût pas parlé à tort et à travers!…

Harry Markel allait descendre à terre pour demander au bureau maritime de rechercher le matelot en bordée, lorsqu'une embarcation se dirigea vers l'Alert.

Il y avait alors dans le Carénage un stationnaire chargé de la police du port.

Or, c'était précisément un de ses canots, monté par une demi-douzaine d'hommes sous les ordres d'un officier, qui s'approchait. Il n'était plus qu'à une demi-encablure, lorsque Corty s'écria:

“Morden est dedans!”

En effet, Morden “était dedans” et doublement, aurait-on pu dire. Après s'être séparé du cuisinier, il avait été s'attabler dans un tap du dernier ordre. Bientôt ivre-mort, on l'avait ramassé, et le canot du stationnaire le reconduisait à bord de l'Alert, où il fut nécessaire de le hisser avec un palan.

Lorsque l'officier eut pris pied sur le pont:

“Le capitaine Paxton?… demanda-t-il.

— Me voici, monsieur, répondit Harry Markel.

— Cet ivrogne est bien un de vos matelots?…

— En effet, et j'allais le réclamer, car nous devons lever l'ancre demain…

— Eh bien, je vous l'ai ramené… vous voyez dans quel état…

— Il sera puni, répondit Harry Markel.

— Mais… une explication, capitaine Paxton, reprit l’officier. Dans son ivresse… des phrases incohérentes lui échappaient, à ce matelot… Il parlait de campagnes dans le Pacifique… de ce navire Halifax dont il a été dernièrement question… de cet Harry Markel qui le commandait, et dont nous avons appris l’évasion de la prison de Queenstown?…”

On se figure quels efforts Harry Markel dut faire pour se contenir, pour ne rien perdre de son sang-froid en entendant l’officier. John Carpenter et Corty, moins maîtres d’eux, détournant la tête, s’étaient peu à peu éloignés. Très heureusement, l’officier ne remarqua point leur trouble, et se borna à demander:

“Capitaine Paxton… qu’est-ce que cela signifie?…

— Je ne puis l’expliquer, monsieur, répondit Harry Markel. Ce Morden est un ivrogne, et, quand il a bu, on ne sait ce qui lui passe par la tête…

— Ainsi il n’a jamais navigué à bord de l’Halifax?…

— Jamais, et voilà plus de dix ans que nous courons les mers ensemble.

— Alors, pourquoi a-t-il parlé de cet Harry Markel?… insista l’officier.

— Cette affaire de l’Halifax a fait grand bruit, monsieur… Il était question de l’évasion des malfaiteurs, lorsque nous avons quitté Queenstown… On en a parlé souvent à bord… Ce sera resté dans la mémoire de cet homme… C’est la seule explication que je puisse donner à ces propos d’ivrogne…”

Au total, rien n’aurait pu inspirer à l’officier le soupçon qu’il se trouvait en face de Harry Markel, ni que cet équipage ne fût pas celui du capitaine Paxton. Il termina donc l’entretien en disant:

“Qu’allez-vous faire de ce matelot?…

— L’envoyer pour huit jours à fond de cale, où il se dégrisera, répondit Harry Markel. Et même, si je n’étais à court d’hommes, — j’en ai perdu un dans la baie de Cork, — j’aurais débarqué Morden à Sainte-Lucie… Mais il m’eût été impossible de le remplacer…

— Et quand attendez-vous vos passagers, capitaine Paxton?…

— Demain matin, car nous mettrons à la voile au plein de la mer.

— Bon voyage alors!…

— Merci, monsieur.”

L’officier rembarqué, le canot s’éloigna pour rejoindre le stationnaire.

Il va de soi que Morden, qui n’entendait, qui ne comprenait rien dans son ivresse de brute, fut affalé dans la cale à grands coups de pied. Le fait est qu’il avait failli faire tout découvrir en parlant de l’Halifax et d’Harry Markel.

“J’en ai encore une sueur froide!… dit Corty, en s’essuyant le front.

— Harry, observa John Carpenter, nous devrions partir cette nuit même… sans attendre nos passagers!… Il fait trop chaud pour nous dans ces satanées Antilles…

— Et, quand nous serons partis, répondit Harry Markel, on comprendra ce qu’a dit Morden!… Tout sera découvert… et ce stationnaire aura vite fait de se lancer à notre poursuite!… Si vous tenez à être pendus, je n’y tiens pas, moi… et je reste.”

Le lendemain, dès huit heures, les passagers étaient à bord. Il parut inutile de les mettre au courant de l'incident de la veille. Que l'un des matelots se fût enivré, cela n'avait aucune importance.

L'ancre à pic, les voiles éventées, l'Alert sortit du port de Castries, et, cap au sud, fit route vers la Barbade.

CHAPITRE VI

VI

La Barbade

Si elle n’est pas exactement déterminée, la date à laquelle les Portugais découvrirent la Barbade ou les Barbades, il est certain qu’un bâtiment, sous pavillon britannique, vint y relâcher dès l’an 1605. La prise de possession fut alors faite au nom de Jacques Ier, roi d’Angleterre.

Cet acte, d’ailleurs, n’avait été que purement nominal. À cette époque, aucun établissement ne fut fondé sur la Barbade, aucun colon ne s’y installa, même à titre provisoire.

Cette île est, comme Sainte-Lucie, isolée de la chaîne micro-antiliane. Elle ne lui appartient pas, pourrait-on dire, et de profonds abîmes l’en séparent. C’est le plateau supérieur d’une montagne qui s’élève à une quarantaine de lieues de Sainte-Lucie, sa voisine au nord. Entre elles, la mer accuse des profondeurs de deux mille huit cents mètres.

La Barbade est d’origine coralligène. Ce sont les infusoires qui l’ont lentement édifiée et haussée au-dessus du niveau de l’océan. Son étendue comprend seize lieues en longueur et cinq lieues en largeur. Solide sur son inébranlable base, une ceinture d’énormes récifs défendent les deux tiers de sa circonférence.

Précisément, au début du XVIIe siècle, étant donné son isolement, la possession de la Barbade fut moins disputée que les autres îles des Indes

Occidentales. C’est grâce à une circonstance toute fortuite que l’attention des puissances européennes fut appelée sur elle.

Un navire anglais revenant du Brésil, pris par la tempête au large de la Barbade, dut aller chercher refuge à l’embouchure d’une rivière de sa côte ouest. Le commandant et l’équipage de ce navire, retenu là plusieurs jours, eurent le temps de visiter cette île, presque inconnue alors, d’en admirer la fertilité, d’en parcourir les forêts qui la couvraient presque tout entière, et de constater que son sol, une fois défriché, serait très propice à la culture du coton et de la canne à sucre.

Après le retour du bâtiment à Londres, la concession de la Barbade fut accordée au comte de Marlborough et, affaire conclue avec un riche négociant de la Cité, des planteurs vinrent s’installer sur l’île en 1624. Ce sont eux qui construisirent la première ville à laquelle ils donnèrent le nom de James-Town, en l’honneur de leur souverain.

Avant cette époque, il est vrai, le comte Carlisle avait obtenu la concession de toutes les Caraïbes, et il se crut fondé à réclamer la Barbade.

De là naquit une lutte entre les deux lords, qui se prolongea, non sans une extrême vivacité, et amena en 1629 la reconnaissance des droits du comte Carliste par Charles Ier d’Angleterre.

Pendant la période des troubles religieux de la Grande-Bretagne, le nombre fut considérable de ceux qui voulurent les fuir, et la Barbade profita dans une large mesure de cette émigration dont s’accrurent l’importance et la prospérité de la colonie.

Après le dictatoriat de Cromwell, lorsque la restauration eut rendu à Charles II le trône de son père, ce roi fut prié par les colons d’accepter la souveraineté de l’île en promettant de payer à la couronne un impôt de quatre et demi pour cent qui frapperait tous les produits de l’île. L’offre était trop avantageuse pour être repoussée. Aussi, le 12 décembre 1667, fut signé le traité d’annexion de la Barbade au domaine colonial de la Grande-Bretagne.

La prospérité de l’île ne cessa de s’accroître depuis cette époque. Dès l’année 1674, sa population montait à cent vingt mille habitants, pour diminuer quelque peu ensuite; les blancs ne comptant que pour un cinquième par rapport aux affranchis et aux esclaves, conséquence de l’avidité des gouverneurs. Toutefois, par sa position même, la Barbade ne fut point troublée par les interminables luttes de l’Angleterre et de la France, et d’ailleurs elle se trouvait protégée par ses défenses naturelles.

Ainsi, alors que la plupart des autres Antilles ont successivement passé sous des dominations diverses, la Barbade, devenue anglaise dès les premiers temps de sa découverte, l’est toujours restée de langage et de moeurs.

Au surplus, parce qu’elle relève de la Couronne, il ne faudrait pas croire qu’elle ne jouit point d’une certaine indépendance. Sa maison d’Assemblée compte vingt-quatre membres nommés par cinq mille électeurs censitaires. Si elle est soumise à l’autorité d’un gouverneur, d’un conseil législatif, et de neuf membres désignés par le souverain, elle est administrée par un conseil exécutif où figurent, avec les principaux fonctionnaires, un membre de la Chambre haute et quatre membres de la Chambre basse. Divisée en onze paroisses, l’île dispose d’un budget dont le total n’est pas inférieur à seize cent mille livres1.

C’est le gouvernement de la Barbade qui commande toutes les forces navales dans les

1 40 millions de francs. petites Antilles anglaises. Bien que l’île n’occupe que le cinquième rang avec une étendue de quatre cent trente kilomètres superficiels, elle est au deuxième rang par le chiffre de sa population, et au troisième par l’importance de ses affaires commerciales. Sa population s’élève au chiffre de cent quatre-vingt-trois mille habitants, dont le tiers occupe Bridgetown et ses faubourgs.

La traversée entre le port de Castries, de Sainte-Lucie et Bridgetown de la Barbade exigea près de quarante-huit heures. Avec une brise bien établie, une mer maniable, l’Alert eût franchi cette distance en moitié moins de temps; mais il se produisit des intermittences et des changements de vent qui ne permirent pas de suivre la route directe. La brise tendit même à haler le nord-ouest, ce qui obligea Harry Markel à s’éloigner des parages de l’Antilie.

On put même craindre de rencontrer, dès le premier jour, les contre-alizés de la partie ouest. Dans ces conditions, l’Alert aurait été entraîné au large. Or, s’il avait fallu louvoyer pendant de longs jours pour rallier les côtes de la Barbade, qui sait si Harry Markel n’eût pas renoncé à cette dernière relâche, si profitable dût-elle être pour ses compagnons et pour lui?… Qui sait s’il n’aurait pas fui ces dangereux parages, s’il n’eût pas enfin assuré sa sécurité en dirigeant son navire sans passagers vers les mers du Pacifique?…

Eh bien, non, avec le tempérament audacieux qu’on lui connaissait, Harry Markel, résistant aux instances de son équipage, aurait fait valoir que la Barbade devait être l’étape terminale; que le voyage serait achevé dans quelques jours, que les périls ne seraient pas plus redoutables dans cette île qu’à Sainte-Lucie ou à la Dominique, anglaises comme elle, et il eût ajouté:

“Au retour, l’Alert vaudra sept mille livres de plus, car je ne jetterai pas ces sept mille livres à la mer, en y jetant ceux qui doivent les toucher à la Barbade!”

Les modifications atmosphériques que l’on pouvait craindre ne se réalisèrent pas. Dans l’après-midi éclata un de ces gros orages, violents roulements de tonnerre, pluie torrentielle, qui ne sont pas rares dans la région des Antilles et y occasionnent trop souvent d’incalculables désastres. L’Alert dut pousser au large durant quelques heures. Puis le météore prit fin avec le coucher du soleil et la nuit promettait d’être assez calme.

Dans cette première journée, l’Alert n’avait franchi que le quart de la distance qui sépare les deux îles. L’orage l’ayant obligé de se mettre en cape courante, hors de sa route, Harry Markel espérait rattraper la nuit ce qu’il venait de perdre.

C’est ainsi que les choses se passèrent. La direction du vent s’étant modifiée, les alizés reprirent dans l’est, faibles et intermittents. La mer restée dure, la houle déferlante, tout ce que put faire le navire jusqu’à l’aube, ce fut de regagner au vent, et, le matin du 6 septembre, il était à mi-chemin entre les deux îles.

Ce jour-là, la navigation s’effectua en d’assez bonnes conditions avec une vitesse moyenne, et, le soir, l’Alert se trouvait en latitude avec la Barbade.

Cette île ne se laisse pas apercevoir de très loin, comme la Martinique. C’est une terre basse, sans grand relief, qui, ainsi que cela a été observé, est lentement montée à la surface de la mer. Son morne le plus élevé, l’Hillaby, ne dépasse pas trois cent cinquante mètres. Autour, de même qu’à Sainte-Lucie, se continue la croissance des couches coralligènes, et sa ceinture extérieure s’étend en quelques endroits à plusieurs kilomètres.

Harry Markel mit donc le cap à l’ouest, et, comme il n’en était qu’à une quinzaine de milles, l’île serait atteinte en quelques heures. Toutefois, ne voulant pas s’aventurer à proximité des brisants, il resta sous petite voilure, attendant le lever du jour pour entrer dans le port de Bridgetown.

Le lendemain, 7 septembre, l’Alert avait pris son mouillage.

L’impression des jeunes passagers, lorsqu’ils se virent au milieu de ce port, fut bien celle que marque Élisée Reclus dans sa Géographie si documentée. Ils crurent avoir atteint un des ports de l’Angleterre, Belfast ou Liverpool. Plus rien de ce qu’ils avaient observé à Amalia-Charlotte de Saint-Thomas, ni à Pointe-à-Pitre de la Guadeloupe, ni à Saint-Pierre de la Martinique. Suivant la remarque du grand géographe français, il semblait que les palmiers fussent dépaysés en cette île.

Si la Barbade n’a qu’une moyenne superficie, elle possède cependant un certain nombre de villes, assez importantes, fondées sur son littoral, Sperghstown, Hoistingtown, Hobetown, Hastings, village balnéaire assez fréquenté. Toutes sont aussi anglaises que leur nom.

On dirait que le Royaume-Uni les a expédiées en pièces démontables et qu’il n’y a eu qu’à les dresser sur place.

Dès que l’Alert eut envoyé son ancre par le fond, la première personne qui se présenta à bord fut une sorte de gentleman, sérieux et correct, habit noir et chapeau de haute forme.

Ce personnage vint présenter au capitaine Paxton et à ses passagers les compliments de Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

C’était M. Well, l’intendant, qui s’inclina respectueusement, et auquel M. Horatio Patterson rendit un salut non moins respectueux. Puis, après quelques propos échangés, les jeunes lauréats ne cachèrent point le vif désir qu’ils éprouvaient de faire connaissance avec la châtelaine de Nording-House.

À cela, M. Well répondit que, au débarquement, les futurs hôtes de Mrs Kethlen Seymour trouveraient les équipages mis à leur disposition et qu’ils seraient immédiatement conduits à Nording-House où les attendait Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

Puis, M. Well se retira avec une dignité dont M. Patterson apprécia toute la valeur, non sans avoir dit que des chambres étaient préparées pour recevoir les hôtes de Nording-House, et que le déjeuner serait servi à onze heures.

Il était vraisemblable, d’ailleurs, que la relâche de l’Alert à la Barbade se prolongerait plus que dans les autres îles.

N’était-il pas naturel que Mrs Kethlen Seymour désirât garder quelque temps près d’elle les boursiers d’Antilian School, et ceux-ci pourraient-ils se refuser à lui faire ce plaisir?… N’était-il pas non moins naturel que l’excellente dame voulût leur montrer cette île qu’elle considérait sans doute comme la plus belle des Indes Occidentales?…

À dix heures et demie, M. Patterson, irréprochablement habillé de noir, ses jeunes compagnons, vêtus de leurs costumes les plus propres, étaient prêts à partir.

Le grand canot de l’Alert les attendait. Après avoir descendu un certain nombre de valises, ils y prirent place, et l’embarcation revint à bord dès qu’elle les eut déposés sur le quai.

Deux équipages étaient là, ainsi que l’avait dit M. Well, cocher sur le siège, valet de pied aux portières.

M. Patterson et ses compagnons montèrent aussitôt dans les voitures, qui partirent au trot des attelages, et, après avoir traversé les rues marchandes voisines du port, elles atteignirent le faubourg de Fontabelle.

C’est ce quartier élégant qu’habitent les riches négociants de Bridgetown. Les superbes habitations, les opulentes villas, s’y élèvent au milieu des arbres, et, de toutes ces résidences, la plus somptueuse était, sans contredit, celle de Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

Il avait été convenu que, pendant le séjour à la Barbade, personne ne reviendrait à bord: on ne reverrait Harry Markel que le jour du départ.

D’une certaine façon, cela ne pouvait que convenir à celui-ci. Les passagers, une fois installés à Nording-House, l’Alert ne recevrait aucun visiteur, et le faux capitaine Paxton courrait moins de risques d’être reconnu.

Mais, d’autre façon, ce qui ne laissait pas de l’inquiéter, c’était la prolongation de la relâche. Si le programme, imposé par Mrs Kethlen Seymour, ne comportait que de deux à trois jours dans les autres Antilles, on ignorait les intentions de cette dame en ce qui concernait la Barbade. Il se pouvait fort bien que l’Alert dût rester une semaine à Bridgetown, peut-être deux, c’est-à-dire jusqu’au 20 septembre. Même en partant à cette date, avec une traversée moyenne de vingt-cinq jours de l’Amérique à l’Europe, les pensionnaires d’Antilian School seraient de retour pour la mi-octobre, presque au début de l’année scolaire. Donc, il était possible que la relâche ne prit fin que vers le 20, ce qui permettrait aux hôtes de Mrs Kethlen Seymour d’explorer complètement l’île.

C’est bien à cela que réfléchissaient Harry Markel et ses compagnons. Après avoir réussi jusqu’alors, après avoir évité la visite de ce matelot du Fire-Fly qui demandait à voir un de ses camarades, puis celle du vieux marin de la Dominique qui voulait serrer la main du capitaine Paxton, la malchance se déclarerait-elle contre eux à la Barbade?…

En tout cas, Harry Markel se tiendrait plus sévèrement que jamais sur ses gardes. Il refuserait toute invitation qui lui serait adressée pour Nording-House. Pas un seul de ses hommes ne descendrait à terre. Cette fois, ni Morden ni aucun autre n’aurait l’occasion d’aller se griser dans les tavernes de Bridgetown.

Magnifique propriété, ce domaine de Nording-House, et d’une importance considérable. Le château s’élève au milieu d’un parc ombragé des plus beaux arbres de la zone tropicale. Autour s’étendent les plantations de cannes à sucre, les champs de cotonniers, avec un horizon de forêts dans le nord-est. Étangs, rios, y sont alimentés d’eaux toujours fraîches, bien que le défrichement de l’île ait amené la diminution des pluies. Quelques rivières l’arrosent, et nombreux sont les puits ou la couche liquide se rencontre à petite profondeur.

Ce fut dans le vaste hall du château que l’intendant fit entrer M. Patterson et les jeunes garçons, tandis que des domestiques noirs prenaient leurs bagages et les montaient aux chambres destinées à chacun d’eux. Puis, M. Well les introduisit dans le salon où attendait Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

C’était une femme de soixante-deux ans, cheveux blancs, yeux bleus, physionomie avenante, taille élevée, ayant un grand air de noblesse et de bonté, à laquelle M. Horatio

Patterson ne manqua pas d’appliquer le patuit incessu Dea de Virgile. Cette dame leur fit à tous l’accueil le plus cordial, et ne cacha point l’extrême joie qu’elle éprouvait à recevoir les lauréats du concours d’Antilian School.

Roger Hinsdale, au nom de ses camarades, répondit par un petit discours bien préparé, bien su, bien récité, dont Mrs Kethlen Seymour se montra charmée. Elle s’exprima à ce sujet en excellents termes, et déclara aux passagers de l’Alert qu’ils seraient ses hôtes pendant toute la durée du séjour à la Barbade.

M. Patterson répondit que les désirs de Mrs Kethlen Seymour étaient pour eux des ordres, et, comme elle lui tendait la main, il y déposa le plus respectueux des baisers.

Mrs Kethlen Seymour, née à la Barbade, appartenait à une riche famille qui avait pris possession de ce domaine dès les débuts de la colonie. Elle comptait parmi ses ancêtres ce comte de Carlisle, l’un des concessionnaires de l’île. À cette époque, tout propriétaire de terres rétrocédées par lui devait verser annuellement la valeur de quarante livres de coton. De là les revenus très considérables que produisaient ces propriétés, et, entre autres, la propriété de Nording-House.

Il n’est pas inutile de noter que le climat de la Barbade est l’un des plus salubres de l’Antilie. La chaleur est quotidiennement tempérée par les brises de mer. Jamais la fièvre jaune, si commune et si désastreuse dans l’archipel, n’y a étendu ses ravages. Cette île ne doit redouter que la violence des ouragans, d’ordinaire terribles et fréquents en ces parages.

Le gouverneur des Antilles anglaises, qui réside à la Barbade, tenait Mrs Kethlen Seymour en haute estime. Femme de grand cœur, généreuse et charitable, les malheureux n’invoquaient pas en vain son inépuisable charité.

Le déjeuner fut servi dans la vaste salle du rez-de-chaussée. Sur la table abondaient les productions de l’île, poissons, gibier, fruits dont la variété égale la saveur, et les convives apprécièrent ce menu comme il le méritait.

S’ils ne purent qu’être satisfaits de l’accueil de leur hôtesse, celle-ci éprouva pleine satisfaction à voir, rangés autour d’elle, ces jeunes voyageurs dont les visages, hâlés par les brises marines, respiraient le contentement et la santé.

Et, pendant le déjeuner, lorsqu’il fut question de la durée de cette relâche à la Barbade:

“Je pense, mes chers enfants, répondit Mrs Kethlen Seymour, qu’elle ne devra pas être moindre d’une quinzaine. C’est aujourd’hui le 7 septembre, et, en partant le 22, il y a tout lieu de croire que vous arriverez en Angleterre vers le milieu du mois d’octobre… J’ai l’espoir que vous ne regretterez pas votre séjour à la Barbade… Que pensez-vous de cette date, monsieur Patterson?…

— Madame, répondit M. Patterson en s’inclinant sur son assiette, nos jours vous appartiennent, et vous pouvez en disposer à votre convenance…

— Alors, mes jeunes amis, si je n’écoutais que mon cœur, je ne vous laisserais plus retourner en Europe!… Et que diraient vos familles?… Que dirait, votre femme en ne vous voyant pas revenir, monsieur Patterson?…

— Le cas est prévu, répondit le mentor. Oui… le cas où l’Alert ayant disparu… des années s’écouleraient sans qu’on eût de mes nouvelles…

— Oh! cela n’arrivera point! affirma Mrs Kethlen Seymour… Votre traversée a été heureuse à l’aller, elle le sera au retour. Vous avez un bon navire… Le capitaine Paxton est un excellent marin…

— Certes, ajouta M. Patterson, nous n’avons jamais eu qu’à nous louer de sa conduite!

— Je ne l’oublierai pas, répondit Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

— Pas plus, noble dame, que nous n’oublierons le jour où il nous a été donné de vous présenter nos premiers hommages, ce dies albo notanda lapillo… et, comme l’a dit Martial: hanc lucem lactea gemma notet; ou, comme l’a dit Horace: cressa ne careat pulchra dies nota; ou, comme l’a dit Stace: creta signare diem…”

Heureusement, M. Patterson s’arrêta sur cette dernière citation, que les jeunes convives crurent devoir interrompre de leurs joyeux hurrahs.

Que Mrs Kethlen Seymour eût compris ces formules latines, ce n’était pas probable, mais elle ne pouvait se méprendre à l’intention de l’éloquent citateur. Et, d’ailleurs, peut-être les lauréats n’avaient-ils pas tous compris les phrases empruntées à Martial, à Stace, à Horace. En effet, lorsqu’ils furent seuls, voici ce que Roger Hinsdale lui dit:

“Monsieur Patterson, comment traduisez-vous exactement crela signare diem?…

— Mais noter un jour avec de la craie, ce qui équivaut à noter avec une pierre blanche, lactea gemma… Comment, vous, Hinsdale, vous n’aviez pas compris, alors que certainement Mrs Kethlen Seymour a dû…

— Oh! s’écria Tony Renault…

— Si… si!… affirma le mentor. Cet admirable latin se comprend tout seul…

— Oh! fit encore ce diable de Tony.

— Pourquoi ce oh?…

— Parce que le latin, même admirable, ne se comprend pas toujours tout seul, comme vous dites, monsieur Patterson, affirma Tony Renault. Et, tenez, permettez-moi de vous citer une phrase et de vous demander comment vous la traduiriez?…”

Assurément, cet incorrigible garçon allait encore énoncer quelqu’une de ces plaisanteries dont il était coutumier, et ses camarades ne s’y trompèrent pas.

“Voyons… citez… répondit M. Patterson en ajustant ses lunettes d’un geste doctoral.

— Voici la phrase: Rosam angelum letorum.

— Ah! fit M. Patterson, qui parut surpris. Et de qui est-elle, cette phrase?…

— D’un auteur inconnu… mais peu importe!… Que peut-elle signifier?…

— Elle ne signifie rien, Tony!… Ce sont des mots sans suite… Rosam, la rose, à l’accusatif; angelum, l’ange, à l’accusatif; letorum, des heureux, au génitif pluriel…

— Je vous demande pardon, répliqua Tony Renault, dont l’oeil brillait de malice. Cette phrase a une signification très précise…

— Que vous connaissez?…

— Que je connais.

— Ah!… Eh bien, je chercherai… conclut M. Patterson, je chercherai!”

Et, en effet, il devait chercher… longtemps encore, comme on le verra.

À partir de ce jour, la relâche s’écoula en excursions, — ”excursions auxquelles Mrs Kethlen Seymour prit souvent part. Il y eut à visiter non seulement le domaine de Nording-House, mais aussi les autres régions de la côte orientale. Bridgetown n’eut pas seule le privilège de posséder les hôtes de l’opulente dame. Ils poussèrent leur exploration jusqu’aux villes du littoral, et vraiment Mrs Kethlen Seymour se réjouissait aux compliments qu’ils lui faisaient de son île.

Il résulte de là que, au cours de cette relâche, l’Alert fut absolument oublié de ses passagers. Pas une seule fois ils n’eurent l’occasion de revenir à bord. D’ailleurs, Harry Markel et les autres étaient toujours sur le qui-vive, et, bien qu’aucun incident ne fût venu les compromettre, il leur tardait d’avoir quitté la Barbade. Alors, en pleine mer, ils seraient à l’abri de toute éventualité et arriveraient au dénouement de ce drame!

On peut dire, sans trop d’exagération, que l’île est un immense jardin, riche en fruits, riche en fleurs. De ce jardin, qui est aussi un potager, l’industrie agricole tire à profusion le riz, le coton de l’espèce “barbadeuse”, recherché sur les divers marchés d’Europe. Quant au sucre, sa production est considérable. Il y a lieu d’ajouter que les établissements industriels s’y trouvent en prospérité croissante. En effet on ne compte pas moins de cinq cents usines à la Barbade.

En diverses occasions, lorsque les touristes visitèrent les autres villes, leur excursion se prolongeant, ils ne purent rentrer le jour même à Nording-House. Ce fut l'exception, et, presque tous les soirs, ils se réunissaient dans les salons du château. Plusieurs fois, les notables de Bridgetown, Son Excellence le Gouverneur, les membres du Conseil exécutif, quelques hauts fonctionnaires, vinrent s'asseoir à la table de Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

Le 17, il y eut une grande fête qui ne compta pas moins d'une soixantaine d'invités, — fête que devait terminer un feu d'artifice. Les jeunes lauréats en eurent tous les honneurs, sans distinction de nationalité.

Et Mrs Kethlen Seymour de redire sans cesse:

"Je ne veux voir ici ni Anglais, ni Français, ni Hollandais, ni Suédois, ni Danois… Non! rien que des Antilians, mes compatriotes!"

Après un concert où l'on exécuta d'excellente musique, quelques tables de whist furent dressées; et M. Horatio Patterson, partenaire de Mrs Kethlen Seymour, fit, non sans un très légitime orgueil, un extraordinaire chelem de dix fiches dont on parle encore dans les Indes Occidentales.

Ainsi s'écoula le temps avec une telle rapidité que les hôtes de Nording-House purent en regarder les jours comme des heures, les heures comme des minutes. Le 21 septembre était arrivé sans qu'ils s'en fussent aperçus. Harry Markel ne les avait point revus à bord. Ils ne tarderaient pas à revenir, d'ailleurs, puisque le départ était fixé au 22.

La veille, cependant, Mrs Kethlen Seymour manifesta le désir de visiter l'Alert. Vive satisfaction pour Louis Clodion et ses camarades, heureux de lui faire les honneurs du navire comme elle leur avait fait les honneurs de son château. L'excellente dame voulait connaître le capitaine Paxton, lui exprimer ses remerciements, — d’autant plus qu’elle avait une demande à lui adresser.

Donc, dans la matinée, les équipages quittèrent le domaine et vinrent s’arrêter au quai de Bridgetown.

Le grand canot de la direction maritime, qui attendait à l’escalier de l’appontement, transporta les visiteurs à bord.

Harry Markel avait été prévenu par l’intendant, et ils se fussent bien passés de cette visite, ses compagnons et lui, craignant toujours quelque complication imprévue! Or, il eût été impossible de l’éviter.

“Au diable tous ces gens-là!… s’était écrié John Carpenter.

— Soit… mais de la tenue”, avait répondu Harry Markel.

Mrs Kethlen Seymour fut reçue avec la convenance et le respect que commandait sa grande situation à la Barbade. Et, tout d’abord, elle offrit au capitaine l’expression de sa gratitude.

Harry Markel mit une extrême politesse dans sa réponse. Puis, comme la châtelaine de Nording-House ajouta que, pour reconnaître les bons soins de l’équipage, elle lui accordait une gratification de cinq cents livres, Corty donna le signal de hurrahs dont l’ardeur ne put que la toucher très sincèrement.

Mrs Kethlen Seymour visita alors le carré et les cabines. Conduite dans la dunette, cette installation parut la satisfaire de tous points. Et quels compliments accueillirent M. Horatio Patterson, lorsqu’il montra le terrible serpent disposé dans une attitude effrayante autour du mât d’artimon.

“Quoi! s’écria Mrs Kethlen Seymour, c’est vous, monsieur Patterson, qui avez tué cet horrible monstre?…

— Moi-même, répondit M. Patterson, et, s’il est encore si terrible d’aspect après sa mort, vous jugez de ce qu’il devait être pendant sa vie, lorsqu’il dardait sur moi sa langue de trigonocéphale!”

Et, si Tony Renault ne se tordit pas à cette répartie, c’est que Louis Clodion le pinça jusqu’au sang.

“Il paraît, d’ailleurs, aussi vivant que lorsque je l’ai tué!… déclara M. Patterson.

— Tout autant!” répondit Tony Renault, que son camarade ne put retenir cette fois.

Revenue sur la dunette, Mrs Kethlen Seymour, rejoignant Harry Markel, lui dit:

“C’est demain que vous prendrez la mer, capitaine Paxton?…

— Demain, madame, et dès le lever du soleil.

— Eh bien, j’ai une demande à vous faire. Il s’agit d’un jeune marin de vingt-cinq ans, le fils de l’une de mes femmes, un brave garçon, qui va retourner en Angleterre pour occuper les fonctions de second maître sur un bâtiment de commerce… Je vous serais très obligée de lui donner passage à bord de l’Alert.”

Que cette demande convint ou non à Harry Markel, il était évident qu’il ne pouvait refuser, puisque le navire naviguait au compte de Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Il se borna donc à répondre:

“Que ce jeune homme vienne à bord, madame, il y sera bien reçu.”

Mrs Kethlen Seymour renouvela ses remerciements au capitaine. Puis elle lui recommanda, pour la traversée de retour, M. Patterson et les jeunes passagers, dont elle avait la responsabilité vis-à-vis de leurs familles.

Et alors, — point essentiel pour Harry Markel, et en vue duquel ses compagnons et lui s’étaient exposés à de si graves dangers, — Mrs Kethlen Seymour annonça que, le jour même, M. Patterson et les boursiers recevraient la prime de sept cents livres promise à chacun.

M. Patterson, très sincèrement, observa que ce serait abuser de la générosité de la châtelaine de Nording-House. Roger Hinsdale, Louis Clodion, d’autres se joignirent à lui.

Mrs Kethlen Seymour ayant déclaré qu’un refus la désobligerait, il n’y eut pas lieu d’insister, à l’extrême satisfaction de John Carpenter et de tout l’équipage.

Puis, après un amical adieu au capitaine de l’Alert, après des souhaits de bon voyage, la visiteuse et ses hôtes reprirent place dans le canot qui les reconduisit au quai, d’où les voitures les ramenèrent au château pour y passer cette dernière journée.

Et lorsque tous eurent quitté le bord:

“Ça y est!… s’écria Corty.

— Mille et mille diables!… ajouta John Carpenter. J’ai vu le moment où ces imbéciles allaient refuser de toucher leur prime!… C’eût été bien la peine d’avoir risqué sa tête pour s’en retourner la poche vide!”

Enfin, les passagers ne reviendraient pas sans rapporter la somme qui devait doubler les bénéfices de l’affaire.

“Et ce marin?… dit alors Corty.

— Bon!… répondit le maître d’équipage. Un de plus… ce n’est pas cela qui nous embarrassera, j’imagine…

— Non, répliqua Corty, et je me charge de lui!”

Ce soir-là, un grand dîner réunit à Nording-House les notables de la colonie et les hôtes de Mrs Kethlen Seymour. Le repas achevé, de nouveaux adieux furent échangés, et les passagers de l’Alert revinrent à bord. Chacun d’eux avait reçu en guinées, renfermées dans un petit sac de soie, la prime attribuée aux lauréats du concours d’Antilian School.

Une heure auparavant était arrivé le jeune marin pour lequel Mrs Kethlen Seymour avait demandé passage, et il avait été conduit à la cabine qu’il devait occuper.

Tout était prêt pour l’appareillage du lendemain, et, au lever du soleil, l’Alert aurait quitté le port de Bridgetown, sa dernière relâche aux Indes Occidentales.

CHAPITRE VII

VII

Début de traversée

Dès dix heures du matin, l’Alert avait laissé derrière l’horizon les extrêmes contours de la Barbade, la plus avancée vers l’est des îles de la chaîne micro-antilienne.

Ainsi cette petite visite des lauréats à leur pays natal s’était effectuée dans des conditions très favorables. Ils n’avaient pas eu trop à souffrir au cours de leurs traversées des violentes perturbations atmosphériques si fréquentes en ces parages. Le voyage de retour commençait. Au lieu de revenir en Europe, le navire, dont Harry Markel et ses complices seraient dès le lendemain les maîtres, allait faire route vers les mers du Pacifique.

En effet, il semblait bien que les passagers de l’Alert ne pouvaient échapper au sort que leur réservaient ces bandits. La nuit prochaine, ils seraient surpris dans leurs cabines, égorgés avant d’avoir pu se défendre!… Et qui dévoilerait jamais ce drame sanglant de l’Alert?… À la rubrique des informations maritimes, le trois-mâts figurerait parmi ces navires perdus corps et biens dont on n’a plus aucune nouvelle. On se mettrait vainement à sa recherche, alors que sous un autre nom, sous un autre pavillon, après quelques modifications à son gréement, le capitaine Markel entreprendrait ses criminelles campagnes dans les mers de l’Ouest-Pacifique.

Et ce n’était pas la présence du marin nouveau-venu qui apporterait quelque chance de salut. Sans doute, les passagers se trouvaient maintenant onze à bord, et Harry Markel et ses compagnons n’étaient que dix. Mais ceux-ci auraient l’avantage de la surprise. D’ailleurs, comment opposer une résistance efficace à ces hommes robustes, habitués à verser le sang?… Et puis, c’est la nuit que s’accomplirait ce massacre… Les victimes seraient frappées en plein sommeil. Quant à implorer la pitié de ces misérables, inutile!… Il n’y en avait aucune à attendre.

Ainsi tout aurait réussi à cet audacieux malfaiteur. Ses projets se seraient réalisés jusqu’au bout. Il aurait eu raison contre les hésitations de John Carpenter et de quelques autres. La navigation à travers les Antilles ne les avait pas trahis, et cette relâche à la Barbade leur valait une somme de sept mille livres, sans parler de la prime accordée par Mrs Kethlen Seymour.

Le marin embarqué sur l’Alert s’appelait Will Mitz. Il n’était âgé que de vingt-cinq ans, — à peine cinq années de plus que Roger Hinsdale, Louis Clodion et Albertus Leuwen.

Will Mitz, de taille moyenne, vigoureux, bien découplé, agile et souple comme l’exige le métier de gabier, offrait tous les caractères de l’honnêteté et de la franchise. C’était aussi un garçon serviable, de bonnes moeurs, d’une conduite irréprochable, très pénétré de sentiments religieux. Jamais il n’avait encouru une punition, et nul ne montrait plus de soumission ni déployait plus de zèle dans le service. Embarqué dès l’âge de douze ans en qualité de mousse, il devint successivement novice, puis matelot, puis quartier-maître. C’était le fils unique de Mrs Mitz, veuve depuis plusieurs années, qui occupait des fonctions de confiance au château de Nording-House.

Après un dernier voyage dans les mers du Sud, Will Mitz resta près de sa mère pendant deux mois. Mrs Kethlen Seymour avait pu apprécier les qualités de cet honnête garçon. Grâce à ses relations, il venait d’obtenir ce poste de second maître à bord d’un bâtiment en chargement à Liverpool pour Sydney de l’Australie. Nul doute que Will Mitz, ayant de bonnes connaissances pratiques en navigation, intelligent, zélé, ne dût faire son chemin et acquérir plus tard la position d’officier dans la marine marchande. Enfin, brave, résolu, il possédait cet imperturbable sang-froid, ce juste coup d’oeil, indispensable aux gens de mer, et qui doit être leur première qualité.

Will Mitz attendait à Bridgetown l’occasion de s’embarquer pour Liverpool, lorsque l’Alert mouilla dans le port de la Barbade. C’est alors que Mrs Kethlen Seymour eut la pensée de s’entendre avec le capitaine Paxton afin d’assurer le retour du jeune marin en Europe. C’était donc dans des conditions très agréables que Will Mitz allait traverser l’Atlantique pour Liverpool, où le trois-mâts devait se rendre, le port même d’embarquement de Will Mitz. De là, M. Horatio Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons regagneraient Londres par chemin de fer et rentreraient à Antilian School, où ils seraient accueillis comme ils le méritaient.

Du reste, Will Mitz n’entendait point rester oisif au cours de la traversée. Le capitaine Paxton ne demanderait pas mieux que de l’employer pour remplacer cet homme qu’il avait eu le malheur de perdre dans la baie de Cork.

Le soir du 21, Will Mitz avait apporté son sac à bord de l’Alert, après avoir pris congé de Mrs Kethlen Seymour et embrassé sa mère. Il était, en outre, gratifié d’une petite somme que la bonne châtelaine le força d’accepter, — somme qui lui permettrait d’attendre à Liverpool le départ de son bâtiment.

Bien que tous les cadres du poste de l’équipage ne fussent pas occupés par ses hommes, Harry Markel préféra ne point mettre Will Mitz avec eux. Cela aurait pu être un embarras à l’accomplissement de ses projets. Il restait une cabine libre dans la dunette, et le nouveau passager en prit aussitôt possession.

En arrivant, Will Mitz dit à Harry Markel:

“Capitaine Paxton, je désire me rendre utile à bord… Je suis à votre disposition, et, si vous le voulez bien, je ferai le quart à mon tour…

— Soit”, répondit Harry Markel.

Il convient de dire que Will Mitz fut peu favorablement impressionné en observant le personnel du navire. Et ce n’était pas seulement le capitaine de l’Alert, c’étaient aussi John Carpenter, Corty et les autres. Si la tenue du trois-mâts lui parut irréprochable, ces figures où se reflétaient tant de passions violentes, ces physionomies farouches, dont la fausseté se dissimulait mal, n’étaient point pour lui inspirer confiance. Aussi résolut-il de garder une certaine réserve avec l’équipage.

D’ailleurs, si Will Mitz ne connaissait pas le capitaine Paxton, il en avait entendu parler comme d’un excellent marin, avant même qu’il eût le commandement de l’Alert, et Mrs Kethlen Seymour ne l’avait pas choisi sans sérieuses références.

En outre, durant leur séjour à Nording-House, les jeunes passagers avaient toujours fait le plus grand éloge du capitaine Paxton et vanté l’habileté dont il avait donné des preuves pendant la tempête au large des Bermudes. La traversée d’aller s’était effectuée d’une manière très satisfaisante, pourquoi n’en serait-il pas ainsi de la traversée de retour?… Will Mitz pensa donc que cette première impression qu’il avait ressentie en arrivant à bord ne tarderait pas à s’effacer.

Lorsque Corty apprit que Will Mitz avait offert ses services, il dit à Harry Markel et à John Carpenter:

“Eh!… voilà une bonne recrue sur laquelle nous ne comptions guère!… Un fameux marin pour commander le quart avec toi, John…

— Et qu’on peut mettre en toute confiance à la barre!… ajouta non moins ironiquement John Carpenter. Avec un pareil timonier, pas d’écart de route à craindre, et l’Alert filera droit sur Liverpool…

— Où, sans doute, la police, prévenue d’une façon ou d’une autre, reprit Corty, nous recevrait à notre arrivée avec les honneurs qui nous sont dus…

— Assez plaisanté, déclara Harry Markel, et que chacun veille sur sa langue pendant vingt-quatre heures encore…

— D’autant plus, fit observer John Carpenter, que ce marsouin-là m’a paru nous regarder d’une singulière façon…

— Dans tous les cas, reprit Harry Markel, qu’on ne lui réponde que peu ou point, s’il veut causer!… Et surtout que Morden ne recommence pas ce qu’il a fait à Sainte-Lucie…

— Bon! conclut Corty, quand il n’a pas bu, Morden est muet comme un poisson, et on l’empêchera de boire avant que nous portions la santé du capitaine Markel!”

Au surplus, il ne sembla pas que Will Mitz voulût engager conversation avec les hommes de l’équipage. Dès son arrivée, il se retira dans la cabine où il déposa son sac, en attendant le retour des passagers, et, le lendemain, il avait donné la main à l’appareillage.

Pendant cette première journée, Will Mitz rencontra à l’arrière ce qu’il n’eût pas trouvé à l’avant du navire, — de braves garçons qui s’intéressaient à lui. Plus particulièrement, Tony Renault et Magnus Anders se montrèrent très heureux “de pouvoir parler marine avec un marin”.

Après le déjeuner, Will Mitz alla se promener sur le pont en fumant sa pipe.

L’Alert portait ses basses voiles, ses huniers et ses perroquets. Il aurait dû courir une longue bordée au nord-est, de manière à passer à l’ouvert du canal de Bahama au-delà des Antilles, et profiter des courants du Gulf-Stream qui se dirigent vers l’Europe. Aussi Will Mitz put-il s’étonner que le capitaine eût pris les amures à tribord au lieu de les prendre à bâbord, ce qui l’éloignait avec cap au sud-est. Mais, sans doute, Harry Markel avait ses raisons pour agir ainsi, et il n’appartenait point à Will Mitz de l’interroger à ce sujet. Il se disait, d’ailleurs, que l’Alert, après avoir parcouru cinquante ou soixante milles, reprendrait sa route vers le nord-est.

En réalité, ce n’était pas sans intention qu’Harry Markel manœuvrait de manière à gagner la pointe méridionale de l’Afrique, et, de temps en temps, il observait si l’homme de barre maintenait le navire en cette direction.

Cependant Tony Renault, Magnus Anders, deux ou trois de leurs camarades causaient avec le jeune marin, en se promenant tantôt sur le pont, tantôt sur la dunette. Ils lui posaient des questions relatives à son métier, ce qu’ils n’avaient pu faire jusqu’ici avec leur peu communicatif capitaine. Au moins, Will Mitz répondait volontiers, se plaisait à leur conversation, voyant le goût qu’ils manifestaient pour les choses de la mer.

Et, tout d’abord, quels pays avait-il visités au cours de ses navigations, soit à l’État, soit au commerce?…

“Mes jeunes messieurs, répondit Will Mitz, je voyage depuis douze ans déjà, autant dire depuis mon enfance…

— Vous avez traversé plusieurs fois l’Atlantique et le Pacifique?… demanda Tony Renault.

— Plusieurs fois, en effet, soit à bord de voiliers, soit à bord de steamers.

— Est-ce que vous avez fait campagne sur des bâtiments de guerre?… dit Magnus Anders.

— Oui, répondit Will Mitz, lorsque l’Angleterre envoya une de ses escadres dans le golfe de Petchili.

— Vous êtes allé en Chine!… s’écria Tony Renault, et il ne cachait point son admiration pour un homme qui avait accosté les rivages du Céleste Empire.

— Oui… monsieur Renault, et je vous assure qu’il n’est pas plus difficile d’aller en Chine que d’aller aux Antilles.

— Et sur quel navire?… questionna John Howard.

— Sur le croiseur-cuirassé Standard, contre-amiral sir Harry Walker.

— Alors, reprit Magnus Anders, vous étiez embarqué comme mousse?…

— En effet… comme mousse.

— Et il y avait de gros canons à bord du Standard?… demanda Tony Renault.

— Très gros… de vingt tonnes…

— De vingt tonnes!” répéta Tony Renault.

Et on sentait combien cet intrépide garçon serait heureux s’il pouvait jamais tirer une de ces formidables pièces d’artillerie.

“Mais, ajouta ensuite Louis Clodion, ce n’est pas à bord des navires de guerre que vous avez le plus navigué?…

— Non, mes jeunes messieurs, répondit Will Mitz. Je ne suis resté que trois ans à l’État, et c’est au commerce que j’ai fait mon apprentissage de gabier.

— Sur quels bâtiments?… demanda Magnus Anders.

— Le North’s-Brothers, de Cardiff, avec lequel je suis allé à Boston, et le Great Britain, à Newcastle.

— Un grand navire?… dit Tony Renault.

— Certes, un charbonnier de trois mille cinq cents tonneaux, qui avait pris son complet chargement pour Melbourne.

— Et qu’est-ce que vous rapportiez?…

— Des blés d’Australie à destination de Leith, le port d’Edimbourg.

— Est-ce que vous n’aimez pas mieux la navigation à voile que la navigation à vapeur?… reprit Niels Harboe.

— Je la préfère et de beaucoup, répondit Will Mitz. C’est plus marin, ces traversées-là, et, en général, elles sont aussi rapides que les autres… Et puis, on ne navigue pas au milieu des fumées de charbon, et rien n’est magnifique comme un bâtiment couvert de toile, qui peut faire ses quinze ou seize milles à l’heure!

— Je vous crois… je vous crois!… répliqua Tony Renault que son imagination entraînait à travers toutes les mers du monde. Et quel est le navire sur lequel vous allez embarquer?…

— L’Elisa Warden, de Liverpool, un superbe quatre-mâts en acier, de trois mille huit cents tonnes, qui est revenu de Thio en Nouvelle Calédonie avec un chargement de nickel.

— Et quelle cargaison va-t-il prendre en Angleterre?… demanda John Howard.

— Une cargaison de houille pour San-Francisco, répondit Will Mitz, et je sais qu’il est affrété pour retour à Dublin avec blés de l’Oregon.

— Que doit durer le voyage?… reprit Magnus Anders.

— De onze à douze mois environ.

— Ah! s’exclama Tony Renault, voilà des traversées que je voudrais faire!… Un an entre le ciel et l’eau!… L’océan Atlantique, la mer du Sud, l’océan Pacifique!… On va par le cap Horn… on revient par le cap de Bonne-Espérance!… C’est presque le tour du monde!…

— Eh! mon jeune monsieur, répondit Will Mitz en souriant, vous auriez aimé la grande navigation…

— Assurément… et plus encore comme marin que comme passager!

— Voilà qui est bien dit, déclara Will Mitz, et je vois que vous avez goût pour la mer!…

— Magnus Anders et lui, affirma Niels Harboe en riant, si on les écoutait, il faudrait leur abandonner la direction du navire, l’un après l’autre à la barre!

— Par malheur, fit observer Louis Clodion, Magnus et Tony sont trop âgés pour faire leurs débuts dans la marine…

— Dirait-on pas que nous avons soixante ans!… riposta Tony Renault.

— Non… mais nous en avons vingt… avoua le jeune Suédois, et peut-être est-il trop tard…

— Qui sait?… répondit Will Mitz?… Vous êtes hardis, lestes, bien portants, et, avec ces qualités-là, le métier s’apprend vite!… Cependant, mieux vaut commencer jeune… Il est vrai, pour la marine du commerce, il n’y a pas d’âge réglementaire.

— Enfin, dit Louis Clodion, Tony et Magnus verront cela, lorsqu’ils auront fini leurs études à Antilian School…

— Et, quand on sort d’Antilian School, conclut Tony Renault, on est apte à tous les métiers… N’est-il pas vrai, monsieur Patterson?…”

Le mentor, qui venait d’arriver, paraissait un peu préoccupé. Peut-être songeait-il à la fameuse phrase latine dont il n’avait pas encore trouvé le sens. Toutefois il n’en dit mot, et Tony Renault, qui le regardait d’un air narquois, n’y fit aucune allusion. Mis au courant de la conversation, il donna raison au jeune pensionnaire qui tenait d’une main si vaillante le pavillon de l’école antilienne. Et le voici, l’excellent homme, qui se donne pour exemple. Il était l’économe d’Antilian School, c’est-à-dire absolument étranger à toutes les connaissances maritimes… Il n’avait jamais voyagé à travers les océans, même en rêve… En fait de bâtiment, il n’avait guère vu que ceux qui remontent ou descendent la Tamise à travers Londres… Eh bien, rien que parce qu’il appartenait au personnel administratif de la célèbre institution, il s’était trouvé capable d’affronter les colères de Neptune!… Sans doute, au début, pendant quelques jours, les secousses du roulage…

“Roulis, souffla Tony Renault.

— Oui… roulis… reprit M. Patterson, du roulis et du tang… oui… du tangage m’ont éprouvé, paraît-il!… Mais, à présent, ne suis-je pas cuirassé contre le mal de mer?… N’ai-je pas le pied marin?… Croyez-moi… experto crede Roberto.

— Horatio, souffla encore Tony Renault.

— Horatio… puisque j’ai été baptisé du même nom que le divin Flaccus!… Et, si je ne désire point lutter contre les tempêtes, les tornades, les cyclones, être le jouet des tourmentes et des ouragans, du moins je les contemplerais d’un oeil ferme et sans pâlir…

— Je vous en fais mon compliment, monsieur

Patterson, répondit Will Mitz. Du reste, entre nous, mieux vaut ne point en faire l’expérience… J’ai passé par là, et j’ai vu les plus braves parfois en proie à l’épouvante, lorsqu’ils se sentaient impuissants devant la tempête…

— Oh! fit M. Patterson, ce que j’en dis, ce n’est point pour provoquer la fureur des éléments!… Loin de moi cette pensée, qui ne serait ni d’un homme prudent, ni d’un mentor, d’un chargé d’âmes, de jeunes âmes, et qui sent tout le poids de sa responsabilité!… D’ailleurs, Will Mitz, j’espère que nous n’avons rien à redouter de semblable…

— Je l’espère, comme vous, monsieur Patterson. À cette époque de l’année, les mauvais temps sont assez rares dans cette partie de l’Atlantique. Il est vrai, un orage est toujours à craindre, et, un orage, on ne sait jamais ni ce qu’il sera ni ce qu’il durera… Nous en éprouverons, sans doute, car ils sont fréquents en septembre, et je souhaite qu’ils ne se changent point en tempête…

— Nous le souhaitons tous, répondit Niels

Harboe. Cependant, en cas de mauvais temps, nous pouvons avoir toute confiance en notre capitaine, c’est un marin habile.

— Oui, répondit Will Mitz, je sais que le capitaine Paxton a fait ses preuves, et j’en ai entendu dire le plus grand bien en Angleterre…

— Avec raison, déclara Hubert Perkins.

— Et son équipage, demanda Will Mitz, vous l’avez vu à l’œuvre?…

— John Carpenter paraît être un maître très entendu, déclara Niels Harboe, et ses hommes connaissent bien la manœuvre d’un navire.

— Ils ne sont pas causeurs… fit observer Will Mitz.

— En effet, mais leur conduite est bonne, répondit Magnus Anders. Puis, la discipline est sévère à bord, et le capitaine Paxton ne laisse jamais aucun matelot descendre à terre… Non! il n’y a rien à leur reprocher…

— Tant mieux, dit Will Mitz.

— Et nous ne demandons qu’une chose, ajouta Louis Clodion, c’est que la campagne se continue dans les conditions où elle s’est faite jusqu’à ce jour.”

CHAPITRE VIII

VIII

La nuit vient

Ainsi s’écoula cette première matinée du voyage de retour. La vie de bord allait reprendre sa régularité habituelle, dont la monotonie ne pouvait être rompue que par les incidents de mer, très rares, lorsque le temps est beau et le vent favorable.

Comme à l’ordinaire, le déjeuner fut servi dans le carré où se réunissaient les passagers sous la présidence de M. Patterson, et par les soins du steward.

Comme à l’ordinaire également, Harry Markel fit apporter son repas dans sa cabine.

Cela même parut quelque peu singulier à Will Mitz, puisqu’il est d’usage que le capitaine s’assoie à la table du carré des navires de commerce.

C’est en vain que Will Mitz chercha à lier conversation avec John Carpenter ou autres de l’équipage. Il ne sentit rien de cette camaraderie qui s’établit si facilement entre gens de mer.

Étant données les fonctions qu’il devait remplir à bord de l’Elisa Warden, le second de l’Alert aurait bien pu le traiter d’égal à égal.

Le repas achevé, Will Mitz remonta sur le pont avec les jeunes garçons qui lui faisaient si bon accueil.

Pendant l’après-midi, les distractions ne manquèrent pas. La brise étant modérée, la vitesse moyenne, des lignes furent mises à la traîne du haut de la dunette, et les passagers se livrèrent au plaisir d’une pêche qui fut fructueuse.

Aux plus ardents, Tony Renault, Magnus Anders, Niels Harboe, Axel Wickborn, se joignit Will Mitz, qui était un vrai pêcheur et très habile.

Il n’ignorait rien du métier de marin, doué d’une adresse et d’une intelligence qui n’échappèrent ni à Harry Markel ni au maître d’équipage.

Cette pêche dura plusieurs heures. On prit des bonites, d’excellente qualité, même un de ces esturgeons de grande taille, dont les femelles, pesant jusqu’à deux cents livres, portent un million d’œufs, espèce très abondante dans l’Atlantique et la Méditerranée.

Les lignes ramenèrent plusieurs de ces merluches qui suivent les bâtiments en troupes nombreuses, des scyphias, des épées de mer du genre espadon, et aussi quelques gymnotes, au corps allongé en forme de serpent, qui fréquentent plus volontiers les parages de l’Amérique.

M. Horatio Patterson, avant que Will Mitz eût pu le retenir, ayant eu l’imprudence de saisir à pleine main une de ces gymnotes, une décharge électrique l’envoya rouler jusqu’à l’habitacle.

On courut à lui, on le releva, et il lui fallut quelque temps pour se remettre.

“Il est dangereux de toucher ces bêtes-là… lui fit observer Will Mitz.

— Je m’en aperçois… trop tard, répondit M. Patterson en détirant ses bras engourdis par la secousse.

— Après tout, déclara Tony Renault, on dit que ces décharges font merveille pour les rhumatismes…

— Alors ça va bien, puisque je suis de nature rhumatisante, et me voici guéri pour jusqu'à la fin de mes jours!”

L'incident auquel les passagers prirent le plus d'intérêt fut la rencontre de trois ou quatre baleines.

Ces cétacés ne sont pas communs dans les parages des Antilles, que les baleiniers n'ont pas l'habitude de considérer comme lieux de pêche.

“C'est en plein Pacifique plus particulièrement que les bâtiments leur donnent la chasse, raconta Will Mitz, soit au nord, dans les vastes baies de la Colombie anglaise, où elles déposent leurs petits, soit dans le sud, sur les côtes de la Nouvelle-Zélande.

— Est-ce que vous avez fait la pêche à la baleine?… demanda Louis Clodion.

— Oui, pendant une saison, à bord du Wrangel de Belfast, aux abords des îles Kouriles et dans la mer d'Okhotsk. Mais il faut être équipé de pirogues, de lignes, de harpons, de harponneurs. Cela ne va pas sans grands risques, lorsqu'on est entraîné hors de vue, et cette pêche fait bien des victimes.

— Est-elle avantageuse?… dit Niels Harboe.

— Oui et non, répondit Will Mitz. L'habileté, c'est bien, mais la chance, c'est mieux, et, trop de fois, il arrive qu'une campagne finisse sans qu'il ait été possible d'amarrer une baleine!”

Au surplus, celles qui venaient d’être signalées soufflaient à trois milles au moins de l’Alert, et il fut impossible de les approcher de plus près, au vif regret des passagers. Même en se couvrant de toile, le trois-mâts n’aurait pu les gagner en vitesse. Elles filaient vers l’est avec tant de rapidité, qu’une pirogue aurait eu grand-peine à les rejoindre.

À mesure que le soleil s’abaissait sur l’horizon, la brise tendait à calmir.

Les nuages du couchant, épais et livides, restaient immobiles. Si le vent se levait de ce côté, ce serait un vent d’orage qui ne durerait pas. À l’opposé s’accumulaient de grosses vapeurs montant jusqu’au zénith, qui rendraient la nuit très obscure.

Il était même à craindre que le ciel s’illuminât d’éclairs et retentît des éclats de la foudre. La chaleur était très forte, la température lourde, l’espace saturé d’électricité.

Pendant que les lignes étaient dehors, Harry Markel avait dû faire mettre l’une des embarcations à la mer, quelques-uns de ces poissons étant tellement lourds qu’on n’aurait pu les hisser directement à bord.

La mer restant calme, cette embarcation ne fut pas remontée à son poste. Harry Markel avait, sans doute, ses raisons pour la laisser dehors.

L’Alert portait toute sa voilure, de manière à profiter des derniers souffles. Aussi Will Mitz pensait-il que le capitaine reprendrait une autre bordée vers le nord-est dès que la brise viendrait à fraîchir. Durant toute la journée, il avait vainement attendu que l’ordre fût donné de virer de bord, et ne parvenait pas à comprendre les intentions de Harry Markel.

Le soleil disparut derrière les gros nuages, dont l'épaisse couche interceptait ses derniers rayons. La nuit allait tomber rapidement, car le crépuscule est de courte durée sous les latitudes voisines du Tropique.

Harry Markel conserverait-il cette voilure jusqu'au jour… Will Mitz ne le pensait pas. Un orage pouvait éclater, et l'on sait avec quelle violence, quelle rapidité ils se déchaînent au milieu de ces parages.

Un bâtiment, surpris tout dessus, n'a pas le temps de larguer ses écoutes, d'amener ses voiles. En quelques instants, il peut engager, et, pour se relever, est forcé de couper sa mâture.

Un marin prudent ne saurait donc s'exposer à de tels risques, et, à moins que le temps ne soit absolument sûr, il est préférable de rester seulement sous les huniers, la misaine, la brigantine et les focs.

Vers six heures, après être monté sur la dunette où M. Patterson et ses jeunes compagnons étaient alors réunis, Harry Markel ordonna de relever la tente, ainsi qu'on avait soin de le faire chaque soir. Puis, ayant une dernière fois observé le temps:

“À serrer les cacatois et les perroquets”, commanda-t-il.

Cet ordre, aussitôt transmis par John Carpenter, l'équipage se mit en mesure de l'exécuter.

Il va sans dire que, suivant leur habitude, Tony Renault et Magnus Anders gravirent les haubans du grand mât avec une légèreté, une souplesse, qui provoquaient toujours chez le mentor autant d'admiration que d'inquiétude… et, aussi, de regret de ne pouvoir les imiter.

Cette fois, Will Mitz les suivit, non moins leste qu'eux. Ils atteignirent presque au même moment les barres, et tous trois s'occupaient de serrer le grand perroquet.

"Tenez-vous bien, mes jeunes messieurs, leur dit-il. C'est une précaution qu'il faut toujours prendre, même quand le navire ne roule pas…

— On tient bon, répondit Tony Renault. Ça ferait trop de peine à M. Patterson si nous tombions à la mer!"

Tous trois suffirent à serrer la voile contre la vergue, qui avait été amenée sur le ton du grand mât, après que cette opération eut été achevée pour le cacatois.

En même temps, les matelots en faisaient autant au mât de misaine; puis le grand foc, le clin-foc et la voile de flèche d'arrière furent rentrés.

Le navire demeura sous ses deux huniers, sa misaine, sa brigantine, son petit foc, que les derniers souffles de la brise gonflaient à peine.

Légèrement appuyé par le courant qui portait à l'est, il ne ferait que peu de route jusqu'au lever du soleil.

Mais Harry Markel ne serait pas surpris si quelque brusque orage tombait à bord.

En quelques instants, ou aurait cargué la misaine et mis les deux huniers au bas ris.

Lorsque Will Mitz fut redescendu avec Tony Renault et Magnus Anders sur la dunette, il observa la boussole, éclairée par la lampe d'habitacle.

Depuis le matin, l’Alert devait avoir couru d’une cinquantaine de milles vers le sud-est, et il pensait que le capitaine allait prendre un autre bord pour la nuit, cette fois, en direction du nord-est.

Harry Markel s’aperçut bien que son passager témoignait quelque surprise à le voir maintenir sa route. Mais, sévère observateur de la discipline, Will Mitz ne se fût pas permis de présenter aucune observation à cet égard.

En effet, après avoir regardé une dernière fois le compas, alors que Corty tenait la barre, il examina l’état du ciel et vînt s’asseoir au pied du grand mât.

À ce moment, Corty, ne risquant point d’être entendu, s’approchant d’Harry Markel, lui dit:

“Il semble bien que Mitz ne pense pas que nous soyons en bonne route!… Eh bien, on l’y mettra cette nuit, lui et les autres, et rien ne les empêchera de gagner Liverpool à la nage, si les requins leur laissent bras et jambes!”

Probablement le misérable trouva la remarque très plaisante, car il partit d’un violent éclat de rire, que Harry Markel réprima d’un regard.

En ce moment, John Carpenter le rejoignit.

“Nous gardons le grand canot à la traîne, Harry?… demanda-t-il.

— Oui, John, il peut nous servir…

— Si nous avions besoin d’achever la besogne au dehors!”

Ce soir-là, le dîner ne fut servi qu’à six heures et demie. Sur la table figurèrent plusieurs des poissons pêchés dans la journée, et que Ranyah

Cogh avait convenablement accommodés.

M. Patterson déclara n’avoir jamais rien mangé de meilleur… surtout les bonites, et il exprima l’espoir que les jeunes pêcheurs sauraient en prendre d’autres de la même espèce au cours de la traversée.

Après le dîner, tous remontèrent sur la dunette, où ils comptaient attendre que la nuit fût close pour regagner leurs cabines.

Le soleil, caché derrière les nuages, n’avait point encore disparu sous l’horizon, et l’obscurité ne serait pas complète avant une grande heure.

Or, Tony Renault, à cet instant, crut apercevoir une voile dans la direction de l’est, et, presque aussitôt, la voix de Will Mitz se fit entendre:

“Navire par bâbord devant.”

Tous les regards se dirigèrent de ce côté.

Un grand navire, portant ses huniers et ses basses voiles, apparaissait à quatre milles au vent. Sans doute, il trouvait là un peu plus de brise, et, grand largue, faisait route à contre-bord de l’Alert.

Louis Clodion et Roger Hinsdale allèrent chercher leurs lorgnettes et observèrent ce bâtiment qui s’approchait, cap au nord-ouest.

“Damné navire! murmura John Carpenter à

Harry Markel. Dans une heure, il sera par notre travers!…”

Cette réflexion que venait de faire le maître d’équipage, Corty et les autres l’avaient faite également. Si le vent tombait entièrement, les deux bâtiments resteraient encalminés pendant la nuit, peut-être à un demi-mille, un quart de mille l’un de l’autre!… Or, si, une première fois, sur la côte d’Irlande, Harry Markel avait pu se féliciter de ne pas en avoir fini avec ses passagers, les circonstances n’étaient plus maintenant les mêmes. L’argent de Mrs Kethlen Seymour était à bord et, dans le voisinage de ce navire, les criminels projets pourraient-ils être mis à exécution?…

“Malédiction! répétait John Carpenter, nous n’arriverons donc jamais à nous débarrasser de cette pension-là?… Est-ce qu’il faudra encore attendre la nuit prochaine?…”

Le bâtiment, profitant du restant de brise, s’approchait de l’Alert. Mais elle ne tarderait pas à lui manquer.

C’était un grand trois-mâts, à destination, soit d’une des Antilles, soit de l’un des ports du Mexique.

Quant à sa nationalité, impossible de la reconnaître, puisque son pavillon ne flottait pas à la corne de brigantine. Cependant il semblait bien que ce bâtiment devait être américain, d’après sa construction et son gréement.

“Il ne paraît pas lourdement chargé… fit observer Magnus Anders.

— En effet, répondit Will Mitz, et je croirais volontiers qu’il navigue sur lest.”

Trois quarts d’heure après, le navire n’était plus qu’à deux milles de l’Alert.

Comme le courant le portait dans cette direction, Harry Markel espérait qu’il dépasserait l’Alert. Pour peu qu’il fût à cinq ou six milles entre une heure et quatre heures du matin, en admettant qu’il y eût lutte à bord, les cris ne pourraient être entendus à cette distance.

Une demi-heure plus tard, lorsque le crépuscule prit fin, aucun souffle de vent ne se faisait sentir. Les deux bâtiments étaient encalminés à moins d’un demi-mille.

Vers neuf heures, M. Patterson, d’une voix que brouillait déjà le sommeil, dit:

“Allons, mes amis, est-ce que nous ne pensons pas réintégrer nos cabines?…

— Il n’est pas tard… monsieur Patterson, répondit Roger Hinsdale.

— Et dormir de neuf heures du soir à sept heures du matin, c’est trop, monsieur Patterson, ajouta Axel Wickborn.

— Et vous reviendrez en Europe gras comme un moine, monsieur Patterson, déclara Tony Renault, en arrondissant les bras autour de son ventre.

— N’ayez la moindre crainte à ce sujet, répliqua le mentor. Je saurai toujours me tenir dans les limites convenables entre la maigreur et l’obésité.

— Monsieur Patterson, vous connaissez le dicton qui nous vient des sages de l’antiquité?…” reprit Louis Clodion.

Et il commença les premiers vers de ce distique de l’école de Salerne:

“Sex horas dormire, sat est…

— Juveni senique… continua Hubert Perkins.

— Septem pigro… poursuivit John Howard.

— Nulli concedimus octo!” acheva Roger Hinsdale.

Si M. Horatio Patterson fut flatté d’entendre cette citation latine sortir successivement de la bouche des lauréats, inutile d’insister à cet égard. Mais enfin, il avait bonne envie de dormir, et il répondit:

“Restez, si cela vous plaît, à respirer l’air du soir sur la dunette… Mais moi… je serai ce piger… je serai même ce nullus, et je vais me coucher…

— Bonne nuit, monsieur Patterson!”

Le mentor redescendit sur le pont et rentra dans sa cabine. Une fois allongé sur son cadre, le hublot ouvert afin d’obtenir plus de fraîcheur, il s’endormit du sommeil des justes, après que ces mots se furent échappés de sa bouche:

“Rosam… letorum… angelum!”

Louis Clodion et ses camarades demeurèrent une heure encore en plein air. Ils causèrent du voyage aux Antilles, rappelant telle ou telle circonstance qui les avait frappés, songeant, au retour dans leurs familles, à cette joie de raconter tout ce qu’ils avaient fait, tout ce qu’ils avaient vu depuis leur départ.

De même que Harry Markel avait hissé son feu blanc à l’étai de misaine, de même le capitaine du navire inconnu avait hissé le sien à l’avant.

C’est prudent par ces nuits obscures, alors que courants et contre-courants peuvent occasionner des collisions. De la dunette on voyait osciller le fanal de ce bâtiment qui, sans changer de place, se balançait sous l’action d’une longue houle.

Tony Renault se promettait bien, cette fois, de ne point dépasser les sex hora recommandées par l’école de Salerne. Avant cinq heures du matin, il aurait quitté sa cabine, il serait sur la dunette. Et, si ce navire se trouvait encore par le travers de l’Alert, on hisserait le pavillon pour lui demander sa nationalité.

Enfin, vers dix heures, tous les passagers étaient endormis, sauf Will Mitz, qui se promenait sur le pont.

Mille pensées agitaient l’esprit du jeune marin. Il songeait à la Barbade… où il ne reviendrait pas avant trois ou quatre ans… à sa mère qu’il serait si longtemps sans revoir… à son embarquement sur l’Elisa Warden… à la position qu’il allait y occuper… à ce voyage qui le conduirait à travers des mers nouvelles pour lui…

Puis il songeait à l’Alert, sur lequel il avait pris passage… à ces jeunes garçons pour lesquels il éprouvait tant de sympathie… Tony Renault et Magnus Anders l’intéressait surtout par leur goût pour la navigation.

Puis, c’était l’équipage de l’Alert, ce capitaine Paxton, dont la personne lui inspirait une involontaire répulsion, ces marins, si peu enclins à l’accueillir!… Jamais il ne se les fût imaginés tels, et reviendrait-il de cette défavorable impression?…

Tout à ses préoccupations, Will Mitz allait du gaillard d’avant à la dunette. Quelques-uns des matelots étaient étendus le long des bastingages, les uns dormant, les autres causant à voix basse.

Harry Markel, voyant qu’il n’y avait rien à faire cette nuit, était rentré dans sa cabine, après avoir donné l’ordre qu’on le prévint, si le vent fraîchissait.

John Carpenter et Wagah, postés sur la dunette, regardaient le feu du trois-mâts dont l’éclat faiblissait. Une légère brume commençait à se lever. La lune étant nouvelle, les étoiles s’éteignant peu à peu derrière les vapeurs, il régnait une profonde obscurité.

Il arriva donc que le navire voisin de l’Alert ne fut bientôt plus visible. Mais il était là… Si des cris se faisaient entendre, il mettrait ses embarcations à la mer et peut-être recueillerait-il quelques-unes des victimes?…

Ce bâtiment devait compter vingt-cinq ou trente hommes d’équipage… Comment soutenir la lutte s’il l’engageait?… Dans ces conditions, Harry Markel avait raison d’attendre… Et il l’avait dit: ce qui ne se ferait pas cette nuit se ferait l’autre… À mesure que l’Alert s’éloignerait des Antilles dans la direction du sud-est, les rencontres de bâtiments seraient plus rares… Il est vrai, au jour, si les alizés reprenaient, Harry Markel devrait virer et courir une bordée au nord-ouest, ou cela aurait paru par trop suspect à Will Mitz…

Tandis que John Carpenter et Wagah s’entretenaient ainsi sur la dunette, deux des hommes causaient à bâbord, près du gaillard d’avant.

C’étaient Corty et Ranyah Cogh. On les voyait souvent ensemble, car Corty rôdait toujours autour de la cuisine pour attraper quelque bon morceau que le cuisinier lui tenait en réserve.

Et voici ce qu’ils disaient, — ce que d’ailleurs devaient se dire leurs compagnons, auxquels il tardait tant d’être enfin maîtres de l’Alert:

“Décidemment, Harry y met trop de prudence, Corty…

— Peut-être, Cogh, et peut-être n’a-t-il pas tort!… Si l’on était sûr de les surprendre dans leurs cabines pendant qu’ils sont endormis, on les expédierait sans qu’ils aient eu le temps de pousser un cri…

— Un coup de coutelas à la gorge, cela vous gêne un peu pour appeler au secours…

— Sans doute, Ranyah, mais il est possible qu’ils essaient de se défendre!… Et ce maudit bâtiment ne s’est-il pas rapproché au milieu de la brume?… Que l’un de ces garçons se jette à la mer et parvienne à gagner le navire, le capitaine aura vite fait d’envoyer une vingtaine d’hommes à bord de l’Alert!… Nous ne serons pas en nombre pour résister et c’est à fond de cale qu’on nous reconduira aux Antilles, puis de là en Angleterre!… Cette fois, les policemen sauront bien nous garder en prison… et tu sais ce qui nous attend, Ranyah!…

— Le diable s’en mêle, Corty!… Après tant de bonnes chances, cette mauvaise qui amène ce navire sur notre route!… Et ce calme qui survient!… Et quand je pense qu’il ne faudrait qu’une heure de bonne brise pour nous déhaler à cinq ou six milles…

— Ça viendra peut-être avant le jour, répliqua Corty. Par exemple, prenons garde à ce Will Mitz, qui ne me paraît point homme à se laisser surprendre…

— Je lui ferai son affaire, déclara Ranyah Cogh, dans sa cabine ou sur le pont, n’importe où il sera!… Un bon coup entre les deux épaules!… Il n’aura même pas le temps de se retourner, et, aussitôt, par-dessus le bord…

— N’était-il pas tout à l’heure à se promener sur le pont?… demanda Corty.

— En effet, répondit Cogh, et je ne le vois plus… à moins qu’il ne soit sur la dunette…

— Non, Ranyah… Il n’y a que John Carpenter et le steward, et voici même qu’ils en descendent…

— Alors, répondit Ranyah Cogh, Will Mitz sera rentré dans le carré… Si ce satané navire n’était pas là, ce serait le moment… et, en quelques minutes, plus un seul passager à bord…

— Puisqu’il n’y a rien à faire, conclut Corty, allons dormir.”

Ils regagnèrent le poste, tandis que deux hommes restaient de quart à l’avant.

Will Mitz, blotti sous le gaillard où il ne pouvait être aperçu, avait entendu cette conversation. À présent il savait tout… Il savait entre quelles mains était tombé le navire… Il savait que le capitaine était Harry Markel… Il savait que ces misérables voulaient jeter les passagers à la mer… Et cet abominable forfait eût été accompli déjà sans la présence du bâtiment que le calme retenait à proximité de l’Alert!

CHAPITRE IX

IX

Will Mitz

Un peu après onze heures, pendant cette nuit du 22 au 23 septembre, une embarcation errait, au milieu des brumes, à la surface de la mer. À peine se balançait-elle au gré d’une houle molle que ne troublait aucun souffle.

Deux avirons la poussaient sans bruit dans la direction du nord-est, — à l’estime du moins, car l’étoile polaire, cachée derrière les vapeurs à demi condensées du brouillard, ne se voyait pas.

L’homme qui tenait la barre devait regretter que le temps n’eût pas tourné à l’orage. Si quelque éclair eût sillonné l’espace, il aurait pu aller directement à son but, au lieu de se diriger en aveugle. Avant que la mer se fût grossie sous les rafales, il eût franchi la faible distance qui le séparait de ce but et assuré le salut commun.

Cette embarcation contenait onze personnes: deux hommes et neuf jeunes garçons, dont les plus âgés s’étaient mis aux avirons. L’un des hommes, se relevant parfois, essayant de glisser son regard à travers quelque déchirure des brumes, prêtait l’oreille…

C’était le grand canot de l’Alert qui emportait les fugitifs. C’étaient Louis Clodion et Axel Wickborn qui nageaient à l’avant. C’était Will Mitz qui gouvernait, cherchant vainement sa route au milieu de cette obscurité que les buées chaudes de la nuit rendaient plus épaisse encore.

Ils avaient perdu de vue l’Alert depuis un quart d’heure et ils n’apercevaient pas le feu blanc du trois-mâts dont la distance ne devait pas dépasser un demi-mille, le calme ayant dû le maintenir à la même place.

Voici comment les choses s’étaient passées.

À la suite de la conversation surprise entre Corty et Ranyah Cogh, Will Mitz s’était glissé hors du gaillard sans être aperçu et avait regagné le carré de la dunette.

Là, il y resta quelques minutes à se rendre compte de ce que commandaient les circonstances avant d’agir.

Aucun doute: le capitaine Paxton et son équipage avaient été massacrés à bord de l’Alert, et, lorsque les passagers arrivèrent, le navire se trouvait déjà aux mains d’Harry Markel et de ses complices.

Quant à ces malfaiteurs, Will Mitz n’ignorait pas ce que les journaux des Antilles avaient raconté sur les pirates de l’Halifax, leur arrestation, puis leur évasion de la prison de Queenstown, en Irlande, — évasion dont la date coïncidait avec celle du départ de l’Alert. Après s’être emparés du navire au mouillage de l’anse Farmar, le défaut de vent avait dû les empêcher d’appareiller… Le lendemain, embarquement de M. Patterson et des pensionnaires d’Antilian School… Quant à la raison pour laquelle Harry Markel ne s’était pas débarrassé d’eux comme il avait fait du capitaine Paxton et de son équipage, pourquoi il n’avait pas exécuté ses projets pendant la traversée de l’Angleterre aux Antilles,

Will Mitz ne savait se l’expliquer.

Mais l’heure n’était point à ces explications. Si les passagers ne parvenaient pas à quitter l’Alert, ils étaient perdus. Que le vent vint à se lever, les deux bâtiments s’éloigneraient l’un de l’autre, et le massacre s’accomplirait… Si ce n’était pas cette nuit, ce serait la nuit prochaine, ou même le jour venu, à la condition que la mer fût déserte… Quoique averti, Will Mitz ne pourrait organiser une défense sérieuse.

Or, puisqu’une circonstance providentielle — on a droit de le dire — retardait la perpétration du crime, il fallait en profiter et chercher le salut là où il était.

Donc, nécessité de partir, et de partir sans donner l’éveil. Harry Markel s’était retiré dans sa cabine. John Carpenter et Wagah venaient de regagner le poste où les autres dormaient déjà. Il n’y avait plus à l’avant que le matelot de quart qui ne devait pas faire bonne surveillance.

Et, d’abord, pour rejoindre le navire encalminé, il y avait une embarcation, le grand canot, qui, après la pêche, était resté à la traîne par ordre d’Harry Markel.

Homme de courage et de résolution, Will Mitz s’était décidé à tout tenter pour sauver ses compagnons, en même temps qu’il assurerait son propre salut.

Les pirates de l’Halifax à bord de l’Alert!… Ainsi s’expliquait cette antipathie que lui inspira dès le premier abord le prétendu capitaine Paxton, et cette répulsion qu’il éprouvait en présence de l’équipage, et la réserve farouche que ces hommes, chargés de crimes, gardaient vis-à-vis de lui!…

Il n’y avait pas un instant à perdre pour profiter des circonstances favorables.

Personne n’ignore avec quelle rapidité le temps change dans ces parages des Tropiques… Une légère brise suffirait à éloigner l’Alert… On n’avait serré ni les huniers, ni la misaine, ni la brigantine, que gonfleraient les premiers souffles du vent… Au même moment, l’autre bâtiment s’éloignerait en direction contraire, et il n’y aurait plus chance de le rencontrer, — chance déjà si incertaine au milieu de ces brumes qui ne permettaient pas de l’apercevoir!…

Ce qu’il y avait d’abord à faire, c’était de réveiller les passagers l’un après l’autre, de les prévenir en quelques mots, puis de les embarquer dans le canot par l’arrière du carré, sans attirer l’attention du matelot de quart.

Avant tout, Will Mitz voulut s’assurer si Harry Markel était toujours dans sa cabine, qui occupait un des angles de la dunette, à l’entrée. Le bruit aurait pu l’éveiller, et, à moins de le mettre hors d’état d’appeler, la fuite serait compromise.

Will Mitz se glissa près de la porte de la cabine, il appuya son oreille contre le vantail, il écouta quelques instants.

Harry Markel, sachant qu’il n’y aurait rien à faire cette nuit, dormait d’un profond sommeil.

Will Mitz revint au fond du carré et, sans allumer la lampe suspendue au plafond, il ouvrit une des deux fenêtres percées dans le tableau d’arrière, à six pieds environ au-dessus de la ligne de flottaison.

Cette fenêtre serait-elle assez large pour que les passagers pussent descendre dans le canot?…

De jeunes garçons, oui!… mais des hommes un peu forts, non…

Heureusement, M. Patterson n'était point corpulent. Les épreuves de la traversée l'avaient plutôt amaigri, en dépit des banquets dont il prenait si copieusement sa part aux diverses réceptions en l'honneur des pensionnaires d'Antilian School.

Quant à lui, Will Mitz, élancé, agile, souple, il saurait bien se glisser par cette fenêtre.

La fuite étant possible, sans avoir à remonter sur la dunette, — ce qui l'eut rendue inexécutable peut-être, — Will Mitz s'occupa de réveiller ses compagnons.

La première cabine, dont il ouvrit doucement la porte, fut celle de Louis Clodion et de Tony Renault.

Tous deux dormaient, et Louis Clodion ne se releva qu'au moment où il sentit une main s'appuyer sur son épaule.

“Pas un mot!… dit Will Mitz. C'est moi…

— Que voulez-vous?…

— Pas un mot, vous dis-je!… Nous courons les plus grands dangers!…”

Une phrase suffit à expliquer la situation. Louis Clodion, qui en comprit la gravité, eut la force de se contenir.

“Éveillez votre camarade, ajouta Will Mitz. Moi… je vais prévenir les autres…

— Et comment fuir?… demanda Louis Clodion.

— Dans le canot… il est à l’arrière au bout de son amarre… Il nous conduira au navire qui ne doit pas être éloigné!”

Louis Clodion n’en demanda pas davantage, et, tandis que Will Mitz sortait de sa cabine, il réveilla Tony Renault qui sauta hors de son cadre, dès qu’il eut été mis au courant.

En quelques minutes, tous les jeunes lauréats furent sur pied. Quant à M. Patterson, il ne serait prévenu qu’au dernier moment. On l’entraînerait, on l’affalerait dans l’embarcation, sans même lui donner le temps de comprendre.

Il convient de le dire à l’éloge d’Antilian School, pas un de ses pensionnaires ne se montra faible devant le danger. Il ne leur échappa ni une plainte, ni un cri d’effroi, qui auraient compromis cette évasion tentée dans des conditions si difficiles.

Toutefois, Niels Harboe fit cette proposition, qui témoignait d’une âme énergique:

“Je ne m’en irai pas sans avoir arraché la vie à ce misérable!”

Et il se dirigeait vers la cabine d’Harry Markel.

Will Mitz l’arrêta:

“Vous n’en ferez, rien, monsieur Harboe… dit-il. Harry Markel pourrait se réveiller au moment où vous entreriez dans sa cabine, puis appeler, puis se défendre, et nous serions bientôt accablés!… Embarquons sans bruit… Une fois à bord du navire, je ne doute pas que son commandant ne veuille s’emparer de l’Alert et des bandits qui en sont les maîtres!”

C’était le seul parti à prendre.

“Et M. Patterson?… observa Roger Hinsdale.

— Embarquez d’abord, répondit Will Mitz, et, lorsque vous serez installés, nous le ferons descendre.”

Alors Louis Clodion et ses camarades de revêtir quelques vêtements plus chauds. Des vivres, il n’en fut pas question, puisqu’il ne s’agissait que de rejoindre le navire à un demi-mille. Dût même le canot attendre le lever de la brume ou le lever du jour, on l’apercevrait. Et, fussent-ils alors vus de l’équipage de l’Alert, les fugitifs seraient recueillis avant qu’Harry Markel et ses hommes eussent pu se mettre à leur poursuite.

Ce qu’il y avait surtout à craindre, c’était la reprise du vent. En ce cas, le bâtiment eût fait route vers l’ouest, tandis que l’Alert aurait marché vers l’est. Dans ce cas, le jour venu, l’embarcation serait exposée à tous les dangers, sans eau et sans vivres, sur cette mer déserte.

Cependant Hubert Perkins recommanda à chacun d’emporter son petit sac aux guinées. Si, à l’aube, l’Alert avait disparu, cette somme de sept mille livres qui aurait échappé à la bande servirait au rapatriement des fugitifs.

Le moment était venu.

Louis Clodion alla se poster contre la cabine et s’assura que rien n’avait troublé le sommeil d’Harry Markel. En même temps, par la porte ouverte de la dunette, il observait le matelot de quart sur le gaillard d’avant.

Will Mitz, se penchant en dehors de l’une des fenêtres du carré, saisit l’amarre et attira le canot sous la voûte d’arrière.

La brume paraissait s’être encore épaissie. À peine distinguait-on l’embarcation. On n’entendait que le petit clapotis léchant le doublage de l’Alert.

Un à un, et sans trop de peine, les jeunes garçons se laissèrent glisser le long de l’amarre que tenait Will Mitz, John Howard et Axel Wickborn les premiers, Hubert Perkins et Niels Harboe les deuxièmes, Magnus Anders et Tony Renault les troisièmes, Albertus Leuwen et Roger Hinsdale les quatrièmes. Il ne restait plus dans le carré que Louis Clodion et Will Mitz.

Will Mitz allait ouvrir la porte de la cabine de M. Patterson, lorsque Louis Clodion l’arrêta.

“Prenons garde… murmura-t-il. Voici l’homme de quart qui vient…

— Attendons, dit Will Mitz.

— Il a un fanal à la main… reprit Louis Clodion.

— Poussez la porte, et il ne pourra rien voir à l’intérieur du carré.”

Le matelot se trouvait déjà entre le grand mât et le mât de misaine. S’il montait sur la dunette, la brume serait sans doute assez forte pour lui dérober l’embarcation déjà chargée et prête à larguer son amarre.

Mais, aux mouvements désordonnés du fanal, Will Mitz reconnut que le porteur ne tenait guère sur ses jambes. Assurément, après s’être procuré une bouteille de brandy ou de gin, cet homme avait bu outre mesure. Puis, ayant peut-être entendu quelque bruit à l’arrière, il s’était machinalement dirigé de ce côté.

Vraisemblablement, tout étant tranquille, il reviendrait prendre sa place sur le gaillard d’avant.

C’est ce qui arriva et, dès que l’ivrogne eut rebroussé chemin, Louis Clodion et Will Mitz s’occupèrent de M. Patterson.

Le mentor dormait d’un profond sommeil et de sonores ronflements emplissaient sa cabine. Peut-être même était-ce ce bruit qui avait attiré l’attention du matelot de quart.

Il fallait se hâter. Les passagers, déjà embarqués, étaient dévorés à la fois d’inquiétude et d’impatience. À chaque instant, ils s’imaginaient surprendre quelque cri, voir les matelots apparaître sur la dunette!… Et comment démarrer tant que M. Patterson, Louis Clodion, Will Mitz ne seraient pas avec eux?… Et si Harry Markel, réveillé, appelait; si John Carpenter, Corty, venaient à son appel, ils étaient perdus!… La présence du bâtiment n’aurait pas empêché le massacre de s’accomplir!…

Louis Clodion entra dans la cabine de M. Patterson et lui toucha légèrement l’épaule.

Les ronflements cessèrent aussitôt, et ces mots s’échappèrent des lèvres du dormeur:

“Madame Patterson… trigonocéphale… angelum… À bientôt le mariage…”

Et de quoi rêvait le digne homme… du serpent… de la citation latine et aussi de mariage!… Quel mariage?…

Comme il ne se réveillait pas, Louis Clodion le secoua plus vivement, après lui avoir mis la main sur la bouche pour l’empêcher de crier, en cas qu’il se revît aux prises avec le terrible serpent dans les forêts de la Martinique

M. Patterson se releva cette fois, en reconnaissant la voix de celui qui lui parlait.

“Louis… Louis Clodion?…” répétait-il, ne comprenant guère ce qu’on lui disait du capitaine Paxton qui n’était pas le capitaine Paxton, de l’Alert tombé au pouvoir de Harry Markel, de la nécessité de rejoindre les passagers qui l’attendaient dans l’embarcation…

Mais, ce qui ne lui échappa point, c’est que la vie de ses jeunes compagnons, la sienne, étaient menacées, s’ils restaient à bord de l’Alert… C’est que tout était préparé en vue d’une fuite immédiate, et qu’on n’attendait plus que lui pour chercher refuge sur le navire signalé…

M. Patterson, sans plus demander, s’habilla avec autant de sang-froid que de rapidité. Il revêtit son pantalon dont il mit soin de retrousser les jambes, il passa son gilet dans le gousset duquel fut glissée sa montre, il endossa sa longue redingote, il se coiffa de son chapeau noir, et répondit à Will Mitz qui le pressait:

“Quand vous voudrez, mon ami…”

Peut-être, en apercevant le reptile qu’il fallait abandonner, M. Patterson eut-il gros cœur; mais il ne désespérait pas de le revoir à cette place, lorsque l’Alert, repris à Harry Markel, serait ramené au port le plus rapproché de l’Antilie.

Restait la question de s’introduire à travers l’étroite fenêtre de l’arrière, de saisir l’amarre, et de s’affaler dans le canot, sans faire ni un faux mouvement ni le moindre bruit.

Au moment où il sortait de sa cabine, la pensée vint à M. Patterson d’emporter la sacoche qui contenait les sept cents livres de Mrs Kethlen Seymour ainsi que le carnet sur lequel il inscrivait les dépenses du voyage, et qui trouvèrent place dans les vastes poches de la redingote.

“Qui aurait jamais cru cela de ce capitaine Paxton!…” se-répétait-il.

Le capitaine Paxton et Harry Markel s’identifiaient encore dans sa pensée, et il n’était pas parvenu à dédoubler ces deux êtres qui se ressemblaient si peu!…

Il ne fallait pas compter sur la souplesse ou l’adresse du mentor. On dut l’aider tandis qu’il glissait le long de l’amarre. Toute la crainte de Will Mitz était qu’il ne vint à tomber lourdement au fond du canot, ce qui aurait pu éveiller l’attention du matelot de quart, si gris qu’il fût…

Enfin M. Patterson atteignit du pied l’un des bancs, et Axel Wickborn le soutint par le bras, pour l’aider à gagner l’arrière.

Ce fut alors le tour de Louis Clodion, qui s’assura une dernière fois que le sommeil d’Harry Markel n’avait point été interrompu, et que tout était tranquille à bord.

Après lui, Will Mitz franchit la fenêtre, et s’affala en un instant. Pour ne point perdre de temps à défaire le noeud de l’amarre, il prit son couteau et la coupa, laissant un bout de quatre à cinq pieds pendre du haut du couronnement.

L’embarcation s’éloigna de l’Alert.

Will Mitz et ses compagnons parviendraient-ils à se réfugier à bord du navire?… Le retrouveraient-ils au milieu de cette brumeuse obscurité, avant que le soleil eût reparu sur l’horizon?… Serait-il là, d’ailleurs, et la brise n’allait-elle pas se lever, qui lui permettrait de faire route?…

En tout cas, si les passagers échappaient au sort que leur réservaient Harry Markel et ses complices, ce serait à Will Mitz qu’ils le devraient, et aussi à Mrs Kethlen Seymour, qui lui avait obtenu passage sur l’Alert!

CHAPITRE X

X

Au milieu des brumes

Il était onze heures et demie.

Si l’obscurité n’eût pas été si complète, la brume si épaisse, on aurait pu voir, à la distance d’un mille ou deux, le feu du bâtiment hissé à l’étai du mât de misaine.

Rien n’apparaissait, ni la masse d’un bâtiment, ni la clarté d’un fanal. Ce que Will Mitz savait, c’est que le navire, alors qu’il cessa de faire route, se trouvait dans le nord. L’embarcation se dirigea donc de ce côté, assurée, du moins, de s’éloigner de l’Alert.

Le brouillard, joint à la nuit, rendait la fuite plus difficile. Toutefois, faute de vent, sur une mer unie comme une glace, le bâtiment aurait été atteint en une heure, si Will Mitz n’eût marché pour ainsi dire à l’aventure!…

Et, à présent, les fugitifs pouvaient reconstituer, dès son début, ce drame dont le dénouement ne se fût pas fait attendre!

“Ainsi, dit Hubert Perkins, ce sont les pirates de l’Halifax qui se sont emparés de l’Alert!…

— Et tandis qu’on les cherchait dans le quartier du port, ajouta Niels Harboe, ils parvenaient à gagner l’anse Farmar!…

— Mais, fit observer Albertus Leuwen, ils savaient donc que l’Alert était en partance, n’ayant à bord que son capitaine et son équipage…

— Sans doute, répondit Roger Hinsdale. Les journaux avaient annoncé ce départ pour le 30 juin, et c’est précisément la veille qu’ils se sont échappés de la prison de Queenstown… Ils ont risqué le tout pour le tout, et cela leur a réussi!…

— Et, dit Axel Wickborn, c’est dans la nuit qui a précédé notre embarquement, que le malheureux capitaine Paxton et son équipage ont été surpris, massacrés, jetés à la mer…

— Oui, ajouta John Howard, et c’est bien le corps de l’un d’eux que le courant a porté sur la grève où il a été retrouvé, ainsi qu’on en a été avisé à la Barbade…

— Et rappelez-vous l’audace de ce Markel!… s’écria Tony Renault. N’a-t-il pas déclaré à l’officier de l’Essex qu’il avait perdu un de ses hommes dans la baie… et n’a-t-il pas même ajouté que si ce pauvre Bob avait reçu un coup de poignard, c’étaient probablement les bandits de l’Halifax qui l’avaient frappé!… Le misérable! puisse-t-il être repris… jugé… condamné… pendu… et les siens avec lui!”

Ces quelques propos échangés, tandis que le canot gagnait vers le nord, montrent que les passagers de l’Alert n’ignoraient plus rien des circonstances dans lesquelles le massacre du capitaine Paxton et de son équipage s’était accompli. Lorsqu’ils arrivèrent à bord, Harry Markel et ses bandits étaient déjà maîtres du navire.

Alors, Hubert Perkins posa cette question:

“Pourquoi, sans attendre notre arrivée, l’Alert n’a-t-il pas pris la mer?…

— Faute de vent, répondit Louis Clodion. Tu te rappelles bien, Hubert, depuis deux jours le temps était aussi calme qu’il l’est aujourd’hui… Pendant notre traversée de Bristol à Cork, nous n’avons pas eu un souffle de brise… Évidemment, son coup fait, Markel espérait mettre à la voile, mais il ne l’a pas pu…

— Aussi, affirma Roger Hinsdale, ce misérable s’est-il décidé à jouer son rôle… Il est devenu le capitaine Paxton, et les autres sont devenus les matelots de l’Alert…

— Et dire que, depuis bientôt deux mois, s’écria Tony Renault, nous vivons dans la société de ces coquins… des pillards, des assassins, et qu’ils ont été assez habiles pour faire figure d’honnêtes gens…

— Oh! fit Albertus Leuwen, ils ne nous ont jamais inspiré aucune sympathie…

— Pas même ce Corty, qui affectait tant de bonnes intentions à notre égard!… déclara Axel Wickborn.

— Et encore moins Harry Markel, qui ne nous donnait pas une bonne idée du capitaine Paxton!” ajouta Hubert Perkins.

Will Mitz les écoutait. Ils n’avaient plus rien à s’apprendre ni les uns ni les autres. Et ils se souvenaient, non sans honte et sans colère, des éloges qu’ils avaient faits du capitaine et de son équipage, des remerciements dont on avait comblé ces malfaiteurs, de la prime que Mrs Kethlen Seymour avait accordée à cette bande de meurtriers…

Et, ces éloges, n’était-ce pas M. Patterson qui s’en était montré le plus prodigue dans les termes excessifs que lui suggérait son emphase habituelle!

Mais, à cette heure, le mentor ne songeait guère à revenir sur le passé, ni à ce qu’il avait pu dire en l’honneur du capitaine. Assis au fond du canot, entendant à peine les observations échangées autour de lui, s’il avait songé à quelqu’un, c’eût été sans doute à Mrs Patterson…

En réalité, il ne songeait à rien.

Alors une dernière question fut faite, à laquelle on répondit d’une façon assez plausible, qui était juste, d’ailleurs.

Pourquoi, après avoir reçu à bord les pensionnaires d’Antilian School, Henry Markel ne s’était-il pas débarrassé d’eux dès le début de la traversée afin de rallier les mers du sud?…

À cette question, Louis Clodion fit la réponse suivante:

“Je crois bien que ce Markel avait l’intention de se défaire de nous dès que l’Alert aurait été en pleine mer. Mais, faute de vent, forcé de rester sous la côte, il aura appris que chaque passager devait toucher une prime à la Barbade, et, avec une incroyable audace, il a conduit l’Alert aux Antilles…

— Oui, dit Will Mitz, oui… ce doit être la raison, et c’est le désir de s’approprier cet argent qui vous a sauvé la vie, mes jeunes messieurs… en admettant qu’elle soit sauvée”, murmura-t-il, car la situation s’aggravait sans qu’il voulût rien laisser paraître de ses inquiétudes.

En effet, depuis près d’une heure, l’embarcation errait au milieu des brumes. Elle n’avait pas rencontré le navire, bien qu’elle eût marché dans sa direction relevée la veille.

Mais Will Mitz, n’ayant pas de boussole, n’avait pas même pu se guider sur les étoiles, et plus de temps s’était écoulé qu’il ne lui en aurait fallu pour accoster le bâtiment. Or, s’il avait été dépassé, que faire?… Revenir vers l’est ou vers l’ouest?… Ne serait-ce pas courir le risque de se retrouver dans les eaux de l’Alert?… Ne valait-il pas mieux attendre au large que le brouillard se fût dissipé, et, peut-être, serait-ce au lever du soleil, c’est-à-dire dans quatre ou cinq heures?… Le canot rejoindrait alors le navire, et, en admettant que les fugitifs fussent aperçus de l’Alert, Harry Markel n’oserait pas les poursuivre. La situation deviendrait très mauvaise pour ses compagnons et lui…

Il est vrai, d’ici là, qui sait si un peu de brise n’aurait pas permis à l’Alert de s’éloigner vers le sud-est? Aussi Will Mitz comprenait-il à présent pourquoi Harry Markel avait mis le cap en cette direction. Par malheur, l’autre bâtiment aurait eu toute facilité pour continuer sa route en sens inverse, et, au lever du jour, il ne serait plus en vue. Que deviendrait alors l’embarcation avec les onze passagers qu’elle portait à la merci du vent et de la mer?…

En tout cas, Will Mitz manœuvra de manière à rester, autant que possible, à longue distance de l’Alert.

Une heure après minuit, rien de nouveau. Une vive inquiétude commençait à se manifester chez quelques-uns des fugitifs. Pleins d’espoir en partant, ils se disaient qu’une demi-heure après ils seraient en sûreté. Or, depuis deux heures déjà, ils couraient à la recherche du bâtiment au milieu de cette profonde nuit.

Louis Clodion et Roger Hinsdale, montrant une grande énergie, réconfortaient leurs camarades, lorsque quelque plainte, quoique défaillance, se faisaient sentir ou entendre, à défaut de M. Patterson, qui ne semblait plus avoir conscience de rien.

Will Mitz les secondait:

“Ayez bon espoir, mes jeunes messieurs, répétait-il. La brise ne s’est point levée, et le navire doit être là… Lorsque ces brumes se dissiperont avec le jour, nous l’apercevrons alors que notre embarcation sera loin de l’Alert, et il suffira de quelques coups d’avirons pour être à bord!”

Cependant Will Mitz était extrêmement anxieux, bien qu’il n’en voulût rien laisser paraître, en songeant à une éventualité qui risquait de se produire.

N’était-il pas à craindre qu’un de ces bandits eût découvert la fuite des passagers, que Harry Markel sût maintenant à quoi s’en tenir, qu’il se fût embarqué dans le second canot avec quelques-uns de ses hommes?…

Cela était possible, après tout. Ce misérable n’avait-il pas un intérêt majeur à reprendre les fugitifs, puisque les calmes empêchaient l’Alert de quitter ces parages?…

Et même, la brise lui eut-elle permis d’éventer ses voiles, ne courait-il pas le danger d’être poursuivi par ce navire, plus rapide et assurément plus fort que le sien et dont le capitaine serait au courant de la situation?…

Aussi Will Mitz tendait-il l’oreille aux moindres bruits qui se propageaient à la surface de la mer. Parfois il croyait entendre un va-et-vient d’avirons à faible distance, ce qui eût indiqué que l’embarcation de l’Alert était à leur poursuite.

Alors, il recommandait de ne plus nager. Le canot, immobile, n’obéissait qu’aux lentes oscillations de la houle. Tous écoutaient en silence, avec la crainte que la voix de John Carpenter ou de tout autre sortit des brumes…

Une heure s’écoula encore. Louis Clodion et ses camarades se relayaient aux avirons, uniquement pour se maintenir sur place. Will Mitz ne voulait pas s’éloigner davantage, ne sachant quelle direction suivre. D’ailleurs, au moment où le soleil reparaîtrait, il importait de ne pas être à une trop grande distance du navire, soit pour lui faire des signaux, soit pour essayer de le rejoindre, s’il se remettait en route.

À cette époque de l’équinoxe, dans la seconde moitié du mois de septembre, le jour n’apparaît guère avant six heures du matin. Il est vrai, dès cinq heures, si le brouillard se dissipait, un bâtiment serait assurément visible dans un rayon de trois à quatre milles.

Aussi, ce que Will Mitz devait désirer, ce dont il parlait avec Roger Hinsdale et Louis Clodion, avec Tony Renault, qui ne se laissait pas abattre, c’était que la brume vint à s’enlever avant l’aube.

“Non point sous l’action de la brise, ajoutait-il, car, si l’Alert s’éloignait, l’autre navire s’éloignerait également, et nous n’aurions plus autour de nous qu’une mer déserte!”

Or, avec ce canot non ponté, très chargé, sans la possibilité d’y établir une voile, un canot que le moindre coup de mer mettrait en perdition, serait-il possible de rallier un port des Antilles?… Will Mitz estimait que, pendant cette première journée de navigation, l’Alert devait s’être déplacé d’une soixantaine de milles dans le sud-est de la Barbade. Soixante milles, même avec une voilure, par bon vent et mer maniable, l’embarcation eût à peine franchi cette distance en quarante-huit heures!… Et pas de provisions à bord, ni eau ni vivres!… Le jour venu, la faim et la soif! comment les apaiser?

Une heure plus tard, brisés de fatigue, saisis d’un irrésistible besoin de dormir, la plupart des jeunes garçons, étendus sur les bancs, avaient succombé au sommeil. Si Louis Clodion et Roger Hinsdale résistaient encore, la nuit ne s’achèverait pas sans qu’ils eussent imité leurs camarades.

Will Mitz resterait donc seul à veiller. Et qui sait s’il ne se sentirait pas pris de désespoir devant tant de circonstances défavorables, tant de chances contraires?

De fait, il n’était plus nécessaire de recourir aux avirons, si ce n’est pour étaler le courant en attendant soit le lever du brouillard, soit le lever du jour.

Toutefois, il semblait bien que quelques souffles intermittents passaient à travers les vapeurs, et, bien que le calme reprit aussitôt, certains symptômes indiquaient le retour du vent à l’approche de l’aube.

Il était un peu plus de quatre heures, lors qu’un choc se produisit. L’avant du canot venait de se heurter, légèrement il est vrai, contre un obstacle, et cet obstacle ne pouvait être que la coque d’un navire.

Était-ce celui que les fugitifs cherchaient inutilement depuis de si longues heures?…

Les uns s’étaient éveillés d’eux-mêmes, les autres avaient été réveillés par leurs camarades.

Will Mitz saisit un des avirons, afin de ranger la coque du bâtiment. L’embarcation l’avait accosté par l’arrière, et Will Mitz sentit les ferrures d’un gouvernail.

Le canot se trouvait donc sous la voûte du navire, et, bien que la brume fût un peu moins épaisse, il n’avait pas dû être aperçu des hommes de quart.

Soudain, la main de Will Mitz saisit un cordage qui pendait de quatre à cinq pieds en dehors du couronnement.

Will Mitz reconnut ce cordage…

C’était l’amarre qu’il avait coupée lui-même, en s’éloignant, et ce navire, c’était l’Alert…

“L’Alert!” répéta-t-il avec un geste de désespoir.

Ainsi, après avoir erré toute cette nuit, c’était vers l’Alert qu’une mauvaise chance les avait ramenés, et ils allaient retomber entre les mains d’Harry Markel!

Tous étaient atterrés, et des larmes s’échappaient de leurs yeux.

Mais n’était-il pas encore temps de fuir, de se lancer à la recherche du bâtiment?… Déjà, du côté de l’est, portaient les premières lueurs… Cinq heures approchaient… Quelques fraîcheurs matinales se faisaient sentir…

Soudain, les vapeurs remontèrent et dégagèrent la surface de l’océan. La vue put s’étendre sur un rayon de trois à quatre milles…

Le navire en vue, profitant des premiers souffles, s’éloignait dans la direction de l’est… Il fallait renoncer à tout espoir de se réfugier à son bord.

Cependant aucun bruit ne se faisait entendre sur le pont de l’Alert. Nul doute que Harry Markel et l’équipage ne fussent encore plongés dans le sommeil. Le matelot de quart ne s'était même pas aperçu du retour de la brise alors que la voilure désorientée battait contre les mâts.

Eh bien, puisque les passagers n'avaient plus à espérer d'autre salut, il leur fallait devenir maîtres de l'Alert!

Ce coup d'audace, Will Mitz, après l'avoir conçu, s'apprêtait à l'exécuter. Ce qu'il voulait faire, il le dit en quelques mots à voix basse. Louis Clodion, Tony Renault, Roger Hinsdale comprirent. C'était l'unique chance, puisque personne n'avait vu ni partir ni revenir l'embarcation.

“Nous vous suivrons, Will Mitz… dit Magnus Anders.

— Quand vous voudrez”, dit Louis Clodion.

Le jour pointant à peine, il s'agissait de surprendre l'Alert avant que l'éveil eût été donné, d'enfermer Harry Markel dans sa cabine, et l'équipage dans le poste. Puis, aidé des jeunes garçons, Will Mitz manœuvrerait de manière, soit à regagner les Antilles, soit à rejoindre le premier bâtiment qui croiserait sa route.

Le canot glissa sans bruit le long de la carène, et s'arrêta à la hauteur des porte-haubans du grand-mât, à bâbord. En s'aidant des ferrures et des capes de mouton, il serait facile d'enjamber la lisse et de prendre pied sur le pont. Aux porte-haubans du mât d'artimon, étant donnée la hauteur de la dunette, l'escalade eût été plus difficile.

Will Mitz monta le premier. À peine avait-il la tête au niveau du bastingage qu'il s'arrêta et fit signe de ne point bouger.

Harry Markel venait de quitter sa cabine et observait le temps. Comme les voiles claquaient sur les mâts, il appela l'équipage pour l'appareillage.

Les hommes dormaient, personne ne lui répondit, et il se dirigea vers le poste.

Will Mitz, qui suivait ses mouvements, le vit disparaître par le capot.

C’était le moment d’agir. Mieux valait ne point être obligé d’enfermer Harry Markel et peut-être d’engager une lutte dont le bruit aurait été entendu de l’avant. Lorsque tous les hommes seraient emprisonnés dans le poste, on saurait les empêcher de sortir avant l’arrivée aux Antilles, et, si les alizés tenaient, en trente-six heures on aurait connaissance de la Barbade.

Will Mitz sauta sur le pont. Les jeunes garçons le suivirent, après avoir amarré le canot, où était resté M. Patterson, et ils rampèrent de manière à n’être ni vus ni entendus.

En quelques secondes, ils eurent atteint le capot du poste, dont la porte fut refermées extérieurement. Puis l’épais prélart goudronné, qui le protégeait en cas de mauvais temps, fut fixé par de lourds espars sur ses bords.

Et, maintenant, Harry Markel compris, tout le personnel du bord était prisonnier. Il n’y aurait plus qu’à surveiller ces misérables jusqu’au moment de les livrer, soit à quelque bâtiment rencontré en route, soit au premier port des Antilles où relâcherait l’Alert.

Le jour se faisait peu à peu. Les volutes de brume remontaient dans l’espace. L’horizon s’élargissait sous les premières lueurs du matin.

En même temps, la brise fraîchissait légèrement, sans s’établir à un point quelconque du compas. Les voiles, telles qu’elles étaient orientées alors, ne pouvaient que maintenir le trois-mâts en panne.

Ainsi la tentative de Will Mitz avait réussi. Ses jeunes compagnons et lui étaient maîtres de l’Alert!

Quant à ce navire à bord duquel ils comptaient chercher refuge, à cinq ou six milles déjà dans l’est, il ne tarderait pas à disparaître.

CHAPITRE XI

XI

Maîtres à bord

Tel était le revirement dû au courage et à l’audace de Will Mitz. Les bonnes chances semblaient être maintenant du côté des honnêtes gens, les mauvaises du côté de ces malfaiteurs. Ce dernier crime, qui devait les débarrasser des passagers et de Will Mitz la nuit prochaine, ils seraient dans l’impuissance de le commettre.

N’étaient-ce pas eux, au contraire, dont les forfaits allaient être châtiés, qui seraient livrés à la police dès l’arrivée de l’Alert en un port quelconque de l’Antilie ou de l’Amérique, s’ils ne parvenaient pas à s’emparer une seconde fois du navire?… Mais y parviendraient-ils?…

Sans doute, ils étaient dix enfermés dans ce poste, — dix hommes robustes, contre lesquels Will Mitz et ses compagnons n’eussent pas lutté avec avantage. Après avoir démoli les cloisons qui séparaient le poste de la cale, n’arriveraient-ils pas à regagner le pont par les panneaux qui y donnaient accès?… Assurément, ils feraient tout le possible pour recouvrer la liberté…

Tout d’abord Will Mitz remercia Dieu, le priant de leur continuer sa protection.

Les jeunes gens joignirent leur prière à la sienne. Homme de foi et de piété, cet honnête marin n’avait affaire ni à des ingrats ni à des incrédules, et une sincère effusion de reconnaissance s’échappa de leur cœur.

Quant à M. Horatio Patterson, on l’avait aidé à remonter sur le pont, sans qu’il fût sorti de son état d’inconscience. Se croyant sous l’influence d’un mauvais rêve, il regagna sa cabine. Cinq minutes après, il dormait de plus belle.

Le jour grandissait, et le soleil ne tarda pas à se lever derrière une bande d’épais nuages qui s’étendait du nord-est au sud-est; Will Mitz eût préféré un horizon nettoyé de vapeurs. Il craignait que le vent ne s’établit pas franchement de ce côté, d’autant plus qu’à l’opposé, l’état du ciel présentait des symptômes de forte brise auxquels son instinct de marin ne pouvait se tromper.

Toute la question était là: si les alizés l’emportaient, ils seraient favorables à une rapide marche de l’Alert vers l’ouest en direction des Antilles.

Mais, avant d’appareiller, il convenait d’attendre que la brise se fût prononcée dans un sens ou dans l’autre. Intermittente jusqu’alors, elle n’eût pas permis d’installer la voilure.

La mer ne verdissait ni au levant ni au couchant. La houle, qui n’est qu’un balancement des eaux, oscillait sur place, imprimant au navire un roulis assez sensible.

Il importait, cependant, que la traversée se fit dans le plus court délai. La cale et la cambuse contenant des provisions pour plusieurs semaines, les passagers n’avaient point à redouter le manque de vivres et d’eau.

Il est vrai, comment pourvoir à la nourriture des prisonniers, si des calmes ou des mauvais temps retardaient l’Alert?… Le poste ne renfermait aucune provision… Dès ce premier jour, Harry Markel et les autres seraient en proie à la faim et à la soif… Faire passer à manger et boire par la porte du capot, n’était-ce pas leur donner accès sur le pont?…

Eh bien, Will Mitz aviserait si la navigation devait se prolonger. N’était-il pas possible qu’en vingt-quatre ou trente-six heures, l’Alert eût d’ailleurs franchi les quatre-vingts milles qui le séparaient des Indes Occidentales?…

Un incident ne tarda pas à trancher cette question de la nourriture des prisonniers. Elle allait être assurée, dût la traversée durer plusieurs semaines.

Il était environ sept heures, lorsque Will Mitz, qui faisait ses préparatifs d’appareillage, en fut distrait par ces cris de Louis Clodion:

“À moi!… à moi!…”

Will Mitz accourut. De tout son poids, le jeune garçon pesait sur le grand panneau que l’on cherchait à soulever de l’intérieur. Harry Markel et les autres, après avoir défoncé la cloison du poste, avaient envahi la cale, et ils essayaient d’en sortir par le grand panneau. Et, certainement, ils y fussent parvenus, si Louis Clodion n’eût arrêté la tentative.

Aussitôt Will Mitz, Roger Hinsdale, Axel Wickborn, de lui venir en aide. Le panneau fut rajusté sur les hiloires, et, les barres de fer transversales mises en place, il serait impossible de le forcer. Même précaution fut prise pour le panneau de l’avant qui aurait pu livrer passage.

Will Mitz, revenant alors près du capot, cria d’une voix forte:

“Écoutez-moi là-dedans, et faites attention à ce que je dis!”

Aucune réponse ne vint du poste.

“Harry Markel, c’est à toi que je m’adresse.”

En l’entendant, Harry Markel comprit que son identité était établie. D’une façon ou d’une autre, les passagers avaient tout appris et devaient être au courant de ses projets.

D’effroyables jurons, voilà la seule réponse qu’obtint Will Mitz. Il continua en ces termes:

“Harry Markel, sache bien et que tes complices le sachent aussi… nous sommes armés… Le premier de vous qui essaierait de sortir du poste, je lui casserais la tête.”

Et, à partir de ce moment, après avoir pris les revolvers du râtelier de la dunette, les jeunes garçons allaient veiller jour et nuit, prêts à faire feu sur quiconque apparaîtrait hors du capot.

Toutefois, si les prisonniers n’avaient plus chance de s’échapper, maintenant maîtres de la cale, ils auraient des provisions en abondance, viande conservée, biscuits, barils de bière, de brandy et de gin. Et, alors libres de se livrer à tous les excès de l’ivresse, Harry Markel aurait-il le pouvoir de les retenir?…

En somme, ces misérables ne devaient se faire aucune illusion sur les intentions de Will Mitz. Harry Markel n’ignorait pas que l’Alert ne se trouvait qu’à soixante-dix ou quatre-vingts milles des Antilles. Avec les vents régnants, il était possible de rallier l’une des îles en moins de deux jours. En outre, à travers ces parages si fréquentés, l’Alert rencontrerait nombre de bâtiments avec lesquels Will Mitz se mettrait en communication. Donc, de toute manière, soit à bord d’un autre navire, soit dans un des ports de l’Antilie, les pirates de l’Halifax, les échappés de la prison de Queenstown, n’auraient plus qu’à attendre le châtiment de leurs crimes.

Aussi Harry Markel devait-il comprendre qu’il ne lui restait aucune chance de salut… Il ne pourrait délivrer ses compagnons et redevenir une seconde fois maître à bord…

Les panneaux et le poste solidement fermés, il n’existait point d’autre communication entre le pont et la cale. Quant à percer la coque au-dessus de la flottaison, attaquer l’épais bordé et la solide membrure, ou trouer le pont, comment le faire sans outils?… Et puis, ce travail ne se fût pas exécuté sans attirer l’attention… En vain même les prisonniers essaieraient-ils de s’introduire dans la partie arrière du navire, en défonçant la cloison étanche de la cambuse à laquelle on n’accédait que par un panneau en avant de la dunette… D’autre part, si les passagers n’avaient à leur disposition que les réserves de cette cambuse, elles leur suffiraient pendant huit à dix jours, ainsi que l’eau douce contenue dans les barils du pont. Or, avant quarante-huit heures, même par brise moyenne, l’Alert aurait atteint une des îles de l’archipel.

Cependant le temps ne se déclarait pas, et si l’autre navire avait pu faire route vers l’ouest, c’est qu’il se trouvait plus au nord, là où les alizés avaient repris dès le lever du jour.

En attendant la brise, d’où qu’elle vint, et tandis que Hubert Perkins et Axel Wickborn veillaient à l’avant près du capot, les autres entouraient Will Mitz, prêts à exécuter les ordres qu’il donnerait.

Will Mitz dit alors:

“Ce que nous devons chercher, c’est de rallier les Antilles dans le plus court délai…

— Et là, répondit Tony Renault, livrer ces misérables à la police…

— Pensons à nous, d’abord, observa le très pratique Roger Hinsdale.

— Et quel jour l’Alert pourrait-il arriver?… demanda Magnus Anders.

— Demain dans l’après-midi, si nous sommes favorisés par le temps, déclara Will Mitz.

— Pensez-vous que le vent soufflera de ce côté?… interrogea Hubert Perkins, en indiquant l’est.

— Je l’espère, et encore faudra-t-il qu’il tienne trente-six heures… Par ces temps orageux, on ne sait trop sur quoi compter…

— Et quelle direction suivrons-nous?… reprit Louis Clodion.

— Franchement l’ouest.

— Et sommes-nous certains de rencontrer les Antilles?… reprit John Howard.

— Certains, affirma Will Mitz. L’archipel depuis Antigoa jusqu’à Tabago occupe une étendue de quatre cents milles, et, en quelque île que ce soit, nous serons en sûreté…

— Assurément, déclara Roger Hinsdale, française, anglaise, danoise, hollandaise, et, même si nous sommes déviés de notre route par des vents contraires, si nous arrivons aux

Guyanes ou dans l’un des ports des États-Unis…

— Eh! que diable, riposta Tony Renault, nous finirons bien par accoster l’une ou l’autre des deux Amériques entre le cap Horn et la Nouvelle-Angleterre…

— En effet, monsieur Tony, conclut Will Mitz. Seulement il ne faut pas que l’Alert reste encalminé à cette place!… Vienne la brise et fasse Dieu qu’elle nous soit favorable!”

Et il ne suffisait pas que le vent fût favorable, il importait non moins qu’il ne fût pas trop violent. Rude et difficile tâche pour Will Mitz d’avoir à manœuvrer avec un équipage de jeunes garçons, étrangers à la pratique, n’en sachant que le peu qu’ils avaient pu voir durant la traversée d’Europe aux Antilles. Et que ferait Will Mitz, s’il fallait opérer avec rapidité, virer vent devant ou vent arrière, en cas qu’il y eût des bords à courir, des ris à prendre, si quelque ouragan risquait de compromettre la mâture?… Comment parer à toutes les éventualités qui peuvent se produire au milieu de parages si fréquemment visités par les cyclones et les tempêtes?…

Et peut-être Harry Markel comptait-il sur l’embarras où serait Will Mitz: ce n’était qu’un matelot, intelligent, énergique, mais incapable de relever sa position avec quelque exactitude! Si les circonstances devenaient critiques, si des vents d’ouest rejetaient l’Alert au large, si une tempête menaçait de le désemparer, s’il se trouvait en perdition, Will Mitz ne se verrait-il pas contraint de recourir à Markel, à ses compagnons, et alors…

Cela, jamais! Will Mitz suffirait à tout avec l’aide des jeunes passagers… Il ne conserverait de la voilure que les voiles facilement manœuvrables, dût-il retarder l’arrivée de l’Alert!… Non! plutôt périr que de recourir à l’assistance de ces misérables, que de retomber entre leurs mains!

Du reste, on n’en était pas là, et, en somme, que demandait Will Mitz?… Trente-six heures, quarante-huit heures au plus d’une brise moyenne de l’est, une mer maniable… Était-ce donc trop espérer de ces parages où les alizés règnent d’ordinaire?…

Il était près de huit heures. En surveillant le capot et les deux panneaux, on entendait l’équipage aller et venir dans la cale, et aussi les cris de colère, les malédictions accompagnées des plus abominables injures. Mais il n’y avait rien à craindre de ces hommes, réduits à l’impuissance.

Tony Renault proposa alors de déjeuner. Après les fatigues et les émotions de cette nuit, la faim commençait à se faire vivement sentir. Ce repas fut pris sur les réserves de la cambuse, biscuit et viande conservée, œufs que le jeune garçon alla faire durcir sur le fourneau de la cuisine dont les divers ustensiles étaient à sa disposition. La cambuse fournit aussi le wisky ou le gin qui furent mélangés à l’eau douce des barils, et ce premier déjeuner réconforta copieusement tout ce petit monde.

M. Patterson en avait eu sa part. Il est vrai, lui, si loquace d’habitude, c’est à peine si quelques paroles s’échappaient de ses lèvres. Se rendant compte de la situation, il en comprenait la gravité, et les dangers de la mer lui apparaissaient maintenant dans toute leur gravité.

Vers huit heures et demie, la brise parut s’établir, dans l’est, par bonne chance. Quelques rides se dessinaient à la surface de la mer, et, à deux milles sur bâbord, étincelaient des blancheurs d’écume. Du reste, l’immense plaine liquide était déserte. Pas un navire en vue, même à la dernière limite de l’horizon.

Will Mitz se décida à appareiller. Son intention n’était point d’employer les hautes voiles de perroquet et de cacatois qu’il faudrait serrer, s’il venait à surventer. Le grand et le petit hunier, la misaine, la brigantine, les focs, suffiraient à se tenir en bonne route. Or, comme ces voiles étaient sur leurs cargues, il n'y aurait qu'à les orienter, à les amurer, à les border, et l'Alert mettrait le cap à l'ouest.

Will Mitz réunit les jeunes garçons. Il leur expliqua ce qu'il attendait d'eux, et assigna à chacun son poste. Suivi de Tony Renault et de Magnus Anders, plus habitués que leurs camarades, il monta dans les hunes, après avoir indiqué à Louis Clodion comment il devrait tenir la barre.

"Cela ira… cela ira!… répétait Tony Renault avec la confiance si naturelle à son âge, et il se sentait vraiment capable des plus grandes choses.

— Je l'espère, Dieu aidant!" dit Will Mitz.

En un quart d'heure le trois-mâts fut sous voiles, et, doucement incliné, il filait grand largue, laissant derrière lui un long sillage blanc.

Jusqu'à une heure, le vent demeura à l'état de petite brise, non sans des intermittences qui causaient certaines inquiétudes à Will Mitz. Et puis, à l'ouest, s'arrondissaient de gros nuages aux bords très nets, d'apparence livide, indices de l'état orageux de l'atmosphère…

"Que dites-vous du temps, Will?… demanda Roger Hinsdale.

— Il n'est pas comme je le voudrais!… Je sens quelque orage devant nous, ou tout au moins du vent…

— Et s'il vient de ce côté?…

— Que voulez-vous, répondit Will Mitz, il faudra bien le prendre comme il sera!… Nous courrons des bordées en attendant le retour des alizés, et, pourvu que la mer ne soit pas trop dure, on s’en tirera… L’important est d’arriver en vue de la terre, et, si ce n’est que dans trois jours au lieu de deux, on se résignera… À cinq ou six milles des Antilles nous devons rencontrer des pilotes qui viendront à bord et, quelques heures après, l’Alert sera à son mouillage.”

Cependant, ainsi que le prévoyait Will Mitz, le vent ne put tenir à l’est. Dans l’après-midi, l’Alert fut très secoué par les contre-lames de l’ouest avec la brise qui s’établit définitivement de ce côté.

Il y eut donc nécessité de courir au plus près, afin de ne point être entraîné vers le large. La manœuvre s’effectua assez facilement sans changer les amures. Tony Renault se mit au gouvernail et tint la barre dessous. Will Mitz et les autres raidirent les bras des vergues, les écoutes de la misaine, des huniers, de la brigantine et des focs. L’Alert, orienté pour sa première bordée, cap au nord-est, appuyé sur tribord, marcha rapidement dans cette direction.

Nul doute que, dans la cale où ils étaient renfermés, Harry Markel et les siens n’eussent reconnu que le navire, ayant vent contraire, s’éloignait des Antilles. Or, ce retard ne pouvait que tourner à leur avantage.

Vers six heures du soir, Will Mitz jugea que l’Alert s’était assez élevé au nord-est, et, pour mieux utiliser les courants, il résolut de tirer une bordée vers le sud-ouest.

C’était, de toutes les manœuvres, celle dont il s’inquiétait le plus. Virer vent devant est une opération qui exige une grande précision de mouvements dans le brassage des vergues. Il est vrai, l’Alert aurait pu virer vent arrière; mais ce serait plus long, sans parler du risque de recevoir quelques mauvais coups de mer. Heureusement, la houle n’était pas trop dure. On borda la brigantine, la barre dessous, puis, les écoutes larguées à propos, la misaine et le petit hunier reçurent le vent par tribord. L'abattée se fit après une courte hésitation, et, ses voiles amurées de nouveau, le navire cingla dans la direction du sud-ouest.

“Bien…, bien…, mes jeunes messieurs!… s'écria Will Mitz, lorsque l'opération fut terminée. Vous avez manœuvré comme de vrais matelots…

— Sous les ordres d'un bon capitaine!” répondit Louis Clodion au nom de tous ses camarades.

Et si, de la cale ou du poste, Harry Markel, John Carpenter et les autres se rendirent compte que l'Alert avait repris une autre bordée, on imagine aisément à quel accès de rage ils s'abandonnèrent!

Le dîner, rapidement expédié comme l'avait été le déjeuner, quelques tasses de thé préparées par Tony Renault le complétèrent.

Cela fait, M. Patterson ne tarda pas à rentrer dans sa cabine, car il ne pouvait être d'aucune utilité.

Alors Will Mitz s'occupa de partager les quarts pour la nuit entre Louis Clodion et ses camarades.

Il fut convenu que cinq d'entre eux resteraient sur le pont, tandis que les quatre autres prendraient quelque repos. Ils se relèveraient de quatre en quatre heures, et, s'il était nécessaire de virer de bord avant le jour, tous viendraient donner la main à la manœuvre.

D'ailleurs, pendant le quart, ils surveilleraient le capot et les panneaux, de façon à prévenir toute surprise.

Les choses ainsi réglées, Roger Hinsdale, Niels Harboe, Albertus Leuwen, Louis Clodion, rentrèrent dans le carré et se jetèrent tout habillés sur leurs cadres. Magnus Anders, au gouvernail, suivit les indications que lui donnait Will Mitz. Tony Renault, Hubert Perkins, se placèrent à l'avant. Axel Wickborn et John Howard restèrent au pied du grand mât.

Will Mitz, lui, allait et venait, ayant l'oeil à tout, mollissant ou raidissant les écoutes suivant les demandes de la brise, prenant la barre lorsqu'il la fallait tenir d'une main ferme et expérimentée, — bref, capitaine, maître, gabier, timonier, matelot, selon les circonstances.

Les quarts se succédèrent comme il avait été décidé. Ceux qui avaient dormi quelques heures vinrent remplacer leurs camarades à l'avant et à l'arrière.

Quant à Will Mitz, il voulut demeurer sur pied jusqu'au matin.

Après une nuit sans incidents, l'orage qui menaçait s'étant dissipé, le vent continua de souffler en petite brise. Il n'y eut donc pas lieu de diminuer la voilure, — opération difficile au milieu de l'obscurité.

Quant à ce qui se passait à l'intérieur du poste et de la cale, ni Harry Markel ni ses compagnons ne firent aucune tentative pour reprendre possession du navire. Même la nuit, ils savaient que cette tentative aurait échoué. Des cris de fureur éclataient parfois sous les panneaux, et aussi des clameurs d'ivrognes qui finirent par cesser.

À l'aube, l'Alert avait couru trois bordées dans l'ouest. Quant à la distance qui le séparait encore des Antilles, de combien de milles avait-elle diminué?… Dix ou douze, à peine!…

CHAPITRE XII

XII

Pendant trois jours

Le soleil, débordant d’un horizon semé de vapeurs “débraillées”, — c’est le mot juste, — n’annonçait pas une importante modification dans l’état atmosphérique. Il semblait, au contraire, que le vent, tout en soufflant de l’ouest, accusait une certaine tendance à fraîchir.

Au surplus, ces nuages ne tardèrent pas à gagner le zénith, et, sans doute, le temps resterait couvert toute la journée, qui serait pluvieuse. Cette pluie aurait peut-être pour résultat d’amoindrir la brise, si elle n’engendrait quelques rafales, — ce que craignait Will Mitz.

Dans tous les cas, à louvoyer jusqu’au soir, il était présumable que l’Alert gagnerait peu en direction des Antilles. De là un retard dont on ne pouvait prévoir la durée. Il y aurait lieu de regretter que le vent ne se fût pas maintenu vingt-quatre heures de plus dans l’est.

Ainsi donc, lorsque le navire quitta la Barbade sous le commandement d’Harry Markel, les alizés avaient contrarié sa marche. Sans cette circonstance, il se fût trouvé à une centaine de milles plus au large en plein Atlantique. Et voici, maintenant, que c’était contre les vents d’ouest qu’il lui fallait louvoyer pour revenir aux Antilles.

Lorsque Louis Clodion rejoignit Will Mitz dès six heures du matin:

“Rien de nouveau?… demanda-t-il.

— Rien, monsieur Louis…

— Vous ne prévoyez pas que le vent puisse changer?…

— Je ne sais trop… S’il ne fraîchit pas, nous ne serons point gênés sous cette voilure…

— Cela nous retardera?…

— Un peu… Néanmoins il n’y a pas à s’inquiéter… Nous arriverons tout de même… Et puis je compte apercevoir quelque navire…

— Vous avez bon espoir?…

— Bon espoir!

— Ne voulez-vous pas prendre du repos?…

— Non… je ne suis pas fatigué… Plus tard, si j’ai besoin de dormir, une ou deux heures de sommeil, il ne m’en faudra pas davantage.”

Si Will Mitz tenait ce langage, c’est qu’il ne voulait pas inquiéter les passagers. Au fond sa perspicacité de marin ne le laissait pas sans appréhension. À bien l’observer, il lui semblait que la mer “sentait quelque chose”, étant plus agitée que ne le comportait la brise.

Il était possible qu’il y eût des gros temps dans l’ouest. En juin ou juillet, ils ne se fussent pas prolongés au-delà de vingt-quatre ou de quarante-huit heures. Mais, en cette période de l’équinoxe, peut-être tiendraient-ils une ou deux semaines?… N’est-ce pas l’époque à laquelle les Antilles ont subi d’effroyables désastres dus aux cyclones?…

En admettant même que le vent n’allât pas jusqu’à la tempête, comment ces jeunes garçons résisteraient-ils à la fatigue en manœuvrant jour et nuit?…

Vers sept heures, M. Patterson parut sur le pont, vint à Will Mitz, et lui serra la main.

“On ne voit pas encore la terre?… demanda-t-il.

— Pas encore, monsieur Patterson.

— Elle est toujours dans cette direction?… ajouta-t-il en désignant l’ouest.

— Toujours.”

De cette réponse, rassurante, il fallait bien que M. Patterson se contentât. Toutefois son imagination très surexcitée lui laissait entrevoir des retards considérables… Et si le navire ne parvenait point à rallier la Barbade ou toute autre île de l’Antilie, s’il était rejeté au large, si quelque tempête se déchaînait, que deviendrait-il sans capitaine, sans équipage?… Le pauvre homme ne se voyait-il pas entraîné jusqu’aux extrêmes limites de l’océan… jeté sur quelque rivage désert de la côte africaine… abandonné pendant des mois, et, qui sait, des années?… Et alors, Mrs Patterson, ayant toute raison de se croire veuve, après l’avoir pleuré comme il convenait… Oui! ces navrantes hypothèses se présentaient à son esprit, et ce n’est ni dans Horace ni dans Virgile qu’il eût trouvé une consolation à sa douleur!… Il ne songeait même plus à essayer de traduire la fameuse citation latine de Tony Renault.

La matinée n’amena aucun changement dans la direction du vent. À midi, Will Mitz résolut de courir un nouveau bord. Mais, la mer étant plus dure, l’Alert ne réussit pas à virer vent devant, et il fallut le faire lof pour lof.

La voilure établie, Will Mitz, succombant à la fatigue, s’étendit sur la dunette près de l’habitacle, tandis que Louis Clodion tenait la barre.

Après une heure de sommeil, il fut réveillé par des cris qui partaient de l’avant, où Roger Hinsdale et Axel Wickborn étaient de garde près du poste.

“Navire… navire!…” répétait le jeune Danois, la main tendue vers l’est.

Will Mitz se précipita vers le bossoir de tribord.

En effet, un bâtiment se montrait de ce côté, faisant la même route que l’Alert. C’était un steamer, dont on ne voyait encore que la fumée. Il marchait rapidement, et sa coque apparut bientôt à la ligne d’horizon. De ses deux cheminées s’échappait une fumée noire, et il devait pousser ses feux.

On s’imagine ce que fut l’émotion des jeunes passagers, tandis que ce bâtiment se rapprochait. Peut-être touchaient-ils au dénouement d’une situation si sérieusement aggravée avec cette persistance des vents contraires.

Toutes les lorgnettes étaient braquées sur ce steamer dont on ne perdait pas un mouvement.

Will Mitz se préoccupait surtout de la direction qu’il suivait en gagnant vers l’ouest. Mais, ce qu’il observa aussi, c’est qu’à continuer sa route, le steamer ne couperait pas celle de l’Alert, et on passerait au moins à quatre milles. Il décida donc de laisser porter, afin de croiser ce bâtiment, d’assez près pour que ses signaux fussent aperçus. On brassa les vergues des deux huniers et de la misaine, on mollit les écoutes de la brigantine et des focs, et l’Alert arriva de plusieurs quarts sous le vent.

Une demi-heure après, le steamer n’était plus qu’à trois milles. Ce devait être un transatlantique d’une ligne française ou anglaise à en juger par ses formes et ses dimensions. S’il ne modifiait pas sa marche en lofant, les deux navires ne pourraient entrer en communication.

Par ordre de Will Mitz, Tony Renault hissa au mât de misaine le pavillon de pilote, blanc et bleu, en même temps que le pavillon britannique se déployait à la corne du mât d’artimon.

Un quart d’heure s’écoula. L’Alert, vent arrière alors, ne pouvait faire davantage pour se rapprocher du steamer, qui lui restait à trois milles dans le nord. N’ayant pas reçu de réponse à leurs signaux, Roger Hinsdale et Louis Clodion allèrent prendre deux carabines au râtelier du carré. Plusieurs coups furent tirés. le vent portant en cette direction, peut-être ces détonations seraient-elles entendues?…

Nul doute que Harry Markel, John Carpenter, les autres, n’eussent compris ce qui se passait. L’allure du trois-mâts ayant changé, il roulait, n’étant plus appuyé comme sous l’allure du plus près. Puis des coups de feu éclataient à bord.

Il y avait donc un navire en vue, avec lequel l’Alert essayait de communiquer…

Ces misérables, se croyant perdus, redoublèrent leurs efforts pour s’échapper de la cale. Des coups violents retentirent sur les parois du poste, contre les panneaux du pont. Des hurlements de colère les accompagnaient. D’ailleurs, au premier qui eût paru, Will Mitz eût cassé la tête d’une balle de revolver.

Par malheur, la chance ne se déclara pas pour les passagers de l’Alert. On ne vit rien de leurs signaux, on n’entendit rien de leurs décharges. Une demi-heure plus tard, le steamer, éloigné de cinq à six milles, disparaissait à l’horizon.

Will Mitz, revenant au vent, reprit alors sa bordée vers le sud-ouest.

Pendant l’après-midi, l’Alert ne fit que louvoyer en gagnant peu. L’apparence du ciel n’était point rassurante. Les nuages s’épaississaient au couchant, le vent fraîchissait, la mer devenait très dure, et les lames commençaient à déferler au-dessus du gaillard d’avant. S’il ne survenait pas quelque accalmie, Will Mitz ne pourrait pas continuer à tenir le plus près, à moins de diminuer la voilure. Il était donc de plus en plus inquiet, tout en s’efforçant de dissimuler son inquiétude. Mais Louis Clodion, Roger Hinsdale, les plus sérieux, sentaient bien ce qui se passait en lui. Quand ils le regardaient et l’interrogeaient des yeux, Will Mitz détournait la tête.

La nuit qui s’approchait menaçait d’être mauvaise. Il devint nécessaire de prendre deux ris dans les huniers, un ris dans la misaine et la brigantine. Cette opération, difficile de jour avec cet équipage improvisé, le serait davantage dans l’ombre. Il fallait manœuvrer de manière à ne point être surpris, tout en résistant à cette violente brise mêlée de rafales.

En effet, que serait-il arrivé si l’Alert était rejeté dans l’est?… Jusqu’où l’entraînerait une tempête qui durerait plusieurs jours?… Aucune terre dans ces parages, si ce n’est, plus au nord-est, ces dangereuses Bermudes où le trois-mâts avait déjà essuyé des gros temps qui l’avaient obligé de fuir vent arrière?… Irait-il se perdre au-delà de l’Atlantique, sur les récifs de la côte africaine?…

Donc nécessité de résister, et tant que le navire pourrait se tenir, soit au plus près, soit même à la cape, dans le voisinage des Antilles. Puis, la tourmente passée, les alizés reprenant le dessus, l’Alert regagnerait les quelques jours de retard.

Will Mitz expliqua ce dont il s’agissait. Alors que les voiles détonaient comme des pièces d’artillerie, on s’occuperait d’abord du petit hunier, puis du grand hunier, Magnus Anders, Tony Renault, Louis Clodion, Axel Wickborn suivraient Will Mitz sur les vergues, ayant soin de ne pas lâcher la main, et, après avoir ramené la toile à eux, ils amarreraient les garcettes.

Quand ils seraient redescendus, tous se mettraient sur les drisses et hisseraient les vergues à bloc.

Albertus Leuwen, Hubert Perkins, se tiendraient à la roue du gouvernail, et Will Mitz leur indiqua comment ils devaient la manœuvrer.

L’opération commença. Après de grands efforts, deux ris étaient pris dans le petit hunier, lequel, une fois solidement étarqué d’en bas, fut orienté au plus près.

Il en fut de même pour le grand hunier. Quant à la brigantine, il n’y eut point à monter aux barres d’artimon, mais seulement à enrouler la partie inférieure de la voile sur le gui.

En ce qui concerne la misaine, on se contenta de la carguer, quitte à la rétablir si le vent mollissait aux approches du jour.

Et, maintenant, l'Alert, sous cette voilure, courait à la surface de l'océan. Il donnait parfois une bande effrayante, recevant des paquets de mer qui inondaient le pont jusqu'à la dunette. Will Mitz, debout à la barre, le redressait d'un bras vigoureux avec l'aide de l'un ou de l'autre des jeunes garçons.

Cette allure put être conservée toute la nuit, et Will Mitz ne crut même pas devoir virer de bord avant le lever du soleil. La bordée vers le nord-est, qu'il avait prise après avoir diminué de toile, se continua jusqu'au jour.

Lorsque l'aube reparut, si Will Mitz n'avait pas quitté le pont, les jeunes garçons, après s'être relayés de quatre heures en quatre heures, s'étaient reposés quelques heures.

Dès que l'horizon fut dégagé du côté du vent, Will Mitz le parcourut du regard. C'était de là que pouvait venir le danger. L'aspect du ciel n'avait rien de satisfaisant. Si le vent n'avait pas fraîchi pendant la nuit, s'il se tenait à l'état de grande brise, aucun symptôme n'indiquait un prochain apaisement. Il fallait aussi craindre des pluies violentes et des rafales contre lesquelles il y aurait certaines précautions à prendre. Peut-être serait-il nécessaire de tenir la cape afin de mieux résister en présentant le navire debout à la lame. Au lieu de faire bonne route, l'Alert perdrait alors plus qu'il ne gagnerait en direction des Antilles.

Bientôt les rafales se déchaînaient, faisant claquer les huniers et menaçant de les mettre en lambeaux. Si M. Patterson ne put sortir du carré, les autres, vêtus de capotes cirées, coiffés de surouets, restèrent sur le pont à la disposition de Will Mitz. Cette eau qui tombait à torrents, ils la recueillirent dans des bailles pour n'en point manquer, dans le cas où l'Alert serait entraîné plus au large en fuyant devant la tempête.

Dans la matinée, au prix d’efforts inouïs, Will Mitz parvint à courir une bordée au sud-ouest, ce qui le maintenait en latitude des Antilles, et, suivant son estime, à la hauteur de la Barbade, dans la partie médiane de l’archipel.

Il espérait donc pouvoir garder ses huniers à deux ris, sa brigantine et son grand foc, lorsque, l’après-midi, le vent prit plus de force, en halant un peu le nord-ouest.

La bande que donnait l’Alert était parfois si considérable que l’extrémité de la grande vergue affleurait la crête des lames, et des coups de mer le couvraient en grand.

Ils devaient se dire, en bas, Harry Markel et ses compagnons, que les choses allaient mal en haut, que le bâtiment était aux prises avec la tourmente, que Will Mitz ne pourrait gouverner… Lorsqu’il serait en perdition, peut-être faudrait-il recourir à eux?…

Ils se trompaient, et l’Alert sombrerait sous voiles, se perdrait corps et biens, plutôt que de retomber entre les mains de ces bandits!…

Will Mitz ne défaillit pas en ces terribles circonstances, et, d’autre part, il semblait que les jeunes passagers ne voulussent pas voir le péril. Aux ordres qui leur furent donnés, ils obéirent avec autant de courage que d’adresse, lorsqu’il devint indispensable de diminuer la voilure.

Le grand hunier fut amené et serré; la brigantine également. L’Alert resta sous son petit hunier au bas ris, — opération que facilitait le système des doubles vergues dont le navire était pourvu. À l’avant, Will Mitz fit hisser un des focs, et, à l’arrière, au mât d’artimon, un tourmentin triangulaire, assez solide pour résister à la violence de l’ouragan.

Et toujours l’immensité déserte!… Pas une voile au large!… Et, d’ailleurs, eût-il été possible d’accoster un navire, de mettre une embarcation à la mer?…

Will Mitz vit bientôt qu’il faudrait renoncer à lutter contre le vent. Impossible de se maintenir ni au plus près, ni à la cape. Mais l’Alert avait “de la fuite”, comme disent les marins, et ne risquait pas de s’affaler sur une côte d’où il n’aurait pu se relever. Il est vrai, c’était tout l’Atlantique qui s’ouvrait devant lui, et, en peu de temps, un millier de milles le sépareraient des Indes occidentales.

La barre dessous, le navire pivota, horriblement secoué, et, après avoir été assailli de lames déferlantes, risquant d’embarder sur un bord ou sur l’autre, il courut vent arrière.

Cette allure est des plus dangereuses, lorsque le bâtiment ne parvient pas à devancer les lames, lorsque sa poupe est menacée de coups de mer. La barre est extrêmement difficile et il faut se faire attacher pour ne point partir par-dessus bord.

Will Mitz obligea, malgré eux, les jeunes garçons à se réfugier à l’intérieur de la dunette.

S’il avait besoin de leur aide il les appellerait.

Et là, dans ce carré, dont les cloisons craquaient, accrochés aux bancs, parfois inondés de l’eau du pont qui pénétrait au dedans, réduits à se nourrir de biscuit et de conserves, cette journée du 25 septembre fut la plus épouvantable qu’ils eussent passée jusqu’alors!

Et quelle nuit, terrible, obscure, tumultueuse! L'ouragan se déchaînait avec une incomparable violence. Lui résister vingt-quatre heures, l'Alert le pourrait-il?… Ne finirait-il pas par engager, et si, pour le relever, il fallait couper sa mâture, y réussirait-on?… Le navire ne serait-il pas entraîné dans l'abîme?…

Will Mitz était seul à la barre. Son énergie domptant sa fatigue, il soutenait l'Alert contre les embardées qui menaçaient de le mettre en travers des lames.

Vers minuit, un coup de mer, montant de cinq à six pieds au-dessus du couronnement, retomba sur la dunette avec une telle violence qu'il faillit la défoncer. Puis, précipité sur le pont, après avoir enlevé le petit canot suspendu à l'arrière, il brisa tout sur son passage, les cages à poules, les deux barils d'eau douce amarrés au pied du grand mât; puis, arrachant la seconde embarcation de ses pistolets, il l'entraîna par-dessus bord.

Il ne restait plus qu'un seul canot, celui dans lequel les passagers avaient tenté de fuir une première fois. D'ailleurs, il n'aurait pu leur servir, et cette mer démontée l'eût englouti en un instant.

Au fracas qui fit trembler le navire jusque dans l'emplanture des mâts, Louis Clodion et quelques autres s'élancèrent hors de la dunette.

Alors la voix de Will Mitz se fit entendre au milieu du sifflement des rafales.

“Rentrez… rentrez!… criait-il.

— N'y a-t-il plus d'espoir de salut?… demanda Roger Hinsdale.

— Si… avec l’aide de Dieu, répondit Will Mitz. Lui seul peut nous sauver…”

En ce moment un horrible déchirement se fit entendre. Une masse blanchâtre passa entre la mâture comme un énorme oiseau que l’ouragan emporte. Le petit hunier venait d’être arraché de sa vergue et il n’en restait plus que les ralingues.

L’Alert était pour ainsi dire à sec de toile et, sa barre n’ayant plus d’action, devenu le jouet des vents et de la mer, il fut déhalé vers l’est avec une épouvantable vitesse.

L’aube revenue, à quelle distance l’Alert se trouvait-il des Antilles?… Depuis qu’il avait été obligé de fuir, n’était-ce pas à plusieurs centaines de milles qu’il fallait évaluer cette distance?… Et, en admettant que le vent repassât dans l’est, que l’on pût installer des voiles de rechange, combien de jours faudrait-il pour la regagner?…

Cependant la tempête parut diminuer. Le vent ne tarda pas à changer avec cette brusquerie si fréquente dans les parages des Tropiques.

Will Mitz fut tout d’abord frappé de l’état du ciel. Durant les dernières heures, l’horizon de l’est s’était dégagé des énormes nuages qui l’obstruaient depuis la veille.

Louis Clodion et ses camarades reparurent sur le pont. Il semblait que cette tempête allait prendre fin. La mer était extrêmement dure, il est vrai, et une journée suffirait à peine à calmer les lames qui déferlaient toutes blanches d’écume.

“Oui… oui… c’est la fin!” répétait Will Mitz.

Et il levait les bras vers le ciel dans un mouvement de confiance et d’espoir auquel s’associèrent les jeunes passagers.

Il s’agissait maintenant de revenir franchement vers l’ouest. La terre, on la trouverait de ce côté, si éloignée fût-elle.

D’ailleurs, la distance ne s’était accrue qu’à partir du moment où l’Alert, ne pouvant plus louvoyer, avait dû fuir devant la tempête.

Vers midi, la force du vent avait diminué à ce point qu’un navire eût pu larguer ses ris et naviguer sous ses huniers et ses voiles basses.

Puis, à mesure qu’elle mollissait, la brise halait le sud, et l’Alert n’aurait qu’à tenir le largue pour faire bonne route.

Il convenait donc de remplacer le petit hunier, puis d’établir le grand hunier, la misaine, la brigantine et les focs.

Cette besogne se prolongea jusqu’à cinq heures du soir, et ce ne fut pas sans peine que l’on parvint à enverguer une voile nouvelle, retirée de la soute d’arrière.

À ce moment, des cris retentirent au fond de la cale, puis des coups contre les panneaux et les parois du poste. Harry Markel et ses compagnons tentaient-ils une dernière fois de se frayer quelque issue au dehors?…

Les jeunes garçons sautèrent sur leurs armes et se tinrent prêts à en faire usage contre le premier qui se montrerait.

Mais, presque aussitôt, Louis Clodion de crier:

“Le feu est au navire!…”

En effet, une fumée qui venait de l’intérieur commençait à envahir le pont.

Nul doute, — probablement par imprudence, — quelques-uns des prisonniers, ivres de brandy et de gin, avaient laissé le feu se communiquer aux caisses de la cargaison. Déjà on entendait les fûts de la cale qui éclataient avec violence.

Cet incendie, eût-il été possible de l’éteindre?… Peut-être, à la condition d’ouvrir les panneaux pour inonder la cale… Il est vrai, c’eût été rendre libres Harry Markel et sa bande… C’eût été permettre la reprise de l’Alert… Avant même de chercher à éteindre l’incendie, les misérables auraient massacré et jeté à la mer les passagers.

Cependant, au milieu des cris qui redoublaient, les volutes plus épaisses couraient à la surface du pont dont les coutures goudronnées commençaient à se disjoindre.

En même temps, d’autres détonations retentissaient, plus particulièrement à l’avant, où étaient rangés les barils d’alcool. Les prisonniers devaient être à moitié asphyxiés dans cette cale où l’air pénétrait à peine.

“Will… Will!” s’écrièrent John Howard, Tony Renault, Albertus Leuwen, en tendant leurs bras vers lui…

Et ne semblaient-ils pas lui demander quelque pitié pour Harry Markel et ses compagnons?…

Non! Le salut commun interdirait toute faiblesse, toute humanité!…

D’ailleurs, il n’y avait pas un instant à perdre en présence d’un incendie qu’on ne pouvait éteindre, et qui aurait bientôt dévoré tout entier le navire!… Il fallait abandonner l’Alert, avec son équipage qui périrait avec lui!

Le second canot et la yole de l’arrière ayant disparu pendant la tempête, il ne restait plus que le grand canot de tribord.

Will Mitz regarda la mer, moins furieuse alors… Il regarda l’Alert enveloppé déjà d’un rideau de flammes… Il regarda les jeunes garçons épouvantés, et il cria:

“Embarque!”

CHAPITRE XIII

XIII

À l’aventure

Il ne s’agissait plus, cette fois, d’accoster un bâtiment à quelques encablures, ni même à quelques milles au large. C’était un navire en proie à l’incendie qu’il fallait abandonner. C’était à la surface d’une mer déserte, avec l’incertain espoir d’être rencontré sur ces parages, qu’une frêle embarcation allait s’exposer à tant de périls!

Tandis que Will Mitz, faisant en toute hâte ses préparatifs de départ, s’occupait de déhaler le dernier canot du bord, que se passait-il dans la cale?…

Des rugissements de damnés éclataient sous le pont. Des coups incessants ébranlaient les panneaux et le capot du poste. Et qui sait si les prisonniers ne finiraient pas par les forcer, si à travers quelque trou de la coque ils ne parviendraient pas à se précipiter à la mer pour remonter sur le pont?…

Quant à la cause de cet incendie, l’hypothèse la plus probable était qu’un baril d’alcool s’étant brisé, son contenu avait été enflammé par l’imprudence d’un Morden ou de tout autre, n’ayant plus conscience de ses actes. À présent, le foyer s’étendait à toute la cale, depuis l’avant jusqu’à la cloison qui séparait l’arrière. En admettant même que le feu s’arrêtât à cette cloison, le navire n’en périrait pas moins, et il n’en resterait bientôt plus que quelques épaves à la surface de la mer.

Dès que le canot, déhalé de ses palans, fut amarré le long du bord, Will Mitz fit embarquer tout ce qui serait nécessaire à une navigation longue peut-être. Louis Clodion et Albertus Leuwen y ayant pris place, on leur passa deux caisses de conserves et de biscuits de la cambuse, un dernier fût d’alcool, deux barils d’eau douce, un fourneau portatif, deux sacs de charbon, une petite provision de thé, quelques armes, quelques munitions, puis divers instruments de cuisine et d’office.

En même temps, Tony Renault et les autres envoyaient le gréement du canot, un mât avec sa drisse, une voile avec sa vergue, le foc de l’avant, quatre avirons, le gouvernail, une boussole et la carte générale des Antilles. Il y joignit plusieurs lignes aussi, car il serait peut-être nécessaire de demander à la pêche un supplément de nourriture.

M. Patterson fut le premier à descendre dans l’embarcation. Ce pauvre homme, dont tant d’épreuves avaient brisé le ressort, ne songeait plus ni à son trigonocéphale destiné à périr dans les flammes, ni à ces mots intraduisibles de la citation latine!… Il ne s’inquiétait que d’avoir à courir la mer sur ce canot, dans lequel Will Mitz jeta des vêtements de rechange, des capotes cirées, des couvertures, et un prélart qui permettrait d’établir un taud.

Ces préparatifs furent achevés en un quart d’heure, tandis que les hurlements redoublaient à travers les flammes qui commençaient à dévorer le gréement et la mâture.

Et, à chaque instant, on craignait de voir surgir quelque échappé de la cale en feu, spectre à demi brûlé au milieu des mugissements de cette fournaise…

Il n’était que temps d’abandonner l’Alert. Rien n’avait été oublié, et Will Mitz allait embarquer à son tour, lorsque Niels Harboe de dire:

“Et l’argent?…

— Oui, répondit Will Mitz, cet argent c’est celui de notre bienfaitrice. Il faut le sauver, ou il sera perdu avec ce navire dont il ne restera plus rien!…”

Et, rentrant dans le carré, il prit l’argent déposé dans la cabine du mentor, revint sur le pont, enjamba les bastingages, et, aussitôt pied dans le canot, dit:

“Pousse!”

L’amarre larguée, l’embarcation s’éloigna dans la direction de l’ouest.

À ce moment, une explosion se produisit sous la pression de l’air porté à une haute température dans la cale du navire. Elle fut si violente que le mât de misaine, soulevé de son emplanture, s’abattit sur bâbord avec tout le phare de l’avant. En même temps, l’Alert se coucha sous la secousse pour se relever aussitôt, et l’eau, qui aurait noyé l’incendie, ne pénétra pas à l’intérieur.

Aucun des compagnons d’Harry Markel ne parut sur le pont. Ou ils étaient asphyxiés, ou ils n’avaient encore pu se frayer passage à travers la fumée et les flammes.

Il était alors cinq heures et demie du soir. Le vent assez régulier permettait d’installer la voile du canot, quitte à l’amener s’il venait à fraîchir. Tony Renault et Magnus Anders la hissèrent ainsi que le foc. Will Mitz, à la barre, les avirons furent dégagés de leurs tolets et rentrés en dedans. Afin d’obtenir toute la vitesse possible sans compromettre la sécurité, on donna un peu de mou à l’écoute, et ce fut grand largue que l’embarcation glissa à la surface de la mer.

Will Mitz n’était pas à un demi-mille, lorsque les deux autres mâts de l’Alert s’abattirent, après que les haubans et galhaubans eurent pris feu. Le navire, rasé comme un ponton, gité cette fois sur bâbord, ne se redressa pas. Puis, peu à peu, l’eau l’envahit par-dessus les bastingages. Quelques hommes se montrèrent sur son flanc, — entre autres Harry Markel. Le misérable jeta un dernier cri de colère, en voyant le canot si loin déjà qu’il serait impossible de le rejoindre.

Enfin, l’Alert, coulant à pic, disparut dans l’abîme. Dieu avait fait justice de ces pirates de l’Halifax échappés à la justice humaine. Du navire, il ne restait que d’informes débris de mâture flottant à la dérive.

En voyant sombrer l’Alert, les jeunes passagers ne purent se défendre d’une profonde émotion, et des larmes mouillèrent leurs yeux.

Cependant, si, depuis une douzaine d’heures, la tempête avait cessé, cette situation n’en était pas moins effrayante.

L’embarcation, qui mesurait trente pieds de l’étrave à l’étambot, sur cinq pieds de largeur, était suffisante pour onze passagers. Mais, n’étant pas pontée, elle n’offrait aucun abri contre la pluie ou le vent et risquait d’emplir au premier coup de mer.

Toutefois, entre le pied du mât et l’étrave, Will Mitz installa le prélart qui, tendu d’un bord à l’autre, et soutenu au moyen d’espars, forma une sorte de taud sous lequel trois personnes trouveraient place.

En même temps, Louis Clodion et Roger Hinsdale prirent la précaution d’abriter la boussole, les caisses de biscuit et de conserves au fond du canot.

Quant aux provisions embarquées, elles devaient durer une dizaine de jours, sans compter ce que donnerait la pêche. Pour l’eau douce, sans compter non plus ce que donnerait la pluie, en la ménageant, il y en avait pour une semaine.

Dans ce délai, avoir rallié une terre quelconque, soit aux Antilles, soit aux Bermudes, était-il permis de l’espérer?…

Non, assurément. L’Alert avait dû être rejeté très au large et plutôt dans le sud-est, ce qui l’écartait des Bermudes. Aussi, Will Mitz chercherait-il à gagner soit une des îles de l’Antilie, soit une des côtes américaines du Brésil, du Venezuela ou des Guyanes.

Mais c’était plutôt sur la rencontre d’un navire qu’il fondait quelque espoir de salut.

Telle était la situation dans cette soirée du 26 septembre. La nuit approchait, et l’obscurité serait bientôt complète. Au coucher du soleil, l’aspect de l’horizon n’avait point paru mauvais, plutôt embrumé de vapeurs que chargé de nuages à l’est comme à l’ouest. La mer tombait graduellement, les lames se balançaient en longues houles. Le souffle des alizés continuait à se faire sentir, ce qui permettait de conserver la voile. Pour éclairer la route, il ne fallait pas compter sur la lune, qui était nouvelle; mais, entre nombre d’étoiles, la polaire brillerait dans le nord à quelques degrés de l’horizon.

Tout d’abord, Louis Clodion et ses camarades avaient offert de se mettre aux avirons en se relayant d’heure en heure. Will Mitz leur fit observer que ce surcroît de fatigue ne s’imposait pas, et mieux valait ménager ses forces.

“La brise est régulière, dit-il, et semble devoir tenir. Il sera temps de nager si le calme revient, ou s’il faut forcer de vitesse pour atteindre un navire…

— Will, demanda Roger Hinsdale, à quelle distance pensez-vous que soit la terre la plus rapprochée?…

— À quatre cents milles au moins…

— Et que pourrait faire notre canot avec une brise moyenne?… ajouta Louis Clodion.

— À peu près une soixantaine de milles par vingt-quatre heures.

— Nous aurions donc à naviguer pendant sept à huit jours?… dit Albertus Leuwen.

— Oui, répondit Will Mitz, à moins que, d’ici là, nous n’ayons trouvé refuge à bord d’un bâtiment…”

Ce serait l’éventualité la plus heureuse, celle sur laquelle, sans doute, il y aurait le plus à compter.

“En tout cas, Will, reprit Louis Clodion, ne nous ménagez pas… Nous sommes à votre disposition si la brise vient à mollir…

— Je le sais, mes jeunes messieurs, répondit Will Mitz, et je ne désespère pas de nous sauver tous!… Mais il est inutile de se fatiguer sans nécessité… Étendez-vous sous le prélart ou au fond de l’embarcation, et dormez… S’il le faut, je vous réveillerai… La nuit sera tranquille, je pense…

— Vous ne voulez pas que l’un de nous reste à l’écoute de la voile… proposa Axel Wickborn.

— Cela n’est pas indispensable, monsieur Axel et je suffirai à tout… Je vous le répète, si le vent obligeait à diminuer la voilure et à prendre les avirons, je vous appellerais… Croyez-moi, enveloppez-vous de vos couvertures, et dormez jusqu’au jour!”

Les jeunes garçons firent ce que leur conseillait Will Mitz. Deux d’entre eux se glissèrent sous le taud auprès de M. Patterson; les autres s’étendirent le long des bancs, et bientôt tous dormaient à bord.

Will Mitz, seul à l’arrière, tenait la barre d’une main, l’autre prête à mollir ou à raidir les écoutes de la voile et du foc. Un petit fanal, éclairant la boussole posée devant lui, lui indiquait si l’embarcation déviait de la route à suivre.

Ainsi s’écoulèrent de longues heures, sans que Will Mitz eut succombé un instant au sommeil. Trop de pensées agitaient son esprit, trop d’inquiétudes! Soutenu par une inébranlable confiance en Dieu, il ne désespérait pas. Il était à l’arrière de ce canot, comme il était, l’autre nuit, sur la dunette de l’Alert, dirigeant l’un d’une main ferme, comme il avait dirigé l’autre. Mais, au lieu du solide navire qui portait ses jeunes compagnons et lui, ce n’était plus qu’une frêle embarcation, avec une réserve de vivres qu’une semaine épuiserait, qui allait les livrer à toutes les incertitudes de cette navigation, à tous les caprices, tous les dangers de la mer.

La brise persistant modérée et régulière, Will Mitz n’eut pas l’occasion de réveiller son petit monde, et si, à plusieurs reprises, se relevant, l’un ou l’autre, ils l’interrogeaient:

“Cela va bien… cela va bien”, répondait-il.

Et, après un signe amical, allongés de nouveau sous leurs couvertures, ils s’abandonnaient au sommeil.

Dès l’aube, tous furent sur pied, même M. Patterson, qui se dégagea du taud et s’assit à l’avant.

Une belle journée s’annonçait. Le soleil se levait sur un horizon voilé de quelques brumes que ses premiers rayons ne tardèrent pas dissiper. Des risées couraient à la surface de la mer, zébrée de petite lames qui clapotaient le long de l’embarcation.

En premier lieu, et suivant son habitude, Tony Renault, comme il le faisait, à bord de l’Alert, s’occupa du déjeuner, thé qu’il fit chauffer sur le fourneau portatif, biscuit que l’on tira de l’une des caisses, puis quelques gouttes de brandy mêlées à l’eau douce.

Roger Hinsdale, s’adressant à Will Mitz, lui dit:

“Il faut dormir à votre tour… il le faut, si vous devez passer la nuit prochaine à la barre…

— Il le faut”, ajouta Louis Clodion.

Will Mitz interrogea l’horizon du regard et, voyant la mer si calme, la brise si régulière:

“Je vais dormir deux heures”, répondit-il.

Remettant la barre à Magnus Anders, après lui avoir donné quelques instructions, il alla s’étendre sous le taud.

Deux heures plus tard, ainsi qu’il l’avait dit, il reparut et vint à l’arrière.

Dès qu’il se fut assuré que l’embarcation était en bonne route, il observa le ciel et la mer.

Les conditions atmosphériques n’avaient point changées. Le soleil montait vers la méridienne sur un ciel pur. La température aurait été insoutenable avec la réverbération des eaux, si les fraîcheurs de la brise ne l’eussent adoucie.

Toutefois, si loin que la vue pût s’étendre, on n’apercevait ni la silhouette blanche d’une voile ni le panache noir d’une fumée. Les lorgnettes se promenèrent vainement le long de l’immense périmètre.

D’ordinaire, à cette époque de l’année, les navires anglais, français, américains, allemands, fréquentent ces parages; limités au nord par l’archipel des Bermudes, à l’ouest par l’archipel des Indes Occidentales. Il est rare qu’une journée s’écoula sans que des bâtiments ne s’y croisent.

Aussi, Will Mitz se demandait-il si la tempête n’avait pas entraîné l’Alert plus au large qu’il ne le pensait, à une distance telle qu’elle ne pourrait être franchie en moins de deux ou trois semaines!… Et, bien avant même, les provisions seraient épuisées!… Il n’y aurait plus à compter que sur la pêche pour se procurer un peu de nourriture, et sur la pluie pour apaiser les tortures de la soif!…

Ces alarmantes réflexions, Will Mitz les gardait pour lui, affectant une confiance qu’il commençait à perdre.

La matinée s’acheva dans ces conditions que rien ne vint modifier. Une sorte de bonnette, maintenue par un tangon, ayant été hissée, la vitesse du canot s’accrut sous l’allure du vent arrière.

Le second déjeuner, moins sommaire que le premier, se composa de biscuit, de viande sèche, de légumes conservés qu’il suffisait de faire réchauffer, et de thé pour boisson. M. Patterson, s’habituant à cette situation, mangea avec quelque appétit. Ses jeunes compagnons, eux, dévorèrent à belles dents, et le cœur de Will Mitz se serrait en songeant aux terribles éventualités de l’avenir, si la navigation se prolongeait…

L’après-midi, les lignes, mises à la traîne, rapportèrent divers poissons, qui, bouillit dans l’eau de mer, augmentèrent le menu du dîner.

Puis, la nuit vint. Aucune voile n’avait été aperçue avant le coucher du soleil. Obligeant Louis Clodion et ses camarades à dormir comme la veille, Will Mitz resta au gouvernail jusqu’au jour.

Le lendemain, 28 septembre, le vent, qui avait légèrement molli entre le coucher et le lever du soleil, fraîchit à mesure que l’astre du jour montait vers le zénith. Dans la matinée, il fut nécessaire d’amener la bonnette. Avec la vitesse qui l’animait, le canot embarquait un peu d’eau par l’avant, et il devenait difficile d’éviter les embardées. Will Mitz, prévoyant le cas où il serait nécessaire de diminuer la voile, ne fit pas ses deux heures de sommeil.

Le vent paraissait d’autant mieux établi que le ciel, d’un bleu intense, était sans nuages. Bien que le soleil, depuis l’équinoxe, décrivit un arc diurne moins allongé, ses rayons obliques étaient d’une extrême ardeur. Aussi convenait-il de ménager l’eau douce, puisque seule la pluie permettrait de renouveler la provision à demi épuisée déjà. Il fallut se rationner, et chacun s’y soumit sans se plaindre.

Ce jour-là, vers trois heures de l’après-midi, une fumée s’allongea vers le nord-est, et l’on eut l’espoir de rencontrer un navire.

Cet espoir fut de courte durée. La silhouette d’un grand steamer apparut, mais à dix milles du canot. Il était impossible d’attirer son attention, et Will Mitz eut bientôt constaté qu’il ne croisait pas sa route.

En effet, une heure après, ce steamer avait dépassé l’embarcation, et on ne vit bientôt plus que les dernières volutes de sa fumée rabattues par la brise.

Avant le dîner, Tony Renault, Hubert Perkins et Albertus Leuwen prirent encore quelques poissons, qui furent accommodés comme la veille. D’ailleurs, il fallut aussi songer à économiser le charbon du fourneau.

Le lendemain, la navigation se poursuivit à peu près dans les mêmes conditions. Seulement, le vent ayant un peu halé le nord, on dut raidir les écoutes et marcher à l’allure du largue.

Ce n’est pas que la vitesse fût diminuée, mais le canot donnait parfois la bande, au point que son plat-bord rasait la surface de l’eau.

Will Mitz le soutenait avec la barre, rendant la main lorsqu’il menaçait de s’emplir, tandis que Tony Renault filait l’écoute de la voile.

Ce qui inquiétait Will Mitz, c’était que les appréhensions qu’il cherchait vainement à cacher commençaient à troubler ses jeunes compagnons.

Et, tout d’abord, M. Patterson, doué d’une moins grande endurance, parut ne pas devoir résister comme il l’avait fait jusqu’alors. Ce n’était pas qu’il fût abattu par le mal de mer, non! Des accès de fièvre l’accablaient, accompagnés d’une soif brûlante. Et, pour l’apaiser, chacun lui eût volontiers abandonné sa part d’eau douce, bien réduite déjà. S’il s’affaiblissait encore, si le délire le prenait, — et parfois s’échappaient de sa bouche des paroles incohérentes, — que faire pour lui?…

En outre, Axel Wickborn et Hubert Perkins furent en proie à de telles faiblesses, qu’ils ne pouvaient demeurer sur les bancs. Leur figure pâlie, leurs yeux caves, leur regard incertain, indiquaient qu’ils étaient à bout de forces, et il fallut les étendre près de M. Patterson.

La nuit du 29 au 30 septembre accrut encore les anxiétés de Will Mitz. Roger Hinsdale, Tony Renault, Magnus Anders, qui avaient montré jusqu’ici le plus d’énergie, les durent partager. Et, pour comble de malchance, le vent, jusqu’alors favorable à la marche du canot, marqua une tendance à mollir.

Voilà ce qu’il y avait le plus à redouter, ces calmes dont on ne prévoit pas la fin. Avec de nouveaux retards, les provisions qui diminuaient chaque jour, et l’eau douce qui serait bientôt réduite à quelques pintes, finiraient par manquer…

C’était le 26 au soir que l’embarcation avait abandonné l’Alert. Depuis quatre jours, le canot errait à l’aventure sur cette mer toujours déserte. Et lorsque Louis Clodion demanda combien de milles il avait pu faire en direction de l’ouest:

“Cent cinquante peut-être… répondit Will Mitz.

— Cent cinquante… s’écria John Howard, et nous n’apercevons pas encore la terre…

— Est-ce qu’il n’y a plus de terre de ce côté?…” murmura Niels Harboe.

Will Mitz ne sut que répondre. La terre était là, mais à quelle distance, impossible même de l’estimer!

En réalité, s’il y avait des vivres pour quelques jours encore, il ne resterait d’eau douce que pour quarante-huit heures, à moins que la pluie ne vint à tomber.

Et, précisément, la sérénité du ciel enlevait tout espoir à cet égard. Ce vent, qui avait halé le nord, n’amenait pas un seul nuage. Le canot avait dû dériver vers le sud, et ce n’était pas en cette direction que se rencontrerait la côte américaine, mais bien le vaste océan ouvert jusqu’aux limites de la mer Antarctique!

D’ailleurs, dans la nuit du 3 au 4 octobre, la brise tomba peu à peu, et, au lever de l’aube, la voile battait sur le mât.

Quel regard désespéré les plus énergiques jetèrent sur cette immensité!

Will Mitz, lui-même, croisant les mains, ne put qu’adresser ce dernier appel à la Providence:

“Mon Dieu… mon Dieu!… prenez-nous en pitié!”

Une journée encore se passa sans changement, et, sous cette chaleur torride, il fallait sans cesse se relayer aux avirons. Ils n’étaient plus que quatre qui pussent encore le faire, Louis Clodion, Tony Renault, John Howard, Magnus Anders. Leurs camarades, brisés par la fatigue, minés par la fièvre, gisaient au fond de l’embarcation, et l’eau potable allait leur manquer…

Will Mitz, cependant, conservait assez d’énergie pour encourager ses jeunes compagnons. Il ne quittait la barre que pour prendre l’aviron à son tour. En vain espérait-il que le vent reviendrait! Les rares nuages de l’horizon se dissipaient presque aussitôt. La voile ne battait plus, et, si on la laissait sur le mât, c’est qu’elle formait abri contre les brûlants rayons du soleil.

Cette situation ne pouvait se prolonger.

Pendant la nuit du 1er au 2 octobre, plusieurs de ces pauvres enfants eurent le délire. Ils criaient… ils appelaient leur mère… Sans l’incessante surveillance de Will Mitz, ils se fussent jetés à la mer sous l’empire d’effroyables hallucinations…

Enfin le jour parut, et, pour quelques-uns, ne serait-ce pas celui qui terminerait leurs souffrances?…

Soudain un cri se fit entendre, — un cri qui échappait des lèvres de Louis Clodion:

“Navire!”

CHAPITRE XIV

XIV

Au terme du voyage

Le steamer Victoria, après avoir quitté la Dominique à destination de Liverpool, se trouvait à trois cent cinquante milles dans le sud-est des Antilles, lorsque les hommes de quart aperçurent le canot de l’Alert.

Le capitaine John Davis, aussitôt prévenu, donna l’ordre de se diriger vers cette embarcation. Était-elle abandonnée, ou contenait-elle quelques malheureux échappés à un naufrage?…

Au moment où Louis Clodion avait poussé ce cri: “Navire!” Will Mitz et deux ou trois autres s’étaient relevés et tendaient les bras vers le bâtiment en vue.

Les plus valides retrouvèrent alors quelque force, et le capitaine du Victoria n’eut pas à envoyer une embarcation pour les recueillir. Will Mitz et Louis Clodion aux avirons, Tony Renault à la barre, le canot ne tarda pas à ranger le flanc du steamer. On lança une amarre, l’échelle fut déployée. Cinq minutes après, tous les passagers de l’Alert étaient à bord du Victoria, où les attendaient l’accueil le plus bienveillant et aussi les soins dont ils avaient si grand besoin.

Les voilà donc sauvés, les pensionnaires d’Antilian School, les boursiers de Mrs Kethlen Seymour, et avec eux M. Horatio Patterson, et aussi ce courageux Will Mitz, auquel tous devaient leur salut!

Louis Clodion fit le récit de ce qui s’était passé depuis le départ de la Barbade. Le capitaine du Victoria apprit dans quelles conditions s’effectua la première traversée, alors que l'Alert était entre les mains d'Harry Markel et de sa bande, puis le voyage d'exploration à travers les Antilles, puis comment Will Mitz découvrit les desseins de ces misérables, comment ses jeunes compagnons et lui avaient dû fuir le navire en flammes, et enfin ce que venait d'être la navigation du canot pendant ces derniers jours.

Ainsi, l'Alert, que l'on croyait, à cette date, aux deux tiers de son voyage de retour, s'était englouti dans les profondeurs de l'Atlantique avec les pirates de l'Halifax, les fugitifs de la prison du Queenstown!

Et alors, au nom de ses camarades, la voix profondément émue, Louis Clodion remercia Will Mitz de tout ce que ce vaillant marin avait fait pour eux. En le pressant dans leurs bras, tous pleuraient de joie et de reconnaissance.

Le Victoria était un charbonnier de deux mille cinq cents tonneaux de jauge, qui, après avoir porté un chargement de houille à la Dominique, retournait sur lest précisément à Liverpool. Les passagers de l'Alert seraient donc ramenés directement en Angleterre. Or, comme le Victoria enlevait aisément ses quinze milles à l'heure, le retour de M. Horatio Patterson et des jeunes lauréats ne serait même pas retardé d'une semaine.

Il va sans dire que, dès cette première journée, grâce aux soins dont ils furent l'objet, aucun d'eux ne se ressentait des fatigues morales et physiques, des terribles épreuves par lesquelles ils avaient passé. Cela reculait déjà dans leurs souvenirs. Ils étaient tous à cette satisfaction, à cet immense bonheur d'en avoir fini avec les périls de la seconde traversée et les souffrances qu'ils avaient subies à bord du canot au milieu de l'Atlantique.

Quant à M. Patterson, en achevant une longue et intéressante conversation avec le capitaine du Victoria, dans laquelle s’entremêlèrent la figure de deux monstres, Harry Markel et le serpent de la Martinique, il s’exprima en ces termes:

“Décidément, capitaine, on a toujours raison de prendre les précautions les plus minutieuses avant de se mettre en voyage!… Suave mari magno, il est doux, comme l’a dit Lucrèce, il est doux, lorsque la mer est agitée, de se rappeler qu’on a fait son devoir!… Que serait-il arrivé si j’eusse disparu dans les profondeurs de l’océan… si je n’étais pas revenu au port… si, pendant de longues années, on eût été sans nouvelles de l’économe d’Antilian School?… Il est vrai, Mrs Patterson aurait pu profiter des suprêmes dispositions que j’avais cru devoir prendre!… Mais, grâce à Dieu, je vais être de retour à temps, et il n’y aura pas lieu d’y donner suite!… Finis coronat opus!”

Probablement, le capitaine du Victoria ne comprit pas ce que le mentor lui disait, ni en latin ni même en sa langue, à propos de Mrs Patterson; mais il n’insista pas et ne put que féliciter son nouveau passager d’avoir triomphé de tant de périls.

On le voit, M. Patterson avait repris toute possession de lui-même, toute liberté d’esprit. Et, alors, lui revint à la mémoire la fameuse citation latine qu’il n’était pas encore parvenu à traduire. D’ailleurs, Tony Renault n’entendait pas lui en faire grâce et, le lendemain, devant ses camarades:

“Eh bien, monsieur Patterson, et cette traduction?… demanda-t-il.

— De votre phrase latine?

— Oui.

— Letorum rosam angelum?…

— Non… non… rectifia Tony Renault, rosam angelum letorum…

— Ah! qu’importe l’ordre de ces mots?…

— Il importe, au contraire, monsieur Patterson!

— Voici qui est plaisant!

— C’est comme cela!… Et vous n’avez pas trouvé?…

— J’ai trouvé que cela ne signifiait rien du tout…

— Erreur! Il est vrai, j’ai oublié de vous prévenir que cette phrase ne peut se traduire qu’en français…

— Me direz-vous enfin?…

— Oui… quand nous serons en vue de la côte anglaise!”

Et, les jours suivants, c’est en vain que M. Patterson tourna et retourna ces mots vraiment cabalistiques! Un latiniste comme lui pris au dépourvu!

Aussi, très ennuyé, très vexé, dès que le cri: “Terre!” retentit à bord, mit-il Tony Renault en demeure de s’expliquer.

“Rien n’est plus simple, répondit le jeune loustic d’Antilian School.

— Eh bien?…

— Rosam angelum letorum signifie exactement en bon français: Rose a mangé l’omelette au rhum!”

M. Patterson ne comprit pas tout d’abord, mais, quand il eut compris, il sursauta comme s’il venait de recevoir une décharge électrique, puis se voila la face en signe d’horreur.

Bref, après une heureuse traversée, à la date du 22 octobre, le Victoria donnait dans le canal de Saint-George, et, le soir même, il s’amarrait à son appontement des docks de Liverpool.

Des dépêches furent aussitôt lancées au directeur d’Antilian School et aux familles des jeunes pensionnaires, annonçant leur retour.

Dès le soir, les journaux relataient les faits dont l’Alert avait été le théâtre, et racontaient dans quelles conditions M. Horatio Patterson et les jeunes lauréats venaient d’être rapatriés en Angleterre.

Cette histoire eut un retentissement considérable. L’émotion fut grande, lorsqu’on apprit les détails de ce drame qui avait débuté dans la baie de Cork par le massacre du capitaine Paxton et de son équipage, et dont le dénouement s’était accompli en plein océan avec l’engloutissement d’Harry Markel et de toute sa bande.

En même temps, par les soins de M. Ardagh, Mrs Kethlen Seymour était informée de ces événements. On imagine sans peine ce que dut être l’émotion de cette excellente et généreuse dame!… Que serait-il arrivé si elle n’avait eu la pensée d’assurer le passage de Will Mitz à bord de l’Alert!… Et quelle reconnaissance elle témoigna à ce brave marin devenu le héros du jour!… Maintenant, à Liverpool, Will Mitz n’avait plus qu’à attendre son embarquement comme second maître sur l’Elisa Warden.

Après avoir renouvelé au capitaine du Victoria les remerciements que méritait sa conduite, M. Patterson et les pensionnaires prirent un train de nuit. Le lendemain, ils rentraient à Antilian School.

À cette date, les vacances étant achevées, on se figure quel accueil les voyageurs reçurent, après les péripéties d'un tel voyage! Il fallut en connaître tous les détails et, assurément, l'on en parlerait longtemps encore, toujours peut-être, pendant les heures de récréations. Malgré tant de dangers auxquels avaient échappé les passagers de l'Alert, combien de leurs camarades regrettèrent de ne point les avoir partagés! Et, nul doute à cet égard, si quelque nouveau concours s'ouvrait pour l'obtention de bourses de voyage, les concurrents ne manqueraient pas!

Il est vrai, tout portait à croire qu'il ne se rencontrerait pas une autre bande de pirates pour s'emparer du navire affecté au transport des jeunes lauréats.

Cependant, tous devaient avoir hâte de revoir leurs familles qui les attendaient avec tant d'impatience, — et à quoi avait-il tenu qu'ils ne fussent jamais revenus de ce voyage aux Antilles!

Aussi, à l'exception d'Hubert Perkins, dont les parents habitaient Antigoa, de Roger Hinsdale, dont la famille habitait Londres, John Howard, Louis Clodion, Tony Renault, Niels Harboe, Axel Wickborn, Albertus Leuwen, Magnus Anders, partirent immédiatement pour Manchester, Paris, Nantes, Copenhague, Rotterdam, Gottenborg, désireux d'y passer quelques jours avant de revenir à Antilian School.

Cette histoire ne serait pas achevée de tous points, si elle ne rappelait une dernière fois l'attention sur M. Horatio Patterson.

Il va sans dire qu'au moment où les deux époux tombèrent dans les bras l'un de l'autre, la scène fut des plus touchantes. Non! Mrs Patterson ne pouvait s'imaginer que son mari, cet homme si rangé, si méthodique, si en dehors de toutes les éventualités fâcheuses de la vie, eût été exposé à de tels dangers et s'en fût tiré avec tant de bonheur! Mais ce que se disait cet excellent homme, c'est qu'il ne se risquerait plus jamais à braver les périls d'une traversée! Il n'en sortirait peut-être pas si heureusement, non bis in idem, et Mrs Patterson admit sans conteste cet axiome de jurisprudence.

Lorsque M. Patterson déposa entre les mains de Mrs Patterson la prime de sept cents livres touchée à la Barbade, il ne put que lui exprimer son vif regret de n'y pas joindre le fameux trigonocéphale, présentement englouti dans les sombres abîmes de l'océan Atlantique. Quel bon effet ce serpent eût produit, sinon dans le salon de l'économat, du moins dans le cabinet d'histoire naturelle d'Antilian School!…

Et alors M. Patterson d'ajouter:

"Il ne nous reste plus maintenant qu'à prévenir le révérend Finbook, de la paroisse d'Oxford-street…"

Mrs Patterson ne put réprimer un sourire, et dit simplement:

"C'est inutile, mon ami…

— Comment… inutile!" s'écria M. Patterson au comble de la surprise, et aussi de la stupéfaction.

Ceci demande une explication, la voici:

Par excès de précaution et dans sa fantastique manie d'ordre poussé à l'extrême en toutes choses, le méticuleux économe d'Antilian School, ne trouvant pas son testament suffisant pour régler ses affaires, avait imaginé de divorcer avant son départ. De cette façon, en cas que l'on fût sans nouvelles de lui, et même s'il ne devait jamais revenir, Mrs Patterson n’aurait pas à attendre des années et des années pour se trouver libérée de toute tutelle comme il est arrivé à des femmes de grands voyageurs dans d’aussi tristes circonstances. M. Patterson ne pouvait se faire à l’idée que, pendant son absence, sa succession ne serait point immédiatement réglée comme il convient pour des choses qui doivent être conduites avec ordre et méthode et que la chère compagne de sa vie, pour récompense de sa fidélité et de son affection, ne fût pas en mesure de disposer d’elle-même et de sa petite fortune comme il convient à une veuve.

Si les idées de M. Patterson étaient trop profondément enracinées pour qu’on songeât à lui opposer n’importe quelle bonne raison, sa digne épouse avait, elle aussi, ses principes bien arrêtés, si bien arrêtés qu’elle n’accepterait jamais un divorce, fut-ce dans ces conditions. Mais, en même temps que l’économe était très entêté, il était distrait prodigieusement — on a pu s’en rendre compte au cours de ce récit — et c’est sur cela que comptait Mrs Patterson pour que tout s’arrangeât selon son désir. D’accord avec un solicitor, vieil ami, conseiller d’Antilian School et des deux époux, elle avait feint de se prêter à toute espèce de démarches. Or, dans l’émotion si légitime que lui causait cet acte, ainsi que l’avait bien prévu Mrs Patterson, son mari ne s’était aperçu de rien.

“Non… monsieur Patterson, je n’avais point signé… Nous n’avons jamais été désunis par le divorce… et notre contrat est resté et restera ce qu’il était…

— Ne varietur!” répondit M. Horatio Patterson, en serrant tendrement dans ses bras Mrs Patterson.

FIN

MASTER OF THE WORLD

Anonymous translation, 1914

First published in 1904, this novel is noted for its dark tone, as Verne's health was failing at the time of its composition. The novel begins with a series of unexplained events occurring across the eastern United States, caused by objects moving with such great speed that they are nearly invisible. The first-person narrator John Strock, head inspector in Washington DC, travels to the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina to investigate and discovers that all the phenomena are being caused by Robur, a brilliant inventor who had previously appeared in Verne's *Robur the Conqueror*.

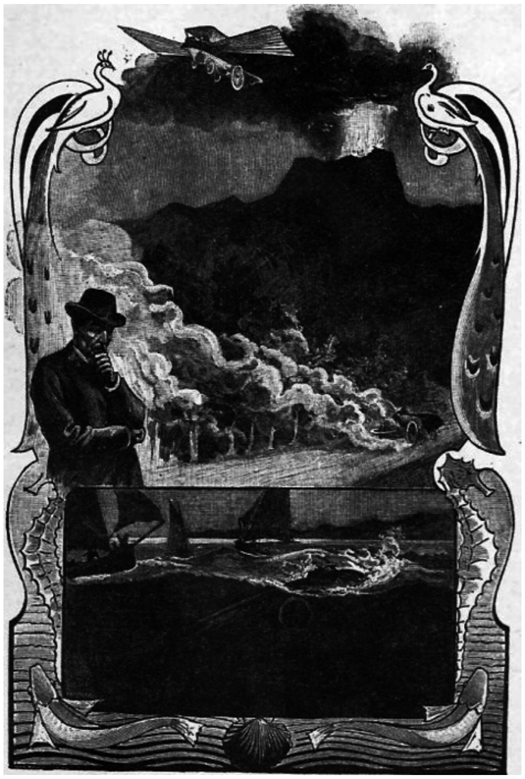

An original illustration

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT HAPPENED IN THE MOUNTAINS

If I speak of myself in this story, it is because I have been deeply involved in its startling events, events doubtless among the most extraordinary which this twentieth century will witness. Sometimes I even ask myself if all this has really happened, if its pictures dwell in truth in my memory, and not merely in my imagination. In my position as head inspector in the federal police department at Washington, urged on moreover by the desire, which has always been very strong in me, to investigate and understand everything which is mysterious, I naturally became much interested in these remarkable occurrences. And as I have been employed by the government in various important affairs and secret missions since I was a mere lad, it also happened very naturally that the head of my department placed In my charge this astonishing investigation, wherein I found myself wrestling with so many impenetrable mysteries.

In the remarkable passages of the recital, it is important that you should believe my word. For some of the facts I can bring no other testimony than my own. If you do not wish to believe me, so be it. I can scarce believe it all myself.

The strange occurrences began in the western part of our great American State of North Carolina. There, deep amid the Blueridge Mountains rises the crest called the Great Eyrie. Its huge rounded form is distinctly seen from the little town of Morganton on the Catawba River, and still more clearly as one approaches the mountains by way of the village of Pleasant Garden.

Why the name of Great Eyrie was originally given this mountain by the people of the surrounding region, I am not quite Sure It rises rocky and grim and inaccessible, and under certain atmospheric conditions has a peculiarly blue and distant effect. But the idea one would naturally get from the name is of a refuge for birds of prey, eagles condors, vultures; the home of vast numbers of the feathered tribes, wheeling and screaming above peaks beyond the reach of man. Now, the Great Eyrie did not seem particularly attractive to birds; on the contrary, the people of the neighborhood began to remark that on some days when birds approached its summit they mounted still further, circled high above the crest, and then flew swiftly away, troubling the air with harsh cries.

Why then the name Great Eyrie? Perhaps the mount might better have been called a crater, for in the center of those steep and rounded walls there might well be a huge deep basin. Perhaps there might even lie within their circuit a mountain lake, such as exists in other parts of the Appalachian mountain system, a lagoon fed by the rain and the winter snows.

In brief was not this the site of an ancient volcano, one which had slept through ages, but whose inner fires might yet reawake? Might not the Great Eyrie reproduce in its neighborhood the violence of Mount Krakatoa or the terrible disaster of Mont Pelee? If there were indeed a central lake, was there not danger that its waters, penetrating the strata beneath, would be turned to steam by the volcanic fires and tear their way forth in a tremendous explosion, deluging the fair plains of Carolina with an eruption such as that of 1902 in Martinique?

Indeed, with regard to this last possibility there had been certain symptoms recently observed which might well be due to volcanic action. Smoke had floated above the mountain and once the country folk passing near had heard subterranean noises, unexplainable rumblings. A glow in the sky had crowned the height at night.

When the wind blew the smoky cloud eastward toward Pleasant Garden, a few cinders and ashes drifted down from it. And finally one stormy night pale flames, reflected from the clouds above the summit, cast upon the district below a sinister, warning light.

In presence of these strange phenomena, it is not astonishing that the people of the surrounding district became seriously disquieted. And to the disquiet was joined an imperious need of knowing the true condition of the mountain. The Carolina newspapers had flaring headlines, "The Mystery of Great Eyrie!" They asked if it was not dangerous to dwell in such a region. Their articles aroused curiosity and fear — curiosity among those who being in no danger themselves were interested in the disturbance merely as a strange phenomenon of nature, fear in those who were likely to be the victims if a catastrophe actually occurred. Those more immediately threatened were the citizens of Morganton, and even more the good folk of Pleasant Garden and the hamlets and farms yet closer to the mountain.

Assuredly it was regrettable that mountain climbers had not previously attempted to ascend to the summit of the Great Eyrie. The cliffs of rock which surrounded it had never been scaled. Perhaps they might offer no path by which even the most daring climber could penetrate to the interior. Yet, if a volcanic eruption menaced all the western region of the Carolinas, then a complete examination of the mountain was become absolutely necessary.

Now before the actual ascent of the crater, with its many serious difficulties, was attempted, there was one way which offered an opportunity of reconnoitering the interior, with out clambering up the precipices. In the first days of September of that memorable year, a well-known aeronaut named Wilker came to Morganton with his balloon. By waiting for a breeze from the east, he could easily rise in his balloon and drift over the Great Eyrie. There from a safe height above he could search with a powerful glass into its deeps. Thus he would know if the mouth of a volcano really opened amid the mighty rocks. This was the principal question. If this were settled, it would be known if the surrounding country must fear an eruption at some period more or less distant.

The ascension was begun according to the programme suggested. The wind was fair and steady; the sky clear; the morning clouds were disappearing under the vigorous rays of the sun. If the interior of the Great Eyrie was not filled with smoke, the aeronaut would be able to search with his glass its entire extent. If the vapors were rising, he, no doubt, could detect their source.

The balloon rose at once to a height of fifteen hundred feet, and there rested almost motionless for a quarter of an hour. Evidently the east wind, which was brisk upon the Surface of the earth, did not make itself felt at that height. Then, unlucky chance, the balloon was caught in an adverse current, and began to drift toward the east. Its distance from the mountain chain rapidly increased. Despite all the efforts of the aeronaut, the citizens of Morganton saw the balloon disappear on the wrong horizon. Later, they learned that it had landed in the neighborhood of Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina.

This attempt having failed, it was agreed that it should be tried again under better conditions. Indeed, fresh rumblings were heard from the mountain, accompanied by heavy clouds and wavering glimmerings of light at night. Folk began to realize that the Great Eyrie was a serious and perhaps imminent source of danger. Yes, the entire country lay under the threat of some seismic or volcanic disaster.

During the first days of April of that year, these more or less vague apprehensions turned to actual panic. The newspapers gave prompt echo to the public terror. The entire district between the mountains and Morganton was sure that an eruption was at hand.

The night of the fourth of April, the good folk of Pleasant Garden were awakened by a sudden uproar. They thought that the mountains were falling upon them. They rushed from their houses, ready for instant flight, fearing to see open before them some immense abyss, engulfing the farms and villages for miles around.

The night was very dark. A weight of heavy clouds pressed down upon the plain. Even had it been day the crest of the mountains would have been invisible.

In the midst of this impenetrable obscurity, there was no response to the cries which arose from every side. Frightened groups of men, women, and children groped their way along the black roads in wild confusion. From every quarter came the screaming voices: “It is an earthquake!” “It is an eruption!” “Whence comes it?” “From the Great Eyrie!”

Into Morganton sped the news that stones, lava, ashes, were raining down upon the country.

Shrewd citizens of the town, however, observed that if there were an eruption the noise would have continued and increased, the flames would have appeared above the crater; or at least their lurid reflections would have penetrated the clouds. Now, even these reflections were no longer seen. If there had been an earthquake, the terrified people saw that at least their houses had not crumbled beneath the shock. It was possible that the uproar had been caused by an avalanche, the fall of some mighty rock from the summit of the mountains.

An hour passed without other incident. A wind from the west sweeping over the long chain of the Blueridge, set the pines and hemlocks wailing on the higher slopes. There seemed no new cause for panic; and folk began to return to their houses. All, however, awaited impatiently the return of day.

Then suddenly, toward three o’clock in the morning, another alarm! Flames leaped up above the rocky wall of the Great Eyrie. Reflected from the clouds, they illuminated the atmosphere for a great distance. A crackling, as if of many burning trees, was heard.

Had a fire spontaneously broken out? And to what cause was it due? Lightning could not have started the conflagration; for no thunder had been heard. True, there was plenty of material for fire; at this height the chain of the Blueridge is well wooded. But these flames were too sudden for any ordinary cause.

“An eruption! An eruption!”

The cry resounded from all sides. An eruption! The Great Eyrie was then indeed the crater of a volcano buried in the bowels of the mountains. And after so many years, so many ages even, had it reawakened? Added to the flames, was a rain of stones and ashes about to follow? Were the lavas going to pour down torrents of molten fire, destroying everything in their passage, annihilating the towns, the villages, the farms, all this beautiful world of meadows, fields and forests, even as far as Pleasant Garden and Morganton?

This time the panic was overwhelming; nothing could stop it. Women carrying their infants, crazed with terror, rushed along the eastward roads. Men, deserting their homes, made hurried bundles of their most precious belongings and set free their livestock, cows, sheep, pigs, which fled in all directions. What disorder resulted from this agglomeration, human and animal, under darkest night, amid forests, threatened by the fires of the volcano, along the border of marshes whose waters might be upheaved and overflow! With the earth itself threatening to disappear from under the feet of the fugitives! Would they be in time to save themselves, if a cascade of glowing lava came rolling down the slope of the mountain across their route?

Nevertheless, some of the chief and shrewder farm owners were not swept away in this mad flight, which they did their best to restrain. Venturing within a mile of the mountain, they saw that the glare of the flames was decreasing. In truth it hardly seemed that the region was immediately menaced by any further upheaval. No stones were being hurled into space; no torrent of lava was visible upon the slopes; no rumblings rose from the ground. There was no further manifestation of any seismic disturbance capable of overwhelming the land.

At length, the flight of the fugitives ceased at a distance where they seemed secure from all danger. Then a few ventured back toward the mountain. Some farms were reoccupied before the break of day.

By morning the crests of the Great Eyrie showed scarcely the least remnant of its cloud of smoke. The fires were certainly at an end; and if it were impossible to determine their cause, one might at least hope that they would not break out again.

It appeared possible that the Great Eyrie had not really been the theater of volcanic phenomena at all. There was no further evidence that the neighborhood was at the mercy either of eruptions or of earthquakes.

Yet once more about five o’clock, from beneath the ridge of the mountain, where the shadows of night still lingered, a strange noise swept across the air, a sort of whirring, accompanied by the beating of mighty wings. And had it been a clear day, perhaps the farmers would have seen the passage of a mighty bird of prey, some monster of the skies, which having risen from the Great Eyrie sped away toward the east.

CHAPTER 2

I REACH MORGANTON

The twenty-seventh of April, having left Washington the night before, I arrived at Raleigh, the capital of the State of North Carolina.

Two days before, the head of the federal police had called me to his room. He was awaiting me with some impatience. “John Strock,” said he, “are you still the man who on so many occasions has proven to me both his devotion and his ability?”

“Mr. Ward,” I answered, with a bow, “I cannot promise success or even ability, but as to devotion, I assure you, it is yours.”

“I do not doubt it,” responded the chief. “And I will ask you instead this more exact question: Are you as fond of riddles as ever? As eager to penetrate into mysteries, as I have known you before?”

“I am, Mr. Ward.”

“Good, Strock; then listen.”

Mr. Ward, a man of about fifty years, of great power and intellect, was fully master of the important position he filled. He had several times entrusted to me difficult missions which I had accomplished successfully, and which had won me his confidence. For several months past, however, he had found no occasion for my services. Therefore I awaited with impatience what he had to say. I did not doubt that his questioning implied a serious and important task for me.

“Doubtless you know,” said he, “what has happened down in the Blueridge Mountains near Morganton.”

“Surely, Mr. Ward, the phenomena reported from there have been singular enough to arouse anyone’s curiosity.”

“They are singular, even remarkable, Strock. No doubt about that. But there is also reason to ask, if these phenomena about the Great Eyrie are not a source of continued danger to the people there, if they are not forerunners of some disaster as terrible as it is mysterious.”

“It is to be feared, sir.”

“So we must know, Strock, what is inside of that mountain. If we are helpless in the face of some great force of nature, people must be warned in time of the danger which threatens them.”

“It is clearly the duty of the authorities, Mr. Ward,” responded I, “to learn what is going on within there.”

“True, Strock; but that presents great difficulties. Everyone reports that it is impossible to scale the precipices of the Great Eyrie and reach its interior. But has anyone ever attempted it with scientific appliances and under the best conditions? I doubt it, and believe a resolute attempt may bring success.”

“Nothing is impossible, Mr. Ward; what we face here is merely a question of expense.”

“We must not regard expense when we are seeking to reassure an entire population, or to preserve it from a catastrophe. There is another suggestion I would make to you. Perhaps this Great Eyrie is not so inaccessible as is supposed. Perhaps a band of malefactors have secreted themselves there, gaining access by ways known only to themselves.”

“What! You suspect that robbers — ”

“Perhaps I am wrong, Strock; and these strange sights and sounds have all had natural causes. Well, that is what we have to settle, and as quickly as possible.”

“I have one question to ask.”

“Go ahead, Strock.”

“When the Great Eyrie has been visited, when we know the source of these phenomena, if there really is a crater there and an eruption is imminent, can we avert it?”

“No, Strock; but we can estimate the extent of the danger. If some volcano in the Alleghanies threatens North Carolina with a disaster similar to that of Martinique, buried beneath the outpourings of Mont Pelee, then these people must leave their homes.”

“I hope, sir, there is no such widespread danger.”

“I think not, Strock; it seems to me highly improbable that an active volcano exists in the Blueridge mountain chain. Our Appalachian mountain system is nowhere volcanic in its origin. But all these events cannot be without basis. In short, Strock, we have decided to make a strict inquiry into the phenomena of the Great Eyrie, to gather all the testimony, to question the people of the towns and farms. To do this, I have made choice of an agent in whom we have full confidence; and this agent is you, Strock.”

“Good! I am ready, Mr. Ward,” cried I, “and be sure that I shall neglect nothing to bring you full information.”

“I know it, Strock, and I will add that I regard you as specially fitted for the work. You will have a splendid opportunity to exercise, and I hope to satisfy, your favorite passion of curiosity.”

“As you say, sir.”

“You will be free to act according to circumstances. As to expenses, if there seems reason to organize an ascension party, which will be costly, you have carte blanche.”

“I will act as seems best, Mr. Ward.”

“Let me caution you to act with all possible discretion. The people in the vicinity are already over-excited. It will be well to move secretly. Do not mention the suspicions I have suggested to you. And above all, avoid arousing any fresh panic.”

“It is understood.”

“You will be accredited to the Mayor of Morganton, who will assist you. Once more, be prudent, Strock, and acquaint no one with your mission, unless it is absolutely necessary. You have often given proofs of your intelligence and address; and this time I feel assured you will succeed.”

I asked him only “When shall I start?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, I shall leave Washington; and the day after, I shall be at Morganton.”

How little suspicion had I of what the future had in store for me!

I returned immediately to my house where I made my preparations for departure; and the next evening found me in Raleigh. There I passed the night, and in the course of the next afternoon arrived at the railroad station of Morganton.

Morganton is but a small town, built upon strata of the jurassic period, particularly rich in coal. Its mines give it some prosperity. It also has numerous unpleasant mineral waters, so that the season there attracts many visitors. Around Morganton is a rich farming country, with broad fields of grain. It lies in the midst of swamps, covered with mosses and reeds. Evergreen forests rise high up the mountain slopes. All that the region lacks is the wells of natural gas, that invaluable natural source of power, light, and warmth, so abundant in most of the Alleghany valleys. Villages and farms are numerous up to the very borders of the mountain forests. Thus there were many thousands of people threatened, if the Great Eyrie proved indeed a volcano, if the convulsions of nature extended to Pleasant Garden and to Morganton.

The mayor of Morganton, Mr. Elias Smith, was a tall man, vigorous and enterprising, forty years old or more, and of a health to defy all the doctors of the two Americas. He was a great hunter of bears and panthers, beasts which may still be found in the wild gorges and mighty forests of the Alleghanies.

Mr. Smith was himself a rich land-owner, possessing several farms in the neighborhood. Even his most distant tenants received frequent visits from him. Indeed, whenever his official duties did not keep him in his so-called home at Morganton, he was exploring the surrounding country, irresistibly drawn by the instincts of the hunter.

I went at once to the house of Mr. Smith. He was expecting me, having been warned by telegram. He received me very frankly, without any formality, his pipe in his mouth, a glass of brandy on the table. A second glass was brought in by a servant, and I had to drink to my host before beginning our interview.

“Mr. Ward sent you,” said he to me in a jovial tone. “Good; let us drink to Mr. Ward’s health.”

I clinked glasses with him, and drank in honor of the chief of police.

“And now,” demanded Elias Smith, “what is worrying him?”

At this I made known to the mayor of Morganton the cause and the purpose of my mission in North Carolina. I assured him that my chief had given me full power, and would render me every assistance, financial and otherwise, to solve the riddle and relieve the neighborhood of its anxiety relative to the Great Eyrie.

Elias Smith listened to me without uttering a word, but not without several times refilling his glass and mine. While he puffed steadily at his pipe, the close attention which he gave me was beyond question. I saw his cheeks flush at times, and his eyes gleam under their bushy brows. Evidently the chief magistrate of Morganton was uneasy about Great Eyrie, and would be as eager as I to discover the cause of these phenomena.

When I had finished my communication, Elias Smith gazed at me for some moments in silence. Then he said, softly, “So at Washington they wish to know what the Great Eyrie hides within its circuit?”

“Yes, Mr. Smith.”

“And you, also?”

“I do.”

“So do I, Mr. Strock.”

He and I were as one in our curiosity.

“You will understand,” added he, knocking the cinders from his pipe, “that as a land-owner, I am much interested in these stories of the Great Eyrie, and as mayor, I wish to protect my constituents.”

“A double reason,” I commented, “to stimulate you to discover the cause of these extraordinary occurrences! Without doubt, my dear Mr. Smith, they have appeared to you as inexplicable and as threatening as to your people.”

“Inexplicable, certainly, Mr. Strock. For on my part, I do not believe it possible that the Great Eyrie can be a volcano; the Alleghanies are nowhere of volcanic origins. I, myself, in our immediate district, have never found any geological traces of scoria, or lava, or any eruptive rock whatever. I do not think, therefore, that Morganton can possibly be threatened from such a source.”

“You really think not, Mr. Smith?”

“Certainly.”

“But these tremblings of the earth that have been felt in the neighborhood!”

“Yes these tremblings! These tremblings!” repeated Mr. Smith, shaking his head; “but in the first place, is it certain that there have been tremblings? At the moment when the flames showed most sharply, I was on my farm of Wildon, less than a mile from the Great Eyrie. There was certainly a tumult in the air, but I felt no quivering of the earth.”

“But in the reports sent to Mr. Ward — ”

“Reports made under the impulse of the panic,” interrupted the mayor of Morganton. “I said nothing of any earth tremors in mine.”

“But as to the flames which rose clearly above the crest?”

“Yes, as to those, Mr. Strock, that is different. I saw them; saw them with my own eyes, and the clouds certainly reflected them for miles around. Moreover noises certainly came from the crater of the Great Eyrie, hissings, as if a great boiler were letting off steam.”

“You have reliable testimony of this?”

“Yes, the evidence of my own ears.”

“And in the midst of this noise, Mr. Smith, did you believe that you heard that most remarkable of all the phenomena, a sound like the flapping of great wings?”

“I thought so, Mr. Strock; but what mighty bird could this be, which sped away after the flames had died down, and what wings could ever make such tremendous sounds. I therefore seriously question, if this must not have been a deception of my imagination. The Great Eyrie a refuge for unknown monsters of the sky! Would they not have been seen long since, soaring above their immense nest of stone? In short, there is in all this a mystery which has not yet been solved."

"But we will solve it, Mr. Smith, if you will give me your aid."

"Surely, Mr. Strock; tomorrow we will start our campaign."

"Tomorrow." And on that word the mayor and I separated. I went to a hotel, and established myself for a stay which might be indefinitely prolonged. Then having dined, and written to Mr. Ward, I saw Mr. Smith again in the afternoon, and arranged to leave Morganton with him at daybreak.

Our first purpose was to undertake the ascent of the mountain, with the aid of two experienced guides. These men had ascended Mt. Mitchell and others of the highest peaks of the Blueridge. They had never, however, attempted the Great Eyrie, knowing that its walls of inaccessible cliffs defended it on every side. Moreover, before the recent startling occurrences the Great Eyrie had not particularly attracted the attention of tourists. Mr. Smith knew the two guides personally as men daring, skillful and trustworthy. They would stop at no obstacle; and we were resolved to follow them through everything.

Moreover Mr. Smith remarked at the last that perhaps it was no longer as difficult as formerly to penetrate within the Great Eyrie.

"And why?" asked I.

"Because a huge block has recently broken away from the mountain side and perhaps it has left a practicable path or entrance."

"That would be a fortunate chance, Mr. Smith."

“We shall know all about it, Mr. Strock, no later than tomorrow.”

“Till tomorrow, then.”

CHAPTER 3

THE GREAT EYRIE

The next day at dawn, Elias Smith and I left Morganton by a road which, winding along the left bank of the Catawba River, led to the village of Pleasant Garden. The guides accompanied us, Harry Horn, a man of thirty, and James Bruck, aged twenty-five. They were both natives of the region, and in constant demand among the tourists who climbed the peaks of the Blueridge and Cumberland Mountains.

A light wagon with two good horses was provided to carry us to the foot of the range. It contained provisions for two or three days, beyond which our trip surely would not be protracted. Mr. Smith had shown himself a generous provider both in meats and in liquors. As to water the mountain springs would furnish it in abundance, increased by the heavy rains, frequent in that region during springtime.

It is needless to add that the Mayor of Morganton in his role of hunter, had brought along his gun and his dog, Nisko, who gamboled joyously about the wagon. Nisko, however, was to remain behind at the farm at Wildon, when we attempted our ascent. He could not possibly follow us to the Great Eyrie with its cliffs to scale and its crevasses to cross.

The day was beautiful, the fresh air in that climate is still cool of an April morning. A few fleecy clouds sped rapidly overhead, driven by a light breeze which swept across the long plains, from the distant Atlantic. The sun peeping forth at intervals, illumined all the fresh young verdure of the countryside.

An entire world animated the woods through which we passed. From before our equipage fled squirrels, field-mice, parroquets of brilliant colors and deafening loquacity. Opossums passed in hurried leaps, bearing their young in their pouches. Myriads of birds were scattered amid the foliage of banyans, palms, and masses of rhododendrons, so luxuriant that their thickets were impenetrable.

We arrived that evening at Pleasant Garden, where we were comfortably located for the night with the mayor of the town, a particular friend of Mr. Smith. Pleasant Garden proved little more than a village; but its mayor gave us a warm and generous reception, and we supped pleasantly in his charming home, which stood beneath the shades of some giant beech-trees.

Naturally the conversation turned upon our attempt to explore the interior of the Great Eyrie. “You are right,” said our host, “until we all know what is hidden within there, our people will remain uneasy.”

“Has nothing new occurred,” I asked, “since the last appearance of flames above the Great Eyrie?”

“Nothing, Mr. Strock. From Pleasant Garden we can see the entire crest of the mountain. Not a suspicious noise has come down to us. Not a spark has risen. If a legion of devils is in hiding there, they must have finished their infernal cookery, and soared away to some other haunt.”

“Devils!” cried Mr. Smith. “Well, I hope they have not decamped without leaving some traces of their occupation, some parings of hoofs or horns or tails. We shall find them out.”

On the morrow, the twenty-ninth of April, we started again at dawn. By the end of this second day, we expected to reach the farm of Wildon at the foot of the mountain. The country was much the same as before, except that our road led more steeply upward. Woods and marshes alternated, though the latter grew sparser, being drained by the sun as we approached the higher levels. The country was also less populous. There were only a few little hamlets, almost lost beneath the beech trees, a few lonely farms, abundantly watered by the many streams that rushed downward toward the Catawba River.

The smaller birds and beasts grew yet more numerous. “I am much tempted to take my gun,” said Mr. Smith, “and to go off with Nisko. This will be the first time that I have passed here without trying my luck with the partridges and hares. The good beasts will not recognize me. But not only have we plenty of provisions, but we have a bigger chase on hand today. The chase of a mystery.”

“And let us hope,” added I, “we do not come back disappointed hunters.”

In the afternoon the whole chain of the Blueridge stretched before us at a distance of only six miles. The mountain crests were sharply outlined against the clear sky. Well wooded at the base, they grew more bare and showed only stunted evergreens toward the summit. There the scraggly trees, grotesquely twisted, gave to the rocky heights a bleak and bizarre appearance. Here and there the ridge rose in sharp peaks. On our right the Black Dome, nearly seven thousand feet high, reared its gigantic head, sparkling at times above the clouds.

“Have you ever climbed that dome, Mr. Smith?” I asked.

“No,” answered he, “but I am told that it is a very difficult ascent. A few mountaineers have climbed it; but they report that it has no outlook commanding the crater of the Great Eyrie.”

“That is so,” said the guide, Harry Horn. “I have tried it myself.”

“Perhaps,” suggested I, “the weather was unfavorable.”

“On the contrary, Mr. Strock, it was unusually clear. But the wall of the Great Eyrie on that side rose so high, it completely hid the interior.”

“Forward,” cried Mr. Smith. “I shall not be sorry to set foot where no person has ever stepped, or even looked, before.”

Certainly on this day the Great Eyrie looked tranquil enough. As we gazed upon it, there rose from its heights neither smoke nor flame.

Toward five o’clock our expedition halted at the Wildon farm, where the tenants warmly welcomed their landlord. The farmer assured us that nothing notable had happened about the Great Eyrie for some time. We supped at a common table with all the people of the farm; and our sleep that night was sound and wholly untroubled by premonitions of the future.

On the morrow, before break of day, we set out for the ascent of the mountain. The height of the Great Eyrie scarce exceeds five thousand feet. A modest altitude, often surpassed in this section of the Alleghanies. As we were already more than three thousand feet above sea level, the fatigue of the ascent could not be great. A few hours should suffice to bring us to the crest of the crater. Of course, difficulties might present themselves, precipices to scale, clefts and breaks in the ridge might necessitate painful and even dangerous detours. This was the unknown, the spur to our attempt. As I said, our guides knew no more than we upon this point. What made me anxious, was, of course, the common report that the Great Eyrie was wholly inaccessible. But this remained unproven. And then there was the new chance that a fallen block had left a breach in the rocky wall.

“At last,” said Mr. Smith to me, after lighting the first pipe of the twenty or more which he smoked each day, “we are well started. As to whether the ascent will take more or less time — ”

“In any case, Mr. Smith,” interrupted I, “you and I are fully resolved to pursue our quest to the end.”

“Fully resolved, Mr. Strock.”

“My chief has charged me to snatch the secret from this demon of the Great Eyrie.”

“We will snatch it from him, willing or unwilling,” vowed Mr. Smith, calling Heaven to witness. “Even if we have to search the very bowels of the mountain.”

“As it may happen, then,” said I, “that our excursion will be prolonged beyond today, it will be well to look to our provisions.”

“Be easy, Mr. Strock; our guides have food for two days in their knapsacks, besides what we carry ourselves. Moreover, though I left my brave Nisko at the farm, I have my gun. Game will be plentiful in the woods and gorges of the lower part of the mountain, and perhaps at the top we shall find a fire to cook it, already lighted.”

“Already lighted, Mr. Smith?”

“And why not, Mr. Strock? These flames! These superb flames, which have so terrified our country folk! Is their fire absolutely cold, is no spark to be found beneath their ashes? And then, if this is truly a crater, is the volcano so wholly extinct that we cannot find there a single ember? Bah! This would be but a poor volcano if it hasn’t enough fire even to cook an egg or roast a potato. Come, I repeat, we shall see! We shall see!”

At that point of the investigation I had, I confess, no opinion formed. I had my orders to examine the Great Eyrie. If it proved harmless, I would announce it, and people would be reassured. But at heart, I must admit, I had the very natural desire of a man possessed by the demon of curiosity. I should be glad, both for my own sake, and for the renown which would attach to my mission if the Great Eyrie proved the center of the most remarkable phenomena — of which I would discover the cause.

Our ascent began in this order. The two guides went in front to seek out the most practicable paths. Elias Smith and I followed more leisurely. We mounted by a narrow and not very steep gorge amid rocks and trees. A tiny stream trickled downward under our feet. During the rainy season or after a heavy shower, the water doubtless bounded from rock to rock in tumultuous cascades. But it evidently was fed only by the rain, for now we could scarcely trace its course. It could not be the outlet of any lake within the Great Eyrie.

After an hour of climbing, the slope became so steep that we had to turn, now to the right, now to the left; and our progress was much delayed. Soon the gorge became wholly impracticable; its cliff-like sides offered no sufficient foothold. We had to cling by branches, to crawl upon our knees. At this rate the top would not be reached before sundown.

“Faith!” cried Mr. Smith, stopping for breath, “I realize why the climbers of the Great Eyrie have been few, so few, that it has never been ascended within my knowledge.”

“The fact is,” I responded, “that it would be much toil for very little profit. And if we had not special reasons to persist in our attempt.”

“You never said a truer word,” declared Harry Horn. “My comrade and I have scaled the Black Dome several times, but we never met such obstacles as these.”

“The difficulties seem almost impassable,” added James Bruck.

The question now was to determine to which side we should turn for a new route; to right, as to left, arose impenetrable masses of trees and bushes. In truth even the scaling of cliffs would have been more easy. Perhaps if we could get above this wooded slope we could advance with surer foot. Now, we could only go ahead blindly, and trust to the instincts of our two guides. James Bruck was especially useful. I believe that that gallant lad would have equaled a monkey in lightness and a wild goat in agility. Unfortunately, neither Elias Smith nor I was able to climb where he could.

However, when it is a matter of real need with me, I trust I shall never be backward, being resolute by nature and well-trained in bodily exercise. Where James Bruck went, I was determined to go, also; though it might cost me some uncomfortable falls. But it was not the same with the first magistrate of Morganton, less young, less vigorous, larger, stouter, and less persistent than we others. Plainly he made every effort, not to retard our progress, but he panted like a seal, and soon I insisted on his stopping to rest.

In short, it was evident that the ascent of the Great Eyrie would require far more time than we had estimated. We had expected to reach the foot of the rocky wall before eleven o’clock, but we now saw that mid-day would still find us several hundred feet below it.

Toward ten o’clock, after repeated attempts to discover some more practicable route, after numberless turnings and returnings, one of the guides gave the signal to halt. We found ourselves at last on the upper border of the heavy wood. The trees, more thinly spaced, permitted us a glimpse upward to the base of the rocky wall which constituted the true Great Eyrie.

“Whew!” exclaimed Mr. Smith, leaning against a mighty pine tree, “a little respite, a little repose, and even a little repast would not go badly.”

“We will rest an hour,” said I.

“Yes; after working our lungs and our legs, we will make our stomachs work.”

We were all agreed on this point. A rest would certainty freshen us. Our only cause for inquietude was now the appearance of the precipitous slope above us. We looked up toward one of those bare strips called in that region, slides. Amid this loose earth, these yielding stones, and these abrupt rocks there was no roadway.

Harry Horn said to his comrade, “It will not be easy.”

“Perhaps impossible,” responded Bruck.

Their comments caused me secret uneasiness. If I returned without even having scaled the mountain, my mission would be a complete failure, without speaking of the torture to my curiosity. And when I stood again before Mr. Ward, shamed and confused, I should cut but a sorry figure.

We opened our knapsacks and lunched moderately on bread and cold meat. Our repast finished, in less than half an hour, Mr. Smith sprang up eager to push forward once more. James Bruck took the lead; and we had only to follow him as best we could.

We advanced slowly. Our guides did not attempt to conceal their doubt and hesitation. Soon Horn left us and went far ahead to spy out which road promised most chance of success.

Twenty minutes later he returned and led us onward toward the northwest. It was on this side that the Black Dome rose at a distance of three or four miles. Our path was still difficult and painful, amid the sliding stones, held in place only occasionally by wiry bushes. At length after a weary struggle, we gained some two hundred feet further upward and found ourselves facing a great gash, which, broke the earth at this spot. Here and there were scattered roots recently uptorn, branches broken off, huge stones reduced to powder, as if an avalanche had rushed down this flank of the mountain.

“That must be the path taken by the huge block which broke away from the Great Eyrie,” commented James Bruck.

“No doubt,” answered Mr. Smith, “and I think we had better follow the road that it has made for us.”

It was indeed this gash that Harry Horn had selected for our ascent. Our feet found lodgment in the firmer earth which had resisted the passage of the monster rock. Our task thus became much easier, and our progress was in a straight line upward, so that toward half past eleven we reached the upper border of the “slide.”

Before us, less than a hundred feet away, but towering a hundred feet straight upwards in the air rose the rocky wall which formed the final crest, the last defence of the Great Eyrie.

From this side, the summit of the wall showed capriciously irregular, rising in rude towers and jagged needles. At one point the outline appeared to be an enormous eagle silhouetted against the sky, just ready to take flight. Upon this side, at least, the precipice was insurmountable.

“Rest a minute,” said Mr. Smith, “and we will see if it is possible to make our way around the base of this cliff.”

“At any rate,” said Harry Horn, “the great block must have fallen from this part of the cliff; and it has left no breach for entering.”

They were both right; we must seek entrance elsewhere. After a rest of ten minutes, we clambered up close to the foot of the wall, and began to make a circuit of its base.

Assuredly the Great Eyrie now took on to my eyes an aspect absolutely fantastic. Its heights seemed peopled by dragons and huge monsters. If chimeras, griffins, and all the creations of mythology had appeared to guard it, I should have been scarcely surprised.

With great difficulty and not without danger we continued our tour of this circumvallation, where it seemed that nature had worked as man does, with careful regularity. Nowhere was there any break in the fortification; nowhere a fault in the strata by which one might clamber up. Always this mighty wall, a hundred feet in height!

After an hour and a half of this laborious circuit, we regained our starting-place. I could not conceal my disappointment, and Mr. Smith was not less chagrined than I.

“A thousand devils!” cried he, “we know no better than before what is inside this confounded Great Eyrie, nor even if it is a crater.”

“Volcano, or not,” said I, “there are no suspicious noises now; neither smoke nor flame rises above it; nothing whatever threatens an eruption.”

This was true. A profound silence reigned around us; and a perfectly clear sky shone overhead. We tasted the perfect calm of great altitudes.

It was worth noting that the circumference of the huge wall was about twelve or fifteen hundred feet. As to the space enclosed within, we could scarce reckon that without knowing the thickness of the encompassing wall. The surroundings were absolutely deserted. Probably not a living creature ever mounted to this height, except the few birds of prey which soared high above us.

Our watches showed three o’clock, and Mr. Smith cried in disgust, “What is the use of stopping here all day! We shall learn nothing more. We must make a start, Mr. Strock, if we want to get back to Pleasant Garden to-night.”

I made no answer, and did not move from where I was seated; so he called again, “Come, Mr. Strock; you don’t answer.”

In truth, it cut me deeply to abandon our effort, to descend the slope without having achieved my mission. I felt an imperious need of persisting; my curiosity had redoubled. But what could I do? Could I tear open this unyielding earth? Overleap the mighty cliff? Throwing one last defiant glare at the Great Eyrie, I followed my companions.

The return was effected without great difficulty. We had only to slide down where we had so laboriously scrambled up. Before five o’clock we descended the last slopes of the mountain, and the farmer of Wildon welcomed us to a much needed meal.

“Then you didn’t get inside?” said he.

“No,” responded Mr. Smith, “and I believe that the inside exists only in the imagination of our country folk.”

At half past eight our carriage drew up before the house of the Mayor of Pleasant Garden, where we passed the night. While I strove vainly to sleep, I asked myself if I should not stop there in the village and organize a new ascent. But what better chance had it of succeeding than the first? The wisest course was, doubtless, to return to Washington and consult Mr. Ward.

So, the next day, having rewarded our two guides, I took leave of Mr. Smith at Morganton, and that same evening left by train for Washington.

CHAPTER 4

A MEETING OF THE AUTOMOBILE CLUB

Was the mystery of the Great Eyrie to be solved some day by chances beyond our imagining? That was known only to the future. And was the solution a matter of the first importance? That was beyond doubt, since the safety of the people of western Carolina perhaps depended upon it.

Yet a fortnight after my return to Washington, public attention was wholly distracted from this problem by another very different in nature, but equally astonishing.

Toward the middle of that month of May the newspapers of Pennsylvania informed their readers of some strange occurrences in different parts of the state. On the roads which radiated from Philadelphia, the chief city, there circulated an extraordinary vehicle, of which no one could describe the form, or the nature, or even the size, so rapidly did it rush past. It was an automobile; all were agreed on that. But as to what motor drove it, only imagination could say; and when the popular imagination is aroused, what limit is there to its hypotheses?

At that period the most improved automobiles, whether driven by steam, gasoline, or electricity, could not accomplish much more than sixty miles an hour, a speed that the railroads, with their most rapid expresses, scarce exceed on the best lines of America and Europe. Now, this new automobile which was astonishing the world, traveled at more than double this speed.

It is needless to add that such a rate constituted an extreme danger on the highroads, as much so for vehicles, as for pedestrians. This rushing mass, coming like a thunder-bolt, preceded by a formidable rumbling, caused a whirlwind, which tore the branches from the trees along the road, terrified the animals browsing in adjoining fields, and scattered and killed the birds, which could not resist the suction of the tremendous air currents engendered by its passage.

And, a bizarre detail to which the newspapers drew particular attention, the surface of the roads was scarcely even scratched by the wheels of the apparition, which left behind it no such ruts as are usually made by heavy vehicles. At most there was a light touch, a mere brushing of the dust. It was only the tremendous speed which raised behind the vehicle such whirlwinds of dust.

“It is probable,” commented the New Fork Herald, “that the extreme rapidity of motion destroys the weight.”

Naturally there were protests from all sides. It was impossible to permit the mad speed of this apparition which threatened to overthrow and destroy everything in its passage, equipages and people. But how could it be stopped? No one knew to whom the vehicle belonged, nor whence it came, nor whither it went. It was seen but for an instant as it darted forward like a bullet in its dizzy flight. How could one seize a cannon-ball in the air, as it leaped from the mouth of the gun?

I repeat, there was no evidence as to the character of the propelling engine. It left behind it no smoke, no steam, no odor of gasoline, or any other oil. It seemed probable, therefore, that the vehicle ran by electricity, and that its accumulators were of an unknown model, using some unknown fluid.

The public imagination, highly excited, readily accepted every sort of rumor about this mysterious automobile. It was said to be a supernatural car. It was driven by a specter, by one of the chauffeurs of hell, a goblin from another world, a monster escaped from some mythological menagerie, in short, the devil in person, who could defy all human intervention, having at his command invisible and infinite satanic powers.

But even Satan himself had no right to run at such speed over the roads of the United States without a special permit, without a number on his car, and without a regular license. And it was certain that not a single municipality had given him permission to go two hundred miles an hour. Public security demanded that some means be found to unmask the secret of this terrible chauffeur.

Moreover, it was not only Pennsylvania that served as the theater of his sportive eccentricities. The police reported his appearance in other states; in Kentucky near Frankfort; in Ohio near Columbus; in Tennessee near Nashville; in Missouri near Jefferson; and finally in Illinois in the neighborhood of Chicago.

The alarm having been given, it became the duty of the authorities to take steps against this public danger. To arrest or even to halt an apparition moving at such speed was scarcely practicable. A better way would be to erect across the roads solid gateways with which the flying machine must come in contact sooner or later, and be smashed into a thousand pieces.

“Nonsense!” declared the incredulous. “This madman would know well how to circle around such obstructions.”

“And if necessary,” added others, “the machine would leap over the barriers.”

“And if he is indeed the devil, he has, as a former angel, presumably preserved his wings, and so he will take to flight.”

But this last was but the suggestion of foolish old gossips who did not stop to study the matter. For if the King of Hades possessed a pair of wings, why did he obstinately persist in running around on the earth at the risk of crushing his own subjects, when he might more easily have hurled himself through space as free as a bird.

Such was the situation when, in the last week of May, a fresh event occurred, which seemed to show that the United States was indeed helpless in the hands of some unapproachable monster. And after the New World, would not the Old in its turn, be desecrated by the mad career of this remarkable automobilist?

The following occurrence was reported in all the newspapers of the Union, and with what comments and outcries it is easy to imagine.

A race was to be held by the automobile Club of Wisconsin, over the roads of that state of which Madison is the capital. The route laid out formed an excellent track, about two hundred miles in length, starting from Prairie-du-chien on the western frontier, passing by Madison and ending a little above Milwaukee on the borders of Lake Michigan. Except for the Japanese road between Nikko and Namode, bordered by giant cypresses, there is no better track in the world than this of Wisconsin. It runs straight and level as an arrow for sometimes fifty miles at a stretch. Many and noted were the machines entered for this great race. Every kind of motor vehicle was permitted to compete, even motorcycles, as well as automobiles. The machines were of all makes and nationalities. The sum of the different prizes reached fifty thousand dollars, so that the race was sure to be desperately contested. New records were expected to be made.

Calculating on the maximum speed hitherto attained, of perhaps eighty miles an hour, this international contest covering two hundred miles would last about three hours. And, to avoid all danger, the state authorities of Wisconsin had forbidden all other traffic between Prairie-du-chien and Milwaukee during three hours on the morning of the thirtieth of May. Thus, if there were any accidents, those who suffered would be themselves to blame.

There was an enormous crowd; and it was not composed only of the people of Wisconsin. Many thousands gathered from the neighboring states of Illinois, Michigan, Iowa, Indiana, and even from New York. Among the sportsmen assembled were many foreigners, English, French, Germans and Austrians, each nationality, of course, supporting the chauffeurs of its land. Moreover, as this was the United States, the country of the greatest gamblers of the world, bets were made of every sort and of enormous amounts.

The start was to be made at eight o’clock in the morning; and to avoid crowding and the accidents which must result from it, the automobiles were to follow each other at two minute intervals, along the roads whose borders were black with spectators.

The first ten racers, numbered by lot, were dispatched between eight o’clock and twenty minutes past. Unless there was some disastrous accident, some of these machines would surely arrive at the goal by eleven o’clock. The others followed in order.

An hour and a half had passed. There remained but a single contestant at Prairie-du-chien. Word was sent back and forth by telephone every five minutes as to the order of the racers. Midway between Madison and Milwaukee, the lead was held by a machine of Renault brothers, four cylindered, of twenty horsepower, and with Michelin tires. It was closely followed by a Harvard-Watson car and by a Dion-Bouton. Some accidents had already occurred, other machines were hopelessly behind. Not more than a dozen would contest the finish. Several chauffeurs had been injured, but not seriously. And even had they been killed, the death of men is but a detail, not considered of great importance in that astonishing country of America.

Naturally the excitement became more intense as one approached the finishing line near Milwaukee. There were assembled the most curious, the most interested; and there the passions of the moment were unchained. By ten o'clock it was evident, that the first prize, twenty thousand dollars, lay between five machines, two American, two French, and one English. Imagine, therefore, the fury with which bets were being made under the influence of national pride. The regular book makers could scarcely meet the demands of those who wished to wager. Offers and amounts were hurled from lip to lip with feverish rapidity. "One to three on the Harvard-Watson!"

"One to two on the Dion-Bouton!"

"Even money on the Renault!"

These cries rang along the line of spectators at each new announcement from the telephones.

Suddenly at half-past nine by the town clock of Prairie-du-chien, two miles beyond that town was heard a tremendous noise and rumbling which proceeded from the midst of a flying cloud of dust accompanied by shrieks like those of a naval siren.

Scarcely had the crowds time to draw to one side, to escape a destruction which would have included hundreds of victims. The cloud swept by like a hurricane. No one could distinguish what it was that passed with such speed. There was no exaggeration in saying that its rate was at least one hundred and fifty miles an hour.

The apparition passed and disappeared in an instant, leaving behind it a long train of white dust, as an express locomotive leaves behind a train of smoke. Evidently it was an automobile with a most extraordinary motor. If it maintained this arrow-like speed, it would reach the contestants in the fore-front of the race; it would pass them with this speed double their own; it would arrive first at the goal.

And then from all parts arose an uproar, as soon as the spectators had nothing more to fear.

“It is that infernal machine.”

“Yes; the one the police cannot stop.”

“But it has not been heard of for a fortnight.”

“It was supposed to be done for, destroyed, gone forever.”

“It is a devil’s car, driven by hellfire, and with Satan driving!”

In truth, if he were not the devil, who could this mysterious chauffeur be, driving with this unbelievable velocity, his no less mysterious machine? At least it was beyond doubt that this was the same machine which had already attracted so much attention. If the police believed that they had frightened it away, that it was never to be, heard of more, well, the police were mistaken which happens in America as elsewhere.

The first stunned moment of surprise having passed, many people rushed to the telephones to warn those further along the route of the danger which menaced, not only the people, but also the automobiles scattered along the road.

When this terrible madman arrived like an avalanche they would be smashed to pieces, ground into powder, annihilated!

And from the collision might not the destroyer himself emerge safe and sound? He must be so adroit, this chauffeur of chauffeurs, he must handle his machine with such perfection of eye and hand, that he knew, no doubt, how to escape from every situation. Fortunately the Wisconsin authorities had taken such precautions that the road would be clear except for contesting automobiles. But what right had this machine among them!

And what said the racers themselves, who, warned by telephone, had to sheer aside from the road in their struggle for the grand prize? By their estimate, this amazing vehicle was going at least one hundred and thirty miles an hour. Fast as was their speed, it shot by them at such a rate that they could hardly make out even the shape of the machine, a sort of lengthened spindle, probably not over thirty feet long. Its wheels spun with such velocity that they could scarce be seen. For the rest, the machine left behind it neither smoke nor scent.

As for the driver, hidden in the interior of his machine, he had been quite invisible. He remained as unknown as when he had first appeared on the various roads throughout the country.

Milwaukee was promptly warned of the coming of this interloper. Fancy the excitement the news caused! The immediate purpose agreed upon was to stop this projectile, to erect across its route an obstacle against which it would smash into a thousand pieces. But was there time? Would not the machine appear at any moment? And what need was there, since the track ended on the edge of Lake Michigan, and so the vehicle would be forced to stop there anyway, unless its supernatural driver could ride the water as well as the land.

Here, also, as all along the route, the most extravagant suggestions were offered. Even those who would not admit that the mysterious chauffeur must be Satan in person allowed that he might be some monster escaped from the fantastic visions of the Apocalypse.

And now there were no longer minutes to wait. Any second might bring the expected apparition.

It was not yet eleven o’clock when a rumbling was heard far down the track, and the dust rose in violent whirlwinds. Harsh whistlings shrieked through the air warning all to give passage to the monster.

It did not slacken speed at the finish. Lake Michigan was not half a mile beyond, and the machine must certainly be hurled into the water! Could it be that the mechanician was no longer master of his mechanism?

There could be little doubt of it. Like a shooting star, the vehicle flashed through Milwaukee. When it had passed the city, would it plunge itself to destruction in the waters of Lake Michigan?

At any rate when it disappeared at a slight bend in the road no trace was to be found of its passage.

CHAPTER 5

ALONG THE SHORES OF NEW ENGLAND

At the time when the newspapers were filled with these reports, I was again in Washington. On my return I had presented myself at my chief's office, but had been unable to see him. Family affairs had suddenly called him away, to be absent some weeks. Mr. Ward, however, undoubtedly knew of the failure of my mission. The newspapers, especially those of North Carolina, had given full details of our ascent of the Great Eyrie.

Naturally, I was much annoyed by this delay which further fretted my restless curiosity. I could turn to no other plans for the future. Could I give up the hope of learning the secret of the Great Eyrie? No! I would return to the attack a dozen times if necessary, and despite every failure.

Surely, the winning of access within those walls was not a task beyond human power. A scaffolding might be raised to the summit of the cliff; or a tunnel might be pierced through its depth. Our engineers met problems more difficult every day. But in this case it was necessary to consider the expense, which might easily grow out of proportion to the advantages to be gained. A tunnel would cost many thousand dollars, and what good would it accomplish beyond satisfying the public curiosity and my own?

My personal resources were wholly insufficient for the achievement. Mr. Ward, who held the government's funds, was away. I even thought of trying to interest some millionaire. Oh, if I could but have promised one of them some gold or silver mines within the mountain! But such an hypothesis was not admissible. The chain of the Appalachians is not situated in a gold bearing region like that of the Pacific mountains, the Transvaal, or Australia.

It was not until the fifteenth of June that Mr. Ward returned to duty. Despite my lack of success he received me warmly. “Here is our poor Strock!” cried he, at my entrance. “Our poor Strock, who has failed!”

“No more, Mr. Ward, than if you had charged me to investigate the surface of the moon,” answered I. “We found ourselves face to face with purely natural obstacles insurmountable with the forces then at our command.”

“I do not doubt that, Strock, I do not doubt that in the least. Nevertheless, the fact remains that you have discovered nothing of what is going on within the Great Eyrie.”

“Nothing, Mr. Ward.”

“You saw no sign of fire?”

“None.”

“And you heard no suspicious noises whatever?”

“None.”

“Then it is still uncertain if there is really a volcano there?”

“Still uncertain, Mr. Ward. But if it is there, we have good reason to believe that it has sunk into a profound sleep.”

“Still,” returned Mr. Ward, “there is nothing to show that it will not wake up again any day, Strock. It is not enough that a volcano should sleep, it must be absolutely extinguished unless indeed all these threatening rumors have been born solely in the Carolinian imagination.”

“That is not possible, sir,” I said. “Both Mr. Smith, the mayor of Morganton and his friend the mayor of Pleasant Garden, are reliable men. And they speak from their own knowledge in this matter. Flames have certainly risen above the Great Eyrie. Strange noises have issued from it. There can be no doubt whatever of the reality of these phenomena.”

“Granted,” declared Mr. Ward. “I admit that the evidence is unassailable. So the deduction to be drawn is that the Great Eyrie has not yet given up its secret.”

“If we are determined to know it, Mr. Ward, the solution is only a solution of expense. Pickaxes and dynamite would soon conquer those walls.”

“No doubt,” responded the chief, “but such an undertaking hardly seems justified, since the mountain is now quiet. We will wait awhile and perhaps nature herself will disclose her mystery.”

“Mr. Ward, believe me that I regret deeply that I have been unable to solve the problem you entrusted to me,” I said.

“Nonsense! Do not upset yourself, Strock. Take your defeat philosophically. We cannot always be successful, even in the police. How many criminals escape us! I believe we should never capture one of them, if they were a little more intelligent and less imprudent, and if they did not compromise themselves so stupidly. Nothing, it seems to me, would be easier than to plan a crime, a theft or an assassination, and to execute it without arousing any suspicions, or leaving any traces to be followed. You understand, Strock, I do not want to give our criminals lessons; I much prefer to have them remain as they are. Nevertheless there are many whom the police will never be able to track down.”

On this matter I shared absolutely the opinion of my chief. It is among rascals that one finds the most fools. For this very reason I had been much surprised that none of the authorities had been able to throw any light upon the recent performances of the “demon automobile.” And when Mr. Ward brought up this subject, I did not conceal from him my astonishment.

He pointed out that the vehicle was practically unpursuable; that in its earlier appearances, it had apparently vanished from all roads even before a telephone message could be sent ahead. Active and numerous police agents had been spread throughout the country, but no one of them had encountered the delinquent. He did not move continuously from place to place, even at his amazing speed, but seemed to appear only for a moment and then to vanish into thin air. True, he had at length remained visible along the entire route from Prairie-du-Chien to Milwaukee, and he had covered in less than an hour and a half this track of two hundred miles.

But since then, there had been no news whatever of the machine. Arrived at the end of the route, driven onward by its own impetus, unable to stop, had it indeed been engulfed within the waters of Lake Michigan? Must we conclude that the machine and its driver had both perished, that there was no longer any danger to be feared from either? The great majority of the public refused to accept this conclusion. They fully expected the machine to reappear.

Mr. Ward frankly admitted that the whole matter seemed to him most extraordinary; and I shared his view. Assuredly if this infernal chauffeur did not return, his apparition would have to be placed among those superhuman mysteries which it is not given to man to understand.

We had fully discussed this affair, the chief and I; and I thought that our interview was at an end, when, after pacing the room for a few moments, he said abruptly, “Yes, what happened there at Milwaukee was very strange. But here is something no less so!”

With this he handed me a report which he had received from Boston, on a subject of which the evening papers had just begun to apprise their readers. While I read it, Mr. Ward was summoned from the room. I seated myself by the window and studied with extreme attention the matter of the report.

For some days the waters along the coast of Maine, Connecticut, and Massachusetts had been the scene of an appearance which no one could exactly describe. A moving body would appear amid the waters, some two or three miles off shore, and go through rapid evolutions. It would flash for a while back and forth among the waves and then dart out of sight.

The body moved with such lightning speed that the best telescopes could hardly follow it. Its length did not seem to exceed thirty feet. Its cigar-shaped form and greenish color, made it difficult to distinguish against the background of the ocean. It had been most frequently observed along the coast between Cape Cod and Nova Scotia. From Providence, from Boston, from Portsmouth, and from Portland motor boats and steam launches had repeatedly attempted to approach this moving body and even to give it chase. They could not get anywhere near it. Pursuit seemed useless. It darted like an arrow beyond the range of view.

Naturally, widely differing opinions were held as to the nature of this object. But no hypothesis rested on any secure basis. Seamen were as much at a loss as others. At first sailors thought it must be some great fish, like a whale. But it is well known that all these animals come to the surface with a certain regularity to breathe, and spout up columns of mingled air and water. Now, this strange animal, if it was an animal, had never “blown” as the whalers say; nor, had it ever made any noises of breathing. Yet if it were not one of these huge marine mammals, how was this unknown monster to be classed? Did it belong among the legendary dwellers in the deep, the krakens, the octopuses, the leviathans, the famous sea-serpents?

At any rate, since this monster, whatever it was, had appeared along the New England shores, the little fishing-smacks and pleasure boats dared not venture forth. Wherever it appeared the boats fled to the nearest harbor, as was but prudent. If the animal was of a ferocious character, none cared to await its attack.

As to the large ships and coast steamers, they had nothing to fear from any monster, whale or otherwise. Several of them had seen this creature at a distance of some miles. But when they attempted to approach, it fled rapidly away. One day, even, a fast United States gun boat went out from Boston, if not to pursue the monster, at least to send after it a few cannon shot. Almost instantly the animal disappeared, and the attempt was vain. As yet, however, the monster had shown no intention of attacking either boats or people.

At this moment Mr. Ward returned and I interrupted my reading to say, “There seems as yet no reason to complain of this sea-serpent. It flees before big ships. It does not pursue little ones. Feeling and intelligence are not very strong in fishes.”

“Yet their emotions exist, Strock, and if strongly aroused — ”

“But, Mr. Ward, the beast seems not at all dangerous. One of two things will happen. Either it will presently quit these coasts, or finally it will be captured and we shall be able to study it at our leisure here in the museum of Washington.”

“And if it is not a marine animal?” asked Mr. Ward.

“What else can it be?” I protested in surprise.

“Finish your reading,” said Mr. Ward.

I did so; and found that in the second part of the report, my chief had underlined some passages in red pencil.

For some time no one had doubted that this was an animal; and that, if it were vigorously pursued, it would at last be driven from our shores. But a change of opinion had come about. People began to ask if, instead of a fish, this were not some new and remarkable kind of boat.

Certainly in that case its engine must be one of amazing power. Perhaps the inventor before selling the secret of his invention, sought to attract public attention and to astound the maritime world. Such surety in the movements of his boat, grace in its every evolution, such ease in defying pursuit by its arrow-like speed, surely, these were enough to arouse world-wide curiosity!

At that time great progress had been made in the manufacture of marine engines. Huge transatlantic steamers completed the ocean passage in five days. And the engineers had not yet spoken their last word. Neither were the navies of the world behind. The cruisers, the torpedo boats, the torpedo-destroyers, could match the swiftest steamers of the Atlantic and Pacific, or of the Indian trade.

If, however, this were a boat of some new design, there had as yet been no opportunity to observe its form. As to the engines which drove it, they must be of a power far beyond the fastest known. By what force they worked, was equally a problem. Since the boat had no sails, it was not driven by the wind; and since it had no smoke-stack, it was not driven by steam.

At this point in the report, I again paused in my reading and considered the comment I wished to make.

“What are you puzzling over, Strock?” demanded my chief.

“It is this, Mr. Ward; the motive power of this so-called boat must be as tremendous and as unknown as that of the remarkable automobile which has so amazed us all.”

“So that is your idea, is it, Strock?”

“Yes, Mr. Ward.”

There was but one conclusion to be drawn. If the mysterious chauffeur had disappeared, if he had perished with his machine in Lake Michigan, it was equally important now to win the secret of this no less mysterious navigator. And it must be won before he in his turn plunged into the abyss of the ocean. Was it not the interest of the inventor to disclose his invention? Would not the American government or any other give him any price he chose to ask?

Yet unfortunately, since the inventor of the terrestrial apparition had persisted in preserving his incognito, was it not to be feared that the inventor of the marine apparition would equally preserve his? Even if the first machine still existed, it was no longer heard from; and would not the second, in the same way, after having disclosed its powers, disappear in its turn, without a single trace?

What gave weight to this probability was that since the arrival of this report at Washington twenty-four hours before, the presence of the extraordinary boat hadn't been announced from anywhere along the shore. Neither had it been seen on any other coast. Though, of course, the assertion that it would not reappear at all would have been hazardous, to say the least.

I noted another interesting and possibly important point. It was a singular coincidence which indeed Mr. Ward suggested to me, at the same moment that I was considering it. This was that only after the disappearance of the wonderful automobile had the no less wonderful boat come into view. Moreover, their engines both possessed a most dangerous power of locomotion. If both should go rushing at the same time over the face of the world, the same danger would threaten mankind everywhere, in boats, in vehicles, and on foot. Therefore it was absolutely necessary that the police should in some manner interfere to protect the public ways of travel.

That is what Mr. Ward pointed out to me; and our duty was obvious. But how could we accomplish this task? We discussed the matter for some time; and I was just about to leave when Mr. Ward made one last suggestion.

“Have you not observed, Strock,” said he, “that there is a sort of fantastic resemblance between the general appearance of this boat and this automobile?”

“There is something of the sort, Mr. Ward.”

“Well, is it not possible that the two are one?”

CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST LETTER

After leaving Mr. Ward I returned to my home in Long Street. There I had plenty of time to consider this strange case uninterrupted by either wife or children. My household consisted solely of an ancient servant, who having been formerly in the service of my mother, had now continued for fifteen years in mine.

Two months before I had obtained a leave of absence. It had still two weeks to run, unless indeed some unforeseen circumstance interrupted it, some mission which could not be delayed. This leave, as I have shown, had already been interrupted for four days by my exploration of the Great Eyrie.

And now was it not my duty to abandon my vacation, and endeavor to throw light upon the remarkable events of which the road to Milwaukee and the shore of New England had been in turn the scene? I would have given much to solve the twin mysteries, but how was it possible to follow the track of this automobile or this boat?

Seated in my easy chair after breakfast, with my pipe lighted, I opened my newspaper. To what should I turn? Politics interested me but little, with its eternal strife between the Republicans and the Democrats. Neither did I care for the news of society, nor for the sporting page. You will not be surprised, then, that my first idea was to see if there was any news from North Carolina about the Great Eyrie. There was little hope of this, however, for Mr. Smith had promised to telegraph me at once if anything occurred. I felt quite sure that the mayor of Morganton was as eager for information and as watchful as could have been myself. The paper told me nothing new. It dropped idly from my hand; and I remained deep in thought.

What most frequently recurred to me was the suggestion of Mr. Ward that perhaps the automobile and the boat which had attracted our attention were in reality one and the same. Very probably, at least, the two machines had been built by the same hand. And beyond doubt, these were similar engines, which generated this remarkable speed, more than doubling the previous records of earth and sea.

“The same inventor!” repeated I.

Evidently this hypothesis had strong grounds. The fact that the two machines had not yet appeared at the same time added weight to the idea. I murmured to myself, “After the mystery of Great Eyrie, comes that of Milwaukee and Boston. Will this new problem be as difficult to solve as was the other?”

I noted idly that this new affair had a general resemblance to the other, since both menaced the security of the general public. To be sure, only the inhabitants of the Blueridge region had been in danger from an eruption or possible earthquake at Great Eyrie. While now, on every road of the United States, or along every league of its coasts and harbors, every inhabitant was in danger from this vehicle or this boat, with its sudden appearance and insane speed.

I found that, as was to be expected, the newspapers not only suggested, but enlarged upon the dangers of the case. Timid people everywhere were much alarmed. My old servant, naturally credulous and superstitious, was particularly upset. That same day after dinner, as she was clearing away the things, she stopped before me, a water bottle in one hand, the serviette in the other, and asked anxiously, “Is there no news, sir?”

“None,” I answered, knowing well to what she referred.

“The automobile has not come back?”

“No.”

“Nor the boat?”

“Nor the boat There is no news even-in the best informed papers.”

“But — your secret police information?”

“We are no wiser.”

“Then, sir, if you please, of what use are the police?”

It is a question which has phased me more than once.

“Now you see what will happen,” continued the old housekeeper, complainingly, “Some fine morning, he will come without warning, this terrible chauffeur, and rush down our street here, and kill us all!”

“Good! When that happens, there will be some chance of catching him.”

“He will never be arrested, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Because he is the devil himself, and you can’t arrest the devil!”

Decidedly, thought I, the devil has many uses; and if he did not exist we would have to invent him, to give people some way of explaining the inexplicable. It was he who lit the flames of the Great Eyrie. It was he who smashed the record in the Wisconsin race. It is he who is scurrying along the shores of Connecticut and Massachusetts. But putting to one side this evil spirit who is so necessary, for the convenience of the ignorant, there was no doubt that we were facing a most bewildering problem. Had both of these machines disappeared forever? They had passed like a meteor, like a star shooting through space; and in a hundred years the adventure would become a legend, much to the taste of the gossips of the next century.

For several days the newspapers of America and even those of Europe continued to discuss these events. Editorials crowded upon editorials. Rumors were added to rumors. Story tellers of every kind crowded to the front. The public of two continents was interested. In some parts of Europe there was even jealousy that America should have been chosen as the field of such an experience. If these marvelous inventors were American, then their country, their army and navy, would have a great advantage over others. The United States might acquire an incontestable superiority.

Under the date of the tenth of June, a New York paper published a carefully studied article on this phase of the subject. Comparing the speed of the swiftest known vessels with the smallest minimum of speed which could possibly be assigned to the new boat, the article demonstrated that if the United States secured this secret, Europe would be but three days away from her, while she would still be five days from Europe.

If our own police had searched diligently to discover the mystery of the Great Eyrie, the secret service of every country in the world was now interested in these new problems.

Mr. Ward referred to the matter each time I saw him. Our chat would begin by his rallying me about my ill-success in Carolina, and I would respond by reminding him that success there was only a question of expense.

“Never mind, my good Strock,” said he, “there will come a chance for our clever inspector to regain his laurels. Take now this affair of the automobile and the boat. If you could clear that up in advance of all the detectives of the world, what an honor it would be to our department! What glory for you!”

“It certainly would, Mr. Ward. And if you put the matter in my charge — ”

“Who knows, Strock? Let us wait a while! Let us wait!”

Matters stood thus when, on the morning of June fifteenth, my old servant brought me a letter from the letter-carrier, a registered letter for which I had to sign. I looked at the address. I did not know the handwriting. The postmark, dating from two days before, was stamped at the post office of Morganton.

Morganton! Here at last was, no doubt, news from Mr. Elias Smith.

“Yes!” exclaimed I, speaking to my old servant, for lack of another, “it must be from Mr. Smith at last. I know no one else in Morganton. And if he writes he has news!”

“Morganton?” said the old woman, “isn’t that the place where the demons set fire to their mountain?”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, sir! I hope you don’t mean to go back there!”

“Because you will end by being burned up in that furnace of the Great Eyrie. And I wouldn’t want you buried that way, sir.”

“Cheer up, and let us see if it is not better news than that.”

The envelope was sealed with red sealing wax, and stamped with a sort of coat of arms, surmounted with three stars. The paper was thick and very strong. I broke the envelope and drew out a letter. It was a single sheet, folded in four, and written on one side only. My first glance was for the signature.

There was no signature! Nothing but three initials at the end of the last line!

“The letter is not from the Mayor of Morganton,” said I.

“Then from whom?” asked the old servant, doubly curious in her quality as a woman and as an old gossip.

Looking again at the three initials of the signature, I said, “I know no one for whom these letters would stand; neither at Morganton nor elsewhere.”

The hand-writing was bold. Both up strokes and down strokes very sharp, about twenty lines in all. Here is the letter, of which I, with good reason, retained an exact copy. It was dated, to my extreme stupefaction, from that mysterious Great Eyrie:

Great Eyrie, Blueridge Mtns,

To Mr. Strock: North Carolina, June 13th.

Chief Inspector of Police,

34 Long St. Washington, D. C.

Sir,

You were charged with the mission of penetrating the Great Eyrie.

You came on April the twenty-eighth, accompanied by the Mayor of Morganton and two guides.

You mounted to the foot of the wall, and you encircled it, finding it too high and steep to climb.

You sought a breech and you found none. Know this: none enter the Great Eyrie; or if one enters, he never returns.

“Do not try again, for the second attempt will not result as did the first, but will have grave consequences for you.

“Heed this warning, or evil fortune will come to you.

“M. o. W.”

CHAPTER 7

A THIRD MACHINE

I confess that at first this letter dumfounded me. “Ohs!” and “Ahs!” slipped from my open mouth. The old servant stared at me, not knowing what to think.

“Oh, sir! is it bad news?”

I answered for I kept few secrets from this faithful soul by reading her the letter from end to end. She listened with much anxiety.

“A joke, without doubt,” said I, shrugging my shoulders.

“Well,” returned my superstitious handmaid, “if it isn’t from the devil, it’s from the devil’s country, anyway.”

Left alone, I again went over this unexpected letter. Reflection inclined me yet more strongly to believe that it was the work of a practical joker. My adventure was well known. The newspapers had given it in full detail. Some satirist, such as exists even in America, must have written this threatening letter to mock me.

To assume, on the other hand, that the Eyrie really served as the refuge of a band of criminals, seemed absurd. If they feared that the police would discover their retreat, surely they would not have been so foolish as thus to force attention upon themselves. Their chief security would lie in keeping their presence there unknown. They must have realized that such a challenge from them would only arouse the police to renewed activity. Dynamite or melinite would soon open an entrance to their fortress. Moreover, how could these men have, themselves, gained entrance into the

Eyrie unless there existed a passage which we had failed to discover? Assuredly the letter came from a jester or a madman; and I need not worry over it, nor even consider it.

Hence, though for an instant I had thought of showing this letter to Mr. Ward, I decided not to do so. Surely he would attach no importance to it. However, I did not destroy it, but locked it in my desk for safe keeping. If more letters came of the same kind, and with the same initials, I would attach as little weight to them as to this.

Several days passed quietly. There was nothing to lead me to expect that I should soon quit Washington; though in my line of duty one is never certain of the morrow. At any moment I might be sent speeding from Oregon to Florida, from Maine to Texas. And this unpleasant thought haunted me frequently if my next mission were no more successful than that to the Great Eyrie, I might as well give up and hand in my resignation from the force. Of the mysterious chauffeur or chauffeurs, nothing more was heard. I knew that our own government agents, as well as foreign ones, were keeping keen watch over all the roads and rivers, all the lakes and the coasts of America. Of course, the size of the country made any close supervision impossible; but these twin inventors had not before chosen secluded and unfrequented spots in which to appear. The main highway of Wisconsin on a great race day, the harbor of Boston, incessantly crossed by thousands of boats, these were hardly what would be called hiding-places! If the daring driver had not perished of which there was always strong probability; then he must have left America. Perhaps he was in the waters of the Old World, or else resting in some retreat known only to himself, and in that case —

“Ah!” I repeated to myself, many times, “for such a retreat, as secret as inaccessible, this fantastic personage could not find one better than the

Great Eyrie!” But, of course, a boat could not get there, any more than an automobile. Only high-flying birds of prey, eagles or condors, could find refuge there.

The nineteenth of June I was going to the police bureau, when, on leaving my house, I noticed two men who looked at me with a certain keenness. Not knowing them, I took no notice; and if my attention was drawn to the matter, it was because my servant spoke of it when I returned.

For some days, she said, she had noticed that two men seemed to be spying upon me in the street. They stood constantly, perhaps a hundred steps from my house; and she suspected that they followed me each time I went up the street.

“You are sure?” I asked.

“Yes, sir and no longer ago than yesterday, when you came into the house, these men came slipping along in your footsteps, and then went away as soon as the door was shut behind you.”

“You must be mistaken?”

“I am not, sir.”

“And if you met these two men, you would know them?”

“I would.”

“Good;” I cried, laughing, “I see you have the very spirit for a detective. I must engage you as a member of our force.”

“Joke if you like, sir. But I have still two good eyes, and I don’t need spectacles to recognize people. Someone is spying on you, that’s certain; and you should put some of your men to track them in turn.”

“All right; I promise to do so,” I said, to satisfy her. “And when my men get after them, we shall soon know what these mysterious fellows want of me.”

In truth I did not take the good soul’s excited announcement very seriously. I added, however, “When I go out, I will watch the people around me with great care.”

“That will be best, sir.”

My poor old housekeeper was always frightening herself at nothing. “If I see them again,” she added, “I will warn you before you set foot out of doors.”

“Agreed!” And I broke off the conversation, knowing well that if I allowed her to run on, she would end by being sure that Beelzebub himself and one of his chief attendants were at my heels.

The two following days, there was certainly no one spying on me, either at my exits or entrances. So I concluded my old servant had made much of nothing, as usual. But on the morning of the twenty-second of June, after rushing upstairs as rapidly as her age would permit, the devoted old soul burst into my room and in a half whisper gasped “Sir! Sir!”

“What is it?”

“They are there!”

"Who?" I queried, my mind on anything but the web she had been spinning about me.

"The two spies!"

"Ah, those wonderful spies!"

"Themselves! In the street! Right in front of our windows! Watching the house, waiting for you to go out."

I went to the window and raising just an edge of the shade, so as not to give any warning, I saw two men on the pavement.

They were rather fine-looking men, broad-shouldered and vigorous, aged somewhat under forty, dressed in the ordinary fashion of the day, with slouched hats, heavy woolen suits, stout walking shoes and sticks in hand. Undoubtedly, they were staring persistently at my apparently unwatchful house. Then, having exchanged a few words, they strolled off a little way, and returned again.

"Are you sure these are the same men you saw before?"

"Yes, sir."

Evidently, I could no longer dismiss her warning as an hallucination; and I promised myself to clear up the matter. As to following the men myself, I was presumably too well known to them. To address them directly would probably be of no use. But that very day, one of our best men should be put on watch, and if the spies returned on the morrow, they should be tracked in their turn, and watched until their identity was established.

At the moment, they were waiting to follow me to police headquarters? For it was there that I was bound, as usual. If they accompanied me I might be able to offer them a hospitality for which they would scarce thank me.

I took my hat; and while the housekeeper remained peeping from the window, I went down stairs, opened the door, and stepped into the street.

The two men were no longer there.

Despite all my watchfulness, that day I saw no more of them as I passed along the streets. From that time on, indeed, neither my old servant nor I saw them again before the house, nor did I encounter them elsewhere. Their appearance, however, was stamped upon my memory, I would not forget them.

Perhaps after all, admitting that I had been the object of their espionage, they had been mistaken in my identity. Having obtained a good look at me, they now followed me no more. So in the end, I came to regard this matter as of no more importance than the letter with the initials, M. o. W.

Then, on the twenty-fourth of June, there came a new event, to further stimulate both my interest and that of the general public in the previous mysteries of the automobile and the boat. The Washington Evening Star published the following account, which was next morning copied by every paper in the country.

“Lake Kirdall in Kansas, forty miles west of Topeka, is little known. It deserves wider knowledge, and doubtless will have it hereafter, for attention is now drawn to it in a very remarkable way.

“This lake, deep among the mountains, appears to have no outlet. What it loses by evaporation, it regains from the little neighboring streamlets and the heavy rains.

“Lake Kirdall covers about seventy-five square miles, and its level is but slightly below that of the heights which surround it. Shut in among the mountains, it can be reached only by narrow and rocky gorges. Several villages, however, have sprung up upon its banks. It is full of fish, and fishing-boats cover its waters.

“Lake Kirdall is in many places fifty feet deep close to shore. Sharp, pointed rocks form the edges of this huge basin. Its surges, roused by high winds, beat upon its banks with fury, and the houses near at hand are often deluged with spray as if with the downpour of a hurricane. The lake, already deep at the edge, becomes yet deeper toward the center, where in some places soundings show over three hundred feet of water.

“The fishing industry supports a population of several thousands, and there are several hundred fishing boats in addition to the dozen or so of little steamers which serve the traffic of the lake. Beyond the circle of the mountains lie the railroads which transport the products of the fishing industry throughout Kansas and the neighboring states.

“This account of Lake Kirdall is necessary for the understanding of the remarkable facts which we are about to report.”

And this is what the Evening Star then reported in its startling article. “For some time past, the fishermen have noticed a strange upheaval in the waters of the lake. Sometimes it rises as if a wave surged up from its depths. Even in perfectly calm weather, when there is no wind whatever, this upheaval sometimes arises in a mass of foam.

“Tossed about by violent waves and unaccountable currents, boats have been swept beyond all control. Sometimes they have been dashed one against another, and serious damage has resulted.

“This confusion of the waters evidently has its origin somewhere in the depths of the lake; and various explanations have been offered to account for it. At first, it was suggested that the trouble was due to seismic forces, to some volcanic action beneath the lake; but this hypothesis had to be rejected when it was recognized that the disturbance was not confined to one locality, but spread itself over the entire surface of the lake, either at one part or another, in the center or along the edges, traveling along almost in a regular line and in a way to exclude entirely all idea of earthquake or volcanic action.

“Another hypothesis suggested that it was a marine monster who thus upheaved the waters. But unless the beast had been born in the lake and had there grown to its gigantic proportions unsuspected, which was scarce possible, he must have come there from outside. Lake Kirdall, however, has no connection with any other waters. If this lake were situated near any of the oceans, there might be subterranean canals; but in the center of America, and at the height of some thousands of feet above sea-level, this is not possible. In short, here is another riddle not easy to solve, and it is much easier to point out the impossibility of false explanations, than to discover the true one.

“Is it possible that a submarine boat is being experimented with beneath the lake? Such boats are no longer impossible today. Some years ago, at Bridgeport, Connecticut, there was launched a boat, The Protector, which could go on the water, under the water, and also upon land. Built by an inventor named Lake, supplied with two motors, an electric one of seventy-five horse power, and a gasoline one of two hundred and fifty horse power, it was also provided with wheels a yard in diameter, which enabled it to roll over the roads, as well as swim the seas.

“But even then, granting that the turmoil of Lake Kirdall might be produced by a submarine, brought to a high degree of perfection, there remains as before the question how could it have reached Lake Kirdall? The lake, shut in on all sides by a circle of mountains, is no more accessible to a submarine than to a sea-monster.

“In whatever way this last puzzling question may be solved, the nature of this strange appearance can no longer be disputed since the twentieth of June. On that day, in the afternoon, the schooner “Markel” while speeding with all sails set, came into violent collision with something just below the water level. There was no shoal nor rock near; for the lake in this part is eighty or ninety feet deep. The schooner with both her bow and her side badly broken, ran great danger of sinking. She managed, however, to reach the shore before her decks were completely submerged.

“When the ‘Markel’ had been pumped out and hauled up on shore, an examination showed that she had received a blow near the bow as if from a powerful ram.

“From this it seems evident that there is actually a submarine boat which darts about beneath the surface of Lake Kirdall with most remarkable rapidity.

“The thing is difficult to explain. Not only is there a question as to how did the submarine get there? But why is it there? Why does it never come to the surface? What reason has its owner for remaining unknown? Are other disasters to be expected from its reckless course?”

The article in the Evening Star closed with this truly striking suggestion: “After the mysterious automobile, came the mysterious boat. Now comes the mysterious submarine.

“Must we conclude that the three engines are due to the genius of the same inventor, and that the three vehicles are in truth but one?”

CHAPTER 8

AT ANY COST

The suggestion of the Star came like a revelation. It was accepted everywhere. Not only were these three vehicles the work of the same inventor; they were the same machine!

It was not easy to see how the remarkable transformation could be practically accomplished from one means of locomotion to the other. How could an automobile become a boat, and yet more, a submarine? All the machine seemed to lack was the power of flying through the air. Nevertheless, everything that was known of the three different machines, as to their size, their shape, their lack of odor or of steam, and above all their remarkable speed, seemed to imply their identity. The public, grown blase with so many excitements, found in this new marvel a stimulus to reawaken their curiosity.

The newspapers dwelt now chiefly on the importance of the invention. This new engine, whether in one vehicle or three, had given proofs of its power. What amazing proofs! The invention must be bought at any price. The United States government must purchase it at once for the use of the nation. Assuredly, the great European powers would stop at nothing to be beforehand with America, and gain possession of an engine so invaluable for military and naval use. What incalculable advantages would it give to any nation, both on land and sea! Its destructive powers could not even be estimated, until its qualities and limitations were better known. No amount of money would be too great to pay for the secret; America could not put her millions to better use.

But to buy the machine, it was necessary to find the inventor; and there seemed the chief difficulty. In vain was Lake Kirdall searched from end to end. Even its depths were explored with a sounding-line without result. Must it be concluded that the submarine no longer lurked beneath its waters? But in that case, how had the boat gotten away? For that matter, how had it come? An insoluble problem!

The submarine was heard from no more, neither in Lake Kirdall nor elsewhere. It had disappeared like the automobile from the roads, and like the boat from the shores of America. Several times in my interviews with Mr. Ward, we discussed this matter, which still filled his mind. Our men continued everywhere on the lookout, but as unsuccessfully as other agents.

On the morning of the twenty-seventh of June, I was summoned into the presence of Mr. Ward.

“Well, Strock,” said he, “here is a splendid chance for you to get your revenge.”

“Revenge for the Great Eyrie disappointment?”

“Of course.”

“What chance?” asked I, not knowing if he spoke seriously, or in jest.

“Why, here,” he answered. “Would not you like to discover the inventor of this three-fold machine?”

“I certainly should, Mr. Ward. Give me the order to take charge of the matter, and I will accomplish the impossible, in order to succeed. It is true, I believe it will be difficult.”

“Undoubtedly, Strock. Perhaps even more difficult than to penetrate into the Great Eyrie.”

It was evident that Mr. Ward was intent on rallying me about my unsuccess. He would not do that, I felt assured, out of mere unkindness. Perhaps then he meant to rouse my resolution. He knew me well; and realized that I would have given anything in the world to recoup my defeat. I waited quietly for new instructions.

Mr. Ward dropped his jesting and said to me very generously, “I know, Strock, that you accomplished everything that depended on human powers; and that no blame attaches to you. But we face now a matter very different from that of the Great Eyrie. The day the government decides to force that secret, everything is ready. We have only to spend some thousands of dollars, and the road will be open.”

“That is what I would urge.”

“But at present,” said Mr. Ward, shaking his head, “it is much more important to place our hands on this fantastic inventor, who so constantly escapes us. That is work for a detective, indeed; a master detective!”

“He has not been heard from again?”

“No; and though there is every reason to believe that he has been, and still continues, beneath the waters of Lake Kirdall, it has been impossible to find any trace of him anywhere around there. One would almost fancy he had the power of making himself invisible, this Proteus of a mechanic!”

“It seems likely,” said I, “that he will never be seen until he wishes to be.”

“True, Strock. And to my mind there is only one way of dealing with him, and that is to offer him such an enormous price that he cannot refuse to sell his invention.”

Mr. Ward was right. Indeed, the government had already made the effort to secure speech with this hero of the day, than whom surely no human being has ever better merited the title. The press had widely spread the news, and this extraordinary individual must assuredly know what the government desired of him, and how completely he could name the terms he wished.

“Surely,” added Mr. Ward, “this invention can be of no personal use to the man, that he should hide it from the rest of us. There is every reason why he should sell it. Can this unknown be already some dangerous criminal who, thanks to his machine, hopes to defy all pursuit?”

My chief then went on to explain that it had been decided to employ other means in search of the inventor. It was possible after all that he had perished with his machine in some dangerous maneuver. If so, the ruined vehicle might prove almost as valuable and instructive to the mechanical world as the man himself. But since the accident to the schooner “Markel” on Lake Kirdall, no news of him whatever had reached the police.

On this point Mr. Ward did not attempt to hide his disappointment and his anxiety. Anxiety, yes, for it was manifestly becoming more and more difficult for him to fulfill his duty of protecting the public. How could we arrest criminals, if they could flee from justice at such speed over both land and sea? How could we pursue them under the oceans? And when dirigible balloons should also have reached their full perfection, we would even have to chase men through the air! I asked myself if my colleagues and I would not find ourselves some day reduced to utter helplessness? If police officials, become a useless incumbrance, would be definitely discarded by society?

Here, there recurred to me the jesting letter I had received a fortnight before, the letter which threatened my liberty and even my life. I recalled, also, the singular espionage of which I had been the subject. I asked myself if I had better mention these things to Mr. Ward. But they seemed to have absolutely no relation to the matter now in hand. The Great Eyrie affair had been definitely put aside by the government, since an eruption was no longer threatening. And they now wished to employ me upon this newer matter. I waited, then, to mention this letter to my chief at some future time, when it would be not so sore a joke to me.

Mr. Ward again took up our conversation. “We are resolved by some means to establish communication with this inventor. He has disappeared, it is true; but he may reappear at any moment, and in any part of the country. I have chosen you, Strock, to follow him the instant he appears. You must hold yourself ready to leave Washington on the moment. Do not quit your house, except to come here to headquarters each day; notify me, each time by telephone, when you start from home, and report to me personally the moment you arrive here.”

“I will follow orders exactly, Mr. Ward,” I answered. “But permit me one question. Ought I to act alone, or will it not be better to join with me?”

“That is what I intend,” said the chief, interrupting me. “You are to choose two of our men whom you think the best fitted.”

“I will do so, Mr. Ward. And now, if some day or other I stand in the presence of our man, what am I to do with him?”

"Above all things, do not lose sight of him. If there is no other way, arrest him. You shall have a warrant."

"A useful precaution, Mr. Ward. If he started to jump into his automobile and to speed away at the rate we know of, I must stop him at any cost. One cannot argue long with a man making two hundred miles an hour!"

"You must prevent that, Strock. And the arrest made, telegraph me. After that, the matter will be in my hands."

"Count on me, Mr. Ward; at any hour, day or night, I shall be ready to start with my men. I thank you for having entrusted this mission to me. If it succeeds, it will be a great honor — "

"And of great profit," added my chief, dismissing me.

Returning home, I made all preparations for a trip of indefinite duration. Perhaps my good housekeeper imagined that I planned a return to the Great Eyrie, which she regarded as an ante-chamber of hell itself. She said nothing, but went about her work with a most despairing face. Nevertheless, sure as I was of her discretion, I told her nothing. In this great mission I would confide in no one.

My choice of the two men to accompany me was easily made. They both belonged to my own department, and had many times under my direct command given proofs of their vigor, courage and intelligence. One, John Hart, of Illinois, was a man of thirty years; the other, aged thirty-two, was Nab Walker, of Massachusetts. I could not have had better assistants.

Several days passed, without news, either of the automobile, the boat, or the submarine. There were rumors in plenty; but the police knew them to be false. As to the reckless stories that appeared in the newspapers, they had most of them, no foundation whatever. Even the best journals cannot be trusted to refuse an exciting bit of news on the mere ground of its unreliability.

Then, twice in quick succession, there came what seemed trustworthy reports of the “man of the hour.” The first asserted that he had been seen on the roads of Arkansas, near Little Rock. The second, that he was in the very middle of Lake Superior.

Unfortunately, these two notices were absolutely unreconcilable; for while the first gave the afternoon of June twenty-sixth, as the time of appearance, the second set it for the evening of the same day. Now, these two points of the United States territory are not less than eight hundred miles apart. Even granting the automobile this unthinkable speed, greater than any it had yet shown, how could it have crossed all the intervening country unseen? How could it traverse the States of Arkansas, Missouri, Iowa and Wisconsin, from end to end without anyone of our agents giving us warning, without any interested person rushing to a telephone?

After these two momentary appearances, if appearances they were, the machine again dropped out of knowledge. Mr. Ward did not think it worth while to dispatch me and my men to either point whence it had been reported.

Yet since this marvelous machine seemed still in existence, something must be done. The following official notice was published in every newspaper of the United States under July 3d. It was couched in the most formal terms.

“During the month of April, of the present year, an automobile traversed the roads of Pennsylvania, of Kentucky, of Ohio, of Tennessee, of Missouri, of

Illinois; and on the twenty-seventh of May, during the race held by the American Automobile Club, it covered the course in Wisconsin. Then it disappeared.

“During the first week of June, a boat maneuvering at great speed appeared off the coast of New England between Cape Cod and Cape Sable, and more particularly around Boston. Then it disappeared.

“In the second fortnight of the same month, a submarine boat was run beneath the waters of Lake Kirdall, in Kansas. Then it disappeared.

“Everything points to the belief that the same inventor must have built these three machines, or perhaps that they are the same machine, constructed so as to travel both on land and water.

“A proposition is therefore addressed to the said inventor, whoever he be, with the aim of acquiring the said machine.

“He is requested to make himself known and to name the terms upon which he will treat with the United States government. He is also requested to answer as promptly as possible to the Department of Federal Police, Washington, D. C. United States of America.”

Such was the notice printed in large type on the front page of every newspaper. Surely it could not fail to reach the eye of him for whom it was intended, wherever he might be. He would read it. He could scarce fail to answer it in some manner. And why should he refuse such an unlimited offer? We had only to await his reply.

One can easily imagine how high the public curiosity rose. From morning till night, an eager and noisy crowd pressed about the bureau of police, awaiting the arrival of a letter or a telegram. The best reporters were on the spot. What honor, what profit would come to the paper which was first to publish the famous news! To know at last the name and place of the undiscoverable unknown! And to know if he would agree to some bargain with the government! It goes without saying that America does things on a magnificent scale. Millions would not be lacking for the inventor. If necessary all the millionaires in the country would open their inexhaustible purses!

The day passed. To how many excited and impatient people it seemed to contain more than twenty-four hours! And each hour held far more than sixty minutes! There came no answer, no letter, no telegram! The night following, there was still no news. And it was the same the next day and the next.

There came, however another result, which had been fully foreseen. The cables informed Europe of what the United States government had done. The different Powers of the Old World hoped also to obtain possession of the wonderful invention. Why should they not struggle for an advantage so tremendous? Why should they not enter the contest with their millions?

In brief, every great Power took part in the affair, France, England, Russia, Italy, Austria, Germany. Only the states of the second order refrained from entering, with their smaller resources, upon a useless effort. The European press published notices identical with that of the United States. The extraordinary “chauffeur” had only to speak, to become a rival to the Vanderbilts, the Astors, the Goulds, the Morgans, and the Rothschilds of every country of Europe.

And, when the mysterious inventor made no sign, what attractive offers were held forth to tempt him to discard the secrecy in which he was enwrapped! The whole world became a public market, an auction house whence arose the most amazing bids. Twice a day the newspapers would add up the amounts, and these kept rising from millions to millions. The end came when the United States Congress, after a memorable session, voted to offer the sum of twenty million dollars. And there was not a citizen of the States of whatever rank, who objected to the amount, so much importance was attached to the possession of this prodigious engine of locomotion. As for me, I said emphatically to my old housekeeper: “The machine is worth even more than that.”

Evidently the other nations of the world did not think so, for their bids remained below the final sum. But how useless was this mighty struggle of the great rivals! The inventor did not appear! He did not exist! He had never existed! It was all a monstrous pretense of the American newspapers. That, at least, became the announced view of the Old World.

And so the time passed. There was no further news of our man, there was no response from him. He appeared no more. For my part, not knowing what to think, I commenced to lose all hope of reaching any solution to the strange affair.

Then on the morning of the fifteenth of July, a letter without postmark was found in the mailbox of the police bureau. After the authorities had studied it, it was given out to the Washington journals, which published it in facsimile, in special numbers. It was couched as follows:

CHAPTER 9

THE SECOND LETTER

On Board the Terror

July 15.

To the Old and New World,

The propositions emanating from the different governments of Europe, as also that which has finally been made by the United States of America, need expect no other answer than this:

I refuse absolutely and definitely the sums offered for my invention.

My machine will be neither French nor German, nor Austrian nor Russian, nor English nor American.

The invention will remain my own, and I shall use it as pleases me.

With it, I hold control of the entire world, and there lies no force within the reach of humanity which is able to resist me, under any circumstances whatsoever.

Let no one attempt to seize or stop me. It is, and will be, utterly impossible. Whatever injury anyone attempts against me, I will return a hundredfold.

As to the money which is offered me, I despise it! I have no need of it. Moreover, on the day when it pleases me to have millions, or billions, I have but to reach out my hand and take them.

Let both the Old and the New World realize this: They can accomplish nothing against me; I can accomplish anything against them.

I sign this letter:

The Master of the World.

CHAPTER 10

OUTSIDE THE LAW

Such was the letter addressed to the government of the United States. As to the person who had placed it in the mail-box of the police, no one had seen him.

The sidewalk in front of our offices had probably not been once vacant during the entire night. From sunset to sunrise, there had always been people, busy, anxious, or curious, passing before our door. It is true, however, that even then, the bearer of the letter might easily have slipped by unseen and dropped the letter in the box. The night had been so dark, you could scarcely see from one side of the street to the other.

I have said that this letter appeared in facsimile in all the newspapers to which the government communicated it. Perhaps one would naturally imagine that the first comment of the public would be, “This is the work of some practical joker.” It was in that way that I had accepted my letter from the Great Eyrie, five weeks before.

But this was not the general attitude toward the present letter, neither in Washington, nor in the rest of America. To the few who would have maintained that the document should not be taken seriously, an immense majority would have responded. “This letter has not the style nor the spirit of a jester. Only one man could have written it; and that is the inventor of this unapproachable machine.”

To most people this conclusion seemed indisputable owing to a curious state of mind easily explainable. For all the strange facts of which the key had hitherto been lacking, this letter furnished an explanation. The theory now almost universally accepted was as follows. The inventor had hidden himself for a time, only in order to reappear more startlingly in some new light. Instead of having perished in an accident, he had concealed himself in some retreat where the police were unable to discover him. Then to assert positively his attitude toward all governments he had written this letter. But instead of dropping it in the post in any one locality, which might have resulted in its being traced to him, he had come to Washington and deposited it himself in the very spot suggested by the government's official notice, the bureau of police.

Well! If this remarkable personage had reckoned that this new proof of his existence would make some noise in two worlds, he certainly figured rightly. That day, the millions of good folk who read and re-read their daily paper could to employ a well-known phrase, scarcely believe their eyes.

As for myself, I studied carefully every phrase of the defiant document. The hand-writing was black and heavy. An expert at chirography would doubtless have distinguished in the lines traces of a violent temperament, of a character stern and unsocial. Suddenly, a cry escaped me a cry that fortunately my housekeeper did not hear. Why had I not noticed sooner the resemblance of the handwriting to that of the letter I had received from Morganton?

Moreover, a yet more significant coincidence, the initials with which my letter had been signed, did they not stand for the words "Master of the World?"

And whence came the second letter? "On Board the 'Terror.'" Doubtless this name was that of the triple machine commanded by the mysterious captain. The initials in my letter were his own signature; and it was he who had threatened me, if I dared to renew my attempt on the Great Eyrie.

I rose and took from my desk the letter of June thirteenth. I compared it with the facsimile in the newspapers. There was no doubt about it. They were both in the same peculiar hand-writing.

My mind worked eagerly. I sought to trace the probable deductions from this striking fact, known only to myself. The man who had threatened me was the commander of this “Terror” — startling name, only too well justified! I asked myself if our search could not now be prosecuted under less vague conditions. Could we not now start our men upon a trail which would lead definitely to success? In short, what relation existed between the “Terror” and the Great Eyrie? What connection was there between the phenomena of the Blueridge Mountains, arid the no less phenomenal performances of the fantastic machine?

I knew what my first step should be; and with the letter in my pocket, I hastened to police headquarters. Inquiring if Mr. Ward was within and receiving an affirmative reply, I hastened toward his door, and rapped upon it with unusual and perhaps unnecessary vigor. Upon his call to enter, I stepped eagerly into the room.

The chief had spread before him the letter published in the papers, not a facsimile, but the original itself which had been deposited in the letter-box of the department.

“You come as if you had important news, Strock?”

“Judge for yourself, Mr. Ward;” and I drew from my pocket the letter with the initials.

Mr. Ward took it, glanced at its face, and asked, “What is this?”

"A letter signed only with initials, as you can see."

"And where was it posted?"

"In Morganton, in North Carolina."

"When did you receive it?"

"A month ago, the thirteenth of June."

"What did you think of it then?"

"That it had been written as a joke."

"And now Strock?"

"I think, what you will think, Mr. Ward, after you have studied it."

My chief turned to the letter again and read it carefully. "It is signed with three initials," said he.

"Yes, Mr. Ward, and those initials belong to the words, 'Master of the World,' in this facsimile."

"Of which this is the original," responded Mr. Ward, taking it up.

"It is quite evident," I urged, "that the two letters are by the same hand."

"It seems so."

"You see what threats are made against me, to protect the Great Eyrie."

"Yes, the threat of death! But Strock, you have had this letter for a month. Why have you not shown it to me before?"

“Because I attached no importance to it. Today, after the letter from the ‘Terror,’ it must be taken seriously.”

“I agree with you. It appears to me most important. I even hope it may prove the means of tracking this strange personage.”

“That is what I also hope, Mr. Ward.”

“Only what connection can possibly exist between the ‘Terror’ and the Great Eyrie?”

“That I do not know. I cannot even imagine.”

“There can be but one explanation,” continued Mr. Ward, “though it is almost inadmissible, even impossible.”

“And that is?”

“That the Great Eyrie was the spot selected by the inventor, where he gathered his material.”

“That is impossible!” cried I. “In what way would he get his material in there? And how get his machine out? After what I have seen, Mr. Ward, your suggestion is impossible.”

“Unless, Strock — ”

“Unless what?” I demanded.

“Unless the machine of this Master of the World has also wings, which permit it to take refuge in the Great Eyrie.”

At the suggestion that the “Terror,” which had searched the deeps of the sea, might be capable also of rivaling the vultures and the eagles, I could not restrain an expressive shrug of incredulity. Neither did Mr. Ward himself dwell upon the extravagant hypothesis.

He took the two letters and compared them afresh. He examined them under a microscope, especially the signatures, and established their perfect identity. Not only the same hand, but the same pen had written them.

After some moments of further reflection, Mr. Ward said, “I will keep your letter, Strock. Decidedly, I think, that you are fated to play an important part in this strange affair or rather in these two affairs. What thread attaches them, I cannot yet see; but I am sure the thread exists. You have been connected with the first, and it will not be surprising if you have a large part in the second.”

“I hope so, Mr. Ward. You know how inquisitive I am.”

“I do, Strock. That is understood. Now, I can only repeat my former order; hold yourself in readiness to leave Washington at a moment’s warning.”

All that day, the public excitement caused by the defiant letter mounted steadily higher. It was felt both at the White House and at the Capitol that public opinion absolutely demanded some action. Of course, it was difficult to do anything. Where could one find this Master of the World? And even if he were discovered, how could he be captured? He had at his disposal not only the powers he had displayed, but apparently still greater resources as yet unknown. How had he been able to reach Lake Kirdall over the rocks; and how had he escaped from it? Then, if he had indeed appeared on Lake Superior, how had he covered all the intervening territory unseen?

What a bewildering affair it was altogether! This, of course, made it all the more important to get to the bottom of it. Since the millions of dollars had been refused, force must be employed. The inventor and his invention were not to be bought. And in what haughty and menacing terms he had couched his refusal! So be it! He must be treated as an enemy of society, against whom all means became justified, that he might be deprived of his power to injure others. The idea that he had perished was now entirely discarded. He was alive, very much alive; and his existence constituted a perpetual public danger!

Influenced by these ideas, the government issued the following proclamation:

“Since the commander of the ‘Terror’ has refused to make public his invention, at any price whatever, since the use which he makes of his machine constitutes a public menace, against which it is impossible to guard, the said commander of the ‘Terror’ is hereby placed beyond the protection of the law. Any measures taken in the effort to capture or destroy either him or his machine will be approved and rewarded.”

It was a declaration of war, war to the death against this “Master of the World” who thought to threaten and defy an entire nation, the American nation!

Before the day was over, various rewards of large amounts were promised to anyone who revealed the hiding place of this dangerous inventor, to anyone who could identify him, and to anyone who should rid the country of him.

Such was the situation during the last fortnight of July. All was left to the hazard of fortune. The moment the outlaw re-appeared he would be seen and signaled, and when the chance came he would be arrested. This could not be accomplished when he was in his automobile on land or in his boat on the water. No; he must be seized suddenly, before he had any opportunity to escape by means of that speed which no other machine could equal.

I was therefore all alert, awaiting an order from Mr. Ward to start out with my men. But the order did not arrive for the very good reason that the man whom it concerned remained undiscovered. The end of July approached. The newspapers continued the excitement. They published repeated rumors. New clues were constantly being announced. But all this was mere idle talk. Telegrams reached the police bureau from every part of America, each contradicting and nullifying the others. The enormous rewards offered could not help but lead to accusations, errors, and blunders, made, many of them, in good faith. One time it would be a cloud of dust, which must have contained the automobile. At another time, almost any wave on any of America’s thousand lakes represented the submarine. In truth, in the excited state of the public imagination, apparitions assailed us from every side.

At last, on the twenty-ninth of July, I received a telephone message to come to Mr. Ward on the instant. Twenty minutes later I was in his cabinet.

“You leave in an hour, Strock,” said he.

“Where for?”

“For Toledo.”

“It has been seen?”

“Yes. At Toledo you will get your final orders.”

“In an hour, my men and I will be on the way.”

“Good! And, Strock, I now give you a formal order.”

“What is it, Mr. Ward?”

“To succeed! This time to succeed!”

CHAPTER 11

THE CAMPAIGN

So the undiscoverable commander had reappeared upon the territory of the United States! He had never shown himself in Europe either on the roads or in the seas. He had not crossed the Atlantic, which apparently he could have traversed in three days. Did he then intend to make only America the scene of his exploits? Ought we to conclude from this that he was an American?

Let me insist upon this point. It seemed clear that the submarine might easily have crossed the vast sea which separates the New and the Old World. Not only would its amazing speed have made its voyage short, in comparison to that of the swiftest steamship, but also it would have escaped all the storms that make the voyage dangerous. Tempests did not exist for it. It had but to abandon the surface of the waves, and it could find absolute calm a few score feet beneath.

But the inventor had not crossed the Atlantic, and if he were to be captured now, it would probably be in Ohio, since Toledo is a city of that state.

This time the fact of the machine’s appearance had been kept secret, between the police and the agent who had warned them, and whom I was hurrying to meet. No journal — and many would have paid high for the chance — was printing this news. We had decided that nothing should be revealed until our effort was at an end. No indiscretion would be committed by either my comrades or myself.

The man to whom I was sent with an order from Mr. Ward was named Arthur Wells. He awaited us at Toledo. The city of Toledo stands at the western end of Lake Erie. Our train sped during the night across West

Virginia and Ohio. There was no delay; and before noon the next day the locomotive stopped in the Toledo depot.

John Hart, Nab Walker and I stepped out with traveling bags in our hands, and revolvers in our pockets. Perhaps we should need weapons for an attack, or even to defend ourselves. Scarcely had I stepped from the train when I picked out the man who awaited us. He was scanning the arriving passengers impatiently, evidently as eager and full of haste as I.

I approached him. “Mr. Wells?” said I.

“Mr. Strock?” asked he.

“Yes.”

“I am at your command,” said Mr. Wells.

“Are we to stop any time in Toledo?” I asked.

“No; with your permission, Mr. Strock. A carriage with two good horses is waiting outside the station; and we must leave at once to reach our destination as soon as possible.”

“We will go at once,” I answered, signing to my two men to follow us. “Is it far?”

“Twenty miles.”

“And the place is called?”

“Black Rock Creek.”

Having left our bags at a hotel, we started on our drive. Much to my surprise I found there were provisions sufficient for several days packed beneath the seat of the carriage. Mr. Wells told me that the region around Black Rock Creek was among the wildest in the state. There was nothing there to attract either farmers or fishermen. We would find not an inn for our meals nor a room in which to sleep. Fortunately, during the July heat there would be no hardship even if we had to lie one or two nights under the stars.

More probably, however, if we were successful, the matter would not occupy us many hours. Either the commander of the “Terror” would be surprised before he had a chance to escape, or he would take to flight and we must give up all hope of arresting him.

I found Arthur Wells to be a man of about forty, large and powerful. I knew him by reputation to be one of the best of our local police agents. Cool in danger and enterprising always, he had proven his daring on more than one occasion at the peril of his life. He had been in Toledo on a wholly different mission, when chance had thrown him on the track of the “Terror.”

We drove rapidly along the shore of Lake Erie, toward the southwest. This inland sea of water is on the northern boundary of the United States, lying between Canada on one side and the States of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York on the other. If I stop to mention the geographical position of this lake, its depth, its extent, and the waters nearest around, it is because the knowledge is necessary for the understanding of the events which were about to happen.

The surface of Lake Erie covers about ten thousand square miles. It is nearly six hundred feet above sea level. It is joined on the northwest, by means of the Detroit River, with the still greater lakes to the westward, and receives their waters. It has also rivers of its own though of less importance, such as the Rocky, the Cuyahoga, and the Black. The lake empties at its northeastern end into Lake Ontario by means of Niagara River and its celebrated falls.

The greatest known depth of Lake Erie is over one hundred and thirty feet. Hence it will be seen that the mass of its waters is considerable. In short, this is a region of most magnificent lakes. The land, though not situated far northward, is exposed to the full sweep of the Arctic cold. The region to the northward is low, and the winds of winter rush down with extreme violence. Hence Lake Erie is sometimes frozen over from shore to shore.

The principal cities on the borders of this great lake are Buffalo at the east, which belongs to New York State, and Toledo in Ohio, at the west, with Cleveland and Sandusky, both Ohio cities, at the south. Smaller towns and villages are numerous along the shore. The traffic is naturally large, its annual value being estimated at considerably over two million dollars.

Our carriage followed a rough and little used road along the borders of the lake; and as we toiled along, Arthur Wells told me, what he had learned.

Less than two days before, on the afternoon of July twenty-seventh Wells had been riding on horseback toward the town of Herly. Five miles outside the town, he was riding through a little wood, when he saw, far up across the lake, a submarine which rose suddenly above the waves. He stopped, tied his horse, and stole on foot to the edge of the lake. There, from behind a tree he had seen with his own eyes seen this submarine advance toward him, and stop at the mouth of Black Rock Creek. Was it the famous machine for which the whole world was seeking, which thus came directly to his feet?

When the submarine was close to the rocks, two men climbed out upon its deck and stepped ashore. Was one of them this Master of the World, who had not been seen since he was reported from Lake Superior? Was this the mysterious “Terror” which had thus risen from the depths of Lake Erie?

“I was alone,” said Wells. “Alone on the edge of the Creek. If you and your assistants, Mr. Strock had been there, we four against two, we would have been able to reach these men and seize them before they could have regained their boat and fled.”

“Probably,” I answered. “But were there no others on the boat with them? Still, if we had seized the two, we could at least have learned who they were.”

“And above all,” added Wells, “if one of them turned out to be the captain of the ‘Terror!’”

“I have only one fear, Wells; this submarine, whether it is the one we seek or another, may have left the creek since your departure.”

“We shall know about that in a few hours, now. Pray Heaven they are still there! Then when night comes?”

“But,” I asked, “did you remain watching in the wood until night?”

“No; I left after an hour’s watching, and rode straight for the telegraph station at Toledo. I reached there late at night and sent immediate word to Washington.”

“That was night before last. Did you return yesterday to Black Rock Creek?”

“Yes.”

“The submarine was still there?”

“In the same spot.”

“And the two men?”

“The same two men. I judge that some accident had happened, and they came to this lonely spot to repair it.”

“Probably so,” said I. “Some damage which made it impossible for them to regain their usual hiding-place. If only they are still here!”

“I have reason to believe they will be, for quite a lot of stuff was taken out of the boat, and laid about upon the shore; and as well as I could discern from a distance they seemed to be working on board.”

“Only the two men?”

“Only the two.”

“But,” protested I, “can two be sufficient to handle an apparatus of such speed, and of such intricacy, as to be at once automobile, boat and submarine?”

“I think not, Mr. Strock; but I only saw the same two. Several times they came to the edge of the little wood where I was hidden, and gathered sticks for a fire which they made upon the beach. The region is so uninhabited and the creek so hidden from the lake that they ran little danger of discovery. They seemed to know this.”

“You would recognize them both again?”

“Perfectly. One was of middle size, vigorous, and quick of movement, heavily bearded. The other was smaller, but stocky and strong. Yesterday, as before, I left the wood about five o’clock and hurried back to Toledo. There I found a telegram from Mr. Ward, notifying me of your coming; and I awaited you at the station.”

Summed up, then, the news amounted to this: For forty hours past a submarine, presumably the one we sought, had been hidden in Black Rock Creek, engaged in repairs. Probably these were absolutely necessary, and we should find the boat still there. As to how the “Terror” came to be in Lake Erie, Arthur Wells and I discussed that, and agreed that it was a very probable place for her. The last time she had been seen was on Lake Superior. From there to Lake Erie the machine could have come by the roads of Michigan, but since no one had remarked its passage and as both the police and the people were specially aroused and active in that portion of the country, it seemed more probable, that the “Terror” had come by water. There was a clear route through the chain of the Great Lakes and their rivers, by which in her character of a submarine she could easily proceed undiscovered.

And now, if the “Terror” had already left the creek, or if she escaped when we attempted to seize her, in what direction would she turn? In any case, there was little chance o following her. There were two torpedo-destroyers at the port of Buffalo, at the other extremity of Lake Erie. By treaty between the United States and Canada, there are no vessels of war whatever on the Great Lakes. These might, however, have been little launches belonging to the customs service. Before I left Washington Mr. Ward had informed me of their presence; and a telegram to their commanders would, if there were need, start them in pursuit of the “Terror.” But despite their splendid speed, how could they vie with her! And if she plunged beneath the waters, they would be helpless. Moreover Arthur Wells averred that in case of a battle, the advantage would not be with the destroyers, despite their large crews, and many guns. Hence, if we did not succeed this night, the campaign would end in failure.

Arthur Wells knew Black Rock Creek thoroughly, having hunted there more than once. It was bordered in most places with sharp rocks against which the waters of the lake beat heavily. Its channel was some thirty feet deep, so that the "Terror" could take shelter either upon the surface or under water. In two or three places the steep banks gave way to sand beaches which led to little gorges reaching up toward the woods, two or three hundred feet.

It was seven in the evening when our carriage reached these woods. There was still daylight enough for us to see easily, even in the shade of the trees. To have crossed openly to the edge of the creek would have exposed us to the view of the men of the "Terror," if she were still there, and thus give her warning to escape.

"Had we better stop here?" I asked Wells, as our rig drew up to the edge of the woods.

"No, Mr. Strock," said he. "We had better leave the carriage deeper in the woods, where there will be no chance whatever of our being seen."

"Can the carriage drive under these trees?"

"It can," declared Wells. "I have already explored these woods thoroughly. Five or six hundred feet from here, there is a little clearing, where we will be completely hidden, and where our horses may find pasture. Then, as soon as it is dark, we will go down to the beach, at the edge of the rocks which shut in the mouth of the creek. Thus if the ‘Terror’ is still there, we shall stand between her and escape.”

Eager as we all were for action, it was evidently best to do as Wells suggested and wait for night. The intervening time could well be occupied as he said. Leading the horses by the bridle, while they dragged the empty carriage, we proceeded through the heavy woods. The tall pines, the stalwart oaks, the cypress scattered here and there, made the evening darker overhead. Beneath our feet spread a carpet of scattered herbs, pine needles and dead leaves. Such was the thickness of the upper foliage that the last rays of the setting sun could no longer penetrate here. We had to feel our way; and it was not without some knocks that the carriage reached the clearing ten minutes later.

This clearing, surrounded by great trees, formed a sort of oval, covered with rich grass. Here it was still daylight, and the darkness would scarcely deepen for over an hour. There was thus time to arrange an encampment and to rest awhile after our hard trip over the rough and rocky roads.

Of course, we were intensely eager to approach the Creek and see if the “Terror” was still there. But prudence restrained us. A little patience, and the night-would enable us to reach a commanding position unsuspected. Wells urged this strongly; and despite my eagerness, I felt that he was right.

The horses were unharnessed, and left to browse under the care of the coachman who had driven us. The provisions were unpacked, and John Hart and Nab Walker spread out a meal on the grass at the foot of a superb cypress which recalled to me the forest odors of Morganton and Pleasant Garden. We were hungry and thirsty; and food and drink were not lacking. Then our pipes were lighted to calm the anxious moments of waiting that remained.

Silence reigned within the wood. The last song of the birds had ceased. With the coming of night the breeze fell little by little, and the leaves scarcely quivered even at the tops of the highest branches. The sky darkened rapidly after sundown and twilight deepened into obscurity.

I looked at my watch, it was half-past eight. “It is time, Wells.”

“When you will, Mr. Strock.”

“Then let us start.”

We cautioned the coachman not to let the horses stray beyond the clearing. Then we started. Wells went in advance, I followed him, and John Hart and Nab Walker came behind. In the darkness, we three would have been helpless without the guidance of Wells. Soon we reached the farther border of the woods; and before us stretched the banks of Black Rock Creek.

All was silent; all seemed deserted. We could advance without risk. If the “Terror” was there, she had cast anchor behind the rocks. But was she there? That was the momentous question! As we approached the denouement of this exciting affair, my heart was in my throat.

Wells motioned to us to advance. The sand of the shore crunched beneath our steps. The two hundred feet between us and the mouth of the Creek were crossed softly, and a few minutes sufficed to bring us to the rocks at the edge of the lake.

There was nothing! Nothing!

The spot where Wells had left the “Terror” twenty-four hours before was empty. The “Master of the World” was no longer at Black Rock Creek.

CHAPTER 12

BLACK ROCK CREEK

Human nature is prone to illusions. Of course, there had been all along a probability that the “Terror” had deserted the locality, even admitting that it was she Wells had seen the previous day. If some damage to her triple system of locomotion had prevented her from regaining either by land or by water her usual hiding-place, and obliged her to seek refuge in Black Rock Creek, what ought we to conclude now upon finding her here no longer? Obviously, that, having finished her repairs, she had continued on her way, and was already far beyond the waters of Lake Erie.

But probable as this result had been from the first, we had more and more ignored it as our trip proceeded. We had come to accept as a fact that we should meet the “Terror,” that we should find her anchored at the base of the rocks where Wells had seen her.

And now what disappointment! I might even say, what despair! All our efforts gone for nothing! Even if the “Terror” was still upon the lake, to find her, reach her and capture her, was beyond our power, and it might as well be fully recognized beyond all human power.

We stood there, Wells and I, completely crushed, while John Hart and Nab Walker, no less chagrined, went tramping along the banks of the Creek, seeking any trace that had been left behind.

Posted there, at the mouth of the Creek, Wells and I exchanged scarcely a word. What need was there of words to enable us to understand each other! After our eagerness and our despair, we were now exhausted. Defeated in our well-planned attempt, we felt as unwilling to abandon our campaign, as we were unable to continue it.

Nearly an hour slipped by. We could not resolve to leave the place. Our eyes still sought to pierce the night. Sometimes a glimmer, due to the sparkle of the waters, trembled on the surface of the lake. Then it vanished, and with it the foolish hope that it had roused. Sometimes again, we thought we saw a shadow outlined against the dark, the silhouette of an approaching boat. Yet again some eddies would swirl up at our feet, as if the Creek had been stirred within its depths. These vain imaginings were dissipated one after the other. They were but the illusions raised by our strained fancies.

At length our companions rejoined us. My first question was, “Nothing new?”

“Nothing,” said John Hart.

“You have explored both banks of the Creek?”

“Yes,” responded Nab Walker, “as far as the shallow water above; and we have not seen even a vestige of the things which Mr. Wells saw laid on the shore.”

“Let us wait awhile,” said I, unable to resolve upon a return to the woods.

At that moment our attention was caught by a sudden agitation of the waters, which swelled upward at the foot of the rocks.

“It is like the swell from a vessel,” said Wells.

“Yes,” said I, instinctively lowering my voice. “What has caused it? The wind has completely died out. Does it come from something on the surface of the lake?”

“Or from something underneath,” said Wells, bending forward, the better to determine.

The commotion certainly seemed as if caused by some boat, whether from beneath the water, or approaching the creek from outside upon the lake.

Silent, motionless, we strained eyes and ears to pierce the profound obscurity. The faint noise of the waves of the lake lapping on the shore beyond the creek, came to us distinctly through the night. John Hart and Nab Walker drew a little aside upon a higher ridge of rocks. As for me, I leaned close to the water to watch the agitation. It did not lessen. On the contrary it became momentarily more evident, and I began to distinguish a sort of regular throbbing, like that produced by a screw in motion.

“There is no doubt,” declared Wells, leaning close to me, “there is a boat coming toward us.”

“There certainly is,” responded I, “unless they have whales or sharks in Lake Erie.”

“No, it is a boat,” repeated Wells. “Is she headed toward the mouth of the creek, or is she going further up it?”

“This is just where you saw the boat twice before?”

“Yes, just here.”

“Then if this is the same one, and it can be no other, she will probably return to the same spot.”

“There!” whispered Wells, extending his hand toward the entrance of the creek.

Our companions rejoined us, and all four, crouching low upon the bank, peered in the direction he pointed.

We vaguely distinguished a black mass moving through the darkness. It advanced very slowly and was still outside the creek, upon the lake, perhaps a cable’s length to the northeast. We could scarcely hear even now the faint throbbing of its engines. Perhaps they had stopped and the boat was only gliding forward under their previous impulse.

It seemed, then, that this was indeed the submarine which Wells had watched, and it was returning to pass this night, like the last, within the shelter of the creek.

Why had it left the anchorage, if only to return? Had it suffered some new disaster, which again impaired its power? Or had it been before compelled to leave, with its repairs still unfinished? What cause constrained it to return here? Was there some imperious reason why it could no longer be turned into an automobile, and go darting away across the roads of Ohio?

To all these questions which came crowding upon me, I could give no answer. Furthermore both Wells and I kept reasoning under the assumption that this was really the “Terror” commanded by the “Master of the World” who had dated from it his letter of defiance to the government. Yet this premise was still unproven, no matter how confident we might feel of it.

Whatever boat this was, that stole so softly through the night, it continued to approach us. Assuredly its captain must know perfectly the channels and shores of Black Rock Creek, since he ventured here in such darkness. Not a light showed upon the deck. Not a single ray from within the cabin glimmered through any crevice.

A moment later, we heard some machinery moving very softly. The swell of the eddies grew stronger, and in a few moments the boat touched the quay.

This word "quay," only used in that region, exactly describes the spot. The rocks at our feet formed a level, five or six feet above the water, and descending to it perpendicularly, exactly like a landing wharf.

"We must not stop here," whispered Wells, seizing me by the arm.

"No," I answered, "they might see us. We must lie crouched upon the beach! Or we might hide in some crevice of the rocks."

"We will follow you."

There was not a moment to lose. The dark mass was now close at hand, and on its deck, but slightly raised above the surface of the water, we could trace the silhouettes of two men.

Were there, then, really only two on board?

We stole softly back to where the ravines rose toward the woods above. Several niches in the rocks were at hand. Wells and I crouched down in one, my two assistants in another. If the men on the "Terror" landed, they could not see us; but we could see them, and would be able to act as opportunity offered.

There were some slight noises from the boat, a few words exchanged in our own language. It was evident that the vessel was preparing to anchor. Then almost instantly, a rope was thrown out, exactly on the point of the quay where we had stood.

Leaning forward, Wells could discern that the rope was seized by one of the mariners, who had leaped ashore. Then we heard a grappling-iron scrape along the ground.

Some moments later, steps crunched upon the sand. Two men came up the ravine, and went onward toward the edge of the woods, guiding their steps by a ship lantern.

Where were they going? Was Black Rock Creek a regular hiding place of the "Terror?" Had her commander a depot here for stores or provisions? Did they come here to restock their craft, when the whim of their wild voyaging brought them to this part of the continent? Did they know this deserted, uninhabited spot so well, that they had no fear of ever being discovered here?

"What shall we do?" whispered Wells.

"Wait till they return, and then — " My words were cut short by a surprise. The men were not thirty feet from us, when, one of them chancing to turn suddenly, the light of their lantern fell full upon his face.

He was one of the two men who had watched before my house in Long Street! I could not be mistaken! I recognized him as positively as my old servant had done. It was he; it was assuredly one of the spies of whom I had never been able to find any further traces! There was no longer any doubt, my warning letter had come from them. It was therefore from the "Master of the World"; it had been written from the "Terror" and this was the

“Terror.” Once more I asked myself what could be the connection between this machine and the Great Eyrie!

In whispered words, I told Wells of my discovery. His only comment was, “It is all incomprehensible!”

Meanwhile the two men had continued on their way to the woods, and were gathering sticks beneath the trees. “What if they discover our encampment?” murmured Wells.

“No danger, if they do not go beyond the nearest trees.”

“But if they do discover it?”

“They will hurry back to their boat, and we shall be able to cut off their retreat.”

Toward the creek, where their craft lay, there was no further sound. I left my hiding-place; I descended the ravine to the quay; I stood on the very spot where the grappling-iron was fast among the rocks.

The “Terror” lay there, quiet at the end of its cable. Not a light was on board; not a person visible, either on the deck, or on the bank. Was not this my opportunity? Should I leap on board and there await the return of the two men?

“Mr. Strock!” It was Wells, who called to me softly from close at hand.

I drew back in all haste and crouched down beside him. Was it too late to take possession of the boat? Or would the attempt perhaps result in disaster from the presence of others watching on board?

At any rate, the two men with the lantern were close at hand returning down the ravine. Plainly they suspected nothing. Each carrying a bundle of wood, they came forward and stopped upon the quay.

Then one of them raised his voice, though not loudly. “Hullo! Captain!”

“All right,” answered a voice from the boat.

Wells murmured in my ear, “There are three!”

“Perhaps four,” I answered, “perhaps five or six!”

The situation grew more complicated. Against a crew so numerous, what ought we to do? The least imprudence might cost us dear! Now that the two men had returned, would they re-embark with their faggots? Then would the boat leave the creek, or would it remain anchored until day? If it withdrew, would it not be lost to us? It could leave the waters of Lake Erie, and cross any of the neighboring states by land; or it could retrace its road by the Detroit River which would lead it to Lake Huron and the Great Lakes above. Would such an opportunity as this, in the narrow waters of Black Rock Creek, ever occur again!

“At least,” said I to Wells, “we are four. They do not expect attack; they will be surprised. The result is in the hands of Providence.”

I was about to call our two men, when Wells again seized my arm. “Listen!” said he.

One of the men hailed the boat, and it drew close up to the rocks. We heard the Captain say to the two men ashore, “Everything is all right, up there?”

“Everything, Captain.”

“There are still two bundles of wood left there?”

“Two.”

“Then one more trip will bring them all on board the ‘Terror.’”

The “Terror!” It WAS she!

“Yes; just one more trip,” answered one of the men.

“Good; then we will start off again at daybreak.”

Were there then but three of them on board? The Captain, this Master of the World, and these two men?

Evidently they planned to take aboard the last of their wood. Then they would withdraw within their machine, and go to sleep. Would not that be the time to surprise them, before they could defend themselves?

Rather than to attempt to reach and capture the ship in face of this resolute Captain who was guarding it, Wells and I agreed that it was better to let his men return unassailed, and wait till they were all asleep.

It was now half an hour after ten. Steps were once more heard upon the shore. The man with a lantern and his companion, again remounted the ravine toward the woods. When they were safely beyond hearing, Wells went to warn our men, while I stole forward again to the very edge of the water.

The “Terror” lay at the end of a short cable. As well as I could judge, she was long and slim, shaped like a spindle, without chimney, without masts, without rigging, such a shape as had been described when she was seen on the coast of New England.

I returned to my place, with my men in the shelter of the ravine; and we looked to our revolvers, which might well prove of service.

Five minutes had passed since the men reached the woods, and we expected their return at any moment. After that, we must wait at least an hour before we made our attack; so that both the Captain and his comrades might be deep in sleep. It was important that they should have not a moment either to send their craft darting out upon the waters of Lake Erie, or to plunge it beneath the waves where we would have been entrapped with it.

In all my career I have never felt such impatience. It seemed to me that the two men must have been detained in the woods. Something had barred their return.

Suddenly a loud noise was heard, the tumult of run-away horses, galloping furiously along the shore!

They were our own, which, frightened, and perhaps neglected by the driver, had broken away from the clearing, and now came rushing along the bank.

At the same moment, the two men reappeared, and this time they were running with all speed. Doubtless they had discovered our encampment, and had at once suspected that there were police hidden in the woods. They realized that they were watched, they were followed, they would be seized. So they dashed recklessly down the ravine, and after loosening the cable, they would doubtless endeavor to leap aboard. The “Terror” would disappear with the speed of a meteor, and our attempt would be wholly defeated!

“Forward,” I cried. And we scrambled down the sides of the ravine to cut off the retreat of the two men.

They saw us and, on the instant, throwing down their bundles, fired at us with revolvers, hitting John Hart in the leg.

We fired in our turn, but less successfully. The men neither fell nor faltered in their course. Reaching the edge of the creek, without stopping to unloose the cable, they plunged overboard, and in a moment were clinging to the deck of the “Terror.”

Their captain, springing forward, revolver in hand, fired. The ball grazed Wells.

Nab Walker and I seizing the cable, pulled the black mass of the boat toward shore. Could they cut the rope in time to escape us?

Suddenly the grappling-iron was torn violently from the rocks. One of its hooks caught in my belt, while Walker was knocked down by the flying cable. I was entangled by the iron and the rope and dragged forward —

The “Terror,” driven by all the power of her engines, made a single bound and darted out across Black Rock Creek.

CHAPTER 13

ON BOARD THE TERROR

When I came to my senses it was daylight. A half light pierced the thick glass port-hole of the narrow cabin wherein someone had placed me — how many hours ago, I could not say! Yet it seemed to me by the slanting rays, that the sun could not be very far above the horizon.

I was resting in a narrow bunk with coverings over me. My clothes, hanging in a corner, had been dried. My belt, torn in half by the hook of the iron, lay on the floor.

I felt no wound nor injury, only a little weakness. If I had lost consciousness, I was sure it had not been from a blow. My head must have been drawn beneath the water, when I was tangled in the cable. I should have been suffocated, if someone had not dragged me from the lake.

Now, was I on board the “Terror?” And was I alone with the Captain and his two men? This seemed probable, almost certain. The whole scene of our encounter rose before my eyes, Hart lying wounded upon the bank; Wells firing shot after shot, Walker hurled down at the instant when the grappling hook caught my belt! And my companions? On their side, must not they think that I had perished in the waters of Lake Erie?

Where was the “Terror” now, and how was it navigating? Was it moving as an automobile? Speeding across the roads of some neighboring State? If so, and if I had been unconscious for many hours, the machine with its tremendous powers must be already far away. Or, on the other hand, were we, as a submarine, following some course beneath the lake?

No, the “Terror” was moving upon some broad liquid surface. The sunlight, penetrating my cabin, showed that the window was not submerged. On the other hand, I felt none of the jolting that the automobile must have suffered even on the smoothest highway. Hence the “Terror” was not traveling upon land.

As to deciding whether she was still traversing Lake Erie, that was another matter. Had not the Captain reascended the Detroit River, and entered Lake Huron, or even Lake Superior beyond? It was difficult to say.

At any rate I decided to go up on deck. From there I might be able to judge. Dragging myself somewhat heavily from the bunk, I reached for my clothes and dressed, though without much energy. Was I not probably locked within this cabin?

The only exit seemed by a ladder and hatchway above my head. The hatch rose readily to my hand, and I ascended half way on deck.

My first care was to look forward, backward, and on both sides of the speeding “Terror.” Everywhere a vast expanse of waves! Not a shore in sight! Nothing but the horizon formed by sea and sky!

Whether it was a lake or the ocean I could easily settle. As we shot forward at such speed the water cut by the bow, rose furiously upward on either side, and the spray lashed savagely against me.

I tasted it. It was fresh water, and very probably that of Lake Erie. The sun was but midway toward the zenith so it could scarcely be more than seven or eight hours since the moment when the “Terror” had darted from Black Rock Creek.

This must therefore be the following morning, that of the thirty-first of July.

Considering that Lake Erie is two hundred and twenty miles long, and over fifty wide, there was no reason to be surprised that I could see no land, neither that of the United States to the southeast nor of Canada to the northwest.

At this moment there were two men on the deck, one being at the bow on the look-out, the other in the stern, keeping the course to the northeast, as I judged by the position of the sun. The one at the bow was he whom I had recognized as he ascended the ravine at Black Rock. The second was his companion who had carried the lantern. I looked in vain for the one whom they had called Captain. He was not in sight.

It will be readily appreciated how eager was my desire to stand in the presence of the creator of this prodigious machines of this fantastic personage who occupied and preoccupied the attention of all the world, the daring inventor who did not fear to engage in battle against the entire human race, and who proclaimed himself “Master of the World.”

I approached the man on the look-out, and after a minute of silence I asked him, “Where is the Captain?”

He looked at me through half-closed eyes. He seemed not to understand me. Yet I knew, having heard him the night before, that he spoke English. Moreover, I noticed that he did not appear surprised to see me out of my cabin. Turning his back upon me, he continued to search the horizon.

I stepped then toward the stern, determined to ask the same question about the Captain. But when I approached the steersman, he waved me away with his hand, and I obtained no other response.

It only remained for me to study this craft, from which we had been repelled with revolver shots, when we had seized upon its anchor rope.

I therefore set leisurely to work to examine the construction of this machine, which was carrying me — whither? The deck and the upper works were all made of some metal which I did not recognize. In the center of the deck, a scuttle half raised covered the room where the engines were working regularly and almost silently. As I had seen before, neither masts, nor rigging! Not even a flagstaff at the stern! Toward the bow there arose the top of a periscope by which the “Terror” could be guided when beneath the water.

On the sides were folded back two sort of outshoots resembling the gangways on certain Dutch boats. Of these I could not understand the use.

In the bow there rose a third hatch-way which presumably covered the quarters occupied by the two men when the “Terror” was at rest.

At the stern a similar hatch gave access probably to the cabin of the captain, who remained unseen. When these different hatches were shut down, they had a sort of rubber covering which closed them hermetically tight, so that the water could not reach the interior when the boat plunged beneath the ocean.

As to the motor, which imparted such prodigious speed to the machine, I could see nothing of it, nor of the propeller. However, the fast speeding boat left behind it only a long, smooth wake. The extreme fineness of the lines of the craft, caused it to make scarcely any waves, and enabled it to ride lightly over the crest of the billows even in a rough sea.

As was already known, the power by which the machine was driven, was neither steam nor gasoline, nor any of those similar liquids so well known by their odor, which are usually employed for automobiles and submarines. No doubt the power here used was electricity, generated on board, at some high power. Naturally I asked myself whence comes this electricity, from piles, or from accumulators? But how were these piles or accumulators charged? Unless, indeed, the electricity was drawn directly from the surrounding air or from the water, by processes hitherto unknown. And I asked myself with intense eagerness if in the present situation, I might be able to discover these secrets.

Then I thought of my companions, left behind on the shore of Black Rock Creek. One of them, I knew, was wounded; perhaps the others were also. Having seen me dragged overboard by the hawser, could they possibly suppose that I had been rescued by the "Terror?" Surely not! Doubtless the news of my death had already been telegraphed to Mr. Ward from Toledo. And now who would dare to undertake a new campaign against this "Master of the World"?

These thoughts occupied my mind as I awaited the captain's appearance on the deck. He did not appear.

I soon began to feel very hungry; for I must have fasted now nearly twenty-four hours. I had eaten nothing since our hasty meal in the woods, even if that had been the night before. And judging by the pangs which now assailed my stomach, I began to wonder if I had not been snatched on board the "Terror" two days before, — or even more.

Happily the question if they meant to feed me, and how they meant to feed me, was solved at once. The man at the bow left his post, descended, and reappeared. Then, without saying a word, he placed some food before me and returned to his place. Some potted meat, dried fish, sea-biscuit, and a pot of ale so strong that I had to mix it with water, such was the meal to which I did full justice. My fellow travelers had doubtless eaten before I came out of the cabin, and they did not join me.

There was nothing further to attract my eyes, and I sank again into thought. How would this adventure finish? Would I see this invisible captain at length, and would he restore me to liberty? Could I regain it in spite of him? That would depend on circumstances! But if the “Terror” kept thus far away from the shore, or if she traveled beneath the water, how could I escape from her? Unless we landed, and the machine became an automobile, must I not abandon all hope of escape?

Moreover — why should I not admit it? — to escape without having learned anything of the “Terror’s” secrets would not have contented me at all. Although I could not thus far flatter myself upon the success of my campaign, and though I had come within a hairbreadth of losing my life and though the future promised far more of evil than of good, yet after all, a step forward had been attained. To be sure, if I was never to be able to re-enter into communication with the world, if, like this Master of the World who had voluntarily placed himself outside the law, I was now placed outside humanity, then the fact that I had reached the “Terror” would have little value.

The craft continued headed to the northeast, following the longer axis of Lake Erie. She was advancing at only half speed; for, had she been doing her best, she must some hours before have reached the northeastern extremity of the lake.

At this end Lake Erie has no other outlet than the Niagara River, by which it empties into Lake Ontario. Now, this river is barred by the famous cataract some fifteen miles beyond the important city of Buffalo. Since the “Terror” had not retreated by the Detroit River, down which she had descended from the upper lakes, how was she to escape from these waters, unless indeed she crossed by land?

The sun passed the meridian. The day was beautiful; warm but not unpleasantly so, thanks to the breeze made by our passage. The shores of the lake continued invisible on both the Canadian and the American side.

Was the captain determined not to show himself? Had he some reason for remaining unknown? Such a precaution would indicate that he intended to set me at liberty in the evening, when the “Terror” could approach the shore unseen.

Toward two o’clock, however, I heard a slight noise; the central hatchway was raised. The man I had so impatiently awaited appeared on deck.

I must admit he paid no more attention to me, than his men had done. Going to the stern, he took the helm. The man whom he had relieved, after a few words in a low tone, left the deck, descending by the forward hatchway. The captain, having scanned the horizon, consulted the compass, and slightly altered our course. The speed of the “Terror” increased.

This man, so interesting both to me and to the world, must have been some years over fifty. He was of middle height, with powerful shoulders still very erect; a strong head, with thick hair rather gray than white, smooth shaven cheeks, and a short, crisp beard. His chest was broad, his jaw prominent, and he had that characteristic sign of tremendous energy, bushy eyebrows drawn sharply together. Assuredly he possessed a constitution of iron, splendid health, and warm red blood beneath his sun burned skin.

Like his companions the captain was dressed in sea-clothes covered by an oil-skin coat, and with a woolen cap which could be pulled down to cover his head entirely, when he so desired.

Need I add that the captain of the “Terror” was the other of the two men, who had watched my house in Long street. Moreover, if I recognized him, he also must recognize me as chief-inspector Strock, to whom had been assigned the task of penetrating the Great Eyrie.

I looked at him curiously. On his part, while he did not seek to avoid my eyes, he showed at least a singular indifference to the fact that he had a stranger on board.

As I watched him, the idea came to me, a suggestion which I had not connected with the first view of him in Washington, that I had already seen this characteristic figure. Was it in one of the photographs held in the police department, or was it merely a picture in some shop window? But the remembrance was very vague. Perhaps I merely imagined it.

Well, though his companions had not had the politeness to answer me, perhaps he would be more courteous. He spoke the same language as I, although I could not feel quite positive that he was of American birth. He might indeed have decided to pretend not to understand me, so as to avoid all discussion while he held me prisoner.

In that case, what did he mean to do with me? Did he intend to dispose of me without further ceremony? Was he only waiting for night to throw me overboard? Did even the little which I knew of him, make me a danger of which he must rid himself? But in that case, he might better have left me at the end of his anchor line. That would have saved him the necessity of drowning me over again.

I turned, I walked to the stern, I stopped full in front of him. Then, at length, he fixed full upon me a glance that burned like a flame.

“Are you the captain?” I asked.

He was silent.

“This boat! Is it really the ‘Terror?’”

To this question also there was no response. Then I reached toward him; I would have taken hold of his arm.

He repelled me without violence, but with a movement that suggested tremendous restrained power.

Planting myself again before him, I demanded in a louder tone, “What do you mean to do with me?”

Words seemed almost ready to burst from his lips, which he compressed with visible irritation. As though to check his speech he turned his head aside. His hand touched a regulator of some sort, and the machine rapidly increased its speed.

Anger almost mastered me. I wanted to cry out “So be it! Keep your silence! I know who you are, just as I know your machine, recognized at Madison, at Boston, at Lake Kirdall. Yes; it is you, who have rushed so recklessly over our roads, our seas and our lakes! Your boat is the ‘Terror’ and you her commander, wrote that letter to the government. It is you who fancy you can fight the entire world. You, who call yourself the Master of the World!”

And how could he have denied it! I saw at that moment the famous initials inscribed upon the helm!

Fortunately I restrained myself; and despairing of getting any response to my questions, I returned to my seat near the hatchway of my cabin.

For long hours, I patiently watched the horizon in the hope that land would soon appear. Yes, I sat waiting! For I was reduced to that! Waiting! No doubt, before the day closed, the “Terror” must reach the end of Lake Erie, since she continued her course steadily to the northeast.

CHAPTER 14

NIAGARA

The hours passed, and the situation did not change. The steersman returned on deck, and the captain, descending, watched the movement of the engines. Even when our speed increased, these engines continued working without noise, and with remarkable smoothness There was never one of those inevitable breaks, with which in most motors the pistons sometimes miss a stroke. I concluded that the “Terror,” in each of its transformations must be worked by rotary engines. But I could not assure myself of this.

For the rest, our direction did not change. Always we headed toward the northeast end of the lake, and hence toward Buffalo.

Why, I wondered, did the captain persist in following this route? He could not intend to stop at Buffalo, in the midst of a crowd of boats and shipping of every kind. If he meant to leave the lake by water, there was only the Niagara River to follow; and its Falls would be impassable, even to such a machine as this. The only escape was by the Detroit River, and the “Terror” was constantly leaving that farther behind.

Then another idea occurred to me. Perhaps the captain was only waiting for night to return to the shore of the lake. There, the boat, changed to an automobile, would quickly cross the neighboring States. If I did not succeed in making my escape, during this passage across the land, all hope of regaining my liberty would be gone.

True, I might learn where this Master of the World hid himself. I might learn what no one had yet been able to discover, assuming always that he did not dispose of me at one time or another — and what I expected his "disposal" would be, is easily comprehended.

I knew the northeast end of Lake Erie well, having often visited that section of New York State which extends westward from Albany to Buffalo. Three years before, a police mission had led me to explore carefully the shores of the Niagara River, both above and below the cataract and its Suspension Bridge. I had visited the two principal islands between Buffalo and the little city of Niagara Falls, I had explored Navy Island and also Goat Island, which separates the American falls from those of the Canadian side.

Thus if an opportunity for flight presented itself, I should not find myself in an unknown district. But would this chance offer? And at heart, did I desire it, or would I seize upon it? What secrets still remained in this affair in which good fortune or was it evil fortune — had so closely entangled me!

On the other hand, I saw no real reason to suppose that there was any chance of my reaching the shores of the Niagara River. The "Terror" would surely not venture into this trap which had no exit. Probably she would not even go to the extremity of the lake.

Such were the thoughts that spun through my excited brain, while my eyes remained fixed upon the empty horizon.

And always one persistent question remained insolvable. Why had the captain written to me personally that threatening letter? Why had he spied upon me in Washington? What bond attached him to the Great Eyrie? There might indeed be subterranean canals which gave him passage to Lake Kirdall, but could he pierce the impenetrable fortress of the Eyrie? No! That was beyond him!

Toward four o’clock in the afternoon, reckoning by the speed of the “Terror” and her direction, I knew we must be approaching Buffalo; and indeed, its outlines began to show some fifteen miles ahead. During our passage, a few boats had been seen, but we had passed them at a long distance, a distance which our captain could easily keep as great as he pleased. Moreover, the “Terror” lay so low upon the water, that at even a mile away it would have been difficult to discover her.

Now, however, the hills encircling the end of Lake Erie, came within vision, beyond Buffalo, forming the sort of funnel by which Lake Erie pours its waters into the channel of the Niagara river. Some dunes rose on the right, groups of trees stood out here and there. In the distance, several freight steamers and fishing smacks appeared. The sky became spotted with trails of smoke, which were swept along by a light eastern breeze.

What was our captain thinking of in still heading toward the port of Buffalo! Did not prudence forbid him to venture further? At each moment, I expected that he would give a sweep of the helm and turn away toward the western shore of the lake. Or else, I thought, he would prepare to plunge beneath the surface. But this persistence in holding our bow toward Buffalo was impossible to understand!

At length the helmsman, whose eyes were watching the northeastern shore, made a sign to his companion. The latter, leaving the bow, went to the central hatchway, and descended into the engine room. Almost immediately the captain came on deck, and joining the helmsman, spoke with him in a low voice.

The latter, extending his hand toward Buffalo, pointed out two black spots, which showed five or six miles distant on the starboard side. The captain studied them attentively. Then shrugging his shoulders, he seated himself at the stern without altering the course of the “Terror.”

A quarter of an hour later, I could see plainly that there were two smoke clouds at the point they had studied so carefully. Little by little the black spots beneath these became more defined. They were two long, low steamers, which, coming from the port of Buffalo, were approaching rapidly.

Suddenly it struck me that these were the two torpedo destroyers of which Mr. Ward had spoken, and which I had been told to summon in case of need.

These destroyers were of the newest type, the swiftest boats yet constructed in the country. Driven by powerful engines of the latest make, they had covered almost thirty miles an hour. It is true, the “Terror” commanded an even greater speed, and always, if she were surrounded so that flight was impossible, she could submerge herself out of reach of all pursuit. In truth, the destroyers would have had to be submarines to attack the “Terror” with any chance of success. And I know not, if even in that case, the contest would have been equal.

Meanwhile, it seemed to me evident that the commanders of the two ships had been warned, perhaps by Mr. Wells who, returning swiftly to Toledo, might have telegraphed to them the news of our defeat. It appeared, moreover, that they had seen the “Terror,” for they were headed at full speed toward her. Yet our captain, seemingly giving them no thought whatever, continued his course toward the Niagara River.

What would the torpedo destroyers do? Presumably, they would maneuver so as to seek to shut the “Terror” within the narrowing end of the lake where the Niagara offered her no passage.

Our captain now took the helm. One of the men was at the bow, the other in the engine room. Would the order be given for me to go down into the cabin?

It was not, to my extreme satisfaction. To speak frankly, no one paid any attention to me. It was as if I had not been on board. I watched, therefore, not without mixed emotions, the approach of the destroyers. Less than two miles distant now they separated in such a way as to hold the “Terror” between their fires.

As to the Master of the World, his manner indicated only the most profound disdain. He seemed sure that these destroyers were powerless against him. With a touch to his machinery he could distance them, no matter what their speed! With a few turns of her engine, the “Terror” would dart beyond their cannon shots! Or, in the depths of the lake, what projectiles could find the submarine?

Five minutes later, scarcely a mile separated us from the two powerful fighters which pursued us. Our captain permitted them to approach still closer. Then he pressed upon a handle. The “Terror,” doubling the action of her propellers, leaped across the surface of the lake. She played with the destroyers! Instead of turning in flight, she continued her forward course. Who knew if she would not even have the audacity to pass between her two enemies, to coax them after her, until the hour when, as night closed in, they would be forced to abandon the useless pursuit!

The city of Buffalo was now in plain view on the border of the lake. I saw its huge buildings, its church towers, its grain elevators. Only four or five miles ahead, Niagara river opened to the northward.

Under these new conditions which way should I turn? When we passed in front of the destroyers, or perhaps between them, should I not throw myself into the waters I was a good swimmer, and such a chance might never occur again. The captain could not stop to recapture me. By diving could I not easily escape, even from a bullet? I should surely be seen by one or other of the pursuers. Perhaps, even, their commanders had been warned of my presence on board the "Terror." Would not a boat be sent to rescue me?

Evidently my chance of success would be even greater, if the "Terror" entered the narrow waters of Niagara River. At Navy Island I would be able to set foot on territory that I knew well. But to suppose that our captain would rush into this river where he might be swept over the great cataract! That seemed impossible! I resolved to await the destroyers' closest approach and at the last moment I would decide.

Yet my resolution to escape was but half-hearted. I could not resign myself thus to lose all chance of following up this mystery. My instincts as a police official revolted. I had but to reach out my hand in order to seize this man who had been outlawed! Should I let him escape me! No! I would not save myself! Yet, on the other hand, what fate awaited me, and where would I be carried by the "Terror," if I remained on board?

It was a quarter past six. The destroyers, quivering and trembling under the strain of their speed, gained on us perceptibly. They were now directly astern, leaving between them a distance of twelve or fifteen cable lengths. The "Terror," without increasing her speed, saw one of them approach on the port side, the other to starboard.

I did not leave my place. The man at the bow was close by me. Immovable at the helm, his eyes burning beneath his contracted brows, the captain waited. He meant, perhaps, to finish the chase by one last maneuver.

Suddenly, a puff of smoke rose from the destroyer on our left. A projectile, brushing the surface of the water, passed in front of the “Terror,” and sped beyond the destroyer on our right.

I glanced around anxiously. Standing by my side, the lookout seemed to await a sign from the captain. As for him, he did not even turn his head; and I shall never forget the expression of disdain imprinted on his visage.

At this moment, I was pushed suddenly toward the hatchway of my cabin, which was fastened above me. At the same instant the other hatchways were closed; the deck became watertight. I heard a single throb of the machinery, and the plunge was made, the submarine disappeared beneath the waters of the lake.

Cannon shot still boomed above us. Their heavy echo reached my ear; then everything was peace. Only a faint light penetrated through the porthole into my cabin. The submarine, without the least rolling or pitching, sped silently through the deeps.

I had seen with what rapidity, and also with what ease the transformation of the “Terror” had been made. No less easy and rapid, perhaps, would be her change to an automobile.

And now what would this Master of the World do? Presumably he would change his course, unless, indeed, he preferred to speed to land, and there continue his route along the roads. It still seemed more probable, however, that he would turn back toward the west, and after distancing the destroyers, regain the Detroit River. Our submersion would probably only last long enough to escape out of cannon range, or until night forbade pursuit.

Fate, however, had decreed a different ending to this exciting chase. Scarce ten minutes had passed when there seemed some confusion on board. I heard rapid words exchanged in the engine room. The steadily moving machinery became noisy and irregular. At once I suspected that some accident compelled the submarine to reascend.

I was not mistaken. In a moment, the semi-obscurity of my cabin was pierced by sunshine. The “Terror” had risen above water. I heard steps on the deck, and the hatchways were re-opened, including mine. I sprang up the ladder.

The captain had resumed his place at the helm, while the two men were busy below. I looked to see if the destroyers were still in view. Yes! Only a quarter of a mile away! The “Terror” had already been seen, and the powerful vessels which enforced the mandates of our government were swinging into position to give chase. Once more the “Terror” sped in the direction of Niagara River.

I must confess, I could make nothing of this maneuver. Plunging into a cul-de-sac, no longer able to seek the depths because of the accident, the “Terror” might, indeed, temporarily distance her pursuers; but she must find her path barred by them when she attempted to return. Did she intend to land, and if so, could she hope to outrun the telegrams which would warn every police agency of her approach?

We were now not half a mile ahead. The destroyers pursued us at top speed, though being now directly behind, they were in poor position for using their guns. Our captain seemed content to keep this distance; though it would have been easy for him to increase it, and then at nightfall, to dodge back behind the enemy.

Already Buffalo had disappeared on our right, and a little after seven o’clock the opening of the Niagara River appeared ahead. If he entered there, knowing that he could not return, our captain must have lost his mind! And in truth was he not insane, this man who proclaimed himself, who believed himself, Master of the World?

I watched him there, calm, impassive not even turning his head to note the progress of the destroyers and I wondered at him.

This end of the lake was absolutely deserted. Freight steamers bound for the towns on the banks of the upper Niagara are not numerous, as its navigation is dangerous. Not one was in sight. Not even a fishing-boat crossed the path of the “Terror.” Even the two destroyers would soon be obliged to pause in their pursuit, if we continued our mad rush through these dangerous waters.

I have said that the Niagara River flows between New York and Canada. Its width, of about three quarters of a mile, narrows as it approaches the falls. Its length, from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, is about fifteen leagues. It flows in a northerly direction, until it empties the waters of Lake Superior, Michigan, Huron, and Erie into Ontario, the last lake of this mighty chain. The celebrated falls, which occur in the midst of this great river have a height of over a hundred and fifty feet. They are called sometimes the Horse-shoe Falls, because they curve inward like the iron shoe. The Indians have given them the name of “Thunder of Waters,” and in truth a mighty thunder roars from them without cessation, and with a tumult which is heard for several miles away.

Between Lake Erie, and the little city of Niagara Falls, two islands divide the current of the river, Navy Island, a league above the cataract, and Goat Island, which separates the American and the Canadian Falls. Indeed, on the lower point of this latter isle stood once that “Terrapin Tower” so daringly built in the midst of the plunging waters on the very edge of the abyss. It has been destroyed; for the constant wearing away of the stone beneath the cataract makes the ledge move with the ages slowly up the river, and the tower has been drawn into the gulf.

The town of Fort Erie stands on the Canadian shore at the entrance of the river. Two other towns are set along the banks above the falls, Schlosser on the right bank, and Chippewa on the left, located on either side of Navy Island. It is at this point that the current, bound within a narrower channel, begins to move at tremendous speed, to become two miles further on, the celebrated cataract.

The “Terror” had already passed Fort Erie. The sun in the west touched the edge of the Canadian horizon, and the moon, faintly seen, rose above the mists of the south. Darkness would not envelop us for another hour.

The destroyers, with huge clouds of smoke streaming from their funnels, followed us a mile behind. They sped between banks green with shade trees and dotted with cottages which lay among lovely gardens.

Obviously the “Terror” could no longer turn back. The destroyers shut her in completely. It is true their commanders did not know, as I did, that an accident to her machinery had forced her to the surface, and that it was impossible for her to escape them by another plunge. Nevertheless, they continued to follow, and would assuredly maintain their pursuit to the very last.

I marveled at the intrepidity of their chase through these dangerous waters. I marveled still more at the conduct of our captain. Within a half hour now, his course would be barred by the cataract. No matter how perfect his machine, it could not escape the power of the great falls. If the current once mastered our engines, we should inevitably disappear in the gulf nearly two hundred feet deep which the waters have dug at the base of the falls! Perhaps, however, our captain had still power to turn to one of the shores and flee by the automobile routes.

In the midst of this excitement, what action should I take personally? Should I attempt to gain the shores of Navy Island, if we indeed advanced that far? If I did not seize this chance, never after what I had learned of his secrets, never would the Master of the World restore me to liberty.

I suspected, however, that my flight was no longer possible. If I was not confined within my cabin, I no longer remained unwatched. While the captain retained his place at the helm, his assistant by my side never removed his eyes from me. At the first movement, I should be seized and locked within my room. For the present, my fate was evidently bound up with that of the “Terror.”

The distance which separated us from the two destroyers was now growing rapidly less. Soon they were but a few cable-lengths away. Could the motor of the “Terror,” since the accident, no longer hold its speeds? Yet the captain showed not the least anxiety, and made no effort to reach land!

We could hear the hissing of the steam which escaped from the valves of the destroyers, to mingle with the streamers of black smoke. But we heard, even more plainly, the roar of the cataract, now less than three miles away.

The “Terror” took the left branch of the river in passing Navy Island. At this point, she was within easy reach of the shore, yet she shot ahead. Five minutes later, we could see the first trees of Goat Island. The current became more and more irresistible. If the “Terror” did not stop, the destroyers could not much longer follow her. If it pleased our accursed captain to plunge us into the vortex of the falls, surely they did not mean to follow into the abyss!

Indeed, at this moment they signaled each other, and stopped the pursuit. They were scarce more than six hundred feet from the cataract. Then their thunders burst on the air and several cannon shot swept over the “Terror” without hitting its low-lying deck.

The sun had set, and through the twilight the moon’s rays shone upon us from the south. The speed of our craft, doubled by the speed of the current, was prodigious! In another moment, we should plunge into that black hollow which forms the very center of the Canadian Falls.

With an eye of horror, I saw the shores of Goat Island flashed by, then came the Isles of the Three Sisters, drowned in the spray from the abyss.

I sprang up; I started to throw myself into the water, in the desperate hope of gaining this last refuge. One of the men seized me from behind.

Suddenly a sharp noise was heard from the mechanism which throbbed within our craft. The long gangways folded back on the sides of the machine, spread out like wings, and at the moment when the “Terror” reached the very edge of the falls, she arose into space, escaping from the thundering cataract in the center of a lunar rainbow.

CHAPTER 15

THE EAGLE’S NEST

On the morrow, when I awoke after a sound sleep, our vehicle seemed motionless. It seemed to me evident that we were not running upon land. Yet neither were we rushing through or beneath the waters; nor yet soaring across the sky. Had the inventor regained that mysterious hiding-place of his, where no human being had ever set foot before him?

And now, since he had not disembarrassed himself of my presence, was his secret about to be revealed to me?

It seemed astonishing that I had slept so profoundly during most of our voyage through the air. It puzzled me and I asked if this sleep had not been caused by some drug, mixed with my last meal, the captain of the “Terror” having wished thus to prevent me from knowing the place where we landed. All that I can recall of the previous night is the terrible impression made upon me by that moment when the machine, instead of being caught in the vortex of the cataract rose under the impulse of its machinery like a bird with its huge wings beating with tremendous power!

So this machine actually fulfilled a four-fold use! It was at the same time automobile, boat, submarine, and airship. Earth, sea and air, — it could move through all three elements! And with what power! With what speed! Al few instants sufficed to complete its marvelous transformations. The same engine drove it along all its courses! And I had been a witness of its metamorphoses! But that of which I was still ignorant, and which I could perhaps discover, was the source of the energy which drove the machine, and above all, who was the inspired inventor who, after having created it, in every detail, guided it with so much ability and audacity!

At the moment when the “Terror” rose above the Canadian Falls, I was held down against the hatchway of my cabin. The clear, moonlit evening had permitted me to note the direction taken by the air-ship. It followed the course of the river and passed the Suspension Bridge three miles below the falls. It is here that the irresistible rapids of the Niagara River begin, where the river bends sharply to descend toward Lake Ontario.

On leaving this point, I was sure that we had turned toward the east. The captain continued at the helm. I had not addressed a word to him. What good would it do? He would not have answered. I noted that the “Terror” seemed to be guided in its course through the air with surprising ease. Assuredly the roads of the air were as familiar to it as those of the seas and of the lands!

In the presence of such results, could one not understand the enormous pride of this man who proclaimed himself Master of the World? Was he not in control of a machine infinitely superior to any that had ever sprung from the hand of man, and against which men were powerless? In truth, why should he sell this marvel? Why should he accept the millions offered him? Yes, I comprehended now that absolute confidence in himself which was expressed in his every attitude. And where might not his ambition carry him, if by its own excess it mounted some day into madness!

A half hour after the “Terror” soared into the air, I had sunk into complete unconsciousness, without realizing its approach. I repeat, it must have been caused by some drug. Without doubt, our commander did not wish me to know the road he followed.

Hence I cannot say whether the aviator continued his flight through space, or whether the mariner sailed the surface of some sea or lake, or the chauffeur sped across the American roads. No recollection remains with me of what passed during that night of July thirty-first.

Now, what was to follow from this adventure? And especially concerning myself, what would be its end?

I have said that at the moment when I awoke from my strange sleep, the “Terror” seemed to me completely motionless. I could hardly be mistaken; whatever had been her method of progress, I should have felt some movement, even in the air. I lay in my berth in the cabin, where I had been shut in without knowing it, just as I had been on the preceding night which I had passed on board the “Terror” on Lake Erie.

My business now was to learn if I would be allowed to go on deck here where the machine had landed. I attempted to raise the hatchway. It was fastened.

“Ah!” said I, “am I to be kept here until the ‘Terror’ recommences its travels?” Was not that, indeed, the only time when escape was hopeless?

My impatience and anxiety may be appreciated. I knew not how long this halt might continue.

I had not a quarter of an hour to wait. A noise of bars being removed came to my ear. The hatchway was raised from above. A wave of light and air penetrated my cabin.

With one bound I reached the deck. My eyes in an instant swept round the horizon.

The “Terror,” as I had thought, rested quiet on the ground. She was in the midst of a rocky hollow measuring from fifteen to eighteen hundred feet in circumference. A floor of yellow gravel carpeted its entire extent, unrelieved by a single tuft of herbage.

This hollow formed an almost regular oval, with its longer diameter extending north and south. As to the surrounding-wall, what was its height, what the character of its crest, I could not judge. Above us was gathered a fog so heavy, that the rays of the sun had not yet pierced it. Heavy trails of cloud drifted across the sandy floor, Doubtless the morning was still young, and this mist might later be dissolved.

It was quite cold here, although this was the first day of August. I concluded therefore that we must be far in the north, or else high above sea-level. We must still be somewhere on the New Continent; though where, it was impossible to surmise. Yet no matter how rapid our flight had been, the air-ship could not have traversed either ocean in the dozen hours since our departure from Niagara.

At this moment, I saw the captain come from an opening in the rocks, probably a grotto, at the base of this cliff hidden in the fog. Occasionally, in the mists above, appeared the shadows of huge birds. Their raucous cries were the sole interruption to the profound silence. Who knows if they were not affrighted by the arrival of this formidable, winged monster, which they could not match either in might or speed.

Everything led me to believe that it was here that the Master of the World withdrew in the intervals between his prodigious journeys. Here was the garage of his automobile; the harbor of his boat; the hangar of his air-ship.

And now the “Terror” stood motionless at the bottom of this hollow. At last I could examine her; and it looked as if her owners had no intention of preventing me. The truth is that the commander seemed to take no more notice of my presence than before. His two companions joined him, and the three did not hesitate to enter together into the grotto I had seen. What a chance to study the machine, at least its exterior! As to its inner parts, probably I should never get beyond conjecture.

In fact, except for that of my cabin, the hatchways were closed; and it would be vain for me to attempt to open them. At any rate, it might be more interesting to find out what kind of propeller drove the “Terror” in these many transformations.

I jumped to the ground and found I was left at leisure, to proceed with this first examination.

The machine was as I have said spindle-shaped. The bow was sharper than the stern. The body was of aluminium, the wings of a substance whose nature I could not determine. The body rested on four wheels, about two feet in diameter. These had pneumatic tires so thick as to assure ease of movement at any speed. Their spokes spread out like paddles or battledores; and when the “Terror” moved either on or under the water, they must have increased her pace.

These wheels were not however, the principal propeller. This consisted of two “Parsons” turbines placed on either side of the keel. Driven with extreme rapidity by the engine, they urged the boat onward in the water by twin screws, and I even questioned if they were not powerful enough to propel the machine through the air.

The chief aerial support, however, was that of the great wings, now again in repose, and folded back along the sides. Thus the theory of the “heavier than air” flying machine was employed by the inventor, a system which enabled him to dart through space with a speed probably superior to that of the largest birds.

As to the agent which set in action these various mechanisms, I repeat, it was, it could be, no other than electricity. But from what source did his batteries get their power? Had he somewhere an electric factory, to which he must return? Were the dynamos, perhaps working in one of the caverns of this hollow?

The result of my examination was that, while I could see that the machine used wheels and turbine screws and wings, I knew nothing of either its engine, nor of the force which drove it. To be sure, the discovery of this secret would be of little value to me. To employ it I must first be free. And after what I knew — little as that really was — the Master of the World would never release me.

There remained, it is true, the chance of escape. But would an opportunity ever present itself? If there could be none during the voyages of the "Terror," might there possibly be, while we remained in this retreat?

The first question to be solved was the location of this hollow. What communication did it have with the surrounding region? Could one only depart from it by a flying-machine? And in what part of the United States were we? Was it not reasonable to estimate, that our flight through the darkness had covered several hundred leagues?

There was one very natural hypothesis which deserved to be considered, if not actually accepted. What more natural harbor could there be for the "Terror" than the Great Eyrie? Was it too difficult a flight for our aviator to reach the summit? Could he not soar anywhere that the vultures and the eagles could? Did not that inaccessible Eyrie offer to the Master of the

World just such a retreat as our police had been unable to discover, one in which he might well believe himself safe from all attacks? Moreover, the distance between Niagara Falls and this part of the Blueridge Mountains, did not exceed four hundred and fifty miles, a flight which would have been easy for the “Terror.”

Yes, this idea more and more took possession of me. It crowded out a hundred other unsupported suggestions. Did not this explain the nature of the bond which existed between the Great Eyrie and the letter which I had received with our commander’s initials? And the threats against me if I renewed the ascent! And the espionage to which I had been subjected! And all the phenomena of which the Great Eyrie had been the theater, were they not to be attributed to this same cause — though what lay behind the phenomena was not yet clear? Yes, the Great Eyrie! The Great Eyrie!

But since it had been impossible for me to penetrate here, would it not be equally impossible for me to get out again, except upon the “Terror?” Ah, if the mists would but lift! Perhaps I should recognize the place. What was as yet a mere hypothesis, would become a starting point to act upon.

However, since I had freedom to move about, since neither the captain nor his men paid any heed to me, I resolved to explore the hollow. The three of them were all in the grotto toward the north end of the oval. Therefore I would commence my inspection at the southern end.

Reaching the rocky wall, I skirted along its base and found it broken by many crevices; above, arose more solid rocks of that feldspar of which the chain of the Alleghanies largely consists. To what height the rock wall rose, or what was the character of its summit, was still impossible to see. I must wait until the sun had scattered the mists.

In the meantime, I continued to follow along the base of the cliff. None of its cavities seemed to extend inward to any distance. Several of them contained debris from the hand of man, bits of broken wood, heaps of dried grasses. On the ground were still to be seen the footprints that the captain and his men must have left, perhaps months before, upon the sand.

My jailers, being doubtless very busy in their cabin, did not show themselves until they had arranged and packed several large bundles. Did they purpose to carry those on board the “Terror?” And were they packing up with the intention of permanently leaving their retreat?

In half an hour my explorations were completed and I returned toward the center. Here and there were heaped up piles of ashes, bleached by weather. There were fragments of burned planks and beams; posts to which clung rusted iron-work; armatures of metal twisted by fire; all the remnants of some intricate mechanism destroyed by the flames.

Clearly at some period not very remote the hollow had been the scene of a conflagration, accidental or intentional. Naturally I connected this with the phenomena observed at the Great Eyrie, the flames which rose above the crest, the noises which had so frightened the people of Pleasant Garden and Morganton. But of what mechanisms were these the fragments, and what reason had our captain for destroying them?

At this moment I felt a breath of air; a breeze came from the east. The sky swiftly cleared. The hollow was filled with light from the rays of the sun which appeared midway between the horizon and the zenith.

A cry escaped me! The crest of the rocky wall rose a hundred feet above me. And on the eastern side was revealed that easily recognizable pinnacle, the rock like a mounting eagle. It was the same that had held the attention of Mr. Elias Smith and myself, when we had looked up at it from the outer side of the Great Eyrie.

Thus there was no further doubt. In its flight during the night the airship had covered the distance between Lake Erie and North Carolina. It was in the depth of this Eyrie that the machine had found shelter! This was the nest, worthy of the gigantic and powerful bird created by the genius of our captain! The fortress whose mighty walls none but he could scale! Perhaps even, he had discovered in the depths of some cavern, some subterranean passage by which he himself could quit the Great Eyrie, leaving the "Terror" safely sheltered within.

At last I saw it all! This explained the first letter sent me from the Great Eyrie itself with the threat of death. If we had been able to penetrate into this hollow, who knows if the secrets of the Master of the World might not have been discovered before he had been able to set them beyond our reach?

I stood there, motionless; my eyes fixed on that mounting eagle of stone, prey to a sudden, violent emotion. Whatsoever might be the consequences to myself, was it not my duty to destroy this machine, here and now, before it could resume its menacing flight of mastery across the world!

Steps approached behind me. I turned. The inventor stood by my side, and pausing looked me in the face.

I was unable to restrain myself; the words burst forth — "The Great Eyrie! The Great Eyrie!"

"Yes, Inspector Strock."

“And you! You are the Master of the World?”

“Of that world to which I have already proved myself to be the most powerful of men.”

“You!” I reiterated, stupefied with amazement.

“I,” responded he, drawing himself up in all his pride, “I, Robur — Robur, the Conqueror!”

CHAPTER 16

ROBUR, THE CONQUEROR

Robur, the Conqueror! This then was the likeness I had vaguely recalled. Some years before the portrait of this extraordinary man had been printed in all the American newspapers, under date of the thirteenth of June, the day after this personage had made his sensational appearance at the meeting of the Weldon Institute at Philadelphia.

I had noted the striking character of the portrait at the time; the square shoulders; the back like a regular trapezoid, its longer side formed by that geometrical shoulder line; the robust neck; the enormous spheroidal head. The eyes at the least emotion, burned with fire, while above them were the heavy, permanently contracted brows, which signified such energy. The hair was short and crisp, with a glitter as of metal in its lights. The huge breast rose and fell like a blacksmith’s forge; and the thighs, the arms and hands, were worthy of the mighty body. The narrow beard was the same also, with the smooth shaven cheeks which showed the powerful muscles of the jaw.

And this was Robur the Conqueror, who now stood before me, who revealed himself to me, hurling forth his name like a threat, within his own impenetrable fortress!

Let me recall briefly the facts which had previously drawn upon Robur the Conqueror the attention of the entire world. The Weldon Institute was a club devoted to aeronautics under the presidency of one of the chief personages of Philadelphia, commonly called Uncle Prudent. Its secretary was Mr. Phillip Evans. The members of the Institute were devoted to the theory of the “lighter than air” machine; and under their two leaders were constructing an enormous dirigible balloon, the “Go-Ahead.”

At a meeting in which they were discussing the details of the construction of their balloon, this unknown Robur had suddenly appeared and, ridiculing all their plans, had insisted that the only true solution of flight lay with the heavier than air machines, and that he had proven this by constructing one.

He was in this turn doubted and ridiculed by the members of the club, who called him in mockery Robur the Conqueror. In the tumult that followed, revolver shots were fired; and the intruder disappeared.

That same night he had by force abducted the president and the secretary of the club, and had taken them, much against their will upon a voyage in the wonderful air-ship, the “Albatross,” which he had constructed. He meant thus to prove to them beyond argument the correctness of his assertions. This ship, a hundred feet long, was upheld in the air by a large number of horizontal screws and was driven forward by vertical screws at its bow and stern. It was managed by a crew of at least half a dozen men, who seemed absolutely devoted to their leader, Robur.

After a voyage almost completely around the world, Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans managed to escape from the “Albatross” after a desperate struggle. They even managed to cause an explosion on the airship, destroying it, and involving the inventor and all his crew in a terrific fall from the sky into the Pacific ocean.

Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans then returned to Philadelphia. They had learned that the “Albatross” had been constructed on an unknown isle of the Pacific called Island X; but since the location of this hiding-place was wholly unknown, its discovery lay scarcely within the bounds of possibility. Moreover, the search seemed entirely unnecessary, as the vengeful prisoners were quite certain that they had destroyed their jailers.

Hence the two millionaires, restored to their homes, went calmly on with the construction of their own machine, the “Go-Ahead.” They hoped by means of it to soar once more into the regions they had traversed with Robur, and to prove to themselves that their lighter than air machine was at least the equal of the heavy “Albatross.” If they had not persisted, they would not have been true Americans.

On the twentieth of April in the following year the “Go-Ahead” was finished and the ascent was made, from Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. I myself was there with thousands of other spectators. We saw the huge balloon rise gracefully; and, thanks to its powerful screws, it maneuvered in every direction with surprising ease. Suddenly a cry was heard, a cry repeated from a thousand throats. Another airship had appeared in the distant skies and it now approached with marvelous rapidity. It was another “Albatross,” perhaps even superior to the first. Robur and his men had escaped death in the Pacific; and, burning for revenge, they had constructed a second airship in their secret Island X.

Like a gigantic bird of prey, the “Albatross” hurled itself upon the “Go-Ahead.” Doubtless, Robur, while avenging himself wished also to prove the immeasurable superiority of the heavier than air machines.

Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans defended themselves as best they could. Knowing that their balloon had nothing like the horizontal speed of the “Albatross,” they attempted to take advantage of their superior lightness and rise above her. The “Go-Ahead,” throwing out all her ballast, soared to a height of over twenty thousand feet. Yet even there the “Albatross” rose above her, and circled round her with ease.

Suddenly an explosion was heard. The enormous gas-bag of the “Go-Ahead,” expanding under the dilation of its contents at this great height, had finally burst.

Half-emptied, the balloon fell rapidly.

Then to our universal astonishment, the “Albatross” shot down after her rival, not to finish the work of destruction but to bring rescue. Yes! Robur, forgetting his vengeance, rejoined the sinking “Go-Ahead,” and his men lifted Mr. Prudent, Mr. Evans, and the aeronaut who accompanied them, onto the platform of his craft. Then the balloon, being at length entirely empty, fell to its destruction among the trees of Fairmount Park.

The public was overwhelmed with astonishment, with fear! Now that Robur had recaptured his prisoners, how would he avenge himself? Would they be carried away, this time, forever?

The “Albatross” continued to descend, as if to land in the clearing at Fairmount Park. But if it came within reach, would not the infuriated crowd throw themselves upon the airship, tearing both it and its inventor to pieces?

The “Albatross” descended within six feet of the ground. I remember well the general movement forward with which the crowd threatened to attack it. Then Robur’s voice rang out in words which even now I can repeat almost as he said them:

“Citizens of the United States, the president and the secretary of the Weldon Institute are again in my power. In holding them prisoners I would but be exercising my natural right of reprisal for the injuries they have done me. But the passion and resentment which have been roused both in them and you by the success of the ‘Albatross,’ show that the souls of men are not yet ready for the vast increase of power which the conquest of the air will bring to them. Uncle Prudent, Phillip Evans, you are free."

The three men rescued from the balloon leaped to the ground. The airship rose some thirty feet out of reach, and Robur recommenced:

"Citizens of the United States, the conquest of the air is made; but it shall not be given into your hands until the proper time. I leave, and I carry my secret with me. It will not be lost to humanity, but shall be entrusted to them when they have learned not to abuse it. Farewell, Citizens of the United States!"

Then the "Albatross" rose under the impulse of its mighty screws, and sped away amidst the hurrahs of the multitude.

I have ventured to remind my readers of this last scene somewhat in detail, because it seemed to reveal the state of mind of the remarkable personage who now stood before me. Apparently he had not then been animated by sentiments hostile to humanity. He was content to await the future; though his attitude undeniably revealed the immeasurable confidence which he had in his own genius, the immense pride which his almost superhuman powers had aroused within him.

It was not astonishing, moreover, that this haughtiness had little by little been aggravated to such a degree that he now presumed to enslave the entire world, as his public letter had suggested by its significant threats. His vehement mind had with time been roused to such over-excitement that he might easily be driven into the most violent excesses.

As to what had happened in the years since the last departure of the "Albatross," I could only partly reconstruct this even with my present knowledge. It had not sufficed the prodigious inventor to create a flying machine, perfect as that was! He had planned to construct a machine which could conquer all the elements at once. Probably in the workshops of Island X, a selected body of devoted workmen had constructed, one by one, the pieces of this marvelous machine, with its quadruple transformation. Then the second “Albatross” must have carried these pieces to the Great Eyrie, where they had been put together, within easier access of the world of men than the far-off island had permitted. The “Albatross” itself had apparently been destroyed, whether by accident or design, within the eyrie. The “Terror” had then made its appearance on the roads of the United States and in the neighboring waters. And I have told under what conditions, after having been vainly pursued across Lake Erie, this remarkable masterpiece had risen through the air carrying me a prisoner on board.

CHAPTER 17

IN THE NAME OF THE LAW

What was to be the issue of this remarkable adventure? Could I bring it to any denouement whatever, either sooner or later? Did not Robur hold the results wholly in his own hands? Probably I would never have such an opportunity for escape as had occurred to Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans amid the islands of the Pacific. I could only wait. And how long might the waiting last!

To be sure, my curiosity had been partly satisfied. But even now I knew only the answer to the problems of the Great Eyrie. Having at length penetrated its circle, I comprehended all the phenomena observed by the people of the Blueridge Mountains. I was assured that neither the country-folk throughout the region, nor the townfolk of Pleasant Garden and Morganton were in danger of volcanic eruptions or earthquakes. No subterranean forces whatever were battling within the bowels of the mountains. No crater had arisen in this corner of the Alleghanies. The Great Eyrie served merely as the retreat of Robur the Conqueror. This impenetrable hiding-place where he stored his materials and provisions, had without doubt been discovered by him during one of his aerial voyages in the “Albatross.” It was a retreat probably even more secure than that as yet undiscovered Island X in the Pacific.

This much I knew of him; but of this marvelous machine of his, of the secrets of its construction and propelling force, what did I really know? Admitting that this multiple mechanism was driven by electricity, and that this electricity was, as we knew it had been in the “Albatross,” extracted directly from the surrounding air by some new process, what were the details of its mechanism? I had not been permitted to see the engine; doubtless I should never see it.

On the question of my liberty I argued thus: Robur evidently intends to remain unknown. As to what he intends to do with his machine, I fear, recalling his letter, that the world must expect from it more of evil than of good. At any rate, the incognito which he has so carefully guarded in the past he must mean to preserve in the future. Now only one man can establish the identity of the Master of the World with Robur the Conqueror. This man is I his prisoner, I who have the right to arrest him, I, who ought to put my hand on his shoulder, saying, "In the Name of the Law — "

On the other hand, could I hope for a rescue from with out? Evidently not. The police authorities must know everything that had happened at Black Rock Creek. Mr. Ward, advised of all the incidents, would have reasoned on the matter as follows: when the "Terror" quitted the creek dragging me at the end of her hawser, I had either been drowned or, since my body had not been recovered, I had been taken on board the "Terror," and was in the hands of its commander.

In the first case, there was nothing more to do than to write "deceased" after the name of John Strock, chief inspector of the federal police in Washington.

In the second case, could my confreres hope ever to see me again? The two destroyers which had pursued the "Terror" into the Niagara River had stopped, perforce, when the current threatened to drag them over the falls. At that moment, night was closing in, and what could be thought on board the destroyers but that the "Terror" had been engulfed in the abyss of the cataract? It was scarce possible that our machine had been seen when, amid the shades of night, it rose above the Horseshoe Falls, or when it winged its way high above the mountains on its route to the Great Eyrie.

With regard to my own fate, should I resolve to question Robur? Would he consent even to appear to hear me? Was he not content with having hurled at me his name? Would not that name seem to him to answer everything?

That day wore away without bringing the least change to the situation. Robur and his men continued actively at work upon the machine, which apparently needed considerable repair. I concluded that they meant to start forth again very shortly, and to take me with them. It would, however, have been quite possible to leave me at the bottom of the Eyrie. There would have been no way by which I could have escaped, and there were provisions at hand sufficient to keep me alive for many days.

What I studied particularly during this period was the mental state of Robur. He seemed to me under the dominance of a continuous excitement. What was it that his ever-seething brain now meditated? What projects was he forming for the future? Toward what region would he now turn? Would he put in execution the menaces expressed in his letter — the menaces of a madman!

The night of that first day, I slept on a couch of dry grass in one of the grottoes of the Great Eyrie. Food was set for me in this grotto each succeeding day. On the second and third of August, the three men continued at their work scarcely once, however, exchanging any words, even in the midst of their labors. When the engines were all repaired to Robur’s satisfaction, the men began putting stores aboard their craft, as if expecting a long absence. Perhaps the “Terror” was about to traverse immense distances; perhaps even, the captain intended to regain his Island X, in the midst of the Pacific.

Sometimes I saw him wander about the Eyrie buried in thought, or he would stop and raise his arm toward heaven as if in defiance of that God with Whom he assumed to divide the empire of the world. Was not his overweening pride leading him toward insanity? An insanity which his two companions, hardly less excited than he, could do nothing to subdue! Had he not come to regard himself as mightier than the elements which he had so audaciously defied even when he possessed only an airship, the “Albatross?” And now, how much more powerful had he become, when earth, air and water combined to offer him an infinite field where none might follow him!

Hence I had much to fear from the future, even the most dread catastrophes. It was impossible for me to escape from the Great Eyrie, before being dragged into a new voyage. After that, how could I possibly get away while the “Terror” sped through the air or the ocean? My only chance must be when she crossed the land, and did so at some moderate speed. Surely a distant and feeble hope to cling to!

It will be recalled that after our arrival at the Great Eyrie, I had attempted to obtain some response from Robur, as to his purpose with me; but I had failed. On this last day I made another attempt.

In the afternoon I walked up and down before the large grotto where my captors were at work. Robur, standing at the entrance, followed me steadily with his eyes. Did he mean to address me?

I went up to him. “Captain,” said I, “I have already asked you a question, which you have not answered. I ask it again: What do you intend to do with me?”

We stood face to face scarce two steps apart. With arms folded, he glared at me, and I was terrified by his glance. Terrified, that is the word! The glance was not that of a sane man. Indeed, it seemed to reflect nothing whatever of humanity within.

I repeated my question in a more challenging tone. For an instant I thought that Robur would break his silence and burst forth.

“What do you intend to do with me? Will you set me free?”

Evidently my captor’s mind was obsessed by some other thought, from which I had only distracted him for a moment. He made again that gesture which I had already observed; he raised one defiant arm toward the zenith. It seemed to me as if some irresistible force drew him toward those upper zones of the sky, that he belonged no more to the earth, that he was destined to live in space; a perpetual dweller in the clouds.

Without answering me, without seeming to have understood me, Robur reentered the grotto.

How long this sojourn or rather relaxation of the “Terror” in the Great Eyrie was to last, I did not know. I saw, however, on the afternoon of this third of August that the repairs and the embarkation of stores were completed. The hold and lockers of our craft must have been completely crowded with the provisions taken from the grottoes of the Eyrie.

Then the chief of the two assistants, a man whom I now recognized as that John Turner who had been mate of the “Albatross,” began another labor. With the help of his companion, he dragged to the center of the hollow all that remained of their materials, empty cases, fragments of carpentry, peculiar pieces of wood which clearly must have belonged to the

“Albatross,” which had been sacrificed to this new and mightier engine of locomotion. Beneath this mass there lay a great quantity of dried grasses. The thought came to me that Robur was preparing to leave this retreat forever!

In fact, he could not be ignorant that the attention of the public was now keenly fixed upon the Great Eyrie; and that some further attempt was likely to be made to penetrate it. Must he not fear that some day or other the effort would be successful, and that men would end by invading his hiding-place? Did he not wish that they should find there no single evidence of his occupation?

The sun disappeared behind the crests of the Blueridge. His rays now lighted only the very summit of Black Dome towering in the northwest. Probably the “Terror” awaited only the night in order to begin her flight. The world did not yet know that the automobile and boat could also transform itself into a flying machine. Until now, it had never been seen in the air. And would not this fourth transformation be carefully concealed, until the day when the Master of the World chose to put into execution his insensate menaces?

Toward nine o’clock profound obscurity enwrapped the hollow. Not a star looked down on us. Heavy clouds driven by a keen eastern wind covered the entire sky. The passage of the “Terror” would be invisible, not only in our immediate neighborhood, but probably across all the American territory and even the adjoining seas.

At this moment Turner, approaching the huge stack in the middle of the eyrie, set fire to the grass beneath.

The whole mass flared up at once. From the midst of a dense smoke, the roaring flames rose to a height which towered above the walls of the Great Eyrie. Once more the good folk of Morganton and Pleasant Garden would believe that the crater had reopened. These flames would announce to them another volcanic upheaval.

I watched the conflagration. I heard the roarings and cracklings which filled the air. From the deck of the “Terror,” Robur watched it also.

Turner and his companion pushed back into the fire the fragments which the violence of the flames cast forth. Little by little the huge bonfire grew less. The flames sank down into a mere mass of burnt-out ashes; and once more all was silence and blackest night.

Suddenly I felt myself seized by the arm. Turner drew me toward the “Terror.” Resistance would have been useless. And moreover what could be worse than to be abandoned without resources in this prison whose walls I could not climb!

As soon as I set foot on the deck, Turner also embarked. His companion went forward to the look-out; Turner climbed down into the engine-room, lighted by electric bulbs, from which not a gleam escaped outside.

Robur himself was at the helm, the regulator within reach of his hand, so that he could control both our speed and our direction. As to me, I was forced to descend into my cabin, and the hatchway was fastened above me. During that night, as on that of our departure from Niagara, I was not allowed to watch the movements of the “Terror.”

Nevertheless, if I could see nothing of what was passing on board, I could hear the noises of the machinery. I had first the feeling that our craft, its bow slightly raised, lost contact with the earth. Some swerves and balancings in the air followed. Then the turbines underneath spun with prodigious rapidity, while the great wings beat with steady regularity.

Thus the “Terror,” probably forever, had left the Great Eyrie, and launched into the air as a ship launches into the waters. Our captain soared above the double chain of the Alleghanies, and without doubt he would remain in the upper zones of the air until he had left all the mountain region behind.

But in what direction would he turn? Would he pass in flight across the plains of North Carolina, seeking the Atlantic Ocean? Or would he head to the west to reach the Pacific? Perhaps he would seek, to the south, the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. When day came how should I recognize which sea we were upon, if the horizon of water and sky encircled us on every side?

Several hours passed; and how long they seemed to me! I made no effort to find forgetfulness in sleep. Wild and incoherent thoughts assailed me. I felt myself swept over worlds of imagination, as I was swept through space, by an aerial monster. At the speed which the “Terror” possessed, whither might I not be carried during this interminable night? I recalled the unbelievable voyage of the “Albatross,” of which the Weldon Institute had published an account, as described by Mr. Prudent and Mr. Evans. What Robur, the Conqueror, had done with his first airship, he could do even more readily with this quadruple machine.

At length the first rays of daylight brightened my cabin. Would I be permitted to go out now, to take my place upon the deck, as I had done upon Lake Erie?

I pushed upon the hatchway: it opened. I came half way out upon the deck.

All about was sky and sea. We floated in the air above an ocean, at a height which I judged to be about a thousand or twelve hundred feet. I could not see Robur, so he was probably in the engine room. Turner was at the helm, his companion on the look-out.

Now that I was upon the deck, I saw what I had not been able to see during our former nocturnal voyage, the action of those powerful wings which beat upon either side at the same time that the screws spun beneath the flanks of the machine.

By the position of the sun, as it slowly mounted from the horizon, I realized that we were advancing toward the south. Hence if this direction had not been changed during the night this was the Gulf of Mexico which lay beneath us.

A hot day was announced by the heavy livid clouds which clung to the horizon. These warnings of a coming storm did not escape the eye of Robur when toward eight o’clock he came on deck and took Turner’s place at the helm. Perhaps the cloud-bank recalled to him the waterspout in which the “Albatross” had so nearly been destroyed, or the mighty cyclone from which he had escaped only as if by a miracle above the Antarctic Sea.

It is true that the forces of Nature which had been too strong for the “Albatross,” might easily be evaded by this lighter and more versatile machine. It could abandon the sky where the elements were in battle and descend to the surface of the sea; and if the waves beat against it there too heavily, it could always find calm in the tranquil depths.

Doubtless, however, there were some signs by which Robur, who must be experienced in judging, decided that the storm would not burst until the next day.

He continued his flight; and in the afternoon, when we settled down upon the surface of the sea, there was not a sign of bad weather. The “Terror” is a sea bird, an albatross or frigate-bird, which can rest at will upon the waves! Only we have this advantage, that fatigue has never any hold upon this metal organism, driven by the inexhaustible electricity!

The whole vast ocean around us was empty. Not a sail nor a trail of smoke was visible even on the limits of the horizon. Hence our passage through the clouds had not been seen and signaled ahead.

The afternoon was not marked by any incident. The “Terror” advanced at easy speed. What her captain intended to do, I could not guess. If he continued in this direction, we should reach some one of the West Indies, or beyond that, at the end of the Gulf, the shore of Venezuela or Colombia. But when night came, perhaps we would again rise in the air to clear the mountainous barrier of Guatemala and Nicaragua, and take flight toward Island X, somewhere in the unknown regions of the Pacific.

Evening came. The sun sank in an horizon red as blood. The sea glistened around the “Terror,” which seemed to raise a shower of sparks in its passage. There was a storm at hand. Evidently our captain thought so. Instead of being allowed to remain on deck, I was compelled to re-enter my cabin, and the hatchway was closed above me.

In a few moments from the noises that followed, I knew that the machine was about to be submerged. In fact, five minutes later, we were moving peacefully forward through the ocean’s depths.

Thoroughly worn out, less by fatigue than by excitement and anxious thought, I fell into a profound sleep, natural this time and not provoked by any soporific drug. When I awoke, after a length of time which I could not reckon, the “Terror” had not yet returned to the surface of the sea.

This maneuver was executed a little later. The daylight pierced my porthole; and at the same moment I felt the pitching and tossing to which we were subjected by a heavy sea.

I was allowed to take my place once more outside the hatchway; where my first thought was for the weather. A storm was approaching from the northwest. Vivid lightning darted amid the dense, black clouds. Already we could hear the rumbling of thunder echoing continuously through space. I was surprised — more than surprised, frightened! — by the rapidity with which the storm rushed upward toward the zenith. Scarcely would a ship have had time to furl her sails to escape the shock of the blast, before it was upon her! The advance was as swift as it was terrible.

Suddenly the wind was unchained with unheard of violence, as if it had suddenly burst from this prison of cloud. In an instant a frightful sea uprose. The breaking waves, foaming along all their crests, swept with their full weight over the “Terror.” If I had not been wedged solidly against the rail, I should have been swept overboard!

There was but one thing to do — to change our machine again into a submarine. It would find security and calm at a few dozen feet beneath the surface. To continue to brave the fury of this outrageous sea was impossible.

Robur himself was on deck, and I awaited the order to return to my cabin — an order which was not given. There was not even any preparation for the plunge. With an eye more burning than ever, impassive before this frightful storm, the captain looked it full in the face, as if to defy it, knowing that he had nothing to fear.

It was imperative that the terror should plunge below without losing a moment. Yet Robur seemed to have no thought of doing so. No! He preserved his haughty attitude as of a man who in his immeasurable pride, believed himself above or beyond humanity.

Seeing him thus I asked myself with almost superstitious awe, if he were not indeed a demoniac being, escaped from some supernatural world.

A cry leaped from his mouth, and was heard amid the shrieks of the tempest and the howlings of the thunder. “I, Robur! Robur! — The master of the world!”

He made a gesture which Turner and his companions understood. It was a command; and without any hesitation these unhappy men, insane as their master, obeyed it.

The great wings shot out, and the airship rose as it had risen above the falls of Niagara. But if on that day it had escaped the might of the cataract, this time it was amidst the might of the hurricane that we attempted our insensate flight.

The air-ship soared upward into the heart of the sky, amid a thousand lightning flashes, surrounded and shaken by the bursts of thunder. It steered amid the blinding, darting lights, courting destruction at every instant.

Robur’s position and attitude did not change. With one hand on the helm, the other on the speed regulators while the great wings beat furiously, he headed his machine toward the very center of the storm, where the electric flashes were leaping from cloud to cloud.

I must throw myself upon this madman to prevent him from driving his machine into the very middle of this aerial furnace! I must compel him to descend, to seek beneath the waters, a safety which was no longer possible either upon the surface of the sea or in the sky! Beneath, we could wait until this frightful outburst of the elements was at an end!

Then amid this wild excitement my own passion, all my instincts of duty, arose within me! Yes, this was madness! Yet must I not arrest this criminal whom my country had outlawed, who threatened the entire world with his terrible invention? Must I not put my hand on his shoulder and summon him to surrender to justice! Was I or was I not Strock, chief inspector of the federal police? Forgetting where I was, one against three, uplifted in mid-sky above a howling ocean, I leaped toward the stern, and in a voice which rose above the tempest, I cried as I hurled myself upon Robur:

“In the name of the law, I — ”

Suddenly the “Terror” trembled as if from a violent shock. All her frame quivered, as the human frame quivers under the electric fluid. Struck by the lightning in the very middle of her powerful batteries, the air-ship spread out on all sides and went to pieces.

With her wings fallen, her screws broken, with bolt after bolt of the lightning darting amid her ruins, the “Terror” fell from the height of more than a thousand feet into the ocean beneath.

CHAPTER 18

THE OLD HOUSEKEEPER’S LAST COMMENT

When I came to myself after having been unconscious for many hours, a group of sailors whose care had restored me to life surrounded the door of a cabin in which I lay. By my pillow sat an officer who questioned me; and as my senses slowly returned, I answered to his questioning.

I told them everything. Yes, everything! And assuredly my listeners must have thought that they had upon their hands an unfortunate whose reason had not returned with his consciousness.

I was on board the steamer Ottawa, in the Gulf of Mexico, headed for the port of New Orleans. This ship, while flying before the same terrific thunder-storm which destroyed the “Terror,” had encountered some wreckage, among whose fragments was entangled my helpless body. Thus I found myself back among humankind once more, while Robur the Conqueror and his two companions had ended their adventurous careers in the waters of the Gulf. The Master of the World had disappeared forever, struck down by those thunder-bolts which he had dared to brave in the regions of their fullest power. He carried with him the secret of his extraordinary machine.

Five days later the Ottawa sighted the shores of Louisiana; and on the morning of the tenth of August she reached her port. After taking a warm leave of my rescuers, I set out at once by train for Washington, which more than once I had despaired of ever seeing again.

I went first of all to the bureau of police, meaning to make my earliest appearance before Mr. Ward.

What was the surprise, the stupefaction, and also the joy of my chief, when the door of his cabinet opened before me! Had he not every reason to believe, from the report of my companions, that I had perished in the waters of Lake Erie?

I informed him of all my experiences since I had disappeared, the pursuit of the destroyers on the lake, the soaring of the “Terror” from amid Niagara Falls, the halt within the crater of the Great Eyrie, and the catastrophe, during the storm, above the Gulf of Mexico.

He learned for the first time that the machine created by the genius of this Robur, could traverse space, as it did the earth and the sea.

In truth, did not the possession of so complete and marvelous a machine justify the name of Master of the World, which Robur had taken to himself? Certain it is that the comfort and even the lives of the public must have been forever in danger from him; and that all methods of defence must have been feeble and ineffective.

But the pride which I had seen rising bit by bit within the heart of this prodigious man had driven him to give equal battle to the most terrible of all the elements. It was a miracle that I had escaped safe and sound from that frightful catastrophe.

Mr. Ward could scarcely believe my story. “Well, my dear Strock,” said he at last, “you have come back; and that is the main thing. Next to this notorious Robur, you will be the man of the hour. I hope that your head will not be turned with vanity, like that of this crazy inventor!”

"No, Mr. Ward," I responded, "but you will agree with me that never was inquisitive man put to greater straits to satisfy his curiosity."

"I agree, Strock; and the mysteries of the Great Eyrie, the transformations of the "Terror," you have discovered them! But unfortunately, the still greater secrets of this Master of the World have perished with him."

The same evening the newspapers published an account of my adventures, the truthfulness of which could not be doubted. Then, as Mr. Ward had prophesied, I was the man of the hour.

One of the papers said, "Thanks to Inspector Strock the American police still lead the world. While others have accomplished their work, with more or less success, by land and by sea, the American police hurl themselves in pursuit of criminals through the depths of lakes and oceans and even through the sky."

Yet, in following, as I have told, in pursuit of the "Terror," had I done anything more than by the close of the present century will have become the regular duty of my successors?

It is easy to imagine what a welcome my old housekeeper gave me when I entered my house in Long Street. When my apparition — does not the word seem just — stood before her, I feared for a moment she would drop dead, poor woman! Then, after hearing my story, with eyes streaming with tears, she thanked Providence for having saved me from so many perils.

"Now, sir," said she, "now — was I wrong?"

"Wrong? About what?"

"In saying that the Great Eyrie was the home of the devil?"

“Nonsense; this Robur was not the devil!”

“Ah, well!” replied the old woman, “he was worthy of being so!”

A DRAMA IN LIVONIA

Though written by Verne in 1893, this novel was revised and first published in 1904. The story begins in Livonia, where a bank employee who is carrying money is murdered. The prime suspect is Professor Dimitri Nicolef, who was the only person present, besides the innkeeper German Kroff.

The novel was first translated in English in 1967 and so is only available in French in this edition due to copyright restrictions.

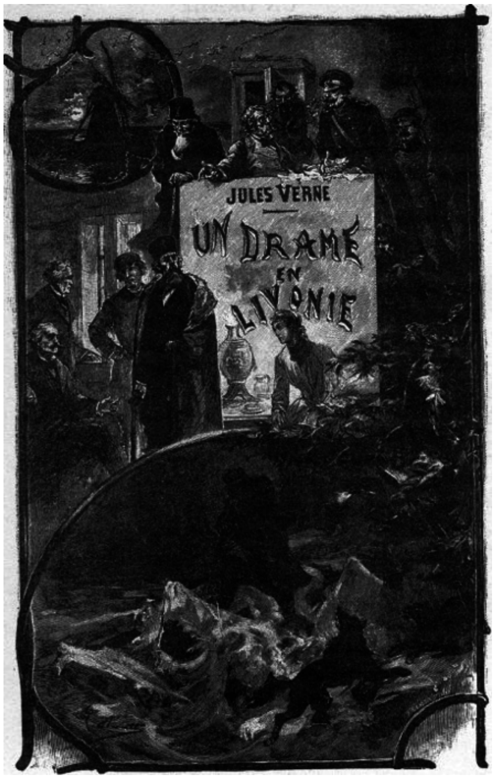
JULES VERNE
UN DRAME
EN
LIVONIE

The original French title page

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CHAPITRE I

Frontière franchie

Cet homme était seul dans la nuit. Il passait comme un loup entre les blocs de glace entassés par les froids d’un long hiver. Son pantalon doublé, son «khalot», sorte de cafetan rugueux, en poil de vache, sa casquette à oreillettes rabattues, ne le défendaient qu’imparfaitement des atteintes de l’âpre bise. De douloureuses gerçures fendaient ses lèvres et ses mains. La pince de l’onglée lui serrait l’extrémité des doigts. Il allait à travers une obscurité profonde, sous un ciel bas dont les nuages menaçaient de se résoudre en neige, bien que l’on fût déjà aux premiers jours d’avril, mais à la haute latitude du cinquante-huitième degré.

Il s’obstinait à ne pas s’arrêter. Après une halte, peut-être eût-il été incapable de reprendre sa marche.

Vers onze heures du soir, cet homme s’arrêta cependant. Ce ne fut pas parce que ses jambes lui refusaient le service, ni parce que le souffle lui manquait, ni parce qu’il succombait à la fatigue. Son énergie physique valait son énergie morale. Et, d’une voix forte, avec un inexprimable accent de patriotisme:

«Enfin… la frontière… s’écria-t-il, la frontière livonienne… la frontière du pays!»

Et de quel large geste il embrassa l’espace qui s’étendait devant lui à l’ouest! De quel pied assuré il frappa la surface blanche du sol comme pour y graver son empreinte au terme de cette dernière étape!

C’est qu’il venait de loin, de très loin – des milliers de verstes, entre tant de dangers bravés par son courage, surmontés par son intelligence, vaincus par sa vigueur, son endurance à toute épreuve.

Depuis deux mois en fuite, il se dirigeait ainsi vers le couchant, franchissant d’interminables steppes, se condamnant à de pénibles détours, afin d’éviter les postes de cosaques, traversant les rudes et sinueux défilés des hautes montagnes, s’aventurant jusqu’à ces provinces centrales de l’Empire russe où la police exerce une si minutieuse surveillance! Enfin, après avoir, par miracle, échappé aux rencontres où il eût peut-être laissé sa vie, il venait de s’écrier:

«La frontière livonienne… la frontière!»

Était-ce donc là le pays hospitalier, celui où l’absent revient après de longues années, n’ayant plus rien à craindre, la terre natale où la sécurité lui est assurée, où des amis l’attendent, où la famille va lui ouvrir ses bras, où une femme, des enfants, guettent son arrivée, à moins qu’il ne se soit fait une joie de les surprendre par son retour?…

Non! Ce pays, il ne ferait qu’y passer, en fugitif. Il essayerait de gagner le port de mer le plus rapproché. Il tâcherait de s’embarquer sans éveiller les soupçons. Il ne serait en sûreté que lorsque le littoral livonien aurait disparu derrière l’horizon.

«La frontière!» avait dit cet homme. Mais quelle était cette frontière, dont aucun cours d’eau ne fixait la limite, ni la saillie d’une chaîne, ni les massifs d’une forêt?… N’existait-il là qu’un tracé conventionnel, sans aucune détermination géographique?…

En effet, c’était la frontière qui sépare de l’Empire russe ces trois gouvernements de l’Esthonie, de la Livonie, de la Courlande, compris sous la dénomination de provinces Baltiques. Et, en cet endroit, cette ligne limitrophe partage du sud au nord la surface, solide l’hiver, liquide l’été, du lac Peipous.

Qui était ce fugitif, âgé de trente-quatre ans environ, haut de taille, d’une structure vigoureuse, épaules larges, torse puissant, membres solides, d’allure très déterminée? De son capuchon, rabattu sur sa tête, s’échappait une barbe blonde, bien fournie, et, lorsque la brise le soulevait, on aurait vu briller deux yeux vifs, dont le vent glacé n’éteignait pas le regard. Une ceinture à larges plis lui ceignait les reins, dissimulant une mince sacoche de cuir, qui contenait tout son argent, réduit à quelques roubles-papier, et dont le montant ne pouvait plus fournir aux exigences d’un voyage de quelque durée. Son fourniment de route se complétait d’un revolver à six coups, d’un couteau serré dans sa gaine de cuir, d’une musette contenant encore un reste de provisions, d’une gourde à demi pleine de schnaps, et d’un solide bâton. Musette, gourde et même sacoche, c’étaient, dans sa pensée, des objets moins précieux que ses armes, dont il était décidé à faire usage en cas d’attaque de fauves ou d’agents de la police.

Aussi ne voyageait-il que de nuit, avec la préoccupation constante d’atteindre, inaperçu, l’un des ports de la mer Baltique ou du golfe de Finlande.

Jusqu’alors, pendant un si dangereux cheminement, il avait pu passer, bien qu’il ne fût point nanti de ce «porodojna», délivré par l’autorité militaire, et dont la présentation doit être réclamée par les maîtres de poste de l’Empire moscovite. Mais en serait-il ainsi aux approches du littoral, où la surveillance est plus sévère?… Il n’était pas douteux que sa fuite eût été signalée, qu'appartenant à la catégorie des criminels de droit commun ou à celle des condamnés politiques, il dût être recherché avec le même soin, poursuivi avec le même acharnement. En vérité, si la fortune, jusqu'ici favorable, l'abandonnait à la frontière livonienne, ce serait échouer au port.

Le lac Peipous, long de cent vingt verstes environ, large de soixante, est fréquenté, pendant la saison chaude, par des pêcheurs qui exploitent ses eaux poissonneuses. La navigation s'y effectue au moyen de ces lourdes barques, rudimentaire assemblage de troncs d'arbres à peine équarris et de planches mal rabotées, nommées «struzzes», qui transportent, par les déversoirs naturels du lac, aux bourgades voisines et jusqu'au golfe de Riga des chargements de blé, de lin, de chanvre. Or, à cette époque de l'année, et sous cette latitude des printemps tardifs, le lac Peipous n'est pas praticable aux embarcations, et un convoi d'artillerie pourrait traverser sa surface durcie par les froids d'un rigoureux hiver. Ce n'était encore qu'une vaste plaine blanche, hérissée de blocs à sa partie centrale, embarrassée d'énormes embâcles à la naissance des fleuves.

Tel était l'effrayant désert que le fugitif franchissait d'un pied sûr, s'orientant sans peine. D'ailleurs il connaissait la région et marchait d'un pas rapide qui lui permettrait d'atteindre la rive occidentale avant le lever du jour.

«Il n'est que deux heures après minuit, se dit-il alors. Plus qu'une vingtaine de verstes à faire, et, là-bas, je ne serai pas gêné de trouver quelque hutte de pêcheur, une hutte abandonnée, où je me reposerai jusqu'au soir… Maintenant, je ne vais plus au hasard en ce pays!»

Et il semblait qu'il oubliât ses fatigues, qu'il sentît la confiance lui revenir. Si la malchance voulait que les agents reprissent la piste qu'ils avaient perdue, il saurait leur échapper.

Le fugitif, craignant d’être trahi par les premières lueurs de l’aube avant d’avoir traversé le lac Peipous, s’imposa un dernier effort.

Réconforté d’une bonne gorgée de schnaps qu’il puisa à sa gourde, il se lança dans une marche plus rapide, sans se permettre aucune halte. Aussi, vers quatre heures du matin, quelques maigres arbres, des pins blancs de givre, des bouquets de bouleaux et d’érables, lui apparurent-ils confusément à l’horizon.

Là était la terre ferme. Là, aussi, les périls seraient plus grands.

Si la frontière livonienne coupe le lac Peipous en sa partie médiane, ce n’est pas sur cette ligne, on le comprend, que sont établis les postes de douaniers. L’administration les a reportés à cette rive occidentale que les struzzes accostent pendant la saison d’été.

Le fugitif ne l’ignorait pas, et il ne put être étonné de voir une lumière briller vaguement, qui faisait comme une trouée jaunâtre au rideau des brumes.

«Ce feu bouge-t-il ou ne bouge-t-il pas?…» se demanda-t-il, en s’arrêtant près de l’un des blocs de glace qui se dressaient autour de lui.

Si le feu se déplaçait, c’est que c’était celui d’un falot porté à la main, probablement pour éclairer une ronde de douaniers en marche de nuit sur cette partie du Peipous, et il importait de ne point se trouver sur son passage.

Si ce feu ne se déplaçait pas, c’est qu’il éclairait l’intérieur de l’un des postes de la rive, car, à cette époque, les pêcheurs n’ont point encore réintégré leurs cabanes, attendant la débâcle qui ne commence guère avant la seconde quinzaine d'avril. La prudence conseillait donc de prendre direction à droite ou à gauche, afin de ne point se montrer en vue dudit poste.

Le fugitif obliqua vers la gauche. De ce côté, autant qu'on en pouvait juger à travers la brume qui se levait au souffle de la brise du matin, les arbres paraissaient plus serrés. En cas de poursuite, peut-être rencontrerait-il là d'abord quelque refuge, ensuite quelque facilité pour fuir.

L'homme avait fait une cinquantaine de pas lorsqu'un sonore «qui vive?» éclata sur sa droite.

Ce «qui vive?» prononcé avec un fort accent germanique, qui ressemblait au «verda» allemand, produisit la plus désagréable impression sur celui auquel il s'adressait. D'ailleurs, la langue allemande est la plus employée, sinon par les paysans, du moins par les citadins des provinces Baltiques.

Le fugitif ne répondit point au «qui vive?» Il se jeta à plat ventre sur la glace et fît bien. Une détonation retentit presque aussitôt, et, sans cette précaution, une balle l'eût frappé en pleine poitrine. Mais échapperait-il à la ronde des douaniers?… Ceux-ci l'avaient aperçu, nul doute à cet égard… Le cri et le coup de feu en témoignaient… Cependant, au milieu de cette obscurité brumeuse, ils pouvaient se croire dupes d'une illusion… Et, en effet, le fugitif eut tout lieu de l'admettre, d'après les propos qui furent échangés entre ces hommes, lorsqu'ils s'approchèrent.

Ils appartenaient à l'un des postes du lac Peipous, pauvres diables à l'uniforme passé du verdâtre au jaunâtre, et qui tendent si aisément la main aux pourboires, tant sont maigres les traitements que leur paye la «tamojna», la douane moscovite. Ils étaient deux, qui revenaient vers leur poste, lorsqu'ils avaient cru entrevoir une ombre entre les blocs.

«Tu es sûr d’avoir aperçu?… disait l’un.

— Oui, répondait l’autre, quelque contrebandier qui essayait de s’introduire en Livonie…

— Ce n’est pas le premier de cet hiver, ce ne sera pas le dernier, et j’imagine que celui-là court encore, puisque nous n’en trouvons plus trace!

— Eh! répliqua celui qui avait tiré, on ne peut guère viser au milieu d’une brume pareille, et je regrette de n’avoir pas mis notre homme à terre… Un contrebandier a toujours sa gourde pleine… Nous aurions partagé en bons camarades…

— Et il n’y a rien de tel pour vous refaire l’estomac!» ajouta l’autre!

Les douaniers continuèrent leurs recherches, plus affriolés, sans doute, à la pensée de se réchauffer d’une large lampée de schnaps ou de vodka qu’à celle d’opérer la capture d’un fraudeur. Ce fut peine inutile.

Dès que le fugitif les crut suffisamment éloignés, il reprit sa marche en se dirigeant vers la rive, et avant le lever du jour, il avait trouvé un abri sous le paillis d’une hutte déserte, à trois verstes dans le sud du poste.

Sans doute, la prudence aurait exigé qu’il veillât pendant cette journée, qu’il se tînt en observation, afin d’être en garde contre toute approche suspecte, qu’il fût à même de s’échapper, si les douaniers poussaient leurs recherches du côté de la hutte. Mais, rompu de fatigue, cet homme, si endurant qu’il fût, ne put résister au sommeil.

Étendu dans un coin, enveloppé de son cafetan, il s’endormit profondément, et la journée était avancée déjà lorsqu’il vint à se réveiller.

Il était alors trois heures de l'après-midi. Par bonheur, les douaniers n'avaient point quitté leur poste, s'en tenant à leur unique coup de fusil de la nuit, et très disposés à admettre qu'ils avaient fait erreur. Le fugitif ne pouvait que se féliciter d'avoir échappé à ce premier danger, au moment où il franchissait la frontière de son pays.

A peine réveillé, le besoin de dormir satisfait, il dut pourvoir au besoin de manger. Les quelques provisions que contenait sa musette suffiraient à lui assurer un repas ou deux. Mais il serait indispensable de les renouveler à la prochaine halte, ainsi que le schnaps de sa gourde, dont il épuisa les dernières gouttes.

«Des paysans ne m'ont jamais repoussé, se dit-il, et ceux de Livonie ne repousseront pas un Slave comme eux!»

Il avait raison, mais il ne fallait pas que la mauvaise fortune le conduisît chez quelque cabaretier d'origine germanique, comme il en est dans ces provinces. Ceux-là ne feraient point à un Russe l'accueil que celui-ci avait trouvé chez les paysans de l'Empire moscovite.

Au surplus, le fugitif n'en était pas à implorer la charité sur sa route. Il lui restait encore un certain nombre de roubles qui lui permettraient de subvenir à ses besoins jusqu'au terme du voyage, en Livonie du moins. Il est vrai, pour s'embarquer, comment ferait-il?… Il aviserait plus tard. L'important, l'essentiel, c'était d'atteindre, sans se laisser prendre, l'un des ports du littoral, sur le golfe de Finlande ou sur la mer Baltique, et c'est à ce but que devaient tendre tous ses efforts.

Dès que l'obscurité lui parut suffisante, – vers sept heures du soir, – ayant mis son revolver en état, le fugitif quitta la hutte. Le vent avait halé le sud pendant la journée. La température s'était relevée au zéro centigrade, et la couche de neige, piquée de points noirâtres, indiquait une tendance à fondre.

Toujours même aspect du pays. Peu élevé dans sa partie centrale, il ne présente de tumescences de quelque importance que dans le nord-ouest, et leur altitude ne dépasse pas de cent à cent cinquante mètres. Ces longues plaines n'offrent aucune difficulté au cheminement d'un piéton, à moins que le dégel ne rende le sol momentanément impraticable, et peut-être y avait-il lieu de le craindre.

Donc, il importait de gagner le port, et, si la débâcle arrivait prématurément, ce serait tant mieux, puisque la navigation redeviendrait possible.

Quinze verstes environ séparent le Peipous de la bourgade d'Ecks, que le fugitif atteignit dès six heures du matin; mais il prit garde de l'éviter. C'eût été s'exposer, de la part des agents de la police, à une demande de papiers qui eût été très embarrassante. Ce n'était pas à cette bourgade qu'il convenait de chercher refuge. Cette journée, il la passa, à une verste, dans une masure abandonnée, d'où il repartit à six heures du soir, en inclinant vers le sud-ouest, dans la direction de la rivière d'Embach, qu'il rencontra après une étape de onze verstes, – rivière qui mêle ses eaux à celles du lac Watzjero à sa pointe septentrionale.

En cet endroit, au lieu de prendre à travers les bois d'aulnes et d'érables massés sur les rives, le fugitif trouva plus prudent de cheminer sur le lac, dont la solidité n'était pas encore compromise.

Une assez grosse pluie, provenant de nuages élevés, tombait alors et activait la dissolution de la couche de neige. Les symptômes d'un prochain dégel se manifestaient sérieusement. Le jour n'était pas éloigné où se produirait la dislocation des glaces à la surface des cours d'eau de la région.

Le fugitif marchait d’un pas rapide, désireux d’atteindre la pointe du lac avant le retour de l’aube. Vingt-cinq verstes à enlever, rude étape pour un homme déjà fatigué, et la plus longue qu’il se fût encore imposée, puisqu’elle aurait été, cette nuit-là, d’une cinquantaine de verstes – soit une douzaine de lieues métriques.

Les dix heures de repos de la journée suivante auraient été bien gagnées.

C’était, au total, une regrettable circonstance que le temps se fût mis à la pluie. Un froid sec eût rendu la marche plus aisée et plus rapide. Il est vrai, sur cette glace unie de l’Embach, le pied trouvait un point d’appui que ne lui eût pas offert le chemin des berges, déjà tout empli de la boue du dégel. Mais des craquements sourds, quelques fissures, indiquaient une dislocation prochaine et une débâcle des glaçons. De là, autre difficulté pour un piéton, s’il avait une rivière à traverser, à moins qu’il ne le fit à la nage. Pour toutes ces raisons il fallait, au besoin, doubler les étapes.

Il le savait bien, cet homme, et il déployait une énergie surhumaine. Son cafetan, étroitement serré, le garantissait des rafales. Ses bottes en bon état, car il les avait récemment renouvelées, renforcées de gros clous à la semelle, assuraient son pas sur ce sol glissant. Et puis, dans cette obscurité profonde, il n’avait point à s’orienter, puisque l’Embach le conduisait directement à son but.

A trois heures du matin, vingt verstes avaient été enlevées. Pendant les deux heures qui précéderaient l’aube, le lieu de halte serait atteint. Cette fois encore, nulle nécessité de se risquer en quelque village, de chercher abri en quelque auberge, puisque les provisions suffiraient pour une journée. N’importe quel refuge, pourvu que la sécurité y fût assurée jusqu’au soir. Sous ces bois qui enveloppent la pointe septentrionale du Watzjero, on trouve des cabanes de bûcherons inhabitées durant l’hiver. Avec le peu de charbon qu’elles renferment, avec le bois mort tombé des arbres, il est facile de se procurer une bonne flambée qui réchauffe, on peut le dire, le corps et l’âme, et il n’est pas à craindre que la fumée d’un foyer trahisse au sein de ces vastes solitudes.

Certes, cet hiver avait été dur; mais, sa rigueur à part, combien il avait favorisé la fuite du fugitif depuis son arrivée sur le sol de l’Empire!

Et, d’ailleurs, l’hiver n’est-il pas l’ami des Russes? selon le dicton slave, et ne sont-ils pas assurés de sa rude amitié?…

A cet instant, un hurlement se fit entendre du côté de la berge gauche de l’Embach. Il n’y avait pas à s’y tromper, c’était le hurlement d’un fauve à quelques centaines de pas. L’animal s’approchait-il ou s’éloignait-il?… L’obscurité ne permettait pas de le reconnaître.

L’homme s’arrêta un instant, prêtant l’oreille. Il lui importait de se tenir sur ses gardes, de ne pas se laisser surprendre.

Le hurlement se reproduisit à plusieurs reprises, plus intense. D’autres lui répondirent.

Nul doute, une bande de fauves remontait la rive de l’Embach, et il était possible qu’ils eussent senti la présence d’une créature humaine.

Or, voici que ce lugubre concert éclata avec une telle violence que le fugitif se crut sur le point d’être attaqué.

«Ce sont des loups, se répétait-il, et, maintenant, la bande n’est pas loin.»

Le danger était extrême. Affamés à la suite d’un rigoureux hiver, ces fauves sont redoutables. Un loup seul, il n’y a pas lieu de s’inquiéter, à la condition d’être vigoureux et de sang-froid, n’eût-on qu’un bâton à la main. Mais une demi-douzaine de ces animaux, il est difficile de les repousser, eût-on un revolver à sa ceinture, à moins que tous les coups ne portent.

Trouver un endroit où se mettre pour éviter l’agression, il n’y fallait pas songer. Les rives de l’Embach étaient basses et dénudées. Pas un arbre dont on aurait pu escalader les branches. La bande ne devait pas être à cinquante pas, soit qu’elle se fût lancée sur la glace, soit qu’elle bondît à travers le steppe. Il n’y avait d’autre parti à prendre que de fuir à toutes jambes, sans grand espoir de distancer ces carnassiers, quitte à s’arrêter, à se retourner pour faire face à leur attaque. C’est ce que fit l’homme, mais bientôt il sentit les fauves sur ses talons. Des rugissements éclatèrent à moins de vingt pas derrière lui. Il s’arrêta, et il lui sembla que l’ombre était illuminée de points brillants, de braises ardentes.

C’étaient les yeux des loups, – de ces loups amaigris, efflanqués, rendus féroces par un long jeûne, avides de cette proie qu’ils sentaient à la portée de leurs dents.

Le fugitif se retourna, son revolver d’une main, son bâton de l’autre. Mieux valait ne pas faire feu si le bâton pouvait suffire, et, en cas que quelques agents rôdassent dans le voisinage, ne pas attirer leur attention.

L’homme s’était solidement campé, après avoir dégagé ses bras des plis du cafetan. Un rapide moulinet arrêta d’abord ceux des loups qui le serraient de près. Et, l’un d’eux lui ayant sauté à la gorge, un coup de bâton retendit sur le sol.

Mais, au nombre d’une demi-douzaine, ils étaient trop pour prendre peur, trop pour qu’il fût possible de les exterminer les uns après les autres sans faire usage du revolver. D’ailleurs, après un second coup assené sur la tête d’un second fauve, le bâton se brisa dans la main qui le maniait si terriblement.

L’homme se remit en fuite, et, les loups s’étant lancés sur ses pas, s’arrêtant de nouveau il fit feu quatre fois.

Deux bêtes, mortellement blessées, tombèrent sur la glace teinte de leur sang; mais les dernières balles se perdirent, les deux autres loups s’étant écartés d’un bond à vingt pas.

Le fugitif n’avait pas le temps de recharger son revolver. La bande revenait déjà et se fût précipitée sur lui. Au bout de deux cents pas, les fauves étaient sur ses talons, mordant les basques de son cafetan, dont les morceaux déchirés leur restaient dans la gueule. Il sentait leur haleine brûlante. S’il faisait un faux pas, c’était fait de lui. Il ne se relèverait plus, il serait déchiré par les bêtes furieuses.

Sa dernière heure était-elle donc arrivée?… Tant d’épreuves, tant de fatigues, tant de dangers pour rentrer sur le sol natal, et ne pas même y laisser quelques ossements!

Enfin, l’extrémité du lac apparut avec les premières lueurs de l’aube. La pluie avait cessé, toute la campagne était enveloppée d’une légère brume. Les loups se jetèrent sur leur victime qui les repoussait à coups de crosse, auxquels ils répondaient à coups de dents et de griffes.

Soudain, l’homme se heurta contre une échelle… Où s’appuyait cette échelle?… Peu importait. S’il parvenait à en gravir les échelons, les fauves ne pourraient s'y hisser après lui, et il serait momentanément en sûreté.

Cette échelle se dressait un peu obliquement au sol, et, circonstance bizarre, son pied ne posait pas à terre, comme si elle eût été suspendue, et le brouillard empêchait de voir où elle prenait son point d'appui supérieur.

Le fugitif en saisit les montants et franchit les échelons inférieurs, au moment où les loups se jetaient une dernière fois sur lui. Des coups de crocs portèrent sur ses bottes, dont le cuir fut déchiré.

Cependant, l'échelle craquait sous le poids de l'homme, elle oscillait sous ses efforts. Allait-elle donc s'abattre? Cette fois, alors, il serait déchiré, il serait dévoré vivant…

L'échelle résista, et il put en atteindre les derniers échelons avec l'agilité d'un gabier sur les enfléchures des haubans.

Là faisait saillie l'extrémité d'une poutre, une sorte de gros moyeu au bout duquel il était possible de s'achevaler.

L'homme était hors de l'atteinte des loups, qui bondissaient au pied de l'échelle et s'épuisèrent en affreux hurlements.

CHAPITRE II

Slave pour Slave

Le fugitif était momentanément en sûreté. Des loups ne peuvent grimper comme l’eussent fait des ours, qui sont non moins nombreux que redoutables dans les forêts livoniennes. Mais il ne fallait pas être contraint de descendre avant que les derniers fauves n’eussent disparu, ce qui arriverait certainement au lever du soleil.

Et, d’abord, pourquoi cette échelle se trouvait-elle disposée en cet endroit, et où s’appuyait son extrémité supérieure?…

C’était, on l’a dit, au moyeu d’une roue, sur lequel s’implantaient trois autres échelles de même sorte – en réalité, les quatre ailes d’un moulin élevé sur un petit tertre, non loin de l’endroit où l’Embach s’alimente des eaux du lac. Par une heureuse chance, ce moulin ne fonctionnait pas au moment où le fugitif avait pu s’accrocher à l’une de ses ailes.

Restait la possibilité que l’appareil se mît en mouvement dès la pointe du jour, si la brise s’accentuait. Dans ce cas, il eût été difficile de se maintenir sur le moyeu en état de giration. Et, d’ailleurs, le meunier, alors qu’il serait venu décarguer ses toiles et manœuvrer le levier extérieur, eût aperçu cet homme achevalé au croisement des ailes. Mais le fugitif pouvait-il se risquer à descendre?… Les loups se tenaient toujours là, au pied du tertre, poussant des rugissements qui ne tarderaient pas à donner l’éveil à quelques maisons voisines!…

D’où un seul parti à prendre: s’introduire à l’intérieur du moulin, s’y réfugier pour toute la journée, si le meunier n’y demeurait pas, – supposition assez plausible, – et attendre le soir avant de se remettre en route.

Donc l’homme, se glissant jusqu’au toit, gagna la lucarne à travers laquelle s’engageait le levier de mise en train, dont la tige pendait jusqu’au sol.

Le moulin, ainsi qu’il est habituel dans le pays, se coiffait d’une sorte de carène renversée, ou plutôt d’une sorte de casquette sans visière. Cette toiture roulait sur une série de galets intérieurs, qui permettaient d’orienter l’appareil selon la direction du vent. Il suit de là que la bâtisse principale, en bois, était fixée au sol au lieu de porter sur un pivot central comme la plupart des moulins de la Hollande, et l’on y accédait par deux portes ouvertes à l’opposé l’une de l’autre.

Ayant atteint la lucarne, le fugitif put s’introduire par cette étroite ouverture sans trop de peine ni trop de bruit. A l’intérieur s’évidait une espèce de galetas, traversé horizontalement par l’arbre de couche, lequel se raccordait au moyen d’un engrenage à la tige verticale de la meule, installée dans l’étage inférieur du moulin.

Le silence était aussi profond que l’obscurité. Qu’il n’y eût personne à cette heure au rez-de-chaussée, cela paraissait certain. Un raide escalier, contournant la paroi de madriers, établissait communication avec ce rez-de-chaussée qui avait le sol du tertre pour base. Mais, par prudence, mieux valait ne point se hasarder hors du galetas. Manger d’abord, dormir ensuite, c’étaient là deux besoins impérieux auxquels le fugitif n’aurait pu se soustraire plus longtemps.

Il épuisa donc sa réserve de provisions, ce qui le mettait dans la nécessité de les renouveler pendant sa prochaine étape. Où et comment?… Il aviserait.

Vers sept heures et demie, la brume s'étant levée, il devenait facile de reconnaître les abords du moulin. Que voyait-on en se penchant hors de la lucarne: à droite, une plaine tout enflaquée par la fonte des neiges, sillonnée d'une interminable route, qui se dessinait vers l'ouest, avec ses troncs d'arbres juxtaposés, car elle traversait un marécage, au-dessus duquel voletaient des bandes d'oiseaux aquatiques. Vers la gauche s'étendait le lac, glacé à sa surface, sauf au point où s'amorçait la rivière d'Embach.

Ça et là se dressaient quelques pins et sapins au feuillage sombre, qui contrastaient avec les érables et les aulnes réduits à l'état de squelettes.

Le fugitif observa d'abord que les loups, dont il n'entendait plus les hurlements depuis une heure, avaient quitté la place.

«Bien, se dit-il, mais les douaniers et les agents de la police sont plus à redouter que ces fauves!… Aux approches du littoral, il sera plus difficile de les dépister… Je tombe de sommeil… Pourtant, avant de m'endormir, il me faut reconnaître comment fuir en cas d'alerte.»

La pluie avait cessé. La température s'était relevée de quelques degrés, le vent ayant haie l'ouest. Or, cette brise, qui soufflait assez vivement, ne déciderait-elle pas le meunier à remettre son moulin au travail?…

De cette même lucarne, on pouvait aussi apercevoir, à une demi-verste, diverses maisonnettes isolées, aux chaumes blancs par places, et d'où s'échappaient de minces fumées matinales.

Là, sans doute, demeurait le propriétaire du moulin, et il y aurait lieu de surveiller ce hameau.

Le fugitif se hasarda alors sur les échelons du petit escalier intérieur, et descendit jusqu'au bâti qui supportait la meule. Des sacs de blé étaient rangés au-dessous. Donc, le moulin n'était pas abandonné, et il fonctionnait lorsque la brise était suffisante pour actionner ses ailes. Par suite, d'un instant à l'autre, le meunier ne viendrait-il pas les orienter?…

En ces conditions, il eût été imprudent de demeurer à l'étage inférieur, et mieux valait regagner le galetas pour y prendre quelques heures de sommeil. En effet, on aurait risqué d'être surpris. Les deux portes qui donnaient accès dans le moulin étaient fermées au moyen d'un simple loquet, et n'importe qui, en quête d'un refuge, si la pluie recommençait, pouvait chercher abri dans ce moulin. D'ailleurs, le vent fraîchissait, et le meunier ne tarderait pas à venir.

L'homme se hissa par l'escalier de bois, en jetant un dernier regard par les meurtrières de la paroi, atteignit le galetas, et, la fatigue l'emportant, il tomba dans un profond sommeil.

Quelle heure était-il lorsqu'il se réveilla?… Quatre heures environ. Il faisait grand jour. Cependant le moulin était toujours au repos.

Une heureuse chance voulut qu'en se redressant, bien qu'à demi engourdi par le froid, le fugitif fût ménager de ses mouvements en s'étirant les membres, ce qui le sauva d'un grand danger.

En effet, son oreille perçut tout d'abord quelques paroles échangées à l'étage inférieur, plusieurs personnes causant non sans une certaine animation. Ces personnes étaient entrées une demi-heure avant qu'il ne se réveillât, et il eût été découvert si elles étaient montées au galetas.

L'homme se garda de remuer.

Étendu sur le plancher, il prêta l'oreille à ce qui se disait au-dessous de lui.

Dès les premiers mots, la qualité des individus qui se trouvaient là lui fut révélée. Il comprit aussitôt à quel péril il aurait échappé, s'il y échappait, c'est-à-dire s'il parvenait à quitter le moulin, soit avant, soit après le départ des gens qui s'entretenaient avec le meunier.

C'étaient trois agents de la police, un brigadier et deux de ses acolytes.

A cette époque, la russification de l'administration des provinces Baltiques commençait seulement à écarter les éléments germaniques au profit des éléments slaves. Nombre de policiers étaient encore allemands d'origine. Parmi eux se distinguait le brigadier Eck, très enclin dans ses fonctions à moins de sévérité envers ses concitoyens de même race qu'envers les Russes de la Livonie. Très zélé, d'ailleurs, très perspicace, très bien noté de ses chefs, il mettait un véritable acharnement à la poursuite des affaires criminelles confiées à ses soins, s'enorgueillissant d'un succès, ne pouvant accepter une défaite. Alors engagé dans une importante recherche, il y déployait d'autant plus d'énergie et de dextérité qu'il s'agissait de reprendre un évadé de Sibérie, livonien moscovite d'origine…

Pendant le sommeil du fugitif, le meunier était venu au moulin, avec la pensée de consacrer toute cette journée au travail. Vers neuf heures, la brise lui avait paru favorable, et, si les ailes eussent été mises en mouvement, le dormeur se fût réveillé au premier bruit. Mais, sous l'influence d'une pluie fine, le vent ne fraîchit pas.

Or, le meunier se tenait sur le pas de sa porte, lorsque Eck et ses agents l'aperçurent et entrèrent dans le moulin afin de lui demander quelques renseignements.

En cet instant, Eck disait:

«Tu n'as pas connaissance qu'un homme de trente à trente-cinq ans environ se soit montré hier à la pointe du lac?…

— Aucunement, répondit le meunier. Il ne vient pas deux personnes par jour à cette époque dans notre hameau… S'agit-il d'un étranger?…

— Un étranger?… non, un Russe, et un Russe des provinces Baltiques.

— Ah! un Russe?… répéta le meunier.

— Oui… un coquin, dont la capture me fera honneur!»

En effet, pour un policier, un fugitif est toujours un coquin, qu'il ait été condamné pour crime politique ou pour crime de droit commun.

«Et vous êtes à sa poursuite?… demanda le meunier.

— Depuis vingt-quatre heures qu'il a été signalé à la frontière des provinces.

— Sait-on où il va?… reprit le meunier, pas mal curieux de sa nature.

— Tu peux t'en douter, répondit Eck. Il va là où il pourra s'embarquer dès que la mer sera libre, – sans doute à Revel, de préférence à Riga.»

Le brigadier raisonnait juste en indiquant cette ville, l'ancien Kolyvan des Russes, un point où se concentrent les communications maritimes du nord de l’Empire. Cette cité était en relation directe avec Pétersbourg par le railway du littoral de la Courlande. Un fugitif avait donc intérêt à gagner Revel, qui est en même temps une station balnéaire, ou, sinon Revel, du moins Balliski, son annexe, située à la pointe du golfe, puisque, par sa position, elle est délivrée la première de l’encombrement des glaces.

Il est vrai, Revel, l’une des plus vieilles cités hanséatiques, peuplée d’un tiers d’Allemands et de deux tiers d’Esthes, les vrais originaires de l’Esthonie, se trouvait à cent quarante verstes du moulin, et ce trajet exigeait quatre longues étapes.

«Pourquoi Revel?… Ce coquin ferait mieux de se diriger sur Pernau!» observa le meunier.

En effet, dans cette direction, il n’y aurait eu qu’une centaine de verstes à franchir. Quant à Riga, trop éloignée, du double de Pernau, ce n’était pas sur cette route qu’il eût convenu de continuer les recherches.

Il va sans dire que le fugitif, immobile au fond du galetas, retenant sa respiration, l’oreille tendue, écoutait ces propos, dont il saurait faire son profit.

«Oui, répondit le brigadier, il y a bien Pernau, et les escouades de Fallen ont été prévenues de surveiller le pays; mais tout porte à croire que notre évadé marche sur Revel, où un embarquement sera plus prompt.»

C’était l’avis du major Verder, qui dirigeait alors la police de la province de Livonie sous les ordres du colonel Raguenof. Aussi Eck avait-il été renseigné dans ce sens.

Si le colonel Raguenof, slave de naissance, ne partageait pas les antipathies et les sympathies du major Verder, d'origine germanique, celui-ci s'entendait parfaitement, sous ce rapport, avec son subordonné, le brigadier Eck.

Il est vrai, pour les départager, les modérer, les contenir, il y avait au-dessus d'eux le général Gorko, gouverneur des provinces Baltiques.

Ce haut personnage s'inspirait d'ailleurs des idées du gouvernement, qui tendait, ainsi qu'il a été mentionné, à russifier graduellement l'administration des provinces.

La conversation se prolongea quelques minutes encore. Le brigadier dépeignit le fugitif, tel que le portait son signalement, envoyé aux diverses escouades de la région: taille supérieure à la moyenne, constitution robuste, trente-cinq ans d'âge, toute sa barbe blonde et largement fournie, épais cafetan brunâtre, au moment du moins où il avait passé la frontière.

«Pour la seconde fois, répondit le meunier, j'affirme que cet homme-là, – un Russe, avez-vous dit?…

— Oui… un Russe!

— Eh bien, j'affirme qu'il ne s'est point montré dans notre hameau, et dans aucune maison vous ne trouveriez d'indices à son sujet…

— Tu sais, dit le brigadier, que quiconque lui donnerait asile risquerait d'être mis en arrestation et traité comme un de ses complices?…

— Que le Père nous protège, je le sais et ne m'y risquerai pas!

— Tu as raison, et il est prudent, ajouta Eck, de ne point avoir affaire au major Verder.

— On s’en gardera bien, brigadier.»

Là-dessus, Eck se prépara à sortir en répétant que ses hommes et lui continueraient à battre le pays entre Pernau et Revel, les escouades de police ayant reçu ordre de se tenir en communication.

«En attendant, dit le meunier, voici le vent qui repique au sud-ouest. Il va fraîchir. Vos hommes voudraient-ils me donner un coup de main pour orienter mes ailes?… Ça m’éviterait de revenir au hameau, et je resterai ici toute la nuit.»

Eck se prêta volontiers à la manœuvre. Ses agents sortirent par la porte opposée, et, saisissant le grand levier de la toiture, ils la firent tourner sur les galets, de manière à placer l’appareil moteur dans le lit du vent. Les toiles développées, le moulin fit entendre son tic tac régulier après le déclenchement de l’engrenage.

Le brigadier et ses agents partirent alors en direction du nord-ouest.

Le fugitif n’avait rien perdu de cette conversation. Ce qu’il devait en retenir, c’est que de plus graves dangers le menaçaient au terme de son aventureux voyage. Il était signalé… La police battait la campagne… Les escouades devaient agir de concert pour s’emparer de sa personne… Convenait-il qu’il essayât de gagner Revel?… Non, pensa-t-il. Mieux valait se diriger sur Pernau, où il arriverait plus vite… La débâcle, attendu le relèvement de la température, ne devait plus tarder, ni dans la mer Baltique, ni dans le golfe de Finlande.

Cette résolution prise, il fallait quitter le moulin dès que l’obscurité rendrait la fuite possible.

Et, tout d’abord, comment le faire sans donner l’éveil au meunier? Sa machine fonctionnant, sous la brise établie d’une façon durable, il était installé là pour la nuit. Inutile de songer à gagner l’étage inférieur, à s’échapper par l’une ou l’autre porte…

Serait-il possible de se glisser à travers la lucarne, de ramper jusqu’au grand levier qui servait à manœuvrer la toiture, et de descendre ainsi jusqu’à terre?…

C’était à tenter pour un homme adroit et vigoureux, bien que l’arbre des ailes fût en mouvement et qu’il y eût danger d’être saisi par les dents de l’engrenage. On risquait d’être écrasé, mais, ce risque, il était à courir.

Il s’en fallait d’une heure que l’obscurité fût suffisante. Et si, auparavant, le meunier montait au galetas, si quelque circonstance l’y appelait, le fugitif pouvait-il espérer de ne point être aperçu?… Non, s’il faisait jour encore, et non, s’il faisait déjà nuit, car le meunier se serait muni d’un fanal.

Eh bien, si le meunier montait au galetas et découvrait l’homme qui s’y était caché, cet homme se jetterait sur lui, le maîtriserait, le bâillonnerait. Si le meunier résistait, s’il essayait de se défendre, si ses cris pouvaient mettre le hameau en éveil, ce serait malheur à lui… Le couteau du fugitif lui ferait rentrer ses cris dans la gorge. Celui-ci ne serait pas venu de si loin, à travers tant de dangers, pour reculer devant n’importe quel moyen de recouvrer sa liberté.

Toutefois il conservait l’espoir de ne point être réduit à cette extrémité de verser le sang pour se remettre en route… Pourquoi le meunier entrerait-il dans ce galetas?… N’avait-il pas à surveiller ses meules, tournant à toute vitesse sous l’action des grandes ailes?…

Une heure s’écoula au milieu des tic tac de l’arbre, des grincements de l’engrenage, des sifflements de la brise; des gémissements du grain écrasé. L’ombre commençait à noyer le crépuscule, toujours long sous ces hautes latitudes. A l’intérieur du galetas, l’obscurité était complète. Le moment approchait de prendre ses dispositions. L’étape de cette nuit serait fatigante; elle ne comprendrait pas moins d’une quarantaine de verstes, et il importait de ne pas différer le départ, du moment qu’il serait possible.

Le fugitif s’assura que le couteau qu’il portait à la ceinture jouait facilement dans sa gaine. Il introduisit six cartouches dans le barillet de son revolver en remplacement de celles qu’il avait brûlées contre les loups.

Restait la difficulté, assez grande d’ailleurs, de passer à travers la lucarne, sans être accroché par l’arbre tournant, dont l’extrémité s’appuyait au bâti du mécanisme, à l’orifice même de cette lucarne. Cela fait, en se retenant aux saillies de la toiture, on pouvait rejoindre le grand levier sans trop de peine.

Le fugitif se glissait vers la lucarne, lorsqu’un bruit, assez perceptible au milieu du train de la meule et des engrenages, se fit entendre.

C’était le bruit d’un pas pesant sous lequel criaient les marches de l’escalier. Le meunier montait vers le galetas, un fanal à la main.

Il apparut, en effet, au moment où le fugitif, ramassé sur lui-même, revolver au poing, s’apprêtait à s’élancer sur lui.

Mais, dès que le meunier eut dépassé à mi-corps le niveau du plancher, il dit:

«Petit père, voici l'instant de partir… Ne tarde pas… Descends… la porte est ouverte.»

Stupéfait, le fugitif ne sut que répondre. Le brave meunier savait donc qu'il était là?… Il l'avait donc vu se réfugier dans le moulin?… Oui, pendant son sommeil, il était monté au galetas, il l'avait vu et il s'était gardé de le réveiller. N'était-ce pas un Russe comme lui?… Cela se reconnaît entre Slaves à l'expression du visage… Il avait compris que la police livonienne traquait cet homme… Pourquoi?… Il ne voulait pas même le lui demander, pas plus qu'il n'aurait voulu le livrer au brigadier Eck et à ses agents.

«Descends», reprit-il d'une voix douce.

Le cœur battant sous le flux de l'émotion, le fugitif gagna l'étage inférieur, dont l'une des portes était ouverte.

«Voici quelques provisions, dit le meunier, en bourrant de pain et de viande la musette du fugitif… J'ai vu qu'elle était vide, ainsi que ta gourde… Remplis-la, et pars…

— Mais… si la police apprend…

— Tâche de la dépister, et ne t'inquiète pas de moi… Je ne te demande pas qui tu es… Je ne sais que ceci: c'est que tu es slave, et jamais un Slave ne livrera un Slave à des policiers allemands.

— Merci… merci! s'écria le fugitif.

— Va, petit père!… Que Dieu te conduise et te pardonne, si tu as à te faire pardonner?»

La nuit était très noire, la route qui passait au pied du tertre absolument déserte. Le fugitif adressa au meunier un dernier geste d'adieu et disparut.

Conformément au nouvel itinéraire adopté, il s'agissait d'atteindre pendant la nuit la bourgade de Fallen, de se cacher aux environs pour y reposer la journée suivante. Une quarantaine de verstes, le fugitif les ferait… Il ne serait plus alors qu'à soixante verstes de Pernau. Puis, en deux étapes, si aucune mauvaise rencontre ne le retardait, il comptait arriver à Pernau dans l'avant-minuit du 11 avril. Là, il se cacherait en attendant qu'il se fût procuré les ressources suffisantes pour prendre passage à bord d'un navire, et ils seraient nombreux les bâtiments qui partiraient dès que la débâcle aurait rendu libre la Baltique.

La marche du fugitif fut rapide, tantôt en plaine, tantôt sur la lisière des sombres bois de sapins et de bouleaux. Parfois, il fallait longer la base d'une colline, tourner d'étroits ravins, franchir des rios à demi gelés entre les joncs et les rocs granitiques de leurs rives. Le sol était moins aride qu'aux approches du lac Peipous, où la terre, mélange de sable jaune, ne se couvre que d'une maigre végétation. A de longs intervalles, apparaissaient des villages endormis, voisins de champs plats et monotones, que la charrue allait bientôt préparer pour la semaille du sarrasin, du seigle, du lin et du chanvre.

La température remontait sensiblement. La neige, demi-fondue, se changeait en boue. Le dégel serait précoce cette année-là.

Vers cinq heures, en avant de la bourgade de Fallen, le fugitif découvrit une sorte de masure isolée, dans laquelle il put se blottir sans avoir rencontré personne. Une partie des provisions fournies par le meunier servit à lui rendre des forces: le sommeil ferait le reste. A six heures du soir eut lieu le départ, après un repos que rien n’avait troublé. Sur les soixante verstes que l’on comptait jusqu’à Pernau, si cette nuit du 9 au 10 avril en absorbait la moitié, cette étape serait l’avant-dernière.

Il en fut ainsi. Au lever du jour, le fugitif dut s’arrêter, mais cette fois, faute de mieux, au plus profond d’un bois de pins à une demi-verste de la route. C’était plus prudent que d’aller demander repas et repos dans quelque ferme ou auberge. On ne rencontre pas toujours des hôtes comme le meunier du lac.

Pendant l’après-midi de cette journée, caché derrière un fourré, l’homme vit passer une escouade d’agents sur la route de Pernau. Cette escouade s’arrêta un instant, comme si son intention eût été de fouiller le bois de sapins. Mais, après une courte halte, elle se remit en marche.

Le soir, dès six heures, le voyage fut repris. Le ciel était sans nuages. La lune, presque pleine, brillait d’un vif éclat. A trois heures du matin, le fugitif commença à longer la rive gauche d’une rivière, la Pernowa, cinq verstes en amont de Pernau.

En la suivant, il arrivait au faubourg de la ville, où il avait le dessein de se loger dans une modeste auberge jusqu’au jour de son départ.

Sa satisfaction fut extrême lorsqu’il observa que la débâcle entraînait déjà les glaçons de la Pernowa vers le golfe. Encore quelques jours, et il en aurait fini avec les interminables cheminements, les dures étapes, les fatigues et les dangers de toutes sortes.

Il le croyait du moins…

Soudain un cri retentit. C’était le même que celui dont il avait été salué à son arrivée à la frontière livonienne du lac Peipous, et qui rappelait à son oreille le «verda» germanique.

Cette fois, ce cri ne sortait pas de la bouche d’un douanier.

Une escouade d’agents venait d’apparaître sous les ordres du brigadier Eck, – quatre hommes qui surveillaient la route aux approches de Pernau. Le fugitif s’arrêta un instant, puis il s’élança en descendant la berge.

«C’est lui!…» hurla un des agents.

Malheureusement, l’intense lumière de la lune ne permettait pas de se sauver sans être aperçu. Eck et ses hommes se jetèrent sur les talons du fuyard. Celui-ci, ses forces déjà usées par sa longue étape, ne retrouvait pas sa vitesse habituelle. Il lui serait malaisé d’échapper à ces policiers qui ne s’étaient point rompu les jambes à marcher depuis dix heures.

«Plutôt mourir que de me laisser reprendre!» se dit-il.

Et, au moment où passait un glaçon à cinq ou six pieds de la rive, il y sauta d’un bond prodigieux.

«Feu!… feu! cria Eck à ses agents.

Quatre détonations éclatèrent, mais les balles de revolver allèrent se perdre au milieu de la débâcle.

Le glaçon qui portait le fugitif dérivait assez vite, car le courant de la Pernowa est rapide aux premiers jours de la fonte.

Eck et ses hommes suivaient la berge en courant, dans de mauvaises conditions, il est vrai, pour assurer leurs coups de feu, à travers le déplacement des blocs. Il fallait imiter celui qu'ils poursuivaient, s'élancer sur un glaçon, puis sur un autre, le poursuivre enfin à travers cette débâcle.

Ils allaient le tenter, Eck à leur tête, lorsqu'un violent tumulte se produisit. Le glaçon venait d'être saisi dans une collision des blocs, provoquée par le rétrécissement de la rivière, à un coude brusque qui la déviait vers la droite. Il culbuta, se redressa, culbuta de nouveau, puis disparut sous la masse des autres, qui s'entassèrent en faisant barrage.

La débâcle était immobilisée. Les agents, se lançant sur le champ de glace, le parcoururent et prolongèrent leurs recherches pendant une heure.

Aucune trace du fugitif, qui avait certainement péri dans l'écrasement.

«Mieux eût valu le prendre… dit un des agents.

— Sans doute, répondit le brigadier Eck, mais, puisque nous n'avons pu l'avoir vivant, tâchons de l'avoir mort!»

CHAPITRE III

Famille Nicolef

Le lendemain de ce jour, – 12 avril, – trois personnes, qui en attendaient une quatrième, causaient, entre sept et huit heures du soir, dans la salle à manger d’une maison du faubourg de Riga, principalement affecté aux habitants russes. Maison de modeste apparence, construite en briques, ce qui est rare en ce faubourg dont elle occupait l’extrémité, et dans lequel les habitations sont le plus ordinairement bâties en bois. Le poêle, établi dans un évidement du mur de la salle, fonctionnant depuis le matin, entretenait une température de quinze à seize degrés très suffisante, puisque le thermomètre, placé au dehors, se tenait à cinq ou six degrés au-dessus du zéro centigrade.

La petite lampe à pétrole, abritée de son abat-jour, n’éclairait la table du milieu que d’une assez vague lumière. Un samovar bouillonnait sur une servante à dessus de marbre. Quatre tasses, dressées sur leurs soucoupes, indiquaient que quatre personnes allaient prendre le thé.

Mais la quatrième n’avait pas encore paru, bien que l’heure fût dépassée de quarante minutes.

«Dimitri est en retard»… fit observer l’un des invités, en approchant d’une fenêtre à double châssis qui s’ouvrait sur la rue.

Cet homme, âgé d’une cinquantaine d’années, était le docteur Hamine, un ami de la maison, et des plus fidèles. Depuis vingt-cinq ans qu’il exerçait la médecine à Riga, il était très demandé pour son talent de praticien, très estimé pour l'aménité de son caractère, très jalousé de ses confrères, et l'on sait jusqu'à quel degré peut s'abaisser parfois une jalousie de professionnels, – en Russie comme ailleurs.

«Oui… huit heures vont bientôt sonner…, répondit un autre des invités en regardant l'horloge à poids accrochée entre les deux fenêtres. Mais M. Nicolef a droit au quart d'heure de grâce, comme nous disons en France, et ce quart d'heure-là a généralement plus de quinze minutes!…»

Le personnage qui venait de faire cette réponse était M. Delaporte, consul français à Riga. Âgé de quarante ans, établi depuis une dizaine d'années dans cette ville, ses manières distinguées, son humeur serviable, lui valaient une extrême considération.

«Mon père a été donner une leçon à l'autre bout de la ville, dit alors une troisième personne. Le chemin est long, il est rude aussi, par cette bourrasque moitié pluie moitié neige fondue!… Il arrivera tout transi, mon pauvre père…

— Bon! s'écria le docteur Hamine, le poêle ronfle comme un magistrat à l'audience!… Il fait chaud dans la salle… Le samovar rivalise avec le poêle… Une ou deux tasses de thé, et Dimitri aura retrouvé son contingent de chaleur interne et externe!… Ne crains rien, ma chère Ilka!… Et, d'ailleurs, si ton père a besoin d'un médecin, celui-ci n'est pas loin, et c'est l'un de ses meilleurs amis…

— Nous le savons, mon cher docteur!» répondit en souriant la jeune fille.

Ilka Nicolef, âgée de vingt-quatre ans, était la Slave dans toute sa pureté. Combien différente des autres Riganes, de sang germanique, avec leur carnation trop rosé, leurs yeux trop bleus, leur regard trop inexpressif, leur indolence trop allemande! Ilka, brune, avait le teint chaud sans être coloré, la taille élevée, les traits nobles, la physionomie un peu sévère, sévérité qu'adoucissait d'ailleurs un regard d'une douceur infinie lorsqu'il ne se troublait pas de quelque triste pensée. Sérieuse et réfléchie, peu sensible à la coquetterie du costume, simplement mise avec goût, elle présentait le type achevé de la jeune Livonienne d'origine russe.

Ilka n'était pas le seul enfant de Dimitri Nicolef, veuf depuis dix ans déjà. Son frère Jean, qui venait d'entrer dans sa dix-huitième année, achevait ses études à l'Université de Dorpat. Elle lui avait servi de mère pendant son enfance, et, après la mort de celle qui n'était plus, chez quelle femme aurait-il trouvé plus de dévouement, plus de bonté, plus d'esprit de sacrifice? Grâce aux prodiges d'économie de sa sœur, le jeune étudiant avait pu suffire aux exigences d'une assez dispendieuse instruction en dehors de la maison paternelle.

En effet, Dimitri Nicolef n'avait pour tout revenu que le produit des leçons qu'il donnait chez lui ou en ville. Professeur libre pour les sciences mathématiques et physiques, très instruit, très apprécié, il était, on le savait, sans patrimoine. Ce métier n'engendre guère la fortune, et en Russie moins qu'ailleurs. Si elle eût pu s'acquérir par l'estime publique, Dimitri Nicolef aurait été millionnaire, l'un des plus riches de Riga, où son honorabilité lui assignait le premier rang parmi ses concitoyens, – de race slave s'entend. Et, pour n'avoir aucun doute à cet égard, il suffira de prendre part à la conversation du docteur Hamine et du consul, en attendant le retour du professeur.

Cet entretien se faisait en langue russe, que M. Delaporte parlait aussi purement que les Russes de distinction parlent la langue française.

«Eh bien, docteur, dit ce dernier, vous voici à la veille d'un mouvement qui aura pour résultat de modifier les conditions politiques de l'Esthonie, de la Livonie et de la Courlande… Les journaux esthes, avec tout le charme de leur langage aryen, le font pressentir!…

— L'évolution viendra graduellement, répondit le docteur, et ce ne sera pas trop tôt, lorsque l'administration, les municipalités auront été enlevées aux corporations allemandes! N'est-ce pas une anomalie inacceptable que des Germains aient la direction politique de nos provinces?…

— Et, par malheur, lorsqu'ils ne l'auront plus, fît observer Ilka, ne seront-ils pas encore tout-puissants par la force de l'argent, puisqu'ils sont presque seuls à détenir les terres et les places?…

— Les places, répondit M. Delaporte, on pourra les leur enlever… Quant aux terres, ce sera difficile, pour ne pas dire impossible!… Rien qu'en Livonie, ces Allemands possèdent la plus grande partie du domaine rural, au moins quatre cent mille hectares.»

De fait, ceci est exact. Dans les provinces Baltiques, les nobles, les citoyens honoraires, bourgeois et marchands, sont presque exclusivement d'origine teutonne. Il est vrai, bien que converti par ces Allemands, catholiques d'abord, protestants ensuite, le peuple n'a jamais pu être germanisé. Les Esthes, ces frères des Finnois, et les Lettes, presque tous agriculteurs sédentaires, ne cachent point leur antipathie de race pour ceux qui sont leurs maîtres, et à Revel, à Dorpat, à Pétersbourg, nombre de journaux s'occupent à défendre leurs droits!

Alors le consul d'ajouter:

«Dans une lutte entre les Russes d’origine slave et les Russes d’origine allemande, je ne sais trop qui l’emportera!

— Laissons faire l’Empereur, répondit le docteur Hamine. C’est un Slave de pure race, lui, et il saura bien réduire l’élément étranger dans nos provinces.

— Finira-t-il par réussir! répondit la jeune fille d’une voix grave. Depuis sept cents ans, depuis la conquête, nos paysans, nos ouvriers, ont résisté à la pression des conquérants, et ceux-ci sont restés en dehors du pays!

— Et ton père, ma chère Ilka, déclara le docteur, aura vaillamment combattu pour notre cause!… C’est à juste titre qu’il est à la tête du parti slave.

— Non sans s’être fait de terribles ennemis!… observa M. Delaporte.

— Entre autres, répliqua le docteur, les frères Johausen, ces riches banquiers qui crèveront de dépit le jour où Dimitri Nicolef leur aura enlevé la direction de la municipalité rigane!… Après tout, notre ville ne compte que quarante-quatre mille Allemands contre vingt-six mille Russes et vingt-quatre mille Lettes… Les Slaves y sont en majorité, et cette majorité sera pour Nicolef.

— Mon père n’a pas tant d’ambition, répondit Ilka. Pourvu que les Slaves l’emportent et qu’ils soient les maîtres dans leur pays…

— Ils le seront aux élections prochaines, mademoiselle Ilka, dit M. Delaporte, et si Dimitri Nicolef consent à se présenter…

— Ce serait une charge bien lourde pour mon père, dont la situation est modeste, répondit la jeune fille. Et, d’ailleurs, vous le savez, mon cher docteur, en dépit des chiffres, Riga est une ville beaucoup plus allemande que russe!

— Laissons couler l’eau de la Dwina!… s’écria le docteur. Les vieilles coutumes s’en iront par l’aval, et les idées nouvelles viendront par l’amont… Et, ce jour-là, mon brave Dimitri sera porté par elles!

— Je vous remercie, docteur, et vous aussi, monsieur Delaporte, des sentiments que vous inspire mon père, mais il faut prendre garde… N’avez-vous pas remarqué qu’il devient de plus en plus triste, et cela m’inquiète!»

En effet, ses amis avaient fait la même observation. Depuis quelque temps, Dimitri Nicolef semblait avoir de graves préoccupations. Mais, très renfermé, peu communicatif, il ne s’ouvrait à personne, pas plus à ses enfants qu’à son vieux fidèle Hamine. C’est dans le travail, un travail obstiné qu’il se réfugiait, avec l’espoir d’oublier sans doute. Et cependant la population slave de Riga le regardait comme son futur représentant à la tête d’une nouvelle municipalité.

On était en 1876. Cette idée de russifier les provinces Baltiques datait déjà d’un siècle. Catherine II songeait à cette réforme toute nationale. Le gouvernement prenait des mesures pour éloigner les corporations allemandes de l’administration des villes et bourgades. L’élection des Conseils allait être confiée à l’ensemble des citoyens qui se trouvaient en de certaines conditions d’instruction et de cens. Dans les provinces Baltiques, dont la population se chiffrait alors par dix-neuf cent quatre-vingt-six mille habitants, soit, en chiffres ronds, trois cent vingt-six mille pour l’Esthonie, un million pour la Livonie, six cent soixante mille pour la Courlande, l’élément germanique n’était représenté que par quatorze mille nobles, sept mille marchands ou citoyens honoraires, et quatre-vingt-quinze mille bourgeois, le reste en juifs, au total cent cinquante-cinq mille. Une majorité slave devait donc se former aisément sous la direction du gouverneur et du haut personnel administratif.

La lutte s’engageait contre la municipalité actuelle, dont les personnages les plus influents étaient ces banquiers Johausen, qui sont appelés à jouer un rôle considérable au cours de cette dramatique histoire.

Il est à mentionner que, dans le quartier, ou plutôt le faubourg de Riga, où s’élevait la modeste demeure de la famille Nicolef, que son père habitait avant lui, le professeur jouissait de la considération générale.

Au vrai, ce faubourg ne possède pas moins de huit mille Moscovites.

L’on sait combien la situation de fortune de Dimitri Nicolef était médiocre et même infiniment plus qu’on ne le pensait. Fallait-il attribuer à cette situation qu’Ilka ne fût point encore mariée, bien qu’elle eût atteint l’âge de vingt-quatre ans?… En est-il dans la Livonie comme ailleurs, lorsqu’on n’a que sa beauté pour toute fortune, ainsi qu’il est dit dans les pays d’Occident, quand la dot d’une jeune fille n’est constituée que par ses vertus, alors même qu’elles valent sa beauté?… Non, et peut-être, chez cette société slave de la province, l’argent n’est-il pas le plus important facteur des mariages.

On ne s’étonnera donc pas que la main d’Ilka Nicolef eût été demandée plusieurs fois, mais on pourra s’étonner que Dimitri et sa fille eussent refusé des unions où se réunissaient toutes les convenances.

A cela il y avait une raison. Depuis quelques années, Ilka était fiancée au fils unique de Michel Yanof, un Slave, un ami de Dimitri Nicolef. Tous deux habitaient à Riga le même faubourg. Wladimir Yanof, aujourd’hui âgé de trente-deux ans, était un avocat de talent. Malgré la différence d’âge, on peut dire que les deux enfants avaient été élevés ensemble. En 1872, quatre ans avant le début de ce récit, le mariage de Wladimir Yanof et d'Ilka fut décidé, le jeune avocat ayant vingt-huit ans, la jeune fille en ayant vingt.

Il devait être célébré en l'année courante.

Pourtant le secret avait été gardé dans les deux familles, et si sévèrement que les amis n'en avaient point été instruits. Or, on se préparait à leur en faire part, lorsque ces projets furent brusquement brisés.

Wladimir Yanof était membre d'une de ces associations secrètes qui luttent en Russie contre l'autocratie des tsars. Non point qu'il fût affilié aux nihilistes qui, depuis cette époque, ont substitué à la propagande morale la propagande par le fait.

Mais l'ombrageuse administration moscovite n'y veut voir aucune différence.

Elle agit par mesure administrative, sans procédure légale, «par nécessité d'empêcher de tenter quelque chose», classique formule, on le voit. Des arrestations s'effectuèrent en maintes villes de l'Empire. Il y en eut à Riga, et Wladimir Yanof, brutalement enlevé de sa demeure, fut déporté aux mines de Minusinsk, dans la Sibérie orientale. En reviendrait-il jamais?… Qui eût osé l'espérer?…

Coup terrible pour les deux familles, et toute la Riga slave le ressentit avec eux. Ilka en fût morte sans l'énergie qu'elle puisa dans son amour même. Décidée à rejoindre son fiancé, lorsque cela lui serait permis, elle irait partager sa terrible existence d'exilé en ces régions lointaines. Mais, en attendant, ce qu’était devenu Wladimir, en quel lieu il avait été déporté, elle ne put le savoir, et, depuis quatre ans, était sans nouvelles.

Six mois après l’arrestation de son fils, Michel Yanof sentit la mort venir. Et, alors, il voulut réaliser tout ce qu’il possédait, – peu de chose, vingt mille roubles en billets,1 – qu’il remit à Dimitri Nicolef, chargé de garder ce dépôt pour son fils.

Le dépôt fut accepté, même si secrètement gardé qu’Ilka n’en eut jamais connaissance, et il demeura entre les mains du dépositaire tel qu’il lui avait été remis.

On le sait, si la fidélité devait jamais être bannie de ce bas monde, c’est en Livonie qu’elle aurait trouvé son dernier refuge. Là se rencontrent encore ces étonnants fiancés qui ne s’épousent qu’après vingt ou vingt-cinq ans d’une cour assidue. Et, le plus souvent, s’ils attendent pour s’unir, c’est que leur position n’est pas suffisamment faite, et il convient qu’elle le soit.

En ce qui concernait Wladimir et Ilka, rien de semblable. Aucune question de fortune ne s’était dressée entre eux. La jeune fille n’avait rien, et elle savait que le jeune avocat ne demandait rien, ignorant même ce que lui laisserait son père. Mais le talent, l’intelligence ne lui manquaient pas et l’avenir ne l’effrayait ni pour sa femme, ni pour lui, ni pour la famille qui viendrait d’eux.

Wladimir parti pour l’exil, Ilka était sûre qu’il ne l’oublierait pas plus qu’elle ne l’oublierait elle-même. Ce pays n’était-il pas celui des «âmes sœurs»? Ces âmes, trop souvent, ne parviennent pas à se joindre sur la terre, si Dieu n’est pitoyable à leur amour, et, sans jamais se détacher l’une de l’autre, elles se confondent dans l’éternité quand elles n’ont pu s’unir en ce monde.

Ilka attendait, et tout son cœur était là-bas avec l’exilé. Elle attendait qu’une grâce, si improbable, hélas! le ramenât près d’elle. Elle attendait qu’une permission lui ouvrit le chemin pour aller près de lui. Elle n’était plus seulement sa fiancée, elle se considérait comme sa femme. Et pourtant, si elle partait, que deviendrait son père en cette maison abandonnée à ses uniques soins et dans laquelle, grâce à son habitude d’ordre et d’économie, se révélait encore une certaine aisance?…

Cependant elle ignorait ce qu’il y avait de plus grave dans cette situation. Jamais Dimitri Nicolef ne l’avait avoué, bien qu’il n’y eût rien là que d’honorable pour lui. Et pourquoi l’eût-il fait?… Pourquoi ajouter aux inquiétudes du présent celles de l’avenir?… Cela se saurait toujours assez tôt, car l’échéance approchait.

Le père de Dimitri Nicolef, négociant à Riga, avait laissé en mourant des affaires très embrouillées. La liquidation désastreuse se chiffrait par un passif de vingt-cinq mille roubles. Dimitri, ne voulant pas que le nom de son père fût compromis dans une faillite, résolut de payer les dettes. Faisant argent de tout ce qu’il possédait, il parvint à rembourser quelques milliers de roubles. On lui donna du temps pour le reste, et, chaque année, il put économiser sur son travail de quoi fournir de nouveaux acomptes au créancier. Or, ce créancier, c’était la maison Johausen frères. A l’époque actuelle, engagé pour son père, Dimitri Nicolef redevait encore la somme, énorme pour lui, de dix-huit mille roubles.

Et, ce qui aggravait la situation, ce qui la rendait même absolument effrayante, c’est que l’échéance de cette somme venait dans moins de cinq semaines, au 15 mai suivant.

Dimitri Nicolef pouvait-il espérer que les frères Johausen lui accorderaient un délai, qu’ils consentiraient à un renouvellement?… Non! Ce n’était pas seulement le banquier, l’homme d’affaires, devant lequel il se trouvait: c’était l’ennemi politique, dont l’opinion publique le constituait le rival dans le mouvement antigermanique qui se préparait. Frank Johausen, le chef de la maison, le tenait par cette créance, cette dette, la dernière, mais la plus forte.

Il serait impitoyable.

La conversation du docteur, du consul et d’Ilka continua une demi-heure encore, et la jeune fille se montrait très inquiète du retard de son père, lorsque celui-ci parut à la porte de la salle.

Bien qu’il n’eût que quarante-sept ans, Dimitri Nicolef paraissait de dix ans plus âgé. De taille au-dessus de la moyenne, la barbe grisonnante, la physionomie assez dure, le front traversé de rides, comme de sillons d’où il ne peut germer que des idées tristes et des soucis poignants, d’une constitution vigoureuse, en somme, tel il se présentait.

Mais, de sa jeunesse, il avait conservé un regard puissant, une voix pleine et mordante, – cette voix, a dit Jean-Jacques, qui sonne au cœur.

Dimitri Nicolef se débarrassa de son manteau traversé de pluie, déposa son chapeau sur un fauteuil, alla vers sa fille, qu’il baisa au front, et serra la main de ses deux amis.

«Tu es en retard, père… lui dit Ilka.

— J’ai été retenu, répondit Dimitri. Une leçon qui s’est prolongée…

— Eh bien, prenons le thé…, ajouta la jeune fille.

— A moins que tu ne sois trop fatigué, Dimitri, observa le docteur Hamine. Il ne faut point te gêner… Je ne suis pas content de ta mine… Tu dois avoir besoin de repos…

— Oui, répondit Nicolef, mais ce n’est rien… La nuit me remettra… Prenons le thé, mes amis… Je ne vous ai déjà fait que trop attendre, et, si vous le permettez, je me coucherai de bonne heure…

— Qu’as-tu, père?… demanda Ilka, en regardant Dimitri les yeux dans les yeux.

— Rien, chère enfant, rien, te dis-je. Si tu t’inquiètes davantage, Hamine finira par me découvrir quelque maladie imaginaire, ne fût-ce que pour se donner la satisfaction de me guérir!

— Ce sont celles-là dont on ne guérit pas!… répondit le docteur en secouant la tête.

— Vous n’avez rien appris de nouveau, monsieur Nicolef?… demanda le consul.

— Rien… si ce n’est que le gouverneur général Gorko, qui était à Pétersbourg, vient de revenir à Riga.

— Bon! s’écria le docteur, je doute fort que ce retour fasse plaisir aux Johausen, qu’on ne doit pas voir d’un très bon œil là-bas.»

Le front de Dimitri Nicolef se plissa plus vivement. Ce nom ne lui rappelait-il pas la fatale échéance qui le mettait à la merci du banquier allemand?

Le thé étant prêt, Ilka remplit les tasses, – un thé de bonne qualité, bien qu’il ne coûtât pas jusqu’à cent soixante francs la livre comme celui des riches. Il en est à tout prix, heureusement, car c’est la boisson usuelle, la boisson moscovite par excellence, et dont on fait usage même chez les pauvres gens.

Ces tasses de thé furent accompagnées de petits pains au beurre que la jeune ménagère confectionnait elle-même, et, pendant une demi-heure, l’entretien se prolongea entre les trois amis.

Il porta sur l’état des esprits à Riga, le même, d’ailleurs, qui régnait dans les principales villes des provinces Baltiques. Cette lutte des deux éléments germanique et slave passionnait les plus indifférents.

Avec l’accentuation des énergies politiques, on pouvait prévoir que la bataille serait chaude, surtout à Riga, où les races étaient plus directement en contact.

Dimitri, visiblement préoccupé, prenait à peine part à la conversation, bien que sa personnalité fût souvent mise en cause. Sa pensée était «ailleurs», comme on dit… Où?… lui seul eût pu l’apprendre. Mais, quand il était mis en demeure de répondre, il ne le faisait que par des paroles évasives qui ne contentaient pas le docteur.

«Voyons, Dimitri, répétait-il, tu as l’air d’être au fond de la Courlande, lorsque nous sommes à Riga!… Est-ce que, par hasard, ton intention serait de te désintéresser de la lutte?… L’opinion est pour toi, la haute administration est pour toi…Voudrais-tu donc assurer une fois de plus le succès des Johausen?…»

Encore ce nom, qui produisait toujours l’effet d’un coup violent sur l’infortuné débiteur de la riche maison de banque!

«Ils sont plus puissants que tu ne le crois, Hamine… répondit Dimitri.

— Mais moins qu’ils ne le disent, on le verra bien!» répliqua le docteur.

La demie de neuf heures sonna à l’horloge. Il était temps de se retirer. Le docteur et M. Delaporte se levèrent pour prendre congé de leurs hôtes.

Il faisait très mauvais temps. La rafale fouettait les fenêtres. Le vent sifflait au tournant des rues, et, s’engouffrant par la cheminée, rabattait parfois la fumée du poêle.

«Quelle bourrasque! dit le consul.

— Un temps à ne pas mettre un médecin dehors!… déclara le docteur. Allons, venez, Delaporte, je vous offre une place dans ma voiture… Une voiture à deux pieds, sans roues!»

Le docteur embrassa Ilka, suivant sa vieille habitude. M. Delaporte et lui serrèrent cordialement la main à M. Dimitri Nicolef, qui les reconduisit jusqu’au seuil de la maison. Puis tous deux disparurent au milieu de cette obscurité où la tourmente faisait rage.

Ilka vint donner à son père le baiser du soir, et Dimitri Nicolef la pressa dans ses bras peut-être avec plus de tendresse que d’habitude.

«A propos, père, dit-elle, je ne vois pas ton journal… Le facteur ne l’a pas apporté?…

— Si, ma chère enfant… Je l’ai rencontré ce soir en revenant, comme il arrivait devant la maison, et il me l’a remis…

— Il n’y avait pas de lettre? demanda Ilka…

— Non, ma fille, il n’y en avait pas.»

Et tous les jours, depuis quatre longues années, c’était ainsi: il n’y avait pas de lettre, – du moins de lettre venant de Sibérie, de lettre où Ilka aurait pu mouiller de ses larmes la signature de Wladimir Yanof!…

«Bonne nuit, père… dit-elle.

— Bonne nuit, mon enfant.»

CHAPITRE IV

En malle-poste

A cette époque, les moyens de transport sur les interminables plaines des provinces Baltiques se réduisaient à deux, à moins que le voyageur ne voulût se contenter de les parcourir comme piéton ou comme cavalier. De chemin de fer il n’y en avait qu’un, celui qui desservait le littoral de l’Esthonie, contournant le golfe de Finlande. Si Revel se trouvait en communication avec Pétersbourg, les deux autres capitales de la Livonie et de la Courlande, Riga et Mittau, n’étaient point reliées par railway à la capitale de l’empire russe.

Malle-poste ou télègue, il n’existait aucun autre véhicule à la disposition des touristes.

On connaît la télègue, – un chariot bas, sans clous, sans ferrures, dont les différentes pièces sont jointes par des cordes; pour banquette, un sac d’écorces, ou tout simplement les bagages, et encore faut-il prendre soin de s’assujettir par une courroie, si l’on veut prévenir les chutes très à craindre sur ces routes cahoteuses.

La malle-poste est moins rudimentaire. Ce n’est plus le chariot, c’est la voiture, dont le confort laisse à désirer sans doute, mais où l’on est, en somme, à l’abri de la pluie et du vent. Elle ne contient que quatre places, et celle qui faisait alors le service des transports entre Riga et Revel ne partait que deux fois la semaine.

Il va de soi que, pendant l'hiver, ni malle-poste, ni télègue, ni aucun véhicule à roues n'aurait pu circuler sur les chemins glacés. On les remplaçait, non sans avantage, par le «perklwsnoïo», sorte de lourd traîneau à patins, que son attelage entraînait assez rapidement à travers les steppes blancs des provinces Baltiques.

Ce matin-là, 13 avril, la malle-poste qui allait partir pour Revel n'attendait qu'un seul voyageur, lequel avait retenu sa place dès la veille. C'était un homme de cinquante ans, qui arriva à l'heure du départ, un type de bonne humeur, figure gaie, bouche souriante. Chaudement vêtu d'un épais caban pardessus son veston de gros drap, il tenait sous le bras un portefeuille qu'il serrait étroitement.

Lorsqu'il entra dans le bureau, il fut accosté en ces termes par le conducteur de la malle-poste:

«Eh donc, Poch, c'est toi qui as retenu une place dans la malle?…

— Moi-même, Broks.

— Ainsi une télègue ne te suffit plus!… Il te faut une bonne voiture avec trois bons chevaux…

— Et un bon conducteur comme toi, mon vieil ami…

— Allons, petit père, je vois que tu ne regardes pas à la dépense…

— Non, surtout quand ce n'est pas moi qui paie!

— Et qui est-ce donc?

— Mon maître… M. Frank Johausen.

— Oh! s’écria le conducteur, celui-là a le moyen de retenir toute la malle, si cela lui plaît…

— Comme tu dis, Broks, mais, si je n’ai pris qu’une place, j’espère bien que j’aurai des compagnons de voyage! On s’ennuie moins en route…

— Eh! mon pauvre Poch, il faudra que tu t’en passes, cette fois! Cela n’arrive pas souvent, mais cela arrive aujourd’hui… Pas d’autre place retenue que la tienne…

— Quoi… personne?…

— Personne, et, à moins qu’il ne monte un piéton en chemin, tu en seras réduit à causer avec moi?… Va! ne te gêne pas… Tu le sais, un bout de conversation ne me fait pas peur…

— Ni à moi, Broks.

— Et jusqu’où vas-tu?…

— Jusqu’au bout de la route, à Revel, chez le correspondant de MM. Johausen.»

Et Poch, clignant de l’œil, indiquait le portefeuille, serré sous son bras, et que rattachait à sa ceinture une chaînette de cuivre.

«Eh!… là!… petit père, répondit Broks, inutile de jaser là-dessus!… Nous ne sommes plus seuls.»

En effet, un voyageur, qui avait pu remarquer le mouvement du garçon de banque, venait d’entrer dans le bureau.

Ce voyageur semblait mettre une certaine attention à ne point être reconnu. Enveloppé de sa houppelande, dont le capuchon retombait sur sa tête, il se cachait en partie la figure.

S’approchant du conducteur:

«Avez-vous encore une place libre dans la malle?… demanda-t-il.

— Il en reste trois, répondit Broks.

— Une suffira.

— Pour Revel?…

— Oui… pour Revel», répondit le voyageur, après une courte hésitation.

Et, ce disant, il paya en roubles-papier le prix de sa place jusqu’à destination, une distance de deux cent quarante verstes.

Puis, d’une voix brève:

«Quand partez-vous?…

— Dans dix minutes.

— Où serons-nous ce soir?

— A Pernau, si le temps ne nous contrarie pas trop. Avec ces bourrasques, on ne sait jamais…

— Est-ce qu’il y a des retards à craindre?… demanda le garçon de banque.

— Hum, fit Broks, je ne suis pas content du ciel! Les nuages courent avec une rapidité… Enfin, pourvu qu’ils ne nous donnent que de la pluie!… Mais s’il tombe de la neige…

— Voyons, Broks, en n’économisant pas le coup de schnaps aux postillons, nous serons à Revel demain soir…

— C’est à souhaiter! Trente-six heures, je ne mets pas plus de temps, d’habitude.

— Alors, répondit Poch, en route et ne flânons pas!

— Voici les chevaux attelés, répliqua Broks. Je n’attends plus personne… Le coup du départ, Poch… schnaps ou vodka?…

— Schnaps», répondit le garçon de banque.

Ils allèrent au cabaret en face, après avoir fait signe au postillon de les suivre. Deux minutes après, ils revenaient du côté de la malle, où le voyageur inconnu avait déjà pris place. Poch s’installa près de lui et la voiture s’ébranla.

Les trois chevaux attelés aux brancards n’étaient guère plus grands que des ânes, fauves de robe, le poil long et rude, d’une maigreur qui laissait voir la saillie de leurs muscles, mais pleins d’ardeur. Le sifflement du iemschick suffisait à les maintenir au bon trot.

Depuis bien des années déjà, Poch appartenait au personnel de la maison Johausen frères. Entré enfant, il y resterait jusqu’à l’âge de sa retraite. Jouissant de toute la confiance de ses maîtres, on le chargeait souvent de porter à des correspondants, soit à Revel, soit à Pernau, soit à Mittau, soit à Dorpat, des sommes importantes qu’il eût été imprudent de confier au service des malles-poste. Cette fois, son portefeuille contenait quinze mille roubles en billets d'État, coupures équivalant à cent francs de la monnaie française, soit une liasse de quatre cents billets, soigneusement enfermés dans son portefeuille. Après avoir remis cette somme au correspondant de Revel, il devait revenir à Riga.

Ce n'était pas sans motif qu'il avait hâte d'être de retour. Quel était ce motif?… Sa conversation avec Broks le fera connaître.

L'iemschick enlevait rapidement son attelage, les bras écartés, tenant les guides à la mode russe. Après avoir remonté le faubourg nord de la ville, il se lança sur la grande route à travers la campagne. Aux approches de Riga, les champs cultivés sont nombreux et les travaux de labour allaient bientôt commencer. Mais, à dix ou douze verstes de là, le regard se perdait sur l'interminable steppe dont l'uniformité n'est rompue à défaut d'accidents de terrain, rares à la surface des provinces Baltiques, que par le massif des forêts d'arbres verts.

Ainsi que l'avait fait observer Broks, l'apparence du ciel n'était pas rassurante. L'air se déplaçait en violentes rafales, et la bourrasque s'accentuait à mesure que le soleil s'élevait au-dessus de l'horizon. Heureusement le vent soufflait du sud-ouest.

De vingt verstes en vingt verstes à peu près, un relais de poste permettait de changer à la fois les chevaux et le postillon qui les avait conduits.

Ce service, convenablement organisé, assurait aux voyageurs un transport régulier, assez rapide en somme.

Dès le départ, à son vif déplaisir, Poch comprit qu'il ne pourrait point entrer en conversation suivie avec son compagnon de route.

Celui-ci, blotti dans un coin, la tête encapuchonnée, ne laissant rien voir de son visage, dormait ou feignait de dormir. Le garçon de banque en fut donc pour quelques vaines tentatives de dialogue.

Aussi, très loquace par nature, se vit-il réduit à causer avec Broks, assis près du iemschick sur le siège, abrité sous une capote de cuir. Mais, en abaissant la glace qui fermait le devant de la malle, il était facile de converser. Or, comme le conducteur était aussi bavard, à tout le moins, que le garçon de banque, les langues ne chômèrent pas.

«Et tu assures, Broks, – c'était bien la quatrième fois qu'il lui adressait cette question depuis le départ, – tu assures que nous serons demain soir à Revel?…

— Oui, Poch, si le mauvais temps ne nous retarde pas, et surtout s'il ne nous empêche pas de rouler pendant la nuit.

— Et, une fois arrivée à Revel, la malle en repartira vingt-quatre heures après?

— Vingt-quatre heures, répondit Broks. Le service est établi de cette façon.

— Et c'est toi qui me ramèneras à Riga?…

— Moi-même, Poch.

— Par saint Michel, je voudrais déjà être de retour… avec toi, s'entend!

— Avec moi, Poch?… Merci de ton amabilité!… Mais pourquoi tant de hâte?…

— Parce que j’ai une invitation à te faire, Broks.

— A moi?

— A toi, et une invitation qui ne te déplaira pas, si tu aimes à bien manger et à bien boire en bonne compagnie.

— Eh! fit Broks, qui passait sa langue sur ses lèvres, il faudrait être ennemi de soi-même pour ne pas aimer cela!… Il s’agit d’un repas?…

— Mieux qu’un repas! Un vrai festin de noce.

— De noce?… s’écria le conducteur. Et pourquoi serais-je invité à un repas de noce!…

— Parce que le marié te connaît personnellement.

— Il me connaît?…

— Et la mariée aussi!

— Alors, répliqua Broks, j’accepte, même sans savoir quels sont les futurs époux…

— Je vais te l’apprendre.

— Avant que tu me le dises, Poch, laisse-moi te répondre que ce sont de braves gens!

— Certes… de braves gens, puisque c’est moi qui suis le marié!

— Toi, Poch!

— Moi-même, et que la mariée, c’est cette aimable Zénaïde Parensof.

— Ah! l'excellente créature!… Vrai, je ne m'attendais pas à cela…

— Tu t'en étonnes?…

— Non, et vous ferez un bon ménage, bien que tu aies cinquante ans sonnés, Poch…

— Et que Zénaïde en ait quarante-cinq, Broks. Que veux-tu, nous aurons été heureux moins longtemps, voilà tout! Ah! mon camarade, si on s'aime quand on veut, on ne doit se marier que lorsque c'est possible. J'avais vingt-cinq ans quand cela m'a pris, et Zénaïde en avait vingt. Mais, à nous deux, nous ne possédions pas cent roubles! Attendre, c'était sage. Lorsque, de mon côté, j'aurais entassé une belle petite somme, et elle, du sien, une dot approchant, il était convenu que nous marierions nos économies… Et, aujourd'hui, l'argent est au fond de la sacoche! Est-ce que, dans notre Livonie, ça ne se passe pas le plus souvent ainsi pour les pauvres gens?… D'ailleurs, pour s'être espérés pendant des années et des années, on ne s'en aime que davantage, et on n'a pas à s'inquiéter de l'avenir.

— Tu as raison, Poch.

— Moi, j'ai déjà une bonne place dans la maison Johausen, cinq cents roubles par an, que les deux frères doivent augmenter le jour du mariage. Quant à Zénaïde, elle en gagne autant. Nous voilà donc riches… riches à notre façon, s'entend!… Bien sûr, nous ne possédons pas le quart de ce que j'ai là dans mon portefeuille…»

Poch s'arrêta en jetant un regard méfiant sur son compagnon de route, toujours immobile et qui semblait dormir. Peut-être en avait-il trop dit là-dessus… Et, reprenant:

«Oui, Broks, riches à notre façon! Aussi, avec nos économies, je pense que Zénaïde fera bien d’acheter un petit fonds d’épicerie!… Il y en a un à vendre près du port…

— Et je te promets une belle clientèle, ami Poch! s’écria le conducteur.

— Merci, Broks, merci d’avance! Tu me devras bien cela pour le festin où je te garde une place.

— Laquelle?…

— Pas loin de la mariée! Et tu verras comme Zénaïde sera encore belle dans sa robe de noce, la couronne de myrte sur la tête et avec le collier que lui donne Mme Johausen.

— Je te crois, Poch, je te crois!… Une si bonne femme ne peut être qu’une belle femme… A quand la cérémonie?…

— Dans quatre jours, Broks, le 16 du courant… Et voilà pourquoi je te dis: Presse les iemschicks!… Je ne leur marchanderai pas les petits verres!… Mais qu’ils ne laissent point les chevaux s’endormir entre les brancards!… C’est un fiancé que ta malle emporte, et il ne faut pas qu’il vieillisse trop pendant le voyage!

— Oui! Zénaïde ne voudrait plus de toi!… répondit en riant le joyeux conducteur.

— Ah! Peux-tu dire!… J’aurais vingt ans de plus, qu’elle me voudrait encore!»

Il s’ensuit que, sous le bénéfice des confidences que le garçon de banque venait de faire à son ami Broks, les relais, arrosés d’un coup de schnaps, furent rapidement enlevés, et jamais la malle de Riga n’avait roulé à une telle allure.

Le pays offrait toujours le même aspect, de longues plaines, d’où s’échapperait la forte odeur du chanvre pendant l’été. Les routes, le plus souvent tracées par les voitures et les charrettes, laissaient à désirer pour l’entretien. Parfois, on longeait la lisière de vastes forêts, et, invariablement, les mêmes essences, érables, aulnes et bouleaux, puis d’immenses sapinières qui gémissaient sous les rafales. Peu de monde par les chemins, dans les cultures. On sortait à peine du rude hiver de ces hautes latitudes. La malle allait ainsi, de village en village, de hameau en hameau, de relais en relais, sans perdre de temps, grâce aux injonctions de Broks. Aucun retard n’était à prévoir, et, quant à la tourmente, rien à craindre tant qu’elle pousserait par derrière.

Pendant qu’on dételait et qu’on attelait, le garçon de banque et le conducteur mettaient pied à terre. Mais le voyageur inconnu ne quittait jamais sa place. Seulement il profitait de ce qu’il se trouvait seul, pour jeter un coup d’œil au-dehors.

«Pas remuant, notre compagnon! répétait Poch.

— Pas causeur, non plus!… répondait Broks.

— Tu ne sais pas qui c’est?

— Non… et je n’ai pas seulement vu la couleur de sa barbe!

— Il faudra bien qu’il se décide à montrer son visage, quand nous dînerons au relais de midi…

— A moins qu’il ne mange pas plus qu’il ne parle!» riposta Broks.

Avant d’atteindre le village où la malle devait faire halte à l’heure du dîner, combien de misérables hameaux se rencontrèrent sur sa route: cabanes à peine habitables, cahutes de pauvres, aux volets toujours rabaissés et dont les planches disjointes livraient passage aux âpres bises de l’hiver! Et cependant, en Livonie, les paysans sont robustes: les hommes avec leur tête embroussaillée de cheveux durs, les femmes couvertes de haillons, les enfants pieds nus, bras et jambes maculés de boue comme des bestiaux d’étables négligées. Les malheureux moujiks! Et s’ils souffrent dans leurs taudis des chaleurs de l’été, des froids de l’hiver, de la pluie ou de la neige en tout temps, que dire de leur nourriture, du pain d’écorce, noir et pâteux, trempé d’un peu d’huile de chènevis, de la bouillie d’orge et d’avoine, et, si rarement, quelques bouchées de lard ou de bœuf salé! Quelle existence! Mais ils y sont faits, ils ne savent pas ce que c’est que de se plaindre. A quoi bon, d’ailleurs?

Très heureusement, à l’entrée d’un grand village, au relais d’une heure après-midi, les voyageurs, dans une auberge assez convenable, trouvèrent un plus substantiel dîner: potage au cochon de lait, concombres nageant dans une jatte d’eau salée, gros chanteaux de ce pain qu’on appelle le «pain aigri», car il ne faudrait pas pousser l’exigence jusqu’à vouloir du pain blanc, un morceau de saumon péché dans les eaux de la Dwina, du lard frais accommodé de légumes, du caviar, du gingembre, du raifort et de ces confitures d’airelles des bois d’une saveur singulière. Pour boisson, l’invariable thé, lequel coule si abondamment qu’il suffirait à alimenter tout un fleuve des provinces Baltiques. Enfin un excellent repas qui mit Broks et Poch en belle humeur pour le reste de la journée.

Quant à l’autre voyageur, il ne parut pas qu’il en ressentît de si heureux effets. Il se fit servir à part dans un coin sombre de la salle. A peine releva-t-il son capuchon qui laissa voir le bas d’une barbe grisonnante. En vain le garçon de banque et le conducteur essayèrent-ils de le dévisager. Il mangea rapidement, sobrement, et bien avant les autres il eut regagné sa place dans la voiture.

Cela ne laissa pas d’intriguer ses compagnons de route, surtout Poch, fort dépité de n’avoir pu tirer une seule parole de ce taciturne.

«Nous n’arriverons donc pas à savoir quel est cet individu?… demanda Poch.

— Je vais te le dire, répondit Broks.

— Tu le connais?

— Oui! C’est un monsieur qui a payé sa place, cela me suffit.»

On partit quelques minutes avant deux heures, et la malle reprit une allure rapide. L’attelage, gratifié d’aimables et caressantes appellations: «Allez, mes colombes! Poussez, mes hirondelles!» s’enleva au grand trot sous le fouet du postillon.

Très probablement Poch avait vidé son sac, épuisé son stock de nouvelles, car la conversation devint languissante entre le conducteur et lui. Un peu alourdi, d’ailleurs, par la digestion d’un si bon dîner, le cerveau noyé des vapeurs du vodka, il ne tarda pas à «pêcher à la ligne», comme on dit d’une personne gagnée par le sommeil et dont la tête va deçà et delà. Un quart d’heure après, il dormait d’un gros sommeil, hanté sans doute de rêves dans lesquels apparaissait la douce image de Zénaïde Parensof.

Cependant le temps devenait plus mauvais. Les nuages s’abaissaient vers le sol. La malle avait dû s’engager à travers des plaines marécageuses assez impropres à l’établissement d’une route carrossable. Les terres mouvantes étaient affleurées par les multiples rios dont est sillonnée cette région septentrionale de la Livonie. Aussi avait-il fallu juxtaposer des troncs d’arbres, à peine équarris, pour donner quelque solidité à ces fondrières. Presque insuffisant pour un piéton, le passage y était difficile à une voiture. Nombre de ces madriers, mal assujettis, appuyés d’un bout, non de l’autre, basculaient sous les roues de la malle, qui sonnait avec un inquiétant bruit de ferraille.

Dans ces conditions, l’iemschick ne songeait point à forcer son attelage. Il marchait lentement, par prudence, relevant ses chevaux qui butaient à chaque pas. On franchit ainsi plusieurs étapes où tout accident put être évité. Mais les bêtes arrivaient très fatiguées aux relais, et on n’aurait pu leur demander davantage.

A cinq heures du soir, sous le ciel balayé de nuages, il faisait déjà sombre. Se maintenir en bonne direction sur la route, confondue avec les marécages, exigeait une extrême attention. Les chevaux s’effrayaient de ne plus sentir le sol assuré sous leurs sabots, ils s’ébrouaient et se jetaient de côté.

«Au pas, au pas, puisqu’il le faut!… répétait Broks. Mieux vaut arriver avec une heure de retard à Pernau, et ne point risquer de rester en détresse…

— Une heure de retard!… s’écria Poch, que tant de secousses avaient tiré de son sommeil.

— C’est plus prudent!» répondit l’iemschick, qui dut, à plusieurs reprises, mettre pied à terre afin de conduire son attelage par la bride.

Le voyageur avait fait quelques mouvements, redressé sa tête, cherché en vain à voir à travers la vitre de la portière. L'obscurité était assez épaisse alors pour qu'il fût impossible de rien distinguer. Les lanternes de la malle lançaient deux gerbes lumineuses qui rompaient à peine l'obscurité.

«Où sommes-nous?… demanda Poch.

— Encore à vingt verstes de Pernau, répondit Broks, et, une fois au relais, je pense que nous ferions bien d'y demeurer jusqu'à demain matin…

— Au diable la bourrasque qui va nous retarder de douze heures!» s'écria le garçon de banque.

On continuait d'avancer. Parfois la rafale poussait si violemment que la malle, précipitée sur l'attelage, menaçait de se renverser. Les chevaux se cabraient et s'abattaient. La situation devenait extrêmement difficile. C'est au point même que Poch et Broks agitèrent la question de faire la route à pied jusqu'à Pernau. Peut-être cela n'eût-il été que sage afin d'éviter de plus graves accidents en restant dans la voiture.

Quant à leur compagnon, il ne semblait pas qu'il fût décidé à la quitter. Un flegmatique Anglais n'eût pas montré plus d'indifférence à ce qui se passait. Ce n'était pas pour voyager en piéton qu'il avait payé sa place dans cette malle-poste, et cette malle-poste avait l'obligation de le véhiculer jusqu'à destination.

Soudain, à six heures et demie du soir, au plus fort de la bourrasque, un terrible choc se produisit. Une roue de l'avant-train s'était enfoncée dans une ornière et, sous l'effort de l'attelage enveloppé d'un vigoureux coup de fouet, elle se rompit.

La malle, s’inclinant brusquement et perdant l’équilibre, versa sur le flanc gauche.

Il y eut des cris de douleur. Poch, une contusion à la jambe, n’eut qu’une pensée pour son précieux portefeuille retenu par la chaînette. Le portefeuille ne l’avait point quitté, et il le serra plus étroitement sous son bras, lorsqu’il fut parvenu à sortir de la voiture.

Broks et le voyageur n’avaient reçu que d’insignifiantes contusions, et le postillon, s’étant dégagé, avait sauté à la tête de ses chevaux.

L’endroit était désert, – une plaine avec un massif d’arbres sur la gauche.

«Qu’allons-nous devenir?… s’écria Poch.

— La voiture est hors d’état de se remettre en route», répondit Broks.

Pas un mot ne sortit de la bouche de l’inconnu.

«Peux-tu aller à pied à Pernau?… demanda Broks au garçon de banque.

— Une quinzaine de verstes?… s’écria celui-ci, avec ma contusion!

— Eh bien… à cheval?…

— A cheval!… Au bout de quelques pas, je serais par terre!»

Le seul parti possible, c’était de chercher abri dans une auberge des environs, s’il en existait, et d’y passer la nuit, Poch et le voyageur du moins. De leur côté, après avoir dételé, Broks et le postillon enfourcheraient les chevaux, gagneraient Pernau au plus vite et, le lendemain, ils reviendraient avec un charron qui réparerait la voiture.

Si le garçon de banque n’eût pas été chargé d’une aussi forte somme, il aurait trouvé sans doute le conseil excellent… Mais avec ses quinze mille roubles…

Et, d’ailleurs, dans le voisinage, y avait-il, en cette région déserte, une ferme, une auberge, un cabaret où des voyageurs pussent se réfugier jusqu’au matin?… Ce fut la question que Poch posa tout d’abord.

«Oui… là… sans doute!» répondit le voyageur.

Et, de la main, il indiquait une faible lumière qui brûlait à deux cents pas sur la gauche, au coin d’un bois confusément entrevu dans l’ombre. Mais était-ce le fanal d’une auberge ou le feu d’un bûcheron?…

L’iemschick, interrogé, répondit:

«C’est le cabaret de Kroff.

— Le cabaret de Kroff?… répéta Poch.

— Oui… le kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*.

— Eh bien, dit Broks, en s’adressant à ses compagnons, si vous voulez coucher dans cette auberge, nous viendrons vous reprendre demain dès la première heure.»

La proposition parut agréer au voyageur. C’était, en somme, ce qu’il y avait de mieux à faire. Le temps devenait épouvantable, la pluie ne tarderait pas à tomber torrentiellement. Ce ne serait pas sans grande peine que le conducteur et l’iemschick parviendraient à gagner Pernau avec leur attelage.

«Convenu, dit alors Poch, que sa jambe écorchée faisait quelque peu souffrir. Demain, après une bonne nuit de repos, je serai en état de repartir, et je compte sur toi, Broks…

— Je serai de retour à l’heure dite!» répliqua le conducteur. Les chevaux furent alors dételés, et la malle, couchée sur le flanc, dut être abandonnée. Mais, cette nuit-là, il était probable que ni voiture ni charrette ne viendraient à passer sur la route.

Après avoir serré la main de son ami, Poch, traînant la jambe, se dirigea vers le massif d’où s’échappait la lueur qui indiquait la place de l’auberge.

Comme le garçon de banque marchait avec difficulté, le voyageur crut devoir lui offrir de s’appuyer sur son bras. Poch accepta après avoir remercié son compagnon, qui, en somme, était plus sociable qu’on ne l’eût supposé par son attitude depuis le départ de Riga.

Les deux cents pas furent franchis sans accident, en suivant la grande route au bord de laquelle s’élevait l’auberge.

Suspendu à la porte d’entrée, brillait le fanal garni de sa lampe à pétrole. A l’angle du mur se dressait une longue perche, dont la destination est d’attirer les regards des passants pendant le jour. A travers les joints des contrevents filtraient les lueurs de l’intérieur et s’échappait aussi un bruit de voix et de verres. Une enseigne grossièrement peinte s’étalait au-dessus de la porte principale, et, à la clarté du fanal, on pouvait y lire ces mots: *Kabak de la Croix-Rompue.*

CHAPITRE V

Le kabak de la «Croix-Rompue»

Le cabaret de la *Croix-Rompue* justifiait ce nom par un dessin sang de bœuf figurant, sur un des pignons de l’auberge, – une double croix russe détachée de sa base et gisant à terre. Sans doute, quelque légende relative à une profanation iconoclaste perdue dans la nuit des temps.

Un certain Kroff, d’origine slave, veuf, âgé de quarante à quarante-cinq ans, tenait ce cabaret, que son père possédait avant lui, en ce coin isolé de la grande route de Riga à Pernau. Dans un rayon de deux ou trois verstes on n’eût pas rencontré de maison plus voisine, ou, pour mieux dire, de hameau plus rapproché. C’était l’isolement dans toute sa plénitude.

Pour clients, passagers ou habituels, Kroff ne recevait que de rares voyageurs obligés à cette halte, une douzaine de ces paysans qui travaillaient sur les cultures environnantes, et quelques bûcherons ou charbonniers occupés aux bois d’alentour.

Le cabaretier faisait-il ses affaires?… Dans tous les cas, il ne criait jamais misère, n’étant point homme d’ailleurs à parler de ce qui le concernait. Le kabak fonctionnait depuis une trentaine d’années, avec le père d’abord – lequel, fraudeur et braconnier, avait dû remplir son sac, – avec le fils ensuite. Aussi les malins de la région auguraient-ils que l’argent ne manquait point à la *Croix-Rompue*. Mais cela ne regardait personne.

De nature peu communicative, Kroff vivait très retiré, quittant rarement son auberge, ne faisant que de rares apparitions à Pernau, travaillant à son jardin lorsqu’il n’y avait pas de pratiques à servir, n’ayant ni fille ni garçon pour l’aider. C’était un homme vigoureux, à figure rougeaude, à barbe drue, à chevelure épaisse, au regard hardi. Il n’interrogeait jamais personne et répondait brièvement quand on lui parlait.

La maison, derrière laquelle s’étendait le jardin, comprenait uniquement un rez-de-chaussée avec porte principale d’un seul vantail.

On entrait d’abord dans la salle du débit, éclairée par sa fenêtre au fond. A droite et à gauche deux chambres prenaient jour sur la grande route. Celle de Kroff formait une annexe de l’auberge en retour vers le potager.

Porte et contrevents de ce kabak étaient solides, munis de forts crochets et verrous à l’intérieur. Le cabaretier les fermait dès le crépuscule, le pays n’étant guère sûr. Mais le débit n’en était pas moins ouvert jusqu’à dix heures. En ce moment, il contenait une demi-douzaine de clients que le vodka et le schnaps mettaient en joyeuse humeur.

Le jardin, d’un demi-arpent, simplement clos d’une haie vive, confinait au bois de sapins qui se prolongeait au-delà de la route. Il produisait les légumes de consommation courante, que Kroff cultivait avec assez de profit. Quant aux arbres fruitiers, abandonnés aux soins de la nature, c’était des cerisiers de maigre venue, des pommiers donnant des pommes de bonne qualité, et quelques massifs de ces framboisiers aux fruits parfumés, de couleur éclatante, qui prospèrent en Livonie.

Ce soir-là, autour des tables causaient et buvaient trois ou quatre paysans et autant de bûcherons des hameaux voisins. Le schnaps à deux kopeks le petit verre les y attirait quotidiennement, avant le retour à leurs fermes ou cabanes, distantes de trois ou quatre verstes. Aucun d’eux ne devait passer la nuit à la *Croix-Rompue*. Rarement, d’ailleurs, des voyageurs s’arrêtaient pour y coucher. Mais les postillons et conducteurs de télègues ou de malles-poste faisaient volontiers halte au kabak avant d’achever la dernière étape de Pernau.

Au milieu de ces hôtes habituels, deux individus, assis ce soir-là à l’écart, s’entretenaient à voix basse, dévisageant les buveurs. C’étaient le brigadier de police Eck et l’un de ses agents. Après la poursuite le long de la Pernova, continuant leurs recherches à travers cette région où l’on signalait la présence de quelques malfaiteurs, ils étaient restés en communication avec les diverses escouades chargées de surveiller les villages et les hameaux au nord de la province.

Eck ne revenait point satisfait de sa dernière expédition. De ce fugitif qu’il comptait prendre vivant et ramener au major Verder, on n’avait même pas retrouvé le corps dans la débâcle de la Pernova.

C’était une déception d’amour-propre.

Et le brigadier disait à son compagnon:

«Sans doute, il y a tout lieu de croire que ce coquin s’est noyé…

— C’est sûr, répondit l’agent.

— Eh non, ce n’est pas sûr, ou, du moins, on n’en a pas la preuve matérielle!… D’ailleurs, quand bien même nous aurions repêché l’homme mort, ce n’est pas dans cet état qu’on aurait pu le réexpédier en Sibérie!… Non! C’est vivant qu’il aurait fallu l’arrêter, et ce n’est point là une affaire qui fasse honneur à la police!

— Nous serons plus heureux une autre fois, monsieur Eck», répondit l’agent qui acceptait très philosophiquement les aléas du métier.

Le brigadier secoua la tête, sans chercher à cacher son dépit.

A cette heure, la bourrasque se déchaînait avec une incomparable violence. La porte d'entrée s'agitait sur ses gonds à les arracher de leur scellement. Le gros poêle, comme étouffé, cessait de ronfler par instants, puis repartait avec une activité de fournaise.

On entendait craquer les arbres de la sapinière, dont les branches brisées volaient jusqu'à la toiture du kabak, au risque de la défoncer.

«Voilà de l'ouvrage tout fait pour les bûcherons!… dit un des paysans. Ils n'auront que la peine de ramasser leur charge…

— Et c'est aussi un fameux temps pour les malfaiteurs et contrebandiers!… ajouta l'agent.

— Oui… fameux,… répondit Eck, mais ce n'est pas une raison pour les laisser faire!… Il est certain qu'une bande court le pays… On a signalé un vol à Tarvart, et une tentative de meurtre à Karkus!… De vrai, la route n'est plus sûre entre Riga et Pernau… Les crimes se multiplient, et les criminels s'échappent la plupart du temps… Après tout, que risquent-ils, s'ils se laissent attraper?… D'aller tirer du sel en Sibérie!… Voilà ce qui ne les inquiète guère… Autrefois, une bonne danse au bout du gibet, cela donnait à réfléchir!… Mais les potences, elles sont rompues comme la croix du kabak de maître Kroff…

— On y reviendra, affirma l'agent.

— Et il ne sera pas trop tôt», répliqua Eck.

Comment un brigadier de police aurait-il pu admettre que la peine de mort, maintenue en matière politique, eût été abolie pour les crimes de droit commun? Cela était au-dessus de son entendement, et de l’entendement de nombre de bons esprits qui n’appartiennent pas à la police.

«Allons, en route, dit Eck, qui se disposait à partir. J’ai rendez-vous avec le brigadier de la cinquième escouade, à Pernau, et il n’y a pas de temps qui tienne!»

Mais, avant de se lever, il frappa sur la table.

Kroff vint aussitôt.

«Combien, Kroff?… dit-il, en tirant de sa poche quelque menue monnaie.

— Vous le savez de reste, brigadier, répondit l’aubergiste. Il n’y a qu’un prix pour tout le monde…

— Même pour ceux qui viennent dans ton kabak, où ils savent que tu ne leur demanderas ni leurs papiers ni leur nom?…

— Je ne suis pas de la police! répondit Kroff d’un ton brusque.

— Eh! tous les cabaretiers devraient en être, et le pays serait plus tranquille! répliqua le brigadier. Prends garde, Kroff, qu’un beau jour on ne ferme ton auberge… si tu ne la fermes pas aux fraudeurs, et peut-être à des clients pires encore!…

— Je verse à boire à ceux qui me payent, répondit le cabaretier, et je ne sais pas plus où ils s’en vont après que je n’ai su d’où ils venaient avant!

— N’importe, Kroff, ne fais pas le sourd quand je te parle, ou tes oreilles en pâtiront!… Là-dessus, bonsoir et au revoir!»

Le brigadier Eck se leva, paya sa dépense et se dirigea vers la porte, suivi de son agent. Les autres buveurs les imitèrent, car le mauvais temps ne les engageait point à s’attarder au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue.*

A cet instant, la porte s’ouvrit et fut vivement refermée par la bourrasque.

Deux hommes venaient d’entrer; l’un soutenait l’autre, qui boitait.

C’étaient Poch et son compagnon de voyage que la malle avait laissés en détresse sur la grande route.

Le voyageur était toujours étroitement serré dans sa houppelande, son capuchon rabattu, et on ne pouvait apercevoir son visage.

Ce fut lui qui prit la parole, et, s’adressant au cabaretier:

«Notre voiture s’est brisée à deux cents pas d’ici… dit-il. Le conducteur et le postillon sont partis pour Pernau avec l’attelage… Ils doivent venir nous rechercher demain dans la matinée… En attendant, avez-vous deux chambres à nous donner pour la nuit?…

— Oui, répondit Kroff.

— Il me faut l’une d’elles pour moi, ajouta Poch, et un bon lit si c’est possible…

— Vous l’aurez, répondit Kroff. Est-ce que vous êtes blessé?…

— Une écorchure à la jambe, répliqua Poch, ce ne sera rien.

— Je retiens la seconde chambre», ajouta le voyageur.

Tandis qu'il parlait, il sembla bien à Eck qu'il le reconnaissait au son de sa voix.

«Tiens, se dit-il, je jurerais que c'est…»

Il n'était pas sûr, et, en sa qualité de policier, ne fût-ce que par instinct, il lui semblait bon de s'en assurer.

Pendant ce temps, Poch s'était assis près d'une table, sur laquelle il avait déposé son portefeuille, toujours retenu à sa ceinture par la chaînette.

«Une chambre… c'est bien… dit-il à Kroff. Mais une égratignure n'empêche pas de manger, et j'ai faim.

— Je vais vous servir à souper, répondit l'aubergiste.

— Le plus vite possible», répliqua Poch.

Le brigadier de police s'avança vers lui.

«En vérité, il est heureux, monsieur Poch, dit-il, que vous n'ayez pas été blessé plus grièvement…

— Eh! s'écria le garçon de banque, c'est monsieur Eck!… Bonjour, monsieur Eck, ou plutôt bonsoir!

— Bonsoir, monsieur Poch!

— Vous voilà en tournée par ici?…

— Comme vous voyez. Et ce ne sera rien, votre blessure?

— Il n’y paraîtra plus demain.»

Kroff avait servi sur la table du pain, du lard froid et la tasse pour le thé. Puis, s’adressant au voyageur:

«Et vous, monsieur?…

— Je n’ai pas faim, répondit celui-ci. Indiquez-moi ma chambre… J’ai hâte de me coucher, car il est probable que je n’attendrai pas le retour du conducteur… Je quitterai l’auberge demain dès quatre heures…

— Comme il vous plaira», répondit le cabaretier.

Et il conduisit le voyageur à la chambre qui occupait l’extrémité de la maison, à gauche de la grande salle, réservant au garçon de banque celle qui se trouvait à droite.

Mais, tandis que l’inconnu parlait, son capuchon s’étant légèrement dérangé, le brigadier, qui l’observait, avait pu apercevoir en partie son visage. Cela lui suffit.

«Oui, murmura-t-il, c’est bien lui… Tiens, pourquoi veut-il partir de si bonne heure, et sans reprendre la malle?…»

De fait, les circonstances les plus naturelles paraissent toujours singulières à ces gens de police!

«Et où va-t-il ainsi?…» se demanda Eck, questions auxquelles le voyageur n’aurait certainement pas répondu si elles lui eussent été faites. Du reste, celui-ci ne parut pas s’apercevoir que le brigadier l’eût examiné avec une certaine insistance et reconnu. Il entra donc dans la chambre que lui indiqua Kroff. Eck revint près de Poch, qui mangeait de bon appétit.

«Ce voyageur était avec vous dans la malle?… lui demanda-t-il.

— Oui… monsieur Eck, et je n’ai pas pu en tirer quatre paroles…

— Et vous ne savez pas où il va?…

— Non… il est monté dans la voiture à Riga, et je pense qu’il se rendait à Revel. Si Broks était là, il pourrait vous renseigner.

— Oh! cela n’en vaut pas la peine», répondit le brigadier.

Kroff écoutait cette conversation de cet air d’aubergiste indifférent qui ne tient guère à savoir quels sont ses hôtes. Il allait et venait dans la salle, tandis que paysans et bûcherons prenaient congé en lui souhaitant le bonsoir.

Cependant le brigadier, qui ne se pressait plus de partir, s’amusait à faire causer ce bavard de Poch, lequel ne demandait pas mieux, d’ailleurs.

«Et vous allez à Pernau?… dit-il.

— Non… à Revel, monsieur Eck.

— Pour le compte de M. Johausen?…

— Pour son compte», répondit Poch.

Et, d’un mouvement instinctif, il rapprocha de lui le portefeuille déposé sur la table.

«Voilà un accident de voiture qui vous causera au moins douze heures de retard…

— Douze heures seulement, si Broks revient demain matin comme il l’a promis, et je serai de retour à Riga dans quatre jours… pour le mariage…

— Avec la bonne Zénaïde Parensof!… Oh! je sais…

— Je le crois bien… vous savez tout!

— Non, puisque je ne sais pas où va votre compagnon de voyage… Après tout, s’il part demain matin de si bonne heure et sans vous attendre, c’est sans doute parce qu’il s’arrête à Pernau…

— C’est probable, répondit Poch, et, si nous ne nous revoyons pas, bon voyage! – Mais dites-moi, monsieur Eck, est-ce que vous passez la nuit dans cette auberge?…

— Non, Poch, nous avons rendez-vous à Pernau et nous partons à l’instant… Quant à vous, après un bon souper, tâchez de dormir d’un bon somme… et ne laissez pas traîner votre portefeuille…

— Il tient à moi comme mes oreilles à ma tête! riposta le garçon de banque en riant d’un franc rire.

— En route, dit le brigadier à son agent, et boutonnons-nous jusqu’au menton, ou la rafale nous pénétrera jusqu’aux os! – Bonsoir, Poch.

— Bonsoir, monsieur Eck.»

Les deux policiers ouvrirent la porte, que Kroff referma avec la barre intérieure d’abord, puis du double tour d’une grosse clef qu’il retira ensuite.

A cette heure, il n’était plus à prévoir que personne vînt demander l’hospitalité d’une nuit à la *Croix-Rompue*. C’était déjà rare que deux voyageurs y eussent réclamé deux chambres jusqu’au lendemain, et il avait fallu cet accident de la malle-poste pour que le cabaretier ne fût pas seul, comme d’habitude, en ce kabak isolé.

Cependant Poch avait achevé son repas, et de grand appétit. Du solide et du liquide, il ne fallait pas moins pour réparer ses forces.

Le lit achèverait ce que la table avait si bien commencé.

Kroff, avant de se retirer dans sa chambre, attendait que son hôte eût gagné la sienne. Il se tenait près du poêle, dont la fumée, sous les coups de la tourmente, envahissait parfois la salle au milieu d’une buée chaude. Kroff s’ingéniait alors à la chasser au moyen d’une serviette qu’il agitait et dont les plis, en se détendant, produisaient des claquements de fouet.

La chandelle de suif, posée sur la table, vacillait, faisait danser l’ombre des objets à travers les nappes de lumière.

Au-dehors se produisaient de tels vacarmes de vent contre les volets des fenêtres, qu’on eût dit que quelqu’un y frappait.

«Vous n’entendez pas?… observa même Poch, à un moment où la porte subissait un tel heurt que l’on pouvait s’y tromper.

— Personne, répondit l’aubergiste, il n’y a personne… Je suis habitué à cela… Nous avons bien d’autres mauvais temps en plein hiver…

— Et, d’ailleurs, répliqua Poch, il est peu probable que personne coure les routes cette nuit, si ce n’est les malfaiteurs et les agents de la police.

— Peu probable, comme vous dites!»

Il était près de neuf heures.

Le garçon de banque se leva, assujettit son portefeuille sous son bras, prit la chandelle allumée que lui présentait Kroff et se dirigea vers sa chambre.

La cabaretier tenait à la main une vieille lanterne à grosses vitres, qui devait lui servir à s'éclairer après que la porte se serait refermée sur Poch.

«Vous ne vous couchez pas?… demanda celui-ci avant d'entrer dans sa chambre.

— Si… répondit Kroff, mais, auparavant, je vais faire ma tournée de tous les soirs…

— Dans votre enclos?…

— Oui, dans mon enclos, et voir si mes poules sont au perchoir, car, quelquefois, il en manque une ou deux le matin…

— Ah! fît Poch, les renards?…

— Les renards et aussi les loups. Ces maudites bêtes ne sont pas gênées de sauter par-dessus la haie! Aussi, comme la fenêtre de ma chambre donne sur le jardin, quand je peux les saler d'une charge de plomb!… Donc, si vous entendiez un coup de fusil, ne vous effrayez point…

— Eh! répondit Poch, un coup de canon ne me réveillerait pas, j'imagine, si je dors comme j'en ai l'envie! – A propos, je ne suis pas pressé de partir, moi… Si mon compagnon a hâte de sauter de son lit, c'est son affaire!…

Laissez-moi prolonger mon sommeil jusqu'au grand jour… Il sera temps de se réveiller lorsque Broks, revenu de Pernau, aura remis la malle en état…

— C'est convenu, répondit l'aubergiste. Personne ne vous réveillera, et, quand ce voyageur partira, je ferai en sorte que le bruit n'interrompe pas votre sommeil.»

Poch, étouffant des bâillements très justifiés par la fatigue, entra dans sa chambre, dont il referma la porte à clef sur lui.

Kroff était seul dans la salle à peine éclairée par la lanterne. S'approchant de la table, il enleva le couvert du garçon de banque et rangea les assiettes, la tasse et la théière. C'était un homme d'ordre: il ne remettait pas au lendemain ce qu'il pouvait faire le jour même.

Cela fait, Kroff se dirigea vers la porte de l'enclos et l'ouvrit.

De ce côté, qui était celui du nord-ouest, la rafale s'acharnait avec moins de violence, et l'annexe en retour se trouvait abritée dans une sorte de remous. Mais, au-delà de cet angle, le vent faisait rage, et l'aubergiste ne pensa pas qu'il fût nécessaire de s'y exposer. Un coup d'œil du côté de la basse-cour suffirait.

Rien de suspect dans l'enclos. Pas une de ces ombres mouvantes qui auraient indiqué la présence d'un loup ou d'un renard.

Kroff agita sa lanterne en toutes directions; puis, ne voyant rien de suspect, il regagna la salle.

Comme il convenait de ne pas laisser éteindre le poêle, il le chargea de quelques morceaux de tourbe, jeta un dernier regard autour de lui et se dirigea vers sa chambre.

La porte, presque contiguë à celle du jardinet, permettait de pénétrer dans l’annexe où se trouvait la chambre de l’aubergiste. Cette chambre confinait donc à celle où Poch dormait déjà d’un épais sommeil.

Kroff entra, sa lanterne à la main, et la grande salle fut plongée dans une complète obscurité.

Deux ou trois minutes encore, on aurait pu entendre le bruit des pas du cabaretier, tandis qu’il se déshabillait. Puis un craquement plus accentué indiqua qu’il venait de s’étendre sur son lit.

Quelques instants plus tard, tout le monde dormait dans l’auberge, malgré le tumulte des éléments, le vent, la pluie, malgré les longs gémissements de la tempête à travers la sapinière, découronnée de ses hautes branches.

Un peu avant quatre heures du matin, Kroff se leva et, sa lanterne rallumée, rentra dans la grande salle.

Presque au même moment s’ouvrit la porte de la chambre du voyageur.

Celui-ci était habillé et, comme la veille, enveloppé de sa houppelande, son capuchon sur la tête.

«Déjà prêt, monsieur?… dit Kroff.

— Déjà, répondit le voyageur, qui tenait à la main deux ou trois roubles-papier. Que vous dois-je pour la nuit?…

— Un rouble, répondit l’aubergiste.

— Voici un rouble, et veuillez m’ouvrir…

— A l’instant», répliqua Kroff, après avoir vérifié la valeur du rouble à la lueur de sa lanterne.

Le cabaretier se dirigeait vers la porte, tenant la grosse clef tirée de sa poche, lorsque, s’arrêtant et s’adressant au voyageur:

— Vous ne voulez rien prendre avant de partir?…

— Rien.

— Ni un verre de vodka, ni un verre de schnaps?…

— Rien, vous dis-je. Ouvrez vite, je suis pressé.

— Comme il vous plaira.»

Kroff retira de la porte les barres de bois qui la maintenaient à l’intérieur. Puis il introduisit la clef dans la serrure, dont le pêne grinça.

L’obscurité était profonde encore. La pluie avait cessé, mais le vent soufflait en tempête. Des branches brisées jonchaient le chemin.

Le voyageur assura son capuchon, boutonna sa houppelande, puis, sans prononcer aucune parole, sortit précipitamment, et en quelques pas il eut disparu au milieu de la nuit. Alors, tandis qu’il remontait la grande route vers Pernau, Kroff, replaçant les barres intérieures, refermait la porte du kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*.

CHAPITRE VI

Slave pour Slave

Le premier thé, avec tartines au beurre, se servait exactement à neuf heures du matin sur la table de la salle à manger des frères Johausen. L’exactitude «poussée jusqu’à la dixième décimale», comme ils le disaient eux-mêmes, était l’une des qualités principales de ces riches banquiers, dans la vie courante comme dans les affaires, aussi bien quand il s’agissait de recevoir que lorsqu’il s’agissait de payer. Frank Johausen, le frère aîné, tenait surtout à ce que les repas, les visites, le lever, le coucher, fussent réglés militairement, et aussi, sans doute, les sentiments et les plaisirs; tels les articles du grand-livre de sa maison de banque, l’une des plus importantes de Riga.

Or, ce matin-là, à l’heure dite, le samovar ne se trouva pas en état de fonctionner. Pour quelle raison? Un peu de paresse dont se reconnut coupable Trankel, le valet de chambre, spécialement chargé de ce service près de son maître.

Il advint donc que, au moment où M. Frank Johausen et son frère, Mme Johausen et sa fille Margarit Johausen entrèrent, le thé n’était point prêt à être versé dans les tasses rangées sur la table.

On ne l’ignore pas, la prétention, assez peu justifiée d’ailleurs, de ces riches Allemands des provinces Baltiques, est de traiter paternellement leur personnel domestique. La famille est restée patriarcale, les serviteurs y sont considérés comme des enfants de la maison, et c’est pour cela, on doit le croire, qu’ils ne sauraient échapper aux corrections paternelles.

«Trankel, pourquoi le thé n’est-il pas servi?… demanda M. Frank Johausen.

— Que mon maître m’excuse, répondit Trankel d’un ton assez piteux, mais j’ai oublié…

— Ce n’est pas la première fois, Trankel, répliqua le banquier, et j’ai tout lieu de croire que ce ne sera pas la dernière.»

Mme Johausen et son beau-frère, hochant la tête en signe d’approbation, s’étaient approchés du grand poêle de faïence artistique, lequel, fort heureusement, n’était pas éteint comme le samovar.

Trankel baissa les yeux sans répondre. Non! il n’en était pas à son premier manquement à cette exactitude si chère aux Johausen.

Et, alors, le banquier, tirant de sa poche un carnet à feuilles volantes, écrivit quelques lignes au crayon sur l’une des pages, et il la remit à Trankel, en lui disant:

«Porte ceci à son adresse, et tu attendras la réponse.»

Trankel savait sans doute à quelle adresse il fallait aller et quelle serait la réponse du destinataire.

Il ne prononça pas un mot, il s’inclina, baisa la main de son maître et se dirigea vers la porte pour prendre le chemin du bureau de police.

La page du carnet ne contenait que ces mots:

«Bon pour vingt-cinq coups de verge à mon domestique Trankel.

«Frank Johausen.»

Au moment où le domestique sortait:

«Tu n’oublieras pas de rapporter le régat», dit le banquier.

Trankel n’aurait garde de l’oublier. Ce régat, en effet, permettait au banquier de payer à qui de droit le prix du châtiment, conformément au tarif adopté par le colonel de police.

C’est ainsi que les choses se passaient à cette époque et se passent peut-être encore en Courlande, en Esthonie, en Livonie, et, sans doute, en mainte autre province de l’empire moscovite.

Quelques détails sur la famille Johausen.

On sait quelle est l’importance du fonctionnaire en Russie. Il est soumis à cet impérieux règlement du Tchin, – cette échelle de quatorze échelons que doivent franchir les employés de l’État depuis le rang le plus infime jusqu’au rang de conseiller privé.

Mais il est de hautes classes qui n’ont rien de commun avec celles des fonctionnaires, telle en premier lieu, dans les provinces Baltiques, cette noblesse qui jouit d’une grande considération doublée d’une réelle puissance. D’origine germanique, elle est plus ancienne que la noblesse russe, elle a conservé d’importants privilèges, – entre autres, le droit de délivrer des diplômes, que ne dédaignent pas d’obtenir les membres de la famille impériale.

Près de cette noblesse coexiste la classe bourgeoise, son égale, sa supérieure même par son intervention dans l’administration provinciale et municipale, et, comme elle, ainsi qu’il a été dit, de race allemande presque tout entière.

Elle comprend les marchands, les citoyens honoraires, et, un peu au-dessous, les simples bourgeois, qui forment une couche intermédiaire. Les banquiers, les armateurs, les artisans, les marchands, suivant la «guilde» dont ils relèvent, payent un impôt qui leur permet de faire acte de commerce avec l'étranger.

Dans cette bourgeoisie, la haute classe est instruite, laborieuse, hospitalière, d'une moralité et d'une probité parfaites. Aussi est-ce dans ses premiers rangs que l'opinion publique, avec juste raison, plaçait la famille Johausen et la maison de banque, dont le crédit, en Russie et à l'étranger, défiait toute attaque.

Au-dessous de ces classes privilégiées, et qui se sont imposées dans les provinces Baltiques, végètent ces paysans, ces cultivateurs, ces agriculteurs sédentaires, – un million au moins, – qui forment la véritable population indigène. Ces Lettons, parlant leur ancien idiome slave, tandis que l'allemand est resté la langue des citadins, s'ils ne sont plus des serfs, le plus souvent se voient traités comme tels, parfois mariés malgré eux, lorsqu'il s'agit d'accroître le nombre des familles dont les seigneurs ont le droit d'exiger une redevance.

On s'explique donc que le souverain de la Russie ait la pensée de modifier ce déplorable état de choses, que son gouvernement cherche à introduire l'élément slave dans les assemblées et les administrations municipales.

De là, une lutte dont on verra les terribles effets au cours de ce récit.

Le principal directeur de la maison de banque était l'aîné des deux frères, Frank Johausen.

Le cadet était célibataire. L’aîné, âgé de quarante-cinq ans, avait épousé une Allemande de Francfort. Il était père de deux enfants, un fils, Karl, entré dans sa dix-neuvième année, et une fillette de douze ans. Karl achevait alors ses études à l’Université de Dorpat, où Jean, le fils de Dimitri Nicolef, allait bientôt terminer les siennes.

Riga, dont la fondation remonte au treizième siècle, est, il convient de le répéter, une cité plus germaine que slave. On reconnaîtrait cette origine jusque dans ses maisons aux toits élevés, aux pignons sur rue construits en gradins, bien que certains édifices affectent les formes de l’architecture byzantine par leurs dispositions étranges et leurs coupoles aux couleurs d’or.

Riga est maintenant une ville ouverte. Sa place principale est celle de l’hôtel municipal, où l’on peut admirer, d’un côté, le Rathaus, qui est la maison du Conseil, surmontée d’un haut clocher à grosses boules, et, de l’autre, l’antique monument des Chevaliers de la Tête-Noire, hérissé de clochetons pointus dont les girouettes grincent lamentablement, et qui présente un aspect architectural plus bizarre qu’artistique.

C’est sur cette place qu’est installée la banque Johausen, un assez bel édifice de construction moderne. Ses bureaux sont au rez-de-chaussée; ses appartements de réception occupent le premier étage. Elle est donc située en plein quartier commerçant. Grâce à l’importance de ses affaires, à l’étendue de ses relations, elle jouit dans la ville d’une influence considérable et prépondérante.

La famille Johausen est très unie. Les deux frères s’entendent en toutes choses. L’aîné a la direction générale de la maison. Le cadet a en main plus spécialement les bureaux et la comptabilité.

Mme Johausen est une femme quelconque, aussi allemande que possible, mais d'une extrême fierté vis-à-vis de l'élément slave. D'ailleurs, la noblesse rigane lui fait bon accueil, ce qui contribue à entretenir ses instincts de vanité native.

Il suit de là que la famille Johausen tenait le premier rang dans la haute société bourgeoise de la cité, le premier rang aussi dans le monde financier du pays. Au-dehors, elle jouissait d'un crédit exceptionnel à la Banque russe pour le commerce étranger, également avec les banques de Volka-Kama, la Banque d'Escompte et la Banque internationale de Pétersbourg. La liquidation de leurs affaires aurait assuré aux frères Johausen l'une des plus belles fortunes des provinces Baltiques.

Frank Johausen, membre du conseil municipal de la ville et l'un des plus influents, défendait toujours avec une indomptable ténacité les privilèges de sa caste. On admirait, on exaltait en lui le représentant de ces idées enracinées dans l'esprit des hautes classes depuis la conquête. Il devait donc être personnellement visé et touché par ces tendances du gouvernement à russifier ces obstinées races de sang germanique.

Les provinces Baltiques étaient alors administrées par le général Gorko. Personnage de grande intelligence, comprenant les difficultés de son mandat, très prudent dans ses rapports avec la population allemande, il travaillait au triomphe du slavisme, en tâchant d'introduire ces modifications dans les mœurs publiques, sans agir par les moyens brutaux. Ferme mais juste, il répugnait à tous procédés qui auraient pu provoquer un conflit.

A la tête de la police marchait le colonel Raguenof, un Russe à tous crins, important fonctionnaire, moins habile que son chef et disposé à voir un ennemi dans tout Livonien, Esthonien ou Courlandais que le lait slave n’avait pas nourri. Âgé d’une cinquantaine d’années, cet homme audacieux, résolu, indomptable policier, ne reculait devant rien, et le gouverneur ne le maîtrisait pas sans peine. Il aurait brisé n’importe quel obstacle si on l’eût laissé faire, et mieux valait user que briser.

Que l’on ne s’étonne pas qu’il y ait lieu de fixer d’un trait plus précis ces personnages. S’ils ne sont pas en vedette, ils jouent cependant un rôle considérable dans ce drame judiciaire auquel les passions politiques, les divergences de nationalité, ont donné un si terrible éclat dans ces provinces.

Après le colonel Raguenof, et par contraste, l’attention doit être attirée sur le major Verder, son subordonné direct au département de la police. Le major est d’origine purement germanique, et, dans l’exercice de ses fonctions, il apporte les exagérations de sa race. Il tient pour les Allemands, comme le colonel tient pour les Slaves. Il poursuit les uns avec acharnement, les autres avec mollesse.

Et, malgré la différence des grades, un conflit éclaterait parfois entre ces deux personnages si le général Gorko n’intervenait dans une sage mesure.

Il faut observer, en outre, que le major Verder était très secondé par le brigadier Eck, que l’on a vu, au début de cette histoire, opérer contre l’évadé des mines de Sibérie. Celui-là n’avait pas besoin d’être encouragé à faire son devoir au cours des expéditions qu’on lui confiait, et même plus que son devoir quand il se lançait sur la piste d’un Slave. Il était aussi très apprécié de MM. Johausen frères, auxquels il avait pu rendre quelques services personnels, – services généreusement récompensés au guichet du caissier de la banque.

Maintenant, la situation est connue. On voit sur quel terrain vont se rencontrer les adversaires, celui des élections municipales, Frank Johausen, résolu à ne point céder la place, Dimitri Nicolef, porté malgré lui par les autorités russes et aussi par la classe populaire, dont un nouveau cens allait élargir le droit électoral.

Que ce simple professeur libre, sans fortune, sans position, fût convié à cette lutte contre le puissant banquier, le représentant de la haute bourgeoisie et de la fière noblesse, c’était là un symptôme dont les hommes clairvoyants devaient tenir compte. Cela ne présageait-il pas que, dans un avenir prochain, les conditions politiques de ces provinces seraient modifiées au détriment des détenteurs actuels du pouvoir municipal et administratif?

Les frères Johausen ne désespéraient pas, cependant, de combattre avec avantage, tout au moins, le rival qui leur était opposé. Cette popularité naissante de Dimitri Nicolef, ils espéraient l’écraser dans l’œuf.

Avant deux mois, on verrait si un mandat public pouvait être accordé au misérable débiteur qu’une condamnation civile, une saisie qui en serait la conséquence, auraient jeté à la rue, ruiné, sans domicile.

On ne l’a point oublié: le 15 juin, venait à échéance l’obligation souscrite par Dimitri Nicolef au profit de la maison Johausen, en reconnaissance des dettes de son père. Il s’agissait d’une somme de dix-huit mille roubles, somme énorme pour le modeste professeur de sciences. Serait-il en mesure de la payer?… Les Johausen croyaient pouvoir affirmer que le payement qui eût achevé de le libérer ne saurait être effectué. Les derniers versements ne s’étaient pas faits sans peine, et, depuis lors, il ne semblait pas que la situation pécuniaire de Nicolef se fût améliorée. Non! impossible de s’acquitter envers la maison de banque. S’il venait demander du temps, elle se montrerait impitoyable. Ce ne serait pas le débiteur qu'elle frapperait, ce serait l'adversaire politique qui serait tué du coup.

Les frères Johausen ne se doutaient guère qu'une circonstance imprévue, improbable, allait favoriser leur projet. Ils auraient eu à leur disposition la foudre du ciel, qu'ils n'auraient pu frapper et plus mortellement leur populaire rival.

Cependant, conformément à l'ordre de son maître, Trankel s'était empressé – peut-être ce mot n'est-il pas d'une absolue justesse – s'était empressé d'obéir. La mine penaude, le pied hésitant, mais en homme qui connaît le chemin du bureau de police pour l'avoir maintes fois suivi, il quitta la maison de banque, laissa à gauche le château à murailles jaunes, résidence du gouverneur des provinces, passa entre les baraques du marché, où se vend tout ce qui est vendable, objets de bric-à-brac, bibelots d'une valeur contestable, défroques lamentables, sujets religieux et ustensiles de cuisine; puis, désireux de se donner du cœur, il s'offrit une tasse de ce thé brûlant additionné de vodka, dont les marchands ambulants font un lucratif commerce; il jeta un vague regard aux petites lessiveuses du lavoir, traversa les rues où des galériens, traînant des charrettes, défilaient sous les ordres d'un garde-chiourme, plein d'égards envers ces braves gens que ne déshonore point une condamnation au bagne pour quelque infraction à la discipline, et, enfin, il arriva tranquillement au bureau de police.

Là, le domestique fut accueilli par les agents comme une vieille connaissance.

Des mains furent tendues vers lui et il y répondit par un affectueux serrement.

«Ah! te voilà, Trankel… dit un des policiers. Il y a quelque temps qu’on ne t’avait vu, ce me semble, six mois au moins…

— Non, pas tant que cela! répondit Trankel.

— Et qui t’envoie?…

— Mon maître, M. Frank Johausen.

— Bien, bien… et tu voudrais parler au major Verder?…

— Si c’est possible.

— Il vient justement d’arriver à son bureau, Trankel, et si tu veux te donner la peine de l’y rejoindre, il sera enchanté de te recevoir.»

Trankel, très honoré, se dirigea vers le cabinet du major et frappa discrètement à la porte.

Sur une invitation laconique qui lui fut envoyée de l’intérieur, il entra.

Le major, assis devant son bureau, feuilletait une liasse de documents. Il leva les yeux vers l’individu qui se présentait et dit:

«Ah! c’est toi, Trankel?…

— Moi-même, monsieur le major.

— Et tu viens…

— De la part de M. Johausen.

— Est-ce grave?…

— Le samovar, qui s’est obstiné à ne pas fonctionner ce matin…

— Parce que tu avais oublié de l’allumer, sans doute?… observa en souriant le major.

— Peut-être.

— Et combien?…

— Voici le bon.»

Et Trankel remit au major Verder la fiche que lui avait donnée son maître.

Le major lut la fiche.

«Oh! pas grand-chose… dit-il.

— Hum! fit Trankel.

— Vingt-cinq coups seulement!»

Évidemment, Trankel eût préféré en être quitte pour une douzaine.

«Eh bien, dit le major, on va te servir cela sans te faire attendre!»

Et il appela un des agents.

Celui-ci entra et resta fixe, militairement.

«Vingt-cinq coups de verge, ordonna le major, mais pas trop dur… comme pour un ami. Ah! si c’était un Slave!… Va, Trankel, déshabille-toi, et, quand ce sera terminé, tu reviendras chercher ton reçu…

— Merci, monsieur le major!»

Et, quittant le cabinet, Trankel suivit l’agent vers la chambre où l’exécution devait s’accomplir.

On le traiterait en ami, en habitué de la maison, il n’aurait pas trop à se plaindre.

Alors, Trankel se dévêtit, de manière à mettre son torse à nu, puis il se courba et tendit le dos, tandis que l’agent, une verge à la main, s’apprêtait à la brandir.

Mais, au moment où le premier des vingt-cinq coups allait être appliqué, un grand tumulte se produisit devant la porte du bureau de police.

Un homme, tout haletant d’une course rapide, s’écria:

«Le major Verder!… Le major Verder!»

La verge levée sur le dos de Trankel s’était arrêtée, et l’agent avait ouvert la porte de la chambre pour voir ce qui se passait. Trankel, non moins intéressé, n’avait rien de mieux à faire qu’à regarder.

Au bruit, le major Verder, sortant de son cabinet, venait d’apparaître.

«Qu’est-ce donc?…» demanda-t-il.

L’homme s’avança vers lui, porta la main à sa casquette, et lui remit une dépêche télégraphique, en disant:

«Un crime a été commis…

— Quand?…

— Cette nuit.

— Quel crime?…

— Un assassinat…

— Où?…

— Sur la route de Pernau, à l’auberge de la *Croix-Rompue*…

— Et quelle est la victime?…

— Le garçon de banque de la maison Johausen!

— Quoi!… ce pauvre Poch!… s’écria Trankel. Mon ami Poch?…

— Connaît-on le mobile du crime?… demanda le major Verder.

— Le vol, car le portefeuille de Poch a été retrouvé vide dans la chambre où il avait été assassiné.

— Sait-on ce qu’il contenait?…

— On l’ignore, monsieur le major, mais on le saura à la maison de banque.»

La dépêche, expédiée de Pernau, contenait tout ce que le porteur venait d’apprendre au bureau télégraphique.

Le major Verder, s’adressant à ses agents, dit:

«Toi… va prévenir le juge Kerstorf…

— Oui, monsieur le major.

— Toi… cours chez le docteur Hamine…

— Oui, monsieur le major.

— Et dites-leur de se rendre à l’instant à la banque Johausen, où je les attendrai.»

Les agents quittèrent précipitamment le bureau de police, et, quelques instants après, le major Verder se dirigeait vers la maison de banque.

Et voilà comment, dans le trouble produit par la nouvelle du crime, Trankel ne reçut pas, ce jour-là, les vingt-cinq coups de verge qui lui étaient dus pour manquement dans son service.

CHAPITRE VII

Descente de police

Deux heures après, une voiture courait à toute vitesse sur la route de Pernau. Ce n’était ni une télègue ni une malle-poste. La berline de voyage de M. Frank Johausen avait été attelée de chevaux de poste qu’elle devait changer aux relais. Si rapidement qu’elle fût conduite, on ne pouvait compter qu’elle arriverait au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue* avant la nuit. Elle ferait halte au dernier relais, et, le lendemain, dès le point du jour, elle s’arrêterait à l’auberge.

Dans la berline avaient pris place le banquier, le major Verder, le docteur Hamine pour les constatations, le juge Kerstorf, qui allait être chargé de l’instruction de cette affaire, et le greffier. Deux agents de la police occupaient le siège de derrière.

Un mot sur le juge Kerstorf, puisque les autres personnages ont déjà figuré dans ce récit et sont connus suffisamment.

Ce magistrat, âgé de cinquante ans environ, était justement apprécié de ses collègues et du public. On ne pouvait qu’admirer sa perspicacité, sa finesse, dans les causes criminelles qui relevaient de ses fonctions. D’une intégrité absolue, il ne subissait jamais aucune influence, il était inaccessible à toute pression, d’où qu’elle vînt, et la politique ne lui dictait jamais ses conclusions. C’était la loi faite homme. Peu communicatif, très réservé, il ne parlait guère et réfléchissait beaucoup.

Ainsi, dans cette affaire, il y avait, comme on dit en physique, des fluides contraires qui auraient quelque peine à se combiner si la question politique y intervenait: d’une part, le banquier Johausen et le major Verder, germains d’origine, de l’autre, le docteur Hamine, slave de naissance. Seul le juge Kerstorf était dégagé de ces passions de races qui fermentaient alors dans les provinces Baltiques.

Pendant le trajet, la conversation, – et encore fut-elle très intermittente, – n’eut pour la soutenir que le major et le banquier.

M. Frank Johausen ne cachait pas la profonde pitié que lui causait la mort du malheureux Poch. Il avait une particulière estime pour ce garçon au service de sa maison depuis de longues années déjà, d’une probité parfaite, d’un dévouement à toute épreuve.

«Et cette pauvre Zénaïde, ajouta-t-il, quelle sera sa douleur, quand elle apprendra le meurtre de celui qu’elle allait épouser!…»

En effet, le mariage devait se faire dans quelques jours, à Riga, et c’est au cimetière, au lieu de l’église, que serait conduit le garçon de banque!

Quant au major, s’il s’attendrissait sur le sort de la victime, la capture de l’assassin le préoccupait bien davantage. Impossible de rien dire à ce sujet, avant d’avoir visité le théâtre du crime, avant de savoir dans quelles conditions il avait été commis. Peut-être trouverait-on quelque indice, quelque piste à suivre. Au fond, le major Verder inclinait à voir dans cet assassinat la main d’un de ces rôdeurs dont une partie du territoire livonien était infestée à cette époque. Dès lors, il y avait lieu d’espérer, grâce aux escouades de police qui le parcouraient, que la justice s’emparerait du meurtrier de la *Croix-Rompue.*

Le rôle du docteur Hamine devait se borner aux constatations médico-légales sur le cadavre de Poch. Il attendrait cet examen pour se prononcer. Mais, en ce moment, il avait un tout autre sujet de préoccupation, d’inquiétude même. En effet, la veille, lorsqu’il était allé faire sa visite quotidienne au professeur, celui-ci ne se trouvait plus à la maison. Il avait appris d’Ilka que son père était en voyage. Ce jour-là, Nicolef, qu’elle n’avait même pas vu avant son départ, lui avait fait savoir qu’il quittait Riga pour deux ou trois jours. Où allait-il?… Nulle explication à cet égard. Ce voyage était-il projeté de la veille?… Évidemment, puisque Nicolef n’avait reçu aucune lettre depuis sa rentrée au logis.

Et, cependant, il n’en avait parlé ni à sa fille, ni au docteur, ni au consul pendant la soirée. Leur avait-il paru plus préoccupé que d’habitude?… Peut-être, mais, à un homme si renfermé, on ne demandait guère le sujet de ses préoccupations. Ce qui était certain, c’est que le lendemain, dès les premières heures, il prévenait Ilka par un petit mot, puis, se mettait en route, sans indiquer le but de son voyage. Le docteur Hamine avait donc laissé Ilka Nicolef visiblement inquiète, et lui-même partageait cette inquiétude.

La berline filait au grand trot. Un homme à cheval, envoyé en avant, prenait des mesures pour que les attelages fussent toujours préparés aux relais. Donc, pas de temps perdu, et, si l’on eût quitté Riga trois heures plus tôt, l’enquête aurait pu commencer le jour même.

L’air était sec, un peu froid. Sous une légère brise du nord-est la bourrasque de la veille avait cessé. Seulement la grande route, si effroyablement battue par les rafales, obligeait les chevaux à de grands efforts.

A mi-chemin, une demi-heure fut accordée aux voyageurs pour leur déjeuner. Ils s’attablèrent dans une assez modeste auberge du relais, et repartirent aussitôt.

Ils étaient silencieux maintenant, absorbés dans leurs idées. Sauf quelques rares paroles, échangées entre M. Frank Johausen et le major Verder, on se taisait dans la berline. Si rapidement qu'elle courût sur cette route, on trouvait que les postillons ne marchaient pas. Le plus impatient de ces compagnons de voyage, le major, les stimulait par ses conseils, les relançait par ses objurgations, les menaçait même, lorsque la voiture ralentissait à quelque montée de côte.

Bref, cinq heures sonnaient lorsque la berline fit halte au dernier relais avant Pernau.

Le soleil, très abaissé sur l'horizon, ne tarderait pas à disparaître, et la *Croix-Rompue* était encore éloignée d'une dizaine de verstes.

«Messieurs, dit le juge Kerstorf, lorsque nous arriverons à l'auberge il fera tout à fait nuit, condition peu favorable pour commencer une enquête… Je vous propose donc de la remettre à demain, dès la première heure… En outre, comme nous ne trouverons pas de chambres convenables dans ce cabaret, il me paraît préférable de passer la nuit ici, à l'auberge du relais…

— La proposition est sage, répondit le docteur Hamine, et en partant au petit jour…

— Restons ici, dit alors M. Frank Johausen, et, à moins que le major Verder n'y voie quelque inconvénient…

— Je ne vois d'autre inconvénient que de retarder nos recherches, répondit le major, qui avait hâte d'être arrivé sur le théâtre du crime.

— Il est gardé depuis le matin, sans doute, ce kabak?… demanda le juge.

— Oui, répondit le major Verder. La dépêche expédiée de Pernau m’informe que des agents y ont été immédiatement envoyés avec ordre de n’y laisser pénétrer personne et d’empêcher le cabaretier Kroff de communiquer…

— Dans ces conditions, fît observer le juge, ce retard d’une nuit ne peut être préjudiciable à l’enquête…

— Non, sans doute, répliqua le major, mais il laisse à l’auteur du crime le temps de mettre bon nombre de verstes entre la *Croix-Rompue* et lui!»

Le major parlait là en policier, très entendu dans l’exercice de ses fonctions. Toutefois, la soirée s’avançant, le jour s’éteignant dans les ombres du crépuscule, le plus sage était d’attendre au lendemain.

Le banquier et ses compagnons s’installèrent donc à l’auberge du relais, ils y dînèrent et passèrent la nuit plus ou moins confortablement dans les chambres mises à leur disposition.

Le lendemain, 15 avril, dès la pointe de l’aube, la berline se remit en route, et, vers sept heures, atteignait au kabak.

Les agents de Pernau, installés dans l’auberge, les reçurent sur le seuil.

Kroff allait et venait à travers la salle. Il n’y avait pas eu lieu d’employer la force pour le retenir. Quitter son auberge, pourquoi donc?… Au contraire. Sa présence n’était-elle pas nécessaire pour fournir aux agents tout ce dont ils avaient besoin?… Ne devait-il pas se tenir aux ordres des magistrats qui procéderaient à son interrogatoire?… Quel témoignage eût été plus précieux que le sien au début de cette enquête?…

Au surplus, les agents avaient scrupuleusement veillé à ce que les choses restassent en l'état, à l'intérieur comme à l'extérieur, dans les chambres comme sur la grande route aux abords du cabaret. Défense avait été faite aux paysans des environs de s'approcher de la maison, et, en ce moment même, une cinquantaine de curieux stationnaient à la distance imposée.

Conformément à sa promesse, vers sept heures du matin, le conducteur Broks, accompagné du iemschick avec son attelage et d'un charron, était revenu au kabak, où il comptait retrouver Poch et le voyageur qu'il ramènerait dès que la malle serait réparée.

Que l'on juge de l'horreur que ressentit Broks, lorsque le cabaretier le conduisit devant le cadavre de Poch, ce pauvre Poch, si impatient de rentrer à Riga pour y célébrer son mariage! Aussitôt, sautant sur un des chevaux de l'attelage, laissant le postillon et le charron à l'auberge, il était revenu à Pernau pour informer la police. Un télégramme fut adressé au major Verder à Riga, et des agents se transportèrent à la *Croix-Rompue*.

Quant à Broks, son intention était de retourner au kabak afin de se mettre à la disposition des magistrats qui, sans doute, réclameraient son témoignage.

Cependant le juge Kerstorf et le major Verder procédèrent immédiatement aux premières investigations. Les agents, placés les uns en avant de la maison sur la route, les autres en arrière, le long du potager, ou à droite sur la lisière du bois de sapins, furent chargés de tenir les curieux à distance.

Le juge, le major, le docteur et M. Johausen, introduits dans la salle commune, y trouvèrent le cabaretier Kroff, qui les conduisit à la chambre où gisait le cadavre du garçon de banque.

En présence de l’infortuné Poch, M. Johausen ne fut pas maître de sa douleur. C’était bien le vieux serviteur de sa maison, la tête exsangue, le corps raidi par la mort qui remontait à plus de vingt-quatre heures déjà, étendu sur le lit, dans la position où il avait reçu le coup pendant son sommeil. La veille, le jour venu, n’entendant aucun bruit dans sa chambre, Kroff, se conformant à ses recommandations, s’était bien gardé de le réveiller; mais, à l’arrivée du conducteur, vers sept heures, tous deux avaient frappé à la porte, fermée en dedans. Pas de réponse. Très inquiets alors, ils l’avaient forcée et s’étaient trouvés en présence d’un cadavre encore chaud.

Sur une table, près du lit, se voyait le portefeuille aux initiales des frères Johausen, sa chaînette traînant à terre, vide des quinze mille roubles en billets d’État que Poch portait à Revel.

En premier lieu, le docteur Hamine soumit le cadavre aux constatations d’usage. La victime avait perdu beaucoup de sang. Une mare rouge, à demi coagulée, s’étendait depuis le lit jusqu’à la porte. La chemise de Poch, toute raidie, portait à la hauteur de la cinquième côte, un peu à gauche, la trace d’un trou qui correspondait à une blessure de forme assez singulière. Nul doute qu’elle eût été faite avec un de ces couteaux suédois dont la lame, longue de cinq à six pouces, plantée dans un manche de bois, est munie d’une virole à ressort. Cette virole avait laissé sur la peau, à l’orifice de la blessure, une empreinte très reconnaissable. Le coup ayant été porté avec une extrême violence, un seul avait suffi pour provoquer une mort foudroyante en perforant le cœur.

Sur le mobile de l’assassinat, aucune hésitation possible. C’était le vol, puisque les billets que renfermait le portefeuille de Poch avaient disparu.

Mais comment l’assassin avait-il pénétré dans la chambre?… Évidemment par la fenêtre qui donnait sur la grande route, puisque, la porte de la chambre étant fermée intérieurement, le cabaretier, aidé de Broks, avait dû la forcer. Plus moyen d’en douter, d’ailleurs, lorsque l’état de la fenêtre aurait été constaté à l’extérieur de la maison.

Ce qui fut relevé avec certitude, grâce aux marques de sang laissées sur l’oreiller du lit, c’est que Poch avait dû placer son portefeuille sous cet oreiller, et que l’assassin l’avait cherché là, saisi de ses mains ensanglantées, puis déposé sur la table, après en avoir vidé le contenu.

Ces diverses constatations furent faites avec un soin minutieux, en présence du cabaretier, qui répondait très intelligemment à toutes les questions posées par le magistrat.

Avant de procéder à son interrogatoire, le juge et le major voulurent porter leurs investigations au-dehors. Il convenait de faire le tour de l’auberge et d’examiner si le meurtrier n’aurait pas laissé quelques traces de ce côté.

Tous deux sortirent, accompagnés du docteur Hamine et de M. Johausen.

Kroff et les agents venus de Riga les suivaient, tandis que les paysans étaient maintenus à une trentaine de pas.

Tout d’abord, la fenêtre de la chambre où le crime avait été commis fut l’objet d’un très sérieux examen. On reconnut au premier coup d’œil que le contrevent de droite, qui était en assez mauvais état, avait été forcé au moyen d’un levier, et que le crochet de fer était arraché de l’entablement. Par l’un des carreaux, brisé, dont les morceaux gisaient sur le sol, l’assassin avait glissé son bras, repoussé le montant qui fermait la fenêtre, et qu’il suffisait de faire basculer sur son point central. Donc, aucun doute, l’assassin s’était introduit dans la chambre à travers cette fenêtre par laquelle il s’était enfui après le crime.

Quant aux empreintes de pas le long de l’auberge, elles existaient en grand nombre, et la terre, profondément imbibée par les fortes pluies de cette nuit du 13 au 14, les avait conservées. Mais elles se croisaient, elles se confondaient, elles affectaient des formes si différentes, qu’elles ne pouvaient servir d’indices. Cela tenait à ce que la veille, avant l’arrivée des agents de Pernau, nombre de curieux avaient circulé autour de la maison, sans que Kroff eût pu les en empêcher.

Le juge Kerstorf et le major vinrent alors devant la fenêtre de la chambre qui avait été occupée pendant la nuit par le voyageur inconnu. Elle n’offrait rien de suspect. Les volets, hermétiquement fermés, n’avaient point été ouverts depuis la veille, c’est-à-dire depuis l’heure à laquelle ledit voyageur s’était hâté de quitter le kabak. Cependant l’entablement présentait quelques éraflures, la muraille également, comme s’ils eussent été rudement frôlés par le soulier d’un individu qui eût escaladé cette fenêtre.

Cela fait, le magistrat, le major, le docteur et le banquier rentrèrent dans l’auberge.

Il s’agissait maintenant de visiter la chambre du voyageur, contiguë, on le sait, à la salle commune. A tour de rôle, un agent avait jusque-là veillé devant la porte. La porte fut ouverte. Une profonde obscurité régnait dans cette chambre. Le major Verder alla lui-même à la fenêtre: il en fît basculer le montant de bois, il l’ouvrit, et, décrochant le crochet fixé à l’entablement, il repoussa les contrevents à l’extérieur.

La chambre s’éclaira. Elle était en l’état où le voyageur l’avait laissée, – le lit à demi défait dans lequel il avait passé la nuit, la chandelle de suif presque entièrement consumée, et que Kroff avait éteinte lui-même après son départ, les deux chaises de bois à leur place habituelle, ne témoignant d’aucun désordre, l’âtre de la cheminée placée au fond de la pièce contre le mur du pignon latéral, et au fond duquel se voyaient des cendres et deux bouts de tisons qui n’avaient pas brûlé depuis longtemps, une vieille armoire dont l’intérieur fut examiné et qui ne contenait rien.

Aucun indice ne put donc être relevé dans cette chambre, sauf, toutefois, les éraflures observées au-dehors sur la muraille et l’entablement de la fenêtre. Cette constatation pouvait avoir une extrême importance.

On termina les perquisitions en visitant la chambre de Kroff dans l’annexe en retour sur le jardin. Les agents fouillèrent consciencieusement les appentis de la basse-cour. Le potager fut exploré jusqu’à la haie vive qui lui servait d’enclos et qui ne présentait aucune brisure. On ne pouvait donc douter que le meurtrier ne fût venu du dehors et n’eût pénétré dans la chambre de la victime par la fenêtre donnant sur la grande route, et dont le volet avait été forcé.

Le juge Kerstorf procéda alors à l’interrogatoire de l’aubergiste. Il vint s’installer dans la grande salle, devant une table où son greffier prit place près de lui. Le major Verder, le docteur Hamine et M. Johausen, désireux d’entendre la déposition de Kroff, se rangèrent autour de la table. Kroff fut invité à dire ce qu’il savait.

«Monsieur le juge, dit-il d’un ton très précis, avant-hier soir, vers huit heures, deux voyageurs sont arrivés à l’auberge et ont demandé des chambres pour la nuit. L’un de ces voyageurs boitait légèrement par suite d’un accident de voiture, la malle-poste ayant versé à deux cents pas d’ici sur la route de Pernau.

— C’était Poch, le garçon de banque de la maison Johausen?…

— Oui… et je l’ai appris de lui-même… Il me raconta ce qui s’était passé, les chevaux s’abattant sous la bourrasque, la malle chavirée… Sans cette contusion à la jambe, il aurait été avec le conducteur jusqu’à Pernau, et plût au ciel qu’il l’eût fait!… Quant au conducteur, que je n’ai pas vu ce soir-là, il devait revenir le lendemain matin, comme il est revenu en effet, pour reprendre Poch et son compagnon, après avoir remis la malle en état.

— Poch n’a pas dit ce qu’il allait faire à Revel?… demanda le juge.

— Non… il me pria de lui servir à souper et mangea de grand appétit… Il était à peu près neuf heures quand il gagna la chambre qui lui était destinée, et dont il referma la porte intérieurement à la clef et au verrou.

— Et l’autre voyageur?

— L’autre voyageur, répondit Kroff, s’était contenté de demander une chambre sans vouloir prendre part au souper de Poch. Au moment où il se retirait, il me prévint qu’il n’attendrait pas le retour du conducteur, et repartirait le lendemain, dès quatre heures du matin…

— Vous n’avez pas su quel était ce voyageur?…

— Non, monsieur le juge, et le pauvre Poch ne le savait pas non plus… Tout en soupant, il m’a parlé de son compagnon, qui n’avait pas prononcé dix paroles pendant la route, se refusant à converser, la tête toujours sous son capuchon, un peu comme quelqu’un qui désire ne point être reconnu…

Moi-même je n’ai pu voir sa figure, et il me serait absolument impossible de fournir son signalement.

— Y avait-il d’autres personnes à la *Croix-Rompue* lorsque ces deux voyageurs y sont arrivés?…

— Une demi-douzaine de paysans et de bûcherons des alentours, et aussi le brigadier de police Eck avec un de ses hommes…

— Ah! fît M. Johausen, le brigadier Eck!… Mais ne connaissait-il pas Poch?…

— En effet, ils ont causé tous les deux, pendant le souper…

— Et tout ce monde est parti?… demanda le juge.

— Vers huit heures et demie environ, répondit Kroff. J’ai alors fermé la porte de la salle à clef, après avoir assujetti les barres à l’intérieur.

— Ainsi, on ne pouvait plus l’ouvrir du dehors?…

— Non, monsieur le juge.

— Ni du dedans, si on n’avait pas la clef?…

— Pas davantage.

— Et, le matin, vous l’avez retrouvée dans le même état?…

— Dans le même état. Il était quatre heures, lorsque le voyageur est sorti de sa chambre… Je l’ai éclairé avec ma lanterne… Il m’a payé ce qu’il me devait, un rouble… Il était encapuchonné comme la veille et je n’ai pu apercevoir son visage… Je lui ai alors ouvert la porte, que j’ai refermée après lui…

— Et il n’a pas dit où il allait?…

— Il ne l’a pas dit.

— Et, pendant la nuit, vous n’aviez entendu aucun bruit suspect?…

— Aucun.

— A votre avis, Kroff, demanda le juge, lorsque ce voyageur a quitté l’auberge, le crime devait avoir été commis?…

— Je le pense.

— Et, après le départ du voyageur, qu’avez-vous fait?…

— Je suis rentré dans ma chambre, je me suis jeté sur mon lit pour attendre le jour, et je ne crois pas m’être endormi…

— De sorte que si, de quatre heures à six heures, quelque bruit s’était produit dans la chambre de Poch, vous l’auriez certainement entendu?…

— Certainement, puisque ma chambre, bien qu’elle soit sur le jardin, est voisine de la sienne, et, s’il y avait eu lutte entre Poch et l’assassin…

— En effet, dit le major Verder, mais il n’y a pas eu lutte et le malheureux a été foudroyé dans son lit par ce coup qui l’a frappé au cœur!»

Rien de plus évident, en somme, et il n’était pas douteux que le crime eût été commis avant le départ du voyageur. Cependant, pas de certitude absolue à cet égard, car, de quatre heures à cinq heures du matin, la nuit est noire, la bourrasque se déchaînait encore avec violence, la route était déserte, et un malfaiteur avait pu, sans être aperçu, s'introduire par effraction dans l'auberge.

Kroff continua de répondre très catégoriquement aux questions qui lui furent posées par le magistrat. Assurément, il n'avait jamais pensé que les soupçons pussent se porter sur lui. Il était, d'ailleurs, absolument démontré que l'assassin, venu du dehors, avait brisé le volet, fracturé un carreau, ouvert la fenêtre, puis le meurtre accompli, il était non moins prouvé qu'il s'était enfui par ladite fenêtre, avec les quinze mille roubles volés.

Kroff raconta ensuite comment il avait découvert l'assassinat. Levé vers sept heures, il allait et venait dans la grande salle, lorsque le conducteur Broks, laissant le charron et l'iemschick s'occuper de réparer la malle, était arrivé à l'auberge. Tous deux avaient voulu réveiller Poch… Pas de réponse à leur appel… Rien quand ils frappèrent à la porte de sa chambre… Ils l'avaient alors forcée et avaient trouvé d'un cadavre.

— Vous êtes sûr qu'à ce moment, demanda le juge Kerstorf, il n'y avait plus en ce malheureux un souffle de vie?…

— Pas un souffle, monsieur le juge, répondit Kroff, qui, si grossière que fût sa nature, se montrait gagné par l'émotion. Non! pas un souffle. Broks et moi, nous avons fait tout ce qui était possible pour le ranimer, sans y parvenir!… Songez donc, un pareil coup de couteau dans le cœur!…

— Vous n'avez point retrouvé l'arme dont s'est servi l'assassin?…

— Non, monsieur le juge, et il a eu bien soin de l'emporter avec lui!

— Vous certifiez, insista le magistrat, que la chambre de Poch était fermée intérieurement?…

— Oui, au verrou et à la clef… répondit Kroff. Le conducteur Broks pourra en témoigner comme moi… C’est pour cela que nous avons été obligés de forcer cette porte…

— Broks est parti ensuite?…

— Oui, monsieur le juge, en toute hâte. Il était pressé de retourner à Pernau, afin de prévenir la police qui a envoyé deux agents.

— Et Broks n’est pas revenu?…

— Non, mais il doit revenir ce matin, parce qu’il s’attend à être interrogé.

— C’est bien, répondit M. Kerstorf, vous pouvez vous retirer, mais ne quittez pas l’auberge et restez à notre disposition…

— J’y resterai.»

Au début de son interrogatoire, Kroff avait donné ses nom, prénoms, âge et qualités, dont le greffier avait pris note, et il était probable qu’il y aurait lieu de le mander au cours de l’instruction.

Sur ces entrefaites, le magistrat fut prévenu que le conducteur Broks venait d’arriver à la *Croix-Rompue.* C’était le second témoin, et sa déposition devait être aussi importante que celle de Kroff, avec laquelle elle coïnciderait sans doute.

On fit entrer Brocks dans la salle.

Sur l’invitation du juge, il déclina ses nom, prénoms, âge et profession.

Mis en demeure de déposer, relativement aux voyageurs qu'il avait pris à Riga, à l'accident de la malle, à la résolution de Poch et de son compagnon de voyage de passer la nuit au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*, il n'omit aucun détail.

De plus sa déposition confirma celle du cabaretier en ce qui concernait la découverte du crime, l'obligation où ils s'étaient trouvés d'enfoncer la porte de la chambre puisque Poch ne répondait pas à leur appel.

Mais il insista sur ce point qui méritait d'être relevé, c'est que, pendant le trajet de la malle, le garçon de banque avait peut-être parlé un peu imprudemment de ce qu'il allait faire à Revel, c'est-à-dire verser une somme considérable pour le compte de la maison Johausen.

«Il est certain, ajouta-t-il, que l'autre voyageur et les divers postillons qui changeaient à chaque relais ont pu voir son portefeuille, et je lui en ai même fait l'observation.»

Interrogé sur ce voyageur qui avait pris la malle-poste au départ de Riga:

«Je ne le connais pas, répondit Broks, et il m'a été impossible d'apercevoir son visage.

— Il est arrivé au moment où la malle allait partir?…

— Quelques minutes avant.

— Il n'avait point retenu sa place d'avance?…

— Non, monsieur le juge.

— Allait-il jusqu'à Revel?…

— Il avait payé sa place jusqu’à Revel, voilà du moins tout ce que je puis dire.

— N’était-il pas convenu que vous viendriez le lendemain faire réparer la voiture?…

— Oui, monsieur le juge, comme il était convenu que Poch et son compagnon y reprendraient leur place.

— Et, cependant, le lendemain, dès quatre heures du matin, ce voyageur quittait la *Croix-Rompue?…*

— Aussi, ai-je été surpris, monsieur le juge, lorsque Kroff m’a dit que cet individu n’était plus à l’auberge…

— Et qu’en avez-vous conclu?… demanda M. Kerstorf.

— J’en ai conclu que son intention était de s’arrêter à Pernau, et, comme il n’avait à faire qu’une douzaine de verstes, il se sera décidé à les faire à pied.

— Si telle était son intention, fit observer le magistrat, il est singulier qu’il ne se soit pas rendu à Pernau le soir même, après l’accident de la voiture…

— En effet, monsieur le juge, répondit Broks, et c’est la réflexion que je me suis faite.»

L’interrogatoire du conducteur ne tarda pas à prendre fin, et Broks eut la permission de quitter la salle.

Lorsqu’il fut sorti, le major Verder dit au docteur Hamine:

«Vous n’avez pas d’autres constatations à faire sur le corps de la victime?…

— Non, major, répondit le docteur. J’ai relevé très exactement la place, la forme et la disposition de la blessure…

— Le coup a bien été porté avec un couteau?…

— Un couteau, dont la virole a laissé son empreinte sur la chair», affirma le docteur Hamine.

Peut-être était-ce là un indice qui servirait à l’instruction.

«Puis-je donner des ordres, s’informa alors M. Johausen, pour que le corps de ce pauvre Poch soit transporté à Riga, où se fera l’enterrement?…

— Vous le pouvez, répondit le juge.

— Nous n’avons donc plus qu’à partir?… demanda le docteur.

— Oui, répondit le major, puisqu’il n’y a pas d’autre témoin à entendre ici…

— Avant de quitter l’auberge, dit M. Kerstorf, je désire visiter une seconde fois la chambre du voyageur… Peut-être quelque indice nous a-t-il échappé?…»

Le magistrat, le major, le docteur et M. Johausen rentrèrent dans la chambre.

Le cabaretier les accompagnait, prêt à répondre à toutes les questions.

L’intention du juge était de fouiller les cendres de l’âtre, pour s’assurer qu’elles ne contenaient rien de suspect. Or, lorsque ses yeux se furent fixés sur le tisonnier de fer, déposé dans un angle du foyer, il le prit, l’examina et reconnut qu’il avait été déformé par un violent effort. Était-ce donc le levier qui avait servi à l’effraction du volet de la chambre de Poch…? Cela semblait plus que probable, et, en rapprochant cette constatation de celle qui avait relevé diverses éraflures sur l’entablement de la fenêtre, n’arrivait-t-on pas à cette conclusion presque certaine dont le magistrat entretint ses compagnons, lorsqu’ils furent sortis de l’auberge, alors que Kroff ne devait plus les entendre:

«Le crime ne peut avoir été commis que par trois personnes ou un malfaiteur venu du dehors, ou le cabaretier, ou le voyageur qui a passé la nuit dans cette chambre. Or, la découverte du tisonnier, qui sera emporté comme pièce à conviction, les traces laissées sur la fenêtre ne permettent aucun doute. Le voyageur n’ignorait pas que le portefeuille de Poch contenait une somme considérable. La nuit, après avoir ouvert la fenêtre de sa chambre, il l’a franchie, et, se servant du tisonnier comme d’un levier, il a forcé le volet de la seconde chambre, il a frappé le garçon de banque pendant son sommeil, et, le vol accompli, il est revenu dans sa chambre, d’où il est sorti à quatre heures du matin, la figure toujours cachée sous son capuchon… Ce voyageur est sûrement l’assassin…»

Il n’y avait rien à répondre à cette argumentation. Quel était ce voyageur, et parviendrait-on à établir son identité?…

«Messieurs, dit alors le major Verder, les choses se sont évidemment passées comme vient de le dire M. le juge Kerstorf… Mais les enquêtes réservent bien des surprises, et l’on ne saurait prendre trop de précautions… Je vais fermer la chambre du voyageur, j’en emporterai la clef, et je laisserai ici deux agents en permanence… Ils auront ordre de ne point quitter l’auberge, et aussi de surveiller l’aubergiste.»

Cette mesure fut approuvée et le major donna ses instructions en conséquence.

Un peu avant de remonter dans la berline, M. Johausen, prenant à part le juge, lui dit:

«Il y a une particularité dont je n'ai encore fait part à personne, monsieur Kerstorf, et il est bon que vous la connaissiez…

— Laquelle?

— C'est que je possède les numéros des billets volés… Il y en avait cent cinquante de cent roubles chacun1 et dont Poch a fait une liasse…

— Ah! vous avez conservé les numéros?… répondit le magistrat en réfléchissant.

— Oui, comme d'habitude, et je vais signaler ces numéros aux différentes banques des Provinces et de Russie…

— Je pense qu'il n'en faut rien faire, répondit M. Kerstorf. Si vous prenez cette mesure, elle pourra venir à la connaissance du voleur, et il se défiera, il ira à l'étranger, il trouvera toujours un pays où les numéros des billets ne sont pas connus… Laissons-le donc agir en toute liberté et peut-être se fera-t-il prendre?»

Quelques instants après, la berline emportait le juge et son greffier, le banquier, le major Verder et le docteur Hamine.

Le kabak de la *Croix-Rompue* restait sous la surveillance de deux agents qui ne devaient s'absenter ni nuit ni jour.

CHAPITRE VIII

A l’université de Dorpat

Ce 16 avril, le lendemain du jour où les magistrats avaient procédé à l’enquête dans l’auberge de la *Croix-Rompue*, un groupe de cinq à six jeunes étudiants arpentait la cour de l’Université de Dorpat, l’une des principales villes de la Livonie. Ils paraissaient mettre une certaine vivacité aux demandes et réponses qui s’échangeaient entre eux.

Leurs longues bottes craquaient sur le sable. Ils allaient et venaient, la taille étroitement serrée par leur ceinture de cuir, leur casquette, aux couleurs voyantes, coquettement inclinée sur l’oreille.

L’un disait:

«Pour mon compte, je garantis la fraîcheur des brochets qui figureront sur la table… Ils viennent de l’Aa, et ont été pris cette nuit même… Quant aux «stroemlings»2 ce sont les pêcheurs d’Oesel, auxquels on les a payés cher, qui les ont fournis, et je casserais la tête à quiconque ne les déclarerait pas délicieux, en les accompagnant d’un fin verre de kummel!

— Et toi, Siegfried?… demanda le plus âgé de ces étudiants.

— Moi, répondit, Siegfried, je me suis chargé du gibier, et qui soutiendrait que mes gelinottes et mes coqs de bruyère ne sont pas excellents aurait affaire à votre serviteur!

— Je réclame le prix d’excellence pour les jambons crus, déclara un troisième, et les jambons rôtis, et les «pourogens»… Que je meure à l’instant si l’on a jamais mangé de meilleurs gâteaux à la viande!… Je te les recommande particulièrement, mon cher Karl…

— Bien, répondit l’étudiant auquel son camarade venait de donner ce prénom. Grâce à toutes ces bonnes choses, nous célébrerons dignement la fête de l’Université… Mais, à une condition, c’est que cette fête ne soit pas troublée par la présence de ces Slavo-moscovito-russes…

— Non!… s’écria Siegfried, pas un de ceux qui commencent à porter trop haut la tête…

— Et auxquels nous saurons la rabaisser au niveau du ventre! répondit Karl. Et qu’il prenne garde à lui, celui qu’ils veulent reconnaître pour chef, ce Jean, que je me promets de remettre à sa place, s’il continue à prétendre se hausser à la nôtre!… Un de ces jours, je le prévois, nous aurons quelque affaire ensemble, et je ne voudrais pas avoir quitté l’Université sans l’avoir réduit à s’humilier devant ces Germains qu’il dédaigne…

— Lui et son grand ami Gospodin! ajouta Siegfried, en tendant son poing vers le fond de la cour.

— Gospodin comme tous ceux qui ont la pensée de devenir nos maîtres!… s’écria Karl. Ils verront si l’on a si facilement raison de la race germaine!… Slave, cela signifie esclave, et nous mettrons ces deux rimes-là au bout des vers de notre *hymne livonien,* et nous le leur ferons chanter…

— Chanter en mesure, en *langue allemande!*»répliqua Siegfried, tandis que ses compagnons poussaient un «hoch» formidable.

On le voit, si ces jeunes gens avaient bien fait les choses pour le repas du festival projeté, ils pensaient faire mieux encore en provoquant un conflit, peut-être même une querelle avec les étudiants d’origine slave. C’étaient d’assez mauvaises têtes, plus particulièrement ce Karl. Il exerçait, par son nom et sa situation, une sérieuse influence sur ses camarades, et pouvait les engager en quelque regrettable collision.

Quel était donc ce Karl, dont l’autorité s’imposait à une partie de cette jeunesse universitaire, ce garçon d’un caractère audacieux, mais vindicatif et querelleur?… De haute taille, la chevelure blond ardent, les yeux au regard dur, la physionomie méchante, jamais il n’hésitait à se mettre en avant.

Karl était le fils du banquier Frank Johausen. Cette année même, il allait terminer ses études à l’Université. Quelques mois encore, et il serait de retour à Riga, où sa place était tout naturellement marquée dans la maison de son père et de son oncle.

Et quel était ce Jean, à l’égard duquel Siegfried et lui n’avaient point ménagé leurs propos comminatoires?… N’at-on pas reconnu le fils de Dimitri Nicolef, le professeur de Riga, qui pouvait compter sur son camarade Gospodin, de même origine que lui, comme Karl Johausen sur son camarade Siegfried?

Dorpat, ancienne cité de la Hanse, a été fondée par les Russes en 1750. Cela est admis, bien que certains historiens veuillent faire remonter sa fondation à ce fameux an mil, qui devait voir la fin du monde.

Mais, s’il y avait doute sur la naissance de cette ville, l’une des plus charmantes des provinces Baltiques, ce doute ne saurait exister relativement à son Université célèbre que Gustave-Adolphe créa en 1632, et dont la réorganisation s’opéra en 1812, telle qu’elle fonctionne aujourd’hui. Au dire de certains voyageurs, on prendrait Dorpat pour une ville de la Grèce moderne, et il semble que ses maisons aient été apportées toutes faites de la capitale du roi Othon.

Dorpat est peu commerçante, mais elle est étudiante, avec son Université, qui se divise en corporations ou plutôt en «nations», lesquelles ne sont pas unies par le solide lien de la fraternité. D’après ce qui précède, on a pu constater que les passions y sont aussi vivaces entre l’élément slave et l’élément germanique que parmi la population des autres villes de l’Esthonie, de la Livonie et de la Courlande.

Il s’ensuit donc que la tranquillité ne règne réellement à Dorpat que durant la période des vacances universitaires, alors que les insoutenables chaleurs de la canicule ont renvoyé les étudiants dans leurs familles.

Au surplus, leur nombre considérable, – environ neuf cents – exige un personnel de soixante-douze professeurs pour les divers cours de sciences et de lettres, cours qui se font en langue allemande, et qu’entretient annuellement un budget assez lourd de deux cent trente-quatre mille roubles. A quatre mille près, c’est le chiffre des volumes que renferme la riche bibliothèque de leur Université, l’une des plus importantes et des plus suivies de l’Europe.

Cependant Dorpat n’est pas absolument dépourvue de tout commerce, en conséquence de sa situation géographique, au croisement des principales routes des provinces Baltiques, à deux cents kilomètres de Riga, et à cent trente seulement de Pétersbourg. D’ailleurs, comment pourrait-elle oublier qu’elle fut une des plus prospères cités de la Hanse? Aussi, ce commerce, si peu développé qu’il soit, est-il concentré entre les mains germaniques. En somme, les Esthes, qui forment la population indigène, ne comprennent que des ouvriers, des manœuvres ou des domestiques.

Dorpat est pittoresquement bâtie sur une colline qui domine au sud le cours de l’Embach. De longues rues desservent ses trois quartiers. Les touristes y visitent son observatoire, sa cathédrale de style grec, les ruines d’une église ogivale. Ils ne quittent pas sans regret les allées de son jardin botanique, très apprécié des amateurs.

De même que l’élément germanique l’emportait alors parmi la population de Dorpat, de même, à cette époque, il était prédominant dans la classe universitaire.

Sur les neuf cents étudiants, on en comptait une cinquantaine au plus qui fussent de race slave.

Entre ces derniers, Jean Nicolef tenait le premier rang. Ses camarades le reconnaissaient, sinon pour leur chef, du moins pour leur porte-parole dans les conflits que la sagesse et la prudence du recteur ne parvenaient pas toujours à empêcher.

Ce jour-là, tandis que Karl Johausen et son groupe se promenaient à travers la cour, discutant on sait de quelle façon, à propos des éventualités qui pouvaient troubler leur festival, un autre groupe d’étudiants, bien moscovites de cœur et de naissance, s’entretenaient à l’écart et du même sujet.

L’un de ces étudiants, âgé de dix-huit ans, vigoureux pour son âge, d’une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, avait le regard franc et vif, la figure charmante, les joues à peine revêtues d’une barbe naissante, la lèvre déjà ornée d’une fine moustache. Dès le premier abord, ce jeune homme inspirait la sympathie, bien que sa physionomie fût sérieuse, – celle d’un zélé, d’un laborieux, déjà hanté par les préoccupations de l’avenir.

Jean Nicolef allait achever sa seconde année à l’Université. On l’eût reconnu rien qu’à sa ressemblance avec sa sœur Ilka. C’étaient deux natures graves et réfléchies, très pénétrées des sentiments du devoir, et lui peut-être plus que ne comportait sa jeunesse.

On comprend donc qu’il devait exercer un certain ascendant sur ses compagnons par le zèle dont il s’animait pour la défense des idées slaves.

Son camarade Gospodin appartenait à une riche famille esthonienne de Revel. Bien qu’il fût plus âgé d’un an que Jean Nicolef, il montrait moins de sérieux dans ses actes. C’était un garçon plus prompt à l’attaque qu’à la riposte, plus avide de distractions, plus adonné aux exercices de sport; doué d’un excellent cœur et éprouvant pour Jean une amitié sincère, il était de ceux sur lesquels celui-ci pouvait compter.

De quoi auraient pu parler entre eux ces jeunes gens, sinon des préparatifs du festival qui passionnait les diverses corporations de l’Université?…

Et, suivant son habitude, Gospodin s’abandonnait à sa fougue, à son impétuosité naturelle, que Jean essayait en vain de maîtriser.

«Oui, s’écriait-il, ils prétendent nous exclure de leur banquet, ces tudesques!… Ils ont refusé nos cotisations pour que nous n’ayons pas le droit d’y prendre part!… Ils auraient eu honte de choquer leurs verres contre les nôtres!… Mais tout n’est pas dit, et leur repas pourrait bien finir avant le dessert!

— C’est indigne, j’en conviens, répondit Jean. Cependant cela vaut-il la peine que nous allions leur chercher querelle?… Ils s’obstinent à fêter de leur côté, soit!… fêtons du nôtre, mon cher Gospodin, et nous n’en viderons pas moins gaiement nos gobelets en l’honneur de l’Université!»

Or, l’impétueux Gospodin ne l’entendait pas ainsi. Accepter cette situation, ce serait une reculade, et il s’emportait, il s’exaltait par ses propres paroles.

«C’est entendu, Jean, répliqua-t-il, tu es le bon sens même, et personne ne doute que tu n’aies autant de courage que de raison!… Quant à moi, je ne suis pas raisonnable, et je ne veux pas l’être! Je considère que l’attitude de Karl Johausen et de sa bande est injurieuse envers nous, et je ne le souffrirai pas plus longtemps…

— Laisse donc ce Karl, cet Allemand, tranquille, Gospodin, répondit Jean Nicolef et ne t’inquiète ni de ses actes ni de ses paroles!… Dans quelques mois, lui et toi vous aurez quitté l’Université, et il n’est pas probable que vous vous rencontriez jamais, du moins dans des conditions où la question d’origine et de race sera en jeu…

— C’est possible, sage Nestor! riposta Gospodin, et que c’est beau d’être maître de soi comme tu l’es!… Mais, de partir d’ici sans avoir infligé à ce Karl Johausen la leçon qu’il mérite, je ne m’en consolerais pas!

— Voyons, dit Jean Nicolef, ne nous donnons pas, aujourd’hui du moins, les premiers torts, en le provoquant sans motif…

— Sans motif?… s’écria le bouillant jeune homme. J’en ai mille et mille: sa figure qui ne me revient pas, son attitude qui me choque, le son de sa voix qui me déplaît, son regard dédaigneux, l’air de supériorité qu’il prend et que ses camarades encouragent en le reconnaissant pour chef de leur corporation!

— Tout cela n’est pas sérieux, Gospodin, déclara Jean Nicolef, qui prit le bras de son camarade par un instinctif mouvement d’amitié. Tant qu’il n’y aura pas une injure directe, je ne vois pas en tout ceci matière à provocation!… Ah! si l’injure se produisait, je n’attendrais personne pour y répondre, tu peux m’en croire, mon camarade!…

— Et tu nous aurais à tes côtés, Jean, affirmèrent les autres jeunes gens du groupe.

— Je le sais, dit l’intraitable Gospodin. Mais je m’étonne que Jean ne se trouve pas particulièrement visé par ce Karl…

— Que veux-tu dire, Gospodin?…

— Je veux dire que si, nous autres, nous n’avons avec ces Germains que des rivalités d’école, Jean Nicolef est autrement engagé vis-à-vis de Karl Johausen!…»

Jean savait de reste à quoi Gospodin faisait allusion. La rivalité des Johausen et des Nicolef à Riga était connue des étudiants de l’Université. On n’ignorait pas que les chefs de ces deux familles étaient opposés l’un à l’autre dans cette lutte qui allait les mettre aux prises sur le terrain électoral, l’un porté par l’opinion publique, encouragé par l’autorité administrative, afin d’abattre l’autre.

Aussi, Gospodin avait-il tort d’exciper de cette situation personnelle de son camarade pour étendre jusqu’aux fils la rivalité des pères.

Par malheur, lorsque la colère le prenait, il ne se contenait plus et dépassait toute mesure.

Cependant Jean n’avait pas répondu. Sa figure avait légèrement pâli dans un reflux de son sang au cœur.

Mais, assez fort pour se posséder, après un regard ardemment jeté vers l’extrémité de la cour, où paradait le groupe de Karl Johausen:

«Ne parlons pas de cela, Gospodin, dit-il d’une voix grave qui tremblait un peu. Je n’ai jamais fait intervenir le nom de M. Johausen dans nos discussions, et fasse Dieu que Karl soit aussi réservé vis-à-vis de mon père que je le suis vis-à-vis du sien!… S’il manquait à cette réserve…

— Jean a raison, dit un des étudiants, et Gospodin a tort. Ne nous occupons pas de ce qui se passe à Riga, mais bien de ce qui se passe à Dorpat.

— Oui, répliqua Jean Nicolef, qui désirait ramener la conversation à son premier sujet. Toutefois n’exagérons rien et voyons la tournure que prendront les choses…

— Ainsi, Jean, demanda l’étudiant, tu ne penses pas que nous ayons à protester contre l’attitude de Karl Johausen et de ses camarades, à propos de ce banquet dont ils nous ont exclus?…

— Je pense que, sauf incidents nouveaux, nous ne devons montrer que la plus complète indifférence.

— Va pour l’indifférence! répondit Gospodin en secouant la tête d’un air peu approbatif. Reste à savoir si nos camarades s’y résigneront… Ils sont furieux, Jean, je t’en préviens…

— Grâce à toi, Gospodin.

— Non, Jean, et il suffira d’un regard dédaigneux, d’un mot malsonnant pour mettre le feu aux poudres!

— Bon! s’écria Jean Nicolef en souriant, les poudres ne feront pas explosion, mon camarade, car nous aurons eu soin de les noyer dans le Champagne!»

C’était la raison même qui inspirait cette réponse de la plus sage de ces jeunes têtes. Mais les autres étaient montées… Suivraient-elles ces conseils de prudence?… Comment la journée se terminerait-elle?… Ce festival ne serait-il pas l’occasion d’un désordre?… Si les provocations ne venaient pas du côté slave, ne viendraient-elles pas du côté allemand?… On devait le craindre.

Aussi ne s’étonnera-t-on pas que le recteur de l’Université eût conçu de très sérieuses inquiétudes. Depuis quelque temps, il ne l’ignorait point, la politique, ou tout au moins cette lutte du slavisme et du germanisme tendait à s’accentuer dans le monde des étudiants.

La très grande majorité entendait maintenir à l’Université les traditions, les idées qui dataient de son origine.

Le gouvernement savait qu’il y avait là un ardent foyer de résistance aux tentatives de russification dont les provinces Baltiques étaient menacées. Prévoyait-on quelles seraient les conséquences de troubles qui se produiraient à cette occasion?… Il convenait d’y prendre garde. Si ancienne, si respectable que fût l’Université de Dorpat, elle n’était pas à l’abri d’un ukase impérial, en cas qu’elle devînt le centre d’une agitation contre le mouvement panslaviste. Le recteur observait donc de très près ces dispositions des étudiants. Les professeurs, bien qu’ils fussent tous acquis aux idées allemandes, les redoutaient aussi… Peut-on dire où s’arrêterait cette jeunesse, lancée dans les luttes de la politique?…

En réalité, quelqu’un, ce jour-là, eut plus d’influence que le recteur. Ce fut Jean Nicolef. Si le recteur n’avait pu obtenir que Karl Johausen et ses amis renonçassent à exclure du banquet Jean et ses camarades, celui-ci obtint de Gospodin et des autres qu’ils ne troubleraient point le festival. On ne pénétrerait pas dans la salle du banquet. On ne répondrait pas par des chansons russes aux chansons allemandes, – à la condition, toutefois, de n’être ni provoqué ni insulté. Et qui pouvait répondre de ces têtes échauffées par le vin?… Jean Nicolef et ses camarades se réuniraient au-dehors, ils fêteraient cet anniversaire à leur façon et resteraient tranquilles si personne ne se hasardait à troubler leur tranquillité.

Cependant la journée s’avançait. En masse, les étudiants occupaient la grande cour de l’Université. Les études chômaient ce jour-là. Rien à faire qu’à se promener par bandes, à s’observer, à s’éviter aussi. On pouvait toujours redouter, même avant l’heure du banquet, qu’un incident quelconque n’occasionnât une provocation d’abord, une conflagration ensuite. Étant donnée la disposition des esprits, peut-être eût-il mieux valu interdire ce festival?… Mais, d’empêcher la célébration de cet anniversaire, cela n’eût-il pas surexcité les corporations, fourni un prétexte à ces troubles que l’on voulait précisément prévenir?… Une Université n’est point un collège où l’on s’en tire avec des punitions et des pensums. Ici, il faudrait en arriver aux expulsions, chasser les meneurs, et c’eût été une mesure grave.

Jusqu’à l’heure du banquet – quatre heures du soir – Karl Johausen, Siegfried et leurs amis ne quittèrent pas la cour. La plupart des étudiants venaient échanger quelques paroles avec eux, comme s’ils eussent attendu les instructions de leur chef. Le bruit avait couru que le banquet serait interdit, – bruit erroné d’ailleurs, car, ainsi qu’il a été dit, cette interdiction aurait pu déterminer un éclat.

Mais cela avait suffi pour motiver des allées et venues entre les groupes.

Jean Nicolef et ses camarades, eux, ne voulurent pas s’inquiéter de cet état de choses. Ils se promenaient à l’écart, ainsi qu’ils le faisaient d’habitude, et se croisaient parfois avec les autres étudiants.

On se dévisageait alors. Des regards sortaient ces provocations que les lèvres ne laissaient pas s’échapper encore. Jean restait calme, affectait l’indifférence. Mais que de peine il éprouvait à contenir Gospodin!

Celui-ci ne détournait pas la tête, même en signe de dédain, il ne baissait pas les yeux. Son regard s’engageait comme le fer d’une épée avec celui de Karl.

Il s’en fallait de rien que cette attitude ne donnât lieu à une altercation, qui ne se fût certainement pas bornée à mettre ces deux seuls adversaires aux prises.

Enfin, la cloche du banquet se fit entendre. Karl Johausen, précédant ses camarades – plusieurs centaines – se dirigea vers la salle de l’amphithéâtre qui leur avait été réservée.

Bientôt, il ne resta plus dans la cour que Jean Nicolef, Gospodin et la cinquantaine d’étudiants slaves, attendant l’instant de quitter l’Université pour rentrer dans leurs familles ou chez leurs correspondants.

Puisque rien ne les retenait, peut-être eussent-ils sagement fait en partant sur l’heure. C’était l’avis de Jean Nicolef, mais en vain essaya-t-il de le faire partager à ses camarades. Il semblait que Gospodin et quelques autres fussent enchaînés au sol, attirés même vers l'amphithéâtre comme par un aimant.

Vingt minutes s'écoulèrent ainsi. Ils se promenaient en silence. Ils se rapprochaient des fenêtres de la salle ouvertes sur la cour. Que voulaient-ils donc?… Écouter les bruyants propos qui s'en échappaient, et riposter si des paroles malséantes arrivaient à leurs oreilles?…

En vérité, les convives n'eurent pas besoin d'attendre la fin du banquet pour préluder aux chants et aux toasts. Leurs têtes s'étaient enflammées dès les premières coupes vidées. A travers les fenêtres, ils avaient vu Jean Nicolef et les autres à portée de les entendre. Aussi en vinrent-ils aux personnalités.

Jean fit un dernier effort.

«Partons… dit-il à ses camarades.

— Non! répondit Gospodin.

— Non! répondirent les autres.

— Vous ne voulez ni m'écouter ni me suivre?…

— Nous voulons écouter ce que ces Germains ivres se permettent de dire, et, si cela ne nous convient pas, c'est toi qui nous suivras, Jean!

— Viens, Gospodin, dit Jean, je le veux!

— Attends, répondit Gospodin, et, dans quelques minutes, tu ne le voudras plus!»

Au-dedans redoublait le tumulte, éclats de voix qui se mélangeaient, bruit de verres choqués, cris et hochs qui détonaient comme une mitraillade.

Puis un chœur fut entonné à pleine poitrine, – ce chant, qui se traîne sur un monotone trois-quatre, si en honneur dans les universités allemandes:

Gaudeamus igitur,

Juvenes dum sumus!

Post jucundam juventutem,

Post molestam senectutem,

Nos habebit humus!

On en conviendra, ces paroles ne sont rien moins que réjouissantes, et ne méritent qu’un air d’enterrement. Autant chanter un *De Profundis* au dessert! Après tout, ce chant est bien dans la note germanique.

Mais, voici qu’une voixse fit entendre, disant:

«O Riga, qui t’a faite si belle?… L’esclavage des Livoniens!… Puissions-nous, un jour, avec l’argent, acheter ton château auxAllemands et les faire danser sur des pierres chauffées!…»

C’était Gospodin qui venait de lancer cet hymne russe de si large envergure.

Puis, après lui et avec lui, ses camarades firent retentir les airs du refrain de «Boje-Tsara-Krani», l’hymne moscovite d’un si grand et si religieux caractère.

Soudain, la porte de la salle s'ouvrit. Une centaine d'étudiants s'élancèrent dans la cour.

Ils entourèrent le groupe slave, au centre duquel se trouvait Jean Nicolef, impuissant désormais à retenir ses camarades, surexcités par les cris et les gestes de leurs adversaires. Bien que Karl Johausen ne fût pas avec eux pour les pousser à la violence, – il était encore dans l'amphithéâtre, – leur *Gaudeamus igitur,* vociféré, hurlé même, essayait d'étouffer l'hymne russe dont la puissante mélodie perçait malgré leurs efforts.

A ce moment, deux étudiants se trouvèrent face à face, prêts à se jeter l'un sur l'autre – Siegfried et Gospodin. Était-ce entre eux que cette question de races allait se décider?… Les deux partis ne prendraient-ils pas fait et cause pour leurs champions?… Cette altercation ne dégénérerait-elle pas en une bataille générale, dont la responsabilité retomberait sur l'Université elle-même?…

En entendant le tumulte provoqué par la sortie des convives du banquet, le recteur s'était hâté d'intervenir. Quelques-uns des professeurs, s'étant joints à lui, parcouraient maintenant la cour à travers les groupes. Ils essayaient de calmer ces jeunes gens prêts à en venir aux mains. Ils n'y arrivaient pas. L'autorité du recteur était méconnue…

Que pouvait-il d'ailleurs au milieu de ces «germaniques» dont le nombre grossissait à mesure que se vidait la salle de l'amphithéâtre?…

Jean Nicolef et ses camarades, malgré leur infériorité numérique, ne cédaient ni devant les menaces ni devant les injures.

En ce moment, Siegfried, le verre à la main, s’approchant de Gospodin, lui en jeta le contenu au visage.

C’était le premier coup porté, et il allait être suivi de mille autres.

Et, cependant, rien qu’à la vue de Karl Johausen, qui venait d’apparaître sur les marches du perron, on s’arrêta de part et d’autre. Les rangs s’ouvrirent, et le fils du banquier put se diriger vers le groupe où se tenait le fils du professeur.

On ne saurait dépeindre l’attitude de Karl en cet instant. Calme, ce n’était pas la colère que sa physionomie respirait, c’était le dédain, le mépris, à mesure qu’il s’approchait de son adversaire. Ses camarades ne pouvaient s’y tromper: il ne venait là que pour lui jeter une nouvelle injure à la face.

Au tumulte avait succédé un silence plus terrible encore. On sentait que le conflit, qui précipitait l’une sur l’autre les corporations rivales de l’Université, allait se dénouer entre Jean Nicolef et Karl Johausen.

Cependant Gospodin, ne songeant plus à Siegfried, attendit que Karl se fût avancé de quelques pas, et fit un mouvement pour lui barrer le passage.

Jean le retint.

«Cela me regarde!» dit-il simplement.

Et, en somme, il avait raison de dire que cela le regardait, et lui seul.

Aussi, gardant le plus parfait sang-froid, écarta-t-il de la main ceux de ses camarades qui voulaient s’interposer.

«Tu ne m’empêcheras pas… s’écria Gospodin au paroxysme de la colère.

— Je le veux!» répondit Jean Nicolef, et d’une voix si résolue qu’il n’y avait pas à lui résister.

Alors, s’adressant à la masse des étudiants et de manière à être entendu de tous:

«Vous êtes des centaines, dit-il, et nous ne sommes pas cinquante!… Attaquez-nous donc!… Nous nous défendrons, nous succomberons!… Mais vous vous serez conduits comme des lâches!…»

Un cri de fureur lui répondit.

Karl fît signe alors qu’il voulait parler.

Le silence se rétablit.

«Oui, dit-il, nous serions des lâches!… Y a-t-il un de ces Slaves qui veuille prendre l’affaire à son compte?…

— Nous tous!» s’écrièrent les camarades de Jean.

Celui-ci se rapprochant dit:

«Ce sera moi, et si Karl cherche à être personnellement provoqué, je le provoque…

— Toi?… s’écria Karl, en faisant un geste de mépris.

— Moi! répondit Jean. Choisis deux de tes amis… J’ai déjà fait choix des miens…

— Toi… te battre avec moi?…

— Oui… demain, si tu n’es pas prêt en ce moment. A l’instant même, si tu le veux!»

Il n’est pas rare que les étudiants aient de ces affaires, et mieux vaut que les autorités ferment les yeux, car les conséquences n’en sont jamais très graves.

Cette fois, il est vrai, il y avait lieu de craindre que l’issue ne fût fatale, tant les adversaires étaient sous le coup d’une animosité personnelle.

Karl s’était croisé les bras, et, regardant Jean de la tête aux pieds:

«Ah! dit-il, tu as déjà fait choix de tes témoins?…

— Les voici, répliqua Jean, en indiquant Gospodin et un autre étudiant.

— Et tu crois qu’ils consentiront?…

— Si nous consentirons!… s’écria Gospodin.

— Eh bien, moi, répondit Karl, il y a une chose à laquelle je ne consentirai pas, Jean Nicolef, c’est de me battre avec toi!…

— Et pourquoi, Karl?…

— Parce que l’on ne se bat pas avec le fils d’un assassin!…»

CHAPITRE IX

Dénonciation

Voici ce qui s’était passé la journée précédente à Riga, où le juge Kerstorf, le major Verder, le docteur Hamine et M. Frank Johausen étaient rentrés dans la nuit du 15 au 16 avril.

Douze heures auparavant, dès le matin, s’était répandue la nouvelle du crime commis au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*. En même temps que l’assassinat on apprenait le nom de la victime, Poch, le garçon de banque.

Cet infortuné était très connu de toute la ville. Chaque jour on le rencontrait, lorsque, la sacoche pendue à son épaule, sous le bras le portefeuille retenu à sa ceinture par une chaînette de cuivre, il allait faire les recouvrements pour la maison Johausen frères. Homme bon et serviable, d’heureuse et belle humeur, très aimé et estimé, il n’avait que des amis, pas un ennemi. A la veille d’épouser Zénaïde Parensof, après une si longue attente, grâce à son travail, à sa conduite, à la régularité de son existence, à la sympathie qu’il inspirait, ses économies lui permettaient, en les joignant à celles de sa femme, d’assurer leur avenir. Le surlendemain, les futurs devaient se trouver en présence du pasteur protestant qui célébrerait leur union. Il y aurait une fête de famille à laquelle se joindraient les collègues des autres banques, afin de prendre joyeuse part à la cérémonie nuptiale. On ne doutait pas que MM. Johausen frères voulussent l’honorer de leur présence. Les préparatifs étaient commencés, achevés même… Et voilà que Poch venait de tomber sous les coups d’un assassin, dans un cabaret isolé, sur l’une des routes de la Livonie!… Quel effet produisit cette nouvelle!

Et, paraît-il, on ne put éviter que Zénaïde ne l'apprît brusquement, sans préparation, en lisant un journal qui insérait la dépêche et ne donnait aucun détail.

La pauvre femme fut comme foudroyée. Ses voisins d'abord, Mme Johausen ensuite, lui apportèrent des consolations et des secours. Peut-être la pauvre femme ne se relèverait-elle pas d'un si terrible coup.

Cependant, si on connaissait la victime, on ne connaissait pas le meurtrier. Au cours de ces deux journées du 14 et du 15, alors que la justice s'était rendue sur les lieux et procédait à son enquête, rien n'avait transpiré à ce sujet. Il convenait d'attendre le retour des magistrats, et encore était-il possible qu'ils n'eussent point découvert l'auteur du crime.

Quant au meurtrier, quel qu'il fût, il était voué à l'exécration publique. Ce ne serait pas assez pour le châtier de toute la sévérité des lois. On était à regretter le temps où les plus épouvantables tortures précédaient l'expiation suprême. Il ne faut pas oublier que ce drame judiciaire a pour théâtre les provinces Baltiques où, sans remonter à une lointaine époque, la justice procédait d'une façon barbare contre les condamnés à la peine capitale. On les tenaillait d'abord au fer rouge, on les livrait au supplice des verges, mille coups quelquefois, six mille même, qui ne frappaient plus qu'un cadavre. Il y avait de ces patients que l'on enfermait entre quatre murs, où ils mouraient dans les tortures de la faim, – à moins qu'on ne voulût leur arracher des révélations.

Alors on les nourrissait uniquement de viande ou de poisson salés, sans jamais les abreuver d'une seule goutte d'eau – genre de «question» qui arrachait bien des réponses.

Les mœurs se sont sensiblement adoucies, au point que, si la peine de mort a été maintenue en Russie pour les crimes politiques, elle est abolie pour les crimes de droit commun, et remplacée par les travaux forcés dans les mines sibériennes. La déportation pour l'assassin du kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*, ce ne suffisait pas à satisfaire la population rigane.

Ainsi que cela a été dit, des ordres avaient été donnés relativement au transport de la victime. Ce n'était pas qu'il y eût lieu de faire de nouvelles constatations à Riga.

Le docteur Hamine avait minutieusement relevé dans son procès-verbal la nature et la forme de la blessure, et les empreintes du coup de couteau à son orifice extérieur.

Mais M. Frank Johausen tenait à ce que les funérailles du garçon de banque fussent faites dans la ville, funérailles, commandées par la pitié et la sympathie, qui seraient entièrement à la charge de sa maison.

Dès la matinée du 16, le major Verder se présenta au cabinet de son chef hiérarchique, le colonel de police Raguenof. Ce fonctionnaire attendait impatiemment d'être mis au courant de l'affaire afin de lancer ses meilleurs limiers sur la piste du meurtrier, si quelques indications le permettaient. On verrait plus tard s'il serait nécessaire d'en référer au gouverneur des provinces. Jusqu'à plus ample information, il semblait bien qu'il ne s'agissait que d'un crime de droit commun, un assassinat suivi de vol.

Le major rapporta tous les détails de l'enquête au colonel Raguenof, les circonstances dans lesquelles le crime avait été commis, les indices relevés au cours des perquisitions, les constatations qui avaient été faites par le docteur Hamine.

«Je vois, lui répondit le colonel, que vos soupçons visent plus particulièrement ce voyageur qui a passé la nuit dans l'auberge…

— Très particulièrement, mon colonel.

— Le cabaretier Kroff n'a pas eu une attitude suspecte pendant l'enquête?…

— Il venait naturellement à l'esprit qu'il pouvait être l'assassin, répondit le major, bien qu'il n'y ait rien à reprendre dans ses antécédents. Mais, après les traces observées à la fenêtre de la chambre de ce voyageur, dont le départ a été si matinal; après la découverte, dans ladite chambre, du tisonnier qui a servi à forcer les contrevents, nous n'avions plus de doute sur l'auteur du crime.

— Il sera bon, cependant, de surveiller ce Kroff…

— Assurément, mon colonel. Aussi deux de mes agents gardent-ils la maison, et le cabaretier doit se tenir à la disposition de la justice.

— Ainsi, reprit le colonel Raguenof en insistant, vous n'attribuez même pas ce meurtre à quelque malfaiteur du dehors, qui aurait pu pénétrer dans la chambre de la victime?…

— Je ne veux pas être trop affirmatif, répondit le major, mais il m'est difficile de l'admettre, tant les présomptions se changent en certitudes, lorsqu'on les applique au compagnon de Poch.

— Je vois que votre conviction est faite, major Verder…

— Ma conviction, comme celle du juge Kerstorf, du docteur Hamine et de M. Johausen… Vous remarquerez que ce voyageur a toujours cherché à ne point être reconnu, aussi bien lorsqu'il est arrivé au kabak qu'au moment où il en est parti…

— Et il n'a pas dit où il allait en sortant de l'auberge de la *Croix-Rompue?…*

— Non, mon colonel.

— Ne peut-on supposer que son intention était, en quittant Riga, de se rendre à Pernau?…

— Hypothèse très plausible, mon colonel, bien qu'il eût retenu sa place jusqu'à Revel.

— Aucun étranger n'a été vu à Pernau pendant les journées du 14 et du 15?…

— Aucun, affirma le major Verder, et pourtant la police était en éveil, l'assassinat lui ayant été signalé le jour même… Où est allé ce voyageur?… A-t-il gagné Pernau?… Ne s'est-il pas enfui hors des provinces Baltiques, avec le produit de son vol?…

— En effet, major Verder, et il est à croire que la proximité des ports lui aura fourni l'occasion de s'échapper…

— Lui fournira cette occasion, mon colonel, repartit le major, car actuellement c'est à peine si la navigation est libre dans la mer Baltique ou sur le golfe de Finlande… Les renseignements que j'ai reçus constatent que pas un navire n'a encore pu prendre le large… Si donc ledit voyageur cherche à s'embarquer, il faut qu'il attende quelques jours, soit dans une bourgade de l'intérieur, soit dans un des ports du littoral, Pernau, Revel…

— Ou Riga, répondit le colonel Raguenof. Pourquoi n’y serait-il pas revenu?… Peut-être est-ce ici qu’il trouverait à dépister plus sûrement la police?…

— Cela me paraît peu probable, mon colonel, mais enfin il faut tout prévoir, et nos agents seront chargés de visiter les navires en partance. Dans tous les cas, la débâcle ne sera pas complète avant la fin de la semaine, et, jusque-là, je donnerai des ordres pour que la surveillance de la ville et du port soit sévèrement organisée.»

Le colonel approuva les diverses mesures projetées par son subordonné, en les étendant à tout le territoire des provinces Baltiques.

Le major Verder lui promit de le tenir au courant. Quant à l’enquête, elle serait poursuivie par le juge Kerstorf, et l’on pouvait se reposer sur cet actif magistrat du soin de réunir tous les documents relatifs à cette affaire.

D’ailleurs, après cette conversation avec le major Verder, le colonel Raguenof ne mettait plus en doute que l’assassin ne fût le voyageur qui accompagnait le garçon de banque à l’auberge de Kroff. Il existait contre lui des charges accablantes. Mais qui était-il?…

Et comment parviendrait-on à établir son identité, puisqu’il n’était connu ni du conducteur Broks, qui l’avait pris à Riga au départ de la malle, ni du cabaretier Kroff, qui l’avait hébergé dans son kabak?… Ni l’un ni l’autre n’ayant aperçu son visage, ils ne pouvaient dire s’il était jeune ou vieux. En ces conditions, sur quelle piste lancer les agents?… De quel côté diriger les recherches?… De quels nouveaux témoins l’instruction attendrait-elle une révélation qui lui permît d’agir avec quelque chance de succès?…

C’était l’obscurité complète.

On verra bientôt comment cette obscurité fut soudainement illuminée d'une lueur, comment cette nuit devint le jour.

Ce matin-là, après avoir rédigé son rapport médico-légal sur l'Affaire de la *Croix-Rompue,* le docteur Hamine était allé le porter au cabinet de M. Kerstorf.

«Aucun nouvel indice?… demanda-t-il au magistrat.

— Aucun, docteur.»

En quittant le cabinet du juge, le docteur Hamine rencontra le consul de France, M. Delaporte. Chemin faisant, il lui parla de l'affaire et des difficultés qu'elle présentait.

«En effet, répondit le consul, et, s'il paraît certain que ce voyageur est l'auteur du crime, il est au moins douteux que l'on parvienne à le découvrir… Vous attachez, docteur, une grande importance à cette constatation que le coup a été porté avec un couteau dont la virole a laissé une empreinte autour de la blessure?… Soit!… Mais de là à retrouver ce couteau…

— Qui sait?… répondit le docteur Hamine.

— Nous verrons bien, dit M. Delaporte. A propos, avez-vous des nouvelles de M. Nicolef?

— Des nouvelles de Dimitri?… demanda le docteur. Et comment en aurais-je, puisqu'il est en voyage?…

— En effet, répondit le consul, et depuis trois jours!… Et c'est singulier, plus j'y réfléchis…

— Oui… observa le docteur Hamine.

— Et, hier, Mlle Nicolef n’avait encore reçu aucune nouvelle…

— Allons voir Ilka, proposa le docteur. Peut-être le facteur lui a-t-il remis ce matin une lettre de son père, ou peut-être Nicolef est-il de retour chez lui?…»

M. Delaporte et le docteur Hamine se dirigèrent vers le faubourg à l’extrémité duquel s’élevait la maison du professeur.

Lorsqu’ils furent à la porte, ils demandèrent si Mlle Nicolef pouvait les recevoir.

Sur la réponse affirmative de la servante, ils furent aussitôt introduits dans la salle où se tenait Ilka.

«Ma chère Ilka, ton père est-il revenu?… demanda tout d’abord le docteur.

— Il n’est pas revenu…» répondit la jeune fille.

Et, à sa figure pâle et soucieuse, on voyait combien elle devait être inquiète.

«Mais, mademoiselle, avez-vous eu de ses nouvelles?» reprit le consul.

Un signe négatif d’Ilka fut sa seule réponse.

«Cette absence est inexplicable, reprit le docteur, non moins que la cause du voyage de Dimitri…

— Pourvu qu’il ne soit pas arrivé malheur à mon père!… murmura la jeune fille d’une voix troublée. Les crimes sont fréquents en Livonie depuis quelque temps…»

Le docteur Hamine voulut la rassurer, étant, en somme, plus surpris qu'inquiet de cette absence.

«Il ne faut rien exagérer, dit-il, et l'on peut encore voyager avec quelque sécurité!… Il est vrai, un meurtre a été commis du côté de Pernau… et, si on ne connaît pas l'assassin, on connaît la victime… un malheureux garçon de banque…

— Vous le voyez, mon bon docteur, fit observer Ilka, les routes ne sont pas très sûres, et voilà bientôt quatre jours que mon père est parti… Ah! j'ai malgré moi le pressentiment de quelque malheur…

— Rassurez-vous, ma chère enfant, dit le docteur en lui prenant les mains, il ne faut pas vous abandonner!… Dimitri ayant prévenu qu'il serait absent deux ou trois jours… il n'y a pas de retard inquiétant.

— Vous dites ce que vous pensez, docteur?… demanda la jeune fille en le regardant.

— Certainement, Ilka, certainement, et je n'aurais aucune inquiétude, je vous assure, si je savais quelle a été la cause de ce voyage… Avez-vous le mot que votre père a laissé avant de partir?…

— Le voici!» répondit Ilka en tirant de sa poche un billet qu'elle remit au docteur.

M. Delaporte lut attentivement. Rien de plus à tirer de cette phrase laconique de Dimitri que sa fille avait lue et relue maintes fois.

«Ainsi, reprit le docteur, il ne vous a pas embrassée au moment de son départ?…

— Non, mon bon docteur, répondit Ilka, et même, la veille, en le faisant comme chaque soir, il m’a semblé que sa pensée était à tout autre chose…

— Peut-être, fit observer le consul, M. Nicolef avait-il quelque sujet de préoccupation?…

— Il était rentré plus tard que d’habitude, vous vous en souvenez, docteur… Retenu par une leçon qui s’était prolongée… a-t-il prétendu.

— En effet, répondit le docteur Hamine, il m’a paru moins libre d’esprit qu’à l’ordinaire!… Mais, j’insiste sur ce point, ma chère Ilka, après notre départ, qu’a fait Dimitri?…

— Il m’a dit bonsoir et est remonté dans sa chambre, tandis que j’ai regagné la mienne…

— Et, depuis, il n’a pu recevoir de visite qui ait pu motiver ce voyage?…

— Non, assurément, répondit la jeune fille. Je pense qu’il a dû se coucher aussitôt, car je n’ai entendu aucun bruit pendant la soirée…

— Votre servante ne lui a point remis une lettre qui serait arrivée plus tard?…

— Non, docteur, et je puis affirmer que la porte de la maison ne s’est pas rouverte, après s’être refermée sur vous.

— Il est donc certain que, ce soir-là, son projet était déjà arrêté…

— Nul doute à cet égard, ajouta M. Delaporte.

— Nul doute! répondit le docteur. Et, le lendemain matin, ma chère enfant, après avoir lu le billet de votre père, vous n’avez pas cherché à savoir quelle direction il avait prise en quittant sa maison?…

— Comment l’aurais-je pu, répondit Ilka, et même pourquoi l’aurais-je fait?… Mon père a eu des raisons qu’il n’a cru devoir communiquer à personne, pas même à sa fille… Aussi, si je suis inquiète, c’est moins parce que mon père s’est absenté que parce que son absence se prolonge…

— Non, Ilka, non!… répondit le docteur Hamine, qui voulait absolument rassurer la jeune fille, Dimitri est encore dans les délais qu’il a fixés, et cette nuit, ou demain au plus tard, il sera de retour!»

Au fond, le docteur était peut-être plus inquiet des motifs qui avaient pu déterminer ce voyage que du voyage même.

Puis, M. Delaporte et lui, prenant congé, promirent de revenir dans la soirée pour avoir des nouvelles de Dimitri.

La jeune fille resta sur le seuil de la maison jusqu’au moment où tous deux disparurent au tournant de la rue. Puis, pensive, agitée de sombres pressentiments, elle regagna sa chambre.

Presque à la même heure, dans le cabinet du major Verder, se révélait un fait relatif au crime de la *Croix-Rompue,* et qui allait mettre le magistrat sur la trace du coupable.

Ce jour-là, dès le matin, la brigade dirigée par Eck était rentrée à Riga.

On ne l’a pas oublié, ces agents avaient été envoyés dans le nord de la province, où, depuis quelque temps, se commettaient nombre d’attentats contre les personnes et les propriétés. Il y a lieu de rappeler aussi que, huit jours auparavant, Eck opérait aux environs du lac Peipous, à la recherche d'un évadé des mines de Sibérie, et qu'il avait dû le poursuivre jusqu'en vue de Pernau.

Mais le fugitif, se jetant au milieu des glaçons en dérive de la Pernova, disparut dans la débâcle de la rivière.

Ce malfaiteur avait-il péri?… C'était probable, ce n'était pas sûr.

Et, précisément, le brigadier Eck en doutait d'autant mieux que le corps du fugitif n'avait été retrouvé ni dans le port, ni à l'embouchure de la Pernova.

Bref, de retour à Riga, le brigadier, ayant hâte de transmettre son rapport au major Verder, se rendait à son cabinet, lorsqu'il fut informé de l'assassinat de la *Croix-Rompue,* et personne n'eût pu soupçonner qu'il possédait la clef de cette mystérieuse affaire.

Aussi furent-elles grandes, et la surprise et la satisfaction du major Verder, en apprenant que le brigadier avait des révélations à lui faire sur le crime dont on cherchait vainement l'auteur.

«L'assassin du garçon de banque?…

— Lui-même, monsieur le major.

— Tu connaissais Poch?…

— Je le connaissais, et je l'ai vu pour la dernière fois dans la soirée du 13.

— Où?…

— Au kabak de Kroff.

— Tu étais là?…

— Oui, monsieur le major, avec un de mes agents, avant de retourner à Pernau.

— Et tu as parlé à ce malheureux garçon?…

— Pendant quelques minutes, et j’ajoute que si l’assassin, comme tout le fait supposer, est ce voyageur qui accompagnait Poch, ce voyageur qui a passé la nuit dans l’auberge… je le connais aussi…

— Tu le connais?…

— Oui, et si le meurtrier est bien le voyageur en question…

— Mais cela n’est pas douteux d’après les constatations de l’enquête…

— Eh bien, monsieur le major, je vais vous le nommer… Peut-être ne me croirez- vous pas!

— Je te croirai, si tu m’affirmes…

— J’affirme ceci, répondit Eck: ce voyageur, auquel je n’ai point adressé la parole, je l’ai parfaitement reconnu dans le kabak, bien qu’il tînt sa figure sous son capuchon… C’est le professeur Dimitri Nicolef…

— Dimitri Nicolef?… s’écria le major Verder, stupéfait. Lui… ce n’est pas possible…

— Je vous avais bien dit que vous ne voudriez pas me croire!» répéta le brigadier.

Le major Verder s’était levé, il marchait à grands pas dans son cabinet, murmurant:

«Dimitri Nicolef!… Dimitri Nicolef!»

Quoi! cet homme dont on faisait un candidat aux prochaines élections municipales, cet adversaire de la puissante famille des Johausen, ce Russe en qui se résumaient toutes les aspirations, toutes les revendications du parti slave contre l’élément germanique, ce protégé du gouvernement moscovite, ce serait l’assassin du malheureux Poch!…

«Tu affirmes?… répéta-t-il en s’arrêtant devant Eck.

— J’affirme.

— Dimitri Nicolef avait donc quitté Riga?…

— Oui… cette nuit-là, du moins… Il est, d’ailleurs, facile de vérifier le fait…

— Je vais envoyer un agent à son domicile, répondit le major, et je ferai prévenir M. Frank Johausen de passer à mon cabinet… Toi, reste ici…

— A vos ordres, monsieur le major.»

Celui-ci donna ses instructions à deux des agents du poste, qui partirent aussitôt.

Dix minutes après, M. Frank Johausen était en présence du major, et, devant lui, le brigadier Eck répétait sa déposition.

On peut juger, sans qu’il soit nécessaire d’y insister, des sentiments qui s’agitèrent dans l’âme vindicative du banquier. Enfin la plus inattendue des éventualités, un crime, un assassinat lui livrait ce rival qu’il poursuivait de sa haine!… Dimitri Nicolef… meurtrier de Poch!…

«Tu affirmes?… demanda une dernière fois le major en se retournant vers le brigadier.

— J’affirme! prononça Eck d’une voix qui dénotait l’absolue certitude.

— Mais… s’il n’a pas quitté Riga? dit à son tour M. Frank Johausen.

— Il l’a quitté, déclara Eck. Pendant la nuit du 13 au 14, il n’était pas dans sa maison… puisque je l’ai vu… de mes yeux vu… et reconnu…

— Attendons le retour de l’agent que j’ai envoyé au domicile de Dimitri Nicolef, ajouta le major Verder, il sera ici dans quelques minutes.»

M. Frank Johausen, assis près de la fenêtre, s’abandonnait au tumulte de ses pensées. Il voulait croire que le brigadier ne s’était pas trompé, et pourtant sentait comme un instinct de justice se révolter en lui contre la vraisemblance d’une telle accusation.

L’agent revint et fit connaître le résultat de sa démarche:

M. Dimitri Nicolef était parti de Riga le 13, de grand matin, et il n’était pas encore de retour.

C’était la confirmation des révélations du brigadier Eck.

«J’avais donc raison, monsieur le major, dit-il. Dimitri Nicolef a quitté son domicile le 13, dès l’aube… Poch et lui ont pris place dans la malle-poste…

L’accident de voiture s’est produit vers sept heures du soir, et les deux voyageurs sont entrés à huit heures au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue,* où tous deux ont passé la nuit… Si donc l’un des voyageurs a assassiné l’autre, c’est Dimitri Nicolef qui est l’assassin!»

M. Frank Johausen se retira, à la fois confondu et triomphant de cette terrible nouvelle.

Elle ne pouvait tarder à s’ébruiter.

Ce fut, à travers la ville, comme une traînée de poudre qu’une étincelle eût enflammée!… Dimitri Nicolef l’auteur du crime de la *Croix-Rompue!*

Heureusement, cela ne fut pas connu d’Ilka Nicolef. La maison resta close à ce bruit. Le docteur Hamine y veilla.

Le soir, lorsque M. Delaporte et lui se rencontrèrent dans la salle, pas un mot ne fut prononcé à ce sujet. D’ailleurs, ils avaient haussé les épaules… Nicolef, un assassin!… Ils refusaient de le croire.

Mais le télégraphe avait joué. Les brigades de police du territoire étaient prévenues: ordre d’arrêter Dimitri Nicolef si elles le découvraient.

Et c’est ainsi que cette nouvelle était parvenue à Dorpat, dans l’après-midi du 16. Karl Johausen en avait été instruit un des premiers, et l’on sait par quelle réponse il accueillit Jean Nicolef en présence de ses camarades de l’Université.

CHAPITRE X

Interrogatoire

Dimitri Nicolef rentra à Riga dans la nuit du 16 au 17 avril, sans avoir été reconnu en route.

Dévorée d’inquiétude, Ilka ne dormait pas. Et dans quel état aurait été l’infortunée jeune fille, si elle eût appris quelle accusation pesait sur la tête de son père!…

En outre, un nouveau sujet d’anxiété, ce soir-là, après le départ de M. Delaporte et du docteur Hamine, une dépêche, venue de Dorpat, annonçait l’arrivée de Jean Nicolef pour le lendemain, sans indiquer la cause de ce brusque départ.

Cependant, de quel poids écrasant fut soulagée Ilka, lorsque, vers trois heures du matin, elle entendit son père monter l’escalier. Comme il ne vint pas frapper à sa chambre, elle pensa que mieux valait le laisser se coucher, après les fatigues de ce voyage. Le jour venu, elle irait l’embrasser dès son lever. Et peut-être lui dirait-il pourquoi, si précipitamment et sans l’avertir, il avait été contraint de partir.

Le lendemain, en effet, le père et la fille se retrouvèrent à la première heure, et, tout d’abord, Dimitri Nicolef dit:

«Me voici de retour, ma chère enfant… Mon absence a duré plus longtemps que je ne pensais… Oh! vingt-quatre heures seulement…

— Tu parais fatigué, mon père, observa Ilka.

— Un peu, mais, avec une matinée de repos, je serai tout à fait remis, et, dans l’après-midi, j’irai donner quelques leçons…

— Peut-être, mon père, serait-il plus sage d’attendre à demain?… Les élèves sont prévenus…

— Non, Ilka, non… Je ne puis les faire attendre davantage. – Il n’est venu personne en mon absence?…

— Personne, à l’exception du docteur et de M. Delaporte, qui ont été très surpris de ton départ.

— Oui… répondit Nicolef, d’une voix un peu hésitante… je n’en avais pas parlé… Oh! pour un si court voyage… pendant lequel je crois même que personne n’a dû me reconnaître…»

Le professeur n’en dit pas davantage, et sa fille, très réservée, se contenta de lui demander s’il revenait de Dorpat.

«De Dorpat?… fit Nicolef, assez étonné. Et pourquoi cette question?…

— Parce que je ne m’explique pas une dépêche que j’ai reçue hier soir…

— Une dépêche?… dit vivement Nicolef. Et de qui?…

— De mon frère, qui m’annonce son arrivée pour aujourd’hui.

— Jean arrive?… C’est singulier, en effet… Que vient-il faire?… Enfin, mon fils est toujours sûr de recevoir bon accueil.»

Cependant, sentant dans l’attitude de sa fille que celle-ci semblait l’interroger sur les motifs de son voyage:

«Ce sont des affaires importantes… déclara-t-il, affaires qui m’ont obligé à partir précipitamment…

— Si tu es satisfait, mon père… répondit Ilka.

— Satisfait… oui… chère enfant, répliqua-t-il en regardant sa fille à la dérobée, et j’espère bien que ces affaires-là n’auront pas de suites fâcheuses.»

Et alors, en homme qui est résolu à n’en pas dire davantage, il changea le cours de sa conversation.

Après le premier thé du matin, Dimitri Nicolef remonta dans son cabinet, où il rangea divers papiers, et se remit au travail.

La maison avait recouvré son calme accoutumé, et Ilka était loin de prévoir qu’elle allait être frappée d’un coup de foudre.

Le quart après midi venait de sonner lorsqu’un agent de la police se présenta au domicile de Dimitri Nicolef. Cet agent était porteur d’une lettre qu’il remit à la servante en lui recommandant de la faire parvenir immédiatement à son maître. Il ne s’inquiéta même pas de savoir si le professeur se trouvait chez lui en ce moment. Bien que rien n’en eût paru, la maison était surveillée depuis la veille.

Quand Dimitri Nicolef eut cette lettre entre les mains, il en prit connaissance. Elle ne contenait que ces mots:

«Le juge Kerstorf invite le professeur Dimitri Nicolef à se rendre sans tarder à son cabinet, où il l’attend. Affaire urgente.»

A cette lecture, Dimitri Nicolef ne put retenir un geste qui dénotait plus que de la surprise. Il pâlit, et sa physionomie s’imprégna d’une vive inquiétude.

Puis, sans doute, pensant que le mieux était de déférer à l’invitation qui lui était faite sous cette forme impérative par le juge Kerstorf, il revêtit sa houppelande et descendit dans la salle où était sa fille:

«Ilka, dit-il, je viens de recevoir un mot de M. Kerstorf, le juge, qui me prie de passer à son cabinet…

— Le juge Kerstorf?… répondit la jeune fille. Que te veut-il, mon père?

— Je ne sais… répliqua Nicolef en détournant la tête.

— Serait-ce pour quelque affaire à laquelle Jean se trouverait mêlé, et qui l’a obligé à quitter Dorpat?…

— Je l’ignore, Ilka… Oui… peut-être… Du reste nous allons être promptement fixés à ce sujet.»

Le professeur sortit, non sans que sa fille eût observé son trouble. L’agent près de lui, il allait d’un pas incertain, machinalement pour ainsi dire, ne remarquant pas qu’il fût l’objet de la curiosité publique, même aussi de la malveillance de quelques personnes qui le suivaient ou le regardaient passer.

Arrivé au palais de Justice, il fut introduit dans le cabinet où se trouvait le juge Kerstorf avec le major Verder et le greffier. On se salua de part et d’autre, et Dimitri Nicolef attendit qu’on lui adressât la parole.

«Monsieur Nicolef, dit le juge Kerstorf, je vous ai fait demander pour avoir quelques renseignements sur une affaire dont l'enquête m'a été confiée…

— De quoi s'agit-il, monsieur?… répondit Dimitri Nicolef.

— Veuillez vous asseoir, et écoutez-moi.»

Le professeur prit une chaise en face du bureau derrière lequel était placé le fauteuil du juge, tandis que le major restait debout près de la fenêtre. L'entretien se transforma aussitôt en interrogatoire.

«Monsieur Nicolef, dit le juge, ne soyez pas surpris si les questions que je vais vous poser ont rapport à votre personne, si elles visent des faits de votre vie privée… Il est nécessaire que vous y répondiez sans détour, dans l'intérêt de l'affaire elle-même comme dans le vôtre.»

M. Nicolef, regardant le juge plus qu'il ne l'écoutait, resta quelques instants sans répondre, se bornant à une simple inclination de tête, les bras croisés.

M. Kerstof avait sous les yeux les procès-verbaux de l'enquête. Il les disposa sur la table, et, de sa voix calme et grave:

«Monsieur Nicolef, demanda-t-il, vous venez de faire une absence de quelques jours?…

— En effet, monsieur.

— Quand avez-vous quitté Riga?…

— Le 13 courant, dès l'aube.

— Vous êtes revenu?…

— Cette nuit, vers une heure du matin.

— Vous étiez parti seul?…

— Seul.

— Et vous êtes revenu seul?…

— Seul.

— Pour aller, vous étiez monté dans la malle-poste de Revel?…

— Oui…répondit M. Nicolef non sans une certaine hésitation.

— Et pour en revenir?…

— J’étais en télègue.

— Où avez-vous trouvé cette télègue?…

— A cinquante verstes d’ici, sur la route de Riga.

— Ainsi c’est bien le 13, au lever du jour, que vous êtes parti?…

— Oui, monsieur, à six heures.

— Étiez-vous seul dans la malle-poste?…

— Non… avec un autre voyageur.

— Le connaissiez-vous?…

— Aucunement.

— Mais vous n’avez pas tardé à savoir que c’était Poch, le garçon de banque de la maison Johausen frères?…

— En effet, car ce garçon, assez bavard, n’a cessé de s’entretenir avec le conducteur.

— Il causait de ses affaires personnelles?…

— Uniquement.

— Et que disait-il?…

— Qu’il allait à Revel pour le compte de MM. Johausen.

— Ne paraissait-il pas très impatient d’être revenu à Riga… où il devait se marier?…

— Oui, monsieur… autant qu’il m’en souvient, car je ne prêtais qu’une très médiocre attention à cet entretien sans intérêt pour moi.

— Sans intérêt? dit alors le major Verder.

— Sans doute, monsieur, répondit M. Nicolef, en jetant un regard étonné au major. Et pourquoi me serais-je intéressé à ce que disait ce garçon?…

— C’est peut-être ce que l’enquête à la prétention d’établir», répliqua M. Kerstorf.

A cette réponse, le professeur fit le geste d’un homme qui n’a pas l’air de comprendre.

«Ce Poch, reprit le magistrat, n’avait-il pas un portefeuille du genre de ceux qui servent habituellement aux garçons de banque pour leurs recettes?…

— C’est possible, monsieur, mais je ne l’ai point remarqué.

— Ainsi vous ne pouvez pas dire s’il le laissait, imprudemment peut-être, ou traîner sur la banquette, ou voir à des personnes qui s’approchaient de la malle aux relais?

— J’étais dans un coin, enveloppé dans ma houppelande, sommeillant parfois sous mon capuchon, et je n’ai guère vu ce que faisait ou ne faisait pas mon compagnon de voyage.

— Cependant, le conducteur Broks est affirmatif sur ce fait…

— Eh bien, monsieur le juge, s’il affirme ce fait, c’est que ce fait est vrai. Quant à moi, je ne puis infirmer ni confirmer son dire.

— Vous n’avez pas causé avec Poch?…

— Pendant le voyage, non… Je ne lui ai parlé pour la première fois que lorsqu’il s’est agi de gagner l’auberge après l’accident de la malle.

— Et, toute la journée, vous êtes resté dans votre coin, le capuchon soigneusement rabattu sur votre figure?…

— Soigneusement?… Pourquoi soigneusement, monsieur?… demanda M. Nicolef, qui releva assez vivement le mot.

— Parce que, semble-t-il, vous ne teniez pas à être reconnu.»

Ce fut le major Verder qui, intervenant de nouveau dans l’interrogatoire, lança cette réponse contenant évidemment une insinuation.

Cette fois Dimitri Nicolef ne la repoussa pas comme il avait fait du mot prononcé par le juge. Après un instant de silence, il se contenta de dire:

«En admettant qu’il m’eût convenu de voyager incognito, je pense que c’est le droit de tout homme libre en Livonie comme ailleurs!

— Excellente précaution, répliqua le major, pour ne point être reconnu de témoins avec lesquels on risquerait d’être confronté!»

Encore une insinuation de signification grave, dont le professeur ne pouvait méconnaître l’importance, et qui le fit visiblement pâlir.

«Enfin, ajouta le juge, vous ne niez pas avoir eu ce jour-là le garçon de banque Poch pour compagnon de route?…

— Non… si c’est bien ce Poch qui était avec moi dans la malle…

— Ce n’est que trop certain», répondit le major Verder.

M. Kerstorf reprit en ces termes:

«Le voyage s’est poursuivi sans incidents, de relais en relais… A midi, il y a eu un arrêt d’une heure pour le déjeuner… Vous vous êtes fait servir à l’écart, dans un coin sombre de la salle d’auberge, toujours, semble-t-il, avec cette préoccupation constante de ne point être reconnu… Puis la malle-poste est repartie… Le temps était fort mauvais, les attelages ne résistaient que très difficilement à la bourrasque… Or, vers sept heures et demie du soir, voici qu’un accident se produit… Un des chevaux s’est abattu, et la voiture, dont l’essieu d’avant-train s’était brisé, a versé…

— Monsieur, dit M. Nicolef, en interrompant le magistrat, puis-je vous demander pourquoi vous m’interrogez sur ces faits et dans quel intérêt…

— Dans l’intérêt de la justice, monsieur Nicolef. Lorsque le conducteur Broks a eu constaté que la malle n’était plus en état de gagner le prochain relais, celui de Pernau, la proposition a été faite de passer la nuit dans un cabaret qui se voyait à deux cents pas sur la route… C’est vous-même qui avez indiqué ce cabaret…

— Que je ne connaissais pas, monsieur, et dans lequel, ce soir-là, je suis entré pour la première fois.

— Soit! ce qui est certain, c’est que vous avez préféré y passer la nuit plutôt que de vous rendre à Pernau avec le conducteur et l’iemschick.

— En effet, il s’agissait d’une vingtaine de verstes à faire à pied par un temps épouvantable, et il m’a paru préférable de gagner cette auberge, accompagné du garçon de banque.

— C’est vous qui l’avez décidé à vous suivre?…

— Je ne l’ai décidé à rien, répondit M. Nicolef. Blessé dans l’accident de la malle-poste – une contusion à la jambe, je crois – il n’aurait pas pu franchir la distance qui nous séparait de Pernau… Il est même très heureux pour lui que cette auberge…

— Très heureux!…» s’écria le major Verder, qui, ne possédant pas le sang-froid de l’impassible magistrat, bondit à ce mot.

Dimitri Nicolef, se retournant, ne put retenir un dédaigneux mouvement d’épaule.

M. Kerstorf, désireux de ne pas laisser l’interrogatoire s’écarter de la voie sur laquelle il l’avait engagé, se hâta de le reprendre par de nouvelles questions:

«Le conducteur et le postillon sont partis pour Pernau au moment où vous atteigniez le kabak de la *Croix-Rompue?…*

— La *Croix-Rompue?…* répéta M. Nicolef. J'ignorais que ce fût le nom de cette auberge.

— Lorsque vous y êtes arrivé avec Poch, vous avez été reçu par le cabaretier Kroff… Vous lui avez demandé une chambre, et Poch lui a fait la même demande… Kroff vous a offert à souper, et vous avez refusé, tandis que le garçon de banque acceptait…

— Cela me convenait mieux, en effet.

— Ce qui vous convenait mieux, monsieur Nicolef, c'était de repartir le lendemain avant le jour et sans attendre le retour lu conducteur… Aussi, avez-vous prévenu l'aubergiste Kroff de cette intention, et vous êtes-vous immédiatement retiré dans votre chambre…

— Les choses se sont passées ainsi, répondit le professeur, non sans laisser voir que cette série de questions commençait à le fatiguer.

— Votre chambre était à gauche de la salle, où buvaient encore quelques clients de Kroff, et à l'extrémité de la maison…

— Je l'ignore, monsieur… Je vous répète que je ne connaissais pas ce cabaret où je mettais le pied pour la première fois… Et, de même qu'il faisait nuit lorsque j'y suis arrivé, il faisait nuit lorsque je l'ai quitté…

— Sans attendre le retour du conducteur, j'insiste sur ce point, fit observer M. Kerstorf, sans attendre le conducteur qui devait vous reprendre, après les réparations faites à la malle…

— Sans l’attendre, déclara M. Nicolef, puisque je n’avais plus à faire jusqu’à Pernau qu’une vingtaine de verstes…

— Soit! Ce qui est acquis, c’est que cette idée vous était venue le soir même, et que vous l’avez mise à exécution dès quatre heures du matin.»

Dimitri Nicolef ne répondit pas.

«Maintenant, reprit M. Kerstorf, le moment me semble arrivé de vous poser une question à laquelle, sans doute, vous ne verrez aucun inconvénient à répondre…

— J’attends, monsieur…

— Quel a été le motif de votre voyage, un voyage qui paraît avoir été promptement et secrètement résolu, et dont la veille vous n’aviez même pas parlé à vos élèves qu’on a interrogés?…»

A cette demande, M. Nicolef parut extrêmement troublé.

«Des affaires personnelles… dit-il enfin.

— Lesquelles?…

— Je n’ai point à les faire connaître.

— Vous refusez de parler?…

— Je refuse.

— Direz-vous au moins où vous alliez en quittant Riga?

— Je n’ai point à le dire.

— Vous aviez réglé votre place jusqu’à Revel?… Était-ce à Revel que vous aviez affaire?…»

Pas de réponse.

«Il semble que c’était plutôt à Pernau, reprit le juge, puisque vous n’avez pas cru devoir attendre le retour de la malle au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue.* J’insiste: était-ce à Pernau?…»

Dimitri Nicolef persista à se taire.

«Continuons, dit le juge. Vers quatre heures du matin, d’après la déposition de l’aubergiste, vous vous êtes levé… Il s’est levé au même moment… Lorsque vous êtes sorti de la chambre, enveloppé de votre houppelande, votre capuchon rabattu comme la veille, de telle façon qu’on ne pouvait rien voir de votre visage, Kroff vous a demandé si vous vouliez prendre une tasse de thé ou un verre de schnaps… Vous avez refusé et payé le prix de la nuit… Puis Kroff, après avoir retiré les barres de la porte, fit jouer la serrure avec la clef qu’il tenait… Et alors, sans prononcer une parole, d’un pas précipité, vous vous êtes élancé sur la route au milieu d’une profonde obscurité dans la direction de Pernau… Dans tout ce que j’ai dit là, y a-t-il un détail inexact?…

— Pas un seul, monsieur.

— Une dernière fois, voulez-vous faire connaître le motif de votre voyage, et où vous alliez en quittant Riga?…

— Monsieur Kerstorf, déclara alors Dimitri Nicolef très froidement, je ne sais à quoi tendent toutes ces questions, ni même pourquoi j’ai été demandé dans votre cabinet… Cependant j’ai répondu à toutes celles auxquelles j’ai cru devoir répondre… Aux autres, non!… C’était bien mon droit, je suppose… J’ajoute, d’ailleurs, que je l’ai fait avec une entière bonne foi… Si j’avais voulu cacher que j’eusse fait ce voyage, et cela pour des raisons dont je suis le seul juge, si j’avais voulu nier que le voyageur de la malle-poste, le compagnon du garçon de banque fût moi, comment auriez-vous pu me démentir, puisque, d’après votre aveu, ni le conducteur, ni Poch, ni personne ne m’a reconnu tant je prenais de précautions pour ne point l’être?»

Il y a lieu de l’observer, toute cette argumentation avait été émise par Dimitri Nicolef avec une singulière possession de lui-même, qui n’était pas exempte d’un certain dédain. Mais il dut être plus que surpris lorsqu’il entendit cette réplique du magistrat:

«Si Poch et Broks n’ont pu savoir qui vous étiez, monsieur Nicolef, il est un autre témoin qui vous a reconnu, lui…

— Un autre témoin?…

— Oui… et dont vous allez entendre la déposition.»

Et le magistrat, s’adressant à un agent, lui dit:

«Introduisez ici le brigadier Eck.»

Un instant après, le brigadier entrait dans le cabinet, faisant à son chef le salut militaire, attendant d’être interrogé par M. Kerstorf.

«Vous êtes le brigadier de police Eck, de la sixième escouade?…» demanda le juge.

Le brigadier déclina ses nom et qualités, tandis que Dimitri Nicolef le regardait comme quelqu'un qu'il aurait vu pour la première fois.

«Le 13 avril dernier, reprit le juge, dans la soirée, ne vous trouviez-vous pas dans le kabak de la *Croix-Rompue?…*

— En effet, monsieur le juge, j'y étais, au retour d'une expédition le long de la Pernova, à la recherche d'un fugitif qui nous a échappé en se jetant à travers la débâcle de cette rivière.»

A cette réponse, Dimitri Nicolef ne put retenir un mouvement que surprit M. Kerstorf.

Toutefois, le juge ne fit aucune observation, et, s'adressant au brigadier:

«Faites votre déposition», dit-il.

Le brigadier s'exprima en ces termes:

«Depuis deux heures environ, j'étais avec un de mes agents dans le kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*, et nous nous disposions à partir pour Pernau lorsque la porte s'ouvrit… Deux hommes parurent sur le seuil, des voyageurs… Leur voiture s'étant brisée sur la route, ils venaient chercher un abri dans l'auberge, tandis que le conducteur et le postillon se dirigeaient vers Pernau avec l'attelage… L'un de ces voyageurs était le garçon de banque Poch, de Riga, que je connaissais de longue date, et avec lequel je suis resté à causer pendant une dizaine de minutes… Quant à l'autre voyageur, il me semblait qu'il essayait de dissimuler son visage sous le capuchon de sa houppelande. Cela me parut suspect et je cherchai à découvrir quel était cet homme…

— Tu n'as fait que ton devoir, Eck, dit le major Verder.

— Poch, légèrement contusionné à la jambe, reprit le brigadier, s’était assis près d’une table, sur laquelle il avait posé un portefeuille aux initiales de MM. Johausen frères… Comme il y avait cinq ou six buveurs attablés dans le cabaret, je recommandai à Poch de ne pas trop laisser voir ce portefeuille qui, d’ailleurs, était retenu à sa ceinture par la chaînette… Puis, je me dirigeais vers la porte, en examinant l’inconnu que Kroff conduisait à sa chambre, lorsque le capuchon se dérangea, et j’aperçus un instant, rien qu’un instant, la figure qu’il cachait…

— Et cela vous a suffi?…

— Oui, monsieur le juge.

— Vous le connaissiez?…

— Oui, pour l’avoir maintes fois rencontré dans les rues de Riga.

— C’était bien M. Dimitri Nicolef?…

— Lui-même.

— Ici présent?…

— Ici présent.»

Le professeur, qui avait écouté cette déposition sans l’interrompre, dit alors:

«Le brigadier ne s’est point trompé… Je crois qu’il se trouvait bien au kabak, puisqu’il l’affirme… Seulement, je n’ai point fait attention à lui, s’il a fait attention à moi… Au surplus, je ne sais pourquoi, monsieur le juge, vous avez tenu à nous confronter, puisque j’ai déclaré de moi-même m’être trouvé cette nuit-là à l’auberge de la *Croix-Rompue*…

— Vous allez le savoir, monsieur Nicolef, répondit le magistrat. Mais, auparavant, vous refusez-vous toujours de dire quel était le but de votre voyage?…

— Je m’y refuse.

— Ce refus est fâcheux pour vous!

— Pourquoi?…

— Parce qu’une explication eût peut-être empêché la justice de vous rechercher à propos de ce qui s’est passé cette nuit-là au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue.*

— Cette nuit-là?… répéta le professeur.

— Oui… Vous n’avez rien entendu pendant le temps qui s’est écoulé entre huit heures du soir et quatre heures du matin?…

— Rien, puisque j’ai dormi jusqu’au moment de me lever…

— Ni rien vu de suspect à l’instant de votre départ?…

— Rien.»

Puis Dimitri Nicolef ajouta d’une voix qui ne dénotait plus aucun trouble:

«Je crois comprendre, monsieur, que, sans le savoir, je suis mêlé à quelque grave affaire, dans laquelle vous m’avez appelé comme témoin…

— Comme témoin… non, monsieur Nicolef.

— Non!… comme accusé! s’écria le major Verder.

— Monsieur le major, observa le magistrat d’un ton sévère, ne vous prononcez pas avant la justice, et attendez son arrêt!»

Le major dut se contenir et il sembla bien que Dimitri Nicolef murmurait ces mots:

«Ah! c’est pour cela qu’on m’a fait venir ici?»

Puis, d’un ton très ferme:

«De quoi suis-je accusé?…. demanda-t-il.

— Le garçon de banque Poch a été assassiné dans la nuit du 13 au 14 au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*.

— Ce malheureux a été assassiné?… s’écria M. Nicolef.

— Oui, répondit M. Kerstorf, et nous avons la certitude que son assassin est le voyageur qui occupait la chambre qui vous avait été donnée.

— Or… puisque ce voyageur, c’est vous, Dimitri Nicolef… affirma le major Verder.

— Je serais l’assassin!…»

Et, ce disant, M. Nicolef, repoussant sa chaise, se dirigea vers la porte du cabinet que gardait le brigadier Eck.

«Vous niez… Dimitri Nicolef?… demanda le juge, qui se leva à son tour.

— Il y a des choses que l’on n’a même pas besoin de nier, tant elles se nient d’elles-mêmes… répondit Nicolef.

— Prenez garde…

— Allons donc!… Ce n’est pas sérieux!

— Très sérieux.

— Il ne me convient pas de discuter, monsieur, répondit le professeur, d’un ton hautain, cette fois. Mais pourrais-je savoir pourquoi l’accusation porte précisément et uniquement sur le voyageur qui a passé la nuit dans cette chambre de kabak?…

— Parce que, sur la fenêtre de cette chambre, répondit M. Kerstorf, on a relevé des indices matériels prouvant que le meurtrier l’a franchie pendant la nuit, pour aller s’introduire dans la chambre de Poch par la fenêtre de cette chambre, après avoir forcé les contrevents…; parce que le tisonnier qui a servi à cette effraction a été retrouvé dans la chambre de ce voyageur…

— En effet, répondit Dimitri Nicolef, si ces constatations ont été faites, c’est au moins singulier…»

Puis il ajouta, comme un homme que cette affaire n’aurait pu concerner:

«Mais, en admettant que ces constatations autorisent à croire que le crime n’a pas été commis par un malfaiteur du dehors, elles ne prouvent pas que le crime n’a pas été commis après mon départ?…

— Vous accuseriez donc l’aubergiste… contre lequel l’enquête n’a fourni aucune présomption?…

— Je n’accuse personne, monsieur Kerstorf, répondit d’un ton encore plus hautain Dimitri Nicolef, et, ce que j’ai le droit de dire, c’est que je suis le dernier que la justice puisse soupçonner d’un pareil crime!…

— Cet assassinat a été suivi de vol, dit alors le major Verder, et les roubles que Poch allait verser à Revel pour le compte de MM. Johausen frères ont disparu de son portefeuille…

— Eh! que me fait?…»

Le juge intervint entre le professeur et le major Verder, en disant:

«Dimitri Nicolef, vous persistez à ne vouloir faire connaître ni le motif de votre voyage, ni pourquoi vous avez quitté l’auberge à quatre heures du matin, ni où vous êtes allé en la quittant?…

— Je persiste.

— Eh bien, la justice sera fondée à dire: vous n’ignoriez pas que le garçon de banque était porteur d’une somme considérable… Après l’accident de la malle-poste, quand vous conduisiez Poch à l’auberge de la *Croix-Rompue,* l’idée du vol était venue à votre esprit… Lorsque le moment vous a paru favorable, vous êtes sorti de votre chambre par la fenêtre… vous avez pénétré dans celle de Poch par la fenêtre… vous l’avez assassiné pour le voler, et, à quatre heures du matin, quand vous avez quitté le kabak, c’était pour aller cacher le produit du vol… où…

— Où nous finirons bien par le trouver! interrompit le major.

— Pour la dernière fois, reprit M. Kerstorf, voulez-vous dire où vous êtes allé en sortant de l’auberge?…

— Pour la dernière fois, non! répondit le professeur. Arrêtez-moi, si vous le voulez…

— Non, monsieur Nicolef, conclut le magistrat, à l’extrême stupéfaction du major Verder. Les charges relevées contre vous sont très graves, mais un homme de votre situation, connu par l’honorabilité de toute son existence, a droit à certains égards… Je ne signerai pas l’ordre d’arrestation… aujourd’hui du moins… Vous êtes libre… Toutefois, tenez-vous à la disposition de la justice.»

CHAPITRE XI

En face de la foule

Après cet interrogatoire, le major s’attendait à ce que l’arrestation de Nicolef fût ordonnée, et bien d’autres le pensaient avec lui. En effet, le professeur s’était refusé à indiquer les motifs de son voyage. Sa précipitation à quitter le kabak dès quatre heures du matin, il n’en avait donné aucune raison plausible, sans même vouloir dire où il passa ses trois jours d’absence avant de revenir à Riga. Évidemment ce refus était de nature à augmenter les présomptions à son égard. Pourquoi donc, dans ces conditions, Dimitri Nicolef n’avait-il pas été mis en état d’arrestation?… Pourquoi était-il libre de regagner son domicile, au lieu d’être conduit à la prison de la forteresse?… Sans doute, il devrait se tenir à la disposition de la justice… Mais ne profiterait-il pas de cette liberté pour s’enfuir, maintenant qu’il se sentait si directement impliqué dans cette affaire de la *Croix-Rompue?…*

En Russie, comme ailleurs, il n’y a pas à nier l’indépendance de la justice civile. Elle s’y exerce en toute plénitude. Cependant, lorsque l’élément politique apparaît dans une cause quelconque, l’intervention de l’autorité supérieure ne tarde pas à se produire.

Tel était le cas de Dimitri Nicolef, accusé d’un crime au moment où le parti slave le mettait en avant.

C’est la raison pour laquelle le gouverneur des provinces Baltiques, le général Gorko, s’était réservé de se prononcer sur l’opportunité de l’arrestation, très décidé à ne point l’ordonner, tant que la culpabilité du professeur pouvait encore présenter quelques doutes.

Aussi, l’après-midi, lorsque le colonel Raguenof lui apporta le procès-verbal de l’interrogatoire, voulut-il l’entretenir de cette déplorable affaire, dont il devait rendre compte au gouvernement.

«Je suis aux ordres de Votre Excellence», répondit le colonel.

Le général Gorko lut attentivement le procès-verbal. Puis:

«Que Dimitri Nicolef soit coupable ou non, dit-il, les passions germaniques vont exploiter sa situation, puisqu’il est de race slave. C’était précisément lui que nous allions opposer dans la prochaine lutte électorale à la noblesse allemande, à cette haute bourgeoisie qui est toute-puissante dans les provinces, et en particulier à Riga… Or, le voici sous le coup d’une accusation criminelle dont il se défend mal…

— Votre Excellence a raison, répondit le colonel, cela arrive dans les plus fâcheuses circonstances, lorsque les esprits sont déjà surexcités…

— Croyez-vous Nicolef coupable, colonel?…

— Je ne puis répondre à votre Excellence à ce sujet, et surtout comme je le voudrais pour Dimitri Nicolef, qui a toujours paru digne de l’estime publique.

— Mais pourquoi refuse-t-il de s’expliquer relativement à ce voyage?… Dans quel but l’a-t-il fait?… Où est-il allé?… Il doit avoir de graves motifs pour se taire!…

— En tout cas, Votre Excellence voudra bien observer que seul le hasard l’a mis en rapport avec ce malheureux Poch, seul, il les a réunis dans cette malle-poste au départ de Riga, seul, il les a conduits au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue…*

— Sans doute, colonel, et, je le reconnais, c’est là une argumentation sérieuse. Aussi les présomptions qui pèsent sur Nicolef seraient-elles très amoindries s’il consentait à s’ouvrir sur cet inattendu voyage, dont il n’avait même pas prévenu sa famille…

— J’en conviens, et, cependant, de ce qu’il se tait là-dessus, il n’y a pas à tirer une preuve de sa culpabilité… Non! malgré sa présence, cette nuit-là, à l’auberge de Kroff, je ne veux pas, je ne peux pas croire que Nicolef soit l’auteur du crime!»

Le gouverneur sentait bien que le colonel était porté à défendre Dimitri Nicolef, un Slave comme lui. Pour sa part, d’ailleurs, il n’admettrait la culpabilité que dans le cas où elle reposerait sur des preuves incontestables, et, comme on dit, il conviendrait que cela fût dix fois prouvé avant que sa conviction fût faite.

«Il faut pourtant reconnaître, observa-t-il en feuilletant le dossier, qu’il existe contre lui des présomptions graves. Il ne conteste pas avoir passé la nuit du 13 au 14 dans cette auberge… Il ne nie pas qu’il a occupé cette chambre, dont la fenêtre avait conservé quelques empreintes toutes fraîches, cette chambre où l’on a retrouvé ce tisonnier ayant servi à l’effraction des contrevents, qui a permis à l’assassin de s’introduire dans la chambre de Poch…

— Cela est vrai, répondit le colonel Raguenof. Ces circonstances indiquent bien que le meurtrier est ce voyageur qui a passé la nuit dans cette chambre, et il n’est pas douteux que ce voyageur soit Dimitri Nicolef. Mais toute sa vie privée, toute une existence de probité et d’honneur le défendent contre une telle accusation. Au surplus, Excellence, quand il s’est décidé à partir, il ne savait pas que le garçon de banque de MM. Johausen frères allait voyager avec lui, porteur d’une somme importante pour un correspondant de Revel… Et, si l’on soutient que la pensée du crime lui est venue en voyant ce portefeuille que l’imprudent ne cachait pas assez, encore faudrait-il démontrer que Dimitri Nicolef fût dans une situation embarrassée, qu’il eût un tel besoin d’argent qu’il ne dût pas hésiter à commettre un assassinat pour perpétrer un vol!… Or, cette démonstration a-t-elle été faite, et l’existence à la fois honorable et modeste du professeur Nicolef permet-elle de croire que des nécessités d’argent aient pu le pousser jusqu’à l’assassinat?»

Ces raisons étaient de nature à ébranler le gouverneur, qui se débattait contre ces présomptions dont le major Verder et tant d’autres faisaient des certitudes. Aussi se contenta-t-il de répondre au colonel Raguenof:

«Laissons l’enquête se poursuivre… Peut-être d’autres constatations, d’autres témoignages donneront-ils à l’accusation des bases plus solides… On peut avoir confiance dans le juge Kerstorf chargé de l’instruction… C’est un magistrat indépendant, intègre, qui n’écoute que sa conscience et ne subira point d’influences politiques… Il ne devait pas ordonner l’arrestation du professeur sans me consulter, il l’a laissé libre… c’est sans doute ce qu’il y a de mieux à faire… Si de nouvelles circonstances se produisaient et l’exigeaient, je serais le premier à donner l’ordre d’enfermer Nicolef à la forteresse.»

Cependant une certaine agitation commençait à se propager en ville.

La majorité des habitants, on peut l’affirmer, pensait bien que, après son interrogatoire, le professeur serait mis en état d’arrestation, – les uns, dans les hautes classes, parce qu’ils le croyaient coupable, les autres parce que l’affaire exigeait, tout au moins, que l’on s’assurât de sa personne.

Il y eut donc une extrême surprise, mêlée de protestations, lorsqu’on vit Dimitri Nicolef regagner librement son domicile.

Mais la terrible nouvelle avait enfin pénétré dans cette maison. Ilka savait, à présent, que son père se trouvait sous le coup d’une accusation criminelle. Son frère Jean venait d’arriver et l’avait longuement serrée dans ses bras. L’indignation du jeune homme débordait.

Il avait raconté toute la scène entre les étudiants à l’Université de Dorpat.

«Notre père est innocent, s’écria-t-il, et je saurai bien forcer ce misérable Karl…

— Oui… il est innocent, répondit la jeune fille en relevant fièrement la tête, et qui oserait, même parmi ses ennemis, le croire coupable?…»

Inutile d’y insister, c’était aussi l’opinion de l’intime entourage de Dimitri Nicolef, le docteur Hamine, le consul Delaporte, qui s’étaient hâtés d’accourir dès la comparution du professeur devant le juge d’instruction de Riga.

Leur présence, leurs encouragements, leurs affirmations, furent un adoucissement à la douleur du frère et de la sœur. Mais ce n’est pas sans peine qu’ils les avaient détournés de rejoindre leur père au cabinet du juge.

«Non, leur dit le docteur Hamine, restez ici avec nous… Mieux vaut attendre!… Nicolef va revenir entièrement justifié.

— A quoi sert donc, dit la jeune fille, d'avoir été toute sa vie un honnête homme, si l'on peut être exposé à de si infâmes accusations?…

— Cela sert à vous défendre! s'écria Jean.

— Oui, mon enfant, répondit le docteur, et Dimitri avouerait, que je répondrais: Il est fou, et je ne le croirais pas!»

Voilà dans quelle disposition d'esprit Dimitri Nicolef retrouva sa famille, le docteur, M. Delaporte et quelques autres de ses amis venus à sa maison. Mais les passions étaient si surexcitées, qu'il avait entendu, en chemin, plus d'un mauvais propos à son adresse.

Le frère et la sœur se pressaient sur sa poitrine. Il les couvrit de baisers. Et il savait maintenant comment Jean avait été insulté à Dorpat, quelle abominable injure Karl Johausen lui avait jetée devant ses camarades!… Jean traité de fils d'assassin!…

Le docteur Hamine, le consul, ses amis, serrèrent la main de Nicolef. Ils protestèrent par leurs paroles, par leurs témoignages d'amitié, contre l'accusation!… Jamais ils n'avaient douté de son innocence!… Jamais ils n'en douteraient, et ils ne lui épargnèrent pas les marques de la plus sincère affection.

Puis, dans cette salle où ils étaient réunis, tandis qu'une foule de gens malintentionnés affluaient devant la maison, Dimitri Nicolef dut raconter ce qui s'était passé dans le cabinet du juge, dire les préventions que le major Verder ne dissimulait pas, rendre hommage à l'attitude digne et réservée de M. Kerstorf. Toutefois, il le fit brièvement, d'une voix saccadée, en homme auquel il répugnait de revenir sur ces détails.

On comprit que le professeur avait besoin de se reposer, d’être seul, peut-être même de chercher dans le travail l’oubli de si terribles épreuves, et ses amis prirent congé.

Jean se retira dans la chambre de sa sœur, et Dimitri Nicolef alla s’enfermer dans son cabinet.

En sortant, M. Delaporte dit au docteur:

«Les esprits sont montés, mon cher ami, et, bien que M. Nicolef soit innocent, il est de toute nécessité que l’on découvre le vrai coupable, ou la haine de ses ennemis ne cessera de le poursuivre!

— Cela est très à craindre, répondit le docteur. Si jamais j’ai désiré que l’on mît la main sur un criminel, c’est bien dans cette affaire!… La mort de Poch va être exploitée par les Johausen, et ce Karl qui n’a même pas attendu que l’accusation fût prouvée pour traiter Jean de fils d’assassin!…

— Aussi ai-je peur, fit observer M. Delaporte, que ce ne soit pas fini entre ce Karl et lui!… Vous connaissez Jean… Il voudra se venger en vengeant son père!…

— Non… non, répliqua le docteur, il ne faut pas qu’il commette une imprudence dans l’état actuel des choses!… Ah!… le maudit voyage, et pourquoi Dimitri l’a-t-il fait, et pourquoi a-t-il eu l’idée de le faire!»

C’était bien ce que se demandaient les enfants et les amis de Nicolef, puisque celui-ci n’avait donné aucune explication à ce sujet.

Il est même à remarquer qu’en racontant sur quels points porta son interrogatoire devant le juge d’instruction, le professeur n’avait fait aucune allusion à son voyage, ni dit que le magistrat s’était enquis des motifs pour lesquels il avait quitté Riga ni qu'il eût refusé de répondre à cet égard. Cette obstination à se taire sur ce sujet devait sembler au moins étrange. Mais peut-être s'expliquerait-il plus tard. Les raisons pour lesquelles il s'était absenté pendant trois jours ne pouvaient être qu'honorables, et non moins honorables celles pour lesquelles il persistait à ne point parler.

Et pourtant, puisqu'il semblait inadmissible qu'un homme de son rang et de sa situation eût commis ce crime, d'un mot, sans doute, il aurait pu confondre l'accusation, et ce mot il s'entêtait à ne point le prononcer.

Toutefois, la non-arrestation de Dimitri Nicolef, à la suite de sa comparution devant le juge Kerstorf, avait produit un soulèvement de l'opinion dans la ville, surtout chez les Allemands, en si grande majorité. La famille Johausen, son entourage, la noblesse et la bourgeoisie, se dépensaient en récriminations. On accusait le gouverneur et le colonel Raguenof d'être favorables au professeur, en raison de son origine. Tout autre qu'un Slave, sous le coup d'une telle accusation, eût été déjà enfermé dans la prison de la forteresse.

Et alors, pourquoi ne le traitait-on pas comme un vulgaire bandit?… Méritait-il plus de ménagements qu'un Karl Moor, un Jean Sbogar, un Jéromir?… Ce n'étaient pas de simples présomptions qui s'élevaient contre lui, c'étaient des certitudes, et la justice le laissait libre, et il pourrait s'enfuir, et il ne serait pas traduit devant le jury qui, cependant, n'hésiterait pas à le condamner!… Il est vrai, elle serait trop douce, cette condamnation, puisque la peine capitale est abolie dans l'empire russe quand il s'agit de crimes de droit commun. Il en serait quitte pour être déporté aux mines de Sibérie, cet assassin qui méritait la mort!…

Ces propos se tenaient surtout au milieu des riches quartiers où domine l'élément germanique. Dans la famille Johausen, c'était un véritable déchaînement contre Dimitri Nicolef, contre le meurtrier du malheureux Poch, et, au fond, plus encore contre le modeste professeur, adversaire du puissant banquier.

«Évidemment, répétait M. Frank Johausen, Nicolef, en partant, ne savait pas qu'il voyagerait avec Poch, ni que Poch serait porteur d'une somme considérable. Mais il n'a pas tardé à l'apprendre, et, après l'accident de la malle-poste, lorsqu'il a proposé de passer la nuit dans cette auberge de la *Croix-Rompue,* il avait fait le projet de voler notre garçon de banque, et il n'a pas reculé devant un assassinat pour accomplir le vol… S'il ne veut pas avouer les motifs qui lui ont fait quitter Riga, qu'il dise au moins pourquoi il s'est enfui du kabak avant le jour, pourquoi il n'a pas attendu le retour du conducteur!… Qu'il dise enfin où il est allé, où se sont passés ses trois jours d'absence!… Mais il ne le dira pas!… Ce serait avouer son crime, puisqu'il ne s'enfuyait si précipitamment, en cachant obstinément sa figure, que pour aller mettre en sûreté l'argent volé à sa victime!»

Et, quant à la nécessité où se serait trouvé Dimitri Nicolef de commettre ce vol, voici ce que le banquier se réservait de faire connaître, lorsque le moment en serait venu:

«La situation du professeur est désespérée au point de vue pécuniaire. Il a des engagements auxquels il ne pourra faire face… Dans trois semaines arrive à échéance une créance de dix-huit mille roubles à mon profit, et les fonds nécessaires, pour la payer, il ne parviendra pas à se les procurer… En vain me demanderait-il un délai!… Je le lui refuserai sans pitié!»

Frank Johausen était là tout entier, impitoyable, haineux, vindicatif.

Cependant, en cette affaire à laquelle se mêlait la politique, le général Gorko ne voulait pas se départir d'une extrême prudence. Bien que l’opinion publique la réclamât, il ne croyait pas devoir autoriser l’arrestation du professeur: mais il ne s’opposa point à ce qu’une perquisition fût faite à son domicile.

Le juge Kerstorf, le major Verder, le brigadier Eck, procédèrent le 18 avril à cette perquisition.

Dimitri Nicolef laissa dédaigneusement opérer les agents, ne protestant pas, répondant avec une méprisante froideur aux questions qui lui étaient posées. On fouilla son bureau et ses armoires, on prit connaissance de ses papiers, de sa correspondance, du registre de ses dépenses. Et l’ont put s’assurer que M. Johausen n’exagérait pas en disant que le professeur ne possédait rien. Il ne vivait que du produit de ses leçons, et, à la suite de tels événements, ce produit n’allait-il pas lui manquer?…

La perquisition ne donna aucun résultat, en ce qui concernait le vol commis au préjudice de MM. Johausen frères. Et comment en eût-il été autrement, puisque, dans l’opinion du banquier, Nicolef avait eu le temps de mettre cet argent en sûreté, c’est-à-dire à l’endroit où il s’était rendu le lendemain du crime, et qu’il se gardait bien d’indiquer.

Quant à ces billets dont le banquier possédait les numéros, M. Kerstorf en convenait avec lui, ils ne seraient vraisemblablement utilisés que lorsque le voleur, quel qu’il fût, disait le juge, pourrait le faire sans danger. Un certain délai s’écoulerait donc, vraisembla¬blement, avant qu’ils eussent été remis en circulation.

Entre-temps, les amis de Dimitri Nicolef n’étaient pas sans connaître l’état des esprits non seulement à Riga, mais dans les provinces, très impressionnées par cette affaire.

Ils savaient que l’opinion, en général, se déclarait contre le professeur, que le parti allemand cherchait à opérer une pression sur les autorités pour obtenir son arrestation et sa mise en jugement. En somme, le petit peuple, ouvriers, mercenaires, la population indigène, en un mot, était plutôt disposée à prendre fait et cause pour Nicolef, à le soutenir contre ses ennemis, ne fût-ce que par instinct de race, peut-être même sans être absolument convaincue de son innocence. Il est vrai, que pouvaient ces pauvres gens? Avec les moyens dont disposaient les frères Johausen et leur parti, il n’était que trop facile d’agir sur eux, de les entraîner à des excès, et, ainsi, d’obliger le gouverneur à céder devant un mouvement auquel il eût été dangereux de résister.

Au milieu de cette ville profondément troublée, bien que le faubourg fût incessamment parcouru par des groupes de bourgeois et aussi de cette basse population prête à servir qui la paie, bien qu’il se rît des rassemblements devant sa maison, Dimitri Nicolef conservait un sang-froid hautain, de nature à étonner. Sur la demande de ses enfants, le docteur Hamine était intervenu pour qu’il consentît à ne point sortir. Il eût couru le risque d’être insulté dans les rues, maltraité peut-être. S’étant rendu aux raisons de son ami, tout en haussant les épaules, moins communicatif que jamais, il passait maintenant les longues heures de la journée dans son cabinet de travail. Plus de leçons, ni de celles qu’il donnait au dehors, ni de celles que ses élèves venaient prendre chez lui. Taciturne, n’aimant pas qu’on lui parlât, ne faisant aucune allusion aux imputations dont il était l’objet, il s’était produit en son état moral un trop visible changement, dont ses enfants, ses amis s’alarmaient non sans raison. Aussi le docteur Hamine, d’une amitié qui allait jusqu’au dévouement absolu, leur consacrait-il tout le temps qui lui restait en dehors de ses devoirs professionnels. M. Delaporte et quelques autres se réunissaient chaque soir dans la maison, où pénétraient parfois les cris hostiles, bien que la police ne cessât de la surveiller, par ordre du colonel Raguenof. Tristes soirées, auxquelles Dimitri Nicolef ne prenait point part!… Mais enfin le frère et la sœur n’étaient pas seuls à ces heures que la nuit rend plus pénibles encore et qui sont si longues à s’écouler! Puis, les amis partaient. Jean et Ilka s’embrassaient; le cœur serré d’angoisse, ils regagnaient leurs chambres, ils prêtaient l’oreille aux bruits de la rue, entendant leur père aller et venir, comme s’il lui eût été impossible de reposer.

Il va de soi que Jean ne songeait pas à retourner à Dorpat. Dans quelles pénibles conditions ne se fût-il pas présenté à l’Université?… Quel accueil lui eussent fait les étudiants, même ceux de ses camarades qui lui avaient témoigné une si sincère amitié jusqu’alors?… Peut-être n’aurait-il trouvé que ce brave Gospodin pour le défendre, si les autres avaient subi l’influence de l’opinion publique?… Et comment aurait-il pu se maîtriser en présence de Karl Johausen?…

«Ah! ce Karl! répétait-il au docteur Hamine. Mon père est innocent!… La découverte du vrai coupable fera reconnaître son innocence!… Mais, qu’elle soit reconnue ou non, je forcerai bien Karl Johausen à me rendre raison de son insulte!… Et, d’ailleurs, pourquoi attendre plus longtemps?…»

Le docteur ne parvenait pas sans peine à calmer le jeune homme:

«Ne sois pas impatient, Jean, lui conseillait-il, et pas d’imprudence!… Lorsque l’heure sera venue, je serai le premier à te dire: fais ton devoir!»

Jean ne se rendait pas, et, sans les instances de sa sœur, peut-être se fût-il livré à quelque éclat qui eût rendu la situation pire encore.

Le soir de son retour à Riga, après être rentré chez lui à la suite de l'interrogatoire, au moment où ses amis se retiraient, Dimitri Nicolef avait demandé s'il n'était pas arrivé une lettre pour lui.

Non… le facteur n'était porteur que du journal défenseur des intérêts slaves, qu'il déposait chaque soir.

Le lendemain, à l'heure de la distribution, le professeur, quittant son cabinet, vint attendre le facteur sur le seuil de la porte. En ce moment, le faubourg était encore désert, et seuls quelques agents se promenaient devant la maison.

Ilka, ayant entendu son père, le rejoignit sur le seuil.

«Tu guettes le facteur?… demanda-t-elle.

— Oui, répondit Nicolef, il me semble qu'il tarde à venir ce matin…

— Non, mon père, il est encore de bonne heure, je t'assure… Le temps est un peu froid… Tu ferais mieux de rentrer… Tu attends une lettre?…

— Oui… mon enfant. Mais il est inutile que tu restes ici, remonte dans ta chambre…»

Et on eût dit, à son attitude un peu embarrassée, que la présence d'Ilka lui causait quelque gêne.

En ce moment, le facteur parut. Il n'avait aucune lettre pour le professeur, et celui-ci ne put dissimuler une vive contrariété.

Le soir et le lendemain matin, Nicolef montra la même impatience lorsque le facteur passa devant la maison sans s'y arrêter.

De qui Dimitri Nicolef attendait-il une lettre, et quelle importance cette lettre avait-elle donc?… Se rattachait-elle à ce voyage dont les circonstances étaient si déplorables?… Il ne s'expliqua point à ce sujet.

Ce matin-là, dès huit heures, le docteur Hamine et M. Delaporte, arrivés en toute hâte, demandèrent à voir le frère et la sœur. Ils venaient les prévenir que l'enterrement de Poch allait se faire ce jour même. Ne devait-on pas redouter une manifestation contre Nicolef, et peut-être convenait-il de prendre quelques précautions…

En effet, on pouvait tout craindre de l'animosité des frères Johausen. Ils avaient résolu de célébrer avec éclat les funérailles du garçon de banque.

Qu'ils voulussent donner ce témoignage de sympathie à un fidèle serviteur, depuis trente ans dans leur maison, soit! Mais il n'était que trop visible qu'ils voyaient là l'occasion d'imprimer une surexcitation à l'opinion publique.

Sans doute le gouverneur eût agi plus sagement en empêchant cette manifestation, annoncée par les journaux antislavistes. Toutefois, dans l'état actuel des esprits, l'intervention de l'autorité n'aurait-elle pas eu pour résultat de les provoquer à quelques représailles?

Aussi le mieux semblait-il être d'ordonner les mesures nécessaires afin que le domicile du professeur ne servît pas de théâtre à des violences personnelles.

Il y avait d'autant plus lieu de les prévoir que, pour se rendre au cimetière de Riga, le cortège devait suivre le faubourg et passer devant la maison de Nicolef, – circonstance regrettable qui risquait d'encourager les désordres de la foule.

Dans ces conjectures, le docteur Hamine conseilla de ne point avertir Dimitri Nicolef. Puisqu’il se renfermait d’habitude dans son cabinet et n’en descendait qu’aux heures des repas, bien des angoisses pourraient lui être épargnées, bien des dangers aussi.

Le déjeuner, auquel Ilka avait prié le docteur et M. Delaporte de prendre part, fut silencieux. On ne dit rien de l’enterrement qui était fixé pour l’après-midi. Plus d’une fois, cependant, des cris furieux firent tressaillir les convives, à l’exception du professeur qui ne semblait même pas les entendre. Après le déjeuner, il serra la main de ses amis et regagna son cabinet de travail.

Jean et Ilka, le docteur et le consul restèrent dans la salle. Pénible attente, s’il en fut, pénible silence aussi, que troublaient parfois le tumulte des rassemblements et les vociférations de la foule.

Le tumulte grossissait, d’ailleurs, avec le concours de gens de toutes les classes, qui envahissaient le faubourg, plus nombreux aux abords de la maison du professeur. Il faut l’avouer, la grande majorité de ce public était visiblement contre celui que l’opinion accusait d’être l’assassin du garçon de banque.

En réalité, peut-être eût-il été plus prudent de le soustraire à ce danger de tomber aux mains de la foule, en ordonnant son arrestation. S’il était innocent, son innocence n’eût pas été moins éclatante, parce qu’il aurait été enfermé dans la forteresse… Et qui sait si, en ce moment, le gouverneur et le colonel ne songeaient pas à prendre cette mesure dans l’intérêt même de Dimitri Nicolef?…

Vers une heure et demie, un redoublement de cris annonça l’apparition du cortège à l’extrémité de la rue. La maison retentit de violentes clameurs. A l’extrême épouvante de son fils, de sa fille et de ses amis, le professeur, quittant son cabinet, descendit dans la salle.

«Qu’y a-t-il donc?… demanda-t-il.

— Retire-toi, Dimitri, répondit vivement le docteur. C’est l’enterrement de cet infortuné Poch…

— Celui que j’ai assassiné!… dit froidement Nicolef.

— Retire-toi, je t’en prie…

— Mon père!» firent Jean et Ilka, en le suppliant.

Dimitri Nicolef, dans un état moral indescriptible, ne voulant écouter personne, se dirigea vers l’une des fenêtres de la salle et chercha à l’ouvrir.

«Tu ne feras pas cela!… s’écria le docteur. C’est de la folie!…

— Je le ferai pourtant!…»

Et, avant qu’on eût pu l’en empêcher, la fenêtre ouverte, il s’y montra.

Mille cris de mort éclatèrent dans la foule.

En ce moment, le cortège arrivait à la hauteur de la maison. Zénaide Parensof, traitée comme une veuve, suivait le cercueil orné de fleurs et de couronnes. Puis venaient MM. Johausen et le personnel de leur maison, précédant les amis ou les partisans, qui ne cherchaient dans cette cérémonie qu’un prétexte à manifestation.

Le cortège fit halte devant la maison du professeur, au milieu du tumulte, des cris qui s’élevaient de toutes parts, des menaces de mort qui les accompagnaient.

Le colonel Raguenof et le major Verder étaient là avec une nombreuse escouade de police, mais Eck et ses agents ne seraient-ils pas impuissants à contenir ce déchaînement populaire?…

En effet, depuis que Dimitri Nicolef s’était montré, on hurlait jusque sous la fenêtre:

«Mort à l’assassin!… Mort à l’assassin!»

Lui, les bras croisés, la tête fièrement relevée, immobile comme une statue, la statue du dédain, ne prononçait pas une parole. Ses deux enfants, le docteur et M. Delaporte n’ayant pu empêcher cet acte d’imprudence, se tenaient à ses côtés.

Cependant le cortège se remit en marche à travers ce concours de monde. Les clameurs redoublèrent. Les plus enragés se précipitaient vers la porte de la maison et essayaient de l’enfoncer.

Le colonel, le major, les agents, parvinrent à les repousser. Mais il comprirent que, pour sauver la vie de Nicolef, il serait nécessaire de le mettre en état d’arrestation, et encore devaient-ils craindre qu’il ne fût massacré sur place!…

Enfin, malgré les efforts de la police, la maison allait être envahie, lorsqu’un homme s’élança à travers la foule, arriva jusqu’au seuil, gravit les marches, et, se plaçant devant la porte:

«Arrêtez!…» cria-t-il d’une voix qui domina le tumulte.

On recula, on l’écouta, tant son attitude était impérieuse.

M. Frank Johausen, s’avançant alors, dit:

«Qui donc êtes-vous?…

— Oui! qui êtes-vous?… répéta le major Verder.

— Je suis un proscrit que Dimitri Nicolef a voulu sauver au prix de son honneur, et qui vient le sauver au prix de sa vie!…

— Votre nom?… demanda le colonel en s’avançant.

— Wladimir Yanof!»

CHAPITRE XII

Wladimir Yanof

Que l’on veuille bien se reporter de quinze jours en arrière au début de ce drame.

Un homme vient d’apparaître sur la rive orientale du lac Peipous. Pendant la nuit, il s’est jeté à travers les glaçons dont la surface du lac est hérissée. Une ronde de douaniers, croyant suivre la piste de quelque fraudeur, s’est lancée sur ses traces, et, au moment où il se dissimulait entre les blocs, elle a fait feu sur lui. Cet homme n’a pas été atteint et a pu se réfugier dans une hutte de pêcheurs, où il a passé la journée. Puis, le soir venu, il s’est remis en marche, a dû fuir devant une bande de loups, n’a trouvé d’abri que dans un moulin d’où un brave meunier a favorisé son évasion. Enfin, poursuivi par l’escouade du brigadier Eck, c’est miracle s’il a pu lui échapper en se jetant sur les glaçons en dérive de la Pernova. C’est miracle aussi s’il n’a pas péri dans la débâcle, et s’il lui a été possible de séjourner à Pernau sans y être découvert.

Wladimir Yanof est le fils de Michel Yanof, un vieil ami de Dimitri Nicolef, qui, avant de mourir, lui a confié toute sa fortune. Ce dépôt sacré de vingt mille roubles en billets d’État devait être remis à Wladimir Yanof, lorsque le proscrit reviendrait dans son pays natal, s’il lui était jamais donné d’y revenir.

En effet, on sait à la suite de quelle affaire politique il a été envoyé au fond de la Sibérie orientale dans les salines de Munisinsk. Une condamnation à la déportation perpétuelle pesait sur lui. Sa fiancée, Ilka Nicolef, pouvait-elle conserver l'espoir qu'il lui serait rendu, qu'un jour, dans sa famille adoptive, la seule qui lui restât au monde, il retrouverait le repos et le bonheur?…

Non, et, sans doute, tous deux ne se reverraient que s'il était permis à Ilka de le rejoindre dans son exil – à moins qu'il ne parvînt à s'échapper!…

Or, après quatre ans, il s'est échappé, il a traversé les steppes sibériens et européens de l'Empire russe. Il est arrivé à Pernau, où il espérait s'embarquer pour la France ou l'Angleterre.

C'est là qu'il est caché, dépistant la police, attendant qu'un navire lui offre passage, dès que la navigation sera redevenue libre sur la Baltique.

Réfugié à Pernau, Wladimir Yanof était à bout de ressources. Aussi écrivit-il à Dimitri Nicolef, et ce fut cette lettre qui détermina le professeur à partir, afin de remettre au fils le dépôt qui lui avait été confié par le père.

Et si Nicolef n'a rien voulu dire de son voyage ni à ses amis ni à sa fille, c'est, au départ, parce qu'il voulait s'être assuré de la présence de Wladimir à Pernau; c'est, au retour, parce que le proscrit lui avait fait jurer de ne point révéler sa présence à Ilka, tant qu'une seconde lettre ne lui aurait pas appris qu'il était en sûreté sur une terre étrangère.

Dimitri Nicolef avait donc quitté Riga secrètement. Bien qu'il eût payé sa place jusqu'à Revel, afin qu'on ne pût soupçonner où il se rendait, il comptait abandonner la malle-poste à Pernau, où elle arriverait le soir même, et, sans l'accident survenu à vingt verstes de la ville, le voyage se fût accompli dans les meilleures conditions.

On sait quel déplorable concours de circonstances vint compromettre le plan de Dimitri Nicolef. Il avait dû passer la nuit au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue* avec le garçon de banque Poch. Il en était reparti à quatre heures du matin, afin de gagner Pernau, ce qui valait mieux que d’attendre le retour du conducteur de la malle… et on l’accusait maintenant d’avoir assassiné son compagnon de voyage!

Lorsque Dimitri Nicolef quitta l’auberge, il faisait nuit encore. Espérant n’être point remarqué, il prit la route de Pernau, déserte alors.

Après une rapide marche de deux heures, au soleil levant, il atteignit Pernau, et se rendit à l’hôtel où Wladimir Yanof logeait sous un faux nom.

Quelle joie ce fut pour tous deux de se revoir après une si longue absence, après tant d’épreuves subies, tant de dangers courus!… N’était-ce pas un père qui retrouvait son fils?… Nicolef remit à Wladimir le portefeuille qui renfermait toute la fortune de Michel Yanof, et, désirant assister à son embarquement, il resta deux jours avec lui. Mais le départ du navire sur lequel Wladimir Yanof avait arrêté son passage ayant été retardé, Dimitri Nicolef, ne pouvant prolonger son absence, dut repartir pour Riga. Le jeune proscrit le chargea de toutes ses tendresses pour Ilka, et lui fit promettre de ne rien dire à sa fiancée de son évasion, tant qu’il ne serait pas à l’abri des poursuites de la redoutable police moscovite. Il lui écrirait dès que sa sécurité serait assurée, et peut-être alors le professeur pourrait-il le rejoindre avec Ilka?…

Nicolef embrassa Wladimir, quitta Pernau, et rentra à Riga dans la nuit du 16 au 17, sans se douter de la terrible accusation qui pesait sur lui.

On a vu, d’ailleurs, avec quelle hauteur le professeur repoussa ou plutôt dédaigna cette accusation, quelle attitude il prit devant le juge d’instruction.

On sait également combien ce magistrat insista pour que Nicolef fît connaître le but de son voyage, et en quel endroit il s'était rendu en quittant l'auberge de la *Croix-Rompue…* Mais Dimitri Nicolef refusa de s'expliquer à ce sujet. Il ne parlerait pas tant qu'une lettre de Wladimir ne lui aurait pas appris que le proscrit était en sûreté. Cette lettre n'arriva pas, et on se rappelle avec quelle impatience, pendant ces deux jours, l'attendit Nicolef!

Et, alors, compromis par un silence qu'il ne voulait pas rompre, poursuivi avec une impitoyable haine par ses adversaires politiques, sa vie même menacée par les violences de la foule, il allait être mis en état d'arrestation, lorsque Wladimir Yanof apparut.

Et maintenant, on savait qui il était, ce proscrit, pourquoi il était venu à Riga. La porte de la maison ouverte, Wladimir Yanof tomba dans les bras de Dimitri Nicolef, il pressa sa fiancée sur son cœur, il embrassa Jean, il serra les mains qui lui furent tendues, et devant le colonel, devant le major Verder qui l'avaient suivi, il dit:

«A Pernau… lorsque j'ai su quel crime infâme était imputé à Nicolef, lorsque j'ai appris qu'on l'accusait d'être l'auteur de l'assassinat de la *Croix-Rompue,* lorsque les journaux eurent rapporté qu'il se refusait à faire connaître le motif de son voyage, bien qu'il n'eût qu'un mot, un nom à prononcer, le mien, pour se justifier, et qu'il ne le disait pas pour ne point me compromettre, je n'ai pas hésité, j'ai compris quel était mon devoir, j'ai quitté Pernau, et me voici!… Ce que tu as voulu faire pour moi, Dimitri Nicolef, toi, l'ami de Jean Yanof, toi, mon second père, j'ai voulu le faire pour toi…

— Et tu as eu tort, Wladimir, tu as eu tort, Wladimir!… Je suis innocent, je n'avais rien à craindre, je ne craignais rien, et mon innocence eût été bientôt reconnue.

— N'ai-je pas eu raison, Ilka? demanda Wladimir, en s'adressant à la jeune fille.

— Ne réponds pas, mon enfant, dit Nicolef, tu n'es pas à même de décider entre ton père et ton fiancé!… Je t'estime, Wladimir, pour ce que tu as cru devoir faire, mais je te blâme de l'avoir fait!… Avec plus de raison, tu aurais compris que mieux valait te réfugier en un lieu sûr… De là, tu m'aurais écrit, et, aussitôt ta lettre reçue, j'aurais parlé, j'aurais révélé les motifs de mon voyage… Ne pouvais-je pas supporter encore quelques jours de ces tristes épreuves pour que tu fusses hors de danger?…

— Mon père, dit alors Ilka d'une voix ferme, tu entendras pourtant ma réponse. Quoi qu'il puisse arriver, Wladimir a bien agi, et toute ma vie ne suffira plus à lui payer ma reconnaissance…

— Merci, Ilka, merci! s'écria Wladimir. Je suis déjà payé puisque j'ai pu épargner à votre père qu'il fût accusé un jour de plus!»

Maintenant, la justification de Dimitri Nicolef, due à l'intervention de Wladimir Yanof, ne faisait plus l'objet d'un doute. La nouvelle s'en était répandue au-dehors. Que MM. Johausen missent un haineux entêtement à n'y pas croire, que le major Verder vît avec un déplaisir évident ce Slave échapper à ses accusations, que les amis du banquier fissent toutes réserves sur l'incident, cela ne saurait étonner, et l'on verra bientôt s'ils avaient déposé les armes devant ce qui paraissait être l'évidence même. Mais on n'ignore pas avec quelle rapidité, trop souvent illogique et peu durable, un revirement se produit dans les foules, sinon dans l'opinion publique. C'est précisément ce qui se passa en cette circonstance. L'effervescence se calma. Il ne serait plus question d'envahir la maison de Dimitri Nicolef, les agents de police n'auraient plus à le protéger contre la fureur populaire.

Mais il restait à régler la situation de Wladimir Yanof. Parce que son âme généreuse, le sentiment du devoir l'avaient ramené à Riga, il n'en était pas moins un condamné politique, un évadé des mines de Sibérie.

Aussi le colonel Raguenof lui dit d'une voix où l'on sentait percer une bienveillance, tempérée par la réserve du fonctionnaire moscovite, d'un chef de police:

«Wladimir Yanof, vous êtes en rupture de ban, et je dois en référer au gouverneur. Je vais me rendre chez le général Gorko. Mais, en attendant mon retour, je ne vois aucun inconvénient à vous laisser dans cette maison, si vous donnez votre parole de ne pas chercher à vous enfuir.

— Je vous la donne, colonel», répondit Wladimir.

Le colonel partit, laissant, d'ailleurs, Eck et ses hommes de faction dans la rue.

Inutile d'insister sur la scène intime dans laquelle Jean, Ilka, Wladimir se livrèrent aux plus vifs épanchements. Le docteur Hamine et M. Delaporte les avaient quittés. Ce furent là quelques instants de bonheur, que la famille du professeur ne connaissait plus depuis longtemps. On se revoyait, on se parlait, on faisait presque des projets d'avenir. On oubliait la situation de Yanof, la condamnation qui le frappait, les conséquences de sa fuite, qui pouvaient être terribles, et le colonel qui allait bientôt revenir en faisant connaître les mesures ordonnées par le gouverneur.

Il revint une heure après, et, s'adressant à Wladimir:

«Par ordre du général Gorko, dit-il, vous vous rendrez à la forteresse de Riga, et vous attendrez les instructions qui ont été demandées à

Pétersbourg.

— Je suis prêt à obéir, colonel, répondit Wladimir. Adieu, mon père, dit-il à Nicolef, adieu, mon frère, dit-il à Jean, et, prenant la main d'Ilka, adieu, ma sœur…

— Non… votre femme!» répondit la jeune fille.

La séparation se fit… Combien durerait-elle? et Wladimir Yanof quitta cette maison, où il venait d'apporter tant de bonheur.

A partir de ce moment, l'extraordinaire intérêt que présentait cette affaire, si loin d'être terminée, se reporta sur le fugitif qui n'avait pas hésité à sacrifier sa liberté, et peut-être sa vie, car il avait été condamné pour crime politique. Sa conduite, il eût été difficile de ne pas l'admirer, quelle que fût l'opinion qu'on eût de Dimitri Nicolef. Il est certain que, même dans les camps opposés, les femmes célébraient à l'envi cette générosité d'âme qui avait entraîné Wladimir Yanof. Et puis, il y avait le côté si touchant de son existence, son amour pour Ilka Nicolef, leur brusque séparation au moment où leur union allait s'accomplir!… Et maintenant quels seraient les ordres de l'Empereur!… Le fugitif retournerait-il au fond de cette Sibérie orientale, d'où il s'était échappé au prix de tant de fatigues, en bravant tant de dangers? Sa fiancée, après le bonheur de l'avoir revu un instant, n'allait-elle pas être condamnée à le pleurer éternellement?… Quand il quitterait la forteresse de Riga, sa conduite lui vaudrait-elle d'avoir obtenu sa grâce, ou reprendrait-il le chemin de l'exil?…

Toutefois, ce serait une erreur de croire que cette subite et inattendue intervention de Wladimir Yanof eût proclamé pour tous les esprits l'innocence de Dimitri Nicolef. Dans cette ville de Riga, si infestée de germanisme, il ne pouvait en être ainsi. Les hautes classes, principalement, ne supportaient pas que ce professeur, ce représentant des intérêts slaves, fût quitte de l'accusation portée contre lui. Les journaux du parti ne laissèrent pas de faire des réserves avec leur insigne mauvaise foi. En somme, l'assassin n'était pas découvert. Il y avait une victime qui criait vengeance, et surtout par ces bouches haineuses et intraitables des ennemis de l'influence moscovite.

Et Frank Johausen de résumer ainsi l'opinion de nombre de gens, de ceux surtout qui ne voulaient point lâcher leur proie:

«On connaît maintenant les motifs de ce voyage de Nicolef… Il allait rejoindre Wladimir Yanof à Pernau, soit!… En quittant l'auberge à quatre heures du matin, c'était pour se rendre à Pernau, soit encore!… Mais, oui ou non, a-t-il passé la nuit du 13 au 14 au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue?…* Oui ou non, Poch a-t-il été assassiné, puis volé, cette nuit-là, dans ledit kabak?… Oui ou non, l'assassin peut-il être autre que le voyageur qui occupait la chambre où l'on a retrouvé l'instrument qui a servi à forcer celle du malheureux?… Oui ou non, ce voyageur était-il Dimitri Nicolef?…»

A des questions ainsi posées, seule une réponse affirmative était possible. Mais si aux «oui ou non» du banquier on eût opposé ceux-ci: Oui ou non, le crime a-t-il pu être commis par un malfaiteur du dehors?… Oui ou non, le criminel ne serait-il pas l'aubergiste Kroff?… Oui ou non, plus encore que Nicolef, celui-ci a-t-il eu toute facilité pour frapper Poch, soit avant, soit après le départ du professeur?… Oui ou non, ce Kroff ne savait-il pas que le portefeuille du garçon de banque contenait une somme considérable?…

A cela l'enquête répondait que les perquisitions n'avaient rien relevé de suspect contre l'aubergiste, – réponse qui n'était pas absolument probante. D'autre part, la justice ne se refusait pas à admettre que l'auteur du crime fût un de ces malfaiteurs dont on signalait depuis quelque temps la présence dans la région de la haute Livonie.

Et c'était bien l'opinion du colonel Raguenof qui, le lendemain, s'entretenait de cette affaire avec le major Verder, sans parvenir à le convaincre, comme on l'imagine aisément.

«Voyez-vous, major, disait-il, que Nicolef soit sorti par la fenêtre de sa chambre pendant la nuit pour pénétrer par la fenêtre dans celle de Poch, cela me paraît fort hypothétique…

— Et les empreintes?… objecta le major.

— Les empreintes?… Mais il faudrait savoir, tout d'abord, si elles étaient de fraîche date, ce qui n'est pas absolument prouvé… Ce kabak de la *Croix-Rompue* est isolé sur la grande route… Que quelque rôdeur ait essayé d'enfoncer la fenêtre, cette nuit-là ou une autre, c'est très admissible…

— Je vous ferai observer, mon colonel, que l'assassin a dû nécessairement savoir qu'il y avait gros à voler, et que Nicolef ne l'ignorait pas…

— Ni d'autres non plus, repartit vivement le colonel Raguenof, puisque Poch avait été assez imprudent pour bavarder là-dessus, pour laisser voir son portefeuille… Est-ce que Kroff ne le savait pas, et Broks, le conducteur, et les iemshicks qui se sont succédé aux différents relais, sans compter les paysans et bûcherons attablés dans la grande salle, à l'heure où Nicolef et le garçon de banque ont ouvert la porte du cabaret?»

Assurément, cette argumentation avait sa valeur. Les présomptions ne pesaient pas uniquement sur Dimitri Nicolef. Il restait toujours à démontrer, d’ailleurs, que le professeur se serait trouvé dans une telle situation pécuniaire qu’il n’aurait pu en sortir que par un vol doublé d’un meurtre.

Malgré tout, le major ne voulait pas se rendre et concluait à la culpabilité de Nicolef.

«Et moi je conclus, répondit le colonel, que les Allemands sont toujours des Allemands…

— Comme les Slaves sont toujours des Slaves, riposta le major.

— Aussi, laissons le juge Kerstorf continuer son enquête, dit en terminant le colonel Raguenof. Lorsque l’instruction sera définitivement close, il sera temps de discuter le pour et le contre.»

Tout en se tenant en dehors de ces opinions trop asservies aux passions politiques du jour, le magistrat instruisait l’affaire avec un soin minutieux. Il savait maintenant ce que le professeur s’était toujours refusé à révéler: les motifs de son voyage, et cela justifiait sa répugnance à le croire coupable. Mais alors, quel était l’auteur du crime?… Nombre de témoins furent appelés dans son cabinet: les postillons qui avaient conduit la malle entre Riga et Pernau, les paysans et bûcherons qui buvaient dans l’auberge à l’arrivée de Poch, tous ceux qui étaient au courant de ce que le garçon de banque allait faire à Revel, c’est-à-dire un versement pour le compte des frères Johausen. Rien ne permit d’incriminer l’un ou l’autre de ces témoins.

A plusieurs reprises, le conducteur Broks fut interrogé. Mieux que personne, il connaissait la situation de Poch et savait qu’il était porteur d’une somme considérable. Mais ce brave homme ne donnait prise à aucun soupçon. Après l’accident de la malle, il s’était rendu à Pernau avec l’attelage et le postillon; il avait couché à l’auberge du relais, nul doute à cet égard. L’alibi étant indiscutable, il ne pouvait être inquiété dans cette affaire.

Ainsi donc, l’intervention d’un malfaiteur du dehors se voyait écartée. D’ailleurs, comment un rôdeur de grande route, s’il n’avait eu aucun rapport avec le garçon de banque, aurait-il eu l’idée de le voler, à moins qu’il n’eût appris à Riga, d’une façon quelconque, de quelle mission Poch était chargé?… Et, alors, faisant diligence pour le suivre et guetter l’occasion, il aurait profité de ce que l’accident avait obligé Poch à se réfugier au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue…*

Bien que cette dernière hypothèse fût admissible, en somme, il était plus probable, cependant, que le crime avait été commis par l’un ou l’autre de ceux qui avaient passé la nuit dans l’auberge. Or, ils n’étaient que deux: le cabaretier et Dimitri Nicolef.

Depuis l’affaire, Kroff était resté au kabak, on le sait, très surveillé par les agents. Amené plusieurs fois devant le juge d’instruction, il avait subi de longs et minutieux interrogatoires. Rien dans sa conduite, rien dans ses réponses, n’avait donné prise aux plus légers soupçons. Au surplus, il était affirmatif sur ce point: c’est que Dimitri Nicolef devait être l’assassin, ayant eu toute facilité pour commettre le crime.

«Et vous n’avez entendu aucun bruit pendant la nuit?… lui demandait le magistrat.

— Aucun, monsieur le juge.

— Cependant, cette première fenêtre qu’il a fallu ouvrir, cette seconde fenêtre qu’il a fallu forcer…

— Ma chambre est sur la cour, répondait Kroff, et les fenêtres des deux autres donnent sur la grande route… Je dormais profondément… D’ailleurs, cette nuit-là, il faisait un temps épouvantable, et la bourrasque n’eût permis d’entendre aucun bruit.»

Le juge, en écoutant les dépositions de Kroff, le regardait attentivement, et, bien qu’au fond il fût prévenu contre lui, il ne pouvait rien surprendre qui mît en doute la véracité du cabaretier.

L’interrogatoire achevé, Kroff reprenait librement le chemin de la *Croix-Rompue.* S’il était coupable, ne valait-il pas mieux lui laisser sa liberté tout en le surveillant?… Peut-être se compromettrait-il d’une façon ou d’une autre?…

Quatre jours s’étaient écoulés depuis que Wladimir Yanof avait été enfermé dans la forteresse de Riga.

Conformément aux ordres du gouverneur, une chambre avait été affectée au prisonnier. On le traitait avec les égards que méritaient sa situation et sa conduite. Le général Gorko ne doutait pas que ces ménagements ne fussent approuvés en haut lieu, quelque dénouement que dût avoir cette affaire pour Wladimir Yanof.

Dimitri Nicolef, dont la santé se ressentait de ces terribles épreuves, retenu à la chambre, ne put le voir comme il l’eût désiré. D’ailleurs, l’accès de la prison était permis à la famille de Nicolef et aux amis de Wladimir Yanof. Chaque jour Jean et Ilka se présentaient à la forteresse et on les conduisait près du prisonnier. Et là, que de longs et intimes entretiens d’où l’espoir n’était pas banni! Oui! la sœur et le frère croyaient, voulaient croire à la magnanimité de l’Empereur… Sa Majesté ne serait point insensible aux supplications de cette malheureuse famille si rudement frappée depuis quelque temps… Wladimir et Ilka ne seraient plus séparés par des milliers de lieues, et surtout par cette condamnation à perpétuité, plus terrible encore que la distance… Le mariage de ces deux êtres qui s’aimaient pourrait enfin s’accomplir dans quelques semaines, si Wladimir bénéficiait de la clémence impériale… On le savait, le gouverneur faisait des démarches dans ce but… La situation particulière de Dimitri Nicolef à Riga, à la veille des élections où il représentait le parti slave, les tendances du gouvernement à russifier l’administration municipale dans les provinces Baltiques, tout concourait à ce que le fugitif obtînt remise entière de sa peine.

Le 24 avril, après avoir pris congé de Yanof, puis de son père et de sa sœur, Jean quitta Riga pour retourner à Dorpat. C’était le front haut qu’il voulait rentrer à l’Université, lui qu’on avait traité de fils d’assassin.

Inutile d’insister sur l’accueil que lui firent ses camarades, ceux de sa corporation et Gospodin plus chaleureusement que personne.

Mais inutile aussi de dire que les autres étudiants, ceux que menait Karl Johausen, n’avaient point désarmé. Il semblait donc impossible que cela ne finît pas par un éclat.

Cet éclat se produisit le lendemain du retour de Jean Nicolef.

Jean, ayant demandé satisfaction à Karl de ses insultes, celui-ci refusa de se battre en les aggravant encore.

Jean le frappa au visage. Le duel, qui était devenu inévitable, eut lieu et Karl Johausen fut grièvement blessé.

Que l’on juge de l’effet de cette rencontre lorsque la nouvelle en parvint à Riga! M. et Mme Johausen partirent aussitôt pour aller soigner leur fils mortellement atteint peut-être. Et, à leur retour, avec quelle violence, sans doute, reprendrait la lutte entre ces ennemis acharnés!

En attendant, cinq jours après, la réponse relative à Wladimir Yanof arrivait de Pétersbourg.

On avait eu raison de compter sur la générosité de l’Empereur. Grâce entière était accordée au proscrit, échappé des mines de Sibérie, et Wladimir Yanof fut immédiatement remis en liberté.

CHAPITRE XIII

Deuxième perquisition

La grâce de Wladimir Yanof allait produire un effet énorme, non seulement à Riga, mais dans toutes les provinces Baltiques. On voulut voir là une marque plus intentionnelle du gouvernement de se montrer favorable aux tendances antigermaniques. La population ouvrière y applaudit sans réserve. Chez la noblesse et la bourgeoisie, on blâma la clémence impériale qui, après Wladimir, semblait atteindre et couvrir Dimitri Nicolef. Certes, la généreuse conduite du fugitif, se livrant lui-même, méritait cette grâce, et, avec elle, sa complète réhabilitation, le recouvrement de tous ses droits civils dont une condamnation politique l’avait privé. Mais n’était-ce pas aussi comme une protestation contre les inculpations qui visaient le professeur, un citoyen jusqu’alors honorable et honoré, et désigné au choix du parti slave dans les prochaines élections?…

C’est ainsi, du moins, que fut jugé l’acte de l’Empereur, et le général Gorko ne cacha point son opinion à ce sujet.

Wladimir Yanof quitta la forteresse de Riga en compagnie du colonel Raguenof, qui était venu lui communiquer l’ukase du tsar. Il se rendit aussitôt chez Dimitri Nicolef et, la nouvelle ayant été tenue secrète, Ilka et son père l’apprirent de sa bouche même.

De quels flots de joie et de reconnaissance fut inondée cette modeste maison, où le bonheur semblait enfin revenu!

Presque aussitôt arrivèrent le docteur Hamine, M. Delaporte, quelques-uns des amis de la famille. Wladimir fut félicité, embrassé de tous. Ce accusations qui avaient accablé le professeur, qui y songeait à présent?…

«Quand bien même vous eussiez été condamné, lui dit M. Delaporte, pas un de nous n’eût douté de votre innocence!

— Condamné!… s’écria le docteur. Est-ce qu’il aurait jamais pu l’être?…

— Et si une condamnation eût été prononcée, déclara Ilka, Wladimir, Jean et moi nous aurions consacré notre vie à poursuivre ta réhabilitation, mon père!»

Dimitri Nicolef, le cœur oppressé, la figure pâlie par les émotions, ne put prononcer une parole. Il souriait tristement. Ne se disait-il pas qu’on peut tout attendre de l’incertaine justice des hommes?…

N’a-t-on pas trop d’exemples de condamnations iniques et souvent irréparables?…

La soirée réunit, autour du thé, les plus intimes amis de Wladimir et de Nicolef. Et comme les cœurs battirent, et quelles démonstrations de joie se manifestèrent, lorsque, très simplement, Ilka dit:

«Quand vous le voudrez, Wladimir, je serai votre femme!»

Le mariage fut fixé à six semaines de là, et l’on disposa une chambre au rez-de-chaussée de la maison pour Wladimir Yanof. La fortune des deux fiancés était connue. Ilka n’avait rien et, jusqu’alors, Nicolef s’était tu sur sa situation, sur ses engagements envers la maison Johausen pour les dettes paternelles. A force d’économie, il en avait payé une bonne part, et il espérait toujours pouvoir s’acquitter du reste. Voilà pourquoi il n’avait rien dit à ses enfants, et pourquoi ils ne savaient pas que la dernière créance de dix-huit mille roubles venait à échéance dans quinze jours. Il faudrait bien qu'il en fît l'aveu pourtant. Wladimir ne pouvait pas rester dans l'ignorance d'un danger si inquiétant pour la famille… Ce n'est pas cela, d'ailleurs, qui changerait ses sentiments pour la jeune fille. Lui, avec la somme en dépôt que lui avait restituée Dimitri Nicolef, il saurait attendre, et, son énergie, son intelligence aidant, assurer l'avenir.

Si la famille Nicolef était heureuse, maintenant, plus heureuse qu'elle n'avait peut-être jamais espéré l'être, quel contraste auprès de la famille Johausen! Il y avait lieu de penser que Karl, si grièvement blessé, guérirait avec des soins et du temps, et l'on avait pu le faire transporter à Riga. Toutefois, dans la lutte qu'il soutenait directement contre le professeur qu'il croyait avoir anéanti, Frank Johausen sentait la victoire lui échapper. Il semblait que les armes terribles, dont sa haine n'avait pas hésité à se servir, venaient de se briser entre ses mains. La gêne financière de son rival, la dette contractée envers lui et qui ne serait peut-être pas payée à l'échéance, voilà tout ce qui lui restait pour ruiner son ennemi politique.

Ce qui est certain, c'est que l'opinion publique, – celle des gens désintéressés dans l'espèce et jugeant les faits sans parti pris, – abandonnait peu à peu l'accusation portée contre Dimitri Nicolef.

Elle tendait même à se retourner contre le propriétaire du kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*.

En effet, si l'on écartait aussi l'intervention d'un malfaiteur du dehors, les présomptions devaient porter sur Kroff. Ses antécédents prouvaient-ils pour ou contre lui?… A vrai dire, ils n'étaient ni bons ni mauvais. Kroff avait la réputation d'être un homme rude, âpre au gain. Peu communicatif, très en dessous, il vivait seul, sans famille, dans ce cabaret isolé, fréquenté des paysans et des bûcherons. Ses père et mère, d’origine allemande, et – ce qui n’est pas rare dans les provinces Baltiques – appartenant à la religion orthodoxe, avaient vécu assez misérablement des produits de cette auberge. La maison, le clos, c’était tout ce que leur fils avait hérité d’eux, et la valeur de ce bien n’atteignait pas un millier de roubles.

Là, Kroff, célibataire, sans serviteur ni servante, faisait tout par lui-même, ne s’absentant que lorsqu’il fallait renouveler quelque approvisionnement à Pernau.

Le juge Kerstorf avait toujours conservé certains soupçons contre l’aubergiste. Ces soupçons étaient-ils fondés, et Kroff n’avait-il pas voulu les détourner en accusant le voyageur venu avec le garçon de banque?… N’était-ce pas lui qui avait fait ces empreintes relevées sur la fenêtre de la chambre, lui qui avait replacé le tisonnier dans l’âtre après s’en être servi pour forcer les contrevents, lui enfin qui avait commis le crime, soit avant, soit après le départ de Dimitri Nicolef, sur lequel, grâce aux précautions qu’il avait prises, devaient se porter les investigations de la justice?

N’était-ce pas là une nouvelle piste à suivre, et ne conduirait-elle pas au but, si l’on marchait avec prudence?…

Du reste, depuis que Dimitri Nicolef semblait avoir été mis hors de cause à l’arrivée de Wladimir Yanof, Kroff pouvait craindre que sa situation fût moins nette. Il fallait à tout prix découvrir l’auteur du crime et, dorénavant, l’enquête n’allait-elle pas être dirigée contre lui?…

Après l’assassinat, on le sait, le cabaretier n’avait quitté l’auberge que pour venir au cabinet du juge d’instruction. Bien qu’il fût libre, en somme, il se sentait très surveillé par les agents de police, de garde, nuit et jour, au kabak.

La chambre du voyageur et la chambre de Poch, fermées à clef, et les clefs entre les mains du magistrat, personne n’avait pu y pénétrer. Les choses étaient donc dans l’état où elles se trouvaient lors de la première perquisition.

Si Kroff répétait à qui voulait l’entendre que l’instruction faisait fausse route en abandonnant l’accusation portée contre Nicolef, s’il affirmait que c’était le voyageur le vrai coupable, s’il ne cessait de le charger devant le juge Kerstorf, s’il était soutenu dans son dire par les ennemis du professeur; si, d’autre part, les amis de celui-ci rejetaient le crime sur l’aubergiste, la vérité est que la situation de l’un et de l’autre ne serait pas claire et qu’elle donnerait matière aux plus violentes incriminations, tant que le criminel ne tomberait pas entre les mains de la justice.

Wladimir Yanof et le docteur Hamine causaient souvent de cette situation. Ils comprenaient que la seule éventualité qui fermerait la bouche aux Johausen et à leurs partisans, ce serait non seulement l’arrestation de l’auteur du crime, mais sa mise en jugement, sa condamnation. Et, tandis que Dimitri Nicolef semblait se détacher de cette affaire, ne plus vouloir s’en occuper, n’y faisait jamais allusion, ses amis ne cessaient de presser l’enquête et d’y aider avec les renseignements qu’ils tâchaient de recueillir de part et d’autre.

D’ailleurs, ils se montrèrent si affirmatifs en accusant le cabaretier, que, sous la pression de l’opinion publique, M. Kerstorf et le colonel Raguenof décidèrent qu’une seconde perquisition serait faite au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*.

Cette perquisition eut lieu le 5 mai.

Le juge Kerstorf, le major Verder, le brigadier Eck, partis la veille, arrivèrent dans la matinée au kabak.

Les agents de police, à leur poste dans la maison, n’avaient rien de nouveau à signaler.

Kroff, qui s’attendait à cette visite des magistrats, se mit avec empressement à leur disposition.

«Monsieur le juge, dit-il, je n’ignore pas qu’on a voulu me compromettre dans cette affaire… Mais, cette fois, j’espère que vous partirez convaincu de mon innocence…

— Nous verrons, répondit M. Kerstorf. Commençons…

— Par la chambre du voyageur dont vous avez la clef? dit l’aubergiste.

— Non, répondit le magistrat.

— Votre intention est-elle de visiter la maison entière?… demanda le major Verder.

— Oui, major.

— Je crois, Monsieur Kerstorf, que, s’il reste quelque nouvel indice à trouver, ce sera plutôt dans la chambre qu’a occupée Dimitri Nicolef.»

Et cette observation prouvait bien que le major ne mettait pas en doute la culpabilité du professeur, par suite, la parfaite innocence du cabaretier. Rien n’avait pu modifier son opinion appuyée sur les faits: l’assassin, c’était le voyageur, et le voyageur, c’était Dimitri Nicolef, il ne sortait pas de là.

«Conduisez-nous», ordonna le juge au cabaretier.

Et Kroff obéit avec un empressement qui témoignait en sa faveur.

L’annexe sur le jardin et les appentis furent une seconde fois visités par les agents sous la direction du brigadier Eck, en présence du juge et du major.

Puis on explora le jardin avec un soin minutieux, au pied de chaque arbre, le long de la haie vive, les carrés où végétaient de rares légumes. Peut-être Kroff aurait-il enterré quelque part le produit du vol, s’il l’avait commis, c’est bien ce qu’il eût été important d’établir.

Les recherches furent inutiles.

En fait d’argent, l’armoire du cabaretier ne renfermait qu’une centaine de billets de vingt-cinq, dix, cinq, trois et un roubles, c’est-à-dire d’une valeur inférieure à ceux que contenait le portefeuille du garçon de banque.

Et alors, le major Verder, prenant le juge à part, lui dit:

«N’oubliez pas, Monsieur Kerstorf, que, depuis le jour du crime, Kroff n’a pas quitté le kabak sans être accompagné, car les agents sont arrivés le matin même…

— Je le sais, répondit M. Kerstorf, mais, avant la venue de ces agents, après le départ de M. Nicolef, l’aubergiste a été seul pendant quelques heures.

— Enfin, Monsieur Kerstorf, vous voyez que nous n’avons rien trouvé de compromettant…

— Rien, en effet, jusqu'ici. Il est vrai, notre perquisition n'est pas achevée. – Vous avez les clefs des deux chambres, major?…

— Oui, Monsieur Kerstorf.»

En effet, elles avaient été déposées au bureau de police, et le major Verder les tira de sa poche.

La porte de la chambre où le garçon de banque avait été frappé fut ouverte.

Cette chambre se trouvait dans l'état où les agents l'avaient laissée après la première descente de justice. Il fut facile de le constater dès que les contrevents eurent été repoussés en dehors. Le lit était défait, l'oreiller taché de sang, le plancher rougi d'une mare séchée qui s'étendait jusqu'à la porte. Aucun nouvel indice ne put être relevé. Le meurtrier, quel qu'il fût, n'avait pas laissé de trace de son passage.

Les contrevents refermés, M. Kerstorf, le major, le brigadier, Kroff et ses hommes rentrèrent dans la grande salle.

«Visitons la seconde chambre», dit le juge.

Tout d'abord, la porte fut examinée. Elle ne portait aucune trace extérieure.

D'ailleurs, les agents logés au kabak pouvaient affirmer que personne n'avait tenté de l'ouvrir! Ni l'un ni l'autre n'avaient quitté la maison depuis dix jours.

La chambre était plongée dans une profonde obscurité.

Le brigadier Eck se dirigea vers la fenêtre, l'ouvrit toute grande, fit basculer la barre des contrevents, les rabattit sur le mur, et l'on put opérer en pleine lumière.

Aucun changement depuis la dernière perquisition. Au fond, le lit où avait couché Dimitri Nicolef. Près du lit, vers la tête, une grossière table qui supportait le chandelier de fer avec sa résine à demi consumée. Une chaise de paille dans un coin, un escabeau dans un autre. A droite, une armoire dont les portes étaient fermées. Au fond, la cheminée, c’est-à-dire un âtre formé de deux pierres plates. Au-dessus, le tuyau évasé à sa partie inférieure qui remontait vers le toit en se rétrécissant.

Le lit fut examiné, et, de même que la première fois, on ne releva aucun indice suspect. Dans l’armoire et ses tiroirs aucun vêtement ni aucun papier: elle était vide.

Le tisonnier, déposé dans un angle de l’âtre, fut l’objet d’un examen minutieux. Certainement, étant tordu du bout, il avait pu être employé comme levier pour forcer le volet de l’autre fenêtre. Mais, très certainement aussi, tout autre ustensile, un simple bâton eût suffi à cette effraction, tant ce volet était en mauvais état.

Quant aux éraflures de l’entablement de la fenêtre, on les retrouva; provenaient-elles du passage d’un individu à travers la fenêtre? on ne pouvait l’affirmer.

Le juge revint vers l’âtre.

«Est-ce que le voyageur avait fait du feu?… demanda-t-il à Kroff.

— Assurément non, répondit l’aubergiste.

— Et les cendres, les a-t-on examinées la première fois?…

— Je ne crois pas, répliqua le major Verder.

— Faites-le donc.»

Le brigadier se pencha sur l’âtre, et, dans le coin à gauche, aperçut un papier, à demi brûlé, une sorte de carré dont il ne restait plus que l’angle, et qui se confondait avec les cendres.

Quelle surprise éprouvèrent les assistants, quand on eut reconnu dans ce bout de papier un débris de billet de banque. Oui! à n’en pas douter, un de ces billets d’État de la série des cent roubles, dont le numéro avait été consumé par la flamme – et quelle autre flamme si ce n’est celle de cette résine, posée sur la table, puisque le feu n’avait pas été allumé dans la cheminée?…

En outre, ce morceau de papier était souillé de sang.

Nul doute, c’étaient les mains du meurtrier qui avaient taché ce billet, c’était lui qui l’avait brûlé, parce qu’il était ensanglanté! Et, ce billet, d’où pouvait-il provenir, si ce n’est du portefeuille de Poch?…

Mais de cette incinération incomplète il restait un témoignage accablant!

Une hésitation était-elle permise à cette heure?… Comment admettre que le crime eût été commis par un malfaiteur du dehors?… L’assassin n’était-il pas manifestement le voyageur qui occupait cette chambre, qui y était rentré par la fenêtre après le crime, qui en était ressorti à quatre heures du matin?…

Le major et le brigadier se regardèrent en hommes dont la conviction est depuis longtemps faite. Mais, M. Kerstorf se taisant, ils gardèrent le silence.

Kroff, lui, ne put se contenir.

«Que vous avais-je dit, monsieur le juge, s’écria-t-il, et avez-vous maintenant des doutes sur mon innocence?…

M. Kerstorf mit le morceau de billet dans son calepin, comme pièce à conviction, et se contenta de répondre:

«Notre perquisition est maintenant terminée, Messieurs… Sortons et partons à l’instant.»

Un quart d’heure après, la voiture roulait sur le chemin de Riga, tandis que les agents de police restaient en surveillance au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue.*

Le lendemain, dès la première heure, M. Frank Johausen fut instruit du résultat de l’enquête. Le numéro du billet brûlé ayant disparu, on ne pouvait vérifier si ce billet était l’un de ceux dont on avait conservé les numérotages à la maison de banque. Mais, appartenant évidemment à la série de ceux qui avaient été remis à Poch, nul doute qu’il eût été volé dans son portefeuille.

Cette nouvelle s’ébruita rapidement. Tout d’abord les amis de Dimitri Nicolef en furent atterrés. L’affaire allait entrer dans une seconde phase, ou plutôt revenir à la première. Quelles terribles épreuves menaçaient encore cette famille qui s’en croyait délivrée!

Quant aux partisans des Johausen, ils triomphèrent bruyamment. Pour eux, l’arrestation de Dimitri Nicolef serait ordonnée sans retard, et il ne pourrait échapper, devant le jury, à la peine que méritait cet épouvantable crime.

Wladimir Yanof fut mis au courant de cet incident par le docteur Hamine. Tous deux résolurent de n’en rien dire à Nicolef. Celui-ci n’apprendrait que trop tôt quelles nouvelles charges s’élevaient contre lui.

Wladimir aurait bien voulu empêcher ces bruits de parvenir jusqu’à sa fiancée… Ce fut impossible, et, le jour même, il la vit abîmée dans sa douleur.

«Mon père est innocent!… Mon père est innocent!…répétait-elle sans pouvoir dire autre chose.

— Oui, chère Ilka, il l’est, et nous découvrirons le coupable et nous confondrons tous ceux qui l’accusent!… En vérité, je me demande s’il n’y a pas là quelque infâme machination dans le but de perdre le meilleur et le plus honnête des hommes.»

Et, en vérité, ce cœur généreux en était à raisonner ainsi. Il ne savait que trop jusqu’où peut aller la vengeance politique. Pourtant, quelle apparence qu’une telle infamie eût été combinée et que de telles combinaisons eussent jamais chance de réussir?…

Ce qui devait arriver arriva.

Dans l’après-midi, Dimitri Nicolef fut mandé au cabinet du juge d’instruction. Il descendit aussitôt dans la salle, où Wladimir et Ilka le mirent au courant de ce qui se passait.

«Encore cette affaire! dit-il en haussant les épaules. Elle ne finira donc jamais?…

— Quelque témoignage nouveau que l’on attend de toi, mon père… dit la jeune fille.

— Voulez-vous que je vous accompagne?… demanda Wladimir.

— Non… je te remercie, Wladimir.»

Le professeur sortit et, marchant d’un pas assez rapide, un quart d’heure après, il entrait dans le cabinet de M. Kerstorf.

Le magistrat et son greffier étaient seuls en ce moment. A la suite d’une entrevue avec le gouverneur et le colonel Raguenof, il avait été décidé que le professeur serait soumis à un second interrogatoire, son arrestation étant abandonnée à la seule conscience du magistrat.

M. Kerstorf invita Nicolef à s’asseoir, et, d’une voix où se sentait une certaine émotion:

«Monsieur Nicolef, dit-il, hier une deuxième perquisition a été faite et sous mes yeux à l’auberge de la *Croix-Rompue*… Les agents ont minutieusement visité la maison entière sans qu’il en soit résulté aucune autre constatation… Mais, dans la chambre que vous avez occupée pendant la nuit du 13 au 14 avril, voici ce qu’on a trouvé…»

Et il présenta au professeur le morceau d’angle du billet d’État.

«Qu’est-ce que ce bout de papier?… demanda Dimitri Nicolef.

— C’est ce qui reste d’un billet de banque qui avait été brûlé et jeté dans les cendres de l’âtre…

— Un des billets de banque qui ont été volés dans le portefeuille de Poch?…

— C’est tout au moins vraisemblable, répondit le magistrat, et vous ne serez pas surpris, monsieur Nicolef, si cela semble constituer une charge contre vous…

— Contre moi?… répliqua le professeur en reprenant son ton ironique et dédaigneux. Comment, monsieur le juge, je n’en ai pas fini avec les soupçons, et les déclarations de Wladimir Yanof ne m’ont pas définitivement justifié?»

M. Kerstorf évita de répondre. Il regardait avec une extrême attention Nicolef, ce malheureux dont la physionomie maladive attestait qu’il n’était pas encore remis de l’ébranlement moral dû à cette succession d’épreuves.

Et, paraît-il, elles n’avaient pas atteint leur terme, puisque d’autres présomptions s’élevaient contre lui.

Dimitri Nicolef avait passé la main sur son front et il dit:

«Ainsi ce fragment de billet de banque a été ramassé dans l’âtre de la chambre où j’ai passé la nuit?…

— Oui, monsieur Nicolef.

— Et cette chambre avait été fermée après la première descente de justice?…

— Fermée à clef, et il est certain que la porte n’en a point été ouverte…

— Ainsi personne n’a pu s’introduire dans cette chambre?…

— Personne.»

Il convenait sans doute au magistrat, renversant les rôles, de se laisser interroger.

«Ce billet était taché de sang, reprit Nicolef, après l’avoir examiné, puis il a été brûlé incomplètement, et on l’a retrouvé dans les cendres?…

— On l’y a retrouvé…

— Alors comment se fait-il qu’il ait échappé aux recherches lors de la première perquisition?…

— Je ne l’explique pas, et je m’en étonne, car il était certainement à cette place, puisque personne n’a pu l’y mettre depuis…

— Je ne suis pas moins étonné que vous, répondit non sans quelque ironie Dimitri Nicolef. Je ne devrais pas dire étonné, mais inquiet, car c’est moi, sans doute, que l’on accuse d’avoir brûlé ce billet, de l’avoir jeté dans la cheminée?…

— C’est vous, répondit M. Kerstorf.

— Et, reprit le professeur, d’une voix plus ironique encore, comme ce billet faisait partie de la liasse que renfermait le portefeuille du garçon de banque, comme il a été volé dans ce portefeuille, après l’assassinat de Poch, nul doute que le voleur, c’est le voyageur qui occupait cette chambre, et enfin, comme elle était occupée par moi, c’est moi qui suis l’assassin…

— En peut-on douter?… demanda M. Kerstorf, qui ne perdait pas Nicolef du regard.

— En aucune façon, monsieur le juge. Tout cela s’enchaîne!… La déduction est parfaite… Seulement, à votre argumentation voulez-vous me permettre d’opposer la mienne?…

— Faites, monsieur Nicolef.

— C’est à quatre heures du matin que j’ai quitté l’auberge de la *Croix-Rompue*… A ce moment, le crime était-il commis?… Oui, si j’en suis l’auteur, non, si je n’en suis pas l’auteur… Peu importe d’ailleurs. Eh bien! monsieur le juge, pouvez-vous affirmer que l’assassin n’a pu, après mon départ, prendre toutes mesures et précautions pour que les soupçons dussent se porter sur le voyageur, c’est-à-dire sur moi, pénétrer dans cette chambre, y déposer le tisonnier, jeter dans l’âtre un des billets tachés de sang, après l’avoir incomplètement brûlé, puis enfin érailler le bord extérieur de la fenêtre, afin d’établir que c’était bien moi qui l’avais franchie pour aller frapper dans son lit le garçon de banque?

— De ce que vous dites là, monsieur Nicolef, il ressort une accusation directe contre le cabaretier Kroff…

— Kroff ou tout autre!… Je n’ai pas, au surplus, à découvrir le coupable… J’ai à me défendre et je me défends!»

M. Kerstorf ne pouvait être que très frappé de l’attitude de Dimitri Nicolef. Ce que celui-ci venait de dire, il se l’était dit maintes fois… Non! il se refusait à croire coupable un homme d’une vie si honorable… Mais enfin, s’il soupçonnait Kroff, les recherches opérées, les éléments d’information, les témoignages, ne relevaient rien contre l’aubergiste. Le juge dut donc le faire observer à Nicolef pendant la suite de cet interrogatoire qui se prolongea une heure encore.

«Monsieur le juge, dit enfin le professeur, c’est à vous de déterminer sur lequel de nous deux, Kroff ou moi, pèsent les charges les plus accablantes… Tout homme juste, examinant froidement les choses, peut maintenant et doit affirmer qu’elles ne sont pas de mon côté… Pour des motifs que vous savez, j’avais dû me taire sur le but de mon voyage… Vous les connaissez depuis que Wladimir Yanof s’est livré pour vous les apprendre… C’était le point douteux de ma cause, et il a été publiquement éclairci… L’aubergiste est-il l’auteur du crime?… N’est-ce pas un malfaiteur du dehors?… A la justice de se prononcer!… Pour moi, je ne mets pas en doute la culpabilité de Kroff… Il savait que Poch allait à Revel faire un versement au compte de MM. Johausen frères… Il savait qu’il était porteur d’une somme considérable… Il savait que je devais partir dès quatre heures du matin… Il savait tout ce qu’il fallait savoir pour commettre le meurtre et en rejeter le responsabilité sur le voyageur venu avec le garçon de banque… Avant mon départ ou après, il a assassiné ce malheureux… Après mon départ, il est entré dans ma chambre, il a jeté le reste d’un des billets dans l’âtre, il a tout disposé pour établir ma culpabilité… Eh bien! si vous croyez encore que je suis l’assassin de Poch, placez-moi en face du jury… J’accuserai Kroff… Le débat sera entre nous deux, et je saurai ce qu’il faut penser de la justice des hommes, si c’est moi qu’elle condamne!»

Dimitri Nicolef avait mis moins d’animation qu’on ne le supposerait en présentant ces arguments qui, selon lui, concluaient à sa justification.

M. Kerstorf ne l’avait point interrompu, et lorsque le professeur, en terminant, ajouta:

«Signez-vous l’ordre de mon arrestation?…

— Non, monsieur Nicolef», répondit-il.

CHAPITRE XIV

Coups sur coups

Il est de toute évidence que l’affaire se limitait maintenant au cabaretier Kroff et au professeur Dimitri Nicolef. Le fragment de billet ramassé au coin de l’âtre écartait toute idée que le crime eût été commis par un de ces malfaiteurs dont la police signalait la présence en cette partie de la province livonienne. Après l’assassinat, comment un de ces rôdeurs eût-il pu, sans être surpris, s’introduire dans la chambre du voyageur, y déposer le tisonnier, en admettant que cet ustensile eût servi à forcer le volet de la fenêtre, et jeter dans la cheminée ce billet, brûlé moins l’angle recueilli sous les cendres?… Comment Dimitri Nicolef, d’une part, Kroff, de l’autre, n’auraient-ils rien entendu, si profond qu’eut été leur sommeil?… Et comment, enfin, l’assassin aurait-il pu avoir la pensée de faire retomber la responsabilité du crime sur ce voyageur?… Le meurtre et le vol accomplis, il se fût enfui au plus vite, et, le jour venu, il eût été loin du kabak de la *Croix-Rompue.*

Cela était le bon sens même. L’instruction devait donc se restreindre à ces deux hommes, de situation sociale si différente, et se prononcer entre eux.

Et cependant, ce qui ne laissa pas d’étonner les esprits les plus calmes, après cette dernière perquisition faite à l’auberge, il n’y eut mandat d’arrestation ni contre l’un ni contre l’autre.

On l’imagine sans peine, à la suite de ces nouvelles constatations, l’animation des partis se déchaîna avec une passion plus violente encore. Il est très important de noter ici que l’affaire se doubla plus étroitement alors de l’animosité publique qui séparait en deux camps, non seulement la ville de Riga, mais les trois gouvernements des provinces Baltiques.

Dimitri Nicolef était slave, et les Slaves le soutiendraient autant dans l’intérêt de la cause que parce que, en réalité, ils se refusaient à le croire coupable de ce crime.

Kroff était d’origine germanique, et les Allemands s’en faisaient le défenseur, bien plus pour combattre Dimitri Nicolef que parce qu’ils portaient intérêt à ce tenancier d’un misérable kabak de campagne.

Les journaux luttèrent à coups d’articles sensationnels, suivant l’opinion qu’ils défendaient. On discutait dans les hôtels de la noblesse, dans les habitations de la bourgeoisie, dans les bureaux des commerçants, dans les maisons des ouvriers et des mercenaires.

Il faut en convenir, la situation du gouverneur général se compliquait. Les élections municipales approchaient. C’était avec plus d’éclat, avec plus d’enthousiasme que les Slaves proclamaient Dimitri Nicolef leur candidat et l’opposaient à M. Frank Johausen.

La famille du riche banquier, ses amis, ses clients, loin d’abandonner la lutte, combattaient par tous les moyens en leur pouvoir. Ils avaient pour eux, il est à peine nécessaire de le dire, la puissance de l’argent, et ils ne le ménageaient pas aux journaux de leur parti. Les autorités, les magistrats s’entendaient accuser de faiblesse, voire même de partialité. On exigeait la mise en arrestation de Dimitri Nicolef, et ceux qui parlaient avec plus de modération demandaient au moins l’arrestation de l’aubergiste et du professeur. Il importait que cette affaire eût son dénouement, quel qu’il fût, avant que les partis se rencontrassent sur le terrain électoral, et le scrutin, appelé à se prononcer pour la première fois dans des conditions nouvelles, devait fonctionner avant peu.

Et, au milieu de ce conflit dont il ne se souciait guère, que devenait Kroff?…

Kroff ne quittait point le kabak où les agents exerçaient une surveillance sévère. Il continuait son métier. Chaque soir, ses clients, paysans ou bûcherons, se réunissaient comme d'habitude dans la grande salle. Mais on voyait que cette situation ne laissait pas de l'inquiéter. Du moment qu'on laissait le professeur en liberté, il craignait d'être mis en état d'arrestation. Plus insociable que jamais, baissant les yeux devant les regards trop directement fixés sur lui, il accusait sans cesse Nicolef avec un excès, une ténacité, une colère, qui lui faisaient monter le sang au visage à faire craindre qu'il ne fût frappé de congestion.

D'ordinaire, il y a grande joie dans une maison où se font des préparatifs de mariage. Toute la famille est en fête. On laisse entrer à pleines fenêtres l'air et la gaîté. Le bonheur jaillit de toutes parts.

Il n'en était pas ainsi dans la demeure de Dimitri Nicolef. Peut-être ne pensait-il plus à cette affaire, qui avait si profondément troublé sa vie, mais ne devait-il pas tout craindre de la part d'impitoyables créanciers, les plus acharnés de ses ennemis?…

Sept jours s'étaient écoulés depuis le dernier interrogatoire dans le cabinet de M. Kerstorf.

On était au 13 mai.

Le lendemain, l’engagement souscrit par Nicolef venait à échéance. Si, dans la matinée, il ne se présentait pas à la caisse de MM. Johausen frères avec les dix-huit mille roubles dus, il serait assigné en payement. Or, cette somme, il ne l’avait pas. Après avoir déjà payé une partie des dettes paternelles, soit sept mille roubles, il avait espéré pouvoir se libérer du reste, et voici qu’il n’allait pouvoir faire face à l’échéance.

C’était là que l’attendaient MM. Johausen, et un dilemme terrible s’élevait contre leur débiteur.

Ou Dimitri Nicolef n’était pas en mesure de s’acquitter, ou il l’était.

Dans le premier cas, si l’affaire de la *Croix-Rompue* se dénouait à son avantage, si l’enquête que M. Kerstorf poursuivait découvrait des charges nouvelles contre l’aubergiste, si enfin la culpabilité de Kroff ne pouvait plus être mise en doute, s’il était arrêté, jugé, si enfin l’innocence du professeur éclatait dans toute sa plénitude par la condamnation du vrai coupable, MM. Johausen le tenaient encore avec cette créance qu’il ne pouvait rembourser. En l’exécutant sans pitié, ils lui feraient payer le sang du jeune Karl et tout ce qu’ils avaient souffert dans leur intérêt et leur amour-propre, à ce rival qui levait contre l’élément germanique le drapeau du panslavisme.

Dans le second cas, si Dimitri Nicolef avait les fonds nécessaires au remboursement, c’est qu’ils provenaient du vol fait au kabak. MM. Johausen le savaient, c’étaient à grand-peine, en sacrifiant ses dernières ressources, que le professeur avait pu s’acquitter de sept mille roubles sur vingt-cinq mille. Où aurait-il trouvé les dix-huit mille roubles restants, s’il ne se les était pas procurés par un acte criminel?… Et alors, en apportant cette somme le jour de l’échéance, ces billets d’État dont il ignorait que la maison de banque eût les numéros, Nicolef se dénoncerait lui-même, et, cette fois, ni la protection des autorités, ni l'intervention de ses amis ne pourraient s'interposer: il serait perdu, perdu irrémédiablement.

La matinée du lendemain s'écoula sans que Dimitri Nicolef se fût présenté à la caisse de MM. Johausen frères.

Dans l'après-midi, vers quatre heures, une assignation lancée par les banquiers mit en demeure Dimitri Nicolef d'avoir à payer la somme de dix-huit mille roubles échue le jour même.

Le malheur voulut que ce fût Wladimir Yanof qui reçut cette assignation de la main de l'huissier. Oui!… le malheur, comme on va le voir.

Wladimir prit connaissance de cette assignation. Elle disait que Nicolef, engagé pour les dettes paternelles, était encore redevable vis-à-vis de MM. Johausen frères d'une somme considérable; Wladimir comprit tout, ayant su autrefois que le professeur avait éprouvé de grands embarras pécuniaires à la mort de son père; il comprit que Nicolef avait répondu des dettes de celui-ci; il comprit que, s'il n'avait jamais voulu en parler à sa famille, à ses enfants, c'était pour ne pas ajouter ce souci à tant d'autres, c'était qu'il espérait s'acquitter du restant de la dette à force d'économies et de travail.

Oui! Wladimir comprit tout cela, et il comprit aussi quel était son devoir.

Son devoir, c'était de sauver Dimitri Nicolef, puisqu'il le pouvait. Ne possédait-il pas une somme plus que suffisante, – les vingt mille roubles provenant du dépôt laissé par Jean Yanof entre les mains du professeur, et dont celui-ci lui avait fait remise intégrale à Pernau?…

Eh bien, il prendrait sur cette somme ce qui serait nécessaire au payement intégral de la dette, il rembourserait MM. Johausen frères, il sauverait

Dimitri Nicolef de cette dernière catastrophe.

Il était alors cinq heures du soir, et la maison de banque fermait à six.

Wladimir Yanof n’avait pas un instant à perdre. Résolu à ne rien dire de ce qu’il allait faire, il regagna sa chambre, prit dans son bureau un nombre de billets suffisant pour verser la somme due, sortit sans avoir été vu de personne, et se dirigea vers la porte de la maison.

En ce moment cette porte s’ouvrit. Jean et Ilka rentraient ensemble.

«Vous partez, Wladimir? dit la jeune fille en lui tendant la main.

— Oui, chère Ilka, répondit Wladimir, une course qui ne me retiendra pas longtemps… Je serai de retour avant l’heure du dîner…»

Peut-être eut-il alors la pensée de mettre le frère et la sœur au courant de ce qu’il allait faire… Il se retint. Si aucun incident ne l’obligeait à parler, il ne voulait pas que cela fût connu avant son mariage. Après, lorsque la jeune fille serait sa femme, il lui dirait tout, et il savait bien qu’elle l’approuverait d’avoir sauvé son père, même en compromettant leur avenir.

«Allez, Wladimir, dit-elle, et revenez promptement… Je suis moins inquiète lorsque je vous sais là… Je crains toujours que mon père…

— Il est plus triste, plus accablé que jamais, observa Jean, dont les yeux brillaient de colère. Ces misérables finiront par le tuer!… Il est malade… plus malade qu’on ne pense…

— Tu exagères, Jean, reprit Wladimir, et ton père a une endurance morale dont ses ennemis ne triompheront pas!

— Puissiez-vous dire vrai, Wladimir!» répondit la jeune fille.

Wladimir lui serra la main, et ajouta;

«Ayez confiance!… Dans quelques jours, toutes ses épreuves seront finies!»

Il s’élança dans la rue, et, vingt minutes plus tard, il arrivait à la maison de banque de MM. Johausen frères.

La caisse étant ouverte, Wladimir se présenta au guichet du caissier.

Ce caissier, auquel il s’adressa, lui fit observer que cette affaire regardait les chefs de la maison, détenteurs de l’engagement de Nicolef, et il l’invita à les voir dans leur cabinet.

MM. Johausen étaient là, et, lorsque la carte de Wladimir Yanof leur eut été remise:

«Wladimir Yanof!… s’écria l’un des frères. Il vient de la part de Nicolef… Il va nous demander du temps ou un renouvellement de l’obligation…

— Ni un jour ni une heure! répondit Frank Johausen d’une voix que l’on sentait impitoyable. Dès demain nous le ferons exécuter.»

Wladimir Yanof, prévenu par un des garçons de bureau que MM. Johausen étaient prêts à la recevoir, entra aussitôt. La conversation s’engagea en ces termes:

«Messieurs, dit Wladimir, je suis venu à propos d’une créance que vous avez sur Dimitri Nicolef, créance échue ce jour, et pour laquelle vous lui avez adressé une assignation…

— En effet, Monsieur, répondit Frank Johausen.

— Cette créance, reprit Wladimir, est de dix-huit mille roubles en principal et intérêts…

— En effet… dix-huit mille.

— Et elle constitue le solde des engagements que M. Dimitri Nicolef a pris envers vous à la mort de son père…

— Exactement, répondit Frank Johausen, mais nous ne pouvons admettre aucun délai…

— Qui vous le demande, Messieurs?… répliqua d'un ton hautain Wladimir.

— Ah! fit l'aîné des deux frères. Comme nous devions être remboursés avant midi…

— Vous le serez avant six heures, voilà tout, et je ne pense pas que votre maison ait été sur le point de suspendre ses paiements à cause de ce retard.

— Monsieur!… s'écria Frank Johausen, dont ces paroles ironiques et froides excitaient la colère. Apportez-vous donc cette somme de dix-huit mille roubles?…

— La voici! répondit Wladimir, qui tendit la liasse de billets de banque. Où sont les titres de créance?»

MM. Johausen, non moins surpris qu'irrités, ne répondirent pas. L'un d'eux alla vers le coffre-fort placé dans un angle du cabinet, il ouvrit un portefeuille à fermoir, des plis duquel il retira l'obligation et la posa sur la table.

Wladimir la prit, l’examina attentivement, constata que c’était bien l’engagement signé par Dimitri Nicolef au profit de MM. Johausen frères, et, remettant la liasse de billets:

«Veuillez compter», dit-il.

Frank Johausen était devenu pâle, tandis que Wladimir le couvrait d’un regard méprisant. Sa main tremblait en froissant les billets de banque.

Soudain ses yeux s’animent. Une joie féroce brille sur son visage, et c’est d’une voix imprégnée de haine qu’il s’écrie:

«Ce sont là, Monsieur Yanof, des billets qui ont été volés…

— Volés?…

— Oui… volés dans le portefeuille du malheureux Poch!

— Non!… Ces billets sont ceux que Dimitri Nicolef m’a apportés à Pernau, un dépôt que lui avait confié autrefois mon père…

— Tout s’explique! affirma M. Frank Johausen. Ce dépôt… il n’était plus en mesure de vous le rendre, et alors, profitant d’une occasion…»

Wladimir recula d’un pas.

«Notre maison en avait conservé les numéros, et en voici la liste, ajoute Frank Johausen, en retirant du tiroir de la table une feuille de papier couverte de chiffres.

— Monsieur… monsieur, balbutiait Wladimir atterré, les paroles ne pouvant plus s’échapper de sa bouche.

— Oui, reprit Frank Johausen, et, puisque c’est de la part de M. Nicolef que vous apportez ces billets, c’est que Dimitri Nicolef les a volés à notre garçon de banque après l’avoir assassiné dans le kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*!»

Wladimir Yanof ne trouva rien à répondre… Il sentait sa tête s’égarer, sa raison l’abandonner… Et pourtant, à travers le trouble de ses pensées, il comprit que Dimitri Nicolef était définitivement perdu… On dirait qu’il avait dissipé le dépôt confié à ses soins, que, s’il avait quitté Riga au reçu de la lettre de Wladimir Yanof, c’était pour aller l’implorer et non lui rendre un argent qu’il n’avait plus; que le hasard lui avait fait rencontrer Poch dans la malle-poste… Poch porteur d’un portefeuille de la maison de banque; qu’il l’avait tué et volé, et que c’étaient les billets mêmes de MM. Johausen qu’il avait remis au fils de son ami Yanof, dépouillé par un indigne abus de confiance!…

«Dimitri!… répétait Wladimir, Dimitri… aurait…

— A moins que ce ne soit vous… répondit Frank Johausen.

— Misérable!»

Mais Wladimir avait autre chose à faire qu’à venger cette insulte personnelle. Que l’on en vînt à prétendre qu’il fût l’auteur du crime, ce n’était pas pour le préoccuper. Il ne songeait qu’à Nicolef.

«Enfin, dit M. Frank Johausen, après avoir mis dans sa poche la liasse des billets volés, nous le tenons ce coquin!… Ce ne sont plus des présomptions, ce sont des certitudes, des preuves matérielles!… M. Kerstorf m’a donné un bon avis en me conseillant de garder le secret sur le numérotage des billets!… Tôt ou tard, l’assassin devait se faire prendre, et il est pris!… Je vais chez M. Kerstorf, et, avant une heure, un mandat d’arrestation aura été lancé contre Nicolef!»

Cependant Wladimir Yanof s’était jeté dans la rue. Il marchait à pas précipités, à pas de fou, vers la maison du professeur. Il s’efforçait de chasser de son esprit les tumultueuses pensées qui l’emplissaient. Il ne voulait rien croire tant que Nicolef ne se serait pas expliqué, et c’est cette explication qu’il allait chercher. Car, enfin, ces billets, c’étaient bien ceux que Dimitri Nicolef lui avait apportés à Pernau, et il ne s’était pas encore dessaisi d’un seul!…

Wladimir Yanof, arrivé devant la maison, ouvrit la porte.

Personne au rez-de-chaussée, ni Jean ni Ilka, – heureusement. La seule vue de Yanof leur aurait appris qu’un nouveau malheur venait de s’abattre sur la famille, et, cette fois, sans rémission…

Wladimir monta l’escalier qui conduisait au cabinet du professeur.

Dimitri Nicolef était assis à sa table de travail, la tête dans les mains. Il se releva à l’entrée de Wladimir qui restait debout sur le seuil.

«Qu’as-tu?… demanda Nicolef, en dirigeant sur lui ses regards fatigués.

— Dimitri! s’écria Wladimir, parlez-moi… dites-moi tout… Je ne sais… justifiez-vous… Non! ce n’est pas possible!… Expliquez-vous… ma raison s’égare…

— Qu’y a-t-il donc?… répondit Nicolef. Encore quelque malheur qui vient s’ajouter à tant d’autres?»

Et il prononça ces désespérantes paroles en homme qui s’attend à tout, et que nul coup du sort ne peut plus surprendre.

«Wladimir… reprit-il, c’est moi maintenant qui t’ordonne de parler… Me justifier, et de quoi?… Tu en es donc venu à croire que je suis…»

Wladimir ne le laissa pas achever, et, se maîtrisant par un effort surhumain:

«Dimitri, dit-il, il y a une heure… une assignation est arrivée ici…

— Au nom des frères Johausen!… répondit Nicolef. Alors, tu sais maintenant quelle est ma situation vis-à-vis d’eux… Je ne puis les rembourser… et c’est une dette qui retombera sur la tête des miens! Wladimir, tu vois, il est impossible, à présent, que tu puisses devenir mon fils…»

Wladimir Yanof ne répondit pas à cette dernière phrase, empreinte d’une profonde amertume.

«Dimitri… reprit-il, j’ai eu la pensée qu’il m’appartenait de mettre fin à cette triste situation…

— Toi?…

— J’avais à ma disposition la somme que vous m’aviez remise à Pernau…

— Cet argent t’appartient, Wladimir!… Il te vient de ton père… C’est un dépôt que je t’ai rendu…

— Oui… je sais… je sais… et, puisqu’il m’appartenait, j’avais le droit d’en disposer… J’ai pris les billets… ceux-là mêmes que vous m’aviez apportés… et je suis allé à la maison de banque…

— Tu as fait cela… tu as fait cela!… s’écria Nicolef, qui ouvrit les bras au jeune homme… Pourquoi l’as-tu fait?… C’est ta seule fortune!… Ton père ne te l’a pas laissée pour qu’elle serve à payer les dettes du mien!…

— Dimitri… répondit Wladimir en baissant la voix, ces billets que j’ai remis à MM. Johausen… ce sont les billets mêmes qui ont été volés dans le portefeuille de Poch, à l’auberge de la *Croix-Rompue* et dont la banque avait les numéros…

— Les billets… les billets!…

Et, en répétant ces mots, Nicolef, qui venait de se lever, poussa un cri terrible, qui fut entendu de toute la maison.

Presque aussitôt la porte du cabinet s’ouvrit.

Ilka et Jean parurent.

En voyant dans quel état se montrait l’infortuné, tous deux se précipitèrent vers lui, tandis que Wladimir, à l’écart, cachait sa tête entre ses mains.

Ni le frère, ni la sœur ne songeaient à demander une explication. Avant tout, secourir leur père qui suffoquait. Ils le forcèrent à se rasseoir, et, d’ailleurs, il ne pouvait plus se tenir debout. Et, de sa bouche, s’échappaient ces mots:

«Billets volés… billet volés!…

— Mon père… s’écria la jeune fille, qu’y a-t-il?…

— Wladimir, demanda Jean, qu’est-il arrivé?… Est-ce que la folie…»

Nicolef se releva et, allant à Wladimir, il lui saisit les mains, il les écarta de sa figure. Puis d’une voix étranglée, après l’avoir forcé à le regarder en face:

«Ces billets que tu avais reçus de moi… ces billets que tu as portés à la banque Johausen… ces billets sont ceux qui ont été volés dans le portefeuille de Poch, de Poch assassiné?

— Oui! dit Wladimir.

— Je suis perdu… perdu!…» s’écria Nicolef.

Et, repoussant ses enfants, avant qu’ils eussent pu l’en empêcher, se précipitant hors du cabinet, il remonta dans sa chambre. Mais il ne s’y enferma pas comme d’habitude. Un quart d’heure après, il descendait l’escalier, il ouvrait la porte de la rue, et s’enfuyait à travers le faubourg au milieu de l’obscurité.

Jean et Ilka n’avaient rien compris à cette terrible scène. Ces mots: billets volés!… billets volés!… ne pouvaient pas leur apprendre que, maintenant, leur père allait être écrasé par l’évidence!…

Ils se retournèrent vers Wladimir, et celui-ci, les yeux baissés, la voix déchirée, raconta ce qu’il venait de faire, comment, en voulant sauver Nicolef, l’arracher aux mains des Johausen, il l’avait perdu!… Qui pourrait soutenir son innocence, alors que les billets dérobés au malheureux Poch avait été trouvés sinon en sa possession, du moins entre les mains de Wladimir Yanof?… Celui-ci n’avait-il pas avoué devant les banquiers que ces billets provenaient du dépôt que lui avait restitué Nicolef?…

Jean et Ilka, atterrés par cette révélation, pleuraient.

En ce moment, la servante les avertit que des agents demandaient M. Dimitri Nicolef. Envoyés par le juge d'instruction sur la dénonciation de MM. Johausen, ils venaient procéder à l'arrestation de l'assassin de la *Croix-Rompue.*

La nouvelle de cette arrestation ne s'était pas répandue à travers la ville. On ignorait que l'affaire fût entrée dans cette phase, – la dernière sans doute, et dont le dénouement était prochain.

Tandis que les agents visitaient la maison pour s'assurer que Nicolef n'y était pas, Wladimir, Jean et Ilka, sans s'être concertés, mus par un même sentiment, s'élancèrent dans la rue.

Ils voulaient rejoindre leur père… ils ne l'abandonneraient pas… Et, malgré tant de témoignages accablants, malgré tant de preuves accumulées, ils se refusaient à le croire coupable. Ces pauvres cœurs, si unis, se révoltaient à cette pensée, et pourtant les derniers mots prononcés par Nicolef: «Je suis perdu!… je suis perdu!…» n'était-ce pas comme un aveu qui était sorti de sa bouche?…

La nuit était déjà venue. On avait vu Nicolef remonter le faubourg. Wladimir, Jean et Ilka, courant dans cette direction, atteignirent l'ancienne enceinte de la ville. La campagne tout obscure s'étendait devant eux. Ils prirent la route de Pernau, s'abandonnant pour ainsi dire à l'instinct qui les poussait de ce côté.

A deux cents pas de là, tous trois s'arrêtèrent devant un corps étendu sur l'accotement de la route.

C’était Dimitri Nicolef.

Près de lui gisait un couteau sanglant…

Ilka et Jean se jetèrent sur le corps de leur père, tandis que Wladimir allait chercher du secours à la maison la plus rapprochée.

Des paysans vinrent avec une civière, et Nicolef fut rapporté à sa maison, où le docteur Hamine, immédiatement appelé, ne put que constater à quelle cause était due la mort.

Dimitri Nicolef s’était frappé et comme avait été frappé Poch, – un coup au cœur, et le couteau avait laissé autour de la blessure une empreinte semblable à celle que portait le cadavre du garçon de banque.

Le misérable, se sentant perdu, s’était suicidé pour échapper au châtiment de son crime!

CHAPITRE XV

Sur une tombe

Il était enfin terminé, ce drame judiciaire qui avait passionné la population des provinces Baltiques et surexcité la lutte des partis à la veille de se mesurer sur le terrain électoral. Encore une fois, après la mort violente de l’homme qui représentait l’élément slave, les Allemands allaient l’emporter. Toutefois, l’antagonisme devait reprendre tôt ou tard, et la russification finirait par s’opérer sous l’influence du gouvernement.

Et non seulement Dimitri Nicolef s’était suicidé, mais ce suicide, accompli dans des circonstances terribles, alors que l’incident des billets volés venait de se produire, ne permettait plus de mettre sa culpabilité en doute. Ainsi, lorsqu’il avait quitté Riga, au reçu de la lettre de Wladimir Yanof, il ne possédait plus le dépôt à lui confié… Se rendait-il près du fils de son ami pour lui dire la vérité, ou son projet était-il de s’enfuir après cet abus de confiance qu’il ne pouvait réparer?… Il eût été difficile d’être fixé sur ce point. Ce que l’on doit croire, c’est que Nicolef avait été surpris par l’arrivée inattendue du proscrit échappé des mines de Sibérie; c’est qu’il se sentait saisi dans un engrenage où allait passer tout son honneur; c’est que, entre Wladimir Yanof, auquel il ne pouvait rendre l’héritage de son père, et MM. Johausen, qu’il serait dans l’impossibilité de rembourser quelques semaines plus tard, il ne voyait aucun moyen de salut… Et alors, le garçon de banque Poch s’était rencontré sur sa route, et le produit du vol lui avait permis de porter à Pernau la somme qu’il avait dissipée. C’était la première dette éteinte, mais à quel prix? Au prix d’un double crime, un assassinat et un vol!

Puis, lorsque tout fut découvert, quand la lumière s’était faite sur cette affaire si obscure jusque-là, lorsque, grâce à leurs numéros, les billets présentés par Wladimir Yanof avaient été reconnus pour être ceux que renfermait le portefeuille de Poch, Dimitri Nicolef, le vrai coupable, Dimitri Nicolef, le meurtrier, s’était frappé du couteau même dont il avait frappé sa victime, d’un seul coup, au cœur.

Le dénouement de cette affaire, cela va sans dire, rendit à l’aubergiste Kroff toute sécurité. Il était temps. Le lendemain, M. Kerstorf se préparait à signer son arrestation. Du moment qu’une ordonnance de non-lieu interviendrait en faveur de Dimitri Nicolef, Kroff serait mis directement en cause. Nicolef ou Kroff, la justice ne pouvait chercher d’autres coupables. On sait d’ailleurs quelles présomptions s’élevaient contre l’aubergiste, et, lorsque le magistrat apprit ce qui s’était passé dans les bureaux de MM. Johausen frères, il ne fut pas un des moins étonnés d’avoir à proclamer l’innocence de Kroff et la culpabilité de Nicolef.

Kroff reprit donc son existence habituelle au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue,* et sut tirer avantage de cette situation. N’était-il pas comme un condamné réhabilité, après qu’on a reconnu l’injustice de sa condamnation?… Bref, on en parla quelques jours encore, puis on n’en parla plus.

Quant aux banquiers, s’ils n’étaient pas payés de la dette contractée envers eux par Dimitri Nicolef, ils venaient de récupérer du moins cette somme de dix-huit mille roubles que Wladimir Yanof avait laissée entre leurs mains.

Après l’enterrement du professeur, Ilka et Jean, qui ne devait plus retourner à l’université de Dorpat, regagnèrent leur maison, dont nombre des anciens amis de Nicolef ne songeaient plus à franchir le seuil. Trois seulement ne les abandonnèrent pas dans ce désastre, Wladimir Yanof, il n’est pas besoin de le nommer, M. Delaporte et le docteur Hamine.

Le frère et la sœur ne voyaient plus clair dans leur vie. Tout paraissait obscur, même ce qui touchait à Dimitri Nicolef, qu’il semblait contre nature de croire coupable. Ils allaient jusqu’à se dire que peut-être sa raison ayant succombé sous cette persistance du mauvais sort à le frapper, il avait pu devenir fou; que, dans un accès d’aliénation mentale, il s’était suicidé, que ce suicide ne prouvait pas qu’il fût l’auteur du crime de la *Croix-Rompue*…

Faut-il le dire?… C’est ainsi que pensait Wladimir Yanof, se refusant à admettre ce que les faits démontraient matériellement. Et pourtant, comment ces billets numérotés se fussent-ils trouvés en la possession de Dimitri Nicolef, s’il ne les eût volés sur le cadavre de Poch?…

Et, lorsqu’il discutait avec le docteur Hamine, le plus vieil ami de la famille, celui-ci répondait avec une irréfutable logique:

«J’admettrais tout, mon cher Wladimir, j’admettrais que ce n’est pas Nicolef qui a volé Poch, bien que le produit de ce vol ait été saisi entre ses mains, j’admettrais même que son suicide ne prouve pas sa culpabilité, et qu’il a pu se tuer dans une crise de folie, crise provoquée par de si épouvantables épreuves… Mais il y a un fait qui domine tout… Dimitri s’est frappé avec la même arme qui avait frappé Poch, et, devant ce fait, il faut bien se rendre à l’évidence, si affreuse, je dirai si invraisemblable qu’elle soit!…

— S’il en est ainsi, reprit Wladimir en faisant une dernière observation, Dimitri Nicolef aurait possédé un couteau de ce genre, et son fils, sa fille ne le lui auraient jamais vu?… Non, docteur, ni eux ni personne!… Il y a là un point…

— Auquel je ne puis vous faire qu’une réponse, Wladimir… Oui… Nicolef possédait ce couteau, et comment en douter, puisqu’il s’en est servi à deux reprises, contre Poch et contre lui-même!…»

Wladimir Yanof courbait la tête devant l’évidence, ne sachant quoi répondre…

Le docteur Hamine dit alors:

«Et maintenant, ses malheureux enfants, que vont-ils devenir… Jean… Ilka?…

— Jean ne sera-t-il pas mon frère quand Ilka sera ma femme?»

Le docteur saisit la main de Wladimir et la pressa vivement.

«Avez-vous donc pu croire, docteur, ajouta Wladimir, que je renoncerais à épouser Ilka, que j’aime, qui m’aime… son père fût-il coupable?…»

Et, s’il s’obstinait à ce doute, c’était bien dans son amour seul qu’il trouvait la force de douter, après ce qu’avait dit le docteur Hamine.

«Non, Wladimir, répondit celui-ci, je n’ai jamais cru que vous vous refuseriez à épouser Ilka… L’infortunée est-elle responsable?…

— Elle ne l’est pas!… s’écria Wladimir. A mes yeux, c’est la plus sainte, la plus noble des créatures, la plus digne de l’amour d’un honnête homme!… Notre mariage est reculé, mais il se fera… Puis, s’il faut quitter cette ville, nous la quitterons…

— Wladimir, je reconnais là votre grand cœur… Vous voulez épouser Ilka, mais Ilka voudra-t-elle?…

— Si elle refusait, c’est qu’elle ne m’aimerait pas…

— Si elle refusait, Wladimir, ne serait-ce pas parce qu’elle vous aime et d’un amour dont elle ne veut pas que vous puissiez jamais rougir!»

Cette conversation ne modifia en aucune façon les sentiments de Wladimir Yanof, décidé, au contraire, à presser son mariage avec Ilka, à le faire dès que les convenances le permettraient. Ce que l’on dirait dans la ville, ce que l’on penserait de lui, le blâme même de ses amis, était-il homme à s’en inquiéter?… Et, d’ailleurs, un autre sujet de préoccupation le hantait: c’était sa situation personnelle.

Du dépôt que lui avait remis Dimitri Nicolef, il ne lui restait que peu de chose, soit deux mille roubles, après la restitution faite à MM. Johausen frères… Il est vrai, cette fortune, ne la sacrifiait-il pas lorsqu’il allait à la maison de banque rembourser l’obligation de Dimitri Nicolef?… Eh bien! si l’avenir ne l’effrayait pas alors, pourquoi à présent l’eût-il effrayé davantage?… Il travaillerait pour sa femme et pour lui… Avec l’amour d’Ilka, rien ne lui serait impossible…

Quinze jours se passèrent. Jean, Ilka, Wladimir, le docteur Hamine ne s’étaient pas quittés pour ainsi dire. Le docteur et, plusieurs fois, M. Delaporte avaient été les seuls qui fussent venus dans la maison du professeur.

Wladimir n’avait pas encore prononcé un mot relatif au mariage.

Mais sa présence parlait pour lui. D’autre part, ni Jean ni Ilka n’y avaient fait allusion. Le plus souvent le frère et la sœur gardaient le silence, et durant de longues heures demeuraient enfermés dans la même chambre.

Wladimir résolut alors de faire sortir la jeune fille de la réserve où elle se tenait, et, ce jour-là, seul avec elle dans la salle:

«Ilka, dit-il d'une voix émue, lorsque je quittai Riga, il y a quatre ans, lorsque je fus séparé de vous et envoyé en Sibérie, je vous promis que je ne vous oublierais jamais… Vous ai-je oubliée?…

— Non, Wladimir.

— Je vous promis de vous aimer toujours… Mes sentiments ont-ils changé?…

— Pas plus que les miens pour vous, Wladimir, et, si l'autorisation m'en eût été accordée, je vous aurais rejoint là-bas, et je serais devenue votre femme…

— La femme d'un condamné, Ilka…

— La femme d'un exilé, Wladimir», répondit la jeune fille.

Wladimir sentit bien la pensée que signifiait cette réponse.

Mais il ne voulut pas s'y attacher, et reprenant:

«Eh bien, dit-il, ce n'est pas vous, Ilka, qui avez eu à aller là-bas pour être ma femme… Les circonstances se sont modifiées, et c'est moi qui suis venu ici pour être votre mari…

— Vous avez raison de dire que les circonstances se sont modifiées, Wladimir… oui!… horriblement!»

Ilka prononça ce dernier mot avec une telle expression de douleur que tout son corps en tremblait.

«Chère Ilka, reprit Wladimir, quelque cruel souvenir qu’il doive vous rappeler, j’ai voulu avoir un entretien avec vous… Je ne le prolongerai pas… Je viens seulement vous demander de tenir vos promesses…

— Mes promesses, Wladimir, répondit Ilka qui ne pouvait contenir les sanglots dont sa poitrine était pleine, mes promesses?… Quand je les ai faites, j’étais digne de les faire… Aujourd’hui…

— Aujourd’hui, Ilka, vous êtes toujours digne de les tenir!

— Non, Wladimir, et il faut oublier les projets que nous avions formés.

— Vous saviez bien que je ne les oublierais jamais! Ne seraient-ils pas réalisés depuis quinze jours, ne serions-nous pas l’un à l’autre, sans le malheur qui s’est produit à la veille de notre mariage?…

— Oui, répondit Ilka avec résignation, et Dieu soit loué que notre union n’ait pas été accomplie!… Vous n’avez ni à vous repentir ni à rougir d’être entré dans une famille où se sont introduits la honte, le déshonneur!

— Ilka, dit gravement Wladimir, je ne me serais pas repenti, je vous le jure, et je n’aurais pas rougi d’être le mari d’Ilka Nicolef, puisqu’elle ne peut être atteinte par cette honte!…

— Eh bien… oui… Wladimir, je vous crois!… s’écria la jeune fille dont le cœur débordait. Je connais la noblesse de votre caractère… Vous ne vous seriez pas repenti… vous n’auriez pas rougi de moi!… Vous m’aimez de toute votre âme, mais pas plus que je ne vous aime…

— Ilka, mon adorée Ilka!…» s’écria Wladimir, qui voulut lui prendre la main.

Ilka se retira doucement et répondit:

«Oui… nous nous aimons… Notre amour c’était le bonheur… Mais un mariage entre nous est devenu impossible.

— Impossible! répéta Wladimir. Voici ce dont je dois être, dont je suis seul juge… Je ne suis pas un enfant, Ilka!… Ma vie n’a pas été si facile, si heureuse jusqu’ici que je n’aie pas pris l’habitude de réfléchir à ce que je fais!… Il me semblait, puisque je vous aime, puisque vous m’aimez, que je touchais enfin au bonheur!… J’avais l’espoir que vous auriez confiance en moi au point de tenir pour juste ce que je crois juste, pour juger d’une situation que vous ne pouvez juger comme elle doit l’être…

— Que je juge comme le monde la jugera, Wladimir!

— Et que n’importe l’opinion de ce que vous appelez le monde, chère Ilka!… Le monde, pour moi, c’est vous, vous seule… comme pour vous il ne doit être que moi!… Nous quitterons cette ville, si vous le voulez!… Jean nous suivra, et, partout où nous irons, nous serons heureux, je vous le jure!… Ilka, ma chère Ilka, dites que vous voulez être ma femme!…»

Wladimir se jeta à ses genoux, il la pria, il la supplia. Mais il semblait qu’Ilka eût encore plus d’horreur d’elle-même, quand elle le vit dans cette attitude.

«Relevez-vous… relevez-vous!… suppliait-elle. On ne s’agenouille pas devant la fille d’un…»

Wladimir ne la laissa pas achever:

«Ilka… Ilka… répéta-t-il, la tête perdue, les yeux noyés de larmes, soyez ma femme…

— Jamais, répondit Ilka, jamais la fille d’un assassin ne sera la femme de Wladimir Yanof.»

Cette scène les avait brisés tous les deux. Ilka regagna sa chambre. Wladimir, arrivé au paroxysme du désespoir, sortit de la maison, erra au hasard dans les rues, à travers la campagne, et se réfugia enfin chez le docteur Hamine.

Le docteur comprit bien qu’une explication avait eu lieu entre les deux fiancés, séparés maintenant par un infranchissable abîme, – celui que creusent les conventions sociales.

Wladimir raconta cette scène, répétant tout ce qu’il avait fait de prières, de supplications pour changer la résolution d’Ilka.

«Hélas! mon cher Wladimir, répliqua le docteur Hamine, je vous l’avais bien dit… Je connais Ilka et rien ne la fera revenir…

— Ah! docteur, ne m’ôtez pas le peu qui me reste d’espoir!… Elle consentira…

— Jamais Wladimir… C’est une âme intraitable… Elle se sent déshonorée, et elle ne sera jamais votre femme, jamais, puisqu’elle est la fille d’un assassin…

— Et si elle ne l’était pas? s’écria Wladimir. Si son père n’était pas l’auteur du crime?»

Le docteur Hamine détourna la tête pour n’avoir point à répondre à cette question résolue maintenant.

Alors Wladimir, se maîtrisant, reprenant pleine et entière possession de lui-même, s'expliqua, la voix grave, empreinte d'une extraordinaire force de résolution:

«Voici simplement ce que je veux vous dire, docteur… Je considère Ilka comme étant ma femme devant Dieu… et j'attendrai…

— Quoi Wladimir?…

— Que Dieu intervienne!»

Des mois s'écoulèrent. La situation n'avait pas changé. L'apaisement s'était fait dans les diverses classes de la ville relativement à cette affaire. On n'en parlait plus. Le parti germanique l'avait emporté aux élections municipales. Frank Johausen, réélu, affectait même de ne plus s'occuper de la famille Nicolef.

Mais Jean et Ilka, bien d'accord en ceci, se souvenaient de l'obligation souscrite par leur père au profit du banquier. Ils considéraient comme un devoir de libérer sa mémoire – au moins sur ce point.

Pour y parvenir, cela exigeait du temps. Il fallait réaliser le peu qu'ils possédaient, vendre la maison paternelle, la bibliothèque du professeur, tout ce qui serait réalisable. Peut-être, en sacrifiant jusqu'à leurs dernières ressources, s'acquitteraient-ils par un complet remboursement.

Après, ils verraient… Ilka pourrait donner des leçons, si on voulait d'elle… Peut-être en une autre ville. Jean chercherait à entrer dans quelque maison de commerce.

D’autre part, il fallait vivre. Les ressources s’épuisaient. Les quelques économies faites par Ilka sur ce que gagnait son père diminuaient de jour en jour. Il importait que cette liquidation s’achevât au plus vite. Le frère et la sœur décideraient alors s’ils resteraient ou non à Riga.

Il va sans dire que Wladimir Yanof, après le refus de la jeune fille, avait dû quitter la maison, au moins par convenances. Mais logé dans le faubourg, à quelques pas seulement, il y venait aussi assidûment que s’il l’eût encore habitée. Il offrait ses conseils pour la réalisation du petit avoir destiné à rembourser MM. Johausen frères. Ses conseils étaient reçus comme ceux du plus dévoué des amis fidèles à la famille. Il mettait à la disposition d’Ilka ce qu’il avait gardé du dépôt paternel, mais celle-ci ne voulait rien accepter.

Et alors Wladimir, admirant cette hauteur d’âme, subjugué par la noblesse de ce caractère, adorant Ilka, la suppliait de consentir au mariage, de ne pas s’obstiner à se croire indigne de lui, de se rendre aux instances des amis de son père… Il ne pouvait rien obtenir d’elle, – pas même une espérance pour l’avenir, et se heurtait à une implacable volonté.

Le docteur Hamine, témoin du désespoir de Wladimir, tentait quelquefois de faire fléchir Ilka, sans y parvenir…

«La fille d’un assassin, répondait-elle, ne peut devenir la femme d’un honnête homme!»

Tout le monde savait cela dans la ville et comment ne pas admirer cette énergique nature qui inspirait en même temps les plus sincères sentiments de pitié.

Cependant le temps s’écoulait dans ces conditions. Aucun incident ne s’était produit, lorsque, le 17 septembre, arriva une lettre à l’adresse de Jean et d’Ilka Nicolef.

Cette lettre était signée du pope de Riga, vieillard de soixante-dix ans, vénéré de toute la population orthodoxe, et près duquel Ilka allait parfois chercher de ces consolations que la religion peut seule donner.

Le pope invitait le frère et la sœur à se trouver le jour même, à cinq heures, au cimetière de Riga. De leur côté le docteur Hamine et Wladimir Yanof, ayant reçu une lettre identique, se rendirent dans la matinée à la maison de Dimitri Nicolef.

Jean leur montra cette lettre signée du pope Axief:

«Que signifie cette invitation, dit-il, et pourquoi nous donner rendez-vous au cimetière?…»

C’était le cimetière où avaient été déposés les restes de Dimitri Nicolef, sans que l’Église eût pris part aux funérailles du suicidé.

«Que pensez-vous, docteur?… demanda Wladimir.

— Je pense que nous devons aller là où le pope nous demande d’aller… C’est un respectable prêtre, sage et prudent, et, s’il nous a envoyé cette invitation, c’est qu’il a eu des raisons sérieuses de le faire.

— Vous viendrez, Ilka?… demanda Wladimir en s’adressant à la jeune fille, qui demeurait silencieuse.

— J’ai déjà plus d’une fois prié sur la tombe de mon père… répondit Ilka. J’irai… Et que Dieu nous entende lorsque le pope Axief joindra ses prières aux nôtres…

— Nous serons là à cinq heures», dit le docteur Hamine. Wladimir et lui se retirèrent.

A l’heure dite, Jean et Ilka arrivèrent au cimetière où ils trouvèrent leurs amis, qui les attendaient devant la porte. Ils se dirigèrent vers l’endroit où reposait le corps de Dimitri Nicolef.

Le pope, agenouillé sur cette tombe, priait pour l’âme du malheureux.

Au bruit des pas, il releva sa belle tête toute blanche, il se redressa de toute sa hauteur. Ses yeux brillaient d’un extraordinaire éclat, et ses deux mains s’étendirent pour faire signe au frère et à la sœur, au docteur et à Wladimir de s’approcher.

Lorsque Wladimir et Ilka se furent placés, chacun d’un côté de la modeste tombe, le pope dit: «Wladimir Yanof… votre main.»

Puis, s’adressant à la jeune fille:

«Ilka Nicolef… votre main.»

Et ces deux mains, il les mit l’une dans l’autre par-dessus la tombe. Et, telle était l’énergie de son regard, l’expression de bonté de toute sa physionomie, que la jeune fille laissa sa main dans celle de Wladimir.

Et alors le pope prononça ces mots d’une voix grave:

«Wladimir Yanof et Ilka Nicolef, vous êtes unis devant Dieu.»

La jeune fille ne fut pas maîtresse du mouvement qui la poussa à retirer sa main…

«Laissez-la, Ilka Nicolef, dit doucement le pope, elle est à celui qui vous aime…

— Moi… s’écria Ilka, la fille d’un assassin?…

— La fille d’un innocent, et qui n’est même pas coupable de s’être donné la mort!… répondit le pope en attestant le ciel.

— Et l’assassin?… demanda Jean, tremblant d’émotion.

— C’est l’aubergiste de la *Croix-Rompue*… C’est Kroff!»

CHAPITRE XVI

Confession

La veille de ce jour, l’aubergiste Kroff, frappé d’une congestion pulmonaire, avait succombé en quelques heures.

Avant de mourir, torturé par les remords depuis cinq mois, il avait fait appeler le pope Axief, qui était venu entendre sa confession.

Cette confession, le pope l’avait écrite, et Kroff l’avait signée de son nom. Après sa mort, elle devrait être rendue publique.

C’était la condamnation de Kroff, ce serait la réhabilitation de Dimitri Nicolef.

Voici ce que contenait cette confession de l’auteur du crime, et l’on verra par quel enchaînement de circonstances Kroff avait pu en faire rejaillir la responsabilité sur la tête de Nicolef.

Dans la nuit du 13 au 14 avril, Dimitri Nicolef et Poch étaient arrivés au kabak de la *Croix-Rompue*.

En voyant le portefeuille de Poch, l’aubergiste, dont les affaires allaient fort mal depuis longtemps, conçut le projet de voler le garçon de banque. Toutefois, la prudence lui commandait d’attendre que l’autre voyageur, qui avait annoncé son départ pour quatre heures du matin, eût quitté l’auberge. Mais, ne pouvant maîtriser son impatience, vers deux heures après minuit, il entra dans la chambre de Poch, croyant ne pas avoir été entendu.

Poch ne dormait pas, il se redressa sur son lit, éclairé par le fanal de Kroff. Celui-ci, qui ne voulait que le voler, étant découvert, se précipita sur le malheureux, et, du couteau qu'il avait à sa ceinture – un couteau suédois à virole – il le frappa au cœur d'un coup mortel.

Le portefeuille de Poch fut alors fouillé. Il contenait la somme de quinze mille roubles en billets de banque de cent roubles chacun.

Mais quelle imprécation échappa à Kroff, lorsque, dans un des plis du portefeuille, il trouva une note avec ces mots:

C'était une précaution que prenait toujours Poch, lorsqu'il allait faire un versement pour le compte de la banque.

«Liste des numéros des billets, dont le double est entre les mains de MM. Johausen frères.»

Ainsi, ces billets, dont on avait les numéros, il ne pourrait les passer, sans grand danger du moins d'être pris!… Cet assassinat, il n'en tirerait aucun profit!…

C'est alors que la pensée lui vint de faire retomber la responsabilité du crime sur le voyageur qui occupait l'autre chambre. Il sortit de l'auberge, il fit des éraflures au-dessous de l'entablement extérieur de la première fenêtre, il força les contrevents de la seconde avec un tisonnier, et rentra dans la maison.

Fou de rage à la pensée que ces billets seraient inutiles entre ses mains, non seulement inutiles, mais dangereux, la plus criminelle des inspirations lui traversa l'esprit.

Pourquoi ne pénétrerait-il pas dans la chambre du voyageur, pour glisser ces billets dans la poche de celui-ci, après lui avoir dérobé ceux qu'il avait sans doute?

Or, on le sait, Dimitri Nicolef était porteur des vingt mille roubles qu'il allait restituer à Wladimir Yanof. Et alors, tandis qu'il dormait profondément, Kroff trouva dans sa poche cette somme en billets de banque… On n'avait pas les numéros de ceux-là!… Il en prit pour quinze mille roubles auxquels il substitua les billets du garçon de banque, et il sortit de la chambre sans avoir été vu. Puis, au pied d'un arbre de la sapinière, il cacha cet argent et aussi le couteau qui avait frappé Poch, et si bien qu'ils échappèrent à toutes les recherches de la police.

A quatre heures du matin, Dimitri Nicolef, prenant congé de l'aubergiste, quitta la *Croix-Rompue* pour se rendre à Pernau, où l'attendait Wladimir Yanof. On comprend maintenant par suite de quelles habiles machinations les soupçons allaient se porter sur lui et se changer bientôt en certitudes.

Kroff, possesseur des billets de Dimitri Nicolef, lequel ne s'aperçut pas et ne pouvait s'apercevoir de la substitution, était en mesure de s'en servir sans aucun danger. Il ne le fit cependant qu'avec une extrême prudence, et seulement pour ses besoins immédiats.

Au cours de l'instruction de l'affaire, confiée à M. Kerstorf, Dimitri Nicolef fut reconnu par le brigadier Eck pour le voyageur sur lequel devaient se porter les soupçons. Le professeur, tout en niant être l'auteur du crime, refusa de faire connaître le motif de son voyage, et, sans doute, il eût été mis en arrestation, si l'arrivée de Wladimir Yanof n'eût pas répondu pour lui.

A voir les présomptions s’éloigner de Nicolef, Kroff commença à prendre peur, comprenant qu’elles allaient se retourner sur lui. Bien qu’il fût toujours sous la surveillance des agents à l’auberge, il imagina une nouvelle machination qui, dans sa pensée, devait ramener les soupçons sur le voyageur, convaincu d’être l’auteur du crime. Après avoir brûlé un des billets qu’il tacha de sang, et dont il avait conservé l’angle, il put, pendant la nuit, se hisser sur le chaume de l’auberge, et jeter ce fragment de billet dans l’âtre de la cheminée de la chambre qu’avait occupée Nicolef, où il fut retrouvé le lendemain.

A la suite de cette perquisition, on le sait, Dimitri Nicolef fut interrogé de nouveau, mais on sait aussi que M. Kerstorf, qui, en son âme et conscience, ne pouvait le croire coupable, n’ordonna pas son arrestation.

Kroff, plus inquiet que jamais, était au courant de ce que disaient les défenseurs de Nicolef, l’accusant lui, Kroff, d’être l’assassin du garçon de banque, d’avoir tout préparé pour égarer l’opinion sur un innocent, d’avoir, après le départ du voyageur, placé le tisonnier dans sa chambre et mêlé le fragment de billet aux cendres de l’âtre, où il avait échappé à la première perquisition.

Il s’ensuit donc que tout ce que gagnait Nicolef dans l’opinion, Kroff le perdait. Il attendait, cependant, que la présentation des billets volés portât à Nicolef un dernier coup dont il ne se relèverait pas, et ces billets, Wladimir Yanof n’avait pas encore eu l’occasion d’en faire usage.

Enfin, Kroff comprit qu’il allait être arrêté, et son arrestation c’était sa perte. Ah! s’il avait su que, le 14 mai, les billets volés allaient être mis entre les mains de MM. Johausen, et qu’alors ils seraient reconnus pour être ceux que renfermait le portefeuille de Poch, ce qui serait la condamnation définitive de Dimitri Nicolef, il n’aurait pas eu l’infernale idée de se justifier d’un premier crime en en commettant un second!

Mais il ne le sut pas, ou plutôt il ne le sut qu’après avoir commis le second crime. Il était libre encore, libre d’aller à Riga, où l’avait souvent appelé le juge d’instruction. Il y vint ce jour-là, à la nuit tombante, il rôda autour de la maison du professeur, résolu à tuer Nicolef pour faire croire à un suicide…

Les circonstances le favorisèrent. Il vit sortir Nicolef, s’échappant comme un fou, après la terrible scène avec Wladimir, devant son fils et sa fille. Il le suivit à travers la campagne, et là, sur la route déserte, il le frappa en pleine poitrine avec le couteau qui avait frappé Poch et qu’il laissa près de lui.

Qui eût pu douter, à présent, que Dimitri Nicolef, épouvanté de la dernière constatation relative aux billets volés, ne se fût donné la mort, et qu’il ne fût le véritable assassin du kabak de la *Croix-Rompue?*…

Personne, et ce nouveau crime allait avoir pour son auteur le résultat qu’il en attendait.

Aussi l’instruction dut-elle être considérée comme terminée, et Kroff, délivré de tout soupçon, sinon de tout remords, put-il tranquillement jouir du fruit de ce double assassinat.

Les billets de banque qu’il avait en sa possession étaient ceux auxquels il avait substitué les billets de Poch, dont on n’avait pas les numéros, et il lui était facile de s’en servir sans courir aucun risque.

Kroff ne jouit pas longtemps du bénéfice de ses crimes. La veille, frappé de congestion, épouvanté aux approches de la mort, il avait dicté sa confession au pope, lui demandant de la rendre publique, et lui remit presque intact le dépôt qui constituait légitimement la propriété de Wladimir Yanof.

La réhabilitation de Dimitri Nicolef fut complète. Mais quelle douleur pour son fils et sa fille, pour ses amis, maintenant que la mort l’avait couché dans cette tombe!…

Ainsi se termina ce drame sensationnel, qui eut un si grand retentissement dans les annales judiciaires des provinces Baltiques.

INVASION OF THE SEA

This adventure novel was first published in 1905 and is Verne’s last novel prior to his death. *Invasion of the Sea* describes the exploits of Berber nomads and European travellers in Saharan Africa. The purpose of the Westerners’ visit is to study the feasibility of flooding a low-lying region of the Sahara desert to create an inland sea and open up the interior of Northern Africa to trade.

Parts of the novel, under the title *Captain Hardizan*, were serialised in *The American Weekly*, a Sunday Supplement of a Boston newspaper, on August 6 and August 13, 1905. However, the first complete English translation was published much later in 2001 by Wesleyan University Press. Therefore, due to copyright restrictions, the novel appears here in the original French text only.

Jules Verne
INVASION OF THE SEA
Translated by Edward Baxter
Edited & with introduction and other critical materials
by Arthur B. Evans
FIRST ENGLISH EDITION

The first English translation, 2001

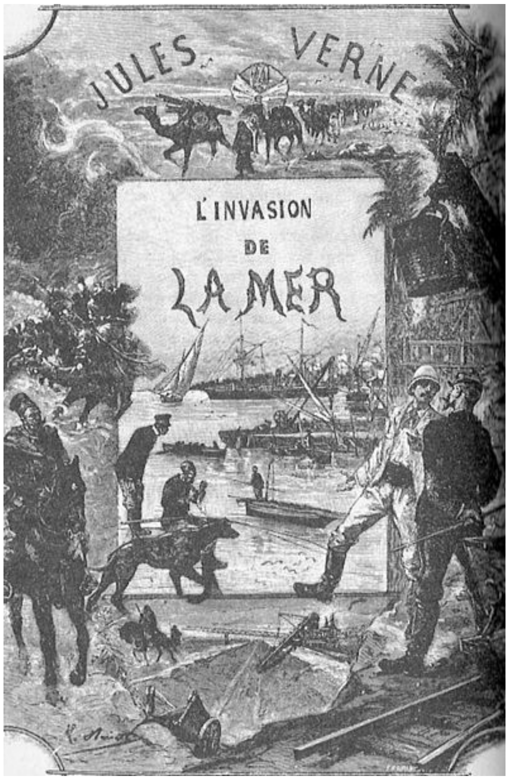
JULES VERNE
L'INVASION
DE
LA MER

The original frontispiece

L’INVASION DE LA MER

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I. L’OASIS DE GABÈS.

“Que sais-tu?…

— Je sais ce que j’ai entendu dans le port…

— On parlait du navire qui vient chercher… qui emmènera Hadjar?…

— Oui… à Tunis, où il sera jugé…

— Et condamné?…

— Condamné.

— Allah ne le permettra pas, Sohar!… Non! il ne le permettra pas!…

— Silence…” dit vivement Sohar, en prêtant l’oreille comme s’il percevait un bruit de pas sur le sable.

Sans se relever, il rampa vers l’entrée du marabout abandonné où se tenait cette conversation. Le jour durait encore, mais le soleil ne tarderait pas à disparaître derrière les dunes qui bordent de ce côté le littoral de la Petite-Syrte. Au début de mars, les crépuscules ne sont pas longs sur le trente-quatrième degré de l’hémisphère septentrional. L’astre radieux ne s’y rapproche pas de l’horizon par une descente oblique: il semble qu’il tombe suivant la verticale comme un corps soumis aux lois de la pesanteur.

Sohar s’arrêta, puis fit quelques pas au-delà du seuil calciné par l’ardeur des rayons solaires. Son regard parcourut en un instant la plaine environnante.

Vers le nord, les cimes verdoyantes d’une oasis, qui s’arrondissait à la distance d’un kilomètre et demi. Au sud, l’aire interminable des grèves jaunâtres frangées d’écume au ressac de la marée montante. À l’ouest, un amoncellement de dunes se profilant sur le ciel. À l’est, un large espace de cette mer qui forme le golfe de Gabès et baigne le littoral tunisien en s’infléchissant vers les parages de la Tripolitaine.

La légère brise de l’ouest qui avait rafraîchi l’atmosphère pendant cette journée était tombée avec le soir. Aucun bruit ne vint à l’oreille de Sohar. Il avait cru entendre marcher aux environs de ce cube de vieille maçonnerie blanche, abrité d’un antique palmier, et il reconnut son erreur. Personne, ni du côté des dunes ni du côté de la grève. Il fit le tour du petit monument. Personne et aucune trace de pas sur le sable, si ce n’est celles que sa mère et lui avaient laissées devant l’entrée du marabout.

À peine s’était-il écoulé une minute depuis la sortie de Sohar, lorsque Djemma parut sur le seuil, inquiète de ne pas voir revenir son fils. Celui-ci, qui tournait alors l’angle du marabout, la rassura d’un geste.

Djemma était une Africaine de race touareg ayant dépassé sa soixantième année, grande, forte, la taille droite, l’attitude énergique. De ses yeux bleus, comme ceux des femmes de même origine, s’échappait un regard dont l’ardeur égalait la fierté. Blanche de peau, elle apparaissait jaune sous la teinture d’ocre qui recouvrait son front et ses joues. Elle était vêtue d’étoffe sombre, un ample haïk de cette laine si abondamment fournie par les troupeaux des Hammâma qui vivent aux alentours des sebkha ou chotts de la basse Tunisie. Un large capuchon recouvrait sa tête, dont l’épaisse chevelure commençait seulement à blanchir.

Djemma resta immobile à cette place jusqu’au moment où son fils vint la rejoindre. Il n’avait rien aperçu de suspect aux environs et le silence n’était troublé que par ce chant plaintif du bou-habibi, le moineau du Djerid, dont plusieurs couples voletaient du côté des dunes.

Djemma et Sohar rentrèrent dans le marabout pour attendre que la nuit leur permît de gagner Gabès sans éveiller l’attention.

L’entretien se continua en ces termes:

— Le navire a quitté la Goulette?…

— Oui, ma mère, et, ce matin, il avait doublé le cap Bon… C’est le croiseur Chanzy…

— Il arrivera cette nuit?…

— Cette nuit… à moins qu’il ne relâche à Sfax… Mais il est plus probable qu’il viendra mouiller devant Gabès, où ton fils, mon frère, lui sera livré…

— Hadjar!… Hadjar!…” murmura la vieille mère.

Et, toute frémissante alors de colère et de douleur:

“Mon fils… mon fils! s’écria-t-elle, ces Roumis le tueront, et je ne le verrai plus… et il ne sera plus là pour entraîner les Touareg à la guerre sainte!… Non… non! Allah ne le permettra pas.”

Puis, comme si cette crise eût épuisé ses forces, Djemma tomba agenouillée dans l’angle de l’étroite salle et demeura silencieuse.

Sohar était revenu se poster sur le seuil, accoudé au montant de la porte, aussi immobile que s’il eût été de pierre, comme une de ces statues qui ornent parfois l’entrée des marabouts. Aucun bruit inquiétant ne le tira de son immobilité. L’ombre des dunes s’allongeait peu à peu vers l’est, à mesure que le soleil s’abaissait sur l’horizon opposé. À l’orient de la Petite-Syrte se levaient les premières constellations. La mince tranche du disque lunaire, au début de son premier quartier, venait de glisser derrière les extrêmes brumes du couchant. Une nuit tranquille se préparait, obscure aussi, car un rideau de légères vapeurs allait en cacher les étoiles.

Un peu après sept heures, Sohar retourna près de sa mère et lui dit:

“Il est temps…

— Oui, répondit Djemma, et il est temps que Hadjar soit arraché, des mains de ces Roumis… Il faut qu’il soit hors de la prison de Gabès avant le lever du soleil… Demain, il serait trop tard…

— Tout est prêt, mère, affirma Sohar… Nos compagnons nous attendent… Ceux de Gabès ont préparé l’évasion… Ceux du Djerid serviront d’escorte à Hadjar, et le jour n’aura pas reparu qu’ils seront loin dans le désert…

— Et moi avec eux, déclara Djemma, car je n’abandonnerai pas mon fils…

— Et moi avec vous, ajouta Sohar. Je n’abandonnerai ni mon frère ni ma mère!”

Djemma l’attira près d’elle, le pressa dans ses bras. Puis, rajustant le capuchon de son haïk, elle franchit le seuil.

Sohar la précédait de quelques pas, alors que tous deux se dirigeaient vers Gabès. Au lieu de suivre la lisière du littoral, le long du relais d’herbes marines laissées par la dernière marée sur la grève, ils suivaient la base des dunes, espérant être moins aperçus pendant ce trajet d’un kilomètre et demi. Là où était l’oasis, la masse des arbres, presque confondue dans l’ombre croissante, ne se présentait plus que confusément au regard. Aucune lumière ne brillait à travers l’obscurité. Dans ces maisons arabes, dépourvues de fenêtres, le jour ne se prend que sur les cours intérieures, et, lorsque la nuit est venue, aucune clarté ne s’échappe au dehors.

Cependant, un point lumineux ne tarda pas à apparaître au-dessus des contours vaguement entrevus de la ville. Le rayon, assez intense d’ailleurs, devait jaillir de la partie haute de Gabès, peut-être du minaret d’une mosquée, peut-être du château qui la dominait.

Sohar ne s’y trompa pas, et, montrant du doigt cette lueur:

“Le bordj… dit-il.

— Et c’est là, Sohar?…

— Là… qu’ils l’ont enfermé, ma mère!”

La vieille femme s’était arrêtée. Il semblait que cette lumière eût établi une sorte de communication entre son fils et elle. Assurément, si ce n’était pas du cachot où il devait être emprisonné que partait cette lumière, c’était du moins du fort où Hadjar avait été conduit. Depuis que le redoutable chef était tombé entre les mains des soldats français, Djemma n’avait plus revu son fils, et elle ne le reverrait jamais, à moins que, cette nuit même, il n’échappât par la fuite au sort que lui réservait la justice militaire. Elle restait donc comme immobilisée à cette place, et il fallut que Sohar lui répétât par deux fois:

“Venez, ma mère, venez!”

Le cheminement continua au pied des dunes qui s’arrondissaient en gagnant l’oasis de Gabès, l’ensemble de bourgades, de maisons, le plus considérable qui occupe la rive continentale de la Petite-Syrte. Sohar se dirigeait vers le groupe que les soldats appellent Conquinville. C’est une agglomération de huttes de bois où réside toute une population de mercantis, ce qui lui a valu ce nom assez justifié. La bourgade est située près de l’entrée de l’oued, ruisseau qui serpente capricieusement à travers l’oasis sous l’ombrage des palmiers. Là, s’élève le bordj, ou Fort-Neuf, d’où Hadjar ne sortirait que pour être transféré à la prison de Tunis.

C’était de ce bordj que ses compagnons, toutes précautions prises, tous préparatifs faits en vue d’une évasion, espéraient l’enlever cette nuit même. Réunis dans une des huttes de Coquinville, ils y attendaient Djemma et son fils. Mais une extrême prudence s’imposait, et mieux valait ne point être rencontré aux approches de la bourgade.

Et, d’ailleurs, avec quelle inquiétude leurs regards se portaient du côté de la mer! Ce qu’ils craignaient, c’était l’arrivée, ce soir même, du croiseur, et le transfèrement du prisonnier à bord de ce navire, avant que l’évasion eût pu s’accomplir. Ils cherchaient à voir si quelque feu blanc apparaissait dans le golfe de la Petite-Syrte, à entendre les hennissements de vapeur, les gémissements stridents de sirène qui signalent un bâtiment venant au mouillage. Non, seuls les fanaux des bateaux de pêche se reflétaient dans les eaux tunisiennes, et aucun sifflement ne déchirait l’air.

Il n’était pas huit heures, lorsque Djemma et son fils atteignirent la rive de l’oued. Encore dix minutes et ils seraient au rendez-vous.

À l’instant où tous les deux allaient s’engager sur la rive droite, un homme, tapi derrière les cactus de la berge, se dressa à demi et prononça ce nom:

“Sohar?…

— C’est toi, Ahmet?…

— Oui… et ta mère?…

— Elle me suit.

— Et nous te suivons, dit Djemma.

— Quelles nouvelles?… demanda Sohar.

— Aucune… répondit Ahmet.

— Nos compagnons sont là?…

— Ils vous attendent.

— Personne n’a eu l’éveil au bordj?…

— Personne.

— Hadjar est prêt?…

— Oui.

— Et comment l’a-t-on vu?…

— Par Harrig, mis en liberté ce matin, et qui se trouve maintenant avec les compagnons…

— Allons”, dit la vieille femme.

Et tous trois remontèrent la rive de l’oued.

La direction qu’ils suivaient alors ne leur permettait plus d’apercevoir la sombre masse du bordj à travers les épaisses frondaisons. Ce n’est vraiment qu’une vaste palmeraie, cette oasis de Gabès.

Ahmet ne pouvait s’égarer et marchait d’un pas sûr. Il y aurait tout d’abord lieu de traverser Djara qui occupe les deux rives de l’oued. C’est dans ce bourg, autrefois fortifié, qui fut successivement carthaginois, romain, byzantin, arabe, que se tient le principal marché de Gabès. À cette heure, la population ne serait pas rentrée, et peut-être Djemma, son fils auraient-ils quelque peine à passer sans éveiller l’attention. Il est vrai, les rues des oasis tunisiennes n’étaient pas encore éclairées à l’électricité ni même au gaz, et, sauf à la hauteur de quelques cafés, elles seraient plongées dans une obscurité profonde.

Cependant, très prudent, très circonspect, Ahmet ne cessait de dire à Sohar qu’on ne saurait prendre trop de précautions. Il n’était pas impossible que la mère du prisonnier fût connue à Gabès, où sa présence aurait pu provoquer un redoublement de vigilance autour du fort. L’évasion ne présentait déjà que trop de difficultés, bien qu’elle eût été préparée de longue main, et il importait que les gardiens ne fussent point mis en éveil. Aussi Ahmet choisissait-il de préférence les chemins qui conduisaient aux environs du Bordj.

Du reste, la partie centrale de l’oasis, pendant cette soirée, ne laissait pas d’être assez animée. C’était un dimanche qui allait finir. Ce dernier jour de la semaine est généralement fêté dans toutes les villes qui possèdent garnison et surtout garnison française, en Afrique comme en Europe. Les soldats obtiennent des permissions, ils s’attablent dans les cafés, ils ne rentrent que tard à la caserne. Les indigènes s’associent à cette animation, principalement dans le quartier des mercantis très mêlés d’Italiens et de Juifs. Le tumulte se prolonge jusqu’à une heure avancée de la nuit.

Il se pouvait – cela vient d’être dit – que Djemma ne fût pas inconnue des autorités de Gabès. En effet, depuis la capture de son fils, elle s’était plus d’une fois risquée autour du bordj. Risque, assurément, et pour sa liberté et peut-être même pour sa vie. On n’ignorait pas l’influence qu’elle avait eue sur Hadjar, cette influence de la mère, si puissante chez la race touareg. Ne la savait-on pas capable, après l’avoir poussé à la révolte, de provoquer une nouvelle rébellion, soit pour délivrer le prisonnier, soit pour le venger, si le conseil de guerre l’envoyait à la mort?… Oui! on devait le craindre, toutes les tribus se dresseraient à sa voix et la suivraient sur le chemin de la guerre sainte. En vain des recherches avaient-elles été entreprises pour s’emparer de sa personne. En vain les expéditions s’étaient-elles multipliées à travers ce pays des sebkha et des chotts. Protégée par le dévouement public, Djemma avait échappé jusqu’ici à toutes les tentatives faites pour capturer la mère après le fils!…

Et, pourtant, voici qu’elle était venue au milieu de cette oasis, où tant de dangers la menaçaient. Elle avait voulu se joindre à ses compagnons que l’œuvre de l’évasion réunissait alors à Gabès. Si Hadjar arrivait à déjouer la surveillance de ses gardiens, s’il pouvait franchir les murs du bordj, sa mère reprendrait avec lui la route du marabout, et, à un kilomètre de là, au plus épais d’un bois de palmiers, le fugitif trouverait les chevaux préparés pour sa fuite. Ce serait la liberté reconquise, et, qui sait, quelque nouvelle tentative de soulèvement contre la domination française.

Le cheminement s’était poursuivi dans ces conditions. Au milieu des groupes de Français et d’Arabes qui se rencontraient parfois, nul n’avait pu deviner la mère de Hadjar sous le haïk qui la recouvrait. Du reste, Ahmet s’ingéniait à les avertir, et tous trois se blottissaient en quelque coin obscur, derrière une hutte isolée, sous le couvert des arbres et ils reprenaient leur marche, après que les passants s’étaient éloignés.

Enfin, ils n’étaient plus qu’à trois ou quatre pas du lieu de rendez-vous, lorsqu’un Targui, qui semblait guetter leur passage, se précipita devant eux.

La rue ou plutôt le chemin qui obliquait vers le bordj était désert en ce moment, et, en le suivant pendant quelques minutes, il suffirait de remonter une étroite ruelle latérale pour gagner le gourbi où se rendaient Djemma et ses compagnons.

L’homme avait été droit à Ahmet; puis, joignant le geste à la parole, il l’avait arrêté en disant:

“Ne va pas plus loin…

— Qu’y a-t-il, Horeb?… demanda Ahmet qui venait de reconnaître un des Touareg de sa tribu.

— Nos compagnons ne sont plus au gourbi.”

La vieille mère avait suspendu sa marche et, interrogeant Horeb d’une voix à la fois pleine d’inquiétude et de colère:

“Est-ce que ces chiens de Roumis ont l’éveil?… demanda-t-elle.

— Non… Djemma, répondit Horeb, et les gardiens du bordj n’ont aucun soupçon…

— Alors pourquoi nos compagnons ne sont-ils plus au gourbi?… reprit Djemma.

— Parce que des soldats en permission sont venus y demander à boire, et nous n’avons pas voulu rester avec eux… Il y avait là le sous-officier de spahis Nicol, qui vous connaît, Djemma…

— Oui, murmura celle-ci… Il m’a vue là-bas… dans le douar… lorsque mon fils est tombé entre les mains de son capitaine… Ah! ce capitaine, si jamais!…”

Et ce fut comme un rugissement de fauve qui s’échappa de la poitrine de cette femme, la mère du prisonnier Hadjar!

“Où rejoindre nos compagnons?… demanda Ahmet.

— Venez”, répondit Horeb.

Et, prenant la tête, il se glissa à travers une petite palmeraie en direction du fort.

Ce bois, désert à cette heure, ne s’animait que les jours où se tenait le grand marché de Gabès. Il y avait donc probabilité qu’on ne rencontrerait plus personne aux approches du bordj, dans lequel il serait d’ailleurs impossible de pénétrer. De ce que la garnison jouissait des permissions de ce dimanche, il n’aurait pas fallu conclure que le poste de service eût été abandonné.

Est-ce qu’une surveillance plus sévère ne s’imposait pas tant que le rebelle Hadjar serait prisonnier dans le fort, tant qu’il n’aurait pas été transféré à bord du croiseur pour être livré à la justice militaire?…

La petite troupe marchait donc sous le couvert des arbres et atteignit la lisière de la palmeraie.

En cet endroit s’aggloméraient une vingtaine de huttes, et quelques lumières filtraient à travers leurs étroites ouvertures. Il n’y avait plus qu’une portée de fusil à franchir pour atteindre le lieu du rendez-vous.

Mais à peine Horeb s’était-il engagé dans une tortueuse ruelle qu’un bruit de pas et de voix le contraignit de s’arrêter. Une douzaine de soldats, des spahis, venaient de leur côté, chantant et criant, sous l’influence de libations peut-être un peu trop prolongées dans les cabarets du voisinage.

Ahmet trouva prudent d’éviter leur rencontre et, pour leur livrer passage, se rejeta avec Djemma, Sohar et Horeb au fond d’un obscur enfoncement non loin de l’école franco-arabe.

Là se creusait un puits dont l’orifice était surmonté d’une armature de bois qui supportait le treuil auquel s’enroulait la chaîne des seaux.

En un instant, tous se furent réfugiés derrière ce puits dont la margelle assez haute les cacherait entièrement.

Le groupe s’avançait, et voici qu’il s’arrêta, et l’un de ces soldats de s’écrier:

“Nom d’un diable! qu’il fait soif!…

— Eh bien, bois!… Voici un puits, lui répondit le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol.

— Quoi! de l’eau… marchef?… se récria le brigadier Pistache.

— Invoque Mahomet, peut-être changera-t-il cette eau en vin…

— Ah! si j’en étais sûr…

— Tu te ferais mahométan?…

— Non, marchef, non… et d'ailleurs, puisque Allah défend le vin à ses fidèles, jamais il ne consentirait à faire ce miracle-là pour des mécréants…

— Bien raisonné, Pistache, déclara le sous-officier, qui ajouta:

En route pour le poste!"

Mais, au moment où ses soldats allaient le suivre, il les arrêta.

Deux hommes remontaient la rue, et le sous-officier reconnut en eux un capitaine et un lieutenant de son régiment.

"Halte!… commanda-t-il à ses hommes qui portèrent la main à leur chéchia.

"Eh! fit le capitaine, c'est ce brave Nicol!…

— Le capitaine Hardigan?… répondit le marchef, d'un ton qui dénotait une certaine surprise.

— Moi-même!…

— Et nous arrivons à l'instant de Tunis, ajouta le lieutenant Villette.

— En attendant de repartir pour une expédition dont tu seras, Nicol…

— À vos ordres, mon capitaine, répondit le sous-officier, et prêt à vous suivre partout où vous irez…

— Entendu… entendu!… dit le capitaine Hardigan. Et ton vieux frère, comment se porte-t-il?…

— Parfaitement… sur ses quatre jambes que j’ai soin de ne point laisser se rouiller…

— Bien, Nicol!… Et aussi Coupe-à-cœur?… Toujours l’ami du vieux frère?…

— Toujours, mon capitaine, et je ne m’étonnerais point qu’ils fussent jumeaux.

— Ce serait drôle… un chien et un cheval!… riposta en riant l’officier… Sois tranquille, Nicol, nous ne les séparerons pas, quand on partira!…

— Pour sûr, ils en mourraient, mon capitaine.”

À ce moment, une détonation retentit du côté de la mer.

“Qu’est-ce que cela?… demanda le lieutenant Villette.

— Probablement le coup de canon du croiseur qui mouille dans le golfe…

— Et qui vient chercher ce, coquin de Hadjar… ajouta le sous-officier. Une fameuse capture que vous avez faite là, mon capitaine…

— Tu peux dire que nous avons faite ensemble, reprit le capitaine Hardigan.

— Oui… et aussi le vieux frère… et aussi Coupe-à-cœur”, déclara le marchef.

Puis les deux officiers reprirent leur route en remontant vers le bordj, tandis que le marchef Nicol et ses hommes redescendaient vers les bas quartiers de Gabès.

II. HADJAR.

Les Touareg, de race berbère, habitaient l’Ixham, pays compris entre le Touat, cette vaste oasis saharienne située à cinq cents kilomètres au sud-est du Maroc, Tombouctou au midi, le Niger à l’ouest et le Fezzan à l’est. Mais, à l’époque où se passe cette histoire, ils avaient dû se déplacer vers les régions plus orientales du Sahara. Au commencement du XXe siècle, leurs nombreuses tribus, les unes presque sédentaires, les autres absolument nomades, se rencontraient alors au milieu de ces plaines, plates et sablonneuses, désignées par le nom d’”outtâ” en langue arabe, au Soudan et jusque dans les contrées où le désert algérien confine au désert tunisien.

Or, depuis un certain nombre d’années, après l’abandon des travaux de la mer intérieure dans ce pays de l’Arad, qui s’étend à l’ouest de Gabès, et dont le capitaine Roudaire avait étudié la création, le résident général et le bey de Tunis avaient amené des Touareg à venir se cantonner dans les oasis autour des chotts. On avait conçu l’espoir que, grâce à leurs qualités guerrières, ils deviendraient peut-être comme les gendarmes du désert. Vain espoir, les Imohagh avaient continué à mériter leur sobriquet injurieux de “Touareg”, c’est-à-dire “brigands de nuit”, sous lequel ils avaient été craints et redoutés dans tout le Soudan, et, au surplus, si la création de la mer Saharienne venait à être reprise, il n’était pas douteux qu’ils ne se missent à la tête des tribus absolument hostiles à l’inondation des chotts.

D’ailleurs, si, ouvertement du moins, le Targui (singulier de Touareg) faisait le métier de conducteur pour les caravanes, et même de protecteur, pillard par instinct, pirate par nature, sa réputation était trop fâcheusement établie pour ne pas inspirer toute défiance. Est-ce que, voilà bien des années déjà, le major Faing, alors qu’il parcourait ces dangereuses contrées du pays noir, ne risqua pas d’être massacré dans une attaque de ces redoutables indigènes? En 1881, pendant cette expédition partie de Ouargla sous les ordres du commandant Flatters, ce courageux officier et ses compagnons ne périrent-ils pas à Bir-el-Gharama? Les autorités militaires de l’Algérie et de la Tunisie devaient se tenir constamment sur la défensive et refouler sans relâche ces tribus qui formaient une population assez nombreuse.

Parmi les tribus touareg, celle des Ahaggar passait justement pour être l’une des plus guerrières. On en retrouvait les principaux chefs dans tous les soulèvements partiels qui rendent si difficile le maintien de l’influence française sur ces longues limites du désert. Le gouverneur de l’Algérie et le résident général de la Tunisie, toujours sur le qui-vive, avaient plus particulièrement à observer la région des chotts ou sebkha. Aussi comprendra-t-on l’importance d’un projet dont l’exécution touchait à son terme, l’invasion de la mer intérieure, qui fait l’objet de ce récit. Ce projet devait nuire singulièrement aux tribus touareg, les priver d’une grande partie de leurs bénéfices en réduisant le trajet des caravanes, et surtout rendre plus rares, en permettant de les réprimer plus facilement, ces agressions qui ajoutaient encore tant de noms à la nécrologie africaine.

C’est à cette tribu des Ahaggar qu’appartenait précisément la famille des Hadjar. Elle comptait parmi les plus influentes. Entreprenant, hardi, impitoyable, le fils de Djemma avait toujours été signalé comme l’un des plus redoutables chefs de ces bandes dans toute la partie qui s’étend au sud des monts Aurès. Pendant ces dernières années, maintes attaques, soit contre des caravanes, soit contre des détachements isolés, furent conduites par lui, et son renom grandit au milieu des tribus qui refluaient peu à peu vers l’est du Sahara, mot qui s’applique à l’immense plaine sans végétation de cette portion du continent africain. La rapidité de ses mouvements était déconcertante, et, bien que les autorités eussent donné mission aux chefs militaires de s’emparer à tout prix de sa personne, il avait toujours su dépister les expéditions lancées à sa poursuite. Alors qu’on le signalait aux approches d’une oasis, il apparaissait soudain dans le voisinage d’une autre. À la tête d’une bande de Touareg non moins farouches que leur chef, il battait tout le pays compris entre les chotts algériens et le golfe de la Petite-Syrte. Les kafila n’osaient plus s’engager à travers le désert ou du moins ne s’y risquaient que sous la protection d’une escorte nombreuse. Aussi le trafic si important qui s’effectuait jusque sur les marchés de la Tripolitaine souffrait-il beaucoup de cet état de choses.

Et, cependant, les postes militaires ne manquaient point, ni à Nefta, ni à Gafsa, ni à Tozeur, qui est le chef-lieu politique de cette région. Mais les expéditions organisées contre Hadjar et sa bande n’avaient jamais réussi, et l’aventureux guerrier était parvenu à leur échapper jusqu’au jour – quelques semaines avant – où il tomba entre les mains d’un détachement français.

Cette partie de l’Afrique septentrionale avait été le théâtre d’une de ces catastrophes qui ne sont malheureusement pas rares sur le continent noir. On sait avec quelle passion, quel dévouement, quelle intrépidité les explorateurs, depuis tant d’années, les successeurs des Burton, des Speke, des Livingstone, des Stanley, se sont lancés à travers ce vaste champ de découvertes. On les compterait par centaines, et combien s’ajouteront encore à cette liste jusqu’au jour, très éloigné sans doute, où cette troisième partie de l’Ancien Monde aura livré ses derniers secrets! Mais aussi combien de ces expéditions pleines de périls se sont terminées en désastres!

Le plus récent concernait celle d’un courageux Belge, qui s’était aventuré au milieu des régions les moins fréquentées et les moins connues du Touat.

Après avoir organisé une caravane à Constantine, Carl Steinx quitta cette ville en se dirigeant vers le sud. Caravane peu nombreuse, en vérité, un personnel d’une dizaine d’hommes en tout, des Arabes recrutés dans la région. Chevaux et méharis leur servaient de montures et aussi de bêtes de trait pour les deux chariots qui composaient le matériel de l’expédition.

En premier lieu, Carl Steinx avait gagné Ouargla par Biskra, Touggourt, Negoussia, où il lui fut facile de se ravitailler. En ces villes résidaient d’ailleurs des autorités françaises qui s’empressèrent de venir en aide à cet explorateur.

À Ouargla, il se trouvait pour ainsi dire au cœur du Sahara, sur cette latitude du trente-deuxième parallèle.

Jusqu’alors l’expédition n’avait pas été très éprouvée: des fatigues, et de sérieuses, oui, mais de sérieux dangers, non. Il est vrai, l’influence française se faisait sentir en ces contrées déjà lointaines. Les Touareg, ouvertement du moins, s’y montraient soumis, et les caravanes pouvaient, sans trop de risques, se prêter à tous les besoins du commerce intérieur.

Pendant son séjour à Ouargla, Carl Steinx eut à modifier la composition de son personnel. Quelques-uns des Arabes qui l’accompagnaient se refusèrent à continuer le voyage au-delà. Il fallut régler leur compte, et cela ne se fit pas sans difficultés, réclamations insolentes, mauvaises chicanes. Mieux valait se débarrasser de ces gens-là qui montraient une évidente mauvaise volonté et qu’il eût été dangereux de conserver dans l’escorte.

D’autre part, le voyageur n’aurait pu se remettre en route sans avoir remplacé les manquants, et, dans ces conditions; on le conçoit, il n’avait pas le choix. Il crut cependant s’être tiré d’embarras en acceptant les services de plusieurs Touareg, qui s’offrirent, moyennant fortes rémunérations, et s’engagèrent à le suivre jusqu’au terme de son expédition soit à la côte occidentale, soit à la côte orientale du continent africain.

Comment, tout en gardant certaines défiances contre les gens de race touareg, Carl Steinx se fût-il douté qu’il introduisait des traîtres dans sa caravane, que celle-ci était guettée depuis son départ de Biskara par la bande de Hadjar, que ce redoutable chef n’attendait que l’occasion de l’attaquer?… Et, maintenant, ses partisans mêlés au personnel, acceptés précisément comme guides à travers ces régions inconnues, allaient pouvoir entraîner l’explorateur là où l’attendait Hadjar…

C’est ce qui arriva. En quittant Ouargla, la caravane descendit vers le sud, franchit la ligne du Tropique, atteignit le pays des Ahaggar d’où, en obliquant au sud-est, elle comptait se diriger vers le lac Tchad. Mais, à dater du quinzième jour après son départ, on n’eut plus aucune nouvelle ni de Carl Steinx ni de ses compagnons. Que s’était-il passé?… La kafila avait-elle pu gagner la région du Tchad, et suivait-elle les routes du retour par l’est ou par l’ouest?…

Or, l’expédition de Carl Steinx avait excité le plus vif intérêt parmi les nombreuses Sociétés de Géographie qui s’occupaient plus spécialement des voyages à l’intérieur de l’Afrique. Jusqu’à Ouargla, elles avaient été tenues au courant de l’itinéraire. Pendant une centaine de kilomètres au-delà, plusieurs nouvelles parvinrent encore, apportées par les nomades du désert et transmises aux autorités françaises. On pensait donc que, dans quelques semaines, l’arrivée de Carl Steinx aux environs du lac Tchad se serait effectuée dans des circonstances favorables.

Or, non seulement des semaines, mais des mois s’écoulèrent, et aucune information relative à l’audacieux explorateur belge ne put être recueillie. Des émissaires furent envoyés jusque dans l’extrême sud. Les postes français prêtèrent la main aux recherches qui s'étendirent au-delà même en diverses directions. Ces tentatives ne donnèrent aucun résultat, et il y eut lieu de craindre que la caravane n'eût péri tout entière, soit dans une attaque des nomades du Touat, soit par la fatigue ou la maladie, au milieu des immenses solitudes sahariennes.

Le monde des géographes ne savait donc que supposer, et commençait à perdre l'espoir, non seulement de revoir Carl Steinx, mais aussi de recueillir, quelque bruit le concernant, lorsque, trois mois plus tard, l'arrivée d'un Arabe à Ouargla vint éclaircir le mystère qui entourait cette malheureuse expédition.

Cet Arabe, qui appartenait précisément au personnel de la caravane, avait pu s'échapper. On sut par lui que les Touareg entrés au service de l'explorateur l'avaient trahi. Carl Steinx, égaré par eux, s'était vu attaquer par une bande de Touareg, qui opérait sous la conduite de ce chef de tribus, Hadjar, déjà célèbre par ces agressions dont plusieurs kafila avaient été victimes. Carl Steinx s'était courageusement défendu avec les fidèles de son escorte. Pendant quarante-huit heures, retranché dans une kouba abandonnée, il avait pu tenir tête aux assaillants. Mais l'infériorité numérique de sa petite troupe ne lui permit pas de résister davantage, et il tomba entre les mains des Touareg, qui le massacrèrent avec ses compagnons.

On comprend quelle émotion provoqua cette nouvelle. Il n'y eut qu'un cri: venger la mort du hardi explorateur, et la venger sur cet impitoyable chef touareg, dont le nom fut voué à l'exécration publique. Et, d'ailleurs, combien d'autres attentats contre les caravanes lui étaient attribués non sans raison! Aussi les autorités françaises décidèrent-elles d'organiser une expédition pour s'emparer de sa personne, le châtier de tant de crimes, anéantir en même temps la funeste influence qu’il exerçait sur les tribus. On ne l’ignorait pas, ces tribus gagnaient peu à peu vers l’est du continent africain; leur habitat tendait à s’établir dans les régions méridionales de la Tunisie et de la Tripolitaine. Le considérable commerce qui se faisait à travers ces contrées risquerait d’être troublé, détruit même, si l’on ne réduisait pas les Touareg à un état absolu de soumission. Une expédition fut donc ordonnée et le gouverneur général de l’Algérie comme le résident général en Tunisie donnèrent des ordres pour qu’elle reçût appui dans les villes du pays des chotts et des sebkha où s’étaient établis des postes militaires. Ce fut un escadron de spahis, commandé par le capitaine Hardigan, que le Ministre de la Guerre désigna pour cette difficile campagne dont on attendait de si importants résultats.

Un détachement d’une soixantaine d’hommes fut amené au port de Sfax par le Chanzy. Quelques jours après le débarquement, avec ses vivres, ses tentes à dos de chameaux, sous la conduite de guides arabes, il quitta le littoral et prit la direction de l’ouest. Il devait trouver à se ravitailler dans les villes et bourgades de l’intérieur, Tozeur, Gafsa et autres, et les oasis ne manquent point dans la région du Djerid.

Le capitaine avait sous ses ordres un capitaine en second, deux lieutenants et plusieurs sous-officiers, parmi lesquels le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol.

Or, dès l’instant que le marchef faisait partie de l’expédition, c’est que son vieux frère Va-d’l’avant et le fidèle Coupe-à-cœur en étaient aussi.

L’expédition, réglant ses étapes avec une régularité qui devait assurer la réussite du voyage, traversa tout le Sahel tunisien. Après avoir dépassé Dar et Mehalla et El Quittar, elle vint prendre quarante-huit heures de repos à Gafsa, en pleine région de l’Henmara.

Gafsa est bâtie dans le coude principal que forme l'oued Bayoeh. Cette ville en occupe une terrasse encadrée de collines auxquelles succède un formidable étage de montagnes à quelques kilomètres de là. Entre les diverses cités de la Tunisie méridionale, elle possède le plus grand nombre d'habitants, groupés dans une agglomération de maisons et de cabanes. La Kasbah qui la domine, et où veillaient autrefois des soldats tunisiens, est présentement confiée à la garde de soldats français et indigènes. Gafsa se vente aussi d'être un centre lettré et diverses écoles y fonctionnent au profit des langues arabe et française. En même temps, l'industrie y est fort prospère, tissage des étoffes, fabrication des haïks de soie, couvertures et burnous dont la laine est fournie par les nombreux moutons des Hammâmma. On y voit encore les Termil, bassins construits à l'époque romaine, et des sources thermales dont la température va de vingt-neuf à trente-deux degrés centigrades.

Dans cette ville, le capitaine Hardigan obtint des nouvelles plus précises concernant Hadjar: la bande de Touareg avait été signalée aux environs de Ferkane, à cent trente kilomètres dans l'ouest de Gafsa. La distance à parcourir était grande, mais des spahis ne comptent avec la fatigue pas plus qu'avec le danger.

Et, lorsque le détachement apprit ce que ses chefs attendaient de son énergie et de son endurance, il ne demanda qu'à se mettre en route. “D'ailleurs, ainsi que le déclara le marchef Nicol, j'ai consulté le vieux frère qui est prêt à doubler les étapes s'il le faut!… et Coupe-à-cœur, qui ne demande qu'à prendre les devants!”

Le capitaine, bien réapprovisionné, partit avec ses hommes. Il fallut d'abord, au sud-ouest de la ville, traverser une forêt qui ne compte pas moins de cent mille palmiers et qui en abrite une seconde uniquement composée d’arbres fruitiers.

Une seule bourgade importante se rencontrait sur ce parcours entre Gafsa et la frontière algéro-tunisienne. C’est Chebika où furent confirmées les informations relatives à la présence du chef touareg. Il opérait alors au très grand dommage des caravanes qui fréquentaient ces extrêmes régions de la province de Constantine, et son dossier, si chargé déjà, s’accroissait sans cesse de nouveaux attentats contre les propriétés et les personnes.

À quelques étapes de là, lorsque le commandant eut franchi la frontière, il fit extrême diligence pour atteindre la bourgade de Négrine, sur les rives de l’oued Sokhna.

La veille de son arrivée, les Touareg avaient été signalés à quelques kilomètres plus à l’ouest, précisément entre Négrine et Ferkane, sur les bords de l’oued Djerich qui coule vers les grands chotts de cette contrée.

D’après les renseignements, Hadjar, que sa mère accompagnait, devait avoir une centaine d’hommes, mais, bien que le capitaine Hardigan en eût près de moitié moins, ni ses spahis, ni lui, n’hésiteraient à l’attaquer. La proportion d’un contre deux n’est pas pour effrayer des troupes d’Afrique, et elles se sont souvent battues dans des conditions inférieures.

Ce fut bien ce qui arriva en cette occasion, lorsque le détachement eut atteint les environs de Ferkane. Hadjar avait été prévenu et, sans doute, il ne se souciait pas d’affronter la lutte. N’était-il pas préférable de laisser l’escadron s’engager plus avant dans ce pays difficile des grands chotts, de le harceler par d’incessantes agressions, de faire appel aux Touareg nomades qui parcourent ces régions et qui ne refuseraient point de rejoindre Hadjar, si connu de toutes les tribus touareg? D’autre part, du moment qu’il était tombé sur ses traces, le capitaine Hardigan ne les abandonnerait pas et poursuivrait aussi loin qu’il le faudrait.

En conséquence, Hadjar avait résolu de se dérober et, s’il parvenait à couper la retraite de l’escadron, après avoir recruté de nouveaux partisans, il parviendrait sans doute à anéantir la petite troupe envoyée contre lui. Et ce serait une nouvelle et plus déplorable catastrophe ajoutée à celle de Carl Steinx.

Cependant, le plan de Hadjar fut déjoué, alors que la bande cherchait à remonter le cours de l’oued Sokhna, afin de gagner dans le nord la base du Djebel Cherchar. Un peloton, conduit par le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol, auquel Coupe-à-cœur avait donné l’éveil, se mit en travers de la route. La lutte s’engagea et le reste du détachement ne tarda pas à y prendre part. Coups de carabines et coups de fusils éclatèrent, auxquels se mêlèrent les détonations des revolvers. Il y eut des morts du côté des Touareg et des blessés du côté des spahis. Une moitié des Touareg, forçant l’obstacle, parvint à fuir, mais leur chef n’était pas avec eux.

En effet, à l’instant où Hadjar tentait de rejoindre ses compagnons de toute la vitesse de son cheval, le capitaine Hardigan s’était lancé sur lui de toute la vitesse du sien. En vain Hadjar essaya-t-il de le désarçonner d’un coup de pistolet, la balle ne l’avait point atteint. Mais, sa monture ayant fait un violent écart, Hadjar vida les étriers et tomba. Avant qu’il eût le temps de se relever, l’un des lieutenants se précipita sur lui, et, d’autres cavaliers accourant, il fut maintenu en dépit des terribles efforts qu’il fit pour se dégager.

C’est à ce moment que Djemma, qui s’était jetée en avant, fût arrivée jusqu’à son fils, si elle n’avait été retenue par le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol. Il est vrai, une demi-douzaine de Touareg purent la lui arracher et c’est en vain que le brave chien assaillit ceux qui entraînaient la vieille Targui au plus vite.

“Je tenais la louve! s’écria le marchef, et la louve m’a filé entre les mains!… Ici, Coupe-à-cœur, ici, répéta-t-il en rappelant l’animal. En tout cas, le louveteau est de bonne prise.”

Hadjar était pris et bien pris, et, si les Touareg ne parvenaient pas à le délivrer avant son arrivé à Gabès, le Djerid serait enfin purgé de l’un de ses plus redoutables malfaiteurs.

La bande l’eût tenté sans aucun doute et Djemma n’aurait pas laissé son fils au pouvoir des Français, si le détachement ne se fût renforcé des soldats réquisitionnés dans les postes militaires de Tozeur et de Gafsa.

L’expédition avait alors rallié le littoral, et le prisonnier était enfermé dans le bordj de Gabès en attendant son transport à Tunis, où il serait déféré à la justice militaire.

Tels sont les événements qui s’étaient passés avant le début de cette histoire. Le capitaine Hardigan, après un court voyage à Tunis, venait de rentrer à Gabès ainsi qu’on l’a vu, et le soir même où le Chanzy mouillait dans le golfe de la Petite-Syrte.

III. L'ÉVASION.

Après le départ des deux officiers, du maréchal des logis-chef et des spahis, Horeb se glissa le long de la margelle du puits et vint en observer les approches.

Lorsque le bruit des pas se fut éteint, en haut comme en bas du sentier, le Targui fit signe à ses compagnons de le suivre.

Djemma, son fils et Ahmet le rejoignirent aussitôt en remontant une sinueuse ruelle, bordée de vieilles masures inhabitées, qui obliquait vers le bordj.

De ce côté, l'oasis était déserte et rien ne s'y répercutait du tumulte des quartiers plus populeux. Il faisait nuit noire sous l'épais dôme des nuages immobilisés en cette calme atmosphère. C'est à peine si les derniers souffles du large apportaient le murmure du ressac sur les plages du littoral.

Un quart d'heure suffit à Horeb pour gagner le nouveau lieu de rendez-vous, la salle basse d'une sorte de café ou de cabaret tenu par un mercanti levantin. Ce mercanti était dans l'affaire et on pouvait compter sur sa fidélité, assurée par le payement d'une forte somme, qui serait doublée après la réussite. Son intervention avait été utile en cette occurrence.

Parmi les Touareg réunis en ce cabaret, se trouvait Harrig. C'était un des plus fidèles et des plus audacieux partisans de Hadjar. Quelques jours avant, à propos d'une rixe dans les rues de Gabès, il s'était fait arrêter et enfermer à la prison du bordj. Pendant les heures passées dans la cour commune, il ne lui fut pas difficile d'entrer en communication avec son chef. Quoi de plus naturel que deux hommes de même race fussent attirés l’un vers l’autre? On ignorait que ce Harrig appartînt à la bande de Hadjar. Il avait pu s’échapper, lors de la lutte, et accompagner Djemma dans sa fuite. Puis, revenu à Gabès, conformément au plan convenu avec Sohar et Ahmet, il mit à profit son incarcération pour combiner l’évasion de Hadjar.

Toutefois, il importait qu’il fût libéré avant l’arrivée du croiseur qui devait emmener le chef touareg, et voici que ce navire, signalé à son passage au cap Bon, allait mouiller dans le golfe de Gabès. Donc nécessité que Harrig pût quitter le bordj à temps pour se concerter avec ses compagnons. Il fallait que l’évasion s’accomplît cette nuit, ou, le jour venu, il serait trop tard. Au lever du soleil, Hadjar aurait été transporté à bord du *Chanzy*, et il ne serait plus possible de l’arracher à l’autorité militaire.

C’est dans ces conditions que le mercanti intervint: il connaissait le gardien chef de la prison du bordj. À la suite de la rixe, la peine légère prononcée contre Harrig était achevée depuis la veille, mais Harrig, si impatiemment attendu, n’avait pas été mis en liberté. Avait-il donc encouru une aggravation pour un manquement quelconque au règlement de la prison, ce n’était guère supposable, il fallait savoir à quoi s’en tenir et surtout obtenir que les portes du bordj se fussent ouvertes devant Harrig avant la nuit.

Le mercanti résolut donc de se rendre près du gardien, lequel, pendant ses heures de loisir, venait volontiers s’attabler à son café. Il se mit en route dès le soir et prit le chemin du fort.

Cette démarche près du gardien ne fut pas nécessaire, démarche qui, plus tard, l’évasion accomplie, aurait pu sembler suspecte. Comme le mercanti approchait de la poterne, un homme le croisa sur le chemin.

C’était Harrig qui reconnut le Levantin. Tous deux, seuls alors sur le sentier qui descend du bordj, ils n’avaient à craindre ni d’être vus, ni d’être entendus, ni même d’être épiés ou suivis. Harrig n’était point un prisonnier qui se sauve, mais un prisonnier auquel, sa peine finie, on a rendu la clef des champs.

“Hadjar?… demanda le mercanti tout d’abord.

— Il est prévenu, répondit Harrig.

— Pour cette nuit?…

— Pour cette nuit. Et Sohar… et Ahmet, et Horeb?…

— Ils ne tarderont pas à te rejoindre.”

Dix minutes plus tard, Harrig se rencontrait avec ses compagnons dans la salle basse du café, et, par surcroît de précaution, l’un d’eux se tint au-dehors pour surveiller la route.

Ce fut une heure après seulement que la vieille Targui et son fils, conduits par Horeb, entrèrent dans le café, où Harrig les mit au courant de la situation.

Pendant les quelques jours de son incarcération, Harrig avait donc communiqué avec Hadjar. Cela ne pouvait sembler suspect que deux Touareg, enfermés dans la même prison, se fussent mis en rapport l’un avec l’autre. D’ailleurs, le chef touareg devait être prochainement emmené à Tunis, tandis que Harrig serait bientôt relâché.

La première question qui fut posée à ce dernier, lorsque Djemma et ses compagnons arrivèrent chez le mercanti, ce fut Sohar qui la formula en ces termes:

“Et mon frère?…

— Et mon fils?… ajouta la vieille femme.

— Hadjar est averti, répondit Harrig. Au moment où je sortais du bordj, nous avons entendu le coup de canon du *Chanzy*… Hadjar sait qu’il y sera embarqué demain matin, et, cette nuit même, il tentera de s’enfuir…

— S’il tardait de douze heures, dit Ahmet, il ne serait plus temps…

— Et s’il n’y réussissait pas? murmura Djemma, d’une voix sourde.

— Il réussira, n’hésita point à déclarer Harrig, avec notre aide…

— Et comment?…” demanda Sohar.

Voici les explications qui furent alors données par Harrig.

La cellule dans laquelle Hadjar passait les nuits occupait un angle du fort, dans la partie de la courtine qui s’élevait du côté de la mer, et dont les eaux du golfe baignaient la base. À cette cellule attenait une étroite cour dont l’accès demeurait libre pour le prisonnier, entre de hautes murailles qui n’auraient pu être franchies.

Dans un coin de cette cour s’ouvrait un passage, sorte d’égout qui aboutissait à l’extérieur de la courtine. Une grille métallique fermait cet égout qui débouchait à une dizaine de pieds au-dessus du niveau de la mer.

Or, Hadjar avait constaté que la grille était en mauvais état et que la rouille rongeait ses barres oxydées par l’air salin. Il ne serait pas difficile de la desceller pendant la nuit qui venait, et de ramper jusqu’à l’orifice extérieur.

Il est vrai, comment s’effectuerait alors l’évasion de Hadjar? En se jetant à la mer lui serait-il possible de gagner la grève la plus proche, après avoir contourné l’angle du bastion?… Était-il d’âge et de force à se risquer au milieu des courants du golfe qui portaient au large?…

Le chef touareg n’avait pas encore quarante ans. C’était un homme de haute taille, la peau blanche, bronzée par le soleil de feu des zones africaines, maigre, fort, rompu à tous les exercices corporels, destiné à rester longtemps valide, étant donnée la sobriété qui distingue les indigènes de sa race, auxquels grains, figues, dattes, laitages assurent certes une nourriture qui les fait robustes et endurants.

Ce n’était pas sans raison que Hadjar avait acquis une réelle influence sur ces Touareg nomades du Touat et du Sahara, rejetés maintenant vers les schotts de la basse Tunisie. Son audace égalait son intelligence. Ces qualités, il les tenait de sa mère comme tous ces Touareg qui suivent le sang maternel. Parmi eux, en effet, la femme est l’égale de l’homme, si même elle ne l’emporte. C’est à ce point qu’un fils de père esclave et de femme noble est noble d’origine, et le contraire n’existe pas. Toute l’énergie de Djemma se retrouvait en ses fils, toujours restés près d’elle depuis vingt années de veuvage. Sous son influence, Hadjar avait acquis les qualités d’un apôtre, dont il avait la belle figure à barbe noire, les yeux ardents, l’attitude résolue. Aussi, à sa voix, les tribus l’auraient-elles suivi à travers les immensités du Djerid s’il eût voulu les entraîner contre les étrangers et les pousser à la guerre sainte.

C’était donc un homme dans toute la vigueur de l’âge, mais il n’aurait pu mener à bien sa tentative d’évasion s’il n’eût été aidé du dehors. En effet, il ne suffisait pas d’arriver à l’orifice de l’égout après en avoir forcé la grille. Hadjar connaissait le golfe; il savait qu’il s’y forme des courants de grande violence, bien que les marées y soient faibles, ainsi qu’il en est dans tout le bassin de la Méditerranée; il n’ignorait pas qu’aucun nageur ne peut leur résister, et qu’il serait emporté au large sans avoir pu prendre pied sur une des grèves en amont ou en aval du fort.

Donc, il fallait qu’il trouvât une embarcation à l’extrémité de ce passage dans l’angle de la courtine et du bastion.

Tels furent les renseignements que donna Harrig à ses compagnons.

Lorsqu’il eut achevé, le mercanti se contenta de dire:

“J’ai là-bas un canot à votre disposition…

— Et tu me conduiras?… demanda Sohar.

— Quand le moment sera venu…

— Tu auras rempli tes conditions… nous remplirons les nôtres, ajouta Harrig, et nous doublerons la somme qu’on t’a promise, si nous réussissons…

— Vous réussirez”, affirma le mercanti, qui, en sa qualité de Levantin, ne voyait dans tout cela qu’une affaire dont il espérait retirer de gros bénéfices.

Sohar s’était relevé et dit:

“À quelle heure Hadjar nous attend-il?

— Entre onze heures et minuit, répondit Harrig.

— Le canot sera là bien avant, répliqua Sohar, et, mon frère embarqué, nous le conduirons au marabout, où les chevaux sont prêts…

— Et en cet endroit, observa le mercanti, vous ne risquerez point d'être vus, vous accosterez la grève qui sera déserte jusqu'au matin…

— Mais le canot?… fit observer Horeb.

— Il suffira de le tirer sur le sable où je le retrouverai", répondit le mercanti.

Il ne restait plus qu'une question à résoudre.

"Qui de nous ira prendre Hadjar?… demanda Ahmet.

— Moi, répondit Sohar.

— Et je t'accompagnerai, dit la vieille Targui.

— Non, ma mère, non, déclara Sohar. Il suffit que nous soyons deux pour conduire le bateau au bordj… En cas de rencontre, votre personne pourrait paraître suspecte… C'est au marabout qu'il faut aller… Horeb et Ahmet s'y rendront avec vous… C'est Harrig et moi, avec le canot, qui ramènerons mon frère…"

Sohar avait raison, Djemma le comprit et dit seulement:

"Quand nous séparons-nous?…

— À l'instant, répondit Sohar. Dans une demi-heure vous serez au marabout… Avant une demi-heure, nous serons au pied du fort avec le canot, dans l'angle du bastion où il ne risque pas d'être aperçu… Et, si mon frère ne paraissait pas à l'heure convenue… j'essaierais… oui! j'essaierais de pénétrer jusqu'à lui…

— Oui, mon fils, oui!… car, s’il n’a pas fui cette nuit, nous ne le reverrons jamais… jamais!”

Le moment était venu. Horeb et Ahmet prirent les devants, en descendant l’étroite route qui se dirige vers le marché. Djemma les suivait, se dissimulant dans l’ombre lorsque quelque groupe les croisait. Le hasard aurait pu les mettre en présence du maréchal des logis-chef Nicol et il ne fallait pas qu’elle fût reconnue de lui.

Au-delà des limites de l’oasis il n’y aurait plus de danger et, à suivre la base des dunes, on ne rencontrerait âme qui vive jusqu’au marabout.

Un peu après, Sohar et Harrig sortirent du cabaret. Ils savaient en quel endroit se trouvait le canot du mercanti et ils préféraient que celui-ci ne les accompagnât point: il aurait pu être aperçu de quelque passant attardé.

Il était environ neuf heures. Sohar et son compagnon remontèrent vers le fort, dont ils longèrent l’enceinte dans la partie orientée vers le sud.

À l’intérieur comme à l’extérieur, le bordj paraissait tranquille et tout tumulte se fût fait entendre au milieu de cette atmosphère si calme que ne traversait pas le moindre souffle, si obscure aussi, car d’épais nuages immobiles et lourds couvraient le ciel d’un horizon à l’autre.

Ce fut seulement à leur arrivée sur la grève que Sohar et Harrig retrouvèrent quelque animation. Des pêcheurs passaient, les uns revenant avec le produit de leur pêche, les autres rejoignant leurs embarcations pour gagner le milieu du golfe. Çà et là des feux piquaient l’ombre et se croisaient en tous sens. À un demi-kilomètre la présence du croiseur *Chanzy* s’indiquait par ses puissants fanaux qui traçaient des traînées lumineuses à la surface de la mer.

Les deux Touareg prirent soin d’éviter les pêcheurs et se dirigèrent vers un môle en construction à l’extrémité du port.

Au pied du môle était amarrée l’embarcation du mercanti. Ainsi qu’il avait été convenu, Harrig, une heure avant, s’était bien assuré qu’elle se trouvait à cette place. Deux avirons s’allongeaient sous les bancs, et il n’y avait plus qu’à embarquer.

Au moment où Harrig allait retirer le grappin, Sohar lui saisit le bras. Deux hommes de la douane en surveillance sur cette partie de la grève s’avançaient de ce côté. Peut-être connaissaient-ils le propriétaire du canot et se fussent-ils étonnés à voir Sohar et son compagnon en prendre possession. Mieux valait ne point éveiller de soupçons et laisser à cette tentative tout le mystère possible. Ces douaniers auraient sans doute demandé à Sohar ce qu’ils voulaient faire d’une embarcation qui ne leur appartenait pas, et, sans attirail de pêche, les deux Touareg n’auraient pu se donner pour des pêcheurs.

Ils remontèrent donc la grève et se blottirent au pied du môle sans avoir été aperçus.

Ils n’y restèrent pas moins d’une grande demi-heure et l’on se figure ce que devait être leur impatience en voyant les préposés s’attarder en cet endroit. Est-ce qu’ils y seraient de faction jusqu’au matin?… Non, et ils s’éloignèrent enfin.

Alors Sohar s’avança sur le sable et, dès que les douaniers se furent perdus au milieu de l’obscurité, il appela son compagnon qui vint le rejoindre.

Le canot fut halé jusqu’à la grève. Harrig s’y embarqua; puis Sohar, déposant le grappin à l’avant, embarqua à son tour.

Aussitôt les deux avirons furent ajustés dans les tolets et, manœuvrés doucement, entraînèrent le canot qui doubla le musoir du môle et longea la base de la courtine baignée par les eaux du golfe.

En un quart d'heure, Harrig et Sohar tournaient l'angle du bastion et s'arrêtaient sous l'orifice de l'égout par lequel Hadjar allait tenter de s'enfuir…

Le chef touareg était seul alors dans la cellule où il devait passer cette dernière nuit. Une heure avant, le gardien l'avait quitté en fermant à gros verrous la porte de cette petite cour sur laquelle s'ouvrait ladite cellule. Hadjar attendait le moment d'agir avec cette extraordinaire patience de l'Arabe si fataliste, et d'ailleurs si maître de lui-même en toutes circonstances. Il avait entendu le coup de canon tiré par le *Chanzy*; il n'ignorait point l'arrivée du croiseur; il savait qu'il y serait embarqué le lendemain et ne reverrait jamais ces régions des sebkha et des chotts, ce pays du Djerid! Mais, à sa résignation toute musulmane se joignait l'espérance de réussir dans sa tentative. Qu'il parvînt à s'échapper en traversant cet étroit passage, il en était assuré; mais ses compagnons auraient-ils pu se procurer une embarcation et seraient-ils là, au pied de la muraille?…

Une heure s'écoula. De temps en temps, Hadjar sortait de la cellule, se plaçait à l'entrée de l'égout et prêtait l'oreille. Le bruit d'un canot frôlant la courtine fût distinctement parvenu jusqu'à lui. Mais il n'entendait rien et reprenait sa place où il gardait une immobilité absolue.

Parfois aussi il venait écouter près de la porte de la petite cour, épiant le pas d'un gardien, craignant qu'on ne voulût procéder à son embarquement dès la nuit même; le silence le plus complet régnait dans l'enceinte du bordj, et, seul, le pas d’une sentinelle placée sur la plate-forme du bastion l’interrompait par instants.

Cependant minuit approchait, et il était convenu avec Harrig qu’une demi-heure avant, Hadjar aurait gagné l’extrémité du passage après en avoir dégagé la grille. Si, à ce moment, l’embarcation se trouvait là, il y embarquerait aussitôt. Si elle n’était pas arrivée, il attendrait jusqu’aux premières lueurs de l’aube, et, qui sait? ne tenterait-il pas alors de s’enfuir à la nage, au risque d’être entraîné par les courants à travers le golfe de la Petite-Syrte? Ce serait la dernière, la seule chance qu’il aurait d’échapper à une condamnation capitale.

Hadjar sortit donc s’assurer que personne ne se dirigeait vers la cour, rajusta ses vêtements de manière à les serrer autour de son corps et se glissa dans le passage.

Ce boyau mesurait environ une trentaine de pieds en longueur, et sa largeur était tout juste pour qu’un homme de taille moyenne pût s’y introduire. Hadjar dut en frôler les parois contre lesquelles se déchirèrent quelques plis de son haïk; mais, en rampant, et au prix de multiples efforts, il atteignit la grille.

Cette grille, on le sait, était en fort mauvais état. Les barreaux ne tenaient pas dans la pierre qui s’effritait sous la main. Il suffit de cinq ou six secousses pour la dégager, et puis, lorsque Hadjar l’eut retournée contre la paroi, le passage fut libre.

Le chef touareg n’avait qu’à ramper pendant deux mètres pour atteindre l’orifice extérieur, et ce fut là le plus pénible, car le boyau se rétrécissait jusqu’à son extrémité. Hadjar y parvint cependant et, là, n’eut pas même besoin d’attendre.

Presque aussitôt, ces mots étaient parvenus à son oreille:

“Nous sommes là, Hadjar…”

Hadjar fit un dernier effort et la partie antérieure de son corps sortit de l’orifice à la hauteur de dix pieds au-dessus des eaux.

Harrig et Sohar se dressèrent vers lui, et, au moment où ils allaient le tirer, un bruit de pas se fit entendre. Ils purent croire que ce bruit venait de la petite cour, qu’un gardien était envoyé près du prisonnier, qu’on voulait procéder à son départ immédiat… Le prisonnier disparu, l’éveil serait donné dans le bordj…

Heureusement, il n’en était rien. La sentinelle, en se promenant près du parapet du donjon, avait fait ce bruit. Peut-être son attention avait-elle été éveillée à l’approche du canot. Mais, de la place que le factionnaire occupait, il ne pouvait l’apercevoir, et, d’ailleurs, cette petite embarcation n’eût pas été visible au milieu de l’obscurité.

Toutefois, il fut nécessaire d’agir avec prudence. Après quelques instants, Sohar et Harrig saisirent Hadjar par les épaules, le dégagèrent peu à peu, et il prit enfin place près d’eux.

D’un coup vigoureux, le canot fut repoussé au large. Il était préférable de ne longer ni les murs du bordj ni la grève; mieux valait remonter le golfe jusqu’à la hauteur du marabout. Il y eut lieu d’éviter, d’ailleurs, plusieurs barques qui sortaient du port ou y rentraient, car cette nuit calme favorisait les pêcheurs. En passant par le travers du *Chanzy*, Hadjar se redressa, et, les bras croisés, lança un long regard de haine… Puis, sans prononcer une parole, il se rassit à l’arrière de l’embarcation.

Une demi-heure après, le débarquement s’effectuait sur le sable; puis, le canot tiré à sec, le chef touareg et ses deux compagnons se dirigeaient vers le marabout, qu’ils atteignirent sans avoir fait aucune mauvaise rencontre.

Djemma s’était avancée vers son fils, qu’elle pressa dans ses bras, et ne dit que ce mot: “Viens!”

Puis, tournant l’angle du marabout, elle rejoignit Ahmet et Horeb.

Trois chevaux attendaient, prêts à s’élancer sous l’éperon de leurs cavaliers.

Hadjar se mit en selle; Harrig et Horeb le firent après lui.

“Viens”, avait dit Djemma en revoyant son fils, et, cette fois encore, elle ne prononça qu’un seul mot:

“Va”, dit-elle, en tendant la main vers les sombres régions du Djerid.

Un moment après, Hadjar, Horeb et Harrig avaient disparu au milieu de l’obscurité.

Jusqu’au matin, la vieille Targui demeura avec Sohar dans le marabout. Elle avait voulu qu’Ahmet retournât à Gabès. L’évasion de son fils était-elle connue?… La nouvelle se répandait-elle dans l’oasis?… Les autorités avaient-elles envoyé des détachements à la poursuite du fugitif?… En quelle direction à travers le Djerid irait-on le chercher?… Enfin allait-on recommencer contre le chef touareg et ses partisans la campagne qui avait déjà été entreprise, et avait amené sa capture?…

Voilà ce que Djemma tenait tant à savoir avant de reprendre la route vers le pays des chotts. Mais Ahmet ne put rien apprendre, tandis qu’il rôdait aux approches de Gabès. Il s’avança même jusqu’en vue du bordj; il repassa par la maison du mercanti, lequel sut alors que la tentative avait réussi et que, libre enfin, Hadjar courait à travers les solitudes du désert.

D’ailleurs, le mercanti n’avait pas encore entendu dire que cette nouvelle de l’évasion eût été ébruitée, et, assurément, il devait être un des premiers à l’apprendre.

Cependant, les premières lueurs de l’aube ne tarderaient pas à éclaircir l’horizon à l’est du golfe. Ahmet ne voulut pas s’attarder plus longtemps. Il importait que la vieille femme eût quitté le marabout avant le jour, car elle était connue et, à défaut de son fils, elle aurait été de bonne prise.

Ahmet la rejoignit donc lorsque l’obscurité était profonde encore et, guidée par lui, elle reprit le chemin des dunes.

Le lendemain, un des canots du croiseur se rendit au port pour effectuer le transport du prisonnier à bord.

Lorsque le gardien eut ouvert la porte de la cellule occupée par Hadjar, il ne put que signaler la disparition du chef touareg. Dans quelles conditions l’évasion s’était-elle produite, cela ne fut que trop facile à constater, après une recherche à travers cet égout dont la grille était démontée. Hadjar avait-il donc tenté de s’échapper à la nage et, dans ce cas, n’était-il pas probable qu’il eût été entraîné au large par les courants du golfe?… Ou bien, une embarcation, amenée par des complices, l’avait-elle transporté sur quelque point du littoral?…

Cela ne put être établi.

C’est en vain, d’ailleurs, que des recherches furent faites aux environs de l’oasis. Aucune trace du fugitif ne put être relevée. Ni les plaines du Djerid, ni les eaux de la Petite-Syrte ne le rendirent vivant ou mort.

IV. LA MER SAHARIENNE.

Après avoir adressé ses sincères compliments à l’assistance qui avait répondu à son appel, après avoir remercié les officiers, les fonctionnaires français et tunisiens qui, avec les notables de Gabès, honoraient l’assemblée de leur présence, M. de Schaller parla comme il suit:

“Il faut en convenir, Messieurs, grâce aux progrès de la science, toute confusion entre l’histoire et la légende tend à devenir de plus en plus impossible. L’une finit par faire justice de l’autre. Celle-ci appartient aux poètes, celle-là appartient aux savants et chacun d’eux possède une clientèle spéciale. Tout en reconnaissant les mérites de la légende, aujourd’hui je suis obligé de la reléguer dans le domaine de l’imagination et d’en revenir aux réalités prouvées par les observations scientifiques.”

La nouvelle salle du Casino de Gabès eût difficilement réuni un public mieux disposé à suivre le conférencier dans ses démonstrations intéressantes. L’auditoire était acquis d’avance au projet dont il allait l’entretenir. Aussi ses paroles furent-elles, dès le début, accueillies par un murmure flatteur. Seuls quelques-uns des indigènes, mêlés à ce public, semblaient garder une réserve prudente. C’est que, en effet, le projet dont M. de Schaller se préparait à faire l’historique n’était point vu d’un bon œil depuis un demi-siècle par les tribus sédentaires ou nomades du Djerid.

“Nous le reconnaîtrons volontiers, reprit M. de Schaller, les anciens étaient gens d’imagination et les historiens ont habilement servi leurs goûts en faisant histoire ce qui n’était que traditions. Ils s’inspiraient dans ces récits d’un souffle purement mythologique.

“N’oubliez pas, Messieurs, ce que racontent Hérodote, Pomponius Mélas et Ptolémée. Le premier, dans son Histoire des Peuples, ne parle-t-il pas d’un pays qui s’étend jusqu’au fleuve Triton, lequel se jette dans la baie de ce nom?… Ne raconte-t-il pas, comme un épisode du voyage des Argonautes, que le navire de Jason, poussé par la tempête sur les côtes lybiennes, fut rejeté à l’ouest jusqu’à cette baie du Triton, dont on n’apercevait pas la limite occidentale?… Il faudrait donc conclure de ce récit que ladite baie communiquait alors avec la mer. C’est, d’ailleurs, ce que rapporte Scylax dans son Périple de la Méditerranée, relativement à ce lac considérable dont les côtes étaient habitées par différents peuples de la Lybie et qui devait occuper l’emplacement actuel des sebkha et des chotts, mais ne se raccordait plus avec la Petite-Syrte que par un étroit canal.

“Après Hérodote, c’est Pomponius Mélas, qui, presque au début de l’ère chrétienne, note encore l’existence de ce grand lac Triton, nommé aussi lac Pallas, dont la communication avec la Petite-Syrte, qui est le golfe de Gabès moderne, a disparu par suite de l’abaissement des eaux dû à leur évaporation.

“Enfin, d’après Ptolémée, le niveau continuant à se déprimer, les eaux se seraient définitivement fixées dans quatre dépressions, lacs Triton et Pallas, lacs de Lybie et des Tortues, qui sont les chotts algériens Melrir et Rharsa, les chotts tunisiens Djerid et Fedjedj, ces derniers souvent réunis sous le nom de sebkha Faraoun.

“Messieurs, il y a à prendre et à laisser, surtout à laisser, dans ces légendes de l’antiquité qui n’ont rien à voir avec la précision et la science contemporaines. Non, le vaisseau de Jason n’a pas été rejeté à travers cette mer intérieure qui n’a jamais communiqué avec la Petite-Syrte, et il n’aurait pu franchir le seuil du littoral qu’à la condition d’être muni des puissantes ailes d’Icare, l’aventureux fils de Dédale! Les observations faites dès la fin du XIXe siècle démontrent péremptoirement qu’une mer saharienne couvrant toute la région des sebkha et des chotts n’a jamais pu exister, puisque sur certains points l’altitude d’une partie de ces dépressions dépasse parfois de quinze à vingt mètres le niveau du golfe de Gabès, principalement pour celles qui sont le plus rapprochées de la côte, et jamais cette mer, au moins pendant les temps historiques, n’aurait eu l’étendue de cent lieues que lui attribuaient des esprits par trop imaginatifs.

“Toutefois, Messieurs, en la réduisant aux dimensions que permet la nature de ces terrains des chotts et des sebkha, il n’était pas impossible de réaliser ce projet d’une mer saharienne qui serait alimentée par les eaux du golfe de Gabès.

“Aussi, tel est le projet que formèrent quelques savants audacieux mais pratiques, dont, après maintes péripéties, l’exécution n’a pu être menée à bonne fin, et c’est son historique que je désire rappeler à vos souvenirs, ainsi que les tentatives vaines et les cruels déboires qui ont duré tant d’années.”

Un mouvement approbatif se fit entendre dans l’auditoire, et, comme le conférencier indiquait de la main une carte à grands points suspendue au mur au-dessus de l’estrade, tous les regards se portèrent de ce côté.

Cette carte comprenait la partie de la Tunisie et de l’Algérie méridionale, traversée par le trente-quatrième parallèle, et qui s’étend depuis le troisième degré de longitude est jusqu’au huitième. Là se dessinaient les grandes dépressions au sud-est de Biskra. C’était d’abord l’ensemble des chotts algériens, d’un niveau inférieur à celui des eaux méditerranéennes, compris sous les dénominations de Melrir, de Grand chott, de chott Asloudje et autres jusqu’à la frontière de la Tunisie. Depuis l’extrémité du chott Melrir, était indiqué le canal qui les raccordait avec la Petite-Syrte.

Au nord, se développaient les plaines parcourues par différentes tribus; au sud, l’immense région des dunes. À leur position exacte figuraient les principales villes et bourgades de la contrée: Gabès, sur le bord de son golfe, La Hammâ, au sud, Limagnes, Softim, Bou-Abdallah et Bechia, sur cette langue de terre qui se prolonge entre le Fedjedj et le Djerid; Seddada, Kri, Tozeur, Nefta, dans l’entre-deux du Djerid et du Rharsa; Chebika au nord et Bir Klebia à l’ouest de ce dernier; enfin Zeribet-Aïn Naga, Tahir Rassou, Mraïer, Fagoussa, voisines du chemin de fer transsaharien projeté à l’ouest des chotts algériens.

L’auditoire pouvait donc embrasser sur la carte l’ensemble de ces dépressions, parmi lesquelles le Rharsa et le Melrir, presque entièrement inondables, devaient former la nouvelle mer africaine.

“Mais, reprit M. de Schaller, que la nature eût heureusement disposé les dépressions pour recevoir les eaux de la Petite-Syrte, cela ne pouvait être établi qu’après un travail sérieux de nivellement. Or, dès 1872, pendant une expédition à travers le désert saharien, M. le sénateur d’Oran, Pomel, et l’ingénieur des mines Rocard prétendirent que ce travail ne pourrait être exécuté, étant donnée la constitution des chotts. L’étude fut alors reprise dans des conditions plus sûres, en 1874, par le capitaine d’état-major Roudaire, auquel revient la première idée de cette extraordinaire création.”

Les applaudissements éclatèrent de toutes parts au nom de l’officier français, qui fut acclamé comme il l’avait été maintes fois déjà et comme il devra toujours l’être. À ce nom, d’ailleurs, il convenait d’associer les noms de M. de Freycinet, Président du Conseil des ministres à cette époque, et de M. Ferdinand de Lesseps, qui, plus tard, avaient préconisé cette gigantesque entreprise.

“Messieurs, reprit le conférencier, c’est à cette date éloignée qu’il faut porter la première reconnaissance scientifique de cette région, que bornent au nord les montagnes d’Aurès, à trente kilomètres dans le sud de Biskra. Ce fut, en effet, en 1874 que l’audacieux officier étudia ce projet de mer intérieure, auquel il devait consacrer tant d’efforts. Mais pouvait-il prévoir que nombre d’obstacles surgiraient, dont son énergie ne parviendrait peut-être pas à triompher? Quoi qu’il en soit, notre devoir est de rendre à cet homme de courage et de science l’hommage qui lui est dû.”

Après les premières études faites par le promoteur de cette entreprise, le ministre de l’Instruction publique chargea officiellement le capitaine Roudaire de diverses missions scientifiques qui se rapportaient à la reconnaissance de la région. De très exactes observations géodésiques furent effectuées, qui eurent pour résultat de fixer le relief de cette partie du Djerid.

C’est alors que la légende dut s’effacer devant la réalité: cette région, que l’on disait avoir été une mer autrefois en communication avec la Petite-Syrte, ne s’était jamais trouvée dans ces conditions. En outre, cette dépression du sol, que l’on disait entièrement inondable depuis le seuil de Gabès jusqu’aux extrêmes chotts algériens, ne l’était que dans une portion relativement restreinte. Mais, de ce que la mer Saharienne n’aurait pas les dimensions que la croyance populaire lui avait attribuées tout d’abord, il ne ressortait pas que le projet dût être abandonné.

“Dans le principe, Messieurs, dit M. de Schaller, on avait paru croire que cette mer nouvelle pourrait s’étendre sur quinze mille kilomètres carrés. Or, de ce chiffre il a fallu en retrancher cinq mille pour les sebkha tunisiennes, dont le niveau est supérieur à celui de la Méditerranée. En réalité, d’après les évaluations du capitaine Roudaire, c’est à huit mille kilomètres carrés que doit être réduite cette superficie inondable des chotts Rharsa et Melrir, dont l’altitude négative sera à vingt-sept mètres plus bas que la surface du golfe de Gabès.”

Et alors, en promenant sur la carte une baguette qu’il tenait à la main, en détaillant la vue panoramique qui l’accompagnait, M. de Schaller put entraîner son auditoire à travers cette portion de l’ancienne Lybie.

Tout d’abord, dans la région des sebkha, à partir du littoral, les cotes supérieures au niveau de la mer, la plus basse étant de 15,52 m, la plus haute de 31,45 m, l’altitude maximum se trouve près du seuil de Gabès. En se dirigeant vers l’ouest, on ne rencontre les premières grandes dépressions que dans la cuvette du chott Rharsa, à deux cent vingt-sept kilomètres de la mer, et sur une longueur de quarante kilomètres. Puis, le sol se relève pendant trente kilomètres, jusqu’au seuil d’Asloudje, pour redescendre ensuite pendant cinquante kilomètres jusqu’au chott Melrir, en grande partie inondable sur une étendue de cinquante-cinq kilomètres. À ce point se croise le degré de longitude 3,40 avec le parallèle, et c’est par quatre cent deux kilomètres qu’il faut chiffrer la distance entre ce point et le golfe de Gabès.

“Tel fut, Messieurs, reprit M. de Schaller, le travail géodésique accompli dans ces régions. Mais si huit mille kilomètres carrés, par suite de leur cote négative, étaient assurément dans les conditions pour recevoir les eaux du golfe, le percement d’un canal de deux cent vingt-sept kilomètres, étant donnée la nature du sol, ne dépasserait-il pas les forces humaines?…” Après nombre de sondages, le capitaine Roudaire ne le pensa pas. Il ne s’agissait pas, ainsi qu’il a été dit à cette époque dans un remarquable article de M. Maxime Hélène, de creuser un canal à travers un désert sableux comme à Suez, ou dans des montagnes calcaires comme à Panama et à Corinthe. Ici le terrain est loin d’avoir cette solidité. Ce serait dans une croûte salifère que s’effectuerait le déblaiement, et, grâce à un drainage, le sol serait suffisamment asséché pour les besoins de ce travail. Et, même sur le seuil qui sépare Gabès de la première sebkha, soit une étendue de vingt kilomètres, le pic ne devait rencontrer qu’un banc calcaire profond de trente mètres. Tout le reste du percement se ferait en terrain tendre.

Le conférencier résuma et rappela alors avec une grande précision les avantages qui, d’après Roudaire et ses continuateurs, devaient résulter de cette œuvre gigantesque. En premier lieu, le climat de l’Algérie et de la Tunisie serait amélioré d’une façon notable. Sous l’action des vents du sud, les nuages formés par les vapeurs de la nouvelle mer se résoudraient en pluies bienfaisantes sur toute la région au profit de son rendement agricole. De plus, ces dépressions des sebkha tunisiennes de Djerid et de Fedjedj, des chotts algériens de Rharsa et de Melrir, actuellement marécageuses, s’assainiraient sous la profonde couche des eaux permanentes. Après ces améliorations physiques, quels gains commerciaux ne recueillerait pas cette région transformée par la main de l’homme?… Enfin M. Roudaire faisait à bon droit valoir ces dernières raisons: c’est que la région au sud de l’Aurès et de l’Atlas serait pourvue de voies nouvelles, où la sécurité des caravanes trouverait des conditions plus sérieuses, c’est que le commerce, grâce à une flottille marchande, se développerait dans toute cette contrée dont les dépressions interdisaient jusqu’ici l’accès, c’est que les troupes, mises à même de débarquer au sud de Biskra, assureraient la tranquillité en accroissant l’influence française en cette partie de l’Afrique.

“Et pourtant, reprit le conférencier, bien que ce projet d’une mer intérieure ait été étudié avec un soin scrupuleux, bien que la plus rigoureuse attention eût présidé aux opérations géodésiques, de nombreux contradicteurs voulurent nier les avantages que la région tirerait de ce grand travail.”

Et M. de Schaller reprit un à un les arguments reproduits dans les articles de différents journaux à l’époque où avait commencé une guerre sans merci à l’œuvre du capitaine Roudaire.

Et d’abord, disait-on, telle était la longueur, du canal qui conduisait les eaux du golfe de Gabès au chott Rharsa, puis au chott Melrir, telle serait la contenance de la nouvelle mer, soit vingt-huit milliards de mètres cubes, que les dépressions ne pourraient être jamais remplies.

Puis, on a prétendu que, peu à peu, l’eau salée de la mer Saharienne s’infiltrerait à travers le sol des oasis voisines, et, remontant à la surface par un effet naturel de capillarité, détruirait les vastes plantations de dattiers qui sont la richesse du pays.

Puis, des critiques, sérieux cependant, ont assuré que les eaux de la mer n’arriveraient jamais aux dépressions, et qu’elles s’évaporeraient quotidiennement à travers le canal. Or, en Égypte, sous les rayons ardents d’un soleil qui vaut bien celui du Sahara, le lac Menzaleth, que l’on disait devoir être irremplissable, s’est pourtant rempli, bien que la section du canal ne fût alors que de cent mètres.

Puis, l’on a argué de l’impossibilité, ou tout au moins des difficultés coûteuses qu’éprouverait le percement du canal. Mais, vérification faite, il s’est trouvé que le sol, depuis le seuil de Gabès jusqu’aux premières dépressions, était de nature si tendre que la sonde parfois s’y enfonçait toute seule par son propre poids.

Puis, les pronostics les plus fâcheux d’être mis en avant par les détracteurs de l’œuvre:

Les bords des chotts étant très plats, ils ne tarderaient pas à se transformer en marécages, autant de foyers pestilentiels, qui infecteraient encore la région. Les vents dominants, au lieu de souffler du sud ainsi que le prétendaient les auteurs du projet, souffleraient plutôt du nord. Les pluies fournies, par l’évaporation de la nouvelle mer, au lieu de retomber sur les campagnes de l’Algérie et de la Tunisie, iraient inutilement se perdre sur les immenses plaines sablonneuses du grand désert.

Ces critiques furent comme le point de départ d’une période néfaste, où se produisirent des événements bien faits pour évoquer l’idée de fatalité, dans ces contrées où le fatalisme règne en maître – événements qui sont restés gravés dans la mémoire de tous ceux qui ont alors vécu en Tunisie.

Les projets du commandant Roudaire avaient séduit l’imagination des uns et sollicité la passion spéculatrice des autres. M. de Lesseps, un des premiers, avait pris l’affaire à cœur jusqu’au moment où il en fut détourné par le percement de l’isthme de Panama.

Tout cela, si peu que ce fût relativement, ne s’était pas passé sans agir sur les imaginations des indigènes de ces contrées, nomades ou sédentaires, qui voyaient tout le Sud-Algérien au pouvoir des Roumis, et la fin de leur sécurité, de leur fortune hasardeuse et de leur indépendance. L’invasion de la mer dans leurs solitudes, c’en était fait d’une domination archi-séculaire. Aussi une agitation sourde se manifestait-elle, parmi les tribus, sous l’empire de l’appréhension d’une atteinte à leurs privilèges, du moins à ceux qu’elles s’octroyaient.

Sur ces entrefaites, le capitaine Roudaire, affaibli, succombait à la déception plutôt qu’à la maladie. Et l’œuvre rêvée par lui dormit longtemps, lorsque, quelques années après le rachat de Panama par les Américains, en 1904, des ingénieurs et des capitalistes étrangers reprirent ses projets et fondèrent une société qui, sous le nom de Compagnie Franco-étrangère, s’organisa pour commencer les travaux et les mener rapidement à bonne fin, pour le bien de la Tunisie et, par contrecoup, de la prospérité algérienne.

D’autant plus que l’idée de pénétration vers le Sahara s’étant imposée à nombre d’esprits, le mouvement dans ce sens, qui se produisait à l’Ouest Algérien, dans l’Oranie, s’était accentué au fur et à mesure de l’oubli où tombait le projet délaissé de Roudaire. Déjà, le chemin de fer de l’État dépassait Beni-Ounif, dans l’oasis de Figuig, et se transformait en tête du Transsaharien.

“Je n’ai pas à entrer, ici, continua M. de Schaller, dans des considérations rétrospectives sur les opérations de cette Compagnie, sur l’énergie qu’elle déploya, et sur les travaux considérables qu’elle entreprit, avec plus de hardiesse que de réflexion. Elle opérait, comme vous le savez, sur un territoire très vaste et le succès ne faisant pas, pour elle, l’ombre d’un doute, la Compagnie se préoccupa de tout, entre autres choses du service forestier auquel elle avait donné pour mission de fixer les dunes, au nord des chotts, en exécutant par des moyens identiques à ceux qui, en France, dans les Landes, avaient été employés pour protéger les côtes, contre le double envahissement de la mer et des sables. C’est-à-dire qu’avant la réalisation de ses projets il lui semblait nécessaire, indispensable même, de mettre les villes existantes ou à fonder, ainsi que les oasis, à l’abri des surprises d’une mer future qui ne serait certainement pas un lac tranquille, et dont il était prudent de se défier d’avance.

“En même temps, tout un système de travaux hydrauliques s’imposait pour l’aménagement des eaux potables des oued et des rhiss. Ne fallait-il pas éviter de blesser les indigènes et dans leurs habitudes et dans leurs intérêts? Le succès était à ce prix. Ne fallait-il pas aussi, non pas creuser, mais installer des ports dont le cabotage, vite organisé, tirerait immédiatement profit?

“Pour ces opérations entamées de tous côtés à la fois, des agglomérations de travailleurs, des villes provisoires s’étaient subitement élevées là où régnait, la veille pour ainsi dire, la solitude à peu près complète. Les nomades, quoique révoltés moralement, étaient contenus par le nombre même des ouvriers. Les ingénieurs se prodiguaient sans réserve et leur science infatigable imposait à cette masse d’hommes qui étaient sous leurs ordres, et qui avaient en eux une confiance illimitée. À ce moment-là le Sud-Tunisien commençait à devenir une véritable ruche humaine, insouciante de l’avenir, et où les spéculateurs de toutes sortes, mercantis, trafiquants, etc. se mettaient en peine d’exploiter les premiers pionniers qui, ne pouvant vivre du pays, étaient obligés de s’en remettre, du soin de leur subsistance, à des fournisseurs venus on ne sait d’où, mais qui se rencontrent toujours partout où se produit cette affluence.

“Et, planant au-dessus de tout cela, de ces nécessités matérielles – irréfragables, l’idée d’un danger ambiant, mais invisible; le sentiment d’une menace indéfinie, quelque chose de comparable à la vague angoisse qui précède tous les cataclysmes atmosphériques, et qui troublait une grande foule, entourée en somme par la vaste solitude; une solitude où se devinait quelque chose, on ne savait pas quoi, mais, à coup sûr, quelque chose de mystérieux, dans ces alentours pour ainsi dire sans limites, où ne se voyait pas un être vivant, homme ou bête, et où tout semblait se dérober aux regards, aussi bien qu'à l'ouïe des travailleurs.

Messieurs, l'échec arriva, par suite d'imprévoyance et de faux calculs, et la Compagnie Franco-étrangère fut obligée de déposer son bilan. Depuis lors, les choses sont restées en l'état, et c'est de la reprise de cette œuvre interrompue que je me suis proposé de vous entretenir. La Compagnie avait voulu tout mener de front, travaux d'ordres les plus divers, spéculations de tous genres, et beaucoup d'entre vous se souviennent encore du triste jour où elle fut obligée de suspendre ses payements sans avoir pu achever son trop vaste programme. Les cartes que je vous indiquais tout à l'heure vous montrent les travaux amorcés par la Compagnie Franco-étrangère.

“Mais ces travaux inachevés existent; le climat africain, essentiellement conservateur, ne les a certainement pas entamés, ou plutôt gravement avariés, et rien de plus légitime, pour une société nouvelle, notre Société de la mer Saharienne, que de les utiliser pour le bien et le succès de notre entreprise, suivant une indemnité à débattre, d'après l'état dans lequel nous les aurons trouvés. Seulement il est indispensable de les connaître *de visu*, de savoir le parti qu'on en pourra tirer. Aussi, c'est pour cela que je me propose de les inspecter sérieusement, d'abord seul, puis, plus tard, en compagnie de savants ingénieurs, et toujours sous la protection d'une escorte suffisante pour assurer la sécurité des postes et chantiers établis récemment ou à établir, comme la nôtre pendant la durée d'un trajet que, soyez-en sûrs, nous abrégerons autant que possible.

“Ce n'est pas que mes appréhensions soient graves, du côté des indigènes, malgré la complication due au cantonnement de quelques partis de Touareg sur les territoires du sud, événement qui aura peut-être son bon côté. – Les

Bédouins du désert n’ont-ils pas été de bons collaborateurs lors du percement de l’isthme de Suez? – Pour le moment ils semblent donc tranquilles, mais gardent l’œil ouvert, et il ne faudrait pas trop se fier à leur apparente inertie. Avec un soldat brave et expérimenté comme le capitaine Hardigan, sûr des hommes qu’il commande, et très au courant des mœurs et coutumes des bizarres habitants de ces contrées, croyez-moi, nous n’aurons rien à craindre. Au retour nous vous communiquerons des observations absolument précises, et nous établirons, avec une stricte exactitude, le devis de l’achèvement de l’entreprise. De la sorte vous pourrez vous associer à la gloire et, j’ose le dire, au bénéfice d’une entreprise grandiose, aussi heureuse que patriotique, condamnée dans ses débuts, mais que, grâce à vous, nous réaliserons, pour l’honneur et la prospérité de la patrie qui nous aidera et qui, comme déjà dans le Sud-Oranais, saura faire, des tribus encore hostiles, les gardiens les plus fidèles et les plus sûrs de notre incomparable conquête sur la nature.

“Messieurs, vous savez qui je suis, et vous savez aussi quelles forces j’apporte à cette grande œuvre, forces financières et forces intellectuelles dont l’union étroite a raison de tous les obstacles. Nous réussirons, groupés autour de la Société nouvelle, je vous le garantis, là où ont échoué nos devanciers, moins bien armés que nous, et c’est ce que j’ai tenu à vous dire avant mon départ pour le sud. Avec une entière confiance dans le succès et une constante énergie, dont vous ne doutez pas, le reste ira de soi et c’est ainsi que, cent ans après que le drapeau français fut planté sur la kasbah d’Alger, nous verrons notre flottille française évoluer sur la mer Saharienne et ravitailler nos postes du désert.”

V. LA CARAVANE.

Après le retour de l’expédition projetée, ainsi que l’avait annoncé M. de Schaller à la réunion du casino, les travaux seraient repris avec ordre et énergie et les eaux du golfe seraient enfin introduites à travers le nouveau canal par le percement du seuil de Gabès. Mais, auparavant, il était indispensable de vérifier sur place tout ce qui restait des anciens travaux et, pour cela, il avait paru bon de parcourir toute cette partie du Djerid, de suivre le tracé du premier canal jusqu’à son débouché dans le chott Rharsa, le tracé du second jusqu’à son débouché du chott Rharsa dans le chott Melrir à travers les chotts de moindre importance qui les séparent, puis de faire le tour de ce dernier après jonction avec une colonne de travailleurs embauchés à Biskra, et de fixer l’emplacement des divers ports de la mer Saharienne.

Pour la mise en valeur des deux millions cinq cent mille hectares de terres concédés par l’État à la Compagnie Franco-étrangère et pour le rachat éventuel des travaux effectués par cette Compagnie, ainsi que de ce qui restait à pied d’œuvre du matériel important, une puissante société s’était créée sous la direction d’un Conseil d’administration dont le siège était à Paris. Le public semblait faire bon accueil aux actions et obligations émises par la nouvelle société. La Bourse les tenait à un cours élevé que justifiaient les succès financiers obtenus dans de grandes affaires et dans des travaux publics des plus utiles par ceux qui étaient à sa tête.

L’avenir de cette œuvre, l’une des plus considérables du milieu du vingtième siècle, paraissait donc être assuré sous tous les rapports.

L’ingénieur en chef de la nouvelle société était précisément ce conférencier qui venait de faire l’historique des premiers travaux exécutés avant lui. L’expédition, projetée pour une reconnaissance de l’état actuel de ces travaux, devait être conduite par lui.

M. de Schaller, âgé de quarante ans, était un homme de moyenne taille, tête forte ou plutôt tête carrée pour employer l’expression vulgaire, les cheveux coupés en brosse, les moustaches jaune roux, la bouche pincée à lèvres minces, les yeux vifs, le regard d’une extrême fixité. Ses épaules larges, ses membres robustes, sa poitrine arrondie où les poumons fonctionnaient à l’aise comme une machine à haute pression dans une vaste salle bien aérée, indiquaient une constitution des plus solides. Au moral, cet ingénieur n’était pas moins bien “établi” qu’au physique. Sorti en bon rang de Centrale, ses premiers travaux avaient appelé l’attention sur lui, et ce fut d’un pas rapide qu’il suivit le chemin de la fortune. Jamais, d’ailleurs, mentalité ne fut plus positive que la sienne. Esprit réfléchi, méthodique, mathématique, si l’on veut bien admettre cette épithète, il ne se laissait prendre à aucune illusion; bonnes chances et mauvaises chances d’une situation ou d’une affaire, il calculait tout avec une précision “poussée jusqu’à la dixième décimale”, disait-on de lui. Il chiffrait tout, il enfermait tout dans des équations, et si jamais le sens imaginatif fut refusé à un être humain; c’est bien à l’homme-chiffre, à l’homme-algèbre qui était chargé de mener à bon terme les si importants travaux de la mer Saharienne.

Au surplus, du moment que M. de Schaller, après avoir froidement et minutieusement étudié le projet du capitaine Roudaire, l’avait déclaré, exécutable, c’est qu’il l’était, et il n’était pas douteux que, sous sa direction, il n’y aurait aucun mécompte soit dans sa partie matérielle, soit dans sa partie financière. “Puisque Schaller en est, répétaient volontiers ceux qui connaissaient l’ingénieur, l’affaire ne peut qu’être bonne!” et tout permettait d’assurer qu’ils ne se trompaient pas.

M. de Schaller avait voulu suivre le périmètre de la future mer, constater que rien n’arrêterait le passage des eaux à travers le premier canal jusqu’au Rharsa, et le second jusqu’au Melrir, vérifier l’état des berges et des rivages qui contiendraient cette masse liquide de vingt-huit milliards de tonnes.

Comme le cadre de ses futurs collaborateurs devait comprendre aussi bien des éléments provenant de l’ancienne Compagnie que des ingénieurs ou entrepreneurs nouveaux dont plusieurs et des plus importants ne pouvaient se trouver dès cette époque à Gabès, l’ingénieur en chef, pour éviter tout conflit ultérieur d’attributions, avait pris le parti de n’emmener avec lui aucun membre du personnel encore incomplet de la Société.

Mais un domestique, un valet de chambre, ou plutôt un “brosseur”, car il eût justifié cette qualification, s’il n’avait été civil, ou mieux encore celle d’”ordonnance”, l’accompagnait. Ponctuel, méthodique, pour ainsi dire “militarisé”, quoiqu’il n’eût jamais servi, M. François était bien l’homme qui convenait à son maître. Doué d’une bonne santé, il supportait sans se plaindre les plus grandes fatigues et elles ne lui avaient pas été épargnées depuis dix ans qu’il servait l’ingénieur. Il parlait peu, mais, s’il économisait les paroles, c’était au profit des pensées. Un homme réfléchi s’il en fut et que M. de Schaller estimait, comme un parfait instrument de précision. Il était sobre, il était discret, il était propre, il n’aurait pas laissé passer vingt-quatre heures sans s’être rasé, ne portant ni favoris, ni moustaches, et jamais, même dans les circonstances les plus difficiles, il n’avait négligé cette opération quotidienne.

Il va de soi que l’expédition, organisée par l’ingénieur en chef de la Société française de la mer Saharienne, ne s’accomplirait pas sans que des précautions eussent été prises. À s'aventurer seuls, son domestique et lui, à travers le Djerid, M. de Schaller eût montré une réelle imprudence. On le sait, les communications n'étaient plus très sûres, même pour les caravanes, dans cette contrée que parcouraient incessamment les nomades, et cela malgré les anciens établissements de la Compagnie mal ou point gardés, en somme très disséminés, et les quelques postes de sûreté qui avaient été établis autrefois ayant été retirés depuis de longues années. Comment eût-on oublié les agressions de Hadjar et de sa bande, et, précisément, ce redoutable chef, après avoir été capturé et incarcéré, venait de s'enfuir avant que la juste condamnation qui l'attendait en eût débarrassé le pays. Qu'il voulût reprendre le cours de ses brigandages, cela n'était que trop à prévoir.

D'ailleurs, les circonstances devaient le favoriser actuellement. Il s'en fallait de beaucoup que les Arabes du sud de l'Algérie et de la Tunisie et encore plus les sédentaires ou les nomades du Djerid eussent accepté sans protestation la mise à exécution du projet du capitaine Roudaire. Elle entraînait l'anéantissement de plusieurs oasis du Rharsa et du Melrir. Que les propriétaires eussent été indemnisés, soit, mais, en somme, d'une manière peu avantageuse à leur gré. Assurément, certains intérêts avaient été lésés, et ces propriétaires ressentaient une haine profonde à la pensée que leurs fertiles touals allaient bientôt disparaître sous les eaux venues de la Petite-Syrte. Et, maintenant, parmi les peuplades que ce nouvel état de choses devait gêner dans leurs habitudes, il fallait compter de plus les Touareg toujours disposés à reprendre leur vie d'aventures, de détrousseurs de caravanes; que deviendraient-ils, lorsque les routes manqueraient entre les sebkha et les chotts, alors que le commerce ne s'effectuerait plus par ces kafila qui depuis un temps immémorial parcouraient le désert vers Biskra, Touggourt ou Gabès? Ce serait une flottille de goélettes, de chébels, de tartanes, de bricks et de trois-mâts, voiliers et vapeurs et aussi toute une baharia ou marine indigène, qui transporterait les marchandises dans le sud des montagnes de l’Aurès. Et comment les Touareg songeraient-ils à les attaquer? Ce serait la ruine à bref délai des tribus vivant de pirateries et de pillages.

On comprendra donc qu’une sourde fermentation régnât parmi cette population spéciale… Ses imans l’excitaient à la révolte. Plusieurs fois, les ouvriers arabes employés au percement du canal furent assaillis par des bandes surexcitées, et il fallut les protéger en appelant les troupes algériennes.

“De quel droit, prêchaient les marabouts, ces étrangers veulent-ils changer en mer nos oasis et nos plaines?… Ce que la nature a fait, pourquoi prétendent-ils le défaire?… La Méditerranée n’est-elle pas assez vaste, pour qu’ils tentent d’y ajouter l’étendue de nos chotts!… Que les Roumis y naviguent tant qu’ils voudront, si tel est leur bon plaisir, nous, nous sommes des gens de terre et le Djerid est destiné au parcours des kafila et non des navires!… Il faut avoir anéanti ces étrangers avant qu’ils aient noyé le pays qui nous appartient, le pays de nos ancêtres, par l’invasion de la mer!…”

Cette agitation toujours croissante avait eu sa part dans la ruine de la Compagnie Franco-étrangère; puis, avec le temps, elle avait semblé s’apaiser à la suite de l’abandon des travaux; mais l’invasion du désert par la mer était restée comme une hantise dans l’esprit des populations du Djerid. Soigneusement entretenue par les Touareg depuis leur cantonnement au sud de l’Arad, comme par les Hadjis ou pèlerins revenus de La Mecque et qui attribuaient volontiers au percement du canal de Suez la perte de l’indépendance de leurs coreligionnaires d’Égypte, elle continuait à être pour tous une préoccupation qui ne s’accordait guère avec le fatalisme musulman. Ces installations abandonnées avec leur matériel fantastique d’énormes dragues aux leviers extraordinaires ayant l’apparence de bras monstrueux, d’excavateurs que l’on a, à juste raison, comparés à de gigantesques pieuvres terrestres, jouaient un rôle fabuleux dans les récits des improvisateurs du pays, dont la race a toujours été si friande depuis les contes des *Mille et Une Nuits*, et les autres productions des innombrables conteurs arabes, persans ou turcs.

Ces récits maintenaient dans l’esprit des indigènes l’obsession de l’invasion de la mer en ravivant les souvenirs des anciens.

Or, on ne s’étonnera pas que plus d’une fois, avant son arrestation, Hadjar se fût mêlé avec ses partisans à diverses agressions à l’époque où nous sommes parvenus.

Cette expédition de l’ingénieur allait donc s’effectuer sous la protection d’une escorte de spahis. Elle serait sous les ordres du capitaine Hardigan et du lieutenant Villette, et il eût été difficile de faire un meilleur choix que celui de ces deux officiers, qui, connaissant le Sud et ayant mené à bonne fin la dure campagne contre Hadjar et sa bande, devaient étudier les mesures de sécurité à prendre pour l’avenir.

Le capitaine Hardigan était dans toute la force de l’âge – trente-deux ans à peine, – intelligent, audacieux, mais d’une audace qui n’excluait point la prudence, très accoutumé aux rigueurs de ce climat africain, et d’une endurance dont il avait donné d’incontestables preuves pendant ses diverses campagnes. C’était l’officier dans la plus complète acception du terme, militaire d’âme, ne voyant d’autre métier en ce monde que celui de soldat. D’ailleurs, célibataire, et même sans proches parents, il n’avait que son régiment pour famille, ses camarades pour frères. On faisait plus que l’estimer au régiment, on l’aimait, et quant à ses hommes, autant par affection que par reconnaissance, ils se fussent dévoués pour lui jusqu’au sacrifice. Il pouvait tout attendre d’eux, car il pouvait tout leur demander.

En ce qui concerne le lieutenant Villette, il suffira de dire que, brave comme son capitaine, énergique et résolu comme lui, et comme lui infatigable et excellent cavalier, il avait déjà fait ses preuves en de précédentes expéditions. C'était un officier très sûr, appartenant à une riche famille d'industriels, et devant qui s'ouvrait un bel avenir. Sorti de l'École de Saumur dans les premiers, il ne tarderait pas à obtenir le grade supérieur.

Le lieutenant Villette devait même être rappelé en France, quand cette expédition à travers le Djerid fut décidée. Lorsqu'il apprit qu'elle se ferait sous les ordres de Hardigan, il vint trouver cet officier, et lui dit:

"Mon capitaine, cela m'irait joliment d'être des vôtres…

— Et cela m'irait joliment que vous en fussiez, lui répondit le capitaine sur le même ton, celui de la bonne et franche camaraderie.

— Mon retour en France pourra tout aussi bien s'effectuer dans deux mois…

— Tout aussi bien, mon cher Villette, et même mieux, puisque vous rapporterez là-bas les plus frais renseignements sur la mer Saharienne!

— En effet, mon capitaine, et nous aurons vu pour la dernière fois ces chotts algériens avant qu'ils ne disparaissent sous les eaux…

— Disparition qui, vraisemblablement, durera autant que durera la vieille Afrique, répondit Hardigan, c'est-à-dire autant que notre monde sublunaire.

— Il y a lieu de le croire, mon capitaine! Eh bien, c'est convenu… et j'aurai le plaisir de faire avec vous cette petite campagne… une simple promenade, sans doute…

— Une simple promenade, comme vous dites, mon cher Villette, surtout depuis que nous avons pu débarrasser le pays de cet enragé Hadjar…

— C’est une capture qui vous a fait honneur, mon capitaine.

— Et à vous également, Villette!”

Il va de soi que les propos entre le capitaine Hardigan et le lieutenant Villette s’étaient échangés avant que le chef touareg fût parvenu à s’échapper du bordj de Gabès. Mais, depuis sa fuite, il y aurait lieu de craindre de nouvelles agressions, et, même, rien ne lui serait plus facile que de provoquer un soulèvement de celles de ces tribus dont cette mer intérieure devait modifier les conditions d’existence.

L’expédition aurait donc à surveiller son cheminement à travers le Djerid, et le capitaine Hardigan y donnerait tous ses soins.

Que le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol ne dût pas faire partie de l’escorte, c’est ce qui eût paru surprenant. Où allait le capitaine Hardigan, allait de toute nécessité le marchef. Il avait été de l’affaire qui avait amené la capture de Hadjar, il serait de l’expédition qui mettrait peut-être encore son capitaine aux prises avec les bandes touareg.

Le sous-officier, à l’âge de trente-cinq ans, avait déjà fait plusieurs congés, et toujours au même régiment de spahis. Les doubles galons de maréchal des logis-chef avaient contenté son ambition. Il ne prétendait rien au-delà que de vivre de sa retraite bien gagnée par de bons services, mais le plus tard possible: soldat d’une extraordinaire endurance, débrouillard s’il en fut, Nicol ne connaissait que la discipline. C’était pour lui la grande loi de l’existence, et il eût voulu qu’elle s’appliquât au civil comme au militaire. Toutefois, s’il admettait que l’homme fût uniquement créé pour servir sous les drapeaux, il lui semblait aussi qu’il aurait été incomplet, s’il n’eût trouvé son complément naturel dans le cheval.

Il avait coutume de dire:

“Va-d’l’avant et moi, nous ne faisons qu’un… Je suis sa tête et il est mes jambes… et, vous l’avouerez, des jambes de cheval, c’est autrement taillé pour la marche que des jambes d’homme!… Et, encore, si nous en avions quatre, mais nous n’en avons que deux, alors qu’il nous en faudrait une demi-douzaine!…”

On le voit, le marchef en était à envier les myriapodes. Mais enfin, tels quels, son cheval et lui étaient bien faits l’un pour l’autre.

Nicol, avec une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, les épaules larges, la poitrine bien effacée, avait su rester maigre, et, plutôt que d’engraisser, eût consenti à tous les sacrifices. Il se fût considéré comme la plus malheureuse des créatures s’il eût prévu le plus léger symptôme d’embonpoint. D’ailleurs, à serrer la boucle de son flottard bleu et à forcer les boutons de son dolman dans les boutonnières, il saurait bien contenir tout envahissement d’obésité, s’il se produisait jamais dans une aussi sèche complexion. C’était un roux, ce Nicol, un roux ardent, les cheveux taillés en brosse, la barbiche drue, la moustache épaisse, les yeux gris roulant sans cesse sous leur orbite, le regard d’une étonnante portée, à distinguer comme l’hirondelle une mouche à cinquante pas, ce qui provoquait la profonde admiration du brigadier Pistache.

Un type gai, celui-là, toujours content et qui le serait à soixante ans comme il l’était à vingt-cinq, ne se plaignant jamais d’avoir faim, même quand l’ordinaire tardait de quelques heures, ni d’avoir soif, même quand les sources se faisaient rares à travers ces interminables plaines brûlées du soleil saharien.

C’était un de ces bons Méridionaux de la Provence, qui n’engendrait point la mélancolie, et pour lequel le marchef Nicol “avait un faible”. Aussi les voyait-on ensemble le plus souvent, et l’un emboîterait le pas à l’autre pendant tout le cours de l’expédition.

Quand il aura été dit que le détachement comprenait un certain nombre de spahis, que deux chariots traînés par des mules transportaient les objets de campements et les vivres de la petite troupe, on connaîtra l’escorte de l’ingénieur de Schaller.

Mais, s’il n’y a point à parler d’une façon particulière des chevaux que montaient les officiers et leurs hommes, il doit être fait mention spéciale de celui du marchef Nicol, et aussi du chien qui ne le quittait pas plus que son ombre.

Que le cheval ait reçu de son maître le nom significatif de Va-d’l’avant, cela s’explique de soi-même. Et, cette qualification, l’animal la justifiait, toujours sur le point de s’emballer, cherchant sans cesse à devancer les autres, et il fallait être aussi bon cavalier que Nicol pour le maintenir dans le rang. Du reste, on le sait, l’homme et la bête s’entendaient admirablement.

Mais s’il est admissible qu’un cheval s’appelle Va-d’l’avant, comment un chien a-t-il jamais pu s’appeler Coupe-à-cœur?… Est-ce que ce chien avait les talents d’un Munito ou autres célébrités de la race canine?… Est-ce qu’il paraissait dans les cirques forains?… Est-ce qu’il jouait aux cartes en public?…

Non, le compagnon de Nicol et de Va-d’l’avant ne possédait aucun de ces talents de société. Ce n’était qu’un brave et fidèle animal, qui faisait honneur au régiment, également aimé, choyé, caressé des chefs et des soldats. Mais son véritable maître c’était le marchef, comme son plus intime ami, c’était Va-d’l’avant.

Or, Nicol avait une extraordinaire passion pour le jeu de rams, c’était à vrai dire sa seule et unique passion, sa seule pendant les loisirs de garnison; il lui semblait difficile qu’il existât quelque chose de plus attrayant à l’usage des simples mortels; il y était d’ailleurs d’une belle force, et ses nombreuses victoires lui avaient valu le surnom de “Maréchal Rams”, surnom dont il était plutôt fier.

Eh bien, deux ans avant, Nicol avait fait un coup heureux entre tous, un coup de la dernière heure, dont il aimait à se souvenir. Attablé dans un café de Tunis, avec deux de ses camarades, devant le tapis sur lequel s’étalait le jeu de trente-deux cartes, après une assez longue séance, à la grande satisfaction de ses amis, sa chance et sa maestria habituelles avaient complètement tourné. Chacun des trois adversaires avait gagné trois parties, il était grand temps de rentrer au quartier, et une dernière partie devait décider de la victoire finale. Le maréchal Rams sentait qu’elle allait lui échapper: il était dans un jour de déveine. Chacun des joueurs n’avait plus qu’une carte en main: ses deux adversaires abattirent, l’un la dame de cœur, l’autre le roi de cœur, leur suprême espoir. Ils pouvaient supposer que l’as de cœur ou le dernier atout étaient demeurés parmi les onze cartes du talon.

“Coupe à cœur!” s’écria Nicol d’une voix retentissante, et en frappant la table d’un tel coup de poing que sa carte d’atout vola jusqu’au milieu de la salle.

Qui alla la ramasser délicatement, qui la rapporta entre ses dents, ce fut le chien, lequel, jusqu’à ce jour mémorable, s’était appelé Misto.

“Merci, merci, mon camarade, s’écria le marchef, aussi fier de sa double victoire que s’il avait enlevé deux drapeaux à l’ennemi. Coupe-à-cœur, entends-tu? J’ai coupé à cœur…”

Le chien laissa échapper un long aboiement de satisfaction.

“Oui… Coupe-à-cœur, répétait Nicol, et ce n’est plus Misto, que tu t’appelleras maintenant… ce sera Coupe-à-cœur!… Ça te va-t-il?…”

Sans doute ce nouveau nom lui allait, à ce digne animal, car, après force gambades, il sauta sur les genoux de son maître, qui faillit être renversé du coup.

Et Misto eut vite oublié son ancien nom pour ce nouveau nom de Coupe-à-cœur, si honorablement connu depuis lors au régiment.

On ne mettra pas en doute que ce projet d’une nouvelle expédition n’eût été accueilli avec une extrême satisfaction par le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol et par le brigadier Pistache. Mais, à les en croire, il ne causerait pas une joie moindre à Va-d’l’avant et à Coupe-à-cœur.

La veille du départ, le marchef, en présence du brigadier, eut, avec les deux inséparables, une conversation qui ne devait laisser aucune hésitation à cet égard.

“Eh bien, mon vieux Va-d’l’avant, dit Nicol en tapotant de la main le cou du cheval, nous allons donc nous remettre en campagne?…”

Il est probable que Va-d’l’avant comprit ce que lui disait son maître, car il poussa un joyeux hennissement.

À ce hennissement, Coupe-à-cœur répondit par une série de petits aboiements de plaisir auxquels il n’eût pas été permis de se méprendre!

“Oui, le bon chien, oui… tu en seras aussi! ajouta le marchef tandis que Coupe-à-cœur gambadait comme s’il eût voulu sauter sur le dos de Va-d’l’avant. Et, de fait, cela lui arrivait bien quelquefois de se mettre en selle et il semblait bien que le cheval ne fût pas moins content de porter le chien que le chien d’être porté par lui!

“C’est demain que nous quitterons Gabès, continua le maréchal des logis-chef, demain que nous prendrons la route des chotts… J’espère que vous serez prêts tous les deux et que vous ne resterez pas en arrière des autres!…”

Nouveaux hennissements et nouveaux aboiements pour répondre à la recommandation.

“À propos, reprit Nicol, vous savez que ce grand diable de Hadjar a décampé sans tambour ni trompette… ce satané Targui que nous avions pris ensemble!…”

Si Va-d’l’avant et Coupe-à-cœur ne le savaient pas, ils l’apprirent alors!… Ah! ce gueux de Targui s’était sauvé!…

“Eh bien, mes camarades, déclara le marchef, il est bien possible que nous le rencontrions là-bas, ce Hadjar, et il faudra le repincer au demi-cercle.”

Coupe-à-cœur était prêt à s’élancer au-dehors et Va-d’l’avant n’attendait que d’être enfourché par son maître pour le suivre.

“À demain… à demain!…” répéta le maréchal des logis-chef en se retirant.

Et assurément, au temps où les bêtes parlaient et disaient sans doute moins de bêtises que les hommes, Va-d’l’avant et Coupe-à-cœur auraient répondu:

“À demain… marchef… à demain!”

VI. DE GABÈS À TOZEUR.

Le 17 mars, dès cinq heures du matin, l’expédition quittait Gabès, alors que le soleil, se levant sur l’horizon de la Petite-Syrte, faisait étinceler les longues plaines sablonneuses de la région des chotts.

Le temps était beau, une légère brise du nord traversait l’espace en chassant quelques nuages qui se dissipaient avant d’atteindre l’horizon opposé.

Du reste, la période hivernale prenait déjà fin. C’est avec une remarquable régularité que les saisons se succèdent sous le climat de l’Afrique orientale. La période des pluies, l’”ech-chta”, n’occupe guère que les mois de janvier et de février. L’été, avec ses températures excessives, va de mai à octobre sous la prédominance des vents qui varient du nord-est au nord-ouest. M. de Schaller et ses compagnons partaient donc à une époque favorable. La campagne de reconnaissance serait assurément terminée avant les terribles chaleurs qui rendent si pénible le cheminement à travers les outtâ sahariennes.

Il a été dit que Gabès ne possédait pas de port. L’ancienne crique de Tnoupe, presque ensablée, n’était abordable qu’aux navires d’un faible tirant d’eau. C’est le golfe, formant demi-cercle entre le groupe des Kerkenath et les îles des Lotophages, qui a reçu l’appellation de Petite-Syrte, et cette Petite-Syrte est aussi justement redoutée des navigateurs que la Grande, si féconde en sinistres maritimes.

C’est à l’embouchure de l’Oued Melah, où se préparaient les aménagements pour le nouveau port, que le canal devait prendre naissance. Du seuil de Gabès, large de vingt kilomètres et dont vingt-deux millions de mètres cubes de matières, terre et sable, avaient été enlevés, il ne restait plus qu’un fort bourrelet qui retenait les eaux du golfe. Ce bourrelet, quelques jours pouvaient suffire à le dégager, mais, il va de soi, cette opération ne s’accomplirait qu’au dernier moment et lorsque tous les travaux de défense, de percement et d’approfondissement dans les chotts seraient entièrement terminés. De plus, il y avait à prévoir l’établissement d’un pont pour le passage vers cet endroit du prolongement sur Gabès et la frontière tripolitaine de la ligne du chemin de fer de Kairouan à Feriana et Gafsa.

Le seuil de Gabès, première et plus courte section du premier canal, avait occasionné une grosse fatigue et une forte dépense, car, en de certains endroits, ce seuil présentait une tumescence de cent mètres, sauf deux brèches hautes de cinquante à soixante, et les sables s’y mélangeaient de masses rocheuses d’une extraction difficile.

À partir de l’embouchure de l’Oued Melah, le canal se dirigeait vers les plaines du Djerid, et c’est en suivant tantôt la berge du Nord, tantôt la berge du Sud, que le détachement commença ses premières étapes. Du kilomètre 20 partait la deuxième section qui suivait autant que possible la berge septentrionale pour diminuer les difficultés et les dangers inhérents à la nature même du terrain des chotts.

L’ingénieur de Schaller et le capitaine Hardigan marchaient en tête, quelques spahis les escortaient. Après eux venait, sous les ordres du maréchal des logis-chef Nicol, le convoi qui transportait les vivres et le matériel de campement. Puis un peloton, que commandait le lieutenant Villette, formait l’arrière-garde.

Cette expédition, n’ayant pour objet que de reconnaître le tracé du canal sur tout son parcours, de vérifier où en étaient les choses jusqu’au chott Rharsa, d’abord, puis jusqu’au chott Melrir, ne devait cheminer qu’à petites journées. S’il est vrai que les caravanes, allant d’oasis en oasis, contournant au sud les montagnes et les plateaux de l’Algérie et de la Tunisie, enlèvent jusqu’à quatre cents kilomètres en dix ou douze jours, l’ingénieur entendait bien ne point en faire plus d’une douzaine par vingt-quatre heures, car il avait à tenir compte du mauvais état dans lequel se trouvaient les pistes et les anciennes routes le long des travaux.

“Nous n’allons pas faire des découvertes, disait M. de Schaller, mais plus exactement nous rendre compte de l’état présent des travaux que nous ont laissés nos devanciers…

— C’est parfaitement entendu, mon cher ami, lui répondit le capitaine Hardigan, et, d’ailleurs, depuis longtemps il n’y a plus rien à découvrir dans cette partie du Djerid. Mais, en ce qui me concerne, je ne suis pas fâché de la visiter une dernière fois avant qu’elle ne se soit transformée! Gagnera-t-elle au change?…

— Assurément, capitaine, et s’il vous plaît d’y revenir…

— Dans une quinzaine d’années…

— Non, je suis convaincu que bientôt vous retrouverez l’animation de la vie commerciale là où ne se rencontrent encore que les solitudes du désert…

— Ce qui avait son charme, mon cher compagnon…

— Oui… si toutefois l’abandon et le vide peuvent charmer…

— Un esprit comme le vôtre, non sans doute, répondit le capitaine Hardigan, mais qui sait si les vieux et fidèles admirateurs de la nature n’auront pas lieu de regretter ces transformations que le genre humain lui impose!…

— Eh bien, mon cher Hardigan ne vous plaignez pas trop, car si tout le Sahara eût été encore d’un niveau inférieur à celui de la Méditerranée, soyez sûr que nous l’aurions transformé en Océan depuis le golfe de Gabès jusqu’au littoral de l’Atlantique! comme cela a dû exister en certaines périodes géologiques.

— Décidément, déclara en souriant l’officier, les ingénieurs modernes ne respectent plus rien! Si on les laissait faire, ils combleraient les mers avec les montagnes et notre globe ne serait qu’une boule lisse et polie comme un œuf d’autruche, convenablement disposée pour l’établissement de chemins de fer!

Et l’on peut tenir pour certain que, pendant les quelques semaines de leur voyage à travers le Djerid, l’ingénieur et l’officier ne verraient point les choses sous le même angle; mais ils n’en seraient pas moins bons amis.

La traversée de l’oasis de Gabès se fit au milieu d’un pays charmant. C’est là que se rencontrent les spécimens des diverses flores africaines entre les sables maritimes et les dunes du désert. Les botanistes y ont recueilli cinq cent soixante-trois espèces de plantes. Ils n’ont pas à se plaindre, les habitants de cette oasis fortunée, et la nature ne leur a point épargné ses faveurs. Si les bananiers, les mûriers, la canne à sucre sont rares, du moins trouve-t-on en abondance figuiers, amandiers, orangers qui se multiplient sous les hauts éventails d’innombrables dattiers, sans parler des coteaux riches en vignobles, et des champs d’orge qui se développent à perte de vue. D’ailleurs, le Djerid, le pays des dattes, compte plus d’un million de ces arbres, dont il existe cent cinquante variétés, et leur fruit, entre autres la “datte-lumière”, à chair transparente, est de qualité supérieure.

Au-delà des extrêmes limites de cette oasis, en remontant le cours de l’Oued Melah, la caravane s’engagea dans l’aride partie du seuil à travers laquelle s’allongeait le nouveau canal. C’est là que les travaux avaient exigé le concours de milliers de bras. Mais, malgré bien des complications, les travailleurs, en fin de compte, n’avaient point manqué, et, à un prix peu élevé, la Compagnie Franco-étrangère avait pu embaucher des Arabes autant qu’il avait été nécessaire. Seules, les tribus touareg et quelques autres nomades qui fréquentaient les abords des sebkha, avaient refusé de prendre part au percement du canal.

Tout en cheminant, M. de Schaller prenait des notes. Il resterait quelques rectifications à faire aux talus des berges et au lit même du canal pour retrouver la pente calculée de manière à obtenir un débit suffisant, “tant, ainsi que l’avait établi M. Roudaire, pour remplir les bassins, que pour les maintenir à un niveau constant, en restituant l’eau qui s’évaporerait chaque jour”.

“Mais, dans le principe, demanda le capitaine Hardigan, quelle devait être la largeur du canal?…

— Seulement de vingt-cinq à trente mètres en moyenne, répondit M. de Schaller, et il devait être établi de manière que l’élargissement pût se faire de lui-même par le courant des eaux. Cependant, bien que ce fût un plus grand travail, et, par suite, une dépense plus considérable, on avait cru nécessaire de porter la largeur à quatre-vingts mètres, telle que vous la voyez aujourd’hui.

— Cela, sans doute, mon cher ami, en vue d’abréger le temps que les chotts Rharsa et Melrir mettront à s’inonder…

— Assurément, et, je vous le répète, nous comptons sur la rapidité du courant pour rejeter les sables latéralement, ce qui laissera passer une plus grande quantité des eaux du golfe.

— Mais enfin, au début, reprit le capitaine Hardigan, on ne parlait pas moins de dix années pour donner à la mer Saharienne son niveau normal?…

— Je le sais… je le sais… répliqua M. de Schaller, et l’on prétendait même que l’eau s’évaporerait pendant son passage à travers le canal, et qu’il n’en arriverait pas une goutte au chott Rharsa! Aussi, à mon avis, eût-ils beaucoup mieux valu s’en tenir à la largeur primitivement fixée et donner plus de tirant d’eau au canal, du moins en sa première partie. C’eût été infiniment plus pratique et moins dispendieux; mais vous savez que ce n’est pas la seule erreur de calcul de nos devanciers. D’ailleurs, des études faites sur des bases plus précises ont permis de réfuter ces assertions, et ce n’est certainement pas dix ans que nécessitera le remplissage des dépressions algériennes. Avant cinq ans, les navires de commerce parcourront la nouvelle mer depuis le golfe de Gabès jusqu’au port le plus éloigné du Melrir.”

Les deux étapes de cette première journée se firent dans de bonnes conditions; la caravane s’était arrêtée toutes les fois que l’ingénieur avait eu à examiner l’état de la tranchée du canal. Ce fut à environ quinze kilomètres de Gabès que, vers cinq heures du soir, le capitaine Hardigan donna le signal de halte pour la nuit.

Le campement fut aussitôt organisé sur la rive nord du canal à l’ombre d’un petit bois de dattiers. Les cavaliers mirent pied à terre et conduisirent les chevaux dans une prairie qui leur fournirait de l’herbe en abondance. Un ruisseau serpentait à travers le bois, et l’on s’assura que son eau était fraîche et limpide.

Les tentes, qui ne seraient d’ailleurs occupées que pendant les heures de sommeil, furent rapidement dressées. Quant au repas, on le prit sous le couvert des arbres. L’ingénieur, les deux officiers, servis par François, firent honneur aux provisions apportées de Gabès. Rien qu’en viandes et légumes conservés, la nourriture de la caravane était garantie pour plusieurs semaines, et dans les bourgades, les villages de la basse Tunisie et de la basse Algérie, au voisinage des chotts, il serait toujours facile de se ravitailler.

Inutile de dire que le maréchal des logis-chef et ses hommes, débrouillards comme ils l’étaient, avaient établi en un clin d’œil leurs tentes, après avoir remisé à l’entrée du bois les deux chariots qui complétaient le convoi. D’ailleurs, avant de penser à lui-même, Nicol – plaisanterie qu’il aimait à faire et dont Pistache riait invariablement – avait voulu “panser” Va-d’l’avant. Le digne cheval paraissait satisfait de cette première journée à travers le Djerid, et il répondit à son maître par de longs hennissements auxquels se mêlèrent les jappements de Coupe-à-cœur.

Il va sans dire que le capitaine Hardigan avait pris toutes les mesures pour la surveillance du campement. Du reste, le silence de la nuit ne fut troublé que par certains hurlements bien connus des nomades de la région. Mais les fauves se tinrent à distance, et la caravane ne reçut aucune fâcheuse visite jusqu’au lever du soleil.

Dès cinq heures, tout le monde fut sur pied, et à cinq heures dix, M. François s’était déjà rasé de frais devant un morceau de glace pendu au piquet de la tente. Les chevaux furent rassemblés, les chariots chargés, et la petite troupe se remit en marche dans le même ordre que la veille.

On suivait les berges du canal, tantôt l’une, tantôt l’autre, déjà moins élevées que dans la partie du seuil de Gabès plus rapprochée du golfe. Uniquement formées de terre très meuble ou de sable peu consistant, nul doute qu’elles ne résisteraient pas à la poussée des eaux si le courant acquérait de la force. Ainsi que cela avait pu être prévu par les ingénieurs et redouté par les indigènes, le canal s’élargirait de lui-même, ce qui abrégerait le temps nécessaire à la complète inondation des deux chotts. Mais, en somme, le lit du canal paraissait solide, ce que put constater M. de Schaller. C’était plutôt dans la traversée de la grande sebkha tunisienne que les couches molles avaient rendu le creusement plus rapide que dans les terrains riverains de la Petite-Syrte.

Le pays présentait toujours le même caractère de solitude et de stérilité qu’au sortir de l’oasis de Gabès. Parfois quelques forêts de dattiers, et des plaines hérissées de ces touffes d’alfas qui sont la véritable richesse du pays.

Depuis le départ, l’expédition s’était dirigée vers l’ouest pour atteindre, en longeant le canal, la dépression désignée sous le nom de Fedjedj, de manière à gagner la bourgade La Hammâ. Cette bourgade, il ne faut pas la confondre avec une autre du même nom située à l’extrémité orientale du Rharsa, et que l’expédition visiterait après la complète traversée du Fedjedj et du Djerid.

C’est au sud du canal, à La Hammâ, que le capitaine Hardigan vint prendre ses logements pour la nuit, après les deux étapes régulières de la journée du 18 mars.

Les diverses bourgades de cette région occupent toutes des positions identiques au milieu de petites oasis. De même que les villages, elles sont entourées de murs de terre, qui leur permettraient de résister aux agressions des nomades et même à l’attaque des grands fauves africains.

Il n’y avait là que quelques centaines d’habitants indigènes, auxquels étaient parfois mêlés plusieurs colons français. Un petit parti de soldats indigènes occupait le bordj, simple maisonnette qui dominait le milieu de la bourgade. Les spahis, auxquels cette population fit bon accueil, se répartirent dans les maisons arabes, tandis que l’ingénieur et les officiers recevaient l’hospitalité chez un compatriote.

Lorsque le capitaine Hardigan s’enquit de ce qu’il pouvait savoir du chef targui évadé de la prison de Gabès, le colon répondit qu’il n’en avait point entendu parler. Nulle part, aux environs de La Hammâ, ne fut signalée la présence de Hadjar. Tout portait à croire, d’ailleurs, que le fugitif avait regagné la contrée des chotts algériens en contournant le Fedjedj et trouvé refuge parmi les tribus touareg du Sud. Toutefois, un habitant de La Hammâ, qui revenait de Tozeur, avait entendu dire que Djemma s’était montrée dans les environs, mais quelle direction elle avait prise ensuite, on l’ignorait. Du reste, il convient de le rappeler, après l’évasion de Hadjar, après son débarquement sur le rivage de la Petite-Syrte, dès qu’il eut revu un instant sa mère, près du marabout, où l’attendaient des chevaux tout prêts, ses compagnons et lui s’étaient enfuis par une route que Djemma n’avait pas suivie après eux.

Le 19, au matin, sous un ciel un peu couvert qui promettait une journée moins chaude, le capitaine Hardigan donna le signal du départ. Une trentaine de kilomètres avaient été franchis entre Gabès et La Hammâ; il n’en restait que la moitié jusqu’au Fedjedj. Ce serait l’affaire d’une journée de marche, et, le soir, la petite troupe camperait sur un point rapproché du chott.

Pour la dernière étape qui l’avait conduit à La Hammâ, l’ingénieur avait dû s’éloigner quelque peu du canal, et, pendant la première partie de cette journée, il le rejoignit à son entrée dans le chott. C’était donc sur un parcours de cent quatre-vingt-cinq kilomètres à travers cette longue dépression du Fedjedj, cotée entre quinze et vingt-cinq mètres au-dessus du niveau de la mer,

que le creusement s’était effectué sans offrir de difficultés trop grandes.

Pendant les journées qui suivirent, le détachement put longer les berges du canal sur un sol qui ne présentait pas toute la fermeté désirable.

C’est au milieu de ces dépressions que les sondes s’engloutissent parfois d’elles-mêmes jusqu’à disparaître, et ce qui arrivait à un outil pouvait arriver à un homme. Cette sebkha tunisienne est la plus étendue de toutes. Au-delà de la pointe de Bou-Abdallah, le Fedjedj et le Djerid – qu’il ne faut pas confondre avec la partie du désert désignée sous ce nom – ne forment qu’une seule dépression jusqu’à leur extrémité occidentale. C’est, d’ailleurs, à travers le Fededj, à partir du village de Mtocia, au-dessus de La Hammâ, que le canal avait été établi, et qu’il y eut lieu d’en suivre le tracé, dirigé presque en ligne droite jusqu’au kilomètre 153 à partir duquel il s’infléchissait vers le Sud, parallèlement à la côte, entre Tozeur et Nefta.

Rien de curieux à observer comme ces bassins lacustres, connus sous le nom de sebkha et de chotts.

Et, à propos de ceux géographiquement dénommés Djerid et Fedjedj, qui n’ont point conservé d’eau, même en leur partie centrale, voici ce que M. de

Schaller, tout en chevauchant, dit au capitaine Hardigan et au lieutenant Villette, qui les avait rejoints comme cela lui arrivait souvent.

“Nous ne voyons rien de la nappe liquide, par cette raison qu’une croûte saline la recouvre. Mais elle n’est séparée de la surface que par cette croûte, véritable curiosité géologique, et vous remarquerez que le pas de nos chevaux résonne comme s’ils marchaient sur le dos d’une voûte…

— En effet, répondit le lieutenant, et c’est à se demander si le sol ne va pas leur manquer tout à coup…

— Il y a des précautions à prendre, ajouta le capitaine Hardigan, et je ne cesse de le répéter à nos hommes… N’a-t-on pas vu quelquefois, dans les parties les plus basses de ces dépressions, l’eau monter soudain jusqu’au poitrail des chevaux?…

— Cela est arrivé déjà, précisément pendant la reconnaissance de cette sebkha par le capitaine Roudaire; et ne cite-t-on pas des exemples de caravanes subitement enlisées, alors qu’elles se rendaient aux diverses bourgades de cette contrée?…

— Une contrée qui, si elle n’est ni mer ni lac, n’est pourtant pas terre dans le vrai sens de ce mot!… observa le lieutenant Villette.

— Ce qui n’existe pas dans ce Djerid se rencontre dans le Rharsa et dans le Melrir, reprit M. de Schaller; outre les eaux cachées, ces chotts contiennent des eaux superficielles dans les bassins à une cote inférieure au niveau de la mer…

— Eh bien, mon cher monsieur, dit le capitaine Hardigan, il est vraiment fâcheux que ce chott ne soit pas dans ces conditions!… Il aurait suffi d’un canal d’une trentaine de kilomètres pour y déverser les eaux du golfe de Gabès, et, depuis quelques années déjà, on naviguerait sur la mer Saharienne!

— C’est très regrettable, en effet, affirma M. de Schaller, et non seulement parce que la durée et l’importance des travaux eussent été diminuées dans une proportion considérable, mais peut-être aussi parce que l’étendue de la nouvelle mer se fût pour ainsi dire doublée. Au lieu de sept mille deux cents kilomètres carrés, soit sept cent vingt mille hectares, elle en eût recouvert environ un million cinq cent mille! En examinant la carte de cette contrée, on voit que le Fedjedj et le Djerid ont une surface supérieure à celle du Rharsa et du Melrir, et ce dernier surtout ne sera pas entièrement inondé.

— Après tout, dit le lieutenant Villette, puisque nous ne foulons du pied qu’un terrain instable, ne pourra-t-il arriver que, dans un avenir plus ou moins éloigné, le sol ne se déprime encore, surtout lorsqu’il aura été plus longtemps pénétré par les eaux du canal?… Qui sait si toute la partie méridionale de l’Algérie et de la Tunisie, par suite d’une modification lente ou brusque du sol, ne deviendra pas le bassin d’un océan… si la Méditerranée ne l’envahira pas de l’est à l’ouest?…

— Voilà bien notre ami Villette qui s’emballe, répliqua le capitaine Hardigan, et qui se laisse impressionner par tous les fantômes qui hantent l’imagination des Arabes dans leurs récits. Il veut rivaliser de vitesse avec le brave Va-d’l’avant, de notre non moins brave Nicol!…

— Ma foi, mon capitaine, répliqua le jeune officier en riant, je pense que tout peut arriver…

— Et quelle est là-dessus votre opinion, mon cher de Schaller?…

— Je n’aime à m’appuyer que sur des faits bien établis, sur des observations précises, conclut l’ingénieur. Mais, en vérité, plus j’ai étudié le sol de cette région, plus je le trouve dans des conditions anormales, et il y a à se demander quels changements pourront se produire avec le temps et grâce à des éventualités qu’on ne saurait prévoir! Mais, en attendant, contentons-nous, tout en réservant l’avenir, de pouvoir réaliser ce magnifique projet de la mer Saharienne.”

Après nombre d’étapes à Limagnes, à Seftimi, à Bou-Abdallah, bourgades situées sur la langue de terre qui se prolonge entre le Fedjedj et le Djerid, l’expédition acheva l’exploration du premier canal jusqu’à Tozeur, où elle s’arrêta dans la soirée du 30 mars.

VII. TOZEUR ET NEFTA.

“Ici, disait ce soir-là le marchef Nicol au brigadier Pistache et à M. François, nous sommes dans le pays des dattes par excellence, en véritable “Datterie”, comme l’appelle mon capitaine, et comme le nommeraient mes camarades Va-d’l’avant et Coupe-à-cœur, s’ils avaient reçu le don de la parole…

— Bon, répondit Pistache, les dattes sont partout les dattes, et qu’on les cueille à Gabès ou à Tozeur, pourvu qu’elles proviennent d’un dattier… N’est-il pas vrai, monsieur François?…”

On disait toujours “monsieur François” quand on s’adressait à ce personnage. Son maître lui-même ne s’exprimait pas autrement, et M. François y tenait dans sa dignité naturelle.

“Je ne saurais me prononcer, répondit-il d’une voix grave, en passant la main sur son menton qu’il raserait le lendemain dès la première heure. J’avoue ne point avoir un goût prononcé pour ce fruit, bon pour des Arabes et non pour les Normands dont je suis…

— Eh bien, vrai, vous êtes difficile, monsieur François, s’écria le marchef, bon pour des Arabes! Vous voulez dire trop bon pour eux, car ils sont incapables de l’apprécier comme il le mérite!… Des dattes! mais poires, pommes, raisins, oranges, je donnerais pour elles tous les fruits de France!…

— Eh! ils ne sont pourtant point à dédaigner… déclara Pistache, en glissant sa langue entre ses lèvres.

— Pour parler ainsi, reprit Nicol, il faut n’avoir jamais goûté aux dattes du Djerid. Tenez, je vous ferai manger demain une “deglat-en-nour”, cueillie à même l’arbre, ferme et transparente, et qui, en vieillissant, forme une délicieuse pâte sucrée… Vous m’en direz des nouvelles! C’est tout simplement un fruit de Paradis… et c’est probablement non avec une pomme, mais avec une datte, que fut tenté notre gourmand de premier père.

— Ce serait bien possible! ajouta le brigadier qui s’inclinait volontiers devant l’autorité du marchef.

— Et ne croyez pas, monsieur François, reprit celui-ci, que je sois le seul à avoir cette opinion sur les dattes du Djerid, et plus particulièrement sur celles de l’oasis de Tozeur!… Demandez au capitaine Hardigan, au lieutenant Villette, qui s’y connaissent!… Interrogez même Va-d’l’avant et Coupe-à-cœur…

— Comment, dit M. François, dont le visage s’imprégnait de surprise, comment votre chien et votre cheval?…

— Ils en raffolent, monsieur François, et, trois kilomètres avant d’arriver, les naseaux de l’un et le nez de l’autre humaient déjà la senteur des dattiers. Oui, dès demain, ils se régaleront de compagnie…

— Bon, monsieur le marchef, répondit M. François, et, si vous le voulez bien, le brigadier et moi nous serons enchantés de faire honneur à quelques douzaines de ces estimables produits du Djerid!”

Certainement le maréchal des logis-chef n’exagérait pas. Dans tout ce pays, et particulièrement aux environs de Tozeur, les dattes sont de qualité supérieure, et, dans l’oasis, on compte plus de deux cent mille palmiers, produisant plus de huit millions de kilos de dattes. C’est la grande richesse de la région; c’est ce qui attire de nombreuses caravanes, lesquelles, après avoir apporté des laines, de la gomme, de l’orge et du blé, remportent des milliers de sacs du précieux fruit.

On comprendra, dès lors, que les populations de ces oasis aient éprouvé de réelles craintes à propos de cette création d’une mer intérieure. En effet, à les en croire, par suite de l’humidité que provoquerait l’inondation des chotts, les dattes perdraient leurs excellentes qualités. C’est grâce à la sécheresse de l’air du Djerid qu’elles occupent le premier rang parmi ces fruits, dont les tribus font leur principale nourriture, et qui peuvent se conserver indéfiniment pour ainsi dire. Le climat changé, elles ne seraient pas plus estimées que celles qui se recueillent dans le voisinage du golfe de Gabès ou de la Méditerranée.

Ces appréhensions étaient-elles justifiées? Les avis, on le sait, se partageaient à cet égard. Mais, le certain, c’est que les indigènes de la basse Algérie et de la basse Tunisie protestaient et s’indignaient contre l’exécution de la mer Saharienne, à la pensée des irréparables dommages que devait causer le projet Roudaire.

Aussi, dès cette époque et pour protéger la région contre l’envahissement progressif des sables, on avait organisé un embryon de service forestier qui s’était assez bien développé par la suite, comme le prouvaient des plantations multipliées de sapins et d’eucalyptus et des opérations de clayonnage, analogues à celles du département des Landes. Mais, si les moyens de s’opposer aux progrès de l’envahissement sont connus et mis en pratique, il est nécessaire que la lutte laborieuse soit ininterrompue, sans quoi les sables ne sont pas longs à franchir les obstacles et à reprendre leur œuvre de destruction et d’engloutissement.

Les voyageurs se trouvaient alors au cœur même du Djerid tunisien, dont les principales villes et bourgades sont Gafsa, Tameghza, Mèdas, Çhebika, Nefzaoua et Tozeur, – à laquelle il faut rattacher les grandes oasis de Nefta, d’Oudiane et de La Hammâ, et qui constituait comme un centre où l’expédition pouvait se rendre compte de l’état des travaux de la Compagnie Franco-étrangère, si brusquement interrompus par des difficultés financières bientôt infranchissables.

Tozeur compte environ dix mille habitants. Près de mille hectares de terre y sont mis en culture. L’industrie s’y borne à la fabrication des burnous, des couvertures et des tapis. Mais, ainsi qu’il a été indiqué, les caravanes y affluent et les fruits du palmier-dattier en sont exportés par millions de kilogrammes. Peut-être s’étonnera-t-on que l’instruction soit relativement très en honneur dans cette lointaine bourgade du Djerid. Il n’en est pas moins vrai que les enfants, au nombre de près de six cents, fréquentent dix-huit écoles et onze zaouias. Quant aux ordres religieux, ils sont nombreux dans l’oasis.

Mais si Tozeur n’était pas faite pour exciter la curiosité de M. de Schaller, au point de vue purement forestier et à celui de ses belles oasis, celle-ci était bien plus vivement sollicitée par le canal dont le chenal passait à quelques kilomètres en se dirigeant vers Nefta. En revanche, c’était la première fois que le capitaine Hardigan et le lieutenant Villette visitaient cette ville. La journée qu’ils y passèrent eût satisfait les plus curieux touristes. Rien de charmant comme certaines places, certaines rues bordées de maisons ou les briques de couleurs se disposent en dessins d’une originalité surprenante. C’est là ce qui doit attirer le regard des artistes, plutôt que les vestiges de l’occupation romaine qui sont peu importants à Tozeur.

Dès le lendemain à la première heure, sous-officiers et soldats avaient permission du capitaine Hardigan de vaquer à leur fantaisie à travers l’oasis, pourvu que tout le monde fût présent aux deux appels de midi et du soir. On ne devait pas plus d’ailleurs s’aventurer au-dehors que ne le faisait le poste militaire établi dans la bourgade sous les ordres d’un officier supérieur commandant la place. Plus que jamais il y avait à tenir compte de cette surexcitation que la reprise des travaux et la prochaine inondation des chotts provoqueraient parmi les tribus sédentaires ou nomades du Djerid.

Il va de soi que le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol et le brigadier Pistache se promenaient ensemble dès l’aube. Si Va-d’l’avant n’avait pas quitté l’écurie où le fourrage lui montait jusqu’à mi-jambes, du moins Coupe-à-cœur gambadait-il à leur côté, et, assurément, ses impressions de chien, curieux et fureteur, il les rapporterait à son grand ami Va-d’l’avant.

C’est précisément sur le marché de Tozeur que l’ingénieur, les officiers, les soldats, eurent l’occasion de se rencontrer le plus souvent pendant cette journée. Là afflue, principalement, la population devant le Dar-el-Bey. Ce souk prend l’aspect d’un campement, lorsque sont dressées les tentes sous lesquelles s’abritent les vendeurs, tendues soit d’une natte, soit d’une légère étoffe que supportent des branches de palmier. Au-devant s’étalent les marchandises, qui ont été apportées à dos de chameaux, d’oasis en oasis.

Le marchef et le brigadier eurent là une occasion, qui se présentait fréquemment, pour tout dire, d’absorber quelques verres de vin de palmier, cette boisson indigène connue sous le nom de “lagmi”. Elle provient du palmier: ou l’on coupe la tête de l’arbre pour l’obtenir, décapitation dont il meurt inévitablement, ou l’on se contente de pratiquer des incisions qui ne laissent pas s’échapper la sève en telle quantité que la mort s’ensuive.

“Pistache, recommanda le marchef à son subordonné, tu sais qu’il ne faut pas abuser des bonnes choses!… et ce lagmi est traître en diable…

— Oh, marchef, moins que le vin de dattes! répondit le brigadier, qui possédait, à ce sujet, des notions très exactes.

— Moins, sans doute, j’en conviens, reprit Nicol, mais il faut s’en défier, car il s’attaque aux jambes aussi bien qu’à la tête!

— Soyez tranquille, marchef, et, tenez, voici des Arabes qui donneraient un bien mauvais exemple à nos hommes!”

En effet, deux ou trois indigènes, pris de boisson, titubant de droite et de gauche, passaient sur le souk, dans un état d’ébriété peu convenable, surtout pour des Arabes, et qui provoqua cette juste réflexion du brigadier:

“Je croyais que leur Mahomet avait interdit à tous ses fidèles de s’enivrer…

— Oui, Pistache, répondit le marchef, avec tous les vins quels qu’ils soient, sauf ce lagmi… Il paraît que le Coran fait une exception pour ce produit du Djerid…

— Et je vois que les Arabes en profitent!…” répliqua le brigadier.

Il paraît que le lagmi ne figure pas sur la liste des boissons fermentées défendues aux fils du Prophète.

Si le palmier est, par excellence, l’arbre de la région, le sol de l’oasis est d’une fertilité merveilleuse, et les jardins s’embellissent ou s’enrichissent des produits végétaux les plus variés. L’oued Berkouk promène ses eaux vivifiantes à travers la campagne environnante, soit par son lit principal, soit par les multiples petits courants qui en dérivent. Et n’y a-t-il pas de quoi provoquer l’admiration, à voir un haut palmier abriter un olivier de taille moyenne, qui abrite un figuier, qui abrite un grenadier, sous lequel serpente la vigne, dont les sarments se glissent entre les rangs de blé, de légumes et de plantes potagères?…

Pendant la soirée que M. de Schaller, le capitaine Hardigan et le lieutenant Villette passèrent dans la grande salle de la kasbah, après l’invitation du commandant de la place, la conversation roula tout naturellement sur l’état actuel des travaux, sur la prochaine inauguration du canal, sur les avantages qui résulteraient pour la région de cette inondation des deux chotts tunisiens. Et, à ce propos, le commandant de dire:

“Il n’est que trop vrai, les indigènes se refusent à reconnaître que le Djerid doive bénéficier dans une mesure considérable de la mer Saharienne. J’ai eu occasion de causer avec des chefs arabes. Eh bien, à peu d’exceptions, ils se montrent hostiles au projet, et je n’ai pu leur faire entendre raison! Ce qu’ils craignent, c’est un changement de climat, dont les produits des oasis et principalement les palmeraies, auraient à souffrir. Cependant, tout démontre le contraire… les savants les plus autorisés n’ont aucun doute à cet égard; ce sera la richesse que le canal apportera à cette contrée avec les eaux de la mer. Mais ces indigènes s’entêtent et ne veulent point se rendre!”

Le capitaine Hardigan demanda alors:

“Est-ce que cette opposition ne vient pas plutôt des nomades que des sédentaires?…

— Assurément, répondit le commandant, car la vie de ces nomades ne pourra plus être ce qu’elle a été jusqu’ici… Entre tous les Touareg se distinguent par leur violence, et cela se conçoit. Le nombre et l’importance des caravanes vont diminuer… Plus de kafila à conduire sur les routes du Djerid, ou à piller ainsi que cela se fait encore! Tout le commerce s’effectuera par les bâtiments de la mer nouvelle, et, à moins que les Touareg ne changent leur métier de voleurs contre celui de pirates!… Mais, dans ces conditions, on les aurait vite réduits à l’impuissance. Il n’est donc pas étonnant qu’à toute occasion ils s’efforcent d’endoctriner les tribus sédentaires, en leur faisant envisager un avenir de ruine par l’abandon du genre de vie de leurs ancêtres. On ne se heurte pas seulement alors à l’hostilité, mais à une sorte de fanatisme irraisonné. Tout cela, à l’état presque latent encore, grâce au fatalisme musulman, peut, dans un temps indéterminé, au premier jour, éclater sous forme d’une violente effervescence. Évidemment, ces gens-là ne saisissent pas plus les conséquences d’une mer saharienne qu’ils n’en comprennent les moyens d’adduction. Ils n’y voient qu’une œuvre de sorciers pouvant amener un épouvantable cataclysme.”

Le commandant n’apprenait là rien de nouveau à ses invités. Le capitaine Hardigan n’ignorait pas que l’expédition rencontrerait mauvais accueil parmi les tribus du Djerid. Mais la question était de savoir si la surexcitation des esprits était telle que l’on dût redouter quelque prochain soulèvement parmi les habitants de la région du Rharsa et du Melrir.

“Tout ce que je puis répondre à ce sujet, déclara le commandant, c’est que les Touareg et autres nomades, à part quelques agressions isolées, n’ont pas jusqu’ici sérieusement menacé le canal. D’après ce que nous pouvons savoir, beaucoup d’entre eux attribuaient ces travaux à l’inspiration de Cheytân, le diable musulman, et se disaient qu’une puissance supérieure à la sienne viendrait y mettre bon ordre.

Et puis, comment connaître les idées précises de ces gens si dissimulés? Peut-être attendent-ils pour tenter des pillages plus fructueux ou quelque coup de force que les travaux soient repris et que les ouvriers embauchés par la Société nouvelle soient revenus!…

— Et quel coup de force?… demanda M. de Schaller.

— Ne pourraient-ils donc, monsieur l’ingénieur, se réunir à plusieurs milliers et essayer d’obstruer le canal sur une partie de son parcours, de rejeter dans son lit le sable des berges, d’empêcher sur un seul point, à force de bras, le passage des eaux du golfe?…”

Et M. de Schaller de répondre:

“Ils auraient plus de peine à le combler que nos prédécesseurs n’en ont eu à le creuser, et, en fin de compte, ils n’y réussiraient pas sur une bien grande largeur…

— Ce n’est pas toujours le temps qui leur manquerait! fit observer le commandant. Ne dit-on pas qu’une dizaine d’années seront nécessaires pour le remplissage des chotts?…

— Non, commandant, non, affirma l’ingénieur. J’ai déjà exprimé mon opinion à cet égard, et elle ne repose pas sur des données fausses, mais sur des calculs exacts. Avec l’aide d’un grand travail de main d’homme, et surtout le concours de puissantes machines, comme celles que nous possédons aujourd’hui, ce n’est pas dix ans, ce n’est même pas cinq ans qu’exigera l’inondation du Rharsa et du Melrir… Les eaux sauront à la fois élargir et approfondir le lit qui leur fut ouvert. Qui sait même si Tozeur, bien que distant du chott de quelques kilomètres, ne sera pas port de mer un jour et relié avec La Hammâ sur le Rharsa? Et c’est ce qui explique même la nécessité de certains travaux de défense auxquels j’ai dû songer, comme aux avant-projets de ports, au nord comme au sud, qui sont un des buts importants de ce voyage.”

Étant donné l’esprit méthodique et sérieux de M. de Schaller, il y avait lieu de croire qu’il ne s’abandonnait pas à de chimériques espérances.

Le capitaine Hardigan posa alors quelques questions relatives au chef touareg qui s’était évadé du bordj de Gabès. Sa présence avait-elle été signalée aux environs de l’oasis?… Avait-on des nouvelles de la tribu à laquelle il appartenait?… Les indigènes du Djerid savaient-ils actuellement que Hadjar eût recouvré sa liberté?… N’y avait-il pas lieu de se demander s’il ne chercherait pas à soulever des Arabes contre le projet de la mer Saharienne?…

“Sur ces questions, répondit l’officier qui commandait la place, je ne puis vous renseigner avec quelque certitude; que la nouvelle de l’évasion de Hadjar ait été connue dans l’oasis, nul doute, et elle y a fait autant de bruit que sa capture, à laquelle vous avez pris part, capitaine. Mais si l’on ne m’a pas rapporté que ce chef ait été vu aux environs de Tozeur, du moins ai-je appris que toute une bande de Touareg se dirigeait vers la partie du canal qui réunit le chott Rharsa au chott Melrir.

— Vous avez des raisons de croire à l’exactitude de cette nouvelle? demanda le capitaine Hardigan.

— Oui, capitaine, parce que je la tiens d’un de ces individus qui sont restés dans le pays où ils avaient travaillé et qui se disent ou se croient des surveillants ou des gardes des travaux, et espèrent ainsi, sans doute, se créer quelques titres à la bienveillance de l’administration.

— Travaux en somme achevés, ajouta M. de Schaller, mais dont la surveillance devrait être très active. Si les Touareg tentent quelque agression contre le canal, c’est sur ce point plus particulièrement qu’ils porteront leurs efforts.

— Et pourquoi?… interrogea le commandant.

— Parce que l’inondation du Rharsa les surexcite moins que l’inondation du Melrir. Ce premier chott ne renferme aucune oasis de quelque valeur, tandis qu’il n’en est pas ainsi du second, où des oasis très importantes doivent disparaître sous les eaux de la nouvelle mer. Il faut donc s’attendre à des attaques, précisément contre le second canal, qui met en communication les deux chotts. Aussi est-il nécessaire de prendre des mesures militaires en prévision d’agressions possibles.

— Quoi qu’il en soit, fit alors le lieutenant Villette, notre petite troupe aura à se tenir sur le qui-vive, après avoir parcouru le Rharsa…

— Et elle n’y manquera pas, déclara le capitaine Hardigan. Nous avons une première fois pris ce Hadjar, nous saurons bien le capturer une seconde, et le mieux garder qu’on ne l’a fait à Gabès, en attendant qu’un conseil de guerre en ait à tout jamais débarrassé le pays.

— C’est à souhaiter, et le plus tôt possible, ajouta le commandant, car ce Hadjar a une grande influence sur les tribus nomades et il pourrait soulever tout le Djerid. En tout cas, un des avantages de la mer nouvelle sera de faire disparaître du Melrir quelques-uns de ces repaires de malfaiteurs…”

Mais non tous, car, dans ce vaste chott, d’après les nivellements du capitaine Roudaire, se rencontraient diverses zones, telles l’Hinguiz et sa principale bourgade de Zenfig, que les eaux ne devaient pas recouvrer.

La distance qui sépare Tozeur de Nefta est de vingt-cinq kilomètres environ et l’ingénieur comptait employer deux journées à la franchir, en campant la nuit prochaine sur une des rives du canal. Dans cette section, dont le tracé n’était pas conforme à celui de Roudaire, et amenait la transformation de la région de Tozeur et de Nefta, à la grande satisfaction de leurs habitants, en une sorte de presqu’île entre le Djerid et le Rharsa, le travail était entièrement terminé et, là encore, tout était en bon état.

La petite troupe quitta Tozeur, dès le matin du 1er avril par un temps incertain qui, sous des latitudes moins élevées, eût provoqué d’abondantes averses. Mais, en cette portion de la Tunisie, de telles pluies n’étaient point à craindre, et les nuages, très élevés, tempéreraient certainement l’ardeur du soleil.

On suivit d’abord les berges de l’oued Berkouk, en traversant plusieurs bras sur des ponts dont les débris de monuments antiques avaient fourni les matériaux.

D’interminables plaines, d’un jaune grisâtre, s’étendaient vers l’ouest, où l’on eût vainement cherché abri contre les rayons solaires heureusement très adoucis. Pendant les deux étapes de cette première journée, on ne rencontra, au milieu de ce terrain sablonneux, que cette maigre graminée à longues feuilles nommée “driss” par les indigènes, et dont les chameaux se montrent très friands, ce qui est de grande ressource pour les kafila du Djerid.

Aucun incident n’interrompit la marche entre le lever et le coucher du soleil, et la tranquillité du campement ne fut point troublée jusqu’au jour. Quelques bandes d’Arabes se montrèrent à grande distance de la rive nord du canal, remontant vers les montagnes de l’Aurès. Mais elles n’inquiétèrent pas le capitaine Hardigan, qui ne chercha pas à se mettre en communication avec elles.

Le lendemain, 2 avril, la marche sur Nefta fut reprise dans les mêmes conditions que la veille, temps couvert, chaleur supportable. Toutefois, aux approches de l’oasis, le pays se transformait peu à peu, et le sol devenait moins stérile. La plaine verdoyait avec les nombreuses tiges d’alfa, entre lesquelles sinuaient de petits oueds. Les armoises réapparaissaient aussi, et des haies de nopals se dessinaient sur les plateaux, où certaines nappes de fleurs bleu pâle, statices et liserons, charmaient le regard. Puis les bouquets d’arbres se succédèrent sur le bord des cours d’eau, oliviers et figuiers, et enfin des forêts d’acacias à gomme se massèrent à l’horizon.

La faune de cette contrée ne comptait guère que des antilopes qui s’enfuyaient par bandes avec une telle vitesse qu’elles disparaissaient en quelques instants. Va-d’l’avant lui-même, quoi qu’en pensât son maître, n’aurait pu les forcer à la course. Quant à Coupe-à-cœur, il se contentait d’aboyer rageusement lorsque quelques singes-magots, assez nombreux dans la région des chotts, gambadaient entre les arbres. On apercevait aussi des buffles et des mouflons à manchettes qu’il eût été inutile de poursuivre, puisque le ravitaillement devait se faire à Nefta.

Les fauves les plus communs en cette partie du Djerid sont les lions, dont les attaques sont très à redouter. Mais, depuis les travaux du canal, ils avaient été peu à peu refoulés vers la frontière algérienne, et aussi dans les régions voisines du Melrir.

Toutefois, si une attaque de fauves n’était pas à craindre, ce ne fut pas sans peine qu’hommes et bêtes eurent à se préserver contre les scorpions et les serpents à sifflet, – najas des naturalistes, – qui pullulaient aux approches du Rharsa. Du reste, l’abondance des reptiles est telle que certaines régions ne sont point habitables, et, entre autres, le Djerid Teldja, qui a dû être abandonné des Arabes. Au campement du soir, près d’un bois de tamarins, M. de Schaller et ses compagnons ne purent reposer sans avoir pris les plus minutieuses précautions. Et l’on admettra que le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol ne dormit que d’un œil, tandis que Va-d’l’avant dormait des deux yeux. Il est vrai, Coupe-à-cœur veillait, lui, et eût signalé tout rampement suspect, qui eût menacé le cheval ou son maître.

Bref, il ne se produisit aucun accident pendant cette nuit, et les tentes furent levées dès l’aube. La direction, suivie par le capitaine Hardigan, était toujours celle du sud-ouest, dont le canal ne s’écartait pas depuis Tozeur. Au kilomètre 207, il remontait vers le nord, et, à partir de ce coude, ce serait sur le méridien que cheminerait la petite troupe, en quittant Nefta, où elle arriva ce jour même dans l’après-midi.

Peut-être la longueur du canal eût-elle été réduite d’une quinzaine de kilomètres, s’il eût été possible de rejoindre le Rharsa sur un point de sa limite orientale dans la direction de Tozeur. Mais les difficultés d’exécution eussent été grandes. Avant d’atteindre le chott de ce côté, il aurait fallu creuser un sol excessivement dur où la roche dominait. C’eût été pour le moins plus long et plus coûteux qu’en certaines parties du seuil de Gabès, et une cote de trente à trente-cinq mètres au-dessus du niveau de la mer aurait imposé un travail considérable. C’est pour cette raison qu’après une étude approfondie de cette région les ingénieurs de la Compagnie franco-orientale avaient renoncé au premier tracé pour en adopter un nouveau partant du kilomètre 207 à l’ouest de Nefta. De ce point il prenait la direction du nord. Cette troisième et dernière section du premier canal avait été menée à bonne fin sur une très grande largeur, en profitant de nombreuses dépressions, et atteignait le Rharsa au fond d’une sorte de crique qui se trouvait à une des cotes les plus basses de ce chott, presque au milieu de sa bordure méridionale.

L’intention de M. de Schaller, d’accord avec le capitaine Hardigan, n’était point de s’arrêter à Nefta jusqu’au surlendemain. Il leur suffirait d’y avoir passé les dernières heures de l’après-midi et la nuit prochaine pour reposer et ravitailler le détachement. D’ailleurs, hommes et chevaux n’avaient pu être fatigués pendant ce parcours de cent quatre-vingt-dix kilomètres à vol d’oiseau, effectué depuis le départ de Gabès, entre le 17 mars et le 3 avril. Il leur serait même facile d’enlever dans la journée du lendemain la distance qui les séparait encore du chott Rharsa où l’ingénieur tenait à arriver à la date précise qu’il avait fixée.

L’oasis de Nefta, au point de vue du pays, de la nature du sol, des productions végétales, ne diffère pas sensiblement de l’oasis de Tozeur. Même amoncellement d’habitations au milieu des arbres, même disposition de la kasbah, même occupation militaire. Mais l’oasis est moins peuplée, et ne comptait pas alors plus de huit mille habitants.

Français et indigènes firent très bon accueil à la petite troupe du capitaine Hardigan et s’empressèrent de la loger du mieux possible. À cela il y avait quelques raisons d’intérêt personnel, et on ne saurait s’en étonner grâce au nouveau tracé. Le commerce de Nefta allait largement bénéficier de ce passage du canal à proximité de l’oasis. Tout le trafic qu’elle aurait perdu, si, au-delà de Tozeur, il se fût dirigé vers le chott, lui reviendrait. C’était presque comme si Nefta était à la veille de devenir ville riveraine de la nouvelle mer. Aussi les félicitations des habitants ne furent-elles pas épargnées à l’ingénieur de la Société française de la mer Saharienne.

Cependant, malgré les instances faites dans le but de retenir l’expédition, ne fût-ce que vingt-quatre heures, le départ fut maintenu pour le lendemain au lever du soleil. Le capitaine Hardigan était toujours inquiet, par suite des nouvelles qu’il recueillait de la surexcitation des indigènes aux environs du Melrir, auquel aboutissait le second canal, et il lui tardait d’avoir achevé cette partie de son voyage d’exploration.

Le soleil n’avait pas encore paru au-dessus de l’horizon, lorsque, les hommes rassemblés, les chevaux et les chariots prêts, le signal du départ fut donné. La douzaine de kilomètres que mesure le canal depuis Nefta jusqu’au coude était franchie dans la première étape, et la distance du coude au Rharsa dans la seconde.

Aucun incident pendant la route, et il était environ six heures du soir lorsque le capitaine Hardigan fit halte au fond de la crique où le canal complètement achevé débouchait sur le chott.

VIII. LE CHOTT RHARSA.

Le campement, cette nuit du 4 au 5 avril, fut établi au pied des dunes, d’un relief assez accusé, qui encadraient le fond de la crique. L’endroit ne présentait aucun abri. Les derniers arbres de cette région désolée avaient été dépassés par la petite troupe à trois ou quatre kilomètres de là, entre Nefta et le chott. C’était le désert sablonneux où s’ébauchaient à peine quelques traces de végétation, le Sahara dans toute son aridité.

Les tentes avaient été dressées. Les chariots, ravitaillés à Nefta, assuraient pour plusieurs jours la nourriture des hommes et des chevaux. D’ailleurs, en contournant le Rharsa, l’ingénieur s’arrêterait dans les oasis, assez nombreuses sur ses bords, où le fourrage frais se rencontrerait en abondance, et qu’on eût vainement cherchées à l’intérieur du chott.

C’est ce que M. de Schaller expliquait au capitaine Hardigan et au lieutenant Villette, alors réunis sous la même tente, avant de prendre leur part du repas que se préparait à servir M. François. Un plan du Rharsa, déposé sur la table, permettait d’en reconnaître la configuration. Ce chott, dont la limite méridionale s’écarte peu du trente-quatrième parallèle, s’arrondit vers le nord à travers la région que bordent les montagnes d’Aurès, aux approches de la bourgade de Chebika. Sa plus grande longueur, mesurée précisément sur ce trente-quatrième degré de latitude, se chiffre par soixante kilomètres, mais sa superficie submersible ne couvre que treize cents kilomètres carrés, soit, comme le dit l’ingénieur, de trois à quatre mille fois l’étendue du Champ-de-Mars à Paris.

“Eh, fit observer le lieutenant Villette, ce qui est énorme pour un Champ-de-Mars, paraît bien médiocre pour une mer…

— Sans doute, lieutenant, répondit M. de Schaller, mais, si vous y ajoutez la superficie du Melrir, soit six mille kilomètres carrés, cela donne sept cent vingt mille hectares à la mer Saharienne. Et, d’ailleurs, il est très possible, avec le temps, et sous l’action d’un travail neptunien, qu’elle finisse par embrasser les sebkha Djerid et Fedjedj…

— Je vois, mon cher ami, reprit le capitaine Hardigan, que vous comptez toujours sur cette éventualité… L’avenir la réserve-t-elle?…

— Qui peut lire dans l’avenir? répondit M. de Schaller. Notre planète, ce n’est pas douteux, a vu des choses plus extraordinaires, et je ne vous cache pas que cette idée, sans m’obséder, m’absorbe quelquefois. Vous avez sûrement entendu parler d’un continent disparu qui s’appelle Atlantide, eh bien! ce n’est pas une mer saharienne qui passe aujourd’hui dessus, c’est l’Océan Atlantique lui-même, et sous des latitudes parfaitement déterminées; et les exemples de ces sortes de cataclysmes ne manquent pas, dans des proportions moindres, il est vrai; voyez ce qui s’est passé dans l’Insulinde au XIXe siècle, lors de la terrible éruption du Krakatoa; aussi, pourquoi ce qui s’est produit hier ne saurait-il se reproduire demain?

— L’avenir, c’est la grande boîte à surprises de l’humanité, répondit en riant le lieutenant Villette.

— Juste, mon cher lieutenant, affirma l’ingénieur, et quand elle sera vide…

— Eh bien, le monde finira”, conclut le capitaine Hardigan.

Puis, posant son doigt sur le plan, là où aboutissait le premier canal, long de deux cent vingt-sept kilomètres:

“Est-ce qu’un port ne doit pas être créé à cet endroit?… demanda-t-il.

— Là même, sur les bords de cette crique, répondit M. de Schaller, et tout indique qu’il deviendra l’un des plus fréquentés de la mer Saharienne. Des plans sont étudiés, et, assurément, maisons et magasins, entrepôts et bordj seront construits pour l’époque où le Rharsa sera devenu navigable. Au surplus, à l’extrémité orientale du chott, la bourgade La Hammâ se transformait déjà en prévision de l’importance maritime et commerciale qu’elle comptait prendre lors du premier tracé et que lui assurera probablement, malgré le changement, sa position de port avancé de Gafsa.”

Devenir un port marchand au cœur même du Djerid, cette bourgade dont l’ingénieur montrait l’emplacement sur la carte à l’extrémité du Rharsa, c’était un rêve qui jadis eût paru irréalisable. Et, cependant, le génie de l’homme allait en faire une réalité. Elle n’aurait à regretter qu’une chose, c’était que le premier canal n’eût pu déboucher à sa porte. Mais on connaît les raisons pour lesquelles les ingénieurs avaient dû rejoindre le chott au fond de cette crique, qui portait actuellement le nom de crique Roudaire, en attendant que ce fût celui d’un nouveau port, sans doute le plus considérable de la mer Saharienne.

Le capitaine Hardigan demanda alors à M. de Schaller si son intention était de conduire l’expédition à travers le Rharsa sur toute sa longueur.

“Non, répondit l’ingénieur, ce sont les bords du chott que je dois visiter; j’espère retrouver peut-être là un matériel précieux et qui pourra nous être utile, soit ici, soit ailleurs, puisqu’il est à pied d’œuvre, bien qu’il soit certainement inférieur au matériel actuel, mais, celui-ci, il faudra le faire venir.

— Est-ce que les caravanes ne traversaient pas le chott de préférence? interrogea le lieutenant Villette.

— Et le traversent encore, mon cher lieutenant, bien que ce soit une route assez dangereuse sur un sol peu ferme; mais elle est plus courte et même moins difficile qu'un cheminement le long des rives encombrées de dunes. C'est pourtant celui que nous effectuerons dans la direction de l'ouest jusqu'au point où commence le second canal; puis, au retour, après avoir relevé les limites du Melrir, nous pourrons côtoyer la limite septentrionale du Rharsa et regagnerons Gabès plus rapidement que nous n'en sommes venus."

Tel était le plan adopté, et, après la reconnaissance des deux canaux, l'ingénieur aurait contourné tout le périmètre de la nouvelle mer.

Le lendemain, M. de Schaller et les deux officiers prirent la tête du détachement. Coupe-à-cœur gambadait en avant, faisant lever des bandes d'étourneaux qui s'enfuyaient avec un morne froufrou d'ailes. On suivait la base intérieure des hautes dunes qui formaient le cadre du chott. Ce n'était pas de ce côté que, d'après certaines appréhensions, la nappe liquide aurait pu s'étendre en dépassant les bords de la dépression. Ses rives élevées, à peu près semblables au bourrelet du seuil de Gabès, étaient de nature à ne point céder à la pression des eaux, et il y avait toute sécurité pour cette partie méridionale du Djerid.

Le campement avait été levé dès les premières heures du jour. La marche se reconstitua dans l'ordre habituel. Le parcours quotidien ne devait point être modifié et garderait sa moyenne de douze à quinze kilomètres en deux étapes.

Ce que M. de Schaller voulait surtout vérifier, c’était le littoral qui allait encaisser les eaux de la nouvelle mer, et s’il n’était pas à craindre que, franchissant son cadre, celui-ci n’envahît les régions voisines. Aussi la petite troupe suivait-elle la base des dunes sablonneuses qui se succédaient le long du chott, en direction de l’ouest. Il semblait bien, d’ailleurs, que l’homme n’avait pas eu à modifier l’œuvre de la nature à ce point de vue. Que le Rharsa autrefois eût été lac ou non, il était disposé pour l’être, et les eaux du golfe de Gabès, que lui amènerait le premier canal, seraient strictement contenues dans les limites prévues.

Cependant, tout en faisant route, il était possible d’observer la dépression sur une vaste étendue. La surface de cette aride cuvette du Rharsa, sous les rayons du soleil, miroitait comme si elle eût été doublée d’une feuille d’argent, de cristal ou de camphre. Les yeux ne pouvaient en soutenir l’éclat et il fallait les préserver au moyen de verres fumés pour éviter les ophtalmies si fréquentes sous l’ardeur de la lumière saharienne. Les officiers et leurs hommes s’en étaient munis à cette intention. Le marchef Nicol avait même fait acquisition de fortes besicles pour son cheval. Mais il ne paraissait pas que cela eût convenu à Va-d’l’avant de porter lunettes. C’était quelque peu ridicule, et Coupe-à-cœur, derrière cet appareil optique, ne reconnaissait plus la figure de son camarade. Aussi Va-d’l’avant ni aucun des chevaux n’étaient-ils pourvus de ces préservatifs, indispensables à leurs maîtres.

Du reste, le chott présentait bien l’aspect de ces lacs salins, qui se dessèchent l’été sous l’action des chaleurs tropicales. Mais une partie de la couche liquide, entraînée sous les sables, rejette les gaz qui la chargent, et le sol se hérisse de boursouflures qui le font ressembler à un champ semé de taupinières; quand au fond de ce chott, l’ingénieur fit remarquer aux deux officiers qu’il se composait de sable rouge quartzeux mélangé de sulfate et de carbonate de chaux. Cette couche se recouvrait d’efflorescences formées de sulfate de soude et de chlorure de sodium, véritable croûte de sel. D’ailleurs, le terrain pliocène où se rencontrent les chotts et les sebkha fournit par lui-même le gypse et le sel en abondance.

Il est bon de noter qu’à cette époque de l’année le Rharsa ne s’était pas vidé de toutes les eaux que les oueds y amènent l’hiver. En s’éloignant parfois des ghourd, c’est-à-dire des dunes encaissantes, les chevaux s’arrêtaient sur le bord de bas-fonds emplis d’un liquide stagnant.

De loin le capitaine Hardigan aurait pu croire qu’un détachement de cavaliers arabes allait et venait encore à travers ces désertes bassures du chott; mais à l’approche de ses hommes toute la troupe s’enfuyait, non point au grand galop, mais à tire d’aile.

Il n’y avait là qu’une bande de flamants bleus et roses, dont le plumage rappelait les couleurs d’un uniforme, et, si rapidement que Coupe-à-cœur se mît à leur poursuite, il ne parvenait pas à rejoindre ces magnifiques représentants de la famille des échassiers.

En même temps, quelles myriades d’oiseaux il faisait lever de toutes parts, et quels cris traversaient l’espace à l’envol des boa-habibis, ces assourdissants moineaux du Djerid!

Cependant, à suivre les contours du Rharsa, le détachement trouverait sans peine des lieux de campement qu’il n’eût pas rencontrés au centre de la dépression. C’est pour cette raison que ce chott était presque entièrement inondable, tandis que certaines parties du Melrir, ayant une cote positive, émergeraient encore après l’introduction des eaux méditerranéennes. On allait donc d’oasis en oasis plus ou moins habitées, destinées à devenir des “marsâ”, c’est-à-dire ports ou calanques de la nouvelle mer. On les désigne sous le nom de “toua” en langue berbère, et en ces oasis le sol reprend toute sa fertilité, les arbres, palmiers et autres reparaissent en grand nombre, les pâturages n’y manquent point, de telle sorte que Va-d’l’avant et ses camarades n’avaient point à se plaindre de la rareté des fourrages. Mais, ces oasis aussitôt dépassées, brusquement le sol reprenait son aridité naturelle. Aux “mourdj” herbeux succédait soudain le “reg” qui est un sol plat composé de gravier et de sable.

Toutefois, il y a lieu de l’observer, la reconnaissance de cette limite méridionale du Rharsa s’effectuait sans grandes fatigues. Il est vrai, lorsque aucun nuage ne tempérait les ardeurs du soleil, la chaleur éprouvait fortement les hommes et les chevaux, au pied de ces dunes. Mais, enfin, des officiers algériens, des spahis ont déjà l’accoutumance de ces brûlants climats, et, en ce qui concerne M. de Schaller, c’était aussi un Africain bronzé par le soleil et les explorations, et c’est précisément ce qui l’avait désigné pour prendre la direction des travaux définitifs de la mer Saharienne.

Quant aux dangers, ils n’auraient pu provenir que d’un cheminement à travers les “hofra” du chott, qui sont les dépressions les plus accusées où le sol est mouvant et n’offre aucun appui solide; mais, sur le parcours que suivait l’expédition, ces enlisements étaient peu à craindre.

“C’est qu’ils sont très sérieux ces dangers, répétait l’ingénieur, et, pendant le creusement du canal à travers les sebkha tunisiennes, on a eu maintes occasions de le constater.

— En effet, ajouta le capitaine Hardigan, c’est une des difficultés que prévoyait déjà M. Roudaire, pour le nivellement du Rharsa et du Melrir… Ne raconte-t-il pas qu’il enfonçait parfois jusqu’au genou dans le sable salé?…

— Et il n’a dit que la vérité, affirma M. de Schaller. Ces bas-fonds sont parsemés de trous auxquels les Arabes donnent le nom d’”œils de mer”, et dont les sondes ne peuvent atteindre le fond. Aussi des accidents sont-ils toujours à redouter. Lors d’une reconnaissance de M. Roudaire, un des cavaliers et son cheval s’engloutirent dans une de ces crevasses, et, même en ajustant vingt baguettes de leurs fusils les unes aux autres, ses camarades ne parvinrent pas à l’en retirer…

— Donc, prenons nos précautions, recommanda le capitaine Hardigan, on ne saurait être trop prudent. Mes hommes ont défense de s’écarter des dunes, à moins que nous n’ayons bien constaté l’état du sol… Et même j’ai toujours la crainte que ce diable de Coupe-à-cœur, qui court à tort, c’est le cas de le dire, et à travers la sebkha, ne vienne à disparaître subitement. Nicol ne parvient pas à le retenir…

— Si pareil malheur arrivait à son chien, déclara le lieutenant Villette, quel chagrin il en éprouverait!…

— Et Va-d’l’avant, ajouta le capitaine, je suis sûr qu’il en mourrait de douleur!

— C’est du reste une bien singulière amitié qui existe entre ces deux braves animaux, observa l’ingénieur.

— Très singulière, dit le lieutenant Villette. Au moins, Oreste et Pylade, Nisus et Euryale, Damon et Pithias, Achille et Patrocle, Alexandre et Ephestion, Hercule et Pirithoüs étaient-ils de même race, tandis qu’un cheval et un chien…

— Et un homme, pouvez-vous ajouter, lieutenant, conclut le capitaine Hardigan, car Nicol, Va-d’l’avant et Coupe-à-cœur forment un groupe d’amis inséparables, dans lequel l’homme entre pour un tiers et les bêtes pour deux!”

Ce qu’avait dit l’ingénieur relativement aux dangers du sol mouvant des chotts n’était point exagéré. Et cependant les caravanes passaient de préférence par la contrée du Melrir, du Rharsa et du Fedjedj. Cette route abrégeait leur parcours, et les voyageurs y trouvaient un chemin plus facile en terrain plat. Mais elles ne le faisaient pas sans l’assistance de guides qui connaissaient parfaitement ces parties lacustres du Djerid et savaient éviter les dangereuses fondrières.

Depuis son départ de Gabès, le détachement n’avait pas encore rencontré une de ces kafila qui transportent les marchandises, les produits du sol, ou produits manufacturés depuis Biskra jusqu’au littoral de la Petite-Syrte, et dont le passage est toujours impatiemment attendu à Nefta, à Gafsa, à Tozeur, à La Hammâ, dans toutes ces villes et bourgades de la basse Tunisie. Mais, pendant la journée du 9 avril, l’après-midi, il prit contact avec une caravane, voici en quelles circonstances.

Il était environ trois heures. Après sa première étape de la journée, le capitaine Hardigan et ses hommes s’étaient remis en marche sous un soleil brûlant. Ils se dirigeaient vers l’extrême courbure que dessine le Rharsa, quelques kilomètres plus loin, à son extrémité occidentale. Le sol remontait sensiblement alors; le relief des dunes s’accusait plus fortement et ce n’est pas de ce côté que le cadre du chott pourrait jamais être forcé par les nouvelles eaux.

En s’élevant, on parcourait du regard un plus large secteur dans le sens du nord et de l’ouest. La dépression étincelait sous les rayons solaires. Chaque gravier de ce sol salin devenait un point lumineux. Sur la gauche, prenait naissance le second canal qui mettait en communication le Rharsa et le Melrir.

L’ingénieur, les deux officiers avaient mis pied à terre. L’escorte les suivait en tirant les chevaux par le bridon.

À un instant où tous s’étaient arrêtés sur un plateau de la dune, voici que le lieutenant Villette dit, en tendant la main:

“Il me semble bien apercevoir une troupe en mouvement dans le fond du chott…

— Une troupe… ou un troupeau, répondit le capitaine Hardigan.

— Il est difficile de se prononcer, étant donnée la distance”, ajouta M. de Schaller.

Le certain, c’est que de ce côté, à trois ou quatre kilomètres environ, un épais nuage de poussière se déroulait à la surface du Rharsa. Peut-être n’était-ce là qu’une bande de ruminants en marche vers le nord du Djerid.

Au surplus, le chien donnait des signes non équivoques, sinon d’inquiétude, du moins d’attention, et le marchef de lui crier:

“Allons, Coupe-à-cœur, du nez et des oreilles… Qu’est-ce qu’il y a là-bas?…”

L’animal aboya violemment, les pattes raidies, la queue battante, et fut sur le point de s’élancer à travers le chott.

“Tout beau… tout beau!” fit Nicol en le retenant près de lui.

Le mouvement qui se produisait au milieu de ce tourbillon devenait plus fort à mesure que les volutes de poussière se rapprochaient. Mais il était difficile d’en déterminer la cause. Quelque vif que fût leur regard, ni M. de Schaller, ni les officiers, ni personne du détachement n’aurait pu affirmer si cette agitation provenait d’une caravane en marche ou d’un troupeau fuyant quelque danger à travers cette partie du chott.

Deux ou trois minutes plus tard, il n’existait aucune incertitude sur ce point. Des éclairs jaillissaient du nuage et des détonations éclataient, dont les fumées se mêlaient au tourbillon de poussière.

En même temps, Coupe-à-cœur, que son maître ne put arrêter, lui échappa, aboyant avec fureur.

“Des coups de feu! s’écria le lieutenant Villette.

— Sans doute quelque caravane qui se défend contre une attaque de fauves…, dit l’ingénieur.

— Ou plutôt contre des pillards, reprit le lieutenant, car les détonations semblent se répondre…

— En selle!” commanda le capitaine Hardigan.

Un instant après les spahis, contournant le bord du Rharsa, se dirigeaient vers le théâtre de la lutte.

Peut-être y avait-il imprudence, ou tout au moins témérité, à engager les quelques hommes de l’escorte dans cette affaire dont on ne connaissait pas la cause. Probablement une bande de ces pillards du Djerid, qui pouvait être nombreuse. Mais le capitaine Hardigan et son détachement n’en étaient pas à regarder au danger. Si, comme il y avait lieu de le supposer, des Touareg ou autres nomades de la région attaquaient une kafila, il était de l’honneur d’un soldat de courir à son secours. Aussi, tous, enlevant leurs chevaux, précédés du chien que Nicol ne cherchait plus à rappeler, abandonnant la lisière des dunes, s’élancèrent-ils à travers le chott.

La distance, on l’a dit, ne paraissait pas mesurer plus de trois kilomètres, et les deux tiers furent franchis en dix minutes. Les

coups de feu continuaient à partir de droite et de gauche au milieu de volutes de fumée et de poussière. Toutefois, le tourbillon commençait à se dissiper, sous le souffle d’une brise du sud-est, qui se levait.

Le capitaine Hardigan put se rendre compte alors de la nature de cette lutte si violemment engagée.

C’était bien, comme on n’allait pas tarder à l’apprendre, une caravane dont le cheminement venait d’être interrompu en cette partie du chott. Cinq jours avant, elle quittait l’oasis de Zeribet, au nord du Melrir, se dirigeant vers Tozeur, d’où elle gagnerait Gabès. Une vingtaine d’Arabes en formaient le personnel conduisant une centaine de chameaux de toute taille.

Ils allaient ainsi, pressant les étapes, les bêtes devant avec leurs charges de dattes, en sacs… Eux, les chameliers, marchaient derrière, répétant le cri que l’un d’eux poussait d’une voix rauque pour exciter les animaux.

La caravane, dont le voyage s’était jusqu’alors effectué dans de bonnes conditions, venait d’atteindre l’extrémité ouest du Rharsa, qu’elle s’apprêtait à traverser dans toute sa longueur sous la conduite d’un guide très expérimenté. Par malheur, dès qu’elle se fut engagée sur les premières pentes du “reg”, une soixantaine de cavaliers surgirent soudain de derrière les dunes.

C’était une bande de pillards qui devait avoir facilement raison du personnel de la kafila. Ils mettraient les chameliers en fuite, ils les massacreraient au besoin, ils s’empareraient des bêtes et de leur charge, ils les pousseraient vers quelque lointaine oasis du Djerid, et sans doute cette agression demeurerait impunie, comme tant d’autres, vu l’impossibilité d’en découvrir les auteurs.

Les gens de la caravane tentèrent une résistance qui ne pouvait réussir. Armés de fusils et de pistolets, ils firent usage de leurs armes. Les assaillants, plus nombreux, tirèrent alors, et la kafila, après dix minutes de lutte, finit par se disperser, les animaux, pris de peur, s’enfuyant en toutes directions.

C’était un peu avant que les détonations avaient été entendues du capitaine Hardigan. Mais sa petite troupe fut aperçue, et les pillards, voyant ces cavaliers venir au secours de la kafila, s’arrêtèrent.

À ce moment, d’une voix forte, le capitaine Hardigan avait crié:

“En avant!…”

Les carabines étaient en état. Du dos des spahis elles passèrent à leur main et à leur épaule, et tous fondirent comme une trombe sur les bandits.

Quant au convoi, il avait été laissé en arrière sous la garde des conducteurs, et on le rejoindrait après avoir dégagé la caravane.

Les pillards n’attendirent pas le choc. Ne se sentirent-ils pas la force ou plutôt le courage de tenir tête à ce peloton d’uniforme connu, qui s’avançait si audacieusement à leur rencontre? Obéirent-ils à une autre impulsion que celle de la peur? Toujours est-il qu’avant que le capitaine Hardigan et ses hommes fussent à portée, ils s’étaient enfuis dans la direction du nord-ouest.

Cependant l’ordre de faire feu fut donné, et quelques vingtaines de coups éclatèrent qui atteignirent plusieurs des fugitifs, mais non assez grièvement pour les arrêter.

Toutefois, le marchef tint à constater avec fierté que Coupe-à-cœur avait reçu le baptême du feu, car il l’avait vu secouer la tête de droite et de gauche, et conclut qu’une balle lui avait sifflé aux oreilles.

Le capitaine Hardigan ne jugea pas opportun de poursuivre les assaillants, emportés de toute la vitesse de leurs chevaux. D’ailleurs, ils n’avaient pas tardé à disparaître derrière le rideau d’un “tell”, colline boisée qui se dressait à l’horizon. En ce pays qu’ils connaissaient bien, ils auraient aisément regagné quelque retraite, où il eût été difficile de les rejoindre. Ils ne reviendraient pas, sans doute, et la caravane n’avait plus à craindre de les retrouver en se dirigeant vers l’est du Rharsa.

Mais le secours était arrivé à temps et, quelques minutes plus tard, les chameaux fussent tombés entre les mains de ces pirates du désert.

L’ingénieur, interrogeant alors le chef de la kafila, apprit comment les choses s’étaient passées, et dans quelles conditions ses chameliers et lui avaient été attaqués.

“Et, demanda le capitaine Hardigan, savez-vous à quelle tribu appartient cette bande?…

— Notre guide assure que ce sont des Touareg, répondit le chef.

— On prétendait, reprit l’ingénieur, que les Touareg avaient abandonné peu à peu les oasis de l’ouest pour gagner l’est du Djerid…

— Oh! tant qu’il y aura des caravanes qui le traverseront, il ne manquera pas de pillards pour les attaquer… observa le lieutenant Villette.

— Éventualité qui ne sera plus à craindre après l’inondation des chotts”, déclara M. de Schaller.

Et alors le capitaine Hardigan de demander au chef si l’on avait entendu parler dans le pays de l’évasion de Hadjar.

“Oui, capitaine, et voilà déjà quelques jours que ce bruit s’est répandu…

— On ne dit pas s’il a été signalé aux environs du Rharsa ou du Melrir?…

— Non, capitaine.

— Et ce n’était pas lui qui commandait cette bande?…

— Je ne puis l’affirmer, répliqua le guide, car je le connais, et je l’aurais reconnu… Que ces pillards soient de ceux qu’il commandait autrefois, c’est bien possible, et, sans votre arrivée, capitaine, nous étions volés, massacrés jusqu’au dernier peut-être!…

— Mais, reprit l’ingénieur, vous allez pouvoir sans danger continuer votre route?…

— Je le pense, répondit le chef. Ces coquins auront regagné quelque bourgade de l’ouest, et dans trois ou quatre jours nous serons à Tozeur.”

Le chef rassembla alors tout son monde. Les chameaux qui s’étaient dispersés revenaient déjà à leur rang; la caravane se reconstitua, n’ayant pas perdu un seul homme, avec quelques blessés et encore peu grièvement, qui pouvaient continuer la route. Puis, après avoir une dernière fois remercié le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons, le chef donna le signal du départ. Toute la kafila se remit en marche.

En quelques minutes, hommes et bêtes eurent disparu au tournant d'un “tarf”, pointe sablonneuse qui s'allongeait sur le chott, et les cris du chef de la kafila, pressant les chameliers, se perdaient, peu à peu, dans l'éloignement.

Lorsque l'ingénieur et les deux officiers se trouvèrent réunis, après cette algarade qui pouvait être grosse de conséquences, ils se communiquèrent leurs impressions, sinon leurs soucis qu'un incident venait de faire naître, et ce fut M. de Schaller qui prit le premier la parole:

“Voici donc que Hadjar a reparu dans le pays!… dit l'ingénieur.

— On devait s'y attendre, répondit le capitaine, et il est à désirer qu'on ait achevé d'inonder les chotts le plus tôt possible! C'est le seul moyen d'en finir avec ces malfaiteurs du Djerid!…

— Par malheur, fit observer le lieutenant Villette, quelques années se passeront avant que les eaux du golfe aient rempli le Rharsa et le Melrir…

— Qui sait?…” prononça M. de Schaller.

Pendant la nuit suivante, le campement ne fut point troublé par les Touareg qui ne reparurent pas aux environs.

Dans l'après-midi du lendemain, 10 avril, le détachement fit halte à l'endroit où commençait le second canal qui réunissait les deux chotts.

IX. LE SECOND CANAL.

Le second canal, reliant le Rharsa et le Melrir au chott Djerid, avait une longueur environ trois fois moindre que celle du premier. D’autre part, tandis que le relief du sol entre Gabès et le Rharsa présentait des cotes depuis quarante-six jusqu’à quinze mètres, il ne dépassait pas dix mètres entre les deux derniers chotts, au seuil d’Asloudje.

Il importe de noter aussi que, outre le Rharsa et le Melrir, il existait des dépressions longues de quelques kilomètres, dont la principale était le chott d’El Asloudje, et qui avaient été utilisées pour la percée du canal.

Le creusement du second canal avait donc demandé moins de temps que celui du premier, et présenté moins de difficultés également. Aussi ne fut-il entrepris que plus tard. Les travaux définitifs pouvant être repris, avec la province de Constantine comme base d’opération et de ravitaillement, il avait été convenu, avant le départ de Gabès, que M. de Schaller trouverait sur le Melrir, à la fin du deuxième canal, sous la conduite d’un agent très compétent des Ponts et Chaussées, un chantier occupé par des hommes qui, après le trajet en chemin de fer jusqu’à Biskra et en caravane le long de la Farfaria, se mettraient en communication avec lui sitôt installés en cet endroit.

Les travaux une fois reconnus, M. de Schaller n’aurait plus qu’à suivre les contours du chott pour revenir à son point de départ, et son inspection serait terminée.

Lorsque le détachement atteignit la fin du Rharsa, l’ingénieur fut très surpris de ne trouver en cet endroit aucun des ouvriers, arabes ou autres, envoyés de Biskra par la Société.

Qu’avait-il pu se passer? Cela ne laissait pas d’être un peu inquiétant, surtout à la suite de l’attaque de la caravane et de la réapparition de Hadjar.

Y avait-il eu changement de programme, sans que l’ingénieur pût être prévenu à temps, ou changement de direction décidé à la dernière heure?

M. de Schaller demeurait songeur, lorsque le capitaine Hardigan l’interrogea:

“Est-ce que les travaux de cette section n’étaient point achevés?

— Mais si, répondit M. de Schaller, et, d’après les rapports connus, le creusement des seuils entre les parties inondables a dû être poussé, avec la pente nécessaire, jusqu’au Melrir dont l’ensemble est au-dessous du niveau de la mer…

— Pourquoi vous étonner que des ouvriers ne soient pas là?…

— Parce que le conducteur des travaux devait avoir envoyé, depuis quelques jours déjà, plusieurs de ses hommes au-devant de moi, et que, en réfléchissant, je ne vois aucune raison pour qu’ils aient été retardés à Biskra ou au Melrir.

— Alors, comment expliquez-vous cette absence?…

— Je ne me l’explique pas, avoua l’ingénieur, à moins que quelque incident ne les ait maintenus au chantier principal qui se trouve à l’autre extrémité du canal…

— Eh bien, nous serons fixés bientôt, fit le capitaine Hardigan.

— N’importe, vous me voyez ennuyé et, en même temps, très préoccupé de ne point rencontrer ici les gens dont j’avais besoin et dont l’absence contrarie mes projets.

— Tandis qu’on prépare le campement, proposa le capitaine Hardigan, voulez-vous aller un peu plus loin?…

— Volontiers”, répondit M. de Schaller.

Le maréchal des logis-chef fut appelé. Il reçut ordre d’organiser la halte pour la nuit près d’un massif de palmiers à l’orée du canal. L’herbe verdissait à l’abri des arbres. Un petit ruisseau courait à leur pied. Ni l’eau, ni le pâturage ne manquaient, et, quant aux provisions fraîches, elles seraient aisément renouvelées à une oasis des bords de l’Asloudje.

Nicol exécuta immédiatement les ordres de son capitaine, et les spahis prirent les mesures habituelles aux campements organisés dans ces conditions.

M. de Schaller et les deux officiers, profitant de la dernière heure du jour, suivirent la berge du nord, qu’ils comptaient longer pendant un kilomètre.

Cette excursion permit à l’ingénieur de reconnaître que la tranchée était entièrement terminée sur ce point et l’ensemble des travaux en aussi bon état qu’il s’y attendait. Le fond des tranchées entre les chotts offrait un passage facile aux eaux qu’y déverserait le Rharsa, lorsqu’il aurait reçu celles du golfe, et la pente était conforme aux plans des ingénieurs.

M. de Schaller et ses compagnons ne prolongèrent pas leur promenade au-delà d’un kilomètre. D’ailleurs, aussi loin que put porter le regard en direction d’El Asloudje, cette portion du canal était déserte. C’est pourquoi, voulant être rentrés avant la nuit, l’ingénieur, le capitaine Hardigan et le lieutenant Villette reprirent le chemin du campement.

Là, une tente était montée. M. François les y servit avec sa correction habituelle. On prit les précautions pour la garde de nuit, et il n’y avait plus qu’à chercher dans un bon sommeil des forces pour les étapes du lendemain.

Cependant, si, au cours de leur excursion, M. de Schaller et les deux officiers n’avaient aperçu personne, si cette partie du second canal leur avait paru déserte, elle ne l’était pas. Que l’équipe ne fût plus là, à ce sujet aucun doute, et l’ingénieur n’y avait point relevé trace d’une main-d’œuvre récente.

Or, les officiers et lui avaient été vus par deux hommes blottis derrière d’épaisses touffes de driss dans une brèche des dunes.

Assurément, si Coupe-à-cœur eût été là, il eût dépisté ces deux hommes. Ceux-ci avaient eu grand soin de ne point se montrer. Ils observèrent à moins de cinquante pas le passage de ces trois étrangers qui longeaient la berge. Ils les revirent alors qu’ils revenaient sur leurs pas. Ce fut seulement dès les premières ombres du crépuscule qu’ils se hasardèrent à se rapprocher du campement.

Sans doute, à leur approche, Coupe-à-cœur donna bien quelques signes d’éveil et grogna sourdement. Mais le maréchal des logis-chef le calma, après avoir jeté un coup d’œil au-dehors, et le chien vint se recoucher près de son maître.

Tout d’abord, ces indigènes s’étaient arrêtés sur la lisière du petit bois. À huit heures, il faisait déjà sombre, car le crépuscule est de courte durée sous cette latitude. Nul doute qu'ils n'eussent tous deux l'intention d'observer de plus près ce détachement en halte à l'entrée du second canal. Qu'était-il venu faire, et qui le commandait?…

Que ces cavaliers appartinssent à un régiment de spahis, ils le savaient, ayant aperçu les deux officiers pendant leur excursion en compagnie de l'ingénieur. Mais combien d'hommes comptait ce détachement, quel matériel escortait-il vers le Melrir? C'était là précisément ce qu'ils voulaient reconnaître.

Les deux indigènes franchirent donc la lisière, rampèrent entre les herbes, gagnèrent d'un arbre à l'autre. Au milieu de l'obscurité, ils purent apercevoir les tentes dressées à l'entrée du bois et les chevaux couchés sur le pâturage.

C'est à ce moment que les grognements du chien les mirent en éveil, et ils retournèrent vers les dunes, sans que leur présence eût été soupçonnée au campement.

Alors, n'ayant plus la crainte d'être entendus, ils échangèrent ces demandes et ces réponses:

"Ainsi… c'est bien lui… ce capitaine Hardigan?…

— Oui!… celui-là même qui avait fait prisonnier Hadjar…

— Et aussi l'officier qui était sous ses ordres?…

— Son lieutenant… Je les ai reconnus…

— Comme ils t'auraient reconnu, sans doute…

— Mais toi… ils ne t’ont jamais rencontré?…

— Jamais.

— Bien!… peut-être… sera-t-il possible… Il se présente là une occasion… dont il faut profiter… qui ne se retrouverait pas…

— Et si ce capitaine et ce lieutenant tombent entre les mains de Hadjar…

— Ils ne s’échapperont pas, eux… comme Hadjar s’est échappé du bordj…

— Ils étaient trois seulement quand nous les avons aperçus, reprit l’un des indigènes…

— Oui… mais ceux qui sont campés là-bas… ne sont pas bien nombreux, répondit l’autre.

— Quel était ce troisième?… Ce n’est pas un officier.

— Non… quelque ingénieur de leur compagnie maudite!… Il sera venu là avec son escorte pour visiter encore les travaux du canal… avant qu’il ne soit rempli par les eaux… Ils se dirigent vers le Melrir… et lorsqu’ils seront arrivés au chott… lorsqu’ils verront…

— Qu’ils ne peuvent plus l’inonder, s’écria le plus violent de ces deux hommes, et qu’elle ne se fera pas, leur mer Saharienne, ils s’arrêteront… ils n’iront pas plus loin… et alors quelques centaines des fidèles Touareg…

— Mais comment… les prévenir… pour qu’ils viennent à temps?

— L’oasis de Zenfig n’est qu’à une vingtaine de lieues… et si le détachement s’arrête au Melrir… et si l’on peut l’y retenir quelques jours…

— Ce n’est pas impossible… surtout maintenant qu’ils n’auront pas de raison d’aller plus loin…

— Et s’ils attendent là que les eaux du golfe se répandent à travers le chott, ils pourront creuser leur tombe en cet endroit, car ils seront tous morts avant qu’elles n’y arrivent!… Viens, Harrig… viens!

— Oui… je te suis, Sohar!”

Ces hommes étaient les deux Touareg qui avaient pris part à l’invasion de Hadjar: Harrig, qui avait combiné l’affaire avec le mercanti de Gabès; Sohar, le propre frère du chef touareg. Ils quittèrent alors la place et disparurent rapidement dans la direction du Melrir.

Le lendemain, une heure après le lever du soleil, le capitaine Hardigan donna le signal du départ. Les chevaux harnachés, les hommes se mirent en selle, et la petite troupe suivit dans l’ordre accoutumé la berge nord du canal.

M. François, rasé de frais et de près, occupait sa place habituelle à l’avant du convoi, et, comme le brigadier Pistache, à cheval, se tenait près de lui, tous deux causaient volontiers de choses et autres.

“Eh bien, cela va-t-il, monsieur François? demandait Pistache de ce ton de bonne humeur qui lui était habituel.

— À merveille, répondit le digne domestique de M. de Schaller…

— Cette excursion ne vous cause pas trop d’ennuis ni de fatigues?…

— Non, brigadier… ce n’est qu’une promenade à travers un pays curieux…

— Ce chott sera bien changé, après l’inondation…

— Bien changé, en effet”, répondit M. François d’une voix mesurée et doctorale.

Car ce n’était pas cet homme minutieux et méthodique qui eût mangé ses mots.

Il les goûtait et les suçait au contraire comme fait un gourmet d’une fine pastille.

“Et quand je pense, reprit Pistache, que là où nos chevaux marchent, nageront des poissons, navigueront des bateaux…

— Oui… brigadier, des poissons de toutes sortes, et des marsouins, et des dauphins, et des requins…

— Et des baleines… ajouta Pistache.

— Non… je ne le crois pas, brigadier; sans doute, il n’y aurait pas assez d’eau pour elles…

— Oh! monsieur François, d’après ce que nous disait notre marchef, vingt mètres de profondeur au Rharsa et vingt-cinq au Melrir!…

— Pas partout, brigadier, et il faut de l’eau à ces géants du monde sous-marin pour qu’ils puissent prendre leurs ébats et souffler à leur aise!…

— Ça souffle fort, monsieur François?…

— À remplir les souffleries d’un haut fourneau ou les orgues de toutes les cathédrales de France!”

Et si M. François fut satisfait de sa réponse si péremptoire, qui ne laissa pas d’étonner un peu ce brave Pistache, on l’admettra sans peine.

Puis il reprit, décrivant avec la main… le périmètre de la nouvelle mer:

“Et je vois déjà cette mer intérieure sillonnée de steamers ou de voiliers se livrant au grand et au petit cabotage, allant de port en port, et savez-vous quel serait mon plus vif désir, brigadier?…

— Exprimez-le, monsieur François…

— Ce serait d’être à bord du premier bâtiment qui cinglera à travers les eaux nouvelles de ces anciens chotts algériens… Et je compte un peu que M. l’ingénieur aura pris passage sur ce navire, et que je ferai avec lui le tour de cette mer, créée de nos propres mains.”

En vérité, le digne M. François n’était pas éloigné de croire qu’il était quelque peu le collaborateur de son maître, dans cette création future de la mer Saharienne.

En somme, – et c’est sur ce vœu que le brigadier Pistache acheva cette intéressante conversation, – puisque l’expédition avait si bien commencé, il était permis d’espérer qu’elle finirait de même.

En se maintenant à l’allure habituelle, – deux étapes par jour, chacune de sept à huit kilomètres, – M. de Schaller comptait atteindre sous peu l’extrémité du second canal. Dès que le détachement serait arrivé au bord du Melrir, la décision serait prise de le contourner soit par la rive du nord, soit par la rive du sud. Peu importait, au surplus, puisque le projet de l’ingénieur comprenait une reconnaissance de tout son périmètre.

La première partie du canal put être franchie dans cette étape. La section partait du Rharsa pour aboutir à la petite dépression connue sous le nom d’El Asloudje entre des dunes hautes de sept à dix mètres.

Mais, avant d’atteindre le Melrir, il y avait à traverser ou à longer une certaine quantité de petits chotts qui s’échelonnaient en tous sens et fournissaient une ligne presque continue de dépressions moins profondes, entre des berges peu élevées, et que l’arrivée des eaux de la Méditerranée devait nécessairement submerger. De là, d’une tranchée à une autre, la nécessité d’un balisage, propre à indiquer leur route dans ces chotts aux bateaux de toutes sortes qui ne tarderaient pas à se montrer sur cette mer nouvelle créée par la science et la volonté des hommes. N’en avait-on pas fait autant, lors du percement du canal de Suez, dans la traversée des lacs amers, où la direction des navires ne serait pas possible sans ces indications précises?

Là encore, tout était bien avancé, l’action de puissantes machines avait creusé des tranchées profondes, jusqu’au Melrir. Que ne pourrait-on tenter demain, si la nécessité s’en faisait sentir, avec les machines actuelles, dragues gigantesques, perforateurs auxquels rien ne peut résister, transporteurs à déblais roulant sur des voies ferrées improvisées, enfin tout ce matériel formidable dont ne pouvaient se douter le commandant Roudaire

et ses successeurs, et que les inventeurs et constructeurs avaient imaginés et construits, au cours des années qui s’étaient écoulées entre le commencement d’exécution du projet Roudaire, celui plus avancé de la Compagnie Franco-étrangère, abandonné par celle-ci, comme on sait, et la reprise de l’affaire par la Société française de la mer Saharienne, sous la direction de M. de Schaller.

Tout ce qui avait été fait jusqu'alors était demeuré en assez bon état, selon les prévisions de l'ingénieur, qui les avait si éloquemment exposées, dans sa conférence de Gabès, en parlant des qualités essentielles de conservation de ce climat africain qui semble respecter jusqu'aux ruines ensevelies sous les sables, et exhumées il n'y a pas si longtemps. Mais, autour de ces travaux de canalisation presque, sinon tout à fait achevés, la solitude complète! Où régnait naguère le mouvement d'une foule d'ouvriers, rien que le morne silence des espaces dépeuplés, où ne se rencontrait aucun être humain, et où seuls les travaux abandonnés attestaient que l'activité, la persévérance et l'énergie humaines avaient passé par là et donné momentanément à ces régions solitaires une apparence de vie.

C'était donc une inspection dans la solitude que M. de Schaller accomplissait, avant de mener à bonne fin de nouveaux et, il avait tout lieu de le croire, définitifs projets. Cependant cette solitude, à ce moment même, était plus inquiétante, et l'ingénieur éprouvait une véritable déconvenue en ne voyant venir à sa rencontre aucun des hommes de l'équipe de Biskra, ainsi qu'il avait été convenu.

La déception était cruelle; mais, en y réfléchissant, M. de Schaller se disait qu'on ne se rend pas de Biskra au Rharsa comme de Paris à Saint-Cloud et que, dans une route aussi longue, un incident quelconque avait pu se produire, dérangeant les prévisions des calculs et modifiant les horaires. Et encore non, ce n'était pas possible, puisque l'agent lui avait télégraphié à Gabès, de Biskra, que tout s'était bien passé jusqu'à cette dernière ville et conformément aux instructions fournies à Paris même. C'était donc dans le trajet, peut-être dans la région marécageuse souvent inondée et mal connue de la Farfaria, entre Biskra et la région du Melrir où il allait bientôt arriver, que quelque chose d'inattendu avait dû arrêter en route ceux qu'il y croyait trouver. Une fois lancé dans le champ des hypothèses, on n'en sort pas.

L’une succède à l’autre avec une continuité obsédante, et elles travaillaient, en ce moment, l’imagination de M. de Schaller, sans lui fournir la moindre explication à peu près plausible ou même vraisemblable. Insensiblement, sa surprise et sa déconvenue se changeaient en réelle inquiétude, et la fin de l’étape arriva sans modifier sa physionomie morose. Aussi le capitaine Hardigan jugea-t-il prudent d’éclairer la route.

Par son ordre, le maréchal des logis-chef dut se porter, avec quelques cavaliers, à un ou deux kilomètres de chaque côté du canal, tandis que le reste du détachement continuait sa marche.

La région était déserte ou, plus exactement, il semblait qu’elle eût été récemment désertée. À la fin de la seconde étape, le détachement fit halte pour la nuit, à l’extrémité du petit chott. L’endroit était absolument dénudé; aucune oasis à proximité. Jusqu’ici, jamais les campements n’avaient été établis dans des conditions aussi insuffisantes. Pas d’arbres, pas de pâturages. Rien que ce “reg” où le sable se mêle au gravier, sans aucune pointe de verdure à l’affleurement du sol. Mais le convoi portait assez de fourrage pour assurer la nourriture des montures. D’ailleurs, sur les bords du Melrir, la petite troupe, allant d’oasis en oasis, trouverait aisément à se ravitailler.

Heureusement, à défaut d’oueds, plusieurs “ras” ou sources coulaient, auxquelles hommes et bêtes purent se désaltérer; on aurait cru qu’ils allaient les épuiser, tant avait été dévorante la chaleur de cette journée.

La nuit fut tranquille, très claire aussi, une nuit de pleine lune, sous un ciel fourmillant d’étoiles; comme toujours, les approches avaient été surveillées. D’ailleurs, en terrain découvert, ni Sohar, ni Harrig n’auraient pu rôder autour du campement sans être aperçus. Ils ne s’y fussent point exposés, et il entrait dans leur projet, sans doute, que l’ingénieur, le capitaine Hardigan et ses spahis fussent engagés plus avant dans la partie algérienne des chotts.

Le lendemain, dès la première heure, le campement fut levé. M. de Schaller avait grande hâte d’atteindre l’extrémité du canal. Là était ouverte la tranchée qui amènerait les eaux du golfe de Gabès au chott Melrir.

Mais, toujours pas de trace de l’équipe partie de Biskra, et dont l’absence restait un mystère. Que lui était-il advenu? M. de Schaller se perdait en suppositions. Arrivé au lieu de la rencontre strictement fixé, il n’y trouvait aucun de ceux qu’il attendait, et dont l’absence lui paraissait grosse de menaces.

“Il s’est évidemment passé quelque chose de grave! ne cessait-il de répéter.

— Je le crains, avouait à son tour le capitaine Hardigan. Tâchons d’arriver au Melrir avant la nuit.”

La halte de midi fut courte. On ne dételа point les chariots, on ne débrida pas les chevaux – le temps seulement de prendre quelque nourriture. On aurait tout loisir de se reposer après cette dernière étape.

Bref, le détachement fit telle diligence, sans avoir jamais rencontré personne sur sa route, que, vers quatre heures du soir, apparurent les hauteurs qui encadrent le chott de ce côté. Sur la droite, au kilomètre 347, se trouvait le dernier chantier de la Compagnie à la fin des travaux, puis à partir de ce point il n’y avait plus que la traversée du chott Melrir et de son entrée, le chott Sellem, pour retrouver les cotes élevées.

Ainsi que l’observa le lieutenant Villette, pas une fumée ne s’élevait à l’horizon, et aucun bruit ne se faisait entendre.

Les chevaux furent vigoureusement poussés, et, comme le chien prenait les devants, Nicol ne put empêcher son cheval de se lancer sur les traces de Coupe-à-cœur.

D’ailleurs, tous prirent le galop, et ce fut au milieu d’un nuage de poussière que les spahis firent halte au débouché du canal. Là, pas plus qu’au Rharsa, aucune trace de l’arrivée de l’équipe qui devait venir de Biskra, et quelles furent la surprise, la stupéfaction de l’ingénieur et de ses compagnons, en voyant le chantier bouleversé, la tranchée comblée en partie, tout passage fermé par un barrage de sable, et, par conséquent, l’impossibilité matérielle, pour les eaux, de se déverser dans les profondeurs du Melrir, sans une réorganisation complète des travaux sur ce point!

X. AU KILOMÈTRE 347.

Il avait été question d’appeler Roudaire-Ville le point où aboutissait le second canal sur le Melrir. Puis, comme le canal, en somme, avait pour terminus réel le bord occidental du chott Melrir, on avait pensé à remplacer son nom de ce côté par celui du Président de la Compagnie Franco-étrangère, et à réserver celui de Roudaire pour le port à établir du côté de Mraïer ou de Sétil, en connexion avec le Transsaharien ou une ligne ferrée s’y rattachant. Enfin, comme son nom avait été donné à la crique du Rharsa, l’habitude s’était conservée d’appeler ce point le kilomètre 347.

De cette tranchée de la dernière section, il ne restait plus vestige. Les sables y étaient amoncelés dans toute sa largeur et sur une étendue de plus de cent mètres. Que le creusement n’eût pas été entièrement terminé en cet endroit, c’était admissible. Mais, à cette époque – et M. de Schaller ne l’ignorait point – c’est tout au plus si un bourrelet de médiocre épaisseur aurait dû barrer l’extrémité du canal et quelques jours auraient suffi pour l’éventrer. Évidemment des troupes de nomades endoctrinées, fanatisées, avaient passé par là et avaient ravagé et détruit, en une journée peut-être, ce que le temps avait si bien épargné.

Immobile sur un étroit plateau qui dominait le canal à sa jonction avec le chott, muet, les deux officiers près de lui, tandis que le détachement stationnait au pied de la dune, l’ingénieur, ne pouvant en croire ses yeux, contemplait mélancoliquement tout ce désastre.

“Il ne manque pas de nomades dans le pays qui ont pu faire le coup… dit le capitaine Hardigan, que ce soient des tribus soulevées par leurs chefs, des Touareg ou autres venus des oasis du Melrir! Ces détrousseurs de caravanes, enragés contre la mer Saharienne, se sont certainement portés en masse contre le chantier du kilomètre 347… Il aurait fallu que la contrée fût jour et nuit surveillée par les maghzen, pour empêcher les agressions des nomades.”

Ces maghzen, dont parlait le capitaine Hardigan, forment un complément de l’armée régulière d’Afrique. Ce sont des spahis et des zambas chargés de la police intérieure et des répressions sommaires. On les choisit parmi les hommes intelligents et de bonne volonté, qui, pour une raison quelconque, ne tiennent pas à rester dans leur tribu. Le burnous bleu est leur signe distinctif, tandis que les cheikhs ont le burnous brun et que le burnous rouge appartient à l’uniforme des spahis et est aussi l’insigne d’investiture des grands chefs. On trouve des escouades de maghzen dans les bourgades importantes du Djerid. Mais c’est tout un régiment qui aurait dû être organisé pour se transporter d’une section à l’autre pendant la durée des travaux, en prévision d’un soulèvement possible des indigènes, dont on connaissait les sentiments hostiles. Lorsque la nouvelle mer serait en exploitation, lorsque des navires sillonneraient les chotts inondés, ces hostilités seraient moins à craindre. Mais, jusque-là, il importait que le pays fût soumis à une surveillance rigoureuse. Les attaques dont ce terminus du canal venait d’être l’objet pourraient se produire ailleurs, si l’autorité militaire n’y apportait bon ordre.

En ce moment, l’ingénieur et les deux officiers tenaient conseil. Que devaient-ils faire? En premier lieu, se mettre à la recherche des hommes composant l’équipe venue du Nord. Comment s’y prendre? De quel côté diriger les recherches? C’était, cependant, d’une importance capitale; il fallait, disait M. de Schaller, les retrouver d’abord, si possible, et sans retard, car, dans ces circonstances, leur absence au rendez-vous devenait de plus en plus inquiétante, et après on verrait. En ramenant ces hommes, ouvriers et contremaîtres, les dégâts seraient réparables en temps opportun, du moins il le croyait.

“À la condition de les protéger, dit le capitaine Hardigan, et ce n’est pas avec mes quelques spahis que je pourrais accomplir cette besogne; veiller sur eux, en admettant qu’on les retrouve, et les préserver contre de grosses bandes de pillards!…

— Aussi, mon capitaine, dit le lieutenant Villette, nous faut-il absolument du renfort, et l’aller quérir au plus près…

— Et le plus près, ce serait Biskra”, déclara le capitaine Hardigan.

En effet, cette ville est située dans le nord-ouest du Melrir, à l’entrée du grand désert et de la plaine du Ziban. Elle appartient à la province de Constantine depuis 1845, époque à laquelle les Algériens l’occupèrent. Longtemps le point le plus avancé dans le Sahara que possédât la France, elle comptait quelques milliers d’habitants et un bureau militaire. Sa garnison pourrait donc fournir, provisoirement du moins, un contingent qui, joint aux quelques spahis du capitaine Hardigan, serait à même de protéger efficacement les ouvriers, si l’on parvenait à les ramener au chantier.

Donc, en faisant diligence, quelques jours suffiraient pour gagner Biskra, beaucoup plus rapprochée que Tozeur et à égale distance de Nefta. Mais ces deux localités n’auraient pu fournir les mêmes renforts que Biskra et, d’ailleurs, en prenant ce parti, on avait la chance de rencontrer Pointar.

“Eh, fit observer l’ingénieur, à quoi servirait de défendre les travaux si les bras manquent pour les rétablir?… Ce qu’il importerait, c’est de savoir dans quelles conditions les ouvriers ont été dispersés et où ils se sont réfugiés en fuyant Goléah…

— Sans doute, ajouta le lieutenant Villette, mais ici… personne pour nous renseigner!… Peut-être, en battant la campagne, retrouverions-nous quelques indigènes qui pourraient, s'ils le voulaient, nous fournir des renseignements…

— En tout cas, reprit le capitaine Hardigan, il ne s'agit plus de continuer la reconnaissance du Melrir, il faut décider si nous irons à Biskra ou si nous retournerons à Gabès."

M. de Schaller se montrait fort perplexe. Une éventualité se présentait qui n'avait pu être prévue; et, ce qui s'imposait et dans le délai le plus court, c'était la réfection du canal, et les mesures à prendre pour le mettre à l'abri de toute nouvelle attaque. Mais, comment songer à cela, avant de se mettre à la recherche du personnel ouvrier, dont l'absence l'avait si vivement ému dès son arrivée au deuxième canal!

Quant à la raison qui avait poussé les indigènes de cette région à bouleverser les travaux, nul doute que ce fût le mécontentement provoqué par la prochaine inondation des chotts algériens. Et qui sait s'il n'en résulterait pas un soulèvement général des tribus du Djerid, et si la sécurité serait jamais assurée sur ce parcours de quatre cents kilomètres entre le fond du Melrir et le seuil de Gabès?…

"Dans tous les cas, dit alors le capitaine Hardigan, et quelque parti que nous prenions, campons en cet endroit, et demain on se remettra en route."

Il n'y avait rien de mieux à faire. Après une étape assez fatigante sous un ciel de feu, la halte s'imposait jusqu'au matin. Ordre fut donc donné de dresser les tentes, de disposer le convoi, de laisser liberté aux chevaux à travers le pâturage de l'oasis, en se gardant comme d'habitude. Il ne semblait pas, d'ailleurs, que le détachement fût menacé de quelque danger.

L’attaque du chantier devait remonter à plusieurs jours. En somme, l’oasis de Goléah et ses environs paraissaient absolument déserts.

Tandis que l’ingénieur et les deux officiers s’entretenaient à ce sujet, ainsi que cela vient d’être dit, le maréchal des logis-chef et deux spahis s’étaient dirigés vers l’intérieur de l’oasis. Coupe-à-cœur accompagnait son maître. Il allait, furetant du nez sous les herbes, et son attention ne semblait pas éveillée, lorsque, soudain, il s’arrêta, redressa la tête, dans l’attitude d’un chien qui tombe en arrêt.

Était-ce quelque gibier courant à travers le bois et que Coupe-à-cœur avait senti?… Quelque fauve, lion ou panthère, prêt à bondir?…

Le maréchal des logis-chef ne s’y trompa pas. À la façon d’aboyer de l’intelligent animal, il comprenait ce que celui-ci voulait dire.

“Il y a quelques rôdeurs par là, déclara-t-il, et si l’on pouvait en pincer un!…”

Coupe-à-cœur allait s’élancer, mais son maître le retint. Si un indigène venait de ce côté, il ne fallait pas le mettre en fuite. Il avait dû, d’ailleurs, entendre les aboiements du chien, et peut-être ne cherchait-il pas à se cacher…

Nicol ne tarda point à être fixé sur ce point. Un homme, un Arabe s’avançait entre les arbres, observant à droite, à gauche, sans s’inquiéter d’être vu ou non. Et, dès qu’il aperçut les trois hommes, il alla vers eux d’un pas tranquille.

C’était un indigène, âgé de trente à trente-cinq ans, vêtu comme ces ouvriers de la basse Algérie, embauchés ici ou là, au hasard des travaux, ou au temps des moissons, et Nicol se dit que de cette rencontre son capitaine pourrait peut-être tirer profit. Il était bien décidé à lui amener cet indigène de gré ou de force, lorsque celui-ci, le devançant, demanda:

“Il y a des Français par ici?…

— Oui… un détachement de spahis, répondit le maréchal des logis-chef.

— Conduisez-moi au commandant!” se contenta de dire l’Arabe.

Nicol, précédé de Coupe-à-cœur, qui poussait quelques sourds grognements, revint donc sur la lisière de l’oasis. Les deux spahis marchaient derrière. Mais l’indigène ne manifestait aucune intention de s’enfuir.

Dès qu’il eut franchi le dernier rang d’arbres, il fut aperçu du lieutenant Villette, qui s’écria:

“Enfin… quelqu’un!…

— Tiens! dit le capitaine, ce chanceux de Nicol a fait une bonne rencontre…

— En effet, ajouta M. de Schaller, et peut-être cet homme pourra-t-il nous apprendre?…”

Un instant après, l’Arabe était en présence de l’ingénieur, et les spahis se formaient en groupe autour de leurs officiers.

Nicol raconta alors dans quelles conditions il avait trouvé cet homme… L’Arabe errait à travers le bois et, dès qu’il avait aperçu le marchef et ses compagnons, il était venu à eux. Cependant, Nicol crut devoir ajouter que le nouveau venu lui paraissait suspect et qu’il croyait devoir faire part à ses chefs de son impression. Le capitaine procéda immédiatement à l’interrogatoire du survenant volontaire:

“Qui es-tu?…” lui demanda-t-il en français.

Et l’indigène de répondre assez correctement dans la même langue:

“Un originaire de Tozeur.

— Tu te nommes?…

— Mézaki.

— D’où venais-tu?…

— De là-bas, d’El Zeribet.”

Ce nom était celui d’une oasis algérienne située à quarante-cinq kilomètres du chott, sur un oued du même nom.

“Et que venais-tu faire?…

— Voir ce qui se passait par ici.

— Pourquoi? Étais-tu donc un ouvrier de la Société?… demanda vivement M. de Schaller.

— Oui, autrefois, et depuis de longues années, je gardais les travaux par ici. Aussi le chef Pointar m’a-t-il pris avec lui dès son arrivée.”

Ainsi s’appelait, en effet, le conducteur des Ponts et Chaussées attaché à la Société qui avait amené l’équipe attendue de Biskra, et dont l’absence inquiétait si vivement l’ingénieur. Enfin, il allait en avoir des nouvelles!

Puis, cet indigène d’ajouter:

“Et je vous connais bien, monsieur l’ingénieur, car je vous ai vu plus d’une fois, lorsque vous veniez dans la région.”

Il n’y avait pas à mettre en doute ce que disait Mézaki, il était un de ces nombreux Arabes que la Compagnie avait employés autrefois au creusement du canal entre le Rharsa et le Melrir et que les agents de la nouvelle Société de la mer Saharienne s’efforçaient soigneusement de recruter. C’était un homme vigoureux, ayant cette physionomie calme, qui est propre à tous ceux de sa race; mais un regard vif, un regard de feu sortait de son œil noir.

“Eh bien… où sont tes camarades qui devaient s’installer au chantier?… demanda M. de Schaller.

— Là-bas… du côté de Zéribet, répondit l’indigène, en tendant son bras vers le nord. Il y en a une centaine à l’oasis de Gizeb…

— Et pourquoi sont-ils partis?… Est-ce que leur campement a été attaqué?…

— Oui… par une bande de Berbères…”

Ces indigènes, berbères ou d’origine berbère, occupent le pays de l’Icham, région comprise entre le Touat au nord, Tombouctou au sud, le Niger à l’ouest, le Fezzan à l’est. Leurs tribus sont nombreuses, Arzchers, Ahaggars, Mahingas, Thagimas, presque toujours en lutte avec les Arabes, et principalement les Chaambas algériens, leurs plus grands ennemis.

Mézaki raconta alors ce qui s’était passé, au chantier, une huitaine de jours avant.

Plusieurs centaines de nomades, soulevés par leurs chefs, s’étaient jetés sur les travailleurs au moment de leur arrivée au chantier. De leur métier, conducteurs de caravanes, ils ne pourraient plus l’exercer, lorsque la marine marchande ferait tout le trafic intérieur de l’Algérie et de la Tunisie par la mer Saharienne. De là, accord de ces diverses tribus, devant la reprise des travaux, pour détruire le canal qui devait amener les eaux de la Petite-Syrte. L’équipe de Pointar n’était pas en force pour résister à une attaque inattendue. Presque aussitôt dispersés, les ouvriers ne purent éviter d’être massacrés qu’en gagnant le nord du Djerid. Revenir vers le Rharsa, puis vers les oasis de Nefta ou de Tozeur leur avait paru dangereux, les assaillants pouvant leur en couper la route, et c’était du côté de Zéribet qu’ils avaient cherché refuge. Après leur départ, les pillards et leurs complices avaient détruit le chantier, incendié l’oasis, bouleversé les travaux avec l’aide des nomades, joints à eux pour cette œuvre de destruction. Et, une fois que la tranchée eut été comblée, lorsqu’il ne resta plus rien du talus, lorsque le débouché du canal sur le Melrir eut été entièrement obstrué, les nomades disparurent aussi soudainement qu’ils étaient venus. Assurément, si le second canal, entre le Rharsa et le Melrir n’était pas gardé par des forces suffisantes, il serait exposé à des agressions de ce genre.

“Oui… dit l’ingénieur, lorsque l’Arabe eut achevé son récit, il importe que l’autorité militaire prenne des mesures pour protéger les chantiers à la reprise des travaux… Après, la mer Saharienne saura se défendre toute seule!”

Le capitaine Hardigan posa alors diverses questions à Mézaki:

“De combien d’hommes était composée cette bande de malandrins?…

— De quatre à cinq cents environ, répondit l’Arabe.

— Et sait-on de quel côté ils se sont retirés?

— Vers le sud, affirma Mézaki.

— Et l’on ne dit pas que les Touareg aient pris part à cette affaire?…

— Non… des Berbères seulement.

— Le chef Hadjar n’a pas reparu dans le pays?…

— Et comment l’aurait-il pu, répondit Mézaki, puisque voilà trois mois qu’il a été fait prisonnier et qu’il est enfermé dans le bordj de Gabès.”

Ainsi cet indigène ne savait rien de l’évasion de Hadjar, et ce ne serait pas par lui que l’on pourrait apprendre si le fugitif avait été revu dans la région. Mais ce qu’il devait être en mesure de dire, c’était ce qui concernait les ouvriers de Pointar, et, à la question que l’ingénieur lui posa à ce sujet, Mézaki répondit:

“Je le répète, ils se sont enfuis dans le nord, du côté de Zeribet…

— Et Pointar, est-il avec eux?… demanda M. de Schaller.

— Il ne les a point quittés, répondit l’indigène, et les contremaîtres y sont aussi.

— Où, en ce moment?

— À l’oasis de Gizeb…

— Éloignée?…

— D’une vingtaine de kilomètres du Melrir…

— Et tu pourrais aller les prévenir que nous sommes arrivés au chantier de Goléah avec quelques spahis?… demanda le capitaine Hardigan.

— Je le peux, si vous le voulez, répondit Mézaki, mais, si je vais seul, peut-être le chef Pointar hésitera-t-il…

— Nous allons délibérer”, conclut le capitaine, après avoir fait donner quelque nourriture à l’indigène, qui paraissait avoir grand besoin de manger et de se reposer.

L’ingénieur et les deux officiers conférèrent à l’écart.

Il ne leur parut point qu’il y eût à suspecter la véracité de cet Arabe qui connaissait évidemment Pointar et avait aussi reconnu M. de Schaller. Nul doute qu’il ne fût un des ouvriers embauchés sur la section.

Or, dans les circonstances actuelles, ce qu’il y avait de plus urgent, c’était, on l’a dit, de retrouver Pointar et de réunir les deux expéditions. En outre, le commandant militaire de Biskra, prévenu, serait prié d’envoyer du renfort et on pourrait peut-être remettre les équipes au travail.

“Je le répète, disait l’ingénieur, après l’inondation des chotts, il n’y aura plus rien à craindre. Mais, avant tout, il faut rétablir la tranchée du canal, et, pour cela, ramener les ouvriers disparus.”

En résumé, voici à quel parti s’arrêtèrent l’ingénieur et le capitaine Hardigan, en tenant compte des circonstances.

Il n’y avait plus rien à craindre de la bande des Berbères, au dire même de Mézaki, laquelle s’était retirée vers le sud-ouest du Melrir. On ne courait donc plus aucun risque au kilomètre 347 et le mieux serait d’y installer un campement en attendant le retour des ouvriers. Le lieutenant Villette, le maréchal des logis-chef Nicol et tous les hommes disponibles accompagneraient Mézaki jusqu’à l’oasis de Gizeb où le chef Pointar et son équipe se trouvaient actuellement, disait-il. En cette partie de la région, traversée par les caravanes, exposée par là même aux agressions des pillards, ce n’était que prudence. En partant le lendemain dès la pointe du jour, le lieutenant comptait atteindre l’oasis dans la matinée et, en repartant dans l’après-midi, regagner avant la nuit le chantier. Probablement Pointar y reviendrait avec l’officier qui mettrait un cheval à sa disposition. Quant aux ouvriers, ils suivraient par étapes et seraient dans quarante-huit heures rassemblés sur la section, s’ils pouvaient partir le lendemain, et le travail reprendrait aussitôt.

Le voyage d’exploration autour du Melrir était donc momentanément suspendu.

Telles furent les dispositions arrêtées d’un commun accord entre l’ingénieur et le capitaine Hardigan. Mézaki n’y fit aucune objection, approuvant fort l’envoi du lieutenant Villette et des cavaliers à l’oasis de Gizeb. Il assurait que les ouvriers n’hésiteraient pas à revenir au chantier dès qu’ils connaîtraient la présence de l’ingénieur et du capitaine. On verrait d’ailleurs, s’il ne conviendrait pas d’y appeler un fort détachement de maghzen de Biskra, qui garderait le chantier jusqu’au jour où les premières eaux du golfe de Gabès inonderaient le Melrir.

XI. UNE EXCURSION DE DOUZE HEURES.

À sept heures du matin, le lieutenant Villette et ses hommes quittaient le campement. La journée s'annonçait lourde et chaude, avec menace d'orage, un de ces violents météores qui assaillent souvent les plaines du Djerid. Mais il n'y avait pas de temps à perdre, et M. de Schaller, avec raison, tenait à retrouver Pointar et son personnel.

Il va sans dire que le marchef montait Va-d'l'avant, et que Va-d'l'avant était accompagné de Coupe-à-cœur.

Au départ, les spahis avaient chargé sur leurs chevaux des vivres pour la journée, et, d'ailleurs, sans pousser jusqu'à Zeribet, à l'oasis de Gizeb la nourriture eût été assurée.

En attendant le retour du lieutenant Villette, l'ingénieur et le capitaine Hardigan commenceraient à organiser le campement avec le concours du brigadier Pistache, de M. François, des quatre spahis ne faisant pas partie de l'escorte du lieutenant Villette et des conducteurs de chariots. Les pâturages de l'oasis étaient abondamment pourvus d'herbe et arrosés par un petit oued qui se déversait dans le chott.

L'excursion du lieutenant Villette ne devait durer qu'une douzaine d'heures. En effet, la distance comprise entre le kilomètre 347 et Gizeb ne dépassait pas vingt kilomètres. Sans trop presser les chevaux, cette distance pourrait être franchie dans la matinée. Puis, après une halte de deux heures, l'après-midi suffirait à ramener le détachement avec Pointar, le chef du chantier.

Un cheval avait été donné à Mézaki, et l’on vit qu’il était bon cavalier, comme le sont tous les Arabes. Il trottait en tête, près du lieutenant et du maréchal des logis-chef, en direction du nord-est qu’il prit dès que l’oasis eut été laissée en arrière.

Une longue plaine semée çà et là de maigres bouquets d’arbres, et que sillonnait le ruisseau, s’étendait à perte de vue. C’était bien l’”outtâ” algérienne dans toute son aridité. À peine quelques touffes jaunâtres de drif émergeaient de ce sol surchauffé, où les grains de sable brillaient comme des gemmes sous les rayons du soleil.

Cette portion du Djerid était entièrement déserte. Aucune caravane ne la traversait alors pour gagner quelque importante ville saharienne, Ouargla ou Touggourt sur la limite du désert. Nulle harde de ruminants ne venait se plonger dans les eaux de l’oued. Ce que faisait précisément Coupe-à-cœur, sur lequel Va-d’l’avant jetait des regards d’envie lorsqu’il le voyait bondir tout ruisselant de gouttelettes.

C’était la rive gauche de ce cours d’eau que remontait la petite troupe. Et à une question posée par l’officier, Mézaki avait répondu:

“Oui… nous suivrons l’oued jusqu’à l’oasis de Gizeb, qu’il traverse dans toute sa longueur…

— Est-ce que cette oasis est habitée?…

— Non, répondit l’indigène. Aussi, en quittant la bourgade de Zeribet, avons-nous dû emporter des vivres, puisqu’il ne restait plus rien au chantier de Goléah…

— Ainsi, dit le lieutenant Villette, l’intention de Pointar, votre chef, était bien de revenir sur la section au rendez-vous donné par l’ingénieur…

— Sans doute, déclara Mézaki, et j’étais venu m’assurer si les Berbères l’avaient ou non abandonnée…

— Tu es certain que nous retrouverons l’équipe à Gizeb…

— Oui… là où je l’ai laissée, et où il est convenu que Pointar doit m’attendre… En pressant nos chevaux, nous serons arrivés dans deux heures.”

Hâter la marche n’était guère possible par cette accablante chaleur et le maréchal des logis-chef en fit l’observation. Du reste, même à une allure modérée, l’oasis serait atteinte pour midi, et, après un repos de quelques heures, le lieutenant aurait regagné Goléah avant la nuit.

Il est vrai, à mesure que montait le soleil, à travers les buées chaudes de l’horizon, la chaleur devenait de plus en plus intense et les poumons ne respiraient qu’un air embrasé.

“De par tous les diables, mon lieutenant, répétait le marchef, je ne crois pas avoir jamais eu si chaud depuis que je suis africain!… C’est du feu qu’on respire et l’eau qu’on avalerait se mettrait à vous bouillir dans l’estomac!… Et encore, si, comme Coupe-à-cœur, on pouvait se soulager en tirant la langue!… Le voyez-vous avec sa loque rouge qui lui pend jusqu’au poitrail…

— Faites-en autant, maréchal des logis, répondit en souriant le lieutenant Villette, faites-le, bien que ce ne soit pas d’ordonnance!…

— Ouf!… je n’en aurais que plus chaud, répliqua Nicol. Mieux vaudrait fermer la bouche et s’interdire de respirer!… Mais le moyen!…

— Certainement, observa le lieutenant, cette journée ne finira pas sans que l’orage ait éclaté…

— Je le pense”, répondit Mézaki, lequel, en qualité d’indigène, souffrait moins de ces températures excessives si fréquentes au désert.

Et il ajouta:

“Peut-être serons-nous auparavant à Gizeb… Là… on trouvera l’abri de l’oasis et nous pourrons laisser passer l’orage…

— C’est à souhaiter, reprit le lieutenant. À peine si les gros nuages commencent à déborder dans le nord, et jusqu’ici le vent ne se fait point sentir.

— Eh, mon lieutenant, s’écria le maréchal des logis-chef, ces orages d’Afrique, ça n’a guère besoin de vent, et ça marche tout seul comme les paquebots de Marseille à Tunis!… à croire qu’ils ont une machine dans le ventre!”

Quelle que fût l’ardeur de la température et quelque fatigue qu’il dût en résulter, le lieutenant Villette pressait la marche. Il avait hâte d’avoir achevé cette étape – une étape de vingt kilomètres, sans arrêt à travers cette plaine sans abri. Il espérait devancer l’orage, qui aurait tout le temps de se déchaîner pendant la halte de Gizeb. Ses spahis s’y reposeraient, ils se referaient avec les provisions emportées dans leur sac-musette. Puis, la grande chaleur méridienne passée, ils se remettraient en route vers quatre heures de l’après-midi, et, avant le crépuscule, ils seraient de retour au campement.

Cependant, les chevaux souffrirent tellement durant cette étape que leurs cavaliers ne purent les maintenir à l’allure du trot. L’air devenait irrespirable sous l’influence de cet orage menaçant. Ces nuages, qui auraient pu voiler le soleil, épais et lourds, ne montaient qu’avec une extrême lenteur, et le lieutenant aurait certainement atteint l’oasis bien avant qu’ils eussent envahi le ciel jusqu’au zénith. Là-bas, derrière l’horizon, ils n’échangeaient pas encore leurs décharges électriques et l’oreille n’entendait point les roulements lointains du tonnerre…

On allait, on allait toujours, et la plaine, brûlée de soleil, restait déserte, comme elle paraissait être sans fin.

“Eh! l’Arbico, répétait le maréchal des logis-chef, en interpellant le guide, mais on ne l’aperçoit pas ta satanée oasis?… Bien sûr, elle est là-haut, au milieu de ces nuages, et nous ne la verrons qu’au moment où ils crèveront sur nous…

— Tu ne t’es pas trompé de direction?… demanda le lieutenant Villette à Mézaki.

— Non, répondit l’indigène, et l’on ne peut se tromper, puisqu’il n’y a qu’à remonter l’oued jusqu’à Gizeb…

— Nous devrions maintenant l’avoir en vue, puisque rien ne gêne le regard… observa l’officier.

— Voici”, se contenta de répondre Mézaki, en tendant la main vers l’horizon.

En effet, quelques massifs se dessinaient alors à la distance d’une lieue. C’étaient les premiers arbres de l’oasis et en un temps de galop la petite troupe en aurait atteint la lisière. Mais demander aux chevaux ce dernier effort, c’était impossible, et Va-d’l’avant lui-même eût mérité d’être appelé “Va-d’l’arrière”, quelle que fût son endurance, tant il se traînait lourdement sur le sol.

Aussi était-il près de onze heures lorsque le lieutenant dépassa la lisière de l’oasis.

Ce qui pouvait paraître assez étonnant, c’est que la petite troupe n’eût pas été aperçue, et de loin, sur cette plaine, par le chef de chantier et ses compagnons, lesquels, au dire de Mézaki, devaient l’attendre à Gizeb. Et, comme le lieutenant en faisait la remarque:

“Est-ce qu’ils ne seraient plus là? répondit l’Arabe, qui feignit tout au moins la surprise.

— Et pourquoi n’y seraient-ils plus?… demanda l’officier.

— C’est ce que je ne m’explique pas, déclara Mézaki. Ils y étaient encore hier… Peut-être, après tout, par crainte de l’orage, auront-ils cherché refuge au milieu de l’oasis!… Mais je saurai bien les y retrouver…

— En attendant, mon lieutenant, dit le maréchal des logis-chef, je crois qu’il sera bon de laisser souffler nos hommes…

— Halte!” commanda l’officier.

À cent pas de là s’ouvrait une sorte de clairière entourée de hauts palmiers où les chevaux pourraient se refaire. Il n’y avait point à craindre qu’ils voulussent en sortir et, quant à l’eau, elle leur serait abondamment fournie par l’oued qui la limitait sur l’un de ses côtés. De là, il se dirigeait vers le nord-est et contournait l’oasis en direction de Zeribet.

Après s’être occupés de leurs montures, les cavaliers s’occupèrent d’eux-mêmes et prirent leur part du seul repas qu’ils dussent faire à Gizeb.

Entre-temps, Mézaki, remontant la rive droite de l’oued, s’était éloigné de quelques centaines de pas en compagnie du maréchal des logis-chef, que devançait Coupe-à-cœur. À en croire l’Arabe, l’équipe de Pointar devait s’être établie dans le voisinage, en, attendant son retour.

“Et c’est bien ici que tu as quitté tes camarades?…

— Ici, répondit Mézaki. Nous étions à Gizeb depuis quelques jours et, à moins qu’ils n’aient été forcés de regagner Zeribet?…

— Mille diables! déclara Nicol, s’il fallait nous trimbaler jusque-là!…

— Non, je l’espère, répondit Mézaki, et le chef Pointar ne peut être loin…

— En tout cas, dit le marchef, revenons au campement… Le lieutenant serait inquiet si notre absence se prolongeait… et allons manger… Après, on parcourra l’oasis et, si l’équipe y est encore, on saura bien mettre la main dessus…”

Puis, s’adressant à son chien:

“Tu ne sens rien, Coupe-à-cœur?…”

L’animal se redressa à la voix de son maître qui répétait:

“Cherche… cherche…”

Le chien se contenta de gambader, et rien n’indiquait qu’il fût tombé sur une piste quelconque. Puis, sa gueule s’ouvrit en un long bâillement sur la signification duquel le marchef ne pouvait se tromper.

“Oui… compris, dit-il, tu meurs de faim, et tu mangerais volontiers un morceau… et moi aussi… J’ai l’estomac dans les talons et je finirais par marcher dessus!… C’est égal, je m’étonne, si Pointar et ses hommes ont campé par ici, que Coupe-à-cœur n’en ait pas retrouvé quelque trace?…”

L’Arabe et lui, redescendant la berge de l’oued, revinrent sur leurs pas. Lorsque le lieutenant Villette fut mis au courant, il ne parut pas moins surpris que ne l’avait été Nicol.

“Mais enfin, demanda-t-il à Mézaki, tu es sûr de ne point avoir fait erreur?…

— Non… puisque j’ai suivi, pour venir de ce que vous appelez le kilomètre 347, la même route que j’avais prise pour y aller…

— Et c’est bien ici l’oasis de Gizeb?…

— Oui… Gizeb, affirma l’Arabe, et, en longeant l’oued qui descend vers le Melrir, je ne pouvais me tromper…

— Alors… où seraient Pointar et son équipe?…

— Dans une autre partie des bois, car je ne comprendrais pas qu’ils fussent retournés à Zeribet…

— Dans une heure, conclut le lieutenant Villette, nous parcourrons l’oasis…”

Mézaki alla tirer de sa musette les vivres qu'il avait apportés, puis, s'étant assis à l'écart sur le bord de l'oued, il se mit à manger.

Le lieutenant et le maréchal des logis-chef, tous deux accotés au pied d'un dattier, prirent leur repas en commun, tandis que le chien guettait les morceaux que lui jetait son maître.

“C'est pourtant singulier, répétait Nicol, que nous n'ayons encore aperçu personne, ni relevé aucun vestige de campement…

— Et Coupe-à-cœur n'a rien senti?… demanda l'officier.

— Rien…

— Dites-moi, Nicol, reprit le lieutenant en regardant du côté de l'Arabe, est-ce qu'il y aurait quelque raison de suspecter ce Mézaki?…

— Ma foi… mon lieutenant, on ne sait d'où il vient ni qui il est que par lui… Au premier abord, je me suis défié de lui, et je n'ai pas caché ma pensée. Mais… jusqu'ici… je n'ai pas remarqué qu'il y eût lieu de se défier… Et, d'ailleurs, quel intérêt aurait-il eu à nous tromper?… Et pourquoi nous eût-il amené à Gizeb… si le chef Pointar et ses hommes n'y ont jamais mis le pied?… Je sais bien… avec ces diables d'Arbicos… on n'est jamais sûr… Enfin… c'est de lui-même qu'il est venu dès notre arrivée à Goléah. Ce n'est pas douteux qu'il a reconnu l'ingénieur pour l'avoir déjà vu… Tout donne à croire qu'il était un des Arabes embauchés par la Compagnie!”

Le lieutenant Villette laissait parler Nicol, dont l'argumentation paraissait plausible en somme… Et cependant, d'avoir trouvé déserte cette oasis de Gizeb, alors que, d'après l'Arabe, de nombreux ouvriers y étaient réunis…

cela devait sembler au moins singulier. Si, hier encore, Pointar y était avec une partie de son personnel, en attendant Mézaki, comment n’avait-il pas guetté son retour?… Comment n’était-il pas venu au-devant de ce petit groupe de spahis, qu’il aurait dû apercevoir de loin?… Et, s’il s’était retiré au plus profond des bois, est-ce donc qu’il y avait été contraint et pour quelle raison?… Pouvait-on admettre qu’il eût remonté jusqu’à Zeribet?… Et, en ce cas, le lieutenant devrait-il pousser sa reconnaissance jusque-là?… Non, assurément, et, l’absence de Pointar et de son équipe constatée, il n’aurait qu’à rejoindre au plus vite l’ingénieur et le capitaine Hardigan. Ainsi, pas d’hésitation; quel que fût le résultat de son expédition à Gizeb, le soir même, il serait de retour au campement…

Il était une heure et demie, lorsque le lieutenant Villette, restauré et reposé, se releva. Après avoir observé l’état du ciel que les nuages envahissaient plus largement, il dit à l’Arabe:

“Je vais visiter l’oasis avant de repartir… tu nous guideras…

— À vos ordres, répondit Mézaki, prêt à se mettre en route.

— Chef, ajouta l’officier, prenez deux de nos hommes et vous nous accompagnerez… Les autres attendront ici…

— Entendu, mon lieutenant”, répliqua Nicol qui fit signe à deux spahis de venir.

En ce qui concerne Coupe-à-cœur, il allait de soi qu’il suivrait son maître, sans qu’il fût nécessaire de lui en donner l’ordre.

Mézaki, qui précédait l’officier et ses compagnons, prit direction vers le nord. C’était s’éloigner de l’oued, mais, en revenant, on en descendrait la rive gauche, de telle sorte que l’oasis aurait été visitée dans toute son étendue. Elle ne couvrait pas d’ailleurs plus de vingt-cinq à trente hectares et, jamais habitée par des indigènes sédentaires, n’était que lieu de halte pour les caravanes, qui se rendaient de Biskra au littoral.

Le lieutenant et son guide marchèrent en cette direction pendant une demi-heure. La ramure des arbres n’était pas tellement épaisse qu’elle empêchât d’apercevoir le ciel où roulaient lourdement de grosses volutes de vapeur qui atteignaient maintenant le zénith. Déjà même, à l’horizon, se propageaient de sourdes rumeurs d’orage, et quelques éclairs sillonnaient les lointaines zones du nord.

Arrivé de ce côté, à l’extrême limite de l’oasis, le lieutenant s’arrêta. Devant lui s’étendait la plaine jaunâtre silencieuse et déserte. Si l’équipe avait quitté Gizeb où, d’après son affirmation, Mézaki l’avait laissée la veille, elle devait être loin déjà, que Pointar eût pris le chemin de Zeribet ou celui de Nefta. Mais il fallait s’assurer qu’elle n’était pas campée en quelque autre partie de l’oasis, ce qui paraissait assez improbable, et les recherches continuèrent en revenant vers l’oued.

Pendant une heure encore, l’officier et ses hommes s’engagèrent entre les arbres, sans rencontrer trace de campement. L’Arabe semblait très surpris. Et, aux regards interrogateurs qui s’adressaient à lui, il répondait invariablement:

“Ils étaient là… hier encore… le chef et les autres… C’est Pointar qui m’a envoyé à Goléah… Il faut qu’ils soient partis depuis ce matin…

— Pour aller… où?… à ton idée?… demanda le lieutenant Villette.

— Peut-être au chantier…

— Mais nous les aurions rencontrés en venant, j’imagine…

— Non… s’ils n’ont pas descendu le long de l’oued…

— Et pourquoi auraient-ils pris un autre chemin que nous?…”

Mézaki ne put répondre.

Il était près de quatre heures lorsque l’officier fut de retour au lieu de halte. Les recherches avaient été infructueuses. Le chien ne s’était lancé sur aucune piste. Il paraissait bien que l’oasis n’eût pas été fréquentée depuis longtemps, pas plus par l’équipe que par le personnel d’une kafila.

Et, alors, le maréchal des logis-chef, ne résistant point à une pensée qui l’obsédait, s’approchant de Mézaki, et le regardant bien en face:

“Eh! l’Arbico… dit-il, est-ce que tu nous aurais mis dedans?…”

Mézaki, sans baisser les yeux devant ceux du marchef, eut un mouvement d’épaules tellement dédaigneux que Nicol l’aurait saisi à la gorge si le lieutenant Villette ne l’avait retenu.

“Silence, Nicol, dit-il. Nous allons retourner à Goléah, et Mézaki nous suivra…

— Entre deux de nos hommes alors…

— Je suis prêt”, répondit froidement l’Arabe dont le regard, un instant enflammé par la colère, reprit son calme habituel.

Les chevaux refaits dans le pâturage, abreuvés aux eaux de l’oued, étaient en mesure de franchir la distance qui séparait Gizeb du Melrir. La petite troupe serait certainement de retour avant la nuit.

Sa montre marquait quatre heures quarante lorsque le lieutenant donna le signal du départ. Le marchef se plaça près de lui, et l’Arabe prit rang entre deux spahis qui ne le perdraient pas de vue. Il convient de l’observer, les compagnons de Nicol partageaient maintenant ses soupçons à l’égard de Mézaki, et, si l’officier n’en voulait rien laisser voir, nul doute qu’il n’éprouvât la même défiance. Aussi avait-il hâte d’avoir rejoint l’ingénieur et le capitaine Hardigan. On déciderait alors ce qu’il conviendrait de faire, puisque l’équipe ne pouvait dès le lendemain être remise au chantier.

Les chevaux allaient rapidement. On les sentait surexcités par l’orage qui ne tarderait pas à se déchaîner. La tension électrique était extrême, et maintenant les nuages s’étendaient d’un horizon à l’autre. Des éclairs les déchiraient, s’entrecroisant à travers l’espace, et la foudre grondait avec ces éclats terribles, particuliers aux plaines du désert, où elle ne trouve aucun écho pour les répercuter. Du reste, pas le plus léger souffle de vent, ni une seule goutte de pluie. On étouffait au milieu de cette atmosphère brûlante, et les poumons ne respiraient qu’un air de feu.

Cependant, le lieutenant Villette et ses compagnons, au prix de grandes fatigues, effectueraient leur retour, sans trop de retard, si l’état atmosphérique n’empirait pas. Ce qu’ils devaient surtout craindre, c’était que l’orage ne tournât à la tempête. Le vent d’abord, la pluie ensuite, pouvaient survenir, et où chercheraient-ils refuge au milieu de cette plaine aride, qui n’offrait pas un arbre?

Il importait donc d’avoir rallié le kilomètre 347 dans le plus bref délai. Mais les chevaux étaient incapables de répondre aux appels de leurs cavaliers. En vain l’essayaient-ils! Par instant, ils s’arrêtaient comme si leurs pieds eussent été entravés, et leurs flancs saignaient sous l’éperon. D’ailleurs, les hommes eux-mêmes ne tardèrent pas à se sentir impuissants, hors d’état de franchir les derniers kilomètres du parcours. Va-d’l’avant, si vigoureux, cependant, était épuisé, et, à chaque pas, son maître pouvait craindre qu’il ne s’abattît sur le sable surchauffé du sol!

Toutefois, avec les encouragements, avec les excitations du lieutenant, vers six heures du soir, les trois quarts de la route avaient été dépassés. Si le soleil, très abaissé sur l’horizon de l’ouest, n’eût pas été voilé d’une épaisse couche de nuages, on eût aperçu à une lieue de là les scintillantes efflorescences du chott Melrir. À sa pointe, s’arrondissaient vaguement les massifs de l’oasis, et, en admettant qu’il fallût encore une heure pour l’atteindre, la nuit ne serait pas complètement close, lorsque la petite troupe en franchirait les premiers arbres.

“Allons, mes amis, courage, répétait l’officier. Un dernier effort!”

Mais, si endurants que fussent ses hommes, il voyait venir le moment où le désordre se mettrait dans sa petite troupe. Déjà, plusieurs cavaliers demeuraient en arrière, et, pour ne point les abandonner, force était de les attendre.

Il était vraiment à souhaiter que l’orage se manifestât autrement que par un échange d’éclairs et de roulements de foudre. Mieux aurait valu que le vent rendît l’air plus respirable et que ces énormes masses de vapeurs ne résolussent en pluie! C’était l’air qui manquait, et les poumons ne fonctionnaient plus que très difficilement au milieu de cette asphyxiante atmosphère.

Le vent s’éleva enfin, mais avec toute la violence que devait déterminer l’extrême tension électrique de l’espace. Ces courants d’une extraordinaire intensité furent doubles, et des tourbillons se formèrent à leur point de rencontre. Un bruit assourdissant se joignit aux éclats du tonnerre, des sifflements d’une incroyable acuité. Comme la pluie n’alourdissait pas les poussières du sol, il se forma une immense toupie qui, tournant sur sa pointe avec une invraisemblable vitesse, sous l’influence du fluide électrique, déterminait un appel d’air auquel il serait impossible de résister. On entendait crier les oiseaux entraînés dans ce tourbillon dont les plus puissants ne parvenaient pas à s’arracher.

Les chevaux se trouvaient sur le chemin de cette trombe. Saisis par elle, ils furent séparés les uns des autres, et plusieurs hommes ne tardèrent pas à être désarçonnés. On ne se voyait plus, on ne s’entendait plus, on ne s’appartenait plus. Le tourbillon enveloppait tout, en se dirigeant vers les plaines méridionales du Djerid.

La route que le lieutenant Villette suivait dans ces conditions, il ne pouvait s’en rendre compte. Que ses hommes et lui eussent été poussés vers le chott, c’était vraisemblable, mais en s’éloignant du campement. Heureusement une pluie torrentielle survint. La trombe, sous les coups des rafales, s’anéantit, au milieu d’une obscurité déjà profonde.

La petite troupe était alors dispersée. Il fallut la rallier non sans peine. D’ailleurs, à la lueur des éclairs, le lieutenant avait reconnu que l’oasis ne se trouvait pas à plus d’un kilomètre un peu dans le sud-est.

Enfin, après des appels réitérés dans les courtes accalmies, hommes et chevaux étaient rassemblés, lorsque soudain le maréchal des logis-chef de s’écrier:

“Où est donc l’Arbico?…”

Les deux spahis chargés de surveiller Mézaki ne purent répondre. Ce qu’il était devenu, ils ne le savaient, ayant été séparés violemment l’un de l’autre au moment où la trombe les entraînait dans ses tourbillons.

“Le gueux!… il a filé!… répétait le maréchal des logis-chef. Il a filé, et son cheval… ou plutôt notre cheval avec lui… Il nous a trompés, l’Arbico, il nous a trompés!…”

L’officier, réfléchissant, se taisait.

Presque aussitôt éclatèrent des aboiements furieux, et, avant que Nicol songeât à le retenir, le chien s’élançait et disparaissait en bondissant vers le chott.

“Ici… Coupe-à-cœur… ici!…” criait le marchef, très inquiet.

Mais, soit qu’il ne l’eût pas entendu, soit qu’il n’eût pas voulu l’entendre, le chien disparut au milieu de l’obscurité.

Après tout, peut-être Coupe-à-cœur s’était-il jeté sur les traces de Mézaki, et cet effort, Nicol n’aurait pu le demander à son cheval, rompu de fatigue comme les autres.

C’est alors que le lieutenant Villette se demanda si un malheur n’était pas arrivé, si, pendant qu’il remontait vers Gizeb, quelque danger ne menaçait pas l’ingénieur, le capitaine Hardigan, et les hommes restés à Goléah. L’inexplicable disparition de l’Arabe rendait plausibles toutes les hypothèses, et le détachement n’avait-il pas eu affaire à un traître, ainsi que le répétait Nicol?…

“Au campement, commanda le lieutenant Villette, et aussi vite que possible!”

En ce moment, l’orage faisait encore rage, bien que le vent fût à peu près calmé, comme on l’a vu plus haut; mais la pluie, de plus en plus violente, creusait de larges et nombreuses fondrières à la surface du sol. Il faisait pour ainsi dire nuit noire, bien que le soleil eût à peine disparu derrière l’horizon. Se diriger vers l’oasis devenait difficile et aucun feu n’indiquait la position du campement.

Et, cependant, c’était là une précaution que l’ingénieur n’eût point négligée pour assurer le retour du lieutenant. Le combustible ne manquait pas… Le bois mort abondait dans l’oasis… Malgré le vent, malgré la pluie, on aurait pu entretenir un foyer dont l’éclat eût été visible à moyenne distance, et la petite troupe ne devait plus être qu’à un demi-kilomètre.

Aussi de quelles craintes était assiégé le lieutenant Villette, craintes que partageait le maréchal des logis-chef et dont il dit un mot à l’officier.

“Marchons, répondit celui-ci, et Dieu veuille que nous n’arrivions pas trop tard!…”

Or, précisément, la direction suivie n’avait pas été exactement la bonne, et c’est sur la gauche de l’oasis que la petite troupe atteignit le chott. Il fut nécessaire de revenir vers l’est en longeant sa rive septentrionale, et, il n’était pas moins de huit heures et demie, lorsque l’on fit halte à l’extrémité du Melrir.

Personne n’avait encore paru, et, cependant, les spahis venaient de signaler leur retour par des cris répétés.

À quelques minutes de là, le lieutenant atteignit la clairière où devaient se trouver les chariots, se dresser les tentes…

Personne encore, ni M. de Schaller, ni le capitaine, ni le brigadier, ni aucun des hommes laissés avec eux.

On appela, on tira des coups de fusil… Pas une réponse ne se fit entendre. Plusieurs branches résineuses furent allumées et jetèrent leur éclat blafard à travers les massifs…

De tentes, il n’y en avait pas, et, quant aux chariots, il fallut reconnaître qu’ils avaient été pillés et mis hors d’usage. Mules qui les traînaient, chevaux du capitaine Hardigan et de ses compagnons, tout avait disparu.

Ainsi le campement avait été attaqué, et, à n’en pas douter, Mézaki n’était intervenu que pour favoriser cette nouvelle attaque au même endroit, en entraînant le lieutenant Villette et ses spahis dans la direction de Gizeb…

Il va de soi que l’Arabe n’avait pas rejoint. Quant à Coupe-à-cœur, le maréchal des logis-chef l’appela vainement, et toutes les heures de la nuit s’écoulèrent sans qu’il eût reparu au campement de Goléah.

XII. CE QUI S’ÉTAIT PASSÉ.

Après le départ du lieutenant Villette pour l’oasis de Gizeb, l’ingénieur avait commencé à prendre ses dispositions pour un séjour qui pouvait se prolonger.

En effet, personne n’avait songé à suspecter Mézaki, personne ne doutait que, le soir même, Pointar et lui seraient de retour à la section avec un certain nombre d’ouvriers ramenés par le lieutenant Villette.

On ne l’a point oublié, il ne restait au kilomètre 347, en comptant M. de Schaller et le capitaine Hardigan, que dix hommes, le brigadier Pistache, M. François, quatre spahis et les deux conducteurs de chariots. Tous s’occupèrent aussitôt de préparer un campement à la lisière de l’oasis, dans le voisinage du chantier. Là furent conduits les chariots; puis, le matériel déchargé, on dressa les tentes comme d’habitude. Quant aux chevaux, les conducteurs et les spahis leur choisirent un pâturage, où ils devaient trouver une abondante nourriture. En ce qui concerne le détachement, il avait des vivres pour plusieurs jours encore. D’autre part, il était probable que Pointar, ses contremaîtres et ses ouvriers, ne reviendraient pas sans rapporter tout ce dont ils avaient besoin, et que la bourgade de Zeribet avait pu aisément leur fournir.

D’ailleurs, on comptait bien avoir assistance aux bourgades les plus rapprochées, Nefta, Tozeur, La Hâmma. Plus tard, les indigènes, on le répète, ne pourraient rien contre cette grande œuvre des continuateurs de Roudaire.

Comme il importait que, dès le premier jour, le ravitaillement du chantier du kilomètre 347 fût assuré, l'ingénieur et le capitaine Hardigan furent d'accord pour envoyer des messagers à Nefta ou Tozeur. Ils firent choix des deux conducteurs de chariots, qui connaissaient parfaitement la route pour l'avoir souvent parcourue avec le personnel des caravanes. C'étaient deux Tunisiens auxquels on pouvait accorder toute confiance. En partant, le lendemain, dès l'aube, ces hommes montant leurs propres bêtes atteindraient assez rapidement la bourgade qui pourrait faire parvenir quelques jours plus tard des vivres au Melrir. Ils seraient porteurs de deux lettres, une de l'ingénieur pour un des employés supérieurs de la Compagnie, une autre du capitaine Hardigan pour le commandant militaire de Tozeur.

Après le repas du matin, pris sous la tente, à l'abri des premiers arbres de l'oasis, M. de Schaller dit au capitaine:

“Maintenant, mon cher Hardigan, laissons Pistache, M. François et nos hommes procéder aux dernières installations… Je voudrais me rendre un compte plus exact des réparations à faire sur cette dernière section du canal…”

Il la parcourut sur toute son étendue afin d'évaluer la quantité des déblais qui avaient été rejetés à l'intérieur.

Et, à ce propos, il dit à son compagnon:

“Assurément, ces indigènes étaient en grand nombre, et je m'explique que Pointar et son personnel n'aient pu leur résister…

— Mais, cependant, il ne suffit pas que ces Arabes, Touareg ou autres, soient venus en force; les ouvriers une fois chassés, comment ont-ils pu bouleverser les travaux à ce point, rejeter tant de matériaux dans le lit du canal?… Cela a dû exiger un temps assez long, au contraire de ce que nous a affirmé Mézaki.

— Je ne puis l’expliquer que de cette façon, répliqua M. de Schaller. Il n’y avait pas à creuser, mais à combler et à ébouler les berges dans le lit du canal. Comme il n’y avait là que des sables, avec du matériel que Pointar et ses hommes ont dû abandonner dans leur fuite précipitée, et peut-être aussi avec celui d’autrefois, la besogne a été beaucoup plus simple que je ne l’aurais cru.

— Dans ce cas, expliqua le capitaine Hardigan, quelque quarante-huit heures auront suffi…

— Je le pense, répondit l’ingénieur, et j’estime que les réparations pourraient s’effectuer en quinze jours au plus.

— C’est heureux, observa le capitaine, mais il est une mesure qui s’impose: c’est de protéger le canal jusqu’à la complète inondation des deux chotts, dans cette section du grand chott au Melrir comme dans toutes les autres. Ce qui s’est passé ici pourrait se reproduire ailleurs. Il est certain que les populations du Djerid, et plus particulièrement les nomades, ont la tête montée, que les chefs de tribus les excitent contre cette création d’une mer intérieure, et des agressions de leur part sont toujours à redouter… Aussi, les autorités militaires devront-elles être prévenues. Avec les garnisons de Biskra, de Nefta, de Tozeur, de Gabès, il ne sera pas difficile d’établir une surveillance effective, et de mettre les travaux à l’abri d’un nouveau coup de main.”

C’était, en somme, ce qu’il y avait de plus urgent, et il importait que le Gouverneur général de l’Algérie et le Résident général en Tunisie fussent mis sans retard au courant de la situation. Ils auraient à sauvegarder les divers intérêts engagés dans cette grande affaire.

Il est certain toutefois – ainsi le répéta l’ingénieur – que la mer Saharienne, lorsqu’elle serait en exploitation, se défendrait seule. Mais, ne point oublier qu’au début de l’entreprise on estimait que l’inondation des dépressions Rharsa et Melrir ne demanderait pas moins d’une période de dix années. Puis, après une étude plus approfondie des terrains, cette période fut réduite de moitié. Toutefois, la surveillance ne serait à maintenir que sur les diverses stations des deux canaux, et non sur la patrie inondable des chotts. Il est vrai, les deux cent vingt-sept kilomètres du premier, les quatre-vingts du second, c’était là une longue ligne à garder pendant longtemps.

Et, pour répondre à la remarque que lui fit à ce sujet le capitaine Hardigan, l’ingénieur ne put que lui répéter ce qu’il avait dit déjà relativement à l’inondation des chotts:

“J’ai toujours l’idée que ce sol du Djerid, dans la partie comprise entre le littoral et le Rharsa et le Melrir, nous réserve des surprises. Ce n’est, en réalité, qu’une croûte salifère, et j’ai moi-même constaté qu’elle subissait certaines oscillations d’une amplitude assez considérable… Il est donc admissible que le canal s’élargira et se creusera au passage des eaux, et c’est sur cette éventualité que Roudaire comptait, non sans raison, pour compléter les travaux. La nature collaborerait avec le génie humain que je n’en serais nullement étonné… Quant aux dépressions, ce sont les lits desséchés d’anciens lacs et, soit brusquement, soit graduellement, ils s’approfondiront sous l’action des eaux au-delà de la cote actuellement prévue. Ma conviction est donc que l’inondation complète prendra moins de temps qu’on ne le suppose. Je le répète, le Djerid n’est point à l’abri de certaines commotions sismiques et ces mouvements ne peuvent que le modifier dans un sens favorable à notre entreprise! Enfin, mon cher capitaine, nous verrons… nous verrons!… Moi, je ne suis pas de ceux qui se défient de l’avenir, mais de ceux qui comptent sur lui!… Et que diriez-vous si, avant deux ans, avant un an, toute une flottille marchande sillonnait la surface du Rharsa et du Melrir remplis à pleins bords?

— J’accepte vos hypothèses, mon cher ami, répondit le capitaine Hardigan. Mais, que ce soit dans deux ans ou dans un an qu’elles se réalisent, il n’en faudra pas moins protéger par des forces suffisantes les travaux et les travailleurs…

— Entendu, conclut M. de Schaller, et je partage votre avis, Hardigan, il importe que la surveillance du, canal, sur toute son étendue, s’établisse sans aucun retard.”

La mesure s’imposait, en effet, et, dès le lendemain, après la rentrée des ouvriers au chantier, le capitaine Hardigan se mettrait en rapport avec le commandant militaire de Biskra, auquel il enverrait un exprès. En attendant, la présence de ses quelques spahis suffirait peut-être à défendre la section, et, dans ces conditions, une nouvelle attaque des indigènes n’était sans doute pas à craindre.

Leur inspection terminée, l’ingénieur et le capitaine revinrent au campement, dont l’organisation se poursuivait, et il n’y avait plus qu’à attendre le lieutenant, qui serait certainement de retour avant le soir.

Une question des plus importantes dans les circonstances où se trouvait actuellement l’expédition était celle du ravitaillement. Jusqu’alors, elle avait la nourriture assurée soit par les réserves des deux chariots, soit par les vivres achetés dans les bourgades et villages de cette partie du Djerid. Ne manquaient les approvisionnements ni pour les hommes ni pour les chevaux.

Or, au chantier rétabli du kilomètre 347, il y aurait à se pourvoir d’une façon plus régulière pour un séjour de plusieurs semaines. Aussi, en même temps qu’il aviserait les autorités militaires des garnisons voisines, le capitaine Hardigan demanderait que des vivres lui fussent fournis pendant toute la durée de son séjour à l’oasis.

On s’en souvient, dès le lever du soleil, ce jour-là, 13 avril, de lourdes vapeurs s’entassaient, à l’horizon. Tout annonçait que la matinée comme l’après-midi seraient étouffants. Nul doute qu’il ne se préparât dans le nord un orage d’une extrême intensité.

Et, en réponse aux observations que faisait le brigadier Pistache à ce sujet:

“Je ne serais pas surpris, déclara M. François, que cette journée fût orageuse, et, depuis ce matin, je m’attends à une prochaine lutte des éléments en cette partie du désert.

— Et pourquoi?… demanda Pistache.

— Voici, brigadier. Tandis que je me rasais à la première heure, tous mes poils se hérissaient, et devenaient si durs qu’il m’a fallu repasser deux ou trois fois mon rasoir. De chaque pointe, on eût dit qu’il se dégageait une petite étincelle…

— Cela est curieux”, répondit le brigadier, sans mettre un instant en doute l’assertion d’un homme tel que M. François.

Que le système pileux de ce digne homme jouît de propriétés électriques, comme la fourrure d’un chat, peut-être n’en était-il rien. Mais Pistache l’admettait volontiers.

“Et alors… ce matin?… reprit-il en regardant la figure rasée de près de son compagnon.

— Ce matin, c’était à ne pas le croire!… Mes joues, mon menton se parsemaient d’aigrettes lumineuses…

— J’aurais voulu voir cela!” répondit Pistache.

Au surplus, même sans se rapporter aux observations météorologiques de M. François, il était certain qu’un orage montait du nord-est, et l’atmosphère se saturait peu à peu d’électricité.

La chaleur devenait accablante. Aussi, après le repas de midi, l’ingénieur et le capitaine s’accordèrent-ils une sieste prolongée. Bien qu’ils fussent abrités sous leur tente et que cette tente eût été dressée sous les premiers arbres de l’oasis, une chaleur torride y pénétrait, et aucun souffle ne se propageait à travers l’espace.

Cet état de choses ne laissait pas d’inquiéter M. de Schaller et le capitaine. À cette heure, l’orage n’avait pas encore éclaté sur le chott Selem. Mais il n’y avait pas à douter que ses violences ne s’exerçassent alors dans le nord-est et précisément au-dessus de l’oasis de Gizeb. Les éclairs commençaient à sillonner le ciel de ce côté, si les roulements de la foudre ne se faisaient pas encore entendre. En admettant que, pour une raison ou pour une autre, le départ du lieutenant n’eût pu s’effectuer avant l’orage, tout donnait à penser qu’il en attendrait la fin sous l’abri des arbres, dût-il même ne rentrer que le lendemain au campement.

“Et il est probable que nous ne le reverrons pas ce soir, fit observer le capitaine Hardigan. Si Villette fût parti cet après-midi vers deux heures, il serait maintenant en vue de l’oasis…

— Quitte à être retardé d’un jour, répondit M. de Schaller, notre lieutenant aura eu raison de ne point s’aventurer avec un ciel si menaçant! Ce qu’il y aurait de plus fâcheux, ce serait que ses hommes et lui eussent été surpris sur la plaine, où ils ne trouveraient aucun abri…

— C’est mon avis”, conclut le capitaine Hardigan.

L’après-midi s’avançait, et rien n’annonçait l’approche de la petite troupe, pas même les aboiements de Coupe-à-cœur, qui l’aurait précédée. Maintenant, à moins d’une lieue, les éclairs illuminaient l’espace sans discontinuer. La lourde masse des nuages, ayant dépassé le zénith, se rabattait lentement vers le Melrir. Avant une demi-heure, l’orage serait sur le campement, et se dirigerait ensuite vers le chott.

Cependant, l’ingénieur, le capitaine Hardigan, le brigadier et deux des spahis s’étaient portés sur la lisière de l’oasis. Devant leurs yeux s’étendait la vaste plaine dont, çà et là, les efflorescences réverbéraient la lueur des éclairs.

En vain leurs regards interrogeaient l’horizon. Aucun groupe de cavaliers n’apparaissait de ce côté.

“Il est certain, dit le capitaine, que le détachement ne s’est point mis en route, et il ne faut pas l’attendre avant demain…

— Je le pense, mon capitaine, répondit Pistache. Même après l’orage, la nuit venue, au milieu de l’obscurité, se diriger sur Goléah serait bien difficile…

— Villette est un officier expérimenté, et on peut compter sur sa prudence… Retournons au campement, car la pluie ne tardera pas à tomber.”

À peine tous quatre avaient-ils fait une dizaine de pas, que le brigadier s’arrêtait:

“Écoutez, mon capitaine…” dit-il.

Tous s’étaient retournés.

“Il me semble entendre des aboiements… Est-ce que le chien du marchef?…”

Ils prêtèrent l’oreille. Non! aucun aboiement pendant les courtes accalmies. Pistache s’était assurément trompé.

Le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons reprirent donc le chemin du campement et, après avoir traversé l’oasis dont les arbres se courbaient sous la violence du vent, ils regagnèrent leurs tentes.

Quelques minutes de plus, ils eussent été assaillis par les rafales qui faisaient rage au milieu d’une pluie torrentielle.

Il était six heures alors. Le capitaine prit ses dispositions pour cette nuit qui s’annonçait comme l’une des plus mauvaises depuis que l’expédition avait quitté Gabès.

Sans doute, il y avait lieu de penser que le retard du lieutenant Villette était dû à la survenue de ce formidable orage qui le retiendrait à l’oasis de Gizeb jusqu’au lendemain.

Néanmoins, le capitaine et M. de Schaller ne laissaient pas de ressentir certaines appréhensions. Que Mézaki se fût donné pour un des ouvriers de Pointar, ne l’étant pas, et qu’il eût préparé quelque criminelle machination contre l’expédition envoyée au Melrir, ils ne pouvaient pas même le soupçonner. Mais comment auraient-ils oublié ce qu’était l’état des esprits chez les populations nomades ou sédentaires du Djerid, l’excitation qui régnait parmi les diverses tribus contre cette création de la mer Saharienne?… Est-ce qu’une attaque récente n’avait pas été dirigée contre le chantier de Goléah, attaque qui se renouvellerait probablement si les travaux de la section étaient repris?… Sans doute, Mézaki affirmait que les agresseurs, après avoir dispersé les ouvriers, s’étaient retirés vers le sud du chott. Mais d’autres partis couraient peut-être la plaine et, s’ils le rencontraient, le détachement du lieutenant Villette serait écrasé sous le nombre!…

Cependant, à y bien réfléchir, ces craintes devaient être exagérées. Mais l’ingénieur et le capitaine y revenaient sans cesse. Et comment eussent-ils pu prévoir que, si quelque danger menaçait, ce n’était pas le lieutenant Villette et ses hommes sur la route de Gizeb, mais M. de Schaller et ses compagnons dans l’oasis?

Vers six heures et demie, l’orage battait son plein. Plusieurs arbres furent frappés de la foudre et il s’en fallut de peu que la tente de l’ingénieur ne fût atteinte par le fluide électrique. La pluie tombait à torrents, et, sous la pénétration des mille rios qui s’écoulaient vers le chott, le sol de l’oasis se changeait en une sorte d’outtâ marécageuse. En même temps, le vent se déchaînait avec une effroyable impétuosité. Les branches se brisaient comme verre et nombre de palmiers, rompus aux racines, s’en allaient à la dérive.

Il n’eût plus été possible de mettre le pied dehors. Très heureusement, les chevaux avaient été abrités à temps sous un énorme bouquet d’arbres capables de résister à l’ouragan, et, malgré l’effroi que leur causait l’orage, ils purent être maintenus.

Il n’en fut pas ainsi des mules laissées sur la clairière. Épouvantées par les éclats de la foudre, et malgré les efforts de leurs conducteurs, elles s’échappèrent à travers l’oasis.

Un des spahis vint prévenir le capitaine Hardigan qui s’écria:

“Il faut à tout prix les reprendre…

— Les deux conducteurs se sont mis à leur poursuite, répondit le brigadier.

— Que deux de nos hommes se joignent à eux, ordonna l’officier. Si les mules parviennent à sortir de l’oasis, elles seront perdues… On ne pourra les rattraper en plaine!…”

Malgré les rafales qui s’abattaient sur le campement, deux des quatre spahis s’élancèrent dans la direction de la clairière, guidés par les cris des conducteurs qui, se faisaient parfois entendre.

Du reste, si l’intensité des éclairs et des éclats de la foudre ne diminua pas, il en fut autrement des rafales qui s’apaisèrent soudain, moins de vent et moins de pluie. Mais l’obscurité était profonde, et l’on ne pouvait se voir qu’à la lueur des fulgurations électriques.

L’ingénieur et le capitaine Hardigan sortirent de la tente, suivis de M. François, du brigadier et des deux spahis restés avec eux au campement.

Il va de soi, étant donnée l’heure avancée déjà, la violence de l’orage qui durerait sans doute une partie de la nuit, qu’il ne fallait aucunement compter sur le retour du lieutenant Villette. Ses hommes et lui ne se remettraient en route que le lendemain, alors que le cheminement à travers le Djerid serait praticable.

Quelles furent donc la surprise et aussi la satisfaction du capitaine et de ses compagnons, lorsqu’ils entendirent des aboiements dans la direction du nord.

Cette fois, pas d’erreur, un chien accourait vers l’oasis, et même s’en rapprochait rapidement.

“Coupe-à-cœur!… lui!… s’écria le brigadier. Je reconnais sa voix…

— C’est donc que Villette n’est pas loin!”, répondit le capitaine Hardigan.

En effet, si le fidèle animal précédait le détachement, ce ne devait être que de quelques centaines de pas.

À ce moment, sans que rien eût annoncé leur apparition, une trentaine d’indigènes, après avoir rampé le long de la lisière, bondirent sur le campement. Le capitaine, l’ingénieur, le brigadier, M. François, les deux spahis furent entourés avant d’avoir pu se reconnaître, saisis avant d’avoir pu se mettre en défense… Et d’ailleurs, qu’auraient-ils pu, vu leur petit nombre, contre cette bande qui venait de les surprendre?…

En un instant, tout fut pillé, et les chevaux furent entraînés vers le Melrir.

Les prisonniers, séparés les uns des autres, dans l’impossibilité de communiquer, étaient poussés à la surface du chott, suivis du chien qui s’était lancé sur leurs traces. Et ils étaient déjà loin lorsque le lieutenant Villette arrivait au campement, où il ne trouvait plus trace des hommes qu’il avait quittés le matin, et des chevaux sans doute échappés pendant l’ouragan.

XIII. L’OASIS DE ZENFIG.

Dans son plan géométral, le chott Melrir, en y comprenant au nord les marécages de Farfaria, au sud d’autres dépressions de même nature comme le chott Merouan, affecte assez bien la forme d’un triangle rectangle. Du nord à l’est son hypoténuse dessine une ligne presque droite depuis la direction de Tahir-Nassou jusqu’au point au-dessous du trente-quatrième degré et de l’extrémité du second canal. Son grand côté, accidenté capricieusement, court le long dudit degré et est prolongé comme à l’est par des chotts secondaires. À l’ouest son petit côté monte vers la bourgade de Tahir-Nassou, en suivant à peu près une direction parallèle à la ligne du Transsaharien, projeté en prolongement de la ligne Philippeville-Constantine-Batna-Biskra, dont le tracé devait être modifié pour éviter un embranchement la reliant à un port de la mer nouvelle, sur la rive opposée à l’arrivée du deuxième canal.

La largeur de cette grande dépression – moins étendue cependant que la surface du Djerid et du Fedjedj – mesure cinquante-cinq kilomètres entre le point terminus de la dernière section du canal et le port à établir sur la côte occidentale en un point à fixer définitivement entre le Signal de Chegga et l’oued Itel, – le projet d’atteindre Meraïer, située plus au sud, semblant abandonné. Mais elle ne peut être inondée que sur six mille kilomètres carrés, soit six cent mille hectares, le restant de sa superficie ayant une cote supérieure au niveau de la Méditerranée. En réalité, la nouvelle mer occuperait huit mille kilomètres carrés dans le cadre des deux chotts, et cinq mille émergeraient après le complet remplissage du Rharsa et du Melrir.

Ces parties non inondées deviendraient donc des îles. Elles formeraient à l’intérieur du Melrir comme une sorte d’archipel comprenant deux grandes îles. La première, nommée l’Hinguiz, figurerait un rectangle coudé au milieu du chott qu’il diviserait en deux parties, l’autre occuperait l’extrême portion comprise entre les deux côtés de l’angle droit près de Strarie. Quant aux îlots, c’est principalement vers le sud-est qu’ils se rangeraient en lignes parallèles. Lorsque les navires se hasarderaient à travers les passes de cet archipel, ils devraient s’en rapporter sévèrement aux levées hydrographiques établies pour diminuer les risques de cette dangereuse navigation.

L’étendue des deux chotts que les eaux allaient recouvrir renfermait quelques oasis avec leurs dattiers et leurs champs. Il va de soi que ces propriétés avaient dû être rachetées à leurs détenteurs. Mais, ainsi que l’avait estimé le capitaine Roudaire, l’indemnité n’avait pas dépassé cinq millions de francs, à la charge de la Compagnie Franco-étrangère qui comptait s’en dédommager sur les deux millions cinq cent mille hectares de terres et de forêts dont le gouvernement lui avait fait cession.

Entre les diverses oasis du Melrir, l’une des plus importantes occupait de trois à quatre kilomètres superficiels au milieu de l’Hinguiz dans sa partie exposée au nord. Ce seraient donc les eaux septentrionales du chott qui en baigneraient la lisière après l’inondation. Cette oasis était riche de ces palmiers dattiers de la meilleure espèce, dont les fruits exportés par les kafila sont recherchés sur les marchés du Djerid. Elle avait nom Zenfig, et ses rapports avec les principales bourgades: La Hammâ, Nefta, Tozeur, Gabès, se réduisaient à la visite de rares caravanes pendant la saison des récoltes.

Sous les grands arbres de Zenfig s’abritait une population de trois à quatre cents indigènes d’origine touareg, une des tribus les plus inquiétantes du Sahara. Les maisons de la bourgade, au nombre d’une centaine, meublaient toute cette partie de l’oasis qui allait devenir un littoral. Vers le centre et en dehors, latéralement, s’étendaient des champs cultivés, des pâturages qui assuraient l’alimentation de cette tribu et de ses animaux domestiques. Un oued destiné à devenir un bras de la mer nouvelle, accru de petits rios de l’île, suffisait aux besoins de la population.

Il a été dit que l’oasis de Zenfig n’avait que de rares rapports avec les autres oasis de la province de Constantine. Seuls s’y ravitaillaient les Touareg nomades qui couraient le désert. Elle était redoutée et redoutable. Les caravanes évitaient, autant que possible, de passer à proximité. Mais que de fois des bandes, sorties de Zenfig, vinrent les attaquer dans les environs du Melrir!

À noter que les approches de l’oasis étaient des plus difficiles, des plus dangereuses. Le long de l’Hinguiz, le sol du chott ne présentait aucune solidité. Partout des sables mouvants où une kafila se fût enlisée tout entière. À travers ces surfaces constituées par le terrain pliocène, sables imprégnés de gypse et de sel, à peine quelques sentes praticables uniquement connues des habitants, et qu’il fallait suivre pour atteindre l’oasis, sous peine d’être englouti dans les fondrières. Il était évident que l’Hinguiz deviendrait aisément accostable lorsque les eaux recouvriraient cette croûte molle où le pied ne pouvait trouver un sûr appui. Mais c’est bien ce que les Touareg ne voulaient point permettre. Aussi là se trouvait le foyer le plus actif, le plus brûlant de l’opposition. De Zenfig partaient d’incessants appels à cette “guerre sainte” contre les étrangers.

Entre les diverses tribus du Djerid, celle de Zenfig tenait le premier rang, et l’influence qu’elle exerçait sur la confédération ne laissait pas d’être grande. Elle pouvait l’étendre en pleine sécurité, sans avoir à craindre d’être troublée dans sa retraite presque inaccessible. Mais cette situation prédominante s’évanouirait entièrement le jour où les eaux de la Petite-Syrte, inondant le chott à pleins bords, auraient fait de l’Hinguiz l’île centrale du Melrir.

C’était à l’oasis de Zenfig que la race touareg s’était conservée dans sa pureté originelle. Là, les coutumes, les mœurs n’avaient subi aucune altération. Des hommes d’un beau type, physionomie grave, attitude fière, marche lente, empreinte de dignité; tous portent l’anneau de serpentine verte qui donne à leur bras droit plus de vigueur, à les en croire. De tempérament très brave, ils ne craignent pas la mort. Ils revêtent encore le costume de leurs ancêtres, la gandoura en cotonnade du Soudan, la chemise blanche et bleue, le pantalon serré à la cheville, les sandales de cuir, la chéchia fixée sur la tête par un mouchoir roulé en turban auquel se rattache le voile qui descend jusqu’à la bouche et préserve les lèvres de la poussière.

Les femmes, d’un type superbe, yeux bleus, sourcils épais, cils longs, vont la face libre et ne la voilent jamais si ce n’est devant les étrangers, par respect. On ne les rencontre pas à plusieurs au foyer touareg qui, en opposition avec les préceptes du Coran, n’admet pas la polygamie, s’il admet le divorce.

Aussi, dans cette région du Melrir, les Touareg formaient comme une population à part. Elle ne se mêlait point aux autres tribus du Djerid. Si ses chefs entraînaient leurs fidèles au-dehors, ce n’était jamais que pour quelque razzia fructueuse, une caravane à piller ou quelque représaille contre une oasis rivale. Et, en réalité, ces Touareg de Zenfig étaient de redoutables pirates dont les agressions s’exerçaient parfois à travers les plaines de la basse Tunisie jusqu’aux approches de Gabès. Les autorités militaires organisaient des expéditions contre ces pillards. Mais ils avaient vite fait de se mettre à l’abri dans ces retraites lointaines du Melrir.

Du reste, si le Targui est plutôt sobre, s’il ne se nourrit ni de poissons ni de gibier, s’il ne consomme que peu de viande, si les dattes, les figues, les baies de la “Salvadora persica”, la farine, le laitage, les œufs lui suffisent, il n’en a pas moins des esclaves à son service, des “imrhad”, chargés des grosses besognes, car il n’a que dédain pour toute espèce de travail. Quant aux “ifguna”, aux marabouts, aux vendeurs d’amulettes, leur influence est très sérieuse sur la race touareg, plus particulièrement en cette région du Melrir. C’étaient ces fanatiques qui prêchaient la révolte contre ce projet d’une mer saharienne. Le Targui est d’ailleurs superstitieux, il croit aux esprits, il redoute les revenants, à ce point qu’il ne pleure pas ses morts par crainte de les ressusciter, et, dans les familles, le nom du défunt s’éteint avec lui.

Telle était, en quelques traits, cette tribu de Zenfig à laquelle appartenait Hadjar. Elle l’avait toujours reconnu pour son chef jusqu’au jour où il tomba entre les mains du capitaine Hardigan.

Là aussi était le berceau de sa famille, toute-puissante sur cette population spéciale de Zenfig, comme aussi sur les autres tribus du Melrir. Nombre d’oasis existaient à la surface du chott, sur divers points de l’Hinguiz et du vaste périmètre de la dépression.

À côté de Hadjar, sa mère Djemma était en grande vénération parmi les tribus touareg. Chez les femmes de Zenfig, ce sentiment allait même jusqu’à l’adoration. Toutes partageaient cette haine que Djemma ressentait pour les étrangers. Elle les fanatisait comme son fils fanatisait les hommes, et l’on n’a pas oublié quelle influence Djemma avait sur Hadjar, – influence que possèdent toutes les femmes touareg. Elles sont, d’ailleurs, plus instruites que leurs maris et leurs frères. Elles savent écrire alors que le Targui sait lire à peine, et, dans les écoles, ce sont elles qui enseignent la langue et la grammaire. En ce qui concernait l’entreprise du capitaine Roudaire, leur opposition n’avait jamais fléchi un seul jour.

Telle était la situation avant l’arrestation du chef touareg. Ces diverses tribus du Melrir, comme celle de Zenfig, allaient être ruinées par l’inondation des chotts. Elles ne pourraient pas continuer leur métier de pirates. Plus de kafila à traverser le Djerid entre Biskra et Gabès. Et, de plus, ne serait-il pas devenu facile de les atteindre jusque dans leurs repaires lorsque les navires pourraient s’en approcher, lorsqu’ils n’auraient plus pour les protéger ce sol mouvant où chevaux et cavaliers risquaient de s’engloutir à chaque pas!

On sait dans quelles conditions Hadjar avait été fait prisonnier, après une rencontre avec les spahis du capitaine Hardigan, comment il fut enfermé dans le fort de Gabès, et comment, avec l’aide de sa mère, de son frère, de quelques-uns de ses fidèles, Ahmet, Harrig, Horeb, il était parvenu à s’enfuir la veille du jour où un aviso allait le transporter à Tunis pour y être jugé par un conseil de guerre. Que l’on sache donc aussi que Hadjar, après son évasion, avait pu heureusement franchir la région des sebkha et des chotts et regagner l’oasis de Zenfig où Djemma n’avait pas tardé à le rejoindre.

Cependant, la nouvelle de l’arrestation de Hadjar, lorsqu’elle fut connue à Zenfig, y provoqua une extraordinaire émotion. Ce chef touareg, pour lequel ses partisans s’étaient dévoués jusqu’à la mort, entre les mains de ses impitoyables ennemis?… Pouvait-on espérer qu’il leur échapperait?… N’était-il pas condamné d’avance?…

Aussi avec quel enthousiasme on accueillit son retour! Le fugitif fut porté en triomphe. De tous côtés, de joyeuses détonations éclatèrent; de toutes parts, battirent les “tabel”, qui sont les tambours, et résonnèrent les “rebaza”, qui sont les violons des orchestres touareg. À la faveur de cet incroyable délire, Hadjar n’aurait eu qu’un signe à faire pour jeter tous ses fidèles sur les bourgades du Djerid!

Mais Hadjar sut contenir les fougueuses passions de ses Touareg. Devant la menace de la reprise des travaux, ce qui pressait le plus, c’était de garantir la sécurité des oasis de l’angle sud-ouest du chott. Il ne fallait pas permettre aux étrangers de transformer le Melrir en un vaste bassin navigable que les bâtiments parcourraient en tous sens. Donc, tout d’abord, bouleverser les travaux du canal.

Mais, en même temps, Hadjar apprit que l’expédition, sous les ordres du capitaine Hardigan, ferait halte avant quarante-huit heures à l’extrémité du canal, où elle devait en rencontrer une autre venue de la province de Constantine au-devant d’elle.

De là cette attaque que Hadjar, en personne, dirigea contre la dernière section, et qui venait de disperser les premiers ouvriers de la Société. Plusieurs centaines de Touareg s’y étaient occupés. Puis, le canal à demi comblé, ils avaient repris la route de Zenfig.

Et, si Mézaki s’était trouvé là, c’est que son chef l’y avait laissé, et si cet homme avait déclaré que Hadjar n’était pas intervenu dans l’attaque du chantier, c’était pour tromper le capitaine, et, s’il avait affirmé que les ouvriers étaient alors réfugiés à Gizeb, c’était pour qu’une partie du détachement y fût envoyée, et, enfin, si actuellement l’ingénieur, le capitaine et quatre de leurs compagnons étaient prisonniers de Hadjar, c’est que, surpris par une trentaine de Touareg, apostés sous les ordres de Sohar aux environs de Goléah, ils avaient été dirigés vers l’oasis de Zenfig, avant d’avoir été rejoints par les spahis du lieutenant Villette.

En même temps que leurs six prisonniers, les Touareg s’étaient emparés des chevaux restés au campement, ceux de l’ingénieur, de l’officier, du brigadier et des deux spahis. M. François, qui jusqu’alors avait pris place dans l’un des chariots de l’expédition, depuis le départ de Gabès, n’était point monté. Mais, à deux cents pas du chantier, attendaient les chevaux et les méharis qui avaient amené la bande des Touareg.

Là, les prisonniers furent contraints de se mettre en selle sur leurs propres montures, tandis qu’un des chameaux était réservé à M. François qui dut se jucher tant bien que mal sur la bête. Puis toute la troupe disparut au milieu de cette nuit orageuse, sous un ciel en feu.

Il y a lieu de noter que le chien du maréchal des logis-chef Nicol était arrivé au moment de l’attaque, et, ne sachant pas qu’il devançait le détachement, Sohar le laissa suivre les prisonniers.

En prévision de ce coup de main organisé par Hadjar, les Touareg étaient munis de vivres pour quelques jours, et deux méharis, chargés de provisions, assuraient la nourriture de la bande jusqu’au retour.

Mais le voyage allait être fort pénible, car il comprenait une cinquantaine de kilomètres entre l’extrémité orientale du chott et l’oasis de Zenfig.

La première étape conduisit les prisonniers à l’endroit où Sohar avait fait halte avant d’attaquer le campement de Goléah. C’est là que les Touareg s’arrêtèrent, toutes précautions prises pour que le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons ne pussent s’enfuir. Ils eurent à passer une nuit affreuse, car les rafales ne se calmèrent qu’aux approches du jour. Et, pour tout abri, les frondaisons d’un petit bois de palmiers. Blottis les uns contre les autres, tandis que les Touareg rôdaient autour d’eux, s’ils ne pouvaient s’échapper, du moins pouvaient-ils parler, et de quoi, si ce n’est de cette agression si inattendue dont ils étaient victimes. Qu’il y eût là la main de Hadjar, rien ne leur permettait de le penser. Mais l’esprit de révolte qui courait à travers les diverses tribus du Djerid, et plus particulièrement du Melrir, n’expliquait que trop les choses. Quelques chefs touareg avaient dû apprendre la prochaine arrivée d’un détachement de spahis au chantier… Des nomades leur auraient fait connaître qu’un ingénieur de la Compagnie venait inspecter les contours du Melrir, avant que les derniers coups de pioche eussent éventré le seuil de Gabès…

Et, alors, le capitaine Hardigan de se demander, sérieusement cette fois, s’il n’avait pas été trompé par cet indigène rencontré la veille à Goléah et, son impression, il ne la cacha point à ses compagnons.

“Vous devez avoir raison, mon capitaine, déclara le brigadier… Cet animal ne m’a jamais inspiré confiance…

— Mais alors, observa l’ingénieur, qu’est devenu le lieutenant Villette?… Il n’aura trouvé ni Pointar ni aucun de ses ouvriers à l’oasis de Gizeb…

— En admettant qu’il soit allé jusque-là, reprit le capitaine. Si Mézaki est le traître que nous soupçonnons, il n’avait pas d’autre but que d’éloigner Villette et ses hommes et de leur fausser compagnie en route…

— Et qui sait s’il ne va pas rejoindre cette bande qui nous est tombée dessus?… s’écria l’un des deux spahis.

— Cela ne m’étonnerait point, avoua Pistache, et, quand j’y songe, combien il s’en est fallu de peu, – un quart d’heure à peine, – que notre lieutenant ne soit arrivé à temps pour foncer sur ces gueux d’Arbicos et nous délivrer!…

— En effet, ajouta M. François, le détachement ne pouvait être loin, puisque nous avons entendu les aboiements du chien, presque à l’instant où les Touareg nous surprenaient.

— Ah! Coupe-à-cœur… Coupe-à-cœur!… répétait le brigadier Pistache, où est-il?… Nous a-t-il suivis jusqu’ici?… N’est-il pas plutôt retourné vers son maître pour lui apprendre…

— Le voici… le voici…” dit en ce moment l’un des spahis.

On imagine sans peine quel accueil fut fait à Coupe-à-cœur. Combien de caresses on lui prodigua, et quels gros baisers Pistache appliqua sur sa bonne tête!

“Oui… Coupe-à-cœur, oui!… c’est nous!… Et les autres!… et notre marchef Nicol… ton maître… est-il arrivé?”

Coupe-à-cœur eût volontiers répondu par de significatifs aboiements. Mais le brigadier le fit taire. Les Touareg devaient penser, d’ailleurs, que le chien se trouvait avec le capitaine au campement de Goléah, et il était naturel qu’il eût voulu les suivre.

Et jusqu’où seraient-ils entraînés?… En quelle partie du Djerid?… Peut-être vers quelque oasis perdue du chott Melrir… peut-être jusque dans les profondeurs de l’immense Sahara?…

Le matin venu, des aliments furent mis à la disposition des prisonniers, du gâteau agglutiné de couscoussou et de dattes, et, pour toute boisson, l’eau d’un oued qui baignait la lisière du petit bois.

D’où ils étaient, la vue s’étendait sur le chott, dont les cristallisations salines scintillaient au soleil levant. Mais, vers l’est, le regard s’arrêtait brusquement à la barrière de dunes qui s’arrondissait de ce côté. Donc, impossibilité d’apercevoir l’oasis de Goléah.

C’est donc en vain que M. de Schaller, le capitaine Hardigan, leurs compagnons, se retournèrent vers l’est, peut-être dans l’espoir d’apercevoir le lieutenant se dirigeant vers cette partie du chott.

“Car, enfin, répétait l’officier, il n’est pas douteux que Villette ne soit arrivé hier soir à Goléah… Et, ne nous y rencontrant plus, trouvant notre campement abandonné, comment admettre qu’il ne se soit pas immédiatement mis à notre recherche?…

— S’il n’a pas été attaqué lui-même, lorsqu’il remontait vers l’oasis de Gizeb… fit observer l’ingénieur.

— Oui!… oui!… tout est possible, répondait Pistache, tout avec le Mézaki!… Ah!… s’il tombe jamais entre mes mains, je souhaite qu’il me pousse ce jour-là des griffes pour lui déchiqueter sa peau de coquin!…”

En ce moment, Sohar donna ordre de partir. Et le capitaine Hardigan allant à lui:

“Que nous voulez-vous?…” demanda-t-il.

Sohar ne répondit pas.

“Où nous conduit-on?…”

Sohar se contenta de commander brutalement “À cheval.”

Il fallut obéir, et, ce qui lui fut particulièrement désagréable, M. François, ce matin-là, n’eut pas la possibilité de se faire la barbe.

À cet instant, le brigadier ne put retenir un cri d’indignation:

“Le voici!… le voici!…” répétait-il.

Et tous les regards se portèrent vers le personnage que Pistache désignait à ses compagnons.

C’était Mézaki. Après avoir conduit le détachement jusqu’à Gizeb, il avait disparu, et, pendant la nuit, il venait de rejoindre la bande de Sohar.

“Rien à dire à ce misérable!” ajouta le capitaine Hardigan, et, comme Mézaki le regardait effrontément, il lui tourna le dos.

Et, alors, M. François de s’exprimer ainsi:

“Décidément, ce Targui ne paraît pas être une personne recommandable…

— J’te crois!” répliqua Pistache, qui, en employant cette vulgaire locution, tutoya pour la première fois M. François, ce dont cet homme si comme il faut voulut bien ne point se blesser.

À l’orage de la veille succédait un temps superbe. Pas un nuage au ciel, aucun souffle à la surface du chott. Aussi le cheminement fut-il très pénible. D’oasis, il ne s’en rencontrait aucune sur cette partie de la dépression, et la troupe ne retrouverait l’abri des arbres qu’à la pointe de l’Hinguiz.

Sohar pressait la marche. Il avait hâte d’avoir regagné Zenfig où l’attendait son frère. Du reste, rien ne pouvait encore permettre aux prisonniers de penser qu’ils fussent tombés entre les mains de Hadjar. Ce que le capitaine Hardigan et M. de Schaller imaginaient avec quelque raison, c’est que cette dernière agression n’avait pas eu pour objet le pillage du campement de Goléah qui n’en valait pas la peine. Ce coup de main devait être plutôt une représaille des tribus du Melrir, et qui sait si le capitaine et ses compagnons n’allaient pas payer de leur liberté, de leur vie peut-être, ce projet d’une mer Saharienne!

Cette première journée comprit deux étapes, soit ensemble un parcours de vingt-cinq kilomètres. La chaleur avait été, sinon accablante, puisque le temps n’était pas à l’orage, mais d’une extraordinaire intensité. Celui qui souffrit le plus pendant la marche, ce fut assurément M. François, juché sur le dos d’un méhari. Peu habitué aux secousses de ce genre de monture, il était littéralement rompu, et il fallut l’attacher pour empêcher sa chute, tant la bête trottait durement.

La nuit se passa tranquillement, sauf que le silence fut troublé par les rauques rugissements des fauves qui rôdaient à la surface du chott.

Pendant ces premières étapes, Sohar avait dû suivre certaines sentes qu’il connaissait bien pour ne pas s’enliser dans les fondrières. Mais, le lendemain, le cheminement s’effectua sur le sol de l’Hinguiz, qui présentait toute solidité.

Les marches de ce 15 avril se firent donc dans des conditions meilleures que la veille, et, vers le soir, Sohar s’arrêtait à l’oasis de Zenfig avec ses prisonniers.

Et quelles furent leur surprise à tous, leurs inquiétudes trop justifiées, lorsqu’ils se trouvèrent en présence de Hadjar!

XIV. EN CAPTIVITÉ.

L’habitation dans laquelle furent conduits les prisonniers de Sohar était l’ancien bordj de la bourgade. Depuis nombre d’années déjà il tombait en ruine. Ses murailles délabrées couronnaient un tertre de moyenne altitude sur la lisière septentrionale de l’oasis. Jadis, ce château, un simple fort, avait servi aux Touareg de Zenfig, lors des grandes luttes que les tribus soutinrent entre elles dans toute la région du Djerid. Mais, après la pacification, on ne s’était plus occupé ni de le réparer ni de l’entretenir en bon état.

Un “sour” ébréché en maint endroit, servait d’enceinte à ce bordj qu’une “souma’ah”, sorte de minaret décoiffé de son extrême pointe, surmontait encore et d’où la vue pouvait largement s’étendre en tous sens.

Cependant, si délabré qu’il fût, le bordj offrait encore quelques parties habitables au centre de la construction. Deux ou trois salles accédant sur une cour intérieure, sans meubles, sans tentures, séparées par d’épaisses parois, pouvaient abriter contre les rafales de la bonne et les froids de la mauvaise saison.

C’est là que l’ingénieur, le capitaine Hardigan, le brigadier Pistache, M. François et les deux spahis furent conduits dès leur arrivée à Zenfig.

Hadjar ne leur avait point adressé une seule parole, et Sohar, qui les amena au bordj sous l’escorte d’une douzaine de Touareg, ne répondit à aucune de leurs questions.

Il va sans dire que, lors de l’attaque du campement, le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons n’avaient pas eu la possibilité de se jeter sur leurs armes, sabres, revolvers, carabines. Ils furent d’ailleurs fouillés, dépouillés du peu d’argent qu’ils portaient sur eux, et il n’est pas jusqu’à M. François, légitimement indigné, auquel ces malappris n’eussent enlevé son rasoir.

Lorsque Sohar les eut laissés seuls, le capitaine et l’ingénieur prirent soin tout d’abord d’explorer le bordj.

“Quand on est enfermé dans une prison, observa M. de Schaller, la première chose à faire est de la visiter…

— Et la seconde de s’en échapper”, ajouta le capitaine Hardigan.

Tous parcoururent donc la cour intérieure, au milieu de laquelle se dressait le minaret. Il fallut bien le reconnaître, les murailles qui l’entouraient, hautes d’une vingtaine de pieds, seraient infranchissables. On n’y découvrit aucune brèche comme il en existait au sour extérieur qui bordait le chemin de ronde. Une seule porte, ouvrant sur ce chemin, donnait accès dans la cour centrale. Elle avait été refermée par Sohar, et ses épais battants, garnis de bandes de fer, n’auraient pu être défoncés. Or, on ne pouvait sortir que par cette porte et encore était-il vraisemblable que les abords du bordj ne resteraient pas sans surveillance.

La nuit était venue, une nuit que les prisonniers passeraient dans une complète obscurité. Ils n’auraient pu se procurer aucune lumière. D’aliments quelconques, pas davantage. Pendant les premières heures, en vain attendirent-ils que des vivres fussent apportés, et aussi de l’eau, car la soif les dévorait. La porte ne s’ouvrit pas.

C’était à la clarté du court crépuscule que les prisonniers avaient visité la cour, et ils se réunirent ensuite dans une des chambres y attenant où des bottes d’alfa séché leur servaient de couchettes. C’est alors qu’ils s’abandonnèrent à de fort tristes réflexions. Au cours des quelques propos qu’ils échangèrent, le brigadier fut amené à dire:

“Est-ce que ces gueux-là voudraient nous laisser mourir de faim?”

Non, ce n’était pas ce qu’il y avait à craindre. Avant la dernière étape, à dix kilomètres de Zenfig, la bande de Touareg avait fait halte, et les captifs avaient eu leur part des provisions chargées sur les méharis. Assurément, le soir venu, le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons auraient volontiers pris quelque nourriture. Mais la faim ne deviendrait intolérable que le lendemain, si, dès l’aube, on ne leur fournissait pas des vivres en quantité suffisante.

“Essayons de dormir, dit l’ingénieur…

— Et de rêver que nous sommes en face d’une table bien servie, ajouta le brigadier: des côtelettes, une oie farcie, une salade…

— N’achevez pas, brigadier, recommanda M. François, et comme on se contenterait d’une bonne soupe au lard!”

Maintenant, quelles étaient les intentions de Hadjar à l’égard de ses prisonniers? Il avait certainement reconnu le capitaine Hardigan. Ne voudrait-il pas le punir, à présent qu’il le tenait? Ne le ferait-il pas mettre à mort et ses compagnons avec lui?…

“Je ne le pense pas, déclara M. de Schaller. Il n’est pas probable que notre vie soit menacée… Les Touareg, au contraire, ont intérêt à nous garder comme otages en prévision de l’avenir. Or, pour empêcher que les travaux du canal ne s’achèvent, il est à supposer que Hadjar et les Touareg renouvelleront leurs attaques contre le chantier du kilomètre 347, si les ouvriers de la Société y reviennent. Hadjar peut échouer dans une nouvelle tentative… Il peut retomber entre les mains des autorités et, cette fois, on le garderait si bien qu’il ne parviendrait pas à s’enfuir. Il est donc bon pour lui que nous soyons encore en son pouvoir… jusqu’au jour où Hadjar, menacé d’être repris à son tour, viendrait dire: “Ma vie et celle de mes compagnons pour celle de mes prisonniers”, il serait assurément écouté… Et j’estime que ce jour est prochain, car le double coup d’audace de Hadjar doit être connu à l’heure qu’il est, et bientôt il aura en face de lui troupes, maghzen et goums envoyés à notre délivrance.

— Il est possible que vous ayez raison, répondit le capitaine Hardigan. Mais ne point oublier que ce Hadjar est un homme vindicatif et cruel… Sa réputation est établie à cet égard. Raisonner comme nous raisonnerions, nous, ce n’est pas dans sa nature. Il a une vengeance personnelle à exercer…

— Et précisément contre vous, mon capitaine, fit observer le brigadier Pistache, puisque vous l’aviez proprement pincé il y a quelques semaines.

— En effet, brigadier, et même je m’étonne que, m’ayant reconnu, sachant qui je suis, il ne se soit pas tout d’abord livré à quelque violence!… Au surplus, nous verrons… Ce qui est certain, c’est que nous sommes entre ses mains, et que nous ignorons le sort de Villette et de Pointar, comme ils ignorent le nôtre.

“Cela dit, je ne suis point homme, mon cher de Schaller, à être le prix de la liberté de Hadjar, ni à être le trophée de sa vie de brigand.

“Coûte que coûte, il faut nous échapper, et, lorsque le moment propice me semblera venu, je ferai l’impossible pour sortir d’ici; mais, pour moi, je veux être libre et non un prisonnier échangé quand je paraîtrai devant mes camarades et je veux aussi garder ma vie pour me retrouver, revolver ou sabre en main, face à face avec le brigand qui, par surprise, s’est emparé de nous.”

Si le capitaine Hardigan et M. de Schaller méditaient des plans d’évasion, Pistache et M. François, quelque décidés qu’ils fussent à suivre leurs chefs, comptaient davantage sur le secours du dehors, et peut-être même sur l’intelligence de leur ami Coupe-à-cœur.

Telle était, de fait, la situation, il fallait bien le reconnaître.

On ne l’a point oublié, depuis leur départ, Coupe-à-cœur avait suivi les prisonniers jusqu’à Zenfig, sans que les Touareg eussent voulu le chasser. Mais, lorsque le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons furent conduits au bordj, on ne laissa point le fidèle animal les y rejoindre. Était-ce intentionnellement?… Il eût été difficile de se prononcer. Ce qui n’est pas douteux, c’est que tous regrettaient de ne point l’avoir avec eux. Et, pourtant, s’il eût été là, quel service aurait-il pu leur rendre, si intelligent et si dévoué qu’il fût?…

“On ne sait pas… on ne sait pas… répétait le brigadier Pistache en causant avec M. François. Les chiens… ils ont des idées d’instinct que n’ont pas les hommes. En parlant à Coupe-à-cœur de son maître Nicol, de son ami Va-d’l’avant, peut-être que de lui-même il se lancerait à leur recherche? Il est vrai que, puisque nous ne pouvons sortir de cette maudite cour, Coupe-à-cœur ne le pourrait pas non plus!… N’importe, je voudrais l’avoir ici!… Et pourvu que ces brutes ne lui fassent point de mal!”

M. François se contenta de hocher la tête sans répondre, en frottant son menton et ses joues, déjà rudes sous la poussée des premiers poils.

Les prisonniers, ayant vainement attendu qu’on leur apportât quelque nourriture, n’avaient plus qu’à prendre un peu de repos dont ils sentaient grand besoin. Après s’être étendus sur les bottes d’alfa, tous parvinrent à s’endormir plus ou moins tard, et ils se réveillèrent d’une assez mauvaise nuit dès la pointe du jour.

“De ce que nous n’avons pas soupé hier soir, objecta justement M. François, faut-il en conclure que nous ne déjeunerons pas ce matin?…

— Ce serait fâcheux, je dirais même déplorable!…” répliqua le brigadier Pistache qui bâillait à se décrocher les mâchoires, non pas de sommeil, cette fois, mais de faim.

Les prisonniers ne tardèrent pas à être fixés sur cette très intéressante question. Une heure après, Ahmet et une douzaine de Touareg pénétraient dans la cour et y déposaient du même gâteau que celui de la veille, de la viande froide, des dattes, de quoi suffire à dix personnes pour une journée. Quelques cruches contenaient une bonne quantité d’eau, puisée à l’oued qui traversait l’oasis de Zenfig.

Une fois encore, le capitaine Hardigan voulut connaître le sort que le chef touareg leur réservait, et il questionna Ahmet.

Celui-ci, pas plus que Sohar la veille, ne consentit à répondre. Il avait sans doute des ordres à ce sujet, et il quitta la cour sans avoir prononcé une seule parole. Trois jours s’écoulèrent et n’apportèrent aucun changement à la situation. Chercher à s’évader du bordj, c’était impossible, du moins en escaladant les hautes murailles, escalade impossible à effectuer faute d’échelle. Peut-être, ces murs franchis en profitant de l’obscurité, le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons auraient-ils pu s’enfuir à travers l’oasis? Il ne semblait même pas que le bordj fût surveillé extérieurement, et, ni le jour ni la nuit, un bruit de pas ne résonnait sur le chemin de ronde. À quoi bon d’ailleurs, les murs opposaient un obstacle infranchissable et la porte de la cour n’aurait pu être forcée.

Du reste, dès le premier jour de leur incarcération, le brigadier Pistache avait pu reconnaître la disposition de l’oasis. À la suite de maints efforts, et non sans avoir risqué cent fois de se rompre le cou, il était parvenu, en montant l’escalier délabré, à atteindre l’extrémité du minaret, décoiffé de sa calotte supérieure.

De là, en regardant à travers les dernières embrasures, assuré de ne point être aperçu, il avait observé le large panorama qui se déroulait à ses yeux.

Sous lui, autour du bordj, s’étendait la bourgade entre les arbres de l’oasis de Zenfig. Au-delà se prolongeait le territoire de l’Hinguiz sur une longueur de trois à quatre kilomètres à l’est et à l’ouest. Face au nord se rangeaient les habitations en plus grand nombre, très blanches au milieu de la sombre verdure. À la place occupée par l’une d’elles, à l’ensemble des constructions que ses murs entouraient, au mouvement qui se produisait devant sa porte, au nombre d’étendards dont la brise déployait l’étamine au-dessus de son entrée, le brigadier se dit, non sans raison, que cette habitation devait être la demeure de Hadjar, et il ne se trompait pas.

Dans l’après-midi du 20, ayant repris son poste d’observation à l’extrémité du minaret, le brigadier remarqua une grande animation dans la bourgade dont les maisons se vidaient peu à peu. Et même, à travers l’oasis, il semblait bien que nombre d’indigènes arrivaient des divers points de l’Hinguiz. Et ce n’étaient point des caravanes de commerce, car aucun méhari, aucune bête de somme ne les accompagnait.

Qui sait si, à l’appel de Hadjar, une importante assemblée ne se réunissait pas ce jour-là à Zenfig?… Et de fait, la place principale fut bientôt envahie par une foule nombreuse.

Voyant ce qui se passait, le brigadier se dit que son capitaine devait en être informé, et il l’appela.

Le capitaine Hardigan n’hésita pas à rejoindre Pistache dans l’étroit réduit du minaret, mais ce ne fut pas sans de pénibles efforts qu’il parvint à se hisser près de lui.

Pas d’erreur, pas de doute, une sorte de palabre comptant plusieurs centaines de Touareg était réunie en ce moment à Zenfig. Des cris, on les entendait, des gestes, on les voyait du haut de la “souma’ah”, et cette effervescence ne prit fin qu’à l’arrivée d’un personnage, suivi d’un homme et d’une femme, qui sortirent de la maison indiquée par le brigadier comme devant être celle du chef touareg.

“C’est Hadjar… c’est lui! s’écria le capitaine Hardigan. Je le reconnais…

— Vous avez raison, mon capitaine, répondit Pistache, et je le reconnais aussi.”

C’était Hadjar, en effet, avec sa mère Djemma, son frère Sohar, et, dès leur entrée sur la place, ils furent acclamés.

Puis le silence se fit. Hadjar, entouré de la foule, prit la parole, et, pendant une heure, parfois interrompu par des clameurs enthousiastes, il harangua cette masse d’indigènes. Mais les discours qu’il prononça ne pouvaient être entendus du capitaine ni du brigadier. De nouveaux cris furent poussés, lorsque la réunion s’acheva, et, Hadjar ayant regagné son habitation, la bourgade retrouva sa tranquillité habituelle.

Le capitaine Hardigan et Pistache redescendirent aussitôt dans la cour, et firent part à leurs compagnons de ce qu’ils avaient observé.

“Je pense, dit l’ingénieur, que cette réunion aura été faite pour protester contre l’inondation des chotts, et qu’elle sera suivie de quelque nouvelle agression, sans doute…

— Je le crois aussi, déclara le capitaine Hardigan. Cela pourrait indiquer que Pointar s’est réinstallé à la section du Goléah.

— À moins qu’il ne s’agisse de nous, dit le brigadier Pistache, et que tous ces coquins n’aient été réunis que pour assister au massacre des prisonniers!…”

Un long silence suivit cette observation. Le capitaine et l’ingénieur avaient échangé un regard qui trahissait leurs secrètes pensées. Que le chef targui fût résolu à exercer des représailles, qu’il voulût donner l’exemple d’une exécution publique, que diverses tribus de l’Hinguiz eussent été convoquées à Zenfig dans ce but, n’y avait-il pas lieu de le craindre?… Et, d’autre part, comment conserver l’espoir qu’un secours quelconque pût arriver, soit de Biskra, soit de Goléah, puisque le lieutenant Villette devait ignorer à quel endroit les prisonniers avaient été conduits, et aussi entre les mains de quelle tribu ils étaient tombés?…

Or, avant de descendre du minaret, le capitaine Hardigan et le brigadier avaient une dernière fois parcouru du regard toute la partie du Melrir qui s’étendait devant eux. Désert au nord comme au sud, déserte également la portion qui se prolongeait à l’est et à l’ouest des deux côtés de l’Hinguiz, qui deviendrait île après l’inondation du chott. Aucune caravane ne se montrait, à travers la vaste dépression. Quant au détachement du lieutenant Villette, en admettant que ses recherches l’eussent amené vers Zenfig, qu’auraient pu faire ses quelques hommes contre la bourgade?…

Il n’y avait donc plus qu’à attendre les événements et dans quelles appréhensions! D’un instant à l’autre, la porte du bordj n’allait-elle pas s’ouvrir pour donner passage à Hadjar et aux siens?…

Serait-il possible de leur résister, si le chef targui les faisait entraîner vers la place pour être mis à mort?… Et, ce qui ne serait pas fait aujourd’hui, ne se ferait-il pas demain?…

La journée s’écoula, cependant, et sans apporter aucun changement à la situation. Les quelques provisions déposées le matin dans la cour leur suffirent, et, le soir venu, ils vinrent s’étendre sur la litière d’alfa, dans la chambre où ils avaient passé les nuits précédentes.

Mais ils y étaient depuis une demi-heure à peine, lorsqu’un bruit se fit entendre au-dehors. Est-ce donc que quelque Targui remontait le chemin de ronde?… Est-ce que la porte allait s’ouvrir?… Est-ce que Hadjar envoyait chercher les prisonniers?…

Le brigadier s’était levé aussitôt, et, blotti contre la porte, il écoutait.

Ce n’était pas un bruit de pas qui arrivait à son oreille, mais plutôt une sorte de jappement sourd et plaintif. Un chien rôdait le long du sour extérieur.

“Coupe-à-cœur… c’est lui! c’est lui!…” s’écria Pistache.

Et se couchant au ras du seuil:

“Coupe-à-cœur… Coupe-à-cœur!… répéta-t-il. C’est toi, mon bon chien?…”

L’animal reconnut la voix du brigadier comme il eût reconnu celle de son maître Nicol, et répondit par de nouveaux aboiements à demi contenus.

“Oui… c’est nous… Coupe-à-cœur… c’est nous!… répétait encore Pistache. Ah! si tu pouvais retrouver le marchef, et son vieux frère, ton ami Va-d’l’avant… Va-d’l’avant… entends-tu, et les prévenir que nous sommes enfermés dans cette cassine!…”

Le capitaine Hardigan et les autres s’étaient rapprochés de la porte. S’ils avaient pu se servir du chien pour communiquer avec leurs compagnons!… Un billet attaché à son collier… Et qui sait si, rien que par son instinct, le fidèle animal n’aurait pas retrouvé le lieutenant?… Et Villette, apprenant où étaient ses compagnons, aurait pris des mesures pour les délivrer!…

Dans tous les cas, il ne fallait pas que Coupe-à-cœur fût surpris dans le chemin de ronde à la porte du bordj. Aussi le brigadier lui répéta-t-il:

“Va… mon chien, va!”

Coupe-à-cœur le comprit, car il s’en alla, après avoir donné un dernier jappement d’adieu.

Le lendemain, comme la veille, des provisions furent apportées dès la première heure et il y eut lieu de penser que la situation des prisonniers ne serait pas encore modifiée ce jour-là.

Pendant la nuit suivante, le chien ne revint pas; du moins, Pistache qui le guettait ne l’entendit point. Et il se demanda si le pauvre animal n’avait pas reçu quelque mauvais coup et si on ne devait plus le revoir…

Les deux journées qui suivirent ne se signalèrent par aucun incident, et l’on ne constata aucune nouvelle animation dans la bourgade.

Le 24, vers onze heures, le capitaine Hardigan, en observation au haut du minaret, remarqua un certain mouvement à Zenfig. Il se faisait comme un tumulte de chevaux, un bruit d’armes qui n’était pas habituel. En même temps, la population se porta en masse sur la place principale, vers laquelle se dirigeaient de nombreux cavaliers.

Était-ce donc ce jour-là que le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons allaient y être amenés devant Hadjar?…

Non, cette fois encore, il n’en fut rien. Tout, au contraire, annonçait un prochain départ du chef targui. À cheval, au milieu de la place, il passait en revue une centaine de Touareg, montés comme lui.

Une demi-heure après, Hadjar se mettait à la tête de cette troupe, et, au sortir de la bourgade, il se dirigeait vers l’est de l’Hinguiz.

Le capitaine redescendit aussitôt dans la cour et annonça ce départ à ses compagnons.

“C’est quelque expédition contre Goléah, où les travaux auront été repris, sans doute, dit l’ingénieur.

— Et qui sait si Hadjar ne va pas se rencontrer avec Villette et son détachement?… observa le capitaine.

— Oui… tout est possible, mais ça n’est pas sûr, répondit le brigadier. Ce qui est certain toutefois, c’est que, puisque Hadjar et ses gueux ont quitté la bourgade, c’est le moment de fuir…

— Comment?…” demanda un des spahis.

Oui… comment?… comment profiter de l’occasion qui venait de se présenter?… Les murs du bordj n’étaient-ils pas toujours infranchissables? La porte, solidement fermée à l’extérieur, pouvait-elle être forcée?… D’autre part, de qui attendre un secours?…

Il vint pourtant, ce secours, et voici dans quelles conditions.

Pendant la nuit suivante, ainsi qu’il l’avait fait une première fois, le chien fit entendre de sourds aboiements, en même temps qu’il grattait le sol près de la porte.

Guidé par son instinct, Coupe-à-cœur avait découvert une brèche sous cette partie du sour, un trou à demi comblé de terre qui communiquait de l’extérieur à l’intérieur.

Et, tout à coup, le brigadier, qui ne s’y attendait guère, le vit apparaître dans la cour.

Oui! Coupe-à-cœur était près de lui, sautant, aboyant, et il eut quelque peine à contenir le brave animal.

Aussitôt, le capitaine Hardigan, M. de Schaller, les autres de se jeter hors de la chambre, et, le chien revenant au trou qu’il venait de franchir, ils le suivirent.

Là était l’orifice d’un étroit boyau, dont il suffirait d’enlever un peu de pierres et de terre pour qu’un homme pût s’y glisser.

Oui… bien inattendue et dont il fallait profiter cette nuit même, avant que Hadjar ne fût de retour à Zenfig.

Et, pourtant, traverser la bourgade puis l’oasis ne serait pas sans offrir de sérieuses difficultés!… Comment les fugitifs se dirigeraient-ils au milieu de cette obscurité profonde?… Ne risquaient-ils pas d’être rencontrés, même par la troupe de Hadjar?… Et les cinquante kilomètres qui les séparaient de Goléah, comment les franchiraient-ils, sans vivres, n’ayant pour se nourrir que les fruits ou les racines des oasis?

Aucun d’eux ne voulut rien voir de ces dangers. Ils n’hésitèrent pas un instant à s’enfuir. Ils suivirent le chien vers ce trou, à travers lequel il disparut le premier:

“Passe, dit l’officier à Pistache.

— Après vous, mon capitaine”, répondit le brigadier.

Il y eut certaines précautions à prendre, pour ne point provoquer un éboulement de la muraille. Les prisonniers y parvinrent, et, après une dizaine de minutes, atteignirent le chemin de ronde.

La nuit était très obscure, nuageuse, sans étoiles. Le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons n’auraient su en quelle direction aller si le chien n’eût été là pour les guider. Ils n’eurent qu’à se fier à l’intelligent animal. Du reste, il ne se rencontrait personne aux approches du bordj, sur les pentes duquel ils se laissèrent glisser jusqu’à la lisière des premiers arbres.

Il était alors onze heures du soir. Le silence régnait dans la bourgade, et des fenêtres des habitations, véritables embrasures, ne filtrait aucune lueur.

Les fugitifs marchant à pas sourds s’engagèrent à travers les

arbres, et, sur la limite de l’oasis, ils n’avaient rencontré personne.

Là, à ce moment, un homme, portant une lanterne allumée, parut devant eux.

Ils le reconnurent et il les reconnut.

C’était Mézaki, qui regagnait son habitation de ce côté de la bourgade.

Mézaki n’eut pas même le temps de pousser un cri. Le chien lui avait sauté à la gorge, et il tombait sans vie sur le sol.

“Bien… bien… Coupe-à-cœur”, dit le brigadier.

Le capitaine et ses compagnons n’avaient plus à s’inquiéter de ce misérable qui gisait sans vie à cette place, et, d’un pas rapide, ils suivirent, la lisière de l’Hinguiz en se dirigeant vers l’est du Melrir.

XV. EN FUITE.

C’était après avoir mûrement réfléchi sur ce qu’il y avait à faire à la suite d’une évasion que le capitaine Hardigan avait pris cette direction de l’est. À l’opposé, sans doute, un peu au-delà de la lisière occidentale du Melrir, se trouvait la piste fréquentée de Touggourt que suivait le tracé du

Transsaharien, et d’où il aurait été facile de gagner Biskra avec sécurité en temps ordinaire. Mais cette partie du chott, il ne la connaissait pas, étant venu par l’est de Goléah à Zenfig, et remonter L’Hinguiz vers l’ouest, c’était non seulement l’inconnu, mais le risque d’y rencontrer des gens postés par Hadjar pour surveiller les troupes pouvant arriver de Biskra par ce côté. D’ailleurs le parcours était à peu près égal entre Zenfig et le terminus du canal. Les ouvriers pouvaient être revenus en force au chantier. Et puis, à rallier Goléah, peut-être rejoindrait-on le détachement du lieutenant Villette qui devait plutôt effectuer ses recherches en cette portion du Djerid… Enfin, de ce côté s’était élancé Coupe-à-cœur à travers l’oasis, et comme le pensait le brigadier, il avait “ses raison pour cela!” et ne convenait-il pas de s’en rapporter à la sagacité de Coupe-à-cœur? Aussi avait-il dit:

“Mon capitaine, il n’y a qu’à le suivre! Il ne se trompera pas!… Et d’ailleurs, il y voit la nuit comme le jour!… Je vous l’affirme, c’est un chien qui a des yeux de chat!…

— Suivons-le”, avait répondu le capitaine Hardigan.

C’était ce qu’il y avait de mieux à faire. Au milieu de cette obscurité profonde, dans le dédale de l’oasis, les fugitifs auraient risqué d’errer autour de la bourgade sans s’en éloigner. Très heureusement, à se laisser guider par Coupe-à-cœur, ils atteignirent assez promptement la lisière septentrionale de l’Hinguiz et n’eurent qu’à en longer la rive.

Il était d’autant plus nécessaire de ne point s’en écarter, que, en dehors, le Melrir ne présentait qu’un sol dangereux, troué de fondrières desquelles il eût été impossible de se tirer. Les passes praticables qui circulaient entre elles n’étaient connues que des Touareg de Zenfig et des bourgades voisines, qui faisaient métier de guides, et, le plus souvent, n'offrant leurs services que pour piller les caravanes.

Les fugitifs marchaient d'un pas rapide, et n'avaient eu aucune mauvaise rencontre, lorsque, le jour se levant, ils firent halte dans un bois de palmiers. Étant donné la difficulté de s'aventurer en pleines ténèbres, ils ne devaient pas estimer à plus de sept ou huit kilomètres la distance parcourue pendant cette étape. Il en resterait donc une vingtaine pour atteindre la pointe extrême de l'Hinguiz, et, au-delà, à peu près autant à travers le chott, jusqu'à l'oasis de Goléah.

En cet endroit, fatigué de cette marche de nuit, le capitaine Hardigan jugea à propos de se reposer une heure. Ce bois était désert, et les bourgades les plus rapprochées occupaient la limite méridionale de cette future île centrale. Il serait donc facile de les éviter. Du reste, aussi loin que le regard pouvait s'étendre vers l'est, la troupe de Hadjar ne se laissait point apercevoir. Partie de Zenfig depuis une quinzaine d'heures, elle devait être loin déjà.

Mais, si la fatigue obligeait les fugitifs à prendre un peu de repos, ce repos ne suffirait pas à les remettre, s'ils ne se procuraient quelque nourriture. Les provisions ayant été épuisées pendant les dernières heures passées au bordj, ils ne pouvaient compter que sur les fruits à cueillir en traversant les oasis de l'Hinguiz, rien que des dattes, des baies et peut-être aussi certaines racines comestibles que connaissait bien Pistache. Le briquet et l'amadou ne manquaient ni aux uns ni aux autres, et, cuites sur un feu de bois sec, ces racines fournissaient une alimentation plus substantielle.

Oui… dans ces conditions, il y avait lieu d'espérer que le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons satisferaient leur faim, leur soif aussi, car plusieurs oueds sillonnaient l'Hinguiz. Peut-être même attraperaient-ils quelque gibier de poil ou de plume avec le concours de Coupe-à-cœur. Mais toute chance de ce genre s’évanouirait, lorsqu’ils feraient route à travers les plaines sablonneuses du chott, sur ces terrains salifères où ne poussaient que quelques touffes de driss, impropres à l’alimentation.

Après tout, puisque les prisonniers étaient venus en deux jours, sous la conduite de Sohar, de Goléah à Zenfig, les fugitifs mettraient-ils plus de temps de Zenfig à Goléah?… Oui, assurément, et pour deux raisons: la première c’est qu’ils n’avaient pas de chevaux cette fois, la seconde, c’est que, ne connaissant pas les passes praticables, leur marche serait forcément retardée à chercher.

“Somme toute, observa le capitaine, il ne s’agit que d’une cinquantaine de kilomètres… Ce soir, nous en aurons fait la moitié… Après une nuit de repos, on se remettra en route, et, même s’il faut le double de temps pour l’autre moitié, nous serons en vue des berges du canal dans la soirée d’après-demain.”

Après cette halte d’une heure, s’étant nourris uniquement de dattes, les fugitifs suivirent le long de la lisière, en se dissimulant de leur mieux. Le temps était couvert. À peine si quelques rayons de soleil filtraient entre les déchirures de nuages. Même la pluie menaçait, mais par bonne chance elle ne tomba pas.

La première étape prit fin à midi. Aucune alerte ne s’était produite. On n’avait pas rencontré un seul indigène. Quant à la bande de Hadjar, nul doute qu’elle ne fût déjà de trente ou quarante kilomètres dans l’est.

La halte dura une heure. Les dattes ne manquaient point, et le brigadier déterra des racines qu’on fit cuire sous la cendre. On s’en nourrit tant bien que mal, et Coupe-à-cœur dut s’en contenter.

Le soir, vingt-cinq kilomètres avaient été franchis depuis Zenfig, et le capitaine Hardigan s’arrêtait à la pointe est de l’Hinguiz.

C’était sur la bordure de la dernière oasis. Au-delà s’étendaient les vastes solitudes de la dépression, l’immense aire étincelante d’efflorescences salines, sur laquelle, faute de guide, le cheminement allait être non moins difficile que dangereux. Mais enfin les prisonniers étaient loin de leur prison, et si Ahmet et autres s’étaient mis à les poursuivre, du moins n’avaient-ils pas retrouvé leurs traces.

Tous avaient grand besoin de repos. Quelque intérêt qu’ils eussent à gagner au plus tôt Goléah, ils durent passer la nuit en cet endroit. D’ailleurs, se hasarder au milieu de l’obscurité sur ces terrains mouvants au-delà de l’Hinguiz aurait été trop imprudent. C’est à peine s’ils s’en tireraient en plein jour! N’ayant point à craindre le froid à cette époque de l’année et sous cette latitude, ils se blottirent au pied d’un bouquet de palmiers.

Sans doute, il eût été sage que l’un d’eux, surveillât les approches de ce campement. Le brigadier s’offrit même pour rester de garde pendant les premières heures, quitte à être relevé par les deux spahis. Tandis que ses compagnons tombaient dans un lourd sommeil, il se tint à son poste en compagnie de Coupe-à-cœur. Mais, à peine un quart d’heure écoulé, Pistache ne put résister à l’envie de dormir. Ce fut presque inconsciemment qu’il s’assit d’abord, puis s’étendit sur le sol, et ses yeux se fermèrent malgré lui.

Heureusement le fidèle Coupe-à-cœur faisait meilleure garde, et ce fut heureux, car, un peu avant minuit, les sourds aboiements qui lui échappèrent réveillèrent les dormeurs.

“Alerte… alerte!…” s’écria le brigadier, qui venait de se relever brusquement.

En un instant, le capitaine Hardigan se retrouva sur pied.

“Écoutez, mon capitaine!” dit Pistache.

Un violent tumulte se produisait sur la gauche du bouquet d’arbres, un bruit de branches brisées, de buissons déchirés, à quelques centaines de pas de là.

“Est-ce donc que les Touareg de Zenfig nous poursuivent et seraient sur notre piste?…”

Et pouvait-il être douteux que, l’évasion des prisonniers constatée, les Touareg ne fussent lancés à leur poursuite?…

Le capitaine Hardigan, après avoir prêté l’oreille, fut d’accord avec le brigadier pour dire:

“Non… ce ne sont pas des indigènes!… Ils auraient essayé de nous surprendre!… Ils ne feraient pas ce bruit!…

— Mais alors?… demanda l’ingénieur.

— Ce sont des animaux… des fauves, qui rôdent à travers l’oasis”, déclara le brigadier.

En effet, le campement n’était point menacé par les Touareg, mais par un ou plusieurs lions, dont la présence n’en constituait pas moins un grand danger.

S’ils se jetaient sur le campement, serait-il, possible de leur résister, sans une arme pour se défendre?…

Le chien donnait les signes de la plus vive agitation. Le brigadier eut grand-peine à le contenir, à l’empêcher d’aboyer, et de se jeter vers l’endroit où les hurlements éclataient avec fureur.

Que se passait-il donc?… Est-ce que ces fauves se battaient entre eux, se disputaient une proie avec cet acharnement?… Est-ce qu’ils avaient découvert les fugitifs sous le bouquet d’arbres?… Est-ce qu’ils allaient se précipiter sur eux?…

Il y eut là quelques minutes de profonde anxiété. S’ils avaient été découverts, le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons seraient vite rejoints! Mieux valait attendre, attendre à cette place, et, tout d’abord, se hisser sur les arbres pour éviter une attaque.

Ce fut l’ordre que donna le capitaine, et il allait être exécuté, lorsque le chien, s’échappant des mains du brigadier, disparut vers la droite du campement.

“Ici… Coupe-à-cœur! ici…” cria Pistache.

Mais l’animal, ou ne l’entendit pas ou ne voulut pas l’entendre, et ne revint pas.

En ce moment, ce tumulte, ces hurlements semblèrent s’éloigner. Peu à peu, ils diminuèrent, et finirent par cesser. Et les seuls bruits encore perceptibles ne furent que les aboiements de Coupe-à-cœur qui ne tarda pas à reparaître.

“Partis… ces fauves sont assurément partis! dit le capitaine Hardigan… Ils n’avaient point vent de notre présence!… Nous n’avons plus rien à craindre…

— Mais qu’a donc Coupe-à-cœur?… s’écria Pistache qui, en caressant le chien, sentait ses mains humides de sang. Est-ce qu’il est blessé?… Est-ce qu’il a reçu là bas quelque coup de griffe?…”

Non… Coupe-à-cœur ne se plaignait pas… Il gambadait, il sautait, il allait vers la droite et revenait aussitôt. On eût dit qu’il cherchait à entraîner le brigadier de ce côté, et, comme celui-ci se disposait à le suivre:

“Non… restez, Pistache, ordonna le capitaine… Attendons la pointe du jour, et nous verrons ce qu’il faudra faire…”

Le brigadier obéit. Chacun reprit la place qu’il avait quittée aux premiers hurlements des fauves, et aussi son sommeil si brusquement interrompu.

Ce sommeil ne fut pas troublé, et, quand les fugitifs se réveillèrent, le soleil commençait à déborder l’horizon à l’orient du Melrir.

Mais voici que Coupe-à-cœur s’élança sous bois, et, quand il revint, cette fois, il fut constaté que son poil portait des traces d’un sang frais.

“Décidément, dit l’ingénieur, il y a là quelque bête blessée ou morte… Un de ces lions qui se sont battus entre eux…

— Dommage que ça ne soit pas bon à manger, car on en mangerait dit un des spahis.

— Allons voir”, répondit le capitaine Hardigan.

Tous suivirent le chien qui les guidait en aboyant, et, à une centaine de pas, ils trouvèrent un animal qui nageait dans son sang.

Ce n’était point un lion, mais une antilope de grande taille, que les fauves avaient étranglée, pour laquelle ils s’étaient battus sans doute, et qu’ils avaient abandonnée, tant la fureur les excitait les uns contre les autres.

“Ah! fameux cela… fameux!” s’écria le brigadier. Voilà un gibier que nous n’aurions jamais pris!… Il arrive à propos, et nous aurions une réserve de viande pour tout notre voyage!”

C’était là, vraiment, une heureuse chance! Les fugitifs n’en seraient plus réduits aux racines et aux dattes. Les spahis et Pistache se mirent aussitôt à la besogne, et détachèrent les meilleurs morceaux de l’antilope dont ils donnèrent sa part à Coupe-à-cœur. Cela faisait quelques kilos de bonne chair qu’ils rapportèrent au campement. On alluma du feu, on plaça quelques tranches sur les charbons ardents, et, si tous se régalèrent de succulentes grillades, il n’y a pas lieu d’y insister.

En vérité, chacun avait repris de nouvelles forces après ce déjeuner inattendu où la viande remplaçait les fruits. Et, dès qu’il fut terminé à la satisfaction générale:

“En route, dit le capitaine Hardigan. Il ne faut pas s’attarder… une poursuite des Touareg de Zenfig est toujours à redouter.”

En effet, et, avant de quitter leur campement, les fugitifs observèrent-ils avec grande attention toute cette lisière de l’Hinguiz qui se prolongeait vers la bourgade. Elle était déserte et, sur toute l’étendue du chott, à l’est comme à l’ouest, ne se montrait aucune créature vivante. Et, non seulement les fauves et les ruminants ne s’aventuraient jamais sur ces régions désolées, mais les oiseaux eux-mêmes ne les traversaient point à tire-d’aile. Et pourquoi l’eussent-ils fait? puisque les diverses oasis de l’Hinguiz leur procuraient des ressources que n’aurait pas fournies l’aride surface du chott?

D’ailleurs, à cette observation que fit le capitaine Hardigan:

“Ils en deviendront les hôtes habituels, répondit l’ingénieur: oiseaux de mer, du moins, goélands, mouettes, frégates, alcyons, lorsque le Melrir sera changé en un vaste lac, et, sous les eaux, se glisseront les poissons et les cétacés méditerranéens! Et je crois déjà voir, à toute voile ou à toute vapeur, les flottilles de guerre et de commerce sillonner la nouvelle mer!

— En attendant que le chott soit rempli, monsieur l’ingénieur, déclara le brigadier Pistache, m’est avis qu’il faut profiter de ce qu’il ne l’est pas encore pour regagner le canal. À espérer qu’un bâtiment vienne nous prendre où nous sommes, il y aurait de quoi perdre patience…

— Sans doute, répondit M. de Schaller, mais je persiste à penser que la complète inondation du Rharsa et du Melrir s’effectuera en moins de temps qu’on ne l’a supposé…

— À ne pas durer plus d’un an, répliqua en riant le capitaine, ce serait trop pour nous! Et, dès que nos préparatifs seront terminés, je donnerai le signal du départ.

— Allons, M. François, dit alors le brigadier, il va falloir jouer des jambes, et puissiez-vous faire bientôt une halte dans une bourgade qui possédera une boutique de barbier, car nous finirions par avoir une barbe de sapeur!…

— De sapeur!” murmura M. François, qui ne se reconnaissait déjà plus lorsque les eaux d’un oued lui reflétaient son visage.

Les préparatifs ne pouvaient être ni longs ni compliqués dans les conditions où se trouvaient alors les fugitifs. Cependant, ce qui les retarda un peu ce matin-là, ce fut la nécessité d’assurer leur nourriture pour les deux jours de marche jusqu’à Goléah. Ils n’avaient à leur disposition que les morceaux de l’antilope dont une partie seulement était consommée. Or, pendant cette traversée du Melrir, où le bois ferait défaut, comment allumer du feu?… Ici, du moins, le combustible ne manquait pas, et les branches, rompues par les violentes rafales du Djerid, jonchaient le sol.

Le brigadier et les deux spahis procédèrent donc à cette besogne. En une demi-heure, des tranches de cette excellente viande eurent grillé sur les charbons. Puis, lorsqu’elles furent refroidies, Pistache les réunit en six parts égales et chacun prit la sienne, qu’il enveloppa de feuilles fraîches.

Il était sept heures du matin, à en juger par la position du soleil au-dessus de l’horizon, qui se levait au milieu de brumes rougeâtres annonçant une chaude journée. Cette fois, durant leurs étapes, le capitaine et ses compagnons n’auraient plus l’abri des arbres de l’Hinguiz contre les ardeurs des rayons solaires.

À cette regrettable circonstance il s’enjoignait une autre, dont le danger était des plus sérieux. Tant que les fugitifs avaient suivi la lisière ombreuse, le risque d’être aperçus, et, dès lors, d’être poursuivis, était en grande partie diminué. Mais, lorsqu’ils franchiraient à découvert les longues sebkhas du chott, qui sait si leur passage ne serait pas signalé?… Et, si quelque bande de Touareg croisait leur route, où se réfugier pour éviter leur rencontre?… Et puis, si, ce jour-là ou le lendemain, Hadjar et sa troupe revenaient vers Zenfig?…

Qu’on ajoute à ces périls les difficultés de la marche sur ces terrains mouvants du Melrir, dont ni l’ingénieur ni le capitaine ne connaissaient les passes, et l’on se rendra compte des dangers que présentait ce parcours de vingt-cinq kilomètres entre la pointe de l’Hinguiz et le chantier de Goléah!

Le capitaine Hardigan et M. de Schaller n’étaient pas sans y avoir réfléchi, et ils y songeaient encore. Mais ces redoutables éventualités, il fallait à tout prix s’y exposer. En somme, tous étaient énergiques, vigoureux, capables de grands efforts.

“En route!… dit le capitaine.

— Oui… en route… bonne troupe!” répondit le brigadier Pistache qui, non sans raison, crut devoir modifier ainsi la vieille locution populaire.

XVI. LE TELL.

Il était un peu plus de sept heures lorsque le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons quittèrent la pointe. La nature particulière du sol commandait de n'avancer qu'avec grande précaution. Les efflorescences de sa surface ne permettaient pas de reconnaître s'il offrait une résistance suffisante et si, à chaque pas, on ne risquait pas de s'enliser dans une fondrière.

L'ingénieur, d'après les sondages du capitaine Roudaire et ceux qu'il avait faits lui-même, savait à quoi s'en tenir sur la composition de ces terrains dont la couche forme le fond des sebkha et des chotts. À la partie supérieure s'étend une croûte salifère, sujette à de certaines oscillations très sensibles. Au-dessous, les sables se mélangent de marnes, parfois fluides, où l'eau entre pour les deux tiers, ce qui leur enlève toute consistance. Parfois les sondes ne rencontrent la roche qu'à de grandes profondeurs. Il n'y a donc pas lieu de s'étonner si hommes et chevaux disparaissaient dans ces couches semi-liquides, comme si le sol se dérobait sous eux, et sans qu'il fût possible de leur porter secours.

Il eût été à souhaiter que, au sortir de l'Hinguiz, les fugitifs retrouvassent les empreintes du passage de Hadjar et de sa troupe de Touareg à travers cette partie du chott. Des traces de pas sur la croûte blanche n'auraient pas encore eu le temps de s'effacer, puisque ni le vent ni la pluie n'avaient balayé l'est du Melrir depuis quelques jours. Dans ce cas, il n'y aurait eu qu'à les suivre pour ne point s'écarter des passes bien connues des indigènes jusqu'à l'oasis de Goléah, vers laquelle vraisemblablement se dirigeait le chef targui. Mais ce fut en vain que M. de Schaller rechercha ces vestiges, et il fallut en conclure que la bande n’avait pas longé jusqu’à son extrême pointe les bords de l’Hinguiz.

Pendant le cheminement, le capitaine et l’ingénieur se tenaient en tête, précédés du chien qui courait en éclaireur. Avant de s’engager dans telle ou telle direction, ils essayaient de déterminer la composition du sol, examen que la longue nappe salifère rendait assez difficile. La marche ne s’effectuait qu’avec lenteur. Aussi cette première étape, lorsqu’elle eut pris fin vers onze heures, ne comprenait-elle qu’un parcours de quatre à cinq kilomètres. Il fallut alors faire halte, autant pour se reposer que pour manger. Il n’y avait en vue ni une oasis, ni un bois, ni même un bouquet d’arbres. Seule, une légère tumescence sablonneuse rompait l’uniformité de la plaine à quelque cent pas.

“Nous n’avons pas le choix”, dit le capitaine Hardigan.

Tous se dirigèrent vers cette petite dune et s’assirent du côté que ne frappaient point les rayons du soleil. Chacun tira de sa poche un morceau de viande. Mais ce fut en vain que le brigadier chercha un “ras” pour y puiser un peu d’eau potable. Aucun oued ne traversait cette portion du Melrir, et la soif ne put être apaisée qu’avec les quelques dattes cueillies au dernier campement.

Vers midi et demi la marche fut reprise, et se continua non sans grosse fatigue ni grandes difficultés. Autant que cela se pouvait, le capitaine Hardigan essayait de maintenir sa direction vers l’est en se basant sur la position du soleil. Mais, presque à chaque instant, le sable se dérobait sous les pieds. La dépression ne comportait alors qu’une cote assez faible, et, assurément, lorsqu’il serait inondé, ce serait entre l’Hinguiz et l’orée du canal que le chott mesurerait sa plus grande profondeur, soit environ une trentaine de mètres au-dessous du niveau de la mer.

C’est ce que fit observer l’ingénieur, et il ajouta:

“Je ne m’étonne donc pas que le sol, de ce côté, soit plus mouvant qu’ailleurs. Pendant la saison des pluies, ces fonds doivent recevoir toutes les eaux courantes du Melrir, et ils ne peuvent jamais se raffermir.

— Il est fâcheux que nous ne puissions les éviter, observa le capitaine; quant à remonter au nord ou redescendre au sud, sans être assurés de trouver une meilleure route, ce serait du temps perdu, et nous n’avons pas un jour à perdre. Notre direction nous mène, en somme, au point le plus rapproché que nous puissions atteindre, et mieux vaut ne pas la modifier…

— Ce n’est pas douteux, déclara M. de Schaller, et il ne l’est pas non plus que Hadjar et sa bande, s’ils se rendaient au kilomètre 347, n’ont pas suivi cette route.”

En effet, on ne retrouvait aucune trace de leur passage.

Quelle pénible marche et combien lente! et quelle difficulté de se maintenir sur les passes. Coupe-à-cœur, toujours en avant, revenait de lui-même lorsqu’il sentait fléchir la croûte blanche. Il fallait alors s’arrêter, tâter le terrain, se rejeter soit à droite soit à gauche, parfois d’une cinquantaine de mètres, et le cheminement s’allongeait de multiples détours. Dans ces conditions, cette seconde étape ne fit pas gagner plus d’une lieue et demie. Le soir venu, ils s’arrêtèrent, à bout de forces, et, d’ailleurs, n’en eussent-ils pas eu l’impérieux besoin, comment auraient-ils pu s’aventurer dans une marche nocturne.

Il était cinq heures du soir. Le capitaine Hardigan avait bien compris que ses compagnons seraient incapables d’aller plus loin. Et, cependant, l’endroit était peu propice à un campement de nuit. Rien que la plaine plate.

Pas même un ressaut de sol pour s’y accoter. Aucun ras où il eût été possible de recueillir un peu d’eau potable… Pas même une touffe de driss en ces bas-fonds, ces “hofrah” où s’accumulaient les cristallisations salines. Quelques oiseaux traversaient rapidement cette région désolée pour regagner les oasis les plus rapprochées, à plusieurs lieues de là sans doute, et que les fugitifs n’auraient su atteindre!…

À cet instant, le brigadier, s’approchant de l’officier, lui dit:

“Mon capitaine, sauf votre respect, il me semble qu’il y aurait mieux à faire que de camper à cette place, dont les chiens touareg ne voudraient pas!

— Et quoi donc, brigadier?…

— Regardez… à moins que je ne me trompe!… Est-ce que ce n’est pas comme une espèce de dune qui s’arrondit là-bas, avec quelques arbres dessus?…”

Et, de sa main tendue vers le nord-est, Pistache montrait un point du chott, distant de trois kilomètres au plus.

Tous les yeux suivirent cette direction. Le brigadier ne se trompait pas. Il y avait là, par chance, une de ces petites collines boisées, un “tell”, au-dessus duquel se profilaient trois ou quatre arbres bien rares dans cette région. Si le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons parvenaient à l’atteindre, peut-être pourraient-ils passer la nuit dans des conditions moins mauvaises?

“C’est là qu’il faut aller… à tout prix, déclara l’officier.

— D’autant plus, ajouta M. de Schaller, que nous ne nous écarterons pas sensiblement de notre route…

— Et puis, dit le brigadier, qui sait si de ce côté le fond du chott ne sera pas meilleur pour nos pauvres pattes!…

— Allons, mes amis, un dernier effort!” ordonna le capitaine Hardigan.

Et tous le suivirent.

Mais, au-delà de ce tell, si, comme venait de le dire Pistache, le fond remontait, si, le lendemain, les fugitifs devaient rencontrer un terrain plus consistant, il n’en fut pas ainsi pendant la dernière heure de cette étape.

“Je n’arriverai jamais! répétait M. François.

— Si… en prenant mon bras!…” répondit l’obligeant brigadier.

C’est à peine si deux kilomètres avaient été franchis, lorsque le soleil fut au moment de disparaître. La lune, au début de son premier quartier, le suivait de près et allait se cacher derrière l’horizon. Au crépuscule déjà court sous cette basse latitude succéderait une obscurité profonde. Il importait donc de mettre à profit les derniers instants du jour pour gagner le tell.

Le capitaine Hardigan, M. de Schaller, le brigadier, M. François, les deux spahis, marchaient en file à pas comptés. Le sol devenait de plus en plus mauvais. La croûte cédait sous le pied, les sables fléchissaient en dessous, laissant monter l’eau qui les pénétrait. Par instants, même, on enfonçait jusqu’au genou dans la couche fluide, et il n’était pas facile de s’en retirer. Il arriva même que M. François, s’étant trop écarté de la passe, s’enlisa jusqu’à mi-corps, et son engloutissement eût été complet dans un de ces trous, ces “œils de mer” dont il a été déjà parlé, s’il n’eût étendu les bras.

“À moi… à moi!… cria-t-il en se débattant de son mieux.

— Tenez bon… tenez bon!…” cria à son tour Pistache.

Et, comme il se trouvait en avant, le brigadier s’arrêta et revint sur ses pas pour le secourir. Tous firent halte en même temps que lui. Mais il avait été devancé par Coupe-à-cœur qui, en quelques bonds, eut rejoint le malheureux M. François dont la tête et les bras émergeaient seuls, et qui se cramponna fortement au cou du robuste animal.

Enfin, le digne homme sortit de cette fondrière tout humide, tout englué de marne.

Et, bien que ce ne fût pas l’instant de plaisanter, Pistache de lui dire:

“Il n’y avait rien à craindre, monsieur François, et, si Coupe-à-cœur ne m’eût pas prévenu, je vous aurais tiré de là, rien qu’en vous empoignant par votre barbe!”

Ce que fut le cheminement ou, terme plus exact, le glissement pendant une heure encore à la surface de cette outtâ, on ne saurait s’en rendre compte. Les fugitifs ne pouvaient plus avancer sans risquer de s’enliser jusqu’à mi-corps. Ils rampaient sur le sable, les uns près des autres, afin de se soutenir mutuellement en cas de besoin. En cette partie de la dépression, le fond continuait à s’abaisser. C’était comme une vaste cuvette où devaient s’accumuler les eaux des ras qu’alimentait le réseau hydrographique du chott.

Plus qu’une seule chance de salut: atteindre le tell signalé par le brigadier Pistache. Là, sans doute, réapparaîtrait le sol résistant, jusqu’au groupe d’arbres en couronnant l’arête, et, dans ces conditions, toute sécurité serait assurée pour la nuit.

Mais, au milieu de l’obscurité, il devenait très difficile de se diriger. À peine était-il possible d’apercevoir ce tell. On ne savait plus s’il fallait prendre sur la droite ou sur la gauche.

À présent, le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons allaient au hasard, et seul le hasard pouvait les maintenir en bon chemin.

Enfin Coupe-à-cœur, en réalité leur véritable guide, fit entendre des aboiements précipités… Il semblait bien que le chien dût être d’une centaine de pas sur la gauche, et sur quelque hauteur.

“La butte est là… dit le brigadier.

— Oui… ajouta M. de Schaller, et nous nous en étions écartés.”

Que le chien eût trouvé le tell, et qu’il eût grimpé jusqu’aux arbres, cela ne paraissait plus douteux, et ses aboiements répétés invitaient certainement à le rejoindre.

C’est ce qui fut fait, mais au prix de quels efforts, et aussi de quels dangers! Dès lors le sol remontait graduellement, en même temps qu’il redevenait plus solide. À sa surface se sentaient maintenant quelques rugueuses touffes de driss auxquelles les doigts pouvaient s’accrocher, et ce fut ainsi que tous, Pistache ayant donné un dernier coup de main à M. François, se trouvèrent sur le tell.

“Enfin… nous y sommes!” s’écria le brigadier, en calmant Coupe-à-cœur qui gambadait près de lui.

Il était plus de huit heures alors. L’obscurité empêchait de rien voir aux alentours. S’étendre au pied des arbres, y prendre une nuit de repos, il n’y avait pas autre chose à faire. Mais, si le brigadier M. François, les deux spahis ne tardèrent pas à s'endormir, c'est en vain que M. de Schaller et le capitaine Hardigan attendirent le sommeil. Trop de préoccupations, d'inquiétudes les tinrent éveillés. N'étaient-ils pas comme des naufragés jetés sur un îlot inconnu, et sans savoir s'ils pourraient le quitter? Au pied de ce tell rencontreraient-ils des passes praticables?… Le jour venu, devraient-ils s'aventurer encore sur un sol mouvant?… Et, qui sait même si, dans la direction de Goléah, le fond du chott ne s'abaissait pas davantage?…

"À quelle distance estimez-vous que se trouve Goléah?… demanda le capitaine Hardigan à l'ingénieur.

— À douze ou quinze kilomètres, répondit M. de Schaller.

— Nous aurions donc fait la moitié du parcours?…

— Je le pense!"

Avec quelle lenteur s'écoulaient les heures de cette nuit du 26 au 27 avril! L'ingénieur et l'officier durent envier leurs compagnons que la fatigue plongeait dans un lourd sommeil dont l'éclat de la foudre ne les eût pas tirés. D'ailleurs, malgré l'état électrique de l'atmosphère, aucun orage ne se déclara, et, cependant, bien que la brise fût tombée, il se produisait certaines rumeurs qui troublaient le silence.

Il était à peu près minuit lorsque ces rumeurs, auxquelles vinrent bientôt se joindre des bruits plus accentués, se firent entendre.

"Que se passe-t-il donc?… demanda le capitaine Hardigan en se redressant au pied de l'arbre contre lequel il s'accotait.

— Je ne sais trop, répondit l’ingénieur. Est-ce un orage éloigné?… Non! il semble plutôt que certains roulements se propagent à travers le sol!”

Il n’y aurait rien eu là d’étonnant. On ne l’a point oublié lorsque s’effectuèrent les travaux de nivellement, M. Roudaire avait constaté que la surface du Djerid subissait des oscillations d’une amplitude assez considérable, qui gênèrent plus d’une fois ses opérations. Ces oscillations étaient dues sans doute à quelque phénomène sismique qui s’accomplissait dans les couches inférieures. Il y avait donc lieu de se demander si une perturbation de ce genre n’allait pas troubler les fonds si peu stables de cette hofra, l’une des plus accentuées du Melrir…

Le brigadier, M. François, les deux spahis venaient d’être réveillés par ces rumeurs souterraines dont l’intensité tendait à s’accroître.

En ce moment, Coupe-à-cœur donnait des signes d’une agitation toute particulière. À plusieurs reprises il descendit même jusqu’au pied du tell, et, la dernière fois qu’il en remonta, il était mouillé comme s’il sortait d’une eau profonde.

“Oui!… de l’eau, de l’eau, répétait le brigadier, et comme qui dirait de l’eau de mer!… Non, cette fois, ce n’est pas du sang!…

Cette observation visait ce qui s’était passé l’autre nuit au campement sur la pointe de l’Hinguiz, lorsque le chien reparut, son poil imbibé du sang de cette antilope étranglée par les fauves.

Et Coupe-à-cœur se secouait en éclaboussant Pistache.

Il y avait donc maintenant autour de cette butte une nappe d’eau assez profonde pour que le chien eût pu s’y plonger. Et, cependant, lorsque le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons l’avaient atteinte, c’était en rampant sur une marne déliquescente, non en traversant une couche liquide.

Était-ce donc un abaissement du sol qui venait de se produire, qui ramenait à la surface l’eau des terrains inférieurs, et le tell était-il transformé en îlot?…

Avec quelle impatience et quelles appréhensions les fugitifs attendirent le jour! Se rendormir, ils ne l’auraient pu. D’ailleurs l’intensité des perturbations souterraines augmentait encore. C’était à croire que les forces plutoniennes et neptuniennes luttaient entre elles sous les fonds du chott qui se modifiaient peu à peu. Parfois, même, il se produisait des secousses si violentes que les arbres se courbaient comme au passage d’une rafale et menaçaient de se déraciner.

À un moment, le brigadier, qui venait de dévaler au bas du tell, constata que les premières couches baignaient dans une nappe d’eau, dont la profondeur mesurait déjà de deux à trois pieds.

D’où venait cette eau? Les perturbations du sol l’avaient repoussée à travers les marnes souterraines jusqu’à la surface du chott, et même n’était-il pas possible que, sous l’action de cet extraordinaire phénomène, cette surface se fût abaissée, et bien au-dessous du niveau méditerranéen?…

Telle était la question que se posait M. de Schaller et, lorsque le soleil aurait reparu sur l’horizon, était-il probable qu’il pût la résoudre?…

Jusqu’aux primes lueurs de l’aube, les lointaines rumeurs qui paraissaient venir de l’est ne cessèrent de troubler l’espace. Il se produisit aussi, à intervalles réguliers, des secousses assez fortes pour que le tell en frémît sur sa base, le long de laquelle l’eau se précipitait avec ce bruit de ressac d’une marée montante contre les roches d’un littoral.

À un certain moment, tandis que tous essayaient de se rendre compte par l’oreille de ce que leurs yeux ne pouvaient voir, le capitaine Hardigan fut amené à dire:

“Est-il donc possible que le Melrir se soit rempli avec les eaux souterraines remontées à sa surface?…

— Ce serait bien invraisemblable, répondit M. de Schaller. Mais je crois qu’il est une explication plus admissible…

— Et laquelle?…

— C’est que ce soient les eaux du golfe qui l’ont inondé… en envahissant depuis Gabès toute cette portion du Djerid…

— Alors, s’écria le brigadier, nous n’aurions plus qu’une ressource… ce serait de nous sauver à la nage!”

Le jour allait enfin paraître. Mais les quelques clartés qui se dessinaient à l’orient du chott étaient bien pâles, et il semblait qu’un épais rideau de brumes se tendit à l’horizon.

Tous, debout au pied des arbres, le regard fixé dans cette direction, n’attendaient que les premières lueurs de l’aube pour reconnaître la situation. Mais, par une malchance déplorable, ils furent déçus dans leur attente!

XVII. DÉNOUEMENT.

Une sorte de brouillard s’étendait au-dessus et autour de la dune, et si épais que les premiers rayons ne pourraient le dissoudre. On ne se voyait pas à quatre pas, et les branches des arbres étaient noyées dans ces lourdes vapeurs.

“Décidément, le diable s’en mêle! s’écria le brigadier.

— Je suis porté à le croire!” répondit M. François.

Cependant il y avait lieu d’espérer que, dans quelques heures, lorsque le soleil prendrait de la force en gagnant vers le zénith, ces brumes finiraient par se fondre, et la vue pourrait s’étendre largement alors sur le Melrir.

Il n’y avait donc qu’à patienter et, bien qu’il fût plus que jamais nécessaire d’économiser les provisions impossibles à renouveler, il fallut en consommer une partie, et, en réalité, il n’en resta que pour deux jours. Quant à la soif, l’eau saumâtre puisée à la base du tell permit de l’apaiser tant bien que mal.

Trois heures s’écoulèrent dans ces conditions. Les rumeurs avaient diminué peu à peu. Une brise assez forte s’élevait, qui faisait cliqueter le branchage des arbres, et, le soleil aidant, il n’était pas douteux que cet épais amas de brumes ne tarderait plus à se dissiper.

Enfin, les volutes commencèrent à s’éclaircir autour du tell. Les arbres montrèrent le squelette de leur ramure, et squelette est le mot juste, car il n’y avait là que des arbres morts, sans un fruit, sans une feuille. Puis, le brouillard fut définitivement enlevé par un coup de vent qui le chassa vers l’ouest.

Et alors le Melrir se découvrit sur une vaste étendue.

Sa surface, par suite de l’abaissement du fond de cette hofra, était en partie inondée, et une ceinture liquide, large d’une cinquantaine de mètres, entourait le tell. Au-delà, sur les niveaux plus élevés, reparaissaient les nappes efflorescentes. Puis, dans les bassures, l’eau réverbérait les rayons solaires entre de longues plaines sablonneuses que leur côte maintenait au sec.

Le capitaine Hardigan et l’ingénieur avaient dirigé leurs regards vers tous les points de l’horizon. Puis, M. de Schaller dit:

“Ce n’est pas douteux, il s’est produit quelque phénomène sismique considérable… Les fonds du chott se sont abaissés et les couches liquides du sous-sol l’ont envahi…

— Eh bien, avant que le cheminement soit devenu impraticable partout, répondit le capitaine, il faut partir… et à l’instant!”

Tous allaient descendre, lorsqu’ils furent cloués à leur place par le spectacle terrifiant qui s’offrit à leurs yeux.

À une demi-lieue vers le nord apparaissait une bande d’animaux qui fuyaient à toute vitesse, venant du nord-est; une centaine de fauves et de ruminants, lions, gazelles, antilopes, mouflons, buffles, se sauvant vers l’ouest du Melrir. Et il fallait qu’ils fussent réunis dans une commune épouvante qui annihilait la férocité des uns et la timidité des autres, ne songeant, dans cet affolement extraordinaire, qu'à se soustraire au danger que provoquait cette déroute générale des quadrupèdes du Djerid.

“Mais que se passe-t-il donc là-bas? répétait le brigadier Pistache.

— Oui… Qu'y a-t-il?” demandait le capitaine Hardigan.

Et l'ingénieur auquel s'adressait cette question la laissait sans réponse.

Et alors un des spahis de s'écrier:

“Est-ce que ces bêtes vont se diriger vers nous?

— Et comment fuir?” ajouta l'autre.

En ce moment, la bande n'était pas à un kilomètre et se rapprochait avec la rapidité d'un express. Mais il ne sembla pas que ces animaux, dans leur fuite éperdue, eussent aperçu les six hommes qui s'étaient réfugiés sur le tell. En effet, dans un même mouvement, ils obliquèrent vers la, gauche et finirent par disparaître au milieu d'un tourbillon de poussière.

Du reste, sur l'ordre du capitaine Hardigan, ses compagnons s'étaient couchés au pied des arbres afin de n'être point découverts. C'est alors qu'ils virent passer au loin des bandes de flamants qui détalaient aussi, tandis que des milliers d'oiseaux fuyaient à grands coups d'aile vers les rives du Melrir.

“Mais qu'y a-t-il donc?…” ne cessait de répéter le brigadier Pistache.

Il était quatre heures de l'après-midi et la cause de cet étrange exode ne tarda pas à se révéler.

Du côté de l’est, une nappe liquide commençait à s’étendre à la surface du chott et la plaine sablonneuse fut bientôt inondée tout entière, mais seulement sous une mince couche d’eau. Les efflorescences salines avaient peu à peu disparu jusqu’à l’extrême portée du regard et c’était un immense lac qui réverbérait alors les rayons du soleil.

“Est-ce que les eaux du golfe auraient envahi le Melrir?… dit le capitaine Hardigan.

— Je ne le mets plus en doute, répondit l’ingénieur. Ces rumeurs souterraines que nous avons entendues provenaient d’un tremblement de terre… Des perturbations considérables se sont produites dans le sol. Il en est résulté un abaissement des fonds du Melrir et peut-être de toute cette partie est du Djerid… La mer, après avoir rompu ce qui restait du seuil de Gabès, l’aura inondé jusqu’au Melrir!”

Cette explication devait être exacte. On se trouvait en présence d’un phénomène sismique dont l’importance échappait encore. Et, par l’effet de ces perturbations, il était possible que la mer Saharienne se fût faite d’elle-même et plus vaste que le capitaine Roudaire ne l’avait rêvée…

D’ailleurs, un nouveau tumulte, lointain encore, emplissait l’espace.

Ce n’était plus à travers le sol, c’était à travers les airs qu’il se propageait avec une rumeur croissante.

Et voici que soudain, dans le nord-est, s’élève un nuage de poussière et de ce nuage sort bientôt une troupe de cavaliers, fuyant comme avaient fui les animaux, à toute vitesse.

“Hadjar!” s’écria le capitaine Hardigan.

Oui! le chef targui, et, si ses compagnons et lui détalaient bride abattue, c’était pour échapper aux tourbillons d’un monstrueux mascaret qui se dressait derrière eux, en se développant sur toute la largeur du chott.

Deux heures s’étaient écoulées depuis le passage des animaux et le soleil allait disparaître. Au milieu de l’inondation grandissante le tell n’était-il pas le seul refuge qui s’offrît à la bande de Hadjar – un îlot au milieu de cette nouvelle mer…

Assurément, Hadjar, les Touareg, qui n’en étaient qu’à un kilomètre, l’avaient aperçu et ils se dirigeaient vers lui dans un galop échevelé. Parviendraient-ils à l’atteindre avant le mascaret et que deviendraient alors les fugitifs que son bouquet d’arbres abritait depuis la veille?…

Mais la montagne liquide courait plus vite, un véritable raz de marée, une succession de lames écumantes, d’une irrésistible puissance, et d’une telle vitesse que les meilleurs chevaux n’auraient pu la dépasser.

C’est alors que le capitaine et ses compagnons furent témoins de ce terrible spectacle: cette centaine d’hommes, rejoints par le mascaret au milieu d’un flot d’écume. Puis, tout ce pêle-mêle de cavaliers et de chevaux disparut, et, aux dernières lueurs du crépuscule on ne voyait plus que des cadavres entraînés par l’énorme vague vers l’ouest du Melrir.

Ce jour-là, lorsque le soleil acheva sa course diurne, c’était sur un horizon de mer qu’il s’était couché!…

Quelle nuit pour les fugitifs! Si une rencontre avec les fauves d’abord, avec les Touareg ensuite leur avait été évitée, n’avaient-ils pas à craindre que l’inondation ne gagnât le sommet de leur refuge.

Mais il était impossible de le quitter et ce fut avec épouvante qu’ils entendirent l’eau monter peu à peu au milieu de cette profonde obscurité, tout emplie d’un bruit de ressac…

On se figure ce que fut cette nuit, tandis que le roulement des eaux, activé par une forte brise de l’est, ne cessait de se faire entendre. Et l’air s’emplissait des cris de ces innombrables oiseaux de mer qui volaient maintenant à la surface du Melrir!…

Le jour reparut. La crue n’avait pas dépassé l’arête du refuge, et il semblait bien qu’elle eût atteint son maximum, en remplissant le chott à pleins bords.

Rien à la surface de cette immense plaine liquide! La situation des fugitifs paraissait désespérée. De nourriture, ils n’en avaient plus pour finir la journée, et aucun moyen de s’en procurer sur cet aride îlot. Fuir… Par quel moyen?… Construire un radeau avec ces arbres et s’y embarquer? Mais comment les abattre?… Et puis, ce radeau, le pourrait-on diriger, et, avec le vent épouvantable qui régnait, ne serait-il pas repoussé au large des rives du Melrir par des courants contre lesquels on ne pourrait lutter?…

“Il sera difficile de s’en tirer, dit le capitaine Hardigan, après avoir porté ses regards sur le chott…

— Eh, mon capitaine, répondit le brigadier Pistache, mais si quelque secours nous arrivait?… On ne sait pas…”

La journée s’écoulait sans que la situation eût changé. Le Melrir était devenu lac, comme le Rharsa, sans doute. Et même jusqu’où l’inondation s’était elle étendue, si les talus du canal avaient été rompus sur toute sa longueur?

Nefta et autres bourgades n’avaient-elles pas été détruites soit par le phénomène sismique, soit par le mascaret qui l’avait suivi?… Enfin, le désastre ne s’était-il pas étendu à toute cette partie du Djerid jusqu’au golfe de Gabès?

Cependant le soir approchait et, après le repas de la matinée, le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons n’avaient plus rien à manger. Ainsi qu’ils l’avaient constaté en prenant pied sur le tell, aucun fruit ne pendait aux branches, rien que du bois mort. Et pas un oiseau, pas même un de ces habibis dont il passait des bandes au loin, ne venait se poser sur cet îlot; pas un de ces étourneaux dont se fût contenté un estomac torturé par la faim. Et, s’il se rencontrait déjà quelques poissons sous ces eaux nouvelles, en vain le brigadier Pistache chercha-t-il à s’en assurer; et puis la soif, comment l’apaiser, puisque cette nappe liquide avait maintenant la salure de la mer?…

Or, vers sept heures et demie, au moment où les derniers rayons solaires allaient s’éteindre, voici que M. François, qui regardait dans la direction du nord-est, dit d’une voix dans laquelle d’ailleurs on n’eût pas surpris la moindre émotion:

“Une fumée…

— Une fumée?… s’écria le brigadier Pistache.

— Une fumée”, répéta M. François.

Tous les yeux se portèrent dans la direction indiquée.

Pas d’erreur, c’était bien une fumée que le vent rabattait vers le tell et elle se voyait assez distinctement déjà.

Les fugitifs restaient muets, saisis de la crainte que cette fumée ne vînt à disparaître et que le navire d’où elle s’échappait ne mît le cap au large, s’éloignant du tell!…

Ainsi donc, l’explication donnée par l’ingénieur était la vraie!… Ses prévisions venaient de se réaliser!…

Pendant la nuit du 26 au 27, les eaux du golfe s’étaient répandues à la surface de cette partie orientale du Djerid!… Dès lors, une communication existait entre la Petite-Syrte et le Melrir, et même praticable puisqu’un navire avait pu suivre, sur la ligne du canal sans doute, cette route maritime à travers la région des sebkhas et des chotts.

Vingt-cinq minutes après que ce bâtiment eut été signalé, on voyait sa cheminée se dessiner sur l’horizon, puis sa coque se montra, la coque du premier navire qui sillonnait les eaux du nouveau lac.

“Des signaux!… faisons des signaux!” s’écria l’un des spahis.

Et comment le capitaine Hardigan aurait-il pu indiquer la présence des fugitifs sur l’étroit sommet de cet îlot?… La butte était-elle même assez élevée pour que l’équipage eût pu l’apercevoir?… Et ce navire entrevu ne se trouvait-il pas encore à plus de deux grandes lieues dans le nord-est?…

D’ailleurs, la nuit venait de succéder au court crépuscule, et la fumée ne fut bientôt plus visible au milieu de l’obscurité.

Et alors le spahi, qui ne fut plus maître de lui, de s’écrier dans un mouvement de désespoir:

“Nous sommes perdus!…

— Sauvés… sauvés, au contraire, répondit le capitaine Hardigan… Nos signaux, qu’on n’aurait pu apercevoir pendant qu’il faisait jour, on les apercevra la nuit!…

Et il ajouta:

“Le feu aux arbres… le feu!…

— Oui, mon capitaine! hurla positivement le brigadier Pistache, le feu aux arbres!… et ils flamberont comme des allumettes!”

À l’instant, le briquet fut battu; des branches, tombées çà et là, s’empilèrent au pied des troncs arbres; une flamme se dégagea, qui gagna les branches supérieures et de vives clameurs dissipèrent les ténèbres autour de l’îlot.

“S’ils ne voient pas notre feu de joie, s’écria Pistache c’est, qu’ils sont tous aveugles à bord de ce bateau-là!

Cependant, cet embrasement du bouquet d’arbres ne dura pas plus d’une heure. Tout ce bois sec s’était rapidement consumé, et, quand les dernières lueurs s’éteignirent, on ne savait si le navire s’était rapproché du tell, car il ne signala même pas sa présence par un coup de canon.

De profondes ténèbres enveloppaient maintenant l’îlot. La nuit s’écoula, et aucun sifflement de vapeur, aucun ronflement d’hélice ou d’aubes battant les eaux du chott ne parvint aux oreilles des fugitifs.

“Il est là… il est là…”, s’écria dès les premières blancheurs du matin Pistache, tandis que Coupe-à-cœur aboyait de toutes ses forces.

Le brigadier ne se trompait pas.

À deux milles était mouillé un petit bâtiment qui déployait à sa corne le pavillon français. Lorsque les flammes avaient illuminé cet îlot inconnu, le commandant avait modifié sa direction et mis le cap au sud-ouest. Mais, par prudence, l'îlot n'apparaissant plus après l'extinction des flammes, il avait envoyé son ancre par le fond et passé cette nuit au mouillage.

Le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons poussèrent des cris auxquels bientôt des voix répondirent, parmi lesquelles ils reconnurent, dans un canot qui s'approchait, celles du lieutenant Villette et du maréchal des logis-chef Nicol.

C'était l'aviso *Benassir* de Tunis, un vapeur de petit tonnage, arrivé depuis six jours à Gabès, et qui, le premier, s'était lancé intrépidement sur la nouvelle mer.

Quelques minutes après, le canot accostait le pied du tell qui avait été le salut des fugitifs et le capitaine Hardigan pressait dans ses bras le lieutenant, le marchef serrait dans les siens le brigadier Pistache, tandis que Coupe-à-cœur sautait au cou de son maître. Quant à M. François, Nicol eut grand-peine à le reconnaître dans cet homme barbu et moustachu, dont le premier soin serait de se raser dès qu'il serait à bord du *Benassir*.

Ce qui s'était passé quarante-huit heures avant, le voici:

Un tremblement de terre venait de modifier toute la région orientale du Djerid entre le golfe et le Melrir. Après la rupture du seuil de Gabès et l'abaissement du sol sur une longueur de plus deux cents kilomètres, les eaux de la Petite-Syrte s'étaient précipitées à travers le canal qui n'avait pu suffire à les contenir. Aussi avaient-elles envahi le pays des sebkhas et des chotts, inondant non seulement le Rharsa sur toute son étendue, mais aussi la vaste dépression du Fejey-Tris. Très heureusement, les bourgades La Hammâ, Nefta, Tozeur et autres n’avaient point été englouties, grâce à leur situation en terrain élevé, et elles pourraient figurer sur la carte comme ports de mer.

En ce qui concerne le Melrir, l’Hinguiz était devenu une grande île centrale. Mais, si Zenfig fut épargnée, du moins le chef Hadjar et sa troupe de pillards, surpris par le mascaret, avaient-ils péri jusqu’au dernier.

En ce qui concerne le lieutenant Villette, c’est en vain qu’il avait tenté de retrouver le capitaine Hardigan et ses compagnons. Les recherches n’avaient point abouti. Après avoir fouillé les environs du Melrir du côté du chantier du kilomètre 347 où les ouvriers de la section n’avaient point reparu, l’expédition de Pointar ayant attendu une escorte envoyée de Biskra, il s’était rendu à Nefta afin d’y organiser une expédition à travers les diverses tribus touareg.

Mais il y avait rejoint les conducteurs et les deux spahis qui avaient dû à un incident fortuit d’échapper au sort de leurs chefs.

Or, il se trouvait dans cette ville lors du tremblement de terre, et il y était encore lorsque le commandant du *Benassir*, parti de Gabès dès que l’inondation l’eut permis, vint y chercher des informations sur le Rharsa et le Melrir.

Le commandant de l’aviso reçut aussitôt la visite du lieutenant et lui offrit de prendre passage à son bord, avec le maréchal des logis-chef, dès qu’il eut été mis au courant de la situation. Le plus pressé était de partir à la recherche du capitaine Hardigan, de l’ingénieur de Schaller et de leurs compagnons. Aussi le *Benassir*, marchant à toute vapeur, après avoir traversé le Rharsa, se lança-t-il sur les eaux du Melrir, afin de fouiller les oasis de ses rives et celles de la Farfaria que l'inondation n'aurait pas submergées.

Or, la seconde nuit de navigation sur le Melrir, mis en éveil par les flammes, le commandant avait pris direction sur le tell, mais, sur cette mer nouvelle et avec son équipage peu nombreux, il avait renvoyé, au lever du jour, malgré les instances de Villette, toute communication avec l'îlot, et maintenant les fugitifs, sains et saufs, étaient tous à bord.

L'aviso, dès qu'il eût reçu ses nouveaux passagers, reprit la route de Tozeur, où le commandant voulait les déposer et faire parvenir de là, par voie rapide, des renseignements à ses chefs avant de reprendre son voyage de reconnaissance jusqu'aux limites du Melrir.

Ce fut donc quand M. de Schaller et ses compagnons débarquèrent à Tozeur que le capitaine Hardigan retrouva les hommes de son détachement. Et avec quelle joie ils le reçurent, ses compagnons et lui!

Même l'introuvable colonne de Biskra était représentée par une dépêche arrivée par Tunis, et dans laquelle Pointar, obligé de rétrograder avec ses hommes jusqu'à Biskra, demandait de nouvelles instructions.

Ce fut là aussi que Va-d'l'avant, le vieux frère, revit Coupe-à-cœur, et quels témoignages de satisfaction échangèrent les deux amis, cela ne saurait s'exprimer!

Et tout cela au milieu d'une foule le plus souvent enthousiaste, mais toujours surexcitée par tous les événements qui avaient entouré ce cataclysme, et qui se pressait autour des premiers explorateurs de la mer nouvelle.

Tout à coup, l'ingénieur trouva en face de lui un inconnu qui s'était frayé un chemin en jouant des coudes; qui le salua d'abord très bas et tout aussitôt lui dit avec un fort accent exotique:

“C'est bien à M. de Schaller, parlant à sa personne, que j'ai l'avantage de m'adresser?

— Il me semble que oui…, répondit celui-ci.

— Eh bien alors, monsieur, j'ai l'avantage de vous signifier qu'aux termes d'une procuration par acte en brevet et dûment authentique, passée par-devant notaire, revêtue de la légalisation de M. le Président du tribunal de première instance du ressort du siège social de la Compagnie Franco-étrangère, visée – pour exequatur à la Résidence générale de France à Tunis – en marge de laquelle se trouve la mention suivante: Enregistré folio 200 verso case 12, reçu 3,75 F, décimes compris, signature illisible, je suis le mandataire des liquidateurs de ladite Compagnie avec les pouvoirs les plus étendus, notamment de transiger et au besoin de compromettre. – Lesdits pouvoirs bien et dûment homologués. – Vous ne serez pas surpris, monsieur, si, agissant ès qualités, je vous demande compte, en leur nom, des travaux entrepris par elle et que vous aviez pris l'engagement d'utiliser.

Dans la joie débordante qui l'envahissait peu à peu, depuis qu'il avait retrouvé ses compagnons et qu'il voyait son œuvre achevée d'une façon tellement fantastique, cet homme si froid, si méthodique, si maître de lui dans les circonstances les plus difficiles, redevint, pour un instant, le boute-en-train renommé d'autrefois, lorsque, dans la cour de Centrale, lui, le major de promotion, apostrophait ses “bizuts” avec la verve endiablée d'un ancien. Et ce fut d'un ton gouailleur que, s'adressant à son interlocuteur, il lui dit:

“Monsieur le mandataire aux pouvoirs très étendus, un conseil d’ami: prenez plutôt des actions de la mer Saharienne.”

Et pendant qu’au milieu des manifestations et des félicitations il poursuivait sa route, il se mit à chiffrer les devis des nouveaux travaux qui devaient figurer dans le rapport qu’il voulait envoyer le jour même aux administrateurs de la Société.

FIN.

THE LIGHTHOUSE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

This 1906 novel is now attributed to Michel Verne, the son of the famous writer, though Verne himself wrote a draft in 1901. The novel features three keepers, who are left to tend the new lighthouse on Staten Island, an island located 200 km NE of Cape Horn in the Atlantic Ocean. Unfortunately Staten has other residents, a group of pirates who’ve been waiting for the opportunity to seize a vessel with which to leave the island.

Due to copyright restrictions on the English translation, only the French text is available in this edition.

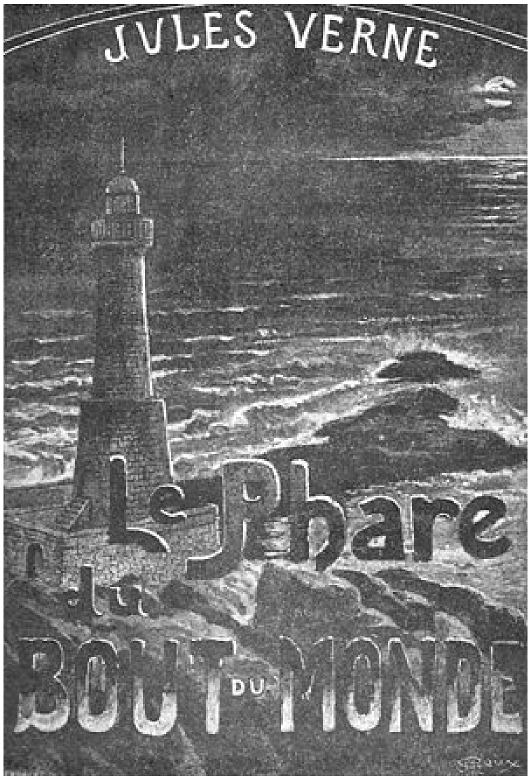
JULES VERNE
Le Phare
du
BOUT DU MONDE
Roux

The original frontispiece

LE PHARE DU BOUT DU MONDE

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Inauguration

Le soleil allait disparaître derrière les collines qui limitaient la vue à l'ouest. Le temps était beau. À l'opposé, au-dessus de la mer qui se confondait avec le ciel dans le nord-est et dans l'est, quelques petits nuages réfléchissaient les derniers rayons, qui ne tarderaient pas à s'éteindre dans les ombres du crépuscule, d'assez longue durée sous cette haute latitude du cinquante-cinquième degré de l'hémisphère austral.

Au moment où le disque solaire ne montrait plus que sa partie supérieure, un coup de canon retentit à bord de l'aviso *Santa-Fé*, et le pavillon de la République Argentine, se déroulant à la brise, fut hissé à la corne de brigantine.

Au même instant jaillit une vive lumière au sommet du phare construit à une portée de fusil en arrière de la baie d'Elgor, dans laquelle le *Santa-Fé* avait pris son mouillage. Deux des gardiens, les ouvriers réunis sur la grève, l'équipage rassemblé à l'avant du navire, saluaient de longues acclamations le premier feu allumé sur cette côte lointaine.

Deux autres coups de canon leur répondirent, plusieurs fois répercutés par les bruyants échos du voisinage. Les couleurs de l'aviso furent alors amenées, conformément aux règles des bâtiments de guerre, et le silence reprit cette Île des États, située au point où se rencontrent les eaux de l'Atlantique et du Pacifique.

Les ouvriers embarquèrent aussitôt à bord du *Santa-Fé*, et il ne resta à terre que les trois gardiens.

L’un étant à son poste, dans la chambre de quart, les deux autres ne regagnèrent pas tout de suite leur logement et se promenèrent en causant le long du rivage.

“Eh bien! Vasquez, dit le plus jeune des deux, c’est demain que l’aviso va prendre la mer…

— Oui, Felipe, répondit Vasquez, et j’espère qu’il n’aura pas une mauvaise traversée pour rentrer au port…

— Il y a loin, Vasquez!…

— Pas plus quand on en vient que quand on y retourne, Felipe.

— Je m’en doute un peu, répliqua Felipe en riant.

— Et même, mon garçon, reprit Vasquez, on met quelquefois plus de temps à aller qu’à revenir, à moins que le vent ne soit bien établi!… Après tout, quinze cents milles, ce n’est pas une affaire, lorsque le bâtiment possède une bonne machine et porte bien la toile.

— Et puis, Vasquez, le commandant Lafayate connaît bien la route…

— Qui est toute droite, mon garçon. Il a mis cap au sud pour venir, il mettra cap au nord pour s’en retourner, et, si la brise continue à souffler de terre, il aura l’abri de la côte et naviguera comme sur un fleuve.

— Mais un fleuve qui n’aurait qu’une rive, repartit Felipe.

— Qu’importe, si c’est la bonne, et c’est toujours la bonne quand on l’a au vent!

— Juste, approuva Felipe; mais si le vent vient à changer bord pour bord…

— Ça, c’est la mauvaise chance, Felipe, et j’espère qu’elle ne tournera pas contre le *Santa-Fé*. En une quinzaine de jours, il peut avoir enlevé ses quinze cents milles et repris son mouillage en rade de Buenos-Ayres… Par exemple, si le vent venait à haler l’est…

— Pas plus du côté de la terre que du côté du large, il ne trouverait de port de refuge!

— Comme tu dis, garçon. Terre de Feu ou Patagonie, pas une seule relâche. Il faut piquer vers la haute mer, sous peine de se mettre à la côte!

— Mais enfin, Vasquez, à mon avis, il y a apparence que le beau temps va durer.

— Ton avis est le mien, Felipe. Nous sommes presque au début de la belle saison… Trois mois devant soi, c’est quelque chose…

— Et, répondit Felipe, les travaux ont été terminés à bonne époque.

— Je le sais, garçon, je le sais, au commencement de décembre. Comme qui dirait le commencement de juin pour les marins du nord. Ils deviennent plus rares en cette saison, les coups de chien qui ne mettent pas plus de façon à jeter un navire au plein qu’à vous décoiffer de votre surouët!… Et puis, une fois le *Santa-Fé* au port, qu’il vente, survente et tempête tant qu’il plaira au Diable!… Pas à craindre que notre île s’en aille par le fond et son phare avec!

— Assurément, Vasquez. D’ailleurs, après avoir été donner de nos nouvelles là-bas, lorsque l’aviso reviendra avec la relève…

— Dans trois mois, Felipe…

— Il retrouvera l’île à sa place…

— Et nous dessus, répondit Vasquez en se frottant les mains, après avoir humé une longue bouffée de sa pipe, qui l’enveloppa d’un épais nuage. Vois-tu, garçon, nous ne sommes pas ici à bord d’un bâtiment que la bourrasque pousse et repousse, ou, si c’est un bâtiment, il est solidement mouillé à la queue de l’Amérique, et il ne chassera pas sur son ancre… Que ces parages soient mauvais, j’en conviens! Que l’on ait fait triste réputation aux mers du cap Horn, c’est justice! Que, précisément, on ne compte plus les naufrages à l’Île des États, et que les pilleurs d’épaves ne puissent choisir meilleure place pour faire fortune, soit encore! Mais tout cela va changer, Felipe! Voilà l’Île des États avec son phare et ce n’est pas l’ouragan, quand il soufflerait de tous les coins de l’horizon, qui parviendrait à l’éteindre! Les navires le verront à temps pour relever leur route!… Ils se guideront sur son feu et ne risqueront pas de tomber sur les roches du cap Saint-Jean, de la pointe San-Diegos ou de la pointe Fallows, même par les nuits les plus noires!… C’est nous qui tiendrons le fanal et il sera bien tenu!”

Il fallait entendre Vasquez parler avec cette animation qui ne laissait pas de réconforter son camarade. Peut-être Felipe envisageait-il, en effet, moins légèrement les longues semaines à passer sur cette île déserte, sans communication possible avec ses semblables, jusqu’au jour où tous trois seraient relevés de leur poste.

Pour finir, Vasquez ajouta:

“Vois-tu, garçon, depuis quarante ans, j’ai un peu couru toutes les mers de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Continent, mousse, novice, matelot, maître. Eh bien, maintenant qu’est venu l’âge de la retraite, je ne pouvais désirer mieux que d’être gardien d’un phare, et quel phare!… Le Phare du bout du Monde!…”

Et, en vérité, à l’extrémité de cette île perdue, si loin de toute terre habitée et habitable, ce nom, il le justifiait bien!

“Dis-moi, Felipe, reprit Vasquez, qui secoua sa pipe éteinte sur le creux de sa main, à quelle heure vas-tu remplacer Moriz?

— À dix heures.

— Bon, et c’est moi qui, à deux heures du matin, irai prendre ton poste jusqu’au lever du jour.

— Entendu, Vasquez. Aussi, ce que nous avons de plus sage à faire tous les deux, c’est d’aller dormir.

— Au lit, Felipe, au lit!”

Vasquez et Felipe remontèrent vers la petite enceinte au milieu de laquelle se dressait le phare, et entrèrent dans le logement dont la porte se referma sur eux.

La nuit fut tranquille. À l’instant où elle prenait fin, Vasquez éteignit le feu allumé depuis douze heures.

Généralement faibles dans le Pacifique, surtout le long des côtes de l’Amérique et de l’Asie que baigne ce vaste Océan, les marées sont, au contraire, très fortes à la surface de l’Atlantique et elles se font sentir avec violence jusque dans les lointains parages de la Magellanie.

Le jusant, ce jour-là, commençant à six heures du matin, l’aviso, pour en profiter, aurait dû appareiller dès la pointe du jour. Mais ses préparatifs n’étaient pas entièrement terminés, et le commandant ne comptait sortir de la baie d’Elgor qu’à la marée du soir.

Le *Santa-Fé*, de la marine militaire de la République Argentine, jaugeant deux cents tonnes, possédant une force de cent soixante chevaux, commandé par un capitaine et un second officier, ayant une cinquantaine d’hommes d’équipage, compris les maîtres, était employé à la surveillance des côtes, depuis l’embouchure du Rio de la Plata jusqu’au détroit de Lemaire sur l’Océan Atlantique. À cette époque, le génie maritime n’avait pas encore construit ses bâtiments à marche rapide, croiseurs, torpilleurs et autres. Aussi, sous l’action de son hélice, le *Santa-Fé* ne dépassait-il pas neuf milles à l’heure, vitesse suffisante, d’ailleurs, pour la police des côtes patagones et fuégiennes uniquement fréquentées par les bateaux de pêche.

Cette année-là, l’aviso avait eu pour mission de suivre les travaux de construction du phare que le gouvernement argentin faisait élever à l’entrée du détroit de Lemaire. C’est à son bord que furent transportés le personnel et le matériel nécessités par ce travail qui venait d’être mené à bonne fin suivant les plans d’un habile ingénieur de Buenos-Ayres.

Il y avait environ trois semaines que le *Santa-Fé* se trouvait à ce mouillage au fond de la baie d’Elgor. Après avoir débarqué des provisions pour quatre mois, après s’être assuré que rien ne manquerait aux gardiens du nouveau phare jusqu’au jour de la relève, le commandant Lafayate allait ramener les ouvriers envoyés à l’Île des États. Si même certaines circonstances imprévues n’eussent retardé l’achèvement des travaux, le *Santa-Fé* aurait dû être, depuis un mois déjà, de retour à son port d’attache.

En somme, pendant toute sa relâche, le commandant Lafayate n’avait rien eu à craindre au fond de cette baie très abritée contre les vents du nord, du sud et de l’ouest. Seuls les gros temps du large auraient pu le gêner. Mais le printemps s’était montré clément, et maintenant, au début de la saison d’été, il y avait lieu d’espérer qu’il ne se produirait que des troubles passagers dans les parages magellaniques.

Il était sept heures, lorsque le capitaine Lafayate et le second officier Riegal sortirent de leurs cabines, situées en abord de la dunette, à l’arrière de l’aviso. Les matelots finissaient le lavage du pont, et les dernières eaux repoussées par les hommes de service s’écoulaient à travers les dalots. En même temps le premier maître prenait ses dispositions pour que tout fût paré, lorsque arriverait l’heure de l’appareillage. Bien qu’il ne dût s’effectuer que dans l’après-midi, on enlevait les étuis des voiles, on fourbissait les manches à air, les cuivres de l’habitacle et des claires-voies, on hissait le grand canot sur ses pistolets, le petit restant à flot pour le service du bord.

Lorsque le soleil se leva, le pavillon monta à la corne de brigantine.

Trois quarts d’heure plus tard, quatre coups furent piqués à la cloche de l’avant, et les matelots de quart prirent leur bordée.

Après avoir déjeuné ensemble, les deux officiers remontèrent sur la dunette, examinèrent l’état du ciel assez dégagé par la brise de terre, et donnèrent l’ordre au maître de les débarquer.

Pendant cette matinée, le commandant voulait inspecter une dernière fois le phare et ses annexes, le logement des gardiens, les magasins qui renfermaient les provisions et le combustible, s'assurer enfin du bon fonctionnement des appareils.

Il descendit donc sur la grève, accompagné de l'officier, et se dirigea vers l'enceinte du phare.

En s'y rendant, ils s'inquiétaient de ces trois hommes qui allaient rester dans la morne solitude de l'Île des États.

"C'est vraiment dur, dit le capitaine. Toutefois, il faut tenir compte de ce que ces braves gens ont toujours mené une existence très rude, étant pour la plupart d'anciens marins. Pour eux, le service d'un phare, c'est un repos relatif.

— Sans doute, répondit Riegal, mais autre chose est d'être gardien de phare sur les côtes fréquentées, en communication facile avec la terre, et autre chose de vivre sur une île déserte, que les navires ne font que reconnaître et encore du plus loin possible.

— J'en conviens, Riegal. Aussi la relève se fera-t-elle dans trois mois. Vasquez, Felipe, Moriz vont débuter dans la période la moins rigoureuse.

— En effet, mon commandant, et ils n'auront point à subir ces terribles hivers du cap Horn…

— Terribles, approuva le capitaine. Depuis une reconnaissance que nous avons faite il y a quelques années dans le détroit, à la Terre de Feu et à la Terre de Désolation, du cap des Vierges au cap Pilar, je n'ai plus rien à apprendre en fait de tempêtes! Mais, enfin, nos gardiens ont une habitation solide que les tourmentes ne démoliront pas. Ils ne manqueront ni de vivres ni de charbon, dût leur faction se prolonger deux mois de plus. Bien portants nous les laissons, bien portants nous les retrouverons, car, si l'air est vif, du moins il est pur, à l'entrée de l'Atlantique et du Pacifique!… Et puis, Riegal, il y a ceci: c'est que, lorsque l'autorité maritime a demandé des gardiens pour le Phare du bout du Monde, elle n'a eu que l'embarras du choix!"

Les deux officiers venaient d'arriver devant l'enceinte où les attendaient Vasquez et ses camarades. La porte leur fut ouverte, et ils firent halte après avoir répondu au salut réglementaire des trois hommes.

Le capitaine Lafayate, avant de leur adresser la parole, les examina depuis les pieds, chaussés de fortes bottes de mer, jusqu'à la tête, recouverte du capuchon de la capote cirée.

"Tout s'est bien passé cette nuit? demanda-t-il en s'adressant au gardien-chef.

— Bien, mon commandant, répondit Vasquez.

— Vous n'avez relevé aucun navire au large?…

— Aucun, et comme le ciel était sans brume, nous aurions aperçu un feu à tout au moins quatre mille.

— Les lampes ont marché convenablement?…

— Sans arrêt, mon commandant, jusqu'au lever du soleil.

— Vous n'avez pas souffert du froid dans la chambre de quart?

— Non, mon commandant. Elle est bien close et le vent est arrêté par la double vitre des fenêtres.

— Nous allons visiter votre logement et le phare ensuite.

— À vos ordres, mon commandant”, répondit Vasquez.

C’est au bas de la tour que le logement des gardiens avait été construit en murs épais, capables de braver toutes les bourrasques magellaniques. Les deux officiers visitèrent les différentes pièces convenablement aménagées. Rien à craindre ni de la pluie, ni du froid, ni des tempêtes de neige qui sont formidables sous cette latitude presque antarctique.

Ces pièces étaient séparées par un couloir au fond duquel s’ouvrait la porte donnant accès à l’intérieur de la tour.

“Montons, dit le capitaine Lafayate.

— À vos ordres, répéta Vasquez.

— Il suffit que vous nous accompagniez.”

Vasquez fit signe à ses deux camarades de rester à l’entrée du couloir. Puis il poussa la porte de l’escalier, et les deux officiers le suivirent.

Cette étroite vis, à marche de pierres encastrées dans la paroi, n’était pas obscure. Dix meurtrières l’éclairaient d’étage en étage.

Lorsqu’ils eurent atteint la chambre de quart, au-dessus de laquelle étaient installés la lanterne et les appareils de lumière, les deux officiers s’assirent sur le banc circulaire fixé au mur. Par les quatre petites fenêtres percées dans cette chambre, le regard pouvait se porter vers tous les points de l'horizon.

Bien que la brise fût modérée, elle sifflait assez fortement à cette hauteur, sans couvrir cependant les cris aigus des mouettes, des frégates et des albatros qui passaient à grands coups d'ailes.

Le capitaine Lafayate et son second, afin d'avoir plus libre vue de l'île et de la mer environnante, grimpèrent par l'échelle conduisant à la galerie qui entourait la lanterne du phare.

Toute la partie de l'île qui se dessinait sous leurs yeux vers l'ouest était déserte, comme la mer, dont leurs regards pouvaient parcourir, du nord-ouest au sud, un vaste arc de cercle interrompu seulement, vers le nord-est, par les hauteurs du cap Saint-Jean. Au pied de la tour se creusait la baie d'Elgor, dont le rivage s'animait d'un va-et-vient des matelots du *Santa-Fé*. Pas une voile, pas une fumée au large. Rien que les immensités de l'Océan.

Après une station d'un quart d'heure à la galerie du phare, les deux officiers, suivis de Vasquez, redescendirent, et retournèrent à bord.

Après déjeuner, le capitaine Lafayate et le second Riegal se firent de nouveau mettre à terre. Les heures qui précédaient le départ, ils allaient les consacrer à une promenade sur la rive nord de la baie. Plusieurs fois déjà, et sans pilote, – on comprendra qu'il n'y en eût point à l'Île des États – le commandant était rentré de jour pour prendre son mouillage habituel dans la petite crique au pied du phare. Mais, par prudence, il ne négligeait jamais de faire une reconnaissance nouvelle de cette région peu ou mal connue.

Les deux officiers prolongèrent donc leur excursion. Traversant l'isthme étroit qui réunit au reste de l'île le cap Saint-Jean, ils examinèrent le rivage du havre du même nom, qui, de l’autre côté du cap, forme comme le pendant de la baie d’Elgor.

“Ce havre Saint-Jean, observa le commandant, est excellent. Il y a partout assez d’eau pour les navires du plus fort tonnage. Il est vraiment fâcheux que l’entrée en soit si difficile. Un feu, même de la plus médiocre intensité, mis en alignement avec le phare d’Elgor, permettrait aux navires mal pris d’y trouver aisément refuge.

— Et c’est le dernier qu’on trouve en sortant du détroit de Magellan”, fit remarquer le lieutenant Riegal.

À quatre heures les deux officiers étaient de retour. Ils remontèrent à bord après avoir pris congé de Vasquez, de Felipe, et de Moriz, qui restèrent sur la grève en attendant le moment du départ.

À cinq heures, la pression commençait à monter dans la chaudière de l’aviso, dont la cheminée vomissait des tourbillons de fumée noire. La mer ne tarderait pas à être étale, et le *Santa-Fé* lèverait son ancre dès que le jusant se ferait sentir.

À six heures moins le quart, le commandant donna l’ordre de virer au cabestan et de balancer la machine. Le trop-plein de la vapeur fusait par le tuyau d’échappement.

À l’avant, le second officier surveillait la manœuvre; l’ancre fut bientôt à pic, hissée au bossoir et traversée.

Le *Santa-Fé* se mit en marche, salué par les adieux des trois gardiens. Et, quoi qu’en pût penser Vasquez, si ses camarades ne virent pas sans quelque émotion s’éloigner l’aviso, les officiers et l’équipage en éprouvaient une profonde à laisser ces trois hommes sur cette île de l’extrême Amérique.

Le *Santa-Fé*, à vitesse modérée, suivit la côte limitant au nord-ouest la baie d’Elgor. Il n’était pas huit heures, lorsqu’il donna en pleine mer. Le cap San Juan doublé, il fila à toute vapeur, en laissant le détroit dans l’ouest, et, à la nuit close, le feu du Phare du bout du Monde n’apparaissait plus que comme une étoile au bord de l’horizon.

CHAPITRE II

L'Île des États

L'Île des États, nommée aussi Terre des États, est située à l'extrémité sud-est du nouveau continent. C'est le dernier et le plus oriental fragment de cet archipel magellanique que les convulsions de l'époque plutonienne ont lancé sur ces parages du cinquante-cinquième parallèle, à moins de sept degrés du cercle polaire antarctique. Baignée par les eaux de deux océans, elle est recherchée des navires qui passent de l'un dans l'autre, qu'ils viennent soit du nord-est, soit du sud-ouest, après avoir doublé le cap Horn.

Le détroit de Lemaire, découvert au dix-septième siècle par le navigateur hollandais de ce nom, sépare l'Île des États de la Terre de Feu, distante de 25 à 30 kilomètres. Il offre aux bâtiments un passage plus court et plus facile, en leur évitant les formidables houles qui battent le littoral de l'Île des États. Celle-ci le limite à l'est sur une longueur de dix milles environ, du cap Saint-Antoine au cap Kempe, et les navires à vapeur ou à voiles y sont moins exposés qu'en passant au sud de l'île.

L'Île des États mesure trente-neuf milles de l'ouest à l'est depuis le cap Saint-Barthélemy jusqu'au cap San Juan, sur onze de largeur entre les caps Colnett et Webster.

Le littoral de l'Île des États est extrêmement déchiqueté. C'est une succession de golfes, de baies et de criques dont l'entrée est parfois défendue par des cordons d'îlots et de récifs. Aussi, que de naufrages se sont produits sur ces côtes, ici murées de falaises à pic, là bordées d’énormes roches contre lesquelles, même par temps calme, la mer se brise avec une incomparable fureur.

L’île était inhabitée, mais peut-être n’eût-elle pas été inhabitable, au moins pendant la belle saison, c’est-à-dire pendant les quatre mois de novembre, de décembre, de janvier et de février, que comprend l’été de cette haute latitude. Des troupeaux eussent même trouvé suffisante nourriture sur les vastes plaines qui s’étendent à l’intérieur, plus particulièrement dans la région située à l’est du Port Parry et comprise entre la pointe Conway et le cap Webster. Lorsque l’épaisse couche de neige a fondu sous les rayons du soleil antarctique, l’herbe apparaît assez verdoyante, et le sol conserve jusqu’à l’hiver une salutaire humidité. Les ruminants, faits à l’habitat des contrées magellaniques, y pourraient prospérer. Mais, les froids venus, il serait nécessaire de ramener les troupeaux aux campagnes plus clémentes, soit de la Patagonie, soit même de la Terre de Feu.

Cependant, on y rencontre à l’état sauvage quelques couples de ces guanaques, sortes de daims de nature très rustique, dont la chair est assez bonne, lorsqu’elle est convenablement rôtie ou grillée. Et, si ces animaux ne meurent pas de faim pendant la longue période hivernale, c’est qu’ils savent trouver sous la neige les racines et les mousses dont leur estomac doit se contenter.

De part et d’autre des plaines s’étendent au centre de l’île, quelques bois déploient leurs maigres ramures et montrent d’éphémères frondaisons plus jaunâtres que verdoyantes. Ce sont principalement des hêtres antarctiques, au tronc haut parfois d’une soixantaine de pieds, dont les branches se ramifient horizontalement, puis des épines-vinettes d’essence très dure, des écorces de Winter, ayant des propriétés analogues à celles de la vanille.

En réalité, la surface de ces plaines et de ces bois ne comprend pas le quart de la superficie de l'Île des États. Le reste n'est que plateaux rocheux où domine le quartz, gorges profondes, longues traînées de blocs erratiques, qui se sont éparpillés à la suite d'éruptions très anciennes, car, maintenant, on chercherait vainement des cratères de volcans éteints dans cette partie de la Fuégie ou de la Magellanie. Vers le centre de l'île, les plaines largement développées prennent des apparences de steppes, lorsque, pendant les huit mois de l'hiver, aucune tumescence ne trouble l'uniformité de la couche de neige qui les recouvre. Puis, à mesure que l'on s'avance vers l'ouest, le relief de l'île s'accentue, les falaises du littoral sont plus hautes et plus escarpées. Là se dressent des cônes sourcilleux, des pics dont l'altitude considérable atteint jusqu'à trois mille pieds au-dessus du niveau de la mer, et qui permettraient au regard d'embrasser l'île tout entière. Ce sont les derniers anneaux de cette prodigieuse chaîne andine qui, du nord au sud, constitue comme la gigantesque ossature du nouveau continent.

Assurément, dans de semblables conditions climatériques, sous le souffle des âpres et terribles ouragans, la flore de l'île se réduit à de rares échantillons, dont les espèces ne s'acclimatent guère au voisinage du détroit de Magellan ou dans l'archipel des Malouines, distant de la côte fuégienne d'environ cent lieues marines. Ce sont des calcéolaires, cytises, pimprenelles, bromes, véroniques, stipals chez lesquels la matière colorante ne se forme qu'à un faible degré. Sous le couvert des bois, entre les herbes des prairies, ces pâles florules montrent leurs corolles presque aussitôt fanées qu'écloses. Au pied des roches littorales, sur leurs déclivités où s'attache un peu d'humus, le naturaliste pourrait encore recueillir quelques mousses, et, à l'abri des arbres, certaines racines comestibles, celles d'une azalée, par exemple, dont les Pécherais se servent en guise de pain, mais toutes peu nourrissantes en somme.

On chercherait vainement un cours d’eau régulier à la surface de l’Île des États. Ni rivière, ni ruisseau sourdant hors de ce sol pierreux. Mais la neige s’y accumule en couches épaisses; elle persiste pendant huit mois sur douze, et, à l’époque de la saison chaude – moins froide serait plus exact – elle fond sous les obliques rayons du soleil, et entretient une humidité permanente. Alors se forment çà et là de petits lagons, des étangs, dont l’eau se conserve jusqu’aux premiers gels. C’est ainsi que, au moment où commence cette histoire, des masses liquides tombaient des hauteurs voisines du phare et allaient se perdre en rebondissant dans la petite crique de la baie d’Elgor ou dans le havre Saint-Jean.

En revanche, si la faune et la flore sont à peine représentées dans cette île, le poisson abonde sur tout le littoral. Aussi, malgré les dangers très sérieux que courent leurs embarcations, en traversant le détroit de Lemaire, les Fuégiens y viennent quelquefois faire de fructueuses pêches. Les espèces y sont très variées, merluches, tiburons, éperlans, loches, bonites, dorades, gobies, mulets. La grande pêche pourrait même y attirer de nombreux navires, car, à cette époque du moins, les cétacés, baleines, cachalots, et aussi phoques et morses, fréquentaient volontiers ces parages. Ces animaux marins ont été pourchassés avec une telle imprévoyance qu’ils se réfugient à présent dans les mers antarctiques où les campagnes sont aussi périlleuses que pénibles.

On le comprendra sans peine, sur tout le périmètre de cette île, où se succèdent les grèves, les anses, les bancs rocheux, les coquilles fourmillent non moins que les coquillages, bivalves ou autres, moules, vignots, huîtres, patelles, fissarelles, buccins, et c’est par milliers que les crustacés se faufilent entre les récifs.

Quant à la gent volatile, elle est innombrablement représentée par les albatros d'une blancheur de cygne, les bécassines, les pluviers, les chevaliers, les alouettes de mer, les mouettes bruyantes, les goélands criards, les labbes assourdissants.

Toutefois, il ne faudrait pas conclure de cette description que l'Île des États fût de nature à exciter les convoitises du Chili ou de la République Argentine. Ce n'est en somme qu'un énorme rocher, à peu près inhabitable. À qui appartenait-elle à l'époque où débute cette histoire?… Tout ce que l'on peut dire, c'est qu'elle faisait partie de l'archipel magellanique, alors indivis entre les deux Républiques de l'extrême continent américain.

Pendant la belle saison, les Fuégiens ou Pécherais y font de rares apparitions, lorsque le gros temps les oblige à y relâcher. Quant aux navires de commerce, le plus grand nombre préfère donner dans le détroit de Magellan, tracé avec une extrême précision sur les cartes marines, et qu'ils peuvent suivre sans danger, qu'ils viennent de l'est ou de l'ouest, pour aller d'un océan à l'autre, grâce aux progrès de la navigation à vapeur. Seuls viennent prendre connaissance de l'Île des États, les bâtiments qui se préparent à doubler ou qui ont doublé le cap Horn.

Il convient de le remarquer, la République Argentine avait montré une heureuse initiative en construisant ce Phare du bout du Monde, et les nations doivent lui en savoir gré. En effet, aucun feu n'éclairait, à cette époque, ces parages de la Magellanie depuis l'entrée du détroit de Magellan au cap des Vierges, sur l'Atlantique, jusqu'à sa sortie au cap Pilar, sur le Pacifique. Le phare de l'Île des États allait rendre d'incontestables services à la navigation en ces mauvais parages. Il n'en existe même pas au cap Horn, et celui-ci pouvait éviter bien des catastrophes, en assurant aux navires venant du Pacifique plus de sécurité pour embouquer le détroit de Lemaire.

Le gouvernement argentin avait donc décidé la création de ce nouveau phare, au fond de la baie d’Elgor. Après un an de travaux bien conduits, son inauguration venait d’être faite à cette date du 9 décembre 1859.

À cent cinquante mètres de la petite crique qui termine la baie, le sol présentait une tumescence d’une superficie de quatre à cinq cents mètres carrés, et d’une hauteur de trente à quarante mètres environ. Un mur de pierres sèches clôtura ce terre-plein, cette terrasse rocheuse qui devait servir de base à la tour du phare.

Cette tour se dressait en son milieu au-dessus de l’ensemble de l’annexe, logements et magasins.

L’annexe comprenait: 1° la chambre des gardiens, meublée de lits, d’armoires, de tables, de chaises, et que chauffait un poêle au charbon, dont le tuyau conduisait la fumée au-dessus du toit; 2° la salle commune également munie d’un appareil de chauffage et qui servait de salle à manger, avec table au centre, lampes accrochées au plafond, placards qui contenaient divers instruments, tels que longue-vue, baromètre, thermomètre, et aussi les lampes destinées à remplacer celles de la lanterne en cas d’accident, enfin une horloge à poids disposée contre le mur latéral; 3° les magasins où se conservaient les provisions pour une année, bien que le ravitaillement et la relève dussent s’effectuer tous les trois mois, conserves de sortes variées, viande salée, corn-beef, lard, légumes secs, biscuits de mer, thé, café, sucre, fûts de whisky et de brandevin, quelques médicaments d’un emploi usuel; 4° la réserve d’huile nécessaire à la consommation des lampes du phare; 5° le magasin, où était déposé le combustible en quantité suffisante pour les besoins du gardiennage pendant toute la durée des hivers antarctiques. Tel était l’ensemble des constructions formant un bâtiment qui s’arrondissait sur le terre-plein.

La tour était d’une extrême solidité, bâtie avec les matériaux fournis par l’Île des États. Les pierres d’une grande dureté, maintenues par des entretoises de fer, appareillées avec grande précision, emboîtées les unes dans les autres à queue d’aronde, formaient une paroi capable de résister aux violentes tempêtes, aux ouragans terribles qui se déchaînent si fréquemment sur cette lointaine limite des deux plus vastes océans du globe. Ainsi que l’avait dit Vasquez, le vent ne l’emporterait pas, cette tour. Ce serait un fanal que tiendraient ses camarades et lui, et ils le tiendraient bien en dépit des tourmentes magellaniques!

La tour mesurait trente-deux mètres de hauteur, et, en y joignant l’élévation du terre-plein, le feu se trouvait porté à deux cent vingt-trois pieds au-dessus du niveau de la mer. Il aurait donc pu être aperçu au large à la distance de quinze milles, distance que franchit le rayon visuel à cette altitude. Mais, en réalité, sa portée n’était que de dix milles. À cette époque, il n’était pas encore question de phares fonctionnant au gaz hydrogène carburé ou à la lumière électrique. D’ailleurs, sur cette île éloignée, de communication difficile avec les États les plus rapprochés, le système le plus simple et nécessitant le minimum de réparations s’imposait. On avait donc adopté l’éclairage à l’huile, en le dotant de tous les perfectionnements que la science et l’industrie possédaient alors.

En somme, cette visibilité à dix milles était suffisante. Il restait aux navires venant du nord-est, de l’est et du sud-est un large champ pour atteindre le détroit de Lemaire ou prendre direction par le sud de l’île. Tous les dangers seraient parés en observant ponctuellement les instructions publiées par les soins de l’autorité maritime: tenir le phare au nord-nord-ouest dans le second cas, et au sud-sud-ouest dans le premier. Le cap San Juan et la pointe Several ou Fallows seraient franchis en les laissant, celui-là sur bâbord, celle-ci sur tribord, et à temps pour n’y point être affalés par le vent, ni par les courants.

En outre, et pour les occasions très rares où un bâtiment serait contraint de relâcher dans la baie d’Elgor, en se guidant sur le phare, il aurait toutes chances de gagner son mouillage. Au retour, le Santa-Fé pourrait donc facilement se rendre à la petite crique, même pendant la nuit. La baie ayant environ trois milles de longueur jusqu’à l’extrémité du cap Saint-Jean, et la portée de feu étant de dix, l’aviso en aurait encore sept devant lui avant d’être arrivé sur les premiers accores de l’île.

Autrefois les phares étaient pourvus de miroirs paraboliques, qui avaient le grave inconvénient d’absorber au moins la moitié de la lumière produite. Mais le progrès avait dit son mot en cette matière comme en toutes choses. On employait dès cette époque des miroirs dioptriques, qui ne laissent perdre qu’une faible partie de la clarté des lampes.

Il va sans dire que le Phare du bout du Monde possédait un feu fixe. Il n’était pas à craindre que le capitaine d’un navire pût le confondre avec un autre feu, puisqu’il n’en existait aucun sur ces parages, pas même, on le répète, au cap Horn. Il n’avait donc point paru nécessaire de le différencier, soit par des éclipses, soit par des éclats, ce qui permettait de supprimer un mécanisme toujours délicat, et dont les réparations eussent été malaisées sur cette île uniquement habitée par les trois gardiens.

La lanterne était donc munie de lampes à double courant d’air et à mèches concentriques. Leur flamme, produisant une intense clarté sous un petit volume, pouvait dès lors être placée presque au foyer même des lentilles. L’huile leur arrivait en abondance par un système analogue à celui des

Carcel. Quant à l’appareil dioptrique disposé à l’intérieur de la lanterne, il se composait de lentilles à échelons, comprenant un verre central de forme ordinaire, qu’entourait une série d’anneaux de médiocre épaisseur et d’un profil tel que tous se trouvaient avoir le même foyer principal. Dans ces conditions, le faisceau cylindrique de rayons parallèles produit derrière le système de lentilles était transmis au dehors dans les meilleures conditions de visibilité. En quittant l’île par un temps assez clair, le commandant de l’aviso put, en effet, constater que rien n’était à reprendre dans l’installation et le fonctionnement du nouveau phare.

Il est évident que ce bon fonctionnement ne dépendait que de l’exactitude, de la vigilance des gardiens. À la condition de tenir les lampes en parfait état, d’en renouveler les mèches avec soin, de surveiller l’introduction de l’huile dans la proportion voulue, de bien régler le tirage en allongeant ou en raccourcissant les manchons des verres qui les entouraient, d’allumer et d’éteindre le feu au coucher et au lever du soleil, de ne jamais se départir d’une surveillance minutieuse, ce phare était appelé à rendre les plus grands services à la navigation dans ces lointains parages de l’océan Atlantique. Il n’y avait pas, d’ailleurs, à mettre en doute, la bonne volonté et le zèle de Vasquez et de ses deux camarades. Désignés après une sélection rigoureuse entre un grand nombre de candidats, ils avaient tous les trois, dans leurs fonctions antérieures, donné des preuves de conscience, de courage et d’endurance.

Il n’est pas inutile de répéter que la sécurité des trois gardiens paraissait être complète, si isolée que fût l’Île des États, à quinze cents milles de Buenos-Ayres, d’où pouvaient seulement venir le ravitaillement et les secours. Les quelques Fuégiens ou Pécherais qui s’y transportaient parfois pendant la belle saison n’y faisaient point un long séjour, et ces pauvres gens sont, au surplus, tout à fait inoffensifs. La pêche achevée, ils avaient hâte de retraverser le détroit de Lemaire et de regagner le littoral de la Terre de Feu ou les îles de l'archipel. D'autres étrangers, jamais on n'avait eu l'occasion d'en signaler la présence. Les côtes de l'île étaient trop redoutées des navigateurs pour qu'un bâtiment fût tenté d'y chercher un refuge qu'il aurait trouvé plus sûrement et plus facilement sur plusieurs autres points de la Magellanie.

Cependant toutes précautions avaient été prises en prévision de l'arrivée de gens suspects dans la baie d'Elgor. Les annexes étaient fermées de portes solides qui se verrouillaient à l'intérieur, et l'on n'aurait pu forcer les grillages des fenêtres des magasins et du logement. En outre, Vasquez, Moriz et Felipe possédaient des carabines, des revolvers, et les munitions ne leur feraient pas défaut.

Enfin, au fond du couloir qui aboutissait au pied de la tour, on avait établi une porte de fer qu'il eût été impossible de briser ou d'enfoncer. Quant à pénétrer autrement à l'intérieur de la tour, comment cela eût-il été possible à travers les étroites meurtrières de l'escalier, défendues par de solides croisillons, et comment atteindre la galerie qui entourait la lanterne, à moins de s'élever par la chaîne du paratonnerre?

Tels étaient les travaux d'une si grande importance qui venaient d'être conduits à bonne fin sur l'Île des États par les soins du gouvernement de la République Argentine.

CHAPITRE III

Les trois gardiens

C’est à cette époque de l’année, de novembre à mars, que la navigation est la plus active dans les parages de la Magellanie. La mer y est toujours dure. Mais, si rien n’arrête et ne calme les immenses houles qui viennent des deux océans, du moins l’état de l’atmosphère est-il plus égal, et les tourmentes qui le troublent jusque dans les hautes zones ne sont que passagères. Les navires à vapeur et les voiliers s’aventurent plus volontiers, pendant cette période de temps maniable, à contourner le Nouveau Continent en doublant le cap Horn. Cependant, ce n’est pas le passage des bâtiments, soit par le détroit de Lemaire, soit par le sud de l’Île des États, qui pourrait rompre la monotonie des longues journées de cette saison. Ils n’ont jamais été nombreux, et ils sont devenus plus rares encore, depuis que le développement de la navigation à vapeur et le perfectionnement des cartes marines ont rendu moins dangereux le détroit de Magellan, route à la fois plus courte et plus facile.

Toutefois cette monotonie, inhérente à l’existence dans les phares, n’est pas aisément perceptible aux gardiens préposés d’ordinaire à leur service. Ce sont, pour la plupart, d’anciens matelots ou d’anciens pêcheurs. Ils ne sont pas gens à compter les jours et les heures; ils savent sans cesse s’occuper et se distraire. Le service, d’ailleurs, ne se borne pas à assurer l’éclairage entre le coucher et le lever du soleil. Il avait été recommandé à Vasquez et à ses camarades de surveiller avec soin les approches de la baie d’Elgor, de se porter plusieurs fois par semaine au cap San Juan, d’observer la côte est jusqu’à la pointe Several, sans jamais s’éloigner de plus de trois à quatre milles. Ils devaient tenir au courant le “livre du phare”, y noter tous les incidents qui pourraient survenir, le passage des bâtiments à voile et à vapeur, leur nationalité, leur nom lorsqu’ils les enverraient avec leur numéro, la hauteur des marées, la direction et la force du vent, la relève du temps, la durée des pluies, la fréquence des orages, les hausses et baisses du baromètre, l’état de la température et autres phénomènes, ce qui permettrait d’établir la carte météorologique de ces parages.

Vasquez, Argentin de naissance, comme Felipe et Moriz, devait remplir à l’Île des États les fonctions de gardien-chef du phare. Il était alors âgé de quarante-sept ans. Vigoureux, d’une santé à toute épreuve, d’une remarquable endurance, comme il sied à un marin qui a coupé et recoupé la majeure partie des cent quatre-vingts parallèles, résolu, énergique, familiarisé avec le danger, il avait su se tirer d’affaire en plus d’une circonstance où il y allait de la vie. Ce n’est pas seulement à l’âge qu’il devait d’avoir été choisi comme chef de la relève, mais à son caractère fortement trempé qui inspirait une entière confiance. Sans être arrivé plus haut que le grade de premier maître dans la marine de guerre de la République, il avait quitté le service avec l’estime de tous. Aussi, lorsqu’il sollicita cette place à l’Île des États, l’autorité maritime n’éprouva-t-elle aucune hésitation à la lui confier.

Felipe et Moriz étaient également deux marins, âgés l’un de quarante, l’autre de trente-sept ans. Vasquez connaissait leurs familles de longue date et il les avait désignés au choix du gouvernement. Le premier, comme lui, était resté célibataire. Seul des trois, Moriz était marié, sans enfant, et sa femme, qu’il reverrait dans trois mois, servait chez une logeuse du port de Buenos-Ayres.

Lorsque les trois mois seraient écoulés, Vasquez, Felipe et Moriz rembarqueraient sur le *Santa-Fé*, qui ramènerait à l'Île des États trois autres gardiens, dont ils reviendraient prendre la place trois mois plus tard.

Ce serait en juin, juillet et août qu'ils reprendraient le service, c'est-à-dire vers le milieu de l'hiver. Donc, après n'avoir pas trop souffert des intempéries pendant leur premier séjour, ils devaient s'attendre à une pénible existence, à leur retour sur l'île. Mais, on l'imagine bien, cela n'était pas pour leur causer la moindre inquiétude. Vasquez et ses camarades seraient déjà presque acclimatés, et ils sauraient braver impunément le froid, les tempêtes, toutes les rigueurs des saisons antarctiques.

Dès ce jour, 10 décembre, le service fut organisé régulièrement. Chaque nuit les lampes fonctionnèrent sous la surveillance de l'un des gardiens posté dans la chambre de quart, tandis que les deux autres se reposaient dans le logement. Le jour, les divers appareils étaient visités, nettoyés, munis de mèches nouvelles au besoin, et mis en état de projeter leurs puissants rayons au coucher du soleil.

Entre temps, suivant les indications du service, Vasquez et ses camarades descendaient la baie d'Elgor jusqu'à la mer, soit à pied en suivant l'un ou l'autre rivage, soit dans l'embarcation laissée à la disposition des gardiens, une chaloupe demi-pontée gréée d'une misaine et d'un foc, qui s'abritait dans une petite crique où elle n'avait rien à craindre, de hautes falaises la protégeant contre les vents de l'est, les seuls à redouter.

Il va de soi que, lorsque Vasquez, Felipe et Moriz faisaient ces excursions dans la baie ou aux alentours de l'enceinte, l'un d'eux restait toujours de garde dans la galerie supérieure du phare. En effet, il pouvait arriver qu'un bâtiment vînt à passer en vue de l'Île des États et voulût envoyer son numéro. Il importait donc que l'un des gardiens fût toujours à son poste. Du terre-plein, on n'apercevait la mer que de l'est au nord-est. Dans les autres directions, les falaises arrêtaient le regard à quelques centaines de toises de l'enceinte. D'où cette obligation de se tenir en permanence dans la chambre de quart, afin de pouvoir communiquer avec les navires.

Les premiers jours qui suivirent le départ de l'aviso ne furent marqués par aucun incident. Le temps demeurait beau, la température assez élevée. Le thermomètre accusait parfois dix degrés au-dessus du zéro centigrade. Le vent soufflait du large, et généralement en petite brise entre le lever et le coucher du soleil; puis, avec le soir, il halait la terre, c'est-à-dire qu'il remontait au nord-ouest, et venait des vastes plaines de la Patagonie et de la Terre-de-Feu. Il y eut cependant quelques heures de pluie, et, comme la chaleur s'accroissait, il fallait s'attendre à de prochains orages, qui pourraient modifier l'état atmosphérique.

Sous l'influence des rayons solaires, qui acquéraient une force vivifiante, la flore commença à se manifester dans une certaine mesure. La prairie voisine de l'enceinte, entièrement dépouillée du manteau blanc de l'hiver, montrait son tapis d'un vert pâle. Dans le bois des hêtres antarctiques, on aurait même eu plaisir à s'étendre sous les frondaisons nouvelles. Le ruisseau largement alimenté coulait à pleins bords jusqu'à la crique. Les mousses, les lichens reparaissaient au pied des arbres et tapissaient le flanc des roches, de même que ces cochléarias si efficaces contre les affections scorbutiques. Enfin, si ce n'était pas le printemps – ce joli mot n'a pas cours en Magellanie – c'était l'été qui pour quelques semaines encore régnait sur l'extrême limite du continent américain.

Cette journée finie, avant que le moment ne fût venu d'allumer le phare, Vasquez, Felipe et Moriz, assis tous trois sur le balcon circulaire qui régnait autour de la lanterne, causaient suivant leur habitude, et tout naturellement le gardien-chef dirigeait et entretenait la conversation.

“Eh bien, garçons, dit-il après avoir consciencieusement bourré sa pipe – exemple qui fut suivi par les deux autres – cette nouvelle existence?… commencez-vous à vous y faire?

— Bien sûr, Vasquez, répondit Felipe. Ce n’est point en si peu de temps que l’on peut avoir grand ennui ni grande fatigue.

— En effet, ajouta Moriz, mais nos trois mois passeront plus vite que je ne l’aurais cru.

— Oui, mon garçon, ils fileront comme une corvette sous ses cacatois, ses perruches, ses ailes de pigeons et ses bonnettes!

— En fait de bâtiments, fit observer Felipe, nous n’en avons pas aperçu un seul aujourd’hui, pas même à l’horizon…

— Il en viendra, Felipe, il en viendra, répliqua Vasquez, en arrondissant sa main sur ses yeux comme pour s’en faire une longue-vue. Ce ne serait pas la peine d’avoir élevé ce beau phare sur l’Île des États, un phare qui envoie ses éclats jusqu’à dix milles au large, pour que pas un navire ne vînt en profiter.

— D’ailleurs, il est tout nouveau, notre phare, observa Moriz.

— Comme tu dis, garçon! répliqua Vasquez, et il faut le temps aux capitaines pour apprendre que cette côte est éclairée maintenant. Quand ils le sauront, ils n’hésiteront pas à la ranger de plus près et à donner dans le détroit au grand avantage de leur navigation! Mais ce n’est pas tout de savoir qu’il y a un phare, encore faut-il être sûr qu’il est toujours allumé, depuis le coucher du soleil jusqu’à son petit lever.

— Cela ne sera bien connu, fit remarquer Felipe, qu’après le retour du *Santa-Fé* à Buenos-Ayres.

— Juste, garçon, déclara Vasquez, et, lorsqu’on aura publié le rapport du commandant Lafayate, les autorités s’empresseront de le répandre dans tout le monde maritime. Mais déjà la plupart des navigateurs ne doivent pas ignorer ce qui s’est fait ici.

— Quant au *Santa-Fé*, qui n’est parti que depuis cinq jours, reprit Moriz, sa traversée durera…

— Ce qu’elle durera, interrompit Vasquez, pas plus d’une semaine encore, je suppose! Le temps est beau, la mer est calme, le vent souffle du bon côté… L’aviso a du largue dans ses voiles jour et nuit, et, en y ajoutant sa machine, je serais bien étonné s’il ne filait pas ses neuf à dix nœuds.

— À l’heure qu’il est, dit Felipe, il doit avoir dépassé le détroit de Magellan et doublé le cap des Vierges d’une quinzaine de milles.

— Sûr, mon garçon, déclara Vasquez. En ce moment, il longe la côte patagone, et il peut défier à la course les chevaux des Patagons… Dieu sait, pourtant, si, dans ce pays-là, hommes et bêtes détalent comme une frégate de premier rang, vent sous vergue!”

On comprendra que ce souvenir du *Santa-Fé* fût encore présent à l’esprit de ces braves gens. N’était-ce pas comme un morceau de la terre natale qui venait de les quitter pour retourner là-bas. Par la pensée, ils le suivraient jusqu’à la fin du voyage.

“As-tu fait bonne pêche aujourd’hui?… reprit Vasquez en s’adressant à Felipe.

— Assez bonne, Vasquez, j’ai pris à la ligne quelques douzaines de gobies, et, à la main, un tourteau pesant bien trois livres, qui se défilait entre les roches.

— Bien cela, répondit Vasquez, et ne crains pas de dépeupler la baie!… Les poissons, plus on en prend, plus il y en a, comme on dit, et cela nous permettra d’économiser nos provisions de viande sèche et de lard salé!… Quant aux légumes…

— Moi, annonça Moriz, je suis descendu jusqu’au bois de hêtres. J’y ai déterré quelques racines, et, comme je l’ai vu faire au maître-coq de l’aviso, qui s’y entend, je vous en accommoderai une fameuse platée!

— Elle sera la bienvenue, déclara Vasquez, car il ne faut pas abuser des conserves, même des meilleures!… Ça ne vaut jamais ce qui est fraîchement tué, ou fraîchement pêché, ou fraîchement cueilli!

— Eh! fit Felipe, s’il nous venait quelques ruminants de l’intérieur de l’île… une couple de guanaques ou autres.

— Je ne dis pas qu’un filet ou un cuissot de guanaque soit à dédaigner, répliqua Vasquez. Un bon morceau de venaison, et l’estomac n’a que des remerciements à faire lorsqu’on lui en a servi!… Aussi, si le gibier se présente, on tâchera de l’abattre. Mais, garçons, attention à ne pas s’éloigner de l’enceinte pour aller chasser la grosse ou la petite bête.

L’essentiel est de se conformer aux instructions et de ne point s’écarter du phare, si ce n’est pour observer ce qui se passe dans la baie d’Elgor, et au large entre le cap San Juan et la pointe Diegos.

— Cependant, reprit Moriz, qui aimait la chasse, s’il venait une belle pièce à une portée de fusil…

— À une portée de fusil et même à deux, et même à trois, je ne dis pas, répondit Vasquez. Mais, vous le savez, le guanaque est trop sauvage de sa nature pour fréquenter la bonne société… la nôtre s’entend, et je serais bien surpris si nous voyions seulement une paire de cornes au-dessus des roches, du côté du bois de hêtres ou à proximité de l’enceinte!”

En effet, depuis le commencement des travaux, aucun animal n’avait été signalé aux approches de la baie d’Elgor. Le second du *Santa-Fé*, déterminé Nemrod, avait plusieurs fois essayé de chasser le guanaque. Sa tentative avait été vaine, bien qu’il se fût avancé de cinq à six milles dans l’intérieur. Si le gros gibier ne faisait point défaut, du moins ne se laissait-il voir que de trop loin pour être tiré. Peut-être, s’il eût franchi les hauteurs et dépassé le port Parry, s’il eût poussé jusqu’à l’autre extrémité de l’île, le second aurait-il été plus heureux. Mais là où se dressaient de grands pics, dans la partie occidentale, le cheminement devait être sans doute fort difficile, et ni lui, ni personne de l’équipage du *Santa-Fé*, n’alla jamais reconnaître les environs du cap Saint-Barthélemy.

Pendant la nuit du 16 au 17 décembre, Moriz étant de garde dans la chambre de quart de six heures à dix heures, un feu apparut en direction de l’est, à cinq ou six milles au large. C’était évidemment un feu de navire, le premier qui se fût montré dans les eaux de l’île depuis l’établissement du phare.

Moriz pensa, avec raison, que cela devait intéresser ses camarades, qui ne dormaient pas encore, et il vint les prévenir.

Vasquez et Felipe remontèrent aussitôt avec lui, et, la longue-vue aux yeux, ils se postèrent devant la fenêtre ouverte à l'est.

“C'est un feu blanc, déclara Vasquez.

— Et, par conséquent, dit Felipe, ce n'est point un feu de position, puisqu'il n'est ni vert ni rouge.”

La remarque était juste. Ce n'était pas un de ces feux de position placés, suivant leur couleur, l'un à bâbord, l'autre à tribord du navire.

“Et, ajouta Vasquez, puisque celui-ci est blanc, c'est qu'il est suspendu à l'étai de misaine, ce qui indique un steamer en vue de l'île.”

Sur ce point, aucun doute. Il s'agissait bien d'un steamer qui ralliait le cap San Juan. Prendrait-il le détroit de Lemaire, ou passerait-il par le sud? C'est la question que se posaient les gardiens.

Ils suivirent donc la marche du bâtiment à mesure qu'il se rapprochait, et, après une demi-heure, ils furent fixés sur sa route.

Le steamer, laissant le phare par bâbord au sud-sud-ouest, se dirigea franchement vers le détroit. On put apercevoir son feu rouge au moment où il passa à l'ouvert du havre Saint-Jean; puis il ne tarda pas à disparaître au milieu de l'obscurité.

“Voici le premier navire qui aura relevé le Phare du bout du Monde! s'écria Felipe.

— Ce ne sera pas le dernier!” assura Vasquez.

Le lendemain, dans la matinée, Felipe signala un grand voilier qui paraissait à l’horizon. Le temps était clair, l’atmosphère dégagée de brumes sous une petite brise du sud-est, ce qui permit d’apercevoir le navire à la distance d’au moins dix milles.

Vasquez et Moriz, prévenus, montèrent à la galerie du phare. On distinguait le bâtiment signalé au-dessus des extrêmes falaises du littoral, un peu à droite de la baie d’Elgor, entre la pointe Diegos et la pointe Several.

Ce navire cinglait rapidement, tout dessus, avec une vitesse qui ne devait pas être estimée à moins de douze ou treize nœuds. Il marchait grand largue, bâbord amures. Mais, comme il se dirigeait en droite ligne sur l’Île des États, on ne pouvait encore assurer s’il en passerait au nord ou au sud.

En gens de mer que ces questions intéressent toujours, Vasquez, Felipe et Moriz discutaient ce point. Finalement, ce fut Moriz qui eut raison, ayant soutenu que le voilier ne cherchait pas l’entrée du détroit. En effet, lorsqu’il ne fut plus qu’à un mille et demi de la côte, il lofa, de manière à venir plus au vent, afin de doubler la pointe Several.

C’était un grand bâtiment, jaugeant au moins dix-huit cents tonnes, gréé en trois-mâts barque du genre de ces clippers construits en Amérique, et dont la vitesse de marche est vraiment merveilleuse.

“Que ma longue-vue se change en parapluie, s’écria Vasquez, si celui-là n’est pas sorti d’un chantier de la Nouvelle-Angleterre!

— Peut-être va-t-il nous envoyer son numéro? dit Moriz.

— Il ne ferait que son devoir”, répondit simplement le gardien-chef.

C’est bien ce qui arriva au moment où le clipper tournait la pointe Several. Une série de pavillons monta à la corne de brigantine, signaux que Vasquez traduisit immédiatement après avoir consulté le livre déposé dans la chambre de quart.

C’était le *Montank* du port de Boston, Nouvelle-Angleterre, États-Unis d’Amérique. Les gardiens lui répondirent en hissant le pavillon argentin à la tige du paratonnerre, et ils ne cessèrent d’observer le navire jusqu’au moment où l’extrémité de sa mâture disparut derrière les hauteurs du cap Webster, sur la côte sud de l’île.

“Et maintenant, dit Vasquez, bon voyage au *Montank*, et fasse le ciel qu’il n’attrape pas quelque mauvais coup de temps au large du cap Horn!”

Pendant les jours qui suivirent, la mer demeura presque déserte. À peine put-on entrevoir une ou deux voiles à l’horizon de l’est.

Les navires qui passaient à une dizaine de milles de l’Île des États ne cherchaient évidemment pas à rallier la terre d’Amérique. Dans l’opinion de Vasquez, ce devaient être des baleiniers qui se rendaient sur les lieux de pêche, dans les parages antarctiques. On aperçut du reste quelques souffleurs qui venaient des latitudes plus élevées. Ils se tenaient à bonne distance de la pointe Several en se dirigeant vers l’Océan Pacifique.

Il n’y eut rien à noter jusqu’à la date du 20 décembre, si ce n’est des observations météorologiques. Le temps était devenu assez variable, avec des sautes de vent du nord-est au sud-est. À plusieurs reprises, il tomba des pluies assez fortes, parfois accompagnées de grêle, ce qui indiquait une certaine tension électrique de l’atmosphère. On pouvait donc craindre des orages qui ne laissent pas d'être redoutables, surtout à cette époque de l'année.

Dans la matinée du 21, Felipe se promenait en fumant sur le terre-plein, lorsqu'il crut apercevoir un animal du côté du bois de hêtres.

Après l'avoir observé pendant quelques instants, il alla prendre une longue-vue dans la salle commune.

Felipe reconnut sans peine un guanaque de grande taille. C'était peut-être l'occasion de faire un bon coup.

Aussitôt, Vasquez et Moriz, qu'il venait d'appeler, sortirent tous deux de l'annexe et le rejoignirent sur le terre-plein.

Tous furent d'avis qu'il fallait se mettre en chasse. Si l'on parvenait à abattre le guanaque, cela vaudrait un supplément de viande fraîche, qui varierait agréablement l'ordinaire.

Voici ce qui fut convenu: Moriz, armé d'une des carabines, quitterait l'enceinte, et essayerait, sans être aperçu, de tourner l'animal, qui restait immobile, et de le repousser du côté de la baie, où Felipe l'attendrait au passage.

“En tout cas, prenez bien garde, garçons, recommanda Vasquez. Ces bêtes-là ont l'oreille fine et le nez fin! Du plus loin que celle-ci verra ou sentira Moriz, elle décampera si vite, que vous ne pourrez ni la tirer ni la tourner. Laissez-la filer alors, car il ne faut pas vous éloigner… C'est bien entendu?…

— Bien entendu”, répondit Moriz.

Vasquez et Felipe se postèrent sur le terre-plein, et, en se servant de la longue-vue, ils constatèrent que le guanaque n’avait pas bougé de la place où il s’était montré tout d’abord. Leur attention se porta sur Moriz.

Celui-ci se dirigeait vers le bois de hêtres. Il y serait à couvert, et peut-être pourrait-il, sans effrayer l’animal, gagner les roches, afin de le prendre à revers et de l’obliger de fuir du côté de la baie.

Ses camarades purent le suivre du regard jusqu’au moment où il atteignit le bois sous lequel il disparut.

Environ une demi-heure s’écoula. Le guanaque était toujours immobile et Moriz devait être à portée de lui envoyer son coup de fusil. Vasquez et Felipe attendaient donc qu’une détonation retentît et que l’animal tombât plus ou moins grièvement blessé, ou prît la fuite à toutes jambes.

Cependant aucun coup ne fut tiré, et, à l’extrême surprise de Vasquez et de Felipe, voici que le guanaque, au lieu de détaler, s’étendit sur les roches, les jambes pendantes, le corps affaissé, comme s’il n’avait plus eu la force de se soutenir.

Presque aussitôt, Moriz, qui était parvenu à se glisser derrière les roches, parut et s’élança vers le guanaque qui ne remua pas; il se pencha sur lui, il le tâta de la main, et se releva brusquement.

Puis, se tournant vers l’enceinte, il fit un geste auquel on ne pouvait se méprendre. Évidemment, il demandait à ses camarades de le rejoindre au plus tôt.

“Il y a quelque chose d’extraordinaire, dit Vasquez. Viens, Felipe.”

Et tous deux, dégringolant du terre-plein, coururent vers le bois de hêtres.

Ils ne mirent pas plus de dix minutes à franchir la distance.

“Eh bien… le guanaque?… interrogea Vasquez.

— Le voici, répondit Moriz, en montrant la bête couchée à ses pieds.

— Il est mort? demanda Felipe.

— Mort, répliqua Moriz.

— De vieillesse alors? s’écria Vasquez.

— Non… des suites d’une blessure!

— Blessé! il aurait été blessé?

— Oui… d’une balle au flanc!

— Une balle!…” répéta Vasquez.

Rien de plus certain. Après avoir été frappé d’une balle et s’être traîné jusqu’à cette place, le guanaque y était tombé mort.

“Il y a donc des chasseurs dans l’île?” murmura Vasquez.

Immobile et pensif, il porta un regard inquiet autour de lui.

CHAPITRE IV

La bande Kongre

Si Vasquez, Felipe et Moriz se fussent transportés à l’extrémité occidentale de l’Île des États, ils auraient constaté combien ce littoral différait de celui qui s’étendait entre le cap Saint-Jean et la pointe Several. Ce n’étaient que falaises s’élevant jusqu’à deux cents pieds de hauteur, la plupart coupées à pic et se prolongeant sous des eaux profondes, incessamment battues d’un violent ressac, même par temps calme.

En avant de ces falaises arides, dont les brisures, les interstices, les failles, abritaient des myriades d’oiseaux de mer, se détachaient nombre de bancs de récifs, dont quelques-uns arrivaient jusqu’à deux milles au large à marée basse. Entre eux sinuaient d’étroits canaux, des passes impraticables, si ce n’est à de légères embarcations. Çà et là des grèves, des tapis de sable, où touffaient quelques maigres plantes marines, semées de coquilles écrasées par le poids des lames au plein de la mer. Les cavernes ne manquaient pas à l’intérieur de ces falaises, grottes profondes, sèches, obscures, d’orifice resserré, dont l’intérieur n’était ni balayé par les rafales ni inondé par la houle, même aux redoutables époques de l’équinoxe. On y accédait en traversant des raidillons pierreux, des éboulis de rocs que les gros flux dérangeaient parfois. Des ravins rudes à gravir donnaient accès jusqu’à la crête, mais, pour atteindre le plateau du centre de l’île, il aurait fallu franchir des crêtes de plus de neuf cents mètres d’altitude, et la distance n’eût pas été moindre d’une quinzaine de milles. Au total, le caractère sauvage, désolé, s’accentuait plus de ce côté qu’au littoral opposé où s’ouvrait la baie d’Elgor.

Bien que l’ouest de l’Île des États fût en partie protégé contre les vents de nord-ouest par les hauteurs de la Terre-de-Feu et de l’archipel Magellanique, la mer s’y déchaînait avec autant de fureur qu’aux abords du cap San Juan, de la pointe Diegos et de la pointe Several. Si donc un phare avait été établi du côté de l’Atlantique, un autre n’eût pas été moins nécessaire du côté du Pacifique, pour les bâtiments cherchant le détroit de Lemaire, après avoir doublé le cap Horn. Peut-être le gouvernement chilien se réservait-il, à cette époque, de suivre un jour l’exemple de la République Argentine.

Dans tous les cas, si ces travaux eussent été entrepris en même temps sur les deux extrémités de l’Île des États, cela eût singulièrement compromis la situation d’une bande de pillards qui s’étaient réfugiés dans le voisinage du cap Saint-Barthélemy.

Plusieurs années auparavant ces malfaiteurs avaient pris pied à l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor. Ils y avaient découvert une profonde caverne creusée dans la falaise. Cette caverne leur offrait un sûr abri, et, aucun navire ne relâchant jamais à l’Île des États, ils s’y trouvaient en parfaite sécurité.

Ces hommes, au nombre d’une douzaine, avaient pour chef un individu du nom de Kongre, auquel un certain Carcante servait de second.

Ce n’était qu’un ramassis de gens originaires du Sud-Amérique. Cinq d’entre eux étaient de nationalité argentine ou chilienne. Quant aux autres, vraisemblablement des natifs de la Fuégie, recrutés par Kongre, ils n’avaient eu qu’à traverser le détroit de Lemaire pour compléter la bande, sur cette île qu’ils connaissaient déjà pour y être venus pêcher pendant la belle saison.

De Carcante, tout ce qu’on en savait, c’est qu’il était Chilien, mais il eût été difficile de dire en quelle ville ou village de la République il avait reçu naissance, ni à quelle famille il appartenait. Âgé de trente-cinq à quarante ans, de taille moyenne, plutôt maigre, mais tout nerfs et tout muscles, et par conséquent d’une extrême vigueur, de caractère sournois, d’âme fausse, jamais il n’eût reculé ni devant un vol à perpétrer, ni devant un meurtre à commettre.

Quant au chef de la bande, on ignorait tout de son existence. Sa nationalité, il ne s’était jamais prononcé à ce sujet. Se nommait-il Kongre? on ne le savait pas. Ce qui est certain, c’est que ce nom est assez répandu chez les indigènes de la Magellanie et de la Terre-de-Feu. Lors du voyage de *l’Astrolabe* et de la *Zélée*, le capitaine Dumont-d’Urville, en relâche au havre Peckett, sur le détroit de Magellan, reçut à son bord un Patagon qui portait ce nom. Mais il est douteux que Kongre fût originaire de la Patagonie. Il n’avait pas la figure rétrécie au sommet et large à sa partie inférieure des hommes de cette contrée, leur front étroit et fuyant, leurs yeux allongés, leur nez écrasé, leur taille généralement haute. En outre, sa physionomie était loin de présenter cette expression de douceur que l’on rencontre chez la plupart des types de ces peuplades.

Kongre avait un tempérament aussi violent qu’énergique. Cela se reconnaissait aisément à ses traits farouches, mal dissimulés sous une barbe épaisse qui blanchissait déjà, bien qu’il ne fût âgé que d’une quarantaine d’années. C’était un véritable bandit, un malfaiteur redoutable, souillé de tous les crimes, qui n’avait pu trouver d’autre refuge que cette île déserte, dont on connaissait seulement le littoral.

Mais, depuis qu’ils étaient venus y chercher asile, comment Kongre et ses compagnons étaient-ils parvenus à y subsister? C’est ce qui va être sommairement expliqué.

Lorsque Kongre et son complice Carcante, à la suite de forfaits qui leur auraient valu la corde ou le garrot, s’enfuirent de Punta-Arénas, le principal port du détroit de Magellan, ils gagnèrent la Terre-de-Feu, où il eût été difficile de les poursuivre. Là, vivant au milieu des Pécherais, ils apprirent combien étaient fréquents les naufrages sur l’Île des États, que n’éclairait pas encore le Phare du bout du Monde. Nul doute que ces rivages ne fussent couverts de débris de toutes sortes, dont quelques-uns devaient avoir une grande valeur. Kongre et Carcante eurent alors l’idée d’organiser une bande de pilleurs d’épaves, avec deux ou trois bandits de leur espèce rencontrés en Fuégie, auxquels se joignirent une dizaine de Pécherais qui ne valaient pas mieux. Une embarcation indigène les transporta sur l’autre rive du détroit de Lemaire. Mais, bien que Kongre et Carcante fussent marins, et eussent longtemps navigué dans les parages suspects du Pacifique, ils ne purent éviter une catastrophe. Un coup de vent les rejeta dans l’est, et la mer, très mauvaise, brisa leur embarcation contre les rochers du cap Colnett, au moment où ils s’efforçaient de relâcher dans les eaux tranquilles du port Parry.

C’est alors qu’ils gagnèrent à pied la baie d’Elgor. Ils ne furent point déçus dans leurs espérances. Les grèves, entre le cap San Juan et la pointe Several, étaient couvertes des débris de naufrages anciens ou récents, ballots encore intacts, caisses de provisions, pouvant assurer la nourriture de la bande pendant de longs mois, des armes, revolvers et fusils, qu’il serait facile de remettre en état, munitions bien conservées dans leurs boîtes métalliques, barres d’or et d’argent de grande valeur, provenant de riches cargaisons australiennes, meubles, bordages, planches, bois de toutes sortes, çà et là quelques restes de squelettes, mais pas un seul survivant de ces sinistres maritimes.

D’ailleurs, elle était bien connue des navigateurs, cette redoutable Île des États. Tout navire que la tempête poussait à cette côte s’y perdait immanquablement corps et biens.

Ce ne fut pas au fond de la baie que Kongre s’établit avec ses compagnons, mais à l’entrée, ce qui lui convenait mieux pour ses projets, de manière à surveiller le cap San Juan. Le hasard lui fit découvrir une caverne, dont l’orifice se cachait sous d’épaisses plantes marines, laminaires et goémons, suffisamment spacieuse pour loger toute la bande. En retour d’un contrefort de la falaise sur la rive nord de la baie, elle n’avait rien à craindre des vents du large. On y transporta tout ce qui, provenant des naufrages, pouvait servir à la meubler, de la literie, des vêtements, et aussi, en quantité, des conserves de viandes, des caisses de biscuit, des fûts d’eau-de-vie et de vin. Une seconde grotte, voisine de la première, servit à emmagasiner celles de ces épaves qui avaient une valeur particulière, comme l’or, l’argent, les bijoux précieux trouvés sur les grèves. Si plus tard Kongre parvenait à s’emparer d’un navire traîtreusement attiré dans la baie, il le chargerait de tout ce pillage et retournerait dans ces îles du Pacifique, théâtre de ses premières pirateries.

Jusqu’alors, l’occasion ne s’étant pas offerte, ces malfaiteurs n’avaient pu quitter l’Île des États. Il est vrai, dans l’espace de deux années, leur richesse ne cessa de s’accroître. D’autres naufrages se produisirent dont ils tirèrent grand profit. Et même, à l’exemple des pilleurs d’épaves sur certaines côtes dangereuses de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Monde, souvent ils provoquèrent ces catastrophes. La nuit, alors que les tourmentes de l’est faisaient rage, si un bâtiment se présentait en vue de l’île, ils l’attiraient avec des feux allumés en direction des récifs et si, exceptionnellement, un des naufragés parvenait à se sauver des lames, il était aussitôt massacré. Telle fut l’œuvre criminelle de ces bandits dont on ignorait même l’existence.

Cependant, la bande continuait d’être prisonnière dans l’île. Kongre avait bien pu provoquer la perte de quelques navires, mais non les attirer dans la baie d’Elgor, où il aurait tenté de s’en emparer. D’autre part, aucun bâtiment n’était venu de lui-même en relâche au fond de la baie, peu connue des capitaines, et encore eût-il fallu qu’un équipage n’eût pas été de force à se défendre contre cette quinzaine de bandits.

Le temps s’écoulait, la caverne regorgeait d’épaves de grande valeur. Ce que devaient être l’impatience, la rage de Kongre et des siens, on le conçoit. C’était l’éternel sujet de conversation entre Carcante et son chef.

“Être échoué sur cette île, comme un navire à la côte! répétait-il, et lorsque nous avons à embarquer une cargaison valant plus de cent mille piastres!…

— Oui, répondait Kongre, il faudra partir, coûte que coûte!

— Quand et comment?” répliquait Carcante. Et cette question restait toujours sans réponse.

“Nos provisions finiront par s’épuiser, répétait Carcante. Si la pêche donne, la chasse peut faire défaut!… Et puis, quels hivers on passe sur cette île! Mille dieux! Quand je songe à ceux que nous serons obligés de supporter encore!”

À tout cela, qu’eût pu dire Kongre? Il était peu loquace, peu communicatif. Mais quelle colère bouillonnait en lui, à sentir son impuissance!

Non, il ne pouvait rien… rien!… À défaut d’un bâtiment que la bande eût surpris au mouillage, si quelque canot fuégien se fût aventuré vers l’est de l’île, Kongre n’aurait pas eu grand’peine à s’en emparer. Et alors, sinon lui, du moins Carcante et un des Chiliens s’en fussent servi pour se rendre au détroit de Magellan, où, une fois là, l’occasion se serait présentée de gagner soit Buenos-Ayres, soit Valparaiso. Grâce à l’argent qui ne manquait pas, on aurait acheté un navire de cent cinquante à deux cents tonneaux, que Carcante, avec quelques matelots, eût amené à la baie d’Elgor. Ce navire une fois dans la crique, on se fût débarrassé de son équipage… Puis toute la bande s’y serait embarquée avec ses richesses, pour gagner les Salomon ou les Nouvelles-Hébrides!…

Or, les choses en étaient là, lorsque, quinze mois avant le début de cette histoire, la situation fut brusquement modifiée.

Au commencement d’octobre 1858, un steamer, battant pavillon argentin, parut en vue de l’île et manœuvra de manière à donner dans la baie d’Elgor.

Kongre et ses compagnons eurent bientôt reconnu un navire de guerre, contre lequel ils ne pourraient rien tenter. Après avoir fait disparaître toute trace de leur présence et dissimulé l’orifice des deux cavernes, ils se retirèrent à l’intérieur de l’île pour attendre le départ du bâtiment.

C’était le *Santa-Fé*, qui venait de Buenos-Ayres, ayant à bord un ingénieur chargé de la construction d’un phare sur l’Île des États, et qui venait en déterminer l’emplacement.

L’aviso ne resta que quelques jours à la baie d’Elgor, et il en repartit sans avoir découvert la retraite de Kongre et des siens.

Cependant, Carcante, qui s’était glissé la nuit jusqu’à la crique, avait pu apprendre pour quel motif le *Santa-Fé* était venu relâcher à l’Île des États. Un phare allait être construit au fond de la baie d’Elgor!… La bande n’avait plus qu’à quitter la place, semblait-il, et, assurément, c’est bien ce qui aurait été fait, si cela eût été possible.

Kongre prit donc le seul parti à prendre. Il connaissait déjà la partie ouest de l'île aux environs du cap Saint-Barthélemy, où d'autres cavernes pourraient lui assurer refuge. Sans perdre un jour, l'aviso ne devant pas tarder à revenir avec une équipe d'ouvriers pour commencer les travaux, il s'occupa d'y transporter tout ce qui serait nécessaire en vue d'y vivre une année, ayant toute raison de croire que, à cette distance du cap Saint-Jean, il ne courait aucun risque d'être découvert. Toutefois le temps lui eût manqué pour vider les deux cavernes. Il dut se borner à retirer la majeure partie des provisions, conserves, boissons, literie, vêtements et aussi quelques-uns des objets précieux, puis, les orifices soigneusement obstrués de pierres et d'herbes sèches, le reste fut laissé à la garde du diable.

Cinq jours après leur départ, le *Santa-Fé* reparaissait dans la matinée à l'ouvert de la baie d'Elgor, et venait reprendre son mouillage dans la crique. Les ouvriers qu'il amenait, le matériel qu'il transportait, furent débarqués. L'emplacement étant choisi sur le terre-plein, les travaux de construction furent aussitôt commencés, et, on le sait, conduits rapidement.

C'est ainsi que la bande Kongre fut obligée de se réfugier au cap Saint-Barthélemy. Un ruisseau, alimenté par la fonte des neiges, lui fournit la quantité d'eau nécessaire. La pêche et, dans une certaine mesure, la chasse lui permirent d'économiser les provisions dont elle s'était pourvue avant de quitter la baie d'Elgor.

Mais avec quelle impatience Kongre, Carcante et leurs compagnons attendaient-ils que le phare fût achevé et que le *Santa-Fé* partît pour ne revenir que trois mois après, lorsqu'il ramènerait la relève.

Il va de soi que Kongre et Carcante se tenaient au courant de tout ce qui se faisait au fond de la baie. Soit en longeant le littoral au sud ou au nord, soit en s'approchant par l'intérieur, soit en observant des hauteurs qui bordent au sud le havre New-Year, ils purent se rendre compte de l’état des travaux, savoir à quelle époque ils prendraient fin. C’est alors que Kongre mettrait à exécution un projet longuement médité. Et qui sait, ensuite, si, maintenant qu’elle serait éclairée, un navire ne relâcherait pas dans la baie d’Elgor, navire dont il parviendrait à s’emparer après en avoir surpris et massacré l’équipage?

Quant à une excursion que les officiers de l’aviso auraient voulu faire à l’extrémité occidentale de l’île, Kongre ne pensa pas qu’il eût lieu de la craindre. Personne ne serait tenté, cette année du moins, de s’aventurer jusqu’au cap Saint-Barthélemy à travers ces plateaux dénudés, ces ravins presque impraticables, toute cette partie montagneuse qu’il faudrait franchir au prix d’énormes fatigues. Il est vrai, peut-être le commandant de l’aviso aurait-il l’idée de faire le tour de l’île. Mais il n’était pas probable qu’il cherchât à débarquer sur la côte hérissée d’écueils, et, en tout cas, la bande prendrait ses mesures pour n’être point découverte.

Du reste, cette éventualité ne se produisit pas, et le mois de décembre arriva dans lequel les installations du phare allaient être terminées. Ses gardiens resteraient seuls, et Kongre en serait averti par les premiers rayons que le phare lancerait dans la nuit.

Aussi, pendant ces dernières semaines, l’un ou l’autre de la bande venait-il se mettre en observation sur un des cônes d’où l’on pouvait apercevoir le phare à la distance de sept ou huit milles, avec l’ordre de revenir, le plus rapidement possible, dès que le feu serait pour la première fois allumé.

Ce fut précisément Carcante qui, dans la nuit du 9 au 10 décembre, rapporta cette nouvelle au cap Saint-Barthélemy.

“Oui, s’écria-t-il, lorsqu’il eut rejoint Kongre dans la caverne, le diable a fini par l’allumer, ce phare que le diable éteigne!

— Nous n’aurons pas besoin de lui!” répondit Kongre, dont la main menaçante se tendit vers l’est.

Quelques jours se passèrent, et ce fut au début de la semaine suivante que Carcante, en chassant aux environs du port Parry, frappa un guanaque d’une balle. On le sait, l’animal lui échappa et vint s’abattre à l’endroit où Moriz le rencontra au bord de la lisière rocheuse, près du bois de hêtres. Et c’est à partir de ce jour que Vasquez et ses camarades, assurés de ne plus être seuls habitants de l’île, surveillèrent plus sévèrement les environs de la baie d’Elgor.

Le jour était donc arrivé où Kongre allait quitter le cap Saint-Barthélemy pour revenir au cap San Juan. Les bandits avaient résolu de laisser leur matériel dans la caverne. Ils n’emporteraient que ce qu’il faudrait de vivres pour trois ou quatre journées de marche, comptant sur l’approvisionnement du phare. On était au 22 décembre. En partant dès l’aube, en suivant un chemin qu’ils connaissaient à l’intérieur de l’île à travers sa partie montagneuse, ils feraient le tiers de la route pendant le premier jour. À la fin de cette étape comprenant une dizaine de milles en terrain montagneux, la halte serait établie soit à l’abri des arbres, soit dans quelque anfractuosité.

Après cette halte, le lendemain, avant même le lever du soleil, Kongre commencerait une seconde étape, à peu près égale à celle de la veille, puis, le surlendemain, une dernière l’amènerait à la baie d’Elgor, qu’il pourrait atteindre dans la soirée du troisième jour.

Kongre supposait que deux gardiens seulement étaient affectés au service du phare, alors qu’il y en avait trois en réalité. Mais peu importait, en somme. Vasquez, Moriz, Felipe ne sauraient résister à la bande dont ils ne soupçonneraient pas la présence aux abords de l'enceinte. Deux succomberaient les premiers dans le logement, et l'on aurait facilement raison du troisième à son poste dans la chambre de quart.

Kongre serait donc le maître du phare. Il aurait tout le loisir de rapporter ensuite du cap Saint-Barthélemy le matériel qu'il allait y laisser et de le placer de nouveau dans la caverne à l'entrée de la baie d'Elgor.

Tel était le plan arrêté dans l'esprit de ce redoutable bandit. Qu'il dût réussir, ce n'était que trop certain. Mais la chance le favoriserait-elle ensuite, c'était moins sûr.

En effet, les choses ne dépendaient plus de lui. Il faudrait qu'un bâtiment vînt relâcher dans la baie d'Elgor. Il est vrai, ce lieu de relâche serait bientôt connu des navigateurs après le voyage du *Santa-Fé*. Donc, rien d'impossible à ce qu'un navire, surtout s'il était de moyen tonnage, voulût se réfugier dans la baie désormais balisée par un phare, plutôt que de fuir à travers une mer démontée soit par le détroit, soit par le sud de l'île… Kongre avait résolu que ce navire tomberait en son pouvoir, et lui fournirait la possibilité tant attendue de s'enfuir à travers le Pacifique, où il s'assurerait l'impunité de ses crimes.

Mais il faudrait que tout se passât ainsi, avant le retour de l'aviso à l'époque de la relève. S'ils n'avaient quitté l'île à ce moment, Kongre et les siens seraient forcés de retourner au cap Saint-Barthélemy.

Et, alors, les circonstances ne seraient plus les mêmes. Lorsque le commandant Lafayate connaîtrait la disparition des trois gardiens du phare, il ne pourrait douter qu'ils n'eussent été victimes d'un enlèvement ou d'un assassinat. Des recherches seraient organisées sur toute l'île. L'aviso ne repartirait pas sans qu’elle eût été visitée d’un bout à l’autre. Comment la bande pourrait-elle échapper aux poursuites, et comment pourvoirait-elle à son existence, si cette situation se prolongeait?… S’il le fallait, le gouvernement argentin enverrait d’autres navires. Si même Kongre parvenait à s’emparer d’une embarcation de Pécherais – chance bien improbable, – le détroit serait surveillé avec tant de soin qu’il ne pourrait plus le traverser, et se réfugier sur la Terre-de-Feu. La fortune favoriserait-elle donc assez ces bandits pour leur permettre de quitter l’île tandis qu’il en serait temps encore?

Dans la soirée du 22, Kongre et Carcante se promenaient en causant sur la pointe du cap Saint-Barthélemy, et, suivant l’habitude des marins, ils observaient le ciel et la mer.

Le temps était moyen. Des nuages se levaient à l’horizon. Le vent soufflait du nord-est en forte brise.

Il était alors six heures et demie du soir. Kongre et ses compagnons se disposaient à regagner leur retraite habituelle au moment où Carcante disait:

“Il est bien entendu que nous laissons tout notre matériel au cap Saint-Barthélemy?

— Oui, répondit Kongre. Il sera facile de l’en rapporter plus tard… lorsque nous serons les maîtres là-bas… et que…”

Il n’acheva pas. Les yeux dirigés vers le large, il s’arrêta et dit:

“Carcante… regarde donc… là… là… par le travers du cap…”

Carcante observa la mer dans la direction indiquée.

“Oh! fit-il, je ne me trompe pas… un navire!…

— Qui semble rallier l’île, reprit Kongre, et en courant de petits bords, car il a vent debout.”

En effet, un bâtiment, sous pleine voilure, louvoyait à deux milles environ du cap Saint-Barthélemy.

Bien qu’il eût le vent contre lui, ce navire gagnait peu à peu, et, s’il cherchait le détroit, il y serait engagé avant la nuit.

“C’est une goélette, dit Carcante.

— Oui… une goélette, de cent cinquante à deux cents tonneaux”, répondit Kongre.

Aucun doute à ce sujet, cette goélette voulait plutôt gagner le détroit que doubler le cap Saint-Barthélemy. Toute la question était de savoir si elle serait à sa hauteur avant que l’obscurité fût profonde. Avec ce vent qui calminait, ne courrait-elle pas le danger d’être jetée par le courant sur les récifs?

La bande entière s’était rassemblée à l’extrémité du cap.

Ce n’était pas la première fois, depuis qu’elle y séjournait, qu’un bâtiment se présentait à si courte distance de l’Île des États. On sait que ces pillards cherchaient, dans ce cas, à l’attirer sur les roches par des feux mouvants. Cette fois encore la proposition fut faite de recourir à ce moyen.

“Non, répondit Kongre, il ne faut pas que cette goélette se perde… Tâchons qu’elle tombe entre nos mains… Le vent et le courant sont contraires… la nuit va être noire. Il lui sera impossible de donner dans le détroit. Demain, nous l’aurons encore par le travers du cap, et on verra ce qu’il conviendra de faire.”

Une heure plus tard, le navire disparut au milieu d’une obscurité profonde, sans qu’aucun feu décelât sa présence au large.

Pendant la nuit, le vent vint à changer et sauta dans le sud-ouest.

Le lendemain, à la pointe du jour, lorsque Kongre et ses compagnons descendirent sur la grève, ils aperçurent la goélette échouée sur les récifs du cap Saint-Barthélemy.

CHAPITRE V

La goélette Maule.

Kongre n’en était plus à connaître le métier de marin. S’il avait commandé, quel navire et dans quelles mers? Seul Carcante, marin comme lui, autrefois son second au cours de sa vie errante, comme il l’était encore sur l’Île des États, eût pu le dire. Mais il ne le disait pas.

Assurément, ce n’eût pas été calomnier ces deux misérables que de leur jeter à la face le nom de pirates. Cette criminelle existence, ils devaient l’avoir menée dans ces parages des Salomon et des Nouvelles-Hébrides, où les navires étaient encore fréquemment attaqués à cette époque. Et, sans doute, ce fut après avoir échappé aux croisières organisées par le Royaume-Uni, la France et l’Amérique dans cette partie de l’Océan Pacifique, qu’ils vinrent se réfugier dans l’archipel magellanique, puis sur l’Île des États, où de pirates ils se firent pilleurs d’épaves.

Cinq ou six des compagnons de Kongre et de Carcante avaient également navigué comme pêcheurs ou matelots du commerce, et, par conséquent, étaient faits à la mer. Quant aux Fuégiens, ils compléteraient l’équipage, si la bande parvenait à s’emparer de la goélette.

Cette goélette, à en juger par sa coque et sa mâture, ne devait pas porter plus de cent cinquante à cent soixante tonneaux. Une rafale de l’ouest l’avait poussée pendant la nuit sur un banc de sable semé de roches contre lesquelles elle aurait pu se fracasser. Mais il ne semblait pas que sa coque eût souffert. Inclinée sur bâbord, l’étrave obliquement tournée vers la terre, elle présentait son flanc de tribord au large. Dans cette position, on voyait son pont depuis le gaillard d’avant jusqu’au rouf de l’arrière. Sa mâture était intacte, mât de misaine, grand mât, beaupré, avec leurs agrès, ses voiles à demi carguées, sauf la misaine, le petit cacatois et la flèche qui avaient été serrés.

La veille au soir, lorsque cette goélette fut signalée au large du cap Saint-Barthélemy, elle luttait contre un vent de nord-est assez fort et, sous l’allure du plus près, amures à tribord, elle essayait de gagner l’entrée du détroit de Lemaire. Au moment où Kongre et ses compagnons l’avaient perdue de vue au milieu de l’obscurité, la brise montrait une tendance à mollir et devenait bientôt insuffisante pour assurer à un navire une vitesse appréciable. Il y avait donc lieu d’admettre que, drossée par les courants contre les récifs, elle s’en était trouvée trop rapprochée pour pouvoir regagner le large, lorsque, pendant la nuit, avec sa brusquerie habituelle dans ces parages, le vent avait changé cap pour cap. Le brasseyage des vergues montrait que l’équipage avait fait tous ses efforts pour s’élever au vent. Mais sans doute était-il trop tard, puisque, finalement, la goélette était venue se mettre au plein sur le banc de sable.

En ce qui concernait le capitaine et l’équipage, on en était réduit aux conjectures. Mais, vraisemblablement, en se voyant drossés par le vent et le courant contre une côte dangereuse, hérissée de récifs, ils avaient mis le canot à la mer, ne doutant pas que leur navire n’allât se briser contre les roches et qu’ils ne courussent risque de se perdre jusqu’au dernier. Déplorable inspiration. En restant à bord, le capitaine et ses hommes s’en fussent tirés sains et saufs. Or, il n’était pas douteux qu’ils n’eussent péri, puisque leur canot apparaissait la quille en l’air, à deux milles dans le nord-est, poussé par le vent vers le fond de la baie Franklin.

Se rendre à bord de la goélette, pendant que la mer baissait encore, ne présentait aucune difficulté. À partir du cap Saint-Barthélemy, on pouvait aller de roche en roche jusqu'au lieu de l'échouage, distant d'un demi-mille au plus. C'est ce que firent Kongre et Carcante, accompagnés de deux de leurs hommes. Les autres restèrent en observation au pied de la falaise, pour voir s'ils n'apercevraient pas quelques survivants du naufrage.

Lorsque Kongre et ses compagnons arrivèrent au banc de sable, la goélette était entièrement à sec. Mais, comme le flot devait monter de sept à huit pieds à la marée prochaine, nul doute que le navire ne retrouvât son tirant d'eau s'il n'était pas avarié dans ses fonds.

Kongre ne s'était pas trompé en évaluant à cent soixante tonneaux la jauge de cette goélette. Il en fit le tour et, arrivé en face du tableau d'arrière, il lut: *Maule, Valparaiso*.

C'était donc un navire chilien, qui venait de s'échouer à l'Île des États pendant cette nuit du 22 au 23 décembre.

“Voilà qui fera notre affaire, dit Carcante.

— Si la goélette n'a pas une voie d'eau dans sa coque, objecta un des hommes.

— Une voie d'eau ou toute autre avarie, cela se répare”, se contenta de répondre Kongre.

Il vint alors examiner la carène du côté du large. Le bordé ne paraissait pas avoir souffert. L'étrave, un peu enfoncée dans le sable, semblait intacte, de même l'étambot, et le gouvernail adhérait toujours à ses ferrures. Quant à la partie de la coque qui reposait sur le banc, faute de pouvoir la visiter extérieurement, impossible de se prononcer. Après deux heures de flot, Kongre saurait à quoi s’en tenir.

“À bord!” dit-il.

Si l’inclinaison du navire rendait aisé l’embarquement par bâbord, elle ne permettait pas de marcher sur le pont. Il fallait s’y traîner, en rampant le long du bastingage. Kongre et les autres le franchirent en prenant appui sur le porte-haubans du grand mât.

L’échouage n’avait pas dû être très rude, et, sauf quelques espars non amarrés, tout était en place. La goélette n’étant pas trop fine dans ses façons, ayant peu de relève de varangues, ne donnait pas une gîte considérable, et, assurément, elle se relèverait d’elle-même avec la marée, si, toutefois, elle ne s’emplissait pas, par suite d’avaries à ses œuvres vives.

Le premier soin de Kongre fut de se glisser jusqu’au rouf, dont il n’ouvrit pas la porte sans quelque difficulté. Sur le carré il trouva la cabine du capitaine. Il y entra en s’arc-boutant contre les parois, prit les papiers du bord dans le tiroir d’un placard, et revint sur le pont où l’attendait Carcante.

Tous deux examinèrent le rôle d’équipage, et apprirent ainsi que:

La goélette *Maule*, du port de Valparaiso, Chili, jaugeant cent cinquante-sept tonnes, capitaine Pailha, ayant six hommes d’équipage, était partie sur lest le 23 novembre, à destination des îles Falkland.

Après avoir heureusement doublé le cap Horn, la *Maule* se préparait donc à embouquer le détroit de Lemaire, lorsqu’elle s’était perdue sur les récifs de l’Île des États. Ni le capitaine Pailha, ni aucun de ses hommes n’avaient échappé au naufrage, car, en cas que l’un d’eux eût survécu, il aurait trouvé refuge au cap Saint-Barthélemy. Or, depuis deux heures qu'il faisait jour, personne n'avait encore reparu.

On le voit, cette goélette ne portait point cargaison puisqu'elle se rendait sur lest aux Malouines. Mais l'essentiel était que Kongre eût un navire à sa disposition pour quitter l'île avec son stock de rapines, et il l'aurait, s'il parvenait à renflouer la *Maule*.

Il eût fallu déplacer le lest pour vérifier l'intérieur de la cale.

Ce lest se composait de vieilles ferrailles jetées en vrac. L'enlever aurait demandé un certain temps, et la goélette serait trop exposée si le vent fraîchissait du large. Il convenait avant tout de la déhaler du banc dès qu'elle flotterait. Or, le flot ne tarderait pas à se faire sentir, et, dans quelques heures, il y aurait pleine mer.

Kongre dit à Carcante:

“Nous allons tout préparer pour touer la goélette dès qu'elle aura suffisamment d'eau sous sa quille… Il est possible qu'elle n'ait point d'avaries graves et n'emplisse pas…

— C'est ce que nous saurons bientôt, répondit Carcante, car la marée commence à monter; et alors, que ferons-nous, Kongre?

— Nous déhalerons la *Maule* en dehors des récifs, et nous la conduirons le long du cap au fond de la crique des Pingouins, devant les cavernes. Là elle ne touchera pas, même au plus bas du jusant, puisqu'elle ne cale que six pieds.

— Et puis? demanda Carcante.

— Et puis, nous embarquerons tout ce que nous avons apporté de la baie d’Elgor…

— Et ensuite?… fit Carcante.

— Nous aviserons”, répondit simplement Kongre.

On se mit au travail, de manière à ne point perdre la prochaine marée, ce qui eût retardé de douze heures le renflouage de la goélette. Il fallait, à tout prix, qu’elle fût mouillée dans la crique avant midi. Là elle serait toujours à flot, et relativement en sûreté si le temps se maintenait.

Tout d’abord, Kongre, aidé de ses hommes, fit enlever l’ancre du bossoir de tribord, et on la fixa en dehors du banc en allongeant la chaîne sur toute sa longueur. De cette façon, dès que la quille ne porterait plus sur le sable, il serait possible de touer la goélette jusqu’à l’endroit où elle se retrouverait en eau profonde. Avant que la marée ne commençât à perdre, on aurait le temps d’atteindre la crique, et pendant l’après-midi, d’effectuer une complète visite de la cale.

Ces mesures, rapidement prises, furent achevées au moment où arriva le premier flot. Le banc de sable allait être en un instant recouvert.

Aussi Kongre, Carcante et une demi-douzaine de leurs compagnons montèrent-ils à bord tandis que les autres regagnaient le pied de la falaise.

Attendre maintenant, il n’y avait que cela à faire. Souvent le vent du large fraîchit avec la marée montante, et c’était ce que l’on devait surtout craindre, car il eût pu engraver davantage la *Maule* et la pousser plus avant sur le banc qui s’échancrait du côté de la terre. Or, on était presque dans la morte-eau et, peut-être, la mer n’eût-elle pas assez monté pour dégager la goélette si elle était drossée vers la côte, ne fût-ce que d’une demi-encablure.

Mais il semblait bien que les circonstances favorisaient les projets de Kongre. La brise força un peu en halant le sud venant ainsi aider au dégagement de la *Maule*.

Kongre et les autres se tenaient à l’avant qui devait flotter plus tôt que l’arrière. Si, comme on l’espérait non sans raison, la goélette pouvait pivoter sur son talon, il n’y aurait plus qu’à virer au cabestan pour faire abattre l’étrave au large, et alors, touée sur sa chaîne longue d’une centaine de brasses, elle retrouverait son élément naturel.

Cependant, la mer gagnait peu à peu. Certains tressaillements indiquaient que la coque ressentait l’action de la marée. Le flot se déroulait en longues houles et pas une lame ne brisait au large. On n’aurait pu demander des circonstances plus heureuses.

Mais, si Kongre se disait maintenant assuré de dégager la goélette et de la mettre en sûreté dans une des criques de la baie Franklin, une éventualité l’inquiétait encore. La coque de la *Maule* n’avait-elle pas été défoncée sur le flanc de bâbord, celui que portait le banc de sable et qu’on n’avait pu examiner? S’il existait là quelque voie d’eau, on n’aurait pas le temps de la chercher sous le lest et de l’aveugler. La goélette ne quitterait pas sa souille, elle emplirait, et force serait de l’abandonner à cette place où la première tempête achèverait de la détruire…

C’était là un gros souci. Aussi avec quelle impatience Kongre et ses compagnons suivaient les progrès de la marée! Si quelque bordage était défoncé, ou si le calfatage avait joué, l’eau ne tarderait pas à envahir la cale, et la *Maule* ne se redresserait même pas.

Mais peu à peu les esprits se rassurèrent. Le flot gagnait. À chaque instant la coque immergeait davantage. L’eau s’élevait le long des flancs sans pénétrer à l’intérieur. Quelques secousses indiquaient que la coque était intacte, et le pont reprenait son horizontalité normale.

“Pas de voie d’eau!… pas de voie d’eau! s’écria Carcante.

— Attention au cabestan!” commanda Kongre.

Les manivelles étaient prêtes. Les hommes n’attendaient qu’un ordre pour les manœuvrer.

Kongre, penché sur le bossoir, observait le flot qui montait déjà depuis deux heures et demie. L’étrave commençait à s’ébranler, et l’avant de la quille ne touchait plus. Mais l’étambot était encore enfoncé dans le sable, et le gouvernail ne jouait pas librement. Il s’en fallait d’une demi-heure sans doute pour que l’arrière fût dégagé.

Kongre voulut alors presser l’opération du renflouage, et, tout en restant à l’avant, il cria:

“Virez.”

Les manivelles, vigoureusement tournées, ne purent que tendre la chaîne, et l’étrave ne se rabattit pas du côté du large.

“Tiens bon!” s’écria Kongre.

On pouvait craindre, en effet, que l’ancre ne vînt à déraper, et il eût été difficile de la mouiller de nouveau.

La goélette était complètement redressée alors, et, en parcourant la cale, Carcante s’assura que l’eau n’y avait point pénétré. Donc, s’il existait quelque avarie, du moins le bordé ne s’était-il pas disjoint. On pouvait espérer que la *Maule* n’avait souffert ni au moment de l’échouage, ni pendant la douzaine d’heures passées sur le banc de sable. Dans ces conditions, sa relâche à la crique des Pingouins ne serait pas de longue durée.

On la chargerait dans l’après-midi, et, dès le lendemain, elle serait en état de reprendre la mer. D’ailleurs, il fallait profiter du temps. Le vent favoriserait la marche de la *Maule,* soit qu’elle remontât le détroit de Lemaire, soit qu’elle longeât la côte méridionale de l’Île des États pour gagner l’Atlantique.

C’est à neuf heures environ que la marée devait être étale, et, on le répète, une marée de quartier n’est jamais très forte. Mais enfin, étant donné le tirant d’eau relativement faible de la goélette, il y avait lieu de croire qu’elle se remettrait à flot.

En effet, un peu après huit heures et demie, l’arrière commença à se soulever. La *Maule* talonna, sans risques d’avarie, par cette mer calme et sur ce banc de sable.

Kongre, après avoir examiné la situation, en conclut que le touage pouvait être de nouveau tenté dans de bonnes conditions. Sur son ordre ses hommes se mirent à virer, et, après qu’ils eurent fait rentrer une douzaine de brasses de la chaîne, l’avant de la *Maule* fut enfin tourné vers le large. L’ancre avait tenu bon. Ses pattes étaient solidement encastrées dans un interstice de roches, et eussent plutôt cassé que cédé sous la traction du cabestan.

“Hardi, les enfants!” s’écria Kongre.

Et tout le monde s’y mit, même Carcante, tandis que, penché au-dessus du couronnement, Kongre observait l’arrière de la goélette.

Il y eut quelques moments d’hésitation, la seconde moitié de la quille raclait toujours le sable.

Aussi, Kongre et les autres ne furent-ils pas sans éprouver une vive inquiétude. La mer ne monterait plus que pendant une vingtaine de minutes, et il importait que la *Maule* fût renflouée auparavant, ou elle serait clouée à cette place jusqu’à la marée prochaine. Or, pendant deux jours encore, la marée devait diminuer de hauteur, et elle ne reprendrait du revif que dans quarante-huit heures.

Le moment était venu de faire un dernier effort. On se figure ce que pouvait être la fureur, plus que la fureur, la rage de ces hommes à se sentir impuissants! Avoir sous les pieds le navire qu’ils convoitaient depuis si longtemps, qui leur assurait la liberté, l’impunité peut-être, et ne pouvoir l’arracher à ce banc de sable!…

Alors, les jurons, les imprécations d’éclater pendant qu’ils haletaient au cabestan avec la crainte que l’ancre ne vînt à casser ou à déraper! Il faudrait alors attendre la marée du soir pour mouiller à nouveau cette ancre, pour y joindre la seconde. Or, d’ici vingt-quatre heures, savait-on ce qui arriverait et si les conditions atmosphériques seraient aussi favorables?…

Et, précisément, quelques nuages, assez épais, se formèrent dans le nord-est. Il est vrai, s’ils se tenaient de ce côté, la situation du navire ne serait pas empirée, le banc de sable ayant l’abri des hautes falaises du littoral. Mais la mer ne deviendrait-elle pas dure, et la houle n’achèverait-elle pas ce que l’échouage avait commencé pendant la nuit précédente?…

Et puis ces vents au nord-est, même à l’état de petite brise, ne seraient pas de nature à favoriser la navigation dans le détroit. Au lieu de filer avec du largue dans les voiles, la *Maule* serait forcée de bouliner peut-être pendant plusieurs jours, et, quand il s’agit de navigation, les conséquences d’un retard peuvent toujours être graves.

La mer était presque étale alors, et, dans quelques minutes, le jusant se ferait sentir. Tout le banc de sable était couvert. Quelques têtes de récifs seulement se montraient à fleur d’eau. Du cap Saint-Barthélemy, la pointe ne se laissait plus voir, et, sur la grève, le dernier relais de marée, après avoir été un instant touché par le flot, restait à sec.

Il était évident que la mer commençait à se retirer lentement et que les roches allaient bientôt découvrir autour du banc.

Alors de nouveaux jurons furent proférés. Les hommes éreintés, hors d’haleine, allaient abandonner une besogne qui ne pouvait plus aboutir.

Kongre courut à eux, les yeux en fureur, écumant de colère. Saisissant une hache, il menaça d’en frapper le premier qui déserterait son poste, et on savait bien qu’il n’hésiterait pas à le faire.

Tous se remirent donc aux manivelles, et, sous leurs efforts, la chaîne se tendit à rompre, en écrasant la doublure de cuivre des écubiers.

Enfin, un bruit se fit entendre. Le linguet du cabestan venait de retomber dans l’entaille. La goélette avait fait un petit mouvement vers le large. La barre du gouvernail, redevenue mobile, indiquait qu’elle se dégageait peu à peu du sable.

“Hurrah!… hurrah!…” crièrent les hommes, en sentant que la *Maule* était libre. Son talon venait de glisser sur la souille. Le virage du cabestan s’accéléra, et, en quelques minutes, la goélette, halée par son ancre, flottait en dehors du banc.

Aussitôt, Kongre se précipita à la roue. La chaîne mollit, l’ancre dérapa et fut rehissée à son bossoir. Il n’y avait plus qu’à donner dans la passe, entre les récifs, pour atteindre la crique de la baie Franklin.

Kongre fit alors établir le grand foc qui devait suffire. En l’état de la mer, il y avait de l’eau partout. Une demi-heure plus tard, après avoir contourné les dernières roches le long de la grève, la goélette prenait son mouillage dans la crique des Pingouins, à deux milles de l’extrémité du cap Saint-Barthélemy.

CHAPITRE VI

À la baie d’Elgor

L’opération du renflouage avait donc pleinement réussi. Mais tout n’était pas terminé. Il s’en fallait que la goélette eût entière sécurité dans cette anse creusée dans le littoral du cap Saint-Barthélemy. Elle y était trop exposée à la houle du large et aux tempêtes du nord-ouest. À l’époque des fortes marées d’équinoxe, elle n’aurait pas même pu rester vingt-quatre heures à cette relâche.

Kongre ne l’ignorait pas. Aussi, son intention était-elle d’abandonner l’anse, au jusant du lendemain, dont il comptait profiter pour remonter en partie le détroit de Lemaire.

Auparavant, toutefois, il était indispensable de compléter la visite du navire, de vérifier l’état de sa coque à l’intérieur. Bien qu’on eût cette certitude qu’il ne faisait pas d’eau, il se pouvait néanmoins que, sinon son bordage, du moins sa membrure eût souffert de l’échouage et qu’il fût nécessaire de procéder à des réparations en vue d’une traversée assez longue.

Kongre mit aussitôt ses hommes à la besogne, afin de déplacer le lest qui remplissait la cale jusqu’à la hauteur des varangues de bâbord et de tribord. On ne serait pas, d’ailleurs, obligé de le débarquer, ce qui épargnerait du temps et de la fatigue, le temps surtout, dont il importait de se montrer avare, dans la situation peu sûre où se trouvait la *Maule*.

La vieille ferraille, qui constituait le lest, fut d’abord reportée de l’avant à l’arrière dans la cale pour permettre d’examiner la partie antérieure du vaigrage.

Cet examen fut soigneusement fait par Kongre et Carcante, aidés d’un Chilien, nommé Vargas, qui avait travaillé autrefois comme charpentier dans les chantiers de construction de Valparaiso et connaissait bien ce métier.

Dans toute la portion comprise entre l’étrave et l’emplanture du mât de misaine, aucune avarie ne fut constatée. Varangues, membrure, bordé étaient en bon état; chevillés en cuivre, ils ne se ressentaient pas du choc de l’échouage sur le banc de sable.

Le lest repoussé vers l’avant, la coque fut trouvée également intacte du mât de misaine au grand mât. Les épontilles n’étaient ni fléchies ni faussées, et l’échelle donnant accès au panneau central n’avait pas été déplacée.

On s’occupa alors du dernier tiers de la cale comprenant le fond de la voûte jusqu’à l’étambot.

Il y avait là une avarie de quelque importance. S’il n’existait pas de voie d’eau, la membrure de bâbord accusait un enfoncement sur une longueur d’un mètre et demi. Cet enfoncement devait provenir d’une collision contre une tête de rocher, avant que la goélette eût été dressée sur le banc de sable. Si le bordage n’avait pas entièrement cédé, si l’étoupe était restée sur place, ce qui avait empêché l’eau de s’introduire dans la cale, cette avarie n’en présentait pas moins une certaine gravité, et un marin devait s’en inquiéter à bon droit.

Une réparation s’imposait donc au moment de reprendre la mer, à moins qu’il ne se fût agi d’une très courte traversée par temps calme. D’ailleurs, il était probable que cette réparation demanderait toute une semaine, en admettant que l'on eût les matériaux et les outils nécessaires au travail.

Lorsque Kongre et ses compagnons surent à quoi s'en tenir, des malédictions justifiées dans les circonstances où l'on se trouvait succédèrent aux hurrahs qui avaient salué le renflouage de la *Maule*. Est-ce que la goélette allait être hors d'usage?… Est-ce qu'ils ne pourraient pas enfin abandonner l'Île des États?…

Kongre intervint en disant:

“L'avarie est grave en effet… Dans son état actuel, nous n'aurions pas à compter sur la *Maule*, qui, par gros temps, risquerait de s'entr'ouvrir… Et il y a des centaines de milles à parcourir avant d'atteindre les îles du Pacifique!… Ce serait risquer de sombrer en route. Mais cette avarie est réparable, et nous la réparerons.

— Où? demanda un des Chiliens qui ne cachait point son inquiétude.

— Pas ici, en tout cas, déclara un de ses compagnons.

— Non, répondit Kongre d'un ton résolu. À la baie d'Elgor.”

En quarante-huit heures, la goélette pouvait, en effet, franchir la distance qui la séparait de la baie. Elle n'aurait qu'à longer le littoral de l'île, soit par le sud, soit par le nord. Dans la caverne où avait été laissé tout ce qui provenait du pillage des épaves, le charpentier aurait à sa disposition le bois et les outils que nécessiterait cette réparation. Fallût-il rester en relâche quinze jours, trois semaines, la *Maule* y resterait. La belle saison devait encore durer deux mois et, du moins, lorsque Kongre et ses compagnons abandonneraient l’Île des États, ce serait à bord d’un navire qui, ses avaries réparées à fond, offrirait toute sécurité.

Au surplus, Kongre avait toujours eu l’intention, en quittant le cap Saint-Barthélemy, de passer quelque temps à la baie d’Elgor. À aucun prix il n’eût voulu perdre les objets de toutes sortes, laissés dans la caverne, lorsque les travaux du phare obligèrent la bande à se réfugier sur l’autre extrémité de l’île. Ainsi, ses projets ne seraient modifiés que quant à la durée de la relâche, qui se prolongerait au delà de ce qu’il eût désiré.

La confiance revint donc, et l’on fit les préparatifs de manière à pouvoir partir au plein de la marée du lendemain.

Quant à la présence des gardiens du phare, ce n’était pas pour inquiéter cette bande de pirates. En quelques mots, Kongre exposa ses projets à cet égard.

“Avant l’arrivée de cette goélette, dit-il à Carcante, dès qu’ils furent seuls, j’étais décidé à reprendre possession de la baie d’Elgor. Mes intentions n’ont pas changé. Seulement, au lieu d’arriver par l’intérieur de l’île, en évitant d’être aperçus, nous arriverons par mer, ouvertement. La goélette ira mouiller dans la crique… on nous y accueillera sans rien soupçonner… et…”

Un geste auquel Carcante ne se méprit pas acheva la pensée de Kongre. Et, en vérité, toutes les chances de réussite seraient acquises aux projets de ce misérable. À moins d’un miracle, comment Vasquez, Moriz et Felipe échapperaient-ils au sort qui les menaçait?…

L’après-midi fut consacré aux préparatifs du départ. Kongre fit remettre le lest en place et s’occupa de l’embarquement des provisions, des armes et autres objets apportés au cap Saint-Barthélemy.

Le chargement s'effectua avec rapidité. Depuis le départ de la baie d'Elgor – et cela datait de plus d'un an – Kongre et ses compagnons s'étaient principalement alimentés sur leurs réserves, et il n'en restait plus qu'une faible quantité qui fut déposée dans la cambuse. Quant à la literie, aux vêtements, aux ustensiles, aux matières d'or et d'argent, la cuisine, le poste de l'équipage, le rouf à l'arrière et la cale de la *Maule* les reçurent, en attendant le matériel encore emmagasiné dans la caverne à l'entrée de la baie.

Bref, on fit telle diligence que, vers quatre heures du soir, cette cargaison était à bord. La goélette aurait pu immédiatement appareiller, mais Kongre ne se souciait pas de naviguer, pendant la nuit, le long d'un littoral hérissé de récifs. Il ne savait même pas s'il prendrait ou non le détroit de Lemaire pour s'élever à la hauteur du cap San Juan. Cela dépendrait de la direction du vent. Oui, s'il halait le sud, et non, s'il se tenait dans le nord et tendait à fraîchir. Dans ce cas, il lui paraîtrait préférable de passer au sud de l'île, ce qui assurerait à la *Maule* l'abri de la terre. Au surplus, quelle que fût la route choisie, cette traversée, à son estime, ne devait pas durer plus d'une trentaine d'heures, compris la relâche pendant la nuit. Le soir venu, aucune modification de l'état atmosphérique ne s'était produite. Aucune brume au coucher du soleil, et telle était la pureté de la ligne du ciel et de l'eau qu'un rayon vert traversa l'espace, à l'instant où le disque disparaissait derrière l'horizon.

Il y avait donc apparence que la nuit serait calme, et elle le fut en effet. La plupart des hommes l'avaient passée à bord, les uns dans le poste, les autres dans la cale. Kongre occupait la cabine du capitaine Pailha à droite, et Carcante celle du second à gauche du carré.

À plusieurs reprises, ils vinrent sur le pont observer l’état du ciel et de la mer, s’assurer que, même au plein de la marée, la *Maule* ne courait aucun risque, et que rien ne retarderait le départ du lendemain.

En effet, le lever du soleil fut superbe. À cette latitude, il est rare de le voir apparaître au-dessus d’un horizon si net.

Dès la première heure, Kongre débarqua avec le canot, et, à travers un étroit ravin, presque à l’amorce du cap Saint-Barthélemy, il gagna l’arête de la falaise.

De cette hauteur, son regard put parcourir un vaste espace de mer sur les trois quarts du compas. À l’est seulement il rencontrait les masses montagneuses qui s’élèvent entre le cap Saint-Antoine et le cap Kempe.

La mer, calme dans la région du sud, était assez houleuse à l’ouvert du détroit, parce que le vent prenait de la force et tendait à fraîchir.

Du reste, pas une voile, pas une fumée au large, et, sans doute, la *Maule* ne croiserait aucun navire pendant sa courte traversée jusqu’au cap San Juan.

Le parti de Kongre fut aussitôt résolu. Craignant avec raison qu’il ne ventât grand frais, et désireux avant tout de ne pas fatiguer la goélette, en l’exposant aux houles du détroit, toujours dures lors du renversement de la marée, il se décida à longer la côte méridionale de l’île, et à gagner la baie d’Elgor en doublant les caps Kempe, Webster, Several et Diegos. Que ce fût par le sud ou par le nord, la distance était à peu près égale d’ailleurs.

Kongre redescendit, regagna la grève, se dirigea vers la caverne, constata qu’aucun objet n’y avait été oublié. Rien ne décèlerait donc la présence d’une troupe d’hommes sur l’extrémité ouest de l’Île des États.

Il était un peu plus de sept heures. Le jusant, qui commençait déjà, favoriserait la sortie de la crique.

L’ancre fut aussitôt ramenée au bossoir, puis on hissa la trinquette et le foc, qui, avec cette brise du nord-est, devaient suffire à pousser la *Maule* en dehors des bancs.

Kongre tenait la barre, tandis que Carcante veillait à l’avant. Dix minutes, il n’en fallut pas davantage pour se dégager du semis des récifs et la goélette ne tarda pas à ressentir un peu de roulis et de tangage.

Sur l’ordre de Kongre, Carcante fit établir la misaine et la brigantine qui est la grande voile dans le gréement d’une goélette, puis hisser le hunier à bloc. Ces voiles amurées et bordées, la *Maule* mit le cap au sud-ouest grand largue, afin de doubler l’extrême pointe du cap Saint-Barthélemy.

En une demi-heure, la *Maule* en eut contourné les roches. Elle lofa alors en grand et prit direction vers l’est, de manière à serrer le vent au plus près. Mais il favorisait sa marche, sous l’abri de la côte méridionale de l’île, que le bâtiment gardait à trois milles au vent.

Entre temps, Kongre et Carcante purent reconnaître que ce léger navire se comportait bien sous toutes les allures. Assurément, pendant la belle saison, on ne courrait aucun danger à s’aventurer sur les mers du Pacifique, après avoir laissé en arrière les dernières îles de l’archipel magellanique.

Peut-être Kongre aurait-il pu arriver à l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor dans la soirée, mais il préférait s’arrêter en un point quelconque du littoral avant que le soleil n’eût disparu derrière l’horizon. Il ne força donc pas de toile, il ne se servit ni du petit perroquet de misaine, ni du flèche du grand mât, et se contenta d’une moyenne de cinq à six milles à l’heure.

Pendant cette première journée, la *Maule* ne rencontra aucun navire, et la nuit allait se faire lorsqu’elle vint relâcher à l’est du cap Webster, ayant effectué à peu près la moitié de sa traversée.

Là s’entassaient d’énormes roches et s’élevaient les plus hautes falaises de l’île. La goélette mouilla à une encablure du rivage dans une anse couverte par la pointe; un bâtiment n’eût pas été plus tranquille au fond d’un port et même dans un bassin. Assurément, si le vent halait le sud, la *Maule* eût été très exposée en cet endroit, où la mer, lorsqu’elle est soulevée par les tempêtes polaires, est aussi violente qu’aux abords du cap Horn.

Mais le temps semblait devoir se maintenir avec brise de nord-est, et la chance continuait à favoriser les projets de Kongre et des siens!

La nuit du 25 au 26 décembre fut des plus calmes. Le vent, qui était tombé vers dix heures du soir, reprit aux approches du jour vers quatre heures du matin.

Dès les premières blancheurs de l’aube, Kongre prit ses dispositions pour l’appareillage. On rétablit la voilure, restée sur ses cargues pendant la nuit. Le cabestan ramena l’ancre à poste, et la *Maule* se mit en marche.

Le cap Webster se prolonge d’environ quatre à cinq milles en mer, du nord au sud. La goélette dut donc remonter pour retrouver la côte qui court vers l’est jusqu’à la pointe Several, sur une longueur d’une vingtaine de milles environ.

La *Maule* reprit sa marche dans les mêmes conditions que la veille, dès qu’elle eut rallié le littoral où elle retrouva des eaux paisibles sous l’abri des hautes falaises.

Quelle côte affreuse et plus effrayante encore que celle du détroit! Amoncellement de blocs énormes et d’un équilibre instable, car nombre de ces masses encombraient les grèves jusqu’aux extrêmes relais de marée, prodigieuse étendue de récifs noirâtres, qui ne laissaient pas une place libre, où, non pas un navire de petit tonnage mais une simple embarcation aurait pu accoster. Pas une crique qui fût abordable, pas un banc de sable, sur lequel il eût été possible de mettre le pied! Et n’était-ce pas le monstrueux rempart que l’Île des États opposait aux terribles houles venues des parages antarctiques.

La goélette filait sous moyenne voilure, à moins de trois milles du littoral. Kongre, ne connaissant pas cette côte, craignait avec raison de trop s’en approcher. D’autre part, ne voulant point fatiguer la *Maule,* il se maintenait au milieu des eaux tranquilles qu’il n’eût pas rencontrées plus au large de la terre.

Vers dix heures, arrivé à l’ouvert de la baie Blossom, il ne put cependant éviter complètement la houle. Le vent, embouquant le golfe qui se creuse profondément dans les terres, soulevait la mer en longues lames que la *Maule* recevait par le travers en gémissant. Kongre laissa porter, afin de doubler la pointe qui limite la baie du côté oriental, puis, cette pointe franchie, il serra le vent au plus près, et, bâbord amures, tira un bord vers le large.

Kongre avait pris la barre lui-même, et, les écoutes raidies à bloc, il serrait le vent le plus possible. Ce fut seulement vers quatre heures de l’après-midi qu’il s’estima avoir assez gagné au vent pour atteindre son but d’un seul bord. Virant alors lof pour lof, il changea ses amures et mit franchement le cap sur la baie d’Elgor, la pointe Several lui restant à ce moment à quatre milles dans le nord-ouest.

De cette distance, la côte montrait son entier développement jusqu’au cap San Juan.

En même temps, au revers de la pointe Diegos, apparaissait la tour du Phare du bout du Monde que Kongre voyait pour la première fois. Avec la longue-vue trouvée dans la cabine du capitaine Pailha, il put même distinguer un des gardiens qui, posté sur la galerie, observait la mer. Le soleil devant rester pendant trois heures encore au-dessus de l’horizon, la *Maule* serait certainement au mouillage avant la nuit.

Il était certain que la goélette n’avait pu échapper aux regards des gardiens, et que son arrivée dans les eaux de l’Île des États était signalée maintenant. Tant que Vasquez et ses camarades l’avaient vue piquer vers le large, ils devaient penser qu’elle se dirigeait vers les Malouines. Mais, depuis qu’elle serrait le vent tribord amures, ils ne pouvaient douter qu’elle ne cherchât à donner dans la baie.

Peu importait, d’ailleurs, à Kongre, que la *Maule* eût été aperçue, ni même qu’on lui supposât l’intention de relâcher. Cela ne modifierait en rien ses projets.

À son extrême satisfaction, cette fin de la traversée allait s’effectuer dans des conditions assez favorables. Le vent venait un peu plus de l’est. En tenant ses voiles bordées à plat, prêtes à ralinguer, la goélette remontait sans avoir à courir des bordées pour doubler la pointe Diegos.

C’était une très heureuse circonstance. Peut-être, dans l’état de sa coque, n’aurait-elle pu supporter une série de virements qui l’eussent fatiguée, et qui sait si une voie d’eau ne se serait pas déclarée avant l’arrivée dans la crique.

C’est même ce qui se produisit. Alors que la *Maule* n’était plus qu’à deux milles de la baie, un des hommes qui venait de s’affaler dans la cale, remonta en criant que l’eau y pénétrait par une fissure du bordage.

C’était précisément à cet endroit de la coque où la membrure avait cédé au choc d’une roche. Si le bordage avait tenu jusque-là, il venait de s’entr’ouvrir, mais seulement sur une longueur de quelques pouces.

En somme, cette avarie ne présentait pas une très sérieuse importance. En déplaçant le lest, Vargas parvint sans trop de peine à boucher la voie d’eau au moyen d’un tampon d’étoupe.

Mais, on le comprend, il serait indispensable de se réparer avec soin. Dans l’état où l’avait mise son échouage au cap Saint-Barthélemy, la goélette n’aurait pu, sans courir à une perte certaine, affronter les mers du Pacifique.

Il était six heures, lorsque la *Maule* se trouva à l’ouvert de la baie d’Elgor, à la distance d’un mille et demi. Kongre fit alors serrer les voiles hautes dont il pouvait maintenant se passer. On ne conserva que le hunier, le grand foc et la brigantine. Sous cette voilure, la *Maule* atteindrait sans peine le mouillage de la crique au fond de la baie d’Elgor, sous le commandement de Kongre, qui, on le répète, connaissait parfaitement la route à suivre et eût pu servir de pilote.

D’ailleurs, vers six heures et demie du soir, un faisceau de rayons lumineux fut projeté sur la mer. Le phare venait d’être allumé, et le premier navire dont il allait éclairer la marche à travers cette baie était une goélette chilienne, tombée entre les mains d’une bande de pirates.

Il était près de sept heures, et le soleil déclinait derrière les hauts pics de l’Île des États, lorsque la *Maule* laissa sur tribord le cap San Juan. La baie s’ouvrait devant elle. Kongre y donna vent arrière.

Kongre et Carcante, en passant devant les cavernes, purent s’assurer que leurs orifices ne semblaient pas avoir été découverts sous l’entassement des pierres et le rideau des broussailles qui les obstruaient. Rien n’avait donc signalé leur présence sur cette partie de l’île, et ils retrouveraient le produit de leurs rapines dans l’état où ils l’avaient laissé.

“Cela va bien, dit Carcante à Kongre près duquel il se tenait à l’arrière.

— Et cela ira mieux encore tout à l’heure!” répondit Kongre.

En vingt minutes au plus, la *Maule* eut gagné la crique où elle devait jeter l’ancre.

C’est à cet instant qu’elle fut “raisonnée” par deux hommes qui venaient de descendre du terre-plein sur la grève.

Felipe et Moriz étaient là. Ils préparaient leur chaloupe pour monter à bord de la goélette. Quant à Vasquez, il se trouvait de service dans la chambre de quart.

Lorsque la goélette fut arrivée au milieu de la crique, sa brigantine et son hunier étaient déjà cargués et elle ne portait plus que son grand foc que Carcante fit amener.

Au moment où l’ancre était envoyée par le fond, Moriz et Felipe sautèrent sur le pont de la *Maule*.

Aussitôt, sur un signe de Kongre, le premier était frappé d’un coup de hache à la tête et tombait. Simultanément deux coups de revolver abattaient Felipe près de son camarade. En un instant, tous deux étaient morts. À travers une des fenêtres de la chambre de quart, Vasquez avait entendu les coups de feu, et vu le meurtre de ses camarades.

Le même sort lui était réservé, si l’on s’emparait de sa personne. Aucune grâce n’était à espérer de ces assassins. Pauvre Felipe, pauvre Moriz, il n’avait rien pu faire pour les sauver, et il restait là-haut, épouvanté de cet horrible crime accompli en quelques secondes!

Après le premier moment de stupeur, il reprit son sang-froid et envisagea rapidement la situation. Il fallait à tout prix échapper aux coups de ces misérables. Peut-être ignoraient-ils son existence, mais il était à supposer que, les manœuvres du mouillage terminées, plusieurs d’entre eux auraient l’idée de monter au phare et, sans doute, avec l’intention de l’éteindre et de rendre la baie impraticable, au moins jusqu’au jour?…

Sans hésiter, Vasquez quitta la chambre de quart et se précipita par l’escalier dans le logement du rez-de-chaussée.

Il n’y avait pas un instant à perdre. On entendait déjà le bruit de la chaloupe qui débordait la goélette et allait mettre à terre quelques hommes de l’équipage.

Vasquez prit deux revolvers qu’il passa dans sa ceinture, mit quelques provisions dans un sac qu’il jeta sur son épaule, puis il sortit du logement, descendit rapidement le talus de l’enceinte, et, sans avoir été aperçu, disparut au milieu de l’obscurité.

CHAPITRE VII

La caverne

Quelle horrible nuit allait passer le malheureux Vasquez, quelle situation que la sienne! Ses infortunés camarades massacrés, puis jetés par-dessus bord, et dont le jusant entraînait maintenant les cadavres vers la mer!… Il ne pensait pas que, s’il n’eût été de garde au phare, leur sort eût été le sien. Il songeait uniquement aux amis qu’il venait de perdre.

“Pauvre Moriz, pauvre Felipe! se disait-il, ils auront été offrir, en toute confiance, leurs services à ces misérables, et on leur a répondu par des coups de revolver!… Je ne les reverrai plus… ils ne reverront plus leur pays et leur famille!… Et la femme de Moriz… qui l’attendait dans deux mois… quand elle apprendra sa mort!”

Vasquez était atterré. C’était une sincère affection qu’il éprouvait pour les deux gardiens, lui, leur chef… Il les connaissait depuis bien des années!… C’était sur ses conseils qu’ils avaient demandé à être employés au phare… et, maintenant, il était seul!… seul!…

Mais d’où venait donc cette goélette, et quel équipage de bandits avait-elle à bord? Sous quel pavillon naviguait-elle et pourquoi cette relâche dans la baie d’Elgor?… Ils la connaissaient donc?… Et qu’y venaient-ils faire… Pourquoi, à peine débarqués, avaient-ils éteint le phare?… Voulaient-ils donc empêcher tout bâtiment de les suivre dans la baie?…

Ces questions se pressaient à l’esprit de Vasquez, sans qu’il pût les résoudre. Il ne pensait même pas au danger qu’il courait personnellement.

Et cependant, ces malfaiteurs ne tarderaient pas à constater que le logement devait être occupé par trois gardiens… Ils se mettraient alors à la recherche du troisième?… Ne finiraient-ils point par le découvrir?…

De l’endroit où il avait pris refuge sur la rive de la baie, à moins de deux cents pas de la crique, Vasquez voyait se mouvoir la lumière des fanaux, tantôt à bord de la goélette, tantôt dans l’enceinte du phare ou à travers les fenêtres du logement. Il entendait même ces gens s’interpeller à haute voix, et dans sa propre langue. Étaient-ce donc des compatriotes, ou des Chiliens, des Péruviens, des Boliviens, des Mexicains, qui tous parlent l’espagnol, ou encore des Brésiliens?

Enfin, vers dix heures, les lumières s’éteignirent, et aucun bruit ne troubla plus le silence de la nuit.

Cependant, Vasquez ne pouvait demeurer à cette place. Le jour venu, il y serait découvert. Aucune pitié n’étant à espérer de ces bandits, il lui fallait se mettre hors de leurs atteintes.

De quel côté dirigerait-il ses pas?… Vers l’intérieur de l’île, où il serait relativement plus en sûreté? Gagnerait-il au contraire l’entrée de la baie, dans l’espoir d’être recueilli par quelque bâtiment passant en vue de la terre? Mais, soit à l’intérieur, soit sur le littoral, comment assurer son existence jusqu’au jour où viendrait la relève? Ses provisions s’épuiseraient vite. Avant quarante-huit heures il n’en resterait plus rien. Comment les renouveler? Il ne possédait pas même un engin de pêche! Et se procurer du feu, par quel moyen? En serait-il réduit à vivre de mollusques ou de coquillages?

Son énergie finit par l’emporter. Il fallait prendre un parti, et il le prit. Ce fut de gagner le littoral du cap San Juan pour y passer la nuit. Lorsqu’il ferait jour, il aviserait.

Vasquez quitta donc la place d’où il observait la goélette. Il ne s’en dégageait plus ni un bruit ni une lueur. Ces malfaiteurs se savaient en sûreté dans cette crique, et personne ne devait être de garde à bord.

Vasquez suivit alors la rive nord en longeant le pied des falaises. Il n’entendait que le clapotis de la marée descendante, et parfois le cri d’un oiseau attardé qui revenait à son nid.

Il était onze heures, lorsque Vasquez s’arrêta à l’extrémité du cap. Là, sur la grève, il ne trouva d’autre abri qu’une étroite anfractuosité, où il resta jusqu’au lever du jour.

Avant que le soleil eût illuminé l’horizon, Vasquez descendit au bord de la mer et regarda si personne ne venait ni du côté du phare, ni du tournant de la falaise, à l’amorce du cap San Juan.

Tout le littoral était désert, sur les deux rives de la baie. Pas une embarcation ne se montrait, bien que, maintenant, l’équipage de la goélette en eût deux à sa disposition, le canot de la *Maule* et la chaloupe affectée au service des gardiens.

Aucun bâtiment n’apparaissait au large de l’île.

Il vint à la pensée de Vasquez combien serait désormais dangereuse la navigation aux approches de l’Île des États, puisque le phare ne fonctionnait plus. En effet, les navires arrivant du large ne seraient plus fixés sur leur position. Dans l’espérance d’avoir connaissance du feu établi au fond de la baie d’Elgor, ils feraient route à l’ouest avec confiance, et risqueraient de se jeter sur cette côte redoutable, comprise entre le cap San Juan et la pointe Several.

“Ils l’ont éteint, ces misérables, s’écriait Vasquez, et puisque leur intérêt est de ne pas le rallumer, ils ne le rallumeront pas!”

C’était, en effet, une circonstance très grave, que cette extinction du phare, et de nature à provoquer des sinistres dont ces malfaiteurs pourraient encore tirer profit pendant leur relâche. Ils n’auraient plus besoin comme autrefois d’attirer les navires par des feux, puisque ceux-ci viendraient sans défiance pour relever le phare.

Vasquez, assis sur un quartier de roche, réfléchissait à tout ce qui s’était passé la veille. Il regardait si le courant n’entraînait pas les corps de ses infortunés camarades… Non, le jusant avait déjà fait son œuvre, et ils étaient engloutis dans les profondeurs de la mer!

La situation lui apparaissait dans toute son effrayante réalité. Que pouvait-il faire? rien… rien, sinon d’attendre le retour du *Santa-Fé*. Mais il s’en fallait de deux longs mois encore que l’aviso se montrât à l’ouvert de la baie d’Elgor. En admettant que Vasquez n’eût pas été découvert auparavant, comment lui serait-il possible de pourvoir à sa nourriture?… Un abri, il le trouverait toujours à l’intérieur de quelque grotte de la falaise, et, d’ailleurs, la belle saison devait se prolonger au moins jusqu’à l’époque de la relève. Mais, si on eût été en plein hiver, Vasquez n’aurait pu résister à ces abaissements de température qui font tomber le thermomètre à trente et quarante degrés au-dessous de zéro. Il serait mort de froid avant même de mourir de faim.

Tout d’abord, Vasquez se mit à la recherche d’un abri. Le logement avait certainement appris aux pirates que le service du phare était confié à trois gardiens. Sans aucun doute, ils voudraient à tout prix se défaire du troisième qui leur avait échappé, et ils ne tarderaient pas à le chercher aux alentours du cap San Juan.

Toute son énergie était revenue à Vasquez. Le désespoir n’avait pas prise sur ce caractère fortement trempé.

Après quelques recherches, il finit par découvrir un évidement étroit d’orifice, d’une profondeur de dix pieds, d’une largeur de cinq à six, près de l’angle que la falaise faisait avec la grève du cap San Juan. Un sable fin en couvrait le sol, qui restait hors d’atteinte des plus hautes marées, et qui ne recevait pas de plein fouet les vents du large. Vasquez s’introduisit dans cette cavité où il déposa les quelques objets emportés du logement, ainsi que le peu de provisions contenu dans son sac. Quant à l’eau douce, un petit rio, alimenté par la fonte des neiges et qui coulait au pied de la falaise vers la baie, l’assurait contre les besoins de la soif.

Vasquez apaisa sa faim avec du biscuit et un morceau de corn-beef. Comme il se disposait à sortir pour se désaltérer, il entendit un bruit à faible distance, et s’arrêta.

“Ce sont eux”, se dit-il.

Se couchant près de la paroi, de manière à voir sans être vu, il regarda dans la direction de la baie.

Un canot, monté par quatre hommes, descendait le courant. Deux nageaient à l’avant. Les deux autres, dont l’un tenait la barre, étaient à l’arrière.

C’était le canot de la goélette et non la chaloupe du phare.

“Que viennent-ils faire? se demanda Vasquez. Sont-ils à ma recherche?… À la manière dont la goélette a navigué dans la baie, il est certain que ces misérables la connaissaient déjà, et que ce n’est pas la première fois qu’ils mettent le pied sur l’île… Ce n’est pas pour visiter la côte qu’ils sont venus jusqu’ici!… Si ce n’est pas moi dont ils veulent s’emparer, quel est leur but?…”

Vasquez observait ces hommes. À son avis, celui qui gouvernait le canot, le plus âgé des quatre, devait être le chef, le capitaine de la goélette. Il n’eût pu dire quelle était sa nationalité, mais il lui parut bien, à leur type, que ses compagnons appartenaient à la race espagnole du Sud-Amérique.

En ce moment, l’embarcation se trouvait presque à l’entrée de la baie dont elle venait de longer la rive nord, à cent pas au-dessus de l’anfractuosité dans laquelle se cachait Vasquez. Celui-ci ne la perdait point de vue.

Le chef fit un signe et les avirons s’arrêtèrent. Un coup de barre, en profitant de l’erre du canot, le fit accoster sur la grève.

Aussitôt les quatre hommes débarquèrent, après que l’un d’eux eut enfoncé le grappin dans le sable.

Et alors, voici les propos qui parvinrent à l’oreille de Vasquez.

“C’est bien ici?

— Oui. La caverne est là. Vingt pas avant le tournant de la falaise.

— Fameuse chance que ces gens du phare ne l’aient point découverte!

— Ni aucun de ceux qui ont travaillé pendant quinze mois à la construction du phare!

— Ils étaient bien trop occupés au fond de la baie.

— Et puis l’ouverture était si parfaitement obstruée qu’il eût été difficile de la voir.

— Allons”, dit le chef.

Deux de ses compagnons et lui remontèrent obliquement à travers la grève, large en cet endroit d’une centaine de pas jusqu’au pied de la falaise.

De sa cachette, Vasquez suivait tous leurs mouvements, prêtant l’oreille pour ne pas perdre une seule parole. Sous leurs pieds craquait le sable semé de coquillages. Mais ce bruit ne tarda pas à cesser, et Vasquez n’aperçut plus que l’homme allant et venant près de l’embarcation.

“Ils ont par là quelque caverne”, se dit-il.

Vasquez ne pouvait plus mettre en doute que la goélette n’eût amené une bande d’écumeurs de mer, de pillards établis sur l’Île des États avant les travaux. Était-ce donc dans cette caverne qu’ils avaient caché leurs rapines?… Et n’allaient-ils pas les emporter à bord de la goélette?

Soudain, la pensée lui vint qu’il devait y avoir là en réserve des provisions dont il pourrait profiter. Ce fut comme un rayon d’espoir qui se glissa dans son âme. Dès que le canot serait parti pour retourner au mouillage, il sortirait de sa cachette, il chercherait l’entrée de la caverne, il y pénétrerait, il y trouvait de quoi vivre jusqu’à l’arrivée de l’aviso!…

Et ce qu’il demanderait alors, si l’existence lui était assurée pour quelques semaines, c’est que ces misérables ne pussent quitter l’île.

“Oui! qu’ils soient encore là, quand le *Santa-Fé* reviendra, et que le commandant Lafayate en fasse bonne justice!”

Mais ce vœu se réaliserait-il? À bien réfléchir, Vasquez se disait que la goélette ne devait être venue en relâche à la baie d’Elgor que pour deux ou trois jours. Le temps d’embarquer cette cargaison enfermée dans la caverne, puis elle abandonnerait l’Île des États pour n’y jamais revenir.

Vasquez allait être bientôt fixé à cet égard.

Après une heure passée à l’intérieur de la caverne, les trois hommes reparurent et se promenèrent sur la grève. De la cavité dans laquelle il se blottissait, Vasquez put encore entendre les divers propos qu’ils échangèrent à haute voix et dont il devait faire presque aussitôt profit.

“Eh! ils ne nous ont pas dévalisés pendant leur séjour, ces braves gens!

— Et la *Maule*, quand elle mettra à la voile, aura son plein chargement.

— Et des provisions suffisantes pour sa traversée, ce qui nous tire d’embarras!

— En effet, ce n’est pas avec celles de la goélette que nous aurions pu nous assurer le boire et le manger jusqu’aux îles du Pacifique!

— Les imbéciles! En quinze mois, ils n’ont pas su découvrir nos trésors, pas plus qu’ils ne sont venus nous relancer au cap Saint-Barthélemy!

— Un hurrah pour eux! Ce n’eût pas été la peine d’attirer les bâtiments sur les récifs de l’île pour en perdre tout le bénéfice!”

En entendant ces paroles, dont les misérables riaient à gorge déployée, Vasquez, la rage au cœur, était tenté de se jeter sur eux, le revolver à la main, et de leur casser la tête à tous trois. Mais il se contint. Mieux valait ne rien perdre de cette conversation. Il apprenait là quel abominable métier ces malfaiteurs avaient fait sur cette partie de l’île et il ne put être surpris lorsqu’ils ajoutèrent:

“Quant à ce fameux Phare du bout du Monde, que les capitaines viennent le chercher maintenant!… Ce sera comme s’ils étaient aveugles!

— Et c’est en aveugles qu’ils continueront à se diriger sur l’île, où leurs navires ne tarderont pas à se mettre en pièces.

— J’espère bien, avant le départ de la *Maule*, qu’un ou deux navires viendront naufrager sur les roches du cap San Juan! Il faut que nous chargions notre goélette jusqu’au plat bord, puisque le diable nous l’a envoyée.

— Eh! le diable fait bien les choses!… Un bon bâtiment qui nous arrive au cap Saint-Barthélemy, et personne de l’équipage, ni capitaine, ni matelots, dont nous nous serions débarrassés, d’ailleurs…”

C’était dire dans quelles conditions la goélette appelée la *Maule* était tombée entre les mains de cette bande à la pointe ouest de l’île, et de quelle manière plusieurs bâtiments s’étaient perdus corps et biens sur les récifs de l’île, attirés par les manœuvres de ces pilleurs d’épaves.

“Et maintenant, Kongre, demanda l’un des trois hommes, qu’allons-nous faire?

— Retourner à la *Maule*, Carcante, répondit Kongre, en qui Vasquez avait justement reconnu le chef de la bande.

— Est-ce que nous n’allons pas commencer à déménager la caverne?

— Pas avant que les avaries ne soient réparées, il est certain que ces réparations vont durer plusieurs semaines…

— Alors, dit Carcante, emportons dans le canot quelques outils.

— Oui… quitte à revenir quand il le faudra. Vargas doit trouver ici tout ce dont il a besoin pour son travail.

— Ne perdons pas de temps, reprit Carcante. La marée ne tardera pas à monter. Nous en profiterons.

— C’est entendu, répondit Kongre, lorsque la goélette sera en état, nous mettrons notre cargaison à bord. Il n’y a pas à craindre qu’on nous la vole.

— Eh! Kongre, ne pas oublier qu’ils étaient trois gardiens au phare, et que l’un d’eux nous a échappé.

— Il ne m’inquiète guère, Carcante. Avant deux jours, il sera mort de faim, à moins qu’il ne vive de mousses et de coquillages… D’ailleurs nous refermerons l’orifice de la caverne.

— N’importe, dit Carcante, il est fâcheux que nous ayons des avaries à réparer. Dès demain, la *Maule* aurait pu reprendre la mer… Il est vrai que, pendant la relâche, quelque navire viendra peut-être se jeter sur la côte, et cela sans qu’on ait même la peine de l’attirer… Et ce qui sera perdu pour lui ne sera pas perdu pour nous!”

Kongre et ses compagnons ressortirent de la caverne, ils en rapportaient des outils, des morceaux de bordage, des pièces de bois pour réparer les membrures. Puis, après avoir pris la précaution de boucher l’entrée, ils descendirent jusqu’au canot et s’y embarquèrent, au moment où le flot arrivait dans la baie.

L’embarcation déborda aussitôt, et, enlevée par ses avirons, elle ne tarda pas à disparaître derrière une pointe de la rive.

Lorsqu’il n’eut plus la crainte d’être aperçu, Vasquez revint sur la grève. Il savait maintenant tout ce qu’il avait intérêt à savoir, entre autres, deux choses importantes: la première, c’est qu’il pourrait se procurer des provisions en quantité suffisante pour plusieurs semaines; la seconde, c’est que la goélette avait des avaries, dont la réparation exigerait au moins une quinzaine de jours, davantage peut-être, mais jamais assez longtemps, sans doute, pour qu’elle fût encore là au retour de l’aviso.

Quant à retarder son départ, lorsqu’elle serait prête à reprendre la mer, comment Vasquez aurait-il pu y songer?… Oui, si quelque navire venait à passer à petite distance du cap San Juan, il lui ferait des signaux… au besoin il se jetterait à la mer pour le rejoindre à la nage… Une fois à bord, il mettrait le capitaine au courant de la situation… et, si ce capitaine disposait d’un équipage assez nombreux, il n’hésiterait pas à donner dans la baie d’Elgor, à s’emparer de la goélette… Si ces malfaiteurs s’enfuyaient alors à l’intérieur de l’île, la quitter serait devenu impossible pour eux… et, au retour du *Santa-Fé*, le commandant Lafayate saurait bien s’emparer de ces bandits ou les détruire jusqu’au dernier!… Mais ce bâtiment arriverait-il en vue du cap San Juan?… Et, s’il en venait un, les signaux de Vasquez seraient-ils aperçus?…

En ce qui le concernait personnellement, d’ailleurs, bien que ce Kongre n’eût aucun doute sur l’existence d’un troisième gardien, il était sans inquiétude… il saurait échapper aux recherches… L’essentiel étant pour l’instant de savoir s’il pouvait assurer sa nourriture jusqu’à l’arrivée de l’aviso, il se dirigea sans plus attendre vers la caverne.

CHAPITRE VIII

La Maule en réparation

Réparer les avaries de la goélette, la remettre en état pour une longue traversée sur le Pacifique, y embarquer toute la cargaison emmagasinée dans la caverne, reprendre la mer le plus tôt possible, c’est à quoi Kongre et ses compagnons allaient s’employer sans perdre de temps.

Au total, les réparations à la coque de la *Maule* constituaient une assez grosse besogne. Mais le charpentier Vargas connaissait son métier, il ne manquerait ni d’outils ni de matériaux, et le travail s’exécuterait dans de bonnes conditions.

En premier lieu, il fallait délester la goélette, puis la tirer sur la grève de la crique, où elle serait abattue sur tribord, pour que les réparations pussent être faites à l’extérieur, en remplaçant les membrures et les bordages de la coque.

Il était donc possible que cela exigeât un certain temps; mais, ce temps, Kongre l’avait largement, car il calculait que la belle saison durerait au moins deux grands mois.

Quant à l’arrivée de la relève, il savait à quoi s’en tenir.

En effet, le livre de phare trouvé dans le logement lui avait appris tout ce qu’il lui importait de connaître: la relève ne devant se faire que tous les trimestres, l’aviso *Santa-Fé* ne reviendrait pas à la baie d’Elgor avant les premiers jours de mars, et on n’était encore que dans les derniers jours de décembre.

En même temps, ce livre portait les noms des trois gardiens Moriz, Felipe et Vasquez. D’ailleurs, l’aménagement de la chambre eût indiqué qu’elle était occupée par trois personnes. L’un des gardiens avait donc pu éviter le sort de ses malheureux camarades. Où s’était-il réfugié? Kongre s’en préoccupait peu, on le sait. Seul, sans ressources, le fugitif aurait bientôt succombé à la misère, à la faim.

Cependant, si le temps ne manquait pas pour les réparations de la goélette, il y avait toujours lieu de compter avec les retards possibles, et précisément, dès le début, on dut interrompre le travail à peine commencé.

On venait de terminer le déchargement de la *Maule*, que Kongre avait résolu d’abattre en carène le lendemain, lorsque, dans la nuit du 3 au 4 janvier, un brusque changement atmosphérique se produisit.

Pendant cette nuit, des masses de nuages s’accumulèrent à l’horizon du sud. Tandis que la température s’élevait jusqu’à seize degrés, le baromètre tombait soudain à tempête. De nombreux éclairs embrasèrent le ciel. La foudre éclatait de toutes parts. Le vent se déchaînait avec une extraordinaire violence; la mer démontée passait en grand par-dessus les récifs, et se brisait contre les falaises. Il était vraiment heureux que la *Maule* fût ancrée dans la baie d’Elgor bien abritée contre ce vent du sud-est. Par un tel temps, un bâtiment de fort tonnage, voilier ou steamer, aurait couru le risque d’être affalé sur les côtes de l’île. À plus forte raison un navire d’aussi faible gabarit que la *Maule*.

Tels étaient l’impétuosité de cette bourrasque, le trouble de l’Océan au large, qu’une véritable houle, envahissait toute la crique. Au plein de la marée, l’eau montait au pied des falaises, et la grève, au bas de l’enceinte, était complètement inondée. Des lames déferlaient jusqu’au logement des gardiens, et leurs embruns atteignaient à un demi-mille de là le petit bois de hêtres.

Tous les efforts de Kongre et de ses compagnons durent tendre à maintenir la *Maule* à son mouillage. Plusieurs fois elle chassa sur son ancre, menaçant de s’échouer sur la grève. Il fallut affourcher une seconde ancre pour aider la première. À deux reprises on put craindre un désastre complet.

Cependant, tout en veillant jour et nuit sur la *Maule*, la bande s’était installée dans les annexes, où elle n’avait rien à redouter de la tourmente. Les literies des cabines et du poste d’équipage y furent transportées, et il y eut place suffisante pour loger cette quinzaine d’hommes. Ils n’avaient jamais eu pareille installation pendant tout leur séjour sur l’Île des États.

Quant aux provisions, il n’y avait pas à s’en préoccuper. Celles que contenait le magasin du phare auraient suffi, et au delà, même s’il y avait eu le double de bouches à nourrir. Et, d’ailleurs, en cas de besoin, on aurait pu recourir aux réserves de la caverne. En somme, le ravitaillement de la goélette était assuré pour une longue traversée dans les mers du Pacifique.

Le mauvais temps dura jusqu’au 12 janvier et ne prit fin que dans la nuit du 12 au 13. Toute une semaine perdue, car il avait été impossible de travailler. Même Kongre avait jugé prudent de remettre une partie du lest dans la goélette, qui roulait comme un canot. On avait fort à faire déjà pour l’écarter des roches du fond contre lesquelles elle se fût brisée tout comme à l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor.

Le vent changea pendant cette nuit et sauta brusquement dans l’ouest-sud-ouest. Ce fut du côté du cap Saint-Barthélemy que la mer devint très dure, car il soufflait une brise à trois ris. Si la *Maule* eût encore été à l’anse du cap, elle s’y fût assurément démolie.

Durant cette semaine un navire avait passé en vue de l’Île des États. C’était de jour. Il n’avait donc pas eu à prendre connaissance du phare, et ne put constater qu’il n’était plus allumé entre le coucher et le lever du soleil. Il venait du nord-est et donna sous voilure réduite dans le détroit de Lemaire, le pavillon français flottant à sa corne.

Du reste, il passa à trois milles de terre, et il fallut employer la longue-vue pour reconnaître sa nationalité. Donc, si Vasquez lui fit des signaux du cap San Juan, ils ne pouvaient être aperçus et ne le furent point, car un capitaine français n’aurait pas hésité à mettre son canot à la mer pour ramener à bord un naufragé.

Dans la matinée du 13, le lest de ferraille fut de nouveau débarqué et mis en vrac sur le sable, à l’abri de la marée, et la visite à l’intérieur de la cale put s’effectuer plus complètement qu’au cap Saint-Barthélemy. Le charpentier déclara les avaries plus graves qu’on ne le supposait. La *Maule* avait beaucoup fatigué pendant sa traversée en luttant au plus près contre une mer assez dure. C’est alors que s’était ouverte cette voie d’eau dans son arrière. Visiblement, le navire n’aurait pu prolonger sa navigation au delà de la baie d’Elgor. Il y avait donc lieu de le mettre à sec, afin de procéder au remplacement de deux varangues, de trois couples et du bordé sur environ six pieds de longueur.

On le sait, grâce aux objets de toute nature et de toute destination recueillis dans la caverne, les matériaux ne manqueraient pas. Le charpentier Vargas, aidé de ses compagnons, ne doutait pas de mener son travail à terme. S’il n’y réussissait pas, il eût été impossible à la *Maule*, incomplètement réparée, de s’aventurer à travers le Pacifique. Ce qui devait être considéré comme très heureux d’ailleurs, c’est que la mâture, la voilure, les agrès n’avaient eu aucun dommage.

La première opération consistait à haler la goélette sur le sable pour la faire gîter sur son flanc de tribord. Cela ne pouvait se faire qu'à la marée, faute d'appareils suffisamment puissants. Or, il y eut un nouveau retard de deux jours pour attendre la grande marée de nouvelle lune, qui permettrait de conduire la goélette assez haut sur la grève pour qu'elle y restât à sec pendant toute la lunaison.

Kongre et Carcante profitèrent de ce retard pour retourner à la caverne, et, cette fois, ils le firent avec la chaloupe du phare, plus grande que le canot de la *Maule*. Elle rapporterait une partie des objets de valeur, l'or et l'argent provenant du pillage, des bijoux et autres matières précieuses qui seraient déposés dans les magasins de l'annexe.

La chaloupe partit dans la matinée du 14 janvier. Le jusant se faisait sentir depuis deux heures déjà, et elle reviendrait avec le flot de l'après-midi.

Le temps était assez beau. Des rayons de soleil passaient entre les nuages qu'une légère brise poussait du sud.

Avant de partir, ainsi qu'il le faisait chaque jour, Carcante était monté à la galerie du phare pour observer l'horizon. Déserte la mer au large, aucun bâtiment en vue, pas même une de ces barques de Pécherais qui se risquaient parfois jusque dans l'est des îlots New-Year.

Déserte aussi l'île, si loin que la vue pouvait s'étendre.

Tandis que la chaloupe descendait avec le courant, Kongre examinait attentivement les deux rivages de la baie. Et ce troisième gardien qui avait échappé au massacre, où était-il alors?… Bien que ce ne fût pas pour lui un sujet d'inquiétude, s'en débarrasser eût mieux valu, et c'est ce qui serait fait à l'occasion.

La terre était aussi déserte que la baie. Elle ne s’animait que du vol et des cris de myriades d’oiseaux qui nichaient dans la falaise.

Vers onze heures, la chaloupe accosta devant la caverne, après avoir été servie non seulement par le jusant, mais aussi par la brise.

Kongre et Carcante débarquèrent, laissant de garde deux de leurs hommes, et se rendirent à la caverne, d’où ils ressortirent une demi-heure plus tard.

Les choses leur avaient paru être dans l’état où ils les avaient laissées. D’ailleurs, il y avait là un tel fouillis d’objets de toute nature qu’il eût été difficile, même à la lueur du fanal, de constater s’il ne manquait rien.

Kongre et son compagnon rapportèrent deux caisses soigneusement fermées, provenant du naufrage d’un trois-mâts anglais, et qui renfermaient une somme importante en monnaie d’or et en pierres précieuses. Ils les déposèrent dans la chaloupe et se disposaient à partir, lorsque Kongre manifesta l’intention d’aller jusqu’au cap San Juan. De là il pourrait observer le littoral en direction du sud et du nord.

Carcante et lui gagnèrent donc le sommet de la falaise et descendirent le cap jusqu’à son extrémité.

De cette pointe le regard portait d’un côté sur le rivage, en retour, qui se profilait vers le détroit de Lemaire sur une étendue de deux milles environ; de l’autre, jusqu’à la pointe Several.

“Personne, dit Carcante.

— Non… personne!” répondit Kongre.

Tous deux revinrent alors vers la chaloupe et, comme le flot commençait, elle prit le fil du courant. Avant trois heures, ils étaient de retour au fond de la baie d'Elgor.

Deux jours après, le 16, Kongre et ses compagnons procédèrent dans la matinée à l'échouage de la *Maule*. C'était vers onze heures que devait avoir lieu la pleine mer, et toutes les dispositions furent prises en conséquence. Une amarre, portée à terre, permettrait de haler la goélette jusqu'à la grève lorsque la hauteur de l'eau serait suffisante.

En soi, l'opération ne présentait ni difficulté ni risques, et c'était la marée qui se chargeait de toute la besogne.

Dès que la mer fut étale on embraqua l'aussière, et l'on hala la *Maule* le plus loin possible au-dessus de la grève.

Il n'y avait plus qu'à attendre le jusant. Vers une heure, l'eau commença à découvrir les roches les plus rapprochées de la falaise, et la quille de la *Maule* rencontra le sable. À trois heures, complètement à sec, elle gîtait sur son flanc de tribord.

On allait donc pouvoir se mettre au travail. Seulement, comme il n'avait pas été possible de conduire la goélette jusqu'au pied de la falaise, ce travail serait forcément interrompu chaque jour pendant quelques heures, puisque le bâtiment flotterait au retour de la marée. Mais, d'autre part, comme, à partir de ce jour, la mer perdrait chaque fois de sa hauteur, le temps de chômage diminuerait graduellement, et, durant une quinzaine, la besogne pourrait être continuée sans interruption.

Le charpentier se mit à l'œuvre. S'il n'y avait pas à compter sur les Pécherais de la bande, du moins les autres, compris Kongre et Carcante, lui viendraient en aide.

La partie de bordage endommagée fut enlevée facilement, après qu’on eut retiré les feuilles de cuivre du doublage. Cela laissa à nu les couples et les varangues qu’il s’agissait de remplacer. Le bois rapporté de la caverne, planches et courbes, y suffirait, et il ne serait pas nécessaire d’abattre un arbre dans le bois de hêtres, de le débiter, de le scier, ce qui eût été un gros ouvrage.

Pendant les quinze jours qui suivirent, Vargas et les autres, favorisés par le temps qui resta beau, avaient fait bonne besogne. Ce qui occasionna le plus de difficultés, ce fut d’enlever les varangues et les membres qui devaient être remplacés. Ces diverses pièces étaient chevillées en cuivre, reliées par des gournables. L’ensemble tenait bon et, décidément, cette goélette, la *Maule*, sortait de l’un des meilleurs chantiers de construction de Valparaiso. Vargas ne parvint pas sans peine à terminer cette première partie de son travail et, assurément, faute des outils de charpentier recueillis dans la caverne, il n’aurait pu le mener à bonne fin.

Il va de soi que pendant les premiers jours il avait fallu interrompre la besogne au moment du plein de la mer. Ensuite, la marée devint tellement faible, qu’elle atteignait à peine les premières déclivités de la grève. La quille n’était plus en contact avec l’eau, et on pouvait travailler à l’intérieur comme à l’extérieur de la coque. Mais il importait d’avoir tout au moins remis le bordage en place avant que la mer eût pris du revif.

Par prudence, et sans aller jusqu’à enlever le doublage de cuivre, Kongre fit reprendre toutes les coutures au-dessous de la flottaison. On en renouvela le calfatage avec le goudron et l’étoupe recueillis parmi les épaves.

L’opération se poursuivit dans ces conditions jusqu’à la fin du mois de janvier, et presque sans interruption. Le temps ne cessait d’être favorable. Il y eut bien, sinon quelques jours, du moins quelques heures de pluies, parfois très violentes; mais, somme toute, elles ne durèrent pas.

Pendant cette période, on eut à signaler la présence de deux bâtiments dans les parages de l’Île des États.

Le premier était un steamer anglais venant du Pacifique, qui, après avoir remonté le détroit de Lemaire, s’éloignait, cap au nord-est, probablement à destination d’un port d’Europe. Ce fut en plein jour qu’il passa à la hauteur du cap San Juan. Apparu après le lever du soleil, il était hors de vue avant son coucher. Son capitaine n’eut donc pas à constater l’extinction du phare.

Le second navire était un grand trois mâts dont on ne put connaître la nationalité. La nuit commençait à se faire, lorsqu’il se montra à la hauteur du cap San Juan pour longer la côte orientale de l’île jusqu’à la pointe Several. Carcante, posté dans la chambre de quart, ne vit que son feu vert de tribord. Mais le capitaine et l’équipage de ce voilier, s’ils étaient depuis plusieurs mois en navigation, devaient ignorer que la construction du phare fût terminée à cette époque.

Ce trois-mâts suivit la côte d’assez près pour que les hommes eussent pu apercevoir des signaux, un feu par exemple allumé à l’extrémité d’un cap. Vasquez tenta-t-il d’attirer leur attention?… Quoi qu’il en soit, au soleil levant, ce bâtiment avait disparu dans le sud.

D’autres voiliers et steamers furent encore entrevus à l’horizon, faisant probablement route vers les Malouines. Ils ne durent même pas avoir connaissance de l’Île des États.

Le dernier jour du mois de janvier, au moment des fortes marées de pleine lune, le temps subit des modifications profondes. Le vent était remonté dans l’est et assaillait directement l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor.

Heureusement, si les réparations n’étaient pas entièrement finies, du moins, les couples, les varangues, le bordage, maintenant remplacés, rendaient-ils étanche la coque de la *Maule*. Il n’y avait plus à craindre que l’eau s’introduisît à l’intérieur de la cale.

Il y eut lieu de s’en féliciter, car, pendant quarante-huit heures, au plein du flot, la mer monta le long de la coque, et la goélette se redressa sans toutefois que sa quille se fût dégagée du fond de sable.

Kongre et ses compagnons durent prendre de grandes précautions pour éviter de nouvelles avaries qui auraient pu retarder de beaucoup leur départ. Par une circonstance des plus favorables, la goélette continua d’être tenue par ses fonds. Elle roula d’un bord sur l’autre avec une certaine violence, mais ne risqua pas d’être jetée contre les roches de la crique.

D’ailleurs, à partir du 2 février, la marée commença à perdre, et la *Maule* s’immobilisa de nouveau sur la grève. Il fut alors possible de calfater la coque dans ses hauts, et le maillet ne cessa de se faire entendre du lever au coucher du soleil.

Au surplus, ce ne serait pas l’embarquement de sa cargaison qui retarderait le départ de la *Maule*. La chaloupe se rendait fréquemment à la caverne, avec les hommes qui n’étaient pas employés par Vargas. Tantôt Kongre, tantôt Carcante, les y accompagnaient.

À chaque voyage, l’embarcation rapportait une partie des objets qui devaient trouver place dans la cale de la goélette. Ces objets, on les déposait provisoirement dans le magasin du phare. Ainsi, le chargement s’effectuerait avec plus de facilité, plus de régularité, que si la *Maule* l’eût pris devant la caverne, à l’entrée de la baie, où l’opération eût pu être contrariée par le temps. Sur cette côte que prolongeait le cap San Juan, il n’existait pas d’autre abri que la petite crique, au pied du phare.

Quelques jours encore, et, les réparations définitivement achevées, la *Maule* serait en état de reprendre la mer, et la cargaison pourrait être mise à bord.

En effet, à la date du 12, les dernières coutures du pont et de la coque avaient reçu un complet calfatage. On avait même pu, avec quelques pots de couleur trouvés dans les carcasses des navires naufragés, repeindre la *Maule* de l’avant à l’arrière. Kongre profita de l’occasion pour changer le nom de la goélette, qu’en l’honneur de son second il baptisa le *Carcante*. Il n’avait pas négligé non plus de réviser le gréement et de faire de légères réparations à la voilure, qui, du reste, devait être neuve lorsque la goélette avait quitté le port de Valparaiso.

La *Maule* aurait donc été à même d’être ramenée à son mouillage dans la crique dès le 12 février et on aurait pu procéder au chargement, si, au grand ennui de Kongre et de ses compagnons, très impatients d’abandonner l’Île des États, il n’eût pas fallu attendre la prochaine marée de nouvelle lune pour remettre la goélette à flot.

Cette marée se produisit le 24 février. Ce jour-là, la quille se souleva de la souille creusée dans le sable de la grève, et la goélette glissa sans effort en eau profonde, il n’y avait plus qu’à s’occuper de la cargaison.

Sauf circonstances imprévues, le *Carcante* pourrait appareiller dans quelques jours, sortir de la baie d’Elgor, descendre le détroit de Lemaire et, cap au sud-ouest, cingler à toutes voiles vers les mers du Pacifique.

CHAPITRE IX

Vasquez

Depuis l’arrivée de la goélette au mouillage de la baie d’Elgor, Vasquez avait vécu sur le littoral du cap San Juan dont il ne voulait pas s’éloigner. Si quelque navire venait en relâche dans la baie, au moins serait-il là pour le héler à son passage.

On le recueillerait, il préviendrait le capitaine du danger qu’il courait à remonter dans la direction du phare, il lui apprendrait qu’une bande de malfaiteurs en étaient maîtres, et, si ce capitaine n’avait pas un équipage suffisant pour s’emparer d’eux ou les chasser à l’intérieur de l’île, il aurait le temps de reprendre le large.

Mais quelle apparence que cette éventualité vînt à se produire, et pourquoi un bâtiment, à moins d’y être forcé, relâcherait-il au fond de cette baie à peine connue des navigateurs?

C’eût été cependant la circonstance la plus favorable que ce navire se dirigeât vers les Malouines, – une traversée de quelques jours seulement, les autorités anglaises eussent été rapidement prévenues des événements dont l’Île des États venait d’être le théâtre. Un bâtiment de guerre aurait peut-être pu se rendre immédiatement à la baie d’Elgor, y arriver avant que la *Maule* en fût repartie, détruire, jusqu’au dernier, Kongre et les siens, et faire le nécessaire pour que le phare fût aussitôt remis en service.

“Pour cela, se répétait Vasquez, faudra-t-il donc attendre le retour du *Santa-Fé*?… Deux mois!… D’ici là, la goélette sera loin… et où la retrouver au milieu des îles du Pacifique?…”

On le voit, le brave Vasquez, s’oubliant lui-même, pensait toujours à ses camarades impitoyablement massacrés, à l’impunité dont jouiraient peut-être ces malfaiteurs après avoir abandonné l’île, et aux graves périls qui menaçaient la navigation sur ces parages depuis l’extinction du Phare du bout du Monde.

D’ailleurs, au point de vue matériel, et à la condition qu’on ne découvrît pas sa retraite, il était rassuré, depuis sa visite à la caverne des pirates.

Cette vaste caverne s’enfonçait profondément à l’intérieur de la falaise. C’est là que la bande s’était abritée pendant plusieurs années. C’est là qu’avaient été entassées toutes les épaves, or, argent, matières précieuses recueillis sur le littoral à mer basse. C’est là, enfin, que Kongre et les siens avaient passé de longs mois, vivant, d’abord, des provisions qu’ils possédaient au moment de leur débarquement, puis de celles procurées par un grand nombre de naufrages, dont plusieurs avaient été provoqués par eux.

De ces provisions, Vasquez ne prit que l’indispensable, de manière que Kongre et les autres ne s’aperçussent de rien: une petite caisse de biscuit de mer, un baril de corn-beef, un réchaud qui lui permettrait de faire du feu, une bouilloire, une tasse, une couverture de laine, une chemise et des bas de rechange, une capote cirée, deux revolvers avec une vingtaine de cartouches, un briquet, un fanal, de l’amadou. Il prit aussi deux livres de tabac pour sa pipe. D’ailleurs, d’après les propos qu’il avait entendus, les réparations de la goélette devaient durer plusieurs semaines, et il pourrait renouveler ses provisions.

Il convient de dire que, par précaution, trouvant l’étroite grotte qu’il occupait trop voisine de la caverne, et craignant d’y être découvert, il avait cherché un autre abri un peu plus éloigné et plus sûr.

C’est à cinq cents pas de là, sur le revers du littoral, au delà du cap San Juan, dans la partie du littoral en bordure du détroit, qu’il l’avait trouvé. Entre deux hautes roches qui contrebutaient la falaise, s’évidait une grotte dont on ne pouvait voir l’orifice. Pour y arriver, il fallait se glisser à travers cet entre-deux, qu’on distinguait à peine au milieu de l’amoncellement des blocs. Au plein du flot, la mer arrivait presque à leur base, mais ne montait jamais assez pour inonder cette cavité dont le sable fin ne contenait aucun coquillage et ne portait aucune trace d’humidité.

On eût passé cent fois devant cette grotte sans en soupçonner l’existence, et c’était par hasard si Vasquez l’avait découverte, quelques jours auparavant.

Ce fut donc là qu’il transporta les divers objets pris dans la caverne, et dont il allait faire usage.

Il était rare, d’ailleurs, que Kongre, Carcante ou d’autres vinssent sur cette partie de la côte. La seule fois qu’ils l’eussent fait, après une seconde visite à la caverne, Vasquez les avait aperçus lorsqu’ils s’arrêtèrent à la pointe du cap San Juan. Accroupi au fond de l’entre-deux, il ne pouvait être vu, et ne le fut pas.

Inutile d’ajouter qu’il ne s’aventurait jamais au dehors, sans les plus minutieuses précautions, le soir de préférence, surtout pour se rendre à la caverne. Avant de tourner l’angle de la falaise à l’entrée de la baie, il s’assurait que ni le canot ni la chaloupe n’étaient amarrés le long de la rive.

Mais combien le temps lui paraissait interminable dans sa solitude, et quels douloureux souvenirs revenaient sans cesse à sa mémoire! Cette scène de carnage à laquelle il avait échappé, Felipe, Moriz, tombés sous les coups des assassins. Un irrésistible désir le prenait au cœur de rencontrer le chef de cette bande et de venger de ses propres mains la mort de ses infortunés camarades!…

“Non… non!… se répétait-il, ils seront punis tôt ou tard!… Dieu ne permettra pas qu’ils échappent au châtiment… Ils paieront ces crimes de leur vie!…”

Il oubliait combien la sienne tenait à peu de chose, tant que la goélette serait en relâche dans la baie d’Elgor.

“Et pourtant… s’écriait-il, qu’ils ne s’en aillent pas, ces misérables! qu’ils soient encore là lorsque reviendra le *Santa-Fé*… que le Ciel les empêche de repartir!…”

Ce souhait serait-il accompli? Il s’en fallait de plus de trois semaines que l’aviso pût être signalé au large de l’île!…

D’autre part, la durée de cette relâche ne laissait pas de surprendre Vasquez. Les avaries de la goélette étaient-elles donc si importantes qu’un mois n’avait pas suffi à leur complète réparation?… Le livre de phare aurait dû renseigner Kongre sur la date à laquelle s’effectuerait la relève. Il ne pouvait ignorer que, s’il n’avait pas repris la mer avant les premiers jours de mars…

On était au 16 février. Vasquez, dévoré d’impatience et d’inquiétude, voulut savoir à quoi s’en tenir. Aussi quand le soleil fut couché, il gagna l’entrée de la baie, et remonta la rive nord, en se dirigeant vers le phare.

Bien que l’obscurité fût déjà profonde, il n’en risquait pas moins d’être rencontré si quelqu’un de la bande fût venu de ce côté. Il se glissait donc le long de la falaise avec précaution, regardant à travers l’ombre, s’arrêtant, écoutant s’il se produisait quelque bruit suspect.

Vasquez avait environ trois milles à faire pour atteindre le fond de la baie. C’était la direction contraire à celle qu’il avait suivie, en fuyant après le meurtre de ses camarades. Il ne fut pas plus vu qu’il ne l’avait été ce soir-là.

Vers neuf heures, il s’arrêtait à deux cents pas de l’enceinte du phare, et, de là, vit quelques lumières briller à travers les fenêtres de l’annexe. Un mouvement de colère, un geste de menace lui échappèrent, à la pensée que ces bandits étaient dans ce logement, à la place de ceux qu’ils avaient tués, de celui qu’ils tueraient, s’il tombait entre leurs mains!

De l’endroit où il se trouvait, Vasquez ne pouvait apercevoir la goélette, enveloppée d’ombre. Il dut s’approcher d’une centaine de pas, ne pensant pas qu’il y eût danger à le faire. Toute la bande était enfermée dans le logement. Personne n’en sortirait sans doute.

Vasquez s’approcha plus près encore. Il se glissa jusqu’à la grève de la petite crique. C’était à la marée de l’avant-veille que la goélette avait été déhalée du banc de sable. À présent, elle flottait, mouillée sur son ancre!

Ah! s’il l’avait pu, s’il n’avait dépendu que de lui, avec quel plaisir il eût défoncé cette coque et l’eût coulée dans la crique.

Ainsi donc les avaries étaient réparées. Cependant, Vasquez avait fait cette remarque, que, si la goélette flottait, il s’en fallait d’au moins deux pieds qu’elle fût dans ses lignes d’eau. Cela indiquait qu’elle n’avait pas encore embarqué son lest, ni sa cargaison. Il se pouvait donc que le départ fût retardé de quelques jours. Mais, assurément, ce serait le dernier délai, et, dans quarante-huit heures peut-être, la *Maule* appareillerait, elle doublerait le cap San Juan, et disparaîtrait à l’horizon pour toujours.

Vasquez n’avait plus alors qu’une petite quantité de vivres. Aussi, le lendemain, se rendit-il à la caverne afin de renouveler ses provisions.

Il faisait à peine jour; mais, se disant que la chaloupe reviendrait ce matin-là enlever tout ce qui devait être embarqué sur la goélette, il se hâta, non sans prendre les plus grandes précautions.

En tournant la falaise, il n’aperçut point la chaloupe, et la rive était déserte.

Vasquez entra donc dans la caverne.

Il s’y trouvait encore nombre d’objets, de ceux qui étaient sans valeur, et dont Kongre ne voulait sans doute pas embarrasser la cale de la *Maule*. Mais, lorsque Vasquez chercha biscuits et viande, quel fut son désappointement!

Tous les comestibles avaient été enlevés!… et, dans quarante-huit heures, les vivres lui manqueraient!…

Vasquez n’eut pas le temps de s’abandonner à ses réflexions. En ce moment, un bruit d’avirons se fit entendre. La chaloupe arrivait, ayant à bord Carcante et deux de ses compagnons.

Vasquez s’avança vivement jusqu’à l’entrée de la caverne, et, allongeant la tête au dehors, regarda.

La chaloupe accostait alors. Il n’eut que le temps de se rejeter à l’intérieur, puis de se cacher dans le coin le plus obscur, derrière un amas de voiles et d’espars dont la goélette n’aurait pu se charger, et qui resteraient dans la caverne.

Vasquez était bien décidé à vendre chèrement sa vie, en cas qu’il fût découvert. Le revolver qu’il portait toujours à sa ceinture, il s’en servirait. Mais, lui seul contre trois!…

Deux seulement franchirent l’orifice, Carcante et le charpentier Vargas. Kongre ne les avait pas accompagnés.

Carcante tenait un fanal allumé, et, suivi de Vargas, il fit choix de différents objets qui compléteraient le chargement de la goélette.

Tout en cherchant, ils causaient. Le charpentier dit:

“Nous voici au 17 février, et il est temps de démarrer.

— Eh bien, nous démarrerons, répondit Carcante.

— Dès demain?

— Dès demain, je pense, puisque nous sommes parés.

— Encore faudra-t-il que le temps le permette! observa Vargas.

— Sans doute, et il paraît être un peu menaçant ce matin… Mais cela se débrouillera.

— C’est que si nous étions retenus huit ou dix jours ici…

— Oui, dit Carcante, on courrait le risque de se rencontrer avec leur relève…

— Pas de ça… pas de ça! s’écria Vargas. Nous ne sommes pas de force à enlever un navire de guerre.

— Non, c’est lui qui nous enlèverait, et probablement aux deux bouts de sa vergue de misaine! répliqua Carcante, en agrémentant sa réponse d’un formidable juron.

— Enfin… reprit l’autre, il me tarde d’être à une centaine de milles en mer!

— Demain, je te le répète, demain! affirma Carcante, ou il faudrait qu’il fît un vent à décorner les guanaques!”

Vasquez entendait ces propos, immobile, respirant à peine. Carcante et Vargas allaient et venaient, le fanal à la main. Ils déplaçaient certains objets, ils en choisissaient d’autres et les mettaient de côté. Parfois, ils s’approchaient si près du coin où se blottissait Vasquez que celui-ci n’aurait eu qu’à étendre le bras pour leur appliquer son revolver sur la poitrine.

Cette visite prit une demi-heure, Carcante appela l’homme resté à la chaloupe. Celui-ci se hâta d’accourir, et prêta la main au transport des colis.

Carcante jeta un dernier coup d’œil à l’intérieur de la caverne.

“Dommage d’en laisser! dit Vargas.

— Il le faut bien, répondit Carcante. Ah! si la goélette jaugeait trois cents tonnes!… Mais nous emportons tout ce qu’il y a de plus précieux et j’ai idée que, là-bas, nous ferons encore de bonnes affaires.”

Ils sortirent alors, et bientôt l’embarcation, filant vent arrière, disparut au delà d’une pointe de la baie. Vasquez sortit à son tour, et regagna son abri.

Ainsi, dans quarante-huit heures, il n’aurait plus rien à manger, et, en partant, nul doute à ce sujet, Kongre et ses compagnons emporteraient toutes les réserves du phare, Vasquez n’y trouverait plus rien. Comment ferait-il pour vivre jusqu’au retour de l’aviso, qui, en admettant qu’il ne fût pas retardé, n’arriverait pas avant une quinzaine de jours?

La situation, on le voit, était des plus graves. Ni le courage, ni l’énergie de Vasquez ne parviendraient à l’améliorer, à moins qu’il ne pût se nourrir de racines déterrées dans le bois de hêtres, ou de poissons pêchés dans la baie. Mais, pour cela, il fallait que la *Maule* eût quitté définitivement l’Île des États. Si quelque circonstance l’obligeait à demeurer encore plusieurs jours au mouillage, Vasquez mourrait inévitablement de faim dans sa grotte du cap San Juan.

La journée s’avançait, le ciel devenait plus menaçant. Des masses de nuages, épais, livides, s’accumulaient dans l’est. La force du vent s’accroissait à mesure qu’il halait le large. Les rapides risées qui couraient à la surface de la mer se changèrent bientôt en longues lames dont la crête se couronnait d’écume, et qui ne tarderaient pas à déferler avec fracas contre les roches du cap. Si ce temps continuait, la goélette ne pourrait assurément pas sortir à la marée du lendemain.

Or, avec le soir qui arrivait, il ne se produisit aucun changement dans l’état atmosphérique. Au contraire, la situation empira. Il ne s’agissait pas d’un orage dont la durée eût pu se limiter à quelques heures. Un coup de vent se préparait. On le voyait à la couleur du ciel et de la mer, aux nuages échevelés qui chassaient avec une croissante vitesse, au tumulte des lames contrariées par le courant, à leurs mugissements lorsqu’elles déferlaient sur les récifs. Un marin comme Vasquez ne pouvait s’y méprendre. Dans le logement du phare, la colonne barométrique était sûrement tombée au-dessous du degré de tempête.

Cependant, malgré le vent qui faisait rage, Vasquez n’était pas resté dans sa grotte. Il parcourait la grève, ses regards à l’horizon qui s’obscurcissait graduellement. Les derniers rayons du soleil, qui s’abaissait au couchant, ne s’éteignirent pas avant que Vasquez n’eût aperçu une masse noire qui se mouvait au large.

“Un navire! s’écria-t-il, un navire qui semble se diriger vers l’île!”

C’était un navire, en effet, venant de l’est, soit pour embouquer le détroit, soit pour passer par le sud.

La tourmente se déchaînait alors avec une extraordinaire violence. C’était plus qu’un coup de vent, c’était un de ces ouragans auxquels rien ne résiste et qui mettent en perdition les plus puissants navires. Lorsqu’ils n’ont pas “de fuite”, pour employer une locution maritime, c’est-à-dire lorsqu’ils ont une terre sous le vent, il est rare qu’ils échappent au naufrage.

“Et le phare que ces misérables n’allument pas! s’écriait Vasquez. Ce bâtiment, qui le cherche, ne l’apercevra pas!… Il ne saura pas qu’une côte est devant lui à quelques milles seulement… Le vent l’y pousse et il viendra se briser sur les écueils!…”

Oui! un sinistre était à craindre, et qui serait causé par Kongre et les siens. Sans doute, du haut du phare, ils avaient aperçu ce navire, qui n’avait pu tenir la cape et en était réduit à fuir vent arrière à la surface d’une mer démontée. Ce n’était que trop certain, faute de pouvoir se guider sur les éclats de ce phare que le capitaine cherchait vainement dans l’ouest, il n’arriverait pas à doubler le cap San Juan, pour donner dans le détroit, ni la pointe Several pour passer au sud de l’île! Avant une demi-heure, il serait jeté sur les récifs à l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor, sans avoir même soupçonné la terre qu’il n’avait pu relever pendant les dernières heures du jour.

La tempête était alors dans toute sa force. La nuit menaçait d’être terrible, et, après la nuit, la journée du lendemain, car il ne semblait pas possible que l’ouragan se calmât dans les vingt-quatre heures.

Vasquez ne songeait pas à regagner son abri et ses regards ne quittaient pas l’horizon. S’il ne distinguait plus le navire au milieu de cette profonde obscurité, ses feux lui apparaissaient parfois, lorsque, sous le choc des lames, il embardait tantôt sur un bord tantôt sur l’autre. À cette allure, il était impossible qu’il sentît franchement l’action de sa barre. À peine s’il devait gouverner. Peut-être, même, était-il désemparé, privé d’une partie de sa mâture. En tout cas, on ne pouvait douter qu’il ne fût à sec de toile. Au milieu de cette lutte des éléments déchaînés, bien juste si un navire aurait pu conserver un tourmentin.

Puisque Vasquez n’apercevait que des feux verts ou rouges, c’est que ce bâtiment était un voilier; un steamer eût montré le feu blanc suspendu à l’étai de misaine. Il n’avait donc pas de machine qui lui permît de lutter contre le vent.

Vasquez allait et venait sur la grève, désespéré de son impuissance à empêcher ce naufrage. Ce qu’il aurait fallu, c’eût été que la lumière du phare se projetât à travers ces ténèbres… Et Vasquez se retournait du côté de la baie d’Elgor. Sa main se tendait inutilement vers le phare. Le phare ne s’allumerait pas plus cette nuit que les nuits précédentes depuis bientôt deux mois, et le navire était destiné à se perdre corps et biens sur les rochers du cap San Juan.

Alors une idée vint à Vasquez. Peut-être ce voilier pourrait-il encore éviter la terre s’il en avait connaissance. Même en admettant qu’il lui fût impossible de tenir la cape, peut-être, en modifiant quelque peu sa marche, éviterait-il d’aborder ce littoral, qui, en somme, du cap San Juan à la pointe Several, ne mesure guère plus de huit milles. Au delà, la mer s’ouvrirait devant son étrave.

Il y avait du bois, restes d’épaves, débris de carcasses sur la grève. Transporter quelques-uns de ces morceaux sur la pointe, en former un bûcher, y introduire des poignées de goémons, y mettre le feu, laisser au vent le soin d’en développer la flamme, n’était-ce donc pas faisable?… Et cette flamme ne serait-elle pas aperçue du bâtiment, qui, ne fût-il plus qu’à un mille de la côte, aurait peut-être encore le temps de la parer?…

Vasquez se mit aussitôt à l’œuvre. Il ramassa plusieurs morceaux de bois, et les porta à l’extrémité du cap. Les varechs secs ne manquaient point, car, s’il ventait, la pluie n’avait pas commencé à tomber. Puis, lorsque le foyer fut prêt, il essaya de l’allumer.

Trop tard… Une énorme masse apparut alors au milieu de l’obscurité. Soulevée par des lames monstrueuses, elle se précipitait avec une effrayante impétuosité. Avant que Vasquez eût pu faire un geste, elle arrivait en trombe sur la barrière des récifs.

Il y eut un fracas épouvantable et, bref, quelques cris de détresse vite étouffés… Puis on n’entendit plus que le sifflement des rafales et les hurlements de la mer qui s’écrasait sur le rivage.

CHAPITRE X

Après le naufrage

Le lendemain, au lever du soleil, la tempête se déchaînait encore avec autant de fureur. La mer apparaissait toute blanche jusqu’au plus lointain horizon. À l’extrémité du cap, les lames écumaient à quinze et vingt pieds de hauteur, et leurs embruns, éparpillés par le vent, volaient au-dessus de la falaise. La marée descendante et les rafales, se rencontrant à l’ouvert de la baie d’Elgor, s’y heurtaient avec une extraordinaire violence. Aucun bateau n’aurait pu entrer, aucun bateau n’aurait pu sortir. À l’aspect du ciel toujours aussi menaçant, il paraissait très probable que la tourmente durerait quelques jours, et cela ne saurait étonner dans ces parages magellaniques.

Il était donc de toute évidence que la goélette, ce matin-là, ne quitterait pas son mouillage. Si ce contretemps devait exciter la colère de Kongre et de sa bande, il est facile de l’imaginer.

Telle était la situation dont Vasquez se rendit compte, lorsqu’il se leva dès les premières lueurs de l’aube, au milieu des tourbillons de sable.

Et voici le spectacle qu’il eut sous les yeux:

À deux cents pas, sur le versant nord du cap, hors de la baie par conséquent, gisait le navire naufragé. C’était un trois-mâts, jaugeant environ cinq cents tonneaux. De sa mâture, il ne restait plus que trois tronçons rompus au niveau des pavois, soit que le capitaine se fût trouvé dans la nécessité de les couper pour se dégager, soit qu’ils fussent venus en bas au moment de l’échouage. Aucune épave ne surnageait à la surface de la mer; mais, sous la formidable poussée du vent, il était possible que les débris eussent été rejetés au fond de la baie d'Elgor.

S'il en était ainsi, Kongre savait maintenant qu'un bâtiment venait de se perdre sur les récifs du cap San Juan.

Vasquez avait donc des précautions à prendre, et il ne s'avança qu'après s'être assuré que personne de la bande ne se trouvait encore à l'entrée de la baie.

En quelques minutes, il arriva sur le lieu de la catastrophe. La mer étant basse, il put faire le tour du bâtiment échoué, et, sur le tableau d'arrière, il lut: *Century. Mobile*.

C'était donc un voilier américain, ayant pour port d'attache cette capitale de l'État d'Alabama, au sud de l'Union, sur le golfe du Mexique.

Le *Century* s'était perdu corps et biens. On ne voyait aucun survivant du naufrage, et, quant au navire, il n'en restait qu'une carcasse informe. Au choc, la coque s'était partagée en deux. La houle en avait enlevé et dispersé la cargaison. Des débris de bordage, de membrures, d'espars, de vergues, gisaient çà et là sur les écueils, découverts maintenant malgré la violence des rafales. Des caisses, des ballots, des barriques, étaient épars le long du cap et sur la grève.

La carcasse du *Century* étant à sec, il fut possible à Vasquez de s'y introduire.

La dévastation y était complète. Les lames avaient tout saccagé. Elles avaient arraché les planches du pont, démoli les cabines de la dunette, brisé les gaillards, démonté le gouvernail, et le choc sur les récifs avait achevé l’œuvre de destruction.

Et personne de vivant, pas un des officiers, pas un des hommes de l’équipage!

Vasquez appela d’une voix forte, sans obtenir de réponse. Il pénétra jusqu’au fond de la cale et ne trouva pas un cadavre. Ou ces malheureux avaient été enlevés par quelque coup de mer, ou ils s’étaient noyés au moment où le *Century* se fracassait sur les roches. Vasquez redescendit sur la grève, s’assura de nouveau que ni Kongre ni aucun de ses compagnons ne se dirigeaient vers le lieu du naufrage, puis il remonta, malgré la bourrasque, jusqu’à l’extrémité du cap San Juan.

“Peut-être, se disait-il, trouverai-je un des hommes du *Century* respirant encore, et pourrai-je le secourir?…”

Ses recherches furent vaines. Revenu sur le littoral, Vasquez se mit à examiner les épaves de toute sorte que la houle y avait jetées.

“Il n’est pas impossible, pensait-il, que je trouve quelque caisse de conserves qui assurera ma nourriture pendant deux ou trois semaines!…”

Il eut bientôt recueilli, en effet, un baril et une caisse, que la mer avait lancés au delà des récifs. Ce qu’ils contenaient était inscrit à l’extérieur. La caisse renfermait une provision de biscuit, le baril, une provision de corn-beef. C’étaient le pain et la viande assurés pour deux mois au moins.

Vasquez transporta d’abord la caisse à la grotte, distante de deux cents mètres au plus, puis il y roula le baril.

Il retourna ensuite à l’extrémité du cap jeter un coup d’œil sur la baie. Il ne doutait pas que Kongre n’eût connaissance du naufrage. La veille, avant la nuit, il avait pu voir du haut du phare ce navire qui courait vers la terre. Or, du moment que la *Maule* était bloquée dans la crique, la bande accourrait certainement à l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor prendre sa part du naufrage. S’il y avait quelques débris à recueillir, peut-être des valeurs, comment ces pillards laisseraient-ils échapper une telle occasion?

Vasquez, au moment où il atteignit le tournant de la falaise, fut surpris de la violence du vent qui s’engouffrait dans la baie.

Il aurait été impossible à la goélette de gagner contre lui, et, en admettant qu’elle eût atteint la hauteur du cap San Juan, jamais elle n’aurait pu s’élever au large.

À cet instant, dans une courte accalmie, des cris se firent entendre. C’était un appel douloureux jeté par une voix à demi éteinte.

Vasquez s’élança dans la direction de cette voix, du côté de la première cavité où il s’était réfugié, près de la caverne.

Il avait fait au plus une cinquantaine de pas, lorsqu’il aperçut un homme étendu au pied d’une roche. Sa main s’agitait comme pour demander assistance.

En une seconde, Vasquez fut près de lui.

L’homme qui gisait là pouvait avoir de trente à trente-cinq ans et paraissait vigoureusement constitué. Vêtu d’un costume de marin, couché sur le côté droit, les yeux clos, la respiration haletante, il était secoué de soubresauts convulsifs. Il ne paraissait pas, d'ailleurs, avoir été blessé, et aucune trace de sang ne souillait ses habits.

Cet homme, peut-être le seul survivant du *Century*, n'avait pas entendu s'approcher Vasquez. Cependant, lorsque celui-ci appuya la main sur sa poitrine, il fit, pour se redresser, un inutile effort, et, trop faible, il retomba sur le sable. Mais ses yeux s'étaient ouverts un instant, et les mots: "À moi!… à moi!…" s'étaient échappés de ses lèvres.

Vasquez, agenouillé près de lui, l'accota contre la roche avec précaution, répétant: "Mon ami… Mon ami… je suis là… Regardez-moi!… Je vous sauverai…"

Tendre la main, c'est tout ce que parvint à faire ce malheureux, qui perdit aussitôt connaissance.

Il fallait sans retard lui donner les soins qu'exigeait son état d'extrême faiblesse.

"Dieu fasse qu'il soit temps encore!" se dit Vasquez.

Tout d'abord, quitter cette place. À chaque instant la bande pouvait arriver avec la chaloupe ou le canot, ou même à pied en suivant le rivage. Transporter cet homme à la grotte, où il serait en sûreté, c'est ce que devait faire Vasquez, et c'est ce qu'il fit.

Après un trajet d'environ cent toises, qui exigea un quart d'heure, il se glissait dans l'entre-deux des roches, l'homme inerte chargé sur son dos, et l'étendait sur une couverture, la tête appuyée sur un paquet de vêtements.

L'homme n'était pas revenu à lui, mais il respirait. Toutefois, s'il n'avait aucune blessure apparente, ne s'était-il pas fracturé les bras ou les jambes en roulant sur les récifs? C’est ce que craignait Vasquez, qui, dans un tel cas, n’aurait su que faire. Il le tâta, il fit mouvoir ses membres, et il lui sembla bien que tout le corps était intact.

Vasquez versa un peu d’eau dans une tasse, y mêla quelques gouttes de brandy que contenait encore sa gourde, et introduisit une gorgée de ce breuvage entre les lèvres du naufragé; puis il frictionna les bras et la poitrine, après avoir remplacé ses vêtements mouillés par ceux qu’il avait trouvés à la caverne des pirates.

Faire davantage était hors de son pouvoir.

Il eut enfin la satisfaction de voir que le malade reprenait connaissance. Celui-ci parvint même à se redresser, et, regardant Vasquez qui le soutenait entre ses bras, il dit d’une voix moins faible:

“À boire… à boire!”

Vasquez lui tendit la tasse pleine d’eau et de brandevin.

“Ça va mieux? demanda Vasquez.

— Oui!… Oui!…” répondit le naufragé.

Et, comme s’il eût rassemblé des souvenirs encore vagues dans son esprit:

“Ici?… vous?… où suis-je?” ajouta-t-il en serrant faiblement la main de son sauveur. Il s’exprimait en anglais – langue que parlait aussi Vasquez, qui répondit:

“Vous êtes en sûreté. Je vous ai trouvé sur la grève, après le naufrage du *Century*.

— Le *Century*!… Oui, je me souviens…

— Vous vous nommez?…

— Davis… John Davis.

— Le capitaine du trois-mâts?

— Non… le second!… Et les autres?

— Tous ont péri, répondit Vasquez, tous. Vous êtes le seul échappé du naufrage!

— Tous?…

— Tous!”

John Davis fut comme atterré de ce qu’il venait d’apprendre. Lui seul survivant! Et à quoi tenait-il qu’il eût survécu! Il le comprit, il devait la vie à cet inconnu penché sur lui avec sollicitude.

“Merci, merci!… dit-il, tandis qu’une grosse larme coulait de ses yeux.

— Avez-vous faim?… Voulez-vous manger?… un peu de biscuit et de viande? reprit Vasquez.

— Non… non… à boire encore!”

L’eau fraîche, mélangée de brandy, fit grand bien à John Davis, car il put bientôt répondre à toutes les questions.

Voici, en peu de mots, ce qu’il raconta:

Le *Century*, trois-mâts à voiles, de cinq cent cinquante tonneaux, du port de Mobile, avait quitté, vingt jours auparavant, la côte américaine. Son équipage comprenait: le capitaine Harry Steward; le second, John Davis, et douze hommes, compris un mousse et un maître-coq. Il était chargé de nickel et d'objets de pacotille pour Melbourne, Australie. Sa navigation fut heureuse jusqu'au cinquante-cinquième degré de latitude sud dans l'Atlantique. Survint alors la violente tempête qui troublait ces parages depuis la veille. Dès son début, le *Century*, surpris par le premier grain, perdit, avec son mât d'artimon, toute la voilure d'arrière. Peu après, une lame énorme, embarquant par la joue de bâbord, balaya le pont, démolit en partie la dunette, et emporta deux matelots qu'on ne put sauver.

L'intention du capitaine Steward avait été de chercher un abri derrière l'Île des États, dans le détroit de Lemaire. Il se croyait certain de sa situation en latitude, le point ayant été fait dans la journée. Cette route, avec raison, lui paraissait préférable pour doubler le cap Horn et remonter ensuite vers la côte australienne.

À la nuit la bourrasque redoubla de violence. Toute la voilure avait été serrée sauf la misaine et le petit hunier au bas ris, et le trois-mâts courait vent arrière.

À ce moment, le capitaine pensait être encore à plus de vingt milles au large de la terre. Il ne voyait aucun danger à porter dessus, jusqu'au moment où il relèverait le feu du phare. En le laissant alors largement dans le sud, il ne courait pas risque de se jeter sur les récifs du cap San Juan, et donnerait sans peine dans le détroit.

Le *Century* continua donc à faire vent arrière, Harry Steward ne doutant pas de voir le phare avant une heure, puisque son feu avait un rayon de dix milles.

Or, ce feu, il ne l’aperçut pas. Alors qu’il se croyait encore à bonne distance de l’île, un épouvantable choc se produisit. Trois matelots, occupés dans la mâture, disparurent avec le mât de misaine et le grand mât. En même temps, les lames assaillirent la coque, qui s’ouvrit, et le capitaine, le second, les survivants de l’équipage furent jetés par-dessus le bord au milieu d’un ressac qui ne laisserait de salut à personne.

Ainsi le *Century* avait péri corps et biens. Seul, le second, John Davis, grâce à Vasquez, venait d’échapper à la mort.

Et, maintenant, sur quelle côte le trois-mâts était-il venu se perdre, c’est ce que Davis ne pouvait comprendre.

Il demanda de nouveau à Vasquez:

“Où sommes-nous?

— À l’Île des États.

— L’Île des États! s’écria John Davis, stupéfait de cette réponse.

— Oui… l’Île des États, reprit Vasquez, à l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor!

— Mais le phare?

— Il n’était pas allumé!”

John Davis, dont la figure exprimait la plus profonde surprise, attendait que Vasquez s’expliquât, lorsque celui-ci, se relevant soudain, prêta l’oreille. Il avait cru entendre des bruits suspects, et voulait s’assurer si la bande ne rôdait pas aux environs. Il se glissa donc à travers l’entre-deux des roches, et promena son regard sur le littoral jusqu’à la pointe du cap San Juan.

Tout était désert. L’ouragan ne perdait rien de sa force. Les lames y déferlaient toujours avec une prodigieuse violence, et des nuages plus menaçants encore chassaient à l’horizon, encrassé de brumes.

Le bruit entendu par Vasquez provenait de la dislocation du *Century*. Sous l’effort du vent, l’arrière de la carcasse s’était retourné, et la rafale, pénétrant à l’intérieur, la poussait plus avant sur la grève. Elle y roulait comme un énorme tonneau défoncé, et finit par s’écraser définitivement contre l’angle de la falaise. Sur le lieu de l’échouage, couvert de mille épaves, il ne restait plus que l’autre moitié du trois-mâts.

Vasquez rentra donc et s’étendit sur le sable près de John Davis. Les forces revenaient au second du *Century*. Il aurait pu se lever, et, appuyé au bras de son compagnon, descendre sur la grève. Mais celui-ci le retint, et c’est alors que John Davis lui demanda pourquoi, cette nuit-là, le phare n’avait pas été allumé.

Vasquez le mit au courant des faits abominables qui s’étaient passés sept semaines auparavant à la baie d’Elgor. Après le départ de l’aviso *Santa-Fé*, rien, pendant deux semaines environ, n’avait d’abord entravé le service du phare, confié à lui, Vasquez, et à ses deux camarades, Felipe et Moriz. Plusieurs bâtiments arrivèrent, durant cette période, en vue de l’île, et firent des signaux qui leur furent régulièrement rendus.

Mais, le 26 décembre, une goélette s’était présentée vers huit heures du soir à l’entrée de la baie. De la chambre de quart, où il était de garde, Vasquez n’avait cessé d’apercevoir ses feux de position et il avait assisté à toute la manœuvre. À son avis, le capitaine qui la commandait devait bien connaître la route à suivre, car il ne montra pas la moindre hésitation.

La goélette atteignit la crique au pied de l’enceinte du phare, et y laissa tomber son ancre. C’est alors que Felipe et Moriz, qui avaient quitté le logement, montèrent à bord pour offrir leurs services au capitaine, et, lâchement frappés, périrent sans avoir pu se défendre.

“Les malheureux! s’écria John Davis.

— Oui!… mes malheureux compagnons! répéta Vasquez dont tout le chagrin renaissait à ces douloureux souvenirs.

— Et vous, Vasquez? demanda John Davis.

— Moi, du haut de la galerie, j’avais entendu les cris de mes camarades… Je compris ce qui s’était passé… C’était un navire de pirates, cette goélette… Nous étions trois gardiens!… Ils en avaient assassinés deux, et ne s’inquiétèrent pas du troisième.

— Comment avez-vous pu leur échapper? demanda encore John Davis.

— Je descendis rapidement l’escalier du phare, répondit Vasquez, je me précipitai dans le logement, j’y pris quelques effets, un peu de vivres, je m’enfuis avant que l’équipage de la goélette eût débarqué, et je vins me réfugier sur cette partie du littoral.

— Les misérables… les misérables! répétait John Davis. Ils sont donc les maîtres du phare, qu’ils n’allument plus. Ce sont eux qui ont causé le naufrage du *Century*, la mort de mon capitaine et de tous nos hommes?

— Oui, ils en sont les maîtres, dit Vasquez, et, en surprenant une conversation de leur chef avec un de ses compagnons, j’ai pu connaître leurs projets.”

John Davis apprit alors comment ces pillards, établis depuis plusieurs années sur l’Île des États, y attiraient les navires et massacraient les survivants des naufrages, toutes celles des épaves qui avaient quelque valeur étant renfermées dans une caverne, en attendant que Kongre pût s’emparer d’un bâtiment.

Survinrent les travaux de construction du phare, la bande fut contrainte d’abandonner la baie d’Elgor et de se réfugier au cap Saint-Barthélemy, à l’autre extrémité de l’Île des États, où personne ne soupçonnait sa présence.

Les travaux achevés, elle revint, il y avait de cela plus d’un mois et demi, mais alors elle était en possession d’une goélette venue s’échouer au cap Saint-Barthélemy, et dont l’équipage avait péri.

“Et comment se fait-il qu’elle ne soit pas encore partie avec la cargaison de ces pillards? demanda John Davis.

— À cause des réparations importantes qui l’ont retenue jusqu’à présent… Mais, je m’en suis assuré par moi-même, Davis, les réparations sont terminées, le chargement est fait, et le départ devait avoir lieu ce matin même.

— Pour?…

— Pour les îles du Pacifique, où ces bandits se croiront en sûreté et continueront leur métier de pirates.

— La goélette ne peut cependant sortir tant que durera cette tourmente…

— Assurément, répondit Vasquez, et, d’après l’aspect du temps, il est possible que ce retard se prolonge toute une semaine.

— Et, tant qu’ils seront là, Vasquez, le phare ne sera pas allumé?…

— Non, Davis.

— Et d’autres bâtiments risquent de se perdre comme s’est perdu le *Century*?

— Ce n’est que trop vrai.

— On ne pourrait donc pas signaler la côte aux marins qui s’en approchent pendant la nuit?

— Si… peut-être, au moyen de feux allumés sur la grève, à la pointe du cap San Juan. C’est bien ce que j’ai essayé de faire pour avertir le *Century*, Davis. J’ai voulu allumer un foyer avec des débris d’épaves et des herbes sèches. Mais le vent soufflait avec une telle furie que je n’ai pu y réussir.

— Eh bien, ce que vous n’avez pu faire, Vasquez, nous le ferons, déclara John Davis. Le bois ne manquera pas. Les débris de mon pauvre navire… et, malheureusement, ceux de tant d’autres, en fourniront en abondance. Car, enfin, si le départ de la goélette est retardé, si le phare de l’Île des États ne peut être relevé par les bâtiments qui arrivent du large, qui sait si d’autres naufrages ne se produiront pas?

— Dans tous les cas, fit observer Vasquez, Kongre et sa bande ne peuvent prolonger leur séjour sur l’île, et la goélette partira, j’en suis bien certain, dès que le temps lui permettra de prendre la mer…

— Pourquoi cela? demanda John Davis.

— Parce qu’ils n’ignorent pas que la relève pour le service du phare doit se faire prochainement.

— La relève?…

— Oui, dans les premiers jours de mars, et nous sommes au 18 février.

— Un navire viendra à cette époque?

— Oui, l’aviso *Santa-Fé* doit arriver de Buenos-Ayres… vers le 10 mars, et peut-être même plus tôt.”

John Davis eut la même pensée qui était venue à l’esprit de Vasquez.

“Ah mais! s’écria-t-il, voilà qui change tout! Puisse alors le mauvais temps durer jusque-là, et fasse le Ciel que ces misérables soient encore ici lorsque le *Santa-Fé* laissera tomber son ancre dans la baie d’Elgor!”

CHAPITRE XI

Les pilleurs d’épaves

Ils étaient là, une douzaine, Kongre et Carcante avec eux, attirés par l’instinct du pillage.

La veille, au moment où le soleil allait tomber sous l’horizon, Carcante, de la galerie du phare, avait aperçu ce trois-mâts qui venait de l’est. Kongre, prévenu, pensa que ce bâtiment, fuyant devant la tempête, voulait gagner le détroit de Lemaire, puis chercher abri sous la côte occidentale de l’île. Tant que le jour le lui permit, il en suivit les mouvements, et, la nuit faite, il en distingua les feux. Il ne tarda pas à reconnaître que le navire était à demi désemparé et il espéra qu’il irait s’échouer sur cette terre qu’il ne voyait pas. Si Kongre avait allumé le phare, tout danger eût disparu. Il se garda bien de le faire, et, quand les fanaux du *Century* vinrent à s’éteindre, il ne mit pas en doute que le navire ne se fût perdu corps et biens entre le cap San Juan et la pointe Several.

Le lendemain, l’ouragan se déchaînait toujours avec fureur. Impossible de songer à mettre la goélette dehors. Un retard s’imposait, retard qui pouvait durer quelques jours, et cela ne manquait pas d’être grave, avec la menace constante de l’arrivée de la relève. Quel que fût le dépit de Kongre et des siens, il fallait cependant attendre coûte que coûte. Après tout, d’ailleurs, on n’était qu’au 19 février. La tourmente serait assurément calmée avant la fin du mois. À la première éclaircie, le Carcante aurait levé l’ancre et repris la mer.

Or, puisqu'un bâtiment venait de se mettre à la côte, n'était-ce pas l'occasion de profiter du naufrage, de recueillir, parmi les épaves, celles qui offriraient quelque valeur, et d'accroître ainsi le prix de la cargaison qu'emporterait la goélette? L'augmentation du bénéfice compenserait du moins l'aggravation du risque couru.

La question ne fut pas même discutée. On peut dire que toute cette bande d'oiseaux rapaces partit du même vol. La chaloupe fut aussitôt parée, une douzaine des hommes et leur chef y prirent place. Il fallu lutter à force d'avirons contre le vent qui soufflait en foudre et refoulait les eaux dans la baie. Une heure et demie suffit à peine pour atteindre les dernières falaises; mais, avec l'aide de la voile, le retour s'effectuerait rapidement.

La chaloupe accosta la rive nord de la baie, en face de la caverne. Tous débarquèrent et se précipitèrent vers le lieu du naufrage.

C'est à ce moment qu'éclatèrent les cris qui interrompirent la conversation de John Davis et de Vasquez.

Aussitôt celui-ci rampa jusqu'à l'entrée de la grotte, en prenant garde de ne point être aperçu.

Un instant après, John Davis s'était glissé près de lui:

“Vous! lui dit Vasquez. Laissez-moi seul!… Il vous faut du repos.

— Non, répondit John Davis. Je suis tout à fait bien, maintenant. Et, moi aussi, je viens voir ce troupeau de bandits.”

C'était un homme énergique, ce second du *Century*, non moins résolu que Vasquez, un de ces fils d'Amérique au tempérament de fer, et, certes, il devait avoir, comme on dit vulgairement, “l’âme chevillée au corps” pour que l’une ne se fût pas séparée de l’autre après le naufrage du trois-mâts!

En même temps excellent marin. Il avait servi comme premier maître dans la flotte des États-Unis avant de naviguer au commerce, et, au retour du *Century* à Mobile, Harry Steward devant prendre sa retraite, les armateurs avaient résolu de lui confier le commandement du navire.

C’était pour lui un autre motif de colère et de haine. De ce navire dont il allait bientôt être le capitaine, il ne voyait plus maintenant que des débris informes livrés à une bande de pillards.

Si Vasquez avait jamais besoin qu’on relevât son courage, c’était bien là l’homme qu’il fallait!

Mais, si déterminés, si braves qu’ils fussent tous deux, qu’auraient-ils pu contre Kongre et ses compagnons?

En s’abritant derrière les roches, Vasquez et John Davis observèrent prudemment le littoral jusqu’à l’extrémité du cap San Juan.

Kongre, Carcante et les autres s’étaient arrêtés d’abord à cet angle où l’ouragan venait de pousser une moitié de la coque du *Century* à l’état de débris entassés au pied de la falaise.

Les pillards se trouvaient à moins de deux cents pas de la grotte, d’où l’on distinguait facilement leurs traits. Ils étaient vêtus de capotes de toile cirée, étroitement serrées à leur taille, afin de ne point donner prise au vent, et coiffés de surouëts qu’une forte patte maintenait au menton. Qu’ils eussent de la peine à résister à la poussée des rafales, cela se voyait. Parfois, il leur fallait s’arc-bouter contre une épave ou une roche pour ne point être renversés.

Vasquez désigna à John Davis ceux qu’il connaissait pour les avoir vus lors de leur première visite à la caverne.

“Ce grand, lui dit-il, là, près de l’étrave du *Century*, c’est celui auquel ils donnent le nom de Kongre.

— Leur chef?

— Leur chef.

— Et l’homme avec lequel il cause?

— C’est Carcante, son second… et, je l’ai bien vu d’en haut, un de ceux qui ont frappé mes camarades.

— Et vous lui casseriez volontiers la tête? dit John Davis.

— À lui et à son chef, comme à des chiens enragés!” répondit Vasquez.

Il s’écoula près d’une heure avant que les pillards eussent achevé de visiter cette partie de la coque. Ils avaient voulu en fouiller tous les coins. Le nickel, qui formait la cargaison du *Century*, et dont ils n’avaient que faire, serait laissé sur la grève. Mais, en ce qui concernait la pacotille embarquée sur le trois-mâts, peut-être comportait-elle des objets à leur convenance. En effet, on les vit transporter deux ou trois caisses et autant de ballots que Kongre fit porter à bord de la chaloupe.

“Si ces gueux cherchent de l’or, de l’argent, des bijoux de prix ou des piastres, ils n’en trouveront pas, dit John Davis.

— C’est là ce qu’ils préfèrent, bien entendu, répondit Vasquez. Il y en avait dans la caverne, et il faut que les navires qui se sont perdus sur ce littoral aient eu à bord une certaine quantité de matières précieuses. Aussi, la goélette doit-elle maintenant avoir une cargaison de prix, Davis.

— Je comprends, répliqua celui-ci, qu’ils aient hâte de la mettre en sûreté… Mais peut-être n’auront-ils pas cette chance!

— Il faudrait, pour cela, que le mauvais temps se maintînt pendant quinze jours, objecta Vasquez.

— Ou que nous trouvions un moyen…”

John Davis n’acheva pas sa pensée… En somme, comment empêcher la goélette de prendre le large, dès que, cette tempête ayant épuisé sa violence, le temps serait redevenu maniable, la mer serait redevenue calme?

En ce moment, les pillards, abandonnant cette moitié du navire, se dirigèrent vers l’autre, sur le lieu d’échouage, à la pointe même du cap. De la place qu’ils occupaient, Vasquez et John Davis pouvaient encore les apercevoir, mais d’un peu plus loin.

La marée baissait, et, bien qu’elle fût refoulée par le vent, la surface des récifs découvrait en grande partie. Il était assez facile d’atteindre la carcasse du trois-mâts.

Kongre et deux ou trois autres s’y introduisirent alors. C’était, à l’arrière du navire, sous la dunette, qu’était la cambuse, ainsi que John Davis le dit à Vasquez.

Très probablement, cette cambuse devait avoir été ravagée par les paquets de mer. Il était néanmoins possible qu’une certaine quantité de provisions fût encore intacte.

En effet, plusieurs des hommes en sortirent des caisses de conserves, quelques barils et fûts qu’ils roulèrent sur le sable et dirigèrent vers la chaloupe. Des ballots de vêtements furent aussi retirés des débris de la dunette et emportés du même côté.

Les recherches durèrent environ deux heures; puis Carcante et deux de ses compagnons, munis de haches, s’attaquèrent au couronnement qui, par suite de la bande du navire, n’était qu’à deux ou trois pieds du sol.

“Que font-ils donc? demanda Vasquez. Est-ce que le bâtiment n’est pas assez démoli? Pourquoi diable vouloir l’achever?

— Ce qu’ils veulent, je le devine, répondit John Davis, c’est que rien ne reste ni de son nom ni de sa nationalité. C’est qu’on ne sache jamais que le *Century* s’est perdu dans ces parages de l’Atlantique!”

John Davis ne se trompait pas. Quelques instants après, Kongre sortait de la dunette avec le pavillon américain trouvé dans la chambre du capitaine, et il déchirait l’étamine en mille pièces.

“Ah! le gueux! s’écria John Davis, le pavillon… le pavillon de mon pays!”

C’est à peine si Vasquez eut le temps de l’arrêter par le bras, au moment où, n’étant plus maître de lui, il allait s’élancer sur la grève!… Le pillage terminé – et la chaloupe en aurait sa pleine charge – Kongre et Carcante remontèrent au pied de la falaise. En se promenant, ils passèrent deux ou trois fois devant l’entre-deux des roches au fond duquel s’évidait la grotte. Vasquez et John Davis purent alors entendre ce qu’ils disaient:

“Il sera encore impossible de partir demain.

— Oui. Je crains même que ce mauvais temps ne dure quelques jours.

— Eh! nous n’aurons pas perdu au retard…

— Sans doute, mais j’espérais trouver mieux dans un américain de ce tonnage!… Le dernier que nous avons attiré sur les récifs nous a valu cinquante mille dollars…

— Les naufrages se suivent et ne se ressemblent pas! répondit Carcante avec philosophie. Nous avons eu affaire à des gueux, voilà tout.”

John Davis, exaspéré, avait saisi un revolver, et, dans un mouvement de colère irréfléchie, il aurait cassé la tête au chef de la bande, si Vasquez ne l’eût retenu de nouveau.

“Oui, vous avez raison! reconnut John Davis. Mais je ne puis me faire à cette idée que ces misérables restent impunis… Et pourtant, si leur goélette réussit à quitter l’île, où les retrouver… où les poursuivre?

— La tempête ne paraît pas se calmer, observa Vasquez. Même si le vent vient à remonter, la mer restera houleuse pendant plusieurs jours encore… Ils ne sont pas sortis de la baie, croyez-moi.

— Oui, Vasquez, mais ce n’est pas avant le commencement du mois prochain que doit arriver l’aviso, m’avez-vous dit?

— Peut-être plus tôt, Davis, qui sait?…

— Dieu le veuille, Vasquez, Dieu le veuille!”

Ce qui n’était que trop évident, c’est que la tourmente ne perdait rien de sa violence, et, sous cette latitude, même pendant la saison d’été, ces troubles de l’atmosphère durent parfois une quinzaine. Si le vent halait le sud, il amènerait les vapeurs de la mer antarctique, où la saison hivernale ne tarderait pas à commencer. Déjà, les baleiniers devaient songer à quitter les parages polaires, car, dès le mois de mars, les nouvelles glaces se forment en avant de la banquise.

Mais, enfin, il était à craindre que, dans quatre ou cinq jours, il ne se produisît une accalmie, dont la goélette profiterait pour reprendre la mer.

Il était quatre heures lorsque Kongre et ses compagnons se rembarquèrent. Sa voile hissée, la chaloupe eut disparu en quelques instants en suivant la rive nord de la baie.

Avec le soir, les rafales s’accentuèrent. Une pluie froide et cinglante se déversa à torrents des nuages venus du sud-est.

Vasquez et John Davis ne purent quitter la grotte. Le froid fut même assez vif, et ils durent faire du feu pour se réchauffer. Le petit foyer fut allumé au fond de l’étroit couloir. Le littoral étant désert, l’obscurité profonde, ils n’avaient rien à redouter.

La nuit fut horrible. La mer venait battre le pied de la falaise. C’était à croire qu’un mascaret, ou plutôt un raz de marée se précipitait sur la côte est de l’île. Assurément, une houle effrayante devait pénétrer au fond de la baie, et Kongre aurait fort à faire pour maintenir le *Carcante* à son mouillage.

“Puisse-t-il être mis en pièces, répétait John Davis, et ses débris dériver au large avec la marée prochaine!”

Quant à la coque du *Century*, il n’en resterait plus le lendemain que les débris coincés entre les roches ou épars sur la grève.

La tourmente avait-elle atteint son maximum d’intensité? C’est ce que Vasquez et son compagnon eurent hâte d’observer dès l’aube.

Il n’en était rien. Impossible d’imaginer un pareil trouble des éléments. Les eaux du ciel se confondaient avec celles de la mer. Et il en fut de même pendant toute la journée et pendant la nuit suivante. Durant ces quarante-huit heures, aucun navire ne parut en vue de l’île, et l’on comprend qu’ils voulussent s’écarter à tout prix de ces dangereuses terres de la Magellanie battues directement par la tempête. Ce n’est ni dans le détroit de Magellan ni dans le détroit de Lemaire qu’ils eussent trouvé refuge contre les assauts d’un tel ouragan. Le salut pour eux c’était la fuite, et il leur fallait devant l’étrave la libre étendue des mers.

Ainsi que le prévoyaient John Davis et Vasquez, la coque du *Century* était entièrement détruite, et d’innombrables débris couvraient la grève jusqu’à la base de la falaise.

Heureusement, la question de nourriture ne devait pas préoccuper Vasquez et son compagnon. Avec les conserves qui provenaient du *Century*, ils auraient pu s’alimenter pendant un mois et plus. D’ici là, peut-être dans une douzaine de jours, le *Santa-Fé* serait arrivé en vue de l’île. Les gros temps auraient pris fin alors, et l’aviso ne craindrait pas de venir reconnaître le cap San Juan.

C’est du navire, si passionnément attendu, que tous deux causaient le plus souvent.

“Que la tempête dure pour empêcher la goélette de sortir, et qu’elle cesse pour permettre au *Santa-Fé* de venir, voilà ce qu’il faudrait, s’écriait naïvement Vasquez.

— Ah! répondait John Davis, si nous disposions des vents et de la mer, ce serait chose faite.

— Malheureusement, cela n’appartient qu’à Dieu.

— Il ne voudra pas que ces misérables échappent au châtiment de leurs crimes”, affirmait John Davis, s’appropriant les termes mêmes employés par Vasquez quelque temps auparavant.

Tous deux ayant le même sujet de haine et la même soif de vengeance, ils étaient unis dans la même pensée.

Le 21 et le 22, la situation ne se modifia pas, sensiblement du moins. Peut-être le vent indiquait-il une certaine tendance à remonter au nord-est. Mais, après une heure d’hésitation, il retomba, et ramena sur l’île tout le cortège de ces épouvantables rafales.

Il va sans dire que ni Kongre ni aucun des siens n’avaient reparu. Ils étaient occupés, sans doute, à préserver la goélette de toute avarie dans cette crique que les marées grossies par l’ouragan devaient remplir à pleins bords.

Le 23, dans la matinée, les conditions atmosphériques s’améliorèrent un peu. Après quelque indécision, le vent parut se fixer au nord-nord-est. Des éclaircies, rares d’abord, puis plus vastes, dégagèrent l’horizon du sud. La pluie cessa, et, si le vent soufflait toujours avec violence, le ciel s’éclaircissait par degrés. La mer, il est vrai, restait démontée, et les lames déferlaient rageusement sur le littoral. Aussi l’entrée de la baie ne redevenait-elle point praticable, et, bien certainement, la goélette ne pourrait se mettre en route ni ce jour-là ni le lendemain.

Kongre et Carcante profiteraient-ils de cette légère accalmie pour revenir au cap San Juan, afin d’observer l’état de la mer?

C’était possible, c’était probable même, et les mesures de prudence ne furent pas négligées.

De grand matin, cependant, leur arrivée n’était point à craindre. Aussi John Davis et Vasquez se hasardèrent-ils hors de la grotte, qu’ils n’avaient pas quittée depuis quarante-huit heures.

“Le vent tiendra-t-il là? interrogea Vasquez.

— Je le crains, répondit John Davis, que son instinct de marin ne trompait guère. Il nous aurait fallu encore dix jours de mauvais temps… dix jours!… et nous ne les aurons pas.”

Les bras croisés, il regardait le ciel, il regardait la mer.

Cependant, Vasquez s’étant éloigné de quelques pas, il le suivit en longeant la falaise.

Soudain, son pied heurta un objet à demi enfoncé dans le sable, près d’une roche, et qui rendit au choc un son métallique. Il se baissa et reconnut la caisse qui renfermait la provision de poudre du bord, tant pour les mousquets que pour les deux caronades de quatre que le *Century* employait à ses signaux.

“Nous n’en avons que faire, dit-il. Ah! s’il était possible de l’allumer dans la cale de la goélette qui porte ces bandits!

— Il n’y faut pas penser, répondit Vasquez en secouant la tête. N’importe, je prendrai cette caisse en revenant, et je la mettrai à l’abri dans la grotte.”

Ils continuèrent à descendre la grève et se dirigeaient vers le cap dont ils ne pourraient d’ailleurs atteindre l’extrême pointe, tant, à cette heure du plein de la mer, la houle y déferlait encore avec fureur, lorsque, arrivé aux récifs, Vasquez aperçut dans un creux de roche une des petites bouches à feu qui avait roulé jusque-là, avec son affût, après l’échouage du *Century*.

“Voici qui vous appartient, dit-il à John Davis, ainsi que ces quelques boulets que les lames ont jetés là.”

Et, comme la première fois, John Davis de répéter:

“Nous n’en avons que faire!…

— Qui sait? répliqua Vasquez. Puisque nous avons de quoi charger cette caronade, l’occasion se présentera peut-être de s’en servir…

— J’en doute, répondit son compagnon.

— Pourquoi pas, Davis? Puisque le phare n’est plus allumé, la nuit, s’il se présentait un navire, dans les conditions où est venu le *Century*, ne pourrions-nous signaler la côte à coups de canon?”

John Davis regardait son compagnon avec une singulière fixité. Il semblait qu’une pensée toute différente lui traversait l’esprit. Il se borna à répondre:

“C’est là l’idée qui vous est venue, Vasquez?…

— Oui, Davis, je ne pense pas qu’elle soit mauvaise. Certes, les détonations seraient entendues au fond de la baie… Elles révéleraient notre présence sur cette partie de l’île… Les bandits se mettraient à notre recherche… Ils nous découvriraient peut-être… et cela nous coûterait la vie!… Mais combien de vies aurions-nous sauvées en échange des nôtres, et enfin nous aurions fait notre devoir!

— Il existe peut-être une autre manière de faire notre devoir!” murmura John Davis, sans s’expliquer davantage. Cependant, il ne fit plus d’objections, et, conformément à l’avis de Vasquez, la caronade fut traînée jusqu’à la grotte; puis, on y transporta l’affût, les boulets et la caisse de poudre. Ce travail fut très pénible et exigea un temps très long. Lorsque Vasquez et John Davis rentrèrent pour déjeuner, la hauteur du soleil au-dessus de l’horizon indiquait qu’il devait être environ dix heures.

Or, à peine étaient-ils hors de vue, que Kongre, Carcante et le charpentier Vargas tournaient l’angle de la falaise. La chaloupe aurait eu trop à faire contre le vent et la marée qui commençait à monter dans la baie. Ils avaient fait la route à pied, par le rivage. Cette fois ce n’était pas pour piller.

Observer l’état du ciel et l’état de la mer, depuis l’embellie du matin, voilà ce qui les avait décidés à venir, ainsi que l’avait pressenti Vasquez. Assurément, ils reconnaîtraient que le *Carcante* courait de grands dangers à vouloir sortir de la baie, et qu’il ne pourrait lutter contre les grosses lames déferlant du large. Avant d’être dans le détroit, où, pour gagner vers l’ouest, il trouverait du vent arrière, il lui faudrait doubler le cap San Juan, et il risquerait de faire côte, ou tout au moins de recevoir quelque mauvais coup de mer.

Tel fut bien l’avis de Kongre et de Carcante. Arrêtés près du lieu d’échouage où il ne restait plus que de rares débris de l’arrière du *Century*, ils avaient peine à se maintenir contre le vent. Ils parlaient avec animation, ils gesticulaient, montraient l'horizon de la main, en reculant parfois, lorsqu'une lame, toute blanche à sa crête, déferlait sur la pointe.

Ni Vasquez ni son compagnon ne les perdirent de vue pendant la demi-heure qu'ils passèrent à surveiller l'entrée de la baie. Ils s'en allèrent enfin, non sans s'être souvent retournés, puis disparurent au tournant de la falaise et reprirent le chemin du phare.

“Les voilà partis, dit Vasquez. Mille millions de trilliards, qu'ils reviennent donc pendant quelques jours encore observer la mer au large de l'île!”

Mais John Davis secoua la tête. Il était trop évident pour lui que la tourmente aurait pris fin dans quarante-huit heures. La houle serait tombée alors, sinon complètement, assez, du moins, pour permettre à la goélette de doubler le cap San Juan.

Cette journée, Vasquez et John Davis la passèrent en partie sur le littoral. La modification de l'état atmosphérique s'accentuait. Le vent paraissait fixé dans le nord-nord-est, et un bâtiment n'eût pas tardé à larguer les ris de sa misaine et de ses huniers pour donner dans le détroit de Lemaire.

Le soir arrivé, Vasquez et John Davis rentrèrent dans la grotte; ils apaisèrent leur faim avec le biscuit et le corn-beef, leur soif, avec de l'eau mêlée de brandy. Puis, Vasquez se disposait à s'envelopper de sa couverture, lorsque son compagnon l'arrêta.

“Avant de vous endormir, Vasquez, écoutez donc une proposition que j'ai à vous faire.

— Parlez, Davis.

— Vasquez, je vous dois la vie, et je ne voudrais rien faire qui n’eût votre approbation… Voici une idée que je vous soumets. Examinez-la, et répondez ensuite sans crainte de me désobliger.

— Je vous écoute, Davis.

— Le temps change, la tempête est finie, la mer va redevenir calme. Je m’attends à ce que la goélette appareille dans quarante-huit heures au plus.

— Ce n’est malheureusement que trop probable!” répliqua Vasquez en complétant sa pensée d’un geste qui signifiait: “Nous n’y pouvons rien!”

John Davis reprit:

“Oui, avant deux jours, elle se montrera au bas de la baie, elle sortira, elle doublera le cap, elle disparaîtra dans l’ouest, elle descendra le détroit, on ne la verra plus, et vos camarades, Vasquez, et mon capitaine, mes compagnons du *Century* ne seront pas vengés!…”

Vasquez avait baissé la tête; puis, la relevant, il regarda John Davis dont la figure s’éclairait des dernières lueurs du foyer.

Celui-ci continua:

“Une seule éventualité pourrait empêcher le départ de la goélette, ou, du moins, le retarder jusqu’à l’arrivée de l’aviso: quelque avarie qui l’obligerait à retourner au fond de la baie… Eh bien, nous avons un canon, de la poudre, des projectiles… Mettons ce canon sur son affût à l’angle de la falaise, chargeons-le, et, quand la goélette passera, tirons en plein dans sa coque… Qu’elle ne coule pas du coup, c’est possible, mais, pour la longue traversée qu’elle entreprend, son équipage n’osera s’y risquer avec une nouvelle avarie… Les misérables seront forcés de retourner au mouillage afin de se réparer… Il faudra débarquer la cargaison… Cela exigera peut-être toute une semaine… et, d’ici là, le *Santa-Fé*…”

John Davis se tut, il avait pris la main de son compagnon, il la pressait.

Sans hésiter, Vasquez ne lui répondit que ce mot:

“Faites!”

CHAPITRE XII

Au sortir de la baie

Ainsi que cela se produit souvent à la suite d’une forte tempête, l’horizon fut voilé de brumes dans la matinée du 25 février. Mais, en remontant, le vent avait calmi, et les indices d’un changement de temps étaient manifestes.

Ce jour-là, il fut décidé que la goélette quitterait son mouillage, et Kongre fit ses préparatifs d’appareillage pour l’après-midi. Il y avait lieu de croire que le soleil aurait alors dissipé les vapeurs accumulées à son lever. La marée qui devait descendre à six heures du soir favoriserait la sortie de la baie d’Elgor. La goélette arriverait à la hauteur du cap San Juan vers sept heures et le long crépuscule de ces hautes latitudes lui permettrait de le doubler avant la nuit.

Assurément, elle aurait pu partir avec le jusant du matin, n’eût été la brume. En effet, tout était paré à bord, cargaison complétée, vivres en abondance, ceux qui provenaient du *Century* et ceux qui avaient été retirés des magasins du phare. Il ne restait dans l’annexe du phare que le mobilier et les ustensiles, dont Kongre ne voulait point embarrasser la cale suffisamment pleine. Bien qu’on l’eût allégée d’une partie de son lest, la goélette enfonçait de quelques pouces de plus que son tirant d’eau normal, et il n’eût pas été prudent de noyer davantage sa ligne de flottaison.

Un peu après midi, tandis qu’ils se promenaient dans l’enceinte, Carcante dit à Kongre:

“Le brouillard commence à se lever et nous allons avoir la vue du large. Avec ces brumailles-là, le vent calmit d’ordinaire, et la mer tombe plus rapidement.

— Je crois que nous sortirons enfin cette fois, répondit Kongre, et que rien ne gênera notre navigation jusqu’au détroit…

— Et au delà, j’espère, acheva Carcante. La nuit sera obscure cependant, Kongre. Nous sommes à peine au premier quartier de la lune, et le croissant va disparaître presque en même temps que le soleil…

— Peu importe, Carcante, et je n’ai besoin ni de lune ni d’étoiles pour longer l’île!… Je connais toute la côte nord et je compte doubler les îlots de New-Year et le cap Colnett à bonne distance pour parer leurs roches!…

— Demain nous serons loin, Kongre, avec ce vent de nord-est, et du large dans nos voiles.

— Demain, nous aurons perdu de vue le cap Saint-Barthélemy, et j’espère bien que, le soir venu, l’Île des États nous restera à une vingtaine de milles par notre arrière.

— Ce ne sera pas trop tôt, Kongre, depuis le temps que nous y sommes.

— Est-ce que tu le regrettes, Carcante?…

— Non, maintenant que c’est fini, et puisque nous y aurons fait fortune, comme on dit, et qu’un bon navire va nous emporter avec nos richesses!… Mais, mille diables, j’ai bien cru que tout était perdu, quand la *Maule*… non, le *Carcante*, est entré dans la baie avec une voie d’eau! Si nous n’avions pu réparer les avaries, qui sait combien de temps encore il aurait fallu séjourner dans l’île. À l’arrivée de l’aviso, nous aurions été obligés de retourner au cap Saint-Barthélemy… Et j’en ai assez, moi, du cap Saint-Barthélemy!

— Oui, répondit Kongre, dont la farouche figure s’obscurcissait, et même la situation eût été bien autrement grave!… En voyant le phare sans gardiens, le commandant du *Santa-Fé* aurait pris des mesures… Il se serait livré à des recherches… Il aurait fouillé toute l’île, et qui sait s’il n’aurait pas découvert notre retraite?… Et puis, n’aurait-il pu être rejoint par le troisième gardien qui nous a échappé?

— Ce n’était pas à craindre, Kongre. Nous n’avons jamais trouvé ses traces, et comment, sans aucune ressource, aurait-il pu vivre depuis près de deux mois! Car voilà bientôt deux mois que le *Carcante*… – ah! je n’ai point oublié son nouveau nom cette fois – est venu au mouillage de la baie d’Elgor, et, à moins que ce brave gardien n’ait vécu tout ce temps de poisson cru et de racines…

— Après tout, nous serons partis avant le retour de l’aviso, dit Kongre, et c’est plus sûr.

— Il ne doit guère arriver que dans une huitaine de jours, à s’en rapporter au livre du phare, déclara Carcante.

— Et, dans huit jours, ajouta Kongre, nous serons déjà loin du cap Horn, en route pour les Salomon ou les Nouvelles-Hébrides.

— Entendu, Kongre. Je vais monter une dernière fois à la galerie pour observer la mer. S’il y a quelque bâtiment en vue…

— Eh! que nous importe, fit Kongre, en haussant les épaules. L’Atlantique et le Pacifique sont à tout le monde. Le *Carcante* a ses papiers en règle. Le nécessaire a été fait à cet égard, tu peux t’en fier à moi. Et, si même le *Santa-Fé* le rencontrait à l’entrée du détroit, il lui rendrait son salut, car une politesse en vaut une autre!”

On le voit, Kongre ne doutait pas de la réussite de ses projets. Il semblait bien d’ailleurs que tout concourait à les favoriser.

Tandis que son capitaine redescendait vers la crique, Carcante monta l’escalier, et, parvenu à la galerie, il y resta en observation pendant une heure.

Le ciel était alors complètement nettoyé et la ligne de l’horizon, reculée d’une douzaine de milles, se montrait dans toute sa netteté. La mer, encore agitée cependant, n’était plus blanchie par les lames déferlantes, et, si la houle demeurait assez forte, elle ne pourrait gêner la goélette. D’ailleurs, dès qu’on serait engagé dans le détroit, on trouverait la mer belle, et l’on naviguerait comme sur un fleuve, à l’abri de la terre et vent arrière.

Au large, nul autre navire qu’un trois-mâts qui, vers deux heures, parut un instant dans l’est, et à une distance telle que, sans sa longue-vue, Carcante n’aurait pu reconnaître sa voilure. Il courait au nord, d’ailleurs. Il n’était donc pas à destination de l’Océan Pacifique, et il ne tarda pas à disparaître.

Une heure plus tard, il est vrai, Carcante eut un sujet d’inquiétude et se demanda s’il ne fallait pas en référer à Kongre.

Une fumée venait de se montrer dans le nord-nord-est, lointaine encore. C’était donc un steamer qui descendait vers l’Île des États ou vers le littoral de la Terre-de-Feu.

Les mauvaises consciences rendent aisément craintif. Il suffit de cette fumée pour que Carcante éprouvât de sérieuses émotions.

“Serait-ce l’aviso?…” se dit-il.

À vrai dire on n’était qu’au 25 du mois de février, et le *Santa-Fé* ne devait arriver que dans les premiers jours de mars!… Aurait-il avancé son départ?… Si c’était lui, dans deux heures, il serait par le travers du cap San Juan… Tout serait perdu… Fallait-il renoncer à la liberté, au moment de la conquérir, et retourner à l’affreuse existence du cap Saint-Barthélemy?

À ses pieds, Carcante voyait la goélette qui se balançait gracieusement, comme si, vraiment, elle eût voulu le narguer. Tout était paré. Elle n’avait plus qu’à lever l’ancre pour appareiller… Mais elle n’aurait pu, avec vent contraire, refouler le flot qui commençait à monter, et la mer ne serait pas étale avant deux heures et demie.

Impossible donc d’avoir pris le large avant l’arrivée de ce steamer, et si c’était l’aviso…

Carcante ne retint pas un juron qui l’étouffait. Il ne voulut pas, cependant, déranger Kongre, très occupé de ses derniers préparatifs, avant d’être sûr de son fait, et il demeura seul en observation dans la galerie du phare.

Le bâtiment approchait rapidement, ayant pour lui le courant et la brise. Son capitaine poussait activement les feux, car une épaisse fumée se dégageait de la cheminée que Carcante ne pouvait encore apercevoir, derrière la voilure fortement tendue. Aussi ce navire donnait-il une assez forte bande sur tribord. Il ne tarderait pas à se trouver par le travers du cap San Juan, s’il continuait à cette allure.

Carcante ne quittait pas la longue-vue, et son inquiétude allait croissant à mesure que diminuait la distance du steamer. Cette distance fut bientôt réduite à quelques milles, et la coque du navire devint en partie visible.

Ce fut au moment où les craintes de Carcante étaient le plus vives, qu’elles se dissipèrent soudain.

Le steamer venait de laisser porter, preuve qu’il cherchait à gagner le détroit, et tout son gréement apparut aux regards de Carcante.

C’était un bâtiment à vapeur, qui devait jauger de douze à quinze cents tonneaux, et qu’on ne pouvait confondre avec le *Santa-Fé*.

Carcante, de même que Kongre et ses compagnons, connaissait bien l’aviso, qu’il avait aperçu à plusieurs reprises pendant sa longue relâche à la baie d’Elgor. Il savait qu’il était gréé en goélette, et le steamer qui s’approchait l’était en trois-mâts.

Quel soulagement éprouva Carcante, qui s’applaudit de ne point avoir troublé inutilement la quiétude de la bande! Il resta encore une heure dans la galerie et vit passer le steamer dans le nord de l’île, mais à trois ou quatre milles, c’est-à-dire trop loin pour que celui-ci pût envoyer son numéro, signal qui, d’ailleurs, fût demeuré sans réponse, et pour cause.

Quarante minutes plus tard, ce steamer, qui filait au moins douze nœuds à l’heure, disparaissait au large de la pointe Colnett.

Carcante redescendit, après s’être assuré qu’aucun autre navire n’était en vue jusqu’à l’horizon.

Cependant l’heure du renversement de la marée approchait. C’était le moment fixé pour le départ de la goélette… Les préparatifs étaient achevés, les voiles prêtes à être hissées. Une fois amurées et bordées, elles recevraient par le travers le vent retourné et bien établi dans l’est-sud-est et le Carcante cinglerait vers la mer avec du largue dans sa toile.

À six heures, Kongre et la plupart des hommes étaient à bord. Le canot ramena ceux qui attendaient au bas de l’enceinte, puis il fut hissé sur les pistolets.

La marée commençait à se retirer lentement. Elle découvrait déjà l’endroit où l’on avait échoué la goélette pendant ses réparations. De l’autre côté de la crique, les roches montraient leurs têtes pointues. Le vent pénétrait par les coupées de la falaise, et un léger ressac allait mourir au rivage.

Le moment du départ était arrivé, Kongre donna l’ordre de virer au cabestan. La chaîne se raidit, grinça dans l’écubier, et, lorsqu’elle fut à pic, l’ancre fut ramenée au bossoir et traversée en vue d’une navigation qui devait être de longue durée.

Les voiles furent alors orientées, et la goélette, sous sa misaine, sa grande voile, son hunier, son perroquet et ses focs, amurés à tribord, prit de l’erre et commença son mouvement vers la mer.

Le vent soufflant de l’est-sud-est, le *Carcante* doublerait aisément le cap San Juan. Il n’y avait, d’ailleurs, aucun danger à raser cette partie très accore de la falaise.

Kongre le savait. Il connaissait bien la baie. Aussi, debout à la barre, il laissait audacieusement la goélette porter d’un quart afin d’augmenter sa vitesse dans la mesure du possible.

La marche du *Carcante* était, en effet, assez irrégulière. Il ralentissait lorsque le vent faiblissait, pour reprendre de l'erre quand la brise lui arrivait en risées plus vives.

Il devançait alors le jusant, en laissant derrière lui un sillage assez plat, ce qui plaidait en faveur de ses lignes d'eau et permettait de bien augurer pour la suite du voyage.

À six heures et demie, Kongre ne se trouvait plus qu'à un mille de l'extrême pointe. Il voyait la mer se développer jusqu'à l'horizon. Le soleil s'abaissait à l'opposé, et bientôt des étoiles brilleraient au zénith, qui s'assombrissait sous le voile du crépuscule.

Carcante s'approcha en ce moment de Kongre.

“Enfin, nous voici bientôt hors de la baie! dit-il avec satisfaction.

— Dans vingt minutes, répondit Kongre, je ferai mollir les écoutes, et je mettrai la barre à tribord pour contourner le cap San Juan…

— Est-ce qu'il faudra courir des bords une fois dans le détroit?

— Je ne le pense pas, déclara Kongre. Aussitôt le cap Saint-Jean doublé, nous changerons les amures, et j'espère bien les garder à bâbord jusqu'au cap Horn. La saison commence à s'avancer, et je crois que nous pourrons compter sur la persistance de ces vents d'est. En tout cas, dans le détroit, nous le ferons autant qu'il le faudra, et il n'est pas à supposer que la brise nous refuse au point de nous contraindre à louvoyer.”

Si, comme il l'espérait, Kongre pouvait éviter de changer ses amures, il gagnerait un temps considérable. Au besoin même, il amènerait ses voiles carrées et ne conserverait que ses voiles auriques et latines: brigantine, trinquette et focs. Ainsi la goélette tiendrait à quatre quarts du vent.

À cet instant, un homme de l'équipage, posté près du bossoir, cria:

“Attention devant?…

— Qu'y a-t-il?” demanda Kongre.

Carcante courut à l'homme, et se pencha au-dessus du bastingage:

“Arrive… arrive en douceur!” cria-t-il à Kongre.

La goélette se trouvait alors par le travers de la caverne que la bande avait si longtemps occupée.

En cet endroit de la baie dérivait une partie de la quille du *Century*, que le jusant repoussait à la mer. Un choc aurait pu avoir de fâcheuses conséquences, et il n'était que temps de parer cette épave.

Kongre mit donc légèrement la barre à bâbord. La goélette arriva d'un quart, et passa le long de cette quille, qui frôla seulement sa carène.

La manœuvre eut pour résultat de rapprocher un peu de la rive nord le *Carcante*, qui fut aussitôt remis en direction. Encore une vingtaine de toises, et l'on aurait dépassé l'angle de la falaise, Kongre pouvait lâcher la barre et donner la route au nord.

À ce moment précis, un sifflement aigu déchira l'air, et un choc fit tressaillir la coque de la goélette, immédiatement suivi par une violente détonation.

En même temps, une fumée blanchâtre, que le vent repoussa vers l’intérieur de la baie, s’éleva du littoral.

“Qu’est cela? s’écria Kongre.

— On a tiré sur nous, répondit Carcante.

— Prends la barre!” ordonna Kongre.

Se précipitant à bâbord, il regarda par-dessus le bastingage, et aperçut un trou dans la coque, un demi-pied plus haut que la ligne de flottaison.

Tout l’équipage s’était instantanément porté de ce côté à l’avant de la goélette.

Une attaque venant de cette partie du littoral!… Un boulet que le *Carcante,* au moment de sortir, recevait dans son flanc, et qui, s’il l’eût atteint plus bas, l’aurait indubitablement coulé!… On en conviendra, s’il y avait de quoi être effrayé d’une telle agression, on devait à bon droit en être également surpris.

Que pouvaient faire Kongre et ses compagnons?… Larguer les saisines du canot, s’y embarquer, s’élancer sur la rive à l’endroit où s’était élevée la fumée, s’emparer de ceux qui avaient envoyé ce projectile, les massacrer ou tout au moins les déloger de cette place?… Mais savait-on si ces agresseurs n’auraient pas pour eux la supériorité du nombre, et le mieux n’était-il pas de s’éloigner afin de reconnaître tout d’abord l’importance de l’avarie?

Ce parti s’imposa avec d’autant plus d’évidence que la caronade fit feu une seconde fois. Une fumée s’arrondit à la même place. La goélette éprouva un nouveau choc. Un second boulet venait de la frapper en plein bois un peu en arrière du premier. “La barre sous le vent!… Brasse carré devant!… Pare à virer!…” hurla Kongre, en courant vers l’arrière rejoindre Carcante qui se hâtait d’exécuter son ordre.

Aussitôt que la goélette sentit l’action du gouvernail, elle lofa, puis abattit sur tribord. En moins de cinq minutes, elle commença à s’éloigner du rivage, et bientôt elle était hors de la portée de cette pièce qui avait été braquée sur elle.

D’ailleurs, aucune autre détonation ne retentit. La grève demeurait déserte jusqu’à la pointe du cap. Il y avait lieu de croire que l’attaque ne se renouvellerait pas.

Le plus pressé, c’était de vérifier l’état de la coque. À l’intérieur, cette vérification n’aurait pas été praticable, puisqu’il eût fallu déplacer la cargaison. Mais, ce qui ne pouvait faire l’objet d’un doute, c’est que les deux boulets avaient traversé le bordage et s’étaient logés dans la cale.

Le canot fut donc amené, tandis que le *Carcante* mettait en panne et ne subissait plus que l’effet de la marée descendante.

Kongre et le charpentier descendirent dans le canot, examinèrent la coque afin de s’assurer si l’avarie pouvait être réparée sur place.

Ils reconnurent que deux boulets de quatre avaient atteint la goélette et percé le bordage de part en part. Heureusement les œuvres vives étaient épargnées. Les deux trous se trouvaient à la naissance du doublage et juste à la ligne de flottaison. Quelques centimètres plus bas, il se fût déclaré une voie d’eau que l’équipage n’aurait peut-être pas eu le temps d’aveugler. La cale aurait certainement rempli, et le *Carcante* se fût englouti à l’entrée de la baie.

Sans doute, Kongre et ses compagnons auraient pu gagner la rive dans le canot, mais la goélette eût été entièrement perdue.

En somme, l’avarie ne devait pas être d’une extrême gravité, mais elle empêchait assurément le *Carcante* de s’aventurer plus au large. À la moindre bande qu’il donnerait sur bâbord, l’eau pénétrerait à l’intérieur. Il importait donc que les deux trous faits par les projectiles fussent bouchés avant de continuer la route.

“Mais quel est le gueux qui nous a envoyé cela? ne cessait de répéter Carcante.

— Peut-être ce gardien qui nous a échappé!… répondit Vargas. Et peut-être aussi quelque survivant du *Century* que ce gardien aura sauvé. Car, enfin, pour envoyer des boulets, il faut un canon, et ce canon n’est pas tombé de la lune.

— Évidemment, approuva Carcante. Nul doute qu’il ne provienne du trois-mâts. Il est bien fâcheux que nous ne l’ayons point trouvé parmi les épaves.

— Il ne s’agit pas de tout cela, interrompit brusquement Kongre, mais de se réparer le plus vite possible!”

En effet, ce n’était pas le cas de discuter sur les circonstances de l’attaque contre la goélette, mais de procéder aux réparations nécessaires. On pouvait à la rigueur la conduire près de la rive opposée de la baie à la pointe Diegos. Une heure y suffirait.

Mais, en cet endroit, elle eût été trop exposée aux vents du large, et, jusqu’à la pointe Several, la côte n’offrait aucun abri. Au premier mauvais temps, elle se fût brisée sur les récifs. Kongre se résolut donc à revenir le soir même au fond de la baie d'Elgor où le travail pourrait être fait en toute sécurité et aussi rapidement que possible.

Mais, en ce moment, la marée descendait, et la goélette n'eût point gagné contre le jusant. Force était donc d'attendre le flot, qui ne se ferait pas sentir avant trois heures.

Or, le *Carcante* commençait à rouler assez vivement sous l'action de la houle, et, avec la dérive, il eût été entraîné jusqu'à la pointe Several en risquant de remplir. Déjà, on entendait le bruit de l'eau qui se précipitait par les trous de la coque à chaque coup de roulis plus accentué. Kongre dut se résigner à jeter l'ancre à quelques encablures de la pointe Diegos.

La situation était, en somme, assez inquiétante. La nuit venait, et bientôt l'obscurité serait profonde. Il faudrait toute la connaissance que Kongre avait de ces parages pour ne point s'échouer sur l'un des nombreux récifs défendant l'accès de la côte.

Enfin, vers dix heures, le flot arriva. L'ancre fut ramenée à bord, et, avant minuit, le *Carcante*, non sans avoir couru maints dangers, était de retour à son ancien mouillage dans la crique de la baie d'Elgor.

CHAPITRE XIII

Pendant trois jours

À quel degré d’exaspération étaient parvenus Kongre, Carcante et les autres, on l’imaginera sans peine. Au moment même où ils allaient définitivement quitter l’île, un dernier obstacle les avait arrêtés!… Et, dans quatre ou cinq jours, moins peut-être, l’aviso pouvait se présenter à l’ouvert de la baie d’Elgor!… Assurément, si les avaries de la goélette avaient été moins graves, Kongre n’eût pas hésité à prendre un autre mouillage. Il serait allé, par exemple, se réfugier dans le havre Saint-Jean, qui, au revers même du cap, se creuse profondément dans la côte septentrionale de l’île. Mais, dans l’état actuel du bâtiment, c’eût été folie que de vouloir entreprendre une telle traversée. On aurait été par le fond avant d’arriver à la hauteur de la pointe. Dans la partie du parcours qu’on eût été contraint de faire vent arrière, la goélette n’aurait pas tardé à remplir en roulant d’un bord sur l’autre. À tout le moins, sa cargaison aurait été irrémédiablement perdue.

Le retour à la crique du phare s’imposait donc, et Kongre avait sagement fait de s’y résigner.

Pendant cette nuit, où l’on ne dormit guère à bord, les hommes durent faire le quart et s’astreindre à une surveillance de tous les instants. Savait-on si une nouvelle attaque ne se produirait pas?… Savait-on si une troupe nombreuse, supérieure à la bande de Kongre, n’avait pas récemment débarqué sur quelque autre point de l’île?… Savait-on si la présence de cette bande de pirates n’était pas enfin connue à Buenos-Ayres, et si le Gouvernement argentin ne cherchait pas à la détruire?

Assis à l’arrière, Kongre et Carcante causaient de tout cela, ou plutôt le second parlait seul, car Kongre était trop absorbé pour lui répondre autrement que par de brèves paroles.

C’est Carcante qui avait d’abord émis cette hypothèse: la descente sur l’Île des États de soldats envoyés à la poursuite de Kongre et de ses compagnons. Mais, en admettant qu’on n’eût pas eu connaissance de son débarquement, ce n’est pas ainsi qu’une troupe régulière eût procédé. Elle aurait attaqué franchement la place, ou bien, si le temps d’agir ainsi lui eût manqué, elle aurait eu à l’entrée de la baie plusieurs embarcations qui eussent cueilli la goélette et s’en fussent emparées le soir même, soit de vive force, à l’abordage, soit après l’avoir mise dans l’impossibilité de continuer sa route. En tous cas, elle ne se serait pas terrée après une unique escarmouche, comme le faisaient ces assaillants inconnus, dont la prudence démontrait la faiblesse.

Carcante abandonna donc cette hypothèse, et en revint à la supposition émise par Vargas:

“Oui… ceux qui ont fait le coup avaient uniquement pour but d’empêcher la goélette de quitter l’île, et, s’ils sont plusieurs, c’est que quelques hommes du *Century* ont survécu… Ils auront rencontré ce gardien, et appris de lui la prochaine arrivée de l’aviso… Ce canon, c’est une épave trouvée par eux!

— L’aviso n’est pas encore là, dit Kongre d’une voix que la colère faisait trembler. Avant son retour, la goélette sera loin.”

En effet, il était très improbable, en admettant que le gardien du phare eût rencontré des naufragés du *Century*, que ceux-ci fussent plus de deux ou trois au maximum. Comment admettre qu’une aussi violente tempête eût épargné plus d’existences? Que pourrait cette poignée d’hommes contre une troupe nombreuse et bien armée? La goélette, une fois réparée, remettrait à la voile et gagnerait le large en suivant, cette fois, le milieu de la baie. Ce qui avait été fait une première fois ne saurait l’être une seconde.

Ce n’était donc plus qu’une question de temps: combien de jours durerait la réparation de la nouvelle avarie?

Il n’y eut aucune alerte cette nuit-là, et, le lendemain, l’équipage se mit à la besogne.

Le premier travail consista à déplacer la partie de la cargaison rangée dans la cale contre le flanc de bâbord. Il ne fallut pas moins d’une demi-journée pour remonter cette quantité d’objets sur le pont. D’ailleurs, il ne serait pas plus nécessaire de débarquer le chargement que de haler la goélette sur le banc de sable. Les trous de boulets se trouvant un peu au-dessus de la flottaison, on parviendrait, en accostant le canot près de la hanche, à les boucher sans trop de peine. L’essentiel était que la membrure n’eût pas été endommagée par les projectiles.

Kongre et le charpentier descendirent alors dans la cale, et voici quel fut le résultat de leur examen:

Les deux boulets n’avaient atteint que le bordage, qu’ils avaient traversé à peu près à la même hauteur, et on les retrouva en déplaçant la cargaison. Ils n’avaient fait qu’effleurer les couples dont la solidité n’était point compromise. Les trous, placés à deux ou trois pieds l’un de l’autre, étaient tous deux à bords francs, comme découpés à la scie. Ils pourraient être fermés hermétiquement avec des tapes maintenues par des pièces de bois intercalées entre les membrures, et par-dessus lesquelles on appliquerait une feuille de doublage.

En somme, ce n’étaient pas là de grosses avaries. Elles ne compromettaient point le bon état de la coque, et elles allaient être promptement réparées.

“Quand? demanda Kongre.

— Je vais préparer les traverses intérieures, et elles seront posées ce soir, répondit Vargas.

— Et les tapes?

— Les tapes seront faites demain dans la matinée, et mises en place le soir.

— Ainsi nous pourrions arrimer la cargaison dans la soirée et appareiller après-demain matin?

— Assurément”, déclara le charpentier.

Soixante heures auraient donc suffi à ces réparations, et le départ du *Carcante* ne serait en somme retardé que de deux jours.

Carcante demanda alors à Kongre si, dans la matinée ou dans l’après-midi, il ne se proposait pas de se rendre au cap San Juan.

“Pour voir un peu ce qui s’y passe, dit-il.

— À quoi bon? répondit Kongre. Nous ne savons pas à qui nous avons affaire. Il faudrait être en troupe, à dix ou douze, et, par conséquent, ne laisser que deux ou trois hommes à la garde de la goélette. Et qui sait ce qui arriverait pendant notre absence?…

— C’est juste, convint Carcante, et puis, qu’est-ce que nous y gagnerions? Que ceux qui ont tiré sur nous aillent se faire pendre ailleurs! L’important, c’est de quitter l’île, et le plus vite possible.

— Après-demain matin, nous serons en mer”, déclara Kongre nettement.

Il y avait donc toutes chances pour que l’aviso, qui ne devait arriver que dans quelques jours, ne fût pas signalé avant le départ.

Du reste, si Kongre et ses compagnons se fussent transportés au cap San Juan, ils n’auraient pas trouvé trace de Vasquez et de John Davis.

Voici ce qui s’était passé:

Pendant l’après-midi de la veille, la proposition faite par John Davis les occupa tous les deux jusqu’au soir. L’endroit choisi pour y placer la caronade fut l’angle même de la falaise. Entre les roches qui encombraient ce tournant, John Davis et Vasquez purent aisément établir l’affût, besogne facile en somme. Mais ils eurent grand’peine à traîner le canon jusque-là. Il fallut le tirer sur le sable de la grève, et puis traverser un espace hérissé de têtes de rocs, où le traînage n’était plus possible. D’où nécessité de soulever la pièce avec des leviers, ce qui exigea du temps et de la fatigue.

Il était près de six heures, lorsque la caronade fut placée sur son affût de manière à pouvoir être pointée sur l’entrée de la baie.

John Davis procéda alors au chargement et introduisit une forte gargousse, qui fut enfoncée avec une bourre de varech sec, par-dessus laquelle fut placé le boulet. La lumière de la pièce fut ensuite amorcée. Il n’y avait plus qu’à y mettre le feu au moment voulu. John Davis dit alors à Vasquez:

“J’ai bien réfléchi à ce qu’il convient de faire. Ce qu’il faut, ce n’est point couler la goélette. Tous ces coquins gagneraient la rive, et nous ne pourrions peut-être pas leur échapper. L’essentiel, c’est que leur goélette soit forcée de retourner au mouillage, et d’y rester quelque temps pour réparer ses avaries.

— Sans doute, fit observer Vasquez, mais un trou de boulet peut être bouché en une matinée.

— Non, répondit John Davis, puisqu’ils seront obligés de déplacer la cargaison. J’estime que cela durera quarante-huit heures, au moins, et nous sommes déjà au 28 février.

— Et si l’aviso n’arrive que dans une semaine, objecta Vasquez. Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux tirer sur la mâture que sur la coque?

— Évidemment, Vasquez, une fois désemparée de son mât de misaine ou de son grand mât – et je ne vois guère comment on pourrait les remplacer – la goélette serait retenue pour longtemps. Mais atteindre un mât est plus difficile que d’atteindre une coque, et il faut que nos projectiles portent à coup sûr.

— Oui, répondit Vasquez, d’autant plus que, si ces misérables ne sortent qu’à la marée du soir, ce qui est probable, il fera déjà peu clair. Faites donc pour le mieux, Davis.”

Tout étant préparé, Vasquez et son compagnon n’eurent plus qu’à attendre, et ils se postèrent à côté de la pièce, prêts à tirer, dès que la goélette passerait par le travers.

On sait quel fut le résultat de cette canonnade et dans quelles conditions le *Carcante* dut regagner son mouillage. John Davis et Vasquez ne quittèrent point la place avant de l’avoir vu regagner le fond de la baie.

Et maintenant, ce que leur commandait la prudence, c’était de chercher un refuge sur quelque autre point de l’île.

En effet, ainsi que le dit Vasquez, peut-être le lendemain Kongre et une partie de ses hommes viendraient-ils au cap San Juan. Peut-être voudraient-ils se mettre à leur poursuite?…

Leur parti fut rapidement pris. Quitter la grotte, chercher à un ou deux milles de là un nouvel abri situé de telle manière qu’ils puissent voir tout navire qui arriverait par le nord. Si le *Santa-Fé* apparaissait, ils lui feraient des signaux, après avoir regagné le cap San Juan. Le commandant Lafayate enverrait un canot, les recueillerait à bord et il serait informé de la situation – situation qui serait enfin dénouée, soit que la goélette fût encore retenue dans la crique, soit, – ce qui était malheureusement possible, – qu’elle eût repris la mer.

“Fasse Dieu que cela n’arrive pas!” se répétaient John Davis et Vasquez.

Au milieu de la nuit, tous deux se mirent en route, en emportant des provisions, leurs armes, et leur réserve de poudre. Ils suivirent le rivage de la mer pendant six milles environ, en contournant le havre Saint-Jean. Après quelques recherches, ils finirent par découvrir, de l’autre côté de ce golfe, une cavité qui suffirait à les abriter jusqu’à l’arrivée de l’aviso.

D’ailleurs, si la goélette venait à sortir, il leur serait loisible de revenir à la grotte.

Pendant toute la journée, Vasquez et John Davis restèrent en observation. Tout le temps que montait la marée, ils savaient que la goélette ne pouvait appareiller, et ils ne s’inquiétaient pas. Mais, avec le jusant, la crainte les reprenait que les réparations eussent été achevées dans la nuit. Kongre ne retarderait assurément pas son départ, fût-ce d’une heure, dès que le départ serait possible. Ne devait-il pas redouter de voir apparaître le *Santa-Fé*, autant que John Davis et Vasquez l’appelaient de tous leurs vœux?

En même temps, ceux-ci surveillaient le littoral. Mais ni Kongre, ni aucun de ses compagnons ne s’y montrèrent.

En effet, on le sait, Kongre avait décidé de ne point perdre son temps à des recherches qui eussent été vraisemblablement inutiles. Activer le travail, terminer les réparations dans le plus bref délai, c’était ce qu’il avait de mieux à faire et c’est ce qu’il faisait. Ainsi que l’avait dit le charpentier Vargas, la pièce de bois fut posée dans l’après-midi entre les membrures. Le lendemain, les tapes seraient préparées et ajustées ainsi qu’il l’avait promis.

Vasquez et John Davis n’eurent donc aucune alerte pendant cette journée du 1er mars. Mais combien elle leur parut longue!

Le soir, après avoir guetté la sortie de la goélette, et quand ils eurent la certitude qu’elle n’avait point abandonné son mouillage, ils vinrent se blottir dans la cavité, où le sommeil leur procura un repos dont ils avaient grand besoin.

Le lendemain, ils étaient sur pied dès l’aube. Leurs premiers regards furent dirigés vers la mer. Aucun navire en vue. Le *Santa-Fé* ne paraissait pas et nulle fumée ne se montrait à l’horizon.

La goélette allait-elle prendre le large avec la marée du matin? Le jusant venait de s’établir. Si elle en profitait, elle aurait doublé le cap San Juan dans une heure…

Quant à recommencer la tentative de la veille, John Davis n’y pouvait songer, Kongre serait sur ses gardes. Il passerait hors de portée, et les boulets n’atteindraient pas la goélette.

On comprend à quelles impatiences, à quelles inquiétudes furent en proie John Davis et Vasquez jusqu’à la fin de cette marée. Enfin, vers sept heures, le flot se fit sentir. Désormais, Kongre ne pourrait plus appareiller qu’à la prochaine marée du soir.

Le temps était beau, le vent, remonté, se maintenait dans la partie du nord-est. La mer ne se ressentait plus de la dernière tempête. Le soleil brillait entre de légers nuages très élevés que n’atteignait pas la brise.

Encore une interminable journée pour Vasquez et John Davis. Pas plus que la veille ils n’eurent d’alerte. La bande n’avait pas quitté la crique. Que l’un des pirates s’en éloignât dans la matinée ou dans l’après-midi paraissait très improbable.

“Cela prouve que ces coquins sont tout à leur besogne, dit Vasquez.

— Oui! ils se hâtent, répondit John Davis. Bientôt, ces trous de boulets seront bouchés. Rien ne les retiendra plus.

— Et peut-être… ce soir… quoique la marée soit tard, ajouta Vasquez. Il est vrai, cette baie, ils la connaissent! Ils n’ont pas besoin d’un feu pour l’éclairer. Ils l’ont remontée la nuit dernière… S’ils la descendent la nuit prochaine, leur goélette les emportera… Quel malheur, conclut-il avec désespoir, que vous ne l’ayez pas démâtée!

— Que voulez-vous, Vasquez, répondit Davis, nous avons fait tout ce que nous pouvions!… À Dieu de faire le reste!

— Nous l’aiderons”, dit entre ses dents Vasquez, qui parut prendre tout à coup une énergique résolution.

John Davis demeurait pensif, allait et venait sur la grève, les yeux tournés vers le nord. Rien à l’horizon… rien!

Soudain, il s’arrêta. Il revint près de son compagnon, et il lui dit:

“Vasquez… si nous allions voir ce qu’ils font là-bas?

— Au fond de la baie, Davis?

— Oui… nous reconnaîtrions si la goélette est en état… si elle s’apprête à partir…

— Et cela nous servira?…

— À savoir, Vasquez, s’écria John Davis. Je bous d’impatience. Je ne peux plus y tenir… C’est plus fort que moi!”

Et, véritablement, le second du *Century* n’était plus maître de lui.

“Vasquez, reprit-il, combien y a-t-il d’ici au phare?

— Trois milles tout au plus, en passant par-dessus les collines et en allant en droite ligne jusqu’au fond de la baie.

— Eh bien, j’irai, Vasquez… je partirai vers quatre heures… j’arriverai avant six heures… je me glisserai aussi loin que cela me sera possible. Il fera grand jour encore… mais on ne me verra pas… et moi… je verrai!”

Il eût été inutile de chercher à dissuader John Davis. Vasquez d’ailleurs ne l’essaya pas, et, lorsque son compagnon lui dit:

“Vous resterez ici. Vous surveillerez la mer… Je serai revenu dans la soirée… J’irai seul…”

Il répondit, en homme qui a son plan:

“Je vous accompagnerai, Davis. Je ne serais pas fâché, moi non plus, d’aller faire un tour du côté du phare.”

C’était décidé, ce serait fait.

Pendant les quelques heures qui devaient s’écouler avant le moment du départ, Vasquez, laissant son compagnon seul sur la grève, s’isola dans la cavité qui leur avait servi de refuge et se livra à des besognes mystérieuses. Le second du *Century* le surprit une fois en train d’affûter soigneusement son large couteau sur un éclat de rocher, une autre fois, comme il déchirait une chemise en lanières qu’il tressait ensuite en manière de corde lâche.

Aux questions qui lui furent faites, Vasquez répondit évasivement, assurant qu’il s’expliquerait plus clairement le soir venu. John Davis n’insista pas.

À quatre heures, après avoir mangé un biscuit et un morceau de corn-beef, tous deux, armés de leurs revolvers, se mirent en route.

Un étroit ravin leur facilita la montée des collines dont ils atteignirent la crête sans trop de peine.

Devant eux s’étendait un large plateau aride, où poussaient seulement quelques touffes d’épines-vinettes. Pas un seul arbre aussi loin que pouvait se porter la vue. Quelques oiseaux de mer criards et assourdissants volaient par bandes, en fuyant vers le sud.

Quant à la direction à suivre pour gagner le fond de la baie d’Elgor, elle était tout indiquée.

“Là”, dit Vasquez.

Et, de la main, il montrait le phare qui se dressait à moins de deux milles.

“Marchons!” répondit John Davis.

Tous deux allaient d’un pas rapide. S’ils avaient à prendre quelques précautions, ce serait aux approches de la crique.

Ce ne fut qu’après une demi-heure de marche qu’ils s’arrêtèrent, haletants. Mais ils ne sentaient pas leur fatigue.

Il restait encore un demi-mille à franchir. La prudence devenait nécessaire, en cas que Kongre ou un de ses hommes eût été en observation dans la galerie du phare. À cette distance, ils pouvaient être aperçus.

Par ce temps très clair, la galerie était parfaitement visible. Personne ne s’y trouvait en ce moment, mais peut-être Carcante ou tout autre se tenait-il alors dans la chambre de quart, d’où, par les étroites fenêtres orientées à tous les points cardinaux, le regard embrassait l’île sur une vaste étendue.

John Davis et Vasquez se glissèrent entre les roches, éparses çà et là dans un désordre chaotique.

Ils passaient de l’une à l’autre, se défilant, rampant parfois pour traverser un espace découvert. Leur marche fut considérablement retardée pendant cette dernière partie de la route.

Il était près de six heures lorsqu'ils atteignirent l'ultime ressaut des collines qui encadraient la crique. Ils plongèrent leurs regards au-dessous d'eux.

Qu'ils pussent être aperçus, ce n'était pas possible, à moins qu'un des hommes de la bande ne vînt à gravir la colline. Même du haut du phare, ils n'auraient pas été visibles, au milieu des roches avec lesquelles ils se confondaient.

La goélette était là, flottant dans la crique, ses mâts et ses vergues parés, ses agrès en bon état. L'équipage était occupé à remettre dans la cale la partie de la cargaison qui avait dû être déposée sur le pont pendant les réparations. Le canot traînait au bout de sa bosse à l'arrière, et, puisqu'il n'était plus contre le flanc de bâbord, c'est que le travail avait pris fin, c'est que les trous de boulets étaient bouchés.

"Ils sont prêts, murmura John Davis, en comprimant sa colère sur le point d'éclater.

— Qui sait s'ils ne vont pas appareiller avant la marée, dans deux ou trois heures d'ici.

— Et ne pouvoir rien… rien!" répétait John Davis.

En effet, le charpentier Vargas avait tenu parole. La besogne avait été rapidement et convenablement exécutée. Il ne restait plus trace de l'avarie. Ces deux jours avaient suffi. La cargaison remise en place, les panneaux fermés, le *Carcante* allait être en état de repartir.

Cependant, le temps s'écoula; le soleil s'abaissa, disparut; la nuit se fit, sans que rien permît de croire à un prochain appareillage de la goélette. De leur abri, Vasquez et John Davis écoutaient les bruits qui montaient jusqu'à eux de la baie. C’étaient des rires, des cris, des jurons, le grincement des colis traînés sur le pont. Vers dix heures, ils entendirent nettement le bruit d’un panneau qu’on fermait. Puis, ce fut le silence.

Davis et Vasquez attendirent, le cœur serré. Sans doute, le travail terminé, c’était le moment du départ… Non, la goélette se balançait toujours au fond de la crique, l’ancre toujours au fond, les voiles toujours sur leurs cargues.

Une heure passa. Le second du *Century* saisit la main de Vasquez:

“La marée renverse, dit-il. Voici le flot.

— Ils ne partiront pas!

— Aujourd’hui. Mais demain?…

— Ni demain, ni jamais”, affirma Vasquez. “Venez”, ajouta-t-il en sortant de l’anfractuosité où ils étaient restés en embuscade.

Davis, très intrigué, suivit Vasquez, qui s’avançait prudemment vers le phare. En peu d’instants, ils furent au pied du tertre servant de piédestal à la tour. Arrivé là, Vasquez, après une courte recherche, déplaça une roche qu’il fit pivoter sans trop d’effort.

“Glissez-vous là-dedans, dit-il à Davis, en lui désignant de la main le dessous du rocher. Voici une cachette que j’ai découverte par hasard pendant que j’étais au phare. Je ne me doutais pas alors qu’elle me servirait un jour. Ce n’est pas une caverne. C’est un simple trou dans lequel nous aurons peine à tenir tous les deux. Mais on pourrait passer mille fois devant notre porte sans deviner que la maison est habitée.”

Davis, obéissant à l’invitation, se laissa glisser dans la cavité, où le rejoignit immédiatement Vasquez. Serrés l’un contre l’autre au point de ne pouvoir bouger, ils se parlaient bouche à bouche, à mi-voix.

“Voici mon plan, dit Vasquez. Vous allez m’attendre ici.

— Vous attendre? répéta Davis.

— Oui; moi, je vais à la goélette.

— À la goélette, répéta encore Davis stupéfait.

— J’ai résolu que les gueux ne partiraient pas”, déclara fermement Vasquez.

Il tira de sa vareuse deux paquets et un couteau.

“Voici une cartouche que j’ai faite avec notre poudre et un morceau de chemise. Avec un autre morceau de chemise et le reste de poudre, j’ai fabriqué une mèche, que voilà. Je mets le tout sur ma tête et je vais jusqu’à la goélette à la nage. Je me hisse le long du gouvernail, et, avec ce couteau, je creuse un trou sous la voûte, entre le gouvernail et l’étambot. Dans ce trou, je place ma cartouche, j’allume la mèche et je reviens. Tel est mon projet, que rien au monde ne m’empêchera d’accomplir.

— Il est merveilleux! s’écria John Davis enthousiasmé. Mais je ne vous laisserai pas courir seul un tel danger. Je vous accompagnerai.

— À quoi bon? répliqua Vasquez. Un homme passe mieux, quand il est seul, et un homme suffit pour ce que je veux faire.”

Davis eut beau insister, Vasquez demeura inflexible. L’idée était à lui, et il entendait la mettre seul à exécution. De guerre lasse, Davis dut s’incliner.

Au moment le plus sombre de la nuit, Vasquez, après s’être dépouillé de ses vêtements, rampa hors du trou et commença à descendre la pente de la colline. Arrivé à la mer, il se mit à l’eau et nagea d’un bras vigoureux vers la goélette, qui se balançait mollement à une encablure du rivage.

À mesure qu’il s’en rapprochait, la masse du bâtiment se faisait plus noire et plus imposante. Rien ne bougeait à bord. On y veillait pourtant. Bientôt le nageur aperçut nettement la silhouette de l’homme de garde. Assis sur le gaillard d’avant, les jambes pendantes au-dessus de l’eau, le matelot sifflotait une chanson marine dont les notes s’égrenaient, claires dans le silence de la nuit.

Vasquez décrivit une courbe, et, s’approchant du navire par l’arrière, devint invisible dans l’ombre plus opaque projetée par la voûte. Le gouvernail s’arrondissait au-dessus de lui. Il en saisit à pleines mains la surface gluante, et, au prix d’efforts surhumains, réussit à s’élever, en s’agrippant aux ferrures. Parvenu à se mettre à califourchon sur le sommet du safran, il le serra entre ses genoux, comme un cavalier eût serré sa monture. Ses mains ainsi devenues libres, il put prendre le sac fixé sur le sommet de sa tête, et, le retenant entre les dents, en explorer le contenu. Le couteau qu’il en sortit commença aussitôt son œuvre. Peu à peu, le trou qu’il creusait entre le safran et l’étambot devint plus large et plus profond. Après une heure de travail, la lame du couteau sortit de l’autre côté. Dans ce trou devenu assez grand, Vasquez glissa la cartouche préparée, y adapta la mèche, puis chercha son briquet au fond du sac.

À ce moment, ses genoux lassés desserrèrent un quart de seconde leur étreinte. Il se sentit glisser, et, glisser, c’était l’irrémédiable échec de sa tentative. Son briquet une fois mouillé, ne lui donnerait plus de feu. Dans le mouvement involontaire qu’il fit pour reprendre son équilibre, le sac oscilla, et son couteau, que, l’œuvre accomplie, il y avait remis, s’en échappa et tomba, en faisant rejaillir l’eau en bruyantes gouttelettes.

La chanson de l’homme de veille avait brusquement cessé. Vasquez l’entendit descendre le gaillard, marcher sur le pont, monter sur la dunette. Il vit son ombre se dessiner à la surface de la mer. Le matelot, penché sur le couronnement, cherchait sans doute à discerner la cause du bruit insolite qui avait attiré son attention. Longtemps, il resta ainsi, tandis que Vasquez, les jambes raidies, les ongles crispés sur le bois gluant, sentait peu à peu la force lui manquer. Enfin, rassuré par le silence, le matelot s’éloigna, et, retournant à l’avant, reprit sa chanson.

Vasquez retira le briquet du sac et battit le silex à petits coups. Quelques étincelles jaillirent. La mèche, allumée, commença à crépiter sournoisement.

Rapidement, Vasquez, se laissant glisser le long du gouvernail, entra de nouveau dans l’eau, et, à longues brasses silencieuses, s’enfuit vers la terre.

Dans la cachette, où il était demeuré seul, le temps paraissait interminable à John Davis. Une demi-heure, trois quarts d’heure, une heure s’écoulèrent. Davis, n’y pouvant tenir, sortit du trou en rampant et regarda anxieusement vers la mer. Que pouvait-il être arrivé à Vasquez? Sa tentative avait-elle échoué? En tout cas, il ne devait pas avoir été découvert, puisqu’on n’entendait aucun bruit.

Tout à coup, répercutée par l’écho de la colline, une explosion sourde éclata dans le calme de la nuit, explosion immédiatement suivie d’un assourdissant concert de piétinements et de cris. Quelques instants plus tard, un homme, tout souillé d’eau et de vase, arrivait en courant, repoussait Davis, se glissait près de lui au fond de la cachette, et faisait retomber le bloc qui en dissimulait l’entrée.

Presque aussitôt une troupe d’hommes passa en criant. Les gros souliers frappant à grand bruit les rochers ne parvenaient pas à couvrir leurs voix.

“Hardi! disait l’un. Nous le tenons.

— Je l’ai vu comme je te vois, disait un autre. Il est seul.

— Il n’a pas cent mètres d’avance.

— Ah! la canaille! Nous l’aurons.”

Le bruit décrut, s’éteignit.

“C’est fait? demanda Davis à voix basse.

— Oui, dit Vasquez.

— Et vous pensez avoir réussi?

— Je l’espère”, répondit Vasquez.

À l’aube, un vacarme de marteaux fit disparaître toute incertitude. Puisque l’on travaillait ainsi à bord de la goélette, c’est qu’elle avait des avaries, et que la tentative de Vasquez avait réussi. Mais, quelle était l’importance de ces avaries, voilà ce que ni l’un ni l’autre ne pouvaient savoir.

“Puissent-elles être assez graves pour les retenir un mois dans la baie! s’écria Davis, oubliant que, dans ce cas, son compagnon et lui seraient morts de faim au fond de leur retraite.

— Silence!” murmura Vasquez, en lui saisissant la main.

Une nouvelle troupe s’approchait, silencieuse celle-ci. Peut-être la même revenant de sa chasse infructueuse. En tout cas, les hommes qui la composaient ne prononçaient pas une parole.

On ne percevait que le bruit des talons martelant le sol.

Toute la matinée, Vasquez et Davis entendirent ainsi piétiner autour d’eux. Des bandes passaient, lancées à la poursuite de l’insaisissable assaillant. Cependant, à mesure que les heures s’écoulèrent, cette poursuite parut se ralentir. Depuis longtemps déjà, rien n’avait plus troublé le silence environnant, quand, vers midi, trois ou quatre hommes s’arrêtèrent à deux pas du trou dans lequel Davis et Vasquez étaient blottis.

“Décidément, il est introuvable! dit l’un d’eux, en s’asseyant sur le roc même qui en obstruait l’orifice.

— Mieux vaut y renoncer, affirma un autre. Les camarades sont déjà rentrés à bord.

— Et nous allons faire comme eux. D’autant plus que, après tout, le gredin a manqué son coup.”

Invisibles, Vasquez et Davis tressaillirent, et prêtèrent l’oreille avec plus d’attention encore.

“Oui, approuva un quatrième interlocuteur. Voyez-vous ça, qu’il voulait faire sauter le gouvernail!

— L’âme et le cœur d’un bâtiment, quoi!

— Une belle jambe, comme dit l’autre, que ça nous aurait fait!

— Heureux que sa cartouche ait fusé à bâbord et à tribord. Le mal se réduit à un trou dans la voûte et à une ferrure arrachée. Quant à la mèche du gouvernail, c’est à peine si le bois a été roussi.

— Tout sera réparé aujourd’hui, reprit le premier qui avait parlé. Et ce soir, avant le flot, vire au guindeau, les garçons! Après ça, que l’autre crève de faim, si ça lui chante!

— Eh bien, Lopez! es-tu assez reposé? interrompit brutalement une voix rude. À quoi bon tant bavarder? Rentrons.

— Rentrons!” dirent les trois autres, en se remettant en marche.

Dans la cachette où ils étaient terrés, Vasquez et Davis, écrasés par ce qu’ils venaient d’entendre, se regardaient en silence.

Deux grosses larmes gonflèrent les yeux de Vasquez, glissèrent de ses cils, sans que le rude marin s’inquiétât de cacher ce témoignage de son impuissant désespoir. Voilà donc à quel résultat dérisoire avait abouti son héroïque tentative. Douze heures de retard supplémentaire, à cela se réduisait le dommage subi par la bande de pirates. Le soir même, ses avaries réparées, la goélette s’éloignerait sur la vaste mer et disparaîtrait à l’horizon.

Le bruit des marteaux qui montait du rivage prouvait que Kongre faisait travailler avec ardeur à remettre le Carcante en état. Vers cinq heures un quart, au grand désespoir de Vasquez et de Davis, ce bruit cessa brusquement. Ils comprirent que le dernier coup de marteau avait achevé le travail. Quelques minutes plus tard, le grincement de la chaîne raclant l’écubier confirma cette hypothèse. Kongre mettait l’ancre à pic. L’instant de l’appareillage approchait.

Vasquez n’y put tenir. Faisant pivoter le rocher, il risqua prudemment un regard au dehors.

Vers l’ouest, le soleil déclinant atteignait le sommet des montagnes qui limitaient la vue de ce côté. À cette date, proche de l’équinoxe d’automne, une heure ne s’écoulerait pas avant qu’il fût couché.

À l’opposé, la goélette était toujours à l’ancre au fond de la crique. Il n’existait aucune trace visible de ses récentes avaries. Tout paraissait en règle à bord. La chaîne, verticale comme l’avait supposé Vasquez, montrait qu’un dernier effort suffirait à faire déraper l’ancre au moment voulu.

Celui-ci, oubliant toute prudence, avait sorti la moitié du corps hors du trou. Davis, derrière lui, se pressait contre son épaule. Tous deux, haletants, regardaient.

La plupart des pirates avaient déjà regagné le bord. Quelques-uns, cependant étaient encore à terre. Parmi ceux-ci, Vasquez reconnut parfaitement Kongre, qui, dans l’enceinte du phare, faisait les cent pas avec Carcante. Cinq minutes plus tard, ils se séparèrent, et Carcante se dirigea vers la porte de l’annexe.

“Prenons garde, dit Vasquez à voix basse. Il va sans doute monter au phare.”

Tous deux se laissèrent glisser au fond de leur cachette.

En effet, Carcante faisait une dernière fois l’ascension du phare. La goélette allait partir dans un instant. Il voulait encore observer l’horizon, et voir si quelque bâtiment ne paraissait pas en vue de l’île.

D’ailleurs, la nuit serait calme, le vent avait molli avec le soir, et cela promettait un beau temps au lever du soleil.

Lorsque Carcante eut atteint la galerie, John Davis et Vasquez le virent très distinctement. Il en faisait le tour, en promenant sa longue-vue vers tous les points de l’horizon.

Soudain, un véritable hurlement s’échappa de sa bouche. Kongre et les autres avaient levé la tête vers lui. D’une voix qui fut entendue de tous, Carcante criait:

“L’aviso… l’aviso!”

CHAPITRE XIV

L’aviso Santa-Fé

Comment peindre l’agitation dont ce fond de la baie fut alors le théâtre?… Ce cri: “l’aviso… l’aviso!” était tombé comme un coup de foudre, comme un arrêt de mort sur la tête de ces misérables. Le *Santa-Fé*, c’était la justice qui arrivait sur l’île, c’était le châtiment de tant de crimes, auquel ils ne pourraient plus échapper!

Mais Carcante n’avait-il pas fait erreur? Ce navire qui s’approchait était-il bien l’aviso de la marine argentine? Ce bâtiment était-il à destination de la baie d’Elgor? Ne se dirigeait-il pas tout simplement vers le détroit de Lemaire ou vers la pointe Several pour passer au sud de l’île?

Dès que Kongre eut entendu le cri de Carcante, il remonta en courant sur le sommet du tertre, se précipita dans l’escalier du phare, atteignit la galerie en moins de cinq minutes.

“Où est ce navire? demanda-t-il.

— Là… dans le nord-nord-est.

— À quelle distance encore?

— Dix milles à peu près.

— Il ne peut donc pas être à l’entrée de la baie avant la nuit?

— Non.”

Kongre avait pris la longue-vue. Il observa le bâtiment avec une extrême attention, sans prononcer une parole.

Il était certain qu’on avait affaire à un steamer. On distinguait sa fumée s’échappant en volutes épaisses, ce qui montrait qu’il poussait activement ses feux.

Et, que ce steamer fût précisément l’aviso, ni Kongre ni Carcante n’en pouvaient douter. Maintes fois ils avaient vu le navire argentin pendant les travaux de construction, alors qu’il ralliait ou qu’il quittait l’Île des États. D’ailleurs, ce steamer portait directement sur la baie. Si l’intention de son capitaine eût été de donner dans le détroit de Lemaire, il aurait eu le cap plus à l’ouest, et plus au sud s’il avait voulu passer au large de la pointe Several.

“Oui, dit enfin Kongre, c’est bien l’aviso!

— Maudite malchance, qui nous a retenus jusqu’ici! s’écria Carcante. Sans ces coquins, qui nous ont arrêtés par deux fois, nous serions déjà en plein Pacifique.

— Tout cela, il ne sert à rien de le dire, répliqua Kongre. Il faut prendre un parti.

— Lequel?

— Appareiller.

— Quand?

— Immédiatement.

— Mais, avant que nous soyons loin, l’aviso sera par le travers de la baie…

— Oui… mais il restera dehors.

— Et pourquoi?

— Parce qu’il ne pourra pas relever le feu du phare, et qu’il ne se risquera pas à remonter vers la crique au milieu de l’obscurité.”

Ce raisonnement très juste que faisait Kongre, John Davis et Vasquez le faisaient aussi. Ils ne voulaient point quitter la place tant qu’ils pourraient être vus du haut de la galerie. Dans leur étroite cachette, ils exprimaient précisément la même pensée que le chef des pirates. Le phare aurait dû déjà être allumé, puisque le soleil venait de disparaître. En n’apercevant pas son feu, bien qu’il eût très probablement connaissance de l’île, le commandant Lafayate n’hésiterait-il pas à continuer sa route?… Ne pouvant s’expliquer cette extinction, ne resterait-il pas toute la nuit à croiser au large?… Dix fois déjà, à vrai dire, il était entré dans la baie d’Elgor, mais de jour seulement, et, n’ayant plus le phare pour lui donner la route, il ne se hasarderait certainement pas à travers cette sombre baie. D’ailleurs, il devrait penser que l’île avait été le théâtre d’événements graves, puisque les gardiens n’étaient pas à leur poste.

“Mais, dit alors Vasquez, si le commandant n’a pas vu la terre, et s’il continue à marcher dans l’espérance d’apercevoir le feu, ne peut-il lui arriver ce qui est arrivé au *Century*? Ne peut-il venir se perdre sur les récifs du cap San Juan?”

John Davis ne répondit que par un geste évasif. Il n’était que trop vrai, l’éventualité dont parlait Vasquez pouvait se produire. Sans doute le vent ne soufflait pas en tempête et le *Santa-Fé* ne se trouvait pas dans la situation du *Century*. Mais, enfin, une catastrophe était possible, à la rigueur.

“Courons au littoral, reprit Vasquez. En deux heures, nous atteindrons le cap. Peut-être sera-t-il temps encore d’allumer un feu pour signaler la terre.

— Non, répondit John Davis, il serait trop tard. Avant une heure peut-être l’aviso se montrera à l’ouvert de la baie.

— Que faire alors?

— Attendre!” répondit John Davis.

Il était plus de six heures, et le crépuscule commençait à envelopper l’île.

Cependant les préparatifs de départ étaient conduits avec la plus grande activité à bord du *Carcante*. Kongre voulait appareiller à tout prix. Dévoré d’inquiétude, il avait résolu de quitter immédiatement son mouillage. S’il ne le faisait qu’à la marée du matin, il s’exposait à rencontrer l’aviso. En voyant sortir ce navire, le commandant Lafayate ne le laisserait pas passer. Il lui donnerait ordre de mettre en panne, il interrogerait son capitaine. Assurément, il voudrait savoir pourquoi le phare n’avait pas été allumé. La présence du *Carcante* lui paraîtrait à bon droit suspecte. Lorsque la goélette serait arrêtée, il irait à bord, il ferait venir Kongre, il inspecterait son équipage, et, rien que sur la mine de ces hommes, il concevrait les plus légitimes soupçons. Il obligerait le bâtiment à virer de bord, à le suivre et le retiendrait dans la crique jusqu’à plus ample information.

Alors, quand le commandant du *Santa-Fé* ne retrouverait plus les trois gardiens du phare, il ne pourrait expliquer leur absence que par un attentat dont ils auraient été victimes. Et, ne serait-il pas porté à croire que les auteurs de cet attentat devaient être les gens de ce navire qui cherchaient à s’échapper?

Enfin, une autre complication se produirait peut-être.

Puisque Kongre et sa bande avaient aperçu le *Santa-Fé* au large de l’île, n’était-il pas probable, certain même, qu’ils l’avaient aperçu aussi, ceux qui, par deux fois, venaient d’attaquer le *Carcante* au moment où il allait sortir de la baie? Ces ennemis inconnus auraient suivi tous les mouvements de l’aviso, ils seraient là à son arrivée dans la crique, et, si, parmi eux, comme il y avait lieu de le penser, se trouvait le troisième gardien, Kongre et les siens ne pourraient plus échapper au châtiment de leurs crimes.

Kongre avait entrevu toutes ces éventualités et leurs conséquences. De là le parti, le seul à prendre, auquel il s’était arrêté: appareiller sur-le-champ, et, puisque le vent, qui soufflait du nord, était favorable, profiter de la nuit pour gagner le large, en forçant de toile. Alors la goélette aurait l’Océan devant elle. Il se pouvait que l’aviso, dans l’impossibilité de relever le phare, et ne voulant pas s’approcher de la terre au milieu des ténèbres, fût, à ce moment, assez éloigné de l’Île des États. S’il le fallait, pour plus de prudence encore, au lieu de se diriger vers le détroit de Lemaire, Kongre piquerait au sud, irait doubler la pointe Several, et se déroberait derrière la côte méridionale. Aussi pressait-il l’appareillage.

John Davis et Vasquez, comprenant le plan des pirates, se demandaient comment ils pourraient l’empêcher de réussir, et, désespérés, ils sentaient toute leur impuissance!

Vers sept heures et demie, Carcante rappela les quelques hommes encore à terre. Dès que l’équipage fut au complet à bord, on hissa le canot, et Kongre ordonna de lever l’ancre.

John Davis et Vasquez entendirent le bruit régulier du linguet, tandis que la chaîne rentrait sous l'action du guindeau.

Au bout de cinq minutes, l'ancre était ramenée au bossoir. Aussitôt la goélette commença son évolution. Elle avait tout dessus, basses et hautes voiles, de manière à ne rien perdre de la brise qui faiblissait. Lentement, elle sortit de la crique, et, pour mieux recevoir le vent, se maintint au milieu de la baie.

Mais, bientôt, la navigation devint très difficile. La mer étant à peu près basse, la goélette n'était pas servie par le courant, et, sous cette allure, avec trois quarts de largue, elle ne gagnait guère. Elle ne gagnerait plus du tout, et peut-être même perdrait-elle, lorsque, dans deux heures, le flot s'établirait. En mettant les choses au mieux, elle ne serait pas avant minuit à la hauteur du cap San Juan.

Peu importait d'ailleurs. Du moment que le *Santa-Fé* n'entrait pas dans la baie, Kongre ne risquait point d'être rencontré. Dût-il espérer la marée suivante, nul doute qu'il serait dehors au lever du jour.

L'équipage ne négligeait rien pour hâter la marche du *Carcante*, mais il était désarmé contre le danger très réel qui venait de la dérive. Peu à peu, le vent repoussait le navire vers le rivage sud de la baie d'Elgor. Cette rive, que Kongre connaissait mal, il la savait pourtant très dangereuse avec le long semis de roches qui la bordaient. Une heure après le départ, il s'en crut même si rapproché qu'il lui parut prudent de virer de bord afin de s'en écarter.

Ce ne serait pas sans peine que ce changement d'amures pourrait s'exécuter, par cette brise qui tombait de plus en plus avec la nuit.

Cependant, la manœuvre était urgente. La barre dessous, les écoutes furent raidies à l’arrière, alors qu’on larguait celles de l’avant. Mais, faute de vitesse, la goélette ne parvint pas à lofer, et continua à dériver vers la côte.

Kongre comprit le danger. Un seul moyen lui restait. Il l’employa. Le canot fut amené, six hommes y descendirent avec une aussière, et, à force d’avirons, ils parvinrent à faire évoluer la goélette, qui prit les amures à tribord. Un quart d’heure après, elle put reprendre sa direction première sans crainte d’être jetée sur les récifs du sud.

Malheureusement, on ne sentait plus un souffle de vent; les voiles battaient contre les mâts. Le canot aurait en vain essayé de remorquer le *Carcante* jusqu’à l’entrée de la baie. Tout ce qu’il aurait pu faire, c’eût été d’étaler le flot, qui commençait à se faire sentir. Quant à le remonter, il n’y fallait pas songer. Kongre allait-il être obligé de mouiller à cette place, à moins de deux milles de la crique?

Après l’appareillage, John Davis et Vasquez s’étaient relevés, et, descendus presque jusqu’à la mer, ils avaient suivi les mouvements de la goélette. La brise étant complètement tombée, ils comprirent que Kongre serait forcé de s’arrêter et d’attendre le prochain jusant. Mais il aurait toujours le temps, avant le retour de l’aube, d’atteindre l’entrée de la baie, et il lui restait de grandes chances de partir sans être aperçu.

“Non! nous le tenons! s’écria tout à coup Vasquez.

— Et comment? demanda John Davis.

— Venez… Venez!”

Vasquez entraîna rapidement son compagnon dans la direction du phare.

À son avis, le *Santa-Fé* devait croiser devant l'île. Il pouvait même en être très rapproché, ce qui, après tout, ne présentait pas un bien grand danger avec cette mer calme. Nul doute que le commandant Lafayate, très surpris de l'extinction du phare, ne fût là sous petite vapeur, en attendant le lever du soleil.

C'est bien aussi ce que pensait Kongre; mais celui-ci se disait également qu'il avait les plus grandes chances de dépister l'aviso. Dès que le jusant ramènerait les eaux de la baie vers la mer, même sans avoir besoin du vent, le *Carcante* reprendrait sa marche, et, en moins d'une heure, il aurait gagné la pleine mer.

Une fois dehors, Kongre ne s'éloignerait pas vers le large. Il lui suffirait d'une de ces faibles risées, qui ne peuvent manquer de se lever de temps à autre, même par les nuits les plus tranquilles, et du courant portant au sud, pour longer impunément la côte, au milieu de cette nuit très noire. Dès qu'elle aurait doublé la pointe Several, distante au plus de sept à huit milles, la goélette serait abritée par les falaises, et elle n'aurait plus rien à craindre. Le seul danger était d'être aperçu des vigies du *Santa-Fé*, s'il se tenait au-dessous de la baie, et non à la hauteur du cap San Juan. Assurément, le commandant Lafayate, si le *Carcante* était signalé à sa sortie de la baie, ne le laisserait pas s'éloigner, ne fût-ce que pour interroger son capitaine au sujet du phare. La vapeur aidant, il aurait rejoint le bâtiment fugitif avant que celui-ci n'eût disparu derrière les hauteurs du sud.

Il était alors plus de neuf heures. Kongre dut se résigner à mouiller pour étaler la marée, en attendant le moment où le jusant se ferait sentir. Mais il s'en fallait de près de six heures. Ce n'est pas avant trois heures du matin que le courant lui redeviendrait favorable. La goélette évita au flot, son étrave tournée vers le large. Le canot avait été rehissé. Kongre, le moment venu, ne perdrait pas une minute pour se remettre en marche.

Soudain l’équipage poussa un cri qu’on eût pu entendre des deux rivages de la baie.

Un long trait de lumière venait de percer les ténèbres. Le feu du phare brillait dans tout son éclat, illuminant la mer au large de l’île.

“Ah! les coquins! Ils sont là! s’écria Carcante.

— À terre!” ordonna Kongre.

En effet, pour échapper au pressant danger qui le menaçait, il n’avait plus que ce parti à prendre: débarquer, en ne laissant qu’un petit nombre d’hommes à bord de la goélette, courir vers l’enceinte, pénétrer dans l’annexe, gravir l’escalier de la tour, atteindre la chambre de quart, se jeter sur ce gardien, sur ses compagnons, s’il en avait, se débarrasser d’eux et éteindre le phare. Si l’aviso s’était mis en marche pour donner dans la baie, il s’arrêterait assurément… S’il s’y trouvait déjà, il essaierait d’en sortir, n’ayant plus de feu pour le guider jusqu’à la crique. Au pis aller, il mouillerait en attendant le jour.

Kongre fit amener le canot. Carcante et douze des hommes y prirent place avec lui, armés de fusils, de revolvers, de coutelas. En une minute ils eurent accosté la rive, et se précipitèrent vers l’enceinte, dont ils n’étaient éloignés que d’un mille et demi.

Ce trajet fut fait en un quart d’heure. Ils ne s’étaient point séparés les uns des autres. Toute la bande, moins les deux hommes laissés à bord, se trouvait réunie au pied du terre-plein.

Oui… John Davis et Vasquez étaient là. Au pas de course, sans prendre aucune précaution, puisqu’ils savaient bien qu’ils ne pourraient rencontrer personne, ils avaient gravi le tertre et pénétré dans l’enceinte. Ce que voulait Vasquez, c’était rallumer le phare, afin que l’aviso pût gagner la crique sans attendre le jour. Ce qu’il craignait – et quelles craintes le dévoraient! – c’était que Kongre eût détruit des lentilles, brisé les lampes et que l’appareil ne fût plus en état de fonctionner. Alors la goélette, selon toute probabilité, s’enfuirait sans avoir été aperçue du *Santa-Fé*.

Tous deux s’élancèrent vers le logement, s’introduisirent dans le couloir, poussèrent la porte de l’escalier qu’ils refermèrent derrière eux et dont ils assujettirent tous les verrous, gravirent les marches, et atteignirent la chambre de quart…

La lanterne était en bon état, les lampes à leur place, encore munies de mèches et pourvues d’huile depuis le jour où on les avait éteintes. Non! Kongre n’avait point détruit l’appareil dioptrique de la lanterne, il n’avait pensé qu’à empêcher le fonctionnement du phare pendant tout le temps de son séjour au fond de la baie d’Elgor.

Et comment aurait-il pu prévoir les circonstances dans lesquelles il serait forcé de la quitter?

Mais voici que le phare brillait de nouveau! L’aviso pouvait sans peine reprendre son ancien mouillage.

Des coups violents retentirent au pied de la tour. La bande entière se ruait contre la porte pour monter à la galerie et éteindre le feu. Tous risqueraient leur vie pour retarder l’arrivée du *Santa-Fé*. Ils n’avaient trouvé personne sur le terre-plein ni dans le logement. Ceux qui étaient dans la chambre de quart ne pouvaient être nombreux. Ils en auraient facilement raison. Ils les tueraient, et le phare ne projetterait plus dans la nuit ses redoutables rayons.

On le sait, la porte qui s'ouvrait au fond du couloir était faite d'une épaisse plaque de fer. Forcer les verrous qui la fermaient sur l'escalier serait impossible. Impossible également de la faire sauter à coups d'anspects ou de haches. Carcante, qui l'essaya, le comprit bien vite. Après quelques efforts inutiles, il vint rejoindre Kongre et les autres dans l'enceinte.

Que faire? Y avait-il un moyen de s'élever par l'extérieur jusqu'à la lanterne du phare? Si ce moyen n'existait pas, la bande n'avait plus qu'à s'enfuir à l'intérieur de l'île pour éviter de tomber entre les mains du commandant Lafayate et de son équipage. Quant à retourner à bord de la goélette, à quoi bon? D'ailleurs, le temps manquerait. Nul doute que l'aviso ne fût maintenant dans la baie et ne fît route vers la crique.

Si, au contraire, dans quelques minutes, le phare était éteint, le *Santa-Fé*, non seulement ne pouvait pas continuer sa marche, mais il serait forcé de revenir en arrière, et peut-être la goélette réussirait-elle à passer? Or, il existait, ce moyen d'atteindre la galerie.

“La chaîne du paratonnerre!” s'écria Kongre.

En effet, le long de la tour se tendait une chaîne métallique, maintenue, de trois en trois pieds, par des crampons de fer. En s'élevant de l'un à l'autre à la force des poignets, il était certainement possible de gagner la galerie et peut-être de surprendre ceux qui occupaient la chambre de quart.

Kongre allait tenter ce dernier moyen de salut. Carcante et Vargas le précédèrent. Tous deux se hissèrent sur l'annexe, saisirent la chaîne et commencèrent à grimper l'un après l'autre, espérant ne pas être aperçus au milieu de l'obscurité.

Ils arrivèrent enfin au garde-fou, se cramponnèrent aux montants… Ils n'avaient plus qu'à l'escalader…

À cet instant, des coups de revolver retentirent. John Davis et Vasquez étaient là, sur la défensive. Les deux bandits, frappés à la tête, lâchèrent prise et vinrent s'écraser sur le toit de l'annexe.

Alors des sifflets se firent entendre au pied du phare. L'aviso arrivait dans la crique, et la sirène jetait ses sons aigus à travers l'espace…

Il n'était que temps de fuir. Dans quelques minutes, le *Santa-Fé* serait à son ancien mouillage.

Kongre et ses compagnons, comprenant qu'il n'y avait plus rien à tenter, se précipitèrent en bas du terre-plein, et se sauvèrent à l'intérieur de l'île.

Un quart d'heure plus tard, au moment où le commandant Lafayate envoyait son ancre par le fond, la chaloupe des gardiens reconquise accostait le navire de guerre en quelques coups d'aviron.

John Davis et Vasquez étaient à bord de l'aviso.

CHAPITRE XV

Dénouement

L’aviso *Santa-Fé*, ayant à bord la relève de l’Île des États, avait quitté Buenos-Ayres le 19 février. Favorisée par le vent et la mer, sa traversée fut très rapide. La grande tempête qui dura près de huit jours ne s’était pas étendue au delà du détroit de Magellan. Le commandant Lafayate n’en avait donc point ressenti les effets, et il arrivait à destination avec une avance de plusieurs jours. Douze heures plus tard, la goélette eût été loin déjà, et il aurait fallu renoncer à poursuivre la bande Kongre et son chef.

Le commandant Lafayate ne laissa pas s’écouler cette nuit sans avoir été mis au courant de ce qui s’était passé depuis trois mois à la baie d’Elgor.

Si Vasquez était à bord, ses camarades Felipe et Moriz n’étaient pas avec lui. Son compagnon, personne ne le connaissait et ne savait son nom.

Le commandant Lafayate les fit venir tous deux dans le carré, et sa première parole fut:

“Le phare a été allumé tardivement, Vasquez.

— Il y a neuf semaines qu’il ne fonctionnait plus… répondit Vasquez.

— Neuf semaines!… Que signifie cela?… Vos deux camarades?…

— Felipe et Moriz sont morts!… Vingt et un jours après le départ du *Santa-Fé* le phare n’avait plus qu’un seul gardien, mon commandant!”

Vasquez fit le récit des événements dont l'Île des États venait d'être le théâtre. Une bande de pirates, sous les ordres d'un chef nommé Kongre, était depuis plusieurs années installée à la baie d'Elgor, attirant les navires sur les écueils du cap San Juan, recueillant les épaves, massacrant les survivants du naufrage. Personne ne soupçonna sa présence pendant toute la durée des travaux du phare, car elle s'était réfugiée au cap Saint-Barthélemy, à l'extrémité occidentale de l'île. Le *Santa-Fé* reparti, les gardiens restés seuls au service du phare, la bande Kongre remonta la baie d'Elgor sur une goélette tombée par hasard en sa possession. Quelques minutes après son entrée dans la crique, Moriz et Felipe étaient frappés et tués à son bord. Et, si Vasquez put échapper, c'est qu'il se trouvait à ce moment dans la chambre de quart. Après l'avoir quittée, il s'était réfugié sur le littoral du cap San Juan. Là, il put se nourrir des provisions découvertes dans une caverne où ces pirates emmagasinaient leurs réserves.

Puis Vasquez dit comment, après le naufrage du *Century*, il fut assez heureux pour sauver le second de ce bâtiment, et comment tous deux vécurent en attendant l'arrivée du *Santa-Fé*. Leur plus vif espoir fut alors que la goélette, retardée par des réparations importantes, ne pût prendre la mer pour gagner les parages du Pacifique, avant le retour de l'aviso dans les premiers jours de mars.

Mais elle eût pourtant quitté l'île si les deux boulets que John Davis envoya dans sa coque ne l'eussent retenue quelques jours encore.

Vasquez arrêtait là son récit, faisant le silence sur ce qui était plus spécialement à son honneur. John Davis intervint:

"Ce que Vasquez oublie de vous dire, mon commandant, ajouta-t-il, c'est que nos deux boulets se sont trouvés tout à fait insuffisants. Malgré les trous que nous lui avions faits dans la coque, la *Maule* eût repris la mer ce matin même si, la nuit dernière, Vasquez, au péril de sa vie, ne l'avait rejointe à la nage et n'avait fait éclater une cartouche entre le gouvernail et l'étambot du bâtiment. À vrai dire, il n'obtint pas tout le résultat qu'il espérait. Les avaries furent légères et purent être réparées en douze heures. Mais ce sont ces douze heures-là qui vous ont permis de trouver la goélette dans la baie. C'est à Vasquez seul que cela est dû, comme c'est encore lui qui, ayant reconnu l'aviso, a eu l'idée de courir au phare et de rallumer ce soir le feu éteint depuis si longtemps."

Le commandant Lafayate serra chaleureusement la main à John Davis et à Vasquez, qui, par leur audacieuse intervention, avaient permis au *Santa-Fé* de devancer le départ de la goélette, puis il raconta dans quelles conditions, une heure avant le coucher du soleil, l'aviso avait eu connaissance de l'Île des États.

Le commandant Lafayate, ayant fait le point dans la matinée, était sûr de sa position. L'aviso n'avait qu'à prendre direction sur le cap San Juan, qu'il devait apercevoir avant la nuit.

En effet, à l'heure où le crépuscule commençait à obscurcir le ciel, le commandant Lafayate distingua très nettement sinon la côte est de l'île, du moins les hauts pics qui se dressent en arrière-plan. Il s'en trouvait alors à une dizaine de milles, et il comptait bien être au mouillage deux heures plus tard.

C'est à ce moment même que le *Santa-Fé* avait été aperçu par John Davis et Vasquez. C'est alors aussi que Carcante, du haut du phare, le signala à Kongre, lequel prit ses dispositions pour appareiller en toute hâte, afin de sortir de la baie avant que le *Santa-Fé* n'y fût entré.

Pendant ce temps, le *Santa-Fé* continuait à courir vers le cap San Juan… La mer était calme et sentait à peine les derniers souffles de la brise du large.

Assurément, avant que le Phare du bout du Monde n’eût été établi sur l’Île des États, le commandant Lafayate n’eût pas commis l’imprudence de s’approcher si près de terre pendant la nuit, encore moins de donner dans la baie d’Elgor pour gagner la crique.

Mais la côte et la baie étaient éclairées maintenant, et il ne lui parut pas nécessaire d’attendre au lendemain.

L’aviso continua donc sa route vers le sud-ouest, et, quand la nuit fut tout à fait sombre, il était parvenu à moins d’un mille de l’entrée de la baie d’Elgor.

L’aviso se tenait là sous petite vapeur, attendant que le phare voulût bien s’allumer.

Une heure s’écoula. Aucun feu ne parut sur l’île. Le commandant Lafayate ne pouvait se tromper sur sa position… La baie d’Elgor s’ouvrait bien devant lui… Il était bien en dedans de la portée du phare… Et le phare ne s’allumait pas!…

Que dut-on penser à bord de l’aviso, si ce n’est qu’un accident était arrivé à l’appareil? Peut-être, pendant la dernière tempête qui fut si violente, la lanterne avait-elle été brisée, les lentilles endommagées, les lampes mises hors de service. Jamais, non, jamais, il ne serait venu à l’idée de personne que les trois gardiens eussent été attaqués par une bande de pirates, que deux d’entre eux fussent tombés sous les coups de ces assassins, et que le troisième eût été obligé de s’enfuir pour éviter leur sort.

“Je ne savais que faire, dit alors le commandant Lafayate. La nuit était profonde. Je ne pouvais me hasarder à donner dans la baie. Il me faudrait donc rester au large jusqu’à l’aube. Mes officiers, mon équipage, nous étions dans une mortelle inquiétude, et nous pressentions quelque malheur. Enfin, après neuf heures, le phare brilla… Ce retard ne devait être dû qu’à un accident… Je fis monter la pression, le cap fut mis sur l’entrée de la baie. Une heure plus tard, le *Santa-Fé* y pénétra. À un mille et demi de la crique, je rencontrai une goélette à l’ancre, qui paraissait abandonnée… J’allais envoyer quelques hommes à bord, lorsque des coups de feu éclatèrent, et ces coups de feu étaient tirés de la galerie du phare!… Nous comprîmes que nos gardiens étaient attaqués, qu’ils se défendaient, et, probablement, contre l’équipage de cette goélette… Je fis mugir la sirène, pour effrayer les agresseurs… et, un quart d’heure après, le *Santa-Fé* était au mouillage.

— À temps, mon commandant, dit Vasquez.

— Ce qu’il n’aurait pu faire, répondit le commandant Lafayate, si vous n’aviez pas risqué votre vie pour rallumer le phare. Maintenant, la goélette serait en mer. Nous ne l’aurions sans doute pas aperçue au sortir de la baie, et cette bande de pirates nous eût échappé!”

Toute cette histoire en un instant connue à bord de l’aviso, les félicitations les plus chaudes ne furent épargnées ni à Vasquez, ni à John Davis.

La nuit se passa tranquillement, et, le lendemain, Vasquez fit connaissance avec les trois gardiens de la relève que le *Santa-Fé* amenait à l’Île des États.

Il va sans dire que, pendant la nuit, un fort détachement de matelots avait été envoyé à la goélette pour en prendre possession. Kongre, sans cela, eût certainement cherché à s’y rembarquer, et, avec le jusant, il aurait rapidement gagné le large.

Le commandant Lafayate, pour assurer la sécurité des nouveaux gardiens, ne devait donc plus avoir qu’un objectif: purger l’île des bandits qui l’infestaient, et qui, après la mort de Carcante et de Vargas, étaient encore au nombre de treize, compris un chef réduit au désespoir.

Étant donné l’étendue de l’île, les poursuites risquaient d’être longues et même de ne point aboutir. Comment l’équipage du *Santa-Fé* parviendrait-il à la fouiller tout entière?

Assurément Kongre et ses compagnons ne commettraient pas l’imprudence de retourner au cap Saint-Barthélemy, le secret de cette retraite pouvant avoir été surpris. Mais ils disposaient du reste de l’île, et des semaines, des mois s’écouleraient peut-être avant que la bande n’eût été capturée jusqu’au dernier homme. Et pourtant le commandant Lafayate n’aurait point consenti à quitter l’Île des États, avant d’avoir mis les gardiens à l’abri de toute agression, et d’avoir assuré le fonctionnement régulier du phare.

Ce qui pouvait, il est vrai, amener un plus prompt résultat, c’était le dénuement dans lequel Kongre et les siens allaient se trouver. De provisions, il ne leur en restait plus, ni dans la caverne du cap Saint-Barthélemy, ni dans celle de la baie d’Elgor.

Le commandant Lafayate, guidé par Vasquez et John Davis, constata le lendemain dès l’aube que cette dernière, tout au moins, ne contenait aucune réserve, ni en biscuit, ni en salaisons, ni en conserves d’aucune sorte. Tout ce qui restait de vivres avait été transporté à bord de la goélette, qui fut reconduite à la crique par les marins de l’aviso. La caverne ne renfermait plus que des épaves sans grande valeur, literie, vêtements, ustensiles qui furent déposés dans le logement du phare. En admettant que Kongre fût revenu dans la nuit à l’ancien entrepôt de son butin, il n’y aurait rien trouvé de ce qui aurait pu servir à la nourriture de sa bande. Il ne devait même pas avoir d’armes de chasse à sa disposition, étant donné la quantité de fusils et de munitions de ce genre que l’on découvrit à bord du *Carcante*. Il en serait réduit au seul produit de la pêche. Dans de telles conditions, ou ses compagnons et lui se verraient forcés de se rendre, ou ils ne tarderaient pas à mourir de faim.

Cependant les recherches furent aussitôt commencées. Des détachements de matelots, sous les ordres d’un officier ou d’un maître, se dirigèrent, les uns vers l’intérieur de l’île, les autres vers le littoral. Le commandant Lafayate se transporta même au cap Saint-Barthélemy, où on ne reconnut aucune trace de la bande.

Plusieurs jours se passèrent, et pas un des pirates n’avait été signalé, lorsque, dans la matinée du 10 mars, arrivèrent à l’enceinte sept misérables Pécherais, hâves, amaigris, épuisés, que la faim torturait. Recueillis à bord du *Santa-Fé*, où on les réconforta, ils furent mis dans l’impossibilité de fuir.

Quatre jours plus tard, le second Riegal, qui visitait la côte méridionale dans les environs du cap Webster, y découvrit cinq cadavres, parmi lesquels Vasquez put encore reconnaître deux des Chiliens de la bande.

Les débris trouvés sur le sol autour d’eux permirent de constater qu’ils avaient essayé de se nourrir de poissons et de crustacés; mais nulle part ni trace de foyer, ni charbons éteints, ni cendre. Ils n’avaient plus évidemment aucun moyen de se procurer du feu.

Enfin, dans la soirée du lendemain, un peu avant le coucher du soleil, un homme apparut au milieu des rochers bordant la crique, à moins de cinq cents mètres du phare.

C'était presque à la place d'où John Davis et Vasquez, redoutant le départ de la goélette, l'avaient observée la veille de l'arrivée de l'aviso, dans cette soirée au cours de laquelle ce dernier s'était résolu à tenter un suprême effort.

Cet homme c'était Kongre.

Vasquez qui se promenait dans l'enceinte avec les nouveaux gardiens, le reconnut aussitôt, et s'écria:

"Le voilà!… le voilà!…"

À ce cri, le commandant Lafayate, qui arpentait la grève avec le second, se hâta d'accourir.

John Davis et quelques matelots s'étaient élancés à sa suite, et tous, réunis sur le terre-plein, purent voir ce chef survivant seul de la bande qu'il commandait.

Que venait-il faire en cet endroit? Pourquoi se montrait-il? Son intention était-elle de se rendre? Il ne devait cependant point se méprendre sur le sort qui l'attendait. Il serait emmené à Buenos-Ayres et paierait de sa tête toute une existence de vols et de meurtres.

Kongre demeurait immobile sur un rocher plus élevé que les autres et contre lequel la mer venait doucement se briser. Ses regards parcouraient la crique. Près de l'aviso, il pouvait apercevoir cette goélette que la chance lui avait si opportunément envoyée au cap Saint-Barthélemy, et qu'une chance contraire lui avait reprise. Que de pensées devaient se presser dans son cerveau! Que de regrets! Sans l’arrivée de l’aviso, il eût été depuis longtemps dans les mers du Pacifique, où il lui eût été si facile de se soustraire à toutes poursuites et de s’assurer l’impunité…

On le comprendra, le commandant Lafayate tenait à s’emparer de Kongre.

Il donna des ordres, et le second Riegal, suivi d’une demi-douzaine de matelots, se glissa hors de l’enceinte, afin de gagner le bois de hêtres, d’où, en remontant la barrière rocheuse, il leur serait facile d’atteindre le bandit.

Vasquez guidait cette petite troupe par le plus court.

Ils n’avaient pas fait cent pas au delà du terre-plein, qu’une détonation retentit et qu’un corps, projeté dans le vide, venait s’abîmer dans la mer au milieu d’un rejaillissement d’écume.

Kongre avait tiré un revolver de sa ceinture, il l’avait appuyé à son front…

Le misérable s’était fait justice, et maintenant la marée descendante entraînait son cadavre vers le large.

Tel fut le dénouement de ce drame de l’Île des États.

Il va sans dire que, depuis la nuit du 3 mars, le phare n’avait pas cessé de fonctionner.

Les nouveaux gardiens avaient été mis au courant du service par Vasquez.

À présent, il ne restait plus un seul homme de la bande des pirates.

John Davis et Vasquez allaient tous deux embarquer sur l’aviso qui retournait à Buenos-Ayres; de là, le premier serait rapatrié à Mobile, où il ne tarderait sans doute pas à obtenir un commandement, que lui méritaient son énergie, son courage et sa valeur personnelle.

Quant à Vasquez, il irait dans sa ville natale se reposer de tant d'épreuves si résolument supportées… Mais il y reviendrait seul, ses pauvres camarades n'y rentreraient pas avec lui!

Ce fut dans l'après-midi du 18 mars que le commandant Lafayate, certain désormais de la sécurité des nouveaux gardiens, donna le signal du départ. Le soleil se couchait comme il sortait de la baie.

Aussitôt, là-bas, sur le rivage, une lumière jaillit, dont le reflet dansa dans le sillage. Et l'aviso, s'éloignant sur la mer assombrie, semblait emporter avec lui quelques-uns des rayons innombrables que projetait de nouveau le Phare du bout du Monde.

THE GOLDEN VOLCANO

This novel was first published in the original French in 1989 and then into English for the first time in 2006, and so therefore is not available in this edition. However, the adapted version by Verne’s son Michel is available.

The story concerns two cousins, who travel to the Yukon to investigate their late uncle’s claim. Instead they find disaster, until fortune gives them information regarding a volcano filled with gold.

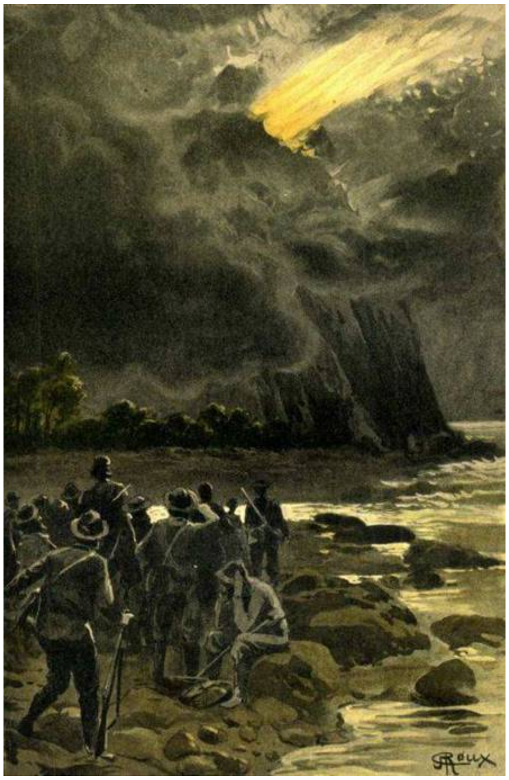

One of the original illustrations from the French edition

LE VOLCAN D'OR

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PREMIÈRE PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

Un oncle d’Amérique

Le 17 mars de l’antépénultième année du dernier siècle, le facteur faisant le service de la rue Jacques-Cartier, à Montréal, remit au numéro 29 une lettre à l’adresse de M. Summy Skim.

Cette lettre disait:

«Me Snubbin présente ses compliments à M. Summy Skim et le prie de passer sans retard à son étude pour une affaire qui l’intéresse.»

A quel propos le notaire désirait-il voir M. Summy Skim? Comme tout le monde à Montréal, celui-ci connaissait maître Snubbin, excellent homme, conseiller sûr et prudent. Canadien de naissance, il dirigeait la meilleure étude de la ville, celle-là même qui, soixante ans auparavant, avait pour titulaire le fameux maître Nick, de son vrai nom Nicolas Sagamore, ce notaire d’origine huronne, si patriotiquement mêlé à la terrible affaire Morgaz, dont le retentissement fut considérable vers 1837.

M. Summy Skim fut assez surpris en recevant la lettre de Me Snubbin. Il se rendit aussitôt à l’invitation qui lui était faite; une demi-heure plus tard, il arrivait sur la place du Marché Bon-Secours et était introduit dans le cabinet du notaire.

«Bien le bonjour, monsieur Skim, dit celui-ci en se levant. Permettez-moi de vous présenter mes devoirs…

— Et moi les miens, répondit Summy Skim en s’asseyant près de la table.

— Vous êtes le premier au rendez-vous, monsieur Skim…

— Le premier, dites-vous, maître Snubbin?… Ne suis-je donc pas seul convoqué dans votre étude?

— Votre cousin, M. Ben Raddle, répondit le notaire, a dû recevoir une lettre identique à la vôtre.

— Alors il ne faut pas dire: «a dû recevoir», mais «recevra», déclara Summy Skim. Ben Raddle n'est point à Montréal en ce moment.

— Va-t-il bientôt revenir? demanda Mc Snubbin.

— Dans trois ou quatre jours.

— Diable!

— La communication que vous avez à nous faire est donc pressante?

— D'une certaine façon, oui, répondit le notaire. Enfin, je vais toujours vous mettre au courant, et vous voudrez bien faire connaître à M. Ben Raddle, dès son retour, ce que je suis chargé de vous apprendre.

Le notaire mit ses lunettes, feuilleta quelques papiers épars sur la table, prit une lettre qu'il tira de son enveloppe et, avant d'en lire le contenu, dit:

— M. Raddle et vous, monsieur Skim, êtes bien les neveux de M. Josias Lacoste?

— En effet, ma mère et celle de Ben Raddle étaient ses sœurs; mais, depuis leur mort, il y a sept ou huit ans, toutes relations ont été rompues avec notre oncle. Des questions d'intérêt nous avaient divisés, il avait quitté le Canada pour l’Europe… Bref! depuis lors, il n’a jamais donné de ses nouvelles, et nous ignorons ce qu’il est devenu…

— Il est mort, déclara Me Snubbin. Je viens précisément de recevoir la nouvelle de son décès survenu le 16 février dernier.

Quoique tous rapports eussent cessé depuis longtemps entre Josias Lacoste et sa famille, cette nouvelle ne laissa pas d’émouvoir Summy Skim. Son cousin Ben Raddle et lui n’avaient plus ni père ni mère, et tous deux, fils uniques, ils en étaient réduits à cette parenté germaine que resserrait une amitié fraternelle. Summy Skim songeait que, de toute la famille, il ne restait plus maintenant que Ben Raddle et lui. A plusieurs reprises, ils avaient cherché à savoir ce qu’était devenu leur oncle, regrettant qu’il eût brisé tous liens avec eux. Ils espéraient encore le revoir dans l’avenir, et voici que la mort tranchait négativement la question.

Josias Lacoste, peu communicatif de sa nature, avait toujours été d’humeur très aventureuse. Son départ du Canada, pour aller faire fortune en courant le monde, remontait à une vingtaine d’années déjà. Célibataire, il possédait un modeste patrimoine qu’il espérait accroître en se lançant dans la spéculation. Avait-il réalisé son espoir? Ne s’était-il pas plutôt ruiné, avec son tempérament bien connu qui le portait à risquer le tout pour le tout? Ses neveux, seuls héritiers, recueilleraient-ils quelques bribes de son héritage?

A vrai dire, Summy Skim n’y avait jamais pensé, et il ne semblait pas qu’il dût y penser davantage, maintenant tout à l’émotion que lui causait la disparition de leur dernier parent.

Me Snubbin, laissant son client à lui-même, attendait que celui-ci posât des questions auxquelles il était prêt à répondre.

— Maître Snubbin, demanda Summy Skim, la mort de notre oncle est du 16 février?

— Du 16 février, monsieur Skim.

— Voilà vingt-neuf jours déjà?..

— Vingt-neuf, en effet. Il n’a pas fallu moins de temps à cette nouvelle pour m’arriver.

— Notre oncle était donc en Europe… au fond de l’Europe, en quelque contrée lointaine? interrogea Summy Skim.

— Nullement, répondit le notaire.

Et il tendit une lettre dont les timbres portaient l’effigie canadienne.

— C’est d’un oncle d’Amérique, tout à fait d’un oncle d’Amérique, comme disent les Européens, que M. Ben Raddle et vous êtes héritiers. Maintenant, cet oncle d’Amérique a-t-il ou n’a-t-il pas tous les caractères classiques de l’emploi? voilà un point qui reste à élucider!

— Ainsi, dit Summy Skim, il se trouvait au Canada sans que nous en ayons eu connaissance?

— Oui, au Canada. Mais dans la partie la plus reculée du Dominion, à la frontière qui sépare notre pays de l’Alaska américaine, et avec laquelle les communications sont aussi lentes que difficiles.

— Le Klondike, je suppose, maître Snubbin?

— Oui, le Klondike, où votre oncle avait été se fixer il y a dix mois environ.

— Dix mois, répéta Summy Skim. Et, en traversant l’Amérique pour se rendre à cette région des mines, il n’a pas même eu la pensée de venir à Montréal serrer la main de ses neveux!..

— Que voulez-vous? répondit le notaire. Sans doute, M. Josias Lacoste était pressé d’arriver au Klondike, comme tant de milliers de ses semblables… je dirai comme tant de milliers de malades en proie à cette fièvre de l’or qui a déjà fait et fera encore d’innombrables victimes! De tous les coins du monde, c’est une ruée vers les placers. Après l’Australie, la Californie; après la Californie, le Transvaal; après le Transvaal, le Klondike; après le Klondike, d’autres territoires aurifères, et il en sera ainsi jusqu’au jour du jugement… je veux dire du gisement dernier!

Mc Snubbin communiqua alors, à Summy Skim tous les renseignements en sa possession. C’était vers le commencement de l’année 1897 que Josias Lacoste avait pris pied à Dawson City, capitale du Klondike, avec l’équipement obligatoire de prospecteur. Depuis juillet 1896, après la découverte de l’or dans le Gold Bottom, un affluent du Hunter, l’attention avait été attirée sur ce district. L’année suivante, Josias Lacoste venait sur ces gisements, où la foule des mineurs affluait déjà, avec l’intention de consacrer à l’acquisition d’un claim le peu d’argent qui lui restait. Quelques jours après son arrivée, il devenait, en effet, propriétaire du claim 129, situé sur le Forty Miles Creek, un tributaire du Yukon, la grande artère canado-alaskienne.

Me Snubbin ajouta:

— Il ne semble pas, d’ailleurs, d’après la lettre que m’a adressée le Gouverneur du Klondike, que ce claim ait donné jusqu’ici tout le profit qu’en attendait M. Josias Lacoste. Toutefois il ne paraît pas être épuisé, et peut-être votre oncle en eût-il finalement retiré les avantages qu’il espérait, si la mort ne l’avait surpris?

— Ce n’est donc pas la misère qui aurait tué notre oncle? demanda Summy Skim.

— Non, répondit le notaire, la lettre ne dit point qu’il en ait été réduit là. Il a succombé au typhus, si redoutable sous ce climat et qui fait tant de victimes. Atteint des premiers germes de la maladie, M. Lacoste a quitté le claim, et c’est à Dawson City qu’il a succombé. Comme on le savait originaire de Montréal, c’est à moi que le Gouverneur a écrit, afin que je recherche la famille et que j’informe celle-ci de son décès. M. Ben Raddle et vous, monsieur Skim, êtes trop, et j’ajouterai trop honorablement, connus à Montréal pour que l’hésitation m’ait été permise, et c’est ainsi que je vous ai invités tous deux à venir prendre en mon étude connaissance des droits que vous tenez du défunt.

Des droits! Summy Skim ébaucha un sourire de mélancolique ironie. Il songeait à ce qu’avait dû être la vie de Josias Lacoste au cours d’une exploitation si difficile et si pénible… N’y avait-il pas engagé ses dernières ressources, après avoir acheté ce claim, peut-être à un prix exorbitant, ainsi que le faisaient trop d’imprudents prospecteurs?.. N’était-il pas même mort endetté, insolvable?.. Ces réflexions faites, Summy Skim de dire au notaire:

— Maître Snubbin, il est possible que notre oncle ait laissé derrière lui une situation obérée… Eh bien, – et je me porte garant de mon cousin Raddle qui ne me désavouera pas – nous soutiendrons l’honneur du nom que nos mères ont porté. S’il y a des sacrifices à faire, nous les ferons sans hésiter… Il faudra donc, et dans le plus court délai, établir par un inventaire…

— Je vous arrête là, mon cher monsieur, interrompit le notaire. Tel que je vous connais, ce sentiment ne m’étonne point de vous. Mais je ne pense pas qu’il y ait lieu de prévoir les sacrifices dont vous parlez. Bien que votre oncle soit vraisemblablement décédé sans fortune, n’oublions pas qu’il était propriétaire de ce claim de Forty Miles Creek, et cette propriété a une valeur qui peut permettre de faire face à toutes les charges de la succession, s’il en existe. Or, cette propriété est devenue la vôtre, indivise entre votre cousin Ben Raddle et vous, puisque vous êtes les seuls parents de M. Josias Lacoste au degré successible.

Me Snubbin ajouta qu’il convenait cependant d’agir avec une certaine prudence. Cette succession ne devait être acceptée que sous bénéfice d’inventaire. On ferait état de l’actif et du passif, et alors les héritiers prendraient un parti en parfaite connaissance de cause.

— Je vais m’occuper de cette affaire, monsieur Skim, conclut-il, et prendre les informations les plus sûres… Somme toute, qui sait?.. Un claim est un claim! même s’il n’a rien ou presque rien produit jusqu’ici… Il suffît d’un heureux coup de pioche pour faire un heureux coup de poche, comme disent les prospecteurs…

— C’est entendu, maître Snubbin, répondit Summy Skim, et, si le claim de notre oncle a quelque valeur, nous chercherons à nous en défaire aux meilleures conditions.

— Sans doute, approuva le notaire, et j’espère que vous serez d’accord là-dessus avec votre cousin.

— J’y compte bien, répliqua Summy Skim. Je ne pense pas qu’il vienne jamais à l’idée de Ben Raddle d’exploiter lui-même…

— Eh! qui sait, monsieur Skim? M. Ben Raddle est ingénieur. C’est un esprit aventureux, audacieux… Il peut être tenté!.. Et si, par exemple, il apprenait que le claim de votre oncle est situé sur une bonne veine…

— Je vous garantis, maître Snubbin, qu’il n’ira point y voir! Du reste, il doit être de retour ici dans trois ou quatre jours… Nous nous consulterons à ce sujet, et nous vous prierons de prendre toutes mesures utiles, soit pour la vente du claim de Forty Miles Creek au plus offrant, soit, ce qui me paraît le plus probable, qu’il y ait lieu de faire honneur aux engagements de notre oncle Josias Lacoste.»

Montreal. Place Jacques-Cartier - le jour du marche

Sur cette conclusion pessimiste, Summy Skim quitta l’étude du notaire, en ajournant sa prochaine visite à deux ou trois jours, et revint à la maison de la rue Jacques-Cartier que son cousin et lui habitaient ensemble.

Summy Skim était fils d’un père d’origine anglo-saxonne et d’une mère franco-canadienne. Sa famille remontait à l’époque de la conquête de 1759. Fixée dans le Bas Canada, district de Montréal, elle y possédait un vaste domaine de rapport, bois, terres et prairies, qui constituait la plus grande part de sa fortune.

Âgé de trente-deux ans alors, d’une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, la physionomie agréable, la constitution robuste de l’homme habitué au grand air des champs, les yeux bleu foncé, la barbe blonde, Summy Skim offrait le type si personnel et si sympathique des Franco-Canadiens, qu’il tenait de sa mère. Il vivait de sa propriété, sans soucis, sans ambition, de l'existence du gentleman-farmer, au milieu de ce privilégié district du Dominion. Sa fortune, sans être considérable, lui permettait de satisfaire ses goûts peu dispendieux, et jamais il n'avait ressenti le désir ni le besoin de l'accroître. Grand amateur de pêche, il avait à sa disposition tout ce réseau hydrographique des tributaires ou sous-tributaires du Saint-Laurent, sans parler des lacs si nombreux sous les latitudes septentrionales de l'Amérique. Passionné pour la chasse, il pouvait s'y livrer en toute liberté au milieu des vastes plaines et des giboyeuses forêts qui occupent la plus grande partie de cette région du Canada.

La maison que possédaient les deux cousins, sans luxe, mais confortable, était située dans l'un des quartiers les plus tranquilles de Montréal, en dehors du centre de l'industrie et du commerce. C'est là que tous deux passaient, non sans attendre impatiemment le retour de là belle saison, ces hivers si rudes du Canada, bien que celui-ci soit sous le même parallèle que le Midi de l'Europe.

Mais des vents terribles, qui ne sont arrêtés par aucune montagne, des bourrasques chargées des froidures de la région arctique, s'y déchaînent sans entrave avec une extraordinaire violence.

Montréal, siège du Gouvernement depuis 1843, aurait pu offrir à Summy Skim l'occasion de se mêler aux affaires publiques. Très indépendant de caractère, dédaigneux du monde officiel, se mêlant peu à la haute société des fonctionnaires, il avait une sainte horreur de la politique. D'ailleurs, il se soumettait très volontiers à la souveraineté plus apparente qu'effective de la Grande-Bretagne et jamais il n'avait pris position au milieu des partis qui divisent le Dominion. C'était, en somme, un philosophe aimant à se laisser vivre, sans ambition d'aucune sorte.

A son avis, toute modification survenue dans son existence n’aurait pu amener qu’ennuis, préoccupations et diminution de bien-être.

On comprendra que ce philosophe n’eût jamais songé au mariage et qu’il continuât à n’y point songer, bien que trente-deux années eussent passé sur sa tête. Peut-être, si sa mère ne lui avait pas été enlevée – on sait combien les femmes aiment à se perpétuer dans leurs petits-enfants – peut-être eût-il fait l’effort nécessaire pour la doter d’une belle-fille. Dans ce cas, aucun doute à cet égard, la femme de Summy Skim aurait partagé ses goûts. Parmi ces nombreuses familles du Canada où les enfants dépassent souvent les deux douzaines, il aurait trouvé, soit à la ville, soit à la campagne, la jeune fille simple et saine qui lui eût convenu. Mais Mme Skim était morte cinq ans plus tôt, trois années après son mari, et, depuis ce moment, on aurait pu parier sans crainte que jamais la moindre velléité matrimoniale n’effleurerait l’esprit de son fils.

Dès les premiers adoucissements de la température de ce rude climat, lorsque le soleil, plus matinal, annonçait le retour de la belle saison, Summy Skim s’empressait de quitter la maison de la rue Jacques-Cartier. Il se rendait alors à sa ferme de Green Valley, à une vingtaine de milles dans le nord de Montréal, sur la rive gauche du Saint-Laurent. Là, il reprenait la vie de campagne, interrompue par les rigueurs d’un hiver qui glace tous les cours d’eau et couvre toutes les plaines d’un épais tapis de neige. Là, il se retrouvait au milieu de ses fermiers, braves gens, depuis un demi-siècle au service de la famille, qui ressentaient une affection sincère doublée d’un dévouement à toute épreuve pour ce maître bon, d’humeur placide, aimant à rendre service, même s’il fallait payer de sa personne. Aussi ne lui épargnaient-ils pas les démonstrations de joie à son arrivée, non plus que de regret à l’heure de son départ.

La propriété de Green Valley rapportait annuellement une trentaine de mille francs que se partageaient les deux cousins, le domaine étant resté indivis entre eux comme la maison de Montréal. On y cultivait en grand un sol très fertile en fourrages et en céréales, dont le rendement s’ajoutait à celui de ces bois magnifiques qui recouvrent encore les territoires du Dominion, principalement dans la partie orientale. La ferme comprenait un ensemble de bâtiments bien aménagés, bien entretenus, écuries, granges, étables, basses-cours, hangars, et possédait un matériel très complet, très perfectionné, répondant à tous les besoins de l’agriculture moderne. A l’entrée d’un vaste enclos, tapissé de pelouses et ombragé d’arbres, un grand pavillon, dont la simplicité n’excluait pas le confort, servait de maison de maître.

Telle était l’habitation où Summy Skim vivait le meilleur de sa vie, et où Ben Raddle venait passer quelques jours hâtifs au cours de la belle saison. Le premier, tout au moins, n’eût pas voulu l’échanger contre n’importe quel château seigneurial du plus opulent des Américains. Si modeste qu’elle fût, elle lui suffisait, et il ne rêvait ni d’agrandissements ni d’embellissements, satisfait de ceux dont la nature fait tous les frais. Là s’écoulaient ses journées remplies par les exercices cynégétiques et ses nuits toujours favorisées d’un paisible sommeil.

Contentus sua sorte, ainsi que le recommande la sagesse, Summy Skim se trouvait assez riche du revenu de ses terres qu’il faisait valoir avec autant de méthode que d’intelligence. Toutefois, s’il n’entendait pas laisser sa fortune dépérir, il ne se souciait en aucune façon de l’accroître. Pour rien au monde, il ne se fût jeté dans l’une quelconque de ces innombrables affaires qui pullulent dans la trépidante Amérique, spéculations commerciales et industrielles, chemins de fer, banques, mines, sociétés maritimes ou autres. Non! Ce sage avait horreur de tout ce qui présente des risques ou simplement des aléas. S’astreindre à supputer de bonnes ou mauvaises chances, se sentir à la merci d’éventualités qu’on ne peut ni empêcher, ni prévoir, se réveiller le matin avec cette pensée: suis-je plus riche ou plus pauvre que la veille?.. cela lui eût paru abominable, et il aurait préféré, ou ne jamais s’endormir, ou ne jamais se réveiller.

C’était là le très marqué contraste entre les deux cousins. Qu’ils fussent nés de deux sœurs et qu’ils eussent tous deux du sang français dans les veines, à cela nul doute. Mais, si le père de Summy Skim était de nationalité anglo-saxonne, le père de Ben Raddle était de nationalité américaine, et il existe assurément entre l’Anglais et le Yankee une différence qui s’accentue avec le temps. Jonathan et John Bull, s’ils sont parents, ne le sont plus qu’à un degré fort éloigné, et cette parenté, semble-t-il, finira par s’effacer entièrement.

Que la diversité des origines ou toute autre raison fût cause de l’opposition de leurs caractères, le certain était que les deux cousins, très unis, d’ailleurs, et résolus à ne jamais se quitter, n’avaient ni les mêmes goûts, ni le même tempérament.

Ben Raddle, de moins grande taille, brun de cheveux et de barbe, de quatre ans moins âgé que Skim, ne regardait pas l’existence sous le même angle que lui. Tandis que l’un se contentait de vivre en bon propriétaire, et de surveiller ses récoltes, l’autre se passionnait pour le mouvement industriel de son époque. Il avait fait ses études d’ingénieur et déjà pris part à quelques-uns de ces travaux prodigieux dans lesquels les Américains cherchent à l’emporter par l’audace des conceptions et la hardiesse de l’exécution. En même temps, il ambitionnait la richesse. Non pas la petite aisance de nos médiocres millionnaires, mais le fleuve d’or des milliardaires américains. Les fabuleuses fortunes des Gould, des Astor, des

Vanderbilt, des Rockefeller, des Carnegie, des Morgan et de tant d'autres surexcitaient son cerveau. Il rêvait de ces occasions extraordinaires, capables de faire monter en quelques jours au Capitule, comme parfois elles précipitent en quelques heures de la roche tarpéienne. Aussi, tandis que Summy Skim ne se déplaçait guère que pour ses excursions à Green Valley, Ben Raddle avait-il maintes fois couru les États-Unis, traversé l'Atlantique, visité une partie de l'Europe, sans avoir jamais pu saisir jusqu'ici l'unique cheveu de l'occasion. Il était récemment revenu d'un assez long voyage d'outre-mer, et, depuis son retour, il ne prenait pas une minute de repos, guettant sans se lasser l'énorme affaire à laquelle il pourrait apporter son concours.

Cette opposition de leurs goûts était un gros chagrin pour Summy Skim. Il redoutait sans cesse que Ben Raddle ne fût entraîné à le quitter, ou du moins à engloutir dans une entreprise aventureuse le modeste avoir qui leur assurait à tous deux l'indépendance et la liberté.

C'était là le thème d'incessantes discussions entre les deux cousins.

«Mais enfin, Ben, disait Summy, à quoi sert de se casser la tête dans ce que tu appelles si pompeusement les grandes affaires?

— Cela sert à devenir riche, à devenir très riche, Summy, répondait Ben Raddle.

— Eh, cousin, à quoi bon être si riche? Il n'en faut pas tant pour être heureux à Green Valley. Que ferais-tu de tant d'argent?

— Des affaires nouvelles, et plus importantes, cousin.

— Dans le but?..

— D’amasser encore plus d’or, que je consacrerai à des affaires plus importantes encore.

— Et ainsi de suite?

— Et ainsi de suite.

— Jusqu’à la mort, sans doute? suggérait ironiquement Summy Skim.

— Jusqu’à la mort, Summy,» concluait Ben Raddle sans s’émouvoir, tandis que son cousin, ne trouvant rien à répondre, levait ses bras au ciel avec découragement.

CHAPITRE II

Ou Summy Skim s’engage malgré loi sur la voie des aventures.

Rentre chez lui, Summy Skim prit les dispositions que lui imposait la mort de Josias Lacoste. Il s’occupa des faire part à envoyer aux amis de la famille, du deuil qu’il fallait prendre, du service religieux qu’il convenait de commander à la paroisse.

Quant au règlement des affaires personnelles de son oncle, il y aurait lieu de s’en entretenir sérieusement avec Me Snubbin quand les deux cousins se seraient mis d’accord, et lorsque le notaire aurait reçu les renseignements demandés par dépêche lui permettant de dresser l’inventaire de la succession du défunt.

Ben Raddle ne rentra à Montréal que cinq jours plus tard, dans la matinée du 22 mars, après un mois de séjour à New York, où il avait étudié pour le compte d’un puissant syndicat le gigantesque projet de jeter un pont sur l’Hudson entre la Métropole et le New Jersey.

Ben Raddle s’était attelé de tout son cœur à ce travail de nature à passionner un ingénieur. Mais il ne semblait pas que la construction du pont dût être prochainement entreprise. Si on en parlait beaucoup dans les journaux, si on l’étudiait non moins sur le papier, une année sans doute, deux peut-être s’écouleraient avant le commencement effectif des travaux. Aussi Ben Raddle s’était-il décidé à revenir.

Son absence avait paru longue à Summy Skim. Combien il regrettait de ne pouvoir convertir son cousin à ses propres idées, de ne pouvoir lui faire aimer son existence sans soucis! Cette grande affaire de l’Hudson Bridge ajoutait encore à ses inquiétudes. Si Ben Raddle y prenait part, ne le retiendrait-elle pas longtemps, des années peut-être, à New York? Et alors Summy Skim serait seul, dans la maison commune, seul à la ferme de Green Valley!

Dès que l’ingénieur fut de retour, son cousin lui apprit la mort de leur oncle Josias, décédé à Dawson City, en laissant pour toute fortune le claim n° 129 situé au bord du Forty Miles Creek, sur le territoire du Klondike.

A ce dernier nom, très retentissant alors, l’ingénieur dressa l’oreille. Vraisemblablement, il n’accueillait pas avec la belle indifférence d’un Summy Skim la perspective d’être désormais propriétaire d’un gisement aurifère. Quelle que fût sa pensée à cet égard, d’ailleurs, il ne l’exprima pas sur le moment.

Avec son habitude d’étudier les choses à fond, il désirait réfléchir avant de se prononcer.

Vingt-quatre heures lui suffirent à peser le pour et le contre de la situation, et, dès le lendemain, au cours du déjeuner, il interpellait *ex abrupto* Summy Skim, qui le trouvait singulièrement absorbé:

«Dis donc, cousin, si nous parlions un peu du Klondike?

— S’il ne s’agit que d’en parler un peu!..

— Un peu… ou beaucoup, Summy.

— A ton aise! mon cher Ben.

— Le notaire ne t’a pas communiqué les titres de propriété de ce claim 129?

— Non, répondit Summy Skim, je n’ai pas pensé qu’il fût utile d’en prendre connaissance.

— Je te retrouve bien là, mon bon Summy! s’écria Ben Raddle en riant.

— Pourquoi cela? objecta Summy. Il n’y a pas lieu, ce me semble, de tant se tracasser pour cette affaire. C’est très simple: ou cet héritage a quelque valeur, et nous le liquiderons au mieux de nos intérêts, ou, ce qui me parait infiniment plus probable, il n’en a aucune, et nous ne nous en occuperons même pas.

— Tu as raison, accorda Ben Raddle. Mais rien ne presse… Avec ces placers, on ne sait jamais… On les croit pauvres, épuisés… et un coup de pioche vous donne une fortune.

A ces mots, Summy Skim sentit poindre un commencement d’inquiétude.

— Eh bien, mon cher Ben, dit-il en s’échauffant, c’est précisément ce que doivent savoir les gens de la partie, ceux qui exploitent en ce moment ces fameux gisements du Klondike. Si le claim de Forty Miles Creek vaut quelque chose, nous essaierons, je le répète, de nous en défaire au prix le plus avantageux… Mais comme il est probable, n’est-ce pas? que notre oncle Lacoste ait quitté ce monde juste au moment d’être millionnaire!..

— C’est ce qui reste à déterminer, répondit Ben Raddle. Le métier de prospecteur est fécond en surprises de ce genre. On est toujours à la veille de découvrir une heureuse veine, et, par ce mot de veine, je n’entends pas dire la chance, mais le filon aurifère où les pépites abondent. Enfin il est, tu ne le contesteras pas, de ces chercheurs d’or qui n’ont point eu à se plaindre…

— Oui, répondit Summy Skim, un sur cent, sur mille, sur cent mille plutôt, et au prix de quels soucis, de quelles fatigues, et l’on peut ajouter de quelles misères!..

— Voilà de belles phrases, Summy, dit Ben Raddle, mais rien que des phrases. Moi, ce n’est pas sur de la littérature que j’entends raisonner, mais sur des faits, rien que des faits.

Summy Skim, sentant, sans autrement s’en étonner, où son cousin voulait en venir, se raccrocha au thème familier, et l’éternelle discussion recommença une fois de plus.

— Mon cher ami, est-ce que l’héritage que nous ont laissé nos parents n’est pas suffisant? Est-ce que notre patrimoine ne nous assure pas l’indépendance et le bien-être?.. Si je te parle ainsi, c’est que je m’aperçois que tu donnes à cette affaire plus d’importance qu’elle n’en mérite à mon avis… Voyons, ne sommes-nous pas assez riches?

— On ne l’est jamais assez quand on peut l’être davantage.

— A moins qu’on ne le soit trop, Ben, comme certains milliardaires, qui ont autant d’ennuis que de millions, et qui prennent plus de peine à conserver leur fortune qu’ils n’en ont eu à l’acquérir.

— Allons, allons, répondit Ben Raddle, la philosophie a beau être une belle chose, il ne faut pas en abuser. D’ailleurs, ne me fais pas dire ce que je ne dis point. Je ne m’attends pas à trouver des tonnes d’or dans le claim de notre oncle Josias. Je veux me renseigner, voilà tout.

— Nous nous renseignerons, mon cher Ben, c’est convenu, et fasse le ciel que, informations prises, nous ne nous trouvions pas en présence d’une situation embarrassée, à laquelle nous devrions faire face par respect pour notre famille… Dans ce cas, j’ai assuré Me Snubbin…

— Tu as bien fait, Summy, interrompit Ben Raddle. Mais il me parait superflu d’envisager cette éventualité qui ne se réalisera probablement pas. S’il y avait des créanciers, ils se seraient déjà fait connaître, sois tranquille. Causons plutôt du Klondike. Tu dois bien penser que je n’en suis pas à entendre parler de ces gisements. Bien que l’exploitation en remonte à deux ans à peine, j’ai lu tout ce qu’on a publié sur les richesses de ces territoires, et je puis te dire des choses qui troubleront ta superbe indifférence. Après l’Australie, la Californie, l’Afrique du Sud, on pouvait supposer que notre globe ne contenait pas d’autres placers. Et voici que, dans cette partie du Nord-Amérique, sur les confins de l’Alaska et du Dominion, le hasard en fait découvrir de nouveaux. Il semble d’ailleurs que ces contrées septentrionales de l’Amérique soient privilégiées sous ce rapport. Non seulement il existe des mines d’or au Klondike, mais on en a trouvé dans l’Ontario, le Michipicoten, la Colombie anglaise, où de puissantes compagnies se sont constituées, telles que la War Eagle, la Standard, le Sullivan Group, l’Alhabarca, le Ferm, le Syndicate, la Sans Poel, le Cariboo, le Deer Trail, la Géorgie Reed, et tant d’autres, dont les actions sont en plus-values constantes, sans parler des mines d’argent, de cuivre, de manganèse, do fer, de charbon. En ce qui concerne plus spécialement le Klondike, songe, Summy, à l’étendue que mesure cette région aurifère, deux cent cinquante lieues de longueur, sur environ quarante de largeur, et cela rien que sur le territoire du Dominion, en négligeant les gisements de l’Alaska. N’est-ce pas là un immense champ ouvert à l’activité humaine, le plus vaste, peut-être, qui ait été reconnu à la surface de la terre? Qui sait si les produits de cette région ne se chiffreront pas un jour, non par millions, mais par milliards!

Ben Raddle aurait pu longtemps parler sur ce sujet, Summy Skim ne l’écoutait plus. Ce dernier se contenta de dire en haussant les épaules:

— Allons, Ben, c’est trop visible, tu as la fièvre…

— Comment?.. j’ai la fièvre?

— Oui, la fièvre de l’or, comme tant d’autres, et c’est une fièvre qu’on ne guérit pas avec le sulfate de quinine, car elle n’est malheureusement pas intermittente.

— Rassure-toi, mon cher Summy, répondit Ben Raddle en riant, mon pouls ne bat pas plus vite que d’ordinaire. Je me reprocherais, d’ailleurs, de compromettre ta magnifique santé, en t’exposant au contact d’un fiévreux…

— Oh! moi!.. je suis vacciné, repartit sur le même ton Summy Skim, mais je te vois avec peine, je l’avoue, te perdre dans des songes creux qui ne peuvent mener à rien de bon, et t’emballer…

— Où vois-tu cela? interrompit Ben Raddle. Il n’est question pour le moment, que d’étudier une affaire et d’en tirer profit si on le peut. Tu penses que notre oncle n’a guère été heureux dans ses spéculations. Il est possible, en effet, que ce claim de Forty Miles Creek lui ait rapporte plus de boue que de pépites. Mais peut-être n’avait-il pas les ressources nécessaires pour l’exploiter. Peut-être n’opérait-il pas avec méthode comme l’aurait pu faire…

— Un ingénieur, n’est-il pas vrai, Ben?

— Sans doute, un ingénieur…

— Toi… par exemple?

— Pourquoi pas? répondit Ben Raddle. En tout cas, ce n’est pas de cela qu’il est actuellement question. Il s’agit de se renseigner, tout simplement. Lorsque nous saurons à quoi nous en tenir sur la valeur du claim, nous verrons ce qu’il conviendra de faire.»

La conversation en resta là. En somme, il n’y avait rien à objecter aux propositions de Ben Raddle. Il était naturel de se renseigner avant de prendre une décision. Que l’ingénieur fût un homme sérieux, intelligent, pratique, cela ne pouvait être mis en doute. Summy n’en était pas moins affligé et inquiet, en voyant avec quelle sorte d’avidité son cousin se jetait sur cette proie si inopinément offerte à son ambition. Parviendrait-il à le retenir? Assurément, en aucun cas, Summy Skim ne se séparerait de Ben Raddle. Leurs intérêts resteraient communs, quoi qu’il pût arriver. Mais il ne se faisait pas faute de pester contre la mauvaise idée qu’avait eue l’oncle Josias d’aller chercher fortune au Klondike, où l’attendaient la misère et la mort, et il en arrivait à désirer que les renseignements demandés fussent tels qu’il n’y eût pas lieu de donner suite à cette affaire.

Dans l’après-midi, Ben Raddle se rendit à l’étude du notaire et prit connaissance des titres de propriété, qu’il trouva parfaitement en règle. Un plan à grande échelle permettait de préciser avec exactitude la situation du claim 129. On le trouvait à quarante-deux kilomètres de Fort Cudahy, bourgade fondée par la Compagnie de la baie d’Hudson, sur la rive droite du Forty Miles Creek, l’un des innombrables affluents du Yukon, ce grand fleuve qui, après avoir arrosé les territoires occidentaux du Dominion, traverse toute l’Alaska, et dont les eaux, anglaises dans son haut cours, sont devenues américaines en aval, depuis que cette vaste région a été cédée par les Russes aux États-Unis.

«Vous n’avez pas remarqué une particularité assez curieuse, maître Snubbin, dit Ben Raddle après avoir examiné la carte. Le Forty Miles Creek coupe, avant de se jeter dans le Yukon, le 141e méridien choisi comme ligne de démarcation entre le Dominion et l’Alaska, et ce méridien se confond avec la limite occidentale de notre claim qui est ainsi mathématiquement situé à la frontière commune des deux contrées.

— En effet, approuva le notaire.

— Vraiment, reprit Ben Raddle en poursuivant son examen, cette situation ne me paraît pas mauvaise à première vue. Il n’y a pas de raison pour que le Forty Miles Creek soit moins favorisé que la Klondike River ou son affluent la Bonanza, ou ses sous-affluents la Victoria, l’Eldorado et autres rios si productifs et si recherchés des mineurs!

Ben Raddle dévorait littéralement du regard cette merveilleuse contrée dont le réseau hydrographique roule à profusion le précieux métal, qui, au taux de Dawson City, vaut deux millions trois cent quarante-deux mille francs la tonne!

— Excusez-moi, monsieur Raddle, hasarda le notaire. Oserais-je vous demander si votre intention est d’exploiter vous-même le placer de feu Josias Lacoste?

Ben Raddle eut un geste évasif.

— C’est que M. Skim… insinua Me Snubbin.

— Summy n’a pu se prononcer, déclara nettement Ben Raddle, et moi-même je réserve mon opinion jusqu’au moment où j’aurai tous les renseignements utiles… et, s’il le faut, vu par moi-même…

— Songeriez-vous donc à entreprendre ce long voyage du Klondike? demanda Me Snubbin en hochant la tête.

— Pourquoi pas? Quoi qu’en puisse penser Summy, l’affaire, à mon avis, vaut qu’on se dérange… Une fois à Dawson City, on serait fixé… Ne fût-ce que pour vendre ce claim, pour en évaluer la valeur, vous en conviendrez avec moi, maître Snubbin, le mieux serait de l’avoir visité.

— Est-ce bien nécessaire? observa Me Snubbin.

— Ne serait-ce que pour trouver un acquéreur?

Le notaire allait répondre. Il en fut empêché par l’entrée d’un employé porteur d’une dépêche.

— Si ce n’est que cela, dit-il après l’avoir ouverte, voici qui pourra vous éviter les fatigues d’un tel voyage, monsieur Raddle.

Ce disant, Mc Snubbin tendit à Ben Raddle un télégramme daté de huit jours, lequel, après avoir été porté de Dawson City à Vancouver, arrivait à Montréal par les fils du Dominion.

Aux termes de ce télégramme, l’*Anglo-American Transportation and Trading C° (Chicago-Dawson),* syndicat américain déjà possesseur do huit claims dont l’exploitation était dirigée par le capitaine Healey, faisait, en effet, pour l’acquisition du claim 129 de Forty Miles Creek, une offre ferme de cinq mille dollars, qui seraient envoyés à Montréal dès le reçu du télégramme d’acceptation.

Ben Raddle avait pris la dépêche et la lisait avec le même soin qu’il venait de mettre à étudier les titres de propriété.

— Qu’en dites-vous, monsieur Raddle? demanda le notaire.

— Rien, répondit l’ingénieur. Le prix offert est-il suffisant? Cinq mille dollars pour un claim du Klondike!

— Cinq mille dollars sont toujours bons à prendre.

— Moins que dix mille, maître Snubbin.

— C’est évident. Je présume toutefois que M. Skim…

— Summy sera toujours de mon avis, si je puis appuyer cet avis de bonnes raisons. Et, si je lui prouve qu’il est nécessaire d’entreprendre ce voyage, il l’entreprendra, n’en doutez pas.

— Lui?.. s’écria Me Snubbin, l’homme le plus heureux, le plus indépendant que jamais notaire ait rencontré dans l’exercice de sa profession!

— Oui, cet heureux, cet indépendant, si je lui montre qu’il peut doubler son bonheur et son indépendance… Que risquerions-nous, après tout, puisque nous serons toujours en mesure d’accepter la somme offerte par ce syndicat?»

Ben Raddle, après avoir quitté l’étude, prit par le plus court, tout en réfléchissant au parti qu’il convenait d’adopter. Quand il arriva à la maison de la rue Jacques-Cartier, son opinion était faite. Il monta aussitôt à la chambre de son cousin.

«Eh bien, demanda celui-ci, tu as vu Me Snubbin? Y a-t-il du nouveau?

— Du nouveau, oui, Summy, et des nouvelles.

— Bonnes?

— Excellentes.

— Tu as examiné les titres de propriété?..

— Comme de juste, ils sont en règle. Nous sommes bien propriétaires du claim 129.

— Voilà qui va joliment accroître notre fortune! observa en riant Summy Skim.

— Plus que tu ne penses, peut-être, déclara l'ingénieur d'un ton sérieux.

Et Ben Raddle tendit à son cousin la dépêche de l'*Anglo-Américain Transportation and Trading Company*.

— Mais c'est parfait, s'écria celui-ci. Il n'y a pas à hésiter. Vendons notre claim à cette obligeante société, et le plus vite possible encore!..

— Pourquoi céder au prix de cinq mille dollars ce qui peut en valoir bien davantage?.. ajouta Ben Raddle.

— Cependant, mon cher Ben…

— Eh bien! ton cher Ben te répond qu’on ne traite pas ainsi les affaires. Pour agir en connaissance de cause, il faut avoir vu, vu de ses propres yeux, ce qui s’appelle vu.

— Tu en es toujours là?..

— Plus que jamais. Réfléchis donc, Summy. Si l’on nous fait cette proposition d’achat, c’est que l’on connaît la valeur du claim, c’est que cette valeur est infiniment plus considérable. Il ne manque pas d’autres placers disponibles, le long des rios ou dans les montagnes du Klondike.

— Qu’en sais-tu?..

— Et, poursuivit Ben Raddle sans s’occuper de l’interruption, si une société qui en possède déjà plusieurs veut acquérir le nôtre, c’est qu’elle a, non pas cinq mille raisons pour offrir cinq mille dollars, mais dix mille, mais cent mille…

— Un million, dix millions, cent milliards, continua Summy railleur. Vraiment, Ben, tu jongles avec les chiffres.

— Les chiffres, c’est la vie, mon cher, et je trouve que tu ne chiffres pas assez…

— C’est peut-être que tu chiffres trop.

— Voyons, mon cher Summy, c’est très sérieusement que je te parle. J’hésitais à partir. Depuis l’arrivée de cette dépêche, je suis décidé à porter ma réponse en personne.

— Quoi!.. tu veux partir pour le Klondike?..

— Oui.

— Sans avoir pris de renseignements?..

— Je me renseignerai sur place.

— Et tu vas encore me laisser seul?..

— Non, puisque tu m’accompagneras.

— Moi?..

— Toi.

— Jamais!..

— Si, car l’affaire nous regarde tous deux.

— Je te donnerai mes pouvoirs.

— Je les refuse, c’est ta personne que je veux.

— Un voyage de quinze cents lieues!…

— Pas du tout!.. Dix-huit cents seulement.

— Seigneur!.. Et qui durera?..

— Ce qu’il devra durer. Il peut arriver, en effet, que nous ayons intérêt, non pas à vendre notre claim, mais à l’exploiter.

— Comment… à l’exploiter?.. s’écria Summy Skim éperdu. Alors, c’est toute une année…

— Deux, s’il le faut.

— Deux ans!.. deux ans!.. répétait Summy Skim.

— Qu’importé!.. s’écria Ben Raddle. Lorsque chaque mois, chaque jour, chaque heure accroîtra notre fortune!..

— Non, non!.. s’exclamait Summy Skim, en se blottissant, en s’enfonçant dans son fauteuil, comme un homme résolu à ne jamais le quitter.

Mais il avait affaire à forte partie. Ben Raddle, bien certainement, ne lui ferait grâce que lorsqu’il aurait emporté son consentement de haute lutte.

— Quant à moi, Summy, conclut-il, je suis décidé à partir pour Dawson City, et je ne puis croire que tu refuses de m’accompagner. D’ailleurs, tu as été trop sédentaire jusqu’ici!.. Il faut un peu courir le monde…

— Eh!.. fit Summy Skim, j’aurais bien d’autres contrées à visiter en Amérique ou en Europe, si j’en avais le goût. Assurément, je ne commencerai pas par m’enfoncer jusqu’au cœur de cet abominable Klondike.

— Qui te paraîtra charmant, Summy, lorsque tu auras constaté par toi-même qu’il est semé de poudre d’or et pavé de pépites.

— Ben, mon cher Ben, supplia Summy Skim, tu me fais peur!.. oui, tu me fais peur!.. Tu veux t’embarquer là dans une affaire où tu ne trouveras que périls et désillusions.

— Nous le verrons bien!..

— A commencer par ce maudit claim qui n’a sans doute pas la valeur d’un carré de choux!..

— Alors pourquoi cette compagnie en offrirait-elle plusieurs milliers de dollars?..

— Et quand je songe, Ben, qu’il faut l’aller chercher, ce claim dérisoire, dans un pays où la température tombe à 50 degrés au-dessous de zéro!..

— Nous ferons du feu.

A tout, Ben Raddle trouvait la réplique. La détresse de son cousin le laissait complètement insensible.

— Mais Green Valley, Ben?.. soupirait celui-ci.

— Bon!.. répliquait Ben Raddle, le gibier ne manque pas aux plaines, ni le poisson aux rios du Klondike. Tu chasseras, tu pécheras dans un pays nouveau qui te réserve des surprises.

— Mais nos fermiers, nos braves fermiers qui nous attendent!.. gémissait Summy.

— Auront-ils lieu de regretter notre absence, lorsque nous serons revenus assez riches pour leur bâtir d’autres fermes et pour acheter tout le district?»

Finalement, Summy Skim dut s’avouer vaincu… Non, il ne laisserait pas son cousin partir seul pour le Klondike… Il l’accompagnerait, ne fût-ce que pour l’en ramener plus vite…

Aussi, ce jour-là, une dépêche s’envola-t-elle sur les fils télégraphiques du Dominion, annonçant au capitaine Healey, directeur de la *Transportation and Trading Company, Dawson City, Klondike*, le prochain départ de MM. Ben Raddle et Summy Skim, propriétaires du claim 129.

CHAPITRE III

En route.

Par le Pacific Canadian railway, touristes, commerçants, émigrants, chercheurs d’or, à destination du Klondike, peuvent se transporter directement sans changer de ligne, sans quitter le Dominion, de Montréal à Vancouver. Débarqués dans cette métropole colombienne, il leur reste à choisir entre différentes routes, terrestres, fluviales ou maritimes, et à combiner les divers modes de transport possibles, bateaux, chevaux, voitures, plus le mode pédestre dans la majeure partie du parcours.

Le départ étant résolu, Summy Skim n’aurait qu’à s’en rapporter, pour tous les détails du voyage, l’acquisition du matériel, le choix des routes, à son cousin Ben Raddle. Ce serait proprement l’affaire de cet ambitieux mais intelligent ingénieur, seul promoteur de l’entreprise, à qui en reviendraient et qui en acceptait toutes les responsabilités.

En premier lieu, Ben Raddle observa très justement que le départ ne pouvait être retardé. Il importait que les héritiers de Josias Lacoste fussent rendus au Klondike au début de l’été, un été qui ne réchauffe que pendant très peu de mois cette région hyperboréenne, située à la limite du cercle polaire arctique.

Eu effet, lorsqu’il consulta le code des lois minières canadiennes, applicables au district du Yukon, il y lut un certain article 9 ainsi conçu:

«Tout claim retournera au domaine public, qui restera sans être creusé pendant quinze fois vingt-quatre heures, durant la belle saison (définie par le commissaire), à moins d’une permission spéciale de ce dernier.»

Or, le début de la belle saison, pour peu qu’il soit précoce, se fait dans la seconde moitié de mai. Donc, à cette époque, si l’exploitation du claim 129 chômait plus de quinze jours, la propriété de Josias Lacoste reviendrait au Dominion, et, très vraisemblablement, le syndicat américain ne manquerait pas de signaler à l’Administration tout motif de déchéance de la propriété qu’il convoitait.

«Tu comprends, Summy, déclara Ben Raddle, qu’il ne faut pas nous laisser devancer.

— Je comprends tout ce que tu veux que je comprenne, mon cher ami, répondit Summy Skim.

— D’autant plus que j’ai parfaitement raison, ajouta l’ingénieur.

— Je n’en doute pas, Ben. D’ailleurs, je ne répugne en aucune façon à quitter Montréal tout de suite, si cela doit nous permettre d’y revenir plus tôt.

— Nous ne serons au Klondike que le temps nécessaire, Summy.

— C’est entendu, Ben. A quelle date le départ?..

— Le 2 avril, répondit Ben Raddle. Dans une dizaine de jours.

Summy Skim, les bras croisés, la tête penchée, eut fort envie de s’écrier: «Quoi!.. Si tôt!..» Mais il se tut, puisque gémir n’eût servi à rien.

Au surplus, Ben Raddle agissait sagement en fixant le 2 avril comme date extrême du départ. Son itinéraire sous les yeux, il s’embarqua dans une série d’observations, hérissées de chiffres qu’il maniait avec une incontestable compétence.

— Pour nous rendre au Klondike, dit-il, nous n’avons pas à choisir entre deux routes, puisqu’il n’y en a qu’une. Peut-être un jour ira-t-on rejoindre le Yukon en passant par Edmonton et le fort Saint-John et en suivant la Peace River, qui traverse, au nord-est de la Colombie, le district du Cassiar…

— Une contrée giboyeuse s’il en fut, ai-je entendu dire, interrompit Summy Skim, s’abandonnant à ses rêves cynégétiques. Au fait, pourquoi ne pas suivre ce chemin?

— Parce qu’il nous faudrait, en quittant Edmonton, faire quatorze cents kilomètres par terre, à travers des régions à peu près inexplorées.

— Alors quelle direction comptes-tu adopter, Ben?

— Celle de Vancouver, sans aucun doute. Voici des chiffres très exacts qui te fixeront sur la longueur de l’itinéraire: De Montréal à Vancouver on compte quatre mille six cent soixante-quinze kilomètres et, de Vancouver à Dawson City, deux mille quatre cent quatre-vingt-neuf.

— Soit au total, dit Summy Skim, en chiffrant l’opération: Cinq et neuf quatorze, je retiens un; huit et huit seize, je retiens un; sept et quatre onze, je retiens un; cinq et deux, sept… Soit sept mille cent soixante-quatre kilomètres.

— Exactement, Summy.

— Eh bien, Ben, si nous rapportons autant de kilogrammes d’or que nous aurons fait de kilomètres!..

— Cela vaudra, au taux actuel de deux mille trois cent quarante francs le kilogramme, seize millions sept cent soixante-trois mille sept cent soixante francs.

— Pourvu, murmura Summy Skim entre ses dents, que nous rapportions seulement les sept cent soixante francs!

— Tu dis, Summy?

— Rien, mon cher Ben. Absolument rien.

— Une telle somme, reprit Ben Raddle, ne me surprendrait pas. Le géographe John Minn n’a-t-il pas déclaré que l’Alaska produirait plus d’or que la Californie, dont le rendement a été pourtant do quatre cent cinq millions, rien que dans l’année mil huit cent soixante et un? Pourquoi le Klondike n’ajouterait-il pas sa, bonne part aux vingt-cinq milliards de francs qui composent la fortune aurifère de notre globe?

— Ça me paraît extrêmement probable, approuva Summy avec une sage prudence. Mais, Ben, il faut songer aux préparatifs… On ne s’en va pas là-bas, dans ce pays invraisemblable, en n’emportant qu’une chemise de rechange et deux paires de chaussettes.

— Ne t’inquiète de rien, Summy, je me charge de tout. Tu n’auras qu’à monter dans le train à Montréal, pour en descendre à Vancouver. Quant à nos préparatifs, ce ne seront pas ceux de l’émigrant qui, errant à l’aventure dans une contrée lointaine, est obligé d’avoir un matériel considérable. Le nôtre est tout rendu. Nous le trouverons sur le claim de l’oncle Josias. Nous n’avons à nous occuper que du transport de nos personnes…

— Eh! c’est quelque chose! s’écria Summy Skim. Elles valent la peine que l’on prenne certaines précautions… surtout contre le froid… brrrrr… je me sens déjà gelé jusqu’au bout des ongles.

— Allons donc! Summy, lorsque nous arriverons à Dawson City la belle saison battra son plein.

— Mais la mauvaise reviendra.

— Sois tranquille, répondit Ben Raddle. Même l’hiver tu ne manqueras de rien. Bons vêtements, bonne nourriture. Tu reviendras plus gras qu’au départ.

— Ah! non! je n’en demande pas tant, protesta Summy Skim, qui avait pris le parti de se résigner. Je te préviens que, si je dois engraisser seulement de dix livres, je reste!

— Plaisante, Summy, plaisante tant que tu voudras… mais aie confiance.

— Oui…, la confiance est obligatoire. Il est donc entendu que, le 2 avril, nous nous mettrons en route en qualité d’eldoradores…

— Oui… Ce délai me suffira pour nos préparatifs.

— Alors, Ben, puisque j’ai une dizaine de jours devant moi, j’irai les passer à la campagne.

— A ta guise, approuva Ben Raddle, bien qu’il ne doive pas encore faire beau à Green Valley.

Summy Skim aurait pu répondre qu’en tout cas ce temps-là vaudrait celui du Klondike. Mais il préféra s’abstenir, et se contenta d’affirmer qu’il aurait grand plaisir à se retrouver pendant quelques jours au milieu de ses fermiers, à revoir ses champs, même blancs de neige, les belles forêts toutes chargées de givre, les rios cuirassés de glace et la masse solidifiée des embâcles du Saint-Laurent. Et puis, par les grands froids, l'occasion ne manque point au chasseur d'abattre quelque superbe pièce, poil ou plume, sans parler des fauves, ours, pumas ou autres, qui rôdent aux environs. C'était comme un adieu que Summy Skim voulait adresser à tous les hôtes de la région…

— Tu devrais m'accompagner, Ben, dit-il.

— Y penses-tu? répondit l'ingénieur. Et qui s'occuperait des préparatifs de départ?»

Dès le lendemain, Summy Skim prit le chemin de fer, trouva à la gare de Green Valley un «stage» bien attelé, et, dans l'après-midi, descendit à la ferme. Comme toujours, Summy Skim se montra très sensible à l'affectueux accueil qu'il y reçut. Mais, lorsque les fermiers connurent le motif d'une si précoce visite, lorsqu'ils apprirent que tout l'été se passerait sans que leur maître fût avec eux, ils ne cachèrent point le chagrin que leur causait celle nouvelle.

«Oui, mes amis, dit Summy Skim, Ben Raddle et moi nous allons au Klondike, un pays du diable, qui est à tous les diables, si loin qu'il ne faut pas moins de deux mois, rien que pour y arriver et autant pour en revenir.

— Et tout cela pour ramasser des pépites! dit un des paysans en haussant les épaules.

— Quand on en ramasse, ajouta un vieux philosophe, qui secoua la tète d'un air peu encourageant.

— Que voulez-vous, mes amis, dit Summy Skim, c’est comme une lièvre, ou plutôt une épidémie, qui, de temps en temps, traverse le monde, et qui fait bien des victimes!

— Mais pourquoi s’en aller là-bas, not’ maître? demanda la doyenne de la ferme.

Et alors Summy Skim d’expliquer comment son cousin et lui venaient d’hériter d’un claim après la mort de leur oncle Josias Lacoste, et pour quelles raisons Ben Raddle estimait leur présence nécessaire au Klondike.

— Oui, reprit le vieux, nous avons entendu parler de ce qui se passe à la frontière du Dominion, et surtout des misères de tant de pauvres gens qui succombent à la peine! Enfin, monsieur Summy, il n’est point question que vous restiez dans ce pays, et, lorsque vous aurez vendu votre tas de boue, vous reviendrez…

— Croyez-le bien, mes amis! Mais, en attendant, cinq à six mois s’écouleront, et la belle saison sera à son terme!.. C’est un été que je vais perdre!..

— Et, été perdu, hiver plus triste encore! ajouta une vieille, qui se signa et dit:

«Dieu vous protège, not’ maître!»

Après une semaine passée à Green Valley, Summy Skim pensa qu’il était temps de rejoindre Ben Raddle. Ce ne fut pas sans émotion, une émotion partagée de tous, qu’il prit congé de ces braves gens. Et songer que, dans quelques semaines, le soleil d’avril se lèverait sur l’horizon de Green

Valley, que, de toute cette neige, sortiraient les premières verdures du printemps, que, sans ce maudit voyage, il serait revenu, comme il le faisait chaque année, s'installer dans ce pavillon jusqu'au retour des premiers froids de l'hiver! Pendant ces huit jours, il avait confusément espéré qu'une lettre de Ben Raddle arriverait à Green Valley et lui apprendrait qu'il n'y avait pas lieu de donner suite à leurs projets. Mais la lettre n'était pas venue… Rien n'était changé… Le départ s'effectuerait à la date fixée… Aussi Summy Skim dut-il se faire conduire à la gare, et, le 31 mars, dans la matinée, il était à Montréal en face de son terrible cousin.

«Rien de nouveau?… demanda-t-il en se plantant devant lui comme un point d'interrogation.

— Rien, Summy, si ce n'est que nos préparatifs sont achevés.

— Ainsi tu t'es procuré…

— Tout, sauf les vivres que nous trouverons en route, répondit Ben Raddle. Je ne me suis occupé que des vêtements. Quant aux armes, tu as les tiennes, et j'ai les miennes. Deux bons fusils dont nous avons l'habitude et l'équipement complet du chasseur. Mais, comme il n'est pas possible de renouveler là-bas sa garde-robe, voici les divers objets d'habillement que nous emportons chacun par prudence: chemises de flanelle, camisoles et calerons en laine, jersey d'épais tricot, costume de velours à côtes, pantalons de gros drap et pantalons de toile, costume de toile bleue, veste de cuir avec fourrure en dedans et capuchon, vêtement imperméable de marin avec coiffure idem, manteau en caoutchouc, six paires de chaussettes ajustées et six paires de chaussettes d'un numéro plus grand, mitaines fourrées et gants de cuir, bottes de chasse à gros clous, mocassins à tiges, raquettes, mouchoirs, serviettes…

— Eh! s’écria Summy Skim en levant les mains vers le ciel, veux-tu donc créer un bazar dans la capitale du Klondike? En voilà pour dix ans!

— Non, deux ans seulement!

— Seulement, répéta Summy. «Seulement» est tout bonnement épouvantable. Voyons, Ben, il ne s’agit que d’aller à Dawson City, de céder le claim 129 et de revenir à Montréal. Il ne faut pas deux ans pour cela, que diable!

— Sans doute, Summy, si on nous donne du claim 129 ce qu’il vaut.

— Et si on ne nous le donne pas?

— Nous aviserons, Summy!»

Dans l’impossibilité d’obtenir une autre réponse, Summy Skim n’insista pas.

Le 2 avril, dès le matin, les deux cousins étaient à la gare où leurs bagages avaient été transportés. Cela ne formait pas un gros volume au total, et leur matériel de prospecteurs ne deviendrait véritablement un embarrassant «impedimentum» qu’après avoir été complété à Vancouver.

Si, avant de quitter Montréal, ils se fussent adressés à la Compagnie du Canadian Pacific, les voyageurs auraient pu prendre des billets de steamer pour Skagway. Mais Ben Raddle n’avait pas encore décidé quelle voie ils suivraient pour gagner Dawson City, la route maritime et fluviale qui remonte le Yukon, depuis son embouchure jusqu’à la capitale du Klondike, ou la route terrestre qui, au delà de Skagway, se déroule à travers les montagnes, les plaines et les lacs de la Colombie britannique.

Ils étaient donc enfin partis, les deux cousins, l’un entraînant l’autre, celui-ci résigné, celui-là plein de confiance, mais, au demeurant, tous deux confortablement installés dans un excellent pulmann-car. C’est bien le moins que l’on veuille avoir toutes ses aises, lorsqu’il s’agit d’un voyage de quatre mille sept cents kilomètres, dont la durée est de six jours, entre Montréal et Vancouver.

En quittant Montréal, le train traverse cette partie du Dominion qui comprend les districts si variés de l’Est et du Centre. C’est seulement après avoir dépassé la région des grands lacs qu’il entre dans une contrée moins populeuse et parfois déserte, surtout aux approches de la Colombie.

Le temps était beau, l’air vif, le ciel voilé de légères brumes. La colonne thermométrique oscillait autour de zéro. A perte de vue se développaient les plaines toutes blanches, qui, dans quelques semaines, deviendraient verdoyantes, et dont les multiples rios seraient dégagés de glace. De nombreuses troupes d’oiseaux, devançant le train, se dirigeaient vers l’Ouest à grands coups d’aile. De chaque côté de la voie, sur la couche de neige, on pouvait relever des empreintes d’animaux, jusqu’aux forêts de l’horizon. Voilà des pistes qu’il eût été aisé de suivre et qui eussent mené à quelque beau coup de fusil!

Mais il était bien question de chasse, à présent! S’il y avait des chasseurs dans ce train en marche sur Vancouver, ce n’étaient que des chasseurs de pépites, et les chiens qui les accompagnaient n’étaient point dressés à l’arrêt des perdrix ou des lièvres, ni à la poursuite des daims ou des ours. Non, simples bêtes de trait, leur destin était de tirer les traîneaux sur la glace solidifiée des lacs et des cours d’eau, dans cette partie de la Colombie comprise entre Skagway et le district du Klondike.

La fièvre de l’or n’était à vrai dire qu’à son début. Mais des nouvelles arrivaient constamment annonçant la découverte de nombreux gisements sur l’Eldorado, la Bonanza, le Hunter, le Bear, le Gold Bottom et tous les affluents de la Klondike River. On parlait de claims où le prospecteur lavait jusqu’à quinze cents francs d’or au plat. Aussi l’affluence des émigrants ne cessait-elle pas de s’accroître. Ils se jetaient sur le Klondike comme ils s’étaient jetés sur l’Australie, la Californie, le Transvaal, et les compagnies de transport commençaient à être débordées. D’ailleurs, ceux qu’emportait ce train, ce n’étaient point des représentants de sociétés ou de syndicats formés avec l’appui des grandes banques de l’Amérique ou de l’Europe. Ceux-là, pourvus d’excellent matériel, largement ravitaillés en vêtements et en vivres par des services spéciaux, peuvent n’avoir aucune crainte de l’avenir. Non! il n’y avait là que de ces pauvres gens en proie à toutes les rigueurs de l’existence, que la misère chasse de leur pays, qui peuvent tout risquer, n’ayant rien à perdre, et dont, il faut bien l’avouer, l’espoir de quelque coup de fortune trouble la cervelle.

Cependant le train de la Transcontinental courait à toute vapeur. Summy Skim et Ben Raddle n’auraient pas pu se plaindre du manque de confort au cours de ce long voyage: un drawing-room à leur disposition pendant la journée, un bed-room pour y passer la nuit, un smoking-room où ils pouvaient fumer à leur aise comme dans les meilleurs cafés de Montréal, un dining-room où la qualité des mets et le service ne laissaient rien à désirer, un wagon-bain, s’ils voulaient se baigner en route. Mais tout cela n’empêchait pas Summy Skim de soupirer en pensant à son pavillon de Green Valley!

Ottawa. Rideau Falls; Post Office et Palais du Parlement

En quatre heures, le train eut atteint Ottawa, la capitale du Dominion, qui, du haut d’une colline, domine la contrée environnante, cité superbe dont la prétention plus ou moins justifiée est d’occuper le centre du monde.

Au delà, près de Carlton Junction, on aurait pu apercevoir sa rivale, Toronto, l’ancienne capitale aujourd’hui détrônée.

Winnipeg. Main Street

Courant alors directement vers l’Ouest, le train gagna la station de Sudbury, où la ligne se divise en deux branches, contrée enrichie par l’exploitation des mines de nickel. Ce fut la branche nord qui fut suivie pour contourner le Lac Supérieur et aboutir à Port Arthur, près de Fort William. A Héron Bay, à Schreiber et à toutes les stations du vaste lac, l’arrêt avait été assez long pour que les deux cousins pussent, s’ils l’avaient désiré, se rendre compte de l’importance de ces ports en eau douce. Puis, par Bonheur, Ignace, Eagle River, à travers une région dont les mines font la fortune, ils arrivèrent à l’importante cité de Winnipeg.

C’est bien là qu’en d’autres circonstances une halte de quelques heures eût paru trop courte à Summy Skim, désireux de garder au moins un souvenir de son voyage. S’il n’eût pas été hypnotisé par le Klondike, sans doute eût-il volontiers consacré un jour ou deux à visiter cette cité de quarante mille habitants et les villes avoisinantes du Western Canada… Malheureusement, Summy Skim n’était pas en état de s’intéresser aces contingences. Le train reprit donc ses voyageurs, véritables colis humains pour la plupart, qui ne voyageaient pas pour leur plaisir, mais pour arriver à destination par le plus vite et par le plus court.

C’est en vain que Ben Raddle essaya de réveiller l’attention du copropriétaire de Green Valley.

«Tu ne remarques pas, Summy, suggéra-t-il, avec quelle perfection toute cette contrée est cultivée?..

— Ah! fit mollement Summy Skim.

— Et quelles immenses prairies elle possède. Les buffles y fréquentent, dit-on, par milliers. Voilà une belle chasse, Summy!..

— Assurément, concéda Summy Skim sans la moindre aménité, j’aimerais mieux passer ici six mois, et même six ans, que six semaines au Klondike.

— Bah! s’il n’y a pas de buffles aux environs de Dawson City, répliqua Ben Raddle en riant, tu te rattraperas sur les orignals.»

Regina City dépassée, le train se dirigea vers la Crow New Pass des Montagnes Rocheuses, puis vers les frontières de la Colombie britannique, après avoir stationné pendant quelques heures à Calgary City.

C’est de cette ville que se détache, vers Edmonton, où cesse la ligne ferrée, un embranchement que prennent quelquefois les émigrants pour se rendre au Klondike, En passant par Peace River et Fort Saint-John, puis par Dease, Francis et Pelly Rivers, celte route relie le nord-est de la Colombie au Yukon à travers le district de Cassiar, si célèbre au point de vue cynégétique. C’est une route de chasseurs, que Summy Skim eût certainement préférée s’il avait été là pour son plaisir. Mais, difficile et longue, elle oblige le voyageur à des ravitaillements fréquents, sur un parcours qui excède deux mille kilomètres. Il est vrai, cette contrée est particulièrement aurifère; on peut laver dans presque tous ses cours d'eau. Malheureusement, elle est dénuée de ressources, et ne deviendra praticable que le jour où le gouvernement canadien y aura établi des relais de quinze en quinze lieues.

Pendant la traversée des Rocheuses, il fut loisible aux voyageurs d'entrevoir ces montagnes orgueilleuses éternellement coiffées de leur calotte de neige. Au milieu de ces solitudes glacées régnait le «silence of all life», que troublait seul le halètement de la locomotive.

A mesure que le train gagnait vers l'Ouest, des régions s'ouvraient devant lui, non point riches enterres fertiles, auxquelles le travail assure les beaux rendements d'un sol que la production n'a pas encore épuisé. Non!.. C'étaient des territoires de Koota-way, ces Gold Fields du Cariboo, où l'or fut rencontré et se rencontre abondamment encore, tout ce réseau hydrographique qui roule des paillettes du précieux métal. Il y avait même lieu de se demander pourquoi les prospecteurs ne fréquentaient pas plus assidûment un pays qu'il était aisé d'atteindre, au lieu d'affronter les fatigues d'un lointain voyage au Klondike, sans parler des dépenses excessives qu'il exige.

«En vérité, fit observer Summy Skim, c'est bien dans ce Cariboo que l'oncle Josias aurait dû venir tenter la fortune!.. Nous serions arrivés maintenant… Ce qu'aurait valu son exploitation, nous le saurions à l'heure présente! Nous en aurions fait argent dans les vingt-quatre heures, et notre absence n'aurait pas duré plus d'une semaine!..»

Summy Skim avait raison. Mais il était sans doute écrit sur le grand livre de sa destinée qu'il s'aventurerait jusqu'à cette terrifiante région du Klondike, et pataugerait dans les boues du Forty Miles Creek.

Et c’est pourquoi le train continuait sa route, entraînait Summy Skim toujours plus loin de Montréal et de Green Valley, l’emportait vers la frontière littorale de la Colombie, et finalement, sans qu’aucun incident eût troublé le voyage, le déposait, le 8 avril, à côté de son cousin Ben Raddle, sur le quai de la gare de Vancouver.

CHAPITRE IV

Un fâcheux voisinage.

La ville de Vancouver n’est point sur la grande île du même nom. Elle occupe un point de cette langue de terre qui se détache du littoral colombien. Ce n’est qu’une métropole. La capitale de la Colombie britannique, Victoria, dont la population atteint seize mille âmes, est précisément bâtie sur la côte sud-est de l’île, où se trouve également New Westminster avec ses dix mille habitants.

Vancouver est située à l’extrémité d’une rade ouverte sur le sinueux détroit de Juan-de-la-Fuca, qui se prolonge vers le Nord-Ouest. En arrière de la rade pointe le clocher d’une chapelle, entre d’épaisses frondaisons de pins et de cèdres qui suffiraient à cacher les hantes tours d’une cathédrale.

Après avoir suivi la partie méridionale de l’île, le canal en contourne les côtes orientales et septentrionales. On le voit, le port de Vancouver est facilement accessible aux navires venant du Pacifique, qu’ils descendent le littoral canadien ou qu’ils remontent le littoral des États-Unis d’Amérique.

Les fondateurs de la ville de Vancouver ont-ils trop préjugé de l’avenir? Ce qui est certain, c’est qu’elle suffirait à une population de cent mille habitants, et une telle population circulerait encore à l’aise à travers la dernière de ses rues géométriquement tracées à angles droits. Elle a des églises, des banques, des hôtels, s’éclaire au gaz et à l’électricité, est desservie par des ponts lances à travers l’estuaire de False Bay et possède un parc de trois cent quatre-vingts hectares aménagé sur la péninsule du nord-ouest.

En quittant la gare, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle s’étaient fait conduire à Westminster Hôtel, où ils devaient demeurer jusqu’au jour de leur départ pour le Klondike.

Le difficile fut précisément de trouver à se loger dans cet hôtel encombré de voyageurs. Les trains et les paquebots versaient alors jusqu’à douze cents émigrants par vingt-quatre heures. On imaginera sans peine le profit qu’en retirait la ville, et plus spécialement cette classe de citoyens qui se sont donné la mission d’héberger les étrangers, en leur imposant des prix invraisemblables, en échange de nourritures parfois plus invraisemblables encore. Sans doute, la population flottante de Vancouver n’y séjournait jamais que le moins de temps possible, si grande était la hâte de tous ces aventuriers d’être rendus sur les territoires dont l’or les attirait comme l’aimant attire le fer. Mais encore fallait-il pouvoir partir, et bien souvent la place manquait sur les nombreux steamers qui remontent vers le Nord, après escale aux divers ports du Mexique et des États-Unis.

Deux routes mènent de Vancouver au Klondike. L’une, à travers le Pacifique, va chercher, à Saint-Michel, sur la côte occidentale de l’Alaska, l’embouchure du Yukon, et en remonte le cours jusqu’à Dawson City. L’autre, maritime de Vancouver à Skagway, devient ensuite terrestre entre cette ville et la capitale du Klondike. Laquelle de ces deux routes allait choisir Ben Raddle?

Dès que les deux cousins eurent pris possession de leur chambre, la première demande que posa Summy Skim fut celle-ci:

«Pour combien de temps, mon cher Ben, sommes-nous à Vancouver?

— Pour quelques jours seulement, répondit Ben Raddle. Je ne pense pas qu’il en faille davantage pourvoir arriver le *Foot Ball*.

— Va pour le *Foot Ball*, répondit Summy. Et qu’est ce *Foot Ball*, je te prie?

— Un steamer du Canadian Pacific, qui nous transportera à Skagway, et sur lequel je vais dès aujourd’hui retenir deux places.

— Ainsi, Ben, entre les différentes routes du Klondike, tu as fait ton choix?

— Le choix était tout indiqué, Summy. Nous prendrons la route qui est le plus généralement suivie, et, en longeant le littoral colombien à l’abri des îles, nous atteindrons Skagway sans fatigue. A cette époque de l’année, le lit du Yukon est encore encombré de glaces, et il n’est pas rare que les navires périssent au milieu de la débâcle, ou que, à tout le moins, ils soient retardés jusqu’au mois de juillet. Le *Foot Ball*, au contraire, ne mettra pas plus d’une semaine à se rendre soit à Skagway, soit même à Dyea. Une fois débarqués, nous aurons, il est vrai, à franchir les rampes assez rudes du Chilkoot ou de la White Pass. Mais, au delà, moitié par terre, moitié par les lacs, nous atteindrons sans trop de peine le Yukon, qui nous portera à Dawson City. J’estime que nous serons à destination avant le mois de juin, c’est-à-dire au début de la bonne saison. Pour le moment, nous n’avons qu’à prendre patience, en attendant l’arrivée du *Foot Ball*.

— D’où vient-il, ce paquebot au nom sportif? demanda Summy Skim.

— Précisément de Skagway, car il est affecté au service régulier entre Vancouver et cette ville. On l’attend pour le 14 de ce mois au plus tard.

— Le 14 seulement! se récria Summy.

— Ah! ah! dit Ben Raddle en riant, te voilà plus pressé que moi!

— Oui certes, approuva Summy, puisque, après tout, il faut bien partir avant d’être revenu!»

Magasin d’équipements de prospecteurs.

Les deux cousins n’allaient pas être très absorbés par leurs occupations pendant ce séjour à Vancouver. Leur équipement n’était pas à compléter. Il ne s’agissait pas d’acquérir le matériel nécessaire à l’exploitation d’un claim, puisqu’ils devaient trouver sur place celui de l’oncle Josias. Le confort dont ils avaient joui dans le train du Transcontinental Pacific, ils le retrouveraient à bord du *Foot Ball*. Ce serait à Skagway que Ben Raddle aurait plus spécialement à se préoccuper des moyens de transport jusqu’à Dawson City. Il lui faudrait alors se procurer un bateau démontable pour la navigation des lacs, un attelage de chiens pour les traîneaux, seul moyen pratique de locomotion sur les plaines glacées de l’extrême Nord, à moins, toutefois, qu’il n’estimât préférable de traiter avec un chef de portage, qui se chargerait, à forfait, de les conduire à Dawson City. Dans l’un et l’autre cas, évidemment, le voyage ne laisserait pas d’être fort coûteux. Mais ne suffirait-il pas d’une ou deux belles pépites pour rentrer et au delà dans ces débours?

Du reste, telle était l’animation de la ville, telle était l’affluence des voyageurs, que les deux cousins, malgré leur désœuvrement, ne s’ennuyèrent pas un instant. Rien de curieux comme les arrivées des trains, qu’ils vinssent de l’est du Dominion ou des États de l’Union. Rien d’intéressant comme le débarquement de ces milliers de passagers que les steamers déposaient sans cesse à Vancouver. Que de gens, en attendant leur départ pour Skagway, erraient le long des rues, la plupart réduits à se blottir dans tous les coins du port ou sous les madriers des quais inondés de lumière électrique.

L’occupation ne manquait pas à la police au milieu de cette foule grouillante d’aventuriers sans feu ni lieu, attirés par le prodigieux mirage du Klondike. A chaque pas, on rencontrait ces agents vêtus d’un sombre uniforme couleur feuille morte, prêts à intervenir dans d’incessantes querelles qui menaçaient de finir dans le sang.

Assurément, ces constables accomplissent leur tâche souvent périlleuse, toujours difficile, avec tout le zèle et tout le courage qui sont nécessaires dans ce monde d’émigrants où se heurtent toutes les classes sociales, et plus particulièrement l’innombrable classe des déclassés. Mais comment ne leur vient-il pas à l’esprit qu’il y aurait peut-être pour eux plus de profit et moins de péril à laver les boues des affluents du Yukon? Comment ne pensent-ils pas aux cinq constables canadiens qui, presque au début du Klondike, revinrent au pays avec deux cent mille dollars de bénéfices? Cela fait honneur à leur force d’âme, puisqu’ils ne se laissent pas griser comme tant d’autres.

La lecture des journaux apprit à Summy Skim que, pendant l’hiver, la température tombait parfois au Klondike à 60 degrés centigrades au-dessous de zéro. D’abord, il n’en crut rien, mais, ce qui lui donna à réfléchir, ce fut de voir chez un opticien de Vancouver plusieurs thermomètres gradués jusqu’à 90 degrés au-dessous de glace. «Bah! se disait-il vainement pour se rassurer, c’est affaire d’amour-propre… Quatre-vingt-dix degrés!.. Les Klondiciens, fiers de leurs froids exceptionnels, mettent une certaine coquetterie à les faire valoir!» Summy Skim, néanmoins, demeurait inquiet, et finalement il se décida à franchir le seuil de la boutique, pour examiner de près ces inquiétants thermomètres.

Les divers modèles que le marchand lui présenta étaient tous gradués, non pas suivant l'échelle Fahrenheit, en usage dans le Royaume-Uni, mais selon l'échelle centigrade, plus particulièrement adoptée au Dominion, encore imbu des coutumes françaises.

Après examen, Summy Skim dut convenir qu'il ne s'était pas trompé. Ces thermomètres étaient réellement établis en prévision de températures aussi excessives.

«Ces thermomètres sont construits avec soin? demanda Summy Skim, pour dire quelque chose.

— Assurément, monsieur, répondit l'opticien. Je crois que vous serez satisfait.

— Pas le jour, du moins, où ils marqueront soixante degrés, déclara Summy Skim du ton le plus sérieux.

— Bon, répliqua le marchand, l'essentiel est qu'ils marquent juste.

— C'est un point de vue, monsieur. Mais, dites-moi, insinua Summy Skim, c'est par pure réclame, je présume, que ces instruments sont à votre étalage? Je ne pense pas que, dans la pratique…

— Eh bien?

— …la colonne d'alcool tombe jamais à soixante degrés.

— Fréquemment, monsieur, affirma le marchand avec vivacité, fréquemment et même plus bas encore.

— Plus bas!

— Pourquoi pas? répondit l’industriel, non sans une évidente fierté. Et si monsieur désire un instrument gradué jusqu’à cent degrés…

— Merci… merci, se hâta de dire Summy Skim épouvanté. Soixante degrés me paraissent largement suffisants!»

Et même, à quoi bon cette acquisition? Lorsque les yeux sont brûlés sous les paupières rougies par l’âpre bise du nord, lorsque l’haleine retombe en neige, lorsque le sang à demi glacé est sur le point de s’embâcler dans les veines, lorsqu’on ne peut toucher un objet de métal sans y laisser la peau de ses doigts, lorsqu’on gèle devant les foyers les plus ardents comme si le feu lui-même avait perdu toute chaleur, il n’y a pas en vérité grand intérêt à savoir si le froid qui vous tue s’arrête à soixante ou atteint cent degrés.

Cependant les jours s’écoulaient, et Ben Raddle ne cachait pas son impatience. Le *Foot Ball* avait-il donc éprouvé des retards de mer? On savait qu’il avait quitté Skagway le 7 avril. Or, la traversée ne durait pas plus de six jours, et il aurait dû être, le 13, en vue de Vancouver.

Le paquebot, consacré au transport des émigrants et de leurs bagages, à l’exclusion de toute marchandise, ne ferait, il est vrai, qu’une très courte relâche. Vingt-quatre heures, trente-six heures tout au plus, suffiraient au nettoyage des chaudières, à l’approvisionnement en charbon et en eau douce, à l’embarquement, enfin, des quelques centaines de passagers qui avaient retenu leur place à l’avance.

Quant à ceux qui n’avaient pas eu cette précaution, il leur faudrait prendre les autres paquebots attendus après le *Foot Ball*. Jusque-là, les hôtels et auberges de Vancouver ne pouvant suffire à les recevoir, des familles entières coucheraient à la belle étoile. Que l’on juge par leurs misères présentes de celles que leur réservait l’avenir!

La plupart de ces pauvres gens ne devaient pas se trouver plus confortablement à bord des paquebots qui les transporteraient de Vancouver à Skagway, où commencerait pour eux l’interminable, l’épouvantable voyage qui les conduirait jusqu’à Dawson City. A bord, les cabines de l’arrière et de l’avant suffisent à peine aux passagers les plus fortunés; l’entrepont donne asile à des familles qui s’y entassent pour ces six à sept jours de traversée pendant lesquels ils doivent pourvoir à leurs besoins. Quant au plus grand nombre, ils acceptent d’être enfermés dans la cale comme des animaux, comme des colis. Et, en vérité, cela vaut encore mieux que d’être exposé sur le pont à toutes les rigueurs atmosphériques, aux rafales glacées, aux tempêtes de neige si fréquentes en ces parages voisins du cercle polaire.

Vancouver n’était pas envahie seulement par les émigrants arrivant de toutes les parties de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Monde. Il fallait compter aussi avec les centaines de mineurs qui n’entendent point passer la mauvaise saison dans les glacières de Dawson City.

Pendant l’hiver, il est impossible de continuer l’exploitation des claims; tous les travaux sont forcément suspendus, lorsque le sol est recouvert de dix à douze pieds de neige, lorsque, sur ces épaisses couches saisies par des froids de quarante à cinquante degrés et rendues aussi dures que du granit, se brisent le pic et la pioche.

Aussi, ceux des prospecteurs qui le peuvent, ceux que la chance a favorisés dans une certaine mesure préfèrent-ils revenir dans les principales villes de la Colombie. Ceux-là ont do l’or à dépenser, et ils le dépensent avec une prodigalité insouciante dont on ne saurait se faire une idée. Ils ont cette conviction que la fortune ne les abandonnera pas, que la saison prochaine sera fructueuse, que de nouveaux gisements seront découverts et mettront entre leurs mains des monceaux de pépites. A eux les meilleures chambres dans les hôtels et les meilleures cabines dans les paquebots.

Summy Skim l’eut promptement constaté, c’est parmi cette catégorie de mineurs que figuraient les gens les plus violents, les plus grossiers, les plus tapageurs, ceux qui se livraient à tous les excès dans les tripots, dans les casinos où, l’argent à la main, ils parlaient en maîtres.

A vrai dire, le brave Summy se préoccupait peu de cette engeance. Estimant, ce en quoi il se trompait peut-être, qu’il ne pouvait avoir jamais rien de commun avec l’un quelconque de ces peu recommandables aventuriers, il écoutait d’une oreille distraite ce que la rumeur publique lui apprenait sur leur compte, et bientôt il n’y pensait plus.

Le 14 avril, dans la matinée, Ben Raddle et lui se promenaient sur le quai, lorsque la sirène d’un steamer se fit entendre.

«Serait-ce enfin le *Foot Ball*? s’écria Summy.

— Je ne le pense pas, répondit Ben Raddle. Ces sifflets viennent du sud, et c’est par le nord que le *Foot Ball* doit arriver.»

Il s’agissait, en effet, d’un vapeur qui ralliait le port de Vancouver en remontant le détroit de Juan-de-la-Fuca et qui, par conséquent, ne pouvait venir de Skagway.

Cependant, n’ayant rien de mieux à faire, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim se dirigèrent vers l’extrémité de la jetée, au milieu du nombreux public que l’arrivée d’un bateau attirait toujours. C’étaient d’ailleurs plusieurs centaines de passagers qui allaient débarquer, en attendant qu’il leur fût possible de prendre passage sur un des paquebots qui font le service du Nord, et le spectacle ne pouvait manquer d’être pittoresque.

Le navire qui s’avançait à coups de sifflet stridents était le *Smyth*, bâtiment de 2500 tonnes, qui venait de faire toutes les escales de la côte, depuis le port mexicain d’Acapulco. Spécialement affecté au service du littoral, il allait redescendre vers le Sud, après avoir déposé à Vancouver ses passagers, qui en augmenteraient encore l’encombrement.

A peine le *Smyth* eut-il accosté le ponton, que son chargement humain se porta d’un même mouvement vers la coupée. En un clin d’œil, ce fut une cohue, gens et choses enchevêtrés de telle sorte que personne, à vrai dire, ne semblait plus pouvoir passer.

En tous cas, tel n’était pas l’avis de l’un des passagers, qui se démenait furieusement pour être le premier à terre. Sans doute, celui-ci était un habitué et savait combien il était essentiel de s’inscrire avant les autres au bureau des départs pour le Nord. C’était un gaillard de forte taille, brutal et vigoureux, la barbe noire et drue, le teint hâlé des hommes du Sud, le regard dur, la physionomie méchante, l’abord antipathique. Un autre passager l’accompagnait, de même nationalité à en juger par son apparence, et qui ne semblait ni plus patient ni plus sociable que lui.

La hâte des autres était, probablement, aussi grande que celle de ce passager impérieux et bruyant. Mais le moyen de devancer cet énergumène, qui jouait des coudes, sans tenir aucun compte des injonctions des officiers et du capitaine, et repoussait ses voisins, en les insultant d’une voix rauque, qui accentuait la dureté de ses injures, proférées moitié en anglais, moitié en espagnol.

«By God! s’écria Summy Skim, voilà ce qu’on peut appeler un agréable compagnon de route, et, s’il doit prendre passage à bord du *Foot Ball*…

— Bah! pour quelques jours de traversée seulement, répondit Ben Raddle, nous saurons bien nous tenir ou le tenir à l’écart.»

A ce moment un curieux, qui se trouvait auprès des deux cousins, s’écria:

«Eh mais! c’est ce damné Hunter. Voilà qui nous promet du bruit dans les tripots ce soir, s’il ne quitte dès aujourd’hui Vancouver!

— Tu vois, Ben, fit Summy à son cousin, je ne m’étais pas trompé. C’est une célébrité, ce particulier-là.

— Oui, accorda Ben, il est très connu…

— Et pas à son avantage!

— Sans doute, expliqua Ben Raddle, un de ces aventuriers qui vont en Amérique passer la mauvaise saison et qui retournent au Klondike à l’époque favorable pour recommencer une nouvelle campagne.»

Hunter revenait, en effet, du Texas, son pays d’origine, et si son compagnon et lui arrivaient ce jour-là à Vancouver, c’était effectivement avec l’intention de continuer plus au Nord, à bord du premier paquebot en partance. Tous deux, métis hispano-américains, trouvaient, dans ce monde si mêlé des chercheurs d’or, le milieu qui convenait précisément à leurs instincts violents, à leurs mœurs révoltantes, à leurs passions brutales, à leur goût pour l'existence irrégulière où tout est donné au hasard.

En apprenant que le *Foot Ball* n'était pas arrivé et ne pourrait, selon toute vraisemblance, reprendre la mer avant trente-six ou quarante-huit heures, Hunter se fit conduire à Westminster Hôtel où les deux cousins étaient descendus six jours plus tôt. Summy se trouva nez à nez avec lui, en pénétrant dans le hall de l'hôtel.

«Décidément, c'est une gageure», bougonna Summy entre ses dents.

C'est en vain qu'il s'efforça de vaincre la désagréable impression que lui laissait sa rencontre avec ce triste personnage. Il avait beau se dire que ce Hunter et lui, noyés dans la foule immense des émigrants, avaient des milliers de chances de ne plus se retrouver face à face, quelque chose l'imposait à son esprit. C'est presque inconsciemment, comme si quelque obscur pressentiment l'y poussait, que deux heures plus tard il s'adressait au bureau de l'hôtel et tentait d'obtenir quelques éclaircissements sur le nouveau venu.

«Hunter? lui fut-il répondu, qui ne le connaît?

— C'est un propriétaire de claim?

— Oui, d'un claim qu'il exploite lui-même.

— Et il est situé, ce claim?..

— Au Klondike.

— Et plus spécialement?

— Sur le Forty Miles Creek.

— Le Forty Miles Creek, répéta Summy surpris. C’est réellement curieux. Dommage que je ne puisse connaître le numéro de son claim. Je parierais…

— Mais, ce numéro, dit l’interlocuteur de Summy, tout le monde vous le dira à Vancouver.

— C’est?..

— Le numéro 131.

— Mille carabines! s’exclama Summy abasourdi. Et nous le 129! Nous sommes les voisins de ce délicieux gentleman. Voilà qui nous promet de l’agrément.»

Summy Skim ne savait pas si bien dire.

CHAPITRE V

À bord du «Foot Ball».

Le *Foot Ball* prit la mer le 16 avril, avec quarante-huit heures de retard. Si ce steamer de douze cents tonneaux ne comptait pas plus de passagers que de tonnes, c’est que l’inspecteur de la navigation avait mis son veto.

Déjà, d’ailleurs, la ligne de flottaison, indiquée par le zéro barré point sur la coque, se trouvait au-dessous de son niveau normal.

En vingt-quatre heures les grues du quai avaient déposé à bord les innombrables colis des émigrants, tout un lourd matériel de mine augmenté d’un imposant troupeau de bœufs, de chevaux, d’ânes et de rennes, sans parler de plusieurs centaines de chiens, appartenant à la race du Saint-Bernard ou des Esquimaux, dont seraient formés les attelages des traîneaux à travers la région des lacs.

Les passagers du *Foot Ball* étaient de toute nationalité, Anglais, Canadiens, Français, Norvégiens, Suédois, Allemands, Australiens, Américains du Sud et du Nord, les uns avec leur famille, les autres seuls.

Tout ce monde, grouillant à bord du navire, l’emplissait d’un pittoresque désordre.

Dans les cabines, on avait augmenté le nombre des cadres, portés à trois ou quatre, au lieu de deux. L’entrepont présentait l’aspect d’un vaste dortoir, avec une série de tréteaux établis en abord, entre lesquels étaient tendus des hamacs. Quant au pont, lu circulation y était fort difficile. De pauvres gens, qui n’avaient pu s’assurer une cabine, dont le prix est de trente-cinq dollars, s’y entassaient le long des tambours et des bastingages. C’est là qu’ils faisaient leur maigre cuisine, et qu’ils vaquaient, à la vue de tous, aux soins de leur toilette et de leur ménage.

Ben Raddle avait pu retenir deux places dans une des cabines de l’arrière. Elle en contenait une troisième occupée par un Norvégien, nommé Royen, qui possédait un claim sur la Bonanza, l’un des affluents du Klondike. C’était un homme paisible et doux, hardi et prudent à la fois, de cette race Scandinave qui obtient le succès par l’opiniâtreté d’un lent effort. Originaire de Christiana, après avoir passé l’hiver dans sa ville natale, il retournait à Dawson City. Compagnon de voyage peu communicatif et, en somme, peu gênant.

Il était heureux pour les deux cousins qu’ils n’eussent pas à partager la cabine du Texien Hunter. D’ailleurs, l’eussent-ils voulu, ce partage eût été impossible. Hunter avait réussi à retenir, à coups de dollars, une cabine de quatre places pour son compagnon et lui. C’est en vain que plusieurs passagers avaient prié ces grossiers personnages de leur céder les deux places vacantes. Ils en avaient été pour un brutal refus.

On le voit, ce Hunter et ce Malone – ainsi se nommait l’acolyte du Texien – ne regardaient pas au prix. Ce qu’ils gagnaient à l’exploitation de leur claim, ils étaient gens à le dépenser en folles prodigalités, à le jeter par poignées sur des tables de baccarat ou de poker. Nul doute qu’ils ne fissent, au cours du voyage, de longues stations dans le salon de jeu du *Foot Ball*.

Sorti dès six heures du matin du port et de la baie de Vancouver, le *Foot Ball* prit direction à travers le canal, afin d’en gagner l’extrémité septentrionale. A partir de ce point, le plus souvent à l’abri des îles de la

Reine Charlotte et du Prince de Galles, il n’aurait qu’à remonter à petite distance le long de la côte américaine.

Au cours de ces six journées de navigation, les passagers de l’arrière ne pourraient guère quitter la dunette qui leur était réservée. Pour varier leur promenade, ils ne devaient pas compter sur le pont, tout encombré des baraquements qui renfermaient les animaux, bœufs, chevaux, ânes, rennes, et sillonné en tous sens par la meute des chiens, qui circulaient en hurlant au milieu de groupes pitoyables, hommes encore jeunes mais frappés du stigmate de la misère, femmes épuisées entourées d’enfants souffreteux. Ce n’est pas pour exploiter quelque gisement à leur compte qu’ils émigraient, ceux-là, mais pour mettre leurs bras au service des syndicats dont ils se disputeraient les salaires.

«Enfin, dit Summy Skim, au moment où le paquebot sortait de la rade, tu l’as voulu, Ben. Cette fois, nous voici bien en route pour l’Eldorado. Nous faisons partie, nous aussi, de ce monde des chercheurs d’or, qui ne paraît pas être des plus recommandables.

— Il serait difficile qu’il en fût autrement, mon cher Summy, répondit Ben Raddle. Il faut le prendre tel qu’il est.

— J’aimerais bien mieux ne pas le prendre du tout, répliqua Summy. Que diable! Ben, nous ne sommes pas de ces gens-là. Que nous ayons hérité d’un claim, soit! Que ce claim soit truffé de pépites, j’y consens! Ce n’est pas une raison pour nous muer en chercheurs d’or.

— C’est entendu, répondit Ben Raddle avec un imperceptible mouvement d’épaules qui ne rassura guère Summy Skim.

Et celui-ci d’insister:

— Nous allons au Klondike pour vendre le claim de notre oncle Josias, c’est bien convenu, n’est-ce pas?.. Seigneur! rien qu’à cette pensée que nous pourrions partager les instincts, les passions, les mœurs de cette cohue d’aventuriers!..

— Attention! dit Ben Raddle en raillant, tu vas prêcher, Summy!

— Et pourquoi pas, Ben? Oui, j’en ai horreur de cette exécrable soif de l’or, de cet affreux désir de richesses qui font braver tant de misères. C’est du jeu, cela. C’est la course au gros lot, à la grosse pépite… Ah! quand je songe qu’au lieu de naviguer à bord de ce steamer, en route vers des contrées invraisemblables, je devrais être à Montréal, faisant mes préparatifs pour passer la belle saison dans les délices de Green Valley!

— Tu m’avais promis de ne pas récriminer, Summy.

— C’est fini, Ben, c’est la dernière fois. Désormais je ne pense plus qu’à…

— A gagner Dawson City? demanda Ben Raddle, non sans quelque ironie.

— A en revenir, Ben, à en revenir,» répondit Summy Skim.

Tant que le *Foot Ball* avait navigué dans le canal, les passagers n’avaient pas souffert de la mer. A peine si le roulis se faisait sentir. Mais, lorsque le paquebot eut dépassé l’extrême pointe de l’île de Vancouver, il fut exposé à la houle du large.

Le temps était froid, la brise âpre. Des lames assez fortes battaient les grèves du littoral colombien. Des rafales où se mélangeaient la pluie et la neige tombaient avec violence. On imagine ce que durent souffrir les passagers du pont, pour la plupart accablés par le mal de mer. Les animaux n’étaient pas moins éprouvés. A travers les sifflements des rafales, c’était un concert de beuglements, de hennissements, de braiments dont on ne saurait se faire une idée. Le long des roufs couraient et se roulaient les chiens qu’il était impossible de renfermer ou de tenir à l’attache. Certains, devenus furieux, sautaient à la gorge des gens, cherchaient à mordre, et le maître d’équipage dut en abattre quelques-uns à coups de revolver.

Pendant ce temps, en compagnie d’une bande de joueurs, que, dès le premier jour, ils étaient parvenus à racoler, le Texien Hunter et son camarade Malone vivaient autour d’une table de monte et de faro. Du salon de jeu, transformé en tripot, s’échappaient, jour et nuit, des vociférations et des provocations d’une sauvage brutalité.

Quant à Ben Raddle et à Summy Skim, inutile de dire qu’ils bravaient le mauvais temps. Observateurs déterminés, ils ne quittaient pas la dunette de toute la journée, et ne regagnaient leur cabine que la nuit venue. Ils ne se lassaient pas du spectacle que leur donnaient, et le pont grouillant d’une confuse multitude, et la dunette où se croisaient des types moins pittoresques peut-être, mais plus caractéristiques, pour la plupart représentants de la classe supérieure de cette race d’aventuriers. Dès les premières heures de la traversée, ils avaient nécessairement remarqué deux passagers, ou plus exactement deux passagères, qui tranchaient violemment sur la triste compagnie environnante, lieux jeunes femmes de vingt à vingt-deux ans, deux jeunes filles plutôt, sœurs à en juger par un certain «air de famille», l’une brune et l’autre blonde, toutes deux petites, et fort jolies au demeurant.

Elles ne se quittaient pas. On apercevait toujours la blonde à rôle de la brune, qui semblait être le chef de cette association du premier degré.

Ensemble, elles faisaient dès le matin une longue promenade à l’arrière, puis elles se risquaient sur le pont, circulaient au milieu de sa population misérable, et, s’arrêtant auprès des mères chargées de famille, s’ingéniaient à rendre les mille services délicats dont les femmes seules sont capables.

Bien des fois, Ben et Summy avaient assisté du haut de la dunette à ce touchant spectacle, et leur intérêt pour ces deux jeunes filles s’en était accru. La violence du cadre mettait en valeur leur réserve si digne, leur distinction si évidente, que nul parmi tous ces gens sans aveu qu’elles coudoyaient à chaque instant ne s’était avisé de leur manquer jusqu’ici de respect.

Que faisait à bord du *Foot Ball* ce couple jeune et charmant? Les deux cousins se posaient cette question sans pouvoir y répondre, et, par degrés, leur sympathique intérêt se compliquait d’une grandissante curiosité.

Au surplus, on ne pouvait méconnaître que les deux jeunes filles n’eussent trouvé d’autres admirateurs parmi leurs compagnons de route. Il en était deux, à tout le moins, qui leur accordaient une particulière attention, et ces deux-là n’étaient autres que le Texien Hunter et son âme damnée Malone. Chaque fois qu’ils se décidaient à abandonner leur table de jeu pour venir sur la dunette respirer hâtivement un peu d’air, ils en donnaient une preuve nouvelle. Se poussant réciproquement du coude, échangeant des coups d’œil blessants, agrémentés d’insinuations plus ou moins offensantes proférées à haute et intelligible voix, ils tournaient autour des deux sœurs, qui ne semblaient pas, d’ailleurs, s’apercevoir de leur existence.

Souvent, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim avaient assisté à ce manège, et le désir ne leur manquait pas d’intervenir. Mais de quel droit l’eussent-ils fait? A tout prendre, Hunter et Malone ne dépassaient pas les limites tolérables dans un pareil milieu, et les objets de leur grossière assiduité n’avaient réclamé le secours de personne.

Les deux cousins se bornaient donc à surveiller de loin leurs futurs voisins de Forty Miles Creek, mais en désirant sans cesse davantage qu’un hasard leur permît de faire connaissance avec les jeunes passagères.

L’occasion ne s’en présenta que le quatrième jour de la traversée. A l’abri de l’île de la Reine Charlotte, le *Foot Ball* naviguait alors dans des conditions moins dures, sur une mer que ne troublaient plus les houles du large. Du côté de la terre, se succédaient des fjords comparables à ceux de la Norvège et qui devaient évoquer maints souvenirs du pays chez le compagnon de cabine de Summy Skim et de Ben Raddle. Autour de ces fjords se dressaient de hautes falaises, boisées pour la plupart, entre lesquelles apparaissaient, sinon des villages, du moins des hameaux de pêcheurs et, souvent, quelque maisonnette isolée, dont les habitants, d’origine indienne, vivaient de la chasse et de la pêche. Au passage du *Foot Ball,* ils venaient vendre leurs produits qui trouvaient facilement acquéreurs.

Si, en arrière des falaises, à une distance assez reculée, des montagnes profilaient leurs crêtes neigeuses à travers le brouillard, du côté de l’île de la Reine Charlotte on n’apercevait que do longues plaines ou d’épaisses forêts toutes blanches de givre. Ça et là, se montraient aussi quelques agglomérations de cases, sur les bords d’étroites criques où les barques de pêche attendaient un vent favorable. C’est au moment où le *Foot Ball* atteignait l’extrémité de l’île de la Reine Charlotte que les deux cousins entrèrent en relation avec les passagères, objets de leur sympathique attention. Cela se fit de la manière la plus banale, à l’occasion d’une quête charitable entreprise par celles-ci au profit d’une malheureuse femme qui venait de mettre au monde, à bord même du paquebot, un enfant, d'ailleurs robuste et bien portant.

Suivie comme de coutume de sa blonde compagne, la jeune fille brune vint tendre la main à Ben et à Summy, au même titre qu'à tous les autres voyageurs. Après qu'ils lui eurent remis leur obole, Ben Raddle, entamant délibérément la conversation, obtint, sans plus de formalités, les éclaircissements qu'il désirait. En un instant, il sut que les deux passagères étaient, non pas sœurs mais cousines germaines, du même âge à quelques jours près, que leur nom de famille était Edgerton, et que, si la passagère blonde avait Edith comme prénom, Jane était celui de la brune.

Ces renseignements, c'est Jane qui, sans la moindre hésitation ni le moindre embarras, les lui avait donnés en quelques mots concis et nets; après quoi elle s'était éloignée, fidèlement suivie de sa cousine, qui n'avait même pas ouvert la bouche.

La curiosité de Ben et de Summy n'était nullement satisfaite par ces brèves confidences. Le champ de leurs hypothèses se trouvait au contraire agrandi. Edgerton, ainsi se nommaient deux frères qui avaient eu leur heure de célébrité panaméricaine. Grands brasseurs d'affaires, leur fortune, érigée en quelques heures par une audacieuse spéculation sur les cotons, avait été longtemps colossale, puis le sort contraire avait, d'un seul coup, l'ait succéder la ruine à la richesse, et les frères Edgerton avaient disparu dans la foule anonyme, qui en a englouti et en engloutira tant d'autres. Y avait-il quelque chose de commun entre ces fabuleux milliardaires et les jeunes passagères du Foot Bull?

Rien de plus simple que d'obtenir réponse à cette question. La glace était rompue, maintenant, et ce n'est pas aux environs du cercle polaire qu'on s'embarrasse des prescriptions du protocole mondain. Aussi, moins d'une heure après la première entrevue, Ben Raddle abordait-il Jane Edgerton et reprenait-il son enquête, en procédant par interrogations directes.

Les réponses ne se firent pas attendre. Oui, Edith et Jane Edgerton étaient bien les filles des deux «Rois du Coton», comme on avait jadis appelé leurs pères. Âgées de vingt-deux ans, dépourvues de la moindre parcelle de cet or que ceux-ci avaient remué à la pelle, elles étaient seules, sans famille, orphelines, leurs mères étant mortes depuis longtemps, et les deux frères Edgerton ayant péri, six mois plus tôt, le même jour, dans un accident de chemin de fer.

Tandis que Ben interrogeait et que Jane répondait, Edith et Summy gardaient symétriquement le silence. Plus timides, peut-être, d'allure en tous cas moins décidée, ils semblaient vraiment se faire pendant de part et d'autre des deux interlocuteurs.

«Y aurait-il indiscrétion, miss Edgerton, continua Ben Raddle poursuivant la conversation, à vous faire part de l'étonnement que nous avons éprouvé, mon cousin et moi, en vous apercevant à bord du *Foot Ball*, et à vous demander dans quel but vous avez entrepris ce long et pénible voyage?

— Nullement, répondit Jane Edgerton. Un ancien médecin de mon oncle, le docteur Pilcox, nommé récemment directeur de l'hôpital de Dawson City, a offert une place d'infirmière à ma cousine Edith, qui a accepté tout de suite et s'est mise en route sans tarder.

— Pour Dawson City!

— Pour Dawson City.

Les regards des deux cousins, celui de Ben Raddle, toujours calme, celui de Summy Skim, troublé par un commencement d'étonnement, se portèrent vers la blonde Edith, qui supporta paisiblement ces regards, sans en paraître gênée le moins du monde. Ils eurent tout le loisir de dévisager la jeune fille, et, à mesure qu'ils prolongeaient leur examen, son audacieuse entreprise leur paraissait de moins en moins déraisonnable. Peu à peu, ils découvraient l'âme qui se cachait derrière ces traits délicats. Évidemment, Edith était différente de sa cousine. Elle n'en avait pas le regard audacieux, la parole nette, l'attitude catégorique. Mais un observateur attentif n'eût pas mis en doute qu'elle ne l'égalât en calme énergie et en ferme volonté. De modalité différente, ces deux natures étaient de qualité identique. Si tout, dans l'une, disait la décision et l'action, tout, dans l'autre, disait le bon ordre et la méthode. A voir ce front poli, de forme un peu carrée, ces yeux bleus au regard plein de lucide intelligence, on comprenait que toutes les idées, toutes les sensations nouvelles devaient aller automatiquement prendre leur place dans des cases spéciales bien étiquetées, d'où Edith Edgerton pouvait, en cas de besoin, les reprendre à sa guise et sans recherches, comme elle l'eût fait dans un tiroir parfaitement rangé, et que cette tête charmante possédait, en somme, toutes les qualités d'un classeur perfectionné. A n'en pas douter, elle avait au plus haut point un tempérament d'administrateur, cette blonde jeune fille, et on pouvait être assuré qu'elle rendrait les plus grands services à l'hôpital de Dawson City.

— All right! fit Ben Raddle sans manifester la moindre surprise. Et vous-même, miss Jane, comptez-vous donc vous consacrer aussi au soulagement de l'humanité souffrante?

— Oh! moi, répondit Jane en souriant, je suis moins favorisée qu'Edith, et totalement dépourvue de situation sociale. Rien ne me retenant dans le Sud, j'ai préféré aller avec elle chercher fortune vers le Nord, voilà tout.

— Et en quoi faisant, Seigneur?

— Mais, monsieur, répliqua Jane tranquillement, comme tout le monde, en faisant de la prospection.

— Hein! s’exclama Summy tout à fait abasourdi.

Et le respect de la vérité force à dire que Ben Raddle eut besoin de tout son empire sur lui-même pour ne pas imiter son cousin, et pour mettre en pratique son principe qu’un homme digne de ce nom ne doit jamais s’étonner de rien. Prospecter, cette frêle jeune fille!

En attendant, la frêle jeune fille, comme blessée par la malencontreuse exclamation de Summy Skim, s’était retournée vers lui.

— Quoi d’étonnant à cela? interrogea-t-elle d’un air quelque peu agressif.

— Mais… miss Jane… balbutia le bon Summy mal remis de la secousse, vous n’y songez pas?.. Une femme!..

— Et pourquoi, s’il vous plaît, monsieur, une femme ne ferait-elle pas ce que vous faites vous-même? objecta Jane Edgerton sans s’émouvoir.

— Moi!.. protesta Summy. Mais je ne prospecte pas, moi!.. Et encore, si je suis propriétaire d’un claim, et si je vais dans ce pays diabolique, c’est bien malgré moi, je vous prie de le croire. Mon seul désir est d’en revenir au plus tôt.

— Soit! accorda Jane, avec une nuance de dédain dans la voix. Mais vous n’êtes pas seul ici. Ce qui vous effraye, des milliers d’autres le font. Pourquoi une femme ne pourrait-elle les imiter?

— Dame!.. balbutia de nouveau Summy. Il me semble… La force… La santé… Et ne serait-ce que le costume, que diable!..

— La santé? répliqua Jane Edgerton. Je vous souhaite la mienne. La force? Le joujou que j’ai dans ma poche m’en donne plus qu’à six athlètes réunis. Quant à mon costume, je ne vois pas ce qu’il a d’inférieur au vôtre. Il y a peut-être plus de femmes capables de porter les culottes, que d’hommes dignes de revêtir nos jupes!»

Cela dit, Jane Edgerton – une déterminée féministe, à coup sûr – rompit l’entretien d’un signe de tête à l’adresse de Summy complètement dompté, échangea avec Ben Raddle un bref shake-hand, et s’éloigna, suivie de sa silencieuse cousine, qui, durant toute cette fin de conversation, n’avait cessé de sourire d’un air tranquille.

Cependant, le *Foot Ball* avait dépassé la pointe septentrionale de l’île de la Reine Charlotte. Il fut de nouveau exposé à la haute mer en traversant le Dixon Entrance que ferme au Nord l’île du Prince de Galles; mais, la brise ayant halé le Nord-Est, et venant de la grande terre, les secousses du tangage et du roulis furent moins violentes.

Le nom de Prince de Galles s’applique à tout un archipel assez compliqué qui se termine au Nord en un fouillis d’îlots.

Au delà s’allonge l’île Baranof où les Russes ont fondé le fort do Nouvel Arkangel et dont la principale ville, Sitka, est devenue capitale de la province, depuis la cession de l’Alaska consentie aux États-Unis par l’Empire moscovite.

Le soir du 19 avril, le *Foot Ball* passa en vue de Port Simpson, dernier établissement canadien sur le littoral. Quelques heures plus tard, il entrait dans les eaux de l’État américain de l’Alaska, et le 20 avril, d’assez bonne heure, il venait faire escale au port de Wrangel, à l’embouchure de la Stikeen River.

La ville ne comptait alors qu’une quarantaine d’habitations, quelques scieries en activité, un hôtel, un casino et des maisons de jeu, qui ne chômaient guère pendant la saison.

C’est à Wrangel que débarquent les mineurs désireux de se rendre au Klondike par la route du Telegraph Creek, au lieu de suivre celle des lacs au delà de Skagway. Mais cette route ne mesure pas moins de quatre cent trente kilomètres à franchir dans les conditions les plus dures, moins coûteuses cependant. Aussi, malgré les avis qui leur furent donnés que la voie des traîneaux était encore impraticable, une cinquantaine des émigrants quittèrent-ils le bord, résolus à braver les dangers et les fatigues dans les interminables plaines de la Colombie septentrionale.

A partir de Wrangel, le chenal devient plus étroit, les détours plus capricieux. C’est à travers un véritable labyrinthe d’îlots que le *Foot Ball* atteignit Juneau, village en passe de devenir bourgade, puis ville, ainsi nommé par son fondateur, en 1882.

Deux ans plus tôt, ce même Juneau et son compagnon, Richard Harris, avaient découvert les gisements du Silver Bow Bassin, d’où ils rapportaient soixante mille francs d’or en pépites quelques mois après.

C’est de cette époque que date la première invasion des mineurs, attirés par le retentissement de cette découverte et l’exploitation des terrains aurifères de la région du Cassiar, qui précéda celle du Klondike. Bientôt la mine de

Tread Ville, travaillée par deux cent quarante pilons, broyait jusqu'à quinze cents tonnes de quartz par vingt-quatre heures, et rapportait jusqu'à deux millions cinq cent mille francs.

Lorsque Ben Raddle eut mis Summy Skim au courant des merveilleux résultats obtenus sur ces territoires:

«Vraiment, répondit celui-ci, il est fâcheux que l'oncle Josias n'ait pas eu l'idée de passer par ici, en allant à son futur claim de Forty Miles Creek.

— Pourquoi cela, Summy?

— Parce qu'il s'y serait probablement arrêté, et que nous pourrions aujourd'hui faire comme lui.»

Summy Skim parlait d'or. Encore, s'il n'eût été question que d'atteindre Skagway, il n'y aurait pas eu lieu de se plaindre. Mais, bien au contraire, là commenceraient les véritables difficultés, lorsqu'il s'agirait de franchir les passes du Chilkoot et de rejoindre la rive gauche du Yukon par la route des lacs.

Et cependant quelle hâte n'avaient-ils pas, tous ces passagers, de s'aventurer dans la région arrosée par la grande artère alaskienne! S'ils songeaient à l'avenir, ce n'était pas pour prévoir des fatigues, des épreuves, des dangers, des déceptions. Pour eux, le mirage de l'or s'élevait de plus en plus à l'horizon.

Après Juneau, le paquebot remonta le canal qui, pour les navires d'un certain tonnage, se termine à Skagway, où on arriverait le lendemain, mais que les bateaux plats peuvent suivre jusqu'à la bourgade de Dyea. Vers le

Nord-Ouest resplendissait le glacier de Muir, haut de deux cent quarante pieds, et dont le Pacifique reçoit incessamment les bruyantes avalanches.

Pendant cette dernière soirée qu’on allait passer à bord, il s’engagea dans la salle des jeux une formidable partie, où plusieurs de ceux qui l’avaient fréquentée au cours de la traversée devaient perdre jusqu’à leur dernier dollar. On comptait, cela va de soi, les deux Texiens Hunter et Malone au nombre de ces joueurs enragés. Les autres, d’ailleurs, ne valaient pas mieux, et il eût été malaisé de faire une différence entre ces aventuriers, qui se retrouvaient d’habitude dans les tripots de Vancouver, de Wrangel, de Skagway et de Dawson City.

Au bruit qui s’échappait du room des joueurs, on ne pouvait mettre en doute qu’il ne fût le théâtre de scènes déplorables. Des cris, des invectives grossières retentissaient; on devait craindre que le capitaine du *Foot Ball* ne fût contraint d’intervenir. Les autres passagers jugèrent prudent de s’enfermer dans leurs cabines.

Il était neuf heures, lorsque Summy Skim et Ben Raddle songèrent à regagner la leur. En ouvrant la porte du grand salon qu’il leur fallait traverser, ils aperçurent, à l’extrémité opposée, Jane et Edith Edgerton qui, au même instant, se disposaient à rentrer dans leur chambre. Les deux cousins se dirigeaient vers elles pour leur souhaiter le bonsoir, quand la porte de la salle de jeu s’ouvrit soudain avec fracas et livra passage à une douzaine de joueurs, qui firent irruption dans le salon.

A leur tête était Hunter, aux trois quarts ivre et parvenu aux dernières limites de la surexcitation. Brandissant de la main gauche un portefeuille bourré de bank-notes, il hurlait un véritable chant de victoire. La tourbe des aventuriers lui faisait cortège et l’acclamait en tempête.

«Hip! hip! hip! scandait Malone.

— Hurrah! vociférait le chœur comme un seul homme.

— Hurrah! répéta Hunter.

Puis, glissant de plus en plus à l’ivresse complète:

«Steward! appela-t-il d’une voix tonnante, du champagne!.. Dix, vingt, cent bouteilles de champagne!.. J’ai tout ramassé, ce soir!.. Tout! tout! tout!

— Tout! tout! tout! rugit le chœur en écho.

— Et j’invite tout le monde, passagers et équipage, du capitaine au dernier mousse!

Attirés par le bruit, un plus grand nombre de passagers emplissaient maintenant le salon.

— Hurrah!.. Bravo, Hunter! clamèrent les aventuriers, en applaudissant à tout rompre, et des mains et des talons.

Celui-ci ne les écoutait plus. Tout à coup, il avait découvert Edith et Jane Edgerton que la foule empêchait de se retirer. Il s’était élancé, et, saisissant brutalement Jane par la taille:

— Oui, j’invite tout le monde, s’écria-t-il de nouveau, et sans vous oublier, la belle enfant…

Devant cette agression imprévue, Jane Edgerton ne perdit rien de son sang-froid. Ses deux poings, ramenés en arrière, allèrent frapper le misérable en plein visage, conformément aux règles les plus pures de la boxe. Mais que pouvaient ces faibles mains contre un homme hors de lui, dont l'alcool décuplait momentanément la force!

«Eh!.. ricana Hunter, on est méchante, la belle!.. Faudra-t-il donc…

Il n'acheva pas. Une main puissante avait saisi le bandit à la gorge. Irrésistiblement, il allait rouler à dix pas.

Un silence relatif s'était fait dans le salon. On observait les deux adversaires, l'un bien connu par sa violence, l'autre qui venait de prouver sa vigueur. Déjà, Hunter se relevait, un peu étourdi, mais le couteau hors de sa gaine, lorsqu'un nouvel incident modifia ses dispositions belliqueuses.

On descendait du pont, et le craquement des marches annonçait sans doute l'arrivée du capitaine attiré par le bruit. Hunter tendit l'oreille, puis, comprenant son impuissance, regarda cet ennemi, dont l'attaque avait été si soudaine, qu'il n'avait même pu l'apercevoir.

«Ah!.. c'est vous!.. dit-il en reconnaissant Summy Skim.

Et, remettant son arme au fourreau, il ajouta d'une voix grosse de menaces:

«On se reverra, camarade!

Summy, immobile, ne semblait vraiment pas avoir entendu. Ben Raddle vint à son secours.

— Quand et où vous voudrez, dit-il, en s'avançant.

— Au Forty Miles Creek alors, messieurs les 129! s'écria Hunter qui s'élança hors du salon.

Summy ne bougeait toujours pas. Lui, qui, de sang-froid, n’eût pas écrasé une mouche, il restait tout éperdu de son acte de violence.

Jane Edgerton s’approcha de lui:

— *Thank you, sir,* dit-elle du ton le plus naturel, en lui donnant à droite un solide shake-hand.

— Oh! oui, merci, monsieur, répéta Edith d’une voix plus émue, en lui serrant l’autre main.

A ce double contact, force fut à Summy de revenir sur la terre. Mais avait-il conscience de ce qui venait de se passer? Avec le vague sourire d’un homme qui descend de la lune:

— Bonsoir, mesdemoiselles,» dit-il avec la plus suave politesse.

Malheureusement, cette politesse fut perdue pour les deux jeunes filles, attendu qu’au moment où Summy consentait à s’apercevoir de leur existence, il y avait déjà trente secondes qu’elles avaient quitté le salon.

CHAPITRE VI

Jane Edgerton and C°.

Skagway, comme tous ces lieux de halte perdus au milieu, d’une région où les routes manquent, où les moyens de transport font défaut, ne fut d’abord qu’un campement de chercheurs d’or. Puis, à ce pêle-mêle de huttes succéda un ensemble de cabanes plus régulièrement bâties, puis des maisons s’élevèrent sur ces terrains dont le prix montait sans cesse. Mais qui sait si, dans l’avenir, ces villes créées pour les besoins du jour ne seront pas abandonnées, si la région ne redeviendra pas déserte, lorsque les gisements d’or auront été épuisés?

On ne peut, en effet, comparer ces territoires à ceux de l’Australie, de la Californie et du Transvaal. Là, les villages auraient pu devenir des villes, même si les placers n’avaient pas existé. Là, le sol était productif, la contrée habitable, les affaires commerciales ou industrielles étaient susceptibles de prendre une réelle importance. Après avoir livré ses trésors métalliques, la terre suffisait encore à rémunérer le travail.

Mais ici, dans cette partie du Dominion, sur la frontière de l’Alaska, presque à la limite du cercle polaire, sous ce climat glacial, il n’en est pas ainsi. Lorsque les dernières pépites auront été extraites, pourquoi vivrait-on dans une contrée sans ressource, à demi épuisée déjà par les trafiquants de fourrures?

Il est donc fort possible que les villes si rapidement fondées dans ces régions, villes où ne manquent actuellement ni l’animation des affaires, ni le mouvement des voyageurs, disparaissent peu à peu, lorsque les mines du

Klondike seront vides, et, cela, malgré les sociétés financières qui se forment pour établir des communications plus faciles, malgré même le chemin de fer qu'il est question de construire de Wrangel à Dawson City.

Au moment où y arrivait le *Foot Ball*, Skagway regorgeait d'émigrants, les uns amenés par les paquebots de l'océan Pacifique, les autres par les railways canadiens ou les railroads des États-Unis, tous à destination des territoires du Klondike.

Quelques voyageurs se faisaient transporter jusqu'à Dyea, bourgade située à l'extrémité du canal, non par des steamers, pour lesquels la profondeur du canal eût été insuffisante, mais sur des bateaux plats construits de manière à pouvoir franchir la distance séparant les deux cités, ce qui abrégeait d'autant la pénible route de terre.

De toutes manières, c'est à Skagway, d'ailleurs, que commence la partie pénible du voyage, après ce transport relativement facile à bord des paquebots qui font le service du littoral.

Les deux cousins avaient fait le choix d'un hôtel, car Skagway en possédait déjà plusieurs. Ils y occupaient la même chambre, pour un prix qui dépassait encore ceux de Vancouver. Aussi mettraient-ils tous leurs soins à la quitter le plus promptement possible.

Les voyageurs pullulaient dans cet hôtel, en attendant leur départ pour le Klondike. Toutes les nationalités se coudoyaient dans le dining-saloon, où, seule, la nourriture était malheureusement alaskienne. Mais avaient-ils le droit de se montrer difficiles, tous ces émigrants à qui pendant plusieurs mois tant de privations seraient imposées?

Summy Skim et Ben Raddle ne devaient pas avoir, durant leur séjour à Skagway, l'occasion de rencontrer ces deux Texiens, avec l'un desquels Summy avait si rudement pris contact au moment de quitter le *Foot Ball*. Dès leur arrivée, Hunter et Malone étaient repartis pour le Klondike. Comme ils retournaient là d'où ils étaient venus six mois auparavant, leurs moyens de transport étaient assurés d'avance, et ils n'avaient eu qu'à se mettre en route, sans s'embarrasser d'un matériel qui se trouvait déjà sur leur exploitation du Forty Miles Creek.

«Ma foi, dit Summy Skim, c'est une chance de ne plus avoir ces butors pour compagnons de voyage! et je plains ceux qui feront route avec eux… à moins qu'ils ne se valent, ce qui est fort probable dans ce joli monde des chercheurs d'or.

— Sans doute, répondit Ben Raddle, mais lesdits butors sont mieux partagés que nous. Ils ne sont pas retardés à Skagway, tandis qu'il nous faudra quelques jours…

— Eh! nous arriverons, Ben, nous arriverons! s'écria Summy Skim, et nous retrouverons ces deux coquins sur le claim 131. Charmant voisinage! Délicieuse mitoyenneté! Agréable perspective, en vérité!.. Voilà, j'espère, qui va nous exciter à vendre notre carré de cailloux au meilleur prix et à reprendre vivement le chemin du retour!»

Si Summy Skim n'avait plus à s'inquiéter de Hunter et de Malone, il retrouva bientôt, par contre, les jeunes passagères, dont il avait si vaillamment pris la défense. Descendues au même hôtel que les deux cousins, elles croisèrent ceux-ci plusieurs fois. Au passage, on échangeait quelques paroles dont la brièveté n'excluait pas la cordialité, puis chacun retournait à ses affaires.

Il n’était pas difficile de deviner celles qui pouvaient préoccuper les deux jeunes filles, à la recherche, sans aucun doute, du moyen le plus pratique de gagner Dawson City. Mais, ce moyen, il ne semblait pas qu’elles dussent le trouver aisément. Quarante-huit heures après l’arrivée à Skagway, rien n’indiquait qu’elles eussent fait, dans cette voie, le moindre progrès, à en juger du moins par le visage de Jane Edgerton, où, en dépit des efforts de la jeune fille pour ne rien trahir de ses impressions, se lisait un commencement d’inquiétude.

Ben Raddle et Summy Skim, dont l’intérêt pour les jeunes voyageuses croissait de jour en jour, ne pouvaient songer sans émotion, sans pitié, aux dangers et aux fatigues auxquels elles allaient être exposées. Quel appui, quel secours pourraient-elles jamais trouver, le cas échéant, au milieu de cette cohue d’émigrants, chez qui l’envie, la cupidité, la passion de l’or éteignaient tout sentiment de justice et d’honneur?

Le soir du 23 avril, Summy Skim, n’y tenant plus, se risqua à aborder la cousine blonde, qui, à tort ou à raison, lui paraissait moins impressionnante.

«Eh bien, mademoiselle Edith, demanda-t-il, rien de neuf, depuis l’arrivée à Skagway?

— Rien, monsieur, répondit la jeune fille.

Summy fit à ce moment la remarque soudaine que c’était en somme la première fois qu’il entendait cette voix au timbre musical.

— Sans doute, votre cousine et vous, reprit-il, étudiez les moyens de transport jusqu’à Dawson?

— En effet, monsieur.

— Et vous n’avez rien décidé encore?

— Non, monsieur, rien encore.»

Aimable, certes, mais peu encourageante, cette Edith Edgerton. Les intentions secourables que Summy agitait confusément en furent paralysées, et la conversation en resta là pour l’instant.

Toutefois, Summy avait son idée, et la conversation interrompue fut reprise le lendemain. Les deux jeunes filles étaient alors en pourparlers pour se joindre à une caravane dont les préparatifs de départ seraient achevés dans quelques jours. Cette caravane ne comprenait guère que des gens misérables, incultes et grossiers. Quelle compagnie pour ces voyageuses d’allures si fines, d’éducation si parfaite!

Dès qu’il les aperçut, Summy revint à la charge, encouragé, cette fois, par la présence de Ben Raddle et de Jane Edgerton.

«Eh bien, mademoiselle Edith, répéta comme la veille le brave Summy, qui n’était pas autrement inventif, rien de neuf?

— Rien, monsieur, déclara de nouveau Edith.

— Cela peut durer longtemps comme cela, mademoiselle.

Edith fît un geste évasif. Summy reprit:

«Serait-il indiscret de vous demander quels sont vos projets pour continuer votre voyage jusqu’à Dawson?

— Nullement, répondit Edith. Nous cherchons à former une petite caravane avec les personnes qui nous parlaient tout à l’heure.

— Bonne idée, en principe, approuva Summy. Mais, mademoiselle – pardonnez-moi de me mêler de ce qui ne me regarde pas – avez-vous mûrement réfléchi avant d’adopter ce parti? Ces gens avec lesquels vous avez l’intention de vous associer paraissent peu recommandables, et, permettez-moi de vous le dire…

— On prend ce qu’on peut, interrompit Jane Edgerton en riant. L’état de notre fortune nous interdit les relations princières.

— Il n’est pas besoin d’être prince pour être supérieur à vos futurs compagnons. Vous serez forcées de les quitter à la première étape, j’en suis certain.

— S’il en est ainsi, nous continuerons seules notre route, répondit Jane nettement.

Summy leva les bras au ciel.

— Seules, mesdemoiselles!.. Y pensez-vous?.. Vous périrez en route!

— Pourquoi aurions-nous à redouter plus de dangers que vous-mêmes? objecta Jane, en reprenant son attitude autoritaire. Ce que vous pouvez faire, nous le pouvons aussi.

Décidément, elle ne désarmait pas, cette enragée féministe.

— Évidemment, évidemment, accorda Summy conciliant. Mais il y a ceci, que, ni mon cousin, ni moi, nous n’avons l’intention d’entreprendre avec nos seules forces le voyage de Dawson. Nous aurons un guide, un guide excellent, qui nous donnera le concours de son expérience et nous fournira tout le matériel voulu.

Summy fit une pause, puis ajouta d’une voix insinuante:

«Pourquoi ne profiteriez-vous pas de ces avantages?

— A quel titre?..

— A titres d’invitées, bien entendu, dit Summy avec chaleur.

Jane lui tendit franchement la main.

— Ma cousine et moi, monsieur Skim, nous vous sommes bien reconnaissantes de votre offre généreuse, mais nous ne pouvons l’accepter. Nos ressources, bien que modestes, sont suffisantes, et nous sommes résolues à ne rien devoir qu’à nous-mêmes, à moins d’absolue nécessité.

Au ton tranquille de cette déclaration, on comprenait qu’elle était sans appel. Si Jane Edgerton pensait aux graves difficultés qu’elle allait affronter, ce n’était pas pour en être effrayée, mais, au contraire, pour se redresser dans l’orgueil de son effort personnel, comme un ressort bien trempé.

Elle ajouta, s’adressant à Ben Raddle:

«N’ai-je pas raison, monsieur?

— Tout à fait, miss Jane,» déclara Ben, sans faire la moindre attention aux signes désespérés de son cousin.

Dès son arrivée à Skagway, Ben Raddle s’était, en effet, occupé d’assurer son transport jusqu’à la capitale du Klondike. Suivant les indications qui lui avaient été données à Montréal, il s'était enquis d'un certain Bill Stell dont on lui répondait, et avec lequel on lui avait conseillé de se mettre en relation.

Bill Stell était un ancien coureur des prairies, d'origine canadienne. Pendant plusieurs années, à l'entière satisfaction de ses chefs, il avait rempli la fonction de Scout ou d'éclaireur dans les troupes du Dominion et pris part aux longues luttes qu'elles eurent à soutenir contre les Indiens. On le tenait pour un homme de grand courage, de grand sang-froid et de grande énergie.

Le Scout faisait actuellement le métier de convoyeur pour les émigrants, que le retour de la belle saison appelait ou rappelait au Klondike. Ce n'était pas seulement un guide. Il était aussi chef d'un véritable personnel et propriétaire du matériel propre à ces difficiles voyages: bateaux et leurs équipages pour la traversée des lacs, traîneaux et chiens pour le traînage à la surface des plaines glacées qui s'étendent au delà des passes du Chilkoot. En même temps, il assurait à forfait la nourriture de la caravane organisée par ses soins. C'était précisément parce qu'il comptait utiliser les services de Bill Stell, que Ben Raddle, en quittant Montréal, ne s'était pas embarrassé de bagages encombrants. Il savait que le Scout lui fournirait tout ce qui serait nécessaire pour atteindre le Klondike, et il ne doutait point de s'entendre avec lui pour l'aller et le retour.

Lorsque Ben Raddle, le lendemain de son arrivée à Skagway, se rendit à la maison de Bill Stell, il lui fut répondu que celui-ci était absent. Il avait été conduire une caravane par la White Pass jusqu'à l'extrémité du lac Bennet. Mais son départ remontait à une dizaine de jours déjà. S'il n'avait pas éprouvé de retards, ou s'il n'avait pas été requis en route par d'autres voyageurs, il ne devait pas tarder à revenir.

Il en fut ainsi, en effet, et, dès la matinée du 25 avril, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim purent se mettre en rapport avec Bill Stell.

De taille moyenne, barbe grisonnante, cheveux ras, rudes et gros, regard ferme et pénétrant, le Scout était un homme de cinquante ans et paraissait avoir un corps de fer. Une parfaite honnêteté se lisait sur sa physionomie sympathique. Au cours de ses longs services dans l'armée canadienne, il avait acquis les plus rares qualités de circonspection, de vigilance, de prudence. Réfléchi, méthodique, plein de ressources, il n'eût pas été facile à tromper. En même temps, philosophe à sa manière, il prenait la vie par ses bons côtés, et, très satisfait de son sort, l'ambition ne lui était jamais venue d'imiter ceux qu'il conduisait aux territoires aurifères. L'expérience de tous les jours ne lui prouvait-elle pas, d'ailleurs, que la plupart succombaient à la peine, ou revenaient de ces dures campagnes plus misérables qu'auparavant?

Ben Raddle fît connaître à Bill Stell son projet de partir pour Dawson City dans le plus court délai.

«Bien, monsieur, répondit le Scout. Tout à votre service. C'est mon métier de guider les voyageurs, et je suis outillé en conséquence.

— Je le sais, Scout, dit Ben Raddle, et je sais aussi que l'on peut s'en rapporter à vous.

— Vous ne comptez rester que quelques semaines à Dawson City? demanda Bill Stell.

— C'est probable.

— Il ne s'agit pas alors d'exploiter un claim?

— Je l’ignore. Pour le moment il n’est question que de chercher à vendre celui que nous possédons, mon cousin et moi, et qui nous est venu par héritage. Une proposition d’achat nous a déjà été faite; mais, avant de l’accepter, nous avons voulu nous rendre compte de la valeur de notre propriété.

— C’est prudent, monsieur Raddle. Dans ces sortes d’affaires, il n’est de ruses qu’on n’emploie pour tromper le monde. Il faut se défier…

— C’est ce qui nous a décidés à entreprendre ce voyage.

— Et, lorsque vous aurez vendu votre claim, vous reviendrez à Montréal?

— C’est notre intention. Après nous avoir conduits à l’aller. Scout, vous aurez, sans doute, à nous conduire au retour.

— Nous pourrons nous entendre à ce sujet, répondit Bill Stell. Comme je n’ai pas l’habitude de surfaire, voici dans quelles conditions je traiterai avec vous, monsieur Raddle.

Il s’agissait, en somme, d’un voyage dont la durée serait de trente à trente-cinq jours, et pour lequel le Scout aurait à fournir chevaux ou mules, attelages de chiens, traîneaux, bateaux et tentes de campement. Il devait, en outre, pourvoir à l’entretien de sa caravane, et l’on pouvait se fier à lui pour cela, car, mieux que personne, il connaissait les exigences de ce long cheminement à travers un pays désolé.

Les deux cousins n’ayant pas de matériel de mine à transporter, le prix du voyage fut, tout compte fait, fixé à la somme de dix-huit cents francs de Skagway à Dawson City, et à une somme égale pour le retour.

Il eût été malséant de discuter les conditions avec un homme aussi consciencieux, aussi honnête que le Scout. Du reste, à cette époque, les prix de transport, rien que pour franchir les passes jusqu'à la région des lacs, étaient assez élevés, en raison des difficultés des deux routes existantes: quatre à cinq cents par livre de bagage pour traverser l'une, six à sept pour l'autre. Les prix demandés par Bill Stell étaient donc fort acceptables, et Ben Raddle les accepta sans marchander.

— C'est convenu, dit-il, et n'oubliez pas que nous désirons partir dans le plus bref délai.

— Quarante-huit heures, c'est tout ce qu'il me faut, répondit le Scout.

— Est-il nécessaire que nous allions à Dyea par bateau? demanda Ben Raddle.

— C'est inutile. Puisque vous ne traînez pas un matériel à votre suite, il me parait préférable de partir de Skagway.

Il restait à décider quel chemin suivrait la caravane à travers cette partie montagneuse qui précède la région des lacs, et dans laquelle s'accumulent les plus grandes difficultés. Aux questions que lui posa Ben Raddle à cet égard, Bill Stell répondit:

«Il existe deux routes, ou plutôt deux «traces», la White Pass et la passe du Chilkoot. Qu'elles prennent l'une ou l'autre, les caravanes n'ont plus ensuite qu'à descendre vers le lac Bennet ou le lac Lindeman.

— Laquelle de ces deux routes suivrons-nous, Scout?

— Celle du Chilkoot. De là, nous atteindrons directement la pointe du lac Lindeman, après avoir fait halte au Sheep Camp. On peut se loger et se ravitaillera cette station. Nous trouverons mon matériel au lac Lindeman où je l’ai laissé, ce qui m’évite de le ramener à Skagway par-dessus la montagne.

— Nous nous en rapportons à votre expérience, et ce que vous ferez sera bien fait, conclut Ben Raddle. En ce qui nous concerne, nous sommes prêts à partir dès que vous donnerez le signal.

— Dans deux jours, vous ai-je dit, répliqua Bill Stell. Il me faut ce temps-là pour mes préparatifs, monsieur Raddle. Nous nous mettrons en route de grand matin, et, le soir venu, nous ne serons pas loin du sommet du Chilkoot.

— A quelle hauteur est ce sommet?

— A trois mille pieds environ, répondit le Scout. Ce n’est pas énorme. Mais la passe est étroite, sinueuse, et ce qui rend le passage difficile, c’est qu’il est encombré à cette époque par la foule des mineurs, des véhicules, des attelages, sans parler des neiges qui l’obstruent parfois.

Tout était en règle avec Bill Stell. Ben Raddle cependant ne s’en allait pas.

— Un dernier mot, Scout, demanda-t-il au guide. Pourriez-vous me dire quelle serait l’augmentation de prix, si nous étions par hasard accompagnés de deux voyageuses?

— Cela dépend, monsieur, répondit le Scout. Beaucoup de bagages?

— Non. Très peu.

— Dans ce cas, monsieur Raddle, il faudrait compter de cinq à sept cents francs selon la nature et le poids des colis à transporter, nourriture des voyageuses comprise.

— Merci, Scout, nous verrons, dit Ben Raddle en prenant congé.

Tandis qu'ils faisaient route pour rentrer à l'hôtel, Summy fit part à son cousin de l'étonnement que lui avait causé la dernière question posée au guide. A qui pouvait penser Ben, si ce n'est à Edith et à Jane Edgerton?

— En effet, reconnut Ben.

— Mais tu sais bien, objecta Summy, qu'elles ont déjà carrément refusé, et même avec ton approbation.

— Il est vrai.

— Et le refus a été formulé d'un ton tel qu'il n'y a certainement pas à y revenir.

— C'est que tu n'as pas su t'y prendre, cousin, répondit Ben sans se troubler. Laisse-moi faire, et tu verras que je m'y entends mieux que toi.»

Aussitôt de retour à l'hôtel, Ben, suivi de Summy très intrigué, se mit en quête des deux jeunes filles. Les ayant découvertes dans le reading-room, il aborda Jane délibérément:

«Mademoiselle, dit-il *ex abrupto*, j'ai une affaire à vous proposer.

— Laquelle? demanda Jane sans paraître surprise de cette entrée en matière.

— La voici, expliqua Ben tranquillement. Mon cousin Summy vous a offert l'autre jour de vous joindre à nous pour gagner Dawson. Je l'ai blâmé, car votre présence et celle de votre cousine nous occasionneraient une dépense de sept cents francs environ, et un homme d’affaires comme moi pense forcément que chaque dollar doit en rapporter un ou plusieurs autres. Fort heureusement vous avez décliné cette offre.

— En effet, dit Jane. Ensuite?

— Nous ne pouvez cependant méconnaître, mademoiselle, que vous allez courir de sérieux dangers et que l’offre de mon cousin était de nature à faciliter votre voyage.

— Je suis loin de le contester, reconnut Jane. Mais je ne vois pas…

— M’y voici, reprit Ben sans s’occuper de l’interruption. Je répète que notre concours constituerait pour vous un immense avantage. Il vous éviterait les retards qu’il vous faudra autrement subir et vous permettrait d’arriver à bonne époque sur les placers. Si vous acceptez, vos chances de succès seront notablement augmentées, et il est juste, par conséquent, que je sois intéressé dans une entreprise que j’aurai ainsi facilitée. Je vous propose donc de prendre votre transport à ma charge jusqu’à Dawson, moyennant une participation de dix pour cent dans vos bénéfices ultérieurs.

Jane ne semblait pas le moins du monde étonnée de cette singulière proposition. Quoi de plus naturel qu’une affaire? Si elle tardait à donner sa réponse, c’est uniquement qu’elle examinait celle qui lui était proposée. Dix pour cent, c’est beaucoup! Mais elle est bien longue et bien dure aussi, la route jusqu’à la capitale du Klondike! Et l’audace n’exclut pas le bon sens.

— J’accepte, dit-elle, après avoir réfléchi. Si vous voulez, nous allons signer un contrat.

— J’allais vous le proposer, dit sérieusement Ben en s’asseyant à une table.

Et, surveillé du coin de l’œil par sa nouvelle associée, il écrivit gravement:

«*Entre les soussignés*:

»*1° Mademoiselle Jane Edgerton, prospectrice, demeurant…*

— A propos, demanda-t-il en s’interrompant, votre domicile?

— Mettez: Dawson City’s hospital.

Ben Raddle se remit à écrire:

»*… Dawson City’s hospital…………d’une part;*

»2° *Et monsieur Ben Raddle, ingénieur, demeurant a Montréal, 29, rue Jacques-Cartier………… d’autre part;*

»*Ont été arrêtées les conventions suivantes:*

…………………………………

Par-dessus la table, Edith et Summy échangèrent un regard. Regard joyeux pour le rayonnant Summy. Regard mouillé d’une douce émotion pour Edith qui, elle du moins, n’était pas dupe du généreux subterfuge.

CHAPITRE VII

Le Chilkoot.

Bill Stell avait raison de préférer la passe du Chilkoot à la White Pass. Cette dernière, il est vrai, on peut la suivre en sortant de Skagway, tandis que la première ne commence qu’à Dyea; mais, après la White Pass, il reste environ huit lieues à faire dans des conditions déplorables pour atteindre le lac Bennet, alors que seize kilomètres seulement séparent le lac Lindeman de la passe du Chilkoot, et ce lac conduit sans peine au lac Bennett, dont son extrémité supérieure n’est distante que de trois kilomètres.

Que la passe du Chilkoot, plus dure que la White Pass, comporte un talus presque vertical de mille pieds à gravir, cela n’était pas pour embarrasser des gens que n’encombrait aucun lourd matériel. Au delà du Chilkoot, ils trouveraient une route suffisamment entretenue qui aboutit au lac Lindeman. Cette première section du voyage à travers la barrière montagneuse du territoire n’offrirait donc pas, sinon de grandes fatigues, du moins de grandes difficultés.

Le 27 avril, à six heures du matin, Bill Stell donna le signal du départ. Edith et Jane Edgerton, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle, le Scout et les six hommes à son service quittèrent Skagway et prirent la route du Chilkoot. Deux traîneaux attelés de mules devaient suffire à cette partie du voyage qui se terminait à la pointe sud du lac Lindeman où Bill Stell avait établi son poste principal. Ce parcours ne pouvait s’effectuer en moins de trois à quatre jours dans les circonstances les plus favorables.

Un des traîneaux portait les bagages. L’autre était destiné aux deux jeunes filles, qu’un amoncellement de couvertures et de pelleteries défendait contre une bise extrêmement vive. Elles n’avaient jamais imaginé, on s’en doute, que leur voyage s’accomplirait de la sorte, et, glissant un bout de nez rosé hors de ses fourrures, Edith, à plusieurs reprises, adressa à Summy Skim des remerciements que celui-ci s’obstinait à ne point entendre.

Ben Raddle et lui étaient trop heureux de pouvoir leur être utiles. Quelle agréable compagnie pour un si affreux voyage! Bill Stell lui-même en était enchanté.

Du reste, le Scout n’avait point caché à Edith avec quelle impatience elle était attendue à Dawson City. L’hôpital était littéralement encombré, et plusieurs gardes-malades avaient été atteintes par les différentes épidémies qui décimaient la ville. La fièvre typhoïde, plus particulièrement, désolait alors la capitale du Klondike. C’est par centaines que l’on comptait les victimes, parmi ces malheureux émigrants qui arrivaient, anémiés, surmenés, épuisés, après avoir laissé tant de leurs compagnons sur la route.

«Charmant pays, décidément! se disait Summy Skim. Nous, encore, nous ne ferons qu’y passer!.. Mais ces deux petites, qui vont braver de tels dangers, et qui ne reviendront peut-être pas!..»

Il avait semblé inutile d’emporter des vivres pour la traversée du Chilkoot, afin de diminuer le poids à transporter sur ces rudes pentes. Le Scout connaissait, sinon des hôtels, du moins des «lodgings», auberges des plus rudimentaires, où l’on trouvait à se nourrir, et même, à la rigueur, un logement pour la nuit. A de hauts prix, il est vrai. On paye un demi-dollar un lit fait d’une simple planche, et un dollar le repas qui se compose invariablement de lard et de pain à peine levé. Un confortable si relatif ne serait heureusement inévitable que pendant fort peu de jours. La caravane de Bill Stell ne serait point réduite à ce régime lorsqu’elle franchirait la région lacustre.

Le temps était froid et la température se maintenait à 10 degrés centigrades au-dessous de zéro, avec une bise glaciale. Du moins, une fois engagés à travers la «trace», les traîneaux pourraient glisser sur la neige durcie. C’était une circonstance favorable pour les attelages. La montée était raide, en effet. Aussi mules, chiens, chevaux, bœufs, rennes, y succombent-ils en grand nombre, et la passe du Chilkoot, comme la White Pass, est-elle semée de leurs cadavres.

En quittant Skagway, le Scout s’était dirigé vers Dyea, en suivant la rive orientale du canal. Ses traîneaux, moins chargés que tant d’autres qui remontaient vers le massif, auraient pu aisément les devancer. Mais déjà l’encombrement était prodigieux. Au milieu des rafales qui font rage dans ces étroits défilés et soulèvent d’aveuglants tourbillons de neige, ce n’étaient que véhicules de toutes sortes, projetés en travers, voire culbutés, bêtes se refusant à marcher malgré les coups et les cris, violents efforts des uns pour se faire livrer passage, violente résistance des autres pour s’y opposer, matériel qu’il fallait décharger puis recharger, disputes et rixes au cours desquelles s’échangeaient injures et coups, et parfois même des balles de revolver. Autant d’infranchissables obstacles qui barraient la route, et force était de régler son allure sur celle du plus lent. Puis, c’étaient des attelages de chiens qui s’enchevêtraient, et que de temps mettaient les conducteurs à les dépêtrer, au milieu des hurlements de ces animaux à demi sauvages!

La distance qui sépare Skagway de la passe est courte, et, malgré les difficultés du cheminement, on peut la franchir en quelques heures. Aussi, avant midi, la caravane du Scout faisait-elle halte à Dyea.

Sur la pente de Chilkoot.

Campement près de la crête du Chilkoot.

Au sommet du Chilkoot

Ce n’était encore qu’une agglomération de cabanes disposées au bout du canal. Mais quelle invraisemblable cohue! Plus de trois mille émigrants se pressaient dans cet embryon de ville, à l’orée de la passe du Chilkoot.

Désireux de mettre à profit ce temps froid, qui facilitait le traînage, Bill Stell, avec raison, entendait quitter Dyea au plus tôt. A midi on repartit, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim à pied, les deux jeunes filles dans leur traîneau. Il eût été difficile de ne pas admirer les sites sauvages et grandioses que découvrait chaque détour du défilé, ces massifs de pins et de bouleaux couverts de givre qui se hissaient vers la crête, ces torrents que le froid n’avait pu saisir et qui bondissaient tumultueusement jusqu’au fond des abîmes dont la profondeur échappait aux regards.

Le Sheep Camp n’était distant que de quatre lieues. Quelques heures suffiraient à les franchir, bien que la passe se développât en rampes très raides et que les attelages s’arrêtassent fréquemment. Ce n’était pas sans peine que leurs conducteurs les obligeaient à se remettre en marche.

Tout en cheminant, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim causaient avec le Scout. Celui-ci, à une question qui lui fut posée, répondit:

«Je compte bien arriver au Sheep Camp vers cinq ou six heures. Nous y resterons jusqu’au matin.

— Y existe-t-il une auberge où nos deux compagnes puissent prendre quelque repos? demanda Summy Skim.

— Il y en a, répondit Bill Stell, car le Sheep Camp est un lieu de halte pour les émigrants.

— Mais, interrogea Ben Raddle, est-on certain d’y trouver de la place?

— C’est très douteux, affirma le Scout. D’ailleurs ces auberges sont peu engageantes. Peut-être serait-il préférable de dresser nos tentes pour passer la nuit.

— Messieurs, dit Edith qui, de son traîneau, avait entendu cette conversation, nous ne voulons pas être une cause de gêne.

— De gêne! répondit Summy Skim. En quoi pourriez-vous nous gêner? N’avons-nous pas deux tentes? L’une vous sera réservée. Nous occuperons l’autre.

— Et avec nos deux petits poêles qui brûleront jusqu’au jour, ajouta Bill Stell, il n’y aura rien à craindre du froid, quoiqu’il soit vif actuellement.

— C’est parfait, approuva Jane en prenant la parole à son tour. Mais il doit être bien convenu que vous n’avez pas à nous ménager. Nous ne sommes pas des invitées. Nous sommes des associées qui ne méritons ni plus ni moins d’égards que les autres. Quand il faudra voyager de nuit, nous le ferons. Nous voulons être traitées en hommes, et nous regarderions comme une injure tout ce qui pourrait ressembler à de la galanterie.

— Soyez tranquilles, déclara Summy Skim en riant, et tenez pour certain que nous ne vous épargnerons ni ennuis, ni fatigues. Nous en inventerions, au besoin!»

La caravane atteignit Sheep Camp vers six heures. En arrivant, les attelages étaient harassés. On se hâta de les dételer, et les gens du Scout s’occupèrent de leur nourriture.

Bill Stell avait eu raison de dire que les auberges de ce village étaient dépourvues de tout confort. Elles étaient combles, d’ailleurs. Le Scout fit donc établir les deux tentes à l’abri des arbres, un peu en dehors du Sheep Camp, de manière à ne point être troublé par l’effroyable tumulte de la foule.

Edith et Jane prirent à ce moment le premier rôle. En un clin d’œil, les couvertures et les pelleteries des traîneaux furent, par leurs soins, transformées en couches suffisamment moelleuses, et les poêles firent entendre d’agréables ronflements. Si l’on se contenta de viandes froides, du moins les boissons chaudes, thé et café, ne firent-elles point défaut. Puis les hommes allumèrent leurs pipes, et la soirée se prolongea confortablement, en dépit du thermomètre qui, à l’extérieur, était tombé à 17° au-dessous de zéro.

Que de souffrances devaient éprouver ceux des émigrants qui – par centaines – n’avaient pu trouver un abri dans le Sheep Camp! Combien de femmes, d’enfants, déjà épuisés au début du voyage, n’en verraient pas le terme!

Le Scout fixa le départ du lendemain à la pointe du jour, afin de devancer la foule dans la passe du Chilkoot. Le temps se maintenait sec et froid, mais, en somme, dût le thermomètre baisser encore, cent fois préférable aux rafales, aux tourbillons de neige, à ces violents blizzards, si redoutés dans les hautes régions du Nord-Amérique.

La tente de Jane et d’Edith était abattue quand les deux cousins sortirent de la leur. Aussitôt, le café fut préparé et servi bouillant, puis la seconde tente disparut à son tour. Quelques instants plus tard, sans que la partie masculine de la caravane ait eu à s’en occuper, tout le matériel était remis sur les traîneaux, bien en ordre, et de manière que chaque objet tînt le minimum de place et pût être aisément retiré sans déranger les antres. Ben Raddle, Summy Skim, et jusqu’à Bill Stell, étaient littéralement émerveillés d’une telle virtuosité. Le premier, en voyant la méthode supérieure des «associées», commençait même à penser que le contrat signé par lui dans un but charitable pourrait bien, en fin de compte, se transformer en une excellente affaire.

Quant à Summy, il admirait béatement le manège de ses jeunes compagnes, qu’il suivait pas à pas, les mains vides, offrant avec obstination un tardif concours qu’elles refusaient en riant.

L’allure n’allait pas être plus rapide que la veille. La rampe s’accentuait à mesure que la passe gagnait vers le sommet du massif. Ce n’était pas trop de ces mules robustes pour tirer les véhicules sur un sol inégal, rocailleux, coupé d’ornières, et que le dégel eût rendu tout à fait impraticable.

Toujours la même foule grouillante et tumultueuse, toujours les mêmes obstacles qui rendent cette trace du Chilkoot si pénible. Toujours des haltes forcées et parfois longues, lorsqu’un embarras de traîneaux et d’attelages coupait la route. A plusieurs reprises le Scout et ses hommes durent en venir aux mains pour se frayer un passage.

Sur les côtés du sentier, les cadavres de mules se succédaient, plus nombreux à mesure qu’on gagnait en hauteur. Les uns après les autres, ces animaux étaient tombés, tués par le froid, la fatigue et la faim, et les attelages de chiens, emportant avec eux leurs traîneaux malgré les efforts des conducteurs, se précipitaient sur cette nourriture inespérée et s’en disputaient en hurlant les derniers débris.

Spectacle plus triste encore, il n’était pas rare d’apercevoir le corps de quelque émigrant, mort de froid et de fatigue, abandonné sous les arbres ou au fond des précipices. Un exhaussement de la couche neigeuse, d’où sortaient un pied, une main ou un bout de vêtement, indiquait seul la place de la tombe éphémère qu’emporterait le premier souffle du printemps. Invinciblement d’abord, l’œil était attiré par ces sinistres tumuli, puis, peu à peu, l’accoutumance faisait son œuvre, et l’on passait avec une indifférence grandissante.

Parfois, c’étaient des familles entières, hommes, femmes, enfants, incapables d’aller plus loin, qui gisaient sur le sol glacé, sans que personne leur vînt en aide. Inlassables, Edith et Jane, aidées de leurs compagnons, s’efforçaient de porter secours à ces malheureux, de les ranimer avec un peu d’eau-de-vie. Mais que pouvaient-elles pour cette foule de misérables? Bientôt, il fallait abandonner ces infortunés à leur sort, et reprendre l’ascension épuisante de ce sentier de nécropole.

Toutes les cinq minutes, on était contraint de s’arrêter, soit pour laisser souffler les mules, soit à cause de l’encombrement. En quelques endroits, à des coudes brusques, le défilé devenait si étroit, que le matériel emporté par certains émigrants ne parvenait pas à le franchir. Les pièces principales des bateaux démontables excédaient la largeur du sentier. De là nécessité d’en décharger les véhicules, et de les faire haler une à une par les bêtes de trait. De là, aussi, une perte de temps considérable pour les autres attelages.

En d’autres endroits, la rampe était si rude, que l’angle d’inclinaison dépassait quarante-cinq degrés. Bien que ferrés à glace, les animaux, alors, se révoltaient ou, tout ou moins, se dérobaient. On ne pouvait les décider à attaquer la montée qu’à grand renfort de cris et de fouet, et les crocs de leurs fers laissaient de profondes empreintes sur la neige, tachée de gouttelettes de sang.

Vers cinq heures du soir, le Scout arrêta la caravane. Les mules exténuées étaient dans l’incapacité de faire un pas de plus, bien que leur charge fût faible relativement à tant d’autres. Sur la droite de la passe, s’évidait une sorte de ravin, où des arbres résineux poussaient en grand nombre. Sous leur frondaison, les tentes trouveraient un abri contre les bourrasques que devait faire redouter le relèvement de la température.

Bill Stell connaissait cette place où il avait déjà plus d’une fois passé la nuit. Le campement y fut organisé sur ses indications.

«Vous craignez quelque rafale? lui demanda Ben Raddle.

— Oui, la nuit sera mauvaise, répondit le Scout, et nous ne saurions prendre trop de précautions contre les tempêtes de neige, qui s’engouffrent ici comme dans un entonnoir.

— Mais, fit observer Summy Skim, nous serons en sûreté, grâce à l’orientation de ce ravin.

— C’est pour cela que je l’ai choisi,» répondit Bill Stell.

L’expérience du Scout ne l’avait pas trompé. La tourmente, qui commença vers sept heures du soir et se prolongea jusqu’à cinq heures du matin, fut terrible. Elle était accompagnée de tourbillons neigeux qui n’eussent pas permis de se voir à deux mètres. On eut grand’peine à maintenir les poêles en activité, car la furie du vent refoulait les fumées à l’intérieur, et il n’était pas facile de renouveler les provisions de bois au milieu des rafales. Si les tentes résistèrent, c’est que Summy Skim et Ben Raddle veillèrent une partie de la nuit, avec la crainte perpétuelle que celle où s’abritaient les jeunes filles ne fût emportée.

C’est précisément ce qui arriva pour la plupart de celles qui avaient été dressées en dehors du ravin, et, lorsque le jour reparut, on put juger de l’importance des dégâts causés par la tempête. Attelages ayant rompu leurs entraves, dispersés en toutes directions, traîneaux culbutés, quelques-uns jusqu’au fond des précipices qui bordaient la route et dans lesquels mugissaient les torrents, familles en larmes, implorant vainement une assistance qu’il n’était au pouvoir de personne de leur donner: c’était un véritable désastre.

«Pauvres gens!.. pauvres gens!.. murmuraient les jeunes filles. Que vont-ils devenir?

— Ce n’est pas notre affaire, déclara d’un ton bourru le Scout, cachant son émotion impuissante sous une apparente dureté, cl, comme nous n’y pouvons rien, le mieux est de décamper au plus tôt.»

Sans tarder, il donna le signal du départ et la caravane attaqua de nouveau la montée.

Cependant la bourrasque s’était apaisée à l’aube. Avec cette brusquerie que le thermomètre constate en ces régions élevées, le vent avait halé le Nord-Est, et la température était retombée à 12° sous zéro. L’épaisse couche de neige qui recouvrait le sol acquit aussitôt une extrême dureté.

L’aspect de la région s’était modifié. Au delà des talus, les bois avaient fait place à de vastes plaines blanches, dont la réverbération éblouissait. Les voyageurs qui n’ont pas eu soin de se munir de lunettes bleues en sont réduits dans ce cas à saupoudrer leurs cils et leurs paupières avec du charbon de bois.

Sur le conseil du Scout, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim prirent cette précaution, mais ils ne purent décider Edith et Jane à les imiter.

«Comment ferez-vous, mademoiselle Jane, pour découvrir les pépites, quand vous aurez une bonne ophtalmie? insista vainement Ben.

— Et vous, mademoiselle Edith, renchérit Summy, comment soignerez-vous alors les malades? Ne serait-ce que pour nous, mademoiselle, car, j’en suis certain, il nous arrivera malheur dans ce pays du diable, et vous serez notre infirmière un jour ou l’autre à l’hôpital de Dawson.»

Cette éloquence fut perdue. Les deux jeunes filles préférèrent disparaître sous la retombée de leurs capuchons et renoncer à faire usage de leurs yeux, plutôt que de les barbouiller de cette manière. Ce qui prouverait, s’il en était besoin, que, même chez la féministe la plus militante, l’éternelle coquetterie ne perd jamais ses droits.

Dans la soirée du 29 avril, la caravane fit halte au sommet de la passe du Chilkoot, et le Scout y établit son campement. Le lendemain, on adopterait les mesures nécessaires pour effectuer la descente sur le revers septentrional du massif.

En cet endroit, entièrement découvert et exposé à toutes les rigueurs de la température, l'encombrement était extraordinaire. Plus de trois mille émigrants l'occupaient alors. C'est là qu'ils organisent les «caches» où ils abritent une partie de leur matériel. La descente ne s'effectuant pas, en effet, sans d'extrêmes difficultés, on ne peut procéder que par petites charges, afin d'éviter les accidents. Aussi, tous ces illuminés, auxquels le mirage du Klondike donne une énergie, une ténacité surnaturelles, après être descendus au pied de la montagne avec un premier fardeau, remontent-ils au sommet, où ils reprennent une seconde charge, puis descendent et remontent encore, et cela quinze ou vingt fois, s'il le faut, pendant d'interminables jours. C'est alors que les chiens peuvent rendre d'inappréciables services, qu'ils soient attelés à des traîneaux ou à de simples peaux do bœuf que l'on fait plus facilement glisser sur la neige durcie des pentes.

La plupart des émigrants, bravant les vents du Nord qui, battant de plein fouet ce revers du Chilkoot, allaient décupler leurs souffrances au cours de la descente, avaient fait halte à l'arête septentrionale de la passe.

De ce point, tous ces malheureux voyaient, ou croyaient voir, ouvertes devant leurs pas, les plaines du Klondike. Ils étaient à leurs pieds, ces territoires fabuleux, que leurs imaginations surchauffées transformaient en un immense champ d'or, où germaient pour eux, pour eux seuls, une richesse infinie, une puissance surhumaine! Et toute leur âme se projetait vers le Nord mystérieux de toute la violence de leur désir, de toute la force de leur rêve merveilleux, dont la plupart seraient arrachés par un épouvantable réveil!

Bill Stell et sa caravane n’avaient point à prolonger leur séjour sur le sommet. Pour ces privilégiés, pas de cache à établir, et nul besoin de gravir de nouveau la pente, après l’avoir descendue. Lorsqu’ils auraient mis le pied sur la plaine, il ne leur resterait plus à franchir qu’une distance de quelques lieues pour atteindre la pointe du lac Lindeman.

Le campement fut établi comme d’habitude. Mais cette dernière nuit fut des plus mauvaises. Brusquement la température s’était relevée, et la tourmente se remit à souffler avec une nouvelle violence. Les tentes n’ayant plus, cette fois, l’abri d’un ravin, furent, à plusieurs reprises, arrachées de leurs piquets par la rafale, et il fallut enfin les plier, sans quoi elles eussent été emportées au milieu des tourbillons de neige. Il n’y eut d’autres ressources que de s’envelopper dans les couvertures et d’attendre philosophiquement le retour de l’aube.

«Et en vérité, pensait Summy Skim, ce ne serait pas trop de toute la philosophie de tous les philosophes anciens et modernes pour accepter les abominations d’un tel voyage, surtout lorsque rien ne vous oblige à le faire!»

Pendant les rares accalmies, éclataient des cris de douleur et de terreur, des imprécations horribles. Aux gémissements des blessés que le vent roulait à la surface du sol, se mêlaient les aboiements, les hennissements, les beuglements des bêtes errant effarées à travers le plateau.

L’aube du 30 avril parut enfin. Bill Stell donna le signal du départ. Les chiens, remplaçant les mules, furent attelés aux traîneaux sur lesquels d’ailleurs personne ne prit place, et la descente commença.

Grâce à la prudence et à l’expérience du Scout, elle s’effectua sans accidents, sinon sans fatigues, et les deux traîneaux atteignirent heureusement la plaine, à l’issue de la passe du Chilkoot. Le temps devenait plus favorable. Le vent, moins vif, tournait à l’Est, et le thermomètre remontait. Fort heureusement, il se maintenait toutefois au-dessous de zéro, car le dégel eût rendu la marche plus difficile.

Au pied de la montagne, nombre d’émigrants étaient réunis dans un campement en attendant que leur matériel les eût rejoints. L’emplacement était vaste et l’encombrement moins considérable que sur le plateau supérieur. A l’entour s’étendaient des bois où les tentes pouvaient être dressées en toute sécurité.

Ce fut là que la caravane vint passer la nuit. Le lendemain elle se remettait en route, et, par un chemin assez facile, arrivait vers midi à la pointe méridionale du lac Lindeman.

CHAPITRE VIII

Vers le nord.

L’après-midi de cette journée fut consacrée au repos. Il y avait lieu, d’ailleurs, de faire quelques préparatifs en vue de la navigation à travers les lacs, ce dont le Scout s’occupa sans tarder. En vérité, pour eux-mêmes et pour leurs compagnes de voyage, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle ne pouvaient que s’applaudir d’avoir traité avec cet homme si prudent et si entendu.

C’était à l’extrémité du lac Lindeman, dans un campement déjà encombré par un millier de voyageurs, que se trouvait le matériel de Bill Stell. Il avait là, au revers d’une colline, son installation principale. L’établissement comprenait une maisonnette en bois divisée en plusieurs chambres bien closes, à laquelle attendaient les hangars renfermant les traîneaux et autres véhicules de transport. En arrière étaient disposés des étables et des chenils pour les animaux d’attelage.

Les rapides entre les lacs Lindeman et Bennet

Le canyon dans la passe du Chilkoot.

Déjà le Chilkoot commençait à être plus fréquenté que la White Pass, bien que celle-ci aboutît directement au lac Bennett en évitant la traversée du lac Lindeman. Sur ce dernier lac, soit qu’il fût solidifié par le froid, soit que ses eaux fussent dégagées des glaces, le transport du personnel et du matériel des mineurs s’effectuait dans des conditions meilleures qu’à la surface des longues plaines et à travers les épais massifs séparant la White Pass de la rive sud du lac Bennet. La station choisie par le Scout devenait donc de plus en plus importante. Aussi faisait-il de bonnes affaires, et assurément plus sûres que l’exploitation des gisements du Klondike.

Bill Stell n’était pas seul, d’ailleurs, à exercer ce profitable métier. Les concurrents ne lui manquaient pas, soit à cette station du lac Lindeman, soit à celle du lac Bennet. On peut même dire que ces entrepreneurs, d’origine canadienne ou américaine, ne suffisaient pas aux milliers d’émigrants qui affluaient à cette époque de l’année.

Il est vrai qu’un grand nombre de ces émigrants ne s’adressent ni au Scout ni à ses collègues, et cela par raison d’économie. Mais ceux-là sont alors forcés d’amener leur matériel depuis Skagway, de charger sur leurs traîneaux des bateaux démontables en bois ou en tôle, et l’on a vu quelles difficultés ils éprouvent pour traverser, avec ces lourds impedimenta, la chaîne du Chilkoot. Elles ne sont pas moins grandes par la White Pass, et, par l’un comme par l’autre chemin, une bonne partie de ce matériel reste en détresse.

Il en est cependant qui, pour éviter, soit l’embarras, soit la dépense du transport des bateaux, aiment mieux les faire construire sur place ou les construire eux-mêmes. En cette région boisée, les matériaux ne manquent pas, et déjà quelques chantiers existent, quelques scieries fonctionnent autour de la station du lac Lindeman.

A l’arrivée de la caravane, Bill Stell fut reçu par son personnel, quelques hommes qu’il employait comme pilotes pour conduire les bateaux de lac en lac jusqu’au cours du Yukon. On pouvait se fier à leur habileté; ils connaissaient les nécessités de cette navigation difficile.

La température étant assez basse, Summy Skim, Ben Raddle et leurs compagnes furent très satisfaits de prendre logement dans la maison du Scout dont les meilleures chambres étaient à leur disposition. Bientôt ils étaient tous réunis dans la salle commune, où régnait une agréable chaleur.

«Ouf! dit Summy Skim en s’asseyant. Le plus fort est fait!

— Hum, dit Bill Stell. Comme fatigues… oui, peut-être… et encore!.. N’empêche qu’il nous reste plusieurs centaines de lieues à parcourir pour atteindre le Klondike.

— Je le sais, mon brave Bill, répondit Summy Skim, mais je pense que cette seconde partie du voyage s’effectuera sans danger ni fatigue.

— En quoi vous avez tort, monsieur Skim, répondit le Scout.

— Cependant, nous n’aurons plus qu’à nous abandonner au courant des lacs, des rivières et des fleuves.

— Il en serait ainsi si la saison d’hiver était terminée. Malheureusement la débâcle n’est pas commencée. Lorsqu’elle se produira, notre bateau sera très exposé au milieu des glaçons en dérive, et plus d’une fois nous serons obligés à des portages pénibles…

— Décidément, s’écria Summy Skim, il reste quelque chose à faire pour que le tourisme soit confortable dans cet infect pays!

— Cela viendra, affirma Ben Raddle, puisqu’il est question d’y établir un railway. Deux mille hommes vont être incessamment employés à ce travail par l’ingénieur Hawkins.

— Bon!.. bon! s’écria Summy Skim, j’espère bien être revenu auparavant. Ne tenons donc aucun compte de ce railway hypothétique et examinons, si vous le voulez bien, notre itinéraire, tel qu’il faut le suivre actuellement.

Faisant droit à cette requête, le Scout étala une carte assez grossière de la région.

— Voici d’abord, dit-il, le lac Lindeman qui s’étend au pied du Chilkoot et que nous aurons à traverser dans toute sa longueur.

— La traversée est longue? demanda Summy Skim.

— Non, répondit le Scout, quand sa surface est uniformément solidifiée ou lorsqu’elle est entièrement libre de glaces.

— Et ensuite? dit Ben Raddle.

— Ensuite nous aurons un portage d’une demi-lieue pour conduire notre bateau et nos bagages jusqu’à la station du lac Bennet. Là encore, la durée du trajet dépend de la température, et vous avez déjà vu combien elle peut varier d’un jour à l’autre.

— En effet, continua Ben Raddle, des différences de vingt à vingt-cinq degrés, selon que le vent souffle du Nord ou du Sud.

— En somme, ajouta Bill Stell, il nous faut, ou le dégel qui permet la navigation, ou un froid sec qui durcit la neige sur laquelle on peut alors faire glisser le bateau comme un traîneau.

— Enfin, dit Summy Skim, nous voici arrivés sur le lac Bennet…

— Il s’étend, expliqua le Scout, sur une douzaine de lieues. Mais il ne faut pas compter moins de trois jours pour sa traversée, en raison des relâches qui sont nécessaires.

— Au delà, dit Summy Skim en consultant la carte, il y à un portage?

— Non, c’est le rio du Caribou, long d’une lieue, qui met le lac Bennet en communication avec le lac Tagish, lequel se développe sur sept à huit lieues et donne dans le lac Marsh d’une dimension à peu près égale. En quittant ce lac, il faut suivre les détours d’une rivière pendant une dizaine de lieues, et c’est sur son parcours qu’on rencontre les rapides de White Horse assez difficiles et parfois très dangereux à franchir. Puis on atteint le confluent de la rivière Tahkeena, à la tête du lac Labarge. C’est dans cette partie du trajet que peuvent se produire les plus grands retards, quand il s’agit de s’engager à travers les rapides de White Horse. Je me suis déjà vu arrêté toute une semaine en amont du lac Labarge.

— Et ce lac, demanda Ben Raddle, est-il navigable?

— Parfaitement, sur ses treize lieues, répondit Bill Stell.

— En somme, observa Ben Raddle, sauf pendant quelques portages, notre bateau va nous conduire jusqu’à Dawson City?

— Directement, monsieur Raddle, répondit Bill Stell, et, à tout prendre, c’est encore par eau que le voyage est le plus facile.

— Et, tant par la rivière Lewis que par le Yukon, demanda Ben Raddle, quelle est la distance qui sépare le lac Labarge du Klondike?

— Cent cinquante lieues environ, en tenant compte des détours.

— Je vois, déclara Summy Skim, que nous ne sommes pas encore arrivés.

— Assurément, répondit le Scout. Lorsque nous aurons atteint la Lewis, à l'extrémité nord du lac Labarge, nous serons tout juste à mi-route.

— Eh bien! conclut Summy Skim, en prévision de ce long voyage, prenons des forces, et, puisque nous avons l'occasion de passer une bonne nuit à la station du lac Lindeman, allons dormir.»

Ce fut, en effet, une des meilleures nuits que les deux cousins eussent passées depuis leur départ de Vancouver. Les poêles largement alimentés maintenaient une haute température dans cette maisonnette bien abritée et bien close.

Il était neuf heures, lorsque le signal du départ fut donné le lendemain 1er mai. La plupart des hommes qui avaient accompagné le Scout depuis Skagway devaient le suivre jusqu'au Klondike. Leurs services seraient très utiles pour la conduite du bateau transformé en traîneau, en attendant qu'il pût naviguer sur les lacs et descendre le cours de la Lewis et du Yukon.

Quant aux chiens, ils appartenaient à la race du pays. Ces animaux, remarquablement acclimatés, ont les pattes dépourvues de poils, ce qui les rend plus aptes à courir sur la neige sans risque de s'y entraver. Mais, de ce qu'ils étaient acclimatés, il ne faudrait pas conclure qu'ils ne fussent pas restés sauvages. En vérité, ils paraissaient l'être tout autant que des loups ou des renards. Aussi n'est-ce pas précisément en employant les caresses et les sucreries que leurs conducteurs parviennent à s'en faire obéir.

Parmi le personnel de Bill Stell se trouvait à présent un pilote auquel serait réservée la direction du bateau en cours de navigation. C'était un Indien du Klondike, nommé Neluto, employé depuis neuf ans par le Scout. Très au courant de son métier, connaissant bien les difficultés de toute sorte qu’offre la traversée des lacs, des rapides et des rivières, on pouvait se fier à son habileté. Avant d’être engagé dans le personnel du Scout, Neluto avait été au service de la Compagnie de la baie d’Hudson, et il avait longtemps guidé les chasseurs de fourrures à travers ces vastes territoires. Il connaissait parfaitement le pays, qu’il avait parcouru dans tous les sens, et même la région au delà de Dawson City jusqu’à la limite du cercle polaire.

Neluto savait assez d’anglais pour comprendre et être compris. Du reste, en dehors des choses de son métier, il ne parlait guère et, comme on dit, il fallait lui tirer les mots du gosier. Cependant, cet homme, très accoutumé au climat du Klondike, pouvait sans doute être questionné avec profit. Aussi Ben Raddle crut-il devoir lui demander ce qu’il augurait du temps et s’il croyait que la débâcle des lacs fût prochaine.

Neluto déclara que, à son avis, il n’y avait pas lieu de prévoir la fonte des neiges ni la débâcle des glaces avant une quinzaine de jours, à moins qu’il ne se produisît un brusque changement dans l’état atmosphérique, – ce qui n’est pas rare sous ces latitudes élevées.

Ben Raddle pensa ce qui lui plut de ce renseignement un peu vague. Il dut, en tout cas, renoncer à tirer autre chose d’un homme décidé à ne pas se compromettre.

Si l’avenir demeurait incertain, aucune hésitation, du moins, n’était permise pour le présent. Ce ne serait pas une navigation, mais un traînage qui allait s’effectuer à la surface du lac Lindeman. Jane et Edith pourraient néanmoins trouver place dans le bateau qui glisserait sur l’un de ses flancs et que les hommes suivraient à pied.

Le temps était calme, l'âpre bise de la journée précédente avait molli et tendait à retomber vers le Sud. Cependant le froid était vif – une douzaine de degrés sous zéro, – circonstance favorable et très propice à la marche que rendent si pénibles les tourmentes de neige.

Le lac Lindeman traversé vers onze heures, une heure suffit à franchir les deux kilomètres qui le séparent du lac Bennet, et, à midi sonnant, le Scout et sa caravane faisaient halte à la station qui s'élève à son extrémité méridionale.

A cette station du lac Bennet, l'encombrement était aussi considérable qu'au Sheep Camp de la passe du Chilkoot. Plusieurs milliers d'émigrants l'occupaient en attendant l'occasion de poursuivre leur route. De toutes parts étaient dressées des tentes, que cabanes et maisons ne tarderont pas à remplacer, si l'exode vers le Klondike continue quelques années encore.

Déjà en cet embryon de village, qui deviendra peut-être bourgade et ville, on trouvait des auberges qui pourront devenir des hôtels, des scieries et des chantiers de construction navale, disséminés sur les rives du lac, sans parler d'un poste de policemen dont les fonctions ne laissent pas d'être fort dangereuses au milieu de ces aventuriers lâches à travers la région.

L'Indien Neluto avait sagement fait de donner à la manière normande ses prévisions du temps. Au commencement de l'après-midi, un brusque changement se produisit dans l'état atmosphérique.

Le vent passa franchement au Sud, et le thermomètre remonta à 0° centigrade. C'étaient là des symptômes auxquels on ne pouvait se méprendre. Il y avait lieu de croire que la saison froide touchait à sa fin, et que la débâcle rendrait bientôt libre la surface des cours d'eau et des lacs.

Déjà, le lac Bennet n’était plus pris sur toute son étendue. Entre les icefields ou champs de glace sinuaient des passes praticables pour un bateau à la condition d’allonger le parcours.

Vers la fin du jour, la température remonta encore; le dégel s’accentua; quelques glaçons commencèrent à se détacher des rives et à s’éloigner vers le Nord. Donc, à moins d’une vive reprise du froid pendant la nuit, on atteindrait l’extrémité septentrionale du lac sans trop de difficultés.

Le thermomètre ne baissa pas pendant la nuit, et, au lever du jour, le 2 mai, Bill Stell constata que la navigation pourrait s’opérer dans des conditions assez favorables. La brise, qui soufflait du Sud, permettrait, si elle persistait, d’employer la voile vent arrière.

Lorsque, dès l’aube, le Scout avait voulu embarquer dans le bateau les bagages et les provisions, il avait constaté que la besogne était faite. Dès la veille, Edith et Jane s’en étaient chargées. Sous leur direction, tout avait été arrimé avec une perfection que le Scout n’eût certainement pas atteinte. Le moindre coin était employé, et tous les colis, du plus gros au plus petit, s’alignaient en ordre merveilleux, agréables à voir, faciles à retirer.

Quand les deux cousins l’eurent rejoint sur la rive, il leur fît part de la surprise qu’il avait éprouvée.

«Oui, répondit Ben Raddle, elles sont étonnantes toutes les deux. L’activité, la perpétuelle bonne humeur de miss Jane, l’invincible et douce fermeté de miss Edith, ont quelque chose de surprenant, et je commence à craindre d’avoir réellement fait une bonne affaire.

— Quelle affaire? demanda Bill Stell.

— Vous ne comprendriez pas… Mais dites-moi, Scout, reprit Ben Raddle, que pensez-vous du temps? En avons-nous fini avec l’hiver?

— Je ne voudrais pas me prononcer d’une manière absolue, répondit le Scout. Il semble pourtant bien que les lacs et les rivières ne tarderont pas à se dégager. D’ailleurs, en suivant les passes, dussions-nous allonger la route, notre bateau…

— N’aura point à quitter son élément naturel, acheva Summy Skim. C’est au mieux.

— Qu’en pense Neluto? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Neluto pense, déclara sentencieusement l’Indien, qu’il n’y a pas à craindre que le dégel s’arrête si le thermomètre ne baisse pas.

— Fort bien! approuva Ben Raddle en riant, Vous ne risquez pas de vous compromettre, mon garçon… Mais les glaces en dérive ne sont-elles pas à redouter?

— Oh! le bateau est solide, affirma Bill S tell. Il a déjà fait ses preuves en naviguant au milieu de la débâcle.

Ben se retourna vers l’Indien.

— Voyons, Neluto, insista-t-il, ne voulez-vous pas me donner plus clairement votre opinion?

— Voici deux jours que les premières glaces se sont mises en mouvement, répondit le pilote, preuve que le haut lac doit être dégagé.

— Ah! ah! fit Ben d’un air satisfait, voilà enfin une opinion. Et la brise, pilote, qu’en pensez-vous?

— Elle s’est levée deux heures avant le jour et nous est favorable.

— C’est un fait, cela, pilote. Mais, tiendra-t-elle?

Neluto se retourna et parcourut du regard l’horizon du Sud que fermait le massif du Chilkoot. A peine si de légères brumes glissaient sur le flanc de la montagne. Après avoir tendu la main dans cette direction, le pilote répondit:

— Je crois que la brise tiendra jusqu’au soir, monsieur…

— *All right!*

— … A moins qu’elle ne change d’ici là, acheva Neluto avec le plus grand sérieux.

— Merci, pilote, dit Ben vexé. Me voici parfaitement fixé.»

Le bateau du Scout était une sorte de chaloupe, ou plutôt une barque longue de trente-cinq pieds. Un taud en occupait l’arrière, sous lequel deux ou trois personnes pouvaient s’abriter, soit la nuit, soit le jour, lors des bourrasques de neige et des rafales de pluie. Cette embarcation à fond plat, et par conséquent tirant le moins d’eau possible, était large de six pieds, ce qui lui permettait de porter une assez grande surface de toile. Taillée comme la misaine des chaloupes de pêche, la voile s’amarrait à la pointe de l’avant et se hissait à l’extrémité d’un mâtereau d’une quinzaine de pieds. En cas de mauvais temps, il était facile de dégager ce mâtereau de son emplanture et de le coucher sur les bancs.

Une telle embarcation n’eût pu tenir le plus près. Mais, avec du largue, elle gagnait encore. Quand les sinuosités des passes entre les champs de glace contraignaient le pilote à prendre vent debout, on serrait la voile et l’on bordait les avirons, qui, maniés par les bras robustes de quatre Canadiens, permettaient d’atteindre une allure plus favorable.

La surface du lac Bennet n’est pas considérable. On ne saurait le comparer à ces vastes mers intérieures du nord de l’Amérique, où les tempêtes se déchaînent avec violence. Nul doute que ne fussent suffisantes, pour une telle traversée, les provisions emportées par le Scout: viande conservée, biscuits, thé, café, un tonnelet d’eau-de-vie, plus une réserve de charbon pour le fourneau. D’ailleurs, on comptait sur la pêche, car le poisson abonde dans ces eaux, et aussi sur le gibier, perdrix ou gelinottes, qui fréquente les rives du lac.

Le pilote Neluto à la barre, derrière le taud sous lequel Edith et Jane avaient pris place, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle accotés en abord auprès de Bill Stell, les quatre hommes placés à l’avant écartant les glaçons avec leurs gaffes, le bateau, à huit heures, délaissa la rive.

La navigation était rendue assez délicate par le grand nombre d’embarcations engagées dans les passes. Afin de profiter de la débâcle et du vent favorable, plusieurs centaines de bateaux avaient quitté la station du lac Bennet. Au milieu de cette flottille, il était parfois malaisé d’éviter les abordages. Et alors, quelles vociférations, quelles injures, quelles menaces éclataient de toutes parts, sans parler des coups échangés!

Dans l’après-midi, on croisa une embarcation de la police. L’occasion d’intervenir n’était que trop souvent offerte aux hommes qui la montaient.

Le chef de cette escouade de policemen connaissait le Scout et l’interpella au passage:

«Salut, Scout!.. Toujours des émigrants qui nous arrivent de Skagway pour le Klondike…

— Oui, répondit le Canadien, plus qu’il n’en faut…

— Et plus qu’il n’en reviendra…

— C’est sûr! A combien estime-t-on ceux qui ont traversé le lac Bennet?

— Quinze mille environ.

— Et ce n’est pas fini!

— Loin de là.

— Sait-on si la débâcle se fait en aval?

— On le dit. Vous pourrez donc atteindre le Yukon en naviguant.

— Oui, si le froid ne reprend pas.

— On peut l’espérer.

— Oui… Merci.

— Bon voyage!»

Le temps étant au calme, la marche du bateau s’en ressentait. Après avoir relâché pendant deux nuits, il ne vint s’arrêter près de l’extrémité du lac Bennet que dans l’après-midi du 4 mai.

En cet endroit se détache du lac la petite rivière, ou plutôt le canal du Caribou qui, à moins d'une lieue de là, va déboucher dans le lac Tagish.

Le départ ne devant s'effectuer que le lendemain après la halte de nuit, Summy Skim voulut mettre à profit les dernières heures de jour pour aller tirer quelque gibier dans les plaines du voisinage. A peine eut-il fait connaître son intention, qu'à sa grande surprise et à sa satisfaction plus grande encore, Jane Edgerton déclara qu'elle l'accompagnerait.

En vérité, son entreprise devait paraître de moins en moins folle à ses compagnons de voyage. Elle était armée pour la vie, cette jeune fille. Si Summy Skim était un merveilleux chasseur, elle ne se montra guère moins adroite, et bientôt tous deux rapportaient le produit de leur chasse commune, soit trois couples de perdrix de savane et quatre gelinottes au plumage d'un vert pâle. Edith, pendant ce temps, avait préparé un feu de bois sec sur la rive, et le gibier, rôti devant une flamme pétillante, fut déclaré excellent.

Le lac Tagish, long de sept lieues et demie, est relié au lac Marsh par une étroite coupée, que la débâcle, lorsque la caravane y parvint le 6 mai, avait obstruée la nuit précédente sur une étendue d'une demi-lieue. Force fut donc de traîner le bateau, après avoir loué un attelage de mules. La navigation put ainsi être reprise dans la matinée du 7 mai.

Quarante-huit heures allaient être nécessaires pour traverser le lac Marsh dans toute sa longueur, bien qu'elle ne dépasse pas sept à huit lieues. Le vent avait halé le Nord, et avec les avirons on ne devait pas compter sur une marche rapide. Fort heureusement, la flottille des bateaux paraissait moins serrée que sur le lac Bonnet, un certain nombre d'embarcations étant peu à peu restées en arrière, et la halte put être établie, à l'extrémité du lac, le 8 mai, avant le coucher du soleil.

«Si je ne me trompe, Scout, dit Ben Raddle après le repas du soir, nous n’avons plus qu’un lac à franchir, le dernier de la région?

— Oui, monsieur Raddle, répondit Bill Stell, le lac Labarge. Mais, auparavant, il nous faudra suivre la Lewis River, et c’est dans cette partie du voyage que les embarras sont les plus grands. Nous avons à franchir les rapides de White Horses, où plus d’une embarcation s’est perdue corps et biens.

Ces rapides constituent en effet le plus sérieux danger pour la navigation entre Skagway et Dawson City. Ils occupent trois kilomètres et demi des quatre-vingt-cinq qui séparent le lac Marsh du lac Labarge. Sur cette courte distance, la différence de niveau n’est pas inférieure à trente-deux pieds, et le cours de la rivière est encombré de récifs contre lesquels les embarcations risquent fort de se briser.

— On ne peut donc suivre les berges? demanda Summy Skim.

— Elles sont impraticables, répondit le Scout. Mais on construit un tramway qui transportera les bateaux tout chargés en aval des rapides.

— Si l’on construit ce tramway, reprit Summy Skim, c’est qu’il n’est pas encore terminé, Scout?

— En effet, monsieur, bien que des centaines d’ouvriers y travaillent.

— Alors, nous n’avons pas à nous en occuper. Vous verrez même, mon brave Bill, qu’il ne sera pas achevé à notre retour.

— A moins que vous ne restiez au Klondike plus longtemps que vous ne le pensez, répondit Bill Stell. On sait bien quand on va au Klondike; on ne sait pas quand on en revient…

— Ni même si on reviendra!» approuva Summy Skim avec conviction.

Ce fut dans l’après-midi du lendemain, 9 mai, que le bateau, en descendant la rivière, atteignit les rapides de White Horses. Il n’était pas seul à s’aventurer dans cette dangereuse passe. D’autres embarcations le suivaient, et combien de celles qui se présentaient ainsi en amont ne se retrouveraient plus en aval!..

On comprendra aisément que les pilotes affectés au service des White Horses exigent un prix élevé. Ces trois kilomètres leur rapportent cent cinquante francs par voyage. Aussi ne songent-ils guère à abandonner ce lucratif métier pour celui plus aléatoire de prospecteur.

En cet endroit la vitesse du courant est de cinq lieues à l’heure. Il ne faudrait donc qu’un temps très court pour descendre les trois kilomètres des rapides, si l’on n’était obligé à tant de détours entre les roches de basalte capricieusement semées entre les deux rives, – ou pour éviter les glaçons, écueils mouvants dont le choc fracasserait la plus solide embarcation, – que la durée du trajet en est extrêmement augmentée.

A plusieurs reprises, le bateau, appuyé sur les avirons, dut virer bout pour bout sous la menace d’un abordage, soit avec un glaçon, soit avec un canot, et l’habileté de Neluto le tira de plus d’un mauvais pas. Le dernier saut de ces rapides est le plus dangereux, et c’est là que se produisent de nombreuses catastrophes. Il importe de bien se tenir aux bancs, si l’on ne veut pas être jeté par-dessus bord. Mais Neluto avait l’œil juste, la main sûre, un imperturbable sang-froid, et, s’il ne put se garer de quelques paquets d’eau que l’on eut vite fait de rejeter à la rivière, le passage redoutable fut néanmoins franchi sans dommages.

«Et maintenant, s’écria Summy Skim, le plus fort est-il fait, Bill?

— Ce n’est pas douteux, répondit Ben Raddle.

— En effet, messieurs, déclara le Scout. Il ne nous reste plus que le lac Labarge à traverser et la Lewis à suivre pendant cent soixante lieues environ…

— Cent soixante lieues! répéta Summy Skim en riant, autant dire que nous sommes arrivés!»

Bill Stell, d’accord avec Neluto, décida de faire une halte de vingt-quatre heures à la station du lac Labarge, qu’on atteignit dans la soirée du 10 mai. Le vent soufflait du Nord avec violence. A peine si le bateau, même à force d’avirons, eût pu gagner le large, et le pilote tenait d’autant moins à tenter la traversée dans ces conditions, que l’abaissement de la température lui faisait craindre un embâcle qui eût emprisonné la caravane au milieu du lac solidifié.

Cette station, créée sur le même modèle et pour les mêmes besoins que celles du lac Lindeman et du lac Bennet, comprenait déjà une centaine de maisons et de cabanes. Dans l’une de ces maisons, décorée du nom d’hôtel, les voyageurs eurent la chance de trouver des chambres libres.

Le lac Labarge, long de cinquante kilomètres environ, se compose de deux parties, qui se coudent au point même où naît la rivière Lewis.

Démarré dans la matinée du 12 mai, le bateau dut employer trente-six heures à traverser cette première partie du lac. Ce fut donc dans l’après-midi du 13 mai, vers cinq heures, que le Scout et ses compagnons, après avoir essuyé force rafales, atteignirent le cours de la Lewis, qui oblique au Nord-Est en gagnant vers Fort Selkirk. Dès le lendemain, le bateau s'y engageait au milieu de la débâcle.

Installation d'un campement au bord de la Lewis River.

Vers cinq heures, le Scout donna l'ordre d'accoster la rive droite, près de laquelle il comptait passer la nuit. Jane et Summy débarquèrent. Des détonations retentirent bientôt, et quelques couples de canards et de gelinottes permirent d'économiser les conserves au souper.

Du reste, ces haltes de nuit que s'imposait Bill Stell, les autres embarcations qui descendaient le cours de la Lewis se les imposaient aussi, et nombre de feux de campement s'allumaient sur les rives.

A partir de ce jour, la question du dégel parut être entièrement résolue. Sous l'influence des vents du Sud, le thermomètre se tenait à cinq ou six degrés au-dessus de zéro. Il n'y avait donc plus à craindre que la rivière vînt à se prendre.

La nuit, aucune attaque de fauves n'était à redouter. On ne signalait pas la présence d'ours dans les environs de la Lewis, et Summy Skim, à son vif regret peut-être, n'eut pas l'occasion l'abattre l'un de ces formidables plantigrades. En revanche, il allait se défendre contre des myriades de moustiques, et c'est i peine si l'on parvenait à éviter leurs morsures aussi douloureuses qu'agaçantes, en alimentant les feux toute la nuit.

Après avoir descendu la Lewis pendant une cinquantaine de kilomètres, le Scout et ses compagnons, dans l’après-midi du 15 mai, aperçurent le confluent de rio Hootalinqua, puis, le lendemain, celui du Big Salmon, deux tributaires de la Lewis. Il y eut lieu de remarquer combien les eaux bleues de la rivière s’altèrent au mélange de ses affluents. Le jour suivant, le bateau passait devant l’embouchure du rio Walsh, maintenant délaissé par les mineurs; puis ce fut le Cassiar, banc de sable qui émerge aux basses eaux, sur lequel quelques prospecteurs récoltèrent en un mois pour trente mille francs d’or.

Le voyage se continuait avec des alternatives de bon et de mauvais temps. Le bateau marchait tantôt à l’aviron, tantôt à la voile, et parfois même halé à la cordelle dans les passages très sinueux.

Le 25 mai, la plus grande partie de la Lewis, qui allait bientôt devenir le Yukon, avait été descendue dans des conditions favorables, lorsque le Scout vint s’établir au camp de Turenne, qui occupe une falaise toute semée à ce moment des premières fleurs, anémones, crocus et genièvres parfumés. De nombreux émigrants y avaient dressé leurs tentes. Le bateau nécessitant quelques réparations, on y resta vingt-quatre heures, et Summy Skim put se livrer à son exercice favori.

Pendant les deux jours qui suivirent, grâce à un courant de quatre nœuds à l’heure, le bateau descendit assez rapidement la rivière. Le 28 mai, dans l’après-midi, après avoir dépassé le labyrinthe des îles Myersall, il se rapprocha de la rive gauche et vint s’amarrer au pied de Fort Selkirk.

Ce fort, bâti en 1848 pour le service des agents de la baie d’Hudson, puis démoli par les Indiens en 1852, n’est plus actuellement qu’un bazar assez bien approvisionné. Entouré de huttes et de tentes d’émigrants, il commande le cours de la grande artère, qui, à partir de là, porte plus spécialement le nom de Yukon, alors grossi des eaux du Pelly, son principal tributaire de la rive droite.

A des prix excessifs, il est vrai, le Scout trouva tout ce qu’il voulut à Fort Selkirk, et, après une relâche de vingt-quatre heures, dans la matinée du 30 mai, le bateau s’abandonna de nouveau au courant. On passa, sans s’y arrêter, devant le confluent de la rivière Stewart, qui commençait à attirer les chercheurs d’or. Déjà, les claims pullulaient sur son cours de trois cents kilomètres. Puis, le bateau stationna pendant une demi-journée à Ogilvie, sur la rive droite du Yukon.

En aval, le fleuve s’élargissait de plus en plus, et les embarcations pouvaient circuler sans peine au milieu des nombreux glaçons qui dérivaient dans la direction du Nord.

Après avoir laissé en arrière les embouchures de l’Indian River et du Sixty Miles Creek qui s’ouvrent face à face à quarante-huit kilomètres de Dawson City, le Scout et ses compagnons, dans l’après-midi du 3 juin, mirent enfin le pied dans la capitale du Klondike.

A l’instant précis où les voyageurs débarquaient, Jane s’approcha de Ben Raddle et lui tendit un feuillet déchiré de son carnet, sur lequel elle venait, tout en marchant, d’écrire quelques mots.

«Permettez-moi, monsieur Raddle, dit-elle, de vous donner reçu.

Ben prit le papier et lut:

«Reçu de M. Ben Raddle un voyage confortable de Skagway à Dawson conformément aux termes de notre contrat. Dont quittance.»

Suivait la signature.

— C’est en règle, fit Ben avec flegme, en mettant le papier dans sa poche le plus sérieusement du monde.

— Permettez-moi aussi, messieurs, reprit Jane en s’adressant cette fois aux deux cousins, d’ajouter à ce reçu les remerciements d’Edith et les miens pour la sympathie que vous nous avez témoignée, et que j’espère être à même de reconnaître comme il convient.

Sans un mot de plus, Jane serra la main à Ben Raddle. Mais, quand ce fut le tour de Summy, celui-ci, sans chercher à dissimuler son émotion, retint dans les siennes la petite main qui lui était offerte.

— Voyons!.. voyons!.. mademoiselle Jane, dit Summy, la tête un peu perdue, vous allez réellement nous quitter?

— En douteriez-vous? répondit Jane avec surprise. Cela n’a-t-il pas toujours été convenu?

— Oui, oui… concéda Summy. Du moins on se reverra, j’imagine?

— Je l’espère, monsieur Skim, mais cela ne dépend pas de moi. Tout dépend désormais des hasards de la prospection.

— La prospection!.. s’écria Summy. Eh quoi! mademoiselle Jane, toujours cette folle idée!

D’un mouvement sec Jane dégagea sa main prisonnière.

— Je ne vois pas ce que mon projet a de fou, monsieur Skim, dit-elle d’un ton piqué. Vous devriez penser que je ne suis pas venue jusqu’à Dawson pour changer subitement d’avis, à la manière d’une girouette qui tournera tous les vents… D’autant plus que j’ai pris maintenant des engagements auxquels j’entends l’aire honneur, ajouta-t-elle en se tournant vers Ben Raddle.

Summy Skim avait-il la fibre du pitoyable particulièrement développée? Le certain, c’est qu’il éprouvait, sans l’analyser autrement, un vif et profond chagrin.

— Évidemment!.. évidemment!..» balbutia-t-il sans conviction, pendant que les deux cousines s’éloignaient d’un pas décidé vers l’hôpital de Dawson.

CHAPITRE IX

Le Klondike.

C’est une vaste région, baignée par les eaux de deux océans, l’Arctique et le Pacifique, cette portion du Nord-Amérique qui s’appelle l’Alaska. On ne donne pas moins de quinze cent mille kilomètres carrés à ce territoire, que l’empereur russe, autant, dit-on, par sympathie pour l’Union que par antipathie pour la Grande-Bretagne, céda aux États-Unis qui firent, ce jour-là, un pas de plus vers la réalisation intégrale de la fameuse doctrine de Monroë: *Toute l’Amérique aux Américains*.

En dehors des gisements aurifères qu’elle contient, y aura-t-il grand profit à tirer de la contrée mi-canadienne, mi-alaskienne que le Yukon arrose, contrée en partie située au delà du cercle polaire, et dont le sol n’est propre à aucune culture? C’est peu probable.

Il ne faut pas oublier, cependant, que l’Alaska, en y comprenant les îles Baranof, Amirauté, Prince-de-Galles, qui en dépendent, ainsi que l’archipel des Aléoutiennes, possède un développement littoral immense, où nombre de ports se prêtent à la relâche des navires, depuis Sitka, capitale de l’État d’Alaska, jusqu’à Saint-Michel, placé à l’embouchure du Yukon, l’un des plus grands fleuves du monde.

Le cent quarante et unième méridien a été arbitrairement choisi comme ligne de démarcation entre l’Alaska et la Puissance du Dominion. Quant à la limite méridionale, qui dévie et se recourbe de manière à envelopper les îles riveraines, elle manque peut-être de la précision désirable.

En jetant les yeux sur une carte de l'Alaska, on remarque que le sol est plat sur sa plus grande étendue. Le système orographique ne s'accuse que dans le sud. Là, débute la chaîne des montagnes qui se continue à travers la Colombie et la Californie sous le nom de Cascade Ranger.

Ce qui frappe plus particulièrement, c'est le cours du Yukon. Après avoir arrosé le Dominion en se dirigeant vers le nord après l'avoir couvert de l'immense réseau de ses affluents, le magnifique fleuve pénètre dans l'Alaska, décrit une courbe jusqu'au Fort Yukon, puis, redescendant vers le sud-ouest, va rejeter, à Saint-Michel, dans la mer de Behring.

Le Yukon est supérieur au Père des Eaux, au Mississipi lui-même. Il ne débite pas moins de vingt-trois mille mètres cubes à la seconde, et son cours s'étend sur deux mille deux cent quatre-vingt-dix kilomètres, à travers un bassin dont la surface égale deux fois celle de la France.

Si les territoires qu'il parcourt ne sont pas susceptibles de culture, l'aire forestière y est très considérable. Ce sont particulièrement d'impénétrables bois de cèdres jaunes où le monde entier pourrait se fournir, si les forêts plus accessibles venaient à s'épuiser. Quant à la faune, elle a pour représentants l'ours noir, l'orignal, le caribou, le thébai ou brebis de montagne, le chamois à long pelage blanc, plus une riche collection de gibier de plume, gelinottes, bécassines, grives, perdrix des neiges, canards qui se multiplient par myriades.

Les eaux qui baignent l'immense périmètre des côtes ne sont pas moins riches en mammifères marins et en poissons de toute espèce. Il en est un, le harlatan, qui mérite une mention spéciale. Ce poisson est tellement imprégné d'huile que l'on peut, sans aucune préparation, l'allumer pour s'éclairer ainsi qu'on ferait d'une torche. D'où ce nom de *Candle Fish* que lui ont donné les Américains. Découverte par les Russes en 1730, explorée en 1741, alors que sa population totale, en général d’origine indienne, ne dépassait pas trente-trois mille habitants, cette contrée est présentement envahie par la foule des émigrants et des prospecteurs, que les mines d’or attirent depuis quelques années au Klondike.

C’est en 1864 que l’on entendit parler pour la première fois de ces mines arctiques. A cette époque, le révérend Mac Donald trouva l’or à ramasser par cuillerées dans une petite rivière voisine du Fort Yukon.

En 1882, une troupe d’anciens mineurs de la Californie, et parmi eux les frères Boswell, s’aventurent à travers les traces du Chilkoot et exploitent régulièrement les nouveaux placers.

En 1885, des orpailleurs du Lewis-Yukon signalent les gisements du Forty Miles Creek, un peu en aval de l’emplacement futur de Dawson City, presque à l’endroit même que devait occuper plus tard le claim 129 de Josias Lacoste. Deux ans après, au moment où le gouvernement canadien procède à la délimitation de la province, ils en ont extrait six cent mille francs d’or.

En 1892, la North American Trading and Transportation Company, de Chicago, fonde la bourgade de Cudahy, au confluent du Forty Miles Creek et du Yukon. Vers la même époque, tout en surveillant le travail, treize constables, quatre sous-officiers et trois officiers ne recueillent pas moins de quinze cent mille francs dans les claims du Sixty Miles Creek, un peu en amont de Dawson City.

L’élan est donné; les prospecteurs vont accourir de toutes parts. En 1895, ils ne sont pas moins de mille Canadiens, principalement des Français, à franchir le Chilkoot.

Mais c’est en 1896 que se répand la retentissante nouvelle. On vient de découvrir un cours d’eau d’une richesse incroyable. Ce cours d’eau, c’est l’Eldorado, un affluent de la Bonanza, laquelle est un affluent de la Klondike River, elle-même affluent du Yukon. Aussitôt s’empresse la foule des chercheurs d’or. A Dawson City, les lots qui se vendaient vingt-cinq francs en valent bientôt cent cinquante mille.

La région qui porte plus spécialement le nom de Klondike n’est qu’un district du Dominion. Le cent, quarante et unième degré de longitude, qui trace déjà la ligne de démarcation entre l’Alaska devenue américaine et les possessions de la Grande-Bretagne, forme aussi la limite occidentale de ce district.

Au Nord, un affluent du Yukon, la Klondike River, marque sa frontière, et va confluer à la ville même de Dawson City qu’elle divise en deux parties inégales.

Par l’Est, il confine à cette portion du Dominion sur laquelle apparaissent les premières ramifications des Montagnes Rocheuses, et que le Mackensie traverse du Sud au Nord.

Le centre du district se relève en hautes collines, dont la principale, le Dôme, fut découverte en juin 1897. Ce sont les seuls reliefs de ce sol, généralement plat, où se développe le réseau hydrographique qui se rattache au bassin du Yukon. La plupart des tributaires du fleuve charrient l’or en paillettes, et, sur leurs rives, des centaines de claims sont déjà en exploitation. Mais le territoire aurifère par excellence est celui que baignent la Bonanza sortie des Dômes de Cormack et ses multiples affluents, l’Eldorado, la Queen, le Bulder, l’American, le Pure Gold, le Cripple, la Tail, etc.

On s’explique que, sur un territoire sillonné de creeks et de rios entièrement dégagés de glaces pendant les trois ou quatre mois de la belle saison, sur ces gisements si nombreux et d’une exploitation relativement facile, les prospecteurs se soient précipités en foule, et l’on comprend que leur nombre augmente chaque année, malgré les fatigues, la misère, les déboires du voyage.

A l’endroit même où la Klondike River se jette dans le Yukon, il n’existait, il y a quelques années, qu’un marais souvent submergé par les crues. Quelques huttes d’Indiens, des sortes d’isbas construites à la mode russe, où vivaient misérablement des familles indigènes, animaient seules cette triste solitude.

C’est à ce confluent des deux cours d’eau qu’un Canadien du nom de Leduc fonda un beau jour Dawson City qui, en 1898, comptait déjà plus de dix-huit mille habitants.

La ville fut tout d’abord divisée par son fondateur en lots dont celui-ci ne demandait pas plus de vingt-cinq francs, lots qui trouvent maintenant acheteurs à des prix variant entre cinquante et deux cent mille francs. Si les gisements du Klondike ne sont pas voués à un épuisement prochain, si d’autres placers sont découverts dans le bassin du grand fleuve, il peut arriver que Dawson City devienne une métropole aussi imposante que Vancouver de la Colombie britannique ou Sacramento de la Californie américaine.

Aux premiers jours qui suivirent sa naissance, la ville nouvelle fut menacée de disparaître sous l’inondation, comme il en était du marécage dont elle occupait la place. Il fallut construire des digues solides pour se garantir contre ce danger, qui n’existe, d’ailleurs, chaque année, que pendant un temps très court. Si, en effet, au moment de la débâcle du Yukon, l’abondance des eaux est telle que les plus grands ravages sont à redouter, durant l’été, par contre, le niveau des fleuves baisse à ce point que la Klondike River peut être traversée à pied sec.

Ben Raddle connaissait à fond l’histoire de ce district. Il s’était mis au courant de toutes les découvertes faites depuis quelques années. Il savait quelle avait été la progression constante du rendement des placers et quels coups de fortune s’y étaient produits. Qu’il ne fût venu au Klondike que pour prendre possession du claim de Forty Miles Creek, pour en reconnaître la valeur, pour le vendre au meilleur prix, on devait le croire, puisqu’il l’affirmait. Mais Summy Skim sentait que l’intérêt de son cousin pour les questions aurifères avait crû en même temps que diminuait son éloignement de la région minière, et, de plus en plus, il redoutait que l’on ne prît racine dans ce pays de l’or et de la misère.

A cette époque, le district ne comptait pas moins de huit mille claims, numérotés depuis l’embouchure des affluents et des sous-affluents du Yukon jusqu’à leur source. Les lots étaient de cinq cents pieds de superficie, ou de deux cent cinquante, d’après la modification apportée par la loi de 1896.

L’engouement des prospecteurs, la préférence des syndicats allaient toujours aux gisements de la Bonanza, de ses tributaires, et des collines de la rive gauche de la Klondike River.

N’est-ce pas dans ce sol privilégié que Georgy Mac Cormack vendit plusieurs claims, de vingt-quatre pieds de longueur sur quatorze de largeur, dont on retira des pépites pour une valeur de huit mille dollars, soit quarante mille francs en moins de trois mois?..

La richesse des gisements de l’Eldorado n’est-elle pas si grande que, d’après le cadastreur Ogilvie, la moyenne de chaque plat est comprise entre vingt-cinq et trente-cinq francs? D’où cette logique conclusion, que, si, comme tout le donne à croire, la veine est large de trente pieds, longue de cinq cents, épaisse de cinq, elle produira jusqu’à vingt millions de francs. Aussi, dès cette époque, les sociétés, les syndicats cherchaient-ils à acquérir ces claims et se les disputaient-ils aux plus hauts prix.

Il était véritablement regrettable – c’est du moins ce que devait se dire Ben Raddle, car pour Summy Skim il n’y songeait guère – que l’héritage de l’oncle Josias n’eût pas été un de ces claims de la Bonanza, au lieu d’appartenir à la région du Forty Miles Creek, de l’autre côté du Yukon. Que l’on voulût l’exploiter ou le vendre, le profit eût été plus considérable. Il est même à supposer que les offres faites aux héritiers auraient été telles qu’ils n’eussent pas entrepris le voyage du Klondike: Summy Skim serait alors en villégiature dans sa ferme de Green Valley, au lieu de patauger dans les rues de cette capitale, dont la boue renferme peut-être des parcelles du précieux métal.

Restaient, il est vrai, les propositions faites par la Trading and Transportation Company, à moins que, faute de réponse, elles ne fussent devenues caduques.

Après tout, Ben Raddle était venu pour voir, il verrait. Bien que le 129 n’eût jamais produit de pépites de trois mille francs, – la plus grosse qui fut trouvée au Klondike atteignait cette valeur – il ne devait pas être épuise, puisque des offres d’achat avaient été faites. Les syndicats américains ou anglais ne traitent pas les yeux fermés ces sortes d’affaires. Il était donc à croire, même en admettant le pire, que les deux cousins retireraient de leur voyage au moins de quoi en couvrir les frais.

D’ailleurs, Ben Raddle le savait, on parlait déjà de nouvelles découvertes. Summy avait les oreilles rebattues du Hunter, un affluent de la Klondike River, qui s’écoule entre des montagnes hautes de quinze cents pieds, riches de gisements dont l’or était plus pur que celui de l’Eldorado; – du Gold Bottom, où, d’après le rapport d’Ogilvie, il existerait un filon de quartz aurifère, donnant jusqu’à mille dollars par tonne; – de cent autres rios plus merveilleux encore.

«Tu comprends, Summy, concluait Ben Raddle. En cas de déception, nous pourrons toujours nous retourner dans ce pays extraordinaire.

Summy faisait alors la sourde oreille, et revenait obstinément à ses moutons:

— Tout cela est parfait, Ben. Permets-moi, cependant, de te rappeler à la question. Très bien la Bonanza, l’Eldorado, le Bear, le Hunter, le Gold Bottom. Mais il s’agit pour nous du Forty Miles, et je n’en entends pas plus parler, de ce Forty Miles, que s’il n’existait pas.

— Il existe, sois tranquille, répondait Ben Raddle sans s’émouvoir. Tu pourras le constater bientôt *de visu*.

Puis, revenant à son idée favorite, il reprenait:

«Mais comment ne t’intéresses-tu pas davantage à ce prodigieux Klondike? Les rues sont pavées d’or, ici, positivement. Et le Klondike n’est pas le seul territoire de la contrée à être sillonné par les veines aurifères. Tu n’as qu’à jeter les yeux sur une carte, et tu verras quelle incroyable quantité de régions minéralisées sont déjà signalées. Il y en a au Chilkoot, que nous avons traversé, aux monts Cassiar, et ailleurs. L’Alaska en est pleine, et leur chaîne se prolonge au delà du cercle polaire, jusqu'aux rivages de l'océan Glacial!..

Mais cet hymne enflammé n'arrivait pas à troubler la sérénité de Summy. En vain Ben Raddle faisait-il miroiter tous ces trésors devant les yeux de son cousin, celui-ci se contentait de répondre en souriant:

— Tu as raison, Ben, tu as parfaitement raison. Le bassin du Yukon est à coup sûr un pays béni des dieux. En ce qui me concerne je songe avec une véritable ivresse que nous en possédons un tout petit morceau… car, s'il était plus gros, il nous faudrait sans doute plus de temps pour en être enfin débarrassés!»

CHAPITRE X

Les hésitations d’un méridien.

Une agglomération de cabanes, d’isbas, de tentes, à la surface d’un marais, une sorte de camp toujours menacé par les crues du Yukon et de la River, des rues aussi irrégulières que boueuses, des fondrières à chaque pas, non point une cité, mais quelque chose comme un vaste chenil tout au plus bon à être habité par les milliers de chiens que l’on entend aboyer toute la nuit, voilà ce que, sur la foi des légendes, vous pensiez être Dawson City, monsieur Skim! Mais le chenil s’est transformé à vue d’œil, grâce aux incendies qui ont déblayé le terrain. Dawson est une ville, maintenant, avec des églises catholique et protestante, des banques et des hôtels. Bientôt elle aura deux théâtres, dont une salle d’opéra de plus de deux mille places, et caetera, et caetera… Et vous ne vous imaginez pas ce que sous-entendent mes «et caetera!..»

Ainsi s’exprimait le docteur Pilcox, un Anglo-Canadien, tout rond, d’une quarantaine d’années, vigoureux, actif, débrouillard, d’une santé inébranlable, d’une constitution sur laquelle aucune maladie n’avait prise, et qui paraissait jouir d’incroyables immunités. Nommé, un an auparavant, directeur de l’hôpital de Dawson, il était venu s’installer dans cette ville si favorable à l’exercice de sa profession, puisqu’il semble que les épidémies s’y soient donné rendez-vous, sans parler de la fièvre endémique de l’or, contre laquelle il était d’ailleurs vacciné au moins autant qu’un Summy Skim.

En même temps que médecin, le docteur Pilcox était chirurgien, apothicaire, dentiste, et, comme on le savait aussi habile que dévoué, la clientèle affluait dans sa confortable maison de Front street, l’une des principales rues de Dawson City.

Bill Stell connaissait le docteur Pilcox. Il s’autorisait de ses relations pour lui recommander, d’ordinaire, les familles d’émigrants qu’il amenait de Skagway au Klondike. Cette fois encore, il s’empressa de mettre, quarante-huit heures après leur arrivée, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim en rapport avec ce personnage très haut placé dans l’estime publique. Le Klondike possédait-il un autre habitant plus au courant de ce qui se passait dans le pays?.. Et si quelqu’un était capable de donner un bon conseil autant qu’une bonne consultation ou un bon remède, c’était bien cet excellent homme.

La première question de Summy Skim fut relative à leurs gentilles compagnes de voyage. Qu’étaient-elles devenues?.. Le docteur Pilcox les avait-il vues?..

«Ne m’en parlez pas! Elle est prodigieuse, s’écria le docteur sur le mode lyrique, mais en s’exprimant au singulier, à la réelle angoisse de Summy. C’est une perle, cette petite, une vraie perle, et je suis ravi de l’avoir attirée jusqu’ici. Voilà deux jours à peine qu’elle est entrée à l’hôpital, et elle l’a déjà transformé. Ce matin, en ouvrant une armoire, j’ai été littéralement ébloui par sa magnifique ordonnance, à laquelle je n’étais, je dois l’avouer, pas habitué. Intrigué, j’en ouvre une autre, trois autres, dix autres: toutes pareilles. Il y a mieux: mes instruments sont nets et rangés à ravir, et la salle d’opération brille d’un éclat de propreté qu’elle n’avait jamais connu. Enfin, c’est à ne pas le croire, cette enfant a pris en quelques heures un ascendant invraisemblable sur le reste du personnel. Tout marche à la baguette. Les infirmiers et les infirmières sont à leur poste. Les lits, rangés avec art, ont un aspect qui réjouit l’œil. Jusqu’aux malades, Dieu me pardonne, qui semblent positivement se mieux porter!..

Ben Raddle paraissait tout heureux de ce qu’il entendait.

— Je suis charmé, docteur, dit-il, des éloges que vous décernez à votre nouvelle infirmière. Cela prouve que je ne m’étais pas trompé sur son compte, et mon opinion est que l’avenir vous réserve beaucoup d’autres agréables surprises.

Summy Skim paraissait moins joyeux. Sa figure exprimait même une véritable inquiétude.

— Pardon!.. pardon, docteur!.. interrompit-il. Vous parlez d’une jeune fille… Il y en a deux, si je ne m’abuse.

— Oui, c’est vrai, reconnut en riant le docteur Pilcox, mais, outre que je connaissais beaucoup celle qui est devenue mon infirmière, et pas du tout l’autre, c’est à peine si cette dernière m’a laissé lé temps de l’apercevoir. Arrivée à l’hôpital avec sa cousine, elle en est partie dix minutes après, pour n’y revenir que vers midi, accoutrée en mineur, pic sur l’épaule et revolver à la ceinture. Hier matin, quand je me suis informé d’elle, j’ai appris qu’elle s’était mise en route presque aussitôt, sans dire un mot à personne. Et c’est par sa cousine que j’ai su qu’elle avait l’intention de prospecter comme un homme.

— Ainsi, elle est partie?.. insista Summy.

— Radicalement, affirma le docteur, qui ajouta:

«Je crois avoir vu plus d’un type singulier au cours de ma vie, mais j’avoue n’en avoir jamais rencontré un seul de ce calibre!

— Pauvre petite! murmura Summy. Comment avez-vous pu la laisser s’engager dans une aventure aussi insensée?

Mais le docteur n’écoutait plus Summy Skim. Il avait entrepris Ben Raddle sur le chapitre de Dawson, et il parlait d’abondance. Le docteur Pilcox était fier de sa ville et ne s’en cachait pas.

— Oui, répétait-il, elle est déjà digne du nom de capitale du Klondike que le gouvernement du Dominion lui a donné.

— Une capitale à peine bâtie, docteur, fit observer Ben Raddle.

— Si elle ne l’est pas, elle le sera sous peu, puisque le nombre de ses habitants s’accroît chaque jour.

— Elle en compte aujourd’hui? demanda Ben.

— Près de vingt mille, monsieur.

— Dites vingt mille passants, docteur, et non vingt mille habitants. L’hiver, Dawson doit être un désert.

— Pardonnez-moi. Vingt mille habitants, qui y sont établis avec leurs familles et ne songent pas plus que moi à la quitter.

Pendant que Ben Raddle, au grand profit de son instruction, feuilletait le dictionnaire vivant qu’était le docteur Pilcox, Summy gardait un silence attristé. Sa pensée était partie avec Jane Edgerton. Il la voyait sur la longue route sauvage, seule, abandonnée, sans autre défense que son indomptable volonté… Mais, après tout, cela ne le regardait pas, et cette folle était bien libre d’aller chercher la misère et la mort, si tel était son caprice… Summy, d’un haussement d’épaules, rejeta son souci loin de lui, et intervint dans la controverse.

— Cependant, fit-il observer pour pousser l’excellent docteur, je ne vois pas en Dawson ce qui caractérise habituellement une capitale…

— Comment! s’écria le docteur Pilcox, en se gonflant, ce qui le faisait paraître plus rond encore, mais c’est la résidence du Commissaire général des territoires du Yukon, le major James Walch, et de toute une hiérarchie de fonctionnaires telle que vous n’en trouveriez pas dans les métropoles de la Colombie ou du Dominion!

— Lesquels, Docteur?

— Un membre de la Cour Suprême, le Juge Mac Guire; un commissaire de l’or, M. Th. Faucett, esquire; un commissaire des Terres de la Couronne, M. Wade, esquire; un consul des États-Unis d’Amérique, un agent consulaire de France…

— Esquires, acheva gaiement Summy Skim. En effet, ce sont là de hauts personnages… Et pour le commerce?

— Nous possédons déjà deux banques, répondit le docteur. *The Canadian Bank of Commerce*, de Toronto, que dirige M. H.-I. Wills, et *The Bank of British North America*.

— C’est suffisant. Quant aux églises?..

— Dawson City en a trois, monsieur Skim, une église catholique, une église de la religion réformée et une protestante anglaise.

— Voilà qui va bien pour le salut des âmes! Et si celui des corps est aussi parfaitement assuré!…

Quartier général de la police montée à Dawson City

— Que pensez-vous, pour cela, monsieur Skim, d’un commandant en chef de la police montée, le capitaine Stearns, un Canadien d’origine française, et du capitaine Harper, à la tête du service postal, tous deux comptant une soixantaine d’hommes sous leurs ordres?

— Je pense, docteur, répondit Summy Skim, que cette escouade de police doit être fort insuffisante, étant donnés le nombre et la qualité de la population dawsonienne.

— On l’augmentera autant qu’il sera nécessaire, assura le docteur Pilcox, et le gouvernement du Dominion ne négligera rien pour garantir la sécurité des habitants de la capitale du Klondike.

Il aurait fallu entendre le docteur prononcer ces mots: Capitale du Klondike!

Et Summy Skim de répondre:

— Tout est donc pour le mieux… Mais, d’ailleurs, je ne sais pas pourquoi je vous pose ces questions. La brièveté de mon séjour m’empêchera, je l’espère bien, d’apprécier comme il conviendrait les nombreux avantages de Dawson. Et, pourvu que la ville possède un hôtel, je serais mal venu d’en demander davantage..

Il y en avait au moins trois: *Yukon Hôtel*, *Klondike Hôtel*, *Northern Hôtel*, et Summy Skim ne pouvait l'ignorer, puisque c'est dans le dernier que les deux cousins avaient leurs chambres.

Du reste, pour peu que les mineurs continuent d'affluer, les propriétaires de ces hôtels ne peuvent manquer de faire fortune. Une chambre coûte sept dollars par jour, et les repas trois dollars chaque; on paie le service d'un dollar quotidien; le prix d'une coupe de barbe s'élève à un dollar, et celui d'une coupe de cheveux à un dollar et demi.

«Heureusement, fit observer Summy Skim, que j'ignore le rasoir!.. Quant aux cheveux, je m'engage à rapporter les miens intacts à Montréal!»

Les chiffres précités montrent la cherté de la vie dans la capitale du Klondike. Qui ne s'y enrichit pas rapidement par quelque coup de chance est à peu près certain de s'y ruiner à court délai. Qu'on en juge par ces prix relevés sur les mercuriales du marché de Dawson City: un verre de lait vaut deux francs cinquante, la livre de beurre cinq francs, et il faut posséder douze francs cinquante pour pouvoir acheter une douzaine d'œufs. La livre de sel coûte un franc, et la douzaine de citrons vingt-cinq francs.

Quant aux bains, on les paie douze francs cinquante, s'ils sont ordinaires, mais le prix d'un bain russe s'élève à cent soixante francs!

Summy Skim se déclara résolu à se contenter de bains ordinaires.

A cette époque, Dawson City s'étendait sur deux kilomètres le long de la rive droite du Yukon, distante de douze cents mètres des collines les plus rapprochées. Ses quatre-vingt-huit hectares de surface étaient divisés en deux quartiers séparés par le cours de la Klondike River, qui tombe là dans le grand fleuve. On y comptait sept avenues et cinq rues se coupant à angle droit, et bordées par des trottoirs en bois. Lorsque ces rues n’étaient pas sillonnées par les traîneaux, pendant les interminables mois d’hiver, de grosses voitures, de lourds chariots à roues pleines les parcouraient à grand fracas au milieu de la foule des chiens.

Autour de Dawson City, se succèdent nombre de jardins potagers dans lesquels poussent navets, choux-raves, laitues, panais, mais en quantité insuffisante. D’où la nécessite de faire venir à grands frais des légumes du Dominion, de la Colombie ou des États-Unis. Quant à la viande de boucherie, c’étaient les bateaux frigorifiques qui l’apportaient après la débâcle en remontant le Yukon, depuis Saint-Michel jusqu’à Dawson City. Dès la première semaine de juin, ces yukoners apparaissent en aval, et les quais retentissent des sifflements de leurs sirènes.

Mais, l’hiver, le Yukon, enserré dans sa carapace de glace, est inutilisable, et Dawson est, pendant des mois et des mois, isolé du reste du monde. Il faut alors vivre de conserves et demeurer confiné chez soi, la rigueur de la température interdisant presque complètement l’exercice à l’air libre.

Aussi, le printemps revenu, les épidémies font-elles rage dans la ville. Le scorbut, la méningite, la fièvre typhoïde en déciment la population anémiée par une longue claustration.

Cette année précisément, après un hiver tout particulièrement rigoureux, les salles de l’hôpital étaient encombrées. Le personnel ne pouvait suffire au travail, et le docteur Pilcox avait mille raisons de s’applaudir de l’aide que lui apportait, dans une situation très difficile, sa nouvelle et précieuse recrue.

A quel état la fatigue, le froid, la misère avaient-ils réduit ces pauvres gens venus do si loin! La statistique des décès s’élevait de jour en jour, et, par les rues, des attelages de chiens traînaient incessamment des corbillards conduisant tant de malheureux au cimetière, où les attendait une tombe banale, creusée peut-être, pour ces miséreux, en plein minerai d’or!

En dépit de ce lamentable spectacle, les Dawsoniens, ou tout au moins les mineurs de passage, ne cessaient de s’abandonner à des plaisirs excessifs. Ceux qui se rendaient pour la première fois aux gisements et ceux qui y retournaient, afin d’y refaire leurs gains dévorés en quelques mois, menaient grand bruit dans les casinos et dans les salles de jeu. La foule emplissait les restaurants et les bars, pendant que des épidémies décimaient la ville. A voir ces centaines de buveurs, de joueurs, d’aventuriers de constitution solide, on n’eût pu croire que tant de misérables, des familles entières, hommes, femmes, enfants, succombassent, terrassés par la misère et la maladie.

Tout ce monde, avide de sensations violentes, d’émotions renaissantes, s’entassait dans les *Folies-Bergère*, les *Monte-Carlo*, les *Dominion*, les *Eldorado*, on ne saurait dire du soir au matin, d’abord parce que, à cette époque de l’année, aux environs du solstice, il n’y avait plus ni matin ni soir, et ensuite parce que ces lieux de plaisir ne fermaient pas un seul instant. Là fonctionnaient sans interruption poker, monte et roulette. Là, on risquait sur le tapis vert, non pas les dollars, les souverains ou les piastres, mais les pépites et la poussière d’or, au milieu du tumulte, des cris, des provocations, des agressions et quelquefois des détonations du revolver. Là se passaient des scènes abominables que la police était impuissante à réprimer, et dans lesquelles des Hunters, des Malones, ou leurs pareils, jouaient les premiers rôles.

A Dawson, les restaurants sont ouverts jour et nuit. A toute heure, on y mange des poulets à vingt dollars la pièce, des ananas à dix dollars, des œufs garantis à quinze dollars la douzaine; on y fume des cigares de trois francs cinquante; on y boit du vin à vingt dollars la bouteille, du whisky qui coûte aussi cher qu’une maison de campagne.

Trois ou quatre fois la semaine, les prospecteurs reviennent des claims du voisinage, et gaspillent en quelques heures dans ces restaurants ou dans les maisons de jeu tout ce que leur ont donné les boues de la Bonanza et de ses tributaires.

C’est là un spectacle triste, affligeant, où se manifestent les plus déplorables vices de la nature humaine, et le peu que, dès les premières heures, en observa Summy Skim, ne put qu’accroître son dégoût pour ce monde d’aventuriers.

Il comptait bien n’avoir pas l’occasion de l’étudier plus à fond, et, sans perdre de temps, il mit tout en œuvre pour rendre aussi courte que possible la durée de son séjour au Klondike.

Aussitôt après le déjeuner à *Northern Hôtel*, le jour même de leur arrivée, Summy interpella son cousin:

«Avant tout, notre affaire, dit-il. Puisqu’un syndicat nous a offert d’acheter le claim 129 de Forty Miles Creek, allons voir ce syndicat.

— Quand tu voudras,» répondit Ben Raddle.

Malheureusement, aux bureaux de l’American and Transportation Trading Company, il leur fut répondu que le directeur, le capitaine Healey, était en excursion aux environs et ne reviendrait que dans quelques jours. Force fut donc aux deux héritiers de mettre un frein à leur impatience.

En attendant, ils cherchèrent à se renseigner sur la situation approximative de leur propriété. Bill Stell était, pour cela, un cicérone tout indiqué.

«Le Forty Miles Creek est-il loin de Dawson? lui demanda Ben Raddle.

— Je ne suis jamais allé là, répondit le Scout. Mais la carte indique que ce creek se jette dans le Yukon à Fort Cudahy, au Nord-Ouest de Dawson City.

— D'après le numéro qu'il porte, fit observer Summy Skim, je ne pense pas que le claim de l'oncle Josias soit très éloigné.

— Il ne peut l'être de plus d'une trentaine de lieues, expliqua le Scout, puisque c'est à cette distance qu'est tracée la frontière entre l'Alaska et le Dominion et que le claim 129 est en territoire canadien.

— Nous partirons aussitôt que nous aurons vu le capitaine Healey, déclara Summy.

— C'est entendu,» répondit son cousin.

Mais les jours s'écoulèrent sans que le capitaine Healey reparût. C'est pour la dixième fois que Ben et Summy, dans l'après-midi du 7 juin, quittaient le *Northern Hôtel*, et se dirigeaient vers les bureaux du syndicat de Chicago.

Il y avait foule dans le quartier. Un steamer du Yukon venait de débarquer un grand nombre d'émigrants. En attendant l'heure de se répandre sur les divers affluents du fleuve, les uns pour exploiter les gisements qui leur appartenaient, les autres pour louer leurs bras à des prix très élevés, ils fourmillaient dans la ville. De toutes les rues, Front street, où se trouvaient les principales agences, était la plus encombrée. A la foule humaine s'ajoutait la foule canine. A chaque pas, on se heurtait à ces animaux aussi peu domestiques que possible et dont les hurlements déchiraient l'oreille.

«C’est bien une cité de chiens, cette Dawson! disait Summy Skim. Son premier magistrat devrait être un molosse, et son nom vrai est Dog City!»

Non sans chocs, bousculades, objurgations et injures, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim parvinrent à remonter Front street jusqu’au bureau du syndicat. Le capitaine Healey n’étant pas encore de retour, ils se résignèrent à voir le sous-directeur, M. William Broll, qui s’enquit de l’objet de leur visite.

Les deux cousins déclinèrent leurs noms:

«Messieurs Summy Skim et Ben Raddle, de Montréal.

— Enchanté de vous voir, messieurs, affirma M. Broll. Enchanté, en vérité!

— Non moins enchantés, répondit poliment Summy Skim.

— Les héritiers de Josias Lacoste, propriétaires du claim 129 de Forty Miles Creek? suggéra M. Broll.

— Précisément, déclara Ben Raddle.

— A moins, ajouta Summy, que, depuis notre départ pour cet interminable voyage, ce maudit claim n’ait disparu.

— Non, messieurs, répondit William Broll. Soyez sûrs qu’il est toujours à la place que lui assigne le cadastreur, sur la limite des deux États… sur la limite probable, du moins.

Probable?.. Pourquoi probable? Et que venait faire là est adjectif inattendu.

— Monsieur, reprit Ben Raddle, sans faire autrement attention à la restriction géographique de M. Broll, nous avons été avisés à Montréal que votre syndicat se propose d'acquérir le claim 129 de Forty Miles Creek…

— Se proposait… En effet, monsieur Raddle.

— Nous sommes donc venus, mon cohéritier et moi, afin de reconnaître la valeur de ce claim, et nous désirons savoir si les offres du syndicat tiennent toujours.

— Oui et non, répondit M. William Broll.

— Oui et non! s'écria Summy Skim consterné.

— Oui et non! répéta Ben Raddle. Expliquez-vous, monsieur.

— Rien de plus simple, messieurs, répondit le sous-directeur. C'est oui, si l'emplacement du claim est établi d'une façon, et non, s'il est établi d'une autre. En deux mots, je vais…

Mais, sans attendre l'explication, Summy Skim de s'écrier:

— Quelle que soit la façon, monsieur, il y a les faits. Notre oncle, Josias Lacoste, était-il propriétaire de ce claim, et ne le sommes-nous pas en son lieu et place, puisque son héritage nous est dévolu?

Et, à l'appui de cette déclaration, Ben Raddle tirade son portefeuille les titres qui attestaient leurs droits à entrer en possession du claim 129 de Forty Miles Creek.

— Oh! fît le sous-directeur en refusant les papiers d'un geste, ces titres de propriété sont en règle, je n'en doute nullement. La question n'est pas là, messieurs.

— Où est-elle donc? demanda Summy que l’attitude un peu narquoise de M. Broll commençait à agacer.

— Le claim 129, répondit M. Broll, occupe sur le Forty Miles un point de la frontière, entre le Dominion qui est britannique et l’Alaska qui est américaine…

— Oui, mais du côté canadien, précisa Ben Raddle.

— Cela dépend, répliqua M. Broll. Le claim est canadien, si la limite des deux États est bien à la place qu’on lui a jusqu’ici assignée. Il est américain, dans le cas contraire. Or, comme le syndicat, qui est canadien, ne peut exploiter que des gisements d’origine canadienne, je ne puis vous donner qu’une réponse conditionnelle.

— Ainsi, demanda Ben Raddle, il y a actuellement contestation au sujet de la frontière entre les États-Unis et la Grande-Bretagne?

— Justement, messieurs, expliqua M. Broll.

— Je croyais, dit Ben Raddle, que l’on avait choisi un méridien, le cent quarante et unième, comme ligne de séparation.

— On l’a choisi effectivement, messieurs, et avec raison.

— Eh bien, reprit Summy Skim, je ne pense pas que les méridiens changent de place, même dans le nouveau morde. Je ne vois pas le cent quarante et unième se promener de l’Est à l’Ouest la canne à la main!

— C’est entendu, approuva M. Broll en riant de la vivacité de Summy, mais peut-être n’est-il pas exactement où on l’a tracé. Depuis deux mois, des contestations sérieuses se sont élevées à ce sujet, et il serait possible que la frontière dût être reportée un peu plus à l’Est ou un peu plus à l’Ouest.

— De quelques lieues? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Non, de quelques centaines de mètres seulement.

— Et c’est pour ça qu’on discute! s’écria Summy Skim.

— On a raison, monsieur, répliqua le sous-directeur. Ce qui est américain doit être américain et ce qui est canadien doit être canadien.

— Quel est celui des deux Etats qui a réclamé? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Tous les deux, répondit M. Broll. L’Amérique revendique vers l’Est une bande de terrain que le Dominion revendique de son côté vers l’Ouest.

— Eh! by God! s’écria Summy, que peuvent, après tout, nous faire ces discussions?

— Cela fait, répondit le sous-directeur, que, si l’Amérique l’emporte, une partie des claims du Forty Miles Creek deviendra américaine.

— Et le 129 sera de ceux-là?..

— Sans aucun doute, puisqu’il est le premier de la frontière actuelle, répondit M. Broll, et, dans ces conditions, le syndicat retirerait ses offres d’acquisition.

Cette fois la réponse était claire.

— Mais, au moins, demanda Ben Raddle, a-t-on commencé cette rectification de frontière?

— Oui, monsieur, et la triangulation est conduite avec une activité et une précision remarquables.

Si les réclamations se faisaient pressantes de la part des deux États, pour une bande de terrain en somme assez étroite le long du cent quarante et unième degré de longitude, c’est que le terrain contesté était aurifère. Savait-on si, à travers cette longue bande, du mont Elie au Sud à l’océan Arctique au Nord, ne courait pas quelque riche veine, dont la République fédérale saurait tirer aussi bon profit que le Dominion?

— Pour conclure, monsieur Broll, demanda Ben Raddle, si le claim 129 reste à l’Est de la frontière, le syndicat maintient ses offres?

— Parfaitement.

— Et si, au contraire, il passe dans l’Ouest, nous devrons renoncer à traiter avec lui?

— C’est cela même.

— Eh bien, déclara Summy Skim, nous nous adresserons à d’autres, dans ce cas. Si notre claim est transporté en terre américaine, nous l’échangerons contre des dollars au lieu de l’échanger contre des livres sterling, voilà tout.»

L’entretien prit fin sur ces mots, et les deux cousins revinrent à Northern Hôtel.

Ils y retrouvèrent le Scout qui fut mis au courant de la situation.

«Dans tous les cas, leur conseilla-t-il, vous feriez sagement, messieurs, de vous rendre à Forty Miles Creek le plus tôt possible.

— C’est bien notre intention, dit Ben Raddle. Nous partirons dès demain. Et vous, Bill, qu’allez-vous faire?

— Je vais retourner à Skagway, afin de ramener une autre caravane à Dawson City.

— Et vous serez absent?..

— Deux mois environ.

— Nous comptons sur vous pour le retour.

— C’est entendu, messieurs, mais, de votre côté, ne perdez pas de temps, si vous voulez quitter le Klondike avant l’hiver.

— Fiez-vous à moi pour cela, Bill, affirma Summy avec chaleur, bien que, à vrai dire, nous ayons reçu dès le début une tuile de forte taille!

— Il y aura des acheteurs moins vétilleux, affirma Ben Raddle. En attendant, rendons-nous compte par nous-mêmes…

— Eh mais! j’y pense, interrompit Summy, nous allons retrouver là-bas notre charmant voisin…

— Ce Texien Hunter, acheva Ben Raddle.

— Et M. Malone. Des gentlemen très distingués.

— Dites des gens de sac et de corde, monsieur Skim, rectifia Bill Stell. Ils sont bien connus à Skagway et à Dawson. Ce sont vos voisins, en effet, puisque le claim 131 est mitoyen du vôtre, quoique de l’autre côté de la frontière actuelle, et c’est là pour vous un bien fâcheux voisinage.

— D’autant plus, ajouta Ben Raddle, que Summy a déjà eu l’occasion de donner une sévère correction à l’un de ces messieurs. Voilà qui n’est pas fait pour faciliter nos relations futures.

Bill Stell semblait soucieux.

— Vos affaires ne sont pas les miennes, messieurs, dit-il d’un ton sérieux. Permettez-moi cependant de vous donner un conseil. Faites-vous accompagner pour aller au claim 129. Si vous voulez Neluto, je le mets à votre disposition. Et ne partez que bien armés.

— En voilà des aventures! s’écria Summy en levant les bras au ciel. Quand je pense que, si nous étions restés tranquillement à Montréal, notre claim serait vendu à l’heure présente, puisque le marché aurait été conclu avant ces stupides contestations de frontière. Et moi, je me prélasserais à Green Valley!

— Tu ne vas pas encore récriminer, je suppose, objecta Ben Raddle. J’ai ta promesse, Summy. D’ailleurs, si tu étais resté à Montréal, tu n’aurais pas fait un voyage intéressant, passionnant, extraordinaire…

— Qui m’indiffère totalement, Ben!

— Tu ne serais pas à Dawson…

— Dont je ne demande qu’à m’éloigner, Ben!

— Tu n’aurais pas rendu service à Edith et à Jane Edgerton.

Summy serra avec vigueur la main de son cousin.

— Veux-tu que je t’apprenne une chose, Ben? Eh bien, parole d’honneur, voilà le premier mot sensé que tu prononces depuis doux mois,» dit-il, tandis que son visage s’illuminait subitement d’un large et franc sourire.

CHAPITRE XI

De Dawson City à la frontière.

Bill Stell avait donné un avis sage aux deux cousins en leur conseillant de se hâter. Ils n’avaient pas un jour à perdre pour terminer leur affaire. Les froids arctiques viennent vite cous ces hautes latitudes. Le mois de juin était commencé, et, vers la fin d’août, il arrive que les glaces encombrent de nouveau lacs et creeks, que neiges et bourrasques emplissent de nouveau l’espace. Trois mois, la belle saison ne dure pas davantage au Klondike, et même, pour les deux cousins, convenait-il d’en retrancher le temps nécessaire au retour à Skagway par la région lacustre, ou, s’ils entendaient changer leur itinéraire, à la descente du Yukon de Dawson à Saint-Michel.

Les préparatifs de Ben Raddle et de Summy Skim étaient achevés. Ils ne manqueraient de rien, même si le séjour au claim 129 se prolongeait au delà de leurs prévisions. Au surplus, il ne s’agissait, ni d’acquérir, ni d’emporter un matériel, puisque celui de Josias Lacoste se trouvait sur place, ni d’engager un personnel, puisqu’il n’était pas question d’exploiter le claim de Forty Miles Creek.

Cependant il était prudent d’avoir un guide connaissant bien le pays. Le Scout, ayant trouvé à Dawson City un autre de ses pilotes pour retourner au lac Lindeman, avait offert Neluto. Ben Raddle accepta, en remerciant vivement Bill Stell. Il eût été difficile de faire un meilleur choix. On avait vu l’Indien à l’œuvre, et l’on savait pouvoir compter sur lui de toutes les manières, à la seule condition de ne pas en exiger des renseignements trop précis.

Comme véhicule, Ben Raddle choisit la carriole, de préférence au traîneau que les chiens ont l’habitude de tirer, même lorsque glaces et neiges ont disparu. Ces animaux étaient si chers à ce moment qu’on payait jusqu’à quinze cents ou deux mille francs par tête.

Cette carriole, à deux places, pourvue d’une capote de cuir pouvant se relever ou se rabattre, assez solidement établie pour résister aux cahots et aux chocs, fut attelée d’un cheval vigoureux.

Il n’y avait pas à faire provision de fourrage, car, en cette saison, les prairies se succédaient tout le long des routes, et, dans ces conditions, un cheval parvient plus aisément à se nourrir qu’un attelage de chiens.

A la prière de Ben Raddle, Neluto examina la voiture avec le plus grand soin. Ce fut une inspection méticuleuse. Caisse, brancards, capote, ressorts, tout y passa, jusqu’au dernier boulon. Quand elle fut terminée, Neluto avait le visage satisfait.

«Eh bien? interrogea Ben Raddle.

— Si elle ne casse pas en route, affirma l’Indien du ton de la plus profonde conviction, je pense qu’elle nous conduira jusqu’au claim 129.

— Grand merci, mon brave!» s’écria Ben Raddle sans chercher à réprimer une formidable envie de rire.

Cependant, il parvint à obtenir du circonspect Neluto des indications utiles quant aux objets qu’il convenait d’emporter, et finalement l’ingénieur put être assuré que rien ne lui manquerait pour le voyage.

Entre temps, Summy Skim s’amusait à flâner philosophiquement dans les rues de Dawson City. Il examinait les magasins, se rendait compte du prix des objets manufacturés. Combien il s'applaudissait d'avoir fait ses acquisitions chez les marchands de Montréal!

«Sais-tu, Ben, ce que coûte une paire de souliers dans la capitale du Klondike? dit-il à son cousin la veille du départ.

— Non, Summy.

— De cinquante à quatre-vingt-dix francs. – Et une paire do bas?

— Pas davantage.

— Dix francs. – Et des chaussettes de laine?

— Mettons vingt francs.

— Non, vingt-cinq. – Et des bretelles?

— On peut s'en passer, Summy.

— Et l'on fait bien, – dix-huit francs.

— Nous nous en passerons.

— Et des jarretières de femme?

— Cela m'est égal, Summy.

— Quarante francs, et neuf cents francs la robe qui vient de chez la bonne faiseuse. Décidément, en ce pays invraisemblable, on a tout profit à rester célibataire.

— Nous le resterons, répondit Ben Raddle, à moins que tu n'aies l'intention d'épouser quelque opulente héritière…

— Elles ne manquent point, Ben, les héritières… et surtout les aventurières qui possèdent de riches claims sur la Bonanza ou l’Eldorado. Mais, parti garçon de Montréal, j’y rentrerai garçon!.. Ah! Montréal! Montréal!.. nous en sommes bien loin, Ben!..

— La distance qui sépare Dawson City de Montréal, répondit Ben Raddle, non sans une certaine ironie, est précisément égale à celle qui sépare Montréal de Dawson City, Summy.

— Je m’en doute, répliqua Summy Skim, mais cela ne veut pas dire qu’elle soit courte!»

Les deux cousins ne voulurent pas quitter Dawson sans aller à l’hôpital dire adieu à Edith Edgerton. Aussitôt prévenue de leur visite, celle-ci descendit au parloir. Elle était à croquer dans son costume d’infirmière. A voir sa robe de bure grise et son tablier à bavette éclatant de blancheur qui tombaient en plis d’une parfaite régularité, ses cheveux bien lissés que séparait une raie mathématique, ses mains blanches et soignées, on n’eût pas deviné la remarquable travailleuse si lyriquement décrite par le docteur Pilcox.

«Eh bien, mademoiselle, lui demanda Ben Raddle, vous plaisez-vous dans vos nouvelles fonctions?

— On aime toujours le métier qui vous fait vivre, répondit simplement Edith.

— Hum! hum! fit Ben Raddle mal convaincu… Enfin, vous êtes satisfaite. C’est l’essentiel. Quant au docteur Pilcox, il ne tarit pas d’éloges sur votre compte.

— Le docteur est trop bon, répondit la jeune infirmière. J’espère mieux faire avec le temps.

Summy intervint.

— Et votre cousine, mademoiselle, en avez-vous des nouvelles?

— Aucune, déclara Edith.

— Ainsi donc, reprit Summy, elle a mis son projet à exécution?

— N’était-ce pas convenu?

— Mais qu’en espère-t-elle? s’écria Summy avec un soudain et inexplicable emportement. Que deviendra-t-elle si elle échoue, comme cela est certain, dans son entreprise insensée?

— Je serai toujours là pour la recueillir, répliqua tranquillement Edith. Au pis aller, ce que je gagne suffira à nous faire vivre.

— Alors, objecta Summy très excité, vous êtes donc décidées à vous fixer toutes deux au Klondike, à n’en plus sortir, à y prendre racine…

— En aucune façon, monsieur Skim, car, si Jane réussit, c’est moi qui, dans ce cas, profiterai de son effort.

— Admirable combinaison!.. Vous vous décideriez donc à quitter Dawson?

— Pourquoi pas? J’aime le métier qui me fait vivre, mais, du jour où je pourrai m’en passer, j’en chercherai un autre plus agréable, bien entendu.»

Tout cela était débité d'une voix posée, avec une assurance qui désarmait la contradiction. A cette conception calme et modérée de la vie, il n'y avait rien à répliquer, et Summy Skim ne répliqua rien.

Quand bien même, d'ailleurs, il aurait eu la velléité de faire entendre une dernière protestation, l'intervention du docteur Pilcox s'y fût opposée.

Dès qu'il connut le prochain départ des deux cousins, le docteur se répandit eu félicitations sur l'intéressant voyage qu'ils allaient entreprendre, et, enfourchant son dada favori, se remit à vanter les beautés de son cher Klondike.

Summy Skim fit franchement la moue. Il n'aimait pas le Klondike, lui. Ah mais, non!

«Vous y viendrez, affirma le docteur. Si seulement il vous était donné de le voir pendant l'hiver!..

— J'espère bien ne pas avoir cette chance, docteur, dit Summy en esquissant une grimace.

— Qui sait!»

Cette réponse du docteur, l'avenir dira si Summy Skim avait tort ou raison de ne pas la prendre au sérieux.

Dès cinq heures du matin, le 8 de ce mois de juin, la carriole attendait devant la porte de *Northern Hôtel*. Les provisions et le petit matériel de campement étaient en place. Le cheval piaffait entre les brancards, Neluto trônait sur le siège.

«Le chargement est complet, Neluto?

— Complet, monsieur…

— En route alors, commanda Ben Raddle.

— … si on n’a laissé aucun paquet à l’hôtel, acheva l’Indien avec sa prudence accoutumée.

Ben Raddle étouffa un soupir résigné.

— Enfin! espérons que nous n’oublions rien, dit-il en montant en voiture.

— Et surtout que nous devons être de retour dans deux mois à Montréal,» ajouta Summy avec l’obstination d’un leitmotiv.

La distance entre Dawson City et la frontière est de cent quarante-six kilomètres. Le claim 129 de Forty Miles Creek touchant cette frontière, trois jours allaient être nécessaires pour l’atteindre, à raison d’une douzaine de lieues par vingt-quatre heures.

Neluto organisa les étapes de manière à ne point surmener le cheval. Il y en aurait deux dans la journée: la première de six heures du matin à onze heures, suivie d’une halte de deux heures; la seconde de une heure à six, après laquelle le campement serait disposé pour la nuit. On ne pouvait aller plus vite à travers ce pays inégal.

Chaque soir, on dresserait la tente à l’abri des arbres, si Ben Raddle et son cousin ne trouvaient pas une chambre dans quelque auberge de la route.

Les deux premières étapes se firent dans des conditions favorables. Le temps était beau. Une brise légère poussait de l’Est quelques nuages élevés, et la température se maintenait à une dizaine de degrés au-dessus de zéro. Le sol se soulevait en médiocres collines dont les plus hautes n’atteignaient pas mille pieds; anémones, crocus, genièvres, dans toute leur floraison printanière, se multipliaient sur leurs pentes. Au creux des ravins, des arbres, épinettes, peupliers, bouleaux et pins, se groupaient en profonds massifs.

On avait dit à Summy Skim que le gibier ne ferait pas défaut sur la route, et même que les ours fréquentaient volontiers cette partie du Klondike. Ben Raddle et lui n’avaient donc pas négligé d’emporter leurs fusils de chasse. Mais ils n’eurent point l’occasion de s’en servir.

Au surplus, la contrée n’était pas déserte. On y rencontrait des mineurs employés aux claims des montagnes, dont certains produisent jusqu’à mille francs par jour et par homme.

Dans l’après-midi, la carriole atteignit Fort Reliance, bourgade très animée à cette époque. Fondé par la Compagnie de la Baie d’Hudson, pour l’exploitation des fourrures et sa défense contre les tribus indiennes, Fort Reliance, comme beaucoup d’établissements du même genre, n’a plus la destination d’autrefois. Depuis la découverte des mines d’or, la station militaire s’est transformée en entrepôt d’approvisionnement.

Les deux cousins firent à Fort Reliance la rencontre du major James Walsh, commissaire général des territoires du Yukon, en tournée d’inspection.

C’était un homme d’une cinquantaine d’années, excellent administrateur, installé depuis deux ans dans le district. Le gouverneur du Dominion l’y avait envoyé à l’époque où les gisements aurifères commençaient à être assiégés par ces milliers d’émigrants dont l’exode ne semblait pas devoir prendre fin de sitôt.

La tâche était malaisée. Concessions sur lesquelles il fallait statuer, lotissement des claims, redevances à recouvrer, bon ordre à maintenir dans cette région que les Indiens ne laissaient pas envahir sans protestation et parfois sans résistance, – mille difficultés surgissaient et renaissaient tous les jours.

A ces ennuis courants, s'ajoutait aujourd'hui la contestation au sujet du cent quarante et unième méridien, contestation qui rendait nécessaire un nouveau travail de triangulation. C'était précisément cette affaire qui motivait la présence du major James Walsh dans cette partie Ouest du Klondike.

«Qui a soulevé cette question, monsieur Walsh? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Les Américains, répondit le commissaire. Ils prétendent que l'opération, faite à l'époque où l'Alaska appartenait encore à la Russie, n'a pas été conduite avec toute l'exactitude voulue. La frontière, représentée par le cent quarante et unième degré, doit, suivant eux, être reportée à l'Est, ce qui rendrait aux États-Unis la plupart des claims existants sur les affluents de la rive gauche du Yukon.

— Et par conséquent, ajouta Summy Skim, le claim 129 qui nous vient par héritage de notre oncle Josias Lacoste?

— Évidemment, messieurs, vous serez les premiers, le cas échéant, à changer de nationalité.

— Mais, reprit Summy Skim, a-t-on des raisons de penser, monsieur Walsh, que le travail de rectification soit bientôt achevé?

— Tout ce que je puis vous dire, déclara M. Walsh, c’est que la commission nommée *ad hoc* est à l’œuvre depuis plusieurs semaines. Nous espérons bien que la frontière entre les deux États sera définitivement déterminée avant l’hiver.

— Selon vous, monsieur Walsh, demanda Ben Raddle, y a-t-il lieu de croire qu’une erreur ait été commise à l’origine et que la frontière doive être finalement déplacée?

— Non, monsieur. D’après les informations qui me sont parvenues, cette affaire semble n’être qu’une mauvaise querelle cherchée au Dominion par quelques syndicats américains.

— Nous n’en serons pas moins forcés, dit Summy Skim, de prolonger notre séjour au Klondike au delà de nos désirs. Voilà qui n’est pas gai!

— Je ferai tout ce qui dépendra de moi pour activer le travail de la commission, affirma le commissaire général. Mais il faut avouer qu’il est parfois entrave par le mauvais vouloir de quelques propriétaires des claims voisins de la frontière. Celui du 131 notamment…

— Un Texien du nom de Hunter? dit Ben Raddle.

— Précisément. Vous en avez entendu parler?

— Dans la traversée de Vancouver à Skagway, mon cousin a été obligé d’entrer en rapport avec lui… et même un peu rudement, peut-être!

— Dans ce cas, tenez-vous sur vos gardes. C’est un individu violent et brutal. Il est doublé d’un certain Malone, de même origine, et qui ne vaut pas mieux que lui, dit-on.

— Ce Hunter, demanda Ben Raddle, est un de ceux qui ont réclamé la rectification du méridien, monsieur Walsh?

— Oui. C’est même l’un des plus ardents.

— Quel intérêt y a-t-il?

— Celui d’être un peu plus éloigné de la frontière, et d’échapper ainsi à la surveillance indirecte de nos agents. C’est lui qui a excité les propriétaires des gisements compris entre la rive gauche du Yukon et la frontière actuelle. Toute cette population interlope aimerait mieux dépendre de l’Alaska, beaucoup moins fortement administrée que le Dominion. Mais, je vous le répète, je doute que les Américains aient gain de cause, et ce Hunter en sera pour ses pas et démarches. Toutefois, je vous conseille de nouveau d’avoir le minimum de rapports avec votre voisin, un aventurier de la pire espèce, dont ma police a déjà dû s’occuper plus d’une fois.

— Soyez sans crainte à cet égard, monsieur le commissaire, répondit Summy Skim. Nous ne sommes pas venus au Klondike pour laver les boues du 129, mais pour le vendre. Dès que ce sera fait, nous reprendrons sans tourner la tête le chemin du Chilkoot, de Vancouver et de Montréal.

— Je vous souhaite, messieurs, un heureux voyage, répondit le commissaire, en prenant congé des deux cousins. Si je puis vous être utile, vous pouvez compter sur moi.»

Le lendemain, la carriole se remit en route. Le ciel était moins beau que la veille. Avec le vent du Nord-Ouest s’abattirent quelques violentes rafales. Mais, à l’abri de la capote, les deux cousins n’eurent pas trop à en souffrir.

Neluto n’aurait pu exiger de son cheval une allure rapide. Le sol devenait très cahoteux. Les ornières, vidées de la glace qui les comblait depuis de longs mois, causaient des chocs redoutables pour le véhicule et pour son attelage.

La région était forestière, toujours des pins, des bouleaux, des peupliers et des trembles. Le bois ne manquerait pas de longtemps aux mineurs, tant pour leur usage personnel que pour l’exploitation des claims. D’ailleurs, si le sol de cette partie du district renferme de l’or, il renferme aussi du charbon. A six kilomètres de Fort Cudahy, sur le Coal Creek, puis, à treize milles de là, sur le Cliffe Creek, puis encore, à dix-neuf kilomètres plus loin, sur le Flatte Creek, on a découvert des gisements d’une houille excellente, qui ne donne pas un résidu de cendres supérieur à cinq pour cent. On en avait déjà trouvé auparavant dans le bassin du Five Fingers, et cette houille remplacera avantageusement le bois, dont les steamers de moyenne force brûlent une tonne par heure. Il peut y avoir là, pour le district, une chance de survie, lorsque les mines d’or seront épuisées.

Le soir de cette journée, à la fin de la seconde étape qui avait été très fatigante, Neluto et ses compagnons atteignirent Fort Cudahy, sur la rive gauche du Yukon. Une sorte d’auberge leur fut indiquée, sinon recommandée, par le chef du détachement de la police à cheval. Peut-être l’estimeraient-ils préférable à leur tente.

Ce renseignement obtenu, Summy Skim, voulant en obtenir un autre sur un point qui, décidément, le préoccupait, se mit en devoir d’interviewer le chef de police. Le chef de police n’aurait-il pas vu une femme passer par Fort Cudahy ces jours derniers?

«Si j’ai vu une femme passer par ici! s’écria le lieutenant en riant de tout son cœur. Non, monsieur, je n’ai pas vu une femme, mais bien des dizaines et des centaines. Beaucoup de mineurs traînent toute une smala avec eux, et vous devez comprendre que, dans le nombre…

— Oh! protesta Summy, celle dont je parle est tellement particulière! C'est une prospectrice, lieutenant, et je ne crois pas que les prospectrices se comptent à la douzaine.

— Détrompez-vous, affirma le lieutenant. Il n'en manque pas. Les femmes sont aussi enragées que les hommes dans la chasse aux pépites.

— Ah bah! fit Summy. Dans ce cas… je comprends…

— On peut tout de même essayer, reprit le lieutenant. Si vous voulez me donner le signalement de la personne qui vous intéresse…

— C'est une toute jeune fille, expliqua Summy. Vingt-deux ans à peine. Elle est petite, très brune et très jolie.

— En effet, concéda le lieutenant, un tel signalement n'est pas ordinaire dans nos parages… Vous dites… une jeune fille… brune… petite… jolie… qui serait récemment passée par ici…

Le chef de police cherchait vainement dans ses souvenirs.

— Non, je ne vois rien, déclara-t-il enfin.

— Elle aura pris une autre route, la pauvre petite, dit Summy tristement… Merci tout de même, lieutenant.»

La nuit s'écoula tant bien que mal, et, le lendemain, 10 juin, la carriole se remit en route de grand matin.

En sortant de Fort Cudahy, le Yukon continue à remonter vers le Nord-Ouest, jusqu’au point où il coupe le cent quarante et unième méridien, tel qu’il se dessinait alors sur les cartes. Quant au Forty Miles Creek, long de quarante milles, ainsi que son nom l’indique, il oblique en amont vers le Sud-Ouest, et se dirige lui aussi du côté de la frontière, qui le divise en deux parties sensiblement égales.

Neluto comptait atteindre dans la soirée l’emplacement occupé par le claim de Josias Lacoste. Il avait fait donner ample ration au cheval, que ces deux jours de marche ne semblaient pas avoir trop fatigué. S’il fallait un coup de collier, on l’obtiendrait, et d’ailleurs le vigoureux animal aurait ensuite tout le temps de se reposer au claim 129.

A trois heures du matin, au moment où Ben Raddle et Summy Skim quittèrent l’auberge, le soleil était assez haut. Dans une dizaine de jours, ce serait le solstice, et c’est à peine s’il disparaîtrait alors quelques instants sous l’horizon.

La carriole suivait la rive droite du Forty Miles Creek, rive très sinueuse, parfois encaissée de collines que séparaient des gorges profondes.

Le pays n’était aucunement désert. De tous côtés, on travaillait dans les claims. A chaque tournant des berges, à l’ouverture des ravins, se dressaient les poteaux qui limitaient les placers, dont le numéro apparaissait en gros chiffres. Le matériel n’y était guère compliqué: de rares machines mues à bras d’hommes, moins encore actionnées par la dérivation d’un creek. La plupart des prospecteurs, aidés parfois par un petit nombre d’ouvriers, retiraient la boue de puits creusés sur le claim et travaillaient au plat ou à l’écuelle. Tout cela se fût fait presque sans bruit, si, de temps à autre, le silence n’eût été troublé par les cris de joie d’un mineur découvrant une pépite de valeur.

La première halte dura de dix heures à midi. Pendant que le cheval paissait dans une prairie voisine, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim purent fumer leur pipe, après un déjeuner de conserves et de biscuits, que terminèrent des tasses de café.

Neluto repartit un peu avant midi et poussa vivement son attelage. Quelques minutes avant sept heures, on aperçut, à faible distance, les poteaux du claim 129.

A ce moment, Summy Skim, saisissant brusquement les guides dans les mains de Neluto, se mit debout dans la carriole, qui s'arrêta.

«Là!..» dit-il, en montrant du geste un long et profond ravin qui descendait en pente raide jusqu'au lit du creek.

Les deux compagnons suivirent du regard la direction indiquée, et, tout au bas du ravin, ils aperçurent, rendue un peu confuse par l'éloignement, une silhouette évoquant pour eux quelque chose de «déjà vu». C'était un prospecteur, de petite taille autant qu'on en pouvait juger à cette distance, en train de laver les sables d'un puits. Un autre homme, un véritable géant, celui-là, travaillait à côté de lui. Ils étaient si absorbés par leur besogne, qu'ils ne l'avaient même pas interrompue au moment où la carriole avait fait halte sur la route.

«On dirait vraiment… murmura Summy.

— Quoi? demanda Ben Raddle impatienté.

— Mais… Dieu me pardonne… Jane Edgerton, Ben!

Ben Raddle haussa les épaules.

— Tu vas en rêver maintenant?.. Comment pourrais-tu reconnaître quelqu’un de si loin?.. D’ailleurs, Jane Edgerton n’avait pas de compagnon, que je sache… Et même, qu’est-ce qui te fait croire que l’un de ces prospecteurs soit une femme?

— Je ne sais… répondit Summy en hésitant. Il me semble…

— Pour moi, ce sont deux mineurs, le père et le fils. Aucun doute à cela. Tiens, demande plutôt à Neluto.

L’Indien plaça la main en abat-jour devant ses yeux.

— C’est une femme, affirma-t-il catégoriquement après un examen prolongé.

— Tu vois bien! s’écria Summy triomphant.

— Ou un homme, continua Neluto avec une égale autorité.

Summy découragé lâcha les guides, et la carriole se remit en marche. Neluto continuait le cours de ses réflexions.

— Il n’y aurait rien d’étonnant si c’était un enfant… une jeune fille, par exemple, suggéra-t-il.

La carriole avançait de nouveau rapidement. Bientôt, en ayant franchi les limites, elle s’arrêtait sur le terrain du claim 129.

— … ou peut-être bien un jeune garçon,» prononça alors Neluto, dans son souci méritoire de ne négliger aucune hypothèse.

Ni Ben Raddle, ni Summy Skim ne l’entendirent. Chacun de son côté, ils sautaient au même instant à bas de la voiture et, après deux mois et neuf jours de voyage, foulaient enfin le sol du claim 129.

CHAPITRE XII

Les débuts d’une prospectrice.

Apeine débarquées du bateau qui les avait amenées, les deux cousines s’étaient hâtées de se rendre à l’hôpital de Dawson. Accueillie d’une manière paternelle par le docteur Pilcox, Edith prit immédiatement son service, sans plus de gêne ni de trouble que si elle l’avait quitté de la veille.

Pendant ce temps, Jane, allant droit à son but, retirait au bureau de l’Administration un permis de chasse, pêche et mines, qui lui fut délivré en échange d’une somme de dix dollars, parcourait la ville de Dawson et se procurait rapidement l’équipement et le matériel du prospecteur. A midi, c’était chose faite. Elle revenait alors à l’hôpital, transformée de la tête aux pieds.

Ses cheveux noirs réunis au sommet de la tête et dissimulés sous un vaste chapeau de feutre, chaussée de gros souliers fortement encloués, vêtue d’une blouse et d’un pantalon en rude et solide étoffe, elle avait perdu toute apparence féminine et ressemblait à un jeune et alerte garçon.

Les deux cousines déjeunèrent ensemble. Puis, sans rien manifester de l’émotion qu’elles éprouvaient en réalité l’une et l’autre, elles s’embrassèrent comme de coutume, et, tandis qu’Edith retournait à ses malades, Jane se mit résolument en route vers l’aventure et l’inconnu.

Au cours de ses achats elle s’était renseignée, en interrogeant les uns et les autres. De la moyenne des indications recueillies il résultait qu’elle n’avait aucune chance de succès vers le Sud et vers l’Est. C’est dans ces directions que se rencontraient les régions les plus riches et, par suite, les plus courues. Elle pourrait les sillonner longtemps avant d'y trouver un coin inexploité capable de la payer de ses peines.

Vers l'Ouest, au contraire, les rios et les creeks étaient moins connus, et la concurrence y était moins âpre. Peut-être, dans cette direction, lui serait-il possible de s'assurer la possession d'un claim jusque-là négligé, sans s'éloigner outre mesure de la ville.

Jane Edgerton, s'en fiant à son heureuse étoile, quitta Dawson par l'Ouest, et, pic et bissac sur l'épaule, descendit la rive gauche du Yukon.

Où allait-elle ainsi? En vérité, elle-même n'en savait rien. Elle marchait droit devant elle, ayant, pour tout plan, le projet bien arrêté de remonter la première rivière de quelque importance qui couperait le chemin et d'en explorer soigneusement les rives.

Vers cinq heures du soir, aucun rio ne s'étant encore rencontré qui méritât un autre nom que celui de ruisseau, Jane, un peu lasse, fit une courte halte, et entama ses provisions. Jusque-là elle n'avait aperçu âme qui vive depuis la dernière maison de la ville. Le pays autour d'elle était silencieux et semblait désert.

Son frugal repas terminé, elle allait se remettre en marche, quand une voiture venant de Dawson City déboucha sur le chemin et s'approcha rapidement. C'était une simple carriole, moins encore, une véritable charrette de paysan, recouverte d'une bâche en toile et traînée par un cheval vigoureux. Sur la banquette suspendue par des cordes au-dessus de l'essieu, un gros homme au visage rubicond et jovial s'étalait, en faisant gaiement claquer son fouet.

Une montée assez raide commençant à cet endroit, force fut à la voiture de se mettre au pas. Jane entendit, derrière elle, le cheval frapper le sol d'un sabot ralenti, et les roues grincer à une distance qui lui parut demeurer invariable.

Une voix, un peu épaisse peut-être, mais joyeuse, l'interpella tout à coup:

«Eh! petiot, disait la voix, que fais-tu par ici?

A ces mots, prononcés dans un anglais très intelligible, mais d'une incorrection puissamment comique pour une oreille anglo-saxonne, Jane se retourna et toisa son interlocuteur avec tranquillité.

— Et vous? dit-elle.

La bouche du gros homme se fendit en un large sourire.

— *Bon Diou*! s'écria-t-il, en aggravant son accent étranger d'un violent accent marseillais, tu n'as pas froid aux yeux, mon jeune coq! Voyez-vous ce toupet d'interroger les passants? Serais-tu de la police, mon pitchoun?

— Et vous? dit encore Jane Edgerton.

— «Et vous,» répéta plaisamment le conducteur de la charrette. Tu ne sais donc dire que ça, gamin?.. Ou bien, peut-être faudrait-il être présenté à monsieur?..

— Pourquoi pas? répliqua Jane souriant à demi.

— Rien de plus simple, affirma le joyeux personnage en excitant son attelage d'un léger coup de fouet. J'ai l'honneur de te présenter Marius

Rouveyre, le plus important négociant de Fort Cudahy. A ton tour maintenant, pas vrai?

— Jean Edgerton, prospecteur.

La charrette s'était arrêtée net, Marius Rouveyre ayant involontairement tiré sur les guides dans l'excès de sa surprise. Il les lâchait maintenant et se tenait les côtes, en riant à gorge déployée.

— Prospecteur!.. bégayait-il au milieu de son rire. Prospecteur, *pécaïré*!.. Tu veux donc te faire manger par les loups?.. Et depuis combien de temps es-tu prospecteur, comme tu dis?

— Depuis trois heures, répondit Jane Edgerton rouge de colère. Mais voilà plus de deux mois que je suis en route pour arriver jusqu'ici, et je n'ai pas été mangée, il me semble.

— Juste! reconnut le gros Marius en redevenant sérieux. C'est vrai qu'il est venu jusqu'ici, ce petit!.. N'empêche que tu as choisi là un fichu métier… Le pauvre!.. Tiens, ta figure me revient. Tu me plais, bien que tu te redresses un peu trop sur tes ergots… J'ai justement besoin d'un commis, et, si tu veux la place… Voilà qui vaudrait mieux que la prospection!

— Commis?.. interrogea Jane. Commis de quoi?

— De tout, affirma Marius Rouveyre. Je fais tous les commerces. Mon magasin, ma voiture même contiennent absolument de tout. Tu ne pourrais t'imaginer ce qu'il y a dans ces caisses-là. Fil, aiguilles, épingles, ficelle, jambons, papier à lettre, saucissons, corsets, conserves, jarretières, tabac, vêtements d'homme et de femme, casseroles, chaussures, etc. Un vrai bazar! Dans ce carton, c'est un chapeau haut-de-forme, le seul qui existera à

Fort Cudahy. Je le louerai à chaque mariage, et il me rapportera mille fois son prix. Il faudra qu’il aille à toutes les têtes par exemple!.. Dans cet autre, c’est une robe… une robe de bal… et décolletée… et de la dernière mode de Paris, mon cher!

— On vend ces choses-là ici?

— Si je vendrai ma robe? Misère de moi, on se l’arrachera! Celui qui aura trouvé la première grosse pépite l’offrira à son épouse, afin qu’elle écrase les autres de son luxe dans les soirées dansantes de Fort Cudahy… Mais, ça, c’est de la fantaisie… Le sérieux est là, dans ces autres caisses… Champagne, brandy, wisky, etc. J’ai beau en faire venir, il n’y en a jamais assez… Voyons, ma proposition te convient-elle? Quatre dollars par jour, nourri et logé?

— Non, monsieur, répondit franchement Jane Edgerton. Je vous remercie, mais je veux suivre mon idée.

— Mauvaise idée, petiot, mauvaise idée, affirma Marius Rouveyre avec conviction. La prospection, ça me connaît. Je peux t’en parler pour l’avoir pratiquée.

— Vous avez été prospecteur?

— Parbleu! comme tout le monde ici. On commence toujours comme ça. Mais sur cent il y en a un qui réussit, deux qui changent leur fusil d’épaule, une dizaine qui repartent plus gueux qu’auparavant, et le reste y laisse sa peau… J’ai bien failli être de ceux-là!

— Vraiment? fit Jane, toujours désireuse de s’instruire.

— Tel que tu me vois, mon petit, reprit Marius, je suis marin, un marin de Marseille, en France. J’avais déjà roulé ma bosse dans les cinq parties du monde, quand je me laissai embobiner par un sacripant que j’eus le malheur de rencontrer à Vancouver où j’étais en relâche. A l’entendre, il n’y avait qu’à se baisser, par ici, pour ramasser des pépites grosses comme la tête. Nous partîmes tous les deux. C’est mon pécule, naturellement, qui paya le voyage, et, naturellement toujours, je ne trouvai ici que misère. Je n’avais plus que la peau et les os, et ma bourse n’était guère plus grasse, quand le mécréant qui m’avait entraîné m’abandonna pour une nouvelle dupe. Cela me permit de réfléchir, et comme Marius n’est pas plus bête qu’un autre, il ne tarda pas à comprendre que tout ce qu’un mineur gagne au Klondike reste au Klondike, dans les tripots, dans les cabarets et dans les magasins où l’on vend cent francs ce qui coûte ailleurs cent sous. Je résolus donc de me faire cabaretier et marchand, et je m’applaudis de mon idée, conclut Marius Rouveyre en se tapotant le ventre avec satisfaction, car ma bourse et moi nous nous sommes arrondis de compagnie!

On arrivait en haut de la côte. Marius arrêta sa voiture.

— Décidément, tu ne veux pas?..

— Décidément, non, dit Jane Edgerton.

— Tu as tort, soupira Marius, qui rendit la main à son cheval.

Mais, presque aussitôt, la voiture s’arrêtait de nouveau.

— Il ne sera pas dit que je t’aurai laissé sur la route coucher, à la belle étoile. Marius est assez riche pour rendre service à un petit gars comme toi. Où vas-tu?

— Je vous l’ai dit: devant moi.

— Devant toi!.. devant toi!.. Tu peux aller longtemps devant toi. Il n’y a pas un seul creek sérieux avant Fort Cudahy. Veux-tu que je te conduise jusque-là?

— En voiture?

— En voiture.

— Comment donc!.. J’accepte avec reconnaissance, se hâta de répondre Jane ravie de la proposition.

— Ouste, alors!.. Monte vite!.. Et nigaud qui s’en dédit!»

Grâce à cette aubaine inespérée, Jane vit le début de son voyage singulièrement abrégé. Le cheval avait le trot allongé. Le 4 juin, à une heure fort tardive, il est vrai, il s’arrêtait à la porte du magasin de Marius Rouveyre.

Celui-ci ne se fit pas faute alors de réitérer ses propositions d’embauchage. Ces trente-six heures passées avec son jeune compagnon avaient augmenté la sympathie qu’il avait tout de suite ressentie pour lui. Son insistance fut vaine. Jane Edgerton entendait exécuter ses projets, et elle se remit en marche dès les premières heures de la journée du 5 juin.

Un affluent du Yukon lui barra bientôt la route. Elle obliqua au Sud-Ouest, et, sans même connaître le nom de cet affluent, en remonta la rive droite.

Toute la journée elle marcha. Tantôt le chemin suivait le bord même du creek, tantôt le caprice d’une montée l’en écartait, et l’eau n’était plus visible alors qu’au bas de ravins dévalant en pente plus ou moins raide.

Jane ne manquait pas de s’engager dans ces ravins et les descendait consciencieusement jusqu’au bout. Peut-être dans l’un d’eux trouverait-elle un coin favorable négligé par ceux qui l’avaient précédée. Mais la tin du jour approcha sans que son espoir fût réalisé. Tout le sol était, ou occupé, ou jalonné de poteaux qui le transformaient en propriétés régulières. Pas un pouce de terrain qui fût *res nullius*. Les claims succédaient aux claims, sans autre interruption que les points inaccessibles ou manifestement stériles.

D’ailleurs, Jane ne songeait pas à s’étonner de son échec. Comment aurait-il pu en être autrement dans ce pays parcouru par une foule de mineurs et déjà mis en coupe réglée? Ce n’était plus un désert qui l’entourait. De tous côtés on travaillait, et l’invraisemblable eût été que la moindre pépite ait pu échapper à la sagacité des innombrables chercheurs.

Il fallait aller plus loin, voilà tout. Elle irait donc plus loin, et autant qu’il serait nécessaire.

Vers le soir, un nouveau ravin s’ouvrit à droite de la route. Jane s’y engagea comme elle l’avait fait pour les précédents, et descendit vers le creek en examinant soigneusement le terrain d’alentour. D’aspect plus rude et plus sauvage quelles autres, ce ravin ne gagnait la rive qu’au prix de nombreuses sinuosités. Au bout de cent pas, Jane avait perdu la route de vue et n’avait plus devant elle qu’un sentier resserré entre deux hautes murailles de roches et coupé à chaque instant par de larges et profondes crevasses.

Elle se trouvait précisément au bord de l’une de ces excavations et se préparait à la franchir, quand, à un détour du sentier, surgit, à vingt mètres d’elle, un homme dont l’aspect la fit frissonner. C’était une sorte de géant, un colosse hirsute, haut de six pieds ou approchant. La tignasse rouge qui retombait sur son front en mèches épaisses et frisées lui donnait un air bestial qu’aggravait le surplus du personnage. Nez camus, oreilles écartées, lèvres lippues, vastes mains couvertes de poils roux, gros souliers éculés au-dessus desquels flottaient les restes d’un pantalon en loques, c’était une brute sans conteste, mais à coup sûr une brute dont la force devait être prodigieuse.

En s’apercevant mutuellement, Jane Edgerton et l’homme s’étaient arrêtés sur place. Celui-ci sembla d’abord réfléchir, dans la mesure du moins où une telle occupation pouvait lui être permise. Puis il se remit en route d’un pas de bœuf, lourd et solide. A mesure qu’il s’avançait, Jane voyait plus nettement les traits de son visage, et, tandis qu’elle en discernait mieux l’aspect féroce, l’inquiétude tout de suite conçue grandissait.

En quelques secondes, l’homme parvint à la crevasse au bord de laquelle Jane s’était immobilisée comme pour s’en faire éventuellement une défense. Là, il fit halte de nouveau.

Aucun doute n’était désormais possible sur ses intentions. Le regard torve de ses yeux injectés, le rictus qui découvrait ses dents, ses poings énormes crispés pour l’attaque, tout criait la folie du meurtre. Jane saisit son revolver et l’arma.

Comme s’il eût raillé une telle arme maniée par cette main d’enfant, l’homme, de l’autre côté de la crevasse, haussa les épaules, ricana, ramassa rapidement et lança avec violence une pierre qui, d’ailleurs, manqua son but, puis se jeta à corps perdu dans la coupure, qu’il était de taille à franchir en trois bonds. Jane attendait froidement l’ennemi, afin de tirer à coup sûr.

Il n’en fut pas besoin. Dès son premier pas, le géant, glissant sur un caillou, s’était écroulé en poussant un véritable hurlement. Il ne se releva pas.

Qu’était-il arrivé?.. Jane n’y pouvait rien comprendre. L’assaillant n’était pas mort. Sa poitrine se soulevait, en effet, par saccades et des plaintes s’échappaient de ses lèvres. En tous cas, puisqu’il était hors de combat, le mieux était de remonter le ravin, de regagner la route et de s’enfuir au plus vite.

Un gémissement plus profond arrêta Jane dans sa retraite et ramena son attention sur son adversaire terrassé. Celui-ci était méconnaissable. Les lèvres lippues s’étaient rapprochées et n’avaient plus rien de féroce; les yeux, tout à l’heure sanglants, n’exprimaient plus qu’une intolérable douleur; le gros poing s’était ouvert et la main se tendait maintenant en un geste de prière. L’assassin suant le meurtre s’était, comme par un coup de baguette, transformé en un pauvre diable en proie à la plus affreuse misère et devenu subitement plus faible qu’un petit enfant.

«Me laisserez-vous donc mourir ici?.. dit-il d’une voix rugueuse en assez bon anglais.

Jane n’hésita pas. Toute la pitié de la femme s’éveilla dans son cœur. Délibérément, elle descendit dans la crevasse et s’approcha.

— Ou bien, c’est donc que vous allez me tuer vous-même?.. gémit alors le malheureux dont les regards éperdus se fixaient sur le revolver que Jane avait gardé à la main.

Simplement, celle-ci remit son arme à la ceinture et continua d’avancer.

— Que vous est-il arrivé?.. demanda-t-elle. Qu’avez-vous?..

— Quelque chose de cassé, pour sûr. Ça me tient là… et là… répondit le blessé, en montrant ses reins et sa jambe droite.

— Laissez-moi faire… Je vais voir, dit Jane en s'agenouillant.

Délicatement, avec des gestes doux et précis, elle releva le bourgeron crasseux et le bas du pantalon effiloché.

— Vous n'avez rien de cassé, déclara-t-elle après examen. Ce n'est qu'un «effort» causé par un faux mouvement, lorsque vous avez glissé. Dans vin quart d'heure, vous irez mieux.

Sans s'occuper du risque qu'elle-même pouvait courir en se mettant ainsi à portée des larges mains naguère si menaçantes, elle donna méthodiquement ses soins. Massages intelligents, frictions énergiques, ventouses posées à l'aide du gobelet surmontant son bidon de prospecteur, un médecin n'eût pas mieux fait. Le résultat de ce traitement ne se fit pas attendre. Pour cruels que soient un «tour de rein» et un «coup de fouet», ce sont là maux peu graves. Bientôt la respiration revint au blessé. Une demi-heure plus tard, incapable encore de se mettre debout, il était du moins assis, le dos appuyé contre un rocher, et en état de répondre aux questions.

— Qui êtes-vous?.. Comment vous appelez-vous? demanda Jane.

Le regard du misérable n'exprimait plus qu'un immense étonnement. Que cet enfant qu'il avait voulu tuer le sauvât maintenant, cela bouleversait toutes ses idées. C'est d'une voix timide qu'il répondit:

— Patrick Richardson, monsieur.

— Vous êtes Anglais?.. Américain?..

— Irlandais.

— Prospecteur?..

— Non, monsieur. Forgeron.

— Pourquoi avez-vous quitté votre pays et votre métier?

— Pas de travail… La misère… Pas de pain.

— Et ici, avez-vous mieux réussi?

— Non.

— Vous n’avez pas trouvé de claim?

— Comment en aurais-je cherché? Je ne connais rien à tout cela.

— Qu’espériez-vous donc?

— Louer mes bras.

— Eh bien?

— J’ai essayé. Les claims sont au complet pour l’instant.

— Où alliez-vous quand vous m’avez rencontrée?

— Dans l’Est, où je serai peut-être plus heureux.

— Et pourquoi vouliez-vous me tuer tout à l’heure?

— Toujours la même chose… Je meurs de faim, dit Patrick Richardson en baissant les yeux.

— Ah!.. ah!.. fit Jane.

Après un court silence, elle tira des provisions de son bissac.

— Mangez, dit-elle.

Elle ne fut pas obéie sur-le-champ. Patrick Richardson, d’un regard de plus en plus obscurci, contemplait l’enfant qui venait ainsi à son secours. Le misérable pleurait.

«Mangez! répéta Jane.

Le débile colosse no se lit pas, cette fois, répéter l’invitation. Goulûment, il se jeta sur la nourriture offerte.

Pendant qu’il dévorait, Jane observait son convive inattendu. Bien certainement, c’était un minus habens que Patrick Richardson. Ses oreilles écartées, son prognathisme presque aussi accusé que celui d’un nègre, signaient son irrémédiable infériorité intellectuelle. Mais, en dépit de sa tentative de violence, ce ne devait pas être un méchant. A n’en pas douter, Jane avait devant elle un de ces déshérités du sort, un de ces êtres de misère, épaves des grandes villes, qu’un implacable destin rejette constamment au ruisseau où ils sont nés. En dernière analyse, ses grosses lèvres exprimaient la bonté, et ses yeux bleus avaient un regard naïf plein d’une douceur étonnée. C’était peut-être la première fois qu’il trouvait un peu de compassion sur la dure route de la vie.

Quand Patrick fut restauré, Jane avait achevé ses réflexions.

«Si cela vous convient, je vous prends à mon service, dit-elle en le regardant fixement.

— Vous!..

— Oui, vous aurez dix dollars par jour; c’est le prix du pays. Mais je ne vous payerai que plus tard, lorsque j’aurai récolté assez d’or pour pouvoir le faire. En attendant, à titre d’acompte, j’assurerai votre nourriture, et, à la première occasion, je vous habillerai d’une manière plus confortable. Ces conditions vous vont-elles?»

Patrick saisit la main de Jane et y appuya ses lèvres. Il n’était pas besoin d’autre réponse. Ce n’était pas un serviteur que Jane allait avoir en sa personne. C’était un esclave; c’était un chien.

«Maintenant, reprit-elle, il s’agit de dormir. Je vais tâcher de faire un lit de feuilles sur lequel vous vous étendrez. Demain, il ne sera plus question de votre accident.»

Le lendemain, en effet, après quelques nouvelles passes de massage, Patrick put se remettre en route de bon matin. Certes, la douleur lui arracha plus d’une grimace, quand un mouvement involontaire lui contractait les reins ou la jambe. Il réussit toutefois, en s’appuyant sur l’épaule de son maître, à remonter le sentier sans trop de peine et à regagner la route. Et c’était, en vérité, un bizarre spectacle que celui de ce colosse, dont l’aspect rappelait celui d’un ours de grande taille, guidé et protégé par cet adolescent qui compensait la faiblesse de ses muscles par la fermeté de son âme.

La marche rendit, par degrés, l’élasticité aux membres de Patrick, et bientôt le singulier couple adopta un train plus rapide. Un peu avant midi, on fit halte pour le déjeuner. Jane commença à concevoir quelque inquiétude, en voyant de quelle manière son compagnon faisait disparaître les provisions. Ce grand corps était un abîme qu’il serait bien onéreux de combler!

Vers le soir, un nouveau ravin s’ouvrit sur la droite de la route. Jane et Patrick s’engagèrent dans cette coupée plus large que les précédentes et la descendirent jusqu’à la rivière.

A mesure qu’il en approchait, le ravin s’agrandissait. Sa largeur ne devait pas, au bas de la pente, être inférieure à cinq cents mètres. Là, sa surface était divisée en deux étages bien distincts, le plus haut en amont, le plus bas en aval, par une énorme barrière de rochers perpendiculaire au creek et presque exactement horizontale, barrière qui, sortie du thalweg du ravin, se terminait, à la rive, en un éperon haut d’une dizaine de mètres. Jane examina l’étage inférieur où le hasard l’avait conduite.

C’est la pente régulière du sol de cette partie du ravin qui faisait la hauteur de la barrière de rochers élevée vers l’amont. Ce sol était percé de nombreux puits plus ou moins comblés par les éboulements et, de tous côtés, on apercevait les débris d’un outillage d’orpailleur. C’était manifestement l’emplacement d’un ancien claim.

Que ce claim fût abandonné, nul doute à cela. L’état des puits et du matériel le prouvait avec évidence, et, d’ailleurs, aucun piquet n’en délimitait l’étendue. Il pouvait être intéressant, cependant, le plus gros du travail étant fait, d’en reprendre l’exploitation, et Jane décida qu’elle ferait en cet endroit sa première tentative.

Dès le lendemain, les objets les plus essentiels: seaux, plats, écuelles, achetés à hauts prix dans le voisinage, Patrick attaquait sur son ordre le déblaiement d’un puits, et, moins de vingt-quatre heures après, commençait à en laver les boues, tandis qu’elle-même s’occupait des formalités nécessaires pour obtenir la pose des poteaux indicateurs et pour s’assurer la possession du claim.

Ces formalités furent accomplies en moins de trois jours, mais, au même moment qu’on jalonnait son claim auquel on attribuait le numéro 127 bis, Jane était obligée de reconnaître que, s’il contenait de l’or, ce n’était qu’à close infinitésimale, et qu’elle n’avait aucune chance d’y faire ample récolte de pépites. Malgré le travail acharné de Patrick, ils ne pouvaient, en raison sans doute de leur inexpérience, laver à deux par vingt-quatre heures plus d’une centaine de plats, dont le rendement moyen n’excédait que de très peu un dixième de dollar. C’était bien juste de quoi payer le serviteur qu’elle avait engagé et assurer sa subsistance personnelle. Si la situation ne s’améliorait pas, elle se retrouverait aussi pauvre à la fin qu’au commencement de l’été.

Avait-elle donc eu tort de s’arrêter en cet endroit? N’aurait-elle pas dû pousser plus loin et passer la frontière, dont, ainsi qu’elle l’avait appris lors de sa demande de concession, cinq à six cents mètres tout au plus la séparaient?

Jane avait appris autre chose. Elle connaissait maintenant le nom de la rivière bordant le claim où elle s’essayait au dur métier de prospectrice: le Forty Miles, ce même creek sur la rive duquel était situé le claim 129, voisin du sien, et qui se trouvait sûrement là, derrière cette colline fermant le ravin au Sud-Ouest.

Fut-ce en raison d’un espoir confus, fut-ce par simple entêtement de réussir dans la chose entreprise, Jane, en tous cas, ne voulut pas s’avouer vaincue avant d’avoir lutté jusqu’au bout, et, plus que jamais, s’acharna à laver le plus grand nombre possible de ces plats qui lui donnaient un si maigre profit.

Une après-midi, le 11 juin, elle était, ainsi que Patrick, absorbée comme de coutume dans son travail, au point d’en oublier le reste du monde, quand elle fut interpellée *ex abrupto* par une voix bien connue:

«Oserai-je, mademoiselle, m'informer de votre santé?

— Monsieur Skim! s'écria-t-elle, toute rosé d'un plaisir qu'elle ne cherchait pas à cacher.

— Lui-même, dit Summy, en serrant chaleureusement la main qui lui était tendue.

— Ma santé est excellente, monsieur Skim, reprit Jane.

— Et celle de votre claim, mademoiselle?.. Puisque aussi bien vous avez un claim, à ce que je vois.

— Je vous avouerai, monsieur Skim, que je n'en suis pas enchantée, reconnut Jane moins gaiement. C'est à peine si je recueille de dix à douze cents au plat. A peine de quoi payer mes frais.

— Triste résultat! fit Summy Skim, qui, d'ailleurs, ne semblait pas autrement affecté d'un tel malheur. Quels sont vos projets?

— Je ne sais, dit Jane. Aller plus loin… quitter sans doute ce mauvais claim qui m'a coûté plus qu'il ne vaut et où un malheureux hasard m'a conduite…

— Un hasard? insista Summy. Vous ignoriez donc être notre voisine?

— Je l'ai appris il y a quelques jours. Mais, quand je me suis arrêtée ici pour la première fois, j'ignorais que ce creek fût le Forty Miles et que votre propriété se trouvât de l'autre côté de cette colline.

— Ah bah!.. fit Summy désappointé.

Après un instant de silence, il reprit:

«Pourquoi, mademoiselle, ne profiteriez-vous pas de ce hasard, puisque hasard il y a? Avant de vous enfoncer dans les déserts de l'Alaska, il serait bon, ce me semble, d'étudier à fond le coin que vous avez d'abord choisi. Je ne vous offre pas mon concours, car je suis trop ignorant de ces sortes de choses, mais, à cinq cents mètres d'ici, il y a mon cousin Ben Raddle, un ingénieur comme on n'en rencontre pas tous les jours, et, si vous le voulez…

— Un bon conseil est toujours le bienvenu, et j'accepterai volontiers ceux de M. Ben Raddle, dit Jane. Quand il aura examiné mon claim, il verra lui-même ce qu'on en peut espérer.

— C'est donc convenu… Mais, mademoiselle, permettez-moi une question, en attendant, si elle n'est pas trop indiscrète.

— Elle ne l'est pas, affirma Jane à l'avance.

— C'est que je ne vois pas trace de la moindre bicoque ici… Où donc dormez-vous pendant la nuit?

— En plein air, tout simplement, répondit Jane en riant. Un lit de feuilles, un oreiller de sable. On dort merveilleusement ainsi.

Summy Skim ouvrait de grands yeux.

— En plein air! se récria-t-il! Vous n'y songez pas, mademoiselle. C'est d'une imprudence!..

— Que non pas! dit Jane. J'ai deux gardiens, monsieur Skim.

— Deux gardiens?

— Voici l’un, expliqua Jane en indiquant le revolver passé à sa ceinture… et voici l’autre, ajouta-t-elle en montrant Patrick Richardson, qui, à quelque distance, considérait avec surprise le nouveau venu.

Summy ne paraissait qu’à demi rassuré.

— Ce sauvage?.. répliqua-t-il. Certes, il est de taille à vous défendre, mais c’est égal!.. vous feriez bien mieux, le travail terminé, de franchir cette colline, et d’accepter l’hospitalité que mon cousin et moi serions si heureux de vous offrir.

Jane secoua négativement la tête.

— Vous avez tort, mademoiselle, vous avez tort, insista Summy. Croyez-moi, ce serait plus sûr… et même, si ce n’était pas plus sûr, ce serait du moins… plus…

— Plus?..

— Plus convenable, conclut Summy Skim brûlant ses vaisseaux.

Jane Edgerton fronça les sourcils. De quoi se mêlait ce monsieur Skim? Elle allait vertement répliquer et clouer l’indiscret conseiller par une de ses coutumières sorties sur l’égalité des sexes… Elle n’en eut pas le courage. Summy, qui n’osait plus la regarder en face, avait un air bizarre, à la fois furieux et déconfit, qui lui donna à réfléchir.

Ses lèvres esquissèrent un malicieux sourire aussitôt réprimé, puis, lui tendant la main:

— Vous avez raison, monsieur Skim, dit-elle sérieusement. J’accepte l’hospitalité que vous avez la bonté de m’offrir.

— Bravo! applaudit Summy. Dans ce cas, soyez bonne jusqu’au bout, mademoiselle. Terminez votre journée un peu plus tôt aujourd’hui, et acceptez-la tout de suite, cette hospitalité. Vous me raconterez vos aventures en route, et dès demain Ben viendra visiter votre claim.

— Comme vous voudrez, concéda Jane, qui appela: «Patrick!»

— Monsieur Jean? répondit l’Irlandais.

— Assez travaillé pour aujourd’hui. Nous allons au claim 129.

— Bien, monsieur Jean.

— Ramasse les outils et passe devant.

— Oui, monsieur Jean, fit le docile Patrick, qui, chargé des écuelles, des plats, des pics et des pioches, attaqua pesamment la pente de la colline, à distance respectueuse de Jane et de Summy.

— Monsieur Jean? interrogea Summy. Il vous prend donc pour un homme?

— Comme vous voyez, monsieur Skim. Grâce à mon costume de mineur.

Summy considéra le vaste dos du géant, qui marchait devant lui.

— C’est une brute!» affirma-t-il avec une si profonde conviction que, sans savoir exactement pourquoi, Jane Edgerton éclata de rire.

CHAPITRE XIII

Le claim 129.

Situé sur la rive droite du Forty Miles Creek, le claim 129 était, comme il a été dit, le dernier du Klondike, et les poteaux qui en marquaient la limite occidentale indiquaient en même temps la frontière alasko-canadienne.

Au delà du claim 129, vers le Sud, entre deux collines peu élevées, s’étendait une prairie verdoyante que bordaient de chaque côté des. massifs de bouleaux et de trembles-,

Au nord du claim, la rivière promenait ses eaux rapides, d’un étiage alors moyen, entre des berges faiblement inclinées en amont. Mais, sur la rive gauche, une chaîne de hauteurs, venue du Nord et s’infléchissant vers l’aval, les relevait brusquement, presque en face d’une arête de collines plus basses qui, sur la rive droite, courant perpendiculairement au creek, formaient la limite orientale de la propriété de Josias Lacoste. C’est derrière ces collines, au pied de l’autre versant, que Jane Edgerton s’acharnait, depuis près d’une semaine déjà, à son opiniâtre et stérile labeur, au moment où, le 10 juin, les deux cousins arrivèrent enfin au terme de leur voyage.

En maint endroit on apercevait maisons, cabanes ou huttes de propriétaires de claims. Sur un espace de deux à trois kilomètres on pouvait compter plusieurs centaines de travailleurs.

De l’autre côté de la frontière, en territoire américain, existaient des installations semblables, et, en première ligne, la plus proche, celle du claim

131, propriété du Texien Hunter, qui l’exploitait depuis un an et venait de commencer sa seconde campagne.

Que ce Hunter eût, dans le passé, cherché querelle à Josias Lacoste, son voisin, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle, qui connaissaient le personnage, étaient fort enclins à le croire. Hunter en avait été nécessairement pour ses peines. Établie conformément aux règles en usage, la propriété du claim 129 était régulière. Déclaration de la découverte avait été faite, acceptée par l’État et enregistrée dans les délais voulus au bureau du commissaire des mines du Dominion, moyennant une somme annuelle de trente-cinq dollars. De plus, un droit régalien de dix pour cent de l’or extrait devait être perçu, sous peine d’expropriation en cas de fraude. Mais Josias Lacoste n’avait jamais encouru cette pénalité, et, jamais non plus, il n’était tombé sous le coup de la loi, d’après laquelle tout claim non exploité pendant quinze jours au cours de la belle saison fait retour au domaine public. Il n’y avait eu interruption des travaux que depuis sa mort, en attendant que ses héritiers eussent pris possession de leur héritage.

L’exploitation entreprise par Josias Lacoste avait duré dix-huit mois. Elle s’était faite, en somme, sans grand profit, les frais de premier établissement, de personnel, de transport, etc. ayant été assez élevés. En outre, une soudaine inondation du Forty Miles avait bouleversé les travaux et occasionné de grands dommages. Bref, le propriétaire du claim 129 avait à peine couvert ses dépenses, lorsque la mort vint le surprendre.

Mais quel est le prospecteur qui perd jamais l’espoir, qui ne se croit pas toujours à la veille de rencontrer une riche veine, de découvrir quelque pépite de valeur, de laver des plats de mille, deux mille, quatre mille francs?.. Et peut-être, après tout, Josias Lacoste aurait-il finalement réussi, bien qu’il n’eût à sa disposition qu’un matériel très restreint.

Tous les renseignements relatifs à l’exploitation, les deux cousins les obtinrent de l’ancien contremaître de Josias Lacoste. Depuis le renvoi du personnel, il était resté le gardien du claim, en attendant la reprise du travail, soit pour le compte des héritiers, soit pour celui d’un acquéreur.

Ce contre-maître se nommait Lorique. Canadien d’origine française, âgé d’une quarantaine d’années, et très entendu au métier de prospecteur, il avait travaillé pendant plusieurs années aux gisements aurifères de la Californie et de la Colombie britannique, avant de venir sur le territoire du Yukon. Personne n’aurait pu fournir à Ben Raddle des données plus exactes sur l’état actuel du 129, sur les profits effectués et à en espérer, sur la valeur réelle du claim.

Tout d’abord, Lorique s’occupa de loger du mieux possible Ben Raddle et Summy Skim, qui, vraisemblablement, auraient plusieurs jours à passer au Forty Miles Creek. A un campement sous la tente, ils préférèrent une chambre des plus modestes, propre du moins, dans la maisonnette que Josias Lacoste avait fait construire pour son contre-maître et lui. Bâtie au pied des collines du Sud, au milieu d’un massif de bouleaux et de trembles, elle offrait un abri suffisant, à cette époque de l’année où les grands mauvais temps n’étaient plus à craindre.

En ce qui concerne les vivres, le contre-maître ne serait point embarrassé pour en assurer à ses nouveaux maîtres. Il existe, en effet, dans cette région comme dans tout le Klondike, des sociétés de ravitaillement. Organisées à Dawson City où elles sont approvisionnées par les yukoners du grand fleuve, elles desservent les placers, non sans y recueillir de larges bénéfices, tant en raison des prix atteints par les divers objets de consommation que du nombre des travailleurs employés dans le district.

Le lendemain de leur arrivée au Forty Miles Creek, Ben Raddle et Summy Skim, guidés par Lorique, qui leur racontait les débuts de l’exploitation, visitèrent le claim.

«M. Josias Lacoste, disait Lorique, n’employa pas d’abord son personnel, qui se composait d’une cinquantaine d’ouvriers, au forage des puits sur la rive du creek. Il se contenta de procéder à des grattages superficiels, et ce fut seulement vers la fin de la première campagne que les puits s’enfoncèrent dans la couche aurifère.

— Combien en avez-vous percé à cette époque? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Quatorze, répondit le contre-maître. Chacun d’eux a un orifice de neuf pieds carrés, ainsi que vous pouvez le voir. Ils sont restés en l’état, et il suffirait d’y puiser pour reprendre l’exploitation.

— Mais, s’enquit à son tour Summy Skim, avant de creuser ces puits, quel profit avait donné le grattage du sol? Le rendement couvrait-il les dépenses?

— Assurément non, monsieur, avoua Lorique. Il en est ainsi sur presque tous les gisements, lorsqu’on se borne à laver le gravier et les galets aurifères.

— Vous travailliez seulement au plat et à l’écuelle? interrogea Ben Raddle.

— Uniquement, messieurs, et il est rare que nous ayons rapporté des plats de trois dollars.

— Tandis que, dans les claims de la Bonanza, s’écria Summy Skim, on en fait, dit-on, de cinq ou six cents!

— Croyez bien que c’est l’exception, déclara le contre-maître, et que si la moyenne est d’une vingtaine de dollars on se tient pour satisfait. Quant à celle du 129 elle n’a jamais notablement dépassé un dollar.

— Piteux!.. piteux!.. insinua Summy entre ses dents.

Ben Raddle se hâta de rompre les chiens.

— Quelle profondeur ont vos puits?

— De dix à quinze pieds. C’est suffisant pour atteindre la couche où se rencontre ordinairement la poudre d’or.

— Quelle est le plus souvent l’épaisseur de cette couche?

— Environ six pieds.

— Et combien un pied cube de matière extraite donne-t-il de plats?

— A peu près dix, et un bon ouvrier est capable d’en laver une centaine par jour.

— Ainsi vos puits n’ont pas encore servi?.. demanda Ben Raddle.

— Tout était prêt lorsque M. Josias Lacoste est mort. Le travail a dû être suspendu.

Si ces renseignements passionnaient Ben Raddle, il était manifeste que son cousin y prenait aussi vin certain intérêt. N’étaient-ils pas de nature, en effet, à lui faire connaître aussi exactement que possible la valeur du 129?.. Une question précise fut, à ce sujet, posée par lui au contre-maître.

— Nous avons extrait pour une trentaine de mille francs d’or, répondit celui-ci, et les dépenses ont à peu près absorbé cette somme. Mais je ne mets pas en doufe que la veine du Forty Miles ne soit bonne. Sur les claims du voisinage, lorsque les puits ont fonctionné, le rendement a toujours été considérable.

— Vous savez sans doute, Lorique, dit Ben Raddle, qu’un syndicat de Chicago nous a fait des offres d’achat?

— Je le sais, monsieur. Ses agents sont venus visiter le placer, il y a quelque temps.

— Le syndicat nous a offert cinq mille dollars de la propriété. Est-ce suffisant, à votre avis?

— C’est dérisoire, affirma catégoriquement Lorique. En me basant sur les résultats obtenus dans les autres claims du Forty Miles Creek, je n’estime pas la valeur du vôtre à moins de quarante mille dollars.

— C’est un beau chiffre, dit Summy Skim, et, ma foi, nous n’aurions pas à regretter notre voyage, si nous en retirions ce prix-là. Malheureusement la vente du claim sera bien difficile, tant que la question de frontière ne sera point résolue.

— Qu’importé!.. objecta le contre-maître. Que le 129 soit canadien ou alaskien, il a toujours la même valeur.

— Rien de plus juste, dit Ben Raddle. Il n’en est pas moins vrai que le syndicat a cru devoir retirer ses propositions malgré le bas prix offert.

— Lorique, demanda Summy Skim, y a-t-il lieu d’espérer que cette rectification soit prochainement terminée?

— Je ne puis vous répondre qu’une chose, messieurs, déclara Lorique, c’est que la commission a commencé ses travaux. A quelle époque seront-ils terminés?.. Je pensé que pas un des commissaires ne pourrait le dire. Ils sont d’ailleurs aidés par l’un des géomètres le plus en renom du Klondike, un homme d’une grande expérience, M. Ogilvie, qui a relevé avec précision l’état cadastral du district.

— Qu’augure-t-on du résultat probable de l’opération? interrogea Ben Raddle.

— Qu’il tournera à la confusion des Américains, répondit le contre-maître, et que, si la frontière n’est pas à sa vraie place, c’est qu’il faudra la reporter vers l’Ouest.

— Ce qui assurerait définitivement au 129 la nationalité canadienne, conclut Summy Skim.

Ben Raddle posa alors quelques questions au contre-maître sur les rapports de Josias Lacoste avec le propriétaire du claim 131.

— Ce Texien et son compagnon? fit le contre-maître. Hunter et Malone?

— Précisément.

— Ma foi, messieurs, ils ont été fort désagréables, je vous le déclare tout net. Ce sont deux chenapans, ces Américains-là. A tout propos, ils nous ont cherché noise, et, dans les derniers temps, nous ne pouvions travailler que le revolver à la ceinture. A plus d’une reprise, les agents ont dû intervenir pour les mettre à la raison.

— C’est ce que nous a dit le chef de la police que nous avons rencontré à Fort Cudahy, déclara Ben Raddle.

— Je crains, ajouta Lorique, qu’il n’ait plus d’une fois encore l’occasion d’intervenir. Voyez-vous, messieurs, on n’aura la paix que le jour où ces deux coquins auront été expulsés.

— Comment pourraient-ils l’être?

— Rien ne sera plus facile, si la frontière est reportée plus à l’Ouest. Le 131 sera alors en territoire canadien, et Hunter devra se soumettre à toutes les exigences de l’Administration.

— Et naturellement, fît observer Summy Skim, il est de ceux qui prétendent que le cent quarante et unième méridien doit être reporté vers l’Est?

— Naturellement, répondit le contre-maître. C’est lui qui a ameuté tous les Américains de la frontière, aussi bien ceux du Forty Miles que ceux du Sixty Miles. Plus d’une fois ils ont menacé d’envahir notre territoire et de s’emparer de nos claims. C’est Hunter et Malone qui les poussaient à ces excès. Les autorités d’Ottawa ont fait parvenir leurs plaintes à Washington, mais il ne semble pas qu’on soit pressé de les examiner.

— On attend sans doute, dit Ben Raddle, que la question de frontière ait été tranchée.

— Probable, monsieur Raddle. Jusque-là, il faudra nous tenir sur nos gardes. Quand Hunter saura que les nouveaux propriétaires sont arrivés au Forty Miles Creek, il est capable de tenter quelque mauvais coup.

— Il sait qu’il trouvera à qui parler, déclara Summy Skim, car nous avons déjà eu l’honneur de lui être présentés.»

En parcourant l’étendue du claim, les deux cousins et le contremaître s’étaient arrêtés près du poteau séparant le 129 du 131. Si le 129 était désert, le 131 était au contraire en pleine activité. Le personnel de Hunter travaillait aux puits percés en amont. Après avoir été lavée, la boue, entraînée par l’eau des rigoles, allait se perdre dans le courant du Forty Miles.

Ben Raddle et Summy Skim cherchèrent vainement à reconnaître Hunter et Malone au milieu des ouvriers du 131. Ils ne les aperçurent pas. Lorique pensait, d’ailleurs, qu’ils avaient dû, après quelques jours passés sur le claim, se rendre plus à l’Ouest, dans cette partie de l’Alaska où l’on signalait de nouvelles régions aurifères.

La visite du claim achevée, les deux cousins et le contre-maître revinrent à la maisonnette où les attendait le déjeuner préparé par Neluto.

«Eh bien! pilote, demanda gaîment Ben Raddle, le déjeuner sera-t-il bon?

— Délicieux, monsieur Raddle!.. s’il n’est pas raté,» répliqua l’Indien corrigeant suivant sa coutume par une restriction modeste son orgueilleuse affirmation.

Lorsque le déjeuner fut terminé, Summy Skim s’enquit des projets de son cousin.

«Tu connais maintenant le claim 129, lui dit-il, et tu sais quelle est sa valeur. En restant ici, je n’imagine pas que tu puisses en apprendre davantage!

— Ce n’est pas mon avis, répondit Ben Raddle. J’ai à causer longuement avec le contre-maître, à examiner les comptes de l’oncle Josias. Je ne pense pas que ce soit trop de quarante-huit heures pour cela.

— Va pour quarante-huit heures, accorda Summy Skim, à la condition que j’aie la permission de chasser dans les environs.

— Chasse, mon ami, chasse. Cela te distraira pendant les quelques jours qu’il nous faut patienter ici.

— Tiens, observa Summy Skim en souriant, voici les quarante-huit heures devenues déjà quelques jours!

— Sans doute, dit Ben Raddle… Si même j’avais pu voir travailler les ouvriers… laver des écuelles et des plats…

— Oh! oh! fit Summy Skim, les quelques jours me paraissent en passe de devenir quelques semaines!.. Attention! Ben, attention!.. Nous ne sommes pas des prospecteurs, ne l’oublie pas.

— C’est entendu, Summy. Cependant, puisque nous ne pouvons pas traiter la vente de notre claim, je ne vois pas pourquoi, en attendant que la commission de rectification ait fini ses travaux, Lorique ne recommencerait pas…

— Alors, interrompit Summy Skim, nous voilà condamnés à prendre racine ici tant que ce maudit méridien n’aura pas été remis à sa place!

— Autant ici qu’ailleurs. Où irions-nous, Summy?

— A Dawson City, Ben, par exemple.

— Y serions-nous mieux?»

Summy Skim ne répondit pas. Sentant la colère le gagner, il prit son fusil, appela Neluto, et tous deux, quittant la maisonnette, remontèrent le ravin vers le Sud.

Summy Skim avait bien raison de se mettre en colère. Ben Raddle était, en effet, décidé à tenter l’exploitation du placer devenu sa propriété. Puisqu’une circonstance inattendue l’obligeait à prolonger son séjour au Forty Miles Creek durant quelques semaines, comment résister à la tentation d’utiliser les puits tout préparés, de vérifier leur rendement?.. L’oncle Josias avait-il tout fait pour obtenir de bons résultats?.. Ne s’était-il pas contenté de suivre la vieille méthode des orpailleurs, évidemment trop rudimentaire, alors qu’un ingénieur trouverait sans doute un autre procédé plus rapide et plus productif?.. Et enfin, si, des entrailles de ce sol qui lui appartenait, il y avait à retirer des centaines de mille francs, des millions peut-être, était-il raisonnable d’y renoncer pour un prix dérisoire?..

Oui, telles étaient les pensées de Ben Raddle. A tout prendre, il n’était pas autrement fâché que la question de frontière lui donnât un argument devant lequel force serait à Summy Skim de s’incliner, et, optimiste jusqu’au bout, il allait jusqu’à se dire que son cousin finirait par prendre goût à ce qui le passionnait lui-même.

Aussi, quand il eut examiné les comptes de l’oncle Josias, quand le contremaître lui eut fourni tous les documents de nature à le renseigner, il demanda sans préambule:

«Si vous aviez maintenant à recruter un personnel, le pourriez-vous, Lorique?

— Je n’en doute pas, monsieur Raddle, répondit le contre-maître. Des milliers d’émigrants cherchent de l’ouvrage dans le district et n’en trouvent pas. Il en arrive tous les jours sur les gisements du Forty Miles. Je pense même que, vu l’affluence, ils ne pourraient prétendre à des salaires très élevés.

— Il ne vous faudrait qu’une cinquantaine de mineurs?

— Tout au plus. M. Josias Lacoste n’en a jamais employé davantage.

— En combien de temps auriez-vous réuni ce personnel? demanda Ben Raddle.

— En vingt-quatre heures.

Puis, après un instant, le contre-maître ajouta:

«Auriez-vous donc l’intention de prospecter pour votre compte, monsieur Raddle?

— Peut-être…. Du moins, tant que nous n’aurons pas cédé le 129 à son prix.

— En effet, cela vous permettrait de mieux apprécier sa valeur.

— D’ailleurs, observa Ben Raddle, que faire ici, jusqu’au jour où la question de frontière sera réglée d’une façon ou d’une autre?

— C’est juste, approuva le contre-maître. Mais, qu’il soit américain ou canadien, le 129 n’en vaut pas moins ce qu’il vaut. Pour moi, j’ai toujours eu l’idée que les claims des affluents de gauche du Yukon ne sont point inférieurs à ceux de la rive droite. Croyez-moi, monsieur Raddle, on fera fortune aussi vite sur le Sixty Miles et le Forty Miles que sur la Bonanza ou l’Eldorado.

— J’en accepte l’augure, Lorique,» conclut Ben Raddle, très satisfait de ces réponses, qui s’accordaient avec ses propres désirs.

Restait Summy Skim. Peut-être trouverait-il tout de même la pilule trop amère. Ben Raddle concevait à cet égard plus d’inquiétude qu’il ne voulait bien se l’avouer.

Mais une heureuse chance le protégeait décidément. L’explication redoutée ne put avoir lieu. Quand Summy revint, vers cinq heures du soir, il n’était point seul. Ben le vit apparaître au sommet de la colline qui limitait le claim en aval, suivi d’un gigantesque ouvrier chargé comme une bête de somme, et ayant à son côté un compagnon d’une taille au contraire très exiguë. De loin, Summy faisait de grands gestes d’appel.

«Eh! arrive donc, Ben! cria-t-il dès qu’il fut à portée de la voix. Que je te présente notre voisine!

— Miss Jane! s’exclama Ben Raddle en reconnaissant le soi-disant compagnon de son cousin.

— Elle-même!.. claironna Summy… Et propriétaire du claim 127 *bis* encore!

Il est inutile de dire si la jeune Américaine reçut de l’ingénieur un cordial accueil. Celui-ci fut ensuite mis au courant des aventures de son *associée*, qu’il félicita avec chaleur de son sang-froid et dont il déplora sincèrement l’échec relatif. Summy en profita pour glisser sa requête.

«J’ai affirmé à notre voisine, dit-il, que tu ne lui refuserais pas un conseil. J’espère que tu ne me désavoueras pas?

— Tu plaisantes, protesta Ben Raddle.

— Alors tu visiteras son claim?

— Sans aucun doute.

— Tu l’examineras soigneusement?

— Cela va sans dire.

— Et tu lui donneras ton avis autorisé?

— Dès demain. Au besoin je ferai appel aux lumières de Lorique, qui est plus *pratique* que moi de ces régions.

— C’est très bien, Ben, et tu es un bon garçon. Quant à vous, mademoiselle, votre fortune est faite, déclara Summy avec conviction.

Ben Raddle estima le moment opportun pour faire part à son cousin de sa décision.

— Et la nôtre aussi, Summy, insinua-t-il sans oser le regarder en face.

— La nôtre?

— Oui. Puisque après tout il faut attendre que la question de ce maudit méridien soit tranchée, j’ai pris le parti d’exploiter jusque-là. Dès demain Lorique recrutera du personnel.

Ben Raddle s’attendait à une explosion. Il tomba des nues en entendant son cousin dire d’un air bonasse:

— C’est une excellente idée, Ben!.. Excellente, en vérité! Puis, délaissant aussitôt ce sujet, comme s’il eût été dénué d’importance, Summy ajouta:

«A propos, Ben, je me suis permis d’offrir l’hospitalité nocturne de notre maison à mademoiselle Jane, qui en est réduite à coucher à la belle étoile. Tu n’y vois pas d’inconvénient, je suppose?

— En voilà une question! fit Ben. Notre maison est à la disposition de miss Edgerton, c’est évident.

— Tout est donc pour le mieux, dit Summy. Et, dans ces conditions, je suis d’avis…

— Que?..

— Que nous fassions faire à notre voisine le tour du propriétaire, acheva joyeusement Summy, qui, sans attendre de réponse, se mit en marche, entraînant avec lui Jane Edgerton, et suivi de Ben Raddle abasourdi du détachement de son cousin.

Cependant, celui-ci disait à sa compagne de l’air le plus sérieux du monde:

«Les placers peuvent, tout de même, avoir du bon, quelquefois. Les placers, voyez-vous, mademoiselle Jane…»

Incapable de comprendre une aussi étonnante métamorphose, Ben Raddle alluma une cigarette en haussant les épaules.

CHAPITRE XIV

Exploitation.

L’optimisme de Summy Skim ne dura que l’espace d’une nuit. En se réveillant, le lendemain, il fut aussitôt repris par ses idées ordinaires dont, sous une influence inexplicable, il s’était un instant départi. Il fut alors d’aussi mauvaise humeur que le comportait son heureux caractère, en constatant que ses craintes se trouvaient justifiées.

Ainsi, jusqu’au moment où il pourrait le vendre, Ben Raddle allait remettre le claim en activité. Qui sait même s’il consentirait jamais à s’en défaire!..

«C’était fatal, se répétait le sage Summy Skim… Ah! oncle Josias!.. Si nous sommes devenus des mineurs, des orpailleurs, des prospecteurs, de quelque nom que l’on veuille affubler les chercheurs d’or que j’appelle moi des chercheurs de misère, c’est à vous que nous le devons… Une fois la main dans cet engrenage, le corps y passe tout entier, et le prochain hiver arrivera sans que nous ayons repris la route de Montréal!.. Un hiver au Klondike!.. avec des froids pour lesquels il a fallu fabriquer de gentils thermomètres gradués au-dessous de zéro plus que les autres ne le sont au-dessus! Quelle perspective!.. Ah! oncle Josias, oncle Josias!..»

Ainsi raisonnait Summy Skim. Mais, que ce fût le naturel effet de la philosophie qu’il se flattait volontiers de pratiquer ou de toute autre cause, sa conviction n’avait plus sa verdeur d’antan. Summy Skim était-il donc en train d’évoluer, et le tranquille gentilhomme-fermier de Green Valley prenait-il goût à la vie d’aventures?

La saison, pour les gisements du Yukon, ne faisait guère que commencer. Depuis quinze jours au plus, le dégel du sol et la débâcle des creeks les avaient rendus praticables. Si la terre, durcie par les grands froids, offrait encore quelque résistance au pic et à la pioche, on parvenait à l’entamer cependant. Il devenait assez facile d’atteindre la couche aurifère sans avoir à craindre que les parois des puits, solidifiées par l’hiver, ne vinssent à s’effondrer.

Faute d’un matériel plus perfectionné, fauté de machines qu’il aurait su employer avec grand profit, Ben Raddle allait en être réduit à l’écuelle ou au plat, le *pan* comme on l’appelle dans l’argot des mineurs. Mais ces engins rudimentaires suffiraient à laver les boues dans la partie voisine du Forty Miles Creek.

En somme, ce sont les mines filoniennes, non les claims de rivière, qui demandent à être travaillées industriellement. Déjà, des machines à pilon pour broyer le quartz étaient établies sur les gisements montagneux du Klondike, et y fonctionnaient comme dans les autres contrées minières du Canada et de la Colombie anglaise.

Pour la réalisation de ce projet, Ben Raddle n’aurait pu trouver un concours plus précieux que celui du contre-maître Lorique. Il n’y avait qu’à laisser faire cet homme, très expérimenté, très entendu en ce genre de travaux, et très capable, d’ailleurs, d’appliquer les perfectionnements que lui proposerait l’ingénieur.

Il convenait, en tous cas, de se hâter. Une trop longue interruption dans l’exploitation du claim 129 aurait motivé des plaintes de la part de l’Administration. Très avide des taxes qu’elle prélève sur le rendement des placers, elle prononce volontiers la déchéance des concessions abandonnées pendant une période de temps relativement assez brève au cours de la bonne saison.

Le contre-maître éprouva plus de difficultés qu'il ne l'imaginait à recruter un personnel. De nouveaux gisements, signalés dans la partie du district que dominent les Dômes, avaient attiré les mineurs, car la main-d'œuvre promettait d'y être chère. Assurément, les caravanes ne cessaient d'arriver à Dawson City, la traversée des lacs et la descente du Yukon étant plus faciles depuis la débâcle. Mais les bras des travailleurs étaient réclamés de tous les côtés, à cette époque où l'emploi des machines n'était pas encore généralisé.

Tandis que Lorique s'efforçait de réunir un nombre suffisant de travailleurs, Ben Raddle s'empressa de tenir la promesse faite à Jane Edgerton. Sans plus attendre, Summy Skim et lui franchirent la colline séparant leur propriété de celle de leur jeune voisine.

La singulière division du claim en deux étages, le supérieur en amont, l'inférieur en aval, frappa tout de suite l'ingénieur. Après s'être avancé jusqu'au bord du creek et avoir soigneusement examiné la disposition des rives, il formula nettement son avis:

«Personne ne pourrait évaluer, mademoiselle, dit-il à Jane Edgerton, la valeur réelle de votre claim. Par contre, ce que je puis, en tous cas, affirmer avec certitude, c'est que vous avez fait fausse route en cherchant à en exploiter l'étage inférieur.

— Pourquoi cela? objecta Jane. Mon choix n'était-il pas dicté par l'emplacement des puits?

— C’est précisément la présence des puits, répliqua Ben Raddle, qui aurait dû vous en écarter. N’est-il pas évident, en effet, que si, dans une région sillonnée par autant de mineurs, ces puits ont été creusés, puis abandonnés, c’est que leur rendement a toujours été nul? Pourquoi réussiriez-vous où les autres ont échoué?

— C’est vrai, reconnut Jane frappée de la justesse de l’observation.

— Il y a un autre argument, poursuivit Ben Raddle. Mais, pour que vous en sentiez toute la force, il faut que vous ayez une idée nette de la manière dont s’est formée la couche aurifère que nous exploitons l’un et l’autre. Cette couche n’est autre chose qu’un dépôt abandonné par les eaux du Forty Miles Creek, à une époque très reculée où il n’était pas contenu entre ses rives actuelles. La rivière plus large recouvrait alors, comme le claim 129 et comme tous les autres claims du voisinage, l’endroit même où nous nous trouvons, et le ravin au bas duquel vous avez fondé votre exploitation formait une sorte de golfe dans lequel le courant, dévié par la colline qui sépare nos propriétés, venait s’engouffrer avec une certaine violence. Bien entendu, l’eau devait d’abord traverser l’étage supérieur, puisque celui-ci est en amont, puis, du haut de la barrière de rochers, elle tombait en cascade sur l’étage inférieur pour reprendre ensuite son cours. Cette barrière de rochers constituait forcément un obstacle contre lequel l’eau se brisait et tourbillonnait. Il est donc infiniment probable qu’avant de le franchir, elle avait abandonné en deçà de cet obstacle tous les corps lourds, et notamment les parcelles d’or, qu’elle pouvait tenir en suspension. La cuvette formée par la barrière de rochers s’est évidemment remplie peu à peu du dépôt de ces corps lourds, et un jour est arrivé où l’or aurait pu commencer à se déverser sur l’étage inférieur, mais il est à supposer que, juste à ce moment, une convulsion du sol a fait ébouler la masse de pierres qui recouvre et cache la couche sablonneuse que je prévois exister, et que le creek, rejeté vers le

Nord par cet éboulement, a dû renoncer à franchir la rive telle que nous la voyons aujourd’hui.

Summy Skim ne cachait pas son admiration.

— Lumineux! s’écria-t-il. Tu es un rude savant, Ben!

— N’allons pas si vite, répondit Ben Raddle. Après tout, cène sont là que des hypothèses. Je ne crois pas me tromper, cependant, en affirmant que, si le claim 127 bis contient de l’or, ce ne peut être que sous l’amoncellement des blocs qui recouvrent sa moitié supérieure.

— Allons-y voir,» conclut Jane avec sa décision accoutumée.

Les deux cousins et leur compagne remontèrent le ravin pendant environ deux cents mètres, puis, parvenus au point où la barrière de rocs sortait insensiblement du thalweg, s’engagèrent sur l’étage supérieur en revenant vers le creek. La marche était extrêmement difficile au milieu de l’éboulis de blocs parfois énormes qui le recouvrait, et il fallut près d’une heure aux excursionnistes pour arriver à la rivière.

Nulle part, malgré la plus patiente recherche, Ben Raddle ne put découvrir la moindre parcelle de sable. Ce n’était partout qu’un chaos de pierres et de rochers, dans l’intervalle desquels on discernait encore d’autres roches plus profondément encaissées.

«Il sera malaisé de prouver expérimentalement ma théorie, fit observer Ben Raddle en atteignant le bord taillé à pic comme une falaise au-dessus du courant.

— Moins que tu ne crois, peut-être, répondit Summy, qui, à quelques mètres de là, semblait avoir fait une découverte intéressante. Voici du sable, Ben.

Ben Raddle rejoignit son cousin. Un carré de sable, grand à peine comme un mouchoir de poche, apparaissait en effet entre deux roches.

— Et du sable magnifique! s’écria Ben après un instant d’examen. C’est miracle que personne ne l’ait trouvé avant nous. Regarde sa coloration, Summy; regardez, mademoiselle Jane. Je parie cent contre un que ce sablé-là donne du cinquante dollars au plat!

Il n’y avait aucun moyen de vérifier sur place l’affirmation de l’ingénieur. Hâtivement, on remplit poches et chapeaux du précieux dépôt, et l’on refit en sens inverse le chemin parcouru.

Dès que l’on fut revenu près du creek, le sable lavé abandonna son métal, et Ben Raddle eut la satisfaction de constater que son évaluation avait été trop modeste de moitié. Le rendement ne pouvait être estimé à moins de cent dollars au plat.

— Cent dollars! s’écrièrent Jane et Summy émerveillés.

— Au bas mot, affirma catégoriquement Ben Raddle.

— Mais alors… ma fortune est faite! balbutia Jane tout de même un peu émue malgré son imperturbable sang-froid.

— Ne nous emballons pas, dit Ben Raddle, ne nous emballons pas… Certes, je suis d’avis que cette partie de votre claim doit contenir des pépites pour une somme colossale, mais, outre que la richesse de cette petite poche peut n’être qu’un simple accident, il y a lieu de tenir compte des frais énormes que nécessitera le déblaiement du sol. Il vous faudra du personnel, de l’outillage… La dynamite ne sera pas de trop pour vous débarrasser de cet amoncellement de rochers.

— Aujourd’hui même nous nous mettrons à l’œuvre, dit Jane avec énergie. Nous tâcherons, Patrick et moi, de déblayer un petit coin sans l’aide de personne. Ce que nous y trouverons me permettra d’embaucher le personnel et d’acheter le matériel nécessaire, de manière à activer le travail.

— C’est judicieusement penser, approuva Ben Raddle, et il ne nous reste plus qu’à vous souhaiter bonne chance…

— Et à accepter, ainsi que M. Summy, mes bien vifs remercîments, ajouta Jane. Sans vous, j’allais me décider à franchir la frontière, à m’enfoncer dans l’Alaska, et nul ne saurait dire…

— Puisque je suis votre associé, interrompit Ben Raddle un peu plus froidement, il était de mon intérêt, miss Edgerton, de vous aider à trouver une meilleure solution et de diminuer dans la mesure du possible les risques courus par le capital que vous représentez.

— C’est juste, reconnut Jane d’un air satisfait.

Summy Skim interrompit le dialogue qui lui portait visiblement sur les nerfs.

— Quels damnés gens d’affaires vous faites tous les deux! Vous êtes étonnants, ma parole!.. Moi qui ne suis pas «associé», ça ne m’empêche pas d’être rudement content!»

Laissant Jane Edgerton commencer sa nouvelle exploitation, les deux cousins regagnèrent le claim 129, où apparaissaient déjà quelques ouvriers. Vers la fin de la journée, Lorique était parvenu à en embaucher une trentaine à des salaires très élevés qui dépassaient souvent dix dollars par jour.

Tels étaient, d’ailleurs, les prix qui avaient cours alors dans la région de la Bonanza. Nombre d’ouvriers se faisaient de soixante-quinze à quatre-vingts francs par jour, et beaucoup d’entre eux s’enrichissaient, car ils ne dépensaient pas cet argent aussi facilement qu’ils le gagnaient.

Qu’on ne s’étonne pas de cette élévation des salaires. Sur les gisements du Sookum, par exemple, un ouvrier recueillait jusqu’à cent dollars par heure. En réalité, il ne prélevait pour lui-même que la centième partie de son gain.

Il a été dit que le matériel du 129 était des plus rudimentaires: des plats et des écuelles, voilà tout. Mais, si Josias Lacoste n’avait pas cru devoir compléter cet outillage par trop primitif, ce qu’il n’avait pas fait, son neveu voulut le faire. Avec le concours du contre-maître, et en y mettant un bon prix, deux «rockers» furent ajoutés au matériel du 129.

Le rocker est tout simplement une boîte longue de trois pieds, large de deux, une sorte de bière montée sur bascule. A l’intérieur est placé un sas muni d’un carré de laine, qui retient les grains d’or en laissant passer le sable. A l’extrémité inférieure de cet appareil, auquel sa bascule permet d’imprimer des secousses régulières, une certaine quantité de mercure s’amalgame au métal, quand la finesse de celui-ci empêche qu’il soit retenu à la main.

Plutôt qu’un rocker, Ben Raddle aurait désiré établir un sluice, et, n’ayant pu s’en procurer un, il songeait à le construire. C’est un conduit en bois que sillonnent, de six pouces en six pouces, des rainures transversales. Lorsqu’on y lance un courant de boue liquide, la terre et le quartz sont entraînés, tandis que les rainures retiennent l’or en raison de son poids spécifique.

Ces deux procédés, assez efficaces, donnent de bons résultats, mais ils exigent l’installation d’une pompe pour élever l’eau jusqu’à l’extrémité supérieure du sluice ou du rocker, ce qui augmente notablement le prix de l’appareil. Lorsqu’il s’agit de claims de montagnes, on peut quelquefois utiliser des chutes naturelles, mais, à la surface des claims de rivières, il faut nécessairement recourir à un moyen mécanique qui nécessite une assez forte dépense.

L’exploitation du 129 fut donc recommencée dans des conditions meilleures.

Tout en philosophant à sa manière, Summy Skim ne se lassait pas d’observer avec quelle ardeur, quelle passion, Ben Raddle se livrait à ce travail.

«Décidément, se disait-il, Ben n’a point échappé à l’épidémie régnante, et fasse Dieu que je ne sois pas pris à mon tour! Je crains bien que l’on n’en guérisse pas, même après fortune faite, et qu’il ne suffise pas d’avoir assez d’or!.. Non! il faut en avoir trop, et peut-être trop n’est-il pas encore assez!»

Les propriétaires du 129 n’en étaient pas là, à beaucoup près. Que ce gisement fût riche si l’on en voulait croire le contre-maître, soit! En tout cas, il ne livrait pas généreusement ses richesses. Il y avait des difficultés pour atteindre la couche aurifère qui courait à travers le sol en suivant le cours du Forty Miles. Ben Raddle dut reconnaître que les puits n’avaient pas une profondeur suffisante et qu’il fallait les forer plus avant. Grosse besogne, à cette époque de l’année, où la gelée ne produisait plus la solidification des parois.

Mais, en vérité, était-il sage de se lancer dans ces travaux coûteux, et ne valait-il pas mieux les laisser aux syndicats ou aux particuliers qui se rendraient acquéreurs du claim? Ben Raddle ne devait-il pas se borner au rendement des plats et du rocker?

Il est vrai que les plats atteignaient à peine un quart de dollar. Au prix où l'on payait le personnel, le profit était mince, et l'on pouvait se demander si les prévisions du contre-maître reposaient sur des bases sérieuses.

Pendant le mois de juin, le temps fut assez beau. Plusieurs orages éclatèrent, très violents parfois, mais passèrent vite. Les travaux interrompus étaient aussitôt repris le long du Forty Miles Creek.

Dans les premiers jours de juillet, tout ce que les propriétaires du claim 129 purent faire, ce fut d'envoyer à Dawson une somme de trois mille dollars qui fut déposée au crédit de leur compte dans les caisses de l'*American Trading and Transportation Company*.

«J'en mettrais de ma poche, si elle n'était pas vide, disait Summy Skim, pour leur envoyer davantage, afin qu'ils regrettent d'avoir laissé échapper le claim 129… Mais trois mille dollars!.. Ils vont rire de nous.

— Patience, Summy, patience! répondait Ben Raddle. Ça viendra.»

En tout cas, pour que *ça vienne*, comme disait l'ingénieur, il fallait agir vite. En juillet, la belle saison n'a plus que deux mois à courir. Le soleil, qui se couche à dix heures et demie, reparaît avant une heure du matin au-dessus de l'horizon. Et encore, entre son lever et son coucher, règne-t-il un crépuscule qui laisse à peine voir les constellations circumpolaires. Avec une seconde équipe remplaçant la première, les prospecteurs auraient pu continuer le travail. C'est ainsi qu'on procédait sur les placers situés au delà de la frontière, sur le territoire de l’Alaska, où les Américains déployaient une incroyable activité.

Au grand regret de Ben Raddle, il était impossible de les imiter. Lorique, malgré ses recherches, n’avait pu réunir plus de quarante travailleurs.

Sur le claim 127 *bis*, Jane Edgerton se heurtait à une difficulté semblable. Force lui était de se contenter d’une dizaine d’ouvriers. A n’importe quel prix, impossible d’en trouver davantage.

Tous les soirs, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle étaient tenus au courant du résultat de ses efforts. Sans se maintenir au niveau de la première expérience, la teneur du claim était encourageante. Le rendement moyen des plats s’élevait à quatre dollars et les plats de dix dollars n’étaient pas rares. Dix ouvriers habiles auraient dû suffire, dans ces conditions, pour assurer un bénéfice de plusieurs centaines de mille francs en fin de saison.

Malheureusement, les ouvriers de Jane Edgerton étaient presque tous occupés au déblaiement du terrain, et, malgré le dévouement et la force prodigieuse de Patrick, ce travail avançait lentement. Une plus grande surface de sable apparaissait cependant peu à peu, à mesure que les rochers étaient précipités à l’étage inférieur, et l’on pouvait prévoir que, vers le milieu du mois de juillet, le claim 127 *bis* commencerait à donner à sa propriétaire de sérieux profits.

Les perspectives étaient moins riantes sur le claim 129, en dépit de l’activité déployée par Ben Raddle.

On ne s’étonnera pas, étant donné son tempérament, qu’il voulût parfois prendre directement part à la besogne. Il ne dédaignait point de se joindre à ses ouvriers, tout en les surveillant, et, le plat à la main, de laver les boues du 129. Souvent aussi, il manœuvrait lui-même les rockers, tandis que Summy le considérait d'un air narquois. Celui-ci, du moins, gardait tout son calme, et c'est en vain que son cousin s'efforçait de lui communiquer un peu de sa passion.

«Eh bien, Summy, tu n'essaies pas? disait-il.

— Non, répondait invariablement Summy Skim, je n'ai pas la vocation.

— Ce n'est pas difficile, pourtant. Un plat qu'on agite, dont on délaie le gravier, et au fond duquel restent les parcelles d'or!

— En effet, Ben. Mais, que veux-tu, ce métier ne me plaît pas. Non, quand bien même on me paierait deux dollars l'heure!

— Je suis sûr que tu aurais la main heureuse! soupirait Ben Raddle avec une expression de regret.

Un jour, pourtant, Summy Skim se laissa fléchir. Docilement, il prit le plat, y versa de la terre qui venait d'être extraite de l'un des puits, et, après avoir transformé cette terre en vase liquide, il l'écoula peu à peu.

Pas la moindre trace de ce métal que Summy Skim ne cessait de maudire!

— Bredouille! dit-il. Pas même de quoi me payer une pipe de tabac!»

Summy était plus heureux à la chasse. Bien que le hasard de la poursuite l'amenât presque tous les jours – comme s'il l'eût fait exprès! – jusqu'au claim 127 *bis,* où il perdait un temps précieux, en attendant que Jane Edgerton cessât le travail, il revenait en général le carnier abondamment garni. Que ce persistant succès fût dû à ses talents de chasseur, il n’y avait pas lieu d’en douter, mais l’abondance du gibier de poil et de plume dans les plaines et dans les gorges voisines y était aussi pour quelque chose. A défaut d’orignals, dont il n’avait pu réussir à apercevoir un seul échantillon, les caribous se rencontraient fréquemment dans les bois. Quant aux bécassines, aux perdrix de neige, aux canards, ils pullulaient à la surface des marécages des deux côtés du Forty Miles Creek. Summy Skim se consolait donc de son séjour prolongé au Klondike, non sans regrettée, la giboyeuse campagne de Green Valley.

Pendant la première quinzaine de juillet, le lavage donna de meilleurs résultats. Le contre-maître était enfin tombé sur la véritable couche aurifère qui devenait plus riche en se rapprochant de la frontière. Les plats et les rockers produisaient une somme importante en grains d’or. Bien qu’aucune pépite de grande valeur n’eût été recueillie, le rendement de cette quinzaine ne fut pas inférieur à trente-sept mille francs. Voilà qui justifiait les dires de Lorique et qui devait surexciter l’ambition de Ben Raddle.

Par les rumeurs circulant entre les ouvriers, on savait, sur le claim 129, qu’une amélioration identique était constatée sur le claim 131 du Texien Hunter, à mesure que l’exploitation gagnait vers l’Est. Nul doute, d’après l’enrichissement graduel de la couche aurifère dans les deux sens, qu’il n’y eût une poche, une *bonanza*, aux environs de la frontière, et peut-être à la frontière même.

Excités par cette perspective, les ouvriers de Hunter et de Malone et le personnel des deux Canadiens s’avançaient l’un vers l’autre. Le jour ne tarderait pas où ils se rencontreraient sur le tracé actuel de la frontière contestée par les deux États.

Les recrues des Texiens – une trentaine d'hommes – étaient tous d'origine américaine. Il eût été difficile de réunir plus déplorable troupe d'aventuriers. De mines peu rassurantes, sortes de sauvages, violents, brutaux et querelleurs, ils étaient bien dignes, en un mot, de leurs maîtres si désavantageusement connus dans la région du Klondike.

En général, d'ailleurs, une certaine différence existe entre les Américains et les Canadiens employés sur les gisements. Ceux-ci se montrent d'ordinaire plus dociles, plus tranquilles, plus disciplinés. Aussi les syndicats leur donnent-ils d'ordinaire la préférence. Les sociétés américaines, toutefois, recherchent plutôt leurs compatriotes, malgré leur violence, leur tendance à la rébellion, leur emportement dans ces rixes presque quotidiennes provoquées par les liqueurs fortes, qui font d'immenses ravages dans les régions aurifères. Il est rare qu'un jour s'écoule sans que la police ait à intervenir sur un claim ou sur un autre. Coups de poignard et coups de revolver s'échangent, et parfois il y a mort d'homme. Quant aux blessés, il faut les diriger sur l'hôpital de Dawson City, déjà encombré des malades que les épidémies permanentes y envoient sans cesse.

Pendant la troisième semaine de juillet, l'exploitation continua d'être fructueuse, sans que ni Ben Raddle, ni Lorique, ni leurs hommes eussent jamais recueilli une pépite de valeur. Mais enfin les profits étaient très supérieurs aux dépenses, et, le 20 juillet, un nouvel envoi de douze mille dollars put être fait, au crédit de MM. Summy Skim et Ben Raddle, dans les caisses de l'*American Trading and Transportation Company*.

Summy Skim se frottait les mains.

«C'est M. William Broll, dit-il, qui va faire une tête!»

Il n’était pas douteux désormais, en effet, que les bénéfices de la campagne ne s’élevassent à beaucoup plus de cent mille francs. Il y aurait donc lieu de tenir haut le prix du 129, lorsque les acquéreurs se présenteraient.

Sur le claim 127 *bis*, les événements prenaient également une tournure favorable. Jane Edgerton, une faible partie de son terrain déblayée, arrivait enfin à la période de rendement. Déjà, plus de trois mille dollars de poudre d’or lui appartenant étaient mis en réserve dans la maisonnette des deux cousins, en attendant le prochain envoi à Dawson. Selon toute probabilité, elle aurait, en fin de saison, retiré de son claim une cinquantaine de mille francs, malgré les difficultés et les lenteurs du début.

Vers la fin de juillet, Summy Skim fit une proposition non dénuée de quelque apparence de raison:

«Je ne vois pas pourquoi, dit-il, on serait obligé de rester ici, et pourquoi mademoiselle Jane et nous, nous ne vendrions pas nos claims?

— Parce que, répondit Ben Raddle, cette opération ne peut se faire à de bons prix avant la rectification de la frontière.

— Eh! riposta Summy, que le diable emporte le cent quarante et unième méridien! Une vente peut se faire par correspondance, par intermédiaire, à Montréal, dans l’étude de maître Snubbin, aussi bien qu’à Dawson City.

— Non dans des conditions aussi favorables, répliqua Ben Raddle.

— Pourquoi? puisque nous sommes maintenant fixés, mademoiselle Jane et nous, sur la valeur de nos claims?

— Dans un mois ou six semaines, nous le serons bien davantage, déclara l’ingénieur, et ce n’est plus quarante mille dollars qu’on nous offrira du

129, ce sera quatre-vingt mille, cent mille dollars!

— Que ferons-nous de tout cela? s’écria Summy Skim.

— Bon usage, sois-en sûr, affirma Ben Raddle. Ne vois-tu donc pas que la couche devient de plus en plue riche à mesure qu’on avance vers l’Ouest?

— Oui, mais, à force d’avancer, on finira par arriver au 131, fît observer Summy Skim, et, lorsque nos hommes se trouveront en contact avec ceux de ce délicieux Hunter, je ne sais trop ce qui se passera.»

En effet, il y avait lieu de redouter qu’une lutte s’engageât alors entre les deux personnels qui se rapprochaient chaque jour de la limite mitoyenne des deux placers. Déjà même des injures avaient été échangées, et de violentes menaces se faisaient parfois entendre. Lorique avait eu maille à partir avec le contre-maître américain, sorte d’athlète brutal et grossier, et l’on pouvait craindre que ces injures ne dégénérassent en voies de fait, lorsque Hunter et Malone seraient de retour. Plus d’une pierre avait été lancée d’un claim à l’autre… non pas, toutefois, sans qu’on se fût assuré qu’elles étaient veuves de la moindre parcelle d’or.

Dans ces circonstances, Lorique, secondé par Ben Raddle, faisait tout ce qu’il pouvait pour retenir ses ouvriers. Au contraire, le contre-maître américain ne cessait d’exciter les siens, et ne laissait échapper aucune occasion de chercher querelle à Lorique.

La prospection donnait, d’ailleurs, de moins bons résultats en territoire américain, et, pour le moment du moins, le 131 ne valait pas le 129; il semblait même que l’enrichissement de la couche aurifère manifestait une tendance à se détourner vers le Sud en s’écartant de la rive du Forty Miles

Creek, et l’on pouvait croire que la poche, la *bonanza* poursuivie serait trouvée en territoire canadien.

Le 27 juillet, les deux équipes n’étaient plus qu’à dix mètres l’une de l’autre. Quinze jours ne s’écouleraient pas avant qu’elles se fussent rejointes sur la ligne séparative. Summy Skim n’avait donc pas tort de prévoir et de craindre quelque collision.

Or, précisément à la date du 27 juillet, un incident vint aggraver singulièrement la situation.

Hunter et Malone étaient reparus sur le claim 131.

CHAPITRE XV

La nuit du 5 au 6 août.

Le territoire du Klondike n'est pas le seul à posséder des régions aurifères. Il en existe d'autres sur la vaste étendue de l'Amérique du Nord-Ouest comprise entre l'océan Glacial et le Pacifique, et très probablement de nouveaux gisements ne tarderont pas à être découverts. La nature s'est montrée prodigue de trésors minéraux envers ces contrées auxquelles elle refuse les richesses agricoles.

Les placers qui appartiennent au territoire de l'Alaska sont plus particulièrement situés à l'intérieur de cette large courbe que le Yukon décrit entre le Klondike et Saint-Michel et dont la convexité est tangente au cercle polaire.

L'une de ces régions avoisine Circle City, bourgade établie à trois cent soixante-dix kilomètres en aval de Dawson City. C'est près de là que prend sa source Birch Creek, affluent qui se jette dans le Yukon, à peu de distance du Fort du même nom, fondé sur le cercle polaire, au point le plus septentrional de la courbe du grand fleuve.

A la fin de la dernière campagne, le bruit s'était répandu que les gisements de Circle City valaient ceux de la Bonanza. Il n'en fallait pas tant pour y attirer la foule des mineurs.

Sur la foi de ces rumeurs, Hunter et Malone, après avoir remis le 131 en exploitation, avaient pris passage sur un des steam-boats qui font les escales du Yukon, et, débarqués à Circle City, ils avaient visité la région arrosée par le Birch Creek. Sans doute ils n’avaient pas jugé profitable d’y séjourner toute la saison, puisqu’ils revenaient au claim 131.

La preuve, d’ailleurs, que le résultat de leur voyage avait dû être nul, c’est que les deux Texiens s’étaient arrêtés au Forty Miles et prenaient leurs dispositions pour y rester jusqu’à la fin de la campagne. S’ils eussent fait ample récolte de pépites et de poudre d’or sur les gisements du Birch Creek, ils auraient eu hâte de gagner Dawson City, où les maisons de jeu et les casinos leur offraient tant d’occasions de dissiper leurs gains.

«Ce n’est pas la présence de Hunter qui ramènera la tranquillité sur les claims de la frontière et plus particulièrement sur ceux du Forty Miles, dit Lorique aux deux cousins, en apprenant le retour des propriétaires du claim 131.

— Nous nous tiendrons sur nos gardes, répliqua Ben Raddle.

— Ce sera raisonnable, messieurs, déclara le contre-maître et je recommanderai la prudence à nos hommes.

— N’y aurait-il pas lieu d’informer la police du retour de ces deux coquins? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Elle doit l’être déjà, répondit Lorique. Au surplus, nous enverrons un exprès à Fort Cudahy afin de prévenir toute agression.

— By God! s’écria Summy Skim, avec une vivacité qui ne lui était pas habituelle, vous me permettrez de vous dire que vous êtes bien pusillanimes. S’il prend fantaisie à cet individu de se livrer à ses violences habituelles, il trouvera quelqu’un pour lui répondre.

— Soit! accorda Ben Raddle. Mais à quoi bon, Summy, te commettre avec cet homme?

— Nous avons un vieux compte à régler, Ben.

— Il me paraît réglé, et à ton avantage, ce compte-là, objecta Ben Raddle, qui, à aucun prix, ne voulait laisser son cousin s'engager dans quelque mauvaise affaire. Que tu aies pris la défense d'une femme insultée, rien de plus naturel; que tu aies remis ce Hunter à sa place, je l'aurais fait comme toi; mais ici, lorsque c'est tout le personnel d'un claim qui est menacé, cela regarde la police.

— Et si elle n'y est pas? répliqua Summy Skim, qui n'entendait pas céder.

— Si elle n'y est pas, monsieur Skim, dit le contre-maître, nous nous défendrons nous-mêmes, et nos hommes ne reculeront pas, croyez-le.

— Après tout, conclut Ben Raddle, nous ne sommes pas venus ici pour débarrasser le Forty Miles des misérables qui l'infestent, mais pour…

— Pour vendre notre claim, acheva Summy Skim, qui en revenait toujours à ses moutons, et dont la tête commençait à se monter un peu. Dites-moi, Lorique, sait-on ce que devient la commission de rectification?

— On dit qu'elle est tout à fait dans le Sud, répondit le contremaître, au pied du mont Elie.

— C'est-à-dire trop loin pour qu'on aille la relancer?

— Beaucoup trop loin. Et à moins de repasser par Skagway…

— Maudit pays! s'écria Summy Skim.

— Tiens, Summy, suggéra Ben Raddle en frappant sur l’épaule de son cousin, tu as besoin de te calmer. Va en chasse, emmène Neluto qui ne demande pas mieux, et rapportez-nous ce soir quelque gibier de choix. Pendant ce temps, nous secouerons nos rockers et tâcherons de faire bonne besogne.

— Qui sait? insinua le contre-maître. Pourquoi ne nous arriverait-il pas ce qui est arrivé en octobre 1897 au colonel Earvay à Cripple Creek?

— Que lui est-il arrivé à votre colonel? demanda Summy Skim.

— De trouver dans son claim, à une profondeur de sept pieds seulement, un lingot d’or valant cent mille dollars.

— Peuh! fit Summy Skim d’un ton dédaigneux.

— Prends ton fusil, Summy, dit Ben Raddle. Va chasser jusqu’au soir, et défie-toi des ours!»

Summy Skim n’avait rien de mieux à faire. Neluto et lui remontèrent le ravin, et, un quart d’heure plus tard, on entendait retentir leurs premiers coups de feu.

Quant à Ben Raddle, il reprit son travail, non sans avoir recommandé à ses ouvriers de mépriser les provocations qui pourraient leur venir du 131. Ce jour-là, du reste, il ne se produisit aucun incident qui fût de nature à mettre aux prises le personnel des deux claims.

En l’absence de Summy Skim qui ne se serait peut-être pas contenu, Ben Raddle eut l’occasion d’apercevoir Hunter et Malone. En attendant qu’elle fût ou non déplacée, la ligne de frontière suivait le thalweg du ravin, en descendant vers le Sud. La maisonnette qu’occupaient les deux Texiens faisait le pendant de l’habitation de Lorique, au pied du versant opposé. Aussi, de sa chambre, Ben Raddle put-il observer Hunter et son compagnon, pendant qu’ils parcouraient le claim 131. Sans paraître s’occuper de ce qui se passait chez ses voisins, mais sans chercher non plus à se cacher, il resta appuyé sur la barre de la fenêtre, au rez-de-chaussée de la maisonnette.

Hunter et Malone s’avancèrent jusqu’au poteau limite. Ils causaient avec animation. Après avoir dirigé leurs regards vers le creek et observé les exploitations de l’autre rive, ils firent quelques pas du côté du ravin. Qu’ils fussent de la plus méchante humeur, ce n’était pas douteux, le rendement du 131 étant des plus médiocres depuis le commencement de la campagne, alors que les dernières semaines avaient valu au claim mitoyen des bénéfices très importants.

Hunter et Malone continuèrent à remonter vers le ravin et s’arrêtèrent à peu près à la hauteur de l’habitation. De là, ils aperçurent Ben Raddle qui ne sembla pas leur prêter attention. Celui-ci pourtant s’apercevait bien qu’ils le désignaient de la main, et comprenait que leurs gestes violents, leurs voix furieuses cherchaient à le provoquer. Très sagement, il n’y prit pas garde, et, lorsque les deux Texiens se furent retirés, il rejoignit Lorique qui manœuvrait le rocker. «Vous les avez vus, monsieur Raddle? dit alors celui-ci.

— Oui, Lorique, répondit Ben Raddle, mais leurs provocations ne me feront pas sortir de ma réserve.

— Monsieur Skim ne parait pas d’humeur si endurante…

— Il faudra bien qu’il se calme, déclara Ben Raddle. Nous ne devons même pas avoir l’air de connaître ces gens-là.»

Les jours suivants s’écoulèrent sans incidents. Summy Skim – et son cousin l’y poussait – partait dès le matin pour la chasse avec l’Indien, et ne revenait que tard dans l’après-midi. Il était toutefois de plus en plus difficile d’empêcher les ouvriers américains et canadiens de se trouver en contact. Leurs travaux les rapprochaient chaque jour des poteaux, à la limite des deux claims. Le moment allait arriver où, pour employer une locution du contre-maître, «ils seraient pic à pic et pioche à pioche». La moindre contestation pourrait alors engendrer une discussion, la discussion un conflit, et le conflit une rixe, qui dégénérerait bientôt en bataille. Lorsque les hommes seraient lancés les uns contre les autres, qui serait capable de les arrêter? Hunter et Malone n’essaieraient-ils pas de provoquer des troubles dans les autres claims américains de la frontière? Avec de tels aventuriers, tout était à craindre. La police de Fort Cudahy serait dans ce cas impuissante à rétablir l’ordre.

Pendant quarante-huit heures, les deux Texiens ne se montrèrent pas. Peut-être précisément étaient-ils en train de parcourir les placers du Forty Miles Creek situés en territoire alaskien. Si, en leur absence, il se produisit bien quelques altercations entre les ouvriers, cela n’alla pas plus loin.

Les trois jours suivants, Summy ne put, à cause du mauvais temps, se livrer à son plaisir favori. La pluie tombait parfois à torrents, et force était de rester à l’abri dans la maisonnette. Le lavage des sables devenait très difficile dans ces conditions: les puits se remplissaient jusqu’à l’orifice, et leur trop-plein s’écoulait à la surface du claim couvert d’une boue épaisse où l’on s’enfonçait jusqu’aux genoux.

On profita de ces loisirs forcés pour peser et mettre en sacs la poudre d’or recueillie. Le rendement du 129 avait un peu baissé au cours des quinze derniers jours. La prochaine expédition à Dawson ne serait cependant pas inférieure à dix mille dollars.

L’exploitation de Jane Edgerton s’améliorait au contraire peu à peu. Chaque jour donnait un profit plus grand que celui de la veille, et elle put joindre près de douze mille dollars lui appartenant aux dix mille dollars des deux cousins.

Le travail ne fut repris que le 3 août dans l’après-midi. Après une matinée pluvieuse, le ciel se rasséréna sous l’influence du vent de Sud-Est. Mais on devait s’attendre à des orages qui, à cette époque de l’année, sont terribles et occasionnent parfois de véritables désastres.

Les deux Texiens revinrent ce jour-là de leur expédition. Ils s’enfermèrent aussitôt dans leur maison et ne se montrèrent pas de toute la matinée du 4 août.

Quant à Summy Skim, il profita de l’éclaircie pour se remettre en chasse. Quelques ours venaient d’être signalés en aval, et il ne désirait rien tant que se rencontrer avec un de ces redoutables plantigrades. Il n’en serait pas à son coup d’essai d’ailleurs. Plus d’un étaient déjà tombés sous ses balles dans les forêts de Green Valley.

Au cours de cette journée, Lorique eut un heureux coup de pioche. En creusant un trou presque à la limite du claim, il découvrit une pépite dont la valeur ne devait pas être inférieure à quatre cents dollars, soit deux mille francs en monnaie française. Le contre-maître ne put contenir sa joie et, à pleins poumons, il appela ses compagnons.

Les ouvriers et Ben Raddle accoururent, et tous poussèrent des acclamations en voyant une pépite grosse comme une noix enchâssée dans un fragment de quartz.

Au 131, on comprit sans peine la cause de ces cris. De là, une explosion de colère jalouse, en somme justifiée, puisque, depuis quelque temps, les ouvriers américains n’avaient pu trouver un gîte rémunérateur, et que leur exploitation devenait de plus en plus onéreuse.

Une voix se fit alors entendre, la voix de Hunter:

«Il n’y en a donc que pour ces chiens des prairies du Far West! criait-il, furieux.

C’est ainsi qu’il qualifiait les Canadiens.

Ben Raddle avait entendu l’insulte.

Faisant un effort sur lui-même, il se contenta de tourner le dos au grossier personnage, en haussant les épaules en signe de dédain.

«Hé! fît alors le Texien, c’est pour vous que je parle, monsieur de Montréal.

Ben Raddle se contraignit à garder le silence.

«Je ne sais ce qui me retient!..» reprit Hunter.

Il allait franchir la limite et se jeter sur Ben Raddle. Malone l’arrêta. Mais les ouvriers des deux placers, massés de part et d’autre de la frontière, se menaçaient de la voix et du geste, et il était évident que l’ouverture des hostilités ne pourrait plus être retardée bien longtemps.

Le soir, lorsque Summy Skim rentra, tout heureux d’avoir abattu un ours, non sans quelque danger, il raconta en détail son exploit cynégétique. Ben Raddle ne voulut point lui parler de l’incident de la journée, et, après souper, tous deux regagnèrent leur chambre où Summy Skim dormit le réconfortant sommeil du chasseur.

Y avait-il lieu de craindre que l’affaire n’eût des suites? Hunter et Malone chercheraient-ils de nouveau querelle à Ben Raddle et pousseraient-ils leurs hommes contre ceux du 129? C’était probable, car le lendemain pics et pioches allaient se rencontrer sur la limite des deux claims.

Or précisément, au grand ennui de son cousin, Summy Skim ne partit pas pour la chasse ce jour-là. Le temps était lourd; de gros nuages se levaient dans le Sud-Est. La journée ne se passerait pas sans orage, et mieux valait ne point se laisser surprendre loin de l’habitation.

Toute la matinée fut employée au lavage, tandis qu’une équipe, sous la direction de Lorique, poursuivait la fouille presque sur la ligne de démarcation des deux propriétés.

Jusqu’au milieu du jour il ne survint aucune complication. Quelques propos assez malsonnants, il est vrai, tenus par les Américains, amenèrent des ripostes plus ou moins vives de la part des Canadiens. Mais tout se borna à des paroles et les contre-maîtres n’eurent point à intervenir.

Par malheur, les choses ne se passèrent pas aussi bien à la reprise du travail dans l’après-midi. Hunter et Malone allaient et venaient sur leur placer, tandis que Summy Skim, en compagnie de Ben Raddle, en faisait autant sur le sien.

«Tiens, dit Summy Skim à Ben Raddle, ils sont donc de retour, ces chenapans?.. Je ne les avais pas encore vus… Et toi, Ben?

— Si… hier, répondit évasivement Ben Raddle. Fais comme moi. Ne t'occupe pas d'eux.

— C'est qu'ils nous regardent d'une façon qui ne me plaît guère…

— N'y fais pas attention, Summy.»

Les Texiens s'étaient rapprochés. Toutefois, s'ils étaient prodigues de regards insultants à l'adresse des deux cousins, ils ne les accompagnaient pas des invectives dont ils étaient coutumiers, ce qui permit à Summy Skim de paraître ignorer leur existence.

Cependant les ouvriers continuaient à travailler sur la limite des deux claims, défrichant le sol, recueillant les boues pour les porter aux sluices et aux rockers. Ils se touchaient pour ainsi dire, et leurs pioches, volontairement ou non, se heurtaient à chaque instant.

Toutefois, personne jusqu'alors n'y avait pris garde, lorsque, vers cinq heures, s'élevèrent de violentes clameurs. Ben et Summy sur le 129, Hunter et Malone de l'autre côté de la frontière, se précipitèrent à la rencontre les uns des autres.

Les deux équipes ne travaillaient plus, et des deux côtés on chantait victoire. La poche, la bonanza était enfin découverte. Depuis quelques instants les sables portés de part et d'autre aux appareils de lavage donnaient des rendements dépassant cent dollars, quand, au fond de l'excavation, on venait de découvrir une pépite, un véritable lingot d'une valeur d’au moins deux mille dollars, sur lequel les deux contre-maîtres, face à face, avaient mis en même temps le pied.

«Elle est à nous! cria Hunter en arrivant tout essoufflé.

— Non! à nous! protesta Lorique conservant sa prise.

— A toi, failli chien?.. Regarde plutôt le poteau. Tu verras si ton pied n’est pas chez moi.

Un coup d’œil sur la ligne déterminée par les deux piquets les plus voisins convainquit Lorique que, dans l’excès de son zèle, il avait réellement franchi la limite, et il allait en soupirant abandonner sa trouvaille, lorsque Ben Raddle intervint.

— Si vous avez passé la frontière, Lorique, dit-il d’une voix calme, c’est qu’elle a été changée pendant la nuit. Tout le monde peut voir que les piquets ne sont plus à l’alignement, et que celui-ci a été reculé de plus d’un mètre vers l’Est.

C’était vrai. La série des poteaux formait, en effet, une ligne brisée, présentant vers l’Est un angle rentrant à la hauteur des deux claims.

— Voleur! rugit Lorique dans la figure de Hunter.

— Voleur toi-même! répliqua celui-ci en bondissant sur le Canadien qui fut renversé par surprise.

Summy Skim se précipita au secours du contre-maître, que le Texien maintenait à terre. Ben Raddle le suivit aussitôt et saisit à la gorge Malone qui accourait. En un instant, Lorique se relevait, délivré, tandis que Hunter roulait sur le sol à son tour.

Ce fut alors une mêlée générale. Les pioches, les pics, maniés par ces mains vigoureuses, se transformaient en armes terribles, je sang n’eût pas tardé à jaillir, et peut-être y aurait-il eu mort d’homme, si une ronde de police n’eût, précisément au même instant, paru sur cette partie du Forty Miles.

Grâce à cette cinquantaine d’hommes résolus, les troubles furent rapidement comprimés.

Ce fut Ben Raddle qui s’adressa le premier à Hunter, que la fureur empêchait de parler.

— De quel droit, lui dit-il, avez-vous voulu nous voler notre bien?

— Ton bien? vociféra Hunter, dans un tutoiement grossier, garde-le, ton bien!.. Tu ne l’auras pas longtemps!

— Essayez de le reprendre, menaça Summy en serrant les poings.

— Oh! quant à toi, hurla Hunter qui écumait littéralement, nous avons un vieux compte à régler tous les deux!

— Quand il vous plaira, dit Summy Skim.

— Quand il me plaira?.. Eh bien!..

Hunter s’interrompit tout à coup. Précédée de Patrick, Jane Edgerton, revenant du travail quotidien, arrivait comme chaque soir sur le claim 129. Intriguée, elle s’approchait à grands pas du groupe bruyant qui gesticulait sur la frontière. Hunter la reconnut sur-le-champ.

— Eh! dit-il en ricanant, tout s’explique! Le vaillant défenseur de femmes travaillait pour son compte!

— Misérable lâche! s’écria Summy indigné.

— Lâche!..

— Oui, lâche! répéta Summy Skim, qui ne se possédait plus, et trop lâche pour rendre raison à un homme.

— Tu le verras! hurla Hunter. Je te retrouverai!

— Quand vous voudrez, répliqua Summy Skim. Dès demain.

— Oui, demain!» dit Hunter.

Repoussés par les hommes de police, qui remirent le piquet à sa place régulière, les mineurs durent rentrer sur leurs placers respectifs. Lorique, du moins, emportait avec lui, en signe de triomphe, la précieuse pépite qui avait allumé la querelle.

«Summy, dit Ben Raddle à son cousin, dès qu’ils eurent regagné leur maisonnette, tu ne peux te battre avec ce coquin.

— Je le ferai cependant, Ben.

— Non, Summy, tu ne le feras pas.

— Je le ferai, te dis-je, et, si je parviens à lui loger une balle dans la tête, ce sera la plus belle chasse de ma vie. Une chasse à la bête puante!

Malgré tous ses efforts, Ben Raddle ne put rien obtenir. De guerre lasse, il appela Jane Edgerton à son secours.

«Mademoiselle Jane!.. dit Summy. Mais, ne serait-ce que pour elle, ce duel serait encore nécessaire. Maintenant que Hunter l’a reconnue, il ne cessera de rôder autour d’elle.

— Je n’ai pas besoin qu’on me protège, monsieur Skim, affirma Jane en raidissant sa petite taille.

— Laissez-moi tranquille, s’écria Summy exaspéré. Je suis assez grand peut-être pour savoir ce que j’ai à faire? Et ce que j’ai à faire maintenant, c’est…

— C’est?..

— C’est de dîner, tout simplement,» déclara Summy Skim en s’asseyant avec une telle énergie que son escabeau fut cassé net en trois morceaux.

Un désastre inattendu allait d’ailleurs rendre impossible ou du moins retarder le dénouement de cette affaire.

Le temps s’était de plus en plus alourdi pendant cette journée. Vers sept heures du soir, l’espace saturé d’électricité fut sillonné d’éclairs, et le tonnerre gronda dans le Sud-Est. L’obscurité due à l’amoncellement des nuages devint même profonde, bien que le soleil fût au-dessus de l’horizon.

Durant l’après-midi déjà, on avait constaté, sur les divers claims du Forty Miles Creek, des symptômes inquiétants: sourdes trépidations courant à travers le sol et accompagnées de grondements prolongés, jets de gaz sulfureux s’échappant parfois des puits. Assurément on pouvait craindre une manifestation des forces plutoniques.

Vers dix heures et demie, tous allaient se coucher dans la maisonnette du claim 129, lorsque de violentes secousses ébranlèrent l’habitation.

«Un tremblement de terre!» s’écria Lorique.

Il avait à peine prononcé ces mots que la maison se renversait brusquement comme si la base lui eût soudain manqué.

Ce ne fut pas sans peine que ses hôtes, heureusement sans blessures, purent se retirer des décombres.

Mais, au dehors, quel spectacle! Le sol du claim disparaissait sous une inondation torrentielle. Une partie du creek avait débordé et s'écoulait à travers les gisements en s'y frayant un nouveau lit.

De tous côtés éclataient des cris de désespoir et de douleur. Les mineurs, surpris dans leurs cabanes, cherchaient à fuir l'inondation qui les gagnait. Des arbres arrachés ou rompus par le pied étaient entraînés avec la rapidité d'un express.

L'inondation gagnait déjà la place où gisait l'habitation abattue. En quelques secondes on eut de l'eau à mi-corps.

«Fuyons!..» s'écria Summy Skim, qui, enlevant Jane Edgerton entre ses bras, l'entraîna sur la pente.

A ce moment, un tronc de bouleau atteignit Ben Raddle dont la jambe fut brisée au-dessous du genou. Lorique, puis Neluto, s'élancèrent à son secours et furent renversés à leur tour. Tous trois allaient périr. Patrick, heureusement, avait vu le péril. Tandis que Summy, revenant à la charge, enlevait son cousin sur ses épaules, le géant saisissait à bout de bras le contre-maître et le pilote, et, ferme comme un roc au milieu des eaux déchaînées, les emportait loin des atteintes du torrent.

En un instant, tous furent hors de danger, sans autre dommage que la fracture de Ben Raddle. On put alors contempler le désastre à la lueur du ciel en feu.

La maison avait disparu, et avec elle les trésors amassés par les deux cousins et par Jane Edgerton. La colline que celle-ci franchissait chaque matin et chaque soir avait changé de forme. Contre elle se brisait en rugissant une énorme masse d’eau qui recouvrait sur une longueur de plus d’un kilomètre la rive droite du Forty Miles Creek de part et d’autre de la frontière.

Comme vingt autres propriétés du voisinage, celles des deux cousins et de Jane Edgerton étaient englouties sous plus de dix mètres d’eau furieuse. C’est en vain que les héritiers de Josias Lacoste avaient fait des milliers de kilomètres pour tirer le meilleur parti du claim 129; leur héritage était disparu à jamais. Il n’y avait plus de claim 129.

SECONDE PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

Un hiver au Klondike.

Un tremblement de terre, très localisé d'ailleurs, venait de bouleverser cette partie du Klondike, comprise entre la frontière et le Yukon, que traverse le cours moyen du Forty Miles Creek.

Le Klondike n'est pas, à vrai dire, exposé à de fréquentes secousses sismiques. Son sol contient cependant des agrégats quartzeux, des roches éruptives, indiquant que les forces plutoniques l'ont travaillé à son origine, et ces forces, endormies seulement, se réveillent parfois avec une violence peu ordinaire. Au surplus, dans toute la région des Montagnes Rocheuses, qui prennent naissance aux approches du cercle polaire arctique, se dressent plusieurs volcans dont la complète extinction n'est pas certaine.

Si l'éventualité des tremblements de terre ou des éruptions est, en général, peu à craindre dans le district, il n'en est pas ainsi des inondations dues aux crues soudaines de ses creeks.

Dawson City n'a pas été épargnée, et le pont qui réunit la ville à Klondike City, son faubourg, a été plus d'une fois emporté.

Cette fois, le territoire du Forty Miles Creek avait subi un double désastre. Le bouleversement complot du sol entraînait la destruction des claims sur une vaste étendue des deux côtés de la frontière. L'inondation était venue par surcroît, et l'eau recouvrait l'emplacement des anciens placers, où toute exploitation serait désormais impossible.

Il eût été difficile, au premier moment, d’apprécier la grandeur du dommage. Une obscurité profonde enveloppait la contrée. Si les maisonnettes, les cabanes, les huttes avaient été détruites, si la plupart des mineurs étaient maintenant sans abri, si le nombre des blessés et des morts, les uns écrasés sous les décombres, les autres noyés, était considérable, on ne l’apprendrait que le lendemain. Que toute cette population d’émigrants répandue sur les placers fût obligée d’abandonner la région, on ne le saurait qu’après avoir constaté l’importance de la catastrophe.

Ce qui paraissait, en tout cas, avoir causé un désastre irréparable, c’était le déversement d’une partie des eaux du Forty Miles Creek sur les gisements de sa rive droite. Sous la poussée des forces souterraines, le fond de son lit avait été soulevé au niveau des deux bords. Il y avait donc lieu de penser que l’inondation n’était point passagère. Dans ces conditions, comment reprendre les fouilles dans un sol recouvert par cinq à six pieds d’une eau courante dont on ne pourrait provoquer la dérivation?

Quelle nuit de terreur et d’angoisses eurent à passer les pauvres gens frappés par cette soudaine catastrophe! Ils n’avaient aucun abri, et l’orage dura jusqu’à cinq heures du matin. La foudre frappa à maintes reprises les bois de bouleaux et de trembles où s’étaient retirées les familles. En même temps, une pluie torrentielle mélangée de grêlons ne cessa de tomber. Si Lorique n’eût découvert, en remontant le ravin, une petite grotte dans laquelle Summy Skim et lui transportèrent Ben Raddle, le blessé n’aurait pas trouvé de refuge.

On imagine aisément à quelles idées les deux cousins devaient s’abandonner. Ainsi, c’était pour être les victimes de tels événements qu’ils avaient entrepris un si long et si pénible voyage! Tous leurs efforts étaient perdus. Il ne restait rien de leur héritage, pas même ce que l’exploitation avait produit au cours des dernières semaines. De l’or recueilli par eux-mêmes et par leur infortunée compagne, il n’existait plus la moindre parcelle. Après la chute de la maisonnette, l’inondation avait tout balayé. Aucun objet n’avait pu être sauvé, et, à présent, l’or s’en allait en dérive dans le courant du rio.

Lorsque l’orage eut cessé, Summy Skim et le contre-maître quittèrent la grotte quelques instants, en laissant Ben Raddle aux soins de Jane Edgerton, et cherchèrent à se rendre compte de l’étendue du désastre. Comme le 129, le 127 *bis* et le 131 avaient disparu sous les eaux. La question de frontière était résolue du coup. Que le cent quarante et unième méridien fût reporté à l’Est ou à l’Ouest, cela n’intéressait plus les deux claims; que le territoire fût alaskien ou canadien, peu importait. Le creek élargi coulait à sa surface.

Quant aux victimes de ce tremblement de terre, on ne connaîtrait leur nombre qu’après enquête. Assurément, des familles avaient dû être surprises, soit par les secousses du sol, soit par l’inondation, dans leurs cabanes ou dans leurs huttes, et il était à craindre que la plupart n’eussent péri sans avoir eu le temps de fuir.

Ben Raddle, Summy Skim, Lorique et Jane Edgerton n’avaient échappé que par miracle, et encore l’ingénieur ne s’en tirait-il pas sain et sauf. Il convenait de se procurer les moyens de le transporter à Dawson City dans le plus court délai.

Il va sans dire que de l’affaire Hunter-Skim il n’était plus question. Le rendez-vous du lendemain pour le duel tombait de lui-même. D’autres soins réclamaient les deux adversaires, qui ne se retrouveraient jamais, peut-être, l’un en face de l’autre.

D’ailleurs, quand les nuages furent dissipés et lorsque le soleil éclaira le théâtre du drame, ni l’un ni l’autre des deux Texiens ne fut aperçu. De la maison qu’ils occupaient à l’entrée du ravin, à travers lequel coulait désormais la dérivation du Forty Miles, il ne restait plus rien. Du matériel, dressé à la surface du claim, rockers, sluices ou pompes, il ne subsistait pas le moindre vestige. Le courant se propageait avec d’autant plus de rapidité que l’orage de la veille avait grossi les eaux, et l’élargissement de leur cours n’en abaissait pas le niveau.

Les deux Texiens et leur personnel avaient-ils pu se tirer indemnes de l’aventure, ou fallait-il les compter au nombre des victimes? On l’ignorait, et, en vérité, Summy Skim ne songeait pas à s’en inquiéter. Sa seule préoccupation était de ramener Ben Raddle à Dawson City, où les soins ne lui manqueraient pas, d’y attendre son rétablissement, et, s’il en était temps encore, de reprendre le chemin de Skagway, de Vancouver et de Montréal. Ben Raddle et lui n’avaient plus aucun motif de prolonger leur séjour au Klondike. Le 129 ne rencontrerait plus d’acquéreurs, maintenant qu’il gisait sous une profonde masse d’eau. Le mieux serait donc de quitter le plus tôt possible cet abominable pays où, ainsi que l’avait dit bien souvent Summy Skim, non sans quelque raison, des gens sains d’esprit et de corps n’auraient jamais dû mettre le pied.

Mais un prompt retour serait-il possible? La guérison de Ben Raddle n’exigerait-elle pas de longs jours, des semaines, des mois peut-être?

La première quinzaine d’août allait bientôt prendre fin. La seconde ne s’achèverait pas sans que l’hiver, si précoce sous cette haute latitude, ne fermât les régions lacustres et la passe du Chilkoot. Le Yukon lui-même ne tarderait pas à devenir impraticable, et les derniers steam-boats seraient partis pour le descendre jusqu’à son embouchure, avant que Ben Raddle fût en état de s’y embarquer.

C’était, dans ce cas, tout un hiver à passer à Dawson. Or, la perspective de rester ensevelis sept ou huit mois sous les neiges du Klondike, avec des froids de cinquante ou soixante degrés, n’était rien moins qu’agréable. Pour éviter une telle calamité, il convenait de rentrer à Dawson City en toute hâte, et de confier le blessé au docteur Pilcox, avec injonction de le guérir dans le plus court délai.

Fort heureusement, – car la question des transports ne laissait pas d’être épineuse, – Neluto retrouva sa carriole intacte sur l’épaulement où il l’avait remisée et que les eaux n’avaient pas atteint. Quant au cheval qui, pâturant en liberté, s’était enfui au moment du cataclysme, il put être repris et ramené à ses maîtres.

«Partons! s’écria aussitôt Summy Skim. Partons à l’instant!

Ben Raddle lui saisit la main.

— Mon pauvre Summy, dit-il, me pardonneras-tu? Si tu savais combien je regrette de t’avoir engagé dans cette triste affaire!..

— Il ne s’agit pas de moi, répliqua Summy Skim d’un ton bourru. Il s’agit de toi… Par exemple, sois docile, ou sinon!.. Mlle Jane va t’emmailloter la jambe du mieux possible, puis Patrick et moi nous t’étendrons dans la carriole, sur une bonne litière d’herbe sèche. J’y prendrai place avec Mlle Jane et Neluto. Lorique et Patrick nous rejoindront à Dawson City, comme ils le pourront. Nous marcherons aussi vite… non, je veux dire aussi lentement qu’il sera nécessaire, afin de t’éviter les cahots. Une fois à l’hôpital, tes maux seront finis, et le docteur Pilcox raccommodera ta jambe rien qu’en la regardant… Pourvu seulement qu’il ne la regarde pas trop longtemps et que nous puissions repartir avant la mauvaise saison!

— Mon cher Summy, dit alors Ben Raddle, il est possible que ma guérison demande plusieurs mois et je comprends quelle impatience tu dois avoir d’être de retour à Montréal… Pourquoi ne partirais-tu pas?

— Sans toi, Ben?.. Tu délires, je suppose. Mais, mon vieux Ben, je me ferais plutôt casser une jambe à mon tour!»

A travers les routes encombrées de gens qui allaient chercher du travail sur d’autres placers, la carriole transportant Ben Raddle reprit le chemin de Fort Cudahy, en suivant la rive droite du Forty Miles Creek. Au bord de la rivière, fonctionnaient les claims que l’inondation n’avait pas atteints. Quelques-uns cependant, s’ils n’avaient pas été envahis par les eaux, n’étaient plus exploitables pour le moment. Bouleversés par les secousses du sol qui s’étaient propagées à une assez grande distance de la frontière, leur matériel brisé, leurs puits comblés, leurs poteaux abattus, leurs maisonnettes détruites, ils présentaient un lamentable aspect. Mais, enfin, ce n’était pas la ruine absolue et les travaux pourraient y être repris l’année suivante.

La carriole ne marchait pas vite, les cahots de ces mauvaises routes causant de vives souffrances au blessé. Ce fut seulement le surlendemain que le véhicule s’arrêta à Fort Cudahy.

Assurément, Summy Skim n’épargnait pas ses soins, mais la vérité force à reconnaître qu’il se montrait d’une insigne maladresse, et que Ben Raddle eût été à plaindre sans le secours de Jane Edgerton. Celle-ci inventait mille moyens de soutenir le membre brisé, découvrait pour lui des positions toujours nouvelles et toujours les meilleures, et surtout trouvait sans effort les paroles les plus propres à réconforter l’âme du malade.

Malheureusement, ni elle, ni Summy Skim n’étaient capables de réduire une fracture. Il fallait pour cela un médecin, et, pas plus qu’à Fort Cudahy, il n’en existait à Fort Reliance où l’on arriva quarante-huit heures après.

Summy Skim s’inquiétait à bon droit. La situation de son cousin n’allait-elle pas empirer avec le temps et le défaut de médication? Ben Raddle, il est vrai, supportait sans se plaindre ses souffrances qui devaient être vives, mais c’est pour ne pas alarmer Summy qu’il se contenait ainsi, et celui-ci le comprenait aux cris de douleur qui échappaient parfois à l’ingénieur au plus fort de ses accès de fièvre.

Il fallait donc se hâter et atteindre, coûte que coûte, la capitale du Klondike. Là seulement, Ben Raddle pourrait être vraiment soigné. Aussi, quel soupir de soulagement poussa Summy Skim, quand, dans l’après-midi du 16 août, la carriole s’arrêta enfin devant l’hôpital de Dawson.

Le hasard voulut qu’à ce moment Edith Edgerton fût sur le seuil de la porte pour les besoins de son service. D’un coup d’œil, elle reconnut quel malade on lui amenait, et sans doute en éprouva-t-elle une violente émotion, car la subite pâleur de son visage put être remarquée de toutes les personnes présentes. Quelle que fût, d’ailleurs, cette émotion, elle ne la trahit par aucun autre signe extérieur, sinon qu’elle en oublia d’embrasser sa cousine. Sans prononcer une parole, elle prit rapidement les mesures les plus propres à soulager le blessé, qu’une fièvre ardente rendait à demi inconscient. Sous sa direction, celui-ci fut descendu de la carriole et transporté dans l’hôpital avec tant d’adresse qu’il ne poussa pas la moindre plainte. Dix minutes après, il était déposé dans une chambre particulière, et s’endormait entre deux draps d’une blancheur éblouissante et soigneusement bordés.

«Vous voyez, miss Edith, que j’avais raison de soutenir, en vous amenant à Dawson City, que nous avions à votre présence un intérêt personnel! dit Summy d’un ton désolé.

— Qu’est-il donc arrivé à M. Raddle?» interrogea Edith sans répondre directement à la remarque.

Ce fut Jane qui mit sa cousine au courant des aventures dont celle-ci voyait en somme le dénouement. Le récit durait encore quand survint le docteur Pilcox, qu’Edith avait aussitôt fait appeler.

Le tremblement de terre dont la région du Forty Miles Creek avait été le théâtre était connu depuis quelques jours à Dawson City. On savait maintenant qu’une trentaine de personnes en avaient été victimes. Mais le docteur Pilcox ne pouvait se douter que l’une d’elles fût l’ingénieur.

«Comment! s’écria-t-il avec sa faconde habituelle, c’est monsieur Raddle!.. et avec une jambe brisée!

— Oui, docteur, lui-même, répondit Summy Skim… Et mon pauvre Ben souffre effroyablement.

— Bon!.. bon!.. Ce ne sera rien, reprit le docteur. On la lui remettra, sa jambe!.. Ce n’est pas un médecin, c’est un rebouteur qu’il lui faut. On va lui rebouter ça dans les règles!

Ben Raddle n’avait qu’une fracture simple au-dessous du genou, fracture que le docteur réduisit très habilement, puis le membre fut placé dans un appareil qui assura sa complète immobilité. Tout en agissant, le docteur parlait suivant sa coutume:

— Mon cher client, disait-il, vous pouvez vous vanter d’avoir une vraie chance! Axiome: se briser les membres pour les avoir solides. Vous aurez des jambes de cerf ou d’orignal… une jambe de cerf plutôt, à moins que vous ne préfériez que je casse aussi l’autre!

— Merci bien! murmura avec un pâle sourire Ben Raddle, revenu à la pleine conscience de lui-même.

— Ne vous gênez pas! reprit le jovial docteur. A votre disposition… Non?.. Vous ne vous décidez pas?.. On se contentera donc d’en guérir une.

— Combien de temps exigera la guérison? demanda Summy.

— Euh!.. Un mois… six semaines… Des os, monsieur Skim, ça ne se ressoude pas comme deux bouts de fer chauffés au rouge blanc. Il faut le temps, à défaut de la forge et du marteau.

— Le temps!.. le temps!.. maugréa Summy Skim.

— Que voulez-vous, répliqua le docteur Pilcox, c’est la nature qui opère, et, vous ne l’ignorez pas, elle n’est jamais pressée, la nature. C’est même pour cela qu’on a inventé la patience.»

Patienter, voilà ce que Summy Skim avait de mieux à faire. Patienter et se résigner à voir la mauvaise saison arriver avant que Ben Raddle fût remis sur pied! Aussi a-t-on idée d’un pays où l’hiver commence dès la première semaine de septembre, où la neige et les glaces s’accumulent au point de rendre la contrée impraticable? Comment, à moins d’être tout à fait valide, Ben Raddle pourrait-il, par de telles températures, affronter les fatigues du retour et franchir les passes du Chilkoot, pour aller s'embarquer à Skagway sur les steamboats de Vancouver? Quant à ceux qui descendent le Yukon jusqu'à Saint-Michel, le dernier serait parti dans une quinzaine de jours en laissant les embâcles se former derrière lui!

Précisément, le Scout revint le 20 août à Dawson City.

Le premier soin de Bill Stell fut de s'informer si MM. Ben Raddle et Summy Skim avaient terminé l'affaire relative au claim 129, et s'ils se préparaient à reprendre la route de Montréal. Il alla, dans ce but, trouver le docteur Pilcox à l'hôpital.

Quelle fut sa surprise lorsqu'il apprit que Ben Raddle y était en traitement et ne pourrait être rétabli avant six semaines.

«Oui, Bill, lui déclara Summy Skim, voilà où nous en sommes! Non seulement nous n'avons pas vendu le 129, mais il n'y a plus de 129! Et non seulement il n'y a plus de 129, mais il nous est impossible de quitter cet atroce Klondike pour un pays plus habitable!

Le Scout connut alors la catastrophe du Forty Miles et comment Ben Raddle avait été grièvement blessé dans cette circonstance.

«C'est bien là ce qu'il y a de plus déplorable, conclut Summy Skim, car enfin, nous en aurions fait notre deuil du 129. Je n'y tenais pas, moi, au 129! Parbleu! Quelle sotte idée a eue l'oncle Josias d'acquérir le 129 et de mourir pour nous laisser le 129!»

Cent vingt-neuf!.. Avec quel mépris Summy Skim énonçait ce nombre maudit!

«Ah! Scout, s’écria-t-il, si le pauvre Ben n’en avait pas été victime, comme au fond je l’aurais béni, ce tremblement de terre! Il nous débarrassait d’un héritage encombrant! Plus de claim! Plus d’exploitation! C’est tout bénéfice à mon sens.

— Vous allez donc être obligés, interrompit le Scout, de passer l’hiver à Dawson City?

— Autant dire au pôle Nord, répliqua Summy Skim.

— De sorte que moi, reprit Bill Stell, qui venais vous chercher…

— Vous repartirez sans nous, Bill,» répondit Summy Skim, avec un accent de résignation qui confinait au désespoir.

C’est ce qui arriva quelques jours plus tard, après que le Scout eut pris congé des deux Canadiens, en promettant de revenir au début du printemps.

«Dans huit mois!» avait soupiré Summy Skim.

Cependant le traitement de Ben Raddle suivait son cours régulier. Aucune complication n’était survenue. Le docteur Pilcox se déclarait on ne peut plus satisfait. La jambe de son client n’en serait que plus solide et lui en vaudrait deux à elle seule. «Cela lui en fera trois, si je compte bien,» avait-il coutume de dire.

Quant à Ben Raddle, il prenait son mal en patience. Admirablement soigné par Edith, il semblait s’accommoder le mieux du monde du régime de l’hôpital. Tout au plus eût-on pu lui reprocher de se montrer un peu trop exigeant à l’égard de sa douce garde-malade. Il fallait que celle-ci fit d’interminables stations au chevet de son blessé, et encore lui était-il interdit de le quitter quelques minutes, pour les besoins du service, sous peine de s’attirer les plus véhémentes protestations. Il est juste d’ajouter que la victime de cette tyrannie n’en paraissait pas autrement fâchée. Volontiers, elle s’oubliait en de longues causeries, quitte à réaliser, pendant le sommeil de l’ingénieur, des miracles d’activité, pour que les autres pensionnaires de l’hôpital ne souffrissent pas de la préférence qu’elle accordait à un seul.

Au cours de leurs tête-à-tête, les deux jeunes gens ne songeaient pas à ébaucher le moindre roman. Non, pendant que son cousin, chaque fois que le temps le permettait, allait à la chasse avec le fidèle Neluto, Ben Raddle se tenait au courant des marchés de Dawson City et des découvertes nouvelles dans les régions aurifères. Edith était sa gazette vivante. Elle lui lisait les journaux locaux, tels que *Le Soleil du Yukon, Le Soleil de Minuit*, *La Pépite du Klondike,* d’autres encore. De ce que le 129 n’existait plus, résultait-il qu’il ne restât plus rien à faire dans le pays? N’y aurait-il pas quelque autre claim à acquérir, puis à exploiter? L’ingénieur, décidément, avait pris goût à ses travaux du Forty Miles Creek.

S’il se gardait bien de parler de ces vagues projets à Summy Skim qui, cette fois, n’aurait pu contenir sa trop juste indignation, il se rattrapait quand Edith était seule auprès de lui. Celle-ci n’avait pas été abattue par la ruine de sa cousine, et sa foi dans l’avenir n’en était pas ébranlée. Elle discutait avec l’ingénieur les mérites de telle ou telle partie du district. Ils élaboraient ensemble des plans d’avenir le plus sérieusement du monde. On le voit, si la fièvre causée par la blessure ne dévorait plus le corps de Ben Raddle, la fièvre de l’or n’avait pas quitté son âme, et, de celle-là, il ne semblait pas près de guérir. Cette fièvre morale, ce n’était pas, d’ailleurs, le désir dépossséder le précieux métal qui la lui donnait, mais bien la passion de la découverte et l’ivresse supérieure de rendre réalisables les rêves audacieux qu’enfantait son cerveau.

Comment son imagination n'eût-elle pas été surexcitée par les nouvelles des claims montagneux de la Bonanza, de l'Eldorado et du Little Skookum?

Ici, on lavait jusqu'à cent dollars par ouvrier et par heure! Là, on retirait huit mille dollars d'un trou long de vingt-quatre pieds, large de quatorze! Un syndicat de Londres venait d'acheter deux claims sur le Bear et le Dominion au prix de dix-sept cent cinquante mille francs! Le placer n° 26, sur l'Eldorado, était à céder pour deux millions, et les ouvriers y recueillaient chacun et chaque jour jusqu'à soixante mille francs! Au Dôme, sur la ligne de partage des eaux entre la Klondike River et l'Indian River, M. Ogilvie ne prévoyait-il pas, avec sa haute compétence, une extraction totale dépassant cent cinquante millions de francs?

Et cependant, en dépit de ce mirage, Ben Raddle eût été sage, peut-être, de ne pas oublier ce que le pasteur de Dawson City répétait à un Français, M. Amès Semiré, l'un des voyageurs qui ont le mieux étudié ces régions aurifères:

«Avant de partir, il convient que vous vous assuriez la possession d'un lit à mon hôpital. Si la fièvre de l'or vous atteint, vous aussi, au cours de votre excursion, vous ne le regretterez pas. Pour peu que vous trouviez quelques parcelles d'or – et il y en a partout, dans le pays – vous vous surmènerez inévitablement. Dans ce cas vous attraperez sûrement le scorbut ou autre chose. Or, pour deux cent cinquante francs par an, je cède des abonnements qui vous donnent droit à une couchette et aux soins gratuits du médecin. Tout le monde me prend des tickets. Voici le vôtre.»

Des soins, l'expérience actuelle montrait à Ben Raddle qu'il n'en manquerait pas à l'hôpital de Dawson. Mais son irrésistible besoin d'aventures n'allait-il pas l'entraîner loin de Dawson City, dans ces régions inexplorées où l'on découvrait de nouveaux gisements?

Entre temps, Summy Skim s’était informé, près de la police, des Texiens Hunter et Malone. Avaient-ils été revus depuis la catastrophe du Forty Miles Creek?

La réponse avait été négative. Ni l’un ni l’autre n’étaient revenus à Dawson City où leurs excès eussent, comme d’habitude, signalé leur présence. On les aurait rencontrés dans les casinos, dans les maisons de jeu, en tous ces lieux de plaisir où ils tenaient le premier rang. Il se pouvait donc qu’ils eussent péri dans le tremblement de terre du Forty Miles Creek, entraînés par l’inondation qui en avait été la conséquence. Toutefois, comme aucun des Américains qui travaillaient sur le claim 131 n’avait été retrouvé, et comme il n’était pas admissible que tous eussent été victimes du désastre, il était possible que Hunter et Malone fussent repartis avec leur personnel pour les gisements de Circle City et de Birch Creek, où ils avaient commencé leur campagne.

Au début d’octobre, Ben Raddle put quitter son lit. Le docteur Pilcox ne laissait pas d’être fier de cette guérison, à laquelle les soins d’Edith avaient contribué autant que les siens.

Si l’ingénieur était sur pied, il lui fallait toutefois s’imposer encore certains ménagements; et il n’aurait pu supporter le voyage de Dawson City à Skagway. D’ailleurs, il était trop tard. Les premières neiges de l’hiver tombaient, abondantes, les cours d’eau commençaient à geler, la navigation n’était plus praticable, ni sur le Yukon, ni sur les lacs. Déjà, la moyenne de la température atteignait quinze degrés au-dessous de zéro, en attendant qu’elle tombât à cinquante ou soixante.

Les deux cousins avaient fait choix d’une chambre dans un hôtel de Front street et prenaient au French Royal Restaurant leurs repas qui n’étaient pas assaisonnés de la plus franche gaîté. Ils parlaient peu. Mais, jusque dans la tristesse, la diversité de leurs natures continuait à s'accuser.

Lorsque Summy Skim disait parfois en hochant la tête: «Ce qu'il y a de plus fâcheux dans cette affaire, c'est que nous n'ayons pu quitter Dawson City avant l'hiver.

Ben Raddle répondait invariablement:

— Ce qu'il y a de plus fâcheux, c'est, peut-être, de n'avoir pas vendu notre claim avant la catastrophe et, sûrement, d'être dans l'impossibilité d'en continuer l'exploitation.»

Là-dessus, pour ne point entamer une discussion inutile, Summy Skim décrochait son fusil, appelait Neluto et partait en chasse aux environs de la ville.

Un mois s'écoula encore, au cours duquel les oscillations de la colonne thermométrique furent vraiment extraordinaires. Elle descendait à trente ou quarante degrés, puis remontait à quinze ou dix sous zéro, suivant la direction du vent.

Pendant ce mois, la guérison de Ben Raddle se poursuivit de la manière la plus satisfaisante. Bientôt, il put entreprendre, en compagnie de Summy Skim, des excursions chaque jour plus longues, auxquelles, à défaut de sa cousine retenue par ses fonctions, se joignait d'ordinaire Jane Edgerton. C'était un véritable plaisir pour les trois promeneurs, soit de marcher, lorsque le calme de l'atmosphère le permettait, soit, chaudement vêtus de fourrures, de glisser en traîneau sur la neige durcie.

Un jour, le 17 novembre, le trio, sorti à pied cette fois-là, se trouvait à une lieue environ dans le nord de Dawson City; Summy Skim avait fait bonne chasse et on se préparait à revenir, lorsque Jane Edgerton s'arrêta tout à coup et s'écria, en indiquant un arbre distant d'une cinquantaine de pas:

«Un homme!.. là!

— Un homme?» répéta Summy Skim.

En effet, au pied d'un bouleau, un homme était étendu sur la neige. Il ne faisait aucun mouvement. Sans doute il était mort, mort de froid, car la température était alors très basse.

Les trois promeneurs coururent vers lui. L'inconnu paraissait âgé d'une quarantaine d'années. Il avait les yeux clos, et son visage exprimait une grande souffrance. Il respirait encore, mais si faiblement qu'il semblait parvenu au seuil même de la mort.

Comme si la chose allait de soi, Ben Raddle s'empara sur-le-champ de l'autorité.

«Toi, Summy, dit-il d'une voix brève, tâche de te procurer un véhicule quelconque. Moi, je cours à la plus prochaine maison chercher un cordial. Pendant ce temps, Mlle Jane frictionnera le malade avec de la neige et s'efforcera de le ranimer.»

L'ordre fut aussitôt exécuté. Quand Ben Raddle prit sa course, Summy était déjà parti et se dirigeait vers Dawson à toutes jambes.

Restée seule auprès de l’inconnu, Jane se mit en devoir de lui faire subir une friction héroïque. Le visage d’abord. Puis elle entr’ouvrit le grossier cafetan afin d’atteindre les épaules et la poitrine.

De l’une des poches, un portefeuille de cuir glissa, et des papiers s’éparpillèrent sur le sol. L’un d’eux attira plus particulièrement l’attention de Jane qui le ramassa et y jeta un rapide coup d’œil. C’était une feuille de parchemin pliée en quatre, aux arêtes élimées et presque coupées par des frottements répétés. Ouvert, le document n’était autre chose qu’une carte géographique, la carte d’un littoral marin, sans autre indication qu’un parallèle, un méridien et une grosse croix rouge en un point de cette côte ignorée.

Jane replia le document et, l’ayant mis machinalement dans sa poche, ramassa les autres papiers qu’elle réintégra dans le portefeuille, puis continua son énergique médication. Les bons effets, d’ailleurs, n’en étaient pas contestables. Le malade commençait à s’agiter. Bientôt ses paupières battirent et de vagues paroles s’échappèrent de ses lèvres bleuies, tandis que sa main, qu’il avait d’abord portée à sa poitrine, venait faiblement serrer celle de Jane Edgerton. En se penchant, la jeune fille put saisir quelques mots qui, lui parurent dénués de sens:

«Là… disait le mourant… Portefeuille… Vous le donne… Volcan d’Or… Merci… A vous… Ma mère…

Ben Raddle revenait à ce moment, et, sur la route, on entendait le bruit d’une voiture qui s’approchait au galop.

— Voici ce que j’ai trouvé, dit Jane en remettant le portefeuille à l’ingénieur.

Ce portefeuille ne contenait que des lettres, toutes adressées au même destinataire: M. Jacques Ledun, et datées de Nantes ou de Paris.

— Un Français!» s'écria Ben Raddle.

Un instant plus tard, l'homme retombé dans un profond coma était placé dans la carriole ramenée par Summy et emporté à toute bride vers l'hôpital de Dawson.

CHAPITRE II

Le volcan d’or.

Un quelques minutes, la carriole fut à l’hôpital. L’homme qu’elle rapportait y fut introduit et déposé dans cette même chambre que Ben Raddle avait occupée jusqu’à sa guérison. Ainsi, le malade n’aurait pas à subir le voisinage des autres hospitalisés.

C’est à Summy Skim qu’il devait cette faveur. Celui-ci, pour l’obtenir, avait mis enjeu ses hautes relations.

«C’est un Français, presque un compatriote! avait-il dit à Edith Edgerton. Ce que vous avez fait pour Ben, je vous demande de le faire pour lui; et j’espère que le docteur Pilcox le guérira comme il a guéri mon cousin.»

Le docteur ne tarda pas à se rendre auprès de son nouveau pensionnaire. Le Français n’avait point repris connaissance et ses yeux restaient fermés. Le docteur Pilcox constata un pouls très faible, une respiration à peine sensible. De blessure, il n’en observa aucune sur ce corps effroyablement amaigri par les privations, les fatigues, la misère. Nul doute que le malheureux ne fût tombé d’épuisement près de l’arbre au pied duquel on l’avait ramassé, et bien certainement le froid l’eût achevé s’il fût resté toute la nuit sans secours et sans abri.

«Cet homme est à demi gelé,» dit le docteur Pilcox.

On entoura le malade de couvertures et de boules d’eau chaude; on lui fît prendre des boissons brûlantes, on le frictionna pour rétablir la circulation.

Tout ce qu’il y avait à faire fut fait. Vains efforts qui ne purent le tirer de son état de prostration.

La vie reviendrait-elle dans le moribond qu’on avait ramené? Le docteur Pilcox refusait de se prononcer.

Jacques Ledun, tel était, on l’a vu, le nom inscrit sur l’adresse des lettres, toutes signées par sa mère, trouvées dans le portefeuille du Français. La plus récente, timbrée de Nantes, avait déjà cinq mois de date. La mère écrivait à son fils: à Dawson City, Klondike. Elle implorait une réponse qui n’avait peut-être pas été envoyée.

Ben et Summy les lurent, ces lettres, qu’ils passaient ensuite à Edith et à Jane Edgerton. Leur émotion à tous fut profonde. Plus d’une crispation de la face la dissimula chez les hommes, tandis que les jeunes filles, malgré leur force d’âme, laissaient librement couler des larmes de pitié. Chaque ligne criait l’amour maternel le plus ardent. C’était une suite ininterrompue de conseils, de caresses et d’appels. Que Jacques se soignât bien, et surtout qu’il revînt et renonçât à son aventureuse poursuite de la fortune; tel était le vœu incessant de la mère lointaine qui se riait de la misère, à la condition que l’on fût deux pour la supporter.

Ces lettres fournissaient, en tous cas, d’utiles indications sur leur destinataire. S’il succombait, on pourrait ainsi prévenir la pauvre mère du malheur qui la frappait.

Ce qui fut établi par l’ensemble de ces lettres, au nombre d’une dizaine, c’est que Jacques Ledun avait quitté l’Europe depuis deux ans déjà. Il ne s’était pas rendu directement au Klondike pour y exercer le métier de prospecteur. Les inscriptions de quelques lettres indiquaient qu’il avait dû chercher fortune tout d’abord sur les gisements aurifères de l’Ontario et de la Colombie. Puis, attiré sans doute par les prodigieuses nouvelles des journaux de Dawson City, il s'était joint à la foule des mineurs. Du reste, il ne semblait pas qu'il eût été propriétaire d'un claim, car son portefeuille ne contenait aucun titre de propriété, ni d'ailleurs aucun document en dehors des lettres qui venaient d'être lues.

Il en existait un cependant, mais celui-là ne se trouvait plus dans le portefeuille. Il était entre les mains de Jane Edgerton, qui ne songea même pas à le communiquer à sa cousine et à ses amis. Le soir seulement, au moment de se coucher, elle pensa à ce bizarre morceau de parchemin, et, l'ayant étalé sous la lumière de la lampe, s'amusa à le déchiffrer comme elle eût fait d'un rébus.

C'était bien une carte, ainsi qu'elle l'avait tout d'abord supposé. Des lignes assez irrégulièrement tracées au crayon dessinaient le littoral d'un océan où allait se jeter un cours d'eau auquel affluaient quelques rivières. A en juger par l'orientation naturelle de la carte, ce cours d'eau paraissait se diriger vers le Nord-Ouest. Était-ce donc le Yukon ou son tributaire la Klondike River? Cette hypothèse n'était pas admissible. D'après le sens de la carte, il ne pouvait être question que de l'océan Glacial et d'une contrée située au-dessus du cercle polaire arctique. Au croisement d'un méridien numéroté 136° 15' et d'un parallèle dont on n'indiquait pas l'ordre numérique était tracée la croix rouge qui, tout de suite, avait attiré l'attention de Jane Edgerton. C'est en vain que celle-ci s'appliqua à résoudre le problème. Sans le chiffre de la latitude, il était impossible de savoir quelle partie du Nord-Amérique représentait la carte, et plus spécialement en quel point du continent pouvait être située la mystérieuse croix rouge.

Était-ce donc vers cette contrée quelle qu'elle fût que se dirigeait Jacques Ledun, ou en revenait-il lorsqu'il était tombé vaincu à quelques kilomètres de Dawson City? On ne le saurait jamais, si la mort emportait le malheureux Français sans qu'il eût repris connaissance.

Il ne paraissait pas douteux que Jacques Ledun appartînt à une famille occupant un certain rang social. Ce n'était pas un ouvrier. Les lettres de sa mère, écrites de bon style, en témoignaient. Par quelles vicissitudes, par quelles infortunes avait-il passé pour en être arrivé à ce dénûment, à cette fin misérable sur un lit d'hôpital?

Quelques jours s'écoulèrent. Malgré les soins dont Jacques Ledun était entouré, son état ne s'améliorait pas. A peine s'il pouvait, pour répondre aux questions, balbutier des mots inintelligibles. Qu'il fût en possession de son intelligence, on était même en droit d'en douter.

«Il est à craindre, dit à ce propos le docteur Pilcox, que l'esprit de notre malade n'ait été fortement ébranlé. Lorsque ses yeux s'entr'ouvrent, j'y surprends un regard vague qui me donne à penser.

— Mais son état physique, s'informa Summy Skim, ne s'améliore-t-il pas?

— Il me paraît plus grave encore que son état moral,» déclara nettement le docteur.

Pour que le docteur Pilcox, si confiant d'ordinaire, tînt ce langage, c'est qu'il avait peu d'espoir dans la guérison de Jacques Ledun.

Cependant Ben Raddle et Summy Skim ne voulaient pas désespérer. A les entendre, une réaction se produirait avec le temps. Quand bien même Jacques Ledun ne devrait point revenir à la santé, il recouvrerait, du moins, son intelligence; il parlerait, il répondrait.

Quelques jours plus tard, l’événement sembla leur donner raison. Le docteur Pilcox avait-il trop douté de l’efficacité de ses remèdes? Toujours est-il que la réaction si impatiemment attendue par Ben Raddle commença à se produire. L’état de prostration de Jacques Ledun parut moins absolu. Ses yeux restaient plus longtemps ouverts. Son regard plus ferme interrogeait, parcourait avec surprise cette chambre inconnue et les personnes groupées autour de lui: le docteur, Ben Raddle, Summy Skim, Edith et Jane Edgerton.

Le malheureux était-il donc sauvé?

Le docteur secoua la tête avec découragement. Un médecin ne pouvait être dupe de ces trompeuses apparences. Si l’intelligence se rallumait, c’était à la veille de s’éteindre. Ces yeux, qui venaient de se rouvrir, seraient bientôt à jamais refermés. Il n’y avait là qu’une dernière révolte de la vie luttant inutilement contre un prochain anéantissement.

Edith s’était penchée, guettant les paroles que, bien bas, d’une voix entrecoupée de soupirs et qui s’entendait à peine, murmurait Jacques Ledun. Elle dit, répondant à une question devinée plutôt que comprise:

«Vous êtes dans une chambre de l’hôpital.

— Où? interrogea le malade en essayant de se redresser.

— A Dawson City… Il y a six jours, on vous a trouvé évanoui sur la route… On vous a transporté ici.

Les paupières de Jacques Ledun s’abaissèrent un instant. Il semblait que cet effort l’eût épuisé. Le docteur lui fit prendre quelques gouttes d’un cordial qui ramena le sang à ses joues décolorées et la parole à ses lèvres.

— Qui êtes-vous? demanda-t-il.

— Des Canadiens, répondit Summy Skim, presque des Français. Ayez confiance. Nous vous sauverons.»

Le malade eut un pâle sourire, et retomba sur son oreiller. Sans doute comprenait-il que la mort était proche, car, de ses yeux clos, filtraient de grosses larmes qui coulaient une à une sur son visage amaigri. De l’avis du docteur, on ne lui adressa pas d’autres questions. Mieux valait le laisser reposer. On veillerait à son chevet, et on serait là, prêts à lui répondre, dès qu’il aurait repris assez de force pour parler.

Les deux jours suivants n’amenèrent ni aggravation, ni amélioration dans l’état de Jacques Ledun. Sa faiblesse était toujours la même, et on pouvait craindre qu’il lui fût impossible de réagir. Cependant, à de longs intervalles, en ménageant ses efforts, il put parler de nouveau et répondre à des questions qu’il paraissait provoquer. On sentait qu’il y avait bien des choses qu’il désirait dire.

Peu à peu, on parvint ainsi à connaître l’histoire de ce Français, autant d’après ce qu’il raconta volontairement dans ses instants lucides que par ce qu’on, réussit à comprendre dans ses moments de délire. Certaines circonstances de sa vie demeuraient toutefois entourées de mystère. Que faisait-il au Klondike? D’où venait-il, où allait-il, quand il était tombé aux portes de Dawson? On n’avait aucun renseignement sur ce sujet.

Âgé de quarante-deux ans, d’une constitution robuste qui n’avait pu être altérée à ce point que par les plus atroces privations, Jacques Ledun était un Breton de Nantes.

Sa mère, veuve d’un agent de change ruiné en des spéculations hasardeuses, demeurait encore dans cette ville, où elle soutenait contre la misère grandissante une lutte chaque jour plus inégale.

Dès l’enfance, Jacques Ledun avait eu la vocation de la mer. Une grave maladie, survenue au moment où il allait passer les examens de l’École navale l’avait arrêté aux premiers pas de cette carrière. Ayant dépassé l’âge réglementaire, il dut s’engager comme pilotin à bord d’un navire de commerce, et, après quelques voyages à Melbourne, aux Indes et à San Francisco, il se fit recevoir capitaine au long cours. C’est à ce titre qu’il était entré comme enseigne auxiliaire dans la marine militaire.

Son service dura trois ans, au bout desquels comprenant que, à moins de circonstances rares où peut se distinguer un marin, il n’aurait jamais l’avancement de ses camarades sortis du *Borda*, il donna sa démission et chercha une position dans la marine marchande.

Un commandement était difficile à obtenir, et il dut se contenter d’être second sur un voilier à destination des mers du Sud.

Quatre années s’écoulèrent ainsi. Il atteignait vingt-neuf ans quand son père mourut, laissant sa veuve dans un état voisin de la misère. En vain Jacques Ledun s’efforça-t-il de changer sa place de second pour celle de capitaine. Le manque d’argent lui interdisant de prendre, ainsi que cela se fait d’ordinaire, une part dans le navire dont il sollicitait le commandement, il resta second. Quel médiocre avenir s’ouvrait devant lui, et comment arriverait-il à cette aisance, si modeste fût-elle, qu’il rêvait pour sa mère?

Ses voyages l’avaient amené en Australie et en Californie où les gisements aurifères attirent tant d’émigrants. Comme toujours, c’est le plus petit nombre qui s’y enrichit, tandis que l’immense majorité n’y rencontre que ruine et misère. Jacques Ledun, ébloui par l’exemple des plus heureux, résolut de poursuivre la fortune sur la route si périlleuse des chercheurs d’or.

A cette époque, l’attention venait d’être attirée sur les mines du Dominion, avant même que ses richesses métalliques se fussent si étonnamment accrues par les découvertes du Klondike. En d’autres parties moins éloignées, d’un accès plus facile, le Canada possédait des territoires aurifères où l’exploitation s’effectuait dans des conditions meilleures, sans être interrompue par les terribles hivers de la région yukonienne. Une des mines de cette région, la plus importante peut-être, *le Roi*, venait alors de produire en deux ans quatre millions cinq cent mille francs de dividende. Ce fut au service de cette société qu’entra Jacques Ledun.

Mais celui qui se borne à vendre le travail de son cerveau ou de ses membres ne s’enrichit pas d’ordinaire. Ce que rêvait le courageux et imprudent Français, une fortune rapidement enlevée par quelque heureux coup du sort, demeurait aussi irréalisable sur la terre ferme que sur la mer. Ouvrier ou employé, il était condamné à végéter toute sa vie.

On parlait alors des découvertes faites sur les territoires arrosés par le Yukon. Le nom du Klondike éblouissait comme avaient ébloui ceux de la Californie, de l’Australie et du Transvaal. La foule des mineurs se portait vers le Nord. Jacques Ledun suivit la foule.

En travaillant sur les gisements de l’Ontario, il avait fait la connaissance d’un certain Harry Brown, Canadien d’origine anglaise. Tous deux étaient animés de la même ambition, dévorés du même appétit de réussir. Ce fut cet Harry Brown qui décida Jacques Ledun à quitter sa position pour se lancer dans l’inconnu. Tous deux, avec les quelques économies dont ils pouvaient disposer, se rendirent à Dawson City.

Résolus à travailler cette fois pour leur propre compte, ils eurent la sagesse de comprendre qu'il leur fallait porter leur effort ailleurs que dans les districts trop connus de la Bonanza, de l'Eldorado, du Sixty Miles ou du Forty Miles. Quand bien même les claims n'y fussent pas montés à des prix exorbitants, les deux compagnons n'y eussent pas trouvé une place libre. On s'y disputait déjà les placers à coups de millions de dollars. Il fallait aller plus loin, dans le Nord de l'Alaska ou du Dominion, bien au delà du Grand Fleuve, dans ces régions presque inexplorées où quelques hardis prospecteurs signalaient de nouvelles richesses aurifères. Il fallait aller là où personne n'était allé encore. Il fallait découvrir quelque gisement sans maître, dont la possession appartiendrait au premier occupant.

Ainsi raisonnèrent Jacques Ledun et Harry Brown.

Sans matériel, sans personnel, après s'être assuré avec ce qu'il leur restait d'argent l'existence pour dix-huit mois, ils quittèrent Dawson City, et, vivant du produit de leur chasse, s'aventurèrent au Nord du Yukon à travers la contrée à peu près inconnue qui s'étend au delà du cercle polaire arctique.

L'été débutait au moment où Jacques Ledun se mit en route, presque exactement six mois avant le jour où il venait d'être relevé mourant aux environs de Dawson City. Jusqu'où leur campagne avait-elle conduit les deux aventuriers? S'étaient-ils transportés aux limites du continent sur les rivages de l'océan Glacial? Quelque découverte les avait-elle payés de tant d'efforts? Il n'y paraissait pas, à en juger par le dénûment de l'un d'eux. Et celui-là était seul! Des deux compagnons, attaqués par des indigènes sur la route du retour, seul Jacques Ledun avait pu sauver sa vie, en abandonnant tout ce qu’il possédait aux assaillants. Harry Brown était mort sous leurs coups, et ses os blanchissaient maintenant dans ces régions désolées.

Ce fut la dernière information que l’on put obtenir. Encore, cette douloureuse histoire, n’avait-il été possible de la recueillir que par bribes, lorsqu’un peu de lucidité revenait au malade, dont la faiblesse, ainsi que l’avait prévu le docteur Pilcox, s’aggravait de jour en jour.

Quant au résultat de son exploration, quant à la région atteinte par Jacques Ledun et Harry Brown et d’où ils revenaient au moment de l’attaque des Indiens, autant de secrets qui risquaient d’être enfermés à jamais dans la tombe où le pauvre Français ne tarderait pas à être couché.

Et, cependant, un document existait, incomplet, il est vrai, mais que la fin de cette histoire eût probablement complété. Ce document que nul en dehors d’elle ne connaissait, Jane y pensait souvent. L’usage qu’elle en ferait dépendrait des circonstances. Bien certainement, elle le restituerait à Jacques Ledun s’il revenait à la santé. Mais, s’il mourait au contraire?.. En attendant, Jane s’entêtait dans de vaines tentatives pour percer l’irritant mystère. Que cette carte fût celle de la contrée où le Français et son compagnon avaient passé la dernière saison, cela n’était pas douteux. Mais quelle était cette contrée?.. Où courait ce creek dont la ligne sinueuse se dessinait du Sud-Est au Nord-Ouest? Était-ce un affluent du Yukon, du Koyukuk ou de la Porcupine River?..

Un jour qu’elle était seule avec lui, Jane mit sous les yeux du malade cette carte que sa main avait vraisemblablement tracée. Le regard de Jacques Ledun s’anima, se fixa un instant sur la croix rouge qui excitait au plus haut point la curiosité de la jeune prospectrice. Celle-ci fut convaincue que cette croix marquait le lieu de quelque découverte… Mais bientôt le malade repoussa de la main la carte qui lui était offerte, puis referma les yeux sans que le moindre mot eût éclairé l'irritant mystère.

N'avait-il donc pas la force de parler? Ou bien entendait-il garder jusqu'au bout son secret? Au fond de cette âme, prête à quitter un corps épuisé, restait-il encore l'espoir de revenir à la vie? Peut-être le malheureux voulait-il se réserver le prix de tant d'efforts. Peut-être se disait-il qu'il reverrait sa mère et qu'il lui rapporterait une fortune conquise pour elle.

Plusieurs jours s'écoulèrent. On était alors en pleine saison froide. A plusieurs reprises la température s'abaissa jusqu'à cinquante degrés centigrades au-dessous de zéro. Il était impossible de braver de tels froids au dehors. Les heures qu'ils ne donnaient pas à l'hôpital, les deux cousins les passaient dans leur chambre. Parfois, cependant, après s'être emmitouflés de fourrures jusque par-dessus la tête, ils se rendaient dans quelques casinos où le public se faisait, d'ailleurs, assez rare, la plupart des mineurs ayant gagné, avant les grands froids, Dyea, Skagway ou Vancouver.

Peut-être Hunter et Malone s'étaient-ils installés, pour l'hiver, dans l'une de ces villes. Le certain, c'est que, depuis la catastrophe du Forty Miles Creek, personne ne les avait revus et qu'ils ne figuraient pas, d'autre part, au nombre des victimes du tremblement de terre dont l'identité avait été reconnue.

Pendant ces journées souvent troublées par des tempêtes de neige, Summy Skim ne pouvait aller chasser, en compagnie du fidèle Neluto, les ours qui venaient rôder jusqu'aux abords de Dawson City. Il en était réduit, comme tout le monde, à se confiner dans une claustration quasi absolue, cause, avec l'excessif abaissement de température, des maladies qui déciment la ville au cours de la mauvaise saison. L'hôpital ne suffisait plus à recevoir les malades, et elle serait bientôt occupée de nouveau, la place qui ne tarderait pas à être libre dans la chambre de Jacques Ledun.

Le docteur Pilcox avait tout essayé en vain, pour lui rendre des forces. Les remèdes avaient perdu toute action, et son estomac ne supportait plus aucune nourriture. Visiblement la vie abandonnait de jour en jour, d’heure en heure, cet organisme épuisé.

Le 30 novembre, dans la matinée, Jacques Ledun eut une crise si furieuse que l’on put croire qu’il n’en reviendrait pas. Il se débattait, et, si faible qu’il fût, on eut peine à le maintenir dans son lit. En proie à un violent délire, il bégayait, des mots, toujours les mêmes, dont il n’avait pas conscience.

«Là!.. le volcan… l’éruption… l’or… de la lave d’or…

Puis, dans un appel désespéré, il criait:

«Mère… mère… pour toi!..

Par degrés, l’agitation se calma et le malheureux tomba dans un profond abattement. La vie ne se trahissait plus en lui que par un léger souffle. Le docteur le jugea incapable de supporter une seconde crise de ce genre.

Pendant l’après-midi, Jane Edgerton, étant venue s’asseoir au chevet du malade, le trouva plus calme. Il semblait même avoir repris la pleine conscience de lui-même. Une grande amélioration s’était produite sans conteste, comme il arrive parfois aux approches de la mort.

Jacques Ledun avait rouvert les yeux. Son regard, d’une singulière fixité, alla chercher celui de la jeune fille. Évidemment, il avait quelque chose à dire, il voulait parler. Jane se pencha, s’efforçant de comprendre les mots presque inintelligibles que balbutiaient les lèvres du mourant.

— La carte… disait Jacques Ledun.

— La voici, répondit vivement Jane, en rendant le document à son légitime propriétaire.

Comme il l’avait fait une première fois, celui-ci repoussa le papier du geste.

— Je la donne… murmura-t-il. Là… la croix rouge… un volcan d’or…

— Vous donnez votre carte?.. à qui?

— Vous…

— A moi?..

— Oui… A la condition… que vous pensiez… à ma mère.

— Votre mère?.. Vous voulez me recommander votre mère?

— Oui…

— Comptez sur moi. Mais que dois-je faire de votre carte? Je n’en puis comprendre le sens.

Le mourant parut se recueillir, puis, après un moment de silence:

— Ben Raddle… dit-il.

— Vous voulez voir M. Raddle?

— Oui.»

Quelques instants plus tard, l’ingénieur était au chevet du malade, qui, d’un signe, fit comprendre à Jane Edgerton qu’il désirait rester seul avec lui.

Alors, après avoir cherché à tâtons la main de Ben Raddle, Jacques Ledun dit:

«Je vais mourir… ma vie s’en va… je le sens…

— Non, mon ami, protesta Ben Raddle. Nous vous sauverons.

— Je vais mourir, répéta Jacques Ledun. Approchez-vous… Vous m’avez promis… de ne pas abandonner ma mère… J’ai foi en vous… Écoutez, et retenez bien ce que je vais vous dire.

D’une voix qui s’affaiblissait par degrés, mais claire, la voix d’un homme dont la raison n’était pas altérée, en possession de toute son intelligence, voici ce qu’il confia à Ben Raddle:

— Quand vous m’avez trouvé… je revenais… de très loin… dans le Nord… Là, sont situés les plus riches gisements du monde… Pas besoin de remuer la terre… C’est la terre elle-même qui rejette l’or de ses entrailles!.. Oui!.. là… j’ai découvert une montagne… un volcan qui renferme une immense quantité d’or… un volcan d’or… le Golden Mount…

— Un volcan d’or? répéta Ben Raddle d’un ton qui exprimait une certaine incrédulité.

— Il faut me croire, s’écria Jacques Ledun avec une sorte de violence, en essayant de se redresser sur son lit. Il faut me croire. Si ce n’est pour vous, que ce soit pour ma mère… mon héritage, dont elle aura sa part… J’ai fait l’ascension de ce mont… Je suis descendu dans son cratère éteint… plein de quartz aurifère, de pépites… Rien qu’à les ramasser…

Après cet effort, le malade retomba dans une prostration dont il sortit au bout de quelques minutes. Son premier regard fut pour l’ingénieur.

«Bien, murmura-t-il, vous êtes là… près de moi… vous me croyez… vous irez là-bas… là-bas… au Golden Mount…

Sa voix baissait de plus en plus, Ben Raddle, qu’il attirait de la main, s’était penché sur son chevet.

«Par 68° 37’ de latitude… la longitude est marquée sur la carte…

— La carte? interrogea Ben Raddle.

— Vous demanderez… à Jane Edgerton…

— Mlle Edgerton possède la carte de cette région? insista Ben Raddle au comble de la surprise.

— Oui… donnée par moi… Là… au point marqué d’une croix… près d’un creek… dans le Nord du Klondike… un volcan… dont la prochaine éruption lancera de l’or… dont les scories sont de poussière d’or… là… là…

Jacques Ledun, à demi relevé entre les bras de Ben Raddle, tendait sa main tremblante dans la direction du Nord. Ces derniers mots s’échappèrent de ses lèvres livides:

«Mère… mère…

Puis, avec une douceur infinie:

«Maman!»

Une suprême convulsion l’agita.

Il était mort.

CHAPITRE III

Ou Summy Skim ne prend pas précisément le chemin de Montréal.

L’enterrement du pauvre Français se fit le lendemain. Jane et Edith Edgerton le suivirent jusqu’au cimetière avec Ben Raddle et Summy Skim. Une croix de bois portant le nom de Jacques Ledun fut plantée sur cette tombe que les intempéries auraient tôt fait de rendre anonyme. Au retour, conformément à la promesse qu’il avait faite au mourant, Ben Raddle écrivit à la malheureuse mère qui ne reverrait plus jamais son fils.

Ces pieux devoirs accomplis, il examina sous toutes ses faces la situation nouvelle créée par la demi-confidence dont il était dépositaire.

Que le secret relatif au Golden Mount fût de nature à singulièrement préoccuper Ben Raddle, cela ne saurait étonner. Mais il était moins naturel qu’un ingénieur, c’est-à-dire par définition un homme de raison froide et de sens rassis, acceptât un tel secret comme une vérité démontrée. Il en était ainsi cependant. Pas un instant il ne vint à la pensée de Ben Raddle que la révélation de Jacques Ledun ne reposât pas sur une base certaine. Il ne mettait pas en doute que, dans le Nord du Klondike, ne s’élevât une montagne merveilleuse, qui, comme une énorme poche d’or, se viderait d’elle-même un jour ou l’autre. Des millions de pépites seraient alors projetées, dans les airs, à moins qu’il n’y eût qu’à les recueillir au fond du cratère définitivement éteint.

D’ailleurs, il semblait bien que de riches placers existassent dans les régions arrosées par la Mackensie et ses affluents. Au dire des Indiens fréquentant ces territoires voisins de l’océan Arctique, les cours d’eau y charriaient de l’or. Aussi les syndicats songeaient-ils à étendre leurs recherches jusque dans la partie du Dominion comprise entre la mer Glaciale et le cercle polaire, et des prospecteurs méditaient-ils déjà de s’y transporter pour la campagne prochaine, les premiers arrivants devant être les plus favorisés. Qui sait, songeait Ben Raddle, si l’on ne découvrirait pas ce volcan, dont, grâce aux confidences de Jacques Ledun, il était sans doute seul maintenant à connaître l’existence?

S’il voulait tirer parti de cet avantage, il importait donc d’agir vite. Avant tout, cependant, il convenait de compléter les renseignements en sa possession et surtout de connaître cette carte que, d’après le Français défunt, détenait Jane Edgerton.

Ben Raddle, sans plus tarder, se rendit à l’hôpital, résolu à traiter sur-le-champ cette affaire.

«D’après ce que Jacques Ledun m’a affirmé avant de mourir, dit-il à Jane, il paraîtrait que vous auriez entre les mains un& carte lui appartenant.

— J’ai une carte, en effet… commença Jane.

Ben Raddle poussa un soupir de satisfaction. L’affaire irait toute seule, du moment que Jane confirmait aussi facilement les assertions du Français.

«Mais cette carte n’appartient qu’à moi, acheva celle-ci.

— A vous?

— A moi. Pour la bonne raison que Jacques Ledun me l’a volontairement donnée.

— Ah!.. ah!.. fit Ben Raddle d’un ton indécis.

Après un instant de silence, il reprit:

«Peu importe du reste, car je ne pense pas que vous refusiez de me la communiquer.

— Cela dépend, répliqua Jane avec le plus grand calme.

— Bah!.. s’écria Ben Raddle surpris. Cela dépend?.. et de quoi?.. Expliquez-vous, je vous prie.

— C’est très simple, répondit Jane. La carte dont il s’agit, et qui m’a été donnée, je le répète, par son légitime propriétaire, montre, comme j’ai tout lieu de le croire, l’emplacement exact d’une mine fabuleusement riche. Si Jacques Ledun m’a fait cette confidence, c’est en échange de ma promesse de porter secours à sa mère, promesse que je ne devrai et pourrai tenir que si j’utilise le document qui m’a été remis. Or, les indications de cette carte sont incomplètes.

— Eh bien? interrogea Ben Raddle.

— Eh bien! la démarche que vous faites auprès de moi me porte à supposer que Jacques Ledun vous a donné les indications qui me manquent, vraisemblablement contre un engagement pareil au mien, mais en vous cachant celles que je possède. S’il en est ainsi, je ne refuse pas de vous communiquer le document que vous désirez connaître, mais seulement à titre d’associée. En somme, vous avez la moitié d’un secret et moi l’autre. Voulez-vous que nous réunissions ces deux moitiés et que nous partagions ce que produira le secret tout entier?

Sur le moment, Ben Raddle fut, comme on dit, estomaqué par la réponse. Il ne s’attendait pas à celle-là. Très forte, décidément, Jane Edgerton. Puis le bon sens et l’équité reprirent le dessus. Après tout, elle n’était pas mauvaise, la thèse de la jeune prospectrice. Nul doute que Jacques Ledun n’eût voulu s’assurer deux chances d’améliorer le sort de sa mère, et c’est pourquoi il s’était prudemment adressé à deux personnes distinctes en leur réclamant à chacune un engagement identique. D’ailleurs, quel inconvénient à accepter la proposition de Jane et à partager avec elle le produit de l’exploitation du Volcan d’Or? Ou le Volcan d’Or n’était qu’un mythe, et, dans ce cas, le secret de Jacques Ledun n’ayant aucune valeur, il en était de même *a fortiori* de sa moitié. Ou bien l’histoire était sérieuse, et, dans ce cas, la participation de Jane Edgerton était négligeable, le Volcan d’Or devant alors donner une fortune pratiquement infinie.

Cette série de réflexions ne demanda que quelques secondes pour l’ingénieur, qui prit sans plus hésiter sa décision.

— C’est entendu, dit-il.

— Voici la carte, répliqua Jane en offrant le parchemin déplié.

Ben Raddle y jeta un coup d’œil rapide, puis, à l’intersection de la croix rouge, il traça un parallèle qu’il numérota 68° 37’.

— Les coordonnées sont complètes, maintenant, déclara-t-il d’un air satisfait. On irait les yeux fermés au Volcan d’Or.

— Le Volcan d’Or? répéta Jane. Jacques Ledun avait déjà prononcé ce nom.

— C’est celui d’une montagne extraordinaire que j’irai visiter…

— Que nous irons, rectifia Jane.

— Que nous irons visiter au printemps, concéda l’ingénieur.

Ben Raddle mit alors Jane Edgerton au courant de ce que lui avait confié Jacques Ledun. Il lui révéla, ou plutôt lui confirma l’existence d’une véritable montagne d’or, le Golden Mount, inconnue de tous et que celui-ci avait découverte en compagnie d’Harry Brown. Il lui apprit comment, contraints à revenir à cause du manque de matériel, les deux aventuriers, qui rapportaient néanmoins de magnifiques preuves de leur trouvaille, avaient été attaqués sur la route du retour par une bande d’indigènes qui avaient tué l’un et réduit l’autre au plus affreux dénûment.

— Et vous n’avez pas douté de la vérité d’une si fabuleuse histoire? demanda Jane quand Ben Raddle eut achevé son récit.

— J’ai été sceptique d’abord, reconnut celui-ci. Mais l’accent de sincérité de Jacques Ledun a eu vite raison de mon scepticisme. L’histoire est vraie, soyez-en certaine. Cela ne veut pas dire, bien entendu, que nous soyons sûrs d’en pouvoir tirer parti. Le grand danger en ces sortes d’affaires est d’être devancé par d’autres. Si le Golden Mount n’est pas connu au sens propre du mot, on a cependant sur son existence des notions transmises par tradition et considérées comme légendaires. Il suffirait d’un prospecteur plus crédule et plus audacieux que les autres pour transformer la légende en belle et bonne réalité. Là est le danger, auquel nous parerons dans la mesure de nos moyens à deux conditions: nous hâter et nous taire.»

On ne s’étonnera pas que l’ingénieur voulût, à partir de ce jour, se tenir au courant de toutes les nouvelles qui circulaient dans le monde des chercheurs d’or. Jane ne s’y intéressait pas moins que lui, et, le plus souvent, tous deux s’entretenaient du sujet qui les préoccupait. Mais ils étaient résolus à garder pour eux seuls jusqu’à la dernière minute le secret du Volcan d’Or. Ben Raddle n’en avait même pas parlé à Summy Skim. Rien ne pressait, d’ailleurs, puisqu’il n’y avait que trois mois d’écoulés sur les huit que compte la saison d’hiver au Klondike.

Sur ces entrefaites, la commission de rectification de la frontière fit connaître le résultat de ses travaux. Elle concluait que les réclamations n’étaient admissibles, ni d’un côté, ni de l’autre. Aucune erreur n’avait été commise. La frontière entre l’Alaska et le Dominion, exactement tracée, ne devait être reculée, ni à l’Ouest au profit des Canadiens, ni à l’Est à leur détriment, et les claims limitrophes ne seraient point obligés de subir un changement de nationalité.

«Nous voilà bien avancés! dit Summy Skim, le jour où il apprit cette nouvelle. Le 129 est canadien, c’est entendu. Par malheur, il n’y a plus de 129. On le baptise après sa mort.

— Il existe sous le Forty Miles Creek, répondit le contre-maître qui ne voulait pas renoncer à tout espoir.

— Très juste! Lorique. Vous avez parfaitement raison. Allez donc l’exploiter à cinq ou six pieds sous l’eau! A moins qu’un second tremblement de terre ne vienne remettre les choses en l’état, je ne vois pas…

Et Summy Skim, haussant les épaules, ajouta:

«D’ailleurs, si Pluton et Neptune doivent encore collaborer au Klondike, j’espère bien que ce sera pour en finir une bonne fois avec cet affreux pays, pour le bouleverser et le submerger si bien qu’on ne puisse plus y recueillir une seule pépite.

— Oh! monsieur Skim! fit le contre-maître sincèrement indigné.

— Et après? répliqua Ben Raddle, en homme qui se retenait d'en dire plus qu'il ne voulait. Crois-tu donc qu'il n'y a de gisements qu'au Klondike?

— Je n'excepte pas de ma catastrophe, riposta Summy Skim en se montant un peu, ceux qui sont ailleurs, dans l'Alaska, le Dominion, le Transvaal… et, pour être franc, dans le monde entier.

— Mais, monsieur Skim, s'écria le contre-maître, l'or c'est l'or.

— Vous n'y êtes pas, Lorique. Vous n'y êtes pas du tout. L'or, vous voulez savoir ce que c'est? Eh bien! l'or, c'est de la blague, voilà mon avis. Et je ne vous l'envoie pas dire!

La conversation aurait pu se poursuivre longtemps sans aucun profit pour les interlocuteurs. Summy Skim la termina brusquement:

«Après tout, dit-il, que Neptune et Pluton fassent ce qui leur plaît. Ce n'est pas mon affaire. Je ne m'occupe, moi, que de ce qui nous regarde. Il me suffit que le 129 ait disparu pour que je sois ravi, puisque cet heureux événement nous force à reprendre la route de Montréal.»

Dans la bouche de Summy, c'était là figure de rhétorique, simplement. En réalité, lointaine était encore l'époque où l'état de la température lui permettrait de faire le premier pas sur le chemin du retour. L'année finissait à peine. Jamais Summy Skim n'oublierait cette semaine de Noël qui, bien que le froid ne dépassât pas vingt degrés au-dessous de zéro, n'en était pas moins abominable. Peut-être eût-il mieux valu un abaissement de température plus excessif avec des vents du Nord vifs et secs.

Pendant cette dernière semaine de l'année, les rues de Dawson furent à peu près désertes. Aucun éclairage n'aurait pu résister aux tourbillons qui les rendaient inabordables. La neige s’y entassa sur une épaisseur de plus de six pieds. Aucun véhicule, aucun attelage n’aurait pu s’y engager. Si le froid revenait avec son intensité habituelle, le pic et la pioche ne parviendraient pas à faire brèche dans ces masses accumulées. Il faudrait employer la mine. En certains quartiers avoisinant les rives du Yukon et de la Klondike River, plusieurs maisons, bloquées jusqu’au premier étage, n’étaient plus accessibles que par les fenêtres. Heureusement, celles de Front street ne furent pas prises dans ces sortes d’embâcles, et les deux cousins auraient pu sortir de l’hôtel, si la circulation n’eût pas été absolument impossible. Au bout de quelques pas, on se serait enlizé jusqu’au cou dans la neige.

A cette époque de l’année, le jour ne dure que très peu d’heures. A peine si le soleil se montre au-dessus des collines qui encadrent la ville. La tourmente chassant des flocons si drus et si épais que la lumière électrique ne parvenait pas à les pénétrer, on était donc plongé dans une obscurité profonde pendant vingt heures sur vingt-quatre.

Toute communication étant supprimée avec le dehors, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle restaient confinés dans leurs chambres. Le contre-maître et Neluto, qui occupaient en compagnie de Patrick une modeste auberge de l’un des bas quartiers, ne pouvaient leur rendre visite ainsi qu’ils le faisaient d’habitude, et tout rapport se trouvait brisé avec Edith et Jane Edgerton. Summy Skim tenta une fois d’aller jusqu’à l’hôpital; il faillit être enseveli sous la neige, et ce ne fut pas sans peine que les gens de l’hôtel parvinrent à l’en tirer sain et sauf.

Il va sans dire que les divers services ne fonctionnaient plus au Klondike. Les lettres n’arrivaient point, les journaux n’étaient pas distribués. Sans les réserves accumulées dans les hôtels et les maisons particulières en prévision de ces redoutables éventualités, la population de Dawson City eût été exposée à mourir de faim. Inutile de dire que les casinos, les maisons de jeu chômaient. Jamais la ville ne s'était trouvée dans une situation si alarmante. La neige rendait inabordable la résidence du gouverneur, et, aussi bien en territoire canadien qu'en territoire américain, la vie administrative était totalement arrêtée. Quant aux victimes que les épidémies faisaient chaque jour, comment les eût-on conduites à leur dernière demeure? Que la peste vînt à se déclarer et Dawson ne compterait bientôt plus un seul habitant.

Le premier jour de l'année 1899 fut épouvantable. Pendant la nuit précédente et pendant toute la journée, la neige tomba en quantité telle qu'elle recouvrit presque entièrement nombre de maisons. Sur la rive droite de la Klondike River, quelques-unes ne laissaient plus émerger que leur toiture. C'était à croire que la cité entière allait disparaître sous les blanches couches du blizzard, comme avait disparu Pompéi sous les cendres du Vésuve. Si un froid de quarante à cinquante degrés eût immédiatement succédé à cette tourmente, toute la population eût péri sous ces masses durcies.

Le 2 janvier, un brusque changement se produisit dans la situation atmosphérique. Par suite d'une saute de vent, le thermomètre remonta rapidement au-dessus du zéro centigrade et il n'y eut plus lieu de craindre que les amas de neige ne vinssent à se solidifier. Elle fondit en quelques heures. Il fallait, comme on dit, le voir pour le croire. Une véritable inondation s'ensuivit, qui ne laissa pas d'occasionner de gros dommages; les rues furent transformées en torrents, et les eaux chargées de débris de toute sorte se précipitèrent vers les lits du Yukon et de son affluent et roulèrent à grand fracas sur leur surface glacée.

Cette inondation fut générale dans le district. Le Forty Miles Creek entre autres se gonfla démesurément et recouvrit les claims en aval. Ce fut un nouveau désastre comparable à celui du mois d'août. Si Ben Raddle avait conservé quelque espoir de rentrer en possession du 129, il dut y renoncer définitivement.

Dès que les rues furent praticables, on se hâta de rétablir les relations rompues. Lorique et Neluto se présentèrent à Northern Hôtel. Ben Raddle et Summy Skim s'empressèrent de courir à l'hôpital où ils furent reçus par les deux jeunes filles avec une joie dont la claustration qu'on venait de subir doublait la vivacité. Quant au docteur Pilcox, il n'avait rien perdu de sa bonne humeur habituelle.

«Eh bien, lui demanda Summy Skim, êtes-vous toujours fier de votre pays d'adoption?

— Comment donc! monsieur Skim, répondit le docteur. Étonnant, ce Klondike, étonnant!.. Je ne crois pas que, de mémoire d'homme, on ait vu tomber une telle quantité de neige!.. Voilà qui trouvera place dans vos souvenirs de voyage, monsieur Skim.

— Je vous en réponds, docteur!

— Par exemple, si le retour des grands froids n'avait pas été précédé de quelques jours de dégel, nous étions tous momifiés. Hein! quel fait divers pour les journaux de l'ancien et du nouveau continent! C'est une occasion qui ne se retrouvera plus, et cette saute de vent dans le Sud est un incident bien regrettable!

— C'est ainsi que vous le prenez, docteur?

— Et c’est ainsi qu’il faut le prendre. C’est de la philosophie, monsieur Skim.

— De la philosophie à cinquante degrés au-dessous de zéro, je ne tiens pas cet article-là,» protesta Summy mal convaincu.

La ville eut bientôt retrouvé son aspect ordinaire, ses habitudes aussi. Les casinos rouvrirent leurs portes. Le public emplit de nouveau, les rues, encombrées par les corbillards conduisant au cimetière les innombrables victimes des grands froids.

Cependant, en janvier, on est loin d’en avoir fini avec l’hiver au Klondike. Durant la seconde quinzaine du mois, on eut encore à subir d’excessifs abaissements de température; mais enfin, à la condition que l’on fût prudent, la circulation était redevenue possible, et le mois se termina mieux qu’il n’avait commencé, en ce sens que les blizzards furent moins fréquents et ne se déchaînèrent pas avec violence. Quand l’atmosphère est calme, les froids se supportent aisément, en effet; c’est lorsque le vent venant du Nord, après avoir traversé les régions du pôle arctique, souffle en grande brise et coupe la figure des gens dont l’haleine retombe en neige, qu’il est dangereux de se risquer en plein air. Summy Skim put presque constamment chasser en compagnie de Neluto, et parfois de Jane Edgerton. Personne n’avait réussi à le dissuader de se mettre en campagne malgré les rigueurs de la température. Le temps lui paraissait si long, à lui que ne tentaient ni les émotions du jeu, ni les distractions des casinos. Un jour qu’on le pressait trop, il répondit avec le plus grand sérieux:

«Soit! je ne chasserai plus, je vous le promets, quand…

— Quand?.. insista le docteur Pilcox.

— Quand il fera tellement froid que la poudre ne pourra plus prendre feu.»

Lorsque Jane Edgerton n’accompagnait pas Summy, elle se rencontrait d’ordinaire avec Ben Raddle, soit à l’hôpital, soit à Northern Hôtel. En somme, il ne se passait guère de jour qu’ils n’eussent échangé au moins une visite. A leurs entretiens assistait toujours Edith. L’utilité de sa présence n’était pas évidente. Elle paraissait cependant essentielle à l’ingénieur, qui, pour la jeune fille seule, avait cru devoir se départir de la discrétion rigoureuse qu’il s’était imposée, et, depuis lors, il sollicitait son avis sur le plus petit détail d’organisation de l’expédition projetée. Il semblait vraiment attacher un haut prix à ses conseils. Peut-être était-ce parce que celle-ci n’en donnait pas, et qu’elle approuvait les yeux fermés, comme elle avait approuvé le principe même du projet, tout ce que proposait l’ingénieur, dont elle prenait invariablement le parti contre sa cousine et au besoin contre Lorique, qui, bien que laissé dans l’ignorance du véritable but de ces conciliabules, était généralement admis à y participer. Tout ce que Ben Raddle disait était bien dit. Tout ce qu’il faisait était bien fait. Celui-ci appréciait fort une opinion si flatteuse et si naïvement exprimée.

Quant à Lorique, l’ingénieur l’interrogeait à satiété sur le Klondike et plus particulièrement sur les régions Nord du district que le contre-maître avait souvent parcourues. Summy Skim, qui les trouvait toujours ensemble, en rentrant de la chasse avec Neluto, se demandait avec une certaine inquiétude de quoi ils pouvaient bien s’entretenir.

«Qu’est-ce qu’ils peuvent bien mijoter, tous les quatre? se répétait-il. Ben n’en aurait-il pas assez… et même trop de cet abominable pays? Voudrait-il tenter une seconde fois la fortune et se laisserait-il entraîner par Lorique? Ah mais! ah mais!.. Je suis là, moi, et, quand je devrais employer la force!..

Si le mois de mai me trouve dans cette horrible ville, c’est que l’excellent Pilcox m’aura amputé des deux jambes… et encore il n’est pas bien sûr que je ne fasse pas la route en cul-de-jatte?»

Summy Skim ne savait toujours rien des confidences de Jacques Ledun. Ben Raddle et Jane Edgerton avaient bien gardé le silence qu’ils s’étaient réciproquement promis, et Lorique n’était pas plus avancé que Summy Skim. Cela n’empêchait pas le contre-maître de continuer à flatter, comme il l’avait toujours fait, les goûts évidents de Ben Raddle et d’exciter celui-ci à poursuivre sa chance. Puisqu’il avait tant fait que de venir au Klondike, allait-il se décourager au premier échec, surtout quand cet échec était imputable à des circonstances exceptionnelles, pour ne pas dire uniques? Sans doute, il était désolant que le 129 fût détruit, mais pourquoi ne chercherait-on pas à acquérir un autre claim? En poussant plus en amont, on découvrirait de nouveaux gisements qui vaudraient bien celui qu’on avait perdu… Dans une autre direction, la Bonanza et l’Eldorado continuaient à donner des résultats magnifiques… Du côté des Dômes s’étendait une vaste région aurifère à peine effleurée par les mineurs… Les placers y appartiendraient au premier occupant… Le contre-maître se chargerait de recruter un personnel… Après tout, pourquoi Ben Raddle échouerait-il là où tant d’autres réussissaient? Il semblerait au contraire que, dans ce jeu hasardeux, la science d’un ingénieur lui mît en main dés pipés et cartes truquées.

On l’imaginera aisément, l’ingénieur prêtait une oreille complaisante à ces propos. L’existence du Golden Mount, du rang de grande probabilité, passait dans son esprit à celui de certitude absolue. Et il rêvait de ce Golden Mount… Un claim, plus qu’un claim, une montagne, dont les flancs renfermaient des millions de pépites… un volcan qui livrerait lui-même ses trésors… Ah! certes, il fallait courir cette merveilleuse aventure. En partant au début du printemps, on arriverait en trois ou quatre semaines à la montagne. Quelques jours suffiraient à recueillir plus de pépites que tous les tributaires du Yukon n’en avaient fourni depuis deux ans, et l’on reviendrait avant l’hiver, riches de trésors fabuleux, forts d’une puissance devant laquelle pâlirait celle des rois.

Ben Raddle et Jane consacraient des heures à l’étude du croquis tracé par la main du Français. Ils l’avaient reporté sur la carte générale du Klondike. Ils avaient reconnu, par sa latitude et sa longitude, que la croix devait être tracée sur la rive gauche du rio Rubber, l’une des branches de la Mackensie, et que la distance séparant le Volcan d’Or de Dawson City ne dépassait pas deux cent quatre-vingts milles, soit environ cinq cents kilomètres.

«Avec un bon chariot et un bon attelage, disait Lorique interrogé à ce sujet, cinq cents kilomètres peuvent être franchis en une vingtaine de jours, et cela, dès la seconde semaine de mai.»

Pendant ce temps, Summy Skim ne cessait de se répéter:

«Mais que diable machinent-ils donc tous les quatre?

Bien qu’il ne fût pas au courant, il soupçonnait que ces entretiens si fréquents devaient avoir pour objet quelque expédition nouvelle, et il était résolu à s’y opposer par tous les moyens.

«Allez, mes bons petits enfants! grommelait-il *in petto*. Faites votre compte, je fais le mien, et rira bien qui rira le dernier!»

Mars arriva, et, avec lui, un retour offensif du froid. Deux jours durant, le thermomètre tomba à soixante degrés centigrades sous zéro. Summy Skim le fît constater à Ben Raddle, en ajoutant que, si cela continuait, la graduation de l’instrument serait certainement insuffisante.

L’ingénieur, pressentant vaguement l’irritation latente de son cousin, s’efforça d’être conciliant.

«C’est un froid excessif, en effet, dit-il d’un ton bonhomme, mais, comme il ne fait pas de vent, on le supporte mieux que je ne l’aurais pensé.

— Oui, Ben, oui… reconnut Summy en se contenant, c’est en effet très sain, et j’aime à croire qu’il tue les microbes par myriades.

— J’ajoute, reprit Ben Raddle, que, d’après les gens du pays, il ne semble pas devoir durer. On a même l’espoir, paraît-il, que la période hivernale ne sera pas très longue cette année et que les travaux pourront être repris dès le commencement de mai.

— Les travaux?.. Si toutefois tu me permets cette forte expression, j’oserai dire que je m’en bats l’œil, mon vieux Ben, s’écria Summy d’une voix plus haute. Je compte bien que nous profiterons de la précocité du printemps pour nous mettre en route dès que le Scout sera revenu.

— Cependant, fit observer l’ingénieur, qui crut sans doute arrivée l’heure des confidences, il serait peut-être bon, avant de partir, de faire une visite au claim 129?

— Le 129 ressemble maintenant aune vieille carcasse de navire engloutie au fond de la mer. On ne peut plus le visiter qu’en scaphandre. Et comme nous n’avons pas de scaphandres…

— Il y a pourtant là des millions perdus!..

— Des milliards, si tu veux, Ben. Je ne m’y oppose pas. Mais, dans tous les cas, perdus, et bien perdus. Je ne vois pas la nécessité de retourner au Forty Miles Creek qui te rappellerait de vilains souvenirs.

— Oh! je suis guéri et bien guéri, Summy.

— Peut-être pas tant que tu le crois. Il me semble que la fièvre… la fameuse fièvre… tu sais… la fièvre de l’or…

Ben Raddle regarda son cousin bien en face, et, en homme qui a pris son parti, se décida à lui dévoiler ses projets.

— J’ai à te parler, Summy, dit-il, mais ne t’emporte pas dès les premiers mots.

— Je m’emporterai, au contraire, s’écria Summy Skim. Rien ne pourra me retenir, je t’en avertis, si tu fais même indirectement une allusion quelconque à la simple possibilité d’un retard.

— Écoute, te dis-je, j’ai un secret à te révéler.

— Un secret? et de la part de qui?

— De la part de ce Français que tu as relevé à demi mort et ramené à Dawson City.

— Jacques Ledun t’a confié un secret, Ben?

— Oui.

— Et tu ne m’en as pas encore parlé?

— Non, parce qu’il m’a donné l’idée d’un projet qui méritait réflexions.

Summy Skim bondit.

— Un projet!.. s’écria-t-il. Quel projet?

— Non, Summy, répliqua Ben Raddle: Quel secret. Le secret d’abord. Le projet ensuite. Procédons par ordre, s’il te plaît, et calme-toi.»

Bon Raddle fît alors connaître à son cousin l’existence du Golden Mount dont Jacques Ledun avait relevé exactement la situation à l’embouchure de la Mackensie, aux bords mêmes de l’océan Arctique. Summy Skim dut jeter les yeux sur le croquis original, puis sur la carte où la montagne avait été reportée par l’ingénieur. La distance entre elle et Dawson City s’y trouvait également repérée suivant une direction Nord-Nord-Est, à peu près sur le cent trente-sixième méridien. Enfin, il lui fut appris que cette montagne était un volcan… un volcan dont le cratère contenait des quantités énormes de quartz aurifère, et qui renfermait dans ses entrailles des milliards de pépites.

— Et tu crois à ce volcan des «Mille et une Nuits»? demanda Summy Skim d’un ton goguenard.

— Oui, Summy, répondit Ben Raddle qui paraissait décidé à n’admettre aucune discussion sur ce point.

— Soit, accorda Summy Skim. Et après?

— Comment, après! répliqua Ben Raddle en s’animant. Eh quoi! un tel secret nous aurait été révélé, et nous n’en userions pas! Nous laisserions d’autres en tirer parti!

Summy Skim, se maîtrisant pour conserver son sang-froid, se borna à répondre:

— Jacques Ledun avait voulu en tirer parti, lui aussi, et tu sais comment cela lui a réussi. Les milliards de pépites de Golden Mount ne l’ont pas empêché de mourir sur un lit d’hôpital.

— Parce qu’il avait été attaqué par des malfaiteurs.

— Tandis que nous, riposta Summy Skim, nous ne le serons pas, c’est entendu… En tout cas, pour aller exploiter cette montagne il faudra remonter d’une centaine de lieues vers le Nord, je présume.

— D’une centaine de lieues, en effet, et même un peu plus.

— Or notre départ pour Montréal est fixé aux premiers jours de mai.

— Il sera retardé de quelques mois, voilà tout.

— Voilà tout! répéta Summy ironiquement. Mais alors il sera trop tard pour se mettre en route.

— S’il est trop tard, nous hivernerons une seconde fois à Dawson City.

— Jamais!» s’écria Summy Skim d’un ton si résolu que Ben Raddle crut devoir arrêter là cette trop intéressante conversation.

Il comptait bien d’ailleurs la reprendre par la suite et il la reprit, en effet, malgré le mauvais vouloir de son cousin. Il appuya son projet sur les meilleures raisons. Le voyage s’effectuerait sans difficulté après le dégel. En deux mois, on pourrait atteindre le Golden Mount, s’être enrichi de quelques millions et être revenu à Dawson. Il serait encore temps de repartir pour Montréal, et du moins cette campagne au Klondike n’aurait pas été faite en pure perte.

Ben Raddle tenait en réserve un suprême argument. Si Jacques Ledun lui avait fait cette révélation, ce n'était pas sans motifs. Sa mère, qu'il chérissait, lui survivait, une pauvre femme malheureuse pour laquelle il s'était efforcé d'acquérir la fortune, et dont la vieillesse serait assurée, si les désirs de son fils se réalisaient. Summy Skim voulait-il que son cousin manquât à la promesse faite à un mourant?

Summy Skim avait laissé parler Ben Raddle sans l'interrompre. Il se demandait qui était fou, de Ben, qui disait des choses si énormes, ou de lui-même qui consentait à les entendre. Lorsque le plaidoyer fut achevé, il lâcha la bride à son indignation:

«Je n'ai à te répondre qu'une chose, dit-il d'une voix que la colère faisait trembler, c'est que j'en arriverais à regretter d'avoir secouru le malheureux Français et d'avoir ainsi empêché que son secret disparût avec lui dans la tombe. Si tu as pris à son égard un engagement insensé, il y a d'autres moyens de te libérer. On peut servir une pension à sa mère, par exemple, et je m'en chargerai personnellement, si cela te convient. Quant à recommencer la plaisanterie qui nous a si bien réussi, non. J'ai ta parole de retourner à Montréal. Je ne te la rendrai jamais. Voilà mon dernier mot.»

C'est en vain que Ben Raddle revint à la charge. Summy demeura inflexible. Il semblait même en vouloir à son cousin d'une insistance qu'il considérait comme déloyale, et Ben commençait à être sérieusement inquiet de la tournure que prenaient leurs relations jusque-là fraternelles.

La vérité est que Summy luttait contre lui-même. Il ne cessait dépenser à ce qui adviendrait s'il ne réussissait pas à convaincre Ben Raddle. Si celui-ci persistait à pousser l'aventure, jusqu'au bout, le laisserait-il s'engager seul dans cette dangereuse campagne? Summy ne se faisait pas d'illusions. Il savait qu'il ne se résignerait jamais aux inquiétudes et aux angoisses qui seraient alors son lot et que, pour les éviter, il céderait au dernier moment. Il enrageait à cette pensée. Aussi dissimulait-il sa faiblesse sous les dehors les plus rudes que sa nature bienveillante fût capable d'imaginer.

Ben Raddle, obligé de s'enfler aux apparences, désespérait de jour en jour davantage d'amener son cousin à partager ses idées. Bien qu'il ne fût pas sentimental au même point que celui-ci, il ne laissait pas d'être profondément affligé de la fissure faite dans leur amitié. Le temps s'écoulant sans modifier la situation, il se résigna, un jour qu'il était à l'hôpital, à faire part à Jane Edgerton de l'invincible résistance de Summy Skim. Elle en fut très étonnée. L'opinion de Summy sur le projet qui la passionnait ne l'avait jamais préoccupée. Que cette opinion fût conforme à la sienne propre, cela semblait tout naturel à la jeune prospectrice, qui, d'ailleurs, eût été bien embarrassée de préciser les raisons d'un tel optimisme. Quoi qu'il en soit, étant donné cet état d'esprit, son étonnement eut tôt fait de se transformer en irritation, comme si le malheureux Summy se fût rendu coupable à son égard d'une injure personnelle. Avec son esprit de décision ordinaire, elle alla le trouver incontinent à l'hôtel, bien résolue à lui adresser les reproches que méritait son inqualifiable conduite.

«Il paraît que vous vous opposez à notre excursion au Golden Mount, lui dit-elle sans préambule sur un ton non dépourvu d'aigreur.

— Notre?.. répéta Summy attaqué ainsi par surprise.

— Je me demande quel intérêt vous pouvez avoir, poursuivit Jane, à empêcher le voyage que nous avons projeté, votre cousin et moi.

Summy passa en une seconde par toutes les couleurs de l'arc-en-ciel.

— Alors, balbutia-t-il, vous en êtes, du voyage, mademoiselle Jane?

— Ne faites pas l’ignorant, répliqua celle-ci avec sévérité. Vous feriez bien mieux de vous montrer meilleur compagnon et de venir tout simplement avec nous prendre votre part du butin. Le Golden Mount pourra sans peine nous enrichir tous les trois.

Summy devint rouge comme un coq. D’une seule haleine, il aspira une quantité d’air telle qu’il y avait lieu de se demander s’il allait en rester pour les autres.

— Mais, dit-il effrontément, je ne désire pas autre chose, moi!

Ce fut au tour de Jane d’être étonnée.

— Bah!.. fit-elle. Que me racontait donc M. Ben Raddle?

— Ben ne sait ce qu’il dit, affirma Summy avec l’audace d’un menteur endurci. Je lui ai l’ait quelques objections de détail, il est vrai; mais mes objections portent uniquement sur l’organisation de l’expédition. Son principe est hors de discussion.

— A la bonne heure! s’écria Jane.

— Voyons, mademoiselle Jane, comment renoncerais-je à un pareil voyage? Au vrai, ce n’est pas l’or qui me tente, moi. C’est…

Summy s’interrompit, fort empêché de dire ce qui l’intéressait. En réalité, il n’en savait rien.

— C’est?.. insista Jane.

— C’est la chasse, parbleu. Et le voyage lui-même, la découverte, l’aventure…

Summy devenait lyrique.

— Chacun son but,» conclut Jane qui partit pour rendre compte à Ben Raddle du résultat de sa démarche.

Celui-ci ne fit qu’un bond jusqu’à l’hôtel.

«C’est bien vrai, Summy? demanda-t-il en abordant son cousin. Tu te décides à être des nôtres?

— T’ai-je jamais dit le contraire?» répliqua Summy avec une si prodigieuse impudence que Ben Raddle décontenancé se demanda depuis s’il n’avait pas rêvé les longues discussions des jours précédents.

CHAPITRE IV

Circle City.

On le sait, les richesses du Nord-Dominion et de l’Alaska ne se bornent pas à celles du Klondike. Cela est fort heureux pour les amateurs d’émotions fortes, car, si les claims du Klondike sont loin d’être épuisés, leur prix s’élève de jour en jour, et, si ce n’est aux sociétés puissantes, il deviendra bientôt impossible d’en acquérir. C’est pourquoi les prospecteurs, par groupes ou isolément, sont obligés d’étendre leurs recherches jusque dans les contrées du Nord, en descendant le cours de la Mackensie et ensuite celui de la Porcupine River.

Il est à noter que des bruits de toutes sortes attiraient, dès cette époque, l’attention des mineurs sur ces lointaines contrées plus inconnues que ne l’étaient l’Australie, la Californie et le Transvaal, lors des premières exploitations. Des nouvelles arrivaient, apportées par on ne sait qui, venues on ne sait d’où. Plus particulièrement, elles circulaient grâce à ces tribus indiennes qui parcourent les vastes solitudes du Nord sur les confins de l’océan Arctique. Incapables d’exploiter eux-mêmes les gisements, ces indigènes s’efforcent d’attirer les émigrants vers les régions septentrionales. A les en croire, les creeks aurifères se multiplient dans la partie du Nord-Amérique qui se développe au delà du cercle polaire. Les Indiens rapportaient parfois des échantillons de pépites ramassées aux environs de Dawson City et qu’ils prétendaient avoir trouvées vers le soixante-quatrième parallèle. On le comprendra, grande devait être la disposition des mineurs, trop souvent déçus dans leurs espérances, à tenir ces trouvailles pour authentiques.

Ainsi que Ben Raddle ne l’ignorait pas, l’existence d’un volcan aurifère s’était même accréditée au Klondike, sous une forme légendaire. Peut-être étaient-ce ces bruits vagues qui avaient poussé le Français Jacques Ledun à s’aventurer dans l’extrême Nord. Rien n’indiquait actuellement que l’on songeât à se lancer sur ses traces. Mais la légende du Volcan d’Or ne laissait pas d’avoir des partisans, et, puisque certains mineurs se disposaient à chercher la fortune dans le Nord du Dominion, peut-être ce qui n’était qu’à l’état d’hypothèse ne tarderait-il pas à devenir une réalité.

Vers l’Est et vers l’Ouest, la prospection se montrait également très active. Déjà, la région des Dômes était mise en coupe réglée, et, dans la direction opposée, une armée de pioches égratignait le sol aux environs de Circle City.

C’est là que les deux Texiens, Hunter et Malone, avaient commencé la campagne qui devait être si tragiquement interrompue. L’exploitation entreprise sur le bord du Birch Creek n’ayant donné que des résultats médiocres, ils étaient revenus au claim 131, jusqu’au moment où la catastrophe du 5 août les en avait chassés.

Ni Hunter, ni Malone, ni aucun de leurs hommes ne furent personnellement victimes du désastre. Si Ton put croire tout d’abord qu’ils avaient péri, c’est qu’ils étaient immédiatement repartis pour Circle City avec leur personnel, après avoir reconnu que le malheur était irréparable.

En de telles circonstances, Hunter ne songea pas plus à la rencontre projetée avec Summy Skim, que Summy Skim n’y songea de son côté. L’affaire se trouvait réglée, *ipso facto,* par force majeure.

Lorsque les Texiens eurent regagné les gisements de Circle City, la belle saison avait encore près de deux mois à courir. Ils reprirent donc l’exploitation abandonnée. Mais, décidément, ils n’avaient pas eu la main heureuse en acquérant leur nouveau claim. Les profits n’y dépassaient guère les frais, et, si Hunter n’eût pas possédé quelques ressources, ses compagnons et lui-même eussent été sans doute fort embarrassés pendant le prochain hiver.

Une circonstance particulière allait d’ailleurs les délivrer de tout souci à cet égard.

Ces hommes violents ne pouvaient semer autour d’eux que discorde et querelles. Avec leur insolente prétention d’imposer leur volonté à tous, de ne respecter les droits de personne, de se considérer partout en pays conquis, ils ne cessaient de s’attirer de mauvaises affaires. On a vu quelle tournure prenaient les choses sur les claims du Forty Miles Creek. Il en fut de même sur celui de Birch Creek. A défaut d’étrangers, leurs compatriotes eurent à souffrir de leur mauvaise foi et de leur violence.

Finalement, le gouvernement de l’Alaska dut intervenir. La police, puis la justice s’en mêlèrent. A la suite d’une collision avec les représentants de l’autorité, la bande de Hunter tout entière fut arrêtée, condamnée à dix mois de prison et dûment verrouillée dans celle de Circle City.

La question du logement et de la nourriture pendant l’hiver se trouva du coup réglée pour les Texiens et leurs compagnons. En revanche, Hunter et Malone durent renoncer aux plaisirs des grandes villes, et la présence des deux honorables gentlemen ne fut point signalée de toute la saison dans les casinos de Skagway, Dawson ou Vancouver.

Leur incarcération donnait à Hunter et à Malone tout le temps de penser à l’avenir. Leur peine devait finir au retour de la belle saison. Que feraient-ils de leur personnel et que feraient-ils eux-mêmes à ce moment?

L’exploitation du claim du Forty Miles Creek devenue impossible, celle du gisement de Circle City ne donnant que des résultats insuffisants, leurs ressources seraient rapidement épuisées s’ils ne rencontraient pas quelque bonne affaire. Recruté dans des contrées diverses, mais ayant toutes le défaut commun de posséder une police insuffisamment endurante, leur personnel, composé de gens de sac et de corde, était à l’entière dévotion des deux aventuriers. L’ordre qu’ils donneraient serait accompli, quel qu’il fût. Encore fallait-il donner cet ordre, c’est-à-dire avoir un plan, avoir un but. Ce but, parviendraient-ils à le découvrir! L’occasion se présenterait-elle de sortir de l’impasse dans laquelle ils étaient actuellement fourvoyés?

Cette occasion se présenta, et voici dans quelles circonstances.

Au nombre des détenus dont ils partageaient la vie, Hunter avait remarqué un Indien nommé Krarak, qui, de son côté, paraissait observer tout particulièrement Hunter. Ce sont là des sympathies très naturelles. On s’apprécie entre coquins. Les deux hommes étaient faits pour se comprendre, et une certaine intimité fut bientôt établie entre eux.

Krarak était âgé d’une quarantaine d’années. Trapu, vigoureux, l’oeil cruel, la physionomie farouche, sa nature ne pouvait que plaire à Hunter et Malone.

Il était Alaskien d’origine, et connaissait bien le pays qu’il parcourait depuis sa jeunesse. Il eût assurément fait un excellent guide, et l’on aurait pu s’en rapporter à son intelligence, si son aspect n’eût pas inspiré la plus grande défiance. Défiance trop justifiée. Les mineurs au service desquels il était entré avaient tous eu à s’en plaindre, et c’est à la suite d’un vol important, précisément sur les exploitations de Birch Creek, qu’il avait été incarcéré dans la prison de Circle City.

Au cours du premier mois, Hunter et Krarak gardèrent une certaine réserve l’un vis-à-vis de l’autre. Ils s’observaient. Hunter, ayant cru comprendre que Krarak voulait lui faire une confidence, attendait que celui-ci se décidât.

Il ne se trompait pas, d’ailleurs. Un jour, en effet, afin d’entrer en matière, l’Indien lui parla de ses pérégrinations à travers la partie inconnue du Nord-Amérique, alors qu’il servait de guide aux agents de la baie d’Hudson, dans la région arrosée par la Porcupine River, et située entre Fort Yukon, Fort Mac Pherson et la mer Arctique.

Krarak se borna, d’abord, à des généralités et ne dit que juste ce qu’il fallait dire pour exciter les convoitises de Hunter, mais peu à peu il se montra plus expansif.

«C’est dans le Nord et au voisinage de l’Océan, affirma-t-il un jour, que l’or se trouve en abondance. Avant peu, on comptera sur le littoral les mineurs par milliers.

— Il n’y a qu’une chose à faire, répondit Hunter: les y devancer.

— Sans doute, répliqua Krarak. Encore faut-il connaître la situation des gisements.

— Tu en connais, toi?

— Plusieurs. Mais le pays est difficile… on peut s’y égarer pendant des mois, et passer auprès des claims sans les voir… Un surtout, et quel claim… Ah! si j’étais libre!..

Hunter le regarda bien en face.

— Que ferais-tu, si tu étais libre? demanda-t-il.

— J’irais là où j’allais lorsque j’ai été pris, répondit Krarak.

— Où donc?

— Là où l’or se ramasse à la brouette!» déclara l’Indien avec emphase.

Hunter eut beau le presser de questions, Krarak ne s’avança pas davantage. Il on avait dit assez, d’ailleurs, pour enflammer la cupidité de son interlocuteur.

Hunter et Malone, convaincus que Krarak connaissait des gisements dans le voisinage de la mer Polaire, eurent tous deux la même pensée qu’il fallait lui faire dévoiler tout ce qu’il savait, en vue de la prochaine campagne. De là, d’interminables entretiens, dont les deux Texiens ne retirèrent aucun profit. Si l’Indien continua d’être affirmatif sur l’existence des placers, il garda toujours un silence absolu sur leur situation exacte.

Avec les dernières semaines d’avril était arrivée la fin d’un hiver qui avait été aussi dur à Circle City qu’à Dawson. Les prisonniers avaient beaucoup souffert. Hunter et ses compagnons attendaient impatiemment d’être remis en liberté, bien résolus à entreprendre une expédition vers les hautes régions du continent américain.

Pour cela, le concours de Krarak était indispensable, et celui-ci ne semblait pas disposé à le refuser. Les autorités de l’Alaska s’opposaient malheureusement à ce qu’il obéit à ses préférences naturelles. Si Hunter et les siens devaient, en effet, être prochainement libérés, il n’en était pas ainsi de l’Indien, que ses engagements antérieurs à l’égard de la justice de son pays obligeaient à séjourner plusieurs années encore dans la prison de Circle City.

Restait la ressource d’une évasion. La fuite n’était possible qu’en s’ouvrant un passage sous l’un des murs du préau, qui limitait à la fois, de ce côté, la prison et la ville. De l’intérieur, on ne pouvait pratiquer cette ouverture sans attirer l’attention des gardiens. Mais, de l’extérieur, la nuit, en prenant les précautions voulues, le travail ne présenterait pas de grandes difficultés.

Le concours de Hunter devenait à son tour nécessaire. Entre les deux sacripants, le marché fut vite conclu. Aussitôt libre, Hunter viendrait en aide à Krarak, qui, libre lui aussi, se mettrait au service du Texien et le conduirait aux gisements connus de lui dans le Nord du Klondike.

Le 13 mai, l’emprisonnement de Hunter et de sa bande arriva à son terme. L’Indien n’eut donc plus qu’à se tenir sur le qui-vive. Comme il n’était point enfermé dans une cellule, il lui serait facile, le moment venu, de quitter le dortoir commun et de se glisser à travers le préau sans être remarqué.

C’est ce qu’il fit dès la nuit suivante. Couché au pied du mur, il attendit jusqu’à l’aube.

Il eut lieu d’exercer sa patience. Aucun bruit ne parvint à son oreille entre le coucher et le lever du soleil. Hunter et Malone n’avaient encore pu agir. Craignant que la police n’eût le mauvais goût de s’étonner de ne point les voir quitter immédiatement Circle City, ils avaient cru devoir attendre vingt-quatre heures. Les outils ne leur manquaient pas. Ils avaient retrouvé à l’auberge où ils étaient descendus et où ils élurent de nouveau domicile en sortant de la prison les pics et les pioches de leur dernière campagne.

La bourgade montrait déjà une certaine animation. Les prospecteurs des gisements alaskiens du bas cours du Yukon, attirés par la précocité de la belle saison, commençaient à y affluer. Cette circonstance favorisait la bande des Texiens qui se perdraient ainsi plus aisément dans la foule.

La nuit suivante, Krarak, dos dix heures du soir, reprit son poste au pied du mur. La nuit était obscure, et une assez forte brise soufflait du Nord.

Vers onze heures, l’Indien, l’oreille appliquée au ras du sol, crut comprendre que l’on travaillait à sa délivrance.

Il ne se trompait pas. Hunter et Malone s’étaient mis à l’œuvre. Avec la pioche, ils foraient une galerie sous le pied de la muraille, afin de ne pas avoir besoin d’en déplacer les pierres.

De son côté, dès qu’il eut bien reconnu l’endroit choisi, Krarak fouilla le sol avec ses ongles.

Il n’y eut aucune alerte. Les gardiens ne furent point attirés dans le préau. Le vent vif et froid les retenait à l’intérieur où l’absence de Krarak resta inaperçue.

Enfin, un peu après minuit, le trou fut assez large pour livrer passage à un homme de corpulence ordinaire.

«Viens, dit une voix qui était celle de Hunter.

— Personne au dehors? demanda Krarak.

— Personne.»

Quelques instants plus tard, l’Indien était en liberté.

Au delà du Yukon, dont Circle City occupe la rive gauche, il apercevait une vaste plaine encore parsemée des dernières neiges de l’hiver. La débâcle était commencée et le fleuve charriait des glaçons. Une barque n’aurait pu s’y engager, en admettant qu’il eût été possible à Hunter de s’en procurer une sans exciter la défiance de la police.

L’Indien n’était pas homme à se laisser arrêter par un tel obstacle. Il saurait bien sauter d’un glaçon à l’autre pour atteindre la rive droite. Une fois là, toute la campagne s’ouvrait devant lui. Il serait loin lorsqu’on découvrirait sa fuite.

Il importait cependant que le fugitif fût hors d’atteinte avant le lever du soleil. Il n’avait donc pas une heure à perdre.

Hunter lui dit:

«Tout est convenu?

— Convenu, répondit Krarak.

— Où nous retrouverons-nous?

— Comme il a été dit: à dix milles de Fort Yukon, sur la rive gauche de la Porcupine.

C’est, en effet, ce qui avait été arrêté entre eux. Dans deux ou trois jours, Hunter et ses compagnons quitteraient Circle City et se dirigeraient vers Fort Yukon, situé en aval dans le Nord-Ouest. De là, ils remonteraient le cours de la Porcupine vers le Nord-Est. Quant à l’Indien, après avoir franchi le Grand Fleuve, il se dirigerait au Nord, en droite ligne, vers son tributaire.

Au moment de se séparer:

— Tout est convenu? répéta Hunter.

— Tout.

— Et tu nous conduiras?.. fit Malone.

— Droit aux placers.

Hunter gardait malgré lui une certaine méfiance.

— Pars donc, dit-il. Et, si tu nous as trompés, ne crois pas nous échapper. Il y aurait alors trente hommes lancés à ta poursuite et qui sauraient bien te retrouver.

— Je ne vous ai pas trompés, répondit Krarak avec calme.

Tendant son bras vers le Nord, il ajouta:

«Une fortune, une fortune immense nous attend tous là-bas.

L’Indien se rapprocha de la rive.

«L’endroit où je vous conduirai, affirma-t-il avec une sorte de solennité, n’est pas un placer. C’est une poche d’or, une montagne d’or plutôt. Vous n’aurez que la peine d’en remplir vos charrettes. Fussiez-vous cent, fussiez-vous mille, vous pourriez encore me laisser ma part sans diminuer la vôtre.»

D’un bond, Krarak s’élança sur un glaçon qui fut aussitôt saisi par le courant. Un instant, Hunter et Malone purent le voir passer d’un glaçon à l’autre, s’éloignant toujours vers la rive droite du fleuve. En quelques minutes, il avait disparu dans l’obscurité.

Les Texiens regagnèrent alors leur auberge, et, dès le lendemain, commencèrent leurs préparatifs pour cette nouvelle campagne.

Il va sans dire que l'évasion de l'Indien fut connue au lever du soleil. Mais l'enquête de la police ne donna aucun résultat, et la complicité de Hunter resta ignorée.

Trois jours après, celui-ci et ses compagnons, en tout une trentaine d'hommes, s'embarquaient avec un matériel très réduit sur un chaland qui allait descendre le fleuve jusqu'à Fort Yukon.

Le 22 mai, après s'être ravitaillée à cette bourgade et avoir chargé ses provisions sur un traîneau tiré par un vigoureux attelage de chiens, la caravane remonta vers le Nord-Est le long de la rive gauche de la Porcupine. Si l'Indien était exact au rendez-vous, on le rencontrerait le soir même.

«Pourvu qu'il y soit! dit Malone.

— Il y sera, avait répondu Hunter. S'il a menti, la peur le tient, et l'intérêt, s'il a dit vrai.»

L'Indien était à son poste, en effet, et, sous sa direction, la bande continua de longer la rive gauche de la Porcupine, en route vers les solitudes glacées de l'extrême Nord.

CHAPITRE V

Une leçon de boxe.

Il était donc écrit dans le livre de la destinée que Summy Skim, après avoir accompagné Ben Raddle au Klondike, l’accompagnerait jusqu’aux régions les plus élevées de l’Amérique du Nord. Il avait vaillamment résisté. Tous les arguments contre cette nouvelle campagne, il les avait produits. Et, finalement, il avait suffi de quelques mots d’une petite fille pour vaincre en dix secondes son inflexible résolution.

Sa défaite, à vrai dire, n’avait-elle pas été un peu voulue? Summy Skim aurait-il eu le courage de reprendre sans Ben Raddle le chemin de Montréal, ou la patience de l’attendre dans le confortable relatif de Dawson? Rien n’est moins certain.

Ces questions resteraient en tous cas à jamais sans réponse, puisque Summy, décidément, allait suivre son cousin à la conquête du Golden Mount.

«Céder une première fois, se répétait-il, c’est s’exposer à céder toujours. Je ne puis en accuser que moi!.. Ah! Green Valley! Green Valley, que tu es loin!»

Faut-il l’avouer? c’est un peu pour la forme et pour ne pas en avoir le démenti que Summy s’exprimait à lui-même de tels regrets. Certes, il «se languissait» toujours de Green Valley. Mais quelque chose qu’il ne pouvait définir chantait en lui. Il se sentait joyeux et léger comme un enfant, et la perspective d’un voyage en somme assez troublant ne lui causait pas de réelle appréhension. C’était la chasse sans doute qui donnait ainsi au bon Summy le goût des aventures.

Grâce à la précocité de la saison, le Scout fut de retour à Dawson City dès les premiers jours de mai. Le passage du Chilkoot, la navigation à travers les lacs et sur la Lewis River, avaient pu s’effectuer plus tôt que de coutume et dans des conditions favorables. Ainsi que cela avait été convenu huit mois auparavant, Bill Stell venait se mettre à la disposition des deux cousins pour les reconduire à Skagway, d’où le steamboat les ramènerait à Vancouver.

Bill Stell ne se montra pas très surpris en apprenant que les projets de Ben Raddle étaient à ce point modifiés. Il savait trop que poser le pied sur le sol du Klondike, c’est risquer d’y prendre racine. Si l’ingénieur n’en était pas tout à fait là, du moins ne semblait-il pas près de boucler sa valise pour Montréal!

«Ainsi?.. dit le Scout à Summy Skim.

— C’est comme ça, mon brave Bill.»

Et ce fut toute la réponse de Summy.

Celui-ci fut cependant moins concis, lorsqu’il apprit que Bill Stell acceptait de faire la nouvelle campagne. Abondamment, il exprima le plaisir que sa décision lui causait.

C’était là une bonne idée, en effet. Ben Raddle avait eu raison de penser qu’il ne pouvait trouver de concours plus sûr que celui du Scout, et, pour le décider, il lui avait fait connaître le véritable but de l’expédition. Le secret du Français Jacques Ledun, qu’il avait jalousement gardé vis-à-vis de tous, ce secret que Summy Skim et les deux cousines Edgerton étaient seuls à connaître jusqu'alors, il n'hésita pas à le confier à Bill Stell, en qui il avait la plus absolue confiance.

Tout d'abord, celui-ci refusa de croire à l'existence du Golden Mount. Il avait entendu parler de cette légende et n'admettait pas qu'on pût lui accorder la moindre créance. Mais, lorsque Ben Raddle lui eut raconté l'histoire de Jacques Ledun, lorsqu'il lui eut montré la carte où figurait le Volcan d'Or, le Scout se montra moins sceptique, et, peu à peu, la conviction qui animait l'ingénieur emporta la sienne.

«Enfin, Scout, conclut Ben Raddle, il y a là des richesses incalculables, cela n'est pas douteux. Si j'ai réussi à vous persuader, pourquoi ne viendriez-vous pas avec nous en prendre votre part?

— Vous m'offrez de vous accompagner au Golden Mount? insista Bill Stell.

— Mieux que de nous y accompagner, Scout. De nous y guider. N'avez-vous pas déjà parcouru les territoires du Nord? Si l'expédition ne réussit pas, je paierai largement vos services; si elle réussit, pourquoi, vous aussi, ne puiseriez-vous pas à pleines mains dans ce coffre-fort volcanique?

Si philosophe que fût le brave Scout, il se sentit ébranlé. Jamais pareille occasion ne s'était offerte à lui.

Ce qui l'effrayait, toutefois, c'était la longueur du voyage. Le meilleur itinéraire suivait une ligne brisée passant par Fort Mac Pherson qu'il avait visité autrefois, et la distance à franchir dépassait six cents kilomètres.

— C’est à peu près celle qui sépare Skagway de Dawson City, remarqua l’ingénieur. Elle ne vous a jamais épouvanté.

— Sans doute, monsieur Raddle, et j’ajouterai que le pays est moins difficile entre Dawson City et Fort Mac Pherson. Mais, au delà, pour atteindre les bouches de la Mackensie, c’est peut-être bien une autre affaire.

— Pourquoi admettre le pire? répliqua Ken Raddle. En somme, six cents kilomètres peuvent être enlevés en un mois.»

C’était possible, en effet, à la condition qu’il ne survînt aucune des fâcheuses éventualités si fréquentes sous de si hautes latitudes.

Bill Stell hésitait.

Il ne put hésiter longtemps. Aux instances de Ben Raddle se joignirent celles de Neluto tout joyeux de revoir son chef, de Summy Skim qui parla dans le même sens avec une éloquence entraînante, de Jane Edgerton qui se fit persuasive à un point inimaginable. Tous avaient raison; du moment que le voyage était résolu, le concours du Scout devenait très précieux et en multipliait les chances de succès.

Quant à Neluto, l’expédition dont il ignorait le véritable but lui souriait beaucoup. Quelles belles chasses devaient offrir ces territoires à peine visités jusqu’alors!

«Il reste à savoir à qui ils les offrent, ces chasses, observa Summy Skim.

— Mais… à nous, répondit Neluto, quelque peu étonné de la remarque.

— A moins que ce ne soit nous qu’on chasse!» riposta Summy, prouvant ainsi à Neluto qu’il avait mal choisi l’occasion d’être exceptionnellement affirmatif.

En effet, les régions septentrionales sont parcourues, pendant la belle saison, par des bandes d’Indiens dont il n’y a rien de bon à attendre, et contre lesquels les agents de la Compagnie de la baie d’Hudson ont souvent eu à se défendre.

Les préparatifs furent rapidement faits. Le Scout, prêt à partir avec ses hommes pour le Nord comme pour le Sud, se procura sans peine le matériel nécessaire: chariots, canot portatif, tentes, attelages de mules dont la nourriture est assurée sur ces plaines verdoyantes, et, par suite, bien préférables aux attelages de chiens. Quant aux vivres, sans parler de ce que produirait la chasse ou la pêche, il fut facile de s’en assurer pour plusieurs mois, Dawson City venant d’être ravitaillé par les sociétés qui desservent les gisements du Klondike, dès le rétablissement des communications avec Skagway et Vancouver. Les munitions ne manquaient pas non plus, et, s’il y avait lieu de recourir aux carabines, elles ne resteraient point muettes.

La caravane, sous la direction du Scout, allait comprendre les deux cousins, Jane Edgerton, Neluto avec sa carriole et son cheval, Patrick Richardson, neuf Canadiens qui avaient travaillé sur le 129, et six au service de Bill Stell, soit au total vingt et une personnes. Ce nombre réduit de prospecteurs suffirait à l’exploitation du Golden Mount, tout le travail consistant, d’après Jacques Ledun, à recueillir les pépites amassées dans le cratère éteint du volcan.

On mit tant de diligence à préparer cette campagne dont Ben Raddle, Summy Skim, Jane Edgerton et le Scout étaient seuls à connaître le but, que le départ put être fixé au 6 mai.

On ne sera pas étonné que Ben Raddle, avant de quitter Dawson City, voulût s'enquérir une dernière fois de la situation des claims du Forty Miles Creek. Par son ordre, le contre-maître et Neluto se rendirent à l'endroit où se trouvait naguère l'héritage de l'oncle Josias.

La situation était la même. Le 129, comme Je 131, comme beaucoup d'autres claims de part et d'autre de la frontière, était entièrement submergé. Le rio, décuplé en largeur par le tremblement de terre, suivait son cours régulier. Le détourner et lui faire réintégrer son ancien lit eût été une besogne impossible peut-être, et, en tous cas, si considérable, si coûteuse, que personne n'y songeait. Lorique revint donc avec la certitude que tout espoir de jamais exploiter ces gisements devait être abandonné.

Les préparatifs furent achevés le 5 mai. Dans l'après-midi, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle allèrent à l'hôpital prendre congé d'Edith et du docteur.

Ils y trouvèrent d'abord les deux cousines qui passaient ensemble cette dernière journée. Edith avait comme toujours son air tranquille et calme. Que pensait-elle de ce voyage? Bien fin qui eût pu le dire.

«Je n'ai pas d'opinion, répondit-elle à une question que Ben Raddle lui posa sur ce sujet. Chacun mène sa vie à sa guise. L'essentiel est de bien faire ce qu'on fait.

La conversation se prolongea pendant plus de deux heures. Chose étrange, Summy et Jane en faisaient presque exclusivement les frais. A mesure que l'heure avançait, Ben Raddle et Edith gardaient un silence plus obstiné, comme si une idée fixe eût de minute en minute appesanti davantage leur esprit.

Ce fut Summy qui termina joyeusement l’entrevue, quand le moment de se séparer fut arrivé.

— Le programme est: pas de bile! conclut-il d’une voix éclatante. Donc, soyons gais. Avant l’hiver nous serons de retour, ployant sous le fardeau des pépites!

— Dieu t’entende!» murmura Ben Raddle avec une sorte de lassitude, tandis qu’il tendait à Edith une main que celle-ci serra silencieusement.

Quand la porte se fut refermée sur eux, et tandis qu’ils allaient rendre visite au docteur Pilcox, Summy entreprit son cousin avec une certaine vivacité.

«Qu’est-ce qui te prend? interrogea-t-il. Tu as l’air de porter le diable en terre, et Mlle Edith semble copier tes airs désenchantés. Comme c’est encourageant! Le voyage aurait-il cessé de te plaire?

Ben Raddle, d’un effort, sembla chasser des pensées importunes.

— Tu plaisantes!» dit-il.

Quant au docteur Pilcox, voici quelle fut sa manière de voir:

«Vous allez faire un voyage superbe, car le pays doit être, là-bas, plus beau encore qu’au Klondike, qui n’est déjà pas mal, cependant! Et puis, si vous vous étiez engagés sur la route du Sud, c’eût été pour retourner à Montréal. Nous ne vous aurions jamais revus. Au moins, lorsque vous reviendrez de là-bas, vous nous retrouverez à Dawson.»

Ben Raddle consacra la fin de la journée à tenir un dernier conciliabule avec Lorique. Ce que se dirent les deux interlocuteurs, Summy n’en sut rien, par bonheur, car il se fût sérieusement emporté s’il eût connu le véritable état d’âme de son cousin.

Au cours de longs entretiens qu’il poursuivait depuis tant de mois avec le contre-maître canadien, l’ingénieur avait été décidément envahi par cette fièvre de l’orque Summy redoutait si fort. Lorique, mineur enragé, dont toute la vie s’était passée à faire de la prospection, avait par degrés amené Ben Raddle à ses idées. Le serviteur, par intoxication, par contagion lente, avait déteint sur le maître, et celui-ci en était arrivé à donner comme but exclusif à sa vie la recherche et la mise en œuvre de filons ou de sables aurifères. Dans son for intérieur, le retour à Montréal était reculé à un avenir indéterminé. Tout son intérêt se concentrait uniquement sur le Klondike, source inépuisable d’émotions appréciées du joueur qui sommeillait en lui.

Ben Raddle avait décidé que Lorique ne ferait pas partie de l’expédition qui allait s’enfoncer dans le Nord. Il resterait à Dawson, et aurait comme mission de se tenir au courant de tous les événements intéressant l’industrie minière. S’il voyait quelque bonne opération à tenter, il serait de cette manière à même de la faire.

Tout étant ainsi convenu, la caravane sortit de Dawson, le lendemain, dès cinq heures du matin, par le haut quartier de la rive droite du Klondike, et se dirigea vers le Nord-Est.

Le temps était à souhait: ciel pur, brise faible, température de cinq à six degrés au-dessus de zéro. La neige avait en grande partie fondu, et il n’en subsistait sur le sol herbeux que de rares plaques d’une éblouissante blancheur.

Que l’itinéraire eût été soigneusement établi, il est inutile de le dire. Le Scout avait déjà fait le voyage de Dawson City à Fort Mac Pherson, et l’on pouvait s’en rapporter à la fidélité de ses souvenirs.

La contrée à parcourir était, en somme, assez plate, et coupée seulement de quelques rios, d’abord affluents ou sous-affluents du Yukon et de la Klondike River, puis, au delà du cercle polaire arctique, affluents ou sous-affluents de la Peel River qui longe la base des Montagnes Rocheuses avant de se jeter dans la Mackensie.

Pendant cette première période du voyage, tout au moins, entre Dawson City et Fort Mac Pherson, le cheminement ne présenterait pas de grandes difficultés. Après la fonte des dernières neiges, les rios descendraient à leur plus bas étiage; il serait aisé de les franchir, et ils conserveraient toujours assez d’eau pour les besoins de la petite troupe. Lorsqu’elle aurait atteint la Peel River, on déciderait dans quelles conditions s’effectuerait la dernière partie de l’itinéraire.

Par un phénomène bien humain d’autosuggestion, tous, à l’exception peut-être de Summy Skim et de Patrick Richardson, partaient pleins d’espoir dans le succès de l’expédition. Et encore Summy Skim se bornait-il à ne pas avoir d’opinion, et à ne pas arrêter son esprit un seul instant sur le but du voyage. Après une longue et stérile hostilité, il se mettait en route joyeux sans savoir pourquoi et débordant d’une irrésistible bonne humeur.

Quant à Patrick, lui non plus n’avait pas d’opinion, en admettant qu’il eût été capable d’en avoir une. La veille du départ, Jane lui avait dit:

«Patrick, nous partons demain.

— Bien, monsieur Jean,» avait répondu le fidèle géant, qui n’avait jamais paru remarquer le changement de sexe de son jeune maître.

Les autres, ceux du moins qui étaient dans la confidence, Ben Raddle, Jane Edgerton, Bill Stell lui-même, admettaient l’existence du Golden Mount et de ses trésors comme un article de foi. Quant au reste de la troupe, il suivait de confiance, sachant seulement que l’on faisait un voyage de prospection dans le Nord, et tous, grisés par un optimisme sans cause, en supputaient à l’avance les résultats. La qualité de Ben Raddle faisait merveille. On se racontait à l’oreille que le Scout lui avait donné un «tuyau», et que l’on marchait à coup sûr vers de fabuleuses richesses que l’ingénieur saurait bien faire sortir de terre d’un seul coup.

C’est dans ces heureuses dispositions que l’on quitta Dawson City. Au sortir de la ville, la carriole conduite par Neluto, et dans laquelle les deux cousins et Jane Edgerton avaient pris place, marcha d’abord d’une rapide allure; mais bientôt elle dut ralentir son train, que les attelages lourdement chargés ne pouvaient suivre. Cependant il fut possible d’allonger ces premières étapes sans trop fatiguer les animaux et les hommes, la vaste plaine très unie ne présentant aucun obstacle. Souvent, pour soulager les mules, les hommes faisaient à pied une partie de la route. Ben Raddle et le Scout causaient alors du sujet qui occupait leur pensée. Summy Skim et Neluto battaient la campagne à droite et à gauche, et, comme le gibier abondait, ils ne perdaient pas leur poudre. Puis, avant même que ne fût venue la nuit déjà tardive à cette époque de l’année et sous cette latitude, le campement s’organisait jusqu’au lendemain.

Ce fut à la date du 16 mai, dix jours après son départ de Dawson City, que la caravane franchit le cercle polaire, un peu au delà du soixante-sixième parallèle. Aucun incident n’avait marqué cette première partie du parcours. On n’avait même pas fait la rencontre de ces bandes d’Indiens que les agents de la Compagnie de la baie d’Hudson poursuivent encore et repoussent de plus en plus vers l’Ouest.

Le temps était beau, les santés bonnes. Le personnel vigoureux, rompu aux fatigues, ne paraissait pas souffrir du voyage. Les attelages trouvaient facilement à se nourrir au milieu des prairies verdoyantes. Quant aux campements nocturnes, on parvenait toujours à les installer à portée d'un rio limpide, sur la lisière des bois de bouleaux, de trembles et de pins qui se succèdent à perte de vue dans la direction du Nord-Est.

L'aspect de la région se modifiait lentement. A l'horizon oriental se profilait maintenant l'arête des Montagnes Rocheuses. C'est dans cette partie du Nord-Amérique que le sol est soulevé par leurs premières ondulations, qui se prolongent ensuite, exhaussées, sur presque toute la longueur du nouveau continent.

Quelques kilomètres après avoir franchi le cercle polaire, la caravane dut passer à gué, près de sa source, une rivière allant vers le Nord-Ouest se jeter dans la Porcupine River.

Tant à cause du réseau des creeks que des inégalités du sol, la route, au Nord de cette rivière, se fît assez dure, et, sans l'extrême soin qu'y apportait Neluto, l'essieu ou les roues de la carriole se fussent plusieurs fois rompus.

Nul, d'ailleurs, ne songeait à s'étonner de ces difficultés. On ne s'était pas attendu à trouver dans ces régions perdues des voies bordées de becs de gaz et soigneusement macadamisées. Seul, Bill Stell, qui avait jadis suivi le même chemin, manifestait quelque surprise.

«La route, dit-il un jour que la caravane était engagée dans un étroit défilé, ne m'avait pas paru si mauvaise lorsque je l'ai parcourue il y a vingt ans.

— Elle n'a pourtant pas dû changer depuis, répliqua Summy Skim.

— Cela tient peut-être à la rigueur du dernier hiver, fît observer l'ingénieur.

— C'est ce que je pense, monsieur Ben, répondit le Scout. Les froids ont été si excessifs, que les gelées ont profondément défoncé la terre. Aussi, ne saurais-je trop recommander de prendre garde aux avalanches.»

Il s'en produisit, en effet, deux ou trois fois. D'énormes morceaux de quartz et de granit, déséquilibrés par les affouillements, roulèrent en rebondissant sur les talus, brisant, broyant les arbres situés sur leur passage. Il s'en fallut de peu que l'un des chariots et son attelage ne fussent détruits par ces lourdes masses.

Pendant doux jours, les étapes furent pénibles, et leur longueur ne se maintint pas à sa moyenne habituelle. De là des retards contre lesquels pestait Ben Raddle et que Summy Skim accueillait avec le calme d'un philosophe.

Ce n'était pas l'or qui l'attirait, lui. Puisqu'il avait dû renoncer à regagner des pays plus cléments, autant passer son temps à voyager qu'à autre chose. Et, d'ailleurs, il était obligé de convenir avec lui-même qu'il se trouvait parfaitement heureux.

«Il est étonnant, ce Ben, disait parfois Summy à Jane Edgerton. C'est un enragé.

— Nullement, répondait Jane. Il est pressé, voilà tout.

— Pressé? ripostait Summy. Pourquoi pressé? Il gâte toujours le présent avec son souci du lendemain. Moi, je me laisse vivre et j'accepte les choses comme elles viennent.

— C’est que M. Raddle a un but. Il va droit au Golden Mount, et le chemin qu’il faut suivre pour l’atteindre n’est qu’un moyen qui ne l’intéresse pas.

— Le Golden Mount – s’il existe – répliquait Summy, sera là dans quinze jours comme dans huit. Je compte bien, d’ailleurs, que nous prendrons un repos mérité à Fort Mac Pherson. Après une trotte pareille, on a le droit de vouloir s’étendre dans un lit.

— S’il y a des auberges à Fort Mac Pherson!

Le Scout, consulté, déclara qu’il n’y en avait pas.

— Fort Mac Pherson, dit-il, n’est qu’un poste fortifié pour les agents de la Compagnie. Mais il y a des chambres.

— Puisqu’il y a des chambres, il y a des lits, répliqua Summy Skim, et je ne serais pas fâché d’y allonger mes jambes pendant deux ou trois bonnes nuits.

— Commençons par y arriver, interrompit Ben Raddle, et ne nous attardons pas en haltes inutiles.»

La caravane marchait donc aussi rapidement que le permettaient les détours et les embarras des défilés; mais, malgré les encouragements de Ben Raddle, il lui fallut près d’une semaine pour sortir de la région montagneuse et arriver à la Peel River.

Ce fut seulement dans l’après-midi du 21 mai qu’on l’atteignit, et, sans attendre, on traversa cet important affluent de la Mackensie, en s’aidant des derniers glaçons de la débâcle qui l’encombraient encore. Avant la nuit, matériel et personnel étaient transportés sans accident sur la rive droite, et le camp était établi au bord de l’eau, sous les frondaisons de grands pins maritimes. Les tentes dressées, on s’occupa du repas du soir, toujours impatiemment attendu.

Mais il était écrit que la journée ne s’achèverait pas sans dramatique incident. A peine était-on installé, que l’un des Canadiens, descendu un peu en aval, reparut au pas de course, les traits convulsés par la peur.

«Alerte!.. alerte! cria-t-il dès qu’il fut à portée de la voix.

On se releva en désordre. Seul, Summy Skim, en chasseur de profession, eut le sang-froid de saisir sa carabine. En un instant, il était debout, armé, prêt à faire feu.

— Des Indiens? demanda-t-il.

— Non, répondit Bill Stell, des ours.»

Sur les talons du fuyard apparaissait, en effet, un trio d’ours de grande taille, d’aspect formidable, appartenant à cette espèce de grizzlis qui fréquentent d’habitude les gorges des Montagnes Rocheuses.

Ces ours étaient-ils excités par la faim? C’était probable, à en juger par leurs terribles rugissements, qui eurent pour effet d’affoler les bêtes d’attelage.

La confusion générale s’en augmenta, et les trois ours furent au milieu du camp avant que l’on eût pris la moindre mesure de défense.

Au premier rang se trouvait, par hasard, Jane Edgerton. Elle essaya de reculer, de fuir, mais il était visible qu’elle n’en aurait pas le temps. D’un bond, Summy se plaça devant la jeune fille et, épaulant sa carabine, fit feu à deux reprises, coup sur coup.

Summy ne manquait jamais le but. C'était, du moins, sa prétention, qui fut justifiée une fois de plus. Deux ours frappés au cœur tombèrent pour ne plus se relever.

Il en restait un troisième. Indifférent au meurtre de ses congénères, l'animal accourait à toute vitesse. Dans une seconde il aurait saisi dans la tenaille de ses redoutables griffes le malheureux Summy désarmé. Celui-ci, décidé à vendre chèrement sa vie, prit par le canon son fusil transformé en massue et, de pied ferme, attendit.

Soudain, l'ours chancela. Attaqué de flanc, il lui fallait faire face à un nouvel ennemi, qui n'était autre que Patrick Richardson. Sans autres armes que celles dont la nature l'avait pourvu, l'Irlandais était venu à la rescousse et, selon les règles de la savate la plus pure, il avait décoché dans le flanc droit de l'ours un coup de pied si magistral que l'élan de la bête féroce en fut brisé.

L'ours fit sur lui-même un quart de conversion, et, déchirant l'air d'un effroyable rugissement, se lança sur l'audacieux qui le bravait. Les spectateurs de cette scène rapide poussèrent un cri d'effroi. Seul, Patrick, ramassé sur lui-même, ne manifesta aucune émotion.

C'était vraiment un beau spectacle: d'un côté un animal gigantesque emporté par la plus furieuse des colères, se précipitant avec l'aveuglement de la brute, griffes dardées, crocs menaçants; de l'autre, un superbe échantillon physique de la race des hommes, aussi grand, aussi fort que son terrifiant adversaire, moins bien armé sans aucun doute, mais remplaçant, quelle que fût la modestie de son rang sur l'échelle intellectuelle, l’infériorité de ses armes naturelles par cette flamme de l’intelligence dont l’espèce humaine a l’exclusif privilège.

On aurait cru revivre une scène des temps préhistoriques, au cours desquels nos premiers ancêtres durent, par l’unique force de leurs muscles, conquérir la terre inconnue et hostile.

Cette fois encore, l’intelligence devait triompher. A l’instant précis où l’ours allait étouffer Patrick entre ses bras velus, celui de l’Irlandais se détendit rapide comme la foudre, et son poing vint frapper, avec la violence d’une catapulte, l’assaillant en plein museau.

Le coup avait été formidable. L’ours vacilla sur ses pattes de derrière et tomba comme une masse à la renverse. Patrick eut un petit rire *mezza voce*, et, sans bouger, se tint prêt à soutenir une nouvelle attaque.

Elle ne se fit pas attendre. A peine tombé, l’ours s’était relevé le museau en sang. Ivre de rage, il se lança à corps perdu sur son ennemi.

Patrick ne perdit rien de son sang-froid. Le moment favorable choisi avec un tact parfait, ses deux poings, cette fois, partirent à la volée. Le gauche, d’abord, atteignit et creva l’un des yeux de l’animal, puis le droit revint s’écraser contre le museau avec une telle violence que le sang gicla et que l’on entendit le bruit sec des crocs brisés.

De nouveau, l’ours tomba à la renverse et, de nouveau, Patrick attendit généreusement qu’il se fût remis debout avant de reprendre le jeu. On n’eût pas agi avec plus de loyauté dans une séance de lutte romaine.

L’ours, d’ailleurs, se relevait moins rapidement que lors de sa première chute. Il se redressa enfin, mais pour se reposer lourdement sur son arrière-train. Il ne bougeait plus. Il ne rugissait plus. D’un air désorienté, il frottait de la patte son œil crevé, tandis que sa langue épaisse passait et repassait sur ses babines ensanglantées.

Lassé d’attendre, Patrick, le poing en arrêt, fit en avant un pas que l’ours fit immédiatement en arrière. L’Irlandais aussitôt avança d’un second pas, puis d’un troisième, tandis que l’ours reculait d’autant. Pendant trois minutes, cette singulière poursuite continua, au grand ébahissement des spectateurs.

Patrick, impatienté, brusqua les choses: Désespérant d’atteindre l’ennemi dans sa retraite, et comprenant la nécessité d’une arme de jet, il se baissa pour ramasser une grosse pierre dont l’envoi, à titre d’insultante provocation, ferait, sans doute, renaître la bataille.

Il n’en fut rien. En voyant le mouvement de l’Irlandais, l’ours ne demanda pas son reste. La leçon lui suffisait évidemment, et il en avait assez. Se laissant retomber sur ses quatre pattes, il battit en retraite au petit trot, et s’éloigna d’un air penaud, l’arrière-train peureusement contracté, en lançant de son œil unique un regard craintif à l’adresse de son vainqueur.

Quelques minutes plus tard il avait disparu sous les arbres de la forêt.

Un éclat de rire homérique, accompagné d’un tonnerre d’applaudissements, salua ce dénouement inattendu. On entoura Patrick, on le complimenta.

«Merci, Patrick, dit avec chaleur Summy Skim en serrant vigoureusement la main de son sauveur.

— Oui, merci, répéta Jane au géant. Merci et bravo!

Patrick ne sembla pas s’apercevoir de l’existence de Summy. Il se tourna du côté de sa jeune maîtresse qui, pour lui, peuplait la terre à elle seule.

— Il n’y a pas de quoi, dit-il modestement. Cette bête, voyez-vous, elle ne sait pas la boxe, monsieur Jean.»

CHAPITRE VI

Ou l’on touche au but.

Situé à peu près par 135° de longitude Ouest et 67° de latitude, le Port Mac Pherson était à cette époque le poste le plus septentrional que possédât la Compagnie de la baie d’Hudson dans le Nord-Amérique. Il commandait toute la partie de territoire arrosée par les nombreux bras qui se ramifient à l’estuaire de la Mackensie sur la mer Polaire Arctique. C’est là que les chasseurs de fourrures trouvaient à se ravitailler, et aussi à se défendre contre les bandes d’Indiens errant à travers les plaines du Haut-Dominion.

Ce fort, élevé sur la rive droite de la Peel River, se tenait le plus possible en communication avec le Fort Good Hope, bâti en amont au bord de la Mackensie. Les stocks de pelleteries refluaient de l’un vers l’autre, pour être ensuite transportés sous bonne escorte dans l’entrepôt central de la Compagnie.

Le Fort Mac Pherson est constitué par un vaste magasin au-dessus duquel se succèdent la chambre de l’agent-chef, le poste de ses hommes et une salle munie de lits de camp pouvant contenir une vingtaine de personnes. En bas sont disposées des écuries où les attelages de chevaux et de mules peuvent trouver place. Les forêts voisines fournissent le combustible nécessaire pour combattre les grands froids de la saison glaciale.

Le bois ne manque pas et ne manquera pas pendant nombre d’années encore. Quant à la nourriture, elle est assurée régulièrement chaque été par les ravitailleurs de la Compagnie, la chasse et la pêche alimentant, d’ailleurs, largement les réserves.

Le Fort Mac Pherson est commandé par un agent-chef, ayant sous ses ordres une vingtaine d’hommes originaires du Canada et de la Colombie britannique, véritables soldats soumis à une sévère discipline. Vie assez dure que la leur, étant donnés la rigueur du climat et le danger perpétuel d’être attaqué par les bandes d’aventuriers errant dans ces solitudes désolées. Aussi le râtelier d’armes est-il garni de carabines et de revolvers, et la Compagnie a-t-elle soin de renouveler les munitions de manière que le poste en soit toujours approvisionné.

Au moment où l’expédition de Ben Raddle parvint au Fort Mac Pherson, l’agent-chef et ses hommes venaient précisément d’avoir une alerte.

Quelques jours auparavant, dans la matinée du 25 mai, l’homme de garde avait signalé l’approche d’une troupe composée de trente à quarante hommes, dont plusieurs Indiens, qui remontait la rive droite de la Peel River.

Ainsi qu’il est d’usage en de telles circonstances, la porte du Fort Mac Pherson fut tout d’abord fermée solidement. A moins d’escalader les murs, on n’aurait pu pénétrer dans l’enceinte.

Lorsque les étrangers furent arrivés devant la porte, l’un d’eux, qui semblait être le capitaine, demanda que l’entrée leur fût accordée. L’agent-chef monta alors sur la crête du mur et examina les hôtes que le hasard lui envoyait. Il est à croire que cet examen ne lui dit rien de bon et que la troupe lui parut suspecte, car sa réponse fut que personne ne pénétrerait dans la place.

Ce qui suivit prouva la sagesse de sa décision. Des injures et des menaces éclatèrent aussitôt. A l’accent, le gardien-chef reconnut que la bande était composée, outre les Indiens, d'Américains du Sud, gens toujours portés aux plus extrêmes violences.

Les aventuriers ne s'en tinrent pas aux paroles. Ils passèrent aux actes. Soit pour se ravitailler, soit dans le but de s'emparer du Fort Mac Pherson, point d'appui très important qui commande l'embouchure de la Mackensie, ils essayèrent de forcer la porte. Elle résista d'ailleurs, et, après une décharge du poste, qui en blessa quelques-uns, les assaillants s'éloignèrent dans la direction du Nord-Ouest, mais non sans avoir fait usage de leurs carabines contre les agents de la Compagnie, dont, par bonheur, aucun ne fut atteint.

A dater de cette alerte, un retour offensif étant toujours à craindre, la garnison du Fort Mac Pherson se tint jour et nuit sur le qui-vive. Et vraiment ne dut-elle pas s'applaudir d'avoir fait bonne garde, lorsque, cinq jours plus tard, le 30 mai, une nouvelle troupe fut signalée, qui se dirigeait également vers le fort, en descendant la rive droite du cours d'eau?

Grande fut la surprise de la caravane du Scout – car c'était elle – lorsqu'elle vit apparaître sur la courtine une douzaine d'hommes armés, qui lui intimèrent l'ordre de s'éloigner.

Il fallut parlementer.

L'agent-chef reconnut enfin qu'il avait affaire à des Canadiens, et, circonstance des plus heureuses, il se trouva que Bill Stell et lui étaient d'anciennes connaissances, du temps que tous deux servaient dans la milice du Dominion. Aussitôt, la porte du Fort Mac Pherson s'ouvrit toute grande, et la caravane pénétra dans la cour intérieure où il lui fut fait bon accueil.

L'agent-chef donna alors l'explication de son attitude à l'approche d'une troupe d'étrangers. Il raconta qu'une bande d'Américains et d'Indiens avait fait quelques jours auparavant une démonstration hostile contre le fort, qu'elle avait tenté d'y entrer par la violence, et qu'il avait fallu la repousser à coups de carabine. Que voulaient ces rôdeurs? On l'ignorait. La méfiance de la garnison se justifiait en tous cas après cette échauffourée.

«Cette bande, qu'est-elle devenue? demanda le Scout.

— Son coup manqué, répondit l'agent-chef, elle a continué sa route.

— De quel côté?

— Vers le Nord-Ouest.

— Puisque nous allons prendre celle du Nord, dit Ben Raddle, il est probable que nous ne la rencontrerons pas.

— Je vous le souhaite, approuva l'agent-chef, car elle m'a paru composée d'un ramassis de gens de la pire espèce.

— Où peuvent-ils aller ainsi? questionna Summy Skim.

— Sans doute à la recherche de nouveaux gisements, puisqu'ils avaient un matériel de prospecteurs.

— Avez-vous donc entendu dire qu'il y en eût dans cette partie du Dominion? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Il en existe assurément, répondit l'agent-chef. Il ne reste qu'à les trouver.»

L'agent-chef n'en savait pas davantage. Il ne fit pas la moindre allusion au Golden Mount, qui cependant ne devait pas être très éloigné du Fort Mac Pherson.

Ben Raddle en fut satisfait. Il préférait que le secret de Jacques Ledun ne fût connu de personne. Par contre, une telle ignorance ne laissa pas d’impressionner Summy Skim, qui doutait toujours de l’existence de la Montagne d’Or. Pour en avoir le cœur net, il demanda à l’agent-chef s’il y avait des volcans dans le Nord. Celui-ci déclara qu’il n’en avait jamais entendu parler, et cette réponse augmenta la perplexité de Summy.

Le Scout se contenta de dire à son camarade de régiment que la caravane allait précisément à la recherche de territoires aurifères vers l’embouchure de la Mackensie. Il ajouta, qu’après une marche d’un mois, elle serait désireuse de se reposer deux ou trois jours au Fort Mac Pherson, si on voulait bien lui accorder l’hospitalité.

La requête de Bill Stell fut exaucée sans difficulté. En ce moment, d’ailleurs, le fort ne renfermait que sa petite garnison réglementaire. Les chasseurs n’y étaient attendus que dans un mois. On ne manquait donc pas de place, et la caravane put se loger à l’aise sans causer aucun dérangement.

Ben Raddle remercia vivement l’agent-chef de ce bon accueil, et, en moins d’une heure, l’installation du personnel et du matériel était terminée.

Les trois jours s’écoulèrent dans un repos absolu, et aucun incident ne marqua le séjour de la caravane au Fort Mac Pherson. Lorsque l’heure du départ arriva, tous, bien reposés, étaient prêts à repartir d’un cœur joyeux.

Dans la matinée du 2 juin, la petite troupe se reforma sous la conduite du Scout, qui ne ménagea pas à l’agent-chef et à ses camarades des remerciements aussi sincères que mérités, puis elle se remit en marche sur la rive droite de la Peel River.

Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et Jane Edgerton avaient repris place dans la carriole conduite par Neluto. Les autres attelages suivaient sous la direction du Scout. Celui-ci ne connaissait plus le territoire qu'il traversait, ses voyages antérieurs ne l'ayant jamais conduit au delà du Fort Mac Pherson.

C'était donc aux renseignements possédés par l'ingénieur qu'il convenait de s'attacher maintenant. Sa carte, où était reporté le Golden Mount, d'après les relèvements de Jacques Ledun, montrait que la route, à partir du Fort Mac Pherson, obliquait légèrement sur la gauche de la Peel River.

A midi la halte s'organisa près d'un rio, à l'orée d'un bois de sapins. Les animaux furent mis au pâturage dans une prairie voisine. Le temps était rafraîchi par une légère brise du Nord-Est, et le ciel voilé de quelques nuages.

On était en pays plat. Le regard n'était arrêté qu'au levant par les premières tumescences de la chaîne des Montagnes Rocheuses. La distance à parcourir jusqu'au Golden Mount, distance qui, d'après la carte, ne devait pas excéder deux cents kilomètres, n'exigerait, dans ces conditions, que cinq ou six jours, s'il ne se produisait aucun retard.

Tout en causant pendant la halte, Bill Stell fut conduit à dire:

«Enfin, monsieur Summy, nous voilà au terme du voyage. Bientôt nous n'aurons plus qu'à songer au retour.

— Mon cher Bill, répondit Summy, un voyage n'est terminé que lorsqu'on est revenu chez soi, et, en ce qui concerne spécialement celui-ci, je ne le croirai achevé que le jour où la porte de notre maison de la rue Jacques-Cartier se refermera sur nous.»

Bill Stell n’insista pas. Quant à Ben Raddle, il échangea un regard navré avec Jane Edgerton. Incorrigible, décidément, ce Summy!

Il ne fallut pas moins de trois jours à la caravane pour atteindre le confluent de la Peel River et de la Mackensie. Elle n’y parvint que dans l’après-midi du 5 juin.

Rien ne troubla ces longues étapes effectuées sans trop de fatigue, sur la rive assez plate de la rivière. Le pays était désert. A peine si on rencontra quelques groupes d’Indiens, de ceux qui vivent de la pêche sur le delta du Grand Fleuve. La bande signalée par l’agent-chef du Fort Mac Pherson ne fut point rencontrée, et le Scout s’en félicitait.

«Arrivons seuls au Golden Mount, répétait-il, revenons-en seuls, et tout sera pour le mieux.»

Il prenait pour cela toutes les précautions possibles. Trois de ses hommes allaient sans cesse en éclaireurs en avant et sur les flancs de la caravane, et, durant les haltes, les abords du campement étaient surveillés avec soin de manière à se garder contre toute surprise.

Ces précautions avaient jusqu’alors été superflues, et la caravane n’avait fait aucune mauvaise rencontre au moment où elle atteignit la Mackensie.

L’embouchure de ce Grand Fleuve constitue un important réseau hydrographique qui n’a peut-être pas de similaire en n’importe quelle région du nouveau et de l’ancien monde.

Cent cinquante kilomètres avant de se jeter dans l’Océan, la Mackensie se divise, se déploie à la manière d’un éventail, en bras réunis par une multitude de canaux secondaires, dont les grands froids ne font qu’une vaste surface glacée pendant l’hiver. A cette époque de l’année, les derniers débris de la débâcle venaient de se dissoudre dans les eaux de la mer Arctique, et la Peel River ne charriait plus un seul glaçon.

A voir cette disposition si compliquée de l’estuaire de la Mackensie, on peut même se demander si sa branche de l’Ouest n’est pas formée par la Peel River elle-même, couplée au bras principal de l’Est, par le réseau qui s’étend entre eux.

Quoi qu’il en soit à cet égard, que le bras de l’Ouest prolonge la Peel River ou constitue une dérivation de la Mackensie proprement dite, la caravane était dans la nécessité de passer sur sa rive gauche, puisque les coordonnées du Golden Mount le plaçaient à peu de distance de cette rive, sur le bord de l’océan Glacial Arctique.

Très heureusement, l’étiage des eaux n’était pas élevé, et le Scout réussit à trouver un gué. Le passage put donc être effectué pendant la halte du 5, non sans d’assez grandes difficultés.

Cette opération occupa toute l’après-midi, et, lorsque le soir tomba, Bill Stell et ses compagnons étaient installés sur l’autre rive.

Le lendemain, 6 juin, dès trois heures du matin, Bill Stell donna le signal du départ. A son estime, trois jours devaient largement suffire à atteindre le littoral. La caravane serait alors en vue du Golden Mount, si les indications de la carte avaient quelque précision. En admettant même que la longitude et la latitude relevées par Jacques Ledun ne fussent pas absolument exactes, la montagne serait visible, car elle devait dominer la région.

Les étapes le long de la branche occidentale du Grand Fleuve s’effectuèrent sans offrir d’obstacles notables. Toutefois, le temps était moins favorable. Des nuages, venus du Nord, chassaient à grande vitesse, et la pluie tomba parfois avec violence. La marche fut retardée de ce fait, et les haltes de nuit ne laissèrent pas d’être pénibles. Mais on supportait allègrement des ennuis que la proximité du but faisait paraître légers.

C’était une circonstance heureuse que la caravane ne se fût pas engagée dans le réseau hydrographique du delta. Le Scout se demandait comment il s’en fût tiré. Tant de rios à traverser, s’ils n’étaient pas guéables, auraient occasionné les plus sérieux embarras. On aurait été contraint de laisser en arrière une partie du matériel, quitte à venir le reprendre plus tard.

Le 8 juin, à la halte du soir, on ne devait pas être à plus de sept ou huit lieues du littoral, qu’on atteindrait le lendemain sans aucun doute.

Ben Raddle jugea le moment venu de faire connaître à ses compagnons le véritable but du voyage. Il raconta donc l’histoire de Jacques Ledun et répéta les confidences du malheureux Français à la troupe des prospecteurs groupés en cercle autour de lui,

Ce fut une explosion de joie. Tous les regards se tendirent vers le Nord, dans l’espoir d’apercevoir le sommet du Golden Mount. Même en admettant qu’il n’eût que de cinq à six cents pieds d’altitude, il aurait été visible à cette distance.

Le soleil était encore assez haut dans le ciel. Mais, par malheur, quelques brumes s’accumulaient à l’horizon. Rien n’apparut à ces yeux impatients.

On conçoit à quel degré de nervosité était arrivé le personnel de la caravane, et, plus que tous les autres, Ben Raddle absorbé depuis si longtemps par son idée fixe qui serait sous peu d’heures une réalité ou un rêve.

Jane Edgerton partageait la surexcitation de l’ingénieur. Ils ne pouvaient tous deux tenir en place. Si le Scout et Summy Skim ne leur eussent fait entendre raison, ils auraient repris la marche au milieu de l’obscurité.

«Mais, nom d’une pipe! calme-toi, Ben; calmez-vous, mademoiselle Jane, répétait Summy Skim. Patientez jusqu’à demain. Si le Golden Mount est là, vous le trouverez à sa place. Il ne s’envolera pas, que diable! et il est bien inutile de quitter notre campement pendant la nuit pour être fixé quelques heures plus tôt.»

Conseil sage, qui fut appuyé par Bill Stell. De fâcheuses rencontres étaient toujours à craindre, soit avec les Indiens, soit avec des bandes d’aventuriers dans le genre de celle qui avait attaqué le Fort Mac Pherson.

La nuit s’écoula dans ces conditions. Lorsque le jour reparut, les vapeurs ne s’étaient pas dissipées. A deux kilomètres le Golden Mount n’eût pas été visible.

Ben Raddle, les traits contractés, le front assombri, se contenait avec peine. Summy Skim, malgré sa bonté naturelle, n’était pas sans éprouver quelque malin plaisir de la colère du tyran qui l’avait entraîné si loin de Green Valley.

«Rage, mon vieux, rage, mâchonnait-il entre ses dents. Si le Golden Mount n’existe pas, tu ne peux pas le voir, c’est évident.

Cette réflexion pleine de bon sens, qui prouvait son inguérissable scepticisme, Summy eut seulement le tort de la murmurer un peu trop près de Jane Edgerton. Celle-ci eut un regard irrité qui lit rougir jusqu’aux oreilles l’insolent raisonneur. Summy voulut réparer sa bévue.

«Mais comme il existe, se hâta-t-il d’ajouter, on le verra dès que le temps sera clair, c’est évident.

Et lâchement, à haute voix, il répéta avec conviction:

«C’est évident!»

Puis, afin de savoir s’il avait obtenu son pardon, il coula un regard du côté de la jeune prospectrice. Il eut alors l’humiliation de constater qu’elle ne s’occupait plus de lui.

Le campement fut levé dès quatre heures du matin. Il faisait grand jour, et le soleil était déjà de quelques degrés au-dessus de l’horizon. On le sentait derrière les brumes que ses rayons n’avaient pas la force de dissiper.

La caravane se remit en marche. A onze heures, le littoral ne devait pas être à plus de trois lieues. Le Golden Mount demeurait toujours invisible.

Summy Skim commençait à se demander si son cousin n’allait pas devenir fou. Tant de fatigues subies, tant de dangers courus, pour n’arriver qu’à une désillusion!..

Enfin, un peu avant midi, l’atmosphère s’éclaircit. Le globe rouge du soleil s’estompa vaguement dans le brouillard moins dense. La voix de Neluto retentit:

«Là!.. là!.. Une fumée! s’écriait-il.

Mais il eut aussitôt du regret de s’être montré si audacieusement affirmatif.

«Ou un nuage, dit-il.

Il réfléchit une seconde, et ajouta:

«Ou un oiseau!

Le pilote réfléchit encore. Une fumée, un nuage, un oiseau… Avait-il bien épuisé la série des hypothèses?.. Non, il ne pouvait imaginer d’autres possibilités… Et pourtant, il en existait peut-être?..

«Ou rien du tout!» conclut-il entre ses dents pour son con lentement personnel et pour satisfaire, dans tous les cas, sa conscience.

Eût-il parlé à voix plus haute, qu’on ne l’eût pas écouté davantage. La caravane semblait frappée d’immobilité, âmes et regards tendus vers le Nord.

Ben Raddle, lui aussi, regardait le Nord, troublé par une sourde et vague inquiétude.

«Une fumée?.. murmurait-il. Mais non! C’est impossible… puisque, d’après Jacques Ledun, le Golden Mount est un volcan éteint!..»

Et pourtant Neluto avait eu tort d’être aussi timide. Sa première hypothèse était la bonne.

La brume se dissipait de plus en plus. Bientôt le soleil rayonna librement dans le bleu pâle du ciel, tandis que, salué par les hurrahs des prospecteurs, apparaissait le mont prodigieux, le Volcan d’Or, dont le cratère s’empanachait de vapeurs fuligineuses.

CHAPITRE VII

Une complication inattendue.

Malgré les difficultés de la route, il ne fallut pas plus de deux heures à Ben Raddle et aux siens pour franchir la distance qui les séparait du Golden Mount. Tous, sans échanger un mot, absorbés dans la contemplation du but qu'ils allaient enfin atteindre, marchaient aussi vite que le permettait la nature du terrain. Ils semblaient attirés par la montagne comme par un énorme aimant.

Il n'était pas trois heures lorsque la caravane s'arrêta au pied du volcan, dont le Rio Rubber contournait la base, à l'Est, et dont l'océan Glacial battait au Nord les dernières assises.

Contrée absolument déserte. Ni au delà de la montagne vers l'Ouest, ni du côté des bouches de la Mackensie, on n'apercevait un village indigène, ou un groupe de ces Indiens qui parcourent le littoral. Au large, pas une embarcation, pas une voile de baleinier, pas une fumée de steamer. E t, cependant, c'était l'époque à laquelle les mers septentrionales sont fréquentées par les pêcheurs de cétacés ou les chasseurs de phoques. Fallait-il en conclure que personne, en cette région lointaine, n'avait devancé Ben Raddle et ses compagnons, et que Jacques Ledun était le seul qui eût poussé ses recherches jusqu'à l'embouchure de la Mackensie, le seul par conséquent qui eût constaté l'existence du Volcan d'Or?

Le gisement, s'il existait, appartenait bien, en tous cas, à Ben Raddle, à titre de premier occupant. Personne n'ayant pris avant lui possession du Golden Mount, aucun poteau n'en délimitant la concession, nul n'aurait désormais le droit d’intervenir, et l’administration canadienne ne pourrait exiger aucune redevance.

Ce fut au pied du flanc de l’Est, séparé du Rio Rubber par un bois de bouleaux et de trembles, que le Scout établit son campement, à moins d’une demi-lieue du littoral. L’eau douce et le bois ne manqueraient donc pas.

Au delà, se développaient, vers l’Ouest et le Sud, de vastes plaines verdoyantes, semées de bouquets d’arbres, qui, de l’avis de Summy Skim, devaient être assez giboyeuses.

L’installation s’organisa rapidement sous la direction de Bill Stell. Les tentes furent dressées à la lisière du bois. La carriole et les chariots trouvèrent place dans une clairière, et l’on mit à paître dans les prairies voisines les mules entravées. A des places judicieusement choisies, on établit des postes de grand’garde, les abords du campement devant être, par prudence, surveillés jour et nuit, bien qu’il ne semblât pas qu’aucun danger fût à craindre, si ce n’est peut-être de la part des ours, hôtes habituels des territoires du Dominion.

Personne ne doutait, d’ailleurs, que l’exploitation du Golden Mount ne fût de courte durée. Le temps de puiser au trésor accumulé dans le cratère et d’en charger les chariots, et l’on repartirait immédiatement. Ni pic, ni pioche à employer, aucun lavage à faire. L’or, d’après les dires de Jacques Ledun, existait là sous forme de poudre ou de pépites libres, tout le travail préparatoire ayant été fait, et depuis longtemps, par les prospecteurs de Pluton.

Ben Raddle ne serait exactement fixé à cet égard qu’après avoir fait l’ascension de la montagne, et lorsqu’il aurait reconnu la disposition du cratère dans lequel, d’après Jacques Ledun, il était facile de descendre.

Bill Stell fit à ce propos une observation qui ne manquait pas de justesse:

«Monsieur Ben, dit-il, lorsque le Français vous a révélé l’existence du Golden Mount, ne vous a-t-il pas parlé d’un volcan éteint?

— En effet, Bill.

— Il l’avait, je crois, gravi jusqu’au sommet?

— Oui. Et même il avait visité le cratère. Mais, depuis cette époque, les forces éruptives ont eu le temps de se réveiller.

— Il n’y a pas lieu d’en douter, répondit le Scout, puisque des volutes de fumée s’élèvent en ce moment de la montagne. Je me demande si, dans ces conditions, le cratère ne va pas être inaccessible.

Ben Raddle avait pour sa part déjà réfléchi à cette éventualité. Il ne s’agissait plus d’un volcan éteint, mais d’un volcan endormi seulement, et qui se réveillait.

— C’est possible, en effet, répondit-il, mais ce contretemps peut aussi avoir son bon côté. Pourquoi une éruption ne nous épargnerait-elle pas du travail, en vidant le Golden Mount des pépites qu’il renferme? Nous n’aurions alors qu’à les ramasser au pied de la montagne. Demain, lorsque nous aurons fait l’ascension, nous agirons suivant les circonstances.»

La surveillance du campement fut organisée par le Scout, mais la nuit ne fut pas troublée, si ce n’est par quelques lointains grognements d’ours, qui ne s’aventurèrent pas jusqu’au Golden Mount.

Dès cinq heures tous furent sur pied.

L’imagination aidant, Summy Skim ne contemplait tout de même pas sans quelque intérêt ce fameux Golden Mount.

«Sais-tu à quoi je pense, Ben? demanda-t-il à son cousin.

— Non, Summy, répondit Ben Raddle. Mais je le saurai quand tu me l’auras dit.

— Probable, Ben. Eh bien! je pense que, si notre oncle Josias avait fait une pareille découverte, il serait retourné dans son pays frayer avec les milliardaires du nouveau monde, au lieu de mourir au Klondike… ce qui nous aurait évité d’y venir.

— Le destin ne l’a point voulu, Summy, et cette chance échoit à ses neveux…

— Dont l’un, tout au moins, n’a jamais poussé l’ambition jusque-là… même en rêve!

— Entendu, Summy. Mais enfin, puisque nous avons tant fait que d’atteindre les rivages de la mer Arctique, tu ne trouveras pas mauvais que nous tâchions de revenir le gousset bien garni, et, par gousset, j’entends nos chariots et notre carriole chargés d’or à se rompre.

— Ainsi soit-il! accorda Summy. Pourtant, te le dirai-je? j’ai beau examiner cette montagne sous toutes ses faces et me répéter qu’elle est de taille à elle seule à humilier l’Australie, la Californie et l’Afrique réunies, je n’arrive pas à être impressionné. Pour moi, elle n’a pas l’air assez coffre-fort.

— A ce compte-là, Summy, il faudrait, pour te satisfaire, que le Golden Mount ressemblât aux caisses de la Banque.

— Je n’y verrais pas d’inconvénient, Ben, surtout si le caissier était à son poste, prêt à m’ouvrir la porte.

— Nous nous passerons de lui, affirma Ben Raddle, et nous saurons bien forcer la serrure.

— Hum!..» fit Summy d’un air dubitatif en considérant le sommet empanaché du volcan.

N’en déplaise à Summy Skim, le Golden Mount était un mont comme tous les autres. Ses mille pieds d’altitude dominaient le littoral, et de la base, mesurant, autant qu’on en pouvait juger, environ deux kilomètres de circonférence, ses flancs s’élevaient en pente très raide jusqu’au plateau qui couronnait le sommet. Il affectait donc la forme d’un cône ou plus exactement d’un cône tronqué.

La raideur des pentes allait sans doute en rendre l’ascension malaisée. Mais, enfin, cette ascension ne devait pas être impossible puisque Jacques Ledun avait pu arriver jusqu’au cratère.

Le flanc le plus perpendiculaire était celui qui regardait le large, et il ne fallait pas songer à attaquer le volcan par son versant nord, que la mer battait directement. Aucune roche n’émergeait au pied de la montagne, dont la paroi verticale aurait mérité le nom de falaise si elle eût été composée de matières crayeuses ou blanchâtres et non de noirâtres substances éruptives. La première chose à faire était donc de décider par quel côté du Golden Mount on essaierait d’atteindre le sommet. Jacques Ledun n’ayant donné aucun renseignement à ce sujet, Ben Raddle et Bill Stell quittèrent le campement établi dans l’angle formé par le Rubber et le flanc de l’Est, et contournèrent la base du volcan, afin de procéder à un examen préliminaire.

Le talus paraissait gazonné d’une herbe courte semée de touffes ligneuses qui pourraient servir de point d’appui aux ascensionnistes. Mais, dans la partie supérieure, ce gazonnage faisait place à une sorte d’humus sombre, peut-être une couche de cendres et de scories. Les deux prospecteurs ne relevèrent, d’ailleurs, aucune trace d’une éruption récente.

Rentrés au campement, Ben Raddle et le Scout firent connaître le résultat de leurs recherches. Ce serait par le flanc de l’Ouest, dont la pente était moins accusée, qu’il conviendrait d’effectuer l’ascension.

Le déjeuner, hâtivement dévoré, on se prépara au départ. Sur le conseil de Bill Stell, on décida d’emporter quelques provisions, et les gourdes furent remplies de gin et de whisky mêlés d’eau dans une proportion convenable. On se munit également d’une pioche, de piquets et de cordes, qu’il y aurait peut-être lieu d’employer sur les rampes trop raides.

Le temps était favorable à cette tentative. Une belle journée s’annonçait. De rares nuages poussés par une légère brise du Nord ne faisaient que modérer les ardeurs du soleil.

Neluto ne suivait pas les ascensionnistes. Avec le personnel, il garderait le campement, dont il ne s’éloignerait sous aucun prétexte. Bien que le pays parût être tout à fait désert, il convenait de ne point se départir d’une sévère surveillance.

Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et le Scout se mirent en route vers huit heures, accompagnés de Jane Edgerton, qui avait voulu à toute force prendre part à l’expédition, et tous quatre longèrent l’assise méridionale du mont afin de gagner le versant de l’Ouest.

De la dernière éruption – et à quelle époque remontait-elle? – on ne rencontrait aucun indice, le long de cette base. Pas la moindre trace de matières éruptives et notamment de la poussière d’or qu’elles devaient, au dire de Jacques Ledun, contenir en si forte proportion. Fallait-il en induire que les excréta du volcan avaient tous été projetés du côté de la mer et gisaient sous les eaux profondes baignant le littoral?

«Que nous importe? répondit Ben Raddle à Bill Stell, qui faisait cette remarque. Il est incontestable qu’il n’y a pas eu d’éruption depuis la visite de Jacques Ledun. C’est l’essentiel. Les pépites qu’il a vues, nous les verrons aussi.»

Il était près de neuf heures lorsque les quatre ascensionnistes s’arrêtèrent à la base du versant ouest.

Le Scout prit aussitôt la tête, et la montée commença. Au début, la rampe était relativement douce, et les herbes prêtaient au pied un solide appui. Il ne fut donc pas nécessaire de recourir aux piquets et aux cordes. Bill Stell, d’ailleurs, avait la pratique des montagnes. Un sûr instinct le conduisait, et il était si vigoureux, si rompu aux exercices de ce genre, que ses compagnons avaient peine à le suivre.

«Voilà ce que c’est, disait Summy Skim, un peu essoufflé, que d’avoir traversé vingt fois les passes du Chilkoot! Ça vous donne des jambes de chamois et des jarrets d’acier.»

Toutefois, après le premier tiers de l’ascension, un chamois, lui-même, eût peut-être été embarrassé. Les ailes d’un vautour ou d’un aigle n’eussent pas été de trop.

La pente était devenue telle, alors, qu'il fallut s'aider des genoux, des pieds et des mains, et s'accrocher aux maigres touffes d'arbustes. Bientôt, l'emploi des piquets et des cordes s'imposa. Le Scout se portait en avant, plantait un piquet entre les herbes, et déroulait la corde à l'aide de laquelle les autres se hissaient jusqu'à lui. On agissait avec une extrême prudence, car toute chute eût risqué d'être mortelle.

Vers onze heures, les ascensionnistes étaient parvenus à la moitié du versant. On fit halte afin de reprendre haleine, et l'on but quelques gorgées aux gourdes, après quoi on recommença à ramper le long des talus.

Bien que les forces souterraines fussent en action, ainsi que le prouvaient les vapeurs couronnant la cime du volcan, aucun frémissement ne faisait trembler ses parois, aucun ronflement ne se faisait entendre. De ce côté, sans doute, l'épaisseur était trop considérable, et il était à supposer que la cheminée du cratère s'ouvrait plutôt dans la partie nord, à proximité du rivage de la mer.

L'ascension se continua, de plus en plus difficile à mesure qu'on s'élevait, toujours possible cependant. Et d'ailleurs, ce que Jacques Ledun avait fait, pourquoi le Scout et ses compagnons ne le feraient-ils pas?

La montre de Ben Raddle marquait exactement midi treize lorsque les ascensionnistes se trouvèrent réunis sur la section de cône qui formait le plateau du mont.

Tous plus ou moins éreintés s'assirent sur les roches de quartz qui entouraient ce plateau, d'une circonférence de trois, à quatre cents pieds environ. A peu près à son centre s’ouvrait le cratère, d’où s’échappaient des vapeurs fuligineuses et des fumerolles jaunâtres.

Avant de se diriger vers cette cheminée, Ben Raddle et ses compagnons, tout en reprenant haleine, observèrent le vaste panorama développé devant leurs yeux.

Vers le Sud, le regard parcourait les plaines verdoyantes que la caravane venait de traverser, et s’arrêtait aux lointaines ondulations derrière lesquelles Fort Mac Pherson commandait la contrée environnante.

Vers l’Ouest, le littoral de l’océan Arctique se dessinait en une suite de grèves sablonneuses, et, dans l’intérieur des terres, apparaissait la masse sombre d’une vaste foret, distante d’une lieue et demie environ.

A l’Est, au pied du Golden Mount, s’entremêlait le réseau hydrographique de l’estuaire de la Mackensie, dont les multiples branches s’épanchaient dans une large baie défendue par un archipel d’ilote arides et d’écueils noirâtres. Au delà, la côte se relevait droit au Nord, terminée par un promontoire, sorte de morne colossal qui fermait l’horizon de ce côté.

Au Nord du Golden Mount, à partir de la falaise verticale dont la base disparaissait sous les eaux, la mer n’avait d’autre limite que la ligne géométrique du ciel.

L’atmosphère purifiée, nettoyée par la brise, était alors d’une parfaite clarté. La mer étincelait sous les rayons du soleil.

Le rivage était désert. Aucun pêcheur, étranger ou indigène, ne se montrait, bien que les bouches de la Mackensie soient riches en mammifères marins et en amphibies de plusieurs espèces.

Mais il n’en était pas ainsi au large. La lunette aidant, le Scout signala quelques voiles et quelques fumées qui se détachaient sur l’horizon septentrional.

«Ce sont des baleiniers, dit-il, qui viennent du détroit de Behring. Dans trois mois, ils reprendront la même route en sens inverse. Les uns relâcheront à Saint-Michel à l’embouchure du Yukon, les autres à Petropolawsk du Kamtchatka, sur la côte d’Asie, puis ils iront vendre dans les ports du Pacifique les produits de leur pêche.

— N’en est-il pas qui vont jusqu’à Vancouver? demanda Summy Skim.

— En effet, répondit Bill Stell, mais ceux-là ont tort, grand tort, car il est bien difficile de retenir les équipages, et la plupart des matelots désertent pour se rendre au Klondike.»

Ce n’était que trop vrai. La proximité des mines d’or affole littéralement ces matelots, qui reviennent pourtant d’une pénible campagne. Aussi, pour les sauver de l’épidémie, les capitaines baleiniers évitent-ils autant que possible les ports de la Colombie anglaise et préfèrent-ils ceux du continent asiatique.

Après une halte d’une demi-heure, dont ils avaient grand besoin, Ben Raddle et ses compagnons se mirent en devoir de visiter le plateau du Golden Mount. C’était, non point au centre, comme ils l’avaient cru, mais dans la partie nord-est que se creusait le cratère, dont l’orifice mesurait de soixante-quinze à quatre-vingts pieds de circonférence. En ayant soin de se tenir au vent, afin d’échapper aux tourbillons, de fumée âcre qui s’en échappaient, ils purent s’approcher jusqu’à l’extrême bord et plonger leurs regards dans l’intérieur du gouffre.

Tout concourait à rendre de plus en plus vraisemblable l’histoire racontée par Jacques Ledun. Le cratère se creusait en pente douce, et la descente eût été des plus aisées sans les gaz irrespirables qui en interdisaient maintenant l’entrée.

La poudre d’or dont le sol était semé confirmait encore les dires du Français. Mais cette poudre impalpable, toute mélangée de terre et de scories, ne pouvait donner qu’un profit dérisoire au regard du prodigieux amas de pépites que l’on était venu chercher si loin.

«Il est évident, dit Ben Raddle, que Jacques Ledun ne s’est pas heurté à l’obstacle qui nous arrête. Quand il est venu ici, le volcan était complètement endormi, et il a pu, sans danger, descendre au fond du cratère. Attendons que le mouvement éruptif se calme, que les vapeurs se dissipent, nous y descendrons à notre tour, et nous y puiserons à pleines mains comme il y a puisé lui-même.

— Et si les vapeurs ne se dissipent pas, demanda Summy Skim, si toute descente est impossible?

— Nous attendrons encore, Summy.

— Nous attendrons… quoi?

— Que l’éruption fasse ce que nous n’aurons pu faire, et qu’elle rejette les matières contenues dans les entrailles du Golden Mount.

C’était, en effet, le seul parti qu’il fût possible d’adopter, bien qu’il ne manquât pas de sérieux inconvénients. Pour des gens qui n’auraient pas eu à compter avec le temps, qui auraient pu affronter la terrible saison froide aux embouchures de la Mackensie comme à Dawson City, oui, ce parti était tout indiqué. Mais, si les choses traînaient en longueur, si avant deux mois et demi le volcan n’était pas retombé dans le sommeil ou s’il n’avait pas de lui-même vidé son trésor de pépites, ne serait-on pas contraint de quitter le campement, de battre en retraite vers le Sud, où l’on arriverait juste pour être bloqué par l’hiver?

Cette pensée, les quatre prospecteurs l’avaient, mais chacun d’eux l’accueillait selon son tempérament particulier.

Bill Stell souriait dans sa barbe d’une manière un peu narquoise. C’était une fameuse leçon pour lui. Après avoir résisté tant d’années à la contagion de l’or, il s’y était laissé prendre à son tour, et voilà quel résultat il obtenait! Il était guéri du coup; et, revenu à sa philosophie ordinaire, il envisageait son échec avec sérénité, en se disant qu’il n’en pouvait pas être autrement dans le métier de prospecteur.

Jane Edgerton, les sourcils froncés, demeurait immobile au bord du cratère, les yeux fixés sur l’amas de vapeurs tourbillonnantes qui s’en échappaient. Elle constatait qu’il est des cas où l’énergie et la décision sont insuffisantes, et elle s’irritait d’être arrêtée par des forces naturelles contre lesquelles sa volonté était impuissante.

Summy Skim était le plus malheureux de tous. Passer un nouvel hiver dans la capitale du Klondike! Il ne pouvait songer à cette éventualité sans frémir.

Ce fut lui qui répondit à son cousin:

— C’est parfaitement raisonné, Ben, mais à la condition qu’il y ait une éruption. Or, y aura-t-il une éruption? Tout est là. Ne trouves-tu pas que ce volcan est bien calme? Il ne rejette pas de cendres, pas le plus petit caillou. On n’entend pas la moindre détonation. Il fume, à coup sûr, mais il fume en silence, et j’en ferais autant, ma parole! Cela ne te donne-t-il pas à penser?

Ben Raddle eut un geste évasif.

— Nous verrons,» dit-il.

Après une station de deux heures sur le plateau, les ascensionnistes commencèrent à dévaler les flancs du Golden Mount. Une heure suffit à la descente. Avant trois heures de l’après-midi Ben Raddle et ses compagnons, passablement fatigues mais sains et saufs, étaient de retour au campement.

Dès qu’ils furent seuls, Summy, poursuivi par son idée fixe, s’approcha de son cousin et revint à la charge.

«Voyons, Ben, dit-il, je te parle sérieusement. Que ferons-nous, si elle tarde, cette éruption… si elle n’a pas lieu avant l’hiver?»

Sans répondre, Ben Raddle détourna la tête, et Summy n’eut pas le courage d’insister.

CHAPITRE VIII

Ou Ben Raddle intervient.

Lorsque Ben Raddle avait entrepris cette nouvelle campagne, il ne mettait pas en doute, d'après les informations, exactes d'ailleurs, de Jacques Ledun, qu'il suffisait de ramasser les pépites dans le cratère du Golden Mount, d'en charger les chariots et de reprendre la route de Dawson City. Une huitaine de jours devaient suffire à cette facile besogne, et le voyage aller et retour aurait dès lors été accompli en moins de trois mois. C'est donc le plus sincèrement du monde qu'il avait affirmé à Summy Skim que la caravane rentrerait à Dawson dans les premiers jours d'août, à temps, par conséquent, pour atteindre avant les grands froids Skagway, puis Vancouver, d'où le railway ramènerait les deux cousins à Montréal.

«Et quel train il faudra, avait répondu Summy en plaisantant, pour nous transporter, nous et les millions du Golden Mount!.. et quel excédent de bagages!..»

Or, si les millions étaient bien à la place indiquée dans le cratère, voilà qu'on ne pouvait les en tirer.

Cette complication inattendue obligeait à organiser le campement en vue d'un séjour de quelques semaines. Le Scout prit donc ses mesures pour assurer la subsistance de ses compagnons et la nourriture des attelages jusqu'au jour où il serait absolument indispensable de redescendre vers le Sud. Vouloir passer l'hiver sous la tente eût été folie, en effet. Quoi qu'il arrivât, que la campagne eût réussi ou non, il fallait franchir le cercle polaire vers la mi-août, au plus tard. Passé ce terme, la route serait impraticable dans cette région que ravagent les bourrasques et les tempêtes de neige.

Cette existence allait s’écouler dans l’attente et, pour la supporter, une forte dose de patience ne serait pas superflue. Il y aurait lieu, toutefois, d’observer l’état du volcan et de surveiller la marche de l’éruption. Plusieurs autres ascensions seraient évidemment nécessaires. Ni Ben Raddle, ni le Scout, ni, moins que personne, Jane Edgerton, ne reculeraient devant la fatigue, et les progrès du phénomène seraient bien certainement suivis de jour en jour.

Summy Skim et Neluto, en tous cas, ne seraient pas embarrassés pour employer ces longues heures. Ils chasseraient, soit dans les plaines du Sud et de l’Ouest, soit à travers les marécages du delta de la Mackensie. Le gibier abondait, et ce n’est pas à ces enragés chasseurs que les jours paraîtraient interminables. Dès le premier jour, toutefois, le Scout leur recommanda de ne pas trop s’éloigner. Pendant la belle saison, le littoral de l’océan Polaire est fréquenté par des tribus d’Indiens, dont il est prudent d’éviter la rencontre.

Quant au personnel de la caravane, il pourrait se livrer au plaisir de la pêche. Le poisson ne manquait pas dans le labyrinthe des rios, et, rien que de ce chef, l’alimentation générale eût pu être assurée jusqu’à la formation des premières glaces.

Plusieurs jours n’amenèrent aucun changement dans la situation. L’éruption ne montrait aucune tendance à s’accroître. Ainsi que l’avait supposé Ben Raddle, en voyant en quel point du sommet s’ouvrait le cratère, la cheminée volcanique était bien creusée dans le flanc nord-est de la montagne, ce qu’expliquait d’ailleurs l’obliquité du profil ouest, par lequel seulement pouvait s’effectuer l’ascension. Du campement établi presque au pied du

Golden Mount et que dominait sa face orientale, on entendait assez distinctement, en effet, le sourd tumulte du travail plutonique. L’ingénieur en concluait que l’épaisseur de ce flanc très abrupt ne devait pas être considérable, et Bill Stell partageait cette opinion.

Jane Edgerton, Ben Raddle et le Scout faisaient presque quotidiennement l’ascension du volcan, pendant que chassait, en compagnie de Neluto, l’infatigable Summy. Un jour pourtant, celui-ci voulut se joindre au trio des ascensionnistes ainsi transformé en quatuor. Mal lui en prit, et cette fantaisie risqua de coûter cher au déterminé chasseur.

Parvenus à peu de distance du sommet, tous quatre, réunis par une corde, marchaient comme la première fois en file indienne, le Scout en tête, Ben Raddle le dernier, et entre eux Summy Skim précédant Jane Edgerton. Ils gravissaient le cône de cendres friables amoncelé par les anciennes éruptions sur les assises inférieures du volcan, quand la corde cassa net au ras du piquet que le Scout venait d’enfoncer. Summy, qui se hissait à cet instant, perdit pied, tomba et se mit à dévaler la pente avec la vitesse accélérée qu’indiquent les lois de la pesanteur. En vain s’efforçait-il de se retenir. Le sol auquel il s’agrippait fuyait sous ses doigts crispés.

Ses compagnons poussèrent un cri d’effroi. Summy n’arriverait pas vivant au bas de la montagne, et il allait entraîner dans sa chute ceux auxquels l’unissait le reste de la corde rompue, Ben Raddle et, avant Ben Raddle, Jane Edgerton.

Heureusement, celle-ci n’avait rien perdu de son sang-froid. Un hasard favorable voulait qu’elle eût trouvé sous la main, à l’instant où l’accident s’était produit, une touffe d’arbustes nains à laquelle elle se cramponna énergiquement. Lorsque Summy, contraint d'obéir aux nécessités de la gravitation, passa à sa portée, elle réussit à le saisir par ses vêtements et, d'un effort désespéré, l'arrêta dans son élan.

Summy fut aussitôt sur pied, un peu étourdi peut-être, mais sain et sauf.

«Rien de cassé? interrogea Ben Raddle d'en bas.

— Rien, répondit Summy. Des bobos, peut-être, de simples écorchures qui ne nécessiteront pas l'intervention du docteur Pilcox!

— En route, alors! s'écria Ben Raddle rassuré.

Summy protesta.

— Laisse-moi au moins le temps de remercier mademoiselle Jane. Elle m'a sauvé la vie, tout simplement.

Jane Edgerton prit son air le plus pincé.

— Inutile, dit-elle. Nous sommes quittes. Vous me permettrez, toutefois, de vous faire remarquer, dût cela modifier vos idées, que les femmes peuvent être parfois bonnes à quelque chose.»

Summy aurait eu mauvaise grâce à le contester. Aussi en convint-il chaleureusement, puis l'ascension fut reprise et s'acheva sans autre incident.

Les jours continuèrent de couler sans qu'aucune modification se produisît. Aucune flamme, aucun jet de matière éruptive ne s'échappaient de la bouche du Golden Mount.

On arriva au 20 juin.

On imaginera, sans peine, dans quelle impatience vivaient Ben Raddle et ses compagnons. Cette impossibilité de rien tenter, cette passivité qui leur était imposée, les énervaient au plus haut degré. L’installation terminée, les prospecteurs n’avaient rien à faire, et un lourd ennui pesait sur le campement.

La personne la plus occupée était à coup sûr Jane Edgerton, qui avait pris la haute main sur le département de la cuisine. Assurer la nourriture de vingt et une personnes n’est pas une sinécure, et cela suffit à remplir une existence.

Il arriva pourtant à la fidèle intendante de manquer à sa fonction. Ce jour-là, au moment où l’ascension quotidienne l’amenait au sommet du Golden Mount, avec Ben Raddle et le Scout, il s’éleva un épais brouillard qui s’opposa à la descente. Il fallut rester des heures dans cette situation, au grand chagrin de Jane préoccupée du déjeuner de ses compagnons.

S’il lui avait été donné de voir ce qui se passait au campement, elle eût été moins inquiète. Un suppléant s’était trouvé, et ce suppléant n’était autre que Summy. La même cause qui retenait les excursionnistes au sommet de la montagne lui interdisant la chasse, il s’était avisé, pour charmer ses loisirs, de s’attribuer, exceptionnellement, les fonctions de l’intendante absente. Sanglé dans un tablier, qui le fit trébucher plus d’une fois, brandissant fourchette et couteau, il s’activa à la confection d’un repas qui allait être succulent, si le cuisinier avait autant de talent que de zèle.

Quand, le brouillard enfin dissipé, les ascensionnistes purent regagner le camp, Jane eut la surprise de voir la table prête et le déjeuner cuit à point. Il ne lui fut pas difficile d’en deviner l’auteur. Summy ne se cachait pas, loin de là. Il se faisait voir, au contraire, non sans une certaine vanité, toujours sanglé dans son tablier et armé de ses ustensiles culinaires, le teint rendu écarlate par la chaleur du feu.

«A table! cria-t-il joyeusement dès que Jane et ses deux compagnons furent à portée de la voix.

Lorsque tout le monde fut assis, il voulut servir lui-même sa jeune compagne de route. Avec la correction d'un valet bien stylé il lui présenta un plat où celle-ci puisa copieusement.

«N'ayez pas peur d'en prendre, mademoiselle Jane, répétait Summy pendant ce temps. Vous m'en direz des nouvelles.

Cependant, au moment où elle allait goûter les produits du cuisinier improvisé, celui-ci l'arrêta du geste.

«Un mot auparavant, mademoiselle Jane, dit-il, pour vous faire remarquer, dût cela modifier vos idées, que les hommes peuvent être parfois bons à quelque chose!

Jane, sans répondre, goûta le mets placé dans son écuelle.

— Ce n'est pas mon avis,» prononça-t-elle froidement.

Le ragoût était détestable, en effet, et Summy, très humilié, fut forcé, d'en convenir après l'avoir goûté à son tour.

Bon ou mauvais, le déjeuner fut toutefois fort apprécié par ces estomacs affamés. Les dents ne chômaient pas, et les langues pas davantage.

Et de quoi eût-on parlé, si ce n'est du sujet constant des préoccupations de tous? On causait du Golden Mount, des richesses qu'il recelait dans ses flancs et de l’impossibilité où l’on était de les atteindre. Au cours de la conversation, un des prospecteurs proposa, comme la chose la plus simple, d’éventrer la montagne à coups de mine.

«Toute notre provision de poudre n’y suffirait pas, répondit Bill Stell, et d’ailleurs, en admettant que l’on pût pratiquer une brèche, qu’en sortirait-il?

— Un torrent de pépites peut-être, dit le Canadien.

— Non, dit le Scout, rien que des vapeurs. Elles s’échapperaient par là au lieu de sortir par la cheminée, et nous ne serions pas plus avancés.

— Que faire alors?

— Attendre.

— Attendre! protesta un autre des anciens ouvriers du claim 129. Bientôt nous ne le pourrons plus. Dans deux mois, au plus tard, il nous faudra partir, si nous ne voulons pas être surpris par l’hiver.

— Eh bien! nous partirons, déclara Ben Raddle prenant la parole à son tour. Nous rentrerons à Dawson City et nous reviendrons aux premiers beaux jours.

— Hein? fit Summy Skim en se levant d’un bond, subir un autre hiver au Klondike!

— Oui, affirma nettement Ben Raddle. Libre à toi de retourner à Montréal. Quant à moi, je resterai à Dawson. L’éruption viendra tôt ou tard. Je veux être là.

Jane Edgerton intervint dans la discussion qui tournait mal. Elle demanda:

— N’existe-t-il donc aucun moyen de la provoquer, cette éruption?

— Aucun, dit Ben Raddle, nous ne pouvons…»

Comme frappé d’une idée soudaine, l’ingénieur s’interrompit tout à coup, en regardant fixement Jane Edgerton. C’est en vain que celle-ci le pressa. Secouant la tête, il se refusa à compléter sa pensée.

Pendant les jours suivants, d’assez mauvais temps se déclarèrent. De gros orages montèrent du Sud. La dépression atmosphérique parut augmenter l’activité du volcan. Quelques flammes se mêlèrent aux vapeurs vomies par le cratère.

Des pluies torrentielles succédèrent à ces orages rapidement apaisés. Il y eut une inondation partielle de l’estuaire de la Mackensie et les eaux débordèrent entre les deux principales branches du fleuve.

Inutile de dire que, durant cette période, Summy Skim ne put continuer ses chasses quotidiennes et qu’il dut passer au camp des journées qui lui semblèrent longues.

Les choses en étaient là, quand il se produisit un événement important.

Le 23 juin, dans l’après-midi, Ben Raddle invita Summy Skim, Jane Edgerton et le Scout à l’accompagner dans sa tente.

«J’ai à vous parler, mes amis, leur dit l’ingénieur, dès qu’ils furent assis, et je vous prie de bien vouloir écouter la proposition que j’ai à vous faire.

Sa figure était sérieuse. Les rides de son front témoignaient de l’obsession qui le dominait, et, étant donnée la sincère amitié qu’il éprouvait pour lui, Summy Skim se sentit profondément troublé. Ben Raddle avait-il donc pris le parti d’abandonner la campagne, de renoncer à lutter contre la nature qui se déclarait contre lui? Était-il enfin résigné à revenir à Montréal, si la situation ne se modifiait pas avant la mauvaise saison? Inutile de dire si Summy Skim eût été satisfait d’une telle décision.

«Mes amis, commença Ben Raddle, aucun doute n’est permis sur l’existence du Golden Mount ni sur la valeur des matières qu’il renferme. Jacques Ledun ne s’est pas trompé, nous avons pu le constater de nos yeux. Les premières manifestations d’une éruption nous ont malheureusement interdit, et nous interdisent encore de pénétrer dans le cratère. Si nous avions pu le faire, notre campagne serait terminée et nous serions en route pour le Klondike.

— Cette éruption se produira, affirma Bill Stell.

— Avant six semaines alors, dit Summy entre ses dents.

Il y eut quelques instants de silence. Chacun suivait sa propre pensée. Après un dernier effort de réflexion, comme s’il eût voulu peser toutes les conséquences d’un projet longuement médité, Ben Raddle reprit:

— Il y a quelques jours, j’ai laissé passer sans y répondre une suggestion de miss Edgerton. Peut-être cette réflexion lui était-elle dictée par le dépit, en constatant l’impuissance où nous sommes de mener notre tâche à bonne fin, et peut-être n’y attachait-elle aucune importance… Moi, l’idée émise m’a frappé, j’y ai profondément réfléchi, j’ai cherché tous les moyens de la réaliser, et je crois les avoir trouvés. A la question qui m’a été posée: Ne pourrait-on provoquer l’éruption hésitante? je réponds: Pourquoi pas?

Jane Edgerton gardait ses yeux fixés sur ceux de l’ingénieur. Voilà un langage qui lui plaisait! Agir, dominer les êtres et les choses, plier à sa volonté jusqu’à la nature, c’est vivre, cela! Sa bouche frémissait, ses narines dilatées palpitaient, tout dans son attitude montrait son impatience avide de connaître les détails d’un si excitant projet.

Summy Skim et le Scout, eux, se regardaient, et paraissaient se demander si l’ingénieur possédait encore tout son bon sens, si tant de déceptions et de soucis n’avaient point ébranlé sa raison. Ben Raddle devina-t-il leur pensée? Ce fut, en tous cas, avec la lucidité d’un homme parfaitement maître de lui-même qu’il reprit:

«Les volcans, vous le savez, sont tous situés sur les bords de la mer: le Vésuve, l’Etna, l’Hécla, le Chimborazo et tant d’autres, ceux du nouveau continent comme ceux de l’ancien. On en conclut naturellement que la présence de l’eau leur est nécessaire, et la théorie moderne admet que les volcans doivent être en communication souterraine avec l’Océan. Les eaux s’y infiltrent, s’y introduisent brusquement ou lentement suivant la nature du sol, pénètrent jusqu’au foyer intérieur, et s’y réduisent en vapeurs. Lorsque ces vapeurs enfermées dans les entrailles du globe ont acquis une haute tension, elles provoquent des bouleversements internes, elles cherchent à s’échapper au dehors, en entraînant les scories, les cendres, les roches, par la cheminée du volcan, au milieu de tourbillons de fumée et de flammes. Là est, à n’en point douter, la cause des éruptions et sans doute aussi des tremblements de terre, de certains d’entre eux, tout au moins… Eh bien, ce que fait la nature, pourquoi des hommes ne le feraient-ils pas?

On peut dire qu’en ce moment tous dévoraient l’ingénieur du regard. Si la théorie des phénomènes éruptifs n’a pas encore un caractère de certitude absolue, l’explication qu’il venait d’en donner est toutefois considérée d’ordinaire comme la plus plausible. En ce qui concernait spécialement le Golden Mount, rien ne s’opposait à ce qu’il reçût des infiltrations de l’océan Arctique. Obstruées pendant un temps plus ou moins long, les communications ne l’étaient plus aujourd’hui, puisque, sous la pression des eaux volatilisées, le volcan commençait à rejeter des vapeurs. Était-il donc possible d’introduire, à torrents, les eaux de la mer dans le foyer central? L’ingénieur avait-il poussé l’audace jusqu’à vouloir tenter une pareille œuvre, jusqu’à la croire exécutable?..

«Vous avez observé comme moi, reprit Ben Raddle, lorsque nous étions à la cime du Golden Mount, que le cratère est situé vers le flanc nord-est du mont. Le bruit du travail plutonien se fait, d’ailleurs, entendre de ce côté, et, en ce moment même, les grondements intérieurs sont très perceptibles.

En effet, comme pour appuyer le raisonnement de l’ingénieur, des grondements se propageaient au dehors avec une intensité particulière.

«Nous devons tenir pour certain, continua Ben Raddle, que la cheminée du volcan est creusée dans le voisinage de notre campement. Nous n’avons donc qu’à percer ce côté de la montagne et à y creuser un canal, par lequel les eaux se précipiteront en quantités illimitées.

— Quelles eaux? interrogea Bill Stell. Celles de la mer?

— Non, répondit l’ingénieur. Il ne sera pas nécessaire de chercher l’eau si loin. N’avons-nous pas le Rio Rubber? Détaché de l’une des branches de la Mackensie, il déversera dans le Golden Mount l’inépuisable réseau du delta.»

Ben Raddle avait dit:«déversera», comme si le canal, déjà foncé à travers le massif, eût livré passage aux eaux du Rio Rubber. A mesure qu’il l’exposait, il s’était affermi dans son projet, devenu maintenant pour lui résolution ferme et arrêtée *ne varietur*.

Quelque audacieux que fût ce projet, aucun de ses compagnons, pas même Summy Skim, n’eut, d’ailleurs, la pensée de formuler une objection quelconque. Si Ben Raddle échouait, la question serait résolue, et il ne resterait plus qu’à partir. S’il réussissait, si le volcan livrait ses richesses, la solution serait la même, mais c’est alors plus lourdement chargés que les chariots reprendraient la route du Klondike.

Lancer des masses liquides dans le foyer volcanique pouvait, il est vrai, présenter de grands dangers. Leur vaporisation ne se ferait-elle pas avec une violence dont on ne serait plus maître? En se substituant à la nature, ne courrait-on pas à quelque catastrophe? N’allait-on pas provoquer, plus qu’une éruption, un tremblement de terre qui bouleverserait la région et anéantirait le campement avec ceux qui l’occupaient?

Mais, de ces dangers, personne ne voulait rien voir, et, dès la matinée du 24 juin, le travail fut commencé.

Sur l’ordre de l’ingénieur, on s’attaqua en premier lieu au flanc du Golden Mount. En effet, si la pioche rencontrait une roche trop dure pour être entamée, si une galerie ne pouvait être ouverte jusqu’à la cheminée du cratère, il devenait inutile de creuser, pour la dérivation du rio, un canal qui n’aurait pas d’issue.

L’ouverture de la galerie fut établie à une vingtaine de pieds au-dessous de l’étiage du rio, de manière à favoriser un écoulement rapide. Par une heureuse circonstance, les outils n’eurent point à travailler une matière résistante, du moins sur la première moitié de la galerie. On rencontra d’abord des terres friables, puis des débris pierreux et des fragments de laves depuis longtemps enfoncés dans la masse, et enfin des morceaux de quartz fragmenté sans doute par des secousses antérieures.

Le travail était poursuivi jour et nuit. Il n'y avait pas une heure à perdre en effet. Quelle était l'épaisseur de la paroi? Ben Raddle n'avait pu s'appuyer sur aucun calcul, et la galerie serait peut-être plus longue qu'il ne l'avait estimé. A mesure que la besogne avançait les bruits intérieurs devenaient de plus en plus intenses. Toutefois, que l'on s'approchât de la cheminée, cela ne voulait pas dire qu'on fût sur le point de l'atteindre.

Summy Skim et Neluto avaient suspendu leur chasse. Ils prenaient leur part du travail comme l'ingénieur lui-même, et, quotidiennement, le forage avançait de cinq à six pieds.

Malheureusement, après cinq jours, on rencontra le quartz contre lequel le pic et la pioche vinrent s'émousser. Combien de temps faudrait-il pour percer ce massif d'une extrême dureté, dont était formé sans doute le cœur entier de la montagne? Ben Raddle résolut d'employer la mine, et, dût Summy Skim en être privé, d'y consacrer une partie de la réserve de poudre transformée en cartouches. Cette poudre, il est vrai, ne constituait pas seulement des munitions de chasse. Le cas échéant, elle pouvait aussi être très précieuse pour la défense. Toutefois, il ne semblait pas que la caravane courût un danger quelconque. La contrée était toujours déserte, et jamais aucun parti d'indigènes n'avait été signalé aux approches du campement.

L'emploi de lamine donna d'assez bons résultats. Si la moyenne de l'avancement baissa dans une certaine mesure, du moins ne fut-il pas arrêté.

A la date du 8 juillet, après quinze jours de travail, la longueur de la galerie parut suffisante. Elle mesurait alors quatorze toises de profondeur sur une section de trente pieds carrés. Elle était donc capable de livrer passage à une importante masse d'eau. Les grondements, les ronflements du volcan se faisaient alors entendre avec une telle force, que l'épaisseur de la paroi ne devait pas dépasser un ou deux pieds. Il suffirait donc de quelques coups de mine pour l’éventrer et pour terminer le percement de la galerie.

Il était certain, maintenant, que le projet de Ben Raddle ne serait pas arrêté par un infranchissable obstacle. Le canal à ciel ouvert par lequel dériveraient les eaux du Rio Rubber s’exécuterait sans peine dans un sol uniquement composé de terre et de sable, et, bien qu’il dût mesurer trois cents pieds environ, l’ingénieur comptait l’achever en une dizaine de jours.

«Le plus difficile est fait, dit Bill Stell.

— Et le plus long, répondit Ben Raddle. Dès demain, nous commencerons à creuser le canal à six pieds de la rive gauche du Rio Rubber.

— Eh bien, dit Summy Skim, puisque nous avons une après-midi de repos, je propose de l’employer…

— A la chasse? monsieur Summy, demanda Jane en riant.

— Non, mademoiselle Jane, répondit Summy Skim. A faire une dernière fois l’ascension du Golden Mount, afin de voir ce qui se passe là-haut.

— Bonne idée, Summy, déclara Ben Raddle, car il semble bien que l’éruption tend à s’accroître, et il est bon de le constater de nos propres yeux.»

La proposition était sage, en effet, et l’on partit sur-le-champ. Rendus plus adroits par la répétition du même exercice, les ascensionnistes, auxquels s’était joint Neluto, ne mirent qu’une heure et demie pour arriver au cratère.

Il leur fut impossible de s’en approcher autant que la première fois. Les vapeurs, plus hautes et plus épaisses, étaient zébrées de longues flammes, et la chaleur, près du cratère, était réellement intolérable. Le volcan, toutefois, continuait à ne projeter ni laves, ni scories.

«Décidément, fit observer Summy Skim, il n'est guère généreux, ce Golden Mount, et, s'il a des pépites, il les garde précieusement.

— On les lui prendra de force, puisqu'il ne veut pas les donner de bon gré,» répondit Jane Edgerton.

En tout cas, les phénomènes éruptifs se manifestaient maintenant avec plus d'énergie. Le grondement intérieur rappelait celui d'une chaudière soumise à une haute pression et dont les tôles ronflent sous l'action du feu. Une éruption se préparait incontestablement. Mais peut-être s'écoulerait-il des semaines et des mois avant que le volcan lançât dans l'espace sa substance enflammée.

Aussi Ben Raddle, après avoir observé l'état actuel du cratère, ne songea-t-il point à interrompre les travaux commencés, et résolut-il au contraire de les pousser avec un surcroît d'activité.

Avant de redescendre, les excursionnistes promenèrent leurs regards autour d'eux. La contrée semblait déserte. Rien d'insolite n'apparaissait, ni dans la plaine, ni sur la mer. Sous ce rapport, Ben Raddle et ses compagnons avaient lieu d'être satisfaits. Le secret du Golden Mount devait être ignoré de tous.

Le dos tourné au cratère, Ben Raddle et ses compagnons s'oubliaient dans la contemplation du vaste horizon. Summy tout particulièrement semblait perdu dans un rêve intérieur. Les yeux fixés vers le Sud-Est, il ne faisait pas un mouvement et paraissait avoir oublié ceux qui l'entouraient.

«Qu’y a-t-il donc de si intéressant de ce côté? lui demanda Jane Edgerton.

Summy répondit d’une voix étouffée:

— Montréal, mademoiselle Jane. Montréal et Green Valley.

— Green Valley! répéta Jane. Voilà un pays qui vous tient au cœur, monsieur Skim.

— Comment en serait-il autrement? expliqua Summy sans détourner son regard de la direction qui l’attirait comme le pôle attire l’aiguille aimantée. N’est-ce pas là que j’ai vécu? A Green Valley, j’ai vu naître les uns et c’est moi que les autres ont vu naître. Là, connu et bien accueilli de tous, de l’aïeul au plus petit enfant, je suis l’ami de toutes les maisons, et, si j’en excepte mon cher Ben, plus fait malheureusement pour recevoir l’affection que pour la donner, c’est là seulement que je trouve une famille. J’aime Green Valley parce que Green Valley m’aime, mademoiselle Jane.»

Summy se tut et Jane imita son silence. Elle paraissait pensive à son tour. Les quelques mots prononcés par son compagnon d’aventure réveillaient-ils dans son cœur des sentiments endormis? Se disait-elle que l’énergie, l’effort, fussent-ils victorieux, ne suffisent pas à remplir une existence, que, si le libre exercice d’une volonté sage et consciente peut à lui seul enivrer d’orgueil notre cerveau, il est en nous d’autres instincts que ces fortes joies sont impuissantes à satisfaire? Sous l’influence des paroles entendues, avait-elle eu une notion plus nette de la singularité de sa position? S’était-elle vue, faible et seule, au sommet de cette montagne perdue aux contins du monde habitable, entourée d’hommes pour la plupart grossiers, et pour lesquels en tout cas elle ne serait bientôt qu’une passante d’un jour en un jour oubliée? Se disait-elle qu’elle n’avait pas de famille, elle non plus, et que, moins heureuse que Summy, il n’y avait pas pour elle un Green Valley plein de mains ouvertes et de cœurs aimants?

«Tiens! s’écria tout à coup Neluto qui, de tous, avait la meilleure vue, on dirait…

— Quoi donc? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Rien, répondit Neluto. Et pourtant j’ai cru voir…

— Quoi donc, enfin? insista Ben Raddle.

— Je ne sais trop, dit l’Indien hésitant… Il m’a semblé… Une fumée, peut-être.

— Une fumée! s’écria l’ingénieur. Dans quelle direction?

— Par là, expliqua Neluto en montrant la forêt qui commençait dans l’Ouest a trois milles du volcan.

— Dans la forêt? sur la lisière?

— Non.

— Dans l’intérieur, sous les arbres, alors?

— Oui.

— A quelle distance?

— Heu!.. deux ou trois milles dans les arbres… moins peut-être…

— Ou davantage, acheva Ben Raddle impatienté. Je connais le refrain, mon brave Neluto. Je ne vois rien, en tout cas.

— Je ne vois plus rien non plus, dit Neluto… Et même je ne suis pas sûr d’avoir vu… C’était si peu de chose… J’ai pu me tromper.»

C’était la première fois, depuis que l’on avait atteint le littoral de l’océan Polaire, que la présence de l’homme était signalée dans ces régions hyperboréennes. Une fumée au-dessus des arbres, cela voulait dire qu’une troupe campait en ce moment à leur abri, et, quelle que fût cette troupe, il n’y avait rien de bon à en attendre.

Quels étaient ces gens? Des chasseurs? N’étaient-ils pas plutôt des prospecteurs à la recherche du Volcan d’Or dont l’existence leur aurait été signalée?

Il pouvait très bien se faire que les nouveaux venus n’eussent point aperçu le Golden Mount, que les frondaisons géantes avaient dû cacher à leurs yeux. Mais, ce qu’ils n’avaient pas encore vu, ils le verraient, la lisière franchie, et nul ne pouvait dire ce qui résulterait de cette découverte.

En tous cas, c’était là une grave éventualité qui ne laissait pas de préoccuper vivement Ben Raddle et ses compagnons.

Tous, à l’exception de Jane qui demeurait absorbée, dirigèrent, avec persistance, leurs regards vers l’Occident. Rien d’insolite ne fut remarqué. Aucun nuage de fumée ne se montra au-dessus des arbres dont la masse sombre se prolongeait au delà de l’horizon.

Convaincu de l’erreur de Neluto, Ben Raddle donna le signal du départ.

A ce moment, Jane s’approcha de Summy.

«Je suis fatiguée, monsieur Skim, dit-elle d’un ton dolent.

Summy fut frappé de stupéfaction. Il y avait de quoi. Que Jane consentît à se reconnaître fatiguée, cela ne s'était jamais vu. Il fallait qu'en elle quelque chose fût changé.

Oui, quelque chose était changé, et elle était bien fatiguée, Jane Edgerton, monsieur Skim. Le ressort qui la soutenait, quand elle accomplissait, sans se lasser, des besognes au-dessus de ses forces, venait, sinon de se briser, du moins de s'affaisser. Pour un instant, elle voyait la vie autrement que comme une suite de luttes et d'efforts ininterrompus. Elle comprenait la douceur d'être aimée, protégée; elle devinait celle du nid familial où l'on est tout enveloppé de tendresse, et son corps était alangui par la détresse de son cœur solitaire. Ah! comme elle était fatiguée Jane Edgerton, monsieur Skim!

Il ne s'en racontait pas si long, le brave Summy; il ne se perdait pas dans cette analyse compliquée, il regardait Jane, simplement, et, surpris de sa réflexion, du ton brisé dont elle avait été faite, il s'étonnait de découvrir ce qu'il n'avait jamais bien vu jusqu'ici. Comme elle était délicate, et frêle – et jolie! – cette petite fille, dont la silhouette, découpée sur le ciel, était si peu de chose dans l'espace immense qui les entourait. Quelle misère qu'elle fût là, dans cette contrée perdue, exposée à toutes les fatigues, à tous les maux, à tous les périls! Et le bon Summy était ému d'une grande et fraternelle pitié.

— N'ayez pas peur, mademoiselle Jane, dit-il avec un gros rire, afin de chasser son émotion, je suis là. Appuyez-vous sur moi. J'ai le bras et le pied solides.»

Ils commencèrent à descendre, Summy choisissant la route, et soutenant sa légère compagne avec les attentions d'un grand frère, avec les soins d'un amateur voulant conduire à bon port quelque bibelot fragile et précieux.

Jane, à demi inconsciente, se laissait faire. Elle marchait dans une sorte de rêve, ses yeux sans pensée regardant très loin. Quoi? elle n’eût pu le dire. Là-bas, au delà de l’horizon, l’inconnu, ou le mystère plus impénétrable encore de son cœur troublé?

CHAPITRE IX

Une chasse a l’orignal.

La rive gauche du Rio Rubber dessinait un coude prononcé à cinquante toises environ de l’endroit où s’ouvrait la galerie allant rejoindre la cheminée du cratère. La dérivation serait pratiquée à l’angle même formé par ce coude. Il s’agissait donc de creuser un canal long de trois cents pieds.

Dès la matinée du 9 juillet, on attaqua l’ouvrage.

Les premiers coups de pioche permirent de constater que le terrassement n’exigerait pas de grands efforts. Le sol, jusqu’à sept ou huit pieds, était formé de terre assez friable. Cette profondeur serait très suffisante, avec une largeur à peu près égale, et il ne serait pas nécessaire de recourir à la mine, ce qui aurait pu épuiser la provision de poudre.

Le personnel de la caravane montrait une grande activité. La proximité du but doublait l’ardeur de tous. On connaissait le plan de Ben Raddle. Bien que plusieurs en comprissent mal la théorie, nul ne mettait en doute que le Golden Mount ne vomît bientôt l’or à plein cratère.

Patrick, notamment, faisait merveille. Servi par sa force prodigieuse, il accomplissait à lui seul la besogne de dix hommes.

Le canal avançait donc avec rapidité. On se relayait et, profitant des longs crépuscules, on travaillait une partie des nuits. Ben Raddle surveillait l’accomplissement de l’œuvre, et s’occupait de faire soutenir les berges du canal, tout en recherchant s’il ne recoupait pas quelque filon aurifère. Il ne découvrit rien.

«Voilà un rio, fit observer le Scout, qui ne vaut pas la Bonanza. Mais enfin, peu importe que ses eaux ne charrient pas de pépites, si elles nous procurent celles du Golden Mount!»

Huit jours s'écoulèrent. Le 16 juillet, le canal était presque entièrement achevé. Encore quelques mètres à creuser, et il suffirait ensuite d'échancrer la berge du rio sur une largeur de cinq à six pieds et de percer la paroi qui subsistait encore entre le fond de la galerie et la cheminée. Les eaux iraient aussitôt d'elles-mêmes se déverser dans les entrailles du volcan.

Combien de temps faudrait-il alors pour que l'éruption, provoquée par l'accumulation des vapeurs, se produisît? Nul n'aurait pu répondre sur ce point avec précision. Toutefois, l'ingénieur avait observé que l'activité volcanique s'était accrue de jour en jour. Au milieu des fumées plus épaisses qui couronnaient la montagne, les flammes s'élevaient à une plus grande hauteur, et, pendant les quelques heures d'obscurité, éclairaient la contrée environnante sur une large étendue. Il y avait donc lieu d'espérer que les eaux, lancées dans le foyer central, seraient immédiatement vaporisées et provoqueraient une énergique et soudaine recrudescence des phénomènes éruptifs.

Ce jour-là, vers la fin de l'après-midi, Neluto vint trouver Summy Skim, et, d'une voix qu'une course rapide rendait haletante:

«Ah!.. monsieur Skim!.. monsieur Skim!..

— Qu'y a-t-il, Neluto?

— Il y a… il y a des orignals, monsieur Skim!

— Des orignals! s'écria Summy.

— Oui… tout une bande… une demi-douzaine peut-être… ou plus… ou…

— Ou moins, continua Summy. Je connais l’antienne, mon garçon. Dans quelle direction ces orignals?

— Par là.

Et l’Indien indiquait la plainte à l’Ouest du Golden Mount.

— Loin?

— Euh!.. une lieue à peu près… ou une demi-lieue…

— Ou deux cents kilomètres, c’est entendu, dit Summy en riant.

Un des plus vifs désirs de l’enragé chasseur était de rencontrer des orignals et d’en abattre une couple. Ce désir, il n’avait pu le satisfaire depuis son arrivée au Klondike. A peine si deux ou trois de ces animaux avaient été signalés aux environs de Dawson City ou sur le territoire du Forty Miles Creek. La nouvelle apportée par Neluto était donc de nature à surexciter ses instincts cynégétiques.

— Viens!» dit-il à l’Indien.

Tous deux quittèrent le campement et longèrent pendant quelques centaines de pas la base du Golden Mount. Parvenu au tournant du dernier contrefort méridional, Summy put, de ses propres yeux, apercevoir la troupe des orignals qui remontaient tranquillement vers le Nord-Ouest à travers la vaste plaine.

Malgré le violent désir qu'il éprouva de commencer immédiatement la poursuite, il eut la sagesse de remettre au lendemain l'accomplissement de son projet. Il était trop tard pour partir en chasse. Le principal, d'ailleurs, était que ces ruminants eussent paru aux environs. On saurait bien les retrouver.

Aussitôt rentré au camp, Summy fit connaître son dessein à Ben Raddle. Comme les bras ne manquaient pas pour achever le canal, l'ingénieur ne vit aucun inconvénient à se priver de Neluto pendant une journée. Il fut donc convenu que les deux chasseurs se lanceraient dès cinq heures du matin sur les traces des orignals.

«Mais, recommanda Ben Raddle, tu me promets, Summy, de ne pas trop t'éloigner…

— C'est aux orignals que tu devrais faire cette recommandation, répondit Summy Skim en riant.

— Non, Summy, c'est bien à toi que je la fais. Il y a toujours à redouter quelques mauvaises rencontres dans ce pays désert.

— C'est précisément parce qu'il est désert qu'il est sûr, répliqua Summy.

— Soit! Summy. Promets-moi, cependant, d'être de retour dans l'après-midi.

— Dans l'après-midi… ou dans la soirée, Ben.

— Des soirées qui durent la moitié de la nuit!.. Cela ne t'engage à rien, lit remarquer l'ingénieur. Non, Summy, disons six heures, et sache que, si tu n'es pas revenu avant six heures, je serai réellement inquiet.

— Entendu, Ben, repartit Summy Skim. Entendu pour six heures… avec le quart de grâce!

— J’accepte le quart de grâce, à la condition qu’il ne dure pas plus de quinze minutes!»

Ben Raddle redoutait toujours que son cousin, une fois en chasse, ne se laissât entraîner plus qu’il ne convenait. Jusqu’ici aucun parti d’Indiens ne s’était montré aux bouches de la Mackensie, et il y avait lieu de s’en féliciter. Mais enfin cette éventualité pouvait se produire d’un jour à l’autre, et Ben Raddle ne cessait de penser à la fumée que Neluto avait cru discerner au-dessus des arbres de la forêt. Bien que près de quinze jours se fussent écoulés depuis lors sans incident, il en conservait une certaine angoisse et aspirait au moment où, la campagne terminée et heureusement terminée, il pourrait reprendre la route de Dawson.

Le lendemain, avant cinq heures, Summy Skim et Neluto quittèrent le campement, armés chacun d’une carabine à longue portée, munis de provisions pour deux repas, et accompagnés d’un chien choisi parmi les rares échantillons de la race canine que la caravane avait emmenés avec elle. Cet animal, qui répondait au nom de Stop, était plutôt un chien de garde que de chasse. Mais Summy, ayant cru reconnaître en lui une certaine finesse d’odorat, doublée d’un caractère des plus sociables, l’avait attaché à sa personne et poursuivait méthodiquement son éducation. Il se montrait même généralement assez vain des résultats obtenus.

Le temps était beau et frais, malgré le soleil qui, depuis longtemps déjà, traçait sa longue courbe au-dessus de l’horizon. Les deux chasseurs s’éloignèrent rapidement, tandis que leur chien gambadait autour d’eux en aboyant.

En somme, les excursions faites par Summy Skim aux approches de Dawson City ou dans le voisinage de Forty Miles Creek ne lui avaient procuré, si l'on en excepte les trois ours abattus, dont deux dans une circonstance assez mémorable, que du menu fretin: grives, grouses, perdrix ou autres bestioles du même genre. Aussi exultait-il à la pensée de tenir bientôt au bout de son fusil un plus noble gibier.

L'orignal est un élan à la tête parée de magnifiques andouillers. Autrefois très commun dans la contrée arrosée par le Yukon et ses tributaires, ce ruminant, jadis à demi domestique, s'est dispersé depuis la découverte des claims du Klondike et s'est réfugié sous des latitudes plus septentrionales, où il tend à retourner à l'état sauvage.

On ne l'approche plus que difficilement, et on ne l'abat que dans des circonstances très favorables. C'est grand dommage, car sa dépouille est précieuse, et sa chair excellente est estimée à l'égal de celle du bœuf.

Summy Skim n'ignorait pas combien la défiance de l'orignal est aisément excitée. Cet animal est doué d'une façon remarquable sous le triple rapport de l'ouïe, de l'odorat et de la vitesse. A la moindre alerte, en dépit de son poids qui peut atteindre jusqu'à cinq cents kilos, il se dérobe avec une telle rapidité que toute poursuite devient inutile. Les deux chasseurs prirent donc les plus minutieuses précautions pour arriver à portée de fusil.

Le troupeau des ruminants, alors arrêté sur la lisière de la forêt, était par conséquent éloigné d'une lieue et demie environ.

Quelques bouquets d'arbres se dressaient çà et là, et il était possible, à la rigueur, pour franchir une partie du parcours, de se glisser, ou, pour mieux dire, de ramper de l'un à l'autre sans donner l'éveil. Mais, dans le voisinage de la lisière, il n'en serait plus ainsi, et les chasseurs ne pourraient faire un pas sans trahir leur présence. Les orignals détaleraient alors et il faudrait renoncer à l’espoir de retrouver leurs traces.

Après conseil tenu, Summy Skim et Neluto décidèrent de pénétrer dans la forêt plus au Sud. De là, en allant d’arbre en arbre, peut-être parviendraient-ils à rejoindre la bande et la prendre à revers.

Trois quarts d’heure plus tard, Summy Skim et l’Indien entraient dans la forêt à deux kilomètres environ du point où paissaient les orignals. Neluto tenait par le collier Stop tout frémissant d’impatience.

«Suivons maintenant la lisière en dedans des arbres, dit Summy Skim. Mais, pour Dieu, ne lâche pas le chien!

— Oui, monsieur Skim, répondit l’Indien, mais, à votre tour, tenez-moi bien, ça ne sera pas de trop!»

Summy Skim sourit. En vérité il avait assez de peine à se retenir lui-même!

Sous le couvert des arbres, la marche ne s’effectuait pas sans difficultés. Les trembles, les bouleaux et les pins se pressaient les uns contre les autres, et d’épaisses broussailles embarrassaient la marche. Il fallait éviter de faire craquer du pied les branches mortes dont le sol était jonché. Le bruit eût été d’autant plus aisément entendu par les orignals, que nul souffle ne traversait l’espace. Le soleil, devenu plus ardent, inondait de lumière les ramures immobiles. Aucun pépiement d’oiseau ne frappait l’oreille, aucune rumeur ne venait des profondeurs de la forêt.

Il était plus de neuf heures, lorsque les deux chasseurs firent halte à moins de trois cents pieds de l’endroit occupé par les orignals. Les uns pâturaient et se désaltéraient à un rio qui sortait du bois; les autres, couchés sur l’herbe, étaient probablement endormis. Le troupeau ne manifestait aucune inquiétude. Cependant, à n’en pas douter, la moindre alerte le mettrait en fuite, et très probablement dans la direction du Sud, vers les sources de la Porcupine River.

Summy Skim et Neluto n’étaient pas gens à se reposer, bien qu’ils en eussent besoin. Puisque l’occasion d’un heureux coup de fusil se présentait, ils ne la laisseraient pas échapper.

Les voici donc, la carabine armée, le doigt sur la gâchette, qui se faufilent entre les broussailles, en rampant le long de la lisière. Bien qu’il y manquât le piment du danger, puisqu’on n’avait pas affaire à des fauves, jamais Summy Skim – il en fit plus tard l’aveu – n’avait ressenti pareille émotion. Son cœur battait à coups précipités, sa main tremblait et il craignait de ne pouvoir tirer juste. Vraiment, s’il manquait une pareille occasion d’abattre l’orignal tant convoité, il n’aurait plus qu’à mourir de honte!

Summy Skim et Neluto s’approchaient sans bruit à travers les herbes, à la suite l’un de l’autre. Quelques minutes de cette silencieuse reptation les amenèrent à moins de soixante pas de l’endroit où stationnaient les ruminants. Ils étaient à portée. Stop, maintenu par Neluto, haletait, mais n’aboyait pas.

Les orignals ne paraissaient pas se douter de l’approche des deux chasseurs. Ceux qui étaient étendus sur le sol ne se relevèrent point, tandis que les autres continuaient à brouter.

Toutefois, l’un d’eux, une bête magnifique, dont les andouillers se développaient comme la ramure d’un jeune arbre, redressa la tête à ce moment. Ses oreilles s’agitèrent, il tendit son museau vers la lisière, comme s’il eût voulu humer l’air qui lui en arrivait.

Avait-il donc flairé le danger, et n’allait-il pas s’enfuir en entraînant les autres à sa suite?

Summy Skim en eut le pressentiment, et le sang lui afflua au cœur. Mais, se ressaisissant, il dit à voix basse:

«Feu! Neluto, et tous deux sur le même, pour être sûrs de ne pas le manquer.

Tout à coup, un violent aboiement se fit entendre, et Stop, que Neluto avait lâché pour épauler sa carabine, s’élança au milieu du troupeau.

Ce ne fut pas long. Une compagnie de perdreaux ne s’envole pas plus vite que ne détalèrent les orignals. Ni Summy Skim ni l’Indien n’eurent le temps de tirer.

«Maudit chien! s’écria Summy en se relevant furieux.

— J’aurais dû le tenir à la gorge! dit l’Indien.

— Et même l’étrangler! renchérit Summy Skim hors de lui.

Et vraiment, si l’animal eût été là, il n’en aurait pas été quitte à bon marché. Mais Stop était déjà à plus de deux cents mètres lorsque les chasseurs franchirent la lisière de la forêt. Il s’était lancé à la poursuite des orignals et l’on s’époumona vainement à le rappeler.

Le troupeau se dirigeait vers le Nord avec une rapidité qui dépassait celle du chien, bien que ce dernier fût un animal vigoureux et très vite. Rentrerait-il dans la forêt, ou s’enfuirait-il à travers la plaine en gagnant du côté de l’Est? C’eût été l’éventualité la plus heureuse, car il se fût ainsi rapproché du Golden Mount dont les fumées tourbillonnaient à une lieue et demie. Mais il se pouvait aussi qu’il prît une direction oblique vers le Sud-Est, du côté de la Peal River, et qu’il allât chercher refuge dans les premières gorges des Montagnes Rocheuses. En ce cas, il aurait fallu renoncer à l’atteindre jamais.

«Suis-moi! cria Summy Skim à l’Indien, et tâchons de ne pas les perdre de vue.

Tous deux, courant le long de la lisière, se mirent à la poursuite du troupeau éloigné alors de près d’un kilomètre. La même irrésistible passion, qui entraînait leur chien, les grisait eux aussi et ne leur permettait plus de raisonner.

Un quart d’heure plus tard, Summy Skim eut une vive émotion. Les orignals venaient de s’arrêter, comme incertains sur le parti qu’il convenait d’adopter. Qu’allaient-ils faire? Ils ne pouvaient continuer à fuir vers le Nord, du côté du littoral qui les obligerait bientôt à s’arrêter. Redescendraient-ils vers le Sud-Est? Dans ce cas, Summy Skim et Neluto devraient abandonner la partie.

Non, après quelques moments d’hésitation, les orignals se décidèrent à rentrer sous bois et à se réfugier derrière l’enchevêtrement des arbres. Le chef du troupeau franchit la lisière d’un bond, et les autres suivirent.

«C’est ce qui pouvait nous arriver de plus heureux, s’écria Summy Skim. En plaine, nous n’aurions pu les approcher à portée de fusil. Dans la forêt, il leur sera impossible de détaler aussi vite; nous parviendrons peut-être à les rejoindre, et cette fois…»

Que ce raisonnement fût juste ou non, il n’en aurait pas moins pour résultat d’entraîner les chasseurs à travers une forêt dont ils ne connaissaient pas l’étendue, et qui leur était complètement inconnue.

Stop les avait précédés. Il avait bondi entre les arbres. Ses aboiements s’entendaient encore, mais on ne le voyait déjà plus.

Sa souplesse lui permettant de passer partout, il gagnait maintenant sur les orignals, que leurs longs andouillers devaient gêner pour franchir les halliers et les buissons. Il n’était pas impossible, dans ces conditions, que l’on parvînt à les forcer.

Les deux chasseurs, engagés sous ces épaisses ramures et uniquement guidés par la voix du chien, s’y épuisèrent deux heures durant. Emportés par une passion irraisonnée, ils s’en allaient à l’aventure, s’enfonçant de plus en plus dans l’Ouest, sans se demander s’ils n’éprouveraient pas quelques difficultés à retrouver leur chemin, quand il s’agirait de revenir.

La forêt était de moins en moins épaisse à mesure qu’on s’éloignait de la lisière. C’étaient toujours les mêmes arbres: bouleaux, trembles et pins, mais plus espacés, et jaillissant d’un sol mieux dégagé de racines et de broussailles.

S’ils n’apercevaient pas les orignals, Stop, en tous cas, n’avait pas perdu la piste. Ses aboiements persistaient. Il ne devait même pas être loin de son maître.

Summy Skim et Neluto s’aventuraient toujours plus avant dans les profondeurs des bois, lorsque, un peu après midi, la voix du chien cessa de parvenir à leurs oreilles.

Ils se trouvaient alors dans un espace vide où pénétraient librement les rayons du soleil. A quelle distance étaient-ils de la lisière? Summy Skim, qui ne pouvait s’en rendre compte que par le temps écoulé, l’estimait à huit ou dix kilomètres. Le temps ne manquerait donc pas pour revenir au campement, après une halte dont tous deux avaient grand besoin. Éreintes, affamés, ils s’assirent au pied d’un arbre. Les provisions furent tirées des gibecières, et, s’ils mangèrent avec un formidable appétit, ce ne fut pas sans éprouver de vifs regrets de ne pouvoir ajouter des grillades d’orignal à leur menu.

Bien restaurés, les chasseurs hésitèrent un instant sur la direction à suivre. La sagesse commandait en vain de reprendre la route du campement. Summy Skim y paraissait peu disposé. Si revenir bredouille est déjà vexant pour un chasseur, revenir sans son chien est le comble du déshonneur. Or, Stop n’avait pas reparu.

«Où peut-il être? demanda Summy Skim.

— A la poursuite des orignals, évidemment, répondit l’Indien.

— C’est clair, Neluto. Mais alors, où sont les orignals?»

Comme pour répondre à cette question, les aboiements de Stop retentirent tout à coup à moins de trois cents toises. Sans échanger d’autres paroles, les deux chasseurs s’élancèrent du côté où la voix du chien se faisait entendre.

La sagesse ni la prudence n’avaient plus la moindre chance d’être écoutées. Summy Skim et Neluto couraient de nouveau à perdre haleine.

Cela pouvait les mener fort loin. En effet, la direction suivie n’était plus celle du Nord-Ouest. C’est vers le Sud-Ouest que se portaient maintenant les orignals, et, derrière eux, Stop acharné à la poursuite, et, derrière Stop, ses maîtres plus enragés encore. Ceux-ci tournaient donc exactement le dos au Golden Mount et au campement.

Après tout, le soleil commençait à peine à décliner vers l'horizon occidental; si les chasseurs n'étaient pas rentrés pour six heures, conformément à leur promesse, ils le seraient à sept ou huit, voilà tout, c'est-à-dire longtemps avant la nuit close.

Summy Skim et Neluto ne s'attardèrent pas, d'ailleurs, à ces réflexions. Ils couraient aussi rapidement que leurs forces le permettaient, sans penser à autre chose, sans même essayer de rappeler leur chien.

Le temps écoulé, ils en avaient perdu toute notion. La fatigue, ils ne la sentaient pas. Summy Skim oubliait où il se trouvait. Il chassait sur ces territoires de l'Extrême-Nord comme il eût chassé aux environs de Montréal.

Une ou deux fois, Neluto et lui se crurent sur le point de réussir. Quelques andouillers s'étaient montrés au-dessus des buissons, à moins de cinq cents pas. Mais les agiles animaux ne tardaient pas à disparaître, et l'occasion ne se présenta pas de leur envoyer un coup de fusil à bonne portée.

Plusieurs heures s'écoulèrent dans cette vaine poursuite, puis l'affaiblissement des aboiements de Stop prouva que les orignals gagnaient de l'avance. Enfin ces aboiements cessèrent, soit que le chien fût trop éloigné, soit que, époumoné par une si longue course, il ne fût plus capable de donner de la voix.

Summy Skim et Neluto s'arrêtèrent à bout de forces et tombèrent sur le sol comme des masses. Il était alors quatre heures du soir.

«Fini! dit Summy Skim, dès qu’il fut en état de parler.

Neluto hocha la tête en signe d’assentiment.

— Où sommes-nous? reprit Summy Skim.

L’Indien fit un geste d’ignorance et regarda autour de lui.

Les deux chasseurs se trouvaient au bord d’une assez large clairière que traversait un petit rio allant sans doute rejoindre dans le Sud-Ouest un des affluents de la Porcupine River. Le soleil l’éclairait largement. Au delà, les arbres se pressaient les uns contre les autres, comme pour interdire le passage.

— Il faut nous remettre en route, dit Summy Skim

— Pour le campement, je suppose, répondit Neluto se reconnaissant fourbu.

— Parbleu! s’écria Summy Skim en haussant les épaules.

— En route, alors! approuva l’Indien en se relevant péniblement, et en commençant à suivre le contour de la clairière.

Il n’avait pas fait dix pas, qu’il s’arrêtait, les yeux fixés sur le sol à ses pieds.

— Regardez, monsieur Skim, dit-il.

— Qu’y a-t-il? interrogea Summy.

— Du feu, monsieur Skim.

— Du feu!

— Il y en a eu tout au moins.

Summy Skim vit, en s’approchant, un petit tas de cendres devant lequel l’Indien demeurait immobile et pensif.

— Il y a donc des chasseurs, dans cette forêt? demanda Summy.

— Des chasseurs… ou autre chose, répondit Neluto.

Summy s’était penché. Il considérait attentivement les cendres suspectes.

— Elles ne sont pas d’hier, en tous cas, dit-il en se relevant.

En effet, ces cendres blanches, à demi cimentées, pour ainsi dire, pas l’humidité, devaient être là depuis assez longtemps.

— Il semblerait, reconnut Neluto. Mais voici qui va nous fixer.

A quelques pas du foyer éteint, les regards fureteurs de l’Indien avaient découvert un objet brillant entre les herbes. Il se dirigea rapidement de ce côté, se baissa, et ramassa l’objet, en poussant un cri de surprise.

C’était un poignard à lame plate emmanchée dans une poignée de cuivre.

Après l’avoir examiné, Neluto déclara:

— Si l’on ne peut exactement connaître l’âge du foyer, voici un poignard qui n’a pas été perdu depuis plus de dix jours.

— Oui, répondit Summy Skim. La lame en est encore brillante et n’a qu’une légère couche de rouille. C’est tout récemment qu’il est tombé entre les herbes.

L’arme, ainsi que le reconnut Neluto, après l’avoir tournée et retournée, était de fabrication espagnole. Sur le manche, l’initiale M était gravée, et sur la lame le nom de Austin, capitale du Texas.

— Ainsi, reprit Summy Skim, il y a quelques jours, quelques heures peut-être, des étrangers ont campé dans cette clairière!..

— Et ce ne sont pas des Indiens, observa Neluto, car les Indiens n’ont point d’armes de ce genre.

Summy regardait autour de lui avec inquiétude.

–Qui sait, ajouta-t-il, s’ils ne se dirigeaient pas vers le Golden Mount?

Cette hypothèse était admissible après tout. Et si l’homme auquel appartenait cette navaja faisait partie d’une troupe nombreuse, un grand danger menaçait peut-être Ben Raddle et ses compagnons. Peut-être même, en ce moment, cette troupe rôdait-elle aux environs de l’estuaire de la Mackensie!

— Partons, dit Summy Skim.

— A l’instant, répondit Neluto.

— Et notre chien! s’écria Summy.

L’Indien appela d’une voix forte, en se tournant dans toutes les directions. Son appel ne fut pas entendu. Stop ne reparut pas.

Il n’était plus question maintenant de la chasse aux orignals. Il fallait regagner au plus tôt le campement, afin que la caravane fût mise sur ses gardes et se tint sur la défensive.

— En route, et sans perdre une minute,» commanda Summy Skim.

Juste à ce moment, à trois cents pas de la clairière, retentit la détonation d’une arme à feu.

CHAPITRE X

Ou le désert se peuple plus qu’il ne conviendrait.

Après le départ de Summy Skim et de Neluto pour la chasse aux orignals, Ben Raddle avait passé une nouvelle inspection des travaux. Si aucun retard ne se produisait, le canal serait achevé le soir même. Il n’y aurait plus qu’à donner les derniers, coups de pic à la paroi du cratère, ouvrir la saignée dans la rive gauche du Rio Rubber, et les eaux se précipiteraient en torrent dans les entrailles du Golden Mount.

Ces énormes masses liquides, vaporisées par le feu central, détermineraient bientôt une violente poussée qui lancerait au dehors les matières volcaniques. Sans doute, elles contiendraient une forte proportion de laves, de scories et d’autres substances sans valeur, mais les pépites, les quartz aurifères y seraient mélangés, et on n’aurait qu’à les recueillir sans avoir eu la peine de les extraire.

La violence des forces souterraines continuait à s’accroître. Les bouillonnements intérieurs augmentaient d’intensité de jour en jour. C’était à se demander si l’introduction des eaux dans le cratère serait nécessaire.

«Nous le verrons bien, répondit Ben Raddle au Scout qui lui faisait cette observation. Il ne faut pas oublier que le temps nous est strictement ménagé. Nous avons dépassé la moitié du mois de juillet.

— Et il serait imprudent, approuva Bill Stell, de s’attarder plus d’un mois à l’embouchure de la Mackensie. Comptons trois semaines pour revenir au Klondike, surtout si nos chariots sont lourdement chargés…

— Ils le seront, Scout, n’en doutez pas!

— Dans ce cas, monsieur Raddle, la saison sera déjà assez avancée lorsque nous arriverons à Dawson City. Si l’hiver était précoce, nous pourrions éprouver de gros embarras en traversant la région des lacs pour gagner Skagway.

— Vous parlez d’or, mon cher Scout, répondit l’ingénieur en plaisantant, et c’est bien le cas lorsqu’on est campé au pied du Golden Mount! Mais soyez sans inquiétude. Je serai fort étonné si, dans huit jours, nos attelages n’ont pas repris le chemin du Klondike.»

La journée s’écoula comme de coutume, et, le soir venu, le canal était percé de bout en bout.

A cinq heures de l’après-midi, ni l’un ni l’autre des deux chasseurs n’avait été signalé sur la plaine de l’Ouest. Ben Raddle ne s’inquiéta pas. Summy Skim pouvait encore disposer d’une heure sans manquer à sa promesse. A plusieurs reprises, cependant, le Scout, poussant une reconnaissance au delà du canal, alla voir s’il l’apercevait. Il ne vit personne. Aucune silhouette ne se dessinait à l’horizon.

Une heure plus tard Ben Raddle, qui commençait à ressentir quelque impatience, se promit de faire des remontrances à son cousin, mais sa décision demeura forcément platonique, en raison de l’absence persistante du coupable.

A sept heures, Summy Skim et Neluto ne se montrant toujours pas, la mauvaise humeur de Ben Raddle se changea en inquiétude, et cette inquiétude redoubla lorsque, une heure après, les absents ne furent pas encore de retour.

«Ils se sont laissé entraîner, répétait-il. Avec ce diable de Skim on ne peut compter sur rien, quand il a un animal devant lui et un fusil à la main. Il va!.. il va!.. Il n'y a pas de raisons pour qu'il s'arrête… J'aurais dû m'opposer à cette chasse.

— Il ne fera pas nuit avant dix heures, dit Bill Stell pour rassurer l'ingénieur, et il n'y a pas lieu de craindre que M. Skim puisse s'égarer. Le Golden Mount s'aperçoit de loin, et, dans l'obscurité, ses flammes serviraient de phare au besoin.»

L'observation ne manquait pas de valeur. A quelque distance qu'ils fussent du campement, les chasseurs devaient apercevoir le volcan. Mais s'ils étaient victimes d'un accident? S'ils se trouvaient dans l'impossibilité de revenir?

Deux heures se passèrent. Ben Raddle ne tenait plus en place et le Scout commençait à devenir nerveux. Le soleil allait descendre sous l'horizon et l'espace ne serait plus éclairé que par la lumière crépusculaire des hautes latitudes.

Un peu après dix heures, Ben Raddle et le Scout, qui, de plus en plus inquiets, avaient quitté le campement, longeaient la base de la montagne au moment où le soleil disparaissait au couchant. Le dernier regard qu'ils jetèrent sur la plaine leur montra qu'elle était déserte. Immobiles, ils écoutaient, l'oreille tendue, tandis que la nuit tombait peu à peu. Aucun bruit n'arrivait jusqu'à eux de toute l'étendue de la plaine aussi silencieuse que déserte.

«Que supposer, monsieur Raddle? dit le Scout. La chasse aux orignals n'est pas une chasse dangereuse, et, à moins que M. Skim et Neluto n'aient été aux prises avec des ours…

— Des ours… ou des pillards, Bill… Oui! j’ai le pressentiment qu’il leur est arrivé malheur!

Bill Stell saisit brusquement la main de l’ingénieur.

— Écoutez! dit-il.

Dans la nuit grandissante des aboiements lointains se faisaient entendre.

— Stop! cria Ben Raddle.

— Ils ne sont pas loin! ajouta le Scout.

Les aboiements augmentaient de force. II s’y mêlait des plaintes comme si le chien eût été blessé.

Ben Raddle et son compagnon coururent au-devant de Stop, qu’ils découvrirent au bout de deux cents pas.

Le chien revenait seul, traînant la patte, l’arrière-train ensanglanté. Il semblait à bout de forces.

— Blessé!.. blessé!.. et seul!.. s’écria Ben Raddle dont le cœur battait avec violence.

Cependant le Scout fit cette réflexion:

— Peut-être Stop a-t-il été blessé involontairement par son maître ou par Neluto? Quelque balle perdue l’aura frappé…

— Pourquoi ne serait-il pas resté avec Summy, si Summy avait pu lui donner des soins et le ramener avec lui? objecta Ben Raddle.

— Dans tous les cas, dit Bill Stell, rapportons le chien au camp, et pansons sa blessure. Si elle est légère, peut-être pourra-t-il nous mettre sur la piste de son maître?

— Oui, répondit l’ingénieur et nous partirons en nombre et bien armés sans attendre le jour.»

Le Scout emporta l’animal dans ses bras. Dix minutes plus tard on était de retour au campement.

Le chien fut transporté sous la tente et sa blessure fut soigneusement examinée. Elle ne parut pas être grave. Il ne s’agissait que d’une profonde éraflure limitée aux muscles et qui n’intéressait aucun organe.

C’était une balle qui l’avait frappé, et le Scout, très entendu à ce genre d’opération, parvint même à l’extraire.

Ben Raddle prit cette balle et l’examina attentivement.

«Ce n’est point une balle de Summy, dit-il. Celle-ci est plus grosse et ne vient point d’une carabine de chasse.

— Vous avez raison, approuva Bill Stell. Ce projectile-là vient d’un rifle.

— Ils ont eu affaire à des aventuriers, à des malfaiteurs! s’écria l’ingénieur. Ils ont dû se défendre!.. Pendant l’attaque, Stop a été atteint… et, s’il n’est pas resté près de son maître, c’est que son maître a été entraîné… ou qu’il a succombé avec Neluto!.. Ah! mon pauvre Summy! mon pauvre Summy!»

Qu’aurait pu répondre Bill Stell? Cette balle qui n’avait pas été tirée par l’un des deux chasseurs, ce chien qui revenait seul, tout cela ne justifiait-il pas les craintes de Ben Raddle? Était-il possible de mettre en doute qu'un malheur ne fût arrivé? Ou Summy Skim et son compagnon avaient péri en se défendant, ou ils étaient entre les mains de leurs agresseurs, puisqu'ils n'avaient pas reparu.

A onze heures, Ben Raddle et le Scout se décidèrent à informer leurs compagnons de cette situation. Le personnel du campement fut réveillé, et, en quelques mots hâtifs, l'ingénieur lui apprit que Summy Skim et Neluto, partis dès l'aube, n'étaient pas encore de retour. Jane Edgerton traduisit la pensée de tous.

«Il faut partir, dit-elle d'une voix tremblante, partir à l'instant.»

On fit aussitôt les préparatifs nécessaires. Il était inutile de prendre des vivres, puisque la caravane ne s'éloignerait pas du Golden Mount, du moins pendant les premières recherches. Mais tout le monde serait armé et prêt, soit à se défendre, si l'on était attaqué, soit à délivrer, s'il le fallait, les deux prisonniers par la force.

Stop avait été pansé avec soin. La balle avait été extraite, sa blessure bandée; bien réconforté, car il était surtout épuisé de faim et de soif, il manifestait le désir d'aller au-devant de son maître.

«Nous l'emmènerons, dit Jane Edgerton, nous le porterons s'il est trop fatigué. Peut-être retrouvera-il les traces de M. Skim.»

Si, pendant la nuit, les recherches demeuraient vaines, on les reprendrait le lendemain, et l'on fouillerait au besoin toute la contrée entre l'océan Polaire et le cours de la Porcupine River. Du Golden Mount, il ne serait plus question tant que l'on n'aurait pas retrouvé Summy Skim, ou qu'on ne serait pas fixé sur son sort.

On partit.

Jane Edgerton en tête, aux côtés de Ben Raddle et de Bill Stell qui portait le chien, on longea tout d’abord la base de la montagne dont les sourds grondements faisaient trembler le sol. A son sommet empanaché de vapeurs, se détachaient des langues de flamme très apparentes dans l’obscurité du crépuscule.

Parvenus au pied du versant occidental, on s’arrêta et l’on tint conseil. Dans quelle direction convenait-il de se diriger? Rien ne pouvait être plus pratique que de s’en rapporter à l’instinct du chien que le Scout avait mis sur ses pattes. L’intelligent animal semblait comprendre ce qu’on attendait de lui. Il cherchait, quêtait de tous côtés, le museau au ras de terre, en jappant sourdement.

Après quelques instants d’hésitation, Stop prit son parti vers le Nord-Ouest.

«Quand M. Skim nous a quittés, ce matin, il allait plus au Sud, dit le Scout.

— Suivons le chien, répliqua Jane Edgerton. Il sait mieux que nous ce qu’il faut faire.»

Une heure durant, la petite troupe parcourut la plaine dans cette direction. Elle atteignit alors la lisière de la forêt que les deux chasseurs avaient franchie près d’une lieue plus bas. Là, elle s’arrêta de nouveau, indécise.

«Eh bien! qu’attendons-nous? demanda Jane un peu nerveusement.

— Le jour, répondit Bill Stell. Nous ne verrions plus rien sous les arbres. Stop lui-même hésite.

Non, Stop n'hésitait pas. Tout à coup, il fit un bond, et disparut entre les arbres en aboyant avec force.

— Suivons-le! s'écria Jane Edgerton.

— Non. Attendez, commanda Bill Stell en arrêtant ses compagnons; et tenez vos armes prêtes.»

Il ne fut pas utile de s'en servir. Presque aussitôt, conduits par le chien qui paraissait ne plus sentir sa blessure, deux hommes s'élancèrent d'entre les arbres, et, un instant après, Summy Skim était dans les bras de son cousin.

Son premier mot fut: «Au campement!.. au campement!

— Qu'est-il arrivé? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Tu le sauras, répondit Summy Skim, mais là-bas… Au campement! vous dis-je, au campement!»

Guidés par les flammes du Golden Mount, tous se mirent rapidement en marche. Un peu après une heure du matin, ils atteignaient le Rio Rubber. Bientôt le jour allait paraître. Déjà l'aube enflammait l'horizon du Nord-Est. Avant de se réunir sous la tente, Ben Raddle, Jane Edgerton, le Scout et Summy Skim observèrent une dernière fois les approches du Golden Mount. Ils ne virent rien d'insolite dans l'ombre blanchissante.

Lorsqu'ils furent seuls, Summy Skim exposa brièvement à ses compagnons les faits survenus entre six heures du matin et cinq heures du soir. Il raconta la première poursuite des orignals inutilement continuée jusqu'à midi, puis la seconde partie de la chasse, lorsque les aboiements du chien s'étaient fait entendre, et enfin, de guerre lasse, la halte au bord de la clairière, où ils avaient trouvé les cendres d’un foyer éteint.

«Il était évident, ajouta-t-il, que des hommes, indigènes ou étrangers, avaient campé en cet endroit, ce qui, d’ailleurs, n’avait rien de bien étonnant.

— En effet, dit le Scout. Il arrive que les équipages des baleiniers débarquent sur le littoral, sans parler des Indiens qui le fréquentent durant la belle saison.

— Mais, reprit Summy Skim, au moment où nous allions revenir au Golden Mount, Neluto découvrit entre les herbes l’arme que voici.

Ben Raddle et le Scout examinèrent le poignard, et, comme Neluto, ils reconnurent au premier coup d’œil que c’était une arme de fabrication espagnole.

— L’aspect de ce poignard, continua Summy, nous fit supposer qu’il avait été perdu assez récemment. Quant à la lettre M qui est gravée sur le manche…

— Elle ne pouvait rien vous apprendre, monsieur Skim, interrompit le Scout.

— Non, Bill, et pourtant je n’eu sais pas moins devant quel nom il faut la mettre.

— Et ce nom?.. demanda Ben Raddle.

— C’est celui du Texien Malone.

— Malone!

— Oui, Ben.

— Le compagnon de Hunter? insista Bill Stell.

— Lui-même.

— Ils étaient donc là, il y a quelques jours? dit l’ingénieur.

— Ils y sont encore, répliqua Summy Skim.

— Vous les avez vus? demanda Jane Edgerton.

— Écoutez la fin de mon récit. Vous serez fixés.

Et Summy Skim poursuivit en ces termes:

«Nous allions partir, Neluto et moi, après la découverte du poignard, cette découverte nous causant de vives inquiétudes, lorsqu’un coup de fusil retentit à peu de distance.

«Qu’il y eût des chasseurs dans la forêt, cela n’était pas douteux, et probablement des étrangers, car les Indiens ne se servent pas d’armes à feu. Mais, quels qu’ils fussent, le plus prudent était de se tenir sur ses gardes.

«Maintenant, ce coup de fusil était-il destiné à l’un des originals, un de ceux auxquels Neluto et moi nous avions inutilement donné la chasse? Je l’ai cru jusqu’au moment où j’ai connu la blessure de notre chien. C’est évidemment sur lui que le coup de feu avait été tiré.

— Et, interrompit Ben Raddle, lorsque nous l’avons vu revenir sans toi, frappé par une balle étrangère, se traînant à peine, songe à ce que j’ai éprouvé!.. J’étais déjà en proie à d’affreuses inquiétudes en ne te voyant pas reparaître. Que pouvais-je croire, si ce n’est que, Neluto et toi, vous aviez été attaqués, et que, pendant l’attaque, ton chien avait reçu cette blessure… Ah! Summy, Summy!.. Comment oublier que c’était moi qui t’avais entraîné…

Ben Raddle était agité par une violente émotion. Summy Skim comprit ce qui se passait dans l’âme de son cousin, conscient de la responsabilité qui pesait sur lui.

— Ben! mon cher Ben, dit-il en lui serrant affectueusement la main, ce qui est fait est fait. Ne te reproche rien. Si la situation s’est aggravée, elle n’est pas désespérée, et nous nous en tirerons, je l’espère… D’ailleurs, tu vas en juger.

«Dès que nous eûmes entendu la détonation, qui venait de l’Est, c’est-à-dire de la direction que nous allions prendre pour retourner au campement, nous nous hâtâmes de quitter la clairière où nous aurions pu être aperçus, et de nous dissimuler dans les broussailles qui l’entourent.

«Bientôt, des voix se firent entendre, des voix nombreuses. Une troupe d’hommes s’avançait évidemment de notre côté.

«Mais nous voulions voir, si nous ne voulions pas être vus. De quelle sorte de gens cette troupe était-elle composée? Que faisaient ces hommes, à une si faible distance du Golden Mount? Connaissaient-ils donc l’existence du volcan et se dirigeaient-ils vers lui? Autant de problèmes dont nous avions le plus grand intérêt à connaître la solution.

«Convaincus que les inconnus ne pouvaient manquer de s’installer pour la nuit dans la clairière, nous eûmes vite fait de gagner un épais buisson d’où nos regards la parcouraient tout entière. Blottis au milieu des hautes herbes et des broussailles, nous ne courions pas le risque d’être découverts, et, ce qui était l’essentiel, nous pouvions à la fois voir et entendre.

«Il était temps. La troupe se montra presque aussitôt. Elle se composait d’une quarantaine d’hommes, dont une vingtaine d’Américains et une vingtaine d’indigènes. Nous ne nous étions pas trompés. Ils avaient en effet l’intention de passer la nuit en cet endroit, et ils commencèrent par allumer des feux pour préparer leur repas.

«De ces hommes, je ne connaissais aucun. Neluto, pas davantage. Ils étaient armés de rifles et de revolvers qu’ils déposèrent sous les arbres. Ils ne parlaient guère entre eux, ou ils le faisaient d’une voix si basse que je ne réussissais pas à les entendre.

— Mais Hunter… Malone?.. demanda Ben Raddle.

— Ils arrivèrent un quart d’heure après, répondit Summy Skim, en compagnie d’un Indien et du contre-maître qui dirigeait l’exploitation du claim 131.

«Ah! nous les reconnûmes bien, Neluto et moi. Oui! ces coquins sont dans le voisinage du Golden Mount et toute une bande d’aventuriers de leur espèce les accompagne.

— Mais que viennent-ils faire? demanda le Scout. Connaissent-ils l’existence du Golden Mount? Savent-ils qu’une caravane de mineurs s’est transportée jusque-là?

— Je me posais les mêmes questions, mon brave Bill, répondit Summy Skim. J’ai fini par avoir réponse à toutes.

En ce moment, le Scout fit signe à Summy Skim de se taire. Il avait cru entendre un bruit au dehors, et, sortant de la tente, il alla observer les environs du campement.

La vaste plaine était déserte. Aucune troupe ne s'approchait de la montagne, dont les ronflements troublaient seuls le silence de la nuit.

Dès que le Scout fut revenu prendre sa place, Summy Skim continua de la sorte:

«Les deux Texiens vinrent précisément s'asseoir sur la lisière de la clairière, à dix pas du buisson derrière lequel nous étions cachés. D'abord, ils parlèrent d'un chien qu'ils avaient rencontré, et je comprends maintenant qu'il s'agissait du nôtre. «C'est une singulière rencontre au milieu de cette forêt, dit Hunter. Il n'est pas possible qu'il se soit risqué seul à pareille distance de tout centre habité.» – «Il y a des chasseurs par ici! répondit Malone, ce n'est pas douteux. Mais où sont-ils?.. Le chien se sauvait dans cette direction.» Malone tendait en même temps la main du côté de l'Est. – «Eh! s'écria alors Hunter, qui nous dit que ce sont des chasseurs? On ne s'aventure pas si loin à la poursuite des ruminants ou des fauves.» – «Tu as raison, Hunter, approuva Malone, il y a par ici des mineurs en quête de nouveaux gisements.» – «Que nous mettions la main dessus, riposta Hunter, et ils verront ce qui leur en restera.» – «Pas seulement de quoi remplir un plat ou une écuelle,» répliqua Malone, en scandant son rire d'abominables jurons…

«Un silence suivit, puis les deux bandits se remirent à causer, et c'est ainsi que j'appris tout ce que nous avions intérêt à savoir.

«Hunter et Malone campaient pour la seconde fois dans cette clairière. Partis depuis deux mois et demi de Circle City, ils ont erré un peu au hasard, sous la direction d’un guide indigène du nom de Krarak, qui connaît par tradition l’existence du Golden Mount, mais ignore son emplacement exact. La bande, après avoir fait inutilement un grand crochet dans l’Est, a remonté quelques jours avant nous la Peel River, et c’est sans doute contre elle que la garnison du Fort Mac Pherson a dû se défendre. Du Fort Mac Pherson elle est revenue dans l’Ouest et elle a atteint, mais beaucoup plus au Sud, la forêt où elle est encore et dans laquelle elle s’est égarée. C’est ainsi, qu’une dizaine de jours plus tôt, elle était déjà venue dans la clairière où elle se trouvait avec nous. Le foyer que nous avions remarqué avait été allumé par elle, et c’est sa fumée que Neluto a aperçue au-dessus des arbres, lors de notre dernière ascension au sommet du volcan.

«Après leur première halte dans la clairière, Hunter et ses acolytes, mal conseillés par leur guide Krarak, se sont d’abord enfoncés dans l’Ouest. Naturellement, ils n’ont rien découvert dans cette direction. Enfin, lassés de leurs vaines recherches, ils se sont décidés à rebrousser chemin et à faire une tentative du côté de l’Est, à battre au besoin tout le littoral pour découvrir le Golden Mount.

«A l’heure actuelle, ils ne savent pas encore où se trouve le volcan, mais ce n’est, je le crains, qu’une question d’heures, et nous devons agir en conséquence.»

Tel fut le récit de Summy Skim.

Ben Raddle, qui l’avait écouté sans l’interrompre, demeurait pensif. Ce qu’il avait toujours craint s’était produit. Le Français Jacques Ledun n’était pas seul à connaître l’existence du Golden Mount. Un Indien possédait ce secret, et il l’avait révélé aux Texiens. Ceux-ci ne tarderaient pas à être fixés sur la situation du volcan, sans avoir besoin pour cela de parcourir tout le littoral de l’océan Arctique. Dès qu’ils auraient mis le pied hors de la forêt, ils l’apercevraient, ils verraient les fumées et les flammes qui tourbillonnaient au-dessus du cratère. En une heure, ils en auraient atteint la base, et, quelques instants après, ils seraient arrivés près du campement de leurs anciens voisins du Forty Miles Creek. Alors, que se passerait-il?..

«Combien as-tu dit qu’ils étaient? demanda Ben Raddle à Summy.

— Une quarantaine d’hommes armés.

— Deux contre un! fit Ben Raddle soucieux.

Jane Edgerton intervint avec sa vivacité accoutumée.

— Qu’importé! s’écria-t-elle. La situation est grave, mais elle n’est pas désespérée, comme l’a dit tout à l’heure M. Skim. S’ils ont l’avantage du nombre, nous avons celui de la position. Cela égalise les chances.

Ben Raddle et Summy regardèrent avec satisfaction, du coin de l’œil, la jeune guerrière.

— Vous avez raison, miss Jane, approuva Ben Raddle. On se défendra, si cela devient nécessaire. Mais, auparavant, nous allons nous efforcer de passer inaperçus.

Le Scout hocha la tête d’un air incrédule.

— Cela me paraît bien difficile, dit-il.

— Essayons toujours, répliqua Summy.

— Soit! concéda Bill Stell. Mais enfin il faut tout prévoir.

Que ferons-nous si nous sommes découverts, si nous sommes obligés d’en venir aux mains, si nous sommes débordés?

L’ingénieur le rassura du geste.

— Nous aviserons,» dit-il.

CHAPITRE XI

Avant la bataille.

Yavait-il lieu d'espérer que le Golden Mount ne serait pas découvert par la bande des Texiens? Non, puisque Hunter le verrait dès qu'il aurait franchi la lisière do la forêt. N'était-il pas, d'ailleurs, guidé par ce Krarak, dont Summy Skim avait entendu prononcer le nom?

Le Golden Mount découvert, pouvait-on raisonnablement admettre que Ben Raddle et les siens ne fussent pas aperçus? Pas davantage. Évidemment, ils en courraient la chance, mais il y avait mille à parier contre un qu'ils seraient trahis par les travaux du canal destiné à déverser le Rio Rubber dans les entrailles du volcan.

La lutte deviendrait dès lors inévitable.

Or, la bande de Hunter comptait une quarantaine d'hommes, et Ben Raddle et ses compagnons n'étaient qu'au nombre de vingt et un. De là, une infériorité numérique que le courage ne pourrait compenser.

Pour le moment, il n'y avait qu'à attendre les événements. Dans quarante-huit heures tout au plus, avant peut-être, Hunter serait en vue du Golden Mount.

Abandonner le campement de la Mackensie, reprendre le chemin du Klondike, laisser la place libre aux Texiens, il ne pouvait en être question. Le Scout ne l'aurait pas proposé à ses compagnons, et ceux-ci, d'ailleurs, eussent répondu par un refus. Ne se considéraient-ils pas, en leur qualité de premiers occupants, comme les légitimes propriétaires de ce gisement volcanique? Assurément, ils ne s’en laisseraient pas dépouiller sans avoir lutté pour le défendre.

Summy Skim lui-même, le sage Summy Skim, n’eût pas consenti à reculer.

Reculer devant ce Hunter dont il n’avait point oublié la grossièreté au moment de l’arrivée à Skagway, non plus que l’insolente mauvaise foi pendant l’exploitation des claims 129 et 131!.. Il n’était pas sans éprouver quelque plaisir, au contraire, en se retrouvant face à face avec un adversaire dont la catastrophe du Forty Miles Creek l’avait séparé. Il restait entre eux une affaire à régler, et, puisque l’occasion s’en présentait, il ne la laisserait pas échapper.

«Dans quelques heures, j’imagine, nous verrons la bande se diriger vers le Golden Mount, dit, le lendemain, Bill Stell à Ben Raddle, en reprenant l’entretien au point où ils l’avaient laissé la veille. Lorsqu’elle l’aura atteint, Hunter s’arrêtera-t-il pour établir son campement, ou ne préférera-t-il pas suivre la base du mont pour camper au bord de la Mackensie, comme nous l’avons fait nous-mêmes?

— Je crois, Bill, répondit l’ingénieur, que les Texiens voudront d’abord monter au sommet du Golden Mount, afin de reconnaître si l’on peut recueillir du quartz aurifère et des pépites à son sommet. Cela est tout indiqué.

— Sans doute, approuva le Scout. Mais, après avoir constaté l’impossibilité de pénétrer dans le cratère, ils redescendront. C’est alors que se posera la question. Ils ne s’en iront évidemment pas avant que l’éruption se soit déclarée, ou qu’elle ait pris fin. Dans les deux cas, ils seront obligés d’installer un campement.

— A moins qu’ils ne s’en aillent comme ils sont venus, s’écria Summy Skim. Ce serait de leur part la résolution la plus sage.

— Tu peux être sûr qu’ils ne la prendront pas, affirma Ben Raddle.

— D’ailleurs, ajouta le Scout, la présence d’un chien dans la forêt a dû leur donner des soupçons. Ils voudront voir si d’autres prospecteurs ne les ont pas précédés aux embouchures de la Mackensie, et ils porteront leurs recherches jusqu’à l’estuaire.

— Dans ce cas, répondit Summy Skim, ils nous auront bientôt découverts, et ils essayeront de nous chasser. Je me retrouverai par conséquent en face de ce Hunter!.. Eh bien! si un bon duel à la française ou à l’américaine – je lui laisserai le choix – pouvait terminer cette affaire!..»

On ne devait pas compter sur une solution de ce genre. Puisque les Texiens avaient pour eux le nombre, ils s’efforceraient évidemment d’en profiter, de manière à rester seuls maîtres du Golden Mount. Il fallait donc se tenir prêts à repousser leur attaque, et toutes les mesures furent prises en vue d’une agression prochaine.

Bill Stell fit replier matériel et personnel au delà du canal. Les chariots et les tentes furent dissimulés sous les arbres qui parsemaient l’espace trapézoïdal limité, d’un côté, par ce canal, et, des trois autres, par le volcan, le littoral et le Rio Rubber. Le sol en était couvert d’une herbe assez rare, suffisante pourtant à la nourriture des bêtes pendant quelques jours. La caravane se trouva ainsi dans une sorte de camp retranché, à peu près inabordable à l’ouest, au nord et à l’est, le canal formant au sud une ligne de défense que les assiégeants ne franchiraient pas sans peine sous le feu des carabines, lorsque les eaux du rio y couleraient à pleins bords.

Les armes furent préparées pour la défense. Tous les hommes furent munis de fusils, de revolvers et de coutelas, sans parler de l'infaillible carabine de Summy Skim.

Il va de soi qu'à partir de ce moment les chasseurs renonceraient à la chasse, si les pêcheurs ne renonçaient à la pêche, soit dans le rio, soit dans les criques du littoral, afin d'économiser les réserves.

Dès les premières lueurs de l'aube, Ben Raddle fit établir un barrage à l'entrée de la galerie souterraine, de manière qu'elle ne fût pas envahie par l'eau lorsqu'on pratiquerait la saignée dans la rive du Rio Rubber afin de remplir le canal. Ainsi, l'ingénieur assurerait sa ligne de défense, tout en restant maître de son heure pour provoquer l'éruption. En même temps, il fit percer des trous de mine dans la paroi de la cheminée au fond de la galerie, et des cartouches qu'il n'y aurait plus qu'à allumer, le moment venu, y furent placées avec le plus grand soin.

Tout étant prêt, on attendit l'attaque, en se tenant sur le qui-vive. Les hommes demeuraient dans la partie la plus reculée du campement. Pour les apercevoir, il aurait fallu s'avancer jusqu'à la rive gauche du Rio Rubber.

Toutefois, à plusieurs reprises, Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et le Scout franchirent le canal afin d'observer la plaine sur une plus grande étendue. Ils contournèrent même la base du volcan.

De ce point, le regard n'était arrêté que par les premiers arbres de la forêt, qui fermait l'horizon à une lieue et demie de là.

La plaine était déserte. Aucune troupe d'hommes ne s'y montrait. Personne non plus du côté du littoral.

«Il est certain, dit le Scout, que les Texiens n’ont pas encore quitté la forêt.

— Ils ne sont guère pressés, fit Summy Skim.

— Peut-être, répondit Ben Raddle, veulent-ils reconnaître la situation avant de s’engager, et ne pousseront-ils jusqu’au Golden Mount que la nuit prochaine?

— C’est probable, approuva le Scout, et nous nous garderons en conséquence.»

La journée s’acheva paisiblement, et, contrairement à l’hypothèse de Ben Raddle, la nuit qui suivit ne fut pas troublée. Summy Skim dormit d’une seule traite, conformément à son habitude. En revanche, c’est à peiné si Ben Raddle réussit à trouver le sommeil. L’inquiétude et l’irritation se disputaient son âme.

Au moment d’atteindre le but, voilà que la mauvaise chance se déclarait contre lui! Et quelle responsabilité n’aurait-il pas encourue, responsabilité dont il sentait maintenant tout le poids, s’il ne pouvait résister à la bande de Hunter! N’était-ce point par sa volonté que s’était organisée cette expédition? N’avait-il pas été l’instigateur de cette campagne qui menaçait de finir si malheureusement? N’avait-il pas obligé, pour ainsi dire, Summy Skim à passer une seconde année dans les contrées perdues du Dominion?

Dès cinq heures du matin, Ben Raddle et le Scout franchirent de nouveau le canal. Ils revinrent sans avoir rien remarqué d’anormal.

Le temps paraissait fixé au beau, et le baromètre se tenait au-dessus de la moyenne. Un vent frais, venant du large, adoucissait la température, qui sans cela eût été assez élevée. Cette fraîche brise rabattait vers le Sud les vapeurs du cratère, qui parurent à l’ingénieur et à Bill Stell moins épaisses et moins fuligineuses que la veille.

«L’action volcanique tendrait-elle à décroître? demanda Ben Raddle.

— Ma foi, répondit le Scout, si le cratère s’éteignait, voilà ce qui simplifierait notre besogne.

— Et aussi celle de Hunter,» répliqua l’ingénieur.

Dans l’après-midi, Neluto, à son tour, poussa une pointe du côté de la plaine. Il était accompagné de Stop, qui ne se ressentait presque plus de sa blessure. Si l’un des hommes de Hunter s’était aventuré jusqu’à la base du mont, l’intelligent animal saurait bien le dépister.

Vers trois heures, Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et le Scout observaient la berge du rio, près de l’endroit où la saignée devait être faite, lorsqu’ils furent soudain mis en éveil. Des aboiements retentissaient dans la plaine, où l’Indien et Stop avaient été en reconnaissance.

«Qu’y a-t-il? demanda le Scout.

— Quelque gibier que notre chien aura fait lever, répondit Ben Raddle.

— Non, objecta Summy Skim, il n’aboierait pas de cette façon.

— Venez! dit l’ingénieur.

Ils n’avaient pas fait cent pas qu’ils aperçurent Neluto courant à perdre haleine. Ils se hâtèrent à sa rencontre.

«Qu’y a-t-il, Neluto? interrogea Ben Raddle.

— Les voilà, répondit l’Indien. Ils arrivent.

— Tous? demanda Bill Stell.

— Tous.

— A quelle distance sont-ils encore? questionna l’ingénieur.

— A quinze cents mètres à peu près, monsieur Ben.

— Ils ne t’ont pas aperçu?

— Non, répondit Neluto. Mais, moi, je les ai bien vus. Ils s’avancent en masse serrée, avec leurs chevaux et leurs chariots.

— Et ils se dirigent?

— Vers le rio.

— Ont-ils entendu les aboiements du chien? demanda Summy Skim.

— Je ne le pense pas, dit Neluto. Ils étaient trop éloignés.

— Au campement!» ordonna Ben Raddle.

Quelques minutes plus tard, tous quatre avaient franchi le canal par le barrage du rio et rejoint leurs compagnons à l’abri des arbres.

Hunter, Malone et leur bande s’arrêteraient-ils lorsqu’ils auraient atteint la base du Golden Mount, et s’établiraient-ils en cet endroit? Continueraient-ils, au contraire, leur marche vers l’estuaire de la Mackensie?

Cette dernière hypothèse semblait la plus probable. Dans la nécessité où ils étaient, eux aussi, de camper pendant quelques jours, ils chercheraient un emplacement où l’eau douce ne leur manquerait pas. Or, aucune crique n’arrosait la plaine à l’Ouest du Golden Mount, et Hunter ne pouvait ignorer que le Grand Fleuve se jetait dans l’Océan à courte distance. Il fallait donc s’attendre à le voir se diriger vers l’estuaire. Comment, dès lors, les travaux du canal n’attireraient-ils pas son attention et comment espérer qu’il ne découvrît pas le campement sous les arbres?

Cependant, l’après-midi se passa sans que l’agression se fût produite. Ni les Texiens, ni aucun de leurs hommes ne se montrèrent aux environs du Rio Rubber.

«Il est possible, dit Jane Edgerton, que Hunter ait voulu, comme nous le supposions l’autre jour, faire l’ascension du volcan avant de s’établir à sa base.

— C’est possible, en effet, répondit Summy Skim. Ne faut-il pas qu’il reconnaisse le cratère, qu’il s’assure s’il contient des pépites?»

L’observation était juste, et Ben Raddle l’approuva d’un signe de tète.

Quoi qu’il en fût, la journée s’acheva sans que le campement eût reçu la visite des Texiens.

Afin d’être prêts à toute éventualité, le Scout et ses compagnons résolurent de rester éveillés toute la nuit. A tour de rôle, ils traversèrent le canal par la berge du rio, et s’avancèrent dans la plaine de manière à pouvoir observer la base de la montagne.

Jusqu’à onze heures, le crépuscule donna assez de clarté pour apercevoir des hommes qui se seraient dirigés vers le rio, et trois heures plus tard naissaient les premières lueurs de l’aube. Pendant cette courte nuit, il ne se produisit aucun incident. Au soleil levant, la situation était semblable à celle de la veille.

Ce retard de l’attaque rendait de plus en plus vraisemblable la supposition faite d’abord par Ben Raddle et reprise par Jane Edgerton. Puisque les Texiens ne paraissaient pas, c’est qu’ils avaient probablement résolu de tenter l’ascension du volcan.

Cette ascension, quand se ferait-elle? Voilà ce qu’il importait de savoir. Mais comment, sans se découvrir, surveiller le sommet de la montagne? Il ne fallait pas songer à prendre du champ en descendant vers le Sud. Dans cette direction, on n’aurait pu trouver un abri. En reculant vers l’Est du côté de la branche principale de la Mackensie, impossible également d’échapper aux regards de Hunter et de Malone lorsqu’ils auraient atteint le plateau du Golden Mount.

Un seul poste pouvait être occupé, d’où on les verrait sans être vu, lorsqu’ils feraient le tour du cratère. C’était, sur la rive gauche du rio, en aval du point choisi pour établir la dérivation, un groupe de vieux bouleaux situé à deux cents pas du bois qui abritait maintenant Ben Raddle et les siens. Entre le campement et ce groupe de bouleaux, une baie d’arbustes permettait de se rendre de l’un à l’autre à la condition de ramper derrière elle.

De bonne heure, Ben Raddle et Bill Stell allèrent s’assurer que, de ce point, l’arête du plateau était parfaitement visible. Le plateau circulaire entourant le cône terminal était, ainsi qu’ils l’avaient remarqué dès leur première ascension, formé de blocs de quartz, de laves durcies, sur lesquels il était possible de prendre pied. Au-dessous, le flanc de la montagne tombait verticalement comme un mur, et cette disposition existait également sur la face qui regardait le large.

«L’endroit est excellent, dit le Scout. On ne sera aperçu, ni pour y aller, ni pour en revenir. Si Hunter monte au plateau, il voudra sûrement examiner de ce côté l’estuaire de la Mackensie…

— Oui, approuva Ben Raddle. Aussi, aurons-nous toujours là un de nos hommes en faction.

— J’ajoute, monsieur Ben, que d’en haut notre campement ne doit pas être visible. Il est abrité sous les arbres maintenant. Nous veillerons à ce que tous les feux soient éteints et qu’il ne se produise aucune fumée. Dans ces conditions, il échappera vraisemblablement aux regards de Hunter.

— Ce serait désirable, répondit l’ingénieur. Dans ce cas, je renouvelle le souhait que les Texiens, après avoir reconnu l’impossibilité de descendre dans le cratère, abandonnent leurs projets et se décident à battre en retraite.

— Et que le diable les conduise! s’écria le Scout, qui ajouta: Si vous voulez, monsieur Ben, puisque je suis tout rendu, je vais rester ici, tandis que vous rentrerez au campement.

— Non, Bill, je préfère que vous me laissiez en observation. Allez vous assurer que toutes nos mesures sont bien prises et veillez à ce qu’aucune de nos bêtes ne puisse s’écarter.

— Bien, monsieur, répondit le Scout, et je dirai à M. Skim de venir vous remplacer dans deux heures.

— Oui, dans deux heures,» approuva Ben Raddle en s’étendant au pied d’un bouleau, d’où il ne perdrait pas de vue l’arête du plateau volcanique.»

Bill Stell retourna donc seul au petit bois, et, vers neuf heures, sur son invitation, Summy Skim, son fusil en bandoulière, comme s’il se fût agi de se mettre en chasse, alla retrouver l’ingénieur.

«Rien de nouveau, Ben? demanda Summy Skim.

— Rien, Summy.

— Aucun de ces butors du Texas n’est venu se percher là-haut sur les roches?

— Personne.

— Quel plaisir j’aurais eu à en démonter un ou deux! reprit Summy Skim en montrant sa carabine chargée de deux balles.

— A cette distance, Summy? fit observer l’ingénieur.

— C’est vrai… c’est un peu haut!

— D’ailleurs, Summy, il ne s’agit pas d’être adroit. Il s’agit d’être prudent. La suppression d’un homme ne rendrait pas la bande moins dangereuse. Tandis que, si nous ne sommes pas découverts, j’espère encore que Hunter et ses compagnons nous débarrasseront de leur présence, après avoir reconnu qu’il n’y a rien à faire.

Ben Raddle se releva pour retourner au campement.

«Veille bien, Summy, ajouta-t-il, et, si tu aperçois les Texiens sur le plateau, accours nous avertir immédiatement, en prenant soin de ne pas te laisser voir.

— Convenu, Ben.

— Le Scout viendra te remplacer dans deux heures d’ici.

— Lui ou Neluto, répondit Summy Skim. Nous pouvons nous fier à tous les deux. Quant à Neluto, il a des yeux d’Indien, c’est tout dire.

Ben Raddle allait se mettre en mouvement, lorsque Summy Skim lui saisit le bras:

— Attends, dit-il.

— Qu’y a-t-il?

— Là-haut… regarde!

L’ingénieur leva les yeux vers le plateau du Golden Mount.

Un homme, puis un second, apparurent au bord de l’arête.

— Ce sont eux, dit Summy Skim.

— Oui, Hunter et Malone! répondit Ben Raddle qui rentra vivement à l’abri du bouquet d’arbres.

C’étaient les deux Texiens, en effet, et probablement quelques-uns des leurs se trouvaient en arrière sur le plateau. Après avoir reconnu l’état du cratère, ils en faisaient le tour, en observant la contrée environnante. En ce moment, ils examinaient le vaste réseau hydrographique du delta de la Mackensie.

— Ah! murmurait Summy Skim, les deux coquins! Dire que j’ai là deux balles à leur adresse, et qu’elles ne peuvent porter jusqu’à eux!

Ben Raddle, lui, gardait le silence. Il suivait des yeux ces deux hommes, qui sans doute allaient lui disputer le Golden Mount.

Pendant une demi-heure environ il put voir les deux Texiens aller et venir sur le plateau. Ils fouillaient des yeux la contrée avec une extrême attention, se penchant parfois afin d'apercevoir la base du volcan du côté de l'estuaire.

Avaient-ils découvert le campement au pied de la montagne? Savaient-ils qu'une caravane les eût précédés à l'embouchure de la Mackensie? Ce qui n'était pas douteux, en tout cas, c'est que Hunter et Malone regardaient obstinément le Rio Rubber, qui devait leur paraître tout indiqué pour une installation de quelques semaines.

Deux hommes les rejoignirent bientôt. L'un, que reconnurent Ben Raddle et Summy Skim, était le contre-maître du 131. L'autre était un Indien.

— Est-ce le guide qui les a conduits jusqu'ici? demanda l'ingénieur.

— C'est bien celui que j'ai vu dans la clairière, répondit Summy Skim.

En apercevant les quatre aventuriers au bord du plateau, il lui vint à la pensée que, si l'équilibre venait à leur manquer, s'ils tombaient de huit à neuf cents pieds, cela ne laisserait pas de simplifier la situation, de la dénouer peut-être. Après la mort de ses chefs, la bande abandonnerait vraisemblablement la campagne.

Il ne devait pas en être ainsi. Ce n'est point les Texiens qui furent précipités du haut du volcan, mais bien un assez gros bloc de quartz qui se détacha de l'arête.

Ce quartier de roche, dans sa chute, rencontra une saillie contre laquelle il se brisa en plusieurs morceaux, qui vinrent s’écraser au milieu des arbres abritant le campement.

Summy Skim ne put retenir un cri, que Ben Raddle comprima en lui mettant la main sur la bouche.

Y avait-il des blessés parmi les prospecteurs canadiens ainsi bombardés? Ben Raddle et Summy Skim l’ignoraient. Aucun cri, toutefois, ne s’éleva du campement.

Mais il arriva ceci, que la chute de ce bloc effraya un des chevaux de la caravane. L’animal, après avoir rompu sa longe, s’élança hors du petit bois, remonta vers le canal, le franchit d’un bond et s’enfuit vers la plaine.

Des cris diminués par la distance se firent entendre au sommet du Golden Mount. Hunter et Malone appelaient leurs compagnons.

Cinq ou six accoururent sur l’arête du plateau, et se mirent à discuter avec animation. Aux gestes, il ne fut pas difficile de comprendre que Hunter savait désormais à quoi s’en tenir sur la présence d’une caravane aux bouches de la Mackensie. Ce cheval ne pouvait s’être échappé que d’un campement, et ce campement était là, à ses pieds.

— Maudite bête! s’écria Summy.

— Oui, répondit Ben Raddle. Grâce à elle, nous avons perdu la partie… la première manche tout au moins.

Summy, de l’œil et de la main, caressa sa carabine.

— Nous allons maintenant jouer la seconde,» murmura-t-il entre ses dents.

CHAPITRE XII

Assiégés.

Les compagnons de Ben Raddle et de Summy Skim ignoraient encore que le campement eût été découvert. De la place qu'ils occupaient au pied du Golden Mount, il leur était impossible de voir l'arête du plateau. Ils ne savaient même pas que Hunter et quelques-uns des siens eussent fait l'ascension de la montagne, et ils ne pouvaient par conséquent supposer que ceux-ci eussent aperçu le cheval échappé, à la poursuite duquel Neluto s'était élancé et qu'il avait, d'ailleurs, aisément rattrapé.

Dès que les deux cousins eurent rejoint le gros de la caravane, ils exposèrent la situation, et personne ne mit en doute qu'on n'eût à repousser une très prochaine attaque.

«Nous nous défendrons, déclara le Scout. Nous ne céderons pas la place à ces gueux d'Américains!»

Un hurrah unanime accueillit ces paroles.

L'agression s'effectuerait-elle le jour même? C'était probable, Hunter avait intérêt à précipiter les choses. Toutefois, ignorant quelles forces seraient opposées aux siennes, il n'agirait probablement pas sans quelque prudence. Il chercherait à se renseigner avant d'en venir aux mains. Peut-être même, après s'être assuré qu'il possédait la supériorité numérique, essayerait-il de parlementer et d'obtenir pacifiquement gain de cause. Cependant on ne devait pas perdre de vue qu'il ignorait encore avoir affaire à ses voisins du Forty Miles Creek. Lorsqu'il se retrouverait en présence de son ancien adversaire, cette circonstance ne serait pas de nature à faciliter un arrangement.

Une sorte de conseil fut tenu sans tarder entre les chefs naturels de la caravane, afin de décider les dernières mesures propres à assurer la défense.

Ben Raddle prit la parole:

«Notre campement est admirablement couvert, dit-il, d’un côté par le Golden Mount, de l’autre par le Rio Rubber, que Hunter et les siens ne pourraient traverser sans s’exposer au feu de nos carabines…

— En effet, monsieur Raddle, répondit le Scout. Malheureusement, par devant, nous ne sommes défendus que par le canal entre le rio et la montagne, et ce n’est pas un fossé large de sept à huit pieds qui arrêtera les assaillants.

— Non, tant que ce fossé est à sec, j’en conviens, répliqua l’ingénieur, mais il sera plus difficile de le franchir s’il est rempli d’eau jusqu’aux bords.

— Il faut l’inonder en coupant la berge du rio, s’écria Jane Edgerton.

— C’est mon avis, approuva Ben Raddle.

— Bien, monsieur Raddle, dit le Scout, c’est cela qu’il faut faire, et faire à l’instant. Nous avons quelques heures devant nous avant que la bande ait eu le temps de redescendre et de paraître en vue de notre campement… A l’ouvrage!»

Bill Stell rassembla ses hommes. Munis de leurs outils, ils coururent à la berge, qu’ils attaquèrent à l’endroit où s’amorçait le canal. En quelques minutes, l’eau se déversait avec violence jusqu’au barrage établi à l’entrée de la galerie.

Toute communication était maintenant coupée avec la plaine.

Tandis que ce travail s’exécutait, Summy Skim, Jane Edgerton et Neluto s’occupaient de mettre les armes en état: carabines, rifles, revolvers, et aussi coutelas pour le cas où l’on en viendrait à lutter corps à corps. De poudre et de balles, il restait encore une suffisante réserve, ainsi que de cartouches toutes faites.

«Nous avons pour ces coquins, dit Summy Skim, autant de coups qu’ils en méritent, et nous ne les épargnerons pas…

— Mon idée, fit Neluto, est que, s’ils sont accueillis par une bonne fusillade, ils s’en iront comme ils seront venus.

— C’est possible. Mais, s’il faut se battre, comme nous sommes à couvert derrière les arbres et qu’ils ne le seront pas de l’autre côté du canal, cela compensera le désavantage du nombre. Par exemple, s’il y a jamais eu occasion de viser, c’est bien celle-ci!.. Ne l’oublie pas, Neluto.

— Comptez sur moi, monsieur Skim,» affirma l’Indien.

Ces préparatifs de défense rapidement terminés, il n’y eut plus qu’à surveiller les abords du campement. Des hommes furent placés en avant du canal, de manière à pouvoir observer toute la base méridionale du Golden Mount.

Il n’était personne qui ne se rendit compte des avantages de la position. L’espace trapézoïdal dans lequel était campée la caravane n’offrait plus d’autre issue que le barrage conservé à l’orifice de la galerie, barrage juste assez large pour les chariots. S’il y avait lieu de battre en retraite, de céder la place aux Texiens, cet étroit passage permettrait de gagner la plaine et d’atteindre la rive gauche du Rio Rubber. Si, au contraire, on voulait donner issue à l’eau venant du rio pour provoquer l’éruption du volcan, rien ne serait plus facile que de détruire le barrage en un instant à l’aide de cinq ou six cartouches qui furent enfoncées dans sa masse, et qu’une seule et même mèche réunit à celles antérieurement placées dans le fond de la galerie. En attendant qu’une telle éventualité se réalisât, on eut le soin de barricader ce passage en ne laissant qu’une étroite ouverture qui serait fermée au moment de l’attaque.

Tandis que les hommes de faction se tenaient au dehors, les autres déjeunèrent sous les arbres. Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et Jane Edgerton partagèrent leur repas. La pèche avait été abondante les jours précédents et les conserves étaient presque intactes. On alluma du feu, ce qui ne présentait plus aucun inconvénient, puisque le campement était découvert, et la fumée s’échappa librement entre les ramures.

Ce repas ne fut nullement troublé. Lorsque vint le moment de la relève des hommes de garde, l’approche de la bande n’avait pas été signalée.

«Peut-être, dit Summy Skim, ces coquins préféreront-ils nous assaillir pendant la nuit?

— La nuit dure deux heures à peine, répondit Ben Raddle. Ils ne peuvent espérer nous surprendre.

— Pourquoi non, Ben? Ils ignorent que nous sommes sur nos gardes et que nous connaissons leur présence au Golden Mount. Ils ne savent pas que nous les avons aperçus quand ils se trouvaient sur le bord du plateau.

— C’est possible, reconnut le Scout, mais ils ont vu le cheval qui s’est échappé. Un chien d’abord, dans la forêt, un cheval ensuite à travers la plaine, c’est plus qu’il ne faut pour qu’ils aient la certitude qu’une caravane est campée en cet endroit. Donc, soit dans l’après-midi, soit dans la nuit prochaine, attendons-nous à les voir.»

Vers une heure, Bill Stell traversa le barrage et rejoignit les hommes qui observaient les environs.

Pendant son absence, Ben Raddle et Summy retournèrent au bouquet d’arbres, d’où ils avaient aperçu Hunter et Malone sur l’arête du plateau. De ce point, les fumées du volcan étaient visibles. Elles s’élevaient à une cinquantaine de pieds au-dessus du cratère et tourbillonnaient avec force, traversées par d’incessantes langues de feu. La violence des forces volcaniques augmentait d’une façon manifeste. Y avait-il donc lieu de penser que l’éruption ne tarderait pas à se produire?

C’eût été une explication très nuisible aux projets de l’ingénieur. Le volcan eût, en effet, rejeté des matières aurifères avec ses laves et ses scories, et les Texiens n’auraient eu que la peine de les recueillir. Comment Ben Raddle pourrait-il en disputer la possession? Au campement, la caravane avait des chances de succès. En rase campagne, il lui serait impossible de lutter avec quelque avantage. Si l’éruption se produisait, elle se ferait au profit de Hunter, et la partie serait irrémédiablement perdue.

L’ingénieur éprouva d’autant plus d’inquiétudes que, contre ce danger, il n’y avait rien à faire, et il revint au campement plus soucieux qu’il n’en était parti.

A l’instant où il arrivait, Summy Skim lui montra le Scout qui accourait en toute hâte. Les deux cousins se portèrent au-devant de lui jusqu’au barrage.

«Ils viennent! s’écria Bill Stell.

— Sont-ils loin encore? demanda l’ingénieur.

— A une demi-lieue environ, répondit le Scout.

— Avons-nous le temps d’aller en reconnaissance?

— Oui, dit Bill Stell.

Tous trois franchirent le canal et gagnèrent rapidement l’endroit où quelques hommes étaient en observation.

Il était facile, sans se montrer, d’embrasser la plaine du regard.

Le long de la base du volcan, une troupe compacte approchait. La bande entière devait être là. On voyait reluire les canons des fusils. Ni chevaux, ni chariots. Tout le matériel avait été laissé en arrière.

Hunter, Malone et le contre-maître marchaient en tête. Ils avançaient avec une certaine prudence, s’arrêtant parfois et descendant de plusieurs centaines de pas dans la plaine, afin d’apercevoir le sommet du Golden Mount.

— Avant une heure ils seront ici, dit Ben Raddle.

— Il est évident que notre campement leur est connu, répondit Summy Skim.

— Et qu’ils viennent l’attaquer, ajouta le Scout.

— Si j’attendais que Hunter fût à bonne portée, s’écria Summy Skim, je le saluerais d’un coup de fusil, et je me fais fort de le démonter comme un canard.

— A quoi bon? objecta Ben Raddle. Non, rentrons au camp et gardons jusqu’au bout le bon droit de notre côté.»

C’était le plus sage. La mort du Texien n’aurait pas empêché une attaque, qui, après tout, n’était pas encore absolument certaine.

Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et le Scout revinrent donc au canal. Dès qu’ils eurent franchi un à un le barrage, l’ouverture de la barricade fut bouchée avec des pierres préparées à cet effet. Dès lors, il ne restait plus aucune communication entre les deux berges du canal.

Tous reculèrent alors de soixante pas, et se replièrent derrière les premiers arbres, où l’on serait à l’abri, si on en venait aux coups de feu, ce qui devenait infiniment probable, puis, les armes chargées, on attendit.

Mieux valait, en effet, patienter jusqu’à la dernière extrémité, laisser approcher la bande et n’intervenir qu’au moment où elle essaierait de franchir le canal.

Une demi-heure plus tard, Hunter, Malone et leurs compagnons apparaissaient au tournant de la montagne. A petits pas, les uns en longèrent la base, les autres se dirigèrent vers le rio, dont ils descendirent la rive gauche.

La moitié de ces hommes étaient des mineurs que Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et Neluto avaient vu travailler sur le claim 131 du Forty Miles Creek. L’autre moitié se composait d’une vingtaine d’Indiens, embauchés par

Hunter à Circle City et à Fort Yukon pour cette campagne au littoral de la mer Polaire.

Toute la bande se réunit, lorsqu'elle eut atteint le canal, au bord duquel Hunter et Malone s'arrêtèrent.

Tous deux engagèrent avec leur contre-maître une conversation qui devait être vive à en juger par leurs gestes. Que sous la protection de ces arbres fût installé un campement, ils n'en pouvaient douter. Mais ce qui semblait leur causer un véritable désappointement, c'était le canal qui leur opposait un obstacle assez difficile à franchir, si une fusillade éclatait à soixante pas de là.

Ils avaient reconnu au premier coup d'œil que ledit canal avait été creusé récemment. Dans quel but? Ils ne pouvaient certainement le deviner, l'orifice de la galerie étant invisible, derrière un fouillis de branches. D'ailleurs, comment auraient-ils imaginé jamais que cette galerie fût destinée à déverser les eaux du rio dans les entrailles du Golden Mount?

Cependant, Hunter et Malone allaient et venaient sur la berge, en quête sans doute d'un moyen de passer. Il leur fallait de toute nécessité s'avancer jusqu'au petit bois, soit pour prendre contact avec ceux qui l'occupaient, soit pour s'assurer que ceux-ci avaient quitté la place ce qui était possible après tout.

Au bout de quelques minutes, leur contre-maître vint les rejoindre et montra du geste le barrage qui seul permettait de franchir le canal à pied sec.

Tous trois se dirigèrent de ce côté. En voyant la barricade qui ne présentait aucune ouverture, ils durent forcément penser que le bois n'était pas abandonné, et qu'ils trouveraient un campement de l'autre côté de cette barricade.

Ben Raddle et ses compagnons, derrière les arbres, suivaient tous les mouvements de la bande. Ils comprirent que Hunter allait se frayer un passage en déplaçant les pierres entassées sur te barrage. Le moment était venu d'intervenir.

«Je ne sais, dit Summy à voix basse, ce qui me retient de lui casser la tête!.. Je l'ai au bout de mon fusil…

— Non… ne tire pas, Summy, répliqua Ben Raddle, en abaissant l'arme de son cousin. Le chef tué, resteraient les soldats. Peut-être est-il préférable d'essayer de s'expliquer avant d'en venir aux coups. Qu'en pensez-vous, Scout?

— Essayons toujours, répondit Bill Stell, quoique je n'aie pas d'illusion sur le résultat. Si ça ne fait pas de bien, ça ne peut pas faire de mal.

— En tout cas, recommanda Jane Edgerton, ne nous montrons pas tous. Il ne faut pas que Hunter puisse nous compter.

— C'est juste, approuva l'ingénieur, moi seul…

— Et moi,» ajouta Summy Skim, qui n'eût jamais consenti à se cacher devant Hunter.

Ce fut au moment où, sur un signe du Texien, quelques-uns de ses hommes s'avançaient afin de démolir la barricade, que Ben Raddle et Summy Skim parurent à la lisière du petit bois.

Dès que Hunter les aperçut, il fit signe à ses hommes de battre en retraite, et toute la bande se tint sur la défensive à dix pas environ de la berge du canal.

Seuls, Hunter et Malone se rapprochèrent, le fusil à la main.

Ben Raddle et Summy Skim avaient eux aussi leurs carabines, dont ils posèrent la crosse à terre. Les deux Texiens les imitèrent, aussitôt.

«Eh! s’écria Hunter, avec l’accent de la surprise, c’est vous, le diable m’emporte, messieurs du cent vingt-neuf!

— Nous-mêmes, répondit Summy Skim.

— Je ne m’attendais guère à vous trouver à l’embouchure de la Mackensie, reprit le Texien.

— Pas plus que nous à vous voir y arriver, répliqua Summy Skim.

— Cela prouve que votre mémoire ne vaut pas la mienne. N’y a-t-il pas entre nous une vieille affaire à régler?

— Elle peut l’être aussi bien ici que sur les claims du Forty Miles Creek, riposta Summy Skim.

— A votre aise!

Hunter, chez qui la colère succédait à la surprise, releva vivement son fusil. Summy Skim en fit autant.

Un mouvement se produisit dans toute la bande, mouvement que Hunter réprima du geste. Avant d’engager la partie, mieux valait savoir le nombre de ses adversaires, et c’est en vain qu’il fouillait du regard l’intérieur du petit bois. Aucun des hommes de la caravane ne se laissait apercevoir entre les arbres.

Ben Raddle jugea l’instant venu de s’interposer. Il s’avança jusqu’à la berge. Séparés l’un de l’autre par le canal, Hunter et lui étaient seuls face à face, Malone et Summy étant restés en arrière.

— Que voulez-vous? demanda l’ingénieur d’une voix calme.

— Nous voulons savoir ce que vous êtes venus faire au Golden Mount.

— De quel droit?

— Voici mon droit! répondit brutalement Hunter en frappant le sol de la crosse de son fusil.

— Et voici le mien! riposta Ben Raddle en l’imitant.

Il y eut quelques instants de dramatique silence.

— Encore une fois, reprit le Texien, qu’êtes-vous venus faire au Golden Mount?

— Ce que vous venez y faire vous-mêmes, répondit Ben Raddle.

— Votre but serait-il d’exploiter le gisement?

— Oui. Le gisement qui nous appartient.

— Le Golden Mount n’appartient à personne, protesta Hunter. Il est à tout le monde.

— Non, répliqua Ben Raddle. Il est aux premiers occupants.

— Il ne s’agit pas de l’avoir occupé le premier, s’écria Hunter.

— Vraiment! De quoi s’agit-il donc?

— De pouvoir le défendre.

— Nous sommes prêts, déclara l’ingénieur avec calme.

— Une dernière fois, reprit Hunter que le sang-froid abandonnait peu à peu, voulez-vous nous céder la place?

— Venez la prendre,» répondit Ben Raddle.

Sur un signe de Malone, des coups de feu éclatèrent. Aucun n’atteignit ni Ben Raddle, ni Summy Skim, qui se rabattirent vers le petit bois. Avant de disparaître sous les arbres, Summy Skim se retourna, épaula vivement et tira sur Hunter.

Le Texien, en se jetant de côté, put éviter la balle qui alla frapper mortellement un de ses hommes.

Des deux côtés crépita la fusillade. Mais les compagnons de Ben Raddle, abrités derrière les arbres, n’en souffrirent pas à beaucoup près autant que les assaillants. Il y eut quelques blessés parmi les premiers, il y eut des morts parmi les seconds.

Hunter comprit qu’il risquait de laisser décimer sa bande, s’il ne parvenait pas à franchir le canal. Il ordonna à ses hommes de se coucher sur le sol. Les terres rejetées sur les berges formaient une sorte d’épaulement qui permettait de s’abriter à la condition de rester étendu. Dans cette position, il était possible de diriger impunément un feu nourri contre le bois, d’où personne ne pouvait plus sortir sans danger.

Ainsi soutenus, Malone et deux des siens, sur l’ordre de Hunter, se dirigèrent vers le barrage en rampant sur le sol. Ils l’atteignirent sans dommage, et, à l’abri derrière les roches de la barricade, ils commencèrent à détacher peu à peu les pierres, qui retombaient dans le canal.

Ce fut sur ce point que se porta toute l’attention de la défense. Si le passage était forcé, si la bande parvenait jusqu’au petit bois et envahissait le campement, tout espoir de résistance serait perdu, et l’avantage resterait au plus grand nombre.

Aucune des balles parties du petit bois n’alla frapper Malone et ses deux compagnons. Bill Stell, voulant à tout prix les empêcher de franchir le barrage, parlait déjà de faire une sortie et d’aller combattre corps à corps.

Ben Raddle l’arrêta. C’eût été dangereusement s’exposer que de vouloir traverser l’espace découvert qui séparait le bois du canal. Ce danger, mieux valait le laisser à Hunter et aux siens, qui le courraient également, lorsque, après avoir dépassé la barricade, ils se précipiteraient vers le campement. Jusque-là, le mieux à faire était de diriger un feu incessant contre le barrage, tout en répondant aux multiples coups de fusil tirés de l’épaulement du canal.

Une dizaine de minutes s’écoulèrent dans ces conditions. Aucun de ceux qui étaient occupés à la barricade n’avait été blessé. Mais, lorsque l’ouverture eut été agrandie, les balles commencèrent à porter.

Un des Indiens fut renversé. Aussitôt, un autre le remplaça qui eut le même sort. Au même instant, une balle, envoyée par Neluto, atteignit Malone en pleine poitrine. Le Texien tomba, et sa chute provoqua un cri terrible de toute la bande.

«Bien, bien, dit Summy Skim à Neluto posté près de lui. Fameux coup! celui-là!.. Mais laisse-moi Hunter, mon garçon!»

Celui-ci, après la chute de Malone, parut renoncer à une attaque qui ne pouvait décidément réussir. Dans ces conditions, les assaillants finiraient par se faire tuer l’un après l’autre jusqu’au dernier. Ne voulant pas exposer ses hommes davantage, il donna le signal de la retraite, et la bande, emportant ses blessés sous la fusillade qui salua sa fuite, reprit le chemin de la plaine et disparut au tournant du Golden Mount.

CHAPITRE XIII

Le bouclier de Patrick.

Ainsi s’était terminé ce premier assaut. Il coûtait à Hunter plusieurs blessés et quatre morts, et, parmi ces derniers, son *alter ego*, Malone. C’était là une perte sensible pour la troupe des bandits. Du côté des assiégés, quelques hommes avaient été légèrement effleurés par des balles perdues. A cela se réduisait le dommage.

Cette tentative se renouvellerait-elle et dans des conditions plus favorables? Il y avait lieu de le croire. Étant donnés son caractère vindicatif et son envie féroce de rester maître du Golden Mount, Hunter ne se reconnaîtrait évidemment pas vaincu dès la première escarmouche.

«Dans tous les cas, ces coquins ont battu en retraite, dit le Scout. Ce n’est pas aujourd’hui qu’ils recommenceront.

— Non… mais cette nuit peut-être, répondit Summy Skim.

— Nous veillerons, déclara Ben Raddle. D’ailleurs pendant les deux ou trois heures d’obscurité Hunter aurait autant de peine à franchir le canal qu’en plein jour. J’affirmerai qu’il ne l’osera pas, car il sait bien que nous serons sur nos gardes.

— N’est-il pas important de rétablir la barricade du barrage? demanda Jane Edgerton.

— C’est ce que nous allons faire, approuva Bill Stell, qui appela quelques-uns de ses hommes pour l’aider dans ce travail.

— Auparavant, intervint Summy Skim, voyons donc si la bande retourne à son campement.»

Ben Raddle, Summy Skim, Jane Edgerton, Bill Stell et Neluto, carabine à la main, franchirent le barrage et s’avancèrent de quelques centaines de mètres dans la plaine. De là, leur vue s’étendrait, en suivant la base de la montagne, jusqu’au lieu de halte des Texiens.

Il n’était que six heures, et il faisait encore grand jour.

A cinq ou six portées de fusil, Hunter et ses compagnons s’éloignaient lentement, malgré la crainte qu’ils pouvaient avoir d’être poursuivis. Un moment Ben Raddle et le Scout se demandèrent s’il ne convenait pas de leur donner la chasse, mais, toute réflexion faite, ils estimèrent préférable de s’abstenir. Mieux valait que les Texiens ne connussent pas le petit nombre de leurs adversaires.

Si la bande s’éloignait lentement, c’est qu’elle emportait ses morts et ses blessés. Plusieurs de ces derniers n’auraient pu marcher, ce qui ralentissait leurs compagnons.

Pendant près d’une heure, les Canadiens surveillèrent cette retraite. Ils virent Hunter tourner la base du Golden Mount, et disparaître derrière un contrefort à l’abri duquel il avait établi son camp.

Vers huit heures, on eut achevé de relever la barricade. Deux hommes y furent mis en faction et les autres regagnèrent le petit bois pour le repas du soir.

La conversation porta sur les événements de la journée. L’échec de Hunter ne pouvait être regardé comme un dénouement. On ne serait définitivement en sûreté que lorsque la bande aurait quitté le Golden Mount. Tant que les Texiens persisteraient à se tenir dans le voisinage, il fallait s'attendre à tout. Que l'éruption se produisît d'elle-même, on en viendrait à se disputer à coups de fusil les pépites rejetées par le volcan.

Rien ne troubla la soirée. Néanmoins, on ne songea à goûter quelque repos qu'après avoir pris toutes les mesures commandées par la prudence. Ben Raddle, Summy Skim, le Scout et Neluto convinrent de se relayer pour la garde du barrage. On pouvait compter sur leur vigilance.

Les quelques heures de nuit s'écoulèrent dans un calme absolu, et il en fut de même de la journée du lendemain. C'est en vain que le Scout se porta plusieurs fois au delà du canal. Il n'aperçut rien de suspect. Hunter avait-il donc renoncé à sets projets?

Une nouvelle nuit s'achevait sans incident, et les premières lueurs de l'aube naissaient à l'orient, lorsque des coups de feu retentirent du côté du canal. Laissant deux hommes en surveillance près des tentes, la caravane se porta à la lisière du petit bois, prête à soutenir ses grand'gardes.

La défense du barrage était à ce moment assurée par le Scout et par Neluto. On pouvait être certain qu'aucun des assaillants n'avait réussi à le franchir malgré eux. Tous deux, en effet, abrités par la barricade de rochers, tiraient par des meurtrières leur permettant de prendre en enfilade la berge sud du canal.

Il ne semblait pas, toutefois, que leur tir fût très efficace. Les assaillants, venus en rampant pendant les heures d'obscurité et couchés maintenant à plat ventre derrière le talus formé par les terres rejetées de la fouille, devaient être à l'abri des balles. Leur feu, en tout cas, ne subissait pas le moindre ralentissement.

Sur l’ordre de Ben Raddle, qui, ne sachant pas sur quel but viser, jugeait inutile de gaspiller la provision de poudre, la caravane demeura immobile, protégée par le premier rang des arbres, et attendit les événements l’arme au pied.

Une heure s’écoula. De l’autre côté du canal, le feu continuait, aussi violent qu’inoffensif. Les balles se perdaient dans la verdure sans causer aucun dommage aux assiégés,

Tout à coup, – il faisait alors grand jour – des cris éclatèrent en arrière de la ligne de défense, tandis que la fusillade se ralentissait d’une manière marquée.

Le Scout profita de l’accalmie pour quitter le barrage avec Neluto, et pour rejoindre ses compagnons en traversant l’espace dangereux au pas de course. On lui remit aussitôt le commandement en chef, auquel le prédisposait plus que tout autre son expérience de la guerre de partisans.

Il divisa rapidement la caravane en deux parties. La première moitié, composée des mineurs canadiens, s’égailla le long de la lisière du bois, de façon à l’occuper tout entière, et à s’assurer efficacement la défense du front sud, tandis que l’autre moitié, formée en majorité du personnel de Bill Stell, faisait volte-face et remontait vers les tentes d’où partaient les cris, les hommes séparés par de larges espaces, et chacun se défilant d’arbre en arbre. Le Scout se joignit à cette section mobile, tandis que Ben Raddle, Summy Skim et Jane Edgerton demeuraient parmi les défenseurs du canal.

Le Scout et ses compagnons n’avaient pas fait cent mètres vers le Nord, qu’ils aperçurent à faible distance un groupe compact de sept cavaliers, accourant aussi vite que leur permettait la nature du terrain, dans le but évident de prendre à revers la troupe des Canadiens.

Le Scout comprit sans peine ce qui s’était passé. Évidemment, pendant les trente-six heures de répit que les Texiens avaient laissées à leurs adversaires, ils s’étaient ingéniés à trouver un gué dans le Rio Rubber, et, l’ayant traversé à cheval à la faveur de la nuit, ils avaient envahi le camp par le Nord-Est, tandis qu’une partie des leurs opérait une diversion sur le premier front de combat.

Ce calcul, juste en théorie, se trouva faux dans la pratique. Trompé sur le nombre réel de ses ennemis, Hunter avait commis la faute d’employer un détachement trop réduit à ce raid audacieux. Que pouvaient ses cavaliers et lui-même contre une douzaine de rifles qui ne pardonnaient pas?

La malchance, d’ailleurs, s’en était mêlée. Au lieu d’arriver dans un camp abandonné, ce qui lui aurait permis de le détruire sans risque et de tomber ensuite à l’improviste dans le dos d’adversaires surpris, Hunter avait été signalé de loin, sans qu’il le sût, par les sentinelles canadiennes. D’autre part, les chevaux, empêtrés dans les buissons et dans les halliers, retardèrent sa manœuvre, au lieu de l’activer comme il l’avait espéré. Il ne put donc précipiter les événements, et ce fut lui, finalement, qui fut surpris par le retour offensif du Scout et des siens.

Il lui fallait maintenant renoncer à son plan. La route du Sud étant fermée, il était dans la nécessité de tourner bride et de repasser le Rio Rubber au galop des montures.

Il n’en eut pas le temps. Les fusils canadiens commencèrent à parler au milieu des arbres, et, à cette courte distance, peu de balles furent perdues. En quelques minutes, six cavaliers mortellement frappés vidèrent les étriers et trois chevaux furent tués, tandis que les autres s’enfuyaient à l’aventure. Ce n’était plus un échec, c’était un désastre pour Hunter.

Par un hasard miraculeux, lui seul restait indemne et sans blessure. Il prit rapidement son parti. Au lieu de fuir devant les balles qui volaient plus vite qu’il n’aurait pu courir, il fonça hardiment sur ses adversaires obligés de suspendre leur feu dans la crainte de se frapper les uns les autres, et, au risque de, se fracasser contre les troncs d’arbres, passa en trombe au milieu d’eux.

En un instant, il avait disparu dans la verdure, devançant sans peine le détachement du Scout qui s’était lancé à sa poursuite. Avant de pouvoir se dire sauf, il lui restait, toutefois, à franchir la ligne de tirailleurs faisant face au canal, puis, au delà, l’espace séparant la lisière du bois de la plaine.

Hunter n’éprouvait que peu d’inquiétude, en pensant au premier de ces obstacles. Les tireurs devaient, à son estime, être si disséminés qu’il lui serait facile de se glisser entre eux. Mais il n’en était pas de même du second. Il ne pouvait méconnaître combien il lui serait difficile d’échapper aux coups de carabines plus nombreuses qu’il ne l’avait supposé, lorsqu’il aurait quitté l’abri du bois et qu’il se serait avancé dans l’espace découvert qui lui faisait suite.

Son cerveau fertile en expédients s’épuisait en vain à chercher une solution à cette difficulté, quand, tout à coup, il tressaillit d’espoir.

Il arrivait alors à la lisière du petit bois. La pleine lumière étincelait entre les troncs, au delà des derniers arbres. A l’abri de l’un d’eux, un des tirailleurs de la troupe canadienne s’activait à la défense. Un genou à terre, il chargeait sa carabine, visait, tirait, puis rechargeait sans prendre une minute de répit, si absorbé qu’il n’avait pas entendu Hunter arriver à moins de dix pas derrière lui.

Celui-ci étouffa une exclamation de triomphe, en reconnaissant que ce tireur acharné était une femme, et que cette femme n’était autre que la jeune passagère du *Foot Ball*.

Il rassembla son cheval, puis, lui enfonçant ses éperons dans le ventre, il l’enleva d’un énergique effort, tandis qu’il se laissait lui-même glisser sur la droite de la selle, le corps en porte-à-faux, la main rasant le sol, à la mode des cow-boys du Far-West.

Il était près de Jane Edgerton que celle-ci ne se doutait pas encore de sa présence. Au passage, son bras étreignit la taille de la jeune fille, qui fut soulevée comme une plume et jetée en travers de la selle. Puis Hunter continua sa course éperdue, protégé désormais contre les balles par l’otage qu’il emportait.

En se sentant saisir, Jane Edgerton avait poussé un grand cri, qui eut pour résultat immédiat de faire cesser le feu de part et d’autre. Des visages inquiets ou curieux se montrèrent entre les arbres et au-dessus de l’épaulement, tandis que, lancé au triple galop, Hunter jaillissait hors du bois et s’engageait dans l’espace découvert qu’il redoutait si fort quelques instants auparavant.

Personne dans les deux camps ne comprit rien à ce qui arrivait. Les Américains élevèrent le buste tout entier au-dessus de l’amas de terre qui les protégeait, puis, en voyant leur chef se diriger vers eux à toute bride, ils se crurent menacés par un danger inconnu et coururent à travers la plaine chercher refuge derrière le premier contrefort du Golden Mount. De leur côté, les Canadiens sortirent tout à fait du bois, si étonnés qu’ils ne songèrent même pas à saluer de quelques coups de fusil le départ de leurs adversaires.

Hunter profita du saisissement de tous. Une quinzaine de foulées l’amenèrent au bord du canal, que son cheval franchit d’un bond désespéré, et il continua sa course folle dans la plaine.

La conscience revint alors aux Canadiens, qui se précipitèrent en tumulte vers le canal. Mais pouvaient-ils espérer gagner de vitesse un cheval emporté qui avait sur eux une telle avance?

Un seul d’entre eux ne quitta pas la lisière du petit bois et n’essaya pas d’une poursuite inutile. Bien d’aplomb sur ses jambes qui semblaient avoir pris racine dans le sol, parfaitement calme, maître de lui-même, celui-là saisit son fusil, épaula, tira avec la rapidité de l’éclair.

Ce tireur audacieux n’était et ne pouvait être que Summy Skim. Summy était-il donc si confiant dans son adresse qu’il n’éprouvât aucune crainte d’atteindre Jane Edgerton en voulant frapper son ravisseur? En vérité il n’en savait rien lui-même. Il avait tiré au jugé, sans viser, avec la spontanéité d’un mouvement réflexe.

Mais Summy Skim, on le sait, ne manquait jamais son but. Cette fois encore, il avait donné de son adresse une preuve nouvelle et plus étonnante que les précédentes. Son coup à peine parti, la monture de Hunter trébucha lourdement, et, soit que le Texien eût été contraint de la lâcher pour retrouver son équilibre, soit pour toute autre raison, Jane Edgerton glissa de la selle et resta étendue sans mouvement. Quant au cheval, il fit encore trois ou quatre foulées, puis il s’abattit comme une masse, tandis que Hunter roulait sur le sol et y demeurait immobile.

Ce drame rapide avait plongé les Canadiens dans la stupeur. Un grand silence planait sur eux. Summy Skim, incertain du résultat de son initiative et le regard obstinément dirigé vers la plaine, ne faisait pas un mouvement.

A une cinquantaine de mètres au delà du canal gisait Hunter. Mort ou vivant? On n’en savait rien. Plus près, son cheval se tordait dans les dernières convulsions de l’agonie. Il haletait péniblement et le sang giclait de ses naseaux. Plus près encore, à moins de vingt mètres du barrage, c’était Jane Edgerton, toute petite tache dans la vaste étendue, Jane Edgerton que Summy peut-être avait tuée!

Cependant, en voyant tomber son chef, la bande de Hunter s’était élancée en désordre hors de l’abri de la montagne. Il n’en fallut pas plus pour rendre leur sang-froid aux Canadiens. Une pluie de fer contraignit les bandits à reculer et leur prouva que la plaine leur était désormais interdite.

Par malheur, ce qui était vrai pour les uns l’était aussi pour les autres. Si les tireurs de Ben Raddle, auxquels étaient venus se joindre le Scout et ses compagnons, étaient en état de défendre aux Texiens de s’écarter du volcan, ceux-ci pouvaient, de leur côté, s’opposer à ce que les Canadiens quittassent l’épaulement bordant le canal reconquis. La plaine, en réalité, était impraticable pour les deux partis.

Il ne semblait pas qu’il y eût de remède à cette situation. Les Canadiens ne pouvaient montrer leur tête au-dessus de l’épaulement sans être salués d’une grêle de coups de feu, ils commençaient à s’énerver et Ben Raddle redoutait que des imprudences ne fussent commises. Summy Skim, si calme tout à l’heure, se faisait particulièrement remarquer par sa violente surexcitation. Voir Jane Edgerton étendue et comme morte à moins de trente mètres de lui et ne pouvoir la secourir, cela l’affolait. Il fallut le retenir par la force et lutter contre lui pour l’empêcher de courir à la barricade, d’en jeter bas les pierres et de braver la mort qui le guettait au delà.

«Allons-nous la laisser mourir?.. Nous sommes des lâches! criait-il hors de lui.

— Nous ne sommes pas des fous, voilà tout, répliqua sévèrement Ben Raddle. Tiens-toi tranquille, Summy, et donne-nous le temps de réfléchir.»

Mais l’ingénieur eut beau réfléchir, son esprit, pourtant inventif, ne lui fournit aucune solution satisfaisante du problème, et la situation menaçait de s’éterniser.

La solution, ce fut Patrick qui la trouva.

Cette attente irritante durait depuis près d’un quart d’heure, quand on le vit sortir du bois, dans lequel, par un hasard extraordinaire, il avait pu rentrer sans attirer l’attention de la bande des Texiens. Patrick n’allait pas vite, d’abord parce qu’il marchait à reculons, et ensuite parce qu’il traînait sur le sol un objet particulièrement lourd et encombrant, à savoir le cadavre de l’un des chevaux tués quelques instants auparavant par le feu de salve de l’escouade du Scout.

Quel était le projet de Patrick, et que voulait-il faire de ce cheval mort? Personne n’aurait pu répondre à cette question.

De l’autre côté du canal, les Texiens, abrités par le contrefort du Golden Mount, avaient vu, eux aussi, le géant sortir du bois.

Son apparition avait été le signal de clameurs sauvages accompagnées d’une grêle de balles. Patrick ne sembla faire attention ni aux cris, ni aux balles. D’un effort égal et tranquille, il continua à traîner son fardeau jusqu’au barrage, qu’il réussit, par une chance inexplicable, à atteindre sain et sauf.

Il se mit alors en devoir de se frayer vin passage suffisant à travers la barricade, ce qui ne lui demanda que quelques minutes, puis, saisissant le cheval par les jambes de devant, il le redressa sur l’arrière-train, et, d’un seul effort, le jeta sur ses épaules.

Malgré la gravité de la situation, les camarades de l’Irlandais, enthousiasmés par ce fabuleux tour de force, éclatèrent en applaudissements. Le cheval avait beau être de petite taille, il n’en devait pas moins être d’un poids énorme, et l’exploit de Patrick avait quelque chose de surhumain.

Nul, d’ailleurs, n’aurait pu dire quel en était le but. Nul, sauf un seul, pourtant.

«Bravo, Patrick!» cria Summy Skim, qui, se débarrassant violemment de ses gardes du corps, se mit debout, et, sans souci du plomb sifflant autour de lui, courut rejoindre le géant au barrage que celui-ci se préparait à traverser.

Les deux camps adverses eurent à ce moment l’occasion d’assister à un spectacle original.

Plié en deux, portant sur les épaules le cadavre du cheval dont les pieds de derrière traînaient sur le sol, Patrick, d’un pas lent et sûr, avait franchi le barrage, et Summy Skim, à son abri, l’avait franchi avec lui.

A peine eurent-ils débouché dans la plaine, que des coups de feu à leur adresse partirent du contrefort du Golden Mount, au delà duquel n’osaient s’aventurer les Texiens. Mais Patrick, Summy devant lui, leur tournait le dos, et que pouvaient leurs balles contre son épaisse cuirasse? Ni Summy

Skim, ni Patrick ne parurent donc émotionnés, et tous deux continuèrent à s'éloigner de conserve.

Il ne leur fallut que quelques minutes pour arriver au point où Jane Edgerton demeurait étendue. Là, Patrick s'arrêta, tandis que Summy Skim se baissait et soulevait la jeune fille dans ses bras.

Il s'agissait maintenant de revenir, et le retour promettait d'être moins aisé que l'aller. Dans cette direction, on devait faire face aux adversaires auxquels on avait tourné le dos jusque-là, et la protection du bouclier de Patrick risquait d'être beaucoup moins efficace. Il fallut biaiser, louvoyer, faire trois ou quatre fois le chemin, mais enfin Patrick et Summy Skim, chacun chargé de son fardeau, réussirent à franchir de nouveau le canal, tandis que les Texiens poussaient des hurlements de rage impuissante.

Parvenus au barrage, ils y trouvèrent deux de leurs compagnons qui s'y étaient traînés en rampant derrière l'épaulement, et qui se hâtèrent de réparer la brèche faite à la barricade, pendant que les deux sauveteurs poursuivaient imperturbablement leur route jusqu'à la lisière des arbres, où ils arrivèrent sans encombre.

Là, Patrick se débarrassa du singulier bouclier imaginé par lui. On put alors en constater l'efficacité. Plus de vingt balles avaient vainement frappé le cheval en plein corps. La cuirasse était donc d'excellente qualité et n'avait d'autre défaut que de pas être à la commune mesure.

Quant à Summy, il s'empressait auprès de Jane Edgerton. Celle-ci ne semblait pas avoir la moindre blessure. Son évanouissement n'était causé sans doute que par la violence de sa chute.

Quelques affusions d’eau froide en eurent raison. Bientôt, la jeune fille ouvrit les yeux et reprit conscience d’elle-même. Summy se hâta de l’emporter jusqu’aux tentes. Un peu de repos suffirait probablement à la guérir.

Pendant ce temps, les deux partis adverses avaient gardé leurs positions respectives. Les Canadiens tenaient toujours le canal, d’où leurs carabines interdisaient la plaine aux Texiens. Ceux-ci, toujours embusqués derrière le contrefort du volcan, continuaient eux aussi à immobiliser leurs adversaires. Il n’y avait pas de raison pour que cette situation prit fin.

Toute la journée s’écoula ainsi. Puis, ce fut le crépuscule, puis, la nuit.

L’obscurité rendit un peu de liberté aux belligérants. Ben Raddle et ses compagnons s’éloignèrent du canal. Trois hommes ayant été préposés à sa garde et un autre ayant été placé en faction au nord du bois, afin de parer à une nouvelle attaque par le Rio Rubber, les autres regagnèrent le campement, où, après le repas du soir, ils purent trouver quelques heures de sommeil.

Dès l’aube, les Canadiens furent debout, un peu lassés peut-être, mais au complet. Aussitôt que la lumière fut suffisante, tous les regards se portèrent vers le Sud.

Les Texiens avaient-ils profité de l’obscurité pour aller au secours de leur chef? La situation avait-elle subi une modification quelconque?

Aucun bruit ne venait du contrefort du Golden Mount. Quelques hommes, en faisant un grand détour le long du Rio Rubber, se risquèrent à descendre de quelques centaines de mètres dans la plaine, de manière à découvrir toute la base du volcan. Ils constatèrent que la position était abandonnée.

Rien ne troublait le calme de la plaine aussi silencieuse que déserte. Des deux corps que le crépuscule y avait recouverts la veille, il ne restait qu’un au lever de l’aube. Seul, à quelque distance du canal, le cheval mort mettait une tache sombre sur le vert clair de la prairie. Déjà, des oiseaux carnassiers voltigeaient autour de lui.

Quant à Hunter, il avait disparu.

CHAPITRE XIV

Ou l’on se fait sauter.

La deuxième attaque avait donc été repoussée comme la première, et avec un succès plus grand. Pas un seul des Canadiens ne manquait à l’appel, alors que la troupe assaillante avait perdu le quart de son effectif.

Toutefois, si la situation s’était améliorée, il s’en fallait qu’elle fût devenue brillante. Les forces en présence demeuraient fort inégales, et, d’ailleurs, on ne pourrait considérer la victoire comme acquise qu’après avoir purgé la région du dernier des bandits qui l’infestaient. Jusque-là, le soin de la défense absorberait toute l’attention de la caravane et il serait impossible de se livrer en sécurité à aucun travail de prospection ou d’exploitation.

Ce résultat serait-il obtenu en temps voulu? Faudrait-il, au contraire, s’épuiser en de stériles combats et n’obtenir la victoire qu’au moment où la proximité de l’hiver la rendrait inutile? Dans trois semaines, on serait dans la nécessité de partir, si l’on voulait échapper à la mauvaise saison, à ses tourmentes, ses neiges, ses blizzards, si l’on voulait, après avoir vaincu l’attaque des hommes, éviter celle de la nature plus implacable et plus farouche encore.

Et pourtant, sous prétexte de gagner du temps, Ben Raddle devait-il, tant que les Texiens seraient là, donner suite à son projet de provoquer l’éruption, en précipitant les eaux du rio dans le cratère? Hunter, maître du sommet du volcan, ne recueillerait-il pas seul alors le fruit de tant de peines et de tant d’efforts?

Ben Raddle ne cessa d’agiter ces questions pendant toute la journée du 22 juillet qu’aucun incident ne vint troubler.

Ce calme insolite ne laissait pas de l’étonner. Hunter entendait-il maintenant faire traîner les choses en longueur? Dans ce cas, les assiégés, pressés par l’approche de l’hiver, seraient dans la nécessité d’aller chercher leurs adversaires en rase campagne et de solutionner à tout prix une querelle qui ne pouvait s’éterniser.

Le lendemain, de très bonne heure, le Scout et Ben Raddle, après avoir franchi le canal, vinrent observer la plaine. Elle était déserte. Aucune troupe en marche du côté de la forêt. Hunter se serait-il donc résolu à un départ définitif?

«Il est fâcheux, dit alors Bill Stell, que l’ascension du Golden Mount soit impossible du côté du campement. Nous les aurions aperçus en nous portant sur l’autre bord du plateau.

— En effet, Bill, c’est fort regrettable, répondit Ben Raddle.

— Il n’y a pas de danger, je pense, reprit le Scout, à ce que nous nous écartions de quelques centaines de pas du mont?

— Aucun, Bill, puisqu’il n’y a personne en vue. Ce que nos hommes ont fait hier, nous pouvons le faire nous-mêmes. Et, d’ailleurs, quand bien même nous serions aperçus, nous aurions toujours le temps de revenir au canal et de refermer la barricade.

— Allons donc, monsieur Raddle. Nous verrons du moins le sommet du volcan. Peut-être les vapeurs sont-elles plus épaisses, et peut-être le cratère commence-t-il à rejeter des laves.

Tous deux s’éloignèrent d’un quart de lieue dans le Sud.

Aucun changement ne s’était produit à l’orifice du cratère, d’où s’échappaient en tourbillons des vapeurs zébrées de flammes que le vent rabattait vers la mer.

«Ce ne sera pas encore pour aujourd’hui, remarqua le Scout.

— Ni pour demain, approuva l’ingénieur. Au reste, je ne m’en plains pas. J’en suis à désirer maintenant que l’éruption n’ait pas lieu avant le départ de Hunter… s’il doit partir!

— Il ne partira pas, dit Bill Stell, en montrant une fumée qui s’élevait au pied du dernier contrefort du Golden Mount.

— Oui… dit Ben Raddle, ils sont toujours là… comme chez eux!.. Et, puisque nous ne tentons pas de les faire déguerpir, ils en concluront à bon droit que nous ne sommes pas en force.»

Tous deux, après avoir parcouru la plaine du regard, revinrent vers le canal, et rentrèrent au campement.

On était au 23 juillet, et Ben Raddle voyait avec douleur les jours s’écouler sans amener aucun résultat.

Dans trois semaines, ainsi que le faisait observer le Scout, il serait déjà bien tard pour reprendre le chemin du Klondike, où la caravane n’arriverait pas avant le 15 septembre. Or, à cette date, les mineurs qui vont passer la mauvaise saison à Vancouver ont quitté Dawson City, et les derniers paquebots descendent le cours du Yukon.

Souvent Summy Skim s’entretenait avec Bill Stell à ce sujet, et c’est précisément ce dont ils parlèrent pendant l’après-midi, tandis que Ben Raddle se promenait sur le bord du canal.

Celui-ci, après avoir examiné le barrage, releva les branchages qui dissimulaient l’orifice de la galerie, et se glissa jusqu’à la paroi qui la séparait de la cheminée du volcan.

Une fois de plus, il s’assura de la position des trous percés à six endroits de cette paroi, et dans lesquels il avait introduit lui-même les cartouches de mine. Il constata que six autres cartouches étaient bien placées dans le barrage et vérifia le bon état de la mèche. Une allumette!.. et l’eau se précipiterait en irrésistible torrent.

Sans la présence des Texiens, c’est aujourd’hui même qu’il eût tenté la chance. Pourquoi aurait-il attendu davantage, puisque le temps pressait, puisqu’il ne semblait pas que l’éruption dût se produire d’elle-même?

Il lui aurait suffi de mettre le feu à ces mines, dont la mèche durerait quelques minutes, et, après une demi-journée, après deux heures, une heure, moins peut-être, les vapeurs accumulées se frayeraient violemment une issue dans les airs.

Ben Raddle restait pensif devant cette paroi, maudissant son impuissance et l’impossibilité de provoquer sur-le-champ le dénouement de son plan audacieux.

Tout en réfléchissant, il écoutait les bruits de la cheminée centrale. Les ronflements lui parurent plus intenses. Il croyait même entendre un bruit de roches entrechoquées, comme si les vapeurs eussent soulevé des blocs, pour les laisser ensuite retomber. Ces symptômes étaient-ils ceux d’une éruption prochaine?

En ce moment des cris retentirent au dehors. La voix du Scout pénétra par l’orifice de la galerie. Il appelait:

«Monsieur Raddle!.. monsieur Raddle!

— Qu’y a-t-il? demanda l’ingénieur.

— Venez!.. venez! répondit Bill Stell.

Ben Raddle pensa que la bande tentait un troisième assaut, et se hâta de revenir au barrage. Il y trouva Summy Skim et Jane Edgerton en compagnie de Bill Stell.

— Les Texiens nous attaqueraient-ils de nouveau? interrogea-t-il.

— Oui! les gueux, s’écria le Scout, mais ni en face, ni par derrière. Par en haut!

Et sa main se tendit du côté du Golden Mount.

«Voyez, monsieur Ben, ajouta-t-il.

En effet, n’ayant pu forcer le passage ni par le Sud, ni par le Nord, Hunter et les siens avaient renoncé à une attaque directe pour adopter un autre plan dont le résultat serait tout au moins d’obliger la caravane à abandonner son campement.

Montés de nouveau au sommet du volcan, ils avaient contourné le piton terminal et s’étaient portés sur le côté du plateau qui dominait les tentes canadiennes. Là, à coups de pic et de levier, ils avaient soulevé les énormes pierres, les quartiers de rochers qui s’y trouvaient entassés par centaines. Bientôt, ces blocs pesants furent poussés jusqu’au bord et commencèrent à tomber en avalanche, brisant, renversant les arbres, saccageant tout sur leur passage. Quelques-uns de ces terribles projectiles roulèrent même dans le canal, en faisant jaillir l’eau hors des berges. Ben Raddle et ses compagnons s’étaient rangés contre le flanc du mont, afin d’éviter cette grêle meurtrière.

Dans le petit bois, la place n’était plus tenable. Déjà le campement disparaissait sous l’amoncellement des blocs précipités du haut de la montagne, et son personnel avait cherché refuge sur la rive du rio, trop éloignée pour recevoir les éclats de l’avalanche.

Du matériel, il ne restait guère que des débris. Deux des chariots avaient été brisés, les tentes abattues et déchirées, les ustensiles détruits. Trois mules assommées gisaient sur le sol. Les autres, épouvantées, affolées, avaient franchi d’un bond le canal et se dispersaient à travers la plaine. C’était une véritable catastrophe.

De là-haut venaient des hurlements farouches, cris de joie de la bande qui s’excitait à cette abominable extermination. Et les roches de tomber toujours, se heurtant parfois au cours de leur chute, et se brisant en fragments qui s’éparpillaient comme de la mitraille.

— Mais ils vont donc nous jeter toute la montagne sur la tête! s’écria Summy Skim.

— Que faire? demanda le Scout.

— Ce qu’il faut faire, je ne sais, répliqua Summy Skim, mais je sais bien ce qu’il fallait faire! Envoyer une balle à Hunter avant de parlementer avec lui!

Jane Edgerton, très énervée, haussa les épaules.

— Ce sont des mots, dit-elle, et pendant ce temps notre matériel est réduit en miettes. Il n’en restera bientôt plus rien si nous ne sauvons pas au moins ses débris. Traînons nos chariots jusqu’au rio où ils seront hors d’atteinte.

— Soit, approuva le Scout. Mais après!..

— Après? répéta Jane Edgerton, après, nous irons au campement de ces bandits et nous les y attendrons. Nous les tirerons à bonne portée pendant qu’ils descendront, et leurs chariots viendront remplacer ceux que nous avons perdus!

Summy Skim eut un regard d’admiration pour sa vibrante compagne. Son projet était hardi, mais il pouvait réussir. Hunter et ses compagnons seraient à coup sûr en mauvaise posture, lorsqu’ils se déhaleraient le long du talus du Golden Mount sous le feu d’une vingtaine de carabines.

Évidemment, ils ne quitteraient la place qu’ail moment où la pierre viendrait à leur manquer. On aurait donc le temps de longer la base de la montagne, sans être aperçu, et de se porter sur l’autre versant. Si quelques hommes de la bande s’y trouvaient, on en aurait facilement raison, et l’on attendrait la descente de Hunter et de ses compagnons, que l’on tirerait à l’affût comme des chamois ou des daims.

— Merveilleux! s’écria Summy Skim. Appelons nos hommes, et passons le barrage. Dans une demi-heure nous serons rendus, tandis qu’il faut à ces coquins au moins deux heures pour descendre.

Bien que Ben Raddle ne se fût pas mêlé à la discussion, il avait parfaitement entendu Jane Edgerton exposer son plan, le seul, en vérité, qui parût réalisable et pratique.

Au moment où Summy Skim se mettait en mouvement, son cousin l’arrêta du geste.

— Il y a mieux à faire, dit-il.

— Quoi donc? demanda Summy Skim.

— Répondre à la bande de Hunter comme il sied. Nous avons toute prête une arme terrible.

— Une arme? répéta le Scout.

— Le volcan. Provoquons l’éruption, et détruisons-les tous jusqu’au dernier.

Après un court silence, l’ingénieur reprit:

— Allez retrouver nos hommes, en suivant la base de la montagne et le bord de la mer. Pendant ce temps, j’allumerai les mines, puis je vous rejoindrai rapidement.

— Je reste avec toi, Ben!.. dit Summy Skim en serrant la main de l’ingénieur.

— C’est inutile, déclara celui-ci d’un ton ferme. Je ne cours pas le moindre danger. La mèche est prête, tu le sais, et je n’aurai qu’à y mettre le feu.»

Il n’y avait pas à insister. Summy Skim, Jane Edgerton et le Scout s’éloignèrent donc afin de se réunir au gros de la caravane massé sur la rive du Rio Rubber. Aussitôt, Ben Raddle disparut par l’orifice que masquaient les branchages. En rampant, il atteignit le milieu de la galerie, puis, ayant allumé la mèche qui se réunissait, d’une part, aux cartouches de la paroi, et, de l’autre, à celles du barrage, il revint en toute hâte, et courut à son tour dans la direction de la mer.

Un quart d’heure plus tard, les mines éclataient avec un bruit sourd. Il sembla que le mont tremblait sur sa base. Le barrage fracassé se dispersa en mille débris, et l’eau du canal se précipita avec violence dans la galerie béante. A son autre extrémité, la paroi était-elle éventrée par l’explosion? Les épaisses vapeurs fuligineuses qui fusèrent au dehors auraient répondu à cette question avant qu’on ait eu le temps de la poser. Oui, la paroi était renversée, puisque, par la blessure faite, le volcan soufflait son haleine empestée.

Un bruit assourdissant s’échappa en même temps de la galerie. Bouillonnements, hurlements, sifflements de l’eau luttant contre les premières laves et se vaporisant à leur contact.

Le feu et l’eau. Lequel des deux éléments serait victorieux dans cette bataille titanesque? Le feu, en s’éteignant, cimenterait-il un obstacle que l’eau ne pourrait franchir? L’eau, venue en torrent de l’inépuisable Mackensie, ne serait-elle au contraire vaincue par le feu qu’après l’avoir atteint au cœur?

C’était le dernier problème qui restât à résoudre, et la solution allait en être donnée à l’instant.

Une demi-heure, une heure se passèrent. L’eau coulait toujours à pleins bords, s’engouffrait dans la galerie et, refoulant les vapeurs, se perdait tumultueusement dans la montagne.

Bien armée, au complet, la troupe des Canadiens s’était réfugiée au delà du Rio Rubber sur le rivage de l’Océan. Immobiles et silencieux, tous surveillaient anxieusement le phénomène.

Tout à coup, le sol fut secoué d’un frisson, et un grondement terrible vint des entrailles de la terre. Puis il se passa une étrange chose. La plaine entière parut onduler à perte de vue dans le Sud, et une poussière opaque s’éleva dont fut obscurci le disque éclatant du soleil.

Les Canadiens furent saisis de terreur. Tous, jusqu’au plus brave, connurent la peur en concevant quelle invincible force leurs faibles mains avaient déchaînée.

Mais déjà la colère du volcan semblait s’apaiser. Le nuage de poussière retombait et laissait de nouveau apercevoir le soleil.

On se rassura. Des soupirs dilatèrent les poitrines oppressées, les cœurs ralentirent leurs battements éperdus. On échangea même des sourires incertains, et l’on osa regarder autour de soi.

Rien n’était changé dans la nature. Le Rio Rubber allait toujours se perdre dans l’océan Arctique, dont les vagues continuaient à se briser sur le même rivage. Le Golden Mount, géant frappé au talon d’une blessure insignifiante et mortelle, dressait toujours son front empanaché de fumées et de flammes, indifférent au torrent d’eau que le canal déversait toujours dans ses vastes flancs.

Un nouveau quart d’heure s’écoula, et soudain, sans que rien l’eût fait pressentir, une explosion terrible retentit.

Un morceau de montagne s’écroula et tomba dans la mer, qui fut soulevée en une lame prodigieuse. Accompagnées de pierres, de morceaux de laves durcies, de scories, de cendres, des flammes et des fumées tourbillonnant à grand fracas jaillirent hors du cratère et s’élancèrent à plus de cinq cents mètres dans les airs.

A partir de ce moment, les détonations succédèrent aux détonations. Le volcan, secoué d’une rage toute fraîche, crachait vers le ciel des milliers de projectiles incandescents. Les uns retombaient dans la gueule béante qui les avait vomis. Les autres, suivant le chemin frayé par le premier effort de l’énergie plutonique, allaient s’engloutir en sifflant dans les flots de l’océan Arctique.

«Mais… Dieu me pardonne!.. balbutia Summy Skim dès que l’excès de son émotion lui permit d’articuler, c’est dans la mer qu’elles vont, nos pépites!

Cette réflexion, si Ben Raddle et Bill Stell ne l’avaient pas faite avant lui, c’est qu’ils n’étaient pas capables de prononcer une parole. La surprise, le désespoir plutôt les accablait.

Avoir entrepris ce voyage, être entré en lutte avec la nature, tant d’efforts, tant de peines, pour en arriver là!

Ben Raddle ne s’était pas trompé. En introduisant les eaux dans la cheminée volcanique, il avait, ainsi qu’il le pensait, provoqué l’éruption. Mais, cette éruption, il n’avait pas le pouvoir de la diriger, et la campagne finissait par un désastre.

Le monstre qu’il avait lâché échappait désormais à sa volonté. Rien n’aurait pu calmer l’éruption qui faisait rage. Le sol tremblait comme prêt à s’entr’ouvrir. Le mugissement des flammes, le sifflement des vapeurs faisaient vibrer l’espace. Le cône terminal avait disparu derrière un rideau de fumées brûlantes et de gaz irrespirables. Quelques-uns des blocs projetés dans les airs éclataient comme des bombes et s’éparpillaient en poudre d’or…

«Nos pépites qui éclatent!.. gémissait Summy Skim.

Tous regardaient épouvantés cet effrayant spectacle.

Ils ne songeaient guère aux Texiens en ce moment, mais seulement à ces richesses du plus prodigieux gisement du monde qui se perdaient inutiles dans les eaux de la mer Glaciale.

La caravane, il est vrai, n’avait plus rien à redouter de Hunter et de sa bande. Surpris par la soudaineté du phénomène, ils n’avaient sans doute pas eu le temps de se garer. Peut-être le plateau s’était-il effondré sous leurs pieds… Peut-être avaient-ils été engloutis dans le cratère?.. Peut-être, projetés dans l’espace, brûlés, mutilés, gisaient-ils maintenant dans les profondeurs de l’océan Polaire?

Ben Raddle fut le premier à retrouver le sang-froid.

— Venez!.. venez!» s’écria-t-il.

A sa suite, on remonta la rive droite du Rubber qui fut passé à gué au delà du canal, et l’on s’élança dans la plaine en suivant la base du Golden Mount. Vingt minutes plus tard, on parvenait au campement des Texiens.

Les cinq ou six hommes qui y étaient restés de garde s’enfuirent vers la forêt, en se voyant assaillis à leur tour, tandis que les chevaux, épouvantés par le fracas de l’éruption et par la détonation des armes à feu, achevaient de se disperser à travers la prairie.

Les Canadiens prirent possession du campement déserté par ses défenseurs, puis leurs regards se portèrent sur les flancs abrupts de la montagne.

L’éruption qui grondait là-haut avait, en effet, accompli son œuvre destructrice. De la troupe des pirates, il ne restait que de rares survivants, qui, en proie à un affolement bien naturel, dévalaient les pentes du Golden Mount et se laissaient glisser au risque de se rompre bras et jambes.

Parmi eux, on aperçut Hunter, grièvement blessé et se traînant à peine, à une centaine de mètres au-dessus de la plaine. Les linges qui enveloppaient sa tête cachaient sans doute les traces de sa chute de l’avant-veille dont le contre-coup l’avait plongé dans un si profond évanouissement.

En voyant leur camp envahi, les malheureux, décimés, sans armes, éperdus, eurent un geste de désespoir, et, biaisant vers le Nord, s’efforcèrent d’atteindre le rivage de la mer afin de le suivre jusqu’à la forêt.

Deux d’entre eux, au moins, ne devaient pas l’atteindre.

Au moment où Hunter, soutenu par deux de ses compagnons, faisait les premiers pas dans cette nouvelle direction, un bloc énorme s’éleva du cratère mugissant. Alors que les autres projectiles du volcan allaient uniformément se perdre dans le Nord, ce bloc seul, dévié par des causes inconnues, décrivit, dans le Sud, une vaste et puissante parabole, et, avec une précision mathématique, s’abattit sur le groupe des trois Texiens fugitifs.

L’un d’eux, assez heureux pour éviter le choc, se sauva en criant. Un autre demeura sur place, littéralement broyé contre le sol.

Quant à Hunter, frappé à la tête, il tournoya sur lui-même, et, rebondissant de roche en roche, vint s’écraser au bas de la montagne.

Pendant ce temps, précédant sa victime, le bloc avait continué à rouler sur la pente. Puis sa vitesse décrut, et, comme un serviteur docile, il s’arrêta doucement aux pieds mêmes de Ben Raddle.

Celui-ci se pencha. Sous les éraflures causées par les chocs, une substance jaune brillait d’un éclat métallique. Et l’ingénieur, le cœur étreint par une grave émotion, reconnut que le bloc justicier était tout entier fait d’or pur.

CHAPITRE XV

Ou Jane Edgerton, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle n’y comprennent plus rien.

Oui, cet or si âprement poursuivi par Hunter, le destin implacable ne le lui donnait qu’avec la mort. Quelle n’avait pas été sa soif du précieux et malfaisant métal! Que de crimes commis, combien plus encore projetés pour arriver à en posséder des parcelles! Et, par un ironique retour du sort, c’était l’or même qui broyait ce cerveau où s’étaient formés tant de rêves criminels!

Ben Raddle avait machinalement mesuré de l’œil l’étonnant projectile qui venait de le débarrasser de son ennemi, et il n’en estimait pas la valeur à moins d’une centaine de mille francs. Cette masse, devenue son incontestable propriété, suffirait donc amplement à couvrir les frais de l’expédition, et permettrait même d’allouer une modeste prime à chacun des audacieux mais malheureux explorateurs.

Quel dénouement à côté de celui sur lequel tous avaient compté! Des incalculables trésors du volcan, on n’emporterait que cet unique échantillon!

Sans doute, l’hostilité des Texiens avait contrarié les plans de Ben Raddle. Pour la défense de sa caravane, il avait dû précipiter le dénouement. Mais, en somme, quand même il eût été libre de choisir son jour et son heure, l’or que renfermait le cratère n’en aurait pas moins été perdu pour lui, puisque c’était du côté de la mer que le Golden Mount projetait ses matières éruptives.

«Tout le malheur, conclut le Scout, quand les esprits se furent un peu calmés, c’est que le cratère du volcan ait été inabordable quand nous sommes arrivés.

— En effet, approuva Summy Skim. Jacques Ledun l’avait cru éteint alors qu’il n’était qu’endormi. Il s’est réveillé quelques semaines trop tôt!

C’était, en effet, cette mauvaise chance qui avait fait perdre à Ben Raddle tous les bénéfices de sa campagne. Quoi qu’on pût lui dire, il ne parviendrait jamais à s’en consoler.

— Voyons, mon pauvre Ben, dit Summy Skim, un peu de courage et de philosophie!.. Renonce à tes rêves, et contente-toi d’être heureux dans notre cher pays dont nous sommes si loin depuis dix-huit mois!»

Ben Raddle serra la main de son cousin, et, chassant sa tristesse d’un énergique effort, reprit sur-le-champ la direction de la caravane.

Il y avait lieu de réédifier le camp, hors des atteintes du volcan, même dans le cas d’un changement de direction dans l’écoulement des laves. Ce camp n’aurait d’ailleurs qu’une existence éphémère, puisqu’on n’avait plus aucun motif de s’attarder dans ces régions hyperboréennes.

L’emplacement en ayant été choisi à deux kilomètres en amont sur la rive du Rubber, on se mit aussitôt à l’œuvre. Une dizaine d’hommes furent envoyés de l’autre côté du canal, avec mission de réunir tout ce qui pouvait être sauvé de l’ancien matériel. D’autres chargèrent du butin conquis les propres chariots des vaincus. Le reste de la caravane se lança à la poursuite des chevaux échappés, dont plusieurs furent assez facilement capturés.

Avant la fin du jour, le nouveau campement était installé d’une manière, en somme, suffisamment confortable.

La nuit fut tranquille. On veilla par prudence, afin de parer à un retour offensif des survivants de la bande dispersée, mais le calme ne fut troublé que par la grande voix de l’éruption.

Pendant les quelques heures d’obscurité, quel spectacle que celui de cette éruption dans sa première violence! La poudre d’or, chauffée à blanc et lancée par une formidable puissance, s’arrondissait en dôme au-dessus du cratère. Plus haut que cette voûte de feu, les flammes montaient en hurlant jusqu’à la zone des nuages, et éclairaient d’une lumière sinistre toute la contrée jusqu’aux limites de l’horizon.

Le canal continuait à s’écouler dans la terre irritée. Si rien ne venait combler la blessure faite au flanc de la montagne, pendant combien de semaines et de mois les eaux du vaste estuaire n’allaient-elles pas l’alimenter?

«Qui sait même, dit au matin le Scout à Summy Skim, si une telle inondation ne finira pas par éteindre le volcan?

— C’est bien possible, Bill, mais, pour l’amour de Dieu, ne dites pas cela à Ben! Il serait capable d’attendre!.. Et pourtant, il n’y a plus rien maintenant à récolter dans le cratère!»

Summy Skim avait tort de s’inquiéter. Le parti de Ben Raddle était pris et bien pris. Une fois de plus il s’inclinait devant la force des choses. Le claim 129 noyé sous les eaux, le Golden Mount vidé dans la mer, c’étaient là deux faits contre lesquels il ne pouvait rien et dont il était, par conséquent, décidé à ne pas encombrer son cerveau. Pour lui, ces deux déceptions, c’était déjà du passé, et résolument il se tournait vers l’avenir.

L’avenir, l’avenir le plus proche du moins, c’était Dawson City. Et Dieu sait pourquoi cette ville vers laquelle l’ingénieur dirigeait sa pensée se synthétisait pour lui en une chambre d’hôpital où une blonde jeune fille disait posément des choses douces et sensées. Affaire de contraste, sans doute. Au milieu du désordre général qui l’entourait, il évoquait involontairement, comme pour rétablir l’équilibre, l’image de ce calme limpide.

Le lendemain, dès cinq heures, il fit part à ses compagnons de sa décision de commencer, le jour même, à redescendre vers le Sud. Il s’attendait à des résistances. Il n’en rencontra pas. L’espoir était envolé et le courage avec lui. Tous poussèrent, au contraire, un soupir de soulagement en apprenant qu’on allait s’engager sur la route du retour.

Avant que ne fût donné le signal du départ, Ben Raddle et le Scout suivirent une dernière fois la base du volcan. L’éruption avait-elle lancé de ce côté quelques fragments de quartz aurifères?

Non. Le bloc qui, après avoir exécuté Hunter, était venu rouler aux pieds de l’ingénieur resterait le seul souvenir que l’on rapporterait du Haut-Dominion.

L’éruption n’avait pas dévié. Toutes les substances: pierres, scories, laves, cendres, projetées vers le Nord, ne cessaient de retomber dans la mer, parfois même à deux kilomètres du rivage. Quant à l’intensité du phénomène, elle n’avait subi aucune diminution, et il eût été radicalement impossible d’atteindre le sommet du Golden Mount.

Pendant que Ben Raddle et le Scout procédaient à cette exploration, Jane Edgerton s’approcha de Summy Skim, qui, assis dans l’herbe, fumait placidement sa pipe. Comme peu de temps auparavant, lors de la dernière ascension, la jeune fille avait une allure lasse, un peu brisée, qui la rendait plus charmante encore.

«Il faut me pardonner, monsieur Skim, dit-elle avec une sorte de trouble, si je ne vous ai pas remercié comme il convient, mais c’est ce matin seulement que j’ai appris combien de reconnaissance je vous dois une fois de plus.

— Quel est le bavard?.. commença Summy Skim irrité.

— Patrick m’a tout dit, interrompit Jane doucement. Je sais que, si je suis en vie, c’est à votre adresse et à votre sang-froid, d’abord, à votre courage ensuite, que j’en suis redevable… Un jour, ajouta-t-elle avec un timide et touchant sourire, j’ai eu l’outrecuidance de me dire quitte envers vous. Je reconnais aujourd’hui qu’il me sera impossible d’y parvenir.

— C’est Patrick qui vous a ainsi monté la tête, mademoiselle Jane? répondit indirectement Summy. Il est modeste, dans ce cas, car c’est lui qui a tout fait en réalité.

— Non, monsieur Skim, insista Jane avec plus de chaleur. Je sais quel rôle a joué Patrick, et je lui garde dans mon cœur la place à laquelle il a droit. Mais je sais aussi quel a été le vôtre.

— Le mien?.. se récria Summy. J’ai joué le rôle d’un chasseur, voilà tout. Un chasseur voit quelque chose qui se sauve devant lui… il tire. C’est bien simple…

Summy s’arrêta brusquement, et, simulant une vive colère:

«Et puis, en voilà assez là-dessus. Je ne veux plus que l’on me parle de cette affaire.

— Soit, accorda Jane Edgerton, on n’en parlera plus… Mais j’y penserai toujours.»

La caravane s’ébranla vers huit heures. L’ingénieur et Summy Skim prirent la tête, précédant Jane Edgerton installée dans la carriole conduite par Neluto. Les chariots, chargés du matériel de campement, suivaient sous la direction du Scout.

La nourriture était largement assurée, la chasse et la pêche ayant permis d’économiser les conserves durant les semaines passées au Golden Mount. D’ailleurs, tout en faisant route, les chasseurs ne manqueraient ni de perdrix, ni de canards, ni de gros gibier. Si Summy Skim avait la chance d’abattre enfin un de ces fameux orignals, peut-on aller jusqu’à dire qu’il ne regretterait pas son voyage?

Le temps était incertain, ce qui n’avait rien d’étonnant, la belle saison étant déjà très avancée. Il y avait lieu d’espérer, cependant, que la capitale du Klondike serait atteinte avant le mois de septembre, et qu’on n’aurait pas à souffrir du froid durant les haltes de nuit.

Lorsque la caravane s’arrêta pour le déjeuner, le Golden Mount était encore visible à l’horizon. Ben Raddle s’était retourné, il ne pouvait détacher ses regards des tourbillons de fumée qui s’élevaient de sa cime.

«Allons, Ben, allons, lui dit Summy Skim, l’or s’en va en fumée, comme tant de choses en ce bas monde. N’y pensons plus. Ce n’est pas de ce côté qu’il faut regarder, c’est par là.»

Et la main de Summy se tendait vers le Sud-Est, dans la direction approximative du cher et lointain Montréal.

D’un commun accord, Ben Raddle et le Scout avaient adopté pour le retour un nouvel itinéraire. Au lieu de faire un crochet dans l’Est, de manière à passer par Fort Mac Pherson, on marcherait au Sud en ligne droite. Ainsi la route serait sensiblement raccourcie. Quant à l’eau, on n’avait pas à craindre d’en manquer dans cette région sillonnée de creeks, surtout quand on serait à proximité des sources de la Porcupine River.

Vers la fin du premier jour de marche, l’attention clés conducteurs fut attirée par de nombreuses crevasses dont la terre était couturée. Il fallait faire d’incessants détours qui diminuèrent dans une notable proportion le chemin utile parcouru. Si cet inconvénient persistait, on serait dans l’obligation d’obliquer à droite ou à gauche jusqu’à ce qu’on eût trouvé un sol plus propice au roulage.

Heureusement, après quelques kilomètres, la situation se modifia favorablement. Les sillons plus profonds se firent en même temps plus rares. Ils semblaient se réunir par degrés, les uns aux autres, de telle sorte qu’il ne resta bientôt qu’un petit nombre de crevasses agrandies dont chacune totalisait celles qui avaient contribué à la former.

Cette loi se poursuivit jusqu’au bout avec une rigueur mathématique. A soixante kilomètres du Golden Mount, il n’en existait plus qu’une seule, mais d’une telle taille que le nom de ravin lui eût mieux convenu. Cette cassure, profonde de quinze mètres, large de soixante, aux bords déchiquetés comme à la suite d’un violent arrachement, courait du Nord au Sud avec quelques degrés de déviation vers l’Ouest. Elle paraissait donc se diriger presque exactement vers Dawson City, et la caravane n’eut qu’à suivre son bord oriental pour ne pas s’écarter d’une droite géométrique.

Cette circonstance singulière était naturellement l’objet des conversations de tous. L’énorme fossé s’en allait à perte de vue, implacablement rectiligne. A ses pentes que n’égayait pas la plus petite touffe d’herbe, à la netteté des fragments d’humus que nulle pluie n’avait encore lavés, on reconnaissait qu’il devait être de création récente. Quelle force avait pu accomplir d’un seul coup une œuvre aussi gigantesque?

«Le Golden Mount, répondit Ben Raddle à Summy Skim qui l’interrogeait à ce sujet. C’est une réaction secondaire du volcan. Avant l’éruption proprement dite, nous avons ressenti, si tu t’en souviens, une violente secousse sismique, et l’horizon du Sud a été pendant un certain temps tout empâté de poussière. Tu connais maintenant l’origine de cette poussière.

— A une telle distance de la montagne! se récria Summy Skim.

— Cela n’a rien de surprenant, affirma l’ingénieur. Les volcans, avant d’entrer en éruption, causent souvent des désordres à une distance infiniment plus grande. Mais tout s’apaise, dès que la pression intérieure réussit à se frayer une issue suffisante par le cratère. C’est bien ce qui s’est passé ici.»

On ne franchit le cercle polaire que le 12 août. La route, plus courte, était aussi plus mauvaise, et l’on ne parvenait pas à dépasser une moyenne de douze à quinze kilomètres par jour. Le Scout regrettait vivement de n’avoir pas refait en sens inverse la route de Fort Mac Pherson.

Par bonheur, la santé générale se maintenait dans un état satisfaisant. Ces vigoureux Canadiens, rompus aux fatigues, restaient valides en dépit des pires épreuves.

La vaste crevasse ouverte par l’effort volcanique accompagnait toujours la caravane dans son exode vers le Sud. Cependant, cent kilomètres au delà du cercle polaire, elle parut perdre de son importance première. Les bords se rapprochaient, le fond se comblait. Cette modification, toutefois, ne s’opérait que très lentement, et l’on pouvait encore aisément discerner cette fidèle compagne de route, quand, cinquante kilomètres plus loin, elle obliqua plus fortement sur la droite, et, d’abîme devenue simple fêlure, alla se perdre dans l’horizon de l’Ouest.

Les hauteurs qui encadrent la capitale du Klondike apparurent le 3 septembre. Quelques instants après midi, on s’arrêtait enfin devant la porte de Northern Hôtel.

Ce fut le signal de la dislocation. Patrick et Neluto se dirigèrent vers la maison du faubourg où ils comptaient bien retrouver leur ami Lorique. Le Scout conduisit ses hommes et son matériel augmente de celui de Hunter à son dépôt de Dawson. Quant aux anciens mineurs du 129, ils se répandirent dans la ville, et se mirent en quête de logements.

Pendant ce temps, Jane Edgerton, Summy Skim et Ben Raddle, auxquels les épreuves endurées n’avaient pu faire perdre le souvenir des raffinements de la civilisation, se livraient avec délice à une exagération de toilette. En dépit des prix excessifs de Dawson, tout y passa: bain, coiffeur, tailleur et couturière, lingère et chemisier. Vers trois heures, ils se retrouvaient tous trois, reposés, ragaillardis, transformés, dans le hall de Northern Hôtel.

Tandis que Jane, impatiente d’embrasser sa cousine, se dirigeait en hâte vers l’hôpital, Ben et Summy se rendirent aux bureaux de l’*Anglo-American Transportation and Trading Company*, où, avant de partir, ils avaient déposé ce qui leur restait de fonds. Il fallait penser à la question d’argent. Quelle que fût la valeur de la masse d’or projetée par le Golden Mount, ils étaient pour l’instant fort dépourvus d’espèces monnayées.

Ce fut Summy qui présenta au guichet un chèque que le préposé reçut d’un air nonchalant, qui se transforma instantanément en un air effaré dès qu’il eut jeté les yeux sur les noms dont ce chèque était signé. Le guichet se referma aussitôt d’un coup sec, puis, derrière le grillage, il y eut un bruit de remue-ménage dont les deux cousins furent très intrigués.

En attendant que fussent accomplies, à l’abri des regards profanes, les formalités prescrites pour le payement d’un chèque, les deux cousins se transportèrent à un autre guichet où ils remirent le bloc d’or envoyé par le Golden Mount dans de si dramatiques circonstances. Le préposé aux matières précieuses, en recevant cette pépite phénoménale, ne montra pas la superbe indifférence de son collègue des comptes courants. Il manifesta, au contraire, par la vivacité de ses gestes, la surprise que lui causait ce merveilleux échantillon des richesses minières. Le bloc était splendide, en effet. Nettoyé, frotté, débarrassé de la moindre parcelle de matière étrangère, il étincelait dans sa robe jaune et réfléchissait la lumière du jour par ses mille facettes.

Quand le représentant de la *Trading Company* eut suffisamment exprimé son admiration, il procéda à la pesée que suivit un rapide calcul.

«Vingt mille six cent trente-deux dollars, cinquante cents,[1] annonça-t-il.

Ben Raddle acquiesça du geste.

«Au crédit de messieurs?.. interrogea le préposé, la plume en suspens.

— Summy Skim et Ben Raddle,» compléta l'ingénieur.

omme précédemment, le guichet se ferma d'un coup sec, et il y eut derrière le grillage ce même remue-ménage qui avait déjà excité la curiosité des deux cousins.

Quelques minutes s'écoulèrent. Ben Raddle, peu patient de son naturel, commençait à se demander tout haut si l'on ne se moquait pas de lui, lorsqu'un employé paraissant d'un grade élevé vint, à travers la salle, prier MM. Summy Skim et Ben Raddle de bien vouloir prendre la peine de le suivre, M. William Broll désirant leur parler.

Ceux-ci, quel que fût leur étonnement, obéirent à la courtoise invitation et se trouvèrent en peu d'instants en présence du sous-directeur, qui était pour eux une vieille connaissance.

«Je vous prie de m'excuser, messieurs, si je vous ai dérangés, dit-il. Mais j'avais donné l'ordre de me prévenir la première lois que l'un de vous se présenterait dans nos bureaux. Je me félicite de vous y recevoir tous les deux en même temps.

Summy Skim et Ben Raddle saluèrent, sans exprimer autrement leur surprise de l'honneur qui leur était fait.

«Je ne pouvais, vous le comprendrez, continua le sous-directeur, laisser partir, sans les avoir priés d'agréer nos compliments, les plus importants clients de notre maison.

Les deux cousins, d’un même mouvement, relevèrent les yeux sur leur interlocuteur. M. William Broll était-il atteint de folie subite? Ou bien l’*Anglo-American Transportation and Trading Company* en était-elle réduite à cet excès de misère que leur médiocre crédit eût une telle importance dans ses livres?

«Ah! reprenait pendant ce temps le sous-directeur, vous devez, souvent vous moquer de nous, et il faut avouer que vous en avez le droit. Avons-nous assez manqué de flair! Quand je pense que nous nous sommes laissés arrêter par une misérable question de frontière! Quand je pense que nous avions estimé à cinq mille dollars, – oui, à cinq mille dollars! – votre propriété!.. Enfin, il n’y a pas à craindre que vous nous reprochiez notre aveuglement, puisque c’est à lui que vous devez d’être les heureux propriétaires du 129.

— Du 129? répétèrent ensemble Summy Skim et Ben Raddle littéralement ahuris.

— Du merveilleux, de l’extraordinaire, du prodigieux 129!

Et si le prolixe sous-directeur s’en tenait à ces trois épithètes, c’est, évidemment, qu’il n’en trouvait pas d’autres!

— Pardon, mais… commença Summy Skim suffoqué.

Ben Raddle, qui n’était jamais bien long à retrouver le Nord dans toutes les circonstances de la vie, lui coupa la parole.

— Que voulez-vous, monsieur le sous-directeur, en affaire tout n’est qu’heur et malheur, dit-il en affectant le ton le plus naturel. Vous retrouverez une autre occasion.

— Jamais comme celle-là, affirma énergiquement William Broll. II n’existe pas au Klondike, ni ailleurs, de gisement comparable au vôtre. Certes, je conçois que vous en ayez douté longtemps. Pendant un an vous avez dû tâtonner, lutter de toutes les manières, et nous n’avons eu, à notre grand regret, que des rapports trop rares. Mais vous êtes, maintenant, royalement payés do vos peines, ainsi que le prouvent les envois que vous nous faites tous les jours depuis un mois.

— Tous les jours? balbutia Summy Skim.

— Ou presque tous, du moins.

— Depuis un mois, vous croyez? insinua Ben Raddle d’une voix plus assurée.

Le sous-directeur parut chercher dans ses souvenirs.

— Mon Dieu, oui, dit-il, il y a près d’un mois que nous avons reçu le premier de vos envois actuels.

— Vraiment! fit Ben Raddle d’un ton bonasse.

— Du reste, ajouta M. William Broll, si vous avez besoin de connaître la date exacte de ce premier envoi, nous la trouverons sur nos livres.

Il appuya sur un timbre. Un employé parut aussitôt.

«Faites-moi monter, lui dit le sous-directeur, le compte-courant de MM. Summy Skim et Ben Raddle, propriétaires du claim 129.

L’employé disparut.

«Cela me permettra de vous donner votre solde exact par la même occasion. Voilà qui ne manquera pas non plus d’un certain intérêt, s’écria M. William Broll, en riant largement.

On apportait le registre. Le sous-directeur l’ouvrit devant lui.

«Voyez vous-mêmes, messieurs, dit-il. Je ne me trompais guère. Nous sommes aujourd’hui le 3 septembre et votre premier envoi est du 5 août…

— Le 5 août!.. se disait en lui-même Summy Skim. Un an, jour pour jour, après l’inondation du claim 129!..

— Quant à votre solde… continuait le sous-directeur en suivant de l’œil les longues colonnes de chiffres. Voyons!.. Ah! le voici… Voulez-vous prendre note?

Ben Raddle s’empara d’un crayon et écrivit sous la dictée d’une main ferme:

«Trois millions trois cent huit mille quatre cent trente et un dollars quatre-vingt-dix cents2… Et encore sans y comprendre votre livraison d’aujourd’hui, qui porte le total général à trois millions trois cent vingt-neuf mille soixante-quatre dollars quarante cents3.

L’ingénieur avait écrit avec soin ces chiffres vertigineux. Si Summy Skim, ému de pitié pour sa propre cervelle, avait simplement pris le parti de ne plus penser, il réfléchissait, lui, pendant que William Broll continuait sur le mode dithyrambique:

«Ah! votre envoi d’aujourd’hui!.. C’est le plus merveilleux de tous, non par la somme assurément, mais par la beauté extraordinaire de l’échantillon!..

Quelle pépite, *by God*!.. Je la crois vraiment unique au monde, et le 129 seul pouvait en donner une de cette taille!..

Ben Raddle avait terminé ses réflexions. Que le sous-directeur fût fou et fou à lier, cela ne faisait aucun doute. Il y avait en tous cas un moyen bien simple de s'en assurer. Il expliqua d'un air détaché:

— Nous étions venus, mon cousin et moi, dans l'intention de toucher un petit chèque de mille dollars; mais, puisque nous sommes de passage à Dawson, je réfléchis que nous ferions bien de prendre une somme plus importante.

— A vos ordres, messieurs, répondit M. Broll. Quelle somme désirez-vous?

— Cent mille dollars[4], dit Ben Raddle froidement.

On allait bien voir. Si le sous-directeur était fou, il n'était pas croyable que tous les employés le fussent devenus en même temps. La plaisanterie prendrait fin, lorsqu'il faudrait effectivement verser une pareille somme.

— A vos ordres, messieurs, répéta M. Broll à la demande formulée par Ben Raddle. Le temps de compter ces cent mille dollars et on les portera à votre hôtel en même temps que le reçu.»

«Nous pouvons les attendre longtemps,» se disait Ben Raddle, en prenant congé du sous-directeur qui reconduisit ses deux visiteurs jusqu'à la porte en manifestant la plus grande amabilité.

Summy s'était levé en même temps que son cousin, et l'avait suivi avec la docilité d'un petit enfant.

«Qu’est-ce que tu penses de ça, Ben? bégaya-t-il, dès qu’ils furent dans la rue.

— Rien,» répondit Ben Raddle plus troublé qu’il ne voulait le paraître.

Le reste de la route se fît en silence et les deux cousins arrivèrent à Northern Hôtel sans échanger d’autre parole.

En entrant dans le hall, ils y trouvèrent Jane Edgerton qui semblait les attendre impatiemment. La jeune fille avait dû éprouver, elle aussi, sa part d’émotion. Ses traits bouleversés exprimaient une cruelle inquiétude et son visage était baigné de larmes.

A cette vue, Summy Skim oublia sa fantastique entrevue avec le sous-directeur de l’*Anglo-American Transportation and Trading Company*. Il courut vers Jane Edgerton, lui prit affectueusement les mains.

«Qu’avez-vous, mademoiselle Jane? interrogea-t-il. Que se passe-t-il?

— Ma cousine a disparu, répondit Jane Edgerton en s’efforçant vainement de retenir ses sanglots.

Ce fut au tour de Ben Raddle d’être ému.

— Miss Edith est disparue? dit-il d’une voix troublée. C’est impossible!

— Rien n’est plus certain, cependant, affirma Jane Edgerton. En vous quittant, je suis allée à l’hôpital où j’ai trouvé le docteur Pilcox. C’est de lui que je tiens la nouvelle.

— Et le docteur Pilcox ne vous a donné aucun détail?

— Il m’a dit qu’Edith l’avait quitté à l’improviste, sans aucun avertissement préalable, le 25 juillet dernier, à la première heure.

— Sans donner la raison de son départ?

— Non.

— Sans dire où elle allait?

— Pas davantage. Elle s’est bornée à annoncer qu’elle comptait être de retour au début de l’hiver.

— Et le docteur ne sait pas où elle est allée?

— Il l’ignore.

— Voilà une aventure, par exemple! s’écria l’ingénieur qui semblait en proie à une violente émotion.

A ce moment, un domestique pénétra dans le hall et annonça qu’un visiteur désirait parler à MM. Summy Skim et Ben Raddle.

«Faites entrer, répondit machinalement l’ingénieur.

Le nouveau venu portait à la main une sacoche assez volumineuse.

— Je suis chargé, dit-il, par notre sous-directeur, M. William Broll, d’apporter à ces messieurs les cent mille dollars qu’ils ont demandés, et de les prier de bien vouloir m’en donner reçu.

Tout en parlant, l’employé de la *Transportation and Trading Company* avait extrait de la sacoche des liasses de banknotes qu’il empilait au fur et à mesure sur la table.

— Si ces messieurs veulent bien vérifier? suggéra-t-il.

Ben Raddle, dominant son trouble, compta méthodiquement les billets.

— D’accord, dit-il.

— Ces messieurs auront donc l’obligeance de signer mon reçu?»

Ben Raddle prit la plume et apposa son nom d’une main ferme. Quant à Summy, il dut lui indiquer la place et presque lui guider la main. Summy vivait en plein rêve et n’était plus de ce monde.

Ce fut Ben Raddle qui reconduisit l’employé de la banque jusqu’à la porte. Puis il revint vers Jane Edgerton et son cousin.

Il les retrouva face à face, considérant le tas de banknotes qui recouvrait la table.

Summy Skim avait toujours son air désorienté. Jane Edgerton continuait à pleurer; mais, à travers ses larmes, son regard quêteur interrogeait.

Ben Raddle n’était pas d’humeur à s’embarquer en de longues dissertations en vue d’éclaircir ce qu’il ne comprenait pas lui-même. Il s’était dominé jusque-là, mais la réaction se produisait maintenant et la force commençait à lui manquer. D’un geste las, il remit toute explication à plus tard.

Un instant, ils demeurèrent tous trois, debout, au milieu du hall. Puis, d’un même mouvement, ils se laissèrent tomber au fond de fauteuils qui ouvraient des bras accueillants, et leurs têtes se renversèrent sur de confortables dossiers. Longtemps ils restèrent ainsi, l’esprit tendu, Œdipes impuissants à deviner les énigmes du Sphinx, tandis qu’au dehors, sur la cité où le bruit de la vie s’apaisait, descendaient peu à peu les ombres du crépuscule.

CHAPITRE XVI

Ex abysso resurgit.

La dépression de Ben Raddle aurait-elle duré longtemps? C’est peu probable, étant donné le tempérament de l’ingénieur. En tous cas, les événements ne permirent pas que la réaction se fit d’une manière spontanée.

Au moment où l’électricité s’allumait dans les rues de Dawson, un domestique vint annoncer pour la deuxième fois qu’un étranger demandait à parler à M. Summy Skim.

Le visiteur n’était autre que Neluto. Il n’apportait aucune nouvelle de bien grande importance. Il avait cru simplement devoir avertir M. Skim que Patrick et lui se trouvaient dans l’impossibilité d’habiter la maison du faubourg, cette maison étant fermée et Lorique l’ayant quittée depuis plus d’un mois.

Le départ de Lorique ne pouvait étonner Ben Raddle. Il était à croire que le contre-maître canadien avait découvert une bonne occasion d’employer son activité. Peut-être même était-il à l’heure actuelle en train de prospecter pour le compte de son ancien patron.

Mais l’intervention de Neluto suffit à rompre le charme. Ben Raddle se redressa, de nouveau prêt aux décisions promptes, à l’action énergique.

«Neluto! appela-t-il au moment où, sa confidence faite, celui-ci allait se retirer.

— Monsieur Raddle?

— Neluto, nous partons demain pour le claim 129.

— Pour le 129! répéta l’Indien surpris.

— Oui. La fermeture de la maison du faubourg n’a donc aucune importance, puisqu’il te faut renoncer à dormir cette nuit.

Ben Raddle prit sur la table une poignée de banknotes.

«Voici deux mille dollars, dit-il. Je t’en donnerai d’autres, autant qu’il le faudra. N’épargne donc pas l’argent, et que demain, à la première heure, nous ayons devant la porte une voiture capable de nous contenir tous.

— Demain matin! se récria Neluto. Mais il fait nuit, monsieur Raddle!

— Insiste, prie, menace, et surtout sème les dollars à pleines mains. C’est encore le meilleur moyen. D’ailleurs, conclut l’ingénieur, arrange-toi comme tu voudras, pourvu que la voiture soit prête à l’heure dite.

Neluto soupira.

— On essayera, monsieur Raddle,» dit-il en s’élançant au dehors.

L’Indien à peine parti, ce fut le docteur Pilcox, qui, averti par la visite de Jane du retour des deux cousins, vint, toujours empressé, toujours jovial, leur prodiguer les témoignages de la plus vive amitié.

En sa qualité de médecin, c’est de la santé qu’il s’enquit tout d’abord.

«Bien portants?.. demanda-t-il.

— Comme vous voyez, répondit Summy Skim.

— Et contents?..

— Vous pensez!

— Je crois bien, s’écria le docteur. Un si beau voyage!

— Vous n’y êtes pas. Contents… d’être revenus!

Le docteur Pilcox fut alors mis au courant des péripéties de l’expédition. Il en connut tous les déboires. On lui raconta l’arrivée des Texiens, leurs attaques, l’éruption du volcan provoquée par l’ingénieur, et comment tant d’efforts demeuraient inutiles, puisque, à l’exception d’une seule, les pépites du Golden Mount gisaient maintenant dans les profondeurs de la mer Polaire.

— Voyez-vous, dit le docteur, ce volcan qui n’a même pas su vomir du bon côté!.. Vraiment, c’était bien la peine de lui administrer de l’émétique!

Et, par émétique, le docteur entendait la dérivation du Rio Rubber qui avait précipité ses torrents d’eau dans l’estomac du Golden Mount.

Pour toute consolation, il ne put que répéter avec quelques variantes d’ordre médical ce que, déjà, Summy Skim avait dit à Ben Raddle:

«Soyez philosophes! La philosophie, c’est tout ce qu’il y a de plus hygiénique au monde. Or, l’hygiène, c’est la santé. Et la santé, c’est encore la plus merveilleuse des pépites!»

Ben Raddle ne laissa pas partir le docteur sans le questionner au sujet d’Edith Edgerton. Il n’en put rien obtenir. Le docteur avait dit à Jane tout ce qu’il savait, et cela se réduisait d’ailleurs à peu de chose.

Un beau jour, Edith était partie brusquement, en se bornant à promettre qu’elle serait revenue avant l’hiver. Le docteur avait dû se contenter de cette assurance, et force fut à Ben Raddle de l’imiter en soupirant.

Le lendemain matin, le jour n’était pas levé, quand la voiture s’arrêta devant la porte de l’hôtel. Neluto s’était surpassé. Provisions, armes, bagages, rien ne manquait, sans compter que le véhicule, des plus confortables, était attelé de deux vigoureux chevaux. On partit aux premières lueurs do l’aube.

Mais, si l’argent semé à pleines mains avait pu improviser des moyens de transport, il était impuissant à diminuer le nombre des kilomètres. Il avait fallu trois jours, l’année précédente, pour arriver au claim 129; il n’en fallut guère moins pour franchir de nouveau la même distance, d’ailleurs légèrement accrue.

A Fort Cudahy, on avait dû, en effet, passer le Forty Miles Creek près de son confluent. D’après les renseignements donnés par les gens du pays, la rive droite était, depuis plus d’un mois, devenue absolument impraticable à proximité de la frontière.

Conformément à ces avis autorisés, les quatre voyageurs prirent le parti de traverser la rivière et d’en remonter la rive gauche.

Tout le long de la route, et plus spécialement à Fort Cudahy, les gens du pays ne parlaient, d’ailleurs, que des claims situés sur le haut cours du Forty Miles. A les en croire, d’extraordinaires découvertes avaient été faites depuis peu, et l’on se trouvait en présence de gisements d’une richesse prodigieuse, comme aucun mineur n’en avait jamais vu.

C’est en vain que Ben Raddle bouillait d’impatience en entendant ces merveilleux récits: les chevaux, indifférents à son impatience, n’en faisaient pas un pas de plus, et ce fut seulement le 6 septembre, vers une heure de l’après-midi, qu’on arriva à proximité de la frontière.

Le pays était méconnaissable.

Pendant la plus grande partie du parcours, les voyageurs n’avaient remarqué aucun changement notable. Les sites qu’ils avaient contemplés, jusque-là, seulement de la rive droite, et qu’ils apercevaient maintenant de la rive gauche, ne paraissaient pas avoir subi d’autres modifications que celles résultant de cette différence d’orientation. Tout était à la même place qu’avant la catastrophe du 5 août.

Mais, en arrivant à la hauteur dû claim 127 *bis* jadis exploité sur la rive droite par Jane Edgerton, et lorsque, ayant franchi la crête des hauteurs, dont la chaîne venue du Nord-Ouest s’infléchissait en face de ce claim et courait vers l’aval du rio de manière à en former, à partir de ce point, la rive gauche, la voiture commença à descendre la pente, il n’en fut plus ainsi. Alors qu’ils auraient dû trouver à leurs pieds le creek élargi aux dépens du claim 129, ils avaient devant eux un vaste espace de terre ferme, étendu de part et d’autre de la frontière sur une longueur totale d’environ un kilomètre, et sur lequel grouillait tout un peuple de travailleurs.

La nappe liquide ne commençait qu’au Sud de cet espace de terre ferme et paraissait être désormais tout entière contenue dans les limites Nord et Sud de l’ancien claim 129, au-dessus duquel le creek dévié s’écoulait bruyamment. La colline qui séparait jadis la propriété des deux cousins de celle de Jane Edgerton ne pouvait plus faire obstacle au courant. Son extrême pointe avait disparu. A sa place, le creek suivait son cours, et, arrivé à la barrière rocheuse qui séparait autrefois en deux parties le claim

127 bis, tombait en cascade de l’étage supérieur à l’étage inférieur, pour aller, une centaine de mètres plus loin, retrouver son ancien lit, qu’il ne quittait plus jusqu’à sa rencontre avec le Yukon.

Les changements survenus paraissaient donc n’avoir intéressé qu’une zone très restreinte, s’étendant de part et d’autre de la frontière, zone dont la partie du Forty Miles Creek qui était auparavant en bordure du claim de l’oncle Josias occupait sensiblement le centre.

La voiture continuait à descendre la route en lacets, et ses occupants considéraient avec surprise l’extraordinaire spectacle qui leur était offert. Était-ce donc le claim 129? Mais la surface en exploitation excédait de beaucoup les limites communément admises pour un claim. D’autre part, si c’était bien là le fameux 129, dont, mieux que quiconque, ils connaissaient les merveilleux rendements, à qui appartenait-il, et comment pouvait-il se faire que ses produits eussent été versés au crédit de Summy Skim et Raddle? Par qui et pourquoi ces versements avaient-ils été opérés? Qui avait recruté, qui dirigeait ce peuple de travailleurs? Ces questions se pressaient tumultueusement dans leur esprit.

A mesure qu’ils approchaient du bas de la pente, les objets se précisaient. Ben Raddle discerna bientôt quatre rockers installés en deux groupes distants l’un de l’autre de trois cents mètres environ et alimentés par une pompe à vapeur fonctionnant en contre-bas. Occupés au service de ces rockers, piochant ou lavant au plat ou à l’écuelle, deux cent cinquante ouvriers environ s’activaient au travail sans même paraître remarquer l’arrivée des nouveaux venus.

L’un d’eux, cependant, quitta sa besogne, lorsque la voiture pénétra sur la surface en exploitation, et demanda poliment aux visiteurs ce qu’ils désiraient.

«Parler à votre maître, répondit Ben Raddle an nom de tous.

— Veuillez me suivre, messieurs,» dit l’ouvrier.

Summy Skim, Ben Raddle et Jane Edgerton mirent pied à terre et commencèrent, sous la conduite de leur guide, à remonter la pente de la nouvelle rive du Forty Miles Creek.

Au bout de cinq cents pas, celui-ci s’arrêta devant une maisonnette construite au pied du versant occidental des hauteurs que la voiture venait de franchir, et, du poing, il en heurta la porte.

Celle-ci s’ouvrit aussitôt. Sur le seuil parut une jeune femme qui fut saluée par des exclamations de surprise.

«Edith! s’écria Jane, en la reconnaissant et en s’élançant dans ses bras.

Tout en rendant à sa cousine caresses pour caresses, le regard d’Edith Edgerton courut en dessous jusqu’à Ben Raddle qui s’avançait le premier.

— Mademoiselle Edith! s’écriait aussi l’ingénieur au comble de l’étonnement.

— Monsieur Raddle! fit Edith sur le même ton.

Et, pour tout observateur suffisamment clairvoyant, il eût été indubitable qu’une sorte de trouble avait passé dans le clair regard de la jeune fille et que son frais visage s’était coloré – oh! si peu! – comme du reflet d’une fugitive rougeur. Mais c'étaient là nuances impalpables qui devaient passer et passèrent inaperçues.

Quand on se fut abondamment manifesté le plaisir réciproque qu'on éprouvait à se retrouver, quand des sakehands eurent été échangés au milieu d'un bruit confus, car tout le monde parlait à la fois:

— Nous expliquerez-vous?.. commença Ben Raddle.

— A l'instant, interrompit Edith. Mais prenez la peine d'entrer auparavant. Je crois que je trouverai assez de sièges pour vous recevoir décemment.

On pénétra dans la maisonnette garnie d'un mobilier dont la simplicité méritait largement l'épithète de Spartiate. Un coffre servant d'armoire, un matelas d'herbes sèches, une table et des chaises, l'œil le plus perspicace n'aurait pu y découvrir autre chose. Mais ce rudiment de mobilier étincelait d'une si méticuleuse propreté qu'il en paraissait presque luxueux.

«Mon explication sera la plus simple du monde, dit Edith dès qu'on se fut assis. Le soir du 24 juillet dernier, Lorique apprit par le plus grand des hasards que le haut Forty Miles Creek venait d'être le théâtre d'un bouleversement plus grand encore que celui de l'année dernière. On disait notamment que la plupart des claims inondés à cette époque avaient reparu au jour. Comment la nouvelle s'était-elle transmise avec cette rapidité? Comment avait-elle franchi en vingt-quatre heures une distance que l'on ne peut parcourir en moins de trois jours, en employant les plus rapides moyens de transport? Je ne sais. Elle avait volé de bouche en bouche, s'étalant comme une tache d'huile sur la mer. Quelques heures après que Lorique en eût été informé, tout le monde à Dawson était aussi bien renseigné que lui-même.

— Que fit alors Lorique? interrogea Ben Raddle.

— Il vint le soir même, répondit Edith, me mettre au courant de ces faits. Mon parti fut pris sur-le-champ. Puisque M. Raddle et M. Skim étaient absents, il convenait de les suppléer, et de faire ce qu’ils auraient fait s’ils avaient été là. Je le pouvais d’autant mieux, que, pendant l’été, il n’y a presque pas de malades à l’hôpital.

«Après nous être munis de fonds, grâce à la procuration que M. Raddle avait laissée à Lorique, nous partîmes donc tous les deux à la première heure le lendemain, en cachant à tous, par prudence, le but de notre voyage.

— Vous êtes ici depuis ce moment?

— Oui, depuis le 27 juillet. Nous y avons trouvé les choses comme vous les voyez. Le bruit public avait dit la vérité, mais en la dénaturant quelque peu. Ainsi que vous pouvez le constater, les anciens claims ne sont nullement revenus au jour. Au contraire, inondés une première fois par l’exhaussement du lit du Forty Miles Creek, ils l’ont été plus fortement encore par une nouvelle surélévation du sol. Nous travaillons aujourd’hui dans le lit même du Forty Miles Creek, qui, définitivement dévié, coule uniquement désormais sur l’emplacement des anciens claims.

— Dans ce cas, fit observer Ben Raddle, je m’explique de moins en moins…

— Attendez, répliqua Edith. Vous comprendrez tout à l’heure. Quand nous sommes arrivés ici, personne ne nous avait encore devancés. Comme vous le savez, la concession d’un claim de rivière comporte le droit d’exploitation dans le cours d’eau en bordure. La partie de l’ancien lit du creek soulevée au jour appartenait donc en droit aux concessionnaires riverains. Ces prescriptions légales, qui sont connues de toute la région, avaient été cause de l’abstention générale. Nous fûmes moins scrupuleux, et notre premier soin fut de planter des piquets qui englobaient à la fois les parties dépendant des claims 127 *bis* et 129 et celles dépendant, à l’Est, du claim 127 et, à l’Ouest, de l’autre côté de la frontière, du claim 131. Cela fait, nous procédâmes à quelques recherches sur ce terrain vierge jusque-là de toute prospection.

— Je connais déjà le résultat de ces recherches, interrompit Ben Raddle. Il y a de quoi confondre l’imagination.

— Je vous fais grâce du détail, reprit Edith Edgerton, et passe tout de suite à la conclusion de l’examen rapide que nous finies à ce moment. Nous reconnûmes immédiatement que toute la surface, la veille encore, recouverte par les eaux du Forty Miles Creek, était d’une richesse étonnante, bien qu’inégale. Si, depuis des siècles, l’or s’était partout déposé à dose massive, il s’en fallait que le dépôt eût été fait d’une manière uniforme. Il nous fut aisé de constater, et l’exploitation n’a fait que confirmer cette conclusion de la première heure, que la teneur, d’ailleurs toujours très remarquable, des sables aurifères allait néanmoins en s’amoindrissant du centre aux extrémités de la surface délimitée par nos piquets. Au centre même, c’est-à-dire exactement en face de l’ancien claim 129, nous fûmes littéralement éblouis par nos premiers essais. Que s’est-il passé en cet endroit? Je ne suis pas assez savante pour le dire. Peut-être une dépression du sol a-t-elle causé dans le cours du Forty Miles des tourbillons favorables au dépôt séculaire de l’or en suspension? Je ne sais. Ce qu’il y a de sûr, c’est qu’en ce point nous nous trouvâmes en présence d’un amas de poudre d’or presque pure, amas qui affecte la forme d’une ellipse de trente-cinq yards sur vingt et un environ, et dont la profondeur, que je crois être relativement considérable, demeure tout à fait inconnue.

Les auditeurs d’Edith Edgerton écoutaient comme dans un rêve ce féerique récit qui tenait plus du roman que de la réalité. Ils n’auraient pu dire ce qui les étonnait le plus, de ce caprice de la nature ou de la clairvoyance et de l’énergie de celle qui en avait si bien tiré parti. Ils n’étaient pas au bout de leurs étonnements.

«En présence d’une telle découverte, reprit Edith, je ne perdis pas une heure pour consolider le droit d’exploitation. Un claim lût enregistré au nom de M. Raddle, un autre au nom de M. Skim, d’autres au nom de ma cousine, de Lorique et au mien. Que, pour obtenir ces concessions, la plupart aux noms d’absents, je n’aie pas été amenée à commettre quelques… incorrections, je n’oserais pas le soutenir. Mais, en ces sortes de choses, l’essentiel est de réussir.

— A coup sûr! approuva Ben Raddle.

— Il est inutile d’ajouter que pas un instant je n’ai perdu de vue la situation réelle. C’est avec les capitaux de M. Summy Skim et de M. Ben Raddle que ces claims ont pu être mis en exploitation. C’est donc à eux qu’ils appartiennent. Je ne me suis jamais considérée que comme leur mandataire, et j’ai agi en conséquence. Aujourd’hui, tout est en règle. J’ai reçu, pour le claim situé en territoire américain, le dernier document dûment paraphé.

Edith, tout en parlant, s’était dirigée vers le coffre qui occupait un coin de la pièce. Elle en retira une liasse de papiers.

«Voici les titres de propriété, et voici les contre-lettres de Lorique et de moi-même garantissant les véritables propriétaires contre toute réclamation de notre part. Il ne manque plus que celle de Jane, mais je crois pouvoir garantir qu’elle ne la refusera pas.

Pour toute réponse, Jane embrassa sa cousine.

Quant à Ben Raddle, il était tout simplement écrasé d'admiration par une telle virtuosité. «Prodigieux! prodigieux!» répétait-il entre ses dents.

Edith se leva.

«Si maintenant, dit-elle, vous voulez faire le tour du propriétaire, je vais vous servir de guide, et par la même occasion M. Raddle pourra dire bonjour à Lorique.

On sortit de la maisonnette et l'on parcourut en tous sens l'exploitation. Il y régnait une activité générale à laquelle l'ingénieur fut encore plus sensible qu'aux prouesses diplomatiques dont il venait d'entendre le récit.

Tout marchait avec une régularité de chronomètre.

A chaque extrémité de la bande de terrains aurifères, les uns en territoire canadien, les autres au delà de la frontière alaskienne, deux rockers fonctionnaient, alimentés par une petite pompe à vapeur placée près de la nouvelle rive du creek, presque en face de la partie centrale sur laquelle, travaillant, ceux-ci, au plat ou à l'écuelle, s'agitaient le plus grand nombre des ouvriers.

— Cette pompe ne m'a rien coûté, expliqua Edith. Je l'ai trouvée après le retrait des eaux, dans l'ancien lit de la rivière. Il est à croire qu'elle provient d'un claim situé en amont et abandonné lors de l'inondation de l'année dernière. Par un miracle extraordinaire, elle n'avait absolument rien de cassé. Il nous a suffi de la nettoyer, de l'installer et de nous procurer du charbon, ce qui, entre parenthèses, n'a pas été très facile.

Ben Raddle fut incapable de se contenir plus longtemps.

— Mais enfin, s'écria-t-il, me direz-vous qui a dirigé tout cela, qui a organisé le travail, procédé à ces installations?

— C'est moi, monsieur Raddle, avec l'aide de Lorique, répondit Edith d'un ton aussi éloigné de l'infatuation que d'une modestie déplacée.

— Vous! s'exclama l'ingénieur, qui, à partir de ce moment, parut plongé dans ses pensées.

Edith continuait ses explications. Elle entraîna ses compagnons jusqu'à la dernière concession située en territoire alaskien et enregistrée au nom de Lorique. Sur le claim dont il était officiellement propriétaire, on rencontra précisément le contre-maître, qui parut très ému de se retrouver en présence de Ben Raddle. Mais celui-ci, décidément très absorbé, répondit d'un air un peu étranger aux démonstrations d'amitié de ce fidèle serviteur.

Les promeneurs, en compagnie du contre-maître, revinrent vers le centre de l'exploitation.

— C'est ici la partie la plus riche, expliqua Edith.

— Où nous trouvons couramment des plats de mille dollars 1 ajouta le contre-maître avec orgueil.

Après avoir assisté à quelques lavages qui donnèrent effectivement le résultat annoncé, on se remit en marche pour retourner à la maisonnette.

Au moment d’en franchir la porte, Ben Raddle, frappé d’un pensée subite, arrêta Edith du geste.

— Ne m’avez-vous pas dit, tout à l’heure, demanda-t-il, que vous avez quitté Dawson le 25 juillet?

— En effet, répondit Edith.

— A quelle date s’était donc produit le soulèvement du Forty Miles Creek?

— Le 23 juillet.

— J’en étais sûr! s’écria Ben Raddle. C’est à notre volcan que nous devons cette fortune!

— Quel volcan? dit Edith d’un ton interrogatif.

Ben Raddle lui raconta alors les aventures de l’expédition partie à la recherche du Golden Mount. Quand il eut achevé son récit, personne ne mit en doute que l’éruption si audacieusement provoquée n’eût été la cause première du bouleversement dont cette partie du Klondike avait été le théâtre. Pour tous, il devint évident que l’ébranlement plutonique s’était transmis de proche en proche, en déterminant successivement une série de soulèvements et de dépressions symétriques.

Pendant des centaines de kilomètres la longue crevasse indiquait nettement la direction suivie par cette force, qui était venue mourir là. En ce point, déjà désagrégé par une convulsion antérieure, elle avait fini de s’épuiser en soulevant de deux mètres à peine, élévation compensée par un abaissement correspondant des anciens claims de la rive droite, une bande de terrain d’environ cinquante mètres de largeur sur un kilomètre de longueur.

Jane Edgerton fut particulièrement enthousiasmée par ces conclusions conformes à sa manière d’envisager la vie. Non, l’action n’est jamais inutile. Ce voyage en était un nouvel exemple. Alors qu’ils pensaient avoir lutté en vain, l’énergie déployée avait, à des centaines de kilomètres, des répercussions inattendues, et leur ménageait un retour triomphal.

Edith calma avec un sourire l’enthousiasme de sa cousine, et fit observer qu’il restait encore à examiner la comptabilité de l’exploitation.

Lorsque tout le monde fut entré dans la maisonnette, elle étala ses livres, en effet, et les commenta de manière à porter au comble l’admiration de Ben Raddle. Pour l’établissement de ses prix de revient et de ses frais, pour la surveillance des entrées et des sorties d’or, pour se garantir contre le vol dans une industrie où cet accident est tout particulièrement à craindre, elle avait inventé, à force de bon sens et de méthode, des procédés très simples mais d’une précision rigoureuse qui ne laissait place ni à l’erreur ni à la fraude.

«C’est de ce matin que j’ai terminé mon travail, dit-elle en forme de conclusion. Je comptais, si vous n’étiez pas arrivés, repartir pour Dawson, en emportant un double des livres. Lorique, qui restera ici, continuera à diriger jusqu’à l’hiver l’exploitation, que l’on peut, comme vous le voyez, surveiller parfaitement de loin.»

Sur ces mots, Ben Raddle quitta la maisonnette. Il étouffait. Cette petite fille lui donnait une leçon. Elle ne lui avait rien laissé à faire. Tout était au point, mieux qu’il n’aurait pu l’y mettre lui-même.

Summy Skim inquiet suivi son cousin au dehors. Pourquoi donc Ben Raddle était-il sorti si brusquement? Serait-il souffrant par hasard?

Non, Ben Raddle n’était pas souffrant. Les yeux perdus à l’horizon, il respirait l’air à pleins poumons comme quelqu’un qui se remettrait de quelque violente secousse.

«Eh bien! Ben, dit Summy en l’abordant, te voici arrivé à tes fins, et tu es content, je pense. Tu vas en avoir à remuer, des millions! D’autant plus que, cela va sans dire, je t’abandonne les miens, dont je me soucie comme de ça!..

Et Summy fit claquer son ongle entre ses dents solides.

Ben Raddle prit le bras de son cousin.

— Que penses-tu de Mlle Edith, Summy? lui demanda-t-il confidentiellement.

— Mais, qu’elle est charmante, tout à fait charmante, répondit Summy avec chaleur.

— N’est-ce pas?.. Mais ce n’est pas assez dire. C’est un prodige, cette jeune fille, Summy, un vrai prodige!» dit Ben Raddle d’un air rêveur.

CHAPITRE XVII

Un règlement de comptes.

Après un court séjour au nouveau claim 129, les deux cousins et les deux cousines avaient regagné Dawson City, en laissant Lorique à la tête de l’exploitation. Tout était convenu avec lui. Il dirigerait le claim, jusqu’à son épuisement que rien ne faisait prévoir, et il enverrait les comptes chaque semaine à Montréal où Summy Skim et Ben Raddle allaient se hâter de revenir.

Le contre-maître, cela va de soi, serait intéressé dans les bénéfices réalisés. A cet égard, il s’en était remis à ses maîtres dont il connaissait la droiture et l’équité. Le jour encore lointain où les gisements du Forty Miles Creek seraient épuisés, Lorique serait donc riche lui aussi, et capable, soit d’entreprendre une exploitation pour son compte, soit d’aller chercher un repos bien gagné sous un ciel plus clément.

Assurément, les quatre voyageurs avaient été quelque peu tassés dans la voiture qui les emmenait, mais personne n’avait songé à s’en plaindre. Les nerfs encore secoués par cette série d’émotions heureuses, tous s’étaient montrés fort gais. Edith, elle-même, s’était départie de son calme un peu froid.

Les deux cousins s’étant en cours de route enquis des projets des jeunes filles, chacune d’elles avait énoncé les siens. Ils étaient bien simples. Puisque le sort n’avait pas favorisé les efforts de Jane, rien ne serait changé dans leur situation. Celle-ci continuerait à prospecter, tandis que sa cousine retournerait à ses malades.

Ben Raddle et Summy, sans s’indigner autrement, s’étaient bornés à demander aux jeunes filles si elles les prenaient pour des monstres d’ingratitude, et la conversation en était restée là.

Ce soir-là, il s’agissait de trancher la question. Sur la convocation de Ben Raddle, tous quatre étaient réunis dans un salon dont celui-ci s’était assuré l’exclusive possession.

L’ingénieur entra tout de suite dans le vif de la question.

«L’ordre du jour est de régler nos comptes, dit-il en ouvrant la séance.

Summy bâilla.

— Ça va être bien ennuyeux!.. fit-il remarquer. D’ailleurs, je te l’ai déjà dit, insatiable Ben, pour moi, pose zéro et retiens tout!

— Si nous commençons par des plaisanteries de ce genre, répondit Ben Raddle sévèrement, nous n’en finirons pas. Soyons sérieux, Summy, je t’en prie.

— Soyons donc sérieux! acquiesça Summy en soupirant. Mais que de temps perdu qu’on pourrait mieux employer!

Ben Raddle reprit:

— Le premier point dont il convient de tenir compte, c’est que l’exploitation du Forty Miles Creek est la conséquence, indirecte il est vrai, mais enfin la conséquence de la découverte du Golden Mount.

— D’accord! approuvèrent ses trois interlocuteurs.

— Par conséquent, les engagements pris en raison de ce voyage conservent toute leur valeur, et au premier rang celui qui concerne la mère de Jacques Ledun. Avez-vous une idée de ce qu'il serait juste selon vous de lui allouer?

— Une participation du quart?.. proposa Jane Edgerton.

— Ou même des quatre quarts, renchérit Summy. En ce qui me regarde, je n'y vois aucun inconvénient.

Ben Raddle haussa les épaules.

— Il me semble, suggéra Edith de sa voix calme, qu'une rente serait préférable.

— Mademoiselle Edith a raison, comme toujours, dit l'ingénieur. Nous adopterons donc le principe d'une rente, dont nous fixerons le quantum ultérieurement, mais qui sera en tout cas largement calculée, cela va sans dire.

L'approbation fut unanime.

«Il faudra en outre, reprit Ben Raddle, désintéresser généreusement Lorique, le Scout et les hommes qui ont fait avec nous l'expédition du Golden Mount.

— C'est évident, dirent ensemble les deux cousines.

— Ce qui restera ensuite devra être, suivant nos conventions avec miss Jane, divisé en deux parties égales. Une pour elle, l'autre pour moi. Je ne pense pas que miss Jane refuse de partager à son tour avec sa cousine à qui nous devons le claim 129, tandis que, de mon côté, je partagerai avec Summy, en dépit de ses airs dégoûtés.

— Votre calcul n’est pas juste, objecta Jane. Puisque vous voulez, sans y être forcé, partager avec nous, il faut du moins appliquer toutes les conventions. Vous oubliez qu’un contrat antérieur vous donne droit à dix pour cent sur mes bénéfices au Klondike.

— C’est exact, reconnut Ben Raddle, d’un air sérieux.

Il prit un crayon et du papier.

«Chiffrons maintenant, annonça-t-il. Nous disons donc que j’ai droit à un dizième de votre moitié, soit à un vingtième de l’ensemble, ce qui fait au total onze vingtièmes pour moi et neuf vingtièmes pour vous.

— Si je compte bien, intervint Summy de l’air le plus sérieux du monde, il résulte des calculs que la part de Mlle Edith sera les sept cinquièmes des trois quarts des trente-huit quatre-vingt-neuvièmes… Quant à la mienne, on la trouvera en divisant la hauteur du Golden Mount par le rayon du cercle polaire et en multipliant le quotient par l’âge du Scout. On obtiendra ainsi une équation exponentielle, dont on extraira la racine, et qui, soumise à l’analyse algébrique et au calcul intégral ou différentiel, au choix…

— Ces plaisanteries sont de mauvais goût, prononça Ben Raddle sèchement, tandis que les deux cousines riaient aux éclats.

— Quel fatras! soupira Summy Skim, qui alla s’asseoir dans le coin le plus éloigné en manifestant une suprême indifférence.

Ben Raddle le suivit d’un regard courroucé, haussa de nouveau les épaules, et reprit:

— Or, comme notre crédit à la *Transportation and Trading Company* s’élève à…

Il fut interrompu par Jane Edgerton.

— Après tout, monsieur Raddle, dit-elle de l’air le plus naturel du monde, à quoi bon tous ces comptes?

— Cependant…

— Oui, à quoi bon?.. Puisqu’on va évidemment se marier.

Se cramponnant aux bras du fauteuil sur lequel il était mollement étendu, Summy Skim se releva d’un seul coup en poussant un véritable rugissement.

— Avec qui? s’écria-t-il, la voix étranglée.

Ramassé sur lui-même, le visage convulsé, les poings crispés, il ressemblait à une bête fauve prête à bondir.

Incapables de résister au comique intense de ce spectacle, ses amis partirent à l’unisson d’un homérique éclat de rire.

Il ne riait pas, Summy. Il venait de découvrir son propre cœur, et il en était littéralement bouleversé. Il aimait, lui, le célibataire endurci, si heureux de son célibat, il aimait à l’adoration, depuis longtemps, depuis toujours, depuis que pour la première fois, sur le pont du *Foot Ball*, lui était apparue cette petite fille qui riait là-bas à gorge déployée. C’est par elle et pour elle qu’il avait si allègrement supporté un absurde exil dans ces contrées baroques. Puisqu’il ne pouvait pas la décider à quitter le Klondike, c’est pour y rester avec elle qu’il s’était condamné à y vivre. Et la voilà maintenant qui parlait tranquillement de se marier! Avec Ben Raddle sans doute, plus jeune et plus séduisant que son malheureux cousin. Certes, s'il en était ainsi, Summy Skim saurait s'effacer… mais quelle douleur serait la sienne!

«Avec qui? répéta-t-il d'une voix si pleine de larmes que te rire de Jane en fut arrêté.

— Mais avec vous, monsieur Skim, dit-elle. Cela va de soi. A quoi bon?..

Elle n'eut pas le temps d'achever.

Summy s'était précipité. Il l'avait enlevée comme une plume dans ses grands bras, et maintenant, il l'emportait dans une sarabande effrénée, en l'embrassant de tout son cœur. Jane avait beau se débattre et se défendre. Summy, éperdu, ne sentait plus les coups. C'est seulement lorsque, hors d'haleine, il dut s'écrouler dans un fauteuil en soufflant comme un phoque, qu'il se résigna à lâcher son léger fardeau.

«Grand fou! fit Jane ni fâchée, ni rieuse, en rajustant sa coiffure dont l'harmonie était gravement compromise.

Sans paraître s'occuper de Ben Raddle qui regardait Edith en silence, ni de sa cousine dont les yeux restaient obstinément baissés, Jane reprit sa phrase interrompue par le délire de Summy:

«A quoi bon demander ce qu'on sait d'avance? Il est aussi clair que je me marie avec vous, monsieur Skim, que M. Raddle épouse ma cousine.

Les paupières d'Edith battirent légèrement.

— Confirmez-vous, miss Edith, ce que vient de dire votre cousine? demanda Ben Raddle d’une voix un peu tremblante.

Pour toute réponse, la jeune fille montra son clair regard et d’un geste loyal tendit la main.

L’enthousiasme de Summy Skim ne connut plus de bornes. Agité, trépidant, exhilarant, bousculant, renversant les meubles sur son passage, il se mit à parcourir la pièce en tous sens.

— Qu’est-ce que nous faisons là? disait-il. Puisque nous sommes d’accord, pourquoi perdre un temps précieux? Agissons, que diable! Agissons!»

On eut beaucoup de peine à lui faire comprendre qu’un mariage, et, *a fortiori*, deux mariages, ne pouvaient s’improviser au milieu de la nuit, et on ne parvint à le calmer qu’en s’engageant à réduire au minimum les indispensables délais.

On se hâta, en effet, et, quelques jours plus tard, le double mariage était célébré au temple de Dawson. Ce fut une belle cérémonie. Les aventures des deux couples rendaient ceux-ci légendaires. Toute la population, un peu raréfiée à vrai dire en cette saison par l’exploitation des gisements aurifères, faisait la haie sur le passage du cortège. La beauté impérieuse de Jane, la grâce fière d’Edith, l’air énergique de Ben Raddle et la superbe prestance de Summy Skim furent admirés par un nombreux public.

Ils étaient là, tous les compagnons de misère et de victoire, Lorique, le Scout et le personnel entier de l’expédition du Golden Mount. Edith donnait le bras au docteur Pilcox, plus joyeux et plus rond que jamais, et Jane était conduite à l’autel par le gigantesque Patrick aussi rutilant que le soleil dans la gloire de ses habits neufs. Jane avait voulu qu'il en fût ainsi, et l'Irlandais ne se montrait pas peu fier de l'honneur que lui faisait sa jeune maîtresse, qu'il s'entêtait ingénument à appeler «monsieur Jean», en dépit de sa robe blanche et de son bouquet de fleurs d'oranger.

«Donne-moi le bras, Patrick.

— Oui, monsieur Jean.

— Fais donc attention, Patrick. Tu marches sur la traîne de ma robe.

— Oui, monsieur Jean.»

Il n'en démordait pas. Jane riait de tout son cœur.

Les nouveaux époux quittèrent Dawson le soir même du mariage, sur l'un des steamers descendant le Yukon. Lorique et le Scout les saluèrent de la rive. Le premier, dès le lendemain, se mettrait en route pour reprendre la direction de ses claims. Quant au Scout, il allait retourner à Skagway par la région des lacs en emmenant son personnel; mais, s'il continuait ensuite le dur métier de guide, ce ne serait plus qu'en amateur volontaire. Le Scout, devenu riche, était bien forcé de convenir que la prospection peut quelquefois avoir du bon.

Montréal vue générale.

Par contre, deux des personnages qui ont figuré dans ce récit descendaient eux aussi le Yukon et se dirigeaient sur Montréal en compagnie des jeunes mariés. Neluto, en effet, avait au dernier moment réussi à prendre une décision: celle de ne pas quitter un aussi déterminé chasseur que Summy

Skim. Quant à Patrick, la mort seule aurait pu le séparer de «monsieur Jean».

Peu à peu, les vivats qui saluaient le départ s’apaisèrent dans le lointain, les lumières de Dawson décrurent, s’éteignirent, et ce fut la nuit tout autour du grand steamer soufflant sans se lasser son halètement robuste. Il faisait beau. Du ciel rempli d’étoiles tombait une douce température, bien rare à cette époque de l’année.

A l’arrière du bateau, Summy Skim avait groupé quatre fauteuils et l’on goûtait paisiblement le charme de l’heure.

Mais bientôt Ben Raddle rompit l’heureux silence. Il n’était pas en son pouvoir d’arrêter le fonctionnement de son cerveau et, déjà, il échafaudait des projets. Appuyé sur une fortune colossale, il pouvait tout entreprendre, désormais. Aussi se laissait-il aller à des rêves qu’il exprimait tout haut. Agir, créer, produire… Transformer le tas d’or en de vastes entreprises, qui se changeraient en or à leur tour, lequel se muerait en entreprises plus vastes et plus nombreuses… Et ainsi de suite… toujours!

Jane écoutait d’une oreille avide et donnait la réplique au frénétique rêveur. Peu à peu, leurs sièges se rapprochèrent l’un de l’autre, puis, las de l’immobilité, ils se levèrent d’un même mouvement et allèrent s’accouder côte à côte au garde-fou, l’un oubliant sa femme, l’autre son mari.

Summy soupira.

«Les voilà partis, tous les deux! dit-il à Edith restée près de lui.

— Il faut, répondit la petite épouse raisonnable, prendre les gens et les aimer comme ils sont.

— Vous avez raison, Edith, reconnut Summy d’un ton peu convaincu.

Mais il avait décidément un vrai chagrin. Un soupir plus gros que le précédent gonfla de nouveau sa poitrine.

«Oui, dit-il encore, les voilà partis. Jusqu’où iront-ils ainsi?

Edith souleva, puis laissa retomber sa main, acceptant du geste l’avenir quel qu’il fût.

«Je connais mon Ben, reprit Summy. Il ne sera pas à Montréal depuis huit jours qu’il aura la nostalgie des aventures. Il voudra repartir, et je crains bien qu’il n’entraîne votre cousine, déjà si peu disposée à voir la vie d’une manière raisonnable.

— S’ils partent, répondit Edith, ils finiront toujours par revenir. Nous les attendrons au logis.

— Ce n’est pas gai, ça, Edith.

— Mais c’est utile, Summy. Pendant qu’ils courront le monde, nous, nous garderons leur maison.

Summy eut un dernier soupir.

— Et nous élèverons leurs enfants,» dit-il, sans bien se rendre compte de ce que sa réponse contenait à la fois de profondeur comique et de sublime abnégation.

CHAPITRE XVIII

Dans les délices de Green Valley.

C’est l’été. Pas un nuage dans l’azur du ciel. Le soleil de midi tombe librement sur la campagne ardente.

Guêtre de cuir, Summy Skim, revenu de la chasse avec Neluto, fume paisiblement sa pipe à l’ombre des grands arbres, devant la maison de Green Valley. A quelques mètres de lui, presque à ses pieds, trois petits enfants – trois ans, cinq ans, six ans –jouent sous la surveillance d’une bonne à l’aspect rassurant. Elle n’a pas moins de six pieds, cette bonne, et sa barbe grisonnante ferait honte à un sapeur. Elle répond, d’ailleurs, au nom de Patrick Richardson, peu à peu transformé en nourrice sèche par la confiance de monsieur Jean.

Si Patrick a vieilli, sa force est restée prodigieuse; mais, cette force, qu’il n’emploie plus à boxer les ours, est maintenant la propriété exclusive des fils de Jane et de Summy. On ne rencontre plus le géant sans les trois bambins, un juché sur l’épaule, un autre assis sur la paume de la main comme sur un fauteuil dont le pouce serait le dossier, le dernier parfois niché dans une poche, car Patrick a cousu lui-même à sa veste des poches spéciales à cet usage. Ils peuvent l’escalader comme une montagne, le piétiner, lui tirer la barbe et les cheveux ou lui enfoncer les doigts dans les yeux. Patrick se laisse faire avec un air béat. C’est un fameux joujou, que Patrick Richardson, pour les petits enfants.

Les douze coups de midi vont sonner quand une jeune femme arrive au trot allongé d’un bon cheval. Summy se lève et court aider l’écuyère qu’il serre dans ses grands bras, comme jadis dans le salon de Northern Hôtel. Un peu plus, Summy danserait comme il le fit alors. Mais Summy Skim ne danse plus depuis qu'il a commencé, disons-le tout bas, à bedonner légèrement. Quant à Jane Edgerton, elle n'a pas changé en devenant Jane Skim. Elle est toujours aussi petite, aussi frêle, aussi jolie.

«A table! s'écrie Summy d'une voix joyeuse.

Aussitôt les trois enfants montent à l'assaut de Patrick. L'aîné s'installe sur l'épaule, le cadet dans le creux de la main, le plus petit au fond de la poche.

— Ils ont été sages, Patrick? demande Jane.

— Très sages, monsieur Jean, affirme l'Irlandais.

Au moment où l'on va pénétrer dans la maison, une autre jeune femme apparaît sur le seuil. Celle-ci est blonde. Comment, en effet, Edith Raddle ne serait-elle pas blonde comme l'était Edith Edgerton? Edith tient encore à la main son outil de travail, la plume agile dont elle sait faire si bon usage.

— Ben n'est pas arrivé? interroge Jane.

— Non, répond Edith. Il ne sera pas ici avant trois heures.»

On entre. On se met à table. Tout, dans la demeure, comme au dehors, a gardé la simplicité d'autrefois. Une aile, simplement, a été ajoutée à la vieille bâtisse pour loger les nouveaux habitants.

On cause tout en déjeunant. Les paroles sont calmes et bienveillantes. Cette journée n'a rien de particulier. C'est la longue chaîne des jours heureux et pareils qui continue à dérouler ses maillons.

Le bonheur plane sur la maison paisible.

Des années ont coulé, depuis les aventures du Golden Mount et le retour à Montréal, sans atténuer le double amour né sous le ciel glacé du Klondike. Jane et Summy, Edith et Ben ne font qu’un seul être, et chacun d’eux sent quatre cœurs battre dans sa poitrine.

Les craintes de Summy ne se sont pas réalisées. Aidé en cela par Edith; il a été assez diplomate pour canaliser le besoin d’action de sa femme. C’est chose faite aujourd’hui, et il va repris confiance dans la solidité d’un lien que la naissance des enfants est d’ailleurs venue consolider.

Puisque la question d’argent ne comptait plus pour lui, il en a profité pour agrandir ses terres. Maintenant c’est de tout un pays qu’il est le roi incontesté. Jane y a trouvé l’aliment nécessaire à son activité. Elle s’est passionnée pour l’exploitation agricole de ces vastes espaces, et ses hangars sont remplis de machines perfectionnées que son cerveau ingénieux améliore sans cesse.

Edith est l’administrateur delà communauté. C’est elle qui tient les comptes. Elle examine, juge et décide en dernier ressort, tous s’inclinant devant son infaillible bon sens. Lorsque Jane se laisse emporter par son imagination, et menace de s’engager sur une voie hasardeuse, sa cousine est là pour crier «casse cou!» et pour remettre les choses en équilibre.

Il n’y a que Summy qui soit capable de troubler sa gestion. Ce détestable propriétaire, sous prétexte qu’il est trop riche, s’obstine à rendre en cachette la majeure partie des loyers que lui versent ses fermiers. Edith gronde pour la forme, car, après tout, c’est vrai qu’on est trop riche.

Summy a beau donner, en effet, il ne peut arriver à dépenser l’argent aussi vite que Ben Raddle le gagne.

Avant d’être définitivement épuisés, les claims du Forty Miles ont produit vingt fois leur première récolte, et, cet or, Ben Raddle n’en a pas thésaurisé une parcelle. Il l’a répandu dans tous les coins du monde, d’où il s’obstine sans cesse à revenir décuplé, pour repartir sans cesse en de nouveaux voyages.

L’ingénieur, appuyé sur une si formidable puissance, a réalisé son rêve. Il a fait de tout, il s’est intéressé à tout, donnant, pour son plaisir, sa vie entière à un travail acharné. Le jour est proche où il fera partie de la tribu des milliardaires, ce qui lui sera un motif de travailler davantage. Tout lui réussit. Il a spéculé avec le même bonheur sur les cotons, les laines, les sucres et les cuirs, et l’argent gagné est allé travailler lui aussi dans les entreprises les plus disparates. Aujourd’hui, il possède des mines de cuivre et de charbon, des lignes de chemin de fer dans l’Amérique du Sud et dans les Balkans, des puits de pétrole au Texas et en Roumanie, des stations centrales électriques et beaucoup d’autres choses encore. Hier, il vient de fonder le trust de l’étain. Il fondera demain celui du nickel.

Au milieu de ces multiples affaires, Ben Raddle ne s’y reconnaîtrait pas, si Edith n’était pas là pour administrer son œuvre. Jour par jour, heure par heure, il est tenu au courant de sa situation. Il n’a à s’occuper de rien, et, sans souci, il peut créer.

Ben Raddle est un homme heureux.

Mais cet homme heureux n’est jamais là, et c’est le seul point noir dans la vie de Summy. Toujours par monts et par vaux, il passe et disparaît comme l’éclair. Au passage, il embrasse affectueusement sa femme qui l’accueille en souriant et le laisse repartir sans une observation. Edith, avec son calme accoutumé, attend son heure qu’à des signes certains elle sait être désormais prochaine.

Summy Skim est moins patient, et il ne se gêne pas pour accabler Ben Raddle des plus vifs reproches. Celui-ci le laisse dire d’abord, puis il se fâche, ce qui a pour effet de couper court à la morale.

Summy, quand son cousin est reparti pour une nouvelle tournée, est le premier, d’ailleurs, à l’excuser.

«Il ne faut pas en vouloir à mon pauvre Ben, a-t-il coutume de dire à Edith, s’il est toujours prêt à faire éruption. Après tout, quand on a eu un volcan dans sa vie, il vous en reste toujours quelque chose.»

FIN.

THE THOMPSON AGENCY AND CO.

This novel was in fact written by Verne’s son Michel and it was first published in 1907. Robert Morgand, a Frenchman, finds himself without employment and very little money in London, England. He sees a poster for a tour that will visit the “Three Archipelagos;” that is the Azores, Madeira and Canary Islands. As the book was first translated into English in 1965, only the original French text is available in this edition.

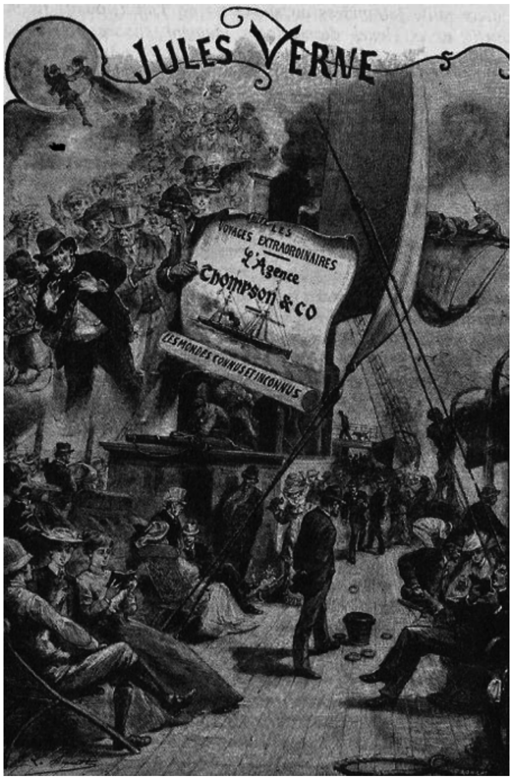
JULES VERNE
LES VOYAGES EXTRAORDINAIRES
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The original frontispiece

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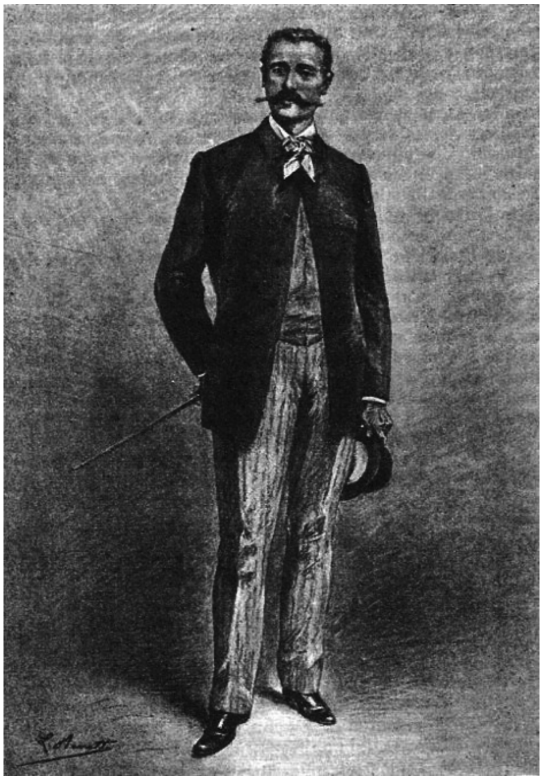

One of the original illustrations from the French edition

PREMIÈRE PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

SOUS L’AVERSE

Jambes écartées, regard perdu vers l’horizon brumeux du rêve, Robert Morgand, depuis cinq bonnes minutes, demeurait immobile, en face de ce long mur noir tout constellé d’affiches bordant une des plus tristes rues de Londres. La pluie tombait à torrents. Du ruisseau, monté peu à peu à l’assaut du trottoir, le courant minait sournoisement la base du songeur, dont le sommet était en même temps fort menacé.

Abandonnée par l’esprit parti pour quelque lointain voyage, la main, en effet, avait lentement laissé glisser le parapluie protecteur, et l’eau du ciel ruisselait librement du chapeau à l’habit transformé en éponge, avant de se mêler au cours du ruisseau tumultueux.

Robert Morgand ne s’apercevait pas de cette malice des choses. Il ne sentait pas la douche glacée aspergeant ses épaules. En vain fixait-il ses bottines avec une attention passionnée, il ne les voyait pas - tant sa préoccupation était grande - se transformer en deux récifs, contre lesquels le ruisseau mécontent s’acharnait en humides taloches.

Toutes ses facultés d’attention étaient monopolisées par un mystérieux travail auquel se livrait sa main gauche. Disparue dans la poche du pantalon, cette main agitait, soupesait, lâchait, reprenait quelques menues pièces de monnaie, d’une valeur totale de trente-trois francs quarante-cinq, ainsi qu’il s’en était préalablement assuré à de nombreuses reprises.

Français, échoué à Londres six mois plus tôt, après un bouleversement subit et cruel de son existence, Robert Morgand venait de perdre, ce matin même, la place de précepteur qui le faisait vivre. Aussitôt, l’état de sa caisse rapidement - trop rapidement, hélas! - constaté, il était sorti, marchant devant lui, par les rues, à la recherche d’une idée, jusqu’au moment où il s’était inconsciemment arrêté à la place où nous l’avons trouvé.

Et le problème était celui-ci: que faire, seul, sans amis, dans cette grande ville de Londres, avec trente-trois francs quarante-cinq pour toute fortune?

Problème ardu. Si ardu que le calculateur n’était pas encore parvenu à le résoudre, et commençait même à désespérer d’y parvenir jamais.

Robert Morgand, cependant, à en croire son apparence extérieure, ne paraissait pas homme à se décourager aisément.

Le teint clair, le front net et limpide couronné d’une jeune chevelure châtain coupée militairement, sa longue moustache à la gauloise séparant d’une bouche amicale un nez modelé en courbe énergique, il était charmant de tout point. Mieux encore: il était bon et droit. On sentait cela du premier coup à ses yeux d’un bleu sombre, dont le regard, très doux pourtant, ne connaissait qu’un seul chemin: le plus court.

Le reste ne démentait pas les promesses du visage. Épaules élégantes et larges, poitrine puissante, membres musclés, harmonie des mouvements, extrémités fines et soignées, tout disait l’athlète aristocrate, dont le corps, rompu à la pratique des sports, exhale la souplesse et la force.

“On pensait, en le voyant: “Voilà un beau garçon, un rude garçon, un bon garçon.”

Que Robert ne fût pas de ceux qui se laissent désarçonner par le choc absurde des choses, il l’avait prouvé, il le prouverait encore, apte toujours à la défense, digne toujours de la victoire. Toutefois, elles sont brutales, les rencontres avec la destinée, et le meilleur cavalier a le droit de quitter un instant les étriers. Robert, si l’on veut bien continuer cette image empruntée à l’art équestre, avait donc perdu son assiette et s’appliquait à la reprendre, incertain sur ce qu’il devait faire.

Comme il se posait inutilement pour la centième fois cette question, il leva les yeux au ciel dans l’espoir peut- être d’y trouver la réponse. Alors seulement il s’aperçut de la pluie, et découvrit que ses absorbantes pensées l’avaient immobilisé au milieu d’une flaque d’eau, en face d’un long mur noir constellé d’affiches multicolores.

Une de ces affiches, une “double colombier” aux teintes discrètes, semblait, juste devant lui, solliciter particulièrement son regard. Machinalement - car on ne revient pas vite du royaume des rêves - Robert se mit à parcourir cette affiche et, quand il en eut achevé la lecture, il la recommença une seconde fois, puis une troisième, sans être mieux renseigné sur son contenu. À la troisième lecture, cependant, il tressaillit. Une ligne, imprimée en petits caractères au bas de la feuille venait tout à coup de lui “sauter aux yeux”. Vivement intéressé, il la relut pour la quatrième fois.

Robert se rapprocha de l’affiche et s’assura qu’il avait correctement lu. On demandait bien un cicérone- interprète...

Voici ce que disait cette affiche:

AGENCE BAKER & C°, LIMITED 69, Newghate Street, 69 LONDON

grande excursion

AUX TROIS ARCHIPELS

Açores - Madère - Les Canaries

Par superbe Steamer “*The Traveller*” de 2500 tonneaux et 3000 chevaux. Captain: MATHEWS.

Départ de Londres: le 10 Mai à 7 heures du soir. Retour à Londres: le 14 Juin à midi.

Messieurs les voyageurs n ‘auront à débourser aucun frais en dehors du prix stipulé. Porteurs et voitures pour excursions. Séjours à terre dans Hôtels de premier ordre.

PRIX DU VOYAGE, TOUS FRAIS COMPRIS:

78 £

Pour tous renseignements, s’adresser aux bureaux de

l’Agence: 69, Newghate Street, 69. - LONDON.

On demande un Cicérone-interprète.

Il résolut aussitôt qu’il serait cet interprète. Si l’Agence Baker and Co. l’acceptait toutefois.

Ne pouvait-il se faire que sa figure ne revînt pas? ou seulement que la place fût déjà prise?

Il lui fallait surseoir à conclure en ce qui regardait le premier point. Quant au second, l’aspect de la bienheureuse affiche le rassura grandement. Neuve et fraîche, elle semblait posée du matin même, de la veille au soir tout au plus.

Néanmoins, il n’y avait pas de temps à perdre. Un mois de tranquillité, assurant le loisir de retrouver les étriers perdus, la perspective d’une somme nette économisée au retour - car on serait sans aucun doute nourri à bord - et, par-dessus le marché, un agréable et intéressant voyage, tout cela n’était pas à dédaigner pour un capitaliste tel que Robert. Il se hâta donc vers Newghate Street. À onze heures juste, il ouvrait la porte du N° 69.

L’antichambre et les couloirs, qu’il parcourut à la suite d’un garçon, lui firent une impression favorable. Tapis visiblement fatigués, tentures présentables, mais défraîchies. Agence sérieuse, évidemment, maison qui n’était pas née de la veille.

Toujours précédé de son guide, Robert fut enfin introduit dans un confortable bureau, où, derrière une vaste table, un gentleman se leva pour le recevoir.

“Monsieur Baker? interrogea Robert.

-Il est absent, mais je le remplace entièrement, répondit le gentleman en invitant du geste Robert à s’asseoir.

-Monsieur, dit celui-ci, j’ai vu les affiches par lesquelles votre agence annonce le voyage qu’elle a organisé, et ces affiches m’ont appris que vous cherchiez un interprète. Je viens vous proposer de me confier cet emploi.”

Le sous-directeur regarda plus attentivement son visiteur.

“Quelles langues savez-vous? demanda-t-il, après un instant de silence.

-Le français, l’anglais, l’espagnol et le portugais.

-Bien?

-Je suis Français. Vous pouvez juger si je sais l’anglais. Je parle l’espagnol et le portugais de la même manière.

-Très bien par conséquent. Mais ce n’est pas tout. Il faut aussi être largement documenté sur les pays compris dans notre itinéraire. L’interprète devra être en même temps un cicérone.”

Robert hésita une seconde.

“C’est bien ainsi que je l’entends”, répondit-il.

Le sous-directeur reprit:

“Arrivons à la question des appointements. Nous offrons trois cents francs à forfait pour le voyage, nourri, logé, tous frais payés. Ces conditions vous iraient-elles?

-Parfaitement, déclara Robert.

-Dans ce cas, lui fut-il répondu, si vous pouvez me fournir quelques références.

-Mon Dieu, monsieur, je ne suis que depuis peu à Londres. Mais voici une lettre de Lord Murphy, qui vous renseignera sur mon compte et vous expliquera en même temps pourquoi je me trouve sans emploi”, répondit Robert, en tendant à son interlocuteur la fâcheuse lettre, conçue d’ailleurs en termes très flatteurs, qu’il avait reçue le matin.

La lecture fut longue. Homme éminemment ponctuel et sérieux, le sous-directeur pesa chaque mot l’un après l’autre, comme pour en extraire tout le suc. En revanche, la réponse fut nette.

“Où demeurez-vous? interrogea-t-il.

-25, Cannon Street.

-Je parlerais de vous à M. Baker, conclut le sous- directeur, en notant cette adresse. Si les renseignements que je vais prendre concordent avec ce que je sais déjà, vous pouvez vous considérer comme appartenant à l’agence.

-Alors, monsieur, c’est entendu? insista Robert enchanté.

-Entendu”, affirma l’Anglais en se levant.

Robert tenta vainement de placer quelques mots de remerciement. “Time is money.” À peine eut-il le loisir d’esquisser un salut d’adieu, qu’il était déjà dans la rue, étourdi de la facilité et de la rapidité de son succès.

CHAPITRE II

UNE ADJUDICATION VRAIMENT PUBLIQUE

Le premier soin de Robert, le lendemain matin, 26 avril, fut d’aller revoir l’affiche qui, la veille, avait servi de truchement à la Providence. En vérité, il lui devait ce pèlerinage.

Il retrouva facilement la rue, le long mur noir, le point précis où sous l’averse il avait pataugé, mais l’affiche fut plus malaisée à découvrir. Bien que son format n’eût pas changé, elle était méconnaissable. Ses couleurs, hier discrètes, s’étaient exaspérées. Le fond grisâtre était devenu d’un bleu cru, les lettres noires d’un rutilant écarlate. L’Agence Baker, sans doute, l’avait renouvelée, l’adjonction de Robert rendant inutile un appel aux cicérones-interprètes sans emploi.

Celui-ci s’en assura. Son regard courut en bas de la feuille. Il sursauta.

La mention finale était en effet changée. Elle annonçait maintenant qu’un cicérone-interprète parlant toutes les langues était attaché à l’excursion.

“Toutes les langues! se récria Robert. Mais je n’ai pas dit un mot de ça.”

Il fut arrêté dans l’expression de son mécontentement par une découverte inattendue. Ses yeux, en remontant, avaient aperçu en haut de l’affiche une raison sociale où le nom de Baker ne figurait plus.

“Agence Thompson and Co.”, lut Robert étonné, et comprenant que la nouvelle mention relative à l’interprète ne le concernait en rien.

Il n’eut pas de peine à déchiffrer le mot de l’énigme. Si même cette énigme s’était un instant posée, c’est que les couleurs criardes choisies par ce Thompson “tiraient l’œil” d’une manière irrésistible aux dépens des alentours. À côté de la nouvelle venue, bord à bord, l’affiche de Baker s’étalait toujours.

“Bon! se dit Robert, en revenant vers l’affiche éclatante. Mais comment n’ai-je pas vu celle-ci hier? Et, s’il y a deux affiches, il y a donc deux voyages?”

Une rapide comparaison l’en convainquit. Sauf la raison sociale, le nom du navire et celui du capitaine, exactement pareilles, ces deux affiches: le superbe steamer The *Seamew* remplaçait le superbe steamer The Traveller, et le brave captain Pip succédait au brave captain Mathews, voilà tout. Pour le reste, elles se plagiaient mutuellement mot à mot.

Il s’agissait donc bien de deux voyages, organisés par deux compagnies distinctes.

“Voilà qui est bizarre”, pensa Robert, vaguement inquiet sans trop savoir pourquoi.

Et son inquiétude augmenta encore, quand il s’aperçut d’un quatrième et dernier changement.

Alors que Baker and Co. exigeaient soixante-dix-huit livres de leurs passagers, l’Agence Thompson and Co. se contentait de soixante-seize. Cette légère diminution de deux livres (cinquante francs) ne serait-elle pas suffisante aux yeux de beaucoup de gens, pour faire pencher la balance de son côté? Robert, on le voit, épousait déjà les intérêts de ses patrons.

Il les épousait tellement que, sous l’empire de sa préoccupation, il repassa, au cours de l’après-midi, devant les affiches jumelles. Ce qu’il vit le rassura pleinement. Baker acceptait la lutte.

Son placard, naguère discret, était remplacé par un nouveau, plus aveuglant encore que celui de l’agence concurrente. Quant au prix, Thompson était, non pas seulement atteint, mais dépassé. Baker désormais faisait savoir urbi et orbi qu’il offrait pour soixante-quinze livres (mille huit cent soixante-quinze francs) le voyage des trois archipels!

Robert se coucha donc assez tranquille. Néanmoins, tout n’était pas terminé. Thompson and Co. n’allaient-ils pas riposter et abaisser encore leur tarif?

Il reconnut le lendemain que ses craintes étaient fondées. Dès huit heures du matin, une bande blanche coupait en deux l’affiche Thompson, et cette bande portait ces mots: Prix du parcours, tous frais compris: 74 £ .

Moins inquiétant cependant était ce nouveau rabais. Puisque Baker avait accepté la lutte, nul doute qu’il ne continuât à se défendre. Et en effet, Robert, qui désormais surveillait soigneusement les affiches, vit tout le long du jour les bandes blanches se succéder et s’entasser les unes sur les autres.

À dix heures et demie, l’Agence Baker abaissa son prix à soixante-treize livres, à midi quinze, Thompson n’en réclama plus que soixante-douze; Baker, à une heure quarante, assurait qu’une somme de soixante et onze livres était largement suffisante, et, à trois heures juste, Thompson déclarait qu’il en était assez de soixante-dix (mille sept cents cinquante francs).

Les passants, amusés par ces enchères à rebours, commençaient à s’intéresser à la bataille. Ils s’arrêtaient quelques instants, jetaient un coup d’œil, souriaient, puis repartaient.

Cependant, elle continuait, cette bataille, dans laquelle se valaient l’attaque et la riposte. La journée se termina encore par la victoire de l’Agence Baker, dont les prétentions ne dépassaient plus soixante-sept livres (mille six cent soixante-quinze francs).

Les journaux du lendemain s’occupèrent de ces incidents, et les jugèrent diversement. Le Times, entre autres, blâmait l’Agence Thompson and Co. d’avoir déclaré cette guerre de sauvages. Le Pall Mall Gazette, au contraire, suivi du Daily Chronicle, l’approuvaient entièrement. Le public, en fin de compte, ne bénéficiait-il pas de cet abaissement des tarifs causé par l’universelle concurrence?

Quoi qu’il en soit, cette réclame ne pouvait qu’être extrêmement profitable à celle des deux agences qui garderait la victoire finale. Ceci devint évident dès le matin du 28. Les affiches ce jour-là, ne cessèrent d’être entourées de groupes compacts, dans lesquels s’échangeaient de nombreux lazzis.

Au surplus, la lutte continuait, plus chaude même et plus serrée que la veille. Maintenant, il ne s’écoulait plus une heure entre deux ripostes, et l’épaisseur des bandes accumulées prenait des proportions considérables.

À midi, l’Agence Baker put déjeuner sur ses positions. Le voyage était alors devenu possible, à son estime, moyennant un forfait de soixante et une livres (quinze cent vingt-cinq francs).

“Eh! dites donc! s’écria un cockney, je retiens mon billet, quand on en sera à une guinée (douze francs cinquante). Prenez mon adresse: 175, White Chapel, Toby Laugher... Esquire!” ajouta-t-il en gonflant les joues.

Un éclat de rire parcourut la foule. Des gens mieux renseignés que ce gavroche londonien auraient pu cependant, comme lui et avec plus de raison, escompter un pareil rabais. Des précédents les y eussent autorisés. Ne serait-ce, par exemple, que la concurrence acharnée des chemins de fer américains, le Lake-Shore et le Nickel- Plate, et surtout cette guerre que se firent les Trunk-Lines, au cours de laquelle les compagnies en arrivèrent à donner pour un seul dollar (cinq francs) les mille sept cents kilomètres séparant New York de Saint Louis!

Si l'Agence Baker avait pu déjeuner sur ses positions, l'Agence Thompson y coucha. Mais à quel prix! À cette heure, il pouvait accomplir le voyage qui possédait seulement cinquante-six livres (mille quatre cents francs).

Quand ce prix fut porté à la connaissance du public, il était à peine cinq heures. Baker aurait donc eu le temps de répliquer. Cependant, il n'en fit rien. Lassé de cette lutte monotone, il se recueillait sans doute, avant de porter un coup suprême.

Tel fut du moins le sentiment de Robert qui commençait à se passionner pour cette course d'un nouveau genre.

L'événement lui donna raison. Le matin du 29, il arriva devant les affiches, au moment où les colleurs de l'Agence Baker apposaient une dernière bande. L'effort, cette fois, était plus rude. Diminué d'un seul coup de six livres (cent cinquante francs), le prix tombait à cinquante livres (mille deux cent cinquante francs). Thompson and Co. allaient être évidemment assommés. Pouvaient-ils raisonnablement mettre un shilling au-dessous?

Et, de fait, toute la journée se passa sans qu'ils donnassent signe de vie. Robert estima ville gagnée.

Mais un fâcheux réveil l’attendait le 30. Dans la nuit, les affiches Thompson avaient été arrachées. De nouvelles les remplaçaient, violentes à éborgner le soleil. Et, sur ces affiches de l’immense format double grand-aigle, on lisait en lettres énormes: Prix du parcours, tous frais compris: 40 £.

Si Baker avait espéré assommer Thompson, Thompson avait voulu aplatir Baker. Et il n’y avait que trop réussi!

Mille francs pour un voyage de trente-sept jours, soit environ vingt-sept francs par jour! C’était là un minimum qu’il paraissait impossible de dépasser. Et tel fut vraisemblablement l’avis de l’Agence Baker, car la journée entière s’écoula sans qu’elle donnât signe de vie.

Robert cependant espérait encore. Il voulait croire, pour le lendemain, à une de ces manœuvres assassines dites de la dernière heure. Une lettre qu’il reçut le soir même lui enleva cette illusion.

Sans autre explication, on lui fixait un rendez-vous pour le lendemain 1er mai, à neuf heures du matin. Ne devait-il pas tout redouter devant cette convocation, après les incidents qu’il connaissait?

Inutile de dire s’il fut exact au rendez-vous.

“J’ai reçu cette lettre...” commença-t-il, en s’adressant au sous-directeur qui le recevait pour la seconde fois.

Mais celui-ci l’interrompit. Il n’aimait pas les paroles inutiles.

“Parfaitement! Parfaitement! Je voulais seulement vous informer que nous avons renoncé au voyage des trois archipels.

-Bah!... fit Robert, étonné du calme avec lequel cette nouvelle lui était annoncée.

-Oui, et si vous avez vu quelques-unes des affiches...

-Je les ai vues, dit Robert.

-En ce cas, vous devez comprendre qu'il nous est impossible de persister dans cette voie.

Au prix de quarante livres, le voyage devient une duperie pour l'agence ou pour les voyageurs, et peut-être bien pour les deux. Pour oser le proposer dans ces conditions, il faut être un farceur ou un sot. Pas de milieu!

-Et l'Agence Thompson?... insinua Robert.

-L'Agence Thompson, décida le sous-directeur d'un ton tranchant, est dirigée par un farceur qui fait des sottises, ou par un sot qui fait des farces. On a le choix."

Robert se mit à rire.

"Cependant, objecta-t-il, vos voyageurs?

-La poste leur a déjà restitué leurs arrhes, doublées à titre de juste indemnité, et c'est précisément pour nous entendre au sujet de la vôtre que je vous ai prié de passer ce matin."

Mais Robert ne voulait pas d'indemnité. Être payé pour un travail accompli, rien de plus naturel. Quant à spéculer en quelque sorte sur les difficultés rencontrées par la société qui l'avait accueilli, cela ne lui convenait pas.

“Très bien! approuva son interlocuteur sans insister le moins du monde. Au reste, je puis en échange vous donner un bon conseil.

-Et ce conseil?

-C’est tout simplement de vous présenter à l’Agence Thompson and Co. pour y remplir le rôle auquel vous étiez destiné ici. Et je vous autorise à vous présenter de notre part!

-Trop tard, repartit Robert. La place est prise.

-Bah! Déjà? Comment le savez-vous?

-Par les affiches. L’Agence Thompson annonce même un interprète avec lequel je ne saurais certainement rivaliser.

-Alors, c’est par les affiches seulement?...

-Seulement.

-Dans ce cas, conclut le sous-directeur en se levant, essayez toujours, croyez-moi.”

Robert se retrouva dans la rue, fort désappointé. Cette place, à peine tenue, lui échappait. Il retombait sur le pavé comme auparavant. Quant à suivre le conseil de l’Agence Baker, à quoi bon? Quelle probabilité que la place fût libre? D’autre part, cependant, ne devait-il pas tenter la chance jusqu’au bout?

Dans cette irrésolution, il se laissait conduire par le hasard. Mais le Ciel l’avait décidément pris sous sa protection spéciale, car c’est devant les bureaux de Thompson and Co. qu’il s’arrêta inconsciemment, comme dix heures sonnaient à une horloge voisine.

D’un geste sans conviction, il poussa la porte, et entra de plano dans une vaste salle assez luxueuse, au milieu de laquelle une rangée de guichets se courbait en hémicycle. Il y en avait quinze pour le moins. L’un d’eux, le seul ouvert d’ailleurs, permettait d’apercevoir un employé absorbé par son travail.

Au milieu de l’espace réservé au public, un homme, en train de lire et d’annoter un prospectus, se promenait à grands pas. Si la main armée du crayon avait trois bagues, une au petit doigt, deux à l’annulaire, celle qui tenait le papier en avait quatre. De taille moyenne, plutôt replet, ce personnage marchait avec vivacité, agitant une chaîne d’or dont les nombreuses breloques tintinnabulaient sur son gaster quelque peu proéminent. Tantôt sa tête s’abaissait vers le papier, tantôt elle se relevait vers le plafond, comme pour y chercher l’inspiration. Tous ses gestes étaient exubérants. Il était évidemment de ces gens toujours agités, toujours en mouvement, pour lesquels l’existence n’est normale qu’agrémentée d’émotions renaissantes et d’inextricables difficultés.

Le plus surprenant, c’est qu’il fût Anglais. À son embonpoint, au teint accusé de sa peau, à sa moustache d’un noir d’encre, à l’aspect général de sa personne continuellement en pression, on l’eût juré de ces Italiens qui ont l’”Excellence” si facile. Le détail eût confirmé cette impression d’ensemble. Yeux rieurs, nez retroussé, front fuyant sous une sombre chevelure frisée, tout dénotait une finesse de qualité un peu vulgaire.

En apercevant Robert, le promeneur interrompit sa marche et sa lecture, se précipita à sa rencontre, salua coup sur coup avec un débordement d’amabilité, puis, arrondissant la bouche en cœur:

“Aurions-nous, monsieur, l’avantage de pouvoir vous être bons à quelque chose?”

Robert n’eut pas le loisir de répondre. L’autre continuait:

“Sans doute, il s’agit de notre excursion aux trois archipels?

-En effet, dit Robert, mais...”

De nouveau, il fut interrompu.

“Superbe voyage! Voyage admirable, monsieur! s’exclama son interlocuteur. Et que nous avons ramené, j’ose le dire, aux extrêmes limites du bon marché! Tenez, monsieur, regardez cette carte (il en montrait une appendue à la muraille) et voyez le parcours à accomplir. Eh bien! Nous offrons tout cela pour combien? Pour deux cents livres? Pour cent cinquante? Pour cent? Non, monsieur, pour la ridicule somme de quarante livres, tous frais compris. Nourriture de premier choix, monsieur; steamer et chambres confortables; voitures et porteurs pour excursions; séjours à terre dans des hôtels de premier ordre!”

Il récitait son prospectus.

Robert essaya vainement d’arrêter ce flux de paroles. Arrêtez donc un express lancé à toute vapeur!

“Oui... oui... Vous connaissez ces détails par les affiches? Alors, vous savez aussi quelle lutte nous avons soutenue. Lutte glorieuse, monsieur, j’ose le dire!”

Cette éloquence eût pu couler ainsi pendant des heures. Robert, impatienté, y mit bon ordre.

“M. Thompson, s’il vous plaît? demanda-t-il d’un ton sec.

-Il est devant vous, et bien à votre service, répondit son prolixe interlocuteur.

-Voudriez-vous me dire, en ce cas, reprit Robert, s’il est bien exact que vous ayez, comme on me l’a affirmé, un interprète pour ce voyage?

-Comment donc! s’écria Thompson. En doutez-vous? Un tel voyage serait-il possible sans interprète? Certes,

nous en avons un, un admirable, auquel toutes les langues sans exception sont également familières.

-Alors, dit Robert, il ne me reste plus qu’à vous prier d’agréer mes excuses.

-Comment cela? demanda Thompson interloqué.

-Je venais précisément me proposer pour cet emploi... mais puisqu’il est occupé...”

Tout en parlant, Robert salua poliment et se dirigea vers la porte.

Il ne l’atteignit pas. Thompson s’était précipité à sa poursuite. Il disait:

“Ah! c’était pour cela!... On s’explique, sapristi!... Quel diable d’homme!... Voyons, voyons, ayez donc l’obligeance de me suivre.

-À quoi bon?” objecta Robert.

Thompson insista.

“Mais si, mais si, venez!”

Robert se laissa conduire au premier étage, dans un bureau dont l’ameublement très modeste contrastait singulièrement avec le luxe un peu criard du rez-de- chaussée. Une table d’acajou veuve de son vernis et six chaises de paille, il n’y avait pas autre chose.

Thompson s’assit en invitant Robert à en faire autant.

“Maintenant que nous sommes seuls, dit-il, je vous avouerai carrément que nous n’avons pas d’interprète.

-Cependant, objecta Robert, il n’y a pas cinq minutes...

-Oh! répliqua Thompson, il y a cinq minutes, je vous prenais pour un client!”

Et il se mit à rire de si bon cœur que Robert, quoi qu’il en eût, dut partager son hilarité.

Thompson continua:

“La place est donc libre. Mais, tout d’abord, avez-vous des références?

-Je pense que vous n’en aurez pas besoin, répondit Robert, quand vous saurez que je faisais encore partie, il n’y a pas une heure, de l’Agence Baker and Co.

-Vous venez de chez Baker!” s’exclama Thompson.

Robert dut lui conter point par point comment les choses s’étaient passées.

Thompson exultait. Souffler à la compagnie rivale jusqu’à son interprète, c’était le comble! Et il riait, se frappait la cuisse, se levait, se rasseyait, ne tenait plus en place. Et des exclamations: “Parfait! Superbe! Diablement drôle!”

Quand il fut un peu calmé:

“Du moment qu’il en est ainsi, l’affaire est faite, mon cher monsieur. Mais, dites-moi, avant d’entrer chez ce pauvre Baker, que faisiez-vous?

-J’étais professeur, répondit Robert. J’enseignais ma langue maternelle.

-Qui est?... interrogea Thompson.

-Le français.

-Bon! approuva Thompson. Et savez-vous d’autres langues?

-Dame! repartit Robert en riant, je ne les sais pas toutes, comme votre fameux interprète. En dehors du français, je connais l’anglais, comme vous pouvez le voir, l’espagnol et le portugais. Voilà tout.

-C’est parbleu bien joli! s’écria Thompson, qui, lui, ne savait que l’anglais, et encore pas très bien.

-Si cela vous suffit, tout est pour le mieux”, dit Robert.

Thompson reprit:

“Parlons un peu maintenant des appointements. Y a-t- il indiscrétion à vous demander ce que vous gagniez chez Baker?

-Nullement, répondit Robert. Un forfait de trois cents francs m’était assuré, net de tous frais.”

Thompson parut soudain distrait.

“Oui, oui, murmura-t-il, trois cents francs, ce n’est pas trop.”

Il se leva.

“Non, ce n’est pas trop, en effet”, dit-il avec énergie.

Il se rassit, et s’abîma dans la contemplation d’une de ses bagues.

“Cependant, pour nous qui avons abaissé le prix aux dernières limites du bon marché - aux dernières limites, vous entendez bien! - ce serait peut-être un peu élevé.

-Il me faudrait donc subir une diminution? demanda Robert.

-Oui... peut-être!... souffla Thompson. Une diminution... une petite diminution...

-Enfin, de quelle importance?” insista Robert agacé.

Thompson se leva, et, se promenant à travers la pièce:

“Mon Dieu, mon cher monsieur, je m’en rapporte à

vous. Vous avez assisté à la lutte que nous ont livrée ces damnés Baker.

-Bref, de sorte que?... interrompit Robert.

-De sorte que nous avons finalement consenti un rabais de cinquante pour cent sur les prix du début. Cela n’est-il pas vrai, cher monsieur? Cela n’est-il pas aussi exact que deux et deux font quatre? Eh bien! pour nous permettre d’accomplir ce sacrifice, il faut que nos collaborateurs nous aident, qu’ils se laissent entraîner par notre exemple, qu’ils nous imitent...

- Et qu’ils réduisent leurs prétentions de cinquante pour cent”, formula Robert tandis que son interlocuteur faisait un geste d’approbation.

Robert esquissa une grimace. Mais alors Thompson, se plantant en face de lui, laissa déborder son éloquence.

Il fallait savoir se sacrifier aux causes d’intérêt général. Et n’en était-ce pas une au premier chef? Réduire à presque rien les voyages autrefois si coûteux, rendre accessibles au plus grand nombre des plaisirs jadis réservés à quelques privilégiés! Il y avait là une question de haute philanthropie, que diable! devant laquelle un coeur bien né ne pouvait rester indifférent.

Indifférent, Robert l’était en tout cas à cette faconde. Il réfléchissait, et, s’il amena son pavillon, ce fut de propos délibéré.

Les paroles furent donc échangées, les cent cinquante francs acceptés, et Thompson scella l’accord par de chaleureuses poignées de main.

Robert rentra chez lui relativement assez satisfait. Bien que ses émoluments eussent diminué, le voyage n’en demeurait pas moins agréable, et, tout compte fait, avantageux pour un homme dans une situation aussi précaire. Une seule chose était à craindre. C’est qu’une troisième agence concurrente ne survînt, puis, après celle- là, une quatrième, et ainsi de suite. Il n’y avait pas de raison pour que cela finît.

Et alors, à quelle somme dérisoire risquaient de tomber les appointements du cicérone-interprète?

CHAPITRE III

DANS LA BRUME

Fort heureusement, rien de tout cela ne devait arriver. Le 10 mai naquit à son heure sans qu'aucun événement nouveau se fût produit. Lorsque Robert s'embarqua ce jour-là, on achevait d'amarrer le navire, cap au large, à l'appontement, d'où, le soir, il s'élancerait vers la mer. Robert avait voulu être de bonne heure à son poste, mais, en mettant le pied à bord, il comprit l'inutilité de cet excès de zèle. Aucun voyageur ne s'était encore présenté.

Robert connaissait le numéro de sa cabine, le 17. Son mince bagage y fut transporté. Libre alors de ses mouvements, il regarda autour de lui.

Un homme à casquette triplement galonnée, le capitaine Pip évidemment, se promenait de bâbord à tribord sur la passerelle, en mâchonnant à la fois sa moustache grise et un cigare. Petit de taille, les jambes torses comme un basset, l'air rude et sympathique, c'était un spécimen accompli du lupus maritimus, ou du moins d'une des nombreuses variétés de cette espèce de la faune humaine.

Sur le pont, des matelots réparaient le désordre causé par la mise à quai. Ils lovaient des manœuvres, les paraient pour l'appareillage.

Ce travail achevé, le capitaine descendit de la passerelle et disparut dans sa cabine. Le second l'imita aussitôt,

tandis que l'équipage s'affalait par le panneau de l'avant. Seul, un lieutenant, qui avait accueilli Robert à son arrivée, demeura près de la coupée. Le silence régna sur le navire déserté.

Robert, désœuvré, entama, pour tuer le temps, la visite complète du bâtiment.

À l’avant, l’équipage et la cuisine, et, au-dessous, une cale pour les ancres, chaînes et cordages divers. Au centre, les machines, l’arrière demeurant réservé aux passagers.

Là, dans l’entrepont, entre les machines et le couronnement, soixante à soixante-dix cabines s’alignaient. Celle de Robert était du nombre, très suffisante, ni mieux, ni plus mal que les autres.

Au-dessous de ces cabines, régnait le maître d’hôtel, dans son empire: la cambuse. Au-dessus, entre le pont proprement dit et le faux pont supérieur appelé spardeck, la salle à manger-salon, très vaste et assez luxueusement décorée. Une longue table traversée par le mât d’artimon l’occupait presque toute, centre d’un ovale de divans qui en meublaient le pourtour.

Cette salle, éclairée par de nombreuses fenêtres prenant jour sur la coursive qui l’entourait, se terminait à un couloir en croix, où l’escalier des cabines venait s’amorcer. La branche transversale de ce couloir donnait de part et d’autre sur la coursive extérieure. Quant à la branche longitudinale, avant d’aboutir sur le pont, elle séparait et desservait le smoking-room et, en face, le reading-room, puis à tribord la vaste cabine du capitaine, et à bâbord celles plus exiguës du second et du lieutenant. Ces officiers pouvaient ainsi exercer leur surveillance jusqu’au gaillard d’avant.

Son inspection terminée, Robert monta sur le spardeck au moment où cinq heures sonnaient à une horloge lointaine.

L’aspect des choses s’était fâcheusement modifié. Une brume menaçante, bien que légère encore, obscurcissait l’atmosphère. Déjà, sur le quai, les lignes des maisons devenaient moins nettes, les gestes de la foule des portefaix s’ennoblissaient d’indécision, et, du navire même, les deux mâts allaient se perdre à d’incertaines hauteurs.

Le silence pesait toujours sur le bâtiment. Seule, la cheminée, vomissait une fumée noire, disait le travail intérieur.

Robert s’assit sur un banc, à l’avant du spardeck, puis, s’accoudant à la batayole, regarda, attendit.

Presque aussitôt embarqua Thompson. Il esquissa à l’adresse de Robert un signe d’amicale bienvenue, et se mit à faire les cent pas, en lançant vers le ciel des regards pleins d’inquiétude.

Le brouillard épaississait toujours, en effet, au point de rendre le départ douteux. Maintenant, on ne voyait plus les maisons, et les quais n’étaient sillonnés que d’ombres falotes. Vers le fleuve, les mâts des vaisseaux les plus proches rayaient la brume de lignes indécises, et les eaux de la Tamise coulaient, silencieuses et invisibles, cachées sous de jaunâtres vapeurs. Tout s’imprégnait d’humidité. On respirait de l’eau.

Robert frissonna soudain et s’aperçut qu’il était trempé. Il descendit dans sa cabine, se munit d’un caoutchouc, et retourna à son poste d’observation.

Vers six heures, quatre domestiques sortirent, formes confuses, du couloir central, s’arrêtèrent en groupe devant la chambre du second et, s’asseyant sur un banc, guettèrent l’arrivée de leurs futurs maîtres.

Ce fut seulement à six heures et demie que se présenta le premier souscripteur. Robert le supposa du moins, en voyant Thompson s’élancer et disparaître, subitement escamoté par le brouillard. Aussitôt, les domestiques s’agitèrent, un bruit de voix s’éleva, des formes vagues passèrent au pied du spardeck.

Comme si celui-là eût donné le signal, le défilé des voyageurs ne s’arrêta plus à partir de cet instant, et Thompson fit perpétuellement la navette entre le couloir du salon et la coupée.

À sa suite, les touristes venaient. Hommes, femmes, enfants? On eût été bien en peine de le dire. Ils passaient, disparaissaient, fantômes incertains dont Robert ne pouvait apercevoir les visages.

Mais lui-même, n’aurait-il pas dû être aux côtés de Thompson, lui prêter son aide, et commencer dès ce moment son rôle d’interprète? Il n’en avait pas le courage. Tout d’un coup, comme un mal soudain et terrible, une tristesse profonde avait glacé son cœur. La cause? Il n’eût pu la dire, et d’ailleurs il ne songeait pas à la chercher.

C’était ce brouillard sans doute qui lui paralysait ainsi l’âme. Ce nuage opaque l’étouffait, l’enserrait comme des murs de prison.

Et il demeurait immobile, éperdu de solitude, tandis que, du pont, des quais, de Londres tout entière, parvenait jusqu’à lui, comme dans un rêve, l’incessant frémissement de l’universelle vie, de la vie d’êtres invisibles avec lesquels il n’avait et n’aurait jamais rien de commun.

Cependant le navire s’était éveillé. Les capots du salon rayonnaient dans la brume. Le pont peu à peu s’emplissait de bruit. Certains demandaient leur cabine, et on ne les voyait pas. Des matelots passaient qu’on distinguait à peine.

À sept heures, quelqu’un dans le coffee-room demanda un grog en criant. Quelques instants après, coupant un bref moment de silence, une voix sèche et hautaine s’éleva nettement du pont:

“Je crois vous avoir prié pourtant de faire attention!”

Robert se pencha. Une ombre longue et mince, et, derrière celle-là, deux autres à peine visibles, des femmes peut-être.

Juste à ce moment, la brume se déchira, refoulée pour une seconde par un groupe plus nombreux. Robert reconnut avec certitude trois femmes et un homme, s’avançant rapidement sous l’escorte de Thompson et de quatre marins chargés de bagages.

Il se pencha davantage. Mais le rideau de brume se reformait déjà, épais, impénétrable. Les inconnues disparurent, inconnues. La moitié du corps hors de la batayole, Robert restait les yeux grands ouverts sur cette ombre. Pas un seul de tous ces gens pour lequel il fût quelque chose!

Et demain, qu’allait-il être pour eux? Une sorte de factotum, presque un domestique temporaire. Celui qui fait prix avec le cocher et ne paie pas la voiture. Celui qui retient la chambre et ne l’occupe pas; qui discute avec l’hôtelier, et réclame pour des repas étrangers. En cet instant, il regretta cruellement sa décision, et son cœur s’emplit d’amertume.

La nuit venait, ajoutant sa tristesse à celle de la brume. Les feux des navires restaient invisibles, invisibles les lumières de Londres. Dans ce coton humide de l’atmosphère alourdie, s’amortissait la rumeur même de la ville immense qui semblait glisser au sommeil.

Tout à coup, dans l’ombre, près de la coupée, une voix cria:

“Abel!...”

Une seconde appela à son tour, et deux autres répétèrent successivement:

“Abel!... Abel!... Abel!...”

Un murmure suivit. Les quatre voix s’unissaient en des exclamations d’angoisse, des cris d’anxiété.

Un gros homme passa, en galopant, à frôler Robert. Il appelait toujours:

“Abel!... Abel!...”

Et le ton désolé était en même temps si comique, il traduisait si clairement tant d’épaisse sottise, que Robert ne put s’empêcher de sourire. Ce gros homme, c’était aussi un de ses nouveaux maîtres.

D’ailleurs, tout se calmait. Un cri de jeune garçon, des sanglots convulsifs, et la voix du gros homme reprit:

“Le voilà!... Je l’ai!...”

Le bourdonnement général et confus recommença, diminué. Le flot des voyageurs se ralentissait. Il cessa. Le dernier, Thompson apparut un moment dans la lumière du couloir, pour disparaître aussitôt derrière la porte du salon. Robert demeurait à sa place. Nul ne le demandait. On ne s’occupait pas de lui.

À sept heures et demie, des marins étaient montés sur les premières enfléchures du grand mât, et, sur les galhaubans du mât de flèche, avaient fixé les feux de position, un vert à tribord, un rouge à bâbord. À l’avant, le feu blanc des steamers était sans doute hissé à l’étai, mais on ne pouvait l’apercevoir. Tout était prêt pour le départ, si la brume, en persistant, ne le rendait pas impossible. Il ne devait pas en être ainsi.

À huit heures moins dix, une brise aigre souffla en courtes rafales. Le nuage se condensa. Une pluie fine et glacée délaya le brouillard. En un instant, l’atmosphère s’éclaircit. Des feux se montrèrent, ternis, brouillés, mais visibles enfin.

Aussitôt un homme parut sur le spardeck. Un galon d’or étincela. Des marches craquèrent. Le capitaine montait à la passerelle.

Dans la nuit, sa voix tombe de là-haut: “Tout le monde sur le pont, pour l’appareillage!” Des piétinements. Les marins se rendent à leurs postes. Deux viennent, presque au-dessous de Robert, prêts à larguer au premier signal une aussière qui est amarrée là. La voix demande: “La machine est-elle balancée?” Un grondement fait trembler le navire, la vapeur fuse, l’hélice bat quelques tours, puis une réponse arrive, sourde, effacée: “Parés!”

Le capitaine crie de nouveau: “Largue tribord devant!

-Largue tribord devant!” répète, invisible, le second, à son poste, aux bossoirs.

Une corde fouette l’eau à grand bruit. Le capitaine commande:

“Un tour en arrière!

-Un tour en arrière! répond-on dans la machine.

-Hop!”

Tout retombe dans le silence.

“Largue tribord derrière!... En avant, en douceur!...”

Le navire est secoué d’un frisson. La machine se met en mouvement.

Mais on stoppe bientôt, et le canot rallie le bord, après avoir largué les bouts des amarres restés à terre.

Aussitôt la marche est reprise.

“À hisser le canot!” crie la voix du second.

Un bruit confus de poulies frappant le pont. Puis les matelots, rythmant leur effort, entonnent une chanson en mineur:

Il a deux fi-ill ‘, rien n ‘est plus beau!

Goth boy falloé! Goth boy falloé!

Il a deux fi-ill ‘, rien n ‘est plus beau!

Hurrah! pour Mexico-o-o-o!

“Un peu plus vite! dit le capitaine.

-Un peu plus vite!” redit le mécanicien.

Déjà, on a dépassé les derniers navires mouillés dans la rivière. Le chemin devient libre.

“En route! commande le capitaine.

-En route!” répète l’écho des profondeurs.

L’hélice tourne plus rapidement. L’eau tourbillonne. Le

bateau prend son erre. On est parti.

Alors Robert appuya sa tête sur son bras étendu. La pluie continuait à tomber. Il n’y faisait pas attention, perdu dans sa tristesse grandissante.

Tout le passé revivait dans son cœur. Sa mère à peine entrevue, le collège, où il s’était cru heureux, son père, hélas!... Puis la catastrophe qui avait si profondément bouleversé son existence. Qui lui eût prédit autrefois qu’il se verrait un jour, seul, sans amis, sans ressources, transformé en interprète, parti pour un voyage, dont cet appareillage lugubre dans la brume, dans l’ombre, dans la pluie, présageait peut-être l’issue?

Combien de temps se serait-il abandonné à cette faiblesse? Un tumulte le mit debout. Des cris, des grondements, des jurons. De grosses bottes martelant le pont. Puis un grincement affreux de fer contre fer, et une masse énorme apparut sur bâbord, pour se perdre aussitôt dans la nuit.

Aux fenêtres, des visages affolés se montraient. Le pont se remplissait de passagers terrifiés. Mais la voix du capitaine s’éleva, rassurante. Ce n’était rien.

“Pour cette fois”, se dit Robert en remontant sur le spardeck, tandis que le pont redevenait désert.

Le temps se modifiait de nouveau. La pluie, dont la violence s’était peu à peu accrue, cessa subitement.

Et ce fut comme un changement à vue. Le brouillard s’envola d’un grand coup d’aile, des étoiles s’allumèrent dans le ciel, les rives basses du fleuve devinrent perceptibles.

Robert consulta sa montre. Il était neuf heures un quart.

Les lumières de Greenwich avaient depuis longtemps disparu dans le lointain. Par bâbord derrière, celles de Woolwich étaient visibles encore et, à l’horizon, naissait le feu de Stonemess. Ce feu bientôt laissé en arrière, ce fut celui de Broadness. À dix heures on passait devant les feux de Tilburyness, et, vingt minutes plus tard, la pointe Coalhouse était doublée.

Robert vit alors que le spardeck avait un second promeneur. Une cigarette piquait la nuit à dix pas de lui.

Indifférent, il continua sa promenade, puis, machinalement, s’approcha du capot éclairé du grand salon.

Tout bruit s’était éteint à l’intérieur. Les voyageurs avaient l’un après l’autre gagné leurs cabines. Le grand salon était vide.

Seule, une passagère, presque en face de Robert, lisait, à demi couchée sur un divan. Il put l’examiner à loisir, détailler les traits délicats vivement éclairés, les cheveux blonds, les yeux noirs, la taille fine, le petit pied sortant d’une jupe élégante. Il admira la grâce de la pose, la beauté de la main tournant les feuillets du livre. Avec raison, il jugea cette passagère charmante, et, pendant quelques instants, il s’oublia à la contempler.

Mais le fumeur fit un mouvement, toussa, frappa du pied. Robert, honteux de son indiscrétion, s’éloigna du capot, et reprit sa promenade.

Les feux continuaient à défiler. À onze heures dix, on se trouvait par le travers de la station des signaux. Au loin clignotaient maintenant ceux du Nore et du Great-Nore, sentinelles perdues de l’océan.

Robert se décida au repos. Il quitta le spardeck, descendit l’escalier des cabines, s’engagea dans le couloir. Il marchait songeur, indifférent à ce qui l’entourait.

À quoi rêvait-il ainsi? Continuait-il le triste monologue de naguère? Ne pensait-il pas plutôt au gracieux tableau qu’il venait d’admirer? Elles passent si vite, parfois, les tristesses d’un homme de vingt-huit ans!

Il ne reprit possession de lui-même que la main sur la porte de sa cabine. Il s’aperçut alors qu’il n’était pas seul.

Deux autres portes s’ouvraient en même temps. Dans la cabine voisine de la sienne, une femme entrait et un voyageur dans la suivante. Les deux passagers échangèrent un salut familier, puis la voisine de Robert se retourna, glissant vers lui un regard curieux, et, avant qu’elle ne fût disparue, il reconnut la vision du grand salon.

Il poussa la porte à son tour.

Comme il la refermait sur lui, le navire se souleva en gémissant, puis retomba dans un vacarme d’écume. Et, au même instant qu’en arrivait la première lame, sur le pont siffla dans les agrès la première haleine de la mer.

CHAPITRE IV

PREMIER CONTACT

Au lever du jour, toute terre avait disparu. Dans le ciel déblayé de nuages, le soleil s’épandait librement sur le cercle immense de la mer. Le temps était superbe, et, comme s’il eût partagé l’ivresse générale de la nature, le navire s’élançait allégrement, brisant, dans une lutte amicale, les courtes et rudes lames que poussait contre lui une fraîche brise de nord-ouest.

Quand le timonier piqua le quart de six heures, le capitaine Pip descendit de la passerelle, où il était resté toute la nuit, et remit le service au second.

“Cap à l’ouest, monsieur Flyship, dit-il.

-Bien, capitaine, répondit le second, qui, montant à son tour sur la passerelle, commanda:

-Les bâbordais à laver le pont!”

Cependant le capitaine, au lieu de rentrer directement dans sa chambre, avait entrepris le tour du navire en promenant partout son regard sûr et tranquille.

Il alla jusqu’au gaillard d’avant, et là, penché au-dessus de l’étrave, regarda le navire s’élever à la lame. Il revint vers l’arrière, et longuement examina le sillage. De l’arrière, il gagna les capots des machines, et, d’un air soucieux, écouta le grondement ferrailleur des bielles et des pistons en mouvement.

Il allait s’éloigner, quand une casquette galonnée s’éleva hors de l’orifice béant. Le premier mécanicien, M. Bishop, venait sur le pont humer les fraîches brises matinales.

Les deux officiers se serrèrent la main. Puis ils demeurèrent face à face, silencieux, tandis que le capitaine coulait un regard interrogateur vers les profondeurs où le fer travaillait à grand bruit.

Cette muette interrogation fut comprise de M. Bishop.

“Oui, commandant... en effet!” dit-il avec un soupir.

Il ne s’expliqua pas davantage. Mais le capitaine se trouvait sans doute suffisamment renseigné, car il n’insista pas et se contenta de balancer la tête avec un visible mécontentement. Après quoi, les deux officiers reprirent de conserve l’inspection commencée par le capitaine.

Leur promenade durait encore, quand Thompson sortit à son tour, et monta sur le spardeck.

Pendant qu’il y parvenait d’un côté, Robert y arrivait de l’autre.

“Ah! ah! s’écria Thompson, voilà M. Morgand. Monsieur le professeur a-t-il passé une bonne nuit? Est-il satisfait de son excellente cabine? Beau temps, n’est-il pas vrai, monsieur le professeur?”

Instinctivement, Robert avait tourné la tête, s’attendant à voir derrière lui quelque passager.

Ce titre de professeur ne s’adressait évidemment pas à sa modeste personne.

Mais il n’eut pas le loisir de s’expliquer sur ce point. Thompson brusquement s’était interrompu. Prenant soudain son parti, il dégringola les escaliers et s’élança sur le pont.

Robert, en regardant autour de lui, ne put découvrir la raison de cette fuite si prompte. Sauf deux passagers qui venaient d’y monter, le spardeck était vide. Est-ce donc la vue de ces deux passagers qui avait mis Thompson en déroute? Leur aspect n’avait rien de terrifiant, cependant. Pour original et singulier, c’était autre chose.

S’il est à la rigueur possible à des Français d’adopter une autre nationalité que la leur sans exciter outre mesure l’incrédulité de leurs compatriotes improvisés, pareil avatar est plus difficile pour un Anglais. Pour que l’on puisse s’y tromper, les fils d’Albion montrent d’ordinaire des signes trop caractéristiques de leur race, dont ils portent dans toute leur personne l’énergique signature.

L’un des deux passagers qui étaient survenus et s’avançaient maintenant vers Robert, offrait un remarquable exemple de la justesse de cette observation. Impossible d’être plus Anglais. Il aurait même été un grand Anglais, si la hauteur de la taille suffisait pour mériter ce qualificatif. Maigre, d’ailleurs, à proportion, sans doute afin de rétablir l’équilibre, et de ne pas dépasser le poids normal auquel a droit un homme bien constitué.

Ce long corps s’appuyait sur de longues jambes, terminées par de longs pieds posant bien d’aplomb sur le sol, dont ils semblaient à chaque pas prendre une exclusive possession. Où qu’il se trouve, ne faut-il pas qu’un Anglais plante, d’une manière quelconque, le drapeau de son pays?

Par son aspect général, ce passager ressemblait beaucoup à un vieil arbre. Les nœuds eussent été figurés par des articulations rugueuses, que le moindre mouvement emplissait de grincements et de craquements comme les engrenages d’une mécanique mal graissée. Au physique, il manquait certainement de synovie, et peut- être, à en juger par l’apparence, n’avait-il pas au moral plus de lubrifiant.

On était fortement porté à l’admettre, quand de la base, les yeux remontaient vers les hauteurs du chef. On apercevait d’abord un mince et long nez à l’extrémité acérée. De chaque côté de cette crête redoutable, deux petits charbons brûlaient à la place ordinaire des yeux, et au-dessous, une mince coupure, que la connaissance seule des lois naturelles faisait reconnaître pour une bouche, permettait de croire à quelque méchanceté. Enfin, une auréole d’un beau roux, commençant au sommet de la tête par des cheveux soigneusement lissés séparés par une raie merveilleusement droite, et se continuant par les pointes interminables d’une paire de favoris nuageux, servait de cadre au tableau. Raie et favoris criaient: raideur, pour peu que l’on comprît l’anglais.

Ce visage, au total, était une succession de bosses et de vallées. Dieu, qui pétrit les hommes de ses mains, avait évidemment modelé celui-là à coups de poing. Et le résultat, ce mélange de finesse, de malice, de méchanceté, de raideur, n’eût pas été heureux, si, corrigeant le tout, la lumière d’une âme égale et calme n’eût été répandue sur ces traits montueux comme un terrain d’origine volcanique.

Car ce bizarre gentleman était calme à un point inimaginable. Jamais il ne s’emportait, jamais il ne s’échauffait, jamais il n’élevait la voix, sa voix qui n’avait qu’une note, et, comme la basse persistante de certaines pages musicales, ramenait toujours dans le ton une discussion près de s’égarer.

Ce gentleman n’était pas seul sur le spardeck. Il conduisait, il remorquait plutôt une sorte de forteresse ambulante, un homme aussi grand que lui, mais, par exemple, épais et large à proportion, un colosse d'aspect puissant et débonnaire.

Les deux passagers abordèrent Robert Morgand.

"C'est à M. le professeur Robert Morgand que nous avons l'avantage de parler? demanda le premier d'une voix aussi harmonieuse que s'il eût mâché des cailloux.

-Oui, monsieur, répondit machinalement Robert.

-Cicérone-interprète à bord de ce navire?

-En effet.

-Enchanté, monsieur le professeur, affirma avec une froideur glaciale le gentleman en frisant la pointe de ses favoris d'un si beau roux. Je suis, moi, M. Saunders, passager."

Robert salua légèrement.

"Maintenant que tout est en règle, permettez-moi, monsieur le professeur, de vous présenter M. Van Piperboom, de Rotterdam, dont la vue m'a paru singulièrement troubler votre administrateur, M. Thompson."

En entendant son nom, M. Van Piperboom dessina une gracieuse révérence.

Robert regarda son interlocuteur avec un certain étonnement. Thompson s'était sauvé en effet. Mais pourquoi aurait-il été troublé par la vue d'un de ses passagers? Pourquoi surtout M. Saunders jugeait-il à propos de faire à l'employé dudit Thompson une si singulière réflexion?

Saunders ne donna pas ses raisons. Sa face resta grave et froide. Seule, sa langue, pointant en dehors, eût pu, si

Robert avait mieux connu ce gentleman, montrer, qu’à son estime, il en avait dit une bien bonne.

“M. Van Piperboom, poursuivit-il, ne sait absolument que le hollandais, et il se consume vainement dans la recherche d’un interprète, comme je l’ai appris par cette carte, dont il eut la sage précaution de se munir.”

Et Saunders exhiba une carte de visite sur laquelle Robert put lire:

VAN PIPERBOOM demande un interprète

ROTTERDAM

Piperboom crut sans doute devoir appuyer la demande formulée par la carte, car il énonça d’une voix flûtée qui contrastait étrangement avec ses dimensions.

“Inderdaad, mynheer, ik ken geen woord engelsch... - M. Piperboom tombe mal monsieur, interrompit Robert. Je ne sais pas le hollandais plus que vous.” Cependant le vaste passager continuait: “... ach zal ik dikwyls uw raad inwinnen op die reis.” Et il ponctua sa phrase d’un aimable salut et d’un engageant sourire.

“Comment! vous ne savez pas le hollandais! Ne serait-ce donc pas à vous que ceci fait allusion?” s’écria Saunders, en tirant des profondeurs de sa poche un papier qu’il présenta à Robert.

Robert prit le papier qui lui était offert. Sur cette feuille, programme du voyage entrepris, les indications de l’affiche étaient d’abord reproduites, et, au bas de la

première page, la mention relative à l’interprète figurait toujours, ainsi modifiée:

“Un professeur de l’Université de France, parlant toutes les langues, a bien voulu consentir à se mettre au service de MM. les passagers en qualité de cicérone- interprète.”

Robert, ayant lu, releva les yeux sur Saunders, les reporta sur le papier, puis les releva encore et les promena autour de lui, comme s’il eût espéré trouver sur le pont l’explication d’un fait qui échappait à sa compréhension. Alors, il aperçut Thompson penché sur le capot de la machine, et, semblait-il, absorbé dans la contemplation des bielles et des pistons.

Abandonnant Saunders et Piperboom, Robert courut à lui, et, un peu vivement peut-être, lui tendit le malencontreux programme.

Mais Thompson s’attendait à ce coup. Thompson, toujours, était prêt à tout.

Sous le bras levé de Robert, son bras se glissa, amical, et, d’un effort sans brusquerie, il entraîna l’interprète mécontent. On eût juré deux camarades devisant paisiblement de la pluie et du beau temps.

Cependant Robert n’était pas homme à se payer de cette monnaie.

“Pourriez-vous m’expliquer, monsieur, les affirmations de votre programme? s’écria-t-il brutalement. Vous ai-je jamais dit que je parlais toutes les langues?”

Thompson souriait, agréable.

“Ta! ta! ta! fit-il doucement, ce sont les affaires, cher monsieur.

-Elles ne sauraient excuser un mensonge”, répliqua Robert sèchement.

Thompson eut un dédaigneux mouvement d’épaules. Ah bien! il n’en était pas à un mensonge près, quand il s’agissait de réclame!

“Voyons! voyons! cher monsieur, reprit-il d’un ton insinuant, de quoi vous plaignez-vous? Elle est exacte, après tout, cette mention, j’ose le dire. N’êtes-vous pas Français? N’êtes-vous pas professeur? N’avez-vous pas fait vos études à l’Université de France, et n’est-ce pas d’elle que vous tenez vos diplômes?”

Thompson savourait la force de ses déductions. Il s’écoutait, s’appréciait. Il se persuadait lui-même.

Robert n’était pas d’humeur à entreprendre une discussion bien inutile.

“Oui, oui, vous avez raison, se contenta-t-il de répondre ironiquement. Et je sais aussi toutes les langues. C’est entendu.

-Eh bien? quoi, toutes les langues? se récria Thompson. Toutes les langues “utiles”, entendez-vous bien? Le mot “utiles” a été oublié, positivement. Voilà une grande affaire, j’ose le dire!”

Robert désigna du geste Piperboom, assistant de loin à cette scène, en compagnie de Saunders. Cet argument était sans réplique.

Thompson, probablement, ne le jugea pas ainsi, car il se borna à claquer les doigts d'un air détaché. Puis ses lèvres plissées laissèrent échapper un "Pfuut!" insouciant, et, finalement, pirouettant sur ses talons avec désinvolture, il planta là son interlocuteur.

Robert eût peut-être poussé l'explication plus avant, mais un incident vint changer le cours de ses idées. Un passager sortait à ce moment du couloir des cabines et se dirigeait vers lui.

Blond, de taille élancée, d'une élégance discrète et soignée, ce passager portait en lui un je ne sais quoi de "pas Anglais" auquel Robert ne pouvait se méprendre. Aussi fut-ce avec plaisir, mais sans surprise, qu'il s'entendit interpeller dans sa langue maternelle.

"Monsieur le professeur, dit le nouveau venu avec une sorte de bonne humeur communicative, on vous a indiqué à moi comme étant l'interprète du bord.

-En effet, monsieur.

-Et, comme j'aurai certainement besoin de votre secours, lorsque nous serons dans les possessions espagnoles, je viens, en qualité de compatriote, me mettre sous votre protection spéciale. Permettez-moi donc de me présenter: M. Roger de Sorgues, lieutenant au 4e chasseurs, en congé de convalescence.

-L'interprète Robert Morgand est entièrement à vos ordres, mon lieutenant."

Les deux Français prirent congé l'un de l'autre. Tandis que son compatriote se dirigeait vers l'avant, Robert revint vers Saunders et le vaste Hollandais.

Il ne put les retrouver. Saunders avait disparu, et avec lui le débonnaire Piperboom.

Saunders, en effet, avait quitté la place. En ce moment, débarrassé de son encombrant compagnon, il rôdait autour du capitaine Pip dont les allures l’intriguaient.

Le capitaine Pip, auquel, il faut le reconnaître, ne manquaient pas les tics les plus singuliers, avait une habitude particulièrement bizarre.

Qu’une émotion quelconque l’agitât, chagrin ou joie, et le mît dans cet “état d’âme” où les humains ont besoin d’un confident, le capitaine, lui, restait hermétiquement boutonné. Pas un mot ne s’échappait de ses lèvres. C’est seulement au bout d’un certain temps, quand un mystérieux travail s’était accompli en lui-même, qu’il éprouvait le besoin d’une “âme sœur”, dans le sein de laquelle il pût s’épancher. Ajoutons qu’alors il la trouvait sans difficulté, cette “âme sœur” étant à quatre pattes et toujours à vingt centimètres derrière les talons de son maître.

De la race des griffons, mais incalculablement mâtiné, cet ami fidèle répondait avec empressement au nom d’Artimon. Le capitaine avait-il un ennui, un plaisir, il appelait Artimon, et confiait à sa discrétion éprouvée les réflexions que l’événement suggérait.

Le capitaine, ce matin-là, était gros sans doute de quelque confidence. En effet, M. Bishop à peine quitté, il s’était brusquement arrêté au pied du mât de misaine, et, d’une voix brève, il avait dit:

“Artimon!”

Parfaitement dressé à la manoeuvre, l’affreux roquet d’un jaune sale, qui le suivait pas à pas, avait été aussitôt se placer devant lui. Puis, s’asseyant posément sur son arrière-train, il avait relevé vers son maître des yeux intelligents, en donnant tous les signes de la plus vive attention.

Mais le capitaine Pip ne s’épancha pas tout de suite. La confidence n’était pas mûre. Un long instant, il demeura immobile, muet, les sourcils froncés, laissant Artimon dans une pénible indécision.

En tout cas, c’est d’un souci, non d’un plaisir bien certainement, qu’il désirait vider son cœur. L’âme sœur ne pouvait s’y tromper, à la moustache hérissée de son ami, au regard fulgurant de ses yeux, dont la colère faisait diverger notablement les prunelles.

Ce regard fulgurant, le capitaine, tout en se pétrissant cruellement le bout du nez, le promena longtemps des bossoirs au couronnement et du couronnement aux bossoirs. Après quoi, ayant craché dans la mer avec violence, il frappa du pied, et, considérant Artimon bien en face, décréta d’une voix courroucée:

“Enfin, c’est de la camelote, tout ça, monsieur!” Artimon baissa la tête d’un air désolé. “Et s’il nous tombait quelque bon coup de temps?... Hein, master?”

Le capitaine fit une pause avant de conclure, et se reprit à torturer son nez innocent.

“Ce serait une péripétie, monsieur!” prononça-t-il avec emphase.

Les confidences de son maître n’étant jamais bien longues, Artimon crut en être quitte ainsi. Il jugea donc pouvoir se permettre un mouvement. Mais la voix du capitaine le cloua sur place. Il ricanait, maintenant, en récitant les mentions du prospectus:

““Superbe steamer “. Ah! ah! ah!” de deux mille cinq cents tonneaux “. Deux mille cinq cents tonneaux, ça?”

Une voix caverneuse s’éleva à deux pas de lui: “Des bordelaises, commandant!” Le capitaine méprisa cette interruption. ““Et trois mille chevaux “, continua-t-il. Quel damné aplomb, monsieur!

- Des poneys, commandant, trois mille petits poneys”, prononça la même voix.

Cette fois, le capitaine, ayant achevé, daigna entendre. Lançant un regard irrité à l’audacieux interrupteur, il s’éloigna, tandis que son passif confident, revenu à son rôle de chien, s’incrustait dans son sillage.

Saunders, car tel était l’impertinent commentateur, tout en regardant s’éloigner le capitaine, s’abandonna à une gaieté qui, pour ne pas se traduire à la manière ordinaire, n’en devait pas moins être violente, à en juger par les secousses dont grinçaient ses articulations.

Après le premier déjeuner, le spardeck commença à s’émailler de passagers, certains se livrant aux douceurs de la promenade, d’autres assis en groupes de causeurs.

Un de ces groupes attira bientôt particulièrement l’attention de Robert. Assises loin de lui vers l’avant du spardeck, trois personnes, dont deux femmes, le composaient. Dans l’une de celles-ci, en train de lire alors le dernier numéro du Times, il reconnut la douce vision de la veille et sa voisine de cabine.

Mariée ou veuve, elle était femme à coup sûr, et paraissait âgée de vingt-deux à vingt-trois ans. D'ailleurs, il avait eu raison de la juger charmante, et le soleil se montrait aussi flatteur pour elle que les lumières.

Sa compagne était une jeune fille de dix-neuf à vingt ans, sa sœur, à en juger par une évidente ressemblance.

Quant au gentleman qui complétait le groupe, il n'inspirait pas la sympathie à première vue. Petit, maigre, moustaches tombantes, nez busqué, regard insaisissable de deux yeux fureteurs, tout de lui déplut à Robert.

“Au reste, que m'importe” se dit-il.

Il ne put cependant en détourner aussitôt son attention. Une involontaire association d'idées lui fit, à la vue de cet antipathique personnage, évoquer le fumeur impatient qui, la veille, l'avait contraint à la retraite.

“Quelque mari jaloux”, pensa Robert en haussant les épaules.

Juste à ce moment le vent, qui depuis le matin montrait une tendance à fraîchir, souffla en subite et courte rafale. Le journal que lisait la jeune femme lui fut arraché des mains, et partit comme une flèche vers la mer. Robert s'élança à la poursuite du fugitif, eut le bonheur de le saisir au moment où il allait disparaître pour jamais, et s'empressa de le rendre à sa charmante voisine, qui le remercia par un gracieux sourire.

Robert, ce léger service rendu, se retirait discrètement, quand Thompson s'interposa. Mot inexact. C'est “précipita” qu'il faudrait dire.

“Bravo! monsieur le professeur, bravo! s'écria-t-il. Mrs. Lindsay, Miss Clarck, Mr. Lindsay, permettez-moi de vous présenter M. Robert Morgand, professeur à l'Université de France, qui a eu l'extrême bonté de bien vouloir consentir à remplir parmi nous le rôle ingrat d’interprète, ce qui vous prouvera une fois de plus - si toutefois cette preuve pouvait être utile! - que l’agence ne recule devant rien pour assurer le plaisir de ses voyageurs!”

Thompson était superbe en débitant sa tirade, superbe d’audace et de conviction. Quant à Robert, il se sentait au contraire fort embarrassé de sa personne. Par son silence, il se rendait complice du mensonge. Mais, d’autre part, pourquoi faire un éclat? Thompson le servait, après tout, malgré lui. On accorderait certainement plus d’égards au professeur, que n’en eût obtenu l’humble cicérone- interprète.

Remettant à plus tard la solution de cette question, il prit simplement congé, et s’inclina en un correct salut.

“Il est très bien, ce gentleman”, dit à Thompson Mrs. Lindsay, en suivant Robert des yeux.

Thompson répondit par une mimique expressive. Il hocha emphatiquement la tête, gonfla les joues, avança les lèvres, de façon à faire bien comprendre à quel point l’interprète du *Seamew* était un personnage considérable.

“Je lui suis d’autant plus reconnaissante, reprit Mrs. Lindsay, d’avoir sauvé mon journal, qu’il contient un entrefilet concernant un de nos compagnons, et nous tous un peu par conséquent. Jugez plutôt, ajouta-t-elle, en lisant à voix haute:

““C’est aujourd’hui, 11 mai, qu’aura lieu le départ du *Seamew*, steamer affrété par l’Agence Thompson and Co. pour le voyage de circumnavigation qu’elle a organisé. Nous apprenons que Mr. E. T. du Club des Suicidés, est au nombre des passagers. Nous aurons donc bientôt sans doute à enregistrer quelque original fait divers. “

- Hein?... fit Thompson. Pardon, chère Mrs. Lindsay, voulez-vous me permettre?...”

Et, prenant le journal des mains de Mrs. Lindsay, il relut le passage avec attention.

“Voilà qui est fort! s’écria-t-il enfin. Que vient faire ici cet original? Mais d’abord qui peut-il être?”

Thompson consulta rapidement la liste des passagers. “Le seul, conclut-il, qui réponde aux initiales E. T. est un Mr. Edward Tigg, qui... Et, tenez! précisément, le voyez-vous, accoudé aux haubans de misaine, tout seul et les yeux fixés sur la mer? Ce ne peut être que lui. C’est lui certainement... Je ne l’avais pas remarqué... Et pourtant, a-t-il l’air assez sinistre!...”

Thompson montrait en parlant un gentleman d’une quarantaine d’années, brun, les cheveux frisés, la barbe en pointe, au demeurant, fort bien de sa personne.

“Mais, interrogea Miss Clarck, qu’est-ce donc que ce Club des Suicidés?

-La charmante Miss Clarck, en sa qualité d’Américaine, ne peut en effet connaître cela.

Le Club des Suicidés est une institution éminemment anglaise, j’ose le dire, répondit Thompson avec un évident amour-propre. Ce club n’est composé que de gens ayant assez de l’existence. Qu’ils aient eu à subir des chagrins exceptionnels, ou qu’ils en soient venus là par simple ennui, tous ses membres sont au bord du suicide. Leurs conversations roulent sur ce sujet, et leur temps se passe à chercher des manières originales d’en finir avec la vie. Nul doute que ce Mr. Tigg ne compte sur les incidents du voyage pour se procurer une mort émouvante et rare.

-Pauvre garçon! dirent à la fois les deux soeurs, dont les regards se portèrent sur le désespéré.

-Ah! mais! s’écria Thompson qui semblait beaucoup moins ému, on y mettra bon ordre. Un suicide ici, voilà qui serait gai, j’ose le dire! Permettez-moi de vous quitter, Mrs. Lindsay. Je veux répandre la nouvelle, afin qu’on ait l’oeil sur cet intéressant passager.

-Quel homme aimable, que ce Mr. Thompson! dit en riant Dolly, quand l’exubérant manager se fut éloigné. Il ne peut prononcer votre nom, sans y accoler quelque épithète flatteuse. C’est la jolie Miss Dolly Clarck par-ci, la délicieuse Mrs. Alice Lindsay par-là. Il ne tarit pas.

-Petite folle! dit Alice avec une indulgente sévérité.

-Mère grondeuse!” répliqua Dolly avec un bon sourire.

Cependant, les uns après les autres, tous les touristes avaient envahi le spardeck.

Désireux de se renseigner autant que possible sur les compagnons de route que le hasard lui imposait, Robert s’était emparé d’un rocking-chair, et amusait ses yeux du spectacle, tout en consultant la liste des passagers.

Cette liste dénombrait d’abord l’état-major, l’équipage et généralement le personnel du *Seamew.* Dans cette nomenclature, Robert put voir qu’il figurait en bonne place.

À tout seigneur tout honneur: Thompson ouvrait la marche, orné du titre pompeux d'administrateur général. Le capitaine Pip suivait, puis venait Mr. Bishop, premier mécanicien. Immédiatement après Mr. Bishop, on signalait la présence de M. le professeur Robert Morgand. L'administrateur général faisait décidément la partie belle à son cicérone-interprète.

À ces hautes autorités du bord succédait l'état-major secondaire, puis tout le menu fretin des matelots et des serviteurs. Robert, s'il l'eût voulu, eût pu lire les noms du second: Mr. *Flyship,* du lieutenant: Mr. Brown, du maître d'équipage: Mr. Sky, et de leurs quinze mousses ou marins, du second mécanicien et de ses six chauffeurs, des six valets et des quatre femmes de chambre, des deux maîtres d'hôtel enfin, deux nègres du plus beau noir, l'un extra-gros, l'autre extra-maigre, et déjà surnommés par un loustic Mr. Roastbeaf et Mr. Sandweach.

Mais Robert, intéressé seulement par les passagers, dont la liste officielle portait le nombre à soixante-trois, sauta cette insipide énumération. Il se divertit donc à reconstituer les familles, et à mettre des noms sur les visages qui défilaient devant lui.

Besogne malaisée et qui eût été fertile en erreurs, si Thompson, renversant les rôles, et se constituant obligeamment le cicérone de son interprète, ne fût venu à son secours.

“Je vois ce qui vous préoccupe, dit-il en s'asseyant auprès de lui. Voulez-vous que je vous aide? Il est bon que vous ayez quelques notions des plus notables hôtes du *Seamew.* Inutile de vous parler de la famille Lindsay. Je vous ai présenté ce matin. Vous connaissez Mrs. Alice Lindsay, une Américaine richissime, Miss Dolly Clarck, sa sœur, et Mr. Jack Lindsay, son beau-frère.

-Son beau-frère, dites-vous? interrompit Robert. Mrs. Lindsay n’est donc pas mariée?

-Veuve”, répondit Thompson.

Pourquoi il fut satisfait de cette réponse, Robert eût été bien embarrassé de le dire.

“Donc, passons, reprit Thompson, et commençons, si vous voulez, par cette vieille dame que vous voyez à dix pas de nous. C’est Lady Heilbuth, une originale qui ne voyage jamais sans une douzaine de chats et de chiens. Derrière elle, son domestique, raide dans ses galons, tient sous le bras le toutou actuellement préféré. Un peu plus loin, c’est un jeune couple que je connais peu. Mais il ne faut pas être grand clerc pour deviner de nouveaux mariés accomplissant leur voyage de noces. Il s’appelle Johnson, ce gros gentleman qui bouscule imperturbablement tout le monde. C’est un fameux buveur, j’ose le dire! Revenez maintenant vers l’arrière. Voyez-vous ce long corps perdu dans les plis d’une vaste redingote? C’est le révérend Cooley, un estimable clergyman.

-Et celui-là, si raide, qui se promène entre sa femme et sa fille?

-Oh! dit Thompson avec importance, c’est le très noble Sir George Hamilton, la très noble Lady Evangelina Hamilton, la très noble Miss Margaret Hamilton. Comme ils ont conscience de leur haute situation! Comme ils se promènent silencieusement, gravement, solitairement! Qui, sauf peut-être Lady Heilbuth, serait digne ici d’être admis dans leur très noble intimité?”

Robert considéra son interlocuteur avec intérêt. Amusant, cet homme à facettes. Le flatteur, au besoin, avait bon bec.

Son trait lancé, Thompson s’était levé. Il n’aimait pas faire longtemps la même chose.

“Je ne vois plus rien d’important à vous signaler, mon cher professeur, dit-il. Vous connaîtrez les autres à l’usage. Permettez-moi de retourner à mes affaires.

-Et ce gros gentleman, demanda encore Robert cependant, qui paraît chercher quelque chose, escorté de trois dames et d’un jeune garçon?

-Celui-là, commença Thompson... Au fait! je vous laisse le plaisir de faire sa connaissance, car, si je ne me trompe, c’est à vous qu’il en veut.”

Le personnage en question avait, en effet, pris subitement son parti, et se dirigeait en droite ligne vers Robert. Il l’aborda poliment tandis que Thompson s’esquivait.

“Sapristi! mon cher monsieur, s’écria-t-il en s’essuyant le front, j’ai eu du mal à vous trouver. “M. Morgand?” demandais-je à tout le monde. “M. Morgand? Connais pas. “Voilà ce qu’on me répondait invariablement, vous le croirez si vous voulez.”

Robert éprouva quelque surprise de cette singulière entrée en matière. Toutefois, il n’y avait pas lieu de se fâcher, l’intention de blesser étant certainement absente. Pendant le discours de leur chef, les trois femmes se confondaient en révérences, et le jeune garçon écarquillait des yeux où se lisait une évidente admiration.

“Pourrais-je savoir, monsieur, à qui j’ai l’honneur de parler?” demanda froidement Robert.

Froideur bien naturelle. Il n’était pas de rapports bien tentants, ce gros homme commun, suant la sottise et le contentement de soi, non plus que sa famille, composée, sans compter le jeune garçon, d’une femme plus que mûre et de deux filles sèches et laides qui devaient friser la trentaine.

“Parfaitement! parfaitement, monsieur”, répondit l’épais personnage.

Pourtant, avant de donner le renseignement demandé, il se mit en quête de sièges pour lui et pour les siens. Les pliants récoltés, toute la famille s’installa confortablement.

“Asseyez-vous donc”, dit à Robert l’intrus d’une voix engageante.

Robert, résolu à prendre l’incident du bon côté, obéit à l’invitation.

“On est mieux assis, pas vrai? s’écria le gros homme en riant lourdement. Ah! Ah! Vous demandiez donc qui j’étais. Mr. Blockhead, bien connu dans son quartier, et honorablement, monsieur! Tout le monde vous le dira. L’Épicerie Blockhead, de Trafalgar Street! Franc comme l’or, monsieur, franc comme l’or.”

Robert fit un geste évasif d’adhésion.

“Maintenant, vous vous demandez peut-être comment moi, Blockhead, épicier honoraire, je suis en ce moment sur ce bateau? Je vous répondrai qu’hier encore je n’avais jamais vu la mer. C’est fort, ça, hein? Qu’est-ce que vous voulez, mon cher monsieur, dans le commerce, il faut travailler dur, si on ne veut pas finir au Work-House. Vous me direz: le dimanche. Mais le dimanche!... Bref! pendant trente ans, nous n’avons pas mis le pied hors de la ville. Tant qu’enfin, l’aisance étant venue, nous nous retirâmes des affaires.

-Et vous avez voulu rattraper le temps perdu? demanda Robert en affectant un vif intérêt.

-Vous n’y êtes pas. Nous nous sommes d’abord reposés. Puis après nous avons commencé à nous ennuyer ferme. Les commis à gronder, les pratiques à servir, tout cela nous manquait. Je disais souvent à Mrs. Blockhead: “Mrs. Blockhead, nous devrions faire un petit voyage. “Mais elle ne voulait rien entendre, rapport à la dépense, vous comprenez.

Tant qu’enfin, il y a de cela dix jours, j’ai aperçu une affiche de l’Agence Thompson.

C’était justement, ce jour-là, le trente et unième anniversaire de celui où j’ai épousé Georgina... Mrs. Blockhead s’appelle Georgina de son petit nom, monsieur... Alors j’ai pris les tickets sans rien dire. Et qu’est-ce qui a été content? Ce sont mes filles, que je vous présente... Saluez, Bess! Saluez, Mary!... Mrs. Blockhead a bien un peu bougonné. Mais, quand elle a su que j’avais payé demi-place pour Abel... Abel, c’est mon fils, monsieur... Saluez, Abel! C’est la politesse qui distingue toujours le gentleman... Oui, monsieur, demi- place. Abel n’aura dix ans que le 2 juin. C’est une chance, ça, hein?

-Et vous êtes satisfait de votre décision? interrogea Robert pour dire quelque chose...

-Satisfait? s’écria Blockhead. Dites: enchanté. La mer! Le navire! Les cabines! Et des domestiques en veux-tu en voilà! C’est extraordinaire, tout ça. Je le dis comme je le pense, monsieur. Franc comme l’or, Blockhead est franc comme l’or, monsieur.”

Robert recommença son geste commode d’adhésion.

“Mais ça n’est pas tout ça, reprit l’intarissable bavard. Quand j’ai appris que j’allais voyager avec un professeur français, mon sang n’a fait qu’un tour. Je n’en ai jamais vu, moi, de professeur français!”

Robert, transformé en phénomène, esquissa une légère grimace.

“Puis, j’ai pensé à faire d’une pierre deux coups. Ça ne vous ferait rien, pas vrai, de donner à mon fils quelques leçons de français? Il a déjà un commencement.

-Ah! votre fils a déjà...

-Oui. Il ne sait qu’une phrase, mais il la sait bien. Abel, dites votre phrase à monsieur.”

Aussitôt Abel se leva, et, du ton d’un écolier qui récite une leçon, mais sans évidemment en comprendre le sens, articula ces mots inattendus:

“Ce que les épiciers honoraires sont rigolos, c’est rien de le dire!” prononça-t-il avec un accent très français et même assez faubourien.

Robert partit d’un irrésistible éclat de rire, au grand scandale de Blockhead et de sa famille.

“Il n’y a rien de drôle là-dedans, dit celui-ci d’un air pincé. Abel ne peut pas mal prononcer. C’est un peintre français, un “répine” comme il disait, qui lui a appris cette phrase-là.”

Coupant court à cet incident ridicule, Robert s’excusa de ne pouvoir accepter l’offre qui lui était faite, ses fonctions ne lui laissant aucune liberté, et il allait se débarrasser à tout prix du fâcheux, quand le hasard vint à son secours.

Depuis un moment, Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam - allait et venait sur le spardeck, continuant, infatigable, sa chasse à l’interprète. Il abordait les passagers et les interpellait les uns après les autres, sans obtenir d’autre réponse qu’un geste d’ignorance impuissante. À chaque tentative avortée, le visage de Piperboom s’allongeait, se faisait plus désolé.

Quelques paroles prononcées par l’infortuné arrivèrent jusqu’à Blockhead, et lui firent dresser l’oreille.

“Quel est ce gentleman? demanda-t-il à Robert, et quel drôle de langage parle-t-il donc?

-C’est un Hollandais, répondit machinalement Robert, dont la situation n’a rien de très agréable.”

Au mot de: Hollandais, Blockhead s’était levé.

“Abel, suivez-moi!” ordonna-t-il.

Et il s’éloigna rapidement, escorté de sa famille tout entière à distance respectueuse.

Quand Piperboom aperçut cette famille qui s’avançait vers lui, il se dirigea à sa rencontre. Était-ce enfin l’interprète attendu?

“Mynheer, kunt u my den tolk van het schip wyzen? dit-il à Blockhead en l’abordant gracieusement.

-Monsieur, répondit solennellement Blockhead, je n’avais jamais vu de Hollandais. Je suis heureux et fier que mon fils puisse contempler un enfant de ce peuple célèbre par ses fromages.”

Piperboom ouvrit de grands yeux. C’était à son tour de ne pas comprendre. Il insista:

“Ik versta u niet, mynheer. Ik vraag u of gy my den tolk van het schip wilt...

-... wyzen”, acheva Blockhead d’un air conciliant.

En entendant ce mot, le visage de Piperboom s’éclaircit. Enfin! Mais Blockhead continuait:

“C’est probablement du hollandais. Je suis extraordinairement content d’avoir été à même d’en entendre. Voilà les occasions que nous offrent les grands voyages”, ajouta-t-il en se retournant vers sa famille suspendue à ses lèvres.

Piperboom s’était rembruni. Évidemment celui-là ne comprenait pas mieux que les autres.

Mais tout à coup un grognement s’échappa de ses lèvres. Il venait d’apercevoir Thompson en bas, sur le pont. Celui-là, il le connaissait. Il l’avait vu, quand il avait fait la sottise de prendre son billet. Là, il trouverait ce qu’il cherchait, ou bien alors!...

Thompson, qui aurait pu l’éviter comme il l’avait fait le matin même, attendit l’ennemi de pied ferme. Une explication, après tout, était nécessaire. Autant maintenant que plus tard.

Piperboom l’aborda avec une extrême politesse, et débita sa phrase inévitable: “Mynheer, kunt u my den tolk van het schip wyzen?” Thompson, d’un signe, lui indiqua qu’il ne l’entendait pas.

Piperboom, s’obstinant, recommença son discours d’un ton plus haut. Thompson, froid et glacé, répéta le même signe.

Une troisième fois, Piperboom tenta l’épreuve, mais, cette fois, d’une voix si élevée que tous les passagers se tournèrent de son côté. Jusqu’à Mr. *Flyship,* qui, de la passerelle, parut s’intéresser à l’incident. Seul, Thompson ne fut pas ému. Calme et superbe, il refit d’un air paisible le même geste d’ignorance.

Alors, devant cette froideur, devant l’inutilité de ses efforts, Piperboom perdit toute mesure. Sa voix s’éleva jusqu’au cri. Il s’étrangla en gloussements inarticulés, ponctués de gestes indignés. Enfin, comme dernier argument, il jeta aux pieds de Thompson le fameux programme froissé dans sa main furieuse, ce programme qu’un ami lui avait traduit sans doute, et sur la foi duquel il s’était embarqué.

Dans cette circonstance, Thompson, comme toujours, fut ce qu’il devait être. D’un geste digne, il ramassa le programme chiffonné. Il le lissa avec soin, le replia, et l’inséra froidement dans sa poche. Ce fut seulement, ce travail accompli, qu’il daigna relever les yeux sur le visage de Piperboom, où se lisait une redoutable colère.

Thompson ne trembla pas.

“Monsieur, dit-il d’un ton sec, bien que vous parliez un incompréhensible jargon, je saisis parfaitement votre pensée. Vous en voulez à ce programme. Vous lui reprochez quelque chose. Était-ce cependant une raison pour le mettre en cet état? Fi! monsieur, ces manières ne sont pas d’un gentleman.”

Piperboom n’objecta rien contre cette proposition. Toute sa vie concentrée dans les oreilles, il s’épuisait en efforts surhumains pour arriver à comprendre. Mais l’angoisse de son regard disait assez qu’il en perdait l’espoir.

Thompson triompha de l’accablement de son adversaire. Audacieusement, il fit en avant deux pas que Piperboom fit en arrière.

“Et que lui reprochez-vous monsieur, à ce programme? reprit-il d’une voix plus aiguë. Êtes-vous mécontent de votre cabine? Vous plaignez-vous de la table? Quelqu’un vous a-t-il manqué? Parlez! mais parlez donc!... Non! ce n’est rien de tout cela? Alors, d’où vient votre colère? Tout simplement de ce que vous ne trouvez pas d’interprète!”

Thompson prononça ces derniers mots avec un mépris non dissimulé. Il était admirable ainsi, se répandant en paroles violentes, en gestes enfiévrés, repoussant toujours son adversaire visiblement dompté. Les yeux agrandis, les bras tombants, celui-ci écoutait, le malheureux, ahuri, éperdu.

Les passagers, formant cercle autour des belligérants, s’intéressaient à cette scène bruyante. Des sourires naissaient sur leurs lèvres.

“Mais est-ce ma faute? s’exclama Thompson en prenant le Ciel à témoin. Quoi? Comment? Vous dites? Le programme annonce un interprète parlant toutes les langues?... Oui, cela y est en toutes lettres... Eh bien! quelqu’un se plaint-il?”

Et Thompson chercha autour de lui d’un air triomphant.

“Non! il n’y a que vous! Oui, monsieur, toutes les langues, mais pas le hollandais, naturellement! Ce n’est pas une langue, le hollandais. C’est un dialecte, un patois, tout au plus, monsieur, j’ose le dire! Quand un

Hollandais veut être compris, monsieur, sachez-le, il n’a qu’à rester chez lui!”

Un fou rire courut comme un tonnerre parmi les passagers, gagna les officiers, se répandit parmi l’équipage, descendit jusqu’au fond de la cale. Pendant deux minutes, le navire entier fut secoué par une gaieté peu charitable, mais irrésistible.

Quant à Thompson, laissant là son ennemi définitivement terrassé, il remonta sur le spardeck et se promena au milieu de ses passagers, en s’épongeant le front d’un air important et glorieux.

Le rire général ne s’était pas encore éteint, quand, à midi, la cloche annonça le déjeuner.

Thompson aussitôt pensa à Tigg, que l’incident Piperboom lui avait fait oublier. Si on voulait le voir renoncer à ses idées de suicide, on devait faire en sorte qu’il fût entièrement satisfait, et le bien placer à table était le soin du moment.

Mais ce que vit Thompson le rassura. L’histoire de Tigg portait déjà ses fruits. Des âmes charitables s’intéressaient au désespéré. C’est escorté des deux sœurs Blockhead que Tigg se dirigeait vers la salle à manger. C’est entre elles qu’à table il s’assit. Et ce fut une lutte à qui glisserait un coussin sous ses pieds, à qui lui couperait son pain, lui passerait les plus friands morceaux. Elles déployaient un zèle véritablement évangélique, et ne négligeaient rien pour lui faire reprendre goût à la vie... et au mariage.

Thompson s’assit au milieu de la table, le capitaine Pip en face de lui. À leurs côtés, Lady Heilbuth, Lady Hamilton, et deux dames considérables.

Les autres passagers s’étaient casés à leur guise, au petit bonheur ou au gré de leurs sympathies. Robert, discrètement relégué au bout de la table, se trouva par hasard entre Roger de Sorgues et Saunders, non loin de la famille Lindsay. Il ne se plaignit pas de ce hasard.

Le commencement du repas se fit en silence. Mais, dès que le premier appétit fut apaisé, des conversations, d’abord particulières, puis générales, ne tardèrent pas à s’engager.

Vers le dessert, Thompson jugea le moment opportun pour un speech bien senti.

“J’en appelle à tous ceux qui m’écoutent, s’écria-t-il dans tout l’enivrement du triomphe, n’est-ce pas charmant de voyager ainsi? Qui de nous ne troquerait les salles à manger terrestres contre cette salle à manger flottante?”

Ce préambule reçut une approbation unanime. Thompson reprit:

“Et comparez notre situation à celle du voyageur isolé. Livré à ses seules ressources, réduit à un perpétuel monologue, c’est dans les plus déplorables conditions qu’il se déplace. Nous, au contraire, nous avons la jouissance d’une installation luxueuse, chacun de nous trouve en ses compagnons une société aimable et choisie. À quoi, s’il vous plaît, devons-nous tout cela, à quoi devons-nous la possibilité d’accomplir à des prix insignifiants une incomparable excursion, sinon à cette admirable invention des voyages économiques, qui, forme nouvelle de la coopération, cette réserve de l’avenir, met ces précieux avantages à la portée de tous?”

Fatigué de cette longue période, Thompson reprit haleine. Il allait repartir sur de nouveaux frais, lorsqu’un incident vint tout gâter.

Depuis un moment déjà, le jeune Abel Blockhead pâlissait à vue d’œil. Si, en plein air, il n’avait pas encore éprouvé les premières atteintes du mal de mer, cet effet ordinaire des vagues, qui d’ailleurs grossissaient d’instant en instant, ne tarda pas à se faire sentir, dès qu’il eut quitté le pont. De rose, il était d’abord devenu blanc. De blanc, il allait devenir vert, quand une lame plus dure brusqua les choses. En même temps que le navire retombait dans le creux de l’ondulation, le jeune garçon s’abîma dans son assiette.

“Une forte dose d’ipéca n’aurait pas mieux opéré”, déclara Saunders avec flegme au milieu du silence général.

Cet incident avait jeté un froid. Plus d’un passager avait prudemment détourné les yeux. Quant à la famille Blockhead, ce fut pour elle le signal de la déroute. En une minute, les visages de ses membres passèrent par toutes les nuances de l’arc-en-ciel, puis les deux filles se levèrent et s’enfuirent avec un extrême empressement, en abandonnant Tigg à son sort. Leur mère, emportant dans ses bras son malheureux rejeton, se précipita sur leurs traces, suivie de Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead comprimant son estomac révolté.

Quand les domestiques eurent réparé le désordre, Thompson essaya de continuer son enthousiaste discours. Mais on n’était plus au diapason. À chaque instant, un des convives, les traits tirés, se levait, disparaissait, allant chercher à l’air libre un douteux remède au mal cruel et comique qui commençait à multiplier ses victimes. Bientôt la table fut réduite des deux tiers, les plus solides seuls restant à leur poste.

Les Hamilton étaient de ceux-là. Le mal de mer aurait- il osé s’attaquer à d’aussi puissants personnages? Rien n’avait pu troubler leur gravité. Ils mangeaient d’un air digne, avec un désintéressement absolu des êtres qui s’agitaient autour d’eux.

Par contre, Lady Heilbuth avait dû battre en retraite. Son domestique l’avait suivie, chargé du toutou favori donnant lui aussi des signes non équivoques de malaise.

Parmi les survivants du massacre, figurait également Elias Johnson. Comme les Hamilton, lui non plus ne s’occupait pas du reste du monde. Mais le dédain n’avait aucune part dans son indifférence. Il mangeait. Il buvait surtout. Les verres devant lui s’emplissaient, se vidaient comme par miracle, au grand scandale de son voisin le clergyman Cooley. Johnson ne s’en inquiétait guère, et satisfaisait sa passion sans vergogne.

Si Johnson buvait, Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam - mangeait. Si l’articulation cubitale de l’un était douée d’une admirable souplesse, l’autre maniait la fourchette avec une remarquable maestria. À chaque verre bu par Johnson, Piperboom ripostait en engloutissant quelque énorme morceau. Complètement remis de ses fureurs, il montrait une face calme et reposée. Évidemment, il avait pris son parti des choses, et, rejetant désormais tout souci, il se nourrissait simplement et formidablement.

Une douzaine de passagers, parmi lesquels Robert, les Lindsay, Roger et Saunders, garnissaient seuls avec ceux- là la vaste table que continuaient à présider Thompson et le capitaine Pip.

Public restreint. Non pas négligeable, cependant, au jugement de Thompson brûlant de reprendre le speech si malencontreusement interrompu.

Mais le sort était contre lui. Au moment où il allait ouvrir la bouche, une voix grinçante s’éleva dans le silence général.

“Steward! appelait Saunders en repoussant dédaigneusement son assiette, ne pourrait-on avoir deux œufs sur le plat? Il n’est pas surprenant que nous ayons tant de malades. L’estomac d’un loup de mer ne résisterait pas à cette nourriture!”

Jugement un peu sévère, vraiment. Le repas, médiocre, avait en somme été passable. Mais qu’importait au systématique mécontent? Le caractère de Saunders tenait décidément les promesses de son visage. Ainsi que l’apparence permettait de le supposer, on aurait en lui un irréductible grincheux. Agréable nature! À moins toutefois - mais quelle apparence? - qu’il eût quelque raison cachée d’en vouloir à Thompson, et qu’il cherchât de parti pris les occasions d’être agressif et de semer la discorde entre l’administrateur général et ses administrés.

Un rire étouffé courut parmi les convives clairsemés. Thompson seul ne rit pas. Et, s’il devint vert à son tour, le mal de mer à coup sûr n’en était pas responsable!

CHAPITRE V

AU LARGE

Peu à peu, la vie de bord prit son cours normal. À huit heures, on sonnait le thé puis la cloche appelait les passagers à midi et à sept heures du soir, pour le déjeuner et le dîner.

Thompson, on le voit, avait adopté les habitudes françaises. Sous prétexte que les nombreux repas anglais seraient impossibles pendant les excursions projetées, il les avait préalablement supprimés à bord du *Seamew.* À aucun il n’avait fait grâce, même pas au “five o’clock” si cher aux estomacs britanniques. Volontiers il vantait l’utilité de cette révolution gastronomique, et prétendait habituer ainsi ses compagnons de route au genre de vie qu’il leur faudrait adopter quand on en serait à parcourir les îles. Précaution vraiment humaine, qui avait le double mérite d’être en même temps économique.

Vie monotone que cette vie de bord, mais non pas ennuyeuse. La mer est toujours là, spectacle éternellement changeant. On croise des navires, des terres se montrent, coupant le géométrique horizon.

À ce dernier point de vue, les hôtes du *Seamew* étaient, il est vrai, mal partagés. Le premier jour seulement, une brumaille avait indiqué, à l’horizon du sud, la côte française de Cherbourg. Depuis, aucun point solide ne s’était érigé hors du vaste disque liquide dont le navire formait le centre mouvant.

Les passagers paraissaient s’accommoder de cette existence. En conversations, en promenades, ils se récréaient de leur mieux, ne quittant guère le spardeck, salon et place publique à la fois.

Bien entendu, il ne s’agit ici que des passagers valides, dont le nombre ne s’était malheureusement pas augmenté, depuis que l’auditoire de Thompson avait été si largement décimé.

Le navire, cependant, n’avait eu à lutter contre aucune difficulté réelle. Le temps avait toujours mérité l’épithète de beau dans la bouche d’un marin. Mais un humble “terrien” a le droit de se montrer plus difficile. Les “terriens” du *Seamew* ne s’en faisaient pas faute, et ne se gênaient pas pour maudire le vent assez frais, qui rendait ainsi la mer, sinon méchante, du moins clapoteuse et taquine.

Cette taquinerie, il est juste de le reconnaître, le bâtiment avait paru ne pas la prendre au sérieux. Que la lame vînt de l’avant ou par le travers, il s’était comporté comme un bon et honnête bateau. À plusieurs reprises, le capitaine Pip l’avait constaté, et l’âme sœur, dans la position réglementaire, avait reçu la confidence de son plaisir, comme elle avait précédemment reçu la confidence de son ennui.

Toutefois, les qualités nautiques du *Seamew* ne pouvaient empêcher les humains d’être malades, et M. l’administrateur général ne pouvait faire bénéficier de ses talents d’organisateur qu’un public clairsemé.

Parmi les intrépides, figurait toujours Saunders. Il allait de l’un à l’autre, bien accueilli de tous ses compagnons, qu’amusait sa verve féroce. Chaque fois qu’ils se croisaient, Thompson et lui échangeaient de ces coups d’œil qui valent des coups d’épée. L’administrateur général n’avait pas oublié la remarque désobligeante du premier jour, et il en conservait une amère rancune. Saunders, d’ailleurs, ne faisait rien pour effacer son algarade. Bien au contraire, il saisissait avec empressement toutes les occasions d’être désagréable. Qu’un repas ne fût pas sonné à l’heure précise, il apparaissait, le programme à la main, et assassinait Thompson de réclamations énervantes. Le malheureux administrateur général en était arrivé à chercher le moyen de se débarrasser de cet odieux passager à la première relâche.

Plus particulièrement, Saunders s’était lié avec la famille Hamilton. Pour vaincre leur passif dédain, la conformité de leurs goûts et des siens avait été son talisman. Sans aucune raison, Hamilton, en effet, se montrait tout aussi désagréable que Saunders. Il était de ces gens qui naissent grincheux et meurent de même, qui trouvent toujours à reprendre et ne sont satisfaits que lorsqu’ils ont découvert quelque motif de se plaindre. Dans toutes ses réclamations, Saunders avait en lui un second. Hamilton était son éternel écho. À propos de tout et de rien, Thompson avait sur les bras ces deux perpétuels mécontents devenus son cauchemar.

Le trio Hamilton, transformé en quatuor par l’adjonction de Saunders, n’avait même pas tardé à devenir un quintette. Tigg était cet heureux privilégié, ayant reçu libre pratique du hautain baronnet. Pour lui, le père, la mère, la fille s’étaient départis de leur raideur. Il est à supposer que les Hamilton n’avaient pas agi ainsi à la légère, qu’ils avaient recueilli des informations, et l’existence de Miss Margaret permettait bien des hypothèses!

Quoi qu’il en soit Tigg, ainsi gardé, ne courait aucun risque. Bess et Mary Blockhead étaient remplacées. Ah! si elles eussent été là! Mais les Misses Blockhead n’avaient pas reparu, non plus que père, mère et frère. Elle continuait à souffrir, cette intéressante famille, toutes les tortures du mal de mer.

Deux des passagers valides formaient symétriquement le contraste de Saunders et d’Hamilton. Ceux-là ne réclamaient jamais. Ceux-là paraissaient entièrement satisfaits.

Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam - était l’un de ces heureux. Le sage Hollandais, renonçant à poursuivre l’irréalisable, s’était pratiquement fait une vie de coq en pâte. De temps à autre, par acquit de conscience, il essayait encore l’effet de sa fameuse phrase, que la plupart des passagers commençaient à savoir par cœur. Le reste du temps, il mangeait, digérait, fumait, dormait - énormément. Sa vie tenait dans ces quatre verbes. D’une santé insolente, il traînait son immense corps d’un siège à l’autre, toujours armé de son immense pipe d’où s’échappaient d’immenses nuages de fumée.

Johnson formait le pendant de ce philosophe. Deux ou trois fois par jour, on le voyait apparaître sur le pont. Quelques minutes, il le parcourait brutalement, reniflant, crachant, sacrant, roulant comme une barrique, dont ses goûts avaient fini par lui donner les apparences et les allures, puis il retournait dans le coffee-room, et bientôt on l’entendait réclamer à grand bruit quelque cocktail ou quelque grog. S’il n’était pas agréable, du moins n’était-il pas gênant.

Au milieu de tout ce monde, Robert menait une existence paisible. De temps à autre, il échangeait quelques mots avec Saunders, quelquefois aussi avec Roger de Sorgues, qui paraissait dans les meilleures dispositions pour son compatriote. Mais celui-ci, s’il avait hésité jusqu’ici à détruire la frauduleuse légende inventée par Thompson, entendait cependant n’en pas profiter outre mesure. Il demeurait sur une prudente réserve et ne se livrait pas.

Le hasard ne l’avait plus mis en rapport avec la famille Lindsay. Matin et soir, on échangeait un salut. Rien de plus. Cependant, en dépit de l’insignifiance de leurs relations, Robert s’intéressait malgré lui à cette famille, et il ressentit comme une vague jalousie, quand, présenté par Thompson, et aidé par l’obligatoire cohabitation du bord, Roger de Sorgues, en quelques jours, se lia intimement avec les passagères américaines.

Presque toujours seul et désœuvré, Robert restait du matin au soir sur le spardeck, et se persuadait y trouver une distraction dans le va-et-vient des voyageurs. En réalité, certains d’entre eux l’intéressaient plus spécialement et c’est en général du côté de la famille Lindsay que ses regards se dirigeaient sans qu’il y pensât. S’apercevait-il tout à coup de cette indiscrète contemplation, il détournait aussitôt les yeux, mais pour les ramener trente secondes après vers le groupe qui l’hypnotisait. À force de s’occuper d’elles, il devenait, à leur insu et au sien même, l’ami des deux sœurs. Il devinait leurs pensées inexprimées, comprenait leurs paroles qu’il n’entendait pas. Il vivait de loin avec la rieuse Dolly, avec Alice surtout, dont, sous l’adorable enveloppe du visage, il pénétrait par degrés l’âme charmante et grave.

Mais, si c’est instinctivement qu’il s’occupait des compagnes de Jack Lindsay, ce dernier était pour Robert l’objet d’une étude préméditée. Sa première impression ne s’était pas modifiée, loin de là. De jour en jour, il se sentait porté à un jugement plus sévère. Il s’étonnait de ce voyage entrepris par Alice et Dolly en compagnie d’un tel personnage. Comment, ce qu’il voyait, lui, ne le voyaient- elles pas?

Robert aurait été plus surpris encore s’il avait connu les conditions dans lesquelles ce voyage avait été décidé.

Frères jumeaux, Jack et Williams Lindsay avaient vingt ans quand leur père mourut, en leur laissant une fortune considérable. Mais, pareils par l'âge, les deux frères étaient dissemblables par le caractère. Tandis que Williams, continuant les travaux de son père, augmentait son héritage dans des proportions énormes, Jack, au contraire, dissipait le sien. En moins de quatre ans, il avait tout dévoré.

Réduit alors aux derniers expédients, il ne s'était pas fait faute d'y avoir recours. On parlait à mots couverts de procédés louches au jeu, de combinaisons irrégulières dans les réunions sportives, d'opérations de bourse suspectes. Sinon absolument déshonoré, il était du moins extrêmement compromis, et les familles prudentes l'avaient mis en interdit.

Telle était la situation, quand, à vingt-six ans, Williams rencontra, aima, épousa Miss Alice Clarck, orpheline puissamment riche elle-même de son chef et alors âgée de dix-huit ans.

Williams, malheureusement, était marqué par le destin. Six mois presque jour pour jour après son mariage, on le rapportait mourant à son hôtel. Un accident de chasse, brutal et bête comme un fait, transformait en veuve la jeune fille à peine femme.

Avant de mourir, Williams, cependant, avait pu mettre ordre à ses affaires. Il connaissait son frère, il l'avait jugé. Par sa volonté, sa fortune passa sur la tête de sa femme, qu'il chargea verbalement de servir une large pension au misérable Jack.

Pour celui-ci, ce fut le dernier coup. Il écuma. Il blasphéma contre son frère. D'irrité contre le sort, il devint furieux contre les êtres. De méchant, il se fit féroce.

La réflexion le calma. Au lieu de se briser stupidement contre l’obstacle, il résolut d’en entreprendre le siège avec méthode. Un moyen qu’il estima pratique s’offrait à lui de modifier la situation à son avantage: profiter de l’inexpérience de sa belle-sœur, l’épouser et reconquérir ainsi la fortune dont il se jugeait dépouillé.

Conformément à ce plan, il changea sur-le-champ son genre de vie, et il cessa d’être une cause perpétuelle de scandales.

Cependant, cinq ans s’étaient écoulés depuis ces événements sans que Jack eût osé avouer ses projets. La froideur d’Alice avait toujours été une barrière impossible à franchir. Il crut l’occasion favorable quand, profitant de la liberté américaine, celle-ci résolut de faire avec sa sœur un voyage en Europe, sur lequel, sous l’influence d’une affiche lue par hasard et engendrant un caprice subit, devait ensuite se greffer l’excursion de l’Agence Thompson. Audacieusement, il se proposa pour compagnon de route. Alice n’accepta pas son offre sans répugnance. Toutefois elle s’y contraignit. Jack depuis longtemps semblait amendé, son existence paraissait plus régulière. Le moment était peut-être venu de lui rendre une famille.

Elle eût refusé, si elle avait connu les projets de son beau-frère, si elle avait pu surtout lire en lui, et se convaincre ainsi que Jack était resté le même, devenu pire peut-être, qu’il était homme enfin à ne reculer devant rien au monde, lâchetés, vilenies, voire devant le crime, dans la conquête de la fortune.

Au surplus, depuis le départ de New York, Jack ne s’était permis aucune allusion à ce qu’il appelait audacieusement son amour et il n’était pas sorti de sa prudente réserve à bord du *Seamew.* Taciturne, il donnait aux deux sœurs sa présence matérielle, il gardait sa pensée, attendant. Son humeur devint encore plus sombre, quand Roger de Sorgues fut présenté aux passagères américaines et s’en fit bien venir par sa bonne grâce et sa gaieté. Il se rassura toutefois en voyant Roger s’occuper infiniment plus de Dolly que de sa sœur.

Quant aux autres hôtes du *Seamew,* il n’y pensait guère. À peine s’il connaissait leur existence. Il ignorait dédaigneusement celle de Robert.

Alice était moins hautaine. Ses yeux pénétrants de femme avaient remarqué l’évident désaccord de la position subalterne de l’interprète et de son apparence extérieure, ainsi que la froideur polie avec laquelle il recevait les avances de certains passagers, et notamment de Roger de Sorgues.

“Que pensez-vous de votre compatriote? avait-elle demandé un jour à ce dernier, qui venait précisément de dire à Robert quelques mots accueillis comme de coutume. Il a l’air peu liant, ce me semble.

-C’est un être fier, et qui entend rester à sa place, avait répondu Roger, sans chercher à dissimuler son évidente sympathie pour son discret compatriote.

-Il faut qu’il soit bien au-dessus d’elle pour s’y maintenir avec une si ferme dignité”, dit simplement Alice.

Cette réserve, cependant, force serait bien à Robert d’y renoncer. Le moment était proche où il lui faudrait entrer vraiment en fonction. La quiétude présente était de nature à lui faire oublier sa position réelle. Mais le moindre incident la lui rappellerait nécessairement, et cet incident devait se produire avant même que le *Seamew* eût pour la première fois atterri.

Depuis qu’on avait quitté la Manche, on avait constamment suivi une direction ouest-sud-ouest, un peu moins méridionale qu’il ne l’aurait fallu pour atteindre le groupe principal des Açores. Le capitaine Pip avait en effet mis le cap sur les îles les plus occidentales, afin d’en assurer la vue à ses passagers. Du train dont allaient les choses, il ne semblait pas qu’ils dussent beaucoup profiter de cette attention de Thompson.

Quelques mots entendus à ce sujet excitèrent la curiosité de Roger.

“Pourriez-vous me dire, monsieur le professeur, demanda-t-il à Robert quatre jours après le départ, quelles sont les premières îles que le *Seamew* doit trouver devant lui?”

Robert demeura interdit. Il ignorait complètement ce détail.

“Bon! accorda Roger. Le capitaine nous renseignera. Les Açores appartiennent aux Portugais, je crois? demanda-t-il encore après un court silence.

-Mais, balbutia Robert... je le crois aussi.

-Je vous avouerai, monsieur le professeur, que je suis totalement ignorant de tout ce qui concerne cet archipel, reprit Roger. Pensez-vous qu’il ait quelque chose d’intéressant à nous offrir?

-Certainement, affirma Robert.

-De quel genre? insista Roger. Des curiosités naturelles, peut-être?

-Naturelles, c’est évident, dit Robert avec empressement.

-Et des édifices, sans doute?

-Et des édifices, cela va de soi.”

Roger regarda, un peu surpris, son interlocuteur. Un malin sourire naquit sur ses lèvres. Il recommença ses questions.

“Un dernier mot, monsieur le professeur. Le programme n’annonce le débarquement que dans trois îles: Le Fayal, Tercère et Saint-Michel. L’archipel n’en contient-il pas d’autres? Mrs. Lindsay a désiré savoir combien il en comportait en tout; je n’ai pu la renseigner.”

Robert était au supplice. Il constatait un peu tard son ignorance absolue de ce qu’il avait mission d’apprendre aux autres.

“Cinq, affirma-t-il audacieusement.

-Grand merci, monsieur le professeur”, dit enfin Roger narquoisement, en prenant congé de son compatriote.

À peine seul, celui-ci se précipita dans sa chambre. Avant son départ de Londres, il avait eu soin de se munir d’une collection de livres propres à le documenter sur les pays compris dans l’itinéraire. Ces livres, pourquoi les avoir si follement négligés?

Il parcourut le Baedeker des Açores. Hélas! il avait commis une grossière erreur en n’attribuant que cinq îles à l’archipel. On en comptait neuf bel et bien. Robert fut fort humilié et rougit cruellement, quoique personne ne pût voir sa honte. Il se hâta de regagner le temps perdu. Désormais, il passa ses journées le nez dans ses livres, et son hublot demeura éclairé fort avant dans la nuit. Roger constata le fait et s’en égaya vivement.

“Potasse, mon bon ami, potasse! se dit-il très amusé. Quant à être professeur!... Comme je suis pape!”

Le matin du septième jour, c’est-à-dire le 17 mai à huit heures, Saunders et Hamilton s’approchèrent de Thompson, et le premier lui fit observer d’un ton sec qu’aux termes du programme le *Seamew* aurait dû mouiller la nuit dernière à Horta, capitale de l’île de Fayal. Thompson s’excusa de son mieux, rejetant tout sur l’état de la mer. Pouvait-il prévoir qu’il aurait à lutter contre un vent debout et des lames aussi dures? Les deux compères ne prirent pas la peine de discuter. Ils avaient fait constater l’irrégularité, cela suffisait pour l’instant. Ils se retirèrent d’un air digne, et le baronnet déversa sa bile dans le sein de sa famille.

D’ailleurs, il est à croire que le navire et les éléments eux-mêmes ressentirent quelque émotion du mécontentement d’un voyageur aussi considérable. Le vent qui, dès les premières heures du jour, avait manifesté une tendance à mollir, décrut progressivement. Par un effet naturel la houle tombait en même temps. Le bâtiment se poussait en avant plus rapidement, et l’amplitude de son tangage diminuait. Bientôt, tout en restant debout, le vent ne fut plus qu’une brise légère, et les hôtes du *Seamew* purent se croire revenus sur la paisible Tamise.

Le résultat de cette accalmie se fit aussitôt sentir. Les malheureux passagers, qu’on n’avait pas revus depuis six jours entiers, montèrent l’un après l’autre sur le pont. Successivement, ils apparurent, visages pâlis, traits tirés, en somme de lamentables ruines.

Indifférent à cette résurrection, Robert, accoudé à une batayole, fouillait l’horizon des yeux, cherchant vainement la terre prochaine.

“Pardon, monsieur le professeur, dit tout à coup une voix derrière lui, ne sommes-nous pas ici à la place occupée autrefois par un continent disparu: l’Atlantide?”

Robert, en se retournant, se trouva en face de Roger de Sorgues, d’Alice Lindsay et de Dolly.

Si Roger avait espéré “coller” son compatriote par cette question impromptue, il perdait son temps. La leçon précédente avait porté ses fruits. Robert était ferré, désormais.

“En effet, monsieur, dit-il.

-Ce pays a donc réellement existé? demanda Alice à son tour.

-Qui le sait? répondit Robert. Vérité ou légende, une grande incertitude plane évidemment sur l’existence de ce continent.

-Mais enfin, demanda encore Alice, y a-t-il des témoignages en faveur de l’affirmative?

-Plusieurs, répondit Robert, qui se mit en devoir de réciter son guide. Sans parler de la Méropide, dont Midas, d’après Théopompe de Chio, avait reçu la connaissance du vieux et pauvre Silène, il reste au moins la narration du divin Platon. Avec Platon, la tradition se fait récit, la légende, histoire. Grâce à lui, la chaîne du souvenir a tous ses maillons. Elle se relie d’années en années, de siècles en siècles, et remonte dans la nuit des âges. Les faits dont il se constituait ainsi l’historien, Platon les tenait de Critias, qui lui-même, à l’âge de sept ans, en avait entendu le récit de la bouche de son arrière-grand-père, Dropidas, alors nonagénaire. Quant à Dropidas, il ne faisait que répéter ce qu’à maintes reprises il avait entendu raconter à son intime ami, Solon, un des sept sages de la Grèce, le législateur d’Athénes. Solon lui avait dit comment, reçu par les prêtres de la ville égyptienne de Saïs, alors âgée de huit mille ans, il avait appris d’eux que leurs monuments relataient les guerres éclatantes soutenues autrefois par les habitants d’une antique cité de la Grèce, fondée mille ans avant Saïs même, contre des peuples innombrables venus d’une île immense située au-delà des colonnes d’Hercule. Si cette tradition est exacte, c’est donc huit à dix mille ans avant Jésus-Christ que respirait cette race évanouie des Atlantes, et c’est ici même que s’étendait leur patrie.

-Comment, objecta Alice après un instant de silence, ce vaste continent aurait-il pu disparaître?”

Robert fit un geste évasif.

“Et de ce continent, rien, pas une pierre n’aurait subsisté?

-Si, répondit Robert. Des pics, des montagnes, des volcans émergeraient encore. Les Açores, Madère, les Canaries, les îles du Cap-Vert ne seraient pas autre chose. Le reste a été englouti. Dans les plaines toujours labourées, le navire a remplacé la charrue. Tout, sauf les plus orgueilleux sommets, s’est effondré en d’insondables abîmes, tout a disparu sous les flots, villes, édifices, hommes, dont pas un n’est revenu dire à ses frères l’épouvantable catastrophe.”

Ceci n’était plus dans le guide. Robert l’avait tiré de son propre fond. Il collaborait, l’audacieux.

D’ailleurs, le résultat en était heureux. Ses auditeurs semblaient émus. Si le désastre était vieux de dix mille ans, il était effroyable aussi, et tel que les annales du monde n’en contiennent pas de semblable. Les yeux errant sur les vagues, ils songeaient aux secrets recelés par le gouffre. Là, des moissons avaient jauni, des fleurs étaient écloses, le soleil avait rayonné sur ces contrées plongées dans une ombre éternelle. Là, des oiseaux avaient chanté, des hommes avaient vécu, des femmes aimé, jeunes filles, mères, pleuré. Et, sur ce mystère de vie, de passion, de douleur, roulait maintenant, comme sur une tombe immense, l’impénétrable linceul de la mer.

“Pardon, monsieur, prononça une voix, je n’ai saisi que la fin de ce que vous disiez. Si je vous ai bien compris, un affreux accident aurait eu lieu en cet endroit. Une terre importante aurait été détruite par la mer. Eh bien! monsieur, il est vraiment extraordinaire que les journaux n’en aient point parlé!”

En se retournant avec un peu d’effarement, les causeurs aperçurent l’aimable Mr. Blockhead, accompagné de sa famille. Oh! combien pâlis, ces visages! Combien maigrie, cette intéressante famille! Roger se chargea de la réponse.

“Eh! c’est vous, cher monsieur! Guéri enfin! Compliments!... Comment! vous n’avez pas vu dans les journaux le récit de cet accident? Je peux cependant vous affirmer qu’il en a été longuement question.”

La cloche annonçant le déjeuner coupa la réponse de Blockhead.

“Voilà un signal que j’ai plaisir à entendre!” s’écria- t-il.

Et rapidement il s’élança vers la salle à manger, suivi de Mrs. Georgina et de son fils Abel. Étrange phénomène! Miss Bess et Miss Mary ne l’accompagnèrent pas avec l’empressement qu’eût rendu naturel un jeûne aussi prolongé. Non, d’un même mouvement, elles s’étaient élancées vers l’arrière. Un instant plus tard, on les vit revenir escortant Tigg enfin reconquis. À quelques pas, les Hamilton s’avançaient à leur tour, les yeux rageurs, les lèvres pincées.

Tigg ressemblait ainsi à un moderne Pâris, que trois déesses nouveau style se seraient disputées. Le proverbe affirmant que dans le royaume des aveugles les borgnes sont rois, Miss Margaret était vraiment la Vénus de ce trio céleste. La hautaine Mary eût alors rempli le rôle de Junon, celui de Minerve demeurant réservé à Miss Bess, à cause de ses angles belliqueux... En ce moment, il était évident que, contrairement à la tradition généralement accepté, Minerve et Junon triomphaient. Vénus était verte de rage.

Pour la première fois depuis longtemps, la table se trouva garnie de bout en bout. Thompson éprouva des sentiments divers en considérant cette abondance de convives.

Vers la fin du repas, Blockhead, à travers la table, lui adressa directement la parole:

“Mon cher monsieur, dit-il, j’ai appris tout à l’heure que ces parages avaient été le théâtre d’un accident épouvantable. Une contrée entière aurait été submergée. Je crois donc opportun de vous proposer d’ouvrir entre nous une souscription pour les victimes de la catastrophe. Je m’inscrirai volontiers pour une livre.”

Thompson n’eut pas l’air de comprendre.

“De quelle catastrophe voulez-vous parler, mon cher monsieur? Du diable si j’ai jamais rien entendu dire à ce sujet!

-Pourtant je n’invente rien, insista Blockhead. C’est de la bouche de M. le professeur que j’ai appris cette affaire, et cet autre gentleman français qui est auprès de lui m’a affirmé que les journaux en avaient parlé.

-Parfaitement! s’écria Roger, voyant qu’il était question de lui, parfaitement! Mais ce n’est pas aujourd’hui que la chose est arrivée. Il y a de cela quelques années. C’était... Attendez donc!... Il y a deux ans?... Non, c’est plus vieux que ça... C’était... Ah! j’y suis! Il y aura exactement huit mille quatre cents ans, vienne la Saint-Jean, que l’Atlantide a disparu sous les flots. Je l’ai lu, sur ma parole, dans les gazettes de la première Athènes.”

La table entière partit d’un éclat de rire. Quant à Blockhead, il était resté bouche béante. Peut-être allait-il se fâcher, car la farce était un peu grosse, mais soudain une voix tombant du pont éteignit à la fois et rire et colère.

“Terre par bâbord devant!” criait un matelot.

En un clin d’oeil, la salle fut vide. Seul, le capitaine Pip demeura à sa place, achevant paisiblement son repas.

“Ils n’ont donc jamais vu la terre, monsieur?” demanda-t-il à son fidèle confident accroupi à son côté.

Les passagers étaient remontés sur le spardeck, et, les regards tendus vers le sud-ouest, s’efforçaient d’apercevoir la terre annoncée.

Ce fut seulement un quart d’heure plus tard, que, pour leurs yeux inexpérimentés, une tache commença à se dessiner, comme un nuage à l’horizon.

“À en juger par la direction que nous avons suivie, dit Robert à ses voisins immédiats, ce doit être Corvo, c’est- à-dire l’île la plus septentrionale et la plus occidentale de l’archipel.”

L’archipel des Açores se divise en trois groupes bien tranchés. Un, central, comprend cinq îles: Fayal, Tercère, Saint-Georges, Pico et Gracieuse; un au nord-ouest avec deux îles: Corvo et Florès; un au sud-est, également formé par deux îles: Saint-Michel et Sainte-Marie, plus l’amas de récifs nommé les Désertas. Situées à quinze cent cinquante kilomètres du continent le plus proche, ces îles, de grandeurs fort inégales, et occupant plus de cent lieues marines, réunissent à peine entre elles toutes vingt-quatre mille kilomètres carrés de terre ferme et cent soixante-dix mille habitants. C’est dire que de larges bras de mer les séparent, et que la vue peut rarement aller de l’une à l’autre.

La découverte de cet archipel est, comme d’usage, revendiquée par des peuples divers. Quoi qu’il en soit de ces querelles de vanité, ce fut des colons portugais, qui s’y établirent de 1427 à 1460, qu’elles reçurent leur nom, en raison d’une espèce d’oiseau alors très abondante, et que les premiers occupants prirent par erreur pour des milans ou des autours.

Ces renseignements généraux, Robert les donna à la demande de Thompson. Succès vraiment flatteur, à peine avait-il ouvert la bouche, que la plupart des passagers s’étaient arrêtés auprès de lui, jaloux d’entendre le professeur français. Ceux-ci en attirant d’autres, il fut bientôt le centre d’un véritable cercle. En somme, il ne pouvait se refuser à cette conférence improvisée. Cela faisait partie de ses fonctions. Au premier rang des auditeurs de Robert, Blockhead, sans rancure, avait poussé son intéressant rejeton. “Écoutez bien M. le professeur, lui disait-il, écoutez bien M. le professeur!” Un autre auditeur, et celui-là tout à fait inattendu, était Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam. Quel intérêt pouvait-il bien prendre à des discours complètement inintelligibles pour ses néerlandaises oreilles? Mystère. En tout cas, il était là, au premier rang lui aussi, oreille tendue, bouche ouverte, ne perdant pas un mot. Qu’il comprît ou non, il en voulait évidemment pour son argent.

Une heure plus tard, l’île de Corvo cessa d’être un nuage, s’affirma, masse confuse encore, cependant, à cette distance d’environ vingt-cinq milles. En même temps, une autre terre montait vaguement à l’horizon.

“Florès”, annonça Robert.

Le navire avançait rapidement. Peu à peu les détails apparurent, se précisèrent, et bientôt on put distinguer une haute et abrupte falaise s’élevant à plus de trois cents mètres au-dessus des flots. Le *Seamew* s’en approcha à moins de trois milles, puis le capitaine, laissant porter au sud, suivit la côte.

La falaise se continuait, toujours aussi haute, aussi aride, sa base semée de roches innombrables, sur lesquelles la mer déferlait avec rage. L’aspect en était terrible et sauvage. À bord du *Seamew,* les cœurs s’étaient serrés, et l’on hésitait à croire Robert, quand il affirmait que cette île menaçante contient et nourrit près de mille créatures humaines. Sauf quelques vallées un peu verdoyantes, partout l’œil rencontrait les signes de la plus effroyable dévastation. Nulle apparence de vie sur ces basaltes noirâtres, sur ces rocs arides et grandioses, amoncelés, bouleversés par le caprice d’une incommensurable puissance.

“Voilà l’œuvre des tremblements de terre”, observa Robert.

À ce mot, un remous brisa la foule des passagers, et, bousculant tout le monde, Johnson, l’œil irrité, se planta en face de l’interprète du *Seamew.*

“Qu’avez-vous dit, monsieur? s’écria-t-il. N’avez- vous pas parlé de tremblements de terre? Il y en a donc aux Açores?

-Il y en a eu tout au moins, répondit Robert.

-Et maintenant?

-Maintenant, dit Robert, s'ils ont complètement cessé à Florès et à Corvo, on ne peut en dire autant des autres îles, surtout de Saint-Georges et de Saint-Michel."

En entendant cette réponse, Johnson parut enflammé de colère.

"C'est une indignité! cria-t-il en se tournant vers Thompson. On avertit les gens, que diable! On imprime ça sur le programme! Eh bien, monsieur, libre à vous de descendre à terre, à vous et à tous ceux qui auront la sottise de vous suivre! Mais retenez bien ceci: moi, je- n'y-met-trai-pas-les-pieds!"

Cette déclaration faite avec énergie, Johnson s'éloigna brutalement comme il était venu, et bientôt on entendit sa voix tonner dans le coffee-room.

Une demi-heure plus tard, le *Seamew* arriva à l'extrémité méridionale de cette île désolée. En cet endroit, la falaise hautaine s'abaisse et le rivage est terminé par une pointe assez basse, que Robert désigna sous le nom de pointe Peisqueiro. Le capitaine laissa alors porter de deux quarts dans l'ouest, et se rapprocha franchement de Florès qu'un détroit de dix milles à peine sépare de Corvo.

Depuis qu'on l'avait alors aperçue, Florès avait singulièrement grandi. On pouvait maintenant concevoir sa configuration générale. On distinguait son sommet, le "Morro Grande", haut de neuf cent quarante-deux mètres, et son entourage de montagnes, puis de collines, descendant par étages jusqu'à la mer. Plus grande que sa voisine, Florès mesure quinze milles de long sur neuf de large, soit environ cent quarante-huit kilomètres carrés, et sa population n'est pas inférieure à neuf mille âmes. Son aspect est aussi plus doux et plus tendre. Ces collines, qui déboulent dans l'océan, sont couvertes d’un vaste tapis de verdure coupé ça et là de bouquets d’arbres. Sur les sommets, de gras pâturages resplendissent au soleil. Plus bas, s’étendent des champs, encadrés et soutenus par des murs de lave. Les passagers furent rassérénés par cette nature accueillante.

Quand il ne fut plus qu’à une faible distance de la pointe Albernas, qui forme l’extrémité nord-ouest de l’île, le capitaine Pip obliqua directement vers l’est. Le *Seamew* traversa ainsi le canal séparant les îles jumelles, côtoyant de près la riante Florès, tandis que, par degrés, Corvo s’effaçait à l’horizon. Le capitaine donna successivement la route au sud-est, puis au sud. Vers quatre heures de l’après-midi, le *Seamew* se trouvait par le travers de la capitale Santa Cruz, dont on distinguait facilement les maisons vivement éclairées par le soleil. La marche fut alors modifiée encore une fois, et le *Seamew,* laissant dans son sillage les deux premières Açores, s’avança à toute vapeur vers Fayal.

De Santa Cruz à Horta, capitale de Fayal, la distance est d’environ cent trente milles, soit une traversée de onze heures à peu près. Avant sept heures, les sommets de Florès étaient à peine visibles. Bientôt ils se fondirent définitivement dans la nuit.

Le lendemain comportant un programme assez chargé, le pont fut, ce soir-là, déserté de bonne heure. Robert allait le quitter à son tour, quand Roger de Sorgues vint échanger avec lui quelques mots et lui souhaiter amicalement le bonsoir.

“À propos! dit-il au moment de se séparer, y aurait-il indiscrétion à vous demander, mon cher compatriote, dans quel lycée de France vous êtes professeur?”

Robert, nullement embarrassé, se mit à rire.

“Dans l’imagination de M. Thompson, répondit-il avec gaieté. C’est exclusivement à lui que je dois cette nomination, sans l’avoir sollicitée, je vous prie de le croire.”

Roger, resté seul, le regarda s’éloigner. Il songeait: “Pas professeur, c’est avoué. Interprète occasionnel, c’est évident. Il m’intrigue, moi, ce monsieur-là.”

Tranchant provisoirement la question par un geste d’insouciance, Roger descendit le dernier. Le problème l’irritait, cependant, et, allongé dans son cadre, il murmurait encore:

“On ne m’ôtera pas de l’idée que j’ai vu cette figure-là quelque part!... Mais où, mille carabines, mais où?...”

CHAPITRE VI

LUNE DE MIEL

Lorsque, le lendemain, Robert, vers sept heures, monta sur le pont, le navire immobile était mouillé dans le port de Horta, capitale de l'île de Fayal. De toutes parts, la terre bornait l'horizon.

À l'ouest, flanquée de ses deux forts, la ville, d'agréable aspect, s'étageait en amphithéâtre, élevant les uns au-dessus des autres les clochers de ses églises, et couronnée par une éminence que surmonte un vaste édifice, couvent de jésuites autrefois.

Au nord, le regard était arrêté par la Ponta Espalamaca limitant un des côtés de la rade; au sud, par deux rochers limitant l'autre côté, le Monte Queimado (Montagne- Brûlée), sur lequel s'appuie la digue qui ferme le port, et la Ponta da Guia (Pointe-du-Guide), ancien volcan, dont le cratère égueulé, la Chaudière-de-l'Enfer, est envahi par la mer et sert parfois de refuge aux pêcheurs lorsque le temps menace.

Vers le nord-est, la vue s'étendait librement jusqu'à la pointe occidentale de l'île Saint-Georges, distante de vingt milles environ.

À l'est, c'était la masse énorme de Pico (le Pic). Sous ce nom, île et montagne se confondent comme elles se confondent dans la réalité. Hors des flots, les rivages de l'île surgissent brusquement, et, par une pente ininterrompue, deviennent, deux mille trois cents mètres plus haut, le sommet de la montagne.

Ce sommet, Robert ne put l’apercevoir. À douze cents mètres environ, un rideau de brume arrêtait le regard. Une incessante tourmente parcourait cet amas de vapeurs. Tandis que, sur le sol, les vents alizés soufflaient du nord-est, là-haut, des lambeaux de nuages se détachaient à chaque instant de la masse toujours reformée, et allaient se perdre en sens contraire, emportés par les contre-alizés du sud-ouest.

Au-dessous de ce rideau impénétrable, sur la pente descendant régulièrement jusqu’à la mer, des prairies, des champs, des arbres entouraient de nombreuses quintas, où les riches habitants de Fayal vont fuir les chaleurs et les moustiques de l’été.

Robert admirait ce panorama, quand la voix de Thompson le tira de sa contemplation.

“Eh! bonjour, monsieur le professeur. Intéressant, ce pays, j’ose le dire! Si vous le voulez bien, monsieur le professeur, j’aurai ce matin besoin de vos services. Les passagers doivent, vous le savez, débarquer à huit heures, d’après le programme. Quelques préparatifs sont indispensables auparavant.”

Ainsi poliment sollicité, Robert quitta le bord en compagnie de Thompson. En suivant le rivage de la mer, tous deux gagnèrent les premières maisons de Horta. Bientôt Thompson s’arrêtait, en montrant du doigt un assez vaste immeuble orné d’une enseigne en portugais, que Robert traduisit sur-le-champ.

“Un hôtel, dit-il. L’Hôtel de la Vierge.

-Va pour l’Hôtel de la Vierge. Entrons, cher monsieur, et abordons l’hôtelier.”

Mais celui-ci ne souffrait pas apparemment d'une pléthore de voyageurs. Il n'était pas levé. Il fallut attendre un quart d'heure avant de le voir apparaître, à demi vêtu, les yeux gros encore de sommeil.

Robert traduisant demandes et réponses, ce dialogue aussitôt s'engagea entre l'hôte et Thompson:

“Pouvez-vous nous donner à déjeuner?

-À cette heure!

-Mais non, à onze heures.

-Certainement. Ce n'était pas la peine de me déranger pour ça.

-C'est que nous sommes assez nombreux.

-Deux. Je le vois bien.

-Oui, nous deux, avec soixante-trois autres personnes.

-Diavolo! fit l'hôte en se grattant la tête.

-Eh bien! insista Thompson.

-Eh bien! dit l'hôte, en prenant résolument son parti, vous aurez à onze heures vos soixante-cinq déjeuners.

-À quel prix?”

L'hôte réfléchit un instant.

“Vous aurez, dit-il enfin, œufs, jambon, poisson, poulet, dessert, pour vingt-trois mille réis, vin et café compris.”

Vingt-trois mille réis, soit deux francs par tête environ, c’était d’un invraisemblable bon marché. Tel ne fut pas sans doute l’avis de Thompson, car, par le canal de son interprète, il entama un marchandage effréné. Finalement, on tomba d’accord sur le prix de dix-sept mille réis, soit environ cent francs en monnaie française.

Cette question réglée, un autre marchandage recommença à propos des moyens de transport nécessaires. Après dix minutes de discussion, l’hôte s’engagea, moyennant un forfait de trente mille réis (cent quatre-vingts francs), à mettre, le lendemain matin, à la disposition des touristes, soixante-cinq montures, chevaux et ânes, ces derniers en majorité. Quant à des voitures, il n’y fallait pas songer, l’île n’en contenant pas une seule.

Témoin et acteur de ces discussions, Robert constatait avec un étonnement mêlé d’inquiétude que Thompson, s’en fiant à son heureuse étoile, n’avait absolument rien préparé.

“Voilà qui nous promet de l’agrément!” se dit-il in petto.

Tout étant bien convenu, Thompson et Robert se hâtèrent d’aller retrouver les passagers, qui, depuis au moins une demi-heure, devaient attendre leur éminent administrateur.

Ils étaient tous là en effet, formant sur le quai un groupe compact et gesticulant. Tous sauf un, cependant. Comme il l’avait déclaré, Elias Johnson était resté à bord, manifestant par une rigoureuse abstention son horreur des tremblements de terre.

Dans le groupe des passagers, la mauvaise humeur était évidente, mais elle se calma d’elle-même à la vue de Thompson et de Robert. Seul, Saunders crut devoir protester. Et encore le fit-il avec une extrême discrétion. Il exhiba silencieusement sa montre, et de loin, invita du doigt Thompson à constater que la grande aiguille avait notablement dépassé la demie de huit heures. Ce fut tout.

Thompson n’eut l’air de rien voir. Agité, aimable, s’épongeant le front à grands gestes, afin de donner une haute idée de sa dévorante activité, il s’empressa. Peu à peu, sous sa direction, la foule des passagers se pétrit, s’allongea, s’effila. La cohue se transforma en un régiment aux hommes bien alignés.

Les Anglais, habitués à cette singulière manière de voyager, se pliaient du reste aisément aux exigences d’un aussi militaire embrigadement. Cela leur semblait tout naturel, et d’eux-mêmes ils s’étaient massés en seize rangs composés chacun de quatre personnes. Seul, Roger de Sorgues fut quelque peu étonné, et dut même réprimer une intempestive envie de rire.

En tête, au premier rang, figurait Lady Heilbuth flanquée de Sir Hamilton. Cet honneur leur était bien dû. Et tel était sans doute l’avis personnel du baronnet, car il éclatait visiblement de satisfaction. Les autres rangs s’étaient organisés au gré du hasard ou des sympathies. Roger réussit sans peine à compléter celui de la famille Lindsay.

Thompson s’était naturellement excepté de sa combinaison. Sur le flanc de la troupe, en serre-file, rectifiant un alignement défectueux, refrénant de personnelles velléités d’indépendance, il allait, venait, tel un capitaine ou, comparaison peut-être plus exacte, tel un pion surveillant un convoi de potaches disciplinés.

Au signal, la colonne s’ébranla. En bon ordre, elle longea la mer, passa devant l’Hôtel de la Vierge, et l’hôtelier put, de sa porte, la suivre d’un regard satisfait. Cent pas plus loin, sur l’invitation de Robert, elle obliqua sur la gauche, et pénétra réellement dans la ville de Horta.

Combien moins engageante de près que de loin, la ville de Horta! Une seule rue, bifurquée à son extrémité, la compose presque exclusivement. Raide, étroite, irrégulière, mal pavée, cette rue n’est pas précisément une agréable promenade. À cette heure de la journée, le soleil déjà brûlant l’enfilait de bout en bout, cuisant les nuques et les dos, et ses morsures firent bientôt naître des plaintes, que réprimait avec peine l’œil sévère de Thompson.

Les maisons dont la rue de Horta est bordée n’offrent pas assez d’intérêt pour faire mépriser par l’âme les doléances du corps. Grossièrement bâties en murs de lave d’une très grande épaisseur, afin de mieux résister aux tremblements de terre, elles seraient du dernier banal, n’était l’originalité qu’elles atteignent à force de saleté. De ces maisons, le rez-de-chaussée est régulièrement occupé, soit par des magasins, soit par des écuries ou des étables. Les étages supérieurs, réservés aux habitants, s’emplissent, grâce à la chaleur et au voisinage des étables, des odeurs les plus écœurantes et des plus ignobles insectes.

Chaque maison s’enfle d’un large balcon, d’une “vérandah” fermée par un treillage. Surveillant la rue, épiant les voisins et les passants, épluchant les faits et gestes de tous ceux que le hasard met à leur portée, les bourgeoises indigènes font de longues stations derrière leur abri protecteur. Mais, à cette heure matinale, aveugles étaient les balcons, leurs propriétaires ayant coutume de prolonger au-delà du vraisemblable les heures consacrées au sommeil.

Sur le passage de la colonne, les rares promeneurs se retournaient avec surprise, les boutiquiers sortaient sur le pas de leurs portes. Que signifiait ce débarquement? L’île était-elle envahie, comme au temps de l’usurpateur don Miguel? En somme, on obtenait un succès de bon aloi. Thompson avait le droit d'être fier. Il l'était.

Mais Sir Hamilton l'était davantage encore. En tête, raide, droit, le regard fixé à beaucoup plus de quinze pas, tous les pores de sa peau criaient: “Moi!” Cette attitude orgueilleuse faillit même lui jouer un mauvais tour. Faute de regarder à ses pieds en tenant les yeux modestement baissés, le noble baronnet trébucha sur le pavé très cahoteux, et s'étala de tout son long. Un simple gentleman en eût fait autant. Par malheur, si les membres de Sir Hamilton sortirent intacts de cette aventure, il n'en fut pas de même pour un accessoire de toilette absolument indispensable. Sir Hamilton avait brisé son lorgnon. Cruelle catastrophe! Quel plaisir était possible désormais pour ce myope devenu aveugle?

Vigilant administrateur, Thompson heureusement avait tout vu. Il s'empressa de faire remarquer au baronnet un magasin à la montre duquel on apercevait quelques misérables appareils d'optique, et par l'entremise de Robert, un marché fut bientôt conclu. Moyennant deux mille réis - environ douze francs - le marchand s'engagea à rendre dès le lendemain matin l'instrument réparé.

Au passage, on visitait églises et couvents sans grand intérêt. D'églises en couvents, de couvents en églises, on atteignit enfin l'éminence dominant la ville, et, suant, soufflant, mais toujours en bon ordre, on s'arrêta vers dix heures au pied de l'ancien couvent des jésuites construit face à la mer. Aussitôt la colonne se disloqua et, sur un signe de Thompson, le cercle se forma autour de Robert. Au premier rang, Blockhead avait poussé le jeune Abel, à côté duquel Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam - plaça son encombrante et massive personne.

“L’ancien couvent des jésuites, annonça Robert en prenant la voix professionnelle du cicérone. Le plus bel édifice qu’ils aient élevé aux Açores. On peut le visiter conformément au programme. Je crois devoir vous prévenir toutefois que, si ce monument est remarquable par ses proportions considérables, il n’offre aucun intérêt artistique.”

Les touristes, excédés par leurs précédentes visites, se déclarèrent convaincus. Seul, Hamilton, le programme à la main, exigea son exécution complète, et fièrement pénétra dans le couvent. Blockhead, de son côté, fit observer avec sagacité qu’on aurait pu tout au moins aller voir les proportions, puisqu’on les reconnaissait remarquables, mais personne ne daigna écouter l’épicier honoraire.

“Nous passerons donc à l’article suivant du programme”, dit Robert.

Et il lut:

““Vue magnifique. Cinq minutes. “

“Devant vous, expliqua-t-il, l’île de Pico. Au nord, Saint-Georges. Dans l’île de Pico, une agglomération de “quintas “indique le quartier de “La Magdalena “, où les habitants de Fayal vont passer l’été.”

Ceci dit, Robert ayant rempli ses fonctions, le cercle se rompit, et les touristes s’éparpillèrent à leur fantaisie en contemplant le panorama étendu devant eux. À leurs pieds, la ville de Horta semblait rouler à la mer. En face, le Pic dressait sa masse colossale, dont le sommet allait toujours se perdre au-delà d’un chaos de vapeurs. Le canal entre les deux îles était maintenant empli de soleil, et les eaux miroitaient, incendiées, jusqu’aux rivages empourprés de Saint-Georges.

Lorsque le baronnet revint, sa visite terminée, la colonne déjà exercée se reforma avec rapidité. Elle se remettait en marche, quand le méticuleux passager brandit de nouveau l'inflexible règlement. Le programme portant: "Vue magnifique. Cinq minutes", il lui fallait ces cinq minutes.

On dut subir les fantaisies de cet original, et, dans un impeccable alignement, la colonne tout entière, face à l'est, s'octroya, non sans de nombreux et légitimes murmures, cinq minutes de contemplation supplémentaires. Pendant tout ce temps, Hamilton, trompé par sa quasi-cécité, resta invariablement tourné vers l'ouest. Dans cette direction, il n'apercevait guère que la façade aveuglante de l'ancien couvent des jésuites, et cela, avec la meilleure volonté du monde, ne pouvait passer pour une "vue magnifique." Mais ceci était un détail. Le baronnet considéra le mur avec conscience pendant les cinq minutes réglementaires.

La colonne enfin reprit sa route.

Dès les premiers pas, l'œil vigilant de Thompson découvrit qu'un des rangs était réduit de moitié. Deux passagers s'étaient éclipsés - les deux jeunes mariés, ainsi que le lui fit reconnaître un examen plus attentif. Thompson fronça le sourcil. Il n'aimait pas ces irrégularités. Toutefois, il réfléchit aussitôt que cette diminution de convives allait lui permettre d'imposer à l'hôtelier un équitable rabais.

Il était onze heures et demie, quand, toujours en bon ordre, mais harassés, les touristes firent leur entrée à l'Hôtel de la Vierge. L'hôte, rubicond et jovial, les reçut son bonnet à la main.

On prit place autour de la table. Sir Hamilton eut le vis- à-vis de Thompson que personne ne songea à lui disputer. Mary et Bess Blockhead, grâce à une savante manœuvre, se placèrent loin de leur famille, et purent ainsi se consacrer exclusivement au bonheur de Tigg définitivement cerné.

Quand la première faim fut calmée, Thompson prit la parole, et sollicita l'appréciation de ses passagers sur la ville de Horta.

“C'est superbe! s'écria Blockhead, tout simplement superbe!”

Mais il parut bientôt que Blockhead était seul de son avis.

“Affreuse ville! dit l'un.

-Et sale! renchérit un autre.

-Quelle rue!

-Quelles maisons!

-Quel soleil!

-Quels pavés!”

On reconnaîtra le baronnet à cette dernière réclamation.

“Et quel hôtel! dit à son tour Saunders, avec des grincements de scie dans la voix. On voit bien qu'on nous a promis des hôtels de premier ordre.”

Saunders n'avait pas tout à fait tort, on doit le reconnaître. Certes, les œufs, le jambon, le poulet, figuraient en effet sur la table. Mais le service laissait singulièrement à désirer. La nappe ne manquait pas de trous, les fourchettes étaient de fer, et l'on ne changeait pas les assiettes, d'ailleurs d'une propreté douteuse.

Thompson secoua la tête d’un air belliqueux.

“Ai-je donc besoin de faire observer à Mr. Saunders, siffla-t-il avec amertume, que les mots “Hôtels de premier ordre “n’ont qu’une valeur tout à fait relative? Une auberge des faubourgs de Londres devient un confortable hôtel au Kamtchatka...

- Et en général, interrompit Hamilton, dans tout pays habité par un peuple latin, c’est-à-dire inférieur. Ah! si nous étions dans une colonie anglaise!...”

Mais le baronnet ne put à son tour achever sa pensée. Le déjeuner terminé, on partait bruyamment. Thompson, sorti le dernier, eut la satisfaction de trouver la colonne reformée. Chacun avait repris de soi-même la place que le hasard ou sa volonté lui avait assignée le matin. Aucune contestation ne s’était élevée, tant l’idée de propriété naît aisément parmi les hommes.

Pour la troisième fois, au milieu d’un plus nombreux concours de population, elle suivit la rue si fatale au baronnet. En arrivant sur le théâtre de son accident, celui- ci jeta un coup d’œil oblique sur la boutique où il avait trouvé secours. Précisément, l’opticien était sur sa porte, comme tous les autres marchands, ses confrères. Lui aussi, il avait reconnu son client occasionnel. Et même, il le suivit d’un regard, dans lequel Hamilton crut lire - mais quelle idée! - comme une expression de blâme méprisant.

Vers le haut de la rue, on tourna à gauche, et l’on continua de s’élever sur les flancs de la colline. Bientôt les dernières maisons furent dépassées. Quelques centaines de mètres plus loin, la route commençait à côtoyer un torrent aux capricieux méandres. Ses rives délicieuses et changeantes furent néanmoins dédaignées par la plupart de ces touristes trop alignés. Un site qui ne figurait pas sur le programme ne comptait pas. Disons mieux, il n’existait pas.

Après une marche d’un demi-mille, la route parut tout à coup fermée par une énorme barrière de rochers, du haut desquels l’eau du torrent se précipitait en cascade. Sans altérer son admirable alignement, la colonne évoluant à droite, continua de remonter la pente.

Bien qu’on fût à l’heure la plus chaude de la journée, la température demeurait supportable. Dans le ravin suivi par les promeneurs, les arbres abondaient. Cèdres, noyers, peupliers, châtaigniers, hêtres, répandaient leur ombre bienfaisante.

L’ascension durait depuis une heure, quand l’horizon s’élargit tout à coup. À un brusque tournant, la route déboucha à flanc de coteau, dominant une vaste vallée, en laquelle se continuait le ravin agrandi.

Thompson fit un signe, et les touristes formèrent de nouveau le cercle autour du cicérone. Les soldats, décidément, s’habituaient à la manœuvre. Quant à Robert, tout en ressentant vivement le ridicule de cette façon ultra¬anglaise de voyager, il eut le bon esprit de n’en rien laisser paraître. Il dit sans préambule, d’un ton froid:

“C’est ici, mesdames et messieurs, le lieu de premier établissement des Flamands, qui colonisèrent cette île avant les Portugais. Vous remarquerez que les habitants de cette vallée ont conservé dans une large mesure les traits physiques, les costumes, le langage et l’industrie de leurs ancêtres.”

Robert se tut brusquement comme il avait commencé. Que les infortunés touristes fussent hors d’état de remarquer quoi que ce fût, ainsi qu’il les y invitait, ce n’était pas son affaire. D’ailleurs, on parut satisfait. On remarqua, puisque tel était le programme, de loin, de très loin, et aucune réclamation ne surgit.

Au signal de Thompson, la colonne se reforma comme un régiment exercé, et les yeux se détournèrent passivement du paysage enchanteur.

C’était vraiment dommage. Enserrée de collines aux doux contours, sillonnée par des ruisselets qui, réunis, deviennent plus bas le torrent dont on venait de remonter le cours, la Vallée Flamande s’étale, pleine d’une virgilienne mollesse. Aux gras pâturages où paissent des troupeaux de bœufs, succèdent des champs de froment, de maïs, d’orge, et, capricieusement dispersées, de blanches maisons brillent aux rayons du soleil.

“Une Suisse normande, dit Roger.

- Un reflet de notre pays”, ajouta mélancoliquement Robert en se remettant en marche.

Contournant la ville de Horta par le nord, la colonne obliqua un peu sur la droite, et la Vallée Flamande ne tarda pas à disparaître. Après les champs rappelant les perspectives de la Normandie, on traversait maintenant des entreprises de cultures maraîchères. Oignons, pommes de terre, ignames, pois, tous les légumes défilèrent, sans préjudice des fruits, tels que pastèques, calebasses, abricots et cent autres.

Mais il fallut quitter ce quartier plantureux. La journée s’avançant, Thompson ne crut pas devoir pousser la reconnaissance jusqu’au bout du cap Espalamaca. Il prit la première route qu’il rencontra sur la droite, et l’on commença à redescendre vers la ville.

La route dévalait entre une succession ininterrompue de villas entourées de superbes jardins, terrain de fusion des espèces les plus disparates.

Aux essences exotiques, se mêlaient celles d’Europe, parfois extrêmement agrandies. Le palmier s’élevait auprès du chêne; à côté de l’acacia, le bananier et l’oranger. Les tilleuls et les peupliers y voisinaient avec l’eucalyptus, le cèdre du Liban avec l’araucaria du Brésil. Des fuchsias s’y haussaient à la taille de nos arbres.

Il était quatre heures de l’après-midi. Sous le dôme majestueux des grands arbres, les rayons plus obliques du soleil déclinant ne se glissaient qu’atténués. Après le pays de Chanaan, c’était le Paradis terrestre.

Instinctivement, les touristes avaient ralenti le pas. Ils se taisaient. Dans l’ombre lumineuse des arbres, caressés par la brise attiédie, ils descendaient sans se hâter, en silence, jouissant de la délicieuse promenade.

On atteignit ainsi le fort de l’ouest, puis l’on suivit le parapet qui le réunit au fort central. La demie de cinq heures sonnait à peine, au moment où les touristes arrivaient sur le port, à l’amorce de la grande rue de Horta. La colonne alors se disloqua. Les uns préférèrent rentrer à bord. D’autres se répandirent en ville à l’aventure.

Robert dut aller s’assurer à l’Hôtel de la Vierge que tout serait prêt pour le lendemain. Sa commission terminée, il retournait au *Seamew,* quand il se heurta à Sir Hamilton.

Sir Hamilton était furieux.

“Monsieur, dit-il ex abrupto, il m’arrive une chose singulière. L’opticien chez lequel vous m’avez conduit ce matin refuse absolument, je ne puis savoir pourquoi, de faire la réparation convenue. Comme il m’est impossible de comprendre un mot de son damné charabia, vous m’obligeriez, en venant avec moi lui demander une explication.

- À vos ordres”, répondit Robert.

Entré dans le magasin du commerçant récalcitrant, Robert entama une discussion longue et bruyante, drôle aussi probablement, car il refrénait visiblement une violente envie de rire. Lorsque toutes les répliques eurent été échangées, il se retourna vers le baronnet:

“Le senor Luiz Monteiro, opticien, que voilà, dit-il, a refusé et refuse de travailler à votre service, parce que...

-Parce que?...

-Tout simplement parce que vous avez omis de le saluer cette après-midi.

-Hein?... fit Hamilton, estomaqué.

-C’est comme ça! Quand nous sommes passés, après le déjeuner, le senor Luiz Monteiro était sur sa porte. Il vous a vu, et, de votre côté, vous l’avez reconnu, il le sait. Vous n’avez pas daigné cependant esquisser le moindre salut. Tel est votre crime à ses yeux.

-Qu’il aille au diable!” s’écria Hamilton courroucé.

C’est à peine s’il écouta Robert, qui lui expliquait

l’invraisemblable rigueur du cérémonial aux Açores. Là, tout se fait suivant un inflexible protocole. Veut-on visiter un de ses amis, on a soin de solliciter préalablement son agrément. Si le médecin consent à vous soigner, le cordonnier à vous chausser, le boulanger à vous nourrir, c’est à la condition sine qua non que vous les saluerez fort poliment à chaque rencontre, et que vous les honorerez par d’affectueux présents à des époques fixées une fois pour toutes et variant avec les professions.

Tout ceci pénétrait difficilement dans le concept du baronnet. Pourtant, il dut se soumettre. Avec son approbation, Robert apaisa par des excuses bien senties le pointilleux Luiz Monteiro, et la réparation fut de nouveau promise.

Hamilton et Robert arrivèrent à bord du *Seamew* au moment où la cloche appelait les retardataires pour le dîner. Celui-ci se passa joyeusement. Aucun, parmi tous

ces passagers, qui ne se déclarât enchanté de ce début de voyage. On se faisait mutuellement remarquer la bonne entente qui n’avait cessé de régner entre les touristes. On se congratulait.

Si la ville de Horta avait déçu dans une certaine mesure, tous étaient d’accord pour reconnaître la splendeur des choses de la nature. Non, personne n’oublierait, ni cette évocation de la Suisse à la Vallée Flamande, ni la richesse de la campagne aux approches de la Ponta Espalamaca, ni ce retour exquis le long de la mer, ou sous l’ombre bienfaisante des grands arbres.

Au milieu de l’allégresse générale, Blockhead renchérissait avec ardeur. À plusieurs reprises, il avait déjà énergiquement déclaré à son voisin qu’il n’avait jamais - jamais, vous entendez bien! - rien vu de plus beau.

Quant au parti de l’opposition, il était réduit à l’impuissance. L’écrasante majorité de l’administrateur général contraignait Hamilton et Saunders au silence.

Ce dernier semblait d’humeur particulièrement farouche. Pourquoi? Était-il réellement d’une si méchante nature que la joie des autres fût pour lui une blessure? Ou bien, son amour-propre souffrait-il d’une plaie secrète sur laquelle le contentement général eût coulé comme du plomb fondu? En vérité on eût pu le croire, en l’entendant bougonner les épithètes méprisantes qu’il appliquait furieusement à ses compagnons, dont la satisfaction permettait de présager l’éclatante réussite du voyage entrepris. Il n’y put tenir, et, quittant la table, il monta promener ses aigres pensées sur le spardeck.

Le grand air peu à peu fit l’apaisement dans son cœur ulcéré. Sur ses lèvres minces comme le bord d’une coupure, un sourire naquit. Il haussa les épaules.

“Oui, oui, murmurait-il, c’est la lune de miel!...” Et, s’étendant dans un rocking-chair, il contempla paisiblement le ciel étoilé, dans lequel, il en était sûr, naîtrait à son heure la lune rousse.

CHAPITRE VII

LE CIEL SE COUVRE

L’aube naissait à peine, quand un vacarme assourdissant interrompit le sommeil des hôtes du *Seamew.* La machine grondait, le pont résonnait sous la chute de corps lourds. Les plus obstinés dormeurs durent céder. Maugréant, pestant, les passagers, jusqu’au dernier, avaient fait, avant sept heures, leur apparition sur le spardeck, privé ce jour-là de son habituel lavage.

Le long du bord, des chalands étaient amarrés, portant des sacs de charbon que le treuil enlevait et précipitait dans la soute.

“C’est charmant! dit Saunders à très haute voix, à un moment où Thompson passait près de lui. Comme si on n’aurait pas pu embarquer ce charbon deux heures plus tard!”

Cette juste observation rencontra de l’écho.

“C’est évident, approuva avec énergie Sir Hamilton.

- C’est évident!” répéta le pasteur Cooley, d’ordinaire plus conciliant, au milieu des murmures de tous les passagers.

Thompson ne vit rien, n’entendit rien. Souriant, il traversait les groupes, et, le premier, riait du contretemps. Après tout, affirmait-il, rien de meilleur que de se lever tôt! Comment n’aurait-on pas été désarmé par cette indestructible gaieté?

Le programme, ce jour-là, annonçait une excursion à la “Caldeira” ou “Chaudière”, nom habituel des volcans aux Açores. Le départ se fit correctement à huit heures. Sur le quai, une troupe d’ânes et d’âniers attendait les voyageurs.

Malgré les promesses de l’hôtelier, aucun cheval n’humiliait par sa présence ses cousins dégénérés. Rien que des ânes. Soixante-cinq ânes et soixante-cinq âniers, à raison d’un homme par animal. À la vue de ce nombreux troupeau, des protestations s’élevèrent de nouveau parmi les touristes. Aller à âne! Beaucoup s’y refusèrent d’abord avec énergie. Les uns, tels que le pasteur, alléguèrent leurs rhumatismes, d’autres, comme Lady Heilbuth, mirent en avant des raisons de pudeur, d’autres enfin, et particulièrement Sir Hamilton, parlèrent de leur dignité compromise. Saunders, lui, ne donna aucune raison, et ne fut pas néanmoins le plus timide dans ses récriminations. Thompson dut parlementer longuement. Pendant un quart d’heure, les cris des femmes, les jurons des âniers, les demandes, appels, interjections se fondirent en une dissonante harmonie.

Au fond, la majorité s’amusait de bon cœur. Renfermés durant sept jours, embrigadés le huitième, les touristes s’égayaient en somme de cette promenade imprévue. Ces magistrats, ces officiers, négociants, rentiers, dont était formé le chargement humain du *Seamew*, tous gens graves par l’état et par l’âge, redevenaient jeunes pour un jour, et bientôt, jeunes ou non, minces ou bedonnants, enfourchèrent joyeusement les ânes indifférents et paisibles. Saunders, la face plus froide à mesure que la gaieté de ses compagnons s’accentuait, sauta en selle le dernier, sans prononcer une parole.

Tigg avait été le premier.

Pendant que la discussion suivait son cours Bess et Mary, ses deux anges gardiens, n’avaient pas perdu leur temps. Successivement elles avaient examiné les soixante- cinq ânes, passé la revue de toutes les selles, et s’étaient assurées les trois montures les meilleures et les plus confortablement garnies. Tigg, bon gré mal gré, avait dû s’installer sur l’un de ces ânes, après quoi, les Misses Blockhead avaient continué à l’entourer de leurs tendres soins. Était-il bien? Ne lui manquait-il rien? Leurs blanches mains avaient réglé la longueur de ses étriers. Elles lui eussent mis la bride en main, si l’âne açorien eût comporté cet accessoire, ou quoi que ce fût lui ressemblant.

Aux Açores, les rênes sont remplacées par un ânier. Armé d’un long aiguillon avec lequel il le dirige, l’ânier marche à côté de l’animal. Maître Aliboron va-t-il trop vite, ou descend-il une pente un peu raide, l’ânier le retient tout simplement par la queue.

“Affaire de latitude! dit Roger en riant. Chez nous, le mors n’est pas du même côté, voilà tout!”

Quand tout le monde fut prêt, Thompson s’aperçut que trois ânes demeuraient sans propriétaires. L’énergique trembleur Johnson était, selon sa promesse, parmi les absents. Quant aux deux autres, ils n’étaient et ne pouvaient être que le jeune ménage devenu invisible depuis la veille.

À huit heures et demie, la cavalcade - analcade serait plus exact - se mit en mouvement. En tête, “analcadait”

Thompson, flanqué de son lieutenant Robert, et, derrière eux, le régiment suivait deux par deux.

En remontant la rue principale de Horta, cette troupe de soixante-deux cavaliers, escortée par soixante-deux piétons, fit nécessairement révolution. Tous ceux qui ne s’étaient pas oubliés dans la douceur matinale des draps parurent aux portes et aux fenêtres. De ceux-là, fut le cérémonieux Luiz Monteiro. Drapé noblement dans un vaste manteau, accoudé dans une pose pleine de dignité contre le chambranle de sa porte, il regarda défiler la longue théorie des touristes, sans qu’aucun mouvement trahît les agitations possibles de son âme. À un certain moment pourtant, cette statue de la politesse parut s’animer, son regard brilla: Sir Hamilton passait.

Bien que privé du secours de son lorgnon, le baronnet eut néanmoins le bonheur de reconnaître son inflexible professeur de civilité et, la mort dans l’âme, il dessina un superbe salut. Ce salut, le fier Luiz Monteiro le rendit en se courbant jusqu’à terre, et rentra immédiatement dans sa boutique. Sans doute, apaisé, allait-il procéder à la réparation promise!

On arriva bientôt à l’endroit où la rue principale se divise en deux branches. La tête de la colonne s’engageait dans celle de droite, quand un cri s’éleva, suivi de piétinements et d’exclamations confuses. Tous s’arrêtèrent sur place, et Thompson, revenant sur ses pas, se porta rapidement sur le théâtre de l’incident.

À l’un des derniers rangs, deux corps gisaient sur le pavé inégal. L’un, celui d’un âne, l’autre, à peine moins vaste, celui de Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam.

Celui-ci du moins était sans blessure. Thompson le fit se relever paisiblement et contempler d’un air triste sa malheureuse monture. L’âne açorien a beau en effet être un robuste animal, il est des limites à sa force. Ces limites, Van Piperboom les avait franchies, et, de la rupture de quelque vaisseau, ou par toute autre cause, son âne était mort, bien mort, et ne se releva pas.

Ce ne fut pas sans un énorme tapage que cette constatation put être faite. Dix minutes s’écoulèrent au milieu des éclats de rire des touristes et des exclamations des guides, avant que le décès de l’âne fût officiellement reconnu. Restait à trouver le remède. Toute autre monture n’allait-elle pas avoir le même sort?

“Que diable! s’écria Thompson impatienté, nous n’allons pas rester ici jusqu’au soir! Si un âne ne suffit pas, qu’on en mette deux!”

En entendant cette proposition fidèlement traduite par Robert, l’ânier se frappa le front d’un air inspiré, et rapidement il dévala la pente. Quelques instants plus tard, on le vit revenir, accompagné de trois de ses collègues, escortant avec lui quatre animaux frais. Un appareil bizarre, fait de deux fortes perches munies en leur milieu de sangles disposées en forme de fauteuil, réunissait les ânes deux à deux. Piperboom, aux applaudissements de ses compagnons, fut hissé à grand renfort de bras sur l’un de ces sièges improvisés, et la caravane put enfin continuer sa route.

Robert, à la prière de Thompson, demanda toutefois auparavant quel était l’usage des deux ânes jumelés qui suivaient à vide. L’ânier interrogé mesura de l’œil la masse inquiétante de son voyageur.

“Un relais!” dit-il.

Si rapidement qu’on eût opéré, neuf heures sonnaient quand la colonne se remit en marche. Thompson fit recommander au guide de tête de se hâter le plus possible. Il n’y avait pas de temps à perdre, si l’on voulait franchir avant la nuit, aller et retour, les dix-huit kilomètres séparant la Caldeira de

Horta. Mais le guide interpellé secoua la tête d’une manière peu encourageante, et les ânes ne firent pas une enjambée de plus. Robert calma de son mieux l’impatient Thompson, en lui expliquant qu’on tenterait vainement de modifier l’allure toujours pareille d’un âne açorien. Ce sont bêtes placides. On apprécierait par contre la sûreté de leur sabot dans les difficiles chemins qu’il faudrait affronter bientôt.

“Pour le moment, la route est bonne en tout cas”, grommela Thompson.

La route, assez étroite, ne présentait en effet aucune difficulté particulière. Après avoir traversé, au sortir de Horta, de belles plantations d’orangers, la colonne se trouvait maintenant dans une large vallée, aux flancs couverts de champs et de prairies parsemés de bouquets de hêtres. La pente douce et régulière offrait aux pieds des animaux un appui solide. Mais, à mesure que les touristes s’éloignaient de la mer, l’aspect du pays se modifia. Aux hêtres succédaient d’abord les pins, pressés les uns contre les autres, puis par degrés toute culture cessa, et la route, devenue sentier, fit un crochet vers la gauche et s’éleva en lacet sur le flanc de la vallée rétrécie.

C’est alors que les ânes montrèrent ce dont ils étaient capables. Bien secondés par leurs conducteurs qui les excitaient de la voix et de l’aiguillon, les bonnes bêtes, pendant une heure et demie, s’élevèrent sans un faux pas sur ce raidillon au sol rocailleux et fuyant.

Au cours de cette ascension, il arriva que Piperboom fut dans une position assez critique. À de brusques tournants, son hamac se trouva plus d’une fois suspendu au-dehors du sentier tracé. Il demeura impassible, il faut le reconnaître, et, s’il éprouva quelque crainte, la combustion de sa pipe n’en fut pas troublée un seul instant.

Parvenus au sommet de ce difficile sentier, les touristes débouchèrent dans une nouvelle vallée beaucoup plus large que la précédente et développée en une sorte de plateau entouré de collines. Là, Piperboom changea de fauteuil, afin de laisser aux huit pattes de l’autre un repos mérité.

Quand les voyageurs jetèrent autour d’eux un premier regard, ils purent se croire transportés dans un autre pays. La pauvreté remplaçait l’abondance. Partout les signes de la richesse naturelle et de l’incurie humaine. De tous côtés, une terre fertile que les habitants indolents abandonnaient aux mauvaises herbes. Seuls, quelques champs de lupin, de manioc ou d’ignames, verdoyaient, tôt bornés par la désolation environnante. À des étendues d’herbes folles succédaient des étendues de broussailles, faites de myrtes, de genévriers, de buis, de cèdres rabougris, que le sentier traversait ou contournait. Quelques cabanes, masures plutôt, apparaissaient de loin en loin. Un seul village, encombré de porcs et de chiens au milieu desquels on eut peine à se frayer passage, fut rencontré vers onze heures et demie. Après, ce fut la solitude. Les rares habitants que l’on croisait, des femmes pour la plupart, passaient graves et silencieux, enveloppés dans les plis de leur vaste manteau, le visage caché sous la retombée d’un énorme capuchon. Tout disait la misère de ces îles, dont la vie, en raison du manque de routes, s’est concentrée sur le littoral.

Il était une heure bien sonnée, quand on parvint au point extrême de la Caldeira, à 1021 m d’altitude. Exténués, mourants de faim, les voyageurs se répandaient en récriminations. Hamilton et Saunders n’étaient plus seuls à se plaindre du mépris dans lequel on tenait le programme. Les meilleurs estomacs faisant d’ordinaire les meilleurs caractères, rien d’étonnant si les gens habituellement les plus paisibles se montraient à cette heure les plus ardents à protester.

Mais, tout à coup, les légitimes griefs furent oubliés...

Les voyageurs venaient d'arriver au sommet de la Caldeira. Si Anglais, c'est-à-dire si indifférents qu'ils fussent, ils ne purent le demeurer devant le spectacle sublime offert à leurs yeux.

Sous l'immensité de l'azur, au milieu de la mer enflammée par un soleil triomphal, l'île se déployait à leurs pieds. Elle apparaissait toute, nettement dessinée, avec ses pics secondaires, ses contreforts, ses vallons, ses ruisseaux, ses récifs brodés d'écume neigeuse. Vers le nord-est, le sommet de Gracieuse surgissait dans le lointain. Plus près et plus à l'est, la longue île de Saint- Georges semblait s'étendre mollement sur les vagues comme sur une couche berceuse, et, par-dessus ses montagnes et ses plaines, une vapeur indécise montrait la place de Tercère aux confins de l'horizon reculé. Au nord, à l'ouest, au sud, rien n'était que l'espace. Le regard, suivant dans ces directions une impeccable courbe, se heurtait soudain, revenu à l'est, à la masse gigantesque de Pico.

Par un hasard très rare, le Pic, débarrassé de brumes, s'élançait d'une seule venue dans le ciel lumineux. Royal, il dépassait de mille mètres son entourage de monts plus humbles, et s'érigeait, orgueilleux et dominateur, dans la glorieuse paix de ce beau jour.

Après cinq minutes de contemplation, on se remit en marche, et, deux cents mètres plus loin, ce fut un spectacle d'un autre genre. Devant les touristes alignés sur la crête dessinant un circuit régulier de six kilomètres, l'ancien cratère du volcan se creusait. Là, le sol s'effondrait, descendant d'un seul coup ce qu'on avait eu tant de peine à gravir. Sur les parois de ce gouffre de six cents mètres, des arêtes tourmentées rayonnaient du centre à la circonférence, formant entre elles d'étroits vallons obstrués par une impénétrable végétation. Tout au fond, sous les rayons perpendiculaires du soleil, étincelait un petit lac, que l’ennui d’un Anglais peupla naguère de cyprins aux écailles d’or et d’argent. Autour de ce lac, des moutons paissaient, mettant des taches blanches sur le vert clair de l’herbe et le vert plus sombre des fourrés.

Le programme comportait une descente au fond du cratère éteint. Toutefois, en raison de l’heure tardive, Thompson osa proposer de donner pour cette fois une entorse à la règle. Le croirait-on, certains protestèrent. Mais les autres, en bien plus grand nombre, opinèrent pour un prompt retour. Nouveauté imprévue! Sir Hamilton fut le plus farouche de ces contempteurs de la loi. C’est qu’en vérité sa situation était par trop misérable. En vain il avait religieusement suivi la direction du doigt indicateur de Robert, en vain il s’était consciencieusement tourné vers Pico, Saint-Georges, Gracieuse, Tercère, vers ce lac enfin enfoncé dans les profondeurs de la montagne, Sir Hamilton, privé de son indispensable lorgnon, n’avait rien vu de toutes ces merveilles, et l’admiration, pour lui moins que pour tout autre, ne pouvait contrebalancer les souffrances de l’estomac.

La majorité l’emporta, comme il est d’usage, et la colonne refit en sens inverse le chemin parcouru. Au reste, il y fallut moins de temps. À deux heures et quart, les touristes parvenaient au village déjà traversé. C’est là qu’on devait déjeuner. Ainsi l’avait déclaré Thompson.

Les plus intrépides se sentirent inquiets en pénétrant dans ce village misérable, comptant à peine une douzaine de masures. On se demanda comment Thompson avait jamais pu espérer y trouver à déjeuner pour cent vingt-sept mâchoires exaspérées par un jeûne prolongé. On put constater, d’ailleurs, que Thompson n’avait aucune lumière à cet égard, et qu’il comptait uniquement sur sa chance pour résoudre ce problème ardu.

La caravane s’était arrêtée au milieu du sentier élargi formant la rue du village. Ânes, âniers, touristes, attendaient immobiles, entourés d’une affluence de porcs et de chiens mêlés d’enfants à la mine hébétée, dont le nombre faisait honneur à la fécondité légendaire des épouses açoriennes.

Après avoir longtemps promené autour de lui un regard angoissé, Thompson enfin prit son parti. Appelant Robert à son secours, il se dirigea vers la plus vaste chaumière, sur la porte de laquelle un homme à l’air de brigand s’accoudait, en contemplant le spectacle pour lui insolite de la caravane anglaise. Ce ne fut pas sans peine que Robert réussit à comprendre le patois barbare de ce paysan. Il y parvint cependant, et Thompson put annoncer que le déjeuner serait servi dans une heure.

À cette annonce, de violents murmures éclatèrent. C’était dépasser les bornes. Thompson dut déployer tout son génie. Allant de l’un à l’autre, il prodigua les amabilités les plus délicates, les compliments les plus flatteurs. Qu’on lui fît crédit de cette heure. Il avait annoncé que le déjeuner serait prêt à trois heures et demie, il le serait.

Il le fut.

Le paysan s’était éloigné rapidement. Il revint bientôt accompagné de deux indigènes mâles et de cinq ou six du sexe opposé. Tout ce monde conduisait les animaux qui devaient faire les frais du repas, et parmi lesquels figurait une vache à la tête ornée de cornes gracieuses, et dont la taille ne dépassait pas quatre-vingts centimètres, soit à peu près celle d’un gros chien.

“C’est une vache de Corvo, dit Robert. Cette île a la spécialité de cet élevage de modèle parfait mais réduit.”

Le troupeau et ses conducteurs disparurent dans l’intérieur. Une heure plus tard, Thompson put annoncer que le déjeuner était prêt.

Ce fut un repas bien singulier.

Quelques-uns des touristes seulement avaient réussi à trouver place dans la maison. Les autres s’étaient installés le mieux possible en plein air, qui sur le pas d’une porte, qui sur une grosse pierre. Chacun, sur ses genoux, tenait une calebasse, à laquelle était dévolu le rôle de l’assiette absente. Quant aux cuillères et fourchettes, il eût été insensé d’y songer.

En voyant ces préparatifs, Saunders s’égayait fort. Était-il possible que des gens convenables tolérassent l’incroyable désinvolture avec laquelle les traitait ce Thompson? Des protestations allaient naître, des déchirements survenir, et des drames. Saunders, à cette pensée, se sentait d’une humeur charmante.

Et, de fait, il semblait bien que la colère couvât au cœur des passagers. Ils parlaient peu. Absence d’études préalables des excursions, manque total d’organisation, on prenait évidemment fort mal ces fantaisies de l’administrateur général.

Robert comprenait aussi, et autant que Saunders, à quelle épreuve Thompson, par son imprévoyance, mettait la patience de ses souscripteurs. Quel repas, pour ces bourgeois aisés habitués au confort, pour ces femmes élégantes et riches! Mais, contrairement à Saunders, loin de s’égayer de cette situation, il s’efforçait de réparer dans la mesure de ses forces les erreurs de son chef hiérarchique.

En furetant dans les masures du village, il découvrit une petite table à peu près convenable et des escabeaux à peu près complets. Aidé de Roger, il transporta à l’ombre d’un cèdre ce butin, qui fut offert aux dames Lindsay. En continuant leur chasse, les deux jeunes gens firent d’autres trouvailles. Des serviettes, quelque vaisselle, des couteaux, trois couverts d’étain - presque du luxe! En peu de minutes, les passagères américaines eurent devant elles une table du plus séduisant aspect.

Si les deux Français avaient eu besoin d’un salaire, ils se fussent jugés largement payés par le regard dont les gratifièrent les deux sœurs. Évidemment, ils leur avaient sauvé plus que la vie, en leur évitant de manger avec les doigts. Mais tout paiement eût été usuraire. Cette chasse mouvementée avait été par elle-même un plaisir. Emporté par la gaieté, Robert sortait de son habituelle réserve. Il riait, plaisantait, et, sur l’invitation de Roger, il ne fit aucune difficulté pour prendre place à la table dressée grâce à son zèle ingénieux.

Cependant, on commençait à servir le déjeuner, si l’on peut employer cet euphémisme. Les cuisiniers improvisés s’étaient transformés en pittoresques maîtres d’hôtel. Transportant au milieu des groupes capricieusement disséminés une vaste marmite en terre, ils emplissaient les calebasses d’une sorte de ragoût bizarre, assez fortement pimenté pour faire passer le vin épais du pays. D’autres rustiques serviteurs disposaient à côté des convives des quignons de pain propres à exciter l’effroi des estomacs les plus robustes par leurs proportions colossales.

“Pays du pain, ici, expliqua Robert en réponse à une exclamation d’Alice. Aucun de ces paysans qui en consomme moins de deux livres par jour. Un de leurs proverbes affirme que “tout avec le pain fait l’homme sain ““.

Il était douteux que les estomacs européens se montrassent d’équivalente capacité. Pas un des voyageurs qui n’esquissât une grimace en enfonçant la dent dans cette pâte grossière faite avec la farine du maïs.

Les Lindsay et leurs compagnons prenaient gaiement leur parti de cet insolite repas. La table, toute blanche grâce aux serviettes juxtaposées, donnait à l'aventure un air de fête champêtre. On s'amusait juvénilement. Robert oubliait qu'il était l'interprète du *Seamew*. Pour une heure, il redevenait un homme comme les autres, et se montrait tel qu'il était, c'est-à-dire charmant et plein d'entrain. Malheureusement, tandis qu'il rejetait inconsciemment le fardeau de sa position, celle-ci ne le lâchait pas. Un insignifiant détail allait le rappeler à la réalité des choses.

Au ragoût avait succédé une salade. Ce n'était certes pas le moment de se montrer difficile. Cependant, malgré le vinaigre dont elle était largement assaisonnée, cette exécrable salade fit pousser des cris à tous les convives. Robert, appelé par Thompson, dut interroger le paysan.

“C'est du lupin, Excellence, répondit celui-ci.

-Eh bien! reprit Robert, il est coriace, votre lupin.

-Coriace? répéta le paysan.

-Oui. Coriace, dur.

-Je ne sais pas, dit l'indigène d'un air stupide. Je ne trouve pas ça dur, moi.

-Ah! Vous ne trouvez pas cela dur?... Et ce n'est pas salé non plus, sans doute?

-Ah! pour salé, c'est salé. C'est l'eau de mer, Excellence. Le lupin y sera resté trop longtemps.

-Bon, dit Robert. Mais pourquoi avoir mis ce lupin dans l'eau de mer?

-Pour enlever son amertume, Excellence.

-Eh bien! mon ami, je suis fâché de vous dire que l’amertume est restée.

-Alors, fit le paysan sans s’émouvoir, c’est qu’il n’a pas trempé assez longtemps.”

Il n’y avait évidemment rien à tirer de ce rustre. Le mieux était de se résigner en silence. Les convives se rejetèrent donc sur le pain de maïs, dont, contrairement aux prévisions, plus d’un estomac britannique estima la quantité insuffisante.

Robert fit comme les autres. Mais sa gaieté s’était envolée. Il ne reprit pas place à la table joyeuse. Solitairement, il acheva son repas, revenu à la réserve, dont il regrettait déjà d’être sorti un instant.

Vers quatre heures un quart, la caravane se remit en marche. Le temps pressant, les ânes durent coûte que coûte adopter le pas accéléré. La descente du sentier en lacet fut des plus mouvementées. Accrochés aux queues de leurs bêtes, les âniers se laissaient traîner sur la pente raide et glissante. Les femmes, les hommes même, poussèrent plus d’une exclamation d’inquiétude. Seul, Piperboom continua de montrer un front serein. Après avoir englouti ces quantités énormes de lupin sans donner aucun signe de malaise, il se laissait tranquillement bercer par ses deux ânes. Confortablement installé, il dédaignait les difficultés de la route, et, paisible, il s’entourait de l’éternel nuage de fumée dont il charmait son éternel repos.

Dans la rue de Horta, Hamilton, accompagné de Robert, s’empressa d’aller réclamer son lorgnon, qui lui fut remis avec de grandes démonstrations de politesse, auxquelles il se garda de répondre. Ses désirs satisfaits, il revenait immédiatement à son insolence naturelle.

À huit heures, les ânes et les âniers renvoyés et payés, tous les voyageurs, toilette faite, se retrouvèrent, exténués, affamés, autour de la table du *Seamew,* et jamais la cuisine du maître coq n'eut autant de succès.

Revenus quelques instants auparavant, les jeunes mariés étaient aussi à la table commune. Où avaient-ils passé ces deux jours? Peut-être ne le savaient-ils pas. Évidemment, ils n'avaient rien vu, et, maintenant encore, ils ne voyaient rien de ce qui n'était pas eux-mêmes.

Saunders, lui, n'avait pas les mêmes raisons d'être distrait. Et ce qu'il discernait remplissait d'aise cet aimable gentleman. Quelle différence entre ce dîner et celui de la veille! Hier, on causait gaiement, on était joyeux. Aujourd'hui, les convives montraient des visages sombres et mangeaient en silence. Décidément, cette fantaisie du déjeuner ne passait pas aussi bien que Thompson avait osé l'espérer. Saunders ne put jusqu'au bout contenir son bonheur. Il fallait nécessairement que Thompson en reçût quelque éclaboussure.

“Steward! appela-t-il d'une voix éclatante, encore un peu de ce rumsteck, je vous prie.”

Puis, s'adressant à travers la table au baronnet, son compère:

“La nourriture des hôtels de premier ordre, ajouta-t-il avec une ironique emphase, a du moins cela de bon qu'elle rend supportable celle du bord.”

Thompson sauta sur sa chaise comme s'il eût été piqué par un insecte. Il ne répliqua rien cependant. Et vraiment, qu'aurait-il pu répondre?

L’opposition, cette fois, avait pour elle l’opinion publique.

CHAPITRE VIII

LES FÊTES DE LA PENTECÔTE

Fatigués par cette excursion mouvementée, les passagers du *Seamew* dormirent longtemps la nuit suivante. Quand, le 20 mai, vers neuf heures, les premiers d’entre eux montèrent sur le spardeck, ils étaient déjà loin de Fayal.

Parti de Horta à sept heures et demie, le *Seamew* suivait, pour se rendre à Tercère, un chemin capricieux, afin de donner aux touristes quelques lumières sur les îles dans lesquelles on ne devait pas descendre.

Au moment où Roger, escortant les passagères américaines, parut à son tour sur le spardeck, le navire, côtoyant le rivage méridional de Pico, se trouvait presque en face de la montagne tombant dans la mer par un escalier de monts décroissants. On apercevait Lagens, la capitale de l’île, dominée par un imposant couvent de Franciscains, et entourée de chaumières éparses dont les toits coniques faits de roseaux entrelacés donnent l’illusion d’un camp.

La côte demeurait rude, mais la campagne peu à peu s’adoucissait. Les hauteurs dont est formée l’arête médiane de l’île s’abaissaient et se couvraient de magnifiques pâturages.

Vers dix heures et demie, on passa devant le bourg de Calhea. Une demi-heure plus tard, l’extrémité orientale de Pico était doublée et découvrait l’île Saint-Georges, au moment où la cloche sonnait le déjeuner.

Durant toute la matinée, Robert était demeuré enfermé dans sa chambre. Roger ne manqua pas de faire remarquer son absence à Mrs. Lindsay.

“Il pioche Tercère, lui dit-il en riant. Ah! c’est un bien singulier cicérone que nous avons là!”

Devant le regard interrogateur d’Alice, il fut plus explicite. Certes, son exclamation ne comportait aucun sous-entendu désagréable, au contraire. Mais, outre que les allures élégantes de M. Morgand contrastaient étrangement avec la modestie de ses fonctions, il était aussi, Roger s’en était assuré, d’une ignorance extraordinaire de tout ce qui concernait son apparent métier. En somme, ces observations ne faisaient que confirmer la remarque profonde qu’Alice avait déjà faite au sujet de l’interprète du *Seamew.*

“Enfin, conclut Roger, je suis absolument sûr de l’avoir rencontré autrefois quelque part. Où? Je ne sais. Mais j’arriverai bien à le savoir, et je saurai en même temps pourquoi ce garçon évidemment mondain a revêtu la peau d’un professeur.”

Le résultat de cette conversation fut d’exciter la curiosité d’Alice Lindsay. Aussi, quand Robert monta sur le pont après le déjeuner, lui adressa-t-elle la parole, s’amusant à vouloir le mettre en défaut.

Le *Seamew* s’avançait alors entre le Pic et Saint- Georges. Il longeait de près cette dernière île, sorte de digue de trente milles de long sur cinq seulement de large, jetée en cet endroit par un caprice de la nature.

“Quelle est cette ville?” demanda Alice à Robert, au moment où le *Seamew* passait devant une agglomération de maisons étagées.

Mais Robert savait désormais son guide sur le bout des ongles.

“Urzelina, répondit-il. C’est là qu’en 1808 eut lieu la dernière et la plus terrible éruption qui ait éprouvé ces parages. Elle terrorisa les habitants du Pic et de Fayal. Quinze cratères, dont un énorme, s’étaient ouverts. Pendant vingt-cinq jours ils vomirent la flamme et les laves. La ville eût été infailliblement détruite, si le fleuve de lave ne se fût miraculeusement détourné et n’eût pris son cours vers la mer.

-Et depuis?”

Cette question, ce fut Johnson qui la posa. Il faut croire que ce problème volcanique l’attirait en vertu d’affinités inconnues, car il était arrivé juste au moment voulu pour entendre le début de l’explication de Robert. Aussitôt, il avait interrompu sa promenade et prêté une oreille attentive. Robert se retourna vers lui.

“Depuis, dit-il, il n’y a plus eu d’éruption à proprement parler. Mais il n’y a guère d’années que l’île ne soit plus ou moins secouée. Saint-Georges est, au reste, d’une origine plus récente que les autres Açores, et elle est, avec la partie occidentale de Saint-Michel, la plus sujette à ce genre d’accidents.

-*All right*!” dit Johnson d’un air satisfait, en reprenant sa marche sans autre formalité.

Pourquoi était-il content? Parce que la réponse de Robert justifiait sa résolution de ne pas descendre à terre? Cet original paraissait s’en applaudir beaucoup. La vie ainsi comprise semblait tout à fait de son goût, et depuis le départ il n’avait en rien modifié ses habitudes. Le matin, à midi et le soir, on le voyait, pendant cinq minutes, passer et repasser sur le pont, coudoyant, bousculant, fumant, crachant, mâchonnant des mots inarticulés, puis on n’entendait plus parler de lui. Quant aux occupations qui absorbaient le reste de son temps, on les devinait aisément. Son teint plus rouge à midi qu’au matin, le soir qu’à midi, et se fonçant visiblement de jour en jour, donnait à cet égard des renseignements fort précis.

À deux heures de l’après-midi, le *Seamew* doubla la pointe Rosalès, en laquelle, vers le nord-ouest, s’effile l’extrémité de Saint-Georges, et se dirigea rapidement vers Gracieuse, au nord-ouest. Les passagers purent alors apercevoir la côte nord de Saint-Georges, bordée d’une effrayante falaise haute de six cents mètres, à mesure que s’affirmait le sommet modéré de Gracieuse. Vers quatre heures, le *Seamew* n’était plus qu’à trois milles de cette île qui contraste par la douceur de ses lignes avec les autres terres de l’archipel, quand, sur un signe du capitaine Pip, il évolua, et se dirigea rapidement vers Tercère, dont les hauts rivages se dessinaient à vingt-cinq milles de distance.

Ce fut à ce moment que Piperboom parut sur le pont, suivi de Thompson congestionné. Ce dernier fit un signe à Robert, qui, laissant aussitôt ses interlocuteurs, se rendit à l’appel de l’administrateur général.

“Est-il donc définitivement impossible, monsieur le professeur, lui dit celui-ci, en montrant le Hollandais considérable, entouré suivant l’usage d’un opaque nuage de fumée, de se faire entendre de ce pachyderme à vapeur?”

Robert fit un geste d’impuissance.

“Voilà qui est vexant! s’écria Thompson. Figurez- vous que ce gentleman refuse absolument de solder les suppléments par lui consommés.

-Quels suppléments? demanda Robert.

-Quels suppléments? Mais un âne assassiné, plus la journée de trois autres et de trois âniers supplémentaires, si le compte est bon.

-Et il refuse?

-Absolument. Je me suis tué à lui expliquer la chose de la voix et du geste. Autant parler à un caillou. Et voyez s'il a l'air ému!"

Piperboom, en effet, paisiblement étendu sur un rocking-chair, s'était égaré dans les doux nuages de la rêverie. Les yeux au ciel, tirant sur sa pipe avec la régularité d'un piston, il semblait avoir définitivement rejeté loin de lui les vulgaires soucis de ce monde. Robert compara avec un ironique sourire la mine irritée de Thompson et le placide visage de son voyageur.

"La fortune a de ces retours!" dit-il en ébauchant un geste vague, et Thompson, bon gré mal gré, dut se contenter de cette réponse.

À six heures et demie, le *Seamew* n'était plus qu'à quelques milles de la côte occidentale de Tercère. Depuis longtemps, on voyait nettement la cime de sa chaudière, dont la hauteur dépasse mille mètres. Vers le midi, la pente paraissait assez douce et glissait jusqu'à la mer, où la terre s'achevait en une falaise accore. Mais, de toutes parts, on discernait les signes d'un récent travail souterrain. Des coulées de lave se détachaient en sombre sur le vert des vallées, des cônes de cendres et de pierres ponces se dressaient, élévations fragiles que la pluie et le vent effritent lentement.

À sept heures, un promontoire escarpé, le mont Brazil, se découvrit, semblant barrer la route. Une demi-heure plus tard, ce cap sauvage doublé, la ville d'Angra se développa. Avant huit heures, les ancres touchaient le fond de la rade, et le capitaine Pip pouvait donner l'ordre: "En place" à M.

Bischop, qui laissa aussitôt tomber, sans les éteindre, les feux de sa machine.

Admirablement placés au centre de la rade d'Angra, les passagers du *Seamew* pouvaient contempler l'un des plus admirables panoramas dont la Terre maternelle réjouisse la vue de ses enfants. Derrière eux, la vaste mer, semée de quatre îlots: les Fadres et les Cabras; à droite et à gauche, de noires et menaçantes falaises, s'abaissant de part et d'autre, comme pour former une couche immense, où la ville d'Angra s'étendait harmonieusement. Flanquée de ses forts au nord et au sud, elle élevait en amphithéâtre, aux rayons mourants du jour, ses blanches maisons, ses clochers et ses dômes. Plus loin, servant de cadre au tableau, des collines émaillées de quintas, d'orangers et de vignes, se haussaient en un escalier de mollesse, jusqu'à la campagne verdoyante et féconde qui en couronnait les derniers sommets. L'air était doux, le temps superbe, une brise parfumée soufflait de la terre prochaine. Accoudés aux batayoles du spardeck, les passagers admirèrent ce spectacle, que ses moindres proportions rendent seules inférieur à celui qu'offre la baie de Naples, jusqu'au moment où tout disparut dans la nuit grandissante.

Insensible à la séduction de ce rivage, le capitaine Pip allait se retirer dans sa chambre, quand un matelot lui amena un étranger qui venait d'accoster.

“Capitaine, dit ce personnage, ayant appris votre arrivée sur la rade d'Angra, la pensée m'est venue de me joindre à vos passagers, si toutefois...

-Ces questions, monsieur, interrompit le capitaine, ne me regardent pas. Bistow, ajouta-t-il en s'adressant au matelot, conduisez ce gentleman à Mr. Thompson.”

Thompson, dans sa cabine, discutait avec Robert le programme du lendemain, quand l’étranger fut introduit.

“Tout à votre service, monsieur, répondit-il aux premières ouvertures du nouveau venu. Bien que les places dont nous disposons soient assez limitées, il nous est encore possible... Vous connaissez, je suppose, les conditions du voyage?

-Non, monsieur”, répondit l’arrivant.

Thompson réfléchit un instant. N’y avait-il pas lieu de déduire du prix total une certaine somme représentant le parcours déjà accompli? Il ne le pensa pas, sans doute, car il dit finalement, bien qu’avec un peu d’hésitation:

“Le prix, monsieur, a jusqu’ici été de quarante livres...

-Fort bien, dit l’étranger. Comme nous sommes trois...

-Ah! vous êtes trois?...

-Oui, mes deux frères et moi. Cela fait donc en tout cent vingt livres, que voici.”

Et, tirant de son portefeuille une liasse de bank-notes, il la déposa sur la table.

“Il n’y avait rien d’urgent, fit observer poliment Thompson, qui, ayant compté les billets, les encaissa, et se mit en devoir d’en libeller le reçu.

-Reçu de monsieur?... interrogea-t-il, la plume en suspens.

-Don Hygino Rodrigues da Veiga”, répondit l’étranger, tandis que Thompson faisait courir sa plume.

Robert, pendant ce temps, observait silencieusement ce touriste de la dernière heure. Bien que le personnage fût de haute mine, il ne lui revenait pas, comme on dit. Grand, fortes épaules, noir de barbe et de cheveux, la peau très montée de ton, il n’y avait pas, en tout cas, à se méprendre sur sa nationalité. Il était Portugais. Et cette hypothèse était encore confirmée par l’accent exotique avec lequel il parlait l’anglais.

Don Hygino, ayant pris son reçu des mains de Thompson, le plia soigneusement, l’inséra à la place des bank-notes, puis demeura un instant silencieux, comme indécis. Quelque chose sans doute restait à dire, quelque chose d’important, à en juger par la figure sérieuse du nouveau passager.

“Un mot encore, prononça-t-il enfin. Voudriez-vous me dire, monsieur, quand vous comptez quitter Tercère?

-Dès demain, répondit Thompson.

-Mais... à quelle heure?”

Don Hygino fit cette question d’une voix un peu nerveuse. Évidemment, il attachait à la réponse une importance particulière.

“Demain soir, vers dix heures”, répondit Thompson.

Don Hygino poussa un soupir de satisfaction. Il perdit sur-le-champ quelque chose de sa raideur.

“Vous avez probablement l’intention, reprit-il plus aimablement, de consacrer cette journée à visiter Angra?

-En effet.

-Je pourrai, dans ce cas, vous être de quelque secours. Je connais dans tous ses détails cette ville que j'habite depuis près d'un mois, et je me mets à votre disposition pour servir de cicérone à mes nouveaux compagnons."

Thompson remercia.

"J'accepte avec reconnaissance, répondit-il. D'autant plus que votre complaisance donnera un peu de repos à M. le professeur Morgand, que j'ai l'honneur de vous présenter."

Don Hygino et Robert échangèrent un salut.

"Je serai donc sur le quai demain matin à huit heures, et tout à votre disposition", dit le premier, en prenant congé et en regagnant son embarcation.

Don Hygino Rodrigues da Veiga fut exact au rendez- vous. En débarquant, le dimanche 21 mai, à la tête de ses passagers, Thompson le trouva sur le quai. Sous l'œil vigilant de son administrateur général, la colonne se mit aussitôt en marche dans un impeccable alignement.

Don Hygino fut d'un précieux secours. Il pilota ses compagnons à travers Angra avec une sûreté que n'eût pu avoir Robert. Il leur fit parcourir les rues de la ville, plus larges, plus régulières, mieux bâties, et plus nombreuses que celles de Horta. Il les conduisit dans les églises remplies à cette heure par la foule des fidèles.

Pendant tout ce temps, le baronnet ne le quitta pas d'une semelle.

Le baronnet, il faut le reconnaître, était bien seul depuis son embarquement sur le *Seamew.* Que Mr. Saunders lui apportât une certaine distraction, nul doute à cela. Mais ce n'était pas une relation sérieuse, quelqu'un de son monde enfin. Jusqu’ici, il lui avait bien fallu s’en contenter pourtant, la liste des passagers n’offrant rien de plus relevé. Lady Heilbuth peut-être?... Mais Lady Heilbuth ne s’occupait que de ses chats et de ses chiens. Ces animaux formaient sa seule famille. Uniquement, ils meublaient son esprit et remplissaient son cœur. Une fois initié aux mœurs particulières à Cesar, Job, Alexander, Black,

Phann, Punch, Foolich, etc. etc. le baronnet avait évité de recommencer son éducation à cet égard, et avait mis dès lors le plus grand soin à fuir la vieille passagère, qu’un irrespectueux Français eût sans hésitation qualifiée d’insupportable raseuse.

Au total, Sir Hamilton était donc véritablement seul.

En entendant les aristocratiques syllabes formant le nom du nouveau passager, il avait compris que le Ciel lui accordait un vrai gentleman, et il s’était fait présenter sur- le-champ par Thompson. Après quoi le noble Portugais avaient échangé un courtois shake-hand. À l’abandon, à la spontanéité qu’ils mirent à ce geste de bon accueil comme on vit bien qu’ils se sentaient tous deux en pays de connaissance!

À partir de cet instant, le baronnet s’était incrusté, incorporé au nouveau guide. Il avait enfin un ami! Au déjeuner qui eut lieu à bord et que partagea Don Hygino, il l’accapara, lui assigna une place près de lui. Don Hygino se laissa faire avec une hautaine indifférence.

La table était au complet, si on néglige le jeune ménage, dont l’absence aux escales commençait à devenir naturelle.

Thompson prit la parole.

“Je pense, dit-il, être l’interprète de toutes les personnes présentes, en remerciant Don Hygino da Veiga de la peine qu’il a bien voulu s’imposer ce matin.”

Don Hygino esquissa un geste de protestation polie.

“Si fait! si fait! insista Thompson. Sans vous, senor, nous n’aurions visité Angra, ni si vite, ni si bien. J’en suis à me demander ce qui nous reste à faire pour remplir cette après-midi.

-Cette après-midi! s’écria Don Hygino. Mais elle est tout employée. Ne savez-vous donc pas que c’est aujourd’hui la Pentecôte?

-La Pentecôte? répéta Thompson.

-Oui, reprit Don Hygino, une des plus grandes fêtes catholiques, et qui est célébrée ici d’une manière particulièrement solennelle. Je vous ai fait réserver une place d’où vous verrez parfaitement la procession qui est fort belle, et dans laquelle figure un crucifix que je vous recommande.

-Qu’a-t-il donc de si particulier, ce crucifix, mon cher Hygino? demanda le baronnet.

-Sa richesse, répondit Hygino. Il n’a pas, à vrai dire, un grand intérêt artistique, mais la valeur des pierres précieuses dont il est littéralement couvert dépasse, à ce qu’on dit, dix mille contos de réis! (six millions de francs).”

Thompson était enchanté de sa nouvelle recrue. Quant à Sir Hamilton, il faisait outrageusement la roue.

Don Hygino tint ses promesses avec exactitude.

En quittant le *Seamew,* il crut toutefois faire une recommandation dont plus d’une passagère fut effarouchée.

“Mes chers compagnons, dit-il, un bon conseil avant de nous mettre en route.

-C’est... suggéra Thompson.

-C’est d’éviter la foule autant que possible.

-Ce ne sera pas facile, fit observer Thompson, en montrant les rues noires de monde.

-Je le reconnais, acquiesça Don Hygino. Faites du moins ce que vous pourrez pour éviter les contacts.

-Mais pourquoi cette recommandation? demanda Hamilton.

-Mon Dieu, mon cher baronnet, la raison n’en est pas commode à dire. C’est que... les habitants de cette île ne sont pas très propres, et qu’ils sont extrêmement sujets à deux maladies dont le résultat commun est de procurer d’insupportables démangeaisons. L’une de ces maladies a un nom déjà fort laid, puisqu’il s’agit de la gale. Quant à l’autre, par exemple!...”

Don Hygino s’était arrêté, comme incapable de trouver une périphrase convenable. Mais Thompson qu’aucune difficulté n’effrayait vint à son aide. Appelant la pantomime à son secours, il retira son chapeau, et se frotta énergiquement la tête, en regardant Don Hygino d’un air interrogateur.

“Précisément!” dit celui-ci en riant, tandis que les dames détournaient la tête, scandalisées par cette chose réellement “shoking”.

À la suite de Don Hygino, on traversa des rues détournées, on suivit des ruelles presque désertes, la foule s'étant portée dans les grandes voies que devait parcourir la procession. Quelques hommes se montraient cependant dans ces ruelles. Dépenaillés, l'air sordide et sinistre, ils justifiaient amplement la remarque que plus d'un touriste fit à leur endroit.

“Quelles têtes de brigands! dit Alice.

-En effet! approuva Thompson. Savez-vous quels sont ces gens? demanda-t-il à Don Hygino.

-Pas plus que vous.

-Ne seraient-ce pas des agents de police déguisés? insinua Thompson.

- Il faut avouer que le déguisement serait réussi!” s'écria railleusement Dolly.

Bientôt, d'ailleurs, on arrivait. Tout à coup, la colonne déboucha sur une vaste place où grouillait le populaire sous un éclatant soleil. Le seigneur portugais, grâce à une manœuvre habile, parvint à conduire ses compagnons jusqu'à une petite éminence, au pied d'un bâtiment de vastes proportions. Là, gardé par quelques agents, un espace vide avait été ménagé et mis à l'abri de la foule.

“Voici votre place, mesdames et messieurs, dit Hygino. J'ai profité de mes relations avec le gouverneur de Tercère, pour vous faire réserver cet endroit au pied de son palais.”

On se confondit en remerciements. “Maintenant, reprit-il, vous me permettrez de vous quitter. Avant mon départ, il me reste quelques préparatifs à faire. D'ailleurs vous n'avez plus besoin de moi. Gardés par ces braves agents, vous êtes merveilleusement placés pour tout voir, et je pense que vous allez assister à un spectacle curieux.”

Ces mots à peine prononcés, Don Hygino salua gracieusement et se perdit dans la foule. Il ne craignait évidemment pas la contagion. Les touristes ne tardèrent pas à l’oublier. La procession arrivait, déroulant ses magnificences.

Vers le haut de la rue, dans le large espace que la police déblayait devant le cortège, des bannières d’or et de soie, des statues portées sur les épaules, des oriflammes, des couronnes, des dais, s’avançaient dans la fumée odorante de l’encens. Des uniformes brillaient au soleil au milieu des blanches robes de jeunes filles. Et les voix s’élevaient soutenues par des orchestres de cuivres, lançant vers le ciel la prière de dix mille créatures, tandis que, de toutes les églises, tombait en nappes sonores la clameur des cloches, chantant elles aussi la gloire du Seigneur.

Tout à coup, un souffle passa sur la foule. Un même cri sortit de toutes les bouches:

“Ô Christo! Ô Christo!”

Le spectacle était solennel. Sa robe violette tranchant sur les ors éclatants de son dais, l’évêque apparaissait à son tour. Lentement il marchait, élevant de ses deux mains le vénérable et pompeux ostensoir. Et, en effet, devant lui, un crucifix, dont les pierreries brisaient en éclairs innombrables les rayons du soleil, était porté, éblouissant, au-dessus de la foule à cette heure prosternée.

Mais soudain un mouvement insolite parut troubler la procession dans l’entourage immédiat de l’évêque. Sans savoir de quoi il s’agissait, emportée par une curiosité subite, la foule se releva d'un seul mouvement.

Au reste, personne ne vit rien. Les Anglais eux-mêmes, bien qu'admirablement placés, ne purent rien comprendre à ce qui se passait. Un remous colossal, le dais roulant et tanguant comme un vaisseau, puis disparaissant en même temps que l'opulent crucifix dans la foule comme dans la mer, ensuite des cris, des hurlements plutôt, tout un peuple affolé s'enfuyant, l'escouade de police placée en tête du cortège s'efforçant vainement de remonter l'irrésistible flot des fuyards, voilà tout ce qu'ils virent sans pouvoir en discerner la cause.

En un instant le cordon d'agents qui les protégeait fut rompu, et, devenus partie intégrante de la foule en délire, ils furent emportés comme des brins de paille dans ce formidable torrent.

Arc-boutés les uns aux autres, Roger, Jack et Robert avaient réussi à protéger Alice et Dolly. Une encoignure les avait heureusement servis.

Tout d'un coup, l'étonnant phénomène prit fin. Subitement, sans transition, la place se trouva vide et silencieuse.

Vers le haut de la rue, à l'endroit où, dans un furieux remous, avaient disparu le dais de l'évêque et le crucifix, un groupe s'agitait encore, composé en grande partie des agents placés précédemment en tête du cortège, et qui, selon l'usage, étaient arrivés trop tard. Ils se baissaient, se relevaient, transportant dans les maisons riveraines les victimes de cette inexplicable panique.

“Tout danger me paraît conjuré, dit Robert au bout d’un instant. Je crois que nous ferions bien de nous mettre à la recherche de nos compagnons.

-Où? objecta Jack.

-À bord du *Seamew*, dans tous les cas. Ces affaires, après tout, ne sont pas les nôtres, et j’estime que nous serons, quoi qu’il arrive, plus en sûreté sous la protection du pavillon anglais.”

On reconnut la justesse de cette observation. On se hâta donc de regagner le quai, puis le bord, où la plupart des passagers étaient réunis, et discutaient avec animation les péripéties de cette étonnante aventure. Plusieurs se répandaient en plaintes acrimonieuses. Certains parlaient même de réclamer une confortable indemnité au cabinet de Lisbonne, et parmi ceux-ci Sir Hamilton figurait en assez bon rang, cela va sans dire.

“C’est une honte! une honte! déclarait-il sur tous les tons. Mais aussi, des Portugais!... Si l’Angleterre voulait

m’en croire, elle “civiliserait “ces Açores, et l’on verrait enfin finir de pareils scandales!”

Saunders, lui, ne disait rien, mais son visage parlait éloquemment. Vraiment, dans le cas où il eût souhaité à Thompson des incidents désagréables, il n’aurait pu imaginer mieux. C’en était un, et de premier choix. Selon toutes probabilités, une dizaine de passagers au moins allaient manquer à l’appel, et, après un tel drame, c’était la dislocation de la caravane et une piteuse rentrée en Angleterre. L’arrivée des premiers survivants n’altéra pas le contentement de cette charmante nature. Il n’avait pu raisonnablement espérer que la caravane tout entière eût péri dans le désastre. Par exemple, son front se rembrunit quand on vit les derniers passagers rallier le bord de minute en minute. Il estima que cela devenait une véritable plaisanterie.

Au dîner, Thompson fit l’appel, et reconnut que deux personnes seulement manquaient. Mais presque aussitôt ces deux retardataires descendirent dans le salon, sous la forme des deux jeunes mariés, et Saunders, constatant que le personnel du *Seamew* était au complet, reprit incontinent son habituelle face de dogue peu conciliant. Le jeune couple avait son ordinaire apparence, c’est-à-dire qu’il manifestait pour le reste de l’univers une indifférence aussi amusante qu’absolue. Évidemment, ni le mari, ni la femme, ne se doutaient des graves événements qui s’étaient déroulés au cours de cette journée. Assis côte à côte, ils limitaient comme toujours à eux-mêmes une causerie à laquelle la langue avait moins de part que les yeux, et la conversation générale se croisait autour d’eux sans les atteindre.

Quelqu’un de presque aussi heureux que cet attendrissant petit ménage, c’était maître Johnson. Il s’était distingué ce jour-là. Un effort de plus, et il arrivait à une parfaite ébriété. Autant que son état lui permettait de comprendre les propos échangés autour de lui, il s’applaudissait de son obstination à ne pas mettre le pied dans l’archipel des Açores, et planait, en joie, dans le ciel vallonné de l’alcool.

Tigg était la quatrième personne parfaitement heureuse de la nombreuse assemblée. Quand il avait été, comme tous les autres, emporté par la foule furieuse, ses deux gardes du corps avaient éprouvé un instant de cruelle angoisse. Quelle occasion meilleure d’en finir avec la vie pouvait s’offrir à cette âme éprise à la fois de mort et d’originalité? Au prix d’un héroïque effort, Bess et Mary étaient parvenues à garder Tigg entre elles, et l’avaient protégé avec un dévouement que l’aigreur de leurs angles rendit efficaces.

Tigg était donc sorti indemne de cette bagarre, et, à part lui, il estimait que ses compagnons en exagéraient beaucoup l’importance.

Hélas! il n’en était pas ainsi de la malheureuse Bess et de l’infortunée Mary. Couvertes de horions, le corps illustré de “bleus”, elles avaient de bonnes raisons pour ne jamais oublier la fête de la Pentecôte à Tercère.

Également, bien qu’autrement malchanceux, leur père, le respectable Blockhead, dut dîner tout seul dans sa cabine. Il n’était pas blessé pourtant. Mais, dès le début du repas, Thompson, ayant remarqué chez son passager des signes d’inquiétantes démangeaisons, avait cru prudent, dans le doute, de lui suggérer un isolement protecteur. Blockhead s’était soumis à ce désagrément de la meilleure grâce du monde. Il ne paraissait même pas fâché de la distinction particulière dont le sort le gratifiait.

“Il paraît que j’ai attrapé une maladie du pays, dit-il à ses filles avec importance en se grattant de plus belle. Il n’y a que moi qui aie eu ça!”

Don Hygino revint à bord comme Mr. Sandweach servait le rôti. Il amenait avec lui ses deux frères.

On ne pouvait douter que don Hygino et ses deux compagnons eussent eu les mêmes parents, puisqu’il l’avait positivement déclaré. Mais on n’eût certainement pas deviné cette parenté. Impossible de se moins ressembler. Autant don Hygino portait dans toute sa personne la signature de la race, autant ses frères étaient d’aspect vulgaire et commun. L’un, grand et fort, l’autre, trapu, épais et carré, ils n’eussent point été déplacés, à en juger sur l’apparence, dans une baraque de lutteurs.

Circonstance singulière, tous deux semblaient s’être récemment blessés. La main gauche du plus grand était enveloppée de linges, tandis qu’une assez notable estafilade, dont une bande de sparadrap rejoignait les bords, sillonnait la joue droite du plus petit.

“Permettez-moi, monsieur, dit don Hygino à Thompson en désignant ses deux compagnons, à commencer par le plus grand, de vous présenter mes deux frères, don Jacopo et don Christopho.

-Ces messieurs sont les bienvenus à bord du *Seamew,* répondit Thompson... Je vois avec regret, reprit-il quand Jacopo et Christopho eurent pris place à table, que ces messieurs ont été blessés...

-Une chute malheureuse dans une vitre d’escalier pendant les allées et venues du départ, interrompit don Hygino.

-Ah! fit Thompson. Vous répondez d’avance à ma question. J’allais vous demander si ces messieurs avaient été ainsi malmenés au cours de la terrible bagarre de cette après-midi.”

Robert, qui regardait machinalement Jacopo et Christopho, crut les voir tressaillir. Mais il s’était évidemment trompé, et les deux frères ne savaient rien du drame incompréhensible auquel il venait d’être fait allusion, car don Hygino répondit sur-le-champ avec l’accent de la surprise la plus sincère:

“De quelle bagarre voulez-vous parler? Vous serait-il arrivé quelque chose?”

Ce furent des exclamations. Comment ces messieurs da Veiga pouvaient-ils ignorer une aventure qui avait dû mettre la ville en révolution!

“Mon Dieu, c’est fort simple, répondit don Hygino. De toute la journée, nous n’avons pas quitté notre maison. Au reste, il est probable que vous exagérez involontairement quelque rixe sans importance.”

On protesta, et Thompson fit à Hygino le récit des événements de l’après-midi. Celui-ci se déclara extrêmement surpris.

“Je ne puis m’expliquer, dit-il, comment la pieuse population de cette île a osé se conduire ainsi au cours d’une procession. Laissons à l’avenir le soin de nous donner le mot de cette énigme! Car vous partez toujours ce soir? ajouta-t-il en se tournant vers Thompson.

-Toujours”, répondit celui-ci.

Le mot n’était pas terminé, que le bruit d’un coup de canon faisait trembler sourdement les vitres du salon. Peu entendirent et nul ne remarqua cette détonation effacée comme un écho.

“Vous sentez-vous indisposé, cher ami? demanda le baronnet à don Hygino qui avait subitement pâli.

-Un peu de fièvre gagnée à La Praya. Cette ville est décidément très malsaine”, répondit le Portugais dont le visage se recolorait.

La voix du capitaine Pip tomba du pont.

“À virer au guindeau, les garçons!”

Presque aussitôt, on entendit le bruit sec et régulier du cliquet tombant sur le fer de l’engrenage. Les passagers montèrent sur le spardeck pour assister à l’appareillage.

Le ciel s’était couvert pendant le dîner. Dans la nuit d’un noir d’encre, on ne voyait rien que les lumières d’Angra, d’où venaient de confuses rumeurs.

La voix de Mr. Flyship s’éleva sur l’avant.

“À pic, commandant.

-Tiens bon!” répondit le capitaine de la passerelle.

Sur son ordre, la vapeur fusa dans les cylindres, la

machine fut balancée, l’hélice battit l’eau quelques secondes.

“Veuillez déraper, s’il vous plaît, Mr. Flyship”, commanda le capitaine.

Le cliquet du guindeau fit de nouveau entendre sa chute régulière, et l’ancre allait quitter le fond, quand une voix héla dans la nuit à deux encablures du *Seamew.*

“Oh! du vapeur.

-Oh! répondit le capitaine, qui ajouta en se retournant vers l’avant. Tiens bon, Mr. Flyship, s’il vous plaît!”

Une embarcation à deux avirons sortit de l’ombre et accosta par bâbord.

“Je voudrais parler au capitaine”, dit en portugais un individu que la nuit empêchait d’apercevoir distinctement.

Robert traduisit la demande.

“Me voici, dit le capitaine Pip en descendant de la passerelle et allant s’accouder sur le plat-bord.

-Cette personne, commandant, traduisit encore Robert, demande qu’on lui envoie l’échelle pour monter à bord.”

On fit droit à cette requête, et bientôt sauta sur le pont un homme dont tous purent reconnaître l'uniforme, pour l'avoir vu cette après-midi sur le dos de leurs gardes inutiles. À en juger par les galons qui brillaient sur sa manche, ce policier était d'un grade élevé. Entre le capitaine et lui, la conversation s'établit aussitôt par l'intermédiaire de Robert.

"C'est au capitaine du *Seamew* que j'ai l'honneur de parler?

-À lui-même.

-Arrivé hier soir?

-Hier soir.

-Il m'a semblé que vous faisiez vos préparatifs d'appareillage?

-En effet!

-Vous n'avez donc pas entendu le coup de canon?"

Le capitaine Pip se retourna vers Artimon.

"Avez-vous entendu un coup de canon, master? Je ne vois pas en quoi ce coup de canon peut nous intéresser, monsieur.

-Le capitaine demande, traduisit librement Robert, quel rapport a ce coup de canon avec notre départ."

L'inspecteur parut étonné.

"Ignorez-vous donc que le port est fermé, et qu'embargo est mis sur tous les navires en rade? Voici l'ordre du gouverneur, répondit-il en dépliant un papier sous les yeux de Robert.

-Bon! dit philosophiquement le capitaine Pip, si le port est fermé, on ne partira pas. Laisse filer la chaîne, Mr. Flyship! cria-t-il vers l’avant.

-Pardon! pardon! Un instant! fit Thompson en s’avançant. Il y a peut-être moyen de s’entendre. Monsieur le professeur, voulez-vous demander à Monsieur pourquoi le port est fermé?”

Mais le représentant de l’autorité ne répondit pas à Robert. Le laissant là sans plus de façon, il se dirigea tout à coup vers l’un des passagers.

“Je ne me trompe pas! s’écria-t-il. Don Hygino à bord du *Seamew*!

-Comme vous voyez, répondit celui-ci.

-Vous nous quittez donc?

-Oh! avec espoir de retour!”

Un colloque animé s’engagea entre les deux Portugais. Don Hygino en traduisit bientôt l’essentiel à ses compagnons.

Au cours de la bagarre de l’après-midi, des malfaiteurs encore inconnus avaient profité du désordre causé par leur agression pour s’emparer du fameux crucifix. Dans une ruelle écartée, on avait seulement retrouvé le bois de la monture, veuve de ses pierreries, d’une valeur totale de six millions de francs. Le gouverneur avait en conséquence mis embargo sur tous les navires, jusqu’au moment où la bande des voleurs sacrilèges serait sous les verrous.

“Et cela peut durer?” interrogea Thompson.

L’inspecteur fit un geste vague, auquel Thompson répondit par une moue de désappointement. Cent quatre personnes à nourrir au total, cela rend onéreux les jours de retard!

À son instigation, Robert insista vainement. L’ordre du gouverneur était là, formel et décisif.

Mais, si furieux que fût Thompson, Saunders l’était plus encore. Un nouvel accroc au programme! cela le jetait hors de lui.

“De quel droit nous retiendrait-on ici? prononça-t-il énergiquement. Sous le pavillon qui nous couvre, nous n’avons pas d’ordre à recevoir des Portugais, je suppose!

-Parfaitement, approuva le baronnet. Et après tout, quel besoin avons-nous d’obéir à ce policeman? Il n’a pas la prétention, je pense, d’arrêter à lui seul un navire portant soixante-six passagers, plus l’état-major et l’équipage!”

Thompson du doigt montra les forts dont les masses sombres se profilaient dans la nuit, et cette réponse muette parut sans doute éloquente au baronnet, car il ne trouva rien à répliquer. Fort heureusement, un secours inattendu allait lui arriver.

“Sont-ce les forts qui vous retiennent? insinua Don Hygino à l’oreille de Thompson. Ils ne sont guère dangereux. De la poudre et des pièces, ils en ont certainement. Pour des projectiles, c’est autre chose!

-Ils n’auraient pas de boulets? dit Thompson avec incrédulité.

-Il leur en reste peut-être quelques-uns qui traînent, affirma Don Hygino à voix basse. Mais, quant à en avoir un seul qui entre dans les pièces!... Pas plus qu’aucun autre fort de l’archipel!

-Comment! mon cher Hygino, s’écria le baronnet étonné, vous, un Portugais, vous êtes notre allié dans cette circonstance!

-En ce moment, je ne suis qu’un voyageur pressé”, répondit un peu sèchement Don Hygino.

Thompson était indécis. Il hésitait. Risquer une telle aventure, c’était une bien grosse partie. D’autre part, n’était-il pas vexant de voir le voyage interrompu, au mécontentement général des passagers et au grand dommage de l’agence? Un grincement de Saunders, un ricanement d’Hamilton, une nouvelle affirmation de Don Hygino achevèrent de le décider à l’audace. Il appela le capitaine Pip.

“Captain, lui dit-il, le navire est retenu, vous le savez, par ordre de l’autorité portugaise.”

Le capitaine adhéra de la tête à cette proposition.

“Si... pourtant... moi... Thompson, je vous ordonnais de partir, le feriez-vous?

-À l’instant, monsieur.

-Vous êtes cependant sous les feux des forts d’Angra, vous ne l’ignorez pas.”

Le capitaine Pip regarda le ciel, puis la mer, puis Don Hygino, et finalement se pinça le nez d’un air de souverain mépris. Il eût parlé, qu’il n’eût pas indiqué plus clairement qu’avec cette mer calme, cette nuit obscure, il se souciait comme un poisson d’une pomme des boulets envoyés par des canonniers portugais.

“Dans ce cas, monsieur, reprit Thompson, je vous donne cet ordre de partir.

-Puisqu’il en est ainsi, répondit le capitaine avec le plus grand calme, ne pourriez-vous emmener dans le salon seulement cinq minutes ce particulier à face de carême?”

Obtempérant à un désir formulé en termes si énergiques, Thompson insista auprès de l’inspecteur pour lui faire accepter un rafraîchissement.

À peine avait-il disparu avec son hôte, le capitaine remit l’équipage au guindeau. On prit uniquement la précaution de relever le cliquet, afin d’en éviter le bruit révélateur. En quelques minutes, l’ancre fut dérapée, caponnée, traversée, le tout dans le plus grand silence. L’équipage apportait au travail un zèle énorme.

Dès que l’ancre eut quitté le fond, le navire commença à dériver. La différence de position, par rapport aux lumières de la ville, était déjà devenue sensible, quand l’inspecteur remonta sur le pont, en compagnie de Thompson.

“Commandant, s’il vous plaît? cria-t-il du pont au capitaine à son poste sur la passerelle.

-Plaît-il, monsieur? répondit gracieusement celui-ci en se penchant sur le garde-fou.

-Monsieur l’inspecteur, dit Robert traduisant l’observation qui lui était faite, pense que votre ancre chasse, commandant.”

Le capitaine regarda autour de lui d’un air incrédule.

“Croit-il?” dit-il bonnement.

L’inspecteur savait son métier. D’un regard, il parcourut l’équipage silencieux, et, sur-le-champ, il comprit. Sortant alors de sa poche un long sifflet, il en tira un son perçant bizarrement modulé, qui, dans le calme de la nuit, devait porter fort loin. Il fut bientôt évident qu’il en avait été ainsi. Des lumières coururent sur le parapet des forts.

Angra est défendue par deux forts: le “Morro do Brazil” au midi; le fort “Saint-Jean-Baptiste” au nord. C’est vers le second que le courant drossait doucement le *Seamew,* l’étrave en avant, quand le coup de sifflet vint donner l’éveil.

“Monsieur, déclara froidement le capitaine, un second coup de sifflet, et je vous fais jeter par-dessus bord.”

L’inspecteur comprit au son de la voix que le jeu devenait sérieux, et, la menace lui ayant été fidèlement traduite, il se le tint pour dit.

Depuis qu’on s’était remis au guindeau, la cheminée du *Seamew* vomissait des torrents de fumée et même des flammes. Ceci entrait dans les plans du capitaine, qui se faisait ainsi une réserve de vapeur qu’il pourrait utiliser plus tard. Et, en effet, déjà les soupapes, bien que surchargées, fusaient avec bruit, tandis que décroissait le panache lumineux de la cheminée. Bientôt il disparut tout à fait.

À ce moment deux coups de canon éclatèrent simultanément, et deux projectiles venus de chacun des deux forts ricochèrent à cinq cents mètres de chaque bord. C’était un avertissement.

Devant cet incident inattendu, Thompson pâlit. Qu’avait donc raconté Don Hygino?

“Arrêtez! captain, arrêtez!” cria-t-il d’une voix éperdue.

Et nul ne s’étonnera si plus d’un passager se joignit à cette prière. Toutefois, il y en eut un au moins qui garda un silence héroïque. Et celui-là, ce fut l’estimable épicier honoraire. Il était ému, certes! Il tremblait même, il faut avoir la franchise de l’avouer. Mais pour rien au monde il n’eût cependant renoncé à la joie d’assister à la première bataille de sa vie. Songez donc! il n’avait jamais vu ça!

Roger de Sorgues, lui non plus, n’eût pas donné sa place pour un empire. Par une bizarre association d’idées, ces coups de canon évoquaient pour lui le vaudevillesque déjeuner de Fayal, et il s’amusait étrangement.

“Bombardés, maintenant! songeait-il en se tenant les côtes. C’est un comble, ça!”

À la voix de Thompson, le capitaine s’était redressé sur son banc de quart.

“J’aurai le regret, monsieur, de vous désobéir pour cette fois, dit-il d’une voix hautaine qu’on ne lui connaissait pas. Ayant appareillé sur l’ordre de mon armateur, je suis désormais le seul maître à mon bord. Je conduirai ce navire au large, s’il plaît à Dieu. Par la barbe de ma mère, un capitaine anglais ne reculera pas.”

De sa vie, le brave capitaine n’avait fait si long discours.

Conformément à ses instructions, le navire prit une allure modérée. Manœuvre de nature à surprendre, il ne s’élançait pas vers la mer. Formant, grâce à ses lumières, que le capitaine, au grand étonnement de tous, ne commandait pas d’éteindre, un but bien défini et facile à frapper, il se dirigeait vers le fort “Saint-Jean-Baptiste” en droite ligne.

Au reste, il fut bientôt évident que la ruse avait réussi. Rassurés sans doute par la direction suivie, les forts avaient cessé leur feu.

“La barre à bâbord toute!” commanda soudain le capitaine.

Et le *Seamew*, toujours illuminé, mit à toute vapeur le cap au large.

Aussitôt, trois coups de canon éclatèrent successivement, et pareillement inoffensifs. L’un des projectiles, lancés par le fort “Saint-Jean-Baptiste”, passa en sifflant au-dessus de la pomme des mâts. Le capitaine se pinça joyeusement le nez. Sa manoeuvre avait réussi. Ce fort était déjà réduit à l’impuissance, et, contre ses coups, la terre protégeait désormais le navire. Quant aux deux autres projectiles, envoyés par le “Morro do Brazil”, le premier tomba à l’arrière du *Seamew*, et le second, le capitaine ayant stoppé sur place, égratigna la mer à deux encablures de l’étrave.

À peine ce cinquième coup de canon avait-il été tiré, que, sur l’ordre du capitaine, toute lumière, y compris les feux de position, s’éteignit subitement à bord du *Seamew*. Des prélarts recouvrirent le capot de la machine. En même temps, sous l’impulsion du timonier, le navire pivota sur lui-même, et revint vers la terre à toute vapeur.

Il contourna ainsi la rade, à la limite où venaient mourir les lumières de la ville. Noir dans la nuit noire, il devait passer, et passa inaperçu.

La rade traversée dans toute sa largeur, le *Seamew* côtoya avec une extrême audace les rochers du “Morro do Brazil”. À cet endroit, un nouveau coup de sifflet eût été fatal. Mais, dès le début de l’action, le capitaine avait prudemment fait descendre l’inspecteur dans une cabine où il était gardé à vue avec les deux hommes de son canot.

Au reste, il semblait bien que tout danger fût écarté. Devenu maintenant à son insu le seul dangereux, le fort “Saint-Jean-Baptiste” ne tirait pas, tandis que le “Morro do Brazil” persistait à bombarder le vide dans la direction de son partenaire.

Le *Seamew* longea rapidement le rivage, confondu avec les roches sombres. Parvenu à l’extrémité de la pointe, il la contourna, et prit le large, droit au sud, tandis que les deux forts, se décidant à recommencer leur inutile duo, envoyaient dans l’est leurs boulets superflus.

Quand il fut à trois milles au large, le capitaine Pip se donna le plaisir d’illuminer brillamment le bord. Il fit ensuite remonter l’inspecteur, et l’invita à retourner dans son embarcation. Poliment, il l’escorta jusqu’à la coupée, puis, penché sur la lisse, la casquette à la main:

“Vous voyez, monsieur, crut-il devoir faire observer, bien que le malheureux inspecteur, ne sachant pas un traître mot d’anglais, fût hors d’état d’apprécier la finesse de la remarque, comment un marin anglais joue à cache- cache avec des boulets portugais? C’est ce que j’appelle une péripétie. J’ai bien l’honneur de vous saluer, monsieur.”

Cela dit, le capitaine coupa avec son propre couteau la bosse de l’embarcation qui dansa dans le sillage, remonta au banc de quart, donna la route au sud-est, puis, contemplant la mer, le ciel et enfin Tercère, dont la masse noire disparaissait dans la nuit, il cracha dans la mer, orgueilleusement.

CHAPITRE IX

UN POINT DE DROIT

Le 22, le *Seamew* mouilla de bon matin devant Ponta- Delgada, capitale de Saint-Michel, sa dernière escale aux Açores. Grande de sept cent soixante-dix kilomètres carrés, comptant près de cent vingt-sept mille habitants, cette île est la plus importante de l’archipel, et sa capitale, avec ses dix-sept mille âmes, est la quatrième ville du royaume de Portugal. Protégée à l’est et à l’ouest par deux caps: la Ponta-Delgada, qui lui donne son nom, et la Ponta-Galé, une digue de huit cent cinquante mètres de long achève de rendre très sûre sa rade fermée, suffisante pour cent navires.

C’est entre cette digue et le rivage que le *Seamew* avait mouillé, au milieu d’un grand nombre d’autres bâtiments à voiles et à vapeur. Au nord, Ponta-Delgada s’élevait en terrasses, séduisante par ses maisons très blanches symétriquement disposées. De tous côtés, elles rayonnent, s’égrenant peu à peu dans un océan de jardins superbes, qui font à la ville une verdoyante auréole.

La plupart des passagers s’étant trop attardés dans leurs couchettes, la descente à terre fut remise à l’après-midi. Trois jours pleins étant consacrés à l’île de Saint-Michel, et quatre ou cinq heures devant largement suffire à parcourir Ponta-Delgada, il n’y avait pas lieu de se presser.

Cependant, ce n’est pas sans orages que cette décision put être adoptée. Certains manifestèrent un mécontentement très vif. Saunders et Hamilton furent parmi les plus grincheux, cela va de soi. Encore un accroc au programme! Cela devenait intolérable! Ils allèrent porter leurs doléances à l’Administration. L’Administration répondit que ces messieurs étaient libres de descendre à terre, si le cœur leur en disait. Saunders répliqua qu’on devait y descendre tous, avec administrateur et interprète, et, ce, aux frais de l’agence. Thompson lui conseilla alors de persuader ses compagnons, et l’entrevue prit fin sur un ton assez aigre.

En résumé, deux passagers seulement débarquèrent dans la matinée: le sauvage jeune couple qui voyageait à sa manière. Thompson se tint pour assuré de ne les revoir qu’à l’heure même du départ.

Quant à Saunders et Hamilton, ils durent ronger leur frein. Avec quatre ou cinq de leurs compagnons presque aussi désagréables qu’eux-mêmes, ils occupèrent leurs loisirs par un échange d’aimables propos.

Ce groupe d’opposants n’était pas bien nombreux. Il existait pourtant, et Thompson fut obligé de constater que ses bourreaux faisaient des prosélytes. Pour la première fois, une scission légère, mais réelle, séparait les hôtes du *Seamew* en deux camps heureusement très inégaux. Le motif en était futile, mais il semblait que tous les désagréments précédents revinssent à la mémoire et fissent masse pour grossir hors de raison l’incident actuel.

Thompson s’en remit au temps.

Après le déjeuner, en effet, quand les embarcations eurent déposé tout le monde, sauf l’irréconciliable Johnson et le pestiféré Blockhead, sur le quai de Ponta- Delgada, toute mésintelligence parut oubliée, et l’on procéda, sous la conduite de Robert, à la visite de la ville, en rangs dont la régularité annonçait la concorde.

On visita ainsi les églises et les couvents que renferme Ponta-Delgada, et, sous l’obsession des cloches éternellement agitées, on parcourut jusqu’au soir ses rues étroites et sales.

Quelle déception! Les maisons, si blanches de loin, apparaissaient de près lourdes et massives. Sur la chaussée, des porcs, énormes pour la plupart, au milieu desquels il fallait se frayer un passage, se promenaient avec désinvolture. Et cette ceinture de verdoyants jardins? De hautes murailles les mettaient à l’abri du regard. À peine si, au-dessus de la crête des murs, on apercevait de loin en loin la cime d’un de ces rosiers blancs ou de ces camélias, qui, à Saint-Michel, atteignent communément la taille d’un grand arbre.

Cette rébarbative promenade rembrunissait les touristes à vue d’œil. L’annonce du retour fut bien accueillie.

La colonne, en redescendant la pente, ne s’avançait plus dans l’ordre admirable qu’elle avait jusque-là respecté. Sans doute, trop grand était leur respect de la discipline, pour que ces calmes Anglais osassent la braver ouvertement du premier coup. Mais une évidente lassitude se faisait sentir. Des intervalles séparaient les rangs, dont les uns s’étaient illégalement augmentés au détriment des autres. Il y avait des traînards. Thompson constatait et soupirait.

En arrivant au bord de l’eau, les touristes eurent un choc de surprise. Sur le quai, grouillait une foule nombreuse, d’où sortaient des clameurs irritées. Des poings s’élevaient en des gestes de menace. Deux partis étaient évidemment en présence, échangeant de préalables injures, prêts à les transformer en horions. L’émeute de Tercère allait-elle recommencer?

Thompson, et derrière lui tous les passagers, s’était arrêté indécis. Impossible de parvenir aux canots du bord, à travers la foule qui en interdisait l’accès. Restaient les embarcations du pays, et certes il n’en manquait pas dans le port, mais, ce qui manquait, c’étaient les mariniers. Autour des touristes, pas une âme. Toute vie s’était concentrée en face du *Seamew,* à l’endroit où la foule houleuse semblait sur le point de vider une querelle inconnue.

Tout à coup, Thompson poussa un cri. Six embarcations s’étaient détachées du quai, et, accompagnées par les hurlements de la foule, elles s’éloignaient à force de rames, en deux groupes distincts; trois paraissant appuyer la chasse aux autres. En tout cas, elles se dirigeaient certainement vers le *Seamew,* et, après l’expérience faite à Tercère de la violence açorienne, on devait trembler sérieusement pour le navire. Au comble de l’agitation, Thompson se promenait de long en large sur le quai.

Il prit soudain son parti. Halant sur la bosse d’un des canots les plus proches, il embarqua résolument, entraînant avec lui Robert, qu’accompagnèrent Roger et les Lindsay. En un instant, la bosse fut larguée, l’ancre ramenée, et, sous l’impulsion des quatre nageurs, le canot se dirigea rapidement vers le navire menacé.

Électrisés par cet exemple, les autres passagers se hâtèrent de l’imiter. Des embarcations se remplirent, les hommes saisirent les rames familières à la plupart des Anglais, et cinq minutes plus tard une escadre en miniature troublait les eaux du port du choc de ses avirons.

Thompson, en accostant le *Seamew,* fut en partie rassuré. Les six canots suspects appartenaient en effet à deux camps opposés, et leur antagonisme apportait aux assiégés un secours inespéré. Chaque fois que l’un d’eux tentait un mouvement en avant, un canot du parti adverse se mettait en travers, et rendait impossible l’approche de l’escalier gardé d’ailleurs par une douzaine de marins.

“Qu’y a-t-il donc, captain? demanda Thompson essoufflé en sautant sur le pont.

-Je n’en sais rien, monsieur, répondit flegmatiquement le capitaine.

-Comment! captain, vous ne savez pas ce qui a pu motiver une pareille émeute!

-Absolument pas, monsieur. J’étais dans ma chambre, quand Mr. *Flyship* est venu me prévenir qu’une jeune fille était montée à bord et que des groupes aux allures menaçantes se rassemblaient sur le quai. J’ignore si l’un de ces faits découle de l’autre, car il m’a été impossible de comprendre un mot au damné jargon de la petite.

-Et cette enfant, captain, qu’en avez-vous fait?

-Elle est au salon, monsieur.

-J’y vais, dit Thompson avec emphase, comme s’il eût couru à la mort. En attendant, captain, continuez à veiller sur le navire dont vous êtes responsable.”

Le capitaine, pour toute réponse, sourit dans sa moustache d’un air dédaigneux.

La situation, du reste, ne semblait pas bien critique. Les passagers avaient traversé sans peine la ligne des belligérants. Les uns après les autres, ils montaient à bord. Le *Seamew* pouvait subir longtemps sans dommage un blocus si mal gardé.

En somme, il était certain que, si, pour des motifs inconnus, le *Seamew* avait des ennemis sur la terre de Saint-Michel, il y possédait aussi, pour des raisons également ignorées, de solides alliances, dont le concours actuellement tout au moins suffisait à sa défense.

Cependant, Thompson et Robert étaient entrés dans le salon. Ainsi que l’avait annoncé le brave capitaine, ils y trouvèrent une jeune fille littéralement écroulée sur un divan, le visage enfoui dans ses mains et toute secouée de sanglots. En entendant venir les deux hommes, elle se releva vivement, et, dessinant un modeste salut, elle découvrit un charmant visage, qui exprimait pour le moment une cruelle confusion.

“Mademoiselle, dit Robert, une sorte d’émeute entoure ce bâtiment. Pourriez-vous nous dire si cette émeute a quelque rapport avec votre présence ici?

-Hélas! monsieur, je le crois, répondit la jeune fille en pleurant de plus belle.

-Dans ce cas, mademoiselle, veuillez vous expliquer. Votre nom, d’abord?

-Thargela Lobato.

-Et pourquoi, reprit Robert, Mlle Lobato est-elle venue à bord?

-Pour être protégée contre ma mère! répondit résolument la jeune Açorienne.

-Contre votre mère!

-Oui, c’est une méchante femme. Et puis...

-Et puis?... insista Robert.

-Et puis, murmura la jeune Thargela dont les joues s’empourprèrent, à cause de Joachimo Salazar.

-Joachimo Salazar? répéta Robert. Qui est ce Joachimo Salazar?

-Mon fiancé”, répondit Thargela en se cachant le visage dans ses mains.

Robert tordit sa moustache d’un air ennuyé. Voilà une affaire qui prenait un tour ridicule. Que faire de cette enfant? Ainsi que le fit observer Thompson avec impatience, ils n’étaient pas venus à Saint-Michel pour protéger les amours des jeunes filles contrariées dans leurs inclinations. Robert estima toutefois qu’un peu de morale suffirait à remettre le calme dans cette tête folle.

“Voyons, voyons, mon enfant, dit-il d’un ton bonhomme, il faut rentrer chez vous. Vous n’avez pas réfléchi sans doute qu’il est mal de se mettre en révolte contre sa mère.”

Thargela se redressa vivement.

“Elle n’est pas ma mère! cria-t-elle d’une voix rauque, les joues pâlies par une subite colère. Je suis une enfant abandonnée à cette misérable femme, dont je porte le nom, faute d’en avoir un autre que celui de Thargela. Et d’ailleurs, quand même elle serait ma mère, elle n’a pas le droit de me séparer de Joachimo.”

Et, s’écroulant sur la banquette, Thargela fondit de nouveau en larmes.

“Tout cela est très joli, mon cher monsieur, dit Thompson à Robert. Mais enfin, si triste que soit la situation de cette enfant, cela ne nous regarde pas, et nous ne pouvons rien pour elle. Veuillez le lui faire comprendre. Il est temps que cette comédie finisse.”

Mais, aux premiers mots que Robert prononça pour expliquer leur impuissance, Thargela releva son visage illuminé d'une joie triomphante.

“Vous le pouvez! Vous le pouvez! s'écria-t-elle. C'est la loi!

- La loi?” insista Robert.

Mais il eut beau retourner la question sous toutes ses faces. La loi était pour elle, Thargela savait cela, et ne savait que cela. D'ailleurs, si ces messieurs anglais voulaient être mieux renseignés, que n'appelaient-ils Joachimo Salazar? Il n'était pas loin. Celui-là savait tout. Il répondrait à toutes les questions.

Et, sans attendre de réponse, Thargela, entraînant Robert sur le pont, l'amena près du bastingage de bâbord, et lui montra avec un sourire dont son frais visage fut tout illuminé, un grand jeune homme debout à la barre de l'une des embarcations belligérantes.

“Joachimo! Joachimo!” appela Thargela.

À ce cri, des vociférations répondirent. Quant au timonier, donnant un heureux coup de barre, il accosta le *Seamew* et sauta sur le pont, tandis que son embarcation retournait au combat.

C'était vraiment un beau garçon à l'air franc et décidé. Son premier soin fut d'élever Thargela dans ses bras et de la gratifier à la face des cieux et de la terre de deux baisers sonores qui firent redoubler les hurlements des camps adverses. Ce devoir rempli, un vif colloque s'engagea entre les fiancés, puis enfin, Joachimo, se tournant vers les passagers qui contemplaient cette scène avec curiosité, les remercia en nobles termes de l'aide qu'ils voulaient bien apporter à sa chère Thargela.

Robert traduisit fidèlement. Quant à Thompson, il fit la grimace. Quel diplomate, ce garçon! Ne l'engageait-il pas maintenant vis-à-vis de l'équipage et des passagers?

Cependant Joachimo continuait sa harangue improvisée. Ce qu'avait dit Thargela était exact. La loi des Açores permettait aux jeunes gens de se marier à leur goût, à l'aide du moyen qu'elle avait adopté. Il suffisait de quitter, dans ce but, la demeure de ses parents, pour échapper ipso facto à leur autorité, et pour tomber sous celle du juge, alors obligé de donner, s'il en était requis, l'autorisation désirée. Certes, Joachimo ne connaissait pas par le menu les termes de cette loi, mais on pouvait se rendre sur-le-champ chez le corrégidor, qui éclairerait ces messieurs anglais tant sur la valeur morale de la femme Lobato, que sur les droits de sa pupille Thargela et du fiancé de cette dernière, le disert Joachimo. Que, si l'on demandait pourquoi Thargela avait choisi le *Seamew* comme refuge, plutôt que la maison d'un ami, c'est tout simplement que les pauvres n'ont pas d'amis. En outre, la femme Lobato, demi-sorcière, demi-prêteuse sur gages, tenait, soit par crainte, soit par intérêt, la moitié du bas peuple des faubourgs, ainsi que le prouvait la manifestation actuelle. Sur la terre ferme, Thargela eût donc couru le risque d'être reprise. À bord du *Seamew,* sous la sauvegarde du noble peuple anglais, il n'en serait certainement pas de même.

Ayant dit, l'habile orateur se tut.

Son trait de la fin avait porté. Le jeune Açorien en avait pour preuve le changement d'attitude de Sir Hamilton. Sans le connaître, il s'était attaché à convaincre ce personnage, que sa tenue gourmée désignait comme le plus rébarbatif de tous ses auditeurs. Or, incontestablement, Hamilton s'était dégelé. Même, il avait approuvé d'un signe de tête la conclusion du discours.

“Que pensez-vous de tout cela, captain? demanda-t-il.

-Hum!” fit le capitaine, en se détournant modestement.

Mais, derrière lui, le fidèle Artimon était à son poste.

“Vous qui êtes gentleman anglais, dit-il à ce vieil ami, repousseriez-vous une femme, monsieur?

-Hum! fit à son tour Thompson, en coulant vers les passagers un regard incertain.

-Ma foi! monsieur, dit Alice Lindsay en s’avançant courageusement hors du cercle de ses compagnons, je pense que, sans rien préjuger, on pourrait du moins faire ce que propose ce garçon, c’est-à-dire aller chez le corrégidor qui nous tracera notre devoir.

-Qu’il soit fait selon votre désir, Mrs. Lindsay, s’écria Thompson. L’agence n’a rien à refuser à ses passagers.”

Des bravos éclatèrent. Évidemment, le jeune couple avait fait la conquête des habitants du *Seamew.* À ces applaudissements, seul Hamilton évita de joindre les siens. Phénomène surprenant, son attitude était soudain redevenue, correcte toujours, mais glacée. Une citoyenne américaine en ayant en quelque sorte pris la direction, cette affaire avait subitement cessé de l’intéresser. C’était désormais chose à régler entre ces deux peuples inférieurs: Portugais et Américains. L’Angleterre, dans sa personne, n’avait plus rien à y voir.

“En tout cas, reprit Thompson, cette démarche ne pourra être faite qu’après notre dîner, dont l’heure doit être même largement dépassée. Il restera alors à traverser la ligne des assiégeants. Vous devriez, mon cher professeur, soumettre le cas à ce garçon.

- Je m’en charge”, déclara Joachimo.

S’approchant du bastingage, il héla les belligérants, et leur fit part de la résolution prise. Sa communication reçut des accueils divers. Mais enfin, du moment qu’il ne s’agissait plus d’un enlèvement, d’un rapt avec la complicité d’étrangers, du moment que cette affaire devait recevoir une solution régulière, il n’y avait qu’à se soumettre, et l’on se soumit, chaque parti restant libre au demeurant de s’attribuer la victoire. Les abords du *Seamew* se dégagèrent aussitôt, et quand, le dîner terminé, Thompson et Robert, en compagnie de Joachimo, débarquèrent sur le quai, ils le trouvèrent revenu à un calme relatif.

Thompson, indécis, jetait de droite à gauche des coups d’œil furtifs.

Toutefois, c’est escortés par un assez nombreux concours de populaire que les trois compagnons parvinrent au bureau de l’official. Le corrégidor n’y était pas, et un agent dut se mettre à sa recherche. Il arriva bientôt. C’était un homme entre deux âges, chauve, au teint de brique cuite, indiquant un tempérament irascible et bilieux. Irrité sans doute de ce dérangement imprévu, il interrogea aigrement ses tardifs visiteurs.

Robert le mit en peu de mots au courant des faits et lui demanda son avis. Mais, si rapidement qu’il eût exposé l’affaire, il avait été trop prolixe encore au gré de l’impatient corrégidor, dont les doigts battaient sur la table, derrière laquelle il était assis, une marche extrêmement orageuse.

“Femme Lobato, répondit-il en style télégraphique, réputation déplorable. Joachimo Salazar et fille Thargela, excellente. Droit absolu de cette dernière de se réfugier où il lui convient, et d’épouser qui bon lui semble, quand moi, corrégidor, l’aurai ainsi ordonné. Telle est la loi. Toutefois, ne puis donner pareil ordre, que si Thargela le réclame, soit de vive voix, soit par une attestation écrite.

-La voilà, dit vivement Joachimo, qui tendit une lettre au corrégidor.

-Bien! approuva celui-ci, en saisissant une plume dont il se servit pour tracer un menaçant paraphe sur une feuille imprimée. Aujourd’hui, le 22. Mariage, le 25. Je désigne don Pablo Terraro, église Sao Anthonio.”

Le corrégidor se leva et appuya violemment sur un timbre. À ce signal, deux agents pénétrèrent dans le cabinet du magistrat.

“Messieurs, bonsoir!” prononça celui-ci, tandis que les trois justiciables se retrouvaient dans la rue.

“Voilà une affaire arrangée, mon brave, dit Robert à Joachimo. Dans trois jours, vous épouserez votre Thargela.

-Oh! messieurs, messieurs, comment vous remercier? s’écria Joachimo, qui pressait chaleureusement les mains des obligeants étrangers.

-En rendant votre femme heureuse, mon garçon, dit Robert en riant. Mais qu’allez-vous faire, jusqu’au jour de votre mariage?

-Moi? demanda Joachimo étonné.

-Oui. N’avez-vous rien à craindre de tous ces énergumènes de tantôt?

-Bah! fit avec insouciance le jeune homme en montrant ses deux bras, j’ai ça.”

Et, sifflotant gaiement un air de danse, il se perdit dans les rues sombres de la capitale de Saint-Michel.

CHAPITRE X

OÙ IL EST PROUVÉ QUE JOHNSON EST UN SAGE

L’île de Saint-Michel affecte grossièrement la forme d’une gourde très allongée. Au centre, dans les deux anses qui déterminent la partie resserrée de la gourde, deux villes: Ponta-Delgada, au sud; Ribeira-Grande, au nord. Une route bonne et facile, qui ne dépasse pas deux cents mètres d’altitude, réunit ces deux villes presque égales par le nombre de leurs habitants, et distantes l’une de l’autre de dix-huit kilomètres environ.

Mais le reste de l’île, à droite et à gauche de cette dépression, se profile en crêtes plus élevées. Au deuxième jour était réservée la partie de l’ouest, après une nuit passée à Ribeira-Grande, où des montures de relais seraient amenées de Ponta-Delgada. Le premier jour devait suffire à visiter la partie orientale.

En tenant compte des sinuosités de la route, c’était pour chaque journée un trajet d’une quarantaine de kilomètres. Tâche assez rude en somme. Renseignements pris auprès de Robert et des guides, Thompson avait cru devoir avancer à six heures et demie le départ fixé à huit heures par le programme.

Cette décision lui valut une scène terrible d’Hamilton et de Saunders. Les deux acolytes se plaignirent avec violence de ces continuels changements à un programme, qui aurait dû cependant faire la loi des parties.

“Et, monsieur, retenez bien ceci, avait conclu Saunders en détachant les syllabes: Je-ne-par-ti-rai-pas-à-six- heures-et-demie!

- Ni moi non plus, avait signifié le baronnet jaloux d'égaler son modèle, et Lady Hamilton ne partira pas plus que moi, et Miss Hamilton pas plus que sa mère. Nous serons tous sur le quai à huit heures précises, ainsi que le spécifie votre programme, et nous comptons y trouver les moyens de transport qu'il promet. Tenez-vous-le pour dit!"

Les observations d'Hamilton et de Saunders étaient peut-être fondées, mais Thompson, malgré tout son désir de contenter ses passagers, se sentait à bout de patience avec ces deux-là. Il se borna à les saluer sèchement sans leur accorder la moindre réponse.

Laissant à bord la jeune Thargela, la cavalcade, entièrement pareille à celle de Fayal, s'ébranlait le lendemain à sept heures précises, au signal de Thompson. On pouvait y remarquer de nombreuses désertions.

Absent, le jeune ménage. Absent, le craintif Johnson, qui continuait à fuir les tremblements de terre.

"Il n'en a pourtant pas besoin pour osciller sur sa base!" se permit de faire observer Roger.

Absents également, les Hamilton et Saunders. Absentes, enfin, deux ou trois passagères, auxquelles l'âge interdisait une excursion de si longue haleine.

La colonne ne comptait au total que cinquante-quatre touristes, en y comprenant don Hygino da Veiga, dont les deux frères avaient préféré rester à bord.

C'est grâce à don Hygino que Blockhead figurait parmi les excursionnistes. Thompson l'en aurait impitoyablement écarté, si le Portugais n'avait intercédé pour lui, en promettant pour le matin même la guérison de l’intéressant malade. Sur cette assurance, l’épicier honoraire avait été admis, mais à la condition qu’il se tiendrait invariablement à cent mètres derrière le dernier rang. Il s’avançait donc seul, sans autre compagnie que son âne et son ânier, et ne paraissait pas d’ailleurs autrement fâché de sa situation anormale. Blockhead était de ceux-là qui savent s’intéresser à tout, prendre toujours le bon côté des choses. Heureux caractère aux antipodes de celui du quinteux Hamilton!

Sortis de la ville par l’est, les touristes, à huit heures, arrivèrent dans la campagne. Ils purent alors se croire revenus aux environs de Horta. Mêmes champs de céréales et de légumes. Dans le fond, les mêmes essences d’arbres s’élevaient en masses verdoyantes. Toutefois, une différence essentielle s’accusa bientôt entre Fayal et Saint- Michel, et tout en faveur de la seconde île. Ici, plus d’espaces arides, mais au contraire pas un pouce de terre cultivable qui ne fût cultivé. Plus de taillis rabougris sur les sommets que laissait apercevoir la coupée des vallées, mais de superbes futaies de sapins, admirable résultat des incessants efforts de l’administration locale, qui, depuis cinquante ans, reboise sans se lasser par milliers et par milliers de pieds.

Un peu avant midi la caravane déboucha à l’orée d’une vaste vallée.

“Le Val das Furnas”, dit le guide de tête.

Entourée d’une ceinture de montagnes arides, la Vallée des Fournaises affecte presque parfaitement la forme d’un grand cercle d’environ trois kilomètres de rayon. Vers le sud-est, la ligne des montagnes s’abaisse, pour laisser fuir une rivière qui, par une étroite coupure, pénètre dans la vallée au nord-est.

Les touristes remontèrent cette rivière, la Ribeira- Quente, ou Rivière chaude, aux rives consacrées à la culture des primeurs, jusqu'aux sources thermales situées au-delà d'un village, dont, à deux kilomètres, ils apercevaient les toits dorés par le soleil.

Ce coin de pays est singulier. De tous côtés des sources surgissent, les unes chaudes, les autres froides, mais toutes à un degré remarquable de minéralisation. Certaines, réduites à un imperceptible filet d'eau, ont reçu des indigènes le nom de Olhas, les yeux. D'autres sont plus importantes. L'une de celles-ci sourd dans un bassin en forme de vasque. À grand bruit, elle lance à près d'un mètre de hauteur une colonne d'eau bouillante, dont la température s'élève à 105°C. Tout autour d'elle, l'atmosphère est obscurcie d'épaisses vapeurs sulfureuses, qui se déposent sur le sol et recouvrent brins d'herbe, plantes et fleurs d'une véritable croûte pierreuse.

Blockhead, sur la pressante invitation de Thompson, dut affronter ces vapeurs. Telle était, en effet, la cure imaginée par don Hygino, qui se contentait en somme d'appliquer un remède populaire à Saint-Michel, et que l'instinct des animaux incommodés par les parasites a dès longtemps montré à la raison humaine.

Remède énergique à coup sûr. Au vent de la source, à peine si l'on pouvait en endurer la chaleur. Blockhead cependant n'hésita pas et disparut bravement derrière le rideau de vapeurs brûlantes. Au fond, il n'était pas fâché de tâter de ce remède insolite.

Quand Blockhead sortit de son étuve, peut-être n'était- il pas guéri, mais du moins il était cuit indubitablement. Congestionné, la sueur tombant de son visage en ruisseaux sur le sol, il reparut dans un état lamentable.

Son supplice n’était pas fini, cependant. Sur l’indication de don Hygino, les touristes se réunirent près d’une autre source, à une dizaine de mètres de la première. Plus farouche encore, cette deuxième source, qui a reçu le nom de Pedro Botelho, bouillonne au fond d’une sorte de caverne, que les indigènes croient fermement être une des bouches de l’enfer. Le fait est que, au fond de cette caverne, l’eau invisible siffle d’une manière effrayante, tandis que s’écoule au-dehors une énorme quantité de boue savonneuse, sur laquelle comptait don Hygino pour achever la guérison de son malade.

Par son ordre, Blockhead, ayant quitté ses vêtements, fut plongé à de nombreuses reprises dans cette boue, dont la température atteint au moins quarante-cinq degrés centigrades. Le malheureux Blockhead n’en pouvait littéralement plus, et bientôt il se mit à pousser de véritables hurlements, couverts par les bruyants éclats de rire de ses peu charitables compagnons.

Mais, à ces cris, à ces rires, un grondement effroyable répond. De la caverne, une épaisse fumée s’échappe, sillonnée de menaçantes langues de feu, tandis qu’une gerbe d’eau s’élève dans les airs, et retombe en pluie brûlante sur les audacieux visiteurs.

Terrifiés, ceux-ci avaient fui. Pour leur rendre courage, il fallut l’assurance des guides que ce phénomène se produisait souvent et avec d’autant plus de violence que le bruit fait aux environs de la source était lui-même plus grand, sans que personne ait jamais pu en donner une explication acceptable.

Quant à Blockhead, il avait profité de la panique pour fuir son bain de boue. Déjà, il se roulait dans la Ribeira- Quente, dont les eaux, plus que tièdes cependant, lui paraissaient délicieusement glacées.

Maintenant, le remède indiqué par don Hygino a-t-il réellement les propriétés que lui attribuent les indigènes? Ou bien Absyrthus Blockhead n'avait-il eu qu'une maladie imaginaire? On ne tranchera pas la question. Le certain, c'est que l'épicier honoraire fut considéré comme guéri à partir de cet instant et put reprendre part à la vie commune.

Après le déjeuner fourni à grand-peine par le village, déjeuner qui, tout en ressemblant beaucoup au repas champêtre de Fayal, fut néanmoins un peu moins fantaisiste, la colonne vers deux heures se reforma. Elle allait partir, on avait même déjà fait les premiers pas, quand une seconde caravane déboucha à son tour dans le village.

Diminutif de la première, celle-ci ne comprenait en tout que huit personnes. Mais aussi quelles personnes! Rien de moins que Saunders, Sir, Lady et Miss Hamilton, accompagnés de leurs quatre guides, partis tous à la minute réglementaire, c'est-à-dire avec six quarts d'heure de retard qu'ils avaient soigneusement conservés.

Gravement, Hamilton et Saunders, descendus de leurs montures, s'avancèrent vers Thompson qui sifflotait d'un air détaché entre ses dents.

“Pouvons-nous espérer, monsieur, dit Saunders, trouver ici à déjeuner?

-Ma foi, monsieur, je l'ignore, répondit Thompson avec une charmante désinvolture. Si vous voulez bien vous adresser à ce brave aubergiste que vous voyez sur sa porte, il pourra peut-être vous satisfaire... si toutefois ces messieurs et ces dames ont laissé dans le pays quelque chose à se mettre sous la dent.”

Thompson s'émancipait. Il redressait la tête. Il secouait le joug. Hamilton fut étrangement surpris de ces velléités d'indépendance. Aussi, quel regard il lança! Saunders espéra voluptueusement qu’à défaut d’un mets plus civilisé, le terrible baronnet apaiserait sa faim aux dépens de l’audacieux administrateur.

Mais celui-ci avait nonchalamment tourné le dos, et, sans autre formalité, il avait donné à ses fidèles le signal du départ.

En quittant le Val das Furnas, la caravane côtoya pendant quelque temps le lac du même nom, remplissant une dépression ovale qui fut autrefois un cratère. Elle dut ensuite remonter un sentier en lacet qui l’amena graduellement jusqu’aux plateaux supérieurs. Cette ascension fut assez fatigante. Bientôt, le pied des animaux foula, avec un bruit de linge froissé, un sol friable et sec composé uniquement d’une sorte de cendre grise qui s’écrasait en crépitant sous leurs sabots.

“La Lagoa secca, annonça le guide de tête.

-La Lagune sèche, traduisit Robert. Nous sommes ici sur l’emplacement d’un ancien cratère auquel un lac, d’une étendue de deux cents hectares et d’une profondeur de trente mètres, s’était autrefois substitué. Ce lac disparut à son tour et le cratère fut nivelé par l’éruption de 1563 qui bouleversa cette partie de l’île. Ce fut au cours de cette éruption qu’une montagne entière, le mont Volcao, s’abîma dans les entrailles du sol. À sa place s’étend aujourd’hui le lac “do Fogo”, ou lac du Feu. Je pense que nous le verrons à l’heure.”

On le vit en effet. On en vit même beaucoup d’autres. On en vit trop. Ce n’étaient que cratères transformés en lacs, les uns atteignant cent et deux cents mètres de profondeur, les autres n’en dépassant pas deux ou trois. À la longue, cela devenait monotone.

Il était nuit close quand, par de raides sentiers, on descendit sur la ville de Ribeira-Grande. Les touristes, brisés de fatigue, prirent à peine le temps de dîner dans un misérable hôtel où les montures de rechange attendaient pour l'excursion du lendemain. Tout de suite, ils réclamèrent leurs lits. Mais ce n'est pas à Ribeira-Grande qu'un seul hôtel peut loger une troupe aussi nombreuse. Il fallut se séparer, et vraiment il était fort heureux que le cantonnement eût été, cette fois, préparé à l'avance.

“Rendez-vous à sept heures précises pour le départ”, avait déclaré Thompson.

Hélas! que de manquants à ce rendez-vous! Il fallut battre le rappel. Thompson d'un côté, Robert de l'autre, galopèrent à travers la ville à la poursuite des réfractaires. Peine perdue, le plus souvent. Tous se déclaraient perclus et se plaignaient amèrement que des escadrons de belliqueuses punaises eussent, par des charges irrésistibles, rendu tout sommeil impossible. C'est tout juste si Thompson et son lieutenant parvinrent à réunir le tiers de leurs voyageurs. Vingt-deux touristes, voilà ce qui restait de l'imposante caravane! Et encore la plupart de ces intrépides avaient-ils piteuse mine.

Parmi ces vingt-deux braves figurait naturellement la famille Lindsay. Ce n'est pas ces voyageurs aguerris qu'une étape de quarante kilomètres pouvait abattre. Et de même Roger de Sorgues, fidèle cavalier servant de la rieuse Dolly.

Et de même Blockhead et sa famille. L'épicier honoraire pouvait-il manquer une occasion d'exercer ses facultés d'admiration? Bon gré, mal gré, il avait entraîné sa femme et ses filles, qui s'avançaient d'un pas un peu raide peut-être en entraînant Tigg à leur tour.

Quant à Saunders et au trio des Hamilton, correctement arrivés la veille à Ribeira-Grande avec une heure et demie de retard, ceux-ci n'auraient eu garde de manquer à un seul des articles du programme. Morts ou vifs, ils achèveraient l'excursion. Par exemple, fidèles à leurs immuables principes, ils ne partiraient qu'à l'heure dite.

Le programme annonçant le départ pour huit heures, c'est donc à huit heures seulement qu'ils prirent possession de leurs nouvelles montures, et la plaisanterie de la veille eût certainement recommencé sans la paresse de leurs compagnons.

De régiment devenue bataillon, de bataillon compagnie, de compagnie simple escouade, la colonne des touristes laissa rapidement derrière elle les extrêmes maisons de Ribeira-Grande. Venus tard, partis tôt, ces intrépides voyageurs ne devaient rien connaître de cette ville dont la population dépasse treize mille âmes. Devaient-ils le regretter? Guère. En dehors de ses sources, bien inférieures à celles du Val das Furnas, ce grand village sale et mal bâti ne possède rien d'intéressant.

Pendant une demi-heure, le chemin se développa dans un pays assez plat parsemé de nombreux cônes volcaniques. Mais bientôt le sol se releva. On entrait de nouveau dans la région des montagnes. La campagne conservait son caractère de richesse et de fécondité. Tout disait le patient travail humain. Pas une crête qui n'eût été boisée, pas un coin de terre cultivable qui ne fût cultivé.

Dans ce district de l'Ouest, la population paraissait plus dense. À chaque instant on croisait des couples de paysans. Majestueusement, l'homme marchait le premier, son épouse, à dix mètres derrière lui, trottinant avec humilité. Timides, effacées, dissimulées dans leur vaste manteau au capuchon moins grand, mais plus fermé que celui de Fayal, elles passaient, ces femmes, comme des fantômes, sans que l’on pût distinguer leur visage. À mesure qu’on s’éloignait des centres populeux, les capuchons se fermaient davantage. Et même, comme vers dix heures ils traversaient un village, les touristes virent avec étonnement, les femmes, à leur approche, se retourner modestement contre les murailles.

“Faut-il qu’elles soient laides!” observa Dolly, trouvant de ces exagérations de pudeur une raison bien féminine.

À la sortie de ce village, la route se fit sentier, tandis que la pente s’accentuait notablement. Quatre cents mètres au-dessus d’eux, les touristes distinguèrent alors la crête de la montagne, dont le flanc leur cachait l’horizon. Grimpant péniblement les lacets du raidillon, ils arrivèrent à mi-côte, mais alors tous implorèrent un moment de repos. Depuis le matin, vingt kilomètres avaient été franchis dans des conditions très fatigantes. Porteurs et portés étaient à bout de forces.

Un quart d’heure plus tard, la colonne allait se remettre en route, quand un bruit confus s’éleva vers le sommet de la montagne. En même temps, un nuage de poussière se formait et se déplaçait rapidement, en paraissant suivre les méandres du sentier.

Le bruit inexplicable croissait de seconde en seconde. Des sons bizarres s’en échappaient. Beuglements?

Hurlements? Aboiements? Les guides eux-mêmes parurent inquiets.

Poussant leurs montures à l’abri d’une masure abandonnée, qui, par fortune, se trouvait à proximité, tous furent bientôt en sûreté. Au malheureux Blockhead seul, le temps manqua. La croupe de son âne faisait encore saillie sur l’angle de la maison, quand l’orage de poussière arriva comme la foudre. Cela suffit. En un instant, l’infortuné épicier honoraire fut soulevé, emporté - disparut!

Ses compagnons poussèrent un cri de terreur.

Mais la trombe déjà était passée, portant plus loin sa fureur dévastatrice, et Blockhead se relevait, en éternuant, mais sans blessure apparente.

On s’était précipité vers lui. Il ne semblait pas ému. Sur sa placide figure se lisait seulement un réel étonnement. Et, tandis que son regard émerveillé suivait le nuage de poussière qui dégringolait la pente, une exclamation imprévue sortait des lèvres du voyageur malmené.

“Quels cochons!” disait Blockhead, avec un accent de vive admiration.

Certes, ce qui venait de lui arriver était désagréable. Ses compagnons trouvèrent cependant l’expression un peu forte. On sait se contenir, que diable! Les dames se détournèrent en étouffant des rires.

Toutefois, après explication, il fallut bien innocenter Blockhead. C’étaient bien des cochons, de véritables porcs, dont il avait subi le redoutable assaut. Quant à l’origine de cette panique, quant à la cause qui avait transformé en catapulte irrésistible cette bande d’animaux ordinairement inoffensifs, les guides eux-mêmes ne s’en doutaient pas.

Il était juste midi quand les touristes parvinrent à la crête. Comme au sommet de la chaudière de Fayal, la grandeur du spectacle les arrêta sur place.

Dépassant tout ce que l’imagination peut concevoir, le sol devant eux se creusait en une cuvette immense profonde de quatre cents mètres et dessinant un ovale étonnamment régulier de vingt-huit kilomètres de pourtour. Au-delà de la crête étroite, la descente suivait immédiatement la montée. Les pentes intérieures, parées de la plus magnifique végétation, conduisaient doucement jusqu'au fond de la paradoxale dépression, au milieu de laquelle un village délicieux se grisait de soleil, baigné par deux lacs aux eaux plus bleues que le ciel.

Franchissant les limites de cet abîme, l'œil parcourait librement l'île tout entière. Vers le nord, c'était un chaos d'escarpements semés de bouquets d'orangers, puis, plus loin, des champs et des maisons; vers l'est, un océan de sommets, et la campagne, tantôt verdoyante, tantôt sillonnée de noirs et sauvages ravins; au-delà enfin des rivages de Saint-Michel, on distinguait, taches du miroir immense de la mer, les contours vagues de Tercère au nord-ouest et de Sainte-Marie au sud-est.

L'heure ne permettant pas une halte trop longue, on se dirigea rapidement vers le village. À mesure qu'on s'en approchait, le charme s'évanouissait peu à peu. Il disparut quand on parvint aux maisons. Ni plus ni moins sale, boueux et misérable que les autres, ce village ennobli de loin dans la gloire décevante du soleil.

“Les Sept-Cités”, avait dit Robert.

Et vraiment ce nom pompeux allait bien à cette agglomération de lamentables masures.

“Pourvu qu'on y trouve à déjeuner!” grinça Roger entre ses dents.

Les ressources limitées du village suffirent pourtant à la troupe réduite des touristes. Une heure et demie plus tard, restaurés tant bien que mal, ceux-ci purent s'engager sur la route du retour. De visiter les volcans, les ravins, les précipices nombreux dans la vallée du cratère, il ne fut pas question, non plus que d’aller admirer les cascades pittoresques qu’il contient. Le temps manquait.

“C’est très anglais, cette façon de voyager, fit gaiement observer Roger à son compatriote. Voir quelque chose? Pourquoi faire, du moment qu’on avale sa ration de kilomètres?”

Onze milles environ séparent le village des Sept-Cités de Ponta-Delgada. Partis vers trois heures de l’après-midi, les voyageurs devaient franchir aisément cette distance avant le coucher du soleil.

Entrés dans la vallée par le nord, ils en remontaient maintenant les pentes méridionales, non sans jeter de temps à autre un regard de regret vers le village, dont la grâce renaissait à mesure qu’augmentait l’éloignement.

Pendant cette première partie de la route, pas un mot ne fut échangé. Penchés sur le cou de leurs mulets, cramponnés à leurs selles, tous se taisaient, absorbés par la pénible ascension du sentier pierreux. Aussi, quel soupir de soulagement, quand, parvenus à la crête, ils reçurent en plein visage la brise de mer, dont les flots lointains miroitaient six cents mètres plus bas! Les langues se délièrent. Et de quoi aurait-on parlé, si ce n’est du spectacle qu’on venait de contempler?

“Pourriez-vous nous dire, monsieur le professeur, demanda Thompson à Robert, quelle est l’origine de l’abîme que nous venons de traverser, et d’où lui vient son nom de “Sept-Cités “?

-Mon Dieu, monsieur, répondit Robert, l’origine est toujours la même. Il s’agit toujours de volcans éteints, dont la pluie a plus ou moins empli le cratère. Celui-là est plus vaste que les autres, voilà tout. Quant à ce nom de “Sept-Cités “, c’est probablement un souvenir des sept villes fondées dans l’île fantastique d’Antilia par les sept évêques légendaires qui s’exilèrent du Portugal lors de l’invasion des Maures. Suivant une croyance populaire, les villes fondées par ces évêques se seraient englouties dans la mer avec l’île fabuleuse qui les portait. Le peuple a voulu sans doute perpétuer la légende, en nommant ainsi ce cratère, dont l’origine fut pareillement un effondrement du sol, au cours de l’éruption de 1445.

-Si près de nous! s’écria Thompson avec une sorte de crainte qui rappelait les terreurs de Johnson. Je suppose du moins que ces phénomènes ont depuis longtemps cessé?

-Oui et non, dit Robert. D’autres éruptions très violentes ont eu lieu en 1522 et en 1652. En outre, l’île de Saint-Michel, et surtout la partie ouest où nous nous trouvons, est particulièrement exposée aux convulsions volcaniques. La dernière alerte sérieuse date de 1811. C’est assez récent.

-Cela fait tout juste quatre-vingt-dix-neuf ans, j’ose le dire! s’écria Thompson sérieusement alarmé cette fois, après un silence consacré à un rapide calcul.

-Pas davantage”, répondit philosophiquement Robert.

Mais Thompson voulait être rassuré.

“Enfin, pensez-vous, monsieur le professeur, dit-il encore, que de pareilles catastrophes puissent de nouveau se produire?

- Ma foi, monsieur, je n’en sais absolument rien, répondit Robert en souriant. Il est certain qu’aux Açores comme ailleurs l’activité volcanique a une grande tendance à décroître. Cependant.”

Robert n’eut pas le temps d’achever. Comme si le sol eût subitement manqué sous leurs pieds, hommes et animaux furent renversés en un amas confus. Personne heureusement n’avait le moindre mal. En un instant tous furent debout.

“Voilà la réponse”, dit Robert à Thompson.

Mais, tout à coup, l’un des guides poussa un cri terrible, en étendant le bras vers la crête, puis, ce cri lancé, s’enfuit à toutes jambes vers la vallée, comme affolé par l’épouvante.

Un effroyable danger menaçait en effet les touristes. À moins de cent mètres, directement au-dessus d’eux, le sol était travaillé par de terrifiantes convulsions. Au milieu de grondements, de rugissements pareils à ceux de cent ménageries de fauves, il se soulevait comme la mer, entrechoquant ses lourdes vagues de sable. Déjà le soleil se cachait derrière un opaque nuage de poussière.

Les malheureux voyageurs étaient à ce moment engagés entre deux énormes rochers, dont les parois à pic formaient une sorte de couloir large de cinq cents mètres environ sur une longueur à peu près égale. À la suite de leurs guides, ils se précipitèrent vers le rocher de droite, à l’abri d’un pan énorme, dont la saillie pourrait peut-être les sauver.

Il était temps.

Avec un horrible déchirement, les terres désunies prirent leur élan sur la pente. Un morceau de montagne s’écroulait, tombait. Faible d’abord, la vitesse de l’avalanche s’accéléra de mètre en mètre, devint vertigineuse. Le vacarme se fit assourdissant.

Les touristes, cœurs serrés, bouches closes, mains étreintes, de toute leur âme regardaient.

Le météore passa.

Du premier choc, le rocher protecteur fut emporté. Perdu dans le tourbillon, il devint l’un des projectiles avec lesquels la montagne bombardait la vallée. Désormais, rien ne défendait plus les voyageurs, et le troupeau déchaîné des rocs roula en tempête à quelques pouces de leurs poitrines désarmées.

En vingt secondes, tout fut terminé. Mais depuis longtemps la nature avait retrouvé son calme immense, que pas un geste n’avait encore rompu la raide immobilité des spectateurs épouvantés du cataclysme. Les uns couchés au bas de la formidable muraille de rochers, les autres debout, les bras en croix, le dos appliqué contre elle, en un surhumain effort pour diminuer l’épaisseur de leur corps, la vie semblait les avoir abandonnés.

La première qui reprit possession du réel fut Alice Lindsay. Tout à coup, elle se vit blottie dans une anfractuosité des rochers. Comment était-elle venue là? Qui l’y avait portée? Son beau-frère? N’était-ce pas plutôt Robert, qui, sans même en avoir conscience, continuait à la protéger en la couvrant de son corps?

“Voilà déjà deux fois, si l’on compte l’émeute de Tercère, que je vous dois de la reconnaissance”, lui dit- elle en se dégageant.

Robert n’eut pas l’air de comprendre.

“Vraiment, madame, vous ne m’en devez pas plus qu’à tout autre que le hasard dans ces deux circonstances aurait placé près de vous.”

Le mouvement d’Alice avait rompu le charme qui paralysait ses compagnons. Tous se secouèrent, s’ébrouèrent, et peu à peu les cœurs recommencèrent leur battement régulier.

Pour revenir à Ponta-Delgada, il ne pouvait plus être question de sentier. Nivelée par l’assaut furieux des terres et des rochers, la montagne s’abaissait désormais en une pente régulière que parsemaient une infinité de blocs arrêtés dans leur chute. Fait plus grave, la plupart des montures avaient péri. Ce qu’il en restait fut réservé aux femmes, et l’on s’aventura avec précaution sur ce sol raviné.

Avant le départ, cinq ou six guides, réunissant leurs voix, avaient appelé leur camarade disparu. Vains étaient restés leurs appels. Dans sa fuite insensée vers la vallée, le malheureux, ce n’était que trop certain, avait été rejoint par l’avalanche, et maintenant où dormait-il sous son lourd linceul de vingt mètres de terre?

On se remit en chemin sans perdre de temps. Il convenait de se hâter, ce qui venait d’arriver pouvant se produire encore. Toutefois, la marche était forcément lente dans ce sol défoncé, et l’on ne put regagner la route avant la nuit. Dix kilomètres séparaient encore ce point de Ponta-Delgada. En deux heures, cette distance fut franchie, et vingt minutes avant neuf heures les touristes montaient à bord du *Seamew*, brisés de fatigue, mais sains et saufs.

Leurs compagnons, revenus de Ribeira-Grande par la route, s’y trouvaient depuis longtemps. Ils s’applaudirent fort de leur paresse, quand ils connurent les incidents de cette journée.

Pourtant, plus qu’eux encore, il en fut un qui triompha. Et celui-là, ce fut Johnson, dont la résolution n’était pas si bête après tout.

“Il paraît donc, monsieur, dit-il à Robert sans aucune modestie, que vous avez failli y rester tous aujourd’hui?

-En effet, monsieur.

-Eh! eh! reprit Johnson, il m’en serait arrivé autant, si j’avais eu la sottise de vous suivre!

-C’est probable, monsieur, répondit Robert. Veuillez toutefois remarquer que nous sommes tous revenus à bon port.

-Sauf un guide, pourtant, à ce que j’ai entendu dire, riposta Johnson sans s’émouvoir. Les autres, ce sera pour une autre fois!... Mais dites-moi donc, s’il vous plaît, monsieur, en quittant Saint-Michel, nous allons à Madère, n’est-ce pas?

-À Madère, oui, monsieur, répondit Robert, sans savoir où l’original voulait en venir.

-Et, à Madère, y a-t-il aussi des tremblements de terre?

-Je ne le pense pas, dit Robert.

-Bon, fit Johnson. Nous disons donc qu’il n’y a absolument rien à craindre dans cette île délicieuse.

-Mon Dieu, répondit Robert, non... je ne vois pas... non... sauf peut-être les inondations...

-Des inondations! interrompit Johnson. Vous avez dit: inondations? Il y en a donc?

-Quelquefois.

-Fort bien, conclut froidement Johnson. Alors, monsieur, notez cela dans vos papiers, ajouta-t-il en scandant ses mots: Je ne mettrai pas les pieds dans votre damnée île de Madère!”

Et l’incorrigible poltron, tournant les talons, réintégra le coffee-room, où sa voix résonna bientôt, demandant quelque boisson apéritive et réconfortante.

Pendant que Johnson triomphait ainsi, une bien désagréable surprise accablait Thompson au contraire.

Il était à peine à bord, qu’une grande embarcation accostait le *Seamew.* En un instant, le pont fut envahi par une vingtaine d’agents de police conduits par un haut officier.

“Monsieur, prononça sèchement l’officier dans un anglais passable, l’aviso à vapeur le Camoens vient d’arriver dans notre port. Il nous apporte le récit des faits inqualifiables dont la rade d’Angra a été le théâtre. Je n’entends pas traiter cette affaire qui regarde notre diplomatie. Mais un point me concerne, et c’est la découverte du voleur. Votre conduite nous autorisant à penser que vous lui donnez asile, vous voudrez bien vous considérer comme consigné dans le port de Ponta- Delgada. Défense absolue à vos passagers et à vous-même de quitter le bord et de communiquer avec la terre, avant la perquisition qui sera faite dans votre navire.”

Ce discours avait été débité d’un ton qui n’admettait pas de réplique. Un Anglais peut être arrogant parfois. Il n’y fallait pas songer ici. Thompson se fit petit garçon.

“Quand cette perquisition aura-t-elle lieu? demanda-t-il.

-Demain, lui fut-il répondu.

-Et combien de temps mon navire sera-t-il retenu?

- Ceci, je l’ignore, conclut l’officier de police, mais autant qu’il le faudra, je suppose, pour que le coupable soit découvert et incarcéré. Serviteurs, messieurs.”

Sur ces mots, l’officier toucha légèrement le bord de sa casquette et regagna son embarcation, laissant Thompson absolument désespéré.

CHAPITRE XI

UNE NOCE À SAINT-MICHEL

Le réveil, au matin du 25 mai, fut morose à bord du *Seamew.* Depuis la veille, on aurait dû être parti, depuis l’avant-veille même, si un premier jour de retard n’avait été perdu avant d’atterrir à Fayal.

Personne n’avait songé à cette conséquence, pourtant logique, des événements de Tercère. Quand le *Seamew* avait quitté la rade d’Angra, aucun autre steamer n’y était mouillé. Pouvait-on prévoir que le Camoens y arriverait en temps utile pour rattraper les fugitifs à Saint-Michel?

Parmi les passagers, peu acceptaient avec une âme tranquille ce nouvel incident du voyage. La plupart ne se gênaient pas pour manifester leur mauvaise humeur, et, non sans quelque injustice, attribuaient à Thompson la responsabilité de cette déconvenue, dont il était, à tout prendre, la première victime. Quel besoin de braver ouvertement les autorités de Tercère? S’il avait agi avec plus de circonspection, l’affaire eût pris sans doute une autre tournure.

Bien plus! quand on remontait aux origines, c’est alors que la faute de l’agence apparaissait évidente. Si, contrairement à ses engagements, on n’était pas arrivé à Fayal le 18 au lieu du 17, on eût quitté Tercère dès le soir du 20 mai. Les passagers du *Seamew* n’eussent ainsi été mêlés en aucune façon à cette absurde histoire de voleurs dont on ne pouvait prévoir la solution.

Les irréconciliables Saunders et Hamilton se montraient, on serait surpris du contraire, les plus ardents à récriminer sur cette thèse. Aucune circonstance n’aurait pu être plus propice aux manifestations de leur hargneuse ponctualité. Le verbe haut, ils péroraient au milieu d’un cercle approbateur, au premier rang duquel figurait, tout en fumant sa pipe, Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam.

Le Hollandais avait-il compris dans quelle désagréable situation il se trouvait, ainsi que tous ses compagnons? En tout cas, il n’était pas chiche de signes approbateurs, en écoutant, sans d’ailleurs y comprendre un mot, les périodes des leaders de l’opposition.

Don Hygino, lui aussi, se faisait remarquer parmi les plus enflammés. Il s’emportait en paroles violentes. Il menaçait, lui Portugais, son propre pays des représailles du Cabinet de Saint James. Quel besoin de se déplacer travaillait donc le seigneur portugais? Quelle importance avait un retard, pour un homme qui, à l’entendre, ne savait que faire de son temps?

Thompson, quand il passait à côté du groupe hostile dont Saunders s’était constitué le grincheux Tyrtée, faisait humblement le gros dos. Dans son for intérieur, il excusait la mauvaise humeur de ses passagers. Proposer aux gens un agréable voyage d’un mois environ, leur faire verser dans ce but une somme respectable, puis les tenir bloqués dans le port de Ponta-Delgada, il y avait de quoi exaspérer les plus patients. Encore un peu, et ceux mêmes qui jusque-là lui étaient restés fidèles allaient l’abandonner, il le voyait, il le sentait. Sans se répandre en violentes récriminations comme Saunders, Hamilton et leurs sectateurs, certains, tels que le clergyman Cooley, avaient déjà insinué que, si les choses ne s’arrangeaient pas rapidement, ils renonceraient au voyage commencé et rentreraient en

Angleterre par le vapeur qui passe mensuellement à Saint-Michel. C'était là un symptôme grave.

En regard de cette imposante opposition, quels partisans demeuraient à Thompson? Uniquement la famille Blockhead, copiant servilement l'optimisme de son chef. L'excellent épicier honoraire arborait une face toujours aussi réjouie, et il déclarait à qui voulait l'entendre qu'il n'était pas, en somme, autrement mécontent de se trouver mêlé à des complications diplomatiques.

Quant aux Lindsay et à Roger, ils étaient neutres. Ni adversaires, ni partisans de l'administration. Des indifférents, simplement. Ils se préoccupaient fort peu des incidents dont leurs compagnons étaient si fort émus. À Ponta-Delgada, comme ailleurs, Alice et Dolly avaient l'agrément de leur réciproque présence, et pouvaient s'égayer de la verve joyeuse de l'officier français.

Aidé par les facilités de la vie de bord, celui-ci s'était aisément emparé d'une place abandonnée par le maussade et taciturne Jack. Peu après le départ, les deux soeurs et lui ne se quittaient déjà plus, et leur intimité ne laissait pas de faire jaser les bonnes langues de leurs compagnons. Mais qu'importait aux libres Américaines? Et Roger ne semblait pas se soucier davantage des cancans. Sans aucun mystère, il faisait bénéficier ses compagnes du précieux trésor de sa gaieté. Entre Dolly et lui particulièrement, c'était un éclat de rire perpétuel. En ce moment même, le nouvel incident était encore un prétexte à plaisanteries sans fin, et Roger ne cessait de s'égayer d'un voyage si bien organisé.

À cette intimité des trois passagers Robert se mêlait peu à peu. Quelle que fût sa réserve prudente, il aurait eu mauvaise grâce à résister trop rigoureusement aux avances de son compatriote et de Mrs. Lindsay, dont la curiosité était éveillée à son endroit. Il devenait donc moins sauvage, il causait. Et l’humble interprète, à mesure qu’il se laissait pénétrer, justifiait la flatteuse faveur des passagers qui l’admettaient en leur compagnie. Tout en restant sagement à sa place, il rejetait en quelque mesure auprès d’eux la livrée d’emprunt qu’il avait revêtue, il redevenait lui-même et s’abandonnait parfois à des causeries dans lesquelles il trouvait un charme toujours plus aigu. Lors de l’éboulement des Sept-Cités, c’est au hasard seul qu’il avait reporté les remerciements d’Alice Lindsay. Hasard en tout cas singulièrement aidé par ses nouvelles habitudes, qui multipliaient les rencontres entre les deux sœurs et lui.

Mais, même en comptant ces indifférents au nombre de ses partisans résolus, Thompson était obligé de convenir que son armée était bien réduite, et il se torturait la cervelle à rechercher les moyens de mettre fin à une aussi lamentable situation. Le premier était évidemment un recours au consul britannique. Malheureusement l’interdiction d’avoir avec la terre la moindre communication le rendait impossible. Thompson tenta sans succès une démarche auprès du lieutenant commandant les forces de police à bord du *Seamew.* Il fallait attendre la perquisition. Jusque-là, rien à faire.

Le capitaine Pip assistait de loin au colloque qui aboutit à cette conclusion. Sans les entendre, il devinait les paroles des deux interlocuteurs, et, de colère, il pétrissait outrageusement le bout de son nez, tandis que ses prunelles divergeaient en un terrifiant strabisme. Voir son armateur réduit à cette humiliation de solliciter le bon vouloir d’un policier portugais, cela dépassait l’entendement du brave capitaine. Si Thompson l’eût consulté, assurément l’honnête marin eût conseillé quelque coup de tête, comme par exemple de sortir fièrement en plein jour, couleurs au vent, sous le canon des forts.

Mais Thompson ne songeait pas à recourir aux lumières de son capitaine. Tout entier à la conciliation, il s’efforçait de temporiser, en satisfaisant tout le monde. Tâche difficile, s’il en fût.

Quelqu’un de moins patient, c’était la pauvre Thargela. Sans ces malheureux incidents, le moment n’était plus éloigné où elle serait devenue la femme de Joachimo. L’envie la brûlait d’aller trouver cet officier inflexible, qui le serait moins peut-être pour elle. Elle n’hésita plus à tenter cette audacieuse démarche, quand elle vit Joachimo, venu à sa rencontre, lui faire de son canot des gestes désespérés.

Thargela se dirigea résolument vers l’officier de police et lui exposa la situation où la mettait l’arrêté du gouverneur. Fut-ce la justice de sa cause, fut-ce plutôt le retentissement que cette histoire avait eu à travers l’île, ou simplement l’effet des beaux yeux de la suppliante? Toujours est-il que l’officier se laissa convaincre. Il envoya à terre un émissaire, qui revint bientôt en apportant l’ordre de débarquer Thargela, à la condition qu’en arrivant à terre elle se soumettrait à une visite minutieuse de ses vêtements et de sa personne. Cette clause eût indiqué, si on ne l’avait su déjà, combien le blocus était sévère.

Libre, la jeune Açorienne fut prompte à profiter de sa liberté. Auparavant toutefois, elle prit le temps d’aller remercier Thompson et Alice Lindsay, qui s’était montrée particulièrement favorable à sa cause. À tous deux elle dit un grand merci, en les invitant gentiment à venir au bal de ses noces avec tous leurs compagnons.

Thompson, à cette invitation, ne répondit que par un pâle sourire, tandis qu’Alice l’acceptait, avec les seules restrictions imposées par les circonstances.

Son devoir de gratitude rempli, Thargela s’envola joyeusement.

Il était près de quatre heures, quand une grande embarcation amena le long du bord trois personnes qu’il était facile, à leurs allures, de reconnaître pour des magistrats, accompagnés de deux femmes dont le rôle futur demeurait incertain. Parmi les arrivants, Thompson reconnut au premier coup d’œil le corrégidor laconique auquel, deux jours plus tôt, il avait eu affaire. Ce fut celui- ci qui prit la parole, et cela au moyen d’un seul mot, que Robert traduisit aussitôt.

“Perquisition”, dit-il, en mettant le pied sur le pont.

Thompson s’inclina en silence et attendit le bon plaisir de ses visiteurs, qui, avant de procéder à la perquisition annoncée, s’étaient arrêtés quelques instants à la coupée, et jetaient au préalable sur l’ensemble du navire un coup d’œil investigateur.

Quand il jugea que cet examen avait assez duré, le corrégidor invita Thompson à faire monter les passagers sur le spardeck. La chose étant faite par avance,

Thompson se borna à montrer du geste le cercle de visages inquiets dont ils étaient entourés.

“Messieurs, prononça le corrégidor, un vol estimé à dix mille contos de réis - six millions de francs - a été commis à Tercère. Une prime de un pour cent, soit cent contos de réis - soixante mille francs - est offerte à qui fera découvrir le voleur. C’est vous dire l’importance que le gouvernement attache à cette affaire qui a soulevé d’indignation nos religieuses populations. En raison de la conduite suspecte de vos armateurs et de votre capitaine (ici, le capitaine Pip échangea avec Artimon un regard de pitié, et, du haut de la passerelle, cracha dans la mer avec mépris), le voleur est véhémentement soupçonné de se cacher parmi vous. Vous avez donc intérêt, si vous voulez dissiper tout malentendu, à vous prêter docilement aux instructions que je suis chargé de vous transmettre, et que je ferais au besoin exécuter par la force.”

Le corrégidor fit une pause. Il avait débité d’une haleine ce discours évidemment préparé. Désormais, il allait revenir à son habituelle concision.

“Passagers sur le spardeck avec officiers, dit-il en se tournant vers Thompson, équipage sur le gaillard. Seront gardés par mes hommes, pendant que nous procéderons à la visite du bâtiment.”

Conformément à cet ordre traduit par Robert, tous, jusqu’au capitaine mâchonnant rageusement sa moustache, se groupèrent sur le spardeck, tandis que les hommes d’équipage étaient refoulés sur le gaillard d’avant. Un seul des passagers se sépara de ses compagnons et s’engagea, sans que personne le vît, dans le couloir central conduisant aux cabines. Ce passager, c’était don Hygino.

Qu’avait-il donc à faire dans l’intérieur du navire? Pourquoi ce Portugais, seul, désobéissait-il aux ordres de l’autorité portugaise? Peut-être, après tout, allait-il simplement chercher ses deux frères qu’on avait à peine aperçus depuis leur embarquement.

“Vos passagers sont au complet? demanda le corrégidor quand tout le monde fut réuni. Au reste, veuillez faire l’appel.”

Thompson obtempéra à ce désir. Mais, arrivé aux dernières lignes, ce fut en vain qu’il appela don Hygino, don Jacopo et don Christopho da Veiga.

Le corrégidor fronça le sourcil.

“Faites venir ces messieurs”, commanda-t-il.

Un domestique dépêché à leur recherche ramena bientôt les trois frères. Visiblement, ils n’étaient pas dans leur assiette. Rouges, congestionnés, on eût juré qu’ils sortaient d’une violente querelle.

“Comment se fait-il, messieurs, que vous ne soyez pas avec vos compagnons?” demanda le corrégidor d’un ton sévère.

Ce fut comme d’habitude don Hygino qui répondit au nom de ses frères comme au sien.

“Mes frères et moi, monsieur, dit-il paisiblement, nous ignorions votre présence à bord.

- Hum!...” fit le corrégidor.

Robert ne dit rien. Il eût fait cependant le serment d’avoir aperçu tout à l’heure le noble Portugais mêlé aux autres passagers. Sagement, il garda pour lui cette observation.

Au reste, le corrégidor n’avait pas fini son enquête relative aux frères da Veiga.

“Vous êtes Portugais, je crois, messieurs? demanda-t-il.

-En effet, répondit don Hygino.

-C’est à Londres que vous vous êtes embarqués à bord de ce navire?

-Pardonnez-nous, monsieur, à Tercère seulement, répliqua don Hygino.

-Hum! fit pour la seconde fois le corrégidor, en lançant à don Hygino un regard perçant. Et, bien entendu, vous n’avez sur ce navire aucune relation personnelle?”

Hamilton bouillait intérieurement en écoutant cet incroyable interrogatoire. Parle-t-on ainsi à des gentlemen? Il n’y put tenir.

“Pardon, monsieur, dit-il, ces messieurs da Veiga ne manquent pas de relations ici, et ils ne seraient pas embarrassés d’y trouver des répondants.

-À qui ai-je l’honneur?...” demanda le pointu corrégidor.

Hamilton se redressa de manière à friser un lumbago.

“Au baronnet Sir Georges Hamilton”, dit-il d’un ton rogue.

Le corrégidor ne parut pas autrement ébloui.

“Fort bien, monsieur, fort bien!” dit-il assez cavalièrement.

Puis, ayant recommandé une fois de plus à tous les passagers de ne quitter le spardeck sous aucun prétexte, il disparut par l’un des capots, tandis que don Hygino échangeait avec Hamilton une chaleureuse poignée de main.

La perquisition était commencée. Successivement, les furets de la police allaient parcourir les soutes, la cale, la machinerie, le poste de l’équipage, pour finir par les cabines des passagers. Au cours de cette visite méticuleuse, conduite par un magistrat dont l’aspect disait la finesse, pas un coin, si caché fût-il, ne resterait certainement inexploré.

Les passagers durent attendre longtemps. Deux heures s’écoulèrent avant que le corrégidor revînt sur le pont. Quelques minutes après six heures, il reparut enfin.

L’expression renfrognée de son visage montrait assez qu’il n’avait rien trouvé.

“Dépêchons, dépêchons, messieurs, dit-il, en mettant le pied sur le spardeck. Nous allons maintenant procéder à la visite du pont et des agrès. Pendant ce temps, ces messieurs et ces dames voudront bien laisser inspecter leur personne.”

Un mouvement de révolte courut parmi les passagers. L’escorte de police resserra le cercle.

“Fort bien! fort bien! dit le corrégidor. Vous êtes libres. Je me contenterai d’emmener les récalcitrants, et de les incarcérer jusqu’à ce que le gouverneur ait statué. Gardes, veuillez commencer l’appel.”

Toute résistance était impossible. L’un après l’autre, chaque passager descendit dans sa cabine respective en compagnie d’un agent. C’est alors que fut expliquée la présence des deux femmes amenées par le corrégidor.

Celui-ci achevait de parcourir le navire. Les cordages furent soulevés, des hommes furent envoyés dans les hunes et jusqu’à la pomme des mâts. Pas un recoin ne fut oublié, au cours de cette perquisition conduite avec une admirable méthode.

Mais le meilleur limier ne peut rien trouver où il n’y a rien, et il était écrit que le malin corrégidor reviendrait bredouille de cette chasse impossible. À sept heures, tout avait été vu et revu inutilement.

“Libre pratique vous est rendue, dit-il aigrement à Thompson en se dirigeant vers la coupée.

-Nous pouvons donc descendre à terre?

-Parfaitement.

-Et quitter l’île aussi sans doute? insinua Thompson.

-Pour cela, monsieur, répondit sèchement le corrégidor, vous voudrez bien attendre que nous ayons reçu une réponse au rapport que nous allons incessamment envoyer à Tercère.”

Et, tandis que Thompson demeurait sur place, accablé, le corrégidor disparut, emmenant avec lui son escorte d’agents, de visiteurs et de visiteuses. Seuls, dix hommes de police commandés par un lieutenant demeuraient à bord, chargés de surveiller le navire consigné.

Pendant le dîner, les conversations furent vives. On était unanime à qualifier sévèrement la conduite du Gouvernement portugais. Retenir le *Seamew* avant la perquisition, passe encore! Mais après!

On se lasse de tout cependant, de la colère comme du reste. Bientôt, Alice put, au milieu d’un calme relatif, se risquer à transmettre à ses compagnons l’invitation de la gentille Thargela. Cette invitation fut mieux accueillie qu’on n’eût pu le craindre de ces touristes irrités. Obligés de rester à bord toute cette longue journée, ils acceptèrent avec plaisir la perspective d’une promenade nocturne et d’un spectacle original. C’est donc à peu près au complet que, vers neuf heures, ils entrèrent dans la salle où Thargela célébrait par un bal son union avec son cher Joachimo, et dans laquelle une centaine d’hommes et femmes dansaient à l’aise aux sons d’une musique endiablée.

Des acclamations accueillirent les Anglais. N'étaient-ils pas les véritables artisans du bonheur des deux jeunes gens? Sans leur présence, la noce n'eût pas été complète. Aussi, leur fit-on fête, et de bon cœur.

Un instant suspendues, les danses reprirent bientôt. Les quadrilles succédaient aux polkas, les valses aux mazurkas. Mais vers onze heures un cri général s'éleva:

“La landun! la landun!”

À ce signal, tous firent cercle, et Thargela et Joachimo se mirent en devoir de satisfaire leurs amis, en exécutant cette danse nationale, pour laquelle les Açoriens de toutes classes ont une véritable passion.

La landun est sœur jumelle du boléro espagnol. Ce sont mêmes piétinements, mêmes renversements souples, mêmes mines mutines et provocantes. Il est à croire que Thargela exécuta habilement cette difficile danse de caractère, car de longs applaudissements saluèrent le jeune couple quand les castagnettes firent silence.

Vers minuit, la fête battait son plein. Le vin de Fayal avait porté au comble la gaieté des danseurs. Les passagers du *Seamew* se disposèrent à partir.

Auparavant cependant, Alice Lindsay, après avoir pris l'avis de ses compagnons, résolut de mettre à exécution une pensée qui lui était venue. Puisque le hasard les avait mêlés aux destinées de ces jeunes gens, pourquoi, par un élan de cœur, ne pas achever ce qu'ils avaient commencé? Thargela, qui avait si ingénument réclamé leur protection, l'avait obtenue. Restait maintenant à vivre. Certes, avec un courageux garçon comme Joachimo, le nouveau ménage avait toutes chances d'y parvenir largement. Mais une petite somme d’argent, que les touristes n’auraient pas de peine à réunir entre eux, faciliterait en tout cas singulièrement l’avenir. Ce serait la dot de Thargela, et Joachimo, devenu son heureux mari, aurait fait du même coup une bonne affaire. Avoir marié Thargela, c’était bien. Assurer son avenir, c’était mieux encore.

Alice tendit donc la main pour sa petite protégée, et il est juste de dire qu’aucun de ses compagnons ne lui marchanda son obole.

Blockhead, le premier, se saigna de deux livres (cinquante francs), ce qui est raisonnable pour un épicier honoraire, et Saunders, Thompson et Tigg ne crurent pas pouvoir donner une somme moindre.

Johnson eût donné aussi sans doute, si, fidèle à son serment, il n’était demeuré à bord du *Seamew.*

Roger, entre les mains de la gracieuse passagère, versa galamment cinq louis en or de France.

Hamilton, qui, malgré son fâcheux caractère, avait bon cœur au fond, diminua dans cette occasion ses capitaux d’une belle bank-note de quatre livres (cent francs), qui parut donnée avec plaisir.

Alice remercia chaudement le généreux baronnet; puis, continuant sa charitable quête, elle demeura saisie, en se trouvant en face de Robert.

Sans lui dire un mot, sans paraître honteux de la modicité de son offrande, Robert, avec un geste plein d’une grâce fière, remit à la jolie quêteuse une pièce portugaise de mille réis (six francs), et tout d’un coup Alice se sentit rougir malgré elle, jusqu’à la racine des cheveux.

Irritée de cette faiblesse, dont elle n’eût pu dire la cause, Alice remercia d’un signe de tête et, se détournant rapidement, sollicita le passager suivant.

Le passager suivant n’était autre que le noble don Hygino. Si Hamilton avait fait princièrement les choses, don Hygino les fit royalement. Une bank-note de quarante livres (mille francs), tel fut le don magnifique dont il gratifia Mrs. Lindsay. Peut-être y mit-il un peu trop d’ostentation, peut-être déplia-t-il la bank-note de manière que tout le monde pût en lire la valeur, avec une lenteur que le goût réprouvait. Mais c’était là péché de Méridional, et Alice ne s’arrêta pas à de pareilles vétilles.

Électrisés par cet exemple, les autres passagers dénouèrent largement les cordons de leur bourse. Personne ne refusa son offrande, plus ou moins forte selon sa fortune.

La quête terminée, Alice annonça glorieusement un total de deux cents livres (cinq mille francs). C’était un résultat superbe. Pour l’obtenir, pour arrondir ainsi la somme, Alice avait dû s’imposer une large contribution personnelle. Mais elle n’imita pas l’ostentation vaniteuse de don Hygino, et, ce qu’elle donna, personne ne le sut.

Par le même sentiment de modestie et d’effacement volontaire, elle ne voulut pas remettre elle-même à la mariée cette dot inespérée. Elle chargea de ce soin les jeunes et sauvages époux qui faisaient à bord du *Seamew* un si singulier voyage. Ils étaient présents ce soir-là par grand hasard, et la commission leur revenait de droit.

Ce fut la jeune Anglaise qui porta à sa soeur Portugaise la dot que l’on venait de constituer, et elle accompagna le cadeau d’un affectueux baiser. Elle ne voulut pas néanmoins taire le nom de la charitable passagère, à laquelle, en réalité, Thargela devait sa reconnaissance. Alice dut donc subir les remerciements enflammés de Thargela et de son mari. Cinq mille francs, c’était pour eux la fortune, et jamais ils n’oublieraient la bonne fée qui avait assuré leur bonheur.

Les autres passagers eurent leur part de cette explosion de gratitude. Thargela, fondant en larmes, allait de l’un à l’autre, et Joachimo, la tête perdue, serrait des mains et des mains au petit bonheur.

Il fallait cependant partir.

À grand-peine on calma l’émotion des nouveaux mariés, et les touristes se dirigèrent vers la porte de la salle, au milieu d’enthousiastes acclamations.

Jusqu’au bout, Thargela et Joachimo les escortèrent, les payant au centuple du bienfait par le spectacle de leur délicieuse émotion. Et, quand ils eurent enfin réussi à sortir, Thargela et Joachimo restèrent encore sur le pas de la porte, la main dans la main, les yeux ouverts sur la nuit, regardant s’effacer et disparaître ces passants d’un jour, ces voyageurs continuant un voyage qui, par la force de cette bonne action, ainsi semée en un coin du vaste monde, ne pouvait plus désormais être inutile.

CHAPITRE XII

SINGULIERS EFFETS DU MAL DE MER

Lorsque les passagers, en quittant Thargela et son heureux mari, étaient rentrés à bord, ils avaient trouvé cinq des agents de police préposés à leur surveillance se promenant régulièrement sur le pont, pendant que leurs cinq camarades, dans le poste de l’équipage, et leur officier, dans la chambre mise à sa disposition, se livraient aux douceurs du sommeil. Et cependant, en dépit de cette garde vigilante, le *Seamew*, quand se leva le soleil du 26 mai, flottait librement sur la vaste mer, à plus de trente milles de Saint-Michel.

Cela devenait une habitude.

Pour fuir, il n’avait pas fallu, cette fois, braver les projectiles portugais. Cela s’était fait tout seul, à la faveur d’une brume épaisse qui, vers deux heures du matin, avait recouvert toutes choses sous un voile impénétrable. Le lieutenant et ses cinq hommes endormis enfermés à double tour, les cinq autres terrassés en un tour de main, le *Seamew* était bien tranquillement parti, absolument comme si l’arrêté du gouvernement n’avait pas existé.

Une heure plus tard, le lieutenant délivré s’était vu contraint de subir la loi du vainqueur et d’accepter une capitulation désastreuse. Ses hommes avaient été désarmés, et le *Seamew* les emportait avec lui, pour les déposer seulement à Madère, au moment où il s’éloignerait de cette possession portugaise.

Terrassé par ce revers soudain, le malheureux lieutenant se promenait d’un air soucieux. Et, songeant combien cette aventure nuirait à son avancement, il faisait piteuse mine, tandis que, dans l’aube grandissante, se découvrait la libre étendue de la mer.

Le capitaine Pip, lui non plus, n’était pas allé chercher un repos cependant bien mérité. Indépendamment du danger qui pouvait résulter d’un groupe de récifs nommé “Les Fourmis”, l’apparence du temps nécessitait sa présence. Bien qu’il n’y eût à proprement parler aucune menace de tempête, la mer était grosse d’une manière anormale; le *Seamew*, la prenant debout, avançait avec peine et tanguait lourdement.

Si le capitaine assumait ainsi tous les soucis du bord, c’était apparemment pour que les autres en profitassent. Tel était l’avis de Thompson qui, la conscience en paix, dormait à poings fermés depuis le départ, quand le contact d’une main se posant sur son épaule le réveilla en sursaut.

“Qu’y a-t-il? Quelle heure est-il?” demanda-t-il en se frottant les yeux.

Il aperçut alors la face d’ébène du second maître d’hôtel, master Sandweach.

“Il est six heures, monsieur, répondit respectueusement celui-ci.

-Et qu’y a-t-il? répéta Thompson d’un ton impatient.

-C’est un valet de chambre des passagers qui m’envoie vous prévenir qu’on entend des gémissements terribles dans la cabine occupée par le gentleman portugais et ses deux frères. Il craint qu’ils ne soient gravement malades et ne sait que faire.”

Thompson réfléchit que les choses devaient être graves en effet pour que l’on eût songé à venir le réveiller.

“C’est bon. J’y vais”, répondit-il avec humeur.

Quand il fut dans la chambre des seigneurs portugais, il ne regretta pas d’être venu. Don Hygino et ses frères paraissaient effectivement bien malades. Livides, les yeux clos, la face couverte d’une sueur d’agonie, ils demeuraient sur le dos, immobiles, mais poussant sans interruption des clameurs déchirantes. Leurs souffrances devaient être intolérables.

“Quel damné concert!” murmura Thompson.

Du premier coup d’œil il avait été rassuré, en reconnaissant les signes d’un mal de mer provoqué par la grosse houle actuelle. Pour être d’une violence peu habituelle, ce malaise n’en devenait pas plus dangereux.

Toutefois, l’humanité commandait de venir au secours de ces pauvres gens, et Thompson, on doit le dire à sa louange, ne faillit pas à ce devoir. Une heure durant, il leur prodigua des soins dévoués, et ce ne fut pas de sa faute s’ils demeurèrent inefficaces.

Mais, en vérité, il semblait plutôt que l’état des trois frères allait en s’aggravant. Thompson, en outre, remarquait avec inquiétude des symptômes que l’on n’a pas coutume d’observer dans le mal de mer. De temps à autre, les malades de livides, devenaient tout à coup écarlates. Ils semblaient faire alors des efforts surhumains, pour retomber bientôt épuisés, la respiration sifflante, la peau glacée, la face revenue à une pâleur cadavérique.

Thompson, à sept heures, jugea la situation si critique qu’il fit réveiller Robert. Il éprouvait le besoin d’un conseil.

Robert ne put malheureusement en donner à son chef hiérarchique, et tous deux durent se reconnaître impuissants à soulager les trois malades auxquels le nom de moribonds commençait à mieux convenir.

“Il faut pourtant tenter quelque chose, dit Robert vers huit heures. Si nous essayions de faire aboutir ces nausées qui s’arrêtent toujours à moitié route?

-Comment? interrogea Thompson. Connaissez-vous un moyen?

-L’eau chaude, suggéra Robert.

-Essayons!” s’écria Thompson qui perdait la tête.

Le moyen héroïque indiqué par Robert fut d’un effet immédiat. Dès le second verre d’eau chaude, les infirmiers improvisés obtinrent la preuve certaine de son efficacité.

Mais qu’ont donc vu Robert et Thompson? Qu’ont-ils cru voir plutôt?

Le doute est facile à éclaircir. L’eau ne manque pas. Les cuvettes sont donc nettoyées avec précaution, et alors...

Alors, quel éblouissement!

Des émeraudes, des rubis, des diamants, plus de cinquante pierres précieuses lancent leurs éclairs au fond de ces cuvettes souillées!

Éperdus, Thompson et Robert se regardent en silence. En un instant, tout s’est expliqué pour eux. Les voilà donc, les sacrilèges voleurs du crucifix de Tercère, les chefs tout au moins, et elle ne se trompait pas, la police açorienne, qui accusait le *Seamew* de leur servir de refuge! Quelle meilleure cachette que leurs estomacs auraient pu trouver les coupables menacés par la perquisition de Saint- Michel?

Robert, le premier, reprend son sang-froid.

“Ce secret est trop grand pour que nous le possédions à nous seuls, dit-il. Je vous demande donc la permission de faire venir un de vos passagers, le révérend Cooley, par exemple.”

Thompson acquiesce d’un signe de tête, et un domestique est envoyé à la recherche du respectable clergyman.

Quand celui-ci arriva à son tour dans la cabine où haletaient les frères da Veiga, la situation était la même. Ne pouvait-il se faire toutefois que les voleurs, au fond de leurs estomacs, recelassent encore quelques-unes des pierres dérobées? Pour s’en assurer, il n’y avait qu’à continuer le traitement qui avait déjà si bien réussi.

Bientôt, plus de trois cents pierres précieuses, de superbes diamants en majorité, furent récupérées par ce moyen original.

Il parut alors que les trois malades, débarrassés de leur secret, étaient notablement soulagés. S’ils souffraient toujours, il ne s’agissait plus maintenant que du mal de mer habituel, et, de ce mal-là, aucun effet funeste n’était à redouter. On rédigea alors de ces singuliers événements un procès-verbal dont le pasteur Cooley resta dépositaire, puis les pierres, comptées successivement par les trois conjurés, furent remises à Thompson qui, après les avoir enfermées, s’en fut à la recherche du lieutenant réduit quelques heures plus tôt à une cruelle capitulation.

Mais, comme il sortait du rouf, une ombre se dressa devant lui, et cette ombre, c’était l’inévitable Saunders flanqué de son reflet Sir Hamilton, tous deux dignes, calmes et sévères, comme il convient à des passagers mécontents.

“Un mot, monsieur, dit Saunders, en arrêtant Thompson au passage. Nous voudrions savoir jusqu’où vous comptez pousser cette plaisanterie.

-Quelle plaisanterie? murmura Thompson impatiemment. Qu’y a-t-il encore?

-Sur quel ton vous le prenez, monsieur! s’écria Hamilton avec hauteur. Oui, monsieur, nous entendons savoir enfin si vous continuerez longtemps à mentir audacieusement à toutes les promesses d’un programme auquel nous avons été assez sots pour ajouter foi!”

Comment! encore cette persécution du programme! Thompson, préoccupé de questions autrement graves, haussa les épaules et, écartant nerveusement Hamilton, s’élança sur le pont, laissant le baronnet suffoqué d’un pareil procédé.

Ayant trouvé le lieutenant, il l’entraîna dans sa cabine par l’annonce d’une communication importante.

“Lieutenant, dit-il dès qu’ils furent assis, le sort des armes vous a été contraire tantôt.

-En effet, monsieur, répondit le lieutenant en se tenant sur la réserve.

-Et nous vous emmenons présentement à Madère.

-Il paraît, monsieur.

-C’est là pour nous deux, lieutenant, une fâcheuse aventure, j’ose le dire, et j’imagine que si un bon moyen se présentait d’arranger cette affaire à notre commun bénéfice!...

-Difficile! dit le lieutenant.

-Peut-être! reprit Thompson. Vous n’ignorez pas, lieutenant, que votre gouvernement a offert une prime de un pour cent à qui ferait pincer le voleur?

-Oui, reconnut le lieutenant, mais je ne vois pas...

-Attendez, lieutenant, attendez! Nous pouvons peut- être nous entendre. Car, ce voleur... ces voleurs, plutôt...

-Ces voleurs?...

-Je les tiens, dit tranquillement Thompson.

-Hein? fit le lieutenant.

-Je les tiens, répéta Thompson, et je tiens aussi une bonne partie au moins des diamants volés!”

Le lieutenant, pâle d’émotion, incapable d’articuler une parole, avait saisi le bras de Thompson. Celui-ci acheva de formuler sa proposition.

“Dès lors, vous comprenez, lieutenant, cette prime de un pour cent m’appartient. Eh bien! arrangez notre affaire d’une manière quelconque, en disant par exemple que vous êtes parti volontairement dans le but de pincer les voleurs dont la présence donnera beaucoup d’autorité à votre affirmation, et je suis prêt à vous abandonner une part, le cinquième, le quart au besoin, de la prime qui m’est due.

-Oh, çà! fit le lieutenant avec une indifférence qui n’avait rien de flatteur pour la générosité du gouvernement portugais.

-Eh bien! acceptez-vous? insista Thompson.

-Et si je refuse?

-Si vous refusez, répondit Thompson, mettons que je n’aie rien dit. Je vous dépose paisiblement à Madère, et je garde mes voleurs, pour les remettre entre les mains du consul d’Angleterre, qui saura bien m’en assurer tout l’honneur et le profit.”

Un travail rapide se faisait dans l’esprit du lieutenant. Refuser les propositions de Thompson, c’était retourner à Saint-Michel l’oreille basse, avec la honte de s’être laissé surprendre comme un enfant. Les accepter, c’était au contraire revenir avec les honneurs de la guerre, car le succès justifie tout. Même en comptant comme absolument négligeable la chance de toucher jamais un sou de la prime promise, cette aventure lui serait encore profitable, en le servant dans l’esprit de ses chefs, puisqu’il pourrait, dans ce cas, s’attribuer tout le mérite de la capture.

“J’accepte, dit-il d’un ton résolu.

-Fort bien, approuva Thompson. Nous allons, dans ce cas, s’il vous plaît, régler cette affaire sur-le-champ.”

Le compromis, dont les bases venaient d’être jetées, fut rédigé et signé par les deux parties. Thompson remit aussitôt à l’officier les pierreries retrouvées et s’en fit délivrer reçu. Il put alors respirer, et se féliciter d’avoir mené à bonne fin cette importante affaire.

Pendant que Thompson conduisait aussi bien cette négociation, une colère redoutable s’amoncelait au même instant dans le cœur d’Hamilton.

Revenu de la stupéfaction où l’avait plongé l’impertinence de Thompson, le baronnet, tout bouillant de fureur, s’était élancé à la poursuite de l’insolent. Il ne put le retrouver. Il se retourna alors vers le capitaine Pip, qui, descendu de la passerelle, se promenait innocemment en fumant le cigare matinal.

“Captain, prononça-t-il d’une voix contenue, pourrais- je savoir à qui je dois sur ce bord présenter mes réclamations?”

Le capitaine ouvrit les bras en signe d’ignorance.

“À Artimon, peut-être! formula-t-il d’un air rêveur.

-Captain! s’écria le baronnet rouge de colère.

-Sir? répliqua le capitaine paisiblement.

-Captain, je trouve qu’on s’est suffisamment moqué de moi ici. Puisque vous êtes responsable de la marche du navire, daignerez-vous me dire pourquoi je puis encore apercevoir à l’arrière les roches des “Fourmis “? Pourquoi, à dix heures du matin, nous sommes à peine par le travers de Sainte-Marie? Pourquoi, après huit heures de navigation, l’île de Saint-Michel est encore en vue?

-Saint-Michel? répéta le capitaine avec incrédulité.

-Oui, monsieur, Saint-Michel”, affirma sévèrement le baronnet, en montrant un point noir coupant la ligne de l’horizon entre les Fourmis et Sainte-Marie.

Le capitaine s’était emparé d’une longue-vue.

“Si c’est là Saint-Michel, dit-il enfin d’un air goguenard, c’est donc que Saint-Michel est une île à vapeur! Car elle fume, monsieur.”

Et le capitaine remonta sur sa passerelle, tandis que le baronnet furieux combinait en soi-même de terribles projets de vengeance.

Pour cavalièrement qu’elles fussent reçues, les observations d’Hamilton n’en étaient pas moins justes. Mais le capitaine ne l’avait pas attendu pour les faire lui- même. Dès le lever du jour, le sillage lui avait montré que la vitesse du *Seamew* était, de douze nœuds, subitement tombée à huit environ.

Mr. Bishop, appelé, ne fut pas rassurant. Depuis l’appareillage, il poussait en vain ses feux. Impossible de faire monter la pression. La faute en était certainement à la mauvaise qualité du charbon livré à Horta. Jusque-là on avait vécu sur les réserves d’Angleterre, mais, depuis le départ de Saint-Michel, force avait bien été de recourir à la houille nouvellement embarquée, et le fâcheux effet s’en faisait aussitôt sentir.

Mr. Bishop n’ajouta, et le capitaine ne lui demanda rien de plus. Des hommes sensés ne s’insurgent pas contre l’impossible. Puisqu’on ne pouvait dépasser huit nœuds, on ferait huit nœuds, voilà tout, et l’on arriverait à Madère avec un nouveau retard de vingt-quatre heures. La mer manifestant une tendance à mollir, le baromètre demeurant à une hauteur raisonnable, le capitaine n’avait pas à s’inquiéter, et il ne s’inquiéta pas. Il garda seulement de cette déconvenue un peu de mauvaise humeur, dont Hamilton devait recevoir le trop-plein.

Cet orage, tout réduit qu’il fût, suffit pourtant à débarrasser le brave capitaine de son excès d’électricité. Un caractère aussi égal ne pouvait tarder à reprendre son équilibre. Ce fut donc dans les meilleures dispositions qu’il s’assit en face de Thompson, à la table du déjeuner, que l’agitation des flots avait largement dégarnie.

Toutefois son humeur s’assombrit de nouveau, quand, remonté sur le pont, il vit le même point que Sir Hamilton lui avait signalé, obstinément fixé dans le sillage du *Seamew*. Cette obstination lui donna à penser.

Ce vapeur ne pouvait-il avoir été envoyé à sa poursuite par le gouverneur de Saint-Michel? Il est vrai que ce pouvait être tout aussi bien un paquebot effectuant sa traversée normale entre les Açores et Madère. L’avenir fournirait la solution de ce problème.

Ces soucis de la passerelle, le spardeck les ignorait, et pourtant il n’avait pas son animation coutumière. Non seulement la grosse houle avait diminué le nombre de ses habituels promeneurs, mais encore, semblait-il, le mécontentement de la veille continuait à peser sur les passagers demeurés valides. Ils allaient et venaient isolément. Réfractaires aux invites des fauteuils groupés amicalement, la plupart restaient debout, solitaires, accrochés aux batayoles pour conserver leur équilibre.

Hamilton, le cœur ulcéré, offrait au vent du ciel son front qu’avait rougi l’outrage. Pour rien au monde, il n’eût adressé la parole à un être vivant, et son ressentiment s’en prenait à toute la nature. Retranché dans sa dignité, il ressassait à satiété les scènes du matin, tandis que sa fille, sous la surveillance de Lady Hamilton, causait avec Tigg, rendu à la liberté par le malaise des Misses Blockhead.

Hamilton constatait cette aimable causerie. Lui, il était seul. Si du moins son ami don Hygino avait été là! Mais don Hygino gisait dans sa cabine, terrassé par le mal de mer, et Hamilton se jugeait avec amertume abandonné de tout l'univers.

La tristesse du baronnet avait-elle donc déteint sur ses compagnons? On l'eût juré, à voir leurs visages moroses.

Dolly occupée à quelques rangements, Alice Lindsay, momentanément seule, était allée s'asseoir à l'extrême arrière, à une place qu'elle affectionnait particulièrement. Accoudée à la batayole du couronnement, elle laissait errer sur la mer un regard vague et chargé d'une tristesse sans cause dont son âme était appesantie.

À dix pas d'elle, Jack, immobile, semblait poursuivre en lui-même quelque travail difficile et compliqué.

Quand il estima avoir suffisamment réfléchi, Jack, d'un pas lent, se dirigea vers sa belle-sœur et s'assit à son côté.

Perdue dans sa rêverie, celle-ci ne s'aperçut même pas de la présence du sombre et taciturne personnage.

“Alice!” murmura Jack.

Mrs. Lindsay tressaillit et fixa sur son beau-frère des yeux voilés encore de la brume fine des lointains contemplés.

“Alice, reprit Jack, je voudrais avoir avec vous un sérieux entretien. Le moment me paraît convenable, le spardeck étant à peu près désert. Voulez-vous, Alice, m’accorder cet entretien?

-Je vous écoute, Jack, répondit avec bonté Alice, étonnée de ce solennel préambule.

-Je vais, vous le savez, reprit Jack après un instant de silence, atteindre trente et un ans. Ce n’est pas un grand âge, certes, mais je n’ai cependant pas de temps à perdre si je veux modifier mon existence. Celle que j’ai menée jusqu’ici me fait horreur. J’en veux une autre, utile et féconde. Bref! Alice, j’ai songé au mariage.

-C’est fort bien pensé, Jack, approuva Alice, étonnée seulement du moment choisi pour une pareille confidence. Il ne vous reste plus qu’à trouver une femme, et ce ne sera pas pour vous chose difficile.

-C’est fait, Alice, interrompit Jack Lindsay. Ou du moins il est une femme que j’ai choisie au fond du cœur. Depuis longtemps, je la connais, je l’estime et je l’aime. Mais, elle, Alice, m’aime-t-elle, ou puis-je espérer qu’elle m’aimera jamais?”

Un merveilleux instinct sert les femmes et les avertit du danger. Aux premiers mots de Jack, Alice avait senti celui qui la menaçait. Détournant la tête, c’est d’une voix brève et froide qu’elle répondit:

“Il faudrait lui demander cela à elle-même, mon cher.”

Jack perçut le changement qui durcissait la voix de sa belle-sœur. Un éclair de colère passa dans ses yeux.

Cependant, par un violent effort, il réussit à se vaincre.

“C’est ce que je fais en ce moment, Alice, répondit-il, et j’attends avec angoisse son arrêt... Alice, reprit Jack, après avoir vainement attendu une réponse, ne voudriez- vous pas garder le même nom, en acceptant un nouveau mari?”

Froissant son mouchoir entre ses doigts crispés, les yeux pleins de larmes nerveuses, Alice se retourna vivement vers son beau-frère.

“Voilà une passion bien subite et une demande bien imprévue! dit-elle d’un ton d’amère raillerie.

-Passion subite! s’écria Jack. Pouvez-vous dire cela, Alice? Serait-il vrai que vous n’ayez jamais remarqué combien je vous aime?

-Ne prononcez plus ce mot! interrompit Alice avec violence. Non, je ne me suis jamais aperçue de rien de ce que vous dites. Ah! Dieu, si j’avais remarqué quelque chose, aurais-je été si insensée de vous laisser nous accompagner dans ce voyage?

-Vous êtes dure pour moi, Alice, dit Jack. En quoi ai- je pu mériter une pareille colère? Si ma démarche est à tel point une surprise pour vous, imposez-moi une attente, mettez-moi à l’épreuve, mais ne m’enlevez pas tout espoir.”

Mrs. Lindsay regarda son beau-frère bien en face.

“Tout espoir au contraire”, dit-elle fermement.

Jack laissa tomber son front dans ses mains avec toutes les apparences d’une profonde douleur. Alice en fut émue.

“Voyons, Jack, reprit-elle plus doucement, il y a là- dedans quelque malentendu. Peut-être vous trompez-vous involontairement. Peut-être, acheva-t-elle en hésitant, nos situations respectives sont-elles en partie la cause de cette erreur.

-Que voulez-vous dire? demanda Jack en relevant la tête.

-J’ai été si peu de temps la femme de votre frère, poursuivit Alice en choisissant ses mots avec précaution, que peut-être avez-vous été blessé en me voyant recueillir sa fortune entière... Peut-être vous êtes-vous jugé lésé... dépouillé...”

Jack Lindsay fit un geste de protestation.

“Je suis sur un terrain brûlant, continua Alice. Je fais tous mes efforts pour éviter de prononcer un seul mot qui puisse vous peiner. Il faudra me pardonner, si je n’y parviens pas. Peut-être aussi, d’un autre côté, vous êtes-vous trouvé gêné, qui sait?... presque ruiné même. Il est naturel que vous ayez pensé alors à un mariage qui rétablirait vos affaires et réparerait en même temps ce qui est à vos yeux une injustice. Tout entier à ce projet, vous aurez pris alors pour de l’amour une simple affection familiale.

-Concluez, fit Jack d’une voix sèche.

-Eh bien! Jack, si telle est la vérité, tout peut encore s’arranger. Puisque j’ai le bonheur d’être riche, très riche même, ne puis-je venir fraternellement à votre secours? Ne puis-je... éteindre votre passif... s’il existe... vous aider ensuite dans la vie, et... finalement... vous constituer une dot vous permettant de trouver une femme mieux disposée que votre belle-sœur.

-Un os à ronger, gronda Jack, les yeux baissés.

-Que dites-vous? s’écria Alice. Il faut donc que j’aie été bien malheureuse dans le choix de mes mots, pour obtenir une pareille réponse. Vous ne pouvez vous figurer quel chagrin...”

Mrs. Lindsay ne put achever. Repoussant brusquement son fauteuil, Jack s’était levé.

“Trêve de simagrées, s’il vous plaît, prononça-t-il brusquement, l’œil mauvais, la voix dure. Inutile d’envelopper votre refus d’autant de fioritures. Vous me repoussez. N’en parlons plus. À moi d’examiner ce que j’ai à faire.”

Laissant sa belle-sœur, qui, très émue par cette scène et par la sortie violente qui la terminait, se réfugia dans la solitude calmante de sa chambre, Jack s’éloigna tout frémissant de colère. Peu à peu cependant, cette colère tomba, et il put alors examiner froidement sa situation.

Lui fallait-il donc renoncer à la fortune convoitée? Jamais, décida-t-il énergiquement. Restait alors à trouver le moyen de se l’approprier, puisque Alice se refusait à devenir sa femme.

Au dîner, celle-ci ne parut pas. Sa sœur alla vainement frapper à sa porte. Elle s’obstina dans sa solitude.

Elle ne reprit que le lendemain la vie coutumière du bord. Mais alors tout paraissait oublié entre le beau-frère et la belle-sœur. Chacun d’eux sans doute avait arrêté sa résolution dans l’inviolable secret de son âme.

Au cours de cette journée du 27 mai, la mer mollit sensiblement, et le nombre des passagers valides s’accrut simultanément. Le soir venu, les frères da Silva et la famille Blockhead étaient à peu près les seuls à ne pas embellir le spardeck de leur présence.

Tandis que la vie retrouvait ainsi son cours paisible à bord du *Seamew*, son capitaine au contraire semblait broyer du noir. Distrait, préoccupé, il se promenait constamment depuis deux jours sur la passerelle, en se pétrissant le nez d'une façon menaçante. Et toujours ses yeux, divergeant en un terrible strabisme, revenaient vers ce point que Sir Hamilton, quelques heures après le départ, avait pris pour un des sommets de Saint-Michel.

Le matin du 28 mai, il fit comme il avait accoutumé, et, en arrivant sur le pont, il braqua sa longue-vue vers le point devenu pour lui une obsession.

"Mille diables! gronda-t-il à l'adresse d'Artimon, en abaissant l'instrument, nous sommes dans une péripétie infernale, monsieur."

Il y avait longtemps que toute hésitation avait disparu. Le *Seamew*, en effet, ne se dirigeait pas directement vers Madère. Conformément au programme, on devait auparavant contourner l'île de Porto-Santo, et la route de Ponta-Delgada à Porto-Santo ne laisse pas de faire un angle appréciable avec la ligne droite réunissant à Madère la capitale de Saint-Michel. Cependant, le bâtiment inconnu avait suivi cette même route qui, en réalité, n'aboutissait nulle part, en se maintenant à la distance invariable de quatre milles environ. Il appuyait donc la chasse à n'en pas douter.

Cette persistance dans l'intervalle qui séparait les deux navires avait en partie rassuré le capitaine. Il ne serait pas du moins gagné de vitesse. Et quoi d'étonnant à cela? Le navire portugais n'avait-il pas aussi fait son charbon aux Açores? Mais le capitaine Pip était bien forcé de se dire que la traversée ne serait pas éternelle. On finirait par arriver à Madère, et Madère, c'était encore le Portugal.

Depuis quarante-huit heures, le capitaine retournait cette question sous toutes ses faces, sans aboutir à aucune solution satisfaisante. S’il avait été le maître, plutôt que de se résigner à de nouveaux geôliers, il se serait lancé droit devant lui jusqu’à épuisement de son charbon et de toutes les parties combustibles du bâtiment. On aurait vu alors lequel avait les soutes les plus vastes! Par malheur, maître, il ne l’était qu’à demi, et à la seule condition qu’il conduirait le *Seamew* dans la maudite rade de Funchal, capitale de Madère. Aussi enrageait-il perpétuellement.

Il lui fallut bien prendre un parti quand, le 28 mai vers dix heures du matin, la cime de Porto-Santo commença à mordre l’horizon. Le pauvre capitaine dut se résigner à en référer à Thompson et, s’il avait l’oreille basse, il est inutile de le dire.

À sa joyeuse surprise, sa communication ne fut pas reçue aussi mal qu’il le craignait.

“Vous voyez donc, captain, dit seulement Thompson, que ce navire est portugais?

-Je le crois, monsieur.

-Et qu’il est à notre poursuite?

-Je le crois aussi, malheureusement.

-Eh bien! dans ce cas, captain, je ne vois qu’une chose à faire.

-Et c’est, monsieur?

-Mais de stopper, tout simplement.

-De stopper!

-Mon Dieu, oui, captain, de stopper.”

Le capitaine demeura interdit, les bras ballants, les yeux écarquillés.

“Amen! monsieur”, prononça-t-il enfin avec effort, et sans jurer cette fois par la barbe de sa mère.

Héroïquement, il exécuta l’ordre reçu. L’hélice stoppa, le *Seamew* demeura immobile à la surface de la mer, et la distance qui le séparait du navire poursuivant diminua graduellement. C’était bien un vaisseau de guerre portugais, reconnaissable à la longue flamme qui se déroulait à son grand mât. Vingt minutes plus tard, un mille à peine le séparait encore du *Seamew*.

Thompson fit alors mettre à flot une embarcation dans laquelle prirent place les agents de police. Pip n’en revenait pas. Voilà maintenant qu’on rendait les otages!

Le lieutenant, cependant, et six de ses hommes ne s’étaient pas embarqués avec leurs camarades. L’étonnement du capitaine fut au comble, en les voyant paraître à leur tour, en voyant surtout quels singuliers colis ils transportaient.

Ces colis, colis humains, n’étaient autres que le noble don Hygino Rodriguez da Veiga et ses deux frères.

Encore accablés des coups de Neptune, sortes de cadavres vivants, ils n’essayaient aucune résistance. Le capitaine les vit passer par-dessus le bastingage, insensibles et inconscients.

“Ah çà, mais!... Ah çà, mais!...” gronda le brave capitaine, incapable de trouver une explication.

Pour surpris qu’il fût, Sir Hamilton l’était plus encore. Indigné par ce traitement infligé à des gentlemen, il avait cependant mis une sourdine prudente à ses perpétuelles protestations. Provisoirement au moins, il se contenta de demander quelques éclaircissements à un matelot auprès duquel le hasard l’avait placé.

Hamilton tombait mal. Vieux homme bronzé, tanné, l’âme trop élargie par une longue contemplation de l’immensité des mers pour s’intéresser aux petitesses humaines, ce matelot ne savait rien, et, dans son indifférence superbe, il ne tenait pas à savoir. À la question du baronnet, il haussa les épaules en signe d’ignorance. Il daigna cependant ôter sa pipe de la bouche.

“C’est des particuliers, expliqua-t-il, qui ont mangé des cailloux, qu’on dit. Paraît que c’est défendu en Portugal.”

Hamilton dut se contenter de cette réponse. Satisfait de son explication, le vieux matelot tirait de nouveau sur sa bouffarde, et déjà, le regard enfui à la suite des lames rapides, il pensait à autre chose.

La vérité, Hamilton ne devait la connaître que plus tard, en même temps que les autres passagers. Ce fut une épreuve cruelle pour le vaniteux baronnet.

“Souvenez-vous de notre traité, avait dit Thompson au lieutenant, quand celui-ci prit congé à son tour.

- Soyez tranquille”, avait répondu le lieutenant.

L’embarcation fut poussée sur ces mots. Puis, son chargement humain transporté sur l’aviso, elle rallia le *Seamew*, dont l’hélice se remit aussitôt en mouvement.

Le capitaine Pip continuait à n’y rien comprendre. Quant à Thompson, il n’était pas sans inquiétude. Malgré les assurances du lieutenant, l’aviso n’allait-il pas reprendre chasse, à portée de canon désormais?

Il est à croire que l’officier tint loyalement ses promesses et que ses explications furent jugées satisfaisantes. Bientôt, en effet, l’aviso décrivait un grand demi-cercle sur tribord et disparaissait sous l’horizon du nord, en même temps que dans le sud se haussaient les rivages de Porto-Santo.

Vers midi, on côtoya cette île montagneuse surtout dans sa partie septentrionale, puis le *Seamew* fit route au sud- sud-ouest, et se dirigea droit sur Madère, distante encore d’une trentaine de milles, qui commençait à dresser au- dessus des eaux sa masse colossale.

Deux heures plus tard on avait connaissance du cap Sao-Lourenço, tandis que s’élevaient à leur tour les “Desertas”, dont les trois îlots complètent l’archipel, avec les récifs les “Salvages”. À ce moment, la côte septentrionale de l’île se déroulait aux yeux des passagers dans toute son abrupte puissance.

En créant Madère, le Seigneur, visiblement, n’a pas cherché à faire du nouveau. Toujours de hautes falaises verticales, des promontoires aigus et sauvages, des monts convulsés séparés par de profondes et sombres vallées. C’est le modèle des Açores, mais un modèle achevé, agrandi, décuplé.

Au-dessus des durs rivages, une autre mer s’étend sous le ciel. Mer de verdure, celle-là, ayant pour vagues un nombre immense d’arbres géants.

Tapissés par cette futaie comme par un gazon à leur taille, les monts s’étagent, grandissant, dominés tous au centre par les mille huit cent cinquante mètres du pic Ruivo.

Peu à peu le rivage nord se profila, et enfin le cap Sao- Lourenço, pointe orientale de l’île, fut doublé vers trois heures. Le *Seamew* s’en approcha à moins de deux milles, et l’on put facilement apercevoir le mât des signaux et le phare élevés à son extrémité.

Le capitaine fit alors ranger la terre de plus près encore, et le rivage méridional se déroula sous les yeux des passagers enthousiasmés.

Ce furent d’abord les roches basses dont est formé le cap Sao-Lourenço ainsi que la langue de terre qui le relie au reste de l’île. Puis la côte se releva, pour former les monstrueux contreforts qui soutiennent les montagnes du centre. Entre chacun d’eux, des villages se cachaient, délicieux à cette distance: Machico, Santa-Cruz, Caniçal, que Robert nommait au passage.

À quatre heures, un nouveau cap, le “Cabo Carajao”, se dressa devant le navire. Quelques tours d’hélice suffirent à le doubler et, peu d’instants après, le *Seamew* mouillait en rade de Funchal, au milieu d’une flotte nombreuse, aux mâts de laquelle flottaient les pavillons de toutes les nations.

CHAPITRE XIII

LA SOLUTION D’UN ANAGRAMME

À neuf cents kilomètres du point de l’Europe le plus rapproché, à sept cents du Maroc, à quatre cents de l’archipel des Canaries, séparée par quatre cent soixante milles marins de Sainte-Marie des Açores, Madère s’étend sur une longueur d’environ soixante-dix kilomètres, presque à l’intersection du trente-troisième degré de latitude nord et du dix-neuvième degré de longitude ouest.

Impossible d’imaginer plus grandiose oasis dans le Sahara de la mer.

De la chaîne montagneuse qui, haussant son extrême crête jusqu’à mille neuf cents mètres, court près du rivage nord de l’île, dont elle forme comme la gigantesque épine dorsale, des chaînons latéraux se détachent, affluents de ce fleuve de sommets. Vers le nord, d’un côté, vers le midi, de l’autre, séparés par de profondes vallées emplies d’un paradoxal ruissellement de végétation, ils vont mourir à la mer qu’ils dentellent de leurs aigres promontoires.

Raides, définitifs, volontaires, sont les rivages de cette reine de l’Atlantique septentrional. Ainsi un gigantesque emporte-pièce eût découpé le bloc en plein sol. D’une seule poussée, l’effort plutonien l’a, dans un passé reculé, lancé hors des eaux, qui tout autour d’elle se creusent à quatre kilomètres de profondeur.

Et pourtant, malgré ses roches farouches, que brodent des tufs aux coloris les plus imprévus, malgré les violentes dénivellations dont elle est tourmentée, l’île est d’aspect doux et tendre. Un incomparable manteau de verdure, adoucissant les angles trop aigus, arrondissant les cimes trop pointues, tombe en cascades jusqu’au bord extrême des falaises.

En nul autre point du globe, la végétation n’a cette énergie et cette ampleur. À Madère, nos arbustes deviennent des arbres, nos arbres atteignent des proportions colossales. Là, plus encore qu’aux Açores, s’élèvent côte à côte les végétaux des climats les plus divers. Les fleurs et les fruits des cinq parties du monde y prospèrent. Les sentiers sont bordés de roses, et il suffit de se baisser pour cueillir des fraises au milieu des brins d’herbe.

Que devait donc être cette île paradisiaque au moment de sa découverte, quand des arbres, relativement jeunes aujourd’hui, alors plusieurs fois séculaires, surélevaient ses montagnes de leurs frondaisons géantes! L’île n’était à cette époque qu’une vaste forêt ne laissant pas un pouce de terre à la culture, et le premier gouverneur dut déchaîner l’incendie dans ces fourrés impénétrables. La chronique rapporte que le feu brûla six années consécutives, et l’on prétend que la fécondité du sol provient de ce peut-être nécessaire mais barbare vandalisme.

Par-dessus toute autre cause, c’est à son heureux climat que Madère doit cette luxuriante végétation. Peu de pays, sous ce rapport, peuvent lui être comparés. Moins chaude en été que les Açores, moins froide en hiver, la température de ces deux saisons diffère à peine de dix degrés centigrades. C’est le paradis des malades.

Aussi viennent-ils en rangs pressés au commencement de chaque hiver, les malades anglais surtout, demander la santé à ce ciel de miel et d’azur. De ce chef, une somme annuelle de trois millions de francs reste entre les mains des Madériens, tandis que les tombes creusées pour ceux qui ne repartiront pas font de Madère, selon une énergique expression, “le plus grand des cimetières de Londres”.

Sur la rive méridionale de l’île, au bord même de la mer, s’étage la capitale, Funchal. Un millier de navires mouillent annuellement dans sa rade foraine, où d’innombrables barques de pêche croisent, le jour, les points blancs de leurs voiles, la nuit, le trompeur appât de leurs feux.

À peine le *Seamew* avait-il laissé tomber son ancre, qu’il fut entouré d’une multitude d’embarcations conduites par des enfants à demi nus, dont les vociférations s’unissaient en un dissonant concert. Dans leur jargon anglo-portugais, ils offraient des fleurs, des fruits, ou suggéraient aux passagers amusés de jeter quelque sou, qu’ils iraient, surprenants nageurs, chercher au fond de l’eau.

Quand la Santé eut accordé libre pratique, ces canots indigènes rallièrent le bord, et firent leurs offres de service pour le débarquement.

Offres inutiles pour ce jour-là. Il était plus de cinq heures, et vraiment trop tard pour entreprendre la visite de Funchal.

Deux voyageurs seulement crurent devoir quitter le navire. Dans ces deux impatients, on reconnaîtra le jeune ménage, qui promenait sous tous les ciels un amour toujours pareil. Tenant chacun un petit sac, l’un près de l’autre, ils se dirigèrent, femme et mari, vers un canot auquel ils avaient fait un signe discret. La mine hypocritement embarrassée, avec une gaieté sournoise éclatant malgré tout au fond de leurs yeux baissés, ils passèrent, rapides et modestes, au milieu de leurs compagnons, dont les regards sympathiques les suivirent longtemps.

Ceux-ci demeurèrent à bord. Le programme comportant une escale de six jours pleins à Funchal, le temps manquait d'autant moins que ce programme n'annonçait aucune excursion.

“26, 27, 28, 29, 30 et 31 mai, séjour à Funchal”, voilà ce qu'il disait laconiquement. Était-ce un oubli de Thompson? Ou bien, avait-il supposé que l'île de Madère ne renfermait aucun site qui méritât le dérangement? Le programme ne s'expliquait pas sur ce point.

Hamilton se chargea d'obtenir un supplément d'informations.

Depuis leur dernière escarmouche, Thompson et lui ne se parlaient plus. Vis-à-vis de ses deux passagers grincheux, Hamilton et Saunders, Thompson avait désormais rejeté toute contrainte. Toujours empressé, affairé, débordant d'amabilité quand il avait affaire à quelqu'un de leurs compagnons, il restait avec ces deux-là poli, net et froid. Le baronnet se fit violence, et aborda l'odieux Thompson.

“Comment se fait-il, monsieur, demanda-t-il d'un ton hautain, que vous n'annonciez aucune excursion pendant les six jours de notre relâche à Madère?

- Voyez le programme, monsieur, répondit sèchement Thompson.

-Fort bien, dit Hamilton en se pinçant les lèvres. Voudriez-vous du moins nous dire où vous comptez nous loger?

-Voyez le programme, monsieur, répéta Thompson imperturbable.

-Mais il est muet sur ce point, votre programme. Aucune indication, aucun nom d'hôtel. Rien.

-Et ce navire, monsieur? objecta Thompson.

-Comment! s’écria Hamilton, outré, auriez-vous la prétention de nous tenir prisonniers à bord du *Seamew*? C’est ça que vous appelez voir Madère!

-Voyez le programme, monsieur!” répondit pour la troisième fois Thompson en tournant le dos à son irascible administré.

Mais, tombant de Charybde en Scylla, le malheureux administrateur se trouva en face d’un nouvel ennemi.

“Vraiment! monsieur, prononça la voix grinçante de Saunders, il faut voir le programme! Mais c’est une duperie, votre programme, j’en appelle à tous ces messieurs.”

Et Saunders, d’un geste circulaire, prit à témoin tous les passagers, dont un cercle se formait peu à peu autour des belligérants.

“Comment! continuait cependant Saunders, il n’y aurait rien de curieux à nous montrer dans cette île? Après nous avoir traînés, comme un troupeau, dans des pays sans habitants et sans route, vous osez nous retenir à bord de votre... de votre...”

Saunders hésitait.

“... de votre sabot, de votre infernal sabot, trouva-t-il enfin, maintenant que nous arrivons dans une contrée à peu près civilisée!”

Thompson, les yeux perdus au ciel, sa main, au fond de la poche, agitant doucement un trousseau de clés, attendait flegmatiquement la fin de l’orage. Cette attitude acheva d’irriter Saunders.

“Eh bien! s’écria-t-il, cela ne se passera pas ainsi!

-Parfaitement! appuya Hamilton.

-Nous verrons s’il y a des juges à Londres!

-Parfaitement! dit de nouveau le baronnet énergiquement.

-Et, pour commencer, je descends à terre, moi! Je vais dans un hôtel, moi! Un hôtel de premier ordre, monsieur! Et je m’y installe à vos frais!”

Saunders s’engouffra sur ces mots dans l’escalier des cabines. Bientôt, on le vit reparaître, portant sa valise, héler une embarcation, et quitter le bord avec une majestueuse mais bruyante dignité.

Pour ne pas se livrer à des protestations aussi véhémentes, la plupart de ses compagnons ne l’en approuvaient pas moins. Pas un qui ne jugeât sévèrement la légèreté de l’Agence Thompson, et beaucoup d’entre eux, à coup sûr, ne se borneraient pas à parcourir la capitale de Madère.

Alice et Dolly, à tout le moins, sillonneraient un peu l’île elle-même, elles l’avaient déjà résolu, et de ce voyage Roger naturellement ferait partie. Ce fut lui qui se chargea d’obtenir de Robert les renseignements préalables indispensables. Il se décida à élucider par la même occasion un doute qui le tracassait depuis trop longtemps touchant l’interprète du *Seamew.*

“Un renseignement, s’il vous plaît, mon cher monsieur, lui dit-il en l’abordant, non sans esquisser un malicieux sourire, après le repas du soir.

-Tout à vous, monsieur, répondit Robert.

-La famille Lindsay et moi, reprit Roger, désirons faire une excursion dans l’intérieur de Madère. Voudriez-vous avoir l’obligeance de nous indiquer le meilleur itinéraire à suivre?

-Moi! s’écria Robert, qu’à la lueur des fanaux Roger vit positivement rougir. Mais j’en suis incapable! Je ne sais absolument rien sur cette île de Madère!”

Pour la seconde fois, Robert s’apercevait qu’il avait complètement négligé son devoir. Cela le désolait et l’humiliait. Quelle faible volonté avait-il donc? Quelles pensées le distrayaient ainsi de ce qui pour lui aurait dû être l’essentiel?

En entendant cet aveu d’impuissance, Roger avait paru très mécontent.

“Comment! dit-il. N’êtes-vous pas le cicérone- interprète du bord?

-En effet, dit Robert d’un ton glacé.

-Comment se fait-il alors que vous soyez d’une telle ignorance sur Madère?”

Robert, préférant le silence à une humiliante défense, répondit par un geste évasif.

Roger prit un air narquois.

“Ne serait-ce pas, insinua-t-il, que vous n’avez pas eu le loisir de consulter vos fidèles bouquins? Il y a longtemps que votre hublot ne s’éclaire plus le soir.

-Que voulez-vous dire? demanda Robert devenu écarlate.

-Ce que je dis, parbleu!”

Robert, un peu désorienté, ne répondit pas. Quelque chose d’amical dans la voix de son interlocuteur perçait sous l’ironie des paroles. Il demeurait dans l’incertitude. Il fut rapidement fixé. À sa grande surprise, Roger, le prenant par le bras avec une familiarité imprévue, lui dit à brûle-pourpoint:

“Allons, mon cher, avouez-le! Vous êtes interprète comme je suis pape!

-J’avoue ne pas comprendre... se défendit Robert.

-Je me comprends, moi, repartit Roger. Ça suffit. Évidemment, vous êtes interprète actuellement, c’est clair, à peu près comme je suis marin. Mais quant à l’être de profession!... Ai-je l’air d’un curé, moi?... En tout cas, mon cher, si interprète vous êtes, il faut avouer que vous n’en êtes pas un fameux!

-Mais... protesta Robert en ébauchant un demi-sourire.

-Parfaitement, affirma Roger avec énergie. Vous le faites très mal, votre métier. Vous ne dirigez pas, on vous dirige. Et jamais rien que quelques mots tout secs appris d’avance dans un guide quelconque. Si c’est là un cicérone!...

-Mais enfin...” répéta Robert.

Roger de nouveau lui coupa la parole. Un bon sourire sur les lèvres, la main tendue, il s’était planté en face de lui, et il disait:

“Ne vous entêtez donc pas dans un incognito percé à jour. Professeur comme ma canne, cicérone comme mon cigare, vous êtes déguisé, mon cher, avouez-le.

-Déguisé? répéta Robert.

-Eh oui, vous êtes entré dans la peau d’un cicérone- interprète comme on revêt un habit d’emprunt.”

Robert tressaillit. Que sa résolution eût été bonne, il ne pouvait en douter. Mais allait-il, par obstination d’orgueil, refuser dans son isolement l’amitié qui s’offrait à lui avec tant de confiance?

“C’est vrai, dit-il.

-Parbleu! fit tranquillement Roger en lui serrant la main, et en l’entraînant dans une amicale promenade. Il y a longtemps que je l’avais deviné. Un homme bien élevé en reconnaîtrait un autre sous la couche de charbon d’un chauffeur. Mais, maintenant que vous les avez commencées, j’espère que vous allez continuer vos confidences. Comment avez-vous pu être conduit à accepter cette situation?”

Robert soupira.

“Serait-ce?... insinua son compagnon.

-Serait-ce?...

-L’amour!

-Non, dit Robert. La pauvreté.”

Roger s’arrêta sur place et prit dans la sienne la main de son compatriote. Ce geste cordial alla au cœur de Robert et l’émut assez pour qu’il se livrât sans difficulté dès que l’autre reprit:

“La pauvreté!... Voyons, mon cher, contez-moi ça. Raconter son mal est, dit-on, un soulagement, et vous ne trouverez jamais auditeur plus sympathique. Vos parents?

-Morts.

-Tous les deux?

-Tous les deux. Ma mère, lorsque j’avais quinze ans; mon père, il y a six mois. Jusqu’à cette époque, j’avais vécu la vie que mènent tous les jeunes gens riches, très riches même, et c’est seulement depuis la mort de mon père...

-Oui, je comprends, dit Roger d’un ton de profonde sympathie. Votre père était un de ces mondains, un de ces viveurs...

-Je ne l’accuse pas! interrompit vivement Robert. Tout le temps de sa vie, il s’est montré bon pour moi. Main et cœur ouverts toujours. Pour le reste, il était bien libre d’organiser son existence à sa manière. Quoi qu’il en soit, je me suis vu en quelques jours littéralement sans un sou. Tout ce que je possédais, aux mains des créanciers de la succession, deux semaines après la mort de mon père il ne me restait à peu près rien. Il m’a bien fallu alors songer à gagner mon pain. Malheureusement, peu accoutumé aux difficultés d’une pareille vie, j’ai perdu pied un instant, je l’avoue. Au lieu de faire tête à l’orage, de rester à Paris, et d’user de mes relations, j’ai ressenti une sotte honte de ma nouvelle condition. Résolu à disparaître, j’ai changé de nom et me suis embarqué pour Londres, où j’eus bientôt épuisé mes dernières ressources. Par chance, j’ai décroché une place de professeur, et je commençais à me remettre de la secousse, à ébaucher des projets, comme par exemple celui d’aller chercher fortune dans quelque colonie française, quand je retombai de nouveau sur le pavé. Je dus sauter sur la première occasion. Cette occasion s’est appelée Thompson. Voilà mon histoire en peu de mots.

-Elle n’est pas gaie, déclara Roger. Mais ne m’avez- vous pas dit que vous aviez changé de nom?

-Il est vrai.

-Et votre nom véritable? Au point où nous en sommes, y aurait-il indiscrétion?...”

Robert sourit avec un peu d’amertume.

“Mon Dieu, j’en ai tant dit!... Je vous demande seulement le secret pour ne pas faire de moi la fable du bord. Et d’ailleurs, je vous l’ai avoué, c’est par un amour- propre que je juge sot à cette heure, que je me suis permis ce ridicule baptême. Je ne voulais pas livrer mon vrai nom à des railleries. Il me semblait déchoir. Quelles sottises! Alors, je me suis amusé à inventer quelque nom nouveau, et je n’ai rien trouvé de mieux que de faire puérilement l’anagramme du mien.

-Ainsi, dans Morgand?...

-Dans Morgand, il y a Gramond. Ajoutez-y une particule qui m’est fort utile en ce moment, et un titre de marquis qui me rend incontestablement de grands services, et vous connaîtrez ma personnalité complète.”

Roger avait poussé une exclamation.

“Parbleu! s’écria-t-il, je savais bien que je vous connaissais! Si vous avez quelque mémoire, vous devez vous souvenir que nous nous sommes vus parfois, étant enfants. J’ai eu l’honneur d’être reçu chez Mme votre mère. Nous sommes même vaguement cousins, je crois.

-Tout cela est exact, reconnut Robert. Je m’en suis souvenu dès que j’ai entendu prononcer votre nom.

-Et vous avez persisté dans votre incognito! se récria Roger.

-À quoi bon le rompre? dit Robert. Mais ce sont les circonstances que vous rappelez qui m’ont poussé à répondre à vos questions.”

Un instant, les deux compatriotes se promenèrent en silence.

“Et votre emploi d’interprète? demanda brusquement Roger.

-Eh bien? dit Robert.

-Voulez-vous le quitter? Je suis, cela va sans dire, à votre entière disposition.

-Et comment vous rembourserais-je? Non, non, mon cher monsieur. Je suis touché de vos offres plus que je ne saurais dire, mais je ne puis les accepter. Si je me suis réduit à cet état de misère, si j’ai quitté amis et pays, c’est précisément pour ne rien devoir à personne. Et, en cela, je m’entêterai.

- Au reste, vous avez raison”, dit Roger d’un air songeur.

Longtemps encore, les deux compatriotes se promenèrent bras dessus bras dessous, et peu à peu Roger à son tour s’aventura sur la pente des confidences.

Ce n’est pas en vain que deux jeunes hommes se livrent ainsi l’un à l’autre. En se quittant, les deux compagnons de route avaient vu tomber les barrières qui les séparaient. Le *Seamew* désormais transportait au moins deux amis.

Robert reçut la bienfaisante impression de ce changement imprévu. Elle avait pris fin cette solitude morale dans laquelle il se morfondait depuis plus de six mois. Interprète pour tous, de quel secours ne lui serait pas la conscience d’avoir aux yeux d’un seul reconquis sa dignité tout entière.

C’est livré à ces agréables pensées qu’il alluma sa bougie et se plongea dans l’étude de Madère, et de Funchal en particulier. Les innocentes railleries de Roger lui en avaient démontré la nécessité. Il s’efforça de rattraper le temps perdu et travailla son guide fort avant dans la nuit. Aussi était-il ferré sur la question, prêt à subir toutes les colles, quand sonna l’heure du départ.

Pour aller au rivage distant à peu près d’un demi-mille, on ne devait pas employer les canots du bord. La mer, toujours brisante à Funchal, y rend l’atterrissage assez difficile. Le concours des embarcations du pays et de marins “très pratiques” de la côte est nécessaire à la sécurité des passagers.

“Vous savez, monsieur le professeur, dit Thompson à Robert en s’embarquant avec lui, à Madère, où tout le monde parle anglais, j’ose le dire, c’est pour vous une espèce de congé. Rendez-vous seulement à onze heures à l’Hôtel d’Angleterre et à huit heures du soir à bord, si l’on veut profiter de la table commune.”

En peu d’instants, les embarcations, celle de Thompson en tête, arrivèrent au rivage. Par malheur, les abords s’en trouvaient encombrés. C’était jour de marché, ainsi que le dit un des marins, et le passage était obstrué par des barques de toute espèce, d’où s’élevait un assourdissant concert. Des animaux, empilés dans ces barques, grognaient, mugissaient, bêlaient. Chacun dans sa langue, ils disaient abondamment leur ennui.

L’un après l’autre, on les débarquait. Débarquement peu compliqué, qui consistait simplement à les jeter à l’eau, à grand renfort de rires et de cris. Les passagers du *Seamew* durent atterrir, confondus dans ce bruyant troupeau, sous les yeux d’un double et dissemblable public. Indifférents, ceux qui, sur le galet, recevaient les animaux destinés au marché; attentive, la foule élégante, en majorité composée d’Anglais, qui, à l’arrière-plan, se promenait sur la digue en cherchant quelque visage de connaissance parmi les nouveaux arrivants.

Du reste, en dehors de l’espoir confus de découvrir un ami parmi les visiteurs de leur île, ces promeneurs ne pouvaient manquer de s’intéresser aux manœuvres de l’atterrissage. Il y a toujours là un petit moment d’incertitude qui ne manque pas d’un certain charme, si ce n’est peut-être pour les acteurs.

Parvenus à une vingtaine de mètres du galet, les marins qui vous transbordent stoppent et attendent la vague qui doit les conduire jusqu’à terre, au milieu d’un bouillonnement d’écume plus effrayant que dangereux. Les matelots de Madère choisissent le moment psychologique avec une remarquable habileté, et un atterrissage manqué est fort rare.

Il devait pourtant y en avoir un ce jour-là. Arrêtée un peu trop loin du bord, l’une des embarcations n’y fut pas portée entièrement par la vague, qui, en se retirant, la laissa à sec. Ses trois occupants s’empressèrent alors de la quitter mais, rattrapés à la course par une seconde lame déferlante, ils furent renversés, roulés, trempés, tandis que leur canot se retournait la quille en l’air. Le bain était complet. Ces trois passagers n’avaient rien à envier aux veaux et aux moutons, qui continuaient à pousser leurs cris lamentables.

Et quels étaient ces trois passagers? Ni plus ni moins que Mr. Edward Tigg, Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead et le baronnet Sir George Hamilton. Dans le désordre du départ, ils s’étaient trouvés réunis, juste pour faire de compagnie connaissance avec Madère de cette manière originale.

Les trois baigneurs involontaires prirent l’aventure de façons fort différentes.

Tigg flegmatiquement. Dès que la vague l’eut laissé à sec, il se secoua philosophiquement, et s’éloigna d’un pas tranquille hors d’une nouvelle atteinte du perfide élément. Entendit-il seulement le cri que poussèrent Miss Mary et Miss Bess Blockhead? S’il l’entendit, il jugea modestement que crier est naturel, quand on voit bouler son père comme un simple galet.

Quant à ce père, il exultait. On riait autour de lui, mais il riait bien davantage. Avoir frisé la noyade, cela le mettait aux anges. Il fallut que les marins maladroits, causes du mal, l’entraînassent, sans quoi, dans son ravissement, il aurait attendu une seconde douche à la place même où il avait reçu la première. Heureuse nature que celle de l’épicier honoraire!

Si Tigg fut calme, et Blockhead joyeux, Hamilton fut courroucé. À peine relevé, il se dirigea vers Thompson, sain et sauf, lui, au milieu du rire général que cette intempestive baignade avait déchaîné aux deux étages de la plage. Sans un mot, il montra ses vêtements trempés à celui qu’il estimait l’auteur responsable de ses maux.

Thompson comprit qu’il se devait en cette circonstance, et se mit à la disposition de son infortuné passager. Une barque lui fut offerte qui le ramènerait à bord, où il pourrait changer de vêtements. Mais Hamilton refusa net.

“Moi, monsieur, m’embarquer de nouveau dans un de ces infâmes canots!”

La fureur d’Hamilton s’augmentait de la présence de Saunders. L’œil narquois, celui-ci assistait à ce débarquement mouvementé. “Aussi, pourquoi m’avoir lâché hier? Je suis sec, moi”, semblait-il dire ironiquement au baronnet.

“En ce cas, monsieur, répliqua Thompson, à moins qu’un de vos compagnons...

- Parfaitement! Parfaitement! interrompit Blockhead. Je rapporterai à Sir George Hamilton tout ce qu’il voudra. Je ne serais même pas fâché...”

De quoi le brave épicier honoraire n’aurait-il pas été fâché? De prendre un second bain probablement!

Il n’eut pas cette joie. Son second voyage s’effectua sans incident, et les vêtements du baronnet arrivèrent secs à destination.

La plupart des passagers s’étaient déjà dispersés. Quant à Robert, Roger l’avait tout de suite accaparé.

“Êtes-vous libre? lui avait-il demandé.

-Tout à fait, avait répondu Robert. M. Thompson vient de me donner cette bonne nouvelle.

-En ce cas, voudriez-vous me piloter quelque peu?

-Avec le plus grand plaisir, bien évidemment”, avait déclaré le nouvel ami de l’officier.

Mais, au bout de trois pas, celui-ci s’était arrêté, et, d’un air ironique:

“Ah çà! n’allez pas m’égarer au moins!

-Soyez tranquille”, avait gaiement riposté Robert qui sortait de repasser son plan de Funchal.

Et, de fait, il ne se trompa que cinq fois dans la première demi-heure, au grand amusement de Roger.

Débarqués presque en face de la tour qui supporte le mât des signaux, les deux voyageurs s’étaient engagés tout de suite dans les ruelles étroites et tortueuses de Funchal. Mais ils n’avaient pas fait cent mètres qu’ils ralentissaient leur allure. Bientôt même, ils s’arrêtèrent, avec une grimace douloureuse à l’adresse du désolant pavé dont leurs pieds étaient meurtris. En aucun point du globe, il n’en est de plus inhumain. Fait d’éclats basaltiques aux arêtes tranchantes, il a raison des plus entêtées chaussures. Quant au trottoir, il n’y fallait pas songer. Le trottoir est un luxe inconnu à Madère.

La table d’hôte de l’Hôtel d’Angleterre réunit à onze heures tous les passagers du *Seamew*, abstraction faite des jeunes mariés toujours aussi invisibles, et de Johnson, qui recommençait sa plaisanterie des Açores décidément.

Combien différent, ce déjeuner, de celui de Fayal. Les touristes apprécièrent vivement le changement et jugèrent que l’agence tenait pour la première fois ses promesses. On aurait pu se croire en Angleterre, sans les confitures de pommes de terre que fabriquent les religieuses du couvent de Santa-Clara, et qui furent servies au dessert. Cette friandise exotique, mais assez fade, n’eut aucun succès près des convives.

Après le déjeuner, Roger accapara de nouveau son compatriote, et lui déclara qu’il comptait absolument sur lui pour le guider à travers Funchal en compagnie de la famille Lindsay.

“Toutefois, ajouta-t-il en l’attirant à l’écart, nous ne pouvons infliger à ces dames une promenade de quelque durée sur le belliqueux pavé dont nous avons ce matin éprouvé la méchante humeur. N’y a-t-il aucune voiture dans ce pays?

-Aucune voiture sur roues, du moins, répondit Robert.

-Diable! fit Roger perplexe.

-Mais il y a mieux.

-Et c’est?...

-Le hamac.

-Le hamac! Charmant, le hamac! Une promenade en hamac sera délicieuse. Mais où trouver ces bienheureux hamacs, ô savant cicérone?

-Place Chafariz, répondit Robert en souriant, et je vais, si vous le voulez, vous conduire de ce pas.

-Jusqu’aux noms des rues, maintenant!” s’écria Roger émerveillé.

Priant Alice et Dolly de les attendre, Roger sortit sur les pas de son compatriote. Mais, dans la rue, la science de celui-ci se trouva en défaut.

Bientôt, il fut réduit à l’humiliation de demander son chemin.

“J’en aurais fait autant, constata impitoyablement Roger. Il n’y a donc pas de plan dans votre guide?”

Sur la place Chafariz, assez vaste et ornée d’une fontaine centrale, grouillait une foule nombreuse de campagnards venus pour le marché. Les deux Français trouvèrent sans peine la station de hamacs et arrêtèrent deux de ces agréables véhicules.

Quand Alice et Dolly y furent installées, la petite troupe se mit en marche.

On s’approcha d’abord du Palacio Sao-Lourenço, dont on longea les fortifications irrégulières, flanquées de tours rondes peintes en jaune, derrière lesquelles s’abrite le gouverneur de Madère. Puis, revenant vers l’est, on traversa le jardin public, fort beau et très bien entretenu, qui se développe à côté du Théâtre de Funchal.

Ce fut seulement à la Cathédrale que les dames quittèrent leurs hamacs. Effort dont elles auraient pu se dispenser, cet édifice du XVe siècle ayant perdu tout caractère sous les badigeonnages successifs que lui a infligés la trop conservatrice administration locale.

Quant aux autres églises, Robert affirmant qu’elles ne méritaient pas le dérangement, on résolut de s’abstenir, et l’on se dirigea seulement vers le couvent des Franciscains, dans lequel, au dire de Robert, se trouvait “une curiosité.”

Pour se rendre à ce couvent, les touristes durent traverser presque toute la cité de Funchal. Bordées de maisons blanches aux persiennes vertes et ornées de balcons de fer, les rues se succédaient, pareillement sinueuses, toujours veuves de trottoirs, et pavées des mêmes impitoyables cailloux. Aux rez-de-chaussée, des magasins s’ouvraient d’un air engageant, mais, à voir la pauvreté de leurs étalages, il était douteux que l’acheteur le moins difficile pût en sortir satisfait. Quelques-uns de ces magasins offraient aux amateurs les productions spéciales de Madère. C’étaient des broderies, des dentelles en fil d’agave, des nattes, de petits meubles en marqueterie. Aux éventaires des joailliers s’étageaient des piles de bracelets, réduction de l’écliptique, car les signes du zodiaque y étaient gravés.

De temps à autre, il fallait se ranger pour laisser passer quelque promeneur venant en sens opposé. De piétons, on voyait peu. En hamac généralement, le promeneur était parfois à cheval, et suivi, dans ce cas, de l’infatigable arriero chargé de donner la chasse aux moustiques. Type bien spécial à Madère, que cet arriero. À aucune allure, il ne se laisse distancer. Il trotte quand le cheval trotte, galope quand le cheval galope, et jamais il ne demande grâce, quelles que soient la vitesse et la longueur de la marche.

D’autres fois, le promeneur se prélassait sous l’imperméable baldaquin d’un “carro”, sorte de voiture à patins glissant sur les pierres polies. Tiré par des bœufs agrémentés de clochettes, le carro s’avance avec une sage lenteur, conduit par un homme et précédé par un enfant qui fait l’office de postillon.

“Deux grands bœufs attelés, d’un pas tranquille et lent... commença Roger, en arrangeant le vers connu de Boileau.

- Promènent dans Funchal cet English indolent”, acheva Robert en complétant la mutilation.

Peu à peu, cependant, le caractère de la ville changeait. Les magasins se faisaient moins nombreux, les rues plus étroites et plus tortueuses, les pavés plus irréconciliables.

En même temps, la montée s’accentuait. On arrivait dans les quartiers pauvres, dont les maisons, adossées au rocher, laissaient voir par leurs fenêtres ouvertes leur misérable mobilier. Elles expliquaient, ces sombres et humides demeures, pourquoi la population de l’île est décimée par des maladies qui devraient être inconnues sous cet heureux climat: la scrofule, la lèpre, sans compter la phtisie, que des Anglais, venus pour s’en guérir, ont acclimatée.

Les porteurs de hamac ne se rebutaient pas de la raideur de la pente. D’un pas égal, sûr et fort, ils continuaient leur marche, échangeant des bonjours au passage.

Plus de carros dans ces raidillons. Sorte de traîneau admirablement adapté à ces pentes de montagne, le “carrhino” les remplaçait. À chaque instant, on en voyait passer, glissant à toute vitesse, et dirigés par deux hommes robustes, au moyen de cordes fixées à l’avant du véhicule.

Les dames mirent pied à terre devant le couvent des Franciscains, presque en haut de la montée. La “curiosité” annoncée consistait en une vaste pièce servant de chapelle, aux murs incrustés de trois mille crânes humains. Ni leur cicérone, ni leurs guides ne purent, d’ailleurs, expliquer aux voyageurs l’origine de cette bizarrerie.

La “curiosité” suffisamment contemplée, on redescendit la pente, et les deux piétons ne tardèrent pas à demeurer en arrière, incapables de suivre le train sur ce pavé, auquel ils n’épargnaient pas les épithètes désobligeantes.

“Quelle horrible façon d’entretenir les rues! s’écria Roger en s’arrêtant tout à fait. Verriez-vous un inconvénient à souffler un instant, ou du moins à ralentir le pas?

-J’allais vous le proposer, répondit Robert.

-À merveille! Et je profiterai de notre solitude pour vous présenter une requête.”

Roger rappela alors à son compagnon que les dames Lindsay et lui avaient projeté pour le lendemain une excursion dans l’intérieur. Au cours de cette excursion, un interprète serait nécessaire, et Roger comptait sur son nouvel ami.

“Ce que vous désirez est bien difficile, objecta Robert.

-Pourquoi? demanda Roger.

-Mais parce que j’appartiens à l’ensemble des touristes et non à quelques-uns d’entre eux.

-Nous ne ferons pas bande à part, répondit Roger. Viendra avec nous qui voudra. Quant aux autres, ils n’ont pas besoin d’interprète à Funchal, où tout le monde parle anglais, et que l’on peut visiter en deux heures, y compris la chapelle des crânes. Au surplus, cela regarde M. Thompson, auquel j’en parlerai ce soir.”

Au bas de la pente, les deux Français rejoignirent leurs compagnes, arrêtées par un concours assez nombreux de populaire. Une maison semblait être l’objectif de cette foule, d’où s’élevaient des rires et des exclamations.

Bientôt un cortège se forma, se mit en marche et défila devant les touristes, aux sons d’une joyeuse musique et de chants de fête.

Roger poussa une exclamation d’étonnement.

“Mais... mais... Dieu me pardonne!... C’est un enterrement, ça!”

En effet, à la suite des premiers rangs du cortège, on apercevait, sur les épaules de quatre porteurs, une sorte de brancard, sur lequel un petit corps, celui d’une fillette, était couché dans l’éternel sommeil.

De leur place, les touristes distinguaient nettement jusqu’au moindre détail. Ils voyaient le front entouré de fleurs blanches, les yeux clos, les mains jointes du petit cadavre, que l’on conduisait ainsi à la tombe au milieu d’une gaieté générale.

Quant à croire à une cérémonie tout autre, quant à douter que la fillette fût morte, cela était impossible. On ne pouvait se tromper à ce front jauni, à ce nez pincé, à la raideur des deux petits pieds sortant des plis de la robe, à cette immobilité définitive de l’être.

“Quelle est cette énigme? murmura Roger, tandis que la foule s’écoulait lentement.

-Elle n’a rien de mystérieux, répondit Robert. Ici, dans ce pays religieux et catholique, on estime que les enfants, étant purs de toute tache, vont directement prendre place parmi les anges du ciel. Pourquoi dès lors les pleurerait- on? Ne doit-on pas, au contraire, d’autant plus se réjouir de leur mort qu’on les a mieux aimés sur la terre? De là les chants joyeux que vous avez entendus. Après la cérémonie, les amis de la famille viendront en foule complimenter les parents de la petite morte, qui devront encore renfermer en eux-mêmes leur humaine et irrésistible douleur.

-Quelle singulière coutume! dit Dolly.

-Oui, murmura Alice, singulière. Mais belle, et tendre, et consolante aussi.”

À peine à l’hôtel, où les touristes se réunissaient pour retourner en corps au *Seamew*, Roger présenta sa requête à Thompson. Trop heureux, Thompson, de se débarrasser ainsi de bouches vraiment onéreuses! Non seulement il accueillit la requête sans difficulté, mais encore il fit une chaleureuse propagande en faveur de cette excursion extra-officielle.

Peu nombreux furent les adhérents qu’il récolta. Quelle idée d’ajouter un supplément de frais à un voyage déjà très coûteux!

Pourtant, il en fut un qui ne marchanda pas son approbation et qui, sans hésiter, déclara se joindre aux excursionnistes. Il félicita même Roger de son idée.

“Vraiment, cher monsieur, dit-il d’une voix de stentor, c’est vous qui auriez dû, dans notre intérêt, organiser le voyage tout entier!”

Qui aurait pu être cet insolent passager, si ce n’est l’incorrigible Saunders?

Électrisé par cet exemple, le baronnet donna lui aussi son adhésion, et pareillement Blockhead qui se déclara enchanté sans s’expliquer davantage.

Aucun autre passager ne se joignit à ceux-là.

“Nous serons donc huit”, conclut Jack du ton le plus simple.

Alice fronça les sourcils, et considéra son beau-frère avec une sévère surprise. Dans l’état de leurs rapports, n’aurait-il pas dû montrer plus de réserve? Mais Jack s’était détourné, et il ne vit pas ce qu’il ne voulait pas voir.

Mrs. Lindsay fut contrainte de renfermer son mécontentement en elle-même, et son humeur ordinairement sereine s’en trouva assombrie. Quand les passagers du *Seamew,* sauf ceux qui devaient participer à l'excursion du lendemain, furent retournés à bord, elle ne put s'empêcher de reprocher à Roger d'avoir ainsi publié leurs projets. Roger s'excusa de son mieux. Il avait pensé qu'un interprète serait utile dans l'intérieur. En outre, ajouta-t-il sans rire, M. Morgand, grâce à sa connaissance du pays, pourrait leur servir de guide.

“Vous avez peut-être raison, répondit Alice sans désarmer, cependant je suis un peu fâchée, je dois vous le dire, que vous l'ayez joint à notre petite troupe.

-Et pourquoi donc? demanda Roger sincèrement étonné.

-Parce que, répliqua Alice, une semblable excursion donnera forcément à nos relations un certain caractère d'intimité. Cela, pour deux femmes, est délicat, quand il s'agit d'une personne comme M. Morgand. Je vous accorde que les apparences sont des plus engageantes. Mais enfin, voilà un homme remplissant un emploi en somme subalterne, on ne sait d'où il vient, il n'offre aucune surface, n'a parmi nous aucun répondant...”

Roger écoutait avec surprise cet exposé de principes si insolite dans la bouche d'une citoyenne de la libre Amérique. Mrs. Lindsay l'avait jusque-là accoutumé à moins de timidité. Il constatait, non sans en éprouver un mystérieux plaisir, l'attention singulière qu'une femme, placée si fort au-dessus d'un interprète par la fortune, daignait accorder à cet humble fonctionnaire de l'Agence Thompson. Eh quoi! elle parlait d'avoir avec lui “des rapports” intimes ou non! Elle s'inquiétait de ses origines, regrettait qu'il n'eût pas de répondant!...

“Pardon! interrompit-il. Il en a.

-Qui donc?

-Moi. Je le cautionne formellement auprès de vous”, dit sérieusement Roger, qui, avec un aimable salut, s’empressa de prendre congé.

La curiosité est la maîtresse passion des femmes, et les derniers mots de Roger avaient déchaîné celle de

Mrs. Lindsay. Remontée dans sa chambre, elle n’y put trouver le sommeil. L’énigme qui venait de lui être proposée l’énervait, et, d’autre part, elle s’irritait de la fausseté de sa situation vis-à-vis de son beau-frère. Que ne quittait-elle le bord? Que n’abandonnait-elle ce voyage, qu’elle n’aurait jamais dû entreprendre? Cette solution était la seule logique. Elle remettait toute chose en place. Alice était forcée de le reconnaître. Et pourtant, au fond de son être, une insurmontable répugnance s’opposait sourdement à ce parti.

Elle ouvrit la fenêtre, et délicieusement baigna son visage dans la brise voltigeante et tiède.

C’était une nuit de nouvelle lune. Noirs tous deux, les cieux et la mer, que piquaient des lumières, là-haut étoiles, feux des navires à l’ancre en bas.

Longtemps, agitée de confuses pensées, Alice demeura rêveuse devant l’espace empli d’une ombre mystérieuse, tandis que, de la plage, montait jusqu’à elle la plainte éternelle des galets.

CHAPITRE XIV

LE CURRAL DAS FREIAS

Le lendemain, les huit hamacs se trouvèrent exactement devant l’Hôtel d’Angleterre. À six heures, la caravane - combien réduite! - se mit en route dans la fraîcheur délicieuse du matin.

Au pas allègre de ses seize porteurs, escortée de seize autres porteurs de relais, elle s’engagea sur le Chemin- Neuf, et, pendant une heure et demie, longea la mer sur cette route bien entretenue. Avant huit heures, on fit une courte halte à Camara de Lobos, puis on attaqua résolument la montagne par un chemin auquel son extrême raideur a valu le nom de “Mata Boes”, ou “Tueur de Bœufs”.

Ce sentier où les bœufs succombent, les hommes l’assaillaient et le domptaient. C’était merveille de voir les porteurs de hamac. Deux heures durant, en se relayant de quinze en quinze minutes, ils poursuivirent la dure montée, d’un égal effort, sans une plainte. Vers dix heures seulement, ils soufflèrent. La route, en cet endroit, franchissait un petit torrent alors à sec, et le pavé faisait place à la terre reposante.

Encore une heure de marche, puis, ayant traversé un bois de vieux châtaigniers, une steppe désolée, où quelques sapins subsistent seuls d’une ancienne forêt, et

enfin une lande couverte d’odorantes bruyères, les porteurs s’arrêtèrent auprès d’une barrière rustique, au- delà de laquelle apparaissaient les murs rouges de la quinta de Campanario.

Élégante demeure autrefois, cette quinta n’est plus qu’une misérable ruine. Plutôt que d’y chercher refuge pour le déjeuner, les touristes préférèrent s’installer en plein air, à une place que les porteurs débarrassèrent de ses ronces et de ses pierres, ainsi que des détritus de toute espèce que la saleté madérienne y avait accumulés. Les provisions furent sorties des sacs. Une nappe blanche recouvrit le sol. La table, en somme, devint engageante.

Pendant qu’on la disposait sous la surveillance de Robert, les touristes, jetant en passant un coup d’œil au panorama splendide, allèrent admirer les deux châtaigniers qui s’élèvent près de la quinta, et dont le plus gros, véritable curiosité de l’île, mesure plus de onze mètres de circonférence.

Mais leur appétit, aiguisé par cette rude ascension, les ramena bientôt vers leur table improvisée. Surprise désagréable, un cercle de chèvres et d’enfants déguenillés l’entourait. Par des menaces et des aumônes, on éloigna à grand-peine cette horde. L’estomac le moins délicat n’y aurait pas résisté.

Les voyageurs étaient à peine au milieu de leur repas, quand leur attention fut attirée par un singulier personnage qui venait d’apparaître dans le cadre de la porte de la quinta en ruine. Sale, vêtu de loques misérables, son visage au teint de brique auréolé d’une barbe hirsute et d’une folle crinière de cheveux qui, propres, eussent été blancs, ce personnage, appuyé contre un des montants, considérait la troupe affamée. Enfin, il prit son parti et, d’un pas nonchalant, s’avança vers les touristes.

“Soyez les bienvenus chez moi, dit-il en soulevant les restes d’un vaste sombrero, dont il ne subsistait guère que les bords.

-Chez vous? répéta Robert, qui se leva et rendit son salut au courtois propriétaire.

-Oui, chez moi, à la quinta de Campanario.

-En ce cas, senor, excusez des touristes étrangers du sans-gêne avec lequel ils ont envahi votre domaine.

-Excuses inutiles, protesta le Madérien dans un anglais assez passable. Trop heureux de vous offrir l’hospitalité.”

Robert et ses compagnons le considéraient avec surprise. Leurs regards allaient de sa misérable personne à la masure en ruine qui servait de gîte à ce bizarre propriétaire. Celui-ci semblait jouir de l’étonnement de ses hôtes.

“Permettez-moi, dit-il, de me présenter moi-même à ces dames, puisque personne n’est là pour me rendre ce bon office. J’espère qu’elles voudront bien pardonner cette incorrection à don Manuel de Goyaz, leur très humble serviteur.”

En vérité, sous ses haillons, le noble gueux ne laissait pas d’avoir grand air. Il avait débité sa tirade dans un style mi-hautain, mi-familier - excellent. Toutefois, sa politesse ne pouvait empêcher le bavardage de ses yeux.

Hypnotisés par le couvert alléchant, ils allaient, ces yeux, des pâtés aux jambons, caressaient au passage les fioles tentatrices, et clamaient fort éloquemment la plainte d’un estomac affamé.

Alice eut pitié de son hôte malheureux. Charitablement, elle invita le senor don Manuel de Goyaz à participer au déjeuner.

“Merci, senora, j’accepte de grand coeur, répondit-il sans se faire prier. Et ne croyez pas, s’il vous plaît, déjeuner en mauvaise compagnie. Cette apparence un peu fruste cache à vos yeux un “morgado “(seigneur), ainsi qu’on nous appelle ici, et vous voyez en moi l’un des plus riches propriétaires terriens de Madère.”

Devant le regard indécis des touristes, don Manuel se mit à rire.

“Ah! ah! s’écria-t-il, vous vous demandez sans doute comment sont les autres? Eh bien! leurs habits ont encore plus de trous que mes habits, leurs maisons moins de pierres que ma quinta, voilà tout! Rien n’est plus simple, vous le voyez.”

Les yeux du morgado brillaient. Évidemment, le sujet lui était cher.

“Non, rien n’est plus simple, reprit-il, grâce aux lois stupides qui régissent ce pays. Nos terres, que nous ne pouvons pas cependant cultiver nous-mêmes, nos pères les ont louées par des baux que l’usage ici veut de très longue durée. Ce bail, c’est la propriété du fermier. Il le cède, le vend, le lègue à ses enfants, et, pour tout loyer, verse au propriétaire la moitié de ses revenus. En outre, il peut élever des murs, bâtir des maisons, faire toutes les constructions que bon lui semble sur les terres qui lui sont louées, et le propriétaire, à l’expiration du bail, doit, pour rentrer en possession de son bien, racheter tout cela à prix coûtant. Lequel d’entre nous pourrait le faire? Propriétaires en principe, nous sommes donc dépouillés de fait, surtout depuis que l’invasion du phylloxéra a permis à nos fermiers de supprimer toute redevance, sous prétexte que leurs revenus sont nuls. Voilà vingt ans que cela dure, et vous voyez le résultat. Je tiens de mes aïeux assez de terres pour bâtir une ville: je ne puis même pas faire réparer ma maison!”

Le visage du morgado était devenu sombre. Machinalement il tendit son verre que l’on s’empressa de remplir. Cette consolation fut sans doute de son goût, car il y revint fréquemment. À peine s’il parlait maintenant. Il mangeait pour quinze jours et buvait pour un mois. Par degrés, son regard s’adoucit, ses yeux se firent vagues, puis tendres. Bientôt ils se fermèrent complètement, et le morgado, glissant mollement sur le sol, s’endormit avec béatitude.

Les voyageurs n’eurent garde de le réveiller pour prendre congé.

“On va chercher bien loin la solution de la question sociale, dit Roger au moment de partir. La voilà, parbleu! Avec une pareille loi, les paysans ne tardent pas à devenir seigneurs!

- Et les seigneurs à devenir paysans, répondit mélancoliquement Robert. À leur tour de faire souche de révoltés.”

Roger ne trouva rien à répondre à ce triste argument, et la petite troupe reprit sa route en silence.

Restaurés, reposés, les porteurs avançaient d’un pas rapide. Au reste, on descendait. En moins d’une demi- heure, un étroit et capricieux sentier amena les excursionnistes jusqu’à la petite plate-forme naturelle qui constitue le sommet du Cabo Cirao.

De cette arête étroite, ils apercevaient la côte méridionale de l’île. En face d’eux, celle de Porto-Santo, sans un arbre, sans un taillis, découpait son sec profil. À l’ouest, c’était le bourg de Calheta, avec un arrière-plan de montagnes hautes et brumeuses; à l’est, Camara de Lobos, Funchal et le cap Sao-Lourenço.

Mais le nombre de kilomètres qui restaient à franchir avant le coucher du soleil ne permettait pas une longue contemplation. On se remit donc hâtivement en marche, et sur la route bientôt regagnée les porteurs s’avancèrent d’un pas vif.

Reposante, cette manière de voyager est assurément des moins propres à la causerie. Isolés les uns des autres, hors d’état d’échanger leurs impressions, les voyageurs se laissaient nonchalamment bercer, en regardant défiler le prestigieux paysage.

Le chemin tantôt s’élevait, tantôt s’abaissait, mais à chaque nouvelle vallée l’altitude moyenne augmentait, tandis que les végétaux se modifiaient. Peu à peu les espèces tropicales firent place aux essences des régions tempérées. Les chênes, les cèdres, les érables, remplacèrent palmiers, fougères et cactus.

Dans les descentes ou les côtes, les porteurs infatigables gardaient leur même pas souple et allongé. Descendus au fond des vallées, ils remontaient la crête suivante, pour redescendre et remonter encore sans se lasser. Par treize fois ils avaient fait cet effort, quand dans le soleil couchant apparut le bourg de Magdalena.

Un quart d’heure plus tard, les hamacs s’arrêtaient devant un hôtel de suffisante apparence, au milieu d’une bande d’enfants déguenillés demandant à grands cris la charité.

Pour les éloigner, Robert et Roger distribuèrent inutilement d’indulgentes taloches. Saunders trouva le seul moyen vraiment pratique. Puisant dans son gousset une poignée de billion, et l’ayant exactement comptée, il jeta le trésor à la volée. La bande avide se précipita aussitôt à la curée, tandis que Saunders, tirant de sa poche un petit carnet, écrivait soigneusement la dépense. Après quoi, remettant le carnet à sa place, il se retourna vers Robert que ce manège intriguait.

“Vous pourrez affirmer à Mr. Thompson que j’ai tenu régulièrement mes comptes, lui dit-il d’une voix pleine des plus agressifs grincements.”

Le lendemain on se remit en route dès l’aube. L’étape est longue, fatigante surtout de Magdalena à Saint-Vincent où l’on devait coucher.

Pendant deux kilomètres environ on refit d’abord la route parcourue la veille, puis les porteurs, obliquant sur la gauche, s’engagèrent dans un sentier de chèvres serpentant au fond d’une étroite et noire vallée.

Sur ce chemin raide et rocailleux, ils n’avançaient pas bien vite malgré leur courage. À chaque instant ils se relayaient et, de quart d’heure en quart d’heure, il fallait se résigner à une courte halte de repos.

Vers dix heures le sommet de la montée n’apparaissait pas encore, quand ils s’arrêtèrent une fois de plus. En même temps un vif colloque s’engageait entre eux.

“Qu’y a-t-il? demanda la voix hargneuse du baronnet.

- Un incident, répondit Robert, qui va sans doute interrompre notre marche.”

À son exemple, ses compagnons mirent aussitôt pied à terre.

“Mais qu’y a-t-il donc enfin? demanda à son tour Alice.

-Rien de grave, Mrs. Lindsay, rassurez-vous, s’empressa de répondre Robert. Un peu de leste à subir, voilà tout.

-De leste?

-Voyez”, répondit seulement l’interprète en montrant la mer.

Un singulier changement s’était accompli dans l’atmosphère. Une sorte de brume jaunâtre embrasait l’horizon. Dans cette vaste nuée semblable à de l’or fondu, l’air tremblait, comme soumis à une excessive chaleur.

“Ce nuage, expliqua Robert, nous annonce un coup de vent du Sahara, et les guides cherchent à nous en garer le mieux possible.

-Comment! se récria Hamilton, nous allons nous arrêter pour ce méchant nuage.”

Il n’avait pas fini de parler, que le météore arrivait jusqu’au groupe des touristes. En un instant, la chaleur augmenta dans d’incroyables proportions, tandis que se mêlait à l’air une fine poussière de sable brûlant.

En ville même, il est impossible de se défendre contre ce terrible vent du désert. Le sable qu’il transporte au- dessus des mers entre partout, malgré les fenêtres les mieux closes. Dans ce sentier dépourvu de tout abri, la situation était bien plus grave. Elle ne tarda pas à devenir intolérable.

Déjà l’atmosphère semblait avoir perdu toute humidité. Des feuilles, jaunies en quelques minutes, voltigeaient dans l’haleine brûlante, et les branches assoiffées des arbres pendaient tristement. L’air devenait irrespirable. Les touristes avaient beau se couvrir le visage à l’exemple des guides, ils haletaient. Le sable, pénétrant dans leurs bronches, déterminait des accès de toux déchirante, et une soif ardente commençait à les dévorer.

Cette situation ne pouvait se prolonger. Fort heureusement, Robert en découvrit le remède.

Les flancs du sentier suivi par les voyageurs étaient, depuis son origine, sillonnés par une de ces “levadas” qui sont la gloire de Madère. Au prix d’un travail gigantesque, les Madériens ont couvert leur île d’un véritable réseau de ces aqueducs en miniature destinés à amener l’eau potable du sommet des montagnes aux endroits habités. Robert eut tout à coup l’idée de demander à celle qui se trouvait à proximité un secours efficace contre le souffle embrasé venu du désert africain.

À son appel un barrage fait de pierres entassées s’éleva dans la levada. Bientôt, l’eau déborda, tomba en cascade, fermant d’un humide rideau une anfractuosité existant dans le flanc de la colline.

Cette petite grotte était malheureusement trop exiguë pour que tous les touristes pussent s’y réfugier. Alice et Dolly du moins y trouvèrent un abri. Une troisième place restait disponible. Les hommes l’occupèrent tour à tour. Toutes les cinq minutes ils se remplaçaient, et la douche obligatoire qu’ils recevaient pour entrer dans l’excavation et pour en sortir était loin de leur déplaire.

Quant aux guides, il leur fallait se passer de ces répits. Au reste, souffraient-ils? Accotés à des rochers, la tête emmitouflée dans leurs vastes capuchons, ils attendaient, immobiles et patients.

Ils eurent là l’occasion d’exercer largement cette patience. À quatre heures le vent soufflait toujours aussi brûlant.

Mais, tout à coup, un oiseau chanta. D’autres aussitôt lui répondirent. Puis, l’une après l’autre, les feuilles des arbres se déplièrent, et les guides se mirent debout en rejetant leurs capuchons.

Vingt secondes plus tard, le leste cessait brusquement, et, sans transition, une brise délicieusement fraîche lui succédait.

““L’impbate ““, dit un des guides, tandis que les touristes poussaient en chœur un hourra d’enthousiasme.

Avant de se remettre en route, il convenait de procéder au déjeuner si malencontreusement retardé. On fit donc honneur aux provisions, en se désaltérant à la bienfaisante cascade qu’on eut le soin de supprimer.

Malheureusement, ce retard de plus de cinq heures compliquait singulièrement l’excursion. Sans aucun doute, on n’arriverait pas avant la nuit à Saint-Vincent.

Était-ce cette certitude qui assombrissait les guides, quand vers sept heures on déboucha sur le Paul da Serra, vaste plateau situé à quinze cents mètres d’altitude? En proie à une évidente angoisse, taciturnes, la figure sombre, ils se hâtaient autant que leurs forces le leur permettaient.

Leur angoisse devint même si visible, et en somme si disproportionnée avec sa cause probable, que Mrs. Lindsay inquiète s’en ouvrit à Robert, à un moment où leurs hamacs se rapprochèrent au hasard d’une de ces courtes haltes, que la singulière impatience des guides rendait de plus en plus rares. Celui-ci la rassura. L’approche de la nuit augmentait seulement la terreur des guides. En plein jour même, ils n’eussent traversé qu’en tremblant le Paul da Serra, dont une légende locale a fait le séjour de prédilection des démons.

Les touristes n’eurent pas à se plaindre de cette crainte superstitieuse. À peine était-on parvenu sur le plateau que les hamacs avaient pris une allure vertigineuse. Les porteurs ne marchaient plus, ils couraient en silence, au milieu de ce paysage désolé, sans culture et sans arbres, que le crépuscule rendait plus triste encore. Presque complète était la solitude. Seuls, quelques troupeaux lointains paissaient la verdure rare et le thym.

Avant huit heures, on avait franchi les trois milles que mesure le plateau dans sa largeur, et la descente commença, tandis que les chansons des guides s'élevaient, disant le soulagement des chanteurs.

Descente effrayante, dans un sentier presque à pic dont l'ombre augmentait la difficulté. La fatigue éteignit bientôt les chansons des guides qui se relayaient de deux en deux minutes.

À neuf heures et demie enfin on arrivait à Saint- Vincent, à la porte de l'hôtel, dont l'hôte, aimable, empressé, se multiplia autour de ses tardifs voyageurs.

À Saint-Vincent finissait le rôle des hamacs. Sur des chevaux amenés depuis la veille à leur rencontre, les touristes allaient désormais suivre l'excellente route qui réunit ce bourg à Funchal.

En quittant le lendemain l'hôtel situé au bord même de la mer, ils traversèrent le village de Saint-Vincent, élégamment niché au fond d'une vallée verdoyante qui contraste avec les roches abruptes dont elle est de toutes parts entourée. Puis la route déroula de nouveaux lacets, et les chevaux attaquèrent la rude pente de la montagne.

Le temps depuis la veille s'était profondément modifié. Plus de leste, il est vrai, mais plus de ciel bleu. Fait assez rare à Madère, le vent poussait de gros nuages qui encombraient les basses zones de l'atmosphère. Les touristes n'avaient pas escaladé deux cents mètres, qu'ils entraient dans un opaque brouillard permettant tout juste d'apercevoir la route assez raboteuse. En outre, l'air était saturé d'un excès d'électricité; un orage menaçait. Bêtes et gens souffraient de cette tension électrique. Ceux-ci, taciturnes, ne profitaient pas des facilités que le nouveau mode de locomotion apportait à la causerie. Celles-là, tête basse, naseaux sifflants, montaient d'un effort pénible, le poil déjà perlé de sueur.

Mais, deux heures après le départ, les ascensionnistes, parvenus à la passe de l'Encuemada, émergèrent tout à coup du brouillard. Au-dessous d'eux, les nuages, poussés par une brise lente, se déchiquetaient toujours aux arêtes des montagnes; mais, au-dessus de leurs têtes, l'azur s'enfonçait libre de vapeurs, tandis que leurs regards s'élançaient au nord et au sud jusqu'aux flots lointains de la mer.

L'air était vif à cette hauteur. Porteurs et portés ressentirent la bienfaisante influence du changement de température. Malheureusement, la route, se faisant sentier, s'opposait à son tour aux cordiales chevauchées.

À la passe de l'Encuemada, commençait pour les touristes la descente du versant sud de l'île. Tout d'abord, ils durent longer l'interminable falaise en demi-cercle de la "Rocha-Alta". Tout à fait rétréci, le chemin longeait une gorge abrupte au fond de laquelle coulait un torrent étrangement diminué par la distance.

Pendant une heure et demie, il fallut s'avancer ainsi, la falaise d'un côté, le vide de l'autre. Malgré l'aide des arrieros, cette partie du chemin commençait à sembler bien longue aux excursionnistes, quand, au sortir d'un couloir étroit, la falaise se termina subitement, tandis que le sentier, redevenant route, obliquait sur la droite.

Mais, sur cette route, excellente cette fois, nul ne s'empressa de s'engager. Tous, groupés en un peloton serré, regardaient.

Ils étaient au bord de l'ancien cratère central de Madère. Devant eux, à huit cents mètres de profondeur, un gouffre se creusait qu'on ne saurait décrire, et ils admiraient, stupéfaits, un des plus beaux décors qu’ait signés l’art sublime du Créateur.

En silence, ils plongeaient leurs regards dans ce gouffre autrefois empli par la foudre et le feu, quand, dans les temps préhistoriques, l’île brûlait toute, phare immense de l’immense océan. Longtemps, l’éclair avait jailli, les laves avaient coulé par cent volcans, comblant la mer, repoussant les eaux, créant des rivages. Puis la force plutonienne s’était ralentie, les volcans s’étaient éteints, le brûlot inaccessible était devenu l’île douce et maternelle aux créatures. Le dernier, alors que depuis des siècles déjà les flots battaient les rivages refroidis, alors que tous les autres cratères s’étaient apaisés, celui-ci avait dû s’emplir encore de tonnerres. Mais des siècles avaient encore coulé, et ses colères s’étaient éteintes à leur tour. Les roches fondues s’étaient solidifiées, laissant entre elles ce prodigieux abîme aux parois sauvages, puis l’humus s’était formé, des plantes avaient germé, un village enfin avait pu se fonder où avait rugi l’incendie, et le cratère terrible était devenu le “Curral das Freias” - Parc des religieuses - au fond duquel murmure un ruisseau.

Impressionnant toutefois, ce lieu où grondèrent toutes les fureurs de la Terre. De ces fureurs il porte les marques. Nul ne saurait dire ses parois vertigineuses, son prodigieux entassement de roches colossales, la fantaisie grimaçante des détails.

Un cercle de montagnes sourcilleuses l’entoure. À leur gauche, les touristes voyaient les “Torrinhas”, élevant leurs tours jumelles à mille huit cent dix-huit mètres; à leur droite, le pic Arriero, haut de mille sept cent quatre-vingt-douze mètres; en face d’eux, le sommet le plus élevé de Madère, le pic Ruivo, portant jusqu’à mille huit cent quarante-six mètres son front empanaché de brumes.

Le fond de l’abîme a été paré par le temps d’une admirable végétation, et au milieu apparaissaient, comme des points et comme un fil, les maisons et le rocher du Libramento.

L’itinéraire de l’excursion comportait une descente à ce village. On avait même compté sur lui pour fournir le déjeuner. Cependant la petite troupe demeurait hésitante, en constatant l’impossibilité d’engager les chevaux sur l’effrayant sentier qui, au prix de mille méandres, s’enfonçait dans les profondeurs du curral. Faciles à descendre, huit cents mètres seraient durs à remonter.

Les arrieros rassurèrent les touristes. Les parois du cratère, à partir de ce point, allant sans cesse en s’abaissant, ils auraient tout au plus cent mètres à gravir, après avoir suivi le fond pendant deux milles environ, pour retrouver la route et leurs chevaux.

Toute difficulté étant ainsi aplanie, l’inquiétante descente commença.

Le sentier d’ailleurs était plus effrayant que dangereux. Il n’en demeurait pas moins difficilement praticable aux femmes, et Alice et Dolly durent accepter le secours de Robert et de Roger.

Ce n’est pas sans hésitation que Robert s’était aventuré à offrir son aide à sa compagne de route. Jusqu’alors, il ne l’avait pas accoutumée à pareille liberté. Pourtant une impression confuse l’incitait à sortir un peu désormais de sa discrète réserve. Depuis que cette excursion avait commencé, Mrs. Lindsay lui adressait fréquemment la parole, elle lui faisait part de ses impressions, acceptait, recherchait même en quelque sorte sa compagnie. Robert, étonné et charmé, en était à se demander si Roger ne l’avait pas trahi.

Pourtant, quelque désir qu’il en pût avoir, il n’était pas encore sorti de la stricte et froide politesse qui convenait à sa situation, et, pendant les premiers instants de la descente, il laissa, bien qu’à regret, sa compagne se débattre au milieu des difficultés du sentier. D’autres étaient là, mieux qualifiés pour offrir une main secourable, le baronnet, Saunders, Jack Lindsay surtout.

Mais Hamilton et Saunders paraissaient occupés exclusivement de leurs précieuses personnes, et quant à Jack, il marchait le dernier, d’un air détaché et inattentif. S’il s’inquiétait de sa belle-sœur, c’était pour jeter parfois sur elle des regards qui eussent donné beaucoup à penser à celui qui les eût surpris. En vérité, rien de tendre, dans ces regards qu’il promenait d’Alice aux gouffres que côtoyait le sentier. Peut-être ne l’y eût-il pas poussée, mais il ne l’eût pas retirée à coup sûr, si elle y fût tombée par mégarde.

Robert avait donc été contraint de s’attacher à la délaissée. Dans un passage plus ardu que les autres, il avança machinalement la main, sur laquelle Alice s’appuya le plus naturellement du monde, et il la conduisit ainsi jusqu’au fond du curral. Il arriva au Libramento sans s’en apercevoir.

À mesure qu’on avait quitté les hautes altitudes, la température était redevenue étouffante. Mais un vent frais s’éleva tout à coup, comme on finissait de déjeuner. Évidemment l’orage avait crevé. Il devait pleuvoir sur les crêtes de l’Arriero et du Ruivo, dont les sommets se cachaient derrière d’impénétrables vapeurs.

En tout cas, il ne pleuvait pas dans la vallée. Si le ciel était gris, la terre restait sèche, et il ne paraissait pas que cette situation dût se modifier. Un indigène, consulté à ce sujet, se montra très affirmatif. Par exemple, il eut une mine de désapprobation, quand il connut le projet des touristes de suivre pendant deux milles le fond du curral. Son regard indécis fixa un instant le sommet empanaché du Ruivo, puis il hocha la tête d’une manière peu rassurante.

Mais en vain Robert le pressa de questions, il ne put rien tirer de précis de cette sorte de brute, qui se borna, sans s’expliquer davantage, à recommander aux voyageurs de ne pas s’approcher des bords du torrent.

Robert rapporta cet avis à ses compagnons.

“Il est probable, leur dit-il, que ce rustre redoute une de ces inondations qui sont assez fréquentes ici. Quand une pluie d’orage tombe dans les montagnes, il arrive souvent que les torrents presque à sec à cette époque de l’année montent tout à coup d’une manière prodigieuse. Cette crue ne dure que quelques heures, mais elle n’en laisse pas moins derrière elle de véritables ruines. Nous ferons donc bien de suivre l’avis de ce paysan.”

Cependant, après une demi-heure de marche, il devint évident que le temps se rassérénait de plus en plus. Au zénith, les nuages se coupaient, et, si des brumes tournoyaient toujours au-dessus des pics, elles devenaient moins épaisses et manifestaient une tendance à se dissiper dans l’atmosphère rafraîchie.

Les touristes crurent donc pouvoir négliger la prudence. Le sol, d’ailleurs, devenait extrêmement rocailleux, tandis qu’à une quinzaine de mètres plus bas, au bord même du torrent réduit à un inoffensif filet d’eau, s’étendait un lit de sable fin qui devait être un excellent tapis pour les pieds fatigués.

Les voyageurs s’aventurèrent sur ce sable élastique, qui constituait, en effet, un sol très propice à la marche, et la petite troupe s’avança gaiement, Robert et Roger cueillant pour leurs compagnes des fleurs: roses, aubépines, violettes, qui croissaient par centaines dans les interstices des rochers.

Mais bientôt la vallée, qui n’avait cessé de se rétrécir depuis le Libramento, se trouva à peu près réduite au lit du torrent. Celui-ci en même temps obliquait brusquement dans une sorte de couloir, bordé, à gauche, par une muraille à pic, tandis que la rive droite, d’accès assez difficile en raison des blocs qui la parsemaient, s’élevait en pente relativement douce jusqu’à la route, où, cinq cents mètres plus loin, devaient attendre les chevaux.

Avant de s’engager dans ce couloir, les touristes eurent la précaution de jeter un coup d’œil en arrière. La vue s’étendait à plus d’un kilomètre, et au loin on apercevait le clocher du Libramento. Le ciel s’éclaircissait de plus en plus. Rien d’anormal n’apparaissait dans la vallée.

Jupiter affole ceux qu’il veut perdre, a dit le poète. Aux voyageurs, cependant, les avis n’avaient pas manqué. Écrite par la bouche de Robert répétant les enseignements de ses livres, orale par la bouche du paysan du Libramento, l’expérience ne leur avait pas ménagé ses conseils. Ces conseils, tous les dédaignèrent, jusqu’à celui qui les avait donnés, et, rassurée par le retour du beau temps, la petite troupe suivit avec confiance le torrent dans sa nouvelle direction.

Trois cents mètres plus loin, Robert, estimant qu’on devait être proche du lieu du rendez-vous, s’offrit à pousser une courte reconnaissance. Joignant l’acte à la parole, il escalada la rive de droite et disparut rapidement entre les roches, tandis que ses compagnons poursuivaient leur marche ralentie.

Deux minutes ne s’étaient pas écoulées qu’ils s’arrêtaient sur place. Un grondement vague et terrible était né dans les profondeurs du curral et grossissait de seconde en seconde.

Aussitôt, la mémoire et la raison revinrent aux imprudents voyageurs. Tous comprirent ce que ce grondement signifiait et, d’un même mouvement, ils se jetèrent sur la rive droite, Roger soutenant Dolly, les autres chacun pour soi. Avec une hâte fébrile, ils s’élevèrent sur la pente raide de la montagne.

En un instant, Dolly, Roger, Hamilton, Blockhead et Saunders furent hors d’atteinte, tandis que, caché par un mouvement du terrain, Jack, un peu plus loin, se trouvait en sûreté sur le sommet d’un roc escaladé.

Il était temps.

Le grondement s’était fait sifflement, hurlement, mugissement, et déjà la vague arrivait, énorme, furieuse, roulant dans ses replis jaunâtres d’innombrables débris.

Inconsciemment, Alice avait suivi la route de son beau- frère. Retardée par une chute, elle arriva au bas du rocher quand il en était déjà au sommet. Elle s’efforça d’abord d’escalader le bloc à son tour, mais elle comprit bientôt que le temps lui manquerait. La vague menaçante n’était plus à cent mètres.

Pourtant, qu’elle réussît à s’élever de deux ou trois mètres encore, et cela suffirait peut-être. Mais, pour y parvenir en temps utile, un secours lui était nécessaire. Que Jack seulement...

“Jack!...” cria-t-elle.

À cet appel, Jack Lindsay abaisse les yeux. Il la voit. Aussitôt, il se penche, tend la main...

Mais quel sourire infernal s’est tout à coup dessiné sur ses lèvres? Quel regard plein de choses profondes a-t-il, avec la rapidité de l’éclair, transporté de sa belle-sœur à la vague menaçante? Après une courte hésitation, il se redresse sans avoir donné le secours imploré, tandis qu’Alice pousse un cri de désespoir promptement étouffé par la vague hurlante qui la recouvre et l’emporte dans son tourbillon...

Pâle, essoufflé comme après un écrasant travail, Jack s’est éloigné d’un bond du lieu de ce drame. Il apparaît à ses compagnons, et silencieusement les rejoint. Nul ne saura jamais!... et déjà ses yeux se tournent vers Dolly à demi évanouie et que secourt Roger à genoux.

En même temps que Jack Lindsay, Robert, lancé dans une course folle, rejoint ses compagnons. Du haut de la pente, il a vu le torrent rouler sa vague dévorante, et il s’est hâté vers ses amis menacés. Il est arrivé trop tard, hélas! À temps, cependant, pour connaître, à l’insu de son auteur, le drame abominable qui vient de se dérouler. Un témoin existe qui du moins punira.

Grand Dieu! Robert ne songe pas à punir! Tête nue, livide, un vent de folie dans les yeux, il passe à toute vitesse devant ses amis stupéfaits, et, sans un mot d’explication, bondit et disparaît dans le torrent, ruisseau devenu fleuve énorme et terrible, tandis que Dolly, comprenant subitement le malheur qui la frappe, se relève, compte des yeux ceux qui l’entourent, et retombe, en poussant un cri déchirant, dans les bras de Roger terrifié.

CHAPITRE XV

FACE À FACE

L’étoile de Thompson pâlissait-elle? Sans conteste, les choses se gâtaient à bord du *Seamew*. L’hydre de la révolution y relevait audacieusement la tête.

Le 30 mai, les passagers étaient débarqués dès le matin, comme la veille. Comme la veille, la table d’hôte de l’Hôtel d’Angleterre les avait réunis, et, comme la veille, ils avaient usé leur journée à parcourir Funchal et ses environs immédiats.

Mais, le soir, quand ils furent rentrés à bord, la pensée qu’il faudrait refaire quatre jours encore ce qu’ils avaient fait les deux premiers commença à les remplir d’un tel écœurement que, le 31, la moitié d’entre eux se refusèrent à descendre.

Thompson, aveugle et sourd de parti pris, n’eut pas l’air de s’apercevoir du mécontentement général. Sans difficulté, il accepta ces défections économiques, et c’est avec un visage radieux qu’il débarqua à la tête de sa phalange réduite pour aller présider la table du déjeuner.

Il lui fallut bien cependant ouvrir les yeux et les oreilles.

Durant cette ennuyeuse journée passée en rade, un complot s’était ourdi parmi les récalcitrants, et, quand l’administrateur général remonta sur son navire, il ne put méconnaître qu’une certaine effervescence agitait les touristes ordinairement paisibles confiés à ses soins. Évidemment, une émeute couvait.

Elle éclata dès le matin du 1er juin, lorsque, à la mauvaise humeur de ceux qui s’étaient entêtés à ne pas quitter le *Seamew,* fut venue s’ajouter celle des autres. Furieux aussi, ceux-là, furieux de ces dix heures passées stupidement pour la troisième fois à errer dans les rues de Funchal, et bien décidés à ne pas recommencer cette plaisanterie.

C’est pourquoi, quand, le 1er juin, arriva le moment du départ, Thompson se vit seul à la coupée. Pas tout à fait, pourtant. Un compagnon lui restait, sous les espèces de Van Piperboom, de Rotterdam, dont l’oreille demeurait fermée, et pour cause, à toutes les excitations extérieures.

Sur celui-là, la propagande révolutionnaire n’avait aucune prise. Il persistait imperturbablement à s’attacher aux pas du seul de ses compagnons dont il connût le caractère officiel, et Thompson devenait doucement le cornac de cet éléphant des passagers.

Pendant ces trois jours, il ne l’avait pas quitté d’une semelle. Où Thompson était allé, Piperboom l’avait suivi. Et maintenant, il était encore là, dernier fidèle du chef abandonné par ses soldats.

En voyant “sa suite” réduite à une seule unité, Thompson, en dépit de son ordinaire aplomb, demeura perplexe au moment de quitter le navire. Que devait-il faire? Il crut entendre Hamilton et Saunders lui répondre: “Le programme, monsieur, le programme”, et, obéissant aux ordres supposés de ces terribles ergoteurs, il descendait la première marche de l’escalier, quand des rumeurs violentes éclatèrent parmi les passagers réunis sur le spardeck.

De nouveau indécis, Thompson s’arrêta. En un instant, vingt visages irrités l’entourèrent.

L’un des passagers se fit l’orateur de ses compagnons.

“Ainsi, monsieur, dit-il en s’efforçant de garder son calme, vous allez à Funchal aujourd’hui.

-Mais certainement, monsieur, répondit Thompson en prenant un air innocent.

-Et demain? Après-demain?

-Il en sera de même.

-Eh bien! monsieur, formula le passager en grossissant sa voix malgré lui, je me permets de vous informer que nous trouvons cela monotone.

-Est-il possible! s’écria Thompson avec une naïveté charmante.

-Oui, monsieur, monotone. On ne contraint pas des gens sensés à visiter six jours de suite une ville comme Funchal. Nous comptions sur des promenades, des excursions...

-Cependant, monsieur, fit Thompson, le programme ne promet rien de tel.”

Le passager respira fortement comme quelqu’un qui s’efforce de dompter sa colère.

“Il est vrai, dit-il, et nous en cherchons en vain la raison. Nous direz-vous pourquoi vous n’agissez pas pour Madère comme vous l’avez fait pour les Açores?”

La raison, c’est que, les prix se “civilisant” avec les mœurs des habitants, Thompson avait craint le coût d’une excursion dans ce pays gâté par les Anglais. Mais pouvait- il donner un pareil argument?

“Rien n’est plus simple, répondit-il en appelant à son secours son plus aimable sourire. L’agence a pensé que les passagers ne seraient pas fâchés de se reposer un peu de leur embrigadement habituel, qu’ils organiseraient des excursions particulières, rendues plus faciles ici par la diffusion de la langue anglaise, que...

-Eh bien! l’agence s’est trompée, interrompit froidement l’orateur du spardeck, et par conséquent...

-Trompée! s’écria Thompson en interrompant à son tour l’avocat de la partie plaignante. Trompée! Je suis heureux de voir que c’est d’une simple erreur qu’on me fait un grief.”

Il sauta sur le pont, courut de l’un à l’autre des passagers.

“Car enfin, messieurs, l’agence, vous le savez, n’épargne rien pour assurer le bien-être de ses passagers. L’agence ne recule devant rien, j’ose le dire!”

Il s’échauffait.

“L’agence! messieurs. Mais elle est l’amie de ses passagers! Une amie infatigable et dévouée! Que dis-je! Une mère, messieurs!”

Thompson s’attendrissait. Encore un peu, il allait pleurer.

“Heureusement, on ne l’accuse pas d’avoir sciemment négligé quelque chose pour votre plaisir. Cette accusation m’aurait révolté. Révolté, j’ose le dire!... Tandis que trompé!... Trompé, c’est autre chose. Je peux m’être trompé. J’admets m’être trompé. Tout le monde peut se tromper. Je m’en excuse, messieurs, je m’en excuse. Erreur n’est pas compte, eh! messieurs?

-Il n’y a donc qu’à la réparer, dit le passager d’un ton froid, après avoir laissé passer ce verbiage inutile.

-Comment, monsieur? demanda Thompson avec amabilité.

-En improvisant dès demain une excursion, au lieu de nous morfondre deux jours de plus à Funchal.

-Impossible! se récria Thompson. L’agence n’a rien préparé, rien prévu. Le temps nous manque. Une excursion demande à être mûrement étudiée, organisée à l’avance. Elle exige de grands préparatifs...”

Un éclat de rire général coupa la parole à Thompson. Ah bien! ils étaient jolis, les préparatifs que l’agence avait faits pour les précédentes excursions! Mais Thompson ne se laissa pas démonter.

“Impossible!” répéta-t-il avec une nouvelle énergie.

Quelque chose dans sa voix montrait que sur ce point il serait inébranlable. L’orateur intimidé n’insista pas.

“Alors, allons-nous-en!” s’écria une voix gouailleuse parmi les passagers.

Thompson, sautant sur cette proposition, l’adopta séance tenante.

“Partir, messieurs? Mais je ne demande pas mieux. L’agence est tout à votre service, il est inutile de vous le répéter. Voyons, nous allons mettre le départ aux voix.

-Oui, oui, partons! cria l’unanimité des passagers.

-Il sera fait selon votre désir, déclara Thompson. En cette circonstance comme toujours, j’ose le dire!”

Renonçant à aller à terre, il donna de nouvelles instructions au capitaine Pip, pendant que Piperboom, voyant que décidément on n’irait pas à Funchal ce jour-là, s’étendait paisiblement dans un fauteuil, et allumait son éternelle pipe. Rien ne pouvait être imprévu pour sa superbe indifférence.

Cependant on ne pouvait appareiller sur-le-champ. Il fallait auparavant attendre le retour des huit passagers partis depuis l’avant-veille. Ce retour, d’ailleurs, ne tarderait pas. Avant cinq heures, ils auraient regagné le bord.

Au cours de cette journée, Thompson eut l’occasion d’exercer ses rares facultés de diplomate. Bien qu’un traité de paix eût été signé entre les belligérants, la paix n’était pas au fond des cœurs. Adversaires et partisans de ce départ hâtif voté comme un pis-aller, Thompson à bord n’avait que des ennemis.

À cet égard, il feignait une admirable ignorance. Personne ne lui adressait la parole. On se détournait presque sur son passage. Toutes ces piqûres glissaient sur lui. Souriant comme de coutume, il traversait les groupes hostiles avec son habituelle désinvolture.

Vers cinq heures pourtant il sentit poindre un véritable malaise. Saunders et Hamilton allaient revenir. Que diraient les éternels grincheux de ce nouvel accroc au programme? Thompson en avait froid dans le dos.

Mais cinq, six, sept heures sonnèrent sans que les excursionnistes fussent de retour. Au dîner, les passagers s’entretinrent de cet inexplicable retard, et les familles Hamilton et Blockhead commencèrent à être sérieusement alarmées.

Leur inquiétude augmenta encore, quand la nuit se fit noire sans qu’aucune nouvelle parvînt des voyageurs. Que pouvait-il leur être arrivé?

“Tout, monsieur, tout, et le reste”, dit confidentiellement Johnson d’une voix pâteuse au clergyman Cooley, qui se recula, suffoqué par l’haleine du prudent ivrogne.

À neuf heures et demie, Thompson allait se décider à prendre des informations à Funchal, quand enfin une embarcation accosta le *Seamew* par tribord. Successivement on vit arriver sur le pont les excursionnistes retardataires, hélas! diminués de nombre.

Joyeux départ, triste retour. Qu’il leur avait semblé long, le chemin qui les ramenait à Funchal!

Tout d’abord, on avait dû s’occuper exclusivement de Dolly, dont cette catastrophe semblait avoir emporté la raison. Longtemps, tous s’étaient en vain multipliés autour d’elle. Seul Roger, à force de bonnes paroles, réussit à apaiser cet effrayant désespoir.

Quand enfin la lassitude eut adouci les premiers sanglots de la malheureuse jeune fille, il s’ingénia à lui rendre l’espérance. M. Morgand était adroit et courageux. Il sauverait celle pour qui il s’était dévoué. Pendant une heure, Roger répéta sans se lasser la même assurance, et peu à peu un calme relatif revint dans l’âme déchirée de Dolly.

Il l’aida alors à remonter jusqu’à la route où attendaient les chevaux, puis, l’ayant mise en selle, il demeura à côté d’elle, répétant avec obstination de réconfortantes paroles d’espoir.

Jack, sombre et absorbé en soi-même, n’avait pas tenté d’intervenir entre eux. Il n’avait pas profité de ses liens de parenté pour réclamer ce rôle de bienfaisant consolateur. Son indifférence eût même semblé bizarre à ses compagnons, si ceux-ci n’eussent eu l’esprit trop frappé par la soudaine catastrophe pour rien remarquer autour d’eux. Ils marchaient en silence, pensant aux lamentables événements qui venaient de se dérouler. Pas un qui l’éprouvât, cet espoir, que Roger s’efforçait charitablement de suggérer à Dolly.

Lentement, ils avaient suivi la route qui longe la pente orientale du Curral das Freias jusqu’à son point d’intersection avec le Chemin-Neuf. Durant tout ce long trajet, ils n’avaient cessé de fouiller du regard l’eau bouillonnante dont la colère semblait déjà s’apaiser. À la nuit tombante, ils atteignaient le Chemin-Neuf, qui les éloigna rapidement du torrent dans lequel deux de leurs amis avaient disparu.

Une heure plus tard, ils étaient à Funchal, et une barque les transportait au *Seamew,* où Thompson les attendait avec une impatience non dépourvue d’angoisse.

Thompson puisa dans cette angoisse le courage du désespoir. Mieux valait en finir d’un coup.

Il s’était donc précipité au-devant des retardataires. Précisément, ce fut le baronnet qui, le premier, émergea à la coupée. Mais les grincements qui se faisaient entendre derrière lui trahissaient la proximité du redoutable Saunders. Thompson avait en face de lui l’un de ses deux ennemis. L’autre n’était pas loin.

“Comme vous revenez tard, messieurs! s’écria-t-il en appelant à la rescousse son plus engageant sourire, sans réfléchir que l’obscurité en neutralisait l’effet. Nous commencions à être dans une infernale inquiétude.”

Dans l’état de leurs rapports avec l’administrateur général, l’expression de son inquiétude avait de quoi surprendre Hamilton et Saunders. Mais Hamilton et Saunders, préoccupés de bien autre chose, écoutaient Thompson sans le comprendre, tandis que les autres excursionnistes, arrivant à leur tour sur le pont, s’y rangeaient en un demi-cercle, immobiles et silencieux.

“Nous vous attendions d’autant plus impatiemment, reprit Thompson avec volubilité, qu’en votre absence ces messieurs et ces dames m’ont demandé, ont exigé de moi, j’ose le dire, une toute petite modification au programme.”

C’est en tremblant que Thompson avait prononcé ces derniers mots. Ne recevant pas de réponse, il s’enhardit.

“Non, pas grand-chose, en vérité! Ces messieurs et ces dames, trouvant un peu long le séjour à Funchal, désireraient l’abréger en partant ce soir même. Je suppose que vous n’avez pas d’objections contre cette combinaison qui nous fait regagner deux jours sur nos trois jours de retard?”

Toujours pas de réponse. Thompson, étonné de la facilité de son succès, considéra plus attentivement ses muets auditeurs. L’étrangeté de leur attitude le frappa subitement. Dolly pleurait sur l’épaule de Roger. Leurs quatre compagnons attendaient gravement que le bavard Thompson leur permît de placer un mot qui devait être sérieux, à en juger par l’expression de leurs visages.

D’un regard, Thompson parcourut le groupe des excursionnistes, et s’aperçut des vides que le sort y avait faits.

“Vous serait-il arrivé quelque chose?” demanda-t-il, la voix tout à coup tremblante.

Comme provoqué par un mystérieux avertissement, un grand silence se fit parmi les passagers, qui se resserrèrent fébrilement autour de Thompson.

“Mrs. Lindsay?... insista celui-ci. Mr. Morgand?...”

Saunders, d’un geste désolé, commenta un sourd sanglot de Dolly. Puis enfin Jack Lindsay, se portant un peu en avant de ses compagnons, allait prendre la parole, quand soudain, il recula pâlissant, le bras étendu.

L’intérêt de cette scène avait monopolisé l’attention générale. Personne n’avait songé à s’occuper de ce qui se passait de l’autre côté du bâtiment. Au mouvement de Jack, tous les regards se dirigèrent vers le point qu’il désignait.

Alors, à la clarté des fanaux, un groupe tragique apparut. Le front ensanglanté, les vêtements ruisselants et souillés de vase, Robert Morgand était là, soutenant Alice Lindsay défaillante, mais redressant néanmoins énergiquement son visage d’une pâleur cadavérique.

Ce fut elle qui répondit à la question de Thompson.

“Nous voici, dit-elle simplement, en fixant ses yeux brûlants de fièvre sur son beau-frère, qui recula, plus pâle qu’elle encore.

- Nous voici”, répéta Robert, d’une voix où grondait une accusation, une menace - un défi.

2e Partie

DEUXIÈME PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

LE LEVER DE LA LUNE ROUSSE

Ainsi donc, les événements donnaient raison à Saunders. Le ciel de Thompson s’obscurcissait, et voilà que se levait cette lune rousse, dont l’aigre prophète avait discerné les futures lueurs dans le firmament de Horta. Cette discussion que Thompson avait dû soutenir contre la majorité de ses passagers aurait-elle des sœurs? L’avenir le dirait, mais bien certainement quelque chose s’était cassé entre l’administrateur général et ses administrés.

Le sommeil peut, dit-on, remplacer le dîner pour un estomac affamé. Il ne saurait, par contre, rendre la bonne humeur à des touristes irrités, et c’est de promeneurs mécontents que se peupla le spardeck dans la matinée du 2 juin.

Encore était-il fort heureux pour Thompson que leur colère latente fût détournée par les événements de la veille. Unique sujet de conversation, monopolisant l’attention de tous, ils adoucirent les premières rencontres, qui, sans cela, eussent été plus fertiles en orages.

Unanimement, les passagers plaignaient Mrs. Lindsay d’avoir couru un tel danger, et surtout ils exaltaient l’héroïsme de Robert Morgand. Pour ses compagnons de route, déjà favorablement disposés à son égard par la correction de ses allures, et aussi - il faut le reconnaître - par les hâbleries de Thompson, il devenait tout à fait un personnage, et un accueil flatteur lui était ménagé quand il apparaîtrait sur le pont.

Mais, fatigué sans doute par les émotions et les efforts physiques de la veille, plus ou moins blessé peut-être dans sa lutte contre le torrent furieux, Robert ne sortit pas de sa cabine de toute la matinée, et ne fournit à ses admirateurs aucune occasion d'exprimer leur légitime enthousiasme.

Ils se rabattirent sur les témoins du drame. Saunders, Hamilton, Blockhead durent fournir de nombreuses éditions de la dramatique aventure.

Toutefois, il n'est pas de sujet inépuisable, et celui-là s'épuisa comme les autres. Quand tous les détails eurent été dits et redits, quand Roger eut affirmé que son compatriote souffrait seulement d'une légère courbature et qu'il se lèverait probablement au cours de l'après-midi, on cessa de s'occuper d'Alice et de Robert, et les touristes furent repris par leurs préoccupations personnelles.

Thompson, alors, fut arrangé de belle manière. Si les mots désagréables possédaient la qualité de la pesanteur, il eût été indubitablement assommé. Divisés par groupes, les victimes de l'agence épanchèrent leur bile en de hargneux apartés. Toute la kyrielle des griefs défila de nouveau. Aucun ne fut oublié, qu'on s'en rapporte à Hamilton et à Saunders. Cependant, malgré tous les efforts de ces deux provocateurs, la mauvaise humeur demeura platonique. Personne n'eut l'idée de porter ses doléances à Thompson. À quoi bon? Celui-ci ne pouvait, l'eût-il voulu, rien changer au passé. Puisqu'on avait eu la sottise de croire aux promesses de l'agence, il fallait en subir les conséquences, jusqu'à la fin d'ailleurs prochaine de ce voyage, dont le dernier tiers ne vaudrait sans doute pas mieux que les deux premiers.

Pour le moment, il commençait mal, ce dernier tiers. À peine avait-on quitté Madère, qu'un désagrément supplémentaire mettait à l'épreuve la patience des passagers. Le *Seamew* ne marchait pas. Nul besoin d'être marin pour s’apercevoir de l’incroyable diminution de sa vitesse. Où étaient-ils, les douze nœuds annoncés, promis, tenus... pendant trop peu de jours? À peine si maintenant on faisait cinq milles à l’heure! Un bateau de pêche eût donné utilement la remorque.

Quant à la cause de cet excessif ralentissement, il était aisé de la deviner aux bruits de la machine, qui geignait, haletait, ferraillait lamentablement, au milieu des sifflements de la vapeur fusant par les joints.

De ce train-là, il faudrait quarante-huit heures pour arriver aux Canaries, tout le monde le comprenait. Mais que faire à cela? Rien évidemment, ainsi que le capitaine Pip l’avait déclaré à Thompson d’ailleurs désolé de ce retard très fâcheux pour ses intérêts.

On le subit en silence, cet ennui. Comprenant l’inutilité de la colère, on glissait à la tristesse. Sur les visages, la lassitude avait remplacé toute expression menaçante.

Ce calme fatigué devait être bien profond, pour que les passagers ne s’en départissent pas au cours du déjeuner sonné à l’heure habituelle. Dieu sait pourtant s’il eût pu servir de thème aux plaintes les plus légitimes!

Il est à croire que Thompson cherchait à rétablir un équilibre budgétaire cruellement compromis par les retards successifs, car la table se ressentait de ces soucis d’économie. Quelle différence entre ce déjeuner et ce repas au cours duquel Saunders pour la première fois avait donné issue à sa bile!

Pourtant, même alors, nul ne songea à formuler des plaintes à l’avance stériles. Chacun mangea en silence sa médiocre pitance. Thompson qui, tout de même un peu apeuré, surveillait ses victimes du coin de l’œil, fut en droit de les supposer définitivement domptées. Seul, Saunders ne désarmait pas, et soigneusement il inscrivit ce nouveau grief sur le carnet où il notait ses dépenses journalières. Il ne fallait rien oublier. Dépenses et griefs se régleraient en même temps.

Robert, en apparaissant vers deux heures sur le spardeck, rendit quelque vie à la morne assemblée. Tous les passagers se portèrent à sa rencontre, et plus d'un qui ne lui avait pas encore adressé la parole lui serra la main chaleureusement ce jour-là. L'interprète accueillit avec une modestie polie les compliments qui ne lui furent pas épargnés, et, dès qu'il le put honnêtement, s'isola avec Dolly et Roger.

Le rassemblement importun à peine dissipé, Dolly, les yeux pleins de larmes joyeuses, lui avait saisi les deux mains. Robert, vivement ému lui-même, n'eut pas la petitesse de se dérober aux témoignages d'une si naturelle reconnaissance. Un peu embarrassé toutefois, il sut gré à son compatriote de venir à son secours.

“Maintenant que nous sommes entre nous, dit Roger après quelques instants, vous allez, je suppose, nous raconter les péripéties de votre sauvetage?

-Oh! oui, monsieur Morgand, supplia Dolly.

-Que voulez-vous que je vous dise? répondit Robert. Au fond, rien ne peut être plus facile et plus simple.”

Cependant, malgré ses défaites, il dut s'exécuter, et faire à ses amis un récit que Dolly écouta passionnément.

Tombé dans le torrent, peu de secondes après Alice, il avait eu le bonheur de l'atteindre aussitôt. Mais, dans ce courant furieux labouré de terribles remous, jamais il n’aurait sauvé, ni Mrs. Lindsay, ni lui-même, sans un arbre énorme tout garni de ses feuilles, qui, arraché aux pentes supérieures de la montagne, passa juste à point pour être transformé en radeau. Dès lors, le rôle de Robert se réduisait à peu de chose. Portés par cet arbre, Mrs. Lindsay et lui étaient à peu près hors de danger. En se servant d’une forte branche en guise de gaffe, il avait réussi à pousser vers la rive gauche l’arbre sauveur dont la cime s’agrippa dans le sol. Le reste se comprenait de soi. Avec mille peines, ils étaient arrivés épuisés jusqu’à une chaumière de paysan. De là, sur des hamacs, ils avaient regagné Funchal, puis le *Seamew*, en temps utile pour rassurer leurs compagnons.

Tel fut le récit de Robert. À satiété, Dolly se le fit répéter, voulant en connaître jusqu’au plus infime détail. La cloche du dîner la surprit au milieu de ce bonheur. Pour elle, la journée s’était écoulée comme un rêve.

Les autres passagers n’auraient pu malheureusement en dire autant. La tristesse planait toujours sur le navire, changeant les minutes en heures, les heures en siècles. Si les trois causeurs absorbés ne s’en étaient pas aperçus, le dîner les renseigna forcément. Silencieuse, cette table du soir, comme celle du matin. On s’ennuyait, cela crevait les yeux, sauf peut-être les insatiables Johnson et Piperboom. Ceux-là pouvaient-ils s’ennuyer jamais, l’un insaturable éponge, l’autre abîme sans fond appréciable?

Piperboom, comme de coutume, allait tout à l’heure fumer paisiblement sa pipe, dont les nuages emporteraient avec eux les misérables soucis des hommes. Pour le moment, indifférent à la diverse qualité des nourritures, il les engloutissait simplement, car telle était sa fonction ici- bas.

Digne pendant de cette prodigieuse machine à digérer, Johnson, à l’autre bout de la table, asséchait des flacons variés de manière à frapper d’admiration le spectateur le plus blasé. Définitivement gris désormais, il se tenait raide sur sa chaise, le front pâle couronnant un visage écarlate, la main incertaine, l’œil vague et trouble.

Tous deux dans l’impossibilité de parler et de comprendre, ils ignoraient le mécontentement qui les entourait. L’eussent-ils connu, qu’ils ne l’auraient pas admis. Voyage peut-il être plus agréable, alors qu’on boit jusqu’à la fusion, qu’on mange jusqu’à l’éclatement?

Mais, en dehors de ces deux heureux, on n’apercevait autour de la table que des visages renfrognés. Évidemment, si les convives de Thompson n’étaient pas encore ses ennemis déclarés, il eût du moins trouvé malaisément un ami parmi eux.

Il lui en restait un pourtant. Du premier coup d’œil, un nouveau venu eût discerné ce passager au milieu des autres. Il parlait, celui-là, il parlait très haut même. Peu lui importait que ses paroles ne trouvassent pas d’écho, et se perdissent, amorties comme par de l’ouate dans la froideur hostile de ses compagnons.

Pour la dixième fois, il racontait le drame qui avait failli coûter la vie à Mrs. Lindsay, et, sans tenir aucun compte de l’inattention de ses voisins, il se montrait prodigue d’interjections admiratives à l’adresse de Robert Morgand.

“Oui, monsieur, s’exclamait-il, c’est de l’héroïsme! La vague était haute comme une maison et nous la voyions venir à toute vitesse. C’était terrifiant, monsieur, et, pour sauter là-dedans, il a fallu à M. le professeur un courage extraordinaire. Je ne l’aurais pas fait, moi qui vous parle, je l’avoue. Franc comme l’or, monsieur, franc comme l’or.”

Ah! certes, c’est un véritable ami que possédait Thompson en la personne de l’honorable épicier honoraire. Et pourtant, telle est la puissance de la cupidité, cet ami fidèle, Thompson allait dans un instant risquer de le perdre à jamais.

On venait de quitter la table. Les passagers étaient remontés sur le spardeck dont ils troublaient à peine le silence. Seul, Blockhead continuait à faire part urbi et orbi de sa perpétuelle satisfaction, et spécialement à son agréable famille augmentée de l’infortuné Tigg tenu à l’œil par ses deux geôlières.

“Abel! disait solennellement Blockhead, n’oubliez jamais ce qu’il vous a été donné de voir au cours de ce superbe voyage. J’espère...”

Quelle était l’espérance de Blockhead? L’épicier honoraire ne put s’expliquer à cet égard. Thompson l’abordait, un papier à la main.

“Vous m’excuserez, monsieur Blockhead, dit Thompson, de vous présenter mon petit compte. Un ancien commerçant ne trouvera pas mauvais que l’on fasse régulièrement les affaires.”

Du coup, Blockhead parut ému. Sa figure bonasse en fut moins réjouie.

“Un compte? répéta-t-il en repoussant de la main le papier que lui tendait Thompson. Nous ne pouvons avoir de compte, monsieur, il me semble. Nous avons payé nos places, monsieur.

-Pas tout à fait... rectifia Thompson en souriant.

-Comment! pas tout à fait, balbutia Blockhead.

-Votre mémoire vous trahit, j’ose le dire, mon cher monsieur, insista Thompson. Si vous voulez bien vous en souvenir, vous vous rappellerez que vous avez soldé au total quatre places entières et une demi-place.

-C’est vrai, dit Blockhead en ouvrant de grands yeux.

-Eh bien! continua Thompson, cette demi-place était pour votre fils, M. Abel ici présent, lequel n’avait pas encore dix ans au moment du départ. Ai-je besoin de rappeler à son père qu’il a aujourd’hui même atteint cet âge aimable?”

Blockhead était devenu réellement pâle à mesure que Thompson parlait. Frapper à sa bourse!...

“Et alors... insinua-t-il, la voix cassée.

-Il n’y a plus de raison, répondit Thompson, de faire bénéficier M. Abel de la réduction consentie. Toutefois, dans un esprit de conciliation, et considérant que le voyage est en partie accompli, l’agence a spontanément renoncé à la moitié de ce qui lui est dû. Vous pouvez constater que le compte s’élève à dix livres, pas un penny de plus.”

Ce disant, Thompson insinua délicatement sa note entre les doigts de son passager démoralisé, et, la bouche en cœur, il attendit la réponse. Le visage de Blockhead avait décidément perdu son habituelle sérénité. Quelle belle colère il aurait prise, pour peu que son âme placide eût été accessible à la violence de ce sentiment! Mais Blockhead ne connaissait pas la colère. Les lèvres blanches, le front plissé, il demeurait silencieux, aplati, sous l’œil un peu narquois de Thompson.

Malheureusement pour lui, ce dernier avait compté sans son hôte. L’inoffensif Blockhead possédait de redoutables alliées. Tout à coup, M. l’administrateur général vit à deux pouces de ses yeux trois paires de griffes acérées, précédant trois bouches armées de crocs redoutables, tandis qu’un triple cri retentissait à ses oreilles. Mrs. Georgina et les douces Misses Mary et Bess venaient au secours de leur chef.

Thompson se tourna du côté des assaillants, et, à la vue de ces visages convulsés par la fureur, il fut saisi d’une terreur panique. Rapidement, il battit en retraite. Tranchons le mot, il se sauva, laissant Mrs. Georgina, Miss Bess et Miss Mary se jeter dans les bras de Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead qui reprenait avec difficulté sa respiration.

CHAPITRE II

LE SECOND SECRET DE ROBERT MORGAND

Toute dormait encore à bord du *Seamew,* quand, le lendemain matin, Jack Lindsay émergea de l’escalier des cabines. D’un pas incertain, il parcourut quelques instants le spardeck, puis, allant machinalement s’asseoir sur l’un des bancs de bâbord, il s’accouda à la batayole et laissa distraitement errer son regard sur la mer.

Une vapeur légère à l’horizon du sud-est annonçait l’approche de la première Canarie. Mais Jack ne voyait pas ce nuage de granit. Il n’accordait son attention qu’à soi-même; il s’appliquait uniquement à déchiffrer ses propres pensées, s’absorbait dans l’examen de sa situation que, depuis la veille, il ne cessait d’envisager sous toutes ses faces. De nouveau, il revivait la scène du torrent. De nouveau, il entendait, comme s’il eût éclaté à ses oreilles, le cri d’angoisse vainement poussé par Alice. À cet endroit du drame, une question s’imposait pour la dixième fois à son esprit, obsédante, inquiétante. Alice avait-elle compris?

Si elle avait compris, si elle avait vu clairement l’odieux retrait de la main tendue, elle allait sans doute agir, chercher hors d’elle-même une protection nécessaire, le dénoncer peut-être!... Et alors, que ferait-il?

Mais, pour la dixième fois, une analyse plus sévère des faits le rassurait. Non, Alice ne parlerait pas. Jamais elle ne consentirait à jeter dans un scandale le nom qu’elle portait. Même instruite, elle se tairait.

Au surplus, Alice avait-elle vu, avait-elle compris? Rien, en somme, n’était moins certain. Tout avait dû rester bien confus dans un tel chaos des éléments et des âmes. À force d’y songer, Jack en arriva à se tranquilliser pleinement de ce côté. Donc, aucune difficulté à ce qu’il vécût comme par le passé avec ses compagnons, sans en excepter Alice confiante...

Et vivante! ajoutait-il en lui-même. En mettant tout au mieux, en effet, il lui fallait du moins reconnaître le misérable échec du plan subitement échafaudé. Alice était à bord du *Seamew,* bien vivante, et nantie toujours de cette fortune qu’elle se refusait à partager. Fût-elle morte, du reste, que les espérances de Jack n’en eussent pas été moins irréalisables. Pas plus que sa sœur, Dolly n’eût été de facile conquête, il ne pouvait plus l’ignorer. Le désespoir de la jeune fille, en jetant bas pour un instant toutes les barrières de convenances élevées par les usages, avait permis au plus aveugle de connaître l’état de son cœur, et de ce cœur, tout entier à Roger de Sorgues, Jack devait renoncer à s’emparer jamais.

Dès lors, à quoi bon?...

À moins cependant... insinuait une voix profonde. Mais Jack, secouant les épaules dédaigneusement, rejetait ces suggestions insensées. Passif jusqu’ici, allait-il se muer en un assassin actif, s’attaquer ouvertement à deux femmes?... Folies que tout cela. À défaut d’autres raisons, un pareil crime eût été trop absurde. Le coupable, unique héritier des victimes, eût été forcément en butte aux premiers soupçons. Et d’ailleurs, quel moyen de tromper la garde jalouse de Roger de Sorgues?

Non, cela ne supportait pas l’examen. Il n’y avait rien à faire, qu’à attendre. Attente paisible, s’il n’existait aucun témoin de la tentative avortée. Mais, sur ce point, Jack jugeait sa sécurité absolue. Il était bien seul avec Alice lorsqu’elle avait tendu vers lui ses bras suppliants. Nul autre n’était là quand la vague furieuse avait enlevé la jeune femme dans son tourbillon. Un autre?... Quel autre?...

Au moment précis où il se posait ironiquement cette question, Jack sentit une main se poser sur son épaule avec une ferme énergie. Il tressaillit et se leva brusquement. Robert Morgand était devant lui.

“Monsieur...” balbutia Jack, d’un ton qu’il s’efforçait en vain de rendre rassuré.

Robert, du geste, lui coupa la parole, tandis que son autre main affirmait son étreinte.

“J’ai vu! dit-il seulement avec une menaçante froideur.

-Monsieur, essaya de répliquer Jack, je ne comprends pas...

-J’ai vu!” répéta Robert d’un ton plus grave, dans lequel Jack put discerner un solennel avertissement.

Celui-ci, libéré, se redressa, et, sans jouer plus longtemps l’ignorance.

“Voilà d’étranges façons, dit-il avec hauteur. L’agence Thompson a singulièrement stylé ses gens. Qui vous a donné le droit de me toucher?

-Vous-même, répondit Robert dédaignant de relever l’intention injurieuse contenue dans les paroles du passager américain. Tout le monde a le droit de mettre la main à l’épaule d’un assassin.

-Assassin! assassin! répéta Jack Lindsay sans s’émouvoir, c’est bientôt dit... Ainsi donc, vous avez la prétention de m’arrêter, ajouta-t-il railleusement sans faire le moindre effort pour se disculper.

-Pas encore, dit froidement Robert. Pour le moment, je me borne à vous avertir. Si le hasard seul m’a mis cette fois entre Mrs. Lindsay et vous, désormais ce sera ma volonté, sachez-le.”

Jack haussa les épaules.

“C’est entendu, mon ami, c’est entendu, acquiesça-t-il avec une insolente légèreté. Mais vous avez dit: “Pas encore. “C’est donc que plus tard...

-J’en référerai à Mrs. Lindsay, interrompit Robert sans se départir de son calme. C’est elle, instruite par moi, qui décidera.”

Cette fois, Jack perdit son allure railleuse.

“Avertir Alice! s’écria-t-il, les yeux tout à coup étincelants de colère.

-Oui.

-Vous ne ferez pas cela!

-Je le ferai.

-Prenez garde!” gronda Jack menaçant, en avançant d’un pas vers l’interprète du *Seamew.*

Ce fut au tour de Robert de hausser les épaules. Jack, par un violent effort, redevint impassible.

“Prenez garde, répéta-t-il la voix sifflante. Prenez garde alors pour elle et pour vous.”

Et, sans attendre de réponse, il s’éloigna brusquement.

Seul, Robert maintenant songeait à son tour. En se retrouvant en face de l’abominable Jack, il avait été droit au but, et il avait accompli sans tergiversations le projet résolu. Cette leçon suffisait probablement. D’ordinaire, les méchants sont des lâches. Quelles que fussent les raisons ignorées, soupçonnées cependant, qui l’avaient poussé à ce demi-crime, Jack Lindsay, se sachant surveillé, perdrait l’audace, et Mrs. Lindsay n’aurait plus rien à redouter de son dangereux parent. On veillerait, d’ailleurs, au besoin.

Sa brève exécution terminée, Robert chassa dédaigneusement de son esprit l’image de son antipathique compagnon de route, et dirigea son regard désœuvré vers l’horizon du sud-est, où la vapeur de tout à l’heure s’était changée en une île haute et aride, tandis que plus au sud d’autres terres s’élevaient confusément.

“S’il vous plaît, monsieur le professeur, quelle est donc cette île?” demanda derrière lui une voix narquoise.

Robert, en se retournant, se trouva en face de Roger de Sorgues. Il sourit, mais garda le silence, car le nom de cette île, après tout, il ne le savait pas.

“De mieux en mieux! s’écria Roger avec un ricanement moqueur, mais amical. Nous avons donc oublié de compiler notre excellent guide? Il est heureux vraiment que je me sois montré moins négligent.

-Bah! fit Robert.

-Parfaitement. L’île qui s’élève devant nous est l’île Allegranza, c’est-à-dire la Joyeuse, monsieur le professeur. Pourquoi est-elle joyeuse? Peut-être parce qu’elle n’a pas d’habitants. Inculte, aride, cette terre sauvage n’est en effet visitée qu’à l’époque de la récolte de l’orseille, plante tinctoriale qui constitue une des richesses de cet archipel. Le nuage que vous voyez plus au sud indique la place de la grande île de Lancelote. Entre Lancelote et Allegranza, on peut distinguer Graciosa, autre îlot inhabité séparé de Lancelote par un étroit canal, le Rio, et Monta-Clara, simple rocher trop souvent funeste aux navigateurs.

-Grand merci, monsieur l'interprète", dit gravement Robert profitant du moment où Roger s'arrêtait essoufflé.

Les deux compatriotes se mirent à rire.

"Il est vrai, reprit Robert, que j'ai cruellement négligé mes fonctions depuis quelques jours. Mais aussi, pourquoi me faire perdre mon temps à travers l'île de Madère?

-L'avez-vous donc si mal employé, votre temps?" objecta Roger, en montrant à son compagnon Alice et Dolly, qui s'avançaient vers eux, enlacées.

La démarche ferme de Mrs. Lindsay montrait qu'elle avait retrouvé la plénitude de sa santé. Un peu de pâleur et quelques légères ecchymoses au front et aux joues demeuraient les derniers vestiges de l'aventure où elle avait frôlé de si près une épouvantable mort. Robert et Roger s'étaient élancés au-devant des deux Américaines, qui, en les apercevant, avaient détruit leur groupe harmonieux.

Alice pressa longuement la main de Robert et leva vers lui un regard plus éloquent que de verbeux remerciements.

"Vous, madame! s'écria Robert. N'y a-t-il pas quelque imprudence à quitter si tôt votre chambre?

-Aucune, répondit Alice avec un sourire, aucune, grâce à vous, qui m’avez si bien protégée aux dépens de vous-même, pendant notre voyage involontaire - involontaire pour moi, du moins, ajouta-t-elle en chargeant son regard d’un plus chaleureux remerciement.

-Oh! madame, quoi de plus naturel? Les hommes sont beaucoup moins fragiles que les femmes. Les hommes, vous comprenez...”

Dans sa confusion, Robert s’embourbait. Il allait dire des sottises...

“Tenez, madame, conclut-il, n’en parlons plus. Je suis heureux de ce qui s’est passé, et je ne voudrais pas - mot affreusement égoïste - que tout cela n’ait pas eu lieu. Je serais donc payé par ma propre joie, s’il en était besoin, et vous pouvez honnêtement vous considérer comme libérée à mon égard.”

Et, pour couper court à tout nouvel attendrissement, il se hâta d’entraîner ses compagnons vers le bastingage et se mit en devoir de leur faire admirer les îles qui s’élevaient de plus en plus sur l’horizon.

“Nous approchons, mesdames, vous le voyez, de la fin de notre voyage, dit-il avec volubilité. Devant nous, voici la première Canarie, Allegranza. C’est une île aride, inculte et inhabitée, sauf à l’époque de la récolte de l’orseille. Cette plante tinctoriale constitue une des richesses de cet archipel. Plus au sud, on aperçoit l’île de Rio, séparée par un bras de mer, le Monta-Clara, d’un îlot également inhabité nommé Lancelote, et Graciosa, simple rocher perdu...”

Robert ne put achever sa fantaisiste description. Un éclat de rire de Roger lui coupa la parole.

“Nom d’un chien, quel gâchis! s’écria l’officier, en entendant cette traduction libre de sa conférence.

- Décidément, dit Robert en faisant chorus, j’ai besoin d’étudier encore un peu les Canaries.”

Vers dix heures, parvenu à cinq milles d’Allegranza, le *Seamew* mit le cap presque exactement au sud. Une heure plus tard, on passait devant le rocher de Monta-Clara, quand la cloche sonna le rappel des passagers.

Le menu continuait sa marche descendante. La plupart des voyageurs, plongés dans une farouche résignation, parurent n’y pas faire attention. Mais Alice, qui n’avait pas bénéficié de l’éducation du jour précédent, éprouva quelque surprise et, à un certain moment, ne put même retenir une légère grimace.

“C’est le système des compensations, madame, lui cria audacieusement Saunders à travers la table. À long voyage, mauvaise table.”

Alice sourit sans répondre. Quant à Thompson, il n’eut pas l’air d’entendre son acharné persécuteur. Il se borna, en signe d’indifférence, à faire claquer sa langue d’un air satisfait. Il était content de sa cuisine, lui!

Quand on remonta sur le pont, le navire avait dépassé l’îlot de Graciosa et commençait à suivre avec une vitesse constamment plus réduite les rivages de Lancelote.

Pour commenter le spectacle offert aux yeux des passagers, Robert Morgand n’eût-il pas dû être à son poste, prêt à subir toutes les questions, à soutenir toutes les colles? Oui, sans doute, et pourtant le cicérone du *Seamew* demeura invisible jusqu’au soir.

Au reste, qu’aurait-il pu dire? La côte occidentale de Lancelote se déroulait uniformément, déployant une sauvagerie qui, depuis les Açores, commençait à devenir un peu monotone.

D’abord, c’est une haute falaise, le Risco de Famara, puis le rivage plus bas se recouvre de cendres volcaniques d’où émerge une armée de cônes noirs, pour aboutir enfin à la Playa Quemada, plage brûlée, dont le nom dit assez l’irrémédiable infertilité. Partout c’est la désolation, partout des rocs tristes avec lesquels se confondent les bleuâtres plantes grasses qui seules parviennent à prendre racine. Pas de ville un peu importante sur cette côte occidentale qu’animent seulement de rares et pauvres villages dont le cicérone le mieux informé a le droit d’ignorer les noms obscurs.

Des deux centres commerçants de l’île, l’un, Téhuise, est dans l’intérieur des terres, l’autre, Arrécife, offre sur la côte orientale l’abri de son excellent mouillage. C’est dans ces régions et dans d’autres analogues, exposées aux alizés du nord-est qui apportent avec eux une humidité bienfaisante, que la vie a pu s’établir, tandis que le reste de l’île, et notamment la partie longée par le *Seamew*, a été transformé par la sécheresse en véritables steppes.

Voilà tout ce que Robert Morgand aurait pu dire, s’il l’avait su et s’il avait été là. Comme aucune de ces deux conditions n’était remplie, force fut aux touristes de se passer de cicérone, ce dont ils semblèrent d’ailleurs ne pas s’apercevoir. L’œil éteint, l’air accablé, ils laissaient, sans manifester aucune curiosité, fuir de conserve le navire et le temps. Seuls, Hamilton et Saunders possédaient encore un peu de leur belliqueuse ardeur. Blockhead lui-même depuis la veille paraissait sensiblement déprimé.

Roger, pendant cette après-midi, tint, comme de coutume, compagnie aux passagères américaines; à plusieurs reprises, celles-ci s’étonnèrent de l’absence de Robert, que son compatriote expliqua par le besoin de travailler son guide. Et Dieu sait si ce besoin était réel!

La causerie aiguillée sur ce sujet, on ne le quitta plus, et les oreilles du cicérone-interprète du *Seamew* eurent de bonnes raisons de tinter agréablement. Dolly le disait tout à fait de son goût et Roger l’en approuvait énergiquement.

“Ce qu’il a fait pour Mrs. Lindsay, conclut-il, est déjà passablement héroïque. Mais Robert Morgand est de ces hommes qui accomplissent simplement et toujours ce qui doit être accompli. C’est un homme, dans toute la force du terme.”

Songeuse, Alice écoutait ces éloges, le regard perdu vers l’horizon vague comme les pensées dont son âme était agitée...

“Bonjour, Alice! Je suis aise de vous voir revenue à la santé”, dit tout à coup un personnage dont les trois causeurs absorbés n’avaient pas entendu l’approche.

Mrs. Lindsay eut un tressaillement vite réprimé.

“Je vous remercie, Jack, dit-elle d’une voix paisible. Ma santé est excellente, en effet.

- Aucune nouvelle ne peut m’être plus agréable”, répondit Jack en poussant malgré lui un soupir de soulagement.

Ce premier choc qu’il redoutait si fort avait eu lieu, et il en sortait à son honneur. Jusqu’ici, tout au moins, sa belle- sœur ne savait rien.

Il se trouva si réconforté par cette certitude que son caractère ordinairement sombre s’anima exceptionnellement. Au lieu de se tenir à l’écart, il se mêla à la conversation. Fait surprenant, il fut presque gai. Dolly et Roger, qui n’en revenaient pas, lui donnaient mollement la réplique, tandis qu’Alice semblait, l’esprit ailleurs, ne rien entendre de ce qui se disait autour d’elle.

Vers quatre heures, le *Seamew* laissa derrière lui l’île de Lancelote et commença à côtoyer les rivages presque identiques de Fortaventure. N’eût été la Bocaïna, canal de dix kilomètres de large qui sépare les deux îles, on ne se fût pas aperçu du changement.

Robert persistait dans son absence. Ce fut en vain que Roger, intrigué par cette complète disparition, alla jusque dans les cabines relancer son ami. M. le professeur Morgand n’était pas chez lui.

On ne l’aperçut qu’au dîner, lequel fut aussi morne que le déjeuner, puis, le repas à peine terminé, il disparut de nouveau, et Alice, remontée sur le spardeck, put voir à la nuit tombante s’allumer le hublot de son insaisissable sauveur.

Toute la soirée, Robert demeura invisible, et les passagères américaines gagnèrent l’heure du repos, que la lumière studieuse brillait toujours.

“Il est enragé!” dit en riant Roger qui reconduisait les deux sœurs.

Dans sa cabine, Alice ne se mit pas au lit avec sa tranquillité coutumière. Ses mains paresseuses s’attardaient. Plus d’une fois, elle se surprit, assise et rêvant, ayant inconsciemment interrompu les soins de sa toilette nocturne. Quelque chose était changé qu’elle n’eût pu dire. Une indéfinissable angoisse pesait sur son cœur.

Dans la chambre voisine, un bruit de pages froissées lui avait prouvé que M. Morgand était là, et qu'il travaillait en effet. Mais bientôt Alice tressaillit. On avait cessé de tourner les pages. Le livre clos d'un coup sec, une chaise avait été repoussée, et aussitôt le bruit de la porte refermée indiqua à l'indiscrète écouteuse que M. Morgand était remonté sur le pont.

"Est-ce donc parce que nous n'y sommes plus?" se demanda involontairement Alice.

D'un mouvement de tête, elle chassa cette idée, et délibérément acheva sa toilette. Cinq minutes plus tard, étendue dans sa couchette, elle cherchait le sommeil. Il devait être plus long que d'ordinaire à venir.

Robert, éprouvant après cette journée de rigoureuse claustration le besoin de prendre l'air, était en effet remonté sur le pont.

Lumineux dans la nuit, l'habitacle du spardeck l'attira. D'un coup d'œil, il vit que la route était au sud-ouest, et en inféra que le *Seamew* se dirigeait sur la Grande- Canarie. Désœuvré, il revint vers l'arrière, et se laissa tomber dans un fauteuil, à côté d'un fumeur qu'il n'aperçut même pas. Un moment, son regard flotta dans l'ombre sur la mer invisible puis s'abaissa, et bientôt, le front dans la main, il se perdit en de profondes pensées.

"Pardieu! dit tout à coup le fumeur, vous voilà bien ténébreux ce soir, monsieur le professeur!"

Robert tressaillit et se mit debout d'une secousse. Le fumeur s'était levé en même temps, et, à la lueur des fanaux, Robert reconnut son compatriote Roger de Sorgues, la main cordialement tendue, un sourire de bon accueil aux lèvres.

“Il est vrai, dit-il. Je suis un peu souffrant.

-Malade? interrogea Roger avec intérêt.

-Pas précisément. Fatigué, las plutôt.

-Un reste de votre plongeon de l’autre jour?”

Robert fit un geste évasif.

“Mais aussi quelle idée de vous enfermer toute cette journée!” continua Roger.

Robert répéta le même geste, bon décidément pour toutes les réponses.

“Vous travailliez sans doute? insista Roger.

-Avouez que j’en ai besoin! repartit en souriant Robert.

-Mais où diable alors vous êtes-vous installé pour compulser vos coquins de guides? J’ai été frapper à votre porte sans obtenir de réponse.

-C’est que vous êtes venu juste au moment où je prenais un peu de récréation en plein air.

-Et pas avec nous!” dit Roger d’un ton de reproche.

Robert garda le silence.

“Je ne suis pas le seul, reprit Roger, à m’être étonné de votre disparition. Ces dames en ont manifesté plusieurs fois leur regret. C’est un peu à la requête de Mrs. Lindsay que je suis allé vous relancer jusque dans votre fort.

-Serait-il vrai! s’écria malgré lui Robert.

-Voyons, entre nous, insista amicalement Roger, votre réclusion n’a-t-elle pas d’autre cause que votre amour du travail?

-En aucune façon.

-Dans ce cas, affirma Roger, il y a abus et vous avez eu tort. Votre absence a réellement gâté notre journée. Nous étions moroses, et Mrs. Lindsay tout particulièrement.

-Quelle idée!” s’écria Robert.

L’observation faite par Roger sans aucune intention particulière sur le mécontentement de Mrs. Lindsay n’avait rien de bien extraordinaire. Aussi fut-il grandement étonné de l’effet produit par des mots aussi simples. Après avoir poussé son exclamation d’une voix bizarre, Robert s’était aussitôt détourné. Il paraissait gêné, son visage exprimant en même temps de l’embarras et de la joie.

“Ah bah!” se dit Roger subitement intéressé.

“Après tout, reprit-il après un silence, je m’avance peut-être beaucoup en attribuant à votre absence la tristesse de Mrs. Lindsay. Figurez-vous que nous avons dû subir toute l’après-midi ce vilain oiseau de Jack Lindsay, en général moins prodigue de ses désagréables amabilités. Par extraordinaire, le personnage était plutôt jovial aujourd’hui. Mais sa gaieté est encore plus pénible que sa froideur, et je ne serais pas étonné que sa compagnie ait suffi à rembrunir Mrs. Lindsay.”

Roger regarda Robert qui ne broncha pas. Il poursuivit:

“D’autant que la pauvre femme s’est vue réduite à ses seules forces pour soutenir cet interminable assaut. Miss Dolly et moi, nous l’avons lâchement abandonnée, oublieux du reste du monde, jusques et y compris le beau-frère.”

Cette fois, Robert ramena son regard vers son compatriote. Celui-ci, d’ailleurs, ne se fit pas prier pour achever sa confidence.

“Comment trouvez-vous Miss Dolly? demanda-t-il à son ami en rapprochant son fauteuil d’une saccade.

-Adorable, répondit Robert avec sincérité.

-N’est-ce pas! fit Roger. Eh bien! mon cher, je veux que vous en soyez le premier informé. Cette fille adorable, c’est vous qui l’avez dit, je l’aime, et je compte bien l’épouser dès le retour.”

Robert ne parut pas autrement surpris de cette nouvelle.

“Je m’attendais un peu à votre confidence, avoua-t-il en souriant. À vrai dire, votre secret est à bord un peu celui de Polichinelle. Toutefois, me permettrez-vous une question? C’est à peine si vous connaissez ces dames Lindsay. Avez-vous pensé qu’une union avec leur famille pourrait rencontrer des difficultés dans la vôtre?

-La mienne? répondit Roger en serrant la main du bénévole conseiller. Je n’en ai pas. Tout au plus quelques cousins éloignés que mes affaires ne concernent en rien. Et puis, aimer en hussard ne veut pas dire aimer en fou. Dans cette circonstance, j’ai agi, sachez-le, avec la prudence d’un vieux notaire. Dès notre arrivée aux Açores - la tarentule du mariage m’avait déjà piqué à cette époque - j’ai demandé par télégraphe sur la famille Lindsay des renseignements qui me sont parvenus à Madère. Ces renseignements, sauf peut-être en ce qui concerne le nommé Jack - mais à cet égard le télégraphe ne m'a rien appris que je n'eusse deviné - ont été tels que tout homme d'honneur doit s'estimer fier d'épouser Miss Dolly... ou sa sœur", ajouta-t-il après une pause.

Robert soupira légèrement sans répondre.

"Vous voilà devenu bien silencieux, mon cher! reprit Roger après un moment de silence. Auriez-vous donc à formuler des objections telles...

-Rien que des encouragements au contraire! s'écria vivement Robert. Miss Dolly est charmante et vous êtes un heureux. Mais, en vous écoutant, j'ai eu, je l'avoue, l'égoïsme de faire un retour sur moi-même, et un moment je vous ai jalousé. Pardonnez-moi ce blâmable sentiment.

-Jalousé! Et pourquoi donc? Quelle femme aurait le mauvais goût de refuser M. le marquis de Gramond...

-... Cicérone-interprète à bord du *Seamew,* et possesseur de cent cinquante francs, bien problématiques pour qui connaît Thompson", acheva Robert avec amertume.

Roger repoussa l'objection d'un geste insouciant.

"Belle affaire que cela! souffla-t-il d'un ton léger. L'amour se mesure-t-il aux écus? On a vu plus d'une fois, et notamment des Américaines...

-Pas un mot de plus! interrompit Robert d'une voix brève, en saisissant la main de son ami. Aussi bien, confidence pour confidence. Écoutez la mienne, et vous comprendrez que je ne puisse plaisanter sur ce sujet.

-J’écoute, dit Roger.

-Vous me demandiez tout à l’heure si j’avais quelque raison de m’être tenu à l’écart aujourd’hui. Eh bien! oui, j’en avais une.”

“Nous y voilà”, pensa Roger.

-Vous pouvez vous laisser aller librement au penchant qui vous entraîne vers Miss Dolly. Vous ne le cachez pas, votre bonheur d’aimer. Moi, c’est la crainte d’aimer qui me paralyse.

-La crainte d’aimer! voilà une crainte que je ne connaîtrai jamais!

-Oui, la crainte. L’événement imprévu au cours duquel j’ai été assez heureux pour rendre service à Mrs. Lindsay m’a naturellement relevé à ses yeux...

-Vous n’aviez pas besoin, soyez-en sûr, d’être relevé aux yeux de Mrs. Lindsay, interrompit nettement Roger.

-Cet événement a mis plus d’intimité dans nos rapports, les a rendus moins hiérarchiques, presque amicaux, poursuivit Robert. Mais, en même temps, il m’a permis de voir clair, trop clair en moi-même. Hélas! aurais-je fait ce que j’ai fait, si je n’avais pas aimé!”

Robert se tut un instant. Puis il reprit:

“C’est parce que cette conscience m’est venue que je n’ai pas voulu profiter, et que je ne profiterai pas à l’avenir de ma nouvelle intimité avec Mrs. Lindsay.

-Quel drôle d’amoureux êtes-vous donc? dit Roger avec une affectueuse ironie.

-C’est pour moi une question d’honneur, répondit Robert. J’ignore quelle est la fortune de Mrs. Lindsay, mais, à ce que je puis croire, elle est considérable, n’en aurais-je pour preuve que certains faits dont j’ai été témoin.

-Quels faits? demanda Roger.

-Il ne saurait me convenir, poursuivit Robert, sans s’expliquer davantage, de passer, moi aussi, pour un courtisan de la richesse, et ma lamentable situation autoriserait toutes les suppositions à cet égard.

-Voyons, mon cher, objecta Roger, cette délicatesse vous honore, mais avez-vous réfléchi que la rigueur de vos sentiments fait un peu le procès des miens? Je raisonne moins que vous lorsque je pense à Miss Dolly.

-Notre situation n’est pas la même. Vous êtes riche...

-En regard de vous, riposta Roger, mais pauvre en comparaison de Miss Dolly. Ma fortune n’est rien, à côté de la sienne.

-Elle suffit du moins à garantir votre indépendance, dit Robert. Et d’ailleurs, Miss Dolly vous aime, c’est l’évidence même.

-Je le crois, dit Roger. Mais, si Mrs. Lindsay vous aimait?...

-Si Mrs. Lindsay m’aimait?...” répéta Robert à demi- voix.

Mais aussitôt il secoua la tête, comme pour rejeter cette hypothèse insensée, et, s’appuyant au bastingage, laissa de nouveau errer son regard sur la mer.

Roger lui aussi s’était accoudé, et longtemps le silence régna entre les deux amis.

Paisiblement les heures coulèrent ainsi. Le timonier avait depuis longtemps piqué minuit, qu’ils suivaient

encore leurs rêves dansant dans le sillage, leurs rêves tristes et gais.

CHAPITRE III

OÙ LE “SEAMEW” S’ARRÊTE TOUT À FAIT

En montant à l’aube sur le spardeck, le 4 juin, les passagers auraient pu apercevoir, lointains encore, les rivages altiers de la Grande-Canarie. Là, le *Seamew* allait faire sa première escale dans l’archipel. Ténériffe serait la seconde, et la dernière à la fois du voyage.

L’archipel des Canaries se compose de onze îles ou îlots disposés en une demi-circonférence qui tourne sa concavité vers le nord. En commençant à l’extrémité nord- est pour finir à l’extrémité nord-ouest, on trouve successivement: Allegranza, Monta-Clara, Gracieuse, Lancelote, Lobos, Fortaventure, la Grande-Canarie, Ténériffe, Gomère, l’île de Fer et Palma. Habitées par une population d’environ deux cent quatre-vingt mille âmes, ces diverses îles, dont les plus orientales sont séparées de l’Afrique par un bras de mer large au plus de cent kilomètres, réunissent entre elles une superficie supérieure à deux cent soixante-quinze lieues carrées.

Sous le gouvernement d’un commandant résidant à Sainte-Croix de Ténériffe et de deux alcades mayores, les Canaries forment une province de l’Espagne. Province lointaine, il est vrai, et, par conséquent, quelque peu négligée. Il faut admettre cette négligence de la métropole pour s’expliquer la médiocrité du commerce de cet archipel, qui, en raison de sa situation géographique, devrait être une des principales hôtelleries de la grande route de l’océan.

Différentes par la taille, les Canaries se ressemblent toutes par la sauvagerie de l’aspect. Ce ne sont que falaises de basalte à pic à peine bordées d’une grève étroite. En voyant ces murailles de fer, on s’étonne de l’épithète de “Fortunées” jadis appliquée à ces îles de si rébarbatif abord. Mais l’étonnement cesse, ou plutôt change de nature, quand on pénètre dans l’intérieur des terres.

De pareille origine volcanique, elles sont taillées sur le même patron. Presque toujours, une ceinture de volcans secondaires s’élève à la périphérie, entourant, au centre, un volcan principal. C’est dans les cratères de ces volcans aujourd’hui éteints, abrités, par leurs parois circulaires, des vents torrides venus de l’Afrique, c’est dans les vallées séparant les cimes, c’est dans les plateaux concaves qui couronnent certains sommets, que l’on trouve la justification de l’épithète critiquée. Là, règne un printemps perpétuel; là, presque sans culture, la nature donne à l’homme jusqu’à trois récoltes annuelles.

Des îles qui composent l’archipel, la Grande-Canarie n’est pas la plus vaste. Le courage déployé par ses premiers habitants, lors de la conquête de Jean de Béthencourt, lui a seul valu d’être désignée ainsi. Et vraiment, n’est-ce pas là une façon d’être “grande” qui en vaut bien une autre?

L’Agence Thompson avait fait montre d’un véritable discernement en la choisissant comme point de relâche. La Grande-Canarie est le résumé des autres îles. Si elle n’a pas une aussi prodigieuse cime que Ténériffe, elle occupe à cet égard un bon rang, et le premier à tous les autres. C’est elle qui possède les rivages les plus inaccessibles, au point que les poissons ne peuvent y déposer leur frai, les vallées les mieux abritées, les barranques les plus profondes, et en général les plus curieuses particularités naturelles.

Cependant, on aurait pu faire à l’Agence Thompson une observation judicieuse. Pour voir toutes les choses intéressantes que recèle la Grande-Canarie, pour en avoir une idée tout au moins, n’aurait-il pas été bon de faire une excursion à l'intérieur de l'île, de pousser au moins une petite pointe dans la campagne? Or, l'Agence Thompson avait complètement négligé ce détail.

“Le 2 juin, arrivée à Las Palmas à 4 heures du matin. À 8 heures, visite de la ville. Départ pour Ténériffe, le même jour à minuit”, voilà tout ce qu'annonçait le programme.

On arriverait, il est vrai, le 4 juin, mais cela n'était pas, au contraire, pour modifier les plans de l'agence dans le sens d'une prodigalité ruineuse. Que ce fût le 2 ou le 4, on repartirait le même jour pour Ténériffe. Tant pis pour les passagers, si, de la Grande-Canarie, ils ne voyaient à peu près rien!

Ils acceptaient d'ailleurs facilement cette perspective. Leur grincheuse torpeur n'eût laissé à personne la force de manifester son mécontentement. Ce mécontentement, d'ailleurs, eût-il été fondé dans un cas où l'agence ne faisait après tout que tenir ses engagements? Au surplus, on était las, et, puisqu'on devait partir le même jour, on partirait “le même jour”. Si Thompson eût tout à coup proposé d'allonger la relâche, la plupart des voyageurs se fussent refusés à une prolongation d'un voyage qui commençait à leur être à charge.

Vers 11 heures, le *Seamew* se trouvait par le travers de la capitale, Las Palmas, ou “Les Palmiers”. On eut le loisir de la contempler. Soufflant, geignant, le navire ne marchait plus beaucoup mieux qu'une bouée.

Pour la première fois depuis le départ de Londres, les passagers purent éprouver une franche sensation d'exotisme. Bâtie à l'issue de la barranque de Guiniguanda, sur une succession de terrains procédant par brusques ressauts, la ville est d'allure tout à fait orientale. Ses rues étroites, ses blanches maisons aux toits plats justifient dans une certaine mesure l’épithète de “kasbah” dont Roger de Sorgues crut devoir la gratifier.

Vers midi, le *Seamew* stoppait enfin dans le port de “La Luz”, distant de la ville de trois kilomètres environ.

Ces trois kilomètres, il allait falloir les refaire en sens inverse. Aussi, Thompson, l’amarrage à peine terminé, s’était-il posté sur le quai, où il s’efforçait de former ses passagers en colonne, au fur et à mesure de leur débarquement. C’était la répétition de cette manœuvre, à laquelle de nombreux exercices avaient rompu les touristes enrégimentés hors des premières escales aux Açores.

Mais, hélas! où était la belle discipline d’antan? Ces conscrits si dociles se mutinaient, grognards. Les mouvements indiqués par Thompson s’accomplissaient avec un évident mauvais vouloir; la troupe était pleine de murmures. Les rangs se disloquaient, à peine formés. Après un quart d’heure d’efforts, Thompson parvint bien juste à réunir une dizaine de fidèles, parmi lesquels le placide Piperboom - de Rotterdam - et Mr. Absyrthus

Blockhead, revenu à son habituelle bonne humeur, depuis qu’il n’était plus question de l’âge de son rejeton.

Le gros des touristes était demeuré en arrière. Massés en un groupe compact, ils opposaient une invincible inertie aux efforts de l’administrateur général.

“Voyons, messieurs!... Messieurs, voyons!... lançait timidement Thompson à ces récalcitrants.

-C’est tout vu, monsieur, répondit brutalement Saunders en prenant d’autorité la parole au nom de ses compagnons. Nous attendons patiemment les véhicules et porteurs promis par votre programme.”

Et Saunders, ce disant, brandissait l’imprimé où ces fallacieuses promesses s’étalaient en effet en toutes lettres.

“Mais, messieurs, où voulez-vous que je les prenne? demanda piteusement Thompson.

-Fort bien! repartit Saunders de sa voix la plus grinçante. Je vais donc tâcher de trouver une voiture tout seul.”

Il tira de sa poche son fidèle carnet.

“Mais je la louerai à vos frais! C’est un compte que nous réglerons à Londres, monsieur, ajouta-t-il en se mettant en marche, tandis que ses articulations s’emplissaient des plus belliqueux ferraillements.

-Je vous suis, cher monsieur, je vous suis!” s’écria aussitôt Sir George Hamilton, qui, suivi lui-même de Lady Hamilton et de Miss Margaret, emboîta le pas à son chef de file.

Cette adhésion en entraînant d’autres, les deux tiers des touristes s’étaient, quelques instants plus tard, séparés du reste de leurs compagnons.

À proximité du port de La Luz, une petite ville s’est créée, offrant toutes les ressources nécessaires aux navires en relâche. Saunders allait certainement trouver sans peine ce qu’il cherchait. En avant des plus proches maisons, trois ou quatre voitures stationnaient, en effet. Saunders n’eut qu’un signe à faire pour qu’elles vinssent à sa rencontre.

Par malheur, ces quatre voitures ne pouvaient suffire. Quand, escaladées d’assaut, elles se furent éloignées, la majorité des dissidents dut revenir en arrière, formant ainsi un appoint inespéré à la troupe du général en chef.

À ce moment, Mrs. Lindsay, accompagnée de sa soeur et de Roger, quittait à son tour le *Seamew*. Thompson, en l’apercevant, battit des mains pour activer le mouvement.

“Allons, messieurs, en place, s’il vous plaît! s’écria-t- il. L’heure passe, veuillez y songer.”

Mrs. Lindsay, d’ordinaire, était à coup sûr une voyageuse paisible et bien différente du désagréable Saunders. Cependant, fût-ce par une suggestion de ses compagnons, ou plutôt jugeait-elle avoir assez goûté les charmes d’une promenade dans ce ridicule alignement, quoi qu’il en soit, elle ne parut pas accueillir avec sa bonne grâce accoutumée la proposition qui lui était indirectement faite.

“Comment? murmura-t-elle, en mesurant de l’œil la longue route poudreuse veuve de maisons et d’ombrage, nous allons faire ça à pied!

- Je serais heureux, madame, d’aller, si vous le désirez, vous chercher une voiture à la ville”, proposa Robert.

S’il était resté indifférent aux protestations précédentes et au mouvement séparatiste qui les avait suivies, estimant que cela, en somme, ne le concernait pas, quel poids, par contre, n’avait-il pas trouvé à l’observation de Mrs. Lindsay! L’offre obligeante avait jailli toute seule de ses lèvres. Il fut sur-le-champ payé de sa bonne pensée. Sans marchander le secours offert, Mrs. Lindsay l’accepta charitablement comme une chose due.

“Si vous vouliez avoir cette bonté”, dit-elle en payant d’avance d’un sourire le bénévole commissionnaire.

Robert allait partir, quand une nouvelle demande l’arrêta.

“Puisque monsieur le professeur va jusqu’à la ville, disait Lady Heilbuth, ne voudrait-il pas avoir la complaisance de me procurer également une voiture?”

Malgré la forme polie de la requête, Robert ne se priva pas de penser que Lady Heilbuth aurait bien pu faire marcher à son service le grand flandrin de laquais qui, derrière elle, tenait dans ses bras un havanais actuellement promu au rang de favori. Toutefois, s’inclinant avec respect devant la vieille passagère, il l’assura qu’il était entièrement à ses ordres.

Il fut aussitôt dans le cas de regretter la politesse de sa réponse. Tous s’étaient mis à parler à la fois, et, à grand renfort de gestes, tous le chargeaient de leur rendre le même service offert à Mrs. Lindsay et accordé à Lady Heilbuth.

Robert esquissa une grimace. Se faire le courrier de Mrs. Lindsay, c’était un plaisir; se charger des commissions de Lady Heilbuth, passe encore! Mais se voir accablé des corvées de tout le monde, cela changeait singulièrement la question. Il ne pouvait refuser cependant. Roger de Sorgues vint généreusement à son secours.

“J’irai avec vous, cher ami, lui cria-t-il. Et nous ramènerons toutes les voitures de la ville.”

Ce fut un concert de bravos, tandis que Robert serrait la main de son compatriote, dont il n’était plus à compter les marques de délicate affection.

La route parcourue au pas accéléré, les deux émissaires n’eurent pas de peine à se procurer des véhicules en nombre suffisant. Ils revenaient dans l’un d’eux, lorsque à mi-route ils croisèrent Thompson à la tête d’une misérable colonne composée d’à peine quinze soldats, les plus pauvres ou les plus avares de son régiment autrefois si fringant. Laissant à son compagnon le soin de parfaire la commission acceptée, Robert se joignit à cette troupe réduite, dans laquelle l’appelait sa fonction.

Dire qu’il était satisfait de cette combinaison serait exagéré. Mais, comme après tout il n’avait pas le choix, il prit, bien que sans enthousiasme, sa place à côté de Thompson, et se mit en tête de la petite colonne.

L’arrivée aux premières maisons de la ville lui réservait une surprise.

Cette surprise, Thompson aussi l’éprouva, quand il eut jeté un regard en arrière. Où était la colonne? Fondue, dispersée, évanouie. Chaque coude de la route, chaque buisson fleuri, chaque bouquet d’arbres ombreux, avait été le prétexte de quelque défection, et peu à peu les touristes s’étaient égrenés jusqu’au dernier. Il n’y avait plus personne derrière Thompson, personne si ce n’est le monumental Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam - qui s’était placidement arrêté avec son chef et attendait sans impatience.

Robert et Thompson échangèrent un regard non dépourvu d’ironie.

“Mon Dieu, monsieur le professeur, dit enfin celui-ci avec un sourire rentré, je ne puis, dans ces conditions, que vous rendre votre liberté. Pour moi, qui ne me soucie nullement de Las Palmas, je vais, si vous le permettez, retourner tout bonnement à bord.”

Et Thompson rebroussa chemin, obstinément suivi de l’impénétrable Hollandais qui, évidemment, ne se souciait pas non plus de Las Palmas.

Robert, égayé, rêvait encore à cette aventure, quand il s’entendit héler par une voix joyeuse.

“Eh! que diable faites-vous là? Qu’est devenu votre régiment? demandait Roger de la voiture où il était assis en face des deux Américaines.

-Mon régiment? répondit Robert sur le même ton, je serais curieux d’en avoir des nouvelles. Le colonel vient de rentrer à bord dans l’espoir d’y retrouver ses soldats.

-Il n’y trouvera que l’impayable Johnson, dit Roger en riant, puisque cet original s’obstine à fuir le contact de la terre. Mais vous, que faites-vous?

-Absolument rien, comme vous le voyez.

-Eh bien! alors, conclut Roger en faisant une place à côté de lui, venez avec nous. Vous nous piloterez, monsieur le professeur.”

Le rio de Guiniguanda sépare Las Palmas en deux parties inégales: la ville haute, habitée seulement par la noblesse et les fonctionnaires, et la ville basse, plus spécialement commerçante, qui va mourir sur le promontoire de l’Ouest, à l’extrémité duquel s’élève la forteresse du Castillo del Rey.

Pendant trois heures, les quatre touristes parcoururent, soit à pied, soit en voiture, les rues de la capitale; puis, la lassitude les prenant, ils se firent ramener au *Seamew.* À qui les eût alors interrogés, voilà ce qu’ils eussent pu répondre:

“Las Palmas est une ville bien bâtie, aux rues étroites et ombreuses, mais où la nature du terrain transforme la promenade en une perpétuelle montée suivie d’une perpétuelle descente. En dehors de la cathédrale de style Renaissance espagnole, elle possède peu de monuments intéressants. Quant à l’aspect mauresque de la ville vue de la mer, il vous incite à des espoirs trompeurs. De près, le charme s’évanouit. Rien de moins mauresque que les rues, les maisons, les habitants, ces derniers offrant à l’admiration publique des élégances exclusivement européennes, voire françaises.”

À cela se bornaient leurs impressions de voyage. Et comment en eût-il été autrement? Avaient-ils vécu de la vie de ce peuple, pour pouvoir en apprécier la politesse et l’obligeance corrigées par une vivacité qui fait trop souvent sortir le couteau de sa gaine? Avaient-ils pénétré dans ces demeures aux correctes façades, mais qui ne contiennent que des pièces dérisoires, toute la place étant réservée au salon d’apparat dans les dimensions duquel rivalise l’orgueil des Canariens? Pouvaient-ils connaître l’âme de cette population où se mêle la fierté de l’ancêtre hidalgo à l’orgueilleuse naïveté du Guanche, un autre ancêtre, celui-ci désavoué?

C’est là le défaut des rapides voyages. L’homme, trop compliqué, n’est pas de leur domaine. Seule, la nature se laisse saisir d’un regard.

Mais encore faut-il la regarder! Et le programme de l’Agence Thompson s’y opposait formellement.

Ces notions si vagues que les touristes rapportaient de leur promenade à travers Las Palmas, Robert, lui, ne les possédait même pas. Il n’avait rien vu au cours de cette après-midi passée dans l’intimité de Mrs. Lindsay. Ses yeux ne conservaient qu’une image, celle de la jeune femme gravissant, descendant les rues en pente, l’interrogeant ou lui répondant avec une simplicité souriante.

Oublieux de ses résolutions, il s’était abandonné au bonheur présent. Mais à peine avait-il touché le pont du *Seamew,* que les soucis un instant dissipés le ressaisirent. Pourquoi biaiser avec sa conscience? Pourquoi s’engager dans une voie qu’il ne voulait pas suivre jusqu’au bout? Cette heureuse après-midi lui laissait une amertume, l’angoisse de n’avoir pas su dissimuler peut-être. Et, s’il s’était trahi par quelque regard ou par quelque geste, quels sentiments, quelles inavouables cupidités n’allait pas prêter la riche Américaine à ce soupirant de misère?

À ces pensées, il se sentait rougir de honte, et se promettait de mieux se garder à l’avenir, quitte à perdre jusqu’à l’amicale sympathie qu’il avait cependant bien gagnée. Mais le sort avait décidé que ses généreuses résolutions demeureraient lettre morte. Son histoire était écrite là-haut, et la chaîne des événements la réalisait invinciblement.

Au moment où les quatre touristes arrivèrent à bord, Thompson et le capitaine Pip causaient avec animation. Il s’agissait sans doute de quelque grave discussion; Thompson, congestionné, enfiévré, se répandait comme de coutume en mouvements exubérants. Le capitaine, placide et calme au contraire, lui répondait par de brefs monosyllabes, ou plus souvent par des gestes énergiques, signatures évidentes de refus résolus. Intrigués, Mrs. Lindsay et ses compagnons s’arrêtèrent à quelques pas des deux interlocuteurs. Ils n’étaient pas les seuls, d’ailleurs, à s’intéresser à ce débat. Sur le spardeck, alignés en trois rangs pressés, les autres passagers, déjà rentrés pour la plupart, en suivaient des yeux les péripéties.

Fait qui contribuait à exciter la curiosité générale, la cheminée du *Seamew* ne s’empanachait d’aucune fumée. Rien ne semblait disposé pour l’appareillage fixé cependant à minuit. On se perdait en conjectures et l’on attendait impatiemment que la discussion du capitaine et de Thompson eût pris fin pour obtenir de l’un ou de l’autre quelques explications.

La cloche sonna le dîner, que l’entretien durait toujours. Rapidement, les passagers gagnèrent leurs places habituelles. Au cours du repas, sans doute, ils auraient le mot de l’énigme.

Mais le dîner se poursuivit, s’acheva sans que Thompson jugeât à propos de satisfaire la curiosité des convives. Cette curiosité, d’ailleurs, s’émoussait, momentanément dominée par un autre souci plus immédiat.

L’ordinaire du bord avait fait un pas énorme dans la marche descendante qu’il suivait depuis quelques jours. Encouragé par l’impunité, Thompson apparemment s’était cru tout permis. Mais, cette fois, il dépassait les bornes. Le menu, digne d’une véritable gargote, péchait aussi par la quantité. L’appétit des convives s’éveillait à peine quand le dessert fut servi.

On se regardait, on regardait Thompson qui semblait parfaitement à l’aise. Toutefois, personne n’avait encore osé formuler de réclamation, lorsque Saunders, selon son usage, mit carrément les pieds dans le plat.

“Steward! appela-t-il de sa voix grinçante.

- Sir? répondit Mr. Roastbeaf en accourant.

-Steward, je reprendrai de cet exécrable poulet. Tout bien pesé, mieux vaut mourir par le poison que par la faim.”

Mr. Roastbeaf ne parut pas goûter tout le sel de cette excellente plaisanterie.

“Il n’y en a plus, monsieur, répondit-il simplement.

-Tant mieux! s’écria Saunders. Dans ce cas, donnez- moi autre chose. Ça ne pourra pas être plus mauvais.

-Autre chose, monsieur! se récria Roastbeaf. Monsieur ignore qu’il n’y a plus à bord de quoi remplir une dent creuse. Messieurs les passagers n’ont même pas laissé le dîner de l’office!”

Avec quelle amertume Roastbeaf avait prononcé ces mots!

“Ah çà! monsieur Roastbeaf, vous moqueriez-vous de moi, par hasard? demanda Saunders d’une voix orageuse.

-Moi, monsieur! implora Roastbeaf.

-Alors, que signifie cette plaisanterie? Sommes-nous ici sur le radeau de la Méduse?”

Roastbeaf ouvrit les bras en signe d’ignorance. Et son geste déclinait toute responsabilité, la rejetait tout entière sur Thompson, qui se curait les dents d’un air détaché. Saunders, outré de cette attitude, frappa sur la table dont les verres sautèrent.

“C’est à vous que je parle, monsieur! s’écria-t-il d’un ton courroucé.

-À moi, monsieur Saunders! répondit Thompson jouant la naïveté.

-Oui, à vous. Avez-vous juré de nous faire mourir de faim? Il est vrai que ce serait le seul moyen d’étouffer nos plaintes.”

Thompson ouvrit des yeux étonnés.

“Voilà trois jours, continua Saunders avec colère, que la nourriture est devenue indigne du chien d’un pauvre. Nous avons patienté jusqu’ici. Mais aujourd’hui, c’est trop fort, j’en appelle à tous ces messieurs.”

L’interpellation de Saunders obtint un succès que les journaux parlementaires eussent qualifié de “vive approbation” et d’”applaudissements frénétiques”. Tout le monde se mit à parler à la fois. On approuvait bruyamment. Des “parfaitement!”, des “vous avez raison!” se croisaient. Durant cinq minutes, ce fut un bruit formidable.

Au milieu du vacarme, Roger riait de tout son cœur. Ce voyage devenait d’un irrésistible comique. Alice, Dolly et Robert partageaient l’hilarité du joyeux officier. Aucun d’eux n’eût voulu renoncer à ce mauvais, mais si amusant dîner.

Pendant ce temps, Thompson, sans manifester autrement d’émotion, s’efforçait d’obtenir un peu de silence. Peut-être, après tout, avait-il en réserve quelque bonne raison.

“Je reconnais, dit-il, quand enfin un silence relatif se fut établi, que ce dîner a été un peu moins bon que les précédents...”

Un tollé général lui coupa la parole.

“... que les précédents, reprit Thompson avec tranquillité, mais l’agence en est absolument innocente, et M. Saunders regrettera ses critiques quand il connaîtra la vérité.

- Des mots! répliqua brutalement Saunders. Je ne me paie pas de cette monnaie. Il m’en faut une autre, ajouta-t- il en tirant de sa poche son éternel calepin, une autre que me fournira, lorsque nous serons à Londres, ce carnet sur lequel je note devant tous la nouvelle avanie qui nous est faite.

-Que ces messieurs sachent donc, reprit Thompson sans relever l’interruption, que le leste dont nous avons souffert à Madère s’est fait sentir ici, mais d’une manière bien plus violente en raison de la situation géographique de ces îles et de leur proximité de l’Afrique. Pour comble de malheur, le leste a apporté avec lui une nuée de sauterelles venues du continent. Cette invasion, très rare ici, s’est produite juste pour notre arrivée. Les deux fléaux réunis ont tout brûlé, tout saccagé, tout dévasté. Si l’agence s’est montrée un peu chiche sur les vivres, c’est qu’ils sont en effet très rares dans la Grande-Canarie.

-Allons donc! répliqua l’implacable Saunders. Dites qu’ils sont chers.

-Mais n’est-ce pas la même chose?” demanda ingénument Thompson, laissant voir ainsi le fin fond de son âme.

Cette naïveté jeta les passagers dans la stupeur.

“Vraiment! répliqua Saunders. Enfin, nous réglerons cela à Londres. En attendant, il n’y a qu’une chose à faire. Partons sur-le-champ. Puisqu’on ne peut dîner à la Grande-Canarie, allons souper à Ténériffe.

-Bravo!” cria-t-on de toutes parts.

Thompson, du geste, réclama le silence.

“Sur ce point, dit-il, notre honorable commandant va vous répondre, messieurs.

-Il vous répondra qu’on ne peut partir, dit le capitaine Pip, et cela à son grand regret. Mais la machine a besoin d’un sérieux nettoyage, tous les joints sont à refaire, et ce travail, commencé aujourd’hui, demandera au moins trois jours. Nous ne pourrons donc quitter La Luz que le 7 juin, vers midi.”

La communication du capitaine avait glacé les courages. On échangeait des regards accablés. Encore trois jours à passer là, sans une excursion, sans une promenade! “Et avec cette nourriture!” ajoutait l’acharné Saunders.

Bientôt la tristesse fit place à la colère. Était-il admissible que l’Agence Thompson se jouât à ce point de ses souscripteurs? Un murmure menaçant courait dans la foule des passagers, quand ils quittèrent la table et remontèrent sur le spardeck.

Au même instant, un grand steamer entrait dans le port. C’était un des paquebots réguliers faisant le service entre l’Angleterre et la colonie du Cap. Celui-ci retournait à Londres. La nouvelle en fut connue immédiatement à bord du *Seamew*.

Cinq ou six des passagers saisirent cette occasion inespérée, et débarquèrent résolument avec leurs bagages. Parmi ces désabusés figurait Lady Heilbuth suivie de sa meute chérie. Ceux-là en avaient assez et le prouvaient.

Thompson n’eut pas l’air de s’apercevoir de ces défections. Au reste, elles furent peu nombreuses. Raison d’économie ou autre, la grande majorité des passagers demeura fidèle au *Seamew*. De ces fidèles était Saunders, et l’économie n’entrait pour rien dans sa décision. Lâcher Thompson? Allons donc! Non, il le tenait, et le tiendrait jusqu’au bout. Était-ce donc décidément de la haine qui emplissait le cœur de cet inquiétant passager?

Mais tout le monde n’avait pas les raisons sans doute excellentes de Saunders ou celles meilleures encore des gens de fortune médiocre. Mrs. Lindsay par exemple.

Pourquoi se serait-elle entêtée à finir ce voyage si riche en désagréments de toute nature? Quel motif pouvait la retenir sous l'administration de l'Agence Thompson? Ces questions, Robert, à quelques pas d'Alice qu'il contemplait à travers la nuit, se les posait avec angoisse.

Cependant, Mrs. Lindsay ne bougeait pas. Elle avait regardé passer le grand paquebot sans lui accorder la moindre attention. Non, elle ne partirait pas. Robert en eut la preuve, quand il l'entendit dire à Roger:

“Nous n'allons pas, je suppose, rester à bord pendant ces deux jours?

-Évidemment, répondit Roger en riant encore.

-Ce retard, reprit Alice, aura du moins cela de bon, qu'il nous fera connaître un peu le pays, si vous voulez comme moi le consacrer à une excursion.

-Certainement, répondit Roger. M. Morgand et moi, nous pouvons ce soir même nous mettre en quête en moyens de transport. Voyons, nous sommes cinq, n'est-ce pas?”

Robert attendait ce moment. Il entendait ne pas se laisser entraîner par la serviable amitié de son compatriote. Quelque chagrin qu'il en pût éprouver, il ne se joindrait pas à la petite caravane, et, strictement, demeurerait à sa place.

“Permettez... commença-t-il.

-Non, quatre seulement, interrompit Alice d'une voix paisible. Mon beau-frère ne viendra pas.”

Robert sentit son cœur battre plus vite. Ainsi donc, c'était Mrs. Lindsay elle-même qui décidait de sa présence, lui assignait son rôle, voulait qu'il fût à ses côtés...

Le plaisir balaya ses scrupules; mille pensées confuses bouillonnèrent en lui.

Laissant sa protestation inachevée, il aspira largement l’air du soir et leva ses yeux vers le ciel où des étoiles nouvelles lui parurent s’être allumées.

CHAPITRE IV

LA DEUXIÈME DENT DE L’ENGRENAGE

Le lendemain, à six heures du matin, les quatre touristes mettaient le pied sur le quai, où ils devaient trouver un guide et des chevaux réunis par les soins de Robert et de Roger. Une véritable surprise les y attendait.

Non pas que les chevaux ne fussent point présents au rendez-vous. Ils étaient là, au contraire, mais multipliés d’une manière tout à fait imprévue. On pouvait en compter quinze, plus celui du guide, déjà chargé de son cavalier.

Le phénomène s’expliqua aussitôt de lui-même. Successivement, Mrs. Lindsay et ses compagnons virent arriver Saunders, la famille Hamilton suivie de quelques passagers, parmi lesquels Tigg, dont, depuis quelques jours, on oubliait un peu les sinistres projets.

Par bonheur, tout le monde ne faisait pas montre de cet esprit léger. Les Misses Blockhead, à tout le moins, persistaient dans leur charitable surveillance. Qui apercevait Tigg, était toujours assuré de les voir.

Et de fait, cette fois encore, elles apparurent à dix pas derrière l’objet de leur sollicitude, précédant leur père qui, obligé bon gré mal gré de se soumettre au caprice de ses filles, considérait maintenant avec inquiétude le lot de montures parmi lesquelles il allait faire un choix téméraire.

Évidemment le secret de l’excursion avait transpiré, et la promenade intime se transformait en cavalcade, au grand déplaisir des deux Américaines et des deux Français.

Mais le sort leur ménageait un désagrément supplémentaire. Venant le dernier, tout seul, le quinzième cavalier s’avançait sous les traits de Jack Lindsay. En l’apercevant, si Dolly et Roger firent simplement la moue, Alice et Robert, pour des raisons semblables qu’ils ne se confièrent pas, eurent le visage empourpré de colère.

Jack, sans avoir égard à la froideur ou à l’hostilité qui l’accueillaient, se mit en selle. Tout le monde l’imita sans tarder et en un instant la caravane se trouva prête au départ.

Pas tout à fait cependant. L’un des cavaliers s’époumonait encore à escalader sa monture. En vain il s’accrochait à la crinière, se rattrapait à la selle, il retombait toujours, vaincu dans cette lutte inégale contre la pesanteur. Suant, soufflant, il se dépensait en efforts grotesques, et ce spectacle d’un haut comique semblait très apprécié par les spectateurs.

“Voyons, papa! fit d’un ton de reproche encourageant Miss Mary Blockhead.

- Vous êtes bonne, vous, répondit d’une voix bourrue Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead. Croyez-vous que je sois léger? Et puis, je vous le demande, est-ce là mon métier? Je ne suis pas un horse guard, moi, et j’ai en horreur toutes ces rosses, je ne vous l’envoie pas dire. Franc comme l’or, ma fille, franc comme l’or!”

Et Blockhead, posant définitivement les deux pieds sur le sol, épongea d’un air résolu son front ruisselant. Il ne ferait certainement pas de nouvelles et inutiles tentatives.

Sur un signe de Robert, le guide vint au secours du touriste en détresse. Avec son aide, Mr. Blockhead fut hissé jusqu’au sommet qu’il s’efforçait de gravir. Un peu vivement même, et il ne s’en fallut guère qu’il retombât de l’autre côté. Mais enfin ce désagrément lui fut évité, et la cavalcade put s’ébranler.

En tête marchait le guide, suivi de Robert et d’Alice, puis de Roger et de Dolly. Le troisième rang se glorifiait de Sir et de Lady Hamilton, et au cinquième Tigg chevauchait à côté de Miss Margaret.

Si les Misses Blockhead n’avaient pu en effet empêcher ce classement scandaleux, elles s’étaient du moins arrangées de manière à en atténuer les résultats, et elles cernaient le couple sacrilège. Au quatrième rang, Miss Bess s’imposait à la compagnie de Saunders, tandis qu’au sixième, Miss Mary réconfortait son malheureux père, qui, l’œil hagard, les doigts crispés sur la crinière de son cheval, se laissait docilement conduire, en regrettant amèrement le jour où il était né. De cette manière, Tigg n’échapperait pas à une surveillance incessante. Autour de lui des oreilles avides recueilleraient ses paroles, des yeux perçants sauraient profiter de la moindre faiblesse de l’adversaire, et la place momentanément perdue serait vite reconquise.

Le dernier des touristes, Jack Lindsay, s’avançait, silencieux et seul comme de coutume. De temps en temps, son regard suivait la file de ses compagnons, et se fixait une seconde sur le jeune couple qui en formait le premier rang. Une lueur alors s’allumait dans ses yeux rapidement détournés.

Ces regards, Robert les devinait sans les voir. C’est la présence de Jack qui, en lui inspirant une sourde inquiétude, l’avait décidé à prendre possession de la place qu’il occupait. Si Jack n’eût pas été là, Robert se fût effacé au dernier rang de la petite troupe.

Une autre raison l’avait aussi amené à se mettre à sa tête. Un instinct le portait à surveiller le guide qui lui inspirait une vague méfiance. Non pas que la conduite de celui-ci eût prêté jusqu’ici à la critique. Mais Robert lui trouvait un air louche, l’air d’un franc sacripant, pour tout dire, et il avait résolu de ne pas le quitter de l’œil, afin d’être prêt à intervenir, si un acte de ce serviteur occasionnel venait, au cours de l’excursion, confirmer son apparence.

Du reste, il n’abusait pas de la situation que les circonstances lui imposaient. Sans froideur, il ne disait que le nécessaire. Pour l’instant, après quelques mots sur la beauté du temps, il s’était tu, et Alice avait imité un silence qui semblait être de son goût. Les yeux de Robert, il est vrai, moins esclaves que sa langue, discouraient pour celle-ci et se détournaient à de fréquents intervalles vers le fin profil de sa compagne.

Mais l’intimité, pour être silencieuse, n’en accomplit pas moins son mystérieux travail au fond des âmes. À chevaucher ainsi côte à côte dans l’air tiède du matin en échangeant de rapides et involontaires regards, les deux jeunes gens se sentaient pénétrés de douceur. Un immatériel aimant attirait leurs cœurs si proches. Ils apprenaient ce merveilleux langage du silence et, à chaque pas, ils entendaient, ils comprenaient un peu mieux des mots qu’ils n’avaient pas prononcés.

On sortit rapidement par le nord-ouest de Las Palmas encore mal réveillée. Moins d’une heure après le départ, le sabot des chevaux frappait le sol d’une des excellentes routes qui rayonnent autour de la capitale. Celle que l’on suivait débuta comme une avenue, entre deux rangs de villas nichées dans la verdure. Toutes les essences poussaient dans leurs plantureux jardins où les palmiers agitaient leur panache.

Sur ce chemin fréquenté, de nombreux paysans croisaient les voyageurs. Juchés sur des chameaux dont l'élevage a parfaitement réussi aux Canaries, ils apportaient à la ville le produit de leurs terres. De complexion maigre, de taille moyenne, de grands yeux noirs éclairant un visage aux traits réguliers, ils ne manquaient pas d'une véritable distinction native.

Plus on avançait, plus la cavalcade s'allongeait. Des intervalles irréguliers naissaient entre les rangs. Bientôt, plus de deux cents mètres séparèrent Alice et Robert de Jack, toujours seul à la queue de la colonne.

De sa place, ce dernier continuait à surveiller le couple de tête et progressivement la colère grandissait dans son cœur. La haine est clairvoyante, et Jack était riche de haine. Pas une des attentions de Robert pour sa compagne n'échappait au vigilant espion. Il saisissait au passage le moindre coup d'œil, et il en analysait l'impalpable et instinctive douceur. Il devinait presque les paroles et, peu à peu, il découvrait la vérité.

Ainsi donc, c'était pour soi-même que ce misérable interprète faisait si bonne garde, et Mrs. Lindsay semblait mordre à cet appât grossier. Loin de lui, déjà, alors que son cœur était libre, combien, en aimant un autre, n'allait- elle pas lui devenir hostile?

En remuant ces pensées, il se sentait étouffer de rage. Par sa sottise, n'avait-il pas tiré les marrons du feu pour l'intrigant qui le supplantait? Celui-ci, en effet, aurait-il eu la partie aussi belle, si Jack, en tendant la main à sa belle-sœur en péril, eût rendu inutile l'intervention d'un dévouement intéressé?

Oui, il s'était lui-même créé ce rival. Et quel rival! Instruit de tout ce qui s'était passé au Curral das Freias, Robert Morgand était conscient de sa force, puisqu'il s'était aventuré jusqu'à la menace.

Ces menaces, il était fort douteux, à vrai dire, qu'il les eût mises à exécution. Rien jusqu'ici dans les allures d'Alice n'autorisait Jack Lindsay à croire qu'elle fût mieux informée qu'au lendemain même de la scène du torrent. Mais ce qui n'était pas fait pouvait se faire, et peut-être, en ce moment même, Alice entendait-elle la confidence redoutée.

C'était un danger permanent suspendu sur la tête de Jack. Et, à ce danger, nul autre remède que la suppression du redoutable et unique témoin.

Par malheur, Robert Morgand n'était pas de ces hommes auxquels on s'attaque légèrement. Jack ne pouvait méconnaître que, dans une lutte à front découvert, il avait peu de chances d'être vainqueur. Non, il fallait agir d'autre sorte, et compter plus sur la ruse que sur l'audace et le courage. Mais, même décidé à un acte de tortueuse traîtrise, l'occasion en était douteuse au milieu de cette quinzaine de touristes.

Ainsi peu à peu la haine de Jack se déplaçait. Momentanément au moins, elle quittait Alice, pour retomber tout entière sur Robert. C'était la deuxième dent de l'engrenage. Assassin de sa belle-sœur, certes, mais assassin seulement passif, il en arrivait à préméditer formellement le meurtre de Robert, également impuissant d'ailleurs contre les deux jeunes gens qu'il détestait avec tant de fureur.

Pendant ce temps, ceux-ci, suivant une route opposée, oubliaient jusqu'à son existence. Tandis qu'en lui grandissait la colère, l'amour commençait à naître dans leurs cœurs.

Si la colonne des excursionnistes s'était, au sortir de Las Palmas, quelque peu égrenée, trois rangs du moins demeuraient en peloton serré, et Tigg, cerné de toutes parts, n'aurait pu concevoir un moyen d'échapper à ses vigilantes gardiennes. En proie à une sourde colère, les Misses Blockhead ne le lâchaient pas d’un sabot de cheval. Même, dans son ardeur, Miss Mary poussa plus d’une fois le sien jusqu’à heurter la monture de Miss Margaret. C’était alors des “Faites donc attention, mademoiselle!” et des “Mais je fais attention, mademoiselle!”, échangés d’une voix pointue, sans que les positions respectives des belligérantes fussent encore modifiées.

La campagne traversée était fertile et bien cultivée. Les champs succédaient aux champs, offrant aux regards tous les produits d’Europe et des tropiques, et particulièrement de vastes plantations de nopals.

Si les Canariens n’étaient pas, d’aventure, grands admirateurs de ce minotaure appelé Progrès, il ne faudrait pas s’en étonner. Adonnés exclusivement jadis à la culture de la canne, l’invention du sucre de betterave vient les dépouiller du fruit de leurs peines. Courageusement, ils couvrent leur pays de vignes: fléau contre lequel les doctes facultés n’ont pas trouvé de remède, le phylloxéra les assaille sans tarder. Aux trois quarts ruinés, ils remplacent alors la plante chère à Bacchus par des plantations de nopals à cochenille, et, en peu de temps, deviennent les principaux pourvoyeurs du précieux insecte tinctorial. Mais la science qui a déprécié leurs cannes à sucre, la science qui n’a pas su les défendre contre le microscopique ennemi du raisin, les attaque aussitôt dans leurs nouvelles tentatives. Elle crée les couleurs chimiques dérivées de l’aniline et menace d’un dernier et prochain désastre les malheureux éleveurs de cochenilles.

Les nombreux avatars qu’ont subis leurs cultures montrent en tout cas l’esprit d’initiative des habitants. Il est assuré que rien ne résisterait à leur patient labeur, s’ils n’avaient à lutter contre la sécheresse. Dans ces contrées brûlées par le soleil, et où plusieurs semaines, plusieurs mois, plusieurs années parfois se passent sans que le ciel accorde une goutte de pluie, la sécheresse est la véritable calamité. Aussi, que d’ingénieux efforts pour s’en défendre! C’est un réseau serré d’aqueducs amenant dans les vallées les eaux des sommets. Ce sont des citernes creusées aux pieds des nopals et des aloès, dont les larges feuilles recueillent l’humidité des nuits sous forme d’une gelée blanche que fond le premier rayon de soleil.

Vers huit heures, la cavalcade s’engagea dans un vaste bois d’euphorbes. La route déroulait sa régulière ascension entre deux haies de ces plantes épineuses, contournées, à l’aspect étrange et méchant, dont la sève constitue un poison mortel. Mais, à mesure qu’on s’élevait, cette euphorbia canariensis fit place à l’euphorbia balsamifera de forme moins rébarbative, dont la peau luisante et tendue ne recèle qu’un lait inoffensif, qu’elle émet jusqu’à trois mètres de distance au moindre choc.

Une demi-heure plus tard, on parvenait au sommet de la Caldeira de Bandana, cratère exactement rond et creux de deux cent trente mètres, au fond duquel se trouvent une ferme et ses champs.

On visita ensuite au passage la Cima de Giramar, autre cratère comblé, et dont il ne subsiste plus qu’une cheminée sans fond, dans laquelle les touristes s’amusèrent à jeter des pierres fertiles en échos et, vers onze heures, on arriva enfin à Saint-Laurent, bourg de deux mille habitants, où le guide assurait qu’on trouverait à déjeuner.

On l’y trouva en effet, mais à la condition de ne pas se montrer trop difficile. Abondant en fruits délicieux, le bourg de Saint-Laurent manque un peu de ressources à d’autres égards. Il était fort heureux que le grand air eût aiguisé l’appétit des convives et leur fît ainsi découvrir des charmes au “gofio”, qui constitua le plat de résistance. Sorte de bouillie de farine d’orge ou de blé fortement torréfiée et délayée dans du lait, ce mets national est, en réalité, d’un agrément contestable. Tous, la faim aidant, l’accueillirent cependant avec plaisir, sauf toutefois l’irréconciliable Saunders, qui inscrivit sévèrement: gofio sur son éternel carnet. Lui imposer le “gofio”! Rien que cela valait au moins cent livres d’indemnité!

Le déjeuner terminé, on se remit en selle. Mais l’ordre de marche avait subi quelques inévitables modifications. L’un des rangs, entre autres, comptait maintenant trois cavaliers: Tigg et ses deux vigilantes gardiennes.

Oui, grâce à une savante manœuvre, Miss Margaret Hamilton avait été honteusement éliminée, et, de même que Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead, elle trottinait désormais solitaire, tandis que ses rivales victorieuses couvaient leur conquête d’un œil jaloux.

Cette révolution, d’ailleurs, ne s’était pas accomplie sans lutte. Quand Margaret, remontée à cheval, avait vu sa place occupée, une protestation était née dans son âme irritée.

“Mais, mademoiselle, avait-elle dit en s’adressant indifféremment aux deux sœurs, c’est ma place, je crois.

-À laquelle de nous faites-vous l’honneur... avait commencé Miss Bess d’une voix aigre.

-... de vous adresser, mademoiselle? avait achevé Miss Mary également acide.

-Votre place n’est pas...

-... numérotée, je suppose!”

Quant à Tigg, il n’avait rien entendu de ce dialogue en sourdine. Ignorant de la guerre déchaînée à son sujet, il se laissait faire comme d’habitude avec une aimable nonchalance, heureux après tout d’être ainsi dorloté.

Autre changement dans la succession primitive des excursionnistes. Jack Lindsay était passé de l’arrière-garde à l’extrême avant-garde. Précédant même sa belle-sœur toujours escortée de Robert Morgand, il marchait maintenant près du guide canarien et semblait soutenir avec lui une conversation animée.

Cette circonstance ne laissait pas d’exciter la curiosité de Robert. Le guide connaissait donc l’anglais? La conversation se prolongeant, la curiosité de Robert ne tarda pas à se mêler d’une vague inquiétude. Jack Lindsay, en effet, paraissait redouter les oreilles indiscrètes et se maintenait avec son interlocuteur cent mètres en avant du premier touriste.

Que pouvaient dont comploter ce passager qu’il avait de si fortes raisons de suspecter et cet indigène aux allures inquiétantes? Voilà ce que Robert se demandait sans trouver de réponse satisfaisante.

Il fut sur le point de confier ses soupçons à sa compagne. Ainsi que Jack l’avait justement discerné, Robert ne s’était pas jusqu’ici décidé à mettre ses menaces à exécution. Mrs. Lindsay ne savait rien. Il avait hésité à troubler la jeune femme par de pareilles confidences, à s’avouer instruit d’une affaire aussi délicate, et, confiant après tout dans l’efficacité de sa vigilance, il avait gardé le silence. Une fois de plus, il recula au moment d’entamer ce brûlant sujet, et se résolut simplement à veiller plus soigneusement encore.

En moins de trois heures, on parvint à Gualdar, résidence des anciens rois berbères sur la côte nord-ouest; puis, ayant traversé au retour le petit bourg d’Agaëte, on arriva vers cinq heures à Artenara.

Situé sur la pente intérieure de la chaudière de Tejeda, à une altitude dépassant douze cents mètres, le village d’Artenara est le plus élevé de toute l’île. De ce point, la vue est splendide.

Le cirque, sans un éboulement, sans une fissure, déroule devant l’œil étonné son pourtour elliptique de trente-cinq kilomètres, d’où, vers le centre, convergent des ruisseaux, des chaînons de collines boisées, à l’abri desquels se sont fondés des hameaux.

Le village lui-même est des plus singuliers. Peuplé uniquement de charbonniers, qui, si on n’y met bon ordre, auront tôt fait de priver l’île de ses derniers vestiges de végétation, Artenara est une cité de troglodytes. Seule l’église élève son clocher dans l’air libre. Les demeures des humains sont creusées dans la muraille du cirque. Elles s’étagent les unes au-dessus des autres, éclairées par des ouvertures qui jouent le rôle de fenêtres. Le sol de ces maisons est recouvert de nattes, sur lesquelles on s’assoit pour prendre les repas. Quant aux autres sièges et aux lits, la nature en a fait les frais, et les ingénieux Canariens se sont contentés de les sculpter à même le tuf.

Il ne pouvait être question de passer la nuit à Artenara. L’hospitalité de ces troglodytes eût été trop rudimentaire. On s’imposa donc encore une heure de marche, et, vers six heures, on put mettre définitivement pied à terre à Tejeda, petit bourg auquel la chaudière a donné son nom.

Il était temps. Quelques-uns des touristes n’en pouvaient littéralement plus. Pour les trois Blockhead notamment, un supplément de route eût été rigoureusement impossible. Tour à tour jaunes, vertes, blanches, il avait fallu à Miss Mary et à Miss Bess une âme héroïque pour accomplir jusqu’au bout la tâche imposée par leur humanité. Que de cris dont elles avaient dû étouffer la tonalité diverse suivant le sens des chocs auxquels les contraignaient leurs montures! Mais aussi, quel soupir elles poussèrent en atteignant le port, c’est-à- dire l’auberge, dont le propriétaire regardait avec effarement cet arrivage inhabituel.

C’était une auberge, en effet, rien qu’une auberge, où le guide canarien amenait sa colonne de touristes. Fort suffisante pour lui-même, il l’avait estimée suffisante pour les autres, et il ne comprit rien aux mines renfrognées qui accueillirent le signal de la halte. En tout cas, il était trop tard pour récriminer. Puisque Tejeda n’avait rien de mieux que cette auberge, il fallait bien s’en contenter.

La réalité, d’ailleurs, était supérieure à l’apparence. Les quinze touristes et leur guide parvinrent à dîner, au prix d’un nouveau gofio qui servit de prétexte à une nouvelle mention sur le carnet de Saunders. Mais les choses se compliquèrent quand il s’agit du logement.

Si, à force d’ingéniosité, on parvint à trouver un abri suffisant pour les dames, les hommes, enroulés dans des manteaux, des couvertures, voire des sacs, durent se contenter du plancher des salles ou de l’herbe du plein air.

Bien que le climat soit doux aux îles Canaries, le lever du soleil ne laisse pas d’amener une certaine fraîcheur très défavorable aux rhumatismes. Sir Hamilton acquit par expérience la connaissance de ce détail géographique. Réveillé dès le point du jour par de lancinantes douleurs articulaires, il lui fallut se frictionner avec ardeur, non sans maugréer contre le damné Thompson qui lui valait tous ces maux.

Saunders, pendant ce temps, le regardait d’un œil d’envie se livrer à cet exercice. Que n’eût-il pas donné pour constater dans son individu quelque douleur anormale! Quel meilleur argument à faire valoir plus tard? Et Saunders examinait ses jointures, les faisait craquer, se pliait, se cambrait à attraper un effort. Peine inutile. Dans ce corps noueux comme un chêne, le mal n’avait aucune prise, il dut le reconnaître en rechignant.

Toutefois, il ne négligea pas de noter sur son carnet le désagrément dont souffrait son compagnon. Qu’il n’eût pas eu de rhumatismes, soit! mais enfin il aurait pu en avoir, puisque le baronnet en avait eu! Il jugea que le risque couru n’était pas négligeable dans la bouche d’un habile avocat.

Le sommeil des Misses Blockhead avait été chaudement abrité, et pourtant, dès leur lever, elles parurent bien malades. Raides, les lèvres tordues par la souffrance, elles s’avançaient péniblement en s’aidant de tout ce qui se trouvait à leur portée, meubles, murs ou personnes. Tigg, qui s’informa le premier de leur santé, connut la triste vérité. Les Misses Blockhead avaient un lumbago!

Il fallait cependant partir. Coûte que coûte, ces deux victimes de la charité furent hissées sur leurs chevaux, non sans de lamentables gémissements, et la cavalcade entière se mit en route.

À ce moment, Robert fit une remarque singulière. Alors que tous les autres chevaux de la caravane, bien brossés et étrillés par les soins de l’aubergiste, semblaient complètement remis par cette nuit de repos de leur travail du jour précédent, les montures du guide indigène et de Jack Lindsay paraissaient au contraire accablées de fatigue. À l’amalgame de poussière et de sueur qui recouvrait le poil de ces animaux, on eût juré qu’ils avaient, pendant la nuit, accompli rapidement une longue course.

Ce point ne pouvant être tranché sans un interrogatoire direct auquel il répugnait, Robert renferma en lui-même le soupçon subitement conçu.

D’ailleurs, si Jack Lindsay avait ourdi quelque complot avec le guide, il était trop tard pour intervenir avec efficacité. Les deux complices présumés n’avaient plus rien à se dire. Tandis que l’un demeurait en tête à son poste, l’autre avait repris sa place favorite à l’extrémité opposée de la petite troupe.

Il n’en formait plus toutefois l’extrême arrière-garde, où le remplaçaient maintenant Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead et ses agréables filles. Cruelle situation des Misses Blockhead! Alors que l’amour du prochain les poussait en avant, une lancinante courbature les contraignait à ralentir coûte que coûte. Peu à peu, malgré leur énergie, Tigg échappa à leur surveillance défaillante, et bientôt les deux sœurs, cent mètres après le dernier touriste, durent constater, cramponnées à des selles cruelles, le triomphe d’une rivale abhorrée.

Partis de bonne heure, on arriva de bonne heure au gouffre de Tirjana. Le chemin pénètre dans cet ancien cratère par une des étroites fissures de la muraille de l’ouest, puis, remontant en lacet, gravit la paroi de l’est.

Depuis longtemps déjà, on en poursuivait péniblement l’ascension, quand la route se bifurqua en deux autres, de directions presque parallèles et formant entre elles un angle aigu.

Alice et Robert, qui marchaient en tête, s’arrêtèrent et cherchèrent des yeux le guide indigène.

Le guide avait disparu.

En un instant, tous les touristes furent rassemblés au croisement des deux routes, en un groupe bruyant où ce singulier incident était vivement commenté.

Pendant que ses compagnons se répandaient en paroles, Robert silencieusement réfléchissait. Cette disparition n’était-elle pas le commencement du complot soupçonné? De loin, il observait Jack Lindsay, qui semblait partager très sincèrement la surprise de ses compagnons. Rien, dans son attitude, n’était de nature à justifier les craintes qui, de plus en plus, s’élevaient dans l’âme de l’interprète du *Seamew.*

En tout cas, avant de se prononcer, il convenait d’attendre. L’absence du guide pouvait avoir les causes les plus simples. Peut-être allait-on le voir tranquillement revenir.

Mais une demi-heure s’écoula sans qu’il fût de retour, et les touristes commencèrent à perdre patience. Que diable! on n’allait pas s’éterniser à cette place. Dans l’incertitude, on n’avait qu’à s’engager sur l’une des deux routes, au petit bonheur. On arriverait toujours quelque part.

“Peut-être vaudrait-il mieux, objecta Jack Lindsay, avec bon sens, que l’un de nous allât explorer pendant un millier de mètres l’une de ces routes. On serait ainsi fixé sur sa direction générale. Les autres resteraient où nous sommes, et attendraient le guide, qui, après tout, peut encore parfaitement revenir.

-Vous avez raison, répondit Robert, auquel appartenait ce rôle d’éclaireur, en regardant fixement Jack Lindsay. Quelle route êtes-vous d’avis que je choisisse?”

Jack se récusa du geste.

“Celle-ci, par exemple? insinua Robert en indiquant la route de droite.

-Comme vous voudrez, répondit Jack d’un air insouciant.

-Va pour celle-ci”, conclut Robert, tandis que Jack détournait ses yeux où, malgré lui, passait un regard de plaisir.

Avant de partir cependant, Robert prit à part son compatriote Roger de Sorgues, et lui recommanda la plus grande vigilance.

“Certains faits, lui dit-il en substance, et notamment cette inexplicable disparition du guide, me font craindre quelque guet-apens. Ainsi donc, veillez avec soin.

-Mais vous-même? objecta Roger.

-Oh! répliqua Robert, si une agression doit avoir lieu, ce n’est pas contre moi vraisemblablement qu’elle est dirigée. D’ailleurs, j’agirai prudemment.”

Ces recommandations faites à demi-voix, Robert s’aventura sur la route qu’il avait lui-même choisie, et les touristes recommencèrent leur attente.

Les dix premières minutes s’écoulèrent aisément. Il fallait bien ce temps pour explorer un kilomètre de route au trot allongé d’un cheval. Par contre, les dix minutes suivantes parurent plus longues, et chacune d’elles rendit plus singulier le retard de Robert. À la vingtième, Roger n’y tint plus.

“Nous ne pouvons attendre davantage, déclara-t-il nettement. Cette disparition du guide ne me dit rien qui vaille, et je suis convaincu qu’il est arrivé quelque chose à M. Morgand. Pour moi, je vais à sa rencontre sans plus tarder.

-Nous irons avec vous, ma sœur et moi, dit Alice d’une voix ferme.

-Nous irons tous”, s’écria sans hésiter l’unanimité des touristes.

Quelles que fussent ses pensées cachées, Jack Lindsay ne fit à ce projet aucune opposition, et, comme les autres, il poussa son cheval à vive allure.

La route rapidement suivie par la petite cavalcade se déroulait entre deux murailles crayeuses coupées perpendiculairement.

“Un vrai coupe-gorge!” gronda Roger entre ses dents.

Pourtant, rien d’anormal n’apparaissait. En cinq minutes, on eut franchi un kilomètre sans rencontrer un être vivant.

À un coude du chemin, les touristes s’arrêtèrent soudainement, tendant l’oreille. Un brouhaha confus, ressemblant au murmure d’une foule, parvenait jusqu’à eux.

“Dépêchons-nous!” cria Roger en mettant son cheval au galop.

En quelques secondes, la troupe des cavaliers parvint à l’entrée d’un village d’où sortait le bruit qui avait attiré leur attention.

Village des plus singuliers en vérité puisqu’il ne comportait pas de maisons. C’était une réédition d’Artenara. Ses habitants se logeaient aux dépens des murailles crayeuses dont la route état bordée.

Pour le moment, elles étaient vides, ces demeures de troglodytes. Toute la population, uniquement composée de nègres du plus beau noir, avait envahi la chaussée et s’y agitait en poussant d’incroyables vociférations.

Le village, évidemment, était en ébullition. Pour quelle cause? Les touristes ne songeaient pas à se le demander. Leur attention tout entière était confisquée par le spectacle imprévu qui s’offrait à leurs yeux.

À moins de cinquante mètres, ils apercevaient Robert Morgand, vers lequel la colère générale semblait converger. Robert avait mis pied à terre. Adossé à l’une des murailles transformée en ruche humaine, il se défendait de son mieux, en se faisant un rempart de son cheval. L’animal énervé se démenait avec fureur, et les ruades qu’il lançait de tous côtés maintenaient libre un large espace autour de son maître.

Il ne semblait pas que les nègres possédassent d’armes à feu. Néanmoins, quand les touristes arrivèrent sur le théâtre de la lutte, celle-ci touchait à sa conclusion. Robert

Morgand faiblissait visiblement. Après avoir déchargé son revolver et s’être ainsi débarrassé de deux nègres qui demeuraient étendus sur le sol, il ne possédait plus comme arme défensive que sa cravache, dont le lourd pommeau jusqu’ici avait suffi à le sauvegarder. Mais, assailli de trois côtés à la fois, lapidé avec frénésie par une tourbe d’hommes, de femmes et d’enfants, il était douteux qu’il pût résister longtemps. Déjà plus d’une pierre bien lancée avait atteint le but. Le sang coulait de son front.

L’arrivée des touristes, il est vrai, lui apportait un secours, mais non le salut. Entre ceux-ci et Robert, en effet, plusieurs centaines de nègres s’interposaient, criant, hurlant, avec tant d’animation qu’ils ne s’étaient même pas aperçus de la présence des nouveaux venus.

Roger allait, comme au régiment, commander la charge à tous risques. Un de ses compagnons le prévint.

Tout à coup, parti des derniers rangs des excursionnistes, un cavalier s’élança en tempête, et tomba comme la foudre sur les nègres entassés.

Au passage, les touristes avaient pu reconnaître avec stupéfaction Mr. Blockhead, qui, pâle, livide, poussant de lamentables cris d’angoisse, se cramponnait au cou de son cheval emballé par les clameurs des nègres.

À ces cris, les moricauds répondirent par des exclamations de terreur. Le cheval affolé galopait, bondissait, piétinant tout ce qui se trouvait sur son passage. En un instant, la route fut libre. Cherchant un refuge au fond de leurs demeures, tous les nègres valides avaient fui devant ce foudre de guerre.

Pas tous, cependant. L’un d’eux était resté.

Seul, au milieu du chemin, celui-là, un vrai géant à la carrure herculéenne, semblait mépriser la panique de ses concitoyens. Bien planté sur ses jambes en face de Robert, il brandissait avec orgueil une sorte de fusil démodé, quelque tromblon espagnol, que, depuis un quart d’heure, il remplissait de poudre jusqu’à la gueule.

Cette arme, qui, sans aucun doute, allait éclater entre ses mains, le nègre l’épaula et la dirigea vers Robert.

Roger, suivi de tous ses compagnons, s’était élancé dans l’espace déblayé par la brillante fantasia de l’estimable épicier honoraire. Arriverait-il à temps pour arrêter le coup prêt à partir?

Fort heureusement, un héros le devançait: Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead, et son cheval enivré de liberté!

Tout à coup, celui-ci se trouva à deux pas du géant nègre absorbé dans le maniement inhabituel de son antique engin. Cet obstacle imprévu intimida le cheval emballé, qui, se calant au sol par ses quatre fers, pointa rageusement et s’arrêta net sur place.

Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead, au contraire, continua sa course. Emporté par son ardeur, et un peu aussi, il faut le reconnaître, par la vitesse acquise, il franchit l’encolure de son noble coursier, et, décrivant une courbe harmonieuse et savante, vint, à l’instar d’un obus, frapper le nègre en pleine poitrine.

Projectile et bombardé roulèrent de conserve sur le sol.

Au même instant, Roger et tous ses compagnons parvenaient sur le lieu de ce mémorable combat.

En un tour de main, Blockhead fut ramassé, jeté en travers d’une selle, tandis qu’un autre touriste s’emparait du cheval du cavalier désarçonné. Robert étant remonté sur le sien, la petite troupe des Européens s’évada au galop du village nègre par l’extrémité opposée à celle qui lui avait donné entrée.

Moins d’une minute après le moment où l’on avait aperçu Robert Morgand, tout le monde était en sûreté. Oui, ce délai si court avait suffi à Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead pour s’illustrer à jamais dans les fastes de la cavalerie, inventer une nouvelle arme de jet, et sauver un de ses semblables par-dessus le marché!

Pour le moment, ce valeureux guerrier ne paraissait pas en brillante condition. Une violente commotion cérébrale l’avait plongé dans un évanouissement qui ne montrait aucune tendance à se dissiper.

Aussitôt que l’on fut assez éloigné du village nègre pour n’avoir plus à redouter un retour offensif, on mit pied à terre, et quelques affusions d’eau froide suffirent à rendre le sentiment à Mr. Blockhead. Bientôt, il se déclara prêt à repartir.

Auparavant, toutefois, il lui fallut accepter les remerciements de Robert, auxquels - c’était un excès de modestie sans doute - l’estimable épicier honoraire eut l’air de ne rien comprendre.

Au pas des chevaux, on contourna une heure durant le pic central de l’île, le Pozzo de la Nieve, ou Puits de la Neige, ainsi nommé en raison des glacières que les Canariens ont ménagées dans ses flancs, puis on traversa un vaste plateau bossué de nombreux pitons, des “rocs” dans le langage du pays. Successivement, on passa entre ceux de Saucillo del Hublo, bloc monolithe de cent douze mètres, de Rentaïgo, de la Cuimbre.

Était-ce un reste de l’émotion causée par les nègres, était-ce le résultat de la fatigue, quoi qu’il en soit, peu de paroles furent échangées pendant la traversée de ce plateau. La plupart des touristes s’avançaient en silence, presque dans le même ordre qu’au départ. Quelques rangs seulement avaient subi une légère modification, Saunders, d’une part, s’étant attaché aux pas du valeureux Blockhead, Robert, d’autre part, chevauchant avec Roger, tandis qu’Alice et Dolly formaient le second rang.

Les deux Français parlaient de l’incompréhensible événement qui avait failli coûter la vie à l’un d’eux.

“Vous aviez deviné juste, dit Roger, en prévoyant un guet-apens, sauf que le danger était en avant, et non en arrière.

-C’est vrai, reconnut Robert. Mais pouvais-je supposer qu’on en voulût à mon humble personne? D’ailleurs, je suis convaincu que c’est le hasard qui a tout fait, et que vous auriez reçu le même accueil, si vous vous étiez risqué à ma place dans ce village de moricauds.

-Au fait, demanda Roger, qu’est-ce que c’est donc que cette colonie noire en plein pays de race blanche?

-Une ancienne république de nègres marrons, répondit Robert. Aujourd’hui, l’esclavage étant aboli dans tout pays dépendant d’un gouvernement civilisé, cette république a perdu sa raison d’être. Mais les nègres ont des cerveaux obstinés, et les descendants persistent dans les mœurs des ancêtres. Ils continuent, terrés au fond de leurs cavernes sauvages, à vivre dans un isolement presque absolu, parfois sans se montrer dans les villes voisines pendant toute une année.

-Ils ne sont guère hospitaliers, observa Roger en riant. Que diable avez-vous pu leur faire pour les mettre ainsi en révolution?

-Absolument rien, dit Robert. La révolution avait éclaté avant mon arrivée.

-Bah! fit Roger. Pour quel motif?

-Ils ne m’en ont pas fait confidence, mais je l’ai deviné aisément aux injures dont ils m’abreuvaient. Pour comprendre une pareille raison, il faut savoir que beaucoup de Canariens voient d’un très mauvais œil les étrangers arriver chez eux en plus grand nombre chaque année. Ils prétendent que tous ces malades laissent dans leurs îles plus ou moins de leurs maladies et finiront par en rendre le séjour mortel. Or, nos moricauds s’imaginaient que nous venions dans leur village dans le but d’y fonder un hôpital de lépreux et de phtisiques. De là leur fureur.

-Un hôpital! s’écria Roger. Comment une pareille idée a-t-elle pu naître dans leurs têtes crépues?

-Quelqu’un la leur aura soufflée, répondit Robert, et vous pouvez vous représenter l’effet d’une pareille menace sur ces cervelles puériles imbues des préjugés locaux.

-Quelqu’un? répéta Roger. Qui donc soupçonnez- vous?

-Le guide, dit-il.

-Dans quel but?

-Dans un but de lucre, cela va de soi. Le drôle comptait bien prendre sa part de nos dépouilles.”

Vraiment cette explication était assez plausible, et il n’était pas douteux que les choses se fussent passées ainsi. Au cours de la nuit dernière, le guide avait dû préparer ce guet-apens et semer la colère dans ces légères cervelles de nègres faciles à enflammer et à duper.

Ce que Robert taisait, c’est la part que Jack avait sûrement prise à ce complot et cela dans un but tout autre que celui d’un pillage immédiat. À la réflexion, il avait en effet adopté le parti de ne rien dire de ses soupçons. À une telle accusation, il faut des preuves, et Robert n’en avait pas. Des présomptions, certes. Mais il se trouvait hors d’état, le guide manquant, de fournir la moindre preuve matérielle. Mieux valait, dans ces conditions, faire le silence sur cette aventure.

Même plus armé, d’ailleurs, peut-être eût-il encore agi ainsi. Même alors, il eût préféré laisser impunie l’attaque subie, plutôt que d’en tirer une vengeance qui retomberait autant sur Mrs. Lindsay que sur son véritable auteur.

Pendant que les deux Français épuisaient ce point intéressant, Saunders avait entrepris Blockhead.

“Mes compliments, monsieur!” lui dit-il quelques instants après que l’on se fut remis en marche.

Blockhead resta silencieux.

“Quel damné plongeon, monsieur!” s’écria Saunders avec un harmonieux ricanement.

Pareil silence de Blockhead. Saunders se rapprocha en manifestant un vif intérêt.

“Voyons, mon cher monsieur, comment ça va-t-il maintenant?

-J’ai bien mal! soupira Blockhead.

-Oui, oui, accorda Saunders. Votre tête...

-Pas à la tête!

-Où donc?

-De l’autre côté! gémit Blockhead, couché à plat ventre sur son cheval.

-De l’autre côté? répéta Saunders. Ah! bon, bon! fit- il, comprenant, c’est absolument la même chose.

-Que non! murmura Blockhead.

-Parbleu! répliqua Saunders, n’est-ce pas en tout cas la faute de l’Agence Thompson? Si nous étions cent, au lieu d’être quinze, aurions-nous été attaqués, et auriez- vous mal à la tête? Si, au lieu d’être à cheval, nous avions les porteurs annoncés par ses impudents programmes, auriez-vous mal... ailleurs? Je comprends que vous soyez indigné, furieux...”

Blockhead trouva la force de protester.

“Enchanté! monsieur, dites enchanté, au contraire! murmura-t-il d’une voix dolente, emporté par la force de l’habitude.

-Enchanté? répéta Saunders stupéfait.

-Oui, monsieur, enchanté, affirma Blockhead plus vigoureusement. Des chevaux en veux-tu, en voilà, des îles avec des nègres... c’est extraordinaire, tout ça, monsieur, positivement extraordinaire!”

Dans son exubérance admirative, Blockhead oubliait sa meurtrissure. Il se redressa imprudemment sur sa selle, étendit la main solennellement.

“Franc comme l’or, monsieur, Blockhead est franc... Aïe!” cria-t-il en retombant subitement à plat ventre, ramené par un vif pincement au sentiment du réel, tandis que Saunders s’éloignait de cet incoercible optimiste.

Vers onze heures, on arriva dans un des nombreux villages qui se sont nichés entre les contreforts de la Cuimbre. On le traversait en causant, quand la route brusquement déboucha sur une petite place sans autre issue que celle par laquelle on avait pénétré. La cavalcade s’arrêta, fort embarrassée.

Il fallait nécessairement que l’on se fût trompé deux heures plus tôt, à l’embranchement des deux routes, et le seul remède était sans doute de revenir en arrière.

Robert, auparavant, voulut prendre langue auprès des habitants du village. Mais alors, une grave difficulté se présenta. L’espagnol de Robert paraissait inintelligible aux paysans consultés, tandis que l’espagnol de ces paysans demeurait mystérieux pour Robert.

Celui-ci ne s’en montra pas autrement surpris. Il n’ignorait pas l’incroyable diversité des patois de l’intérieur.

Cependant, à l’aide d’une pantomime animée, à force de répéter le mot “Tedde”, nom de la ville où l’on désirait se rendre, et où l’on comptait déjeuner, Robert finit par obtenir un résultat satisfaisant. L’indigène, se frappant le front d’un air entendu, appela un gamin, le fortifia d’un abondant et incompréhensible discours, puis, du geste, engagea la cavalcade à suivre le nouveau guide qu’il lui improvisait.

Pendant deux heures, on marcha sur les traces du gamin sifflotant des airs entre ses dents. À sa suite, on gravit un sentier, on en descendit un autre, on traversa une route, on reprit un sentier, cela n’en finissait plus. Depuis longtemps déjà, on aurait dû être à destination. Robert, en désespoir de cause, allait s’efforcer de tirer coûte que coûte quelque éclaircissement du jeune conducteur, quand, au moment où on arrivait sur une nouvelle route, celui-ci agita joyeusement son bonnet, indiqua la direction du sud, et, dévalant rapidement un sentier de chèvres, disparut en un clin d’œil.

Parmi les touristes, ce fut de la stupeur. Que diable avait donc pu comprendre le paysan canarien? Quoi qu’il en soit, rien n’aurait servi de se lamenter. Il n’y avait qu’à repartir, et l’on repartit en effet, non pas vers le sud, mais vers le nord, seule direction où l’on eût chance de rencontrer la ville de Tedde.

Cependant, les heures passèrent sans que le clocher du bourg apparût aux voyageurs harassés et affamés. La journée s’écoula, que la cavalcade poursuivait toujours sa marche lamentable. Les Misses Blockhead inspiraient notamment la pitié. Embrassant l’encolure de leurs chevaux, elles se laissaient transporter, n’ayant même plus la force de gémir.

Vers six heures, les touristes les plus courageux parlaient d’y renoncer et de camper en plein air, quand enfin on distingua des maisons. L’allure des chevaux fut aussitôt activée. Ô surprise! c’était Las Palmas! Une heure plus tard, la ville rapidement traversée, on arrivait au *Seamew* sans que l’on dût jamais comprendre comment on y était arrivé.

Les voyageurs s’empressèrent de prendre place à table où l’on commençait à servir le dîner, et entamèrent le potage avec entrain. Malheureusement, les principes qui présidaient deux jours plus tôt à la confection du menu étaient toujours en vigueur à bord du *Seamew* et le repas fut notoirement insuffisant pour ces estomacs affamés.

Cet inconvénient parut assez léger. Une question primait toutes les autres. Où en étaient les réparations de la machine? Certes, elles n’étaient pas terminées. Le bruit des marteaux renseignait suffisamment à cet égard. Il pénétrait partout, ce bruit infernal, dans la salle à manger, où il scandait déplorablement les conversations, dans les chambres, d’où il faisait fuir le sommeil. Toute la nuit, il persista, portant à son comble l’exaspération des passagers.

La fatigue aidant, Robert avait néanmoins fini par s’endormir. À cinq heures du matin, le silence subit le réveilla. Tout s’était tu à bord du bâtiment.

Habillé en un tour de main, Robert monta sur le pont désert. Seuls au bas du spardeck, le capitaine Pip et

Mr. Bishop causaient. Robert en quête de renseignements allait descendre les trouver, quand la voix du capitaine parvint jusqu'à lui.

"Ainsi, vous êtes paré, monsieur? disait-il.

-Oui, commandant, répondait Mr. Bishop.

-Et vous êtes satisfait de vos réparations?

-Euh!" fit Mr. Bishop.

Un silence suivit, et Mr. Bishop reprit:

"Artimon vous dirait, commandant, qu'on ne peut faire du neuf avec du vieux.

-Juste! approuva le capitaine. Mais enfin, nous pouvons partir, je suppose?

-Certes! commandant, répondit Mr. Bishop... Mais arriver?..."

Un nouveau silence intervint, plus long que le précédent. Robert, en se penchant, vit le capitaine loucher d'une manière terrible, suivant sa coutume quand une émotion l'agitait. Puis il se pétrit le bout du nez et, saisissant enfin la main du premier mécanicien:

"C'est une péripétie, monsieur!" conclut-il avec solennité en prenant congé de l'officier.

Robert jugea inutile de faire part à ses compagnons des fâcheux pronostics dont il avait irrégulièrement reçu la confidence. Quant à la nouvelle du départ, il n’eut pas besoin de la transmettre. Les volutes de fumée qui couronnèrent bientôt la cheminée renseignèrent là-dessus les autres passagers.

Il ne fallut rien de moins que cette certitude d’un prochain départ, pour sauver l’administrateur général de la fureur de ses administrés, exaspérés par un déjeuner vraiment intolérable. Cependant, personne ne protesta. On se borna à tenir en rigoureuse quarantaine le coupable directeur de l’agence. Seulement, tous les visages s’épanouirent quand, vers la fin du déjeuner, on entendit retentir les premiers commandements d’appareillage, qui permettaient d’espérer un plus supportable dîner.

CHAPITRE V

AU SOMMET DU TEYDE

Un cinquantaine de milles à peine séparent Las Palmas de Santa-Cruz. Le *Seamew*, revenu à sa vitesse normale de douze nœuds, mit quatre heures à franchir cette distance. À trois heures et demie, il mouillait dans le port de la capitale de Ténériffe.

Entre cette ville, rivale en importance de Las Palmas, et l’Europe, les communications sont fréquentes et faciles. De nombreuses lignes de steamers l’unissent à Liverpool, Hambourg, Le Havre, Marseille et Gênes, sans compter la compagnie locale qui assure un passage bimensuel entre les diverses îles de l’archipel.

Étagée en amphithéâtre dans sa ceinture de montagnes, Santa-Cruz est de séduisant abord et peut aussi, à cet égard, soutenir la comparaison avec Las Palmas.

Sa grâce fut cependant insuffisante à secouer l’indifférence des passagers. Au cours de la traversée, ils n’avaient jeté que de vagues regards sur ces rivages grandioses et sauvages, aux rocs dénudés, vers lesquels les poussait l’hélice du *Seamew.* Au port, la plupart d’entre eux se contentèrent d’un bref coup d’œil vers la terre, et leur curiosité parut satisfaite.

Que leur importait ce spectacle, merveilleux assurément, mais rendu banal par l’accoutumance, cette ville, agréable sans doute, mais sans doute aussi trop pareille aux autres villes déjà visitées? Leur unique préoccupation était le célèbre pic du Teyde, plus connu sous le nom de pic de Ténériffe, dont l’ascension, promise par le programme, constituait le clou du voyage. Voilà certes qui était nouveau et original! Rien que l’approche d’une telle excursion faisait déjà notablement remonter les actions de Thompson.

Mais vraiment, les touristes du *Seamew* jouaient de malheur. Ce pic vers lequel, pendant la traversée de Canarie à Ténériffe, ils avaient tendu leurs regards, il s’était obstinément caché derrière un épais rideau de nuages infranchissables pour les meilleures lorgnettes. Maintenant, en admettant que le ciel se fût déblayé, il était trop tard. La côte elle-même bornait la vue.

On supportait toutefois ce contretemps avec philosophie. Il semblait même que le pic eût encore excité la curiosité de ses futurs conquérants en demeurant si mystérieux. On ne parlait que de lui, et l’obsession était telle que Thompson put assez aisément persuader à la plupart de ses passagers de renoncer à fouler le pavé de Santa-Cruz.

Le jeune ménage ne fut pas de ceux-là. Avant même que l’ancre eût mordu le fond, il s’était fait mettre à terre avec sa discrétion accoutumée et en peu d’instants il eut disparu pour ne reparaître qu’à l’heure du départ.

Leurs compagnons les auraient probablement suivis, si Thompson, constatant l’indifférence générale pour la capitale de Ténériffe, ne s’était risqué à proposer d’aller par eau à la ville d’Orotava qui, située sur la côte septentrionale, est le point de départ des ascensions, au lieu de s’y rendre par terre, conformément au programme.

De cette manière, songeait-il, il économiserait un transport onéreux.

À sa grande surprise, cette proposition ne rencontra aucune difficulté et, le départ du *Seamew* ayant été fixé au lendemain, le plus grand nombre des touristes décidèrent qu'ils resteraient à bord.

Quelques voyageurs pratiques cependant n'imitèrent pas cette indifférence exagérée. Ceux-là - toujours les mêmes: Alice Lindsay et sa sœur, Roger de Sorgues, leur inséparable compagnon, Saunders, pourvu de son menaçant carnet, Sir Hamilton et sa famille exécutant rigoureusement le programme - ceux-là se firent débarquer dès que le *Seamew* fut mouillé, résolus à gagner Orotava par terre. Jack Lindsay n'ayant pas jugé à propos, cette fois, de se joindre à cette excursion particulière, Robert avait estimé préférable de rester aussi à bord. Mais Roger de Sorgues était d'un avis contraire et il s'était fait adjuger par Thompson l'exclusive propriété de l'interprète, dont le concours, prétendait-il, serait indispensable dans l'intérieur. Robert faisait donc partie de la petite colonne dissidente, veuve, hélas! de ses plus beaux fleurons.

Pouvait-il en être autrement? Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead pouvait-il aller exercer à travers l'île de Ténériffe ses merveilleuses facultés d'admiration, quand depuis vingt heures il dormait à faire croire qu'il ne se réveillerait jamais? Ses filles gracieuses pouvaient-elles du moins le suppléer, alors qu'elles gisaient sur un lit de douleur avec la préoccupation constante de ne pas se mettre sur le dos?

Tigg profita lâchement de cette situation lamentable. Lui aussi quitta le *Seamew*, et sans doute, au cours de cette excursion, s'éloignerait-il peu de Miss Margaret.

À terre, la chaleur était accablante. Sur le conseil de Robert, on résolut d'aller le soir même coucher à La Laguna, ancienne capitale de l'île. Là, assurait-il, on trouverait température plus clémente, et surtout on éviterait les moustiques, qui, à Santa-Cruz, sont un véritable fléau.

Les touristes se bornèrent donc à faire de la ville une rapide visite. On suivit ses larges rues, on longea ses maisons généralement pourvues d'élégants balcons et souvent recouvertes de peintures à la mode italienne, on traversa la belle place de la Constitution, au centre de laquelle s'élève un obélisque de marbre blanc gardé par les statues de quatre anciens rois guanches, et cinq heures sonnaient à peine que deux confortables voitures emportaient les huit touristes au galop de leurs chevaux.

En une heure et demie, on fut à La Laguna, que dix kilomètres tout au plus séparent de la capitale. Établie sur un plateau à une altitude de cinq cent vingt mètres, cette situation lui assure une température agréable, et les moustiques, comme l'avait affirmé Robert, y sont complètement inconnus. Ces avantages en font un des lieux de villégiature des habitants de Santa-Cruz, qui viennent chercher le repos sous ses grands arbres parmi lesquels domine l'eucalyptus.

En dépit de ses agréments, La Laguna est cependant une ville en décadence. Si l'on y rencontre deux belles églises, on y voit aussi nombre de monuments en ruine. L'herbe verdit le pavé de ses rues, et jusqu'au toit de ses maisons.

Il n'était pas question de faire un long séjour dans cette cité silencieuse, où la tristesse est contagieuse. Dès le lendemain matin, les touristes quittaient cette reine déchue, par la diligence qui, entre La Laguna et Orotava, accomplit dans chaque sens deux voyages quotidiens. Au trot poussif des cinq rosses qui le remorquent péniblement, le "coche" mit quatre grandes heures à franchir les trente kilomètres qui séparent La Laguna d'Orotava. Sans qu'aucun de ses voyageurs daignât descendre, il traversa Tacoronte, où se trouve un musée possédant une curieuse collection de momies guanches, d'armes et d'instruments de ce peuple aboli; Sanzal, riche de sa carrière de laves; la Mantaza, “la Tuerie”, dont le nom évoque le souvenir d’un sanglant combat; Victoria, théâtre d’une autre antique bataille; Santa-Ursula enfin.

C’est seulement au sortir de cette dernière bourgade que la route débouche dans la vallée d’Orotava, qu’un illustre voyageur, Humboldt, a prétendu être la plus belle du monde.

Le fait est qu’il serait difficile d’imaginer plus harmonieux spectacle. À droite, c’est la plaine immense de la mer; à gauche, c’est un amoncellement de pics sauvages et noirs, derniers contreforts du volcan - ses fils, dans le pittoresque langage populaire - tandis que le père, le Teyde lui-même, se dresse majestueusement à l’arrière- plan. Entre ces deux limites grandioses, la vallée d’Orotava se déroule en une incroyable débauche de verdure.

Peu à peu, à mesure qu’on avançait, le sommet du Teyde paraissait s’abaisser à l’horizon. Il disparut au moment où l’on commençait à discerner entre les arbres les maisons des deux Orotava, l’une, la ville, à cinq kilomètres de la mer, l’autre, le port, trois cent quatre- vingts mètres plus bas. En même temps que le coche arrivait à la première, un point environné de fumée s’arrêtait au second. Ce point, c’était le *Seamew* amenant sa cargaison de passagers.

Le coche avait fait halte devant un hôtel de confortable apparence, l’Hôtel des Hespérides, ainsi que l’indiquaient les lettres d’or de sa façade. Robert, qui, le premier, avait sauté à terre, fut agréablement surpris en s’entendant souhaiter la bienvenue dans sa langue maternelle. L’Hôtel des Hespérides est, en effet, tenu par un Français, qui ne se montra pas moins satisfait quand il eut découvert deux compatriotes parmi les nouveaux arrivants. Aussi, avec quelle ardeur se mit-il à leur disposition! De quels soins n’entoura-t-il pas leur déjeuner! Habitués aux menus du *Seamew,* les touristes n’en revenaient pas. Une fois de plus, la cuisine française triompha.

Aussitôt après le repas, Robert se dirigea rapidement vers le port, afin de s’entendre avec Thompson au sujet de l’excursion du lendemain. Ayant reçu les instructions de son chef hiérarchique, et celui-ci aiguillé par ses soins vers l’Hôtel des Hespérides, il rebroussa chemin, emmenant avec lui deux voitures bondées de couvertures et de paquets.

Bien qu’il fût à peine quatre heures de l’après-midi, il n’avait pas trop de temps pour organiser une excursion aussi considérable. Sa besogne fut heureusement facilitée par l’obligeance de l’hôtelier des Hespérides, qui, très au courant des ressources locales, fournit toutes les indications nécessaires. Il n’eut qu’à suivre ponctuellement ses instructions. Toutefois, la journée n’y suffit pas. Il y fallut encore la soirée, et Robert, très absorbé par sa besogne, ne parut pas au dîner.

Celui-ci fut digne du déjeuner. Les passagers du *Seamew* se demandaient s’ils rêvaient et regardaient à la dérobée Thompson avec inquiétude. Était-ce bien lui? ou du moins avait-il toute sa raison? Un peu plus, oubliant les misères passées, on l’eût applaudi, en vérité!

Mais il en était un qui ne désarmait pas.

“Il faut croire que les sauterelles ne sont pas venues jusqu’à Ténériffe, prononça Saunders de sa voix caverneuse.

- Oh! elles ne vont jamais plus loin que la Grande- Canarie”, répondit sans y entendre malice l’hôtelier, qui faisait à ses convives l’honneur de les servir lui-même.

Saunders lui lança un coup d’œil furieux. Qu’avait-on besoin de ses renseignements géographiques! Néanmoins, innocentant Thompson dans une certaine mesure, la réponse avait porté. Plus d’un touriste gratifia l’administrateur général d’un regard où naissait un commencement d’attendrissement.

Ces heureuses dispositions, la nuit les confirma. Confortablement nourri, on fut confortablement couché, et l’aube du 8 juin trouva les touristes prêts au départ et débordant de bonne humeur.

Une véritable armée, infanterie et cavalerie, les attendait dès six heures du matin.

De soixante-cinq, la défection de quelques déserteurs dans le port de La Luz n’avait laissé au *Seamew* que cinquante-neuf passagers, le cicérone-interprète et l’administrateur général compris. Subissant pour la circonstance un nouveau déchet, ce nombre de cinquante- neuf était tombé à cinquante et un.

Trois de ces huit dissidents étaient de fondation. Le jeune ménage d’abord, disparu comme de coutume depuis le moment de l’arrivée à Santa-Cruz. Évidemment, il ne reparaîtrait qu’à la minute précise du départ. Puis c’était

Johnson. Était-ce encore la crainte des tremblements de terre ou des inondations qui l’avait retenu à bord du *Seamew*? Nul n’eût pu répondre à cette question, Johnson ayant négligé de donner aucune raison de sa manière de faire, en supposant qu’il eût été en état d’en fournir. Il était resté à bord, simplement. Peut-être, après tout, ignorait-il que le *Seamew* fût à l’ancre. En mer, au port, sur la terre même, n’était-ce pas pour lui un balancement perpétuel?

Par contre, bien involontaires, les cinq autres absents! Mais le lumbago ne pardonne pas, et Mrs. Georgina Blockhead, le jeune Abel collé à ses jupes, avait dû se transformer en garde-malade de son mari et de ses deux filles aussi raides que des pieux.

C’était donc de cinquante et un touristes seulement que Robert avait eu à se préoccuper. Toutefois, c’est un chiffre encore respectable, et les gens et montures qu’il nécessitait suffisaient à produire un vacarme infernal sous les fenêtres de l’hôtel.

On comptait d’abord cinquante et une mules, à raison d’une mule par voyageur. Ces animaux au pied sûr sont précieux dans les sentiers raides et mal frayés qui mènent au Teyde. Puis, c’étaient vingt chevaux, porteurs des couvertures et des vivres. Ces soixante et onze quadrupèdes composaient la cavalerie.

L’infanterie non moins imposante comprenait quarante arrieros, soit vingt pour les chevaux de bât, et vingt pour aider les femmes au besoin, plus douze guides sous le commandement de l’un d’eux, Ignacio Dorta, qui prit, dès qu’elle fut constituée, la tête de la caravane.

Derrière lui se pavanait Thompson suivi de Robert, auquel le nombre des personnes présentes assurait une tranquillité suffisante pour qu’il pût se permettre de s’éloigner d’Alice. Les passagers venaient ensuite, en une longue file gardée par les onze guides et vingt arrieros, tandis que les chevaux fermaient la marche sous la conduite des vingt autres arrieros.

Les habitants d’Orotava ont beau être habitués aux ascensions, celle-là tout de même était un peu trop extraordinaire, et elle obtint un vif succès de curiosité. C’est au milieu d’un nombreux concours de populaire, que, la cavalcade s’ébranlant au signal, guides, touristes et arrieros attaquèrent les premières pentes du Monte Verde.

En vérité, Robert avait bien fait les choses. Mais, comme cela était juste d’ailleurs, l’honneur en remontait uniquement à Thompson, qui finalement paierait la note. Il lui revenait des amis. La parfaite organisation de cette dernière excursion rassérénait ses administrés. Si le souvenir des ennuis passés n’était pas aboli, il pâlissait du moins sans conteste. Tout conspirait d’ailleurs pour amollir les courages. Le temps était délicieux, la brise légère, le sentier facile. Saunders lui-même se sentait ébranlé.

Par un violent effort il réagit contre cette faiblesse. Eh quoi! allait-il stupidement désarmer, se reconnaître vaincu? Une excursion réussie pouvait-elle effacer les dix autres si complètement manquées? D’ailleurs, cette excursion même réussirait-elle? Il fallait attendre la fin. Bien certainement, quelque chose clocherait avant le retour régulier à Orotava. Qui vivrait, verrait.

Sous forme de conclusion, Saunders fit d’un air résolu craquer ses jointures, et couvrit son visage de l’expression la plus désagréable qu’il lui fût possible d’imaginer.

Le Monte Verde doit son nom aux sapins dont il était autrefois revêtu. Mais à peine s’il en reste maintenant quelques échantillons.

À l’ombre des châtaigniers d’abord, puis à celle des sapins subsistants, la cavalcade s’avançait le long d’un sentier charmant, bordé de géraniums fleuris et d’agaves aux feuilles pointues. Au-delà, c’étaient des vignobles, des champs de céréales et de nopals, où, de temps à autre, quelque pauvre masure mettait une note de vie.

À l’altitude de mille mètres, on pénétra dans un bois de bruyères arborescentes. Puis, quatre cents mètres plus haut, le signal de la halte fut donné par Ignacio Dorta, et l’on s’assit pour déjeuner à l’ombre claire des cytises. Il était alors dix heures du matin.

Saunders fut obligé de constater que le déjeuner se maintenait à la hauteur. L’appétit aidant, la joie était générale parmi les convives, malgré un peu de fatigue. On n’y voulait pas songer. Convaincus de la proximité du sommet, tous s’extasiaient sur la facilité de l’ascension. Saunders entendait ces éloges amers, en implorant du sort clément l’apparition des premières difficultés.

Ses vœux malveillants avaient-ils été exaucés par celui qui préside aux destinées des agences? En tout cas, leur réalisation ne se fit pas attendre.

On venait, à peine le déjeuner terminé, de se remettre en route, au milieu des plaisanteries joyeuses provoquées par une agréable digestion, quand le chemin changea de caractère. Engagés dans le défilé du “Portillo”, les touristes commencèrent à trouver l’ascension moins aisée. D’excellent, devenu très mauvais, s’allongeant de nombreux méandres, le sentier, très encaissé et coupé par de profonds ravins, était semé de scories et de pierres ponces sur lesquelles butaient fréquemment les mules.

Au bout de quelques minutes, cette montée fut, avec raison, jugée exténuante. Un quart d’heure plus tard, les derniers rires s’étaient éteints. Moins d’une demi-heure de marche après l’origine du défilé, des plaintes, d’abord timides, se firent entendre. N’allait-on pas voir la fin de cet infernal sentier?

Mais les méandres succédaient aux méandres, les ravins aux ravins, sans que le but parût s’approcher. Il y eut des chutes, qui, bien que sans gravité, refroidirent le zèle des touristes les plus mûrs. Quelques-uns de ceux-ci songèrent à ne pas pousser plus loin. Ils hésitaient encore, cependant, personne n’osant être le premier fuyard.

Le clergyman Cooley fut celui-là. Soudain, il tourna bride courageusement, et, sans regarder en arrière, reprit avec calme la route d’Orotava.

Funeste effet de l’exemple! Les vieilles mistress, les vieux gentlemen sentirent à cette vue décliner leur reste d’ardeur. De minute en minute, le nombre des poltrons augmenta. Un bon tiers de la caravane avait ainsi fondu, quand, après deux heures de cette fatigante montée, le Pic de Ténériffe, jusque-là caché par les mouvements du terrain, apparut subitement aux regards. Le Portillo enfin franchi, on arrivait au petit plateau de l’Estancia de la Cera.

Sous sa blanche robe de pierres ponces striée de noires coulées de lave, la cime perdue dans un tourbillon de nuées, le Pic, en cône régulier, s’élevait tout seul au milieu d’une plaine dont l’œil ne pouvait apprécier l’étendue. Toutes tournées vers lui, comme vénérant le maître, des montagnes indiquaient les frontières circulaires de la vaste plaine. Vers l’ouest seulement, la barrière des monts se brisait, s’abaissait, finissait en un sol chaotique et convulsé, un “Mal Païs”, au-delà duquel la mer lointaine étincelait au soleil.

Ce spectacle unique et sublime décida du succès de l’excursion. Des hourras éclatèrent.

Thompson modestement salua. Il pouvait se croire revenu aux beaux jours de Fayal, alors que la colonne bien dressée obéissait au moindre signe. Et, de fait, ne l’avait-il pas reconquise?

Il parla.

“Messieurs, dit-il - et sa main semblait familièrement offrir le cône colossal ainsi qu’un présent délicat - vous pouvez voir une fois de plus que l’agence ne recule devant rien, j’ose le dire, pour le plaisir de ses souscripteurs. Si vous le voulez bien, nous allons mélanger l’utile à l’agréable, et M. le professeur Morgand va nous renseigner en quelques mots sur le panorama que nous avons la bonne fortune de contempler.”

Robert, fort surpris de cette proposition devenue si inhabituelle, reprit à l’instant l’air froid qui convenait à la circonstance, l’air cicérone comme il l’appelait lui-même.

“Messieurs et mesdames, dit-il, tandis que le cercle réglementaire se formait autour de lui, vous avez devant vous la plaine de Las Canadas, cratère primitif maintenant comblé par les détritus mêmes vomis par le volcan. Peu à peu, au centre de ce cratère devenu plaine, les scories se sont amoncelées au point de former le Pic du Teyde et de le porter jusqu’à mille sept cents mètres de hauteur. Cette activité volcanique, autrefois prodigieuse, est aujourd’hui assoupie, mais non éteinte. Tout à l’heure, vous apercevrez à la base du cône les fumerolles qui servent de soupapes aux forces plutoniennes, et auxquelles les indigènes ont donné le nom expressif de “narizes “, c’est- à-dire les narines du volcan.

“Le Pic de Ténériffe atteint une altitude totale de trois mille huit cent huit mètres. C’est le plus haut volcan du globe.

“Ses proportions imposantes ne pouvaient manquer de frapper les imaginations. Les premiers voyageurs européens voyaient en lui la montagne la plus élevée du monde, et lui assignaient plus de quinze lieues de hauteur. Quant aux Guanches, population autochtone de ces îles, ils l’avaient transformé en divinité. Ils l’adoraient, juraient par lui, vouaient à Guayata, génie du mal qui réside au fond du cratère, quiconque manquait à sa parole.

- Mr. Thompson a bien tort de vouloir monter là- haut”, interrompit une voix rocailleuse, dans laquelle chacun reconnut l’organe séduisant de Saunders.

L’observation jeta un froid. Robert s’était tu, et Thompson ne jugea pas à propos de l’inviter à reprendre le fil de son discours. Sur un signe de lui, Ignacio Dorta ordonna le départ, et les touristes s’engagèrent à sa suite sur le cirque de Las Canadas.

On l’entamait d’un cœur léger, cette traversée. Les proportions du cirque semblaient en somme assez restreintes, et nul ne doutait qu’on ne fût à la base du cône en moins d’une demi-heure.

Mais cette demi-heure s’écoula sans que l’on parût s’être approché du but d’une manière sensible. Au départ, on aurait cru le toucher. On pouvait le croire encore. On ne le touchait pas.

En outre, le terrain était pire peut-être que dans la traversée du Portillo. Ce n’était que bosses et crevasses, sans autre végétation que de rares et misérables touffes de retamas.

“Pardon, monsieur le professeur, demanda l’un des touristes à Robert, combien faut-il donc de temps pour traverser cet abominable plateau?

-Environ trois heures, monsieur”, répondit Robert.

Cette réponse sembla faire réfléchir le touriste et ses plus proches voisins.

“Et après la traversée du plateau, reprit le touriste inquiet, quelle distance nous séparera du sommet?

-Quinze cents mètres environ, suivant la verticale”, dit laconiquement Robert.

-Le questionneur s’abîma en des réflexions plus profondes, et maugréa quelques injures à l’adresse des impedimenta de la route.

Il faut avouer que la promenade n’avait plus rien de très agréable. Le froid, à cette altitude, commençait à devenir assez vif, tandis que brûlaient les rayons du soleil, insuffisamment tamisés par l’air raréfié. Grillés en avant, gelés en arrière, les touristes appréciaient modérément ce système de compensation.

D’autre part, à s’avancer ainsi vers le Midi, on ne tarda pas à souffrir d’inconvénients plus graves. Sur ce sol de ponces, d’un blanc plus éclatant que celui de la neige, les rayons du soleil rebondissaient comme sur un miroir, au grand dam des yeux les plus robustes. Roger qui, sur le conseil de Robert, s’était muni d’un petit stock de lunettes bleues, put se mettre et mettre ses amis à l’abri de tout accident. Mais rares étaient ceux de ses compagnons qui avaient eu cette précaution, et bientôt des commencements d’ophtalmie se déclarèrent, forçant plusieurs touristes à lâcher pied. Cela fit réfléchir les autres et, peu à peu, la traversée du cirque se prolongeant sans que la fin en parût moins lointaine, le plus grand nombre des cavaliers, soit par crainte d’ophtalmie, soit pour cause de fatigue, reprit discrètement la route d’Orotava.

Botte à botte avec Ignacio Dorta, Robert marchait en tête de la caravane. Tout entier à ses pensées, il ne prononça pas une parole pendant les trois heures que dura la traversée du cirque. Ce fut seulement parvenu au sommet de la Montagne-Blanche, ultime contrefort du Pic, à deux mille quatre cents mètres d'altitude, qu'il jeta un regard en arrière. Il vit alors, non sans surprise, à quel point la caravane avait diminué.

Une quinzaine de touristes tout au plus la composaient désormais, et le nombre des arrieros avait subi une proportionnelle diminution. Le reste était dispersé, évanoui.

“Une caravane anglaise, vint murmurer Roger à l'oreille de son ami, est décidément le corps qui a la plus basse température de fusion. Je note cette observation de chimie transcendante.

- En effet! répondit Robert en riant. Mais je crois le phénomène arrêté. La solution doit être à saturation.”

L'événement allait lui prouver le contraire.

Il s'agissait maintenant d'attaquer le cône lui-même par un sentier d'une raideur telle qu'il paraissait impossible que des chevaux et des mules pussent s'y maintenir. Les derniers intrépides reculèrent à cette vue, et, prétextant une extrême fatigue, affirmèrent résolument leur volonté de regagner Orotava par le plus court. Vainement Thompson insista, mobilisa l'arsenal de ses séductions. Il ne put obtenir que d'énergiques refus formulés d'un ton qui n'avait plus rien d'aimable.

Avoir imaginé une pareille excursion! C'était de la folie! Comment un homme possédant sa raison avait-il pu la proposer à des gens autres que des ascensionnistes de profession? Pourquoi pas le mont Blanc tout de suite?

Voilà ce qu’on disait et l’on ajoutait d’autres réflexions non moins bienveillantes. On se repentait à haute voix d’avoir été sur le point, trois heures plus tôt, de croire au succès final du voyage. On se raillait d’avoir admis un instant qu’un projet de Thompson pût avoir le sens commun.

Il fallut se résoudre à laisser partir les désabusés, en leur adjoignant une partie des guides et quinze des vingt chevaux porteurs des provisions. Puis Thompson attaqua aussitôt la montée, sans donner à ses derniers fidèles le temps de se raviser.

Au premier rang de ceux-ci figurait Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam. Ombre de son administrateur, il ne l’avait pas depuis quinze jours lâché d’une semelle. C’était sa vengeance peut-être. Thompson, prodigieusement agacé, ne pouvait se débarrasser de ce remords vivant. Marchait- il, Piperboom était sur ses talons; parlait-il, le Hollandais buvait ses paroles; il n’avait de répit que pendant les heures de la nuit.

Cette fois comme toujours, Piperboom était à son poste. Sa mule eût pu brouter la queue de celle de Thompson.

Si un cavalier et sa monture ne font pas forcément deux bêtes, ainsi que le soutient un vieux proverbe, cela fait bien deux têtes en tout cas, c’est-à-dire deux volontés distinctes et parfois opposées. Or, si Piperboom entendait s’attacher aux pas de son chef de file, s’il voulait gravir le cône jusqu’au bout, sa mule était d’un avis contraire. Au bout de dix pas, elle se refusa énergiquement à faire le onzième. Il trouvait la charge trop lourde, cet animal!

Tous les arguments physiques et moraux furent employés sans succès, les guides s’attelèrent au mors de la récalcitrante. Celle-ci, qui, apparemment, avait pris une irrévocable résolution, ne se laissa pas convaincre. Enfin, ennuyée des taquineries qu’on se permettait à son égard, elle manifesta clairement sa mauvaise humeur en déposant son fardeau sur le sol.

Piperboom se vit donc dans la nécessité de quitter, bon gré mal gré, son administrateur, et de prendre lui aussi avant l’heure la route du retour, en compagnie d’un guide, de deux arrieros et d’un cheval, dont on agrémenta sa solitude, tandis que ses compagnons plus heureux continuaient leur ascension.

Ils étaient dix-neuf en tout: trois guides, huit arrieros, conduisant les quatre chevaux conservés, et huit voyageurs, savoir: Thompson, que sa grandeur obligeait à la persévérance, Robert, Roger de Sorgues, Alice et sa sœur, Jack Lindsay, Saunders et Hamilton. Quant à Lady Hamilton et à Miss Margaret, elles devaient depuis longtemps être arrivées à Orotava sous la conduite de Tigg, qui s’était galamment chargé de les escorter. Ah! si Miss Mary et Miss Bess Blockhead avaient été là! Combien elles auraient préféré voir l’ingrat monter jusqu’au sommet du Pic et se précipiter dans son cratère, plutôt que de se transformer en courtisan d’une rivale!

Dans cette colonne réduite, Robert avait été repris sur- le-champ par ses soucis habituels. Entre Jack Lindsay et sa belle-sœur, que le hasard avait fait s’engager successivement sur la pente, il avait poussé sa mule avec vivacité, et non sans bousculer légèrement Alice. Celle-ci,

d’ailleurs, comme si elle eût deviné le mobile de l’interprète du *Seamew,* ne s’était pas formalisée de cette hâte un peu nerveuse. Posément, elle avait cédé son rang, et s’était mise à la suite de son fidèle protecteur.

Jack Lindsay, lui aussi, avait remarqué la manœuvre de Robert, mais, pas plus que sa belle-sœur, il ne montra par aucun signe qu’il s’en fût aperçu. Tout au plus une légère crispation de ses lèvres trahit sa colère intime, et il continua à gravir la pente sans se retourner vers l'ennemi qu'il savait être derrière lui.

Ce fut une montée exténuante. Sur ce sol friable et croulant, chaque pas demandait un véritable travail. Quand, à six heures du soir, après deux heures d'efforts, le commandement de halte retentit, bêtes et gens étaient à bout.

On était parvenu à Alta Vista, sorte de renflement du cône, sur lequel on a bâti un refuge pour les ouvriers qui exploitent le soufre. Là, on devait passer la nuit.

Tout d'abord, on fit fête au dîner excellent, et abondant en raison de la diminution des convives, puis on s'occupa de s'installer pour la nuit. Le froid était vif. Le thermomètre marquait à peine trois degrés au-dessus de zéro. Un toit était impérieusement nécessaire.

Pourtant, il n'est pas certain qu'Alice et Dolly, malgré leur entraînement de voyageuses, eussent accepté celui du refuge, déjà envahi par les ouvriers de la solfatare. Peut- être eussent-elles préféré la nuit froide à cette peu engageante promiscuité.

Heureusement Robert avait tout prévu pour leur éviter ce désagrément. Par ses soins, les chevaux furent déchargés de leur fardeau, et bientôt une tente confortable s'éleva, dans laquelle, grâce à un petit poêle et à une suffisante provision de combustible, le feu ronfla en quelques minutes.

Le jour déclinait rapidement. À huit heures, la mer fut envahie par l'ombre, que l'on vit avec la vitesse d'un express monter à l'assaut des côtes, des escarpements et des montagnes environnantes. En deux minutes, le cirque de Las Canadas était plongé dans la nuit. Seul, le Pic, étincelant encore, émergeait d'un invisible abîme.

Le globe du soleil atteignit l'océan, la ligne de l'horizon le rongea, tandis qu'un immense cône d'ombre projeté par le Pic, passant en un instant par tous les tons imaginables, s'allongeait jusqu'à la Grande-Canarie, et le dernier rayon passa, flèche lumineuse, dans l'atmosphère obscurcie.

Alice et Dolly se retirèrent aussitôt dans leur tente. Quant aux hommes, s'il leur fut impossible, à l'abri du refuge, de trouver le sommeil, en raison de nuées de parasites dont semblaient se soucier fort peu les ouvriers, leurs hôtes et compagnons de lit, du moins purent-ils combattre le froid à l'aide d'un feu de retamas.

Vers deux heures du matin, les odieux insectes suffisamment repus, ils réussissaient avec peine à s'endormir, quand résonna le signal du départ. Il n'y avait pas de temps à perdre, si l'on voulait être au sommet pour le lever de l'aube.

Le respect de la vérité force à confesser que deux touristes se bouchèrent obstinément les oreilles.

L'un, le baronnet Sir George Hamilton, pouvait arguer de l'impossibilité d'agir autrement. Et vraiment, il ne fallait pas moins qu'une raison de cette valeur pour décider le pointilleux passager à faire un accroc au programme. Mais, cette fois, il était réellement hors d'état de le respecter. Quel moyen de grimper jusqu'au sommet, quand le moindre mouvement lui causait les plus cruelles douleurs? Décidément, la fraîcheur des nuits était funeste à ses nobles articulations. Simple prologue à Canarie, le rhumatisme devenait drame à Ténériffe.

L’autre récalcitrant n’aurait pu fournir une aussi valable excuse. Sa santé était parfaite, à celui-là et, circonstance aggravante, les plus fortes raisons lui conseillaient le courage. Mais il n’est pas de fortes raisons pour un homme éreinté, et Thompson l’était au-delà du supportable. Aussi ne répondit-il que par des grognements inarticulés aux appels d’Ignacio Dorta, et laissa-t-il partir sans lui ses derniers administrés. Il avait, à son estime, assez fait pour leur bonheur.

Six ascensionnistes seulement eurent donc le courage d’attaquer les cinq cent trente-cinq mètres qui séparent le sommet du refuge d’Alta Vista. Ces cinq cent trente-cinq mètres, qu’il faut gravir à pied, sont en réalité les plus pénibles. Dans la nuit noire, à peine éclairée par les torches de pin portées par les guides, la marche était incertaine sur ce terrain mouvant, et dont la pente se relevait de mètre en mètre. En outre, le froid ne cessait de s’accroître, et bientôt le thermomètre tomba au-dessous de zéro. Les hardis touristes luttaient péniblement contre le vent glacé qui leur coupait le visage.

Après deux heures de cette pénible montée, on atteignit à la Rambleta, petit plateau circulaire ourlant la base du piton terminal. Cent cinquante mètres restaient encore à gravir.

Ces cent cinquante derniers mètres, il fut aussitôt évident que Saunders du moins ne les gravirait pas. À peine arrivé sur la Rambleta, il s’était allongé sur le sol, et il y demeurait immobile malgré les exhortations des guides. En dépit de sa vigueur, ce grand corps était terrassé. L’air manquait à ses vastes poumons. Livide, il haletait péniblement. Ignacio Dorta rassura ses compagnons inquiets.

“Ce n’est que le mal des montagnes, dit-il. Ce monsieur se guérira, dès qu’il pourra redescendre.”

Sur cette assurance, les cinq survivants du massacre reprirent leur ascension mouvementée, en laissant un des guides avec le malade. Mais la fin du parcours en est de beaucoup la partie la plus épuisante. Sur ce sol incliné à quarante-cinq degrés, chaque pas exige une étude, il faut du temps et de violents efforts pour gagner quelques centimètres. C’est une excessive dépense de forces, à laquelle la raréfaction de l’air ne permet de résister que difficilement.

À peine au tiers du chemin, Jack dut à son tour se déclarer vaincu. Aux trois quarts évanoui, secoué par d’épouvantables nausées, il tomba lourdement sur le sentier. Ses compagnons qui le précédaient ne s’aperçurent même pas de son indisposition et, sans s’arrêter, continuèrent leur marche, tandis que le dernier guide restait près du touriste hors de combat.

Cinquante mètres plus haut, ce fut le tour de Dolly; Roger, non sans un sourire légèrement narquois, lui conseilla aussitôt le repos, et son regard égayé suivit Alice et Robert qui, sous la conduite d’Ignacio Dorta, atteignaient enfin le point suprême.

Il faisait nuit encore. Toutefois un peu de lumière, maintenant éparse dans l’ombre, permettait de percevoir confusément le sol que foulaient les pieds.

Sous la conduite du guide, qui se retira aussitôt, Alice et Robert étaient allés se blottir dans une anfractuosité des rochers, et subitement la température jusque-là glaciale était devenue d’une surprenante douceur.

Bientôt la lumière grandissante leur fit reconnaître qu’ils avaient trouvé abri dans le cratère même du volcan, qui se creusait devant eux à quarante mètres de profondeur. De tous côtés s’élevaient des fumerolles. Le sol spongieux et brûlant était criblé de petites excavations d’où s’échappaient des vapeurs sulfureuses.

La périphérie du cratère marque une limite d’une netteté remarquable. Jusqu’à lui, c’est la mort absolue, sans un être, sans une plante. Sous l’influence de sa bienfaisante chaleur, la vie renaît au sommet.

Alice et Robert, debout, à trois pas l’un de l’autre, contemplaient l’horizon que l’aube enflammait. Émus d’une religieuse émotion, ils s’emplissaient les yeux et l’âme du spectacle grandiose qui commençait à apparaître à leurs yeux.

Autour d’eux bourdonnaient des mouches et des abeilles, les rapides fringilles du Pic se croisaient à tire- d’aile. À ses pieds, Robert aperçut une violette cachée frileusement sous ses larges feuilles velues. Se baissant, il cueillit cette fleur paradoxale qui s’épanouit à des altitudes où nul autre représentant du règne végétal ne saurait vivre et l’offrit à sa compagne qui, silencieusement, la piqua à son corsage...

Soudain, la lumière du jour éclata. Tel qu’une sphère de métal rougie à blanc, incendié, sans rayons, le soleil montait à l’horizon. Le sommet, d’abord, flamba dans la clarté, puis, ainsi que la veille elle avait monté, l’ombre descendit d’une pareille vitesse. Alta Vista, le cirque de

Las Canadas apparurent. Et, d’un seul coup, comme si un voile se fût déchiré, la mer immense resplendit sous l’infini de l’azur.

Sur cette mer, l’ombre du pic se dessinait en un cône étonnamment régulier, dont la pointe allait lécher dans l’ouest l’île de Gomère. Plus loin et plus au sud, Hierro et Palma apparaissaient nettement malgré la distance de cent cinquante kilomètres. Vers l’est, la Grande-Canarie se dressait dans la gloire de l’aube. Si Las Palmas, sa capitale, se cachait sur la côte opposée, on distinguait par contre la Isleta et le port de La Luz, où trois jours plus tôt le *Seamew* était mouillé.

À la base du Teyde, l’île de Ténériffe se déployait comme un vaste plan. La lumière rasante du matin accusait le relief des dénivellations. Énergiquement, elle se mamelonnait d’innombrables pics, se creusait de sauvages barranques et de douces vallées, au fond desquelles s’éveillaient à cette heure des villages.

“Que c’est beau! soupira Alice après une longue contemplation.

-Que c’est beau!” redit Robert en un écho.

Ces quelques mots jetés dans le silence universel qui les entourait suffirent à rompre le charme. Tous deux du même mouvement se retournèrent l’un vers l’autre. Alice s’aperçut alors de l’absence de Dolly.

“Où donc est ma sœur? demanda-t-elle comme au sortir d’un véritable rêve.

-Miss Dolly, légèrement souffrante, dit Robert, s’est arrêtée un peu plus bas avec M. de Sorgues. Si vous le désirez, je puis aller à leur aide?”

Robert avait fait un mouvement de retrait. Alice l’arrêta du geste.

“Non, dit-elle. Demeurez.”

Puis, ayant gardé quelques instants de silence:

“Je suis heureuse que nous soyons seuls, reprit-elle avec une sourde hésitation peu habituelle à ce caractère décidé. J’ai à vous parler... à vous remercier plutôt.

-Moi, madame! se récria Robert.

-Oui, affirma Alice. J’ai remarqué la protection discrète dont vous m’entourez depuis notre départ de Madère, et j’en ai compris les causes. Cette protection m’est précieuse, croyez-le, mais je veux rassurer votre sollicitude. Je ne suis pas désarmée. Je n’ignore rien de ce qui s’est passé à Madère.”

Robert allait répondre. Alice le prévint.

“Ne me répondez pas. J’ai dit ce qu’il fallait dire, mais mieux vaut ne pas insister sur un sujet aussi pénible. C’est un secret honteux que nous possédons tous les deux. Je sais qu’il sera fidèlement gardé.”

Après un court silence, elle reprit d’une voix douce:

“Comment n’aurais-je pas voulu rassurer votre amitié inquiète? Ma vie n’est-elle pas maintenant un peu votre bien?”

Robert du geste protesta.

“Feriez-vous donc fi de mon amitié? demanda Alice avec un demi-sourire.

-Amitié bien courte, répondit mélancoliquement Robert. Dans peu de jours désormais le navire qui nous porte sera mouillé dans la Tamise, et chacun de nous suivra son destin.

-Il est vrai, dit Alice émue. Nos existences se sépareront peut-être, mais il nous restera le souvenir.

-Il s’effacera si vite dans le brouillard du temps!”

Alice, le regard perdu vers l’horizon, laissa d’abord tomber l’exclamation désenchantée sans y répondre.

“Il faut que la vie ait été pour vous bien cruelle, dit- elle enfin, si vos paroles traduisent fidèlement votre pensée. Êtes-vous donc seul dans l’humanité, pour avoir en elle si peu de confiance? N’avez-vous pas de parents?”

Robert secoua négativement la tête.

“D’amis?

-J’en avais autrefois, répondit Robert avec amertume.

-Et aujourd’hui n’en avez-vous plus? objecta Alice. Seriez-vous donc vraiment assez aveugle pour refuser ce titre à M. de Sorgues, sans parler de ma sœur et de moi?

-Vous, madame! s’écria Robert d’une voix étouffée.

-Il est certain, en tout cas, poursuivit Alice, en négligeant l’interruption, que vous n’êtes pas encourageant pour l’amitié qui s’offre à vous. J’en suis à me demander si j’ai été coupable en quelque manière à votre égard.

-Comment pourriez-vous l’être? interrogea Robert sincèrement surpris.

-Je l’ignore, répondit Alice. Mais il est évident que, depuis l’événement que je rappelais tout à l’heure, vous vous êtes éloigné de nous. Ma sœur et moi, nous nous en étonnons, et M. de Sorgues ne se prive pas de blâmer une conduite dont il ne peut trouver, dit-il, l’explication. Quelqu’un de nous vous aurait-il donc blessé à son insu?

-Oh, madame! protesta Robert confus.

-Alors, je ne comprends plus.

-Parce qu’il n’y a rien à comprendre, répondit vivement Robert. Malgré ce que vous supposez, je suis resté ce que j’étais. La seule différence du passé au présent réside dans l’intérêt que m’a valu une circonstance fortuite, et que ne pouvait ambitionner l’humble interprète du *Seamew.*

-Vous n’êtes pas pour moi l’interprète du *Seamew*, répliqua Alice dont les joues se colorèrent légèrement. Votre explication est mauvaise, et cette chicane n’est digne ni de vous, ni de moi. Reconnaissez-vous nous éviter, moi, ma sœur, et jusqu’à M. de Sorgues?

-C’est vrai, dit Robert.

-Alors, je vous répète: pourquoi?”

Robert sentit une émeute de pensées se heurter dans son cerveau.

Il parvint cependant à se ressaisir, et, se contraignant au silence, il dit simplement:

“Parce que nos situations réciproques me dictent ma conduite et m’imposent une grande réserve. Puis-je méconnaître la distance qui les sépare à bord de ce navire où nous vivons à des titres si opposés?

-Mauvaise raison, repartit Alice avec impatience, puisqu’il nous convient à tous trois d’ignorer cette distance dont vous parlez.

-Il est de mon devoir de m’en souvenir, déclara Robert avec fermeté, et de ne pas abuser d’un généreux sentiment de reconnaissance au point de m’accorder une liberté qui pourrait être diversement interprétée.”

Alice rougit, et son cœur se mit à battre. Elle eût conscience qu’elle s’engageait sur un terrain brûlant. Mais quelque chose de plus fort qu’elle l’entraînait irrésistiblement à pousser jusqu’au bout un entretien qui commençait à devenir dangereux.

“Je n’entends pas bien ce que vous voulez dire, prononça-t-elle avec un peu de hauteur, et je ne sais quels sont les jugements que vous estimez devoir redouter.

-Et si c’était uniquement le vôtre, madame! s’écria malgré lui Robert.

-Le mien!

-Oui, le vôtre, madame. Même hors du *Seamew,* nos vies sont trop différentes pour qu’elles puissent se mêler sans appeler le soupçon. Que penserait-on de moi, qu’en penseriez-vous vous-même, si je vous autorisais jamais à supposer que j’ai osé, que j’ose...”

Robert se tut brusquement, renfermant en lui d’un dernier effort la parole irréparable qu’il s’était juré de ne pas prononcer. Mais ne se taisait-il pas trop tard, et n’en avait-il pas dit assez pour que Mrs. Lindsay comprît?

S’il en était effectivement ainsi, si Alice avait deviné le mot prêt à jaillir, il est à croire qu’elle ne le redoutait pas. Engagée par sa faute dans une situation sans issue, elle lui faisait tête, sans chercher à se dérober par de puérils faux- fuyants. Bravement, elle s’était complètement tournée vers Robert.

“Eh bien? dit-elle résolument. Achevez.”

Robert crut sentir le sol manquer sous ses pieds. Ses dernières résolutions furent emportées. Il cessa de lutter, éperdu. Une seconde encore, et son cœur trop plein allait crier son secret...

Une pierre roula à dix pas de lui, en même temps qu’une toux violente faisait vibrer l’air raréfié. Presque aussitôt Roger parut soutenant Dolly, défaillante, et suivi d’Ignacio Dorta qui était redescendu les aider à parfaire l’ascension.

Roger, d’un coup d’œil, vit l’embarras de ses amis, et reconstitua facilement la scène. Toutefois, il n’en fit rien paraître. Mais un invisible sourire courut sous sa moustache, tandis que son doigt complaisant commençait à détailler pour Dolly l’immense panorama déployé devant elle.

CHAPITRE VI

UN ACCIDENT QUI ARRIVE À POINT

Le 11 juin, à dix heures du matin, le *Seamew* quitta le port d'Orotava. Le programme fixait ce départ au 7, à six heures du matin. Mais, ayant déjà un retard de quatre jours, Thompson n'avait vu aucun inconvénient à l'augmenter de quatre heures. De fait, cela n'avait guère d'importance au moment où l'on s'engageait sur la route du retour, et il restait ainsi loisible aux passagers de prolonger un repos réparateur.

Thompson, on le voit, en revenait au système des aimables procédés. Maintenant que chaque tour d'hélice allait le rapprocher du quai de la Tamise, il jugeait avantageux d'amadouer par la douceur des souscripteurs dont plusieurs étaient devenus ses ennemis. En sept jours de traversée, un homme adroit est capable de faire bien des choses, de retourner bien du monde. Et d'ailleurs, à quoi désormais lui eût servi la froideur? Il n'y aurait plus de relâche, et, à bord du *Seamew,* il n'était pas à craindre qu'aucun ennui nouveau se présentât.

La délicate attention de leur administrateur fut appréciée des passagers. Tous firent grasse matinée ce jour-là. Pas un n'avait encore quitté sa cabine quand le *Seamew* appareilla.

Autre délicate attention, le capitaine, sur l'ordre de Thompson, avait commencé un voyage de circumnavigation: avant de mettre le cap sur l'Angleterre, on passerait entre Ténériffe et Gomère, puis on contournerait l'île de Fer, ce qui constituerait une promenade charmante. On remonterait ensuite vers Palma, à portée de laquelle on serait, il est vrai, pendant la nuit.

Mais c’était là un insignifiant détail, le plus exigeant ne pouvant obliger Thompson à ralentir la course du soleil. Après cette revue finale de l’archipel des Canaries, les passagers, en se réveillant le lendemain, auraient un plus vif plaisir en trouvant devant eux la mer libre.

Conformément à ce programme revu et corrigé, le *Seamew* longeait à la vitesse réglementaire de ses douze nœuds la côte ouest de Ténériffe, quand la cloche sonna le déjeuner.

Les convives en furent clairsemés. Raison de fatigue ou autre, un grand nombre d’entre eux restèrent confinés dans leurs cabines.

La descente du Pic avait cependant été plus rapide et plus facile que la montée. Seuls, les conquérants de la crête suprême avaient eu à vaincre quelques difficultés. Si, jusqu’à Alta Vista, il ne s’était agi que d’une véritable glissade sur le sol incliné, ils avaient dû, à partir de ce point, remonter sur leurs mules et suivre de nouveau le sentier en lacet plus inquiétant encore à descendre que pénible à monter. Une fois parvenus au cirque de Las Canadas, le retour s’était montré simplement pareil à l’aller, et, finalement, les huit intrépides s’étaient retrouvés en excellente santé vers sept heures du soir à bord du *Seamew*.

Que ces huit touristes eussent besoin de repos, cela se comprenait. Mais les autres auraient dû être tout à fait remis après deux nuits entières de sommeil.

Le capitaine Pip les avait vus, l’avant-veille, regagner successivement le bord. Avant midi, les premiers étaient arrivés, puis les autres avaient suivi, espacés jusqu’à Piperboom, venu le dernier à sept heures du soir, sans autre mal qu’un appétit dévorant.

Les vides ne manquaient pas cependant parmi ces inconstants voyageurs. C’est que la fatigue se mesure moins au travail accompli qu’à l’effort. Tous souffraient plus ou moins d’un mal particulier. L’un avait une courbature, l’autre une ophtalmie causée par la blanche steppe de Las Canadas, le troisième un gros rhume apporté par le vent glacial de la montagne.

Maux peu graves en somme, puisque avant une heure ces invalides commencèrent à sortir de leur retraite, au moment où le *Seamew* doublait la pointe Teno, en laquelle, à l’ouest, se termine l’île de Ténériffe.

À peu de distance, Gomère apparaissait. Le *Seamew* s’en rapprocha rapidement et suivit le rivage à moins de trois milles.

Vers deux heures, on passa au large de Saint-Sébastien, capitale de l’île, bourg de médiocre importance, mais grand par les souvenirs qu’il évoque. C’est de ce point que, le 7 septembre 1492, Christophe Colomb s’élança définitivement dans l’inconnu. Trente-quatre jours plus tard, l’immortel voyageur découvrait l’Amérique.

Quelques battements d’hélice, et l’île de Fer apparaissait à son tour, séparée de Gomère par un détroit de vingt-deux milles, que le *Seamew* mit deux heures à franchir.

Il était quatre heures et demie, quand on commença à côtoyer cette île, la plus méridionale de l’archipel. Située environ par 28° 30’ de latitude nord et 20° de longitude ouest, elle n’a aucune importance commerciale, et ne doit sa célébrité relative qu’à une particularité géographique: pendant longtemps son méridien fut adopté comme origine de tous les autres, et la longitude des divers points du monde s’exprima en degrés à l’est ou à l’ouest de l’île de Fer.

Heureusement pour les passagers du *Seamew,* cette île offre à la curiosité du voyageur d’autres attractions que cet intérêt un peu spécial. Son aspect particulièrement terrible et sauvage expliquait le détour imposé par Thompson à son navire. Moins élevée que Ténériffe, que Palma, que la Grande-Canarie même, cette sentinelle avancée de l’archipel est d’un abord plus rébarbatif que ces terres pourtant déjà assez peu accueillantes. De toutes parts, une falaise la borde, s’élevant verticalement à plus de mille mètres de hauteur au-dessus des flots et la rend à peu près inaccessible. Pas une fissure, pas une crique dans cette muraille d’airain.

Les insulaires, dans l’impossibilité de séjourner sur les rivages, ont dû s’établir en grande majorité dans l’intérieur. Ils y vivent séparés du reste du monde, peu de navires se souciant d’affronter les récifs semés au large de l’île, les courants violents et les vents dangereux qui l’entourent et rendent dans ces parages la navigation des plus difficiles.

Ces vents et ces courants n’étaient pas pour inquiéter un navire à vapeur. Le *Seamew* put donc suivre imperturbablement cette côte désolée, dont pas une maison, pas un arbre ne vint, durant trois heures, égayer la sauvage majesté.

Dans le nord-est, le pic de Ténériffe, par-dessus l’île de Gomère, se dressait tout embrumé de nuées, montrant aux passagers le point que bien peu d’entre eux avaient réussi à atteindre. Vers six heures et demie il disparut, caché derrière le cap Restinga que doublait le *Seamew.* Tous les regards saluèrent alors pour la dernière fois le mont prodigieux que l’on ne devait plus revoir, tandis que le capitaine faisait mettre progressivement la route au nord. On s’engageait définitivement sur le chemin du retour.

À sept heures, la table se retrouva au complet, Thompson présidant régulièrement, le capitaine en face de lui, les passagers à leurs places habituelles. La mer était douce, le menu confortable, tout conspirait pour que ce repas inaugurât l’ère de la réconciliation. Il débuta mal cependant au milieu d’un silence menaçant.

Entre Alice et Robert particulièrement une gêne existait, évidente. Sur le sommet du Teyde, ils en avaient à la fois dit trop et trop peu, et ni l’un ni l’autre n’osait reprendre l’entretien. Robert, auquel ses vacances désormais illimitées ne fournissaient plus de prétextes à disparaître, avait toute l’après-midi gardé un obstiné silence, tandis qu’Alice était demeurée rêveuse. Roger, qui les observait du coin de l’œil, fut désagréablement surpris du résultat de sa diplomatie.

“En voilà, des amoureux!” se disait-il ironiquement.

Pourtant leur trouble était patent, quand Dolly et lui étaient arrivés au sommet du Pic. Il ne pouvait s’illusionner à cet égard. Mais le retrait actuel n’était pas moins certain, et Roger en concluait avec dépit qu’il avait un peu trop tôt interrompu le tête-à-tête.

Bien qu’ils n’eussent pas les mêmes raisons, les autres touristes s’étaient mis d’eux-mêmes au diapason. Une sourde contrainte enveloppait le bâtiment tout entier.

Que Jack Lindsay fût sombre, quoi d’étonnant à cela? N’était-ce pas son état ordinaire? Seul, à l’écart, il ressassait avec rage les incidents de la veille. Que s’était-il passé, lorsque, malgré sa haine, il avait dû, vaincu, s’arrêter à mi-route? Non content de le deviner trop aisément, il aurait voulu voir et savoir.

Des colères le prenaient. Ah! s’il avait pu d’un seul coup éventrer ce maudit navire! Avec quelle joie il eût précipité ses compagnons et soi-même dans les flots, pourvu qu’il eût le plaisir d’y faire périr en même temps sa belle-sœur et son exécrable sauveur!

Mais, si la méchante humeur de Jack s’expliquait facilement, d’où venait la tristesse des autres? Pourquoi, au cours de l’après-midi, ne s’étaient-ils pas réunis en groupes comme au début du voyage? Pourquoi n’avaient- ils pas échangé leurs impressions en longeant cette rébarbative île de Fer, au lieu de rester isolés et silencieux?

C’est qu’ils avaient perdu le plus nécessaire des biens: l’espoir, qui peut au besoin remplacer tous les autres. Jusque-là, l’avenir leur avait fait supporter le présent. Il était possible qu’une excursion réussie, un hôtel confortable, une promenade agréable, vinssent compenser une excursion manquée, un hôtel honteux, une promenade éreintante. Aujourd’hui, le livre était clos. Le voyage terminé ne réservait plus aucune surprise aux voyageurs. Et c’est pourquoi ceux-ci passaient leur temps à récapituler en eux-mêmes les ennuis dont ils avaient souffert; et c’est pourquoi, leur mécontentement porté à son comble par leur dernière désillusion, ils gardaient le silence, par honte réciproque de s’être laissé prendre à ce traquenard.

Ce silence persistant, Saunders en jouissait profondément. Il y sentait l’électricité latente. Incontestablement, l’orage couvait. À lui de le faire éclater. Il en cherchait l’occasion favorable. Le hasard la lui fournit.

Il avait déjà risqué plusieurs pointes désagréables sans rencontrer d’écho, quand ses yeux fureteurs découvrirent le vide de deux places voisines ordinairement occupées.

“Deux des intelligents passagers qui nous ont brûlé la politesse à Las Palmas”, songea-t-il tout d’abord.

Mais un examen plus attentif le convainquit de son erreur. Les places inoccupées étaient celles du jeune ménage, qui, suivant sa coutume, avait débarqué dès l'arrivée à Santa-Cruz.

Saunders fit aussitôt sa remarque à haute voix et s'informa des passagers absents. Personne ne les avait vus.

“Ils sont souffrants, peut-être, dit Thompson.

-Pourquoi seraient-ils malades? répliqua hargneusement Saunders. Ils n'étaient pas avec vous hier.

-Où voulez-vous qu'ils soient? objecta Thompson avec mansuétude.

-Le sais-je, moi? répondit Saunders. Vous les aurez oubliés à Ténériffe sans doute.”

Saunders avait dit cela comme autre chose. Quant à Thompson, il haussa les épaules.

“Comment voulez-vous qu'on les ait oubliés? N'avaient-ils pas un programme!”

À ces mots, le baronnet intervint.

“Un programme, en effet, dit-il d'un air pincé, qui annonce que le *Seamew* partira le 4 juin, et non le 7, de Santa-Cruz, et non d'Orotava. Si c'est sur le programme que vous comptez!

- Ils ont dû être informés du changement, répondit Thompson. Et d'ailleurs, rien n'est plus simple que d'aller frapper à la porte de leur cabine.”

Deux minutes plus tard, Mr. Roastbeaf annonçait que la chambre était vide. Les jeunes mariés avaient incontestablement disparu.

Malgré son ordinaire aplomb, Thompson avait légèrement pâli; l'affaire cette fois était grave. Encaisser des gens le prix d'un voyage, puis les semer tranquillement en route, nul doute que les tribunaux anglais appréciassent fort mal cette fantaisie.

“Il n'y a qu'un moyen, dit-il après un instant de réflexion. Si ces messieurs le veulent bien, nous allons retourner à Santa-Cruz de Ténériffe. Grâce au détour que nous avons fait, cela ne nous écartera guère de notre route, et dès demain matin...”

Un tollé général lui coupa la parole. Tous les passagers parlaient à la fois. Allonger d'une nuit, d'une heure même, un voyage en la compagnie de l'administrateur général, jamais! Décidément, l'étincelle avait jailli, l'orage éclatait. Quant à la foudre, Saunders se chargeait de la décider à tomber.

À lui tout seul, il parlait plus haut que les autres. Il gesticulait avec un formidable bruit de bielles rouillées.

“Nous arrêter! s'exclamait-il. Parbleu! Est-ce notre faute, si vous oubliez vos passagers comme un mouchoir de poche? Vous vous arrangerez avec ceux-là. Nous aurions à parcourir un trop long chemin, s'il nous fallait aller chercher tout ce que vous avez oublié en cours de route, vos engagements, par exemple, que vous avez égarés un peu partout, aux Canaries, aux Açores, à Madère! Nous les retrouverons à Londres!” ajouta-t-il d'une voix terrible, en frappant à tour de bras sur son carnet.

Thompson se leva, et quitta la table.

“Vous me parlez, monsieur, d’un ton qui ne saurait me convenir, dit-il en s’efforçant de prendre une attitude pleine de dignité. Souffrez donc que je brise là et que je me retire.”

Que les injures eussent entamé l’épiderme de Thompson, cela en vérité était fort douteux. Sa peau, normale au demeurant, se faisait cuirasse pour ce genre de piqûres. Mais il avait jugé déplorable l’effet de cette algarade, au moment où la conciliation devenait le premier de ses besoins. Mieux valait laisser renaître le calme. Il reprendrait alors son œuvre de paix, et quelques bons dîners suffiraient à lui ramener ses souscripteurs.

Il connaissait mal son ennemi. Saunders le suivit pas à pas sur le spardeck où il s’était réfugié, et, derrière Saunders, tous les passagers sans exception, les uns irrités, les autres seulement amusés, comme Roger et les Américaines, mais tous, au demeurant, approuvant l’esprit sinon la forme de la diatribe de Saunders.

“Oui, monsieur, reprit ce dernier, en cernant dans un coin le malheureux administrateur général, et en lui mettant son carnet sous le nez, nous les retrouverons à Londres, vos engagements, et les tribunaux estimeront à leur valeur vos excellentes plaisanteries. J’établirai mon compte. Je prouverai que vous m’avez contraint par votre ladrerie à dépenser de ma poche, en sus du prix de ma place, une somme totale de vingt-sept livres sterling neuf shillings, et cinq pence (six cent quatre-vingt-six francs quatre-vingt) qui aurait dû y rester. Je leur raconterai la noyade de Mrs. Lindsay, l’avalanche de Saint-Michel, le déjeuner de Horta, le rhumatisme de Sir Hamilton, le lumbago de Mr. Blockhead...

-Permettez! permettez! réclama faiblement Blockhead.

-... et les hôtels infects, et toutes nos excursions, toutes nos promenades si bien organisées, sans oublier la dernière, cette ascension insensée au pic de Ténériffe, dont la plupart de vos passagers sont revenus malades, et dont les plus persévérants n’ont rapporté que des puces!

-Bravo, bravo! crièrent tous les auditeurs d’une voix étranglée par un rire de vengeance.

-Parfaitement, monsieur, continua Saunders lancé à fond de train, je ferai tout cela. Mais, en attendant, je ne vous mâcherai pas la vérité: nous avons été volés, monsieur, je ne vous l’envoie pas dire.”

La scène prenait décidément une mauvaise tournure. À la violence de son adversaire, aux mots employés, Thompson comprit qu’il se devait de protester. Il protesta.

“En vérité, monsieur, dit-il, voilà qui est intolérable. Puisque vous devez, dites-vous, vous adresser aux tribunaux, veuillez donc attendre qu’ils aient prononcé, et m’épargner des scènes dans le genre de celle-ci. Depuis le départ, je n’ai eu d’affaires qu’avec vous. Si vous n’étiez pas là, tout le monde se déclarerait content. Que me voulez-vous donc? Je ne vous connais pas, moi, après tout, monsieur Saunders!

-Vous me connaissez parfaitement, au contraire, répliqua Saunders.

-Moi?

-Vous.”

L’irréconciliable passager se planta en face de l’administrateur général.

“Mon nom n’est pas Saunders, dit-il nettement.

-Bah! fit Thompson étonné en regardant son ennemi.

-Mon nom est Baker, monsieur, cria celui-ci en levant son long bras vers le ciel.

-Baker!

-Oui, monsieur, Baker, directeur d’une agence de voyages, sans aucun rapport avec la vôtre, je m’en flatte.”

Rien n’avait fait prévoir ce coup de théâtre. Après avoir poussé une exclamation de surprise, les passagers se taisaient, les yeux fixés sur Baker, qui attendait dans une pose agressive l’effet de sa révélation.

Cette révélation, qui, dans l’esprit de son auteur, aurait dû assommer Thompson, avait au contraire paru le mettre à son aise.

“Baker! répéta-t-il railleusement. Tout s’explique! Quand je pense que j’accordais quelque attention à vos récriminations incessantes! Mais c’est tout simplement de la vulgaire concurrence!”

Et Thompson agita sa main avec une dédaigneuse insouciance. Il ne l’agita pas longtemps. Baker - on lui conservera désormais son nom véritable - avait pris une mine vraiment féroce qui glaça la gaieté naissante de l’imprudent administrateur général.

“Ici, prononça Baker froidement, je suis un passager comme les autres, et j’ai comme les autres le droit de me dire volé.

“Mais pourquoi y êtes-vous, ici? objecta Thompson exaspéré. Qui vous forçait d’y venir?

- Ah çà! répondit Baker, pensez-vous donc que nous allons nous laisser tranquillement ruiner? Pourquoi je suis ici? Pour voir. Et j’ai vu. Je sais maintenant ce que cachent les rabais insensés que font les farceurs de votre espèce. Puis, j’ai compté sur un autre plaisir. Vous connaissez sans doute l’histoire de cet Anglais qui suivait un dompteur dans l’espoir de voir ses fauves le dévorer?... Eh bien! moi, c’est absolument la même chose.”

Thompson fit la grimace.

“Il n’y a qu’une différence entre l’Anglais et moi, c’est que j’ai envie d’y mettre personnellement la dent! Si je ne me retenais, savez-vous bien que je vous boxerais, monsieur?”

Ce fut autour des deux champions un tonnerre de bravos. Excité par ces clameurs, Baker prit la position classique et fit un pas en avant.

Thompson, lui, aurait bien voulu en faire un en arrière. Mais le moyen de percer la barrière humaine qui le cernait de toutes parts?

“Messieurs! messieurs!” priait-il en vain.

Et Baker, qui avançait toujours, allait peut-être passer de la parole à l’action...

Tout à coup, une violente commotion ébranla le navire, et un sifflement assourdissant retentit dans la machine.

Tous, y compris les belligérants, demeurèrent frappés de stupéfaction. Au sifflement, des cris de détresse s’étaient mêlés, et par le capot et les manches à air de la machine une vapeur épaisse s’élevait. L’hélice stoppa.

Que s’était-il passé?

Le capitaine Pip, le premier, s’était précipité à l’endroit du péril. Il allait enjamber l’échelle de fer conduisant à la

machinerie, quand un chauffeur sauta sur le pont et s’enfuit en criant. Un autre le suivit, puis un autre, tous par bonheur sains et saufs.

Il en manquait encore un pourtant. Mais on le vit apparaître soutenu, porté plutôt par Mr. Bishop. Celui-là paraissait bien malade. Grièvement brûlé par tout le corps, il poussait des gémissements lamentables.

Lorsque l’homme fut étendu sur le pont, hors d’atteinte de la vapeur qui continuait à fuser à grand bruit, Mr. Bishop se redressa, et l’on put voir qu’il avait été, lui aussi, profondément brûlé à la poitrine et au visage. Il ne paraissait pas toutefois y faire attention, et, se tournant vers le capitaine, il attendit ses questions.

“Qu’y a-t-il, monsieur? demanda celui-ci d’une voix calme.

-Un accident. Je vous l’ai dit, commandant, on ne fait pas du neuf avec du vieux. La chaudière a cédé, vers la base heureusement, et a noyé les feux.

-L’accident est-il réparable?

-Non, commandant.

-C’est bien, monsieur, dit le capitaine Pip qui, tandis que les passagers sous la direction de Mr. Flyship s’empressaient auprès des deux blessés, remonta à son banc de quart et commanda de sa voix ordinaire: À larguer la grand-voile! à larguer le grand foc! à larguer tout!”

Puis, ayant jeté un coup d’œil sur Mr. Bishop et le chauffeur qu’on transportait évanouis dans les cabines, il se tourna vers Artimon, qu’aucun événement ne pouvait éloigner de son poste réglementaire.

Le capitaine regarda Artimon, et Artimon regarda le capitaine. Ce regard sympathique échangé, le premier loucha de la manière réservée aux plus mémorables circonstances, et, ayant craché dans la mer avec circonspection:

“Par la barbe de ma mère, master, dit-il enfin, nous sommes dans une péripétie, monsieur!”

CHAPITRE VII

À LA DÉRIVE

Le lendemain, le 12 juin, à huit heures du matin, le capitaine Pip descendit du banc de quart où il avait passé la nuit, et rendit visite à Mr. Bishop et au chauffeur atteint. Les deux blessés allaient mieux. Rassuré de ce côté, le capitaine entra dans sa cabine, et, d’une main calme, écrivit sur le livre de bord: “Ce 11 juin. Appareillé à dix heures du matin. Quitté Orotava de Ténériffe (Canaries) à destination de Londres (Angleterre). Modifié la route directe selon les instructions de l’armateur. Cap à l’ouest. À midi, doublé la pointe Teno. Pris connaissance de l’île de Gomère. Fait route au sud. À une heure et demie, fait route au sud-ouest; laissé Gomère à tribord. À cinq heures, longé la côte de l’île de Fer. Route au sud un quart ouest. À six heures et demie, doublé la pointe Restinga de l’île de Fer (Canaries). Fait dîner l’équipage. À sept heures, dîner du carré. À huit heures, par le travers du port Naos, à cinq milles de la côte, la chaudière a cédé à trois pouces au-dessus du fond, occasionnant l’extinction des feux. Mr. Bishop, premier maître mécanicien, brûlé à la figure et à la poitrine en remontant un chauffeur évanoui et grièvement blessé. Déclare l’accident irréparable. Largué toute la toile, route au plus près tribord amures, par alizés du nord-est. Fait signaux réglementaires. À huit heures et demie, viré de bord. La nuit venant, lancé fusées sans résultat. À neuf heures, viré de bord. À minuit, viré de bord.

“Ce 12 juin. À deux heures, viré de bord. À quatre heures, viré de bord. Au jour levant, aperçu l’île de Fer à vingt milles environ dans le nord. Mis pavillon en berne. Sondé sans rencontrer le fond. Continuons à dériver, drossés par alizés du nord-est. À neuf heures, me trouvant à environ trente milles de l’île de Fer, laissé porter. Mis cap au sud un quart ouest, faisant route bâbord amures pour les îles du Cap-Vert.”

Ayant apposé le point final, le capitaine s’étendit sur son lit, et s’endormit paisiblement.

Par malheur, tous les passagers du *Seamew* ne possédaient pas cette force d’âme qui permettait au brave capitaine Pip de relater en termes si brefs et si simples d’aussi singuliers événements. La veille au soir, il s’en était fallu de peu qu’une panique se déclarât et que les embarcations fussent prises d’assaut, comme si un naufrage eût été imminent. Tout s’était calmé néanmoins, grâce au sang-froid du commandant, en qui l’on avait instinctivement une universelle confiance.

Toutefois, pendant une partie de la nuit, la plupart des passagers étaient demeurés sur le spardeck, commentant les circonstances de l’accident, en discutant les conséquences probables. Dans ces groupes, Thompson n’était certes pas en odeur de sainteté. Ainsi donc, non seulement il avait attaqué ses souscripteurs dans leur bourse, mais encore il mettait leur vie même en danger.

Avec une inexcusable inconscience, il les avait économiquement entassés - les paroles de Mr. Bishop étaient écrasantes à cet égard - sur un vieux navire presque hors de service qui se déclarait fourbu avant la fin du parcours. On s’expliquait maintenant les rabais successifs consentis par l’agence, et auxquels tant de gogos s’étaient sottement laissé prendre.

Voilà un incident que Baker pouvait noter sur son carnet. Nul doute qu’il ne lui valût une solide indemnité, s’il était jamais en mesure de faire appel aux juges de l’Angleterre.

Pour le moment, en effet, ils étaient loin, ces juges, et l’océan, insensible aux arguments les mieux déduits, entourait de tous côtés le bâtiment désemparé. Qu’allait- on devenir? Vers quel point des mers serait entraîné ce steamer désarmé, ce navire à la dérive?

Cependant, quand on vit le capitaine Pip à son banc de quart commander la manœuvre avec calme, quand, toutes voiles dehors, le *Seamew* eut repris de l’erre et mit le cap sur la côte méridionale de l’île de Fer, disparue dans la nuit, on commença à se rassurer. Le lendemain sans doute, on serait à l’abri dans une crique de la falaise, et les touristes pourraient s’embarquer sur un des paquebots réguliers.

Peu à peu, le spardeck se vida. Tout dormait à l’arrière du *Seamew,* lorsque le timonier piqua minuit.

D’un sommeil agité toutefois, et, dès la pointe du jour, les passagers reparurent sur le pont au grand complet. Quel ne fut pas leur désappointement en apercevant à près de vingt milles dans le nord le rivage de l’île de Fer où ils avaient pensé atterrir!

Il ne fallut rien de moins que le spectacle du capitaine Pip, continuant, comme si de rien n’était, son éternelle promenade sur la passerelle, pour leur rendre un peu de courage. Mais ils furent repris de leurs angoisses en voyant la terre continuer à s’éloigner davantage à mesure que le temps s’écoulait.

On se demandait ce que cela voulait dire. Ce fut un soulagement quand le capitaine fit prier les passagers de se réunir dans le grand salon pour entendre une communication.

En un clin d’œil, le salon fut plein, bourdonnant de conversations animées qui s’apaisèrent subitement à l’entrée du capitaine.

En quelques mots, celui-ci exposa clairement la situation.

Le *Seamew*, désemparé de sa machine, ne pouvait plus compter que sur ses voiles. Mais un steamer n’est pas mâté pour ce genre de navigation. Il ne peut offrir au vent qu’une insuffisante surface de toile. En outre, les formes de sa carène ne sont pas propices à toutes les allures. Alors qu’un voilier, au plus près, gagnerait aisément “dans le vent”, un steamer dérive par suite du moindre creux de sa coque, et marche presque autant du travers que de l’avant.

Le capitaine, bien que sans illusions, avait cependant tenté cette allure, qui pouvait seule le rapprocher de l’archipel des Canaries. Toute la nuit, on avait louvoyé, en s’efforçant de gagner du terrain contre les alizés du nord-est. Conformément à ses prévisions, le navire avait beaucoup dérivé, et d’autant plus qu’il était en même temps drossé par un courant d’environ deux nœuds à l’heure, qui, branche détachée du Gulf Stream, suit du nord au sud la côte occidentale de l’Afrique.

Dans ces conditions, il aurait été insensé de s’obstiner. Mieux valait profiter du courant et du vent pour gagner le plus rapidement possible un port de secours.

Deux destinations dès lors s’offraient à lui: les possessions françaises du Sénégal ou les îles du Cap-Vert. Le capitaine avait choisi ces dernières. Ainsi qu’il l’expliqua à son auditoire, la distance était la même, et il évitait ainsi la côte d’Afrique dont il redoutait l’approche avec un bâtiment disposant d’aussi faibles moyens d’action.

D’ailleurs, il n’y avait pas lieu de s’inquiéter. La brise était belle et, dans cette région des alizés, on devait considérer comme très probable qu’elle se maintiendrait ainsi. Il ne s’agissait donc en somme que d’une prolongation du voyage; sans que les risques en fussent notablement accrus.

Son speech terminé, le capitaine salua, puis, ayant manœuvré de façon à mettre le bâtiment dans sa nouvelle route, il regagna sa chambre et, avant de s’endormir, fit dans le journal du bord la narration obligatoire des événements qui venaient de se dérouler.

Quant aux passagers, il les avait laissés véritablement accablés. Un grand silence emplissait le salon tout à l’heure si bruyant.

En même temps que ses administrés, Thompson avait reçu la communication du commandant. Certes, tout ce qui arrivait arrivait par la faute du coupable administrateur général. Nul n’hésitait à ce sujet. Pourtant, il avait l’air si malheureux, si totalement anéanti, que personne n’eut le cœur de lui faire le moindre reproche. Qu’était-il maintenant, sinon un naufragé comme les autres?

C’est au milieu de ce profond silence qu’éclata soudain un rire joyeux. Tous relevèrent le front et considérèrent avec étonnement Roger de Sorgues, propriétaire de cette intempestive gaieté. Celui-ci s’amusait sincèrement de ces renaissantes péripéties, et il ne s’aperçut même pas de la surprise de ses compagnons.

“Bon Dieu! mon cher monsieur, dit-il en frappant avec une sorte d’amitié l’épaule de Thompson, quels drôles de voyages on fait dans les agences anglaises! Partir pour les Canaries sur un navire à vapeur, et aborder aux îles du Cap-Vert sur un navire à voiles, voilà une bonne blague, s’il en est au monde!”

Et Roger, communiquant son irrésistible gaieté aux deux passagères américaines, remonta avec elles sur le spardeck, tandis que, dans le salon, les langues commençaient à se délier. Son rire avait détendu les nerfs. Mieux que les plus énergiques exhortations, mieux que les plus sages conseils, il avait raffermi les courages. On en vint à envisager d'un cœur plus léger cette traversée supplémentaire, sans toutefois arriver jusqu'à l'optimisme du joyeux officier français.

Il faut avouer que la situation justifiait largement ce reste d'inquiétude. Ce n'était pas une simple promenade que le *Seamew* entreprenait là. Entre l'île de Fer et la première île du Cap-Vert, une étendue d'environ sept cent vingt milles marins lui restait à franchir. À la vitesse de cinq nœuds que lui donnaient ensemble le courant et sa voilure réduite, ces sept cent vingt milles exigeraient au moins huit jours de navigation. Et, en huit jours, que ne peut-il survenir dans le capricieux empire de Neptune!

Toutefois, comme le désespoir n'eût été d'aucun secours, on se résigna. Peu à peu, le bord retrouva son habituelle physionomie, et la vie reprit son cours, dont les repas venaient à heure fixe couper la monotonie.

Cette question des repas avait acquis une nouvelle importance. Les touristes les multipliaient comme on les multiplie en wagon, plus par désœuvrement que par appétit. Thompson laissait faire, et même, par une lâcheté dont l'imprudence allait lui être bientôt démontrée, il favorisait cette distraction, à l'insu du capitaine Pip, dans le chimérique espoir d'obtenir son pardon.

Cette distraction, Piperboom - de Rotterdam - l'appréciait tout particulièrement. Incorporé à l'administrateur général, il avait entendu l'explosion, écouté la communication du capitaine Pip. Comprenait-il l'obligation où l'on se trouvait de modifier la route? Ses regards, qui, plus d’une fois, s’étaient dirigés sur la boussole et sur le soleil, permettaient de le supposer. En tout cas, l’inquiétude, s’il en éprouvait, laissait intact son appétit. Il continuait à se montrer grand appréciateur des combinaisons culinaires. Les repas avaient beau se multiplier, se subdiviser en breakfasts, dinners, teas, luncheons, il les honorait tous d’une manière aussi prodigieuse. Son estomac était décidément insondable.

Symétriquement à ce gouffre, le buveur Johnson nageait dans une béatitude plus complète encore peut-être. Grâce à d’incessants efforts, il était enfin parvenu au point où l’ivresse totale va devenir une maladie, et il se maintenait à ce point délicat par de savantes combinaisons. Il avait renoncé à ses brutales promenades sur le spardeck. On ne l’apercevait plus que de loin en loin. Presque toujours, il dormait maintenant, ne se réveillant que pour boire la quantité juste nécessaire pour se rendormir de nouveau. De l’accident qui avait transformé le *Seamew* en voilier, de la nouvelle direction qu’on avait dû adopter, il ne savait absolument rien. L’eût- il su d’ailleurs, qu’il n’en eût pas éprouvé la moindre émotion. Pouvait-il, à terre, être plus ivre que sur ce navire bien garni d’alcools variés, ce qui donnait la sensation délicieuse de demeurer dans un cabaret?

Mais le plus heureux du bord était comme toujours Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead, cet épicier honoraire auquel la nature avait départi un si heureux caractère. Quand l’accident se produisit, il venait précisément d’éprouver une joie très réelle. Pour la première fois depuis plusieurs jours, ses filles et lui avaient pu entrer en relation avec une chaise, sans pousser un cri de douleur. Ils se congratulaient tous les trois de cet agréable changement, quand le sifflement de la vapeur leur fit prématurément quitter une position dont ils avaient un peu perdu l’habitude.

Certes, Mr. Blockhead plaignit alors les deux blessés qui remontèrent au jour l’un portant l’autre, certes il éprouva quelque inquiétude relativement aux suites de l’événement. Mais une sorte de satisfaction vaniteuse de courir un aussi considérable danger se mêla bientôt à son angoisse. Lorsque le capitaine Pip eut définitivement modifié la route, ce fut bien autre chose. L’idée de visiter un cap vert jeta Mr. Blockhead dans un océan d’hypothèses.

Jusque-là du moins, il ne marchandait pas au malheur commun le secours de ses lumières. Il s’emploierait de son mieux à activer la marche réduite du navire. Tout d’abord, il suggéra au capitaine l’idée d’augmenter la voilure en offrant au vent tous les draps et serviettes du *Seamew.* Cette proposition n’ayant eu aucun succès, Mr. Blockhead ne se tint pas pour battu et mit personnellement ses théories en pratique.

Du matin au soir, on pouvait le voir, assis à l’arrière avec sa femme, son fils et ses filles, tous les cinq déployant patiemment à la brise leurs mouchoirs comme de petites voiles. Puis, quand ils étaient fatigués de cet exercice monotone, ils se levaient et, s’alignant en un rang bien correct, ils soufflaient à perdre haleine dans la voilure

du *Seamew.*

Si Mr. Blockhead avait possédé les connaissances d’Archimède, il aurait su que, pour agir utilement sur un corps quelconque, il faut disposer d’un point d’appui extérieur à ce corps. Mais Mr. Blockhead n’était pas Archimède et il ne mettait pas en doute que le voyage ne fût sensiblement abrégé par ces efforts méritoires, qui faisaient la joie de ses compagnons de route.

Fut-ce à force de se gonfler ainsi les joues, fut-ce par toute autre cause, le certain est que le troisième jour une rage de dents terrible contraignit Mr.

Blockhead à cesser cette déloyale concurrence à Borée. En moins de deux heures, sa joue droite enfla d’une manière surprenante, donnant à son propriétaire le plus bizarre aspect du monde. Grâce à cette fluxion extraordinaire, Mr. Blockhead demeura la gaieté du bord, et ses compagnons, privés du spectacle de ses expériences nautiques, changèrent simplement de plaisir.

Mais comment se faisait-il que Miss Mary et Miss Bess présentassent leur concours à leur honorable père? Oubliaient-elles donc leur devoir? Avaient-elles renoncé à arracher Tigg à la mort?

Oui, il faut avouer qu’elles y avaient en effet renoncé.

Ah! ce n’est pas sans douleur et sans lutte que ces deux anges de la charité avaient répudié la mission que leur amour du prochain leur avait imposée! Malheureusement, il leur avait fallu reconnaître qu’une nouvelle gardienne s’était définitivement chargée de retenir sur la terre cette âme prête à s’envoler. Que s’était-il passé lors de cette ascension du Teyde, à laquelle un cruel lumbago les avait empêchées de prendre part? Miss Mary et Miss Bess l’ignoraient, mais elles avaient pu constater les résultats de cette promenade. Depuis lors, Miss Margaret Hamilton tenait décidément la corde, et, après bien des vaines tentatives, les deux aimables sœurs avaient dû se déclarer vaincues.

Toutefois, elles ne se désintéressaient pas du désespéré sur lequel elles avaient inutilement fait pleuvoir la manne de leur dévouement, et elles pronostiquaient que Tigg, privé de leur secours, allait être la proie des plus cruels événements.

“Vous le verrez, ma chère, disait Miss Mary d’un air sombre, il lui arrivera malheur!

- Il se tuera, ma chère”, affirmait Miss Bess en frissonnant.

La réalisation de cette lugubre prophétie ne semblait pas du moins devoir être prochaine. Pour le moment, Tigg, adopté par la famille Hamilton, faisait montre de la plus honteuse ingratitude envers ses deux anges gardiens, et Miss Margaret Hamilton ne semblait pas autrement fâchée de la faiblesse de sa mémoire.

Le père de celle-ci était moins satisfait. Quelque chose manquait à l’équilibre de sa vie. Depuis que le *Seamew* s’était mis si complètement hors du programme du voyage, il n’y avait plus de réclamations possibles, et cette situation pesait à l’aimable baronnet.

Il s’en était vainement ouvert à Baker. Ce dernier, ayant brûlé ses vaisseaux, ne pouvait rien de plus. Les deux conspirateurs en étaient réduits à ressasser leurs vieilles rancunes, jusqu’au jour encore lointain où, de retour à

Londres, il leur serait possible d’entamer de vengeresses instances, pour lesquelles ils trouveraient, sans nul doute, de nombreux alliés parmi les passagers si fortement étrillés.

En attendant, le temps coulait, et la résignation faisait place par degrés à une morne tristesse. À mesure que la traversée se prolongeait, l’inquiétude peu à peu renaissait.

Il ne manquait cependant pas, à bord, de ces heureuses natures dont rien ne saurait abattre la robuste et virile gaieté, ni de ces caractères bien trempés qu’aucun danger ne saurait ébranler. Roger et Dolly n’étaient-ils pas des premiers? Alice et Robert n’auraient-ils pu être classés parmi les seconds?

Mais, sur ceux-là aussi, il semblait qu’une fatalité se fût abattue, et la sourde tristesse du quatuor ressortait même au milieu de la tristesse générale.

Entre Alice et Robert grandissait de jour en jour un malentendu qui n’était pas près de s’éclaircir, puisque ni l’un ni l’autre ne voulait parler. Robert, bâillonné par une excessive fierté, n’avait rien fait pour approfondir le sujet effleuré au sommet du Teyde, et Alice, jugeant qu’elle en avait assez dit, se refusait à en dire davantage. Tous deux, ils supposaient avoir mal compris l’autre, et, par orgueil, ils demeuraient enfermés dans une situation douloureuse et sans issue.

Leurs rapports se ressentaient du malaise de leurs âmes, Robert, traduisant volontairement à la lettre les reproches qu’Alice lui avait faits, la quittait peu. Par contre, il évitait de rester avec elle en tête à tête, et si Roger s’éloignait, il ne tardait pas à en faire autant, sans qu’Alice fît un geste pour le retenir.

Roger voyait cette froideur et en souffrait, malgré son amour personnel qui, de jour en jour, s’épanouissait davantage dans la clarté et la santé, et sa gaieté naturelle en était assombrie.

Ces quatre personnages qui, chacun à sa manière, auraient dû apporter à leurs compagnons un précieux secours moral, étaient au contraire les plus malheureux de tous.

Pas tout à fait pourtant. À Thompson appartenait cette suprématie. On a beau être inconscient et léger, il est toutefois des circonstances dont la gravité ne peut laisser indifférent. Or, Thompson se trouvait dans une de celles- ci. Combien de temps serait-on retenu aux îles du Cap- Vert? Combien de temps exigeraient les réparations de cette machine maudite?

Pendant cette relâche imprévue, le soin lui incomberait de nourrir et d’héberger passagers et équipage, près de cent personnes au total. C’était un désastre, la ruine de ses espérances, une perte énorme au lieu du bénéfice espéré.

Et tout cela, sans compter les procès qu’il lui faudrait subir au retour. Ce n’était plus une plaisanterie de Baker. Cet accident qui compromettait la vie de ses passagers, ce retard considérable qui compromettait leurs intérêts, tout cela fournirait à ses ennemis une base solide. Thompson voyait déjà passer devant lui le spectre de la faillite.

Cependant, si rien n’était à tenter contre les faits accomplis, ne pouvait-il du moins améliorer l’avenir? Ne pouvait-il, en amadouant ses passagers, éviter au moins quelques-unes des réclamations redoutées?

Mais cet espoir se brisait contre la tristesse du bord. Ces mécontents seraient des révoltés, quand ils se retrouveraient en sûreté sur la terre ferme. Pour les dérider, Thompson essaya vainement de tout. Il invita Robert à faire une conférence. Personne ne vint. Il organisa un véritable bal, avec gâteaux et champagne. Le piano se trouva faux, et une violente dispute s’éleva entre ceux qui voulaient dormir et ceux qui voulaient danser.

Thompson y renonçait, lorsqu’une nouvelle épreuve acheva de l’abattre.

Le navire qui, en quittant Ténériffe, devait se rendre à Londres à la vapeur, et non aux îles du Cap-Vert à la voile, n’avait embarqué que pour sept jours de vivres. Personne n’y songeait, et Thompson fut saisi d’un affreux désespoir quand, le 17 juin, à dix heures du matin, Mr. Roastbeaf vint lui annoncer que, si le régime n’était pas modifié, il n’y aurait plus le soir même un seul morceau de pain à bord du *Seamew.*

CHAPITRE VIII

COMME UNE LAMPE QUI S'ÉTEINT

C'était là une grave complication pour ces passagers et marins, que l'on commençait à pouvoir appeler des naufragés. Que deviendrait-on, si la traversée se prolongeait? En faudrait-il arriver à rééditer le radeau de la Méduse, à se nourrir les uns des autres?

Vraiment cette hypothèse n'était pas inacceptable. Rien qu'aux regards de convoitise qui suivaient parfois le monumental Piperboom, il était évident que déjà cette idée avait germé dans plus d'un cerveau.

Infortuné Hollandais! Être mangé est assurément fort pénible. Mais combien il doit sembler plus pénible de l'être sans savoir pourquoi!

Piperboom toutefois devait avoir au moins un faible aperçu de la situation. Dans les petits yeux qui trouaient le disque lunaire de son visage passaient des lueurs d'inquiétude, quand il lui fallait quitter la table subitement devenue moins abondante.

Mieux renseignés, ses compagnons de route n'en subissaient pas plus aisément le nouveau et frugal régime.

Lorsque le capitaine Pip, mis au courant par Thompson, eut transmis aux passagers la fâcheuse nouvelle, un concert de désespoir avait d'abord éclaté. En quelques mots précis et calmes, il s'efforça de rassurer le troupeau apeuré.

La situation était nette. Il restait des vivres pour un repas confortable. Eh bien! au lieu d’un repas confortable, on en ferait quatre qui le seraient moins, voilà tout, et l’on arriverait ainsi jusqu’au soir du 18 juin. D’ici là, on aurait certainement connaissance de la terre, et même on y serait très probablement parvenu.

L’énergie du chef rendit un peu de courage à la troupe. On résolut de s’armer de patience. Mais, que les visages étaient tristes! Qu’ils étaient mornes, ces touristes partis naguère en si brillante condition!

De Baker seul, la satisfaction était parfaite. Il voyait avec un plaisir sans limites le voyage de l’Agence Thompson tomber de jour en jour un peu plus dans le gâchis. Faire mourir les gens de faim! Cela devenait délicieux. Un ou deux passagers seraient morts en effet, que son bonheur aurait été complet. Voilà qui eût été décisif! Toutefois, même si les choses n’allaient pas à ce point, il jugeait déjà son adversaire définitivement terrassé et, d’un geste sec qui scandait de fréquents et muets soliloques, il rayait le nom de Thompson de la liste anglaise des agences de voyages économiques.

Quant au risque qu’il courait personnellement, Baker ne semblait pas s’en préoccuper. Avait-il donc un talisman contre la faim, cet Anglais vindicatif et atrabilaire?

La journée du 17 s’écoula sous l’empire du nouveau régime. Cela, après tout, ne parut pas autrement cruel.

Mais les estomacs à demi vides font les cerveaux à demi solides, et la démoralisation continua à faire son œuvre parmi les passagers. Le 18, la journée commença d’une manière lugubre. On ne se parlait pas, on s’évitait, on se fuyait, toute vie concentrée dans les yeux braqués vers le sud où n’apparaissait aucune terre.

Au déjeuner, on mangea le dernier morceau de pain. Si la terre n’était pas en vue avant le soir, la situation deviendrait réellement des plus graves.

Au cours de cette journée, il y eut une distraction de nature à interrompre l’ennui général, et cette distraction - un peu cruelle, peut-être - ce fut, comme toujours, Mr. Blockhead qui la fournit.

Le malheureux épicier honoraire n’avait décidément pas de chance. Alors que les derniers vivres allaient manquer, il ne pouvait même pas jouir de son reste. L’instrument nécessaire se brisait dans sa main - ou plus exactement dans sa bouche.

Aussi, quelle idée de s’être transformé en Aquilon! Elle ne se guérissait pas, la fluxion que lui avait value cette fantaisie. Loin de là, elle augmentait de jour en jour, jusqu’à prendre des proportions absolument phénoménales.

À force de souffrir, Blockhead n’y tint plus. Il alla trouver Thompson et, d’un ton que la douleur exaspérait, le mit en demeure de le soulager. N’aurait-il pas dû avoir un médecin à bord?

Thompson regarda d’un air triste ce nouvel ennemi de son repos. Jusqu’à celui-là, maintenant! Quel coup de pied désormais lui réservait l’avenir?

Toutefois, les souffrances de Blockhead étaient si évidentes que Thompson voulut au moins essayer de le satisfaire. Après tout, il ne faut pas nécessairement être docteur pour arracher une dent. Est apte à cette besogne qui sait manier une pince, voire à la rigueur une tenaille. Or, n’y avait-il pas à bord toute une catégorie de gens familiers avec ces instruments? Et Thompson, dans la bonté de son âme, conduisit-il le malade vers le poste des mécaniciens désœuvrés.

L’un d’eux se proposa sans hésiter et se fit fort d’accomplir l’œuvre désirée. C’était un grand gaillard rouge de peau, roux de poil, d’une carrure herculéenne. Nul doute qu’il eût poigne suffisante pour débarrasser Blockhead en un tour de main.

Mais un écrou est une chose, et une dent en est une autre. Le thérapeute improvisé en fit l’expérience. Armé d’une énorme tenaille de forge, il dut s’y reprendre à trois fois, au milieu des hurlements assourdissants du patient installé sur le pont en plein soleil et solidement maintenu par deux mathurins fort égayés.

Les contorsions multiples du malheureux épicier honoraire n’eussent pas manqué, en toute autre circonstance, de faire naître le rire de ses peu charitables compagnons. L’homme est ainsi fait. Le sens du comique est chez lui plus délicat que le sens du pitoyable. Le rire jaillit avant que ne s’éveille la compassion. Mais, dans la situation actuelle, Mr. Blockhead put être grotesque à son aise. À peine si quelques sourires éteints suivirent Mr. Blockhead qui, enfin délivré, s’enfuyait vers sa cabine, en se tenant la joue à deux mains.

Malgré son mal, ses facultés admiratives n’étaient pas cependant entièrement abolies. Être opéré par un mécanicien, à l’aide d’une tenaille de forge, à bord d’un navire désemparé, voilà qui était à coup sûr peu banal, et, maintenant qu’elle était terminée, Mr. Blockhead n’était pas fâché d’avoir été le héros d’une telle aventure. Aussi trouva-t-il la force de réclamer sa dent. Ce serait plus tard un souvenir palpable de cet extraordinaire voyage. Cette dent, une molaire superbe, lui fut aussitôt remise, et Blockhead, après l’avoir contemplée avec émotion, la mit avec soin dans sa poche.

“Il la gardera contre vous”, dit aimablement Baker à Thompson, qui reconduisait vers l’arrière son passager soulagé.

Blockhead désormais pouvait manger.

Malheureusement, il était trop tard. Il n’y avait plus rien à manger à bord du *Seamew.*

Le soir de ce jour mémorable, qui consomma la ruine de la cambuse, on parvint encore, en furetant dans les recoins les plus cachés, à découvrir quelques restes de victuailles, quelques bribes, grâce auxquelles on réussit à se soutenir. Mais c’était bien la dernière fois. Le navire avait été visité de haut en bas, perquisitionné, nettoyé, et, si la terre n’apparaissait pas à bref délai, rien ne pourrait plus sauver des affres de la faim les passagers et l’équipage.

Aussi, de quels regards était fouillé l’horizon du sud!

Vainement. Le soleil, en s’abaissant le 18, continua à couper une circonférence impeccable que ne brisait aucun profil solide.

On ne pouvait pourtant être loin des îles du Cap-Vert. Une erreur du capitaine Pip était inadmissible. Il ne s’agissait donc que d’un retard. Dans la nuit certainement on aurait connaissance de la terre.

Le sort en avait décidé autrement. Pour comble de malchance la brise mollit au coucher du soleil et ne cessa de diminuer d’heure en heure. Avant minuit, il faisait calme plat. Le *Seamew,* hors d’état de gouverner, ne pouvait plus compter pour gagner la terre que sur le faible courant qui le drossait.

Dans la région des alizés, les changements de direction du vent sont assez rares. Cependant, à force de s’avancer vers le sud, le *Seamew* s’était notablement approché du point où la brise cesse d’être aussi constante. Il s’en fallait, à vrai dire, qu’il eût atteint cette limite, mais, aux îles du Cap-Vert, la proximité du continent fausse le régime des alizés. Très peu au sud-est de l’archipel, ils sont définitivement supprimés, alors qu’ils persistent à latitude égale au milieu de l’océan. Dans cette région, ils ne soufflent avec une certaine régularité que d’octobre à mai. En décembre et en janvier, ce sont des vents d’est dont l’haleine brûlante dessèche et dévore. Juin, juillet et août constituent la saison des pluies, et l’on devait s’estimer heureux que le *Seamew* eût jusque-là gardé son pont sec.

À ce nouveau désagrément que le sort lui infligeait, Thompson eut la velléité de s’arracher les cheveux.

Quant au capitaine Pip, bien malin qui eût pu connaître ses impressions. À peine si, par un simple froncement de sourcils, il autorisa Artimon à supposer qu’il éprouvait quelque désagrément du contretemps.

Pour être cachée, l’inquiétude du capitaine n’en était pas moins réelle. Toute la nuit, il demeura sur le pont. Quel moyen aurait-il de gagner la terre lorsqu’elle serait en vue, avec ce navire sans âme, qui ne gouvernait même plus?

Toutefois, le problème ne se posait pas encore. L’aube du 19 n’éclaira qu’une vaste plaine liquide, sans un îlot, sans un rocher.

Cette journée fut pénible. Dès le matin, les estomacs mal satisfaits la veille au soir commencèrent à crier famine. Si les chétifs et les faibles supportaient assez bien le jeûne commençant, il fut pour les passagers robustes une véritable souffrance. Piperboom, parmi ceux-ci, se faisait remarquer par son visage défait. La veille, il n’avait traduit son regret que par un indéfinissable regard en constatant le mutisme de la cloche et l’absence de tout préparatif pour le dîner. Mais quand, ce jour-là, les heures passèrent, sans que ni le premier ni le second déjeuner fussent sonnés, il n’y tint plus. Il alla trouver Thompson et, à l’aide d’une énergique pantomime, lui fit comprendre qu’il mourait de faim. Thompson lui ayant démontré par gestes son impuissance, le Hollandais tomba dans l’abîme du désespoir.

Combien moins malheureux le spongieux Johnson! L’alcool ne manquait pas à bord du *Seamew,* et qu’importait que l’on ne pût manger alors qu’on pouvait boire? Or Johnson buvait d’une prodigieuse manière, et son perpétuel abrutissement le rendait inaccessible à la peur.

Baker n’avait pas semblable remède à sa disposition, et pourtant il semblait également d’excellente humeur. Il exhibait même une mine si florissante, que Robert, vers midi, ne put s’empêcher de lui en exprimer son étonnement.

“Vous n’avez donc pas faim, vous? lui dit-il.

-Permettez! répondit Baker. Je n’ai “plus “faim. Il y a une nuance.

-Certes! approuva Robert. Et vous seriez réellement bien bon de m’indiquer votre moyen.

-Le plus simple de tous, dit Baker. Manger à la manière ordinaire.

-Manger? Mais quoi?

-Je vais vous montrer ça, répondit Baker, en entraînant Robert dans sa cabine. Au reste, il y en a largement pour deux.”

Il n’y en avait pas pour deux, il y en avait pour dix. Deux énormes valises pleines de victuailles diverses, voilà ce que put voir Robert après avoir juré un silence absolu.

“Comment s’écria-t-il, en admirant une telle prévoyance. Vous aviez songé à cela!

-Quand on voyage sous le pavillon de l’Agence Thompson, il faut songer à tout”, répondit Baker d’un air profond, en offrant généreusement à Robert de puiser dans ses richesses.

Celui-ci n’accepta que pour apporter son butin aux deux passagères américaines, qui lui firent largement honneur, sur l’assurance que leur providentiel pourvoyeur en avait pris sa part.

Les autres passagers, privés d’un tel secours, trouvaient le temps étrangement long. Aussi, quel cri de soulagement, quand, vers une heure de l’après-midi, le cri de “Terre!” tomba enfin des barres de misaine.

On se crut sauvé, et tous les regards se tournèrent vers la passerelle. Le capitaine n’était pas à son poste.

Il était urgent cependant qu’il fût mis au courant. Un passager alla frapper à la porte de la cabine du commandant. Mais le commandant n’était pas dans sa cabine, non plus que dans aucune partie de l’arrière.

Ceci commençait à devenir inquiétant. Plusieurs touristes se répandirent dans les diverses parties du bâtiment, réclamant le capitaine à tous les échos. Ils ne le trouvèrent pas. Pendant ce temps, sans que l’on sût comment, la nouvelle se répandait à bord qu’un marin, envoyé dans la cale, y avait constaté trois pieds d’eau.

Alors, ce fut de l’affolement. On se précipita vers les embarcations d’ailleurs insuffisantes pour tant de monde. Mais le capitaine avait laissé des ordres en s’éloignant. On se heurta à des marins qui montaient la garde autour des canots, et le flot humain fut invinciblement refoulé sur le spardeck, où l'on eut tout le loisir de maudire, et Thompson, et le capitaine Pip, dont l'entêtement annihilait les derniers moyens de salut.

Thompson, lui non plus, n'était pas là. En voyant comment les choses tournaient, il s'était prudemment terré en quelque coin, et il y attendait en sûreté la fin de l'orage.

Quant au capitaine, pendant qu'on l'accablait, il faisait comme toujours son devoir.

À peine au courant de la nouvelle complication, il s'était affalé dans la cale, et, en ce moment, il procédait à un minutieux examen, dont le résultat n'avait rien d'encourageant.

Il eut beau, en effet, l'explorer soigneusement de bout en bout, il ne put trouver de blessures dans la carène. Il n'y avait pas, à proprement parler, de voie d'eau qu'il eût été possible d'aveugler avec plus ou moins de difficulté, ou plutôt il y en avait par centaines. Si en aucun point la mer ne pénétrait en abondance dans l'intérieur du navire, elle y suintait goutte à goutte par mille endroits. Évidemment, sous les chocs répétés des lames, les rivets avaient pris du jeu, les coutures s'étaient entrouvertes, et le *Seamew* mourait tout simplement de vieillesse.

À cela, rien à faire, et le capitaine, écoutant, l'oreille collée au vaigrage, le bruissement de l'eau assassine, ne put que se reconnaître désarmé.

Cependant, il avait son air habituel en remontant sur le spardeck quelques instants plus tard, et c'est d'une voix tranquille qu'il ordonna à l'équipage de se mettre aux pompes.

Après tout, la situation n’était pas désespérée. La terre était prochaine, et l’on avait le droit de compter que les pompes courageusement manœuvrées arriveraient à assécher la cale.

Il fallut renoncer à cet espoir. Des sondages fréquents démontrèrent bientôt que la mer envahissante gagnait, malgré tous les efforts, environ cinq centimètres par heure.

D’autre part, la terre, visible toujours, ne paraissait pas sensiblement plus près. Le soleil se coucha avant que le nuage lointain eût cessé d’être un nuage.

Personne ne dormit cette nuit-là. Fébrilement, on attendait le lever du soleil, qui fort heureusement se lève de bonne heure au mois de juin.

Avant quatre heures, on distingua une terre basse et sablonneuse, surmontée d’un mamelon de médiocre hauteur à une dizaine de milles dans le sud-ouest. Étant donné la faible élévation de son point culminant, le Pic Martines, cette île, que le capitaine désigna sous le nom d’île du Sel, n’avait pu être aperçue la veille que de vingt à vingt-cinq milles tout au plus. Il fallait donc que le courant qui entraînait le *Seamew* eût singulièrement décru.

En tout cas, si faible fût-il, ce courant portait droit à la côte, et peu à peu, à raison d’un nœud à l’heure environ, on parvenait vers midi à un mille d’une pointe que le capitaine nomma la pointe Martines, quand le courant, changeant subitement de direction, courut du nord au sud, tandis que sa vitesse était doublée.

Il était temps vraiment que la terre fût devenue si proche. L’eau à cette heure s’élevait à deux mètres vingt dans la cale. Mais sans doute, sous l’influence des mêmes causes qui l’avaient amené jusque-là, le navire ne tarderait pas à s’échouer sur une saillie du rivage.

Échouage qui serait sans danger par ce beau temps, avec ce calme plat et cette mer d’huile.

Non. Le *Seamew,* inerte, véritable épave, courait parallèlement à la côte sans en approcher. Au gré du courant qui le poussait, il en contournait toutes les sinuosités, en doublait toutes les pointes, en se maintenant à l’invariable distance d’un mille.

À chaque instant, on jetait la sonde. Sa réponse était toujours la même: pas de fond. Impossible par conséquent de mouiller. Le capitaine se mordait les moustaches, en proie à la sourde rage de l’impuissance.

Véritable supplice de Tantale, le salut était là, à portée de la main, inaccessible cependant.

Ce n’est pas que l’aspect de l’île fût bien tentant. Pas un arbre, pas un bouquet de verdure. Dans toutes les régions que le regard pouvait atteindre, on ne voyait que du sable.

À mesure que l’on s’avançait vers le sud, la côte s’abaissait d’un mouvement régulier. L’île se faisait plaine, plaine faiblement vallonnée et d’une affreuse infertilité.

Vers trois heures et demie, on dériva au large du Pedra de Lume, assez bon ancrage, où quelques barques de pêche se balançaient. On fit en vain des signaux de détresse. Personne ne répondit. Le Pedra de Lume passa, puis disparut.

Deux heures plus tard, on doublait la Pointe est, et un souffle d'espoir emplissait les âmes à bord du *Seamew.* À la faveur d'un remous, le navire avait fait un grand mouvement vers la côte. Cinq cents mètres au plus l'en séparaient désormais.

Malheureusement, le mouvement s'arrêta comme il avait commencé, sans que l'on sût pourquoi, et le *Seamew* continua à longer l'île du Sel, dont les moindres détails apparaissaient nettement.

À cette faible distance, on eût pu héler, si un être humain se fût montré. Mais rien ne vivait dans ce désert. On n'avait devant les yeux qu'une véritable steppe, qui justifiait amplement l'expression du voyageur anglais appelant l'île du Sel un tombeau de sable. Basse, grise, sinistre, cette lande s'étendait presque au niveau de la mer, défendue contre le ressac par une ceinture de récifs.

Le *Seamew,* suivant, à une vitesse uniforme, sa route implacable, contourna la baie qui se creuse après la Pointe est. Avant une heure, il aurait doublé la Pointe du Naufrage, et après, ce serait de nouveau la mer, la mer profonde dans laquelle le navire sombrait lentement.

Tout à coup, l'homme qui sondait aux bossoirs cria:

“Vingt-cinq brasses!... Fond de sable!...”

Le capitaine, sur la passerelle, tressaillit de plaisir. Évidemment, le profil sous-marin se relevait. Que cela continuât un instant encore, et il deviendrait possible de mouiller.

“Faites faire le peneau de l'ancre, Mr. *Flyship*”, dit-il avec calme au second.

Un quart d’heure encore, le *Seamew* suivit le fil du courant, tandis que la sonde ne cessait d’accuser des profondeurs constamment plus réduites.

“Dix brasses!... Fond de sable!... cria enfin l’homme de bossoir.

- Mouille!” commanda le capitaine.

La chaîne fila bruyamment par l’écubier, puis le *Seamew,* évitant cap au nord, demeura immobile.

Immobile, il l’était certes, et sans le plus petit mouvement de tangage ni de roulis, sur cette mer dont aucune ride ne ternissait le miroir. Un lac eût été moins paisible.

Mais un autre danger que celui de la tempête menaçait les touristes de l’Agence Thompson. Le navire qui les portait fuyait sous leurs pieds. L’eau, dont la cale était maintenant à demi pleine, montait peu à peu, et bientôt le pont arriverait au niveau de l’océan.

Il fallait se hâter d’aller chercher un refuge sur la terre ferme.

Toutefois, le *Seamew* étant capable, grâce au secours des pompes, de flotter de longues heures encore, le temps ne pressait pas outre mesure.

On put donc procéder à un débarquement méthodique, sans bousculade, ni précipitation. On eut le loisir de vider les cabines. On n’oublia rien, jusqu’aux plus menus objets. Avant même de sauver les gens, on se donna le luxe de sauver les choses.

Vers sept heures et demie, tous les passagers étaient parvenus sains et saufs au rivage. Alignés en rangs d’oignons devant leurs bagages amoncelés, légèrement ahuris de l’aventure, ils contemplaient un peu bêtement la mer, sans trouver un mot à se dire.

Après avoir quitté son bord le dernier, comme le veulent les règlements maritimes, le capitaine Pip, Artimon sur ses talons, était avec ses marins, devenus ses égaux par l’abandon du navire. Lui aussi il contemplait la mer, bien qu’un observateur superficiel eût pu aisément s’y tromper. Jamais, en effet, le capitaine n’avait louché d’une manière si excessive, et jamais son nez n’avait passé un aussi mauvais quart d’heure.

Cependant, depuis que l’on avait abandonné les pompes, le navire enfonçait plus rapidement. En une demi-heure, l’eau eut envahi les hublots des cabines, puis monta... monta... Ce fut à huit heures vingt exactement, à l’instant précis où le soleil atteignait l’horizon de l’ouest, que le *Seamew* coula. Sans drame, sans agonie, il disparut tranquillement dans l’eau qui se referma sur lui avec mollesse. Un instant plus tôt, on le voyait, on ne le vit plus, voilà tout.

Les touristes regardaient, figés sur le rivage. Ils ne parvenaient pas à prendre tout cela au sérieux. Comme dit le poète, ils en demeuraient stupides.

Partir joyeusement pour les Canaries, et aboutir à un banc de sable dans l’archipel du Cap-Vert, il n’y avait pas lieu de s’en vanter. Si encore ils avaient eu des tempêtes à combattre, si même leur navire s’était éventré sur des récifs!... Mais non, rien de tout cela ne s’était produit. La nature n’avait cessé de se montrer bienveillante: ciel d’azur, brise légère, mer clémente, aucun atout n’avait manqué à leur jeu. En ce moment, particulièrement, il faisait le plus beau temps du monde...

Et cependant, ils étaient là.

Avait-on jamais entendu parler d’un naufrage pareil? Pouvait-on imaginer quelque chose de plus absurde?

Et les touristes restaient devant la mer, bouches bées, et, non sans raison, ils se jugeaient un peu ridicules.

CHAPITRE IX

OÙ THOMPSON SE TRANSFORME EN AMIRAL

La nuit se passa assez bien pour les anciens passagers du *Seamew.* À défaut des couchettes disparues, le sable élastique se montra très favorable au sommeil.

Par exemple, le premier rayon de l’aube réveilla les plus indolents. En un instant, tous se levèrent, pressés de connaître ce qu’ils devaient craindre ou espérer.

La vérité leur apparut d’un coup d’œil: c’était de tous côtés la solitude absolue.

Devant eux, la mer, sans une voile. Au-dessus de l’eau, apparaissait le sommet des mâts du *Seamew,* dont le cadavre était scellé vingt mètres plus bas dans son humide tombeau.

De l’autre côté, un désert dont la tristesse étreignait le cœur. À l’endroit où ils avaient atterri, l’île s’amincissait en pointe étroite. Reliée au nord à une terre désolée, entourée par la mer des trois autres côtés, ce n’était qu’une langue de sable, large d’un mille à peine, frappée de la sinistre infertilité du sel et parsemée de ses lépreuses écailles.

Quel secours espérer dans un pareil pays? On se le demandait avec angoisse, sans trouver à la question de réponse satisfaisante.

Heureusement le capitaine Pip veillait pour tous.

Dès qu’il vit debout tous ses passagers, il les rassembla autour de lui, et, prenant la parole, exposa brièvement la situation.

Elle était simple.

Par suite de circonstances sur lesquelles il convenait au capitaine de ne pas insister, on était en détresse sur la côte sud-est de l’île du Sel, presque à l’extrémité de la Pointe du Naufrage. L’île du Sel n’offrant aucune ressource, il s’agissait d’aviser le plus tôt possible aux moyens de la quitter.

Pour le moment, le capitaine avait paré au plus pressé. Selon ses instructions, M. Morgand, accompagné du maître d’équipage, était parti depuis une heure déjà pour le phare élevé à l’extrémité de la Pointe du Sud, à peu de distance du théâtre de la catastrophe. Là, les deux envoyés se documenteraient et chercheraient à se procurer des vivres. Il n’y avait qu’à attendre leur retour.

La communication du capitaine fit souvenir ses auditeurs qu’ils mouraient de faim. Dans le désordre moral où l’aventure les avait jetés, ils l’oubliaient un peu. Un mot suffit pour réveiller un appétit que depuis cinquante heures rien n’était venu calmer.

Il fallait bien cependant prendre son mal en patience, puisqu’il n’existait aucun moyen de l’abréger. Les touristes se résignèrent donc à faire les cent pas sur la grève, et lentement les heures coulèrent. Par bonheur, le temps se maintenait au beau. Le ciel restait pur sous l’influence d’une fraîche brise du nord-ouest qui s’affermit d’heure en heure.

Ce fut seulement vers huit heures que Robert et le maître revinrent de leur expédition, escortant une charrette traînée par une mule et conduite par un cocher nègre. Le chargement de cette charrette, composé de victuailles les plus diverses, monopolisa à l’instant l’attention générale.

On se bouscula, et Thompson dut intervenir pour que la distribution des vivres se fît en bon ordre. Enfin, chacun emporta sa part, et ce fut pendant longtemps un parfait silence que troublait seul le bruit des mâchoires.

Piperboom était particulièrement superbe. Un pain de quatre livres dans une main, tout un gigot de mouton dans l’autre, il élevait et abaissait ses avant-bras avec la régularité d’une machine à vapeur. Malgré leur fringale personnelle, les compagnons du Hollandais demeurèrent paralysés d’étonnement en voyant cet engloutissement mécanique. “Il va se rendre malade”, songea plus d’un.

Mais Piperboom se préoccupait très peu de l’effet qu’il produisait. Ses mains continuaient leur imperturbable va- et-vient. Progressivement, le pain et le gigot diminuèrent de concert. Ils disparurent en même temps. Piperboom alors se frotta les mains, et alluma sa vaste pipe, sans paraître incommodé le moins du monde.

Pendant que les passagers et l’équipage satisfaisaient leur appétit, le capitaine, par l’intermédiaire de Robert, tenait conférence avec l’indigène propriétaire de la charrette. Les renseignements qu’il en obtint n’étaient rien moins qu’encourageants.

L’île du Sel n’est en quelque sorte qu’une steppe de deux cent trente-trois kilomètres carrés, sur laquelle, il y a moins d’un siècle, pas un être humain ne vivait. Fort heureusement pour les naufragés, un Portugais, une cinquantaine d’années plus tôt, avait eu l’idée d’exploiter les salines auxquelles l’île doit son nom, et cette industrie y avait attiré un millier d’habitants environ. Les uns, pêcheurs, les autres, en grande majorité, ouvriers des salines, ces habitants n’ont constitué nulle part une agglomération suffisante pour lui mériter le nom de ville ou même de bourg. Cependant, au bord de la baie Mordeira, excellent mouillage sur la côte ouest de l’île, quelques maisons avaient déjà formé une vague bourgade, au point terminus de la voie de fer sur laquelle des wagons à voiles amènent jusqu’à la mer le produit des salines. C’est à ce village, distant de quinze kilomètres à peine, que l’on trouverait du secours, s’il était possible d’en trouver.

Ayant reçu communication de ces renseignements, Thompson partit sur-le-champ avec l’indigène, afin de réunir assez de véhicules pour emmener gens et bagages. En attendant, les passagers n’eurent qu’à recommencer leur promenade du matin. Mais maintenant la satisfaction des estomacs déliait les langues, et chacun donna libre cours à son naturel.

Les uns étaient calmes, ceux-ci tristes, ceux-là furieux.

Fait exceptionnel, le visage de Mr. Absyrthus Blockhead n’exprimait pas, comme de coutume, une satisfaction sans bornes. Oui, l’honorable épicier honoraire était mélancolique, préoccupé tout au moins. Il ne semblait pas dans son assiette, et jetait des regards de tous côtés comme s’il avait perdu quelque chose. À la fin, il n’y tint plus, et, s’adressant à Roger de Sorgues qui lui inspirait une confiance particulière:

“Nous sommes bien, n’est-ce pas, monsieur, à l’archipel du Cap-Vert?

-Oui, monsieur, répondit Roger, sans savoir où le questionneur voulait en venir.

-Alors, monsieur, où donc est le cap? s’écria Blockhead avec explosion.

-Le cap? répéta Roger ahuri. Quel cap?

-Le cap Vert, parbleu! On n’a pas tous les jours l’occasion de voir un cap vert, et je veux montrer celui-là à Abel.”

Roger réprima une violente envie de rire.

“Hélas, monsieur, il faut en faire votre deuil, dit-il en prenant une mine désolée. Mr. Abel ne verra pas le cap Vert.

-Pourquoi? demanda Blockhead désappointé.

-Il est en réparation, affirma froidement Roger.

-En réparation?

-Oui, sa couleur commençait à passer. On l’a transporté en Angleterre pour le repeindre.”

Blockhead regarda Roger d’un air indécis. Mais celui-ci tint héroïquement son sérieux, et l’épicier honoraire fut convaincu.

“Ah! fit-il simplement d’un ton de regret, nous n’avons vraiment pas de chance!

-En effet!” approuva Roger, étouffant, tandis que son hilarant compagnon retournait auprès des siens.

Au milieu des furieux, Baker et Hamilton se faisaient naturellement remarquer. En vérité, ils avaient la partie trop belle. D’où provenaient tous ces malheurs, sinon de l’avarice et de la légèreté de Thompson? C’était une thèse irréfutable. Aussi, le groupe qui entourait Baker comptait- il la majorité des passagers. À tous, il prêchait la guerre, pour le jour où l’on serait enfin en Angleterre, et ses belliqueuses diatribes trouvaient de l’écho.

Il s’était découvert en Johnson un allié inattendu. Jusque-là peu encombrant, ce passager semblait emporté par la fureur. Il criait plus haut que Baker lui-même, se répandait en injures contre Thompson et son agence, répétait à satiété le serment de le traîner devant toutes les juridictions anglaises.

“Cet ivrogne hydrophile et géophobe est exaspéré d’avoir dû bon gré mal gré venir à terre”, dit en riant Roger qui observait de loin le groupe en ébullition.

Sur Roger, ni la tristesse, ni la colère ne pouvaient prendre. Sa bonne humeur emportait tout. Joyeux, il l’eût été dans une bataille, il l’eût été à l’article de la mort. Il l’était dans cette île dénudée où le sort l’avait jeté.

Son observation avait fait rire Dolly.

“Pauvre monsieur! soupira-t-elle. Comme il doit souffrir du désordre de l’office!

-C’est le seul qui ait le droit de se plaindre, affirma sérieusement Roger. Lui au moins, cela se comprend. Mais les autres!... Qu’est-ce que tout cela peut bien leur faire? Pour ma part, je trouve ce voyage tout bonnement délicieux. Voilà notre steamer à voiles devenu sous-marin, et j’attends avec impatience le moment où il deviendra ballon.

-Vive le ballon! s’écria Dolly en frappant des mains.

-Le ballon me paraît bien improbable, fit un peu mélancoliquement observer Robert. La fin du *Seamew* marque celle de notre voyage. Nous allons nous disperser selon les moyens qui nous seront offerts de regagner l’Angleterre.

-Pourquoi nous disperser? répondit Alice. Mr. Thompson va, je suppose, rapatrier ses passagers et nous embarquer tous sur le premier paquebot en partance.

-Les passagers, certainement, répliqua Robert, mais l’équipage et votre serviteur, c’est autre chose.

-Bah, bah! conclut gaiement Roger, attendons pour nous mettre martel en tête qu’on ait rencontré le paquebot en partance. Voilà un paquebot auquel je crois peu. Ce serait trop simple. Moi, je m’en tiens au ballon qui me paraît infiniment plus probable.”

Vers une heure de l’après-midi, Thompson revint, amenant avec lui une vingtaine de charrettes de tous modèles, mais uniformément traînées par des mules et conduites par des nègres. On commença aussitôt le chargement des bagages.

L’administrateur général se montrait moins abattu qu’on eût pu le supposer en de telles circonstances. Son navire perdu, le rapatriement de près de cent personnes à payer de sa poche, il y avait là de quoi assombrir l’homme le plus jovial. Thompson pourtant ne semblait pas autrement attristé.

C’est que le malheur n’allait pas sans de sérieuses compensations. Si l’obligation de solder une centaine de passages constituait un sensible désagrément, la perte totale du *Seamew* était par contre un véritable coup de fortune. Bien assuré à des compagnies solvables, le vieux navire, Thompson se chargeait d’y parvenir, serait payé comme un neuf. Le naufrage deviendrait ainsi une fructueuse opération et l’administrateur général ne doutait pas que le compte se balançât finalement par un important bénéfice.

Ce bénéfice, l’agence l’empocherait sans remords. Il viendrait grossir le magot déjà rondelet qu’une infatigable économie avait permis d’entasser dans cette sacoche que Thompson portait en bandoulière depuis l’atterrissage. Dans cette sacoche, les soixante-deux mille cinq cents francs versés par les passagers, en tenant compte de la demi-place du jeune Abel, étaient venus s’engouffrer au départ. Depuis lors, il est vrai, quelques bank-notes - bien peu après tout - en étaient sorties, pour le charbon, les excursions des passagers et la nourriture du bord. Restait maintenant à payer l’équipage et les employés, parmi lesquels Robert Morgand. Thompson allait se débarrasser de cette formalité dès qu’on serait à la bourgade, où, si pauvre fût-elle, on trouverait toujours de l’encre et des plumes. La somme qui resterait alors serait bien nette et liquide, et il conviendrait d’y ajouter plus tard le bénéfice de l’assurance. Thompson se divertissait à supputer le chiffre que ne pouvait manquer d’atteindre le total.

Un peu après deux heures, les touristes se mirent en route, les uns en voiture, les autres à pied. Sur ce sol sablonneux, il fallut trois heures pour arriver à la baie Mordeira. Quelques maisons, dont l’ensemble méritait à peine le nom de village, s’y élevaient en effet sur le rivage du nord.

Dans cette partie de l’île, la nature était d’aspect moins sinistrement infertile. Le sol se vallonnait légèrement, et quelques rocs montraient leurs têtes noirâtres à travers la couche amincie du sable, qu’une timide végétation égayait de loin en loin.

À peine arrivé, Thompson, installé dans une misérable auberge, procéda au règlement qu’il avait décidé. Chacun reçut son dû, ni plus ni moins, et

Robert en quelques minutes se vit riche de cent cinquante francs.

Pendant ce temps, les passagers, errant sur la grève, examinaient la mer avec inquiétude. Roger avait-il donc eu raison, quand il s’était permis un doute touchant le paquebot en partance? Pas un navire n’était à l’ancre sur la baie Mordeira, où se balançaient seulement quelques barques de pêche. Qu’allait-on devenir dans ce misérable hameau, s’il fallait y séjourner, au milieu de cette population nègre parmi laquelle on n’avait pas encore aperçu un seul représentant de la race blanche?

Ce fut un soulagement, quand Thompson reparut. On l’entoura aussitôt. On s’enquit impatiemment de ce qu’il avait décidé.

Mais Thompson n’avait rien décidé, il l’avoua ingénument. Pour prendre un parti, il manquait des bases les plus nécessaires. Robert, heureusement ferré sur son guide, put lui donner quelques indications sommaires, et Thompson écouta avec un plaisir tout nouveau ces renseignements qui ne lui coûtaient plus rien.

L’archipel du Cap-Vert, ainsi que l’apprit Robert à son auditoire, comporte un assez grand nombre d’îles ou d’îlots divisés en deux groupes distincts. Les îles de Sao- Antonio, de Sao-Vicente, de Sao-Nicolao, les îlots de Santa-Lucia, de Branco et de Raza, disposés suivant une ligne presque droite allant à peu près du nord-ouest au sud-est, constituent le premier groupe, dit “Barlovento” ou “au vent”, avec les deux îles du Sel et de Boavista. Ces deux dernières, se continuant par le second groupe, dit “Sotavento”, ou “sous le vent”, forment avec lui un arc dont la convexité est tournée vers la côte d’Afrique, et sur lequel on rencontre successivement, au sud de Boavista, les îles de Maio, de Sao-Thiago, de Fogo et de Brava, plus les îlots Rombos.

Puisqu’un séjour de quelque durée était impossible sur cette misérable île du Sel, il convenait d’abord de savoir si un paquebot ne devait pas y faire prochainement escale. En cas de réponse négative, le seul parti à prendre serait de gagner, sur quelques-unes de ces barques de pêche mouillées dans la baie, une autre île mieux desservie. Il s’agirait alors de choisir cette île avec discernement.

“Nous irions à Sao-Vicente”, décida Robert sans hésiter.

Cette île, qui n’est pas la plus vaste de l’archipel, en a monopolisé et en monopolise en effet de plus en plus le commerce. Les navires viennent par centaines relâcher à sa capitale, Porto-Grande, dont la population flottante dépasse vingt fois la population locale. Dans ce port magnifique et très fréquenté, il ne s’écoulerait certainement pas vingt-quatre heures avant que l’occasion s’offrît de rentrer en Angleterre.

Le capitaine, consulté, confirma les affirmations de Robert.

“Certes, vous avez raison, dit-il. Malheureusement, je doute que l’on puisse gagner Sao-Vicente par ce vent de nord-ouest. Il y faudrait des jours et des jours. C’est à mon sens une entreprise irréalisable avec les barques que nous voyons. Je pense que nous devons plutôt chercher à atteindre une des îles sous le vent.

- Sao-Thiago, alors, sans aucun doute”, dit Robert.

Moins commerçante que Sao-Vicente, Sao-Thiago n’en est pas moins l’île la plus grande de l’archipel, et son chef- lieu, La Praya, en est la capitale. La Praya est, en outre, un excellent port, où le mouvement maritime dépasse annuellement cent quarante mille tonneaux. Là aussi, sans aucun doute, on trouverait toutes facilités pour se rapatrier, et, quant à l’éloignement, il n’y avait guère de différence. La seule objection, c’était l’insalubrité de cette île, qui lui a valu d’être surnommée “la mortifère”.

“Bah! dit Thompson, nous ne comptons pas nous y établir. Un jour ou deux, ce n’est pas une affaire, et si personne ne s’y oppose...”

Avant tout, cependant, il convenait de trancher la question du paquebot. Mais, dans ce pays aux trois quarts sauvage, où il n’y avait apparence ni de gouverneur, ni de maire, on ne savait à qui s’adresser. Sur le conseil du capitaine, Thompson, escorté de tous ses compagnons d’infortune, aborda un groupe d’indigènes qui considéraient curieusement la foule des naufragés.

Ceux-ci n’étaient pas des Noirs. Des mulâtres seulement, issus du croisement de colons portugais et des esclaves d’autrefois. À leur costume, on les reconnaissait pour des marins.

Robert, prenant la parole au nom de Thompson, s’adressa à l’un de ces mulâtres et lui demanda s’il existait dans l’île du Sel un moyen de regagner l’Angleterre.

Le matelot caboverdien hocha la tête. Ce moyen n’existait pas. Les paquebots ne touchaient pas à l’île du Sel, et il était très improbable que l’on trouvât un autre navire. Pendant la saison des alizés, d’octobre à mai, les bâtiments, à voiles pour la plupart, ne manquent pas dans la baie Mordeira. Mais, à cette époque de l’année, le dernier d’entre eux était parti avec son chargement de sel, et très probablement il n’en viendrait pas un seul avant le mois d’octobre suivant.

Ce point résolu d’une manière aussi formelle, on ne pouvait plus hésiter. Les marins, d’ailleurs, parurent trouver tout naturel le projet de gagner une autre île. Leurs barques étaient solides et auraient fait au besoin de plus longues croisières. En ce qui concernait Sao-Vicente, ils furent unanimement de l’avis du capitaine. Il n’y fallait pas compter avec cette aire de vent.

“Et Sao-Thiago?” insinua Robert.

En entendant ce nom, les marins caboverdiens échangèrent un coup d’œil. Avant de répondre, ils prirent le temps de la réflexion. Une pensée les tracassait évidemment qu’ils n’exprimaient pas.

“Pourquoi pas? dit enfin l’un d’eux. Ça dépend du prix.

-Ceci regarde monsieur, formula Robert en désignant Thompson.

-Parfaitement, déclara celui-ci, quand la réponse du mulâtre lui eut été traduite. Si le capitaine et vous voulez bien m’accompagner, ce marin nous montrera les barques qu’il peut nous proposer et nous discuterons en même temps les conditions du voyage.”

Moins d’une heure plus tard, tout était convenu. Pour le transport des naufragés et de leurs bagages, le capitaine avait choisi six barques sur lesquelles il estimait qu’on pouvait se risquer sans imprudence. D’un commun accord, on avait fixé le départ à trois heures du matin, afin de voyager autant que possible pendant le jour. Il ne s’agissait, en effet, de rien de moins que de franchir cent dix milles, et il fallait prévoir dix-sept heures de traversée au minimum.

Personne d’ailleurs ne protesta. On avait hâte de quitter cette île désolée.

Les bagages furent arrimés séance tenante. Quant aux passagers, après un grossier repas, ils usèrent le temps de leur mieux. Les uns se promenèrent sur la grève, les autres tentèrent d’y sommeiller étendus. Pas un qui consentît à accepter l’hospitalité par trop rudimentaire que pouvaient offrir les masures du village.

Le moment du départ trouva tout le monde sur pied. À l’heure dite, chacun avait pris sa place, et les six barques,

larguant leurs voiles, doublaient rapidement la Pointe des Tortues. Comme on le voit, Thompson montait en grade. Le commodore se transformait en amiral.

Une heure après le départ, on laissait à bâbord la pointe sud de l’île du Sel, et, aux rayons du soleil levant, Boavista apparaissait dans le lointain.

Par une chance rare à cette époque de l’année, le ciel se maintenait obstinément pur. Un vent assez vif soufflait du nord-ouest, poussant grand largue les six embarcations qui gagnaient vers le sud d’une pareille allure.

À huit heures du matin, on passa au large de Boavista. C’était une terre basse, d’un aspect aussi aride que l’île du Sel, un simple banc de sable, que percent en son milieu quelques pics de basalte couronnant un soulèvement longitudinal qui n’atteint pas cent mètres de hauteur.

Par le travers des barques s’ouvrait la Rade Anglaise, au fond de laquelle s’élèvent les cabanes et les rares maisons de Rabil, village érigé au rang de chef-lieu. Peut- être des navires étaient-ils à l’ancre dans la rade, mais la distance ne permit pas de s’en assurer.

Quelques heures plus tard, le sommet du Sao-Antonio, pic culminant de l’île de Sao-Thiago, commença à denteler l’horizon. Ce point élevé de deux mille deux cent cinquante mètres fut salué des hourras des naufragés auxquels il indiquait le but encore éloigné du voyage.

Bien que plus prochaine, l’île de Miao, beaucoup plus basse que Sao-Thiago, ne se montra qu’après celle-ci. Il était deux heures de l’après-midi, quand on aperçut ses rivages sablonneux. À cinq heures, on parvenait à sa hauteur.

C’était la réédition de l’île du Sel et de Boavista. Rien qu’une steppe de sable, sans rivière, sans sources et sans arbres, sur lequel des plaques de sel réverbéraient par endroits les rayons du soleil. On avait peine à croire que plus de trois mille créatures humaines vécussent sur cette lande si totalement inféconde.

L’œil lassé de cette monotonie de tristesse se reportait avec plaisir vers l’horizon du sud où grandissait rapidement Sao-Thiago. Ses rocs découpés, ses falaises de basalte, ses barranques emplies d’une végétation touffue, rappelaient un peu l’aspect des Açores, et, par rapport à la désolation des sables, on trouvait agréable cette sauvagerie autrefois jugée fastidieuse.

À huit heures du soir, on doubla la Pointe est, au moment où s’allumait le phare qui la couronne. Une heure plus tard, dans la nuit grandissante, on distingua le feu de la pointe de Tamaro qui ferme à l’occident le Porto da Praya. Une heure encore, et, après avoir doublé la pointe des Biscadas, les barques pénétraient à la file indienne dans l’eau plus calme de la baie, au fond de laquelle brillaient les lumières de la ville.

Ce n’est pas vers ces lumières que se dirigèrent les marins caboverdiens. À peine avaient-ils doublé la pointe des Biscadas, qu’ils avaient lofé en grand, s’efforçant de longer la côte. Quelques instants plus tard, ils mouillaient à une assez grande distance de la ville.

Robert s’étonna de cette manœuvre. Renseigné par son guide, il n’ignorait pas qu’un débarcadère existe sur le rivage occidental. Mais tout ce qu’il put dire fut inutile. Pour une raison ou une autre, les mulâtres persistèrent dans leur projet, et commencèrent le transbordement des gens et des choses au moyen de chaloupes amenées par les deux bateaux portant les bagages.

Successivement, les passagers furent conduits à un petit rocher situé au pied de la falaise qui termine la pointe orientale de la baie. Ainsi que Robert put le discerner d’après les indications de son Baedeker, c’était l’ancien débarcadère aujourd’hui complètement abandonné, et il s’étonna de plus en plus de la fantaisie des transporteurs.

Le ressac faisait rage contre ce rocher, et l’atterrissage au milieu de l’obscurité ne fut rien moins que facile. Il y eut plus d’une chute sur la surface glissante du granit que la vague polissait depuis des siècles, et plusieurs passagers prirent un bain involontaire. Néanmoins, tout se termina sans accident notable, et, un peu après onze heures, la totalité des naufragés était à terre.

Avec une hâte singulière qui donna fort à penser, les chaloupes rallièrent leurs bords respectifs. Moins de dix minutes plus tard, les six bateaux appareillaient, s’élançaient vers la haute mer, et disparaissaient dans la nuit.

En tout cas, s’il y avait là un mystère, ce n’était ni le temps, ni le lieu d’essayer de le comprendre. La situation des voyageurs réclamait présentement toute leur attention. Ils ne pouvaient dormir à la belle étoile, et, d’autre part, comment transporter ces caisses, ces malles, ces valises qui encombraient le rivage? Il fallut encore que le capitaine intervînt.

Conformément à sa décision, on laissa les bagages en arrière sous la garde de deux matelots, et les autres naufragés se mirent en route dans la direction de la ville encore bien lointaine.

Combien changée, la colonne brillante que Thompson dirigeait naguère avec une si parfaite maestria! Ce n’était plus qu’un troupeau en désordre, qui, déprimé, découragé, cherchait péniblement son chemin sur cette côte inconnue, semée de blocs épars et recouverte d’une épaisse nuit.

Route épuisante, même pour de plus valides marcheurs. Pendant plus d’une heure, on suivit un sentier à peine tracé, les pieds enfonçant jusqu’à la cheville dans un sable profond et cotonneux. Puis on dut gravir un chemin escarpé. Minuit était depuis longtemps sonné, quand les touristes à bout de forces se virent entourés de secourables maisons.

La ville entière dormait. Pas un passant. Pas une lumière. Au milieu de ce désert d’ombre et de silence, trouver suffisant logement pour tant de personnes était un véritable problème.

On prit le parti de se diviser en trois bandes. L’une, sous la conduite du capitaine, comprit l’équipage du navire défunt. La seconde, dirigée par Thompson, compta naturellement Baker parmi ses membres. La troisième enfin se confia au polyglottisme de Robert.

Cette dernière du moins, à laquelle s’étaient incorporés Roger et les deux Américaines, n’eut aucune peine à trouver un hôtel. En quelques minutes, Robert en avait découvert un. Il en heurta aussitôt la porte de façon à réveiller les plus obstinés dormeurs.

Quand l’hôte, attiré par le vacarme, eut entrouvert sa porte, la vue d’aussi nombreux clients parut le frapper de stupéfaction.

“Avez-vous des chambres à nous donner? demanda Robert.

- Des chambres?... répéta l’hôtelier, comme s’il eût rêvé. Mais d’où diable sortez-vous? s’écria-t-il avec explosion avant de répondre. Comment êtes-vous venus ici?

-Comme on y vient d’ordinaire, je pense. En bateau, dit Robert impatiemment.

-En bateau! répéta le Portugais qui semblait au comble de l’étonnement.

-Oui, en bateau, affirma Robert agacé. Qu’y a-t-il là de si extraordinaire?

-En bateau! s’écria derechef l’hôtelier. On n’a cependant pas levé la quarantaine.

-Quelle quarantaine?

-Eh! par le Christ! celle de l’île, où pas un navire n’a abordé depuis un mois.”

C’était au tour de Robert d’être étonné.

“Que se passe-t-il donc ici? Quelle est la cause de cette quarantaine? demanda-t-il.

-Une violente épidémie de fièvre pernicieuse.

-Dangereuse?

-Vous pouvez le dire! Rien qu’en ville, il meurt plus de vingt personnes par jour, sur une population de quatre mille habitants.

-Parbleu! s’écria Robert, il faut avouer que je n’ai pas eu une brillante idée en conseillant de venir ici. Heureusement que nous n’y sommes pas pour longtemps!

-Pas pour longtemps! se récria l’hôtelier.

-Certes!”

Le Portugais hocha la tête d’une manière peu rassurante.

“Pour le moment, je vais, s’il vous plaît, vous montrer vos chambres, dit-il ironiquement. J’ai idée que vous ne les quitterez pas de sitôt. D’ailleurs, vous verrez vous- mêmes demain que, lorsqu’on est à Sao-Thiago, on y reste.”

CHAPITRE X

EN QUARANTAINE

En vérité, ils jouaient de malheur, les infortunés souscripteurs de l’Agence Thompson! Oui, une épidémie des plus meurtrières sévissait à Sao-Thiago, et supprimait depuis un mois toute communication avec le reste du monde. À vrai dire, l’insalubrité est l’état ordinaire de cette île surnommée à bon droit la mortifère, comme Robert, avant de quitter l’île du Sel, en avait averti ses compagnons. La fièvre y est endémique et y fait en temps normal de nombreuses victimes.

Mais la maladie locale avait pris cette fois une virulence inusitée et revêtu un caractère pernicieux qui ne lui est pas habituel. En présence des ravages qu’elle causait, le gouvernement s’était ému, et, pour couper le mal dans sa racine, il avait tranché dans le vif.

L’île tout entière subissait par ordre supérieur un rigoureux interdit. Certes, les navires conservaient le droit d’y atterrir, mais à la condition de ne plus la quitter jusqu’à la fin, impossible à prévoir, de la quarantaine et de l’épidémie. On conçoit que les paquebots réguliers et les longs-courriers se fussent détournés d’une pareille impasse, et, de fait, avant l’arrivée des administrés de Thompson, pas un seul bâtiment n’avait, depuis trente jours, pénétré dans la baie.

Ainsi s’expliquait l’hésitation des pêcheurs de l’île du Sel, quand on leur avait parlé de Sao-Thiago; ainsi s’expliquait leur fuite immédiate après le débarquement nocturne, loin de la ville, en un point inusité. Au courant de la situation, ils n’avaient voulu, ni perdre par un scrupule excessif le bénéfice du voyage, ni se voir retenus de longs jours loin de leurs familles et de leur pays.

Les passagers étaient atterrés. Combien de semaines leur faudrait-il demeurer dans cette île maudite?

Toutefois, puisqu'il n'y avait pas moyen de faire autrement, il fallut bien s'accommoder de cette situation. Il n'y avait qu'à attendre; on attendit, chacun tuant le temps à sa manière.

Les uns, comme Johnson et Piperboom, avaient simplement repris leur vie habituelle, et paraissaient enchantés. Un restaurant pour l'un, un cabaret pour l'autre, suffisaient à leur bonheur. Or, ni les cabarets, ni les restaurants ne manquaient à La Praya.

Leurs compagnons ne trouvaient pas les mêmes agréments à la prison que le caprice du sort leur imposait. Absolument anéantis, hypnotisés par la terreur de la contagion, ils restaient, pour la plupart, nuit et jour dans leurs chambres, sans oser même ouvrir les fenêtres. Ces précautions semblaient leur réussir. Au bout de huit jours, nul d'entre eux n'avait été frappé. En revanche, ils mouraient d'ennui, et ils aspiraient après une délivrance que rien encore ne faisait pressentir.

D'autres étaient plus énergiques. Ceux-ci, ignorant de parti pris la malencontreuse épidémie, vivaient sans en tenir le moindre compte. Parmi ces courageux, figuraient les deux Français et leurs amies américaines. Ils jugeaient avec raison la peur plus à craindre que le mal. En compagnie de Baker, qui souhaitait peut-être au fond du cœur d'être bel et bien malade, afin d'avoir un nouveau prétexte à récriminer contre son rival, ils sortaient, allant et venant, comme ils l'eussent fait à Londres ou à Paris.

Depuis l’arrivée à Sao-Thiago, à peine s’ils avaient aperçu Jack Lindsay, qui, plus que jamais, persistait dans sa vie effacée et solitaire. Alice, absorbée par d’autres soucis, ne songeait guère à son beau-frère. Si parfois l’image s’en évoquait, elle la chassait aussitôt, moins irritée déjà, bientôt prête à l’oubli. L’aventure du Curral das Freias pâlissait dans le recul des jours, perdait de son importance. Quant à un retour de méchanceté active, le sentiment de profonde sécurité qu’elle puisait dans la protection de Robert s’opposait à ce qu’elle en conçût l’hypothèse.

Celui-ci, par contre, se souvenant de l’embuscade de la Grande-Canarie, pensait souvent à l’ennemi, qui, dans sa conviction intime, l’avait une première fois attaqué. L’inaction de l’adversaire ne le rassurait qu’à demi, et il veillait avec le même soin, en conservant une sourde inquiétude.

Jack, pendant ce temps, suivait la route fatale. Nullement préméditée, sa mauvaise action du Curral das Freias n’avait été qu’un geste réflexe soudainement suggéré par une occasion inattendue. Et pourtant l’avortement de cette première tentative avait, dans le creuset de son âme, transmué en haine un simple dépit. Cette haine, après la dédaigneuse intervention de Robert, s’était doublée de peur et détournée à la fois de son but naturel. Un instant, au moins, Jack Lindsay avait oublié sa belle-sœur pour l’interprète du *Seamew,* au point de lui dresser une embuscade, à laquelle celui-ci, eût-il pris l’autre route, ne devait pas échapper.

La résistance opiniâtre de Robert, l’héroïque intervention de Mr. Blockhead, avaient encore une fois fait échouer ses projets.

Depuis lors, Jack Lindsay ne faisait plus de différence entre ses deux ennemis. Il englobait Alice et Robert dans la même haine exaspérée par les échecs successifs qu’elle avait subis.

S’il était inactif, c’est la vigilance de Robert qui créait son inaction. Qu’une occasion propice se fût présentée, Jack, ayant désormais rejeté tout scrupule et résolu à ne pas rester sur sa défaite, n’eût pas hésité à se débarrasser de ces deux êtres dont la perte lui eût assuré et vengeance et fortune. Mais sans cesse il se heurtait à la surveillance obstinée de Robert, et, de jour en jour, il perdait l’espoir de trouver cette occasion favorable au milieu d’une ville populeuse, que les deux Français et les deux Américaines sillonnaient avec une tranquillité qui l’exaspérait.

La ville de La Praya ne peut malheureusement offrir beaucoup de ressources au touriste désœuvré. Enserrée entre deux vallées qui viennent à la mer aboutir sur deux plages, l’une, la “Plage Noire”, à l’ouest, l’autre à l’est - celle-là même sur laquelle on avait débarqué - la “Grande Plage”, elle est bâtie sur une “archada”, c’est-à-dire sur un plateau de laves jadis descendues des volcans de quatre à cinq cents mètres d’altitude qui bornent au nord son horizon. Se limitant en une brusque falaise d’environ quatre-vingts mètres, l’éperon de ce plateau va jusqu’à la mer et sépare les deux plages que des chemins d’une terrible raideur réunissent à la ville.

Le caractère nettement africain que la Villa da Praya possède à un plus haut degré que les autres centres de l’archipel est, aux yeux d’un voyageur européen, son unique curiosité. Ses rues encombrées de porcs, de volailles et de singes, ses maisons basses et bariolées de couleurs vives, les cases nègres des faubourgs, sa population noire au milieu de laquelle une importante colonie blanche, composée en majorité de fonctionnaires, est venue s’implanter, tout cela constitue un spectacle original et nouveau.

Mais, au bout de quelques jours, le touriste, blasé sur cet exotisme, ne trouve que de rares distractions dans cette ville de quatre mille âmes.

Quand il a parcouru le quartier européen, aux rues larges et bien percées rayonnant autour de la vaste place de “O Pelourinho”, quand il a contemplé l’église et l’hôtel du gouvernement se regardant de chaque côté d’une autre petite place en bordure de la mer, quand il a vu l’Hôtel de Ville, la prison, le tribunal et enfin l’hôpital, le cycle est achevé. Il pourrait alors sans inconvénient fermer les yeux. C’est à ce tournant que l’ennui guette.

Ce tournant, les deux Français et leurs compagnes ne tardèrent pas à l’atteindre. Ils y trouvèrent, sinon l’ennui, désarmé contre les cerveaux et les cœurs occupés, du moins un désœuvrement relatif. Peu à peu les promenades furent remplacées par de longues stations sur le sable des grèves, en face de cette mer qu’il était impossible de franchir, le bruit régulier de ses vagues berçant les silences d’Alice et de Robert, et scandant à la fois les causeries joyeuses de Roger et de Dolly.

Sur ceux-ci, en tout cas, la mélancolie n’avait évidemment pas de prise. L’accident, puis la disparition du *Seamew,* la quarantaine actuelle, rien n’avait pu entamer leur gaieté.

“Que voulez-vous, affirmait parfois Roger, ça m’amuse, moi, d’être Caboverdien - quel fichu nom! Miss Dolly et moi, nous nous faisons très bien à l’idée de devenir nègres.

-Mais la fièvre? disait Alice.

-Quelle blague! répondait Roger.

-Mais votre congé qui va expirer? disait Robert.

-Force majeure, répondait l’officier.

-Mais votre famille qui vous attend en France!

-Ma famille? Elle est ici, ma famille!”

Au fond du cœur, certes, Roger était moins rassuré qu’il ne voulait le paraître. Comment n’aurait-il pas songé avec angoisse au risque couru chaque jour par ses compagnons et par lui-même, dans ce pays infesté, dans cette ville à la population décimée? Mais il était de ces natures heureuses qui évitent par-dessus tout de gâter le présent par la peur de l’avenir. Or, le présent ne manquait pas de quelques charmes à ses yeux. Vivre à Sao-Thiago lui aurait sincèrement plu, pourvu qu’il y vécût comme maintenant dans l’intimité de Dolly. Entre eux, pas un mot précis n’avait été prononcé, et ils étaient sûrs l’un de l’autre. Sans se l’être jamais dit, ils se savaient fiancés.

Rien de moins mystérieux que leur conduite. On lisait dans leurs âmes comme dans un livre, et nul ne pouvait ignorer des sentiments si évidents qu’ils avaient jugé superflu de se les exprimer.

Mrs. Lindsay, spectatrice plus intéressée que les autres, ne semblait pas se préoccuper de cette situation. Elle permettait à sa sœur d’user de cette liberté américaine dont elle-même avait bénéficié, jeune fille. Elle avait foi dans la nature sincère et virginale de Dolly, et Roger était de ces hommes de qui la confiance émane aussi naturellement qu’ils respirent. Alice laissait donc l’idylle suivre son cours, assurée qu’un mariage la clôturerait au retour, tel que le dénouement logique et prévu d’une histoire très simple.

Plût au Ciel qu’elle possédât dans son âme le même apaisement et la même sécurité! Entre elle et Robert, le malentendu persistait. Une fausse honte glaçait les paroles sur leurs lèvres, et, à mesure que coulaient les jours, ils s’éloignaient de plus en plus de l’explication précise et franche qui, seule, eût pu leur rendre la paix.

Leurs relations extérieures ne tardèrent pas à souffrir de leur trouble moral. S’ils ne se fuyaient pas, c’est que cela était hors de leur pouvoir. Mais, perpétuellement ramenés l’un vers l’autre par une invincible force, ils sentaient, à peine face à face, s’élever entre eux une barrière, d’orgueil pour l’un, de défiance pour l’autre. Leurs cœurs alors se serraient, et ils n’échangeaient plus que des paroles froides qui prolongeaient le misérable quiproquo.

Roger assistait avec découragement à cette guerre sourde. Certes, il avait mieux auguré du résultat de leur tête-à-tête au sommet du Teyde. Comment ne s’étaient-ils pas livré le fond et le tréfonds de leurs pensées en une seule fois et pour toujours à cette minute d’émotion, au milieu de cette nature immense, dont la grandeur aurait dû par comparaison rapetisser singulièrement la pudeur sentimentale de l’une et la maladive fierté de l’autre? Toutes ces difficultés qu’il jugeait un peu puériles, toutes ces discussions soutenues avec soi-même ne pouvaient être admises par la nature ouverte de l’officier, qui, lui, eût aimé, roi, une pauvresse, pauvre, une reine, avec la même tranquille simplicité.

Au bout de huit jours de cette tacite et insoluble querelle, il en jugea le spectacle insupportable et résolut de mettre comme on dit les pieds dans le plat. Sous un prétexte quelconque, il entraîna un matin son compatriote sur la Grande Plage, complètement déserte à cette heure, et, assis sur un bloc de rocher, il entama une explication définitive.

Ce matin-là, Mrs. Lindsay était sortie seule. L’explication que Roger entendait imposer à son compatriote, elle voulait l’avoir avec elle-même, et, de ce pas nonchalant que donne le vagabondage de la volonté, elle s’était, un peu avant les deux amis, dirigée elle aussi vers cette Grande Plage dont la solitude lui plaisait. Bientôt lassée de sa promenade dans le sable, elle se laissa tomber à une place que fixa le hasard, et, le menton dans sa main, s’oublia à rêver en regardant la mer.

Un bruit de voix la tira de cette méditation. Deux personnes parlaient de l’autre côté du rocher sur lequel elle s’était machinalement appuyée, et, dans les deux interlocuteurs, Mrs. Lindsay reconnut Roger de Sorgues et Robert Morgand.

Son premier mouvement fut de se montrer. Ce qu’elle entendit l’en empêcha. Intriguée, Mrs. Lindsay écouta.

Robert avait suivi son compatriote avec l’indifférence qu’il apportait malgré soi à beaucoup de choses. Il marcha tant que Roger voulut marcher. Il s’assit quand Roger en manifesta le désir. Mais celui-ci connaissait le moyen d’éveiller l’attention de son indolent compagnon.

“Ouf! dit l’officier en s’arrêtant, il fait chaud dans ce satané pays. Un peu de farniente me paraît indiqué. Qu’en dites-vous, mon cher Gramond?

-Gramond?...” répéta de l’autre côté du rocher Alice étonnée.

Robert, acquiesçant du geste, avait obéi silencieusement à l’invitation.

“Ah çà! dit brusquement Roger, sommes-nous encore pour longtemps ici?

-Ce n’est pas à moi qu’il faut le demander, répondit Robert en ébauchant un sourire.

-Ce n’est pas mon avis, répliqua Roger, car, si le séjour dans cette île caboverdienne - mon Dieu, quel fichu nom! - n’a rien de bien séduisant pour personne, il doit être particulièrement désagréable pour Mrs. Lindsay et pour vous.

-Pourquoi cela? demanda Robert.

-Renieriez-vous donc les confidences que vous m’avez faites certain soir, en longeant les rivages des îles Canaries?

-Jamais de la vie, répondit Robert. Mais je ne vois pas...

-C’est très clair dans ce cas, interrompit Roger. Puisque vous aimez toujours Mrs. Lindsay - car vous l’aimez, n’est-ce pas?

-Certes! affirma Robert.

-Fort bien!... Je reprends: Puisque vous aimez Mrs. Lindsay et que, d’autre part, vous êtes absolument décidé à ne pas l’en informer, j’en reviens à mon dire, et je prétends que le séjour sur ce rocher africain ne doit avoir pour elle et pour vous que des attraits contestables. D’ailleurs, il n’y a qu’à vous voir tous les deux. Vous avez l’air de porter le diable en terre. À peine si vous desserrez les dents. Révérence parler, on dirait deux chats qui n’osent retirer du feu des marrons rôtis. Comment ne voyez-vous pas ce qui cependant crève les yeux, à savoir que Mrs. Lindsay s’ennuie à périr et qu’elle apprécierait fort la distraction de brûlants aveux?

-Mon cher de Sorgues, dit Robert d’une voix un peu émue, je ne comprends pas comment vous pouvez plaisanter sur un pareil sujet. Vous qui savez ce que je pense, vous qui connaissez ma situation et les scrupules qu’elle m’impose...

-Ta, ta, ta! interrompit Roger qui semblait peu frappé de l’observation, n’empêche qu’il est intolérable de vous voir rendre malheureux à plaisir vous-même et les autres, alors que tout cela au fond, vous savez, c’est si simple!

-Que voudriez-vous donc que je fisse? demanda Robert.

-Mon Dieu, mon cher, je ne peux guère vous donner de conseils. En pareil cas, chacun agit conformément à son tempérament. Mais pourquoi n’êtes-vous pas vous- même, c’est-à-dire gai, aimable, aimant, puisque vous aimez? Le reste viendrait tout seul. Regardez-nous, Miss Dolly et moi. Avons-nous l’air d’amoureux de mélodrame?

-Vous en parlez à votre aise, fit observer Robert avec amertume.

-Soit! accorda Roger. Eh bien! alors, allez-y carrément. Brûlez vos vaisseaux. Quand nous rentrerons tout à l’heure, montez chez Mrs. Lindsay comme on monte à l’assaut, et narrez-lui la chose sans tant de fioritures. Vous n’en mourrez pas, que diable! et vous verrez bien ce qu’elle vous répondra.

-La réponse, quelle qu’elle soit, ne m’effraierait pas, si je me jugeais en droit de poser la question.

-Mais pourquoi? Pour cette bêtise de la fortune? Mais entre la fortune et ça, s’écria Roger en faisant claquer son ongle entre ses dents, il n’y a pas la moindre différence! Et d’ailleurs, n’êtes-vous pas en mesure d’en offrir l’équivalent? Vous avez beau vous être affublé d’un autre nom, vous redeviendrez marquis de Gramond quand il vous plaira, et les marquis de Gramond ne courent pas encore les rues, que je sache!”

Robert prit la main de son compatriote.

“Tout ce que vous me dites, mon cher de Sorgues, prononça-t-il, me prouve de plus en plus à quel point vous êtes mon ami. Mais, croyez-moi, il vaut mieux faire le silence sur ce sujet: vous n’obtiendrez rien de moi. Je n’ignore pas que l’échange dont vous me parlez soit généralement admis. Cependant, que voulez-vous, ces marchés-là ne me vont pas.

-Marché! marché! c’est bientôt dit, bougonna Roger sans se laisser convaincre. Où voyez-vous un marché, du moment que vous n’êtes guidé par aucune pensée d’intérêt?

-Oui, répondit Robert, mais Mrs. Lindsay ne le sait pas, elle. Voilà le point délicat.

-Eh bien! mille carabines, prenez la peine de le lui affirmer. Quoi qu’il arrive, cela vaudra mieux que de vous rendre ainsi malheureux, sans parler de Mrs. Lindsay elle- même.

-Mrs. Lindsay? répéta Robert. Je ne saisis pas...

-Si elle vous aimait cependant? interrompit Roger. Y avez-vous pensé? Elle ne peut pas, après tout, parler la première.

-Voilà deux fois déjà que vous me faites cette objection, répondit Robert un peu tristement. Il faut croire que vous la jugez bien puissante. Si Mrs. Lindsay m’aimait, cela changerait en effet bien des choses. Mais Mrs. Lindsay ne m’aime pas, et je n’ai pas la fatuité d’admettre qu’elle m’aimera jamais, alors surtout que je ne fais rien dans ce but.

-C’est peut-être pour ça... murmura Roger entre ses dents.

-Vous dites?

-Rien... ou du moins je dis que vous êtes d’un aveuglement prodigieux, s’il n’est volontaire. Au surplus, Mrs. Lindsay ne m’a pas chargé de vous dévoiler sa manière de voir. Mais admettez pour un instant que les sentiments que je lui supposais tout à l’heure soient en effet les siens. Faudrait-il donc, pour que vous le croyiez, qu’elle vînt elle-même vous le dire?

-Cela ne suffirait peut-être pas, répondit tranquillement Robert.

-Bah! fit Roger. Même après ça, vous auriez encore le front de douter?

-Extérieurement, cela me serait impossible, dit Robert avec mélancolie, mais au fond du cœur il me resterait une angoisse bien cruelle. Mrs. Lindsay est mon obligée, et, pour des âmes comme la sienne, ces dettes-là sont plus sacrées que les autres. Je songerais que l’amour peut n’être que le déguisement délicat d’une trop lourde reconnaissance.

-Incorrigible obstiné! s’écria Roger, en considérant son ami avec des yeux remplis d’étonnement. J’avoue que je ne saurais pas ergoter ainsi contre mon plaisir. Pour rendre plus légère votre langue de plomb, il faudra la fin du voyage. Peut-être qu’alors le chagrin de perdre Mrs. Alice pour tout de bon sera plus fort que votre orgueil.

-Je ne crois pas, dit Robert.

-Nous verrons ça, conclut Roger en se levant. Pour le moment, je déclare que cette situation ne peut durer. Je vais de ce pas trouver le capitaine Pip, et je prétends mijoter avec lui quelque moyen de filer à l’anglaise. Que diable! il y a des bateaux dans la rade, et quant aux forts portugais, c’est une plaisanterie devenue banale!”

Les deux Français s’éloignèrent du côté de la ville, suivis des yeux par Alice. Sur son visage toute trace de chagrin s’était dissipée. Elle connaissait la vérité, et cette vérité n’était pas pour lui déplaire. À n’en pouvoir douter désormais, elle se savait aimée, aimée comme toute femme voudrait l'être, pour elle-même, et sans qu'une pensée étrangère altérât la pureté de ce sentiment.

Joie plus grande encore, elle pouvait rejeter la contrainte qui depuis si longtemps lui paralysait l'âme. Certes, elle n'avait pas attendu les révélations qu'elle venait de surprendre pour se sentir entraînée vers Robert Morgand, pour être certaine même, rien que sur l'apparence, qu'il cachait quelque mystère dans le genre de celui dont elle avait à l'instant reçu irrégulièrement la confidence. Toutefois, les préjugés du monde possèdent tant de puissance, que le penchant qui l'emportait lui avait jusque-là procuré moins de bonheur que de tristesse. Aimer le cicérone-interprète du *Seamew,* fût-il cent fois professeur, la chute semblait cruelle à la riche Américaine, et, depuis le départ de Madère, la lutte de son orgueil et de son cœur l'avait jetée dans un perpétuel mécontentement d'elle-même et des autres.

Maintenant la situation se simplifiait. Tous deux étaient de niveau.

Seul point qui demeurât délicat, il restait à vaincre les scrupules un peu excessifs de Robert. Mais, de cela, Alice ne s'inquiétait guère. Elle n'ignorait pas quelle force de persuasion possède naturellement une femme aimante et aimée. D'ailleurs, ce n'était pas sur cette île le lieu des mots décisifs. Avant que le jour en arrivât, qui sait si Alice n'aurait pas payé d'une façon ou d'une autre sa dette de reconnaissance, et reconquis ainsi aux yeux de Robert l'indépendance de son cœur.

Roger fit comme il avait dit. Il communiqua sur-le- champ son projet de fuite au capitaine, et il est inutile de dire si le vieux marin sauta avidement sur cette idée. Certes, tout valait mieux que de moisir sur cette île maudite, où il avait, prétendait-il, le “mal de terre”. Il désira seulement mettre

Thompson et les autres passagers dans la confidence, et vraiment cela était trop juste pour que Roger pût avoir la pensée de s’y opposer.

L’assentiment fut général et unanime. Les uns, lassés de cette ville trop souvent visitée, les autres, terrorisés par l’abondance des convois funèbres qu’ils voyaient de leurs fenêtres, tous étaient au bout de leur courage ou de leur patience.

De deux passagers, toutefois, l’avis fut jugé superflu. À bord du futur navire, on aurait soin d’emporter abondamment à boire et à manger. Dès lors, à quoi bon consulter Johnson et Piperboom?

Le départ décidé, il s’agissait de le réaliser.

Si, comme Roger l’avait fait observer, des navires étaient effectivement mouillés en rade, ces navires étaient peu nombreux. En tout et pour tout, trois voiliers de sept cents à mille tonneaux, et encore paraissaient-ils fort délabrés aux yeux des moins connaisseurs. Tous les bâtiments en état de naviguer avaient évidemment pris la mer avant la déclaration de quarantaine, et l’on n’avait laissé au port que les navires hors de service.

En outre, il ne fallait pas perdre de vue que le départ, s’il devenait possible, devait se faire mystérieusement. Or, quel moyen de dissimuler l’embarquement d’une centaine de personnes, ainsi que celui des vivres et du matériel nécessités par un aussi grand nombre de passagers?

Il y avait là un très difficile problème. Le capitaine Pip offrit de le résoudre, et on lui donna un blanc-seing absolu.

Comment s’y prit-il? Il ne le dit pas. Mais le fait est que le lendemain matin il possédait déjà une ample moisson de renseignements, qu’il communiqua aux naufragés réunis sur la Plage Noire, et en particulier à Thompson auquel appartenait le premier rôle dans l'œuvre du rapatriement.

Des trois bateaux mouillés en rade, deux étaient bons tout au plus à transformer en bois de chauffage - et même en mauvais bois de chauffage! ajoutait le capitaine. Quant au dernier, nommé la Santa-Maria, c'était assurément un vieux navire très fatigué, mais possible encore à la rigueur. On pouvait s'y fier sans déraison trop criante pour un voyage en somme assez court.

Après avoir visité ce navire de fond en comble, le capitaine s'était risqué à tâter le terrain auprès de l'armateur, et là il avait trouvé besogne facile. La quarantaine arrêtant complètement le commerce de l'île pour un temps indéterminé, cet armateur avait accueilli avec empressement les ouvertures du capitaine. On pouvait donc espérer obtenir de lui des conditions relativement douces.

Quant à la résolution à prendre, le capitaine déclara vouloir s'abstenir du moindre conseil. Il n'entendait même pas dissimuler que l'on courût un certain danger en s'embarquant dans de telles conditions, pour peu que l'on dût subir du gros temps. Il appartenait à chacun de choisir le risque qui lui paraîtrait le moins redoutable: risque de maladie ou risque de mer.

À ce sujet, le capitaine fit seulement observer que l'imprudence serait notablement diminuée si l'on consentait à éviter le Golfe de Gascogne, en désarmant dans un port de l'Espagne ou du Portugal. De cette façon, la majeure partie de la traversée se ferait dans la région des alizés où les mauvais temps sont assez rares. Finalement, en son nom personnel, le capitaine vota pour un prompt appareillage et jura qu'il préférait le risque de la noyade à la certitude de mourir de fièvre ou d'ennui.

La délibération ne fut pas longue. À l'unanimité, le départ fut décidé séance tenante, et le capitaine fut chargé de faire les préparatifs nécessaires. Celui-ci accepta le mandat et s'engagea à être prêt sous quatre jours sans avoir donné l'éveil.

Auparavant, cependant, il convenait de traiter avec le propriétaire du navire, et ce soin incombait à Thompson. Mais on eut beau chercher de tous côtés l'administrateur général, Thompson, tout à l'heure présent, avait disparu.

Après avoir largement donné cours à leur indignation, les touristes décidèrent de transmettre à l'un des leurs les pouvoirs du général transfuge, et de le déléguer auprès de l'armateur, avec lequel il aurait mission de traiter aux meilleures conditions possibles. Ce fut naturellement

Baker que l'on choisit, son expérience des affaires, et de ce genre d'affaires en particulier, le désignant au choix de tous.

Baker accepta sans difficulté sa nouvelle fonction et partit aussitôt en compagnie du capitaine.

Deux heures plus tard, il était de retour.

Tout était entendu et convenu, le traité signé et paraphé. Après discussion, on était tombé d'accord sur une somme de six mille francs, moyennant laquelle on avait droit au navire jusqu'en Europe. L'armateur prendrait ultérieurement les dispositions qu'il jugerait convenables pour se défaire de ce bâtiment, du retour duquel on n'aurait par conséquent pas à se préoccuper. Il n'y avait lieu de s'inquiéter non plus ni de l'équipage, l'état-major et les hommes du *Seamew* consentant tous à reprendre leur service sans autres salaires ou appointements que la nourriture et le passage, ni du gréement de la Santa-Maria, dont toutes les voiles étaient enverguées. On devait seulement procéder à quelques aménagements intérieurs, afin de loger un aussi grand nombre de personnes tant dans le carré que dans l'entrepont, et à l'embarquement de vivres suffisants pour un mois de navigation. En tout cela, on serait puissamment aidé par l'armateur de la Santa- Maria, qui, sous un prétexte quelconque, ferait procéder aux réparations par ses propres ouvriers, et qui procurerait en secret les vivres que les marins anglais transporteraient à bord pendant la nuit.

Ces dispositions ayant été approuvées par tous, l'assemblée se sépara, et le capitaine se mit aussitôt au travail.

C'était donc quatre jours à patienter. En temps ordinaire, ce n'est guère. Mais quatre jours semblent démesurés quand ils succèdent à huit autres jours de terreur ou d'ennui.

Ces quatre jours, on les passa comme les précédents, c'est-à-dire les uns calfeutrés dans leurs chambres, certains - on devine lesquels - en perpétuelles bombances, les autres en promenades qu'ils s'ingénièrent à varier.

Sans être plus que précédemment gênés par Jack Lindsay toujours invisible, Mrs. Lindsay et ses habituels compagnons rayonnèrent autour de la Villa da Praya. Alice paraissait revenue à son heureux équilibre des premiers temps du voyage. Sous sa douce influence, ces promenades furent autant de parties de plaisir.

Il ne fallait pas songer à de sérieuses excursions dans l'intérieur de l'île, que ne traversent que de rares et très mauvaises routes. Mais les environs immédiats de la Villa da Praya étaient accessibles, et les quatre touristes les visitèrent en tous sens.

Une journée fut consacrée à la ville de Ribeira Grande, ancienne capitale de l’île et de l’archipel, détruite en 1712 par les Français. Ribeira Grande, d’ailleurs encore plus insalubre que La Praya, ne s’est jamais bien relevée de ses ruines depuis cette époque, et sa population n’a cessé de décroître. Elle est aujourd’hui tombée à un chiffre insignifiant. On a le cœur serré en passant dans les rues désertes de la ville déchue.

Les autres jours, on parcourut les nombreuses vallées qui entourent la capitale. Dans ces campagnes médiocrement cultivées habite une population exclusivement nègre, à la fois catholique et païenne, au milieu des végétations de son pays d’origine. Ce ne sont que palmiers, bananiers, goyaviers, cocotiers, papayers, tamariniers, à l’ombre desquels s’élève une multitude de cases africaines, qui ne se groupent nulle part jusqu’à constituer un misérable village.

Pendant ces quatre derniers jours, la chance qui jusque- là avait protégé les voyageurs contre l’épidémie sembla les abandonner. Le 2 juillet, deux d’entre eux, Mr. Blockhead et Sir George Hamilton, se réveillèrent la tête lourde, la bouche pâteuse, et souffrant de douloureux vertiges. Un médecin aussitôt appelé ne put que diagnostiquer un cas grave de la fièvre régnante. Ce fut une nouvelle cause de terreur pour les autres. Chacun se dit: “À quand mon tour?”

Le lendemain était le jour fixé pour le départ. Dès le matin, les touristes, à leur grande surprise, eurent peine à reconnaître le pays dans lequel ils se réveillaient. Le ciel était d’un jaune d’ocre, les contours indécis des objets se devinaient à peine à travers un brouillard de nature particulière, qui vibrait dans l’air surchauffé.

“Ce n’est que du sable amené par le vent d’est”, répondirent les indigènes consultés.

En effet, pendant la nuit le vent avait changé cap pour cap, passant du nord-ouest à l’est.

Cette saute de vent allait-elle modifier les projets du capitaine Pip? Non, car, le soir de ce même jour, il annonça l’achèvement des derniers préparatifs et déclara que tout était paré pour l’appareillage. Les passagers étaient prêts de leur côté. Depuis que le départ avait été résolu, chaque jour ils avaient sorti de leurs hôtels respectifs quelque partie de leur bagage, que les marins transportaient pendant la nuit à bord de la Santa-Maria. Seules, les malles vides restaient dans les chambres, quand on les quitta définitivement, et il ne pouvait être question de les emporter. Mais c’était là un ennui négligeable.

“D’ailleurs, avait déclaré Baker, il faudra bien que Thompson paie nos malles avec le reste.”

En admettant que Thompson dût effectivement subir les condamnations multiples dont le menaçait Baker, on devait considérer comme probable que ces condamnations seraient prononcées par défaut. Qu’était-il devenu? Nul n’aurait pu le dire. On ne l’avait pas revu depuis qu’il s’était dérobé par la fuite à l’obligation onéreuse de rapatrier tout le monde.

D’ailleurs, on ne s’occupait pas de lui. Puisqu’il se plaisait si fort à Sao-Thiago, on l’y laisserait, voilà tout!

Furtif, l’embarquement devait forcément être nocturne. À onze heures du soir, moment fixé par le capitaine, tous, sans une défection, se trouvèrent réunis sur la Plage Noire, en un endroit où un retour des roches atténuait le ressac. L’embarquement commença aussitôt.

Hamilton et Blockhead furent conduits les premiers à bord de la Santa-Maria, après avoir failli être abandonnés à Sao-Thiago. Un grand nombre de leurs compagnons s'étaient ouvertement insurgés contre l'idée d'emmener les deux malades qui seraient une cause d'infection pour les valides. Pour que l'on renonçât à les abandonner purement et simplement, Roger et les deux Américaines avaient en vain fait tous leurs efforts, jusqu'à l'instant où le capitaine Pip avait jeté dans la balance le poids de son autorité, en déclarant qu'il ne se chargerait pas de la conduite du navire, si un seul des naufragés était laissé en arrière.

Hamilton et Blockhead quittaient donc les îles du Cap- Vert avec les autres sans même en avoir conscience. Depuis la veille, leur état avait considérablement empiré. Leur intelligence sombrait dans un perpétuel délire, et il paraissait fort douteux que l'on pût les ramener jusqu'en Angleterre.

Plusieurs voyages furent nécessaires pour transborder tout le monde avec les deux seuls canots de la Santa- Maria. À la coupée, on trouvait Baker, qui, prenant au sérieux ses fonctions d'administrateur, indiquait à chacun la place qui lui était assignée.

Certes, on avait lieu de regretter le *Seamew.* Rien de plus rudimentaire que l'installation hâtivement improvisée. Si les dames, logées sous la dunette, dans le carré, n'eurent pas trop à se plaindre de leurs cabines exiguës, mais convenables, les hommes durent se contenter d'un vaste dortoir pris sur la cale à l'aide d'une cloison en planches et d'un parquet posé sur les barres sèches de l'entrepont.

Les divers convois se succédèrent sans incident. Personne dans l'île ne paraissait s'être aperçu de cet exode. Sans difficulté, les canots pour la dernière fois débordèrent et parvinrent jusqu'à la Santa-Maria. Baker, à son poste de la coupée, eut alors un haut-le-corps de surprise. Confondu parmi les autres passagers, se faisant aussi petit que possible, Thompson, le transfuge Thompson, venait de sauter sur le pont.

CHAPITRE XI

OÙ THOMPSON, À SON TOUR, N’EN A PAS POUR SON ARGENT

“Mr Thompson!” s’écria Baker avec une joie féroce.

C’était bien Thompson en personne, mais un peu penaud, il faut l’avouer, malgré son extraordinaire aplomb. Dans la lutte entre sa peur et son avarice, celle-ci avait finalement succombé, et Thompson vaincu mettait les pouces. Patiemment, il avait guetté le départ, et, profitant de la nuit, il s’était joint au dernier convoi.

“Mr. Thompson! répéta Baker, couvant son ennemi comme un chat une souris. Nous n’espérions plus avoir le désagrément de vous revoir! Aurons-nous donc l’ennui de retourner avec vous en Angleterre?

-En effet, répondit Thompson, qui eût au besoin avalé d’autres couleuvres. Mais j’entends payer mon passage, ajouta-t-il précipitamment, espérant désarmer ainsi son implacable adversaire.

-Comment donc! approuva Baker. Cela est trop surnaturel!

-Surnaturel? répéta Thompson.

-Oui. Vous ne nous avez pas habitués jusqu’ici à de semblables façons. Enfin! il n’est jamais trop tard pour bien faire. Voyons, quel prix allons-nous vous prendre, mon cher monsieur?

-Le prix de tout le monde, je suppose, dit Thompson avec angoisse.

-C’est que voici la difficulté, objecta Baker d’un ton bonhomme, nous n’avons pas de tarif. Nous formons tous, tels que vous nous voyez, une société mutuelle, une coopérative comme on dit, dans laquelle chacun a versé sa part. Vous, vous êtes un étranger. Il faut créer pour vous un tarif spécial et personnel. C’est très délicat!

-Pourtant, murmura Thompson, il me semble que six livres (150 fr.)...

-C’est bien peu! répondit Baker d’un air rêveur.

-Dix livres (250 fr.)...

-Hum! fit Baker.

-Vingt livres (500 fr.)... trente livres (750 fr.)...”

Baker secouait toujours la tête, et semblait réellement

fort chagrin d’être obligé de refuser des offres si tentantes.

“Eh bien! quarante livres (1000 fr.), dit enfin Thompson avec effort. Autant que je vous ai demandé pour vous conduire...

-Au cap Vert! et même malgré moi, acheva Baker dans les yeux duquel luisait une malice infernale. Ainsi donc, vous pensez que quarante livres?... Allons, va pour quarante livres!... Ce n’est pas assez évidemment. J’ai tort. Mais, le diable m’emporte, je ne sais rien vous refuser. Si donc vous voulez bien me verser la somme?...”

Thompson s’exécuta en soupirant, et tira du fond de sa sacoche les bank-notes exigées, que Baker compta par deux fois avec une merveilleuse insolence.

“Le compte y est, je m’empresse de le reconnaître. D’ailleurs, quoi vraiment de plus extraordinaire?” dit-il en tournant le dos à son passager, qui s’empressa d’aller choisir une place dans le dortoir commun.

Pendant cette discussion, la Santa-Maria avait largué ses voiles et hissé son ancre à bord. À une heure du matin, par une brise d’est bien établie, elle sortit sans inconvénient ni difficulté de la baie de La Praya. Devant son étrave, s’étendait la mer libre. Il ne lui restait plus qu’à y creuser son sillon.

Successivement, les passagers gagnèrent leurs couchettes. L’un des premiers, Thompson s’était étendu sur le matelas qu’il s’était réservé, et déjà il glissait au sommeil, quand il se sentit touché à l’épaule. Ouvrant les yeux en sursaut, il aperçut Baker penché au-dessus de lui.

“Qu’y a-t-il? demanda Thompson dans un demi- sommeil.

-Une erreur, ou plutôt un malentendu, mon cher monsieur. Tout à fait content de vous déranger, mais il n’y a pas moyen de faire autrement, quand je vous vois sans droit couché sur ce matelas.

-J’ai payé ma place, il me semble! s’exclama Thompson avec mauvaise humeur.

-Votre passage! cher monsieur, votre passage! rectifia Baker. J’emploie votre propre expression. Ne confondons pas, s’il vous plaît. Passage ne veut pas dire place. Je dois uniquement vous transporter, je vous transporte. Je ne dois nullement vous coucher. Les matelas sont hors de prix à La Praya, et, si vous voulez jouir de celui-ci, je serai dans l’obligation de vous demander un léger supplément.

-Mais c’est un vol! Je suis dans un coupe-gorge, ici! s’écria avec colère Thompson redressé sur son séant, et promenant autour de lui des regards éperdus. Et quelle somme avez-vous la prétention de m’extorquer pour me donner la permission de dormir?

-Il m’est impossible, dit sentencieusement Baker, de ne pas répondre à une question formulée en termes si choisis. Voyons!... Oui... à la rigueur... Oui, pour deux livres (50 F) il m’est possible de vous louer ce matelas. C’est un peu cher, je ne dis pas. Mais à Sao-Thiago, les matelas...”

Thompson haussa les épaules.

“Celui-ci ne vaut pas les deux livres. Mais peu importe. Je vais vous verser vos deux livres, et, moyennant cette somme, il est bien entendu que j’aurai la paix pour toute la traversée.

-Pour toute la traversée! Y pensez-vous? Pour toute la traversée!... Ma parole, messieurs, ce gentleman est fou, s’écria Baker en levant les bras au ciel et en prenant à témoin les autres passagers assistant, accoudés sur leurs couchettes, à cette scène qu’ils scandaient d’irrésistibles éclats de rire. C’est deux livres par nuit, mon cher monsieur. Par nuit, entendons-nous!

-Par nuit! et, par conséquent, soixante livres si ce voyage dure un mois? Eh bien! monsieur, sachez-le, je ne paierai pas cela. La plaisanterie ne prend pas, répondit Thompson rageusement, en s’étendant de nouveau.

-Dans ce cas, monsieur, déclara Baker avec un flegme imperturbable, je vais avoir l’avantage de vous mettre dehors.”

Thompson regarda son adversaire, et vit qu’il ne badinait pas. Déjà Baker allongeait ses longs bras.

Quant à espérer un secours des spectateurs, il n’y fallait pas songer. Ravis de cette vengeance inespérée, ils se tordaient, les spectateurs.

Thompson préféra, en cédant, éviter une lutte dont l’issue n’était pas douteuse. Il se leva sans ajouter un mot, et se dirigea vers l’échelle du capot. Avant d’en gravir le premier échelon, il crut bon toutefois de protester.

“Je cède à la force, dit-il avec dignité, mais je proteste énergiquement contre le traitement qui m’est infligé. On aurait dû me prévenir que mes quarante livres ne m’assuraient pas la liberté de dormir en repos.

- Mais la chose allait de soi, répliqua Baker qui paraissait tomber des nues. Non certes, vos quarante livres ne vous donnent pas le droit de dormir sur les matelas de la Société, pas plus que de boire dans les verres ou de manger à la table de la Société. Passage, je suppose, ne veut pas dire matelas, fauteuil, claret et beafsteack! Si vous voulez de ces choses, il faudra les payer, et tout cela est horriblement cher par le temps qui court!”

Et Baker s’étendit nonchalamment sur le matelas qu’il venait de conquérir, tandis que Thompson défaillant montait à tâtons les degrés de l’échelle.

Le malheureux avait compris.

On croira sans peine qu’il dormit mal. Il passa la nuit entière à chercher quelque moyen d’échapper au sort qui le menaçait. Il n’en découvrit pas malgré son esprit inventif. Il s’était sottement laissé prendre dans un traquenard sans issue.

Thompson finit pourtant par se rassurer, en pensant combien il était peu probable que Baker exécutât ses menaces jusqu’au bout. Il ne s’agissait évidemment que d’une plaisanterie, désagréable assurément, mais d’une simple plaisanterie qui cesserait d’elle-même à bref délai.

Ces considérations optimistes n’eurent pas toutefois le pouvoir de rendre à Thompson assez de calme pour lui permettre de trouver le sommeil. Jusqu’au matin, tout en agitant les chances qu’il avait de sauver à la fois sa vie et sa caisse, il se promena sur le pont, où veillaient à tour de rôle les bordées de quart.

Pendant que Thompson veillait, les autres passagers de la Santa-Maria dormaient à poings fermés le bon sommeil des consciences paisibles. Le temps se maintenait assez beau, malgré la sécheresse de ce vent d’est qui gonflait les voiles du navire. À cette allure, on avançait rapidement. Quand le jour se leva, Sao-Thiago restait à plus de vingt milles dans le sud.

On passait en ce moment à une faible distance de l’île de Maio, mais personne, sauf Thompson, n’était là pour contempler cette terre désolée.

Il n’en était pas de même, quand, quatre heures plus tard, on longea, mais de moins près, l’île de Boavista. Tous étaient alors levés à bord de la Santa-Maria, et la dunette regorgeait de promeneurs que le défaut de place forçait à refluer sur le pont. Tous les regards se dirigèrent vers la ville de Rabil, devant laquelle on apercevait distinctement cette fois quelques navires à l’ancre. Boavista s’abaissait à son tour sur l’horizon, lorsque la cloche sonna le déjeuner.

Baker, promu administrateur de ce voyage de retour, avait donné libre carrière à son penchant pour l’ordre et la méthode. À bord de la Santa-Maria, il entendait que les choses marchassent comme à bord du plus régulier des paquebots, et la ponctualité des repas était l’essentiel à ses yeux. Bien qu’elles fussent contraires à ses goûts et aux usages de la marine, il avait conservé les heures adoptées par son prédécesseur. Par ses soins, la cloche sonnerait comme autrefois à huit heures, à onze heures et à sept heures du soir.

Toutefois, il ne pouvait être question, malgré son désir, d’avoir une table correcte. À peine si le carré était suffisant pour une douzaine de convives. Il fut donc entendu que chacun s’accommoderait de son mieux sur la dunette ou sur le pont en des groupes au milieu desquels passerait l’ancien personnel du *Seamew*, devenu celui de la Santa-Maria. D’ailleurs, cet inconvénient n’allait pas sans charmes. Ces repas en plein air s’égaieraient d’une apparence de parties de plaisir. En cas de mauvais temps, on en serait quitte pour se réfugier dans le dortoir de l’entrepont. Mais la pluie ne serait plus à craindre, dès qu’on aurait quitté les parages des îles du Cap-Vert.

Au cours de ce déjeuner auquel Thompson ne participa en aucune façon, le capitaine Pip fit une proposition inattendue.

Ayant réclamé l’attention, il rappela d’abord ses réserves touchant les dangers d’un pareil voyage sur un navire tel que la Santa-Maria. Puis il avoua que, ébranlé par la responsabilité énorme qui pesait sur lui, il avait eu un moment la pensée de rallier, non pas la côte espagnole ou portugaise, mais tout simplement la ville de Saint- Louis, au Sénégal. Toutefois, il n’avait pas cru devoir proposer cette combinaison, en raison du vent d’est qui s’était mis à souffler, rendant cette relâche presque aussi longue à atteindre que l’une des Canaries ou même un port européen. Mais, à défaut de Saint-Louis, ne pouvait-on aller à Porto Grande de Sao-Vicente?

Pour cela, le capitaine n’avait qu’à laisser porter de deux quarts, et avant la nuit tout le monde serait à terre, en sûreté, avec la certitude d’un prochain paquebot.

La communication du capitaine Pip fit d’autant plus d’effet, qu’il n’avait pas accoutumé jusqu’ici à d’inutiles paroles. Il fallait qu’il jugeât le danger sérieux, pour s’être aventuré dans un aussi long discours.

Ce fut Baker, en sa qualité d’administrateur délégué, qui s’empara de la tribune.

“Vos paroles sont graves, commandant, dit-il. Mais précisons, et dites-nous franchement si vous considérez comme déraisonnable le voyage que nous avons entrepris.

-Si telle avait été ma pensée, répondit le capitaine, je vous l’aurais fait connaître dès le début. Non, ce voyage est possible, et cependant... avec tant de monde à bord...

-Enfin, interrompit Baker, si vous n’aviez avec vous que des marins, auriez-vous autant d’inquiétude?

-Non certes, affirma le capitaine. Mais ce n’est pas la même chose. Naviguer, c’est notre métier à nous, et nous avons nos raisons...

-Nous avons aussi les nôtres, dit Baker, ne serait-ce que les fonds que nous a contraint d’engager sur ce navire la ladrerie de celui qui aurait dû payer pour tous. Il en est encore une autre plus sérieuse: la quarantaine qui frappe l’île de Sao-Thiago que nous venons de quitter. À cette heure, la Santa-Maria est peut-être signalée à toutes les îles de l’archipel, et je suis convaincu qu’on s’opposerait d’autant plus formellement à notre débarquement que nous ne possédons pas de patente nette et que nous avons deux malades à bord. Si donc, malgré tout, nous parvenions à prendre terre, ce ne serait que pour subir un emprisonnement réel cette fois, c’est-à-dire infiniment plus rigoureux que celui dont nous venons d’être victimes à

Sao-Thiago. On peut objecter qu’en Portugal et en Espagne il en sera de même. C’est possible, mais ce n’est pas sûr. D’ailleurs, nous serons arrivés alors, et cela nous donnera du courage. Dans ces conditions, je vote pour la continuation du voyage commencé, et je pense que tout le monde est ici de mon avis.”

Le speech de Baker obtint en effet un assentiment unanime, et le capitaine Pip se contenta d’y répondre par un geste d’acquiescement. Cependant, la solution ne le satisfaisait qu’à moitié, et qui l’eût écouté le soir de ce jour eût pu l’entendre murmurer d’un air soucieux au fidèle Artimon:

“Vous voulez connaître mon avis, master? Eh bien! c’est une péripétie, monsieur, une véritable péripétie!”

D’ailleurs, le problème ne se posa bientôt plus. Vers deux heures de l’après-midi, la brise tourna progressivement au sud, et la Santa-Maria commença à faire route vent arrière. Le retour se fermait pour elle. La seule route ouverte désormais était celle des Canaries et de l’Europe.

Ce fut à cette allure que, vers quatre heures et demie, on longea l’île du Sel, que nul ne pouvait considérer sans émotion. Toutes les lunettes se dirigèrent vers cette terre, au bord de laquelle le *Seamew* épuisé était venu mourir.

Un peu avant la nuit on perdit de vue cette dernière île de l’archipel du Cap-Vert. Maintenant, rien ne romprait plus le cercle de l’horizon, jusqu’au moment où l’on aurait connaissance des îles Canaries. C’était une affaire de trois ou quatre jours, si la brise actuelle se maintenait. En somme, on n’avait pas à se plaindre de cette première journée. Tout s’était bien passé, et l’on pouvait espérer que cette heureuse chance persisterait.

Un seul des passagers avait le droit d’être un peu moins satisfait, et il n’est pas besoin, pour le désigner, de le nommer par son nom de Thompson. Au repas de midi, il s’était procuré une assiette et l’avait hardiment offerte à la distribution générale. Mais Baker veillait, et l’assiette était restée vide. Au cours de l’après-midi, Thompson ayant essayé de s’aboucher avec Roastbeaf, dans l’espoir que celui-ci n’aurait pas le front de résister à un ordre de son ancien chef, il se heurta encore à Baker qui le surveillait avec un invincible zèle. Décidément, l’affaire devenait sérieuse.

Thompson, mourant de faim, comprit qu’il fallait céder, et il se décida à aller trouver son impassible bourreau.

“Monsieur, lui dit-il, je meurs de faim.

-Je m’en réjouis, répondit Baker avec flegme, car cela prouve en faveur de votre estomac.

-Trêve de plaisanteries, s’il vous plaît, dit brutalement Thompson que la souffrance jetait hors de son caractère, et veuillez me dire jusqu’où vous comptez pousser celle dont vous me rendez victime.

-De quelle plaisanterie voulez-vous parler? demanda Baker en simulant une profonde recherche. Je ne crois pas avoir fait avec vous la moindre plaisanterie.

-Ainsi, s’écria Thompson, vous comptez sérieusement me laisser mourir de faim?

-Dame! fit Baker, si vous ne voulez pas payer!

-C’est bon, conclut Thompson, je paierai. Nous réglerons ce compte-là plus tard...

-Avec les autres, approuva Baker d’un ton aimable.

-Veuillez donc me dire à quel prix vous m’assurerez la liberté de dormir et de manger jusqu’à la fin du voyage.

-Du moment qu’il s’agit d’un forfait”, dit Baker avec importance, tout se simplifie étrangement.

Il tira son carnet et en feuilleta les pages.

“Voyons!... Hum!... Vous avez déjà versé une somme de quarante livres... C’est ça... Oui... Hum!... Parfaitement!... Eh bien! il ne s’agit plus que de payer un petit supplément de cinq cent soixante-douze livres, un shilling et deux pence - (quatorze mille trois cent un francs, quarante-cinq centimes) - pour avoir droit à tous les avantages du bord sans exception.

-Cinq cent soixante-douze livres! s’écria Thompson. C’est de la folie! Plutôt que de subir une pareille exigence, j’en appellerai à tous les passagers. Que diable! je trouverai bien un honnête homme parmi eux.

-Je puis le leur demander, proposa Baker avec amabilité. Toutefois, je vous conseillerai d’examiner auparavant comment cette somme a été obtenue. L’affrètement de la Santa-Maria nous a coûté net deux cent quarante livres; nous avons dû consacrer deux cent quatre-vingt-dix livres et dix-neuf shillings à l’acquisition des vivres nécessaires pour la traversée; et enfin l’aménagement du navire nous a entraînés dans une dépense de quatre-vingt-une livres, deux shillings et deux pence; soit, au total, six cent douze livres un shilling et deux pence, dont j’ai déduit, comme je vous l’ai dit, les quarante livres que vous avez déjà versées. Je ne pense pas que vous puissiez, contre une réclamation aussi juste, obtenir l’appui de ceux que vous avez dépouillés. Toutefois, si le cœur vous en dit...”

Non, le cœur n’en disait pas à Thompson, qui le fit comprendre du geste. Sans essayer une résistance à l’avance inutile, il ouvrit sa précieuse sacoche et en tira une liasse de bank-notes, qu’il réintégra avec soin, après avoir prélevé la somme exigée.

“Il en reste”, fit Baker en montrant la sacoche.

Thompson ne répondit que par un pâle et indéfinissable sourire.

“Mais pas pour longtemps! ajouta le féroce administrateur, tandis que le sourire ébauché s’évanouissait sur les lèvres de Thompson. Nous aurons bientôt à régler les petits comptes qui nous sont personnels.”

“Avant de quitter son implacable adversaire, Thompson voulut au moins en avoir pour son argent. À bord de la Santa-Maria, il avait retrouvé le fidèle Piperboom, et le Hollandais, comme si la chose eût été d’une évidente légitimité, s’était de nouveau incrusté à celui qu’il persistait à considérer comme le gouverneur de la colonie errante. Thompson promenait partout cette ombre triple de lui-même, et l’obstination de l’énorme passager commençait à l’agacer outre mesure.

“Ainsi donc, demanda-t-il, il est bien entendu que j’ai les droits de tout le monde, que je suis un passager comme les autres?

-Absolument.

-Dans ce cas, vous m’obligeriez en me débarrassant de cet insupportable Piperboom, dont je ne puis me dépêtrer. Tant que j’étais administrateur général, il me fallait le subir. Mais, maintenant, c’est bien le moins que...

-Évidemment! évidemment! interrompit Baker. Malheureusement, je ne suis pas plus administrateur que vous. Au reste, rien ne vous sera plus facile, ajouta l'impitoyable railleur en pesant sur les mots, que de faire comprendre à Mr. Van Piperboom combien il vous gêne."

Thompson, pâle de colère, dut se retirer avec ce viatique, et, à partir de cet instant, Baker cessa de faire à lui la moindre attention.

En se levant, le 6 juillet, les passagers eurent la surprise de voir la Santa-Maria presque immobile. Dans la nuit, la brise avait molli peu à peu, et, au lever du soleil, un calme plat s'était étendu sur la mer que soulevait une houle longue et sans rides. Ballottée par cette houle accourue de l'horizon de l'ouest, la Santa-Maria frappait ses voiles contre les mâts en gémissant et en roulant d'une manière écœurante.

Malgré la satisfaction très réelle que tous éprouvèrent en constatant à quel point, sous l'influence de l'air pur de la mer, l'état d'Hamilton et de Blockhead s'était amélioré, ce fut une bien triste journée. Ce calme imprévu représentait une prolongation du voyage. Cependant, mieux valait encore trop peu que trop de vent, et l'on prit en patience un ennui qui ne s'aggravait pas d'inquiétude.

On aurait pu croire que tel n'était pas l'avis du capitaine Pip, à voir et combien fréquemment son strabisme des grandes occasions faisait diverger ses prunelles, et de quelle cruelle façon il se pétrissait le bout du nez. Évidemment, quelque chose d'anormal choquait le brave capitaine, dont les regards se portaient constamment vers cet horizon de l'ouest d'où venaient les longues ondulations qui secouaient la Santa-Maria.

Trop au courant des tics et des manies de leur estimable commandant pour n'en pas comprendre le mystérieux langage, les passagers regardaient, eux aussi, cet horizon de l’ouest, sans parvenir à y rien remarquer. Là comme ailleurs, le ciel était d’un bleu pur sur lequel ne tranchait aucun nuage.

Ce fut seulement vers deux heures de l’après-midi qu’une légère vapeur y apparut, et grandit ensuite lentement, en passant successivement du blanc au gris et du gris au noir.

Vers cinq heures, le soleil déclinant entra dans cette vapeur, et la mer se teignit aussitôt d’une sinistre teinte de cuivre. À six heures, la nuée fuligineuse avait déjà envahi la moitié du ciel quand les premiers commandements du capitaine éclatèrent:

“À carguer le clinfoc!... À carguer le petit cacatois!... À carguer le flèche!... À carguer le grand cacatois!”

Un quart d’heure plus tard, on amenait le grand foc et les perroquets, et, vingt minutes après, le petit volant, la trinquette et la brigantine, à la place de laquelle on enverguait une voile de cape. Ce travail à peine terminé, le capitaine faisait serrer la grand-voile, la misaine et le grand volant, ne laissant dehors que le petit foc, les deux huniers au bas ris et une voile de cape au mât d’artimon.

L’atmosphère était calme cependant. Mais ce calme trop profond n’avait rien de rassurant.

À huit heures précises, en effet, la rafale arriva comme la foudre, accompagnée de torrents de pluie. La Santa- Maria s’inclina à faire croire qu’elle allait chavirer, puis, présentant son étrave à la mer, commença à bondir sur les lames subitement dressées.

Le capitaine invita alors tout le monde à aller chercher le sommeil. Il n’y avait plus rien à faire maintenant qu’à attendre.

Jusqu’au matin, en effet, la Santa-Maria demeura à la cape, et les passagers furent durement secoués dans leurs couchettes. La tempête malheureusement ne montra, au cours de cette nuit, aucune tendance à décroître. Bien au contraire, au lever du soleil, elle parut redoubler de violence. Le capitaine Pip, au surplus, n’était pas trop mécontent de la manière dont la Santa-Maria tenait la cape. Elle montait légèrement à la lame, le pont à peine mouillé par les embruns. Par contre, il était moins satisfait de la mâture, et il constatait avec ennui la mauvaise qualité du filin acheté à Sao-Thiago. Les haubans et les galhaubans, sous les chocs imprimés par la mer, avaient subi un allongement considérable, et les bas mâts jouaient dans les emplantures.

Durant toute cette journée, la rage de l’ouragan ne cessa d’augmenter. Sans nul doute, on avait à lutter contre un de ces cyclones capables de désoler des contrées entières. Avant midi, les lames devenues monstrueuses commencèrent à déferler avec fureur. La Santa-Maria reçut plus d’un paquet de mer dont son coffre fut rempli.

Le capitaine s’entêtait cependant à tenir la cape. Mais, vers sept heures du soir, l’état du vent et des flots s’aggrava dans de telles proportions, la mâture se mit à osciller d’une façon si menaçante, qu’il jugea impossible de conserver cette allure. Comprenant qu’il y aurait eu folie à s’obstiner, il se résolut à fuir vent arrière devant la tempête.

Dans la situation où se trouvait la Santa-Maria, passer de la cape au vent arrière ou réciproquement est toujours une manœuvre délicate. Entre l’instant où le navire présente son étrave aux lames courroucées et celui où il a pris assez de vitesse pour qu’elles glissent sous son couronnement, il en est forcément un où il les reçoit par le flanc. Un navire frappé à ce moment par une lame suffisamment forte serait roulé comme un bouchon. Il importe donc de surveiller la mer et de profiter d'une accalmie. Le choix de la minute propice est du plus haut intérêt.

Le capitaine Pip avait pris lui-même la barre, tandis que l'équipage tout entier se tenait prêt à haler sur les bras de bâbord du grand hunier.

“Brasse carré derrière! commanda le capitaine”, choisissant avec tact l'instant favorable et tournant rapidement la roue du gouvernail.

Le navire abattit d'un seul coup sur tribord et tomba dans le lit du vent. Mais tout n'était pas dit encore. Il ne suffit pas qu'un navire présente son arrière aux lames, il faut aussi qu'il ait acquis une vitesse assez grande pour atténuer la violence de leurs assauts.

“Brasse carré devant! commanda le capitaine dès que le navire fut arrivé. À larguer la misaine!... Cargue le petit foc et le foc d'artimon!”

La manœuvre avait heureusement réussi. Sous l'impulsion de la misaine offrant au vent sa vaste superficie, la Santa-Maria, en quelques secondes commença à fendre les flots avec la vitesse d'un cheval au galop. Précaution supplémentaire, elle traînait derrière elle un filet de pêche trouvé dans la soute aux voiles, filet dont le rôle consistait à empêcher les lames de déferler sur la dunette.

L'allure du vent arrière succédant à celle de la cape, ce fut pour les passagers un repos relatif. Ils en apprécièrent fort la douceur et estimèrent le danger considérablement atténué.

Le capitaine était d’une opinion contraire. À fuir ainsi dans l’est, il calculait qu’on aurait atteint la côte d’Afrique avant d’avoir fait trois cent cinquante milles. Et trois cent cinquante milles ne sont pas longs à franchir, à la vitesse que le vent imprimait à la Santa-Maria.

Durant toute la nuit, il veilla. Mais le soleil se leva le 8 juillet sans que ses craintes se fussent réalisées. De tous côtés l’horizon était libre. Le capitaine espéra s’être trompé dans son estime et souhaita une anordie lui permettant d’aller coûte que coûte en relâche à Saint- Louis du Sénégal.

Malheureusement, l’anordie espérée ne vint pas, le vent resta fixé dans l’ouest-nord-ouest, et la Santa-Maria continua à filer comme un express vers la côte d’Afrique.

Mis au courant de la situation par quelque indiscrétion des hommes de l’équipage, les passagers partageaient maintenant les angoisses de leur capitaine, et tous les yeux cherchaient dans l’est cette côte vers laquelle courait le navire.

Ce fut seulement vers cinq heures du soir qu’on l’aperçut par bâbord devant. Le rivage sans doute se creusait en cet endroit en une sorte de golfe, car la Santa- Maria le longeait comme une flèche, au lieu de se diriger normalement sur lui. Mais peu à peu la côte s’infléchit vers le sud, et la distance qui en séparait la Santa-Maria diminua rapidement.

Seul, à bâbord, sur la dunette, le capitaine regardait de toute son âme cette côte basse, sablonneuse, limitée à l’arrière plan par des dunes et défendue par une barrière de récifs.

Tout à coup il se redressa et, ayant craché dans la mer avec violence, formula à l’adresse d’Artimon:

“Dans une demi-heure nous serons au plain, master, mais, par la barbe de ma mère, on se défendra, monsieur!”

Puis, Artimon ayant paru approuver vivement, le capitaine commanda dans les hurlements de la mer et du vent:

“La barre à bâbord toute! À larguer le foc d’artimon, les enfants!”

L’équipage s’était élancé. Deux minutes plus tard, la Santa-Maria, revenue à l’allure de la cape, s’efforçait péniblement de s’élever de la côte. De nouveau, elle bondissait au-dessus des lames, qui, capelant son gaillard d’avant, déferlaient sur le pont de bout en bout.

Le capitaine jouait là sa dernière carte. Serait-elle bonne, et emporterait-elle le gain de la partie? On put le croire d’abord.

En effet, peu d’instants après celui où le navire avait cessé de courir vent arrière, le vent et la mer manifestèrent une tendance à s’apaiser. Bientôt, le capitaine fit hisser le grand volant et laissa porter d’un quart. Dans ces conditions, il n’était pas impossible d’arriver à reprendre du champ.

Malheureusement, tombant dans un excès contraire, le vent, tout à l’heure si furieux, ne cessa de mollir par degrés. En quelques heures, la Santa-Maria, effroyablement secouée par la mer encore démontée, se vit immobilisée dans le calme de l’atmosphère que n’agitait plus une risée, plus un souffle.

Le capitaine inféra de ce changement si prompt qu’il se trouvait au centre même de la tempête, et ne douta pas de la voir renaître dans un délai plus ou moins long. En attendant, cette accalmie rendait la voilure inutile. La Santa-Maria ne gouvernait même plus. Ce n’était qu’une épave que la houle portait peu à peu à la terre.

Vers sept heures du soir, le rivage restait à moins de cinq encablures. À trois cents mètres du couronnement, les lames se brisaient avec rage contre la barrière de récifs.

Il est rare que l’on puisse s’approcher aussi près de la terre d’Afrique. D’ordinaire, des hauts-fonds en défendent les abords, et parfois jusqu’à quinze kilomètres au large. On devait en somme remercier le hasard qui, tout malveillant qu’il fût, avait du moins conduit la Santa- Maria à l’un des rares points où cette immense succession de bancs de sable a été entamée par les courants et les remous.

Cependant, on ne pouvait aller plus loin. Le fond se relevait rapidement. La sonde, jetée sans cesse, n’accusait plus qu’une vingtaine de brasses. Le capitaine résolut de mouiller à tout prix.

Peut-être, en s’affourchant sur trois ancres, les deux ancres de bossoirs et l’ancre du grand panneau, en frappant cent brasses de chaîne sur chacune d’elles, réussirait-il à tenir tête à l’ouragan, quand celui-ci rugirait de nouveau.

Certes, c’était bien improbable. Combien de chances opposées de voir les chaînes brisées, les ancres chasser! Toutefois, c’était encore un espoir, et cet ultime espoir, un homme énergique ne devait point le mépriser.

Le capitaine fit donc faire peneau aux ancres de bossoirs et parer la bitture de la chaîne. Il allait donner l’ordre de mouiller, quand un incident inattendu vint changer la face des choses.

Subitement, sans que rien eût annoncé l’étrange phénomène, la mer s’était mise à bouillir autour de la Santa-Maria. Ce n’étaient plus des lames. L’eau s’entrechoquait bruyamment en une sorte de clapotis monstrueux.

À bord du navire, un cri universel de terreur s’était élevé. Seul, le capitaine demeura impassible et, d’un œil clairvoyant, observa la nouvelle attaque de la nature. Sans perdre son temps à rechercher les causes du phénomène, il s’efforça d’en profiter. Le remous poussait la Santa-Maria à la côte, et, circonstance favorable, grâce à une insaisissable brise de l’ouest, elle gouvernait maintenant. Peut-être réussirait-on à s’approcher du rivage et à mouiller dans une meilleure situation.

Précisément, devant l’étrave, un étroit chenal trouait la barrière de brisants, au-delà de laquelle une nappe d’eau tranquille apparaissait en avant d’une seconde rangée de récifs. S’il était possible de l’atteindre, on pourrait considérer le salut comme très probable. Dans ce port naturel, la Santa-Maria, agrippée au sol par ses ancres, résisterait certainement au retour prévu de l’ouragan; puis, le beau temps définitivement revenu, elle regagnerait le large, en sortant par le même chemin.

Le capitaine prit lui-même la barre et mit le cap sur la terre.

Toutefois, l’aspect singulier de la mer ne laissant pas de l’inquiéter, il fit avant tout déblayer le pont et la dunette de la foule qui les encombrait. Par son ordre, tous les passagers et employés non marins durent vider la place et se réfugier dans l’intérieur. Ceci fait, le capitaine se sentit l’esprit plus libre.

Sous la main de son maître, la Santa-Maria s’engagea dans le chenal, le franchit...

Le capitaine allait crier: “Mouille!”

Il n’en eut pas le temps.

Tout à coup, une lame énorme, gigantesque, colossale s’était dressée sur la mer, et ce coursier de l’océan accourait au galop sur l’arène liquide. En trois secondes, elle atteignit le bâtiment.

Que celui-ci l’eût reçue par le travers, il était roulé, détruit, anéanti, dispersé en impalpables allumettes. Mais, grâce à la manœuvre du capitaine, il présentait l’arrière à la vague prodigieuse, et cette circonstance fut le salut. La Santa-Maria fut enlevée comme une plume, tandis qu’une trombe d’eau s’abattait sur le pont, puis, portée par la crête tumultueuse, elle fila vers la terre avec la vitesse d’un boulet.

À bord, tout était dans la confusion. Les uns se retenant aux manœuvres, les autres envahis par l’eau jusque dans le carré, marins et passagers avaient perdu la raison.

Le capitaine Pip conservait la plénitude de la sienne.

Ferme à son poste, il surveillait son navire, et sa main n’avait pas lâché la barre, à laquelle il se cramponnait dans ce désordre des éléments. Homme, si petit au milieu de la fureur grandiose de la nature, son âme la dominait encore, et c’est sa volonté souveraine qui guidait vers la mort son navire révolté. Rien n’échappa à son regard, qu’aucun strabisme n’affaiblissait à cette heure. Il vit la vague frapper les récifs, s’écraser contre eux, se recourber en une volute immense et monter à l’assaut du rivage, tandis que les cataractes du ciel, s’ouvrant tout à coup, mêlaient le déluge de leurs eaux à celles de la terre.

Au sommet de la volute d’écume, la Santa-Maria, en brave navire, s’était légèrement enlevée. Avec elle, elle était montée. Avec elle, elle redescendit. Un épouvantable choc l’arrêta dans sa course.

Il y eut un horrible craquement. Tout fut renversé, tout fut brisé à bord. Un formidable paquet de mer balaya le pont de bout en bout. Le capitaine, arraché de la barre, fut jeté du haut de la dunette. Les mâts, d'un seul coup, vinrent en bas avec tout leur gréement.

En un instant, la catastrophe était consommée, et la Santa-Maria - ce qui en restait, du moins - demeura immobile dans la nuit, sous la pluie diluvienne, tandis qu'autour d'elle hurlait la tempête renaissante.

CHAPITRE XII

OÙ L'ON NE FAIT QUE CHANGER DE GEÔLIERS

On était au 9 juillet. Depuis près d'un mois déjà, selon le programme de l'Agence Thompson, on aurait dû fouler le pavé de Londres. Au lieu des rues vivantes, des maisons solides de la vieille capitale de l'Angleterre, que voyait- on?

Limitée d'un côté par un océan aux lames déferlantes, de l'autre par une chaîne ininterrompue de dunes stériles et tristes, une simple bande de sable s'allongeant à l'infini vers le nord et vers le sud. Au milieu de cette bande, presque au centre de sa largeur, un navire gisait, masse de débris informes, porté par une incommensurable puissance à deux cents mètres de la mer.

La nuit avait été dure pour les touristes naufragés. Tâtonnant dans une ombre épaisse, ils s'étaient à grand- peine défendus contre la pluie, dont le pont entrouvert ne les abritait plus qu'à demi. Fort heureusement, le vent n'avait pas tardé à déblayer le ciel, et l'on avait pu trouver quelques instants d'un sommeil bercé par ses sifflements décroissants.

À l'aube seulement, il fut possible d'apprécier toute l'étendue du désastre. Il était immense, irréparable.

Entre la mer et le bâtiment échoué, plus de deux cents mètres s'étendaient. Cette distance, que la mer avait pu lui faire franchir en quelques secondes, quelle puissance humaine serait capable de la lui faire rétrograder? Les plus étrangers aux choses de la mécanique et de la navigation perdirent sur-le-champ tout espoir de renflouer jamais la Santa-Maria.

D’ailleurs, la Santa-Maria n’existait plus. Ce n’était plus un navire, mais une misérable épave.

Le choc l’avait cassée en deux. Une énorme blessure déchirait ses flancs. Plus rien ne demeurait sur le pont, rompu vers son milieu. Tout avait été emporté, sièges, chaloupe, canots, et jusqu’à la mâture, dont quelques restes pendaient encore à des haubans brisés.

Tel est le spectacle qui s’offrit aux yeux des passagers et les plongea dans un accablement désespéré.

Ce fut comme de coutume l’impassibilité de leur capitaine qui leur rendit un peu de courage et d’espoir. En compagnie de Mr. Bishop complètement remis de ses brûlures, il se promenait à pas comptés sur le sable lorsque le soleil se leva. En peu d’instants, les deux promeneurs furent entourés du cercle silencieux des passagers.

Dès que tout le monde fut rassemblé autour de lui, le capitaine procéda d’abord à un appel général. Un éclair de satisfaction passa dans ses yeux, lorsqu’il se fut ainsi assuré que personne ne manquait. La maison était détruite, mais ses habitants étaient saufs, et cet heureux résultat était dû en grande partie à sa prévoyance. S’il avait toléré que l’on restât sur le pont, que de victimes n’aurait pas faites la chute effroyable de la mâture?

L’appel terminé, le capitaine exposa brièvement la situation.

Par un de ces raz de marée que les cyclones provoquent si fréquemment, la Santa-Maria avait été jetée sur la côte d’Afrique, de telle façon que son renflouement devait être considéré comme irréalisable. On était, en conséquence, dans l’obligation de l’abandonner et de commencer par terre un voyage dont l’issue demeurait fort aléatoire.

La côte d’Afrique a, en effet, une déplorable réputation, et il faut reconnaître qu’il n’en est pas de plus méritée.

Entre le Maroc au nord et le Sénégal au sud, s’étendent les douze cents kilomètres des rivages sahariens. Celui que sa mauvaise étoile fait aborder en un point quelconque de cette étendue sablonneuse, sans eau et sans vie, que parsème une rare et grêle végétation, a encore à redouter les hommes, qui viennent ajouter leur cruauté à celle de la nature. Le long de ces plages inhospitalières, rôdent des bandes de Maures dont la rencontre est pire que celle des animaux féroces.

Il importait donc de savoir à quelle distance d’un pays civilisé le vent avait porté la Santa-Maria. De cette question dépendait la perte ou le salut des naufragés.

Pour en trouver la solution, il fallait que le capitaine procédât à des observations solaires. Et n’était-il pas à craindre que le soleil restât caché derrière un rideau de nuages?

Fort heureusement, l’ouragan continuait à décroître et le ciel se fit plus pur d’heure en heure. À neuf heures, le capitaine réussit à prendre une bonne observation et une seconde à midi.

Le résultat de ses calculs fut immédiatement porté à la connaissance de tous, et les passagers apprirent ainsi que la Santa-Maria était venue se briser un peu au sud du cap Mirik, par 18° 37’ de longitude ouest et 19° 15’ de latitude nord, à plus de trois cent quarante kilomètres de la rive septentrionale du Sénégal!

La foudre en tombant n’eût pas produit plus de stupeur. Pendant cinq minutes, un silence pesant écrasa le groupe des naufragés. Les femmes ne poussèrent pas un cri. Anéanties, elles reportaient leurs regards vers les hommes, desquels, pères, frères ou maris, elles attendaient un espoir de salut.

Mais le mot d'espoir ne venait pas. La situation était trop claire dans sa dramatique simplicité pour que personne pût s'illusionner sur le sort qui lui était réservé. Trois cent quarante kilomètres à franchir! Il y faudrait au moins dix-sept jours, en admettant qu'une caravane dans la composition de laquelle entraient des femmes, des enfants et des malades fit quotidiennement vingt kilomètres sur ce sol de sable. Or, était-il probable que l'on pût, sans fâcheuse rencontre, suivre pendant dix-sept jours un littoral d'ordinaire sillonné par tant de bandes de maraudeurs?

Au milieu de la désolation générale, quelqu'un dit tout à coup:

“Où cent personnes ne passent pas, un homme passe.”

C'était Robert qui avait prononcé cette phrase, qu'il adressait directement au capitaine. Les yeux de celui-ci brillèrent et se relevèrent interrogateurs.

“L'un de nous, continua Robert, ne peut-il pas partir en éclaireur? Si nous sommes à trois cent quarante kilomètres de Saint-Louis, avant Saint-Louis il y a Portendick, et entre le Sénégal et ce comptoir s'étendent des bois de gommiers dans lesquels les troupes françaises font de fréquentes patrouilles. Jusque-là il y a tout au plus cent vingt kilomètres que, sous l'empire de la nécessité, un homme isolé peut franchir en deux jours. C'est donc seulement deux jours de vivres à emporter. Pendant ce temps, rien ne s'oppose à ce que le gros des passagers commence à suivre lentement le littoral. Avec un peu de chance, votre émissaire, en quatre jours, ramènera une escorte sous la protection de laquelle on n'aura plus rien à craindre. Si l'on veut, je m'offre à partir à l'instant même.

-Par la barbe de ma mère! voilà qui est parlé en gentleman! s’écria le capitaine Pip, en serrant chaleureusement la main de Robert. À cela je n’ai qu’une objection à faire: c’est que ce voyage-là me regarde et qu’il m’appartient de droit.

-C’est une erreur, commandant, objecta Robert.

-Et pourquoi donc? demanda le capitaine, en fronçant les sourcils.

-D’abord, répondit tranquillement Robert, il y a la question de l’âge. Où je résisterai, vous succomberez.”

Le capitaine approuva de la tête.

“En outre, votre place est parmi ceux dont vous êtes le guide et le soutien naturel. Un général ne court pas aux avant-postes.

-Non, dit le capitaine, en serrant de nouveau la main de Robert, mais il y envoie ses soldats d’élite. Vous partirez donc.

-Dans une heure je serai en route”, déclara Robert, qui commença aussitôt ses préparatifs.

La protestation du capitaine demeura isolée. Nul, parmi tous ces gens qui ne faisaient pas profession d’héroïsme, ne songea à disputer à Robert le dangereux honneur qu’il s’était attribué. Quant à Roger, il trouvait toute naturelle la résolution de son ami. Lui aussi, il eût exécuté ce projet simplement s’il l’avait conçu. Un autre l’avait devancé. Ce serait son tour une autre fois, voilà tout. Il proposa cependant à Robert de partir avec lui. Mais celui-ci refusa et pria, sans s’expliquer davantage, son compatriote de veiller sur Alice qu’il estimait particulièrement en péril et qu’il abandonnait à regret.

Roger accepta la mission et promit de la remplir fidèlement.

Il eut pourtant une réelle émotion, quand Robert, bien armé et pourvu de munitions et de trois jours de vivres, se décida au départ. Silencieusement, les deux hommes s’étreignirent la main.

Mais Robert avait à faire d’autres adieux plus cruels. Mrs. Lindsay était là, et Robert se sentait le cœur plein de tristesse. S’il s’était ainsi offert en holocauste, ce n’est pas qu’il ignorât les dangers de l’entreprise. Combien de chances n’avait-il pas de ne jamais revoir celle qui le couvrait en ce moment d’un regard enflammé? Appelant à lui tout son courage, il trouva la force de sourire, en s’inclinant respectueusement devant la passagère américaine.

Celle-ci se garda de toute amollissante parole de crainte et de regret. Pâle et tremblante, elle tendit une main ferme à celui qui peut-être allait mourir pour tous.

“Merci! lui dit-elle seulement. À bientôt!”

Et, dans sa voix, il y avait plus qu’un espoir. Il y avait une volonté, il y avait un ordre.

“À bientôt!” répondit Robert redressé, avec la certitude subite d’obéir.

Les naufragés demeurés autour de la Santa-Maria suivirent longtemps des yeux le courageux courrier. On le vit s’éloigner sur la grève, saluer une dernière fois de la main... Quelques instants plus tard, il disparaissait derrière les dunes qui bordaient le rivage.

“Je serai là dans quatre jours”, avait affirmé Robert. Quatre jours, cela reportait au 13 juillet. Mais on ne pouvait attendre cette date à l’abri du navire échoué, que son inclinaison rendait inhabitable. Le capitaine improvisa donc un campement sommaire sur la grève à l’aide de voiles et d’espars. Tout était terminé avant la nuit, et les naufragés purent s’endormir sous la garde de matelots armés se relevant aux quarts, à terre comme à bord.

Toutefois, il fut long à venir, le sommeil, au cours de cette première nuit sur ce rivage semé d’embûches. Plus d’un resta jusqu’à l’aube les yeux ouverts dans l’ombre, l’oreille tendue, écoutant le moindre frémissement des tentes.

Pour Mrs. Lindsay surtout, la nuit fut une perpétuelle angoisse. À la douleur qui l’accablait, une inquiétude nouvelle était venue s’ajouter, dont l’absence inexplicable de son beau-frère était la cause. Tout d’abord, elle n’avait accordé aucune importance à cette disparition pourtant assez singulière. Mais, avec le temps, elle s’en était étonnée. Vainement elle avait alors cherché Jack dans la foule des passagers et des domestiques. Il était demeuré introuvable.

Au milieu de l’ombre et du silence de la nuit, Alice ne pouvait détacher son esprit de cette surprenante disparition. Elle avait beau le chasser, ce fait bizarre s’imposait à son attention, et quelque chose de plus fort qu’elle associait invinciblement dans sa crainte grandissante les noms de Jack et de Robert.

La nuit se passa sans incident et, dès l’aube, tout le monde fut sur pied.

La première levée, Alice put aussitôt vérifier l’exactitude de ses soupçons. L’un après l’autre, elle dénombra les naufragés.

Jack Lindsay, décidément, n’était pas parmi eux.

Alice garda le silence sur cette absence qui la torturait. À quoi bon parler? Le mal, s’il devait l’être, était fait à cette heure, se disait-elle, l’âme glacée à cette pensée.

Jack avait toujours vécu si seul, il s’était toujours conduit depuis le commencement du voyage d’une manière si réservée et si sombre, que son absence ne faisait pas grand vide. Nul, en dehors d’Alice, ne la remarqua parmi les naufragés d’ailleurs assaillis par d’autres soucis.

Au cours de cette journée, on procéda au déchargement de la Santa-Maria. Peu à peu, les caisses de biscuits et de conserves s’alignèrent sur la grève où elles furent disposées en une sorte de retranchement.

Le capitaine Pip avait, en effet, résolu qu’on attendrait sur place le retour de Robert Morgand. S’il admettait qu’il aurait été possible d’emporter avec soi assez de vivres pour accomplir le parcours, il n’avait trouvé, au contraire, aucune solution au problème de l’eau, et cette difficulté insurmontable avait dicté sa décision. On ne possédait pas assez de gourdes ni assez d’outres pour prémunir contre la soif un aussi grand nombre de personnes. Et, quant à traîner avec soi des tonneaux d’eau, c’était une entreprise irréalisable. Sur place, au contraire, on n’aurait qu’à puiser à ces tonneaux, et on pouvait le faire pendant un mois sans crainte de les tarir. Il n’y avait donc aucune imprudence à retarder le départ de quelques jours. Si, au bout du temps qu’il avait fixé lui-même, Robert Morgand n’était pas de retour, alors il conviendrait de prendre, coûte que coûte, un parti énergique. Jusque-là, les caisses de vivres et les tonneaux remplis d’eau ou d’alcool formeraient un rempart appuyé à la mer par ses deux extrémités et à l’abri duquel une troupe aussi nombreuse n’aurait à redouter aucune surprise.

Toute la journée se passa dans ces transbordements et dans ces préparatifs. L’inclinaison de la Santa-Maria compliquait beaucoup le travail et doublait la peine des travailleurs. Le soleil se coucha, comme la dernière tente s’élevait au milieu d’un retranchement sans solution de continuité.

En raison de la sécurité inspirée par la tranquillité de la nuit précédente, et qu’augmentaient encore les modifications apportées au campement, le capitaine Pip autorisa dans la garde de nuit un changement nécessité par l’excessive fatigue de son équipage surmené. Au lieu de se relayer par bordée, deux hommes seulement veilleraient et se remplaceraient d’heure en heure. Ainsi seraient diminuées les chances de voir les grand-gardes succomber au sommeil, deux hommes suffisant d’ailleurs à donner l’alerte avec les nouvelles dispositions adoptées.

Le capitaine Pip prit lui-même la garde à neuf heures en compagnie du fidèle Artimon. Une heure après il était remplacé par le second, que le maître, une heure plus tard, remplacerait à son tour.

Avant de se retirer à l’abri du rempart des caisses, le capitaine jeta autour de lui un dernier regard. Rien n’apparaissait d’insolite. Le désert était paisible et silencieux, et Artimon ne manifestait au surplus aucune inquiétude.

Après avoir recommandé à son remplaçant une garde vigilante, le capitaine rentra sous la tente où reposaient déjà un grand nombre des passagers, et, dompté par la fatigue, s’endormit aussitôt.

Depuis combien de temps dormait-il ainsi, quand un rêve vint troubler son sommeil?

Dans ce rêve, il voyait, sans en comprendre la cause, Artimon s’agiter d’une manière singulière. Le chien, après avoir vainement essayé de réveiller son maître, allait, en grondant sourdement, glisser son museau hors de la tente, puis revenait tirer le capitaine par un pan de son habit. Mais le capitaine s’obstinait à dormir.

Alors, Artimon n’hésitait plus. Il sautait sur le corps de son ami, lui léchait le visage à coups rapides, et même, cette manœuvre étant encore insuffisante, se risquait à lui mordiller une oreille.

Cette fois, le capitaine ouvrit les yeux et reconnut que le rêve était une réalité. D’un bond, il fut sur ses pieds et se dirigea rapidement vers l’entrée de la tente, conduit, tiraillé par Artimon.

Il n’eut pas le loisir de l’atteindre.

Tout à coup, Artimon éclata en furieux aboiements, et, sans avoir eu le temps d’y rien comprendre, le capitaine renversé vit en tombant ses compagnons, réveillés en sursaut, maintenus par une bande de Maures que leurs burnous faisaient dans la nuit ressembler à une nuée de fantômes.

CHAPITRE XIII

OÙ L'EXCURSION DE L'AGENCE THOMPSON MENACE DE PRENDRE DES PROPORTIONS TOUT À FAIT IMPRÉVUES

Le long de l'ourlet liquide dont la mer borde le rivage, contournant les dunes les plus hautes, franchissant les autres, Robert Morgand suit d'un pas souple et régulier la route du sud. Afin de relever leur courage, il a un peu doré pour ses compagnons la situation véritable. Mais, en réalité, il ne s'y trompe pas. C'est un minimum de cent soixante kilomètres qu'il lui faudra égrener, avant d'arriver dans le rayon de l'influence française.

Cent soixante kilomètres, cela représente, à ce train persistant de six kilomètres à l'heure, trois jours de voyage et d'efforts, à raison de dix heures de marche par chaque journée.

Ces dix heures de marche, Robert a résolu qu'il les ferait ce jour même. Parti à trois heures de l'après-midi, il ne s'arrêtera qu'à une heure du matin, pour repartir au lever de l'aube. Ainsi, il gagnera vingt-quatre heures.

Le soleil décline à l'horizon. Il fait grand jour encore, mais une fraîcheur s'élève de la mer et stimule le courage du marcheur, qui, depuis près de cinq heures, suit sa route obstinée. Avant une heure, il fera nuit, et alors la marche sera douce sur ce sable ferme, qui offre au pied un élastique point d'appui.

Autour de Robert, c'est le désert et sa poignante tristesse. Pas un oiseau, pas un être animé dans cette immensité, que son regard, de temps à autre, peut parcourir jusqu'à l'horizon, selon le vallonnement capricieux des dunes. Sur cette étendue morne, quelques rares touffes de palmiers nains indiquent seules la vie latente de la terre.

La tempête a cessé, et du ciel tombe la majesté du soir. Tout est calme et silence. Nul bruit, sauf celui de la mer qui chante, en brisant ses rides sur la grève.

Soudain, Robert s’arrête. Illusion ou réalité, le sifflement d’une balle a fait vibrer l’air à deux centimètres de son oreille, bientôt suivi d’une sèche détonation vite étouffée dans la grandeur de cette plage sans écho.

D’un bond, Robert s’est retourné et, à moins de dix pas derrière lui, parvenu jusque-là à la faveur du tapis de sable assourdissant sa marche, il voit, avec un mélange de colère et d’angoisse, Jack Lindsay qui, un genou en terre, le vise.

Sans perdre un instant, Robert s’élance sur cet assassin, sur ce lâche. Un choc arrête son élan. Une douleur fulgurante lui étreint l’épaule, et, comme une masse, il s’écroule en avant, le visage enfoui dans le sable.

Son œuvre accomplie, Jack Lindsay s’éloigna rapidement. Il ne prit même pas la peine d’aller s’assurer de la mort de son ennemi. À quoi bon, d’ailleurs? Dans ce désert, mort ou blessé, n’était-ce pas la même chose? De toute manière, l’émissaire des naufragés n’arriverait pas à son but, et le secours ne viendrait pas.

Avoir arrêté le courrier de ses compagnons d’infortune, c’était quelque chose. Ce n’était pas tout. Pour que Jack Lindsay devînt le maître de l’un d’eux, il fallait que leur troupe tout entière tombât en son pouvoir.

Jack Lindsay disparut derrière un mouvement de dunes, poursuivant l’achèvement de l’œuvre commencée.

Robert - cadavre ou blessé? - gît sur le sable. Depuis qu’il est tombé à cette place, une nuit s’est écoulée, le soleil a décrit dans le ciel sa courbe diurne jusqu’à sa chute dans l’horizon, puis une seconde nuit a commencé qui s’achève, car déjà une lueur vague rougeoie le ciel à l’Orient.

Pendant ces longues heures, pas un mouvement n’est venu dire s’il reste à Robert un souffle de vie. D’ailleurs, vivrait-il, le soleil, en versant sur lui pour la deuxième fois ses rayons enflammés, va certainement marquer son dernier jour.

Mais, quelque chose a bougé auprès du corps immobile. Un animal, dont on ne saurait reconnaître l’espèce dans l’ombre encore épaisse, s’agite et gratte le sable sur lequel le visage repose. L’air, désormais, peut librement arriver jusqu’aux poumons, s’ils ont encore la faculté de respirer.

Le résultat de ce changement ne se fait pas attendre. Robert pousse quelques gémissements confus, puis essaie de se soulever. Une douleur cruelle dans le bras gauche le rejette haletant sur le sol.

Cependant, il a eu le temps de reconnaître son sauveur.

“Artimon!” soupira-t-il, près de s’évanouir de nouveau.

À l’appel de son nom, Artimon a répondu par des jappements délirants. Il se multiplie, il s’empresse. Sa langue moite et tiède se promène sur le visage du blessé, qu’il débarrasse de l’amalgame de sable et de sueur qui s’y est accumulé.

Maintenant, la vie afflue dans le cœur de Robert. Le sang se presse dans ses artères, ses tempes battent, les forces reviennent au galop. En même temps, le souvenir renaît, et il se rappelle les circonstances de sa chute.

Avec précautions, cette fois, il renouvelle son effort, et, bientôt, le voilà à genoux. Puis il se traîne au bord de la mer, et la fraîcheur de l'eau achève de le ranimer.

Le jour s'est complètement levé. Au prix de mille peines, il réussit alors à se dévêtir, et il examine sa blessure. Elle n'est pas grave. La balle s'est aplatie sur la clavicule sans la briser, et elle tombe à la première tentative. L'écrasement d'un nerf a seul causé l'effroyable douleur, et l'évanouissement n'a été prolongé que par la perte de sang et la diminution de respiration produite par le sable. Avec lucidité, Robert comprend tout cela, et, méthodiquement, il bande sa blessure à l'aide de son mouchoir mouillé d'eau salée. Déjà une souplesse relative est revenue au membre meurtri. N'était la faiblesse qui le terrasse encore, Robert serait capable de reprendre sa route.

Cette faiblesse, il faut la dompter, et Robert procède sur-le-champ à son premier repas, qu'il partage avec Artimon.

Mais Artimon semble n'accepter qu'à regret la nourriture offerte. Il va, vient, agité par une évidente inquiétude. Son compagnon est, à la fin, frappé de ces allures insolites. Il prend le chien dans ses bras, lui parle, le caresse... et tout à coup aperçoit un papier noué au collier de l'animal.

“Camp envahi. Faits prisonniers par les Maures. Pip.” Voilà la terrifiante nouvelle que Robert apprend, dès qu'il a fébrilement ouvert le billet.

Prisonniers des Maures! Alice aussi, par conséquent! Et aussi Roger! Et aussi Dolly!

En un instant, Robert a empaqueté le reste de ses vivres. Il est debout. Il n’y a plus de temps à perdre. Il doit marcher. Il marchera. La nourriture absorbée lui a rendu la force, que décuple la volonté.

“Artimon!” commande Robert prêt à partir.

Mais Artimon n’est plus là, et Robert, en regardant autour de lui, n’aperçoit plus qu’un point imperceptible qui s’éloigne, diminuant, à fond de train, le long de la mer. C’est le chien qui, sa mission remplie, va en rendre compte à qui de droit. La tête basse, la queue entre les jambes, le dos rond, il déboule, sans un arrêt, sans une distraction, de toute la vitesse de ses pattes, vers l’idée fixe, vers le maître.

“Brave bête!” murmure Robert en se mettant en route.

Machinalement, il jette un coup d’œil sur sa montre et s’aperçoit avec surprise qu’elle s’est arrêtée à une heure trente-cinq. Du soir ou du matin? Il se rappelle fort bien pourtant l’avoir remontée peu avant la traîtresse attaque de Jack Lindsay. Son petit cœur d’acier a donc dû battre une nuit, puis un jour entiers, et c’est seulement la nuit suivante qu’en a cessé le tic-tac régulier. À cette pensée, Robert sent des gouttes de sueur perler sur son front. Ainsi donc, il aurait été immobilisé pendant près de trente heures! Tombé le soir du 9 juillet, c’est le matin du 11 qu’il se serait réveillé. Que vont devenir tous ceux qui espèrent en lui?

Mais c’est la raison nouvelle de se hâter, et Robert presse le pas, après avoir réglé sa montre sur le soleil qui indique approximativement cinq heures du matin...

Jusqu’à onze heures, il marche ainsi, puis il s’accorde un bref repos, et s’endort d’un sommeil réparateur, la tête à l’ombre d’une touffe de palmiers nains. Ce sommeil lui fait le plus grand bien. Quand il se réveille, à quatre heures, il est énergique et fort comme autrefois. Il repart, et, jusqu’à dix heures du soir, ne s’arrête plus.

Cela fait douze heures de marche, pendant lesquelles il a dû franchir au moins soixante-dix kilomètres.

Le lendemain, il recommence, et va toujours sans se lasser. Mais cette journée est plus dure que celle de la veille. La fatigue accable le courageux marcheur. Par accès violents, la fièvre l’assaille et sa blessure le fait cruellement souffrir.

Après sa sieste du milieu du jour, il a peine à se remettre en route. Des éblouissements le font vaciller. Il va néanmoins, laissant derrière lui les kilomètres, dont chacun ajoute un supplice au précédent.

Enfin, dans le crépuscule, des masses sombres apparaissent. C’est la région des gommiers. Robert atteint ces arbres, tombe épuisé au pied de l’un d’eux, et s’endort d’un sommeil profond.

Quand il s’éveille, le soleil est déjà haut sur l’horizon. On est au 13 juillet, et Robert se reproche d’avoir si longtemps dormi. C’est là du temps perdu qu’il lui faudra regagner.

Hélas! comment le regagner, avec cette faiblesse qui le terrasse? Ses jambes sont molles, sa langue sèche, sa tête lourde. La fièvre le dévore. Son bras est immobilisé dans l’enflure de l’épaule. Qu’importe! il marchera, sur les genoux s’il le faut.

À l’ombre du gommier, au pied duquel il s’est étendu la veille, Robert contraint à la nourriture son estomac révolté. Il faut manger pour être fort, et, fermement, il dévore son dernier morceau de biscuit, il avale sa dernière goutte d’eau.

Désormais, il ne s’arrêtera plus avant d’avoir touché le but.

Il est deux heures de l’après-midi. Parti à six heures du matin, Robert poursuit sans trêve son interminable chemin. Depuis longtemps déjà, il comprend qu’il se traîne, et qu’il gagne à peine un kilomètre par heure. N’importe! il va toujours, ayant résolu de lutter tant qu’il lui resterait un souffle de vie.

Mais, voici que la lutte devient impossible. Les yeux du malheureux papillotent, et tout un kaléidoscope danse devant ses prunelles dilatées. Les pulsations de son cœur diminuent de force et s’espacent. L’air manque à sa poitrine. Robert peu à peu se sent glisser le long du gommier contre lequel il s’est désespérément appuyé.

À ce moment - c’est une hallucination de la fièvre sans doute - il croit voir passer sous le couvert une troupe nombreuse. Les fusils brillent. La blancheur des casques de liège renvoie les rayons du soleil.

“À moi! À moi!” crie Robert.

Hélas! la voix même lui manque. Si la troupe qu’il se figure apercevoir existe, nul ne l’entend de ceux qui la composent et qui poursuivent imperturbablement leur chemin.

“À moi!” murmure encore Robert, qui s’écroule enfin sur le sol, définitivement vaincu.

Ce moment où Robert succombait ainsi sur la dévorante terre d'Afrique était précisément celui qu'il avait, en partant, fixé pour son retour. Les naufragés n'avaient pas oublié le rendez-vous qu'il leur avait donné, et ils comptaient les heures en attendant le salut.

Aucun changement notable ne s'était fait dans leur situation, depuis qu'ils étaient tombés au pouvoir des Maures. Le camp était toujours à sa place auprès de la Santa-Maria échouée.

Dès que le capitaine Pip comprit quel nouveau malheur frappait le troupeau humain dont il avait assumé la garde, il n'essaya pas une résistance inutile. Docilement, il se laissa parquer avec tous les autres en une foule confuse qu'enserra un triple cercle d'Africains en armes. Il ne connut même pas la colère contre les deux matelots de garde, lors de la surprise, qui s'étaient si malheureusement acquittés de leur mission. Le mal était fait. À quoi eût servi de récriminer?

Le capitaine Pip chercha uniquement si, dans cette situation désespérée, il ne pouvait pas faire quelque chose d'utile pour le salut général. Il lui apparut aussitôt qu'il serait bon d'instruire Robert des derniers événements, s'il existait un moyen de lui faire parvenir cette communication. Or, ce moyen, le capitaine l'avait à sa disposition, et il se résolut à l'employer sans attendre.

Dans l'ombre, il griffonna un billet, et l'attacha au collier d'Artimon, sur le museau duquel il mit gravement un grave baiser. Puis, lui ayant fait sentir un objet appartenant à Robert, il reposa le chien à terre, et lui indiqua la direction du sud, en l'excitant de la voix.

Artimon partit comme une flèche, et, en moins d'une seconde, disparut dans la nuit.

C’était là un gros sacrifice qu’avait fait le pauvre capitaine. Exposer ainsi son chien! Il eût certes mieux aimé s’exposer lui-même. Pourtant, il n’avait pas hésité, jugeant indispensable de porter à la connaissance de Robert des événements qui modifieraient peut-être ses projets.

Il n’importe. Les dernières heures de la nuit furent pénibles pour le capitaine, dont la pensée courait avec son chien le long des grèves battues par l’Atlantique.

Le jour en se levant montra toute l’étendue du désastre. Le camp était ravagé, les tentes renversées; les caisses du retranchement éventrées laissaient voir leur contenu. Tout ce qui appartenait aux naufragés était réuni en un tas qui représentait désormais le butin du vainqueur.

Au-delà du camp, le spectacle était plus triste encore. Sur le sable, que rasait la lumière frisante de l’aube, deux corps étendus se détachaient énergiquement en sombre, et, dans ces deux cadavres, le capitaine reconnut en soupirant les deux marins qu’il fut heureux alors de n’avoir pas accusés en son âme. Au milieu de la poitrine de tous deux, presque à la même place un poignard était fiché jusqu’à la garde.

Dès que le jour fut complet, il y eut une certaine agitation parmi les Africains. Bientôt l’un d’eux, le cheikh sans doute, se détacha des autres et se dirigea vers le groupe des naufragés. Le capitaine aussitôt se porta à sa rencontre.

“Qui es-tu? demanda le cheikh en mauvais anglais.

-Le capitaine.

-C’est toi qui commandes à ces gens?

-Aux marins, oui. Les autres sont des passagers.

-Passagers? répéta le Maure d’un air indécis... Emmène avec toi ceux qui t’obéissent. Je veux parler aux autres”, reprit-il après un silence.

Mais le capitaine ne bougeait pas.

“Que veux-tu faire de nous?” osa-t-il interroger avec calme.

Le Maure fit un geste évasif.

“Tu le sauras tout à l’heure, dit-il. Va.”

Le capitaine, sans insister davantage, exécuta la consigne. Bientôt ses hommes et lui formèrent un groupe séparé de celui des touristes.

Au milieu de ceux-ci, le cheikh passait lentement, et l’un après l’autre il les interrogeait avec une étrange insistance. Qui était celui-ci? Quel était son nom? son pays? sa fortune? Avait-il laissé de la famille derrière lui? C’était un véritable questionnaire qu’il répétait sans se lasser, et auquel chacun répondait à sa guise, les uns disant tout bonnement la vérité, d’autres amplifiant leur situation sociale, d’autres se faisant plus pauvres que de raison.

Quand vint le tour des passagères américaines, Roger répondit pour elles, et pensa bien faire en leur donnant le plus d’importance possible. À son estime, c’était là le meilleur moyen de sauvegarder leur existence. Mais le cheikh l’interrompit dès les premiers mots.

“Ce n’est pas à toi que je parle, dit-il sans brutalité. Ces femmes sont-elles donc muettes?”

Roger resta un instant interloqué.

“Es-tu leur frère? leur père? leur mari?

-Celle-ci est ma femme”, crut pouvoir se permettre d’affirmer Roger en désignant Dolly.

Le Maure fit un geste de satisfaction.

“Bon! dit-il. Et celle-là?

-Est sa sœur, répondit Roger. Toutes deux sont de grandes dames dans leur pays.

-Grandes dames? insista le Maure, pour lequel ces mots parurent dénués de signification.

-Oui, des grandes dames, des reines.

-Reines? répéta encore le cheikh.

-Enfin, leur père est un grand chef”, expliqua Roger à bout d’images.

Cette dernière, d’ailleurs, parut avoir l’effet désiré.

“Oui! Général, général, traduisit librement le Maure d’un air satisfait. Et quel est le nom de la fille du grand chef?

-Lindsay, répondit Roger.

-Lindsay! répéta le Maure, qui, pour une raison mystérieuse, paraissait se plaire à la consonance de ces syllabes, Lindsay! Bon, ça!” ajouta-t-il, en passant au prisonnier suivant, non sans adresser un geste aimable à Roger de Sorgues et à ses deux protégées.

Le prisonnier suivant n’était autre que Thompson. Combien diminué de son importance, l’infortuné administrateur général! Aussi timide que jadis exubérant, il se faisait maintenant le plus petit possible.

“Que portes-tu là? lui demanda le cheikh brusquement.

-Là? balbutia Thompson démoralisé.

-Oui... Ce sac... Donne!” commanda le Maure, en mettant la main sur la précieuse sacoche que Thompson avait en bandoulière.

Celui-ci fit instinctivement un mouvement en arrière. Deux Africains s’élancèrent aussitôt, et Thompson se vit soulagé, en un clin d’œil, de son cher fardeau, sans qu’il osât pousser plus avant une inutile résistance.

Le cheikh ouvrit la sacoche conquise. Ses yeux brillèrent de plaisir.

“Bon! Très bon!” s’écria-t-il.

Absolument anéanti, son prisonnier était loin d’être du même avis.

Faisant suite, comme de juste, à Thompson, Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam - arrondissait sa vaste corpulence. Il ne semblait pas ému. Paisiblement, il réduisait en fumée d’énormes quantités de tabac, ses petits yeux curieusement ouverts sur les alentours.

Le cheikh, un long instant, considéra le géant blond avec une évidente admiration.

“Ton nom? demanda-t-il enfin.

-Ik begrijp niet wat. U van mij wilt, Mynheer de Cheik, maar ik veronderstel dat u wenscht te weten welke mijn naam is en uit welk land ik ben. Ik ben de Heer Van Piperboom, en woom te Rotterdam, een der voornaamste steden van Nederland.”

Le cheikh tendit l’oreille.

“Ton nom? insista-t-il.

-Ik ben de Heer Van Piperboom uit Rotterdam, répéta Van Piperboom, qui ajouta mélancoliquement:

-Overigens, waartoe dient het, u dit te zeggen? Het is blijkbaar, dat ik toch maar Hebreeuwsch voor u spreek, zooals ik dit voor de anderen ook doe.”

Le cheikh haussa les épaules et continua sa tournée, sans daigner répondre au gracieux salut de l’incompréhensible Hollandais.

La répétition des mêmes questions ne le lassait pas. À tous, il les posait, écoutant attentivement les réponses. Nul n’échappa à sa patiente enquête.

Cependant, fut-ce par une inexplicable distraction, fut- ce de propos délibéré, il en est un qu’il négligea d’interroger, et celui-là c’était Jack Lindsay.

Alice, en suivant des yeux la file des naufragés, avait eu la surprise d’apercevoir son beau-frère confondu avec les autres. Dès lors, elle ne l’avait plus quitté des yeux, et elle remarqua avec inquiétude qu’il n’était pas soumis à la règle commune.

L’absence certaine de Jack Lindsay, son retour, l’indifférence du cheikh maure, cet ensemble de faits jeta dans l’âme d’Alice un trouble que toute son énergie eut peine à dompter.

L’interrogatoire terminé, le cheikh se retirait parmi les siens, quand le capitaine Pip lui barra audacieusement le passage.

“Veux-tu me dire maintenant ce que tu comptes faire de nous?” lui demanda-t-il de nouveau avec un flegme que rien n’était capable d’entamer.

Le cheikh fronça le sourcil, puis, à la réflexion, secoua la tête avec nonchalance.

“Oui, dit-il. À ceux qui pourront payer rançon, la liberté sera rendue.

-Et les autres?

-Les autres!...” répéta le Maure.

D’un geste large il montra l’horizon.

“La terre d’Afrique a besoin d’esclaves, dit-il. Les jeunes ont la force et les vieux la sagesse.”

Parmi les naufragés, ce fut une explosion de désespoir. Ainsi donc, la mort ou la ruine, voilà ce qui les attendait.

Au milieu de l’abattement général, Alice gardait intact un courage qu’elle puisait dans sa confiance absolue en Robert. Il atteindrait les avant-postes français. Il délivrerait à l’heure dite ses compagnons de naufrage. Sur ce point, pas un doute ne s’élevait en elle.

Une certitude possède naturellement une grande force de persuasion, et sa foi entêtée fit renaître un peu d’espoir dans ces âmes déprimées.

Quelle n’aurait donc pas été sa confiance, déjà si complète, si elle avait été à la place du capitaine Pip. Vers huit heures du matin, celui-ci, avec une joie désordonnée qu’il refoula soigneusement, avait vu revenir Artimon, dont le retour passa aussi inaperçu que le départ.

D’ailleurs, Artimon était loin d’être une bête. Au lieu d’accourir au grand galop comme un fou, il avait longtemps rôdé autour du camp sans avoir l’air de rien, avant de s’y glisser cauteleusement. Pourquoi les Maures se seraient-ils inquiétés de ce toutou en train de faire aux alentours une petite promenade matinale?

Le capitaine saisit avidement le chien dans ses bras et, sous le coup de l’émotion qui lui gonflait le cœur, gratifia l’intelligent animal de cette même caresse dont il l’avait réconforté au départ, et à laquelle jusqu’ici il ne l’avait pas habitué. D’un coup d’œil, il avait constaté la disparition du billet, parvenu par conséquent à son adresse, et il avait tiré de ce fait des conclusions favorables quant à l’issue de l’aventure.

Une réflexion pourtant gâta bientôt sa joie. Parti à une heure et revenu à huit heures du matin, Artimon avait donc mis sept heures à franchir, aller et retour, la distance séparant les naufragés de Robert Morgand. Celui-ci, après un jour et demi de voyage, était donc éloigné de trente kilomètres tout au plus. Il y avait là un mystère bien propre à tracasser l’âme la mieux équilibrée, mystère dont le capitaine eut soin de ne pas entretenir ses compagnons.

Ceux-ci, peu à peu réconfortés, retrouvaient lentement l’espoir que l’âme humaine n’abandonne qu’avec la vie, et les journées du 12 et du 13 juillet passèrent assez facilement.

Ces journées, les Maures les employèrent à vider complètement la Santa-Maria et même à démonter du navire tout ce qui était démontable. Les morceaux de fer, les outils, les vis, les boulons constituaient pour eux autant de trésors inappréciables, qui s'élevaient sur la grève en un amas grandissant pour être ultérieurement répartis sur les méhara de la troupe.

Le 14 juillet, ce travail fut achevé, et les Maures se livrèrent à une série de préparatifs annonçant un prochain départ. Évidemment, dès le lendemain, il faudrait quitter la grève, si, d'ici là, on n'était pas délivré.

Cette journée du 14 parut longue aux malheureux naufragés. Depuis la veille, Robert, d'après sa promesse, aurait dû être de retour. Même en faisant entrer en ligne de compte toutes les difficultés d'un pareil voyage, le retard commençait à devenir anormal. À l'exception du capitaine qui n'avait garde de donner ses raisons et laissait ses compagnons user inutilement leurs yeux à fouiller l'horizon du sud, on se montrait surpris. On fut bientôt irrité et on ne se gêna pas pour accuser Robert. Pourquoi, après tout, serait-il revenu? Maintenant qu'il était très probablement en sûreté, il aurait été bien sot de s'exposer à de nouveaux dangers.

L'âme d'Alice ne connaissait pas cette ingratitude et cette faiblesse. Que Robert eût trahi, un tel soupçon ne se discutait même pas. Mort? Cela, oui, peut-être... Mais aussitôt, quelque chose protestait en elle contre la possibilité d'une pareille hypothèse, et, pour l'avoir admise un instant, elle retrouvait plus affermie sa confiance inébranlable et superbe dans le bonheur et dans la vie.

Pourtant, toute la journée du 14 passa sans donner raison à son optimisme, et il en fut de même de la nuit suivante. Le soleil du 15 juillet se leva, sans qu'aucune modification fût apportée à la situation des naufragés.

À l’aube, les Maures avaient chargé les chameaux, et, dès sept heures du matin, le cheikh donna le signal du départ. Un peloton de cavaliers en avant-garde, les autres suivant sur deux files, il fallut se résigner à obéir.

Entre la double rangée de leurs geôliers, prisonniers et prisonnières allaient à pied, en une ligne unique, réunis les uns aux autres par une longue corde entourant les cous et serrant les poignets. Toute évasion dans ces conditions était impossible, en admettant que le désert mortel dont on était environné n’eût pas été une barrière suffisante.

Le capitaine Pip, qui s’avançait en tête, s’arrêta résolument dès les premiers pas, et, s’adressant au cheikh accouru: “Où nous emmenez-vous?” lui demanda-t-il avec fermeté.

Pour toute réponse, le cheikh leva sa matraque et en frappa son prisonnier au visage.

“Marche, chien!” cria-t-il.

Le capitaine, dont le sang coulait, n’avait pas bronché. De son air flegmatique, il refit la question.

De nouveau, la matraque se leva. Mais, considérant l’énergique visage de celui qui l’interrogeait, puis la longue file des prisonniers qu’il lui fallait conduire et dont la révolte n’eût pas été sans lui créer de sérieux embarras, le cheikh abaissa l’arme menaçante.

“À Tombouctou!” répondit-il, tandis que le capitaine, satisfait, consentait à se remettre en route.

CHAPITRE XIV

QUITTES!

À Tombouctou! C’est-à-dire dans cette ville où semblent se centraliser tous les mystères de la mystérieuse Afrique, dans cette ville aux portes infranchissables pendant des siècles, qui, peu de mois plus tard, devaient pourtant s’ouvrir devant les colonnes françaises.

Mais le Maure ne pouvait prévoir l’avenir et conduisait ses prisonniers au centre légendaire de toutes les transactions du désert, au grand marché des esclaves.

En réalité, il était peu probable qu’il les amenât lui- même à destination. Les pilleurs d’épaves qui infestent les côtes de l’Atlantique s’éloignent rarement à une telle distance de la mer. Vraisemblablement, la bande des Maures, ainsi que cela se fait d’ordinaire, vendrait, à mi- chemin, ses prisonniers à quelque caravane de Touareg, sous la garde desquels s’achèverait le voyage.

Ce détail n’avait, au surplus, qu’une bien mince importance pour les misérables naufragés. Que ce fût sous la conduite d’un cheikh maure ou d’un cheikh targui, c’étaient, dans tous les cas, plus de quinze cents kilomètres à franchir, et un tel parcours exigerait au moins deux mois et demi. De ceux qui partaient, combien arriveraient au but? Combien jalonneraient de leurs os blanchis la longue route déjà si souvent jalonnée?

La première journée ne parut naturellement pas trop pénible. On était reposé, l’eau était abondante et saine. Mais il n’en serait plus de même, quand la succession des lieues ferait saigner les pieds fatigués et meurtris, quand on n’aurait plus, pour calmer la soif allumée par un soleil de feu, qu’une eau corrompue et parcimonieusement distribuée.

Hamilton et Blockhead, du moins, ne connaîtraient pas ces tortures et leur échapperaient par la mort. Mal remis encore de leur fièvre, à peine entrés en convalescence, la force leur manqua dès le début. Déjà, le matin, ils avaient éprouvé la plus grande peine à faire l’étape, et ils s’étaient laissés tomber comme des masses au moment de la sieste. Mais, l’après-midi, ce fut bien autre chose. Leurs membres engourdis refusèrent tout service, et, au bout de quelques kilomètres, il leur devint impossible de faire un pas de plus.

À partir de cet instant, un martyre incessant commença pour eux et pour leurs compagnons. Tombant presque à chaque pas, se relevant pour retomber aussitôt, ils étaient tramés par le reste de la colonne. Le soir, au moment de la halte définitive, ils ressemblaient plus à des cadavres qu’à des créatures vivantes, et nul ne douta que le lendemain ne fût leur dernier jour.

Fort heureusement, les autres naufragés supportaient mieux l’épreuve.

En tête, ainsi qu’il a été dit, s’avançait le capitaine Pip, un peu désorienté au milieu de ces dunes semblables à des vagues qu’un navire n’aurait pu entrouvrir sous son étrave. Le capitaine espérait-il toujours? C’était probable, car un caractère de cette trempe ne saurait, dans aucune circonstance, être accessible au désespoir. Son visage, aussi fermé et froid que de coutume, ne donnait d’ailleurs aucune indication à cet égard. Au surplus, il n’en était pas besoin. Son aspect eût suffi à gonfler de courage le cœur du plus lâche.

La plaie du coup de matraque avait séché toute seule au soleil. Du sang, qui d’abord en avait abondamment coulé, la moustache, la poitrine et l’épaule étaient devenues rougeâtres. Certains eussent pu avoir l’air terrible ainsi. Mais telle n’était pas la caractéristique du capitaine, dont tout l’être ne disait que l’invincible volonté. Le premier de ses marins, il marchait d’un pas ferme comme son âme, et, rien qu’à le voir, on se sentait gagné par son énergie et son espérance tenace.

Depuis son dernier dialogue avec le cheikh, il n’avait pas prononcé vingt paroles, et encore ces rares confidences avaient-elles été adressées exclusivement au fidèle Artimon, qui, la langue pendante, trottinait à côté de son maître.

“Master!” avait d’abord simplement dit le capitaine, d’une voix pleine de tendresse que le chien avait parfaitement su discerner.

Puis, une demi-heure plus tard, le capitaine s’était montré plus explicite.

Après avoir préalablement louché d’une effrayante manière et craché avec mépris dans la direction du cheikh:

“Master! avait-il formulé du ton le plus affirmatif, nous sommes dans une péripétie, par la barbe de ma mère!”

Et Artimon de secouer ses longues oreilles, comme contraint à une fâcheuse approbation.

Depuis, le capitaine n’avait plus ouvert la bouche. De temps en temps, l’homme regardait le chien et le chien regardait l’homme, voilà tout. Mais que ces regards valaient de discours!

À l’étape, Artimon s’assit sur son derrière, quand son maître s’étendit sur le sable. Et celui-ci partagea avec son chien sa maigre pitance et l’eau qui lui fut parcimonieusement distribuée.

Après le capitaine, venaient l'état-major, l'équipage et les serviteurs divers du *Seamew* défunt, se suivant dans un classement qui n'avait rien de hiérarchique. Que pensaient-ils, ceux-là? En tout cas, ils subordonnaient leurs opinions personnelles à celles du commandant qui avait la charge de penser pour tous. Tant que le chef aurait confiance, ils ne désespéreraient pas. L'ordre d'agir, s'il devait être donné, les trouverait prêts, à quelque moment qu'il arrivât.

Au dernier matelot, succédait le premier passager, auquel faisait suite la longue file de ses compagnons.

Les femmes, pour la plupart, pleuraient ou se lamentaient à mi-voix, et surtout les épouses et les filles d'Hamilton et de Blockhead, assistant, impuissantes, à l'agonie de leurs pères et de leurs maris.

Les hommes se montraient plus fermes en général, chacun traduisant son énergie dans la forme particulière à son caractère. Si Piperboom avait faim, Johnson avait soif. Si le clergyman Cooley puisait dans la prière un secours efficace, Baker par contre ne décolérait pas, et ne cessait de mâchonner les plus terrifiantes menaces. Quant à Thompson, l'âme en déroute, il pensait uniquement à la sacoche qui lui avait été subtilisée.

Roger, lui, trouvait encore la force de l'ironie. Placé près de Dolly, il s'acharnait à relever le moral de la jeune fille en la faisant rire, par la contagion d'une gaieté héroïquement simulée.

En premier lieu, abordant son sujet habituel, il avait daubé largement sur l'imprévu de cet invraisemblable voyage. Au fond, rien était-il plus comique que le spectacle de ces gens, partis faire un petit tour à Madère, en train de se transformer en explorateurs du Sahara? Dolly n'ayant pas paru goûter toute la finesse de ce comique un peu spécial, Roger, piqué au jeu et jurant de faire oublier à la jeune fille les tristesses de la route, était bravement entré dans le vaste champ du calembour. Depuis lors, c'était un feu roulant de coq-à-l'âne, plus ou moins hilarants, de mots plus ou moins bien venus, pour lesquels tout lui était bon, le cheikh, les Maures, le Sahara, le ciel et la terre, si bien qu'enfin un frais éclat de rire vint le récompenser de tant d'efforts. Roger conclut alors que tout cela n'était pas sérieux, que le coup de main de ces moricauds, à si faible distance du Sénégal, constituait une folie, que l'on serait délivré le lendemain au plus tard, et que, d'ailleurs, on se délivrerait très bien soi-même au besoin.

Comment Dolly n'aurait-elle pas eu confiance en d'aussi consolantes affirmations? La situation pouvait- elle être réellement grave, quand Roger plaisantait d'un cœur si léger! D'ailleurs elle n'avait qu'à regarder sa sœur, pour que ses dernières inquiétudes fussent dissipées.

Alice ne plaisantait pas, elle, car ce n'était pas sa manière, mais sur son visage éclatait la sérénité de son âme. Malgré le départ de la caravane, malgré le temps qui s'écoulait, malgré tout, elle ne doutait pas de la délivrance.

Oui, le salut viendrait. Roger avait raison de l'affirmer, et tout ceci n'était qu'une épreuve qui resterait sans durée.

Soutenue, portée par ces deux volontés, Dolly ignora le découragement, et quand, le soir, elle s'endormit à l'abri d'une tente, que le cheikh, pour des motifs de lui connus, avait fait dresser spécialement pour ses deux prisonnières, elle avait la certitude de se réveiller dans la liberté.

L'aube, pourtant, la réveilla prisonnière. Les sauveurs attendus n'étaient pas venus pendant la nuit, et une nouvelle journée commençait qui allait ajouter d’autres kilomètres de sable entre les naufragés et la mer.

Pourtant, à leur grand étonnement, le signal du départ ne leur fut pas donné à l’heure de la veille. Le soleil s’éleva sur l’horizon, atteignit le zénith, sans qu’aucun préparatif parût être fait parmi l’escorte.

Quelle pouvait être la cause de cette prolongation imprévue de la halte? À cet égard, toutes les suppositions étaient permises, mais, seule, Alice possédait les éléments d’une hypothèse plausible.

Réveillée la première, ce matin même, elle avait aperçu Jack Lindsay et le cheikh en conférence. Écouté avec ce calme particulier aux Orientaux, Jack parlait en mettant dans son discours toute l’animation dont son caractère sombre était susceptible. Évidemment, il cherchait à prouver quelque chose, il plaidait. Au demeurant, le cheikh et lui semblaient être les meilleurs amis du monde, et, si invraisemblable que cela fût, Alice eut le sentiment qu’ils avaient eu des relations antérieures.

Et en vérité sa perspicacité ne l’égarait pas. Oui, le cheikh et Jack Lindsay se connaissaient.

Après avoir vu Robert tomber, Jack, qui, ne pouvant prévoir l’intervention d’Artimon, considérait son ennemi comme mort, s’était empressé de poursuivre la réalisation du plan qu’il avait formé.

Ce plan était d’une monstrueuse simplicité.

Puisqu’il lui était interdit d’atteindre isolément sa belle- sœur, trop bien protégée au milieu de ses compagnons, sans s’exposer lui-même à des représailles, il frapperait tout le monde. Il avait, en conséquence, commencé par supprimer Robert, puis, ayant ainsi rendu impossible l’arrivée de tout secours, il s'était aventuré dans le désert en quête d'alliés. Sur cette côte parcourue par des pillards, que les naufragés attirent, comme les batailles attirent les corbeaux, il rencontrerait sûrement quelque bande, dût-il pour cela sillonner plusieurs jours le désert.

Il n'avait pas eu si longtemps à attendre. Avant la fin du jour suivant, assailli à l'improviste par une dizaine de Maures Oulad-Delim, il s'était vu traîner devant le cheikh avec lequel il conversait maintenant, et réduit à une captivité qui mettait le comble à ses vœux.

Cet Oulad-Delim, qui comprenait un peu l'anglais, avait aussitôt essayé d'interroger son prisonnier dans cette langue, et celui-ci avait répondu aux questions de la meilleure grâce du monde. Il avait dit son nom: Jack Lindsay, en ajoutant qu'à peu de distance se trouvait un grand nombre d'Européens, parmi lesquels sa propre femme, qui, puissamment riche, paierait volontiers une forte rançon pour la commune délivrance d'elle-même et de son mari.

Mis de cette façon sur la piste, les Maures avaient envahi le camp, et Roger, dans une bonne intention, avait, en somme, confirmé les premiers renseignements donnés par Jack Lindsay. Ainsi s'expliquait la satisfaction du cheikh en entendant le nom de l'une de ses prisonnières et la nouvelle assurance de la richesse de sa famille. Ainsi s'expliquait aussi qu'il eût conçu assez de confiance dans les affirmations du prétendu mari de celle-ci, pour se sentir ébranlé par les observations que le fourbe se risquait à lui faire dès le second jour du voyage, au point de prolonger la halte pendant une journée entière.

Patiemment, Jack Lindsay se dirigeait vers son but. Avoir fait tomber la caravane aux mains des Maures ne pouvait lui être profitable, que s'il réussissait à recouvrer personnellement sa liberté.

Il s’était donc risqué à démontrer au cheikh l’illogisme de sa conduite. Il lui avait représenté que, s’il emmenait ainsi tout le monde jusqu’à Tombouctou, personne n’aurait la possibilité de lui verser les rançons auxquelles il lui plairait de tarifer les libertés. En ce qui concernait particulièrement sa femme, à lui, Jack Lindsay, capable, il le répétait, de verser à elle seule une somme considérable, comment se la procurerait-elle quand elle serait hors d’état de communiquer avec l’Amérique et l’Europe? N’était-il pas plus naturel que l’un des passagers, et de préférence Jack Lindsay, fût, dès maintenant, mené sous escorte jusqu’aux possessions françaises où il lui serait facile de s’embarquer. Il se hâterait alors de réunir la rançon de sa femme, et en même temps celles des autres naufragés, puis il reviendrait dans un endroit fixé, en Tripolitaine par exemple, ou à Tombouctou, ou ailleurs, verser les sommes convenues contre la liberté de tous.

Jack Lindsay avait fait valoir par tous les moyens ces observations très justes en réalité, et il avait eu la joie de les voir accueillies. Le cheikh avait décidé que l’on resterait au repos durant toute cette journée, qu’il occupa à fixer les rançons de ses divers prisonniers.

Jack Lindsay touchait au but. Ces rançons, qu’il irait soi-disant chercher, il se garderait bien de les réunir en réalité. Les naufragés se débrouilleraient comme ils le voudraient. Pour lui, il se contenterait d’aller tout simplement en Amérique, où, tôt ou tard, il parviendrait bien à faire reconnaître le décès de sa belle-sœur, et à en hériter par conséquent, fût-ce au prix de quelques... irrégularités que son habileté, il s’en flattait, saurait bien rendre inoffensives.

Certes, l’idée de laisser derrière lui tant d’accusateurs possibles, et qui pouvaient devenir des accusateurs terribles, si jamais l’un d’eux recouvrait sa liberté, ne lui souriait qu’à demi. Mais il n’avait pas le choix des moyens. D’ailleurs, gardé par les Africains féroces et par le désert, plus féroce encore, un prisonnier s’échappe-t-il jamais?

Toutefois, une dernière difficulté se dressait devant Jack. S’il voulait partir sans encombre, il fallait nécessairement que son départ eût lieu avec l’assentiment général. Le cheikh, en effet, allait informer les naufragés du chiffre auquel il avait fixé chaque rançon et leur apprendre le nom de l’émissaire choisi. Jack devait donc jouer jusqu’au bout la comédie du dévouement, faire des promesses de circonstance, accepter les lettres de tous, quitte à jeter à l’eau à la première occasion cette correspondance inutile. À cela, pas de difficulté, car Jack estimait avec juste raison que ses compagnons n’avaient aucun motif de le suspecter plutôt qu’un autre.

Malheureusement, il jugeait tout cela moins simple, en pensant à sa belle-sœur. De celle-là aussi le consentement était nécessaire. Il constituait même le consentement principal. Jack réussirait-il à l’obtenir?

Pourquoi pas? se disait-il. Et cependant, en se rappelant de quelle façon Alice avait refusé le nom qu’il lui offrait, en songeant à la scène du Curral das Freias, une inquiétude le troublait.

Entre sa belle-sœur et lui, une explication était en tout cas nécessaire. Pourtant, son hésitation était telle, que, durant toute cette journée de repos, il en recula l’instant d’heure en heure. La nuit tombait, quand, se décidant tout à coup à en finir, il franchissait enfin le seuil de la tente où Alice avait trouvé refuge.

Alice était seule. Assise sur le sol, le menton dans la main, elle songeait, à peine éclairée par une rudimentaire lampe à huile, dont la lueur fumeuse mourait avant d’avoir atteint les parois de la tente.

En entendant Jack, elle se redressa brusquement, puis attendit qu’il voulût bien donner l’explication de sa visite. Mais celui-ci était embarrassé. Il ne savait comment entrer en matière. Un long moment, il resta silencieux, sans qu’Alice fît aucun effort pour l’aider à vaincre sa gêne.

“Bonsoir, Alice, dit enfin Jack. Vous m’excuserez de vous importuner à pareille heure. J’ai à vous faire une communication qui ne souffre pas de retard.”

Alice persista dans son silence, sans manifester la moindre curiosité.

“Vous avez remarqué que la caravane n’a pas continué sa route aujourd’hui, reprit Jack avec une timidité croissante, et vous vous en êtes sans doute étonnée. Je l’étais également, quand le cheikh m’a donné ce soir les raisons de sa conduite.”

À ce point, Jack fit une pause, espérant un mot d’encouragement qui ne vint pas.

“Comme vous le savez, poursuivit-il, c’est dans un pur but de lucre que les Maures ont envahi notre camp. Leur objectif est beaucoup moins de nous réduire en esclavage, que de tirer de fortes rançons de ceux qui sont en état d’en verser. Mais ces rançons, il faut encore que l’on puisse se les procurer, et c’est pourquoi le cheikh a décidé de rester ici le temps nécessaire pour envoyer jusqu’aux possessions françaises l’un de nous choisi par lui, qui, au nom des autres naufragés et au sien propre, réunirait les sommes exigées et irait les verser à un endroit fixé contre remise des prisonniers.”

Jack fit inutilement une nouvelle pause, afin de provoquer une interruption.

“Vous ne me demandez pas, suggéra-t-il, qui de nous le cheikh a choisi pour cette mission?

-J’attends que vous me le disiez, répondit Alice d’une voix calme qui ne rassura pas son beau-frère.

-En effet”, dit-il en souriant avec effort.

Toutefois, il considéra que quelques périphrases

supplémentaires ne seraient pas superflues.

“Vous devez penser, reprit-il, que l’attention du cheikh s’est portée spécialement sur Dolly et sur vous, après ce que lui a dit M. de Sorgues. Le fait qu’on vous a dressé cette tente suffirait au besoin à vous en convaincre. C’est donc votre rançon, qui sera la plus forte, que le cheikh tient par-dessus tout à recouvrer. D’autre part, il a été très frappé de la similitude de nos noms, et il m’a longuement interrogé à ce sujet. J’ai cru bien faire en me permettant un mensonge analogue à celui de M. de Sorgues. Bref, Alice, afin d’avoir plus de pouvoir pour votre défense, et bien que cela, hélas! ne soit pas vrai, j’ai dit au cheikh que j’étais votre mari.”

Jack, après avoir prononcé ces mots, guetta un signe d’approbation ou de désaveu. Alice ne fit ni l’un ni l’autre. Elle écoutait, simplement, attendant la conclusion. Cette conclusion, il fallait bien enfin la formuler.

“Certes, s’écria Jack, j’ai été bien surpris du résultat de mon mensonge. Dès qu’il connut les prétendus liens qui nous unissent, le cheikh pensa, et en cela il ne se trompe pas, que j’apporterais à votre délivrance plus de dévouement que pas un de nos compagnons, et il me choisit sur-le-champ pour aller réunir les rançons exigées.”

Ses vaisseaux brûlés, Jack respira largement. Alice n’avait pas bronché.

Décidément, cela marchait tout seul.

“J’espère, continua-t-il d’une voix plus assurée, que vous ne désapprouverez pas le choix du cheikh et que vous consentirez à me confier les lettres et les signatures nécessaires pour me procurer les sommes que je devrai rapporter.

-Je ne vous remettrai pas ces lettres, dit avec froideur Alice, en fixant plus attentivement son beau-frère.

-Pourquoi?

-Pour deux raisons.

-Ayez la bonté de me les dire, repartit vivement Jack, et discutons-les en bons parents, si vous le voulez bien.

-En premier lieu, déclara Alice posément, sachez que je suis opposée à l’envoi d’un messager quelconque en ce moment. Vous me paraissez oublier que M. Morgand est parti nous chercher du secours.

-Il est parti, mais il ne revient pas, objecta Jack.

-Il reviendra, affirma Alice d’un ton d’invincible certitude.

-Je ne pense pas”, dit Jack avec une ironie dont il ne fut pas maître.

Alice se sentit le cœur étreint par une subite angoisse. D’un effort énergique, elle dompta cette faiblesse, et, debout maintenant, bien en face de son misérable beau- frère:

“Qu’en savez-vous?” dit-elle.

Jack fut effrayé du changement et, prudemment, battit en retraite.

“Rien, c’est évident, balbutia-t-il, rien... Ce ne sont que des pressentiments... Mais, pour moi, je suis persuadé que M. Morgand, qu’il ait ou non échoué dans sa tentative, ne reviendra pas, et que nous n’avons pas de temps à perdre pour essayer de reconquérir notre liberté avec nos seules ressources.”

Alice avait repris tout son calme.

“Je ne suis pas éloignée de croire, dit-elle lentement, que vous possédiez, en effet, des renseignements particuliers sur le voyage héroïque que M. Morgand a entrepris pour le salut commun...

-Que voulez-vous dire? interrompit Jack d’une voix tremblante.

-Il peut donc se faire, continua imperturbablement Alice, que vous ayez raison et que M. Morgand ait trouvé la mort dans sa tentative. Toutefois, vous me permettrez d’être d’un avis différent. Pour ma part, jusqu’au moment où la longueur du temps écoulé m’aura prouvé mon erreur, j’aurai dans son retour une inébranlable foi.”

La chaleur avec laquelle Alice avait prononcé ces derniers mots montrait que, sur ce point, elle serait irréductible.

“Soit! accorda Jack. Je ne vois pas, d’ailleurs, en quoi la possibilité du retour de M. Morgand est un obstacle à la combinaison qui m’a été proposée. Quel inconvénient peut-il y avoir à mettre deux chances de notre côté?

-Je crois vous avoir dit, repartit Alice, que j’avais deux objections à formuler contre votre projet. Je ne vous ai dit que la première.

-Quelle est donc l’autre?

-La seconde objection, formula Alice en se redressant de toute sa taille, c’est que je blâme formellement le choix du messager. Non seulement je ne favoriserai pas votre départ en vous remettant les lettres que vous me demandez, mais encore je m’y opposerai de tout mon pouvoir, en commençant par réduire votre mensonge à néant.

-Vraiment, Alice, insista Jack, devenu livide en voyant s’écrouler ses projets, quel motif avez-vous d’agir ainsi?

-Le meilleur de tous, dit Alice. La conviction où je suis que vous ne reviendriez pas.”

Jack, terrifié, recula jusqu’à la paroi de la tente. Ses intentions percées à jour, son plan devenait irréalisable. Il tenta cependant un dernier effort.

“Quelle effroyable accusation, Alice! s’écria-t-il en cherchant à mettre de la douleur dans sa voix. Que vous ai-je fait pour que vous me suspectiez ainsi?

-Hélas! répondit tristement Alice, je me souviens du Curral das Freias!”

Le Curral das Freias! Ainsi donc, Alice avait vu, et, depuis lors, avertie, elle avait pu lire, comme dans un livre, dans l’âme malsaine de son beau-frère.

Celui-ci comprit sur-le-champ que la partie était perdue. Il n’essaya pas une justification à l’avance inutile. Tout son cœur de boue lui remonta aux lèvres.

“Soit! siffla-t-il. Mais je ne conçois pas que vous ayez l’aplomb de me reprocher le Curral das Freias. Sans moi, auriez-vous été sauvée par un beau jeune homme, comme dans les romans?”

Alice, indignée, dédaigna de répondre au venimeux insulteur. Elle se bornait à le congédier du geste, lorsqu’une voix s’éleva tout à coup du seuil de la tente, que la lumière de la lampe laissait dans une ombre incertaine.

“Ne craignez rien, madame, disait-on. Je suis là.” Alice et Jack s’étaient retournés en tremblant du côté de cette voix décisive et calme et, soudain, tous deux poussèrent un cri, cri de bonheur pour Alice, rugissement de fureur pour Jack, quand le visiteur inattendu pénétra dans le cercle de lumière.

Robert Morgand était devant eux. Robert Morgand vivant! Jack perdit la raison dans l’excès de sa colère.

“Eh! bégaya-t-il, sa langue paralysée par la rage, c’est le beau jeune homme lui-même! En quoi une discussion de famille peut-elle intéresser le cicérone Morgand?”

Robert, toujours calme, fit un pas vers Jack Lindsay. Mais, entre les deux hommes, Alice s’interposa. D’un geste hautain, elle obtint le silence.

“M. le marquis de Gramond a le droit de connaître tout ce qui regarde sa femme, dit-elle en couvrant de ses regards illuminés son beau-frère impuissant.

- Voilà un marquisat bien subit! ricana celui-ci. C’est sans doute à Tombouctou que vous espérez convoler?”

Une pensée subite lui traversa l’esprit. Si Robert était là, il ne devait pas y être seul. Le camp, sans doute, était au pouvoir des Français ramenés par lui, et ce qu’avait annoncé Alice cessait, par conséquent, d’être une chimère pour devenir une réalité. À cette pensée, un flot de fureur le souleva de nouveau. Il porta la main à sa ceinture, et l’en retira armée de ce même revolver avec lequel déjà il s’était essayé dans l’assassinat.

“Vous n’êtes pas encore marquise!” cria-t-il en dirigeant le canon vers Robert.

Mais Alice veillait.

D’un bond, elle s’était élancée sur Jack Lindsay. Avec une force décuplée, elle se cramponnait à son bras, le désarmait.

Le coup partit cependant, mais la balle déviée se perdit à travers le toit de la tente.

“Quittes!” dit Alice, avec un sourire de triomphe, en jetant le revolver fumant aux pieds de Robert.

Au coup de feu de Jack, d’autres coups de feu répondirent immédiatement. Un ouragan de balles déchira l’air. Des cris éclatèrent, mélange de jurons en plusieurs langues.

Jack Lindsay avait chancelé. Française ou arabe, une balle s’était égarée dans la tente et avait frappé à mort le misérable. À peine eut-il le temps de porter les deux mains à sa poitrine, qu’il s’écroulait sur le sol.

Alice, hors d’état de rien comprendre à ce qui arrivait, se tourna vers Robert, une question sur les lèvres. Les événements ne lui laissèrent pas le loisir de parler.

Comme une trombe, la tente fut emportée, un tourbillon d’hommes passa en hurlant, et, entraînée par Robert qui aussitôt repartit dans l’ombre, Alice se retrouvait au milieu des autres femmes de la caravane. Toutes étaient là, y compris Dolly qui serra sa sœur dans ses bras.

Bientôt d’ailleurs, Robert revenait, suivi du capitaine, de Roger de Sorgues et de tous les autres naufragés. En manquait-il? Le lendemain seulement, il serait possible de s’en assurer.

Une demi-heure plus tard, après avoir rassemblé ses hommes, placé ses grand-gardes, pris toutes ses précautions contre un retour offensif de l’ennemi, un officier français arrivait, le dernier. Le joyeux sourire de la victoire sur les lèvres, bien en vue dans la lumière éclatante de la lune, il salua les dames d’un geste circulaire, et, s’adressant directement à Robert:

“Les moricauds sont dispersés, mon cher monsieur”, dit-il gaiement.

Mais sans attendre un remerciement bien naturel, il s’était élancé.

“Tiens! de Sorgues! s’écria-t-il en apercevant Roger. Vous en étiez donc?

-Comment va, mon cher Beaudoin? répondit Roger. Et pourquoi n’en aurais-je pas été, s’il vous plaît?

-Elle est bonne!” affirma philosophiquement l’officier français en allumant une cigarette.

CHAPITRE XV

CONCLUSION

À l’assaut victorieux des soldats français se termine en réalité l’histoire du voyage si bien organisé par l’Agence Thompson and Co. Certes, jusqu’à Saint-Louis, la route fut dure et pénible. Cependant, le butin conquis sur les Maures permit de l’adoucir dans une large mesure. Sur les mehara restés au pouvoir des vainqueurs, on put transporter toute l’eau de la Santa-Maria, et, à mesure que cette eau s’épuisait, donner du repos aux femmes et aux malades. Dans ces conditions de relatif confortable, Hamilton et Blockhead ne tardèrent pas à recouvrer leur santé habituelle et à reprendre leurs caractères respectifs, l’un optimiste, l’autre grognon.

Jack Lindsay était fort heureusement, parmi les Européens, la seule victime que la rapide escarmouche eût coûtée. Les circonstances de sa mort étant demeurées inconnues, les condoléances ne manquèrent pas à Mrs. Lindsay, et celle-ci reçut l’expression unanime de cette sympathie de manière que ce triste drame de famille demeurât un secret.

Aucun autre touriste n’avait été atteint par les balles des Maures, et le dommage se réduisait à deux soldats si légèrement blessés que, moins de trois jours après l’action, ils purent reprendre leur service.

Ce n’est pas que chacun n’eût fait son devoir. La caravane à peine armée des naufragés avait au contraire, sous la conduite du capitaine Pip, apporté un appréciable concours à la petite troupe des soldats français. Tous s’étaient jetés au plus fort de la mêlée, Robert, Roger de Sorgues, Baker, Piperboom, le révérend Cooley, et jusqu’au spleenétique Tigg, dont l’ardeur avait été particulièrement remarquée. Pourquoi défendre si chaudement une vie que l’on juge haïssable?

“Parbleu! ne put s’empêcher de lui dire Baker le lendemain de la bataille, il faut avouer que vous tapez ferme pour quelqu’un qui ne tient pas à la vie. C’était pourtant une riche occasion!

-Mais pourquoi diable ne tiendrais-je pas à la vie? demanda Tigg en manifestant un vif étonnement.

-Le sais-je? répondit Baker. Je ne connais pas vos raisons. Mais j’aime à croire que vous en aviez de bonnes, le jour où vous êtes entré au Club des Suicidés.

-Moi!”

Baker, surpris à son tour, considéra son interlocuteur avec plus d’attention qu’il ne l’avait fait jusqu’alors. Il fut obligé de reconnaître que ces lèvres charnues, ces yeux rieurs, ce visage aux lignes calmes et pondérées, n’avaient rien de bien lugubre.

“Ah çà! reprit-il, il est pourtant bien exact que vous avez formé le projet de vous tuer?

-Jamais de la vie!

-Et que vous êtes membre du Club des Suicidés?

-Mais c’est de la folie!” se récria Tigg, en regardant avec inquiétude son interlocuteur qu’il crut atteint d’aliénation mentale.

Celui-ci le rassura en lui racontant comment et à la suite de quelles circonstances l’opinion qu’il venait d’exprimer s’était implantée parmi les touristes. Tigg s’amusait énormément.

“J’ignore, dit-il enfin, où le journal avait puisé son information, et qui la lettre T pouvait désigner. Ce qu’il y a de sûr, c’est que ce n’est pas moi, dont le principal objectif est d’atteindre cent dix ans, et même davantage.” Cette explication divulguée par Baker égaya fort la caravane. Seules, Miss Mary et Miss Bess Blockhead parurent prendre la chose du mauvais côté.

“Oh! nous savions bien que ce gentleman... répondit Miss Mary à sa mère qui lui faisait part de la nouvelle.

-... était un imposteur”, acheva Miss Bess, en plissant dédaigneusement les lèvres.

Et toutes deux dirigèrent un regard dénué de bienveillance vers l’ancien objet de leur affection, lequel, au même instant, était engagé avec Miss Margaret Hamilton en un aparté animé, au cours duquel il l’assurait sans doute qu’il n’aurait la vie en haine que s’il ne pouvait la lui consacrer. Mais il était bien improbable que Miss Margaret le réduisît à cette extrémité. Aucun doute n’était possible, en voyant la manière encourageante dont elle l’écoutait.

Sauf les Misses Blockhead, tout le monde était donc heureux dans la caravane, comme cela est naturel quand on a frôlé de si près un aussi épouvantable destin. Robert vivait dans l’air d’Alice, Roger riait du matin au soir avec Dolly, Baker faisait allègrement craquer ses articulations, le révérend Cooley adressait au ciel des prières reconnaissantes, Van Piperboom - de Rotterdam - mangeait. Deux visages seulement demeuraient tristes parmi ces visages joyeux.

L’un promenait un front soucieux au milieu de ses compagnons, en pensant à la disparition d’une certaine sacoche qu’il pleurerait éternellement. L’autre, privé de son ordinaire ration, s’étonnait de ne pas être gris, et il estimait que quelque chose était détraqué dans l’univers où la terre ne tournait plus.

Il y avait là pour Thompson un coup de fortune à tenter. Johnson eût certainement remplacé la sacoche perdue pour une provision des liquides qui lui étaient chers. Malheureusement, la marchandise eût manqué au marchand, le commandant de l’escorte française n’ayant pas compris l’alcool parmi les choses dont il avait jugé le transport nécessaire.

Johnson dut, en conséquence, se priver de ses boissons favorites pendant les vingt jours qui furent employés à atteindre Saint-Louis. Mais aussi, comme il se rattrapa! À peine au milieu des maisons de la ville, il avait quitté ses compagnons, et, dès le soir, ceux qui le rencontrèrent, reconnurent qu’il regagnait consciencieusement le temps perdu.

Sinon sans peine, ce voyage de retour s’était fait sans danger, sous la protection des baïonnettes françaises. Pas un accident notable ne marqua cette marche de trois cent cinquante kilomètres à travers le Sahara.

À Saint-Louis, les secours ne manquaient pas, et tout le monde s’ingénia à réconforter ces touristes si cruellement éprouvés. Mais ils avaient hâte d’être rentrés dans leur pays et dans leurs demeures, et bientôt un confortable paquebot emporta les administrés de l’Agence Thompson, ainsi que leur infortuné administrateur général.

Moins d’un mois après avoir si heureusement échappé aux Maures et aux Touareg, ils débarquaient tous en sûreté sur le quai de la Tamise.

Thompson eut à ce moment une véritable satisfaction. Il fut enfin débarrassé de Piperboom. Le placide Hollandais, dont personne ne pouvait se vanter d'avoir jamais connu les impressions, "lâcha" son administrateur dès qu'il eut sous les pieds le pavé de Londres. Sa valise à la main, il disparut dans la première rue, emportant son mystère.

À son exemple, les autres touristes se dispersèrent, retournant à leurs plaisirs ou à leurs affaires.

Le révérend Cooley retrouva intact le troupeau de fidèles qui pleurait déjà son pasteur.

Le capitaine Pip, toujours suivi d'Artimon à son poste réglementaire, Mr. Bishop, Mr. *Flyship* et les autres marins, ne reprirent terre que pour repartir bientôt sur la mer incertaine, et Mr. Roastbeaf et Mr. Sandweach ne tardèrent pas à se remettre au service de passagers tantôt contents ou mécontents.

Cependant, avant de reconquérir sa liberté, le capitaine Pip eut à subir les remerciements des anciens touristes du *Seamew.* Ceux-ci ne voulurent pas quitter leur commandant sans lui avoir exprimé leur reconnaissance pour tout ce qu'ils devaient à sa calme énergie. Très gêné, le capitaine loucha d'une manière sensible, en jurant par la barbe de sa mère qu'Artimon en eût fait autant. Toutefois, il se départit un peu de sa réserve en disant adieu à Robert Morgand. Il lui serra la main avec une chaleur qui montrait mieux que de longs discours en quelle particulière estime il tenait l'ancien interprète du *Seamew,* et Robert fut profondément ému de la vibrante sympathie d'un si bon juge en fait d'honneur et de courage.

Quant à la famille Hamilton, elle avait reconquis toute sa morgue en se voyant définitivement en sûreté. Sans dire un mot à aucun de ces gens que le hasard égalitaire avait un instant mêlés à son aristocratique existence, Sir George Hamilton, Lady Evangelina et Miss Margaret s’empressèrent de se diriger vers leur home confortable dans une excellente voiture, où Tigg fut prié de prendre une place qui parut acceptée volontiers. Le sort de ceux-là était clairement fixé.

Par contre, elle était seule, la famille Blockhead, quand elle débarqua à son tour, après que son chef exultant eut serré toutes les mains à sa portée. Aucun représentant du sexe laid en âge de se marier ne prit place dans la voiture qui l’emportait, elle et ses bagages. Seule, elle arriva dans son cottage, cette intéressante famille, et seule elle y vécut, Mr. Absyrthus passant son temps à narrer à ses connaissances le voyage - extraordinaire, monsieur! - auquel il avait participé, Mrs. Georgina consacrée à l’éducation de son fils Abel, Miss Bess et Miss Mary acharnées à la poursuite d’un fabuleux mari. Mais le gibier se fait rare. Miss Bess et Miss Mary sont jusqu’ici revenues bredouilles de cette chasse difficile, et elles en accusent aigrement un braconnage éhonté.

Rappelé en France par la nécessité de fournir des explications sur la prolongation irrégulière de son congé, Roger de Sorgues ne fit que toucher barre en Angleterre. Il repartit de Londres le jour même qu’il y débarqua, et quelques heures plus tard il était à Paris.

Sa situation militaire aisément réglée, il sollicita et obtint un nouveau congé, grâce au poids des raisons dont il était en état d’appuyer sa demande. Peut-on, en effet, refuser un congé à qui va se marier? Or, Roger se mariait. Cela avait été convenu en peu de mots entre Miss Dolly et lui, comme une chose toute naturelle et qui n’exigeait aucun examen.

La cérémonie eut lieu le 3 septembre, et le même jour Alice échangeait son nom contre celui de Robert.

Depuis ce moment, ces quatre cœurs heureux n’ont plus d’histoire. Pour eux, le temps suit son cours paisible, et le lendemain apporte un bonheur pareil à celui de la veille.

La marquise de Gramond et la comtesse de Sorgues ont acquis deux hôtels jumeaux sur l’avenue du Bois-de- Boulogne. C’est là qu’elles élèvent leurs enfants, et ces deux voisines sont restées de bonnes amies et des sœurs aimantes.

Souvent, elles revivent en souvenir les événements qui ont précédé leur mariage, et souvent elles en parlent en tête à tête. Elles y puisent de nouvelles raisons d’aimer les maris qu’elles se sont choisis. Dans ces causeries, reviennent parfois les noms de leurs compagnons de voyage et d’infortune. On ne peut oublier tout à fait ceux en compagnie de qui on a souffert, et avec certains d’entre eux elles ont conservé d’amicales relations.

Quatre ans après la fin du voyage de l’Agence Thompson, deux de ces privilégiés sonnaient en même temps, à l’heure du dîner, à la porte de l’hôtel de la marquise de Gramond.

“Par la barbe de ma mère, je suis aise de vous voir, monsieur Saunders! s’écria l’un des visiteurs.

- Monsieur Baker n’est pas moins satisfait de se rencontrer avec le capitaine Pip”, rectifia l’autre visiteur, en tendant amicalement la main au brave commandant du feu *Seamew*.

C’était jour de réunion familiale chez Mme de Gramond. M. et Mme de Sorgues prirent place à la table où s’assirent le capitaine et Baker.

Tous deux au courant des dessous de l’histoire de leur amphitryon et de sa charmante femme, ceux-ci n’étaient pas étonnés du luxe entourant l’ancien interprète de l’Agence Thompson and Co. Du reste, ils en avaient trop vu au cours de leur existence pour s’étonner facilement, et le capitaine Pip, qui se connaissait en hommes, jugeait son hôte digne de toutes les faveurs de la fortune.

Évidemment, ce n’était pas la première fois qu’ils s’asseyaient autour de cette table hospitalière que des laquais servaient discrètement. Aucun embarras dans leur tenue, mais la franche liberté qui convient à des amis véritables.

Derrière la chaise du capitaine, Artimon s’était posément assis sur son derrière. C’était une place qui lui appartenait de droit et dont aucun cataclysme n’aurait pu l’éloigner. D’ailleurs, on n’y songeait guère, et le capitaine ne se gênait pas pour lui passer quelque friand morceau qu’Artimon acceptait avec dignité. Il avait vieilli, Artimon, mais son cœur était resté jeune. Ses yeux se fixaient toujours aussi intelligents et aussi vifs sur ceux de son maître, dont il continuait à recevoir les confidences en agitant ses longues oreilles d’un air de profond intérêt. Lui aussi connaissait bien la maison où il était invité ce soir-là. Choyé par la maîtresse de céans, qui n’oubliait pas le sauveur de son mari, respecté des domestiques qui le vénéraient comme une puissance, il en appréciait aussi l’ordinaire, et il approuvait énergiquement son maître et

ami, quand celui-ci lui confiait son projet d’aller faire un tour à Paris.

“De quel pays, commandant, nous arrivez-vous, cette fois? demanda Robert au cours du repas.

-De New York, répondit le capitaine, qui, engagé sur la ligne Cunard, était ennuyé de la monotonie des éternelles traversées entre l'Angleterre et l'Amérique. C'est diablement écœurant, monsieur!

-Un de ces jours, vous nous y rencontrerez, reprit Robert. Mme de Sorgues et Mme de Gramond ont eu le désir de reprendre la mer, qui leur a joué pourtant assez de mauvais tours. On est en train de leur construire un yacht d'un millier de tonneaux dans un chantier du Havre. Et même, à ce propos, je voulais précisément vous demander si vous ne pourriez pas nous indiquer quelqu'un de sûr comme capitaine.

-Je n'en connais qu'un, répondit Pip bonnement. C'est un nommé Pip, qui n'est pas trop mauvais marin, dit-on. Seulement, voilà, il y a un inconvénient. Ce Pip a trouvé le moyen de se marier sans prendre femme. Avec lui, il faut engager un chien. Mais la pauvre bête est vieille et n'en a plus pour longtemps. Voilà quinze ans qu'elle roule à travers le monde, et c'est un grand âge pour un chien, ajouta-t-il en adressant à Artimon un regard plein d'une mélancolique tendresse.

-Comment, capitaine, vous consentiriez?... s'écria Robert.

-Si je consens!... affirma le capitaine. J'ai assez des navires à passagers. C'est une marchandise trop encombrante. Et puis, aller éternellement de Liverpool à New York et de New York à Liverpool, c'est une péripétie du diable, ça, monsieur!

-Voilà donc qui est entendu, dirent à la fois Robert et Roger.

-Oui, déclara le capitaine, Artimon aura chez vous ses invalides, à bord du... Au fait! avez-vous baptisé votre futur yacht?

-En souvenir du *Seamew,* dit Dolly, ma soeur et moi l’avons nommé la Mouette.

-Bonne idée! approuva ironiquement Baker. Je vous vois déjà sur la route de Tombouctou!

-Nous tâcherons d’éviter ce malheur, répliqua le capitaine. Mais, à propos du *Seamew,* devinez un peu qui j’ai rencontré à Londres, pas plus tard qu’hier?

-Thompson! s’écrièrent en chœur tous les convives.

-Juste! Thompson. Beau comme le jour, élégant, fringant, agité, couvert de bijoux, comme autrefois. Il avait donc une autre sacoche que le cheikh n’a pas découverte? Ou bien vous n’avez pas réalisé vos menaces? demanda le capitaine en se tournant vers Baker.

-Ne m’en parlez pas! dit celui-ci avec mauvaise humeur. Ce Thompson est un homme infernal qui me fera mourir. Certes, je les ai tenues, mes menaces. Moi et vingt autres passagers, nous avons accablé ce farceur de procès que nous avons gagnés sur toute la ligne. Le Thompson, incapable de payer, s’est vu déclarer en faillite; il a dû fermer boutique, et son nom a été rayé de la liste des agences de voyages. Mais ma satisfaction n’a pas été complète. À chaque instant, je trouve le personnage sur mon chemin. Il ne fait rien, que je sache, et pourtant il a l’air de nager dans l’or. Il me nargue, l’animal. J’ai la conviction qu’il avait quelque magot à l’abri, et que j’ai été roulé.”

Pendant la diatribe de Baker, les deux sœurs se regardaient en souriant.

“Soyez en paix, mon cher monsieur Baker, dit enfin Alice. Mr. Thompson est bel et bien ruiné, et incapable de vous faire jamais concurrence.

-Comment vivrait-il alors? insista Baker avec incrédulité.

-Qui sait! répondit Dolly en souriant. Un secours peut-être, que lui aurait donné un passager reconnaissant.”

Baker se mit à rire.

“Ah bien! dit-il, voilà un passager que je voudrais connaître!

-Demandez à Alice! insinua Dolly.

-Demandez à Dolly! suggéra Alice.

-Vous!... s’écria Baker au comble de l’étonnement. Ce serait vous!... Quelle raison avez-vous pu avoir de venir en aide à un pareil farceur? Ne s’est-il pas assez moqué de vous et de tous les autres? N’a-t-il pas manqué outrageusement à ses promesses? N’a-t-il pas failli nous faire mourir, noyés un peu partout, écrasés à Saint-Michel, de la fièvre à Sao-Thiago, brûlés par le soleil ou fusillés par les Maures en Afrique? Vraiment, je cherche ce que vous pouvez vous imaginer lui devoir.

-Le bonheur, dirent ensemble les deux sœurs.

-Si son voyage avait été mieux organisé, serais-je comtesse? interrogea Dolly en riant au nez de Roger, qui répondit par un signe de tête énergiquement affirmatif.

-Et moi marquise?” ajouta Alice en adressant à Robert un profond regard qui lui fut rendu.

Baker ne trouva rien à répondre. Toutefois, malgré les raisons qui lui étaient données, il demeurait mécontent, c’était visible. Il pardonnait difficilement à ses amis d’atténuer, par leur charité sentimentale, une vengeance qu’il eût désirée plus complète.

“Voilà bien les femmes!” bougonna-t-il enfin entre ses dents.

Il garda encore un moment le silence, mâchonnant de confuses paroles. Évidemment, il n’avalait pas, comme on dit, la nouvelle qu’il venait d’apprendre.

“N’importe! conclut-il enfin, voilà une étrange aventure. Qu’en pensez-vous, commandant?”

Le capitaine brusquement interpellé se troubla. Ses yeux divergèrent sous le coup de l’émotion. Légèrement, si l’on veut, mais incontestablement, il loucha.

Une habitude en appelle une seconde, et une seconde, une troisième. Ayant louché, le capitaine se pétrit délicatement le bout du nez, puis, ayant satisfait à cette seconde manie, la troisième s’imposa à son tour, et il se retourna avec l’idée de cracher dans la mer avec adresse. Mais la mer était un peu loin, et un tapis épais étalait à sa place des fleurs vives sur un fond blanc. À cette vue, le capitaine fut interloqué et perdit tout à fait la notion des choses. Au lieu de répondre à Baker, il jugea prudent de faire part de ses sentiments au seul et unique Artimon. Il se pencha donc vers le chien sous les regards amusés de ses amis.

“Par la barbe de ma mère, master, c’est une diabolique péripétie, monsieur!” dit-il sentencieusement au bon toutou qui, d’avance, secouait ses oreilles d’une manière approbative.

FIN

THE CHASE OF THE GOLDEN METEOR

This is one of Verne’s last novels, which was published in 1908, three years after his death. It is one of seven posthumous novels, many of which were extensively edited by his son. Verne himself first wrote *La Chasse au Météore* in 1901 and then rewrote it before his death. Michel Verne is known to have emphasised the romantic sub plot of this novel and expanded it from 17 to 21 chapters, among other changes.

The novel concerns the rivalry between two amateur astronomers in the same small American town who spot a new meteor and attempt to claim the credit for themselves. The meteor turns out to be extremely valuable, as can be guessed from the title, and another eccentric amateur scientist, this time an inventor, creates a device which will cause it to fall where he chooses. This character was an invention of Michel, rather than his father.

Due to the scarcity of this novel in English translation, only the French text is available in this edition.

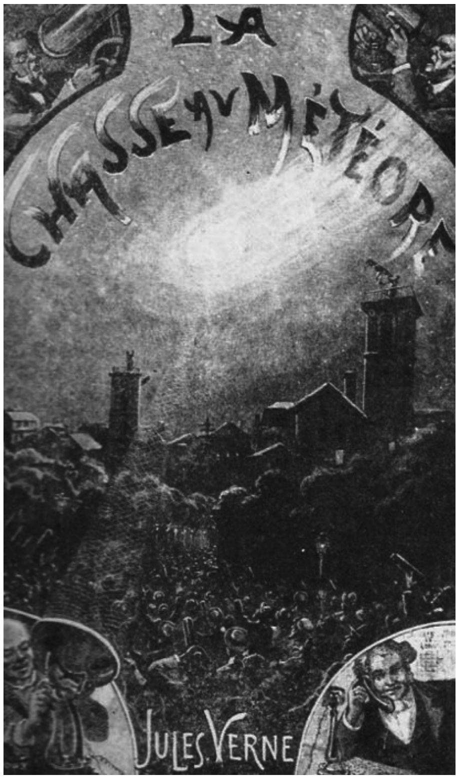
LA
CHASSE AU MÉTÉORE
JULES VERNE

The original frontispiece

CHAPITRE I

I

Dans lequel le juge John Proth remplit un des plus agréables devoirs de sa charge avant de retourner à son jardin.

Il n’y a aucun motif pour cacher aux lecteurs que la ville dans laquelle commence cette histoire singulière est située en Virginie, États-Unis d’Amérique. S’ils le veulent bien, nous appellerons cette ville Whaston, et nous la placerons dans le district oriental, sur la rive droite du Potomac; mais il nous paraît inutile de préciser davantage les coordonnées de cette cité, que l’on chercherait inutilement, même sur les meilleures cartes de l’Union.

Cette année-là, le 12 mars, dans la matinée, ceux des habitants de Whaston qui traversèrent Exeter street au moment convenable purent apercevoir un élégant cavalier monter et descendre la rue, qui est en forte pente, au petit pas de son cheval, puis finalement s’arrêter sur la place de la Constitution, à peu près au centre de la ville.

Ce cavalier, de pur type yankee, type qui n’est point exempt d’une originale distinction, ne devait pas avoir plus de trente ans. Il était d’une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, de belle et robuste complexion, de figure régulière, brun par les cheveux et châtain par la barbe dont la pointe allongeait son visage aux lèvres soigneusement rasées. Un ample manteau le recouvrait jusqu’aux jambes et s’arrondissait sur la croupe du cheval. Il maniait sa monture assez fringante avec autant d’adresse que de fermeté. Tout, dans son attitude, indiquait l’homme d’action, l’homme résolu et aussi l’homme de premier mouvement. Il ne devait jamais osciller entre le désir et la crainte, ce qui est le fait d’un caractère hésitant. Enfin, un observateur eût constaté que son impatience naturelle ne se dissimulait qu’imparfaitement sous une apparence de froideur.

Pourquoi ce cavalier était-il céans dans une ville où nul ne le connaissait, où nul ne l’avait jamais vu?… Se bornait-il à la traverser, ou comptait-il y rester quelque temps?… Pour trouver un hôtel, il n’aurait eu, dans ce dernier cas, que l’embarras du choix. On peut citer Whaston sous ce rapport. En aucun autre centre des États-Unis ou d’ailleurs, voyageur ne rencontrerait meilleur accueil, meilleur service, meilleure table, confort aussi complet à des prix aussi modérés. Il est vraiment déplorable que les cartes indiquent avec tant d’imprécision une ville pourvue de tels avantages.

Non, cet étranger ne semblait point en disposition de séjourner à Whaston, et les engageants sourires des hôteliers n’auraient sans doute aucune prise sur lui. L’air absorbé, indifférent à ce qui l’entourait, il suivait la chaussée qui dessine la périphérie de la place de la Constitution, dont un vaste terre-plein occupe le centre, sans même soupçonner qu’il excitât la curiosité publique.

Et Dieu sait pourtant si elle était excitée, la curiosité publique! Depuis que le cavalier était apparu, patrons et gens de service échangeaient, sur le pas des portes, ces propos ou d’autres analogues:

“Par où est-il arrivé?

— Par Exeter street.

— Et d’où venait-il?

— Il est entré, à ce qu’on dit, par le faubourg de Wilcox.

— Voilà bien une demi-heure que son cheval fait le tour de la place.

— C’est qu’il attend quelqu’un.

— Probable. Et même avec une certaine impatience.

— Il ne cesse de regarder du côté d’Exeter street.

— C’est par là qu’on arrivera.

— Qui ça, “on”?… Il ou elle?

— Eh! eh!… il a ma foi bonne tournure!…

— Un rendez-vous alors?

— Oui, un rendez-vous… mais non dans le sens où vous l’entendez.

— Qu’en savez-vous?

— Voilà trois fois que cet étranger s’arrête devant la porte de Mr John Proth…

— Or, comme Mr John Proth est juge à Whaston…

— C’est que ce personnage a quelque procès…

— Et que son adversaire est en retard.

— Vous avez raison.

— Bon! le juge Proth les aura conciliés et réconciliés en un tour de main!

— C’est un habile homme.

— Et un brave homme aussi.”

En vérité, il était possible que ce fût là le vrai motif de la présence de ce cavalier à Whaston. En effet, à plusieurs reprises, il avait fait halte, sans mettre pied à terre, devant la maison de Mr John Proth. Il en regardait la porte, il en regardait les fenêtres, puis il restait immobile, comme s’il eût attendu que quelqu’un parût sur le seuil, jusqu’au moment où son cheval, qui piaffait d’impatience, le contraignait à repartir.

Or, comme il s’arrêtait là une fois de plus, voici que la porte s’ouvrit toute grande, et qu’un homme se montra sur le palier du petit perron donnant accès au trottoir.

À peine l’étranger eut-il aperçu cet homme:

“Mr John Proth, je suppose?… dit-il en soulevant son chapeau.

— Lui-même, répondit le juge.

— Une simple question qui n’exigera qu’un oui ou un non de votre part.

— Faites, monsieur.

— Quelqu’un serait-il déjà venu, ce matin, vous demander Mr Seth Stanfort?

— Pas que je sache.

— Merci.”

Ce mot prononcé, son chapeau soulevé une seconde fois, le cavalier rendit la main et remonta au petit trot Exeter street.

Maintenant — ce fut l’avis général — il n’y avait plus à douter que cet inconnu eût affaire à Mr

John Proth. À la manière dont il venait de formuler sa question, il était lui-même Seth Stanfort, présent le premier à un rendez-vous convenu. Mais un autre problème tout aussi palpitant se posait. L’heure dudit rendez-vous était-elle passée, et le cavalier inconnu allait-il quitter la ville pour n’y plus revenir?

On le croira sans difficulté, puisque nous sommes en Amérique, c’est-à-dire chez le peuple le plus parieur qui soit en ce bas monde, des paris s’établirent touchant le retour prochain ou le départ définitif de l’étranger. Quelques enjeux d’un demi-dollar, ou même de cinq ou six cents, entre le personnel des hôtels et les curieux arrêtés sur la place, pas davantage, mais enfin enjeux qui seraient bel et bien payés par les perdants, et encaissés par les gagnants, tous gens des plus honorables.

Quant au juge John Proth, il s’était borné à suivre des yeux le cavalier qui remontait vers le faubourg de Wilcox. C’était un philosophe, le juge John Proth, un sage magistrat, qui ne comptait pas moins de cinquante ans de sagesse et de philosophie, bien qu’il ne fût âgé que d’un demi-siècle, — façon de dire qu’en venant au monde, il était déjà philosophe et sage. Ajoutez à cela que, en sa qualité de célibataire, — preuve incontestable de sagesse, — il n’avait jamais eu sa vie troublée par aucun souci, ce qui, on en conviendra, facilite grandement la pratique de la philosophie. Né à Whaston, il n’avait, même en sa première jeunesse, que peu ou pas quitté Whaston, et il était aussi considéré qu’aimé de ses justiciables qui le savaient dépourvu de toute ambition.

Un sens droit le guidait. Il se montrait toujours indulgent aux faiblesses et parfois aux fautes d’autrui. Arranger les affaires évoquées devant lui, renvoyer réconciliés les adversaires qui se présentaient à son modeste tribunal, arrondir les angles, huiler les rouages, adoucir les heurts inhérents à tout ordre social, si perfectionné qu'il puisse être, c'est ainsi qu'il comprenait sa mission.

John Proth jouissait d'une certaine aisance. S'il remplissait ces fonctions de juge, c'était par goût, et il ne songeait point à monter à de plus hautes juridictions. Il aimait la tranquillité pour lui et pour les autres. Il considérait les hommes comme des voisins d'existence avec lesquels on a tout intérêt à vivre en bons termes. Il se levait tôt et se couchait tôt. S'il lisait quelques auteurs favoris de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Monde, il se contentait d'un brave et honnête journal de la ville, le Whaston News, où les annonces tenaient plus de place que la politique. Chaque jour, une promenade d'une heure ou deux, pendant laquelle les chapeaux s'usaient à le saluer, ce qui l'obligeait pour son compte à renouveler le sien tous les trois mois. En dehors de ces promenades, sauf le temps consacré à l'exercice de sa profession, il restait dans sa demeure paisible et confortable, et cultivait les fleurs de son jardin, qui le récompensaient de ses soins en le charmant par leurs fraîches couleurs, en lui prodiguant leurs suaves parfums.

Ce caractère tracé en quelques lignes, le portrait de Mr John Proth étant placé dans son vrai cadre, on comprendra que ledit juge ne fût pas autrement préoccupé de la question posée par l'étranger. Si celui-ci, au lieu de s'adresser au maître de la maison, eût interrogé sa vieille servante Kate, peut-être bien que Kate eût voulu en savoir davantage. Elle aurait insisté sur ce Seth Stanfort, demandé ce qu'il faudrait dire dans le cas où l'on viendrait s'enquérir de sa personne. Et sans doute même il n'aurait pas déplu à la digne Kate d'apprendre si l'étranger devait ou non, soit dans la matinée, soit dans l'après-midi revenir à la maison de Mr John Proth.

Mr John Proth, lui, ne se fût pas pardonné ces curiosités, ces indiscrétions, excusables chez sa servante, puis parce qu’elle appartenait au sexe féminin. Non, Mr John Proth ne s’aperçut même pas que l’arrivée, la présence, puis le départ de l’étranger avaient été remarqués par les badauds de la place, et, après avoir refermé sa porte, il retourna donner à boire aux roses, aux iris, aux géraniums, aux résédas de son jardin.

Les curieux ne l’imitèrent point et restèrent en observation.

Cependant, le cavalier s’était avancé jusqu’à l’extrémité d’Exeter street, qui dominait le côté ouest de la ville. Parvenu au faubourg de Wilcox, que cette rue réunit au centre de Whaston, il arrêta son cheval, et, sans quitter la selle, regarda tout autour de lui. De ce point, son regard pouvait s’étendre à un bon mille aux environs, et suivre la route sinueuse descendant pendant trois milles jusqu’à la bourgade de Steel, qui, au-delà du Potomac, profilait ses clochers sur l’horizon. En vain son regard parcourait-il cette route. Il n’y découvrait sans doute pas ce qu’il cherchait. De là de vifs mouvements d’impatience qui se transmirent au cheval, dont il fallut réprimer les piaffements.

Dix minutes s’écoulèrent, puis le cavalier, reprenant au petit pas Exeter street, se dirigea pour la cinquième fois vers la place.

“Après tout, se répétait-il, non sans consulter sa montre, il n’y a pas encore de retard… Ce n’est que pour dix heures sept, et il est à peine neuf heures et demie… La distance qui sépare Whaston de Steel, d’où elle doit venir, est égale à celle qui sépare Whaston de Brial, d’où je suis venu, et peut être franchie en moins de vingt minutes… La route est belle, le temps est sec, et je ne sache pas que le pont ait été emporté par une crue du fleuve… Il n’y aura donc ni empêchement, ni obstacle… Dans ces conditions, si elle manque au rendez-vous, c’est qu’elle le voudra bien… D’ailleurs, l’exactitude consiste à être là juste à l’heure, et non à faire trop tôt acte de présence… En réalité, c’est moi qui suis inexact, puisque je l’aurai devancée plus qu’il ne convient à un homme méthodique… Il est vrai, même à défaut de tout autre sentiment, la politesse me commandait d’arriver le premier au rendez-vous!”

Ce monologue se poursuivit tout le temps que l’étranger redescendit Exeter street, et il ne prit fin qu’au moment où les sabots du cheval frappèrent de nouveau le macadam de la place.

Décidément, ceux qui avaient parié pour le retour de l’étranger gagnaient leur pari. Aussi, lorsque celui-ci passa le long des hôtels, lui firent-ils bon visage, tandis que les perdants ne le saluaient que par des haussements d’épaules.

Dix heures sonnèrent enfin à l’horloge municipale. Son cheval arrêté, l’étranger compta les dix coups et s’assura que l’horloge marchait en parfait accord avec la montre qu’il tira de son gousset.

Il ne s’en fallait plus que de sept minutes pour que l’heure du rendez-vous fût atteinte, puis aussitôt dépassée.

Seth Stanfort revint à l’entrée d’Exeter street. Visiblement, ni sa monture ni lui ne pouvaient se tenir au repos.

Un public assez nombreux animait alors cette rue. De ceux qui la montaient, Seth Stanfort ne se préoccupait en aucune façon. Toute son attention allait à ceux qui la descendaient, et son regard les saisissait dès qu’ils se montraient au sommet de la pente. Exeter street est assez longue pour qu’un piéton mette une dizaine de minutes à la parcourir, mais il n’en faut que trois ou quatre pour une voiture marchant rapidement ou pour un cheval au trot.

Or, ce n’était point aux piétons que notre cavalier avait affaire. Il ne les voyait même pas. Son plus intime ami eût passé à pied près de lui, qu’il ne l’aurait pas aperçu. La personne attendue ne pouvait arriver qu’à cheval ou en voiture.

Mais arriverait-elle à l’heure dite?… Il ne s’en fallait plus que de trois minutes, juste le temps nécessaire pour descendre Exeter street, et aucun véhicule ne se montrait en haut de la rue, ni motocycle, ni bicyclette, non plus qu’une automobile qui, en faisant du quatre-vingts à l’heure, eût devancé encore l’instant du rendez-vous.

Seth Stanfort lança un dernier coup d’œil dans Exeter street. Ce fut un vif éclair qui jaillit de sa prunelle, tandis qu’il murmurait sur un ton d’inébranlable résolution:

“Si elle n’est point ici à dix heures sept, je n’épouse pas.”

Comme une réponse à cette déclaration, le galop d’un cheval se fit entendre à ce moment vers le haut de la rue. L’animal, une bête superbe, était monté par une jeune femme qui le maniait avec autant de grâce que de sûreté. Les passants s’écartaient devant lui, et bien certainement il ne trouverait aucun obstacle jusqu’à la place.

Seth Stanfort reconnut celle qu’il attendait. Son visage redevint impassible. Il ne prononça pas une seule parole, ne fit pas un geste. Après avoir rassemblé son cheval, il se rendit d’un pas tranquille devant la maison du juge.

Cela fut bien pour intriguer derechef les curieux, qui se rapprochèrent, sans que l’étranger leur prêtât la moindre attention.

Quelques secondes plus tard, la cavalière débouchait sur la place, et son cheval blanc d’écume s’arrêtait à deux pas de la porte.

L’étranger se découvrit et dit:

“Je salue miss Arcadia Walker…

— Et moi Mr Seth Stanfort”, répondit Arcadia Walker, en s’inclinant d’un mouvement gracieux.

On peut nous en croire, les indigènes ne perdaient pas de vue ce couple qui leur était absolument inconnu. Et ils disaient entre eux:

“S’ils sont venus pour un procès, il est à désirer que ce procès s’arrange au profit de tous deux.

— Il s’arrangera, ou Mr Proth ne serait pas l’habile homme qu’il est!

— Et si ni l’un ni l’autre ne sont mariés, le mieux serait que cela finît par un mariage!”

Ainsi allaient les langues, ainsi s’échangeaient les propos.

Mais ni Seth Stanfort ni miss Arcadia Walker ne semblaient se préoccuper de la curiosité plutôt gênante dont ils étaient l’objet.

Seth Stanfort se préparait à descendre de cheval pour frapper à la porte de Mr John Proth, lorsque cette porte s’ouvrit.

Mr John Proth apparut sur le seuil, et la vieille servante Kate, cette fois, se montra derrière lui.

Ils avaient entendu un piétinement de chevaux devant la maison et, celui-là quittant son jardin, celle-ci quittant sa cuisine, voulu savoir ce qui se passait.

Seth Stanfort resta donc en selle, et, s’adressant au magistrat:

“Monsieur le juge John Proth, dit-il, je suis Mr Seth Stanfort, de Boston, Massachusetts.

— Très heureux de faire votre connaissance, Mr Seth Stanfort!

— Et voici miss Arcadia Walker, de Trenton, New-Jersey.

— Très honoré de me trouver en présence de miss Arcadia Walker!”

Et Mr John Proth, après avoir observé l’étranger, reporta toute son attention sur l’étrangère.

Miss Arcadia Walker étant une charmante personne, on nous saura gré d’en donner un rapide crayon. Son âge, vingt-quatre ans; ses yeux, d’un bleu pâle; ses cheveux, d’un châtain foncé; son teint, d’une fraîcheur que le hâle du grand air altérait à peine; ses dents, d’une blancheur et d’une régularité parfaites; sa taille, un peu supérieure à la moyenne; sa tournure, ravissante; sa démarche, d’une rare élégance, souple et nerveuse à la fois. Sous l’amazone dont elle était revêtue, elle se prêtait gracieusement aux mouvements de son cheval, qui piaffait à l’exemple de celui de Seth Stanfort. Ses mains finement gantées jouaient avec les rênes, et un connaisseur eût deviné en elle une habile écuyère. Toute sa personne était empreinte d’une extrême distinction, avec un “je ne sais quoi” de particulier à la haute classe de l’Union, ce que l’on pourrait appeler l’aristocratie américaine, si ce mot ne jurait pas avec les instincts démocratiques des natifs du Nouveau Monde.

Miss Arcadia Walker, originaire du New-Jersey, n’ayant plus que des parents éloignés, libre de ses actions, indépendante par sa fortune, douée de l’esprit aventureux des jeunes Américaines, menait une existence conforme à ses goûts. Voyageant depuis plusieurs années déjà, ayant visité les principales contrées de l’Europe, elle était au courant de ce qui se faisait et se disait à Paris, à Londres, à Berlin, à Vienne ou à Rome. Et, ce qu’elle avait entendu ou vu au cours de ses incessantes pérégrinations, elle pouvait en parler avec des Français, des Anglais, des Allemands, des Italiens dans leur propre langue. C’était une personne instruite, dont l’éducation, dirigée par un tuteur aujourd’hui disparu de ce monde, avait été particulièrement soignée. La pratique des affaires ne lui manquait même pas, et elle faisait preuve dans l’administration de sa fortune d’une remarquable entente de ses intérêts.

Ce qui vient d’être dit de miss Arcadia Walker se fût appliqué symétriquement — c’est le mot juste — à Mr Seth Stanfort. Libre aussi, riche aussi, aimant aussi les voyages, ayant couru le monde entier, il ne résidait guère à Boston, sa ville natale. L’hiver, il était l’hôte de l’Ancien Continent et des grandes capitales, où il avait souvent rencontré son aventureuse compatriote. L’été, il revenait dans son pays d’origine, vers les plages où se réunissent en famille les Yankees opulents. Là, miss Arcadia Walker et lui s’étaient encore retrouvés.

Les mêmes goûts avaient peu à peu rapproché ces deux êtres jeunes et vaillants, que les curieux et surtout les curieuses de la place estimaient si bien faits l’un pour l’autre. Et, en vérité, tous deux avides de voyages, tous deux ayant hâte de se transporter là où quelque incident de la vie politique ou militaire excitait l'attention publique, comment ne se seraient-ils pas convenus? On ne saurait donc s'étonner que Mr Seth Stanfort et miss Arcadia Walker en fussent peu à peu venus à l'idée d'unir leurs existences, ce qui ne changerait rien à leurs habitudes. Ce ne seraient plus deux bâtiments marchant de conserve, mais un seul et, on peut le croire, supérieurement construit, gréé, aménagé pour courir toutes les mers du globe.

Non! ce n'était point un procès, une discussion, le règlement de quelque affaire, qui amenait Seth Stanfort et miss Arcadia Walker devant le juge de cette ville. Non! après avoir rempli toutes les formalités légales devant les autorités compétentes du Massachusetts et du New-Jersey, ils s'étaient donné rendez-vous à Whaston, ce jour même, 12 mars, à cette heure même, dix heures sept, pour accomplir un acte qui, au dire des amateurs, est le plus important de la vie humaine.

La présentation de Mr Seth Stanfort et de miss Arcadia Walker au juge ayant été faite ainsi qu'il vient d'être rapporté, Mr John Proth n'eut plus qu'à demander au voyageur et à la voyageuse pour quel motif ils comparaissaient devant lui.

“Seth Stanfort désire devenir le mari de miss Arcadia Walker, répondit l'un.

— Et miss Arcadia Walker désire devenir la femme de Mr Seth Stanfort”, ajouta l'autre.

Le magistrat s'inclina en disant:

“Je suis à votre disposition, Mr Stanfort, et à la vôtre, miss Arcadia Walker.”

Les deux jeunes gens s’inclinèrent à leur tour.

“Quand vous conviendra-t-il qu’il soit procédé à ce mariage? reprit Mr John Proth.

— Immédiatement… si vous êtes libre, répondit Seth Stanfort.

— Car nous quitterons Whaston dès que je serai Mrs Stanfort”, déclara miss Arcadia Walker.

Mr John Proth indiqua, par son attitude, combien lui, et toute la cité avec lui, regrettaient de ne pouvoir garder plus longtemps dans les murs de Whaston ce couple charmant, qui honorait en ce moment la ville de sa présence.

Puis il ajouta:

“Je suis entièrement à vos ordres”, en reculant de quelques pas, afin de dégager la porte.

Mais Mr Seth Stanfort l’arrêta du geste.

“Est-il bien nécessaire, demanda-t-il, que miss Arcadia et moi nous descendions de cheval?”

Mr John Proth réfléchit un instant.

“Aucunement, affirma-t-il. On peut se marier à cheval aussi bien qu’à pied.”

Il eût été difficile de rencontrer un magistrat plus accommodant, même en cet original pays d’Amérique.

“Une seule question, reprit Mr John Proth. Toutes les formalités imposées par la loi sont-elles remplies?

— Elles le sont”, répondit Seth Stanfort.

Et il tendit au juge un double permis en bonne et due forme, qui avait été rédigé par les greffes de Boston et de Trenton, après acquittement des droits de licence.

Mr John Proth prit les papiers, mit sur son nez des lunettes à monture d’or, et lut attentivement ces pièces régulièrement légalisées et revêtues du timbre officiel.

“Ces papiers sont en règle, dit-il, et je suis prêt à vous délivrer le certificat de mariage.”

Qu’on ne soit pas étonné si les curieux, dont le nombre s’était accru, se pressaient autour du couple, comme autant de témoins d’une union célébrée dans des conditions qui paraîtraient un peu extraordinaires en tout autre pays. Mais ce n’était ni pour gêner les deux fiancés, ni pour leur déplaire. Mr John Proth remonta alors les premières marches de son perron, et, d’une voix qui fut entendue de tous, il dit:

“Mr Seth Stanfort, vous consentez à prendre pour femme miss Arcadia Walker?

— Oui.

— Miss Arcadia Walker, vous consentez à prendre pour mari Mr Seth Stanfort?

— Oui.”

Le magistrat se recueillit pendant quelques secondes, et, sérieux comme un photographe au moment du sacramentel: “ne bougeons plus!” prononça:

“Au nom de la loi, Mr Seth Stanfort, de Boston, et miss Arcadia Walker, de Trenton, je vous déclare unis par le mariage.”

Les deux époux se rapprochèrent et se prirent la main, comme pour sceller l’acte qu’ils venaient d’accomplir.

Puis chacun d’eux présenta au juge un billet de cinq cents dollars.

“Pour honoraires, dit Mr Seth Stanfort.

— Pour les pauvres”, dit Mrs Arcadia Stanfort.

Et tous deux, après s’être inclinés devant le juge, rendirent les rênes à leurs chevaux, qui s’élancèrent dans la direction du faubourg de Wilcox.

“Ah bien!… Ah bien!… fit Kate, paralysée à ce point par la surprise, qu’elle en était exceptionnellement restée dix minutes sans parler.

— Qu’est-ce à dire, Kate?” interrogea Mr John Proth.

La vieille Kate lâcha le coin de son tablier qu’elle tordait depuis un instant comme un cordier de profession.

“M’est avis, dit-elle, qu’ils sont fous, ces gens-là, monsieur le juge.

— Sans doute, vénérable Kate, sans doute, approuva Mr John Proth en saisissant de nouveau son pacifique arrosoir. Mais quoi d’étonnant à cela?… Ceux qui se marient ne sont-ils pas toujours un peu fous?”

CHAPITRE II

II

Qui introduit le lecteur dans la maison de Dean Forsyth et le met en rapport avec son neveu, Francis Gordon, et sa bonne, Mitz.

“Mitz!… Mitz!…

— Mon fieu?…

— Qu’est-ce qu’il a donc, mon oncle Dean?

— Je n’en sais rien.

— Est-ce qu’il est malade?

— Que nenni! mais, si cela continue, il le deviendra pour sûr.”

Ces demandes et ces réponses s’échangeaient entre un jeune homme de vingt-trois ans et une femme de soixante-cinq, dans la salle à manger d’une maison d’Elisabeth street, précisément en cette ville de Whaston, où venait de s’accomplir le plus original des mariages à la mode américaine.

Cette maison d’Elisabeth street appartenait à Mr Dean Forsyth. Mr Dean Forsyth avait quarante-cinq ans et paraissait bien les avoir. Grosse tête ébouriffée, petits yeux à lunettes d’un fort numéro, épaules légèrement voûtées, cou puissant enveloppé en toutes saisons du double tour d’une cravate qui montait jusqu’au menton, redingote ample et chiffonnée, gilet flasque dont les boutons inférieurs n’étaient jamais utilisés, pantalon trop court recouvrant à peine des souliers trop larges, calotte à gland posée en arrière sur une chevelure grisonnante et indisciplinée, figure aux mille plis, se terminant par la barbiche habituelle aux Américains du Nord, caractère irascible toujours à deux millimètres de la colère, tel était Mr Dean Forsyth, dont parlaient Francis Gordon, son neveu, et Mitz, sa vieille servante, dans la matinée du 21 mars.

Francis Gordon, privé de ses parents dès son bas âge, avait été élevé par Mr Dean Forsyth, frère de sa mère. Bien qu’une certaine fortune dût lui revenir de son oncle, il ne s’était pas cru pour cela dispensé de travailler, et Mr Forsyth ne l’avait pas cru davantage. Le neveu, après l’achèvement de ses études d’humanités dans la célèbre université d’Harward, les avait complétées par celles du droit, et il était présentement avocat à Whaston, où la veuve, l’orphelin et les murs mitoyens n’avaient pas de défenseur plus résolu. Il connaissait à fond les lois et la jurisprudence et parlait avec facilité d’une voix chaude et pénétrante. Tous ses confrères, jeunes et vieux, l’estimaient, et il ne s’était jamais fait un ennemi. Très bien de sa personne, propriétaire de beaux cheveux châtains et de beaux yeux noirs, de manières élégantes, spirituel sans méchanceté, serviable sans ostentation, point maladroit dans les divers genres de sport auxquels s’adonne avec passion la gentry américaine, comment n’aurait-il pas pris rang parmi les plus distingués jeunes gens de la ville, et pourquoi n’eût-il pas aimé cette charmante Jenny Hudelson, fille du docteur Hudelson et de sa femme née Flora Clarish?…

Mais c’est trop tôt appeler l’attention du lecteur sur cette demoiselle. Il est plus convenable qu’elle n’entre en scène qu’au milieu de sa famille, et le moment n’en est pas venu. Cela ne saurait tarder, d’ailleurs. Toutefois, il convient d’apporter une méthode rigoureuse dans le développement de cette histoire, qui exige une extrême précision.

En ce qui concerne Francis Gordon, nous ajouterons qu’il demeurait dans la maison d’Elisabeth street, et ne la quitterait sans doute que le jour de son mariage avec miss Jenny… Mais, encore une fois, laissons miss Jenny Hudelson où elle est, et disons seulement que la bonne Mitz était la confidente du neveu de son maître et qu’elle le chérissait comme un fils, ou, mieux encore, un petit-fils, les grand-mères détenant généralement le record de la tendresse maternelle.

Mitz, servante modèle, dont la pareille serait maintenant introuvable, descendait de cette espèce perdue, qui procède à la fois du chien et du chat: du chien, puisqu’elle s’attache à ses maîtres, du chat, puisqu’elle s’attache à la maison. Comme on l’imagine sans peine, Mitz avait son franc-parler avec Mr Dean Forsyth. Quand il avait tort, elle le lui disait nettement, quoique dans un langage extravagant, dont on ne pourra, en français, rendre qu’approximativement la savoureuse fantaisie. S’il ne voulait pas en convenir, il n’avait qu’une chose à faire: quitter la place, regagner son cabinet et s’enfermer à double verrou.

Du reste, Mr Dean Forsyth n’avait pas à craindre d’y être jamais seul. Il était sûr d’y rencontrer toujours un autre personnage, qui se soustrayait de la même manière aux remontrances et aux admonestations de Mitz.

Ce personnage répondait à l’appellation d’Omicron. Appellation bizarre, qu’il devait à sa médiocre stature, et, sans doute, aurait-il été surnommé Oméga, s’il n’eût été de trop petite taille. Haut de quatre pieds six pouces dès l’âge de quinze ans, il n’avait plus grandi ensuite. De son vrai nom Tom Wife, il était entré à cet âge dans la maison de Mr Dean Forsyth, du temps du père de celui-ci, en qualité de jeune domestique, et il avait dépassé la cinquantaine; on en conclura que, depuis trente-cinq ans, il était au service de l’oncle de Francis Gordon.

Il est important de dire à quoi se réduisait ce service. À ceci: aider Mr Dean Forsyth dans ses travaux, pour lesquels il éprouvait une passion au moins égale à celle de son maître.

Mr Dean Forsyth travaillait donc?

Oui, en amateur. Mais avec quel emballement et quelle fougue, on en jugera.

De quoi s'occupait Mr Dean Forsyth? De médecine, de droit, de littérature, d'art, d'affaires, comme tant de citoyens de la libre Amérique?

Pas le moins du monde.

De quoi alors? demandez-vous. De sciences?

Vous n'y êtes pas. Non, pas de sciences, au pluriel, mais de science, au singulier. Uniquement, exclusivement, de cette science sublime qui s'appelle l'Astronomie.

Il ne rêvait que découvertes planétaires ou stellaires. Rien ou presque rien de ce qui se passait à la surface de notre globe ne paraissait l'intéresser, et il vivait dans les espaces infinis. Toutefois, comme il n'y aurait trouvé ni à déjeuner, ni à dîner, il fallait bien qu'il en redescendît deux fois par jour, à tout le moins. Et justement, ce matin-là, il n'en redescendait pas à l'heure habituelle, il se faisait attendre, ce dont maugréait Mitz, en tournant autour de la table.

“Il ne viendra donc pas? répétait-elle.

— Omicron n'est pas là? demanda Francis Gordon.

— Il est toujours où est son maître, répliqua la servante. Je n’ai pourtant plus assez de jambes — oui, c’est ainsi, en vérité, que s’exprima l’estimable Mitz — pour grimper à son perchoir!”

Le perchoir en question n’était ni plus ni moins qu’une tour, dont la galerie supérieure dominait d’une vingtaine de pieds le toit de la maison, un observatoire pour lui donner son véritable nom. Au-dessous de la galerie, existait une chambre circulaire, percée de quatre fenêtres orientées vers les quatre points cardinaux. À l’intérieur, pivotaient sur leurs pieds quelques lunettes et quelques télescopes d’une portée assez considérable, et, si leurs objectifs ne s’usaient point, ce n’était pas faute d’être utilisés. Ce qu’il y aurait eu plutôt lieu de craindre, c’eût été que Mr Dean Forsyth et Omicron finissent par s’abîmer les yeux à force de les appliquer aux oculaires de leurs instruments.

C’est dans cette chambre que tous deux passaient la plus grande partie du jour et de la nuit, en se relayant, il est vrai. Ils regardaient, observaient, planaient dans les zones interstellaires, entraînés par le perpétuel espoir de faire quelque découverte à laquelle s’attacherait le nom de Dean Forsyth. Lorsque le ciel était pur, cela allait encore; mais il s’en faut qu’il le soit toujours au-dessus de la fraction du trente-septième parallèle qui traverse l’État de Virginie. Des nuages, cirrus, nimbus, cumulus, tant qu’on en veut, et assurément plus que n’en voulaient le maître et le serviteur. Aussi, que de jérémiades, que de menaces contre ce firmament sur lequel la brise traînait ces haillons de vapeurs!

Précisément, pendant ces derniers jours de mars la patience de Mr Dean Forsyth était plus que jamais mise à l’épreuve. Depuis plusieurs jours, le ciel s’obstinait à rester couvert au grand désespoir de l’astronome.

Ce matin-là, 21 mars, un vent fort d’Ouest continuait à rouler, presque au ras du sol, toute une mer de nuages d’une désolante opacité.

“Quel dommage! soupira une dixième fois Mr Dean Forsyth, après une dernière et infructueuse tentative pour vaincre la brume épaisse. J’ai le pressentiment que nous passons à côté d’une découverte sensationnelle.

— C’est bien possible, répondit Omicron. C’est même très probable, car, il y a quelques jours, pendant une éclaircie, j’ai cru apercevoir…

— Et moi, j’ai vu, Omicron.

— Tous deux, alors, tous deux en même temps!

— Omicron!… protesta Mr Dean Forsyth.

— Oui, vous d’abord, sans aucun doute, accorda Omicron avec un hochement de tête significatif. Mais, quand j’ai cru apercevoir la chose en question, il m’a bien semblé que ce devait être… que c’était…

— Et moi, déclara Mr Dean Forsyth, j’affirme qu’il s’agissait d’un météore se déplaçant du Nord au Sud…

— Oui, Mr Dean, perpendiculairement au sens du soleil.

— À son sens apparent, Omicron.

— Apparent, cela va sans dire.

— Et c’était le 16 de ce mois.

— Le 16.

— À sept heures trente-sept minutes vingt secondes.

— Vingt secondes, répéta Omicron, ainsi que je l’ai constaté à notre horloge.

— Et il n’a pas reparu depuis! s’écria Mr Dean Forsyth, en tendant vers le ciel une main menaçante.

— Comment aurait-il fait? Des nuages!… des nuages!… des nuages!… Depuis cinq jours, pas même assez de bleu dans le ciel pour s’y tailler un mouchoir de poche!

— C’est un fait exprès, s’écria Dean Forsyth en frappant du pied, et je crois vraiment que ces choses-là n’arrivent qu’à moi.

— À nous”, rectifia Omicron, qui se regardait comme de moitié dans les travaux de son maître.

À vrai dire, tous les habitants de la région avaient le même droit de se plaindre si d’épais nuages attristaient leur ciel. Que le soleil luise ou ne luise pas, c’est pour tout le monde.

Mais, quelque général que fût ce droit, nul n’aurait pu avoir la folle prétention d’être d’aussi méchante humeur que Mr Dean Forsyth lorsque la cité était enveloppée par un de ces brouillards contre lesquels les télescopes les plus puissants, les lunettes les plus perfectionnées ne peuvent rien. Et de tels brouillards ne sont pas rares à Whaston, bien que la ville soit baignée par les eaux claires du Potomac, et non par les eaux bourbeuses de la Tamise.

Quoi qu’il en soit, le 16 mars, alors que le ciel était pur, qu’avaient donc aperçu, ou cru apercevoir, le maître et le serviteur?… Pas moins qu’un bolide de forme sphérique se déplaçant sensiblement du Nord au Sud avec une excessive rapidité, et d'un tel éclat qu'il luttait victorieusement contre la lumière diffuse du soleil. Toutefois, comme sa distance de la terre devait mesurer un certain nombre de kilomètres, il eût été possible de le suivre, malgré sa vitesse, pendant un temps appréciable, si un intempestif brouillard ne fût venu empêcher toute observation.

Depuis lors se dévidait le fil des regrets que provoquait cette mauvaise chance. Reviendrait-il, ce bolide, sur l'horizon de Whaston? Pourrait-on en calculer les éléments, déterminer sa masse, son poids, sa nature? Ne serait-ce pas quelque autre astronome plus favorisé qui le retrouverait en un autre point du ciel? Dean Forsyth, l'ayant si peu tenu au bout de son télescope, serait-il qualifié pour signer de son nom cette découverte? Tout l'honneur n'en reviendrait-il pas en fin de compte à un de ces savants de l'Ancien ou du Nouveau Continent, qui passent leur existence à fouiller l'espace nuit et jour?

“Des accapareurs! protestait Dean Forsyth. Des pirates du ciel!”

Pendant toute cette matinée du 21 mars, ni Dean Forsyth ni Omicron n'avaient pu se décider, malgré le mauvais temps, à s'éloigner de celle des fenêtres qui s'ouvrait vers le Nord. Et leur colère avait grandi, à mesure que les heures s'écoulaient. Maintenant, ils ne parlaient plus. Dean Forsyth parcourait du regard le vaste horizon que limitait de ce côté le profil capricieux des collines de Serbor, au-dessus desquelles une brise assez vive chassait les nues grisâtres. Omicron se hissait sur la pointe des pieds, pour accroître le rayon de vue que réduisait sa taille exiguë. L'un avait croisé les bras, et ses poings fermés s'écrasaient sur sa poitrine. L'autre, de ses doigts crispés, battait l'appui de la fenêtre. Quelques oiseaux filaient à tire-d'aile, en jetant de petits cris, avec un air de se moquer du maître et du serviteur, que leur qualité de bipèdes retenait à la surface de la terre!… Ah! s’ils avaient pu suivre ces oiseaux dans leur vol, en quelques bonds ils auraient traversé la couche des vapeurs, et peut-être alors eussent-ils aperçu l’astéroïde continuant sa course dans la lumière éblouissante du soleil!

En cet instant, on frappa à la porte.

Dean Forsyth et Omicron, absorbés, n’entendirent pas.

La porte s’ouvrit, et Francis Gordon parut sur le seuil.

Dean Forsyth et Omicron ne se retournèrent même pas.

Le neveu alla vers l’oncle et lui toucha légèrement le bras.

Mr Dean Forsyth laissa tomber sur son neveu un regard tellement lointain qu’il devait venir de Sirius, ou, au bas mot, de la lune.

“Qu’est-ce? demanda-t-il.

— Mon oncle, le déjeuner attend.

— Ah! vraiment, dit Dean Forsyth, il attend, le déjeuner? Eh bien! nous attendons aussi, nous.

— Vous attendez… quoi?

— Le soleil, déclara Omicron, dont la réponse fut approuvée d’un signe par son maître.

— Mais, mon oncle, vous n’avez pas, je pense, invité le soleil à déjeuner, et l’on peut se mettre à table sans lui.”

Que répliquer à cela? Si l’astre radieux ne se montrait pas de toute la journée, Mr Dean Forsyth s’entêterait-il à jeûner jusqu’au soir?

Peut-être, après tout, car l’astronome ne semblait pas disposé à obéir à l’invitation de son neveu.

“Mon oncle, insista celui-ci, Mitz s’impatiente, je vous en préviens.”

Du coup, Mr Dean Forsyth reprit conscience de la réalité. Les impatiences de la bonne Mitz, il les connaissait. Puisqu’elle lui avait dépêché un exprès, c’est que la situation était grave, et il fallait se rendre sans plus tarder.

“Quelle heure est-il donc? demanda-t-il.

— Onze heures quarante-six”, répondit Francis Gordon.

Telle était l’heure, en effet, marquée par la pendule, alors que, d’ordinaire, l’oncle et le neveu s’asseyaient en face l’un de l’autre à onze heures précises.

“Onze heures quarante-six! s’écria Mr Dean Forsyth en simulant un vif mécontentement afin de cacher son inquiétude. Je ne comprends pas que Mitz soit d’une telle irrégularité!

— Mais, mon oncle, objecta Francis, c’est la troisième fois que nous frappons inutilement à la porte.”

Sans répondre, Mr Dean Forsyth s’engagea dans l’escalier, tandis qu’Omicron, qui servait habituellement le repas, demeurait en observation, guettant un retour du soleil.

L’oncle et le neveu pénétrèrent dans la salle à manger.

Mitz était là. Elle regarda son maître en face, et celui-ci baissa la tête.

“L’ami Krone?… interrogea-t-elle, car c’est ainsi que Mitz, dans son innocence, désignait la cinquième voyelle de l’alphabet grec.

— Il est occupé là-haut, répondit Francis Gordon. Nous nous passerons de lui ce matin.

— Avec plaisir! déclara Mitz d’un ton bourru.

Ma fine! il peut bien rester dans son haut servatoire (observatoire) tant que ça lui chantera. Tout n’en ira que mieux ici sans cet empâté de première classe.”

Le déjeuner commença. Les bouches ne s’ouvraient que pour manger. Mitz, qui, d’habitude, causait volontiers en apportant les plats et en changeant les assiettes, ne desserrait pas les dents. Ce silence pesait, cette contrainte gênait. Francis Gordon, désireux d’y mettre un terme, demanda, pour dire quelque chose:

“Êtes-vous content, mon oncle, de votre matinée?

— Non, répondit Dean Forsyth. L’état du ciel n’était pas propice, et ce contretemps m’a particulièrement ennuyé aujourd’hui.

— Seriez-vous sur la piste de quelque découverte astronomique?

— Je le crois, Francis. Mais je ne peux rien affirmer, tant qu’une nouvelle observation…

— Voilà donc, monsieur, interrompit Mitz d’un ton sec, ce qui vous travaille depuis une huitaine de jours, au point que vous prenez racine dans votre tour, et que vous vous relevez la nuit… Oui! trois fois la nuit dernière, je vous ai bien entendu, car, Dieu merci, je n’ai pas la berlue, peut-être! ajouta-t-elle sous forme de réponse à un geste de son maître et afin sans doute de bien faire comprendre qu’elle n’était pas encore sourde.

— En effet, ma bonne Mitz”, reconnut Mr Dean Forsyth d’un ton conciliant.

Douceur superflue.

“Une découverte astrocomique! reprit la digne servante avec indignation. Et quand vous vous serez mangé les sangs, quand, à force de regarder dans vos tuyaux, vous aurez attrapé un tour d’airain (tour de reins), une couverture (courbature) ou une flexion de poitrine (fluxion de poitrine), c’est ça qui vous fera une belle jambe! Est-ce vos étoiles qui viendront vous soigner, et le docteur vous ordonnera-t-il de les avaler en pilules?”

Étant donnée la tournure de ce commencement de dialogue, Dean Forsyth comprit que mieux valait ne pas répondre. Il continua à manger en silence, si troublé, toutefois, qu’à plusieurs reprises il prit son verre pour son assiette, et réciproquement.

Francis Gordon s’efforçait de maintenir la conversation, mais c’était comme s’il eût discouru dans le désert. Son oncle, toujours sombre, ne paraissait pas l’entendre. Si bien qu’il en vint à parler du temps. Lorsqu’on ne sait trop que dire, on cause du temps qu’il a fait, ou qu’il fera. Matière inépuisable, à la portée de toutes les intelligences. Cette question atmosphérique intéressait d’ailleurs Mr Dean Forsyth. Aussi, à un certain moment où un épaississement des nuages rendait la salle à manger plus obscure, il releva la tête, regarda la fenêtre et, laissant d’une main accablée retomber sa fourchette, il s’écria:

“Est-ce que ces maudits nuages ne vont pas enfin dégager le ciel, fût-ce au prix d’une pluie torrentielle?

— Ma fine! déclara Mitz, après trois semaines de sécheresse, ça ne serait pas de refus pour les biens de la terre.

— La terre!… La terre!… murmura Mr Dean Forsyth avec un si parfait dédain qu’il s’attira cette réponse de la vieille servante:

— Oui, la terre, monsieur. J’imagine qu’elle vaut bien le ciel, dont vous ne voulez jamais descendre… même à l’heure du déjeuner!

— Voyons, ma bonne Mitz”, dit Francis Gordon d’une voix insinuante.

Peine perdue. La bonne Mitz n’était pas d’humeur à se laisser séduire.

“Il n’y a pas de “ma bonne Mitz”, continua-t-elle sur le même ton. C’est vraiment pas la peine de vous esquinter le tempérament à regarder la lune, pour ne pas savoir qu’il pleut au printemps. S’il ne pleut pas au mois de mars, quand pleuvra-t-il? Je vous le demande.

— Mon oncle, approuva le neveu, c’est vrai que nous sommes en mars, au début du printemps, et il faut bien en prendre son parti!… Mais bientôt, ce sera l’été et vous aurez un ciel plus pur. Vous pourrez alors continuer vos travaux dans des conditions meilleures! Un peu de patience, mon oncle!

— De la patience, Francis? répliqua Mr Dean Forsyth dont le front n’était pas moins rembruni que l’atmosphère, de la patience!… Et, s’il s’en va si loin qu’on ne puisse l’apercevoir?… Et s’il ne se montre plus au-dessus de l’horizon?

— Il?… intervint Mitz. Qui ça, il?

À cet instant, la voix d’Omicron se fit entendre:

“Monsieur!… Monsieur!

— Il y a du nouveau”, s’écria Mr Dean Forsyth en repoussant précipitamment sa chaise et en se dirigeant vers la porte. Il ne l’avait pas atteinte, qu’un vif rayon pénétrait par la fenêtre et piquait de paillettes lumineuses les verres et les bouteilles garnissant la table.

“Le soleil!… Le soleil!… répétait Mr Dean Forsyth, qui montait l’escalier en toute hâte.

— C’est-y Dieu permis! dit Mitz en s’asseyant sur une chaise. Le voilà parti, et, quand il est enfermé à double tour avec son ami Krone dans le haut servatoire, on peut l’appeler. Autant on en porte devant! (en emporte le vent). Quant au déjeuner, il se mangera tout seul, par l’opération des cinq esprits (du Saint-Esprit)… Et tout cela pour des étoiles!…”

Ainsi, dans son langage imagé, s’exprimait l’excellente Mitz, bien que son maître ne pût l’entendre. L’eût-il entendue, d’ailleurs, que cette éloquence n’en eût pas été moins perdue.

Mr Dean Forsyth, essoufflé par l’ascension, venait d’entrer dans son observatoire. Le vent du Sud-Ouest avait fraîchi et chassé les nuages vers le Levant. Une large éclaircie laissait voir, jusqu’au zénith, toute la partie du ciel où le météore avait été observé. La chambre était illuminée par les rayons solaires.

“Eh bien?… demanda Mr Dean Forsyth, qu’y a-t-il?

— Le soleil, répondit Omicron, mais pas pour longtemps, car des nuages reparaissent déjà dans l'Ouest.

— Pas une minute à perdre!” s'écria Mr Dean Forsyth, en braquant sa lunette, tandis que le serviteur en faisait autant du télescope.

Pendant quarante minutes environ, avec quelle passion, ils manièrent leurs instruments! Avec quelle patience, ils en manœuvrèrent la vis pour les maintenir au point! Avec quelle minutieuse attention, ils fouillèrent tous les coins et recoins de cette partie de la sphère céleste!… C'était bien par tant d'ascension droite et tant de déclinaison que le bolide leur était apparu la première fois, pour passer ensuite exactement au zénith de Whaston, ils en étaient certains.

Et rien, rien à cette place! Déserte, toute cette éclaircie qui offrait aux météores un si magnifique champ de promenade! Pas un seul point visible en cette direction! Aucune trace de l'astéroïde.

“Rien! dit Mr Dean Forsyth, en essuyant ses yeux rougis par le sang qui s'était porté à leurs paupières.

— Rien!” fit Omicron comme un écho plaintif.

Il était trop tard pour s'épuiser en d'autres efforts. Les nuages revenaient, le ciel s'obscurcissait de nouveau. Finie l'éclaircie du ciel, et pour toute la journée cette fois! Bientôt, les vapeurs ne formèrent plus qu'une masse uniforme d'un gris sale, et s'égouttèrent en pluie fine. Il fallait renoncer à toute observation, au grand désespoir du maître et du serviteur.

“Et pourtant, dit Omicron, nous sommes bien sûrs de l'avoir vu.

— Si nous en sommes sûrs!…” s’écria Mr Dean Forsyth, en levant les bras au ciel.

Et, d’un ton où se mêlaient l’inquiétude et la jalousie, il ajouta:

“Nous n’en sommes que trop sûrs, car d’autres peuvent l’avoir vu comme nous… Pourvu que nous soyons les seuls!… Il ne manquerait plus qu’il l’eût aperçu aussi, lui… Sydney Hudelson!”

CHAPITRE III

III

Où il est question du docteur Sydney Hudelson, de sa femme, Mrs Flora Hudelson, de miss Jenny et de miss Loo, leurs deux filles.

Pourvu que cet intrigant de Forsyth ne l’ait pas aperçu, lui aussi!”

Ainsi, dans cette matinée du 21 mars, s’exprimait le docteur Sydney Hudelson, parlant à lui-même dans la solitude de son cabinet de travail.

Car il était docteur, et, s’il n’exerçait pas la médecine à Whaston, c’est qu’il préférait consacrer son temps et son intelligence à de plus vastes et plus sublimes spéculations. Ami intime de Dean Forsyth, il en était en même temps le rival. Entraîné par une identique passion, il n’avait, comme lui, de regards que pour l’immensité des cieux et, comme son ami, il n’appliquait son esprit qu’à déchiffrer les énigmes astronomiques de l’Univers.

Le docteur Hudelson possédait une jolie fortune, tant de son chef que du chef de Mrs Hudelson, née Flora Clarish. Sagement administrée, cette fortune assurait son avenir et celui de ses deux filles, Jenny et Loo Hudelson, âgées respectivement de dix-huit et quatorze ans. Quant au docteur lui-même, il eût été littéraire de dire, pour faire connaître son âge, que le quarante-septième hiver venait de neiger sur sa tête. Cette délicieuse image serait malheureusement hors propos, le docteur Hudelson étant chauve à braver le rasoir du plus habile Figaro.

La rivalité astronomique existant à l’état latent entre Sydney Hudelson et Dean Forsyth n’était pas sans troubler quelque peu les relations des deux familles, très unies au demeurant. Assurément, ils ne se disputeraient pas telle planète, ou telle étoile, les astres du ciel, dont les premiers inventeurs sont en général anonymes, appartenant à tout le monde, mais il n’était pas rare que leurs observations météorologiques ou astronomiques servissent de thème à des discussions qui dégénéraient parfois assez vite en querelles.

Ce qui eût pu aggraver ces querelles, et même provoquer, le cas échéant, de regrettables scènes, c’eût été l’existence d’une dame Forsyth. Par bonheur, ladite dame n’existait pas, celui qui l’aurait épousée étant resté célibataire, et n’ayant jamais eu, même en rêve, la pensée de se marier. Donc, pas d’épouse Dean Forsyth pour envenimer les choses sous prétexte de conciliation, et, par conséquent, toute chance pour qu’une brouille entre les deux astronomes amateurs pût s’apaiser à bref délai.

Sans doute, il y avait bien une Mrs Flora Hudelson. Mais Mrs Flora Hudelson était une excellente femme, excellente mère, excellente ménagère, de nature très pacifique, incapable d’un propos malséant sur personne, ne déjeunant pas d’une médisance, pour dîner d’une calomnie, à l’exemple de tant de dames des plus considérées dans les diverses sociétés de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Monde.

Phénomène incroyable, ce modèle des conjointes s’appliquait à calmer son mari, lorsqu’il rentrait, la tête en feu, à la suite de quelque discussion avec son intime ami Forsyth. Autre fait singulier, Mrs Hudelson trouvait tout naturel que Mr Hudelson s’occupât d’astronomie et qu’il vécût dans les profondeurs du firmament, à la condition qu’il en descendît lorsqu’elle le priait d’en descendre. Loin d’imiter Mitz qui harcelait son maître, elle ne harcelait point son mari. Elle tolérait qu’il se fît attendre à l’heure des repas. Elle ne maugréait point quand il était en retard, et s’ingéniait à maintenir les plats à un juste degré de cuisson. Elle respectait sa préoccupation, quand il était préoccupé. Elle s’inquiétait même de ses travaux, et son bon cœur lui dictait d’encourageantes paroles lorsque l’astronome semblait s’égarer dans les espaces infinis au point de ne pas retrouver sa route.

Voilà une femme comme nous en souhaitons à tous les maris, surtout quand ils sont astronomes. Malheureusement il n’en existe guère ailleurs que dans les romans!

Jenny, sa fille aînée, promettait de suivre les traces de sa mère, de marcher du même pas sur le chemin de l’existence. Évidemment Francis Gordon, futur mari de Jenny Hudelson, était destiné à devenir le plus heureux des hommes. Sans vouloir humilier les misses américaines, il est permis de dire qu’on aurait peine à découvrir dans toute l’Amérique une jeune fille plus charmante, plus attrayante, plus douée de l’ensemble des perfections humaines. Jenny Hudelson était une aimable blonde, aux yeux bleus, à la carnation fraîche, avec de jolies mains, de jolis pieds et une jolie taille, autant de grâce que de modestie, autant de bonté que d’intelligence. Aussi Francis Gordon l’appréciait-il non moins qu’elle appréciait Francis Gordon. Le neveu de Mr Dean Forsyth possédant d’ailleurs l’estime de la famille Hudelson, cette sympathie réciproque n’avait pas tardé à se traduire sous la forme d’une demande en mariage, très favorablement accueillie. Ces jeunes gens se convenaient si bien! Ce serait le bonheur que Jenny apporterait au ménage avec ses qualités familiales. Quant à Francis Gordon, il serait doté par son oncle, dont la fortune lui reviendrait un jour. Mais laissons de côté ces perspectives d’héritages. Il ne s’agit pas de l’avenir, mais du présent, qui réunit toutes les conditions de la plus parfaite félicité.

Donc, Francis Gordon est fiancé à Jenny Hudelson, Jenny Hudelson est fiancée à Francis Gordon, et le mariage, dont on fixera la date prochainement, sera célébré par les soins du révérend O’Garth, à Saint-Andrew, la principale église de cette heureuse ville de Whaston.

Vous pouvez être sûrs qu’il y aura grande affluence à cette cérémonie nuptiale, car les deux familles jouissent d’une estime qui n’a d’égale que leur honorabilité, et non moins sûrs que la plus gaie, la plus vive, la plus envolée ce jour-là, sera cette mignonne Loo[1], qui servira de demoiselle d’honneur à sa sœur chérie. Elle n’a pas quinze ans, Loo, et elle a bien le droit d’être jeune. Elle profite de ce droit-là, je vous en réponds. C’est le mouvement perpétuel au physique, et, au moral, une espiègle qui ne se gêne pas pour plaisanter les “planètes à papa”! Mais on lui pardonne tout, on lui passe tout. Le docteur Hudelson est le premier à rire, et, pour unique punition, met un baiser sur ses fraîches joues de fillette.

Au fond, Mr Hudelson était un brave homme, mais très entêté et fort susceptible. Sauf Loo, dont il admettait les plaisanteries innocentes, chacun respectait ses manies et ses habitudes. Très acharné à ses études astronomico-météorologiques, très buté dans ses démonstrations, très jaloux des découvertes qu’il faisait ou prétendait faire, c’est tout juste si, malgré sa réelle affection pour Dean Forsyth, il demeurait l’ami d’un si redoutable rival. Deux chasseurs sur le même terrain de chasse, qui se disputent un rare gibier! Maintes fois il en était résulté du refroidissement, qui aurait pu dégénérer en brouille, n’eût été l’intervention lénifiante de cette bonne Mrs Hudelson, puissamment aidée, d’ailleurs, dans son œuvre de concorde par ses deux filles et par Francis Gordon. Ce pacifique quatuor fondait de grands espoirs sur l’union projetée pour raréfier les escarmouches. Lorsque le mariage de Francis et de Jenny aurait relié plus étroitement les deux familles, ces orages passagers seraient

[1] Diminutif de Louisa.

moins fréquents et moins redoutables. Qui sait même si les deux astronomes amateurs, unis dans une cordiale collaboration, ne poursuivraient pas de concert leurs recherches astronomiques? Ils se partageraient alors équitablement le gibier découvert, sinon abattu, sur ces vastes champs de l’espace.

La maison du docteur Hudelson était des plus confortables. Une mieux tenue, on l’aurait vainement cherchée dans tout Whaston. Ce joli hôtel entre cour et jardin, avec de beaux arbres et des pelouses verdoyantes, occupait le milieu de Moriss street. Il se composait d’un rez-de-chaussée et d’un premier étage avec sept fenêtres de façade. La toiture était dominée, à gauche, par une sorte de donjon carré, haut d’une trentaine de mètres, terminé par une terrasse à balustres. À l’un des angles, se dressait le mât auquel, le dimanche et les jours fériés, on hissait le pavillon aux cinquante et une étoiles des États-Unis d’Amérique.

La chambre supérieure de ce donjon avait été disposée pour les travaux spéciaux de son propriétaire. C’est là que fonctionnaient les instruments du docteur, lunettes et télescopes, à moins que, pendant les belles nuits, il ne les transportât sur la terrasse, d’où ses regards pouvaient librement parcourir le dôme céleste. C’est là que le docteur, en dépit des recommandations de Mrs Hudelson, attrapait ses coryzas les plus carabinés, ses grippes les mieux réussies:

“Au point, répétait volontiers miss Loo, que papa finira par enrhumer ses planètes!”

Mais le docteur n’écoutait rien, et bravait parfois les sept ou huit degrés centigrades au-dessous de zéro des grandes gelées d’hiver, alors que le firmament apparaît dans toute sa pureté.

De l’observatoire de la maison de Moriss street, on distinguait sans peine la tour de la maison d’Elisabeth street. Un demi-mille tout au plus les séparait, et, entre elles, aucun monument ne s’élevait, aucun arbre n’interposait ses ramures.

Sans même recourir au télescope à longue portée, on reconnaissait très aisément, avec une bonne jumelle, les personnes qui se tenaient sur la tour ou sur le donjon. Assurément, Dean Forsyth avait autre chose à faire que de regarder Sydney Hudelson, et Sydney Hudelson n’eût pas voulu perdre son temps à regarder Dean Forsyth. Leurs observations visaient plus haut, beaucoup plus haut. Mais il était naturel que Francis Gordon voulût voir si Jenny Hudelson ne se trouvait pas sur la terrasse, et souvent leurs yeux se parlaient à travers les lorgnettes. Il n’y avait pas de mal à cela, je pense.

Il eût été facile d’établir une communication télégraphique ou téléphonique entre les deux maisons. Un fil tendu du donjon à la tour eût transmis de bien agréables propos de Francis Gordon à Jenny et de Jenny à Francis Gordon. Mais Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson, n’ayant point de telles douceurs à échanger, n’avaient jamais projeté l’installation de ce fil.

Peut-être, lorsque les deux fiancés seraient époux, cette lacune serait comblée. Après le lien matrimonial, le lien électrique, pour unir plus étroitement encore les deux familles.

Dans l’après-midi de ce même jour, où l’excellente mais acariâtre Mitz a donné au lecteur un échantillon de son éloquence savoureuse, Francis Gordon vint faire sa visite habituelle à Mrs Hudelson et à ses filles — et à sa fille, rectifiait Loo en affectant des airs d’offensée. On le reçut, il est permis de le dire, comme s’il eût été le dieu de la maison. Qu’il ne fût pas encore le mari de Jenny, soit! Mais Loo voulait qu’il fût déjà son frère à elle, et ce qui se logeait dans la cervelle de cette fillette y était bien logé.

Quant au docteur Hudelson, il était claquemuré dans le donjon depuis quatre heures du matin. Après avoir paru en retard au déjeuner, tout comme Dean Forsyth, on l'avait vu regagner précipitamment la terrasse, toujours comme Dean Forsyth, au moment où le soleil se dégageait des nuages. Non moins préoccupé que son rival, il ne semblait pas qu'il fût disposé à redescendre.

Et cependant, impossible de décider sans lui la grande question qui allait être discutée en assemblée générale.

“Tiens! s'écria Loo, dès que le jeune homme eut franchi la porte du salon, voilà Mr Francis, l'éternel Mr Francis!… Ma parole, on ne voit que lui ici!”

Francis Gordon se contenta de menacer du doigt la fillette, et, lorsqu'on fut assis, la conversation s'établit, pleine de simple et naturelle bonhomie. Il semblait qu'on ne se fût pas quitté depuis la veille, et, de fait, en pensée tout au moins, les deux fiancés ne se séparaient jamais l'un de l'autre. Miss Loo prétendait même que “l'éternel Francis” était toujours dans la maison, que, s'il feignait de sortir par la porte de la rue, c'était pour rentrer par celle du jardin.

On causa, ce jour-là, de ce dont on causait tous les jours. Jenny écoutait ce que disait Francis, avec un sérieux qui ne lui enlevait rien de son charme. Ils se regardaient, ils formaient des projets d'avenir dont la réalisation ne pouvait être éloignée. Pourquoi, en effet, aurait-on prévu un retard? Déjà, Francis Gordon avait trouvé dans Lambeth street une jolie maison qui conviendrait parfaitement au jeune ménage. C'était dans le quartier de l'Ouest, avec vue sur le cours du Potomac, et pas très loin de Moriss street. Mrs Hudelson promit d'aller visiter cette maison, et, pour peu qu'elle plût à sa future locataire, elle serait louée sous huitaine. Bien entendu, Loo accompagnerait sa mère et sa sœur. Elle n’aurait pas admis que l’on se fût passé de son avis.

“À propos! s’écria-t-elle tout à coup, et Mr Forsyth?… Est-ce qu’il ne doit pas venir aujourd’hui?

— Mon oncle arrivera vers quatre heures, répondit Francis Gordon.

— C’est que sa présence est indispensable pour résoudre la question, fit observer Mrs Hudelson.

— Il le sait, et ne manquera pas au rendez-vous.

— S’il y manquait, déclara Loo, qui tendit une petite main menaçante, il aurait affaire à moi, et n’en serait pas quitte à bon marché.

— Et Mr Hudelson?… demanda Francis. Nous n’avons pas moins besoin de lui que de mon oncle.

— Père est dans son donjon, dit Jenny. Il descendra aussitôt qu’il sera prévenu.

— Je m’en charge, répondit Loo. J’aurai vite grimpé ses six étages.”

Il importait, en effet, que Mr Forsyth et Mr Hudelson fussent là. Ne s’agissait-il pas de fixer la date de la cérémonie? En principe, le mariage devait être célébré dans le plus court délai, mais à la condition, cependant, que la demoiselle d’honneur eût le temps de se faire confectionner sa jolie robe — une robe longue de demoiselle, s’il vous plaît, qu’elle comptait étrenner dans ce jour mémorable.

De là, cette observation que se permit Francis en plaisantant:

“Mais si elle n’était pas prête, la fameuse robe?

— Dans ce cas, on remettrait la noce!” décréta l’impérieuse personne.

Et cette réponse fut accompagnée d’un tel éclat de rire, que Mr Hudelson dut certainement l’entendre des hauteurs de son donjon.

Cependant l’aiguille de la pendule franchissait successivement toutes les minutes du cadran, et Mr Dean Forsyth ne paraissait pas. Loo avait beau se pencher hors de la fenêtre d’où elle apercevait la porte d’entrée, pas de Mr Forsyth!… Il fallut donc s’armer de patience — une arme dont Loo ne connaissait guère le maniement.

“Mon oncle m’a pourtant bien promis… répétait Francis Gordon; mais, depuis quelques jours, je ne sais trop ce qu’il a.

— Mr Forsyth n’est point souffrant, j’espère? demanda Jenny.

— Non, soucieux… préoccupé… On ne peut pas en tirer dix paroles. Je ne sais ce qu’il peut avoir dans la tête.

— Quelque éclat d’étoile! s’écria la fillette.

— Il en est de même de mon mari, dit Mrs Hudelson. Cette semaine, il m’a paru plus absorbé que jamais. Impossible de l’arracher de son observatoire. Il faut qu’il se passe quelque chose d’extraordinaire dans le ciel.

— Ma foi! répondit Francis, je serais tenté de le croire, à la façon dont se comporte mon oncle. Il ne sort plus; il ne dort plus; il mange à peine; il oublie l’heure des repas…

— Ce que Mitz doit être contente! s’écria Loo.

— Elle enrage, déclara Francis, mais cela n’y fait rien. Mon oncle, qui jusqu’ici redoutait les semonces de sa vieille servante, n’y prête plus la moindre attention.

— C’est tout à fait comme ici, dit Jenny en souriant. Ma sœur paraît avoir perdu son influence sur papa… et l’on sait si elle était grande!

— Est-ce possible, mademoiselle Loo? demanda Francis sur le même ton.

— Ce n’est que trop vrai! répliqua la fillette; mais, patience… patience! Il faudra bien que Mitz et moi nous finissions par avoir raison du père et de l’oncle.

— Enfin, reprit Jenny, que peut-il leur être arrivé à tous les deux?

— C’est quelque planète de valeur qu’ils auront égarée, s’écria Loo. Pourvu, mon Dieu, qu’ils l’aient retrouvée avant la noce!

— Nous plaisantons, interrompit Mrs Hudelson, et, en attendant, Mr Forsyth ne vient pas.

— Et voilà que quatre heures et demie vont sonner! ajouta Jenny.

— Si mon oncle n’est pas ici dans cinq minutes, décida Francis Gordon, je cours le chercher.”

En cet instant, la sonnette de la porte d’entrée se fit entendre.

“C’est Mr Forsyth, affirma Loo. Là!… il continue à sonner!… Quel carillon!… Je parie qu’il écoute voler une comète et qu’il ne s’aperçoit même pas qu’il sonne!”

C’était bien Mr Dean Forsyth. Il entra presque aussitôt dans le salon, où Loo l’accueillit avec de vifs reproches.

“En retard!… en retard!… Vous voulez donc qu’on vous gronde?

— Bonjour, Mrs Hudelson! bonjour, ma chère Jenny! dit Mr Forsyth en embrassant la jeune fille; bonjour!” répéta-t-il en tapotant les joues de la fillette.

Toutes ces politesses étaient faites d’un air distrait. Ainsi que l’avait présumé Loo, Mr Dean Forsyth avait, comme on dit, “la tête ailleurs”.

“Mon oncle, reprit Francis Gordon, en ne vous voyant point arriver à l’heure convenue, j’ai cru que vous aviez oublié notre rendez-vous.

— Un peu, je l’avoue, et je m’en excuse, Mrs Hudelson. Heureusement, Mitz me l’a rappelé de la bonne manière.

— Elle a bien fait, déclara Loo.

— Ne m’accablez pas, petite Miss!… Des préoccupations graves… Je suis peut-être à la veille d’une découverte des plus intéressantes.

— C’est comme papa… commença Loo.

— Quoi! s’écria Mr Dean Forsyth en se relevant d’un bond, à faire croire qu’un ressort venait de se détendre dans le fond de son fauteuil, vous dites que le docteur…

— Nous ne disons rien, mon bon Mr Forsyth”, se hâta de répondre Mrs Hudelson, craignant toujours, et non sans raison, qu’il ne surgît une nouvelle cause de rivalité entre son mari et l’oncle de Francis Gordon.

Puis elle ajouta, pour couper court à l’incident:

“Loo, va chercher ton père.”

Légère comme un oiseau, la fillette s’élança vers le donjon. À n’en pas douter, si elle prit l’escalier, au lieu de s’envoler par la fenêtre, c’est qu’elle ne voulut pas se servir de ses ailes.

Une minute plus tard, Mr Sydney Hudelson faisait son entrée dans le salon. Physionomie grave, œil fatigué, tête congestionnée à faire craindre un coup de sang.

Mr Dean Forsyth et lui échangèrent une poignée de main sans conviction, tout en se sondant réciproquement d’un regard oblique. Ils s’observaient à la dérobée, comme s’ils éprouvaient une certaine défiance l’un de l’autre.

Mais, après tout, les deux familles s’étaient réunies dans le but de fixer la date du mariage, — ou, pour employer le langage de Loo, de la conjonction des astres Francis et Jenny. — Il n’y avait donc qu’à fixer cette date. Tout le monde étant d’avis que la cérémonie devait avoir lieu dans le plus court délai possible, la conversation ne fut pas longue.

Mr Dean Forsyth et Mr Hudelson y accordèrent-ils même grande attention? Il est permis de croire, plutôt, qu’ils étaient partis à la poursuite de quelque astéroïde perdu à travers l’espace, chacun d’eux se demandant si l’autre n’était pas sur le point de le retrouver.

En tout cas, ils ne firent aucune objection à ce que le mariage fût fixé à quelques semaines de là. On était au 21 mars. On prit pour date le 15 mai.

De cette manière, on aurait, en se pressant un peu, le temps d’aménager le nouvel appartement.

“Et de finir ma robe”, ajouta Loo de l’air le plus sérieux du monde.

CHAPITRE IV

IV

Comment deux lettres envoyées, l’une à l’Observatoire de Pittsburg, l’autre à l’Observatoire de Cincinnati, furent classées dans le dossier des bolides.

À Monsieur le Directeur de l’Observatoire de Pittsburg, Pennsylvanie.

“Whaston, 24 mars.

“Monsieur le Directeur,

“J’ai l’honneur de porter à votre connaissance le fait suivant, qui est de nature à intéresser la science astronomique. Dans la matinée du 16 mars courant, j’ai découvert un bolide qui traversait la zone septentrionale du ciel avec une vitesse considérable. Sa trajectoire, sensiblement Nord-Sud, faisait avec le méridien un angle de 3° 31’, que j’ai pu mesurer avec exactitude. Il était sept heures trente-sept minutes vingt secondes, lorsqu’il est apparu dans l’objectif de ma lunette, et sept heures trente-sept minutes vingt-neuf secondes lorsqu’il a disparu. Depuis, il m’a été impossible de le revoir, malgré les plus minutieuses recherches. C’est pourquoi je vous prie de bien vouloir prendre note de cette observation et me donner acte de la présente lettre, laquelle, dans le cas où ledit météore serait visible de nouveau, m’assurerait la priorité de cette précieuse découverte.

“Veuillez agréer, monsieur le Directeur, l’assurance de ma très haute considération et me croire votre très humble serviteur.

“Dean Forsyth,

“Elisabeth street.”

À Monsieur le Directeur de l’Observatoire de Cincinnati, Ohio,

“Whaston, le 24 mars…

“Monsieur le Directeur,

“Dans la matinée du 16 mars, entre sept heures trente-sept minutes vingt secondes et sept heures trente-sept minutes vingt-neuf secondes, j’ai eu l’heureuse chance de découvrir un nouveau bolide qui se déplaçait du Nord au Sud, dans la zone septentrionale du ciel, sa direction apparente ne faisant avec le méridien qu’un angle de 3° 31’. Depuis, je n’ai pu ressaisir la trajectoire de ce météore. Mais, s’il reparaît sur notre horizon, ce dont je ne doute pas, il me semble juste d’être considéré comme l’auteur de cette découverte qui mérite d’être classée dans les annales astronomiques de notre temps. C’est dans ce but que je prends la liberté de vous adresser la présente lettre, dont je vous serais obligé de bien vouloir m’accuser réception.

“Veuillez agréer, monsieur le Directeur, avec mes très humbles salutations, l’assurance de mes respectueux sentiments.

“Docteur Sydney Hudelson,

“17, Moriss street.”

CHAPITRE V

V

Dans lequel, malgré leur acharnement, Mr Dean Forsyth et le Dr Hudelson n’ont que par les journaux des nouvelles de leur météore.

Aux deux lettres ci-dessus, envoyées avec recommandation et sous triple cachet à l’adresse des directeurs de l’Observatoire de Pittsburg et de l’Observatoire de Cincinnati, la réponse consisterait en un simple accusé de réception avec avis du classement desdites lettres. Les intéressés n’en demandaient pas davantage. Tous deux comptaient bien retrouver le bolide à brève échéance. Que l’astéroïde eût été se perdre dans les profondeurs du ciel assez loin pour échapper à l’attraction terrestre, et, par conséquent, qu’il ne dût jamais réapparaître en vue du monde sublunaire, ils se refusaient à l’admettre. Non, soumis à des lois formelles, il reviendrait sur l’horizon de Whaston; on pourrait le saisir au passage, le signaler de nouveau, déterminer ses coordonnées, et il figurerait sur les cartes célestes, baptisé du glorieux nom de son inventeur.

Mais quel était cet inventeur? Point éminemment délicat, qui n’eût pas laissé d’embarrasser la justice même de Salomon. Au jour de la réapparition du bolide, ils seraient deux à revendiquer cette conquête. Si Francis Gordon et Jenny Hudelson avaient connu les dangers de la situation, ils eussent bien certainement supplié le ciel de faire en sorte que leur mariage fût conclu avant le retour de ce malencontreux météore. Et, non moins certainement, Mrs Hudelson, Loo, Mitz et tous les amis des deux familles se seraient joints de tout cœur à leur prière.

Mais personne ne savait rien, et, malgré la préoccupation croissante des deux rivaux, préoccupation que l'on constatait sans pouvoir l'expliquer, aucun habitant de la maison de Moriss street, sauf le docteur Hudelson, ne s'inquiétait de ce qui se passait dans les profondeurs du firmament. Des préoccupations, nul n'en avait; des occupations, oui, et de nombreuses. Visites et compliments à recevoir et à rendre, faire-part et invitations à envoyer, préparatifs du mariage et choix des cadeaux de noce, tout cela, d'après la petite Loo, était comparable aux douze travaux d'Hercule, et il n'y avait pas une heure à perdre.

“Quand on marie sa première fille, c'est une grosse affaire, disait-elle. On n'a pas l'habitude. Pour la seconde fille, c'est plus simple: l'habitude est prise, et il n'y a aucun oubli à craindre. Ainsi, pour moi, cela ira tout seul.

— Eh quoi! répondait Francis Gordon, mademoiselle Loo songerait déjà au mariage? Pourrait-on savoir quel est le fortuné mortel…

— Occupez-vous d'épouser ma sœur, ripostait la fillette. C'est une occupation qui réclame tout votre temps. Et ne vous mêlez pas de ce qui me regarde!”

Comme elle l'avait promis, Mrs Hudelson se rendit à la maison de Lambeth street. Quant au docteur, c'eût été folie de compter sur lui.

“Ce que vous ferez sera bien fait, Mrs Hudelson, et je m'en rapporte à vous, avait-il répondu à la proposition d'aller visiter la future demeure du jeune ménage. D'ailleurs, cela regarde surtout Francis et Jenny.

— Voyons, papa, dit Loo, est-ce que vous ne comptez pas descendre de votre donjon le jour de la noce?

— Mais si, Loo, si.

— Et vous montrer à Saint-Andrew, votre fille au bras?

— Mais si, Loo, si.

— Avec votre habit noir et votre gilet blanc, votre pantalon noir et votre cravate blanche?

— Mais si, Loo, si.

— Et ne consentirez-vous pas à oublier vos planètes pour écouter le discours que le révérend O'Garth prononcera avec beaucoup d'émotion?

— Si, Loo, si. Mais nous n'en sommes pas encore là! Et, puisque le ciel est pur aujourd'hui, ce qui est assez rare, partez sans moi."

Mrs Hudelson, Jenny, Loo et Francis Gordon laissèrent donc le docteur manœuvrer sa lunette et son télescope, tandis que Mr Dean Forsyth, il n'en faut pas douter, manœuvrait pareillement ses instruments dans la tour d'Elisabeth street. Cette double obstination aurait-elle sa récompense, et le météore une première fois aperçu passerait-il une seconde fois devant l'objectif des appareils?

Pour aller à la maison de Lambeth street, les quatre promeneurs descendirent Moriss street et traversèrent la place de la Constitution, où ils reçurent au passage le salut de l'aimable juge John Proth. Puis ils remontèrent Exeter street, tout comme l'avait fait, quelques jours avant, Seth Stanfort attendant Arcadia Walker, et arrivèrent dans Lambeth street.

La maison était des plus agréables, bien disposée suivant les règles du confort moderne. Par derrière, un cabinet de travail et une salle à manger donnaient sur le jardin, de quelques acres seulement, mais ombragé de beaux hêtres et égayé par des corbeilles où commençaient à s’épanouir les premières fleurs du printemps. Offices et cuisines dans le sous-sol à la mode anglo-saxonne.

Le premier étage valait le rez-de-chaussée, et Jenny ne put que féliciter son fiancé d’avoir découvert cette jolie résidence, une sorte de villa d’un si charmant aspect.

Mrs Hudelson partageait l’avis de sa fille et assurait qu’on n’aurait pu trouver mieux dans n’importe quel autre quartier de Whaston.

Cette flatteuse appréciation parut plus justifiée encore quand on fut parvenu au dernier étage de la maison. Là, bordée par une balustrade, régnait une vaste terrasse, d’où l’œil embrassait un panorama splendide. On pouvait remonter et descendre le cours du Potomac, et apercevoir, au-delà, cette bourgade de Steel, d’où miss Arcadia Walker était partie pour rejoindre Seth Stanfort.

La ville entière apparaissait avec les clochers de ses églises, les hautes toitures des édifices publics, les verdoyants sommets de ses arbres.

“Voici la place de la Constitution, dit Jenny, en s’aidant d’une lorgnette dont, sur le conseil de Francis, on s’était muni… Voici Moriss street… Je vois notre maison, avec le donjon et le pavillon qui flotte au vent!… Tiens! il y a quelqu’un sur le donjon.

— Papa! formula Loo sans hésitation.

— Ce ne peut être que lui, déclara Mrs Hudelson.

— C’est bien lui, affirma la fillette, qui, sans plus de façon, s’était emparée de la lorgnette. Je le reconnais… Il manœuvre sa lunette… Et vous verrez qu’il n’aura pas la pensée de la diriger de notre côté!… Ah! si nous étions dans la lune!…

— Puisque vous apercevez votre maison, mademoiselle Loo, interrompit Francis, peut-être pourrez-vous voir celle de mon oncle?

— Oui, répondit la fillette, mais laissez-moi chercher… Je la reconnaîtrai facilement avec sa tour… Ce doit être de ce côté… Attendez… Bon!… la voilà!… Je la tiens.”

Loo ne se trompait pas. C’était bien la maison de Mr Dean Forsyth.

“Il y a quelqu’un sur la tour… reprit-elle après une minute d’attention.

— Mon oncle, assurément, répondit Francis.

— Il n’est pas seul.

— C’est Omicron qui est avec lui.

— Et il ne faut pas demander ce qu’ils font, ajouta Mrs Hudelson.

— Ils font ce que fait mon père”, dit, avec une nuance de tristesse, Jenny, à qui la rivalité latente de Mr Dean Forsyth et de Mr Hudelson causait toujours un peu d’inquiétude.

La visite achevée, et Loo ayant une dernière fois affirmé sa complète satisfaction, Mrs Hudelson, ses deux filles et Francis Gordon revinrent à la maison de Moriss street. Dès le lendemain, on passerait bail avec le propriétaire de la villa et l’on s’occuperait de l’ameublement, de manière à être prêt pour le 15 mai.

Pendant ce temps, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson ne perdraient pas une heure de leur côté. Ce qu’allait leur coûter de fatigue physique et morale, d’observations prolongées par les jours clairs et les nuits sereines, la recherche de leur bolide qui s’obstinait à ne pas reparaître au-dessus de l’horizon!…

Jusqu’ici, en dépit de leur assiduité, les deux astronomes en étaient pour leurs peines. Ni pendant le jour, ni pendant la nuit, le météore n’avait pu être saisi à son passage en vue de Whaston.

“Y passera-t-il seulement? soupirait parfois Dean Forsyth après une longue pose à l’oculaire de son télescope.

— Il passera, répondait Omicron avec un imperturbable aplomb. Je dirai même: il passe.

— Alors, pourquoi ne le voyons-nous pas?

— Parce qu’il n’est pas visible.

— Désolant? soupirait derechef Dean Forsyth. Mais enfin, s’il est invisible pour nous, il doit l’être pour tout le monde… à Whaston, tout au moins.

— C’est absolument certain”, affirmait Omicron.

Ainsi raisonnaient le maître et le serviteur, et ces propos qu’ils échangeaient, on les prononçait sous forme de monologue chez le docteur Hudelson non moins désespéré de son insuccès.

Tous deux avaient reçu, des observatoires de Pittsburg et de Cincinnati, réponse à leur lettre. On avait pris bonne note de la communication relative à l’apparition d’un bolide à la date du 16 mars dans la partie septentrionale de l’horizon de Whaston. On ajoutait que, jusqu’ici, il avait été impossible de retrouver ce bolide, mais que, s’il était aperçu de nouveau, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson en seraient aussitôt avisés.

Bien entendu, les observatoires avaient répondu séparément, sans savoir que les deux astronomes amateurs s’attribuaient chacun l’honneur de cette découverte et en revendiquaient la priorité.

Depuis que cette réponse était arrivée, la tour d’Elisabeth street et le donjon de Moriss street eussent pu se dispenser de poursuivre leurs fatigantes recherches. Les observatoires possédaient des instruments à la fois plus puissants et plus précis, et, si le météore n’était pas une masse errante, s’il suivait une orbite fermée, s’il revenait enfin dans les conditions où il avait été déjà observé, les lunettes et les télescopes de Pittsburg et de Cincinnati sauraient bien le saisir au passage. Mr Dean Forsyth et Mr Sydney Hudelson auraient donc sagement fait de s’en remettre aux savants de ces deux établissements renommés.

Mais Mr Dean Forsyth et Mr Sydney Hudelson étaient des astronomes et non des sages. C’est pourquoi ils s’attachèrent à poursuivre leur œuvre. Ils apportèrent même à cette poursuite une ardeur toujours grandissante. Sans qu’ils se fussent rien dit de leurs préoccupations, ils avaient le pressentiment qu’ils chassaient tous les deux un unique gibier, et la crainte d’être devancé ne leur laissait pas un moment de répit. La jalousie les mordait au cœur, et les relations des deux familles se ressentaient de leur état d’esprit.

En vérité, il y avait lieu d’être inquiet. Leurs soupçons prenant chaque jour plus de corps, Mr

Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson, jadis si intimes, ne mettaient plus le pied l’un chez l’autre.

Quelle situation pénible pour les deux fiancés! Ceux-ci se voyaient pourtant chaque jour, car enfin la porte de la maison de Moriss street n’était point interdite à Francis Gordon. Mrs Hudelson lui témoignait toujours la même confiance et la même amitié; mais il sentait bien que le docteur ne supportait pas sa présence sans une gêne visible. C’était bien autre chose quand on parlait de Mr Dean Forsyth devant Sydney Hudelson. Le docteur devenait tout pâle, puis tout rouge, ses yeux lançaient des éclairs vite éteints par la retombée des paupières, et ces regrettables symptômes, révélateurs d’une réciproque antipathie, on les constatait identiques chez Mr Dean Forsyth.

Mrs Hudelson avait vainement essayé de connaître la cause de ce refroidissement, plus encore, de l’aversion que les deux anciens amis éprouvaient l’un pour l’autre. Son mari s’était borné à répondre:

“Inutile: tu ne comprendrais pas… mais je ne me serais pas attendu à un tel procédé de la part de Forsyth!”

Quel procédé? Impossible d’obtenir une explication. Loo elle-même, Loo l’enfant gâtée à qui tout était permis, ne savait rien.

Elle avait bien proposé d’aller relancer Mr Forsyth jusque dans sa tour, mais Francis l’en avait dissuadée.

“Non, je n’aurais jamais cru Hudelson capable d’une pareille conduite à mon égard!” telle est sans doute la seule réponse, qu’à l’instar du docteur, l’oncle de Francis aurait consenti à formuler.

La preuve en était faite par la manière dont Mr Dean Forsyth avait reçu Mitz, qui se risquait à l’interroger.

“Mêlez-vous de ce qui vous regarde!” lui avait-on signifié d’un ton sec.

Au moment que Mr Dean Forsyth osait parler ainsi à la redoutable Mitz, c’est que la situation était grave en effet.

Quant à Mitz, elle en était demeurée estomaquée, pour employer sa forte image, et elle assurait qu’elle avait dû, pour ne pas répondre à une telle insolence, se mordre la langue jusqu’à l’os. En ce qui concerne son maître, son opinion était nette, et elle n’en faisait pas mystère. Pour elle, Mr Forsyth était fou, ce qu’elle expliquait le plus naturellement du monde par les positions incommodes qu’il était forcé de prendre pour regarder dans ses instruments, spécialement lorsque certaines observations près du zénith l’obligeaient à renverser la tête. Mitz supposait que, dans cette posture, Mr Forsyth s’était rompu quelque chose dans la colonne cérébrale.

Il n’est pas, toutefois, de secret si bien caché qui ne transpire. On apprit enfin ce dont il s’agissait par une indiscrétion d’Omicron. Son maître avait découvert un bolide extraordinaire et redoutait que la même découverte n’eût été faite par le docteur Hudelson.

Voilà donc quelle était la cause de cette brouille ridicule! Un météore! un bolide, un aréolithe, une étoile filante, une pierre, une grosse pierre si l’on veut, mais une pierre après tout, un simple caillou, contre lequel risquait de se briser le char nuptial de Francis et de Jenny!

Aussi, Loo ne se gênait-elle pas pour envoyer “au diable les météores et, avec eux, toute la mécanique céleste!”

Le temps s’écoulait cependant… Jour par jour, le mois de mars recula, céda la place au mois d’avril. On arriverait bientôt à la date fixée pour le mariage. Mais ne surviendrait-il rien auparavant? Jusqu’ici, cette déplorable rivalité ne reposait que sur des suppositions, sur des hypothèses. Que se passerait-il si quelque événement imprévu la rendait officielle et certaine, si un choc jetait les deux rivaux l’un contre l’autre?

Ces craintes trop raisonnables n’avaient pas interrompu les préparatifs du mariage. Tout serait prêt, même la belle robe de miss Loo.

La première quinzaine d’avril s’écoula dans des conditions atmosphériques abominables: de la pluie, du vent, un ciel empâté de gros nuages qui se succédaient sans discontinuer. Ne se montrèrent, ni le soleil qui décrivait alors une courbe assez élevée au-dessus de l’horizon, ni la lune presque pleine et qui aurait dû illuminer l’espace de ses rayons, ni, a fortiori, l’introuvable météore.

Mrs Hudelson, Jenny et Francis Gordon ne songeaient pas à se plaindre de l’impossibilité de faire aucune observation astronomique. Et jamais Loo, qui détestait le vent et la pluie, ne s’était autant réjouie d’un ciel bleu qu’elle ne l’était par la persistance du mauvais temps.

“Qu’il dure au moins jusqu’à la noce, répétait-elle, et que pendant trois semaines encore on ne voie ni le soleil, ni la lune, ni la plus minuscule étoile!”

En dépit des voeux de Loo, cette situation prit fin et les conditions atmosphériques se modifièrent dans la nuit du 15 au 16 avril. Une brise du

Nord chassa toutes les vapeurs, et le ciel recouvra sa complète sérénité.

Mr Dean Forsyth de sa tour, le docteur Hudelson de son donjon, se remirent à fouiller le firmament au-dessus de Whaston, depuis l’horizon jusqu’au zénith.

Le météore repassa-t-il devant leurs lunettes?… On serait fondé à n’en rien croire, si l’on en jugeait par leurs mines rébarbatives. Leur égale mauvaise humeur prouvait un double et pareil échec. Et, en vérité, cette opinion serait la bonne. Non, Mr Sydney Hudelson n’avait rien vu dans l’immensité du ciel, et Mr Dean Forsyth pas davantage. N’avaient-ils donc eu décidément affaire qu’à un météore errant échappé pour toujours à l’attraction terrestre?

Une note, parue dans les journaux du 19 avril, vint les fixer à cet égard.

Cette note, rédigée par l’Observatoire de Boston, était ainsi conçue:

“Avant-hier vendredi 17 avril, à neuf heures dix-neuf minutes et neuf secondes du soir, un bolide de merveilleuse grosseur a traversé les airs dans la partie ouest du ciel avec une rapidité vertigineuse.

“Circonstance des plus singulières et de nature à flatter l’amour-propre de la ville de

Whaston, il semblerait que ce météore aurait été découvert le même jour et à la même heure par deux de ses plus éminents citoyens.

“D’après l’Observatoire de Pittsburg, ce bolide serait, en effet, celui que lui a signalé à la date du 24 mars Mr Dean Forsyth, et, d’après l’Observatoire de Cincinnati, celui que lui a signalé, à la même date, le docteur Sydney Hudelson. Or, MM. Dean Forsyth et Sydney Hudelson habitent tous deux Whaston, où ils sont très honorablement connus.”

CHAPITRE VI

VI

Qui contient quelques variations plus ou moins fantaisistes sur les météores en général, et en particulier sur le bolide dont MM. Forsyth et Hudelson se disputent la découverte.

Si jamais continent peut être fier de l’une des régions qui le composent, comme un père le serait de l’un de ses enfants, c’est bien le Nord-Amérique. Si jamais République peut être fière de l’un des États dont le groupement la constitue, c’est bien celle des États-Unis. Si jamais l’un de ces cinquante et un États, dont les cinquante et une étoiles constellent l’angle du pavillon fédéral, peut être fier de l’une de ses métropoles, c’est bien la Virginie, capitale Richmond. Si enfin une ville de la Virginie peut être fière de ses fils, c’est bien la ville de Whaston, où venait d’être faite cette retentissante découverte qui devait prendre un rang considérable dans les annales astronomiques du siècle!

Tel était du moins l’avis unanime des Whastoniens.

On l’imaginera aisément, les journaux, les journaux de Whaston tout au moins, publièrent les plus enthousiastes articles sur Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson. La gloire de ces deux illustres citoyens ne rejaillissait-elle pas sur toute la cité? Quel est celui des habitants qui n’en avait pas sa part? Le nom de Whaston n’allait-il pas être indissolublement lié à cette découverte?

Parmi cette population américaine, dans laquelle des courants d’opinion prennent naissance avec tant de facilité et tant de fureur, l’effet de ces articles dithyrambiques ne tarda pas à se faire sentir. Le lecteur ne sera donc pas surpris — et, d’ailleurs, le serait-il, qu’il aurait l’obligeance de nous croire sur parole — si nous lui affirmons que, dès ce jour, la population se dirigea en foule bruyante et passionnée vers les maisons de Moriss street et d’Elisabeth street.

Personne n’était au courant de la rivalité qui existait entre Mr Forsyth et Mr Hudelson. L’enthousiasme public les unissait en cette circonstance, cela ne pouvait faire l’objet d’un doute. Pour tous, leurs deux noms étaient et resteraient inséparables jusqu’à la consommation des âges, inséparables à ce point, qu’après des milliers d’années, les futurs historiens affirmeraient peut-être qu’ils avaient été portés par un seul homme!

En attendant que le temps permît de vérifier le bien-fondé de telles hypothèses, Mr Dean Forsyth dut paraître sur la terrasse de la tour et Mr Sydney Hudelson sur la terrasse du donjon, pour répondre aux acclamations de la foule. Tandis que des hourras s’élevaient vers eux, ils s’inclinèrent tous deux en salutations reconnaissantes.

Cependant, un observateur eût constaté que leur attitude n’exprimait pas une joie sans mélange. Une ombre passait sur leur triomphe comme un nuage sur le soleil. Le regard oblique du premier se dirigeait vers le donjon, et le regard oblique du second vers la tour. Chacun d’eux voyait l’autre répondant aux applaudissements du public whastonien et trouvait moins harmonieux les applaudissements qui lui étaient adressés qu’il n’estimait discordants ceux qui résonnaient en l’honneur d’un rival.

En réalité, ces applaudissements étaient pareils. La foule ne faisait aucune différence entre les deux astronomes. Dean Forsyth ne fut pas moins acclamé que le docteur Hudelson, et réciproquement, par les mêmes citoyens, qui se succédèrent devant les deux maisons.

Durant ces ovations qui mettaient chaque quartier en rumeur, que se disaient Francis Gordon et la servante Mitz d’une part, Mrs Hudelson, Jenny et Loo, de l’autre? Redoutaient-ils que la note envoyée aux journaux par l’observatoire de Boston n’eût de fâcheuses conséquences? Ce qui avait été secret jusqu’alors était dévoilé maintenant. Mr Forsyth et Mr Hudelson connaissaient officiellement leur rivalité. N’y avait-il pas lieu de croire qu’ils revendiqueraient tous les deux, sinon le bénéfice, du moins l’honneur de leur découverte, et qu’il en résulterait peut-être un éclat très regrettable pour les deux familles?

Les sentiments que Mrs Hudelson et Jenny éprouvèrent pendant que la foule manifestait devant leur maison, il n’est que trop facile de les imaginer. Si le docteur était monté sur la terrasse du donjon, elles s’étaient bien gardées de paraître à leur balcon. Toutes deux, le cœur serré, elles avaient regardé, en se tenant derrière les rideaux, cette manifestation qui ne présageait rien de bon. Si Mr Forsyth et Mr Hudelson, poussés par un absurde sentiment de jalousie, se disputaient le météore, le public ne prendrait-il pas fait et cause pour l’un ou pour l’autre? Chacun d’eux aurait ses partisans, et, au milieu de l’effervescence qui régnerait alors dans la ville, quelle serait la situation des futurs époux, ce Roméo et cette Juliette, dans une querelle scientifique qui transformerait les deux familles en Capulets et en Montaigus?

Quant à Loo, elle était furieuse. Elle voulait ouvrir la fenêtre, apostropher tout ce populaire, et elle exprimait le regret de ne pas avoir une pompe à sa disposition pour asperger la foule et noyer ses hourras sous des torrents d’eau froide. Sa mère et sa sœur eurent quelque peine à modérer l’indignation de la fougueuse fillette.

Dans la maison d’Elisabeth street, la situation était identique. Francis Gordon lui aussi eût volontiers envoyé à tous les diables ces enthousiastes qui risquaient d’aggraver une situation déjà tendue. Lui aussi, il s’était abstenu de paraître, tandis que Mr Forsyth et Omicron paradaient sur la tour, en faisant montre de la plus choquante vanité.

De même que Mrs Hudelson avait dû réprimer les impatiences de Loo, de même Francis Gordon dut réprimer les colères de la redoutable Mitz. Celle-ci ne parlait de rien moins que de balayer cette foule, et ce n’était pas, dans sa bouche, une menace dont il convenait de rire. Nul doute que l’instrument qu’elle maniait chaque jour avec tant de virtuosité n’eût terriblement fonctionné entre ses mains. Toutefois, recevoir à coups de balai des gens qui viennent vous acclamer, c’eût été peut-être un peu vif!

“Ah! mon fieu, s’écria la vieille servante, est-ce que ces braillards-là ne sont pas fous?

— Je serais tenté de le croire, répondit Francis Gordon.

— Tout cela à propos d’une espèce de grosse pierre qui se promène dans le ciel!

— Comme tu dis, Mitz.

— Un met dehors!

— Un météore, Mitz, rectifia Francis en réprimant avec peine une forte envie de rire.

— C’est ce que je dis: un met dehors, répéta Mitz avec conviction. S’il pouvait leur tomber sur la tête et en écraser une demi-douzaine!… Enfin, je te le demande, à toi qui es un savant, à quoi ça sert-il un met dehors?

— À brouiller les familles”, déclara Francis Gordon, tandis que les hourras éclataient de plus belle.

Cependant, pourquoi les deux anciens amis n’accepteraient-ils pas de partager leur bolide? Il n’y avait aucun avantage matériel, aucun profit pécuniaire à en espérer. Il ne pouvait être question que d’un honneur purement platonique. Dès lors, pourquoi ne pas laisser indivise une découverte à laquelle leurs deux noms seraient restés attachés jusqu’à la consommation des siècles? Pourquoi? Tout simplement parce qu’il s’agissait d’amour-propre et de vanité. Or, lorsque l’amour-propre est en jeu, lorsque la vanité s’en mêle, qui pourrait se flatter de faire entendre raison aux humains?

Mais enfin était-il donc si glorieux d’avoir aperçu ce météore? Cela n’était-il pas dû uniquement au hasard? Si le bolide n’avait pas aussi complaisamment traversé le champ des instruments de Mr Dean Forsyth et de Mr Sydney Hudelson juste au moment où ceux-ci avaient l’œil à l’oculaire, aurait-il été vu par ces deux astronomes qui vraiment s’en faisaient trop accroire?

D’ailleurs, est-ce qu’il n’en passe pas, jour et nuit, par centaines, par milliers, de ces bolides, de ces astéroïdes, de ces étoiles filantes? Est-il même possible de les compter, ces globes de feu, qui tracent par essaims leurs capricieuses trajectoires sur le fond obscur du firmament? Six cents millions, tel est, d’après les savants, le nombre des météores qui traversent l’atmosphère terrestre en une seule nuit, soit douze cents millions en vingt-quatre heures. Ils passent donc par myriades, ces corps lumineux, dont, au dire de Newton, dix à quinze millions seraient visibles à l’œil nu.

“Dès lors, faisait observer le Punch, le seul journal de Whaston qui prît la chose par son côté plaisant, trouver un bolide dans le ciel, c’est un peu moins difficile que de trouver un grain de froment dans un champ de blé, et l’on est fondé à dire qu’ils abusent un peu du battage, nos deux astronomes, à propos d’une découverte devant laquelle il n’y a pas lieu de se découvrir.”

Mais, si le Punch, journal satirique, ne négligeait pas cette occasion d’exercer sa verve comique, ses confrères plus sérieux, bien loin de l’imiter, saisirent ce prétexte pour faire étalage d’une science aussi fraîchement acquise que capable de rendre jaloux les professionnels les mieux cotés.

“Kepler, disait le Whaston Standard, croyait que les bolides provenaient des exhalaisons terrestres. Il paraît plus vraisemblable que ces phénomènes ne sont que des aérolithes, chez lesquels on a toujours constaté des traces d’une violente combustion. Du temps de Plutarque, on les considérait déjà comme des masses minérales, qui se précipitent sur le sol de notre globe, lorsqu’ils sont happés au passage par l’attraction terrestre. L’étude des bolides montre que leur substance n’est aucunement différente des minéraux connus de nous et que, dans leur ensemble, ils comprennent à peu près le tiers des corps simples. Mais quelle diversité présente l’agrégation de ces éléments! Les parcelles constitutives y sont tantôt menues comme de la limaille, tantôt grosses comme des pois ou des noisettes, d’une dureté remarquable et montrant à la cassure des traces de cristallisation. Il en est même qui sont uniquement formés de fer à l’état natif, parfois mélangé de nickel, et que l’oxydation n’a jamais altéré.”

Très juste, en vérité, ce que le Whaston Standard portait à la connaissance de ses lecteurs. Pendant ce temps, le Daily Whaston insistait sur l’attention que les savants anciens ou modernes ont toujours accordée à l'étude de ces pierres météoriques. Il disait:

“Diogène d'Apollonie ne cite-t-il pas une pierre incandescente, grande comme une meule de moulin, dont la chute près de l'Ægos-Potamos épouvanta les habitants de la Thrace? Qu'un pareil bolide vienne à tomber sur le clocher de Saint-Andrew, et il le démolira de son faîte à sa base. Qu'on nous permette, à ce propos, de citer quelques-unes de ces pierres qui, venues des profondeurs de l'espace, et entrées dans le cercle d'attraction de la terre, furent recueillies sur son sol: avant l'ère chrétienne, la pierre de foudre, que l'on adorait comme le symbole de Cybèle en Galatie et qui fut transportée à Rome, ainsi qu'une autre trouvée en Syrie et consacrée au culte du soleil; le bouclier sacré recueilli sous le règne de Numa; la pierre noire que l'on garde précieusement à la Mecque; la pierre de tonnerre qui servit à fabriquer la fameuse épée d'Antar.

Depuis le commencement de l'ère chrétienne, que d'aérolithes décrits avec les circonstances qui accompagnèrent leur chute: une pierre de deux cent soixante livres tombée à Ensisheim, en Alsace; une pierre d'un noir métallique, ayant la forme et la grosseur d'une tête humaine, tombée sur le mont Vaison, en Provence; une pierre de soixante-douze livres, dégageant une odeur sulfureuse, qu'on eût dit faite d'écume de mer, tombée à Larini, en Macédoine; une pierre tombée à Lucé, près de Chartres, en 1763, et brûlante à ce point qu'il fut impossible de la toucher. N'y aurait-il pas lieu de citer également ce bolide qui, en 1203, atteignit la ville normande de Laigle et dont Humboldt parle en ces termes: “À une heure de l'après-midi, par un ciel très pur, on vit un grand bolide se mouvant du Sud-Est au Nord-Ouest. Quelques minutes après, on entendit, durant cinq ou six minutes, une explosion partant d'un petit nuage noir presque immobile, explosion qui fut suivie de trois ou quatre autres détonations et d'un bruit que l'on aurait pu comparer à des décharges de mousqueterie, auxquelles se serait mêlé le roulement d'un grand nombre de tambours. Chaque détonation détachait du nuage noir une partie des vapeurs qui le formaient. On ne remarqua en cet endroit aucun phénomène lumineux. Plus de mille pierres météoriques tombèrent sur une surface elliptique dont le grand axe, dirigé du Sud-Est au Nord-Ouest, mesurait onze kilomètres de longueur. Ces pierres fumaient et elles étaient brûlantes sans être enflammées, et l'on constata qu'elles étaient plus faciles à briser quelques jours après leur chute que plus tard."

Le Daily Whaston continuait sur ce ton pendant plusieurs colonnes, et se montrait prodigue de détails qui prouvaient à tout le moins la conscience de ses rédacteurs.

Les autres journaux, d'ailleurs, ne demeuraient pas en arrière. Puisque l'astronomie était d'actualité, tous parlaient d'astronomie, et si, après cela, un seul Whastonien n'était pas ferré sur la question des bolides, c'est qu'il y aurait mis de la mauvaise volonté.

Aux renseignements donnés par le Daily

Whaston, le Whaston News ajoutait les siens. Il évoquait le souvenir de ce globe de feu, d'un diamètre double de celui de la lune dans son plein, qui, en 1254, fut aperçu successivement à Hurworth, à Darlington, à Durham, à Dundee, et passa sans éclater d'un horizon à l'autre, en laissant derrière lui une longue traînée lumineuse, couleur d'or, large, compacte et tranchant vivement sur le bleu foncé du ciel. Il rappelait ensuite que, si le bolide de Hurworth n'a pas éclaté, il n'en a pas été ainsi de celui qui, le 14 mai 1864, s'est montré à un observateur de Castillon, en France. Bien que ce météore n'ait été visible que pendant cinq secondes, sa vitesse était telle que, dans ce court espace de temps, il a décrit un arc de six degrés. Sa teinte, d'abord bleu verdâtre, devint ensuite blanche et d'un extraordinaire éclat. Entre l’explosion et la perception du bruit, il s’écoula de trois à quatre minutes, ce qui implique un éloignement de soixante à quatre-vingts kilomètres. Il faut donc que la violence de l’éclatement ait été supérieure à celle des plus fortes explosions qui peuvent se produire à la surface du globe. Quant à la dimension de ce bolide, calculée d’après sa hauteur, on n’estimait pas son diamètre à moins de quinze cents pieds, et il devait parcourir plus de cent trente kilomètres à la seconde, vitesse infiniment supérieure à celle dont la terre est animée dans son mouvement de translation autour du soleil.

Puis ce fut le tour du Whaston Morning, puis le tour du Whaston Evening, ce dernier journal traitant plus spécialement la question des bolides, fort nombreux, d’ailleurs, presque entièrement composés de fer. Il rappela à ses lecteurs qu’une de ces masses météoriques, trouvée dans les plaines de la Sibérie, ne pesait pas moins de sept cents kilogrammes; qu’une autre, découverte au Brésil, pesait jusqu’à six mille kilogrammes; qu’une troisième, lourde de quatorze mille kilogrammes, avait été trouvée à Olympe, dans le Tucuman; qu’une dernière enfin, tombée aux environs de Duranzo, au Mexique, atteignait le poids énorme de dix-neuf mille kilogrammes!

En vérité, ce n’est pas trop s’avancer que d’affirmer qu’une partie de la population whastonienne ne laissa pas d’éprouver un certain effroi à la lecture de ces articles. Pour avoir été aperçu dans les conditions que l’on sait, à une distance qui devait être considérable, il fallait que le météore de MM. Forsyth et Hudelson eût des dimensions probablement très supérieures à celles des bolides du Tucuman et de Duranzo. Qui sait si sa grosseur n’égalait pas, ne dépassait pas celle de l’aérolithe de Castillon dont le diamètre avait été évalué à quinze cents pieds? Se figure-t-on le poids d’une telle masse? Or, si ledit météore avait déjà paru au zénith de Whaston, c’est que Whaston était située sous sa trajectoire. Il repasserait donc au-dessus de la ville, pour peu que cette trajectoire affectât la forme d’une orbite. Eh bien! que précisément à ce moment, il vînt, pour une raison quelconque, à s’arrêter dans sa course, ce serait Whaston qui serait touchée avec une violence dont on ne pouvait se faire une idée! C’était ou jamais l’occasion d’apprendre à ceux des habitants qui l’ignoraient, de rappeler à ceux qui la connaissaient, cette terrible loi de la force vive: la masse multipliée par le carré de la vitesse, vitesse qui, d’après la loi plus effrayante encore de la chute des corps, et pour un bolide tombant de quatre cents kilomètres de hauteur, serait voisine de trois mille mètres par seconde au moment où il s’écraserait sur la surface du sol!

La presse whastonienne ne faillit pas à ce devoir, et jamais, c’est justice de le reconnaître, journaux quotidiens ne firent une telle débauche de formules mathématiques.

Peu à peu, une certaine appréhension régna donc dans la ville. Le dangereux et menaçant bolide devint le sujet de toutes les conversations sur la place publique, dans les cercles comme au foyer familial. La partie féminine de la population, notamment, ne rêvait plus que d’églises écrasées et de maisons anéanties. Quant aux hommes, ils estimaient plus élégant de hausser les épaules, mais ils les haussaient sans véritable conviction. Nuit et jour, on peut le dire, sur la place de la Constitution comme dans les quartiers plus élevés de la ville, des groupes se tenaient en permanence. Que le temps fût couvert ou non, cela n’arrêtait point les observateurs.

Jamais les opticiens n’avaient vendu tant de lunettes, lorgnettes et autres instruments d’optique! Jamais le ciel ne fut tant visé que par les yeux inquiets de la population whastonienne! Que le météore fût visible ou non, le danger était de toutes les heures, pour ne pas dire de toutes les minutes, de toutes les secondes.

Mais, dira-t-on, ce danger menaçait également les diverses régions, et avec elles, les cités, bourgades, villages et hameaux situés sous la trajectoire. Oui, évidemment. Si le bolide faisait, comme on le supposait, le tour de notre globe, tous les points situés au-dessous de son orbite étaient menacés par sa chute. Toutefois, c’est Whaston qui détenait le record de la peur, si l’on veut bien accepter cette expression ultramoderne, et cela, pour cette unique raison que c’est de Whaston que le bolide avait été pour la première fois aperçu.

Il y eut pourtant un journal qui résista à la contagion et qui se refusa jusqu’au bout à prendre les choses au sérieux. Par contre, il ne fut pas tendre, ce journal, pour MM. Forsyth et

Hudelson, qu’il rendait plaisamment responsables des maux dont la ville était menacée.

“De quoi se sont mêlés ces amateurs? disait le Punch. Avaient-ils besoin de chatouiller l’espace avec leurs lunettes et leurs télescopes? Ne pouvaient-ils laisser tranquille le firmament sans taquiner ses étoiles? N’y a-t-il pas assez, n’y a-t-il pas trop de véritables savants qui se mêlent de ce qui ne les regarde pas et se faufilent indiscrètement dans les zones intrastellaires? Les corps célestes sont très pudiques et n’aiment pas qu’on les regarde de si près. Oui, notre ville est menacée, personne n’y est plus en sûreté maintenant, et, à cette situation, il n’y a pas de remède. On s’assure contre l’incendie, la grêle, les cyclones… Allez donc vous assurer contre la chute d’un bolide, peut-être dix fois gros comme la citadelle de Whaston!… Et pour peu qu’il éclate en tombant, ce qui arrive fréquemment aux engins de cette espèce, la ville entière sera bombardée, voire même incendiée, si les projectiles sont incandescents! C’est, dans tous les cas, la destruction certaine de notre chère cité, il ne faut pas se le dissimuler! Sauve qui peut, donc! Sauve qui peut!… Mais aussi pourquoi MM. Forsyth et Hudelson ne sont-ils pas restés tranquillement au rez-de-chaussée de leur maison au lieu d'espionner les météores? Ce sont eux qui les ont provoqués par leur indiscrétion, attirés par leurs coupables intrigues. Si Whaston est détruite, si elle est écrasée ou brûlée par ce bolide, ce sera leur faute, et c'est à eux qu'il faudra s'en prendre!… En vérité, nous le demandons à tout lecteur vraiment impartial, c'est-à-dire, à tous les abonnés du Whaston Punch, à quoi servent les astronomes, astrologues, météorologues et autres animaux en ogue? Quel bien est-il jamais résulté de leurs travaux?… Poser la question, c'est y répondre, et en ce qui nous concerne, nous persistons plus que jamais dans nos convictions bien connues, si parfaitement exprimées par cette phrase sublime due au génie d'un Français, l'illustre Brillat-Savarin: “La découverte d'un plat nouveau fait plus pour le bonheur de l'humanité que la découverte d'une étoile!” En quelle piètre estime Brillat-Savarin n'aurait-il donc pas tenu les deux malfaiteurs qui n'ont pas craint d'attirer sur leur pays les pires cataclysmes pour le plaisir de découvrir un simple bolide?”

CHAPITRE VII

VII

Dans lequel on verra Mrs Hudelson très chagrine de l’attitude du docteur, et où l’on entendra la bonne Mitz rabrouer son maître d’une belle manière.

À ces plaisanteries du Whaston Punch, que répondirent Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson? Rien du tout, et cela pour l’excellente raison qu’ils ignorèrent l’article de l’irrespectueux journal. Ignorer les choses désagréables que l’on peut dire de nous, c’est encore le plus sûr moyen de n’en pas souffrir, eût dit M. de la Palisse avec une incontestable sagesse. Toutefois, ces moqueries plus ou moins spirituelles sont peu agréables pour ceux qu’elles visent, et si, dans l’espèce, les personnes visées n’en eurent point connaissance, il n’en fut pas de même de leurs parents et de leurs amis. Mitz particulièrement était furieuse. Accuser son maître d’avoir attiré ce bolide qui menaçait la sécurité publique!… À l’entendre, Mr Dean Forsyth devrait poursuivre l’auteur de l’article, et le juge John Proth saurait bien le condamner à de gros dommages et intérêts, sans parler de la prison qu’il méritait pour ses calomnieuses insinuations.

Quant à la petite Loo, elle prit la chose au sérieux, et, sans hésiter, donna raison au Whaston Punch.

“Oui, il a raison, disait-elle. Pourquoi Mr Forsyth et papa se sont-ils avisés de découvrir ce maudit caillou? Sans eux, il serait passé inaperçu, comme tant d’autres qui ne nous ont point fait de mal.”

Ce mal ou plutôt ce malheur auquel pensait la fillette, c'était l'inévitable rivalité qui allait exister entre l'oncle de Francis et le père de Jenny, avec toutes ses conséquences, à la veille d'une union qui devait resserrer plus étroitement encore les liens unissant les deux familles.

Les craintes de miss Loo étaient fondées, et ce qui devait arriver arriva. Tant que Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson n'avaient eu que des soupçons réciproques, aucun éclat ne s'était produit. Si leurs rapports s'étaient refroidis, s'ils avaient évité de se rencontrer, les choses, du moins, n'avaient pas été plus loin. Mais, à présent, depuis la note de l'observatoire de Boston, il était publiquement établi que la découverte du même météore appartenait aux deux astronomes de Whaston. Qu'allaient-ils faire? Chacun d'eux revendiquerait-il la priorité de cette découverte? Y aurait-il à ce sujet des discussions privées, ou même de retentissantes polémiques auxquelles la presse whastonienne donnerait certainement une hospitalité complaisante?

On ne savait, et l'avenir seul répondrait à ces questions. Le certain, en tout cas, c'est que, ni Mr Dean Forsyth, ni le docteur Hudelson ne faisaient plus la moindre allusion au mariage, dont la date approchait trop lentement au gré des deux fiancés. Lorsqu'on en parlait devant l'un ou devant l'autre, ils avaient toujours oublié quelque circonstance qui les rappelait à l'instant dans leur observatoire. C'était là, d'ailleurs, qu'ils passaient le plus clair de leur temps, chaque jour plus préoccupés et plus absorbés encore.

En effet, si le météore avait été revu par des astronomes officiels, c'est en vain que Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson cherchaient à le retrouver. S'était-il donc éloigné à une distance trop considérable pour la portée de leurs instruments? Hypothèse après tout plausible, que rien toutefois ne permettait de vérifier. Aussi, ils ne se départissaient pas d'une surveillance incessante, de jour, de nuit, profitant de toutes les éclaircies du ciel. Si cela continuait, ils finiraient par tomber malades.

Tous deux s'épuisaient en vains efforts pour calculer les éléments de l'astéroïde, dont ils s'entêtaient respectivement à s'estimer l'unique et exclusif inventeur. Il y avait là une chance sérieuse de solutionner leur différend. Des deux astronomes ex aequo, le plus actif mathématicien pouvait encore obtenir la palme.

Mais leur unique observation avait été de trop courte durée pour donner à leurs formules une base suffisante. Une autre observation, plusieurs peut-être seraient nécessaires, avant qu'il fût possible de déterminer avec certitude l'orbite du bolide. C'est pourquoi Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson, chacun redoutant d'être distancé par son rival, surveillaient le ciel avec un zèle pareil et pareillement stérile. Le capricieux météore ne reparaissait pas sur l'horizon de Whaston, ou, s'il y reparaissait, c'était dans le plus rigoureux incognito.

L'humeur des deux astronomes se ressentait de la vanité de leurs efforts. On ne pouvait les approcher. Vingt fois par jour, Mr Dean Forsyth se mettait en colère contre Omicron, qui lui répondait sur le même ton. Quand au docteur, s'il en était réduit à passer sa colère sur lui-même, il ne s'en faisait pas faute.

Dans ces conditions, qui se fût avisé de parler de contrat de mariage et de cérémonie nuptiale?

Cependant trois jours s'étaient écoulés depuis la publication de la note envoyée aux journaux par l'observatoire de Boston. L'horloge céleste, dont le soleil est l'aiguille, eût sonné le 22 avril, si le Grand Horloger avait pensé à la munir d'un timbre. Encore une vingtaine de jours, et la grande date naîtrait à son tour, bien que Loo prétendît, dans son impatience, qu’elle n’existait pas dans le calendrier.

Convenait-il de rappeler à l’oncle de Francis Gordon et au père de Jenny Hudelson ce mariage dont ils ne parlaient pas plus que s’il n’eût jamais dû se faire? Mrs Hudelson fut d’avis qu’il valait mieux garder le silence à l’égard de son mari. Il n’avait point à s’occuper des préparatifs de la noce… pas plus qu’il ne s’occupait de son propre ménage. Au jour venu, Mrs Hudelson lui dirait tout bonnement:

“Voilà ton habit, ton chapeau, et tes gants. Il est l’heure de se rendre à Saint-Andrew. Offre-moi ton bras et partons.”

Il irait, assurément, sans même s’en rendre compte, à la seule condition que le météore ne vînt pas à passer juste à ce moment-là devant l’objectif de son télescope!

Mais si l’avis de Mrs Hudelson prévalut dans la maison de Moriss street, si le docteur ne fut point mis en demeure de s’expliquer sur son attitude vis-à-vis de Mr Dean Forsyth, celui-ci fut rudement attaqué. Mitz ne voulut rien écouter. Furieuse contre son maître, elle entendait, disait-elle, lui parler entre quatre-z-yeux et tirer au clair cette situation tellement tendue que le moindre incident risquait de provoquer une rupture entre les deux familles. Quelles n’en seraient pas les conséquences? Mariage retardé, rompu peut-être, désespoir des deux fiancés, et spécialement de son cher Francis, son “fieu”, comme elle avait coutume de l’appeler, selon une vieille coutume familière et tendre. Que pourrait faire le pauvre jeune homme, après un éclat public qui aurait rendu toute réconciliation impossible?

Aussi, dans l’après-midi du 22 avril, se trouvant seule avec Mr Dean Forsyth dans la salle à manger, entre quatre-z-yeux conformément à ses désirs, elle arrêta son maître au moment où celui-ci se dirigeait vers l’escalier de la tour.

On sait que Mr Forsyth redoutait de s’expliquer avec Mitz. Généralement, il ne l’ignorait pas, ces explications ne tournaient point à son avantage; il jugeait donc plus sage de ne pas s’y exposer.

En cette occasion, après avoir regardé en dessous le visage de Mitz, lequel lui fit l’effet d’une bombe dont la mèche brûle et qui ne tardera pas à éclater, Mr Dean Forsyth, désireux de se mettre à l’abri des effets de l’explosion, battit en retraite vers la porte. Mais, avant qu’il en eût tourné le bouton, la vieille servante s’était mise en travers, et, ses yeux dardés sur ceux de son maître dont le regard fuyait peureusement:

“Monsieur, dit-elle, j’ai à vous parler.

— À me parler, Mitz? C’est que je n’ai guère le temps en ce moment.

— Ma fine! moi non plus, monsieur, vu que j’ai à faire toute la vaisselle du déjeuner. Vos tuyaux peuvent pardi bien attendre comme mes assiettes.

— Et Omicron?… Il m’appelle, je crois.

— Votre ami Krone?… Encore un joli coco, celui-là!… Il aura de mes nouvelles un de ces quatre matins, votre ami Krone. Vous pouvez l’en prévenir. Comme dit l’autre, la bonne entend l’heure et te salue! Répétez-lui cela, mot pour mot, monsieur.

— Je n’y manquerai pas, Mitz. Mais mon bolide?

— Beau lide?… répéta Mitz. Je ne sais pas ce que c’est, mais, quoi que vous en disiez, monsieur, ça ne doit pas être beau, si c’est cette affaire-là qui depuis quelque temps vous a mis un caillou à la place du cœur.

— Un bolide, Mitz, expliqua patiemment Mr Dean Forsyth, c’est un météore, et…

— Ah! s’écria Mitz, c’est le fameux met dehors!… Eh bien, il fera comme l’ami Krone, il attendra, le met dehors!

— Par exemple! s’écria Mr Forsyth, touché au point sensible.

— D’ailleurs, reprit Mitz, le temps est couvert, il va tomber de l’eau, et ce n’est pas le moment de vous amuser à regarder la lune.”

C’est vrai, et, dans cette persistance du mauvais temps, il y avait de quoi rendre enragés

Mr Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson. Depuis quarante-huit heures, le ciel était envahi par d’épais nuages. Le jour, pas un rayon de soleil, la nuit pas un rayonnement d’étoiles. De blanches vapeurs se tordaient d’un horizon à l’autre, comme un voile de crêpe que la flèche du clocher de Saint-Andrew crevait parfois de sa pointe. Dans ces conditions, impossible d’observer l’espace, de revoir le bolide si vivement disputé. On devait même tenir pour probable que les circonstances atmosphériques ne favorisaient pas davantage les astronomes de l’État de l’Ohio ou de l’État de Pennsylvanie, non plus que ceux des autres observatoires de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Continent. En effet, aucune nouvelle note concernant l’apparition du météore n’avait paru dans les journaux. Il est vrai que ce météore ne présentait pas un intérêt tel que le monde scientifique dût s’en émouvoir. Il s’agissait là d’un fait cosmique assez banal en somme, et il fallait être un Dean Forsyth ou un Hudelson pour en guetter le retour avec cette impatience, qui, chez eux, tournait à la rage.

Mitz, lorsque son maître eut bien constaté l'impossibilité absolue de lui échapper, reprit en ces termes, après s'être croisé les bras:

"Mr Forsyth, auriez-vous par hasard oublié que vous avez un neveu qui s'appelle Francis Gordon?

— Ah! ce cher Francis, répondit Mr Forsyth en hochant la tête d'un air bonhomme. Mais non, je ne l'oublie pas… Et comment va-t-il, ce brave Francis?

— Très bien, merci, monsieur.

— Il me semble que je ne l'ai pas vu depuis un certain temps?

— En effet, depuis le déjeuner.

— Vraiment!…

— Vous avez donc vos yeux dans la lune, monsieur? demanda Mitz, en obligeant son maître à se retourner vers elle.

— Que non! ma bonne Mitz!… Mais que veux-tu? Je suis un peu préoccupé…

— Préoccupé au point que vous paraissez avoir oublié une chose importante…

— Oublié une chose importante?… Et laquelle?

— C'est que votre neveu va se marier.

— Se marier!… Se marier!

— N’allez-vous pas me demander de quel mariage il s’agit?

— Non, Mitz!… Mais à quoi tendent ces questions?

— Belle malice!… Il ne faut pas être sorcier pour savoir qu’on fait une question pour avoir une réponse.

— Une réponse à quel sujet, Mitz?

— Au sujet de votre conduite, monsieur, envers la famille Hudelson!… Car vous n’ignorez pas qu’il y a une famille Hudelson, un docteur Hudelson, qui demeure Moriss street, une Mrs Hudelson, mère de miss Loo Hudelson et de miss Jenny Hudelson, fiancée de votre neveu?”

À mesure que ce nom de Hudelson s’échappait, en prenant chaque fois plus de force, de la bouche de Mitz, Mr Dean Forsyth portait la main à sa poitrine, à son côté, à sa tête, comme si ce nom, faisant balle, l’avait frappé à bout portant. Il souffrait, il suffoquait, le sang lui montait à la tête. Voyant qu’il ne répondait pas:

“Eh bien! avez-vous entendu? insista Mitz.

— Si j’ai entendu! s’écria son maître.

— Eh bien?… répéta la vieille servante en forçant sa voix.

— Francis pense donc toujours à ce mariage? dit enfin Mr Forsyth.

— S’il y pense! affirma Mitz, mais comme il pense à respirer, le cher petit! Comme nous y pensons tous, comme vous y pensez vous-même, j’aime à le croire!

— Quoi! mon neveu est toujours décidé à épouser la fille de ce docteur Hudelson?

— Miss Jenny, s’il vous plaît, monsieur! Je vous en donne mon billet, monsieur, qu’il l’est, décidé! Pardine, il faudrait qu’il ait perdu la boussole pour ne pas l’être, décidé! Comment trouverait-il une fiancée plus gentille, une jeunesse plus charmante?…

— En admettant, interrompit Mr Forsyth, que la fille de l’homme qui… de l’homme que… de l’homme, enfin, dont je ne puis prononcer le nom sans qu’il m’étouffe, puisse être charmante.

— C’est trop fort! s’écria Mitz, qui dénoua son tablier comme si elle allait le rendre.

— Voyons… Mitz… voyons”, murmura son maître quelque peu inquiet d’une attitude si menaçante.

La vieille servante brandit son tablier, dont le cordon pendait jusqu’à terre.

“C’est tout vu, déclara-t-elle. Après cinquante années de service, je m’en irai plutôt pourrir dans mon coin comme un chien galeux, mais je ne resterai pas chez un homme qui déchire son propre sang. Je ne suis qu’une pauvre servante, mais j’ai du cœur, monsieur… moi!

— Ah çà, Mitz, répliqua Mr Dean Forsyth piqué au vif, tu ignores donc ce qu’il m’a fait, cet Hudelson?

— Qu’est-ce qu’il vous a donc tant fait?

— Il m’a volé!

— Volé?

— Oui volé, abominablement volé!…

— Et que vous a-t-il volé?… votre montre?… votre bourse?… votre mouchoir?…

— Mon bolide!

— Ah! encore votre beau lide! s’écria la vieille servante, en ricanant de la façon la plus ironique et la plus désagréable pour Mr Forsyth. Il y a longtemps qu’on n’en avait parlé, de votre fameux met dehors! C’est-y Dieu possible de se mettre dans des états pareils pour une machine qui se promène!… Votre beau lide, est-ce qu’il était à vous plus qu’à Mr Hudelson? Avez-vous mis votre nom dessus? Est-ce qu’il n’appartient pas à tout le monde, à n’importe qui, à moi, à mon chien, si j’en avais un… mais, grâce au ciel, je n’en ai pas!… Est-ce que vous l’auriez acheté de votre poche, ou bien est-ce qu’il vous serait venu par héritage?…

— Mitz!… cria Forsyth qui ne se possédait plus.

— Il n’y a pas de Mitz! affirma la vieille servante dont l’exaspération débordait. Pardine, il faut être bête comme Saturne pour se brouiller avec un vieil ami à propos d’un sale caillou qu’on ne reverra jamais plus.

— Tais-toi! tais-toi! protesta l’astronome touché au cœur.

— Non, monsieur, non je ne me tairai pas, et vous pouvez appeler votre bêta d’ami Krone à votre aide…

— Bêta d’Omicron!

— Oui bêta, et il ne me fera pas taire… pas plus que notre Président lui-même ne pourrait imposer silence à l’archange qui viendrait de la part du Tout-Puissant annoncer la fin du monde!”

Mr Dean Forsyth fut-il absolument interloqué en entendant cette terrible phrase, son larynx s’était-il rétréci au point de ne plus donner passage à la parole, sa glotte paralysée ne pouvait-elle plus émettre un son? Ce qui est certain, c’est qu’il ne parvint pas à répondre. Eût-il même voulu, au paroxysme de la colère, flanquer à la porte sa fidèle mais acariâtre Mitz, qu’il lui aurait été impossible de prononcer le traditionnel: “Sortez!… sortez à l’instant, et que je ne vous revoie plus!”

Mitz, d’ailleurs, ne lui eût point obéi. Ce n’est pas après cinquante ans de service qu’une servante se sépare, à propos d’un malencontreux météore, du maître qu’elle a vu venir au monde.

Cependant il était temps que cette scène prit fin. Mr Dean Forsyth, comprenant qu’il n’aurait pas le dessus, cherchait à battre en retraite sans que ce mouvement ressemblât trop à une fuite.

Ce fut le soleil qui lui vint en aide. Le temps s’éclaircit soudain, un vif rayon pénétra à travers les vitres de la fenêtre qui s’ouvrait sur le jardin.

À ce moment, sans nul doute, le docteur Hudelson était sur son donjon, telle est la pensée qui vint aussitôt à Mr Dean Forsyth. Il voyait son rival, profitant de cette éclaircie, l’œil à l’oculaire de son télescope et parcourant les hautes zones de l’espace!…

Il n’y put tenir. Ce rayon de soleil faisait sur lui le même effet que sur un ballon rempli de gaz. Il le gonflait, il accroissait sa force ascensionnelle, l’obligeait à s’élever dans l’atmosphère.

Mr Dean Forsyth, jetant, comme du lest, — ceci pour achever la comparaison — toute la colère amassée en lui, se dirigea vers la porte.

Malheureusement, Mitz était devant, et ne semblait point disposée à lui livrer passage. Serait-il donc dans la nécessité de la prendre par le bras, d’engager une lutte avec elle, de recourir à l’assistance d’Omicron?…

Il ne fut pas obligé d’en arriver à cette extrémité. À n’en pas douter, la vieille servante était très éprouvée par l’effort qu’elle venait de faire. Bien qu’elle eût assez l’habitude de morigéner son maître, jamais jusqu’alors elle n’y avait mis une telle impétuosité.

Fut-ce l’effort physique nécessité par cette violence, fut-ce la gravité du sujet de la discussion, sujet des plus palpitants puisqu’il s’agissait du bonheur futur de son cher “fieu”, toujours est-il que Mitz se sentit tout à coup défaillir et s’écroula lourdement sur une chaise.

Mr Dean Forsyth, il faut le dire à sa louange, en délaissa soleil, ciel bleu et météore. Il s’approcha de sa vieille servante et s’enquit avec sollicitude de ce qu’elle éprouvait.

“Je ne sais pas, monsieur. J’ai comme qui dirait l’estomac retourné.

— L’estomac retourné? répéta Mr Dean Forsyth, ahuri par cette maladie en vérité assez singulière.

— Oui, monsieur, affirma Mitz d’une voix dolente. C’est un noeud que j’ai au cœur.

— Hum!…” fit Mr Dean Forsyth dont cette deuxième explication n’atténuait pas la perplexité.

À tout hasard, il allait donner à la malade les soins les plus usuels en pareille circonstance: relâchement du corsage, vinaigre sur le front et les tempes, verre d'eau sucrée…

Il n'en eut pas le temps.

La voix d'Omicron retentit au sommet de la tour:

“Le bolide, monsieur! criait Omicron. Le bolide!”

Mr Dean Forsyth oublia le reste de l'univers et se précipita dans l'escalier.

Il n'avait pas disparu, que Mitz avait retrouvé la plénitude de ses forces et s'était élancée à la suite de son maître. Tandis que celui-ci s'élevait rapidement, sautant trois par trois les marches en spirale, la voix de sa servante le poursuivait, vengeresse:

“Mr Forsyth, disait Mitz, rappelez-vous bien que le mariage de Francis Gordon et de Jenny Hudelson se fera, et qu'il se fera exactement à la date convenue. Il se fera, Mr Forsyth, ou — et cette alternative ne manquait pas de saveur dans la bouche de l'estimable Mitz — ou j'y perdrai mon latin.”

Mr Dean Forsyth ne répondit pas, n'entendit pas. En bonds précipités, Mr Dean Forsyth montait l'escalier de la tour.

CHAPITRE VIII

VIII

Dans lequel des polémiques de presse aggravent la situation, et qui se termine par une constatation aussi certaine qu’inattendue.

“C’est lui, Omicron, c’est bien lui! s’écria Mr Dean Forsyth, dès qu’il eut appliqué son œil à l’oculaire du télescope.

— Lui-même, déclara Omicron, qui ajouta: Fasse le ciel que le docteur Hudelson ne soit pas en ce moment sur son donjon!

— Ou s’il y est, dit Mr Forsyth, qu’il ne puisse pas retrouver le bolide!

— Notre bolide, précisa Omicron.

— Mon bolide!” rectifia Dean Forsyth.

Ils se trompaient tous les deux. La lunette du docteur Hudelson était, à ce moment même, braquée vers le Sud-Est, région du ciel alors parcourue par le météore. Elle l’avait saisi comme il apparaissait, et, pas plus que la tour, le donjon ne le perdit de vue jusqu’à l’instant où il disparut dans les brumes du Sud.

D’ailleurs, les astronomes de Whaston ne furent pas les seuls à signaler le bolide. L’observatoire de Pittsburg l’aperçut également, ce qui faisait trois observations successives, en y comprenant celle de l’observatoire de Boston.

Ce retour du météore était un fait du plus haut intérêt — si tant est toutefois que le météore lui-même offrit un réel intérêt! Puisqu'il restait en vue du monde sublunaire, c'est qu'il suivait décidément une orbite fermée. Ce n'était pas une de ces étoiles filantes qui disparaissent après avoir effleuré les dernières couches atmosphériques, un de ces astéroïdes qui se montrent une fois et vont se perdre à travers l'espace, un de ces aérolithes dont la chute ne tarde pas à suivre l'apparition. Non, il revenait, ce météore, il circulait autour de la terre comme un second satellite. Il méritait donc que l'on s'occupât de lui, et c'est pourquoi il convient d'excuser l'âpreté que mettaient Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson à se le disputer.

Le météore obéissant à des lois constantes, rien ne s'opposait à ce que l'on calculât ses éléments. On s'y employait un peu partout, mais nulle part, cela va sans dire, avec la même activité qu'à Whaston. Toutefois, pour que le problème fût intégralement résolu, plusieurs bonnes observations seraient encore nécessaires.

Le premier point qui fut déterminé, quarante-huit heures plus tard, par des mathématiciens qui ne s'appelaient ni Dean Forsyth, ni Hudelson, ce fut la trajectoire du bolide.

Cette trajectoire se développait rigoureusement du Nord au Sud. La faible déviation de 3° 31' signalée par Mr Dean Forsyth dans sa lettre à l'observatoire de Pittsburg n'était qu'apparente et résultait de la rotation du globe terrestre.

Quatre cents kilomètres séparaient le bolide de la surface de la terre, et sa prodigieuse vitesse n'était pas inférieure à six mille neuf cent soixante-sept mètres par seconde. Il accomplissait donc sa révolution autour du globe en une heure quarante et une minutes quarante et une secondes quatre-vingt-treize centièmes, d'où l'on pouvait conclure, d'après les gens de l'art, qu'il ne repasserait plus au zénith de Whaston avant qu’il se fût écoulé cent quatre ans, cent soixante-seize jours et vingt-deux heures.

Heureuse constatation de nature à rassurer les habitants de la ville qui redoutaient si fort la chute du malencontreux astéroïde! S’il tombait, ce ne serait toujours pas sur eux.

“Mais quelle apparence qu’il tombe? demandait le Whaston Morning. Il n’y a pas lieu d’admettre la rencontre d’un obstacle sur sa route, ni qu’il puisse être arrêté dans son mouvement de translation.”

C’était l’évidence même.

“Assurément, fit observer le Whaston Evening, il y a de ces aérolithes qui sont tombés, qui tombent encore. Mais ceux-là, le plus généralement de petites dimensions, divaguent dans l’espace, et ne tombent que si l’attraction terrestre les saisit au passage.”

Cette explication était juste et il ne semblait pas qu’elle pût s’appliquer au bolide en question, d’une marche si régulière, et dont la chute ne devait pas être plus à craindre que celle de la lune.

Ceci bien établi, il restait encore plusieurs points à élucider, avant que l’on pût se prétendre complètement renseigné sur le compte de cet astéroïde, devenu en somme un second satellite de la terre.

Quel était son volume? Quelle était sa masse, sa nature?

À la première question, le Whaston Standard répondit en ces termes:

“D’après la hauteur et la dimension apparente du bolide, son diamètre doit être supérieur à cinq cents mètres, tel est du moins ce que les observations ont permis d’établir jusqu’ici. Mais il n’a pas encore été possible de déterminer sa nature. Ce qui le rend visible, à la condition, bien entendu, que l’on dispose d’instruments assez puissants, c’est qu’il brille d’un très vif éclat, dû vraisemblablement au frottement de l’atmosphère, bien que la densité de l’air soit très faible à une telle altitude. Maintenant, ce météore n’est-il qu’un amas de matières gazeuses? Ne se compose-t-il pas au contraire d’un noyau solide entouré d’une chevelure lumineuse? Quelles sont, dans ce cas, la grosseur et la nature de ce noyau? C’est ce qu’on ne sait pas, ce qu’on ne saura peut-être jamais.

“En résumé, ni comme volume, ni comme vitesse de translation, ce bolide n’a rien de bien extraordinaire. Sa seule particularité est qu’il décrit une orbite fermée. Depuis combien de temps évolue-t-il ainsi autour de notre globe? Les astronomes patentés seraient incapables de nous le dire, puisqu’ils ne l’auraient jamais tenu au bout de leurs télescopes officiels sans nos deux compatriotes, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson, à qui était réservée la gloire de cette magnifique découverte.”

En tout cela, ainsi que le faisait judicieusement remarquer le Whaston Standard, il n’y avait rien d’extraordinaire, si ce n’est l’éloquence de son rédacteur. Aussi le monde savant ne s’occupa-t-il que dans la mesure habituelle de ce qui passionnait si fort cet estimable journal, et le monde ignorant n’y prit-il qu’un faible intérêt.

Seuls, les habitants de Whaston s’attachèrent à connaître tout ce qui concernait le météore, dont la découverte était due à deux honorables personnages de la ville.

D’ailleurs, peut-être, comme les autres créatures sublunaires, eussent-ils fini par songer avec indifférence à cet incident cosmique, que le Punch s’entêtait à appeler “comique”, si les journaux, par des allusions de plus en plus claires, n’avaient fait connaître la rivalité de Mr Dean Forsyth et du docteur Hudelson. Ceci donna de l’aliment aux cancans. Tout le monde saisit avec empressement cette occasion de se disputer, et la ville tout doucement commença à se partager en deux camps.

En attendant, la date du mariage approchait. Mrs Hudelson, Jenny et Loo, d’une part, Francis Gordon et Mitz, de l’autre, vivaient dans une inquiétude croissante. Ils en étaient toujours à craindre un éclat provoqué par la rencontre des deux rivaux, de même que la rencontre de deux nuages chargés de potentiels contraires fait jaillir l’étincelle et tonner la foudre. On savait que Mr Dean Forsyth ne décolérait pas et que la fureur de Mr Hudelson cherchait toutes les occasions de se manifester.

Le ciel était généralement beau, l’atmosphère pure, les horizons de Whaston très dégagés. Les deux astronomes pouvaient donc multiplier leurs observations. Les occasions ne leur manquaient pas, puisque le bolide reparaissait au-dessus de l’horizon plus de quatorze fois par vingt-quatre heures, et qu’ils connaissaient maintenant, grâce aux déterminations des observatoires, le point précis vers lequel, à chaque passage, leurs objectifs devaient être dirigés.

Sans doute, la commodité de ces observations était inégale comme la hauteur du bolide au-dessus de l’horizon. Mais les passages de celui-ci étaient si nombreux que cet inconvénient perdait beaucoup de son importance. S’il ne revenait plus au zénith mathématique de Whaston, où, par un hasard miraculeux, on l’avait aperçu une première fois, il le frôlait chaque jour de si près que c’était pratiquement la même chose.

En fait, les deux passionnés astronomes pouvaient s’enivrer librement de la contemplation du météore sillonnant l’espace au-dessus de leur tête et splendidement orné d’une brillante auréole!

Ils le dévoraient du regard. Ils le caressaient des yeux. Chacun l’appelait de son propre nom, le bolide Forsyth, le bolide Hudelson. C’était leur enfant, la chair de leur chair. Il leur appartenait comme le fils à ses parents, plus encore, comme la créature à son créateur. Sa vue ne cessait de les surexciter. Leurs observations, les hypothèses qu’ils déduisaient de sa marche, de sa forme apparente, ils les adressaient, celui-ci à l’observatoire de Cincinnati, celui-là à l’observatoire de Pittsburg, et sans jamais oublier de réclamer la priorité de la découverte.

Bientôt, cette lutte encore pacifique ne satisfit plus leur animosité. Non contents d’avoir rompu les relations diplomatiques, en cessant tous rapports personnels, il leur fallut la bataille franche et la guerre officiellement déclarée.

Un jour, il parut dans le Whaston Standard une note passablement agressive contre le docteur Hudelson, note qui fut attribuée à Mr Dean Forsyth. Elle disait que certaines gens ont vraiment de trop bons yeux quand ils regardent à travers les lunettes d’un autre, et qu’ils aperçoivent trop facilement ce qui a été aperçu déjà.

En réponse à cette note, il fut dit dès le lendemain dans le Whaston Evening qu’en fait de lunettes, il en est qui sont sans doute mal essuyées, et dont l’objectif est semé de petites taches qu’il n’est pas bien adroit de prendre pour des météores.

En même temps, le Punch publiait la très ressemblante caricature des deux rivaux, munis d’ailes gigantesques et luttant de vitesse pour attraper leur bolide, figuré par une tête de zèbre qui leur tirait la langue.

Cependant, bien que par suite de ces articles, de ces allusions vexatoires, la brouille des deux adversaires tendît à s'aggraver de jour en jour, ceux-ci n'avaient pas encore eu l'occasion d'intervenir dans la question du mariage. S'ils n'en parlaient pas, du moins laissaient-ils aller les choses, et rien n'autorisait à admettre que Francis Gordon et Jenny Hudelson ne fussent pas liés à la date convenue

Avec un lien d'or

Qui ne finit qu'à la mort, ainsi que le dit une vieille chanson de Bretagne.

Aucun incident ne survint pendant les derniers jours du mois d'avril. Toutefois, si la situation ne s'aggrava pas, aucune amélioration ne lui fut apportée. Pendant les repas, chez Mr Hudelson, on ne faisait pas la plus petite allusion au météore, et miss Loo, muette par ordre maternel, enrageait de ne pouvoir le traiter comme il le méritait. Rien qu'à la voir couper sa côtelette, on comprenait que la fillette pensait au bolide et eût voulu le réduire en si minces bouchées qu'on n'en pût retrouver la trace. Quant à Jenny, elle ne cherchait pas à dissimuler sa tristesse dont le docteur ne voulait pas s'apercevoir. Peut-être en réalité ne la remarquait-il pas, tant l'absorbaient ses préoccupations astronomiques.

Bien entendu, Francis Gordon ne paraissait point à ces repas. Tout ce qu'il se permettait, c'était sa visite quotidienne, quand le docteur Hudelson avait réintégré son donjon.

Dans la maison d'Elisabeth street, les repas n'étaient pas plus gais. Mr Dean Forsyth ne parlait guère, et, lorsqu'il s'adressait à la vieille Mitz, celle-ci ne répondait que par un oui ou un non, aussi secs que le temps l'était alors.

Une seule fois, le 28 avril, Mr Dean Forsyth, au moment où il se levait de table, après le déjeuner, dit à son neveu:

“Est-ce que tu vas toujours chez les Hudelson?

— Certainement, mon oncle, répondit Francis d’une voix ferme.

— Et pourquoi n’irait-il pas chez les

Hudelson? demanda Mitz d’un ton déjà hargneux.

— Ce n’est pas à vous que je parle, Mitz! grommela Mr Forsyth.

— Mais c’est moi qui vous réponds, monsieur. Un chien parle bien à un évêque!”

Mr Forsyth haussa les épaules et se retourna vers Francis.

“Je vous ai répondu aussi, mon oncle, dit celui-ci. Oui, j’y vais chaque jour.

— Après ce que ce docteur m’a fait! s’écria Mr Dean Forsyth.

— Et que vous a-t-il fait?

— Il s’est permis de découvrir…

— Ce que vous découvriez vous-même, ce que tout le monde avait le droit de découvrir… Car enfin, de quoi s’agit-il? d’un bolide comme il en passe des milliers en vue de Whaston.

— Tu perds ton temps, mon fieu, intervint Mitz en ricanant. Tu vois bien que ton oncle est tout éberlu avec son caillou, dont il n’y a pas à en faire plus de cas que de la borne qui est au coin de notre maison.”

Ainsi s’exprima Mitz dans son langage spécial. Et Mr Dean Forsyth, que cette réplique eut le don d’exaspérer, de signifier, en homme qui ne se possède plus:

“Eh bien! moi, Francis, je te défends de remettre le pied chez le docteur.

— Je regrette de vous désobéir, mon oncle, déclara Francis Gordon, en gardant son calme avec effort, tant le révoltait une telle prétention, mais j’irai.

— Oui, il ira, s’écria la vieille Mitz, quand même vous nous hacheriez tous en morceaux.”

Mr Forsyth dédaigna cette affirmation hasardeuse.

“Tu persistes donc dans tes projets? demanda-t-il à son neveu.

— Oui, mon oncle, affirma celui-ci.

— Et tu entends toujours épouser la fille de ce voleur?

— Oui, et rien au monde ne m’en empêchera!

— C’est ce que nous verrons!”

Et, sur ces paroles, les premières qui indiquassent la résolution de s’opposer au mariage, Mr Dean Forsyth, quittant la salle, prit l’escalier de la tour, dont il referma la porte avec fracas.

Que Francis Gordon fût bien décidé à retourner comme d’habitude dans la famille Hudelson, cela ne faisait pas question. Mais, si, à l’exemple de Mr Dean Forsyth, le docteur allait lui interdire sa porte? Ne pouvait-on tout craindre de ces deux ennemis aveuglés par une jalousie réciproque, une haine d’inventeurs, la pire de toutes les haines?

Ce jour-là, que de peine Francis Gordon eut à cacher sa tristesse, quand il se retrouva en présence de Mrs Hudelson et de ses deux filles. Il ne voulut rien dire de la scène qu’il venait de subir. À quoi bon accroître les inquiétudes de la famille, puisqu’il était résolu à ne pas tenir compte des injonctions de son oncle, en admettant qu’elles fussent maintenues par leur auteur?

Pouvait-il entrer, en effet, dans l’esprit d’un être raisonnable que l’union des deux fiancés pût être empêchée ou même simplement retardée à propos d’un bolide? À supposer même que Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson ne voulussent point se trouver l’un en face de l’autre pendant la cérémonie, eh bien! on se passerait d’eux. Après tout, leur présence n’était pas indispensable. L’essentiel, c’était que leur consentement ne fût pas refusé… au moins par le docteur, car, si Francis Gordon n’était que le neveu de son oncle, Jenny, elle, était bien la fille de son père et n’aurait pu se marier contre sa volonté. Si, ensuite, les deux enragés voulaient se dévorer réciproquement, le révérend O’Garth n’en aurait pas moins accompli l’œuvre matrimoniale dans l’église de Saint-Andrew.

Comme pour justifier ces raisonnements optimistes, quelques jours encore s’écoulèrent sans apporter aucun changement dans la situation. Le temps ne cessait d’être au beau, et jamais le ciel de Whaston n’avait été si serein.

Sauf quelques brumes matinales et vespérales qui se dissipaient après le lever et le coucher du soleil, pas une vapeur ne troublait la pureté de l’atmosphère, au milieu de laquelle le bolide accomplissait sa course régulière.

Faut-il répéter que MM. Forsyth et Hudelson continuaient à le dévorer des yeux, qu’ils tendaient les bras comme pour le happer, qu’ils l’aspiraient à pleins poumons! Certes, mieux eût valu que le météore se dérobât à leurs regards derrière une épaisse couche de nuages, sa vue ne pouvant que les exalter davantage. Aussi Mitz, avant de gagner son lit, brandissait-elle chaque soir son poing vers le ciel. Vaine menace. Le météore traçait toujours sa courbe lumineuse sur un firmament constellé d’étoiles.

Ce qui tendait à aggraver les choses, c’était l’intervention, tous les jours plus nette, du public dans cette discorde privée. Les journaux, les uns avec vivacité, les autres avec violence, prenaient parti pour Dean Forsyth ou pour Hudelson. Aucun n’était indifférent. Bien que la question de priorité ne dût pas, en bonne justice, se poser, personne ne voulait en démordre. Du haut de la tour et du donjon, la querelle descendait jusque dans les bureaux de rédaction, et il était à prévoir des complications graves. On annonçait déjà que des meetings allaient se réunir dans lesquels l’affaire serait discutée. Avec quelle intempérance de langage, on s’en doute, étant donné l’impétueux caractère des citoyens de la libre Amérique.

Mrs Hudelson et Jenny éprouvaient beaucoup d’inquiétude en constatant cette effervescence! Loo s’efforçait vainement de rassurer sa mère, Francis de rassurer sa fiancée. On ne pouvait se dissimuler que les deux rivaux se montaient de plus en plus, qu’ils subissaient l’influence de ces détestables excitations. On rapportait les propos, faux ou vrais, échappés à Mr Dean Forsyth, les paroles véritables ou fausses prononcées par Mr Hudelson, et, de jour en jour, d’heure en heure, la situation se faisait plus menaçante.

C’est dans ces circonstances qu’éclata un coup de foudre qui retentit, on peut le dire, dans le monde entier.

Le bolide venait-il donc de faire explosion, explosion qu’auraient répercutée les échos de la voûte céleste?

Non, il s’agissait simplement d’une nouvelle du caractère le plus singulier, que le télégraphe et le téléphone répandirent avec leur rapidité électrique à travers toutes les républiques et tous les royaumes de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Monde.

Ladite information ne venait point du donjon de Mr Hudelson, ni de la tour de Dean Forsyth, ni de l’observatoire de Pittsburg, ni de celui de Boston, pas plus que de celui de Cincinnati. Cette fois, c’est l’Observatoire de Paris qui révolutionnait l’Univers civilisé, en communiquant, le 2 mai, à la Presse une note ainsi conçue:

“Le bolide signalé à l’attention des Observatoires de Cincinnati et de Pittsburg par deux honorables citoyens de la ville de Whaston, État de Virginie, et dont la translation autour du globe terrestre paraît s’accomplir jusqu’ici avec une régularité parfaite, est actuellement étudié jour et nuit dans tous les observatoires du monde par une phalange d’éminents astronomes, dont la haute compétence n’a d’égal que l’admirable dévouement mis par eux au service de la science.

“Si, malgré cet examen attentif, plusieurs parties du problème sont encore à résoudre, l’observatoire de Paris est du moins parvenu à obtenir la solution de l’une d’elles et à déterminer la nature de ce météore.

“Les rayons émanés du bolide ont été soumis à l’analyse spectrale, et la disposition de leurs raies a permis de reconnaître avec certitude la substance du corps lumineux.

“Son noyau, qu’entoure une brillante chevelure, et d’où partent les rayons observés, n’est point de nature gazeuse, mais de nature solide. Il n’est pas en fer natif comme beaucoup d’aérolithes, ni formé d’aucun des composés chimiques qui constituent d’ordinaire ces corps errants.

“Ce bolide est en or, en or pur, et si l’on ne peut indiquer sa véritable valeur, c’est qu’il n’a pas été possible, jusqu’ici, de mesurer d’une manière précise les dimensions de son noyau.”

Telle était la note qui fut portée à la connaissance du monde entier. Quel effet elle produisit, il est plus facile de l’imaginer que de le décrire. Un globe d’or, une masse du précieux métal dont la valeur ne pouvait être que de plusieurs milliards circulait autour de la terre! Que de rêves un événement aussi sensationnel n’allait-il pas faire naître! Que de convoitises n’allait-il pas éveiller dans tout l’Univers, et plus particulièrement dans cette ville de Whaston, à qui revenait l’honneur de la découverte, et plus particulièrement encore dans les cœurs de ses deux citoyens, désormais immortels, qui avaient nom Dean Forsyth et Sydney Hudelson!

CHAPITRE IX

IX

Dans lequel les journaux, le public, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson font une orgie de mathématiques.

En or!… Il était en or!

Le premier sentiment fut l’incrédulité. Pour les uns, c’était une erreur qui ne tarderait pas à être reconnue; pour les autres, une vaste mystification imaginée par des farceurs de génie.

S’il en était ainsi, nul doute que l’observatoire de Paris ne démentît d’urgence la note qui lui aurait été, dans ce cas, faussement attribuée.

Disons-le tout de suite, ce démenti ne devait pas être donné. Bien au contraire, les astronomes de tous les pays, répétant à l’envi les expériences de leurs confrères français, en confirmèrent à l’unanimité les conclusions. Force fut donc de tenir l’étrange phénomène pour un fait avéré et certain.

Alors, ce fut de l’affolement.

Quand se produit une éclipse de soleil, les verres optiques, on ne l’ignore pas, se débitent en quantité considérable. Que l’on estime donc ce qu’il se vendit de lorgnettes, de lunettes, de télescopes à l’occasion de ce mémorable événement! Jamais souverain ou souveraine, jamais cantatrice ou ballerine illustres, ne furent tant et si passionnément lorgnés que ce merveilleux bolide, poursuivant, indifférent et superbe, sa marche régulière dans l’infini de l’espace.

Le temps restait au beau fixe et se prêtait complaisamment aux observations. Aussi Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson ne quittaient-ils plus, l’un sa tour, l’autre son donjon. Tous deux s’appliquaient à déterminer les derniers éléments du météore, son volume, sa masse, sans préjudice des particularités inattendues qu’une étude attentive pouvait révéler. S’il était définitivement impossible de trancher la question de la priorité, quel avantage pour celui des deux rivaux qui lui arracherait quelques-uns de ses secrets! La question du bolide, n’était-ce pas la question du jour? À l’encontre des Gaulois, qui ne craignaient rien, si ce n’est que le ciel leur tombât sur la tête, l’humanité tout entière n’avait qu’un désir, c’est que le bolide, arrêté dans sa course et cédant à l’attraction, enrichît le globe de ses milliards errants.

Que de calculs furent effectués pour établir le nombre de ces milliards! Malheureusement, ces calculs manquaient de base, puisque les dimensions du noyau restaient inconnues.

La valeur de ce noyau, quelle qu’elle fût, ne pouvait, en tout cas, manquer d’être prodigieuse, et cela suffisait à enflammer les imaginations.

Dès le 3 mai, le Whaston Standard publia à ce sujet une note, qui, après une série de réflexions, se terminait ainsi:

“En admettant que le noyau du bolide Forsyth-Hudelson soit constitué par une sphère mesurant seulement dix mètres de diamètre, cette sphère pèserait, si elle était en fer, trois mille sept cent soixante-treize tonnes. Mais cette même sphère, formée uniquement d’or pur, pèserait dix mille quatre-vingt-trois tonnes, et vaudrait plus de trente et un milliards de francs.”

On le voit, le Standard, très lancé dans le courant moderne, prenait le système décimal pour base de ses calculs. Qu’il nous soit permis de l’en féliciter sincèrement!

Ainsi, même d’un volume si réduit, le bolide aurait une pareille valeur!…

“Est-ce possible, monsieur? balbutia Omicron, après avoir lu la note en question.

— Ce n’est pas seulement possible: c’est certain, répondit doctoralement Mr Dean Forsyth. Il a suffi, pour trouver ce résultat, de multiplier la masse par la valeur moyenne de l’or, soit 3100 francs le kilogramme, laquelle masse n’est autre que le produit du volume, on l’obtient de la manière la plus simple par la formule:

— En effet!… approuva d’un air entendu

Omicron, pour qui tout cela était de l’hébreu.

— Par exemple, reprit Mr Dean Forsyth, ce qui est odieux, c’est que le journal persiste à accoler mon nom à celui de cet individu!”

Très probablement, le docteur faisait, de son côté, la même réflexion.

Pour miss Loo, lorsqu’elle lut la note du Standard, une si dédaigneuse moue se dessina sur ses lèvres roses que les trente et un milliards en eussent été profondément humiliés.

On sait que le tempérament des journalistes les porte instinctivement à surenchérir. Quand l’un a dit deux, l’autre dit trois, sans y penser. Aussi ne sera-t-on pas surpris si, le soir même, le Whaston Evening répondait en ces termes, qui trahissaient sa condamnable partialité en faveur du donjon:

“Nous ne comprenons pas pourquoi le Standard s’est montré si modeste dans ses évaluations. En ce qui nous concerne, nous serons plus audacieux. Ne serait-ce que pour rester dans les hypothèses acceptables, c’est un diamètre de cent mètres que nous attribuerons au noyau du bolide Hudelson. En se basant sur cette dimension, on trouve que le poids d’une telle sphère d’or pur serait de dix millions quatre-vingt-trois mille quatre cent quatre-vingt-huit tonnes, et que sa valeur dépasserait trente et un trillions deux cent soixante milliards de francs, — soit un nombre de quatorze chiffres!”

“Et encore, on néglige les centimes”, fit remarquer plaisamment le Punch, en citant ces nombres prodigieux que l’imagination est incapable de concevoir.

Cependant, le temps continuant à se maintenir au beau fixe, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson s’obstinaient plus que jamais à poursuivre leurs recherches, soutenus par l’espoir d’être du moins le premier à déterminer avec précision les dimensions du noyau astéroïdal. Malheureusement, il était très malaisé d’en relever les contours au milieu de son étincelante chevelure.

Une seule fois, dans la nuit du 5 au 6, Mr Dean Forsyth se crut sur le point d’y parvenir.

L’irradiation s’était un instant affaiblie, laissant paraître aux regards un globe d’un intense éclat.

“Omicron! appela Mr Dean Forsyth d’une voix rendue sourde par l’émotion.

— Monsieur?

— Le noyau!

— Oui… Je le vois.

— Enfin! nous le tenons!

— Bon! s’écria Omicron, on ne le distingue déjà plus!

— N’importe, je l’ai vu!… J’aurai eu cette gloire!… Dès demain, à la première heure, une dépêche à l’observatoire de Pittsburg… et ce misérable Hudelson ne pourra pas prétendre, cette fois…”

Mr Dean Forsyth s’illusionnait-il, ou bien le docteur Hudelson avait-il réellement laissé prendre sur lui un tel avantage? On ne sera jamais renseigné là-dessus, pas plus que ne fut jamais envoyée la lettre projetée à l’Observatoire de Pittsburg.

Dès le matin du 6 mai, en effet, la note suivante parut dans les journaux du monde entier:

“L’observatoire de Greenwich a l’honneur de porter à la connaissance du public qu’il résulte de ses calculs et d’un ensemble d’observations très satisfaisantes que le bolide signalé par deux honorables citoyens de la ville de Whaston, et que l’observatoire de Paris a reconnu être exclusivement composé d’or pur, est constitué par une sphère de cent dix mètres de diamètre et d’un volume de six cent quatre-vingt-seize mille mètres cubes environ.

“Une telle sphère, en or, devrait peser plus de treize millions de tonnes. Le calcul montre qu’il n’en est rien. Le poids réel du bolide s’élève à peine au septième du nombre précédent et est sensiblement égal à un million huit cent soixante-sept mille tonnes, poids correspondant à un volume d’environ quatre-vingt-dix-sept mille mètres cubes et à un diamètre approximatif de cinquante-sept mètres.

“Des considérations qui précèdent, nous devons nécessairement conclure, la composition chimique du bolide étant hors de discussion, ou bien qu’il existe de vastes cavités dans le métal constituant le noyau, ou, plus vraisemblablement, que ce métal s’y trouve à l’état pulvérulent, le noyau étant, dans ce cas, d’une texture poreuse analogue à celle d’une éponge.

“Quoi qu’il en soit à cet égard, les calculs et les observations permettent de préciser plus exactement la valeur du bolide. Cette valeur, au cours actuel de l’or, n’est pas inférieure à cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards de francs.”

Donc, si ce n’était pas cent mètres, comme l’avait supposé le Whaston Evening, ce n’était pas non plus dix mètres, comme l’avait admis le Standard. La vérité se trouvait entre les deux hypothèses. Telle quelle, d’ailleurs, elle eût été capable de satisfaire les plus ambitieuses convoitises, si le météore n’avait été destiné à tracer une éternelle trajectoire au-dessus du globe terrestre.

Lorsque Mr Dean Forsyth connut la valeur de son bolide:

“C’est moi qui l’ai découvert, s’écria-t-il, et non ce coquin du donjon. C’est à moi qu’il appartient, et, s’il venait à tomber sur terre, je serais riche de cinq mille huit cents milliards!”

De son côté, d’ailleurs, le docteur Hudelson se répétait en tendant un bras menaçant vers la tour:

“C’est mon bien, c’est ma chose…, c’est l’héritage de mes enfants, qui gravite à travers l’espace. S’il venait à choir sur notre globe, il m’appartiendrait en toute propriété et je serais cinq mille huit cents fois milliardaire!”

Il est certain que les Vanderbilt, les Astor, les Rockfeller, les Pierpont Morgan, les Mackay, les Gould et autres Crésus américains, sans parler des Rothschild, ne seraient plus, dans ce cas, que de petits rentiers auprès du docteur Hudelson ou de Mr Dean Forsyth!

Voilà où ils en étaient. S’ils n’en perdaient pas la tête, c’est que leur tête était solide!

Francis et Mrs Hudelson ne prévoyaient que trop aisément la manière dont finirait tout cela.

Mais comment retenir les deux rivaux sur une pente si glissante? Impossible de causer posément avec eux. Ils semblaient avoir oublié le mariage projeté et ne songeaient qu’à leur rivalité si déplorablement entretenue par les journaux de la ville.

Les articles de ces feuilles, d’ordinaire assez paisibles, devenaient enragés, et les regrettables personnalités qui s’y mêlaient risquaient d’amener sur le terrain des gens habituellement plus sociables.

De son côté, le Punch, avec ses épigrammes et ses caricatures, ne cessait d’exciter les deux adversaires. Si ce n’était pas de l’huile que ce journal jetait sur le feu, c’était au moins du sel, le sel de ses plaisanteries quotidiennes, et le feu n’en crépitait que davantage!

On en arrivait à redouter que Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson ne voulussent se disputer le bolide les armes à la main et régler cette question dans un duel à l'américaine. Voilà qui ne serait pas fait pour arranger les affaires des deux fiancés!

Heureusement pour la paix du monde, tandis que les deux monomanes perdaient chaque jour un peu plus de leur bon sens, le public se calmait par degrés. Cette réflexion bien simple finissait par s'imposer à tout le monde, qu'il importait peu que le bolide fût en or et qu'il valût des milliers de milliards, du moment qu'on ne pouvait l'atteindre.

Or, on ne pouvait l'atteindre, c'était bien certain. À chacune de ses révolutions, le météore reparaissait fidèlement au point du ciel indiqué par le calcul. Sa vitesse était donc uniforme et, comme l'avait fait observer dès le début le Whaston Standard, il n'y avait pas de raison pour qu'elle subît jamais une diminution quelconque. En conséquence, le bolide graviterait éternellement autour de la terre dans l'avenir, comme il avait gravité vraisemblablement de toute éternité dans le passé.

Ces considérations, reproduites à satiété par tous les journaux de l'Univers, contribuèrent à apaiser les esprits. De jour en jour on pensa un peu moins au bolide, et chacun reprit ses occupations, après un soupir de regret à l'adresse de l'insaisissable trésor.

Dans son numéro du 9 mai, le Punch constata cette indifférence grandissante du public pour ce qui le passionnait quelques jours plus tôt, et, continuant la plaisanterie qu'il jugeait apparemment excellente, il y trouva de nouvelles raisons de tomber sur les deux inventeurs du météore.

“Jusques à quand, s'écriait sur le mode indigné le Punch à la fin de son article, resteront-ils impunis, les deux malfaiteurs que nous avons déjà signalés au mépris public? Non contents d’avoir voulu anéantir d’un seul coup la cité qui les a vus naître, voilà maintenant qu’ils causent la ruine des plus respectables familles. La semaine dernière, un de nos amis, trompé par leurs allégations fallacieuses et mensongères, a dilapidé en quarante-huit heures un patrimoine considérable. Le malheureux comptait sur les milliards du bolide! Que vont devenir les pauvres petits enfants de notre ami, maintenant que les milliards nous passeront sous… non, sur le nez? Avons-nous besoin d’ajouter que cet ami est symbolique, ainsi que le veut l’usage, et qu’il s’appelle légion? Nous proposons que l’unanimité des habitants du globe intente un procès à MM. Dean Forsyth et Sydney Hudelson, à l’effet de les faire condamner à cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards de dommages et intérêts. Et nous demandons qu’on les fasse impitoyablement payer!”

Les intéressés ignorèrent toujours qu’un tel procès, à coup sûr sans précédent, et d’ailleurs d’exécution difficile, les eût jamais menacés.

Alors que les autres humains rendaient leur attention aux choses de la terre, MM. Dean Forsyth et Sydney Hudelson continuaient à planer dans l’azur et persistaient à le fouiller de leurs télescopes obstinés.

CHAPITRE X

X

Dans lequel il vient une idée et même deux idées à Zéphyrin Xirdal.

Dans le langage familier, on disait couramment: “Zéphyrin Xirdal?… Quel type!” Tant au physique qu’au moral, Zéphyrin Xirdal était, en effet, un personnage peu ordinaire.

Long corps dégingandé, chemise souvent sans col et toujours sans manchettes, pantalon en tire-bouchon, gilet auquel manquaient deux boutons sur trois, veston immense aux poches gonflées de mille objets divers, le tout fort sale et pris au hasard dans un amoncellement de costumes disparates, telle était l’anatomie générale de Zéphyrin Xirdal, et telle était la manière dont il comprenait l’élégance. De ses épaules, voûtées comme le plafond d’une cave, pendaient des bras kilométriques terminés par d’énormes mains velues, — d’une prodigieuse adresse, d’ailleurs — que leur propriétaire ne mettait en contact avec le savon qu’à des intervalles indéterminés.

Si la tête était, à la façon de tout le monde, le point culminant de son individu, c’est qu’il n’avait pu faire autrement. Mais cet original se rattrapait en offrant à l’admiration publique un visage dont la laideur atteignait au paradoxe. Rien cependant de plus “prenant” que ces traits heurtés et contradictoires: menton lourd et carré, grande bouche aux lèvres épaisses, bien meublée de dents superbes, nez largement épaté, oreilles mal ourlées qui semblaient fuir avec horreur le contact du crâne, tout cela n’évoquait que très indirectement le souvenir du bel Antinoüs. Par contre, le front, grandiosement modelé, d'une noblesse de lignes admirable, couronnait ce visage étrange, comme un temple couronne une colline, temple à la taille des plus sublimes pensées. Enfin, pour achever de dérouter son monde, Zéphyrin Xirdal, au-dessous de ce vaste front, ouvrait à la lumière du jour deux gros yeux saillants qui exprimaient, selon l'heure et la minute, la plus merveilleuse intelligence ou la plus épaisse stupidité.

Au moral, il ne tranchait pas avec moins de violence sur la banalité de ses contemporains.

Réfractaire à tout enseignement régulier, il avait, dès le plus jeune âge, décrété qu'il s'instruirait tout seul, et ses parents s'étaient vus contraints de s'incliner devant son indomptable volonté. Cela ne leur avait pas, en somme, trop mal réussi. À un âge où l'on se traîne encore sur les bancs des lycées, Zéphyrin Xirdal avait concouru — pour s'amuser, disait-il, — à toutes les grandes écoles l'une après l'autre, et, dans ces concours, il avait invariablement obtenu la première place.

Par exemple, ces succès étaient oubliés à peine conquis. Les grandes écoles avaient dû successivement rayer de leurs contrôles ce lauréat, qui négligeait de se présenter à la reprise des cours.

La mort de ses parents l'ayant rendu, à dix-huit ans, maître de ses actions et riche d'une quinzaine de mille francs de rente, Zéphyrin Xirdal s'empressa de donner toutes les signatures que lui demanda son tuteur et parrain, le banquier Robert Lecœur, qu'il appelait "son oncle" par une habitude d'enfance, puis libéré de tous soucis, s'installa dans deux pièces minuscules, au sixième étage, rue Cassette, à Paris.

Il y demeurait encore à trente et un ans.

Depuis qu’il y avait installé ses pénates, le local ne s’était pas agrandi, et pourtant prodigieuse était la quantité de choses qu’il y avait entassées. Pêle-mêle, on y distinguait des machines et des piles électriques, des dynamos, des instruments d’optique, des cornues, et cent autres appareils disparates. Des pyramides de brochures, de livres, de papiers, s’élevaient du plancher au plafond, s’amoncelant à la fois sur l’unique siège et sur la table, dont ils haussaient simultanément le niveau, si bien que notre original ne s’apercevait pas du changement, quand, assis sur l’un, il écrivait sur l’autre. Au surplus, lorsqu’il se trouvait par trop incommodé par les paperasses, il remédiait sans peine à cet inconvénient. D’un revers de main, il lançait quelques liasses à travers la pièce; puis, l’âme en paix, il se mettait au travail sur une table parfaitement en ordre, puisqu’il n’y restait rien du tout, et prête, par conséquent, pour de futurs envahissements.

Que faisait donc Zéphyrin Xirdal?

En général, on doit le reconnaître, il se contentait de suivre ses rêves dans l’odorante fumée d’une pipe inextinguible.

Mais parfois, à des intervalles variables, il avait une idée. Ce jour-là, il rangeait sa table à sa manière, c’est-à-dire en la balayant d’un coup de poing, et s’y installait, pour la quitter seulement le travail terminé, que ce travail durât quarante minutes ou quarante heures. Puis, le point final apposé, il laissait le papier contenant le résultat de ses recherches sur la table, où ce papier amorçait une future pile, qui serait balayée comme la précédente, lors de la prochaine crise du travail.

Au cours de ces crises successives et irrégulièrement espacées, il avait touché un peu à tout. Mathématiques transcendantes, physique, chimie, physiologie, philosophie, sciences pures et appliquées avaient, à tour de rôle, sollicité son attention. Quel que fût le problème, il l’avait toujours abordé avec autant de violence, autant de frénésie, et ne l’avait jamais abandonné que résolu, à moins que…

À moins qu’une autre idée ne l’en détournât avec la même soudaineté. Il pouvait arriver alors que ce fantaisiste outrancier se lançât à corps perdu dans les plaines de la chimère à la poursuite du second papillon dont les brillantes couleurs l’hypnotisaient, et qu’il perdît jusqu’au souvenir de ses préoccupations antérieures dans l’enivrement de son nouveau rêve.

Mais ce n’était, dans ce cas, que partie remise. Un beau jour, retrouvant inopinément le travail ébauché, il s’y attelait avec une passion toute neuve et, fût-ce après deux ou trois interruptions successives, ne manquait pas de l’amener à sa conclusion.

Que d’aperçus ingénieux ou profonds, que de notes définitives sur les difficultés les plus ardues des sciences exactes ou expérimentales, que d’inventions pratiques dormaient dans l’amoncellement de paperasses que foulait Zéphyrin Xirdal d’un pied dédaigneux! Jamais celui-ci n’avait songé à tirer parti de ce trésor, si ce n’est, toutefois, lorsqu’un de ses rares amis se plaignait devant lui de l’inutilité d’une recherche dans un sens quelconque.

“Attendez donc, disait alors Xirdal. Je dois avoir quelque chose là-dessus.”

En même temps, il allongeait la main, avisait du premier coup, avec un flair merveilleux, sous mille feuillets plus ou moins froissés, celle de ses études relative à la question soulevée, et remettait l’opuscule à son ami, avec la permission d’en user sans la moindre restriction. Pas une seule fois la pensée ne lui était venue qu’il fît, en agissant ainsi, quelque chose de contraire à ses intérêts.

De l’argent! Pourquoi faire? Quand il avait besoin d’argent, il passait chez son parrain, M. Robert Lecœur. S’il avait cessé d’être son tuteur, M. Lecœur était demeuré son banquier, et Xirdal était sûr d’être nanti, en revenant de sa visite, d’une somme sur laquelle il tirait jusqu’à complet épuisement. Depuis qu’il était rue Cassette, il avait toujours procédé ainsi à sa complète satisfaction. Avoir des désirs sans cesse renaissants et être capable de les réaliser, c’est évidemment une des formes du bonheur. Ce n’est pas la seule. Sans l’ombre du plus petit désir, Zéphyrin Xirdal était parfaitement heureux.

Ce matin-là, le 10 mai, cet homme heureux, confortablement assis sur son unique siège, les pieds reposant quelques centimètres plus haut que la tête sur la barre d’appui de la fenêtre, fumait une pipe particulièrement agréable, en s’amusant à déchiffrer des rébus et des mots carrés imprimés sur un papier en forme de sac, dont son épicier l’avait gratifié, en lui délivrant quelque denrée alimentaire. Quand cette occupation importante fut terminée et la solution déchiffrée, il jeta le papier parmi les autres, puis étendit nonchalamment sa main gauche du côté de la table, dans le but obscur d’y récolter quelque chose, n’importe quoi.

Ce que rencontra cette main gauche, ce fut un paquet de gazettes non dépliées. Zéphyrin Xirdal prit au petit bonheur une de ces gazettes, qui se trouva être un numéro du Journal, déjà vieux d’une huitaine de jours. Cette antiquité n’était pas pour effrayer un lecteur qui vivait hors de l’espace et du temps.

Il jeta donc les yeux sur la première page, mais naturellement il ne la lut pas. Il parcourut de la même manière la seconde et toutes les autres, jusqu’à la dernière. Là, il s’intéressa beaucoup aux annonces; puis, croyant passer à la page suivante, il revint innocemment à la première.

Sans qu’il y pensât, ses yeux tombèrent sur le début de l’article de tête, et une lueur d’intelligence s’alluma dans les grosses prunelles qui n’avaient exprimé jusque-là que la plus parfaite imbécillité.

La lueur s’accentua, devint flamme, à mesure que la lecture se poursuivait, s’achevait.

“Tiens!… Tiens!… Tiens!…” murmura, sur trois notes différentes, Zéphyrin Xirdal, qui se mit en devoir de procéder à une seconde lecture.

C’était assez son habitude de parler tout haut dans la solitude de sa chambre. Volontiers même, il parlait au pluriel, afin, sans doute, de se donner la flatteuse illusion d’un auditoire suspendu à ses lèvres, auditoire imaginaire qui ne pouvait manquer d’être fort nombreux, puisqu’il comptait tous les élèves, tous les admirateurs, tous les amis que Zéphyrin Xirdal n’avait jamais eus et qu’il n’aurait jamais.

Cette fois, il fut moins disert et se borna à sa triple exclamation. Puissamment intéressé par la prose du Journal, il en poursuivit la lecture en silence.

Que lisait-il donc de si passionnant?

Le dernier de tout l’univers, il découvrait tout simplement le bolide de Whaston et en apprenait en même temps l’insolite composition, le hasard l’ayant fait tomber sur un article consacré à cette fabuleuse boule d’or.

“Voilà qui est farce!… déclara-t-il pour lui-même, quand il fut au bout de sa seconde lecture.

Il demeura quelques instants songeur, puis ses pieds quittèrent la barre de la fenêtre, et il se rapprocha de la table. La crise de travail était imminente.

Sans hésiter, il trouva, au milieu des autres, la revue scientifique qu’il désirait et dont il fit sauter la bande. La revue s’ouvrit d’elle-même à la page qu’il fallait.

Une revue scientifique a le droit d’être plus technique qu’un grand quotidien. Celle-ci ne s’en faisait pas faute. Les éléments du bolide — trajectoire, vitesse, volume, masse, nature — n’y étaient donnés en quelques mots, qu’après des pages de courbes savantes et d’équations algébriques.

Zéphyrin Xirdal s’assimila sans effort cette nourriture intellectuelle de nature pourtant assez indigeste, après quoi il jeta un coup d’œil sur le ciel et put ainsi constater qu’aucun nuage n’en tachait l’azur.

“Nous allons bien voir!…” murmura-t-il, tout en effectuant d’une main impatiente quelques rapides calculs.

Cela fait, il insinua son bras sous un tas de papiers amoncelés dans l’un des coins, et, d’un geste auquel une longue pratique pouvait seule donner une si grande précision, il envoya le tas dans un autre coin.

“C’est étonnant comme j’ai de l’ordre!” dit-il avec une évidente satisfaction, en constatant que ce “rangement”, conformément à ses prévisions, mettait à découvert une lunette astronomique aussi emmaillotée de poussière qu’une bouteille centenaire.

Amener la lunette devant la fenêtre, la diriger vers le point du ciel qu’il venait de déterminer par le calcul, appliquer son œil à l’oculaire, cela ne demanda qu’un moment.

“Parfaitement exact”, dit-il, après quelques minutes d’observation.

Quelques autres minutes de réflexion, puis il prenait délibérément son chapeau et commençait à descendre ses six étages, en route pour la rue Drouot et pour la banque Lecœur, dont cette rue s'enorgueillissait à juste titre.

Zéphyrin Xirdal ne connaissait qu'une façon de faire ses courses. Jamais d'omnibus, de tramways ni de voitures. Quel que fût l'éloignement du but, il s'y rendait invariablement à pied.

Mais, jusque dans cet exercice, le plus naturel et le plus pratique de tous les sports, il ne pouvait faire autrement que de se montrer original. Les yeux baissés, roulant ses larges épaules de droite et de gauche, il allait à travers la ville comme s'il eût été dans un désert. Véhicules et piétons, il les ignorait avec une égale sérénité. Aussi, que de "butor!", que de "mal appris!", que de "grossier personnage!" proférés par des passants bousculés ou dont il avait, avec un peu trop de sans-gêne, écrasé les orteils! Que d'injures plus énergiques vociférées à son adresse par l'organe enchanteur de cochers contraints d'arrêter court leur attelage, sous peine de donner matière à un fait divers, dans lequel Zéphyrin Xirdal aurait joué le rôle de victime!

Il n'avait cure de tout cela. Sans rien entendre du concert de malédictions qui s'élevait derrière lui, comme le sillage se forme derrière un navire en marche, il continuait imperturbablement son chemin à grandes enjambées égales et solides.

Vingt minutes lui suffirent pour atteindre la rue Drouot et la banque Lecœur.

"Mon oncle est là? demanda-t-il au garçon de bureau qui se levait à son approche.

— Oui, monsieur Xirdal.

— Seul?

— Seul.”

Zéphyrin Xirdal poussa la porte matelassée et pénétra dans le cabinet du banquier.

“Tiens!… c’est toi? demanda machinalement M. Lecœur, en voyant apparaître son pseudo-neveu.

— Puisque me voilà en chair et en os, répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal, j’oserai prétendre que la question est oiseuse et qu’une réponse serait superfétatoire.”

M. Lecœur, habitué aux singularités de son filleul, qu’il considérait avec raison comme un être déséquilibré, mais, par certains côtés, génial, se mit à rire de bon cœur.

“En effet! reconnut-il, mais répondre tout bonnement: oui aurait été plus court. Et le but de ta visite, ai-je le droit de le demander?

— Vous l’avez, car…

— Inutile! interrompit M. Lecœur. Ma seconde question est aussi superflue que la première, l’expérience m’ayant prouvé que je te vois seulement lorsque tu as besoin d’argent.

— Eh! objecta Zéphyrin Xirdal, n’êtes-vous pas mon banquier?

— Il est vrai, accorda M. Lecœur, mais toi, tu es un bien singulier client! Me permettras-tu, à ce propos, de te donner un conseil?

— Si ça peut vous être agréable!

— Ce conseil, c’est d’être un peu moins économe. Que diable, mon cher ami, que fais-tu de ta jeunesse? As-tu seulement idée de l’état de ton compte chez moi?

— Pas la moindre.

— Il est monstrueux, ton compte, tout simplement. Eh quoi! tes parents t’ont laissé plus de quinze mille francs de rente, et tu n’arrives pas à en dépenser quatre mille!

— Bah!… fit Xirdal, en paraissant fort surpris de cette remarque, qu’il entendait, au bas mot, pour la vingtième fois.

— C’est ainsi. Si bien que tes intérêts s’accumulent. Je ne connais pas exactement ton crédit actuel, mais il dépasse sûrement cent mille francs. À quoi faut-il employer tout cet argent-là?

— J’étudierai la question, affirma Zéphyrin Xirdal le plus sérieusement du monde. D’ailleurs, s’il vous gêne, cet argent, vous n’avez qu’à vous en débarrasser.

— Comment?

— Donnez-le. C’est bien simple.

— À qui?

— À n’importe qui. Qu’est-ce que vous voulez que ça me fasse?”

M. Lecœur haussa les épaules.

“Enfin, que te faut-il aujourd’hui? demanda-t-il. Deux cents francs, comme de coutume?

— Dix mille francs, répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal.

— Dix mille francs! répéta M. Lecœur très surpris. Voilà du nouveau, par exemple! Que veux-tu donc faire avec ces dix mille francs?

— Un voyage.

— Excellente idée. Dans quel pays?

— Je n’en sais rien”, déclara Zéphyrin Xirdal.

M. Lecœur, fort amusé, considéra narquoisement son filleul et client.

“C’est un beau pays, dit-il sérieusement. Voilà tes dix mille francs. C’est tout ce que tu désires?

— Non, répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal. Il me faudrait aussi un terrain.

— Un terrain? répéta M. Lecœur, qui marchait, comme on fit, de surprises en surprises. Quel terrain?

— Un terrain comme tous les terrains. Deux ou trois kilomètres carrés, par exemple.

— C’est un petit terrain, affirma froidement M. Lecœur, qui demanda d’un ton railleur: Boulevard des Italiens?

— Non, répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal. Pas en France.

— Où alors? Parle.

— Je n’en sais rien”, dit pour la deuxième fois Zéphyrin Xirdal sans s’émouvoir le moins du monde.

M. Lecœur contenait avec peine son envie de rire.

“Comme ça, du moins, on a du choix, approuva-t-il. Mais, dis-moi, mon cher Zéphyrin, ne serais-tu pas un peu… timbré, par hasard? À quoi rime tout cela, je te prie?

— J’ai une affaire en vue, déclara Zéphyrin Xirdal, tandis que son front se plissait sous l’effort de la réflexion.

— Une affaire!…” s’exclama M. Lecœur, au comble de l’étonnement.

Que ce loufoque songeât aux affaires, il y avait, en effet, de quoi confondre.

“Oui, affirma Zéphyrin Xirdal.

— Importante?

— Peuh!… fit Zéphyrin Xirdal. Cinq à six mille milliards de francs.”

Cette fois, ce fut avec inquiétude que M. Lecœur considéra son filleul. Si celui-ci ne raillait pas, il était fou, fou à lier.

“Tu dis?… interrogea-t-il.

— Cinq à six mille milliards de francs, répéta Zéphyrin Xirdal d’une voix tranquille.

— Es-tu dans ton bon sens, Zéphyrin? insista M. Lecœur. Sais-tu qu’il n’y aurait pas assez d’or sur la terre pour faire la centième partie de cette somme fabuleuse?

— Sur terre, possible, dit Xirdal. Ailleurs, c’est autre chose.

— Ailleurs?…

— Oui. À quatre cents kilomètres d’ici selon la verticale.”

Un éclair traversa l’esprit du banquier. Renseigné, comme toute la terre, par les journaux, qui, pendant si longtemps, avaient ressassé le même sujet, il crut avoir compris. Il avait compris, en effet.

“Le bolide?… balbutia-t-il, en pâlissant légèrement malgré lui.

— Le bolide”, approuva Xirdal paisiblement.

Que tout autre que son filleul lui eût tenu un tel langage, nul doute que M. Lecœur ne l’eût fait jeter incontinent à la porte. Les instants d’un banquier sont trop précieux pour qu’il soit permis de les gâcher à écouter des insensés. Mais Zéphyrin Xirdal n’était pas tout le monde. Que son crâne eût une fêlure de forte taille, ce n’était, hélas! que trop certain, mais ce crâne fêlé n’en contenait pas moins un cerveau de génie, pour lequel rien n’était impossible a priori.

“Tu veux exploiter le bolide? demanda M. Lecœur, en regardant son filleul bien en face.

— Pourquoi pas? Qu’y a-t-il d’extraordinaire à cela?

— Mais ce bolide est à quatre cents kilomètres du sol, tu viens de le dire toi-même. Tu n’as pas la prétention, je pense, de t’élever jusque-là?

— À quoi bon, si je le fais tomber?

— Le moyen?

— Je l’ai, ça suffit.

— Tu l’as!… tu l’as!… Comment agiras-tu sur un corps aussi lointain? Où prendras-tu ton point d’appui? Quelle force mettras-tu en ce jeu?

— Ce serait trop long de vous expliquer tout ça, répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal, et, d’ailleurs, bien inutile: vous ne comprendriez pas.

— Trop aimable!” remercia M. Lecœur sans se fâcher.

Sur ses instances, son filleul consentit cependant à donner quelques explications succinctes. Ces explications, le narrateur de cette singulière histoire les abrégera encore, en indiquant que, malgré son goût bien connu pour les spéculations hasardeuses, il n’entend nullement prendre parti au sujet de ces théories intéressantes, mais peut-être trop audacieuses.

Pour Zéphyrin Xirdal, la matière n’est qu’une apparence; elle n’a pas d’existence réelle. Il prétend le prouver par l’incapacité où l’on est d’imaginer sa constitution intime. Qu’on la décompose en molécules, atomes, particules, il restera toujours une dernière fraction pour laquelle le problème se reposera intégralement, et ce sera éternellement à recommencer, jusqu’au moment où l’on admettra un principe premier qui ne sera pas de la matière. Ce premier principe immatériel, c’est l’énergie.

Qu’est-ce que l’énergie? Zéphyrin Xirdal confesse n’en rien savoir. L’homme n’étant en relation avec le monde extérieur que par ses sens, et les sens de l’homme étant exclusivement sensibles aux excitations d’ordre matériel, tout ce qui n’est pas matière reste ignoré de lui. S’il peut, par un effort de la raison pure, admettre l’existence d’un monde immatériel, il est dans l’impossibilité d’en concevoir la nature, faute de termes de comparaison. Et il en sera ainsi tant que l’humanité n’aura pas acquis de sens nouveaux, ce qui n’est pas absurde a priori.

Quoi qu’il en soit à cet égard, l’énergie, d’après Zéphyrin Xirdal, remplit l’univers et oscille éternellement entre deux limites: l’équilibre absolu, qui ne pourrait être obtenu que par sa répartition uniforme dans l’espace, et la concentration absolue en un seul point, qu’entourerait dans ce cas un vide parfait. L’espace étant infini, ces deux limites sont également inaccessibles. Il en résulte que l’énergie immanente est dans un état de perpétuel cinématisme. Les corps matériels absorbant sans cesse l’énergie, et cette concentration provoquant forcément ailleurs un néant relatif, la matière rayonne, d’autre part, dans l’espace l’énergie qu’elle retient prisonnière.

Donc, en opposition avec l’axiome classique “Rien ne se perd, rien ne se crée”, Zéphyrin Xirdal proclame que “Tout se perd et tout se crée”. La substance, éternellement détruite, se recompose éternellement. Chacun de ses changements d’état s’accompagne d’un rayonnement d’énergie et d’une destruction de substance correspondante.

Si cette destruction ne peut être constatée par nos instruments, c’est qu’ils sont trop imparfaits, une énorme quantité d’énergie étant enclose dans une parcelle impondérable de matière, ce qui explique, pour Zéphyrin Xirdal, que les astres soient séparés par des distances prodigieuses comparativement à leur médiocre grandeur.

Cette destruction non constatée n’en existe pas moins. Son, chaleur, électricité, lumière en sont la preuve indirecte. Ces phénomènes sont de la matière rayonnée, et par eux se manifeste l’énergie libérée, quoique sous une forme encore grossière et semi-matérielle. L’énergie pure, sublimée en quelque sorte, ne peut exister qu’au-delà des confins des mondes matériels. Elle enveloppe ces mondes d’une dynamosphère dans un état de tension directement proportionnelle à leur masse et d’autant moindre que l’on s’éloigne de leur surface. La manifestation de cette énergie et de sa tendance à une condensation toujours plus grande, c’est l’attraction.

Telle est la théorie que Zéphyrin Xirdal exposa à M. Lecœur un peu ahuri. Reconnaissons qu’on le serait à moins.

“Ceci posé, conclut Zéphyrin Xirdal, comme s’il venait d’émettre les propositions les plus simples, il suffit que je libère une petite quantité d’énergie, et que je la dirige sur tel point de l’espace à ma convenance, pour que je sois maître d’influencer un corps voisin de ce point, surtout si ce corps est de peu d’importance, lui aussi, d’une quantité considérable d’énergie. C’est enfantin!

— Et tu as le moyen de libérer cette énergie? demanda M. Lecœur.

— J’ai, ce qui revient au même, le moyen de lui ouvrir un passage, en écartant devant elle tout ce qui est substance et matière.

— À ce compte, s’exclama M. Lecœur, tu pourrais détraquer toute la mécanique céleste!”

Zéphyrin Xirdal ne parut point troublé par l’énormité de cette hypothèse.

“Actuellement, reconnut-il avec une modeste simplicité, la machine que j’ai construite ne peut me donner que des résultats beaucoup plus faibles. Elle est suffisante, cependant, pour influencer un méchant bolide de quelques milliers de tonnes.

“Ainsi soit-il! conclut M. Lecœur qui commençait à être ébranlé. Mais où comptes-tu le faire tomber, ton bolide?

— Dans mon terrain.

— Quel terrain?

— Celui que vous m’achèterez, quand j’aurai fait les calculs nécessaires. Je vous écrirai à ce sujet. Bien entendu, je ferai choix, autant que possible, d’une région presque déserte où le sol est sans valeur. Par exemple, vous aurez sans doute des difficultés pour passer l’acte de vente. Je ne suis pas absolument libre de mon choix, et il peut arriver que le pays ne soit pas d’accès très commode.

— Ça, c’est mon affaire, dit le banquier. Le télégraphe n’a pas été inventé pour autre chose. Je te réponds de tout à cet égard.”

Muni de cette assurance et des dix mille francs mis en paquet à même sa poche, Zéphyrin Xirdal retourna chez lui à grandes enjambées, comme il en était venu, et, à peine enfermé, s’assit à sa table préalablement déblayée d’un revers de main, selon sa méthode ordinaire.

La crise de travail battait décidément son plein. Toute la nuit, il s’acharna dans ses calculs, mais, le matin venu, la solution était trouvée. Il avait déterminé la force qu’il fallait appliquer au bolide, les heures pendant lesquelles cette force devait être appliquée, les directions qu’il convenait de lui donner, le lieu et la date de la chute du météore.

Il prit aussitôt la plume, écrivit à M. Lecœur la lettre promise, qu’il descendit jeter à la boîte, et remonta s’enfermer chez lui.

La porte close, il s’approcha de l’un des coins de sa chambre, celui-là même dans lequel il avait envoyé la veille avec une précision si remarquable le tas de papiers qui recouvrait précédemment la lunette. Il s’agissait aujourd’hui de faire l’opération inverse. Xirdal insinua donc son bras sous les paperasses amoncelées, et, d’une main sûre, les renvoya d’où elles étaient venues.

Ce second “rangement” eut comme résultat de faire apparaître au jour une sorte de caisse noirâtre que Zéphyrin Xirdal souleva sans effort et qu’il transporta au milieu de la pièce, face à la fenêtre.

Rien de bien particulier dans l’aspect de cette caisse, simple cube de bois peint en couleur sombre. À l’intérieur, ce n’était que bobines intercalées dans une série d’ampoules de verre, dont les extrémités aiguës étaient réunies deux à deux par des fils de cuivre de plus en plus fins. Au-dessus de la caisse, à l’air libre, on apercevait, montée sur pivot, au foyer d’un réflecteur métallique, une dernière ampoule doublement fusiforme, qu’aucun conducteur matériel ne réunissait aux autres.

À l’aide d’instruments précis, Zéphyrin Xirdal orienta le réflecteur métallique dans le sens rigoureux que lui indiquaient ses calculs de la nuit précédente; puis, ayant constaté que tout était en ordre, il plaça dans la partie inférieure de la caisse un petit tube qui brillait d’un vif éclat. Tout en agissant, il parlait, selon sa coutume, comme s’il eût voulu faire admirer son éloquence à un imposant auditoire.

“Ceci, messieurs, disait-il, c’est du Xirdalium, corps cent mille fois plus radioactif que le radium. J’avouerai, entre nous, que, si j’utilise ce corps, c’est un peu pour la galerie. Ce n’est pas qu’il soit nuisible, mais la terre rayonne assez d’énergie pour qu’il soit superflu de lui en ajouter. C’est un grain de sel dans la mer. Toutefois, une légère mise en scène ne messied pas, à mon sens, dans une expérience de cette nature.”

Tout en parlant, il avait refermé la boîte, qu’il réunit par deux câbles aux éléments d’une pile placée sur une étagère.

“Les courants neutres-hélicoïdaux, messieurs, reprit-il, ont naturellement, puisqu’ils sont neutres, la propriété de repousser tous les corps sans exception, que ces corps soient électrisés en plus ou en moins. D’autre part, étant hélicoïdaux, ils affectent une forme hélicoïdale, un enfant comprendrait ça… C’est tout de même une rude veine que j’aie pensé à les découvrir… Comme tout sert dans la vie!”

Le circuit électrique fermé, un bourdonnement doux se fit entendre dans la caisse, et une lumière bleuâtre jaillit de l’ampoule montée sur pivot. Presque aussitôt, cette ampoule prit un mouvement de giration, qui, d’abord lent, s’accéléra de seconde en seconde, pour devenir très vite absolument vertigineux.

Zéphyrin Xirdal contempla quelques instants cette ampoule emportée par une valse échevelée, puis son regard, suivant une direction parallèle à l’axe du réflecteur métallique, se perdit dans l’espace.

À première vue, il ne semblait pas que l’action de la machine se révélât par aucun signe matériel. Cependant un observateur attentif aurait pu remarquer un phénomène, qui, pour se manifester avec discrétion, n’en était pas moins assez singulier. Des poussières tenues en suspension dans l’atmosphère, étant entrées en contact avec les bords du réflecteur métallique, semblaient ne pouvoir franchir cette limite et tourbillonnaient avec violence, comme heurtées contre un invisible obstacle. Dans leur ensemble, ces poussières dessinaient un cône tronqué, dont la base s’appliquait sur la circonférence du réflecteur. À deux ou trois mètres de la machine, ce cône, fait de parcelles impalpables et tourbillonnantes, se changeait par degrés en un cylindre de quelques centimètres de diamètre, et ce cylindre de poussière persistait au dehors, à l’air libre, malgré une brise assez fraîche, jusqu’au moment où il disparaissait dans l’éloignement.

“J’ai l’honneur, messieurs, de vous annoncer que tout va bien”, formula Zéphyrin Xirdal, en s’asseyant sur son unique siège et en allumant une pipe bourrée avec art.

Une demi-heure plus tard, il arrêtait le fonctionnement de sa machine, qu’il remettait en marche à plusieurs reprises dans cette même journée et dans les journées suivantes, en ayant soin de diriger, lors de chaque expérience, le réflecteur vers un point de l’espace un peu différent. Pendant dix-neuf jours, il procéda de la sorte, avec une absolue précision.

Le vingtième jour, il venait de mettre sa machine en action et d’allumer sa pipe fidèle, quand le démon des inventions s’empara une fois de plus de son cerveau. L’une des conséquences de cette théorie de la destruction perpétuelle de la matière, qu’il avait succinctement exposée à M. Robert Lecœur, s’imposa, éblouissante, à son esprit. D’un seul coup, ainsi que cela lui arrivait d’ordinaire, il venait de concevoir le principe d’une pile électrique capable de se régénérer d’elle-même par des réactions successives, dont la dernière ramènerait les corps décomposés dans leur état primitif. Une telle pile fonctionnerait évidemment jusqu’à la disparition totale des substances employées et jusqu’à leur transformation intégrale en énergie. C’était pratiquement le mouvement perpétuel.

“Par exemple!… Ah mais!… par exemple!…” balbutia Zéphyrin Xirdal en proie à une forte émotion.

Il réfléchit comme il savait réfléchir, c’est-à-dire en projetant sur un seul point et en une seule masse toute la force vitale de son organisme. Cette pensée ainsi concentrée qu’il dirigeait sur les ombres d’un problème, c’était comme un pinceau lumineux dans lequel seraient réunis tous les rayons du soleil.

“Pas d’objections, dit-il enfin, en traduisant tout haut le résultat de son effort intérieur. Il faut essayer ça sur-le-champ.”

Zéphyrin Xirdal prit son chapeau, dégringola ses six étages et se précipita chez un petit menuisier, dont l’échoppe s’ouvrait de l’autre côté de la rue. En peu de mots nets et précis, il expliqua à cet industriel ce qu’il désirait, soit une sorte de roue montée sur un axe de fer et portant à sa périphérie vingt-sept augets, dont il donna les dimensions, augets destinés à contenir autant de bocaux, qui devaient rester verticaux pendant la rotation de leurs supports.

Cette explication donnée, avec ordre d’exécuter le travail sur l’heure, il poussa, cinq cents mètres plus loin, jusque chez un marchand de produits chimiques, dont il était avantageusement connu. Là, il choisit ses vingt-sept bocaux, que l’employé enveloppa dans un papier fort et cercla d’une ficelle solide, à laquelle s’agrafait une très commode poignée de bois.

L’emballage terminé, Zéphyrin Xirdal se disposait à rentrer chez lui, son paquet à la main, quand, à la porte de la boutique, il se trouva nez à nez avec un de ses rares amis, bactériologue d’un réel mérite. Xirdal, perdu dans son rêve, ne vit pas le bactériologue, mais le bactériologue vit Xirdal.

“Tiens! Xirdal, s’exclama-t-il, les lèvres entrouvertes par un accueillant sourire. En voilà une rencontre!”

À cette voix bien connue, l’interpellé consentit à ouvrir ses gros yeux sur le monde extérieur.

“Tiens! fit-il en écho, Marcel Leroux!

— Lui-même.

— Et comment va?… Rudement content de vous voir, vous savez.

— Je vais comme un homme qui est sur le point de prendre le train. Tel que vous me voyez, muni de cette sacoche en bandoulière, dans laquelle sont inclus trois mouchoirs et plusieurs autres articles de toilette, je cours de ce pas sur le bord de la mer, où je me saoulerai de grand air pendant huit jours.

— Veinard! approuva Zéphyrin Xirdal.

— Il dépend de vous de l’être autant que moi. En nous serrant, nous nous caserions bien tous les deux dans le train.

— Au fait!… commença Zéphyrin Xirdal.

— À moins que vous ne soyez en ce moment retenu à Paris?

— Nullement.

— Vous n’avez rien de particulier?… Pas d’expérience en cours?…”

Xirdal chercha de bonne foi dans ses souvenirs.

“Rien du tout, répondit-il.

— Dans ce cas, laissez-vous tenter. Huit jours de vacances vous feront un bien énorme. Et quelles bavettes nous taillerons sur le sable!

— Sans compter, interrompit Xirdal, que je pourrai en profiter pour élucider un point qui me tracasse au sujet des marées. Cela se relie par certains côtés à des problèmes généraux que j’ai à l’étude. Je pensais précisément à cela, quand je vous ai rencontré, affirma-t-il avec une touchante sincérité.

— Alors, c’est oui?

— C’est oui.

— En route, donc!… Mais, j’y pense, il faudrait d’abord passer chez vous, et je ne sais si l’heure du train…

— Inutile, répondit Xirdal avec conviction, j’ai là tout ce qu’il faut.”

Et le distrait montrait de l’œil le paquet des vingt-sept bocaux.

“Parfait!” conclut gaiement Marcel Leroux.

Les deux amis se remirent en marche, à larges enjambées, dans la direction de la gare.

“Vous comprenez, mon cher Leroux, je suppose que la tension superficielle…”

Un couple, qu’ils croisaient, força les deux causeurs à s’écarter l’un de l’autre, et le reste se perdit dans le vacarme des voitures. Cela n’était pas pour troubler Zéphyrin Xirdal, qui poursuivit imperturbablement son explication, en s’adressant successivement à une série de passants, lesquels en éprouvèrent une grande surprise. L’orateur ne s’en apercevait pas et persistait à discourir avec éloquence, tout en fendant les vagues humaines de l’océan parisien.

Et pendant ce temps, pendant que Xirdal, tout à fait emballé par sa nouvelle marotte, s'éloignait à grands pas vers le train qui l'emporterait loin de la ville, rue Cassette, dans une chambre du sixième étage, une caisse noirâtre, à l'aspect inoffensif, ronronnait toujours discrètement, un réflecteur métallique projetait toujours sa lueur bleuâtre, et le cylindre de poussières tourbillonnantes s'enfonçait toujours, si rigide et si fragile, dans l'inconnu de l'espace.

Abandonnée à elle-même, la machine, que Zéphyrin Xirdal avait négligé d'arrêter et dont il oubliait maintenant jusqu'à l'existence, continuait aveuglément son obscur et mystérieux travail.

CHAPITRE XI

XI

Dans lequel Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson éprouvent une violente émotion.

Le bolide était parfaitement connu désormais. Par la pensée, tout au moins, on en avait fait le tour. On avait déterminé son orbite, sa vitesse, son volume, sa masse, sa nature, sa valeur. Il ne causait même plus d’inquiétudes, puisque, suivant sa trajectoire d’un mouvement uniforme, il n’était pas destiné à jamais tomber sur la terre. Rien de plus naturel que l’attention publique se détournât de ce météore inaccessible, qui avait perdu son mystère.

Sans doute, dans les observatoires, quelques astronomes jetaient encore de temps en temps un regard rapide sur la sphère d’or qui gravitait au-dessus de leurs têtes; mais ils s’en détournaient vite, pour s’attacher à d’autres problèmes de l’espace.

La terre possédait un second satellite, voilà tout. Que ce satellite fût en fer ou en or, qu’est-ce que cela pouvait faire à des savants, pour lesquels le monde n’est guère qu’une abstraction mathématique?

Il était regrettable que Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson n’eussent pas des âmes aussi ingénues. L’indifférence qui grandissait autour d’eux ne calmait pas leur imagination enfiévrée, et ils s’acharnaient tout autant à observer le bolide — leur bolide! — avec une ardeur qui confinait à la rage. À tous ses passages, ils étaient là, l’œil collé à l’oculaire de la lunette ou du télescope, même aux heures où le météore ne s’élevait que de quelques degrés au-dessus de l’horizon.

Le temps, qui se maintenait splendide, favorisait déplorablement leur manie, en leur permettant d’apercevoir l’astre errant une douzaine de fois par vingt-quatre heures. Qu’il dût ou non tomber sur la terre, les insolites particularités de ce météore, particularités qui le faisaient unique et le rendraient à jamais célèbre, augmentaient encore leur maladif désir d’en être déclarés l’exclusif inventeur.

Dans ces conditions, c’eût été folie que d’espérer une réconciliation des deux rivaux, entre lesquels, au contraire, une barrière de haine s’élevait plus haute tous les jours. Mrs Hudelson et Francis Gordon ne le comprenaient que trop clairement. Celui-ci ne mettait plus en doute maintenant que son oncle ne s’opposât par tous les moyens en son pouvoir au mariage projeté, et celle-là se sentait moins confiante dans la docilité de son mari, le grand jour venu. Il n’y avait plus d’illusion à se faire. Au désespoir des deux fiancés, à la fureur de miss Loo et de Mitz, le mariage paraissait, sinon compromis, du moins reculé à une date indéterminée et vraisemblablement fort lointaine.

Il était dit, pourtant, que cette situation, déjà si grave, se compliquerait encore.

Le soir du 11 mai, Mr Dean Forsyth, qui avait, comme de coutume, son œil rivé à l’oculaire du télescope, s’écarta brusquement de l’instrument en poussant une exclamation étouffée, y revint, après avoir jeté quelques notes sur un papier, s’en écarta de nouveau pour y revenir ensuite, et continua ce manège jusqu’à la disparition du bolide au-dessus de l’horizon.

À ce moment, Mr Dean Forsyth était d'une pâleur de cire et respirait avec tant d'efforts, qu'Omicron, croyant son maître malade, se précipita à son secours. Mais celui-ci l'écarta du geste, et, du pas incertain d'un homme ivre, se réfugia dans son cabinet de travail, où il s'enferma à double tour.

Depuis, on n'avait pas revu Mr Dean Forsyth. Pendant plus de trente heures il était resté sans boire, ni manger. Une seule fois, Francis avait réussi à forcer la porte, mais cette porte ne s'était entrouverte qu'avec parcimonie, et, dans l'entrebâillement, le jeune homme avait aperçu son oncle si brisé, si défait, avec de tels yeux de démence, qu'il en était demeuré interdit sur le seuil.

“Que me veux-tu? avait dit Mr Forsyth.

— Mais, mon oncle, s'était écrié Francis, voilà vingt-quatre heures que vous êtes enfermé! Permettez-nous au moins de vous apporter à manger!

— Je n'ai besoin de rien, avait répondu Mr Dean Forsyth, si ce n'est de silence et de calme, et je te demande comme un véritable service de ne pas troubler ma solitude.”

Devant une telle réponse, formulée avec une invincible fermeté et, en même temps, avec une douceur à laquelle Francis n'était pas habitué, ce dernier n'avait pas eu le courage d'insister. Cela, d'ailleurs, aurait été malaisé, la porte ayant été refermée sur les derniers mots de l'astronome. Son neveu s'était donc retiré sans avoir rien appris.

Dans la matinée du 13 mai, l'avant-veille du mariage, Francis exposait pour la vingtième fois cette nouvelle cause de soucis à Mrs Hudelson, qui l'écoutait en soupirant.

“Je n’y puis rien comprendre, dit-elle enfin. C’est à croire que Mr Forsyth et mon mari sont devenus complètement fous.

— Eh quoi! s’écria Francis, votre mari?… Serait-il aussi arrivé quelque chose au docteur?

— Oui, avoua Mrs Hudelson. Ces messieurs se seraient donné le mot qu’ils n’agiraient pas autrement. Pour mon mari, la crise a commencé plus tard, voilà tout. C’est seulement hier matin qu’il s’est verrouillé dans son bureau. Depuis, personne ne l’a revu, et vous pouvez vous imaginer nos inquiétudes.

— Il y a de quoi perdre la tête! s’écria Francis.

— Ce que vous me dites de Mr Forsyth, reprit Mrs Hudelson, me porte à croire qu’ils auront encore fait tous deux à la fois quelque remarque au sujet de leur maudit bolide. Et je n’en augure rien de bon dans leur état d’esprit.

— Ah! si j’étais la maîtresse!… intervint Loo.

— Que feriez-vous, ma chère petite sœur? demanda Francis Gordon.

— Ce que je ferais?… C’est bien simple. J’enverrais cette affreuse boule d’or se promener si loin, si loin, que les meilleures lunettes ne pourraient plus l’apercevoir.”

La disparition du bolide eût peut-être, en effet, rendu le calme à Mr Forsyth et au docteur Hudelson. Qui sait si, le météore parti pour ne plus revenir, leur absurde jalousie n’eût pas été guérie du coup?

Mais il ne semblait pas que cette éventualité dût se produire. Le bolide serait là au jour du mariage, il y serait encore après, il y serait toujours, puisqu’il gravitait avec une régularité constante sur son imperturbable orbite.

“Enfin! conclut Francis, nous verrons bien. Dans quarante-huit heures, il leur faudra prendre un parti définitif, et nous saurons alors à quoi nous en tenir.”

En rentrant à la maison d’Elisabeth street, il put croire, d’ailleurs, que l’incident actuel, à tout le moins, n’aurait pas de suite sérieuse. Mr Dean Forsyth était, en effet, sorti de son isolement, et il avait silencieusement dévoré un copieux repas.

Maintenant, éreinté, repu, gavé, il dormait à poings fermés, tandis qu’Omicron accomplissait en ville une course pour son maître.

“As-tu vu mon oncle avant qu’il s’endorme? demanda Francis à la vieille servante.

— Comme je te vois, mon fieu, répondit celle-ci, puisque c’est moi qui lui ai servi son repas.

— Il avait faim?

— Une faim de loup. Tout le déjeuner y a passé: œufs embrouillés, roastbeaf froid, pommes de terre, pudding aux fruits. Il n’a rien laissé.

— Comment était-il?

— Pas trop mal, sauf qu’il était pâle comme un sceptre, avec des yeux tout rouges. Je lui ai conseillé de les laver à l’eau bourriquée, mais il n’a pas eu l’air de m’entendre.

— Il n’a rien dit pour moi.

— Ni pour toi, ni pour personne. Il a mangé sans ouvrir la bouche, et il est allé se coucher, après avoir envoyé l’ami Krone au Whaston Standard.

— Au Whaston Standard! s’écria Francis. C’est pour lui communiquer le résultat de son travail, je le parierais. Voilà les polémiques de presse qui vont recommencer! Il ne manquait plus que ça!”

Cette communication de Mr Dean Forsyth au Whaston Standard, Francis la lut le lendemain matin avec désolation, en comprenant qu’un nouvel aliment était fourni par le sort à une rivalité déjà si dommageable à son bonheur. Et cette désolation s’augmenta encore, quand il eut constaté que les deux rivaux arrivaient dead heat une fois de plus. Tandis que le Standard publiait la note de Mr Dean Forsyth, le Whaston Morning en publiait une semblable du docteur Sydney Hudelson. Elle continuait donc, cette lutte acharnée, dans laquelle aucun des deux combattants n’avait réussi jusqu’alors à s’assurer le moindre avantage!

Tout à fait pareilles au début, les notes des deux astronomes différaient notablement dans leurs conclusions finales. Cette divergence de vues, qui ne manqua pas de provoquer des controverses, pouvait avoir, d’ailleurs, quelque utilité, le cas échéant, en permettant de départager plus tard les deux rivaux.

En même temps que Francis, tout Whaston, et, en même temps que Whaston, le monde entier, à travers lequel elle fut instantanément répandue par le réseau serré des fils télégraphiques et téléphoniques, connurent la surprenante nouvelle donnée au public par les astronomes d’Elisabeth street et de Moriss street, nouvelle qui fut sur-le-champ le sujet des plus passionnés commentaires dans les deux hémisphères.

S’il pouvait en exister de plus sensationnelle, si l’émotion publique était justifiée, on laissera au lecteur le soin d’en décider.

Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson commençaient par exposer que leurs observations persistantes leur avaient permis de remarquer une incontestable perturbation dans la marche du bolide. Son orbite, jusque-là exactement Nord-Sud, était maintenant légèrement obliquée vers le Nord-Est-Sud-Ouest. D’autre part, une modification beaucoup plus importante avait été constatée dans sa distance du sol, distance qui était légèrement, mais incontestablement réduite, sans que la vitesse de translation fût accrue. De ces observations et des calculs qui en avaient été la conséquence, les deux astronomes concluaient que le météore, au lieu de suivre une orbite éternelle, tomberait nécessairement sur la terre, en un point et à une date qu’il était dès à présent possible de préciser.

Si, jusque-là, ils étaient d’accord, Mr Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson cessaient de l’être pour le surplus.

Tandis que les équations savantes de l’un l’amenaient à prédire que le bolide tomberait le 28 juin à l’extrémité sud du Japon, les équations tout aussi savantes de l’autre l’obligeaient à affirmer que cette chute se produirait seulement le 7 juillet en un point de la Patagonie.

Voilà comment s’entendent les astronomes! Au public de choisir!

Pour l’instant, il ne songeait guère à choisir, le public. Un seul fait l’intéressait, c’est que l’astéroïde tomberait, et avec lui les milliers de milliards qu’il promenait dans l’espace. Cela, c’était l’essentiel. Pour le surplus, au Japon, en Patagonie, ou n’importe où, on les trouverait toujours, les milliards.

Les conséquences d’un tel événement, le bouleversement économique qu’un si prodigieux afflux d’or ne pouvait manquer de causer, faisaient le sujet de toutes les conversations. En général, les riches étaient désolés en pensant à l’avilissement probable de leur fortune, et les pauvres ravis par la perspective vraisemblablement fallacieuse d’avoir une part du gâteau.

En ce qui concerne Francis, il éprouva un véritable désespoir. Que lui importaient ces milliards et ces billiards? Le seul bien qu’il désirât, c’était sa chère Jenny, trésor infiniment plus précieux que le bolide et ses détestables richesses.

Il courut à la maison de Moriss street. Là aussi, on connaissait la funeste nouvelle et l’on en comprenait les lamentables conséquences. La brouille violente et sans remède était inévitable entre les deux insensés qui s’attribuaient des droits sur un astre du ciel, maintenant qu’à l’amour-propre professionnel s’ajoutait l’intérêt matériel.

Que de soupirs poussa Francis, en serrant les mains de Mrs Hudelson et de ses aimables filles! Que de trépignements de colère se permit la bouillante Loo! Combien la charmante Jenny versa de larmes, que sœur, mère et fiancé furent impuissants à tarir, même quand ce dernier eut solennellement affirmé son inlassable fidélité, et qu’il eut juré d’attendre, s’il le fallait, jusqu’au jour où le dernier sou des cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards aurait été dépensé par le propriétaire définitif du fabuleux météore, serment imprudent, qui, selon toute apparence, le condamnait à un éternel célibat.

CHAPITRE XII

XII

Où l’on voit Mrs Arcadia Stanfort attendre à son tour, non sans une vive impatience, et dans lequel Mr John Proth se déclare incompétent.

Ce matin-là, le juge John Proth était à sa fenêtre, tandis que sa servante Kate allait et venait dans la chambre. Que le bolide passât ou non au-dessus de Whaston, il ne s’en inquiétait guère, soyez-en sûr. Non; sans préoccupations d’aucune sorte, il parcourait du regard la place de la Constitution, sur laquelle s’ouvrait la porte principale de sa paisible demeure.

Mais ce que Mr Proth estimait sans intérêt ne laissait pas d’avoir quelque importance aux yeux de Kate.

“Ainsi, monsieur, il serait en or? demanda-t-elle, en s’arrêtant devant son maître.

— Il paraît, répondit le juge.

— Cela n’a point l’air de vous produire grand effet, monsieur.

— Comme vous voyez, Kate.

— Et cependant, s’il est en or, il doit en valoir des millions!…

— Des millions et des milliards, Kate… Oui, ce sont des milliards qui se promènent au-dessus de notre tête.

— Et qui vont tomber, monsieur!

— On le dit, Kate.

— Songez-y, monsieur, il n’y aura plus de malheureux sur la terre!

— Il y en aura tout autant, Kate.

— Cependant, monsieur…

— Cela demanderait trop d’explications… Et d’abord, Kate, vous figurez-vous ce que c’est, un milliard?

— Un milliard, monsieur, c’est… c’est…

— C’est mille fois un million.

— Tant que cela!

— Oui, Kate, et vous vivriez cent ans, que vous n’auriez pas le temps de compter un milliard, fût-ce en y consacrant dix heures tous les jours.

— Est-il possible, monsieur!…

— C’est même certain.”

La servante demeura comme anéantie à cette pensée qu’un siècle ne suffirait pas à compter un milliard!… Puis, elle reprit son balai, son plumeau, et se remit à l’ouvrage. Mais, de minute en minute, elle s’arrêtait, comme plongée dans ses réflexions.

“Combien ça ferait-il pour chacun, monsieur?

— Quoi, Kate?

— Le bolide, monsieur, si on le partageait également entre tout le monde?

— C’est à calculer, Kate”, répondit Mr John Proth.

Le juge prit du papier et un crayon.

“En admettant, dit-il, tout en chiffrant, que la terre ait quinze cents millions d’habitants, cela ferait… cela ferait trois mille huit cent cinquante-neuf francs vingt centimes par tête.

— Pas davantage?… murmura Kate désappointée.

— Pas davantage”, affirma Mr John Proth, tandis que Kate regardait le ciel d’un air rêveur.

Quand elle consentit à redescendre sur la terre, elle aperçut, à l’entrée d’Exeter street, un groupe de deux personnes, sur lequel elle attira l’attention de son maître.

“Voyez donc, monsieur… dit-elle, les deux dames qui attendent là.

— Oui, Kate, je les vois.

— Regardez l’une d’elles… la plus grande… celle qui trépigne d’impatience.

— Elle trépigne, en effet, Kate. Mais, quelle est cette dame, je ne sais.

— Eh! monsieur, c’est celle qui est venue se marier devant nous, il y a plus de deux mois, sans descendre de cheval.

— Miss Arcadia Walker? demanda John Proth.

— Mrs Stanfort, maintenant.

— C’est bien elle, en effet, reconnut le juge.

— Que vient faire ici cette dame?

— Je l’ignore totalement, répondit Mr Proth, et j’ajoute que je ne donnerais pas un farthing pour le savoir.

— Aurait-elle de nouveau besoin de nos services?

— Ce n’est pas probable, la bigamie n’étant pas admise sur le territoire de l’Union, dit le juge en refermant la fenêtre. Quoi qu’il en soit, d’ailleurs, je ne dois pas oublier qu’il est l’heure de me rendre au Palais, où se plaide aujourd’hui une importante affaire, relative précisément au bolide qui vous préoccupe. Si donc cette dame venait à se présenter chez moi, vous voudriez bien lui exprimer mes regrets.”

Tout en parlant, Mr John Proth s’était préparé au départ. D’un pas tranquille, il descendit l’escalier, sortit par sa petite porte ouvrant sur Potomac street, et disparut dans le Palais de

Justice, qui s’élevait juste en face de sa maison, de l’autre côté de la rue.

La servante n’avait point fait erreur: c’était bien Mrs Arcadia Stanfort, qui, ce matin-là, se trouvait à Whaston, avec Bertha, sa femme de chambre. Toutes deux allaient et venaient d’un pas impatient, en suivant des yeux la longue pente d’Exeter street.

Dix coups sonnèrent à l’horloge municipale.

“Dire qu’il n’est pas encore là! s’écria Mrs Arcadia.

— Peut-être a-t-il oublié le jour du rendez-vous? suggéra Bertha.

— Oublié!… répéta la jeune femme d’une voix indignée.

— À moins qu’il n’ait réfléchi, reprit Bertha.

— Réfléchi!…” répéta une seconde fois sa maîtresse avec une indignation encore plus vive. Elle fit quelques pas vers Exeter street, la femme de chambre sur ses talons.

“Tu ne l’aperçois pas? demanda-t-elle d’un ton impatient au bout de quelques minutes.

— Non, madame.

— C’est trop fort!”

Mrs Stanfort retourna du côté de la place.

“Non!… personne encore!… personne!… répétait-elle. Me faire attendre… après ce qui a été convenu entre nous!… C’est bien aujourd’hui le 18 mai, pourtant!

— Oui, madame.

— Et il va être dix heures et demie?

— Dans dix minutes.

— Eh bien! qu’il ne se figure pas lasser ma patience!… Je resterai ici toute la journée, et plus encore, s’il le faut!”

Les gens d’hôtel de la place de la Constitution auraient pu remarquer les allées et venues de cette jeune femme, comme ils avaient remarqué, deux mois auparavant, les impatiences du cavalier qui la guettait alors pour la conduire devant le magistrat. Mais maintenant, tous, hommes, femmes, enfants, songeaient à bien autre chose… une chose à laquelle, dans tout Whaston, Mrs Stanfort était sans doute la seule à ne point penser. On ne s’occupait que du merveilleux météore, de son passage dans le ciel, de sa chute annoncée à jours fixes — quoique différents! — par les deux astronomes de la ville. Les groupes réunis sur la place de la Constitution, les gens de service à la porte des hôtels ne s’inquiétaient guère de la présence de Mrs Arcadia Stanfort. Nous ne savons si, comme semblerait l’établir la croyance populaire aux lunatiques, la lune exerce une certaine influence sur les cervelles humaines. En tout cas, il est permis d’affirmer que notre globe comptait alors un nombre prodigieux de “météoriques”. Ceux-ci en oubliaient le boire et le manger, à la pensée qu’un globe valant des milliards se promenait au-dessus de leur tête, et viendrait un de ces jours s’écraser sur le sol.

Mrs Stanfort avait évidemment d’autres soucis.

“Tu ne le vois pas, Bertha? répéta-t-elle après un bref instant d’attente.

— Non, madame.”

À ce moment, des cris s’élevèrent à l’extrémité de la place. Les passants se précipitèrent de ce côté. Plusieurs centaines de personnes étant accourues par les rues voisines, le rassemblement fut bientôt considérable. En même temps, les fenêtres des hôtels se garnissaient de curieux.

“Le voilà!… le voilà!…”

Tels étaient les mots qui volaient de bouche en bouche. Et ces mots répondaient si bien au désir de Mrs Arcadia Stanfort, qu’elle s’écria: “Enfin!…” comme s’ils se fussent adressés à elle.

“Mais non, madame, dut lui dire sa femme de chambre, ce n’est pas pour Madame que l’on crie.”

Et en vérité, à quel propos la foule eût-elle acclamé de la sorte celui qu’attendait Mrs Arcadia Stanfort? Pourquoi eût-elle remarqué son arrivée?

D’ailleurs, toutes les têtes se levaient vers le ciel, tous les bras se tendaient, tous les regards se dirigeaient vers la partie nord de l’horizon. Était- ce le fameux bolide qui faisait son apparition au-dessus de la cité? Les habitants s’étaient-ils réunis sur la place pour le saluer au passage?

Non. À cette heure, il sillonnait l’espace dans l’autre hémisphère. Au surplus, quand bien même il eût sillonné l’espace au-dessus de l’horizon, ce n’est pas à l’œil nu qu’il eût été possible de l’apercevoir en plein jour.

À qui donc, alors, s’adressaient les acclamations de la foule?

“Madame… c’est un ballon! dit Bertha. Regardez!… le voilà qui se montre derrière la flèche de Saint-Andrew.”

Descendant lentement des hautes zones de l’atmosphère, un aérostat apparaissait, en effet, salué par les applaudissements sympathiques de la foule. Pourquoi ces applaudissements? Cette ascension offrait-elle un intérêt particulier? Y avait-il des raisons pour que le public lui fît un pareil succès?

Oui vraiment, il y en avait.

La veille au soir, le ballon s’était enlevé d’une ville voisine, emportant à son bord le célèbre aéronaute Walter Vragg, accompagné d’un aide, et cette ascension n’avait d’autre but que de tenter une observation du bolide dans des conditions plus favorables. Telle était la cause de l’émotion de la foule anxieuse de connaître les résultats de cette originale tentative.

Il va de soi que, l’ascension décidée, Mr Dean Forsyth, au grand effroi de la vieille Mitz, avait demandé “à en être”, comme disent les Français, et il va également de soi qu’il avait trouvé en face de lui le docteur Hudelson, émettant une prétention semblable, au non moins grand effroi de Mrs Hudelson. Situation éminemment délicate, l’aéronaute ne pouvant emmener avec lui qu’un seul passager. De là, grosse dispute épistolaire entre les deux rivaux qui excipaient de titres égaux. Finalement l’un et l’autre avaient été éconduits au profit d’un tiers, que Walter Vragg présentait comme son aide, et dont il affirmait ne pouvoir se passer.

Maintenant, un vent léger ramenait l’aérostat au-dessus de Whaston, et la population se proposait de faire aux aéronautes une réception triomphale.

Mollement poussé par une imperceptible brise, le ballon, continuant sa tranquille descente, prit terre juste au milieu de la place de la Constitution. Cent bras agrippèrent aussitôt la nacelle, tandis que sautaient sur le sol Walter Vragg et son aide.

Ce dernier, laissant son chef s’occuper de la délicate opération du dégonflement, s’avança d’un pas rapide vers l’impatiente Mrs Arcadia Stanfort.

Lorsqu’il fut près d’elle:

“Me voici, madame, dit-il en s’inclinant.

— À dix heures trente-cinq, constata d’un ton sec Mrs Arcadia Stanfort, en montrant du doigt le cadran municipal.

— Et notre rendez-vous était pour dix heures et demie, je le sais, concéda le nouveau venu avec une déférente politesse. Je vous prie de m’excuser, les aérostats n’obéissant pas toujours à nos volontés avec la ponctualité qui serait désirable.

— Je ne me suis donc pas trompée? C’est bien vous qui étiez dans ce ballon avec Walter Vragg?

— C’est bien moi.

— M’expliquerez-vous?…

— Rien de plus simple. Il m’a paru original, voilà tout, d’arriver de cette manière à notre rendez-vous. J’ai donc acheté, à coups de dollars, une place dans la nacelle, contre la promesse de Walter Vragg de me descendre ici à dix heures et demie sonnant. Je pense qu’on peut lui pardonner de s’être trompé de cinq minutes.

— On le peut, concéda Mrs Arcadia Stanfort, puisque vous voilà. Vos intentions n’ont pas changé, je suppose!

— En aucune manière.

— Votre opinion est toujours que nous faisons sagement en renonçant à la vie commune?

— C’est mon opinion.

— La mienne, c’est que nous ne sommes pas faits l’un pour l’autre.

— Je partage entièrement votre avis.

— Assurément, Mr Stanfort, je suis loin de méconnaître vos qualités…

— Les vôtres, je les apprécie à leur juste valeur.

— On peut s’estimer et ne pas se plaire. L’estime n’est pas l’amour. Elle ne saurait faire supporter une aussi grande incompatibilité de caractères.

— C’est parler d’or.

— Il est évident que si nous nous étions aimés!…

— Ce serait bien différent.

— Mais nous ne nous aimons pas.

— Ce n’est que trop certain.

— Nous nous sommes mariés sans nous connaître, et nous avons eu quelques désillusions réciproques… Ah! si nous nous étions rendu quelque service signalé capable de frapper notre imagination, les choses ne seraient peut-être pas ce qu’elles sont.

— Malheureusement, il n’en a pas été ainsi. Vous n’avez pas eu à sacrifier votre fortune pour m’éviter la ruine.

— Je l’aurais fait, Mr Stanfort. De votre côté, il ne vous a pas été donné de sauver ma vie au péril de la vôtre.

— Je n’eusse point hésité, Mrs Arcadia.

— J’en suis convaincue, mais l’occasion ne s’est pas présentée. Étrangers nous étions l’un à l’autre, étrangers nous sommes restés.

— Déplorablement exact.

— Nous avions cru avoir les mêmes goûts, à tout le moins en ce qui concerne les voyages…

— Et nous n’avons jamais pu être d’accord sur la direction à prendre!

— En effet, quand je désirais aller vers le Sud, votre désir était d’aller vers le Nord.

— Et lorsque mon intention était d’aller vers l’Ouest, la vôtre était d’aller vers l’Est!

— Cette affaire du bolide a fait déborder la coupe.

— Elle l’a fait déborder.

— Car vous êtes toujours décidé, n’est-il pas vrai, à vous ranger du parti de Mr Dean Forsyth?

— Absolument décidé.

— Et à vous mettre en route pour le Japon, afin d’assister à la chute du météore?

— En effet.

— Or, comme je suis, moi, résolue à suivre l’opinion du docteur Sydney Hudelson…

— Et à vous rendre en Patagonie…

— Il n’y a pas de conciliation possible.

— Il n’y en a pas.

— Nous n’avons donc qu’une chose à faire.

— Une seule!

— C’est de nous rendre devant le juge, monsieur.

— Je vous suis, madame.”

Tous deux, sur la même ligne, à la distance de trois pas, se dirigèrent vers la maison de Mr Proth, suivis à distance respectueuse par la femme de chambre Bertha.

La vieille Kate se tenait sur la porte.

“Mr Proth? demandèrent à la fois Mr et Mrs Stanfort.

— Il est absent”, répondit Kate.

Les visages des deux justiciables s’allongèrent pareillement.

“Pour longtemps? demanda Mrs Stanfort.

— Jusqu’au dîner, dit Kate.

— Et il dîne?

— À une heure.

— Nous reviendrons à une heure”, affirmèrent à l’unisson Mr et Mrs Stanfort en s’éloignant.

Parvenus au milieu de la place, qu’encombrait toujours le ballon de Walter Vragg, ils firent halte un instant.

“Nous avons deux heures à perdre, constata Mrs Arcadia Stanfort.

— Deux heures et quart, précisa Mr Seth Stanfort.

— Vous plairait-il de passer ces deux heures ensemble?

— Si vous avez la bonté d’y consentir.

— Que diriez-vous d’une promenade sur le bord du Potomac?

— J’allais vous le proposer.”

Le mari et la femme ne commencèrent à s’éloigner dans la direction d’Exeter street que pour s’arrêter au bout de trois pas.

“Me permettrez-vous une remarque? interrogea Mr Stanfort.

— Je la permets, répondit Mrs Arcadia.

— Je constaterai donc que nous sommes d’accord. C’est la première fois, Mrs Arcadia!

— Et la dernière!” riposta celle-ci en se remettant en marche.

Pour atteindre le commencement d’Exeter street, Mr et Mrs Stanfort durent se frayer un passage au milieu de la foule de plus en plus compacte rassemblée autour de l’aérostat. Et si cette foule n’était pas plus dense, si tous les habitants de Whaston n’étaient pas réunis place de la Constitution, c’est qu’une autre attraction plus sensationnelle encore absorbait en ce moment même le plus clair de l’intérêt public. Dès les premières lueurs de l’aube, la ville entière s’était portée au Palais de Justice, devant lequel une “queue” formidable n’avait pas tardé à s’allonger. Aussitôt l’ouverture des portes, on s’était rué en tumulte dans la salle du Tribunal qui fut pleine à craquer en un clin d’œil. Force avait bien été de rétrograder à ceux qui n’avaient pu y trouver place, et ce sont ces malchanceux ou retardataires qui, à titre de compensation, assistaient à l’atterrissage de Walter Vragg.

Qu’ils eussent préféré être entassés avec les privilégiés qui remplissaient la salle du Tribunal, où se plaidait en ce moment la cause la plus gigantesque qui ait jamais été dans le passé et qui puisse jamais être dans l’avenir soumise à l’appréciation des juges!

Certes, le délire des foules avait paru poussé à ses extrêmes limites, lorsque l’Observatoire de Paris fit connaître que le bolide, ou tout au moins son noyau, était d’or pur. Et pourtant, ce délire n’aurait pu être comparé à celui qui se manifesta sur tous les points de la terre, lorsque Mr Dean Forsyth et Mr Sydney Hudelson affirmèrent catégoriquement que l’astéroïde tomberait. Innombrables furent les cas de folie qui se déclarèrent en cette circonstance, et il n’y eut pas d’asile d’aliénés qui ne devînt trop petit en quelques jours.

Mais, parmi tous ces fous, les plus fous étaient, à coup sûr, les auteurs de l’émotion qui secouait la terre.

Jusque-là, ni Mr Dean Forsyth ni le docteur Hudelson n’avaient entrevu pareille éventualité. S’ils avaient réclamé avec tant d’ardeur la priorité de la découverte du bolide, ce n’était pas à cause de sa valeur, de ses milliards dont personne n’aurait jamais rien, non, c’était pour attacher, l’un le nom de Forsyth, l’autre le nom de Hudelson, à ce grand fait astronomique.

La situation changea du tout au tout, après qu’ils eurent constaté, dans la nuit du 11 au 12 mai, le trouble survenu dans la course du météore. Une question plus brûlante que les autres s’imposa aussitôt à leur esprit.

À qui appartiendrait le bolide après sa chute? À qui les trillions du noyau qu’entourait maintenant une étincelante auréole? Celle-ci disparue — et, d’ailleurs, on n’avait que faire d’impalpables rayons, — le noyau serait là. Lui, on ne serait pas embarrassé pour le convertir en monnaie sonnante et trébuchante!…

À qui appartiendrait-il?

“À moi! s’était écrié sans hésiter Mr Dean Forsyth, à moi qui, le premier, ai signalé sa présence sur l’horizon de Whaston!”

“À moi! s’était écrié avec une égale conviction le docteur Hudelson, puisque je suis l’auteur de sa découverte!”

Ces prétentions contradictoires et inconciliables, les deux insensés n’avaient pas manqué de les faire valoir par la voie de la Presse. Pendant deux jours, les journaux de Whaston avaient eu leurs colonnes encombrées par la prose furieuse des deux adversaires. Ceux- ci se jetèrent à la tête les épithètes les plus malsonnantes à propos du bolide inaccessible, qui semblait vraiment se moquer d’eux du haut de ses quatre cents kilomètres.

On conçoit qu’il ne pouvait, dans ces conditions, être question du mariage projeté. Aussi la date du 15 mai passa-t-elle sans que Francis et Jenny eussent cessé d’être fiancés.

Étaient-ils même fondés à se dire fiancés? À son neveu, qui faisait auprès de lui une dernière tentative, Mr Dean Forsyth avait textuellement répondu:

“Je tiens le docteur pour un misérable, et jamais je ne donnerai mon consentement à ton mariage avec la fille d’un Hudelson.”

Et, presque à la même heure, ledit docteur Hudelson coupait court aux lamentations de sa fille en s’écriant en propres termes:

“L’oncle de Francis est un malhonnête homme, et jamais ma fille n’épousera le neveu d’un Forsyth.”

C’était catégorique, et force fut de s’incliner.

L’ascension aérostatique de Walter Vragg avait fourni une nouvelle occasion de se manifester à la haine que les deux astronomes éprouvaient l’un pour l’autre. Dans les lettres que publia avec empressement une Presse avide de scandales, inouïe fut la violence des expressions employées de part et d’autre, ce qui n’était pas fait, on en conviendra, pour améliorer la situation.

Toutefois, s’injurier n’est pas une solution. Lorsqu’on est en désaccord, il n’y a qu’à agir comme tout le monde en pareil cas, et à s’en remettre à la Justice. C’est le meilleur, le seul moyen de terminer un différend.

Les deux antagonistes avaient fini par en convenir.

C’est pourquoi, le 17 mai, une assignation, à comparaître dès le lendemain devant le tribunal de l’estimable Mr John Proth avait été adressée par Mr Dean Forsyth au docteur Hudelson; c’est pourquoi une assignation identique avait été immédiatement envoyée par le docteur Hudelson à Mr

Dean Forsyth; c’est pourquoi, enfin, ce matin-là, 18 mai, une foule bruyante et trépidante avait envahi le prétoire.

Mr Dean Forsyth et Mr Sydney Hudelson étaient présents. Réciproquement cités devant le juge, les deux rivaux se trouvaient en face l’un de l’autre.

Plusieurs affaires venaient d’être expédiées au commencement de l’audience et les parties, arrivées en se menaçant du poing, avaient quitté la salle bras dessus, bras dessous, à l’entière satisfaction de Mr Proth. En serait-il ainsi des deux adversaires qui allaient se présenter devant lui?

“L’affaire suivante, ordonna-t-il.

— Forsyth contre Hudelson et Hudelson contre Forsyth, appela le greffier.

— Que ces messieurs s’approchent”, dit le juge, en se redressant sur son fauteuil.

Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson s’avancèrent hors des groupes de partisans qui leur faisaient escorte. Ils étaient là, l’un près de l’autre, se toisant du regard, les yeux allumés, les mains crispées, tels deux canons chargés jusqu’à la gueule et dont une étincelle suffirait à provoquer la double détonation.

“De quoi s’agit-il, messieurs?” demanda le juge Proth, qui savait de reste ce dont il retournait.

Ce fut Mr Dean Forsyth qui prit le premier la parole.

“Je viens faire valoir mes droits…

— Et moi, les miens”, interrompit aussitôt Mr. Hudelson.

Ce fut, sans transition, un assourdissant duo, dans lequel on ne chantait ni à la tierce, ni à la sixte, mais, contre toutes les règles de l’harmonie, en perpétuelle dissonance.

Mr Proth frappa son bureau à coups précipités d’un couteau d’ivoire, comme fait de son archet un chef d’orchestre qui veut mettre fin à une cacophonie insupportable.

“De grâce, messieurs, dit-il, expliquez-vous l’un après l’autre! Me conformant à l’ordre alphabétique, je donne la parole à Mr Forsyth;

Mr Hudelson répondra ensuite à loisir.”

Ce fut donc Mr Dean Forsyth qui exposa l’affaire, le premier, tandis que le docteur ne se contenait qu’au prix des plus grands efforts. Il raconta comment, le 16 mars, à sept heures trente-sept minutes vingt secondes du matin, étant en observation dans sa tour d’Elisabeth street, il avait aperçu un bolide traversant le ciel du Nord au Sud, comment il avait suivi ce météore tout le temps qu’il fut visible, et comment enfin, quelques jours plus tard, il avait envoyé une lettre à l’observatoire de Pittsburg pour signaler sa découverte et en établir la priorité.

Le docteur Hudelson, lorsque ce fut son tour de parler, donna forcément une explication identique, si bien que le tribunal, après ces deux plaidoiries, ne devait pas être mieux renseigné qu’auparavant.

Il paraissait l’être, toutefois, suffisamment, puisque Mr Proth ne demanda aucune explication complémentaire. D’un geste onctueux, il réclama simplement le silence et, quand il l’eut obtenu, donna lecture du jugement qu’il avait rédigé pendant que parlaient les deux adversaires.

“Considérant, d’une part, disait ce jugement, que Mr Dean Forsyth déclare avoir découvert un bolide qui traversait l’atmosphère au-dessus de Whaston, le 16 mars à sept heures trente-sept minutes et vingt secondes du matin;

“Considérant, d’autre part, que Mr Sydney Hudelson déclare avoir aperçu le même bolide à la même heure, à la même minute et à la même seconde…

— Oui! oui! s’écrièrent les partisans du docteur en brandissant frénétiquement leurs poings vers le ciel.

— Non! non! ripostèrent les partisans de Mr Forsyth en frappant du pied.

“Mais, attendu que l’instance engagée repose sur une question de minutes et de secondes, et qu’elle est d’ordre exclusivement scientifique;

“Attendu qu’il n’existe pas d’article de loi applicable à la priorité d’une découverte astronomique.

“Par ces motifs nous déclarons incompétent et condamnons les deux parties solidairement aux dépens.”

Le magistrat ne pouvait évidemment répondre d’autre façon.

D’ailleurs, — et telle était peut-être l’intention du juge, — les plaideurs étant renvoyés dos à dos, il n’y avait du moins pas à craindre qu’ils se livrassent, dans cette position, à des actes de violence réciproque. C’était un avantage appréciable.

Mais ni les plaideurs, ni leurs partisans n’entendaient que l’affaire finît de la sorte. Si Mr Proth avait espéré s’en tirer par une déclaration d’incompétence, il lui fallut renoncer à cet espoir.

Deux voix dominèrent le murmure unanime qui avait accueilli le prononcé du jugement.

“Je demande la parole, criaient à la fois Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson.

— Bien que je n’aie point à revenir sur ma sentence, répondit le magistrat, de ce ton aimable qu’il n’abandonnait jamais, même dans les circonstances les plus graves, j’accorde volontiers la parole à Mr Dean Forsyth et au docteur Hudelson, à la condition qu’ils consentiront à ne la prendre que l’un après l’autre.”

C’était trop demander aux deux rivaux. C’est ensemble qu’ils répondirent, avec la même volubilité, la même véhémence de langage, celui-ci ne voulant pas être en retard d’un mot, d’une syllabe sur celui-là.

Mr Proth comprit que le plus sage serait de les laisser aller et prêta l’oreille de son mieux. Il parvint ainsi à comprendre le sens de leur nouvelle argumentation. Il ne s’agissait plus d’une question astronomique, mais d’une question d’intérêts, d’une revendication de propriété. En un mot, puisque le bolide devait finir par tomber, à qui appartiendrait-il? Serait-ce à Mr Dean Forsyth? Serait-ce au docteur Hudelson?

“À Mr Forsyth! s’écrièrent les partisans de la tour.

— Au docteur Hudelson!” s’écrièrent les partisans du donjon.

Mr Proth, dont la bonne figure s’éclairait d’un charmant sourire de philosophe, réclama le silence, et l’obtint sur-le-champ, tant l’intérêt de tous était vivement excité.

“Messieurs, dit-il, vous me permettrez, avant tout, de vous donner un conseil. Dans le cas où le bolide tomberait, en effet…

— Il tombera! répétèrent à l’envi les partisans de Mr Dean Forsyth et du docteur Hudelson.

— Soit! accorda le magistrat avec une condescendante politesse dont la magistrature ne donne pas toujours l’exemple, même en Amérique. Je n’y vois, pour ma part, aucun inconvénient et souhaite seulement qu’il ne tombe pas sur les fleurs de mon jardin.”

Quelques sourires coururent dans l’assistance. Mr Proth profita de cette détente pour adresser un regard bienveillant à ses deux justiciables. Hélas! bienveillance inutile. Apprivoiser des tigres altérés de carnage eût été besogne plus facile que réconcilier ces irréconciliables plaideurs.

“Dans ce cas, reprit le paternel magistrat, comme il s’agirait d’un bolide ayant une valeur de cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards, je vous engagerais à partager!

— Jamais!”

Ce mot si nettement négatif éclata de toutes parts. Jamais Mr Forsyth ni Mr Hudelson ne consentiraient à un partage! Sans doute, cela leur eût fait près de trois trillions à chacun; mais il n’y a pas de trillions qui tiennent devant une question d’amour-propre.

Avec sa connaissance des faiblesses humaines, Mr Proth ne fut pas autrement surpris que son conseil, si sage qu’il fût, eût contre lui l’unanimité de l’assistance. Il ne se déconcerta pas, et attendit de nouveau que le tumulte fût apaisé. “Puisque toute conciliation est impossible, dit-il, aussitôt qu’il lui fut possible de se faire entendre, le Tribunal va rendre son jugement.”

À ces mots, un profond silence s’établit comme par enchantement, et nul ne se permit d’interrompre Mr Proth, qui dictait d’une voix paisible à son greffier:

“Le Tribunal,

“Ouï les parties en leurs conclusions et plaidoiries;

“Attendu que les allégations produites ont même valeur de part et d’autre et sont appuyées sur les mêmes commencements de preuve:

“Attendu que la découverte d’un météore ne découle pas nécessairement sur ledit un droit de propriété, que la loi est muette à cet égard et que, à défaut de la loi, il n’existe rien d’analogue dans la jurisprudence;

“Que l’exercice de ce prétendu droit de propriété, fût-il fondé, pourrait, en raison des circonstances particulières de la cause, se heurter en fait à d’insurmontables difficultés, et qu’un jugement quelconque risquerait de rester lettre morte, ce qui, au grand dommage des principes sur lesquels repose toute société civilisée, serait de nature à diminuer dans l’esprit public la juste autorité de la chose jugée;

“Qu’il échet, dans une espèce aussi spéciale, d’agir avec prudence et circonspection;

“Attendu enfin que l’instance engagée roule, quelles que soient les affirmations des parties, sur un événement hypothétique qui peut fort bien ne pas se réaliser;

“Que le météore peut, d’ailleurs, tomber au sein des mers qui recouvrent les trois quarts du globe;

“Que, dans l’un et l’autre cas, l’affaire devrait être rayée du rôle, par suite de la disparition de toute matière litigieuse;

“Par ces motifs,

“Remet à statuer après la chute effective et dûment constatée du bolide contesté.

“Un point”, dicta Mr Proth, qui se leva en même temps de son fauteuil.

L’audience était terminée.

L’auditoire était resté sous l’impression des sages “attendus” de Mr Proth. Rien d’impossible, en effet, à ce que le bolide tombât au fond des mers où il faudrait renoncer à le repêcher. D’autre part, à quelles “difficultés insurmontables” le juge avait-il fait allusion?

Que signifiaient ces paroles mystérieuses?

Tout cela portait à réfléchir, et la réflexion rend d’ordinaire le calme aux esprits surexcités.

Il est à supposer que Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson ne réfléchissaient pas, car eux, du moins, ne se calmaient pas, loin de là. Des deux extrémités de la salle, ils se montraient réciproquement le poing en haranguant leurs partisans.

“Je ne qualifierai pas ce jugement, clamait Mr Dean Forsyth, d’une voix de stentor, il est proprement insensé!

— Ce jugement est absurde, criait en même temps à tue-tête Mr Sydney Hudelson.

— Dire que mon bolide ne tombera pas!…

— Douter de la chute de mon bolide!…

— Il tombera où je l'ai annoncé!…

— J'ai fixé le lieu de sa chute!…

— Et puisque je ne puis me faire rendre justice…

— Et puisqu'on m'oppose un déni de justice…

— J'irai défendre mes droits jusqu'au bout, et je pars ce soir même…

— Je soutiendrai mon droit jusqu'à la dernière extrémité, et je me mets en route aujourd'hui même…

— Pour le Japon! hurla Mr Dean Forsyth.

— Pour la Patagonie! hurla pareillement le docteur Hudelson.

— Hurrah!" répondirent d'une seule voix les deux camps adverses.

Lorsque tout le monde fut dehors, la foule se divisa en deux groupes, auxquels se joignirent les curieux qui n'avaient pu trouver place dans la salle d'audience. Ce fut un beau tumulte; cris, provocations, menaces de ces enragés. Et sans doute les voies de fait n'étaient pas loin, car, visiblement, les partisans de Mr Dean demandaient qu'à lyncher Mr Hudelson, et les partisans de Mr Hudelson étaient friands de lyncher Mr Forsyth, ce qui eût été une façon ultra-américaine de terminer l'affaire…

Heureusement, les autorités avaient pris leurs précautions. De nombreux policemen intervinrent, avec autant de résolution que d'opportunité, et séparèrent les combattants.

Les adversaires furent à peine écartés les uns des autres, que leur colère un peu superficielle tomba. Comme il leur fallait bien, cependant, conserver un prétexte pour faire le plus de vacarme possible, s'ils cessèrent leurs cris contre le chef du parti qui n'avait pas leur préférence, ils continuèrent à en pousser en l'honneur de celui dont ils avaient adopté le drapeau.

"Hurrah pour Dean Forsyth!"

"Hurrah pour Hudelson!"

Ces exclamations se croisaient avec un bruit de tonnerre. Bientôt, elles se fondirent en un seul rugissement:

"À la gare!" hurlaient les deux partis enfin d'accord.

La foule, aussitôt, s'organisa elle-même en deux cortèges qui traversèrent obliquement la place de la Constitution enfin débarrassée du ballon de Walter Vragg. À la tête de l'un des cortèges paradait Mr Dean Forsyth, et le docteur Sydney Hudelson à la tête de l'autre.

Les policemen laissaient faire avec indifférence, toute crainte de troubles étant écartée. Nul danger, en effet, qu'il survînt une collision entre les deux cortèges, dont l'un conduisait triomphalement Mr Dean Forsyth à la gare de l'Ouest, première étape, pour lui, de San Francisco et du Japon, et dont l'autre escortait non moins triomphalement le docteur Sydney Hudelson à la gare de l'Est, terminus de la ligne de New-York où il s'embarquerait pour la Patagonie.

Peu à peu les vociférations décrurent, puis s'éteignirent dans l'éloignement.

Mr John Proth, qui, sur le pas de sa porte, s'était diverti à regarder la foule tumultueuse, songea alors qu'il était l'heure de déjeuner et fit un mouvement pour rentrer chez lui.

À ce moment, il fut abordé par un gentleman et par une dame qui s'étaient avancés jusqu'à lui en suivant le pourtour de la place.

“Un mot, s'il vous plaît, monsieur le juge, dit le gentleman.

— Tout à votre service, Mr et Mrs Stanfort, répondit Mr Proth avec amabilité.

— Monsieur le juge, reprit Mr Stanfort, lorsque nous avons comparu devant vous, il y a deux mois, c'était pour contracter mariage…

— Et je me félicite, déclara Mr Proth, d'avoir pu faire votre connaissance à cette occasion.

— Aujourd'hui, monsieur le juge, ajouta Mr Stanfort, nous nous présentons devant vous pour divorcer.”

Le juge Proth, en homme d'expérience, comprit que ce n'était pas le moment de tenter une conciliation.

“Je ne me félicite pas moins de cette occasion de renouveler connaissance”, dit-il sans se démonter.

Les deux comparants s'inclinèrent.

“Veuillez prendre la peine d'entrer, proposa le magistrat.

— Est-ce bien nécessaire?” demanda Mr Seth Stanfort, comme il l’avait fait deux mois auparavant.

Et, comme deux mois auparavant, Mr Proth répondit avec flegme:

“Aucunement.”

Impossible d’être plus accommodant. D’ailleurs, bien qu’ils ne soient pas prononcés, en général, dans des conditions aussi anormales, les divorces n’en sont pas pour cela plus difficiles à obtenir dans la grande république de l’Union.

Il semble que rien ne soit aussi aisé, et l’on se délie plus facilement qu’on ne s’est lié dans cet étonnant pays d’Amérique. En de certains États, il suffit d’établir un domicile fictif, et il n’est pas indispensable de se présenter en personne pour divorcer. Des agences spéciales se chargent de réunir les témoins et de procurer des prête-noms. Elles ont des recruteurs à cet effet et il en existe de célèbres.

Mr et Mrs Stanfort n’avaient pas eu besoin de recourir à de tels subterfuges. C’est au lieu de leur domicile réel, à Richmond, en pleine Virginie, qu’ils avaient fait les démarches et accompli les formalités nécessaires. Et s’ils étaient maintenant à Whaston, c’était par simple fantaisie de rompre leur mariage à l’endroit même où il avait été contracté.

“Vous avez des actes en règle? demanda le magistrat.

— Voici les miens, dit Mrs Stanfort.

— Voici les miens”, dit Mr Stanfort.

Mr Proth prit les papiers, les examina, s’assura qu’ils étaient en bonne et due forme. Après quoi, il se contenta de répondre:

“Et voici l’acte de divorce tout imprimé. Il n’y a plus qu’à y inscrire les noms et à signer. Mais je ne sais si nous pourrons ici…

— Permettez-moi de vous proposer ce stylographe perfectionné, intervint Mr Stanfort en tendant l’instrument à Mr Proth.

— Et ce carton qui fera parfaitement office de sous-main, ajouta Mrs Stanfort en enlevant des mains de sa femme de chambre une grande boîte plate qu’elle offrit au magistrat.

— Vous avez réponse à tout”, approuva celui-ci, qui commença à remplir les blancs de l’acte imprimé.

Ce travail terminé, il présenta la plume à Mrs Stanfort.

Sans une observation, sans qu’une hésitation fît trembler sa main, Mrs Stanfort signa de son nom: Arcadia Walker.

Avec le même sang-froid, Mr Seth Stanfort signa après elle.

Puis chacun d’eux présentant, comme deux mois plus tôt, un billet de cinq cents dollars:

“Pour honoraires, dit de nouveau Mr Seth Stanfort.

— Pour les pauvres”, répéta Mrs Arcadia Walker.

Sans plus tarder, ils s’inclinèrent devant le magistrat, se saluèrent réciproquement et s’éloignèrent sans retourner la tête, l’un montant vers le faubourg de Wilcox, l’autre dans une direction opposée.

Lorsqu’ils eurent disparu, Mr Proth rentra définitivement chez lui, où le déjeuner l’attendait depuis trop longtemps.

“Savez-vous, Kate, ce que je devrais mettre sur mon enseigne? dit-il à sa vieille servante, tout en fixant sa serviette sous le menton.

— Non, monsieur.

— Je devrais mettre ceci: “Ici, on se marie à cheval et l’on divorce à pied!”

CHAPITRE XIII

XIII

Dans lequel on voit, comme l’a prévu le juge Proth, surgir le troisième larron, bientôt suivi d’un quatrième.

Mieux vaut renoncer à peindre la profonde douleur de la famille Hudelson et le désespoir de Francis Gordon. Assurément celui-ci n’aurait pas hésité à rompre avec son oncle, à se passer de son agrément, à braver sa colère et ses inévitables conséquences. Mais ce qu’il pouvait contre Mr Dean Forsyth, il ne le pouvait pas contre Mr Hudelson. En vain Mrs Hudelson avait-elle essayé d’obtenir le consentement de son mari et de le faire revenir sur sa décision: ni ses supplications, ni ses reproches ne firent fléchir l’entêté docteur. Loo, la petite Loo elle-même, s’était vue impitoyablement repoussée malgré ses prières, ses cajoleries et ses larmes impuissantes.

Désormais, on ne pourrait même plus recommencer ces tentatives, puisque l’oncle et le père, définitivement frappés de folie, étaient partis pour de lointains pays.

Combien pourtant ce double départ était inutile! Combien inutile le divorce dont les affirmations des deux astronomes avaient été la cause déterminante pour Mr Seth Stanfort et pour Mrs Arcadia Walker! Si ces quatre personnages s’étaient imposé seulement vingt-quatre heures de réflexion supplémentaire, leur conduite eût été certainement toute différente.

Dès le lendemain matin, en effet, les journaux de Whaston et d’ailleurs publièrent, sous la signature de J. B. K. Lowenthal, directeur de l’Observatoire de Boston, une note qui modifiait grandement la situation. Pas tendre pour les deux gloires whastoniennes, cette note, que l’on trouvera ci-dessous reproduite in extenso.

“Une communication, faite, ces jours derniers, par deux amateurs de la ville de Whaston, a fortement ému le public. Il nous appartient de remettre les choses au point.

“On nous permettra auparavant de déplorer que des communications de cette gravité soient faites à la légère, sans avoir été au préalable soumises au contrôle de savants véritables. Ces savants ne manquent pas. Leur science, garantie par brevets et diplômes, s’exerce dans un grand nombre d’observatoires officiels.

“Il est très glorieux, sans doute, d’apercevoir le premier un corps céleste qui a la complaisance de traverser le champ d’une lunette braquée vers le ciel. Mais ce hasard favorable n’a pas la vertu de transformer du coup de simples amateurs en mathématiciens de profession. Si, méconnaissant cette vérité de bon sens, on aborde inconsidérément des problèmes qui exigent une spéciale compétence, on s’expose à commettre des erreurs dans le genre de celle qu’il est de notre devoir de redresser.

“Il est bien exact que le bolide dont toute la terre s’occupe en ce moment a éprouvé une perturbation. MM. Forsyth et Hudelson ont eu le grand tort de se contenter d’une seule observation et de baser sur cette donnée incomplète des calculs qui, d’ailleurs, sont faux. En tenant compte seulement du trouble qu’ils ont pu constater le soir du 11 ou le matin du 12 mai, on arriverait, en effet, à des résultats entièrement différents des leurs. Mais il y a plus. Le trouble dans la marche du bolide n’a ni commencé ni fini le 11 ni le 12 mai. La première perturbation remonte au 10 mai, et il s’en produit encore à l’heure actuelle.

“Cette perturbation ou plutôt ces perturbations successives ont eu comme résultat, d’une part, de rapprocher le bolide de la surface de la terre et, d’autre part, de faire dévier sa trajectoire. À la date du 17 mai, la distance du bolide avait décru de 78 kilomètres environ, et la déviation de sa trajectoire atteignait près de 55 minutes d’arc.

“Cette double modification de l’état de choses antérieur n’a pas été réalisée en une seule fois. Elle est au contraire le total de changements très petits qui n’ont cessé de s’ajouter les uns aux autres depuis le 10 de ce mois.

“Il a été jusqu’ici impossible de découvrir la raison du trouble que le bolide a éprouvé. Rien dans le ciel ne paraît être de nature à l’expliquer. Les recherches continuent sur ce point, et il n’y a pas lieu de mettre en doute qu’elles n’aboutissent à bref délai.

“Quoi qu’il en soit à cet égard, il est au moins prématuré d’annoncer la chute de cet astéroïde, et a fortiori de fixer l’endroit et la date de cette chute. Évidemment, si la cause inconnue qui influence le bolide continue à agir dans le même sens, il finira par tomber, mais rien n’autorise jusqu’ici à affirmer qu’il en sera ainsi. Actuellement, sa vitesse relative a nécessairement augmenté, puisqu’il décrit une orbite plus petite. Il n’aurait donc aucune tendance à tomber, dans le cas où la force qui le sollicite cesserait de lui être appliquée.

“Dans l’hypothèse contraire, les perturbations constatées à chaque passage du météore ayant été jusqu’à ce jour inégales, et leurs variations d’intensité semblant n’obéir à aucune loi, on ne saurait, tout en pronostiquant la chute, en préciser le lieu ni la date.

“En résumé, nous conclurons ainsi qu’il suit: La chute du bolide paraît probable; elle n’est pas certaine. Dans tous les cas, elle n’est pas imminente.

“Nous conseillons donc le calme, en présence d’une éventualité qui demeure hypothétique et dont la réalisation peut au surplus ne conduire à aucun résultat pratique. Nous aurons soin, d’ailleurs, à l’avenir, de tenir le public au courant par des notes quotidiennes qui relateront au jour le jour la marche des événements.”

Mr Seth Stanfort et Mrs Arcadia Walker eurent-ils connaissance des conclusions de J. B. K. Lowenthal? Ce point est demeuré obscur. En ce qui concerne Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson, c’est à Saint-Louis, dans l’État de Missouri, pour le premier, et à New-York, pour le second, qu’ils reçurent le camouflet à eux adressé par le directeur de l’Observatoire de Boston. Ils en rougirent comme d’un véritable soufflet.

Quelque cruelle que fût leur humiliation, il n’y avait qu’à s’incliner. On ne discute pas avec un savant comme J. B. K. Lowenthal. Mr Forsyth et Mr Hudelson revinrent donc l’oreille basse à Whaston, celui-là faisant le sacrifice de son billet payé jusqu’à San-Francisco, celui-ci abandonnant à une compagnie rapace le prix de sa cabine déjà retenue jusqu’à Buenos-Aires.

De retour à leurs domiciles respectifs, ils montèrent impatiemment, l’un à sa tour, l’autre à son donjon. Il ne leur fallut pas beaucoup de temps pour reconnaître que J. B. K. Lowenthal avait raison, puisqu’ils eurent beaucoup de peine à retrouver leur bolide vagabond et qu’ils ne l’aperçurent pas au rendez-vous que leurs calculs, décidément inexacts, lui assignaient.

Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson ne tardèrent pas à ressentir les effets de leur pénible erreur. Qu’étaient-ils devenus, ces cortèges qui les avaient triomphalement conduits à la gare? Visiblement la faveur publique s’était retirée d’eux. Qu’il leur fut douloureux, après avoir savouré à longs traits la popularité, d’être soudain privés de ce breuvage enivrant!

Mais un souci plus grave s’imposa bientôt à leur attention. Ainsi que le juge John Proth l’avait prédit à mots couverts, un troisième compétiteur se dressait en face d’eux. Ce fut d’abord un bruit sourd qui courut dans la foule, puis, en quelques heures, ce bruit sourd devint nouvelle officielle, annoncée à son de trompe urbi et orbi.

Difficile à combattre, ce troisième larron, qui réunissait en sa personne tout l’univers civilisé. Si Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson n’avaient pas été aveuglés à ce point par la passion, ils eussent dès l’origine prévu son intervention. Au lieu de s’intenter réciproquement un procès ridicule, ils se seraient dit que les divers gouvernements du monde s’occuperaient nécessairement de ces milliers de milliards, dont l’apport subit pouvait être la cause de la plus terrible révolution financière. Ce raisonnement si naturel et si simple, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson ne l’avaient cependant pas fait, et l’annonce de la réunion d’une Conférence Internationale les atteignit comme un coup de foudre.

Ils coururent aux informations. La nouvelle était exacte. Même on désignait déjà les membres de la future Conférence qui se réunirait à Washington, à une date que la longueur du voyage de certains délégués rendait malheureusement plus éloignée qu’il n’eût été désirable. Toutefois, pressés par les circonstances, les gouvernements avaient décidé que, sans attendre les délégués, il serait tenu à Washington des réunions préparatoires entre les divers diplomates accrédités auprès du gouvernement américain. Les délégués extraordinaires arriveraient pendant que se poursuivraient ces réunions préparatoires, au cours desquelles on déblaierait le terrain, si bien que la conférence définitivement constituée aurait, dès sa première séance, un programme bien défini.

On ne s’attend pas à trouver ici la liste des États susceptibles de faire partie de la Conférence. Ainsi qu’il a été dit, cette liste comprendrait la totalité de l’univers civilisé. Aucun empire, aucun royaume, aucune république, aucune principauté ne s’étaient désintéressés de la question en litige, et tous avaient désigné un délégué, depuis la Russie et la Chine, représentées respectivement par M. Ivan Saratoff, de Riga, et par Son Excellence Li-Mao-Tchi, de Canton, jusqu’aux Républiques de San-Marin et d’Andorre dont MM. Beveragi et Ramontcho défendraient fermement les intérêts.

Toutes les ambitions étaient permises, tous les espoirs étaient légitimes, puisque nul ne savait encore où le météore tomberait, en admettant qu’il dût effectivement tomber.

La première réunion préparatoire eut lieu le 25 mai, à Washington. Elle débuta par régler ne varietur la question Forsyth-Hudelson, ce qui ne demanda pas plus de cinq minutes. Ces messieurs, qui avaient fait le voyage tout exprès, insistèrent vainement pour être entendus. Ils furent éconduits comme de misérables intrus. On juge de leur fureur quand ils revinrent à Whaston. Mais la vérité force à dire que leurs récriminations restèrent sans écho. Dans la Presse, qui, si longtemps, les avait couverts de fleurs, il ne se trouva pas un seul journal pour prendre leur défense. Ah! on leur avait donné à satiété de “l’honorable citoyen de Whaston”, de “l’ingénieux astronome”, du “mathématicien aussi éminent que modeste”! Le ton était changé maintenant.

“Que venaient faire à Washington ces deux fantoches?… Ils avaient été les premiers à signaler le météore?… Et puis après?… Est-ce que cette circonstance fortuite leur donnait des droits quelconques?… Étaient-ils pour quelque chose dans sa chute?… En vérité, il n’y avait même pas lieu de discuter d’aussi ridicules prétentions!” Voilà comment s’exprimait la Presse à présent. Sic transit gloria mundi!

Cette question réglée, les travaux sérieux commencèrent.

Tout d’abord plusieurs séances furent consacrées à dresser la liste des États souverains auxquels serait reconnu le droit de participer à la Conférence. Beaucoup d’entre eux n’avaient pas de représentant attitré à Washington. Il s’agissait de réserver le principe de leur collaboration pour le jour où la Conférence entamerait la discussion sur le fond. L’établissement de cette liste n’alla pas tout seul et les discussions atteignirent un degré de vivacité qui promettait pour l’avenir. La Hongrie et la Finlande, par exemple, émirent la prétention d’être directement représentées, prétention contre laquelle s’élevèrent vivement les cabinets de Vienne et de Saint-Pétersbourg. D’autre part, la France et la Turquie entamèrent, à propos de la Tunisie, une violente discussion que l’intervention personnelle du Bey vint encore compliquer. Le Japon, de son côté, éprouva de grands ennuis au sujet de la Corée. Bref, la plupart des nations se heurtant à des difficultés analogues, on n’avait encore abouti à aucune solution après sept séances consécutives, quand, le 1er juin, un incident inattendu vint jeter le trouble dans les esprits.

Ainsi qu’il l’avait promis, J. B. K. Lowenthal donnait régulièrement chaque jour des nouvelles du bolide, sous forme de courtes notes communiquées à la Presse. Ces notes n’avaient, jusqu’alors, rien offert de particulièrement spécial. Elles se contentaient d’informer l’Univers que la marche du météore continuait à subir des changements très petits, dont l’ensemble rendait la chute de plus en plus probable, sans qu’il fût toutefois possible de la considérer encore comme certaine.

Mais la note publiée le 1er juin fut notablement différente de celles qui l’avaient précédée. C’était à croire, vraiment, que le trouble du bolide avait quelque chose de contagieux, tant J. B. K. Lowenthal se montrait troublé à son tour.

“Ce n’est pas sans une réelle émotion, disait-il ce jour-là, que nous portons à la connaissance du public les phénomènes étranges dont nous avons été témoin, faits qui ne tendent à rien moins qu’à saper les bases sur lesquelles repose la Science astronomique, c’est-à-dire la Science elle-même, puisque les connaissances humaines forment un tout dont les parties sont solidaires. Toutefois, pour inexpliqués et inexplicables que soient ces phénomènes, nous n’en pouvons méconnaître le caractère d’irréfragable certitude.

“Nos communications antérieures ont informé le public que la marche du bolide de Whaston a éprouvé des perturbations successives et ininterrompues dont il a été impossible jusqu’ici de déterminer la cause ni la loi. Ce fait ne laissait pas d’être très anormal. L’astronome, en effet, lit dans le ciel comme dans un livre, et rien ne s’y passe, d’ordinaire, qu’il ne l’ait prévu ou qu’il ne puisse, à tout le moins, en prédire les résultats. C’est ainsi que des éclipses, annoncées des centaines d’années à l’avance, se produisent à la seconde fixée, comme obéissant à l’ordre de l’être périssable dont la prescience les a vues dans les brumes de l’avenir, et qui, à l’instant où sa prédiction se réalise, est endormi depuis des siècles dans le sommeil éternel.

“Cependant, si les perturbations observées étaient anormales, elles n’étaient pas contraires aux données de la Science, et si leur cause demeurait inconnue, nous pouvions en accuser l’imperfection de nos méthodes d’analyse.

“Aujourd’hui il n’en est plus de même. Depuis avant-hier, 30 mai, la marche du bolide a subi de nouveaux troubles, et ceux-ci sont en contradiction absolue avec nos connaissances théoriques les mieux assises. C’est dire que nous devons perdre l’espoir d’en trouver jamais une explication satisfaisante, les principes qui avaient force d’axiomes et sur lesquels reposent nos calculs n’étant pas applicables dans l’espèce.

“Le moins habile des observateurs a pu aisément remarquer que, lors de son second passage, dans l’après-midi du 30 mai, le bolide, au lieu de continuer à se rapprocher de la terre, comme il le faisait sans interruption depuis le 10 mai, s’en était éloigné sensiblement au contraire. D’autre part, l’inclinaison de son orbite, qui depuis vingt jours tendait à devenir de plus en plus Nord-Est-Sud-Ouest, avait tout à coup cessé de s’accentuer.

“Ce brusque phénomène avait déjà quelque chose d’incompréhensible, lorsque, hier, 31 mai, au quatrième passage du météore après le lever du soleil, on fut obligé de constater que son orbite était redevenue presque exactement Nord-Sud, tandis que sa distance de la terre était, depuis la veille, demeurée sans changement.

“Telle est la situation actuelle. La Science est impuissante à expliquer des faits qui auraient tous les caractères de l’incohérence, si rien pouvait être incohérent dans la nature.

“Nous avions dit, lors de notre première note, que la chute, encore incertaine, devait du moins être considérée comme probable. Nous n’osons même plus maintenant être aussi affirmatif et nous préférons nous borner à confesser modestement notre ignorance.”

Un anarchiste eût jeté une bombe au milieu de la huitième réunion préparatoire qu’il n’eût pas obtenu un effet comparable à celui de cette note signée J. B. K. Lowenthal. On se disputait les journaux qui la reproduisaient en l’encadrant de commentaires bourrés de points d’exclamation. L’après-midi tout entière se passa en conversations et en échanges de vues assez nerveux, au grand dommage des laborieux travaux de la Conférence.

Les jours suivants, ce fut pis encore. Les notes de J. B. K. Lowenthal se succédaient, en effet, plus surprenantes les unes que les autres. Au milieu du ballet si merveilleusement réglé des astres, le bolide semblait danser un véritable cancan, un fantaisiste cavalier seul sans règle ni mesure. Tantôt son orbite s’inclinait de trois degrés dans l’Est et tantôt elle se redressait de quatre dans l’Ouest. Si, à un de ses passages, il paraissait s’être quelque peu rapproché de la terre, il s’en était éloigné de plusieurs kilomètres au passage suivant. C’était à devenir fou.

Cette folie gagnait peu à peu la Conférence Internationale. Incertains de l’utilité pratique de leur discussion, les diplomates travaillaient avec mollesse et sans ferme volonté d’aboutir.

Le temps s’écoulait pourtant. Des divers points du monde, les délégués de toutes les nations accouraient à toute vapeur vers l’Amérique et vers Washington. Beaucoup d’entre eux étaient déjà arrivés, et bientôt leur nombre serait suffisant pour qu’ils pussent se constituer régulièrement sans attendre leurs collègues plus éloignés. Allaient-ils donc trouver un problème intact, dont même le premier point n’aurait pas été élucidé?

Les membres de la réunion préparatoire se piquèrent d’honneur, et, au prix d’un travail acharné, ils parvinrent, en huit séances supplémentaires, à cataloguer les États dont les délégués seraient admis aux séances. Le nombre en fut fixé à cinquante-deux, soit vingt-cinq pour l’Europe, six pour l’Asie, quatre pour l’Afrique, et dix-sept pour l’Amérique. Ils comprenaient douze empires, douze royaumes héréditaires, vingt-deux républiques, et six principautés. Ces cinquante-deux empires, monarchies, républiques et principautés, soit par eux-mêmes, soit par leurs vassaux et colonies, étaient donc reconnus comme seuls propriétaires du globe.

Il était temps que les réunions préparatoires aboutissent à cette conclusion. Les délégués des cinquante-deux États admis à participer aux délibérations, étaient en grande majorité à Washington et il en arrivait tous les jours.

La Conférence Internationale se réunit pour la première fois le 10 juin, à deux heures de l’après-midi, sous la présidence du doyen d’âge, qui se trouva être M. Soliès, professeur d’océanographie et délégué de la Principauté de Monaco. On procéda immédiatement à la constitution du bureau définitif.

Au premier tour de scrutin, la présidence fut attribuée, par déférence pour le pays où l’on était reçu, à M. Harvey, jurisconsulte éminent qui représentait les États-Unis.

La vice-présidence fut plus disputée. Elle échut finalement à la Russie, en la personne de M. Saratoff.

Les délégués français, anglais et japonais furent ensuite désignés comme secrétaires.

Ces formalités accomplies, le Président prononça une allocution très courtoise et fort applaudie, puis il annonça que l’on allait procéder à la nomination de trois sous-commissions, qui auraient comme mandat de rechercher la meilleure méthode de travail au triple point de vue démographique, financier et juridique.

Le vote venait de commencer, quand un huissier monta au fauteuil présidentiel et remit un télégramme à M. Harvey.

M. Harvey lut ce télégramme et, à mesure qu’il le lisait, son visage exprimait un étonnement grandissant. Après un instant de réflexion, toutefois, il haussa dédaigneusement les épaules, ce qui ne l’empêcha pas, après un autre moment de réflexion, de faire résonner la cloche, afin d’attirer l’attention de ses collègues.

Quand le silence se fut rétabli:

“Messieurs, dit M. Harvey, je crois devoir porter à votre connaissance que je viens de recevoir ce télégramme. Je ne mets pas en doute qu’il ne soit l’œuvre d’un mauvais plaisant ou d’un fou. Il me paraît, cependant, plus régulier de vous en donner lecture. Le télégramme, d’ailleurs non signé, est ainsi conçu:

“Monsieur le Président,

“J’ai l’honneur d’informer la Conférence Internationale que le bolide, qui doit faire l’objet de ses discussions, n’est pas res nullius, attendu qu’il est ma propriété personnelle.

“La Conférence Internationale n’a donc aucune raison d’être, et, si elle persistait à siéger, ses travaux sont d’avance frappés de stérilité.

“C’est par ma volonté que le bolide se rapproche de la terre, c’est chez moi qu’il tombera: c’est donc à moi qu’il appartient.”

— Et ce télégramme n’est pas signé? demanda le délégué anglais.

— Il ne l’est pas.

— Dans ces conditions, il n’y a pas lieu d’en tenir compte, déclara le représentant de l’empire d’Allemagne.

— C’est mon opinion, approuva le Président, et je crois répondre au sentiment unanime de mes collègues en classant purement et simplement ce document dans les archives de la Conférence… C’est bien votre avis, messieurs?… Il n’y a pas d’opposition?… Messieurs, la séance continue.”

CHAPITRE XIV

XIV

Dans lequel la VveThibaut, en s’attaquant inconsidérément aux plus hauts problèmes de la mécanique céleste, cause de graves soucis au banquier Robert Lecœur.

De bons esprits soutiennent que le progrès des moeurs amènera peu à peu la disparition des sinécures. Nous les croirons sur parole. En tout cas, on en comptait au moins une à l’époque des singuliers événements qui sont ici relatés.

Cette sinécure était la propriété de Mme Vve Thibaut, ancienne bouchère, préposée aux soins du ménage chez M. Zéphyrin Xirdal.

Le service de la Vve Thibaut consistait uniquement, en effet, à faire la chambre de ce savant déséquilibré. Or, le mobilier de cette chambre étant réduit à sa plus simple expression, son entretien ne pouvait être comparé à un treizième travail d’Hercule. Quant au surplus du logement, il échappait en grande partie à sa compétence. Dans la seconde pièce, notamment, défense absolue lui avait été notifiée de toucher, sous aucun prétexte, aux amas de papier qui en garnissaient le pourtour, et le va-et-vient de son balai devait, de convention expresse, se limiter à un petit carré central où le parquet apparaissait à nu.

La Vve Thibaut, qui avait un penchant naturel pour le bon ordre et pour la propreté, souffrait de voir le chaos dont ce carré de parquet était entouré, comme un îlot par la mer immense, et elle était dévorée du perpétuel désir de procéder à un rangement général. Une fois, se trouvant seule au logis, elle s’était enhardie à l’entreprendre. Mais Zéphyrin Xirdal, rentré à l’improviste, avait manifesté une telle fureur, sa figure si bonasse d’ordinaire avait exprimé une telle férocité, que la Vve Thibaut en était restée pendant huit jours agitée d’un tremblement nerveux. Depuis lors, elle ne s’était plus risquée à la moindre incursion sur le territoire soustrait à sa juridiction.

Des multiples entraves qui brisaient l’essor de ses talents professionnels, il résultait que la Vve Thibaut n’avait à peu près rien à faire. Cela ne l’empêchait pas, d’ailleurs, de passer chaque jour deux heures chez son bourgeois, — c’est ainsi qu’elle désignait Zéphyrin Xirdal, avec une politesse qu’elle estimait raffinée, — sur lesquelles sept quarts d’heure étaient consacrés à une conversation, ou plus exactement à un monologue de bon goût.

À ses nombreuses qualités, la Vve Thibaut joignait, en effet, une étonnante facilité d’élocution. Certains soutenaient qu’elle était bavarde à un point phénoménal. Mais c’était là pure malveillance. Elle aimait parler, voilà tout.

Ce n’est pas qu’elle se mît en frais d’imagination. En général, la distinction de la famille qui la comptait parmi ses membres, formait le thème de ses premiers discours. Entamant ensuite le chapitre de ses malheurs, elle expliquait par quel funeste concours de circonstances une bouchère peut être transformée en servante. Peu importait que l’on connût cette navrante histoire. La Vve Thibaut éprouvait toujours le même agrément à la raconter. Ce sujet épuisé, elle discourait sur les diverses personnes qu’elle servait ou qu’elle avait servies. Aux opinions, aux habitudes, aux façons d’être de ces personnes, elle comparait celles de Zéphyrin Xirdal, et distribuait avec impartialité le blâme et l’éloge.

Son maître, sans jamais répondre, faisait montre d'une patience inaltérable. Il est vrai que, perdu dans ses rêves, il n'entendait pas ce verbiage. Et cela, à tout prendre, diminue beaucoup son mérite. Quoi qu'il en soit, les choses allaient très bien ainsi depuis de longues années, celle-là parlant toujours, celui-ci n'écoutant jamais, tous deux, au demeurant, fort satisfaits l'un de l'autre.

Le 30 mai, la Vve Thibaut, ainsi qu'elle le faisait chaque jour, entra à neuf heures du matin chez Zéphyrin Xirdal. Ce savant étant parti la veille avec son ami Marcel Leroux, le logement était vide.

La Vve Thibaut ne s'en étonna pas outre mesure. Une longue série de fugues antérieures rendait normales pour elle ces disparitions soudaines. Ennuyée seulement d'être privée d'auditoire, elle fit le ménage comme de coutume. La chambre terminée, elle pénétra dans l'autre pièce, qu'elle intitulait pompeusement cabinet de travail. Là, par exemple, elle eut une émotion.

Un objet insolite, une sorte de caisse noirâtre, diminuait notablement la superficie légitime du carré de parquet réservé à son balai. Que signifiait cela? Résolue à ne pas tolérer une telle atteinte à ses droits, la Vve Thibaut déplaça l'objet d'une main ferme, puis vaqua paisiblement à sa besogne habituelle.

Un peu dure d'oreille, elle n'entendit pas le ronronnement qui s'échappait de la caisse, et, pareillement, si faible était la lueur bleuâtre du réflecteur métallique, qu'elle demeura inaperçue par son regard distrait. À un certain moment, cependant, un fait singulier attira nécessairement son attention. Comme elle passait devant le réflecteur métallique, une poussée irrésistible la fit choir sur le carreau. Le soir, en se déshabillant, elle eut la surprise de constater qu'une forte contusion, un superbe noir, illustrait sa hanche droite, ce qui lui parut fort étrange, puisqu’elle était tombée sur le côté gauche. Le hasard ne l’ayant plus amenée de nouveau dans l’axe du réflecteur, le phénomène ne se reproduisit plus, et c’est pourquoi elle ne songea pas à établir le moindre rapport entre son accident et la caisse déplacée par sa main téméraire. Elle supposa avoir fait un faux pas et n’y pensa plus.

La Vve Thibaut, fortement pénétrée du sentiment de ses devoirs, ne manqua pas, le balayage terminé, de remettre la caisse en place. Elle fit même de son mieux, c’est une justice à lui rendre, pour la disposer exactement comme elle l’avait trouvée. Si elle n’y réussit qu’à peu près, il convient de l’en excuser, et ce n’est nullement de propos délibéré qu’elle envoya le petit cylindre de poussières tourbillonnantes dans une direction quelque peu différente de sa direction antérieure.

Les jours suivants, la Vve Thibaut procéda de même, car pourquoi changerait-on ses habitudes, quand elles sont vertueuses et louables?

Toutefois, il faut reconnaître que, l’accoutumance aidant, la caisse noirâtre perdit progressivement beaucoup de son importance à ses yeux et qu’elle apporta un soin décroissant à la remettre dans sa position première, après le balayage quotidien. Sans doute, elle ne manqua jamais de traîner cette caisse devant la fenêtre, puisque c’est là que M. Xirdal avait jugé bon de la placer, mais le réflecteur métallique ouvrit son orifice dans des directions de plus en plus variées. Un jour, c’était un peu à gauche qu’il projetait le cylindre de poussières, un autre jour, c’était un peu à droite. La Vve Thibaut n’y entendait pas malice et ne se doutait guère des cruelles angoisses que sa collaboration fantaisiste infligeait à J. B. K. Lowenthal. Une fois même, ayant par inadvertance fait tourner le réflecteur sur son pivot, elle ne vit pas le plus petit inconvénient à ce qu’il bâillât directement vers le plafond.

C’est ainsi braquée vers le zénith que Zéphyrin Xirdal retrouva sa machine, en rentrant chez lui le 10 juin, au début de l’après-midi.

Son séjour à la mer s’était passé de la manière la plus agréable, et peut-être l’aurait-il prolongé davantage, si, une douzaine de jours après son arrivée, il n’avait eu la singulière fantaisie de changer de linge. Ce caprice l’ayant mis dans la nécessité de recourir à son paquet, il y trouva, à son extrême surprise, vingt-sept bocaux au goulot évasé. Zéphyrin Xirdal ouvrit de grands yeux. Que venaient faire là ces vingt-sept bocaux? Mais bientôt la chaîne des souvenirs se renoua, et il se rappela son projet de pile électrique, projet si passionnant et si parfaitement oublié.

Après s’être administré, à titre de châtiment, quelques solides coups de poing, il s’empressa d’empaqueter à nouveau ses vingt-sept bocaux, et, plantant là l’ami Marcel Leroux, de sauter dans un train, qui le ramena directement à Paris.

Il aurait pu arriver que Zéphyrin Xirdal perdît de vue, en cours de route, le motif urgent qu’il avait de rentrer. Cela n’aurait rien eu de bien extraordinaire. Un incident lui rafraîchit la mémoire, comme il mettait le pied sur le quai de la gare Saint-Lazare.

Il avait apporté tant de soin à refaire le paquet des vingt-sept bocaux, que celui-ci creva tout à coup à cet instant précis et vida sur l’asphalte son contenu, qui se brisa en produisant un terrible vacarme. Deux cents personnes se retournèrent, croyant à un attentat anarchiste. Elles n’aperçurent que Zéphyrin Xirdal contemplant le désastre d’un air ahuri.

Ce désastre avait, du moins, l’avantage de rappeler au propriétaire des bocaux défunts dans quel but il était céans à Paris. Celui-ci, avant de regagner son domicile, passa donc chez le marchand de produits chimiques, où il acquit vingt-sept autres bocaux tout neufs, et chez le menuisier, où l'armature commandée l'attendait vainement depuis dix jours.

C'est chargé de ces divers colis que, tout vibrant du désir de commencer ses expériences, il ouvrit sa porte en grande hâte. Mais il demeura cloué sur le seuil, en apercevant sa machine, dont le réflecteur bâillait vers le zénith.

Zéphyrin Xirdal fut aussitôt assailli par un flot de souvenirs, et tel fut l'excès de son trouble, que ses mains sans force laissèrent échapper leurs fardeaux. Ceux-ci, obéissant sur-le-champ aux lois de la pesanteur, n'hésitèrent pas à se diriger en droite ligne vers le centre de la terre. Nul doute qu'ils ne fussent arrivés à destination, s'ils n'avaient été malencontreusement arrêtés par le carreau, sur lequel le chevalet se cassa en deux morceaux, tandis que les vingt-sept bocaux se fracassaient à grand bruit. Cela faisait cinquante-quatre bocaux en moins d'une heure. De ce train-là, Zéphyrin Xirdal ne serait pas long à solder son compte de banque si scandaleusement créditeur.

Ce remarquable casseur de verre ne s'était même pas aperçu de l'hécatombe. Immobile sur le pas de sa porte, il considérait sa machine d'un air songeur.

"Ça, c'est de la Vve Thibaut, crachée", dit-il, en se décidant à entrer, ce qui, à tout le moins, prouvait l'excellence de son flair.

En relevant les yeux, il découvrit dans le plafond, et, au-dessus du plafond, dans le toit, un petit trou situé exactement dans l'axe du réflecteur métallique, au foyer duquel l'ampoule continuait à valser éperdument. Ce trou, gros comme un crayon, avait des bords aussi nets que s'il eût été découpé à l'emporte-pièce.

Un large sourire fendit la bouche de Zéphyrin Xirdal, qui commençait décidément à s’amuser.

“Ah bien!… Ah bien!…” murmura-t-il.

Cependant, il convenait d’intervenir. Se penchant sur la machine, il en interrompit le fonctionnement. Le ronronnement cessa aussitôt, la lueur bleuâtre s’éteignit, l’ampoule redevint peu à peu immobile.

“Ah bien!… Ah bien!… répéta Zéphyrin Xirdal, il doit s’en passer de belles!”

D’une main impatiente, il fit sauter la bande des journaux empilés sur la table et lut, les unes après les autres, les notes par lesquelles J. B. K. Lowenthal faisait connaître au monde les incohérentes fantaisies du bolide de Whaston. Zéphyrin Xirdal se tordit littéralement de rire.

La lecture de certains numéros lui fit, par contre, froncer les sourcils. À quoi rimait cette

Conférence Internationale, dont la première séance, succédant à quelques réunions préparatoires, était annoncée précisément pour le jour même? Quel besoin d’attribuer la propriété du bolide? N’appartenait-il pas de droit à celui qui l’attirait vers la terre et sans lequel il aurait éternellement sillonné l’espace?

Mais Zéphyrin Xirdal réfléchit que personne n’était au courant de son intervention. Il convenait donc de la révéler, afin que la Conférence Internationale ne perdît pas son temps à des travaux frappés d’avance de stérilité.

Repoussant du pied les débris des vingt-sept bocaux, il courut au bureau de poste le plus proche, d’où il expédia la dépêche que M. Harvey devait lire du haut du fauteuil présidentiel. Ce n’est vraiment la faute de personne, si, par une distraction bien étonnante chez un homme aussi peu distrait, il oublia de la signer de son nom.

Cela fait, Zéphyrin Xirdal remonta chez lui, se renseigna dans une revue scientifique sur les allées et venues du météore, puis, exhumant une seconde fois sa lunette, il prit une excellente observation qui servit de base à de nouveaux calculs.

Vers le milieu de la nuit, tout étant parfaitement résolu, il remit sa machine en marche et déversa dans l’espace l’énergie radiante avec une intensité et dans une direction convenables, puis, la machine arrêtée une demi-heure plus tard, il se coucha paisiblement et dormit du sommeil du juste.

Depuis deux jours Zéphyrin Xirdal poursuivait son expérience, et il venait d’interrompre le fonctionnement de sa machine pour la troisième fois de l’après-midi, quand on frappa à sa porte. En allant ouvrir, il se trouva en face du banquier Robert Lecœur.

“Enfin! te voici! s’écria celui-ci en franchissant le seuil.

— Comme vous voyez, dit Zéphyrin Xirdal.

— Ce n’est pas malheureux! répliqua M. Lecœur. Voilà je ne sais combien de fois que je monte pour rien tes six étages. Où diable étais-tu?…

— Je m’étais absenté, répondit Xirdal en rougissant légèrement malgré lui.

— Absenté!… se récria M. Lecœur d’une voix indignée. Absenté!… Mais c’est abominable!… On ne met pas les gens dans une pareille inquiétude.”

Zéphyrin Xirdal regarda son parrain avec étonnement. Certes, il savait pouvoir compter sur son affection. Mais à ce point!…

“Ah çà, mais, mon oncle, qu’est-ce que ça peut vous faire? demanda-t-il.

— Ce que ça peut me faire? répéta le banquier. Tu ignores, malheureux, que toute ma fortune repose sur ta tête.

— Comprends pas, fit Zéphyrin Xirdal en s’asseyant sur la table et en offrant son unique siège au visiteur.

— Quand tu es venu me faire part de tes projets fantastiques, reprit M. Lecœur, tu as fini par me convaincre, je l’avoue.

— Dame!… approuva Xirdal.

— J’ai donc carrément ponté sur ta chance, et j’ai pris en Bourse une forte position à la baisse.

— À la baisse?…

— Oui, je me suis porté vendeur.

— Vendeur de quoi?

— De mines d’or. Tu comprends que, si le bolide tombe, les mines baisseront, et que…

— Baisseront?… Comprends de moins en moins, interrompit Xirdal. Je ne vois pas quelle influence ma machine peut avoir sur le niveau d’une mine.

— D’une mine, sans doute, reconnut M. Lecœur. Sur celui de ses actions, c’est différent.

— Soit! concéda Xirdal sans insister. Vous avez donc vendu des actions de mines d’or. Ça n’est pas bien grave. Ça prouve simplement que vous en avez.

— Je n’en ai pas une seule, au contraire.

— Bah!… fit Xirdal abasourdi. Vendre ce qu’on n’a pas, c’est rudement malin. Je ne suis pas de cette force-là, moi.

— C’est ce qu’on appelle la spéculation à terme, mon cher Zéphyrin, expliqua le banquier. Quand il faudra livrer les titres j’en achèterai, voilà tout.

— Alors, quel avantage?… Vendre pour acheter, ça ne paraît pas très ingénieux, à première vue.

— C’est ce qui te trompe, puisqu’à ce moment les actions de mines seront moins chères.

— Et pourquoi seraient-elles moins chères?

— Parce que le bolide jettera dans la circulation plus d’or que la terre n’en contient à l’heure actuelle. La valeur de l’or diminuera donc au moins de moitié, et c’est pourquoi les actions de mines d’or tomberont à rien ou presque rien. As-tu compris maintenant?

— Certes, dit Xirdal sans conviction.

— Tout d’abord, reprit le banquier, je me suis applaudi de t’avoir fait confiance. Les troubles remarqués dans la marche du bolide, sa chute annoncée comme certaine ont provoqué une première baisse de vingt-cinq pour cent sur les mines. Tout à fait emballé, persuadé que la baisse s’accentuerait énormément j’ai augmenté ma position dans des proportions considérables.

— C’est-à-dire?…

— C’est-à-dire que j’ai vendu une quantité de mines d’or beaucoup plus grande.

— Toujours sans les avoir?…

— Bien entendu… Tu dois donc t’imaginer mes angoisses en constatant ce qui se passe: toi disparu, le bolide arrêté dans sa chute et battant la campagne aux quatre coins du ciel. Résultat: les mines ont remonté, et je perds des sommes énormes… Que veux-tu que je pense de tout ça?”

Zéphyrin Xirdal considérait son parrain avec curiosité. Jamais il n’avait vu cet homme froid secoué par une telle émotion.

“Je n’ai pas très bien saisi votre combinaison, dit-il enfin. C’est trop fort pour moi, ces histoires-là. J’ai cru comprendre, cependant, qu’il vous serait agréable de voir le bolide tomber. Eh bien! soyez tranquille, il tombera.

— Tu me l’affirmes?

— Je vous l’affirme.

— Formellement?

— Formellement… Mais, vous, de votre côté, avez-vous acheté mon terrain?

— Sans doute, répondit M. Lecœur. Nous sommes en règle. J’ai en poche les titres de propriété.

— Alors, tout va bien, approuva Zéphyrin Xirdal. Je peux même vous annoncer que mon expérience sera terminée le 5 juillet prochain. Ce jour-là, je quitterai Paris, et j’irai à la rencontre du bolide.

— Qui tombera?

— Qui tombera.

— Je partirai avec toi! s’écria M. Lecœur enthousiasmé.

— Si ça vous chante!…” dit Zéphyrin Xirdal.

Fut-ce le sentiment de sa responsabilité à l’égard de M. Robert Lecœur, fut-ce seulement l’intérêt scientifique qui l’avait repris tout entier, toujours est-il qu’une influence favorable l’empêcha de faire de nouvelles sottises. L’expérience commencée fut méthodiquement poursuivie, et la mystérieuse machine bourdonna, jusqu’au 5 juillet, un peu plus de quatorze fois par vingt-quatre heures. De temps à autre, Zéphyrin Xirdal prenait une observation astronomique du météore. Il put ainsi s’assurer que tout se passait sans anicroche et conformément à ses prévisions.

Dans la matinée du 5 juillet, il braqua une dernière fois son objectif vers le ciel.

“Ça y est, dit-il en s’écartant de l’instrument. Maintenant, on peut laisser courir.”

Aussitôt, il s’occupa de ses colis.

Sa machine, avec quelques ampoules de rechange et sa lunette d’abord. Il les emmaillota avec beaucoup d’habileté et les protégea par des étuis capitonnés contre les hasards du voyage. Ce fut ensuite le tour de ses bagages personnels.

Une difficulté sérieuse faillit l’arrêter dès le premier pas. Comment emballer les objets qu’il convenait d’emporter? Une malle? Zéphyrin Xirdal n’en avait jamais eu. Une valise, alors?…

Après de profondes réflexions, il se souvint qu’il devait posséder une valise, en effet. Et la preuve qu’il la possédait réellement, c’est qu’il la trouva, non sans de laborieuses recherches, au fond d’un cabinet noir, où s’entassait un fouillis de débris, excréta de sa vie domestique au milieu duquel le plus savant des antiquaires aurait été bien empêché de se reconnaître.

Cette valise, que Zéphyrin Xirdal attira à la lumière du jour, avait été jadis recouverte de toile. Cela n’était pas contestable, puisque quelques lambeaux de ce tissu adhéraient encore à son squelette de carton. Quant à des courroies, leur existence antérieure était probable, mais non certaine, car il n’en subsistait aucune trace. Zéphyrin Xirdal ouvrit cette valise au milieu de la chambre et resta longtemps rêveur devant le vide de ses flancs béants. Qu’allait-il mettre là-dedans?

“Rien que le nécessaire, s’affirmait-il à lui-même. Il y a donc lieu d’agir méthodiquement et d’opérer une sélection raisonnée.”

C’est en vertu de ce principe qu’il commença par y déposer trois chaussures. Il devait plus tard beaucoup regretter que, de ces trois chaussures, l’une fût, par un hasard malheureux, une bottine à boutons, une autre un soulier à lacet, et la troisième une pantoufle. Mais, pour le moment tout au moins, cela ne présentait pas d’inconvénient, et un bon coin de la valise était déjà rempli. C’était toujours ça!

Les trois chaussures emballées, Zéphyrin Xirdal très fatigué s’essuya le front. Après quoi, il recommença à réfléchir.

Le résultat de ses réflexions fut qu’il prit une vague conscience de son infériorité au point de vue spécial de l’art de l’emballage. C’est pourquoi, désespérant d’arriver à rien de bon par la méthode classique, il résolut de s’en fier à l’inspiration.

Il puisa donc à pleines mains dans ses tiroirs et dans le tas de vêtements qui représentait sa garde-robe. En peu d’instants, un amoncellement d’objets hétéroclites remplirent à déborder le côté de la valise dans lequel ils étaient jetés. Possible que l’autre compartiment fût vide, mais Zéphyrin Xirdal n’en savait rien. Aussi fut-il dans la nécessité de bourrer sa cargaison d’un talon impérieux, jusqu’à suffisant accord entre le contenant et le contenu.

La valise fut alors cerclée d’une forte corde liée par une série de noeuds tellement compliqués que leur auteur devait être ultérieurement dans l’incapacité de les défaire; après quoi celui-ci contempla son œuvre avec une assez vaniteuse satisfaction.

Restait maintenant à se rendre à la gare. Quelle que fût son intrépidité de marcheur, Zéphyrin Xirdal ne pouvait songer à y transporter à pied sa machine, sa lunette et sa valise. Voilà qui était embarrassant!

Il est à supposer qu’il eût fini par découvrir qu’il existait des fiacres à Paris. Mais cet effort intellectuel lui fut épargné. M. Robert Lecœur se montra sur le seuil.

“Eh bien, demanda-t-il, es-tu prêt, Zéphyrin?

— Je vous attendais, vous voyez, répondit avec candeur Xirdal, qui avait profondément oublié que son parrain dût partir avec lui.

— En route, alors, dit M. Lecœur. Combien de colis?

— Trois: ma machine, ma lunette et ma valise.

— Donne-m’en un, et prends les deux autres. Ma voiture est en bas.

— Quelle bonne idée!” admira Zéphyrin Xirdal, en refermant sa porte derrière lui.

CHAPITRE XV

XV

Où J. B. K. Lowenthal désigne le gagnant du gros lot.

Depuis qu’ils avaient commis l’erreur vertement relevée par J. B. K. Lowenthal, première mésaventure suivie de l’échec humiliant de leur tentative auprès de la Conférence Internationale, la vie manquait de gaieté pour Mr Dean Forsyth et pour le docteur Sydney Hudelson. Oubliés, passés au rang de citoyens quelconques et négligeables, ils ne pouvaient digérer l’indifférence du public, eux qui avaient connu les ivresses de la gloire.

Dans leurs entretiens avec leurs derniers fidèles, ils s’élevaient avec violence contre l’aveuglement de la foule et défendaient leur cause à grand renfort d’arguments. S’ils avaient commis une erreur, était-il juste de leur en faire grief? Leur sévère critique, le savant J. B. K. Lowenthal lui-même, ne s’était-il pas trompé également, et n’avait-il pas dû, en fin de compte, proclamer son impuissance? Que fallait-il en conclure, sinon que leur bolide était exceptionnel, anormal? Dans ces conditions, une erreur n’était-elle pas des plus naturelles et des plus excusables?

“Certes!” approuvaient les derniers fidèles.

Quant à la Conférence Internationale, pouvait-on imaginer rien de plus inique que son déni de justice? Qu’elle prit les précautions voulues pour sauvegarder le bon ordre financier du monde, soit! Mais comment osait-on nier les droits de l’inventeur du météore? Le bolide ne serait-il pas resté ignoré, et, s’il devait tomber finalement sur la terre, sa chute aurait-elle été prévue, sans cet inventeur qui l’avait signalé à l’attention universelle?

“Et, cet inventeur, c’est moi!” affirmait énergiquement Mr Dean Forsyth.

“C’est moi!” affirmait de son côté le docteur Sydney Hudelson avec une non moindre énergie.

“Certes!” approuvaient derechef les derniers fidèles.

Quelque réconfort que leur approbation apportât aux deux astronomes, elle ne pouvait remplacer les acclamations enthousiastes de la foule. Toutefois, comme il était matériellement impossible de convaincre tous les passants les uns après les autres, force leur était bien de se contenter du modeste encens d’admirateurs très raréfiés.

Les déboires éprouvés ne diminuaient pas leur ardeur, au contraire. Plus on contestait leurs droits sur le bolide, plus ils s’acharnaient à les revendiquer; moins on paraissait prendre au sérieux leur prétention, plus chacun d’eux s’obstinait à affirmer sa qualité de propriétaire unique et exclusif.

Dans un tel état d’esprit, une réconciliation eût été impossible. Aussi, n’y songeait-on pas. Loin de là, chaque jour semblait séparer davantage les deux malheureux fiancés.

MM. Forsyth et Hudelson annonçaient hautement leur intention de protester jusqu’à leur dernier souffle contre la spoliation dont ils s’estimaient victimes et d’épuiser tous les degrés de juridiction. On aurait ainsi un merveilleux spectacle! Mr Forsyth, d’une part, le docteur Hudelson, de l’autre, et, contre eux, le reste du monde. Voilà qui serait un procès grandiose!… si l’on parvenait toutefois à trouver le tribunal compétent.

En attendant, les deux anciens amis transformés en haineux adversaires ne sortaient plus de leurs maisons respectives. Farouches et solitaires, ils passaient leur vie sur la plate-forme de la tour ou sur celle du donjon. De là, il leur était possible de surveiller le météore qui avait ravi leur bon sens et de s’assurer, plusieurs fois par jour, qu’il continuait à tracer sa courbe lumineuse dans les profondeurs du firmament. Ils ne descendaient que rarement de ces hauteurs, où, du moins, ils étaient à l’abri de leur entourage immédiat, dont l’hostilité déclarée ajoutait une amertume aux amertumes dont ils se jugeaient abreuvés.

Francis Gordon, retenu par mille souvenirs d’enfance, n’avait pas abandonné la maison d’Elisabeth street, mais il n’adressait plus la parole à son oncle. On déjeunait, on dînait sans prononcer un seul mot. Mitz elle-même ne desserrant plus les dents et ne donnant plus cours à son éloquence savoureuse, la maison était silencieuse et triste comme un cloître.

Chez le docteur Hudelson, les rapports familiaux n’étaient pas plus agréables. Loo boudait impitoyablement malgré les coups d’œil suppliants de son père; Jenny pleurait intarissablement malgré les exhortations de sa mère. Quant à celle-ci, elle se contentait de soupirer, en espérant du temps un remède à une situation dont le ridicule le disputait à l’odieux.

Mrs Hudelson avait raison, puisque le temps, dit-on, arrange tout. Il faut cependant reconnaître qu’il ne paraissait pas très pressé, cette fois, d’améliorer les affaires de ces deux malheureuses familles. Si Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson ne restaient pas insensibles à la réprobation qui les entourait chez eux, cette réprobation ne leur causait pas, en effet, un chagrin comparable à celui qu’ils eussent éprouvé en d’autres circonstances. Leur idée fixe les cuirassait d’indifférence contre une émotion qui n’avait pas leur bolide pour objet. Ah! ce bolide!… À lui tout l’amour de leur cœur, toutes les pensées de leur cerveau, toutes les aspirations de leur être!

Avec quelle passion ils lisaient les notes quotidiennes de J. B. K. Lowenthal et les comptes rendus des séances de la Conférence Internationale! Là étaient leurs ennemis communs, et contre eux ils étaient enfin unis dans une haine égale et pareille.

Aussi, bien vive avait été leur satisfaction d’apprendre à quelles difficultés s’étaient heurtées les réunions préparatoires, et plus vive fut-elle encore, quand ils connurent avec quelle lenteur, par quelles voies tortueuses, la Conférence Internationale définitivement constituée s’acheminait vers un accord, qui demeurait problématique et incertain.

Pour employer une expression du langage familier, il y avait, en effet, du tirage à

Washington.

Dès sa seconde séance, la Conférence Internationale avait donné l’impression qu’elle ne mènerait pas sans peine ses importants travaux à bonne fin. Malgré l’étude approfondie faite dans le sein des sous-commissions, l’entente parut, dès le début, des plus difficiles à réaliser.

La première proposition ferme qui se fit jour fut de laisser la propriété du bolide au pays qui le recevrait du ciel. C’était ramener la question à une loterie où il n’y aurait eu qu’un seul lot, et quel gros lot!

Cette proposition, faite par la Russie et soutenue par l’Angleterre et par la Chine, États aux vastes territoires, provoqua ce qu’on appelle des “mouvements divers” en style parlementaire. Très indécis, les autres États.

On dut suspendre la séance. Il y eut des conciliabules, des intrigues de couloir… Finalement, afin de reculer tout au moins un vote embarrassant, une motion d'ajournement, déposée par la Suisse, réunit la majorité des suffrages.

On ne discuterait donc cette solution que s'il était impossible de s'entendre sur un partage équitable.

Mais comment, en pareille matière, acquérir la notion de ce qui est équitable et de ce qui ne l'est pas? Problème éminemment délicat. Sans qu'une opinion précise à cet égard parvînt à se dégager de la discussion, la Conférence Internationale accumula vainement les séances, dont plusieurs furent tumultueuses à ce point que M. Harvey dut se couvrir et quitter le fauteuil présidentiel.

Si ce geste avait été suffisant jusqu'ici pour calmer l'effervescence de l'Assemblée, en serait-il toujours ainsi? À en juger par la surexcitation des esprits, par la violence des expressions échangées, on pouvait en douter. En vérité, l'énervement général était tel qu'il y avait lieu de prévoir le jour où il faudrait recourir à la force armée, ce qui serait fort dommageable à la majesté des États souverains représentés à la Conférence.

Pourtant, un pareil scandale était dans la logique des choses. Il n'y avait pas de raison pour que l'affolement se calmât. Au contraire, il irait vraisemblablement s'exaspérant de jour en jour, puisque de jour en jour, d'après les notes quotidiennes de J. B. K. Lowenthal, la chute du bolide devait être considérée comme de plus en plus probable.

Après une dizaine de communiqués fort émus, qui relataient à la fois l'ahurissante sarabande du météore et le désespoir de son observateur, celui-ci semblait s'être ressaisi. Tout à coup, dans la nuit du 11 au 12 juin, il avait retrouvé la paix de l’âme, en constatant que le météore, cessant ses pérégrinations fantaisistes, était de nouveau sollicité par une force régulière et constante, qui, pour être inconnue, n’en était plus pour cela contraire à toute raison. Dès cet instant, J. B. K. Lowenthal, se réservant de rechercher plus tard pourquoi ce corps céleste avait été pendant dix jours comme frappé de folie, était revenu à la sérénité qui est l’apanage naturel du mathématicien.

Par lui, l’univers avait été informé sans tarder de ce retour à la normale, et, depuis ce jour-là, ses notes quotidiennes avaient toujours enregistré une perturbation lente du météore, dont l’orbite avait recommencé à s’incliner vers le Nord-Est-Sud-Ouest, et dont la distance à la terre diminuait suivant une progression, dont J. B. K. Lowenthal n’était pas, toutefois, parvenu à déterminer la loi. La probabilité de chute devenait donc de plus en plus grande. Si ce n’était pas une certitude, elle y confinait un peu plus tous les jours.

Quel puissant motif pour la Conférence Internationale de hâter l’achèvement de ses travaux!

Le savant directeur de l’observatoire de Boston, dans ses dernières notes échelonnées du 5 au 14 juillet, se montrait encore plus audacieux dans ses pronostics. Il annonçait en même temps, à mots chaque jour moins couverts, qu’une modification nouvelle et très importante était survenue dans la marche du bolide, et que, selon toute vraisemblance, le public pourrait être bientôt renseigné sur les conséquences qu’il convenait d’en déduire.

C’est précisément à cette date du 14 juillet que la Conférence Internationale arriva au fond d’une impasse. Toutes les combinaisons discutées ayant été successivement repoussées, la matière manquait maintenant à la discussion.

Les délégués se regardèrent avec embarras. Par quel bout reprendre une question déjà attaquée sous toutes ses faces sans résultat?

Repoussée dès les premières séances, la répartition des milliards météoriques entre tous les États proportionnellement à leur surface territoriale. Et pourtant, cette combinaison respectait l’équité qu’on proclamait rechercher, les nations à grande superficie ayant plus de besoins et faisant, d’autre part, en consentant au partage, le sacrifice de leurs chances plus nombreuses, ce qui méritait compensation. Cela n’avait pas empêché cette méthode d’être finalement rejetée devant l’opposition invincible des pays à population dense.

Ceux-ci proposèrent aussitôt d’effectuer la répartition, non pas en raison du nombre de kilomètres carrés, mais en raison du nombre des habitants. Ce système, qui avait aussi quelque chose d’équitable, puisqu’il était conforme au grand principe de l’égalité des droits entre les humains, fut combattu par la Russie, le Brésil, la République Argentine et par plusieurs autres contrées à population clairsemée. Le président Harvey, partisan convaincu de la doctrine de Monroe, ne put faire autrement que de se ranger à l’avis exprimé par deux Républiques d’Amérique, et son influence décida du vote. Vingt abstentions et dix-neuf voix hostiles firent pencher la balance du côté de la négative.

Des gouvernements à finances embarrassées, qu’il vaut mieux ne pas désigner plus explicitement, suggérèrent alors qu’il serait équitable de répartir l’or tombé du ciel de telle manière que le sort de tous les habitants de la planète fût autant que possible équilibré. On objecta immédiatement que ce système, avec ses allures socialistes, constituerait une prime à la paresse et qu’il conduirait à une répartition si compliquée qu’on devait la considérer comme pratiquement irréalisable. Cela n’empêcha pas d’autres orateurs de vouloir compliquer encore, en soutenant, par voie d’amendements, qu’il convenait de tenir compte des trois facteurs: superficie, population et richesse, en attribuant à chacun d’eux un coefficient conforme à l’équité.

L’équité! On n’avait que ce mot-là à la bouche. Il est moins certain qu’elle fût au fond des cœurs, et c’est pourquoi sans doute, tous espérant du temps un avantage quelconque, ces solutions furent rejetées comme les précédentes.

Ce dernier vote fut acquis le 14 juillet, et c’est alors que les délégués se regardèrent avec embarras. On se trouvait en face du néant.

La Russie et la Chine estimèrent le moment opportun pour exhumer la proposition enterrée au début sous une motion d’ajournement, en adoucissant toutefois ce qu’elle avait de trop rigoureux. Ces deux États proposèrent donc que la propriété des milliards célestes fût attribuée à celle des nations dont le territoire serait choisi par le sort, à charge pour elle de verser aux autres pays une indemnité calculée à raison de mille francs par citoyen.

Peut-être, tant était grande la lassitude, cette solution transactionnelle aurait-elle été votée le soir même, si l’on ne s’était heurté à l’obstruction de la République du Val d’Andorre. Son représentant, M. Ramontcho, entama un interminable discours, qui durerait peut-être encore, si le Président, constatant le vide absolu des banquettes, n’avait pris le parti de lever la séance et de remettre au lendemain la suite de la discussion.

Si la République du Val d’Andorre, dont les préférences étaient acquises à un mode de répartition basé uniquement sur le chiffre de la population, avait cru faire acte de bonne politique en empêchant le vote immédiat sur la proposition de la Russie, la République du Val d’Andorre s’était lourdement trompée. Alors que cette proposition lui assurait encore, dans tous les cas, d’appréciables avantages, elle risquait fort maintenant de ne pas recevoir un centime, fâcheux résultat sur lequel ne comptait pas M. Ramontcho, qui avait perdu là une belle occasion de se taire.

Dès la matinée du lendemain, 15 juillet, il allait se produire, en effet, un événement de nature à discréditer les travaux de la Conférence Internationale et à en compromettre définitivement le succès. S’il avait été possible, tant qu’on était dans l’ignorance du lieu où tomberait le bolide, de discuter tous les modes possibles de répartition, pouvait-on continuer la discussion alors que cette ignorance avait pris fin? N’aurait-on pas eu mauvaise grâce à demander le partage, après le tirage de la loterie, au bénéficiaire du gros lot?

Une chose était certaine, en tout cas, c’est qu’un tel partage ne pourrait plus se faire à l’amiable. Jamais le pays favorisé par le sort n’y consentirait bénévolement. Jamais, désormais, on ne verrait reprendre séance et participer aux travaux de la Conférence Internationale M. de Schnack, délégué du Groenland, l’heureux gagnant à qui, dans sa note quotidienne, J. B. K. Lowenthal attribuait, ce matin-là, les milliards errants.

“Depuis une dizaine de jours, écrivait le savant directeur de l’Observatoire de Boston, nous avons parlé à plusieurs reprises d’un changement important survenu dans la marche du météore. Nous y reviendrons aujourd’hui avec plus de précision, le temps écoulé nous ayant convaincu du caractère définitif de ce changement, et le calcul nous permettant d’en déterminer les conséquences.

“Le changement consiste uniquement en ceci, que, depuis le 5 juillet, la force qui sollicitait le bolide a cessé de se manifester. À partir de ce jour, il n’a plus été constaté la moindre déviation de l’orbite, et le bolide ne s’est rapproché de la terre que dans la mesure stricte qui lui est imposée par les conditions dans lesquelles il se meut. Il en est aujourd’hui distant de cinquante kilomètres environ.

“Si l’influence qui agissait sur le bolide avait disparu quelques jours plus tôt, celui-ci aurait pu, en vertu de la force centrifuge, s’éloigner de notre planète jusqu’à une distance voisine de sa distance primitive. Désormais, il n’en est plus ainsi. La vitesse du météore, réduite par le frottement sur les couches plus denses de l’atmosphère, n’est que précisément suffisante pour le maintenir sur sa trajectoire actuelle. Il s’y maintiendrait donc éternellement, si la cause à laquelle est dû son ralentissement, c’est-à-dire la résistance de l’air, était supprimée. Mais, cette cause étant permanente, on peut considérer comme certain que le bolide tombera.

“Il y a plus. La résistance de l’air étant un phénomène parfaitement étudié et connu, il est possible de tracer dès aujourd’hui la courbe de chute du météore. Sous réserves de complications inattendues, dont les faits antérieurs nous empêchent de rejeter l’hypothèse, on est dès à présent en état d’affirmer ce qui suit:

“1° Le bolide tombera.

“2° La chute s’effectuera le 19 août entre deux heures et onze heures du matin.

“3° Elle aura lieu dans un rayon de dix kilomètres autour de la ville d’Upernivik, capitale du Groenland.”

Si le banquier Robert Lecœur était en situation d’avoir connaissance de cette note de J. B. K. Lowenthal, il eut lieu d’être content. En effet, à peine la nouvelle fut-elle répandue, qu’il y eut un effondrement sur tous les marchés, et c’est des quatre cinquièmes de leur valeur que tombèrent les actions des exploitations aurifères de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Continent.

CHAPITRE XVI

XVI

Dans lequel on voit nombre de curieux profiter de cette occasion d’aller au Groenland et d’assister à la chute de l’extraordinaire météore.

Le 27 juillet, dans la matinée, une foule nombreuse assistait au départ du steamer Mozik, qui allait quitter Charleston, le grand port de la Caroline du Sud. Telle était l’affluence des curieux désireux de se rendre au Groenland que, depuis plusieurs jours, il n’y avait plus une seule cabine disponible à bord de ce navire de quinze cents tonneaux, bien qu’il ne fût pas le seul à être frété pour cette destination. Nombre d’autres paquebots de différentes nationalités se disposaient à remonter l’Atlantique jusqu’au détroit de Davis et jusqu’à la mer de Baffin, au-delà des limites du Cercle Polaire Arctique.

Cette affluence n’a rien qui doive surprendre dans l’état de surexcitation où se trouvaient les esprits, depuis la communication retentissante de J. B. K. Lowenthal.

Ce savant astronome ne pouvait s’être trompé. Après avoir si durement morigéné MM. Forsyth et Hudelson, il ne se serait pas exposé à encourir les mêmes reproches. Dans des circonstances si exceptionnelles, parler à la légère aurait été inexcusable, et cela l’eût voué à l’indignation publique, il le savait.

On devait donc tenir ses conclusions pour certaines. Ce n’était ni dans les inabordables contrées polaires, ni dans les abîmes des océans, d’où aucun effort humain n’eût pu le retirer, que devait tomber le bolide. Non, c’était sur le sol du Groenland qu’il viendrait s’écraser.

C’était cette vaste région, jadis dépendante du Danemark, et à laquelle ce royaume avait généreusement accordé l’indépendance quelques années avant l’apparition du météore, que la fortune allait favoriser, de préférence à tous les autres États de l’univers.

Il est vrai, immense est cette contrée, dont on ne saurait dire si elle est continent ou île. Il aurait pu arriver que la sphère d’or s’abattît sur un point très éloigné du littoral, à des centaines de lieues vers l’intérieur, et les difficultés eussent été grandes, dans ce cas, pour l’atteindre. Bien entendu, cela va de soi, on aurait vaincu ces difficultés, on aurait bravé les froids arctiques et les tempêtes de neige, et l’on se serait, au besoin, élevé jusqu’au pôle même, à la poursuite de ces milliers de milliards.

Il était, toutefois, fort heureux que l’on ne fût pas obligé à de tels efforts et que le lieu de la chute eût pu être désigné avec autant de précision. Le Groenland suffisait à tout le monde et nul n’enviait la gloire un peu trop froide des Parry, des Nansen, ou autres navigateurs des latitudes hyperboréennes.

Si le lecteur eût pris passage sur le Mozik, au milieu de centaines de passagers, parmi lesquels on comptait quelques femmes, il eût remarqué cinq voyageurs qui ne lui sont pas inconnus. Leur présence, ou tout au moins la présence de quatre de ces passagers, ne l’aurait pas autrement surpris.

L’un était Mr Dean Forsyth qui, en compagnie d’Omicron, voguait loin de la tour d’Elisabeth street; un autre était Mr Sydney Hudelson qui avait quitté le donjon de Moriss street.

Aussitôt que des compagnies de transport bien avisées eurent organisé ces voyages au Groenland, les deux rivaux n’avaient pas hésité à prendre leur billet d’aller et retour. Au besoin, ils eussent affrété chacun un navire à destination d’Upernivik. Évidemment, ils n’avaient pas l’intention de mettre la main sur le bloc d’or, de se l’approprier et de le rapporter à Whaston. Cependant, ils entendaient se trouver là au moment de la chute.

Qui sait, après tout, si le Gouvernement groenlandais, entré en possession du bolide, ne leur attribuerait pas une part de ces milliards tombé du ciel?…

Il va de soi que, à bord du Mozik, Mr Forsyth et le docteur s’étaient soigneusement abstenus de choisir des cabines voisines. Au cours de cette navigation, comme à Whaston, il n’y aurait pas entre eux le moindre rapport.

Mrs Hudelson ne s’était pas opposée au départ de son mari, pas plus que la vieille Mitz n’avait dissuadé son maître d’entreprendre ce voyage. Toutefois, le docteur s’était vu en butte à de si pressantes sollicitations de sa fille aînée qu’il avait fini, le sentiment du chagrin qu’il lui avait causé par son obstination l’incitant d’ailleurs à la faiblesse et à l’indulgence, par consentir à l’emmener. Jenny accompagnait donc son père.

En insistant comme elle l’avait fait, la jeune fille poursuivait un but. Séparée de Francis Gordon depuis les scènes violentes qui avaient définitivement brouillé les deux familles, elle supposait que celui-ci accompagnerait son oncle. Dans ce cas, ce serait encore un bonheur pour les deux fiancés que de vivre si près l’un de l’autre, sans compter que les occasions de se parler et de se joindre ne leur manqueraient sans doute pas au cours du voyage.

L’événement prouva qu’elle avait justement raisonné. Francis Gordon s’était en effet résolu à accompagner son oncle. Assurément, pendant l’absence du docteur, il n’aurait pas voulu transgresser ses ordres formels en se présentant à la maison de Moriss street. Mieux valait donc qu’il prît part au voyage, comme le faisait Omicron, pour s’interposer, le cas échéant, entre les deux adversaires et pour profiter de toute circonstance qui pourrait modifier cette déplorable situation. Peut-être se détendrait-elle d’elle-même, après la chute du bolide, soit qu’il fût devenu propriété de la nation groenlandaise, soit qu’il eût été se perdre dans les profondeurs de l’océan Arctique.

J. B. K. Lowenthal, après tout, n’était qu’un homme et, comme tel, sujet à l’erreur. Le Groenland n’est-il pas situé entre deux mers? Il suffirait donc d’une déviation provoquée par quelque circonstance atmosphérique, pour que l’objet de tant de convoitises échappât à l’avidité humaine.

Un personnage que ce dénouement n’eût pas satisfait, c’était M. Ewald de Schnack, le délégué du Groenland à la Commission Internationale, lequel se trouvait présentement au nombre des passagers du Mozik. Son pays allait tout simplement devenir l’État le plus riche du monde. Pour loger tant de trillions, les coffres du Gouvernement ne seraient, ni assez grands, ni assez nombreux. Heureuse nation, où n’existerait plus aucun impôt d’aucune sorte et où serait supprimée l’indigence! Étant donnée la sagesse de la race Scandinave, nul doute que cette énorme masse d’or ne serait écoulée qu’avec une extrême prudence. Il y avait donc lieu d’espérer que le marché monétaire ne subirait pas un trop grand trouble du fait de cette pluie dont Jupiter inonda la belle Danaé, s’il faut en croire les récits mythologiques.

M. de Schnack allait être le héros du bord. Les personnalités de Mr Dean Forsyth et du docteur Hudelson s’effaçaient devant celle du représentant du

Groenland, et c’était dans une haine commune que les deux rivaux se rencontraient envers ce représentant d’un État qui ne leur laissait aucune part — fût-ce seulement une part de vanité — dans leur immortelle découverte.

La traversée de Charleston à la capitale groenlandaise peut être estimée à trois mille trois cents milles, soit plus de six mille kilomètres. Elle devait durer une quinzaine de jours, y compris une relâche à Boston, où le Mozik se réapprovisionnerait de charbon. Quant aux vivres, il en emportait pour plusieurs mois, ainsi que les autres navires ayant même destination, car, par suite de l’affluence des curieux, il eût été impossible d’assurer leur existence à Upernivik.

Le Mozik remonta d’abord vers le Nord, en vue de la côte orientale des États-Unis. Mais, le lendemain du départ, le cap Hatteras, extrême pointe de la Caroline du Nord, laissé en arrière, il mit le cap plus au large.

Au mois de juillet, le ciel est généralement beau dans ces parages de l’Atlantique, et, tant que la brise soufflait de l’Ouest, le steamer, couvert par la côte, glissait sur une mer calme. Parfois, malheureusement, le vent venait du large, et alors roulis et tangage produisaient leurs effets accoutumés.

Si M. de Schnack avait un cœur solide de trillionnaire, il n’en était pas ainsi de Mr Dean

Forsyth et du docteur Hudelson.

C’était leur début en navigation, et ils payaient largement leur tribut au dieu Neptune. Mais pas un instant ils n’en venaient à regretter de s’être lancés dans une semblable aventure.

Il est inutile de dire si ces indispositions, qui les réduisaient à l’impuissance, étaient mises à profit par les deux fiancés. Eux ne donnaient point prise au mal de mer. Aussi rattrapaient-ils le temps perdu, pendant que père et oncle geignaient lamentablement sous les coups écœurants de la perfide Amphitrite. Ils ne se quittaient que pour prodiguer leurs soins aux deux malades. Toutefois, ce n’est pas sans quelque raffinement de malice qu’ils s’étaient réparti le travail. Tandis que Jenny offrait ses consolations à Mr Dean Forsyth, c’est du docteur Hudelson que Francis Gordon relevait le courage chancelant.

Lorsque la houle était moins forte, Jenny et lui conduisaient hors de leurs cabines les deux malheureux astronomes, ils les amenaient au grand air sur le spardeck, ils les asseyaient chacun sur un fauteuil, pas très loin l’un de l’autre, en ayant soin de diminuer graduellement cette distance.

“Comment allez-vous? disait Jenny en ramenant une couverture sur les jambes de Mr Forsyth.

— J’ai bien mal!” soupirait le malade sans même savoir qui lui parlait.

Et, en accotant le docteur contre des coussins bien disposés:

“Comment cela va-t-il, Mr Hudelson?” répétait Francis d’un ton affable, comme s’il n’eût jamais été congédié de la maison de Moriss street.

Les deux rivaux restaient là quelques heures, n’ayant qu’une vague conscience de leur voisinage. Pour leur rendre un peu de vie, il fallait que M. de Schnack vînt à passer près d’eux, solide sur ses jambes, sûr de lui comme un gabier qui se rit de la houle, la tête haute de l’homme qui n’a que des rêves d’or, qui voit tout en or. Un mourant éclair passait alors dans les yeux de Mr Forsyth et de Mr Hudelson, qui trouvaient la force de bégayer pour eux-mêmes de haineuses invectives.

“Ce détrousseur de bolides!” murmurait Mr Forsyth.

“Ce voleur de météores!” murmurait Mr Hudelson.

M. de Schnack n’y prenait pas garde; il ne consentait même pas à remarquer leur présence à bord. Il allait et venait dédaigneusement avec l’aplomb d’un homme qui va trouver dans son pays plus d’argent qu’il n’en faudrait pour rembourser cent fois la dette publique du monde entier.

Cependant, la navigation se poursuivait dans des conditions assez heureuses en somme. Il était à croire que d’autres navires, partis des ports de la côte est, remontaient au Nord, en se dirigeant vers le détroit de David, et que d’autres encore, ayant même destination, traversaient en ce moment l’Atlantique.

Le Mozik passa au large de New-York sans s’arrêter, et, cap au Nord-Est, continua sa route vers Boston. Dans la matinée du 30 juillet il vint relâcher devant cette capitale de l’État de Massachusetts. Une journée serait suffisante pour remplir ses soutes, car ce n’est pas au Groenland qu’il aurait pu renouveler son combustible.

Si la traversée n’avait pas été mauvaise, la plupart des passagers cependant venaient d’être éprouvés par le mal de mer. Cinq ou six d’entre eux estimèrent que cela suffisait, et, renonçant au voyage, débarquèrent à Boston. Assurément, ce n’étaient ni Mr Dean Forsyth, ni le docteur Hudelson. Dussent-ils, sous les coups de roulis et de tangage, en arriver à leur dernier souffle, du moins le rendraient-ils en face du météore, objet de leurs voeux passionnés.

Le débarquement de ces quelques passagers moins endurants laissa libres plusieurs des cabines du Mozik. Elles ne manquèrent pas d’amateurs qui en profitèrent pour prendre passage à Boston.

Parmi ceux-ci, on aurait pu remarquer un gentleman de belle allure, qui s’était présenté des premiers pour s’assurer l’une des cabines vacantes. Ce gentleman n’était autre que Mr Seth Stanfort, l’époux de Mrs Arcadia Walker, marié, puis divorcé, dans les conditions que l’on sait, par devant le juge Proth de Whaston.

Après la séparation, qui remontait déjà à plus de deux mois. Mr Seth Stanfort était rentré à Boston. Toujours possédé du goût des voyages, et la note de J. B. K. Lowenthal le forçant à renoncer à celui du Japon, il avait visité les principales villes du Canada: Québec, Toronto, Montréal, Ottawa. Cherchait-il à oublier son ancienne femme? Cela semblait peu probable. Les deux époux s’étaient plu d’abord, ils s’étaient déplu ensuite. Un divorce, aussi original que leur mariage, les avait séparés l’un de l’autre. Tout était dit. Ils ne se reverraient jamais sans doute, ou, s’ils se revoyaient, peut-être ne se reconnaîtraient-ils pas.

Mr Seth Stanfort venait d’arriver à Toronto, la capitale actuelle du Dominion, lorsqu’il eut connaissance de la sensationnelle communication de J. B. K. Lowenthal. Quand bien même la chute aurait dû s’effectuer à quelques milliers de lieues, dans les régions les plus reculées de l’Asie ou de l’Afrique, il aurait fait l’impossible pour s’y rendre. Ce n’est point que ce phénomène météorique l’intéressât autrement, mais assister à un spectacle qui ne compterait qu’un nombre relativement restreint de spectateurs, voir ce que des millions d’êtres humains ne verraient pas, cela était bien pour tenter un aventureux gentleman, grand amateur de déplacements, et auquel sa fortune permettait les plus fantaisistes voyages.

Or, il ne s’agissait pas de partir pour les antipodes. Le théâtre de cette féerie astronomique se trouvait à la porte du Canada.

Mr Seth Stanfort prit donc le premier train qui partait pour Québec, puis, de là, celui qui courait vers Boston à travers les plaines du Dominion et de la Nouvelle-Angleterre.

Quarante-huit heures après l’embarquement de ce gentleman, le Mozik, sans perdre la terre de vue, passa au large de Portsmouth, puis de Portland, à portée des sémaphores. Peut-être étaient-ils en mesure de donner des nouvelles du bolide, que l’on pouvait maintenant apercevoir à l’œil nu lorsque le ciel se dégageait.

Les sémaphores restèrent muets et celui d’Halifax ne fut pas plus loquace, lorsque le steamer se trouva par le travers de ce grand port de la Nouvelle-Écosse.

Combien les voyageurs durent regretter que la baie de Fundy, entre la Nouvelle-Écosse et le Nouveau-Brunswich, n’offrît pas d’issue vers l’Est ni vers le Nord! Ils n’auraient pas eu à supporter la houle violente qui les assaillit jusqu’à l’île du Cap Breton. Innombrables étaient les malades, parmi lesquels, malgré les soins de Jenny et de Francis, Mr Forsyth et Mr Hudelson continuaient à se faire remarquer.

Le commandant du Mozik eut pitié de ses passagers si mal en point. Il s’engagea dans le golfe du Saint-Laurent, pour regagner la haute mer par le détroit de Belle-Île, à l’abri du littoral de Terre-Neuve. Il alla ensuite chercher la côte occidentale du Groenland, en traversant le détroit de Davis dans toute sa largeur. On eut dès lors une navigation plus calme.

Le cap Confort fut signalé dans la matinée du 7 août. La terre groenlandaise se termine un peu plus dans l’Est, au cap Farewel, contre lequel viennent se briser les lames de l’océan Atlantique septentrional. Et avec quelle furie, ils ne le savent que trop les courageux pêcheurs du banc de Terre-Neuve et de l’Islande!

Par bonheur, il n’était point question de remonter le long de la côte est du Groenland. Cette côte est à peu près inabordable. Elle n’offre aucun port de relâche aux bâtiments et les houles de la haute mer la battent de plein fouet. Au contraire, dans le détroit de Davis, les abris ne manquent pas. Soit au fond des fjords, soit derrière les îles, on peut aisément trouver un refuge, et, sauf lorsque les vents du Sud donnent directement, la navigation s’effectue dans des conditions favorables.

La traversée se continua, en effet, sans que les passagers eussent trop à se plaindre.

Cette partie de la côte groenlandaises, depuis le cap Farewel jusqu’à l’île Disko, est généralement bordée par des falaises de roches primitives, d’une altitude considérable, qui arrêtent les vents du large. Même pendant la période hivernale, ce littoral est moins obstrué par les glaces que les courants du pôle amènent de l’océan Boréal. Ce fut dans ces conditions que le Mozik battit de sa rapide hélice les eaux de la baie Gilbert. Il vint relâcher quelques heures à Godthaab où le cuisinier du bord put se procurer du poisson frais en grande quantité. N’est-ce pas, en effet, de la mer que les peuplades groenlandaises tirent leur principale nourriture? Puis il passa successivement à l’ouvert des ports de Holsteinborg et de Christianshaab. Ces bourgades, dont la seconde se dissimule au fond de la baie Disko, sont tellement enfermées dans leurs murailles de roches qu’on ne peut en soupçonner l’existence. Elles constituent d’utiles retraites pour les nombreux pêcheurs qui sillonnent le détroit de Davis et y pourchassent baleines, narvals, morses et phoques, en s’élevant parfois jusqu’aux dernières limites de la mer de Baffin.

L’île Disko, que le steamer atteignit dès les premières heures du 9 août, est la plus importante de toutes celles dont le chapelet s’égrène le long du littoral groenlandais. Cette île aux falaises basaltiques possède un chef-lieu, Godhavn, bâti sur sa côte méridionale. Cette station se compose, non de maisons en pierre, mais de maisons en bois, avec des murs de poutres à peine équarries enduites d’une épaisse couche de goudron qui s’oppose à la pénétration de l’air. Francis Gordon et Seth Stanfort, en leur qualité de passagers que n’hypnotisait pas le météore, furent vivement impressionnés par cette bourgade noirâtre que relevait ça et là la teinte rouge des toitures et des fenêtres. Que devait être la vie pendant les hivers de ce climat? On les eût bien étonnés en leur assurant qu’elle était à peu près celle des familles de Stockholm ou de Copenhague. Certaines maisons, bien que peu meublées, n’y sont point dépourvues de confortable. Elles ont salon, salle à manger, bibliothèque même, car la “haute société”, si l’on peut s’exprimer de la sorte, danoise d’origine, n’est pas dépourvue de lettres. L’autorité y est représentée par un délégué du gouvernement dont le siège est à Upernivik.

C’est dans le port de cette ville que le Mozik, après avoir laissé en arrière l’île Disko, vint mouiller le 10 août vers six heures du soir.

CHAPITRE XVII

XVII

Dans lequel le merveilleux bolide et un passager du “Mozik” rencontrent, celui-ci, un passager de l’”Oregon”, et celui-là, le globe terrestre.

Groenland signifie “Terre Verte”. “Terre Blanche” eût mieux convenu à ce pays couvert de neiges. Il n’a pu être ainsi baptisé que par une agréable ironie de son parrain, un certain Erik le Rouge, marin du Xe siècle, qui probablement n’était pas plus rouge que le Groenland n’est vert. Peut-être, après tout, ce Scandinave espérait-il décider ses compatriotes à venir coloniser cette verte région hyperboréenne. Il n’y a guère réussi. Les colons ne se sont point laissé tenter par ce nom enchanteur, et, actuellement, en y comprenant les indigènes, la population groenlandaise ne dépasse pas dix mille habitants.

Si jamais pays ne fut point fait pour recevoir un bolide valant cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards, c’est bien celui-ci, il faut l’avouer. Cette réflexion, plus d’un dut se la permettre, dans cette foule de passagers que la curiosité amenait à Upernivik. Ne lui aurait-il pas été aussi facile, à ce bolide, de tomber quelques centaines de lieues plus au Sud, à la surface des larges plaines du Dominion ou de l’Union, où il eût été si aisé de le retrouver?… Non, c’était une contrée des plus impraticables et des plus inhospitalières qui allait être le théâtre de cet événement mémorable!

À vrai dire, il y avait des précédents à invoquer. Des bolides ne sont-ils pas déjà tombés au Groenland? Dans l’île Disko, Nordenskiold n’a-t-il pas trouvé trois blocs de fer, pesant chacun vingt-quatre tonnes, très probablement des météorites, qui figurent actuellement dans le musée de Stockholm?

Très heureusement, si J. B. K. Lowenthal n’avait pas fait erreur, le bolide devait choir sur une région assez abordable, et au cours de ce mois d’août qui relève la température au-dessus de la glace. À cette époque de l’année, le sol peut justifier, par endroits, l’ironique qualification de terre verte donnée à ce morceau du Nouveau Continent. Dans les jardins poussent quelques légumes et certaines graminées, alors que, vers l’intérieur, le botaniste ne récolterait que mousses et lichens. Sur le littoral, des pâturages apparaissent après la fonte des glaces, ce qui permet d’entretenir un peu de bétail. Certes, on n’y compterait par centaines, ni les bœufs, ni les vaches, mais il s’y rencontre des poules et des chèvres d’une endurance toute rustique, sans oublier les rennes et la nombreuse population des chiens.

Par exemple, après deux ou trois mois d’été, tout au plus, l’hiver revient avec ses interminables nuits, ses rudes courants atmosphériques partis des régions polaires et ses épouvantables blizzards. Sur la carapace qui recouvre le sol, voltige une sorte de poussière grise, dite poussière de glace, cette cryokonite pleine de plantes microscopiques dont Nordenskiold recueillit les premiers échantillons.

Mais, de ce que le météore ne dût pas tomber à l’intérieur de la grande terre, il ne s’ensuivait pas que la possession en fût assurée au Groenland.

Upernivik ne se trouve pas seulement au bord de la mer, c’est la mer qui l’entoure de toutes parts. C’est une île au milieu d’un nombreux archipel d’îlots semés le long du littoral, et cette île, qui n’a pas dix lieues de tour, offrait, on en conviendra, une cible bien étroite au boulet aérien. S’il ne l’atteignait pas avec une justesse mathématique, il passait à côté du but, et les eaux de la mer de Baffin se refermeraient sur lui. Or, la mer est profonde en ces parages hyperboréens, et c'est à mille ou deux mille mètres que la sonde en atteint le fond. Allez donc repêcher dans cet abîme une masse pesant près de neuf cent mille tonnes.

Une telle éventualité ne laissait pas de préoccuper vivement M. de Schnack qui avait plus d'une fois confié ses inquiétudes à Seth Stanfort, avec lequel il s'était lié au cours de la traversée. Mais, contre ce danger, il n'y avait rien à faire, et l'on ne pouvait que s'en remettre aux calculs du savant J. B. K. Lowenthal.

Ce malheur, que redoutait M. de Schnack, Francis Gordon et Jenny Hudelson l'eussent au contraire considéré comme la plus heureuse des solutions. Le bolide disparu, ceux dont leur bonheur dépendait n'auraient plus rien à revendiquer, pas même l'honneur de lui donner leur nom. Ce serait un grand pas vers la réconciliation tant désirée.

Cette manière de voir des deux jeunes gens, il est douteux qu'elle fût partagée par les nombreux passagers du Mozik et de la dizaine d'autres bâtiments de toutes nations, alors mouillés devant Upernivik. Ceux-là tenaient à voir quelque chose, puisqu'ils étaient venus pour ça.

Ce n'est pas, en tout cas, la nuit qui s'opposerait à ce que leur désir fût satisfait. Pendant quatre-vingts jours, dont moitié avant et moitié après le solstice d'été, le soleil ne se lève ni ne se couche, à cette latitude. On aurait donc les plus grandes chances d'y voir clair pour rendre visite au météore, si, conformément aux affirmations de J. B. K. Lowenthal, le sort l'amenait aux environs de la station.

Dès le lendemain de l'arrivée, une foule composée d'éléments très divers se répandit autour des quelques maisonnettes en bois d'Upernivik, dont la principale arbore le pavillon blanc à croix rouge du Groenland. Jamais

Groenlandais et Groenlandaises n’avaient vu tant de monde affluer sur leurs lointains rivages.

Des types assez curieux, ces Groenlandais, principalement sur la côte occidentale. Petits ou de moyenne taille, trapus, vigoureux, courts de jambes, mains et attaches fines, carnation d’un blanc jaunâtre, figure large et aplatie, presque sans nez, yeux bruns et légèrement bridés, chevelure noire et rude qui leur retombe sur la face, ils ressemblent quelque peu à leurs phoques, dont ils ont la physionomie douce, et aussi la confortable couche de graisse qui les défend contre le froid. Les vêtements sont les mêmes pour les deux sexes: bottes, pantalons “amaout” ou capuche; toutefois les femmes, gracieuses et rieuses dans la jeunesse, relèvent leurs cheveux en cimier, s’affublent d’étoffes modernes, s’ornent de rubans multicolores. La mode du tatouage, jadis très en faveur, a disparu sous l’influence des missionnaires, mais ces peuplades ont conservé un goût passionné pour le chant et la danse, qui sont leurs uniques distractions. Pour boisson elles ont de l’eau; pour nourriture, la chair des phoques et de chiens comestibles, du poisson et des baies d’algues. Triste vie, en somme, que celle des Groenlandais.

L’arrivée d’un tel nombre d’étrangers à l’île d’Upernivik causa une grande surprise aux quelques centaines d’indigènes qui habitent l’île, et lorsqu’ils apprirent la cause de cette affluence, leur surprise ne diminua pas, au contraire. Ils n’en étaient plus, ces pauvres gens, à ignorer la valeur de l’or. Mais l’aubaine ne serait pas pour eux. Si les milliards s’abattaient sur leur sol, ils n’iraient point remplir leurs poches, bien que les poches ne manquent point au vêtement groenlandais, qui n’est pas celui des Polynésiens, et pour cause. Ils iraient, ces milliards, s’engouffrer dans les coffres de l’État, d’où, selon l’usage, on ne les verrait plus jamais sortir. Cependant, ils ne devaient pas se désintéresser de l’”affaire”. Qui sait s’il n’en résulterait tout de même pas quelque bien-être pour les pauvres citoyens du Groenland?

Quoi qu’il en soit, il commençait à être temps qu’il se produisît, le dénouement de cette “affaire”.

Si d’autres steamers arrivaient encore, le port d’Upernivik ne suffirait plus à les contenir. D’autre part, le mois d’août s’avançait, et les bâtiments ne pouvaient s’attarder bien longtemps sous une latitude si élevée. Septembre, c’est l’hiver, puisqu’il ramène les glaces des détroits et des canaux du Nord, et la mer de Baffin ne tarde pas à devenir impraticable. Il faut fuir, il faut s’éloigner de ces parages, il faut laisser en arrière le cap Farewel, sous peine d’être pris dans les embâcles pour les sept ou huit mois des rudes hivers de l’océan Arctique.

Pendant les heures de l’attente, les intrépides touristes faisaient de longues promenades à travers l’île. Son sol rocheux, presque plat, rehaussé seulement de quelques tumescences dans sa partie médiane, se prête à la marche. Ça et là s’étendent des plaines, où, au-dessus d’un tapis de mousses et d’herbes plus jaunes que vertes, s’élèvent des arbustes qui ne deviendront jamais des arbres, quelques-uns de ces bouleaux rabougris qui poussent encore au-dessus du soixante-douzième parallèle.

Le ciel était généralement brumeux, et le plus souvent de gros nuages bas le traversaient sous le souffle des brises de l’Est. La température ne dépassait pas dix degrés au-dessus de zéro. Aussi les passagers étaient-ils heureux de retrouver à bord de leurs navires un confort que le village n’aurait pu leur offrir et une nourriture qu’ils n’eussent trouvée ni à Godhavn, ni en aucune autre station du littoral.

Cinq jours s’étaient écoulés depuis l’arrivée du Mozik lorsque, dans la matinée du 16 août, un dernier bâtiment fut signalé au large d’Upernivik. C’était un steamer, qui se glissait à travers les îles et îlots de l’archipel pour venir prendre son mouillage. À la corne de sa brigantine flottait le pavillon aux cinquante et une étoiles des États-Unis d’Amérique.

À n’en pas douter, ce steamer amenait un nouveau lot de curieux sur le théâtre du grand fait météorologique, des retardataires, qui, d’ailleurs, n’arriveraient point en retard, puisque le globe d’or gravitait encore dans l’atmosphère.

Vers onze heures du matin, le steamer Oregon laissait tomber son ancre au milieu de la flottille. Un canot s’en détachait aussitôt et mettait à terre un des passagers sans doute plus pressé que ses compagnons de voyage.

Ainsi que le bruit s’en répandit sur-le-champ, c’était un des astronomes de l’observatoire de Boston, un certain M. Wharf, qui se rendit chez le chef du gouvernement. Celui-ci prévint sans tarder M. de Schnack, et le délégué se rendit à la maisonnette au toit de laquelle se déployait le drapeau national.

L’anxiété fut grande. Le bolide allait-il, par hasard, fausser compagnie à tout le monde, et “filer à l’anglaise” vers d’autres parages célestes, selon le voeu de Francis Gordon?

On fut bientôt rassuré à cet égard. Le calcul avait conduit J. B. K. Lowenthal à des conclusions exactes, et c’est uniquement pour assister à la chute du bolide, à titre de représentant de son chef hiérarchique, que M. Wharf avait entrepris ce long voyage.

On était au 16 août. Il s’en fallait donc encore de trois fois vingt-quatre heures que le bolide reposât sur la terre groenlandaise.

“À moins qu’il ne s’en aille par le fond!…” murmurait Francis Gordon, seul, d’ailleurs, à concevoir cette pensée, et à formuler cette espérance.

Mais que l’affaire dût ou non avoir ce dénouement, on ne le saurait que dans trois jours. Trois jours, ce n’est guère et c’est quelquefois beaucoup, tout particulièrement au Groenland, où il serait osé de prétendre que les plaisirs pèchent par leur abondance. On s’ennuyait donc, et de contagieux bâillements désarticulaient les maxillaires de ces touristes désœuvrés.

L’un de ceux auxquels le temps paraissait le moins long, était assurément Mr Seth Stanfort. Globe trotter déterminé, accourant volontiers où il y avait à voir quelque chose d’un peu spécial, il était accoutumé à la solitude et savait, comme on dit, “se tenir compagnie à lui-même”.

C’est pourtant à son profit exclusif, — car telle est l’injustice immanente, — que devait se rompre la fastidieuse monotonie de ces dernières journées d’attente.

Mr Seth Stanfort se promenait sur la plage pour assister au débarquement des passagers de l’Oregon, lorsqu’il s’arrêta soudain à la vue d’une dame qu’une des embarcations déposait sur le sable.

Seth Stanfort, doutant du témoignage de ses yeux, s’approcha, et, d’un ton qui exprimait la surprise, mais aucun déplaisir:

“Mrs Arcadia Walker, si je ne fais point erreur? dit-il.

— Mr Stanfort! répondit la passagère.

— Je ne m’attendais pas, Mrs Arcadia, à vous revoir sur cette île lointaine.

— Et moi pas davantage, Mr Stanfort.

— Comment vous portez-vous, Mrs Arcadia?

— On ne peut mieux, Mr Stanfort… Et vous-même?

— Très bien, tout à fait bien!”

Sans plus de formalités, ils se mirent à causer, comme deux anciennes connaissances qui viennent de se retrouver par le plus grand des hasards. Mrs Arcadia Walker de demander tout d’abord en levant la main vers l’espace:

“Il n’est pas encore tombé?

— Non, rassurez-vous; pas encore, mais cela ne saurait tarder.

— Je serai donc là! dit Mrs Arcadia Walker avec une vive satisfaction.

— Comme j’y suis moi-même”, répondit Mr Seth Stanfort.

Décidément, c’étaient deux personnes très distinguées, deux personnes du monde, pour ne pas dire deux anciens amis, qu’un pareil sentiment de curiosité réunissait sur cette plage d’Upernivik.

Pourquoi, après tout, en aurait-il été autrement? Certes, Mrs Arcadia Walker n’avait point trouvé en Seth Stanfort son idéal, mais peut-être bien que cet idéal n’existait pas, puisqu’elle ne l’avait rencontré nulle part. Jamais l’étincelle, qu’on appelle “coup de foudre” dans les romans, n’avait jailli pour elle, et, à défaut de cette étincelle légendaire, nul ne s’était emparé de son cœur par la reconnaissance due à quelque service éclatant. Expérience loyalement faite, le mariage ne s’était pas trouvé à sa convenance, non plus qu’à celle de Mr Seth Stanfort; mais, tandis qu’elle éprouvait beaucoup de sympathie pour un homme qui avait eu la délicatesse de renoncer à être son mari, celui-ci gardait de son ex-femme le souvenir d’une personne intelligente, originale, devenue absolument parfaite en cessant d’être sa femme.

Ils s’étaient séparés sans reproche, sans récrimination. Mr Seth Stanfort avait voyagé de son côté, Mrs Arcadia du sien. Leur fantaisie les amenait tous deux sur cette île groenlandaise. Pourquoi auraient-ils affecté de ne pas se connaître? Quoi de plus vulgaire que de se considérer comme prisonniers des préjugés et des plus sottes conventions? Ces premiers propos échangés, Mr Seth Stanfort se mit à la disposition de Mrs Arcadia Walker, qui accepta très volontiers les services de Mr Seth Stanfort, et il ne fut plus question entre eux que du phénomène météorologique dont le dénouement était si proche.

À mesure que le temps s’écoulait, un énervement croissant troublait les curieux réunis sur ce lointain rivage, et plus spécialement les principaux intéressés, parmi lesquels il faut bien ranger, outre le Groenland, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Sydney Hudelson, puisqu’ils s’entêtaient à s’attribuer cette qualité.

“Pourvu qu’il tombe bien sur l’île!” pensaient MM. Forsyth et Hudelson.

“Et non à côté!” pensait le chef du gouvernement groenlandais.

“Mais pas sur nos têtes!” ajoutaient en eux-mêmes quelques trembleurs.

Trop près ou trop loin, c’étaient là, en effet, les deux seuls points inquiétants.

Le 16 et le 17 août passèrent sans aucun incident. Par malheur, le temps devenait mauvais, et la température commençait à baisser sensiblement. Peut-être cet hiver serait-il précoce. Les montagnes du littoral étaient déjà couvertes de neige, et, lorsque le vent soufflait de ce côté, il était si âpre, si pénétrant, qu'il fallait se mettre à l'abri dans les salons des navires. Il n'y aurait donc pas lieu de séjourner sous de pareilles latitudes, et, leur curiosité satisfaite, les curieux reprendraient volontiers la route du Sud.

Seuls, peut-être, les deux rivaux, entêtés à faire valoir ce qu'ils appelaient leurs droits, voudraient demeurer près du trésor. On pouvait s'attendre à tout de la part de tels enragés, et Francis Gordon, pensant à sa chère Jenny, n'envisageait pas sans angoisses cette perspective d'un long hivernage.

Dans la nuit du 17 au 18 août, ce fut une véritable tempête qui se déchaîna sur l'archipel. Vingt heures avant, l'astronome de Boston avait réussi à prendre une observation du bolide dont la vitesse diminuait sans cesse. Mais, telle était la violence de la tourmente, que l'on pouvait se demander si elle n'allait point emporter le bolide.

Aucune accalmie ne se manifesta dans la journée du 18 août, et les premières heures de la nuit qui suivit furent tellement troublées que les capitaines des navires en rade éprouvèrent de graves inquiétudes.

Cependant, vers le milieu de cette nuit du 18 au 19 août, la tempête décrut notablement. Dès cinq heures du matin, tous les passagers en profitèrent pour se faire mettre à terre. Ce 19 août, n'était-ce pas la date fixée pour la chute du bolide?

Il était temps. À sept heures, un coup sourd se fit entendre, si rude que l'île en trembla sur sa base…

Quelques instants plus tard, un indigène accourait à la maison occupée par M. de Schnack. Il apportait la grande nouvelle…

Le bolide était tombé sur la pointe nord-ouest de l’île d’Upernivik.

CHAPITRE XVIII

XVIII

Où, pour atteindre le bolide, M. de Schnack et ses nombreux complices commettent les crimes d’escalade et d’effraction.

Aussitôt, ce fut une ruée.

En un instant répandue, la nouvelle révolutionna les touristes et la population groenlandaise, les navires en rade furent abandonnés de leurs équipages, et un véritable torrent humain s’élança dans la direction indiquée par le messager indigène.

Si l’attention de tous n’avait pas été ainsi confisquée au profit exclusif du météore, on aurait pu remarquer, à cet instant précis, un fait difficilement explicable. Comme obéissant à quelque mystérieux signal, un des bâtiments mouillés dans la baie, un steamer dont la cheminée vomissait la fumée depuis l’aube, leva l’ancre et se dirigea vers la haute mer à toute vapeur. C’était un navire aux formes allongées, un fin marcheur selon toute vraisemblance. En quelques minutes, il eut disparu derrière la falaise.

Une telle conduite avait de quoi surprendre. Pourquoi être venu jusqu’à Upernivik, pour le quitter juste au moment où il y avait quelque chose à voir? Mais personne, tant la hâte générale était grande, ne s’aperçut de ce départ, pourtant assez singulier.

Aller le plus vite possible, telle était l’unique préoccupation de cette foule où l’on comptait quelques femmes et même des enfants. On s’avançait en désordre, se poussant, se bousculant. Cependant, il en était un, au moins, qui avait conservé tout son calme. En sa qualité de globe-trotter chevronné que rien ne saurait plus émouvoir, Mr Seth Stanfort gardait, au milieu du trouble de tous, son dilettantisme un peu dédaigneux. Même — était-ce pur raffinement de politesse ou tout autre sentiment? — il avait commencé par tourner franchement le dos à la direction suivie par ses compagnons pour se porter à la rencontre de Mrs Arcadia Walker et lui offrir sa compagnie. Après tout, n’était-il pas naturel, étant données leurs relations d’amitié, qu’ils allassent ensemble à la découverte du bolide?

“Enfin, il est tombé, Mr Stanfort! tels furent les premiers mots de Mrs Arcadia Walker.

— Enfin, il est tombé!” répondit Mr Seth Stanfort.

“Enfin, il est tombé!” avait répété et répétait encore toute cette foule en se dirigeant vers la pointe nord-ouest de l’île.

Cinq personnes avaient toutefois réussi à se maintenir en avant des autres. C’était d’abord M. Ewald de Schnack, délégué du Groenland à la Conférence Internationale, auquel les plus impatients avaient courtoisement cédé le pas.

Dans l’espace ainsi devenu libre, deux touristes s’étaient aussitôt insinués, et MM. Dean Forsyth et Hudelson marchaient maintenant en tête, fidèlement accompagnés de Francis et de

Jenny. Les jeunes gens continuaient à intervertir leurs rôles naturels, comme ils l’avaient fait à bord du Mozik. Jenny s’empressait près de Mr Dean

Forsyth, tandis que Francis Gordon entourait de soins le docteur Sydney Hudelson. Leur sollicitude n’était pas toujours très bien accueillie, il faut le reconnaître, mais, cette fois, les deux rivaux étaient si profondément troublés, qu’ils n’avaient même pas remarqué leur présence réciproque. Il ne pouvait donc être question de protester contre la malice des deux jeunes gens, qui marchaient entre eux, côte à côte.

“Le délégué va être le premier à prendre possession du bolide, maugréa Mr Forsyth.

— Et à mettre la main dessus, ajouta le docteur Hudelson, croyant répondre à Francis Gordon.

— Mais cela ne m’empêchera pas de faire valoir mes droits! proclama Mr Dean Forsyth, à l’adresse de Jenny.

— Non, certes!” approuva Mr Sydney Hudelson, qui pensait aux siens. À l’extrême satisfaction de la fille de l’un et du neveu de l’autre, il semblait vraiment que les deux adversaires, oubliant leurs rancunes personnelles, fissent masse de leurs deux haines contre l’ennemi commun.

Par suite d’un heureux concours de circonstances, l’état atmosphérique s’était entièrement modifié. La tourmente avait cessé, à mesure que le vent retombait vers le Sud. Si le soleil ne s’élevait encore que de quelques degrés au-dessus de l’horizon, du moins brillait-il à travers les derniers nuages amincis par son rayonnement. Plus de pluie, plus de rafales, un temps clair, un espace tranquille, une température qui se tenait entre huit et neuf degrés au-dessus du zéro centigrade.

De la station à la pointe, on pouvait compter une grande lieue qu’il fallait franchir à pied. Ce n’est pas Upernivik qui aurait pu fournir un véhicule quelconque. Du reste, la marche était facile sur un sol assez plat, de nature rocheuse, dont le relief ne s’accusait sérieusement qu’au centre et au voisinage du littoral, où s’élevaient quelques hautes falaises.

C’était précisément au-delà de ces falaises que le bolide était tombé. De la station, on ne pouvait l’apercevoir.

L’indigène qui, le premier, avait apporté la grande nouvelle, servait de guide. Il était suivi de près par M. de Schnack, MM. Forsyth et Hudelson, Jenny et Francis, suivis eux-mêmes d’Omicron, de l’astronome de Boston et de tout le troupeau des touristes.

Un peu en arrière, Mr Seth Stanfort cheminait à côté de Mrs Arcadia Walker. Les deux ex-époux n’étaient pas sans connaître la rupture devenue légendaire des deux familles, et les confidences de Francis, avec lequel, pendant la traversée, Mr Seth Stanfort avait noué quelques relations, avaient mis celui-ci au courant des conséquences de cette rupture.

“Cela s’arrangera, pronostiqua Mrs Arcadia Walker, quand elle fut renseignée à son tour.

— C’est à souhaiter, approuva Mr Seth Stanfort.

— Certes! dit Mrs Arcadia, et tout n’en ira après que mieux. Voyez-vous, Mr Stanfort, un peu de difficultés, d’inquiétudes, ne messied pas avant le mariage. Des unions trop facilement faites risquent de se défaire de même!… N’est-ce pas votre avis?

— Tout à fait, Mrs Arcadia. Ainsi, nous, notre exemple est probant. En cinq minutes… à cheval… le temps de rendre la main…

— Pour la rendre de nouveau six semaines après, — mais à nous-mêmes et réciproquement, cette fois! interrompit en souriant Mrs Arcadia Walker. Eh bien! Francis Gordon et miss Jenny Hudelson, pour ne point se marier à cheval, n'en seront que plus sûrs d'atteindre le bonheur.”

Inutile de dire que, au milieu de cette foule de curieux, Mr Seth Stanfort et Mrs Arcadia Walker devaient être les seuls, si on en excepte les deux jeunes fiancés, à ne point se préoccuper en ce moment du météore, à n'en point parler, à philosopher, comme l'eût probablement fait Mr John Proth, dont les quelques mots qu'ils venaient de prononcer évoquaient pour eux le visage plein de fine bonhomie.

On allait d'un bon pas sur un plateau semé de maigres arbustes, d'où s'échappaient nombre d'oiseaux plus troublés qu'ils ne l'avaient jamais été aux environs d'Upernivik. En une demi-heure, trois quarts de lieue furent enlevés. Un millier de mètres restaient à franchir pour atteindre le bolide qui se dérobait aux regards derrière un mouvement de la falaise. C'est là qu'on le trouverait, d'après le guide groenlandais, et cet indigène ne pouvait se tromper. Pendant qu'il travaillait la terre, il avait parfaitement vu la lueur fulgurante du météore, et il avait entendu le bruit de la chute, que bien d'autres, quoique de plus loin, avaient entendu aussi.

Une circonstance, paradoxale dans cette région, obligea les touristes à se reposer un instant. Il faisait chaud. Oui, si incroyable que cela pût paraître, on s'épongeait le front, comme si l'on se fût trouvé sous une latitude plus tempérée. Était-ce donc leur course rapide qui infligeait à tous ces curieux ce commencement de liquéfaction? Elle y contribuait sans doute, mais la température de l'air, cela n'était pas contestable, tendait aussi à remonter. En cet endroit, voisin de la pointe nord-ouest de l'île, le thermomètre eût certainement marqué plusieurs degrés de différence avec la station d’Upernivik. Il semblait même que la chaleur s’accusât plus vivement à mesure que l’on approchait du but.

“L’arrivée du bolide aurait-elle modifié le climat de l’archipel? demanda en riant Mr Stanfort.

— Ce serait fort heureux pour les groenlandais! répondit sur le même ton Mrs Arcadia.

— Il est probable que le bloc d’or, échauffé par son frottement sur les couches atmosphériques, est encore à l’état incandescent, expliqua l’astronome de Boston, et que sa chaleur rayonnante se fait sentir jusqu’ici.

— Bon! s’écria Mr Seth Stanfort, est-ce qu’il nous faudra attendre qu’il se refroidisse?

— Son refroidissement eût été bien plus rapide s’il fût tombé en dehors de l’île au lieu de tomber dessus”, fit observer pour lui-même Francis Gordon, revenant à son opinion favorite.

Lui aussi, il avait chaud, mais il n’était pas le seul. M. de Schnack, M. Wharf transpiraient à son exemple, et de même toute la foule, et tous les Groenlandais qui ne s’étaient jamais vus à pareille fête.

Après avoir soufflé un bon moment, on se remit en route. Encore cinq cents mètres et, au détour de la falaise, le météore apparaîtrait dans toute son éblouissante splendeur.

Malheureusement, au bout de deux cents pas, M. de Schnack, qui marchait en tête, dut s’arrêter de nouveau, et derrière lui, MM. Forsyth et Hudelson, et derrière ceux-ci, toute la foule, furent obligés d’en faire autant. Ce n’était pas la chaleur qui les obligeait à cette seconde halte, mais bien un obstacle inattendu, le plus inattendu des obstacles qu’il eût été possible de prévoir en un semblable pays.

Faite de pieux traversés par trois lignes de fil de fer, une clôture, s’infléchissant en interminable courbe, allait à droite et à gauche aboutir au littoral et barrait le passage de tous côtés. De place en place, des pieux plus élevés que les autres supportaient des écriteaux sur lesquels, en anglais, en français et en danois la même inscription était répétée. M. de Schnack qui avait précisément en face de lui un de ces écriteaux, y lisait avec stupéfaction: “Propriété privée. Défense d’entrer.”

Une propriété privée dans ces lointains parages, voilà qui n’était pas ordinaire! Sur les côtes ensoleillées de la Méditerranée ou sur celles plus brumeuses de l’Océan, les villégiatures se comprennent. Mais sur les rivages de l’océan Glacial!… Que pouvait bien faire de ce domaine aride et rocailleux son original propriétaire?

En tout cas, ce n’était pas l’affaire de M. de Schnack. Absurde ou non, une propriété privée lui barrait la route, et cet obstacle tout moral avait brisé net son élan. Un délégué officiel est naturellement respectueux des principes sur lesquels reposent les sociétés civilisées, et l’inviolabilité du domicile privé est un axiome universellement proclamé.

Cet axiome, le propriétaire avait d’ailleurs pris soin de le rappeler à ceux qui auraient pu être tentés de l’oublier. “Défense d’entrer”, signifiait formellement en trois langues la théorie des écriteaux.

M. de Schnack était perplexe. Demeurer là lui semblait bien cruel. Mais, d’autre part, violer la propriété d’autrui, au mépris de toutes lois divines et humaines!…

Des murmures, grossissant de minute en minute, se firent entendre en queue de la colonne et se propagèrent en peu d’instants jusqu’à la tête. Les derniers rangs, ignorants de la cause qui les motivait, protestaient de toute la force de leur impatience contre cet arrêt. Mis au courant de l’incident, ils ne se tinrent pas pour satisfaits, et, leur mécontentement gagnant de proche en proche, ce fut bientôt un infernal vacarme au milieu duquel tout le monde parlait à la fois.

Allait-on s’éterniser devant cette clôture? Après avoir fait des milliers de milles pour arriver jusque-là, allait-on se laisser bêtement arrêter par un méchant bout de fil de fer? Le propriétaire du terrain ne pouvait avoir la folle prétention d’être aussi celui du météore. Il n’avait donc aucune raison de refuser le passage. Et, d’ailleurs, s’il le refusait, c’était bien simple, il n’y avait qu’à le prendre.

M. de Schnack fut-il ébranlé par ce flot d’arguments violents? Toujours est-il que ses principes fléchirent. Précisément en face de lui, retenue par une simple ficelle, une petite porte existait dans la clôture. À l’aide d’un canif, M. de Schnack coupa cette ficelle, et, sans réfléchir que cette véritable effraction le transformait en un vulgaire cambrioleur, il pénétra sur le territoire interdit.

Les uns par la porte, les autres enjambant les fils de fer, le reste de la foule s’y engouffra à sa suite. En quelques instants plus de trois mille personnes eurent envahi la “propriété privée”. Foule agitée, bruyante, qui commentait vivement cet incident inattendu.

Mais le silence s’établit tout à coup comme par enchantement. À cent mètres de la clôture, une petite cabane en planches, cachée jusque-là par un repli du terrain, s’était révélée brusquement, et la porte de cette misérable masure venait de s’ouvrir, encadrant un personnage du plus étrange aspect.

Ce personnage interpellait les envahisseurs. “Eh, là-bas! criait-il en français d’une voix rocailleuse, ne vous gênez pas. Faites comme chez vous!”

M. de Schnack comprenait le français. C’est pourquoi M. de Schnack s’arrêta sur place, et, derrière lui, s’arrêtèrent pareillement les touristes, qui, d’un même mouvement, tournèrent à la fois vers l’insolite interpellateur leurs trois mille visages intrigués.

CHAPITRE XIX

XIX

Dans lequel Zéphyrin Xirdal éprouve pour le bolide une aversion croissante, et ce qui s'ensuit.

Si Zéphyrin Xirdal avait été seul, serait-il parvenu sans anicroche à destination? C'est possible, car tout arrive. On eût cependant fait montre de prudence en pariant pour la négative.

Quoi qu'il en soit, l'occasion avait manqué d'engager des paris à ce sujet, puisque sa bonne étoile l'avait mis sous la sauvegarde d'un Mentor, dont l'esprit pratique neutralisait la fantaisie outrancière de cet original. Zéphyrin Xirdal ignora donc les difficultés d'un voyage, à tout prendre assez compliqué mais que M. Robert Lecœur avait réussi à rendre plus simple qu'une promenade dans les environs.

Au Havre, où l'express les avait amenés en quelques heures, les deux voyageurs furent accueillis avec empressement à bord d'un superbe steamer, qui largua aussitôt ses amarres et gagna la haute mer sans attendre d'autres passagers.

L'Atlantic, en effet, n'était pas un paquebot, mais bien un yacht de cinq à six cents tonneaux affrété par M. Robert Lecœur et à leur disposition exclusive. En raison de l'importance des intérêts engagés, le banquier avait jugé utile de posséder un moyen de communiquer à son gré avec l'univers civilisé. Les énormes bénéfices déjà encaissés par lui dans sa spéculation sur les mines d'or lui permettant, d'autre part, les plus princières audaces, il s’était assuré la jouissance de ce navire, choisi entre cent autres en Angleterre.

L’Atlantic, fantaisie d’un lord multimillionnaire, avait été construit en vue des plus grandes vitesses. De formes fines et allongées, il pouvait, sous l’impulsion des quatre mille chevaux de ses machines, atteindre et même dépasser vingt noeuds. Le choix de M. Lecœur avait été dicté par cette particularité, qui, le cas échéant, serait d’un précieux avantage.

Zéphyrin Xirdal ne manifesta aucune surprise d’avoir ainsi un navire à ses ordres. Peut-être, il est vrai, ne s’aperçut-il pas de ce détail. En tout cas, il franchit la coupée et s’installa dans sa cabine sans formuler la plus petite observation.

La distance entre Le Havre et Upernivik est d’environ huit cents lieues marines, que l’Atlantic, en marchant à pleine puissance, eût été capable de franchir en six jours. Mais M. Lecœur, n’étant nullement pressé, consacra une douzaine de jours à cette traversée, et l’on arriva seulement dans la soirée du 18 juillet devant la station d’Upernivik.

Pendant ces douze jours, c’est à peine si Zéphyrin Xirdal desserra les dents. Au cours des repas qui les réunissaient nécessairement, M. Lecœur s’efforça à vingt reprises de mettre la conversation sur le but de leur voyage; il ne put jamais obtenir de réponse. Il avait beau lui parler du météore, son filleul paraissait ne plus s’en souvenir, et aucune lueur d’intelligence ne s’allumait dans son regard atone.

Xirdal, pour l’instant, regardait “en dedans” et poursuivait la solution d’autres problèmes. Lesquels? Il n’en a pas fait confidence. Mais ils devaient, en quelque manière, avoir la mer pour objet, car, soit à l’avant, soit à l’arrière du bâtiment, Xirdal passait ses journées à regarder les flots.

Peut-être n'est-il pas trop audacieux de supposer qu'il poursuivait mentalement ses recherches sur le phénomène de la tension superficielle, dont il avait précédemment touché un mot à une série de passants, en croyant parler à son ami Marcel Leroux. Peut-être même les déductions qu'il fit alors ne furent-elles pas étrangères à quelques-unes de ces merveilleuses inventions dont il devait plus tard étonner le monde.

Le lendemain de l'arrivée à Upernivik, M. Lecœur, qui commençait à désespérer, voulut essayer de réveiller l'attention de son filleul, en lui mettant sous les yeux sa machine dépouillée de son enveloppe protectrice. Il avait calculé juste, et le moyen fut radical. En apercevant sa machine, Zéphyrin Xirdal se secoua comme au sortir d'un rêve et promena autour de lui un regard où se lisaient la fermeté et la lucidité des grands jours.

“Où sommes-nous? demanda-t-il.

— À Upernivik, répondit M. Lecœur.

— Et mon terrain?

— Nous y allons de ce pas.”

Ce n'était pas tout à fait exact. Auparavant, il fallut passer chez M. Biarn Haldorsen, chef de l'Inspectorat du Nord, dont on trouva facilement la demeure reconnaissable au drapeau qui la surmontait. Les formules de politesse échangées, on entama les affaires sérieuses par le canal d'un interprète, dont M. Lecœur s'était prudemment assuré le concours.

Une première difficulté se présenta tout de suite. Non pas que M. Biarn Haldorsen eût la velléité de contester les titres de propriété qui lui étaient soumis; mais leur interprétation n'était pas évidente. Aux termes de ces titres très réguliers et revêtus de toutes les signatures et de tous les sceaux officiels désirables, le gouvernement groenlandais, représenté par son agent diplomatique à Copenhague, cédait à M. Zéphyrin Xirdal une surface de neuf kilomètres carrés délimitée par quatre côtés égaux de trois kilomètres chacun, orientés selon les points cardinaux et se coupant à angles droits à semblable distance d’un point central situé par 72° 53’ 30’’ de latitude nord et 55° 35’ 18’’ de longitude ouest, le tout au prix de cinq cents kroners le kilomètre carré, soit un peu plus de six mille francs au total.

M. Biarn Haldorsen ne demandait qu’à s’incliner, mais encore fallait-il connaître l’emplacement du point central. Certes, il n’était pas sans avoir entendu parler de latitude et de longitude, et il n’ignorait pas que de telles choses existassent. Par exemple, à cela se bornait le savoir de M. Biarn Haldorsen. Que la latitude fût un animal ou un végétal, la longitude un minéral ou un objet d’ameublement, cela lui paraissait également plausible et il se gardait de toute préférence.

Zéphyrin Xirdal compléta en quelques mots les connaissances cosmographiques du chef de l’Inspectorat du Nord et rectifia ce qu’elles avaient d’erroné. Il offrit ensuite de procéder lui-même, à l’aide des instruments de l’Atlantic, aux observations et aux calculs nécessaires. Le capitaine d’un navire danois actuellement en rade pourrait d’ailleurs en contrôler les résultats, afin de rassurer pleinement son Excellence M. Biarn Haldorsen.

Il fut ainsi décidé. En deux jours, Zéphyrin Xirdal eut terminé son travail, dont le capitaine danois ne put que confirmer la méticuleuse exactitude, et c’est alors que se présenta la seconde difficulté. Le point de la surface terrestre ayant comme coordonnée 72° 51’ 30’’ de latitude nord et 55° 35’

18’’ de longitude ouest, était situé en pleine mer, à deux cent cinquante mètres environ dans le nord de l’île d’Upernivik!

M. Lecœur, atterré par cette découverte, s’emporta en véhémentes récriminations. Qu’allait-on faire? Ainsi donc, on serait venu jusque dans ces contrées perdues pour voir bêtement le bolide se payer une pleine eau! Avait-on idée d’une pareille légèreté! Comment

Zéphyrin Xirdal — un savant! — avait-il pu commettre une erreur aussi grossière?

L’explication de cette erreur était des plus simples. Que le mot “Upernivik” désignât, non seulement une agglomération, mais aussi une île, Zéphyrin Xirdal ne le savait pas, voilà tout. Après avoir déterminé, au point de vue mathématique, le lieu de chute du bolide, il s’en était fié à une méchante carte extraite d’un petit atlas scolaire, carte qu’il tira de l’une de ses nombreuses poches et qu’il mit sous les yeux du banquier irrité. Cette carte indiquait bien que le point du globe situé par 72° 51’ 30’’de latitude nord et par 55° 35’ 18’’de longitude ouest était proche de la bourgade d’Upernivik, mais elle négligeait d’indiquer que cette bourgade, audacieusement figurée assez avant dans les terres, était au contraire située sur l’île du même nom, en bordure immédiate de la mer. Zéphyrin Xirdal, sans chercher plus loin, avait cru sur parole cette carte un peu trop approximative.

Puisse ceci servir de leçon! Puissent les lecteurs de ce récit s’adonner à l’étude de la géographie, et ne pas oublier qu’Upernivik est une île! Cela pourra leur être utile, le jour où ils auront à recueillir un bolide de cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards!

Par contre, cela n’arrangera pas les choses en ce qui concerne celui de Whaston.

Si du moins le terrain avait pu être tracé plus au Sud, cette tricherie aurait été encore favorable, dans le cas d’une déviation du météore. Mais, Zéphyrin Xirdal ayant commis l’imprudence de compléter l’éducation de Son Excellence M. Biarn Haldorsen et d’accepter un contrôle devenu bien gênant, ce modeste truquage n’était même plus possible. Il fallait, coûte que coûte, accepter la situation telle quelle et prendre livraison du terrain acheté partie en surface aquatique et partie en surface terrestre.

La limite sud de cette seconde fraction, la plus intéressante des deux, se trouva, en dernière analyse, portée à douze cent cinquante et un mètres du rivage septentrional d’Upernivik, et sa longueur de trois kilomètres excédant la largeur de l’île en cet endroit, il en résulta que les limites est et ouest auraient dû être tracées en plein Océan. Zéphyrin Xirdal reçut donc effectivement un peu plus de deux cent soixante-douze hectares, au lieu de neuf kilomètres carrés achetés et payés, ce qui rendait infiniment moins avantageuse cette opération immobilière. C’était une mauvaise affaire.

Au point de vue spécial de la chute du bolide, elle devenait même exécrable. Le point visé avec trop d’adresse par Zéphyrin Xirdal était en mer! Certes, il avait admis la possibilité d’une déviation, puisqu’il s’était “donné de l’air” sur quinze cents mètres dans tous les sens autour de ce point. Mais de quel côté se produirait-elle? Voilà ce qu’il ignorait. S’il pouvait évidemment se faire que le météore tombât dans la portion restreinte qui demeurait en sa possession, le contraire n’aurait rien de surprenant. De là, grande perplexité de M. Lecœur.

“Que vas-tu faire maintenant?” demanda-t-il à son filleul.

Celui-ci leva les bras au ciel en signe d’ignorance.

“Il faut agir pourtant, reprit son parrain d’un ton courroucé. Il faut que tu nous sortes de cette impasse.”

Zéphyrin Xirdal réfléchit un instant.

“La première chose à faire, dit-il enfin, c’est de clore le terrain et d’y construire une baraque suffisante pour nous loger. J’aviserai ensuite.”

M. Lecœur se mit à l’œuvre. En huit jours, les marins de l’Atlantic, aidés de quelques Groenlandais attirés par la haute paye offerte, eurent élevé une clôture en fils de fer dont les deux extrémités allaient plonger dans la mer, et construit une cabane en planches qui fut sommairement meublée des objets les plus indispensables.

Le 26 juillet, trois semaines avant le jour où devait s’effectuer la chute du bolide, Zéphyrin Xirdal se mit au travail. Après avoir pris quelques observations du météore dans les hautes zones de l’atmosphère, il s’envola dans les hautes zones des mathématiques. Ses nouveaux calculs ne purent que prouver la perfection de ses calculs antérieurs. Aucune erreur n’avait été commise.

Aucune déviation ne s’était produite. Le bolide tomberait exactement à l’endroit prévu, soit par 72° 51’ 30’’ de latitude nord et 55° 35’ 18’’ de longitude ouest.

“Dans la mer, par conséquent, conclut M. Lecœur, en dissimulant mal sa fureur.

— Dans la mer”, évidemment, dit avec sérénité Xirdal, qui, en vrai mathématicien, n’éprouvait d’autre sentiment qu’une grande satisfaction, en constatant la précision supérieure de ses calculs.

Mais presque aussitôt l’autre face de la question lui apparut.

“Diable!…” fit-il en changeant de ton et en regardant son parrain d’un air indécis.

Celui-ci se contraignit au calme.

“Voyons, Zéphyrin, reprit-il en adoptant le ton bonhomme qui convient avec les enfants, nous n’allons pas rester les bras croisés, je présume. Une gaffe a été commise; il faut la réparer. Puisque tu as été capable d’aller chercher le bolide en plein ciel, c’est un jeu pour toi de lui faire subir une déviation de quelques centaines de mètres.

— Vous croyez ça, vous! répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal en secouant la tête. Quand j’agissais sur le météore, il était à quatre cents kilomètres. À cette distance, l’attraction terrestre s’exerçait dans une mesure telle que la quantité d’énergie que je projetais sur une de ses faces était capable de provoquer une rupture d’équilibre appréciable. Il n’en est plus ainsi, à présent. Le bolide est plus près, et l’attraction terrestre le sollicite avec tant de force qu’un peu plus un peu moins n’y changera pas grand-chose. D’autre part, si la vitesse absolue du bolide a diminué, sa vitesse angulaire a beaucoup augmenté. Il passe maintenant comme l’éclair dans la position la plus favorable et l’on n’a guère le temps d’agir sur lui.

— Alors, tu ne peux rien? insista M. Lecœur en se mordant les lèvres pour ne pas éclater.

— Je n’ai pas dit ça, rectifia Zéphyrin Xirdal. Mais la chose est difficile. On peut essayer, cependant, bien entendu.”

Il l’essaya, en effet, et avec tant d’obstination que, le 17 août, il considéra comme certain le succès de sa tentative. Le bolide définitivement dévié tomberait en plein sur la terre ferme, à une cinquantaine de mètres du rivage, distance suffisante pour écarter tout danger.

Malheureusement, pendant les jours qui suivirent, cette violente tempête qui secoua si fort les navires en rade d’Upernivik balaya toute la surface de la terre, et Xirdal redouta à bon droit que la trajectoire du bolide ne fût modifiée par un aussi furieux déplacement de l’air.

Cette tempête, on le sait, se calma dans la nuit du 18 au 19, mais les habitants de la cabane ne profitèrent pas de ce répit que leur laissaient les éléments déchaînés. L’attente de l’événement ne leur permit pas de prendre une minute de repos. Après avoir assisté au coucher du soleil, un peu après dix heures et demie du soir, ils virent l’astre du jour se lever moins de trois heures plus tard, dans un ciel presque entièrement dégagé de nuages.

La chute se produisit juste à l’heure annoncée par Zéphyrin Xirdal. À six heures cinquante-sept minutes trente-cinq secondes, une lueur fulgurante déchira l’espace dans la région du Nord, aveuglant à demi M. Lecœur et son filleul, qui, depuis une heure, surveillaient l’horizon du pas de leur porte. Presque en même temps, on entendit un bruit sourd, et la terre trembla sous un choc formidable. Le météore était tombé.

Quand Zéphyrin Xirdal et M. Lecœur eurent retrouvé l’usage de la vue, ce qu’ils aperçurent tout d’abord, ce fut le bloc d’or à cinq cents mètres de distance.

“Il brûle, balbutia M. Lecœur en proie à une forte émotion.

— Oui”, répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal, incapable d’articuler autre chose que ce bref monosyllabe. Peu à peu, cependant, ils retrouvèrent le calme et se rendirent un compte plus exact de ce qu’ils voyaient.

Le bolide était bien, en effet, à l’état incandescent. Sa température devait dépasser mille degrés et être voisine du point de fusion. Sa composition de nature poreuse se révélait nettement, et c’est justement que l’observatoire de Greenwich l’avait comparé à une éponge. Traversant la surface, dont le refroidissement dû au rayonnement assombrissait la teinte, une infinité de canaux permettaient au regard de pénétrer dans l’intérieur, où le métal était porté au rouge vif. Divisés, croisés, recourbés en mille méandres, ces canaux formaient un nombre immense d’alvéoles, d’où l’air surchauffé s’échappait en sifflant.

Bien que le bolide eût été fortement aplati dans sa chute vertigineuse, sa forme sphérique se discernait encore. La partie supérieure demeurait assez régulièrement arrondie, tandis que la base disloquée, écrasée, épousait intimement les irrégularités du sol.

“Mais… il va glisser dans la mer!” s’écria M. Lecœur au bout de quelques instants. Son filleul garda le silence. “Tu avais annoncé qu’il tomberait à cinquante mètres du bord!

— Il en est à dix, car il faut tenir compte de son demi-diamètre.

— Dix ne sont pas cinquante.

— Il aura été dévié par la tempête.”

Les deux interlocuteurs n’échangèrent pas d’autres paroles et contemplèrent la sphère d’or en silence.

En vérité, M. Lecœur n’avait pas tort d’éprouver une certaine inquiétude. Le bolide était tombé à dix mètres de l’extrême arête de la falaise, sur le sol déclive qui réunissait cette arête au reste de l’île. Son rayon étant de cinquante-cinq mètres, ainsi que l’Observatoire de Greenwich avait eu raison de l’affirmer, il se trouvait en surplomb de quarante-cinq mètres au-dessus du vide. L’énorme masse de métal, déjà amollie par la chaleur, et ainsi projetée en porte-à-faux, avait pour ainsi dire coulé le long de la falaise verticale et pendait lamentablement jusqu’à peu de distance de la surface de la mer. Mais l’autre partie, littéralement imprimée dans le roc, retenait l’ensemble au-dessus de l’océan.

Assurément, puisqu’il ne tombait pas, c’est qu’il était en équilibre. Toutefois cet équilibre paraissait bien instable et on comprenait que la moindre impulsion aurait suffi à précipiter dans l’abîme le fabuleux trésor. Une fois lancé sur la pente, rien au monde ne serait capable de l’arrêter, et il glisserait alors invinciblement dans la mer qui se refermerait sur lui.

Raison de plus de se hâter, pensa soudain M. Lecœur, en reprenant conscience de lui-même. C’était folie de gâcher ainsi son temps dans une sotte contemplation, au grand dommage de ses intérêts.

Passant, sans perdre une minute de plus, derrière la maisonnette, il hissa le drapeau français au sommet d’un mât assez élevé pour être aperçu des vaisseaux mouillés devant Upernivik. On sait déjà que ce signal devait être vu et compris. L’Atlantic avait aussitôt pris la mer, en route pour le poste télégraphique le plus proche, d’où s’élancerait, à l’adresse de la Banque Robert Lecœur, rue Drouot, à Paris, une dépêche rédigée en langage clair: “Bolide tombé. Vendez.”

À Paris, on s’empresserait d’exécuter cet ordre, et cela vaudrait encore un immense bénéfice à M. Lecœur, qui jouait à coup sûr.

Quand la chute serait connue, nul doute que les mines ne subissent un dernier effondrement. M. Lecœur se rachèterait alors dans d’excellentes conditions. Allons! l’affaire avait du bon, quoi qu’il pût arriver, et M. Lecœur ne pouvait manquer d’encaisser un nombre respectable de millions.

Zéphyrin Xirdal, insensible à ces intérêts vulgaires, était resté plongé dans sa contemplation, quand un grand bruit de voix vint frapper son oreille. En se retournant, il aperçut la foule des touristes, qui, M. de Schnack à leur tête, s’étaient enhardis à pénétrer sur son domaine. Voilà qui était intolérable, par exemple! Xirdal, qui avait acquis un terrain pour être maître chez lui, fut outré d’un tel sans-gêne.

D’un pas rapide, il se porta au-devant des indiscrets envahisseurs.

Le délégué du Groenland lui épargna la moitié du chemin.

“Comment se fait-il, monsieur, dit Xirdal en l’abordant, que vous soyez entré chez moi? N’avez-vous pas vu les écriteaux?

— Pardonnez-moi, monsieur, répondit poliment M. de Schnack, nous les avons parfaitement vus, mais nous avons pensé qu’on était excusable d’enfreindre, en raison de circonstances si exceptionnelles, les règles généralement admises.

— Circonstances exceptionnelles?… demanda Xirdal avec candeur. Quelles circonstances exceptionnelles?”

L’attitude de M. de Schnack exprima à bon droit quelque surprise.

“Quelles circonstances exceptionnelles?… répéta-t-il. Sera-ce donc à moi de vous apprendre, monsieur, que le bolide de Whaston vient de tomber sur cette île?

— Je le sais parfaitement, déclara Xirdal… Mais il n’y a rien d’exceptionnel là-dedans. C’est un fait très banal que la chute d’un bolide.

— Pas quand il est en or.

— En or ou en autre chose, un bolide, c’est un bolide.

— Ce n’est pas l’avis de ces messieurs ni de ces dames, répliqua M. de Schnack, en montrant la foule des touristes dont la grande majorité ne comprenait pas un mot à ce dialogue. Tout ce monde n’est ici que pour assister à la chute du bolide de Whaston. Avouez qu’il aurait été dur, après un pareil voyage, d’être arrêté par une barrière de fils de fer.

— Il est vrai”, reconnut Xirdal disposé à la conciliation.

Les choses étaient ainsi en bonne voie, quand M. de Schnack commit l’imprudence d’ajouter:

“En ce qui me concerne, je pouvais d’autant moins me laisser arrêter par votre barrière, qu’elle s’opposait à l’accomplissement de la mission officielle dont je suis investi.

— Mission qui consiste?

— À prendre possession du bolide au nom du Groenland, dont je suis ici le représentant.”

Xirdal avait sursauté.

“Prendre possession du bolide!… s’écria-t-il. Mais vous êtes fou, mon bon monsieur!

— Je ne vois pas pourquoi, répliqua M. de Schnack d'un ton pincé. Le bolide est tombé en territoire groenlandais. Il appartient donc à l'État groenlandais, puisqu'il n'appartient à personne.

— Autant de mots, autant d'erreurs, protesta Zéphyrin Xirdal avec une violence naissante. D'abord, le bolide n'est pas tombé sur le territoire du Groenland mais sur mon territoire à moi, attendu que le Groenland me l'a bel et bien vendu contre espèces. En outre, le bolide appartient à quelqu'un, et ce quelqu'un, c'est moi.

— Vous?…

— Parfaitement, moi.

— À quel titre?

— Mais à tous les titres possibles, mon cher monsieur. Sans moi, le bolide graviterait encore dans l'espace, où, tout représentant que vous êtes, vous seriez bien en peine d'aller le chercher. Comment ne serait-il pas à moi, puisqu'il est chez moi et que c'est moi qui l'y ai fait tomber?

— Vous dites?… insista M. de Schnack.

— Je dis que c'est moi qui l'ai fait tomber. J'ai d'ailleurs eu soin d'en informer la Conférence

Internationale qui s'est réunie, paraît-il, à Washington. Je présume que ma dépêche à interrompu ses travaux."

M. de Schnack considérait son interlocuteur avec incertitude. Avait-il affaire à un farceur ou à un fou?

“Monsieur, répondit-il, je faisais partie de la Conférence Internationale, et je peux vous affirmer qu’elle siégeait toujours quand j’ai quitté Washington. D’autre part, je peux également vous affirmer que je n’ai aucune connaissance de la dépêche dont vous parlez.”

M. de Schnack était sincère. Un peu dur d’oreille, il n’avait pas entendu un seul mot de cette dépêche, lue, comme il est d’usage dans tout parlement qui se respecte, au milieu de l’infernal vacarme des conversations particulières.

“Je ne l’en ai pas moins envoyée, affirma Zéphyrin Xirdal qui commençait à s’échauffer. Qu’elle soit ou non arrivée à destination, cela ne change rien à mes droits.

— Vos droits?… riposta M. de Schnack que cette discussion inattendue irritait également. Osez-vous bien élever sérieusement des prétentions quelconques sur le bolide?

— Non, mais, je me gênerai peut-être! s’exclama Xirdal gouailleur.

— Un bolide de six trillions de francs!

— Et puis après?… Quand il vaudrait trois cent mille millions de milliards de billiards de trilliards, cela ne l’empêcherait pas d’être à moi.

— À vous!… c’est de la plaisanterie… Un homme posséder à lui seul plus d’or que le reste du monde!… Ce ne serait pas tolérable.

— Je ne sais pas si c’est tolérable ou pas tolérable, cria Zéphyrin Xirdal tout à fait en colère. Je ne sais qu’une chose, c’est que le bolide est à moi.

— C’est ce que nous verrons, conclut M. de Schnack d’un ton sec. Pour le moment, vous voudrez bien souffrir que nous poursuivions notre route.”

Ce disant, le délégué toucha légèrement le bord de son chapeau, et, sur un signe de lui, le guide indigène se remit en marche. M. de Schnack lui emboîta le pas, et les trois mille touristes emboîtèrent le pas à M. de Schnack.

Zéphyrin Xirdal, planté sur ses longues jambes, regarda passer cette foule, qui semblait l’ignorer. Son indignation était grande. Entrer chez lui sans sa permission et s’y comporter comme en pays conquis! Contester ses droits! Cela dépassait les bornes.

Rien à faire, cependant, contre une pareille foule. C’est pourquoi, quand le dernier étranger eut défilé, il en fut réduit à battre en retraite vers sa bicoque. Mais, s’il était vaincu, il n’était pas convaincu, et, chemin faisant, il donna libre cours à sa bile.

“C’est dégoûtant… dégoûtant!” proclamait-il à satiété en gesticulant comme un sémaphore.

Cependant, la foule se hâtait derrière le guide. Celui-ci s’arrêta enfin à l’amorce de l’extrême pointe de l’île. On ne pouvait aller plus loin.

M. de Schnack et M. Wharf le rejoignirent aussitôt. Puis ce furent MM. Forsyth et Hudelson,

Francis et Jenny, Omicron, Mr Seth Stanfort et Mrs Arcadia Walker, et enfin toute la masse des curieux que la flottille avait déversée sur ce littoral de la mer de Baffin.

Oui, impossible d’aller plus loin. La chaleur, devenue insoutenable, n’aurait pas permis un pas de plus.

D’ailleurs, ce pas aurait été inutile. À moins de quatre cents mètres, la sphère d’or apparaissait, et tout le monde pouvait la contempler, comme Zéphyrin Xirdal et M. Lecœur l’avaient contemplée une heure plus tôt. Elle ne rayonnait plus, comme au temps où elle traçait son orbite dans l’espace, mais tel était son éclat que les yeux avaient peine à le supporter. En somme, insaisissable quand elle sillonnait le ciel, elle n’était pas moins insaisissable maintenant qu’elle reposait sur le sol terrestre.

En cet endroit, le littoral s’arrondissait en une sorte de plateau, un de ces rochers désignés sous le nom d’Unalek, en langue indigène. Incliné vers le large, il se terminait en une falaise verticale élevée d’une trentaine de mètres au-dessus du niveau de la mer. C’est sur le bord de ce plateau que le bolide était tombé. Quelques mètres de plus à droite, et il se fût englouti dans les abîmes où plongeait le pied de la falaise.

“Oui! ne put s’empêcher de murmurer Francis Gordon, à vingt pas de là, il était par le fond…

— D’où on ne l’aurait pas facilement retiré, termina Mrs Arcadia Walker.

— Eh! M. de Schnack ne le tient pas encore, fit remarquer Mr Seth Stanfort. Il s’en faut qu’il soit encaissé par le gouvernement groenlandais.”

En effet, mais il le serait un jour ou l’autre. Question de patience, tout simplement. Il suffirait d’attendre le refroidissement et, à l’approche d’un hiver arctique, cela ne tarderait guère.

Mr Dean Forsyth et Mr Sydney Hudelson étaient là, immobiles, hypnotisés, pour ainsi dire, par la vue de cette masse d’or qui leur brûlait les yeux. Tous deux avaient essayé de se porter en avant, et tous deux avaient dû reculer, aussi bien que l’impatient Omicron qui faillit être grillé comme un roastbeef. À cette distance de quatre cents mètres, la température atteignait cinquante degrés centigrades, et la chaleur dégagée par le météore rendait l’air irrespirable.

“Mais enfin… il est là… Il repose sur l’île… Il n’est pas au fond de la mer… Il n’est pas perdu pour tout le monde… Il est aux mains de cet heureux Groenland!… Attendre… il suffira d’attendre…”

Voilà ce que répétaient les curieux arrêtés par la suffocante chaleur à ce tournant de falaise.

Oui, attendre… Mais combien de temps? Le bolide ne résisterait-il pas un mois, deux mois, au refroidissement? De telles masses métalliques, portées à une température si élevée, peuvent rester longtemps brûlantes. Cela s’est déjà vu pour des météorites de volume infiniment moindre.

Trois heures se passèrent et personne ne songeait à quitter la place. Voulait-on attendre qu’il fût possible d’approcher du bolide? Mais ce ne serait ni aujourd’hui, ni demain. À moins d’établir un campement et d’y apporter des vivres, il faudrait bien retourner aux navires.

“Mr Stanfort, dit Mrs Arcadia Walker, pensez-vous que quelques heures suffiront à refroidir ce bloc incandescent?

— Ni quelques heures ni quelques jours, Mrs Walker.

— Je vais donc retourner à bord de l’Oregon, quitte à revenir plus tard.

— Vous avez parfaitement raison, répondit Mr Stanfort, et, à votre exemple, je me dirigerai du côté du Mozik. L’heure du déjeuner a sonné, je pense.”

C’était le parti le plus sage, mais, ce sage parti, il fut impossible à Francis Gordon et à Jenny de le faire adopter par MM. Forsyth et Hudelson.

En vain la foule s’écoula peu à peu, en vain M. de Schnack, le dernier, se décida à regagner la station d’Upernivik, les deux maniaques s’entêtèrent à demeurer seuls en tête à tête avec leur météore.

“Enfin papa, venez-vous?” demanda pour la dixième fois Jenny Hudelson vers deux heures de l’après-midi.

Pour toute réponse, le docteur Hudelson fit une douzaine de pas en avant. Mais il fut obligé de reculer précipitamment. C’était comme s’il se fût aventuré devant la gueule d’un four. Mr Dean Forsyth, qui s’était élancé à sa suite, dut battre en retraite avec non moins de hâte.

“Voyons, mon oncle, reprit à son tour Francis Gordon, voyons Mr Hudelson, il est temps de regagner le bord… Que diable! le bolide ne se sauvera pas maintenant. De le dévorer des yeux, ce n’est pas cela qui vous remplira l’estomac.”

Vains efforts. C’est seulement le soir que, tombant de fatigue et d’inanition, Mr Forsyth et Mr Hudelson se résignèrent à quitter la place, bien décidés à revenir le lendemain.

Ils y revinrent, en effet, dès la première heure, mais ce fut pour se heurter à une cinquantaine d’hommes armés — toutes les forces groenlandaises — assurant le service d’ordre autour du précieux météore.

Contre qui le gouvernement prenait-il cette précaution? Contre Zéphyrin Xirdal? En ce cas, cinquante hommes, c'était beaucoup. D'autant plus que le bolide se défendait fort bien tout seul. Son insoutenable chaleur maintenait les plus audacieux à distance respectueuse. À peine si l'on avait gagné un mètre depuis la veille. De ce train-là, il faudrait des mois et des mois pour que M. de Schnack pût prendre effectivement possession du trésor au nom du Groenland.

N'importe, on faisait garder ce trésor. Quand il s'agit de cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards, on ne saurait être trop prudent.

À la prière de M. de Schnack, un des navires en rade était parti, afin de porter télégraphiquement la grande nouvelle à la connaissance du monde entier. Dans quarante-huit heures, la chute du bolide serait donc universellement connue. Cela n'allait-il pas déranger les plans de M. Lecœur? En aucune façon. Le départ de l'Atlantic remontant à vingt-quatre heures, et la marche du yacht étant notablement supérieure, le banquier disposait de trente-six heures d'avance, délai suffisant pour mener à bonne fin sa spéculation financière.

Si le gouvernement groenlandais s'était senti rassuré par la présence de cinquante gardiens, à quel point ne dut-il pas l'être dans l'après-midi du même jour, en constatant que soixante-dix hommes surveillaient désormais le météore?

Vers midi, un croiseur avait mouillé devant Upernivik. À sa corne flottait le pavillon étoile des États-Unis d'Amérique. Son ancre à peine par le fond, ce croiseur avait débarqué vingt hommes, qui, sous le commandement d'un midshipman, campaient maintenant dans les alentours du bolide.

Quand il connut cet accroissement du service d’ordre, M. de Schnack éprouva des sentiments contradictoires. S’il fut satisfait de savoir le précieux bolide défendu avec tant de zèle, ce débarquement de marins américains en armes sur le territoire groenlandais ne laissa pas de lui causer de sérieuses inquiétudes. Le midshipman, à qui il s’en ouvrit, ne put le renseigner. Il obéissait à l’ordre de ses chefs et ne cherchait pas plus loin.

M. de Schnack se résolut donc à porter dès le lendemain ses doléances à bord du croiseur, mais, quand il voulut exécuter son projet, il se trouva en face d’un travail double.

Pendant la nuit, un deuxième croiseur, anglais celui-là, était arrivé, en effet. Le commandant, apprenant que la chute du météore était un fait accompli, avait, à l’exemple de son collègue américain, débarqué, lui aussi, une vingtaine de marins, et ceux-ci, sous la conduite d’un second midshipman, se dirigèrent au pas accéléré vers le nord-ouest de l’île.

M. de Schnack devint perplexe. Que signifiait tout cela? Et ses perplexités augmentèrent à mesure que le temps s’écoula. L’après-midi, on signala un troisième croiseur battant pavillon tricolore, et, deux heures plus tard, vingt matelots français, sous le commandement d’un enseigne, allaient à leur tour monter la garde autour du bolide.

La situation se corsait décidément. Elle ne devait pas en rester là. Dans la nuit du 21 au 22, ce fut un croiseur russe qui survint, lui quatrième. Puis, dans la journée du 22, on vit arriver successivement un navire japonais, un italien et un allemand. Le lendemain 23, un croiseur argentin et un espagnol ne précédèrent que de peu un bateau chilien, suivi de très près par deux autres navires, l’un portugais et le second hollandais.

Le 25 août, seize bâtiments de guerre, au milieu desquels l’Atlantic avait discrètement repris son mouillage, formaient devant Upernivik, une escadre internationale comme n’en avaient jamais vu ces parages hyperboréens. Et chacun d’eux ayant débarqué ses vingt hommes sous la conduite d’un officier, trois cent vingt marins et seize officiers de toutes nationalités foulaient maintenant un sol que n’eussent pu défendre, malgré leur courage, les cinquante soldats groenlandais.

Chaque navire apportait son contingent de nouvelles, et ces nouvelles ne devaient pas être satisfaisantes, à en juger par leur effet. S’il était constant que la Conférence Internationale siégeât toujours à Washington, il ne l’était pas moins qu’elle ne continuait ses séances que pour la forme. Désormais, la parole était à la diplomatie… en attendant, ajoutait-on dans l’intimité, qu’elle appartînt au canon. On discutait ferme dans les chancelleries, et non sans une certaine acrimonie.

À mesure que les navires se succédaient, les nouvelles devaient être plus inquiétantes. On ne savait rien de précis, mais de sourdes rumeurs couraient dans les états-majors et parmi les équipages, et les relations se faisaient chaque jour plus tendues entre les divers corps d’occupation.

Si le commodore américain avait tout d’abord invité à sa table son collègue anglais, et si celui-ci, en lui rendant cette politesse, avait profité de l’occasion pour rendre un cordial hommage au commandant du croiseur français, c’en était fini de ces amabilités internationales. Maintenant, chacun restait cantonné chez soi, attendant de savoir, pour régler sa conduite, de quel côté viendrait le vent, dont les premiers souffles semblaient être précurseurs de tempêtes.

Pendant ce temps, Zéphyrin Xirdal ne décolérait pas. M. Lecœur avait les oreilles rebattues de ses récriminations incessantes et s’épuisait en vain à faire appel à son bon sens.

“Tu dois bien comprendre, mon cher Zéphyrin, lui disait-il, que M. de Schnack a raison, et qu’il est impossible de laisser à une seule créature la libre disposition d’une somme aussi colossale. Il est donc naturel qu’on intervienne. Mais laisse-moi faire. Quand la première émotion sera calmée, j’interviendrai à mon tour, et je considère comme impossible qu’on ne tienne pas compte dans une large mesure de la justice de notre cause. J’obtiendrai quelque chose, ce n’est pas douteux.

— Quelque chose! se récriait Xirdal. Eh! je m’en moque pas mal, de votre quelque chose. Que voulez-vous que je fasse de cet or? Est-ce que j’en ai besoin, moi?

— Alors, objectait M. Lecœur, pourquoi t’exciter si fort?

— Parce que le bolide est à moi. Ça me révolte qu’on veuille le prendre. Je ne le supporterai pas.

— Que peux-tu contre toute la terre, mon pauvre Zéphyrin?

— Si je le savais, ce serait fait. Mais, patience!… Quand cette espèce de délégué a émis la prétention de prendre mon bolide, c’était dégoûtant. Que dire aujourd’hui!… Maintenant, autant de pays, autant de voleurs. Sans compter qu’ils vont se déchirer entre eux, à ce qu’on prétend… Du diable si je n’aurais pas bien fait de laisser le bolide où il était! Ça m’a paru farce à moi, de le faire tomber. J’ai trouvé l’expérience intéressante… Si j’avais su!… De pauvres hères qui n’ont pas dix sous en poche, qui vont se battre maintenant à propos de milliards!… Vous direz ce que vous voudrez, c’est de plus en plus dégoûtant!”

Xirdal ne sortait pas de là.

Il avait tort, en tout cas, d’être irrité contre M. de Schnack. Le malheureux délégué, pour employer une expression familière, n’en menait pas large, lui non plus. Cet envahissement du territoire groenlandais ne lui disait rien qui vaille, et la prodigieuse fortune de la République lui paraissait reposer sur des bases bien fragiles. Que faire cependant? Pouvait-il rejeter à la mer, avec ses cinquante hommes, les trois cent vingt marins étrangers, canonner, torpiller, couler bas, les seize mastodontes cuirassés qui l’entouraient?

Non évidemment, il ne le pouvait pas. Mais, ce qu’il pouvait, du moins, ce qu’il devait même, c’était protester au nom de son pays contre la violation du sol national.

Un jour que les deux commandants anglais et français étaient descendus à terre de compagnie, en qualité de simples curieux, M. de Schnack saisit cette occasion de demander des explications et de faire des représentations officieuses, dont la modération diplomatique n’exclurait pas la véhémence.

Ce fut le commodore anglais qui répondit. M. de Schnack, dit-il en substance, avait tort de s’émouvoir. Les commandants des bâtiments en rade se conformaient simplement aux ordres de leurs Amirautés respectives. Il ne leur appartenait, ni de discuter, ni d’interpréter ces ordres, mais seulement de les exécuter. On présumait, toutefois, que le débarquement international n’avait d’autre but que le maintien de l’ordre, en présence d’une affluence de curieux fort importante en réalité, mais qui avait sans doute été prévue plus importante encore. Pour le surplus, M. de Schnack devait être tranquille. La question était à l’étude, et les droits de chacun seraient incontestablement respectés.

“Très exact, approuva le commandant français.

— Puisque tous les droits seront respectés, je pourrai donc défendre les miens, s'écria tout à coup un personnage en intervenant sans façon dans la discussion.

— À qui ai-je l'honneur?… interrogea le commodore.

— Mr Dean Forsyth, astronome, à Whaston, le véritable père et légitime propriétaire du bolide, répondit l'interrupteur avec importance, tandis que M. de Schnack haussait légèrement les épaules.

— Aoh! très bien! prononça le commodore. Je connais parfaitement votre nom, Mr Forsyth… Mais certainement, si vous avez des droits, pourquoi ne seriez-vous pas mis à même de les faire valoir?

— Des droits!… s'écria en ce moment un deuxième interrupteur. Alors, que dirai-je des miens? N'est-ce pas moi, moi seul, le docteur Sydney Hudelson, qui, le premier, ai signalé le météore à l'attention de l'univers?

— Vous!… protesta Mr Dean Forsyth, en se retournant comme s'il eût été piqué par une vipère.

— Moi.

— Un médicastre de faubourg prétendre à une telle découverte!

— Aussi bien qu'un ignorant de votre espèce.

— Un hâbleur qui ne sait même pas de quel côté on regarde dans une lunette!

— Un farceur qui n'a jamais vu un télescope!

— Ignorant, moi!…

— Moi, un médicastre!…

— Pas tellement ignorant que je ne sache démasquer un imposteur.

— Pas si médicastre que je ne trouve le moyen de confondre un voleur.

— C’en est trop! cria d’une voix étranglée Mr Dean Forsyth écumant. Prenez garde, monsieur!”

Les deux rivaux, poings serrés, regards furibonds, se menaçaient du geste, et la scène eût probablement mal fini, si Francis et Jenny ne se fussent élancés entre les combattants.

“Mon oncle!… s’écriait Francis en maîtrisant Mr Dean Forsyth d’une main vigoureuse.

— Papa!… Je vous en supplie… Papa!… implorait Jenny toute en pleurs.

— Quels sont ces deux énergumènes?” demanda à Mr Seth Stanfort, à côté duquel il se trouvait par hasard, Zéphyrin Xirdal, qui, à quelque distance, assistait à cette scène tragico-burlesque.

En voyage, on fait aisément bon marché du protocole mondain. Mr Seth Stanfort répondit sans façon à cette question qu’un inconnu lui posait sans façon.

“Vous n’êtes pas sans avoir entendu parler de Dean Forsyth et du docteur Sydney Hudelson.

— Les deux astronomes amateurs de Whaston?

— Précisément.

— Ceux qui ont découvert le bolide qui vient de tomber ici?

— Ce sont eux.

— Qu’ont-ils à se disputer de la sorte?

— Ils ne peuvent se mettre d’accord sur celui à qui revient la priorité de la découverte.”

Zéphyrin Xirdal haussa dédaigneusement les épaules.

“Belle affaire! dit-il.

— Et ils réclament tous deux la propriété du bolide, reprit Mr Seth Stanfort.

— Sous prétexte qu’ils l’ont vu par hasard dans le ciel?

— C’est cela même.

— Ils ont du toupet, déclara Zéphyrin Xirdal. Mais, ce jeune homme et cette jeune fille, que viennent-ils faire là-dedans?”

Complaisamment, Mr Seth Stanfort exposa la situation. Il raconta par quel concours de circonstances les deux fiancés avaient dû renoncer à l’union projetée, et par suite de quelle absurde jalousie la haine corse qui séparait les deux familles avait brisé leur tendre et touchante affection.

Xirdal paraissait bouleversé. Il regardait de l’air dont il eût regardé des phénomènes, Mr Dean Forsyth retenu par Francis Gordon, et Jenny Hudelson entourant de ses faibles bras son père exaspéré. Quand Mr Seth

Stanfort eut achevé son récit, Zéphyrin Xirdal, sans le moindre remerciement, lança un retentissant: “Cette fois, c’est trop fort!” et s’éloigna à grandes enjambées. Avec flegme, le narrateur suivit des yeux cet original, puis il n’y pensa plus et retourna près de Mrs Arcadia Walker, exceptionnellement délaissée pendant ce court dialogue.

Cependant, Zéphyrin Xirdal était hors de lui. D’une main brutale, il ouvrit la porte de sa maisonnette.

“Mon oncle, dit-il à M. Lecœur que cette virulente apostrophe fit sursauter, je déclare que c’est trop dégoûtant.

— Qu’y a-t-il encore? demanda M. Lecœur.

— Le bolide, parbleu! Toujours le maudit bolide!

— Qu’a-t-il fait, le bolide?

— Il est en train de dévaster la terre, tout bonnement. On n’en est plus à compter ses méfaits. Non content de transformer tous ces gens-là en voleurs, il risque de mettre le monde à feu et à sang, en semant partout la discorde et la guerre. Ce n’est pas tout. Ne voilà-t-il pas qu’il se permet de brouiller les fiancés? Allez la voir, cette petite fille, mon oncle, et vous m’en donnerez des nouvelles. Elle est à faire pleurer une borne kilométrique. Tout ça décidément, c’est trop dégoûtant.

— Quels fiancés? De quelle jeune fille parles- tu? Qu’est-ce que c’est encore que cette nouvelle lubie?” interrogea M. Lecœur ahuri.

Zéphyrin Xirdal dédaigna de répondre.

“Oui, c’est trop dégoûtant, proclama-t-il avec violence. Ah mais! ça ne va pas se passer comme ça. Je vais les mettre tous d’accord, et raide encore!

— Quelle sottise vas-tu faire, Zéphyrin?

— Parbleu! ça n’est pas sorcier. Je vais flanquer leur bolide à l’eau.”

M. Lecœur se leva d’un bond. Son visage avait pâli sous le coup de l’intense émotion qui lui paralysait le cœur. Pas un instant, la pensée ne lui vint que Xirdal obéît à la colère et qu’il proférât des menaces dont la réalisation ne fût pas en son pouvoir. Il avait donné des preuves de sa puissance. De lui, on devait s’attendre à tout.

“Tu ne feras pas cela, Zéphyrin, s’écria M. Lecœur.

— Je le ferai, au contraire. Rien ne m’en empêchera. J’en ai assez, moi, et je vais m’y mettre pas plus tard que tout de suite.

— Mais tu ne songes donc pas, malheureux…”

M. Lecœur s’interrompit brusquement. Une pensée de génie, éblouissante et soudaine comme l’éclair, venait de naître tout d’une pièce dans son cerveau. Quelques instants suffirent à ce grand capitaine des batailles de l’argent pour en examiner le fort et le faible.

“Au fait!…” murmura-t-il. Un second effort de réflexion lui confirma l’excellence de son projet. S’adressant alors à Zéphyrin Xirdal: “Je ne te contredirai pas plus longtemps, dit-il carrément, en homme pressé pour qui les minutes sont des heures. Tu veux rejeter le bolide à la mer? Soit! Mais ne pourrais-tu me donner quelques jours de répit?

— J’y suis bien forcé, s’écria Xirdal. Il faut que je fasse subir des modifications à la machine en vue du nouveau travail que je lui demande. Ces modifications exigeront cinq ou six jours.

— Cela nous reporterait donc au 3 septembre.

— Oui.

— Fort bien”, dit M. Lecœur, qui sortit et se dirigea rapidement vers Upernivik, tandis que son filleul se mettait à l’ouvrage.

Sans perdre de temps, M. Lecœur se fit conduire à bord de l’Atlantic, dont la cheminée se mit aussitôt à vomir des torrents de fumée noire. Deux heures plus tard, son armateur retourné à terre, l’Atlantic fuyait à toute vapeur et disparaissait à l’horizon.

Comme tout ce qui est génial, le plan de M. Lecœur était d’une sublime simplicité. De ces deux solutions: dénoncer son filleul aux troupes internationales et le mettre dans l’impossibilité d’agir, ou laisser les choses suivre leur cours, M. Lecœur avait adopté la seconde.

Dans le premier cas, il pouvait raisonnablement compter sur la reconnaissance des gouvernements intéressés. Une part lui serait sans doute réservée du trésor sauvé grâce à son intervention. Mais quelle part? Dérisoire probablement et rendue plus dérisoire encore par l’avilissement de l’or, qu’un tel afflux de ce métal devait logiquement provoquer.

Si, au contraire, il gardait le silence, outre qu’il supprimait toutes les calamités que cette malfaisante masse d’or portait en germe dans ses flancs et qu’elle allait, comme un torrent dévastateur, répandre sur la surface de la terre, il évitait les inconvénients qui lui étaient personnels et s’assurait, en revanche, de grands avantages. Seul pendant cinq jours à connaître un tel secret, il lui était facile d’en tirer parti. Pour cela, il lui suffisait d’expédier par l’Atlantic un nouveau télégramme, dans lequel, après déchiffrement, on lirait rue Drouot: “Événement sensationnel imminent. Achetez Mines quantité illimitée.”

Cet ordre serait facilement exécuté. La chute du bolide était certainement connue à cette heure et les actions de Mines d’or devaient être effondrées à presque rien. Sans aucun doute, on les offrait à des prix insignifiants sans trouver de contrepartie… Quel boum, par contre, quand on apprendrait la fin de l’aventure! Avec quelle rapidité elles remonteraient alors à leurs cours primitifs, au grand profit de leur heureux acheteur.

Disons tout de suite que M. Lecœur avait eu le coup d’œil juste. La dépêche fut distribuée rue Drouot, et, à la bourse du même jour, on exécuta ponctuellement ses instructions. La banque Lecœur acheta au comptant et à terme toutes les mines d’or qui furent offertes, et le lendemain elle en fit autant.

Quelle moisson elle récolta en ces deux jours! Mines de peu d’importance pour quelques centimes par titre, mines autrefois florissantes tombées à deux ou trois francs, mines de premier ordre avilies à dix ou douze, elle ramassa tout indistinctement.

Au bout de quarante-huit heures, le bruit de ces achats commença à circuler dans les diverses bourses du monde et y causa quelque émotion. La banque Lecœur, maison sérieuse bien connue pour son flair, ne devait pas agir à la légère, en se jetant ainsi sur une catégorie spéciale de valeurs. Il y avait quelque chose là-dessous. Tel fut le sentiment général, et les cours remontèrent sensiblement.

Il était trop tard. Le coup était fait. M. Robert Lecœur possédait alors plus de la moitié de la production aurifère du globe.

Pendant que ces événements s’accomplissaient à Paris, Zéphyrin Xirdal utilisait pour modifier sa machine les accessoires dont il avait eu soin de se munir au départ. À l’intérieur, il branchait des fils se croisant en circuits compliqués. À l’extérieur, il ajoutait des ampoules de formes singulières, au centre de deux nouveaux réflecteurs. À la date fixée, le 3 septembre, tout était terminé, et Zéphyrin Xirdal se déclara prêt à l’action.

La présence de son parrain lui assurait exceptionnellement un auditoire véritable. C’était une occasion unique d’exercer ses talents oratoires. Il ne la laissa pas passer.

“Ma machine, dit-il en fermant le circuit électrique, n’a rien de mystérieux ni de diabolique. Ce n’est pas autre chose qu’un organe de transformation. Elle reçoit de l’électricité sous sa forme ordinaire et la rend sous une forme supérieure découverte par moi. Cette ampoule que vous voyez là et qui commence à tourner comme une petite folle, est celle qui m’a servi à attirer le bolide. Avec l’aide du réflecteur au centre duquel elle est située, elle envoie dans l’espace un courant d’une nature particulière, décoré par moi du nom de courant neutre hélicoïdal. Ainsi que son nom l’indique, il se meut à la façon d’une hélice. D’autre part, il a la propriété de repousser avec violence tout corps matériel venu à son contact. L’ensemble de ses spires constitue un cylindre creux, d’où l’air, comme toute autre matière, est chassé, si bien que, dans l’intérieur de ce cylindre, il n’y a rien. Comprenez-vous bien, mon oncle, la valeur de ce mot: rien? Vous dites-vous que, partout dans l’infini de l’espace, il y a quelque chose, et que mon cylindre invisible qui se visse dans l’atmosphère est, pendant un instant, le seul point de l’univers où il n’y ait RIEN? Instant très court, plus court que la durée de l’éclair. Cet endroit unique où règne le vide absolu, c’est un exutoire par lequel s’échappe en vagues pressées l’indestructible énergie que le globe terrestre retient prisonnière et condensée dans les lourdes mailles de la substance. Mon rôle s’est donc borné à supprimer un obstacle.”

M. Lecœur, très intéressé, concentrait toute son attention pour suivre ce curieux exposé.

“La seule chose un peu délicate, reprit Zéphyrin Xirdal, c’est de régler la longueur d’onde du courant neutre hélicoïdal. S’il atteint l’objet que l’on désire influencer, il le repousse, au lieu de l’attirer. Il faut donc qu’il expire à une certaine distance de cet objet, mais le plus près possible, de telle sorte que l’énergie libérée rayonne dans son voisinage immédiat.

— Mais, pour faire rouler le bolide à la mer, il faut le pousser et non l’attirer, objecta M. Lecœur.

— Oui et non, répondit Zéphyrin Xirdal. Suivez-moi bien, mon oncle. Je connais la distance précise qui nous sépare du bolide. Cette distance est exactement de cinq cent onze mètres quarante-huit centimètres. Je règle la portée de mon courant en conséquence.”

Tout en parlant Xirdal manœuvrait un rhéostat intercalé dans le circuit entre la source électrique et la machine.

“Voilà qui est fait, reprit-il. Maintenant, le courant meurt à moins de trois centimètres du bolide, du côté de sa convexité nord-est. L’énergie libérée l’entoure donc sur cette face d’un intense rayonnement. Cela, toutefois, ne serait peut-être pas suffisant pour mouvoir une pareille masse si intimement adhérente au sol. Aussi, pour plus de prudence, vais-je employer deux autres moyens accessoires.”

Xirdal plongea la main dans l'intérieur de la machine. Aussitôt l'une des deux nouvelles ampoules se mit à crépiter furieusement.

“Vous remarquerez, mon oncle, dit-il sous forme de commentaire, que cette ampoule ne tourne pas comme l'autre. C'est que son effet est d'une autre nature. Les effluves qu'elle émet sont particulières. Nous les appellerons, si vous le voulez bien, courants neutres rectilignes, pour les différencier des précédentes. La longueur de ces courants rectilignes n'a pas besoin d'être réglée. Ils s'en iraient, invisibles, dans l'infini, si je ne les projetais sur la convexité sud-ouest du météore qui les arrête. Je ne vous conseille pas de vous placer sur leur passage. Vous ramasseriez une fameuse pelle, comme disent les gens atteints de sportmanie, d'où l'on a fait évidemment sportman. Mais revenons à nos moutons. Que sont ces courants rectilignes? Pas autre chose, comme les hélicoïdaux, et d'ailleurs comme tout courant électrique, de quelque nature qu'il soit, comme le son, comme la chaleur, comme la lumière même, qu'un transport d'atomes matériels au dernier degré de simplification. Vous aurez une idée de la petitesse de ces atomes, quand je vous aurai dit qu'en ce moment ils frappent la surface du bloc d'or dans lequel ils s'incrustent au nombre de sept cent cinquante millions par seconde. C'est donc un véritable bombardement, où la légèreté des projectiles est compensée par l'infinité du nombre et de la vitesse. En joignant cette poussée à l'attraction exercée sur l'autre face, on peut obtenir un résultat satisfaisant.

— Le bolide ne bouge pas, cependant, objecta M. Lecœur.

— Il bougera, affirma tranquillement Zéphyrin Xirdal. Un peu de patience. Au surplus, voici qui hâtera les choses. De ce troisième réflecteur, j'expédie d'autres obus atomiques dirigés, ceux-là, non sur le bolide lui-même, mais sur le terrain qui le supporte du côté de la mer. Vous allez voir ce terrain se désagréger peu à peu, et, la pesanteur aidant, le bolide commencer à glisser sur la pente.”

Zéphyrin Xirdal enfonça de nouveau son bras dans sa machine. La troisième ampoule crépita à son tour.

“Regardez bien, mon oncle, dit-il. Je crois que nous allons rire.”

CHAPITRE XX

XX

Qu’on lira peut-être avec regret, mais que son respect de la vérité historique a obligé l’auteur à écrire, tel que l’enregistreront un jour les annales astronomiques.

Les cris individuels se fondirent en un seul cri, et ce fut comme un rugissement formidable qui jaillit de la foule, au premier frémissement de la masse d’or.

Tous les regards se tendirent du même côté. Que se passait-il? Avait-on été les jouets d’une hallucination? ou bien le météore avait-il réellement fait un mouvement? Dans ce cas, quelle en était la cause? Le sol ne fléchissait-il pas peu à peu, ce qui pouvait amener la chute finale du trésor dans l’abîme?

“Ce serait un singulier dénouement à cette affaire qui a remué le monde, fit observer Mrs

Arcadia Walker.

— Un dénouement qui ne serait peut-être pas le plus mauvais, répondit Mr Seth Stanfort.

— Qui serait le meilleur”, renchérit Francis Gordon.

Non, on ne s’était pas trompé. Le bolide continuait à glisser graduellement du côté de la mer. Point de doute que le terrain ne cédât peu à peu. Si ce mouvement ne s’enrayait pas, la sphère d’or finirait par rouler jusqu’au bord du plateau et s’engloutirait dans les profondeurs de la mer.

Ce fut une stupeur générale, mélangée d’un peu de mépris pour ce sol indigne d’un si merveilleux fardeau. Quel regret que la chute se fût produite sur cette île et non sur l’inébranlable falaise basaltique du littoral groenlandais, où ces milliers de milliards n’auraient pas risqué d’être à jamais perdus pour l’avide humanité!

Oui, il glissait, le météore. Peut-être ne serait-ce qu’une question d’heures, moins encore, une question de minutes, si le plateau venait à s’effondrer brusquement sous son énorme poids.

Au milieu de tous les cris provoqués par l’imminence d’un tel malheur, quelle exclamation d’épouvante avait poussée M. de Schnack! Adieu, cette unique occasion d’emmilliarder son pays! Adieu, cette perspective d’enrichir tous les citoyens du Groenland!

Quant à Mr Dean Forsyth et au docteur Hudelson, on pouvait craindre pour leur raison. Ils tendaient les bras désespérément. Ils appelaient au secours, comme s’il eût été possible de répondre à cet appel.

Un mouvement plus prononcé du bolide acheva de leur faire perdre la tête. Sans réfléchir au danger qu’il courait, le docteur Hudelson, rompant la ligne des gardiens, s’élança vers la sphère d’or.

Il ne put aller loin. Étouffé par cette atmosphère embrasée, il vacilla tout à coup au bout de cent pas et s’écroula comme une masse sur le sol.

Mr Dean Forsyth aurait dû être content, la suppression de son compétiteur supprimant radicalement toute compétition! Mais, avant d’être un astronome passionné, Mr Dean Forsyth était un brave homme, et l’intensité de son émotion le rendit à sa vraie nature. Sa haine factice disparut, tel un mauvais rêve qui disparaît au réveil, et il ne subsista dans son cœur que le souvenir des anciens jours. C’est ainsi que, sans même y penser, comme on fait un geste réflexe, Mr Dean Forsyth — que ceci soit à sa gloire! — au lieu de se réjouir de la mort d’un adversaire, vola bravement au secours d’un vieil ami en péril.

Ses forces ne devaient pas être à la hauteur de son courage. À peine avait-il atteint le docteur Hudelson, à peine avait-il réussi à le traîner en arrière de quelques mètres, qu’il tombait près de lui inanimé, suffoqué à son tour par cette haleine de fournaise.

Heureusement, Francis Gordon s’était précipité derrière lui, et Mr Seth Stanfort n’avait pas hésité à le suivre. Il est à croire que cela ne laissa pas Mrs Arcadia Walker indifférente.

“Seth!… Seth!…” cria-t-elle instinctivement, comme épouvantée du danger auquel s’exposait son ancien mari.

Francis Gordon et Seth Stanfort, suivis de quelques courageux spectateurs, durent se traîner sur le sol, ramper en se mettant un mouchoir sur la bouche, tant l’air était irrespirable. Enfin ils arrivèrent près de Mr Forsyth et du docteur Hudelson. Ils les relevèrent et les rapportèrent en deçà de la limite qu’il n’était pas permis de franchir, sous peine d’être brûlé jusque dans les entrailles.

Par bonheur, ces deux victimes de leur imprudence avaient été sauvées à temps. Grâce aux soins qui ne leur furent point épargnés, ils revinrent à la vie, mais ce fut, hélas! pour assister à la ruine de leurs espérances.

Le bolide continuait à glisser lentement, en effet, soit de son mouvement propre sur ce plateau incliné, soit parce que la surface s’infléchissait peu à peu sous son poids. Son centre de gravité se rapprochait de l’arête, au-delà de laquelle la falaise s’enfonçait verticalement sous les eaux.

Des cris s’élevèrent de toutes parts, traduisant l’émotion de la foule. On s’agitait en tous sens, sans savoir pourquoi. Quelques-uns, parmi lesquels Mr Seth Stanfort et Mrs Arcadia Walker, coururent à toute vitesse du côté de la mer afin de ne perdre, du moins, aucun détail de la catastrophe.

Cependant, on eut un moment d’espoir. La sphère d’or s’était immobilisée!…

Mais ce ne fut qu’un moment. Tout à coup, un effroyable craquement se fit entendre… La roche venait de céder, et le météore s’abîmait dans la mer.

Si les échos du littoral ne répercutèrent pas l’énorme clameur de la foule, c’est que cette clameur fut à l’instant couverte par le fracas d’une explosion plus violente que les éclats de la foudre. En même temps un mascaret aérien balaya la surface de l’île, et, sans en excepter un seul, les spectateurs furent irrésistiblement renversés sur le sol.

Le bolide venait de faire explosion. L’eau, pénétrant par les milliers de pores de la surface dans les innombrables alvéoles de cette éponge d’or, s’était instantanément vaporisée au contact du métal incandescent, et le météore avait sauté comme une chaudière surchauffée. Maintenant ses débris retombaient en gerbe dans les flots au milieu de sifflements assourdissants.

La mer fut soulevée par la violence de cette explosion. Une lame prodigieuse monta à l'assaut du littoral et y retomba avec une irrésistible fureur. Épouvantés, les imprudents qui s'étaient approchés du bord prirent la fuite, s'efforçant d'arriver au sommet de la pente.

Tous ne devaient pas l'atteindre. Lâchement repoussée par certains de ses compagnons que la peur transformait en bêtes fauves, Mrs Arcadia Walker fut saisie, renversée. Elle allait être entraînée, lorsque la masse liquide reviendrait vers la grève!…

Mais Mr Seth Stanfort veillait. Presque sans espoir de la sauver, risquant sa vie pour elle, il s'était jeté à son secours dans de telles conditions qu'il y aurait sans doute à compter deux victimes au lieu d'une…

Non. Seth Stanfort parvint à rejoindre la jeune femme, et s'arc-boutant contre une roche, il put résister au monstrueux remous. De nombreux touristes coururent aussitôt à leur aide et les ramenèrent en arrière. Ils étaient sauvés.

Si Mr Seth Stanfort n'avait point perdu connaissance, Mrs Arcadia Walker était inanimée. Des soins empressés ne tardèrent pas à la rappeler à la vie. Ses premiers mots furent pour son ancien mari.

“Du moment que je devais être sauvée, il était tout indiqué que ce fût par vous”, dit-elle en lui pressant la main et en lui adressant un regard plein de la plus tendre reconnaissance.

Moins heureux que Mrs Arcadia Walker, le merveilleux bolide n'avait pu échapper à son funeste sort! Hors de l'atteinte des hommes, ses débris reposaient maintenant dans les profondeurs de la mer. Quand bien même il eût été possible, au prix d'efforts inouïs, de retirer une telle masse de ces insondables abîmes, il fallait renoncer à cet espoir. Du noyau brisé par l’explosion, les milliers d’éclats s’étaient, en effet, éparpillés au large. M. de Schnack, Mr Dean Forsyth et le docteur Hudelson en cherchèrent vainement la moindre parcelle sur le littoral. Non, ils étaient disparus jusqu’au dernier centime, les cinq mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit milliards. De l’extraordinaire météore, il ne subsistait rien.

CHAPITRE XXI

XXI

Dernier chapitre, qui contient l’épilogue de cette histoire et dans lequel le dernier mot reste à Mr John Proth, juge à Whaston.

Leur curiosité satisfaite, la foule des curieux n’avait plus qu’à partir.

Satisfaite? Ce n’est pas sûr. Ce dénouement valait-il les fatigues et les frais d’un pareil voyage? Avoir aperçu le météore sans pouvoir l’approcher à moins de quatre cents mètres, c’était un maigre résultat. Il fallait bien s’en contenter, cependant.

Pouvaient-ils espérer, du moins, prendre un jour leur revanche? Un second bolide d’or reparaîtrait-il jamais sur notre horizon?… Non. Une aventure de ce genre n’arrive pas deux fois. Sans doute, il peut exister d’autres astres d’or flottant dans l’espace, mais si faible est la chance qu’ils soient retenus dans le cercle d’attraction terrestre, qu’il n’y a pas lieu d’en tenir compte.

C’est heureux en somme. Six trillions d’or jetés dans la circulation déprécieraient outre mesure ce métal, vil pour les uns — ceux qui n’en ont pas, — mais si précieux au dire de tous les autres! On ne devait donc pas regretter la perte de ce bolide, qui, non content de bouleverser le marché financier du monde, eût peut-être déchaîné la guerre sur toute la surface de la terre.

Cependant, ce dénouement, les intéressés avaient bien le droit de le considérer comme une déception. Avec quel chagrin Mr Dean Forsyth et Mr Sydney Hudelson allèrent contempler la place où leur bolide avait fait explosion! Il était dur de revenir sans rien rapporter de cet or céleste. Pas même de quoi se fabriquer une épingle de cravate ou un bouton de manchette, pas un seul grain qu’ils eussent conservé à titre de souvenir, en admettant que M. de Schnack ne l’eût point réclamé pour son pays.

Dans leur commune douleur, les deux rivaux avaient perdu jusqu’au souvenir de leur passagère rivalité. Pouvait-il en être autrement? Était-il possible que le docteur Hudelson tînt rigueur à qui avait si généreusement bravé la mort pour le sauver? Et, d’un autre côté, n’est-il pas humain que l’on soit tout dévoué à celui pour qui l’on faillit mourir? La disparition du bolide eût achevé, au besoin, la réconciliation. À quoi bon se disputer le nom d’un météore qui n’existait plus?

Pensaient-ils à cela, les deux anciens adversaires, avaient-ils conscience du néant de leur générosité tardive, tandis qu’ils faisaient assaut de désintéressement, en se promenant bras dessus bras dessous, dans le premier quartier de la lune de miel d’une amitié remise à neuf?

“C’est un bien grand malheur, disait le docteur Hudelson, que la perte du bolide Forsyth.

— Du bolide Hudelson, rectifiait Mr Dean Forsyth. Il était à vous, cher ami, bien à vous.

— Nullement, protestait le docteur. Votre observation, cher ami, avait précédé la mienne.

— Elle l’avait suivie, cher ami.

— Que non pas! Le manque de précision de ma lettre à l’Observatoire de Cincinnati en serait au besoin la preuve. Au lieu de dire comme vous, de telle heure à telle heure, j’ai dit: entre telle heure et telle heure. C’est bien différent!”

Il n’en voulait pas démordre, l’excellent docteur, mais Mr Dean Forsyth n’en démordait pas non plus. De là, nouvelles discussions, celle-ci heureusement inoffensives.

Poussé à un tel point, ce revirement touchant avait aussi quelque chose de comique. Quelqu’un qui ne pensait pas à en rire, cependant, c’était Francis Gordon, redevenu officiellement le fiancé de sa chère Jenny. Les deux jeunes gens profitaient de leur mieux, après tant d’orages, du retour du beau temps et rattrapaient consciencieusement les heures perdues.

Les navires de guerre et les paquebots mouillés au large d’Upernivik levèrent l’ancre dans la matinée du 4 septembre, en route pour des latitudes plus méridionales. De tous les curieux qui avaient donné, pendant quelques jours, tant d’animation à cette île des régions arctiques, il ne resta que M. Robert Lecœur et son pseudo-neveu, obligés d’attendre le retour de l’Atlantic. Le yacht ne revint que le lendemain. M. Lecœur et Zéphyrin Xirdal embarquèrent aussitôt. Ils en avaient assez de ce séjour supplémentaire de vingt-quatre heures dans l’île d’Upernivik.

Leur cabane de planches ayant été détruite, en effet, par le raz de marée consécutif à l’explosion du bolide, ils avaient dû passer la nuit en plein air, dans les plus déplorables conditions. La mer ne s’était pas contentée de raser leur maison, elle les avait en même temps trempés jusqu’aux os. Mal séchés par le pâle soleil de ces contrées polaires, ils ne possédaient même plus une couverture pour se défendre du froid pendant les quelques heures d’obscurité. Tout avait péri dans le désastre, jusqu’au moindre objet de campement, jusqu’à la valise et jusqu’aux instruments de Zéphyrin Xirdal. Défunte, la fidèle lunette avec laquelle il avait tant de fois observé le météore. Défunte également, la machine qui avait attiré ce météore sur la terre avant de le précipiter au fond des eaux.

M. Lecœur ne pouvait se consoler de la destruction d’un si merveilleux appareil. Xirdal, par contre, ne faisait qu’en rire. Puisqu’il avait fabriqué une machine, rien de l’empêcherait d’en fabriquer une autre plus puissante et meilleure encore.

Assurément, il l’aurait pu, cela n’est pas douteux. Malheureusement il n’y pensa jamais. Son parrain le pressa en vain de s’atteler à ce travail, il remit sans cesse au lendemain, jusqu’au jour où, parvenu à un âge avancé, il emporta son secret dans la tombe.

Il faut donc s’y résigner, cette machine prodigieuse est à jamais perdue pour l’humanité, et son principe demeurera ignoré, tant qu’un nouveau Zéphyrin Xirdal n’apparaîtra pas sur la terre.

En somme, ce dernier revenait du Groenland plus pauvre qu’il n’était parti. Sans compter ses instruments et sa riche garde-robe, il y laissait un vaste terrain d’autant plus difficile à revendre que la majeure partie de cette propriété était située sous la mer.

Par contre, que de millions avait moissonnés son parrain au cours de ce voyage! Ces millions, on les trouva au retour, rue Drouot, et telle fut l’origine de la fabuleuse fortune qui devait faire de la Banque Lecœur l’égale des plus puissants établissements financiers.

Zéphyrin Xirdal ne fut pas étranger, il est vrai, à l’accroissement de cette puissance colossale. M. Lecœur, qui savait maintenant de quoi il était capable, le mit largement à contribution. Toutes les inventions sorties de ce cerveau génial, la banque les exploita au point de vue pratique. Elle n’eut pas à s’en plaindre. À défaut de celui du ciel, elle draina ainsi dans ses coffres une notable partie de l’or de la terre.

Certes, M. Lecœur n’était pas un Shylock. De cette fortune qui était son œuvre, Zéphyrin Xirdal aurait pu prendre sa part, et la plus grosse part si tel avait été son désir. Mais Xirdal, quand on entamait ce chapitre, vous regardait d’une manière si stupide qu’on préférait ne pas insister. De l’argent? de l’or? Qu’en aurait-il fait? Toucher à époques irrégulières les petites sommes suffisantes à ses modestes besoins, cela lui convenait parfaitement. Jusqu’à la fin de sa vie, il continua à venir pédestrement voir dans ce but son “oncle” et banquier, et jamais il ne consentit, ni à quitter son sixième étage de la rue Cassette, ni à se séparer de la Vve Thibaut, ancienne bouchère, qui fut jusqu’au bout sa bavarde servante.

Sept jours après l’avis que M. Lecœur en avait donné à son correspondant de Paris, la perte définitive du bolide avait été connue du monde entier. C’est le croiseur français qui, en revenant d’Upernivik, en transmit la nouvelle au premier poste sémaphorique, d’où elle se répandit avec une rapidité extraordinaire dans tout l’univers.

Si l’émotion fut grande, ainsi qu’on peut le supposer, elle se calma d’elle-même assez rapidement. On se trouvait devant un fait accompli et le mieux était de n’y plus songer. En peu de temps, les humains furent repris par leurs soucis personnels et cessèrent de penser au messager céleste qui avait eu cette fin déplorable, on pourrait même dire un peu ridicule.

On n’en parlait déjà plus, quand le Mozik jeta l’ancre, le 18 septembre, dans le port de Charleston.

Outre ses passagers primitifs, le Mozik débarquait au retour une passagère qu’il n’avait pas embarquée à l’aller. Cette passagère n’était autre que Mrs

Arcadia Walker, qui, désireuse de manifester plus longtemps sa reconnaissance à son ancien mari, s’était empressée de s’installer dans la cabine laissée vacante par M. de Schnack.

De la Caroline du Sud à la Virginie, la distance n’est pas considérable, et, d’ailleurs, les railroads ne manquent point aux États-Unis. Dès le lendemain, 19 septembre, Mr Dean Forsyth, Francis et Omicron, d’une part, Mr Sydney Hudelson et sa fille, de l’autre, étaient de retour, les premiers à la tour d’Elisabeth street, les seconds au donjon de Moriss street.

On les y attendait avec impatience. Mrs Hudelson et sa fille Loo se trouvaient à la gare de Whaston, ainsi que l’estimable Mitz, lorsque le train de Charleston déposa les voyageurs. Et vraiment ceux-ci ne purent qu’être très touchés de l’accueil qui leur fut fait. Francis Gordon embrassa sa future belle-mère, et Mr Dean Forsyth serra cordialement la main de Mrs Hudelson comme si rien ne s’était passé. Aucune allusion n’aurait même été faite aux jours pénibles, si miss Loo, toujours un peu inquiète, n’avait voulu en avoir le cœur net.

“Enfin, c’est fini, n’est-ce pas?” s’écria-t-elle en se jetant au cou de Mr Forsyth.

Oui, c’était fini et bien fini. La preuve en est, que, le 30 septembre, les cloches de Saint-Andrew répandirent à toute volée leurs sonores ondulations sur la cité virginienne. C’est devant une brillante assemblée, qui comprenait les parents, les amis des deux familles et les notabilités de la ville, que le révérend O’Garth célébra le mariage de Francis Gordon et de Jenny Hudelson, parvenus heureusement au port après tant de traverses et de vicissitudes.

Qu’on n’en doute pas, miss Loo était présente à la cérémonie, à titre de demoiselle d’honneur, toute charmante avec sa belle robe, prête depuis quatre mois. Et de même Mitz était là, riant et pleurant à la fois du bonheur de son fieu. Jamais elle n’avait été si émute, affirmait-elle à qui voulait l’entendre.

Presque à la même heure, un autre mariage s’accomplissait ailleurs avec moins de pompe. Cette fois, ce ne fut ni à cheval, ni à pied, ni en ballon, que Mr Seth Stanfort et Mrs Arcadia Walker allèrent chez le juge John Proth. Non, c’est assis l’un près de l’autre dans une confortable voiture qu’ils s’y rendirent, et c’est au bras l’un de l’autre qu’ils pénétrèrent pour la première fois dans sa maison, afin de lui présenter dans des conditions moins fantaisistes leurs papiers bien en règle.

Le magistrat remplit son office en remariant les deux anciens époux séparés par un divorce de quelques semaines, puis il s’inclina galamment devant eux.

“Merci, Mr Proth, dit Mrs Stanfort.

— Et adieu, ajouta Mr Seth Stanfort.

— Mr et Mrs Stanfort, adieu”, répondit Mr John Proth, qui retourna incontinent soigner les fleurs de son jardin.

Mais un scrupule troublait le digne philosophe. Au troisième arrosoir, sa main inactive cessa de répandre une pluie bienfaisante sur les géraniums altérés.

“Adieu?… murmurait-il, en s’arrêtant, pensif, au milieu de l’allée. J’aurais mieux fait, peut-être, de leur dire au revoir…”

THE DANUBE PILOT

This novel was first published in 1908, three years after Verne’s death, and was extensively revised by his son, Michel. The novel recounts the adventures of a prize winner in the ‘Danubian League of Amateur Fishermen’, who travels down the famous European river.

This novel was first translated into English in 1967 and so only the French text is available in this edition due to copyright restricitions.

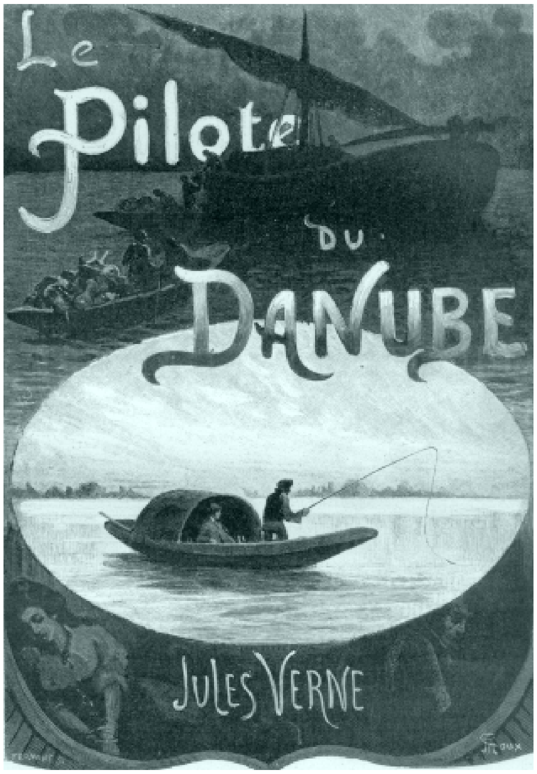
Le Pilote du Danube
Jules Verne

The original cover illustration

LE PILOTE DU DANUBE

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I

AU CONCOURS DE SIGMARINGEN.

Ce jour-là, samedi 5 août 1876, une foule nombreuse et bruyante remplissait le cabaret à l’enseigne du *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs*. Chansons, cris, chocs des verres, applaudissements, exclamations se fondaient en un terrible vacarme que dominaient, à intervalles presque réguliers, ces *hoch!* par lesquels a coutume de s’exprimer la joie allemande à son paroxysme.

Les fenêtres de ce cabaret donnaient directement sur le Danube, à l’extrémité de la charmante petite ville de Sigmaringen, capitale de l’enclave prussienne de Hohenzollern, située, presque à l’origine de ce grand fleuve de l’Europe centrale.

Obéissant à l’invitation de l’enseigne peinte en belles lettres gothiques au-dessus de la porte d’entrée, c’est là que s’étaient réunis les membres de la Ligue Danubienne, société internationale de pêcheurs appartenant aux diverses nationalités riveraines. Il n’est pas de joyeuse réunion sans notable beuverie. Aussi buvait-on de bonne bière de Munich et de bon vin de Hongrie à pleines chopes et à pleins verres. On fumait aussi, et la grande salle était tout obscurcie par la fumée odorante que les longues pipes crachaient sans relâche. Mais, si les sociétaires ne se voyaient plus, ils s’entendaient de reste, à moins qu’ils ne fussent sourds.

Calmes et silencieux dans l’exercice de leurs fonctions, les pêcheurs à la ligne sont, en effet, les gens les plus bruyants du monde dès qu’ils ont remisé leurs attributs. Pour raconter leurs hauts faits, ils valent les chasseurs, ce qui n’est pas peu dire.

On était à la fin d’un déjeuner des plus substantiels, qui avait rassemblé autour des tables du cabaret une centaine de convives, tous chevaliers de la gaule, enragés de la flotte, fanatiques de l’hameçon. Les exercices de la matinée avaient sans doute singulièrement altéré leurs gosiers, à en juger par le nombre de bouteilles figurant au milieu de la desserte. Maintenant, c’était le tour des nombreuses liqueurs que les hommes ont imaginées pour succéder au café.

Trois heures après midi sonnaient, lorsque les convives, de plus en plus montés en couleur, quittèrent la table. Pour être franc, quelques-uns titubaient et n’auraient pu se passer complètement du secours de leurs voisins. Mais le plus grand nombre se tenaient fermes sur leurs jambes, en braves et solides habitués de ces longues séances épulatoires, qui se renouvelaient plusieurs fois dans l’année à propos des concours de la Ligue Danubienne.

De ces concours très suivis, très fêtés, grande était la réputation sur tout le cours du célèbre fleuve jaune, et non pas bleu comme le chante la fameuse valse de Strauss. Du duché de Bade, du Wurtemberg, de la Bavière, de l’Autriche, de la Hongrie, de la Roumanie, de la Serbie, et même des provinces turques de Bulgarie et de Bessarabie, les concurrents affluaient.

La Société comptait déjà cinq années d’existence. Très bien administrée par son Président, le Hongrois Miclesco, elle prospérait. Ses ressources toujours croissantes lui permettaient d’offrir des prix importants dans ses concours, et sa bannière étincelait des glorieuses médailles conquises de haute lutte sur des associations rivales. Très au courant de la législation relative à la pêche fluviale, son Comité directeur soutenait ses adhérents, tant contre l’État que contre les particuliers, et défendait leurs droits et privilèges avec cette ténacité, on pourrait dire cet entêtement professionnel, spécial au bipède que ses instincts de pêcheur à la ligne rendent digne d’être classé dans une catégorie particulière de l’humanité.

Le concours qui venait d’avoir lieu était le deuxième de cette année 1876. Dès cinq heures du matin, les concurrents avaient quitté la ville pour gagner la rive gauche du Danube, un peu en aval de Sigmaringen. Ils portaient l’uniforme de la Société: blouse courte laissant aux mouvements toute leur liberté, pantalon engagé dans des bottes à forte semelle, casquette blanche à large visière. Bien entendu, ils possédaient la collection complète des divers engins énumérés au *Manuel du Pêcheur*: cannes, gaules, épuisettes, lignes empaquetées dans leur enveloppe de peau de daim, flotteurs, sondes, grains de plomb fondus de toutes tailles pour les plombées, mouches artificielles, cordonnet, crin de Florence. La pêche devait être libre, en ce sens que les poissons, quels qu’ils fussent, seraient de bonne prise, et chaque pêcheur pourrait amorcer sa place comme il l’entendrait.

A six heures sonnant, quatre-vingt-dix-sept concurrents exactement étaient à leur poste, la ligne flottante en main, prêts à lancer l’hameçon. Un coup de clairon donna le signal, et les quatre-vingt-dix-sept lignes se tendirent du même mouvement au-dessus du courant.

Le concours était doté de plusieurs prix, dont les deux premiers, d’une valeur de cent florins chacun, seraient attribués au pêcheur qui aurait le plus grand nombre de poissons et à celui qui capturerait la plus lourde pièce.

Il n’y eut aucun incident jusqu’au second coup de clairon, qui, à onze heures moins cinq, clôtura le concours. Chaque lot fut alors soumis au jury composé du Président Miclesco et de quatre membres de la Ligue Danubienne. Que ces hauts et puissants personnages prissent leur décision en toute impartialité et de telle sorte qu’aucune réclamation ne fut possible, bien qu’on ait la tête chaude dans le monde particulier des pêcheurs à la ligne, nul ne le mit en doute un seul instant. Toutefois, il fallut s’armer de patience pour connaître le résultat de leur consciencieux examen, l’attribution des divers prix, soit du poids, soit du nombre, devant rester secrète jusqu’à l’heure de la distribution des récompenses, précédée d’un repas qui allait réunir tous les concurrents en de fraternelles agapes.

Cette heure était arrivée. Les pêcheurs, sans parler des curieux venus de Sigmaringen, attendaient, confortablement assis, devant l’estrade sur laquelle se tenaient le Président et les autres membres du Jury.

Et, en vérité, si les sièges, bancs ou escabeaux, ne faisaient point défaut, les tables ne manquaient pas non plus, ni, sur les tables, les moss de bière, les flacons de liqueurs variées, ainsi que les verres grands et petits.

Chacun ayant pris place, et les pipes continuant à fumer de plus belle, le Président se leva.

«Écoutez!.. Écoutez!..» cria-t-on de tous côtés.

M. Miclesco vida au préalable un bock écumeux dont la mousse perla sur la pointe de ses moustaches.

«Mes chers collègues, dit-il en allemand, langue comprise de tous les membres de la Ligue Danubienne malgré la diversité de leurs nationalités, ne vous attendez pas à un discours classiquement ordonné, avec préambule, développement et conclusion. Non, nous ne sommes pas ici pour nous griser de harangues officielles, et je viens seulement causer de nos petites affaires, en bons camarades, je dirai même en frères, si cette qualification vous paraît justifiée pour une assemblée internationale.

Ces deux phrases, un peu longues comme toutes celles qui se débitent généralement au commencement d’un discours, même quand l’orateur se défend de discourir, furent accueillies par d’unanimes applaudissements, auxquels se joignirent de nombreux *très bien! très bien!* mélangés de *hoch!*, voire de hoquets. Puis, au Président levant son verre, tous les verres pleins firent raison.

M. Miclesco continua son discours en mettant le pêcheur à la ligne au premier rang de l’humanité. Il fit valoir toutes les qualités, toutes les vertus dont l’a pourvu la généreuse nature. Il dit ce qu’il lui faut de patience, d’ingéniosité, de sang-froid, d’intelligence supérieure, pour réussir dans cet art, car, plutôt qu’un métier, c’est un art, qu’il plaça bien au-dessus des prouesses cynégétiques dont se vantent à tort les chasseurs.

— Pourrait-on comparer, s’écria-t-il, la chasse à la pêche?

— Non!... non!... fut-il répondu par toute l’assistance.

— Quel mérite y a-t-il à tuer un perdreau ou un lièvre, lorsqu’on le voit à bonne portée, et qu’un chien — est-ce que nous avons des chiens, nous? — l’a dépisté à votre profit?... Ce gibier, vous l’apercevez de loin, vous le visez à loisir et vous l’accablez d’innombrables grains de plomb, dont la plupart sont tirés en pure perte!... Le poisson, au contraire, vous ne pouvez le suivre du regard... Il est caché sous les eaux... Ce qu’il faut de manoeuvres adroites, de délicates invites, de dépense intellectuelle et d’adresse, pour le décider à mordre à votre hameçon, pour le ferrer, pour le sortir de l’eau, tantôt pâmé à l’extrémité de la ligne, tantôt frétillant et, pour ainsi dire, applaudissant lui-même à la victoire du pêcheur!

Cette fois, ce fut un tonnerre de bravos. Assurément, le Président Miclesco répondait aux sentiments de la Ligue Danubienne. Comprenant qu’il ne pourrait jamais aller trop loin dans l’éloge de ses confrères, il n’hésita pas, sans craindre d’être taxé d’exagération, à placer leur noble exercice au-dessus de tous les autres, à élever jusqu’aux nues les fervents disciples de la science piscicaptologique, à évoquer même le souvenir de la superbe déesse qui présidait aux jeux piscatoriens de l’ancienne Rome dans les cérémonies halieutiques.

Ces mots furent-ils compris? Probablement, puisqu’ils provoquèrent de véritables trépignements d’enthousiasme.

Alors, après avoir repris haleine en vidant une chope de bière neigeuse:

— Il ne me reste plus, dit-il, qu’à nous féliciter de la prospérité croissante de notre Société, qui recruté chaque année de nouveaux membres et dont la réputation est si bien établie dans toute l’Europe centrale. Ses succès, je ne vous en parlerai pas. Vous les connaissez, vous en avez votre part, et c’est un grand honneur que de figurer dans ses concours! La presse allemande, la presse tchèque, la presse roumaine ne lui ont jamais marchandé leurs éloges si précieux, j’ajoute si mérités, et je porte un toast, en vous priant de me faire raison, aux journalistes qui se dévouent à la cause internationale de la Ligue Danubienne!

Certes, on fit raison au Président Miclesco. Les flacons se vidèrent dans les verres, et les verres se vidèrent dans les gosiers, avec autant de facilité que l’eau du grand fleuve et de ses affluents s’écoule dans la mer.

On en fût demeuré là, si le discours présidentiel eût pris fin sur ce dernier toast. Mais d’autres toasts s’imposaient, d’une aussi évidente opportunité.

En effet, le Président s’était redressé de toute sa hauteur, entre le secrétaire et le trésorier également debout. De la main droite, chacun d’eux tenait une coupe de champagne, la main gauche posée sur le coeur.

— Je bois à la Ligue Danubienne, dit M. Miclesco en couvrant l’assistance du regard.

Tous s’étaient levés, une coupe au niveau des lèvres. Les uns montés sur les bancs, quelques autres sur les tables, on répondit avec un ensemble parfait à la proposition de M. Miclesco.

Celui-ci, les coupes vides, reprit de plus belle, après avoir puisé aux intarissables flacons placés devant ses assesseurs et lui:

— Aux nationalités diverses, aux Badois, aux Wurtembergeois, aux Bavarois, aux Autrichiens, aux Hongrois, aux Serbes, aux Valaques, aux Moldaves, aux Bulgares, aux Bessarabiens que la Ligue Danubienne compte dans ses rangs!»

Et Bessarabiens, Bulgares, Moldaves, Valaques, Serbes, Hongrois, Autrichiens, Bavarois, Wurtembergeois, Badois lui répondirent comme un seul homme en absorbant le contenu de leurs coupes.

Enfin le Président termina sa harangue, en annonçant qu’il buvait à la santé de chacun des membres de la Société. Mais, leur nombre atteignant quatre cent soixante-treize, il fut malheureusement obligé de les grouper dans un seul toast.

On y répondit d’ailleurs par mille et mille *hoch!* qui se prolongèrent jusqu’à extinction des forces vocales.

Ainsi s’acheva le second numéro du programme, dont le premier avait pris fin avec les exercices épulatoires. Le troisième allait consister dans la proclamation des lauréats.

Chacun attendait avec une anxiété bien naturelle, car, ainsi qu’il a été dit, le secret du Jury avait été gardé. Mais le moment était venu où on le connaîtrait enfin.

Le Président Miclesco se mit en devoir de lire la liste officielle des récompenses dans les deux catégories.

Conformément aux statuts de la Société, les prix de moindre valeur seraient proclamés les premiers, ce qui donnerait à la lecture de cette sorte de palmarès un intérêt Grandissant.

A l’appel de leur nom, les lauréats des prix inférieurs dans la catégorie du nombre se présentèrent devant l’estrade. Le Président leur donna l’accolade, en leur remettant un diplôme et une somme d’argent variable suivant le rang obtenu.

Les poissons que contenaient les filets étaient de ceux que tout pêcheur peut prendre dans les eaux du Danube: épinoches, gardons, goujons, plies, perches, tanches, brochets, chevesnes et autres. Valaques, Hongrois, Badois, Wurtembergeois figuraient dans la nomenclature de ces prix inférieurs.

Le deuxième prix fut attribué, pour soixante-dix-sept poissons capturés, à un Allemand du nom de Weber dont le succès fut accueilli par de chaleureux applaudissements. Ledit Weber était, en effet, fort connu de ses confrères. Maintes et maintes fois déjà, il avait été classé dans les rangs supérieurs lors des précédents concours, et l’on s’attendait généralement à ce qu’il remportât le premier prix du nombre, ce jour-là.

Non, soixante-dix-sept poissons seulement figuraient dans son filet, soixante-dix-sept bien comptés et recomptés, alors qu’un concurrent, sinon plus habile, du moins plus heureux, en avait rapporté quatre-vingt-dix-neuf dans le sien.

Le nom de ce maître pêcheur fut alors proclamé. C’était le Hongrois Ilia Brusch.

L’assemblée très surprise n’applaudit pas, en entendant le nom de ce Hongrois inconnu des membres de la Ligue Danubienne, dans laquelle il n’était entré que tout récemment.

Le lauréat n’ayant pas cru devoir se présenter pour toucher la prime de cent florins, le Président Miclesco passa sans plus tarder à la liste des vainqueurs dans la catégorie du poids. Les primés furent des Roumains, des Slaves et des Autrichiens. Lorsque le nom auquel était attribué le second prix fut prononcé, ce nom fut applaudi comme l’avait été celui de l’Allemand Weber. M. Ivetozar, l’un des assesseurs, triomphait avec un chevesne de trois livres et demie, qui eût assurément échappé à un pêcheur possédant moins d’adresse et de sang-froid. C’était l’un des membres les plus en vue, les plus actifs, les plus dévoués de la Société, et c’est lui qui, à cette époque, avait remporté le plus grand nombre de récompenses. Aussi fut-il salué par d’unanimes applaudissements.

Il ne restait plus qu’à décerner le premier prix de cette catégorie, et les coeurs palpitaient en attendant le nom du lauréat.

Quel ne fut pas l’étonnement, plus que l’étonnement, quelle ne fut pas la stupéfaction générale, lorsque le Président Miclesco, d’une voix, dont il ne pouvait modérer le tremblement, laissa tomber ces mots:

“Premier au poids pour un brochet de dix-sept livres, le Hongrois Ilia Brusch!”

Un grand silence se fit dans l’assistance. Les mains prêtes à battre demeurèrent immobiles, les bouches prêtes à acclamer le vainqueur se turent. Un vif sentiment de curiosité immobilisait tout le monde.

Ilia Brusch allait-il enfin apparaître? Viendrait-il recevoir du Président Miclesco les diplômes d’honneur et les deux cents florins qui les accompagnaient?

Soudain un murmure courut à travers l’assemblée.

Un des assistants, qui, jusque-là, s’était tenu un peu à l’écart, se dirigeait vers l’estrade.

C’était le Hongrois Ilia Brusch.

A en juger par son visage soigneusement rasé, que couronnait une épaisse chevelure d’un noir d’encre, Ilia Brusch n’avait pas dépassé trente ans. D’une stature au-dessus de la moyenne, large d’épaules, bien planté sur ses jambes, il devait être d’une force peu commune. On pouvait être surpris, en vérité, qu’un gaillard de cette trempe se complût aux placides distractions de la pêche à la ligne, au point d’avoir acquis dans cet art difficile la maîtrise dont le résultat du concours donnait une irrécusable preuve.

Autre particularité assez bizarre, Ilia Brusch devait, d’une manière ou d’une autre, être affligé d’une affection de la vue. De larges lunettes noires cachaient, en effet, ses yeux, dont il eût été impossible de reconnaître la couleur. Or, la vue est le plus précieux des sens pour qui se passionne aux imperceptibles mouvements de la flotte, et de bons yeux sont nécessaires à qui veut déjouer les multiples ruses du poisson.

Mais, que l’on fût ou que l’on ne fût pas étonné, il n’y avait qu’à s’incliner. L’impartialité du Jury ne pouvant être suspectée, Ilia Brusch était le vainqueur du concours, et cela dans des conditions que personne, de mémoire de ligueur, n’avait jamais réunies. L’assemblée se dégela donc, et des applaudissements suffisamment sonores saluèrent le triomphateur, au moment où il recevait ses diplômes et ses primes des mains du Président Miclesco.

Cela fait, Ilia Brusch, au lieu de descendre de l’estrade, eut un court colloque avec le Président, puis se retourna vers l’assemblée intriguée, en réclamant du geste un silence qu’il obtint comme par enchantement.

“Messieurs et chers collègues, dit Ilia Brusch, je vous demanderai la permission de vous adresser quelques mots, ainsi que notre Président veut bien m’y autoriser.

On aurait entendu voler une mouche dans la salle tout à l’heure si bruyante. A quoi tendait cette allocution non prévue au programme?

— Je désire d’abord vous remercier, continuait Ilia Brusch, de votre sympathie et de vos applaudissements, mais je vous prie de croire que je ne m’enorgueillis pas plus qu’il ne convient du double succès que je viens d’obtenir. Je n’ignore pas que ce succès, s’il eût appartenu au plus digne, eût été remporté par quelque membre plus ancien de la Ligue Danubienne, si riche en valeureux pêcheurs, et que je le dois, plutôt qu’à mon mérite, à un hasard favorable.

La modestie de ce début fut vivement appréciée de l’assistance, d’où plusieurs *très bien!* s’élevèrent en sourdine.

— Ce hasard favorable, il me reste à le justifier, et j'ai conçu dans ce but un projet que je crois de nature à intéresser cette réunion d'illustres pêcheurs.

«La mode, vous ne l'ignorez pas, mes chers collègues, est aux records. Pourquoi n'imiterions-nous pas les champions d'autres sports, inférieurs au nôtre à coup sûr, et ne tenterions-nous pas d'établir le record de la pêche?

Des exclamations étouffées coururent dans l'auditoire. On entendit des *ah! ah!*, des *tiens! tiens!*, des *pourquoi pas?*, chaque sociétaire traduisant son impression selon son tempérament particulier.

— Quand cette idée, poursuivait cependant l'orateur, m'est venue pour la première fois à l'esprit, je l'ai adoptée sur-le-champ, et sur-le-champ j'ai compris dans quelles conditions elle devait être réalisée. Mon titre d'associé de la Ligue Danubienne limitait, d'ailleurs, le problème. Ligueur du Danube, c'est au Danube seul qu'il me fallait demander l'heureuse issue de mon entreprise. J'ai donc formé le projet de descendre notre glorieux fleuve, de sa source même à la mer Noire, et de vivre, durant ce parcours de trois mille kilomètres, exclusivement du produit de ma pêche.

«La chance qui m'a favorisé aujourd'hui augmenterait encore, s'il était possible, mon désir d'accomplir ce voyage, dont, j'en suis certain, vous apprécierez l'intérêt, et c'est pourquoi, dès à présent, je vous annonce mon départ, fixé au 10 août, c'est-à dire à jeudi prochain, en vous donnant rendez-vous, ce jour-là, au point précis où commence le Danube.

Il est plus facile d'imaginer que de décrire l'enthousiasme que provoqua cette communication inattendue. Pendant cinq minutes, ce fut une tempête de *hoch!* et d'applaudissements frénétiques.

Mais un tel incident ne pouvait se terminer ainsi. M. Miclesco le comprit, et, comme toujours, il agit en véritable président. Un peu lourdement peut-être, il se leva une fois de plus entre ses deux assesseurs.

— A notre collègue Ilia Brusch! dit-il d’une voix émue, en brandissant une coupe de champagne.

— A notre collègue Ilia Brusch!» répondit l’assemblée avec un bruit de tonnerre, auquel succéda immédiatement un profond silence, les humains n’étant pas conformés, par suite d’une regrettable lacune, de manière à pouvoir crier et boire en même temps.

Toutefois, le silence fut de courte durée Le vin pétillant eut tôt fait de rendre aux gosiers lassés une vigueur nouvelle, ce qui leur permit de porter encore d’innombrables santés, jusqu’au moment où fut clôturé, au milieu de l’allégresse générale, le fameux concours de pêche ouvert ce jour-là, samedi 5 août 1876, par la Ligue Danubienne, dans la charmante petite ville de Sigmaringen.

II

AUX SOURCES DU DANUBE.

En annonçant à ses collègues réunis au *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs* son projet de descendre le Danube, la ligne à la main, Ilia Brusch avait-il ambitionné la gloire? Si tel était son but, il pouvait se vanter de l’avoir Atteint.

La presse s’était emparée de l’incident, et tous les journaux de la région danubienne, sans exception, avaient consacré au concours de Sigmaringen une *copie* plus ou moins abondante, mais toujours capable de chatouiller agréablement l’amour-propre du vainqueur, dont le nom était en passe de devenir tout à fait populaire.

Dès le lendemain, dans son numéro du 6 août, la *Neue Freie Press*, de Vienne, notamment, avait inséré ce qui suit:

Le dernier concours de pêche de la Ligue Danubienne s’est terminé hier à Sigmaringen sur un véritable coup de théâtre, dont un Hongrois du nom d’Ilia Brusch, hier inconnu, aujourd’hui presque célèbre, a été le héros.

»Qu’a donc fait Ilia Brusch, demandez-vous, pour mériter une gloire aussi soudaine?

»En premier lieu, cet habile homme a réussi à s’adjuger les deux premiers prix du poids et du nombre, en distançant de loin tous ses concurrents, ce qui, paraît-il, ne s’était jamais vu depuis qu’il existe des concours de ce genre. Ce n’est déjà pas mal. Mais il y a mieux.

»Quand on a récolté une pareille moisson de lauriers, quand on a remporté une aussi éclatante victoire, il semblerait qu’on soit en droit de goûter un repos mérité. Or, tel n’est pas l’avis de ce Hongrois étonnant, qui se prépare à nous étonner plus encore.

»Si nous sommes bien informés — et l’on connaît la sûreté de nos informations — Ilia Brusch aurait annoncé à ses collègues qu’il se proposait de descendre, la ligne à la main, tout le Danube, depuis sa source, dans le duché de Bade, jusqu’à son embouchure, dans la mer Noire, soit un parcours de trois mille kilomètres environ.

»Nous tiendrons nos lecteurs au courant des péripéties de cette originale entreprise.

»C’est jeudi prochain, 10 août, qu’Ilia Brusch doit se mettre en route. Souhaitons-lui bon voyage, mais souhaitons aussi que le terrible pêcheur n’extermine pas, jusqu’au dernier représentant, la gent aquatique qui peuple les eaux du grand fleuve international!»

Ainsi s’exprimait la *Neue Freie Press* de Vienne. Le *Pester Lloyd* de Budapest ne se montrait pas moins chaleureux, non plus que le *Srbské Noviné* de Belgrade et le *Românul* de Bucarest, dans lesquels la note se haussait aux dimensions d’un véritable article.

Cette littérature était bien faite pour attirer l’attention sur Ilia Brusch, et, s’il est vrai que la presse soit le reflet de l’opinion publique, celui-ci pouvait s’attendre à exciter un intérêt grandissant à mesure que se poursuivrait son voyage.

Dans les principales villes du parcours ne trouverait-il pas, d’ailleurs, des membres de la Ligue Danubienne, qui considéreraient comme un devoir de contribuer à la gloire de leur collègue? Nul doute qu’il ne reçût d’eux assistance et secours, en cas de besoin.

Dès à présent, les commentaires de la presse obtenaient un franc succès parmi les pêcheurs à la ligne. Aux yeux de ces professionnels, l'entreprise d'Ilia Brusch acquérait une énorme importance, et nombre de ligueurs, attirés à Sigmaringen par le concours qui venait de finir, s'y étaient attardés, afin d'assister au départ du champion de la Ligue Danubienne.

Quelqu'un qui n'avait pas à se plaindre de la prolongation de leur séjour, c'était, à coup sûr, le patron du *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs*. Dans l'après-midi du 8 août, avant-veille du jour fixé par le lauréat pour le début de son original voyage, plus de trente buveurs continuaient à mener joyeuse vie dans la grande salle du cabaret, dont la caisse, étant données les facultés absorbantes de cette clientèle de choix, connaissait des recettes inespérées.

Pourtant, malgré la proximité de l'événement qui avait retenu ces curieux dans la capitale du Hohenzollern, ce n'est pas du héros du jour que l'on s'entretenait, le soir du 8 août, au *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs*. Un autre événement, plus important encore pour ces riverains du grand fleuve, servait de thème à la conversation générale et mettait tout ce monde en rumeur.

Cette émotion n'avait rien d'exagéré, et des faits du caractère le plus sérieux la justifiaient amplement.

Depuis plusieurs mois, en effet, les rives du Danube étaient désolées par un perpétuel brigandage. On ne comptait plus les fermes dévalisées, les châteaux pillés, les villas cambriolées, les meurtres même, plusieurs personnes ayant payé de leur vie la résistance qu'elles tentaient d'opposer à d'insaisissables malfaiteurs.

De toute évidence, une telle série de crimes n'avait pu être accomplie par quelques individus isolés. On avait certainement affaire à une bande bien organisée, et sans doute fort nombreuse, à en juger par ses exploits.

Circonstance singulière, cette bande n’opérait que dans le voisinage immédiat du Danube. Au delà de deux kilomètres de part et d’autre du fleuve, jamais un seul crime n’avait pu lui être légitimement attribué. Toutefois, le théâtre de ses opérations ne paraissait ainsi limité que dans le sens de la largeur, et les rives autrichiennes, hongroises, serbes ou roumaines étaient pareillement mises à sac par ces bandits, qu’on ne parvenait nulle part à prendre sur le fait.

Leur coup accompli, ils disparaissaient jusqu’au prochain crime, commis parfois à des centaines de kilomètres du précédent. Dans l’intervalle, on ne trouvait d’eux aucune trace. Ils semblaient s’être volatilisés, ainsi que les objets matériels, parfois très encombrants, qui représentaient leur butin.

Les gouvernements intéressés avaient fini par s’émouvoir de ces échecs successifs, vraisemblablement imputables au défaut de cohésion des forces répressives. Une conversation diplomatique s’était engagée à ce sujet, et, ainsi que la presse en donnait la nouvelle ce matin même du 8 août, les négociations venaient d’aboutir à la création d’une police internationale répartie sur tout le cours du Danube sous l’autorité d’un chef unique. La désignation de ce chef avait été particulièrement laborieuse, mais finalement on s’était mis d’accord sur le nom de Karl Dragoch, détective hongrois bien connu dans la région.

Karl Dragoch était, en effet, un policier, remarquable, et la difficile mission qui lui était confiée n’aurait pu l’être à un plus digne. Agé de quarante-cinq ans, c’était un homme de complexion moyenne, plutôt maigre, et doué de plus de force morale que de force physique. Il avait assez de vigueur, cependant, pour supporter les fatigues professionnelles de son état, comme il avait assez de bravoure pour en affronter les dangers. Légalement, il demeurait à Budapest, mais le plus souvent il était en campagne, occupé à quelque enquête délicate. Sa connaissance parfaite de tous les idiomes du Sud-Est de l’Europe, de l’allemand et du roumain, du serbe, du bulgare et du turc, sans parler du hongrois, sa langue maternelle, lui permettait de n’être jamais embarrassé, et, en sa qualité de célibataire, il n’avait pas à craindre que des soucis de famille vinssent entraver la liberté de ses mouvements.

Sa nomination avait, comme on dit, une bonne presse. Quant au public, il l’approuvait à l’unanimité. Dans la grande salle du *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs*, la nouvelle en était accueillie d’une manière tout particulièrement flatteuse.

«On ne pouvait mieux choisir, affirmait, au moment où s’allumaient les lampes du cabaret, M. Ivetozar, titulaire du second prix du poids, lors du concours qui venait de finir. Je connais Dragoch. C’est un homme.

— Et un habile homme, renchérit le Président Miclesco.

— Souhaitons, s’écria un Croate, du nom peu facile à prononcer de Svrb, propriétaire d’une teinturerie dans un des faubourgs de Vienne, qu’il réussisse à assainir les rives du fleuve. La vie n’y était plus tolérable, en vérité!

— Karl Dragoch a affaire à forte partie, dit l’Allemand Weber, en hochant la tête. Il faudra le voir à l’oeuvre.

— A l’oeuvre!... s’écria M. Ivetozar. Il y est déjà, n’en doutez pas.

— Certes! approuva M. Miclesco. Karl Dragoch n’est pas d’un caractère à perdre son temps. Si sa nomination remonte à quatre jours, comme le disent les journaux, il y en a au moins trois qu’il est en campagne.

— Par quel bout va-t-il commencer? demanda M. Piscéa, un Roumain au nom prédestiné pour un pêcheur à la ligne. Je serais bien embarrassé, je l’avoue, si j’étais à sa place.

— C’est précisément pour ça qu’on ne vous y a pas mis, mon cher, répliqua plaisamment un Serbe. Soyez sûr que Dragoch n’est pas embarrassé, lui. Quant à vous dire son plan, c’est autre chose. Peut-être s’est-il dirigé sur Belgrade, peut-être est-il resté à Budapest... A moins qu’il n’ait préféré venir précisément ici, à Sigmaringen, et qu’il ne soit en ce moment parmi nous au *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs!*

Cette supposition obtint un grand succès d’hilarité.

— Parmi nous!... se récria M. Weber. Vous nous la baillez belle, Michael Michaelovitch. Que viendrait-il faire ici, où, de mémoire d’homme, on n’a jamais eu à déplorer le moindre crime?

— Eh! riposta Michael Michaelovitch, ne serait-ce que pour assister après-demain au départ d’Ilia Brusch. Ça l’intéresse peut-être, cet homme... A moins, toutefois, qu’Ilia Brusch et Karl Dragoch ne fassent qu’un.

— Comment, ne fassent qu’un! S’écria-t-on de toutes parts. Qu’entendez-vous par là?

— Parbleu! ce serait très fort. Sous la peau du lauréat, personne ne soupçonnerait le policier, qui pourrait ainsi inspecter le Danube en parfaite liberté.

Cette fantaisiste boutade fit ouvrir de grands yeux aux autres buveurs. Ce Michael Michaelovitch!... Il n’y avait que lui pour avoir des idées pareilles!

Mais Michael Michaelovitch ne tenait pas autrement à celle qu'il venait de risquer.

— A moins... commença-t-il, en employant une tournure qui lui était décidément familière.

— A moins?

— A moins que Karl Dragoch n'ait un autre motif de venir ici, poursuivit-il, passant sans transition à une autre hypothèse non moins fantaisiste.

— Quel motif?

— Supposez, par exemple, que ce projet de descendre le Danube la ligne à la main lui paraisse louche.

— Louche!... Pourquoi louche?

— Dame! ce ne serait pas bête, non plus, pour un filou, de se cacher dans la peau d'un pêcheur, et surtout d'un pêcheur aussi notoire. Une telle célébrité vaut tous les incognitos du monde. On pourrait faire les cent coups à son aise, à la condition de pêcher dans l'intervalle, histoire de donner le change.

— Oui, mais il faudrait savoir pêcher, objecta doctoralement le Président Miclesco, et c'est là un privilège réservé aux honnêtes gens.

Cette observation morale, peut-être un peu hasardeuse, fut frénétiquement applaudie par tous ces passionnés pêcheurs. Michael Michaelovitch profita avec un tact remarquable de l'enthousiasme général.

— A la santé du Président! s'écria-t-il en levant son verre.

— A la santé du Président! répétèrent tous les buveurs, en vidant les leurs comme un seul homme.

— A la santé du Président! répéta un consommateur solitairement attablé, qui, depuis quelques instants, semblait prendre un vif intérêt aux répliques échangées autour de lui.

M. Miclesco fut sensible à l’aimable procédé de cet inconnu, et, pour l’en remercier, il esquissa à son adresse un geste de toast. Le buveur solitaire, estimant sans doute la glace suffisamment rompue par ce geste courtois, se considéra comme autorisé à faire part de ses impressions à l’honorable assistance.

— Bien répondu, ma foi! dit-il. Oui, certes, la pêche est un plaisir d’honnêtes gens.

— Aurions-nous l’avantage de parler à un confrère? demanda M. Miclesco, en s’approchant de l’inconnu.

— Oh! répondit modestement celui-ci, un amateur tout au plus, qui se passionne pour les beaux coups, mais n’a pas l’outrecuidance de chercher à les imiter.

— Tant pis, monsieur...?

— Jaeger.

— Tant pis, monsieur Jaeger, car je dois en conclure que nous n’aurons jamais l’honneur de vous compter au nombre des membres de la Ligue Danubienne.

— Qui sait? répondit M. Jaeger. Je me déciderai peut-être un jour à mettre moi aussi la main à la pâte... à la ligne, je veux dire, et, ce jour-là, je serai certainement des vôtres, si je réunis toutefois les conditions requises pour l'admission.

— N'en doutez pas, affirma avec précipitation M. Miclesco excité par l'espoir de recruter un nouvel adhérent. Ces conditions fort simples ne sont qu'au nombre de quatre. La première est de payer une modeste cotisation annuelle. C'est la principale.

— Bien entendu, approuva M. Jaeger en riant.

— La seconde, c'est d'aimer la pêche. La troisième, c'est d'être un agréable compagnon, et je considère que cette troisième condition est d'ores et déjà réalisée.

— Trop aimable! remercia M. Jaeger.

— Quant à la quatrième, elle consiste uniquement dans l'inscription du nom et de l'adresse sur les listes de la Société. Or, ayant déjà votre nom, quand j'aurai votre adresse...

— 43, Leipzigerstrasse, à Vienne.

— Vous ferez un ligueur complet au prix de vingt couronnes par an.

Les deux interlocuteurs se mirent à rire de bon coeur.

— Pas d'autres formalités? demanda M. Jaeger.

— Pas d'autres.

— Pas de pièces d'identité à fournir?

— Voyons, monsieur Jaeger, objecta M. Miclesco, pour pêcher à la ligne!...

— C’est juste, reconnut M. Jaeger. D’ailleurs, cela n’a guère d’importance. Tout le monde doit se connaître à la Ligue Danubienne.

— C’est exactement le contraire, rectifia M. Miclesco. Songez donc! certains de nos camarades habitent ici, à Sigmaringen, et d’autres sur le rivage de la mer Noire. Cela ne facilite pas les relations de bon voisinage.

— En effet!

— Ainsi, par exemple, notre étonnant lauréat du dernier concours...

— Ilia Brusch?

— Lui-même. Eh bien! personne ne le connaît.

— Pas possible!

— C’est ainsi, affirma M. Miclesco. Il n’y a pas plus de quinze jours, il est vrai, qu’il fait partie de la Ligue. Pour tout le monde, Ilia Brusch a été une surprise, que dis-je! une véritable révélation.

— Ce qu’on appelle un *outsider*, en style de course.

— Précisément.

— De quel pays est-il, cet outsider?

— C’est un Hongrois.

— Comme vous alors. Car vous êtes Hongrois, je crois, monsieur le Président?

— Pur sang, monsieur Jaeger, Hongrois de Budapest.

— Tandis qu'Ilia Brusch?

— Est de Szalka.

— Où prenez-vous Szalka?

— C'est une bourgade, une petite ville, si vous voulez, sur la rive droite de l'Ipoly, rivière qui se jette dans le Danube à quelques lieues au-dessus de Budapest.

— Avec celui-là, du moins, monsieur Miclesco, vous pourrez par conséquent voisiner, fit observer M. Jaeger en riant.

— Pas avant deux ou trois mois, en tous cas, répondit sur le même ton le Président de la Ligue Danubienne. Il lui faudra bien ce temps pour son voyage...

— A moins qu'il ne le fasse pas! insinua le Serbe facétieux, en se mêlant sans façon à la conversation.

D'autres pêcheurs se rapprochèrent. M. Jaeger et M. Miclesco devinrent le centre d'un petit groupe.

— Qu'entendez-vous par là? interrogea M. Miclesco. Vous avez une brillante imagination, Michael Michaelovitch.

— Simple plaisanterie, mon cher Président, répondit l'interrupteur. Cependant, si Ilia Brusch ne peut être, selon vous, ni un policier ni un malfaiteur, pourquoi n’aurait-il pas voulu se payer, comme on dit, notre tête, et pourquoi ne serait-il pas tout simplement un farceur?

M. Miclesco prit la chose sur le mode grave.

— Votre esprit est malveillant, Michael Michaelovitch, répliqua-t-il. Cela vous jouera un mauvais tour un jour ou l’autre. Ilia Brusch m’a fait l’effet d’un brave homme et d’un homme sérieux. D’ailleurs, il est membre de la Ligue Danubienne. C’est tout dire.

— Bravo! cria-t-on de tous côtés.

Michael Michaelovitch, sans paraître autrement confus de la leçon, saisit avec une admirable présence d’esprit cette nouvelle occasion de porter un toast.

— Dans ce cas, dit-il, en saisissant son moss, à la santé d’Ilia Brusch!

— A la santé d’Ilia Brusch!» répondit en choeur l’assistance, sans excepter M. Jæger, qui vida consciencieusement son verre Jusqu’à la dernière goutte.

Cette boutade de Michael Michaelovitch n’était cependant pas aussi dénuée de bon sens que les précédentes. Après avoir annoncé son projet à grand fracas, Ilia Brusch n’avait plus reparu. Nul n’en avait plus entendu parler. N’était-il pas singulier qu’il se fût ainsi tenu à l’écart, et ne pouvait-on légitimement supposer qu’il avait voulu en faire accroire à ses trop crédules collègues? Pour que l’on fût fixé à cet égard, l’attente, en tous cas, ne serait plus de longue durée. Dans trente-six heures, on saurait à quoi s’en tenir.

Ceux qui s’intéressaient à ce projet n’avaient qu’à se transporter à quelques lieues en amont de Sigmaringen. Ils y rencontreraient assurément Ilia

Brusch, si celui-ci était un homme aussi sérieux que le Président Miclesco l'affirmait de confiance.

Toutefois, une difficulté pouvait se présenter. La situation de la source du grand fleuve était-elle déterminée avec précision? Les cartes l'indiquaient-elles avec exactitude? N'existait-il pas quelque incertitude sur ce point, et, quand on essaierait de rejoindre Ilia Brusch à tel endroit, ne serait-il pas à tel autre?

Certes, il n'est pas douteux que le Danube, l'Ister des Anciens, prenne naissance dans le grand-duché de Bade. Les géographes affirment même que c'est par six degrés dix minutes de longitude orientale et quarante-sept degrés quarante-huit minutes de latitude septentrionale. Mais enfin cette détermination, en admettant qu'elle soit juste, n'est poussée que jusqu'à la minute d'arc et non jusqu'à la seconde, ce qui peut donner lieu à une variation d'une certaine importance. Or, il s'agissait de jeter la ligne à l'endroit même où la première goutte d'eau danubienne commence à dévaler vers la mer Noire.

D'après une légende qui eut longtemps la valeur d'une donnée géographique, le Danube naîtrait au milieu d'un jardin, celui des princes de Furstenberg. Il aurait pour berceau un bassin en marbre, dans lequel nombre de touristes viennent remplir leur gobelet. Serait-ce donc au bord de cette vasque intarissable qu'il conviendrait d'attendre Ilia Brusch le matin du 10 août?

Non, là n'est point la véritable, l'authentique source du grand fleuve. On sait maintenant qu'il est formé par la réunion de deux ruisseaux, la Breg et la Brigach, lesquels se déversent d'une altitude de huit cent soixante-quinze mètres, à travers la forêt du Schwarzwald. Leurs eaux se mélangent à Donaueschingen, quelques lieues en amont de Sigmaringen, et se confondent alors sous l’appellation unique de Donau, d’où les Français ont fait Danube.

Si l’un de ces ruisseaux méritait plus que l’autre d’être considéré comme le fleuve lui-même, ce serait la Breg, dont la longueur l’emporte de trente-sept kilomètres, et qui naît dans le Brisgau.

Mais, sans doute, les curieux plus avisés s’étaient dit que le point de départ d’Ilia Brusch — s’il partait toutefois — serait Donaueschingen, car c’est là qu’ils se rendirent, la plupart appartenant à la Ligue Danubienne, en compagnie du Président Miclesco.

Dès le matin du 10 août, ils se mirent en faction sur la rive de la Breg, au confluent des deux ruisseaux. Mais les heures s’écoulèrent, sans que la présence de l’homme du jour eût été signalée.

«Il ne viendra pas, disait l’un.

— Ce n’est qu’un mystificateur, disait l’autre.

— Et nous ressemblons singulièrement à de bons niais! ajoutait Michael Michaelovitch, qui n’avait pas le triomphe modeste.

Seul, le Président Miclesco persistait à prendre la défense d’Ilia Brusch.

— Non, affirmait-il, je n’admettrai jamais qu’un membre de la Ligue Danubienne ait pu avoir la pensée de mystifier ses collègues!... Ilia Brusch aura été retardé. Patientons. Nous allons bientôt le voir arriver.»

M. Miclesco avait raison de se montrer aussi confiant. Un peu avant neuf heures, un cri s’échappa du groupe qui se tenait au confluent de la Breg et de la Brigach.

«Le voilà!... le voilà!»

A deux cents pas, au tournant d’une pointe, apparaissait un canot conduit à la godille, le long de la berge, en dehors du courant. Seul, debout à l’arrière, un homme le dirigeait.

Cet homme était bien celui qui avait figuré quelques jours avant au concours de la Ligue Danubienne, le gagnant des deux premiers prix, le Hongrois Ilia Brusch.

Lorsque le canot eut atteint le confluent, il s’arrêta, et un grappin le fixa à la berge. Ilia Brusch débarqua, et tous les curieux se réunirent autour de lui. Sans doute, il ne s’attendait pas à trouver si nombreuse assistance, car il en parut quelque peu gêné.

Le Président Miclesco vint le rejoindre, et lui tendit une main qu’Ilia Brusch serra avec déférence, après avoir retiré sa casquette de loutre.

«Ilia Brusch, dit M. Miclesco avec une dignité vraiment présidentielle, je suis heureux de revoir le grand lauréat de notre dernier concours.

Le grand lauréat s’inclina par manière de remerciement. Le Président reprit:

— De ce que nous vous rencontrons aux sources de notre fleuve international, nous en concluons que vous mettez à exécution votre projet de le descendre, en pêchant à la ligne, jusqu’à son embouchure.

— En effet, monsieur le Président, répondit Ilia Brusch.

— Et c’est aujourd’hui même que vous commencez votre descente?

— Aujourd’hui même, monsieur le Président.

— Comment comptez-vous effectuer le parcours?

— En m’abandonnant au courant.

— Dans ce canot?

— Dans ce canot.

— Sans jamais relâcher?

— Si, la nuit.

— Vous n’ignorez pas qu’il s’agit de trois mille kilomètres?

— A dix lieues par jour, ce sera fait en deux mois environ.

— Alors bon voyage, Ilia Brusch!

— En vous remerciant, monsieur le Président!»

Ilia Brusch salua une dernière fois, et remonta dans son embarcation, tandis que les curieux se pressaient pour le voir partir.

Il prit sa ligne, l’amorça, la déposa sur l’un des bancs, ramena le grappin à bord, repoussa le canot d’un vigoureux coup de gaffe, puis, s’asseyant à l’arrière, il lança la ligne.

Un instant après, il la retirait. Un barbeau frétillait à l’hameçon. Cela parut d’un heureux présage, et, comme il tournait la pointe, toute l’assistance acclama par de frénétiques *hoch!* le lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne.

III

LE PASSAGER D'ILIA BRUSCH.

Elle était donc commencée, cette descente du grand fleuve, qui allait promener Ilia Brusch à travers un duché: celui de Bade; deux royaumes: le Wurtemberg et la Bavière; deux empires: l'Autriche-Hongrie et la Turquie; trois principautés: le Hohenzollern, la Serbie et la Roumanie. L'original pêcheur n'avait à redouter aucune fatigue pendant ce long parcours de plus de sept cents lieues. Le courant du Danube se chargerait de le transporter jusqu'à l'embouchure, à raison d'un peu plus d'une lieue à l'heure, soit, en moyenne, une cinquantaine de kilomètres par jour. En deux mois, il serait ainsi au terme de son voyage, à condition qu'aucun incident ne l'arrêtât en route. Mais pourquoi aurait-il éprouvé des retards?

[Note 1: Ces deux principautés ont été érigées depuis en royaumes, la Roumanie en 1881 et la Serbie en 1882.]

Le canot d'Ilia Brusch mesurait une douzaine de pieds. C'était une sorte de barge à fond plat, large de quatre pieds en son milieu. A l'avant, s'arrondissait un rouf, un tôt, si l'on veut, sous lequel deux hommes auraient pu s'abriter. A l'intérieur de ce rouf, deux coffres latéraux, placés en abord, contenaient la garde-robe très réduite du propriétaire, et pouvaient, une fois refermés, se transformer en couchettes. A l'arrière un autre coffre formait banc, et servait à loger divers ustensiles de cuisine.

Inutile d'ajouter que la barge était pourvue de tous les engins qui constituent le matériel du véritable pêcheur. Ilia Brusch n'aurait pu s'en passer, puisque, d'après le projet communiqué par lui à ses collègues le jour du concours, il devait, pendant ce voyage, vivre exclusivement du produit de sa pêche, soit qu’il le consommât en nature, soit qu’il l’échangeât contre espèces sonnantes et trébuchantes, qui lui permettraient de composer des menus plus variés sans donner d’entorse à son programme.

Dans ce but, Ilia Brusch irait, le soir venu, vendre le poisson capturé pendant le jour, et ce poisson aurait des amateurs sur l’une et l’autre rive, après le bruit fait autour du nom du pêcheur.

Ainsi s’écoula la première journée. Toutefois, un observateur, qui aurait pu ne pas quitter des yeux Ilia Brusch, aurait été à bon droit surpris du peu d’ardeur que le lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne semblait mettre à la pêche, seule raison d’être, pourtant, de son excentrique entreprise. Se croyait-il à l’abri des regards, il s’empressait de lâcher la ligne pour l’aviron, et godillait de toutes ses forces, comme s’il eût voulu activer la marche du bateau. Quelques curieux apparaissaient-ils, au contraire, sur l’une des berges, ou croisait-il un batelier, il saisissait aussitôt son arme professionnelle, et, son habileté aidant, ne tardait pas à tirer hors de l’eau quelque beau poisson, qui lui valait les applaudissements des spectateurs. Mais, les curieux cachés par un mouvement de la rive, le batelier disparu à un tournant, il reprenait l’aviron, et imprimait à sa lourde barge une vitesse qui s’ajoutait à celle de l’eau.

Ilia Brusch avait-il donc quelque motif de chercher à abréger un voyage que personne, cependant, ne l’avait forcé à entreprendre? Quoi qu’il en soit à cet égard, il avançait assez vite. Entraîné par un courant plus rapide à l’origine du fleuve qu’il ne le sera plus tard, godillant chaque fois qu’il estimait l’occasion favorable, il dérivait à raison de huit kilomètres à l’heure, sinon davantage.

Après avoir passé devant quelques localités sans importance, il laissa derrière lui Tuttlingen, centre plus considérable, sans s'y arrêter, bien que quelques-uns de ses admirateurs lui fissent, de la berge, signe d'accoster. Ilia Brusch, déclinant du geste l'invitation, se refusa à interrompre sa dérive.

Vers quatre heures de l'après-midi, il arrivait à la hauteur de la petite ville de Fridingen, à quarante-huit kilomètres de son point de départ. Volontiers il aurait brûlé — si toutefois cette expression est de mise quand on suit un chemin liquide — Fridingen comme les stations précédentes, mais l'enthousiasme public ne le lui permit pas. Dès qu'il apparut, plusieurs barques, d'où s'élevaient d'innombrables *hoch!*, se détachèrent de la rive et cernèrent le glorieux lauréat.

Celui-ci se rendit de bonne grâce. D'ailleurs n'avait-il pas à chercher preneur pour le poisson capturé au cours de sa pêche intermittente? Barbeaux, brèmes, gardons, épinoches frétillaient encore dans son filet, sans compter plusieurs de ces mulets qui sont plus particulièrement désignés sous le nom de hottus. Evidemment il ne pouvait consommer tout cela à lui seul. Du reste, il n'en était pas question. Les amateurs étaient nombreux. Aussitôt que la barge fut arrêtée, une cinquantaine de Badois se pressèrent autour de lui, l'appelant, l'entourant, lui rendant les honneurs dus au lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne.

«Eh! par ici, Brusch!

— Un verre de bonne bière, Brusch?

— Nous achetons votre poisson, Brusch!

— Vingt kreutzers, celui-ci!

— Un florin, celui-là!»

Le lauréat ne savait à qui répondre, et sa pêche eut vite fait de lui rapporter quelques jolies pièces sonnantes. Avec la prime déjà touchée au concours cela finirait par former une belle somme, si l’enthousiasme se propageait également des sources du grand fleuve à son embouchure.

Et pourquoi eût-il pris fin? Pourquoi cesserait-on de se disputer les poissons d’Ilia Brusch? N’était-ce pas un honneur de posséder une pièce sortie de ses mains? Certes, il n’aurait même pas la peine d’aller à domicile débiter sa marchandise que le public se disputerait sur place. Cette vente était décidément une idée géniale.

Ce soir-là, outre qu’il vendit aisément son poisson, les invitations ne lui manquèrent pas. Ilia Brusch, qui semblait désireux de quitter son embarcation le moins possible, les repoussa toutes, comme il refusa avec énergie les bons verres de vin et les bons moss de bière, qu’on le priait de tous côtés de venir boire dans les cabarets de la rive. Ses admirateurs durent y renoncer et se séparer de leur héros, après avoir pris rendez-vous pour le lendemain au moment du départ.

Mais, le lendemain, ils ne trouvèrent plus la barge. Ilia Brusch était parti avant l’aube, et, profitant de la solitude de cette heure matinale, il godillait avec ardeur en se maintenant au milieu du fleuve, à égale distance de ses rives assez escarpées. Aidé par le courant rapide, il passa vers cinq heures du matin à Sigmaringen, à quelques mètres du *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs*. Sans doute, un peu plus tard, l’un ou l’autre des membres de la Ligue Danubienne viendrait s’accouder au balcon du cabaret, afin de guetter l’arrivée de son glorieux collègue. Il la guetterait vainement. Le pêcheur alors serait loin, s’il continuait à aller de ce train.

A quelques kilomètres de Sigmaringen, Ilia Brusch laissa derrière lui le premier affluent du Danube, un simple ruisseau, le Louchat, qui s’y jette sur la rive gauche.

Profitant de l’éloignement relatif séparant les centres habités dans cette partie de son parcours, Ilia Brusch activa, durant toute cette journée, la marche de son embarcation, en ne pêchant que le minimum indispensable. A la nuit, n’ayant capturé que tout juste le poisson nécessaire à sa consommation personnelle, il s’arrêta en pleine campagne, un peu en amont de la petite ville de Mundelkingen dont les habitants ne le croyaient certainement pas si proche.

A cette deuxième journée de navigation succéda la troisième, qui fut presque identique. Ilia Brusch dériva rapidement devant Mundelkingen avant le lever du soleil, et il était encore de bonne heure qu’il avait déjà dépassé le gros bourg d’Ehingen. A quatre heures, il coupait l’Iller, important affluent de droite, et cinq heures n’avaient pas sonné, qu’il était amarré à un anneau de fer scellé dans le quai d’Ulm, première ville du royaume de Wurtemberg, après Stuttgart, sa capitale.

L’arrivée du célèbre lauréat n’avait pas été signalée. On ne l’attendait que le lendemain vers les dernières heures du soir. Il n’y eut donc pas l’empressement habituel. Très satisfait de son incognito, Ilia Brusch résolut d’employer la fin du jour à une visite sommaire de la ville.

Toutefois, dire que le quai était désert ne serait pas scrupuleusement exact. Il avait au moins un promeneur, et même tout portait à croire que ce promeneur attendait Ilia Brusch, puisque, depuis le moment où la barge était apparue, il l’avait suivie, en marchant le long de la rive. Selon toute probabilité, le lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne n’éviterait donc pas l’ovation habituelle.

Cependant, depuis que la barge était amarrée à quai, le promeneur solitaire ne s’en était pas rapproché. Il restait à quelque distance, paraissant observer, comme soucieux de n’être pas vu lui-même. C’était un homme de taille moyenne, sec, l’oeil vif, bien qu’il eût certainement dépassé la quarantaine, le corps serré dans un vêtement à la mode hongroise. Il tenait à la main une valise de cuir.

Ilia Brusch, sans lui prêter aucune attention, amarra solidement son bateau, ferma la porte du tôt, s’assura que le couvercle des coffres était bien cadenassé, puis sauta à terre, et gagna la première rue remontant vers la ville.

L’homme aussitôt de lui emboîter le pas, après avoir rapidement déposé dans la barge la valise de cuir qu’il tenait à la main.

Traversée par le Danube, Ulm est wurtembergeoise sur la rive gauche, et bavaroise sur la rive droite, mais, sur les deux rives, c’est une ville bien allemande.

Ilia Brusch allait le long des vieilles rues bordées de vieilles boutiques à guichets, boutiques dans lesquelles la pratique n’entre guère et où les marchés se concluent à travers la devanture vitrée. Quand le vent siffle, quel tapage de ferrailles sonores, alors que se balancent, au bout de leurs bras, les pesantes enseignes découpées en ours, en cerfs, en croix et en couronnes!

Ilia Brusch, après avoir gagné l’ancienne enceinte, parcourut le quartier, où bouchers, tripiers et tanneurs ont leurs séchoirs, puis, tout en flânant à l’aventure, il arriva devant la cathédrale, l’une des plus hardies de l’Allemagne. Son munster avait l’ambition de s’élever plus haut que celui de Strasbourg. Cette ambition a été déçue, comme tant d'autres plus humaines, et l'extrême pointe de la flèche wurtembergeoise s'arrête à la hauteur de trois cent trente-sept pieds.

Ilia Brusch n'appartenant pas à la famille des grimpeurs, l'idée ne lui vint pas de monter au munster, d'où son regard aurait embrassé toute la ville et la campagne environnante. S'il l'eût fait, il aurait été certainement suivi par cet inconnu, qui ne le quittait pas, sans qu'il s'aperçût de cette étrange poursuite. Du moins en fut-il accompagné, lorsque, entré dans la cathédrale, il en admira le tabernacle, qu'un voyageur français, M. Duruy, a pu comparer à un bastion avec logettes et mâchicoulis, et les stalles du choeur, qu'un artiste du XVe siècle a peuplées de personnages célèbres de l'époque.

L'un suivant l'autre, ils passèrent devant l'hôtel de ville, vénérable édifice du XIIe siècle, puis redescendirent vers le fleuve.

Avant d'arriver au quai, Ilia Brusch fit une halte de quelques instants, pour regarder une compagnie d'échassiers juchés sur leurs longues échasses, exercice très goûté à Ulm, bien qu'il ne soit pas imposé aux habitants, comme il l'est encore, dans l'antique cité universitaire de Tubingue, par un sol humide et raviné impropre à la marche des simples piétons.

Afin de mieux jouir de ce spectacle, dont les acteurs étaient une troupe de jeunes gens, de jeunes filles, de garçons et de fillettes, tous en joie, Ilia Brusch avait pris place dans un café. L'inconnu ne manqua pas de venir s'asseoir à une table voisine de la sienne, et tous deux se firent servir un pot de la bière fameuse du pays.

Dix minutes après, ils se remettaient en route, mais dans un ordre inverse à celui du départ. L'inconnu, maintenant, marchait le premier au pas accéléré, et quand Ilia Brusch, qui le suivait à son tour sans s'en douter, atteignit sa barge, il l’y trouva installé et paraissant attendre depuis longtemps. Il faisait encore grand jour. Ilia Brusch aperçut de loin cet intrus, confortablement assis sur le coffre d’arrière, une valise de cuir jaune à ses pieds. Très surpris, il hâta le pas.

«Pardon, Monsieur, dit-il, en sautant dans son embarcation, vous faites erreur, je pense?

— Nullement, répondit l’inconnu. C’est bien à vous que je désire parler.

— A moi?

— A vous, monsieur Ilia Brusch.

— Dans quel but?

— Pour vous proposer une affaire.

— Une affaire! répéta le pêcheur très surpris.

— Et même une excellente affaire, affirma l’inconnu, qui invita du geste son interlocuteur à s’asseoir.

Invitation quelque peu incorrecte, à coup sûr, car il n’est pas d’usage d’offrir un siège à qui vous reçoit chez lui. Mais ce personnage parlait avec tant de décision et de tranquille assurance, qu’Ilia Brusch en fut impressionné. Sans mot dire, il obéit à l’offre incongrue.

— Comme tout le monde, reprit l’inconnu, je connais votre projet et je sais par conséquent que vous comptez descendre le Danube, en vivant exclusivement du produit de votre pêche. Je suis moi-même un amateur passionné de l’art de la pêche, et je désirerais vivement m’intéresser a votre entreprise.

— De quelle façon?

— Je vais vous le dire. Mais, auparavant, permettez-moi une question. A combien estimez-vous la valeur du poisson que vous pécherez au cours de votre voyage.

— Ce que pourra rapporter ma pêche?

— Oui. J’entends ce que vous en vendrez, sans tenir compte de ce que vous consommerez personnellement.

— Peut-être une centaine de florins.

— Je vous en offre cinq cents.

— Cinq cents florins! répéta Ilia Brusch abasourdi.

— Oui, cinq cents florins payés comptant et d’avance.

Ilia Brusch regarda l’auteur de cette singulière proposition, et son regard devait être très éloquent, car celui-ci répondit à la pensée que le pêcheur n’exprimait pas.

— Soyez tranquille, monsieur Brusch. J’ai tout mon bon sens.

— Alors, quel est votre but? demanda le lauréat mal convaincu.

— Je vous l’ai dit, expliqua l’inconnu. Je désire m’intéresser à vos prouesses, y assister même. Et puis, il y a aussi l’émotion du joueur. Après avoir mis sur votre chance cinq cents florins, cela m’amusera de voir la somme rentrer par fractions tous les soirs, au fur et à mesure de vos ventes.

— Tous les soirs? insista Ilia Brusch. Vous auriez donc l’intention de vous embarquer avec moi?

— Certainement, dit l’inconnu. Bien entendu, mon passage ne serait pas compris dans nos conventions et serait payé par une égale somme de cinq cents florins, ce qui fera mille florins au total, toujours comptant et d’avance.

— Mille florins! répéta derechef Ilia Brusch de plus en plus surpris.

Certes, la proposition était tentante. Mais il est à supposer que le pêcheur tenait à sa solitude, car il répondit brièvement:

— Mes regrets, Monsieur. Je refuse.

Devant une réponse aussi catégorique, formulée d’un ton péremptoire, il n’y avait qu’à s’incliner. Tel n’était pas l’avis, sans doute, du passionné amateur de pêche, qui ne parut aucunement impressionné par la netteté du refus.

— Me permettrez-vous, monsieur Brusch, de vous demander pourquoi? Interrogea-t-il placidement.

— Je n’ai pas de raisons à donner. Je, refuse, voilà tout. C’est mon droit, je pense, répondit Ilia Brusch avec un commencement d’impatience.

— C’est votre droit, assurément, reconnut sans s’émouvoir son interlocuteur. Mais je n’excède pas le mien en vous priant de bien vouloir me faire connaître les motifs de votre décision. Ma proposition n’était nullement désobligeante, au contraire, et il est naturel que je sois traité avec courtoisie.

Ces mots avaient été débités d’une manière qui n’avait rien de comminatoire, mais le ton était si ferme, si plein d’autorité même, qu’Ilia Brusch en fut frappé. S’il tenait à sa solitude, il tenait encore plus sans doute à éviter une discussion intempestive, car il fit droit aussitôt à une observation en somme parfaitement justifiée.

— Vous avez raison, Monsieur, dit-il. Je vous dirai donc tout d’abord que j’aurais scrupule à vous laisser faire une opération certainement désastreuse.

— C’est mon affaire.

— C’est aussi la mienne, car mon intention n’est pas de pêcher au delà d’une heure par jour.

— Et le reste du temps?

— Je godille pour activer la marche de mon bateau.

— Vous êtes donc pressé?

Ilia Brusch se mordit les lèvres.

— Pressé ou non, répondit-il plus sèchement, c’est ainsi. Vous devez comprendre que, dans ces conditions, accepter vos cinq cents florins serait un véritable vol.

— Pas maintenant que je suis prévenu, objecta l’acquéreur sans se départir de son calme imperturbable.

— Tout de même, répliqua Ilia Brusch, à moins que je ne m’astreigne à pêcher tous les jours, ne fût-ce qu’une heure. Or, je ne m’imposerai jamais une telle obligation. J’entends agir à ma fantaisie. Je veux être libre.

— Vous le serez, déclara l’inconnu. Vous pécherez quand il vous plaira, et seulement quand il vous plaira. Cela augmentera même les charmes du jeu. D’ailleurs, je vous sais assez habile pour que deux ou trois coups heureux suffisent à m’assurer un bénéfice, et je considère toujours l’affaire comme excellente. Je persiste donc à vous offrir cinq cents florins à forfait, soit mille florins, passage compris.

— Et je persiste à les refuser.

— Alors, je répéterai ma question: Pourquoi?

Une telle insistance avait véritablement quelque chose de déplacé. Ilia Brusch, fort calme de son naturel, commençait néanmoins à perdre patience.

— Pourquoi? répondit-il plus vivement. Je vous l’ai dit, je crois. J’ajouterai, puisque vous l’exigez, que je ne veux personne à bord. Il n’est pas défendu, je suppose, d’aimer la solitude.

— Certes, reconnut son interlocuteur sans faire le moins du monde mine de quitter le banc sur lequel il semblait incrusté. Mais, avec moi, vous serez seul. Je ne bougerai pas de ma place et même je ne dirai pas un mot, si vous m’imposez cette condition.

— Et la nuit? répliqua Ilia Brusch, que la colère gagnait. Pensez-vous que deux personnes seraient à leur aise dans ma cabine?

— Elle est assez grande pour les contenir, répondit l’inconnu. D’ailleurs, mille florins peuvent bien compenser un peu de gêne.

— Je ne sais pas s’ils le peuvent, riposta Ilia Brusch de plus en plus irrité, mais moi je ne le veux pas. C’est non, cent fois non, mille fois non. Voilà qui est net, je pense.

— Très net, approuva l’inconnu.

— Alors?.. demanda Ilia Brusch en montrant le quai de la main.

Mais son interlocuteur parut ne pas comprendre ce geste pourtant si clair. Il avait tiré une pipe de sa poche et la bourrait avec soin. Un pareil aplomb exaspéra Ilia Brusch.

— Faudra-t-il donc que je vous dépose à terre? s’écria-t-il hors de lui.

L’inconnu avait achevé de bourrer sa pipe.

— Vous auriez tort, dit-il, sans que sa voix trahît la moindre crainte. Et cela, pour trois raisons. La première, c’est qu’une rixe ne pourrait manquer de provoquer l’intervention de la police, ce qui nous obligerait à aller tous deux chez le commissaire décliner nos noms et prénoms et répondre à un interminable interrogatoire. Cela ne m’amuserait guère, je l’avoue, et, d’un autre côté, cette aventure serait peu propre à abréger votre voyage, comme vous semblez le désirer...

L’obstiné amateur de pêche comptait-il beaucoup sur cet argument? Si tel était son espoir, il avait lieu d’être satisfait. Ilia Brusch, subitement radouci, semblait disposé à écouter jusqu’au bout le plaidoyer. Le disert orateur, très occupé à allumer sa pipe, ne s’aperçut pas, d’ailleurs, de l’effet produit par ses paroles.

Il allait reprendre sa placide argumentation, quand, à cet instant précis, une troisième personne, qu’Ilia Brusch, absorbé par la discussion, n’avait pas vue s’approcher, sauta dans la barge. Ce nouveau venu portait l’uniforme des gendarmes allemands.

— Monsieur Ilia Brusch? demanda ce représentant de la force publique.

— C’est moi, répondit l’interpellé.

— Vos papiers, s’il vous plaît?

La demande tomba comme une pierre au milieu d’une mare tranquille. Ilia Brusch fut visiblement anéanti.

— Mes papiers?.. bégaya-t-il. Mais je n’ai pas de papiers, moi, si ce n’est des enveloppes de lettres et les quittances de loyer pour la maison que j’habite à Szalka. Cela vous suffit-il?

— Ce ne sont pas des papiers, ça, répliqua le gendarme d’un air dégoûté. Un acte de baptême, une carte de circulation, un livret d’ouvrier, un passeport, voilà des papiers! Avez-vous quelque chose de ce genre?

— Absolument rien, dit Ilia Brusch avec désolation.

— C’est ennuyeux pour vous, murmura le gendarme, qui paraissait très sincèrement fâché d’être dans la nécessité de sévir.

— Pour moi! protesta le pêcheur. Mais je suis un honnête homme, je vous prie de le croire.

— J’en suis convaincu, proclama le gendarme.

— Et je n’ai rien à craindre de personne. Je suis bien connu, du reste. C’est moi qui suis le lauréat du dernier concours de pêche de la Ligue Danubienne à Sigmaringen, dont toute la presse a parlé, et, ici même, j’aurai sûrement des répondants.

— On les cherchera, soyez tranquille, assura le gendarme. En attendant, je suis obligé de vous prier de me suivre chez le commissaire, qui s’assurera de votre identité.

— Chez le commissaire! se récria Ilia Brusch. De quoi m’accuse-t-on?

— De rien du tout, expliqua le gendarme. Seulement, j’ai une consigne, moi. Cette consigne est de surveiller le fleuve et d’amener chez le commissaire tous ceux que je trouverai non munis de papiers en règle. Etes-vous sur le fleuve? Oui. Avez-vous des papiers? Non. Donc, je vous emmène. Le reste ne me regarde pas.

— Mais c’est une indignité! protesta Ilia Brusch, qui semblait au désespoir.

— C’est comme ça, déclara le gendarme avec flegme.

L’aspirant passager, dont le plaidoyer avait été si brusquement interrompu, accordait à ce dialogue une attention telle qu’il en avait laissé éteindre sa pipe. Il jugea le moment venu d’intervenir.

— Si je répondais, moi, de M. Ilia Brusch, dit-il, cela ne suffirait-il pas?

— Ça dépend, prononça le gendarme. Qui êtes-vous, vous?

— Voici mon passeport, répondit l’amateur de pêche, en tendant une feuille dépliée.

Le gendarme la parcourut des yeux, et aussitôt ses allures changèrent du tout au tout.

— C’est différent, dit-il.

Il replia soigneusement le passeport qu’il rendit à son propriétaire. Après quoi, sautant sur le quai:

— A vous revoir, Messieurs, dit-il, en adressant un salut plein de déférence au compagnon d’Ilia Brusch.

Quant à ce dernier, aussi étonné de la soudaineté de cet incident inattendu que de la façon dont il avait été solutionné, il suivait des yeux l’ennemi battant en retraite.

Pendant ce temps, son sauveur, reprenant le fil de son discours au point même où il avait été brisé, poursuivait impitoyablement:

— La deuxième raison, monsieur Brusch, c’est que le fleuve, pour des motifs que vous ignorez peut-être, est étroitement surveillé, comme vous en avez eu la preuve à l’instant. Cette surveillance se fera plus étroite encore quand vous arriverez en aval, et plus encore, s’il est possible, quand vous traverserez la Serbie et les provinces bulgares de l’Empire ottoman, pays fort troublés et qui sont même officiellement en guerre depuis le 1er juillet. J’estime que plus d’un incident peut naître au cours de votre voyage, et que vous ne serez pas fâché d’avoir, le cas échéant, le concours d’un honnête bourgeois, qui a le bonheur de disposer de quelque influence.

Que ce second argument, dont la valeur venait d’être démontrée avant la lettre, fût de nature à porter, l’habile orateur était fondé à le croire. Mais il n’espérait sans doute pas un succès si complet. Ilia Brusch, pleinement convaincu, ne demandait qu’à céder. L’embarrassant était seulement de trouver un prétexte plausible à son revirement.

— La troisième et dernière raison, continuait cependant le candidat passager, c’est que je m’adresse à vous de la part de M. Miclesco, votre président. Puisque vous avez placé votre entreprise sous le patronage de la Ligue Danubienne, c’est bien le moins qu’elle surveille son exécution, de manière à être en état d’en garantir, au besoin, la loyauté. Quand M. Miclesco a connu mon intention de m’associer à votre voyage, il m’a donné un mandat quasi officiel dans ce sens. Je regrette de n’avoir pas prévu votre incompréhensible résistance, et d’avoir refusé les lettres de recommandation qu’il offrait de me remettre pour vous.

Ilia Brusch poussa un soupir de soulagement. Pouvait-il exister meilleur prétexte d’accorder maintenant ce qu’il refusait avec tant d’acharnement?

— Il fallait le dire! s’écria-t-il. Dans ce cas, c’est fort différent, et j’aurais mauvaise grâce à repousser plus longtemps vos propositions.

— Vous les acceptez donc?

— Je les accepte.

— Fort bien! dit l’amateur de pêche enfin parvenu au comble de ses voeux, en tirant de sa poche quelques billets de banque. Voici les mille florins.

— En voulez-vous un reçu? demanda Ilia Brusch.

— Si cela ne vous désoblige pas.

Le pêcheur tira de l'un des coffres de l'encre, une plume et un calepin, dont il déchira un feuillet, puis, aux dernières lueurs du jour, se mit en devoir de libeller le reçu qu'il lisait en même temps à haute voix.

«Reçu, en payement forfaitaire de ma pêche pendant toute la durée de mon présent voyage et pour prix de son passage d'Ulm à la mer Noire, la somme de mille florins de monsieur...

— De monsieur...? répéta-t-il, la plume levée, d'un ton interrogateur.

Le passager d'Ilia Brusch était en train de rallumer sa pipe.

— Jaeger, 45, Leipzigerstrasse, Vienne,» répondit-il entre deux bouffées de tabac.

IV

SERGE LADKO.

Des diverses contrées de la terre, qui, depuis l’origine de la période historique, ont été spécialement éprouvées par la guerre, — en admettant qu’aucune contrée puisse se flatter d’avoir bénéficié d’une faveur relative à cet égard! — le Sud et le Sud-Est de l’Europe méritent d’être cités au premier rang. Par leur situation géographique, ces régions sont, en effet, avec la fraction de l’Asie comprise entre la mer Noire et l’Indus, l’arène où viennent fatalement se heurter les races concurrentes qui peuplent l’ancien continent.

Phéniciens, Grecs, Romains, Perses, Huns, Goths, Slaves, Magyars, Turcs et tant d’autres, se sont disputé tout ou partie de ces malheureuses contrées, sans préjudice des hordes alors sauvages qui n’ont fait que les traverser, pour aller s’établir dans l’Europe centrale et occidentale, où, par une lente élaboration, elles ont engendré les nationalités modernes.

Pas plus que leur tragique passé, l’avenir pour elles ne serait riant, à en croire nombre de savants prophètes. D’après eux, l’invasion jaune y ramènera nécessairement un jour ou l’autre les carnages de l’antiquité et du moyen âge. Ce jour venu, la Russie méridionale, la Roumanie, la Serbie, la Bulgarie, la Hongrie, la Turquie même bien étonnée de jouer un pareil rôle — si toutefois le pays qu’on nomme ainsi aujourd’hui est encore à cette époque au pouvoir des fils d’Osman — seront par la force des choses le rempart avancé de l’Europe, et c’est à leurs dépens que se décideront les premiers chocs.

En attendant ces cataclysmes, dont l’échéance est, à tout le moins, fort lointaine, les diverses races qui, au cours des âges, se sont superposées entre la Méditerranée et les Karpathes ont fini par se tasser vaille que vaille, et la paix — oh! cette paix relative des nations dites civilisées — n’a cessé d’étendre son empire vers l’Est. Les troubles, les pillages, les meurtres à l’état endémique paraissent désormais limités à la partie de la péninsule des Balkans encore gouvernée par les Osmanlis.

Entrés pour la première fois en Europe en 1356, maîtres de Constantinople en 1453, les Turcs se heurtèrent aux précédents envahisseurs, qui, venus avant eux de l’Asie centrale et depuis longtemps convertis au christianisme, commençaient dès lors à s’amalgamer aux populations indigènes et à s’organiser en nations régulières et stables. Perpétuel recommencement de l’éternelle bataille pour la vie, ces nations naissantes défendirent avec acharnement ce qu’elles-mêmes avaient pris à d’autres. Slaves, Magyars, Grecs, Croates, Teutons opposèrent à l’invasion turque une vivante barrière, qui, si elle fléchit par endroits, ne put être nulle part complètement renversée.

Contenus en deçà des Karpathes et du Danube, les Osmanlis furent même incapables de se maintenir dans ces limites extrêmes, et ce qu’on appelle la *Question d’Orient* n’est que l’histoire de leur retraite séculaire.

A la différence des envahisseurs qui les avaient précédés et qu’ils prétendaient déloger à leur profit, ces musulmans asiatiques n’ont jamais réussi à s’assimiler les peuples qu’ils soumettaient à leur pouvoir. Établis par la conquête, ils sont restés des conquérants commandant en maîtres à des esclaves. Aggravée par la différence des religions, une telle méthode de gouvernement ne pouvait avoir d’autre conséquence que la révolte permanente des vaincus.

L’histoire est pleine, en effet, de ces révoltes, qui, après des siècles de luttes, avaient abouti, en 1875, à l’indépendance plus ou moins complète de la Grèce, du Monténégro, de la Roumanie et de la Serbie. Quant aux autres populations chrétiennes, elles continuaient à subir la domination des sectateurs de Mahomet.

Cette domination, dans les premiers mois de 1875, se fit plus lourde et plus vexatoire encore que de coutume. Sous l'influence d'une réaction musulmane qui triomphait alors au palais du Sultan, les chrétiens de l'Empire ottoman furent surchargés d'impôts, malmenés, tués, torturés de mille manières. La réponse ne se fit pas attendre. Au début de l'été, l'Herzégovine se souleva une fois de plus.

Des bandes de patriotes battirent la campagne, et, commandées par des chefs de valeur, comme Peko-Paulowitch et Luibibratich, infligèrent échecs sur échecs aux troupes régulières envoyées contre elles.

Bientôt l'incendie se propagea, gagna le Monténégro, la Bosnie, la Serbie. Une nouvelle défaite subie par les armes turques aux défilés de la Duga, en janvier 1876, acheva d'enflammer les courages, et la fureur populaire commença à gronder en Bulgarie. Comme toujours, cela débuta par de sourdes conspirations, par des réunions clandestines auxquelles se rendait en grand secret la jeunesse ardente du pays.

Dans ces conciliabules, les chefs se dégagèrent rapidement et affermirent leur autorité sur une clientèle plus ou moins nombreuse, les uns par l'éloquence du verbe, d'autres par la valeur de leur intelligence ou par l'ardeur de leur patriotisme. En peu de temps, chaque groupement, et, au-dessus des groupements, chaque ville eut le sien.

A Roustchouk, important centre bulgare situé au bord du Danube, presque exactement en face de la ville roumaine de Giurgievo, l'autorité fut dévolue sans conteste au pilote Serge Ladko. On n'aurait pu faire un meilleur choix.

Agé de près de trente ans, de haute taille, blond comme un Slave du Nord, d’une force herculéenne, d’une agilité peu commune, rompu à tous les exercices du corps, Serge Ladko possédait cet ensemble de qualités physiques qui facilite le commandement. Ce qui vaut mieux, il avait aussi les qualités morales nécessaires à un chef: l’énergie dans la décision, la prudence dans l’exécution, l’amour passionné de son pays.

Serge Ladko était né à Roustchouk, où il exerçait la profession de pilote du Danube, et il n’avait jamais quitté la ville, si ce n’est pour conduire, soit vers Vienne ou plus en amont encore, soit jusqu’aux flots de la mer Noire, les barges et chalands qui s’en remettaient à sa connaissance parfaite du grand fleuve. Dans l’intervalle de ces navigations mi-fluviales, mi-maritimes, il consacrait ses loisirs à la pêche, et, servi par des dons naturels exceptionnels, il avait acquis une étonnante habileté dans cet art, dont les produits, joints à ses honoraires de pilotage, lui assuraient la plus large aisance.

Obligé par son double métier de passer sur le fleuve les quatre cinquièmes de sa vie, l’eau était peu à peu devenue son élément. Traverser le Danube, large à Roustchouk comme un bras de mer, n’était qu’un jeu pour lui, et l’on ne comptait plus les sauvetages de ce merveilleux nageur.

Une existence si digne et si droite avait, bien avant les troubles anti-turcs, rendu Serge Ladko populaire à Roustchouk. Innombrables y étaient ses amis, parfois inconnus de lui. On pourrait même dire que ces amis comprenaient l’unanimité des habitants de la ville, si Ivan Striga n’avait pas existé.

C’était aussi un enfant du pays, cet Ivan Striga, comme Serge Ladko, dont il réalisait la vivante antithèse.

Physiquement, il n’y avait entre eux rien de commun, et pourtant un passeport, qui se contente de désignations sommaires, eût employé des termes identiques pour les dépeindre l’un et l’autre.

De même que Ladko, Striga était grand, large d’épaules, robuste, blond de cheveux et de barbe. Lui aussi avait les yeux bleus. Mais à ces traits généraux se limitait la ressemblance. Autant le visage aux lignes nobles de l’un exprimait la cordialité et la franchise, autant les traits tourmentés de l’autre disaient l’astuce et la froide cruauté.

Au moral, la dissemblance s’accentuait encore. Tandis que Ladko vivait au grand jour, nul n’aurait pu dire par quels moyens Striga se procurait l’or qu’il dépensait sans compter. Faute de certitudes à cet égard, l’imagination populaire se donnait libre carrière. On disait que Striga, traître à son pays et à sa race, s’était fait l’espion appointé du Turc oppresseur; on disait qu’à son métier d’espion il ajoutait, quand l’occasion s’en présentait, celui de contrebandier, et que des marchandises de toute nature passaient souvent grâce à lui de la rive roumaine à la rive bulgare, ou réciproquement, sans payer de droits à la Douane; on disait même, en hochant la tête, que tout cela était peu de chose, et que Striga tirait le plus clair de ses ressources de rapines vulgaires et de brigandages; on disait encore... Mais que ne disait-on pas? La vérité est qu’on ne savait rien de précis des faits et gestes de cet inquiétant personnage, qui, si les suppositions désobligeantes du public répondaient à la réalité, avait eu, en tous cas, la grande habileté de ne jamais se laisser prendre.

Ces suppositions, d’ailleurs, on se bornait à se les confier discrètement. Personne ne se fût risqué à prononcer tout haut une parole contre un homme dont on redoutait le cynisme et la violence. Striga pouvait donc feindre d’ignorer l’opinion que l’on avait de lui, attribuer à l’admiration générale la sympathie que beaucoup lui témoignaient par lâcheté, parcourir la ville en pays conquis et la troubler, en compagnie de ses habitants les plus tarés, du scandale de ses orgies.

Entre un tel individu et Ladko, qui menait une existence si différente, il ne semblait pas que le moindre rapport dût s'établir, et pendant longtemps, en effet, ils ne connurent l'un de l'autre que ce que leur en apprenait la rumeur publique. Logiquement même, il aurait dû en être toujours ainsi. Mais le sort se rit de ce que nous appelons la logique, et il était écrit quelque part que les deux hommes se trouveraient face à face, transformés en irréconciliables adversaires.

Natcha Gregorevitch, célèbre dans toute la ville pour sa beauté, était âgée de vingt ans. Avec sa mère d'abord, seule ensuite, elle demeurait dans le voisinage de Ladko qu'elle avait ainsi connu dès sa première enfance. Depuis longtemps, le secours d'un homme manquait à la maison. Quinze ans avant l'époque où commence ce récit, le père était tombé, en effet, sous les coups des Turcs, et le souvenir de ce meurtre abominable faisait encore frémir d'indignation les patriotes opprimés, mais non asservis. Sa veuve, réduite à ne compter que sur elle-même, s'était mise courageusement au travail. Experte dans l'art de ces dentelles et de ces broderies dont, chez les Slaves, la plus modeste paysanne agrémente volontiers son humble parure, elle avait réussi par ce moyen à assurer sa subsistance et celle de sa fille.

Cependant, c'est aux pauvres surtout que sont funestes les périodes troublées, et plus d'une fois la dentellière aurait eu à souffrir de l'anarchie permanente de la Bulgarie, si Ladko n'était venu discrètement à son secours. Peu à peu, une grande intimité s'était établie entre le jeune homme et les deux femmes qui offraient l'abri de leur paisible demeure à ses désoeuvrements de garçon. Souvent, le soir, il frappait à leur porte, et la veillée se prolongeait autour du samovar bouillant. D’autres fois, c’est lui qui leur offrait, en échange de leur affectueux accueil, la distraction d’une promenade ou d’une partie de pêche sur le Danube.

Lorsque Mme Gregorevitch, usée par son incessant labeur, alla rejoindre son mari, la protection de Ladko se continua à l’orpheline. Cette protection se fit même plus vigilante encore, et, grâce à lui, jamais la jeune fille n’eut à souffrir de la disparition de la pauvre mère, qui avait donné deux fois la vie à son enfant.

C’est ainsi que, de jour en jour, sans même qu’ils en eussent conscience, l’amour s’était éveillé dans le coeur des deux jeunes gens. Ce fut à Striga qu’ils en durent la révélation.

Celui-ci, ayant aperçu celle qu’on appelait couramment la *beauté de Roustchouk*, s’en était épris avec la soudaineté et la fureur qui caractérisaient cette nature sans frein. En homme habitué à voir tout plier devant ses caprices, il s’était présenté chez la jeune fille et, sans autre formalité, l’avait demandée en mariage. Pour la première fois de sa vie, il se heurta à une résistance invincible. Natcha, au risque de s’attirer la haine d’un homme aussi redoutable, déclara que rien ne pourrait jamais la décider à un pareil mariage. Striga revint vainement à la charge. Tout ce qu’il obtint fut de se voir, à la troisième tentative, refuser purement et simplement la porte.

Alors sa colère ne connut plus de bornes. Donnant libre cours à sa nature sauvage, il se répandit en imprécations dont Natcha fut épouvantée. Dans sa détresse, elle courut faire part de ses craintes à Serge Ladko, que sa confidence enflamma d’une colère égale à celle qui venait de l’effrayer si fort. Sans vouloir rien entendre, avec une violence extraordinaire d’expressions, il vitupéra contre l’homme assez osé pour lever les yeux sur elle.

Ladko consentit pourtant à se calmer. Des explications suivirent, très confuses, mais dont le résultat fut parfaitement clair. Une heure plus tard, Serge et Natcha, le ciel dans les yeux et la joie au coeur, échangeaient leur premier baiser de fiançailles.

Lorsque Striga connut la nouvelle, il manqua mourir de rage. Audacieusement, il se présenta à la maison Gregorevitch, l’injure et la menace à la bouche. Jeté dehors par une main de fer, il apprit que la maison avait désormais un homme pour la défendre.

Etre vaincu!... Avoir trouvé son maître, lui, Striga, qui s’enorgueillissait tant de sa force athlétique!... C’était plus d’humiliations qu’il n’en pouvait supporter, et il résolut de se venger. Avec quelques aventuriers de son acabit, il attendit Ladko, un soir que celui-ci remontait la berge du fleuve. Cette fois, il ne s’agissait plus d’une simple rixe, mais bien d’un assassinat en règle. Les assaillants brandissaient des couteaux.

Cette nouvelle attaque n’eut pas plus de succès que la précédente. Armé d’un aviron qu’il manoeuvrait comme une massue, le pilote força ses agresseurs à la retraite, et Striga, serré de près, fut obligé à une fuite honteuse.

Cette leçon avait été suffisante, sans doute, car le louche personnage ne recommença pas sa criminelle tentative. Au début de l’année 1875, Serge Ladko épousa Natcha Gregorevitch, et depuis lors, on s’adorait à plein coeur dans la confortable maison du pilote.

C’est au milieu de cette lune de miel, dont plus d’une année n’avait pas atténué l’éclat, que survinrent les événements de Bulgarie, dans les premiers mois de 1876. L’amour que Serge Ladko éprouvait pour sa femme ne pouvait, quelque profond fût-il, lui faire oublier celui qu’il devait à son pays. Sans hésiter, il fit partie de ceux qui, tout de suite, se groupèrent, se concertèrent, s’ingéniant à chercher les moyens de remédier aux misères de la patrie.

Avant tout, il fallait se procurer des armes. De nombreux jeunes gens émigrèrent dans ce but, franchirent le fleuve, se répandirent en Roumanie, et jusqu’en Russie. Serge Ladko fut de ceux-là. Le coeur déchiré de regrets, mais ferme dans l’accomplissement de son devoir, il partit, laissant loin de lui celle qu’il adorait exposée à tous les dangers qui menacent, en temps de révolution, la femme d’un chef de partisans.

A ce moment, le souvenir de Striga lui vint à l’esprit et aggrava ses inquiétudes. Le bandit n’allait-il pas profiter de l’absence de son heureux rival pour le frapper dans ce qu’il avait de plus cher? C’était possible, en effet. Mais Serge Ladko passa outre à cette crainte légitime. D’ailleurs, il semblait bien que, depuis plusieurs mois, Striga avait quitté le pays sans esprit de retour.

A en croire le bruit public, il avait transporté plus au Nord le théâtre principal de ses opérations. Si les racontars ne manquaient pas à ce sujet, ils restaient incohérents et contradictoires. La rumeur populaire l’accusait en gros de tous les crimes, sans que personne en précisât aucun.

Le départ de Striga paraissait, du moins, chose certaine, et cela seulement importait à Ladko.

L’événement donna raison à son courage. Pendant son absence, rien ne menaça la sécurité de Natcha.

A peine arrivé, il dut repartir, et cette seconde expédition allait être plus longue que la première. Les procédés adoptés jusqu’ici ne permettaient, en effet, de se procurer des armes qu’en quantité insuffisante. Les transports, en provenance de la Russie, étaient effectués par terre, à travers la Hongrie et la Roumanie, c’est-à-dire dans des contrées fort dépourvues à cette époque de lignes ferrées. Les patriotes bulgares espérèrent arriver plus aisément au résultat désiré, si l’un d’eux remontait à Budapest et y centralisait les envois d’armes venus par rail, pour en charger des chalands qui descendraient ensuite rapidement le Danube.

Ladko, désigné pour cette mission de confiance, se mit en route le soir même. En compagnie d’un compatriote, qui devait ramener le bateau à la rive bulgare, il traversa le fleuve, afin de gagner, le plus vite possible, à travers la Roumanie, la capitale de la Hongrie. A ce moment, un incident se produisit qui donna beaucoup à penser au délégué des conspirateurs.

Son compagnon et lui n’étaient pas à cinquante mètres du bord quand un coup de feu retentit. La balle leur était destinée sans aucun doute, car ils l’entendirent siffler à leurs oreilles, et le pilote en douta d’autant moins que, dans le tireur entrevu à l’obscure lumière du crépuscule, il crut reconnaître Striga. Celui-ci était donc de retour à Roustchouk?

L’angoisse mortelle que cette complication lui fit éprouver n’ébranla pas la résolution de Ladko: Il avait fait d’avance à la patrie le sacrifice de sa vie. Il saurait aussi, s’il le fallait, lui sacrifier plus encore: son bonheur mille fois plus précieux. Au bruit du coup de feu, il s’était laissé tomber au fond de l’embarcation. Mais ce n’était là qu’une ruse de guerre destinée à éviter une nouvelle attaque, et la détonation n’avait pas cessé de se répercuter dans la campagne, que sa main, appuyant plus lourdement sur l’aviron, poussait plus vite le bateau vers la ville roumaine de Giurgievo, dont les lumières commençaient à piquer la nuit grandissante.

Parvenu à destination, Ladko s’occupa activement de sa mission.

Il se mit en rapport avec les émissaires du Gouvernement du Tzar, les uns arrêtés à la frontière russe, certains fixés incognito à Budapest et à Vienne. Plusieurs chalands, chargés par ses soins d’armes et de munitions, descendirent le courant du Danube.

Fréquentes étaient les nouvelles qu’il recevait de Natcha, par des lettres envoyées au nom d’emprunt qu’il avait choisi, et portées en territoire roumain à la faveur de la nuit. Bonnes tout d’abord, ces nouvelles ne tardèrent pas à devenir plus inquiétantes. Ce n’est pas que Natcha prononçât le nom de Striga. Elle semblait même ignorer que le bandit fût revenu en Bulgarie, et Ladko commença à douter du bien-fondé de ses craintes. Par contre, il était certain que celui-ci avait été dénoncé aux autorités turques, puisque la police avait fait irruption dans sa demeure et s’était livrée à une perquisition, d’ailleurs sans résultat. Il ne devait donc pas se hâter de revenir en Bulgarie, car son retour eût été un véritable suicide. On connaissait son rôle, on le guettait, jour et nuit, et il ne pourrait se montrer en ville sans être arrêté au premier pas. Arrêté étant, chez les Turcs, synonyme d’exécuté, il fallait donc que Ladko s’abstînt de reparaître, jusqu’au moment où la révolte serait ouvertement proclamée, sous peine d’attirer les pires malheurs sur lui-même et sur sa femme, que l’on n’avait jusqu’ici nullement inquiétée.

Ce moment ne tarda pas à arriver. La Bulgarie se souleva au mois de mai, trop prématurément au gré du pilote qui augurait mal de cette précipitation.

Quelle que fût son opinion à cet égard, il devait courir au secours de son pays. Le train l'amena à Zombor, la dernière ville hongroise, proche du Danube, qui fût alors desservie par le chemin de fer. Là, il s'embarquerait et n'aurait plus qu'à s'abandonner au courant.

Les nouvelles qu'il trouva à Zombor le forcèrent à interrompre son voyage. Ses craintes n'étaient que trop justifiées. La révolution bulgare était écrasée dans l'oeuf. Déjà la Turquie concentrait des troupes nombreuses dans un vaste triangle dont Roustchouk, Widdin et Sofia formaient les sommets, et sa main de fer s'appesantissait plus lourdement sur ces malheureuses contrées. Ladko dut revenir en arrière et retourner attendre de meilleurs jours dans la petite ville où il avait fixé sa résidence.

Les lettres de Natcha, qu'il y reçut bientôt, lui démontrèrent l'impossibilité de prendre un autre parti. Sa maison était surveillée plus que jamais, à ce point que Natcha devait se considérer comme virtuellement prisonnière; plus que jamais on le guettait, et il lui fallait, dans l'intérêt commun, s'abstenir soigneusement de toute démarche imprudente.

Ladko rongea donc son frein dans l'inaction, les envois d'armes ayant été forcément supprimés depuis l'avortement de la révolte et la concentration des troupes turques sur les rives du fleuve. Mais cette attente, déjà pénible par elle-même, lui devint tout à fait intolérable, quand, vers la fin du mois de juin, il cessa de recevoir aucune nouvelle de sa chère Natcha.

Il ne savait que penser, et ses inquiétudes devinrent de torturantes angoisses à mesure que le temps s'écoula. Il était, en effet, en droit de tout craindre. Le 1er juillet, la Serbie avait officiellement déclaré la guerre au Sultan, et, depuis lors, la région du Danube était sillonnée de troupes, dont le passage incessant s'accompagnait des plus terribles excès. Fallait-il donc compter Natcha au nombre des victimes de ces troubles, ou bien avait-elle été incarcérée par les autorités turques, soit comme otage, soit comme complice présumée de son mari?

Après un mois de ce silence, il ne put le supporter davantage, et se résolut à tout braver pour rentrer en Bulgarie afin d’en connaître la véritable cause.

Toutefois, dans l’intérêt même de Natcha, il importait d’agir avec prudence. Aller sottement se faire prendre par les sentinelles turques n’eût servi de rien. Son retour n’aurait d’utilité que s’il pouvait pénétrer dans la ville de Roustchouk et y circuler librement, malgré les soupçons dont il était l’objet. Il agirait ensuite au mieux, selon les circonstances. Au pis aller, et dût-il repasser précipitamment la frontière, il aurait eu du moins la joie de serrer sa femme sur son coeur.

Serge Ladko chercha pendant plusieurs jours la solution de ce difficile problème. Il crut enfin l’avoir trouvée, et, sans se confier à personne, mit immédiatement à exécution le plan imaginé par lui.

Ce plan réussirait-il? L’avenir le lui dirait. Il fallait, en tous cas, tenter le sort, et c’est pourquoi, dans la matinée du 28 juillet 1876, les plus proches voisins du pilote, dont nul ne connaissait le nom véritable, aperçurent hermétiquement close la petite maison dans laquelle, depuis plusieurs mois, il avait abrité sa solitude.

Quel était le plan de Ladko, les dangers auxquels il allait s’exposer en s’efforçant de le réaliser, par quels côtés les événements de Bulgarie, et de Roustchouk en particulier, se relient au concours de pêche de Sigmaringen, c’est ce que le lecteur apprendra dans la suite de ce récit nullement imaginaire, dont les principaux personnages vivent encore de nos jours sur les bords du Danube.

V

KARL DRAGOCH.

Aussitôt qu’il eut son reçu en poche, M. Jaeger procéda à son installation. Après s’être enquis de la couchette qui lui était attribuée, il disparut dans la cabine, en emportant sa valise. Dix minutes plus tard, il en ressortait, transformé de la tête aux pieds. Vêtu comme un pêcheur fini, — rude vareuse, bottes fortes, casquette de loutre, — il semblait la copie d’Ilia Brusch.

M. Jaeger éprouva un peu de surprise, en constatant que, pendant sa courte absence, son hôte avait quitté la barge. Respectueux de ses engagements, il ne se permit toutefois aucune question, quand celui-ci revint, une demi-heure plus tard. C’est sans l’avoir sollicité qu’il apprit qu’Ilia Brusch avait cru devoir envoyer quelques lettres aux journaux, afin de leur annoncer son arrivée à Neustadt pour le surlendemain soir, et à Ratisbonne pour le jour suivant. Maintenant que les intérêts de M. Jaeger étaient en jeu, il importait en effet de ne plus rencontrer un désert pareil à celui qu’on avait trouvé à Ulm. Ilia Brusch exprima même le regret de ne pouvoir s’arrêter aux villes qu’on traverserait avant Neustadt, et notamment à Neubourg et à Ingolstadt, qui sont des cités assez importantes. Ces arrêts, malheureusement, ne cadraient pas avec son plan d’étapes et il était forcé d’y renoncer.

M. Jaeger parut enchanté de la réclame faite à son profit et ne manifesta pas autrement d’ennui de ne pouvoir s’arrêter à Neubourg et à Ingolstadt. Il approuva son hôte, au contraire, et l’assura une fois de plus qu’il n’entendait aucunement diminuer sa liberté, ainsi qu’ils en étaient convenus.

Les deux compagnons soupèrent ensuite face à face, à cheval sur l'un des bancs. A titre de bienvenue, M. Jaeger corsa même le menu d'un superbe jambon, qu'il sortit de son inépuisable valise, et ce produit de la ville de Mayence fut fort apprécié d'Ilia Brusch, qui commença à estimer que son convive avait du bon.

La nuit se passa sans incident. Avant le lever du soleil, Ilia Brusch largua les amarres, en évitant de troubler le profond sommeil dans lequel était plongé son aimable passager.

A Ulm, où il achève de traverser le petit royaume de Wurtemberg pour pénétrer en Bavière, le Danube n'est encore qu'un modeste cours d'eau. Il n'a pas reçu les grands tributaires qui accroissent sa puissance en aval, et rien ne permet de présager qu'il va devenir l'un des plus importants fleuves de l'Europe.

Le courant, déjà fort assagi, atteignait à peu près une lieue à l'heure. Des barques de toutes dimensions, parmi lesquelles quelques lourds bateaux chargés à couler, le descendaient, s'aidant parfois d'une large voile que gonflait une brise de Nord-Ouest. Le temps s'annonçait beau, sans menace de pluie.

Dès qu'il fut au milieu du courant, Ilia Brusch manoeuvra sa godille et activa la marche de l'embarcation. M. Jaeger, quelques heures plus tard, le trouva livré à cette occupation, et jusqu'au soir il en fut ainsi, sauf un court repos au moment du déjeuner, pendant lequel la dérive ne fut même pas interrompue. Le passager ne formula aucune observation, et, s'il fut étonné de tant de hâte, il garda son étonnement pour lui.

Peu de paroles furent échangées au cours de cette journée. Ilia Brusch godillait énergiquement. Quant à M. Jaeger, il observait avec une attention, qui aurait certainement frappé son hôte, si celui-ci eût été moins absorbé, les bateaux qui sillonnaient le Danube, à moins que son regard n'en parcourût les deux rives. Ces rives étaient notablement abaissées. Le fleuve montrait même une tendance à s'élargir aux dépens des alentours. La berge de gauche, à demi submergée, ne se distinguait plus avec précision, tandis que, sur la berge droite, élevée artificiellement pour l'établissement de la voie ferrée, les trains couraient, les locomotives haletaient, mêlant leurs fumées à celles des dampsboots, dont les roues battaient l'eau à grand bruit.

A Offingen, devant lequel on passa dans l'après-midi, la voie ferrée obliqua vers le Sud, définitivement repoussée par le fleuve et la rive droite fut transformée à son tour en un vaste marais, dont rien n'indiquait la fin, lorsqu'on s'arrêta, le soir, à Dillingen, pour la nuit.

Le lendemain, après une étape aussi rude que celle de la veille, le grappin fut jeté en un point désert, à quelques kilomètres au-dessus de Neubourg, et, de nouveau, l'aube du 15 août se leva quand la barge était déjà au milieu du courant.

C'est pour le soir de ce jour qu'Ilia Brusch avait annoncé son arrivée à Neustadt. Il eût été honteux de s'y présenter les mains vides. Les conditions atmosphériques étant favorables et l'étape devant être sensiblement plus courte que les précédentes, Ilia Brusch se résolut donc à pêcher.

Dès les premières heures du jour, il vérifia ses engins, avec un soin minutieux. Son compagnon, assis à l'arrière de la barque, semblait d'ailleurs s'intéresser à ses préparatifs, ainsi qu'il sied à un véritable amateur. Tout en travaillant, Ilia Brusch ne dédaignait pas de causer.

«Aujourd'hui, comme vous le voyez, monsieur Jaeger, je me dispose à pêcher, et les apprêts de la pêche sont un peu longs. C'est que le poisson est défiant de sa nature, et on ne saurait prendre trop de précautions pour l'attirer. Certains ont une intelligence rare, entre autres la tanche. Il faut lutter de ruse avec elle, et sa bouche est tellement dure, qu'elle risque de casser la ligne.

— Pas fameux, la tanche, je crois, fit observer M. Jaeger.

— Non, car elle affectionne les eaux bourbeuses, ce qui communique souvent à sa chair un goût désagréable.

— Et le brochet?

— Excellent, le brochet, déclara Ilia Brusch, à la condition de peser au moins cinq ou six livres; quant aux petits, ils ne sont qu'arêtes. Mais, dans tous les cas, le brochet ne saurait être rangé parmi les poissons intelligents et rusés.

— Vraiment, monsieur Brusch! Ainsi donc, les requins d'eau douce, comme on les appelle...

— Sont aussi bêtes que les requins d'eau salée, monsieur Jaeger. De véritables brutes, au même niveau que la perche ou l'anguille! Leur pêche peut donner du profit, de l'honneur jamais... Ce sont, comme l'a écrit un fin connaisseur, des poissons «qui se prennent» et «qu'on ne prend pas».

M. Jaeger ne pouvait qu'admirer la conviction si persuasive d'Ilia Brusch, non moins que la minutieuse attention avec laquelle il préparait ses engins.

Tout d'abord, il avait saisi sa canne à la fois flexible et légère, qui, après avoir été ployée à son extrémité jusqu'à son point de rupture, s'était redressée aussi droite qu'auparavant. Cette canne se composait de deux parties, l'une forte à sa base de quatre centimètres et diminuant jusqu'à n’avoir plus qu’un centimètre à l’endroit où commençait la seconde, le scion, cette dernière en bois fin et résistant. Faite d’une gaule de noisetier, elle mesurait près de quatre mètres de longueur, ce qui permettait au pêcheur de s’attaquer, sans s’éloigner de la rive, aux poissons de fond, tels que la brème et le gardon rouge.

Ilia Brusch, montrant à M. Jaeger les hameçons qu’il venait de fixer avec l’empile à l’extrémité du crin de Florence:

— Vous voyez, monsieur Jaeger, dit-il, ce sont des hameçons numéro onze, très fins de corps. Comme amorce, ce qu’il y a de meilleur, pour le gardon, c’est du blé cuit, crevé d’un côté seulement et bien amolli... Allons! voilà qui est fini et je n’ai plus qu’à tenter la fortune.»

Tandis que M. Jaeger s’accotait contre le tôt, il s’assit sur le banc, son épuisette à sa portée, puis la ligne fut lancée après un balancement méthodique, qui n’était pas dépourvu d’une certaine grâce. Les hameçons s’enfoncèrent sous les eaux jaunâtres, et la plombée leur donna une position verticale, ce qui est préférable, de l’avis de tous les professionnels. Au-dessus d’eux, surnageait la flotte, faite d’une plume de cygne, qui, n’absorbant pas l’eau, est, par cela même, excellente.

Il va de soi qu’un profond silence régna dans l’embarcation à partir de ce moment. Le bruit des voix effarouche trop facilement le poisson, et d’ailleurs un pêcheur sérieux a autre chose à faire qu’à s’oublier en bavardages. Il doit être attentif à tous les mouvements de sa flotte, et ne pas laisser échapper l’instant précis où il convient de ferrer la proie.

Pendant cette matinée, Ilia Brusch eut lieu d’être satisfait. Non seulement il prit une vingtaine de gardons, mais encore douze chevesnes et quelques dards. Si M. Jaeger avait en réalité les goûts du passionné amateur qu’il s’était vanté d’être, il ne pouvait qu’admirer la précision rapide avec laquelle son hôte ferrait, ainsi que cela est nécessaire pour les poissons de cette espèce. Dès qu’il sentait que «cela mordait», il se gardait bien de ramener aussitôt ses captures à la surface de l’eau, il les laissait se débattre dans les fonds, se fatiguer en vains efforts pour se décrocher, montrant ce sang-froid imperturbable qui est l’une des qualités de tout pêcheur digne de ce nom.

La pêche fut terminée vers onze heures. Pendant la belle saison, le poisson ne mord pas, en effet, aux heures où le soleil, parvenu à son point culminant, fait scintiller la surface des eaux. Le butin, d’ailleurs, était suffisamment abondant. Ilia Brusch craignait même qu’il ne le fût trop, en raison du peu d’importance de la ville de Neustadt où la barge s’arrêta vers cinq heures.

Il se trompait. Vingt-cinq ou trente personnes guettaient son apparition et le saluèrent de leurs applaudissements, dès que l’embarcation fut amarrée. Bientôt il ne sut auquel entendre, et, en quelques instants, les poissons furent échangés contre vingt-sept florins, qu’Ilia Brusch versa, séance tenante, à M. Jaeger à titre de premier dividende.

Celui-ci, conscient de n’avoir aucun droit à l’admiration publique, s’était modestement abrité sous le tôt, où Ilia Brusch vint le rejoindre, aussitôt qu’il put se débarrasser de ses enthousiastes admirateurs. Il convenait, en effet, de ne pas perdre de temps pour chercher le sommeil, la nuit devant être fort écourtée. Désireux d’être de bonne heure à Ratisbonne, dont près de soixante-dix kilomètres le séparaient, Ilia Brusch avait décidé qu’il se remettrait en route dès une heure du matin, ce qui lui donnerait le loisir de pêcher encore au cours de la journée suivante, malgré la longueur de l’étape.

Une trentaine de livres de poissons furent prises par Ilia Brusch avant midi, si bien que les curieux qui se pressaient sur le quai de Ratisbonne n’eurent pas le regret de s’être dérangés en vain. L’enthousiasme public augmentait visiblement. Il s’établit, en plein air, de véritables enchères entre les amateurs, et les trente livres de poissons ne rapportèrent pas moins de quarante et un florins au lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne.

Celui-ci n’avait jamais rêvé pareil succès, et il en arrivait à penser que M. Jaeger pourrait bien, en fin de compte, avoir fait une excellente affaire. En attendant que ce point fût élucidé, il importait de remettre les quarante et un florins à leur légitime propriétaire, mais Ilia Brusch fut dans l’impossibilité de s’acquitter de ce devoir. M. Jaeger avait, en effet, quitté discrètement la barge, en prévenant son compagnon, par un mot laissé en évidence, que celui-ci n’eût pas à l’attendre pour le souper et qu’il reviendrait seulement assez tard dans la soirée.

Ilia Brusch trouva fort naturel que M. Jaeger voulût profiter de cette occasion de visiter une ville qui fut pendant cinquante ans le siège de la diète impériale. Peut-être, aurait-il éprouvé moins de satisfaction et plus de surprise, s’il avait su à quelles occupations se livrait alors son passager, et s’il en avait connu la véritable personnalité.

«M. Jaeger, 45, Leipzigerstrasse, Vienne», avait docilement écrit Ilia Brusch sous la dictée du nouveau venu. Mais celui-ci eût été fort embarrassé si le pêcheur s’était montré plus curieux, et si, reprenant pour son compte une requête dont il venait d’apprécier le désagrément, il avait, à l’exemple de l’indiscret pandore, demandé à M. Jaeger de lui montrer ses papiers.

Ilia Brusch négligea cette précaution, dont la légitimité lui avait cependant été démontrée, et cette négligence devait avoir pour lui de terribles résultats.

Quel nom le gendarme allemand avait lu sur le passeport que lui présentait M. Jaeger, nul ne le sait; mais, si ce nom était bien exactement celui du véritable propriétaire du passeport, le gendarme n'avait pu en lire un autre que celui de Karl Dragoch.

Le passionné amateur de pêche et le chef de la police danubienne ne faisaient, en effet, qu'une seule et unique personne. Résolu à s'introduire, coûte que coûte, dans l'embarcation d'Ilia Brusch, Karl Dragoch, prévoyant la possibilité d'une invincible résistance, avait dressé ses batteries en conséquence. L'intervention du gendarme était préparée, et la scène truquée comme une scène de théâtre. L'événement démontrait que Karl Dragoch avait frappé juste, puisque Ilia Brusch considérait maintenant comme une heureuse chance d'avoir, au milieu des dangers qui lui étaient révélés, ce protecteur dont il ne pouvait contester la puissance.

Le succès était même si complet que Dragoch en était troublé. Pourquoi, après tout, Ilia Brusch avait-il montré tant d'émotion devant l'injonction du gendarme? Pourquoi avait-il une telle crainte de voir se rééditer une aventure de ce genre, qu'il sacrifiait à cette crainte l'amour — dont la violence avait bien aussi, d'ailleurs, quelque chose d'excessif — qu'il proclamait avoir pour la solitude? Un honnête homme, que diable! n'a pas à redouter si fort une comparution devant un commissaire de police. Le pis qui puisse en résulter, c'est un retard de quelques heures, de quelques jours à la rigueur, et quand on n'est pas pressé... Il est vrai qu'Ilia Brusch était pressé, ce qui ne laissait pas de donner aussi à réfléchir.

Défiant par nature, comme tout bon policier, Karl Dragoch réfléchissait. Mais il avait aussi trop de bon sens pour se laisser égarer par des particularités fugitives, dont l'explication était probablement des plus simples. Il enregistra donc purement et simplement ces petites remarques dans sa mémoire, et appliqua les ressources de son esprit à la solution du problème, plus sérieux celui-là, qu’il s’était posé.

Le projet que Karl Dragoch avait mis à exécution, en s’imposant à Ilia Brusch à titre de passager, n’était pas né tout armé dans son cerveau. Le véritable auteur en était Michael Michaelovitch, qui, d’ailleurs, ne s’en doutait guère. Quand ce Serbe facétieux avait plaisamment insinué, au *Rendez-vous des Pêcheurs*, que le lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne pourrait bien être, au choix, soit le malfaiteur poursuivi, soit le policier poursuivant, Karl Dragoch avait accordé une sérieuse attention à ces propos émis à la légère. Certes, il ne les avait pas pris au pied de la lettre. Il avait de bonnes raisons de savoir que le pêcheur et le policier n’avaient rien de commun, et, procédant par analogie, il considéra comme infiniment vraisemblable que ce pêcheur n’eût pas plus de rapport avec le malfaiteur recherché. Mais, de ce qu’une chose n’a pas été faite, il ne s’ensuit pas qu’elle ne puisse l’être, et Karl Dragoch avait pensé aussitôt que le joyeux Serbe avait raison, et qu’un détective, désireux de surveiller le Danube tout à son aise, se fût, en effet, montré très habile, en empruntant la personnalité d’un pêcheur assez notoire pour que personne n’en puisse raisonnablement suspecter l’identité professionnelle.

Quelque tentante que fût cette combinaison, il y fallait cependant renoncer. Le concours de Sigmaringen avait eu lieu, Ilia Brusch, vainqueur du tournoi, avait annoncé publiquement son projet, et certainement il ne se prêterait pas de bonne grâce à une substitution de personne, substitution très scabreuse, au surplus, puisque les traits du lauréat étaient désormais connus d’un grand nombre de ses collègues.

Toutefois, s’il fallait renoncer à ce qu’Ilia Brusch consentît à laisser effectuer sous son nom, par un autre que lui, le voyage qu’il avait entrepris, il existait peut-être un moyen terme d’arriver au même but. Dans l’impossibilité d’être Ilia Brusch, Karl Dragoch ne pouvait-il se contenter de prendre passage à son bord? Qui ferait attention au compagnon d’un homme devenu presque célèbre et qui monopoliserait par conséquent à son profit l’intérêt général? Et même, si quelqu’un laissait par inadvertance tomber un regard distrait sur ce compagnon obscur, était-il admissible qu’il établît le moindre rapprochement entre ce vague inconnu et le policier, qui accomplirait ainsi sa mission dans une ombre protectrice?

Ce projet longuement examiné, Karl Dragoch, en dernière analyse, le jugea excellent, et résolut de le réaliser. On a vu avec quelle maëstria il avait machiné sa scène initiale, mais cette scène eût été, au besoin, suivie de beaucoup d’autres. S’il l’avait fallu, Ilia Brusch eût été traîné chez le commissaire, emprisonné même sous de spécieux prétextes, effrayé de cent façons. Karl Dragoch, on peut en être sûr, eût joué de l’arbitraire sans remords, jusqu’au moment où le pêcheur, terrifié, n’aurait plus vu qu’un sauveur dans le passager qu’il repoussait.

Le détective s’estimait heureux, toutefois, d’avoir triomphé sans employer cette violence morale et sans continuer la comédie plus loin que le premier acte.

Maintenant, il était dans la place, bien certain que, s’il faisait mine de vouloir la quitter, son hôte s’opposerait à son départ avec autant d’énergie qu’il s’était opposé à son entrée. Restait à tirer parti de la situation.

Pour cela, Karl Dragoch n’avait qu’à se laisser entraîner par le courant. Pendant que son compagnon pêcherait ou godillerait, il surveillerait le fleuve, où rien d’anormal n’échapperait à son regard expérimenté. Chemin faisant, il s’aboucherait avec ses hommes disséminés le long des rives. A la première nouvelle d’un délit ou d’un crime, il se séparerait d’Ilia Brusch pour se lancer sur les traces des malfaiteurs, et il en serait au besoin de même, si, en l’absence de tout crime ou de tout délit, un indice suspect attirait son attention.

Tout cela était sagement combiné et, plus il y pensait, plus Karl Dragoch s’applaudissait de son idée, qui, en lui assurant l’incognito sur toute la longueur du Danube, multipliait les chances du succès.

Malheureusement, en raisonnant ainsi, le détective ne tenait pas compte du hasard. Il ne se doutait guère qu’une série de faits des plus singuliers allait, dans peu de jours, aiguiller ses recherches dans une direction imprévue et donner à sa mission une ampleur inattendue.

VI

LES YEUX BLEUS.

En quittant la barge, Karl Dragoch gagna les quartiers du centre. Il connaissait Ratisbonne, et c’est sans hésiter sur la direction à suivre qu’il s’engagea à travers les rues silencieuses, flanquées ça et là de donjons féodaux à dix étages, de cette cité jadis bruyante, que n’anime plus guère une population tombée à vingt-six mille âmes.

Karl Dragoch ne songeait pas à visiter la ville, comme le croyait Ilia Brusch. Ce n’est pas en qualité de touriste qu’il voyageait. A peu de distance du pont, il se trouva en face du Dom, la cathédrale aux tours inachevées, mais il ne jeta qu’un coup d’oeil distrait sur son curieux portail de la fin du XVe siècle. Assurément, il n’irait pas admirer, au Palais des Princes de Tour et Taxis, la chapelle gothique et le cloître ogival, pas plus que la bibliothèque de pipes, bizarre curiosité de cet ancien couvent. Il ne visiterait pas davantage le Rathhaus, siège de la Diète autrefois, et aujourd’hui simple Hôtel de Ville, dont la salle est ornée de vieilles tapisseries, et où la chambre de torture avec ses divers appareils est montrée, non sans orgueil, par le concierge de l’endroit. Il ne dépenserait pas un *trinkgeld*, le pourboire allemand, à payer les services d’un cicérone. Il n’en avait pas besoin, et c’est sans le secours de personne qu’il se rendit au Bureau des Postes, où plusieurs lettres l’attendaient à des initiales convenues. Karl Dragoch, ayant lu ces lettres, sans que son visage décelât aucun sentiment, se disposait à sortir du bureau, lorsqu’un homme assez vulgairement vêtu l’accosta sur la porte.

Cet homme et Dragoch se connaissaient, car celui-ci d’un geste arrêta le nouveau venu au moment où il allait prendre la parole. Ce geste signifiait évidemment: «Pas ici.» Tous deux se dirigèrent vers une place voisine.

«Pourquoi ne m'as-tu pas attendu sur le bord du fleuve? demanda Karl Dragoch, quand il s'estima à l'abri des oreilles indiscrètes.

— Je craignais de vous manquer, lui fut-il répondu. Et, comme je savais que vous deviez venir à la poste...

— Enfin, te voilà, c'est l'essentiel, interrompit Karl Dragoch. Rien de neuf?

— Rien.

— Pas même un vulgaire cambriolage dans la région?

— Ni dans la région, ni ailleurs, le long du Danube s'entend.

— A quand remontent tes dernières nouvelles?

— Il n'y a pas deux heures que j'ai reçu un télégramme de notre bureau central de Budapest. Calme plat sur toute la ligne.

Karl Dragoch réfléchit un instant.

— Tu vas aller au Parquet de ma part. Tu donneras ton nom, Friedrick Ulhmann, et tu prieras qu'on te tienne au courant s'il survenait la moindre chose. Tu partiras ensuite pour Vienne.

— Et nos hommes?

— Je m'en charge. Je les verrai au passage. Rendez-vous à Vienne, d'aujourd'hui en huit, c'est le mot d'ordre.

— Vous laisserez donc le haut fleuve sans surveillance? demanda Ulhmann.

— Les polices locales y suffiront, répondit Dragoch, et nous accourrons à la moindre alerte. Jusqu’ici, d’ailleurs, il ne s’est jamais rien passé, au-dessus de Vienne, qui soit de notre compétence. Pas si bêtes, nos bonshommes, d’opérer si loin de leur base.

— Leur base?... répéta Ulhmann. Auriez-vous des renseignements particuliers?

— J’ai, en tous cas, une opinion.

— Qui est?...

— Trop curieux!... Quoi qu’il en soit, je te prédis que nous débuterons entre Vienne et Budapest.

— Pourquoi là plutôt qu’ailleurs?

— Parce que c’est là que le dernier crime a été commis. Tu sais bien, ce fermier qu’ils ont fait «chauffer» et qu’on a retrouvé brûlé jusqu’aux genoux.

— Raison de plus pour qu’ils opèrent ailleurs la prochaine fois.

— Parce que?...

— Parce qu’ils se diront que le district où ce crime a été perpétré doit être tout spécialement surveillé. Ils iront donc plus loin tenter la fortune. C’est ce qu’ils ont fait jusqu’ici. Jamais deux fois de suite au même endroit.»

— Ils ont raisonné comme des bourriques, et tu les imites, Friedrick Ulhmann, répliqua Karl Dragoch. Mais c’est bien sur leur sottise que je compte. Tous les journaux, comme tu as dû le voir, m’ont attribué un raisonnement analogue. Ils ont publié avec un parfait ensemble que je quittais le Danube supérieur, où, selon moi, les malfaiteurs ne se risqueraient pas à revenir, et que je partais pour la Hongrie méridionale. Inutile de te dire qu’il n’y a pas un mot de vrai là-dedans, mais tu peux être sûr que ces communications tendancieuses n’ont pas manqué de toucher les intéressés.

— Vous en concluez?

— Qu’ils n’iront pas du côté de la Hongrie méridionale se jeter dans la gueule du loup.

— Le Danube est long, objecta Ulhmann. Il y a la Serbie, la Roumanie, la Turquie...

— Et la guerre?.. Rien à faire par là pour eux. Nous verrons bien, au surplus.

Karl Dragoch garda un instant le silence.

— A-t-on ponctuellement suivi mes instructions? reprit-il.

— Ponctuellement.

— La surveillance du fleuve a été continuée?

— Jour et nuit.

— Et l’on n’a rien découvert de suspect?

— Absolument rien. Toutes les barges, tous les chalands ont leurs papiers en règle. A ce propos, je dois vous dire que ces opérations de contrôle soulèvent beaucoup de murmures. La batellerie proteste, et, si vous voulez mon opinion, je trouve qu’elle n’a pas tort. Les bateaux n’ont rien avoir dans ce que nous cherchons. Ce n’est pas sur l’eau que des crimes sont commis.

Karl Dragoch fronça les sourcils.

— J’attache une grande importance à la visite des barges, des chalands et même des plus petites embarcations, répliqua-t-il d’un ton sec. J’ajouterai, une fois pour toutes, que je n’aime pas les observations.

Ulhmann fit le gros dos.

— C’est bon, Monsieur, dit-il.

Karl Dragoch reprît:

— Je ne sais encore ce que je ferai... Peut-être m’arrêterai-je à Vienne. Peut-être pousserai-je jusqu’à Belgrade... Je ne suis pas fixé... Comme il importe de ne pas perdre de contact, tiens-moi au courant par un mot adressé en autant d’exemplaires qu’il sera nécessaire à ceux de nos hommes échelonnés entre Ratisbonne et Vienne.

— Bien, Monsieur, répondit Ulhmann. Et moi?.. Où vous reverrai-je?

— A Vienne, dans huit jours, je te l’ai dit, répondit Dragoch.

Il réfléchit quelques instants.

— Tu peux te retirer, ajouta-t-il. Ne manque pas de passer au Parquet et prends ensuite le premier train.

Ulhmann s’éloignait déjà. Karl Dragoch le rappela.

— Tu as entendu parler d’un certain Ilia Brusch? interrogea-t-il.

— Ce pêcheur qui s’est engagé à descendre le Danube la ligne à la main?

— Précisément. Eh bien, si tu me vois avec lui, n’aie pas l’air de me connaître.»

Là-dessus, ils se séparèrent, Friedrick Ulhmann disparut vers le haut quartier, tandis que Karl Dragoch se dirigeait vers l’hôtel de la Croix-d’Or, où il comptait dîner.

Une dizaine de convives, causant de choses et d’autres, étaient déjà à table, lorsqu’il prit place à son tour. S’il mangea de grand appétit, Karl Dragoch ne se mêla point à la conversation. Il écoutait, par exemple, en homme qui a l’habitude de prêter l’oreille à tout ce qu’on dit autour de lui. Aussi ne put-il manquer d’entendre, quand l’un des convives demanda à son voisin:

«Eh bien, cette fameuse bande, on n’en a donc pas de nouvelles?

— Pas plus que du fameux Brusch, répondit l’autre. On attendait son passage à Ratisbonne, et il n’a pas encore été signalé.

— C’est singulier.

— A moins que Brusch et le chef de la bande ne fassent qu’un.

— Vous voulez rire?

— Eh!.. qui sait?..»

Karl Dragoch avait vivement relevé les yeux. C’était la seconde fois que cette hypothèse, décidément dans l’air, venait s’imposer à son attention. Mais il eut comme un imperceptible haussement d’épaules, et acheva son dîner sans prononcer une parole. Plaisanterie que tout cela. D’ailleurs, il était bien renseigné, ce bavard, qui ne connaissait même pas l’arrivée d’Ilia Brusch à Ratisbonne.

Son dîner terminé, Karl Dragoch redescendit vers les quais. Là, au lieu de regagner tout de suite la barge, il s’attarda quelques instants sur le vieux pont de pierre qui réunit Ratisbonne à Stadt-am-Hof, son faubourg, et laissa errer son regard sur le fleuve, où quelques bateaux glissaient encore en se hâtant de profiter de la lumière mourante du jour.

Il s’oubliait dans cette contemplation, quand une main se posa sur son épaule, en même temps que l’interpellait une voix familière.

«Il faut croire, monsieur Jaeger, que tout cela vous intéresse.

Karl Dragoch se retourna et vit, en face de lui, Ilia Brusch, qui le regardait en souriant.

— Oui, répondit-il, tout ce mouvement du fleuve est curieux. Je ne me lasse pas de l’observer.

— Eh! monsieur Jaeger, dit Ilia Brusch. cela vous intéressera davantage, lorsque nous arriverons sur le bas fleuve, où les bateaux sont plus nombreux. Vous verrez, quand nous serons aux Portes de Fer!.. Les connaissez-vous?

— Non, répondit Dragoch.

— Il faut avoir vu cela! déclara Ilia Brusch. S’il n’y a pas au monde un plus beau fleuve que le Danube, il n’y a pas, sur tout le cours du Danube, un plus bel endroit que les Portes de Fer!..

Cependant la nuit était devenue complète. La grosse montre d’Ilia Brusch marquait plus de neuf heures.

— J’étais en bas, dans la barge, lorsque je vous ai aperçu sur le pont, monsieur Jaeger, dit-il. Si je suis venu vous trouver, c’est pour vous rappeler que nous partons demain de très bonne heure, et que nous ferions bien, par conséquent, d’aller nous coucher.

— Je vous suis, monsieur Brusch, approuva Karl Dragoch.

Tous deux descendirent vers la rive. Comme ils tournaient l’extrémité du pont, le passager de dire:

— Et la vente de notre poisson, monsieur Brusch?.. Êtes-vous satisfait?

— Dites enchanté, monsieur Jaeger! Je n’ai pas à vous remettre moins de quarante et un florins!.

— Ce qui fera soixante-huit, avec les vingt-sept précédemment encaissés. Et nous ne sommes, qu’à Ratisbonne!.. Eh! eh! monsieur Brusch, l’affaire ne me paraît pas si mauvaise!

— J’en arrive à le croire,» reconnut le pêcheur.

Un quart d’heure plus tard, tous deux dormaient l’un près de l’autre, et, au soleil levant, l’embarcation était déjà à cinq kilomètres de Ratisbonne.

En aval de cette ville, les rives du Danube présentent des aspects très différents. Sur la droite se succèdent à perte de vue de fertiles plaines, une riche et productive campagne, où ne manquent ni les fermes, ni les villages, tandis que, sur la gauche, se massent des forêts profondes et s'étagent des collines qui vont se souder au Bohmerwald.

En passant, M. Jaeger et Ilia Brusch purent apercevoir, au-dessus de la bourgade de Donaustauf, le Palais d'été des Princes de Tour et Taxis, et le vieux château épiscopal de Ratisbonne, puis, au delà, sur le Savaltorberg, le Walhalla, ou «Séjour des élus», sorte de Parthénon égaré sous le ciel bavarois, qui n'est point celui de l'Attique, et dont la construction est due au roi Louis. A l'intérieur, c'est un musée, où figurent les bustes des héros de la Germanie, musée moins admirable que les belles dispositions architecturales de l'extérieur. Si le Walhalla ne vaut pas, en effet, le Parthénon d'Athènes, il l'emporte sur celui dont les Écossais ont décoré une des collines d'Édimbourg, la «vieille enfumée».

Longue est la distance séparant Ratisbonne de Vienne, lorsqu'on suit les méandres du Danube. Cependant, sur cette route liquide de près de quatre cent soixante-quinze kilomètres, les cités de quelque importance sont rares. On ne trouve guère a signaler que Straubing, entrepôt agricole de la Bavière, où la barge s'arrêta le soir du 18 août; Passau, où elle arriva le 20, et Lintz qu'elle dépassa dans la journée du 21. En dehors de ces villes, dont les deux dernières ont une certaine valeur stratégique, mais dont aucune n'atteint vingt mille âmes il n'existe que d'insignifiantes agglomérations.

A défaut des oeuvres de l'homme, le touriste a, du moins, pour se défendre contre l'ennui, le spectacle toujours varié des rives du grand fleuve. Au-dessous de Straubing, où il s'étale déjà sur une largeur de quatre cents mètres, le Danube ne cesse de se resserrer, tandis que les premières ramifications des Alpes Rhétiques surélèvent peu à peu la rive droite.

A Passau, bâtie au confluent de trois cours d’eau, le Danube, l’Inn et l’Ils, dont les deux premiers comptent parmi les plus importants de l’Europe, on quitte l’Allemagne, et cette même rive droite devient autrichienne dans l’aval immédiat de la ville, tandis que c’est seulement quelques kilomètres plus bas, au confluent de la Dadelsbach, que la rive gauche commence à faire partie de l’empire des Habsbourg. En ce point, le lit du fleuve est réduit à une étroite vallée de deux cents mètres environ qui va le conduire jusqu’à Vienne, tantôt s’élargissant au point de permettre la formation de véritables lacs parsemés d’îles et d’îlots, tantôt rapprochant plus encore ses parois entre lesquelles grondent les eaux furieuses.

Ilia Brusch paraissait n’accorder aucun intérêt à cette succession de spectacles changeants et toujours sublimes, et semblait uniquement préoccupé d’activer de toute la vigueur de ses bras l’allure de son embarcation. L’attention qu’il lui fallait apporter à la conduite de la barge eût, d’ailleurs, suffi à excuser son indifférence. Outre les difficultés résultant des bancs de sable, difficultés qui sont monnaie courante de la navigation danubienne, il en avait à vaincre de plus sérieuses. Quelques kilomètres avant Passau, il avait dû affronter les rapides de Wilshofen, puis, cent cinquante kilomètres plus bas, un peu au-dessous de Grein, l’une des villes les plus misérables de la Haute-Autriche, ce furent ceux autrement redoutables du Strudel et du Wirbel.

En cet endroit, la vallée devient un étroit couloir limité par des parois sauvages, entre lesquelles se précipitent les eaux bouillonnantes. Autrefois, de nombreux récifs rendaient ce passage des plus dangereux, et il n’était pas rare que la batellerie y éprouvât de graves dommages. Maintenant, le danger a notablement diminué. On a fait sauter à la mine les plus gênantes des roches qui s'échelonnaient d'une rive à l'autre. Les rapides ont perdu de leur fureur, les remous n'attirent plus les bateaux dans leurs tourbillons avec la même violence, et les catastrophes sont devenues moins fréquentes. Beaucoup de précautions, cependant, sont encore à prendre, autant pour les grands chalands que pour les petites embarcations.

Tout cela n'était pas pour embarrasser Ilia Brusch. Il suivait les passes, évitait les bancs de sable, dominait les remous et les rapides, avec une étonnante habileté. Cette habileté, Karl Dragoch l'admirait, mais il ne laissait pas aussi d'être surpris qu'un simple pêcheur eût une science si parfaite du Danube et de ses traîtresses surprises.

Si Ilia Brusch étonnait Karl Dragoch, la réciproque n'était pas moins vraie. Le pêcheur admirait, sans y rien comprendre, l'étendue des relations de son passager. Si infime que fût le lieu choisi pour la halte du soir, il était rare que M. Jaeger n'y trouvât pas quelqu'un de connaissance. A peine la barge était-elle amarrée, il sautait à terre et presque aussitôt il était abordé par une ou deux personnes. Jamais, du reste, il ne s'oubliait en de longues conversations. Après un échange de quelques mots, les interlocuteurs se séparaient, et M. Jaeger réintégrait la barge, tandis que les étrangers s'éloignaient. A la fin Ilia Brusch n'y put tenir.

«Vous ayez donc des amis un peu partout, monsieur Jaeger? demanda-t-il un jour.

— En effet, monsieur Brusch, répondit Karl Dragoch. Cela tient à ce que j'ai souvent parcouru ces contrées.

— En touriste, monsieur Jaeger?

— Non, monsieur Brusch, pas en touriste. Je voyageais à cette époque pour une maison de commerce de Budapest, et, dans ce métier-là, non seulement on voit du pays, mais on se crée de nombreuses relations, vous le savez.»

Tels furent les seuls incidents — si l'on peut appeler cela des incidents — qui marquèrent le voyage du 18 au 24 août. Ce jour-là, après une nuit passée le long de la rive, loin de tout village, en dessous de la petite ville de Tulln, Ilia Brusch se remit en route avant l'aube, ainsi qu'il en avait coutume. Cette journée ne devait pas être pareille aux précédentes. Le soir même, en effet, on serait à Vienne, et, pour la première fois, depuis huit jours, Ilia Brusch allait pêcher, afin de ne pas décevoir les admirateurs qu'il ne pouvait manquer d'avoir dans la capitale, où il avait eu soin de faire annoncer son arrivée par les cent voix de la Presse.

D'ailleurs, ne fallait-il pas penser aux intérêts de M. Jaeger, trop négligés pendant cette semaine de navigation acharnée? Bien qu'il ne se plaignit pas, ainsi qu'il s'y était engagé, celui-ci ne devait pas être content, Ilia Brusch le comprenait de reste, et c'est pour être en mesure de lui donner au moins une apparence de satisfaction, qu'il s'était arrangé de manière à n'avoir qu'une trentaine de kilomètres à franchir durant cette dernière journée. Ainsi, malgré la diminution de sa vitesse, il lui serait quand même possible d'atteindre Vienne d'assez bonne heure pour tirer parti du produit de sa pêche.

Au moment où Karl Dragoch sortit de la cabine, le butin était déjà abondant, mais le pêcheur devait faire mieux encore. Vers onze heures, sa ligne ramena un brochet de vingt livres. C'était une pièce royale qui obtiendrait sûrement un haut prix des amateurs viennois.

Enhardi par ce succès, Ilia Brusch voulut tenter la chance une dernière fois, ce en quoi il eut grand tort, ainsi que l’événement le prouva.

Comment s’y prit-il? Il eût été bien incapable de le dire. Le fait est que, lui, toujours si adroit, eut à ce moment un coup malheureux. Que ce soit le résultat d’un instant de distraction ou pour toute autre cause, sa ligne, fut mal lancée, et l’hameçon, violemment ramené, vint frapper son visage où il traça un sillon sanglant. Ilia Brusch poussa un cri de douleur.

Après avoir labouré les chairs, l’hameçon, continuant sa route, agrippa au passage les lunettes aux grands verres noirs que le pêcheur portait jour et nuit, et cet instrument, enlevé comme une plume, se mit à décrire des courbes éperdues à quelques centimètres au-dessus de la surface de l’eau.

Étouffant une exclamation de dépit, Ilia Brusch, après un coup d’oeil plein d’inquiétude à l’adresse de M. Jaeger, eut tôt fait de ramener à lui les lunettes vagabondes, qu’il s’empressa de remettre à leur place primitive. Alors seulement il parut soulagé.

Cet incident n’avait duré que quelques secondes, mais ces quelques secondes avaient suffi à Karl Dragoch pour constater que son hôte possédait de magnifiques yeux bleus, dont le regard très vif semblait peu compatible avec une vue maladive.

Le détective ne put faire autrement que de réfléchir à cette singularité, son tempérament le portant à réfléchir sur tous les sujets qui sollicitaient son attention, et ses réflexions ne furent pas terminées après que les yeux bleus eurent disparu de nouveau derrière l’écran noir qui les dissimulait habituellement. Il est inutile de dire qu’Ilia Brusch ne pêcha pas davantage ce jour-là. Son estafilade, plus douloureuse que grave, sommairement pansée, il rangea avec soin ses engins, tandis que le bateau suivait tout seul le fil du courant, puis ce fut l’heure du déjeuner.

Peu d’instants auparavant, on était passé au pied du Kalhemberg, mont de trois cent cinquante mètres, dont le sommet domine la ville de Vienne. Maintenant, plus on avançait, plus l’animation des rives annonçait l’approche d’une importante cité. Les villas, tout d’abord, s’étaient succédé, de plus en plus rapprochées. Puis, des usines avaient souillé le ciel des fumées de leurs hautes cheminées. Bientôt Ilia Brusch et son compagnon aperçurent quelques fiacres mettant dans cette banlieue une note franchement urbaine.

Dès les premières heures de l’après-midi, la barge dépassa Nussdorf, point où s’arrêtent les bateaux à vapeur, en raison de leur tirant d’eau. La modeste embarcation du pêcheur avait à cet égard de moindres exigences. D’ailleurs, elle ne contenait pas, comme les dampsschiffs, des voyageurs, qui eussent exigé d’être transportés par le canal jusqu’au coeur même de la ville.

Libre de ses mouvements, Ilia Brusch suivit le grand bras du Danube. Avant quatre heures, il s’arrêtait près de la rive et frappait son amarre à l’un des arbres du Prater, promenade fameuse, qui est à Vienne ce que le Bois de Boulogne est à Paris.

«Qu’avez-vous donc aux yeux, monsieur Brusch? demanda à ce moment Karl Dragoch qui, depuis l’incident des lunettes, n’avait prononcé que de rares paroles.

Ilia Brusch interrompit son travail et se tourna vers son passager.

— Aux yeux? répéta-t-il d’un ton interrogatif.

— Oui, aux yeux, dit M. Jaeger. Ce n’est pas pour votre plaisir, je suppose, que vous portez ces lunettes noires?

— Ah! fit Ilia Brusch, mes lunettes!.. J’ai la vue faible, et la lumière me fait mal, voilà tout.»

La vue faible?.. Avec des yeux pareils!..

Son explication donnée, Ilia Brusch acheva d’amarrer sa barge. Son passager le regardait faire d’un air songeur.

VII

CHASSEURS ET GIBIERS.

Quelques promeneurs animaient, en cette après-midi d’août, la rive du Danube, qui forme, au Nord-Est, l’extrême limite de la promenade du Prater. Ces promeneurs guettaient-ils Ilia Brusch? Probablement, celui-ci ayant eu soin de faire préciser à l’avance par les journaux le lieu et presque l’heure de son arrivée. Mais comment les curieux, disséminés sur un aussi vaste espace, découvriraient-ils la barge que rien ne signalait à leur attention?

Ilia Brusch avait prévu cette difficulté. Dès que son embarcation fut amarrée, il s’empressa de dresser un mât portant une longue banderolle sur laquelle on pouvait lire: *Ilia Brusch, Lauréat du concours de Sigmaringen*; puis, sur le toit du rouf, il fit, des poissons capturés pendant la matinée, une sorte d’étalage, en donnant au brochet la place d’honneur.

Cette réclame à l’américaine eut un résultat immédiat. Quelques badauds s’arrêtèrent en face de la barge et la contemplèrent d’un air désoeuvré. Ces premiers badauds en attirant d’autres, le rassemblement prit en quelques instants des proportions telles que les véritables curieux ne purent faire autrement que de le remarquer. Ils accoururent, et, en voyant tous ces gens se hâter dans la même direction, d’autres se mirent à courir à leur exemple sans savoir pourquoi. En moins d’un quart d’heure, cinq cents personnes étaient groupées en face de la barge. Ilia Brusch n’avait jamais rêvé pareil succès:

Entre ce public et le pêcheur, le dialogue ne tarda pas à s’engager.

«Monsieur Brusch? demanda un des assistants.

— Présent, répondit l’interpellé.

— Permettez-moi de me présenter. M. Claudius Roth, un de vos collègues de la Ligue Danubienne.

— Enchanté, monsieur Roth!

— Plusieurs autres de nos collègues sont ici, d’ailleurs. Voici M. Hanisch, M. Tietze, M. Hugo Zwiedinek, sans compter ceux que je ne connais pas.

— Moi, par exemple, Mathias Kasselick, de Budapest, dit un spectateur.

— Et moi, ajouta un autre, Wilhelm Bickel, de Vienne.

— Ravi, Messieurs, d’être en pays de connaissance, s’écria Ilia Brusch.

Les demandes et les réponses se croisèrent. La conversation devint générale.

— Vous avez fait bon voyage, monsieur Brusch?

— Excellent.

— Voyage rapide, en tous cas. On ne vous attendait pas si tôt.

— Il y a pourtant quinze jours que je suis en route.

— Oui, mais il y a loin de Donaueschingen à Vienne!

— Neuf cents kilomètres, à peu près, ce qui fait une soixantaine de kilomètres par jour en moyenne.

— Le courant les fait à peine en vingt-quatre heures.

— Ça dépend des endroits.

— C’est vrai. Et votre poisson? Le vendez-vous facilement?

— A merveille.

— Alors, vous êtes content?

— Très content.

— Aujourd’hui, votre pêche est fort belle. Il y a surtout un brochet superbe.

— Il n’est pas mal, en effet.

— Combien le brochet?

— Ce qu’il vous plaira de le payer. Je vais, si vous le voulez bien, mettre mon poisson aux enchères, en gardant le brochet pour la fin.

— Pour la bonne bouche, traduisit un plaisant.

— Excellente idée! s’écria M. Roth. L’acquéreur du brochet, au lieu d’en manger la chair, pourra, s’il le préfère, le faire empailler, en souvenir d’Ilia Brusch!»

Ce petit discours obtint un grand succès et les enchères commencèrent avec animation. Un quart d’heure plus tard, le pêcheur avait encaissé une somme rondelette, à laquelle le fameux brochet n’avait pas contribué pour moins de trente-cinq florins.

La vente terminée, la conversation continua entre le lauréat et le groupe d’admirateurs qui se pressait sur la berge. Renseigné sur le passé, on s’enquérait de ses intentions pour l’avenir. Ilia Brusch répondait, d’ailleurs, avec complaisance, et annonçait, sans en faire mystère, qu’après avoir consacré à Vienne la journée du lendemain, il irait, le soir du jour suivant, coucher à Presbourg.

Peu à peu, l’heure s’avançant, les curieux diminuèrent de nombre, chacun regagnant son dîner. Obligé de penser au sien, Ilia Brusch disparut dans le tôt, laissant son passager en pâture à l’admiration publique.

C’est pourquoi deux promeneurs, attirés par le rassemblement qui comptait encore une centaine de personnes, n’aperçurent que Karl Dragoch, solitairement assis au-dessous de la banderolle qui annonçait *urbi et orbi* le nom et la qualité du lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne. L’un de ces nouveaux venus était un grand gaillard de trente ans environ, large d’épaules, chevelure et barbe blondes, de ce blond slave qui semble l’apanage de la race; l’autre, d’aspect robuste aussi, et remarquable par l’insolite carrure de ses épaules, était plus âgé, et ses cheveux grisonnants montraient qu’il avait dépassé la quarantaine.

Au premier regard que le plus jeune de ces personnages jeta vers la barge, il tressaillit et fit un rapide mouvement de recul, en entraînant son compagnon en arrière.

“C’est lui, dit-il, d’une voix étouffée, dès qu’ils furent sortis de la foule.

— Tu crois?

— Sûr! Tu ne l’as donc pas reconnu?

— Comment l’aurais-je reconnu? Je ne l’ai jamais vu.

Un instant de silence suivit. Les deux interlocuteurs réfléchissaient.

— Il est seul dans la barque? demanda le plus âgé.

— Tout seul.

— Et c’est bien la barque d’Ilia Brusch?

— Pas d’erreur possible. Le nom est inscrit sur la banderolle.

— C’est à n’y rien comprendre.

Après un nouveau silence, ce fut le plus jeune qui reprit:

— Ce serait donc lui qui fait ce voyage à grand orchestre sous le nom d’Ilia Brusch?

— Dans quel but?

Le personnage à la barbe blonde haussa les épaules.

— Dans le but de parcourir le Danube incognito, c’est clair.

— Diable! fit son compagnon grisonnant.

— Ça ne m’étonnerait pas, dit l’autre. C’est un malin, Dragoch, et son coup aurait parfaitement réussi, sans le hasard qui nous a fait passer par ici.

Le plus âgé des deux interlocuteurs paraissait mal convaincu.

— C’est du roman, murmura-t-il entre ses dents.

— Tout à fait, Titcha, tout à fait, approuva son compagnon, mais Dragoch aime assez les moyens romanesques. Nous tirerons, d’ailleurs, la chose au clair. On disait autour de nous que la barge resterait à Vienne demain toute la journée. Nous n’aurons qu’à revenir. Si Dragoch est toujours là, c’est que c’est bien lui qui est entré dans la peau d’Ilia Brusch.

— Dans ce cas, demanda Titcha, que ferons-nous?

Son interlocuteur ne répondit pas tout de suite.

— Nous aviserons,” dit-il.

Tous deux s’éloignèrent du côté de la ville, laissant la barge entourée d’un public de plus en plus clairsemé. La nuit s’écoula paisiblement pour Ilia Brusch et son passager. Quand celui-ci sortit de la cabine, il trouva le premier en train de faire subir à ses engins de pêche une révision générale.

“Beau temps, monsieur Brusch, dit Karl Dragoch en manière de bonjour.

— Beau temps, monsieur Jaeger, approuva Ilia Brusch.

— Ne comptez-vous pas en profiter, monsieur Brusch, pour visiter la ville?

— Ma foi non, monsieur Jaeger. Je ne suis pas curieux de mon naturel, et j’ai ici de quoi m’occuper toute la journée. Après deux semaines de navigation, ce n’est pas du luxe de remettre un peu d’ordre.

— A votre aise, monsieur Brusch. Pour moi, je n’imiterai pas votre indifférence et je compte rester à terre jusqu’au soir.

— Et bien vous ferez, monsieur Jaeger, approuva Ilia Brusch, puisque c’est à Vienne que vous demeurez. Peut-être avez-vous de la famille qui ne sera pas fâchée de vous voir.

— C’est une erreur, monsieur Brusch, je suis garçon.

— Tant pis, monsieur Jaeger, tant pis. On n’est pas trop de deux pour porter le fardeau de la vie.

Karl Dragoch se mit à rire.

— Fichtre! monsieur Brusch, vous n’êtes pas gai, ce matin.

— On a ses jours, monsieur Jaeger, répondit le pêcheur. Mais que cela ne vous empêche pas de vous amuser le mieux possible.

— Je tâcherai, monsieur Brusch,” répondit Karl Dragoch en s’éloignant.

A travers le Prater, il alla rejoindre la Haupt-Allée, rendez-vous des élégances viennoises pendant la saison. Mais, à cette époque de l’année, et à cette heure, la Haupt-Allée était presque déserte et il put hâter le pas sans être gêné par la foule.

Il y avait, toutefois, assez de monde pour que son attention ne fût pas attirée par deux promeneurs qu’il croisa, en même temps que plusieurs autres, comme il arrivait à la hauteur du Constantins Hugel, colline artificielle dont on a jugé bon de varier la perspective du Prater. Sans s’occuper de ces deux promeneurs, Karl Dragoch continua tranquillement sa route, et, dix minutes plus tard, il entrait dans un petit café du rond-point du Prater, le Prater Stern en allemand. Il y était attendu. Un consommateur déjà attablé se leva, en l’apercevant, et vint à sa rencontre.

«Bonjour, Ulhmann, dit Karl Dragoch.

— Bonjour, Monsieur, répondit Friedrich Ulhmann.

— Toujours rien de neuf?

— Toujours rien.

— C’est bon. Cette fois, nous pouvons disposer de la journée et convenir mûrement de ce que nous devons faire.»

Si Karl Dragoch n’avait pas remarqué les deux promeneurs de la Haupt-Allée, ceux-ci — les mêmes individus que le hasard avait conduits, la veille, près de la barge d’Ilia Brusch — l’avaient parfaitement vu, au contraire. D’un même mouvement ils avaient fait volte-face, après le passage du chef de la police danubienne, et l’avaient suivi, en gardant une distance suffisante pour éviter toute surprise. Quand Dragoch eut disparu dans le petit café, ils entrèrent dans un établissement semblable situé vis-à-vis du premier, de l’autre côté du rond-point, résolus à rester, s’il le fallait, toute la journée en embuscade.

Leur patience fut mise à l’épreuve. Après avoir consacré plusieurs heures à convenir dans le détail de leurs faits et gestes, Dragoch et Ulhmann déjeunèrent sans se presser. Leur déjeuner terminé, désireux d’échapper à l’atmosphère étouffante de la salle, ils se firent servir à l’air libre la tasse de café devenue le complément indispensable de tout repas. Ils étaient en train de la savourer, quand Dragoch fit soudain un geste d’étonnement et, comme désireux de n’être pas reconnu, rentra rapidement dans l’intérieur du restaurant, d’où, à travers les rideaux du vitrage, il surveilla un homme qui traversait la place en ce moment.

«C’est lui, Dieu me pardonne!» murmura Dragoch, en suivant des yeux Ilia Brusch.

C’était Ilia Brusch, en effet, bien reconnaissable à sa figure rasée, à ses lunettes et à ses cheveux noirs comme ceux d’un Italien du Sud.

Quand celui-ci se fut engagé dans la Kaiser-Josephstrasse, Dragoch vint rejoindre Ulhmann demeuré sur la terrasse, lui intima l'ordre de l'attendre autant qu'il serait nécessaire, et s'élança sur les traces du pêcheur.

Ilia Brusch marchait, sans songer à se retourner, avec le calme d'une conscience paisible. D'un pas tranquille, il marcha jusqu'au bout de la Kaiser-Josephstrasse, puis, en droite ligne, à travers le parc de l'Augarten, il arriva à la Brigittenau. Quelques instants, il parut alors hésiter, et pénétra finalement dans une échoppe de sordide apparence ouvrant sa pauvre devanture dans l'une des plus misérables rues de ce quartier ouvrier.

Une demi-heure plus tard il ressortait. Toujours filé, sans le savoir, par Karl Dragoch, qui ne manqua pas en passant de lire l'enseigne de la boutique où son compagnon de voyage venait de s'arrêter, il prit la Rembrandtgasse, puis, remontant la rive gauche du canal, atteignit la Praterstrasse, qu'il suivit jusqu'au rond-point. Là, il tourna délibérément à droite et s'éloigna par la Haupt-Allée, sous les arbres du Prater. Il rentrait évidemment à bord de la barge, et Karl Dragoch jugea inutile de continuer plus longtemps sa filature.

Celui-ci revint donc au petit café, devant lequel Friedrich Ulhmann l'avait fidèlement attendu.

«Connais-tu un juif du nom de Simon Klein? demanda-t-il en l'abordant.

— Certainement, répondit Ulhmann.

— Qu'est-ce que c'est que ce juif?

— Pas grand'chose de bon. Brocanteur, usurier, au besoin receleur, je crois que ces trois mots le peignent du haut en bas.

— C’est bien ce que je pensais, murmura Dragoch, qui paraissait plongé en de profondes réflexions.

Après un instant, il reprit:

— Combien d’hommes avons-nous ici?

— Une quarantaine, répondit Ulhmann.

— C’est suffisant. Écoute-moi bien. Il faut faire table rase de ce que nous avons dit ce matin. Je change mon plan, car, plus je vais, plus j’ai le pressentiment que l’affaire arrivera près de l’endroit, quel qu’il soit, où je serai moi-même.

— Où vous serez?... Je ne comprends pas.

— C’est inutile. Tu échelonneras tes hommes, deux par deux, sur la rive gauche du Danube de cinq en cinq kilomètres, en commençant à vingt kilomètres au delà de Presbourg. Leur mission unique sera de me surveiller. Aussitôt que le dernier échelon m’aura aperçu, les deux hommes qui le composent se hâteront d’aller cinq kilomètres en avant du premier, et ainsi de suite. C’est compris?... Qu’ils ne me manquent pas surtout!

— Et moi? interrogea Ulhmann.

— Toi, tu t’arrangeras pour ne pas me perdre de vue. Comme je suis dans une barque, au beau milieu du fleuve, ce n’est pas très difficile... Pour tes hommes, qu’ils prennent, bien entendu, en montant leur faction, tous les renseignements possibles. En cas de besoin, le poste informé d’un événement grave avisera les autres, dont il sera le point de concentration.

— Compris.

— Qu’on se mette en route dès ce soir, et que demain je trouve tes hommes à leur poste.

— Ils y seront,» dit Ulhmann.

Par deux et trois fois Karl Dragoch exposa son plan, sans se lasser, jusqu’au moment où, certain d’avoir été parfaitement saisi par son subordonné, il se décida, l’heure avançant, à regagner la barge.

Dans le petit café, de l’autre côté de la place, les deux promeneurs du Prater n’avaient pas interrompu leur espionnage. Ils avaient vu Dragoch sortir, sans en soupçonner la raison, Ilia Brusch n’ayant pas plus attiré leur attention que ne l’aurait fait tout autre passant. Leur premier mouvement avait été de se lancer à sa poursuite, mais la présence de Friedrich Ulhmann les en avait empêchés. Rassurés, d’ailleurs, par l’attente de celui-ci, ils avaient eux-mêmes attendu, convaincus qu’ils ne tarderaient pas à voir revenir Karl Dragoch.

Le retour du détective prouva qu’ils avaient justement raisonné, et, quand le détective disparut avec Ulhmann dans l’intérieur du café, ils restèrent aux aguets, jusqu’au moment où se séparèrent le chef de police et son subordonné.

Laissant ce dernier remonter vers le centre, les deux acolytes s’attachèrent de nouveau à Karl Dragoch, et redescendirent à sa suite la Haupt-Allée, qu’ils avaient suivie le matin même en sens contraire. Après trois quarts d’heure de marche, ils s’arrêtèrent. La ligne d’arbres bordant la berge du Danube apparaissait alors. Il ne pouvait être douteux que Dragoch regagnât son embarcation.

«Inutile d’aller plus loin, dit le plus jeune. Nous sommes fixés, maintenant. Ilia Brusch et Karl Dragoch sont bien le même homme. La démonstration est faite, et, en le suivant plus longtemps, nous risquerions d’être remarqués à notre tour.

— Qu’allons-nous faire? demanda son compagnon à carrure de lutteur.

— Nous en causerons, répondit l’autre. J’ai une idée.»

Pendant que les deux inconnus s’occupaient si fort de sa personne, et élaboraient, en s’éloignant vers le Prater Stern, des plans dont l’exécution ne devait pas être beaucoup différée, Karl Dragoch réintégrait la barge, sans se douter de l’espionnage dont il avait été l’objet au cours de cette journée. Il y trouva Ilia Brusch, fort affairé à préparer le dîner, que les deux compagnons, une heure plus tard, partagèrent comme de coutume, à cheval sur l’un des bancs.

«Eh bien, monsieur Jaeger, êtes-vous content de votre promenade? demanda Ilia Brusch, quand les pipes commencèrent à répandre leurs nuages de fumée.

— Enchanté, répondit Karl Dragoch. Et vous, monsieur Brusch, n’avez-vous pas changé d’avis, et ne vous êtes-vous pas décidé à parcourir un peu la ville de Vienne?.. A y faire quelque visite, peut-être?

— Que non pas, monsieur Jaeger, affirma Ilia Brusch. Je ne connais personne ici, moi. Depuis que vous êtes parti, je n’ai pas mis le pied à terre.

— Vraiment!

— C’est ainsi. Je n’ai pas quitté le bord, où j’avais d’ailleurs assez de travail pour m’occuper jusqu’au soir.»

Karl Dragoch ne répliqua pas. Les pensées que le flagrant mensonge de son hôte pouvait lui suggérer, il les garda pour lui, et l’on parla de choses et d’autres jusqu’au moment où sonna l’heure du sommeil.

VIII

UN PORTRAIT DE FEMME.

Ilia Brusch s’était-il rendu coupable d’un mensonge prémédité, ou bien changea-t-il d’avis par simple caprice? Quoi qu’il en soit, les renseignements fournis par lui sur son itinéraire se trouvèrent être de la plus notoire inexactitude..

Parti deux heures avant l’aube, le matin du 26 août, il ne s’arrêta pas à Presbourg, comme il l’avait annoncé. Vingt heures de godille acharnée le menèrent d’une seule traite à plus de quinze kilomètres au delà de cette ville, et il recommença cet effort surhumain après quelques brefs instants de repos.

Pourquoi il s’efforçait avec une hâte si fébrile d’écourter son voyage, Ilia Brusch ne se crut pas obligé d’en faire confidence à M. Jaeger, dont les intérêts étaient ainsi gravement compromis cependant, et, de son côté, celui-ci, respectueux de la foi jurée, ne manifesta par aucun signe le désappointement que tant de précipitation devait lui faire éprouver.

Les préoccupations de Karl Dragoch détournaient, d’ailleurs, l’attention de M. Jaeger. Le petit dommage que le second risquait de subir n’avait qu’une importance bien mince en regard des soucis du premier.

Dans cette matinée du 26 août, Karl Dragoch venait, en effet, de faire une remarque du caractère le plus insolite, qui, s’ajoutant à celles des jours précédents, achevait de le troubler profondément. C’est vers dix heures du matin que la chose était arrivée. A ce moment, Dragoch, plongé dans ses pensées, regardait machinalement Ilia Brusch godiller, debout à l’arrière de la barge, avec un entêtement de boeuf au labour. A cause d’une sinuosité du chenal qui l’obligeait à se diriger, pour quelques instants, vers le Nord-Ouest, le pêcheur avait alors le soleil en plein derrière lui. Il était tête nue, car, ruisselant littéralement de sueur, il avait rejeté à ses pieds la casquette de loutre dont il se couvrait d’ordinaire, et la lumière éclairait vivement par transparence son abondante et noire chevelure.

Tout à coup, Karl Dragoch fut frappé par une particularité des plus singulières. Si Ilia Brusch était brun, et cela n’était pas contestable, il ne l’était du moins que partiellement. Noirs à leur extrémité, ses cheveux, à leur base, s’accusaient, sur une longueur de quelques millimètres, du plus indéniable blond.

Phénomène naturel que cette diversité de teintes? Peut-être. Mais, plus vraisemblablement, simple résultat d’une vulgaire teinture dont on aurait négligé de renouveler l’application.

Quand bien même un doute aurait pu, d’ailleurs, subsister à ce sujet dans l’esprit de Karl Dragoch, celui-ci n’eût pas tardé à être exactement renseigné, puisque, dès le lendemain matin, les cheveux d’Ilia Brusch avaient perdu leur double coloration. Le pêcheur, évidemment, s’était aperçu de sa négligence et y avait remédié pendant la nuit.

Ces yeux que leur propriétaire dissimulait avec tant de soin derrière d’impénétrables verres, ce mensonge certain au moment de l’escale à Vienne, cette hâte incompréhensible si peu compatible avec le but avoué du voyage, ces cheveux blonds transformés en cheveux noirs, tout cela formait un faisceau de présomptions dont on devait nécessairement conclure... Au fait, que devait-on en conclure? Karl Dragoch, après tout, n’en savait rien. Que la conduite d’Ilia Brusch fût louche, ce n’était que trop certain, mais quelle conclusion convenait-il d’en tirer?

Pourtant, une hypothèse, cent fois repoussée d'abord, finit par s'imposer à Karl Dragoch qui ne cessait de réfléchir au problème posé à sa sagacité. Et cette hypothèse, c'était celle-là même que, par deux fois, lui avait suggérée le hasard. Le joyeux Serbe, Michael Michaelovitch, d'abord, les voyageurs de l'hôtel de Ratisbonne, ensuite, n'avaient-ils pas, moitié sérieusement, moitié sous forme de plaisanterie, émis l'idée que, sous le vêtement d'emprunt du lauréat, se cachait le chef des malfaiteurs qui terrorisaient la région? Fallait-il donc en arriver à examiner sérieusement une supposition à laquelle ceux-mêmes qui l'avaient formulée n'accordaient sûrement pas la moindre créance?

Pourquoi pas, après tout? Certes, les faits observés jusqu'ici n'autorisaient pas une certitude. Ils autorisaient du moins tous les soupçons. Et, en vérité, si des observations subséquentes établissaient le bien-fondé de ces soupçons, ce serait une plaisante aventure que le même bateau eût transporté pendant un si grand nombre de kilomètres ce chef de bandits et le policier chargé de l'arrêter.

Par ce côté, le drame avait tendance à tourner au vaudeville, et Karl Dragoch répugnait fort à admettre la possibilité d'une si merveilleuse coïncidence. Mais les procédés techniques du vaudeville ne consistent-ils pas uniquement dans la concentration en un même lieu et en un court espace de temps de quiproquos et de surprises, qu'on ne remarque pas, ou qui semblent moins hilarants dans la vie réelle, à cause de leur éparpillement et, pour ainsi parler, de leur état de dilution? Il ne serait donc pas d'une saine logique de rejeter *de plano* un fait, sous prétexte qu'il parait anormal ou invraisemblable. Il convient d'être plus modeste, et d'admettre l'infinie richesse des combinaisons du hasard.

C’est sous l’empire de ces préoccupations que Karl Dragoch, le matin du 28, après une nuit passée en pleine campagne à quelques kilomètres en aval de Komorn, mit la conversation sur un sujet qui n’avait jamais été effleuré jusqu’alors.

«Bonjour, monsieur Brusch, dit-il, en sortant, ce matin-là, de la cabine, où il venait de dresser à loisir son plan d’attaque.

— Bonjour, monsieur Jaeger répondit le pêcheur qui godillait avec son énergie coutumière.

— Vous avez bien dormi, monsieur Brusch?

— Parfaitement. Et vous, monsieur Jaeger?

— Euh!.. euh!.. Comme ci, comme ça.

— Vraiment! fit Ilia Brusch. Pourquoi, si vous avez été souffrant, ne pas m’avoir appelé?

— Ma santé est parfaite, monsieur Brusch, répondit M. Jaeger. Cela n’empêche pas que la nuit m’ait paru un peu longue. Je ne suis pas fâché, je l’avoue, d’en avoir vu la fin.

— Parce que?..

— Parce que j’étais un peu inquiet, je peux le reconnaître maintenant.

— Inquiet!.. répéta Ilia Brusch d’un ton de sincère étonnement.

— Ce n’est même pas la première fois que je suis inquiet, expliqua M. Jaeger. Je n’ai jamais été très à mon aise, quand la fantaisie vous a pris de passer la nuit loin de toute ville et de tout village.

— Bah!.. fit Ilia Brusch qui semblait tomber des nues. Il fallait me le dire, et je me serais arrangé autrement.

— Vous oubliez que je me suis engagé à vous laisser toute liberté d’agir à votre guise. Chose promise, chose due, monsieur Brusch! Cela n’empêche pas que je n’aie pas toujours été très rassuré. Que voulez-vous? Je suis un citadin, moi, et je trouve impressionnants ce silence et cette solitude de la campagne.

— Affaire d’habitude, monsieur Jaeger, répliqua gaiement Ilia Brusch. Vous vous y feriez, si notre voyage devait être plus long. En réalité, il y a moins de dangers en rase campagne qu’au coeur d’une grande ville où pullulent les assassins et les rôdeurs.

— Vous avez probablement raison, monsieur Brusch, approuva M. Jauger, mais les impressions ne se commandent pas. Au surplus, mes craintes ne sont pas tout à fait déraisonnables dans le cas présent, puisque nous traversons une région particulièrement mal famée.

— Mal famée!.. se récria Ilia Brusch. Où prenez-vous ça, monsieur Jaeger?.. J’habite par ici, moi qui vous parle, et je n’ai jamais entendu dire que le pays fût mal famé!

Ce fut au tour de M. Jaeger de manifester une vive surprise.

— Parlez-vous sérieusement, monsieur Brusch? s’écria-t-il. Vous seriez le seul, alors, à ignorer ce que tout le monde sait de la Bavière à la Roumanie.

— Quoi donc? demanda Ilia Brusch.

— Parbleu! qu’une bande d’insaisissables malfaiteurs met en coupe réglée les deux rives du Danube, de Presbourg à son embouchure.

— C’est la première fois que j’entends parler de ça, déclara Ilia Brusch avec l’accent de la sincérité.

— Pas possible!.. s’étonna M. Jaeger. Mais on ne s’occupe pas d’autre chose d’un bout à l’autre du fleuve.

— On apprend du nouveau tous les jours, fit observer placidement Ilia Brusch. Et il y a longtemps que ces vols auraient commencé?

— Dix-huit mois environ, répondit M. Jaeger. Si encore il ne s’agissait que de vols!..

Mais les malfaiteurs en question ne se contentent pas de voler. Ils assassinent au besoin. Pendant ces dix-huit mois, on leur attribue au moins dix meurtres dont les auteurs sont demeurés inconnus. Le dernier de ces meurtres, précisément, a été accompli à moins de cinquante kilomètres d’ici.

— Je comprends maintenant vos inquiétudes, dit Ilia Brusch. Peut-être même les aurais-je partagées, si j’avais été mieux renseigné. A l’avenir, nous nous arrêterons, le soir, autant que possible à proximité d’un village ou d’une ville, à commencer par notre halte d’aujourd’hui, que nous ferons à Gran.

— Oh! approuva M. Jaeger, là nous serons tranquilles. Gran est une ville importante.

— Je suis d’autant plus satisfait, continua Ilia Brusch, que vous vous y trouviez en sûreté, que je compte vous laisser seul la nuit prochaine.

— Vous avez l’intention de vous absenter?

— Oui, monsieur Jaeger, mais quelques heures seulement. De Gran, où j’espère bien arriver de bonne heure, je voudrais pousser une pointe jusqu’à Szalka, qui n’en est pas fort éloigné. C’est là que j’habite, comme vous le savez. Je serai, d’ailleurs, de retour avant l’aube, et notre départ, demain matin, n’en sera nullement retardé.

— A votre aise, monsieur Brusch, conclut M. Jaeger. Je conçois que vous ayez le désir de faire un tour chez vous, et à Gran, je le répète, il n’y a rien à redouter.

Pendant une demi-heure, la conversation fut interrompue. Après cet entr’acte, Karl Dragoch reprit sur nouveaux frais.

— C’est vraiment curieux, dit-il, que vous n’ayez jamais entendu parler de ces malfaiteurs du Danube. C’est d’autant plus curieux, qu’on s’est particulièrement occupé de cette affaire quelques jours après le concours de pêche de Sigmaringen.

— A quel propos? demanda Ilia Brusch.

— A propos de la constitution d’une brigade de police spéciale sous les ordres d’un chef que l’on dit fort habile, un nommé Karl Dragoch, détective de Budapest.

— Il aura fort à faire, observa Ilia Brusch, que ce nom ne parut pas autrement frapper. C’est long, le Danube, et il est peu commode de surveiller des gens sur lesquels on ne sait rien.

— C’est ce qui vous trompe, répliqua M. Jaeger. La police ne serait pas sans renseignements. De l’ensemble des témoignages recueillis résulterait, d’abord, un signalement presque certain du chef de la bande.

— Comment est-il fait, ce particulier-là? demanda Ilia Brusch.

— Comme aspect général, c’est un homme dans votre genre...

— Merci bien! interrompit en riant Ilia Brusch.

— Oui, poursuivit M. Jaeger, il serait à peu près de votre taille et de votre corpulence, mais pour le reste, par exemple, aucun rapport.

— Heureusement! soupira Ilia Brusch avec un air de soulagement qui voulait être comique.

— Il aurait, dit-on, de très beaux yeux bleus, et ne serait pas obligé comme vous de porter lunettes. En outre, tandis que vous êtes très brun et soigneusement rasé, il porterait toute sa barbe, que l’on dit blonde. Sur ce dernier point, notamment, les témoignages recueillis sont formels, à ce qu’on prétend.

— C’est une indication, évidemment, reconnut Ilia Brusch, mais encore bien vague. Il y a beaucoup de blonds, et s’il faut les passer tous au crible!..

— On sait encore autre chose. D’après les on dit, ce chef serait de nationalité bulgare... comme vous-même, monsieur Brusch!

— Que voulez-vous dire? demanda Ilia Brusch d’une, voix troublée.

— D’après votre accent, s’excusa Karl Dragoch d’un air innocent, je vous ai cru d’origine bulgare... Mais je me suis trompé, peut-être?.

— Vous ne vous êtes pas trompé, reconnut Ilia Brusch après une courte hésitation.

— Ce chef serait donc votre compatriote. Dans le public, son nom court même de bouche en bouche.

— Oh alors!.. Si l’on sait son nom!..

— Bien entendu, cela n’a rien d’officiel.

— Officiel ou officieux, quel serait le nom du paroissien.

— A tort ou à raison, les riverains du fleuve mettent les méfaits dont ils ont à souffrir au compte d’un certain Ladko.

— Ladko!.. répéta Ilia Brusch qui, en proie à une évidente émotion, arrêta brusquement le va-et-vient de sa godille.

— Ladko, affirma Karl Dragoch, en surveillant du coin de l’oeil son interlocuteur.

Mais déjà celui-ci s’était ressaisi.

— C’est drôle, dit-il simplement, tandis que l’aviron reprenait entre ses mains son éternel travail.

— Qu’est-ce qui est drôle? insista Karl Dragoch. Connaîtriez-vous ce Ladko?

— -Moi? protesta le pêcheur. Pas le moins du monde. Mais ce n’est pas un nom bulgare que Ladko. Voilà tout ce que je vois de drôle là-dedans.»

Karl Dragoch ne poussa pas plus avant un interrogatoire, qui, plus clair, risquait de devenir dangereux, et dont les résultats pouvaient d’ores et déjà être considérés comme satisfaisants. La surprise du pêcheur en entendant le signalement du malfaiteur, son trouble en connaissant la nationalité probable de celui-ci, son émotion en en apprenant le nom, tout cela était indéniable et donnait une force nouvelle aux présomptions antérieures, sans apporter toutefois aucune preuve décisive.

Comme l’avait prévu Ilia Brusch, il n’était pas encore deux heures de l’après-midi lorsque la barge arriva à Gran. Cinq cents mètres avant les premières maisons, le pêcheur prit terre sur la rive gauche, afin d’éviter, dit-il, d’être retardé par la curiosité populaire, et pria M. Jaeger de bien vouloir conduire seul la barge sur la rive droite, où il s’arrêterait au coeur de la ville, ce à quoi le passager consentit avec obligeance.

Son travail terminé, celui-ci se transforma en détective. La barge amarrée, il sauta sur le quai, en quête de l’un de ses hommes.

Il n’avait pas fait vingt pas qu’il se heurtait à Friedrick Ulhmann. Un dialogue rapide s’engagea entre les deux policiers.

«Tout va bien?

— Tout.

— Il faut resserrer le cercle, Ulhmann. Tes postes de deux hommes à un kilomètre l’un de l’autre désormais.

— Ça chauffe, alors?

— Oui.

— Tant mieux.

— Demain, tâche de ne pas me perdre des yeux. J’ai idée que nous brûlons.

— -Compris.

— Et qu’on ne s’endorme pas! Du nerf! Qu’on se grouille!

— Comptez sur moi.

— Si tu apprends quelque chose, un signe de la berge, n’est-ce pas?

— Entendu.»

Les deux interlocuteurs se séparèrent, et Karl Dragoch réintégra l’embarcation.

Si son repos ne fut pas troublé par l’inquiétude qu’il prétendait éprouver d’ordinaire, il le fut, au cours de cette nuit, par le vacarme des éléments déchaînés. A minuit, une tempête de l’Est se leva, en effet, et augmenta d’heure en heure, tandis que la pluie faisait rage.

Au moment où, vers cinq heures du matin, Ilia Brusch regagna la barge, la pluie tombait toujours à torrents et le vent soufflait avec fureur dans une direction nettement opposée à celle du courant. Le pêcheur n’hésita pas, cependant, à partir. Son amarre larguée, il poussa aussitôt au milieu du fleuve et reprit son éternelle godille. Il lui fallait un véritable courage pour se mettre au travail dans de telles conditions, après une nuit qui n’avait pu manquer d’être fatigante.

La tempête ne montra, pendant les premières heures de la matinée, aucune tendance à décroître, au contraire. La barge, malgré l'aide du courant, ne gagnait que péniblement contre ce terrible vent debout, et c'est à peine si, après quatre heures d'efforts, elle était parvenue à une dizaine de kilomètres de la ville de Gran. Le confluent de l'Ipoly, sur la rive droite duquel est situé Szalka, où Ilia Brusch disait s'être rendu la nuit précédente, ne pouvait plus alors être bien éloigné.

A ce moment, la tempête redoubla de fureur, au point de rendre la situation réellement critique. Si le Danube n'est pas comparable à la mer, il est toutefois assez vaste pour que de véritables lames réussissent à s'y former lorsque le vent acquiert une grande violence. Il en était ainsi, ce jour-là, et, malgré la hâte dont Ilia Brusch faisait preuve, force lui fut de se réfugier près de la rive gauche.

Il ne devait pas l'atteindre..

Plus de cinquante mètres l'en séparaient encore, quand surgit un effrayant phénomène. A quelque distance en amont, les arbres qui garnissaient la berge furent tout à coup précipités dans le fleuve, cassés net au ras du sol, comme s'ils eussent été rasés par une faux gigantesque. En même temps, l'eau, soulevée par une incommensurable puissance, monta à l'assaut de la rive, puis se dressa en une lame énorme qui roula en déferlant à la poursuite de la barge.

Evidemment, une trombe venait de se former dans les couches atmosphériques et promenait à la surface du fleuve son irrésistible ventouse.

Ilia Brusch comprit le danger. Faisant pivoter la barge d'un énergique coup d'aviron, il s'efforça de se rapprocher de la rive droite. Si cette manoeuvre n’eut pas tout le résultat qu’il en attendait, c’est pourtant à elle que le pêcheur et son passager durent finalement leur salut.

Rattrapée par le météore continuant sa course furieuse, la barge évita du moins la montagne d’eau qu’il soulevait sur son passage. C’est pourquoi elle ne fut pas submergée, ce qui eût été fatal sans la manoeuvre d’Ilia Brusch. Saisie par les spires les plus extérieures du tourbillon, elle fut simplement lancée avec violence selon une courbe de grand rayon.

A peine effleurée par la pieuvre aérienne, dont la tentacule avait, cette fois, manqué le but, l’embarcation fut presque aussitôt lâchée qu’aspirée. En quelques secondes, la trombe était passée et la vague s’enfuyait en rugissant vers l’aval, tandis que la résistance de l’eau neutralisait peu à peu la vitesse acquise de la barge.

Malheureusement, avant que ce résultat fût complètement atteint, un nouveau danger se révéla à l’improviste. Droit devant l’étrave, qui fendait l’eau avec la vitesse d’un express, le pêcheur aperçut tout à coup un des arbres arrachés, qui, les racines en l’air, suivait lentement le courant. L’embarcation, lancée dans l’enchevêtrement de ces racines, ne pouvait manquer de chavirer, d’être gravement endommagée tout au moins. Ilia Brusch poussa un cri d’effroi, en découvrant cet obstacle imprévu.

Mais Karl Dragoch avait aussi vu le danger, il en avait compris l’imminence. Sans hésiter, il s’élança à l’avant de la barge, ses mains saisirent les racines qui s’échevelaient hors de l’eau, et, s’arc-boutant pour mieux lutter contre l’impulsion du bateau, il s’efforça de l’écarter de la direction dangereuse.

Il y parvint. La barge, déviée de sa route, passa comme une flèche, en raclant les racines, puis la tête de l’arbre encore couverte de ses feuilles. Un instant de plus, et elle allait laisser derrière elle l'épave verdoyante mollement entraînée par le courant, lorsque Karl Dragoch fut atteint en pleine poitrine par une des dernières ramures. En vain, il voulut résister au choc. Perdant l'équilibre, il culbuta par-dessus bord et disparut sous les eaux.

A sa chute en succéda immédiatement une autre, volontaire celle-ci. Ilia Brusch, en voyant tomber son passager, s'était sans hésiter élancé à son secours.

Mais ce n'était pas chose facile d'apercevoir quoi que ce fût dans ces eaux limoneuses tout agitées par le passage d'un furieux météore. Pendant une minute, Ilia Brusch s'y épuisa en vain, et il commençait à désespérer de découvrir M. Jaeger, quand il saisit enfin le malheureux, flottant; évanoui, entre deux eaux.

A tout prendre, cela valait mieux. Un homme qui se noie se débat d'ordinaire et augmente ainsi sans le savoir la difficulté du sauvetage. Un homme évanoui n'est plus qu'une masse inerte dont le salut dépend uniquement de l'habileté du sauveteur.

Ilia Brusch eut tôt fait d'élever hors de l'eau la tête de M. Jaeger, puis, d'un bras vigoureux, il nagea vers la barge, qui, pendant ce temps, s'était éloignée d'une trentaine de mètres. Il s'en rapprocha en quelques brasses, qui semblaient être un jeu pour le robuste nageur, et, d'une main, il en saisit le bord, tandis que son autre main soutenait le passager toujours privé de sentiment.

Restait maintenant à hisser M. Jaeger à bord de l'embarcation, et ce n'était pas besogne aisée. Ilia Brusch, au prix de mille efforts, réussit toutefois à la mener à bonne fin.

Dès qu’il eut déposé le noyé sur une des couchettes du tôt, il le dépouilla de ses vêtements, et, ayant retiré de l’un des coffres quelques morceaux de laine, se mit en devoir de le frictionner, énergiquement. M. Jaeger ne tarda pas à ouvrir les yeux et à revenir au sentiment du réel. L’immersion n’avait pas été longue, en somme, et il était à espérer qu’elle n’aurait pas de suites fâcheuses.

«Eh! Eh! monsieur Jaeger, s’écria Ilia Brusch, dès qu’il vit son malade reprendre connaissance, vous vous y entendez pour les plongeons!

M. Jaeger sourit faiblement sans répondre.

— Ça ne sera rien, poursuivait Ilia Brusch, en continuant ses énergiques frictions. Rien de meilleur pour la santé qu’un bain au mois d’août!

— Merci, monsieur Brusch, balbutia Karl Dragoch.

— Il n’y a vraiment pas de quoi, répliqua gaiement le pêcheur. C’est à moi de vous remercier, monsieur Jaeger, puisque vous m’avez donné l’occasion d’un excellent bain.

Les forces de Karl Dragoch revenaient à vue d’oeil. Un bon coup d’eau-de-vie, et il n’y paraîtrait plus. Malheureusement, Ilia Brusch, plus ému qu’il ne voulait le paraître, bouleversa en vain tous ses coffres. La provision d’alcool était épuisée, et il n’en restait pas une goutte à bord de la barge.

— Voilà qui est vexant! s’écria Ilia Brusch. Pas une goutte de schnaps dans notre cambuse!

— Peu importe, monsieur Brusch, affirma Karl Dragoch, d’une voix faible. Je m’en passerai fort bien, je vous assure.

Karl Dragoch grelottait, cependant, en dépit de ses assurances, et un cordial ne lui eût certes pas été inutile.

— C’est ce qui vous trompe, répondit Ilia Brusch, qui ne s’illusionnait pas sur l’état de son passager, vous ne vous en passerez pas, monsieur Jaeger. Laissez moi faire. Ce ne sera pas long.

En un tour de mains, le pêcheur eut échangé ses vêtements trempés contre des vêtements secs, puis quelques coups de godille amenèrent la barge à la rive gauche où elle fut amarrée solidement.

— Un peu de patience, monsieur Jaeger, dit Ilia Brusch en sautant à terre. Ici, je connais le pays, puisque voilà le confluent de l’Ipoly. A moins de quinze cents mètres, il y a un village, où je trouverai tout ce qu’il faut. Dans une demi-heure, je serai de retour.»

Cela dit, Ilia Brusch s’éloigna, sans attendre la réponse.

Quand il fut seul, Karl Dragoch se laissa retomber sur sa couchette. Il était plus brisé qu’il ne lui plaisait de le dire, et, pendant un instant, il ferma les yeux avec lassitude.

Mais la vie reprenait rapidement son cours; le sang battait dans ses artères. Bientôt il rouvrit les yeux et laissa errer autour de lui un regard plus ferme de minute eh minute.

La première chose qui sollicita ce regard encore vague, ce fut l’un des coffres, qu’Ilia Brusch, dans la précipitation de son départ, avait oublié de refermer. Bouleversé par la recherche infructueuse du pêcheur, l’intérieur de ce coffre n’offrait à la vue qu’un amas d’objets hétéroclites. Linge rude, grossiers vêtements, fortes chaussures y étaient entassés dans le plus grand désordre.

Pourquoi les yeux de Karl Dragoch se mirent-ils à briller tout à coup? Ce spectacle, pourtant peu passionnant, l’intéressait-il donc à ce point qu’il se soulevât sur le coude, après quelques secondes d’attention, de manière a voir plus commodément dans le coffre béant?

Certes, ce n’étaient ni les vêtements, ni le linge qui pouvaient exciter ainsi la curiosité de l’indiscret passager, mais, entre ces divers objets d’habillement, l’oeil fureteur du détective venait de découvrir un objet plus digne de retenir son attention.

Ce n’était pas autre chose qu’un portefeuille à demi entr’ouvert, et laissant fuir les nombreux papiers dont il était bourré. Un portefeuille! Des papiers! C’est-à-dire une réponse, sans doute, aux questions que Karl Dragoch se posait depuis quelques jours.

Le détective n’y put tenir. Après une courte hésitation, au risque de trahir, ce faisant, les lois de l’hospitalité, sa main s’allongea et plongea dans le coffre, d’où elle ressortit avec le portefeuille tentateur et son contenu, dont l’inventaire fut aussitôt commencé.

Des lettres, d’abord, que Karl Dragoch ne s’attarda pas à lire, mais que leur suscription montrait adressées à M. Ilia Brusch à Szalka; puis des reçus, parmi lesquels des quittances de loyer libellées au même nom. Rien d’intéressant dans tout cela.

Karl Dragoch allait peut-être y renoncer, quand un dernier document le fit tressaillir. Rien ne pouvait être plus innocent cependant, et il fallait être un policier pour éprouver, devant un tel «document», un autre sentiment qu’une sympathique émotion.

C’était un portrait, le portrait d’une jeune femme dont la parfaite beauté eût enthousiasmé un peintre. Mais un policier n’est pas un artiste, et ce n’est pas d’admiration pour ce ravissant visage que battait le coeur de Karl Dragoch. A peine même s’il en avait regardé les traits. A vrai dire, il n’avait rien vu de ce portrait, rien qu’une simple ligne d’écriture en langue bulgare tracée au bas de la photographie. “A mon cher mari, Natcha Ladko”, tels étaient les mots que pouvait lire Karl Dragoch éperdu.

Ainsi, ses soupçons étaient justifiés, et logiques ses déductions basées sur les singularités observées. Ladko! C’était bien avec Ladko, qu’il descendait le Danube depuis tant de jours. C’était bien ce dangereux malfaiteur, vainement pourchassé jusqu’alors, qui se cachait sous l’inoffensive personnalité du lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne.

Quelle allait être la conduite de Karl Dragoch après une pareille constatation? Il n’avait pas encore pris de décision, quand un bruit de pas sur la berge lui fit rejeter vivement le portefeuille au fond du coffre dont il rabattit le couvercle. Le nouvel arrivant ne pouvait être Ilia Brusch parti depuis dix minutes à peine.

“Monsieur Dragoch! appela une voix au dehors.

— Friedrick Ulhmann! murmura Karl Dragoch qui parvint péniblement à se mettre debout et sortit en chancelant de la cabine.

— Excusez-moi de vous avoir appelé, dit Friedrick Ulhmann dès qu’il aperçut son chef. J’ai vu votre compagnon s’éloigner tout à l’heure et je vous savais seul.

— Qu’y a-t-il? demanda Karl Dragoch.

— Du nouveau, Monsieur. Un crime a été commis cette nuit.

— Cette nuit! s’écria Karl Dragoch en pensant aussitôt à l’absence d’Ilia Brusch au cours de la nuit précédente.

— Une villa a été pillée à proximité d’ici. Le gardien a été frappé.

— Mort?

— Non, mais grièvement blessé.

— C’est bon, dit Karl Dragoch en imposant de la main silence à son subordonné.

Il réfléchissait profondément. Que convenait-il de faire? Agir certes, et pour cela la force ne lui manquerait pas. La nouvelle qu’il venait d’apprendre était le meilleur des remèdes. Il ne lui restait plus de traces de l’accident dont il venait d’être victime. Il n’avait plus besoin maintenant de chercher un appui sur la cloison de la cabine. Sous le coup de fouet des nerfs, le sang revenait à flots à son visage.

Oui, il fallait agir, mais comment? Devait-il attendre le retour d’Ilia Brusch, ou plutôt de Ladko, puisque tel était le véritable nom de son compagnon de route, et lui mettre à l’improviste la main sur l’épaule au nom de la loi? Cela paraissait le plus sage, puisque désormais il ne pouvait subsister aucun doute sur la culpabilité du soi-disant pêcheur. Le soin avec lequel il dissimulait sa véritable personnalité, le mystère dont il s’entourait, ce nom qui était le sien et, en même temps, celui par lequel la rumeur publique désignait le chef des bandits, son absence de la nuit dernière concordant avec la découverte d’un nouveau crime, tout disait à Karl Dragoch qu’Ilia Brusch était bien le bandit recherché.

Mais ce bandit lui avait sauvé la vie!.. Voilà qui compliquait étrangement la situation!

Quelle apparence qu’un voleur, plus qu’un voleur, un assassin se fût jeté à l’eau pour l’en retirer? Et, quand bien même cette chose invraisemblable serait vraie, était-il possible, à qui venait d’être arraché à la mort, de reconnaître ainsi le dévouement de son sauveur? Quel risque, d’ailleurs, à surseoir à une arrestation? Maintenant que le faux Ilia Brusch était démasqué, que sa personnalité était connue, il lui serait impossible d’échapper aux forces de police disséminées le long du fleuve, et, dans le cas où l’enquête aboutirait en effet au soi-disant pêcheur, on disposerait alors d’un plus nombreux personnel, et l’arrestation serait opérée plus sûrement pour avoir été différée.

Karl Dragoch, pendant cinq minutés, retourna sous toutes ses faces le cas de conscience qui s’imposait à lui. Partir sans avoir revu Ilia Brusch?.. Ou bien rester, placer Friedrick Ulhmann en embuscade dans la cabine, et, quand le pêcheur apparaîtrait, sauter sur lui sans crier gare, quitte à s’expliquer après?... Non, décidément. Répondre par cette trahison à un tel acte de dévouement, cela lui soulevait le coeur. Mieux valait, au risque de laisser à un coupable une chance de salut, commencer l’enquête en oubliant provisoirement ce qu’il croyait savoir. Si cette enquête le ramenait finalement à Ilia Brusch, si son devoir l’obligeait alors à traiter son sauveur en ennemi, ce serait du moins face à face qu’il le combattrait, et après lui avoir donné le temps de se mettre en défense.

Acceptant du geste toutes les conséquences de sa décision, Karl Dragoch, son parti pris, rentra dans la cabine. Par un mot déposé en évidence il avertit

Ilia Brusch de la nécessité où il était de s’absenter, en priant son hôte de l’attendre au moins pendant vingt-quatre heures. Puis il se disposa à partir.

— Combien d’hommes avons-nous? demanda-t-il en sortant de la cabine.

— Il y en a deux sur place, mais on est en train de battre le rappel. Nous en aurons une dizaine avant ce soir.

— Bien, approuva Karl Dragoch. Ne m’as-tu pas dit que le théâtre du crime n’était pas éloigné?

— Deux kilomètres à peu près, répondit Ulhmann.

— Conduis-moi,” dit Karl Dragoch en sautant sur la rive.

IX

LES DEUX ÉCHECS DE DRAGOCH.

Les Karpathes décrivent, dans la partie septentrionale de la Hongrie, un immense arc de cercle, dont l’extrémité occidentale se divise en deux branches secondaires. L’une va mourir au Danube à la hauteur de Presbourg; l’autre atteint le fleuve dans les environs de Gran, où elle se continue, sur la rive droite, par les sept cent soixante-six mètres du mont Pilis.

C’est au pied de cette médiocre montagne qu’un crime venait d’être commis, et c’est là que Karl Dragoch allait pour la première fois se trouver aux prises avec les redoutables malfaiteurs qu’il avait mission de poursuivre.

Quelques heures avant le moment où, faussant compagnie à son hôte, il se faisait violence pour obéir, malgré sa faiblesse, à l’invitation de Friedrich Ulhmann, une charrette lourdement chargée s’était arrêtée devant une misérable auberge construite à la base de l’une des collines par lesquelles le mont Pilis se raccorde à la vallée du Danube.

La position de cette auberge avait été judicieusement choisie au point de vue commercial. Elle commandait le croisement de trois routes se dirigeant, l’une vers le Nord, une autre vers le Sud-Est, et la troisième vers le Nord-Ouest. Ces trois routes aboutissant au Danube, celle du Nord à la courbe qu’il décrit en face du mont Pilis, celle du Sud-Est au bourg de Saint-André, celle du Nord-Ouest à la ville de Gran, l’auberge était située, en quelque sorte, entre les branches d’un vaste compas liquide et ne pouvait manquer de profiter du roulage alimentant la batellerie.

Le Danube qui, au sortir de Gran, coule sensiblement de l’Ouest à l’Est, s’infléchit, en effet, vers le Sud, à quelque distance du confluent de l’Ipoly, puis remonte au Nord, après avoir dessiné une demi-circonférence de faible rayon. Mais, presque aussitôt, il se replie sur lui-même, pour adopter une direction Nord-Sud, qu’il n’abandonnera plus, en aval, pendant un très grand nombre de kilomètres.

Au moment où le véhicule faisait halte, le soleil se levait à peine. Tout dormait encore dans la maison, dont les épais volets étaient hermétiquement fermés.

«Holà, oh! de l’auberge!.. appela, en heurtant la porte du manche de son fouet, l’un des deux hommes qui conduisaient la charrette.

— On y va! répondit de l’intérieur l’aubergiste réveillé en sursaut.

Un instant plus tard, une tête embroussaillée se montrait à une fenêtre du premier.

— Que voulez-vous? interrogea sans aménité l’aubergiste.

IV

— Manger, d’abord; dormir, ensuite, dit le charretier.

— On y va, répéta l’hôte qui disparut dans l’intérieur.

Lorsque, par le portail grand ouvert, la charrette eut pénétré dans la cour, ses conducteurs s’empressèrent de dételer leurs deux chevaux et de les conduire à l’écurie, où une large provende leur fut distribuée. Pendant ce temps, l’hôte ne cessait de tourner autour de ces clients matinaux. Évidemment, il n’eût pas demandé mieux que d’engager la conversation, mais les rouliers, par contre, semblaient peu désireux de lui donner la réplique.

— Vous arrivez de bon matin, camarades, insinua l'aubergiste. Vous avez donc voyagé pendant la nuit?

— Il parait, fit l'un des charretiers.

— Et vous allez loin comme ça?

— Loin ou près, c'est notre affaire, lui fut-il répliqué.

L'aubergiste se le tint pour dit.

— Pourquoi molester ce brave homme, Vogel? intervint l'autre charretier qui n'avait pas encore ouvert la bouche. Nous n'avons aucune raison de cacher que nous allons à Saint-André.

— Possible que nous n'ayons pas à le cacher, répliqua Vogel d'un ton bourru, mais ça ne regarde personne, j'imagine.

— Evidemment, approuva l'aubergiste, flagorneur comme tout bon commerçant.

Ce que j'en disais, c'était histoire de parler, simplement... Ces messieurs désirent manger?

— Oui, répondit celui des deux rouliers qui semblait le moins brutal. Du pain, du lard, du jambon, des saucisses, ce que tu auras.»

La charrette avait dû parcourir une longue route, car ses conducteurs affamés firent largement honneur au repas. Ils étaient fatigués aussi, et c'est pourquoi ils ne s'oublièrent pas à table. La dernière bouchée prise, ils s’empressèrent d’aller chercher le sommeil, l’un sur la paille de l’écurie, près des chevaux, l’autre sous la bâche de la charrette.

Midi sonnait quand ils reparurent. Ce fut pour réclamer aussitôt un second repas qui leur fut servi comme le précédent dans la grande salle de l’auberge. Reposés maintenant, ils s’attardèrent. Au dessert succédèrent les verres d’eau-de-vie qui disparaissaient comme de l’eau dans ces rudes gosiers.

Au cours de l’après-midi, plusieurs voitures s’arrêtèrent à l’auberge et de nombreux piétons entrèrent boire un coup. Des paysans, pour la plupart, qui, la besace au dos, le bâton à la main, se rendaient à Gran ou en revenaient. Presque tous étaient des habitués et l’hôtelier ne pouvait que s’applaudir d’avoir la tête solide réclamée, par sa profession, car il trinquait avec tous ses clients les uns après les autres. Cela faisait marcher le commerce. On cause, en effet, en trinquant, et parler assèche le gosier, ce qui excite à de nouvelles libations.

Ce jour-là précisément la conversation ne manquait pas d’aliment. Le crime commis pendant la nuit mettait les cervelles à l’envers. La nouvelle en avait été apportée par les premiers passants, et chacun racontait un détail inédit ou émettait son avis personnel.

L’aubergiste apprit ainsi successivement que la magnifique villa possédée par le comte Hagueneau à cinq cents mètres de la rive du Danube avait été complètement dévalisée et que le gardien Christian était grièvement blessé; que ce crime était sans doute l’oeuvre de l’insaisissable bande de malfaiteurs auxquels on attribuait tant d’autres crimes impunis; que la police enfin sillonnait la campagne et que les criminels étaient recherchés par la brigade récemment créée pour la surveillance du fleuve.

Les deux rouliers ne se mêlaient pas aux conversations que suscitait l’événement, conversations qui se développaient à grand accompagnement d’exclamations et de cris. Silencieusement, ils restaient à l’écart, mais sans doute ils ne perdaient rien des propos échangés autour d’eux, car ils ne pouvaient manquer de s’intéresser à ce qui passionnait tout le monde.

Cependant, le bruit s’apaisa peu à peu, et, vers six heures et demie du soir, ils furent de nouveau seuls dans la grande salle, d’où le dernier consommateur venait de s’éloigner. L’un d’eux interpella aussitôt l’aubergiste fort activé à rincer des verres sur son comptoir. Celui-ci s’empressa d’accourir.

«Que désirent ces messieurs? demanda-t-il.

— Dîner, répondit un charretier.

— Et coucher ensuite, sans doute? interrogea l’aubergiste.

— Non, mon maître, répliqua celui des deux rouliers qui paraissait le plus sociable. Nous comptons repartir à la nuit...

— A la nuit!... s’étonna l’aubergiste.

— Afin, continua son client, d’être dès l’aube sur la place du marché.

— De Saint-André?

— Ou de Gran. Cela dépendra des circonstances. Nous attendons ici un ami qui est allé aux informations. Il nous dira où nous avons le plus de chances de nous défaire avantageusement de nos marchandises.»

L’aubergiste quitta la salle pour s’occuper des apprêts du repas.

«Tu as entendu, Kaiserlick? dit à voix basse le plus jeune des deux rouliers en se penchant vers son compagnon.

— Oui.

— Le coup est découvert.

— Tu n’espérais pas, je suppose, qu’il demeurerait caché?

— Et la police bat la campagne.

— Qu’elle la batte.

— Sous la conduite de Dragoch, à ce qu’on prétend.

— Ça, c’est autre chose, Vogel. A mon idée, ceux qui n’ont que Dragoch à craindre peuvent dormir sur les deux oreilles.

— Que veux-tu dire?

— Ce que je dis, Vogel.

— Dragoch serait donc?...

— Quoi?

— Supprimé?

— Tu le sauras demain. D’ici là, motus,» conclut le roulier, en voyant revenir l’aubergiste.

Le personnage attendu par les deux charretiers n’arriva qu’à la nuit close. Un rapide colloque s’engagea entre les trois compagnons.

«On affirmait ici que la police est sur la piste, dit à voix basse Kaiserlick.

— Elle cherche, mais elle ne trouvera pas.

— Et Dragoch?

— Bouclé.

— Qui s’est chargé de l’opération?

— Titcha.

— Alors, il y a du bon... Et nous, que devons-nous faire?

— Atteler sans tarder.

— Pour?...

— Pour Saint-André, mais à cinq cents mètres d’ici vous rebrousserez chemin. L’auberge aura été fermée pendant ce temps-là. Vous passerez inaperçus, et vous prendrez la route du Nord. Tandis que on vous croira d’un côté, vous serez de l’autre.

— Où est donc, le chaland?

— A l’anse de Pilis.

— C’est là qu’est le rendez-vous?

— Non, un peu plus près, à la clairière, sur la gauche de la route. Tu la connais?

— Oui.

— Une quinzaine des nôtres y sont déjà. Vous irez les rejoindre.

— Et toi?

— Je retourne en arrière rassembler le surplus de nos hommes que j’ai laissés en surveillance. Je les ramènerai avec moi.

— En route donc,» approuvèrent les charretiers.

Cinq minutes plus tard, la voiture s’ébranlait. L’hôte, tout en maintenant ouvert l’un des battants de la porte cochère, salua poliment ses clients.

“Alors, décidément, c’est-il à Gran que vous allez? interrogea-t-il.

— Non, répondirent les rouliers, c’est à Saint-André, l’ami.

— Bon voyage, les gars! formula l’hôte.

— Merci, camarade.”

La charrette tourna à droite et prit, vers l’Est, le chemin de Saint-André. Quand elle eut disparu dans la nuit, le personnage que Kaiserlick et Vogel avaient attendu toute la journée, s’éloigna à son tour, dans la direction opposée, sur la route de Gran.

L’aubergiste ne s’en aperçut même pas. Sans plus s’occuper de ces passants que vraisemblablement il ne reverrait jamais, il se hâta de fermer la maison et de gagner son lit.

La charrette qui, pendant ce temps, s’éloignait au pas tranquille de ses chevaux, fit volte-face au bout de cinq cents mètres, conformément aux instructions reçues, et suivit en sens inverse le chemin qu'elle venait de parcourir.

Lorsqu'elle fut de nouveau à la hauteur de l'auberge, tout y était clos, en effet, et elle aurait dépassé ce point sans incident, si un chien, qui dormait au beau milieu de la chaussée, ne s'était enfui tout à coup en aboyant si violemment, que le cheval de flèche effrayé se déroba par un brusque écart jusque sur le bas côté de la route. Les charretiers eurent vite fait de ramener l'animal en bonne direction, et, pour la seconde fois, la voiture disparut dans la nuit.

Il était environ dix heures et demie quand, abandonnant le chemin tracé, elle pénétra sous le couvert d'un petit bois, dont les masses sombres s'élevaient sur la gauche. Elle fut arrêtée au troisième tour de roue.

«Qui va là? questionna une voix dans les ténèbres.

— Kaiserlick et Vogel, répondirent les rouliers.

— Passez,» dit la voix.

En arrière des premiers rangs d'arbres la charrette déboucha dans une clairière, où une quinzaine d'hommes dormaient, étendus sur la mousse. «Le chef est là? s'enquit Kaiserlick.

— Pas encore.

— Il nous a dit de l'attendre ici.»

L'attente ne fut pas longue. Une demi-heure à peine après la voiture, le chef, ce même personnage qui était venu sur le tard à l'auberge, arriva à son tour, accompagné d’une dizaine de compagnons, ce qui portait à plus de vingt-cinq le nombre des membres de la troupe.

«Tout le monde est là? demanda-t-il.

— Oui, répondit Kaiserlick qui paraissait détenir quelque autorité dans la bande.

— Et Titcha?

— Me voici, prononça une voix sonore.

— Eh bien?.. interrogea anxieusement le chef.

— Réussite sur toute la ligne. L’oiseau est en cage à bord du chaland.

— Partons, dans ce cas, et hâtons-nous, commanda le chef. Six hommes en éclaireurs, le reste à l’arrière-garde, la voiture au milieu. Le Danube n’est pas à cinq cents mètres d’ici, et le déchargement sera fait en un tour de main. Vogel emmènera alors la charrette, et ceux qui sont du pays rentreront tranquillement chez eux. Les autres embarqueront sur le chaland.

On allait exécuter ces ordres, quand un des hommes laissés en surveillance au bord de la route accourut en toute hâte.

— Alerte! dit-il en étouffant sa voix.

— Qu’y a-t-il? demanda le chef de la bande.

— Ecoute.

Tous tendirent l’oreille. Le bruit d’une troupe en marche se faisait entendre sur la route. A ce bruit, bientôt quelques voix assourdies se joignirent. La distance ne devait pas être supérieure à une centaine de toises.

— Restons dans la clairière, commanda le chef. Ces gens-là passeront sans nous voir.»

Assurément, étant donnée l’obscurité profonde, ils ne seraient pas aperçus, mais il y avait ceci de grave: si, par mauvaise chance, c’était une escouade de police qui suivait cette route, c’est qu’elle se dirigeait vers le fleuve. Certes, il pouvait se faire qu’elle ne découvrit pas le bateau, et, d’ailleurs, les précautions étaient prises. Ces agents auraient beau le visiter de fond en comble, ils n’y trouveraient rien de suspect. Mais, même en admettant que cette escouade ne soupçonnât pas l’existence du chaland, peut-être resterait-elle en embuscade dans les environs, et, dans ce cas, il eût été très imprudent de faire sortir la charrette.

Enfin, on tiendrait compte des circonstances, et on agirait selon les événements. Après avoir attendu dans cette clairière toute la journée suivante, s’il le fallait, quelques-uns des hommes descendraient, à la nuit, jusqu’au Danube, et s’assureraient de l’absence de toute force de police.

Pour l’instant, l’essentiel était de ne pas être dépistés, et que rien ne donnât l’éveil à cette troupe qui s’approchait.

Celle-ci ne tarda pas à atteindre le point où la route longeait la clairière. Malgré la nuit noire, on reconnut qu’elle se composait d’une dizaine d’hommes, et de significatifs cliquetis d’acier indiquaient des hommes armés.

Déjà, elle avait dépassé la clairière, lorsqu’un incident vint modifier les choses du tout au tout.

Un des deux chevaux, effrayé par ce passage d’hommes sur la route, s’ébroua et poussa un long hennissement qui fut répété par son congénère.

La troupe en marche s’arrêta sur place.

C’était bien une escouade de police qui descendait vers le fleuve, sous le commandement de Karl Dragoch complètement remis des suites de son accident de la matinée.

Si les gens de la clairière avaient connu ce détail, peut-être leur inquiétude en eût-elle été augmentée. Mais, ainsi qu’on l’a vu, leur chef croyait hors de combat le policier redouté. Pourquoi il commettait cette erreur, pourquoi il estimait ne plus avoir à compter avec un adversaire qu’il avait précisément en face de lui, c’est ce que la suite du récit ne tardera pas à faire comprendre au lecteur.

Lorsque, dans la matinée de ce même jour, Karl Dragoch eut sauté sur la berge, où l’attendait son subordonné, celui-ci l’avait entraîné vers l’amont. Après deux ou trois cents mètres de marche, les deux policiers étaient arrivés à un canot, dissimulé dans les herbes de la rive, à bord duquel ils s’embarquèrent. Aussitôt, les avirons, vigoureusement maniés par Friedrick Ulhmann, emportèrent rapidement la légère embarcation de l’autre côté du fleuve.

«C’est donc sur la rive droite que le crime a été commis? demanda à ce moment Karl Dragoch.

— Oui, répondit Friedrick Ulhmann.

— Dans quelle direction?

— En amont. Dans les environs de Gran.

— Comment! Dans les environs de Gran, se récria Dragoch. Ne me disais-tu pas tout à l’heure que nous n’avions que peu de chemin à faire?

— Ce n’est pas loin, dit Ulhmann. Il y a peut-être bien trois kilomètres, tout de même.»

Il y en avait quatre, en réalité, et cette longue étape ne put être franchie sans difficulté par un homme qui venait à peine d’échapper à la mort Plus d’une fois, Karl Dragoch dut s’étendre, afin de reprendre le souffle qui lui manquait. Il était près de trois heures de l’après-midi, quand il atteignit enfin la villa du comte Hagueneau, où l’appelait sa fonction.

Dès qu’il se sentit, grâce à un cordial qu’il s’empressa de réclamer, en possession de tous ses moyens, le premier soin de Karl Dragoch fut de se faire conduire au chevet du gardien Christian Hoël. Pansé quelques heures plus tôt par un chirurgien des environs, celui-ci, la face blanche, les yeux clos, haletait péniblement. Bien que sa blessure fût des plus graves et intéressât le poumon, il subsistait toutefois un sérieux espoir de le sauver, à la condition que la plus légère fatigue lui fût épargnée.

Karl Dragoch put néanmoins obtenir quelques renseignements, que le gardien lui donna d’une voix étouffée, par monosyllabes largement espacés. Au prix de beaucoup de patience, il apprit qu’une bande de malfaiteurs, composée de cinq ou six hommes, au bas mot, avait, au milieu de la nuit dernière, fait irruption dans la villa, après en avoir enfoncé la porte. Le gardien Christian Hoël, réveillé par le bruit, avait eu à peine le temps de se lever, qu’il retombait frappé d’un coup de poignard entre les deux épaules. Il ignorait par conséquent ce qui s’était passé ensuite, et il était incapable de donner aucune indication sur ses agresseurs. Cependant, il savait quel était leur chef, un certain Ladko, dont ses compagnons avaient, à plusieurs reprises, prononcé le nom avec une sorte d’inexplicable forfanterie. Quant à ce Ladko, dont un masque recouvrait le visage, c’était un grand gaillard aux yeux bleus et porteur d’une abondante barbe blonde.

Ce dernier détail, de nature à infirmer les soupçons qu’il avait conçus touchant Ilia Brusch, ne laissa pas de troubler Karl Dragoch. Qu’Ilia Brusch fût blond, lui aussi, il n’en doutait pas, mais ce blond était déguisé en brun, et on ne retire pas une teinture le soir pour la remettre le lendemain, comme on ferait d’une perruque. Il y avait là une sérieuse difficulté que Dragoch se réserva d’élucider à loisir.

Le gardien Christian ne put, d’ailleurs, lui fournir de plus amples détails. Il n’avait rien remarqué concernant ses autres agresseurs, ceux-ci ayant pris, comme leur chef, la précaution de se masquer.

Muni de ces renseignements, le détective posa ensuite quelques questions touchant la villa même du comte Hagueneau. C’était, ainsi qu’il l’apprit, une très riche habitation meublée avec un luxe princier. Les bijoux, l’argenterie et les objets précieux abondaient dans les tiroirs, les objets d’art sur les cheminées et les meubles, les tapisseries anciennes et les tableaux de maître sur les murs. Des titres avaient même été laissés en dépôt dans un coffre-fort, au premier étage. Nul doute par conséquent que les envahisseurs n’aient eu l’occasion de faire un merveilleux butin.

C’est ce que Karl Dragoch put, en effet, constater aisément en parcourant les diverses pièces de l’habitation. C’était un pillage en règle, accompli avec une parfaite méthode. Les voleurs, en gens de goût, ne s’étaient pas encombrés des non-valeurs. La plupart des objets de prix avaient disparu; à la place des tapisseries arrachées, de grands carrés de muraille apparaissaient à nu, et, veufs des plus belles toiles découpées avec art, des cadres vides pendaient lamentablement. Les pillards s’étaient approprié jusqu’à des tentures choisies évidemment parmi les plus somptueuses et jusqu’à des tapis sélectionnés parmi les plus beaux. Quant au coffre-fort, il avait été forcé, et son contenu avait disparu.

«On n’a pas emporté tout cela à dos d’hommes, se dit Karl Dragoch en constatant cette dévastation. Il y avait là de quoi charger une voiture. Reste à dénicher la voiture.»

Cet interrogatoire et ces premières recherches avaient nécessité un temps fort long. La nuit était prochaine. Il importait, avant qu’elle fût complète, de retrouver trace, si faire se pouvait, du véhicule dont les voleurs, d’après le policier, avaient dû nécessairement faire usage. Celui-ci se hâta donc de sortir.

Il n’eut pas loin à aller pour découvrir la preuve qu il recherchait. Sur le sol de la vaste cour ménagée devant la villa, de larges roues avaient laissé de profondes empreintes juste en face de la porte brisée, et, à quelque distance, la terre était piétinée, comme elle aurait pu l’être par des chevaux qui eussent longtemps attendu.

Ces constatations faites d’un coup d’oeil, Karl Dragoch s’approcha de l’endroit où des chevaux paraissaient avoir stationné et examina le sol avec attention. Puis, traversant la cour, il procéda, aux abords immédiats de la grille donnant sur la route, à un nouvel et minutieux examen, à l’issue duquel il suivit le chemin public pendant une centaine de mètres, pour revenir ensuite sur ses pas.

«Ulhmann! appela-t-il en rentrant dans la cour.

— Monsieur? répondit l’agent, qui sortit de la maison et s’approcha de son chef.

— Combien avons-nous d’hommes? demanda celui-ci.

— Onze.

— C’est peu, fit Dragoch.

— Cependant, objecta Ulhmann, le gardien Christian n’estime qu’à cinq ou six le nombre de ses agresseurs.

— Le gardien Christian a son opinion, et moi j’ai la mienne, répliqua Dragoch. N’importe, il faut nous contenter de ce que nous avons. Tu vas laisser un homme ici, et prendre les dix autres. Avec nous deux, ça fera douze. C’est quelque chose.

— Vous avez donc un indice? interrogea Friedrick Ulhmann.

— Je sais, où sont nos voleurs... de quel côté ils sont du moins.

— Oserai-je vous demander?.. commença Ulhmann.

— D’où me vient cette assurance? acheva Karl Dragoch. Rien n’est plus simple. C’est même véritablement enfantin. Je me suis d’abord dit qu’on avait pris trop de choses ici pour ne pas avoir besoin d’un véhicule quelconque. J’ai donc cherché ce véhicule et je l’ai trouvé. C’est une charrette à quatre roues, attelée de deux chevaux, dont l’un, celui de flèche, offre cette particularité qu’il manque un clou au fer de son pied antérieur droit.

— Comment avez-vous pu savoir cela? interrogea Ulhmann ébahi.

— Parce qu’il a plu la nuit dernière et que la terre encore mal séchée a gardé fidèlement les empreintes. J’ai appris de la même manière que la charrette, on quittant la villa, avait tourné à gauche, c'est-à-dire dans une direction opposée à celle de Gran. Nous allons nous diriger du même côté et suivre au besoin à la piste le cheval dont le fer est incomplet. Il n'y a pas apparence que nos gaillards aient voyagé pendant le jour. Ils se sont sans doute terrés quelque part jusqu'au soir. Or, la région est peu habitée et les maisons ne sont pas bien nombreuses. Nous fouillerons au besoin toutes celles que nous trouverons sur la route. Réunis tes hommes, car voici venir la nuit, et le gibier doit commencer à se donner de l'air.»

Karl Dragoch et son escouade durent marcher longtemps avant de découvrir un indice nouveau. Il était près de dix heures et demie quand, après avoir visité inutilement deux ou trois fermes, ils arrivèrent, au croisement des trois routes, à l'auberge où les deux rouliers avaient passé la journée et d'où ils venaient de partir trois quarts d'heure plus tôt. Karl Dragoch heurta rudement la porte.

«Au nom de la loi! prononça Dragoch lorsqu'il vit apparaître à sa fenêtre l'aubergiste, dont il était écrit que le sommeil serait troublé ce jour-là.

— Au nom de la loi!.. répéta l'aubergiste, épouvanté en voyant sa demeure cernée par cette troupe nombreuse. Qu'ai-je donc fait?

— Descends, et l'on te le dira... Mais surtout ne tarde pas trop,» répliqua Dragoch d'une voix impatiente.

Quand l'aubergiste, à demi vêtu, eut ouvert sa porte, le policier procéda à un rapide interrogatoire. Une charrette était-elle venue ici dans la matinée? Combien d'hommes la conduisaient? S'était-elle arrêtée? Était-elle repartie? De quel côté s'était-elle dirigée?

Les réponses ne se firent pas attendre. Oui, une charrette conduite par deux hommes était venue à l’auberge de bon matin. Elle y avait séjourné jusqu’au soir, et n’était repartie qu’après la venue d’un troisième personnage attendu par les deux charretiers. La demie de neuf heures avait déjà sonné, quand elle s’était éloignée dans la direction de Saint-André.

«De Saint-André? insista Karl Dragoch. Tu en es sûr?

— Sûr, affirma l’aubergiste.

— On te l’a dit, ou tu l’as vu?

— Je l’ai vu.

— Hum!.. murmura Karl Dragoch, qui ajouta: C’est bon. Remonte te coucher maintenant, mon brave, et tiens ta langue.»

L’aubergiste ne se le fit pas dire deux fois. La porte se referma, et l’escouade de police demeura seule sur la route.

«Un instant!» commanda Karl Dragoch à ses hommes qui restèrent immobiles, tandis que lui-même, muni d’un fanal, examinait minutieusement le sol.

D’abord, il ne remarqua rien de suspect, mais il n’en fut pas ainsi quand, ayant traversé la route, il en eut atteint le bas côté. En cet endroit, la terre moins foulée par le passage des véhicules, et, d’ailleurs, moins solidement empierrée, avait conservé plus de plasticité. Du premier regard, Karl Dragoch découvrit l’empreinte d’un sabot auquel un clou manquait, et constata que le cheval, propriétaire de cette ferrure incomplète, se dirigeait non pas vers Saint-André, ni vers Gran, mais directement vers le fleuve, par le chemin du Nord. C’est donc par ce chemin que Dragoch s’avança à son tour à la tête de ses hommes.

Trois kilomètres environ avaient été franchis sans incident à travers un pays complètement désert, quand, sur la gauche de la route, le hennissement d’un cheval retentit. Retenant ses hommes du geste, Karl Dragoch s’avança jusqu’à la lisière d’un petit bois qu’on distinguait confusément dans l’ombre.

«Qui est là?..» héla-t-il d’une voix forte.

Nulle réponse n’étant faite à sa question, un des agents, sur son ordre, alluma une torche de résine. Sa flamme fuligineuse brilla d’un vif éclat dans cette nuit sans lune, mais sa lumière mourait à quelques pas, impuissante à percer l’obscurité rendue plus épaisse encore par le feuillage des arbres.

«En avant!» commanda Dragoch, en pénétrant dans le fourré à la tête de l’escouade.

Mais le fourré avait des défenseurs. A peine en avait-on dépassé la lisière, qu’une voix impérieuse prononça:

«Un pas de plus, et nous faisons feu!»

Cette menace n’était pas pour arrêter Karl Dragoch, d’autant plus qu’à la vague lueur de la torche, il lui avait semblé apercevoir une masse immobile, celle d’une charrette sans doute, autour de laquelle se groupaient une troupe d’hommes, dont il n’avait pu reconnaître le nombre.

«En avant!» commanda-t-il de nouveau.

Obéissant à cet ordre, l’escouade de police continua sa marche fort incertaine dans ce bois inconnu. La difficulté ne tarda pas à s’aggraver. Tout à coup, la torche fut arrachée des mains de l’agent qui la portait. L’obscurité redevint profonde.

«Maladroit!.. gronda Dragoch. De la lumière, Frantz!.. De la lumière!..»

Son dépit était d’autant plus vif qu’au dernier éclat jeté par la torche en s’éteignant, il avait cru voir la charrette commencer un mouvement de retraite et s’éloigner sous les arbres. Malheureusement, il ne pouvait être question de lui donner la chasse. C’est une vivante muraille que l’escouade de police rencontrait devant elle. A chaque agent s’opposaient deux ou trois adversaires, et Dragoch comprenait un peu tard qu’il ne disposait pas de forces suffisantes pour s’assurer la victoire. Jusqu’ici, aucun coup de feu n’avait été tiré, ni d’un côté, ni de l’autre.

«Titcha!.. appela à ce moment une voix dans la nuit.

— Présent! répondit une autre voix.

— La voiture?

— Partie.

— Alors, il faut en finir.»

Ces voix, Dragoch les enregistra dans sa mémoire. Il ne devait jamais les oublier.

Ce court dialogue échangé, les revolvers se mirent aussitôt de la partie, ébranlant l’atmosphère de leurs sèches détonations. Quelques agents furent atteints par les balles, et Karl Dragoch, se rendant compte qu’il y aurait eu folie à s’obstiner, dut se résoudre à ordonner la retraite.

L’escouade de police regagna donc la route, où les vainqueurs ne se risqueront pas à la poursuivre, et la nuit reprit son calme un instant troublé.

Il fallut d’abord s’occuper des blessés. Ils étaient au nombre de trois, très légèrement frappés, d’ailleurs. Après un sommaire pansement, ils furent renvoyés en arrière sous la garde de quatre de leurs camarades. Quant à Dragoch, accompagné de Friedrick Ulhmann et des trois derniers agents, il s’élança à travers champs, vers le Danube, en obliquant légèrement dans la direction de Gran.

Il retrouva sans difficulté l’endroit où il avait abordé quelques heures plus tôt, et l’embarcation dans laquelle Ulhmann et lui avaient passé le fleuve. Les cinq hommes s’y embarquèrent, et, le Danube traversé en sens inverse, ils en descendirent le cours sur la rive gauche.

Si Karl Dragoch venait de subir un échec, il entendait avoir sa revanche. Qu’Ilia Brusch et le trop fameux Ladko fussent le même homme, cela ne faisait plus pour lui l’ombre d’un doute, et c’est à son compagnon de voyage, il en était convaincu, que le crime de la nuit précédente devait être imputé. Selon toute vraisemblance, celui-ci, après avoir mis son butin à l’abri, se hâterait de reprendre la personnalité d’emprunt qu’il ne savait pas percée à jour et qui lui avait permis de déjouer jusqu’ici les recherches de la police. Avant l’aube, il aurait sûrement regagné la barge, et il y attendrait son passager absent, ainsi que l’aurait fait l’inoffensif et honnête pêcheur qu’il prétendait être.

Cinq hommes résolus seraient alors aux aguets. Ces cinq hommes, vaincus par Ladko et sa bande, triompheraient plus aisément de la résistance que pourrait leur opposer ce même Ladko, obligé à la solitude pour jouer son rôle d’Ilia Brusch.

Ce plan très bien conçu fut malheureusement irréalisable. Karl Dragoch et ses hommes eurent beau explorer la rive, il leur fut impossible de découvrir la barge du pêcheur. Dragoch et Ulhmann n’eurent aucune peine, il est vrai, à reconnaître la place précise où le premier avait débarqué, mais, de la barge, pas la moindre trace. La barge avait disparu, et Ilia Brusch avec elle.

Karl Dragoch était joué, décidément, et cela l’emplissait de fureur.

«Friedrick, dit-il à son subordonné, je suis à bout. Il me serait impossible de faire un pas de plus. Nous allons dormir dans l’herbe pour retrouver un peu de force. Mais un de nos hommes va prendre le canot et remonter à Gran sur-le-champ. A l’ouverture du bureau, il fera jouer le télégraphe. Allume un fanal. Je vais dicter. Ecris.

Friedrick Ulhmann obéit en silence:

«Crime commis cette nuit environs de Gran. Butin chargé sur chaland. Exercer rigoureusement visites prescrites.»

— Voilà pour une, dit Dragoch en s’interrompant. A l’autre maintenant.

Il dicta de nouveau:

«Mandat d’amener contre le nommé Ladko, se disant faussement Ilia Brusch et se prétendant lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne au dernier concours de Sigmaringen, ledit Ladko, *alias* Ilia Brusch, inculpé des crimes de vols et de meurtres.»

— Que ceci soit télégraphié à la première heure à toutes les communes riveraines sans exception,» commanda Karl Dragoch, en s'étendant épuisé sur le sol.

X

PRISONNIER.

Les soupçons conçus par Karl Dragoch et que la découverte du portrait était venue confirmer, ces soupçons n’étaient point entièrement erronés, il est temps de le dire au lecteur pour l’intelligence de ce récit. Sur un point, tout au moins, Karl Dragoch avait justement raisonné. Oui, Ilia Brusch et Serge Ladko n’étaient qu’un seul et même homme.

Mais Dragoch se trompait gravement au contraire quand il attribuait à son compagnon de voyage la série de vols et de meurtres qui, depuis tant de mois, désolaient la région du Danube, et en particulier le dernier attentat, le pillage de la villa du comte Hagueneau et l’assassinat du gardien Christian. Ladko, d’ailleurs, ne se doutait guère que son passager eût de pareilles pensées. Tout ce qu’il savait, c’est que son nom servait à désigner un criminel fameux, et il était incapable de comprendre comment une telle confusion avait pu se produire.

Atterré tout d’abord en se découvrant un si redoutable homonyme, qui, pour comble de malheur, se trouvait être en même temps son compatriote, il s’était ressaisi après ce moment d’effroi instinctif. Que lui importait en somme un malfaiteur avec lequel il n’avait de commun que le nom? Un innocent n’a rien à craindre. Et, innocent de tous ces crimes, il l’était assurément.

C’est donc sans inquiétude que Serge Ladko — on lui conservera désormais son véritable nom — s’était absenté la nuit précédente, afin de se rendre à Szalka ainsi qu’il l’avait annoncé. C’est dans cette petite ville, en effet, que, dissimulé sous le nom d’Ilia Brusch, il avait fixé sa résidence, après son départ de Roustchouk, et c’est là que, pendant de trop longues semaines, il avait attendu des nouvelles de sa chère Natcha.

L’attente, ainsi qu’on le sait déjà, avait fini par lui devenir intolérable, et il se torturait l’esprit à rechercher un moyen de pénétrer incognito en Bulgarie, quand le hasard lui fit tomber sous les yeux un numéro du *Pester Lloyd* dans lequel était annoncé à grand fracas le concours de pêche de Sigmaringen. C’est on lisant l’article consacré à ce concours que l’exilé, aussi habile pêcheur, on ne l’a peut-être pas oublié, que pilote réputé, conçut l’idée d’un plan d’action dont la bizarrerie assurerait peut-être le succès.

Sous le nom d’Ilia Brusch, le seul qu’il eût jamais porté à Szalka, il s’enrôlerait dans la Ligue Danubienne, il participerait au concours de Sigmaringen et, grâce à, sa virtuosité de pêcheur, il y remporterait le premier prix. Après avoir ainsi donné à son nom d’emprunt un commencement de notoriété, il annoncerait avec le plus de bruit possible, et en engageant même des paris, si faire se pouvait, son intention de descendre le Danube, la ligne à la main, depuis la source jusqu’à l’embouchure. Nul doute que ce projet ne mît en révolution le monde spécial des pêcheurs à la ligne et ne valût à son auteur quelque réputation dans le reste du public.

Nanti dès lors d’un état civil hors de discussion, car on accorde, d’ordinaire, une confiance aveugle aux gens en vedette, Serge Ladko descendrait en effet le Danube. Bien entendu, il activerait de son mieux la marche de son bateau et ne perdrait à pêcher que le minimum de temps nécessaire à la vraisemblance. Toutefois, il ferait assez parler de lui le long du parcours pour ne pas se laisser oublier et pour être en état de débarquer ouvertement à Roustchouk sous la protection d’une notoriété bien établie.

Pour que cet unique but de son entreprise fût heureusement atteint, il fallait que nul ne soupçonnât son véritable nom, et que personne ne pût reconnaître, dans les traits du pêcheur Ilia Brusch, ceux du pilote Serge Ladko.

La première condition était facile à réaliser. Il suffirait, une fois transformé en lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne, de jouer ce rôle sans défaillance. Serge Ladko se jura donc à lui-même d’être Ilia Brusch envers et contre tous, quels que fussent les incidents du voyage. Il était a supposer, d’ailleurs, que ce voyage s’accomplirait lentement, mais sûrement, et qu’aucun incident ne viendrait rendre le serment difficile à tenir.

Satisfaire à la deuxième condition était plus simple encore. Un coup de rasoir qui supprimerait la barbe, une application de teinture qui changerait la couleur des cheveux, de larges lunettes noires qui cacheraient celle des yeux, il n’en fallait pas davantage. Serge Ladko procéda à ce déguisement sommaire dans la nuit qui précéda son départ, puis se mit en route avant l’aube, assuré d’être méconnaissable pour tout regard non prévenu.

A Sigmaringen, les événements s’étaient réalisés conformément, à ses prévisions. Lauréat en vue du concours, l’annonce de son projet avait été favorablement commentée par la Presse des régions riveraines. Devenu ainsi un personnage assez notoire pour que son identité ne pût être raisonnablement suspectée, assuré, d’autre part, de trouver du secours, le cas échéant, près de ses collègues de la Ligue Danubienne disséminés le long du fleuve, Serge Ladko s’était abandonné au courant.

A Ulm, il avait eu une première désillusion, en constatant que sa célébrité relative ne le mettait pas à l’abri des foudres de l’administration. Aussi avait-il été trop heureux d’accepter un passager possédant des papiers bien en règle et dont la police semblait priser l’honorabilité. Certes, quand on serait à Roustchouk et que la prétendue gageure serait abandonnée par son auteur, la présence d'un étranger pourrait présenter des inconvénients. Mais, alors, on s'expliquerait, et jusque-là elle augmenterait les probabilités de succès d'un voyage que Serge Ladko avait le plus passionné désir de mener à bonne fin.

Apprendre qu'il portait le même nom qu'un redoutable bandit et que ce bandit était Bulgare avait fait éprouver à Serge Ladko sa seconde émotion désagréable. Quelle que fût son innocence, et par conséquent sa sécurité, il ne pouvait méconnaître qu'une telle homonymie était de nature à provoquer les plus regrettables erreurs ou même les plus graves complications.

Que le nom qu'il dissimulait sous celui d'Ilia Brusch vînt à être connu, et non seulement son débarquement à Roustchouk s'en trouverait compromis, mais encore il était à craindre qu'il n'en résultât de longs retards.

Contre ces dangers, Serge Ladko ne pouvait rien. D'ailleurs, s'ils étaient sérieux, il convenait de ne pas les exagérer. En réalité, il était peu croyable que la police accordât, sans raison particulière, son attention à un inoffensif pêcheur à la ligne, et surtout à un pêcheur protégé par les lauriers cueillis au concours de Sigmaringen.

Venu à Szalka après le coucher du soleil et reparti bien avant le jour sans être vu de personne, Serge Ladko n'avait fait que passer dans sa maison, juste le temps de constater qu'aucune nouvelle de Natcha ne l'y attendait. La persistance d'un tel silence avait véritablement quelque chose d'affolant. Pourquoi la jeune femme n'écrivait-elle plus depuis deux mois? Que lui était-il arrivé? Les périodes de troubles publics sont fécondes en malheurs privés, et le pilote se demandait avec angoisse si, en admettant qu'il débarquât heureusement à Roustchouk, il n'y débarquerait pas trop tard.

Cette pensée, qui lui brisait le coeur, décuplait en même temps la puissance de ses muscles. C’est elle qui lui avait donné, au départ de Gran, la force de résister à la tempête et de lutter victorieusement contre le vent déchaîné. C’est elle qui lui faisait hâter le pas, tandis qu’il revenait vers la barge, muni du cordial destiné à M. Jaeger.

Sa surprise fut grande de n’y pas trouver le passager qu il avait quitté si mal en point, et le petit mot d’avertissement écrit par celui-ci ne la diminua pas. Quel motif si impérieux avait pu décider M. Jaeger à s’éloigner malgré son état de faiblesse? Comment pouvait-il se faire qu’un bourgeois de Vienne eût des affaires si pressantes en rase campagne, loin de tout centre habité? Il y avait là un problème dont les réflexions du pilote ne rendirent pas la solution plus prochaine.

Quelle qu’en fût la cause, l’absence de M. Jaeger avait, en tous cas, le grave inconvénient d’allonger encore un voyage déjà trop long. Sans cet incident inattendu, la barge aurait vite gagné le milieu du fleuve, et, avant le soir, beaucoup de kilomètres eussent été ajoutés aux kilomètres laissés jusqu’ici dans son sillage.

La tentation était bien forte de tenir pour nulle et non avenue la prière de M. Jaeger, de pousser au large, et de continuer sans perdre une minute un voyage dont le but attirait Serge Ladko comme l’aimant attire le fer.

Le pilote se résigna pourtant à l’attente.

Il avait des obligations à l’égard de son passager, et, tout bien considéré, mieux valait perdre une journée et ne fournir aucun prétexte à des contestations ultérieures.

Pour utiliser la fin de cette journée plus qu’à demi écoulée déjà, le travail heureusement ne manquerait pas. Elle suffirait à peine à remettre de l’ordre dans la barge et à réparer quelques petits dégâts causés par la tempête.

Serge Ladko s’occupa tout d’abord de ranger les coffres dont il avait bouleversé le contenu pendant ses infructueuses recherches de la matinée. Cela ne lui aurait pas demandé beaucoup de temps, si, en achevant le rangement du dernier, son regard ne fût tombé sur ce même portefeuille qui avait précédemment sollicité l’attention de Karl Dragoch. Ce portefeuille, le pilote l’ouvrit comme l’avait ouvert le policier, et, comme celui-ci, mais agité de sentiments tout autres, il en retira le portrait que Natcha lui avait remis à l’instant de leur séparation, avec une dédicace pleine de tendresse.

Un long moment, Serge Ladko contempla ce visage adorable. Natcha!.. C’était bien elle!.. C’étaient bien ses traits chéris, ses yeux si purs, ses lèvres entr’ouvertes comme si elles allaient parler!..

Avec un soupir, il replaça enfin la chère image dans le portefeuille et le portefeuille dans le coffre, qu’il referma avec soin et dont il mit la clef dans sa poche, puis il sortit du tôt pour vaquer à d’autres travaux.

Mais il n’avait plus de coeur à l’ouvrage. Bientôt ses mains demeurèrent inactives, et, assis sur l’un des bancs, le dos tourné à la rive, il laissa son regard errer sur le fleuve. Sa pensée s’envola vers Roustchouk. Il vit sa femme, sa maison riante et pleine de chansons... Certes, il ne regrettait rien. Sacrifier son propre bonheur à la patrie, il le referait si c’était à refaire... Quelle douleur pourtant qu’un si cruel sacrifice eût été à ce point inutile! La révolte éclatant prématurément et écrasée sans recours, combien d’années encore la Bulgarie gémirait-elle sous le joug des oppresseurs? Lui-même pourrait-il franchir la frontière, et, s’il y parvenait, retrouverait-il celle qu’il aimait? Les Turcs ne s’étaient-ils pas emparés, comme d’un otage, de la femme d’un de leurs adversaires les plus déterminés? S’il en était ainsi, qu’avaient-ils fait de Natcha?

Hélas! cet humble drame intime disparaissait dans la convulsion qui secouait la région balkanique. Combien peu comptait cette misère de deux êtres, au milieu de la détresse publique? Toute la péninsule était parcourue à cette heure par des hordes féroces. Partout le galop sauvage des chevaux faisait trembler la terre, et dans les plus pauvres villages avaient passé la dévastation et la guerre.

Contre le colosse turc, deux pygmées: la Serbie et le Monténégro. Ces David réussiraient-ils à vaincre Goliath? Ladko comprenait à quel point la bataille était inégale, et, tout pensif, il plaçait son espoir dans le père de tous les Slaves, le grand Tzar de Russie, qui, un jour peut-être, daignerait étendre sa main puissante au-dessus de ses fils opprimés.

Absorbé dans ses pensées, Serge Ladko avait perdu jusqu’au souvenir du lieu où il se trouvait. Un régiment tout entier eût défilé derrière lui sur la berge qu’il ne se fût pas retourné. *A fortiori* ne s’aperçut-il pas de l’arrivée de trois hommes qui venaient de l’amont et marchaient avec précaution. Mais, si Ladko ne vit pas ces trois hommes, ceux-ci le virent aisément, dès que la barge leur apparut au tournant du fleuve. Le trio fit halte aussitôt et tint conciliabule à voix basse.

L’un de ces trois nouveaux venus a déjà été présenté au lecteur, lors de l’escale à Vienne, sous le nom de Titcha. C’est lui qui, en compagnie d’un acolyte, s’était attaché aux pas de Karl Dragoch, après que le détective eut filé de son côté Ilia Brusch, tandis que ce dernier faisait une innocente démarche près d’un des intermédiaires employés lors des envois d’armes en Bulgarie. Cette filature avait, on s’en souvient, amené jusqu’à proximité de la barge les deux espions, qui, sûrs de connaître l’habitation flottante du policier, s’étaient alors éloignés en projetant de tirer parti de leur découverte. Ces projets, il s’agissait maintenant de les réaliser.

Les trois hommes s’étaient tapis dans l’herbe de la rive, et, de là, ils épiaient Serge Ladko. Celui-ci, poursuivant sa méditation, ignorait leur présence et n’avait aucun soupçon du danger qu’elle lui faisait courir. Le danger était grand, cependant, ces gens en embuscade, trois affiliés de la bande de malfaiteurs qui parcourait alors la région du Danube, n’étant pas de ceux qu’il fait bon rencontrer dans un lieu désert.

De cette bande, Titcha était même un membre important; il pouvait être considéré comme le premier après le chef, dont les exploits valaient au nom du pilote une honteuse célébrité. Quant aux deux autres, Sakmann et Zerlang, simples comparses: des bras, non des têtes.

«C’est lui! murmura Titcha, en arrêtant de la main ses compagnons, dès qu’il découvrit la barge au détour du fleuve.

— Dragoch? interrogea Sakmann.

— Oui.

— Tu en es sûr?

— Absolument.

— Mais tu ne vois pas sa figure, puisqu’il a le dos tourné, objecta Zerlang.

— Ça ne m’avancerait pas à grand’chose de voir sa figure; répondit Titcha. Je ne le connais pas. A peine si je l’ai aperçu à Vienne.

— Dans ce cas!..

— Mais je reconnais parfaitement le bateau, interrompit Titcha, j’ai eu tout le loisir de l’examiner, pendant que Ladko et moi nous étions noyés dans la foule. Je suis certain de ne pas me tromper.

— En route, alors! fit l’un des hommes.

— En route,» approuva Titcha, en dépliant un paquet qu’il tenait sous son bras.

Le pilote continuait à ne pas se douter de la surveillance dont il était l’objet. Il n’avait pas entendu les trois hommes arriver; il ne les entendit pas davantage, lorsqu’ils s’approchèrent en étouffant le bruit de leurs pas dans l’herbe épaisse de la rive. Perdu dans son rêve, il laissait sa pensée fuir avec le courant vers Natcha et vers le pays.

Tout à coup une multitude d’inextricables liens s’enroulèrent à la fois autour de lui, l’aveuglant, le paralysant, l’étouffant.

Redressé d’une secousse, il se débattait instinctivement et s’épuisait en vains efforts, quand un choc violent sur le crâne le jeta tout étourdi dans le fond de la barge. Pas si vite, cependant, qu’il n’ait eu le temps de se voir prisonnier des mailles de l’un de ces vastes filets désignés sous le nom d’éperviers, dont lui-même avait usé plus d’une fois pour capturer le poisson.

Lorsque Serge Ladko sortit de ce demi-évanouissement, il n’était plus enveloppé du filet à l’aide duquel on l’avait réduit à l’impuissance. Par contre, étroitement ligotté par les multiples tours d’une corde solide, il n’aurait pu faire le plus petit mouvement; un bâillon eût au besoin étouffé ses cris, un impénétrable bandeau lui enlevait l’usage de la vue.

La première sensation de Serge Ladko, en revenant à la vie, fut celle d’un véritable ahurissement. Que lui était-il arrivé? Que signifiait cette inexplicable attaque, et que voulait-on faire de lui? A tout prendre, il avait lieu de se rassurer dans une certaine mesure. Si l’on avait eu l’intention de le tuer, c’eût été chose faite. Puisqu’il était encore de ce monde, c’est qu’on n’en voulait pas à sa vie, et que ses agresseurs, quels qu’ils fussent, n’avaient d’autre intention que de s’emparer de sa personne.

Mais pourquoi, dans quel but s’emparer de sa personne?

A cette question, il était malaisé de répondre. Des voleurs?.. Ils n’eussent pas pris la peine de ficeler leur victime avec un tel luxe de précautions, quand un coup de couteau les eût servis plus rapidement et plus sûrement. D’ailleurs, combien misérables les voleurs que le contenu de la pauvre barge eût été capable de tenter!

Une vengeance?.. Impossibilité plus grande encore. Ilia Brusch n’avait pas d’ennemis. Les seuls ennemis de Ladko, les Turcs, ne pouvaient soupçonner que le patriote bulgare se cachât sous le nom du pêcheur, et, quand bien même ils en auraient été informés, il n’était pas un personnage si considérable qu’ils se fussent risqués à cet acte de violence si loin de la frontière, en plein coeur de l’Empire d’Autriche. Au surplus, des Turcs l’eussent supprimé, eux aussi, plus certainement encore que de simples voleurs.

S’étant convaincu que, pour l’instant du moins, le mystère était impénétrable, Serge Ladko, en homme pratique, cessa d’y penser, et consacra toutes les forces de son intelligence à observer ce qui allait suivre et à chercher les moyens, s'il en existait, de reconquérir sa liberté.

A vrai dire, sa situation ne se prêtait pas à des observations nombreuses. Raidi par l'étreinte d'une corde enroulée en spirales autour de son corps, le moindre mouvement lui était interdit, et le bandeau était si bien appliqué sur ses yeux qu'il n'aurait su dire s'il faisait jour ou s'il faisait nuit. La première chose qu'il reconnut, en concentrant toute son attention dans le sens de l'ouïe, c'est qu'il reposait dans le fond d'un bateau, le sien sans aucun doute, et que ce bateau avançait rapidement sous l'effort de bras robustes. Il entendait distinctement, en effet, le grincement des avirons contre le bois des tolets, et le bruissement de l'eau glissant sur les flancs de l'embarcation.

Dans quelle direction se dirigeait-on? Tel fut le second problème dont il trouva assez facilement la solution, en constatant une sensible différence de température entre le côté gauche et le côté droit de sa personne. Les secousses que lui communiquait la barge à chaque impulsion des avirons lui montrant qu'il était couché dans le sens de la marche, et le soleil, au moment de l'agression, n'étant guère éloigné du méridien, il en conclut sans peine qu'une moitié de son corps était à l'ombre produite par la paroi de l'embarcation et que celle-ci se dirigeait de l'Ouest à l'Est, en continuant par conséquent à suivre le courant, comme au temps où elle obéissait à son maître légitime.

Aucune parole n'était échangée entre ceux qui le tenaient en leur pouvoir. Nul bruit humain ne frappait son oreille, hors les *han!* des nautoniers lorsqu'ils pesaient sur les rames. Cette navigation silencieuse durait depuis une heure et demie environ, quand la chaleur du soleil gagna son visage et lui apprit ainsi que l'on obliquait vers le Sud. Le pilote n'en fut pas étonné.

Sa parfaite connaissance des moindres détours du fleuve lui fit comprendre que l’on commençait à suivre la courbe qu’il décrit en face du mont Pilis. Bientôt, sans doute, on reprendrait la direction de l’Est, puis celle du Nord, jusqu’au point extrême d’où le Danube commence à descendre franchement vers la péninsule des Balkans.

Ces prévisions ne se réalisèrent qu’en partie. Au moment où Serge Ladko calculait que l’on avait atteint le milieu de l’anse de Pilis, le bruit des avirons cessa tout à coup. Tandis que la barge courait sur son erre, une voix rude se fit entendre.

«Prends la gaffe,» commanda l’un des invisibles assaillants.

Presque aussitôt, il y eut un choc, que suivit un grincement tel qu’en aurait pu produire le bordage éraflant un corps dur, puis Serge Ladko fut soulevé et hissé de mains en mains.

Evidemment la barge avait accosté un autre bateau de dimensions plus considérables, à bord duquel le prisonnier était embarqué à la façon d’un colis. Celui-ci tendait vainement l’oreille afin de saisir au passage quelques paroles. Pas un mot n’était prononcé. Les geôliers ne se révélaient que par le contact de leurs mains brutales et par le souffle de leurs poitrines haletantes.

Ballotté, tiraillé en tous sens, Serge Ladko, d’ailleurs, n’eut pas le loisir de la réflexion. Après l’avoir monté, on le descendit le long d’une échelle qui lui laboura cruellement les reins. Aux heurts dont il était meurtri, il comprit qu’on le faisait passer par une ouverture étroite, et enfin, bandeau et bâillon arrachés, il fût jeté bas comme un paquet, tandis que le bruit sourd d’une trappe qui se ferme résonnait au-dessus de lui.

Il fallut un long moment, à Serge Ladko, tout étourdi de la secousse, pour reprendre conscience de lui-même. Quand il y fut parvenu, sa situation ne lui parut pas améliorée, bien qu’il eût retrouvé l’usage de la parole et de la vue. Si l’on avait jugé un bâillon inutile, c’est évidemment que personne ne pouvait entendre ses cris, et la suppression de son bandeau ne lui était pas d’un plus grand secours. C’est en vain qu’il ouvrait les yeux. Autour de lui tout était ombre. Et quelle ombre! Le prisonnier, qui, d’après la succession des sensations ressenties, supposait avoir été déposé dans la cale d’un bateau, s’épuisait en inutiles efforts pour découvrir la plus faible raie de lumière filtrant à travers le joint d’un panneau. Il ne distinguait rien. Ce n’était pas l’obscurité d’une cave, dans laquelle l’oeil parvient encore à discerner quelque vague lueur: c’était le noir total, absolu, comparable seulement à celui qui doit régner dans la tombe.

Combien d’heures s’écoulèrent ainsi? Serge Ladko estimait qu’on était parvenu au milieu de la nuit, quand un vacarme, assourdi par la distance, parvint jusqu’à lui. On courait, on piétinait. Puis le bruit se rapprocha. De lourds colis étaient traînés directement au-dessus de sa tête, et c’est à peine, il l’eût juré, si l’épaisseur d’une planche le séparait des travailleurs inconnus.

Le bruit se rapprocha encore. On parlait maintenant à côté de lui, sans doute derrière l’une des cloisons délimitant sa prison, mais, de ce qu’on disait, il était impossible de deviner le sens.

Bientôt, d’ailleurs, le bruit s’apaisa, et de nouveau ce fut le silence autour du malheureux pilote qu’environnait une ombre impénétrable.

Serge Ladko s’endormit

XI

AU POUVOIR D’UN ENNEMI.

Après que Karl Dragoch et ses hommes eurent battu en retraite, les vainqueurs étaient d’abord restés sur le lieu du combat, prêts à s’opposer à un retour offensif, tandis que la charrette s’éloignait dans la direction du Danube. Ce fut seulement quand le temps écoulé eut rendu certain le départ définitif des forces de police que, sur un ordre de son chef, la bande des malfaiteurs se mit en marche à son tour.

Ils eurent bientôt atteint le fleuve, qui coulait à moins de cinq cents mètres. La charrette les y attendait, en face d’un chaland, dont on apercevait la masse sombre à quelques mètres de la rive.

La distance était médiocre et les travailleurs nombreux. En peu d’instants, le va-et-vient de deux bachots eut transporté à bord de ce chaland le chargement de la voiture. Aussitôt, celle-ci s’éloigna et disparut dans la nuit, tandis que la plupart des combattants de la clairière se dispersaient à travers la campagne, après avoir reçu leur part de butin. Du crime qui venait d’être commis, il ne subsistait plus d’autre trace qu’un amoncellement de colis encombrant le pont de la gabarre, à bord de laquelle ne s’étaient embarqués que huit hommes.

En réalité, la fameuse bande du Danube était exclusivement composée de ces huit hommes. Quant aux autres, ils représentaient une faible partie d’un personnel indéterminé de sous-ordres, dont telle ou telle fraction était utilisée, selon la région exploitée: Ceux-ci demeuraient toujours étrangers à l’exécution proprement dite des coups de main, et leur rôle, limité aux fonctions de porteurs, de vedettes ou de gardes du corps, ne commençait qu’au moment où il s’agissait d’évacuer vers le fleuve le butin conquis.

Cette organisation était des plus habiles. Par ce moyen, la bande disposait, sur tout le parcours du Danube, d’innombrables affiliés dont bien peu se rendaient compte du genre d’opérations auxquelles ils apportaient leur concours. Recrutés dans la classe la plus illettrée, de véritables brutes en général, ils croyaient participer à de vulgaires actes de contrebande et ne cherchaient pas à en savoir davantage. Jamais ils n’avaient songé à établir le moindre rapprochement entre celui qui commandait les expéditions auxquelles ils prenaient part et ce fameux Ladko qui, tout en leur cachant son nom, semblait se complaire étrangement à laisser une trace quelconque de son état civil sur chaque théâtre de ses crimes.

Leur indifférence paraîtra moins surprenante, si l’on veut bien considérer que ces crimes, commis sur tout le cours du Danube, étaient éparpillés sur une immense étendue. L’émotion publique avait donc, entre chacun d’eux, le temps de se calmer. C’est surtout dans les bureaux de la police, où venaient se centraliser toutes les plaintes des régions riveraines, que le nom de Ladko avait acquis sa triste célébrité. Dans les villes, la classe bourgeoise, à cause des *manchettes* ronflantes des journaux, lui accordait encore un intérêt spécial. Mais pour la masse du peuple, et, *a fortiori*, pour les paysans, il n’était qu’un malfaiteur comme un autre, dont on a à souffrir une fois et qu’on ne revoit plus ensuite.

Au contraire, les huit hommes restés à bord du chaland se connaissaient tous entre eux et formaient une véritable bande. A l’aide de leur bateau, ils montaient ou descendaient sans cesse le Danube. Que l’occasion d’une profitable opération se présentât, ils s’arrêtaient, recrutaient dans les environs le personnel nécessaire, puis, le butin en sûreté dans leur cachette flottante, ils repartaient, en quête de nouveaux exploits.

Quand le chaland était plein, ils gagnaient la mer Noire où un vapeur à leur dévotion venait croiser au jour fixé. Transportées à bord de ce vapeur, les richesses volées, et parfois acquises au prix d'un meurtre, y devenaient brave et loyale cargaison, capable d'être échangée contre de l'or, dans des contrées lointaines, au grand soleil des honnêtes gens.

C'est exceptionnellement que la bande, la nuit précédente, avait fait parler d'elle à si faible distance de son précédent méfait. Elle ne commettait pas, d'ordinaire, une telle faute, qui, répétée, eût pu donner l'éveil aux complices inconscients qu'elle embauchait dans le pays. Mais, cette fois, son capitaine avait eu une raison particulière de ne pas s'éloigner, et si cette raison n'était pas celle que lui avait attribuée Karl Dragoch, en causant à Ulm avec Friedrich Ulhmann, la personnalité du policier n'y était cependant pas étrangère.

Reconnu à Vienne par le chef de bande lui-même, alors accompagné de son second, Titcha, il avait été, depuis cet instant, suivi à la piste, sans le savoir, par une série d'affiliés locaux auxquels on n'avait dit que l'essentiel, et le chaland s'était appliqué à ne précéder la barge que de quelques kilomètres. Cet espionnage, des plus malaisés dans une contrée souvent découverte et où abondaient en ce moment les gens de police, avait été forcément intermittent, et le hasard avait voulu que jamais Karl Dragoch et son hôte ne fussent aperçus en même temps. Rien n'avait donc permis de supposer que la barge eût deux habitants, ni d'admettre, par conséquent, la possibilité d'une erreur.

En instituant cette surveillance, le capitaine des bandits rêvait d'un coup de maître. Supprimer le détective? Il n'y songeait pas. Pour le moment tout au moins, il projetait seulement de s'en emparer, Karl Dragoch en son pouvoir, il aurait ensuite la partie belle pour traiter d’égal à égal, si jamais un sérieux danger le menaçait.

Pendant plusieurs jours, l’occasion de cet enlèvement ne s’était pas présentée. Ou bien la barge s’arrêtait le soir à trop faible distance d’un centre habité, ou bien on rencontrait dans son voisinage trop immédiat quelques-uns des agents égrenés sur la rive et dont la qualité ne pouvait échapper à un professionnel du crime.

Le matin du 29 août, enfin, les circonstances avaient paru favorables. La tempête qui, la nuit précédente, avait protégé la bande pendant qu’elle s’attaquait à la villa du comte Hagueneau, devait avoir plus ou moins dispersé les policiers qui précédaient ou suivaient leur chef le long du fleuve. Peut-être celui-ci serait-il momentanément seul et sans défense. Il fallait en profiter.

Aussitôt la voiture chargée des dépouilles de la villa, Titcha avait été dépêché avec deux des hommes les plus résolus. On a vu comment les trois aventuriers s’étaient acquittés de leur mission, et comment le pilote Serge Ladko était devenu leur prisonnier, au lieu et place du détective Karl Dragoch.

Jusqu’ici, Titcha n’avait pu renseigner son capitaine sur l’heureuse issue de sa mission que par les quelques mots brefs échangés dans la clairière, au moment où l’escouade de police était survenue sur la route. L’entretien serait nécessairement repris à ce sujet, mais, pour l’instant, il ne pouvait en être question. Avant tout, il s’agissait de faire disparaître et de mettre à l’abri les nombreux colis entassés sur le pont, et c’est à quoi s’employèrent sans tarder les huit hommes formant l’équipage de la gabarre.

Soit à bras, soit en les faisant glisser sur des plans inclinés, ces colis furent d’abord introduits dans l’intérieur du bateau, premier travail qui n’exigea que quelques minutes, puis on procéda à l’arrimage définitif. Pour cela le plancher de la cale fut soulevé et laissa à découvert une ouverture béante, à la place où l’on se fût légitimement attendu a trouver l’eau du Danube. Une lanterne, descendue dans ce deuxième compartiment, permit d’y distinguer un amoncellement d’objets hétéroclites qui le remplissaient déjà en partie. Il restait assez de place, cependant, pour que les dépouilles du comte Hagueneau pussent être logées à leur tour dans l’introuvable cachette.

Merveilleusement truquée, en effet, était cette gabarre qui servait à la fois de moyen de transport, d’habitation et de magasin inviolable. Au-dessous du bateau visible, un autre plus petit s’appliquait, le pont de celui-ci formant le fond de celui-là. Ce second bateau, d’une profondeur de deux mètres environ, avait un déplacement tel, qu’il fût capable de porter le premier et de le soulever d’un pied ou deux au-dessus de la surface de l’eau. On avait remédié à cet inconvénient, qui aurait, sans cela, dévoilé la supercherie, en chargeant le bateau inférieur d’une quantité de lest suffisant à le noyer entièrement, de telle sorte que le chaland supérieur gardât la ligne de flottaison qu’il devait avoir à vide.

Vide, sa cale l’était toujours, les marchandises volées, qui allaient s’entasser dans le double fond, y remplaçaient un poids correspondant de lest, et l’aspect de l’extérieur n’était en rien modifié.

Par exemple cette gabarre, qui, lège, aurait dû normalement caler à peine un pied, s’enfonçait dans l’eau de près de sept. Cela n’était pas sans créer de réelles difficultés dans la navigation du Danube et rendait nécessaire le concours d’un excellent pilote. Ce pilote, la bande le possédait dans la personne de Yacoub Ogul, un israélite natif lui aussi de Roustchouk. Très pratique du fleuve, Yacoub Ogul aurait pu lutter avec Serge Ladko lui-même pour la parfaite connaissance des passes, des chenals et des bancs de sable; d’une main sûre, il dirigeait le chaland à travers les rapides semés de rochers que l’on rencontre parfois sur son cours.

Quant à la police, elle pouvait examiner le bateau tant que cela lui plairait. Elle pouvait en mesurer la hauteur intérieure et extérieure sans trouver la plus petite différence. Elle pouvait sonder tout autour sans rencontrer la cachette sous-marine, établie suffisamment en retrait, et de lignes assez fuyantes pour qu’il fût impossible de l’atteindre. Toutes ses investigations l’amèneraient uniquement à constater que ce chaland était vide et que ce chaland vide enfonçait dans l’eau de la quantité strictement suffisante pour équilibrer son poids.

En ce qui concerne les papiers, les précautions n’étaient pas moins bien prises. Dans tous les cas, soit qu’elle descendît le courant, soit qu’elle le remontât, la gabarre, ou allait chercher des marchandises, ou, marchandises débarquées, retournait à son port d’attache. Selon le choix qui paraissait le meilleur, elle appartenait, tantôt à M. Constantinesco, tantôt à M. Wenzel Meyer, tous deux commerçants, l’un de Galatz, l’autre de Vienne. Les papiers, illustrés des cachets les plus officiels, étaient à ce point en règle, que jamais personne n’avait songé à les vérifier. L’eût-on fait, d’ailleurs, que l’on aurait constaté l’existence d’un Constantinesco ou d’un Wenzel Meyer dans l’une ou l’autre des deux villes indiquées. En réalité, le propriétaire s’appelait Ivan Striga.

Le lecteur se rappellera peut-être que ce nom appartenait à un des individus les moins recommandables de Roustchouk, qui, après s’être vainement opposé au mariage de Serge Ladko et de Natcha Gregorevitch, avait disparu ensuite de la ville. Sans qu’on entendît parler positivement de lui, de mauvais bruits avaient alors couru sur son compte, et la rumeur publique l’accusait de tous les crimes.

Pour une fois, la rumeur publique ne se trompait pas. Avec sept autres misérables de son espèce, Ivan Striga avait, en effet, formé une bande de véritables pirates, qui, depuis lors, écumait littéralement les deux rives du Danube.

Avoir trouvé ainsi le chemin de la richesse facile, c’était quelque chose; s’assurer la sécurité, c’était mieux encore. Dans ce but, au lieu de cacher son nom et son visage, ainsi que l’aurait fait un malfaiteur vulgaire, il s’était arrangé de manière, à ne pas être un anonyme pour ses victimes. Bien, entendu, ce n’était pas son vrai nom qu’il leur faisait connaître. Non, celui qu’il avait résolu de laisser deviner avec une adroite imprudence, c’était celui de Serge Ladko.

S’abriter, afin d’échapper aux conséquences d’un forfait, derrière une personnalité d’emprunt, c’est un stratagème assez commun, mais Striga l’avait rénové par le choix intelligent du pseudonyme qu’il s’attribuait.

Si le nom de Ladko n’était, ni plus ni moins qu’un autre, capable de créer une confusion et, par suite, hors le cas de flagrant délit, de détourner les soupçons au profit du coupable, il possédait quelques avantages qui lui étaient propres.

En premier lieu, Serge Ladko n’était pas un mythe. Il existait, si le coup de fusil qui l’avait salué à son départ de Roustchouk ne l’avait pas abattu pour jamais. Bien que Striga se vantât volontiers d’avoir supprimé son ennemi, la vérité est qu’il n’en savait rien. Peu importait, d’ailleurs, au point de vue de l’enquête qui pouvait être faite à Roustchouk. Si Ladko était mort, la police ne pourrait rien comprendre aux accusations dont il serait l’objet. S’il était vivant, elle trouverait un homme de chair et d’os, d’une honorabilité si bien établie que l’enquête, selon toute vraisemblance, en resterait là. Sans doute, on rechercherait alors ceux qui auraient la malchance d’être ses homonymes. Mais, avant qu’on eût passé au crible tous les Ladkos du monde, il coulerait de l’eau sous les ponts du Danube!

Que si, d’aventure, les soupçons, à force d’être dirigés dans la même direction, finissaient par entamer la cuirasse d’honorabilité de Serge Ladko, ce serait alors un résultat doublement heureux. Outre qu’il est toujours agréable à un bandit de savoir qu’un autre est inquiété à sa place, cette substitution lui devient plus agréable encore quand il a voué à sa victime une haine mortelle.

Alors même que ces déductions eussent été déraisonnables, l’absence de Serge Ladko, dont personne ne connaissait la patriotique mission, les eût rendues logiques. Pourquoi le pilote était-il parti sans crier gare? La section locale de la police du fleuve commençait précisément à se poser cette question au moment où Karl Dragoch découvrait ce qu’il croyait être la vérité, et, comme chacun sait, lorsque la police commence à se poser des questions, il y a peu de chances qu’elle y réponde avec bienveillance.

Ainsi, la situation était bien nette dans sa dramatique complication. Une longue série de crimes que des maladresses voulues faisaient toujours attribuer à un certain Ladko, de Roustchouk; le pilote du même nom, vaguement, très vaguement encore soupçonné, à cause de son absence, d’être le coupable, tandis qu’à des centaines de kilomètres un Ladko, accusé par de plus sérieuses présomptions, était dépisté sous le déguisement du pêcheur Ilia Brusch; et Striga, pendant ce temps, reprenant, après chaque expédition, son état civil authentique, pour circuler librement sur le Danube.

Toutefois, pour que sa sécurité ne fût pas menacée, la condition essentielle était que l’on fit disparaître toute trace compromettante dans le plus bref délai possible. C’est pourquoi, ce soir-là, le butin nouvellement conquis fut, comme de coutume, rapidement déposé dans l’introuvable cachette. C’est le bruit de cet arrimage que le véritable Serge Ladko entendit dans son cachot pris aux dépens de cette même cale sous-marine, au fond de laquelle nulle puissance humaine n’était capable de le secourir. Puis, le parquet remis en place, les hommes remontèrent sur le pont dont les panneaux furent refermés. La police pouvait venir désormais.

Il était, à ce moment, près de trois heures du matin. L’équipage de la gabarre, surmené par les fatigues de cette nuit et par celles de la nuit précédente, aurait eu grand besoin de repos, mais il ne pouvait en être question.

Striga, désireux de s’éloigner au plus vite du lieu de son dernier crime, donna l’ordre de se mettre en route en profitant de l’aube naissante, ordre qui fut exécuté sans un murmure, chacun comprenant la force des raisons qui le dictaient.

Pendant qu’on s’occupait de ramener l’ancre à bord et de pousser le chaland au milieu du fleuve, Striga s’enquit des péripéties de l’expédition de la matinée.

«Ça a été tout seul, lui répondit Titcha. Le Dragoch a été pris au premier coup de filet comme un simple brochet.

— Vous a-t-il vus?

— Je ne crois pas. Il avait autre chose à penser.

— Il ne s’est pas débattu?

— Il a essayé, la canaille. J’ai dû l’assommer à moitié pour le faire tenir tranquille.

— Tu ne l’as pas tué, au moins? demanda vivement Striga.

— Que non pas! Étourdi tout au plus. J’en ai profité pour le ligotter proprement. Mais je n’avais pas fini le paquetage que le colis respirait comme père et mère.

— Et maintenant?

— Il est dans la cale. Dans le double fond, naturellement.

— Sait-il où on l’a transporté?

— Il faudrait alors qu’il soit rudement malin, déclara Titcha en riant bruyamment. Tu dois bien penser que je n’ai oublié ni le bâillon, ni le bandeau. On ne les a retirés que le particulier en cage. Là, il peut, si ça lui convient, chanter des romances et admirer le paysage.

Striga sourit sans répondre. Titcha reprit:

— -J’ai fait ce que tu as commandé, mais où cela nous mènera-t-il?

— Ne serait-ce qu’à désorganiser la brigade privée de son chef, répondit Striga.

Titcha haussa les épaules.

— On en nommera un autre, dit-il.

— Possible, mais il ne vaudra peut-être pas celui que nous tenons. Dans tous les cas, nous pourrons causer. Au besoin, nous le rendrions en échange des passeports qui nous seraient nécessaires. Il est donc essentiel de le garder vivant.

— Il l’est, affirma Titcha.

— A-t-on pensé à lui donner à manger?

— Diable!... fit Titcha en se grattant la tête. On l’a tout à fait oublié. Mais douze heures d’abstinence n’ont jamais fait de mal à personne, et je lui porterai son dîner dès que nous serons en marche... A moins que tu ne veuilles le lui porter toi-même, pour te rendre compte par tes yeux?

— Non, dit vivement Striga. Je préfère qu’il ne me voie pas. Je le connais et il ne me connaît pas. C’est un avantage que je ne veux pas perdre.

— Tu pourrais mettre un masque.

— Ça ne prendrait pas avec Dragoch. Pas besoin qu’on lui montre son visage. La taille, la carrure, le moindre détail lui suffît pour reconnaître les gens.

— Alors, je suis frais, moi, qui suis obligé de lui porter sa pitance!

— Il faut bien que quelqu’un le fasse... D’ailleurs, Dragoch n’est pas bien dangereux actuellement, et, s’il le redevient jamais, c’est que nous serons à l’abri.

— Amen!.. fit Titcha.

— Pour le moment, reprit Striga, on va le laisser dans sa boîte. Pas trop longtemps, par exemple, sans quoi il finirait par mourir asphyxié. On le remontera dans une cabine du pont quand nous aurons dépassé Budapest, demain matin, après mon départ.

— Tu as donc l’intention de t’absenter? demanda Titcha.

— Oui, répondit Striga. Je quitterai le chaland de temps en temps afin de recueillir des informations sur la rive. Je verrai ce qu’on dit de notre dernière affaire et de la disparition de Dragoch.

— Et si tu te fais pincer? objecta Titcha.

— Pas de danger. Personne ne me connaît, et la police du fleuve doit être dans le marasme. Pour les autres, j’aurai, s’il le faut, une identité toute neuve.

— Laquelle?

— Celle du célèbre Ilia Brusch, pêcheur insigne et lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne.

— Quelle idée!

— Excellente. J’ai le bateau d’Ilia Brusch. Je lui emprunterai sa peau, à l’exemple de Karl Dragoch.

— Et si l’on te demande du poisson?

— J’en achèterai, s’il le faut, pour le revendre.

— Tu as réponse à tout.

— Parbleu!»

La conversation prit fin sur ce mot. Le chaland avait commencé a suivre le fil du courant. Il soufflait une légère brise du Nord qui serait très favorable quand, un peu au-dessus de Visegrad, le Danube, revenant sur lui-même, suivrait la direction du Sud. Jusque-là, au contraire, cette brise du Nord retardait singulièrement le bateau, et Striga, pressé de s’éloigner du théâtre de ses exploits, donna l’ordre de border deux longs avirons qui aideraient à gagner contre le vent.

Il fallut trois heures pour parcourir dix kilomètres et atteindre le premier coude du fleuve, puis deux heures encore pour suivre la courbe que dessine le Danube avant d’adopter franchement la direction du Sud. Un peu en amont de Waitzen, on put enfin abandonner les avirons, et, sous la poussée de la voile, la marche du bateau fut notablement accélérée.

Vers onze heures on passa devant Saint-André où les deux charretiers Kaiserlick et Vogel avaient prétendu se rendre au cours de la nuit précédente. Il ne fut pas question de s’y arrêter, et le chaland continua à dériver vers Budapest, encore distante de vingt-cinq à trente kilomètres.

A mesure qu’on gagnait vers l’aval, l’aspect des rives devenait plus sévère. Les îles ombreuses et verdoyantes se multipliaient, ne laissant parfois entre elles que d’étroits canaux, interdits aux chalands, mais suffisants pour la navigation de plaisance.

Dans cette partie du Danube, la batellerie commence à devenir assez active. Il y a même de fréquents encombrements, car le cours du fleuve est resserré entre les premières ramifications des Alpes Norriques et les dernières ondulations des Karpathes. Quelquefois se produisent des échouages ou des abordages, peu dommageables en somme, pour peu que l'attention des pilotes soit un seul instant en défaut. En général, le malheur se réduit à une perte de temps. Mais que de cris, que de querelles, au moment de la collision!

Le chaland, dont Striga était le capitaine, devait être compté parmi les mieux dirigés. De grande taille, puisque sa capacité dépassait deux cents tonnes, le pont proprement dit en était recouvert d'une sorte de superstructure, d'un spardeck, qui formait, à l'arrière, le toit du rouf habité par le personnel. Un mâtereau à l'avant servait à hisser le pavillon national, et, à la poupe, un gouvernail à large safran permettait au pilote de maintenir le bateau en bonne direction.

A mesure qu'on descendait le courant, l'animation du fleuve allait croissant, ainsi que cela se produit aux approches des grandes cités. Des embarcations légères, à vapeur ou à voiles, chargées de promeneurs ou de touristes, se glissaient entre les îles. Bientôt, dans le lointain, la fumée de cheminées d'usines empâta l'horizon, annonçant les faubourgs de Budapest.

A ce moment, il se produisit un fait singulier. Sur un signe de Striga, Titcha pénétra dans le rouf de l'arrière, avec un de ses compagnons de l'équipage. Les deux hommes en ressortirent bientôt. Ils escortaient une femme d'une taille élancée, mais dont il était malaisé de voir les traits à demi cachés par un bâillon. Les mains liées derrière le dos, cette femme marchait entre ses deux gardiens, sans essayer d'une résistance dont l'expérience lui avait sans doute démontré l'inutilité. Docilement, elle descendit dans la cale par l'échelle du grand panneau, puis dans un compartiment du double fond dont la trappe fut refermée sur elle. Cela fait, Titcha et son compagnon reprirent leurs occupations, comme si de rien n'était.

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, le chaland s’engagea entre les quais de la capitale de la Hongrie. A droite, c’était Buda, l’ancienne ville turque; à gauche, Pest, la ville moderne. A cette époque, Buda était, plus qu’elle ne l’est restée de nos jours, une de ces vieilles et pittoresques cités que le progrès égalitaire tend à faire disparaître. Par contre, Pest, si son importance était déjà considérable, n’avait pas encore atteint le prodigieux développement qui a fait d’elle la plus importante et la plus belle métropole de l’Europe orientale.

Sur les deux rives, et notamment sur la rive gauche, se succédaient les maisons à arcades et à terrasses, que dominaient les clochers des églises dorés par les rayons du soleil, et la longue enfilade des quais ne manquait ni de noblesse ni de grandeur.

Le personnel du chaland n’accordait pas son attention à ce spectacle enchanteur. La traversée de Budapest pouvant ménager de désagréables surprises à des gens si sujets à caution, l’équipage n’avait d’yeux que pour le fleuve où se croisaient de nombreuses embarcations. Ce prudent souci permit à Striga de distinguer en temps voulu, au milieu des autres, un bateau conduit par quatre hommes, qui se dirigeait en droite ligne vers le chaland. Ayant reconnu un canot de la police fluviale, il avertit d’un coup d’oeil Titcha, qui, sans autre explication, s’affala par le panneau dans la cale.

Striga ne s’était pas trompé. En quelques minutes, ce canot eut rallié la gabarre. Deux hommes montèrent à bord.

«Le patron? demanda l’un des nouveaux arrivants.

— C’est moi, répondit Striga en faisant un pas en avant de ses compagnons.

— Votre nom?

— Ivan Striga.

— Votre nationalité?

— Bulgare.

— D’où vient cette gabarre?

— De Vienne.

— Où va-t-elle?

— A Galatz.

— Son propriétaire?

— M. Constantinesco, de Galatz.

— Chargement?

— Néant. Nous retournons à vide.

— Vos papiers?

— Les voici, dit Striga, en offrant au questionneur les documents demandés.

— C’est bon, approuva celui-ci, qui les restitua après un examen consciencieux. Nous allons jeter un coup d’oeil dans votre cale.

— A votre aise, concéda Striga. Je vous ferai toutefois remarquer que c’est la quatrième visite que nous subissons depuis notre départ de Vienne.

Ce n’est pas agréable.»

Le policier, déclinant du geste toute responsabilité personnelle dans les ordres dont il n’était que l’exécuteur, descendit sans répondre par le panneau. Arrivé au bas de l’échelle, il s’avança de quelques pas dans la cale dont son regard fit le tour, puis il remonta. Rien n’était venu l’avertir que sous ses pieds gisaient deux créatures humaines, un homme, d’un côté, une femme de l’autre, toutes deux réduites à l’impuissance et hors d’état de demander du secours. La visite ne pouvait être plus consciencieuse ni plus longue. Le chaland étant complètement vide, il n’y avait pas lieu de s’enquérir de la provenance de son chargement, ce qui simplifiait beaucoup les choses.

Le policier reparut donc au jour, et, sans poser d’autres questions, regagna son canot, qui s’éloigna vers de nouvelles perquisitions, tandis que la gabarre continuait lentement sa route vers l’aval.

Quand les dernières maisons de Budapest eurent été laissées en arrière, le moment parut venu de s’occuper de la prisonnière de la cale. Titcha et son compagnon disparurent dans l’intérieur, pour en ressortir bientôt, escortant cette même femme qui y avait été incarcérée quelques heures plus tôt, et qui fut réintégrée dans le rouf. Des autres hommes de l’équipage, nul ne sembla prêter la moindre attention à cet incident.

On ne fit halte qu’à la nuit, entre les bourgs d’Ercsin et d’Adony, à plus de trente kilomètres au-dessous de Budapest, et l’on repartit le lendemain dès l’aube. Au cours de cette journée du 31 août, la dérive fut interrompue par quelques arrêts, pendant lesquels Striga quitta le bord, en utilisant la barge, conquise, à ce qu’il pensait, sur Karl Dragoch. Loin de se cacher, il accostait dans les villages, se présentait aux habitants comme étant ce fameux lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne, dont la renommée n’avait pu manquer de parvenir jusqu'à eux, et engageait des conversations qu'il aiguillait adroitement sur les sujets qui lui tenaient au coeur.

Très maigre fut sa récolte de renseignements. Le nom d'Ilia Brusch ne paraissait pas être populaire dans cette région. Sans doute, à Mohacs, Apatin, Neusatz, Semlin ou Belgrade, qui sont des villes importantes, il en serait autrement. Mais Striga n'avait pas l'intention de s'y risquer et il comptait bien se borner à prendre langue dans des villages, où la police exerçait nécessairement une surveillance moins effective. Par malheur, les paysans ignoraient généralement le concours de Sigmaringen et se montraient très rebelles aux interviews. D'ailleurs, ils ne savaient rien. Ils ignoraient Karl Dragoch plus encore qu'Ilia Brusch, et Striga déploya en vain tous les raffinements de sa diplomatie.

Ainsi que cela avait été convenu la veille, c'est pendant une des absences de Striga que Serge Ladko fut remonté au jour et transporté dans une petite cabine dont la porte fut soigneusement verrouillée. Précaution peut-être exagérée, tout mouvement étant interdit au prisonnier étroitement ligotté.

Les journées du 1er au 6 septembre s'écoulèrent paisiblement. Poussé à la fois par le courant et par un vent favorable, le chaland continuait à dériver, à raison d'une soixantaine de kilomètres par vingt-quatre heures. La distance parcourue aurait même été sensiblement plus grande sans les arrêts que rendaient nécessaires les absences de Striga.

Si les excursions de celui-ci étaient toujours aussi stériles au point de vue spécial des renseignements, une fois, du moins, il réussit, en utilisant ses talents professionnels. à les rendre profitables à d'autres égards.

Ceci se passait le 5 septembre. Ce jour-là, le chaland étant venu mouiller à la nuit en face d'un petit bourg du nom de Szuszek, Striga descendit à terre comme de coutume. La soirée était avancée. Les paysans, qui se couchent d’ordinaire avec le soleil, ayant pour la plupart réintégré leurs demeures, il déambulait solitairement, quand il avisa une maison d’apparence assez cossue, dont le propriétaire, plein de confiance dans la probité publique, avait laissé la porte ouverte, en s’absentant pour quelque course dans le voisinage.

Sans hésiter, Striga s’introduisit dans cette maison, qui se trouva être un magasin de détail, ainsi que l’existence d’un comptoir le lui démontra. Prendre dans le tiroir de ce comptoir la recette de la journée, cela ne demanda qu’un instant. Puis, non content de cette modeste rapine, il eut tôt fait de découvrir dans le corps inférieur d’un bahut, dont l’effraction ne fut qu’un jeu pour lui, un sac rondelet, qui rendit au toucher un son métallique de bon augure.

Ainsi nanti, Striga s’empressa de regagner son chaland, qui, l’aube venue, était déjà loin.

Telle fut la seule aventure du voyage.

A bord, Striga avait d’autres occupations. De temps à autre, il disparaissait dans le rouf, et s’introduisait dans une cabine située en face de celle où l’on avait déposé Serge Ladko. Parfois, sa visite ne durait que quelques minutes, parfois elle se prolongeait davantage. Il n’était pas rare, dans ce dernier cas, qu’on entendit jusque sur le pont l’écho d’une violente discussion, où l’on discernait une voix de femme répondant avec calme à un homme en fureur. Le résultat était alors toujours le même: indifférence générale de l’équipage et sortie furibonde de Striga, qui s’empressait de quitter le bord pour calmer ses nerfs irrités.

C’est principalement sur la rive droite qu’il poursuivait ses investigations. Rares, en effet, sont les bourgs et les villages de la rive gauche au delà de laquelle s’étend à perte de vue l’immense puzsta..

Cette puzsta, c’est la plaine hongroise par excellence, que limitent, à près de cent lieues, les montagnes de la Transylvanie. Les lignes de chemins de fer qui la desservent traversent une infinie étendue de landes désertes, de vastes pâturages, de marais immenses où pullule le gibier aquatique. Cette puzsta, c’est la table toujours généreusement servie pour d’innombrables convives à quatre pattes, ces milliers et ces milliers de ruminants qui constituent l’une des principales richesses du royaume de Hongrie. A peine, s’il s’y rencontre quelques champs de blé ou de maïs.

La largeur du fleuve est devenue considérable alors, et de nombreux îlots ou îles en divisent le cours. Telles de ces dernières sont de grande étendue et laissent de chaque côté deux bras où le courant acquiert une certaine rapidité.

Ces îles ne sont point, fertiles. A leur surface ne poussent que des bouleaux, des trembles, des saules, au milieu du limon déposé par les inondations qui sont fréquentes. Cependant on y récolte du foin en abondance, et les barques, chargées jusqu’au plat bord, le charrient aux fermes ou aux bourgades de la rive.

Le 6 septembre, le chaland mouilla à la tombée de la nuit. Striga était absent à ce moment. S’il n’avait voulu se risquer, ni à Neusatz, ni à Peterwardein qui lui fait face, l’importance relative de ces villes pouvant être une cause de dangers, il s’était du moins arrêté, afin d’y continuer son enquête, au bourg de Karlovitz, situé une vingtaine de kilomètres en aval. Sur son ordre, le chaland n’avait fait halte que deux ou trois lieues plus bas, pour attendre son capitaine, qui le rejoindrait en s’aidant du courant.

Vers neuf heures du soir, celui-ci n’en était plus fort éloigné. Il ne se pressait pas. Laissant fuir la barge au gré du courant, il s’abandonnait à des pensées en somme assez riantes. Son stratagème avait pleinement réussi. Personne ne l’avait suspecté et rien ne s’était opposé à ce qu’il se renseignât librement. A vrai dire, de renseignements, il n’en avait guère récolté. Mais cette ignorance publique, qui confinait à l’indifférence, était, en somme, un symptôme favorable. Bien certainement, dans cette région, on n’avait que très vaguement entendu parler de la bande du Danube, et l’on ignorait jusqu’à l’existence de Karl Dragoch, dont la disparition ne pouvait, par suite, causer d’émotion.

D’un autre côté, que ce fût à cause de la suppression de son chef ou en raison de la pauvreté de la région traversée, la vigilance de la police paraissait grandement diminuée. Depuis plusieurs jours, Striga n’avait aperçu personne qui eût la tournure d’un agent, et nul ne parlait de la surveillance fluviale si active deux ou trois cent kilomètres en amont.

Il y avait donc toutes chances pour que le chaland arrivât heureusement au terme de son voyage, c’est-à-dire à la mer Noire, où son chargement serait transporté à bord du vapeur accoutumé. Demain, on serait au delà de Semlin et de Belgrade. Il suffirait ensuite de longer de préférence la rive serbe pour se mettre à l’abri de toute fâcheuse surprise. La Serbie devait être, en effet, plus ou moins désorganisée par la guerre qu’elle soutenait contre la Turquie et il n’y avait pas apparence que les autorités riveraines perdissent leur temps à s’occuper d’une gabarre descendant à vide le cours du fleuve.

Qui sait? Ce serait peut-être le dernier voyage de Striga. Peut-être se retirerait-il au loin, après fortune faite, riche, considéré — et heureux, songeait-il, en pensant à la prisonnière enfermée dans la gabarre.

Il en était là de ses réflexions quand ses yeux tombèrent sur les coffres symétriques dont les couvercles avaient si longtemps servi de couchettes à Karl Dragoch et à son hôte, et tout à coup cette pensée lui vint que, depuis huit jours qu'il était maître de la barge, il n'avait pas songé à en explorer le contenu. Il était grand temps de réparer cet inconcevable oubli.

En premier lieu, il s'attaqua au coffre de tribord qu'il fractura en un tour de main. Il n'y trouva que des piles de linge et de vêtements rangés en bon ordre. Striga, qui n'avait que faire de cette défroque, referma le coffre et s'attaqua au suivant.

Le contenu de celui-ci n'était pas fort différent du précédent, et Striga désappointé allait y renoncer, quand il découvrit dans un des coins un objet plus intéressant. Si les articles d'habillement ne pouvaient rien lui apprendre, il n'en serait peut-être pas de même de ce gros portefeuille qui, selon toute vraisemblance, devait contenir des papiers. Or, les papiers ont beau être muets, rien n'égale, dans certains cas, leur éloquence.

Striga ouvrit ce portefeuille, et, conformément à son espoir, il s'en échappa de nombreux documents, dont il entreprit le patient examen. Les quittances, les lettres défilèrent, toutes au nom d'Ilia Brusch, puis ses yeux, agrandis par la surprise, s'arrêtèrent sur le portrait qui, déjà, avait éveillé les soupçons de Karl Dragoch.

D'abord Striga ne comprit pas. Qu'il y eût dans cette barge des papiers au nom d'Ilia Brusch, et qu'il n'y en eût aucun au nom du policier, c'était déjà passablement étonnant. Toutefois, l'explication de cette anomalie pouvait être des plus naturelles. Peut-être Karl Dragoch, au lieu de doubler le lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne, comme Striga l'avait cru jusqu'ici, avait-il emprunté à l'amiable la personnalité du pêcheur, et peut-être, dans ce cas, avait-il conservé, d’un commun accord avec le véritable Ilia Brusch, les documents nécessaires pour justifier au besoin de son identité. Mais pourquoi ce nom de Ladko, ce nom dont, avec une habileté diabolique, Striga signait tous ses crimes? Et que venait faire là ce portrait d’une femme, à laquelle celui-ci n’avait jamais renoncé malgré l’échec de ses précédentes tentatives? Quel était donc le légitime propriétaire de cette barge pour avoir en sa possession un document si intime et si singulier? A qui appartenait-elle en définitive, à Karl Dragoch, à Ilia Brusch ou à Serge Ladko, et lequel de ces trois hommes, dont deux l’intéressaient à un si haut point, tenait-il prisonnier en fin de compte dans le chaland? Le dernier, il proclamait, cependant, l’avoir tué, le soir où, d’un coup de feu, il avait abattu l’un des deux hommes de ce canot qui s’éloignait furtivement de Roustchouk. Vraiment, s’il avait mal visé alors, il aimerait encore mieux, plutôt que le policier, tenir entre ses mains le pilote, qu’il ne manquerait pas une seconde fois, dans ce cas. Celui-là, il ne serait pas question de le garder comme otage. Une pierre au cou ferait l’affaire, et, débarrassé ainsi d’un ennemi mortel, il supprimerait en même temps le principal obstacle à des projets dont il poursuivait âprement la réalisation.

Impatient d’être fixé, Striga, gardant par devers lui le portrait qu’il venait de découvrir, saisit la godille et pressa la marche de l’embarcation.

Bientôt la masse de la gabarre apparut dans la nuit. Il accosta rapidement, sauta sur le pont, et, se dirigeant vers la cabine faisant face à celle qu’il visitait d’ordinaire, introduisit la clef dans la serrure.

Moins avancé que son geôlier, Serge Ladko n’avait même pas le choix entre plusieurs explications de son aventure. Le mystère lui en paraissait toujours aussi impénétrable, et il avait renoncé à imaginer des conjectures sur les motifs que l’on pouvait avoir de le séquestrer.

Quand, après un fiévreux sommeil, il s’était réveillé au fond de son cachot, la première sensation qu’il éprouva fut celle de la faim. Plus de vingt-quatre heures s’étaient alors écoulées depuis son dernier repas, et la nature ne perd jamais ses droits, quelle que soit la violence de nos émotions.

Il patienta d’abord, puis, la sensation devenant de plus en plus impérieuse, il perdit le beau calme qui l’avait soutenu jusque-là. Allait-on le laisser mourir d’inanition? Il appela. Personne ne répondit. Il appela plus fort. Même résultat. Il s’égosilla enfin en hurlements furieux, sans obtenir plus de succès.

Exaspéré, il s’efforça de briser ses liens. Mais ceux-ci étaient solides et c’est en vain qu’il se roula sur le parquet en tendant ses muscles à les rompre.

Dans un de ces mouvements convulsifs, son visage heurta un objet déposé près de lui. Le besoin affine les sens. Serge Ladko reconnut immédiatement du pain et un morceau de lard qu’on avait sans doute mis là pendant son sommeil. Profiter de cette attention de ses geôliers n’était pas des plus faciles, dans la situation où il se trouvait. Mais la nécessité rend industrieux, et, après plusieurs essais infructueux, il réussit à se passer du secours de ses mains.

Sa faim satisfaite, les heures coulèrent lentes et monotones. Dans le silence, un murmure, un frissonnement, semblable à celui des feuilles agitées par une brise légère, venait frapper son oreille. Le bateau qui le portait était évidemment en marche et fendait, comme un coin, l’eau du fleuve.

Combien d’heures s’étaient-elles succédé, quand une trappe fut soulevée au-dessus de lui? Suspendue au bout d’une ficelle, une ration semblable à celle qu’il avait découverte à son premier réveil, oscilla dans l’ouverture qu’éclairait une lumière incertaine et vint se poser à sa portée.

Des heures coulèrent encore, puis la trappe s’ouvrit de nouveau. Un homme descendit, s’approcha du corps inerte, et Serge Ladko, pour la seconde fois, sentit qu’on lui recouvrait la bouche d’un large bâillon. C’est donc qu’on avait peur de ses cris et qu’il passait à proximité d’un secours? Sans doute, car, l’homme à peine remonté, le prisonnier entendit que l’on marchait sur le plafond de son cachot. Il voulut appeler... aucun son ne sortit de ses lèvres... Le bruit de pas cessa.

Le secours devait être déjà loin, quand, peu d’instants plus tard, on revint, sans plus d’explications, supprimer son bâillon. Si on lui permettait d’appeler, c’est que cela n’offrait plus de danger. Dès lors, à quoi bon?

Après le troisième repas, identique aux deux premiers, l’attente fut plus longue. C’était la nuit sans doute. Serge Ladko calculait que sa captivité remontait environ à quarante-huit heures, lorsque, par la trappe de nouveau ouverte, on insinua une échelle, à l’aide de laquelle quatre hommes descendirent au fond du cachot.

Ces quatre hommes, Serge Ladko n’eut pas le temps de distinguer leurs traits. Rapidement, un bâillon était encore appliqué sur sa bouche, un bandeau sur ses yeux, et, redevenu colis aveugle et muet, il était comme la première fois transporté de mains en mains.

Aux heurts qu’il subit, il reconnut l’ouverture étroite — la trappe, il le comprenait — qu’il avait déjà franchie et qu’il franchissait maintenant en sens inverse. L’échelle qui avait meurtri ses reins pendant la descente, les meurtrit également, tandis qu’on le remontait. Un bref trajet horizontal suivit, puis, brutalement jeté sur le parquet, il sentit qu’on lui enlevait comme auparavant bandeau et bâillon. Il ouvrait à peine les yeux, qu'une porte se refermait avec bruit.

Serge Ladko regarda autour de lui. S'il n'avait fait que changer de prison, celle-ci était infiniment supérieure à la précédente. Par une petite fenêtre, le jour entrait à flots, lui permettant d'apercevoir, déposée auprès de lui, sa pitance ordinaire qu'il avait été contraint jusqu'ici de chercher à tâtons. La lumière du soleil lui rendait le courage et sa situation lui apparaissait moins désespérée. Derrière cette fenêtre, c'était la liberté. Il s'agissait de la conquérir.

Longtemps il désespéra d'en trouver le moyen, quand enfin, en parcourant pour la millième fois du regard la cabine exiguë qui lui servait de prison, il découvrit, appliquée contre la paroi, une sorte de ferrure plate qui, sortie du plancher et s'élevant verticalement jusqu'au plafond, servait probablement à relier entre eux les madriers du bordé. Cette ferrure formait saillie, et, bien qu'elle ne présentât aucun angle tranchant, il n'était peut-être pas impossible de s'en servir pour user ses liens, sinon pour les couper. Difficile à coup sûr, l'entreprise méritait tout au moins d'être tentée.

Ayant réussi avec beaucoup de peine à ramper jusqu'à ce morceau de fer, Serge Ladko commença aussitôt à limer contre lui la corde qui retenait ses mains. L'immobilité presque totale que ses entraves lui imposaient rendait ce travail extrêmement pénible, et le va-et-vient des bras, ne pouvant être obtenu que par une série de contractions de tout le corps, restait forcément contenu dans d'étroites limites. Outre que la besogne avançait lentement ainsi, elle était en même temps véritablement exténuante, et, toutes les cinq minutes, le pilote était contraint de prendre du repos. Deux fois par jour, aux heures des repas, il lui fallait s'interrompre. C'était toujours le même geôlier qui venait lui apporter sa nourriture et, bien que celui-ci dissimulât son visage sous un masque de toile, Serge Ladko le reconnaissait sans hésitation à ses cheveux gris et à la remarquable largeur de ses épaules. D’ailleurs, bien qu’il n’en pût discerner les traits, l’aspect de cet homme lui donnait l’impression de quelque chose de déjà vu. Sans qu’il lui fût possible de rien préciser, cette carrure puissante, cette démarche lourde, ces cheveux grisonnants que l’on distinguait au-dessus du masque de toile, ne lui semblaient pas inconnus.

Les rations lui étaient servies à heure fixe, et jamais, hors de ces instants, on ne pénétrait dans sa prison. Rien n’en aurait même troublé le silence, si, de temps à autre, il n’avait entendu une porte s’ouvrir en face de la sienne. Presque toujours, le bruit de deux voix, celle d’un homme et celle d’une femme, parvenait ensuite jusqu’à lui. Serge Ladko tendait alors l’oreille, et, interrompant son patient travail, il cherchait à mieux discerner ces voix qui remuaient en lui des sensations vagues et profondes.

En dehors de ces incidents, le prisonnier mangeait d’abord, dès le départ de son geôlier, puis il se remettait obstinément à l’oeuvre.

Cinq jours s’étaient écoulés depuis qu’il l’avait commencée, et il en était encore à se demander s’il faisait ou non quelques progrès, quand, à la tombée de la nuit, le soir du 6 septembre, le lien qui encerclait ses poignets se brisa tout à coup.

Le pilote dut refouler le cri de joie qui allait lui échapper. On ouvrait sa porte. Le même homme que chaque jour entrait dans sa cellule et déposait près de lui le repas habituel.

Dès qu’il se retrouva seul, Serge Ladko voulut mouvoir ses membres libérés. Il lui fut d’abord impossible d’y parvenir. Immobilisés pendant toute une longue semaine, ses mains et ses bras étaient comme frappés de paralysie. Peu à peu, cependant, le mouvement leur revint et augmenta graduellement d’amplitude. Après une heure d’efforts, il put exécuter des gestes encore maladroits et délivrer ses jambes à leur tour.

Il était libre. Du moins il avait fait le premier pas vers la liberté. Le second, ce serait de franchir cette fenêtre qu’il était en son pouvoir d’atteindre maintenant, et par laquelle il apercevait l’eau du Danube, sinon la rive invisible dans l’obscurité. Les circonstances étaient favorables. Il faisait dehors un noir d’encre. Bien malin qui le rattraperait par cette nuit sans lune, où l’on ne voyait rien à dix pas. D’ailleurs, on ne reviendrait plus dans sa cellule que le lendemain. Quand on s’apercevrait de son évasion, il serait loin.

Une grave difficulté, plus qu’une difficulté, une impossibilité matérielle l’arrêta à la première tentative. Assez large pour un adolescent souple et svelte, la fenêtre était trop étroite pour livrer passage à un homme dans la force de l’âge et doué d’une aussi respectable carrure que Serge Ladko. Celui-ci, après s’être épuisé en vain, dut reconnaître que l’obstacle était infranchissable et se laissa retomber tout haletant dans sa prison.

Etait-il donc condamné à n’en plus sortir? Un long moment, il contempla le carré de nuit dessiné par l’implacable fenêtre, puis, décidé à de nouveaux efforts, il se dépouilla de ses vêtements et, d’un élan furieux, se lança dans l’ouverture béante, résolu à la franchir coûte que coûte.

Son sang coula, ses os craquèrent, mais une épaule d’abord, un bras ensuite passèrent, et le montant de la fenêtre vint buter contre sa hanche gauche. Malheureusement l’épaule droite avait buté, elle aussi, de telle sorte que tout effort supplémentaire serait évidemment inutile.

Une partie du corps à l’air libre et surplombant le courant, l’autre partie demeurée prisonnière, ses côtes écrasées par la pression, Serge Ladko ne tarda pas à trouver la position intenable. Puisque s’enfuir ainsi était impraticable, il fallait aviser à d’autres moyens. Peut-être, pourrait-il arracher l’un des montants de la fenêtre et agrandir ainsi l’infranchissable ouverture.

Mais, pour cela, il était nécessaire de réintégrer la prison, et Ladko fut obligé de reconnaître l’impossibilité de ce retour en arrière. Il ne lui était permis ni d’avancer, ni de reculer, et, à moins d’appeler à son aide, il était irrémédiablement condamné à rester dans sa cruelle position.

C’est en vain qu’il se débattit. Tout fut inutile. Il s’était lui-même pris au piège par la violence de son élan.

Serge Ladko reprenait haleine, quand un bruit insolite le fit tressaillir. Un nouveau danger se révélait, menaçant. Fait qui ne s’était jamais produit à pareille heure depuis qu’il occupait cette prison, on s’arrêtait à sa porte, une clef cherchait en tâtonnant le trou de la serrure, s’y introduisait enfin...

Soulevé par le désespoir, le pilote raidit tous ses muscles dans un effort surhumain...

Au dehors, cependant, la clef tournait dans la serrure... entraînait le pène avec elle... lui faisait faire un premier pas hors de la gâche...

XII

AU NOM DE LA LOI.

Striga, la porte ouverte, s’arrêta hésitant sur le seuil. Une obscurité profonde emplissait la cellule. Il ne distinguait rien, si ce n’est un carré d’ombre plus claire vaguement découpé par l’ouverture de la fenêtre. Dans un coin, quelque part, gisait le prisonnier. On ne pouvait l’apercevoir.

«Titcha! appela Striga d’une voix impatiente, de la lumière!»

Titcha s’empressa d’apporter une lanterne dont la tremblante lueur, soudainement projetée, parut illuminer la pièce. Les deux hommes, l’ayant parcourue d’un rapide coup d’oeil, échangèrent un regard troublé. La cabine était vide. Sur le parquet, des liens rompus, des vêtements jetés à la volée: du prisonnier, nulle autre trace.

«M’expliqueras-tu?... commença Striga.

Avant de répondre, Titcha alla jusqu’à la fenêtre, et passa le doigt sur l’un des montants.

— Envolé, dit-il, en montrant son doigt rouge.

— Envolé!... répéta Striga, qui proféra un juron.

— Mais pas depuis longtemps, continua Titcha. Le sang est encore frais. D’ailleurs, il n’y a pas plus de deux heures que je lui ai apporté sa ration.

— Et tu n’as rien vu d’anormal à ce moment?

— Absolument rien. Je l’ai laissé ficelé comme un saucisson.

— Imbécile! gronda Striga!

Titcha, ouvrant les bras, exprima clairement par ce geste qu'il ignorait comment l'évasion avait pu s'accomplir et qu'il en déclinait, dans tous les cas, la responsabilité. Striga n'accepta pas cette commode défaite.

— Oui, imbécile, répéta-t-il d'une voix furieuse en arrachant des mains de son compagnon la lanterne qu'il promena sur le pourtour de la cabine. Il fallait visiter ton prisonnier et ne pas te fier aux apparences... Tiens! regarde ce morceau de fer poli par le frottement. C'est là qu'il a usé la corde qui retenait ses mains... Il a dû y mettre des jours et des jours... Et tu ne t'es aperçu de rien!... On n'est pas stupide à ce point-là!

— Ah ça, mais, quand tu auras fini!... répliqua Titcha qui sentait la colère le gagner à son tour. Est-ce que tu me prends pour ton chien?... Après tout, puisque tu tenais tant à boucler le Dragoch, il fallait le garder toi-même.

— J'aurais mieux fait, approuva Striga. Mais, d'abord, est-ce bien Dragoch que nous tenions?

— Qui veux-tu que ce soit?

— Le sais-je?... Je suis en droit de m'attendre à tout, en voyant la manière dont tu t'acquittes d'une mission. L'as-tu reconnu, quand tu l'as pris?

— Je ne peux pas dire que je l'aie reconnu, confessa Titcha, vu qu'il tournait le dos...

— Là!..

— Mais j'ai parfaitement reconnu le bateau. C'est bien celui que tu m'as montré à Vienne. Ça, par exemple, j'en suis sûr.

— Le bateau!.. Le bateau!.. Enfin, comment était-il, ton prisonnier? Etait-il grand?

Serge Ladko et Ivan Striga avaient en réalité une taille sensiblement égale. Mais un homme couché paraît, on ne l'ignore pas, beaucoup plus grand qu'un homme debout, et Titcha n'avait guère vu le pilote qu'étendu sur le parquet de sa prison. C'est donc de la meilleure foi du monde qu'il répondit:

— La tête de plus que toi.

— Ce n'est pas Dragoch!.. murmura Striga, qui se savait d'une stature plus élevée que le détective.

Il réfléchit quelques instants, puis demanda:

— Le prisonnier ressemblait-il à quelqu'un de ta connaissance?

— De ma connaissance? protesta Titcha. Jamais de la vie!

— . Par exemple, il ne ressemblerait pas... à Ladko?

— En voilà une idée! s'écria Titcha. Pourquoi diable veux-tu que Dragoch ressemble à Ladko?

— Et si notre prisonnier n'était pas Dragoch?

— Il ne serait pas davantage Ladko, que je connais assez, parbleu, pour ne pas m'y tromper.

— Réponds toujours à ma question, insista Striga. Lui ressemblait-il?

— Tu rêves, protesta Titcha. D’abord, le prisonnier n’avait pas de barbe, et Ladko en a.

— Ça se coupe, la barbe, fit observer Striga.

— Je ne dis pas non... Et puis, le prisonnier avait des lunettes.

Striga haussa les épaules.

— Etait-il brun ou blond? demanda-t-il.

— Brun, répondit Titcha avec conviction.

— Tu en es sûr?

— Sûr.

— Ce n’est pas Ladko!.. murmura de nouveau Striga. Ce serait donc Ilia Brusch..

— Quel Ilia Brusch?

— Le pêcheur.

— Bah!.. fit Titcha abasourdi. Mais alors, si le prisonnier n’était ni Ladko, ni Karl Dragoch, peu importe qu’il ait pris la clef des champs.

Striga, sans répondre, s’approcha à son tour de la fenêtre. Après avoir examiné les traces de sang, il se pencha au dehors et s’efforça vainement de percer les ténèbres.

— Depuis combien de temps est-il parti?. se demandait-il à demi-voix.

— Pas plus de deux heures, dit Titcha.

— S’il court depuis deux heures, il doit être loin! s’écria Striga, qui maîtrisait, avec peine sa colère.

Après un instant de réflexion, il ajouta:

— Rien à faire pour le moment. La nuit est trop noire. Puisque l’oiseau est envolé, bon voyage. Quant à nous, nous nous mettrons en route un peu avant l’aube, de manière à être le plus tôt possible au delà de Belgrade.»

Il resta un instant songeur, puis, sans rien ajouter, il quitta la cabine pour entrer dans celle qui lui faisait face. Titcha prêta l’oreille. D’abord, il n’entendit rien; mais bientôt, à travers la porte fermée, arrivèrent jusqu’à lui des éclats de voix dont le diapason montait progressivement. Haussant les épaules avec dédain, Titcha s’éloigna et regagna son lit.

C’est à tort que Striga avait jugé inutile de se livrer à des recherches immédiates. Ces recherches n’eussent peut-être pas été vaines, car le fugitif n’était pas loin.

En entendant le bruit de la clef tournant dans la serrure, Serge Ladko, d’un effort désespéré, avait vaincu l’obstacle. Sous la violente traction des muscles, l’épaule d’abord, la hanche ensuite s’étaient effacées, et il avait glissé comme une flèche hors de la fenêtre trop étroite, pour tomber, la tête la première, dans l’eau du Danube, qui s’était ouverte et refermée sans bruit. Quand, après une courte immersion, il revint à la surface, le courant l’avait déjà emporté à quelque distance de l’endroit de sa chute. Un instant plus tard, il dépassait l’arrière du chaland, évité la proue vers l’amont. Devant lui la route était libre.

Il n’avait pas à hésiter. Le seul parti à prendre était de se laisser dériver quelque temps encore. Une fois hors d’atteinte, il nagerait vigoureusement vers l’une des rives. Il y arriverait, il est vrai, dans un état de nudité qui pouvait être une source de grandes difficultés ultérieures, mais il n’avait pas le choix. Le plus pressé était de s’éloigner de la prison flottante où il venait de passer de si pénibles jours. Quand il aurait pris terre, il aviserait.

Tout à coup, dans la nuit, la masse sombre d’une seconde embarcation se dressa devant lui. Quelle ne fut pas son émotion, en reconnaissant sa barge retenue par une bosse amarrée au chaland et que tendait la poussée du courant. Il se cramponna instinctivement au gouvernail, et, un instant, demeura immobile.

Dans la paix nocturne, un bruit de voix parvenait jusqu’à lui. Sans doute, on discutait les circonstances de sa fuite. Il attendit, la tête seule hors de l’eau noire qui le couvrait de son impénétrable voile.

Les voix grandirent, puis se turent, et tout retomba dans le silence. Serge Ladko, s’accrochant au plat bord, se hissa lentement dans la barge et disparut sous le tôt. Là, l’oreille tendue, il écouta de nouveau.. Il n’entendit rien. Plus aucun bruit autour de lui.

Sous le tôt, l’obscurité de la nuit se faisait plus épaisse encore. Dans l’impossibilité de rien distinguer, Serge Ladko tâtonna comme un aveugle pour reconnaître les objets familiers. Il ne semblait pas que l’on eût rien touché. Là étaient ses instruments de pêche; à ce clou pendait encore le bonnet de loutre qu’il y avait lui-même accroché. A droite, c’était sa couchette; à gauche, celle où M. Jaeger avait si longtemps dormi... Mais pourquoi étaient-ils ouverts, les coffres ménagés au-dessous de ces couchettes? On les avait donc forcés?.. Invisibles dans l’ombre, ses mains hésitantes firent l’inventaire de ses modestes richesses... Non, on ne lui avait rien pris. Linge et vêtements paraissaient en on ordre, comme il les avait laissés... Jusqu’à son couteau qu’il retrouva à la place même où il l’avait rangé. Ce couteau, Serge Ladko l’ouvrit, puis, rampant sur le ventre dans le fond de la barge, il s’avança vers l’étrave.

Quel voyage! L’oreille aux aguets, les yeux vainement ouverts dans les ténèbres, s’arrêtant, la respiration coupée, au moindre clapotis de l’eau, il lui fallut dix minutes pour arriver au but. Enfin, sa main put saisir la bosse, qu’il trancha d’un seul coup.

La corde coupée fouetta l’eau à grand bruit. Ladko, le coeur battant, retomba dans la barge. Impossible qu’on n’ait pas entendu la chute de cette corde, dans un silence si profond...

Non... rien ne bougeait... Le pilote, peu à peu redressé, comprit qu’il était déjà foin de ses ennemis. A peine libre, en effet, la barge avait commencé à dériver, et il n’avait fallu qu’un instant pour qu’entre elle et le chaland s’élevât le mur inexpugnable de la nuit.

Quand il s’estima assez loin pour n’avoir plus rien à craindre, Serge Ladko arma un aviron, et quelques coups de godille augmentèrent rapidement la distance. Alors seulement, il s’aperçut qu’il grelottait et s’occupa de se couvrir. Décidément, on n’avait pas touché au contenu de ses coffres, où il trouva sans peine le linge et les vêtements nécessaires. Cela fait, il saisit de nouveau l’aviron et se remit à godiller avec rage.

Où était-il? Il n’en avait aucune idée. Rien ne pouvait le renseigner sur le parcours effectué par le chaland dans lequel il avait été incarcéré. Sa prison flottante avait-elle monté ou descendu le fleuve, il l’ignorait.

En tous cas, c’est dans le sens du courant qu’il devait maintenant se diriger, puisque c’est dans cette direction qu’étaient Roustchouk et Natcha. Si on l’avait ramené en arrière, ce serait du temps à regagner à grands renforts de bras, voilà tout. Pour le moment, il commencerait par naviguer toute la nuit, de manière à s’éloigner le plus possible de ses ennemis inconnus. Il pouvait compter sur environ sept heures d’obscurité. En sept heures, on fait du chemin. Le jour venu, il s’arrêterait, pour prendre du repos, dans la première ville rencontrée.

Serge Ladko godillait vigoureusement depuis une vingtaine de minutes, quand un cri affaibli par la distance s’éleva dans la nuit. Ce qu’il exprimait, joie, colère ou terreur, trop vague était ce cri lointain pour que l’on pût le dire. Et pourtant, si vague qu’elle fût, cette voix, qui lui arrivait des confins de l’horizon, emplit d’un trouble obscur le coeur du pilote. Où avait-il entendu une voix semblable?.. Un peu plus, il eût juré que c’était celle de Natcha... Il avait cessé de godiller, l’oreille tendue aux sourdes rumeurs de la nuit.

Le cri ne se renouvela pas. L’espace était redevenu muet autour de la barge que le courant entraînait en silence. Natcha!..

Il n’avait que ce nom-là en tête... Serge Ladko, d’un mouvement d’épaules, rejeta cette obsession, cette idée fixe et se remit au travail.

Le temps passa. Il pouvait être minuit, quand, sur la rive droite, se dessinèrent confusément des maisons. Ce n’était qu’un village, Szlankament, que Ladko laissa en arrière sans l’avoir reconnu.

Quelques heures plus tard, au moment du lever de l’aube, un autre bourg, Nove Banoveze, apparut à son tour. Il ne le reconnut pas davantage et le dépassa pareillement.

Puis les rives redevinrent désertes, tandis que le jour se levait.

Dès que la lumière fut suffisante, Serge Ladko s'empressa de réparer les dégâts causés à son déguisement par une si longue captivité. En quelques minutes, ses cheveux redevinrent noirs de leur racine à leur pointe, un coup de rasoir fit tomber la barbe naissante et ses lunettes faussées furent remplacées par des neuves. Cela fait, il se remit à godiller avec le même inlassable courage.

De temps à autre, il jetait un coup d'oeil en arrière, sans rien apercevoir de suspect. Les ennemis étaient loin, décidément.

Libérant son esprit de ses préoccupations les plus immédiates, le sentiment de sa sécurité reconquise lui permettait de songer de nouveau à l'étrangeté de sa situation. Quels étaient ces ennemis qui le contraignaient à fuir? Que lui voulaient-ils? Pourquoi l'avaient-ils tenu durant tant de jours en leur pouvoir? Autant de questions auxquelles il était dans l'impossibilité de répondre. Quels que fussent ces ennemis, il fallait, en tous cas, se défier d'eux à l'avenir, et ce souci allait fâcheusement compliquer son voyage, à moins qu'il ne prît le parti de réclamer, malgré les dangers d'une telle démarche, la protection de la police contre ses ravisseurs inconnus, à la première ville qu'il traverserait.

Cette ville, quelle serait-elle? Cela non plus, il ne le savait pas, et rien n'était de nature à le renseigner, sur ces rives désertes où, séparés par de longs espaces, s'égrenaient de rares et pauvres hameaux.

Ce fut seulement vers huit heures du matin, que, toujours sur la rive droite, de hauts clochers piquèrent le ciel, tandis que, devant la barge, une autre ville plus lointaine montait à l'horizon. Serge Ladko eut un sursaut de joie. Ces villes, il les connaissait bien. L'une, la plus proche, c'était Semlin, dernière cité danubienne de l'empire austro-hongrois; l'autre, juste en face de lui, c'était Belgrade, la capitale serbe, située également sur la rive droite, après un coude brusque du fleuve, au confluent de la Save.

Ainsi donc, pendant son incarcération, il avait continué à descendre le courant, sa prison flottante l'avait rapproché du but, et, sans même s'en rendre compte, il avait franchi plus de cinq cents kilomètres.

Pour l'instant, Semlin, c'était le salut. Autant que besoin serait, il y trouverait aide et protection. Mais se résoudrait-il à demander du secours? S'il se plaignait, s'il racontait son inexplicable aventure, n'allait-on pas ouvrir une enquête, dont il serait la première victime? Peut-être voudrait-on savoir qui il était, d'où il venait, où il se rendait, et peut-être parviendrait-on à découvrir le nom qu'il s'était juré de ne jamais révéler, quoi qu'il arrivât.

Remettant à prendre un parti à ce sujet, Serge Ladko activa la marche de son embarcation. La demie de huit heures sonnait aux horloges de la ville comme il fixait son amarre à un anneau du quai. Il procéda ensuite à quelques rapides rangements, puis examina de nouveau ce problème: parler ou se taire. Finalement il se décida pour l'abstention. Tout bien considéré, mieux valait garderie silence, aller chercher sous le tôt un repos bien gagné, et s'éloigner inaperçu de Semlin comme il y était arrivé.

A ce moment, quatre hommes parurent sur le quai et s'arrêtèrent en face de la barge. Ces hommes sautèrent à bord, et l'un d'eux, s'approchant de Serge Ladko, qui le regardait faire avec étonnement, demanda:

«Vous êtes bien le nommé Ilia Brusch?

— Oui, répondit le pilote, en fixant sur le questionneur un regard inquiet.

Celui-ci entr’ouvrit son vêtement, afin de montrer une écharpe aux couleurs hongroises, qui lui enserrait la taille.

— Au nom de la loi, je vous arrête,» dit-il en touchant le pilote à l’épaule.

XIII

UNE COMMISSION ROGATOIRE.

Karl Dragoch n’avait pas souvenir de s’être occupé, dans tout le cours de sa carrière, d’une affaire aussi fertile en incidents inattendus et ayant autant le caractère du mystère que cette affaire de la bande du Danube. L’incroyable mobilité de l’insaisissable bande, son ubiquité, la soudaineté de ses coups, avaient déjà quelque chose d’insolite. Et voici que son chef, à peine dépisté, devenait introuvable, et semblait se rire des mandats d’amener lancés contre lui dans toutes les directions!

Tout d’abord, on eût été fondé à croire qu’il s’était évaporé. De lui, aucune trace, ni en amont, ni en aval. La police de Budapest, notamment, malgré une surveillance incessante, n’avait rien signalé qui lui ressemblât. Il fallait bien qu’il fût passé à Budapest, cependant, puisque, dès le 31 août, il était vu à Duna Földvar, soit près de quatre-vingt-dix kilomètres plus bas que la capitale de la Hongrie. Ignorant que le rôle du pêcheur fût joué à ce moment par Ivan Striga, à qui le chaland assurait un refuge, Karl Dragoch n’y pouvait rien comprendre.

Les jours suivants, c’est à Szekszard, à Vukovar, à Cserevics, à Karlovitz enfin que l’on signalait sa présence. Ilia Brusch ne se cachait pas. Loin de là, il disait son nom à qui voulait l’entendre, et parfois même vendait quelques livres de poissons. D’aucuns, il est vrai, prétendaient aussi l’avoir surpris au moment où il en achetait, ce qui ne laissait pas d’être assez singulier.

Le soi-disant pêcheur faisait preuve en tous cas d’une infernale habileté. La police, aussitôt prévenue de son apparition, avait beau faire diligence, elle arrivait toujours trop tard. C’est en vain qu’elle sillonnait ensuite le fleuve en tous sens, elle n’y découvrait pas le plus petit vestige de la barge qui semblait littéralement volatilisée.

Karl Dragoch se désespérait en apprenant les échecs successifs de ses sous-ordres. Le gibier allait-il décidément lui glisser entre les mains?

Toutefois, deux choses étaient certaines. La première, c’est que le prétendu lauréat continuait à descendre le fleuve. La seconde, c’est qu’il semblait fuir les villes, dont, sans doute, il redoutait la police.

Karl Dragoch fit donc redoubler de surveillance à toutes les cités de quelque importance situées en aval de Budapest, telles que Mohacs, Apatin et Neusatz, et lui-même établit son quartier général à Semlin. Ces villes constituaient ainsi autant de barrages élevés sur la route du fugitif.

Malheureusement, il paraissait bien que celui-ci ne fît que rire de la série d’obstacles accumulés devant lui. De même qu’on avait appris son passage en aval de Budapest, sa présence fut constatée, mais toujours trop tard, en aval de Mohacs, d’Apatin et de Neusatz. Dragoch, transporté de colère et comprenant qu’il jouait sa dernière carte, réunit alors une véritable flottille. Sur son ordre, plus de trente embarcations croisèrent nuit et jour au-dessous de Semlin. Bien adroit serait l’adversaire s’il parvenait à franchir leur ligne serrée.

Pour remarquables qu’elles fussent, ces dispositions n’auraient eu cependant aucun succès, si Serge Ladko fût resté prisonnier dans la gabarre de Striga. Heureusement pour le repos de Dragoch, il ne devait pas en être ainsi.

La journée du 6 septembre s’était écoulée dans ces conditions, sans que rien de nouveau fût survenu, et Dragoch, dès les premières heures du 7, se disposait à rejoindre sa flottille, quand il vit un agent accourir à sa rencontre. Son homme, enfin arrêté, venait d'être incarcéré dans la prison de Semlin.

Il se hâta de se rendre au parquet. L'agent avait dit vrai. Le trop célèbre Ladko était bien réellement sous les verrous.

La nouvelle se répandit avec la rapidité de l'éclair et mit la ville en rumeur. On ne causait pas d'autre chose, et, sur le quai, des groupes compacts stationnèrent toute la journée devant la barge du fameux malfaiteur.

Ces groupes ne purent manquer d'attirer l'attention d'une gabarre qui, vers trois heures de l'après-midi, passa au large de Semlin. Cette gabarre qui descendait innocemment le fleuve, c'était celle de Striga.

«Qu'y a-t-il donc à Semlin? dit celui-ci à son fidèle Titcha, en remarquant l'animation des quais. Serait-ce une émeute?

Il s'aida d'une jumelle, qu'il écarta de ses yeux après un rapide examen.

— Le diable m'emporte, Titcha, s'écria-t-il, si ce n'est pas l'embarcation de notre particulier!

— Tu crois?... fit Titcha en s'emparant de la jumelle.

— Il faut que j'en aie le coeur net, déclara Striga qui paraissait en proie à une vive agitation. Je vais à terre.

— Pour te faire pincer. C'est malin!... Si cette embarcation est celle de Dragoch, c'est que Dragoch est à Semlin. C'est se jeter dans la gueule du loup.

— Tu as raison, approuva Striga, qui disparut dans le rouf. Mais nous allons prendre nos précautions.»

Un quart d’heure plus tard, il revenait «camouflé» de main de maître, si l’on veut bien nous permettre cette expression empruntée à l’argot commun aux malfaiteurs et aux gens de police. Sa barbe coupée et remplacée par des favoris postiches, ses cheveux dissimulés sous une perruque, un large bandeau recouvrant l’un de ses yeux, il s’appuyait péniblement sur une canne, comme un homme qui sortirait à peine d’une grave maladie.

«Et maintenant?... demanda-t-il, non sans quelque vanité.

— Merveilleux! admira Titcha.

— Ecoute, reprit Striga. Tandis que je serai à Semlin, vous continuerez votre route. Deux ou trois lieues au delà de Belgrade, vous mouillerez et vous attendrez mon retour.

— Comment feras-tu pour nous rejoindre?

— Ne t’inquiète pas de ça, et dis à Ogul de me conduire dans le bachot.»

Pendant ce temps, le chaland avait laissé Semlin en arrière. Ayant pris terre assez loin de la ville, Striga revint à grands pas vers les maisons. Dès qu’il les eut atteintes, il modéra son allure, et, se mêlant aux groupes qui stationnaient au bord du fleuve, il recueillit avidement les propos échangés autour de lui.

Il ne s’attendait guère à ce que ces propos lui apprirent. Personne, dans ces groupes animés, ne parlait de Dragoch. On ne s’entretenait pas davantage d’Ilia Brusch. Il n’était question que de Ladko. De quel Ladko? Non pas du pilote de Roustchouk, dont le nom avait été utilisé par Striga de la manière qu’on sait, mais précisément de ce Ladko imaginaire qu’il avait ainsi créé de toutes pièces, du Ladko malfaiteur, du Ladko pirate, c’est-à-dire de lui-même, Striga. C’est sa propre arrestation qui formait le sujet de la conversation générale.

Il ne parvenait pas à comprendre. Que la police commit une erreur et arrêtât un innocent au lieu et place du coupable, il n’y avait à cela rien de bien surprenant. Mais quel rapport avait cette erreur, dont il pouvait mieux que personne certifier la réalité, avec la présence de ce bateau, que son chaland, la veille encore, avait à la traîne?

On estimera, sans doute, qu’il faisait preuve de faiblesse en accordant quelque intérêt à ce côté de la question. L’essentiel, c’était qu’un autre fût poursuivi à sa place. Pendant qu’on suspecterait celui-là, on ne songerait pas à s’occuper de lui. C’était le point important. Le reste ne comptait pas.

Rien n’eût été plus vrai, s’il n’avait eu des motifs particuliers de vouloir être renseigné à cet égard. A en juger d’après les apparences, tout portait à croire que l’homme incarcéré et le maître de la barge ne faisaient qu’un. Quel était cet inconnu, qui, après avoir été, huit jours durant, prisonnier à bord du chaland, en remplaçait si complaisamment le propriétaire entre les griffes de la police? Striga, certes, ne quitterait pas Semlin avant d’être fixé sur ce point.

Il lui fallut s’armer de patience. M. Izar Rona, juge chargé de cette affaire, ne paraissait pas disposé à mener rondement l’instruction. Trois jours s’écoulèrent sans qu’il donnât signe de vie. Cette attente préalable faisait partie de sa méthode. D’après lui, il est excellent de laisser tout d’abord un accusé aux prises avec la solitude. L’isolement est un grand destructeur de force nerveuse, et quelques jours de secret dépriment merveilleusement l’adversaire que le juge va trouver en face de lui.

M. Izar Rona, quarante-huit heures après l’arrestation, exprimait ces idées à Karl Dragoch venu aux informations. Le détective ne pouvait que donner aux théories de son chef une approbation hiérarchique.

«Enfin, monsieur le Juge, se risqua-t-il à demander, quand comptez-vous procéder au premier interrogatoire?

— Demain.

— Je viendrai donc demain soir en apprendre le résultat. Inutile de vous répéter, je pense, sur quoi se fondent les présomptions?

— Inutile, affirma M. Rona. J’ai nos conversations antérieures présentes à l’esprit, et, d’ailleurs, mes notes sont très complètes.

— Vous me permettrez toutefois de vous rappeler, monsieur le Juge, le désir que j’ai pris la liberté de vous exprimer?

— Quel désir?

— Celui de ne pas paraître dans cette affaire, au moins jusqu’à nouvel ordre. Ainsi que je vous l’ai exposé, l’inculpé ne me connaît que sous le nom de Jaeger. Cela peut éventuellement nous servir. Evidemment, lorsque nous serons devant la Cour, il me faudra décliner mon nom véritable. Mais nous n’en sommes pas là, et il me paraît préférable, pour la recherche des complices, de ne pas me brûler avant l’heure...

— C’est entendu,» promit le juge.

Dans la cellule où on l’avait enfermé, Serge Ladko attendait qu’on voulût bien s’occuper de lui. Suivant de si près sa précédente aventure, ce nouveau malheur, aussi inexplicable pour lui que l’autre, n’avait pas abattu son courage. Sans tenter la moindre résistance au moment de son arrestation, il s’était laissé conduire à la prison, après avoir vainement formulé une question restée sans réponse. Que risquait-il, d’ailleurs? Cette arrestation résultait nécessairement d’une erreur qui serait dissipée dès qu’on l’interrogerait.

Par malheur, le premier interrogatoire se faisait singulièrement attendre. Serge Ladko, maintenu au secret le plus rigoureux, demeurait seul, jour et nuit, dans sa cellule, où, de temps à autre, un gardien venait jeter un furtif coup d’oeil par un judas percé dans la porte. Ce gardien espérait-il, obéissant aux ordres de M. Izar Rona, constater les résultats progressifs de la méthode d’isolement! En ce cas, il ne devait pas se retirer satisfait. Les heures et les jours s’écoulaient, sans que rien, dans l’attitude du prisonnier, révélât un changement de ses intimes pensées. Assis sur une chaise, les mains appuyées sur les genoux, les yeux baissés, la face froide, il semblait profondément réfléchir, et gardait une immobilité presque absolue, sans donner aucun signe d’impatience. Dès la première minute, Serge Ladko s’était résolu au calme, et rien ne l’en ferait sortir; mais il en arrivait, en constatant la fuite du temps, à regretter sa prison flottante qui, du moins, le rapprochait de Roustchouk.

Le troisième jour, enfin, — on était alors au 10 septembre, — sa porte s’ouvrit, et il fut invité à quitter sa cellule. Encadré par quatre soldats, baïonnette au canon, il suivit un long couloir, descendit un interminable escalier, puis traversa une rue, au delà de laquelle il pénétra dans le Palais de Justice, bâti en face de la prison.

Dans cette rue, le populaire grouillait, se pressant derrière un cordon d’agents de police. Quand le prisonnier apparut, de féroces clameurs s’élevèrent de cette foule, avide d’exprimer sa haine pour le malfaiteur redouté et si longtemps impuni. Quel que fût le sentiment de Serge Ladko en se voyant en butte à cette injure imméritée, il n’en laissa rien paraître. D’un pas ferme, il entra dans le Palais, et, après une nouvelle attente, se trouva enfin devant son juge.

M. Izar Rona, petit homme malingre, blond, la barbe rare, au teint jaune et bilieux, était un magistrat de la manière forte. Procédant par affirmations tranchantes, par dénégations brutales, il attaquait l’adversaire à coups de boutoir, plus désireux d’inspirer la terreur que de gagner la confiance.

Les gardes s’étaient retirés sur un signe du juge. Debout au milieu de la pièce, Serge Ladko attendait qu’il plût à celui-ci de l’interroger. Dans un angle, le greffier prêt à écrire.

«Asseyez-vous, dit M. Rona d’un ton brusque.

Serge Ladko obéit. Le magistrat reprit:

— Votre nom?

— Ilia Brusch.

— Votre domicile?

— Szalka.

— Votre profession?

— Pêcheur.

— Vous mentez, formula le juge, en surveillant du regard le prévenu.

Une légère rougeur colora le visage de Serge Ladko dont les yeux eurent un rapide éclair. Toutefois, il se contraignit au calme et garda le silence.

— Vous mentez, répéta M. Rona. Vous vous appelez Ladko. Votre domicile est Roustchouk.

Le pilote tressaillit. Ainsi son identité véritable était connue. Comment cela avait-il pu se faire? Cependant, le juge, à qui le tressaillement du prévenu n’avait pas échappé, poursuivait d’une voix cinglante:

— Vous êtes accusé de trois vols simples, de dix-neuf vols qualifiés perpétrés avec les circonstances aggravantes d’escalade et d’effraction, de trois assassinats et de six tentatives de meurtre, lesdits crimes et délits accomplis avec préméditation depuis moins de trois ans. Qu’avez-vous à répondre?

Le pilote avait écouté, stupéfait, cette incroyable nomenclature. Eh quoi! la confusion qu’il avait redoutée, en apprenant de la bouche de M. Jaeger l’existence de son sinistre homonyme, cette confusion s’était produite en effet. Dès lors, à quoi bon avouer qu’il s’appelait Serge Ladko? Tout à l’heure, il avait eu la pensée de le reconnaître, en implorant la discrétion du juge. Il comprenait maintenant qu’un tel aveu serait plus nuisible qu’utile. C’était bien lui, Serge Ladko, de Roustchouk, et non un autre, qui était accusé de cette effroyable série de crimes. Sans doute, même définitivement identifié, il parviendrait à établir son innocence. Mais combien de temps faudrait-il pour y arriver? Non, mieux valait soutenir jusqu’au bout le rôle du pêcheur Ilia Brusch, puisque Ilia Brusch était le nom d’un innocent.

— J’ai à répondre que vous vous trompez, répliqua-t-il d’une voix ferme. Je me nomme Ilia Brusch et je demeure à Szalka. Il est bien facile, d’ailleurs, de vous en assurer.

— Ce sera fait, dit le juge en prenant une note. En attendant, je vais vous faire connaître quelques-unes des charges qui pèsent sur vous.

Serge Ladko se fit plus attentif. On touchait au point intéressant.

— Pour le moment, commença le juge, nous laisserons de côté la plus grande partie des crimes qui vous sont reprochés, et nous nous occuperons seulement des plus récents, de ceux qui ont été perpétrés pendant le voyage au cours duquel vous avez été arrêté.

M. Rona, ayant repris haleine, poursuivit:

— C’est à Ulm que l’on signale pour la première fois votre présence. C’est donc à Ulm que nous placerons l’origine de ce voyage.

— Pardon, Monsieur, interrompit vivement Serge Ladko. Mon voyage avait commencé bien avant Ulm, puisque j’ai remporté deux prix au concours de pêche de Sigmaringen et que j’ai ensuite remonté le fleuve jusqu’à Donaueschingen.

— Il est exact, en effet, répliqua le juge, qu’un certain Ilia Brusch a été proclamé lauréat du concours de pêche institué par la Ligue Danubienne à Sigmaringen, et que cet Ilia Brusch a été vu à Donaueschingen. Mais, ou bien vous aviez déjà adopté à Sigmaringen une personnalité d’emprunt, ou bien vous vous êtes substitué audit Ilia Brusch pendant qu’il allait de Donaueschingen à Ulm. C’est un point que nous éluciderons en son temps, soyez tranquille.

Serge Ladko, les yeux écarquillés par la surprise, écoutait comme dans un rêve ces fantaisistes déductions. Un peu plus, on eût compté l’imaginaire Ilia Brusch au nombre de ses victimes! Sans prendre la peine de répondre, il haussait dédaigneusement les épaules, quand le juge, en le regardant fixement, lui demanda tout à coup à brûle-pourpoint:

— Qu’êtes-vous allé faire à Vienne, le 26 août dernier, chez le juif Simon Klein?

Malgré lui, Serge Ladko tressaillit une seconde fois. Voilà qu’on connaissait cette visite, maintenant! Certes, elle n’avait rien de répréhensible, mais l’avouer, c’était avouer en même temps son identité, et, puisqu’il avait adopté le parti de la nier, force lui était de persister dans cette voie.

— Simon Klein?... répéta-t-il d’un air interrogateur, en homme qui ne comprend pas.

— Vous niez?... fit M. Rona. Je m’y attendais. C’est donc à moi de vous apprendre qu’en vous rendant chez le juif Simon Klein — et le juge, ce disant, se souleva à demi sur son siège pour donner à ses paroles une plus écrasante autorité, — vous alliez vous entendre avec le receleur ordinaire de votre bande.

— De ma bande!... répéta le pilote ahuri.

— Il est vrai, rectifia ironiquement le juge, que vous ne savez pas ce que je veux dire, que vous ne faites partie d’aucune bande, que vous n’êtes pas Ladko, mais bien un inoffensif pêcheur à la ligne du nom d’Ilia Brusch; Mais alors, si vous vous nommez en effet Ilia Brusch, pourquoi vous cachez-vous?

— Je me cache, moi?... protesta Serge Ladko.

— Dame! ça m’en a tout l’air, répondit M. Izar Rona, à moins que ce ne soit pas se cacher que de dissimuler sous des lunettes noires des yeux qui semblent les meilleurs du monde — au fait! ayez donc l’obligeance de les enlever, ces lunettes! — et de teindre en noir des cheveux que l’on a naturellement blonds.

Serge Ladko était accablé.

La police était bien renseignée et la trame se resserrait autour de lui; sans paraître remarquer son trouble, M. Rona poursuivit son avantage:

— Eh! eh! vous voilà moins fringant, mon gaillard. Vous ne nous saviez pas si avancés... mais je continue. A Ulm, vous aviez pris un passager avec vous.

— Oui, répondit Serge Ladko.

— Quel était son nom?

— M. Jaeger.

— Très exact. Voudriez-vous me dire ce qu’il est devenu, ce M. Jaeger?

— Je l’ignore. Il m’a quitté en pleine campagne, presque au confluent de l’Ipoly. J’ai été bien surpris de ne plus le trouver en revenant à bord.

— En revenant, dites-vous. Vous vous étiez donc absenté? Où étiez-vous allé?

— Dans un village des environs, afin de me procurer un cordial pour mon passager.

— Il était donc malade?

— Très malade. Il avait failli se noyer tout bonnement.

— Et c’est vous qui l’avez sauvé, je présume?

— Qui voulez-vous que ce soit, puisqu’il n’y avait que moi?

— Hum!... fit le juge un peu ébranlé.

Mais, se ressaisissant:

— Vous comptez sans doute m’émouvoir avec cette histoire de sauvetage?

— Moi? protesta Ladko. Vous m’interrogez, je réponds. Voilà tout.

— C’est bon, conclut M. Izar Rona. Mais, dites-moi, avant cet incident, vous n’aviez jamais quitté votre barge, je crois?

— Une seule fois, pour aller chez moi, à Szalka.

— Pourriez-vous me préciser la date de cette excursion?

— Pourquoi pas, en cherchant un peu.

— Je vais vous aider. Ne serait-ce pas dans la nuit du 28 au 29 août?

— Peut-être bien.

— Vous ne le niez pas?

— Non.

— Vous l’avouez?

— Si vous voulez.

— Nous sommes d’accord... C’est sur la rive gauche du Danube, je crois, que se trouve Szalka? demanda M. Rona d’un air bonhomme.

— En effet.

— Et il faisait noir, je crois, dans cette nuit du 28 au 29 août?

— Très noir. Un temps affreux.

— Cela explique que vous vous soyez trompé. C’est par une erreur toute naturelle qu’en pensant aborder la rive gauche, vous avez débarqué sur la rive droite.

— Sur la rive droite?

M. Izar Rona se leva tout à fait, et, fixant le prévenu dans les yeux, prononça:

— Oui, sur la rive droite, juste en face de la villa du comte Hagueneau?

Serge Ladko chercha de bonne foi dans ses souvenirs. Hagueneau? Il ne connaissait pas ce nom.

— Vous êtes très fort, déclara le juge déçu dans son essai d’intimidation. Il est donc entendu que c’est la première fois que vous entendez prononcer le nom du comte Hagueneau et que, si, au cours de la nuit du 28 au 29 août, sa villa a été mise au pillage et son gardien Christian Hoël grièvement blessé, c’est à votre insu. Où diable avais-je la tête? Comment connaîtriez-vous ces crimes commis par un certain Ladko? Ladko, que diable! ce n’est pas votre nom!

— Mon nom est Ilia Brusch, affirma le pilote d’une voix moins assurée que la première fois.

— Parfait! parfait!... c’est convenu... mais alors, si vous ne vous appelez pas Ladko, pourquoi avez-vous disparu, juste après la perpétration de ce crime, pour ne rompre votre incognito — et encore bien modestement! — qu’à une distance respectable de la région qui en a été le théâtre? Pourquoi ne vous a-t-on vu, vous qui montriez auparavant si généreusement votre personne, ni à Budapest, ni à Neusatz, ni à aucune ville un peu importante? Pourquoi avez-vous abandonné votre rôle de pêcheur, au point même d’acheter parfois du poisson dans les villages où vous consentiez à vous arrêter?

Tout cela était de l’hébreu pour le malheureux pilote. S’il avait disparu, c’était bien malgré lui. Depuis cette nuit du 28 au 29 août, n’avait-il pas été constamment prisonnier? Dans ces conditions, quoi de surprenant à ce qu’il eût disparu? L’étonnant, au contraire, c’est qu’il se trouvât quelqu’un pour prétendre l’avoir aperçu.

Cette erreur du moins serait facile à dissiper. Il suffirait de raconter sincèrement l’aventure incompréhensible dont il avait été victime. La justice serait peut-être plus clairvoyante et peut-être arriverait-elle à débrouiller les fils de cet imbroglio. Bien décidé à faire ce récit, Serge Ladko attendait impatiemment que M. Rona lui permit de placer un mot. Mais le juge était lancé à toute vapeur. Il se promenait maintenant de long en large dans son cabinet, en jetant au visage de son prisonnier un flot d’arguments qu’il jugeait triomphants.

— Si vous n’êtes pas Ladko, continuait-il avec une véhémence croissante, comment se fait-il que, succédant au pillage de la villa du comte Hagueneau, pillage accompli, par un malheureux hasard, précisément au moment où vous aviez quitté votre barge, un vol, oh! un vol simple, celui-ci! ait été commis à Szuszek dans la nuit du 5 au 6 septembre, nuit que vous avez dû nécessairement passer en face de ce village? Si vous n’êtes pas Ladko, enfin, que faisait dans votre barge ce portrait adressé à son mari par votre femme, Natcha Ladko?

M. Rona avait touché juste, cette fois, et le dernier argument était en effet triomphant. Le pilote, anéanti, avait baissé la tête et de grosses gouttes de sueur ruisselaient de son visage.

Cependant le juge poursuivait d’une voix plus haute:

— Si vous n’êtes pas Ladko, pourquoi ce portrait a-t-il été supprimé du jour où vous vous êtes senti menacé? Il était dans votre coffre, ce portrait; je précise, dans votre coffre de tribord. Il n’y est plus. Sa présence vous accusait; sa disparition vous condamne. Qu’avez-vous à répondre?

— Rien, murmura Ladko d’une voix sourde. Je ne comprends rien à ce qui m’arrive.

— Vous comprendrez à merveille si vous voulez vous en donner la peine. Pour le moment, nous allons interrompre cet intéressant entretien. On va vous reconduire dans votre cellule, où vous aurez tout le temps de vous livrer à vos réflexions. Récapitulons, en attendant, l’interrogatoire d’aujourd’hui. Vous prétendez: 1° Vous nommer Ilia Brusch; 2° Avoir remporté le prix au concours de pêche de Sigmaringen; 3° Habiter Szalka; 4° Avoir passé chez vous, à Szalka, la nuit du 28 au 29 août. Ces points seront vérifiés. De mon côté je prétends: 1° Que votre nom est Ladko; 2° Que votre domicile est Roustchouk; 3° Que, dans la nuit du 28 au 29 août, avec l’aide de nombreux complices, vous avez mis au pillage la villa du comte Hagueneau et vous êtes rendu coupable d’une tentative de meurtre sur la personne du gardien Christian Hoël; 4° Qu’un vol dont le nommé Kellermann, de Szuszek, a été victime, dans la nuit du 5 au 6 septembre, doit être mis à votre passif; 5° Que de nombreux autres vols et meurtres commis dans les régions baignées par le Danube doivent pareillement vous être imputés. L’instruction de ces crimes est ouverte. Des témoins sont cités. Vous serez mis en leur présence... Voulez-vous signer votre interrogatoire?.. Non?.. A votre aise!.. Gardes, reconduisez le prévenu!»

Pour regagner sa prison, Serge Ladko dut passer de nouveau au milieu de la foule et en subir encore les vociférations hostiles. La colère populaire semblait s’être accrue pendant la durée de l’interrogatoire et la police eut quelque peine à protéger le prisonnier.

Au premier rang de cette foule hurlante, figurait Ivan Striga. Celui-ci dévora des yeux l’individu qui prenait sa place avec tant de complaisance. Le pilote passa à deux mètres de lui et il put le voir tout à son aise. Mais il ne reconnut pas cet homme imberbe, aux cheveux bruns, dont le visage était orné d’une superbe paire de lunettes noires, et ses perplexités n’en furent pas atténuées.

Striga s’éloigna tout songeur avec le reste de la foule quand furent refermées les portes de la prison. Décidément, il ne connaissait pas l’homme arrêté. Ce n’était, en tous cas, ni Dragoch, ni Ladko. Dès lors, qu’il s’agît d’Ilia Brusch ou de tout autre, que lui importait? Quelle que fût la personnalité de l’accusé, l’essentiel était qu’il absorbât l’attention de la justice, et Striga n’avait plus de raison de s’attarder à Semlin. C’est pourquoi il se résolut à partir dès le lendemain peur regagner son chaland.

Mais, à son réveil, la lecture des journaux le fit changer d’avis. Cette affaire Ladko étant menée dans le secret le plus rigoureux, c’était une raison péremptoire pour que la Presse s’ingéniât à percer, le mystère. Elle y avait réussi. Ample était sa moisson d’informations.

Les journaux relataient, en effet, assez exactement le premier interrogatoire, en faisant suivre leur récit de commentaires qui n’étaient pas précisément favorables à l’accusé. En général, ils s’étonnaient de l’obstination avec laquelle celui-ci soutenait être un simple pêcheur, du nom d’Ilia Brusch, habitant seul la petite ville de Szalka. Quel intérêt pouvait-il avoir à soutenir un pareil système, dont la fragilité était évidente? Déjà, d’après eux, le juge d’instruction, M. Izar Rona, avait envoyé à Gran une commission rogatoire. D’ici très peu de jours, un magistrat se transporterait donc à Szalka et se livrerait à une enquête qui aurait comme résultat de ruiner les allégations du prévenu. On chercherait cet Ilia Brusch, et on le trouverait... s’il existait, ce qui, en somme, était fort douteux.

Cette nouvelle modifia les projets de Striga. Tandis qu’il poursuivait sa lecture, une idée singulière lui était venue, et l’idée prit corps, quand il eut achevé de lire. Certes, il était très bon que la justice tînt un innocent. Mais il serait meilleur encore qu’elle le gardât. Pour cela, que fallait-il? Lui fournir un Ilia Brusch en chair et en os, ce qui convaincrait *ipso facto* d’imposture le véritable Ilia Brusch qu’on retenait prisonnier à Semlin. Cette charge s’ajouterait à celles qu’on possédait déjà forcément contre lui, puisqu’on l’avait arrêté, et suffirait peut-être à motiver sa condamnation définitive, au grand profit du vrai coupable.

Sans plus attendre, Striga quitta la ville. Seulement, au lieu de regagner son chaland, il lui tournait le dos. Emporté par une rapide voiture, il allait rejoindre la ligne ferrée qui l’emmènerait à toute vapeur vers Budapest et vers le Nord.

Pendant ce temps, Serge Ladko, gardant son immobilité coutumière, comptait tristement les heures. De sa première entrevue avec le juge, il était revenu effrayé de la gravité des présomptions qui pesaient sur lui. Certes, il réussirait fatalement avec le temps à faire triompher son innocence. Mais il lui faudrait sans doute s'armer de patience, car il ne pouvait méconnaître que les apparences fussent contre lui et que la justice n'eût bâti avec logique son échafaudage d'hypothèses.

Toutefois, il y a loin entre de simples soupçons et des preuves formelles. Or, des preuves, on n'arriverait jamais, et pour cause, à en réunir contre lui. Le seul témoin qu'il eût à craindre, et encore uniquement en ce qui concernait le secret de son nom, c'était le juif Simon Klein. Mais Simon Klein, qui avait son point d'honneur professionnel, ne consentirait vraisemblablement jamais à le reconnaître. D'ailleurs, aurait-on même besoin de le mettre en présence de son ancien correspondant de Vienne? Le juge n'avait-il pas déclaré qu'il allait se renseigner à Szalka? Ces renseignements ne pouvant manquer d'être excellents, la mise en liberté du prisonnier en résulterait évidemment.

Plusieurs jours s'écoulèrent, durant lesquels Serge Ladko ressassa ces pensées avec une fébrilité croissante. Szalka n'était pas si loin, et il ne fallait pas si longtemps pour se renseigner. On était au septième jour, depuis son premier interrogatoire, quand il fut introduit, de nouveau dans le cabinet de M. Rona.

Le juge était à son bureau et paraissait fort occupé. Pendant dix minutes, il laissa le pilote attendre debout, comme s'il eût ignoré sa présence.

«Nous avons la réponse de Szalka, dit-il enfin d'une voix détachée, sans même relever les yeux sur le prisonnier qu'il surveillait sournoisement à travers ses cils baissés.

— Ah!.. fît Serge Ladko avec satisfaction.

— Vous aviez raison, continuait cependant M. Rona. Il existe bien à Szalka un nommé Ilia Brusch, qui jouit de la meilleure réputation.

— Ah!.. fit pour la seconde fois le pilote, qui voyait déjà ouverte la porte de sa prison.

Le juge, se faisant plus étranger et plus indifférent encore, murmura sans paraître y attacher la moindre importance:

— Le commissaire de police de Gran, chargé de l’enquête, a eu la bonne fortune de lui parler à lui-même.

— A lui-même? répéta Serge Ladko qui ne comprenait pas.

— A lui-même, affirma le juge.

Serge Ladko croyait rêver. Comment un autre Ilia Brusch avait-il pu être trouvé à Szalka?

— Ce n’est pas possible, Monsieur, balbutia-t-il. Il y a erreur.

— Jugez-en vous-même, répliqua le juge. Voici le rapport du commissaire de police de Gran. Il en résulte que ce magistrat, déférant à la commission rogatoire que je lui ai adressée, s’est transporté le 14 septembre à Szalka et qu’il s’est rendu dans une maison sise au coin du chemin de halage et de la route de Budapest... C’est bien l’adresse que vous avez donnée, je pense? demanda le juge en s’interrompant.

— Oui, Monsieur, répondit Serge Ladko d’un air égaré.

— **...** et de la route de Budapest, reprit M. Rona; qu’il a été reçu dans la dite maison, par le sieur Ilia Brusch en personne, lequel a déclaré n’être que tout récemment revenu d’une assez longue absence. Le commissaire ajoute que les renseignements qu’il a pu recueillir sur le sieur Ilia Brusch tendent à établir sa parfaite honorabilité, et qu’aucun autre habitant de Szalka ne porte ce nom... Avez-vous quelque chose à dire? Ne vous gênez pas, je vous prie.

— Non, Monsieur, balbutia Serge Ladko qui se sentait devenir fou.

— Voilà donc un premier point élucidé,» conclut avec satisfaction M. Rona, qui regardait son prisonnier comme le chat doit regarder une souris.

XIV

ENTRE CIEL ET TERRE

Son deuxième interrogatoire terminé, Serge Ladko regagna sa cellule sans se rendre compte de ce qu’il faisait. A peine s’il avait entendu les questions du juge après que l’incident de la commission rogatoire eut été vidé de la façon que l’on sait, et il n’avait plus répondu que d’un air hébété. Ce qui lui arrivait dépassait les limites de son intelligence. Que lui voulait-on à la fin? Enlevé, puis incarcéré à bord d’un chaland par de mystérieux ennemis, il ne recouvrait sa liberté que pour la perdre aussitôt; et voici maintenant qu’on trouvait, à Szalka, un autre Ilia Brusch, c’est-à-dire un autre lui-même, dans sa propre maison!.. Cela tenait de la fantasmagorie!

Stupéfait, affolé par cette succession d’événements inexplicables, il avait la sensation d’être le jouet de puissances supérieures et hostiles, d’être invinciblement entraîné, proie inerte et sans défense, dans les engrenages de cette machine formidable qui s’appelle: la Justice.

Cette dépression, cet anéantissement de toute énergie, son visage l’exprimait avec tant d’éloquence, qu’un des gardiens qui lui faisaient escorte en fut ému, bien qu’il considérât son prisonnier comme le plus abominable criminel.

«Ça ne va donc pas comme vous voulez, camarade? demanda, en mettant dans sa voix quelque désir de réconfort, ce fonctionnaire blasé cependant par profession sur le spectacle des misères humaines.

Il aurait parlé à un sourd, que le résultat eût été le même.

— Allons! reprit le compatissant gardien, il faut se faire une raison. M. Izar Rona n’est pas un mauvais diable, et tout s’arrangera peut-être mieux que vous ne pensez... En attendant, je vais vous laisser ça... Il est question de votre pays là-dedans. Ça vous distraira.»

Le prisonnier garda son immobilité. Il n’avait pas entendu.

Il n’entendit pas davantage les verrous poussés à l’extérieur et pas davantage il ne vit le journal que le gardien, trahissant ainsi sans penser à mal le secret rigoureux auquel était astreint son prisonnier, déposait sur la table en s’en allant.

Les heures coulèrent. Le jour s’acheva, puis la nuit, et ce fut une nouvelle aurore. Ecroulé sur sa chaise, Serge Ladko n’avait pas conscience de la fuite du temps.

Cependant, quand le jour grandissant vint frapper son visage, il parut sortir de cet accablement. Il ouvrit les yeux, et son regard vague erra par la cellule. La première chose qu’il aperçut alors, ce fut le journal laissé la veille par le pitoyable gardien.

Tel que celui-ci l’y avait placé, ce journal s’étalait toujours sur la table, découvrant une *manchette* imprimée en grasses capitales au-dessous du titre. «Les massacres de Bulgarie», annonçait cette manchette, sur laquelle tomba le premier regard de Serge Ladko. Il tressaillit et s’empara fébrilement du journal. Son intelligence réveillée revenait à flots. Ses yeux fulguraient, tandis qu’il poursuivait sa lecture.

Les événements qu’il apprenait ainsi étaient, au même instant, commentés dans l’Europe entière, et y soulevaient une clameur générale de réprobation.

Depuis, ils sont entrés dans l’histoire, dont ils ne forment pas la page la plus glorieuse.

Ainsi qu’il a été rappelé au début de ce récit, toute la région balkanique était alors en ébullition. Dès l’été de 1875, l’Herzégovine s’était révoltée, et les troupes ottomanes envoyées contre elle n’avaient pu la réduire. En mai 1876, la Bulgarie s’étant soulevée à son tour, la Porte répondit à l’insurrection en concentrant une nombreuse armée dans un vaste triangle ayant pour sommets Roustchouk, Widdin et Sofia. Enfin, le 1er et le 2 juillet de cette année 1876, la Serbie et le Monténégro, entrant en scène à leur tour, avaient déclaré la guerre à la Turquie. Les Serbes, commandés par le général russe Tchernaief, après avoir tout d’abord remporté quelques succès, avaient dû battre en retraite en deçà de leur frontière, et le 1er septembre le prince Milan s’était vu contraint de demander un armistice de dix jours, pendant lequel il sollicita, des puissances chrétiennes, une intervention que celles-ci furent malheureusement trop longues à lui accorder.

«Alors,» dit M. Édouard Driault, dans son *Histoire de la Question d’Orient*, «se produisit le plus affreux épisode de ces luttes; il rappelle les massacres de Chio au temps de l’insurrection grecque. Ce furent les massacres de Bulgarie. La Porte, au milieu de la guerre contre la Serbie et le Monténégro, craignait que l’insurrection bulgare, sur les derrières de l’armée, ne compromît ses opérations. Le gouverneur de la Bulgarie, Chefkat-Pacha, reçut-il l’ordre d’écraser l’insurrection sans regarder aux moyens? Cela est vraisemblable. Des bandes de Bachi-Bouzouks et de Circassiens appelées d’Asie furent lâchées sur la Bulgarie, et en quelques jours elle fut mise à feu et à sang. Ils assouvirent à l’aise leurs sauvages passions, brûlèrent les villages, massacrèrent les hommes au milieu des tortures les plus raffinées, éventrèrent les femmes, coupèrent en morceaux les enfants. Il y eut environ vingt-cinq à trente mille victimes...»

Tandis qu'il lisait, des gouttes de sueur perlaient sur le visage de Serge Ladko. Natcha!.. Qu'était devenue Natcha, au milieu de cet effroyable bouleversement?.. Vivait-elle encore? Était-elle morte, au contraire, et son cadavre éventré, coupé en morceaux, de même que celui de tant d'autres innocentes victimes, traînait-il dans la boue, dans la fange, dans le sang, écrasé sous le pied des chevaux?

Serge Ladko s'était levé, et, pareil à une bête fauve mise en cage, courait furieusement autour de la cellule, comme s'il eût cherché une issue pour voler au secours de Natcha.

Cet accès de désespoir fut de courte durée. Revenu bientôt à la raison, il se contraignit au calme, d'un énergique effort, et, avec un cerveau lucide, chercha les moyens de reconquérir sa liberté.

Aller trouver le juge, lui avouer sans détour la vérité, implorer au besoin sa pitié?.. Mauvais moyen. Quelle chance avait-il d'obtenir la confiance d'un esprit prévenu, après avoir si longtemps persévéré dans le mensonge? Etait-il en son pouvoir de détruire d'un seul mot la suspicion attachée à son nom de Ladko, de ruiner en un instant les présomptions qui l'accablaient? Non. Une enquête serait à tout le moins nécessaire, et une enquête exigerait des semaines, sinon des mois.

Il fallait donc fuir.

Pour la première fois depuis qu'il y était entré, Serge Ladko examina sa cellule. Ce fut vite fait. Quatre murs percés de deux ouvertures: la porte d’un coté, la fenêtre de l’autre. Derrière trois de ces murs, d’autres cachots, d’autres prisons; derrière la fenêtre seulement, l’espace et la liberté.

L’enseuillement de cette fenêtre, dont le linteau atteignait le plafond, dépassait un mètre cinquante, et sa partie inférieure, ce qu’on eût nommé l’appui pour une ouverture ordinaire, était inaccessible, une rangée de gros barreaux scellés dans l’épaisseur du cadre en interdisant l’approche. D’ailleurs, cette difficulté vaincue, il en serait resté une autre. Au dehors, une sorte de hotte, dont les côtés venaient s’appliquer de part et d’autre de la fenêtre, arrêtait tout regard vers l’extérieur et ne laissait de visible qu’un étroit rectangle de ciel. Non pas même pour fuir, mais pour être seulement en état d’en chercher le moyen, il fallait donc tout d’abord forcer l’obstacle de la grille, puis se hisser à force de bras au sommet de cette hotte, de manière à pouvoir reconnaître les alentours.

A en juger par les escaliers descendus lors des convocations de M. Izar Rona, Serge Ladko s’estimait enfermé au quatrième étage de la prison. Douze à quatorze mètres à tout le moins devaient donc le séparer du sol. Serait-il possible de les franchir? Impatient d’être renseigné à cet égard, il résolut de se mettre à l’oeuvre sur-le-champ.

Au préalable, cependant, il convenait de se procurer un instrument de travail. On lui avait tout pris, quand on l’avait écroué, et, dans son cachot, rien ne pouvait être d’aucun secours. Une table, une chaise et une couchette, représentée par une maigre paillasse recouvrant une voûte en maçonnerie, c’était là tout son mobilier.

Serge Ladko cherchait en vain depuis longtemps, quand, en visitant pour la centième fois ses vêtements, sa main rencontra enfin un corps dur. Pas plus que ses geôliers eux-mêmes, il n’avait pensé jusqu’ici à cette chose insignifiante qu’est une boucle de pantalon. Quelle importance n’acquérait pas maintenant cette chose insignifiante, seul objet métallique qui fût en sa possession!

Ayant détaché cette boucle, Serge Ladko, sans perdre une minute, attaqua la muraille au pied de l’un des barreaux, et la pierre, obstinément griffée par les ardillons d’acier, commença à tomber en poussière sur le sol. Ce travail, déjà lent et pénible par lui-même, était encore compliqué par la surveillance incessante à laquelle était soumis le prisonnier. Une heure ne s’écoulait pas, sans qu’un gardien vînt mettre l’oeil au guichet de la porte. De là, nécessité d’avoir toujours l’oreille tendue vers les bruits extérieurs, et, au moindre signe de danger, d’interrompre le travail en faisant disparaître toute trace suspecte.

Dans ce but, Serge Ladko utilisait son pain. Ce pain, malaxé avec la poussière qui tombait de la muraille, prit d’une manière assez satisfaisante la couleur de la pierre et devint un véritable mastic, à l’aide duquel le trou fut dissimulé à mesure qu’il était creusé. Quant au surplus des débris produits par le grattage, il le cachait sous la voûte de son lit.

Après douze heures d’efforts, le barreau était déchaussé sur une hauteur de trois centimètres, mais la boucle n’avait plus de pointes. Serge Ladko brisa l’armature, et, des morceaux, fit autant d’outils. Douze heures plus tard, ces menus fragments d’acier avaient disparu à leur tour.

Heureusement, la chance qui avait déjà souri au prisonnier semblait ne plus vouloir l’abandonner. Au premier repas qui lui fut servi, il se risqua à garder un couteau de table, et, personne n’ayant remarqué ce larcin, il le recommença avec le même bonheur le jour suivant. Il se trouvait ainsi maître de deux instruments plus sérieux que ceux dont il avait disposé jusqu’ici. A vrai dire, il ne s’agissait que de méchants couteaux très grossièrement fabriqués. Toutefois, leurs lames étaient assez bonnes, et les manches en facilitaient le maniement.

Le travail, à partir de ce moment, avança plus vite, bien que trop lentement encore. Le ciment, avec le temps, avait acquis la dureté du granit et ne se laissait que difficilement effriter. A chaque instant, d’ailleurs, le travail devait être interrompu, soit à cause d’une ronde de gardiens, soit par suite d’une convocation de M. Rona, qui multipliait les interrogatoires.

Le résultat de ces interrogatoires était toujours le même. L’instruction piétinait sur place. A chaque séance, c’était un défilé de témoins dont les déclarations n’apportaient aucune lumière. Si les uns semblaient trouver quelque vague ressemblance entre Serge Ladko et le malfaiteur qu’ils avaient plus ou moins nettement aperçu le jour où ils en avaient été victimes, d’autres niaient catégoriquement cette ressemblance. M. Rona avait beau affubler son prévenu de barbes postiches taillées selon toutes les coupes imaginables, l’obliger à montrer ses yeux ou à les dissimuler derrière les verres noirs des lunettes, il ne réussissait pas à obtenir un seul témoignage formel. Aussi attendait-il avec impatience que l’état de Christian Hoël, blessé lors du dernier attentat de la bande du Danube, permît à celui-ci de se rendre à Semlin.

De ces interrogatoires, Serge Ladko se désintéressait d’ailleurs. Docilement, il se prêtait à toutes les expériences du juge, s’affublait de perruques et de fausses barbes, mettait ou retirait ses lunettes, sans se permettre la plus petite observation. Sa pensée était absente de ce cabinet. Elle restait dans sa cellule, où le barreau qui le séparait de la liberté sortait peu à peu de la pierre.

Quatre jours lui furent nécessaires pour achever de le desceller. C’est seulement le soir du 23 septembre qu’il en atteignit l’extrémité inférieure. Il s’agissait maintenant d’en scier l’extrémité opposée.

Cette partie du travail était la plus pénible. Suspendu d’une main au reste de la grille, Serge Ladko, de l’autre, activait le va-et-vient de son outil. Celui-ci, simple lame de couteau, jouait mal son rôle de scie et n’entamait que lentement le fer. D’autre part, cette position exténuante obligeait à de fréquents repos.

Le 29 septembre, enfin, après six jours d’efforts héroïques, Serge Ladko estima suffisante la profondeur de l’entaille. A quelques millimètres près, le fer était en effet sectionné. Il n’aurait donc aucune peine à vaincre la résistance du métal, lorsqu’il voudrait plier la barre. Il était temps. La lame du second couteau était alors réduite à un fil.

Dès le lendemain matin, aussitôt après le passage de la première ronde, ce qui lui assurait une heure environ de sécurité, Serge Ladko poursuivit méthodiquement son entreprise. Conformément à ses prévisions, le barreau fléchit sans difficulté. Par l’ouverture ainsi faite, il passa de l’autre côté de la grille, puis, s’enlevant à la force des bras, atteignit le sommet de la hotte. Avidement, il regarda autour de lui.

Comme il l’avait supposé, quatorze mètres environ le séparaient du sol. Cette distance n’était pas telle qu’il fût impossible de la franchir, pourvu que l’on possédât une corde de longueur suffisante. Mais arriver jusqu’au sol n’était que la difficulté la moins grave, et, cette difficulté fût-elle vaincue, le problème n’en serait pas pour cela plus près d’être résolu.

Ainsi que Serge Ladko put le constater, la prison était, en effet, ceinturée par un chemin de ronde, que limitait, à la périphérie, un mur d’environ huit mètres d’élévation, au delà duquel apparaissaient des toits de maisons.

Après être descendu, il faudrait donc passer par-dessus cette muraille, ce qui, dès l’abord, semblait impraticable.

A en juger par l’éloignement des maisons, une rue entourait probablement la prison. Une fois dans cette rue, un fugitif pouvait se considérer comme sauvé. Mais le moyen existait-il d’y arriver sain et sauf?

Serge Ladko, en quête d’un expédient, commença par examiner attentivement ce qu’il pouvait découvrir sur la gauche. S’il n’y trouva pas la solution qu’il cherchait, ce qu’il aperçut fit battre son coeur d’émotion. Dans cette direction, il voyait le Danube, dont d’innombrables bateaux de toutes tailles sillonnaient les eaux jaunes. Les uns suivaient ou remontaient le courant, d’autres tendaient la corde de leur ancre ou l’amarre qui les retenait au quai.

Parmi ces derniers, le pilote, du premier coup d’oeil, reconnut sa barge. Rien ne la distinguait des embarcations ses voisines, et il ne semblait pas qu’elle fût l’objet d’une surveillance particulière. Ce serait une heureuse chance, s’il parvenait à la reconquérir. En moins d’une heure, grâce à elle, il aurait franchi la frontière, et, en territoire serbe, il se rirait de la justice austro-hongroise.

Serge Ladko reporta ses regards vers la droite, et, de ce côté, il remarqua aussitôt une particularité qui le rendit attentif. Retenue de distance en distance par de solides crampons scellés dans le bâtiment, une tige de fer venue du toit — la chaîne du paratonnerre selon toute vraisemblance — passait à proximité de sa fenêtre, pour aller finalement s’enfoncer dans le sol. Cette tige de fer eût rendu la descente assez facile, si l’on avait pu arriver jusqu’à elle.

Or, ceci n’était peut-être pas irréalisable. A la hauteur du carrelage de sa cellule, une sorte de bandeau, motivé par la décoration de l’édifice, courait le long du mur en faisant une saillie de vingt ou vingt-cinq centimètres. Peut-être, avec du sang-froid et de l’énergie, n’eût-il pas été impossible de s’y tenir debout, et d’atteindre ainsi la chaîne du paratonnerre.

Malheureusement, quand bien même on eût été capable d’une aussi folle audace, la muraille extérieure n’en fût pas moins, demeurée infranchissable. Prisonnier dans une cellule ou dans le chemin de ronde, c’était toujours être prisonnier.

Serge Ladko, en examinant cette muraille avec plus de soin qu’il ne l’avait fait jusqu’alors, observa que la partie supérieure, à peu de distance au-dessous du chaperon, en était décorée intérieurement et extérieurement par une série de bossages, formés de moellons carrés à demi encastrés dans le reste de la maçonnerie. Un long moment Serge Ladko contempla cet ornement architectural, puis, se laissant glisser sur l’appui de la fenêtre, il réintégra sa cellule, et se hâta de faire disparaître toute trace compromettante.

Son parti était pris. Le moyen d’être libre envers et contre tous, il l’avait trouvé. Quelque risqué qu’il fût, ce moyen pouvait, devait réussir. Au surplus, mieux valait la mort que la continuation de pareilles angoisses.

Patiemment, il attendit le passage de la seconde ronde. Assuré dès lors d’une nouvelle période de tranquillité, il se mit en devoir d’achever ses préparatifs. De ses draps, il fit, à l’aide de ce qui subsistait de son couteau, une cinquantaine de bandes de quelques centimètres de largeur. Afin que l’attention des gardiens ne fût pas attirée, il eut soin de réserver une quantité de toile suffisante pour que sa couchette gardât son aspect extérieur. Quant au reste, nul n’aurait évidemment l’idée de venir soulever la couverture.

Les bandes découpées, il les accoupla quatre par quatre sous forme d’une tresse, dans laquelle les brins, se chevauchant l’un l’autre, s’allongeaient d’une nouvelle bande lorsqu’ils étaient proches de leur fin. Une journée fut consacrée à ce travail. Enfin, le 1er octobre, un peu avant midi, Serge Ladko eut en sa possession une corde solide, longue de quatorze à quinze mètres, qu’il dissimula soigneusement sous sa couchette.

Tout étant prêt, il résolut que l’évasion aurait lieu le soir même, à neuf heures.

Cette dernière journée, Serge Ladko l’occupa à examiner les plus petits détails de son entreprise, à en calculer les chances et les dangers. Quelle en serait l’issue: la liberté ou la mort? Un avenir prochain en déciderait. Dans tous les cas, il la tenterait.

Toutefois, avant que l’instant d’agir sonnât, le sort lui réservait une dernière épreuve. Il était près de trois heures de l’après-midi, quand les verrous de sa porte furent tirés à grand bruit. Que lui voulait-on? S’agissait-il encore d’un interrogatoire de M. Izar Rona? L’heure à laquelle il convoquait d’ordinaire le prisonnier était passée cependant.

Non, il n’était pas question de se rendre à une convocation du juge. Par la porte ouverte, Serge Ladko aperçut dans le couloir, outre l’un de ses gardiens habituels, un groupe de trois personnes qui lui étaient inconnues. L’une de ces personnes était une femme, une jeune femme de vingt ans à peine, dont le visage exprimait la douceur et la bonté. Des deux hommes qui l’accompagnaient, l’un était évidemment son mari. Le langage et l’attitude du gardien permettaient de reconnaître dans l’autre le directeur même de la prison.

Il s’agissait évidemment d’une visite. A en juger par la déférence respectueuse qui leur était témoignée, les visiteurs étaient gens de marque, peut-être quelque couple princier en voyage, auprès duquel le directeur jouait le rôle de cicérone.

«L’occupant actuel de cette cellule, dit-il à ses hôtes, n’est autre que le fameux Ladko, chef de la bande du Danube, dont le nom à dû certainement parvenir jusqu’à vous.

La jeune femme glissa un regard timide à l’adresse du célèbre malfaiteur. Il n’avait pas l’air bien terrible, ce célèbre malfaiteur. Jamais on ne se serait imaginé un chef de bandits d’une cruauté légendaire sous les traits de cet homme amaigri, émacié, à la figure hâve, dont les jeux exprimaient tant de détresse et de profond désespoir.

— Il est vrai qu’il s’entête à protester de son innocence, ajouta impartialement le directeur; mais nous sommes habitués à cette chanson.»

Il fit ensuite remarquer aux visiteurs le bon ordre de la cellule et sa parfaite propreté. Dans la chaleur de son discours, il en franchit même le seuil, et alla s’adosser au-dessous de la fenêtre, afin de faire face à son auditoire.

Tout à coup, le coeur de Serge Ladko Cessa de battre. Sans le savoir, l’orateur frôlait l’endroit attaqué par le prisonnier et un peu de ciment commençait à tomber en fine poussière. Ebranlé par un autre mouvement, ce fut bientôt le tampon de mie de pain qui se détacha d’un seul bloc et tomba sur le carreau. Serge Ladko eut un frisson d’épouvanté, en constatant que l’extrémité du barreau descellé apparaissait à nu au fond de son alvéole.

Quelqu’un avait-il vu? Oui, quelqu’un avait vu. Tandis que son mari et le directeur examinaient la misérable table comme un objet du plus haut intérêt, et que le gardien, respectueusement détourné, semblait regarder quelque chose dans l’enfilade du couloir, la visiteuse tenait ses yeux fixés sur l’excavation pratiquée dans la muraille, et l’expression de son visage montrait qu’elle en comprenait le mystérieux langage.

Elle allait parler... d’un mot, ruiner tant d’efforts... Serge Ladko attendait, et, par degrés, il se sentait mourir.

Un peu pâle, la jeune femme releva les yeux sur le prisonnier et le couvrit de son regard limpide. Vit-elle les grosses larmes qui s’échappaient lentement des paupières du misérable? Comprit-elle sa supplication silencieuse? Eut-elle conscience de son horrible désespoir?..

Dix secondes tragiques passèrent, et soudain elle se détourna en poussant un cri de douleur. Ses deux compagnons se précipitèrent vers elle. Que lui était-il arrivé? Rien de grave, affirma-t-elle, d’une voix tremblante, en s’efforçant de sourire. Elle venait de se tordre sottement le pied, voilà tout.

Tandis que Serge Ladko allait, sans être aperçu, se placer devant le barreau accusateur, mari, directeur et gardien s’empressèrent. Les deux premiers sortirent soutenant la prétendue blessée; le troisième repoussa précipitamment les verrous. Serge Ladko était seul.

Quel élan de gratitude gonfla sa poitrine pour la douce créature, qui avait eu pitié! Grâce à elle, il était sauvé. Il lui devait la vie; plus que la vie, la liberté.

Il était retombé, accablé, sur sa couchette. L’émotion avait été trop rude. Son cerveau vacillait sous ce dernier coup du sort.

Le reste du jour s’écoula sans autre incident, et neuf heures sonnèrent enfin aux horloges lointaines de la ville. La nuit était tout à fait venue. De gros nuages, roulant dans le ciel, en augmentaient l’obscurité.

Dans le couloir, un bruit grandissant annonçait l’approche d’une ronde. Arrivée devant la porte, elle fit halte. Un gardien appliqua son oeil au guichet et se retira satisfait. Le prisonnier dormait, enfoncé jusqu’au menton sous sa couverture. La ronde se remit en marche. Le bruit de ses pas décrut, s’éteignit.

Le moment d’agir était arrivé.

Aussitôt, Serge Ladko sauta à bas de sa couchette, dont il disposa le matelas de manière à simuler suffisamment, dans la pénombre de la cellule, la présence d’un homme endormi. Cela fait, il se munit de sa corde, puis, s’étant glissé de nouveau de l’autre côté de la grille; il s’enleva comme la première fois et se mit à cheval sur l’arête supérieure de la hotte.

Les bandeaux qui décoraient le bâtiment étant situés à la hauteur de chaque plancher, Serge Ladko dominait ainsi de près de quatre mètres celui de ces ornements sur lequel il s’agissait de prendre pied. Il avait prévu cette difficulté. Embrassant l’un des barreaux de la grille avec la corde dont il garda en main les deux extrémités, il se laissa glisser sans trop de peine jusqu’à la saillie extérieure.

Le dos appliqué à la muraille, cramponné de la main gauche à la corde qui le supportait, le fugitif se reposa un instant. Comment garder l’équilibre sur cette surface étroite? A peine aurait-il lâché son soutien, qu’il irait s’abîmer sur le sol du chemin de ronde.

Prudemment, s’astreignant a des mouvements d’une extrême lenteur, il réussit à saisir la corde de la main droite, et, de la gauche, il inspecta la paroi de la hotte. Celle-ci ne s’appliquait pas toute seule devant la fenêtre et, pour la retenir, un organe quelconque existait nécessairement. En la frôlant, sa main ne tarda pas, en effet, à rencontrer un obstacle, qu’après, un peu d’hésitation il reconnut être une patte scellée dans la maçonnerie.

Quelque faible que fût la prise offerte par cette patte, force lui était de s’en contenter. S’y accrochant du bout de ses doigts crispés, il attira lentement l’un des doubles de la corde, qui vint peu à peu retomber sur ses épaules. Désormais, les ponts étaient coupés derrière lui. L’eût-il voulu, il ne pouvait plus regagner sa cellule. Il fallait, de toute nécessité, persévérer jusqu’au bout dans son entreprise.

Serge Ladko se risqua à tourner à demi la tête vers la chaîne du paratonnerre dont il avait le plus escompté le secours. Quel ne fut pas son effroi, en constatant que près de deux mètres séparaient cette chaîne de la hotte dont il lui était, sous peine de mort, interdit de s’éloigner!

Cependant, il lui fallait prendre un parti. Debout sur cette étroite saillie, le dos appliqué contre la muraille, retenu au-dessus du vide par un misérable morceau de fer que l’extrémité de ses doigts avait peine à saisir, il ne pouvait s’éterniser dans cette situation. Dans quelques minutes, ses doigts lassés relâcheraient leur étreinte, et ce serait alors la chute inévitable. Mieux valait ne périr qu’après un dernier effort vers le salut.

S’inclinant du côté de la fenêtre, le fugitif replia son bras gauche comme un ressort prêt à se détendre, puis, abandonnant tout appui, il se repoussa violemment vers la droite.

Il tomba. Son épaule heurta la saillie du bandeau. Mais, grâce à l’élan qu’il s’était donné, ses mains étendues avaient enfin atteint le but. La première difficulté était vaincue. Restait à vaincre la seconde.

Serge Ladko se laissa glisser le long de la chaîne et s’arrêta sur l’un des crampons qui la fixaient à la muraille. Là, il fit une courte halte et s’accorda le temps de la réflexion.

Le sol était invisible dans la nuit, mais, d’en bas, arrivait jusqu’au fugitif le bruit d’un pas régulier. Un soldat montait évidemment la garde. A en juger par ce bruit croissant et décroissant tour à tour, la sentinelle, après avoir suivi la fraction du chemin de ronde longeant cette partie de la prison, tournait ensuite dans la prolongation de ce chemin qui passait devant une autre façade du bâtiment, puis revenait, pour recommencer sans interruption son va-et-vient. Serge Ladko calcula que l’absence du soldat durait de trois à quatre minutes. C’est donc dans ce délai que la distance le séparant de la muraille extérieure devait être franchie.

S’il devinait, au-dessous de lui, la crête de cette muraille dont la blancheur se découpait vaguement dans l’ombre, il ne pouvait distinguer les pierres en saillie qui en décoraient le sommet.

Serge Ladko, se laissant glisser un peu plus bas, s’arrêta à l’un des crampons inférieurs. De ce point, il dominait encore de deux ou trois mètres le sommet de la muraille qu’il s’agissait de franchir.

Solide, désormais, il lui était permis de procéder par mouvements plus rapides. Il ne lui fallut qu’un instant pour dérouler sa corde, la faire passer derrière la chaîne du paratonnerre et en nouer les deux bouts de manière à la transformer en une corde sans fin. La longueur nécessaire approximativement calculée, il en lança ensuite au-dessus de la muraille de clôture, puis en ramena à lui l’extrémité en forme de boucle, comme il l’aurait fait avec un lasso, en s’efforçant de saisir une des pierres en saillie dont la muraille était extérieurement ornée.

L’entreprise était difficile. Au milieu de cette obscurité profonde, qui lui cachait le but, il ne pouvait compter que sur le hasard.

Plus de vingt fois la corde avait été lancée sans résultat, quand elle opposa enfin une résistance. Serge Ladko insista en vain. La prise était bonne et ne céda pas. La tentative avait donc réussi. La boucle terminale s’était enroulée autour d’un des bossages extérieurs, et une sorte de passerelle était maintenant jetée au-dessus du chemin de ronde.

Passerelle fragile à coup sûr! N’allait-elle pas se rompre ou se détacher de la pierre qui la retenait? Dans le premier cas, ce serait une épouvantable chute de dix mètres de hauteur; dans le second, ramené contre le mur de la prison à la manière d’un balancier, son fardeau humain viendrait s’y écraser.

Pas un instant, Serge Ladko n’hésita devant la possibilité de ce danger. Sa corde fortement tendue, il en réunit de nouveau les deux extrémités, puis, prêt à s’élancer, il prêta l’oreille aux pas du soldat de garde.

Celui-ci était précisément juste en dessous du fugitif. Il s’éloignait. Bientôt, il tourna le coin du bâtiment et le bruit de ses pas s’éteignit. Il fallait, sans perdre une seconde, profiter de son absence.

Serge Ladko s’avança sur le chemin aérien. Suspendu entre ciel et terre, il avançait d’un mouvement égal et souple, sans s’inquiéter du fléchissement de la corde, dont la courbure s’accentuait à mesure qu’il approchait du milieu du parcours. Il voulait passer. Il passerait.

Il passa. En moins d’une minute, le vertigineux abîme franchi, il atteignait la crête de la muraille.

Sans y prendre de repos, il se hâta de plus en plus, enfiévré par la certitude du succès. Dix minutes à peine s’étaient écoulées depuis qu’il avait quitté sa cellule, mais ces dix minutes lui semblaient avoir duré plus d’une heure, et il redoutait qu’une ronde ne vînt l’inspecter. Son évasion ne serait-elle pas découverte alors, malgré la manière dont il avait disposé sa couchette? Il importait d’être loin auparavant. La barge était là, à deux pas de lui! Quelques coups d’aviron suffiraient à le mettre hors de l’atteinte de ses persécuteurs.

Interrompant son travail à chaque passage du soldat de garde, Serge Ladko dénoua fébrilement sa corde, la ramena à lui en hâlant sur l’un des brins, puis, la doublant de nouveau et entourant de la boucle ainsi formée l’une des saillies intérieures, il commença sa descente, après s’être assuré que la rue était déserte.

Arrivé heureusement à terre, il fît aussitôt retomber la corde à ses pieds et la roula en paquet. Tout était terminé. Il était libre, et aucune trace ne subsisterait de son audacieuse évasion.

Mais, comme il allait partir à la recherche de sa barge, une voix s’éleva tout à coup dans la nuit.

«Parbleu! prononçait-on à moins de dix pas, c’est M. Ilia Brusch, ma parole!

Serge Ladko eut un tressaillement de plaisir. Le sort décidément se déclarait en sa faveur puisqu’il lui envoyait le secours d’un ami.

— M. Jaeger!» s’écria-t-il d’une voix joyeuse, tandis qu’un passant sortait de l’ombre et se dirigeait vers lui.

XV

PRÈS DU BUT.

Le 10 octobre, l’aube se leva pour la neuvième fois, depuis que la barge avait recommencé à descendre le Danube. Pendant les huit jours précédents, près de sept cents kilomètres avaient été laissés en arrière. On approchait de Roustchouk, où l’on arriverait avant le soir.

A bord, rien ne semblait changé. La barge transportait, comme autrefois, les deux mêmes compagnons: Serge Ladko et Karl Dragoch, redevenus, l’un le pêcheur Ilia Brusch, l’autre, le débonnaire M. Jaeger.

Toutefois, la manière dont le premier jouait maintenant son rôle rendait plus difficile à soutenir celui du second. Hypnotisé par le désir de se rapprocher de Roustchouk, manoeuvrant l’aviron jour et nuit, Serge Ladko négligeait, en effet, les précautions les plus élémentaires. Non seulement il s’était débarrassé de ses lunettes, mais encore, supprimant rasoir et teinture, il permettait aux changements survenus dans sa personne pendant la durée de sa détention de s’accuser avec une netteté croissante. Ses cheveux noirs pâlissaient de jour en jour, et sa barbe blonde commençait à atteindre une longueur respectable.

Il eût été naturel que Karl Dragoch manifestât quelque étonnement d’une pareille transformation. Celui-ci ne disait rien pourtant. Décidé à suivre jusqu’au bout la voie dans laquelle il s’était engagé, il avait pris le parti de ne rien voir de ce qui pouvait être gênant.

Au moment où il s’était trouvé face à face avec Serge Ladko, les opinions antérieures de Karl Dragoch étaient fortement ébranlées, et il se sentait moins enclin à admettre la culpabilité de son ancien compagnon de voyage.

L’incident provoqué par la commission rogatoire de Szalka avait été la première cause de ce revirement. Karl Dragoch avait, en effet, procédé à son enquête personnelle. Plus difficile à satisfaire que le commissaire de police de Gran, il avait longuement interrogé les habitants de la ville, et les réponses obtenues n’avaient pas été sans le troubler.

Qu’un nommé Ilia Brusch, dont la vie était au demeurant des plus régulières, eût élu domicile à Szalka et qu’il l’eût quittée peu de temps avant le concours de Sigmaringen, ce premier point n’était pas contestable. Cet Ilia Brusch avait-il été revu après ce concours, et notamment dans la nuit du 28 au 29 août? Sur ce deuxième point, les témoignages furent évasifs. Si les plus proches voisins croyaient bien se rappeler que, vers la fin d’août, ils avaient remarqué de la lumière dans la maison du pêcheur alors fermée depuis plus d’un mois, ils n’osèrent cependant rien affirmer. Ces renseignements, tout vagues et hésitants qu’ils fussent, augmentèrent naturellement les perplexités du policier.

Restait un troisième point à élucider. Quel était le personnage à qui le commissaire de Gran avait parlé au domicile indiqué par le prévenu? A cet égard, Dragoch ne put recueillir aucune indication. Ilia Brusch étant assez connu à Szalka, il fallait nécessairement, s’il y était venu, qu’il fût arrivé et reparti pendant la nuit, puisque personne ne l’avait aperçu. Un tel mystère, déjà suspect par lui-même, le devint bien davantage, quand Karl Dragoch eut mis la main sur le tenancier d’une petite auberge, auquel, dans la soirée du 12 septembre, trente-six heures avant la visite du commissaire de police de Gran, un inconnu avait demandé l’adresse d’Ilia Brusch. Le problème se compliquait. Il se compliqua encore, quand cet aubergiste, pressé de questions, eut donné de l’inconnu un signalement correspondant traits pour traits à celui que, d’après la rumeur publique, il convenait d’attribuer au chef de la bande du Danube.

Tout ceci rendit Karl Dragoch rêveur. Il flaira des choses louches. Il eut le sentiment instinctif d’être en présence de quelque machination ténébreuse dont le but lui demeurait inconnu, mais dont il n’était pas impossible que le prévenu fût la victime.

Cette impression se trouva fortifiée, quand, à son retour à Semlin, il connut la marche de l’instruction. En somme, après vingt jours de secret, elle n’avait pas fait un pas. Aucun complice n’avait été découvert, nul témoin n’avait formellement reconnu le prisonnier, contre lequel il n’existait toujours d’autre charge que le fait d’avoir cherché à modifier l’aspect de son visage et d’avoir possédé un portrait de femme sur lequel figurait le nom de Ladko.

Ces présomptions, qui, corroborées par d’autres, eussent eu une grande valeur, perdaient, isolées, beaucoup de leur importance. Peut-être, après tout, ce déguisement et la présence du portrait avaient-ils une cause avouable.

Karl Dragoch, dans cet état d’esprit, était particulièrement accessible à la pitié. C’est pourquoi il n’avait pu s’empêcher d’être profondément ému par la naïve confiance de Serge Ladko, dans une circonstance où celui-ci aurait été excusable de se défier de son plus intime ami.

Etait-il impossible, d’ailleurs, de mettre ce sentiment de pitié d’accord avec ses devoirs professionnels en reprenant comme devant sa place dans la barge? Si Ilia Brusch se nommait en réalité Ladko, et si ce Ladko était bien un malfaiteur, Karl Dragoch, en s’attachant à lui, dépisterait ses complices. Innocent, au contraire, peut-être conduirait-il quand même au vrai coupable, auquel l’incident de Szalka eût prouvé, dans ce cas, qu’il portait ombrage.

Ces raisonnements, un peu spécieux, n’étaient pas dénués de toute logique. L’aspect misérable de Serge Ladko, le courage surhumain qu’il avait dû déployer pour accomplir sa fantastique évasion, et surtout le souvenir du service autrefois rendu avec tant d’héroïque simplicité, firent le reste. Karl Dragoch devait la vie à ce malheureux qui haletait devant lui, les mains en sang, la sueur ruisselant sur son visage décharné. Allait-il, en retour, le rejeter dans l’enfer? Le détective ne put s’y résoudre.

«Venez!» dit-il simplement en réponse à l’exclamation joyeuse du fugitif, qu’il entraîna vers le fleuve.

Peu de paroles avaient été échangées entre les deux compagnons pendant les huit jours qui venaient de s’écouler. Serge Ladko gardait généralement le silence et concentrait toutes les forces de son être pour accroître la vitesse de l’embarcation.

En phrases hachées, qu’il fallait lui arracher en quelque sorte, il fit toutefois le récit de ses inexplicables aventures depuis le confluent de l’Ipoly. Il raconta sa longue détention dans la prison de Semlin, succédant à une séquestration plus étrange encore à bord d un chaland inconnu. Ils mentaient donc, ceux qui prétendaient l’avoir vu entre Budapest et Semlin, puisque, durant tout ce parcours, il avait été enfermé, pieds et mains liés, dans ce chaland.

À ce récit, les opinions primitives de Karl Dragoch évoluèrent de plus en plus. Malgré lui, il établissait un rapprochement entre l’agression dont Ilia Brusch avait été victime et l’intervention d’un sosie à Szalka. A n’en pas douter, le pêcheur gênait quelqu’un et était en butte aux coups d’un ennemi inconnu, mais dont le signalement semblait correspondre à celui du véritable bandit.

Ainsi, peu à peu, Karl Dragoch s’acheminait vers la vérité. Hors d’état de contrôler ses déductions, il sentait du moins décroître de jour en jour les soupçons autrefois conçus.

Pas un instant, néanmoins, il ne songea à quitter la barge pour revenir en arrière et recommencer son enquête sur nouveaux frais. Son flair de policier lui disait que la piste était bonne, et que le pêcheur, innocent peut-être, était d’une manière ou d’autre mêlé à l’histoire de la bande du Danube. La tranquillité était parfaite, d’ailleurs, sur le haut fleuve, et la succession des crimes commis prouvait que leurs auteurs avaient, eux aussi, descendu le courant, au moins jusqu’aux environs de Semlin. Il y avait donc toutes chances pour qu’ils eussent continué à le descendre pendant la détention d’Ilia Brusch.

Sur ce point, Karl Dragoch ne se trompait pas. Ivan Striga continuait, en effet, à se rapprocher de la mer Noire, avec douze jours d’avance sur la barge au départ de Semlin. Mais, ces douze jours d’avance, il les perdait peu à peu, la distance séparant les deux bateaux diminuait graduellement, et, jour par jour, heure par heure, minute par minute, la barge gagnait implacablement sur le chaland, sous l’effort furieux de Serge Ladko.

Celui-ci n’avait qu’un but: Roustchouk; qu’une idée: Natcha. S’il négligeait les précautions autrefois prises pour protéger son incognito, c’est qu’il n’y pensait vraiment plus. D’ailleurs, de quel intérêt eussent-elles été maintenant? Après son arrestation, après son évasion, s’appeler Ilia Brusch devait être aussi compromettant que de s’appeler Serge Ladko. Sous un nom ou sous un autre, il ne pouvait plus désormais s’introduire que secrètement à Roustchouk, sous peine d’être appréhendé sur-le-champ.

Absorbé par son idée fixe, il n’avait, pendant ces huit jours, accordé aucune attention aux rives du fleuve. S’il s’était aperçu qu’on passât devant

Belgrade — la ville blanche — étagée sur une colline, que domine le palais du prince, le Konak, et précédée d’un faubourg où viennent transiter une immense quantité de marchandises, c’est parce que Belgrade indique la frontière serbe où expiraient les pouvoirs de M. Izar Rona. Mais, ensuite, il ne remarqua plus rien.

Il ne vit, ni Semendria, ancienne capitale de la Serbie, célèbre par les vignobles dont elle est entourée; ni Colombals, où l’on montre une caverne dans laquelle Saint-Georges aurait, d’après la légende, déposé le corps du dragon tué de ses propres mains; ni Orsova, au delà de laquelle le Danube coule entre deux anciennes provinces turques, devenues depuis royaumes indépendants; ni les Portes de Fer, ce défilé fameux bordé de murailles verticales de quatre cents mètres, où le Danube se précipite et se brise avec fureur contre les blocs dont son lit est semé; ni Widdin, première ville bulgare de quelque importance; ni Nikopoli, ni Sistowa, les deux autres cités notoires qu’il lui fallut dépasser en amont de Roustchouk.

De préférence, il longeait la rive serbe, où il s’estimait plus en sûreté, et en effet, jusqu’à la sortie des Portes de Fer, il ne fut pas inquiété par la police.

Ce fut seulement à Orsava que, pour la première fois, un canot de la brigade fluviale intima à la barge l’ordre de s’arrêter. Serge Ladko, très inquiet, obéit en se demandant ce qu’il répondrait aux questions qu’on allait inévitablement lui poser.

On ne l’interrogea même pas. Sur un mot de Karl Dragoch, le chef du détachement s’inclina avec déférence et il ne fut plus question de perquisition.

Le pilote ne songea pas à s’étonner qu’un bourgeois de Vienne disposât à son gré de la force publique. Trop heureux de s’en tirer à si bon compte, il trouva toute naturelle une omnipotence qui s’exerçait à son profit, et il ne manifesta pas plus de surprise, mais simplement une impatience grandissante, en voyant se prolonger l’entretien entre l’agent et son passager.

Conformément aux ordres, tant de M. Izar Rona, furieux de l’évasion de son prévenu, que de Karl Dragoch lui-même, la police du fleuve avait redoublé de vigueur. De distance en distance, on obligeait la navigation à franchir une série de barrages, parmi lesquels celui d’Orsova était d’une importance capitale. L’étranglement du fleuve en cette partie de son cours facilitant la surveillance, il était impossible, en effet, qu’aucun bateau réussît à passer sans avoir été minutieusement visité.

Karl Dragoch, en interrogeant son subordonné, eut l’ennui d’apprendre à la fois, et que ces perquisitions n’avaient donné aucun résultat, et qu’un nouveau crime, un cambriolage d’une certaine gravité, venait d’être commis deux jours auparavant en territoire roumain, au confluent du Jirel, presque exactement en face de la ville bulgare de Rahowa.

Ainsi donc, la bande du Danube avait réussi a passer entre les mailles du filet. Cette bande ayant coutume de s’approprier non seulement l’or et l’argent, mais les objets précieux de toute nature, son butin devait être d’un volume encombrant, et il était vraiment inconcevable qu’on n’en eût pas trouvé trace, alors qu’aucun bateau n’avait pu échapper à la visite.

Il en était cependant ainsi.

Karl Dragoch était stupéfait d’une telle virtuosité. Toutefois, il fallait bien se rendre à l’évidence, les malfaiteurs prouvant eux-mêmes par des attentats leur descente vers l’aval.

La seule conclusion à tirer de ces faits, c’est qu’il convenait de se hâter. Le lieu et la date du dernier vol signalé indiquaient que ses auteurs avaient moins de trois cents kilomètres d’avance. En tenant compte du temps pendant lequel Ilia Brusch avait été immobilisé, temps que la bande du Danube avait certainement mis à profit, il fallait en inférer que sa vitesse était à peine la moitié de celle de la barge. Il n’était donc pas impossible de l’atteindre à la course.

On repartit donc sans plus attendre et, dès les premières heures du 6 octobre, la frontière bulgare était franchie. A partir de ce point, Serge Ladko qui, jusque-là, avait suivi de son mieux la rive droite, serra au contraire le plus possible le bord roumain dont, à partir de Lom-Palamka, une succession de marais de huit à dix kilomètres de large n’allait pas tarder, d’ailleurs, à interdire l’approche.

Quelque absorbé qu’il fût en lui-même, le fleuve, depuis qu’on était entré dans les eaux bulgares, n’avait pu manquer de lui paraître suspect. Un certain nombre de chaloupes à vapeur, de torpilleurs même, voire de canonnières, battant pavillon ottoman, le sillonnaient en effet. En prévision de la guerre qui allait, moins d’un an plus tard, éclater avec la Russie, la Turquie commençait déjà à surveiller le Danube, qu’elle devait peupler ensuite d’une véritable flottille.

Risque pour risque, le pilote préférait se tenir à distance de ces navires turcs, dût-il pour cela se jeter dans les griffes des autorités roumaines, contre lesquelles M. Jaeger serait peut-être capable de le protéger, comme il l’avait fait à Orsova.

L’occasion ne se présenta pas de mettre à une nouvelle épreuve le pouvoir du passager; aucun incident ne troubla cette dernière partie du voyage, et, le 10 octobre, vers quatre heures de l’après-midi, la barge parvenait enfin à la hauteur de Roustchouk, que l’on distinguait confusément sur l’autre rive. Le pilote gagna alors le milieu du fleuve, puis, arrêtant pour la première fois depuis tant de jours le mouvement de son aviron, il laissa tomber le grappin par le fond.

«Qu’y a-t-il? demanda Karl Dragoch surpris.

— Je suis arrivé, répondit laconiquement Serge Ladko.

— Arrivé?... Nous ne sommes pas encore à la mer Noire, cependant.

— Je vous ai trompé, monsieur Jaeger, déclara sans ambages Serge Ladko. Je n’ai jamais eu l’intention d’aller jusqu’à la mer Noire.

— Bah! fit le détective dont l’attention s’éveilla.

— Non. Je suis parti dans l’idée de m’arrêter à Roustchouk. Nous y sommes.

— Où prenez-vous Roustchouk?

— Là, répondit le pilote, en montrant les maisons de la ville lointaine.

— Pourquoi, dans ce cas, n’y allons-nous pas?

— Parce qu’il me faut attendre la nuit. Je suis traqué, poursuivi. Dans le jour, je risquerais de me faire arrêter au premier pas.

Voilà qui devenait intéressant. Les soupçons primitivement conçus par Dragoch étaient-ils donc justifiés?

— Comme à Semlin, murmura-t-il à demi-voix.

— Comme à Semlin, approuva Serge Ladko sans s’émouvoir, mais pas pour les mêmes causes. Je suis un honnête homme, monsieur Jaeger.

— Je n’en doute pas, monsieur Brusch, bien qu’elles soient rarement bonnes, les raisons que l’on a de redouter une arrestation.

— Les miennes le sont, monsieur Jaeger, affirma froidement Serge Ladko. Excusez-moi de ne pas vous les révéler. Je me suis juré à moi-même de garder mon secret. Je le garderai.

Karl Dragoch acquiesça d’un geste qui exprimait la plus parfaite indifférence. Le pilote reprit:

— Je conçois, monsieur Jaeger, que vous ne soyez pas désireux d’être mêlé à mes affaires. Si vous le voulez, je vous déposerai en terre roumaine. Vous éviterez ainsi les dangers auxquels je peux être exposé.

— Combien de temps comptez-vous rester à Roustchouk? demanda Karl Dragoch sans répondre directement.

— Je ne sais, dit Serge Ladko. Si les choses tournent à mon gré, je serai revenu à bord avant le jour et, dans ce cas, je ne serai pas seul. S’il en est autrement, j’ignore ce que je ferai.

— Je vous suivrai jusqu’au bout, monsieur Brusch, déclara sans hésiter Karl Dragoch.

— A votre aise!» conclut Serge Ladko qui n’ajouta pas une parole.

A la nuit tombante, il reprit l’aviron et s’approcha de la rive bulgare. L’obscurité était complète quand il y accosta, un peu en aval des dernières maisons de la ville.

Tout son être tendu vers le but, Serge Ladko agissait à la manière d'un somnambule. Ses gestes nets et précis faisaient sans hésitation ce qu'il fallait faire, ce qu'il lui eût été impossible de ne pas faire. Aveugle pour tout ce qui l'entourait, il ne vit pas son compagnon disparaître dans la cabine dès que le grappin eut été ramené à bord. Le monde extérieur avait perdu pour lui toute réalité. Son rêve seul existait. Et, ce rêve, c'était, tout illuminée de soleil, en dépit de la nuit, sa maison et, dans sa maison, Natcha!... En dehors de Natcha, il n'était plus rien sous le ciel.

Dès que l'étrave de la barge eut touché la rive, il sauta à terre, fixa solidement son amarre et s'éloigna d'un pas rapide.

Aussitôt, Karl Dragoch sortit de la cabine. Il n'y avait pas perdu son temps. Qui aurait reconnu le policier, à la silhouette énergique et sèche, dans ce balourd aux pesantes allures, merveilleuse copie d'un paysan hongrois?

Le détective prit terre à son tour et, suivant le pilote à la piste, partit en chasse une fois de plus.

XVI

LA MAISON VIDE.

En cinq minutes Serge Ladko et Karl Dragoch eurent atteint les maisons.

Roustchouk ne possédant, à cette époque, malgré son importance commerciale, aucun éclairage public, il leur eût été difficile, s’ils en avaient eu le désir, de se faire une idée de la ville irrégulièrement groupée autour d’un vaste débarcadère, sur la périphérie duquel se tassaient des échoppes assez délabrées, à usage d’entrepôts ou de cabarets. Mais, en vérité, ils n’y songeaient guère. Le premier marchait d’un pas rapide, les yeux fixés devant lui, comme s’il eût été attiré par un but étincelant dans la nuit. Quant au second, il mettait tant d’attention à suivre le pilote, qu’il ne vit même pas deux hommes, qui débouchaient d’une ruelle au moment où il la traversait.

Dès qu’ils furent sur le chemin longeant le fleuve, ces deux hommes se séparèrent. L’un s’éloigna à droite, vers l’aval.

«Bonsoir, dit-il en bulgare.

— Bonsoir,» répondit l’autre, qui, tournant à gauche, emboîta le pas à Karl Dragoch.

Au son de cette voix, celui-ci avait tressailli. Une seconde, il hésita, en ralentissant instinctivement sa marche, puis, abandonnant sa poursuite, il s’arrêta soudain et fit volte-face.

Tout un ensemble de dons naturels ou acquis est nécessaire au policier qui a l’ambition de ne pas croupir dans les bas emplois de sa profession. Mais, la plus précieuse des multiples qualités qu’il doit posséder, c’est une parfaite mémoire de l’oeil et de l’oreille.

Karl Dragoch possédait cet avantage au plus haut degré. Ses nerfs auditifs et visuels constituaient de véritables appareils enregistreurs, et leurs sensations lumineuses ou sonores, il ne les oubliait jamais, quelle que fût la longueur du temps écoulé. Après des mois, après des années, il reconnaissait du premier coup un visage à peine aperçu, la voix qui, une seule fois, avait fait vibrer son tympan.

Il en était précisément ainsi pour l'une de celles qu'il venait d'entendre, et, dans la circonstance présente, il n'y avait pas si longtemps qu'il s'était trouvé en face du propriétaire, pour qu'une erreur fût à redouter. Cette voix, qui, dans la clairière, au pied du mont Pilis, avait résonné à son oreille, c'était le fil conducteur vainement cherché jusqu'ici. Pour ingénieuses qu'elles pussent paraître, ses déductions relatives à son compagnon de voyage n'étaient en somme que des hypothèses. La voix, au contraire, lui apportait enfin une certitude. Entre le probable et le certain, l'hésitation était impossible, et c'est pourquoi le détective, abandonnant sa filature, s'était lancé sur une nouvelle piste.

«Bonsoir, Titcha, prononça en allemand Karl Dragoch lorsque l'homme fut arrivé à proximité.

Celui-ci s'arrêta, cherchant à percer l'obscurité de la nuit.

— Qui me parle? interrogeait-il.

— Moi, répondit Dragoch.

— Qui ça, vous?

— Max Raynold.

— Connais pas.

— Mais je vous connais, moi, puisque je vous ai appelé par votre nom.

— C’est juste, reconnut Titcha. Il faut même que vous ayez de bons yeux, camarade.

— Ils sont excellents, en effet.

Le dialogue fut interrompu un instant.

— Que me voulez-vous? reprit Titcha.

— Vous parler, déclara Dragoch, à vous et à un autre. Je ne suis à Roustchouk que pour ça.

— Vous n’êtes donc pas d’ici?

— Non. Je suis arrivé aujourd’hui.

— Joli moment que vous avez choisi, ricana Titcha, qui faisait sans doute allusion à l’anarchie actuelle de la Bulgarie.

Dragoch, ayant esquissé un geste d’indifférence, ajouta:

— Je suis de Gran.

Titcha garda le silence.

— Vous ne connaissez pas Gran? insista Dragoch.

— Non.

— C’est étonnant, après en être venu si près.

— Si près?... répéta Titcha. Où prenez vous que je sois allé près de Gran?

— Parbleu! dit en riant Karl Dragoch, elle n'en est pas si loin, la villa Hagueneau.

Ce fut au tour de Titcha de tressaillir. Il essaya, toutefois, de payer d'audace.

— La villa Hagueneau?... balbutia-t-il d'un ton qu'il voulait rendre plaisant. C'est juste comme pour vous, camarade. Connais pas.

— Vraiment?.. fit ironique ment Dragoch. Et la clairière de Pilis, la connaissez-vous?

Titcha, se rapprochant vivement, saisit le bras de son interlocuteur.

— Plus bas, donc! dit-il sans chercher cette fois à dissimuler son émotion. Vous êtes fou de crier comme ça.

— Puisqu'il n'y a personne, objecta Dragoch.

— On ne sait jamais, répliqua Titcha, qui demanda: Enfin, que voulez-vous?

— Parler à Ladko, répondit Dragoch sans baisser la voix.

Titcha resserra son étreinte.

— Chut! fit-il en jetant autour de lui des regards apeurés. Vous avez donc juré de nous faire pendre?

Karl Dragoch se mit à rire.

— Ah bien! dit-il, ça ne va pas être commode de nous entendre, s’il faut parler à la muette!

— Aussi, gronda sourdement Titcha, on n’a pas idée d’aborder les gens au milieu de la nuit sans crier gare. Il y a des choses qu’il vaut mieux ne pas dire en pleine rue.

— Je ne tiens pas à vous parler dans la rue, riposta Dragoch. Allons ailleurs.

— Où?

— N’importe où. Il y a bien un cabaret dans les environs?

— A quelques pas d’ici.

— Allons-y.

— Soit, concéda Titcha. Suivez-moi.

Cinquante mètres plus loin, les deux compagnons arrivèrent sur une petite place. En face d’eux, une fenêtre brillait faiblement dans la nuit.

— C’est là, dit Titcha.

La porte ouverte, ils entrèrent de plain-pied dans la salle déserte d’un modeste café dont une dizaine de tables garnissaient le pourtour.

— Nous serons à merveille ici, dit Dragoch.

Le patron accourait au-devant de ces clients inespérés.

— Qu’allons-nous boire?... C’est moi qui régale, annonça le détective, en frappant sur son gousset.

— Un verre de racki? proposa Titcha.

— Va pour le racki!... Et du genièvre?... Ça ne vous dit rien?

— Bon aussi, le genièvre, approuva Titcha.

Karl Dragoch se tourna vers le patron attentif aux ordres.

— Vous avez entendu, l’ami?... Servez-nous, et vivement!

Pendant que l’hôte s’empressait, Dragoch, d’un coup d’oeil, pesa l’adversaire qu’il allait avoir à combattre. Il l’eut vite jugé. Larges épaules, cou de taureau, front étroit mangé par d’épais cheveux gris, parfait exemplaire, en un mot, du lutteur forain de bas étage, c’était une véritable brute qu’il avait en face de lui.

Aussitôt que les bouteilles et deux verres eurent été apportés, Titcha reprit la conversation au point où elle avait débuté.

— Vous dites donc que vous me connaissez?

— Vous en doutez?

— Et que vous connaissez l’affaire de Gran?

— Aussi. Nous y avons travaillé ensemble.

— Pas possible!

— Mais certain.

— Je n’y comprends rien, murmura Titcha, qui cherchait de bonne foi dans ses souvenirs. Nous n’étions que nous huit, cependant...

— Pardon, interrompit Dragoch, nous étions neuf, puisque j’y étais.

— Vous avez mis la main à la pâte? insista Titcha mal convaincu.

— Oui, à la villa, et à la clairière pareillement. C’est même moi qui ai emmené la charrette.

— Avec Vogel?

— Avec Vogel.

Titcha réfléchit un instant.

— Ça ne se peut pas, protesta-t-il. C’est Kaiserlick qui était avec Vogel.

— Non, c’est moi, répliqua Dragoch sans se troubler. Kaiserlick était resté avec vous autres.

— Vous en êtes sûr?

— Absolument, affirma Dragoch.

Titcha paraissait ébranlé. Le bandit ne brillait pas précisément par l’intelligence. Sans s’apercevoir qu’il venait lui-même de révéler l’existence de Vogel et de Kaiserlick au prétendu Max Raynold, il considérait comme une preuve que ce dernier connût leurs noms.

— Un verre de genièvre? proposa Dragoch.

— Ça n’est pas de refus, dit Titcha.

Puis, le verre vidé d’un trait:

— C’est curieux, murmura-t-il, à demi vaincu. C’est bien la première fois que nous mêlons un étranger à nos affaires.

— Il faut un commencement à tout, répliqua Karl Dragoch. Je ne serai plus un étranger quand j’aurai été admis dans la bande.

— Quelle bande?

— Inutile de finasser, camarade. Puisque je vous dis que c’est convenu.

— Qu’est-ce qui est convenu?

— Que je serai des vôtres.

— Convenu avec qui?

— Avec Ladko.

— Taisez-vous donc, interrompit rudement Titcha. Je vous ai déjà prévenu qu’il fallait garder ce nom-là pour vous.

— Dans la rue, objecta Dragoch. Mais ici?

— Ici comme ailleurs, dans toute la ville, s’entend.

— Pourquoi? demanda Dragoch suivant la veine.

Mais Titcha conservait un reste de méfiance.

— Si on vous le demande, répondit-il prudemment, vous direz que vous l’ignorez, camarade. Vous savez beaucoup de choses, mais vous ne savez pas tout, je le vois, et ce n’est pas à un vieux renard comme moi que vous tirerez les vers du nez.

Titcha se trompait, il n’était pas de force à lutter avec un jouteur comme Dragoch, et le vieux renard avait trouvé son maître. La sobriété n’était pas sa qualité dominante, et le détective, aussitôt qu’il l’eut découvert, s’était ingénié à tirer parti de ce défaut à la cuirasse de l’adversaire. Ses offres répétées avaient eu raison de la résistance, d’ailleurs assez molle, du bandit. Les verres de genièvre succédaient aux verres de racki, et réciproquement. L’effet de l’alcool commençait déjà à se faire sentir. L’oeil de Titcha devenait trouble, sa langue plus lourde, sa prudence moins éveillée. Or, comme chacun sait, glissante est la route de l’ivresse, et d’ordinaire, plus on apaise la soif, plus elle grandit.

— Nous disions donc, reprit Titcha d’une voix un peu pâteuse, que c’est convenu avec le chef?

— Convenu, déclara Dragoch.

— Il a bien fait... le chef, affirma Titcha, qui, sous l’influence de l’ivresse, se mit à tutoyer son interlocuteur. Tu as l’air d’un bon et d’un vrai camarade.

— Tu peux le dire, approuva Dragoch en s’accordant à l’unisson.

— Seulement, voilà!... Tu ne le verras pas... le chef.

— Pourquoi ne le verrai-je pas?

Avant de répondre, Titcha, avisant la bouteille de racki, s’en versa coup sur coup deux rasades. Quand il eut bu, il déclara d’une voix rauque:

— Parti... le chef.

— Il n’est pas à Roustchouk? insista Dragoch vivement désappointé.

— Il n’y est plus.

— Plus?.. Il y est donc venu?

— Il y a quatre jours.

— Et maintenant?

— Il continue à descendre jusqu’à la mer avec le chaland.

— Quand doit-il revenir?

— Dans une quinzaine.

— Quinze jours de retard! Voilà bien ma chance! s’écria Dragoch.

— Ça te démange donc bien d’entrer dans la compagnie? demanda Titcha avec un gros rire.

— Dame! fit Dragoch. Je suis paysan, moi, et au coup de Gran j’ai touché en une nuit plus que je ne gagne en un an à travailler la terre.

— Ça t’a mis en goût, conclut Titcha en riant aux éclats.

Dragoch parut s’apercevoir que le verre de son vis-à-vis était vide, et s’empressa de le remplir.

— Mais tu ne bois pas, camarade, s’écria-t-il. A ta santé!

— A ta santé! répéta Titcha, qui lampa son verre d’un trait.

Abondante était la moisson de renseignements recueillie par le policier. Il savait de combien d'affiliés se composait la bande du Danube: huit, au dire de Titcha; le nom de trois d'entre eux et même de quatre, en y comprenant le chef; sa destination: la mer, où sans doute un navire serait chargé du butin; la base de ses opérations: Roustchouk. Quand Ladko y reviendrait, dans une quinzaine de jours, toutes les dispositions seraient prises pour qu'il fût appréhendé sur-le-champ, à moins qu'on ne réussît à mettre la main sur lui aux bouches mêmes du Danube.

Plus d'un point, toutefois, restaient encore obscurs. Karl Dragoch pensa qu'il serait peut-être possible d'élucider tout au moins l'un d'eux, en profitant de l'état d'ébriété de son interlocuteur.

— Pourquoi donc, demanda-t-il d'un ton indifférent après un instant de silence, ne voulais-tu pas tout à l'heure que je prononce le nom de Ladko?

Tout à fait gris, décidément, Titcha eut un regard mouillé à l'adresse de son compagnon, auquel, dans une soudaine explosion de tendresse, il tendit la main.

— Je vais te le dire, balbutia-t-il, car tu es un ami, toi!

— Oui, affirma Dragoch en répondant à l'étreinte de l'ivrogne.

— Un frère.

— Oui.

— Un luron, un gars d'attaque.

— Oui.

Titcha chercha des yeux les bouteilles.

— Un coup de genièvre? proposa-t-il.

— Il n’y en a plus, répondit Dragoch.

Estimant l’adversaire à point, et redoutant de le voir tomber ivre-mort, le détective s’était arrangé pour répandre sur le sol une bonne partie des flacons. Mais cela ne faisait pas l’affaire de Titcha qui, en apprenant l’épuisement du genièvre, fit une grimace désolée.

— Du racki, alors? implora-t-il.

— Voilà, consentit Karl Dragoch en avançant sur la table la bouteille qui contenait encore quelques gouttes de liqueur. Mais attention, camarade!... Il ne faudrait pas nous griser.

— Moi!... protesta Titcha, qui s’adjugea le fond de la bouteille. Je le voudrais que je ne pourrais pas!

— Nous disions donc que Ladko?... suggéra Dragoch reprenant patiemment sa marche tortueuse vers le but.

— Ladko?... répéta Titcha qui ne savait plus de quoi il s’agissait.

— Pourquoi ne faut-il pas le nommer?

Titcha eut un rire aviné.

— Ça t’intrigue, ça, mon fils!... C’est qu’ici Ladko se prononce Striga, voilà tout.

— Striga?... répéta Dragoch qui ne comprenait pas. Pourquoi Striga?...

— Parce que c’est son nom, à cet enfant... Ainsi, toi, tu t’appelles... Au fait! comment t’appelles-tu?...

— Raynold.

— C’est ça... Raynold... Eh bien! Je t’appelle Raynold... Lui, il s’appelle Striga... C’est clair.

— A Gran, cependant... insista Dragoch.

— Oh! interrompit Titcha, à Gran, c’était Ladko... Mais, à Roustchouk, c’est Striga.

Il cligna de l’oeil d’un air malin.

— Comme ça, tu comprends, ni vu, ni connu.

Qu’un malfaiteur s’affuble d’un nom d’emprunt quand il accomplit ses méfaits, cela n’est pas pour étonner un policier, mais pourquoi ce nom de Ladko, ce même nom dont était signé le portrait trouvé dans la barge?

— Il existe bien un Ladko pourtant, s’écria avec impatience Dragoch formulant ainsi la conclusion de sa pensée.

— Parbleu! fit Titcha. C’est même le plus beau de l’affaire.

— Qu’est-ce que c’est que ce Ladko?

— Une canaille, affirma énergiquement Titcha.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il t’a fait?

— A moi?... Rien... A Striga...

— Qu’est-ce qu’il a fait à Striga?.

— Il lui a soufflé la femme... la belle Natcha.

Natcha! ce même prénom qui figurait sur le portrait. Dragoch, assuré d’être sur la bonne piste, écoutait avidement Titcha qui poursuivait sans se faire prier:

— Depuis, ils ne sont pas amis, tu penses!... C’est pour ça que Striga a pris son nom. C’est un malin, Striga.

— Tout cela, objecta Dragoch, ne me dit pas pourquoi il ne faut pas prononcer le nom de Ladko.

— Parce qu’il est malsain, expliqua Titcha... A Gran... et ailleurs, tu sais qui il désigne... Ici, c’est celui d’une espèce de pilote qui s’est mis contre le-gouvernement... Il conspire, l’imbécile... Et les rues sont pleines de Turcs à Roustchouk!

— Qu’est-il devenu? demanda Dragoch.

Titcha fit un geste d’ignorance.

— Il a disparu, répondit-il. Striga dit qu’il est mort.

— Mort!

— Et ça doit être vrai, puisque Striga a la femme maintenant.

— Quelle femme?

— Eh! la belle Natcha... Après le nom, la femme... Pas contente, la colombe!... Mais Striga la tient bien à bord du chaland.

Tout s’éclaircissait pour Dragoch. Ce n’est pas en compagnie d’un vulgaire malfaiteur qu’il avait passé de si longs jours, mais avec un patriote exilé. Quelle ne devait pas être en ce moment la douleur du malheureux, n’arrivant enfin chez lui après tant d’efforts, que pour trouver sa maison vide!... Il fallait courir à son aide... Quant à la bande du Danube, Dragoch, renseigné désormais, n’aurait aucune peine à mettre ensuite la main sur elle.

— Il fait chaud!... soupira-t-il en faisant semblant d’être vaincu par l’ivresse.

— Très chaud, approuva Titcha.

— C’est le racki, balbutia Dragoch.

Titcha abattit son poing sur la table.

— Tu n’as pas la tête solide, l’enfant!.. railla-t-il lourdement. Moi... tu vois... Prêt à recommencer.

— Je ne peux pas lutter, reconnut Dragoch.

— Mauviette!.. ricana Titcha. Enfin, sortons, si le coeur t’en dit.

Le patron appelé et payé, les deux compagnons se retrouvèrent sur la place. Ce changement ne parut pas favorable à Titcha. A peine à l’air libre, son ivresse s’aggrava notablement. Dragoch eut peur d’avoir forcé la dose.

— Dis donc, demanda-t-il en montrant l’aval, ce Ladko?...

— Quel Ladko?

— Le pilote. C’est par là qu’il demeurait?

— Non.

Karl Dragoch se tourna du côté de la ville.

— Par la?

— Non plus

— Par là, alors? interrogea Dragoch en indiquant l’amont.

— Oui, balbutia Titcha.

Le détective entraîna son compagnon. Celui-ci titubait et se laissait conduire en mâchonnant des propos incohérents quand, après cinq minutes de marche, il s’arrêta brusquement, s’efforçant de reprendre son aplomb.

— Qu’est-ce qu’il disait donc, Striga, bégayait-il, que Ladko était mort?

— Eh bien?

— Il n’est pas mort, puisqu’il y a quelqu’un chez lui.

Et Titcha montrait, à quelques pas, des raies de lumière filtrant à travers les volets d’une fenêtre et striant la chaussée. Dragoch se hâta vers cette fenêtre. Par une fente des volets, Titcha et lui regardèrent dans la maison.

Ils aperçurent une salle de proportions modestes, mais assez confortablement meublée. Le désordre des meubles et la couche épaisse de poussière qui les recouvrait incitaient à croire que cette salle avait été le théâtre, depuis longtemps abandonné, de quelque scène de violence. Le centre en était occupé par une grande table, sur laquelle était accoudé un homme, qui semblait réfléchir profondément. La contraction de ses doigts à demi disparus dans les cheveux en désordre exprimait éloquemment le trouble douloureux de son âme. Des yeux de cet homme, de grosses larmes coulaient.

Ainsi qu’il s’y attendait, Karl Dragoch reconnut son compagnon de voyage. Mais il ne fut pas seul à reconnaître le désespéré songeur.

— C’est lui!... murmura Titcha en faisant d’énergiques efforts pour chasser son ivresse.

— Lui?...

— Ladko.

Titcha se passa la main sur le visage et parvint à retrouver un peu de sang-froid.

— Il n’est pas mort, la canaille... dit-il entre ses dents. Mais il n’en vaut guère mieux... Les Turcs me payeront sa peau plus cher qu’elle ne vaut... C’est Striga qui sera content!.. Ne bouge pas d’ici, camarade, dit-il en s’adressant à Karl Dragoch. S’il veut sortir, assomme-le!.. Appelle à l’aide au besoin... Moi, je vais chercher la police...

Sans attendre de réponse, Titcha s’éloigna en courant. A peine s’il faisait encore quelques zigzags. L’émotion lui avait rendu son équilibre.

Dès qu’il fut seul, le détective entra dans la maison.

Serge Ladko ne fit pas un mouvement. Karl Dragoch lui mit la main sur l’épaule.

Le malheureux releva la tête. Mais sa pensée restait absente, et son regard vague montrait qu’il ne reconnaissait pas son passager. Celui-ci ne prononça qu’un mot:

«Natcha!...

Serge Ladko se redressa avec violence. Ses yeux flambaient, interrogateurs, rivés sur ceux de Karl Dragoch.

— Suivez-moi, dit le détective, et hâtons-nous.»

XVII

A LA NAGE.

La barge volait sur les eaux. Ivre, exalté, en proie à une sorte de rage, Serge Ladko, plus furieusement que jamais, pesait sur l’aviron. Affranchi des lois communes par la violence de son désir, à peine s’il s’accordait, chaque nuit, quelques instants de repos. Il tombait alors, assommé, dans un sommeil de plomb, dont il s’éveillait soudainement, comme appelé par un coup de cloche, deux heures plus tard, pour reprendre aussitôt son effrayant labeur.

Témoin de cette poursuite acharnée, Karl Dragoch admirait qu’un organisme humain pût être doué d’une telle force de résistance. C’était un homme, cependant, qui lui donnait ce prodigieux spectacle, mais un homme qui puisait une énergie surhumaine dans le plus affreux désespoir.

Soucieux d’épargner au malheureux pilote la plus légère distraction, le détective s’appliquait à ne pas rompre le silence. Tout ce qu’il était essentiel de dire, on l’avait dit au départ de Roustchouk. Dès que la barge eut été repoussée dans le courant, Karl Dragoch avait, en effet, donné les explications indispensables. Tout d’abord, il avait révélé sa qualité. Puis, en quelques mots brefs, il avait expliqué pourquoi il avait entrepris ce voyage, à la poursuite de la bande du Danube, à laquelle la croyance populaire attribuait pour chef un certain Ladko, de Roustchouk.

Ce récit, le pilote l’avait écouté distraitement, en manifestant une fiévreuse impatience. Que lui importait tout cela? Il n’avait qu’une pensée, qu’un but, qu’un espoir: Natcha!

Son attention ne s’était éveillée qu’au moment où Karl Dragoch avait commencé à parler de la jeune femme, à dire comment, de la bouche de

Titcha, il avait appris que Natcha descendait le cours du fleuve, prisonnière à bord d’un chaland commandé par le chef de cette bande, dont le nom réel n’était pas Ladko, mais Striga.

A ce nom, Serge Ladko avait poussé un véritable rugissement.

«Striga!» s’était-il écrié tandis que sa main crispée étreignait violemment l’aviron.

Il n’en avait pas demandé davantage. Depuis lors, il se hâtait sans répit, sans trêve, sans repos, les sourcils froncés, les yeux fous, toute son âme projetée en avant, vers le but. Ce but, il avait dans son coeur la certitude de l’atteindre. Pourquoi? Il eût été incapable de le dire. Il en était certain, voilà tout. Le chaland dans lequel Natcha était prisonnière, il le découvrirait du premier coup d’oeil, fût-ce au milieu de mille autres. Comment? Il n’en savait rien. Mais il le découvrirait. Cela ne se discutait pas, ne faisait pas question. Il s’expliquait maintenant pourquoi il lui avait semblé connaître celui des geôliers chargé de lui apporter ses repas pendant sa première incarcération, et pourquoi les voix entendues confusément avaient eu un écho dans son coeur. Le geôlier, c’était Titcha. Les voix, c’étaient celles de Striga et de Natcha. Et de même, le cri apporté par la nuit, c’était encore Natcha appelant inutilement à l’aide. Que ne s’était-il arrêté alors! Que de regrets, que de remords il se fût épargnés!

A peine si, au moment de sa fuite, il avait aperçu dans l’obscurité la masse sombre de la prison flottante dans laquelle il abandonnait, sans le savoir, celle qui lui était si chère. N’importe! cela suffirait. Il était impossible qu’il passât en vue de ce chaland sans qu’au fond de son être une voix mystérieuse ne l’en avertît.

En vérité, l’espoir de Serge Ladko était moins présomptueux qu’on ne pourrait être tenté de le croire. Ses chances d’erreur étaient, en effet, très réduites par la rareté des chalands sillonnant le Danube. Leur nombre, qui, depuis Orsova, n’avait cessé de diminuer, était devenu tout à fait insignifiant à partir de Roustchouk, et les derniers s’étaient arrêtés à Silistrie. En aval de cette ville, que la barge eut dépassée en vingt-quatre heures, il ne resta que deux gabarres sur le fleuve, où régnaient presque exclusivement désormais les bâtiments à vapeur.

C’est qu’à la hauteur de Roustchouk le Danube est immense. S’étalant sur la rive gauche en interminables marais, son lit y dépasse deux lieues. En aval, il est plus vaste encore, et, entre Silistrie et Braïla, atteint parfois jusqu’à vingt kilomètres de largeur. Cette étendue d’eau, c’est une véritable mer, à laquelle ne manquent ni les tempêtes, ni les lames couronnées d’écume, et il est concevable que des chalands plats, peu faits pour les houles du large, hésitent à s’y aventurer.

Il était même fort heureux pour Serge Ladko que le temps restât fixé au beau. Dans une embarcation de si petite taille et de formes si peu *marines*, il aurait été forcé, pour peu que le vent eût soufflé avec quelque violence, de chercher refuge dans une anfractuosité de la rive.

Karl Dragoch, qui, tout en s’intéressant de grand coeur aux soucis de son compagnon, visait aussi un autre but, ne laissait pas d’être troublé en constatant le désert de cette morne étendue. Titcha ne lui avait-il pas donné un renseignement mensonger? L’arrêt successif de tous les chalands lui faisait craindre que Striga n’eût été dans la nécessité de les imiter. Son inquiétude devint telle qu’il finit par s’en ouvrir à Serge Ladko.

«Un chaland est-il capable d’aller jusqu’à la mer? demanda-t-il.

— Oui, répondit le pilote. Cela arrive rarement, mais ça se voit cependant.

— Vous en avez conduit vous-même?

— Quelquefois.

— Comment font-ils pour décharger leur cargaison?

— En s’abritant dans une des criques qui existent au delà des bouches, et où des vapeurs viennent les trouver.

— Les bouches, dites-vous. Il y en a plusieurs, en effet.

— Il y a deux branches principales, répondit Serge Ladko. L’une, au Nord, celle de Kilia; l’autre, plus au Sud, celle de Sulina. Cette dernière est la plus importante.

— Cela ne peut-il être pour nous une cause d’erreur? s’enquit Karl Dragoch.

— Non, affirma le pilote. Des gens qui se cachent ne passent pas par Sulina. Nous prendrons le bras du Nord.

Karl Dragoch ne fut qu’à demi rassuré par cette réponse. Pendant que l’on suivrait une route, la bande pouvait parfaitement s’échapper par l’autre. Mais que faire contre cette éventualité, sinon s’en remettre à la chance, puisqu’on ne possédait pas le moyen de surveiller à la fois toutes les bouches du fleuve? Comme s’il eût deviné sa pensée, Serge Ladko compléta son explication de cette manière rassurante:

— D’ailleurs, au delà de la bouche de Kilia, il existe une anse, dans laquelle un chaland peut procéder à un transbordement. Par la bouche de

Sulina, il lui faudrait au contraire décharger dans le port de ce nom, qui est situé au bord même de la mer. Quant au bras Saint-Georges, qui coule plus au Sud, il est à peine navigable, bien qu’il soit le plus important au point de vue de la largeur. Aucune erreur n’est donc à craindre.»

Dans la matinée du 14 octobre, le quatrième jour après le départ de Roustchouk, la barge parvint enfin au delta du Danube.

Laissant sur la droite le bras de Sulina, elle s’engagea franchement dans celui de Kilia. A midi, on passait devant Ismaïl, dernière ville de quelque importance que l’on dût rencontrer. Dès les premières heures du lendemain, on déboucherait dans la mer Noire.

Aurait-on rejoint auparavant le chaland de Striga? Rien n’autorisait à le croire. Depuis qu’on avait abandonné le bras principal, la solitude du fleuve était devenue complète. Si loin que s’étendit le regard, plus une voile, plus un panache de fumée. Karl Dragoch était dévoré d’inquiétude.

Quant à Serge Ladko, s’il était inquiet, il n’en laissait rien paraître. Toujours courbé sur l’aviron, il poussait inlassablement la barge de l’avant, attentif à suivre le chenal que seule une longue pratique lui permettait de reconnaître entre les rives basses et marécageuses.

Son courage obstiné devait avoir sa récompense. Dans l’après-midi de ce même jour, vers cinq heures, un chaland apparut enfin, mouillé à une douzaine de kilomètres au-dessous de la ville forte de Kilia. Serge Ladko, arrêtant le mouvement de son aviron, saisit une longue-vue et examina attentivement ce chaland.

“C’est lui!... dit-il d’une voix étouffée en laissant retomber l’instrument.

— Vous en êtes sûr?

— Sûr, affirma Serge Ladko. J’ai reconnu Yacoub Ogul, un habile pilote de Roustchouk, âme damnée de Striga, dont il conduit certainement le bateau.

— Qu’allons-nous faire? demanda Karl Dragoch.

Serge Ladko ne répondit pas sur-le-champ. Il réfléchissait. Le détective reprit:

— Il faut revenir en arrière jusqu’à Kilia et au besoin jusqu’à Ismaïl. La, nous nous procurerons du renfort.

Le pilote hocha négativement la tête.

— Remonter jusqu’à Ismaïl, en refoulant le courant, ou seulement jusqu’à Kilia, dit-il, cela demanderait trop de temps. Le chaland prendrait de l’avance, et, en mer, on ne pourrait plus le retrouver. Non, restons ici et attendons la nuit. J’ai une idée. Si je ne réussis pas, nous suivrons le chaland de loin, et, quand nous connaîtrons son lieu de relâche, nous irons chercher de l’aide à Sulina.

A huit heures, l’obscurité devenue complète, Serge Ladko laissa dériver la barge Jusqu’à deux cents mètres du chaland. Là, il mouilla silencieusement son grappin. Puis, sans un mot d’explication à Karl Dragoch qui le regardait faire avec étonnement, il quitta ses vêtements et s’élança dans le fleuve.

Fendant l’eau d’un bras robuste, il se dirigea en droite ligne vers le chaland qu’il distinguait confusément dans l’ombre. Quand il l’eut dépassé, à distance suffisante pour ne pas être aperçu, il nagea en sens contraire, et, refoulant le courant assez rapide, vint s’accrocher au large safran du gouvernail. Il écouta. Presque étouffé par le frissonnement soyeux de l’eau courant sur les flancs de la gabarre, un air de danse parvint jusqu’à lui. Au-dessus de sa tête, quelqu’un chantonnait à mi-voix. Cramponné des pieds et des mains à la surface gluante du bois, Serge Ladko s’éleva d’un lent effort jusqu’à la partie supérieure du safran et reconnut Yacoub Ogul.

A bord, tout était tranquille. Aucun bruit ne sortait du rouf, dans lequel Ivan Striga s’était sans doute retiré. Des hommes de l’équipage, cinq devisaient paisiblement, étendus sur le pont vers l’avant. Leurs voix se fondaient en un murmure confus. Seul, Yacoub Ogul se trouvait à l’arrière. Monté au-dessus du rouf, il s’était assis sur la barre du gouvernail et se laissait bercer par la paix nocturne, en murmurant une chanson familière.

La chanson s’éteignit tout à coup. Deux mains de fer broyaient la gorge du chanteur, qui, basculant par-dessus le couronnement, vint tomber en travers du safran. Était-il mort? Jambes et bras ballants, son corps inerte pendait comme un linge de part et d’autre de cette arête étroite. Serge Ladko desserra son étreinte et saisit l’homme par la ceinture, puis diminuant graduellement la pression de ses genoux contre le safran, il se laissa glisser peu à peu et s’enfonça silencieusement dans l’eau.

Nul, dans le chaland, n’avait soupçonné l’agression. Ivan Striga n’était pas sorti du rouf. A l’avant, les cinq causeurs continuaient leur paisible conversation.

Serge Ladko, cependant, nageait vers la barge. Le retour était plus pénible que l’aller. Outre qu’il lui fallait maintenant remonter le courant, il avait à soutenir le corps de Yacoub Ogul. Si celui-ci n’était pas mort, il n’en valait guère mieux. La fraîcheur de l’eau ne l’avait pas ranimé; il ne faisait pas un mouvement. Serge Ladko commençait à craindre d’avoir eu la main trop lourde.

Alors que cinq minutes avaient suffi pour venir de la barge au chaland, plus d’une demi-heure fut nécessaire pour refaire le même parcours en sens inverse. Encore le pilote eut-il la chance de ne pas s’égarer dans l’ombre.

“Aidez-moi, dit-il à Karl Dragoch en saisissant enfin l’embarcation. En voici toujours un.

Avec le secours du détective, Yacoub Ogul fut passé par-dessus bord et déposé dans la barge.

— Est-il mort? demanda Serge Ladko.

Karl Dragoch se pencha sur le captif.

— Non, dit-il. Il respire.

Serge Ladko eut un soupir de satisfaction et, reprenant aussitôt l’aviron, commença à remonter le courant.

— Alors, attachez-le, et solidement, dit-il tout en godillant, si vous ne voulez pas qu’il vous brûle la politesse quand je vous aurai déposé à terre.

— Nous allons donc nous séparer? demanda Karl Dragoch.

— Oui, répondit Serge Ladko. Quand vous aurez pris terre, je retournerai aux alentours du chaland, et demain je m’arrangerai pour m’introduire à bord.

— En plein jour?

— En plein jour. J’ai mon idée. Soyez tranquille, pendant un certain temps tout au moins, je ne courrai aucun danger. Plus tard, quand nous serons près de la mer Noire, je ne dis pas que les choses ne risquent de se gâter. Mais je compte sur vous à ce moment que je retarderai le plus possible.

— Sur moi?... Que pourrai-je donc faire?

— M’amener du secours.

— Je m’y emploierai, n’en doutez pas, affirma chaleureusement Karl Dragoch.

— Je n’en doute pas, mais vous aurez peut-être quelque difficulté. Vous ferez pour le mieux, voilà tout. Ne perdez pas de vue que le chaland quittera son mouillage demain à midi, et que, si rien ne l’arrête, il sera en mer vers quatre heures. Basez-vous là-dessus.

— Pourquoi ne restez-vous pas avec moi? demanda Karl Dragoch très inquiet pour son compagnon.

— Parce que vous pouvez éprouver du retard, ce qui permettrait à Striga de prendre de l’avance et de disparaître. Il ne faut pas qu’il atteigne la mer. Et il ne l’atteindra pas, même si vous arrivez trop tard pour me prêter main-forte. Seulement, dans ce cas, il est probable que je serai mort.»

Le ton du pilote était sans réplique. Comprenant que rien ne le ferait changer d’avis, Karl Dragoch n’insista pas. La barge fut donc conduite à la rive, et Yacoub Ogul, toujours évanoui, fut déposé sur le sol.

Aussitôt, Serge Ladko poussa au large. La barge disparut dans la nuit.

XVIII

LE PILOTE DU DANUBE.

Quand Serge Ladko eut disparu dans l’ombre, Karl Dragoch hésita un instant sur ce qu’il convenait de faire. Seul, au début de la nuit, en ce point de la frontière de la Bessarabie, encombré du corps inerte d’un prisonnier dont son devoir lui interdisait de se séparer, sa situation ne laissait pas d’être fort embarrassante. Cependant, comme il était évident qu’un secours ne lui arriverait pas sans qu’il allât le chercher, il lui fallut bien prendre une décision. Le temps pressait. D’une heure, d’une minute peut-être pouvait dépendre le salut de Serge Ladko. Abandonnant provisoirement Yacoub Ogul toujours évanoui, et suffisamment ligotté, d’ailleurs, pour que la fuite lui fût interdite en cas de retour à la vie, il remonta vers l’amont aussi vite que le permettait la nature du terrain.

Après une demi-heure de marche dans un pays complètement désert, il commençait à craindre d’être obligé de pousser jusqu’à Kilia, lorsqu’il découvrit enfin une maison bâtie au bord du fleuve.

Ce ne fut pas une petite affaire que de se faire ouvrir la porte de cette maison, qui semblait être une ferme de quelque importance. A pareille heure, en pareil lieu, une certaine méfiance est excusable, et les habitants de cette demeure paraissaient peu friands d’en permettre l’entrée. La difficulté s’aggravait de l’impossibilité où l’on était de se comprendre, ces paysans parlant un patois local que Karl Dragoch, malgré son polyglotisme, ne connaissait pas. Inventant un jargon de circonstance dans lequel des mots roumains, russes et allemands figuraient chacun pour un tiers, il réussit toutefois à gagner leur confiance, et la porte si énergiquement défendue finit par s’entre-bâiller.

Une fois dans la place, il lui fallut répondre à un interrogatoire serré, dont il sortit nécessairement à son honneur, puisque deux heures ne s’étaient pas écoulées depuis son débarquement, qu’une charrette l’avait ramené prés de Yacoub Ogul.

Celui-ci n’avait pas repris connaissance. Il ne donna même aucun signe de conscience, quand, de l’herbe de la rive, il fut transporté dans la charrette, qui repartit aussitôt vers Kilia. Jusqu’à la ferme, force fut d’aller au pas, mais, au delà, on trouva un chemin, à la vérité fort mauvais, qui permit néanmoins d’activer l’allure.

Il était plus de minuit, quand, après ces péripéties, Karl Dragoch entra dans Kilia. Tout dormait dans la ville, et découvrir le chef de la police ne fut pas chose facile. Il y parvint cependant, et prit, sur lui de réveiller ce haut fonctionnaire, qui, sans manifester trop de mauvaise humeur, se mit obligeamment à sa disposition.

Karl Dragoch en profita pour faire déposer en lieu sûr Yacoub Ogul, qui commençait à ouvrir les yeux; puis, libre de ses mouvements, il put enfin s’occuper de la capture du reste de la bande et du salut de Serge Ladko, qui le passionnait peut-être plus encore.

Dès le premier pas, il se heurta à d’insurmontables difficultés. Aucun vapeur n’était alors à Kilia, et, d’autre part, le chef de la police se refusait énergiquement à envoyer ses hommes sur le fleuve. Ce bras du Danube étant alors indivis entre la Roumanie et la Turquie, on était en droit de craindre que leur intervention ne provoquât de la part de la Sublime Porte des réclamations très regrettables à un moment où grondaient sourdement des menaces de guerre. Si le fonctionnaire roumain avait pu feuilleter le livre du Destin, il y aurait vu que cette guerre, décrétée de toute éternité, éclaterait nécessairement quelques mois plus tard, et cela l’aurait, sans doute, rendu moins timide; mais, dans son ignorance de l’avenir, il tremblait à la pensée d’être mêlé d’une manière quelconque à des complications diplomatiques, et il se conformait au sage précepte: «Pas d’affaires», qui est, comme on ne l’ignore pas, la devise des fonctionnaires de tous les pays.

Le maximum de ce qu’il osa faire, ce fut de donner à Karl Dragoch le conseil de se rendre à Sulina et de lui indiquer l’homme capable de le conduire dans ce difficile voyage de près de cinquante kilomètres à travers le delta du Danube.

Aller réveiller cet homme, le décider, atteler la voiture, la faire passer sur la rive droite, tout cela demanda beaucoup de temps. Il était près de trois heures du matin, quand le détective fut enfin emporté au trot d’un petit cheval, dont la qualité était fort heureusement supérieure à l’apparence.

Le chef de la police de Kilia avait eu raison en représentant comme difficile la traversée du Delta. Sur des routes boueuses et parfois recouvertes de plusieurs centimètres d’eau, la voiture avançait péniblement, et, sans l’habileté du conducteur, elle se fût plus d’une fois égarée dans cette plaine où n’existe aucun point de repère. On n’avançait pas vite ainsi, et encore fallait-il de temps à autre laisser souffler le cheval exténué.

Midi sonnait comme Karl Dragoch arrivait à Sulina. Le délai fixé par Serge Ladko allait expirer dans quelques heures! Sans prendre le temps de se restaurer, il courut se mettre en rapport avec les autorités locales.

Sulina, devenue roumaine depuis le traité de Berlin, était ville turque à l’époque de ces événements. Les relations étant alors des plus tendues entre la Sublime Porte et les puissances occidentales, Karl Dragoch, sujet hongrois, ne pouvait espérer y être *persona grata,* malgré la mission d’intérêt général dont il était investi. Moins mal reçu qu’il ne le craignait, il ne fut donc pas surpris de ne trouver auprès des autorités qu'une aide assez molle.

La police locale, lui dit-on, ne possédant pas d'embarcation qui lui fût spécialement affectée, il ne devait compter que sur l'aviso de la douane, dont le concours était tout indiqué dans la circonstance, une bande de voleurs pouvant, avec un peu de complaisance, être assimilée à une bande de contrebandiers. Malheureusement, cet aviso, navire à vapeur de marche d'ailleurs assez rapide, n'était pas présentement dans le port. Il croisait en mer, mais sûrement à faible distance de la côte. Karl Dragoch n'avait donc qu'à fréter une barque de pêche, et, dès qu il serait hors des jetées, il le rencontrerait sans aucun doute.

Le détective, désespéré de son impuissance, se résigna à adopter ce parti. A une heure et demie de l'après-midi, il mettait à la voile et doublait le môle, à la recherche de l'aviso. Il ne disposait plus que de cent cinquante minutes pour arriver au rendez-vous de Serge Ladko!

Celui-ci, pendant que Karl Dragoch subissait cette série de mésaventures, poursuivait méthodiquement l'exécution de son plan.

Toute la matinée, il était resté aux aguets, sa barge dissimulée dans les roseaux de la rive, s'assurant que le chaland ne faisait aucun préparatif de départ. En s'emparant, un peu brutalement peut-être — mais il n'avait pas le choix des moyens — de Yacoub Ogul, c'est ce but précisément qu'il avait visé. Ainsi qu'il l'avait prévu, Striga n'osait s'aventurer sans guide dans une navigation des plus délicates et que l'abondance des bancs de sable rend impraticable à qui n'en a pas fait l'étude exclusive de sa vie. Il était à croire que les pirates, incapables de s'expliquer la disparition de leur pilote, saisiraient la première occasion de le remplacer. Mais les pilotes n'abondent pas sur le bras de Kilia, et, jusqu'à onze heures du matin, les eaux, si l’on fait exception du chaland toujours immobile et de la barge invisible, demeurèrent complètement désertes A onze heures seulement, deux embarcations apparurent du côté de la mer. Serge Ladko, les ayant examinées avec sa longue-vue, reconnut que l’une d’elles était celle d’un pilote. Ivan Striga allait donc vraisemblablement trouver le secours qu’il devait attendre avec impatience. Le moment d’intervenir était arrivé.

La barge sortit hors des roseaux et se rapprocha du chaland.

“Oh! du chaland!... héla Serge Ladko quand il fut à portée de la voix.

— Oh!... lui fut-il répondu.

Un homme apparut sur le rouf. Cet homme, c’était Ivan Striga.

Quelle fureur gronda dans le coeur de Serge Ladko, lorsqu’il aperçut cet ennemi acharné de son bonheur, le lâche qui, depuis tant de mois, tenait Natcha en son pouvoir!

Mais il s’attendait à cette rencontre qu’il avait cherchée. Il y était préparé. Sa fureur, il la renferma en lui-même, et, se faisant violence:

— Vous n’auriez pas besoin d’un pilote? demanda-t-il d’une voix calme.

Au lieu de répondre, Striga, abritant ses yeux de la main, considéra un long instant celui qui l’interpellait. A vrai dire, d’un seul regard il avait été fixé sur la personnalité du nouveau venu. Mais, qu’il eût devant lui le mari de Natcha, cela lui paraissait si extraordinaire et, on peut le dire, si inespéré, qu’il hésitait devant l’évidence.

— N’êtes-vous pas Serge Ladko, de Roustchouk? interrogea-t-il à son tour.

— C’est bien moi, répondit le pilote.

— Ne me reconnaissez-vous pas?

— Il faudrait donc être aveugle, répliqua Serge Ladko. Je vous reconnais parfaitement, Ivan Striga.

— Et vous me faites vos offres de service?

— Pourquoi pas? je suis pilote, déclara froidement Serge Ladko.

Striga balança un instant. Que celui qu’il haïssait le plus au monde vint ainsi bénévolement se mettre à sa merci, c’était trop beau. Cela ne cachait-il pas un piège?... Mais quel danger pouvait faire courir un homme seul à un équipage nombreux et résolu? Qu’il conduisit le chaland jusqu’à la mer, puisqu’il avait la sottise de le proposer! Une fois en mer, par exemple!...

— Embarque! conclut le pirate, la bouche déformée par un rictus cruel que vit distinctement Serge Ladko.

Celui-ci ne se fit pas répéter l’invitation. Sa barge accosta le chaland, à bord duquel il monta. Striga s’avança au-devant de lui.

— Me permettrez-vous, dit-il, de vous exprimer ma surprise de vous rencontrer aux bouches du Danube?

Le pilote garda le silence.

— On vous croyait mort, reprit Striga, depuis le temps que vous avez disparu de Roustchouk.

Cette insinuation n’obtint pas plus de succès que la précédente.

— Qu’étiez-vous devenu? interrogea Striga sans se décourager.

— Je n’ai pas quitté le voisinage de la mer, répondit enfin Serge Ladko.

— Si loin de Roustchouk! s’exclama Striga.

Serge Ladko fronça les sourcils. Cet interrogatoire commençait à l’exaspérer. Suivant la ligne de conduite qu’il s’était tracée, il refréna toutefois son impatience et expliqua posément:

— Les périodes troublées ne sont pas favorables aux affaires.

Striga le considéra d’un oeil narquois.

— Et l’on vous disait patriote! s’écria-t-il avec ironie.

— Je ne fais plus de politique, dit sèchement Serge Ladko.

A ce moment, le regard de Striga tomba sur la barge, que le courant avait fait éviter à l’arrière du chaland. Il tressaillit violemment. Il ne pouvait se tromper. C’était bien cette barge, dont il s’était servi lui-même pendant huit jours, et qu’il avait retrouvée amarrée au quai de Semlin. Serge Ladko mentait donc quand il prétendait ne pas avoir quitté le delta du Danube?

— Depuis que vous avez quitté Roustchouk, vous ne vous êtes pas éloigné de ces parages? insista Striga en scrutant de l’oeil son interlocuteur.

— Non, répondit Serge Ladko.

— Vous m’étonnez, fit Striga.

— Pourquoi? Avez-vous cru me rencontrer ailleurs?

— Vous, non. Mais cette embarcation... Je jurerais l’avoir vue sur le haut fleuve.

— C’est bien possible, répondit Serge Ladko avec indifférence. Je l’ai achetée, il y a trois jours, d’un homme qui disait arriver de Vienne.

— Comment était cet homme? demanda vivement Striga dont les soupçons évoluaient vers Karl Dragoch.

— Un brun, avec des lunettes.

— Ah!... fit Striga tout songeur.

Les réponses du pilote l’avaient visiblement ébranlé. Il ne savait plus ce qu’il devait croire. Mais il ne tarda pas à libérer son esprit de toute préoccupation. Qu’importait après tout? Que Serge Ladko dît ou ne dît pas la vérité, il n’en était pas moins entre ses mains. L’imbécile, qui se jetait ainsi dans la gueule du loup!... Entré sur le chaland, il n’en sortirait pas vivant. Voilà des mois que Striga mentait en affirmant à Natcha qu’elle était veuve. Dès qu’on serait en mer, ce mensonge deviendrait une vérité.

— Partons! dit-il en manière de conclusion à ses pensées.

— A midi, répondit tranquillement Serge Ladko qui, sortant des provisions d’un sac qu’il portait à la main, se mit en devoir de déjeuner.

Le pirate eut un geste d’impatience. Serge Ladko feignit de n’en rien voir.

— Je dois vous prévenir, dit Striga, que je tiens à être à la mer avant la nuit.

— Nous y serons,» affirma le pilote, sans montrer la moindre velléité de modifier sa décision.

Striga s’éloigna vers l’avant. A en juger par l’expression réfléchie de son visage, il lui restait un souci. Que le mari s’offrit à conduire précisément le chaland dans lequel sa femme était retenue prisonnière, cette coïncidence était tout de même par trop extraordinaire. Certes, rien ne pouvant empêcher que Serge Ladko ne fût seul à bord contre six hommes déterminés, Striga eût sagement fait en ne cherchant pas plus loin. Mais il se tenait en vain ce raisonnement irréfutable. C’était pour lui un besoin de savoir si la disparition de Natcha était connue du principal intéressé. Sa curiosité surexcitée ne lui laissa pas de cesse qu’il n’y eût cédé.

«Avez-vous reçu des nouvelles de Roustchouk depuis que vous l’avez quitté? demanda-t-il en revenant vers le pilote qui continuait paisiblement son repas.

— Jamais, répondit celui-ci.

— Ce silence ne vous a pas surpris?

— Pourquoi m’aurait-il surpris? demanda Serge Ladko en fixant son interlocuteur.

Quelle que fût son audace, celui-ci se sentit gêné sous ce ferme regard.

— Je croyais, balbutia-t-il, que vous y aviez laissé votre femme.

— Et moi je crois, répliqua froidement Serge Ladko, qu’un autre sujet de conversation serait préférable entre nous.»

Striga se le tint pour dit.

Quelques minutes après midi, le pilote donna l'ordre de lever l'ancre, puis, la voile hissée et bordée, il prit lui-même la barre. A ce moment Striga s'approcha de lui.

«Je dois vous prévenir, lui dit-il, que le chaland a besoin de fond.

— Il est sur lest, objecta Serge Ladko. Deux pieds d'eau doivent suffire.

— Il en faut sept, affirma Striga.

— Sept! s'écria le pilote, pour qui ce seul mot était une révélation.

Voilà donc pourquoi la bande du Danube avait échappé jusqu'ici à toutes les poursuites! Son bateau était habilement truqué. Ce qu'on en apercevait hors de l'eau n'était qu'une trompeuse apparence. Le véritable chaland était sous-marin, et c'est dans cette cachette qu'était déposé le produit de ses rapines. Cachette qui pouvait, au besoin, Serge Ladko le savait par expérience, se transformer en inviolable cachot.

— Sept, avait répété Striga en réponse. à l'exclamation du pilote.

— C'est bien,» dit celui-ci sans faire d'autre observation.

Pendant les premiers moments qui suivirent le départ, Striga, qui conservait malgré tout un reste d'inquiétude, ne se départit pas d'une surveillance rigoureuse. Mais l'attitude de Serge Ladko était de nature à le rassurer. Très appliqué à ses fonctions, il ne nourrissait visiblement aucun mauvais dessein et prouvait que sa réputation d'habileté était amplement justifiée. Sous sa main, le chaland évoluait docilement entre les bancs invisibles et suivait avec une précision mathématique les sinuosités de la passe.

Peu à peu, les dernières craintes du pirate s'évanouirent. La navigation se poursuivait sans incident. Bientôt on atteindrait la mer.

Il était quatre heures quand on l'aperçut. Après un dernier coude du fleuve, le ciel et l'eau se rejoignirent à l'horizon.

Striga interpella le pilote.

«Nous voici parés, je pense? dit-il. Ne pourrait-on rendre la barre au timonier habituel?

— Pas encore, répondit Serge Ladko. Le plus difficile n'est pas fait.»

A mesure qu'on gagnait vers l'embouchure, un champ plus vaste était offert à la vue. Placé au sommet mouvant de cet angle dont les branches s'ouvraient peu à peu, Striga tenait son regard obstinément dirigé vers la mer. Tout à coup, il saisit une longue-vue, la braqua sur un petit vapeur de quatre à cinq cents tonneaux qui doublait la pointe Nord, puis, après un bref examen, donna l'ordre de hisser un pavillon en tête de mât. On répondit aussitôt par un signal pareil à bord du vapeur, qui, venant sur tribord, commença à se rapprocher de l'estuaire.

A ce moment, Serge Ladko ayant poussé la barre toute à bâbord, le chaland abattit sur tribord, et, coupant obliquement le courant, prit son erre vers le Sud-Est, comme pour aborder la rive droite.

Striga étonné, regarda le pilote dont l'impassibilité le rassura. Un dernier banc de sable obligeait sans doute les bateaux à suivre cette route capricieuse.

Striga ne se trompait pas. Oui, un banc de sable gisait en effet dans le lit du fleuve, mais non pas du côté de la mer, et c'est droit sur ce banc que Serge

Ladko gouvernait d’une main ferme.

Soudain, il y eut un formidable craquement. Le chaland en fut ébranlé jusque dans ses fonds. Sous le choc, le mât vint en bas, cassé net au ras de l’emplanture, et la voile s’abattit en grand, recouvrant de ses larges plis les hommes qui se trouvaient à l’avant. Le chaland, irrémédiablement engravé, demeura immobile.

A bord, tout le monde avait été renversé, y compris Striga, qui se releva ivre de rage.

Son premier regard fut pour Serge Ladko. Le pilote ne paraissait pas ému de l’accident. Il avait lâché la barre, et, les mains enfoncées dans les poches de sa vareuse, il surveillait son ennemi, le regard attentif à ce qui allait suivre.

“Canaille!” hurla Striga, qui, brandissant un revolver, courut vers l’arrière.

A la distance de trois pas, il tira.

Serge Ladko s’était baissé. La balle passa au-dessus de lui sans l’atteindre. Aussitôt redressé, il fut d’un bond sur son adversaire, que son couteau frappa au coeur. Ivan Striga s’écroula comme une masse.

Le drame s’était déroulé si rapidement, que les cinq hommes de l’équipage, embarrassés, d’ailleurs, dans les plis de la voile, n’avaient pas eu le temps d’intervenir. Mais quel hurlement ils poussèrent en voyant tomber leur chef!

Serge Ladko, s’élançant à l’avant du spardeck, se précipita à leur rencontre. De la, il dominait le pont, sur lequel les hommes accouraient en tumulte.

«Arrière! cria-t-il, les deux mains armées de revolvers, dont l’un venait d’être arraché à Striga.

Les hommes s’arrêtèrent. Ils n’avaient point d’armes, et, pour s’en procurer, il leur fallait pénétrer dans le rouf, c’est-à-dire passer sous le feu de l’ennemi.

— Un mot, camarades, reprit Serge Ladko sans quitter son attitude menaçante. J’ai là onze coups. C’est plus qu’il n’en faut pour vous descendre tous jusqu’au dernier. Je vous préviens que je tire, si vous ne reculez pas immédiatement vers l’avant.

L’équipage se consulta, indécis. Serge Ladko comprit que, s’ils se ruaient tous à la fois, il arriverait bien sans doute à en abattre quelques-uns, mais qu’il serait lui-même abattu par les autres.

— Attention!... Je compte jusqu’à trois, annonça-t-il, sans leur laisser le temps de la réflexion. Un!...

Les hommes ne bougèrent pas.

— Deux!... prononça le pilote.

Il y eut un mouvement dans le groupe. Trois hommes ébauchèrent une velléité d’attaque. Deux commencèrent à battre, en retraite.

— Trois!...» dit Serge Ladko en pressant la détente.

Un homme tomba, l’épaule traversée d’une balle. Ses compagnons s’empressèrent de prendre la fuite.

Serge Ladko, sans quitter son poste d’observation, jeta un regard vers le vapeur qui avait obéi au signal de Striga. Le bâtiment était maintenant à moins d’un mille. Lorsqu’il serait bord à bord avec le chaland, lorsque son équipage se serait joint aux pirates, dont il était nécessairement plus ou moins complice, la situation deviendrait des plus graves.

Le steamer approchait toujours. Il n’était plus qu’à trois encablures, quand, évoluant brusquement sur tribord, il décrivit un grand cercle et s’éloigna vers la haute mer. Que signifiait cette manoeuvre? Avait-il donc été inquiété par quelque chose que Serge Ladko ne pouvait apercevoir?

Celui-ci, le coeur battant, attendit. Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent, et un autre vapeur surgit hors de la pointe du Sud. Sa cheminée vomissait des torrents de fumée. Le cap droit sur le chaland, il arrivait à toute vitesse. Bientôt, Serge Ladko put reconnaître à l’avant une figure amie, celle de son passager, M. Jaeger, celle du détective Karl Dragoch. Il était sauvé.

Un instant plus tard, le pont de la gabarre était envahi par la police, et son équipage se rendait, sans essayer une résistance inutile.

Pendant ce temps, Serge Ladko s’était précipité dans le rouf. L’une après l’autre, il en visita les cabines. Une seule porte était fermée. Il la renversa d’un coup d’épaule et s’arrêta sur le seuil, éperdu.

Natcha, reconquise, lui tendait les bras.

XIX

ÉPILOGUE.

Le procès de la bande du Danube passa inaperçu dans le flamboiement de la guerre russo-turque. Les brigands, y compris Titcha aisément cueilli à Roustchouk, furent pendus haut et court, sans éveiller dans le public l’attention qu’en de moins tragiques circonstances on eût accordé à leur exécution.

— -Toutefois, les débats donnèrent aux principaux intéressés l’explication de ce qui était resté jusqu’ici incompréhensible pour eux. Serge Ladko sut par suite de quel quiproquo il avait été emprisonné dans le chaland en lieu et place de Karl Dragoch, et comment Striga, ayant appris par les journaux l’envoi d’une commission rogatoire à Szalka, s’était introduit dans la maison du pêcheur Ilia Brusch, pour répondre aux questions du commissaire de police de Gran.

Il sut également comment Natcha, enlevée par la bande du Danube, avait eu à lutter contre les attaques de Striga, qui, se croyant certain d’avoir abattu son ennemi, ne cessait de lui affirmer qu’elle était veuve. Un soir notamment, Striga, à l’appui de son dire, avait montré à la jeune femme son propre portrait, qu’il prétendait avoir conquis de haute lutte sur le légitime propriétaire. Il en était résulté une scène violente, au cours de laquelle Striga s’était emporté jusqu’à la menace. De là, le cri poussé par Natcha, et que le fugitif avait entendu dans la nuit.

Mais c’était là de l’histoire ancienne. Serge Ladko ne pensait plus aux mauvais jours depuis qu’il avait eu le bonheur de retrouver sa chère Natcha.

Le territoire de la Bulgarie lui étant interdit, l’heureux couple, après les événements qui viennent d’être racontés, s’était fixé d’abord dans la ville roumaine de Giurgievo. C’est là qu’il se trouvait, quand, au mois de mai de l’année suivante, le Tzar déclara officiellement la guerre au Sultan. Serge Ladko, est-il besoin de le dire, fut des premiers qui s’engagèrent dans les rangs de l’armée russe, à laquelle, grâce à sa connaissance du théâtre des opérations, il rendit d’importants services.

La guerre finie, la Bulgarie enfin libre, il revint avec Natcha dans la maison de Roustchouk et reprit son métier de pilote. Tous deux y vivent encore aujourd’hui, heureux et honorés.

Karl Dragoch est resté leur ami. Pendant longtemps, il n’a jamais manqué de descendre le Danube, au moins une fois l’an, pour venir à Roustchouk. Aujourd’hui, les voies ferrées, dont le réseau s’est progressivement développé, lui permettent d’abréger le voyage. Mais c’est toujours en suivant les méandres du fleuve que Serge Ladko, au hasard de ses pilotages, lui rend ses visites à Budapest.

Des trois garçons que Natcha lui a donnés et qui sont maintenant des hommes, le plus jeune, après un sévère apprentissage sous les ordres de Karl Dragoch, est en bonne voie pour atteindre les plus hauts grades dans l’administration judiciaire de Bulgarie.

Le cadet, digne héritier d’un lauréat de la Ligue Danubienne, s’est consacré au peuple des eaux. Toutefois, rejetant la ligne, il a perfectionné les méthodes de combat. Il doit à ses pêcheries d’esturgeon une célébrité universelle et une fortune qui promet de devenir considérable.

Quant à l’aîné, il succédera à son père, lorsque l’âge de la retraite sonnera pour celui-ci. Par lui seront alors conduits vapeurs et chalands, de Vienne à la mer, dans les passes sinueuses et entre les bancs perfides du grand fleuve; par lui se perpétuera la race des Pilotes du Danube.

Mais, quelle que soit la différence de leurs positions, des trois fils de Serge Ladko le coeur bat à l’unisson. Aiguillés par la vie sur des routes divergentes, ils se rencontrent toujours à ces carrefours: une même vénération pour leur père, une égale tendresse pour leur mère, un pareil amour de la patrie bulgare.

THE SURVIVORS OF THE 'JONATHAN'

This novel was first written under the title *Magellania* in 1897. However, it was not published until 1909, after it had been rewritten by Verne's son Michel under the title *Les naufragés du "Jonathan"*. Scholar Piero Gondolo della Riva discovered the original manuscript in the Hetzel family archives in 1977.

The novel tells the story of a mysterious man named Kaw-djer, who lives in the land of Magellania, a region around the Straits of Magellan. Kaw-djer, whose motto is "Neither God nor master", helps himself survive and also provides assistance to the indigenous peoples of Magellania. However, when a group of settlers is shipwrecked on a nearby island, Kaw-djer helps them establish their colony, though he refuses to rule over them or control them in any way.

Due to copyright restrictions on the English translation, only the French text is available in this edition.

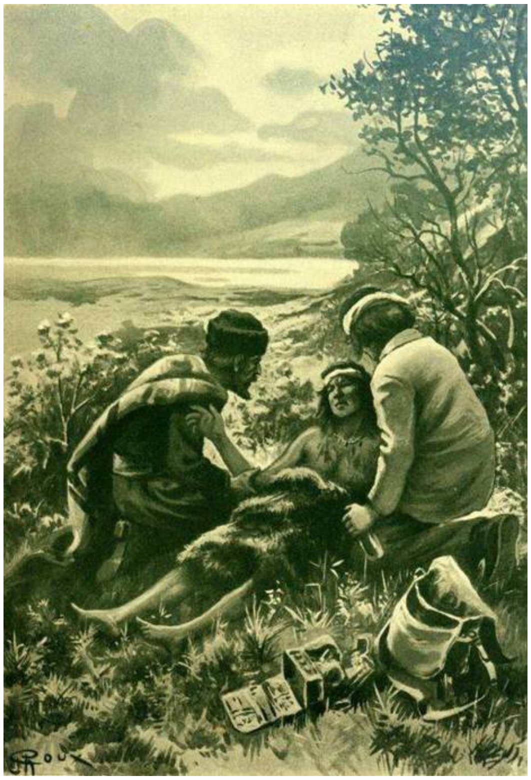

One of the original illustrations from the French edition

LES NAUFRAGÉS DU ‘JONATHAN’

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PREMIERE PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

I

Le guanaque

C’était un gracieux animal, le cou long et d’une courbure élégante, la croupe arrondie, les jambes nerveuses et effilées, les flancs effacés, la robe d’un roux fauve tacheté de blanc, la queue courte, en panache, très fournie de poils. Son nom dans le pays: guanaco; en français: guanaque. Vus de loin, ces ruminants ont souvent donné l’illusion de chevaux montés, et plus d’un voyageur, trompé par cette apparence, a pris pour une bande de cavaliers un de leurs troupeaux passant au galop à l’horizon.

Seule créature visible dans cette région déserte, ce guanaque vint s’arrêter sur la crête d’un monticule, au milieu d’une vaste prairie où les joncs se frôlaient bruyamment et dardaient leurs pointes aiguës entre des touffes de plantes épineuses. Le museau tourné au vent, il aspirait les émanations qu’une légère brise apportait de l’Est. L’œil attentif, l’oreille dressée, pivotante, il écoutait, prêt à prendre la fuite au moindre bruit suspect.

La plaine ne présentait pas une surface uniformément plate. Çà et là, elle était vallonnée de bosses que les grandes pluies orageuses, en ravinant la terre, avaient laissées après elles. Abrité par un de ces épaulements, à faible distance du monticule, rampait un indigène, un Indien, que le guanaque ne pouvait apercevoir. Aux trois quarts nu, n’ayant pour tout vêtement que les lambeaux d’une peau de bête, il avançait sans bruit, se faufilant dans l’herbe, de manière à se rapprocher du gibier convoité sans l’effaroucher. Celui-ci, cependant, avait la notion d’un péril imminent et commençait à donner des signes d’inquiétude.

Soudain, un lasso coupa l’air en sifflant et se déroula vers l’animal. La longue courroie n’atteignit pas le but; elle glissa et, de la croupe, tomba sur le sol.

Le coup était manqué. Le guanaque s’était enfui à toutes jambes. Il avait déjà disparu derrière un massif d’arbres, lorsque l’Indien arriva au sommet du monticule.

Mais, si le guanaque ne courait plus aucun danger, l’homme était menacé à son tour.

Après avoir ramené à lui le lasso dont le bout était fixé à sa ceinture, il se préparait à redescendre, quand un furieux rugissement éclata à quelques pas de lui. Presque aussitôt, un fauve s’abattit à ses pieds.

C’était un jaguar de grande taille, au pelage grisâtre marbré de tachetures noires à centres plus clairs imitant la pupille d’un œil.

L’indigène connaissait la férocité de cet animal capable de l’étrangler d’un seul coup de mâchoire. Il recula d’un bond. Par malheur, une pierre qui roula sous son pied lui fit perdre l’équilibre. La main haute, il essaya de se défendre à l’aide d’une sorte de couteau, fait d’un os de phoque très effilé, qu’il était parvenu à tirer de sa ceinture. Un instant même, il espéra pouvoir se relever et se mettre en meilleure posture. Il n’en eut pas le temps. Le jaguar légèrement touché le chargea avec fureur. Renversé, les griffes du fauve déchirant sa poitrine, il était perdu.

Juste à ce moment retentit la détonation sèche d’une carabine. Le jaguar, le cœur traversé d’une balle, s’abattit foudroyé.

À cent pas de là une légère vapeur blanche voltigeait au-dessus d’un des rocs de la falaise. Debout sur ce roc, se tenait un homme, sa carabine encore épaulée.

De type arien très accusé, cet homme n’était pas un compatriote du blessé. Il n’avait pas la peau brune, bien qu’il fût fortement hâlé, ni le nez élargi dans un profond enfoncement des orbites, ni les pommettes saillantes, ni le front bas sous un angle fuyant, ni les petits yeux de la race indigène. Au contraire, sa physionomie était intelligente, son front vaste et zébré des multiples rides du penseur.

Ce personnage portait, coupés ras, des cheveux grisonnants comme sa barbe. Toutefois on n’aurait pu, à dix ans près, indiquer son âge, compris sans doute entre la quarantaine et la cinquantaine. Il était de haute taille, et paraissait doué d’une force athlétique, d’une constitution vigoureuse, d’une santé inattaquable. Les traits de son visage étaient énergiques et graves, et toute sa personne exprimait la fierté, bien différente de l’orgueilleuse vanité des sots, ce qui lui donnait une véritable noblesse d’attitude et de gestes.

Comprenant qu’il ne serait pas nécessaire de décharger une seconde fois sa carabine, le nouveau venu l’abaissa, la désarma, la mit sous son bras, puis se retourna vers le Sud.

Dans cette direction, en contrebas de la falaise se développait une large étendue de mer. L’homme, se penchant, appela: “Karroly!…” et ajouta deux ou trois mots dans une langue rude et gutturale.

Quelques minutes plus tard, par une coupure de la falaise, apparut un adolescent d’environ dix-sept ans, que suivit de près un homme dans la maturité de l’âge. Assurément, tous deux étaient Indiens, à en juger par leur type bien différent de celui de ce blanc, qui venait de prouver son adresse par un si brillant coup de fusil. Bien musclé, larges épaules, torse puissant, grosse tête carrée portée sur un cou robuste, taille de cinq pieds, très brun de peau, très noir de cheveux, des yeux perçants sous une arcade sourcilière peu fournie, barbe réduite à quelques poils, tel était l'homme, qui paraissait avoir dépassé la quarantaine. Les caractères de l'animalité, mais d'une animalité douce et caressante, le disputaient à ceux de l'humanité, chez cet être de race inférieure, qu'on eût été tenté de comparer, plutôt qu'à un fauve, à un bon et fidèle chien, à l'un de ces courageux terre-neuve, qui peuvent devenir le compagnon, mieux que le compagnon, l'ami de leur maître. Et ce fut bien comme un de ces dévoués animaux qu'il accourut à l'appel de son nom.

Quant au jeune garçon, son fils selon toute apparence, dont le corps souple comme celui d'un serpent était entièrement nu, il semblait très supérieur à son père au point de vue intellectuel. Son front plus développé, ses yeux pleins de feu, exprimaient l'intelligence et, ce qui vaut mieux encore, la droiture et la franchise.

Lorsque les trois personnages furent réunis, les deux hommes échangèrent quelques mots dans ce langage indigène caractérisé par une aspiration courte à la moitié de la plupart des mots, puis tous se dirigèrent vers le blessé, qui gisait sur le sol près du jaguar abattu.

Le malheureux avait perdu connaissance. Le sang coulait de sa poitrine labourée par les griffes de la bête féroce. Cependant, ses yeux fermés se rouvrirent lorsqu'il sentit une main écarter son grossier vêtement.

En apercevant celui qui venait à son secours son regard s'éclaira d'une faible lueur de joie, et ses lèvres décolorées murmurèrent un nom:

“Le Kaw-djer!”

Le Kaw-djer, un mot qui signifie l’ami, le bienfaiteur, le sauveur, en langue indigène, et ce beau nom appartenait évidemment à ce blanc, car celui-ci fit un signe affirmatif.

Pendant qu’il donnait les premiers soins au blessé, Karroly redescendit par la coupée de la falaise pour revenir bientôt avec un carnier renfermant une trousse et quelques flacons pleins du suc de certaines plantes du pays. Tandis que l’Indien soutenait sur ses genoux la tête du blessé, dont la poitrine était à découvert, le Kaw-djer lava les blessures et en étancha le sang. Il rapprocha ensuite les lèvres des plaies, qui furent recouvertes par des tampons de charpie imbibée du contenu de l’un des flacons, puis, détachant sa ceinture de laine, il en entoura la poitrine de l’indigène, de manière à maintenir tout le pansement.

Le malheureux survivrait-il? Le Kaw-djer ne le pensait pas. Aucun remède ne pourrait sans doute provoquer la cicatrisation de ces déchirures, qui semblaient intéresser jusqu’à l’estomac et jusqu’aux poumons.

Karroly, profitant de ce que les yeux du blessé venaient de se rouvrir, demanda:

“Où est ta tribu?…

— Là… là…, murmura l’indigène, en indiquant de la main la direction de l’Est.

— Ce doit être, à huit ou dix milles d’ici, sur la rive du canal, dit le Kaw-djer, ce campement dont nous avons aperçu les feux la nuit dernière.”

Karroly approuva de la tête.

“Il n’est que quatre heures, ajouta le Kaw-djer, mais le flot va bientôt monter. Nous ne pourrons partir qu’au soleil levant…

— Oui”, dit Karroly.

Le Kaw-djer reprit:

“Halg et toi, vous allez transporter cet homme et vous l’étendrez dans la barque. Nous ne pouvons rien de plus pour lui.”

Karroly et son fils se mirent en devoir d’obéir. Chargés du blessé, ils commencèrent à descendre vers la grève. L’un d’eux reviendrait ensuite chercher le jaguar, dont la dépouille se vendrait cher aux trafiquants étrangers.

Pendant que ses compagnons s’acquittaient de cette double besogne, le Kaw-djer s’éloigna de quelques pas et escalada l’un des rochers qui dentelaient la falaise. De là, son regard rayonnait vers tous les points de l’horizon.

À ses pieds, se découpait un littoral capricieusement dessiné, qui formait la limite nord d’un canal large de plusieurs lieues. La rive opposée, que des bras de mer échancraient à perte de vue, s’estompait en vagues linéaments, semis d’îles et d’îlots qui semblaient des vapeurs dans le lointain. Ni à l’Est, ni à l’Ouest on n’apercevait les extrémités de ce canal, le long duquel courait la haute et puissante falaise.

Vers le Nord, se développaient interminablement des prairies et des plaines, zébrées de nombreux cours d’eau qui se déversaient dans la mer, soit en torrents tumultueux, soit par des chutes retentissantes. De la surface de ces immenses prairies jaillissaient, par endroits, des îlots de verdure, forêts épaisses, au milieu desquelles on eût vainement cherché un village, et dont les cimes s’empourpraient des rayons du soleil alors à son déclin. Au-delà, bornant l’horizon de ce côté, se profilaient les masses pesantes d’une chaîne de montagnes, que couronnait la blancheur éclatante des glaciers.

Dans la direction de l’Est, le relief du pays s’accentuait plus encore. À l’aplomb du littoral, la falaise se haussait par étages successifs, puis se redressait enfin brusquement en pics aigus qui allaient se perdre dans les zones élevées du ciel.

La contrée paraissait totalement déserte. Même solitude aussi sur le canal. Pas une embarcation en vue, fût-ce un canot d’écorce, ou une pirogue à voiles. Enfin, si loin que le regard pût atteindre, ni des îles du Sud, ni d’aucun point du littoral, ni d’aucune saillie de la falaise ne s’élevait une fumée témoignant de la présence de créatures humaines.

Le jour en était arrivé à cette heure, toujours empreinte de quelque mélancolie, qui précède immédiatement le crépuscule. De grands oiseaux planeurs, en quête de leur gîte nocturne, fendaient l’air de leurs troupes bruyantes.

Le Kaw-djer, les bras croisés, debout sur la roche qu’il avait gravie, gardait une immobilité de statue. Mais une extase illuminait son visage, ses paupières palpitaient, ses yeux étincelaient d’une sorte d’enthousiasme sacré, pendant qu’il contemplait cette étendue prodigieuse de terre et de mer, dernière parcelle du globe qui n’appartînt à personne, dernière région qui ne fût pas courbée sous le joug des lois.

Longtemps, il demeura ainsi, baigné dans la lumière et fouetté par la brise, puis il ouvrit les bras, les tendit vers l’espace, et un profond soupir gonfla sa poitrine, comme s’il eût voulu embrasser d’une étreinte, aspirer d’une haleine tout l’infini. Alors, tandis que son regard semblait braver le ciel et parcourait orgueilleusement la terre, de ses lèvres s’échappa un cri, qui résumait son appétit sauvage d’une liberté absolue, sans limite.

Ce cri, c’était celui des anarchistes de tous les pays, c’était la formule célèbre, si caractéristique qu’on l’emploie couramment comme un synonyme de leur nom, dans laquelle est contenue en quatre mots toute la doctrine de cette secte redoutable.

“Ni Dieu, ni maître!…” proclamait-il d’une voix éclatante, tandis que, le corps à demi penché au-dessus des flots, hors de l’arête de la falaise, il semblait, d’un geste farouche, balayer l’immense horizon.

CHAPITRE II

II

Mystérieuse existence

Les géographes désignent sous le nom de Magellanie l’ensemble des îles et îlots groupés, entre l’Atlantique et le Pacifique, à la pointe sud du continent américain. Les terres les plus australes de ce continent, c’est-à-dire le territoire patagon, prolongées par les deux vastes presqu’îles du Roi Guillaume et de Brunswick, se terminent par un des caps de cette dernière, le cap Froward. Tout ce qui ne leur est pas directement rattaché, tout ce qui en est séparé par le détroit de Magellan, constitue ce domaine, auquel a été justement réservé le nom de l’illustre navigateur portugais du XVIe siècle.

La conséquence de cette disposition géographique, c’est que, jusqu’en 1881, cette partie du Nouveau-Monde n’était rattachée à aucun État civilisé, pas même à ses plus proches voisins, le Chili et la République Argentine, qui se disputaient alors les pampas de la Patagonie. La Magellanie n’appartenait à personne, et des colonies pouvaient s’y fonder en conservant leur entière indépendance.

Elle n’est cependant pas d’une étendue insignifiante, cette contrée qui, sur une aire de cinquante mille kilomètres superficiels, comprend, outre un grand nombre d’autres îles de moindre importance, la Terre de Feu, la Terre de Désolation, les îles Clarence, Hoste, Navarin, plus l’archipel du cap Horn, formé lui-même des îles Grévy, Wollaston, Freycinet, Hermitte, Herschell, et des îlots et récifs, par lesquels s’achève en poussière la masse énorme du continent américain.

Des diverses parcelles de la Magellanie, la Terre de Feu est de beaucoup la plus vaste. Au Nord et à l’Ouest, elle a pour limite un littoral très déchiqueté, depuis le promontoire d’Espiritu Santo jusqu’au Magdalena Sound. Après avoir projeté vers l’Ouest une presqu’île tout effilochée que domine le mont Sarmiento, elle se prolonge, au Sud-Est, par la pointe de San-Diego, sorte de sphinx accroupi dont la queue trempe dans les eaux du détroit de Lemaire.

C’est dans cette grande île, au mois d’avril 1880, que se sont passés les faits qui viennent d’être racontés. Ce canal que le Kaw-djer avait sous les yeux pendant sa fiévreuse méditation, c’est le canal du Beagle, qui court au sud de la Terre de Feu et dont la rive opposée est formée par les îles Gordon, Hoste, Navarin et Picton. Plus au Sud encore, s’éparpille le capricieux archipel du cap Horn.

Près de dix ans avant le jour choisi comme point de départ à ce récit, celui que les Indiens devaient plus tard appeler le Kaw-djer avait été pour la première fois rencontré sur le littoral fuégien. Comment s’y était-il transporté? Sans doute à bord de l’un des nombreux bâtiments, voiliers et steamers, qui suivent les détours du labyrinthe maritime de la Magellanie et des îles qui la prolongent sur l’Océan Pacifique, en faisant avec les indigènes le commerce des pelleteries de guanaques, de vigognes, de nandous et de loups marins.

La présence de cet étranger pouvait s’expliquer aisément de la sorte, mais, quant à savoir quel était son nom, de quelle nationalité il relevait, s’il se rattachait par sa naissance à l’Ancien ou au Nouveau-Monde, c’étaient là autant de questions auxquelles il eût été malaisé de répondre.

On ignorait tout de lui. Nul, d'ailleurs, il convient de l'ajouter, n'avait jamais cherché à se renseigner à son sujet. Dans ce pays où n'existait aucune autorité, qui aurait eu qualité pour l'interroger? Il n'était pas dans un de ces États organisés où la police s'inquiète du passé des gens et où il est impossible de demeurer longtemps inconnu. Ici, personne n'était dépositaire d'une puissance quelconque, et l'on pouvait vivre en dehors de toutes coutumes, de toutes lois, dans la plus complète liberté.

Pendant les deux premières années qui suivirent son arrivée à la Terre de Feu, le Kaw-djer ne chercha pas à se fixer sur un point plutôt que sur un autre. Sillonnant la contrée de ses courses vagabondes, il se mit en relations avec les indigènes, mais sans jamais approcher des rares factoreries exploitées çà et là par des colons de race blanche. S'il entrait en rapports avec un des navires relâchant en quelque point de l'archipel, c'était toujours par l'intermédiaire d'un Fuégien, et uniquement pour renouveler ses munitions et ses substances pharmaceutiques. Ces achats, il les payait, soit au moyen d'échanges, soit en monnaie espagnole ou anglaise, dont il ne semblait pas dépourvu.

Le reste du temps, il allait de tribus en tribus, de campements en campements. Il vivait, comme les indigènes, des produits de sa chasse et de sa pêche, tantôt parmi les familles du littoral, tantôt chez les peuplades de l'intérieur, partageant leur ajoupa ou leur tente, soignant les malades, secourant les veuves et les orphelins, adoré par ces pauvres gens, qui ne tardèrent pas à lui décerner le glorieux surnom sous lequel il était connu maintenant d'un bout à l'autre de l'archipel.

Que le Kaw-djer fût un homme instruit, aucun doute à cet égard, et il avait dû faire notamment des études très complètes en médecine. Il connaissait aussi plusieurs langues, et Français, Anglais, Allemands, Espagnols et

Norvégiens auraient pu indifféremment le prendre pour un compatriote. À son bagage de polyglotte, cet énigmatique personnage n’avait pas tardé à ajouter le yaghon. Il parlait couramment cet idiome, qui est le plus employé dans la Magellanie, et dont les missionnaires se sont servis pour traduire quelques passages de la Bible.

Loin d’être inhabitable, ainsi qu’on le croit généralement, la Magellanie, où le Kaw-djer avait fixé sa vie, est très supérieure à la réputation que lui ont value les récits de ses premiers explorateurs. Certes, il serait exagéré de la transformer en paradis terrestre, et l’on aurait mauvaise grâce à contester que sa pointe extrême, le cap Horn, ne soit balayée par des tempêtes dont la fréquence n’a d’égale que la fureur. Mais il ne manque pas de pays, en Europe même, qui nourrissent une population nombreuse, bien que les conditions d’existence y soient beaucoup plus rudes. Si le climat y est humide au plus haut point, cet archipel doit à la mer qui l’entoure une incontestable régularité de température, et il n’a pas à subir les froids rigoureux de la Russie septentrionale, de la Suède et de la Norvège. La moyenne thermométrique ne descend pas au-dessous de cinq degrés centigrades en hiver si elle ne s’élève pas au-dessus de quinze degrés en été.

À défaut d’observations météorologiques, l’aspect de ces îles aurait dû mettre en garde contre toute appréciation d’un pessimisme exagéré. La végétation y atteint une ampleur qui lui serait interdite dans la zone glaciale. Il y existe d’immenses pâturages qui suffiraient à la nourriture d’innombrables troupeaux, et de vastes forêts où se rencontrent en abondance le hêtre antarctique, le bouleau, l’épine-vinette et l’écorce de Winter. Sans aucun doute, nos végétaux comestibles s’y acclimateraient aisément, et beaucoup d’entre eux, jusques et y compris le froment, pourraient y prospérer.

Pourtant, cette contrée, qui n’est pas inhabitable, est à peu près inhabitée. Sa population ne comprend qu’un petit nombre d’Indiens, catalogués sous le nom de Fuégiens ou de Pêcherais, véritables sauvages au dernier rang de l’humanité, qui vivent presque entièrement nus et mènent, à travers ces vastes solitudes, une vie errante et misérable.

Longtemps déjà avant l’époque où commence cette histoire, le Chili, en fondant la station de Punta-Arenas sur le détroit de Magellan, avait paru prêter quelque attention à ces régions méconnues. Mais à cela s’était borné son effort, et, malgré la prospérité de sa colonie, il n’avait fait aucune tentative pour prendre pied sur l’archipel magellanique proprement dit.

Quelle succession d’événements avait conduit le Kaw-djer dans cette contrée ignorée de la plupart des hommes? Cela aussi était un mystère, mais ce mystère, du moins, le cri lancé du haut de la falaise, comme un défi au ciel et comme un remerciement passionné à la terre, permettait de le percer en partie.

“Ni Dieu, ni maître!” c’est la formule classique des anarchistes. Il était donc à supposer que le Kaw-djer appartenait, lui aussi, à cette secte, foule hétéroclite de criminels et d’illuminés. Ceux-là, rongés d’envie et de haine, toujours prêts à la violence et au meurtre; ceux-ci, véritables poètes qui rêvent une humanité chimérique d’où le mal serait banni à jamais par la suppression des lois imaginées pour le combattre.

À laquelle de ces deux classes appartenait le Kaw-djer? Était-il un de ces libertaires aigris, un de ces apologistes de l’action directe et de la propagande par le fait, et, successivement rejeté par toutes les nations, n’avait-il trouvé de refuge qu’à cette extrémité du monde habitable?

Une telle hypothèse se serait mal accordée avec la bonté dont il avait donné tant de preuves depuis son arrivée dans l’archipel magellanique. Qui s’était acharné si souvent à sauver des existences humaines n’avait jamais dû songer à en détruire. Qu’il fût anarchiste, oui, puisqu’il le proclamait lui-même, mais alors il appartenait à la section des rêveurs et non à celle des professionnels de la bombe et du couteau. S’il en était effectivement ainsi, son exil ne devait être que le dénouement logique d’un drame intérieur, et non pas un châtiment édicté par une volonté étrangère. Sans doute, tout enivré par son rêve, il n’avait pu supporter ces règles d’airain qui, dans l’Univers civilisé, conduisent l’homme en laisse du berceau jusqu’à la mort, et un moment était venu où l’air lui avait semblé irrespirable dans cette forêt de lois innombrables par lesquelles les citoyens achètent, au prix de leur indépendance, un peu de bien-être et de sécurité. Son caractère lui interdisant de vouloir imposer par la force ses idées et ses répugnances, il n’avait pu, dès lors, que partir à la recherche d’un pays où l’on ne connût pas l’esclavage, et c’est ainsi peut-être qu’il avait échoué finalement en Magellanie, le seul point, sur toute la surface de la terre, où régnât encore la liberté intégrale.

Pendant les premiers temps de son séjour, deux ans environ, le Kaw-djer ne quitta point la grande île où il avait débarqué.

La confiance qu’il inspirait aux indigènes, son influence sur leurs tribus ne tarda pas à s’accroître. On venait le consulter des autres îles parcourues par des Indiens Canoës, ou Indiens à pirogues, dont la race est quelque peu différente de celle des Yacanas qui peuplent la Terre de Feu. Ces misérables Pêcherais, qui vivent, comme leurs congénères, de chasse et de pêche, se rendaient près du “Bienfaiteur”, quand celui-ci se trouvait sur le littoral du canal du Beagle. Le Kaw-djer ne refusait à personne ses conseils ni ses soins. Souvent même, dans certaines circonstances graves, lorsque sévissait quelque épidémie, il risqua sans marchander sa vie pour combattre le fléau. Bientôt sa renommée se répandit dans toute la contrée. Elle franchit le détroit de Magellan. On sut qu'un étranger, installé sur la Terre de Feu, avait reçu des indigènes reconnaissants le titre de Kaw-djer, et, à plusieurs reprises, il fut sollicité de venir à Punta-Arenas. Mais il répondit invariablement par un refus dont aucune instance ne put triompher. Il semblait qu'il ne voulût pas remettre le pied là où il ne sentait plus le sol libre.

Vers la fin de la deuxième année de son séjour, il se produisit un incident dont les conséquences devaient avoir une certaine influence sur sa vie ultérieure.

Si le Kaw-djer s'obstinait à ne pas aller à la bourgade chilienne de Punta-Arenas, qui est située sur le territoire de la Patagonie, les Patagons ne se privent pas d'envahir parfois le territoire magellanique. Eux et leurs chevaux transportés en quelques heures sur la rive sud du détroit de Magellan, ils font de longues excursions, ce qu'on appelle en Amérique de grands raids, d'une extrémité à l'autre de la Terre de Feu, attaquant les Fuégiens, les rançonnant, les pillant, s'emparant des enfants qu'ils emmènent en esclavage dans les tribus patagones.

Entre les Patagons ou Tchnelts et les Fuégiens, il existe des différences ethniques assez sensibles sous le rapport de la race et des moeurs, les premiers étant infiniment plus redoutables que les seconds. Ceux-ci vivent de la pêche et ne se réunissent guère que par familles, tandis que ceux-là sont chasseurs et forment des tribus compactes sous l'autorité d'un chef. En outre, la taille des Fuégiens est un peu inférieure à celle de leurs voisins du continent. On les reconnaît à leur grosse tête carrée, aux pommettes saillantes de leur face, à leurs sourcils clairsemés, à la dépression de leur crâne. En somme, on les tient pour des êtres assez misérables, dont la race n’est pas près de finir cependant, car le nombre des enfants est considérable, autant, pourrait-on dire, que celui des chiens qui grouillent autour des campements.

Quant aux Patagons, ils sont de haute stature, vigoureux et bien proportionnés. Dénués de barbe, ils laissent pendre leurs longs cheveux noirs maintenus sur le front par un bandeau. Leur figure olivâtre est plus large aux mâchoires qu’aux tempes, leurs yeux s’allongent quelque peu suivant le type mongol, et, de part et d’autre d’un nez largement épaté, leurs yeux brillent du fond d’orbites assez rétrécies. Intrépides et infatigables cavaliers, il leur faut de larges espaces à franchir avec leurs non moins infatigables montures, d’immenses pâturages pour la nourriture de leurs chevaux, des terrains de chasse où ils poursuivent le guanaque, la vigogne et le nandou.

Plus d’une fois, le Kaw-djer les avait rencontrés pendant leurs incursions sur la Terre de Feu, mais jusqu’alors il n’avait jamais pris contact avec ces farouches déprédateurs, que le Chili et l’Argentine sont impuissants à contenir.

Ce fut en novembre 1872, alors que ses pérégrinations l’avaient conduit sur la côte ouest de la Fuégie, près du détroit de Magellan, que le Kaw-djer eut pour la première fois à intervenir contre eux, en faveur de Pêcherais de la baie Inutile.

Cette baie, limitée au Nord par des marécages, forme une profonde découpure à peu près en face de l’emplacement où Sarmiento avait établi sa colonie de Port-Famine, de sinistre mémoire.

Un parti de Tchnelts, après avoir débarqué sur la rive sud de la baie Inutile, attaqua un campement de Yacanas, qui ne comptait qu’une vingtaine de familles. La supériorité numérique se trouvait du côté des assaillants, en même temps plus robustes et mieux armés que les indigènes.

Ceux-ci essayèrent de lutter cependant, sous le commandement d’un Indien Canoë qui venait d’arriver au campement avec sa pirogue.

Cet homme s’appelait Karroly. Il faisait le métier de pilote et guidait les bâtiments de cabotage qui s’aventurent sur le canal du Beagle et entre les îles de l’archipel du cap Horn. C’est en revenant de conduire un navire à Punta-Arenas qu’il avait relâché dans la baie Inutile.

Karroly organisa la résistance et, aidé des Yacanas, tenta de repousser les agresseurs. Mais la partie était par trop inégale. Les Pêcherais ne pouvaient opposer une défense sérieuse. Le campement fut envahi, les tentes furent renversées, le sang coula. Les familles furent dispersées.

Pendant la lutte, le fils de Karroly, Halg, alors âgé de neuf ans environ, était resté dans la pirogue, où il attendait son père, lorsque deux Patagons se précipitèrent de son côté.

Le jeune garçon ne voulut pas s’éloigner de la grève, ce qui l’eût mis hors d’atteinte, mais ce qui eût aussi empêché son père de chercher refuge à bord de la pirogue.

Un des Tchnelts sauta dans l’embarcation et saisit l’enfant entre ses bras.

À ce moment, Karroly fuyait le campement au pouvoir des agresseurs. Il courut au secours de son fils que le Tchnelt emportait. Une flèche envoyée par l’autre Patagon siffla à son oreille sans le toucher.

Avant qu’un second trait ne fût lancé, la détonation d’une arme à feu retentit. Le ravisseur mortellement frappé roula à terre, tandis que son compagnon prenait la fuite.

Le coup de feu avait été tiré par un homme de race blanche que le hasard amenait sur le lieu du combat. Cet homme, c’était le Kaw-djer.

Il n’y avait pas à s’attarder. La pirogue fut vigoureusement halée par son amarre. Le Kaw-djer et Karroly sautèrent à bord avec l’enfant et poussèrent au large. Ils étaient déjà à une encablure du rivage lorsque les Patagons les couvrirent d’une nuée de flèches dont l’une atteignit Halg à l’épaule.

Cette blessure présentant une certaine gravité, le Kaw-djer ne voulut pas quitter ses compagnons tant que ses soins pouvaient être nécessaires. C’est pourquoi il resta dans la pirogue, qui contourna la Terre de Feu, suivit le canal du Beagle, et vint enfin s’arrêter dans une petite crique bien abritée de l’Île Neuve, où Karroly avait établi sa résidence.

Alors, il n’y avait plus rien à craindre pour le jeune garçon, dont la blessure était en voie de guérison. Karroly ne savait comment exprimer sa reconnaissance.

Lorsque, sa pirogue amarrée au fond de la crique, l’Indien eut débarqué, il pria le Kaw-djer de le suivre.

“Ma maison est là, lui dit-il; c’est ici que je vis avec mon fils. Si tu n’y veux rester que quelques jours, tu seras le bienvenu, puis ma pirogue te ramènera de l’autre côté du canal. Si tu veux y rester toujours, ma demeure sera la tienne et je serai ton serviteur.”

À dater de ce jour, le Kaw-djer n'avait plus quitté l'Île Neuve, ni Karroly, ni son enfant. Grâce à lui, l'habitation de l'Indien Canoë était devenue plus confortable, et Karroly fut bientôt à même d'exercer son métier de pilote dans de meilleures conditions. À sa fragile pirogue fut substituée cette solide chaloupe, la Wel-Kiej, achetée à la suite du naufrage d'un navire norvégien, dans laquelle l'homme blessé par le jaguar venait d'être déposé.

Mais cette nouvelle existence ne détourna pas le Kaw-djer de son œuvre humanitaire. Ses visites aux familles indigènes ne furent pas supprimées, et il continua de courir partout où il y avait un service à rendre ou une douleur à guérir.

Plusieurs années se passèrent ainsi, et tout portait à croire que le Kaw-djer continuerait à jamais sa vie libre sur cette terre libre, lorsqu'un événement imprévu vint en troubler profondément le cours.

CHAPITRE III

III

La fin d’un pays libre

L’Île Neuve commande l’entrée du canal du Beagle par l’Est. Longue de huit kilomètres, large de quatre, elle affecte la forme d’un pentagone irrégulier. Les arbres n’y manquent pas, plus particulièrement le hêtre, le frêne, l’écorce de Winter, des myrtacées et quelques cyprès de taille moyenne. À la surface des prairies poussent des houx, des berbéris, des fougères de petite venue. En de certaines places abritées se montre le bon sol, la terre végétale, propre à la culture des légumes. Ailleurs, là où l’humus existe en couche insuffisante, et plus spécialement aux abords des grèves, la nature a brodé sa tapisserie de lichens, de mousses et de lycopodes.

C’était sur cette île, au revers d’une haute falaise, face à la mer, que l’Indien Karroly résidait depuis une dizaine d’années. Il n’aurait pu choisir une station plus favorable. Tous les navires, au sortir du détroit de Lemaire, passent en vue de l’Île Neuve. S’ils cherchent à gagner l’Océan Pacifique en doublant le cap Horn, ils n’ont besoin de personne. Mais si, désireux de trafiquer à travers l’archipel, ils veulent en suivre les divers canaux, un pilote leur est indispensable.

Toutefois, relativement rares sont les navires qui fréquentent les parages magellaniques, et leur nombre n’eût pas suffi à assurer l’existence de Karroly et de son fils. Il s’adonnait donc à la pêche et à la chasse, afin de se procurer des objets d’échange qu’il troquait contre tout ce qui était pour eux de première nécessité.

Sans doute, cette île de dimensions restreintes ne pouvait renfermer qu’en petit nombre les guanaques et les vigognes, dont la fourrure est recherchée, mais, dans le voisinage, sont d’autres îles d’une étendue beaucoup plus considérable:

Navarin, Hoste, Wollaston, Dawson, sans parler de la Terre de Feu avec ses immenses plaines et ses forêts profondes où ne manquent ni les ruminants ni les fauves.

Longtemps Karroly n’avait eu pour demeure qu’une grotte naturelle creusée dans le granit, préférable en somme à la hutte des Yacanas. Depuis l’arrivée du Kaw-djer, la grotte avait fait place à une maison dont les forêts de l’île avaient fourni la charpente, dont les roches avaient fourni les pierres, et dont les myriades de coquillages: térébratules, mactres, tritons, licornes, qui en parsèment les grèves, avaient fourni la chaux.

À l’intérieur de cette maison, trois chambres. Au milieu, la salle commune à vaste cheminée. À droite, la chambre de Karroly et de son fils. Celle de gauche appartenait au Kaw-djer, qui retrouvait là, rangés sur des rayons, ses papiers et ses livres, pour la plupart ouvrages de médecine, d’économie politique et de sociologie. Une armoire contenait son assortiment de fioles et d’instruments de chirurgie.

C’est dans cette maison qu’il revint avec ses deux compagnons après son excursion sur la Terre de Feu, dont l’épisode final a servi de thème aux premières lignes de ce récit. Auparavant, toutefois, la Wel-Kiej s’était dirigée vers le campement de l’Indien blessé. Ce campement était situé à l’extrémité orientale du canal du Beagle. Autour de ses huttes capricieusement groupées au bord d’un ruisseau, gambadaient d’innombrables chiens, dont les aboiements annoncèrent l’arrivée de la chaloupe. Dans la prairie avoisinante pâturaient deux chevaux d’un aspect chétif. De minces filets de fumée s’échappaient du toit de quelques ajoupas.

Dès que la Wel-Kiej eut été signalée, une soixantaine d’hommes et de femmes apparurent et dévalèrent en toute hâte vers le rivage. Une foule d’enfants nus couraient à leur suite.

Lorsque le Kaw-djer mit pied à terre, on s’empressa au devant de lui. Tous voulaient lui presser les mains. L’accueil de ces pauvres Indiens témoignait de leur ardente reconnaissance pour tous les services qu’ils avaient reçus de lui. Il écouta patiemment les uns et les autres. Des mères le conduisirent près de leurs enfants malades. Elles le remerciaient avec effusion, à demi consolées par sa présence.

Il entra enfin dans l’une des huttes pour en ressortir bientôt, suivi de deux femmes, l’une âgée, l’autre toute jeune qui tenait par la main un petit enfant. C’étaient la mère, la femme et le fils de l’Indien blessé par le jaguar, et qui était mort au cours de la traversée, malgré les soins dont on l’avait entouré.

Son cadavre fut déposé sur la grève, et tous les indigènes du campement l’entourèrent. Le Kaw-djer raconta alors les circonstances de la mort du défunt, puis il remit à la voile, en laissant généreusement à la veuve la dépouille du jaguar, dont la fourrure représentait une valeur immense pour ces créatures déshéritées.

Avec la saison d’hiver qui s’approchait, la vie habituelle reprit son cours dans la maison de l’Île Neuve. On reçut la visite de quelques caboteurs falklandais qui vinrent acheter des pelleteries avant que les tourmentes de neige n’eussent rendu ces parages impraticables. Les peaux furent avantageusement vendues ou échangées contre les provisions et les munitions nécessaires pendant la rigoureuse période qui va de juin à septembre.

Dans la dernière semaine de mai, un de ces bâtiments ayant réclamé les services de Karroly, Halg et le Kaw-djer restèrent seuls à l’Île Neuve.

Le jeune garçon, alors âgé de dix-sept ans, portait une affection toute filiale au Kaw-djer qui, de son côté, avait pour lui les sentiments du plus tendre des pères. Celui-ci s’était efforcé de développer l’intelligence de cet enfant. Il l’avait tiré de l’état sauvage et en avait fait un être bien différent de ses compatriotes de la Magellanie si en dehors de toute civilisation.

Le Kaw-djer, il est superflu de le dire, n’avait jamais inspiré au jeune Halg que des idées d’indépendance, celles qui lui étaient chères entre toutes. Ce n’était pas un maître, c’était un égal que Karroly et son fils devaient voir en lui. De maître, il n’en est pas, il ne peut y en avoir pour un homme digne de ce nom. On n’a de maître que soi-même, et, d’ailleurs, il n’en est pas besoin d’autre, ni dans le ciel, ni sur la terre.

Cette semence tombait sur un terrain admirablement préparé pour la recevoir. Les Fuégiens ont, en effet, la folie de la liberté. Ils lui sacrifient tout et renoncent pour elle aux avantages que leur assurerait une vie plus sédentaire. Quel que soit le bien-être relatif dont on les entoure, quelque sécurité qu’on leur assure, rien ne peut les retenir, et ils ne tardent pas à s’enfuir pour reprendre leur éternel vagabondage, affamés, misérables, mais libres.

Au début de juin, l’hiver se jeta sur la Magellanie. Si le froid ne fut pas excessif, toute la région fut balayée à grands coups de rafales. De terribles tourmentes troublèrent ces parages, et l’Île Neuve disparut sous la masse des neiges.

Ainsi s’écoulèrent juin, juillet, août. Vers la mi-septembre la température s’adoucit sensiblement, et les caboteurs des Falkland recommencèrent à se montrer dans les passes.

Le 19 septembre, Karroly, laissant Halg et Kaw-djer à l’Île Neuve, partit à bord d’un steamer américain qui avait embouqué le canal du Beagle, un pavillon de pilote au mât de misaine. Son absence dura une huitaine de jours.

Lorsque la chaloupe eut ramené l’Indien, le Kaw-djer, selon son habitude, l’interrogea sur les divers incidents du voyage.

“Il n’y a rien eu, répondit Karroly. La mer était belle et la brise favorable.

— Où as-tu quitté le navire?

— Au Darwin Sound, à la pointe de l’île Stewart, où nous avons croisé un aviso qui marchait à contre-bord.

— Où allait-il?

— À la Terre de Feu. En revenant, je l’ai retrouvé mouillé dans une anse où il avait débarqué un détachement de soldats.

— Des soldats!… s’écria le Kaw-djer. De quelle nationalité?

— Des Chiliens et des Argentins.

— Que faisaient-ils?

— D’après ce qu’ils m’ont dit, ils accompagnaient deux commissaires en reconnaissance sur la Terre de Feu et les îles voisines.

— D’où venaient ces commissaires?

— De Punta-Arenas, où le gouverneur avait mis l’aviso à leur disposition.”

Le Kaw-djer ne posa pas d’autres questions. Il demeura pensif. Que signifiait la présence de ces commissaires? À quelle opération se livraient-ils dans cette partie de la Magellanie? S’agissait-il d’une exploration géographique ou hydrographique, et leur but était-il de procéder, dans un intérêt maritime, à une vérification plus rigoureuse des relevés?

Le Kaw-djer était plongé dans ses réflexions. Il ne pouvait se défendre contre une vague inquiétude. Cette reconnaissance n’allait-elle pas s’étendre à tout l’archipel magellanique, et l’aviso ne viendrait-il pas mouiller jusque dans les eaux de l’Île Neuve?

Ce qui donnait une réelle importance à cette nouvelle, c’est que l’expédition était envoyée par les gouvernements du Chili et de l’Argentine. Y avait-il donc accord entre les deux Républiques qui, jusqu’ici, n’avaient jamais pu s’entendre, à propos d’une région sur laquelle toutes deux prétendaient, à tort d’ailleurs, avoir des droits?

Ces quelques demandes et réponses échangées, le Kaw-djer avait gagné l’extrémité du morne au pied duquel était bâtie la maison. De là, il découvrait une grande étendue de mer, et ses regards se portèrent instinctivement vers le Sud, dans la direction de ces derniers sommets de la terre américaine, qui constituent l’archipel du cap Horn. Lui faudrait-il aller jusque-là pour trouver un sol libre?… Plus loin encore peut-être?… Par la pensée, il franchissait le cercle polaire, il se perdait à travers les immenses régions de l'Antarctique dont le mystère impénétrable brave les plus intrépides découvreurs…

Quelle n'aurait pas été la douleur du Kaw-djer s'il avait su à quel point ses craintes étaient justifiées! Le Gracias a Dios, aviso de la marine chilienne, transportait bien à son bord deux commissaires: M. Idiaste pour le Chili, M. Herrera pour la République Argentine, lesquels avaient reçu de leurs gouvernements respectifs la mission de préparer le partage de la Magellanie entre les deux États qui en réclamaient la possession.

Cette question, qui traînait depuis nombre d'années déjà, avait donné lieu à des discussions interminables, sans qu'il fût possible de la résoudre à la satisfaction commune. Une telle situation cependant risquait d'engendrer, en se prolongeant, quelque grave conflit. Non seulement au point de vue commercial, mais au point de vue politique, il importait d'autant plus qu'elle prît fin, que l'absorbante Angleterre n'était pas loin. De son archipel des Falkland, elle pouvait aisément étendre la main jusqu'à la Magellanie. Déjà ses caboteurs en fréquentaient assidûment les passes, et ses missionnaires ne cessaient d'accroître leur influence sur la population fuégienne. Un beau jour, son pavillon serait planté quelque part, et rien n'est difficile à déraciner comme le pavillon britannique! Il était temps d'agir.

MM. Idiaste et Herrera, leur exploration achevée, regagnèrent, l'un Santiago, l'autre Buenos-Ayres. Un mois plus tard, le 17 janvier 1881, un traité signé dans cette dernière ville entre les deux Républiques mit fin à l'irritant problème magellanique.

Aux termes de ce traité, la Patagonie était annexée à la République Argentine, à l'exception d'un territoire borné par le 52e degré de latitude et par le 70e méridien à l’ouest de Greenwich. En compensation de ce qui lui était ainsi attribué, le Chili renonçait de son côté à l’île des États et à la partie de la Terre de Feu située à l’est du 68e degré de longitude. Toutes les autres îles sans exception appartenaient au Chili.

Cette convention, qui fixait les droits des deux États, privait la Magellanie de son indépendance. Qu’allait faire le Kaw-djer, dont le pied foulerait désormais un sol devenu chilien?

Ce fut le 25 février qu’on eut connaissance du traité à l’Île Neuve, où Karroly, au retour d’un pilotage, en apporta la nouvelle.

Le Kaw-djer ne put retenir un mouvement de colère. Pas une parole ne lui échappa, mais ses yeux s’imprégnèrent de haine, et, dans un terrible geste de menace, sa main se tendit vers le Nord. Incapable de maîtriser son agitation, il fit quelques pas désordonnés. On eût dit que le sol se dérobait sous ses pieds, qu’il ne lui offrait plus un point d’appui suffisant.

Enfin, il parvint à reprendre possession de lui-même. Son visage, un instant convulsé, recouvra sa froideur habituelle. Il alla rejoindre Karroly et l’interrogea d’un ton calme.

“La nouvelle est certaine?

— Oui, répondit l’Indien. Je l’ai apprise à Punta-Arenas. Il paraît que deux pavillons sont hissés à l’entrée du détroit sur la Terre de Feu: l’un chilien au cap Orange, l’autre argentin au cap Espiritu Santo.

— Et, demanda le Kaw-djer, toutes les îles au sud du canal du Beagle dépendent du Chili?

— Toutes.

— Même l’Île Neuve?

— Oui.

— Cela devait arriver”, murmura le Kaw-djer dont une violente émotion altérait la voix.

Puis il regagna la maison et s’enferma dans sa chambre.

Quel était donc cet homme? Quelles raisons l’avaient contraint à quitter l’un ou l’autre des continents pour s’ensevelir dans la solitude de la Magellanie? Pourquoi l’humanité semblait-elle être réduite pour lui à ces quelques tribus fuégiennes; auxquelles il consacrait toute son existence et tout son dévouement?

Les événements, dont la réalisation était prochaine et qui vont faire le sujet de ce récit, devaient se charger de renseigner sur le premier point. Quant aux deux autres questions, la vie antérieure du Kaw-djer permet d’y répondre succinctement.

De grande valeur, ayant aussi profondément creusé les sciences politiques que les sciences naturelles, homme de courage et d’action, le Kaw-djer n’était pas le premier savant qui eût commis la double faute de considérer comme certains des principes qui ne sont après tout que des hypothèses, et de pousser ces principes jusqu’à leurs extrêmes conséquences. Le nom de quelques-uns de ces réformateurs redoutables est dans toutes les mémoires.

Le socialisme, cette doctrine dont la prétention ne va à rien moins qu’à refaire la société de la base au faîte, n’a pas le mérite de la nouveauté. Après beaucoup d’autres qui se perdent dans la nuit des temps, Saint-Simon, Fourrier, Proudhon et tutti quanti sont les précurseurs du collectivisme. Des idéologues plus modernes, tels que les Lassalle, les Karl Marx, les Guesde, n'ont fait que reprendre leurs idées, en les modifiant plus ou moins, et en les appuyant sur la socialisation des moyens de production, l'anéantissement du capital, l'abolition de la concurrence, la substitution de la propriété sociale à la propriété individuelle. Aucun d'eux ne veut tenir compte des contingences de la vie. Leur doctrine réclame une application immédiate et totale. Ils exigent l'expropriation en masse, imposent le communisme universel.

Qu'on approuve ou qu'on blâme une telle théorie, le moins qu'on en puisse dire, c'est qu'elle est audacieuse. Il en est pourtant une qui l'est plus encore: la théorie anarchiste.

La réglementation tyrannique que nécessiterait le fonctionnement de la société collectiviste, les anarchistes la repoussent. Ce qu'ils préconisent, c'est l'individualisme absolu, intégral. Ce qu'ils veulent, c'est la suppression de toute autorité, la destruction de tout lien social.

C'est parmi ces derniers qu'il fallait ranger le Kaw-djer, âme farouche, indomptable, intransigeante, incapable d'obéissance, réfractaire à toutes les lois, imparfaites sans doute, par lesquelles les hommes essaient en tâtonnant de réglementer les rapports sociaux. Certes, il n'avait jamais été compromis dans les violences des propagandistes par le fait. Non pas chassé de la France, de l'Allemagne, de l'Angleterre ou des États-Unis, mais dégoûté de leur prétendue civilisation, ayant hâte de secouer le poids d'une autorité quelle qu'elle fût, il avait cherché un coin de la Terre où un homme pût encore vivre en complète indépendance.

Il crut l'avoir trouvé au milieu de cet archipel, aux confins du monde habité. Ce qu'il n'eût rencontré nulle part ailleurs, la Magellanie allait le lui offrir à l'extrémité de l'Amérique du Sud.

Or, voici que le traité signé entre le Chili et la République Argentine faisait perdre à cette région l'indépendance dont elle avait joui jusqu'alors. Voici que, d'après ce traité, toute la portion des territoires magellaniques située au sud du canal du Beagle passait sous la domination chilienne. Rien de l'archipel n'échapperait à l'autorité du gouverneur de Punta-Arenas, pas même cette Île Neuve où le Kaw-djer avait trouvé asile.

Avoir fui si loin, avoir fait tant d'efforts, s'être imposé une telle existence, pour aboutir à ce résultat!

Le Kaw-djer fut longtemps à se remettre du coup qui le frappait, comme la foudre frappe un arbre en pleine vigueur et l'ébranle jusque dans ses racines. Sa pensée l'entraînait vers l'avenir, un avenir qui ne lui offrait plus aucune sécurité. Des agents viendraient sur cette île, où l'on savait qu'il avait établi sa résidence. Plusieurs fois, il ne l'ignorait pas, on s'était inquiété de la présence d'un étranger en Magellanie, de ses rapports avec les indigènes, de l'influence qu'il exerçait. Le gouverneur chilien voudrait l'interroger, apprendre qui il était; on fouillerait sa vie, on l'obligerait à rompre cet incognito auquel il tenait par-dessus tout…

Quelques jours s'écoulèrent. Le Kaw-djer n'avait plus reparlé du changement apporté par le traité de partage, mais il était plus sombre que jamais. Que méditait-il donc? Songeait-il à quitter l'Île Neuve, à se séparer de son fidèle Indien, de cet enfant pour lequel il éprouvait une si profonde affection?…

Où irait-il? En quel autre coin du monde retrouverait-il l'indépendance, sans laquelle il semblait qu'il ne pût vivre? Lors même qu'il se réfugierait sur les dernières roches magellaniques, fût-ce à l'îlot du cap Horn, échapperait-il à l'autorité chilienne?…

On était alors au début de mars. La belle saison devait durer près d’un mois encore, la saison que le Kaw-djer employait à visiter les campements fuégiens, avant que l’hiver eût rendu la mer impraticable. Cependant, il ne s’apprêtait pas à s’embarquer sur la chaloupe. La Wel-Kiej, dégréée, restait au fond de la crique.

Ce fut seulement le 7 mars, dans l’après-midi, que le Kaw-djer dit à Karroly:

“Tu pareras la chaloupe pour demain dès la première heure.

— Un voyage de plusieurs jours? demanda l’Indien.

— Oui.”

Le Kaw-djer se décidait-il à retourner au milieu des tribus fuégiennes? Allait-il remettre les pieds sur cette Terre de Feu devenue argentine et chilienne?…

“Halg doit-il nous accompagner? interrogea Karroly.

— Oui.

— Et le chien?

— Zol aussi.”

La Wel-Kiej appareilla dès l’aube. Le vent soufflait de l’Est. Un assez fort ressac battait les roches au pied du morne. Dans la direction du Nord, au large, la mer se soulevait en longues houles.

Si l’intention du Kaw-djer eût été de rallier la Terre de Feu, la chaloupe aurait dû lutter, car la brise augmentait à mesure que le soleil s’élevait. Mais il n’en fut rien. Sur son ordre, après avoir contourné l’Île Neuve, on se dirigea vers l’île Navarin dont le double sommet s’estompait vaguement dans les brumes matinales de l’Ouest.

Ce fut à la pointe sud de cette île, l’une des moyennes de l’archipel magellanique, que la Wel-Kiej vint relâcher avant le coucher du soleil, au fond d’une petite anse à rive très accore, où la tranquillité devait lui être assurée pour la nuit.

Le lendemain, la chaloupe, coupant obliquement la baie de Nassau, mit le cap sur l’île Wollaston, près de laquelle elle mouilla le soir même.

Le temps devenait mauvais. Le vent fraîchissait en hâlant le Nord-Est. D’épais nuages s’accumulaient à l’horizon. La tempête n’était pas loin. La chaloupe devant, pour se conformer aux instructions du Kaw-djer, continuer à gagner vers le Sud, il importait de choisir les passes où la mer serait moins dure. C’est ce qui fut fait en quittant l’île Wollaston. Karroly en contourna la partie occidentale de manière à donner dans le détroit qui sépare l’île Hermitte de l’île Herschell.

Quel but poursuivait le Kaw-djer? Lorsqu’il aurait atteint les dernières limites de la Terre, lorsqu’il serait arrivé au cap Horn, lorsqu’il ne verrait plus devant lui que l’immense Océan, que ferait-il?…

Ce fut à cette extrémité de l’archipel que la chaloupe vint relâcher dans l’après-midi du 15 mars, non sans avoir couru les plus grands dangers au milieu d’une mer démontée. Aussitôt le Kaw-djer débarqua. Sans rien dire de ses intentions, ayant renvoyé le chien qui cherchait à le suivre, laissant Karroly et Halg sur la grève, il se dirigea vers le cap.

L’île Horn n’est qu’une agglomération chaotique de roches énormes dont les bois flottés, les laminaires gigantesques, apportés par les courants, jonchent la base. Au-delà, des pointes de récifs piquent de centaines de taches noires la blancheur neigeuse du ressac.

On accède assez facilement au sommet peu élevé du cap par son revers septentrional en pentes très allongées, sur lesquelles se rencontrent quelques parcelles de terre cultivable.

Le Kaw-djer avait entrepris cette ascension.

Qu’allait-il donc faire là-haut? Voulait-il porter ses regards jusqu’aux limites de l’horizon du Sud?… Mais qu’y verrait-il, si ce n’est l’immense nappe de la mer?

La tempête était maintenant à son paroxysme. À mesure qu’il montait, le Kaw-djer était plus furieusement accueilli par le vent déchaîné. Parfois, il lui fallait s’arcbouter pour ne pas être emporté. Les embruns, violemment projetés, lui cinglaient le visage. D’en bas, Halg et Karroly apercevaient sa silhouette graduellement décroissante. Ils voyaient quelle lutte il soutenait contre la rafale.

Cette pénible ascension exigea près d’une heure. Parvenu au point culminant, le Kaw-djer s’avança jusqu’au bord de la falaise, et, là, debout dans la tourmente, il demeura immobile, le regard dirigé vers le Sud.

La nuit commençait à se faire du côté de l’Est, mais l’horizon opposé s’éclairait encore des dernières lueurs du soleil. De gros nuages échevelés par le vent, des haillons de vapeur qui traînaient dans la houle, passaient avec une vitesse d’ouragan. De toutes parts, rien que la mer.

Mais enfin, qu’était venu faire là cet homme à l’âme si profondément troublée? Avait-il un but, un espoir?… Ou bien, arrivé à la fin de la Terre, arrêté par l’impossible, avait-il soif seulement du grand repos de la mort?…

Le temps s’écoula, l’obscurité devint complète. Toutes choses disparurent, englouties par les ténèbres.

Ce fut la nuit…

Soudain, un éclair brilla faiblement dans l’espace, une détonation vint mourir à la grève.

C’était le coup de canon d’un navire en détresse.

CHAPITRE IV

IV

À la côte

Il était alors huit heures du soir. Le vent, qui depuis un certain temps déjà soufflait du Sud-Est, battait en côte avec une prodigieuse violence. Un navire n'aurait pu doubler l'extrême pointe de l'Amérique sans risquer de se perdre corps et biens.

C'était le danger qui menaçait le bâtiment dont cette détonation avait révélé la présence. Sans doute, dans l'impossibilité de porter assez de toile, au milieu de ces rafales furieuses, pour tenir la cape courante, il était invinciblement drossé contre les récifs.

Une demi-heure plus tard, le Kaw-djer n'était plus seul au sommet de l'îlot. Au bruit de la détonation, l'Indien et son fils, s'accrochant aux roches du cap, aux touffes poussées dans les fentes, pour abréger l'escalade, étaient venus le rejoindre.

Un second coup de canon retentit. Dans ces parages déserts, par ce temps déchaîné, quel secours espérait donc le malheureux navire?

“Il est dans l'Ouest, dit Karroly en constatant que la détonation lui arrivait de ce côté.

— Et il marche tribord amures, approuva le Kaw-djer, car il s'est rapproché du cap depuis le premier coup de canon.

— Il ne doublera pas, affirma Karroly.

— Non, répondit le Kaw-djer, la mer est trop dure… Pourquoi ne prend-il pas un bord au large?

— Peut-être qu’il ne le peut pas.

— C’est possible, mais peut-être aussi n’a-t-il pas aperçu la terre… Il faut la lui montrer… Un feu, allumons un feu!” s’écria le Kaw-djer.

Fiévreusement ils se hâtèrent de réunir par brassées des branches sèches arrachées aux arbustes qui hérissaient les flancs du cap, les longues herbes et les varechs entassés par le vent dans les anfractuosités, et ils accumulèrent ce combustible à la cime de l’énorme croupe.

Le Kaw-djer battit le briquet. Le feu se communiqua à l’amadou, puis aux brindilles, puis, activé par le vent, ne tarda pas à gagner tout le foyer. En moins d’une minute, une colonne de flammes se dressa sur le plateau, se tordit en projetant une lueur intense, tandis que la fumée se rabattait vers le Nord en épais tourbillons. Au rugissement de la tempête se joignaient les crépitements du bois dont les noeuds éclataient comme des cartouches.

Le cap Horn est tout indiqué pour porter un phare, qui éclairerait cette limite commune des deux océans. La sécurité de la navigation l’exige, et bien certainement le nombre des sinistres, si fréquents en ces parages, en serait diminué.

Nul doute que, à défaut de phare, le foyer allumé par la main du Kaw-djer n’eût été vu. Le capitaine du navire ne pouvait ignorer à tout le moins qu’il se trouvait à proximité du cap. Renseigné par ce feu sur sa position exacte, il lui serait possible de chercher le salut en se jetant dans les passes sous le vent de l’île Horn.

Mais quels épouvantables dangers comportait cette manœuvre dans une obscurité si profonde! Si aucun pratique de ces parages n’était à bord, combien peu de chances avait-il de se diriger parmi les récifs!

Cependant, le feu continuait à projeter sa lumière dans la nuit. Halg et Karroly ne cessaient de l’alimenter. Le combustible ne manquait pas et durerait jusqu’au matin, s’il le fallait.

Le Kaw-djer, debout en avant du foyer, essayait vainement de relever la position du navire. Soudain, par une brève déchirure des nuages, la lune illumina l’espace. Un instant, il put apercevoir un grand quatre-mâts, dont la coque noire se découpait sur l’écume de la mer. Le bâtiment courait à l’Est, en effet, et luttait péniblement contre le vent et contre la mer.

Au même instant, au milieu d’un de ces silences qui séparent les rafales, de sinistres craquements se firent entendre. Les deux mâts d’arrière venaient de se briser au ras de leurs emplantures.

“Il est perdu! s’écria Karroly.

— À bord!” commanda le Kaw-djer.

Tous trois, dévalant, non sans risques, les talus du cap, atteignirent la grève en quelques minutes. Le chien sur leurs talons, ils embarquèrent dans la chaloupe, qui sortit de la crique, Halg au gouvernail, le Kaw-djer et Karroly aux avirons, car il n’eût pas été possible de larguer un morceau de toile.

Bien que les avirons fussent maniés par des bras vigoureux, la Wel-Kiej eut grand-peine à se dégager des récifs contre lesquels la houle brisait avec fureur. La mer était démontée. La chaloupe, secouée à se démembrer, bondissait, se renversait d’un flanc sur l’autre, se matait parfois, comme disent les marins, toute son étrave hors de l’eau, puis retombait pesamment. De lourds paquets de mer embarquaient, s’écrasaient en douches sur le tillac et roulaient jusqu’à l’arrière. Alourdie par cette charge d’eau, elle risquait de sombrer. Il fallait alors que Halg abandonnât le gouvernail pour manier l’écope.

Malgré tout, la Wel-Kiej s’approchait du navire dont on distinguait maintenant les feux de position. On en apercevait la masse qui tanguait comme une bouée gigantesque plus noire que la mer, plus noire que le ciel. Les deux mâts brisés, retenus par leurs haubans, flottaient à sa suite, tandis que le mât de misaine et le grand mât décrivaient des arcs d’un demi-cercle, en déchirant les brumailles.

“Que fait donc le capitaine, s’écria le Kaw-djer, et comment ne s’est-il pas débarrassé de cette mâture? Il ne sera pas possible de traîner une pareille queue à travers les passes.”

En effet, il était urgent de couper les agrès qui retenaient les mâts tombés à la mer. Mais, sans doute, le navire était en plein désordre. Peut-être même n’avait-il plus de capitaine. On eût été tenté de le croire, en constatant l’absence de toute manœuvre dans une circonstance si critique.

Cependant l’équipage ne pouvait plus ignorer que le navire était affalé sous la terre et qu’il ne tarderait pas à s’y fracasser. Le foyer allumé au faîte du cap Horn jetait encore des flammes qui s’échevelaient comme des lanières démesurées, lorsque le brasier s’activait au souffle de la tourmente.

“Il n’y a donc plus personne à bord!” dit l’Indien, répondant à l’observation du Kaw-djer.

Il se pouvait après tout que le bâtiment eût été abandonné de son équipage, et que celui-ci s’efforçât en ce moment de gagner la terre dans les embarcations. À moins qu’il ne fût plus qu’un énorme cercueil transportant des mourants et des morts dont les corps allaient se déchirer bientôt sur la pointe des récifs, puisque, durant les accalmies, pas un cri, pas un appel ne se faisait entendre.

La Wel-Kiej arriva enfin par le travers du navire, au moment où il faisait une embardée sur bâbord, qui faillit la couler. Un heureux coup de barre lui permit de raser la coque le long de laquelle pendaient des agrès. L’Indien put adroitement saisir un bout d’aussière, qui fut, en un tour de main, amarrée à l’avant de la chaloupe.

Puis son fils et lui, le Kaw-djer ensuite enlevant dans ses bras le chien Zol, franchirent les bastingages et retombèrent sur le pont.

Non, le navire n’avait point été délaissé. Bien au contraire, une foule éperdue d’hommes, de femmes et d’enfants l’encombrait. Étendus pour la plupart contre les roufs, dans les coursives, on eût compté plusieurs centaines de malheureux au paroxysme de l’épouvante, et qui n’auraient pu rester debout, tant les coups de roulis étaient insoutenables.

Au milieu de l’obscurité, personne n’avait aperçu ces deux hommes et ce jeune garçon qui venaient de sauter à bord.

Le Kaw-djer se précipita vers l’arrière, espérant trouver l’homme de barre à son poste… La barre était abandonnée. Le navire, à sec de toile, allait où le poussaient la houle et le vent.

Le capitaine, les officiers, où étaient-ils donc? Avaient-ils, lâchement, au mépris de tout devoir, déserté leur navire?

Le Kaw-djer saisit un matelot par le bras.

“Ton commandant?” interrogea-t-il en anglais.

Cet homme n’eut pas même l’air de s’apercevoir qu’il était interpellé par un étranger et se borna à hausser les épaules.

“Ton commandant? reprit le Kaw-djer.

— Élingué par-dessus bord, et plus d’un autre avec”, dit le matelot d’un ton d’étrange indifférence.

Ainsi le bâtiment n’avait plus de capitaine, et une partie de son équipage lui manquait.

“Le second?” demanda le Kaw-djer.

Nouveau haussement d’épaules du matelot évidemment frappé de stupeur.

“Le second?… répondit-il. Les deux jambes cassées, la tête broyée, affalé dans l’entrepont.

— Mais le lieutenant?… le maître?… où sont-ils?”

D’un geste, le matelot fit entendre qu’il n’en savait rien.

“Enfin, qui commande à bord? s’écria le Kaw-djer.

— Vous! dit Karroly.

— À la barre donc, ordonna le Kaw-djer, et laisse arriver en grand!”

Karroly et lui revinrent en tout hâte à l’arrière et pesèrent sur la roue, pour faire abattre le bâtiment. Celui-ci, obéissant péniblement au gouvernail, vint avec lenteur sur bâbord.

“Brasse carré partout!” commanda le Kaw-djer.

Tombé dans le lit du vent, le navire avait pris un peu d’erre. Peut-être réussirait-on à passer dans l’Ouest de l’île Horn.

Où allait ce navire?… On le saurait plus tard. Quant à son nom et à celui de son port d’attache — Jonathan, SAN-FRANCISCO — il fut possible de les lire sur la roue, à la lueur d’un falot.

Les violentes embardées rendaient très difficile la manœuvre du gouvernail, dont l’action était, d’ailleurs, peu efficace, le bâtiment n’ayant qu’une faible vitesse propre. Cependant, le Kaw-djer et Karroly essayaient de le maintenir dans la direction de la passe, en s’orientant sur les derniers éclats que, pour quelques minutes encore, continuait à jeter le feu allumé au sommet du cap Horn.

Mais, quelques minutes, il n’en fallait pas plus pour atteindre l’entrée du canal, qui se creusait, sur tribord, entre l’île Hermitte et l’île Horn. Que le bâtiment parvînt à parer les écueils émergeant dans la partie moyenne de ce canal, et il gagnerait peut-être un mouillage abrité du vent et de la mer. Là, on attendrait en sûreté jusqu’au lever du jour.

Tout d’abord, Karroly, aidé de quelques matelots dont le trouble était si grand qu’ils ne remarquèrent même pas que des ordres leur étaient donnés par un Indien, se hâta de couper les haubans et galhaubans de bâbord qui retenaient les deux mâts à la traîne. Leurs chocs violents contre la coque eussent fini par la défoncer. Les agrès tranchés à coups de hache, la mâture partit en dérive, et il n’y eut plus à s’en occuper. Quant à la Wel-Kiej, sa bosse la ramena vers l’arrière de manière à prévenir toute collision.

La fureur de la tempête s’accroissait. Les énormes paquets de mer qui embarquaient par- dessus les bastingages augmentaient l’affolement des passagers. Mieux aurait valu que tout ce monde se fût réfugié dans les roufs ou dans l’entrepont. Mais le moyen de se faire entendre et comprendre de ces malheureux? Il n’y fallait pas songer.

Enfin, non sans d’effrayantes embardées qui exposaient tour à tour ses flancs aux assauts des lames, le bâtiment doubla le cap, frôla les récifs qui le hérissaient à l’Ouest et, sous l’impulsion d’un morceau de toile hissé à l’avant en guise de foc, passa sous le vent de l’île Horn, dont les hauteurs le couvrirent en partie contre les violences de la bourrasque.

Pendant cette accalmie relative, un homme monta sur la dunette et s’approcha de la barre que manœuvraient le Kaw-djer et Karroly.

“Qui êtes-vous? demanda-t-il.

— Pilote, répondit le Kaw-djer. Et vous?

— Maître d’équipage.

— Vos officiers?

— Morts.

— Tous?

— Tous.

— Pourquoi n’étiez-vous pas à votre poste?

— J’ai été assommé par la chute des mâts. Je viens à peine de reprendre connaissance.

— C’est bon. Reposez-vous. Mon compagnon et moi nous suffirons à la tâche. Mais, quand vous le pourrez, réunissez vos hommes. Il faut mettre de l’ordre ici.”

Tout danger n’avait pas disparu, loin de là. Lorsque le navire arriverait à la pointe septentrionale de l’île, il serait pris par le travers et de nouveau exposé à toutes les brutalités des lames et du vent, qui enfilaient le bras de mer entre l’île Horn et l’île Herschell. Aucun moyen, d’ailleurs, d’éviter ce passage. Outre que la côte du cap n’offre aucun abri où le Jonathan pût mouiller, le vent, qui hâlait de plus en plus le Sud, ne tarderait pas à rendre intenable cette partie de l’archipel.

Le Kaw-djer n’avait plus qu’un espoir, gagner vers l’Ouest et atteindre la côte méridionale de l’île Hermitte. Cette côte, assez franche, longue d’une douzaine de milles, n’est pas dépourvue de refuges. Au revers de l’une des pointes, il n’était pas impossible que le Jonathan trouvât un abri. La mer redevenue calme, Karroly essaierait, en choisissant un vent favorable, de gagner le canal du Beagle, et de conduire le navire, bien qu’il fût à peu près désemparé, à Punta-Arenas par le détroit de Magellan.

Mais, que de périls présentait la navigation jusqu’à l’île Hermitte! Comment éviter les nombreux récifs dont la mer est semée dans ces parages? Avec la voilure réduite à un bout de foc, comment assurer la direction dans ces profondes ténèbres?…

Après une heure terrible, les dernières roches de l’île Horn furent dépassées et la mer recommença à battre en grand le navire.

Le maître d’équipage, aidé d’une douzaine de matelots, établit alors un tourmentin au mât de misaine. Il ne fallut pas moins d’une demi-heure pour y réussir. Au prix de mille peines, la voile fut enfin hissée à bloc, amurée et bordée à l’aide de palans, non sans que les hommes y eussent employé toute leur vigueur.

Assurément, pour un navire de ce tonnage, l’action de ce morceau de toile serait à peine sensible. Il la ressentit pourtant, et telle était la force du vent, que les sept ou huit milles séparant l’île Horn de l’île Hermitte furent enlevés en moins d’une heure.

Un peu avant onze heures, le Kaw-djer et Karroly commençaient à croire au succès de leur tentative, lorsqu’un effroyable fracas domina un instant les hurlements de la bourrasque.

Le mât de misaine venait de se rompre à une dizaine de pieds au-dessus du pont. Entraînant dans sa chute une partie du grand mât, il tomba en écrasant les bastingages de bâbord et disparut.

Cet accident fit plusieurs victimes, car des cris déchirants s’élevèrent. En même temps, le Jonathan embarqua une lame gigantesque et donna une telle bande qu’il menaça de chavirer.

Il se releva cependant, mais un torrent courut de bâbord à tribord, de l’arrière à l’avant, balayant tout sur son passage. Par bonheur, les agrès s’étaient rompus, et les débris de la mature, emportés par la houle, ne menaçaient pas la coque.

Devenu désormais une épave inerte en dérive, le Jonathan ne sentait plus sa barre.

“Nous sommes perdus! cria une voix.

— Et pas d’embarcations! gémit une autre.

— Il y a la chaloupe du pilote!” hurla un troisième.

La foule se rua vers l’arrière, où la Wel-Kiej suivait à la traîne.

“Halte!” commanda le Kaw-djer d’une voix si impérieuse qu’il fut obéi sur-le-champ.

En quelques secondes, le maître d’équipage eut établi un cordon de matelots, qui barra la route aux passagers affolés. Il n’y avait plus qu’à attendre le dénouement.

Une heure après, Karroly entrevit une énorme masse dans la région du Nord. Par quel miracle le Jonathan avait-il suivi sans dommage le chenal séparant l’île Herschell de l’île Hermitte? Le certain, c’est qu’il l’avait franchi, puisqu’il avait maintenant devant lui les hauteurs de l’île Wollaston. Mais le flot se faisait alors sentir, et l’île Wollaston fut presque aussitôt laissée sur tribord.

Lequel serait le plus fort, du vent ou du courant? Le Jonathan, poussé par le premier, allait-il passer à l’Est de l’île Hoste, ou bien, drossé par le second, la doubler par le Sud? Ni l’un, ni l’autre. Un peu avant une heure du matin, un formidable choc l’ébranla dans toute sa membrure, et il demeura immobile, en donnant une forte gîte sur bâbord.

Le navire américain venait de se mettre au plein sur la côte orientale de cette extrémité de l’île Hoste qui porte le nom de Faux cap Horn.

CHAPITRE V

V

Les naufragés

Quinze jours avant cette nuit du 15 au 16 mars, le clipper américain Jonathan avait quitté San-Francisco de Californie, à destination de l'Afrique australe. C'est là une traversée qu'un navire bon marcheur peut accomplir en cinq semaines, s'il est favorisé par le temps.

Ce voilier de trois mille cinq cents tonneaux de jauge était gréé de quatre mâts, le mât de misaine et le grand mât à voiles carrées, les deux autres à voiles auriques et latines: brigantines et flèches. Son commandant, le capitaine Leccar, excellent marin dans la force de l'âge, avait sous ses ordres le second Musgrave, le lieutenant Maddison, le maître Hartlepool et un équipage de vingt-sept hommes, tous Américains.

Le Jonathan n'avait pas été affrété pour un transport de marchandises. C'est un chargement humain qu'il contenait dans ses flancs. Plus de mille émigrants, réunis par une Société de colonisation, s'y étaient embarqués pour la baie de Lagoa, où le gouvernement portugais leur avait accordé une concession.

La cargaison du clipper, en dehors des provisions nécessaires au voyage, comprenait tout ce qu'exigerait la colonie à son début. L'alimentation de ces centaines d'émigrants était assurée pour plusieurs mois en farine, conserves et boissons alcooliques. Le Jonathan emportait aussi du matériel de première installation: tentes, habitations démontables, ustensiles nécessaires aux besoins des ménages. Afin de favoriser la mise en valeur immédiate des terres concédées, la Société s’était préoccupée de fournir aux colons des instruments agricoles, des plants de diverses natures, des graines de céréales et de légumes, un certain nombre de bestiaux des espèces bovine, porcine et ovine, et tous les hôtes habituels de la basse-cour. Les armes et les munitions ne manquant pas davantage, le sort de la nouvelle colonie était donc garanti pour une période suffisante. D’ailleurs, il n’était pas question qu’elle fût abandonnée à elle-même. Le Jonathan, de retour à San Francisco, y reprendrait une seconde cargaison qui compléterait la première, et, si l’entreprise paraissait réussir, transporterait un autre personnel de colons à la baie de Lagoa. Il ne manque pas de pauvres gens pour lesquels l’existence est trop pénible, impossible même dans la mère-patrie, et dont tous les efforts tendent à s’en créer une meilleure en terre étrangère.

Dès le début du voyage, les éléments semblèrent se liguer contre le succès de l’entreprise. Après une traversée très dure, le Jonathan n’était arrivé à la hauteur du cap Horn que pour y être assailli par une des plus furieuses tempêtes dont ces parages aient été le théâtre.

Le capitaine Leccar, qui, faute d’observation solaire, ne pouvait connaître sa position exacte, se croyait plus loin de la terre. C’est pourquoi il donna la route au plus près, tribord amures, espérant passer d’une seule bordée dans l’Atlantique, où il trouverait sans doute un temps plus maniable. On venait à peine d’exécuter ses ordres, quand un furieux coup de mer, capelant la joue de tribord, l’enleva avec plusieurs passagers et matelots. On tenta vainement de porter secours à ces malheureux qui, en moins d’une seconde, eurent disparu.

Ce fut après cette catastrophe que le Jonathan commença à tirer le canon d'alarme, dont la première détonation avait été entendue par le Kaw-djer et par ses compagnons.

Le capitaine Leccar n'avait donc pas vu le feu allumé au sommet du cap, qui lui eût montré son erreur et permis peut-être de la réparer. À son défaut, le second Musgrave essaya de virer de bord afin de gagner du champ. C'était une entreprise presque irréalisable, étant donné l'état de la mer et la voilure réduite que nécessitait la violence du vent. Après beaucoup d'efforts infructueux, il allait cependant la mener à bonne fin, lorsqu'il fut précipité à la mer avec le lieutenant Maddison par la chute de la mâture arrière. Au même instant, une poulie, violemment balancée par la houle, atteignait le maître d'équipage à la tête et le jetait évanoui sur le pont.

On sait le reste.

Maintenant, le voyage était terminé. Le Jonathan, solidement encastré entre les pointes des récifs, gisait, à jamais immobile, sur la côte de l'île Hoste. À quelle distance était-il de la terre? On le saurait au jour. En tous cas, il n'y avait plus de danger immédiat. Le navire, emporté par sa force vive, était entré très avant au milieu des écueils, et ceux que son élan lui avait permis de franchir le couvraient de la mer, qui n'arrivait plus jusqu'à lui que sous forme d'inoffensive écume. Il ne serait donc pas démoli, cette nuit-là du moins. D'autre part, il ne pouvait être question de couler, la cale qui le supportait ne devant sûrement pas s'enfoncer sous son poids.

Cette situation nouvelle, le Kaw-djer, aidé du maître Hartlepool, réussit à la faire comprendre au troupeau affolé qui encombrait le pont. Quelques émigrants, les uns volontairement, les autres emportés par le choc, étaient passés par-dessus bord au moment de l'échouage. Ils étaient tombés sur les récifs, où le ressac les roulait, mutilés et sans vie. Mais l'immobilité du navire commençait à rassurer les autres. Peu à peu, hommes, femmes et enfants allèrent chercher sous les roufs ou dans l'entrepont un abri contre les torrents de pluie que les nuages déversaient en cataractes. Quant au Kaw-djer, en compagnie d'Halg, de Karroly et du maître d'équipage, il continua à veiller pour le salut de tous.

Lorsqu'ils furent dans l'intérieur du navire, où régnait un silence relatif, les émigrants ne tardèrent pas à s'endormir pour la plupart. Allant d'un extrême à l'autre, les pauvres gens avaient repris confiance dès qu'ils avaient senti au-dessus d'eux une énergie et une intelligence, et docilement ils avaient obéi. Comme si la chose eût été toute naturelle, ils s'en remettaient au Kaw-djer et lui laissaient le soin de décider pour eux et d'assurer leur sécurité. Rien ne les avait préparés à subir de telles épreuves. Forts par leur patiente résignation contre les misères courantes de l'existence, ils étaient désarmés en de si exceptionnelles circonstances, et, inconsciemment, ils souhaitaient que quelqu'un se chargeât de distribuer à chacun sa besogne. Français, Italiens, Russes, Irlandais, Anglais, Allemands, et jusqu'aux Japonais, étaient représentés plus ou moins largement parmi ces émigrants, dont le plus grand nombre, toutefois, provenaient des États du Nord-Amérique. Et, cette diversité de races, on la retrouvait dans les professions. Si pour l'immense majorité ils faisaient partie de la classe agricole, certains appartenaient à la classe ouvrière proprement dite, et quelques-uns même avaient exercé, avant de s'expatrier, des professions libérales. Célibataires en général, cent ou cent cinquante d'entre eux seulement étaient mariés et traînaient à leur suite un véritable troupeau d'enfants.

Mais tous avaient ce trait commun d'être des épaves. Victimes, les uns d'un hasard défavorable de la naissance, d'autres d'un défaut d'équilibre moral, ceux-ci d'une insuffisance d'intelligence ou de force, ceux-là de malheurs immérités, tous avaient dû se reconnaître mal adaptés à leur milieu et se résoudre à chercher fortune sous d’autres cieux.

Cette population hybride, c’était un microcosme, une réduction de la gent humaine où, à l’exclusion de la richesse, toutes les situations sociales étaient représentées. L’extrême misère, d’ailleurs, en était pareillement bannie, la Société de colonisation ayant exigé de ses adhérents la possession d’un capital minimum de cinq cents francs, capital qui, selon les facultés individuelles, avait été, par quelques-uns, porté à un chiffre vingt et trente fois plus fort. C’était une foule, en somme, ni meilleure, ni pire qu’une autre; c’était la foule avec ses inégalités, ses vertus et ses tares, amas confus de désirs et de sentiments contradictoires, la foule anonyme, d’où se dégage parfois une volonté unique et totale, comme un courant se forme et s’isole dans la masse amorphe de la mer.

Cette foule que le hasard jetait sur une côte inhospitalière, qu’allait-elle devenir? Comment allait-elle résoudre l’éternel problème de la vie?

DEUXIÈME PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

I

À terre

Même en cette région si bouleversée, l’île Hoste est remarquable par la fantaisie de son plan. Si la côte septentrionale, qui borde le canal du Beagle sur la moitié de son étendue, en est sensiblement rectiligne, le littoral, sur le reste de son périmètre, est hérissé de caps aigus ou creusé de golfes étroits, dont quelques-uns profonds jusqu’à traverser l’île presque de part en part.

L’île Hoste est une des grandes terres de l’archipel magellanique. Sa largeur peut être estimée à cinquante kilomètres, et sa longueur à plus de cent, non compris cette presqu’île Hardy, recourbée comme un cimeterre, qui projette à huit ou dix lieues dans le Sud-Ouest la pointe connue sous le nom de Faux cap Horn.

C’est à l’Est de cette presqu’île, au revers d’une énorme masse granitique séparant la baie Orange de la baie Scotchwell, que le Jonathan était venu s’échouer.

Au jour naissant, une falaise sauvage apparut dans les brumes de l’aube, que ne tardèrent pas à dissiper les derniers souffles de la tempête expirante. Le Jonathan gisait à l’extrémité d’un promontoire dont l’arête, formée d’un morne très à pic du côté de la mer, se rattachait par un faîte élevé à l’ossature de la presqu’île. Au pied du morne s’étendait un lit de roches noirâtres, toutes visqueuses de varechs et de goémons. Entre les récifs brillait par places un sable lisse et encore humide, prodigieusement constellé de ces coquillages: térébratules, fissurelles, patelles, tritons, peignes, licornes, oscabrions, mactres, venus, si abondants sur les plages magellaniques. En somme, l’île Hoste ne semblait pas des plus accueillantes à première vue.

Dès que la lumière leur permit de distinguer confusément la côte, la plupart des naufragés se laissèrent glisser sur les récifs alors presque entièrement découverts, et s’empressèrent de gagne la terre. C’eût été folie de vouloir les retenir. On imagine aisément quelle hâte ils devaient avoir de fouler un sol ferme après les affres d’une pareille nuit. Une centaine d’entre eux se mirent en devoir d’escalader le morne en le prenant à revers, dans l’espoir de reconnaître du sommet une plus vaste étendue de pays. Du surplus de la foule, une partie s’éloigna en contournant le rivage sud de la pointe, une autre suivit le rivage nord, tandis que le plus grand nombre stationnaient sur la grève, absorbés dans la contemplation du Jonathan échoué.

Quelques émigrants toutefois, plus intelligents ou moins impulsifs que les autres, étaient restés à bord et tenaient leurs regards fixés sur le Kaw-djer, comme s’ils eussent attendu un mot d’ordre de cet inconnu dont l’intervention leur avait déjà été si profitable. Celui-ci ne montrant aucune velléité d’interrompre la conversation qu’il soutenait avec le maître d’équipage, l’un de ces émigrants se détacha enfin d’un groupe de quatre personnes, parmi lesquelles figuraient deux femmes, et se dirigea vers les causeurs. À l’expression de son visage, à sa démarche, à mille signes impalpables, il était aisé de reconnaître que cet homme, âgé d’environ cinquante ans, appartenait à une classe supérieure au milieu dans lequel il se trouvait placé.

“Monsieur, dit-il en abordant le Kaw-djer, que je vous remercie, avant tout. Vous nous avez sauvés d’une mort certaine. Sans vous et sans vos compagnons, nous étions inévitablement perdus.”

Les traits, la voix, le geste de ce passager disaient son honnêteté et sa droiture. Le Kaw-djer serra avec cordialité la main qui lui était tendue, puis, employant la langue anglaise dans laquelle on lui adressait la parole:

“Nous sommes trop heureux, mon ami Karroly et moi, répondit-il, que notre expérience de ces parages nous ait permis d’éviter une si effroyable catastrophe.

— Permettez-moi de me présenter. Je suis émigrant et je m’appelle Harry Rhodes. J’ai avec moi ma femme, ma fille et mon fils, reprit le passager en désignant les trois personnes qu’il avait quittées pour aborder le Kaw-djer.

— Mon compagnon, dit en échange le Kaw-djer, est le pilote Karroly, et voici Halg, son fils. Ce sont des Fuégiens, comme vous pouvez le voir.

— Et vous? interrogea Harry Rhodes.

— Je suis un ami des Indiens. Ils m’ont baptisé le Kaw-djer, et je ne me connais plus d’autre nom.”

Harry Rhodes regarda avec étonnement son interlocuteur qui soutint cet examen d’un air calme et froid. Sans insister, il demanda:

“Quel est votre avis sur ce que nous devons faire?

— Nous en parlions précisément, M. Hartlepool et moi, répondit le Kaw-djer. Tout dépend de l’état du Jonathan. Je n’ai pas, à vrai dire, beaucoup d’illusions à ce sujet. Cependant, il est nécessaire de l’examiner avant de rien décider.

— En quelle partie de la Magellanie sommes-nous échoués? reprit Harry Rhodes.

— Sur la côte sud-est de l’île Hoste.

— Près du détroit de Magellan?

— Non. Fort loin, au contraire.

— Diable!… fit Harry Rhodes.

— C’est pourquoi, je vous le répète, tout dépend de l’état du Jonathan. Il faut d’abord s’en rendre compte. Nous prendrons ensuite une décision.”

Suivi du maître Hartlepool, d’Harry Rhodes, d’Halg et de Karroly, le Kaw-djer descendit sur les récifs, et, tous ensemble, ils firent le tour du clipper.

On eut vite acquis la certitude que le Jonathan devait être considéré comme absolument perdu. La coque était crevée en vingt endroits, déchirée sur presque toute la longueur du flanc de tribord, avaries particulièrement irrémédiables quand il s’agit d’un bâtiment en fer. On devait donc renoncer à tout espoir de le remettre à flot et l’abandonner à la mer qui ne tarderait pas à en achever la démolition.

“Selon moi, dit alors le Kaw-djer, il conviendrait de débarquer la cargaison et de la mettre en lieu sûr. Pendant ce temps, on réparerait notre chaloupe qui a subi de sérieuses avaries au moment de l’échouage. Les réparations terminées, Karroly conduirait à Punta-Arenas un des émigrants qui apprendrait le sinistre au gouverneur. Sans aucun doute, celui-ci s’empressera de faire le nécessaire pour vous rapatrier.

— C’est fort sagement dit et pensé, approuva Harry Rhodes.

— Je crois, reprit le Kaw-djer, qu’il serait bon de communiquer ce plan à tous vos compagnons. Pour cela, il faudrait les réunir sur la grève, si vous n’y voyez pas d’inconvénient.”

On dut attendre assez longtemps le retour des diverses bandes qui s’étaient plus ou moins éloignées dans des directions opposées. Avant neuf heures du matin, cependant, la faim eut ramené tous les émigrants en face du navire échoué. Harry Rhodes, montant sur un quartier de roc en guise de tribune, transmit à ses compagnons la proposition du Kaw-djer.

Elle n’obtint pas un succès absolument unanime. Quelques auditeurs ne parurent pas satisfaits. On entendit des réflexions désobligeantes.

“Décharger un navire de trois mille tonneaux, maintenant!… Il ne manquait plus que ça! murmurait l’un.

— Pour qui nous prend-on? bougonnait un autre.

— Comme si l’on n’avait pas assez trimé!” disait en sourdine un troisième.

Une voix s’éleva enfin nettement de la foule.

“Je demande la parole, articulait-elle en mauvais anglais.

— Prenez-la”, acquiesça, sans même connaître le nom de l’interrupteur, Harry Rhodes, qui descendit sur-le-champ de son piédestal.

Il y fut aussitôt remplacé par un homme dans la force de l’âge. Son visage, aux traits assez beaux, éclairé par des yeux bleus un peu rêveurs, était encadré par une barbe touffue de couleur châtain. Le propriétaire de cette magnifique barbe en tirait, selon toute apparence, quelque vanité, car il en caressait avec amour les poils longs et soyeux, d’une main dont nul travail grossier n’avait altéré la blancheur.

“Camarades, prononça ce personnage en arpentant le rocher comme Cicéron devait jadis arpenter les rostres, la surprise que plusieurs d’entre vous ont manifestée est des plus naturelles. Que nous propose-t-on, en effet? De séjourner un temps indéterminé sur cette côte inhospitalière et de travailler stupidement au sauvetage d’un matériel qui n’est pas à nous. Pourquoi attendrions-nous ici le retour de la chaloupe, alors qu’elle peut être utilisée à nous transporter les uns après les autres jusqu’à Punta-Arenas?”

Des: “Il a raison!”, “C’est évident!”, coururent parmi les auditeurs. Cependant le Kaw-djer répliquait du milieu de la foule:

“La Wel-Kiej est à votre disposition, cela va sans dire. Mais il lui faudra dix ans pour transporter tout le monde à Punta-Arenas.

— Soit! concéda l’orateur. Restons donc ici en attendant son retour. Ce n’est pas une raison pour décharger le matériel à grand renfort de bras. Que nous retirions des flancs du navire les objets qui sont notre propriété personnelle, rien de mieux, mais le reste!… Devons-nous quelque chose à la Société à laquelle tout cela appartient? Bien au contraire, c’est elle qui est responsable de nos malheurs. Si elle n’avait pas fait preuve de tant d’avarice, si son bateau avait été meilleur et mieux commandé, nous n’en serions pas où nous en sommes. Et d’ailleurs, quand bien même il n’en serait pas ainsi, devrions-nous pour cela oublier que nous faisons partie de l’innombrable classe des exploités, et nous transformer bénévolement en bêtes de somme des exploiteurs?”

L’argument parut apprécié. Une voix dit: “Bravo!”. Il y eut de gros rires.

L’orateur, ainsi encouragé, poursuivit avec une chaleur nouvelle:

“Exploités, nous le sommes à coup sûr, nous autres travailleurs — et l’orateur, ce disant, se frappait la poitrine avec énergie — qui n’avons pu, fût-ce au prix d’un labeur acharné, gagner dans les lieux qui nous ont vus naître le pain qu’aurait trempé notre sueur. Nous serions bien sots maintenant de charger nos échines de toute cette ferraille fabriquée par des ouvriers comme nous et qui n’en est pas moins la propriété de ce capitalisme oppresseur, dont l’incommensurable égoïsme nous a contraints à quitter nos familles et nos patries?”

Si la plupart des émigrants écoutaient d’un air ahuri ces tirades prononcées dans un anglais vicié par un fort accent étranger, plusieurs d’entre eux en paraissaient ébranlés. Un petit groupe, réuni au pied de la tribune improvisée, donnait notamment des marques d’approbation.

Ce fut encore le Kaw-djer qui remit les choses au point.

“J’ignore à qui appartient la cargaison du Jonathan, dit-il avec calme, mais mon expérience de ce pays m’autorise à vous affirmer qu’elle pourra éventuellement vous être utile. Dans l’ignorance où nous sommes tous de l’avenir, il est sage, selon moi, de ne pas l’abandonner.”

Le précédent orateur ne manifestant aucune velléité de réplique, Harry Rhodes escalada de nouveau le rocher et mit aux voix la proposition de Kaw-djer. Elle fut adoptée à mains levées sans autre opposition.

“Le Kaw-djer demande, ajouta Harry Rhodes transmettant une question qui lui était faite à lui-même, s’il n’y aurait pas parmi nous des charpentiers qui consentiraient à l’aider pour réparer sa chaloupe.

— Présent! fit un homme à l’aspect solide, qui éleva un bras au-dessus des têtes.

— Présent! répondirent presque en même temps deux autres émigrants.

— Le premier qui a parlé, c’est Smith, dit Hartlepool au Kaw-djer, un ouvrier embauché par la Compagnie. C’est un brave homme. Je ne connais pas les deux autres. Tout ce que je sais, c’est que l’un s’appelle Hobard.

— Et l’orateur, le connaissez-vous?

— C’est un émigrant, un Français, je crois. On m’a dit qu’il se nommait Beauval, mais je n’en suis pas sûr.”

Le maître d’équipage ne se trompait pas. Tels étaient bien le nom et la nationalité de l’orateur, dont l’histoire assez mouvementée peut cependant être résumée en quelques lignes.

Ferdinand Beauval avait commencé par être avocat, et peut-être eût-il réussi dans cette profession, car il ne manquait ni d’intelligence, ni de talent, s’il n’avait eu le malheur d’être piqué, dès le début de sa carrière, par la tarentule politique. Pressé de réaliser une ambition à la fois ardente et confuse, il s’était enrôlé dans les partis avancés et n’avait pas tardé à lâcher le Palais pour les réunions publiques. Il serait, sans doute, parvenu à se faire élire député tout comme un autre, s’il avait pu attendre assez longtemps. Mais ses modestes ressources furent épuisées avant que le succès eût couronné ses efforts. Réduit aux expédients, il s’était alors compromis dans des affaires douteuses, et, de ce jour, datait pour lui la dégringolade qui, de chute en chute, l’avait fait rouler dans la gêne, puis dans la misère, et l’avait enfin contraint à chercher une meilleure fortune sur le sol de la libre Amérique.

Mais, en Amérique, le sort ne lui avait pas été plus clément. Après avoir passé de ville en ville, en exerçant successivement tous les métiers, il avait finalement échoué à San Francisco, où, le destin ne lui souriant pas davantage, il s'était vu acculé à un second exil.

Ayant réussi à se procurer le capital minimum nécessaire, il s'était inscrit dans ce convoi d'émigrants sur le vu d'un prospectus qui promettait monts et merveilles aux premiers colons de la concession de la baie de Lagoa. Son espoir risquait fort d'être trompé de nouveau, après le naufrage du Jonathan, qui le jetait, avec tant d'autres misérables, sur le littoral de la presqu'île Hardy.

Toutefois, les échecs perpétuels de Ferdinand Beauval n'avaient aucunement ébranlé sa confiance en lui-même et dans son étoile. Ces échecs, qu'il attribuait à la méchanceté, à l'ingratitude, à la jalousie, laissaient intacte sa foi en sa valeur propre, qui triompherait, un jour ou l'autre, à la première occasion favorable.

C'est pourquoi pas un instant il n'avait laissé dépérir les dons de conducteur d'hommes qu'il s'attribuait modestement. À peine à bord du Jonathan, il s'était efforcé de répandre autour de lui la bonne semence, et parfois avec une telle intempérance de langage que le capitaine Leccar avait cru devoir intervenir.

Malgré cette entrave apportée à sa propagande, Ferdinand Beauval n'était pas sans avoir remporté quelques petits succès pendant le commencement de ce voyage qui venait de prendre fin d'une manière si dramatique. Certains de ses compagnons d'infortune, en nombre insignifiant, il est vrai, n'avaient pas laissé de prêter une oreille complaisante aux suggestions démagogiques qui faisaient le fond de son éloquence habituelle. Autour de lui, ils formaient maintenant un groupe compact, dont le seul défaut était de compter de trop rares unités.

Plus grande sans doute eût été la quantité de ses adeptes, si Beauval, continuant à jouer de malheur, ne se fût heurté, à bord du Jonathan, à un redoutable concurrent. Ce concurrent n’était autre qu’un Américain du Nord, du nom de Lewis Dorick, homme au visage rasé, à l’aspect glacial, à la parole tranchante comme un couteau. Ce Lewis Dorick professait des théories analogues à celles de Beauval, en les poussant d’un degré plus avant. Alors que celui-ci préconisait un socialisme, dans lequel l’État, unique propriétaire des moyens de production, répartirait à chacun son emploi, Dorick vantait un plus pur communisme, dans lequel tout serait à la fois propriété de tous et de chacun.

Entre les deux leaders sociologues, on pouvait encore noter une différence plus caractéristique que le désaccord de leurs principes. Tandis que Beauval, Latin imaginatif, se grisait de mots et de rêves, tout en pratiquant pour son propre compte des moeurs assez douces, de Dorick, sectaire plus farouche et plus absolu doctrinaire, le cœur de marbre ignorait la pitié. Alors que l’un, fort capable au demeurant d’affoler un auditoire jusqu’à la violence, était personnellement inoffensif, l’autre constituait par lui-même un danger.

Dorick prônait l’égalité d’une manière telle qu’il la rendait haïssable. Ce n’est pas en bas, c’est en haut qu’il regardait. La pensée du sort misérable auquel est vouée l’immense majorité des humains ne faisait battre son cœur de nulle émotion, mais qu’un petit nombre d’entre eux occupassent un rang social supérieur au sien, cela lui donnait des convulsions de rage.

Vouloir l’apaiser eût été une folie. Pour le plus timide des contradicteurs, il devenait sur-le-champ un ennemi implacable qui, s’il eût été libre, n’eût employé d’autre argument que la violence et le meurtre.

À cette âme ulcérée, Dorick devait tous ses malheurs. Professeur de littérature et d’histoire, il n’avait pu résister au désir de répandre, du haut de sa chaire, un tout autre enseignement. Volontiers, il y proclamait ses maximes libertaires, non pas sous la forme d’une pure discussion théorique, mais sous celle d’affirmations péremptoires devant lesquelles on a le devoir étroit de s’incliner.

Cette conduite n’avait pas tardé à porter ses fruits naturels. Dorick, remercié par son directeur, avait été invité à chercher une autre place. Les mêmes causes continuant à produire les mêmes effets, sa nouvelle place lui avait échappé comme la première, la troisième comme la deuxième, et ainsi de suite, tant qu’enfin la porte de la dernière institution s’était irrévocablement refermée derrière lui. Il était alors tombé sur le pavé, d’où, professeur transformé en émigrant, il avait rebondi sur le pont du Jonathan.

Au cours de la traversée, Dorick et Beauval avaient recruté chacun leurs partisans, celui-ci par la chaleur d’une éloquence que n’alourdit pas la critique consciencieuse des idées, celui-là par l’autorité inhérente à un homme qui s’affirme possesseur de la vérité intégrale. Cette modeste clientèle, dont ils s’étaient érigés les chefs, ils n’arrivaient pas à se la pardonner réciproquement. Si, en apparence, ils se faisaient encore bon visage, leurs âmes étaient pleines de colère et de haine.

À peine débarqué sur la grève de l’île Hoste, Beauval n’avait pas voulu perdre un instant pour s’assurer un avantage sur son rival. Trouvant l’occasion favorable, il avait gravi la tribune et pris la parole de la manière que l’on sait. Peu importait que sa thèse n’eût pas finalement triomphé. L’essentiel est de se mettre en vedette. La foule s’habitue à ceux qu’elle voit souvent, et pour devenir tout naturellement un chef, il suffit de s’en attribuer le rôle assez longtemps.

Pendant le court dialogue du Kaw-djer et d’Hartlepool, Harry Rhodes avait continué à haranguer ses compagnons.

“Puisque la proposition est adoptée, leur dit-il du haut de son rocher, il faudrait confier à l’un de nous la direction du travail. Ce n’est pas peu de choses que de décharger entièrement un navire de trois mille cinq cents tonneaux, et une telle entreprise exige de la méthode. Vous conviendrait-il de faire appel au concours de M. Hartlepool, maître d’équipage? Il nous répartirait la besogne et nous indiquerait les meilleurs moyens de la mener à bonne fin. Que ceux qui sont de mon avis veuillent bien lever la main.”

Toutes les mains, à de rares exceptions près, se levèrent d’un même mouvement.

“Voilà donc qui est entendu, constata Harry Rhodes, qui ajouta en se tournant vers le maître d’équipage: Quels sont les ordres?

— D’aller déjeuner, répondit Hartlepool avec rondeur. Pour travailler, il faut des forces.”

En tumulte, les émigrants réintégrèrent le bord où un repas formé de conserves leur fut distribué par l’équipage. Pendant ce temps, Hartlepool avait pris le Kaw-djer à l’écart.

“Si vous le permettez, monsieur, dit-il d’un air soucieux, j’oserai prétendre que je suis un bon marin. Mais j’ai toujours eu un capitaine, monsieur.

— Qu’entendez-vous par là? interrogea le Kaw-djer.

— J’entends, répondit Hartlepool en faisant une mine de plus en plus longue, que je peux me flatter de savoir exécuter un ordre, mais que l’invention n’est pas mon affaire. Tenir ferme la barre, tant qu’on voudra. Quant à donner la route, c’est autre chose.”

Le Kaw-djer examina du coin de l’œil le maître d’équipage. Il existait donc des hommes, bons, forts et droits au demeurant, pour lesquels un chef était une nécessité?

“Cela veut dire, expliqua-t-il, que vous vous chargeriez volontiers du détail du travail, mais que vous seriez heureux d’avoir au préalable quelques indications générales?

— Juste! fit Hartlepool.

— Rien de plus simple, poursuivit le Kaw-djer. De combien de bras pouvez-vous disposer?

— Au départ de San-Francisco, le Jonathan avait un équipage de trente-quatre hommes, compris l’état-major, le cuisinier et les deux mousses, et transportait onze cent quatre-vingt-quinze passagers. Au total, douze cent vingt-neuf personnes. Mais beaucoup sont morts maintenant.

— On en fera le compte plus tard. Adoptons pour le moment le nombre rond de douze cents. En défalquant les femmes et les enfants, il reste à vue d’œil sept cents hommes. Vous allez diviser votre monde en deux groupes. Deux cents hommes resteront à bord et commenceront à monter la cargaison sur le pont. Moi, je conduirai les autres dans une forêt qui n’est pas loin d’ici. Nous y couperons une centaine d’arbres. Ces arbres, une fois ébranchés, seront croisés sur double épaisseur et liés solidement entre eux. On obtiendra ainsi une série de parquets, que vous mettrez bout à bout de façon à former un large chemin réunissant le navire à la grève. À marée haute, vous aurez un pont flottant. À marée basse, ces radeaux reposeront sur les têtes de récifs, et vous les étayerez afin d'assurer leur stabilité. En procédant de cette manière, et avec un si nombreux personnel, le déchargement peut être terminé en trois jours.”

Hartlepool se conforma intelligemment à ces instructions, et, comme l'avait prévu le Kaw-djer, toute la cargaison du Jonathan fut déposée sur la grève, hors de l'atteinte de la mer, le soir du 19. Vérification faite, le treuil à vapeur s'était par bonheur trouvé en parfait état, et cette circonstance avait grandement facilité le levage des colis les plus lourds.

En même temps, avec l'aide des trois charpentiers Smith, Hobard et Charley, les réparations de la chaloupe avaient été activement poussées. À cette date du 19 mars, elle fut en état de prendre la mer.

Il s'agit alors pour les émigrants de choisir un délégué. Ferdinand Beauval eut ainsi une nouvelle occasion de monter à la tribune et de solliciter des électeurs. Mais il jouait décidément de malheur. S'il eut la satisfaction de réunir une cinquantaine de voix, tandis que Lewis Dorick, qui d'ailleurs n'avait pas fait acte de candidat, n'en récoltait aucune, ce fut sur un certain Germain Rivière, agriculteur de race franco-canadienne, père d'une fille et de quatre superbes garçons, que se porta la majorité des suffrages. Celui-ci, du moins, les électeurs étaient bien sûrs qu'il reviendrait.

Sous la conduite de Karroly, qui laissait à l'île Hoste Halg et le Kaw-djer, la Wel-Kiej mit à la voile dans la matinée du 20 mars, et l'on procéda aussitôt à une installation sommaire. Il n'était pas question de fonder un établissement durable, mais seulement d'attendre le retour de la chaloupe, dont le voyage devait exiger environ trois semaines. Il n'y avait donc pas lieu d'utiliser les maisons démontables, et l'on se contenta de dresser les tentes trouvées dans la cale du navire. Augmentées des voiles de rechange dont regorgeait une soute spéciale, elles suffirent à abriter tout le monde, et même la partie fragile du matériel. On ne négligea pas non plus d'improviser des basses-cours avec quelques panneaux de grillages, ni d'établir des enclos à l'aide de cordes et de pieux, pour les bêtes à deux et à quatre pattes que transportait le Jonathan.

En somme, cette foule n'était pas dans la situation de naufrages jetés sans espoir, sans ressources sur une terre ignorée. La catastrophe avait eu lieu dans l'archipel fuégien, en un point exactement porté sur les cartes, à une centaine de lieues tout au plus de Punta-Arenas. D'autre part, les vivres abondaient. Les circonstances ne justifiaient, par conséquent, aucune inquiétude sérieuse, et, si ce n'est le climat un peu plus dur, les émigrants vivraient là, jusqu'au jour prochain du rapatriement, comme ils eussent vécu au début de leur séjour sur la terre africaine.

Il va sans dire que, pendant le déchargement, ni Halg ni le Kaw-djer n'étaient restés inactifs. Tous deux avaient bravement payé de leur personne. Du Kaw-djer notamment le concours avait été particulièrement utile. Quelle que fût sa modestie, quelque soin qu'il prît de passer inaperçu, sa supériorité était si évidente qu'elle s'imposait par la force des choses. Aussi ne se fit-on pas faute de recourir à ses conseils. S'agissait-il du transport d'un poids spécialement lourd, de l'arrimage des colis, du montage des tentes, on s'adressait à lui, et non seulement Hartlepool, mais encore la plupart de ces pauvres gens, peu habitués à de semblables travaux, qui formaient la grande masse des émigrants.

L'installation était fort avancée, sinon terminée, quand, le 24 mars, on eut un nouvel aperçu de la rigueur de ces parages. Durant trois fois vingt-quatre heures, la pluie ruissela en torrents, le vent souffla en tempête. Lorsque l’atmosphère reprit un peu de calme, on eût vainement cherché le Jonathan sur son lit de récifs. Des tôles, des barres de fer tordues, voilà ce qui restait du beau clipper dont, quelques jours auparavant, l’étrave fendait si allègrement la mer.

Bien que tout ce qui pouvait avoir la moindre valeur eût été retiré alors du navire, ce ne fut pas sans un serrement de cœur que les émigrants constatèrent sa disparition définitive. Ils étaient ainsi isolés et complètement séparés de l’humanité qui, si la chaloupe se perdait en cours de navigation, ignorerait peut-être à jamais leur destin.

À la tempête succéda une période de calme. On en profita pour dénombrer les survivants du naufrage. L’appel nominal, auquel procéda Hartlepool, en s’aidant des listes du bord, montra que la catastrophe avait fait trente et une victimes, dont quinze parmi l’équipage et seize parmi les passagers. Il subsistait onze cent soixante-dix-neuf passagers et dix-neuf des trente-quatre inscrits sur le rôle d’équipage. En ajoutant à ces nombres les deux Fuégiens et leur compagnon, la population de l’île Hoste s’élevait donc à douze cent une personnes des deux sexes et de tout âge.

Le Kaw-djer résolut de mettre le beau temps à profit pour visiter les parties de l’île Hoste les plus voisines du campement. Il fut convenu que Hartlepool, Harry Rhodes, Halg et trois émigrants, Gimelli, Gordon et Ivanoff, d’origine italienne pour le premier, américaine pour le deuxième, russe pour le troisième, l’accompagneraient dans cette excursion. Mais, au dernier moment, il se présenta deux candidats imprévus.

Le Kaw-djer allait à l’endroit fixé pour le rendez-vous, lorsque son attention fut attirée par deux enfants d’une dizaine d’années qui, l’un suivant l’autre, se dirigeaient évidemment de son côté. L’un de ces deux enfants, la mine éveillée, légèrement impertinente même, marchait le nez au vent, en affectant une allure crâne qui ne laissait pas d'être un peu comique. L'autre, suivait à cinq pas, d'un air modeste qui convenait à sa petite figure timide.

Le premier aborda le Kaw-djer.

“Excellence…” dit-il.

À cette appellation imprévue, le Kaw-djer fort amusé considéra le bambin. Celui-ci soutint bravement l'examen, sans se troubler ni baisser les yeux.

“Excellence!… répéta le Kaw-djer en riant. Pourquoi m'appelles-tu Excellence, mon garçon?”

L'enfant sembla fort étonné.

“N'est-ce pas comme ça qu'on doit dire pour les rois, les ministres et les évêques? demanda-t-il sur un ton qui exprimait sa crainte de n'avoir pas suffisamment respecté les règles de la politesse.

— Bah!… s'écria le Kaw-djer abasourdi. Et où as-tu vu qu'on devait appeler Excellence les rois, les ministres et les évêques?

— Sur les journaux, répondit l'enfant avec assurance.

— Tu lis donc les journaux?

— Pourquoi pas?… Quand on m'en donne.

— Ah!… ah!…” fit le Kaw-djer.

Il reprit:

“Comment t’appelles-tu?

— Dick.

— Dick quoi?”

L’enfant n’eut pas l’air de comprendre.

“Enfin, quel est le nom de ton père?

— Je n’en ai pas.

— De ta mère, alors?

— Pas plus de mère que de père, Excellence.

— Encore!… se récria le Kaw-djer qui s’intéressait de plus en plus à ce singulier enfant. Je ne suis cependant, que je sache, ni roi, ni ministre, ni évêque!

— Vous êtes le gouverneur!” déclara le gamin avec emphase.

Le gouverneur!… Le Kaw-djer tombait des nues.

“Où as-tu pris cela? demanda-t-il.

— Dame!… fit Dick embarrassé.

— Eh bien?…” insista le Kaw-djer.

Dick parut légèrement troublé. Il hésita.

“Je ne sais pas, moi… dit-il enfin. C’est parce que c’est vous qui commandez… Et puis, tout le monde vous appelle comme ça.

— Par exemple!…” protesta le Kaw-djer.

D’une voix plus grave il ajouta:

“Tu te trompes, mon petit ami. Je ne suis ni plus ni moins que les autres. Ici, personne ne commande. Ici, il n’y a pas de maître.”

Dick ouvrit de grands yeux et regarda le Kaw-djer avec incrédulité. Était-il possible qu’il n’y eût pas de maître? Pouvait-il le croire, cet enfant, pour qui, jusqu’alors, le monde n’avait été peuplé que de tyrans? Pouvait-il croire qu’il existât quelque part un pays sans maître?

“Pas de maître”, affirma de nouveau le Kaw-djer.

Après un court silence, il demanda:

“Où es-tu né?

— Je ne sais pas.

— Quel âge as-tu?

— Bientôt onze ans, à ce qu’on dit.

— Tu n’en es pas plus sûr que ça?

— Ma foi! non.

— Et ton compagnon, qui reste là figé à cinq pas sans bouger d’une semelle, qui est-ce?

— C’est Sand.

— C’est ton frère?

— C’est tout comme… C’est mon ami.

— Vous avez peut-être été élevés ensemble?

— Élevés?… protesta Dick. Nous n’avons pas été élevés, monsieur!”

Le cœur du Kaw-djer se serra. Que de tristesse dans ces quelques mots que prononçait cet enfant d’une voix batailleuse, comme un jeune coq dressé sur ses ergots! Il existait donc des enfants que personne n’avait “élevés”!

“Où l’as-tu connu, alors?

— À Frisco[1] sur le quai.

— Il y a longtemps?

— Très, très longtemps… Nous étions encore petits, répondit Dick en cherchant à rassembler ses souvenirs. Il y a au moins… six mois!

— En effet, il y a très longtemps”, approuva le Kaw-djer sans sourciller.

Il se retourna vers le compagnon silencieux du singulier petit bonhomme.

“Avance à l’ordre, toi, dit-il, et surtout ne m’appelle pas Excellence. Tu as donc ta langue dans ta poche?

— Non, monsieur, balbutia l’enfant en tordant entre ses doigts un béret de marin.

— Alors, pourquoi ne dis-tu rien?

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[1] San Francisco.

— C’est parce qu’il est timide, monsieur”, expliqua Dick.

De quel air dégoûté Dick rendit cet arrêt!

“Ah! dit en riant le Kaw-djer, c’est parce qu’il est timide?… Tu ne l’es pas, toi.

— Non, monsieur, répondit Dick avec simplicité.

— Et tu as, parbleu! bien raison… Mais, enfin, qu’est-ce que vous faites tous les deux ici?

— C’est nous les mousses, monsieur.”

Le Kaw-Djer se souvint qu’Hartlepool avait en effet cité deux mousses en énumérant l’équipage du Jonathan. Il ne les avait pas remarqués jusqu’alors parmi les enfants des émigrants. Puisqu’ils l’avaient abordé aujourd’hui, c’est donc qu’ils désiraient quelque chose.

“Qu’y a-t-il pour votre service?” demanda-t-il.

Ce fut Dick, comme toujours, qui prit la parole.

“Nous voudrions aller avec vous, comme M. Hartlepool et M. Rhodes.

— Pourquoi faire?”

Les yeux de Dick brillèrent.

“Pour voir des choses…”

Des choses!… Tout un monde dans ce mot. Tout le désir de ce qui jamais n’a été vu encore, tous les rêves merveilleux et confus des enfants. Le visage de Dick implorait, toute sa petite personne était tendue vers son désir.

“Et toi, insista le Kaw-djer en s’adressant à

Sand, tu veux aussi voir des choses?

— Non, monsieur.

— Que veux-tu, dans ce cas?

— Aller avec Dick, répondit l’enfant doucement.

— Tu l’aimes donc bien, Dick?

— Oh oui, monsieur!” affirma Sand dont la voix eut une profondeur d’expression au-dessus de son âge.

Le Kaw-djer, de plus en plus intéressé, regarda un moment les deux bambins. Le drôle de petit ménage! Mais charmant et touchant aussi. Il rendit enfin son arrêt.

“Vous viendrez avec nous, dit-il.

— Vive le gouverneur!…” s’écrièrent, en jetant leur béret en l’air, les deux enfants qui se mirent à sauter comme des cabris.

Par Hartlepool, le Kaw-djer apprit l’histoire de ses deux nouvelles connaissances, tout ce que le maître d’équipage en savait du moins, et à coup sûr plus que les intéressés n’en savaient eux- mêmes.

Enfants abandonnés un soir au coin d’une borne, le fait qu’ils eussent vécu était un de ces phénomènes que la raison est impuissante à expliquer. Ils avaient vécu cependant, gagnant leur pain dès l’âge le plus tendre, grâce à de menues besognes: cirage de chaussures, commissions, ouverture de portières, vente de fleurs des champs, autant d’inventions merveilleuses pour d’aussi jeunes cerveaux, mais le plus souvent trouvant leur nourriture, comme des moineaux, entre les pavés de San-Francisco.

Ils ignoraient réciproquement leur triste existence six mois plus tôt, quand le sort les mit soudain face à face, dans des circonstances que la qualité et l’échelle réduite des acteurs empêchent seules de qualifier de tragiques. Dick passait sur le quai, les mains dans les poches, le béret sur l’oreille, en sifflant entre les dents une chanson favorite, quand il aperçut Sand aux trousses duquel un gros chien aboyait en découvrant des crocs menaçants. L’enfant, épouvanté, reculait en pleurant, le visage gauchement caché sous son coude replié. Dick ne fit qu’un bond et sans hésiter se plaça entre le peureux et son terrifiant adversaire, puis, se campant résolument sur ses petites jambes, il regarda le chien droit dans les yeux et attendit le pied ferme.

L’animal fut-il intimidé par cette attitude de matamore? Le certain, c’est qu’il recula à son tour, pour s’enfuir finalement la queue basse. Sans s’occuper davantage de lui, Dick s’était retourné vers Sand.

“Comment t’appelles-tu? lui avait-il demandé d’un air superbe.

— Sand, avait dit l’autre au milieu de ses larmes. Et toi?

— Dick… Si tu veux nous serons amis.”

Pour toute réponse, Sand s’était jeté dans les bras du héros, scellant ainsi une indestructible amitié.

De loin, Hartlepool avait assisté à la scène. Il interrogea les deux enfants et connut ainsi leur triste histoire. Désireux de venir en aide à Dick, dont il avait admiré le courage, il lui proposa de le prendre comme mousse sur le Josuah Brener, trois-mâts carré à bord duquel il était alors embarqué. Mais, au premier mot, Dick avait posé cette condition sine qua non que Sand serait pris avec lui. Il fallut de gré ou de force en passer par là, et, depuis lors, Hartlepool n’avait plus quitté les deux inséparables qui l’avaient suivi du Josuah Brener sur le Jonathan. Il s’était fait leur professeur et leur avait appris à lire et à écrire, c’est-à-dire à peu près tout ce qu’il savait lui-même. Ses bienfaits, du reste, étaient tombés dans un bon terrain. Il n’avait jamais eu qu’à se louer des deux enfants qui éprouvaient pour lui une reconnaissance passionnée. Certes, chacun d’eux avait son caractère; l’un colère, susceptible, batailleur, toujours prêt à se mesurer contre n’importe qui et n’importe quoi, l’autre silencieux, doux, effacé, craintif; l’un protecteur, l’autre protégé; mais tous deux montrant le même cœur à l’ouvrage, ayant la même conscience du devoir, la même affection pour leur grand ami commun, le maître d’équipage Hartlepool.

C’est de telles recrues que s’augmenta le personnel de l’excursion.

Le 28 mars, on se mit en route dès les premières heures du matin. On n’avait pas la prétention d’explorer toute l’île Hoste, mais seulement la partie avoisinant le campement. On passa d’abord par-dessus les crêtes médianes de la presqu’île Hardy, de manière à en atteindre la côte occidentale, puis on suivit cette côte en remontant vers le Nord, afin de revenir au campement par le littoral opposé, en traversant la région sud de l’île proprement dite.

Dès le début de la promenade, on eut l’impression qu’il ne fallait pas juger le pays d’après l’aspect rébarbatif du lieu de l’échouage, et cette impression ne fit que s’accentuer à mesure que l’on gagna vers le Nord. Si la presqu’île Hardy apparaissait rocailleuse et stérile jusqu’aux arides pointes du Faux cap Horn, il n’en était pas ainsi de la contrée verdoyante dont les hauteurs se profilaient au Nord-Ouest.

De vastes prairies, au pied de collines boisées, succédaient, dans cette direction, aux roches tapissées de goémons, aux ravins hérissés de bruyères. Là, s’entremêlaient les doronics à fleurs jaunes et les asters maritimes à fleurs bleues et violettes, des séneçons à tige d’un mètre, et nombre de plantes naines: calcéolaires, cytises rampants, stipes, pimprenelles minuscules en pleine floraison. Le sol était velouté d’une herbe luxuriante capable de nourrir des milliers de ruminants.

La petite troupe des excursionnistes s’était divisée, selon les affinités individuelles, en groupes, autour desquels gambadaient Dick et Sand, qui triplaient par leurs crochets la longueur de la route. Les trois cultivateurs échangeaient des paroles rares en jetant autour d’eux des regards étonnés, tandis que Harry Rhodes et Halg marchaient en compagnie du Kaw-djer. Celui-ci ne se livrait pas et gardait sa réserve habituelle. Cette réserve toutefois ne laissait pas d’être entamée par la sympathie que lui inspirait la famille Rhodes. De cette famille, tous les membres lui plaisaient: la mère, sérieuse et bonne; les enfants, Edward âgé de dix-huit ans et Clary âgée de quinze ans, aux visages ouverts et francs; le père, caractère d’une droiture certaine et d’un ferme bon sens.

Les deux hommes causaient amicalement de ce qui les intéressait en ce moment l’un et l’autre. Harry Rhodes profitait de l’occasion pour se renseigner au sujet de la Magellanie. En échange, il documentait son compagnon sur les plus remarquables échantillons de la foule des émigrants. Le Kaw-djer apprit ainsi beaucoup de choses.

Il sut d’abord comment Harry Rhodes, possesseur d’une assez belle fortune, avait été ruiné à cinquante ans par la faute d’autrui, et comment, après ce malheur immérité, il s’était expatrié sans hésitation afin d’assurer, s’il était possible, l’avenir de sa femme et de ses enfants. Il apprit ensuite, Harry Rhodes ayant été à même de puiser ces renseignements dans les documents du bord, que, défalcation faite des morts, les émigrants du Jonathan se décomposaient de la manière suivante, au point de vue des professions antérieures: Sept cent cinquante cultivateurs — parmi lesquels cinq Japonais! — comprenant cent quatorze hommes mariés accompagnés de leurs cent quatorze femmes et de leurs enfants, dont quelques-uns majeurs, au nombre de deux cent soixante-deux; trois représentants des professions libérales, cinq ex-rentiers et quarante et un ouvriers de métier. À ces derniers, il convenait d’ajouter quatre autres ouvriers non émigrants, un maçon, un menuisier, un charpentier et un serrurier, embauchés par la compagnie de colonisation pour faciliter le début de l’installation, ce qui portait à onze cent soixante-dix-neuf le nombre des passagers survivants, ainsi que l’appel nominal l’avait indiqué.

Ayant énuméré ces diverses catégories, Harry Rhodes entra dans quelques détails sur chacune d’elles. Touchant la grande masse des paysans, il n’avait pas fait de bien nombreuses observations. Tout au plus avait-il cru remarquer que les frères Moore, dont l’un s’était signalé d’ailleurs pendant le déchargement par sa brutalité, semblaient de tempérament violent, et que les familles Rivière, Gimelli, Gordon et Ivanoff paraissaient composées de braves gens, solides, bien portants et disposés à l’ouvrage. Quant au reste, c’était la foule. Sans doute, les qualités devaient s’y trouver fort inégalement réparties, et des vices mêmes, la paresse et l’ivrognerie notamment, s’y rencontraient nécessairement; mais rien de saillant ne s’étant produit jusqu’alors, on manquait de base pour asseoir des jugements individuels.

Harry Rhodes fut plus prolixe sur les autres catégories. Les quatre ouvriers embauchés par la Compagnie étaient des hommes d'élite, des premiers dans leur profession. Selon l'expression courante, on les avait triés sur le volet. Quant à leurs collègues émigrants, tout portait à croire qu'ils étaient infiniment moins reluisants. En grande majorité, ils avaient fâcheuse mine et donnaient l'impression d'être des habitués du cabaret plutôt que de l'atelier. Deux ou trois même, à l'aspect de véritables malfaiteurs, n'avaient sans doute d'ouvriers que l'étiquette.

Des cinq rentiers, quatre étaient représentés par la famille Rhodes. Quant au cinquième, nommé John Rame, c'était un assez triste sire. Âgé de vingt-cinq à vingt-six ans, épuisé par une vie de fêtes, dans laquelle il avait laissé sa fortune jusqu'au dernier sou, il n'était évidemment bon à rien, et l'on était en droit de s'étonner qu'il eût fait, lui si mal armé pour la lutte, cette dernière folie de se joindre à un convoi d'émigrants.

Restaient les trois ratés des professions libérales. Ceux-ci provenaient de trois pays différents: l'Allemagne, l'Amérique et la France. L'Allemand avait nom Fritz Gross. C'était un ivrogne invétéré. Avili par l'alcool au point d'en être repoussant, il promenait en soufflant ses chairs flasques et son ventre énorme, que souillait continuellement un filet de salive. Son visage était écarlate, son crâne chauve, ses joues pendantes, ses dents gâtées. Un tremblement perpétuel agitait ses doigts en forme de boudin. Même parmi cette population peu raffinée, son incroyable saleté l'avait rendu célèbre. Ce dégénéré était un musicien, un violoniste, et par instants un violoniste de génie. Son violon avait seul le pouvoir de réveiller sa conscience abolie. Calme, il le caressait, il le dorlotait avec amour, incapable toutefois de former une note à cause du tremblement convulsif de ses mains. Mais, sous l'influence de l'alcool, ses mouvements retrouvaient leur sûreté, l’inspiration faisait vibrer son cerveau, et il savait alors tirer de son instrument des accents d’une extraordinaire beauté. Par deux fois, Harry Rhodes avait eu l’occasion d’assister à ce prodige.

Quant au Français et à l’Américain, ils n’étaient autres que Ferdinand Beauval et Lewis Dorick qui ont été présentés au lecteur. Harry Rhodes ne manqua pas d’exposer au Kaw-djer leurs théories subversives.

“Ne pensez-vous pas, demanda-t-il en manière de conclusion, qu’il serait prudent de prendre quelques précautions contre ces deux agités? Pendant le voyage, ils ont déjà fait parler d’eux.

— Quelles précautions voulez-vous qu’on prenne? répliqua le Kaw-djer.

— Mais les avertir énergiquement d’abord, et les surveiller avec soin ensuite. Si ce n’est pas suffisant, les mettre hors d’état de nuire, en les enfermant, au besoin.

— Bigre! s’écria ironiquement le Kaw-djer, vous n’y allez pas de main morte! Qui donc oserait s’arroger le droit d’attenter à la liberté de ses semblables?

— Ceux pour qui ils sont un danger, riposta Harry Rhodes.

— Où voyez-vous, je ne dirai pas un danger, mais seulement la possibilité d’un danger? objecta le Kaw-djer.

— Où je le vois?… Dans l’excitation de ces pauvres gens, de ces hommes ignorants, aussi faciles à duper que des enfants et prêts à se laisser griser par toute parole sonore qui flatte leur passion du jour.

— Dans quel but les exciterait-on?

— Pour s’emparer de ce qui est à autrui.

— Autrui a donc quelque chose?… demanda railleusement le Kaw-djer. Je ne le savais pas. En tout cas, ici, où il n’y a rien, autrui comme le roi perd ses droits.

— Il y a la cargaison du Jonathan.

— La cargaison du Jonathan est une propriété collective qui représenterait, le cas échéant, le salut commun. Tout le monde se rend compte de cela, et personne n’aura garde d’y toucher.

— Puissent les événements ne pas vous donner un démenti! dit Harry Rhodes que ce désaccord inattendu échauffait. Mais il n’est pas besoin d’intérêt matériel pour des gens comme Dorick et Beauval. Le plaisir de faire le mal ne suffit à lui-même, et, d’ailleurs, c’est une ivresse de dominer, d’être le maître.

— Qu’il soit maudit, celui qui pense ainsi! s’écria le Kaw-djer avec une violence soudaine. Tout homme qui aspire à régenter les autres devrait être supprimé de la terre.”

Harry Rhodes, étonné, regarda son interlocuteur. Quelle passion farouche dormait en cet homme dont la parole avait d’ordinaire tant de mesure et de calme!

“Il faudrait alors supprimer Beauval, dit-il non sans ironie, car, sous couleur d’une inégalité outrancière, les théories de ce bavard n’ont qu’un but: assurer le pouvoir au réformateur.

— Le système de Beauval est du pur enfantillage, répliqua le Kaw-djer d’une voix tranchante. C’est une manière d’organisation sociale, voilà tout.

Mais une organisation ou une autre, c’est toujours même iniquité et même sottise.

— Approuveriez-vous donc les idées de Lewis Dorick? demanda vivement Harry Rhodes. Voudriez-vous, comme lui, nous faire retourner à l’état sauvage, et réduire les sociétés à une agrégation fortuite d’individus sans obligations réciproques? Ne voyez-vous donc pas que ces théories sont basées sur l’envie, qu’elles suent la haine?

— Si Dorick connaît la haine, c’est un fou, répondit gravement le Kaw-djer. Eh quoi! un homme, venu sur la terre sans l’avoir demandé, y découvre une infinité d’êtres pareils à lui, douloureux, misérables, périssables comme lui, et, au lieu de les plaindre, il prend la peine de haïr! Un tel homme est un fou, et l’on ne discute pas avec les fous. Mais, de ce que le théoricien soit aliéné, il ne résulte pas nécessairement que la théorie soit mauvaise.

— Des lois sont indispensables cependant, insista Harry Rhodes, lorsque les hommes, au lieu d’errer solitaires, en viennent à se grouper dans un intérêt commun. Regardez plutôt ici même. La foule qui nous entoure n’a pas été choisie pour les besoins de la cause, et sans doute elle n’est pas différente de toute autre foule prise au hasard. Eh bien! ne m’a-t-il pas été possible de vous signaler plusieurs de ses membres qui, pour une raison ou une autre, sont dans l’impossibilité de se gouverner eux-mêmes, et il y en a d’autres, assurément, que je ne connais pas encore. Que de mal ne feraient pas de tels individus, si les lois ne tenaient pas en bride leurs mauvais instincts!

— Ce sont les lois qui les leur ont donnés, riposta le Kaw-djer avec une conviction profonde. S’il n’y avait pas de lois, l’humanité ne connaîtrait pas ces tares, et l’homme s’épanouirait harmonieusement dans la liberté.

— Hum!… fit Harry Rhodes d’un air de doute.

— Y a-t-il des lois ici? Et tout ne marche-t-il pas à souhait?

— Pouvez-vous choisir un tel exemple? objecta Harry Rhodes. Ici, c’est un entracte dans le drame de la vie. Tout le monde sait que la situation actuelle est transitoire et ne doit pas se perpétuer.

— Il en serait de même si elle devait durer, affirma le Kaw-djer.

— J’en doute, dit Harry Rhodes avec scepticisme, et je préfère, je l’avoue, que l’expérience ne soit pas tentée.”

Le Kaw-djer ne répliquant rien, la marche fut poursuivie silencieusement.

En revenant par la côte de l’Est, on contourna la baie Scotchwell, dont le site, bien que l’on fût au déclin du jour, acheva de séduire les explorateurs. Leur admiration égalait leur surprise. Entretenus par un réseau de petits creeks, qui se déversaient dans une rivière aux eaux limpides venant des collines du centre, les riches pâturages témoignaient de la fertilité du sol. La végétation arborescente était à la hauteur de cette luxuriante tapisserie. Occupant de vastes espaces, les forêts se composaient d’arbres d’une venue superbe enracinés dans un sol tourbeux mais résistant, et offraient des sous-bois très dégagés, parfois veloutés de mousses rameuses. À l’abri de ces voûtes verdoyantes s’ébattait tout un monde de volatiles, des tinamous de six espèces, les uns gros comme des cailles, les autres comme des faisans, des grives, des merles, ceux qu’on peut appeler des ruraux, et aussi bon nombre de représentants des espèces marines, oies, canards, cormorans et goélands, tandis que les nandous, les guanaques et les vigognes bondissaient à travers les prairies.

Le littoral sud de cette baie, heureusement exposé par conséquent, le Nord de ce côté de l’équateur correspondant au Midi de l’autre hémisphère, était éloigné de moins de deux milles de l’endroit où s’était perdu le Jonathan. Là, débouchait le cours d’eau aux rives ombragées, accru de ses multiples affluents, qui se jetait à la mer au fond d’une petite crique. Sur ses bords, distants d’une centaine de pieds, il eût été facile de bâtir une bourgade pour une installation définitive. Au besoin, la crique, abritée des grands vents, aurait pu servir de port.

L’obscurité était presque complète lorsqu’on atteignit le campement. Le Kaw-djer, Harry Rhodes, Halg et Hartlepool venaient de prendre congé de leurs compagnons quand, dans le silence de la nuit, les sons d’un violon arrivèrent jusqu’à eux.

“Un violon!… murmura le Kaw-djer à l’adresse d’Harry Rhodes. Serait-ce ce Fritz Gross dont vous m’avez parlé?

— C’est alors qu’il est ivre”, répondit sans hésiter Harry Rhodes.

Il ne se trompait pas. Fritz Gross était ivre, en effet. Lorsqu’on l’aperçut quelques minutes plus tard, son regard vague, son visage congestionné, sa bouche baveuse révélèrent aisément son état. Incapable de se tenir debout, il s’accotait contre un rocher, afin de conserver son équilibre. Mais l’alcool avait ranimé l’étincelle. L’archet volait sur l’instrument d’où jaillissait une mélodie sublime. Autour de lui se pressaient une centaine d’émigrants. En ce moment, ces gueux oubliaient tout, l’injustice du sort, leur éternelle misère, leur triste condition présente, l’avenir pareil au passé, et s’envolaient dans le monde du rêve, emportés sur les ailes de la musique.

“L’art est aussi nécessaire que le pain, dit au Kaw-djer Harry Rhodes en montrant Fritz Gross et ses auditeurs absorbés. Dans le système de Beauval, quelle serait la place d’un tel homme?

— Laissons Beauval où il est, répondit le Kaw-djer avec humeur.

— C’est que tant de pauvres êtres croient à ces songe-creux!” répliqua Harry Rhodes.

Ils reprirent leur route.

“Ce qui m’intrigue, murmura Harry Rhodes au bout de quelques pas, c’est le moyen qu’a employé Fritz Gross pour se procurer son alcool.”

Quel que fût le moyen, d’autres que Fritz Gross l’avaient employé. Les excursionnistes ne tardèrent pas, en effet, à se heurter à un corps étendu.

“C’est Kennedy, dit Hartlepool, en se penchant sur le dormeur. Un failli chien, d’ailleurs. Le seul de l’équipage qui ne vaille pas la corde pour le pendre.”

Kennedy était ivre, lui aussi. Et ivres encore, ces émigrants que l’on trouva, cent mètres plus loin, vautrés sur le sol.

“Ma parole! dit Harry Rhodes, on a profité de l’absence du chef pour mettre le magasin au pillage!

— Quel chef? demanda le Kaw-djer.

— Vous, parbleu!

— Je ne suis pas chef plus qu’un autre, objecta le Kaw-djer avec impatience.

— Possible, accorda Harry Rhodes. N’empêche que tout le monde vous considère comme tel.”

Le Kaw-djer allait répondre, quand, d’une tente voisine, le cri rauque d’une femme qu’on étrangle s’éleva dans la nuit.

CHAPITRE II

II

La première loi

La famille Ceroni, composée du père, Lazare, de la mère, Tullia, et d'une fille, Graziella, était originaire du Piémont. Dix-sept ans auparavant, Lazare, alors âgé de vingt-cinq ans, et Tullia, de six ans plus jeune, avaient associé leurs deux misères. Hors soi-même, ni l'un ni l'autre ne possédait rien, mais ils s'aimaient, et un amour honnête est une force qui aide à supporter, parfois à vaincre, les difficultés de la vie.

Il n'en fut malheureusement pas ainsi pour le ménage Ceroni. L'homme, entraîné par de mauvaises fréquentations, ne tarda pas à faire connaissance avec l'alcool, que des cabarets innombrables ont, au nom de la liberté, le droit d'offrir, comme un appât, à la multitude des déshérités. En peu de temps, il tomba dans l'ivrognerie, et son ivresse de plus en plus fréquente se fit, par degrés, sombre, puis colère, puis cruelle, puis féroce. Alors, presque chaque jour, il y eut des scènes atroces, dont les voisins perçurent les éclats. Injuriée, battue, meurtrie, martyrisée, Tullia gravit le calvaire, sur les flancs duquel tant de malheureuses se sont douloureusement traînées avant elle et se traîneront à son exemple.

Certes, elle aurait pu, elle aurait dû peut-être quitter cet homme transformé en bête fauve. Elle n'en fit rien pourtant. Elle était de ces femmes qui ne se reprennent jamais, quelque martyre qui leur soit imposé, quand une fois elles se sont données. Au point de vue de l'intérêt matériel et tangible, de tels caractères méritent assurément l'épithète d'absurdes, mais ils ont aussi quelque chose d’admirable, et par eux il nous est donné de concevoir quelle peut être la beauté du sacrifice et quelle hauteur morale est capable d’atteindre la créature humaine.

C’est dans cet enfer que grandit Graziella. Dès ses plus jeunes ans, elle vit son père ivre et sa mère battue, elle assista aux scènes quotidiennes, elle entendit le torrent d’injures qui sortaient de la bouche de Lazare, comme les immondices d’un égout. À un âge où les petites filles ne pensent encore qu’au jeu, elle entra de cette manière en contact avec les réalités de la vie et fut astreinte à une âpre lutte de tous les instants.

À seize ans, Graziella était une jeune fille sérieuse, armée, par sa volonté forte, contre les douleurs de l’existence, dont elle avait eu la précoce expérience. D’ailleurs, quelle que fût sa cruauté, jamais l’avenir ne dépasserait en horreur le passé! Physiquement, elle était grande, maigre et brune. Sans beauté proprement dite, son plus grand charme résidait dans ses yeux et dans l’expression intelligente de son visage.

La conduite de Lazare Ceroni avait porté ses fruits naturels, et la gêne était bientôt entrée dans la maison. Il ne saurait en être autrement. Boire, cela coûte, et, pendant qu’on boit, on ne gagne rien. Double dépense. Graduellement, la gêne devint pauvreté, et la pauvreté misère noire. On suivit alors le chemin que suivent tous les dégénérés. On changea de pays, dans l’espoir d’un sort meilleur sous d’autres cieux. C’est ainsi que, d’exode en exode, la famille Ceroni, ayant traversé la France, l’Océan, l’Amérique, avait échoué à San Francisco. Le voyage avait duré quinze ans! À San Francisco, le dénuement en arriva à ce point que Lazare ouvrit les yeux et prit conscience de son œuvre de destruction. Prêtant enfin l’oreille aux supplications de sa femme, pour la première fois depuis tant d’années, il promit de s’amender.

Il avait tenu parole. En six mois, grâce à son assiduité à l’ouvrage et à la suppression du cabaret, l’aisance était revenue et l’on avait pu réunir cette grosse somme de cinq cents francs exigée par la Société de colonisation de la baie de Lagoa. Tullia recommençait à croire à la possibilité du bonheur, lorsque le naufrage du Jonathan et l’oisiveté qui en était la conséquence inévitable étaient venus remettre tout en question.

Pour tuer ces longues heures d’inaction, Lazare s’était lié avec d’autres émigrants, et, bien entendu, ses sympathies l’avaient porté vers ses pareils. Ceux-ci, également accablés par l’ennui et inconsolables d’être privés de leurs excès habituels n’auraient eu garde de manquer l’occasion que leur fournissait le départ de celui que tout le monde, sans même s’en rendre compte, considérait comme le chef. À peine le Kaw-djer éloigné avec ses compagnons, cette bande peu recommandable s’était approprié un des barils de rhum sauvés du Jonathan et une orgie en règle en était résultée. Par entraînement, et aussi par lâcheté devant son vice réveillé, Lazare avait imité les autres et ne s’était décidé à regagner la tente où l’attendaient en pleurant sa femme et sa fille, que les jambes molles et la raison perdue.

Dès son entrée, l’inévitable scène commença. Prétextant d’abord que le repas n’était pas prêt, il s’irrita, quand ce repas lui eut été servi, de la tristesse des deux femmes et, s’excitant lui-même, en arriva rapidement aux plus effroyables injures.

Graziella, immobile et glacée, regardait avec épouvante cet être avili qui était son père. En elle, la honte la disputait au chagrin. Mais, de Tullia, qui ne connaissait que la douleur, le cœur ulcéré creva. Eh quoi! tous ses espoirs une fois de plus à vau-l’eau, la retombée dans l’enfer!… Des larmes jaillirent de ses yeux, noyèrent son visage flétri. Il n’en fallut pas plus pour déchaîner la tempête.

“J’vas t’aider à fondre, moi!” cria Lazare devenu furieux.

Il saisit sa femme à la gorge, tandis que Graziella s’efforçait d’arracher la malheureuse à l’étreinte meurtrière.

Drame silencieux. À part la voix sourde de Lazare, qui continuait à proférer des injures, il se déroulait sans bruit. Ni Graziella, ni sa mère n’appelaient à leur aide. Qu’un père martyrise sa fille, qu’un mari assassine sa femme, ce sont des tares honteuses qu’il faut cacher à tous, fût-ce au prix de la vie. Dans un moment où son bourreau relâchait son étreinte, la douleur cependant arracha à Tullia le cri rauque que le Kaw-djer avait entendu. Cette plainte involontaire mit au comble la fureur du dément. Ses doigts se refermèrent plus violemment.

Tout à coup, une main de fer broya son épaule. Contraint de lâcher prise, il alla rouler de l’autre côté de la tente.

“De quoi?… De quoi?… balbutia-t-il.

— Silence!” ordonna une voix impérieuse.

L’ivrogne ne se le fit pas répéter. Son excitation subitement éteinte, il chut, comme dans un trou, dans un sommeil de plomb.

Le Kaw-djer s’était penché sur la femme évanouie et s’empressait à la secourir. Halg, Rhodes et Hartlepool, entrés derrière lui, contemplaient la scène avec émotion.

Tullia enfin ouvrit les yeux. En apercevant des visages étrangers, elle comprit sur-le-champ ce qui s’était passé. Sa première pensée fut d’excuser celui dont la brutalité venait de se manifester de si abominable manière.

“Merci, monsieur, dit-elle en se soulevant. Ce n’était rien… C’est fini, maintenant… Suis-je sotte de m’être ainsi effrayée!

— On le serait à moins! s’écria le Kaw-djer.

— Pas du tout, répliqua vivement Tullia. Lazare n’est pas méchant… Il voulait plaisanter…

— Est-ce qu’il lui arrive souvent de plaisanter ainsi? demanda le Kaw-djer.

— Jamais, monsieur, jamais! affirma Tullia. Lazare est un bon mari… De plus brave garçon, il n’y en a pas…

— C’est faux”, interrompit une voix décidée.

Le Kaw-djer et ses compagnons se retournèrent. Ils aperçurent Graziella qu’ils n’avaient pas distinguée jusqu’ici dans la pénombre de la tente, à peine éclairée par la lueur jaunâtre d’un fanal.

“Qui êtes-vous, mon enfant? interrogea le Kaw-djer.

— Sa fille, répondit Graziella en montrant l’ivrogne dont le bruit ne troublait pas le ronflement sonore. Quelque honte que j’en éprouve, il faut que je le dise pour qu’on me croie et qu’on vienne en aide à ma pauvre maman.

— Graziella!… implora Tullia en joignant les mains.

— Je dirai tout, affirma la jeune fille avec force. C’est la première fois que nous trouvons des défenseurs. Je ne les laisserai pas partir sans avoir fait appel à leur pitié.

— Parlez, mon enfant, dit le Kaw-djer avec bonté, et comptez sur nous pour vous secourir et vous défendre.”

Ainsi encouragée, Graziella, d’une voix haletante, raconta la vie de sa mère. Elle ne cacha rien. Elle dit la sublime tendresse de Tullia et de quel prix on l’avait payée. Elle dit l’avilissement de son père. Elle le montra traînant sa femme par les cheveux, la rouant de coups, la piétinant avec rage. Elle évoqua les jours de misère, sans vêtements, sans feu, sans pain, parfois sans domicile, glorifiant sa mère martyrisée, dont l’héroïque douceur, au milieu de si cruelles épreuves, ne s’était jamais démentie.

En écoutant l’épouvantable récit, celle-ci pleurait doucement. À la voix de sa fille, les tortures subies sortaient de l’ombre du passé et semblaient, pour mieux broyer son cœur, redevenir présentes, toutes à la fois. Sous leur poids accumulé, Tullia fléchissait. Elle s’abandonnait. La force lui manquait enfin pour défendre et protéger le bourreau.

“Vous avez bien fait de parler, mon enfant, dit le Kaw-djer d’une voix émue, quand Graziella eut achevé son récit. Soyez certaine que nous ne vous abandonnerons pas et que nous viendrons en aide à votre mère. Pour ce soir, elle n’a besoin que de repos. Qu’elle s’efforce donc de dormir et qu’elle espère en un avenir meilleur.”

Lorsqu’ils se retrouvèrent au dehors, le Kaw-djer, Harry Rhodes et Hartlepool se regardèrent un instant en silence. Était-il possible qu’un homme en arrivât à ce degré d’ignominie! Puis, ayant d’une large aspiration dilaté leur poitrine oppressée, ils allaient se mettre en marche, quand le premier s’aperçut que la petite troupe comptait un membre de moins. Halg n’était plus avec eux.

Supposant que le jeune homme était resté dans la tente de la famille Ceroni, le Kaw-djer y entra de nouveau. Halg était bien là, en effet, si absorbé qu'il n'avait pas remarqué le départ de ses compagnons et qu'il ne remarqua pas davantage le retour de l'un d'eux. Debout contre la paroi de toile, il regardait Graziella, et son visage, en même temps que la pitié, exprimait avec éloquence un véritable ravissement. À quelques pas, Graziella, les yeux baissés, se prêtait à cette contemplation avec une sorte de complaisance. Les deux jeunes gens ne parlaient pas. Après ces violentes secousses, ils laissaient leurs cœurs s'ouvrir silencieusement à de plus douces émotions.

Le Kaw-djer sourit.

“Halg!…” appela-t-il à demi-voix.

Le jeune homme tressaillit et, sans se faire prier, sortit de la tente. On se mit en route aussitôt.

Les quatre excursionnistes marchaient en silence, chacun suivant le fil de sa pensée. Le Kaw-djer, les sourcils froncés, réfléchissait à ce qu'il venait de voir et d'entendre. Le plus grand service à rendre à ces deux femmes serait évidemment de sevrer d'alcool leur tortionnaire. Était-ce réalisable? Assurément, et même sans difficulté notable, l'alcool étant inconnu sur l'île

Hoste, hormis celui provenant du Jonathan et déposé sur la grève avec le reste de la cargaison. Il suffirait donc d'une ou deux sentinelles…

Soit! mais qui les placerait, ces sentinelles? Qui oserait donner des ordres et formuler des interdictions? Qui s'arrogerait le droit de limiter d'une manière quelconque la liberté de ses semblables et de substituer son initiative à la leur? C’était faire acte de chef, cela, et il n’existait pas de chef sur l’île Hoste.

Allons donc!… En puissance tout au moins, un chef y existait, au contraire. Et qui était-il, sinon celui qui, seul, avait sauvé les autres d’une mort certaine; qui, seul, avait l’expérience de cette contrée déserte; qui, seul, possédait à un degré supérieur à tous intelligence, savoir et caractère?

C’eût été lâcheté de se mentir à soi-même. Le Kaw-djer ne pouvait l’ignorer, c’est vers lui que cette population misérable tournait ses regards attentifs, c’est entre ses mains qu’elle avait remis l’exercice de l’autorité collective, c’est de lui qu’elle attendait, confiante, secours, conseils et décisions. Qu’il le voulût ou non, il ne pouvait échapper à la responsabilité que cette confiance impliquait. Qu’il le voulût ou non, le chef, désigné par la force des choses et par le consentement tacite de l’immense majorité des naufragés, c’était lui.

Eh quoi! lui, le libertaire, l’homme incapable de supporter aucune contrainte, il était dans le cas d’en imposer aux autres, et des lois devaient être édictées par celui qui rejetait toutes les lois! Suprême ironie, c’était l’apôtre anarchiste, l’adepte de la formule fameuse: “Ni Dieu, ni maître”, qu’on transformait en maître; c’est à lui qu’on attribuait cette autorité dont son âme haïssait le principe avec tant de sauvage fureur!

Fallait-il accepter l’odieuse épreuve? Ne valait-il pas mieux s’enfuir loin de ces êtres aux âmes d’esclave?…

Mais alors, que deviendraient-ils, livrés à eux-mêmes? De combien de souffrances le déserteur ne serait-il pas responsable? Si on a le droit de chérir des abstractions, il n’est pas digne du nom d’homme, celui qui, pour l’amour d’elles, ferme les yeux devant les réalités de la vie, nie l’évidence et ne peut se résoudre à sacrifier son orgueil pour atténuer la misère humaine. Quelque certaines que paraissent des théories, il est grand d’en faire table rase, lorsqu’il est démontré que le bien des autres l’exige.

Or, démonstration pouvait-elle être plus nette et plus claire? N’avait-on pas constaté, ce soir-même, de nombreux cas d’ivresse, sans parler de ceux, plus nombreux encore peut-être, qui demeuraient ignorés? Devait-on tolérer dans cette foule paisible un tel abus de l’alcool, au risque d’y provoquer des altercations, des rixes, voire des meurtres? Les effets du poison, d’ailleurs, ne s’étaient-ils pas déjà fait sentir? N’en avait-on pas, chez les Ceroni, constaté les ravages?

On approchait de la tente habitée par la famille Rhodes, on allait se séparer, que le Kaw-djer hésitait toujours. Mais il n’était pas homme à fuir les responsabilités. Au dernier moment, quelque douleur qu’il en dût éprouver, sa résolution fut prise. Il se tourna vers Hartlepool.

“Croyez-vous pouvoir compter sur la fidélité de l’équipage du Jonathan? demanda-t-il.

— À l’exception de Kennedy et de Sirdey, le cuisinier, j’en réponds, dit Hartlepool.

— De combien d’hommes disposez-vous?

— De quinze hommes, moi compris.

— Les quatorze autres vous obéiront?

— Assurément.

— Et vous?

— Moi?…

— Y a-t-il quelqu’un ici dont vous soyez disposé à reconnaître l’autorité?

— Mais… vous, monsieur… naturellement, répondit Hartlepool, comme si la chose était évidente.

— Pourquoi?

— Dame! monsieur… fit Hartlepool embarrassé. Enfin, il faut bien, ici comme ailleurs, que les gens aient un chef. Cela va de soi, que diable!

— Et pourquoi serais-je le chef?

— Il n’y en a pas d’autre”, dit Hartlepool, en ponctuant de ses bras ouverts son irréfutable argument.

La réponse était péremptoire, en effet. Il n’y avait rien à répliquer.

Après un nouvel instant de silence, le Kaw-djer prononça d’une voix ferme:

“À partir de ce soir, vous ferez garder le matériel débarqué du Jonathan. Vos hommes se relaieront deux par deux et ne laisseront approcher personne. Ils surveilleront l’alcool avec une attention particulière.

— Bien, monsieur, répondit simplement Hartlepool. Ce sera fait dans cinq minutes.

— Bonsoir”, dit le Kaw-djer qui s’éloigna à grands pas, mécontent de lui-même et des autres.

CHAPITRE III

III

À la baie Scotchwell

La Wel-Kiej revint le 15 avril de Punta-Arenas. Dès qu’on l’aperçut, les émigrants, impatients de connaître leur sort, se massèrent en rangs serrés sur le point du rivage vers lequel elle se dirigeait.

Le groupement de cette foule s’effectua de lui-même suivant les lois immuables qui régissent les attroupements sur toute la surface de notre planète imparfaite, ce qui revient à dire que les plus forts s’emparèrent des meilleures places. En arrière, furent reléguées les femmes. De là, elles ne pouvaient rien voir, ni rien entendre, mais elles n’en bavardaient qu’avec plus d’entrain en échangeant des commentaires aussi assourdissants que prématurés sur les nouvelles encore inconnues qu’apportait la chaloupe. En avant, c’était les hommes, à une distance du bord de l’eau inversement proportionnelle à leur vigueur et à leur brutalité. Quant aux enfants, pour qui tout est prétexte à jeux, il s’en trouvait un peu partout. Les plus petits pépiaient comme des moineaux, en gambadant à la périphérie du groupe; d’autres étaient noyés dans sa masse, sans pouvoir ni avancer, ni reculer; d’autres, ayant réussi à le traverser de part en part, tendaient leurs frimousses curieuses entre les jambes du premier rang; de quelques-uns, enfin, les plus dégourdis, le corps tout entier, après la tête, était passé.

Le jeune Dick figurait, cela va sans dire, parmi ces débrouillards, et, non seulement il avait triomphé de tous les obstacles pour son compte personnel, mais il avait entraîné dans son sillage son inséparable Sand et un autre enfant avec lequel les deux mousses avaient noué, depuis huit jours, une amitié qui se perdait déjà dans la nuit des temps. Cet enfant, Marcel Norely, du même âge que ses deux camarades, possédait le meilleur des titres à leur affection, puisqu'il avait besoin de leur protection. C'était un être chétif, au visage souffreteux, et, qui plus est, un infirme, sa jambe droite, frappée de paralysie, étant demeurée de quelques centimètres plus courte que la gauche. Cet inconvénient n'altérait nullement, d'ailleurs, la bonne humeur du petit Marcel, ni son ardeur aux jeux, dans lesquels il brillait tout comme un autre, grâce à une béquille dont il se servait avec une remarquable habileté.

Pendant que les émigrants accouraient en tumulte sur la grève, Dick, et à sa suite Sand et Marcel, s'était insinué entre les premiers arrivés, dont son front atteignait tout au plus la taille, et avait réussi à se placer devant eux. Ce haut fait ne put malheureusement s'accomplir sans déranger plus ou moins les précédents occupants, et le hasard voulut que l'un de ceux-ci fût Fred Moore, l'aîné de ces deux frères dont Harry Rhodes avait signalé au Kaw-djer la nature violente.

Fred Moore, homme bien en chair et haut de près de six pieds, poussa un juron sonore en se sentant ébranlé vers la base. Cela suffit pour exciter la verve gouailleuse de Dick. Il se retourna vers Sand et Marcel en train de forcer le passage à son exemple.

“Eh là!… dit-il, ne poussez donc pas comme ça ce gentleman, mille diables!… À quoi cela sert-il? Nous n'avons qu'à nous placer derrière lui et à regarder par-dessus sa tête.”

La prétention, étant donné la stature réduite du minuscule orateur, était si outrecuidante que les voisins ne purent s’empêcher de rire, ce qui mit Fred Moore de très mauvaise humeur. Le sang afflua à son visage.

“Moucheron!… fit-il d’un ton méprisant.

— Merci du compliment, Votre Honneur, quoique vous prononciez mal l’anglais. C’est “gentil” qu’il faut dire, railla Dick, en abusant des consonances analogues de “gnat” (moustique) et de “natty” (gentil).”

Fred Moore fit un pas en avant, mais ses plus proches voisins le retinrent, en lui conseillant de laisser ces enfants. Dick en profita pour s’éloigner avec ses deux amis, en suivant le bord de la mer devant d’autres émigrants d’humeur plus conciliante.

“Tout à l’heure, menaça Fred Moore obligé à l’immobilité, je te tirerai les oreilles, mon garçon.”

Dick, bien à l’abri maintenant, toisa de bas en haut son adversaire.

“Pour ça, il faudrait une échelle, camarade!” dit-il d’un air superbe qui déchaîna de nouveaux rires.

Fred Moore haussa les épaules, et Dick, satisfait d’avoir eu le dernier mot, cessa de s’occuper de lui, pour reporter toute son attention sur la chaloupe, dont l’étrave faisait crier au même instant le gravier du rivage.

Dès qu’elle fut arrêtée, Karroly sauta dans l’eau et vint fixer solidement son ancre sur la terre ferme. Il aida ensuite son passager à débarquer, puis s’éloigna avec Halg et le Kaw-djer, tout heureux de les revoir après cette longue absence.

S’il est vrai que, chez les Fuégiens, les sentiments affectifs soient, en général, assez peu développés, il ne l’est pas moins que le pilote faisait exception à la règle. Les regards dont il couvrait son fils et le Kaw-djer en eussent au besoin témoigné. Pour ce dernier, il était bien le bon chien fidèle et dévoué dont son aspect évoquait l’idée.

Son aveugle dévouement ne pouvait être égalé que par celui, aussi vif, mais plus conscient de Halg. Si Karroly était le père du jeune homme au sens naturel du mot, le Kaw-djer était son père spirituel. À l’un il devait la vie, à l’autre son intelligence, que les leçons du mystérieux solitaire avaient façonnée et qu’elles avaient meublée de sentiments et d’idées inconnues des indigènes déshérités de l’archipel.

Cette affection qu’il portait au Kaw-djer, celui-ci la lui rendait largement. Halg était le seul être capable d’émouvoir encore cet homme désenchanté, qui ne connaissait plus d’autre amour, hors celui qu’il éprouvait pour un enfant, qu’un altruisme collectif et impersonnel, d’une grandeur admirable assurément, mais dont l’ampleur même semble plus adéquate au cœur infini d’un Dieu qu’à l’âme médiocre des créatures. Est-ce pour cela, est-ce parce qu’ils ont l’obscure notion de cette disproportion, que, malgré sa beauté resplendissante, un tel sentiment étonne plus qu’il ne charme les autres hommes, et leur semble-t-il inhumain à force d’être au-dessus d’eux? Peut-être, en jugeant par la pauvreté de leur propre cœur, estiment-ils que la part de chacun est bien petite d’un amour ainsi divisé entre tous et que, s’il est moins sublime, il est meilleur de se donner sans réserve à quelques-uns.

Pendant que ces trois êtres si étroitement unis s’entretenaient des incidents du voyage et s’abandonnaient au plaisir de se revoir, les émigrants, pressés autour de Germain Rivière, s’enquéraient des résultats de sa mission. Les questions se croisaient, diversement formulées, mais se réduisant en somme à celle-ci: Pourquoi la chaloupe était-elle revenue, et pourquoi n’apercevait-on pas à sa place un navire assez grand pour rapatrier tout le monde?

Germain Rivière, ne sachant auquel entendre, réclama de la main le silence, puis, en réponse à une interrogation précise formulée par Harry Rhodes, il raconta brièvement son voyage. À Punta-Arenas, il avait vu le gouverneur, M. Aguire, qui, au nom du gouvernement chilien, avait promis de secourir les victimes de la catastrophe. Toutefois, aucun bateau d’un tonnage suffisant pour transporter les naufragés ne se trouvant alors à Punta-Arenas, ceux-ci devaient s’armer de patience. La situation ne présentait, d’ailleurs, rien d’inquiétant. Puisqu’on disposait d’un matériel en bon état et de vivres pour près de dix-huit mois, on pourrait attendre sans danger.

Or, il ne fallait pas se dissimuler que l’attente serait forcément assez longue. L’automne commençait à peine, et il n’eût pas été prudent d’envoyer sans urgence absolue un bâtiment dans ces parages à cette époque de l’année. Il était de l’intérêt commun que le voyage fût remis au printemps. Dès le début d’octobre, c’est-à-dire dans six mois, un navire serait expédié à l’île Hoste.

La nouvelle, passant de bouche en bouche, fut instantanément transmise du premier au dernier rang. Elle produisit chez les naufragés un effet de stupeur. Eh quoi! on était dans la nécessité de perdre six longs mois dans ce pays où il était impossible de rien entreprendre, puisqu’il faudrait le quitter au printemps après y avoir inutilement subi les rigueurs de l’hiver! La foule, naguère si bruyante, était devenue silencieuse. On échangeait des regards accablés. Puis l’accablement fit place à la colère. Des invectives violentes furent proférées à l’adresse du gouverneur de Punta-Arenas. La colère, cependant, ne tarda pas à s’apaiser, faute d’aliments, et les émigrants commencèrent à se disperser et à regagner les tentes d’un air morne.

Mais, attirés au passage par un autre groupe en voie de formation, ils s’arrêtaient machinalement, sans même s’apercevoir qu’en s’agrégeant à ce second groupe alimenté par les éléments désassociés du premier, ils se transformaient ipso facto en auditeurs de Ferdinand Beauval. Celui-ci avait jugé, en effet, l’occasion favorable au placement d’un nouveau discours et, comme précédemment, il haranguait ses compagnons du haut d’un rocher élevé à la dignité de tribune. Ainsi qu’on peut le supposer, l’orateur socialiste n’était pas tendre pour le régime capitaliste en général et, en particulier, pour le gouverneur de Punta-Arenas qui, d’après lui, en était le produit naturel. Il stigmatisait avec éloquence l’égoïsme de ce fonctionnaire dénué de la plus élémentaire humanité, qui laissait si allègrement un tel nombre de malheureux exposés à tous les dangers et à toutes les misères.

Les émigrants ne prêtaient qu’une oreille distraite à la diatribe du tribun. À quoi tendait ce verbiage? Beauval pouvait bien en clamer pire encore, ce n’est pas cela qui ferait avancer d’un pas leurs affaires. Pour améliorer leur sort il fallait des actes, non des mots. Mais quels actes? Personne, à vrai dire, n’en savait rien. Et péniblement, ils cherchaient, sans grand espoir de la trouver, la solution du problème, en tenant baissés vers le sol leurs yeux ingénus.

Une idée, pourtant, naissait peu à peu dans ces cervelles obscures. Ce qu’il fallait faire, quelqu’un le savait peut-être. Peut-être celui qui les avait déjà tirés de plus d’un mauvais pas donnerait-il le moyen de remédier à cette situation, quand il en serait instruit. C’est pourquoi ils coulaient de timides regards du côté du Kaw-djer, vers lequel se dirigeaient précisément Harry Rhodes et Germain Rivière. Chaque membre d’une population de douze cents âmes ne pouvant prendre à lui seul une décision pour l’ensemble, le plus simple, après tout, était de s’en rapporter au Kaw-djer, à son dévouement, à son expérience, un tel parti ayant, en tout cas, l’inappréciable avantage de rendre superflue la réflexion pour les autres.

S’étant ainsi libérés de tout souci immédiat, les émigrants délaissèrent, les uns après les autres, Ferdinand Beauval, dont l’auditoire fut bientôt réduit à son ordinaire noyau de fidèles.

Harry Rhodes, accompagné de Germain Rivière, se mêlant au groupe formé par les deux Fuégiens et le Kaw-djer, mit celui-ci au courant des événements, lui fit connaître la réponse du gouverneur de Punta-Arenas, et lui exposa les angoisses des émigrants redoutant la rigueur d’un hiver antarctique.

Sur ce dernier point, le Kaw-djer rassura son interlocuteur. L’hiver, en Magellanie, est à la fois moins rude et moins long qu’en Islande, au Canada ou dans les États septentrionaux de l’Union américaine, et le climat de l’Archipel vaut bien, à tout prendre, celui de la basse Afrique, où se rendait le Jonathan.

“J’en accepte l’augure, dit Harry Rhodes, conservant néanmoins un peu de scepticisme. Quoi qu’il en soit, ne serait-il pas, en tout cas, préférable d’hiverner sur la Terre de Feu, qui offre peut-être quelques ressources, plutôt que sur l’île Hoste où nous n’avons jusqu’ici rencontré âme qui vive?

— Non, répondit le Kaw-djer. Se transporter sur la Terre de Feu n’aurait aucun avantage et présenterait au contraire de grands inconvénients au point de vue du matériel qu’on serait contraint d’abandonner. Il faut rester sur l’île Hoste, mais quitter sans retard l’endroit où l’on a campé jusqu’ici.

— Pour aller où?

— À la baie Scotchwell que nous avons contournée pendant notre excursion. Là, nous trouverons sans peine un emplacement convenable pour les maisons démontables provenant de la cargaison du Jonathan, alors qu'il n'existe pas ici un pouce de terrain plat.

— Quoi! s'écria Harry Rhodes, vous conseillez de transporter à deux milles d'ici un matériel aussi lourd et de procéder à une véritable installation!

— C'est absolument nécessaire, affirma le Kaw-djer. Outre que l'exposition de la baie Scotchwell est excellente et à l'abri des vents d'Ouest et du Sud, la rivière qui s'y jette fournira l'eau potable en abondance. Quant à s'installer plus sérieusement, non seulement c'est nécessaire, mais c'est urgent. Le grand ennemi dans cette région, c'est l'humidité. Il importe avant tout de se défendre contre elle. J'ajoute qu'il n'y a pas de temps à perdre, l'hiver pouvant débuter d'un jour à l'autre.

— Vous devriez dire tout cela à nos compagnons, proposa Harry Rhodes. Ils se rendraient un compte plus exact de leur situation quand elle leur aurait été exposée par vous.

— Je préfère que vous vous chargiez de ce soin, répliqua le Kaw-djer. Mais je reste, bien entendu, à la disposition de tous, si on a besoin de moi.”

Harry Rhodes s'empressa de rapporter cette conversation aux émigrants. À sa grande surprise, ils ne reçurent pas la communication aussi mal qu'on aurait pu s'y attendre. La déception qu'ils venaient d'éprouver avait semé parmi eux le découragement, et ils étaient trop heureux de se trouver en présence d'une besogne précise dont quelqu'un prenait la responsabilité de garantir les bons effets. L'invincible espoir qui sommeille jusqu'à la mort dans le cœur de l'homme faisait le reste. Tout autre changement eût également paru devoir être le salut. On se fit une fête de l’installation à la baie Scotchwell et l’on s’en promit des merveilles.

Seulement, par quel bout commencer? Quels moyens employer pour mener à bien le transport du matériel sur un parcours de deux milles, le long de cette grève rocheuse où n’existait même pas l’apparence d’un sentier? À la prière générale, Harry Rhodes dut retourner auprès du Kaw-djer, pour lui demander de bien vouloir organiser le travail dont il avait signalé l’urgence.

Celui-ci ne fit aucune difficulté pour obtempérer à ce désir, et, sous sa direction, on se mit à l’œuvre sur-le-champ.

On créa d’abord, à la limite des plus hautes marées, un rudiment de route, en aplanissant le sol autour des roches les plus grosses, et en écartant celles qu’il était possible de déplacer sans trop de peine. Dès le 20 avril ce travail préliminaire était terminé. On s’attaqua aussitôt au transport proprement dit.

On utilisa dans ce but les plates-formes créées pour le déchargement du Jonathan. Fractionnées en plateaux plus petits et munies, en guise de roues, de troncs d’arbres soigneusement arrondis et dressés, elles fournirent un grand nombre de véhicules primitifs, auxquels s’attelèrent les émigrants, hommes, femmes et enfants. Bientôt, la longue théorie de ces chariots grossiers traînés par leurs attelages humains s’égrena sur le rivage entre la falaise et la mer. Le spectacle ne manquait pas de pittoresque. Que de cris s’échappaient de ces douze cents poitrines haletantes!

La chaloupe était d’un puissant secours. On la chargeait des pièces les plus lourdes ou les plus fragiles, et, du lieu du naufrage à la baie Scotchwell, elle faisait un incessant va-et-vient, sous la conduite de Karroly et de son fils. Le travail allait être, grâce à elle, notablement abrégé.

Il convenait de s’en féliciter, car à plusieurs reprises, on fut retardé par le mauvais temps. L’hiver préludait à ses colères par des troubles avant-coureurs. Il fallait alors se réfugier sous les tentes laissées en place jusqu’au dernier moment et attendre l’accalmie permettant de se remettre à l’ouvrage.

Non content de prodiguer encouragements et conseils le Kaw-djer prêchait d’exemple. Jamais il ne restait inactif. Sans cesse en marche sur le chemin suivi par le convoi, il se trouvait toujours à point nommé pour donner un conseil ou un coup de main. Les émigrants considéraient avec étonnement cet homme infatigable qui s’astreignait volontairement à partager leurs rudes travaux, alors que rien ne l’eût empêché de repartir comme il était venu.

En vérité, le Kaw-djer n’y songeait pas. Tout entier à la tâche que le hasard lui avait fait entreprendre, il s’y livrait sans arrière pensée, satisfait de pouvoir être utile à cette foule misérable, et, par cela même, près de son cœur.

Mais tout le monde n’atteignait pas à sa hauteur morale, et d’autres caressaient pour leur propre compte ces projets de désertion qui, pas un instant, n’avaient effleuré son esprit. Rien de plus facile, en somme, que de s’emparer de la chaloupe, de hisser la voile et de cingler vers une région plus clémente. On n’avait pas à craindre d’être poursuivi, puisque les émigrants ne disposaient d’aucune embarcation. Cela était si simple qu’il y avait lieu d’être surpris que personne ne l’eût tenté jusqu’ici.

Ce qui s’y était opposé, sans doute, c’est que la Wel-Kiej ne restait jamais sans gardiens, Halg et Karroly, qui la pilotaient pendant le jour, y couchant, la nuit venue, en compagnie du Kaw-djer. Force avait donc été à ceux qui projetaient de s’en rendre maître, d’attendre une occasion favorable.

Cette occasion se présenta enfin le 10 mai. Ce jour-là, au retour de son premier voyage à la baie Scotchwell, le Kaw-djer aperçut les deux Fuégiens qui gesticulaient sur le rivage, tandis que la Wel-Kiej, distante déjà de plus de trois cents mètres, s'éloignait cap au large, toutes voiles dehors. À bord, on distinguait quatre hommes dont la distance empêchait de reconnaître les traits.

Quelques mots rapidement échangés lui apprirent ce qui s'était passé. On avait profité, pour sauter à bord du bateau, d'une courte absence de Karroly et de son fils. Quand ceux-ci s'étaient aperçus du rapt, il était trop tard pour s'en défendre.

À mesure qu'ils revenaient du nouveau campement, les émigrants se rassemblaient en nombre croissant autour du Kaw-djer et de ses deux compagnons. Impuissants et désarmés, ils regardaient en silence la chaloupe que la brise inclinait gracieusement. C'était un malheur sérieux pour tous les naufragés, qui perdaient à la fois un précieux moyen d'accélérer leur travail actuel, et la possibilité de se mettre au besoin en communication avec le reste du monde. Mais, pour les propriétaires de la Wel-Kiej, le malheur se transformait en désastre.

Toutefois, le Kaw-djer ne montrait par aucun signe la colère dont son cœur devait déborder. Le visage fermé, froid, impassible, comme toujours, il suivait des yeux le bateau. Bientôt, celui-ci disparut derrière une saillie du rivage. Aussitôt le Kaw-djer se retourna vers le groupe qui l'entourait:

“Au travail!” dit-il d'une voix calme.

On se remit à l'ouvrage avec une nouvelle ardeur. La perte de la chaloupe rendait nécessaire une hâte plus grande, si l'on voulait être prêt avant que l’hiver ne fût définitivement installé. Même, il y avait lieu de s’applaudir que ce vol abominable n’eût pas été commis dès les premiers jours du transport. Peut-être, dans ce cas, eût-il été impossible d’en venir à bout. Fort heureusement, à cette date du 10 mai, il était presque terminé et un peu de courage devait suffire à le mener à bonne fin.

Les émigrants admiraient la sérénité du Kaw-djer. Rien n’était changé dans son attitude habituelle, et il continuait à faire preuve de la même bonté et du même dévouement que par le passé. Son influence en fut notablement accrue.

Un incident, au cours de cette journée du 10 mai, acheva de le rendre tout à fait populaire.

Il aidait à ce moment à traîner l’un des chariots sur lequel étaient entassés plusieurs sacs de semences, quand son attention fut attirée par des cris de douleur. S’étant dirigé rapidement vers l’endroit d’où venaient ces cris, il découvrit un enfant d’une dizaine d’années qui gisait sur le sol et poussait de lamentables gémissements. À ses questions, l’enfant répondit qu’il était tombé du haut d’un rocher, qu’il ressentait une vive douleur dans la jambe droite et qu’il lui était impossible de se relever.

Un certain nombre d’émigrants, rangés en cercle derrière le Kaw-djer, échangeaient des réflexions saugrenues. Les parents de l’enfant ne tardèrent pas à se joindre à l’attroupement, et leurs plaintes bruyantes augmentèrent la confusion.

Le Kaw-djer imposa, d’une voix ferme, silence à tout ce monde et procéda à l’examen du blessé. Autour de lui, les émigrants tendaient le cou, s’émerveillant de la sûreté et de l’adresse de ses gestes. Il diagnostiqua sans peine une fracture simple du fémur, et la réduisit habilement. Au moyen de bouts de bois transformés en attelles, il immobilisa alors le membre brisé qu'il banda avec des lambeaux de toile, puis l'enfant fut transporté à la baie Scotchwell sur un brancard improvisé.

Tout en surveillant le travail de ses mains, le Kaw-djer rassurait les parents éplorés. Cela ne serait rien. L'accident n'aurait pas de suite fâcheuse, et dans deux mois il n'en subsisterait aucune trace. Peu à peu le père et la mère reprenaient confiance. Ils furent complètement rassérénés, quand, le pansement terminé, leur fils déclara qu'il ne souffrait plus.

De ces faits, qui furent en un instant connus de tout le monde, un grand respect rejaillit sur le Kaw-djer. Il était décidément le génie bienfaisant des naufragés. On n'en était plus à compter ses services. Désormais, on s'attendit à mieux encore. De plus en plus, on prit l'habitude de se reposer sur lui, et, de plus en plus, ces êtres rudes et puérils se sentirent rassurés et réconfortés par sa présence au milieu d'eux.

Le soir même du 10 mai, on procéda à une rapide enquête afin de découvrir les auteurs du vol de la Wel-Kiej. Dans cette foule ondoyante où ne régnait aucune discipline, les résultats de l'enquête furent nécessairement fort incertains. Elle permit toutefois de suspecter avec une grande vraisemblance quatre individus que personne n'avait aperçus pendant tout le cours de la journée. Deux appartenaient à l'équipage, le cuisinier Sirdey et le matelot Kennedy. Les autres étaient deux émigrants fort mal notés dans l'esprit public, deux prétendus ouvriers du nom de Furster et de Jackson.

À l'égard des premiers, les événements ne devaient pas permettre d'obtenir une certitude, mais on ne tarda à avoir la preuve que les soupçons s'étaient à bon droit portés sur les deux autres. Le lendemain matin, en effet, Kennedy et Sirdey étaient de nouveau présents et accomplissaient comme de coutume leur part de travail. À vrai dire, ils paraissaient brisés de fatigue. Sirdey même semblait blessé. Il marchait avec peine, et de profondes écorchures labouraient son visage.

Hartlepool connaissait de longue main ce triste sire dont la nature vile lui inspirait un complet mépris. Il l’interpella rudement:

“Où étais-tu, hier, coq[1]?

— Où j’étais?… répondit hypocritement Sirdey. Mais où je suis tous les jours bien entendu.

— Personne ne t’a vu, cependant, maître fourbe. Ne te serais-tu pas égaré plutôt du côté de la chaloupe?

— De la chaloupe?… répéta Sirdey du ton d’un homme qui n’y comprend rien.

— Hum!…” fit Hartlepool.

Il reprit:

“Pourrais-tu me dire d’où te viennent ces écorchures?

— Je suis tombé, expliqua Sirdey. Il me sera même impossible de prêter la main aux autres aujourd’hui. C’est à peine si je peux marcher.

— Hum!…” fit encore en s’éloignant Hartlepool, comprenant qu’il ne tirerait rien du cauteleux personnage.

Quant à Kennedy, il n’y avait même pas de prétexte pour l’interroger. Bien qu’il fût d’une pâleur de cire et parût être fort mal en point, il avait repris sans mot dire ses occupations ordinaires.

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[1] Nom donné au cuisinier à bord des bâtiments de commerce.

On se mit donc au travail le 11 mai à l’heure habituelle sans que le problème fût résolu. Mais une surprise attendait à la baie Scotchwell ceux qui y arrivèrent les premiers. Sur le rivage, à peu de distance de l’embouchure de la rivière, deux cadavres étaient étendus, ceux de Jackson et de Furster. Près d’eux gisait la chaloupe éventrée, aux trois quarts pleine d’eau et de sable.

Dès lors, l’aventure se reconstituait aisément. Le bateau mal dirigé avait dû toucher sur des récifs, un peu au-delà de la baie. Une voie d’eau s’était déclarée, et l’embarcation alourdie avait chaviré. Des quatre hommes qui la montaient, deux, Kennedy et Sirdey selon toute probabilité, avaient réussi à gagner la terre à la nage, mais les deux autres n’avaient pu échapper à la mort, et, à la première marée, leurs corps étaient venus à la côte, en même temps que la Wel-Kiej à demi fracassée par la houle.

Après sérieux examen, le Kaw-djer reconnut que les débris de la chaloupe étaient encore utilisables. Si la plupart des bordés étaient plus ou moins brisés, la membrure n’avait que très peu souffert, et la quille était intacte. Ce qui restait de la Wel-Kiej fut donc hissé à force de bras hors de l’atteinte de la mer en attendant le moment où l’on aurait le loisir de la réparer.

Le transport du matériel fut entièrement achevé le 13 mai. Sans perdre de temps, on se mit en devoir d’installer les maisons démontables. On vit celles-ci, d’un très ingénieux système, s’élever à vue d’œil avec une rapidité prodigieuse. Aussitôt terminées, elles étaient immédiatement occupées, non sans donner chaque fois prétexte à de violentes altercations. Il s’en fallait de beaucoup, en effet, qu’elles fussent en assez grand nombre pour contenir douze cents personnes. C’est tout au plus si les deux tiers des naufragés pouvaient raisonnablement espérer y trouver place. De là, nécessité de procéder à une sélection.

Cette sélection s’opéra à coups de poings. Les plus robustes, ayant commencé par s’emparer des divers éléments des maisons démontables, prétendirent défendre l’accès de celles-ci, lorsqu’elles furent édifiées. Quelle que fût leur vigueur, il leur fallut toutefois céder au nombre et entrer en composition avec une partie de ceux qu’ils essayaient d’évincer. Il y eut ainsi une seconde série d’élus, et par conséquent une seconde sélection, basée, comme la première, sur la force des compétiteurs. Puis, quand les maisons abritèrent des garnisons assez imposantes pour être en état de braver sans péril le surplus des émigrants, ces derniers furent définitivement éliminés.

Près de cinq cents personnes, des femmes et des enfants en majorité, furent ainsi réduites à se contenter de l’abri des tentes. Plus rares étaient les hommes, en général des pères et des maris obligés de suivre le sort de leur famille. Parmi les autres, figuraient le Kaw-djer et ses deux compagnons fuégiens, qui n’en étaient plus à redouter les nuits passées en plein air, ainsi que les survivants de l’équipage du Jonathan auxquels Hartlepool avait intimé l’abstention. Ces braves gens s’étaient inclinés sans un murmure, jusques et y compris Kennedy et Sirdey, qui, depuis l’aventure de la chaloupe, faisaient montre d’un zèle et d’une docilité inaccoutumés. Au nombre des moins favorisés, on comptait également John Rame et Fritz Gross que leur faiblesse physique avait écartés de la lutte, et pareillement la famille Rhodes, dont le chef n’était pas d’un caractère à faire appel à la violence.

Ces cinq cents personnes se logèrent donc sous les tentes. La diminution du nombre des occupants permit d’employer deux enveloppes superposées et séparées par une couche d’air, ce qui les rendit, en somme, assez confortables. Pendant ce temps, les uns achevaient l’aménagement intérieur des maisons, en bouchaient les joints, en obstruaient les moindres fissures, l’important, d’après les indications du Kaw-djer, étant de se défendre contre la pénétrante humidité de la région; les autres faisaient provision de bois aux dépens de la forêt voisine ou répartissaient les vivres en quantité suffisante pour assurer à tous quatre mois d’existence, tandis que les maçons, dont on comptait une vingtaine parmi les ouvriers émigrants, construisaient en hâte des poêles rudimentaires.

Ces travaux n’étaient pas encore tout à fait terminés le 20 mai, quand l’hiver, heureusement très en retard cette année, fondit sur l’île Hoste sous forme d’une tempête de neige d’une effroyable violence. En quelques minutes, la terre fut recouverte d’un blanc linceul d’où jaillissaient les arbres couverts de givre. Le lendemain, les communications étaient devenues très difficiles entre les diverses fractions du campement.

Mais désormais on était paré contre l’inclémence de la température. Calfeutrés dans leurs maisons ou sous la double enveloppe des tentes, chauffés par d’ardentes flambées de bois, les naufragés du Jonathan étaient prêts à braver les rigueurs d’un hivernage antarctique.

CHAPITRE IV

IV

Hivernage

Quinze jours durant, la tempête hurla sans interruption, la neige tomba en épais flocons. Pendant ces deux semaines, les émigrants, contraints de se terrer sous leurs abris, purent à peine se risquer en plein air.

Triste pour tous, cette claustration forcée, assurément, mais plus peut-être pour ceux qui s’étaient attribué la jouissance des maisons démontables. Ces maisons n’étaient formées, en somme, que de panneaux boulonnés entre eux et manquaient du plus élémentaire confortable. Pourtant, séduits par leur aspect — à moins que ce fût seulement par ce nom de maisons! — les émigrants se les étaient disputées, et maintenant ils s’y entassaient au-delà de toute raison. Elles étaient transformées en véritables dortoirs, où se touchaient les paillasses jetées à même sur le parquet, dortoirs qui devenaient salles communes et cuisine pendant les courtes heures de jour. De cet entassement, de cette cohabitation de plusieurs ménages résultait nécessairement une promiscuité de tous les instants, aussi fâcheuse au point de vue de l’hygiène, que défavorable au maintien de la bonne entente. Le désœuvrement et l’ennui sont, en effet, fertiles en disputes, et l’on s’ennuyait ferme dans ces demeures bloquées par la neige.

À vrai dire, les hommes trouvaient encore à occuper leurs loisirs. Ils s’ingéniaient à meubler grossièrement ces maisons dépourvues du plus petit commencement de mobilier. À coups de hachettes, ils taillaient sièges et tables dont on se débarrassait, la nuit venue, afin de pouvoir étendre les paillasses. Mais les femmes ne disposaient pas de cette ressource. Quand elles avaient donné leurs soins aux enfants, quand elles avaient vaqué à la cuisine que l’usage des conserves simplifiait notablement, il ne leur restait plus que le bavardage pour user les heures lentes. Elles ne s’en privaient pas. À défaut des jambes, les langues marchaient, et, on ne l’ignore pas, l’intempérance de langue est trop souvent, elle aussi, génératrice de discordes. C’était merveille qu’il n’en fût pas survenu dès le premier jour.

Si ceux qui occupaient les tentes étaient moins bien garantis contre les intempéries, ils ne laissaient pas de bénéficier de certains avantages à d’autres égards. Ils disposaient de plus de place, et même quelques familles, parmi lesquelles les familles Rhodes et Ceroni, avaient la jouissance d’une tente entière. Les cinq Japonais, étroitement unis entre eux, habitaient aussi l’une des tentes où ils vivaient à l’écart.

Tentes et maisons étaient disséminées selon les caprices individuels. Personne n’ayant dirigé le travail d’installation, le dessin du campement ne répondait à aucun plan préconçu. Il ressemblait, non à une bourgade, mais à l’agglomération fortuite de maisons isolées, et l’on eût été bien embarrassé s’il se fût agi de tracer des rues.

Cela, d’ailleurs, était sans importance, puisqu’il ne s’agissait pas de fonder un établissement durable. Au printemps, on démolirait maisons et tentes, et chacun retrouverait sa patrie et sa misère.

Le campement s’étendait sur la rive droite de la rivière qui, venue de l’Ouest, le touchait en un point, puis se recourbait aussitôt sur elle-même et courait au Nord-Ouest pour aller se jeter dans la mer trois kilomètres plus loin. La construction la plus occidentale s’élevait sur la rive même. C’était une maison démontable de proportions si exiguës que trois personnes seulement avaient pu y trouver place. Sans dispute, sans cris, procédant en silence, un des émigrants, du nom de Patterson, s'était adjugé, dès le premier jour, les éléments constitutifs de cette maison et, afin que personne ne la lui disputât, il avait tout de suite porté le nombre de ses habitants au maximum pratique, en en offrant la jouissance indivise à deux autres naufragés. Cette offre n'avait pas été faite au hasard. Patterson, de complexion plutôt débile, s'était adjoint fort intelligemment deux compagnons taillés en hercules et disposant de poings capables de défendre au besoin la propriété collective.

Tous deux de nationalité américaine, l'un se nommait Blaker et l'autre Long. Le premier était un jeune paysan de vingt-sept ans, de caractère assez jovial, mais affligé d'une boulimie qui compliquait déplorablement sa vie. La misère qui formait son lot ne lui permettant pas d'apaiser son insatiable appétit, il avait eu faim depuis sa naissance, au point qu'il s'était finalement résigné à s'expatrier dans l'unique espoir d'arriver à manger tout son saoul. Le second était un ouvrier, forgeron de son état, à la cervelle petite et aux muscles énormes, une brute solide et malléable comme le fer rouge qu'il martelait.

Quant à Patterson, s'il faisait aujourd'hui partie de cette foule de naufragés, lui du moins n'y avait pas été poussé par l'excès de sa misère, mais par un âpre désir de gain. Le sort s'était montré pour lui hostile et secourable à la fois. Il l'avait fait naître, il est vrai, seul, pauvre et nu sur le bord d'une route irlandaise, mais, à titre de compensation, il l'avait doué d'une avarice prodigieuse, c'est-à-dire du moyen d'acquérir tous les biens qui lui manquaient lors de sa venue sur la terre. Grâce à elle, il avait en effet réussi à amasser dès l'âge de vingt-cinq ans un respectable pécule. Travail acharné, privations de cénobite, voire, quand l'occasion s'en présentait, cynique exploitation d'autrui, rien ne l'avait rebuté pour obtenir ce résultat.

Cependant, quel que soit son génie, un paysan, dénué du moindre capital initial, ne peut progresser que lentement sur le chemin de la fortune. Le champ qui lui est offert est trop petit pour permettre une rapide ascension. Patterson ne s’élevait donc que péniblement, à force de courage, de renoncement et d’astuce, quand de mirifiques récits sur les chances qu’un homme sans scrupules rencontre en Amérique étaient parvenus à ses oreilles. Grisé par ces merveilleux racontars, il ne rêva plus que Nouveau Monde et projeta d’aller, après tant d’autres, y chercher aventure, non pour suivre les traces de ces milliardaires sortis comme lui-même, pourtant, des dernières couches sociales, mais dans l’espoir moins inaccessible d’y faire grossir son bas de laine plus vite que dans la mère patrie.

À peine sur le sol de l’Amérique, il fut sollicité par la réclame intensive de la Société de la baie de Lagoa. Confiant dans les séduisantes promesses de cette Société, il se dit qu’il trouverait là un champ vierge où son petit capital pourrait s’employer fructueusement et, avec mille autres, il s’embarqua sur le Jonathan.

Certes, l’événement trompait son espoir. Mais Patterson n’était pas de ceux qui se découragent. En dépit du naufrage, sans rien montrer de la déception qu’il devait éprouver, il s’entêtait à poursuivre sa chance avec la même patiente obstination. Si, dans le malheur commun, un seul des naufragés devait arriver à gagner quelque chose, ce serait lui assurément.

Aidé de Blaker et de Long, il avait placé sa maisonnette à quelque distance de la mer, sur le bord même de la rivière et à l’unique point où elle fût accessible. En amont, la rive brusquement relevée devenait une sorte de falaise de près de quinze mètres de hauteur. En aval, après une petite étendue de terrain plat devant la maison, le sol cédait tout à coup, et la rivière tombait en cascade sur l’étage inférieur. Entre cette cascade et la mer s’étendait un marécage impraticable. À moins de s’imposer un détour de plus d’un kilomètre vers l’amont, les émigrants étaient donc dans la nécessité de passer devant Patterson pour aller remplir cruches et barils.

Les autres maisons et les tentes s’égrenaient dans un pittoresque désordre parallèlement à la mer dont elles étaient séparées par le marais. Quant au Kaw-djer, il logeait avec Halg et Karroly dans une ajoupa fuégienne édifiée par les deux Indiens. Rien de plus rudimentaire que cet abri formé d’herbes et de branchages, et il fallait, pour s’en contenter, ne pas craindre les rigueurs de ce climat. Mais l’ajoupa, située sur la rive gauche du rio, avait l’avantage d’être à proximité du lieu d’échouage de la chaloupe, ce qui permettrait de profiter de toutes les éclaircies pour activer les réparations.

Pendant les deux semaines que dura le premier assaut sérieux de l’hiver, il ne put être question de les entreprendre. Il ne faudrait pas en conclure que le Kaw-djer vécût en reclus, comme la foule moins aguerrie des naufragés. Chaque jour, en compagnie de Halg, il traversait la rivière sur un pont léger construit en quarante-huit heures par Karroly, et se rendait au campement.

Il y avait fort à faire. Dès le début du froid, quelques émigrants atteints d’affections aiguës, en général de bronchites assez bénignes, avaient demandé le secours du Kaw-djer, qui depuis son intervention chirurgicale, jouissait d’une réputation solidement établie. L’enfant blessé allait, en effet, de mieux en mieux, et tout indiquait que le favorable pronostic de l’opérateur se réaliserait au jour dit.

Celui-ci, après sa tournée médicale, entrait dans la tente de la famille Rhodes, et on causait une heure ou deux de tout ce qui intéressait les naufragés. Le Kaw-djer s’attachait de plus en plus à cette famille. Il goûtait la bonté simple de Mme Rhodes et de sa fille Clary qui jouaient avec dévouement le rôle d’infirmières près des malades qu’il leur signalait.

Quant à Harry Rhodes, il en appréciait le sens droit et l’esprit bienveillant, et, entre les deux hommes, naissaient peu à peu des sentiments de véritable amitié.

“J’en arrive à me féliciter, dit un jour Harry Rhodes au Kaw-djer, que ces coquins aient essayé de s’emparer de votre chaloupe. Peut-être, si elle était en bon état, auriez-vous eu le désir de nous quitter, une fois tout le monde installé. Tandis que, maintenant, vous êtes notre prisonnier.

— Il faudra bien que je parte, cependant, objecta le Kaw-djer.

— Pas avant le printemps, répliqua Harry Rhodes. Voyez combien vous êtes utile à tous. Il y a ici nombre de femmes et d’enfants que vous seul êtes capable de soigner. Que deviendraient-ils sans vous?

— Pas avant le printemps, soit! concéda le Kaw-djer. Mais à ce moment, comme tout le monde s’en ira, rien ne s’opposera à ce que je reprenne la mer.

— Pour retourner à l’Île Neuve?”

Le Kaw-djer ne répondit que par un geste évasif. Oui, l’Île Neuve était sa demeure. Là il avait vécu de longues années. Y retournerait-il? Les raisons qui l’en avaient éloigné existaient toujours. L’Île Neuve, terre libre naguère, était désormais soumise à l’autorité du Chili.

“Si j’avais voulu partir, dit-il, désireux de passer à un autre sujet, je crois que mes deux compagnons n’en eussent pas été également satisfaits. Halg, sinon Karroly, n’eût quitté l’île Hoste qu’à regret, et peut-être même s’y serait-il refusé avec énergie.

— Pourquoi cela? demanda Mme Rhodes.

— Pour la raison bien simple que Halg, je le crains, a le malheur d’être amoureux.

— Le beau malheur! plaisanta Harry Rhodes. Être amoureux, c’est de son âge.

— Je ne dis pas non, reconnut le Kaw-djer. N’importe! le pauvre garçon se prépare là de grands chagrins quand viendra le jour de la séparation.

— Mais pourquoi se séparerait-il de celle qu’il aime, au lieu de l’épouser tout simplement? demanda Clary qui, comme toutes les jeunes filles, s’intéressait aux affaires de cœur.

— Parce qu’il s’agit de la fille d’un émigrant. Elle ne consentirait jamais à rester en Magellanie. Et, d’un autre côté, je ne vois pas très bien ce que ferait Halg, transporté dans un de vos pays soi-disant civilisés. Sans compter qu’il ne nous quitterait pas, je pense, d’un cœur léger, son père et moi.

— Une fille d’émigrant, dites-vous?… interrogea Harry Rhodes. Ne s’agirait-il pas de Graziella Ceroni?

— Je l’ai rencontrée plusieurs fois, dit Edward qui se mêla à la conversation. Elle n’est pas mal.

— Halg la trouve merveilleuse! s’écria le Kaw-djer en souriant. C’est bien naturel, d’ailleurs. Jusqu’ici, il n’avait vu que des femmes fuégiennes, et je suis obligé de reconnaître qu’on peut être mieux très facilement.

— C’est donc bien d’elle qu’il s’agit? demanda Harry Rhodes.

— Oui. Le jour où nous avons dû intervenir dans les affaires de sa famille, comme vous vous le rappelez, sans doute, j’avais déjà remarqué la vive impression qu’elle avait faite sur Halg. Une vraie révélation, on peut le dire. Vous n’ignorez pas à quel point cette jeune fille et sa mère sont malheureuses, et de la pitié à l’amour il n’y a pas loin, bien souvent.

— C’est même le plus beau de tous les chemins qui y conduisent, fit remarquer Mme Rhodes.

— Quel qu’il soit, je vous prie de croire que, depuis ce jour-là, Halg le suit allègrement. Vous n’avez pas idée du changement qui s’est opéré en lui. En voulez-vous un exemple?… Les indigènes de la Magellanie ne sont pas précisément remarquables par leur coquetterie, ainsi que vous pouvez le supposer. Malgré la rigueur du climat, ils poussent l’indifférence à cet égard jusqu’à vivre radicalement nus. Halg, perverti par la civilisation, dont j’ai eu le tort d’apporter un vieux reste dans les plis de mes vêtements, était déjà un raffiné parmi ses congénères, puisqu’il consentait depuis le naufrage du Jonathan à se couvrir de peaux de phoque ou de guanaque.

Mais maintenant, c’est bien autre chose! Il a déniché un barbier parmi les émigrants et s’est fait couper les cheveux. C’est peut-être le premier Fuégien qui ait jamais fait montre d’une telle élégance! Ce n’est pas tout. Il s’est procuré, je ne sais par quel moyen, un costume complet, et il ne sort plus qu’habillé à l’européenne pour la première fois de sa vie, et chaussé de souliers, qui, d’ailleurs, doivent bien le gêner! Karroly n’en revient pas. Moi, je ne comprends que trop ce que cela veut dire.

— Et Graziella, s’enquit Mme Rhodes, est-elle touchée de ces efforts accomplis pour lui plaire?

— Vous pensez que je ne le lui ai pas demandé, répliqua le Kaw-djer. Mais, à en juger par le visage joyeux de Halg, je présume que ses affaires ne vont pas mal.

— Cela ne m'étonne pas, dit Harry Rhodes, c'est un beau garçon que votre jeune compagnon.

— Physiquement, il n'est pas mal, j'en conviens, approuva le Kaw-djer avec une évidente satisfaction, mais moralement il est mieux encore. C'est un brave cœur, fidèle, bon, dévoué et intelligent, ce qui ne gâte rien.

— C'est votre élève, je crois? demanda Mme Rhodes.

— Vous pouvez dire: mon fils, rectifia le Kaw-djer, car je l'aime comme un père. C'est pourquoi je suis affligé qu'il ait de pareilles idées, dont il ne résultera, en fin de compte, que des chagrins."

Les suppositions du Kaw-djer n'étaient point erronées. Une sympathie naissante attirait, en effet, l'un vers l'autre, le jeune Fuégien et Graziella. Dès la première minute où il l'avait aperçue, toutes les pensées de Halg étaient allées vers elle, et, depuis lors, il n'avait pas laissé passer un jour sans la voir. Témoin de la scène qui avait motivé l'intervention du Kaw-djer, il connaissait la plaie de la famille, et, avec l'adresse ordinaire des amoureux, il tirait parti sans scrupule de la situation. Sous prétexte de s'enquérir des besoins des deux femmes et de veiller sur leur sécurité, il restait près d'elles de longues heures, l'anglais que tous parlaient couramment leur permettant d'échanger leurs pensées.

Halg, à cet égard comme aux autres, ne ressemblait en rien à ses compatriotes si étonnamment réfractaires à l'étude des langues. Lui, au contraire, avait appris sans peine l'anglais et le français, et maintenant, excellent prétexte pour fréquenter assidûment la famille Ceroni, il était en train de faire en italien de merveilleux progrès sous la direction de Graziella.

Celle-ci n’avait pas eu de peine à discerner les causes de cette ardeur au travail, mais les sentiments qu’elle inspirait au jeune Indien l’avaient d’abord plus amusée que charmée. Halg, avec ses longs cheveux plats, ses tempes étroites, son nez légèrement épaté, son teint un peu bistré, lui faisait l’effet d’être d’une autre espèce qu’elle-même. D’après sa classification fantaisiste, les habitants de notre planète se divisaient en deux races distinctes: les hommes et les sauvages. Halg, étant un sauvage, ne pouvait par conséquent être un homme. Le raisonnement était rigoureux. L’idée qu’un lien quelconque pût exister entre cet exotique, à peine couvert de peaux de bêtes, et une Italienne qui se jugeait d’essence supérieure, ne lui vint pas à l’esprit.

Peu à peu, cependant, elle s’habitua aux traits et au costume sommaire de son timide adorateur, et elle en arriva par degrés à le considérer comme un adolescent pareil aux autres. Halg, il est vrai, fit tous ses efforts pour provoquer cette évolution de sa pensée. Un beau jour, Graziella le vit apparaître, ses cheveux coupés avec art et séparés en deux versants par une raie tracée d’une main habile. Peu après, transformation plus étonnante encore, Halg se montrait vêtu à l’européenne. Pantalon, vareuse, forts souliers, rien ne manquait à sa toilette. Sans doute, tout cela était rude et grossier, mais tel n’était pas l’avis de Halg, qui s’estimait d’une suprême élégance et s’admirait volontiers dans un fragment de miroir provenant du Jonathan.

Que d’industrie il lui avait fallu pour découvrir l’émigrant de bonne volonté qui avait joué à son profit le rôle de coiffeur, et pour se procurer le superbe complet qui, à son estime, le rendait irrésistible! La recherche des vêtements avait été notamment des plus ardues, et peut-être même serait-elle restée vaine s’il n’avait eu la chance d’entrer en rapport avec Patterson.

Patterson vendait de tout, et jamais l’avare n’eût consenti à laisser perdre l’occasion d’un troc. S’il n’avait pas l’objet demandé, il le trouvait toujours, donnant d’une main, recevant de l’autre, en prélevant au passage un honnête courtage. Patterson avait donc fourni les habits demandés. Par exemple, toutes les économies du jeune homme y étaient passées.

Celui-ci ne les regrettait pas, car il avait eu la récompense de son sacrifice. L’attitude de Graziella avait changé sur-le-champ. Selon sa classification personnelle, Halg cessait d’être un sauvage et devenait un homme.

Dès lors, les choses avaient marché à pas de géant, et l’affection s’était développée rapidement dans le cœur des deux jeunes gens. Harry Rhodes avait raison. Halg, si l’on faisait abstraction du type spécial de sa race, était réellement un beau garçon. Grand, robuste, habitué à la vie libre dans le plein air, il possédait cette grâce d’attitude que donnent la souplesse des membres et l’harmonie des mouvements. D’autre part, outre que son intelligence, ouverte par les leçons du Kaw-djer, n’était pas médiocre, la bonté et la droiture se lisaient dans ses yeux. C’en était là plus qu’il ne fallait pour toucher le cœur d’une jeune fille malheureuse.

Du jour où, sans s’être dit un seul mot, Halg et Graziella se sentirent complices, les heures coulèrent vite pour eux. Que leur importait la tempête? Que leur importait le froid? Les intempéries rendaient l’intimité plus douce, et, loin de souhaiter, ils redoutaient le retour du beau temps.

Il reparut pourtant, et les émigrants, qui n’avaient pas les mêmes raisons d’indifférence, apprécièrent vivement le changement. Comme d’un coup de baguette, le campement s’anima. Maisons et tentes se vidèrent. Tandis que les hommes étiraient leurs membres engourdis par cette longue claustration, les commères, heureuses de renouveler interlocutrices et auditoires, allèrent de porte en porte, échangeant des visites, ébauchant des amitiés, dont l’objet, fait digne de remarque, n’était jamais l’une de celles avec qui elles venaient de vivre près de quinze jours côte à côte.

Karroly mit à profit le temps favorable pour commencer les réparations de la Wel-Kiej avec les charpentiers qui l’avaient déjà aidé une première fois. Les constructeurs étant dans l’obligation de faire eux-mêmes tous les travaux préparatoires: abattage, débitage et cintrage du bois, ces réparations exigeraient un mois de travail, c’est-à-dire qu’elles ne seraient pas achevées avant trois mois, en tenant compte des interruptions imposées par le mauvais temps.

Pendant que Karroly et ses compagnons manœuvraient varlope et scie, le Kaw-djer, désireux de se procurer pour lui-même et pour les malades des provisions fraîches, partit en chasse avec son chien Zol. De ce que l’archipel subît les rigueurs de l’hiver, de ce que la neige commençât à couvrir les plaines et la glace à coiffer les hauteurs, il ne s’ensuivait pas que la vie animale fût supprimée. Les forêts abritaient toujours des ruminants en grand nombre, des nandous, des guanaques, des vigognes, des renards. Au-dessus des prairies voletaient toujours des oies de montagne, de petites perdrix, des bécasses et des bécassines. Sur le littoral pullulaient les mouettes comestibles. Des baleines venaient souffler en vue de l’île, et les loups marins abondaient sur ses grèves.

Par contre, il ne pouvait être question de pêche. Le poisson, merluches et lamproies en majorité, ne fréquente qu’en été les eaux de l’île Hoste. En hiver, il remonte plus au Nord, dans le canal du Beagle et dans le détroit de Magellan.

De son excursion, le Kaw-djer, outre du gibier en assez grande quantité, rapporta des nouvelles de quatre familles qui avaient cru devoir s’éloigner du campement et s’établir à quelques lieues dans l’intérieur. Ces dissidents n’étaient autres que les familles Rivière, Gimelli, Gordon et Ivanoff, dont les chefs avaient, les trois derniers, accompagné le Kaw-djer et Harry Rhodes lors de la première exploration de l’île, celui-là, navigué jusqu’à Punta-Arenas en qualité de délégué des émigrants. C’est au retour de Rivière qu’ils avaient pris d’un commun accord la résolution de faire bande à part. Tous quatre, cultivateurs de profession, appartenaient à la même classe morale, la classe des braves gens, sains, bien équilibrés, bien portants. Aussi éloignés de la rapacité d’un Patterson que de la veulerie d’un John Rame, c’étaient des travailleurs, simplement. Le travail était un besoin pour eux; ils s’y astreignaient sans peine, de même que leurs femmes et leurs enfants, incapables autant qu’eux-mêmes de ne pas chercher toujours à employer utilement leur temps.

Des raisons semblables les avaient incités au départ. Rivière, lors de l’abattage d’arbres nécessité par le déchargement du Jonathan, avait été frappé de la richesse de ces forêts qu’aucune cognée n’avait encore attaquées. Ce souvenir lui revint à Punta-Arenas, au moment où il apprenait qu’il lui faudrait séjourner six mois à l’île Hoste, et il eut aussitôt la pensée de tirer parti des circonstances pour faire une tentative d’exploitation. Il se procura, dans ce but, un matériel élémentaire de scierie et il en chargea la chaloupe. Au point de vue de l’abattage, son entreprise ne pouvait être que fructueuse. Ces forêts n’étant la propriété de personne, le bois, par conséquent, ne coûtait rien. Restait le problème du transport. Mais Rivière estimait que cette difficulté se résoudrait plus tard d’elle-même, et qu’il arriverait toujours, quand le bois serait débité, à le monnayer d’une manière ou d’une autre.

Sur le point de réaliser son projet, il en avait fait confidence à Gimelli, à Gordon et à Ivanoff, avec lesquels il s’était lié sur le Jonathan. Ceux-ci avaient vivement approuvé le Franco-Canadien, en déplorant de ne pouvoir l’imiter pour leur compte. Toutefois, une idée en appelant une autre, un projet similaire leur vint bientôt à l’esprit. Pendant l’excursion faite en compagnie du Kaw-djer, il leur avait été possible d’apprécier la fertilité du sol. Pourquoi ne tenteraient-ils pas, l’un un essai d’élevage, les deux autres un essai de culture? Si, au bout de six mois, le résultat paraissait devoir être favorable, rien ne les obligerait à partir. Magellanie ou Afrique, le pays dans lequel on vit importe peu, du moment qu’on n’est pas dans le sien. Si le résultat semblait, au contraire, devoir être mauvais, il n’y aurait de perdu que du travail. Mais le travail est une denrée inépuisable quand on possède de bons bras et du cœur, et mieux valait au surplus travailler six mois en pure perte que de rester si longtemps inactif. Dans le champ le plus stérile, on récolterait du moins la santé.

Ces quatre familles, pourvues d’hommes sages, de femmes sérieuses, de filles et de garçons robustes et bien portants, avaient en mains tous les atouts pour réussir là où d’autres eussent échoué. Leur décision fut donc arrêtée, et ils la mirent à exécution, avec l’approbation et le concours d’Hartlepool et du Kaw-djer.

Pendant que les émigrants s’occupaient de transporter le matériel à la baie Scotchwell, les dissidents préparèrent activement leur départ. À coups de hache, ils improvisèrent un chariot à essieux de bois et à roues pleines, très primitif assurément, mais vaste et solide. Sur ce chariot furent entassés des provisions de bouche, des semences, des graines, des instruments aratoires, des ustensiles de ménage, des armes, des munitions, tout ce qui pouvait être nécessaire en un mot au début des exploitations. Ils ne négligèrent pas d'emporter quatre ou cinq couples de volailles, et les Gordon, qui se destinaient plus particulièrement à l'élevage, y joignirent des lapins et des représentants des deux sexes des races bovine, ovine et porcine. Ainsi nantis des éléments de leur future fortune, ils s'éloignèrent vers le Nord, à la recherche d'un emplacement convenable.

Ils le rencontrèrent à douze kilomètres de la baie Scotchwell. À cet endroit s'étendait un vaste plateau, borné à l'Ouest par d'épaisses forêts et, dans l'Est, par une large vallée au fond de laquelle serpentait une rivière. Cette vallée, tapissée d'une herbe drue, constituait un magnifique pâturage où d'innombrables troupeaux eussent aisément trouvé leur nourriture. Quant au plateau, il semblait recouvert d'une couche d'humus qui deviendrait excellent, lorsque la pioche l'aurait défriché et débarrassé de l'inextricable réseau de racines qui le sillonnaient de toutes parts.

Les colons se mirent à l'œuvre. Leur premier soin fut d'élever quatre petites fermes, aux murs formés de troncs d'arbres. Mieux valait, au prix d'un travail supplémentaire, être chacun chez soi; la bonne entente en bénéficierait par la suite.

Le mauvais temps, la neige et le froid ne retardèrent pas d'une heure la construction de ces habitations. Elles étaient achevées lors de la visite du Kaw-djer. Celui-ci revint émerveillé de ce que peut accomplir une volonté tendue vers son but. Déjà, les Rivière étaient en train d'établir une roue à aubes pour utiliser une chute naturelle du cours d'eau. Cette roue fournirait la force à la scierie, où la pesanteur ferait descendre automatiquement le bois abattu sur le plateau. Les Gimelli et les Ivanoff avaient, de leur côté, attaqué le sol à coups de pioche, et le préparaient pour la charrue, que traîneraient, quand le temps en serait venu, ces mêmes bêtes à cornes à l’intention desquelles les Gordon limitaient concurremment de vastes enclos.

Dussent ces efforts rester stériles, le Kaw-djer estima ce besoin d’agir préférable à l’apathie des autres émigrants.

Ceux-ci, comme de grands enfants qu’ils étaient, jouirent du soleil tant qu’il brilla, puis, le ciel redevenu inclément, ils se terrèrent sous leurs abris et y vécurent confinés comme la première fois, pour en ressortir dès que revint une éclaircie. Un mois s’écoula ainsi, avec des alternatives de beaux jours en minorité et de mauvais beaucoup plus nombreux. On arriva au 21 juin, date du solstice d’hiver pour l’hémisphère austral.

Pendant ce mois passé à la baie Scotchwell, des changements étaient déjà survenus dans la répartition des émigrants. Des brouilles et de nouvelles amitiés avaient motivé des permutations entre les habitants des diverses maisons démontables. D’autre part, des groupements particuliers commençaient à se dessiner dans la foule, de même que des îlots s’élèvent hors de la surface unie d’un fleuve.

L’un de ces groupements était formé du Kaw-djer, des deux Fuégiens, d’Hartlepool et de la famille Rhodes. Autour de lui gravitait l’équipage du Jonathan, y compris Dick et Sand, comme un satellite autour d’un centre d’attraction.

Un deuxième groupe, également composé de gens tranquilles et sérieux, comprenait les quatre travailleurs embauchés par la Compagnie de colonisation, Smith, Wright, Lawson et Fock, et une quinzaine des ouvriers embarqués sur le Jonathan à leurs risques et périls.

Le troisième ne comptait que cinq membres: les cinq Japonais qui vivaient dans le silence et le mystère, et dont on n’apercevait presque jamais les faces jaunes et les yeux bridés.

Un quatrième reconnaissait pour chef Ferdinand Beauval. Dans le champ magnétique du tribun évoluaient une cinquantaine d’émigrants. Quinze à vingt de ceux-ci méritaient le qualificatif d’ouvriers. Le surplus provenait de la grande masse agricole.

Le cinquième, assez réduit comme nombre, s’inspirait de Lewis Dorick. À ce dernier étaient plus particulièrement inféodés le matelot Kennedy, le maître-coq Sirdey, et cinq ou six individus unanimes à se réclamer de la classe ouvrière, mais dont la moitié au moins appartenaient avec évidence à la corporation des malfaiteurs de profession. Moins activement que passivement, Lazare Ceroni, John Rame et une douzaine d’alcooliques que leur avachissement transformait en pantins, se rattachaient à ce noyau de militants.

Un sixième et dernier groupe absorbait tout le surplus de la foule. Cette foule se divisait assurément en un grand nombre d’autres fractions distinctes, au gré des sympathies et des antipathies individuelles, mais, dans son ensemble, elle avait ce caractère commun de n’en avoir aucun, d’être flottante, inerte, en état d’équilibre indifférent, et prête par conséquent à obéir à toutes les impulsions.

Restaient les isolés, les indépendants, tels que Fritz Gross, parvenu au dernier degré de l’abrutissement, les frères Moore auxquels leur nature violente interdisait de fréquenter plus de trois jours de suite les mêmes personnes, et plus encore Patterson, qui cachait son existence, ne frayait avec ses semblables que lorsqu'il y avait quelque intérêt et vivait à l'écart, flanqué de ses deux acolytes, Blaker et Long.

De tous ces partis, si le mot n'est pas trop ambitieux, celui qui profitait le mieux des circonstances présentes était incontestablement le groupe qui reconnaissait pour chef Lewis Dorick, et, de tous les membres de ce groupe, le plus heureux était non moins incontestablement Lewis Dorick lui-même.

Celui-ci appliquait ses principes. Lorsque le temps le permettait, il allait volontiers de tente en tente, de maison en maison, et faisait dans chacune d'elles des séjours plus ou moins prolongés. Sous le fallacieux prétexte que la propriété individuelle est une notion immorale, que tout appartient à tous et que rien n'appartient à personne, il s'emparait des meilleures places et s'attribuait imperturbablement ce qui était à sa convenance. Un flair subtil lui faisait discerner ceux dont il y avait lieu de craindre une sérieuse résistance. Il ne se frottait pas à ceux-là. Par contre, il mettait en coupe réglée les faibles, les indécis, les timides et les sots. Ces malheureux, littéralement terrorisés par l'incroyable audace et par la parole impérieuse du communiste détrousseur, se laissaient plumer sans une plainte. Pour étouffer leurs protestations, il suffisait à Dorick d'abaisser sur eux ses yeux d'acier. Jamais l'ex-professeur n'avait été à pareille fête. Cette île Hoste, c'était pour lui le pays de Chanaan.

Pour être juste, on doit reconnaître qu'il ne se refusait nullement à pratiquer ses théories en sens contraire. S'il prenait sans scrupule ce que possédaient les autres, il déclarait trouver naturel que les autres prissent ce qu'il possédait lui-même. Générosité d'autant plus admirable qu'il ne possédait absolument rien.

Toutefois, du train dont allaient les choses, il était aisé de prévoir qu'il n'en serait pas toujours ainsi.

Ses disciples marchaient sur les traces du maître. Sans prétendre en égaler la maestria, ils faisaient de leur mieux. Il n'en fallait pas plus, d'ailleurs, pour que les richesses collectives devinssent, en fait, au bout de l'hiver, la propriété particulière de ces farouches négateurs du droit de propriété.

Le Kaw-djer n'ignorait pas ces abus de la force, et il s'étonnait de cette application singulière de doctrines libertaires voisines de celles qu'il professait lui-même avec tant de passion. Remédier à cette tyrannie? À quel titre l'aurait-il fait? De quel droit eût-il soulevé un conflit, en protégeant proprio motu des gens qui n'appelaient même pas au secours, contre d'autres hommes, leurs pareils après tout?

Au surplus, il avait assez de préoccupations personnelles pour perdre de vue celles des autres. Plus l'hiver avançait, plus les malades devenaient nombreux. Il ne suffisait plus à la tâche. Le 18 juin, il y eut un décès, celui d'un enfant de cinq ans emporté par une broncho-pneumonie qu'aucune médication ne put enrayer. C'était le troisième cadavre que, depuis l'atterrissage, recevait le sol de l'île Hoste.

L'état d'esprit de Halg donnait aussi beaucoup de souci au Kaw-djer. Celui-ci lisait comme dans un livre dans l'âme ingénue du jeune Fuégien, et il devinait le trouble croissant de son cœur.

Comment cela finirait-il, lorsque cette foule s'éloignerait à jamais de la Magellanie? Halg ne voudrait-il pas suivre Graziella et n'irait-il pas mourir au loin de chagrin et de misère?

Ce 18 juin précisément, Halg revint plus soucieux que l'ordinaire de sa visite quotidienne à la famille Ceroni. Le Kaw-djer n'eut pas besoin de le questionner pour en connaître les motifs. Spontanément, Halg lui confia que, la veille, après son départ, Lazare Ceroni s’était de nouveau enivré. Comme de coutume, il en était résulté une scène terrible, heureusement moins violente que la précédente.

Cela donna à penser au Kaw-djer. Puisque Ceroni s’était enivré, c’est donc qu’il avait eu de l’alcool à sa disposition. Le matériel provenant du Jonathan n’était-il plus gardé par les hommes de l’équipage?

Hartlepool, interrogé, déclara n’y rien comprendre et l’assura que la surveillance ne s’était pas relâchée. Toutefois, le fait étant indéniable, il promit de redoubler d’attention afin d’en éviter le retour.

Ce fut le 24 juin, trois jours après le solstice, que survint le premier incident de quelque importance, non par lui-même, mais par les conséquences indirectes qu’il devait avoir dans l’avenir. Ce jour-là, il faisait beau. Une légère brise du Sud avait déblayé le ciel, et le sol était durci par un froid sec de quatre à cinq degrés centigrades. Attirés par les pâles rayons du soleil traçant sur l’horizon un arc surbaissé, les émigrants s’étaient répandus au dehors.

Dick et Sand, qu’aucune intempérie n’était capable de retenir au logis, figuraient bien entendu parmi ces amateurs de plein air. En compagnie de Marcel Norely et de deux autres enfants de leur âge, ils avaient organisé un jeu de marelle qui les passionnait au plus haut point. Tout entiers à leur amusement, ils ne remarquèrent même pas une autre bande de joueurs, des adultes ceux-ci, qui se distrayaient à proximité. Jouer n’est pas, en effet, le propre des enfants, et l’âge mûr s’y complaît volontiers. Ces adultes avaient engagé une partie de boules. Ils étaient six, dont ce Fred Moore qui avait déjà eu avec Dick un commencement d’altercation.

Il arriva que le cochonnet des joueurs de boules vint rouler dans la marelle des enfants. Sand s’appliquait précisément à mener à bien des quadruples de la plus grande difficulté. Tout à son affaire, il eut le malheur de ne pas voir la petite boule et de la déplacer involontairement du pied. Il fut aussitôt saisi par l’oreille.

“Eh! gamin, disait en même temps une grosse voix, tu ne pourrais pas faire un peu attention?”

Les doigts qui tenaient l’oreille serrant avec quelque rudesse, le sensible Sand se mit à pleurer.

Les choses sans doute en fussent restées là, si Dick, entraîné par son tempérament belliqueux, n’eût jugé à propos d’intervenir.

Tout à coup, Fred Moore — car tel était l’ennemi redoutable que Sand avait offensé — fut obligé de lâcher son prisonnier pour se défendre à son tour. Un allié inconnu de ce prisonnier — on emploie les armes qu’on peut! — le pinçait cruellement par derrière. Il se retourna vivement et se trouva face à face avec l’impertinent qui déjà l’avait une première fois bravé.

“C’est encore toi, morveux!” s’écria-t-il, en allongeant le bras pour appréhender cet infime adversaire.

Mais Sand et Dick, cela faisait deux. Si la capture de l’un était aisée, il n’en était pas de même de celle de l’autre. Dick fit un bond de côté et prit la fuite, poursuivi par Fred Moore sacrant et jurant comme un templier.

La poursuite se prolongea. Chaque fois que son ennemi allait l’atteindre, Dick s’échappait par un crochet, et Moore, de plus en plus irrité, ne trouvait devant lui que le vide. Toutefois, la partie était trop inégale pour qu’elle pût s’éterniser. Entre les jambes de Dick et celles de Fred Moore, aucune comparaison n’était possible. Malgré la belle défense du fuyard, l’instant vint où il lui fallut renoncer à tout espoir.

À ce moment précis, au moment où Fred Moore, lancé en pleine course, n’avait plus qu’à étendre la main pour en finir, son pied heurta un obstacle malencontreux, et, perdant l’équilibre, il tomba rudement sur le sol, au grand dommage de ses genoux et de ses mains. Dick et Sand, profitant de la diversion, s’empressèrent de se mettre hors d’atteinte.

L’obstacle qui avait causé la chute de Fred Moore était un bâton, et ce bâton n’était autre chose que la béquille de Marcel Norely. Pour secourir son ami en péril, l’enfant avait employé le seul moyen qui fût en son pouvoir, en lançant sa béquille dans les jambes de l’émigrant. Maintenant, heureux du succès obtenu, il riait de bon cœur, sans se douter qu’il eût accompli un acte tout simplement héroïque. Héroïque, son intervention l’était, pourtant, au premier chef, puisque le petit infirme, en se privant d’un accessoire indispensable, et en se condamnant par cela même à l’immobilité, attirait nécessairement sur lui la correction que Fred Moore destinait à un autre.

Celui-ci se redressa furieux. D’un bond, il fut sur Marcel Norely qu’il enleva comme une plume. Ainsi ramené à la saine réalité des choses, l’enfant cessa de rire et poussa incontinent des cris perçants. Mais l’autre n’en avait cure. Sa grosse main se leva, pleine d’une averse de soufflets…

Elle ne retomba pas. Quelqu’un l’avait arrêtée par derrière et la retenait d’une étreinte impérieuse, tandis que, sur un ton de blâme, une voix prononçait:

“Eh quoi! monsieur Moore… un enfant!…”

Fred Moore se retourna. Qui se permettait de lui donner des leçons? Il reconnut le Kaw-djer qui, accentuant le blâme, continuait de sa voix calme:

“Et infirme encore!

— De quoi vous mêlez-vous? cria Fred Moore. Lâchez-moi, ou sinon!…”

Le Kaw-djer ne paraissant nullement disposé à obéir à la sommation, Fred Moore, d’un violent effort, essaya de se dégager. Mais la prise était bonne et ne céda pas. Hors de lui, il repoussa Marcel Norely et leva l’autre main, prêt à frapper. Sans faire un geste, sans qu’un muscle de son visage bougeât, le Kaw-djer se contenta d’aggraver le tenaillement de ses doigts. La douleur dut être vive, car Fred Moore n’acheva pas le geste commencé. Ses genoux fléchirent.

Le Kaw-djer aussitôt desserra son étreinte et lâcha la main qu’il retenait prisonnière. Cette main, Fred Moore, ivre de rage, la porta à sa ceinture et la brandit armée d’un large coutelas de paysan. Il voyait rouge, comme on dit. Dans ses yeux luisait la folie du meurtre.

Fort heureusement, les autres joueurs de boules, épouvantés de la tournure que prenaient les choses, s’interposèrent et maîtrisèrent l’énergumène, que le Kaw-djer contemplait avec un étonnement mêlé de tristesse.

Il était donc possible qu’un homme, sous l’influence de la colère, devînt à ce point l’esclave de ses nerfs? C’était bien un homme, cependant, cet être qui se débattait comme un insensé, en écumant et en poussant des cris qui s’étranglaient dans sa gorge! Devant un tel spectacle, le Kaw-djer ne modifierait-il pas ses théories libertaires? En arriverait-il à admettre que l’humanité a besoin d’être aidée par une salutaire contrainte dans sa lutte éternelle contre les passions bestiales qui l’entraînent?

“On se retrouvera, camarade!” parvint enfin à articuler Fred Moore, que maintenaient solidement quatre robustes gaillards.

Le Kaw-djer haussa les épaules et s’éloigna sans retourner la tête. Au bout de quelques pas, il avait chassé de son esprit le souvenir de cette absurde querelle. Faisait-il preuve de sagesse en attribuant si peu d’importance à l’incident? Un avenir encore lointain devait lui prouver que Fred Moore en conservait plus durable mémoire.

CHAPITRE V

V

Un navire en vue

Au début de juillet, Halg eut une grosse émotion. Il se découvrit un rival. Cet émigrant du nom de Patterson, qui lui avait procuré à prix d'or les vêtements dont il était si fier, était entré en relations avec la famille Ceroni et tournait visiblement autour de Graziella.

Halg fut désespéré de cette complication. Un adolescent de dix-huit ans, à demi sauvage, pouvait-il lutter contre un homme fait, pourvu de richesses qui semblaient fabuleuses au pauvre Indien? Malgré l'affection qu'elle lui témoignait, était-il admissible que Graziella hésitât?

Celle-ci n'hésitait pas, en effet, mais ses préférences n'allaient pas dans le sens qu'il redoutait. L'innocente tendresse et la jeunesse de Halg triomphaient sans peine des avantages de son compétiteur. Si l'Irlandais s'entêtait à s'imposer, c'est qu'il n'était pas sensible à l'éloignement que lui témoignaient Graziella et sa mère. Elles lui répondaient à peine, quand il leur adressait la parole, et feignaient de ne pas s'apercevoir de sa présence.

Patterson n'en montrait aucun trouble. Cela ne l'empêchait pas de continuer son manège avec la froide persévérance qui avait jusqu'ici assuré le succès de ses entreprises. Il ne laissait pas, d'ailleurs, d'avoir un allié dans la place, et cet allié n'était autre que Lazare Ceroni. S'il était mal reçu par les deux femmes, le père, du moins, lui faisait bon visage et paraissait approuver la recherche dont sa fille était l'objet. Patterson et lui étaient dans les meilleurs termes. Parfois même, ils s'isolaient pour de mystérieux conciliabules, comme s'ils eussent traité des affaires qui ne regardaient personne. Quelles affaires pouvaient bien être communes à cet ivrogne invétéré et à ce paysan madré, à ce panier percé et à cet avare?

Ces conciliabules étaient pour Halg une cause de sérieux soucis, qu'aggravait encore la conduite de Lazare Ceroni. Le misérable continuait à s'enivrer, et les scènes recommençaient à intervalles variables, mais de plus en plus rapprochés. Halg ne manquait pas d'en informer chaque fois le Kaw-djer, et celui-ci portait le fait à la connaissance d'Hartlepool. Mais ni le Kaw-djer, ni Hartlepool ne pouvaient arriver à découvrir comment Lazare Ceroni se procurait cette quantité d'alcool, alors qu'il n'en existait pas une goutte sur l'île Hoste, en dehors des provisions sauvées du Jonathan.

La tente abritant ces provisions était gardée jour et nuit, en effet, par les seize survivants de l'équipage, divisés en huit sections de deux hommes, qui se relevaient toutes les trois heures. Ceux-ci, y compris Kennedy et Sirdey, subissaient, du reste, docilement l'ennui de ces trois heures de garde quotidiennes. Aucun d'eux ne se permettait le moindre murmure et ils faisaient preuve de la même obéissance envers Hartlepool que lorsqu'ils naviguaient sous ses ordres. Leur esprit de discipline demeurait intact. Ils formaient un groupe numériquement faible, mais que l'union rendait fort, sans même tenir compte du précieux concours que Dick et Sand n'eussent pas manqué cependant de lui apporter, le cas échéant.

Pour le moment, tout au moins, personne ne songeait à mettre à contribution la bonne volonté des deux enfants. Dispensés de garde à cause de leur âge, ils jouissaient d'une liberté complète qu'ils employaient à s'amuser à cœur perdu. Le temps passé sur l'île Hoste ferait certainement époque dans leur existence et resterait gravé dans leur esprit comme une période de plaisirs incessants. Ils modifiaient leurs jeux selon les circonstances. La neige tombait-elle en épais flocons? Ils y creusaient des cachettes où se livraient de prodigieuses parties. La température s’abaissait-elle au-dessous du point de congélation? C’était le moment des glissades, ou bien, à cheval sur une planche en guise de traîneau, ils s’élançaient le long des pentes et goûtaient l’ivresse des chutes vertigineuses. Le soleil brillait-il au contraire? Accompagnés d’innombrables galopins de leur espèce, ils se répandaient alors dans les environs du campement et inventaient mille jeux dont l’agrément se mesurait à la violence.

Au cours d’une de leurs randonnées au bord de la mer, ils découvrirent, un jour qu’ils n’étaient accompagnés par hasard que de trois ou quatre enfants, une grotte naturelle creusée dans les flancs de la falaise, au revers du cap limitant à l’Est la baie Scotchwell. Cette grotte, dont l’ouverture, orientée au Sud, regardait par conséquent le rivage sur lequel s’était perdu le Jonathan, n’eût pas retenu longtemps leur attention sans une particularité qui la rendait infiniment plus intéressante. Au fond s’ouvrait une fissure aboutissant, après deux ou trois mètres, à une seconde caverne entièrement souterraine, où naissait une galerie sinueuse, qui s’élevait, au travers du massif, jusqu’à une grotte supérieure, ouverte, celle-ci, sur le versant nord de la falaise. De là, on apercevait le campement, où l’on pouvait descendre en se laissant glisser sur la pente rocailleuse.

Cette découverte remplit d’aise les petits explorateurs. Ils se gardèrent bien de la publier.

Ce chapelet de grottes, c’était un domaine qui leur appartenait et dont ils étaient friands de conserver l’exclusive propriété. Ils y allèrent, au contraire, en grand mystère, afin d’y organiser des amusements supérieurs. Ils y furent successivement des sauvages, des Robinsons, des voleurs, avec la même passion.

De quels cris retentirent ces voûtes souterraines! De quelles effrénées galopades résonna la galerie qui réunissait les deux étages du système!

La traversée de cette galerie n’était pas sans danger, cependant. En un point de son parcours, elle paraissait prête à s’effondrer. Là, son toit, élevé d’un mètre tout au plus, n’était soutenu que par un bloc unique, dont la base mordait à peine sur un autre roc incliné et que le plus petit effort eût fait glisser. De là, nécessité de s’avancer sur les genoux et de s’insinuer avec la plus extrême prudence dans l’espace étroit restant libre entre le bloc instable et la paroi de la galerie. Mais ce danger pour terrifiant qu’il fût en réalité, n’effrayait pas les enfants, et son seul effet était de donner plus de piquant à leurs jeux.

Ainsi Dick et Sand occupaient joyeusement leur temps. Ils ne se souciaient de rien, pas même de leur ennemi, Fred Moore, qu’ils rencontraient parfois de loin et devant lequel ils prenaient alors la fuite sans vergogne. L’émigrant n’essayait pas, d’ailleurs, de les poursuivre. Sa colère était tombée, et ce n’est pas contre les deux enfants que subsistait sa rancune.

Au surplus, que Fred Moore fût irrité ou non, ceux-ci ne songeaient pas à se le demander. Rien n’existait pour eux que leurs jeux, grâce auxquels les jours passaient avec une rapidité qu’ils estimaient déplorable.

Si, par un référendum, on eût consulté les émigrants, Dick et Sand eussent probablement été les seuls de cet avis. Autant le temps leur semblait court, autant il semblait long aux autres, confinés le plus souvent dans leurs inconfortables demeures.

Bien entendu, il convient de faire exception pour Lewis Dorick et son cortège de chapardeurs. Pour ceux-ci, l'hivernage s'écoulait agréablement. Ces malins avaient résolu la question sociale. Ils vivaient comme en pays conquis, ne se privant de rien, thésaurisant même, en vue de mauvais jours possibles.

C'était merveille que leurs victimes fissent preuve d'une telle longanimité. Il en était ainsi cependant. Les exploités représentaient assurément le nombre, mais ils l'ignoraient, et il ne leur venait même pas à la pensée de grouper leurs forces éparses. La bande de Dorick formait au contraire un faisceau compact et s'imposait par la peur à chaque émigrant individuellement. En fait, personne n'osait résister aux exactions de ces tyrans.

Par des moyens moins répréhensibles, une cinquantaine d'autres naufragés avaient également réussi à lutter contre la dépression qui résultait de cette vie stagnante. Sous la direction de Karroly, ils occupaient leurs loisirs à pourchasser les loups marins.

C'est un difficile métier que celui de louvetier. Après avoir attendu patiemment que les amphibies, dont la méfiance est très grande, s'aventurent sur le rivage, il faut faire en sorte de les cerner sans leur laisser le temps de prendre la fuite. L'opération ne va pas sans risques, ces animaux choisissant toujours les points les plus escarpés pour s'y livrer à leurs ébats.

Bien guidés par Karroly, les chasseurs obtinrent un brillant succès. Ils firent un butin considérable de loups marins, dont la graisse pouvait être utilisée pour l'éclairage et le chauffage, et dont les peaux assureraient un bénéfice important, au jour du rapatriement.

Abstraction faite de ces énergiques, les émigrants, très déprimés, préféraient se terrer frileusement dans leurs demeures. La température n'était pas excessive pourtant. Pendant la période la plus froide, qui s'étendit du 15 juillet au 15 août, le minimum thermométrique fut de douze degrés, et la moyenne de cinq degrés au-dessous de zéro. Les affirmations du Kaw-djer étaient donc justifiées, et la vie dans cette région n'aurait rien eu de particulièrement cruel, n'eût été la fréquence du mauvais temps et la pénétrante humidité qui en était la conséquence.

Cette humidité perpétuelle avait de déplorables résultats au point de vue hygiénique. Les maladies se multipliaient. Le Kaw-djer arrivait généralement à les enrayer, mais il n'en était pas ainsi quand elles se développaient dans des organismes affaiblis, et par suite incapables de réagir. Au cours de l'hiver, il se produisit pour cette raison huit décès, dont Lewis Dorick dut être désolé, car ils frappèrent en majorité dans la partie de la population qui se laissait le plus bénévolement mettre à contribution.

Un de ces décès désespéra Dick et Sand. Ce fut celui de Marcel Norely. Le petit infirme ne put résister à ce rude climat. Sans souffrance, sans agonie, il s'éteignit un soir en souriant.

Les survivants ne semblaient pas fort émus de ces disparitions. Outre qu'elles étaient en quelque sorte noyées dans la foule, on se flatte volontiers d'échapper personnellement aux malheurs du voisin. L'annonce d'une mort nouvelle n'interrompait qu'un instant leur léthargie. À vrai dire, ils paraissent ne plus avoir de vitalité, hormis pour s'égosiller dans des disputes aussi violentes d'expression que futiles dans leur principe.

La fréquente répétition de ces querelles inspirait au Kaw-djer d'amères réflexions. Il était trop intelligent pour ne pas voir les choses sous leur vrai jour, trop sincère pour échapper aux conséquences logiques de ses observations.

Dans cette réunion fortuite d’hommes venus de tous les points du monde, la maîtresse passion était décidément la haine. Non pas la haine blâmable encore, du moins logique, qui gonfle le cœur de celui qui souffre un grave et injuste dommage, mais une haine réciproque et latente, essentielle pour ainsi dire, qui, dans une catastrophe si exceptionnelle, et tout réduits qu’ils fussent aux dernières limites du malheur, et toutes pareilles que fussent leurs destinées sans joie, les jetait pour des riens les uns contre les autres, comme si la nature mêlait aux germes de vie un obscur, un impérieux instinct de détruire ce qu’elle crée.

La veulerie de ses compagnons frappait aussi le Kaw-djer. À peine si quelques-uns, tels que les quatre familles dissidentes et les chasseurs de loups marins, avaient eu le courage de réagir. Les autres se laissaient aller au jour le jour. Ils avaient pitance et logis. Ils n’en demandaient pas davantage. Aucun besoin de lutter contre la matière pour la soumettre à leur volonté, aucun désir d’améliorer leur sort au prix d’un effort, aucune prévision d’avenir. Esclaves dociles, disposés à exécuter ce qu’on leur commanderait, ils ne faisaient rien de leur initiative propre, et s’en remettaient à autrui du soin de décider pour eux.

Le Kaw-djer ne pouvait méconnaître enfin cette lâcheté générale, qui permettait à un petit nombre de dominer une majorité immense, qui créait quelques rares exploiteurs aux dépens d’un troupeau d’exploités.

L’homme est-il donc ainsi? Ces lois imparfaites qui le contraignent à penser et à tirer parti de son intelligence contre la force brute des choses, qui tendent à limiter le despotisme des uns et l’esclavage des autres, qui tiennent en brides les instincts haineux, ces lois sont-elles donc nécessaires, et est-elle nécessaire l’autorité qui les applique?

Le Kaw-djer n’en était pas encore à répondre par l’affirmative à une pareille question, mais qu’il pût seulement se la poser, cela suffisait à indiquer quelle transformation s’opérait dans sa pensée. Il était obligé de s’avouer que l’homme se montrait fort différent, dans la réalité, de la créature idéale qu’il s’était complu à imaginer de toutes pièces. Il n’y avait rien d’absurde a priori, par conséquent, à admettre qu’il fût bon de le protéger contre lui-même, contre sa faiblesse, son avidité et ses vices, ni à professer, chacun réclamant cette protection dans son intérêt propre, que les lois ne fussent en somme que l’expression transactionnelle des aspirations individuelles, comme serait en mécanique la résultante de forces divergentes.

Pris dans l’inextricable réseau de prescriptions qui ligottent les citoyens du Vieux Monde, lorsque, avant de s’exiler en Magellanie, il avait vécu parmi eux, le Kaw-djer n’avait ressenti que la gêne imposée par l’amas formidable des lois, des ordonnances, des décrets, et leur incohérence, leur caractère trop souvent vexatoire l’avaient aveuglé, sur la nécessité supérieure de leur principe. Mais, à présent, mêlé à ce peuple placé par le sort dans des conditions voisines de l’état primitif, il assistait, comme un chimiste penché sur son fourneau, à quelques-unes des incessantes réactions qui s’opèrent dans le creuset de la vie. À la lumière d’une telle expérience, cette nécessité commençait à lui apparaître, et les bases de sa vie morale en étaient ébranlées. Toutefois, le vieil homme se débattait en lui. S’il ne pouvait empêcher sa raison d’évoluer, son tempérament libertaire protestait. À tout instant, le problème se posait à son esprit, et c’était alors la bataille des arguments, ceux-là étayant sa doctrine, ceux-ci la sapant sans relâche. Lutte incessante, lutte cruelle, dont il était déchiré et meurtri.

Plus encore peut-être que l’imperfection des hommes, leur impuissance à rompre avec leur routine habituelle était, pour le Kaw-djer, un sujet d’étonnement. Sur cette côte déserte, à ces confins du monde, les naufragés n’avaient rien abandonné de leurs idées antérieures. Les principes, voire les conventions et les préjugés qui régissaient leur vie d’autrefois, gardaient sur eux le même empire. La notion de propriété, notamment, restait un article de foi. Pas un qui ne dît comme la chose la plus naturelle du monde: “Ceci est à moi”, et nul n’avait conscience du comique intense — comique tellement éblouissant pour les yeux d’un philosophe libertaire! — de cette prétention d’un être si fragile et si périssable à monopoliser pour lui, pour lui tout seul, une fraction quelconque de l’univers. Quelque absurde que l’estimât le Kaw-djer, cette prétention était cependant ancrée dans leurs cerveaux, et ils n’en démordaient pas. Personne ne consentait à se séparer au profit d’autrui du plus misérable des objets en sa possession, qu’en échange d’une contre-valeur, objet d’une autre nature ou service rendu. Dans tous les cas, il s’agissait d’une vente. Donner, le mot semblait rayé de leur vocabulaire et la chose de leur esprit.

Le Kaw-djer songeait que ses amis les Fuégiens, dont les hordes errantes sillonnent les terres magellaniques, eussent été bien surpris de pareilles théories, eux qui n’ont jamais rien possédé que leur personne.

Lors de ces échanges, ou, pour employer le mot juste, de ces ventes qui se renouvelaient constamment, il arrivait que le cédant n’eût besoin d’aucun service, ni d’aucun des objets possédés par l’autre partie. Dans ce cas, l’or servait à conclure la transaction. Le Kaw-djer admirait grandement cette pérennité de la valeur de l’or. Ce métal est, cependant, un bien imaginaire, il ne se mange pas, il ne peut servir à protéger contre le froid ni contre la pluie, et pourtant il est convoité à l’égal des biens réels qui possèdent ces avantages. Quel étrange et merveilleux phénomène que l’humanité entière s’incline, d’un consentement unanime, devant une matière essentiellement inutile et dont la convention générale fait tout le prix! Les hommes, en cela, ne sont-ils pas semblables à des enfants, qui, par manière de jeu, vendent sérieusement de petits cailloux que leur imagination transforme en objets précieux? Pour que le jeu finît, il suffirait que l’un deux découvrît et proclamât que ces objets précieux ne sont en vérité que des cailloux.

Certes, le Kaw-djer ne niait pas, le principe de la propriété étant admis, la commodité qui résultait de l’emploi d’une valeur arbitraire représentative de toutes les autres. Mais cette commodité n’allait pas, à ses yeux, sans un inconvénient beaucoup plus grave que l’avantage n’était précieux. C’est l’or qui, dans le régime de la propriété individuelle, permet la création et l’accroissement perpétuel des fortunes. Sans lui, les hommes, tous dans un état médiocre il est vrai, seraient du moins à peu près pareils. C’est grâce à lui qu’une seule et même main peut contenir en puissance tant de pouvoir et tant de plaisirs, tandis que d’innombrables êtres, pour en recevoir quelques parcelles, consentent à subir ce pouvoir et à procurer ces plaisirs auxquels ils n’auront point de part.

Le Kaw-djer se trompait assurément. L’or n’est qu’un moyen de satisfaire le besoin d’acquérir inhérent à la nature de l’homme. À défaut de ce moyen, il en eût imaginé un autre, qui eût présenté une même proportion d’inconvénients et d’avantages, et, dans tous les cas, il eût été ce qu’il est, un être illogique et divers, où se rencontrent à doses égales le meilleur et le pire.

Tels étaient, entre cent autres, les arguments pour et contre qui se heurtaient dans le cerveau du Kaw-djer, comme des soldats sur un champ de bataille. Le temps était passé où le droit à une liberté intégrale avait à ses yeux la force d’un dogme. Maintenant, ses maximes libertaires avaient perdu leur apparence de certitude irréfragable. Il en arrivait à discuter avec lui-même la nécessité de l’autorité et d’une hiérarchie sociale.

Les faits devaient se charger de lui fournir de nouvelles raisons en faveur de l’affirmative, en lui prouvant qu’il existe, parmi les hommes, comme parmi les animaux, de véritables bêtes fauves, dont il est nécessaire de juguler les dangereux instincts. Capables de tout pour satisfaire la passion qui les domine, de tels êtres sèmeraient, en effet, la désolation et la mort autour d’eux, sans la loi qui leur crie: halte-là!

Un drame de ce genre, drame poignant à coup sûr, puisque la faim, ce besoin primordial de tout organisme vivant, en était le ressort, se jouait précisément alors dans la maison occupée par Patterson en compagnie de Long et de Blaker, ce pauvre diable que la nature ironique avait doué de l’insatiable appétit catalogué en pathologie sous le nom de boulimie.

Ainsi que tout le monde, Blaker, au moment de la distribution, avait reçu sa part de vivres, mais, en raison de sa voracité maladive, cette part, prévue pour quatre mois, avait été épuisée en moins de deux. Depuis, comme par le passé, plus encore même que par le passé, il connaissait les tortures de la faim.

Sans doute, s’il eût été d’un naturel moins timide, il aurait aisément trouvé un remède à ses souffrances. Il aurait suffi d’un mot à Hartlepool ou au Kaw-djer pour qu’un supplément de nourriture lui fût distribué. Mais Blaker, peu avantagé au point de vue intellectuel, était bien loin de songer à une démarche si audacieuse. Placé, dès sa naissance, tout au bas de l’échelle sociale, son malheur avait depuis longtemps cessé de l’étonner, et il ne connaissait plus que cette passivité résignée qui est l’ultime ressource des misérables. Peu à peu, il avait pris l’habitude d’obéir comme un fétu impalpable à des forces irrésistibles dont il n’essayait même pas d’imaginer la nature, et c’est pourquoi il n’aurait jamais conçu le fol espoir de modifier d’une manière quelconque la distribution des vivres qu’il supposait avoir été ordonnée par une de ces forces supérieures.

Plutôt que de se plaindre, il fût mort d’inanition, si Patterson n’était venu à son secours.

L’Irlandais n’avait pas été sans remarquer avec quelle rapidité son compagnon consommait les aliments mis à sa disposition, et cette observation lui avait aussitôt fait entrevoir la possibilité d’une opération avantageuse. Tandis que Blaker dévorait, Patterson se rationna, au contraire. Poussant aux dernières limites ses instincts de sordide avarice, il se nourrit à peine, se priva du nécessaire, allant jusqu’à ramasser sans vergogne les restes dédaignés par les autres.

Le jour vint où Blaker n’eut plus rien à manger. C’était le moment qu’attendait Patterson. Sous couleur de lui rendre service, il proposa à son compagnon de lui rétrocéder à prix débattu une partie de ses provisions. Marché accepté d’enthousiasme, et aussitôt exécuté que conclu; marché qui se répéta à l’infini, tant que l’acheteur eut de l’argent, le vendeur prétextant de la rareté croissante des vivres pour augmenter graduellement ses prix. Par exemple, les poches de Blaker vidées, Patterson changea de ton. Il ferma incontinent boutique, sans accorder la plus légère attention aux regards éperdus du malheureux qu’il condamnait ainsi à mourir de faim.

Considérant son malheur comme un nouvel effet de la force des choses, celui-ci ne se plaignit pas plus qu’auparavant. Écroulé dans un coin, comprimant à deux mains son estomac torturé, il laissa passer les heures, immobile, ne trahissant ses sensations cruelles que par les tressaillements de son visage. Patterson le considérait d’un œil sec. Qu’importait que souffrît, qu’importait que mourût un homme qui ne possédait plus rien? La douleur eut enfin raison de la résignation du patient. Après quarante-huit heures de supplice, il sortit en chancelant, erra dans le campement, disparut…

Un soir, le Kaw-djer, en regagnant son ajoupa, heurta du pied un corps étendu. Il se pencha et secoua le dormeur qui ne répondit que par un gémissement. Le dormeur était un malade. Après l’avoir ranimé avec quelques gouttes d’un cordial, le Kaw-djer l’interrogea:

“Qu’avez-vous? demanda-t-il.

— J’ai faim”, répondit Blaker d’une voix faible.

Le Kaw-djer fut abasourdi.

“Faim!… répéta-t-il. N’avez-vous pas reçu votre part de vivres comme tout le monde?”

Blaker, alors, en phrases hachées, lui raconta brièvement sa triste histoire. Il lui dit sa maladie et le besoin morbide de manger qui en était la conséquence, comment, ses provisions épuisées, il avait vécu en achetant celles de Patterson, comment et pourquoi enfin celui-ci l’avait laissé, depuis trois jours, agoniser.

Le Kaw-djer écoutait avec stupéfaction cet incroyable récit. Il s’était donc trouvé un homme pour avoir le courage de se livrer à cet affreux négoce, un homme qui, en dépit de tous les drames et de tous les cataclysmes, avait conservé intacte une si effroyable avidité! Marchand voleur qui avait menti afin de pouvoir céder contre espèces ce que d’autres que lui eussent donné, marchand éhonté qui avait impitoyablement vendu la vie à son semblable!

Le Kaw-djer garda ses réflexions pour lui. Quelle que fût l’infamie du coupable, mieux valait la laisser impunie, plutôt que de créer, en la dévoilant, une cause supplémentaire de discorde. Il se contenta de faire délivrer de nouvelles provisions à Blaker, en l’assurant qu’on lui en donnerait à l’avenir autant qu’il serait nécessaire.

Mais le nom de Patterson resta gravé dans sa mémoire, et l’individu qui le portait demeura pour lui le prototype de ce que l’âme humaine peut contenir de plus abject. Aussi ne fut-il pas surpris quand, trois jours plus tard, Halg prononça ce même nom à propos d’une autre histoire presque aussi répugnante que la première.

Le jeune homme revenait de sa visite quotidienne à Graziella. Dès qu’il aperçut le Kaw-djer, il courut à sa rencontre.

“Je sais, lui dit-il d’une haleine, qui fournit l’alcool à Ceroni.

— Enfin!… dit le Kaw-djer avec satisfaction. Qui est-ce?

— Patterson.

— Patterson!…

— Lui-même, affirma Halg. Tout à l’heure, je l’ai vu lui remettre du rhum. Je m’explique maintenant pourquoi ils sont si bons amis, tous les deux.

— Tu es sûr de ne pas te tromper? insista le Kaw-djer.

— Absolument. Le plus curieux, c’est que Patterson ne donne pas sa marchandise. Il la vend, et même assez cher. J’ai entendu leur discussion. Ceroni se plaignait. Il disait que toutes ses économies étaient passées dans la poche de Patterson et qu’il n’avait plus rien. L’autre ne répondait pas, mais il paraissait peu disposé à continuer, du moment que c’était gratuitement.”

Halg s’arrêta un instant, puis s’écria avec colère:

“Si Ceroni n’a plus d’argent, il est capable de tout. Que vont devenir sa femme et sa fille?

— On avisera, répondit le Kaw-djer. Et, après une pause:

— Puisque nous avons entamé ce sujet, dit-il d’un ton d’affectueux reproche, épuisons-le. Si je n’ai jamais voulu t’en parler, je n’ignore pas quels sont tes rêves. Où te mèneront-ils, mon garçon?”

Halg, les yeux baissés, garda le silence. Le Kaw-djer reprit:

“Dans peu de temps, dans un mois peut-être, tous ces gens-là vont disparaître de notre vie. Graziella comme les autres.

— Pourquoi ne resterait-elle pas avec nous? objecta le jeune Fuégien en relevant la tête. — Sa mère aussi, bien entendu.

— Crois-tu qu’elle consentirait à quitter son mari?” objecta le Kaw-djer.

Halg eut un geste violent.

“Il faudra qu’elle y consente!” affïrma-t-il d’une voix sourde.

Le Kaw-djer hocha la tête d’un air de doute.

“Graziella m’aidera à la persuader. Pour elle, son parti est pris. Elle est décidée à rester ici, si vous le permettez. Non seulement elle est lasse de la vie que lui fait son père, mais il y a aussi des émigrants dont elle a peur.

— Peur?…. répéta le Kaw-djer surpris.

— Oui. Patterson d'abord. Voilà un mois qu'il tourne autour d'elle, et, s'il a vendu du rhum à Ceroni, c'est pour mettre celui-ci dans son jeu. Depuis quelques jours, il y en a un autre, un nommé Sirk, un de la bande à Dorick. C'est le plus à craindre de tous.

— Qu'a-t-il fait?

— Graziella ne peut sortir sans le rencontrer. Il l'a abordée et lui a parlé grossièrement. Elle l'a remis à sa place, et Sirk l'a menacée. C'est un homme dangereux. Graziella en a peur. Heureusement, je suis là!"

Le Kaw-djer sourit de cette explosion de juvénile vanité. Du geste, il apaisa son pupille.

"Calme-toi, Halg, calme-toi. Attendons le jour du départ et nous verrons alors comment les choses tourneront. D'ici là je te recommande le sang-froid. La colère est, non seulement inutile, mais nuisible. Souviens-toi que la violence n'a jamais produit rien de bon et qu'il n'est pas de cas, sauf quand on est forcé de se défendre, où l'on soit excusable d'y recourir."

Les soucis du Kaw-djer furent accrus par cette conversation. Outre l'ennui de voir Halg engagé dans cette fâcheuse aventure, il comprenait que l'intervention de rivaux allait encore compliquer les choses, en excitant la jalousie du premier en date et en provoquant peut-être des scènes regrettables.

En ce qui concernait la question de l'alcool, la découverte de Halg n'avait fait que déplacer la difficulté sans la résoudre. On avait découvert le fournisseur de Ceroni. Mais où ce fournisseur se procurait-il l'alcool qu'il vendait? Patterson, dont il connaissait l’abominable nature, possédait-il un stock en réserve quelque part? C’était peu croyable. En admettant qu’il eût réussi, malgré la sévérité des règlements et la surveillance du capitaine Leccar, à embarquer une pacotille prohibée au départ, où l’eût-il cachée depuis le naufrage? Non, il puisait nécessairement dans la cargaison du Jonathan. Mais par quel moyen, puisqu’elle était gardée nuit et jour? Que le voleur fût Ceroni ou Patterson, la difficulté restait la même.

Les jours suivants n’amenèrent pas la solution du problème. Tout ce qu’il fut possible de constater, c’est que Lazare Ceroni continuait à s’enivrer comme par le passé.

Le temps s’écoula. On arriva au 15 septembre. Les réparations de la Wel-Kiej furent terminées à cette date. La chaloupe était remise en bon état au moment où la mer allait redevenir praticable.

La longueur croissante des jours annonçait l’équinoxe du printemps. Dans une semaine, on en aurait fini avec l’hiver.

Toutefois, avant de céder la place, la mauvaise saison eut un retour offensif. Pendant huit jours, un ouragan plus violent que ceux qui l’avaient précédé hurla sur l’île Hoste, obligeant les émigrants à se terrer une dernière fois. Puis le beau temps revint, et aussitôt la nature endormie commença à se réveiller.

Au début d’octobre, le campement reçut la visite de quelques Fuégiens. Ces indigènes se montrèrent très surpris de trouver l’île Hoste habitée par une si nombreuse population. Le naufrage du Jonathan, survenu au début de la période hivernale, était, en effet, resté inconnu des Indiens de l’archipel. Nul doute que la nouvelle ne s’en répandit désormais rapidement.

Les émigrants n’eurent qu’à se louer de leurs rapports avec ces quelques familles de Pêcherais. Par contre, il n’est pas certain que ceux-ci en eussent pu dire autant. Il y eut, en très petit nombre il est vrai, des civilisés, tels que les frères Moore, par exemple, qui crurent devoir affirmer la supériorité qu’ils s’attribuaient en se montrant brutaux et grossiers envers ces sauvages inoffensifs. L’un deux alla même plus loin et poussa la cupidité au point d’être tenté par les misérables richesses de cette horde vagabonde. Le Kaw-djer, attiré par des cris d’appel, dut un jour venir au secours d’une jeune Fuégienne que malmenait ce même Sirk dont Halg avait prononcé le nom. Le lâche individu cherchait à s’emparer des anneaux de cuivre dont la jeune fille ornait ses poignets, et qu’il s’imaginait être en or. Rudement châtié, il se retira l’injure à la bouche. C’était, tous comptes faits, le deuxième émigrant qui se déclarait ouvertement l’ennemi du Kaw-djer.

Celui-ci avait vu arriver avec grand plaisir ses amis Fuégiens. Il retrouvait en eux sa clientèle et, à leur empressement, à leurs témoignages de reconnaissance, on voyait quelle affection, on pourrait dire quelle adoration les mettait à ses pieds. Un jour, — on était alors le 15 octobre — Harry Rhodes ne put lui cacher combien le touchait la conduite de ces pauvres gens.

“Je comprends, lui dit-il, que vous soyez attaché à ce pays où vous faites œuvre si humaine, et que vous ayez hâte de retourner au milieu de ces tribus. Vous êtes un dieu pour elles…

— Un dieu?… interrompit le Kaw-djer. Pourquoi un dieu? Il suffit d’être un homme pour faire le bien!”

Harry Rhodes, sans insister, se borna à répondre:

“Soit, puisque ce mot vous révolte. Je dirai donc, pour exprimer autrement ma pensée, qu’il n’eût tenu qu’à vous de devenir roi de la Magellanie, au temps où elle était indépendante.

— Les hommes, ne fussent-ils que des sauvages, répliqua le Kaw-djer, n’ont aucun besoin d’un maître… D’ailleurs, un maître, les Fuégiens en ont un maintenant…”

Le Kaw-djer avait prononcé ces derniers mots presque à voix basse. Il semblait plus préoccupé que d’habitude. Les quelques paroles échangées lui rappelaient quelle serait l’incertitude de sa destinée, le jour prochain où il devrait se séparer de cette honnête famille qui avait réveillé en lui les instincts de sociabilité si naturels à l’homme. Ce serait pour lui un chagrin profond de quitter cette femme si dévouée dont il avait pu apprécier la charitable bonté, son mari, d’un caractère si sincère et si droit, devenu pour lui un ami, ces deux enfants Edward et Clary, auxquels il s’était attaché. Ce chagrin, la famille Rhodes l’éprouverait au même degré. Leur désir à tous eût été que le Kaw-djer consentît à les suivre dans la colonie africaine, où il serait apprécié, aimé, honoré comme à l’île Hoste. Mais Harry Rhodes n’espérait pas l’y décider. Il comprenait que ce n’était pas sans motifs graves qu’un tel homme avait rompu avec l’humanité, et le mot de cette étrange et mystérieuse existence lui échappait encore.

“Voici l’hiver achevé, dit Mme Rhodes abordant un autre sujet, et vraiment il n’aura pas été trop rigoureux…

— Et nous constatons, ajouta Harry Rhodes en s’adressant au Kaw-djer, que le climat de cette région est bien tel que nous l’avait affirmé notre ami. Aussi plusieurs d’entre nous auront-ils quelque regret de quitter l’île Hoste.

— Alors ne la quittons pas, s’écria le jeune Edward, et fondons une colonie en terre magellanique!

— Bon! répondit en souriant Harry Rhodes, et notre concession du fleuve Orange?… Et nos engagements avec la Société de colonisation?… Et le contrat avec le gouvernement portugais?…

— En effet! approuva le Kaw-djer d’un ton quelque peu ironique, il y a le gouvernement portugais… Ici, d’ailleurs, ce serait le gouvernement chilien. L’un vaut l’autre.

— Neuf mois plus tôt… commença Harry Rhodes.

— Neuf mois plus tôt, interrompit le Kaw-djer, vous auriez abordé une terre libre, à laquelle un traité maudit a volé son indépendance.”

Le Kaw-djer, les bras croisés, la tête redressée, portait ses regards dans la direction de l’Est, comme s’il se fût attendu à voir apparaître, venant de l’océan Pacifique en contournant la pointe de la presqu’île Hardy, le navire promis par le gouverneur de Punta-Arenas.

Le moment fixé était arrivé. On allait entrer dans la seconde quinzaine d’octobre. La mer, cependant, restait déserte.

Les naufragés commençaient à concevoir de ce retard des inquiétudes assez justifiées. Certes ils ne manquaient de rien. Les réserves de la cargaison étaient loin d’être épuisées et ne le seraient pas avant de longs mois encore. Mais enfin ils n’étaient pas à destination, ils n’entendaient pas se résigner à un second hivernage, et déjà quelques-uns parlaient de renvoyer la chaloupe à Punta-Arenas.

Tandis que Kaw-djer s’oubliait dans ses tristes pensées, Lewis Dorick et une dizaine de ses compagnons ordinaires vinrent à passer, bruyants et provocateurs, au retour d’une excursion dans l’intérieur de l’île. Cette famille Rhodes justement respectée dans ce petit monde, ce Kaw-djer dont on ne pouvait nier l’influence, ils n’avaient jamais caché les mauvais sentiments qu’ils leur inspiraient. Harry Rhodes le savait, d’ailleurs, et le Kaw-djer ne l’ignorait pas.

“Voilà des gens, dit le premier, que je laisserais ici sans regret. Il n’y a rien de bon à attendre de leur part. Ils seront une cause de trouble dans notre nouvelle colonie. Ils ne veulent admettre aucune autorité et ne rêvent que le désordre… Comme si ordre et autorité ne s’imposaient pas à toute réunion d’hommes.”

Le Kaw-djer ne répondit pas, soit qu’il n’eût pas entendu, tant il était absorbé dans ses pensées, soit qu’il voulût ne pas répondre.

Ainsi, la conversation tournait, quoi qu’on fît, dans le même cercle, et l’on en revenait toujours à des considérations sociales sur lesquelles un accord était impossible.

Harry Rhodes, en constatant le silence du Kaw-djer, regrettait d’avoir maladroitement abordé un pareil sujet, quand Hartlepool pénétra dans la tente et fit diversion.

“Je voudrais vous parler, monsieur, dit-il en s’adressant au Kaw-djer.

— Nous vous laissons…, commença Harry Rhodes.

— Inutile, interrompit le Kaw-djer qui, se tournant vers le maître d’équipage, ajouta: Qu’avez-vous à me dire, Hartlepool?

— J’ai à vous dire, répondit celui-ci, que je suis fixé au sujet de l’alcool.

— C’est donc bien celui du Jonathan qui est vendu à Ceroni?

— Oui.

— Il y a par conséquent des coupables?

— Deux: Kennedy et Sirdey.

— Vous en avez la preuve?

— Irréfutable.

— Quelle preuve?

— Voilà. Du jour où vous m’avez parlé de Patterson, j’ai eu de la méfiance. Ceroni est incapable d’avoir une idée tout seul, mais Patterson est un finaud. J’ai donc fait surveiller le particulier…

— Par qui? interrompit, en fronçant le sourcil, le Kaw-djer qui répugnait à l’espionnage.

— Par les mousses, répondit Hartlepool. Ils ne sont pas bêtes non plus, et ils ont déniché le pot aux roses. Ils ont pincé en flagrant délit Kennedy hier et Sirdey ce matin, au moment où, profitant de l’inattention de leur compagnon de garde, ils vidaient une moque de rhum dans la gourde de Patterson.”

Le souvenir du martyre de Tullia et de Graziella, et aussi la pensée de Halg, firent oublier pour un instant au Kaw-djer ses doctrines libertaires.

“Ce sont des traîtres, dit-il. Il faut sévir contre eux.

— C’est aussi mon avis, approuva Hartlepool, et c’est pourquoi je suis venu vous chercher.

— Moi?… Pourquoi ne pas faire le nécessaire vous-même?”

Hartlepool secoua la tête, en homme qui voit clairement les choses.

“Depuis la perte du Jonathan, je n’ai plus d’autre autorité que celle qu’on veut bien me reconnaître, expliqua-t-il. Ceux-là ne m’écouteraient pas.

— Pourquoi m’écouteraient-ils davantage?

— Parce qu’ils vous craignent.”

Le Kaw-djer fut très frappé de la réponse. Quelqu’un le craignait donc? Ce ne pouvait être qu’à cause de sa force supérieure. Toujours le même argument: la force, à la base des premiers rapports sociaux.

“J’y vais”, dit-il d’un air sombre.

Il se dirigea en droite ligne vers la tente qui abritait la cargaison du Jonathan. Kennedy précisément venait de reprendre la garde.

“Vous avez trahi la confiance qu’on avait en vous… prononça sévèrement le Kaw-djer.

— Mais, monsieur… balbutia Kennedy.

— Vous l’avez trahie, affirma le Kaw-djer d’un ton froid. À partir de cet instant, Sirdey et vous ne faites plus partie de l’équipage du Jonathan.

— Mais… voulut encore protester Kennedy.

— J’espère que vous ne vous le ferez pas répéter.

— C’est bon, monsieur… c’est bon…” bégaya Kennedy, retirant humblement son béret.

À ce moment, derrière le Kaw-djer, une voix demanda:

“De quel droit donnez-vous des ordres à cet homme?”

Le Kaw-djer se retourna et aperçut Lewis Dorick qui, en compagnie de Fred Moore, avait assisté à l’exécution de Kennedy.

“Et de quel droit m’interrogez-vous?” répondit-il d’une voix hautaine.

Se voyant soutenu, Kennedy avait remis son béret. Il ricanait avec insolence.

“Si je ne l’ai pas, je le prends, riposta Lewis Dorick. Ce ne serait pas la peine d’habiter une île Hoste pour y obéir à un maître.”

Un maître!… Il se trouvait quelqu’un pour accuser le Kaw-djer d’agir en maître!

“Eh!… c’est assez la coutume de Monsieur, intervint Fred Moore, en prononçant ce dernier mot avec emphase. Monsieur n’est pas comme les autres, sans doute. Il commande, il tranche… Monsieur est l’empereur, peut-être?”

Le cercle se resserra autour du Kaw-djer.

“Cet homme, dit Dorick de sa voix cinglante, n’est tenu d’obéir à personne. Il reprendra, si cela lui plaît, sa place dans l’équipage.”

Le Kaw-djer garda le silence, mais, ses adversaires faisant un nouveau pas en avant, il serra les poings.

Allait-il donc être obligé de se défendre par la force? Certes, il ne craignait pas de tels ennemis. Ils étaient trois. Ils auraient pu être dix. Mais quelle honte qu'un être pensant fût obligé d'employer les mêmes arguments que la brute!

Le Kaw-djer n'en fut pas réduit à cette extrémité. Harry Rhodes et Hartlepool l'avaient suivi, prêts à lui prêter main forte. Ils apparaissaient au loin. Dorick, Moore et Kennedy battirent aussitôt en retraite.

Le Kaw-djer les suivait d'un regard attristé, quand des vociférations éclatèrent du côté de la rivière. Il se porta dans cette direction avec ses deux compagnons. Ils ne tardèrent pas à distinguer un groupe nombreux d'où s'élevaient les cris qui avaient attiré leur attention. Presque tous les émigrants semblaient être réunis au même point en une foule serrée que de grands remous faisaient ondoyer. Au-dessus de la foule, des poings étaient brandis en gestes de menace. Quelle pouvait être la cause de ces troubles qui ressemblaient fort à une émeute?

Il n'en existait point. Ou du moins la cause initiale était d'une telle insignifiance et remontait si loin, que nul des belligérants n'eût été capable de la dire.

Cela avait commencé six semaines plus tôt, à propos d'un objet de ménage qu'une femme prétendait avoir prêté à une autre qui, de son côté, soutenait l'avoir rendu. Qui avait raison? Personne ne le savait. De fil en aiguille, les deux femmes avaient fini par s'injurier abondamment pour ne s'arrêter qu'à bout de souffle. Trois jours plus tard, la dispute avait repris, en s'aggravant, car les maris, cette fois, s'en étaient mêlés.

D’ailleurs, il n’était plus question de la cause première du litige. Déjà on avait perdu de vue l’origine de l’animosité, mais l’animosité subsistait. Pour lui obéir, par simple besoin de nuire, les quatre adversaires s’étaient reproché toutes les abominations de la terre, s’accusant réciproquement d’un grand nombre de mauvaises actions, parfois imaginaires, qu’ils faisaient sortir des ombres du passé. Plus une trouvaille était cruelle, plus elle rendait fier son auteur, et chacun s’enorgueillissait du mal qu’il faisait aux autres. “Eh bien! et moi?… Vous avez vu, quand je lui ai dit…”, cette forme de discours devait souvent revenir dans leurs conversations ultérieures.

L’escarmouche, toutefois, n’avait pas été plus loin, mais ensuite les langues ne s’étaient plus arrêtées. Auprès de leurs amis respectifs, les deux partis s’étaient livrés à un débinage en règle allant, suivant une marche progressive, des appréciations méprisantes et des insinuations, aux médisances et aux calomnies. Ces propos, répétés complaisamment aux oreilles des intéressés avaient déchaîné la tempête. Les hommes en étaient venus aux mains, et l’un d’eux avait eu le dessous. Le lendemain, le fils du vaincu avait prétendu venger son père, et il en était résulté une seconde bataille plus sérieuse que la précédente, les habitants des deux maisons où logeaient les combattants n’ayant pu résister au désir d’intervenir dans la querelle.

La guerre ainsi déclarée, les deux groupes avaient fait une active propagande, chacun recrutant des partisans. Maintenant, la majorité des émigrants se trouvait divisée en deux camps. Mais, à mesure que les armées étaient devenues plus nombreuses, le débat avait augmenté d’ampleur. Nul ne se souvenait plus de l’origine du litige. On discutait présentement sur la destination qu’il conviendrait d’adopter, lorsqu’on serait embarqué sur le navire de rapatriement. Continuerait-on à voguer vers l’Afrique? Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux au contraire retourner en Amérique? Tel était désormais le sujet de la dispute. Par quel chemin sinueux en était-on arrivé, parti d’un vulgaire objet de ménage, à débattre cette grave question? C’était un impénétrable mystère. Au surplus, on était convaincu de n’avoir jamais discuté autre chose, et les deux thèses en présence étaient défendues avec une égale passion. On s’abordait, on se quittait, après s’être jeté à la tête, en manière de projectiles, des arguments pour et contre, tandis que les cinq Japonais, unis en un groupe paisible à quelques mètres de la foule bourdonnante, regardaient avec étonnement leurs compagnons enfiévrés.

Ferdinand Beauval, tout guilleret de se sentir dans son élément, essayait en vain de se faire entendre. Il allait de l’un à l’autre, il se multipliait en pure perte. On ne l’écoutait pas. Personne d’ailleurs n’écoutait personne. Tout se passait en altercations particulières, chaque murmure partiel se fondant en une harmonie générale dont la tonalité montait de minute en minute. L’orage n’était pas loin. La foudre allait tomber. Le premier qui frapperait déclencherait ipso facto tous les poings, et la scène menaçait de finir par un pugilat général…

Comme une petite pluie abat parfois un grand vent, ainsi que l’assure le proverbe, il suffît d’un seul homme pour calmer cette exaspération un peu superficielle. Cet homme, l’un de ces émigrants qui avaient entrepris la chasse des loups marins, accourait de toute la vitesse de ses jambes vers la foule en ébullition. Et, tout en courant, avec de grands gestes d’appel:

“Un navire!… criait-il à pleins poumons. Un navire en vue!…”

CHAPITRE VI

VI

Libres

Un navire en vue!… Aucune autre nouvelle n’eût été capable d’émouvoir au même point ces exilés. L’émeute en fut apaisée du coup, et la foule se rua, comme un torrent, vers le rivage. On ne songeait plus à se disputer. On se pressait, on se bousculait silencieusement. En un instant, tous les émigrants furent réunis à l’extrémité de la pointe de l’Est, d’où l’on découvrait une large étendue de mer.

Harry Rhodes et Hartlepool avaient suivi le mouvement général et, non sans émotion, ils ouvraient avidement leurs yeux dans la direction du Sud où une traînée de fumée barrait, en effet, le ciel et annonçait un navire à vapeur.

On n’apercevait pas encore sa coque, mais elle surgit de minute en minute hors de la ligne de l’horizon. Bientôt il fut possible de reconnaître un bâtiment d’environ quatre cents tonneaux, à la corne duquel flottait un pavillon dont l’éloignement empêchait de discerner les couleurs.

Les émigrants échangèrent des regards désappointés. Jamais un bateau d’un aussi faible tonnage ne pourrait embarquer tout le monde. Ce steamer était-il donc un simple cargo-boat de nationalité quelconque, et non le navire de secours promis par le gouverneur de Punta-Arenas?

La question ne tarda pas à être élucidée. Le navire arrivait rapidement. Avant que la nuit ne fût complète, il restait à moins de trois milles dans le Sud.

“Le pavillon chilien”, dit le Kaw-djer, au moment où une risée, tendant l’étamine, permettait d’en distinguer les couleurs.

Trois quarts d’heure plus tard, au milieu de l’obscurité devenue profonde, un bruit de chaînes grinçant contre le fer des écubiers indiqua que le navire venait de mouiller. La foule alors se dispersa, chacun regagnant sa demeure en commentant l’événement.

La nuit s’écoula sans incident. À l’aube, on aperçut le navire à trois encablures du rivage. Hartlepool consulté déclara que c’était un aviso de la marine militaire chilienne.

Hartlepool ne se trompait pas. Il s’agissait bien d’un aviso chilien, dont, à huit heures du matin, le commandant se fit mettre à terre.

Il fut aussitôt entouré de visages anxieux. Autour de lui, les questions se croisèrent. Pourquoi avait-on envoyé un bateau si petit? Quand viendrait-on enfin les chercher? Ou bien, est-ce donc qu’on avait l’intention de les laisser mourir sur l’île Hoste? Le commandant ne savait auquel entendre.

Sans répondre à cet ouragan de questions, il attendit une accalmie, puis, quand il eut obtenu le silence à grand-peine, il prit la parole d’une voix qui parvint aux oreilles de tous.

Ses premiers mots furent pour rassurer ses auditeurs. Ceux-ci pouvaient compter sur la bienveillance du Chili. La présence de l’aviso prouvait d’ailleurs qu’on ne les avait pas oubliés.

Il expliqua ensuite que, si son gouvernement avait cru devoir leur envoyer un bâtiment de guerre au lieu du navire de rapatriement promis, c'est qu'il désirait leur soumettre auparavant une proposition qui serait probablement de nature à les séduire, proposition en vérité très singulière et des plus inattendues, que le commandant exposa sans autre préambule.

Mais, pour le lecteur, un préambule ne sera peut-être pas superflu, afin qu'il puisse sainement apprécier la pensée du gouvernement chilien.

Dans la mise en valeur de la partie ouest et sud de la Magellanie que lui attribuait le traité du 17 janvier 1881, le Chili avait voulu débuter par un coup de maître, en profitant du naufrage du Jonathan et de la présence sur l'île Hoste de plusieurs centaines d'émigrants.

Ce traité n'avait départagé en somme que des droits purement théoriques. Assurément la République Argentine n'avait plus rien à réclamer, en dehors de la Terre des États et de la fraction de la Patagonie et de la Terre de Feu placée sous sa souveraineté. Sur son propre domaine, le Chili avait toute liberté d'agir au mieux de ses intérêts. Mais il ne suffit pas d'entrer en possession d'une contrée et d'empêcher que d'autres nations puissent s'y créer des droits de premier occupant. Ce qu'il faut, c'est en tirer avantage, en exploitant les richesses de son sol au point de vue minéral et végétal. Ce qu'il faut, c'est l'enrichir par l'industrie et le commerce, c'est y attirer une population, si elle est inhabitée; c'est, en un mot, la coloniser. L'exemple de ce qui s'était déjà fait sur le littoral du détroit de Magellan, où Punta-Arenas voyait chaque année s'accroître son importance commerciale, devait encourager la République du Chili à tenter une nouvelle expérience, et à provoquer l'exode des émigrants vers les îles de l'archipel magellanique passées sous sa domination, afin de vivifier cette région fertile, abandonnée jusqu'alors à de misérables tribus indiennes.

Et précisément, voici que sur l’île Hoste, située au milieu de ce labyrinthe des canaux du

Sud, un grand navire était venu se jeter à la côte; voici que plus de mille émigrants de nationalités diverses, mais appartenant tous à ce trop-plein des grandes villes qui n’hésite pas à chercher fortune jusque dans les lointaines régions d’outre-mer, avaient été dans l’obligation de s’y réfugier.

Le gouvernement chilien se dit avec raison que c’était là une occasion inespérée de transformer les naufragés du Jonathan en colons de l’île Hoste. Ce ne fut donc pas un navire de rapatriement qu’il leur envoya, ce fut un aviso dont le commandant fut chargé de transmettre ses propositions aux intéressés.

Ces propositions, du caractère le plus inattendu, étaient en même temps des plus tentantes: la République du Chili offrait de se dessaisir purement et simplement de l’île Hoste au profit des naufragés du Jonathan, qui en disposeraient à leur gré, non en vertu d’une concession temporaire, mais en toute propriété, sans aucune condition ni restriction.

Rien de plus clair, rien de plus net, que cette proposition. On ajoutera: rien de plus adroit. En renonçant à l’île Hoste, afin d’en assurer l’immédiate mise en valeur, le Chili attirerait, en effet, des colons dans les autres îles, Clarence, Dawson, Navarin, Hermitte, demeurées sous sa domination. Si la nouvelle colonie prospérait, ce qui était probable, on saurait qu’il n’y a pas lieu de redouter le climat de la Magellanie, on connaîtrait ses ressources agricoles et minérales; on ne pourrait plus ignorer que, grâce à ses pâturages et à ses pêcheries, cet archipel est propice à la création d’entreprises florissantes, et le cabotage y prendrait une extension de plus en plus considérable.

Déjà, Punta-Arenas, port franc débarrassé de toute tracasserie douanière, librement ouvert aux navires des deux continents, avait un magnifique avenir. En fondant cette station, on s’était assuré, en somme, la prépondérance sur le détroit de Magellan. Il n’était pas sans intérêt d’obtenir un résultat analogue dans la partie méridionale de l’archipel. Pour atteindre plus sûrement ce but, le gouvernement de Santiago, guidé par un sens politique très fin, s’était décidé à faire le sacrifice de l’île Hoste, sacrifice d’ailleurs plus apparent que réel, cette île étant absolument déserte. Non content de l’exempter de toute contribution, il en abandonnait la propriété, il lui laissait son entière autonomie, il la distrayait de son domaine. Ce serait la seule partie de la Magellanie qui aurait une complète indépendance.

Il s’agissait maintenant de savoir si les naufragés du Jonathan accepteraient l’offre qui leur était faite, s’ils consentiraient à échanger contre l’île Hoste leur concession africaine.

Le gouvernement entendait résoudre cette question sans aucun retard. L’aviso avait apporté la proposition, il remporterait la réponse. Le commandant avait tout pouvoir pour traiter avec les représentants des émigrants. Mais ses ordres étaient de ne pas rester au mouillage de l’île Hoste au-delà de quinze jours au maximum. Ces quinze jours écoulés, il repartirait, que le traité fût signé ou non.

Si la réponse était affirmative, la nouvelle République serait immédiatement mise en possession, et arborerait le pavillon qu’il lui conviendrait d’adopter.

Si la réponse était négative, le gouvernement aviserait ultérieurement au moyen de rapatrier les naufragés. Ce n’était pas cet aviso de quatre cents tonnes, on le comprend, qui pourrait les transporter, ne fût-ce qu’à Punta-Arenas. On demanderait à la Société américaine de colonisation d’envoyer un navire de secours, dont la traversée exigerait un certain temps. Plusieurs semaines s'écouleraient donc encore, dans ce cas, avant que l'île fût évacuée.

Ainsi qu'on peut se l'imaginer, la proposition du gouvernement de Santiago produisit un effet extraordinaire.

On ne s'attendait à rien de pareil. Les émigrants, incapables de prendre une décision dans une si grave occurrence, commencèrent par se regarder les uns les autres avec ahurissement, puis toutes leurs pensées s'envolèrent à la fois vers celui qu'on estimait le plus capable de discerner l'intérêt commun. D'un même mouvement, dont le parfait ensemble prouvait à la fois leur reconnaissance, leur clairvoyance et leur faiblesse, ils se retournèrent vers l'Ouest, c'est-à-dire vers le creek à l'embouchure duquel devait se balancer la Wel-Kiej.

Mais la Wel-Kiej avait disparu. Si loin que pussent atteindre les regards, nul ne l'aperçut à la surface de la mer.

Il y eut un instant de stupeur. Puis des ondulations parcoururent la foule. Chacun s'agitait, se penchant, cherchant à découvrir celui dans lequel tous mettaient leur espoir. Il fallut bien enfin se rendre à l'évidence. Emmenant avec lui Halg et Karroly, le Kaw-djer décidément était parti.

On fut atterré. Ces pauvres gens avaient pris l'habitude de s'en remettre du soin de les conduire sur le Kaw-djer, dont ils n'en étaient plus à connaître l'intelligence et le dévouement. Et voilà qu'il les abandonnait au moment où se jouait leur destinée! Sa disparition ne produisit pas moins d'effet que l'apparition du navire dans les eaux de l'île Hoste.

Harry Rhodes, pour des motifs différents, fut aussi profondément affligé. Il aurait compris que le Kaw-djer abandonnât l'île Hoste le jour où les émigrants s'en éloigneraient, mais pourquoi ne pas avoir attendu jusque-là? On ne rompt pas avec cette brusquerie des liens de sincère amitié, et l'on ne se quitte pas s'en s'être dit adieu.

D'un autre côté, pourquoi ce départ précipité qui ressemblait à une fuite? Était-ce donc l'arrivée du bâtiment chilien qui l'avait provoqué?…

Toutes les hypothèses étaient admissibles, étant donné le mystère qui entourait la vie de cet homme, dont on ne connaissait même pas la nationalité.

L'absence de leur conseiller ordinaire, au moment où ses conseils eussent été le plus précieux, désempara les émigrants. Leur foule se désagrégea peu à peu, si bien que le commandant de l'aviso finit par demeurer presque seul. L'un après l'autre, afin de n'être pas dans le cas de participer à une décision quelconque, ils s'éloignaient discrètement par petits groupes, où l'on échangeait des paroles rares sur l'offre surprenante dont on venait de recevoir la communication.

Pendant huit jours cette offre fut le sujet de toutes les conversations particulières. Le sentiment général, c'était la surprise. La proposition semblait même si étrange que nombre d'émigrants se refusaient à la prendre au sérieux. Harry Rhodes, sollicité par ses compagnons, dut aller trouver le commandant pour lui demander des explications, vérifier les pouvoirs dont il était porteur, s'assurer par lui-même que l'indépendance de l'île Hoste serait garantie par la République Chilienne.

Le commandant ne négligea rien pour convaincre les intéressés. Il leur fit comprendre quels étaient les mobiles du gouvernement et combien il était avantageux pour des émigrants de se fixer dans une région dont on leur assurait la possession. Il ne manqua pas de leur rappeler la prospérité de Punta-Arenas et d’ajouter que le Chili aurait à cœur de venir en aide à la nouvelle colonie.

“L’acte de donation est prêt, ajouta le commandant. Il n’attend plus que les signatures.

— Lesquelles? demanda Harry Rhodes.

— Celles des délégués choisis par les émigrants en assemblée générale.”

C’était, en effet, la seule manière de procéder. Plus tard, lorsque la colonie s’occuperait de son organisation, elle déciderait s’il lui convenait ou non de nommer un chef. Elle choisirait en toute liberté le régime qui lui paraîtrait le meilleur, et le Chili n’interviendrait dans ce choix en aucune façon.

Pour qu’on ne soit pas étonné des suites que cette proposition allait voir, il convient de se rendre un compte exact de la situation.

Quels étaient ces passagers que le Jonathan avait pris à San Francisco et qu’il transportait à la baie de Lagoa? De pauvres gens que les nécessités de l’existence forçaient à s’expatrier. Que leur importait, en somme, de s’établir ici ou là, du moment que leur avenir était assuré, et pourvu que les conditions de l’habitat fussent également favorables.

Or, depuis qu’ils occupaient l’île Hoste, tout un hiver s’était écoulé. Ils avaient pu constater par eux-mêmes que le froid n’y était pas excessif, et ils constataient maintenant que la belle saison s’y manifestait avec une précocité et une générosité qu’on ne rencontre pas toujours dans des régions plus voisines de l’équateur.

Au point de vue de la sécurité, la comparaison ne semblait pas favorable à la baie de Lagoa, voisine des Anglais, de l'Orange et des populations barbares de la Cafrerie. Assurément, les émigrants avaient dû, avant de s'embarquer, tenir compte de ces aléas, mais ces aléas augmentaient d'importance à leurs yeux, à présent qu'une occasion se présentait de s'établir dans une contrée déserte, loin de ces voisinages dangereux à des titres divers.

D'autre part, la Société de colonisation n'avait obtenu sa concession sud-africaine que pour une durée déterminée, et le gouvernement portugais n'aliénait pas ses droits au profit des futurs colons. En Magellanie, au contraire, ceux-ci jouiraient d'une liberté sans limites, et l'île Hoste, devenue leur propriété, serait élevée au rang d'État souverain.

Enfin, il y avait cette double considération qu'en demeurant à l'île Hoste on éviterait un nouveau voyage et que le gouvernement chilien s'intéresserait au sort de la colonie. On pourrait compter sur son assistance. Des relations régulières s'établiraient avec Punta-Arenas. Des comptoirs se fonderaient sur le littoral du détroit de Magellan et sur d'autres points de l'archipel. Le commerce se développerait avec les Falkland, lorsque les pêcheries seraient convenablement organisées. Et même, dans un temps prochain, la République Argentine ne laisserait sans doute pas en état d'abandon ses possessions de la Fuégie. Elle y créerait des bourgades rivales de Punta-Arenas, et la Terre de Feu aurait sa capitale argentine comme la presqu'île de Brunswick a sa capitale chilienne[1].

Tous ces arguments étaient de poids, il faut le reconnaître, et finirent par l'emporter.

Après de longs conciliabules, il devint manifeste que la majorité des émigrants tendait à

1 C’est bien ce qui est arrivé, et il existe maintenant une bourgade argentine, Ushaia, sur le canal du Beagle. l’acceptation des offres du gouvernement chilien.

Combien il était regrettable que le Kaw-djer eût précisément quitté l’île Hoste, lorsqu’on aurait eu si volontiers recours à ses conseils! Personne n’était mieux qualifié que lui pour indiquer la meilleure solution. Très probablement il eût été d’avis d’accepter une proposition qui rendait l’indépendance à l’une des onze grandes îles de l’archipel magellanique. Harry Rhodes ne doutait pas que le Kaw-djer n’eût parlé dans ce sens avec cette autorité que lui donnaient tant de services rendus.

En ce qui le concernait personnellement, il était acquis à cette solution, et, phénomène qui avait peu de chances de se reproduire jamais, son opinion était conforme à celle de Ferdinand Beauval. Le leader socialiste faisait, en effet, une active propagande en faveur de l’acceptation. Qu’espérait-il donc? Projetait-il de mettre sa doctrine en pratique? Cette foule inculte, propriétaire indivise, comme aux premiers âges du monde, d’un territoire dont personne n’était fondé à réclamer pour lui-même la moindre parcelle, quelle aventure merveilleuse, quel champ magnifique pour la grande expérience d’un collectivisme ou même d’un communisme intégral!

Aussi, comme Ferdinand Beauval se multipliait! Comme il allait des uns aux autres, plaidant sa cause à satiété! Combien d’éloquence il dépensait sans compter!

Il fallut enfin en venir au vote. Le terme fixé par le gouvernement chilien approchait, et le commandant de l’aviso pressait la solution de cette affaire. À la date indiquée, le 30 octobre, il appareillerait, et le Chili conserverait tous ses droits sur l’île Hoste.

Une assemblée générale fut convoquée pour le 26 octobre. Prirent part au scrutin définitif, tous les émigrants majeurs, au nombre de huit cent vingt-quatre, le reste se composant de femmes, d’enfants et de jeunes gens n’ayant pas atteint vingt et un ans, ou d’absents, tels que les chefs des familles Gordon, Rivière, Ivanoff et Gimelli.

Le dépouillement du scrutin donna sept cent quatre-vingt-douze suffrages en faveur de l’acceptation, majorité considérable, on le voit. Il n’y avait eu que trente-deux opposants, qui voulaient s’en tenir au projet primitif et se rendre à la baie de Lagoa. Encore acceptèrent-ils finalement de se soumettre à la décision du plus grand nombre.

On procéda ensuite à l’élection de trois délégués. Ferdinand Beauval obtint à cette occasion un succès flatteur. Enfin, une de ses campagnes n’aboutissait pas à un échec et il arrivait aux honneurs. Il fut désigné par les émigrants qui, obéissant à un instinctif sentiment de prudence, lui adjoignirent toutefois Harry Rhodes et Hartlepool.

Le traité fut signé le jour même entre ces délégués et le commandant représentant le gouvernement chilien, traité dont le texte extrêmement simple ne contenait que quelques lignes et ne prêtait à aucune équivoque.

Aussitôt le drapeau hostelien — mi-partie blanc et rouge — fut hissé sur la grève, et l’aviso le salua de vingt et un coups de canon. Pour la première fois arboré, claquant joyeusement dans la brise, il annonçait au monde la naissance d’un pays libre.

CHAPITRE VII

VII

La première enfance d’un peuple

Le lendemain, à la première heure, l’aviso quitta son mouillage et disparut en quelques instants derrière la pointe. Il emmenait dix des quinze marins survivants du Jonathan. Les cinq autres, parmi lesquels Kennedy, avaient préféré, ainsi que le maître d’équipage Hartlepool et le cuisinier Sirdey, rester sur l’île en qualité de colons.

Des motifs analogues avaient décidé Kennedy et Sirdey à s’arrêter à ce parti. Tous deux fort mal vus des capitaines, et par suite trouvant difficilement des engagements, ils espéraient avoir vie plus facile et moins précaire dans une société naissante, où les lois, pendant longtemps tout au moins, manqueraient nécessairement de rigueur. Quant à leurs camarades, braves gens énergiques et sérieux, mais pauvres et sans famille, ils escomptaient, comme Hartlepool lui-même, la possibilité d’être leur maître dans un pays neuf en devenant, de marins hauturiers, simples pêcheurs.

La réalisation ou l’échec de leur rêve allait en grande partie dépendre de l’orientation qui serait donnée au gouvernement de l’île. Quand l’État est bien administré, les citoyens ont chance de s’enrichir par leur travail. Tout labeur restera stérile, au contraire, si le pouvoir central ne sait pas découvrir et appliquer les mesures propres à grouper en faisceau les efforts individuels. L’organisation de la colonie était donc d’un intérêt capital.

Pour le moment, tout au moins, les Hosteliens — car tel était le nom qu'ils avaient adopté d'un consentement unanime — ne s'inquiétaient pas de résoudre ce problème vital. Ils ne pensaient qu'à se réjouir. Ce mot magique, la liberté, les avait enivrés. Ils s'en grisaient, comme de grands enfants, sans chercher à en pénétrer le sens profond, sans se dire que la liberté est une science qu'il est nécessaire d'apprendre et que, pour être libres, ce qu'il faut d'abord, c'est vivre.

L'aviso était encore en vue que, dans la foule naguère si houleuse, tout le monde se félicitait et se congratulait réciproquement. Il semblait qu'on fût venu à bout d'une œuvre importante et difficile. L'œuvre commençait à peine cependant.

Il n'est pas de bonne fête populaire qui ne s'accompagne de quelque bombance. On convint donc unanimement de faire grande chère ce jour-là. C'est pourquoi, tandis que les ménagères regagnaient fourneaux et casseroles, les hommes se dirigèrent vers la cargaison du Jonathan.

Il va de soi que, depuis la proclamation d'indépendance, cette cargaison n'était plus surveillée. Les circonstances ayant élevé les naufragés à la dignité de nation, personne, hors elle-même, n'était qualifié pour réglementer l'exercice de sa souveraineté. D'ailleurs, qui eût monté la garde, puisque la plupart des gardiens étaient partis?

On mit gaiement un tonneau en perce, et l'on allait procéder à la distribution, quand une idée meilleure vint à certains esprits avisés. Cet alcool, il appartenait en somme à tout le monde. Dès lors, pourquoi ne pas le répartir jusqu'à la dernière goutte? La motion, en dépit des timides protestations d'un petit nombre de sages, fut adoptée avec enthousiasme. La quantité d'alcool approximativement évaluée, on convint que chaque homme fait aurait droit à une part, et chaque femme ou enfant à une demi-part. Cette décision fut aussitôt exécutée, et les chefs de famille reçurent le lot qui leur était attribué, au milieu de lazzis et de plaisanteries joyeuses.

Dans la soirée, la fête battit son plein. Toutes les rancunes étaient oubliées. Les diverses nationalités semblaient fondues en une seule. On fraternisait. On organisa un bal aux sons d’un accordéon de bonne volonté, et des couples tournèrent au milieu d’un cercle de buveurs.

Parmi ceux-ci, figurait naturellement Lazare Ceroni. Incapable, dès six heures du soir, de se tenir ferme sur ses jambes, à dix il buvait toujours. Cela faisait présager une triste fin de fête pour Tullia et pour Graziella.

Au même instant, dans un coin sombre, à l’écart, il en était un autre qui se grisait à pleins verres. Mais celui-ci, dans l’abominable poison, retrouvait pour un moment son âme que le poison avait dégradée. Soudain, une musique admirable s’éleva, interrompant les danses. Fritz Gross, saturé d’alcool, avait reconquis son génie. Deux heures durant, il joua, improvisant au gré de son inspiration, entouré de mille visages aux yeux écarquillés, aux bouches grandes ouvertes, comme pour boire le torrent musical dont le prestigieux violon était la source.

De tous les auditeurs de Fritz Gross, le plus attentif et le plus passionné était un enfant. Ces sons, d’une beauté jusqu’alors inconnue, étaient pour Sand une véritable révélation. Il découvrait la musique et pénétrait en tremblant dans ce royaume ignoré. Au centre du cercle, debout en face du musicien, il regardait, il écoutait, ne vivant plus que par les oreilles et par les yeux, l’âme enivrée, tout vibrant d’une émotion poignante et joyeuse.

Quels mots rendraient le pittoresque du spectacle? À terre, un homme, presque informe dans ses proportions colossales, écroulé, la tête baissée sur la poitrine, ses yeux fermés ne voyant plus qu’en lui-même, jouant, jouant sans se lasser, éperdument, à la lumière incertaine d'une torche fuligineuse qui le faisait ressortir en vigueur sur un fond d'impénétrable nuit. Devant cet homme, un enfant en extase, et, autour de ce groupe singulier, une foule silencieuse, invisible, mais dont, au gré de la brise capricieuse, un éclat de la torche révélait parfois la présence. Les rayons s'accrochaient alors à quelque trait saillant. La durée de l'éclair, un nez, un front, une oreille, apparaissait, comme engendré par l'ombre qui l'effaçait aussitôt, tandis que s'épandait en larges ondes, planait au-dessus de cette foule, puis allait mourir dans l'espace obscur le chant grêle et puissant d'un violon.

Vers minuit, Fritz Gross, épuisé, lâcha l'archet et s'endormit pesamment. Recueillis, à pas lents, les émigrants regagnèrent alors leurs demeures.

Le lendemain, il ne restait plus trace de cette émotion fugitive, et les colons furent repris par l'attrait de plus grossiers plaisirs. La fête recommença. Tout portait à croire qu'elle se prolongerait jusqu'à complet épuisement des liqueurs fortes.

C'est au milieu de cette kermesse, que la Wel-Kiej revint à l'île Hoste, quarante-huit heures après le départ de l'aviso. Nul ne parut se souvenir qu'elle l'eût quittée pendant deux semaines, et ceux qu'elle portait reçurent le même accueil que s'ils ne se fussent jamais absentés. Le Kaw-djer ne comprit rien à ce qu'il voyait. Que signifiaient ce pavillon inconnu planté sur la grève et la joie générale qui semblait transporter les émigrants?

Harry Rhodes et Hartlepool le mirent, en quelques mots, au courant des derniers événements. Le Kaw-djer écouta ce récit avec émotion. Sa poitrine se dilatait comme si un air plus pur fût arrivé à ses poumons, son visage était transfiguré. Il existait donc encore une terre libre dans l'archipel magellanique!

Toutefois il ne rendit pas confidence pour confidence et demeura muet sur les motifs qui l’avaient déterminé à s’éloigner pendant quinze jours. À quoi bon? Fût-il parvenu à faire comprendre à Harry Rhodes pourquoi, résolu à rompre toute relation avec l’univers civilisé, il était parti en apercevant l’aviso qu’il supposait chargé d’affirmer l’autorité du gouvernement chilien, et pourquoi, abrité au fond d’une baie de la presqu’île Hardy, il avait attendu le départ de cet aviso avant de revenir au campement?

Trop heureux de le retrouver, ses amis, d’ailleurs, ne l’interrogèrent pas. Pour Harry Rhodes et Hartlepool, sa présence était un réconfort. Avoir avec eux cet homme à l’énergie froide, à la vaste intelligence, à la parfaite bonté, leur rendait une confiance que l’enfantillage dont faisaient preuve leurs compagnons commençait à ébranler.

“Les malheureux n’ont vu dans leur indépendance, dit Harry Rhodes en achevant son récit, que le droit de se griser. Ils n’ont pas l’air de penser à la nécessité de s’organiser et d’installer un gouvernement quelconque.

— Bah! répliqua le Kaw-djer avec indulgence, ils sont excusables de se payer du bon temps. Ils en ont eu si peu jusqu’ici! Cet affolement passera et ils en arriveront d’eux-mêmes aux choses sérieuses… Quant à constituer un gouvernement, j’avoue que je n’en vois pas l’utilité.

— Il faut bien, pourtant, objecta Harry Rhodes, que quelqu’un se charge de mettre de l’ordre dans tout ce monde-là.

— Laissez donc! répondit le Kaw-djer. L’ordre se mettra tout seul.

— À en juger par le passé, cependant…

— Le passé n’est pas le présent, interrompit le Kaw-djer. Hier, nos compagnons se sentaient encore citoyens d’Amérique ou d’Europe. Maintenant, ils sont des Hosteliens. C’est fort différent.

— Votre avis serait donc?…

— Qu’ils vivent tranquillement à l’île Hoste, puisqu’elle leur appartient. Ils ont la chance de ne pas avoir de lois. Qu’ils se gardent d’en faire. À quoi ces lois serviraient-elles? Je suis convaincu qu’il est de l’essence même de la nature humaine d’ignorer jusqu’à l’apparence de conflits entre les personnes. Sans les préjugés, les idées toutes faites résultant de siècles d’esclavage, on s’arrangerait aisément. La terre s’offre aux hommes. Qu’ils y puisent à pleines mains, et qu’ils jouissent également et fraternellement de ses richesses. À quoi bon réglementer cela?”

Harry Rhodes ne paraissait pas convaincu de la vérité de ces vues optimistes. Il ne répondit rien toutefois. Hartlepool prit la parole.

“En attendant que tous ces lascars-là, dit-il, aient donné des preuves d’une autre fraternité que de la fraternité de la noce, nous avons toujours confisqué les armes et les munitions.”

Par les soins de la Société de colonisation, la cargaison du Jonathan contenait, en effet, soixante rifles, quelques barils de poudre, des balles, du plomb et des cartouches, afin que les émigrants pussent chasser la grosse bête et se défendre au besoin des attaques de leurs voisins à la baie de Lagoa. Personne n’avait pensé à ce matériel guerrier, personne, si ce n’est

Hartlepool. Profitant du désordre général, il l’avait mis prudemment hors d’atteinte. Peut-être aurait-il eu quelque peine à trouver une cachette convenable, si Dick ne lui avait indiqué le chapelet de grottes traversant de part en part le massif de la pointe de l’Est. Aidé par Harry Rhodes et par les deux mousses, il avait, en plusieurs voyages, transporté pendant la première nuit de fêtes les armes et les munitions dans la grotte supérieure, où on les avait profondément enterrées. Depuis lors, Hartlepool se sentait plus tranquille. Le Kaw-djer approuva sa prudence.

“Vous avez bien fait, Hartlepool, déclara-t-il. Mieux vaut, en somme, laisser aux choses le temps de se tasser. Dans ce pays, d’ailleurs, nos compagnons n’auraient que faire d’armes à feu.

— Ils n’en ont pas, affirma le maître d’équipage. À bord du Jonathan, les règlements étaient formels. Les émigrants ont été fouillés, eux et leurs colis, en embarquant, et toutes les armes à feu ont été saisies. Personne n’en possède en dehors de celles que nous avons cachées, et celles-ci, on ne les trouvera pas. Par conséquent…”

Hartlepool s’interrompit brusquement. Il paraissait soucieux.

“Mille diables!… s’écria-t-il. Il y en a, au contraire. Nous avons trouvé seulement quarante-huit fusils au lieu de soixante. Je croyais à une erreur. Mais, ça me revient maintenant, les douze manquants ont été emportés par les Rivière, les Ivanoff, les Gimelli et les Gordon. Heureusement que ce sont des gens sérieux, et qu’il n’y a rien à craindre d’eux!

— Il existe d’autres dangers que les armes, fit observer Harry Rhodes. L’alcool par exemple. En ce moment, on s’embrasse, mais il n’en sera pas toujours de même. Déjà, Lazare Ceroni a recommencé à faire des siennes. En votre absence, j’ai été obligé d’intervenir. Sans Hartlepool et moi, je crois que, cette fois, il assommait décidément sa victime.

— Cet homme est un monstre, dit le Kaw-djer.

— Comme tous les ivrognes, ni plus ni moins… N’importe, il est heureux pour les deux femmes que Halg soit de retour… Au fait! comment va-t-il, notre jeune sauvage?

— Aussi bien que peut aller un garçon dans son état d’esprit. Inutile de vous dire que ce n’est pas de gaieté de cœur qu’il nous a accompagnés, son père et moi. J’ai dû faire acte d’autorité et engager ma parole que nous reviendrions ici. Puisque cette famille reste avec les autres sur l’île Hoste, cela simplifie évidemment les choses. Ce qui les complique, par exemple, ce sont les déplorables habitudes de Lazare Ceroni. Espérons qu’il s’amendera quand la provision d’alcool sera épuisée.”

Pendant qu’on s’occupait ainsi de lui, Halg, laissant la Wel-Kiej à la garde de son père, s’était empressé d’aller retrouver Graziella. Quelle joie ils eurent de se revoir! Puis la joie fit place à la tristesse. Graziella raconta au jeune Indien les épreuves que Ceroni imposait de nouveau à sa femme et à sa fille. À ces misères s’ajoutaient, pour cette dernière, la recherche cauteleuse de Patterson, et surtout la poursuite brutale de Sirk. Elle ne pouvait faire un pas au dehors sans être exposée à subir l’insolence de ce triste individu. Halg l’écoutait, tout frémissant d’indignation.

Dans un coin de la tente, Lazare Ceroni, cuvant sa dernière ivresse, ronflait à poings fermés. Il n’y avait pas d’illusion à se faire. À peine réveillé, il retomberait dans son vice et retournerait se mêler à la fête générale, dont la fin ne semblait pas devoir être prochaine.

Toutefois, elle tendait déjà à changer de caractère. L’excitation devenait moins innocente et moins puérile. Sur certains visages passaient des lueurs mauvaises. L’alcool faisait son œuvre. La dépression qu’il laissait après lui ne pouvait être combattue que par des doses plus fortes, et, peu à peu, la griserie légère du début faisait place à une ivresse pesante, qui deviendrait une ivresse furieuse, lorsque la ration augmenterait encore.

Quelques-uns, sentant le danger, commençaient à se retirer de la ronde. Aussitôt leur bon sens reprenait ses droits et le problème de l'existence sur l'île Hoste s'imposait à leur attention.

Problème ardu, mais non pas insoluble. Par son étendue voisine de deux cents kilomètres carrés, par ses terres en majeure partie cultivables, par ses forêts et ses pâturages, l'île aurait pu nourrir une population beaucoup plus importante. Mais c'était à la condition qu'on ne s'éternisât pas à la baie Scotchwell et qu'on se répandît à travers le pays. Les instruments de culture ne manquaient pas, non plus que les graines de semaille, les plants, ni, en général, le matériel indispensable à tout établissement agricole. En immense majorité, les émigrants étaient, d'autre part, rompus aux travaux des champs. Rien de plus naturel, pour eux, que de s'y livrer dans leur pays d'adoption, comme ils s'y livraient dans leur pays d'origine. Au début, les animaux domestiques ne seraient évidemment pas assez nombreux, mais, peu à peu, grâce à l'entremise du gouvernement chilien, il en viendrait de la Patagonie, des pampas argentins, des vastes plaines de la Terre du Feu et enfin des Falkland, où l'on fait en grand l'élevage des moutons. Rien ne s'opposait donc, en principe, au succès de cette tentative de colonisation, pourvu que les colons s'occupassent activement de la faire réussir.

Un petit nombre d'entre eux avaient vu nettement cette nécessité du travail et de l'action dès la proclamation de l'indépendance. Ceux-ci, et, le premier de tous, Patterson, étaient revenus, la distribution de l'alcool terminée, à la cargaison du Jonathan, et avaient fait parmi les objets qui la composaient une sélection judicieuse, chacun en vue du projet le plus conforme à ses goûts, l'un la culture, l'autre l'élevage, le troisième l'exploitation forestière.

Puis, s’attelant à des chariots improvisés, ils étaient partis à la recherche d’un terrain propice.

Patterson, au contraire, resta au bord de la rivière. Aidé par Long et par Blaker, qui, malgré l’expérience faite, persistait à demeurer avec lui, il s’occupa d’abord de clore le domaine dont il s’était, dès l’origine, assuré la propriété à titre de premier occupant. Peu à peu, une palissade formée de pieux solides entoura l’enclos sur trois côtés, le quatrième étant limité par la rivière. En même temps, le sol intérieur fut défoncé et reçut des semis de légumes. Patterson s’adonnait à la culture maraîchère.

Après deux jours de réjouissance, quelques émigrants, estimant avoir suffisamment célébré l’indépendance, commencèrent à se ressaisir. Ils s’avisèrent alors que plusieurs de leurs compagnons ne s’étaient pas laissé détourner par l’attrait du plaisir du soin de leurs véritables intérêts, et à leur tour ils rendirent visite à la réserve du Jonathan. Les richesses étaient encore abondantes, et, tant en matériel qu’en provisions, il leur fut aisé de se procurer le nécessaire, voire le superflu. Leur choix fait, leurs moyens de transport créés, ils s’éloignèrent sur les traces de leurs devanciers.

Les jours suivants, cet exemple eut des imitateurs de plus en plus nombreux, si bien que, le temps s’écoulant, la troupe joyeuse diminua progressivement, tandis que de nouvelles caravanes s’ébranlaient, en marche vers l’intérieur de l’île. Les uns à la suite des autres, presque tous les colons quittèrent ainsi peu à peu les rivages de la baie Scotchwell, qui poussant une charrette informe, qui chargé comme un mulet, ceux-ci tous seuls, ceux-là traînant femme et marmaille à leur suite.

Le stock provenant du Jonathan diminuant à mesure qu’on y puisait à pleines mains, le choix, pour les derniers venus, fut singulièrement restreint. Si les retardataires trouvèrent des provisions en abondance, la difficulté du transport ayant limité la quantité que chacun avait pu en emporter, il n’en fut pas de même pour le matériel agricole. Plus de trois cents colons durent se passer de tout animal de ferme ou de basse-cour, et beaucoup n’eurent, en fait d’instruments aratoires, que le rebut de ceux qui les avaient précédés.

Il leur fallait s’en contenter pourtant, puisqu’il ne restait pas autre chose, et, tout en jalousant la riche moisson faite par les plus diligents, les moins bien partagés se résignèrent, et, vaille que vaille, se mirent à leur tour en route vers l’inconnu.

Ces émigrants, les plus mal armés au point de vue de l’outillage, furent aussi ceux à qui le plus dur exode fut imposé. En vain s’éloignaient-ils vers le Nord et vers l’Ouest, ils trouvaient la place prise par ceux qui étaient partis avant eux. Quelques-uns, particulièrement malchanceux, furent obligés, pour découvrir un emplacement favorable, de pousser jusqu’à la presqu’île Dumas, en contournant la profonde indentation désignée sous le nom de Ponsonby Sound, à plus de cent kilomètres de la baie Scotchwell, qui devait être malgré tout considérée comme le principal établissement de la colonie, comme sa capitale en quelque sorte.

Six semaines après le départ de l’aviso, cette capitale avait perdu la plus grande partie de sa population. Presque tous les colons capables de manier la bêche et la pioche l’ayant délaissée, elle comptait tout juste quatre-vingt-un habitants, que leurs occupations antérieures plaçaient en général en état d’infériorité manifeste dans leurs présentes conditions de vie.

Sauf une dizaine de paysans, retenus temporairement à la côte par des raisons de santé, et dont un seul, marié, était accompagné de sa femme et de ses trois enfants, ce résidu de la foule dispersée était exclusivement formé de colons d’origine urbaine. Il comprenait John Rame et la famille Rhodes, Beauval, Dorick et Fritz Gross, les cinq marins, dont Kennedy, le cuisinier, les deux mousses et le maître d’équipage du Jonathan, Patterson, Long et Blaker, la totalité des quarante-trois ouvriers ou soi-disant tels, qui, de tous, se montraient les plus réfractaires aux travaux des champs, parmi lesquels Lazare Ceroni et sa famille, et enfin le Kaw-djer avec ses deux compagnons, Halg et Karroly.

Ces derniers n’avaient pas quitté la rive gauche de la rivière, à l’embouchure de laquelle la Wel-Kiej était mouillée, au fond d’une crique bien abritée des mauvais temps du large. Rien n’était modifié à leur vie antérieure. Le seul changement qu’ils lui apportèrent, fut de remplacer par une habitation solide l’ajoupa primitive qui leur avait assuré jusqu’ici un insuffisant abri. Maintenant qu’il n’était plus question de quitter l’île Hoste, il convenait de s’installer d’une manière moins rudimentaire que par le passé.

Le Kaw-djer avait, en effet, signifié à Karroly sa volonté de ne plus retourner à l’Île Neuve. Puisqu’il existait encore une terre libre, il y vivrait jusqu’à son dernier jour. Halg fut ravi de cette décision qui cadrait si bien avec ses désirs. Quant à Karroly, il se conforma comme de coutume à la volonté de celui qu’il considérait comme son maître, sans faire aucune objection, bien que sa nouvelle résidence dût grandement diminuer les occasions de pilotage.

Cet inconvénient n’avait pas échappé au Kaw-djer, mais il en acceptait les conséquences. Sur l’île Hoste, on vivrait uniquement de chasse et de pêche, voilà tout, et, si cette ressource était, à l’usage, reconnue insuffisante, il serait temps alors d’aviser à d’autres expédients. Décidé, en tous cas, à ne rien devoir qu’à lui-même, il refusa de prendre sa part de provisions.

Il ne poussa pas le renoncement, cependant, jusqu’à dédaigner les maisons démontables, que le départ de leurs habitants avaient rendues libres en grand nombre. L’une de ces maisons, transportée par fractions sur la rive gauche, y fut réédifiée, puis renforcée par des contre-murs qui furent bâtis en peu de jours. Quelques-uns des ouvriers avaient offert spontanément leur concours au Kaw-djer qui l’accepta sans façon. Le travail terminé, ces braves gens ne songèrent pas à réclamer de salaire, et leur abstention était trop conforme aux principes du Kaw-djer pour que celui-ci pût avoir la pensée de leur en offrir un.

La maison terminée, Halg et Karroly embarquèrent sur la Wel-Kiej et se rendirent à l’Île Neuve, d’où ils rapportèrent, trois semaines plus tard, les objets mobiliers contenus dans l’ancienne demeure. Un pilotage, trouvé en route par Karroly, avait prolongé leur absence et permis en même temps à l’Indien de se procurer des vivres et des munitions en quantité suffisante pour la prochaine saison d’hiver.

Après leur retour, la vie prit son cours régulier. Karroly et son fils se consacrèrent à la pêche, et s’occupèrent de fabriquer le sel nécessaire pour conserver l’excédent de leur butin quotidien. Pendant ce temps, le Kaw-djer sillonnait l’île, au hasard de ses chasses.

À la faveur de ses courses incessantes, il gardait le contact avec les colons. Presque tous reçurent successivement sa visite. Il put constater que, dès le début, des différences sensibles s’affirmaient entre eux. Que ces différences provinssent d’une inégalité native dans le courage, la chance ou les capacités des travailleurs, le succès des uns et l’échec des autres se dessinaient déjà clairement.

Les exploitations des quatre familles qui s’étaient mises au travail les premières figuraient en tête des plus brillantes. À cela, rien d’étonnant, puisqu'elles étaient les plus anciennes. La scierie des Rivière était en plein fonctionnement, et les planches déjà débitées eussent assuré le chargement de deux ou trois navires d'un respectable tonnage.

Germain Rivière reçut le Kaw-djer avec de grandes démonstrations d'amitié et profita de sa visite pour s'enquérir des événements du bourg, tout en se plaignant de n'avoir pas été appelé à participer à l'élection du gouvernement de la colonie. Quelle organisation la majorité avait-elle adoptée? Qui avait-on désigné pour chef?

Sa déception fut grande d'apprendre qu'il ne s'était absolument rien passé, que les émigrants étaient partis les uns après les autres, sans même discuter l'opportunité d'établir un gouvernement quelconque, et plus grande encore de constater que son interlocuteur, pour qui il éprouvait autant de respect que de reconnaissance, semblait approuver une aussi déraisonnable conduite. Il montra au Kaw-djer les tas de planches élevés en bon ordre le long de la rivière.

“Et mon bois? interrogea-t-il en manière d'objection. Comment ferai-je pour le vendre?

— Pourquoi, répliqua le Kaw-djer, ceux qui n'en auront point le profit se chargeraient-ils de le vendre à votre place? Je ne suis pas inquiet, d'ailleurs, et je suis certain que vous vous tirerez fort bien d'affaire tout seul.

— Il se peut, reconnut Germain Rivière. N'empêche que ma peine serait de beaucoup diminuée, si, moyennant une faible contribution, quelques-uns se chargeaient de satisfaire aux besoins généraux de la colonie. La vie ne sera pas drôle, si l'on ne divise pas un peu le travail, si chacun ne pense qu'à soi et se trouve par contre dans l'obligation de se procurer lui-même tout ce qui lui est nécessaire. Un échange de services réciproques rendrait, à mon avis, l’existence plus douce.

— Vous avez donc tant de besoins?” demanda le Kaw-djer en souriant.

Mais Germain Rivière paraissait soucieux et préoccupé.

“Il est naturel, dit-il, que l’on veuille avoir la récompense de son travail. Si l’île Hoste ne peut me l’offrir, si elle demeure aussi dénuée de ressources, je la quitterai — et je ne serai pas le seul! — quand j’aurai mis de côté de quoi vivre dans un pays plus agréable. Pour y arriver, je saurai, ainsi que vous le dites, me tirer d’affaire, et d’autres sauront évidemment se débrouiller comme moi. Mais ceux qui n’en seront pas capables resteront sur le carreau.

— Vous êtes ambitieux, monsieur Rivière! s’écria le Kaw-djer.

— Si je ne l’étais pas, je ne me donnerais pas tant de mal, riposta Germain Rivière.

— Est-il bien utile de s’en donner tant?

— Très utile. Sans nos efforts à tous, le monde serait comme aux premiers âges, et le progrès ne serait qu’un mot.

— Un progrès, dit amèrement le Kaw-djer, qui ne s’obtient qu’au bénéfice de quelques-uns…

— Les plus courageux et les plus sages!

— Et au détriment du plus grand nombre.

— Les plus paresseux et les plus lâches. Ceux-ci sont des vaincus dans tous les cas. Bien gouvernés, ils seront peut-être misérables. Livrés à eux-mêmes, ils mourront de leur misère.

— Il ne faut cependant pas tant de choses pour vivre!

— Trop encore, si l’on est faible, ou malade, ou stupide. Ceux qui sont dans ce cas auront toujours des maîtres. À défaut de lois, après tout bénignes, il leur faudra subir la tyrannie des plus forts.”

Le Kaw-djer secoua la tête d’un air mal convaincu. Il connaissait cette antienne. L’imperfection humaine, l’inégalité native, ce sont les excuses éternellement invoquées pour justifier la contrainte et l’oppression, alors qu’on crée ainsi au contraire, en prétendant les atténuer, des maux qui, dans l’état de nature, ne sont aucunement inéluctables.

Il était troublé pourtant. Le souvenir de la conduite de Lewis Dorick et de sa bande au cours de l’hivernage, leur exploitation éhontée des émigrants les plus faibles, donnaient une force singulière à ce que lui disait un homme dont il était obligé d’estimer le caractère.

Chez les voisins de Germain Rivière, l’impression qu’il recueillit fut identique. Les Gimelli et les Ivanoff avaient ensemencé plusieurs hectares de froment et de seigle. Les jeunes pousses verdissaient déjà la terre et promettaient une magnifique récolte pour le mois de février. Les Gordon, par contre, étaient moins avancés. Leurs vastes prairies, soigneusement closes de barrières, étaient encore à peu près désertes. Mais ils avaient la certitude d’un accroissement prochain du nombre de leurs animaux. Ce jour venu, ils auraient en abondance le lait et le beurre, comme ils avaient déjà les œufs.

Le Kaw-djer, dans l’intervalle de ses chasses, Halg et Karroly, dans l’intervalle de leurs pêches, consacrèrent quelques journées à cultiver un petit jardin autour de leur demeure, afin d’assurer complètement leurs moyens d’existence sans dépendre de personne.

C’était une vie animée que la leur. Certes, ils ne bénéficiaient pas des douceurs qu’on se procure si aisément dans les contrées plus avancées en civilisation. Mais le Kaw-djer ne regrettait pas ces douceurs, en songeant au prix dont elles sont payées. Il ne désirait rien de plus que ce qu’elle avait présentement et s’estimait heureux.

A fortiori en était-il ainsi pour ses deux compagnons, qui n’avaient pas connu d’autres horizons que ceux de la Magellanie. Karroly n’avait jamais rêvé une existence aussi douce et, pour Halg, le bonheur parfait consistait à passer près de Graziella tous les instants qu’il ne consacrait pas au travail.

La famille Ceroni, également installée dans une maison délaissée par les premiers occupants, commençait à se remettre des drames qui l’avaient si longtemps troublée et dont l’ère paraissait enfin close. Lazare Ceroni avait, en effet, cessé de s’enivrer, pour cette raison péremptoire qu’il n’existait plus une seule goutte d’alcool sur toute la surface de l’île Hoste. Il était donc obligé de se tenir tranquille, mais sa santé paraissait gravement compromise par les derniers excès auxquels il s’était livré. Presque toujours assis devant sa maison, il se chauffait au soleil, en regardant à ses pieds d’un air morne, les mains agitées d’un tremblement continuel.

Tullia, avec sa patience inaltérable et sa douceur, avait essayé vainement de combattre cette torpeur qui la remplissait d’inquiétude. Tous ses efforts avaient échoué, et elle ne conservait plus d’espoir que dans la prolongation d’habitudes devenues par la force des choses plus conformes à l’hygiène.

Halg, qui raisonnait autrement que la malheureuse femme, trouvait l’existence infiniment plus agréable depuis le début de cette période de paix. D’autre part, pour lui qui rapportait tout à Graziella, les événements semblaient prendre une tournure favorable. Non seulement Lazare Ceroni, dont il avait longtemps redouté l’hostilité, ne comptait plus, mais encore un de ses rivaux, le plus à craindre, l’Irlandais Patterson, s’était définitivement retiré de la lice. On ne le voyait plus. Il n’importunait plus de sa présence Graziella et sa mère. Il avait compris sans doute que l’état de son allié lui enlevait tout espoir.

Par contre, il en était un autre qui ne désarmait pas. Sirk devenait de jour en jour plus audacieux. Avec Graziella, il en arrivait à la menace directe et commençait à s’attaquer, bien qu’avec plus de prudence, à Halg lui-même. Vers la fin du mois de décembre, le jeune homme, en croisant le triste personnage, l’entendit proférer des paroles injurieuses qui étaient indubitablement à son adresse. Quelques jours plus tard, il regagnait la rive gauche de la rivière, quand, partie de l’abri d’une maison, une pierre lancée avec violence passa à quelques centimètres de son visage.

De cette agression, dont il avait reconnu l’auteur, Halg, imbu des idées du Kaw-djer, ne chercha pas à tirer vengeance. Il ne releva pas, davantage, les jours suivants, les provocations incessantes de son adversaire. Mais Sirk, enhardi par l’impunité, ne devait pas tarder à le pousser à bout et à le mettre dans l’obligation de se défendre.

Si Lazare Ceroni, sauvé de l’ennui par son abrutissement, ne souffrait pas de son inaction, il n’en était pas de même des autres ouvriers, ses camarades. Ceux-ci ne savaient que faire de leur temps, et, d’autre part, les plus réfléchis d’entre eux ne laissaient pas de concevoir des inquiétudes d’avenir. Être restés à l’île Hoste, c’était fort bien. Encore fallait-il s’arranger de manière à y vivre. Après avoir taillé, il fallait coudre. Certes, il ne manquaient de rien actuellement, mais qu’arriverait-il quand les provisions seraient épuisées?

Tant pour parer au danger futur que pour se défendre contre l’ennui immédiat, presque tous s’ingéniaient. Réalisant un rêve longtemps caressé, certains s’étaient improvisés entrepreneurs, chacun dans sa profession. Au-dessus de plusieurs portes, on apercevait des enseignes annonçant que la maison abritait un serrurier, un maçon, un menuisier, voire un cordonnier ou un tailleur. Malheureusement, les clients manquaient à ces industriels. Quand bien même, d’ailleurs, leurs échoppes eussent été mieux achalandées, qu’auraient-ils fait de l’argent gagné? Il leur eût été impossible de l’utiliser d’aucune façon et, particulièrement, de l’échanger contre des denrées alimentaires, dont l’utilité, dans les circonstances présentes, primait celle de tout autre objet.

C’est pourquoi plus avisés peut-être étaient ceux qui, renonçant à exercer leur profession habituelle, limitaient leur talent à rechercher tout simplement leur nourriture. La chasse leur étant interdite par l’absence d’armes à feu, la culture par leur ignorance absolue de la terre, ils ne pouvaient espérer la trouver qu’en pêchant. Ils pêchaient donc, suivant, en cela, l’exemple qui leur était donné par quelques colons.

Outre le Kaw-djer et ses deux compagnons, Hartlepool et quatre des marins du Jonathan s’étaient, en effet, consacrés dès les premiers jours à la pêche. À eux cinq, ils avaient entrepris la construction d’une chaloupe de même taille que la Wel-Kiej, et, en attendant qu’elle fût terminée, ils sillonnaient la mer sur de légères pirogues rapidement établies à la mode fuégienne.

Comme le Kaw-djer, Hartlepool et ses matelots conservaient dans du sel les poissons inutiles à leur consommation du jour. Par ce moyen, ils s’assuraient, du moins, contre le risque de mourir de faim.

Alléchés par leurs succès, quelques émigrants ouvriers réussirent, avec l’aide des charpentiers, à fabriquer deux petites embarcations et lancèrent à leur tour lignes et filets.

Mais pêcher est un métier comme un autre.

Qui veut l’exercer avec fruit doit l’avoir appris par la pratique. Les amateurs en firent l’expérience. Tandis que les filets de Karroly et de son fils, d’Hartlepool et de ses marins, crevaient sous le poids des poissons, les leurs remontaient vides le plus souvent. Ils ne pouvaient guère compter sur ce moyen pour se constituer une réserve. Tout au plus réussissaient-ils à varier parfois leur ordinaire quotidien. Encore arrivait-il que ce modeste résultat ne fût pas atteint et qu’ils revinssent bredouilles, pour employer ce terme consacré.

Un jour où leurs efforts avaient eu cette fortune, le canot de ces apprentis pêcheurs croisa la Wel-Kiej qui rentrait au mouillage sous la conduite de Halg et de Karroly. Sur le pont de la chaloupe s’étalaient, bien rangés les uns près des autres, une vingtaine de poissons, dont quelques-uns de belle taille. Cette vue excita la convoitise des pêcheurs malheureux.

“Eh!… l’Indien!…” appela l’un des ouvriers formant l’équipage du canot.

Karroly laissa porter.

“Que voulez-vous? demanda-t-il, quand la Wel-Kiej se fut rapprochée.

— Vous n’avez pas honte d’avoir un chargement pareil pour vous tout seuls, quand il y a de pauvres diables obligés de se serrer le ventre?” interrogea plaisamment le même ouvrier.

Karroly se mit à rire. Il était trop pénétré des principes altruistes du Kaw-djer pour hésiter sur la réponse. Ce qui était à lui était aux autres. Partager, quand on a plus que le nécessaire, avec celui qui ne l'a pas, rien de plus naturel.

“Attrape!… dit-il.

— Envoyez!…”

La moitié des poissons, lancés à la volée, passèrent de la Wel-Kiej au canot.

“Merci, camarade!…” s'écrièrent d'une même voix les ouvriers en se remettant aux avirons.

Bien qu'il eût reconnu Sirk parmi les quémandeurs, Halg ne s'était pas opposé à cet acte de générosité. Sirk n'était pas seul, et, d'ailleurs, on ne doit refuser à personne, fût-ce à un ennemi, tant qu'on peut faire autrement. L'élève du Kaw-djer faisait, on le voit, honneur à son maître.

Tandis qu'une partie des colons s'efforçaient d'utiliser ainsi leur temps, d'autres vivaient dans la plus complète oisiveté. Pour les uns, un tel abandon de soi n'avait rien que de normal. Qu'eussent pu faire Fritz Gross et John Rame, le premier réduit à un véritable gâtisme par l'abus des boissons alcooliques, le second aussi ignorant qu'un petit enfant des réalités de la vie?

Kennedy et Sirdey n'avaient pas ces excuses, et pourtant ils ne travaillaient pas davantage. Se fiant à leur expérience de l'hiver précédent, ils étaient restés sur l'île Hoste avec la perspective d'y vivre dans l'oisiveté aux dépens d'autrui, et ils entendaient n'en pas avoir le démenti. Pour le moment, tout se passait conformément à leurs désirs. Ils n’en demandaient pas davantage et laissaient le temps couler sans s’inquiéter de l’avenir.

Désœuvrés étaient également Dorick et

Beauval. Mal préparés tous deux par leurs occupations antérieures aux conditions très spéciales de leur vie présente, ils étaient fort désorientés. Sur une île vierge, au milieu d’une nature rude et sauvage, les connaissances d’un ancien avocat et d’un ex-professeur de littérature et d’histoire sont d’un bien faible secours.

Ni l’un ni l’autre n’avait prévu ce qui était arrivé. L’exode, logique pourtant, de la grande majorité de leurs compagnons, les avait surpris comme une catastrophe et bouleversait leurs projets, d’ailleurs assez confus. Cette exode coûtait à Dorick sa clientèle de trembleurs, à Beauval un public, c’est-à-dire cet ensemble d’êtres que les politiciens de profession désignent parfois, sans avoir conscience du cynisme involontaire de l’expression, sous le nom plaisant de “matière électorale”.

Après deux mois de découragement, Beauval commença cependant à se ressaisir. S’il avait manqué d’esprit de décision, si les choses, échappant à sa direction, s’étaient réglées d’elles-mêmes sans qu’il eût à intervenir, cela ne voulait pas dire que tout fût perdu. Ce qui n’avait pas été fait pouvait l’être encore.

Les Hosteliens ayant négligé de se donner un chef, la place était toujours libre. Il n’y avait qu’à la prendre.

La pénurie d’électeurs n’était pas un obstacle au succès. Au contraire, la campagne serait plus facile à mener dans cette population clairsemée. Quant aux autres colons, il n’y avait pas lieu de s’occuper de leur avis. Disséminés sur toute la surface de l’île, sans lien entre eux, ils ne pouvaient se concerter en vue d’une action commune. Si, plus tard, ils revenaient au campement, ce ne serait jamais que par petits groupes, et ces isolés, y trouvant un gouvernement en fonctions, seraient bien obligés de s’incliner devant le fait accompli.

Ce projet à peine formé, Beauval en pressa la réalisation. Quelques jours lui suffirent pour constater qu’il existait à l’état latent trois partis en présence, outre celui des neutres et des indifférents: l’un dont il pouvait à bon droit se considérer comme le chef, un deuxième enclin à suivre les suggestions de Lewis Dorick, le troisième subissant l’influence du Kaw-djer. Après mûr examen, ces trois partis lui parurent disposer de forces sensiblement égales.

Ceci établi, Beauval commença la campagne, et son éloquence entraînante eut tôt fait de détourner une demi-douzaine de voix à son profit. Il procéda immédiatement à un simulacre d’élection. Deux tours de scrutin furent nécessaires, à cause des abstentions, dont le grand nombre s’expliquait par l’ignorance où l’on était généralement du grave événement qui s’accomplissait. Finalement, près de trente suffrages se portèrent sur son nom.

Élu par ce tour d’escamotage, et prenant son élection au sérieux, Beauval n’avait plus à s’inquiéter de l’avenir. Ce ne serait pas la peine d’être le chef, si ce titre ne conférait pas le droit de vivre aux frais des électeurs.

Mais d’autres soucis l’accablèrent. Le plus vulgaire bon sens lui disait que le premier devoir d’un gouverneur est de gouverner. Or, cela ne lui paraissait plus si facile, à l’usage, qu’il se l’était imaginé jusqu’ici.

Assurément, Lewis Dorick, à sa place, eût été moins embarrassé. L’école communiste, dont il se réclamait, est simpliste. Il est clair que sa formule:

“Tout en commun”, quelque sentiment qu’on ait sur ses conséquences matérielles et morales, serait du moins d’application aisée, soit qu’on l’impose par des lois rigoureuses qu’on peut imaginer sans trop de peine, soit que les intéressés s’y prêtent docilement. Et, en vérité, les Hosteliens n’eussent peut-être pas si mal fait d’en tenter l’expérience. En nombre restreint, isolés du reste du monde, ils étaient dans les meilleures conditions pour la mener à bonne fin, et peut-être, dans cette situation spéciale, eussent-ils réussi, par la vertu de la formule communiste, à s’assurer le strict nécessaire et à réaliser l’égalité parfaite, à charge de procéder au nivellement, non par l’élévation des humbles, mais par l’abaissement des plus grands.

Malheureusement, Ferdinand Beauval ne professait pas le communisme, mais le collectivisme, dont l’organisation, si elle n’était pas, selon toute vraisemblance, au-dessus des forces humaines, nécessiterait un mécanisme infiniment plus compliqué et plus délicat.

Cette doctrine, d’ailleurs, serait-elle réalisable? Nul ne le sait. Si le mouvement socialiste, qui s’est affirmé pendant la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, n’a pas été inutile, s’il a eu ce résultat bienfaisant d’exciter la pitié générale en appelant l’attention sur la misère humaine, d’orienter les esprits vers la recherche des moyens propres à l’atténuer, de susciter des initiatives généreuses et de provoquer des lois qui ne sont pas toutes mauvaises, ce résultat n’a pu être obtenu qu’en conservant intact l’ordre social qu’il prétendait détruire. S’il a trouvé un terrain solide dans la critique, hélas! trop aisée, de ce qui existe, le socialisme s’est toujours montré d’une rare impuissance dans l’élaboration d’un plan de reconstitution. Tous ceux qui se sont attaqués à cette seconde partie du problème n’ont enfanté que des projets d’une effrayante puérilité.

Le mauvais côté de la situation de Ferdinand

Beauval, c’est précisément qu’il n’avait rien à critiquer, ni à détruire, puisque rien n’existait sur l’île Hoste, et qu’il se trouvait dans la nécessité de construire. À cet égard, les précédents manquaient.

Le socialisme n’est pas, en effet, une science écrite. Il ne forme pas un corps de doctrine complet. C’est un destructeur, il ne crée pas. Beauval, obligé par conséquent d’inventer, constatait qu’il est très difficile d’improviser de toutes pièces un ordre social quelconque, et comprenait que, si les hommes ont marché à tâtons vers un perpétuel devenir, en se contentant de rendre la vie supportable par des transactions réciproques, c’est qu’ils n’ont pas pu faire autrement.

Toutefois, il avait un fil directeur. Il n’est pas d’école socialiste qui ne réclame la suppression de la concurrence par la socialisation des moyens de production. C’est un minimum de revendications commun à toutes les sectes, et c’est en particulier le credo des collectivistes. Beauval n’avait qu’à s’y conformer.

Par malheur, si un tel principe a au moins une apparence de raison d’être dans une société ancienne où l’effort séculaire a accumulé des organismes de production compliqués et puissants, il n’existait rien de tel sur l’île Hoste. Les véritables instruments de production, c’étaient les bras et le courage des colons, à moins que, transformant alors le collectivisme en communisme pur et simple, on ne voulût considérer comme tels les instruments aratoires, les bois, les champs et les prairies! C’est pourquoi Beauval était en proie à une cruelle perplexité.

Pendant qu’il agitait en lui-même ces graves problèmes, son élection avait de curieuses conséquences. Le campement, déjà si désert, se vidait davantage encore. On émigrait.

Le premier, Harry Rhodes en donna l’exemple. Peu rassuré par la tournure que prenaient les événements, il franchit la rivière, le jour même où fut satisfaite l’ambition de Beauval. Sa maison transportée par morceaux, il la fit réédifier sur la rive gauche par quelques maçons, qui la rendirent, comme ils l’avaient fait pour celle du Kaw-djer, plus confortable et plus solide. Harry Rhodes, différent en cela de son ami, paya équitablement les ouvriers, et ceux-ci furent à la fois très satisfaits de recevoir ce salaire, et très troublés de ne savoir qu’en faire.

L’exemple de la famille Rhodes fut imité. Successivement, Smith, Wright, Lawson, Fock, plus les deux charpentiers Hobart et Charley et deux autres ouvriers passèrent la rivière et vinrent établir leur demeure sur la rive gauche. Un bourg rival du premier se créait ainsi autour du Kaw-djer sur cette rive où s’étaient déjà fixés Hartlepool et quatre des marins, bourg qui, trois mois après la proclamation d’indépendance, comptait déjà vingt et un habitants, dont deux enfants, Dick et Sand, et deux femmes, Clary Rhodes et sa mère.

La vie s’écoulait paisiblement dans ce rudiment de village, où rien n’altérait la bonne entente générale. Il fallut que Beauval traversât la rivière pour y faire naître le premier incident.

Ce jour-là, Halg était en sérieuse conversation avec le Kaw-djer. En présence d’Harry Rhodes, il sollicitait un conseil sur la conduite à tenir avec quelques-uns des colons de l’autre rive. Il s’agissait de ces pêcheurs maladroits qui, une première fois, avaient fait appel à la générosité des deux Fuégiens. Mis en goût par le succès de leur requête, ils l’avaient renouvelée à intervalles de plus en plus rapprochés, et, maintenant, il ne s’écoulait guère de jour que Halg ne vît une partie de sa pêche passer dans leurs mains. Ils ne se gênaient même plus. Du moment qu’on avait la bonté de travailler pour eux, ils jugeaient sans doute inutile de prendre la moindre peine. Ils restaient donc à terre et attendaient tranquillement le retour de la chaloupe pour réclamer, comme un dû, leur part du butin.

Halg commençait à s’irriter d’un tel sans-gêne, d’autant plus que son ennemi Sirk faisait partie de cette bande de fainéants. Avant de leur opposer un refus, il avait voulu, toutefois, solliciter l’avis du Kaw-djer. Disciple docile, il entendait se conformer à la pensée du maître.

Ses deux amis et lui assis sur la grève, l’infini de la mer devant eux, il raconta les faits en détail. La réponse du Kaw-djer fut nette.

“Regarde cet espace immense, Halg, dit-il avec une sereine douceur, et qu’il t’apprenne une plus large philosophie. Quelle folie! Être une poussière impalpable perdue dans un monstrueux univers, et s’agiter pour quelques poissons!… Les hommes n’ont qu’un devoir, mon enfant, et c’est en même temps une nécessité s’ils veulent vaincre et durer: s’aimer et s’aider les uns les autres. Ceux dont tu me parles ont, à coup sûr, manqué à ce devoir, mais est-ce une raison pour les imiter? La règle est simple: assurer d’abord ta propre subsistance, puis, cette condition remplie, assurer celle du plus grand nombre possible de tes semblables. Que t’importe qu’ils abusent? C’est tant pis pour eux, non pour toi.”

Halg avait écouté avec respect cet exposé de principes. Il allait peut-être y répondre, quand le chien Zol, couché aux pieds des trois causeurs, gronda sourdement. Presque aussitôt, une voix s’éleva à quelques pas derrière eux.

“Kaw-djer!” appelait-on.

Le Kaw-djer retourna la tête.

“Monsieur Beauval!… dit-il.

— Lui-même… J’ai à vous parler, Kaw-djer.

— Je vous écoute.”

Beauval, toutefois, ne parla pas tout de suite. La vérité est qu’il était fort embarrassé. Il avait, cependant, préparé son discours, mais, en se trouvant en face du Kaw-djer dont la froide gravité l’intimidait étrangement, il ne se rappelait plus ses phrases pompeuses et il prenait conscience de l’énormité, de l’incommensurable sottise de sa démarche.

À force de rêver au principe fondamental de la doctrine socialiste, Beauval avait fini par découvrir qu’il existait sur l’île Hoste des “instruments de production”, auxquels cette doctrine pouvait, à la rigueur, être applicable. Les embarcations, et, plus que toutes les autres, la Wel-Kiej, n’étaient-elles pas des “instruments de production”? N’en était-il pas un, ce fusil du Kaw-djer, qui gisait précisément sur le sable devant celui-ci? Cet unique fusil excitait notamment la convoitise de Beauval. Quelle supériorité il assurait à son propriétaire! Dès lors, quoi de plus naturel, quoi de plus légitime, que cette supériorité fût assurée au gouverneur, c’est-à-dire à celui qui personnifiait l’intérêt collectif?

“Kaw-djer, dit enfin Beauval, vous savez ou vous ne savez pas que j’ai été, il y a quelque temps, élu gouverneur de l’île Hoste.”

Le Kaw-djer, souriant ironiquement dans sa barbe, ne répondit que par un geste d’indifférence.

“Il m’est apparu, reprit Beauval, que le premier de mes devoirs, dans les circonstances présentes, était de mettre au service de la collectivité les avantages particuliers qui peuvent se trouver dans la possession de quelques-uns de ses membres.”

Beauval fit une pause, attendant une approbation. Le Kaw-djer persistant dans son silence, il poursuivit:

“En ce qui vous concerne, Kaw-djer, vous possédez, il n’y a même que vous qui possédiez un fusil et une chaloupe. Ce fusil est la seule arme à feu de la colonie, cette chaloupe y est la seule embarcation sérieuse permettant d’entreprendre un voyage de quelque durée…

— Et vous seriez désireux de vous les approprier, conclut le Kaw-djer.

— Je proteste contre le mot, s’écria Beauval avec un geste de réunion publique. Élu sur un programme collectiviste, je me borne à l’appliquer. Ma démarche ne tend à rien qui ressemble à une spoliation. Il ne s’agit pas de confisquer, mais, ce qui est fort différent, de socialiser ces instruments de production.

— Venez les prendre”, dit tranquillement le Kaw-djer.

Beauval recula d’un pas. Zol fit entendre un grognement de mauvais augure.

“Dois-je comprendre, demanda-t-il, que vous refusez de vous conformer aux décisions de l’autorité régulière de la colonie?”

Une flamme de colère s’alluma dans les yeux du Kaw-djer. Ramassant son fusil, il se leva. Puis, frappant la crosse contre le sol:

“En voilà assez de cette comédie, signifia-t-il durement. J’ai dit: Venez les prendre.”

Excité par l’attitude de son maître, Zol montra les dents. Beauval, intimidé, tant par cette manifestation hostile, que par le ton résolu et la carrure herculéenne de son interlocuteur, jugea préférable de ne pas insister. Prudemment, il battit en retraite, en mâchonnant de confuses paroles, dont le sens général était que le cas serait soumis au Conseil, lequel arrêterait telles mesures qu’il appartiendrait.

Sans l’écouter, le Kaw-djer lui avait tourné le dos et laissait son regard errer de nouveau sur la mer. L’incident comportait une leçon, toutefois, et cette leçon, Harry Rhodes voulut la mettre en évidence.

“Que pensez-vous de la démarche de Beauval? demanda-t-il.

— Que voulez-vous que j’en pense? répondit le Kaw-djer. Que peuvent me faire les faits et gestes de ce fantoche?

— Fantoche, soit! riposta Harry Rhodes. Mais gouverneur en même temps.

— Nommé par lui-même, alors, car il n’y a pas soixante colons au campement.

— Une voix suffît quand personne n’en a davantage.”

Le Kaw-djer haussa les épaules.

“Je vous demande pardon à l’avance de ce que je vais vous dire, reprit Harry Rhodes, mais, en vérité, n’éprouvez-vous pas quelques regrets, je dirai plus, quelques remords?

— Moi?…

— Vous. Seul de tous les colons, vous avez l’expérience de ce pays que vous habitez depuis de longues années et dont vous connaissez les ressources et les périls; seul, vous possédez l’intelligence, l’énergie et l’autorité nécessaires pour vous imposer à cette population ignorante et faible, et vous êtes resté spectateur indifférent et inerte! Au lieu de grouper les bonnes volontés éparses, vous avez laissé tous ces malheureux se disperser sans méthode et sans lien. Que vous le vouliez ou non, vous êtes responsable des misères qui les attendent.

— Responsable!… protesta le Kaw-djer. Mais quel devoir m’incombait que je n’aie rempli?

— L’assistance que le fort doit au faible.

— Ne l’ai-je pas donnée?… N’ai-je pas sauvé le Jonathan?… Quelqu’un peut-il prétendre que je lui aie refusé un secours ou un conseil?…

— Il fallait faire plus encore, affirma Harry Rhodes avec énergie. Qu’il le veuille ou non, tout homme supérieur aux autres a charge d’âmes. Il fallait diriger les événements au lieu de les subir, défendre contre lui-même ce peuple désarmé et le guider…

— En lui volant sa liberté! interrompit amèrement le Kaw-djer.

— Pourquoi pas? répliqua Harry Rhodes. Si la persuasion suffît pour les bons, il est des hommes qui ne cèdent qu’à la contrainte: à la loi qui ordonne, à la force qui oblige.

— Jamais!” s’écria le Kaw-djer avec violence.

Après une pause, il reprit d’une voix plus tranquille:

“Il faut conclure. Une fois pour toutes, mon ami, sachez que je suis l’ennemi irréconciliable de tout gouvernement, quel qu’il soit. J’ai employé ma vie entière à réfléchir sur ce problème et je pense qu’il n’y a pas de circonstance où l’on soit en droit d’attenter à la liberté de son semblable. Toute loi, prescription ou défense, édictée en vue du soi-disant intérêt de la masse au détriment des individus, est une duperie. Que l’individu se développe au contraire dans la plénitude de sa liberté, et la masse jouira d’un bonheur total fait de tous les bonheurs particuliers. À cette conviction, qui est la base de ma vie, et qu’il n’était pas en mon pouvoir, si grand fût-il, de faire triompher dans les sociétés pourries du Vieux Monde, j’ai sacrifié beaucoup, plus que la plupart des hommes n’auraient eu — et pour cause! — la possibilité de le faire, et je suis venu ici, en Magellanie, pour vivre et mourir libre sur un sol libre. Mes convictions n’ont pas changé depuis. Je sais que la liberté a ses inconvénients, mais ils s’atténueront d’eux- mêmes par l’usage, et ils sont moindres en tous cas que ceux des lois qui ont la folle prétention de les supprimer. Les événements de ces derniers mois m’ont attristé. Ils n’ont pas modifié mes idées.”

J’étais, je suis, je serai de ceux qu’on catalogue sous le nom infamant d’anarchistes. Comme eux, j’ai pour devise: Ni Dieu, ni maître. Que ceci soit dit entre nous une fois pour toutes, et ne revenons jamais sur ce sujet.”

Ainsi donc, si l’expérience avait ébranlé sa croyance, le Kaw-djer n’en voulait pas convenir. Loin d’en rien abandonner, il s’y raccrochait, comme celui qui se noie se cramponne à une touffe d’herbe, lorsque tout autre appui lui manque, bien qu’il en connaisse la fragilité.

Harry Rhodes avait écouté avec attention cette profession de foi, débitée d’un ton ferme qui n’admettait pas de réplique. Pour toute réponse il soupira tristement.

CHAPITRE VIII

VIII

Halg et Sirk

Le Kaw-djer plaçait la liberté au-dessus de tous les biens de ce monde, il était aussi attentif à respecter celle d’autrui que jaloux de sauvegarder la sienne, et pourtant, telle était l’autorité émanant de sa personne, qu’on lui obéissait comme au plus despotique des maîtres. C’est en vain qu’il évitait de prononcer une parole qui ressemblât à un ordre, on tenait pour tel le moindre de ses conseils, et presque tous s’y conformaient avec docilité.

On n’avait édifié des maisons sur la rive gauche de la rivière que parce qu’il s’y trouvait déjà. Inquiété par l’anarchie initiale de la colonie, plus inquiété encore par l’ombre de gouvernement qui s’était ensuite emparé du pouvoir, on s’était instinctivement réfugié autour d’un homme dont s’imposaient la force physique, l’ampleur intellectuelle et l’élévation morale.

Plus on touchait le Kaw-djer de près, plus on subissait son influence. Hartlepool et ses quatre marins le regardaient délibérément comme leur chef, et chez Harry Rhodes, plus capable de pénétrer les secrets ressorts de ses actes, le dévouement se magnifiait jusqu’à mériter le nom d’amitié.

Pour Halg et pour Karroly, ce dévouement devenait un véritable fétichisme. Le Kaw-djer recevait d’eux un démenti à sa formule exclusive de toute divinité, car il était un dieu pour ses deux compagnons: le père, dont il avait transformé la vie matérielle, le fils, dont il avait créé la vie psychique et qu’il avait tiré de l’état de demi-animalité où croupissent les peuplades fuégiennes. La moindre de ses paroles était une loi pour eux et possédait à leurs yeux le caractère d’une vérité révélée.

Il n’y a donc pas lieu d’être surpris si Halg, malgré sa vive répugnance à se laisser exploiter par un ennemi, conforma sa conduite aux maximes de celui qu’il considérait comme son maître. Sirk et ses acolytes purent impunément faire montre d’un cynisme croissant, Halg, quelle que fût sa rage intérieure, ne se crut pas en droit de leur refuser le produit de sa pêche, tant que furent réalisées les conditions précisées par le Kaw-djer.

Mais il arriva enfin que les règles édictées par celui-ci durent logiquement conduire à des conclusions différentes. Être habile pêcheur, avoir grandi sur l’eau depuis ses premiers ans, cela ne garantit pas contre un échec accidentel. Halg en fit un jour l’expérience. Ce jour-là, il eut beau lancer lignes et filets, et fouiller la mer en tous sens, il dut se contenter, de guerre lasse, d’une unique pièce de médiocre taille.

En compagnie de quatre autres colons, Sirk, mollement couché sur la grève, attendait son retour comme de coutume. Les cinq hommes se levèrent quand la Wel-Kiej eut jeté l’ancre et s’avancèrent à la rencontre de Halg.

“Nous avons encore été guignards aujourd’hui, camarade, dit l’un des émigrants.

Heureusement que tu es là! Sans ça, il nous faudrait nous serrer le ventre.”

Les quémandeurs ne se fatiguaient pas l’imagination. Chaque jour, leur demande était formulée en termes à peu près identiques, et, chaque jour, Halg répondait brièvement: “À votre service!” Mais, cette fois, la réponse fut différente.

“Impossible, aujourd’hui, répliqua Halg. Les solliciteurs furent grandement étonnés.

— Impossible?… répéta l’un deux.

— Voyez plutôt, dit Halg. Un seul poisson, et pas bien gros, voilà tout ce que je rapporte.

— On s’en contentera, affirma un émigrant, qui daigna faire contre mauvaise fortune bon cœur.

— Et moi?… objecta Halg.

— Toi!…” s’écrièrent cinq voix qui exprimèrent à l’unisson la plus profonde surprise.

En vérité, il ne manquait pas d’aplomb, le jeune sauvage! Croyait-il compter pour quelque chose, en regard des cinq “civilisés” qui lui faisaient l’honneur de le mettre à contribution?

“Eh! dis donc, le mal blanchi, s’écria un des colons, tu as encore une façon de comprendre la fraternité!… c’est-il donc que tu aurais le toupet de nous le refuser, ton méchant poisson?”

Halg garda le silence. Appuyé sur les principes énoncés par le Kaw-djer, il était sûr de son bon droit. “Assurer sa propre subsistance d’abord, puis…” D’abord, avait dit le Kaw-djer. Cet unique poisson étant de toute évidence insuffisant au repas du soir, il était par conséquent fondé à se refuser au partage.

“Ah bien! elle est verte, celle-là!… s’écria l’ouvrier indigné de ce qu’il considérait comme la preuve du plus choquant égoïsme.

— Pas tant de phrases, intervint Sirk d’un ton provocant. Si le moricaud refuse son poisson, prenons-le!”

Puis, se tournant vers Halg:

“Une fois?… deux fois?… trois fois?…”

Halg, sans répondre, se mit en défense.

“En avant, les garçons!” commanda Sirk.

Assailli par cinq hommes à la fois, Halg fut renversé. Le poisson lui fut arraché.

“Kaw-djer!…” appela-t-il en tombant.

À cet appel, le Kaw-djer et Karroly sortirent de la maison. Ils aperçurent Halg soutenant cette bataille inégale et coururent à son secours.

Les agresseurs n’attendirent pas leur intervention. Ils détalèrent à toutes jambes et repassèrent la rivière, en emportant le poisson conquis de vive force. Halg se releva aussitôt, un peu meurtri, mais, au demeurant, sans blessure.

“Qu’est-il donc arrivé?” demanda le Kaw-djer.

Halg lui raconta l’incident, tandis que le Kaw-djer l’écoutait les sourcils froncés. C’était une nouvelle preuve de la méchanceté humaine qui venait saper ses théories optimistes. Combien en faudrait-il avant qu’il se rendît, avant qu’il consentît à voir l’homme tel qu’il est?

Si loin qu’il poussât l’altruisme, il ne put donner tort à son pupille, dont le bon droit s’imposait d’une façon si éclatante. Tout au plus, se risqua-t-il à faire entendre que l’importance du litige ne justifiait pas une pareille défense. Mais Halg, cette fois, ne se laissa pas convaincre.

“Ce n’est pas pour le poisson, s’écria-t-il, encore tout échauffé de la lutte. Je ne peux pas, cependant, être l’esclave de ces gens-là!

— Évidemment… évidemment”, reconnut le Kaw-djer d’un ton conciliant.

Oui, il y avait cela aussi — l’amour-propre — pour semer la discorde parmi les hommes. Ce n’est pas seulement la satisfaction de leurs besoins matériels qui cause les batailles. Ils ont des besoins moraux, aussi impérieux, plus impérieux peut-être, et, au premier rang de tous, l’orgueil, qui a contribué pour sa bonne part à ensanglanter la terre. Le Kaw-djer était-il en droit de nier la furieuse violence de l’orgueil, lui dont l’âme indomptable n’avait jamais pu subir la contrainte?

Cependant, Halg continuait à exhaler sa colère.

“Moi!… disait-il, céder à Sirk.”

Encore cela, nos passions, pour armer les uns contre les autres ceux que le Kaw-djer s’obstinait à considérer comme des frères!

Celui-ci ne releva pas le cri de révolte du jeune Indien. Apaisant Halg du geste, il s’éloigna silencieusement.

Mais il ne renonçait pas à défendre son rêve contre l’assaut des faits. Tout en marchant, il cherchait et trouvait des excuses aux agresseurs. Que ceux-ci fussent coupables, cela ne faisait pas question, mais ces pauvres gens, tristes produits de la civilisation atroce du Vieux Monde, ne pouvaient connaître d'autres arguments que la force lorsque leur vie même était en jeu.

Or, n'étaient-ils pas dans une situation de ce genre? Quelles que fussent leur légèreté et leur imprévoyance, ils devaient être frappés par la croissante pénurie des vivres, dont la plus grande partie avait été emportée dans l'intérieur. Aucun apport ne venant en renouveler le stock, il était possible de fixer le jour où ils seraient épuisés. Dès lors, quoi de plus naturel que ces malheureux voulussent retarder par tous les moyens l'inévitable échéance, et obéissent à l'instinct primordial de tout organisme vivant qui tend à reculer per fas et nefas le terme de la destruction nécessaire?

Sirk et ses acolytes s'étaient-ils rendu compte de l'état des ressources de la colonie, ou bien avaient-ils simplement cédé à la brutalité de leur nature? Quoi qu'il en soit, les craintes du Kaw-djer n'étaient point vaines. Il fallait être aveugle pour ne pas voir que le plus terrible des dangers, la faim, menaçait la colonie naissante. Que se passait-il dans l'intérieur de l'île? On l'ignorait. Mais, en mettant tout au mieux, ce n'était pas avant l'été suivant que l'abondance de la récolte permettrait d'en transporter une partie à la côte. C'était donc toute une année à attendre, alors qu'il restait à peine deux mois de vivres.

Sur la rive gauche, la situation était moins défavorable. Là, sous l'influence du Kaw-djer, on s'était rationné dès le début, et l'on s'ingéniait à économiser la réserve, voire à l'augmenter par le jardinage et la pêche. Par contre, l'indifférence de la soixantaine d'émigrants de la rive droite était remarquable. Que deviendraient ces malheureux? Allaient-ils, à trois cents ans de distance, jouer l'effroyable tragédie d'un nouveau Port Famine?

On était en droit de le craindre, et l'aventure menaçait véritablement de se terminer ainsi, quand une chance de salut fut offerte aux colons imprévoyants.

Le Chili n'avait pas oublié sa promesse de venir en aide à la nation naissante. Vers le milieu de février, un navire battant pavillon chilien mouilla en face du campement. Ce navire, le Ribarto, transport à voiles de sept à huit cents tonneaux, sous les ordres du commandant José Fuentès, apportait à l'île Hoste des vivres, des graines de semaille, des animaux de ferme et des instruments aratoires, cargaison du plus haut prix et de nature à assurer le succès des colons, si elle était judicieusement employée.

Dès que l'ancre fut au fond, le commandant Fuentès se fit conduire à terre et se mit en rapport avec le gouverneur de l'île. Ferdinand Beauval s'étant audacieusement présenté en cette qualité — à bon droit, d'ailleurs, puisque personne d'autre que lui ne revendiquait ce titre — le déchargement du Ribarto fut entrepris sur l'heure.

Pendant que ce travail s'accomplissait, le commandant Fuentès s'occupa d'une autre mission dont il était chargé.

“Monsieur le gouverneur, dit-il à Beauval, mon gouvernement croit savoir qu'un personnage connu sous le nom de Kaw-djer se serait fixé sur l'île Hoste. Le fait est-il exact?”

Beauval ayant répondu affirmativement, le commandant reprit:

“Nos renseignements ne nous ont donc pas trompés. Oserai-je vous demander quel homme est ce Kaw-djer?

— Un révolutionnaire, répondit Beauval avec une candeur dont il n'avait même pas conscience.

— Un révolutionnaire!… Qu’entendez-vous par ce mot, monsieur le gouverneur?

— Pour moi comme pour tout le monde, expliqua Beauval, un révolutionnaire est un homme qui s’insurge contre les lois et refuse de se soumettre aux autorités régulièrement instituées.

— Le Kaw-djer vous aurait-il donc créé des difficultés?

— J’ai fort à faire avec lui, dit Beauval d’un air important. C’est ce qu’on appelle une forte tête. Mais je le materai”, affïrma-t-il énergiquement.

Le commandant du navire chilien semblait très intéressé. Après un instant de réflexion, il demanda:

“Serait-il possible de voir ce Kaw-djer, sur lequel s’est portée à plusieurs reprises l’attention de mon gouvernement?

— Rien de plus facile, répondit Beauval… Et tenez! précisément, le voici qui vient de notre côté.”

Ce disant, Beauval montrait de la main le Kaw-djer en train de traverser la rivière sur le ponceau. Le commandant se porta à sa rencontre.

“Un mot, monsieur, s’il vous plaît”, dit-il en soulevant légèrement sa casquette galonnée.

Le Kaw-djer s’arrêta.

“Je vous écoute”, répondit-il dans le plus pur espagnol.

Mais le commandant ne parla pas tout de suite. Les yeux fixes, la bouche entrouverte, il dévisageait le Kaw-djer avec une stupéfaction qu’il ne cherchait pas à dissimuler.

“Eh bien?… fit celui-ci impatienté.

— Veuillez m’excuser, monsieur, dit enfin le commandant. En vous voyant, il m’a semblé vous reconnaître, comme si nous nous étions déjà rencontrés autrefois.

— C’est peu probable, répliqua le Kaw-djer dont les lèvres esquissèrent un sourire ironique.

— Cependant…”

Le commandant s’interrompit et, se frappant le front.

“J’y suis!… s’écria-t-il. Vous avez raison. Je ne vous ai jamais vu, en effet. Mais vous ressemblez à un portrait qui a été répandu par millions d’exemplaires, au point qu’il me paraît impossible que ce portrait ne soit pas le vôtre.”

À mesure qu’il parlait, une sorte de trouble respectueux assourdissait progressivement la voix, modifiait l’attitude du commandant. Quand il se tut, il avait sa casquette à la main.

“Vous faites erreur, monsieur, dit froidement le Kaw-djer.

— Je jurerais, pourtant…

— À quelle époque remonterait le portrait en question? interrompit le Kaw-djer.

— À une dizaine d’années environ.”

Le Kaw-djer n’hésita pas à dénaturer quelque peu la vérité.

“Il y a plus de vingt ans, répliqua-t-il, que j’ai quitté ce que vous appelez le monde. Ce n’est donc pas moi que ce portrait représente. D’ailleurs, pourriez-vous me reconnaître?… Il y a vingt ans, j’étais jeune. Et maintenant!…

— Quel âge avez-vous donc?” interrogea étourdiment le commandant.

Sa curiosité, surexcitée par l’étrange mystère qu’il pressentait et qu’il se croyait sur le point d’élucider, ne lui laissant pas le temps de la réflexion, la question était partie toute seule. À peine l’eut-il formulée qu’il en comprit l’incorrection.

“Vous ai-je demandé le vôtre?” riposta le Kaw-djer d’un ton froid.

Le commandant se mordit les lèvres.

“Je présume, reprit le Kaw-djer, que vous ne m’avez pas abordé pour que nous causions photographie. Venons au fait, je vous prie.

— Soit!…” acquiesça le commandant.

D’un geste sec, il remit sa casquette galonnée.

“Mon gouvernement, dit-il, en adoptant de nouveau le ton officiel, m’a chargé de m’enquérir de vos intentions.

— Mes intentions?… répéta le Kaw-djer surpris. À quel sujet?

— Au sujet de votre résidence.

— Que lui importe?

— Il lui importe beaucoup.

— Bah!…

— C’est ainsi. Mon gouvernement n’est pas sans connaître votre influence sur les indigènes de l’archipel, et il n’a cessé de tenir cette influence en sérieuse considération.

— Trop aimable!… dit ironiquement le Kaw-djer.

— Tant que la Magellanie est demeurée res nullius, poursuivit le commandant, il n’y avait qu’à rester dans l’expectative. Mais la situation a changé de face depuis le partage. Après l’annexion…

— La spoliation, rectifia le Kaw-djer entre ses dents.

— Vous dites?…

— Rien. Continuez, je vous prie.

— Après l’annexion, reprit le commandant, mon gouvernement, soucieux d’asseoir solidement son autorité dans l’archipel, a dû se demander quelle attitude il convenait d’adopter à votre égard. Cette attitude dépendra forcément de la vôtre. Ma mission consiste donc à m’enquérir de vos projets. Je vous apporte un traité d’alliance…

— Ou une déclaration de guerre?

— Précisément. Votre influence, que nous ne contestons pas, nous sera-t-elle hostile, ou la mettrez-vous au service de notre œuvre de civilisation? Serez-vous notre allié ou notre adversaire? À vous d’en décider.

— Ni l’un, ni l’autre, dit le Kaw-djer. Un indifférent.”

Le commandant hocha la tête d’un air de doute.

“Étant donné votre situation particulière dans l’archipel, dit-il, la neutralité me paraît d’une application difficile.

— Très facile, au contraire, répliqua le Kaw-djer, pour cette excellente raison que j’ai quitté la Magellanie sans esprit de retour.

— Vous avez quitté?… Ici, cependant…

— Ici, je suis sur l’île Hoste, terre libre et je suis résolu à ne pas retourner dans la partie de l’archipel qui ne l’est plus.

— Vous comptez, par conséquent, vous fixer sur l’île Hoste?”

Le Kaw-djer approuva du geste.

“Cela simplifie les choses, en effet, dit le commandant avec satisfaction. Je puis donc emporter l’assurance que mon gouvernement ne vous aura pas contre lui?

— Dites à votre gouvernement que je l’ignore”, répondit le Kaw-djer, qui souleva son bonnet et reprit sa marche.

Un instant, le commandant le suivit des yeux. Malgré l’affirmation de son interlocuteur, il n’était pas convaincu que la ressemblance qu’il avait cru découvrir fût imaginaire, et cette ressemblance devait avoir, d’une manière ou d’une autre, quelque chose d’extraordinaire pour le troubler aussi profondément.

“C’est étrange”, murmurait-il à demi-voix, tandis que, sans tourner la tête, le Kaw-djer s’éloignait d’un pas tranquille.

Le commandant n’eut plus l’occasion de vérifier le bien-fondé de ses soupçons, car le Kaw-djer ne se prêta pas à une seconde entrevue. Comme s’il eût redouté de donner prétexte à une investigation quelconque dans sa vie passée, il disparut le soir du même jour et partit pour une de ses randonnées coutumières à travers l’île.

Le commandant dut donc se borner à effectuer le déchargement de son navire, travail qui fut accompli en une semaine.

En dehors de la cargaison généreusement envoyée par le Chili au profit commun de la nouvelle colonie, le Ribarto apportait également toute une pacotille pour le compte particulier de l’un des colons, qui n’était autre qu’Harry Rhodes.

Incapable de s’adonner à des travaux agricoles auxquels son éducation ne l’avait en aucune façon préparé, Harry Rhodes avait eu l’idée de se transformer en commerçant importateur. C’est pourquoi, au moment de la proclamation d’indépendance, alors qu’on était en droit de prévoir pour la nation naissante une heureuse destinée, il avait chargé le commandant de l’aviso de lui expédier cette pacotille quand il en trouverait l’occasion. Celui-ci s’étant fidèlement acquitté de cette mission, le Ribarto transportait d’ordre et pour compte d’Harry Rhodes une infinité d’objets divers, de médiocre importance isolément, mais ayant tous cette qualité d’être de première nécessité. Fil, aiguilles, épingles, allumettes, chaussures, vêtements, plumes, crayons, papier à lettres, tabac, et mille autres objets, constituaient cette pacotille, véritable assortiment de bazar.

Certes, le projet d’Harry Rhodes était des plus raisonnables, ses choix des plus judicieux. Néanmoins, du train dont allaient les choses, il était à craindre que son assortiment ne lui restât pour compte. Rien n’indiquait qu’un courant de transaction dût jamais s’établir parmi les Hosteliens, qui, en l’absence de toute règle commune endiguant, limitant, solidarisant les égoïsmes individuels, n’étaient autre chose qu’un agrégat fortuit de solitaires.

Harry Rhodes, à en juger par la tournure des événements, considérait désormais l’échec de son entreprise comme si probable, qu’il fut tenté de laisser sa pacotille sur le Ribarto, d’y prendre lui-même passage et de quitter un pays dont il ne semblait pas qu’il y eût rien à espérer.

Mais où serait-il allé, encombré de ces marchandises hétéroclites, si précieuses dans une région presque sauvage, et qui deviendraient sans valeur dans les contrées où elles abondent? Toutes réflexions faites, il se résolut à patienter encore. Il n’était pas à supposer que ce bâtiment fût le dernier qui aborderait dans ces parages. L’occasion se retrouverait donc de quitter l’île Hoste, si la situation ne s’améliorait pas.

Le déchargement de sa cargaison terminé, le Ribarto leva l’ancre et reprit la mer. Quelques heures plus tard, comme s’il n’eût attendu que le départ du navire, le Kaw-djer revenait à la côte.

L’existence antérieure recommença, les uns jardinant ou pêchant, le Kaw-djer poursuivant la série de ses chasses, la plupart ne faisant rien et se laissant vivre avec une sérénité que justifiait dans une certaine mesure l’augmentation du stock de provisions. La population étant réduite à moins de cent âmes, en y comprenant le Bourg-Neuf, nom donné d’un consentement général à l’agglomération groupée autour du Kaw-djer, il y avait des vivres pour au moins dix-huit mois. Pourquoi, dès lors, se serait-on inquiété?

Quant à Beauval, il régnait. À vrai dire, c’était à la manière d’un roi fainéant, et, s’il régnait, il ne gouvernait pas. D’ailleurs, à son estime, les choses allaient très bien ainsi. Dès les premiers jours de sa nomination, il avait, par décret, baptisé le campement, qui, promu au rang de capitale officielle de l’île Hoste, portait depuis le nom de Libéria; après cet effort, il s’était reposé.

Le don généreux du gouvernement chilien lui fournit l’occasion de faire un deuxième acte d’autorité, dont l’important objet fut l’organisation des plaisirs de son peuple. Sur son ordre, tandis que la moitié des boissons alcooliques apportées par le Ribarto était mise en réserve, l’autre moitié fut distribuée aux colons. Le résultat de cette largesse ne se fit pas attendre. Beaucoup perdirent immédiatement la raison, et Lazare Ceroni plus que tous les autres. Tullia et sa fille eurent ainsi à subir de nouveau d’abominables scènes, dont les éclats se perdirent dans le grondement de la kermesse qui, pour la seconde fois, secouait tout le campement.

On buvait. On jouait. On dansait aussi, aux sons du violon de Fritz Gross, que l’alcool avait ressuscité. Les plus sobres faisaient cercle autour du génial musicien. Le Kaw-djer lui-même ne dédaigna pas de passer la rivière, attiré par ces chants merveilleux, plus merveilleux encore d’être uniques dans ces lointaines régions. Quelques habitants du Bourg-Neuf l’accompagnaient alors, Harry Rhodes et sa famille qui goûtaient vivement le charme de cette musique, Halg et Karroly, pour qui elle était une véritable révélation et qui bayaient littéralement d’admiration. Quant à Dick et Sand, ils ne manquaient aucune audition et se précipitaient sur la rive droite dès que le violon se faisait entendre.

À vrai dire, Dick n’allait y chercher qu’une nouvelle occasion de jeu. Il sautait et dansait à perdre haleine, en respectant plus ou moins la mesure.

Mais il n’en était pas de même de son camarade. Comme lors des précédentes auditions, Sand se plaçait au premier rang, et là, les yeux agrandis, la bouche entrouverte, frissonnant d’une profonde émotion, il écoutait de toutes ses forces, sans perdre une note, jusqu’au moment où la dernière s’envolait dans l’espace.

Son attitude recueillie finit par frapper le Kaw-djer.

“Tu aimes donc ça, la musique, mon garçon? lui demanda-t-il un jour.

— Oh!… monsieur!… soupira Sand. Il ajouta d’un air extasié:

— Jouer… jouer du violon, comme M. Grossi…

— Vraiment!… fit le Kaw-djer, amusé par l’ardeur du petit garçon, ça t’amuserait tant que ça?… Eh bien! mais on pourra peut-être te satisfaire.”

Sand le regarda d’un air incrédule.

“Pourquoi pas? reprit le Kaw-djer. À la première occasion, je m’occuperai de te faire venir un violon.

— Vrai, monsieur?… dit Sand les yeux brillants de bonheur.

— Je te le promets, mon garçon, affirma le Kaw-djer. Par exemple, il te faudra patienter!”

Sans pousser la passion musicale au même point que le jeune mousse, les autres émigrants semblaient prendre plaisir à ces concerts. C’était une distraction qui interrompait la monotonie de leur existence.

Cet indéniable succès de Fritz Gross donna une idée à Ferdinand Beauval. Deux fois par semaine régulièrement, une ration fut prélevée au profit du musicien sur la réserve de liqueurs alcooliques, et, deux fois par semaine, Libéria eut par conséquent son concert, à l’exemple de tant d’autres villes plus policées.

Le baptême de la capitale et l’organisation de ses plaisirs suffirent à épuiser les facultés organisatrices de Ferdinand Beauval. Au surplus, il avait tendance, en constatant la satisfaction générale, à s’admirer complaisamment dans son œuvre. Des souvenirs classiques s’évoquaient dans sa mémoire. Panem et circences, demandaient les Romains. Lui, Beauval, n’avait-il pas satisfait à cette antique revendication? Le pain, le Ribarto l’avait assuré, et les récoltes futures feraient le reste. Les plaisirs, le violon de Fritz Gross les représentait, en admettant que tout ne fût pas plaisir dans ce farniente perpétuel, au milieu duquel s’écoulait l’existence de la fraction de la colonie qui avait le bonheur de vivre sous l’autorité immédiate du gouverneur.

Le mois de février, puis le mois de mars s’écoulèrent, sans que fût troublé l’optimisme de celui-ci. Quelques discussions, voire quelques rixes troublaient bien parfois la paix de Libéria. Mais c’étaient là des incidents sans importance sur lesquels Beauval estimait très politique de fermer les yeux.

Les derniers jours du mois de mars amenèrent malheureusement la fin de sa quiétude. Le premier incident qui la troubla et fut comme le prélude des dramatiques péripéties qui n’allaient pas tarder à se dérouler, n’avait par lui-même aucune importance. Il ne s’agissait encore que d’une altercation, mais cette altercation, en raison de son caractère et de ses conséquences, ne parut pas à Beauval devoir comporter une solution pacifique, et il jugea nécessaire de sortir de son habile effacement. Mal lui en prit, d’ailleurs, et son intervention eut un résultat sur lequel il ne comptait guère.

Halg fut, à son corps défendant, le héros de cet incident.

Après la bataille inégale qu’il avait été obligé de soutenir contre Sirk et les quatre émigrants qui accompagnaient celui-ci, plusieurs semaines s’étaient écoulées sans qu’il revît son rival. Par crainte probablement d’une intervention plus efficace du Kaw-djer, ses agresseurs avaient, depuis lors, cessé de prétendre au produit de sa pêche. Bientôt, d’ailleurs, l’arrivée du Ribarto mit tout le monde d’accord. Qu’importaient quelques poissons de plus ou de moins, maintenant que les provisions étaient devenues si abondantes qu’on pouvait à bon droit les considérer comme inépuisables?

Malheureusement, la cargaison du Ribarto n’était pas exclusivement formée de denrées alimentaires. Le navire contenait aussi une certaine quantité d’alcool, et, Beauval ayant commis l’imprudence de le distribuer, le pernicieux breuvage avait aussitôt porté le trouble dans le campement.

Chez les Ceroni, les choses prirent tout particulièrement une mauvaise tournure. Les drames incessants qu’y provoqua l’ivresse de Lazare Ceroni eurent pour conséquence d’accentuer l’aversion que Sirk et Halg éprouvaient l’un pour l’autre. Alors que le second s’érigeait en défenseur de Tullia et de sa fille, le premier semblait flatter le vice du misérable époux et du père indigne. Cette attitude de Sirk emplissait de colère le cœur du jeune Indien, qui ne pouvait pardonner à son rival les larmes de Graziella.

L’épuisement de l’alcool distribué ne ramena pas le calme. Grâce à son intimité avec Ferdinand Beauval, Sirk, reprenant pour son compte la méthode de Patterson, parvint à renouveler la provision de Lazare Ceroni, dont il espérait capter ainsi la bienveillance.

Le procédé, qui avait réussi une première fois, réussissait une seconde. L’ivrogne prenait ouvertement parti pour celui qui favorisait sa déplorable passion et se déclarait son allié. Bientôt il n’appela plus Sirk autrement que son gendre, en jurant qu’il saurait briser la résistance de Graziella.

La jeune fille évitait de mettre Halg au courant de la contrainte contre laquelle il lui fallait lutter, mais celui-ci la devinait en partie, et, conscient du jeu de Sirk, sa haine croissait de jour en jour.

Les choses en étaient là, quand, dans la matinée du 29 mars, Halg, au moment où il venait de traverser le ponceau pour se rendre sur la rive droite, aperçut, à cent mètres de lui, Graziella, qui, échevelée, courant à perdre haleine, semblait fuir quelque danger redoutable.

Elle fuyait, en effet, et un redoutable danger, car, à cinquante pas derrière elle, Sirk la poursuivait de toute la vitesse de ses jambes.

“Halg!… Halg!… À moi!…” appela Graziella, dès qu’elle vit le jeune Indien.

Celui-ci, s’élançant à son secours, barra la route au poursuivant.

Mais Sirk dédaignait un si frêle adversaire. Après un court arrêt, il reprit son élan et, poussant un sourd ricanement, se précipita tête baissée.

L’événement lui prouva bientôt sa présomption. Si Halg était jeune, il devait à sa vie sauvage une adresse de singe et des muscles d’acier. Quand l’ennemi fut à portée, ses deux bras se détendirent ensemble comme des ressorts, et ses deux poings l’atteignirent à la fois au visage et à la poitrine. Sirk, assommé, s’écroula.

Les jeunes gens s’empressèrent de battre en retraite et de rechercher un refuge sur la rive gauche, poursuivis par les vociférations du vaincu, qui, ayant péniblement retrouvé le souffle, les couvrait des plus effroyables menaces.

Sans lui répondre, Halg et Graziella allèrent en droite ligne trouver le Kaw-djer que la jeune fille aborda en suppliante.

L’existence était devenue intolérable pour elle sur l’autre rive. Autant qu’elle l’avait pu, elle avait caché ses misères, mais celles-ci en arrivaient à un point où mieux valait tout dire. Ce matin même, Sirk s’était enhardi jusqu’à la violence. Il l’avait malmenée, frappée, malgré l’intervention de l’impuissante Tullia, tandis que Lazare Ceroni — chose affreuse à dire! — semblait au contraire l’encourager. Graziella avait enfin réussi à prendre la fuite, mais nul ne sait quelle aurait été la fin de l’aventure, si Halg n’en avait pas brusqué le dénouement.

Le Kaw-djer avait écouté ce récit avec son calme habituel.

“Et maintenant, demanda-t-il, que comptez-vous faire, mon enfant?

— Rester près de vous!… s’écria Graziella. Accordez-moi votre protection, je vous en supplie!

— Elle vous est assurée, affirma le Kaw-djer. Quant à rester ici, cela vous regarde; chacun est libre de soi-même. Tout au plus me permettrai-je de vous donner un conseil pour le choix de votre demeure. Si vous m’en croyez, vous demanderez l’hospitalité à la famille Rhodes, qui vous l’accordera certainement à ma prière.”

Cette sage solution ne se heurta, en effet, à aucune difficulté. La fugitive fut reçue à bras ouverts par la famille Rhodes, et spécialement par Clary, heureuse d’avoir une compagne de son âge.

Un souci torturait, cependant, le cœur de Graziella. Qu’allait devenir sa mère dans l’enfer où elle l’avait abandonnée? Le Kaw-djer la rassura. Sur l’heure, il irait inviter Tullia à rejoindre sa fille.

Disons tout de suite qu’il devait échouer dans sa charitable mission. Tout en approuvant le départ de Graziella et en s’applaudissant de la savoir en sûreté sur l’autre rive sous la protection d’une famille honorable, Tullia se refusa obstinément à quitter son mari. La tâche qu’elle avait accepté d’accomplir, elle l’accomplirait jusqu’au bout. Cette tâche, c’était d’accompagner sur la route de la vie, quoiqu’elle en dût souffrir, et dût-elle en mourir, cet homme qui, en ce moment même, cuvait, masse inerte, sa première ivresse de la journée.

En rapportant cette réponse, à laquelle il s’attendait, d’ailleurs, le Kaw-djer trouva, près de Graziella, Ferdinand Beauval, soutenant contre Harry Rhodes une discussion qui commençait à tourner à l’aigre.

“Qu’y a-t-il? demanda le Kaw-djer.

— Il y a, répondit Harry Rhodes irrité, que Monsieur se permet de venir réclamer jusque chez moi Graziella, qu’il prétend ramener à son délicieux père.

— En quoi les affaires de la famille Ceroni regardent-elles M. Beauval? interrogea le Kaw-djer d’un ton où grondait un commencement d’orage.

— Tout ce qui se passe dans la colonie regarde le gouverneur, expliqua Beauval, en s’efforçant de se hausser, par l’attitude et l’accent, à la dignité qui convenait à cette fonction.

— Or, le gouverneur?…

— C’est moi.

— Ah! Ah!… fit le Kaw-djer.

— J’ai été saisi d’une plainte… commença Beauval sans relever la menaçante ironie de l’interruption.

— Par Sirk! dit Halg, qui n’ignorait pas les accointances des deux personnages.

— Nullement, rectifia Beauval, par le père, par Lazare Ceroni, lui-même.

— Bah!… objecta le Kaw-djer. C’est donc que Lazare Ceroni parle en dormant?… Car il dort. Il ronfle même en ce moment.

— Vos railleries n’empêcheront pas qu’un crime ait été commis sur le territoire de la colonie, répliqua Beauval d’un ton rogue.

— Un crime?… Voyez-vous ça!…

— Oui, un crime. Une jeune fille encore mineure a été arrachée à sa famille. Un tel acte est qualifié crime dans la loi de tous les pays.

— Il y a donc des lois à l’île Hoste? demanda le Kaw-djer, dont les yeux, à ce mot de loi, eurent des éclairs inquiétants. De qui émanent-elles donc, ces lois?

— De moi, répondit Beauval d’un air superbe, de moi qui représente les colons et qui, à ce titre, ai droit à l’obéissance de tous.

— Comment avez-vous dit?… s’écria le Kaw-djer. Obéissance, je crois?… Parbleu, voici ma réponse: Sur l’île Hoste, terre libre, nul ne doit obéissance à personne. Libre, Graziella est venue ici, et libre elle y restera, si telle est sa volonté…

— Mais… tenta de placer Beauval.

— Il n’y a pas de mais. Qui se risquera à parler d’obéissance me trouvera contre lui.

— C’est ce que nous verrons, riposta Beauval. Respect est dû à la loi, et dussé-je recourir à la force…

— La force!… s’écria le Kaw-djer. Essayez-en donc! En attendant je vous conseille de ne pas lasser ma patience et de regagner votre capitale, si vous désirez n’y pas être reconduit trop vite.”

L’aspect du Kaw-djer était si peu rassurant, que Beauval jugea prudent de ne pas insister; il battit en retraite, suivi à vingt pas par le Kaw-djer, Harry Rhodes, Hartlepool et Karroly.

Quant il fut en sûreté de l’autre côté de la rivière, il se retourna menaçant:

“Nous nous reverrons!” cria-t-il.

Si peu redoutable que fût la colère de Beauval, il y avait lieu pourtant d’en tenir compte dans une certaine mesure. L’orgueil meurtri peut donner du cœur au plus lâche, et il n’était pas impossible qu’il se risquât, avec la complicité de ses clients ordinaires, à quelque coup de main, en profitant de l’obscurité de la nuit.

Heureusement, il était facile de parer à ce danger. Beauval, en se retournant de nouveau cent pas plus loin, put voir Hartlepool et Karroly en train d’enlever le tablier du ponceau qui reliait les deux rives. La flottille étant tout entière à l’ancre dans l’anse du Bourg-Neuf, les communications étaient ainsi coupées avec Libéria, et une surprise devenait irréalisable.

En comprenant à quel travail se livraient ses adversaires, Beauval, furieux, montra le poing.

Le Kaw-djer se contenta de hausser les épaules, et, l’une après l’autre, les planches du tablier continuèrent à tomber.

Bientôt, il ne subsista que les madriers formant les piles, contre lesquels bruissait l’eau de la rivière séparant désormais les deux campements adverses.

Ainsi se manifestait une fois de plus la nature combative des humains. En acceptant dans leur cœur la possibilité d’un recours à la guerre, en y préludant, de la manière que l’usage a consacrée, par la rupture des relations diplomatiques, ces habitants de deux hameaux perdus aux confins du monde habitable prouvaient que les citoyens des grands empires ne sont pas les seuls à mériter le nom d’hommes.

CHAPITRE IX

IX

Le deuxième hiver

Lorsque le mois d’avril ramena l’hiver avec lui, aucun fait nouveau de quelque importance n’avait jalonné la vie poignante et monotone des habitants de Libéria. Tant que la température fut clémente, ils se laissèrent vivre sans souci de l’avenir, et les troubles atmosphériques dont s’accompagne l’équinoxe les surprirent en plein rêve. Par exemple, aux premiers souffles des bourrasques hivernales, Libéria parut se dépeupler. De même que l’année précédente, on se calfeutra au fond des maisons closes.

Au Bourg-Neuf, l’existence n’était pas beaucoup plus active, les travaux de plein air, et notamment la pêche, étant devenus impraticables. Dès le début du mauvais temps, le poisson avait fui dans le Nord vers les eaux moins froides du détroit de Magellan. Les pêcheurs laissaient donc à l’ancre leurs barques inutiles. Qu’en eussent-ils fait d’ailleurs au milieu des eaux soulevées par le vent?

Après la tempête, ce fut la neige. Puis un rayon de soleil, amenant le dégel, transforma le sol en marécage. Puis ce fut la neige encore.

Dans tous les cas, quand bien même le tablier du ponceau fût resté en place, les communications eussent été malaisées entre la capitale et son faubourg, et Beauval eût été bien empêché de mettre ses menaces à exécution. Mais ne les avait-il pas oubliées? Depuis qu’on l’avait si vertement expulsé de la rive gauche, elles étaient restées lettre morte, et désormais de plus graves et plus pressants soucis l’accablaient, au regard desquels le souvenir de l’injure reçue devait singulièrement décroître d’importance.

Réduite à presque rien après la proclamation de l’indépendance, la population de Libéria avait maintenant tendance à s’accroître. Ceux des émigrants partis dans l’intérieur de l’île qui, pour un motif ou pour un autre, n’avaient pas réussi dans leurs essais de colonisation, refluaient vers la côte à l’approche de la mauvaise saison, et ils y apportaient avec eux des germes de misère et de troubles que Beauval n’avait pas prévus.

Ce n’est pas qu’il fût menacé personnellement. Ainsi qu’il l’avait supposé avec raison, on acceptait sans difficulté le fait accompli. Personne ne manifestait la moindre surprise de le trouver promu à la dignité de gouverneur. Ces pauvres gens avaient, de naissance, l’habitude d’être les inférieurs de tout le monde, et rien ne leur semblait plus normal qu’un de leurs semblables s’attribuât le droit de les régenter. Il y a d’inéluctables nécessités contre lesquelles il serait fou de s’insurger. Qu’ils fussent petits et qu’il existât des grands, qu’on les commandât et qu’ils obéissent, cela était dans l’ordre naturel des choses.

Par exemple, la puissance du maître n’allait pas sans des obligations symétriques. À celui qui s’élevait au-dessus de tous incombait le devoir d’assurer la vie de tous. Pour eux l’humble docilité, mais à la condition que leur pitance fût assurée. À lui l’éclat du pouvoir, mais à la condition qu’il prît toutes les initiatives, qu’il assumât toutes les responsabilités, que la foule, malléable tant qu’elle est satisfaite, saurait bien rendre effectives, du jour où les ventres crieraient famine.

Or, l’accroissement inattendu des bouches à nourrir tendait à rendre cette échéance plus prochaine.

Ce fut le 15 avril qu’on vit revenir le premier de ces émigrants qui se reconnaissaient vaincus dans leur lutte contre la nature. Il apparut vers la fin du jour, traînant avec lui sa femme et ses quatre enfants. Triste caravane! La femme, hâve, amaigrie, vêtue d’une jupe en lambeaux, les enfants, deux filles et deux garçons, dont le dernier avait cinq ans à peine, s’accrochant, presque nus, à la robe de leur mère. En avant, le père, marchant seul, l’air las et découragé.

On s’empressa autour d’eux. On les accabla de questions.

L’homme, tout ragaillardi de se retrouver parmi d’autres hommes, raconta brièvement son histoire. Parti l’un des derniers, il avait dû longtemps cheminer avant de rencontrer de la terre sans maître. C’est seulement dans la deuxième quinzaine de décembre qu’il y était parvenu et qu’il s’était mis à l’œuvre. En premier lieu, il avait bâti sa demeure. Très mal outillé, livré à ses seules forces, il avait eu grand mal à mener son entreprise à bonne fin, d’autant plus que son ignorance de la construction lui fit commettre plusieurs erreurs qui se traduisirent par une augmentation de la durée du travail.

Après six semaines d’efforts ininterrompus, ayant enfin terminé une grossière cabane, il avait entrepris le défrichement. Malheureusement, sa mauvaise étoile l’avait conduit sur un sol lourd et sillonné d’un inextricable réseau de racines dans lequel la pioche et la bêche avaient peine à se frayer passage. Malgré son labeur acharné, la surface préparée pour l’ensemencement était insignifiante, lorsque l’hiver fit son apparition.

Toute culture étant ainsi arrêtée net, dans un moment où il ne pouvait encore espérer la moindre récolte, et les vivres, d’autre part, commençant à lui manquer, il avait dû se résigner à abandonner sur place ses quelques outils et ses inutiles semences, et à refaire en sens inverse le long chemin parcouru quatre mois plus tôt d’un cœur joyeux. Dix jours durant, sa famille et lui s’étaient traînés à travers l’île, se terrant sous la neige pendant les tourmentes, marchant avec de la boue jusqu’aux genoux quand la température devenait plus douce, pour arriver finalement à la côte, harassés, épuisés, affamés.

Beauval s’occupa de soulager ces pauvres gens. Par ses soins, une des maisons démontables leur fut attribuée, et on leur donna des vivres sur lesquels ils se jetèrent goulûment. Cela fait, il considéra l’incident comme résolu de satisfaisante façon.

Les jours suivants le détrompèrent. Il ne s’en passait plus que l’un ou l’autre des émigrants partis au printemps ne regagnât la côte, ceux-ci seuls, ceux-là ramenant avec eux femmes et enfants, mais tous pareillement déguenillés et pareillement affamés.

Certaines familles revenaient moins nombreuses qu’elles n’étaient parties. Où étaient les manquants? Morts sans doute. Et sans doute, aussi, la théorie lamentable des survivants continuait à s’égrener à travers l’île, tous convergeant vers le même point: Libéria, où leur flux ininterrompu ne tarderait pas à poser le plus effrayant des problèmes.

Vers le 15 juin, plus de trois cents colons étaient venus grossir la population de la capitale. Jusque-là, Beauval avait pu suffire à la tâche. Chacun, grâce à lui, avait trouvé refuge dans les maisons démontables où l’on s’entassait comme autrefois. Mais quelques-unes de ces maisons ayant été transportées sur la rive gauche où elles formaient désormais le Bourg-Neuf, d’autres ayant été détruites avec imprévoyance, certaines ayant été réunies en une seule plus vaste que Beauval appelait pompeusement son “Palais”, la place alors commença à manquer, et il fallut de nouveau recourir aux tentes.

Mais la question des vivres dominait toutes les autres. Cette multitude de bouches avides diminuait rapidement les provisions apportées par le Ribarto. Alors qu'on pensait avoir la vie assurée pour une année et plus, on ne pourrait même pas, du train dont allaient les choses, atteindre le printemps. Beauval eut la sagesse de le comprendre et, faisant enfin acte de chef, rendit un décret par lequel il rationnait sévèrement la population croissante.

Il fut débordé. On ne tenait aucun compte d'un décret qu'on savait être dénué de sanction. Afin de le faire respecter, force lui fut de recruter parmi ses plus chauds partisans une vingtaine de volontaires qui montèrent la garde autour des provisions, comme l'avaient jadis montée l'équipage du Jonathan. Cette mesure excita des murmures, mais Beauval fut obéi.

Celui-ci croyait en avoir fini avec les difficultés de la situation ou du moins avoir reculé les mauvais jours autant que cela était humainement possible, quand d'autres catastrophes fondirent sur Libéria.

Tous ces vaincus, qui refluaient vers la mer, y revenaient moralement déprimés, affaiblis physiquement tant par le climat que par les privations et les fatigues de la route. Ce qui devait arriver arriva. Une violente épidémie se déclara. La maladie et la mort firent rage dans cette population débilitée.

L'excès de leur détresse ramena vers le Kaw-djer la pensée de ces malheureux. Jusqu'au milieu du mois de juin, ils ne s'étaient pas inquiétés de son absence. On oublie facilement des bienfaits passés, qu'on ne s'estime pas dans le cas de recevoir dans l'avenir. Mais la misère où ils étaient réduits les fit songer à celui qui tant de fois déjà les avait secourus. Pourquoi les abandonnait-il, à cette heure où tant de maux les accablaient? Quels que fussent les motifs de la scission survenue entre le campement principal et son annexe, combien ces motifs leur paraissaient légers en regard de leurs souffrances! Et peu à peu, plus nombreux de jour en jour, les regards se tendirent vers le Bourg-Neuf, dont les toits perçaient la neige sur l’autre rive.

Un jour, — on était alors au 10 juillet, — le Kaw-djer occupait son temps, une brume épaisse le retenant chez lui, à réparer une de ses blouses en peau de guanaque, quand il crut entendre une voix qui le hélait au loin. Il prêta l’oreille. Un instant plus tard, un nouvel appel parvenait jusqu’à lui.

Le Kaw-djer sortit sur le seuil de sa maison.

Il faisait ce jour-là un temps de dégel. Sous l’influence d’une humide brise de l’Ouest, la neige avait fondu. Devant lui, c’était un lac de boue, au-dessus duquel traînaient des vapeurs, brumailles en bas, en haut nuages, qui, les uns après les autres, se déversaient en cataractes sur le sol détrempé. Impuissant à percer le brouillard, le regard à cent pas ne distinguait plus rien. Au-delà, tout disparaissait dans un mystère. On n’apercevait même pas la mer, qui, abritée par la côte, battait le rivage de vagues paresseuses et comme alanguies par la tristesse générale des choses.

“Kaw-djer!…” appela la voix dans la brume.

Presque étouffée par l’éloignement, cette voix, venue du côté de la rivière, arrivait au Kaw-djer comme une plainte.

Celui-ci se hâta et bientôt il atteignit la rive. Spectacle pitoyable! Sur l’autre berge, séparés de lui par l’eau rapide que la destruction du pont rendait infranchissable, une centaine d’hommes se traînaient. Des hommes? Des spectres plutôt, ces êtres décharnés, en haillons. Dès qu’ils aperçurent celui qui incarnait leur espoir, ils se redressèrent à la fois et, d’un même mouvement, tendirent vers lui leurs bras suppliants.

“Kaw-djer!… appelaient-ils à l’unisson. Kaw-djer!…”

Celui dont ils réclamaient ainsi le secours frémit dans tout son être. Quelle catastrophe s’était donc abattue sur Libéria pour que ses habitants fussent réduits à un si affreux dénuement?

Le Kaw-djer, ayant du geste encouragé ces malheureux, appela à son aide. En moins d’une heure, Halg, Hartlepool et Karroly eurent rétabli le tablier du ponceau et il passa sur la rive droite. Aussitôt un cercle de visages anxieux l’entoura. Leur aspect eût troublé le cœur le plus dur. Quelles fièvres brûlaient dans ces yeux caves!

Mais une sorte de joie les illuminait maintenant. Le bienfaiteur, le sauveur était là. Et les pauvres hères entouraient le Kaw-djer, ils se pressaient contre lui, ils touchaient ses vêtements, tandis que dans les gorges contractées gloussaient comme des rires de confiance et de joie.

Le Kaw-djer ému regardait, écoutait en silence. Ils lui disaient leur misère. Ceux-ci, venus là pour eux-mêmes, lui expliquaient le mal qui les tenaillait, ceux-là imploraient pour le salut d’êtres chers, femmes ou enfants, qui agonisaient au même instant à Libéria.

Le Kaw-djer prêta patiemment l’oreille aux plaintes, car il savait qu’une bonté compatissante est le plus puissant des remèdes, puis il leur répondit collectivement. Chacun devait rentrer chez soi. Il irait voir tout le monde. Personne ne serait oublié.

On lui obéit avec empressement. Dociles comme de petits enfants, tous reprirent la route du campement.

Les réconfortant, les soutenant de la parole et du geste, trouvant pour chacun le mot qu'il fallait, le Kaw-djer les accompagna et s'engagea avec eux entre les demeures éparses. Quel changement depuis qu'on les avait édifiées! Tout trahissait le désordre et l'incurie. Une année avait suffi pour transformer en maisons vétustés ces constructions fragiles qui s'effritaient déjà. Quelques-unes semblaient inhabitées. La plupart, en tous cas, étaient closes, et rien, sauf les amas d'immondices qui les entouraient, ne révélait qu'elles fussent habitées. Cependant, sur le pas des portes, apparaissaient de rares colons, que l'expression sombre des visages disait accablés par l'ennui et par le découragement.

Le Kaw-djer passa devant le "palais" du gouvernement, où, pour le suivre des yeux, Beauval entrouvrit une fenêtre. D'ailleurs, celui-ci ne donna pas autrement signe de vie. Quelle que fût sa rancune, il comprenait sans doute que ce n'était pas le moment de la satisfaire. Personne n'eût toléré un acte d'hostilité contre celui dont on attendait le salut.

Au surplus, Beauval, dans son for intérieur, n'était pas loin de s'applaudir de cette intervention du Kaw-djer. Lui aussi, il en attendait quelque secours. Gouverner est agréable et facile quand les jours heureux succèdent aux jours heureux. Mais il en allait maintenant d'autre sorte, et le chef d'un peuple de moribonds ne pouvait trouver mauvais qu'un autre l'aidât bénévolement à soutenir le poids d'une autorité devenue bien lourde, mais qu'il se réservait in petto de reconquérir dans son intégralité, lorsque les destins seraient favorables.

Nul ne s'opposa donc à ce que le Kaw-djer accomplît sa mission charitable, et son œuvre de dévouement ne rencontra aucun obstacle. Quelle vie fut la sienne à partir de ce jour! Dès les premières heures du matin, par tous les temps, il passait la rivière et se rendait du Bourg-Neuf à Libéria. Là, jusqu’au soir, il allait de maison en maison, se penchait sur les grabats sordides, respirait les haleines enfiévrées, distribuait sans se lasser soins médicaux et paroles d’espoir ou de consolation.

La mort avait beau s’acharner à frapper, sa clientèle de miséreux n’en était pas diminuée. De nombreux émigrants, revenant de l’intérieur, bouchaient perpétuellement les vides. Sans cesse, il en arrivait, dans un état d’épuisement d’autant plus accentué que ceux-ci avaient résisté plus longtemps.

Quels que fussent sa science et son dévouement, le Kaw-djer ne pouvait dominer la fatalité des choses. En vain, il luttait pied à pied contre la tombe avide, les décès se multipliaient dans Libéria décimée.

Il vivait au milieu des tristesses. Femmes et maris à jamais séparés, mères pleurant leurs enfants morts, autour de lui ce n’était que gémissements et que larmes. Rien ne lassait son courage. Quand le médecin devait se déclarer vaincu, le rôle du consolateur commençait.

Parfois aussi, et c’était alors plus triste encore peut-être, nul n’avait besoin de ses consolations, et le défunt, solitaire jusque dans la mort, ne laissait derrière lui personne qui le pleurât. Cela n’était point rare, dans cette réunion d’émigrants, épaves dispersées par les houles de la vie.

Un matin, notamment, comme il arrivait au campement, on l’appela près d’une masse informe d’où un râle s’élevait. C’était un homme, en effet, que cette masse informe à force d’énormité, un homme que le sort avait catalogué sous le nom de Fritz Gross dans la liste infinie des passants de la terre.

Un quart d’heure plus tôt, au moment où, au sortir du sommeil, il s’exposait au froid du dehors, le musicien avait été foudroyé. Il avait fallu se mettre à dix pour le traîner jusqu’au coin dans lequel il agonisait. Au visage violacé, à la respiration courte et rauque du malade, le Kaw-djer diagnostiqua une congestion pulmonaire, et un bref examen le convainquit qu’aucune médication ne pourrait l’enrayer dans cet organisme ravagé par l’alcool.

L’événement vérifia son pronostic. Quand il revint, Fritz Gross n’était plus de ce monde. Son grand corps déjà froid gisait à même le sol, saisi par l’immobilité éternelle, et ses yeux étaient désormais fermés aux choses d’ici-bas.

Mais une particularité attira l’attention du Kaw-djer. Un instant de lucidité avait traversé, sans doute, l’agonie du défunt, lui rendant pendant la durée d’un éclair la conscience du génie qui allait périr avec lui et, peut-être aussi, du mauvais usage qu’il en avait fait. Avant d’expirer, il avait pensé à dire adieu à la seule chose qu’il eût aimée sur la terre. En tâtonnant, il avait cherché son violon, afin de pouvoir étreindre, au moment du grand départ, l’instrument merveilleux qui reposait maintenant sur son cœur, abandonné par la main défaillante qui l’y avait placé.

Le Kaw-djer prit ce violon d’où tant de chants divins s’étaient envolés et qui n’appartenait plus désormais à personne, puis, de retour au Bourg-Neuf, il se dirigea vers la maison occupée par Hartlepool et les deux mousses.

“Sand!…” appela-t-il, en ouvrant la porte.

L’enfant accourut.

“Je t’avais promis un violon, mon garçon, dit le Kaw-djer. Le voici.”

Stand, tout pâle de surprise et de joie, prit l’instrument d’une main tremblante.

“Et c’est un violon qui sait la musique! ajouta le Kaw-djer, car c’est celui de Fritz Gross.

— Alors…, balbutia Sand, M. Gross… veut bien…

— Il est mort, expliqua le Kaw-djer.

— Ça fait un ivrogne de moins”, déclara froidement Hartlepool.

Telle fut l’oraison funèbre de Fritz Gross. Quelques jours après, un autre décès, celui de Lazare Ceroni, toucha plus directement le Kaw-djer. La disparition du père de Graziella ne pouvait, en effet, que favoriser l’accomplissement des rêves de Halg. Tullia n’appela à son aide que lorsqu’il était trop tard pour intervenir avec quelque chance de succès. Dans son ignorance, elle avait laissé la maladie se développer librement, sans concevoir d’inquiétudes plus vives que de coutume. Savoir que celui à qui elle avait tout sacrifié était irrémédiablement perdu fut pour elle un véritable coup de foudre.

D’ailleurs, l’intervention du Kaw-djer, eût-elle été moins tardive, fût pareillement restée inefficace. Le mal de Lazare Ceroni était de ceux qui ne pardonnent pas. Juste conséquence de sa longue intempérance, la phtisie galopante allait l’emporter en huit jours.

Quand tout fut terminé, quand le mort fut rendu à la terre, le Kaw-djer n’abandonna pas la malheureuse Tullia. Prostrée, accablée, elle semblait à son tour sur le bord de la tombe. Des années et des années au milieu des pires douleurs, elle n’avait vécu que pour aimer, aimer malgré tout celui qui l’abandonnait à mi-côte du calvaire de la vie. Le ressort qui l’avait soutenue étant maintenant brisé, elle s’affaissait, lasse de son inutile effort.

Le Kaw-djer emmena la pauvre femme au Bourg-Neuf, près de Graziella. S’il existait un remède capable de guérir ce cœur déchiré, l’amour maternel accomplirait le miracle.

Inerte, à demi-inconsciente, Tullia se laissa conduire et, chargée de ses humbles richesses, quitta docilement sa maison.

Dans cet état de profond anéantissement, comment eût-elle aperçu Sirk, qu’elle croisa au moment d’atteindre le ponceau réunissant les deux rives?

Le Kaw-djer ne l’aperçut pas davantage. Ignorants de la rencontre, tout deux passèrent en silence.

Mais Sirk les avait vus, lui, et s’était arrêté sur place, le visage pâli par une soudaine fureur. Lazare Ceroni mort, Graziella réfugiée au Bourg-Neuf, Tullia allant s’y fixer à son tour, c’était, il le comprenait, la ruine définitive de ses projets si âprement poursuivis. Longtemps, il suivit des yeux cet homme et cette femme qui s’éloignaient côte à côte. Si le Kaw-djer s’était retourné, il aurait surpris ce regard et peut-être, malgré son courage, eût-il alors connu la peur.

CHAPITRE X

X

Du sang

Le défilé de ceux qui venaient se réfugier à Libéria dura interminablement. Pendant tout l’hiver, il en arriva chaque jour. L’île Hoste semblait être un réservoir inépuisable, et on eût dit vraiment qu’elle rendait plus de misérables qu’elle n’en avait reçu. Ce fut au début de juillet que le flot atteignit son maximum, puis il se ralentit de jour en jour, pour cesser définitivement le 29 septembre.

Ce jour-là, on vit encore un émigrant descendre des hauteurs et se traîner péniblement jusqu’au campement. À demi-nu, d’une maigreur de squelette, il était dans un état lamentable. Il s’affaissa en arrivant aux premières maisons.

Pareille aventure était trop ordinaire pour qu’on s’émût outre mesure. On releva le malheureux, on le réconforta, et l’on ne s’occupa plus de lui.

La source, à partir de ce moment, fut tarie. Qu’en fallait-il inférer? Que ceux dont on était sans nouvelles avaient eu meilleure fortune, ou bien qu’ils étaient morts?

Plus de sept cent cinquante colons étaient alors revenus à la côte, au dernier degré, pour la plupart, de la dégradation physique et de l’affaissement moral. Ces organismes affaiblis offraient aux maladies le meilleur des terrains, et le Kaw-djer se surmenait à lutter contre elles. À mesure que l’hiver avançait, les décès se multipliaient. C’était une véritable hécatombe.

Hommes, femmes et enfants, jeunes et vieux, la mort les frappait tous indistinctement.

Mais elle avait beau supprimer tant de bouches voraces, il en restait trop encore pour que les provisions du Ribarto fussent suffisantes. Quand Beauval s'était résolu, bien tardivement déjà, à rationner ses administrés, il ne pouvait prévoir que leur nombre augmenterait dans de telles proportions et, lorsqu'il connut son erreur et voulut la réparer, il n'était plus temps. Le mal était fait. Le 25 septembre, le magasin des provisions distribua ses derniers biscuits, et la foule épouvantée vit se lever le hideux spectre de la faim.

Par la faim, la faim qui déchire les entrailles, la faim qui ronge, et tord, et vrille, telle était la mort dont allaient cruellement, lentement, — si lentement! — périr les naufragés du Jonathan!

Sa première victime fut Blaker. Il mourut le troisième jour dans des souffrances atroces, malgré les soins du Kaw-djer que l'on prévint trop tard. Celui-ci n'était plus, cette fois, en droit d'incriminer Patterson, victime lui-même de la famine, et qui subissait le sort de tous.

Les jours qui suivirent, de quoi vécurent les colons? Qui pourrait le dire? Ceux qui avaient eu la prudence de constituer des réserves de vivres les entamèrent. Mais les autres?…

Le Kaw-djer ne sut où donner de la tête pendant cette sinistre période. Non seulement il lui fallait accourir au chevet des malades, mais aussi venir en aide aux affamés. On le suppliait, on s'accrochait à ses vêtements, les mères tendaient vers lui leurs enfants. Il vivait au milieu d'un affreux concert d'imprécations, de prières et de plaintes. Nul ne l'implorait en vain. Généreusement, il distribuait les provisions accumulées sur la rive gauche, s’oubliant lui-même, ne voulant pas se dire que le danger dont il reculait l’échéance pour les autres le menacerait fatalement à son tour.

Cela ne pouvait tarder cependant. Le poisson salé, le gibier fumé, les légumes secs, tout diminuait rapidement. Que cette situation se prolongeât un mois, et, comme ceux de Libéria, les habitants du Bourg-Neuf auraient faim.

Le péril était si évident que, dans l’entourage du Kaw-djer, on commençait à lui opposer quelque résistance. On refusait de se dessaisir des vivres. Il lui fallait longtemps discuter avant de les obtenir, et l’on ne cédait que de guerre lasse et plus difficilement de jour en jour.

Harry Rhodes essaya de représenter à son ami l’inutilité de son sacrifice. Qu’espérait-il? Il était évidemment impossible que la faible quantité de vivres existant sur la rive gauche suffît à sauver toute la population de l’île. Que ferait-on quand ils seraient épuisés? Et quel intérêt y avait-il à reculer, au détriment de ceux qui avaient fait preuve de courage et de prévoyance, une catastrophe dans tous les cas inévitable et prochaine?

Harry Rhodes ne put rien obtenir. Le Kaw-djer n’essaya même pas de lui répondre. Devant une telle détresse, on n’avait que faire d’arguments et il s’interdisait de réfléchir. Laisser de sang-froid périr toute une multitude, voilà ce qui était impossible. Partager avec elle jusqu’à la dernière miette, quoi qu’il en dût résulter, voilà ce qui était impérieusement nécessaire. Après?… Après, on verrait. Quand on n’aurait plus rien, on partirait, on irait plus loin, on chercherait un autre lieu d’établissement, où, comme au Bourg-Neuf, on vivrait de chasse et de pêche, et l’on s’éloignerait du campement que peu de jours suffiraient alors à transformer en effroyable charnier. Mais du moins on aurait fait tout ce qui était au pouvoir des hommes, et l’on n’aurait pas eu l’affreux courage de condamner délibérément à mort un si grand nombre d’autres hommes.

Sur la proposition d’Harry Rhodes, on examina l’opportunité de distribuer aux émigrants les quarante-huit fusils cachés par Hartlepool. Avec ces armes à feu, peut-être réussiraient-ils à vivre de leur chasse. Cette proposition fut repoussée. Dans cette saison, le gibier était très rare, et des fusils entre les mains de paysans inexpérimentés, seraient d’un bien faible secours pour assurer l’alimentation d’une si nombreuse population. En revanche, ils seraient susceptibles de créer de graves dangers. À certains signes précurseurs, gestes brutaux, regards farouches, altercations fréquentes, il était facile de reconnaître que la violence fermentait dans les couches profondes de la foule. Les colons ne cherchaient plus à dissimuler la haine qu’ils éprouvaient les uns pour les autres. Ils s’accusaient réciproquement de leur échec, et chacun attribuait à son voisin la responsabilité de l’état de choses actuel.

Toutefois, il en était un qu’on s’accordait à maudire unanimement, et celui-là, c’était

Ferdinand Beauval qui avait imprudemment assumé la mission redoutable de gouverner ses semblables.

Bien que son incapacité éclatante justifiât amplement la rancune des émigrants, on le supportait encore. Livrée à elle-même, une foule, tourbillon confus de volontés qui se neutralisent, est incapable d’agir. Son inertie rend sa patience infinie, et, quels que soient ses griefs, elle s’arrête interdite au moment de toucher au chef, comme saisie d’un religieux effroi devant son prestige qu’elle seule pourtant a créé. Il en était ainsi une fois de plus, et peut-être les colons de l’île Hoste n’eussent-ils manifesté leur colère que par des conciliabules privés et de platoniques menaces en sourdine, s’il ne s’était trouvé un des leurs pour les entraîner à l’exprimer par des actes.

C’est une chose merveilleuse que, dans cette situation terrible, le fantôme de pouvoir détenu par Beauval ait pu exciter des convoitises. Pauvre pouvoir qui consistait à être le maître nominal d’une multitude d’affamés!

Il en fut ainsi cependant.

En présence d’une si poignante réalité, Lewis Dorick n’estima pas négligeable cette apparence d’autorité, et peut-être n’avait-il pas tort après tout. Le bon sens populaire n’emploie-t-il pas, pour désigner la puissance politique, l’expression vulgaire, mais expressive et pittoresque, d’assiette au beurre? Dans la plus déshéritée des sociétés, la première place assure, en effet, à son possesseur des avantages relatifs. Beauval en savait quelque chose, lui qui en était encore à connaître les souffrances de ses compagnons d’infortune. Ces avantages, Dorick entendait les assurer à lui-même et à ses amis.

Jusqu’alors, il avait impatiemment supporté la grandeur de son rival. Jugeant l’occasion favorable, il entreprit une campagne, à laquelle le malheur public donnait une base solide. Les sujets de juste critique n’étaient que trop nombreux. Il n’avait que l’embarras du choix. Peut-être aurait-il été fort embarrassé, si on lui avait demandé ce qu’il eût fait à la place de son adversaire. Mais, personne ne lui posant cette indiscrète question, il n’avait pas le souci d’y répondre.

Beauval n’était pas sans discerner le travail de son concurrent. Souvent, de la fenêtre de la demeure décorée par lui du nom pompeux de Palais du gouvernement, il regardait tout songeur passer la foule, de jour en jour plus nombreuse à mesure que l’approche du printemps adoucissait la température. Aux regards qu’on lançait de son côté, aux poings qu’on brandissait parfois dans sa direction, il comprenait que la campagne de Dorick portait ses fruits et, peu enclin à descendre du pavois, il élaborait des plans de défense.

Certes, il ne pouvait nier l’état de délabrement de la colonie, mais il en accusait les circonstances et, en particulier, le climat. Son imperturbable confiance en lui-même n’en était aucunement diminuée. S’il n’avait rien fait, parbleu, c’est qu’il n’y avait rien à faire, et un autre n’en eût pas fait davantage.

Ce n’est pas uniquement par orgueil que Beauval se cramponnait à sa fonction. Malgré tout, dans les circonstances présentes, il avait perdu beaucoup de ses illusions sur le lustre qu’il en recevait. Il songeait aussi, avec inquiétude et complaisance à la fois, à l’abondante réserve de vivres qu’il était parvenu à mettre à l’abri. En aurait-il été ainsi, s’il n’avait pas été le chef? En serait-il encore ainsi, s’il ne l’était plus?

C’est donc pour défendre sa vie, en même temps que sa place, qu’il se jeta ardemment dans la lutte. Très habilement, il ne contesta aucun des griefs énumérés par Dorick. Sur ce terrain il eût été vaincu d’avance. Il les accentua au contraire. De tous les mécontents, ce fut lui le plus ardent.

Par exemple, les deux adversaires différèrent d’avis sur le remède qu’il convenait d’appliquer. Tandis que Dorick prônait un changement de gouvernement, Beauval conseillait l’union et faisait remonter à d’autres la responsabilité des malheurs qui accablaient la colonie.

Les auteurs responsables de ces malheurs, qui étaient-ils? Nuls autres, d’après lui, que le petit nombre d’émigrants qui n’avaient pas été dans la nécessité de se réfugier à la côte au cours de l’hiver. Le raisonnement de

Beauval était simple. Puisqu'on ne les avait pas revus, c'est qu'ils avaient réussi. Ils possédaient, par conséquent, des vivres, et ces vivres, on avait le droit de les confisquer au profit de tous.

Ces excitations trouvèrent de l'écho dans une population réduite au désespoir, et on leur obéit sans attendre. D'abord, on battit la campagne dans les environs de Libéria, puis, en vue d'expéditions plus lointaines, des bandes se formèrent, augmentèrent rapidement d'importance, et enfin, le 15 octobre, ce fut une véritable armée de plus de deux cents hommes qui, sous la conduite des frères Moore, se rua à la conquête du pain.

Pendant cinq jours, cette troupe parcourut l'île en tous sens. Qu'y faisait-elle? On le devinait en voyant affluer ses victimes, affolées de la catastrophe imprévue qui avait annihilé leurs efforts. L'un après l'autre, ils couraient au gouverneur et lui demandaient justice. Mais celui-ci les renvoyait rudement en leur reprochant leur honteux égoïsme. Et quoi! ils auraient consenti à se gorger tandis que leurs frères mouraient de faim?

Ahuris, les malheureux battaient en retraite, et Beauval triomphait. Leurs plaintes lui prouvaient que la piste indiquée par lui était bonne. Il ne s'était pas trompé. Ainsi qu'il l'avait affirmé au petit bonheur, ceux qui n'étaient pas revenus pendant l'hiver avaient vécu dans l'abondance.

Maintenant, en tous cas, leur sort était pareil à celui des autres. Leur patient travail était rendu inutile et ils se trouvaient aussi pauvres et démunis que ceux qui avaient consommé leur ruine. Non seulement on était passé chez eux en trombe et l'on avait fait main basse sur tout ce qui pouvait se mettre sous la dent, mais encore on s'était livré à ces excès dont les foules, dussent-elles être les premières à en pâtir, sont assez volontiers coutumières. Les champs ensemencés avaient été piétinés, les basses-cours saccagées et vidées de leur dernier habitant.

Bien maigre cependant était le butin des pillards. La réussite de ceux qu'ils rançonnaient était en somme très relative. Avoir réussi, cela voulait dire simplement que ces colons plus courageux, plus habiles ou moins malchanceux que leurs compagnons, avaient assuré vaille que vaille leur subsistance, mais non pas qu'ils fussent devenus riches par miracle. On ne découvrait donc rien dans ces pauvres fermes.

De là, parmi ceux qui sillonnaient la campagne, grande désillusion, qui se traduisait souvent par des actes de véritable sauvagerie.

Plus d'un colon fut soumis à la torture, afin qu'il dévoilât la cachette dans laquelle on l'accusait de dissimuler des vivres imaginaires. Les mêmes causes produisant les mêmes effets, l'île Hoste, comme jadis la France, avait sa Jacquerie.

Le cinquième jour après son départ, la bande des pillards se heurta aux palissades qui limitaient les enclos de la famille Rivière et des trois autres familles, leurs voisines. Depuis qu'on s'était mis en route, on n'avait cessé de penser à ces exploitations, les plus anciennes et les plus prospères de la colonie, et l'on se promettait merveille de leur pillage.

Il fallut déchanter.

Attenantes les unes aux autres, les quatre fermes, bâties sur les côtés d'un vaste quadrilatère, constituaient, dans leur ensemble, une sorte de citadelle, et une citadelle inexpugnable, car, seuls de tous les colons, ses défenseurs étaient armés. Ils reçurent à coups de fusils les assaillants, qui eurent, à la première décharge, sept hommes tués ou blessés. Les autres n'en demandèrent pas davantage et s'enfuirent en tumulte.

Cette escarmouche calma sur-le-champ l’ardeur des pillards. Ceux-ci reprirent aussitôt la route de Libéria, qu’ils atteignirent à la nuit tombante. Le bruit de leurs imprécations furieuses les y précéda et annonça leur arrivée. On s’avança à leur rencontre, en prêtant l’oreille à cette clameur venue de la campagne assombrie.

Tout d’abord, l’éloignement ne permettant pas de comprendre ce qu’ils criaient ainsi, on crut à des chants de joie et de victoire. Mais les mots, bientôt, se précisèrent, et l’on se regarda effarés.

“Trahison!… Trahison!…” criaient-ils. Trahison!… Ceux qui n’avaient pas quitté Libéria furent saisis de crainte, et, plus que tous les autres, Beauval trembla. Il pressentit un malheur dont, quel qu’il fût, on le rendrait responsable, et, sans savoir au juste quel danger le menaçait, il courut s’enfermer dans le “Palais”.

Il achevait à peine de s’y verrouiller que le bruyant cortège faisait halte à sa porte.

Que lui voulait-on? Que signifiaient ces blessés et ces morts qu’on déposait sur le sol du terre-plein ménagé devant sa demeure? De quel drame étaient-ils les victimes? Pourquoi cette multitude en rumeur?

Pendant que Beauval s’efforçait vainement de percer ce mystère, un autre drame se jouait, qui allait désoler les habitants du Bourg-Neuf et frapper le Kaw-djer en plein cœur.

Celui-ci n’était pas sans connaître les troubles qui agitaient la population de Libéria. En circulant dans le campement, il apprenait nécessairement tout ce qui s’y passait. Il ignorait néanmoins l’existence de la bande de pillards, partie avant son arrivée et revenue après son départ pour la rive gauche. Si la diminution du nombre des émigrants, durant ces quelques jours, avait, en effet, attiré son attention, il n’avait pu qu’en être étonné, sans en discerner la cause.

Troublé cependant par une sourde inquiétude, il était sorti, ce soir-là, après le coucher du soleil et, avec ses compagnons habituels, Harry Rhodes, Hartlepool, Halg et Karroly, il s’était avancé jusqu’au bord de la rivière. La rive gauche dominant de quelques mètres la rive droite, il eût, de ce point, aperçu Libéria, pendant le jour. Mais, à cette heure, le campement disparaissait dans l’obscurité. Seules, une rumeur lointaine et une vague lueur en indiquaient l’emplacement.

Les cinq promeneurs, assis sur la berge, le chien Zol à leurs pieds, contemplaient la nuit en silence, quand une voix s’éleva de l’autre côté de la rivière.

“Kaw-djer!… appelait un homme haletant, comme s’il eût été essoufflé par une course rapide.

— Présent!…” répondit le Kaw-djer.

Une ombre traversa le ponceau et s’approcha du groupe. On reconnut Sirdey, l’ancien cuisinier du Jonathan.

“On a besoin de vous là-bas, dit-il en s’adressant au Kaw-djer.

— Qu’y a-t-il? demanda celui-ci en se levant.

— Des morts et des blessés.

— Des blessés!… Des morts!… qu’est-il donc arrivé?

— On est allé en bande chez les Rivière… Paraît qu'ils ont des fusils… Et voilà!

— Les malheureux!…

— Bilan: trois morts et quatre blessés. Les morts ne demandent rien, mais peut-être que les blessés…

— J'y vais", interrompit le Kaw-djer, qui se mit en marche, tandis que Halg courait chercher la trousse des instruments de chirurgie.

Chemin faisant, le Kaw-djer interrogeait, mais Sirdey ne pouvait le renseigner. Il ne savait rien. Lui, il n'avait pas accompagné la bande et il n'en connaissait les aventures que par ouï dire. Personne, d'ailleurs, ne l'avait envoyé. Voyant qu'on rapportait sept corps inertes, il avait cru bien faire en accourant prévenir le Kaw-djer.

"Vous avez très bien fait", approuva celui-ci.

En compagnie de Karroly, d'Hartlepool et d'Harry Rhodes, il avait franchi le ponceau et s'était avancé d'une centaine de mètres sur la rive droite, quand, en se retournant, il aperçut Halg, qui revenait avec la trousse. Le jeune Indien, qui traversait à son tour la rivière, rattraperait sans peine ses amis. Le Kaw-djer se remit en marche à pas pressés.

Trois minutes plus tard un cri d'agonie l'arrêtait sur place. On eût dit la voix de Halg!… Le cœur étreint d'une affreuse angoisse, il se hâta de rebrousser chemin. Si grand était son trouble que Sirdey put, sans être vu, lui fausser compagnie et s'éloigner du côté de Libéria de toute la vitesse de ses jambes, et qu'il ne distingua pas davantage une ombre qui s'enfuyait dans la même direction après avoir fait un grand crochet vers l'amont.

Mais si vite que le Kaw-djer courût, Zol courait plus vite encore. En deux bonds, le chien eut disparu dans l’ombre. Quelques instants plus tard, il donnait de la voix. À ses aboiements plaintifs succédèrent des grondements furieux qui allèrent bientôt en s’affaiblissant, comme si l’animal eût pris chasse et se fût lancé sur une piste.

Puis, tout à coup, un nouveau cri d’agonie s’éleva dans la nuit.

Ce deuxième cri, le Kaw-djer ne l’entendit pas. Il venait d’arriver à l’endroit d’où le premier était parti, et là, à ses pieds, il venait d’apercevoir Halg, le visage contre le sol, couché au milieu d’une mare de sang, un large coutelas fiché jusqu’au manche entre les deux épaules.

Karroly s’était jeté sur son fils. Le Kaw-djer l’écarta rudement. Ce n’était pas l’heure de se lamenter, mais d’agir. Ramassant sa trousse, tombée à côté du jeune garçon, il fendit d’un seul coup, de haut en bas, le vêtement de celui-ci. Puis, avec d’infinies précautions, l’arme homicide fut retirée de son fourreau de chair, et la blessure apparut à nu. Elle était terrible. La lame, pénétrant entre les omoplates, avec traversé la poitrine presque de part en part. En admettant que, par miracle, la moelle épinière ne fût pas intéressée, le poumon était nécessairement perforé. Halg, livide, les yeux clos, respirait à peine, et une mousse sanglante coulait de ses lèvres.

En quelques minutes, le Kaw-djer, ayant découpé en lanières sa blouse de peau de guanaque, eut fait un pansement provisoire, puis, sur un signe de lui, Karroly, Hartlepool et Harry Rhodes se mirent en devoir de transporter le blessé.

À ce moment, l’attention du Kaw-djer fut enfin attirée par les grondements de Zol. Évidemment le chien était aux prises avec quelque ennemi. Tandis que le triste cortège se mettait en marche, il s’avança dans la direction du bruit, dont la source ne paraissait pas très éloignée.

Cent pas plus loin, un horrible spectacle frappait sa vue. Sur le sol, un corps, celui de Sirk, ainsi qu’il le reconnut à la lumière de la lune, était étendu, la gorge ouverte par une affreuse blessure. Des carotides tranchées net le sang giclait à flots. Cette blessure, ce n’était pas une arme qui l’avait faite.

Elle était l’œuvre de Zol, qui s’acharnait encore, ivre de rage, à l’agrandir.

Le Kaw-djer fit lâcher prise au chien, puis s’agenouilla dans la boue sanglante près de l’homme. Tous soins étaient inutiles. Sirk était mort. Le Kaw-djer, songeur, considérait le cadavre qui ouvrait dans la nuit des yeux déjà vitreux. Le drame se reconstituait aisément. Pendant qu’il suivait Sirdey, complice peut-être du crime projeté, Sirk, à l’affût, avait bondi sur Halg qui revenait en courant et l’avait assassiné par derrière. Puis, tandis qu’on s’empressait autour du blessé, Zol s’était lancé sur les traces du coupable, dont le châtiment avait suivi de près le crime. Quelques minutes avaient suffi pour que le drame déroulât ses foudroyantes péripéties. Les deux acteurs gisaient abattus, l’un mort, l’autre mourant.

La pensée du Kaw-djer se reporta sur Halg. Le groupe des trois hommes qui soutenaient le corps inerte du jeune Indien commençait à s’effacer dans la nuit. Il soupira profondément. Cet enfant représentait tout ce qu’il aimait sur la terre. Avec lui disparaîtrait sa plus forte, presque son unique raison de vivre.

Au moment de s’éloigner, il laissa tomber un dernier regard sur le mort. La flaque ne s’était pas élargie. À mesure que jaillissait le flot ralenti du sang, il disparaissait dans la terre qui l’absorbait avidement. Depuis l’origine des âges elle a coutume de s’en abreuver, et ce n’est pas un fait d’importance que des gouttes de plus ou de moins dans l’intarissable pluie rouge. Jusqu’ici, cependant, l’île Hoste avait échappé à la loi commune. Inhabitée, elle était ainsi restée pure. Mais des hommes étaient venus peupler ses déserts, et aussitôt le sang des hommes avait coulé.

C’était la première fois peut-être qu’elle en était souillée… Ce ne devait pas être la dernière.

CHAPITRE XI

XI

Un chef

Quand Halg, toujours privé de sentiment, eut été déposé sur son lit, le Kaw-djer changea son pansement de fortune contre un autre moins sommaire. Les paupières du blessé battirent, ses lèvres s’agitèrent, un peu de rose colora ses joues livides, puis, après quelques faibles gémissements, il passa de l’anéantissement de la syncope à celui du sommeil.

Survivrait-il à sa terrible blessure? La science humaine ne pouvait l’affirmer. En somme, la situation était grave, mais non désespérée, et il n’était pas absolument impossible que la plaie du poumon se cicatrisât.

Après avoir donné tous les soins que son affection et son expérience lui dictèrent, le Kaw-djer recommanda pour Halg le calme le plus complet et la plus rigoureuse immobilité, et courut à Libéria, où d’autres avaient peut-être besoin de lui.

Le malheur personnel qui venait de l’accabler laissait intact son admirable instinct de dévouement et d’altruisme. Le drame rapide qui déchirait son cœur ne lui faisait pas oublier ces morts et ces blessés, qui, d’après l’ancien cuisinier du Jonathan, attendaient du secours à Libéria. Y avait-il réellement des blessés et des morts, et Sirdey n’avait-il pas menti? Dans le doute, il fallait se rendre compte par soi-même de la vérité des choses.

Il était à ce moment près de dix heures du soir. La lune, dans son premier quartier, commençait à décliner vers le couchant, et du firmament obscurci de l’orient tombait inépuisablement la cendre impalpable de l’ombre. Dans la nuit grandissante, une vague lueur continuait à rougeoyer au loin. Libéria ne dormait pas encore.

Le Kaw-djer se mit en marche à grands pas. À travers la campagne silencieuse, une rumeur, d’abord légère, puis de plus en plus violente à mesure qu’il approchait, parvenait jusqu’à lui.

En vingt minutes il eut atteint le campement. Passant rapidement entre les maisons noires, il allait déboucher sur l’espace laissé libre devant la maison du gouverneur, quand un spectacle, étrange et du plus intense pittoresque l’arrêta un instant.

Éclairée par un cercle de torches fuligineuses, la population entière de Libéria semblait s’être donné rendez-vous sur le terre-plein. Tout le monde était là, hommes, femmes, enfants, divisés en trois groupes distincts. Le plus important de beaucoup au point de vue du nombre était massé juste en face du Kaw-djer. Ce groupe, qui comprenait la totalité des enfants et des femmes, demeurait silencieux et semblait composé en somme des spectateurs des deux autres. De ceux-ci, l’un se tenait rangé en bataille devant le palais du gouvernement, comme s’il eût voulu en défendre l’entrée, tandis que l’autre avait pris position de l’autre côté de la place.

Non, Sirdey n’avait pas menti. Au milieu du terre-plein, sept corps s’allongeaient, en effet.

Des blessés ou des morts? À cette distance, le Kaw-djer n’en pouvait rien savoir, la flamme mouvante des torches leur prêtant à tous les mêmes apparences de vie.

À en juger par leur attitude, il paraissait impossible de mettre en doute l'hostilité réciproque des deux groupes les moins nombreux. Cependant, de part et d'autre des corps déposés sur le sol, il semblait exister une zone neutre que nul des partis adverses ne se hasardait à franchir. Ceux qu'on était en droit, selon toute apparence, de considérer comme les assaillants n'esquissaient aucun geste d'attaque, et les défenseurs de Beauval n'avaient pas l'occasion de montrer leur courage. La bataille n'était pas engagée. On n'en était encore qu'aux paroles, mais, par exemple, on ne s'en faisait pas faute. Par-dessus les blessés ou les morts, on poursuivait une discussion fiévreuse; on échangeait, en guise de balles, des paroles qui, tantôt s'amenuisaient en arguments, et tantôt s'enflaient jusqu'à l'invective.

On fit silence, quand le Kaw-djer pénétra dans le cercle de lumière. Sans s'occuper de ceux qui l'entouraient, il alla droit aux corps étendus et se pencha sur l'un d'eux. Celui-ci n'étant plus qu'un cadavre, il passa aussitôt au suivant, puis à tous les autres, entrouvrant les vêtements quand il y avait lieu et procédant rapidement à des pansements sommaires. Ce qu'avait annoncé Sirdey était exact. Il y avait bien, en effet, trois morts et quatre blessés.

Quand tout fut terminé, le Kaw-djer regarda autour de lui et malgré sa tristesse, il ne put s'empêcher de sourire en se voyant entouré d'un millier de visages qui exprimaient la plus respectueuse et la plus puérile curiosité. Pour mieux l'éclairer, les porteurs de torches s'étaient rapprochés. Les trois groupes, suivant le mouvement, s'étaient peu à peu fondus en un seul dont il formait le centre, et dans lequel le silence était devenu profond.

Le Kaw-djer demanda qu'on vînt à son aide. Personne ne faisant mine de bouger, il désigna par leur nom ceux dont il réclamait le concours. Ce fut alors très différent. Sans la moindre hésitation, l'émigrant désigné sortait de la foule à l’appel de son nom et se conformait avec zèle aux instructions qui lui étaient données.

En quelques minutes, morts et blessés furent enlevés et transportés dans leurs demeures respectives, sous la conduite du Kaw-djer, dont le rôle n’était pas terminé. Il lui restait à visiter successivement les quatre blessés, à procéder à l’extraction des projectiles et aux pansements définitifs, avant de regagner le Bourg-Neuf.

Tout en parachevant de cette manière son œuvre de dévouement, il s’informait des causes du massacre. Il apprit ainsi la rentrée en scène de Lewis Dorick, l’animosité de la foule à l’égard de Ferdinand Beauval et le dérivatif imaginé par celui-ci, les razzias faites dans les environs du campement et enfin la tentative de pillage dont il pouvait constater de visu le piteux résultat.

Piteux, il ne pouvait l’être, en effet, davantage. Repoussés à coups de fusils, comme il a été dit, par les quatre familles solidement retranchées dans leur enclos, les pillards avaient battu en retraite, ne rapportant, en fait de butin, que leurs camarades tués ou blessés. Combien le retour avait été différent de l’aller! Ils étaient partis à grand bruit, s’excitant les uns les autres, grisés d’une sorte de joie féroce, au milieu d’un concert d’exclamations, de lazzi brutaux, de vociférations, de menaces contre ceux qu’on se disposait à mettre à rançon. Ils revenaient en silence, l’oreille basse, n’ayant gagné dans l’aventure que des horions. Les bouches étaient muettes, les cœurs amers, les yeux sombres. L’excitation sauvage du départ avait fait place à une sourde fureur, qui ne demandait qu’un prétexte pour éclater.

Ils s’estimaient dupes. De qui? Ils ne savaient trop. Pas de leur sottise, ni de leurs illusions, dans tous les cas. Selon la coutume universelle, ils eussent accusé la terre entière avant de s’accuser eux-mêmes.

Ils connaissaient bien, pour l’avoir éprouvé trop souvent, ce sentiment d’amertume et de honte qui succède à l’avortement des entreprises de violence. Avant d’être jetés sur l’île Hoste, ils avaient compté parmi les prolétaires des deux mondes, et plus d’une fois ils s’étaient laissé prendre aux discours vibrants des rhéteurs. Ils avaient pratiqué la grève, digne et calme pendant les premiers jours, quand les bourses sont encore pleines, mais que la misère menaçante rend impatiente et fébrile, et qui devient furieuse enfin, quand les marmots crient devant la huche vide. C’est alors, qu’on voit rouge, qu’on se rue en trombe, et qu’on tue et qu’on meurt pour revenir… victorieux parfois, il est vrai, mais plus souvent vaincu, c’est-à-dire dans une condition pire, l’échec ayant démontré la faiblesse de ceux qui voulaient triompher par la force.

Eh bien! ce retour à travers les champs saccagés, c’était tout à fait le dernier acte d’une grève qui finit mal. L’état des âmes était pareil. Les pauvres diables s’estimaient joués et ils enrageaient de leur sottise. Les chefs, Beauval, Dorick, où étaient-ils partis?… Parbleu! loin des coups. C’était toujours et partout la même chose. Des renards et des corbeaux. Des exploiteurs et des exploités.

Mais la grève, quand elle est sanglante, l’émeute, les révolutions ont leur rituel que les acteurs de ce drame savaient par cœur pour s’y être plus d’une fois scrupuleusement conformés. Il est d’usage que, dans ces convulsions, où l’homme, oubliant qu’il est un être pensant, emploie comme arguments la violence et le meurtre, les victimes deviennent des drapeaux.

Drapeaux donc étaient devenues celles que rapportait la bande des pillards, et c’est pourquoi on les avait étendues sous les yeux de Ferdinand Beauval qui, détenant le pouvoir, était par essence responsable de tous les maux. Mais, là, on s’était heurté à ses partisans, et l’on avait commencé par s’injurier copieusement avant d’en arriver aux coups. L’heure des coups, d’ailleurs, n’avait pas encore sonné. Un protocole inflexible indiquait nettement la marche à suivre. Quand on aurait suffisamment discouru, quand les gosiers seraient fatigués de crier, on rentrerait chez soi, puis, le lendemain, pour que tout fût accompli conformément aux rites, on ferait aux morts de solennelles funérailles. C’est alors seulement que les désordres seraient à craindre.

L’intervention du Kaw-djer avait brusqué les choses. Grâce à lui, les colères avaient fait trêve, et l’on s’était souvenu qu’il n’y avait pas là que des morts, mais aussi des blessés auxquels des soins rapides étaient peut-être susceptibles de conserver la vie.

Le terre-plein était désert, quand il le traversa pour retourner au Bourg-Neuf. Avec sa mobilité coutumière, la foule, toujours prête à s’enflammer soudainement, s’était soudainement apaisée. Les maisons étaient closes. On dormait.

Tout en cheminant dans la nuit, le Kaw-djer pensait à ce qu’il avait appris. Aux noms de Dorick et de Beauval, il avait simplement haussé les épaules, mais la randonnée des pillards à travers la campagne lui semblait mériter plus sérieuse considération. Ces déprédations, ces vols, ces actes de barbarie étaient du plus fâcheux augure. La colonie, déjà si compromise, était perdue sans retour, si les colons entraient en lutte ouverte les uns contre les autres.

Que devenaient, au contact des faits, les théories sur lesquelles le généreux illuminé avait édifié sa vie? Le résultat était là, certain, tangible, incontestable. Livrés à eux-mêmes, ces hommes s’étaient montrés incapables de vivre, et ils allaient mourir de faim, troupeau imbécile qui ne saurait pas trouver sa pâture sans un berger pour la lui donner. Quant à leur être moral, la qualité n’en excédait pas celle de leur sens pratique. L’abondance, la médiocrité et la misère, les brûlures du soleil et les morsures du froid, tout avait été prétexte pour que se révélassent les tares indélébiles des âmes. Ingratitude et égoïsme, abus de la force et lâcheté, intempérance, imprévoyance et paresse, voilà de quoi étaient pétris un trop grand nombre de ces hommes, dont l’intérêt, à défaut de plus noble mobile, eût dû faire une seule volonté aux mille cerveaux. Et voici qu’on arrivait aux dernières lignes de cette lamentable aventure! Dix-huit mois avaient suffi pour qu’elle commençât et se conclût. Comme si la nature eût regretté son œuvre et reconnu son erreur, elle rejetait ces hommes qui s’abandonnaient eux-mêmes. La mort les frappait sans relâche. L’un après l’autre, ils disparaissaient; l’un après l’autre, ils étaient repris par la terre, creuset où tout s’élabore et se transforme, qui, continuant le cycle éternel, referait de leur substance d’autres êtres, hélas! sans doute, pareils à eux.

Encore estimaient-ils que la grande faucheuse n’allait pas assez vite en besogne, puisqu’ils l’aidaient de leurs propres mains. Là-bas, d’où le Kaw-djer venait, des blessés et des morts. Ici, où il passait, le cadavre de Sirk. Au Bourg-Neuf, la poitrine trouée d’un enfant, par qui son cœur désenchanté avait réappris la douceur d’aimer. De tous côtés, du sang.

Avant d’aller chercher le sommeil, le Kaw-djer s’approcha du chevet de Halg. La situation était la même, ni meilleure, ni pire. Une hémorragie soudaine était toujours à craindre et, pendant plusieurs jours, ce danger resterait redoutable.

Brisé par la fatigue, il se réveilla tard le lendemain. Le soleil était déjà haut sur l’horizon, quand il sortit de sa maison, après une visite à Halg, dont l’état demeurait stationnaire. La brume s’était levée. Il faisait beau. Hâtant le pas, afin de rattraper le temps perdu, le Kaw-djer se mit en route, comme chaque jour, pour Libéria, où l’appelaient ses malades ordinaires, en nombre, il est vrai, décroissant depuis le commencement du printemps, et les quatre blessés de le veille.

Mais il se heurta à une barrière humaine dressée en travers du ponceau. À l’exception de Halg et de Karroly, elle comprenait toute la population masculine du Bourg-Neuf. Il y avait là quinze hommes et, circonstance singulière, quinze hommes armés de fusils, qui paraissaient le guetter. Ce n’étaient point des soldats, et pourtant leur attitude avait quelque chose de militaire. Calmes, sévères même, ils demeuraient l’arme au pied, comme dans l’attente des ordres d’un chef.

Harry Rhodes, à quelques pas en avant d’eux, arrêta du geste le Kaw-djer. Celui-ci fit halte, et dénombra la petite troupe d’un regard étonné.

“Kaw-djer, dit Harry Rhodes, non sans une sorte de solennité, depuis longtemps je vous conjure de venir au secours de la malheureuse population de l’île Hoste, en acceptant de vous placer à sa tête. Une dernière fois, je renouvelle ma prière.”

Le Kaw-djer, sans répondre, ferma les yeux, comme pour mieux voir en lui-même. Harry Rhodes poursuivit:

“Les derniers événements ont dû vous faire réfléchir. Nous, en tous cas, nous sommes fixés. C’est pourquoi, cette nuit, Hartlepool, moi et quelques autres, nous sommes allés reprendre ces quinze fusils qui ont été distribués aux hommes du Bourg-Neuf. Nous sommes armés maintenant et maîtres par conséquent d’imposer nos volontés. Or, les choses en sont arrivées à un point qu’une plus longue patience serait un véritable crime. Il faut agir. Mon parti est pris. Si vous persistez dans votre refus, je me mettrai moi-même à la tête de ces braves gens. Malheureusement, je n’ai, ni votre influence, ni votre autorité. On ne m’écoutera pas, et le sang coulera. À vous, au contraire, on obéira sans murmure. Décidez.

— Qu’y a-t-il donc de nouveau? demanda le

Kaw-djer avec son calme habituel.

— Ceci”, répondit Harry Rhodes, en étendant la main vers la maison où Halg agonisait.

Le Kaw-djer tressaillit.

“Et ceci encore”, ajouta Harry Rhodes, en l’entraînant de quelques pas vers l’amont.

Tous deux gravirent la berge qui, en cet endroit, dominait la rive droite. Libéria et la plaine marécageuse qui les en séparait apparurent à leurs regards.

Dès les premières heures du matin, on s’était, au campement réveillé avec la fièvre. Il s’agissait de compléter l’œuvre de la veille, en procédant aux funérailles solennelles des trois morts. La perspective de cette cérémonie mettait tout le monde en ébullition. Pour les camarades des victimes, il s’agissait d’une manifestation; pour les partisans de Beauval, d’un danger; pour les autres, d’un spectacle.

La population tout entière, à l’exception du seul Beauval, qui avait jugé plus sage de se tenir enfermé, suivit donc les trois cercueils. On ne négligea pas de faire passer le cortège devant la maison du gouverneur, ni de s’arrêter sur le terre-plein, ce dont Lewis Dorick profita pour débiter une violente diatribe. Puis on se remit en marche.

Sur les tombes, Dorick, prenant de nouveau la parole, prononça, pour la centième fois, un trop facile réquisitoire contre l’administration de la colonie. À l’entendre, l’imprévoyance, l’incapacité, les principes rétrogrades de son titulaire avaient causé tous les malheurs. Le moment était venu de renverser cet incapable et de nommer à sa place un autre chef.

Le succès de Dorick fut éclatant. On lui répondit par un tonnerre de cris. D’abord, ce furent des “Vive Dorick!” puis on hurla “Au palais!… Au palais!…” et une centaine d’hommes s’ébranlèrent, en martelant le sol de leurs pieds lourds. Ils étaient chauffés à point. Leurs yeux étincelaient, leurs poings vers le ciel se tendaient menaçants, et les bouches grandes ouvertes par des clameurs de haine faisaient dans les visages des trous noirs.

Bientôt le mouvement s’accéléra. Ils pressèrent le pas, puis coururent, et enfin, se poussant, se bousculant, ils dévalèrent comme un torrent.

Un obstacle brisa leur élan. Ceux qui, ayant part aux avantages du pouvoir, redoutaient que le détenteur n’en fût changé, s’étaient constitués ses défenseurs. Poings contre poings, poitrines contre poitrines, les deux bandes se heurtèrent, et les coups commencèrent à pleuvoir.

Toutefois, le parti de Beauval, visiblement le plus faible, dut reculer. Pas à pas, mètre à mètre, il fut refoulé jusqu’au Palais. Sur le terre-plein, la bataille reprit plus ardente. Longtemps elle demeura indécise. De temps à autre, un combattant, forcé de se retirer de la lutte, allait s’abattre dans quelque coin. Des mâchoires furent brisées, des côtes enfoncées, des membres cassés.

Plus on frappait, plus on s’exaspérait. Le moment vint où les couteaux sortirent tout seuls de leurs gaines. Une fois de plus, le sang coula.

Après une résistance héroïque, les défenseurs de Beauval furent enfin débordés, et les assaillants, ayant tout balayé devant eux, se ruèrent en désordre dans l'intérieur du Palais. Avec des hurlements de sauvages, ils le parcoururent de haut en bas. S'ils avaient trouvé Beauval, celui-ci eût été inévitablement écharpé. Par bonheur, il fut impossible de le découvrir. Beauval avait disparu. En voyant de quelle manière tournaient les choses, il avait déguerpi à temps, et, en ce moment, il fuyait à toutes jambes dans la direction du Bourg-Neuf.

L'inutilité de leurs recherches porta au paroxysme la rage des vainqueurs. Il est de l'essence même de la foule de perdre toute mesure dans le bien comme dans le mal. À défaut d'autre victime, on s'en prit aux choses. La demeure de Beauval fut pillée de fond en comble. Son misérable mobilier, ses papiers, ses objets personnels, tout fut jeté pêle-mêle par les fenêtres, et amoncelé en un tas auquel on mit le feu. Quelques instants plus tard, — fut-ce par inadvertance? fut-ce par la volonté de l'un des émeutiers? — le Palais lui-même flambait à son tour.

Chassés par la fumée, les envahisseurs se précipitèrent au dehors. Alors, ils n'étaient plus des hommes. Ivres de cris, de saccage et de meurtre, ils n'avaient plus de pensée ni de but. Rien qu'un irrésistible besoin de frapper, d'assommer, de détruire et de tuer.

Sur le terre-plein stationnait, comme au spectacle, la foule des enfants, des femmes et des indifférents, éternels badauds à qui on ne cesse de rendre les coups qu'ils n'ont pas donnés. Ils formaient, en somme, le gros de la population, mais, en dépit de leur nombre, ils étaient trop pacifiques pour être redoutables. La bande de Lewis Dorick, maintenant grossie de ses anciens adversaires qui jugeaient opportun de se ranger du côté du plus fort, se rua sur cette multitude inoffensive, cognant des pieds et des poings.

Ce fut une fuite éperdue. Hommes, femmes et enfants se répandirent dans la plaine, poursuivis par ces énergumènes qui eussent été bien embarrassés de donner la raison de leur sauvage fureur.

Du haut de la berge qu'il venait de gravir avec Harry Rhodes, le Kaw-djer, en regardant du côté du campement, n'aperçut qu'un nuage de fumée, dont les lourdes volutes allaient rouler jusqu'à la mer. Les maisons disparaissaient dans ce nuage, d'où s'élevaient des cris confus: appels, jurons, exclamations de douleur et d'angoisse. Un seul être vivant, un homme, se montrait dans la plaine, au-delà de la rivière. Il courait de toutes ses forces, bien que personne ne fût à sa poursuite. Sans ralentir son allure, cet homme atteignit le ponceau, le franchit, et vint tomber, hors d'haleine, en arrière de la petite troupe armée. On reconnut alors Ferdinand Beauval.

Voilà ce que vit d'abord le Kaw-djer. Dans sa simplicité, le tableau était éloquent, et il en comprit sur-le-champ la signification: Beauval honteusement chassé, contraint à la fuite, et l'émeute semant dans Libéria l'incendie et la mort.

Quel sens avait tout cela? Qu'on se fût débarrassé de Beauval, rien de mieux. Mais pourquoi cette dévastation, dont les auteurs seraient les premières victimes? Pourquoi cette tuerie, dont les cris lointains disaient la sauvage fureur?

Ainsi donc, les hommes pouvaient en arriver là! Non seulement le plus médiocre intérêt les rendait capables du mal, mais ils l'étaient encore, le cas échéant, de détruire pour détruire, de frapper pour frapper, de tuer pour le plaisir de tuer! Il n'y avait pas que les besoins, les passions et l'orgueil pour lancer les hommes les uns contre les autres; il y avait aussi la folie, cette folie qui existe en puissance dans toutes les foules, et qui fait qu'ayant une fois goûté de la violence, elles ne s’arrêtent que saoules de destruction et de carnage.

C’est par une telle folie — héroïsme ou brigandage, selon l’occurrence — que le bandit abat sans raison le passant inoffensif, c’est par elle que les révolutions font des innocents et des coupables une indistincte hécatombe, comme c’est elle aussi qui enflamme les armées et gagne les batailles.

Que devenaient, devant de pareils faits, les rêves du Kaw-djer? Si la liberté intégrale était le bien naturel des hommes, n’était-ce pas à la condition qu’ils restassent des hommes et qu’ils ne fussent pas susceptibles de se transformer en bêtes fauves, comme ceux dont il contemplait les exploits?

Le Kaw-djer n’avait rien répondu à Harry Rhodes. Droit et ferme au point culminant de la berge, il regarda pendant quelques minutes en silence. Ses réflexions douloureuses, son visage impassible ne les trahissait pas.

Et pourtant, quel débat cruel dont son âme était déchirée! Fermer les yeux à l’évidence et s’entêter égoïstement dans une religion menteuse, tandis que ces malheureux insensés se massacraient les uns les autres, ou bien reconnaître l’évidence, obéir à la raison, intervenir dans ce désordre et les sauver malgré eux, poignant dilemme! Ce que commandait le bon sens, c’était, hélas! la négation de toute sa vie. Voir brisée à ses pieds l’idole élevée dans son cœur, reconnaître qu’on a été dupe d’un mirage, se dire qu’on a bâti sur un mensonge, que rien n’est vrai de ce qu’on a pensé, et qu’on s’est sacrifié stupidement à une chimère, quelle faillite!

Tout à coup, hors de la fumée qui recouvrait Libéria, jaillit un fuyard, puis un autre, puis dix autres, puis cent autres, dont beaucoup de femmes et d’enfants. Quelques-uns cherchaient à se réfugier dans les hauteurs de l’Est, mais le plus grand nombre, serrés de près par leurs adversaires, couraient éperdument dans la direction du Bourg-Neuf. La dernière de ceux-ci était une femme. Un peu forte, elle ne pouvait aller vite. Un homme la rejoignit en quelques enjambées, la saisit par les cheveux, la renversa sur le sol, leva le poing… Le Kaw-Djer se retourna vers Harry Rhodes et dit d’une voix grave:

“J’accepte.”

TROISIÈME PARTIE

CHAPITRE I

I

Premières mesures

Le Kaw-djer, à la tête des quinze volontaires, traversa la plaine au pas de course. Il lui suffît de quelques minutes pour atteindre Libéria.

On se battait encore sur le terre-plein, mais avec moins d'ardeur, et uniquement par suite de la vitesse acquise, car, déjà, on ne savait plus très bien pourquoi.

L'arrivée de la petite troupe armée frappa de stupeur les belligérants. C'était une éventualité qu'ils n'avaient pas prévue. À aucun moment, les émeutiers n'avaient admis qu'ils pussent avoir à lutter contre une force supérieure, de taille à mettre le holà à leurs fantaisies meurtrières. Les combats singuliers en furent subitement arrêtés. Ceux qui recevaient les coups prirent du champ, ceux qui les donnaient s'immobilisèrent aux endroits où ils se trouvaient, les uns tout ahuris de leur inexplicable aventure, les autres l'air un peu égaré, la respiration haletante, en hommes qui, dans un moment d'aberration, auraient accompli quelque travail pénible dont ils ne comprendraient plus la raison. Sans transition, la surexcitation faisait place à la détente.

Le Kaw-djer s'occupa en premier lieu de combattre l'incendie que les flammes, rabattues par une légère brise du Sud, risquaient de communiquer au campement tout entier. L'ancien "palais" de Beauval était alors plus qu'aux trois quarts consumé. Quelques coups de crosse suffirent à jeter bas cette construction légère, dont il ne subsista bientôt plus qu’un tas de débris calcinés d’où s’élevait une fumée âcre.

Cela fait, laissant cinq de ses hommes de garde près de la foule assagie, il partit avec les dix autres à travers la plaine, afin de rallier le surplus des émigrants. Il y réussit sans peine. De tous côtés on revenait vers Libéria, les assaillants, dont la fatigue avait apaisé la fureur insensée, formant l’avant-garde, et derrière eux, les badauds étrillés, qui, encore mal remis de leur terreur, se rapprochaient craintivement en conservant un prudent intervalle. Quand ceux-ci aperçurent le Kaw-djer, ils reprirent confiance et pressèrent le pas, si bien que les uns et les autres arrivèrent confondus à Libéria.

En moins d’une heure, toute la population fut rassemblée sur le terre-plein. À voir ses rangs serrés, sa masse homogène, il eût été impossible de soupçonner que des partis adverses l’eussent jamais divisée. Sans les nombreuses victimes qui jonchaient le sol, il ne serait resté aucune trace des troubles qui venaient de finir.

La foule ne montrait pas d’impatience. De la curiosité simplement. Tout étonnée de l’incompréhensible rafale qui l’avait secouée et meurtrie, elle regardait placidement le groupe compact des quinze hommes armés qui lui faisait face, et attendait ce qui allait s’ensuivre.

Le Kaw-djer s’avança au milieu du terre-plein, et, s’adressant aux colons dont les regards convergeaient vers lui, il dit d’une voix forte:

“Désormais, c’est moi qui serai votre chef.”

Quel chemin il lui avait fallu parcourir pour en arriver à prononcer ces quelques mots! Ainsi donc, non seulement il acceptait enfin le principe d’autorité, non seulement il consentait, en dépit de ses répugnances, à en être le dépositaire, mais encore, allant d’un extrême à l’autre, il dépassait les plus absolus autocrates. Il ne se contentait pas de renoncer à son idéal de liberté, il le foulait aux pieds. Il ne demandait même pas l’assentiment de ceux dont il se décrétait le chef. Ce n’était pas une révolution. C’était un coup d’État.

Un coup d’État d’une étonnante facilité. Quelques secondes de silence avaient suivi la brève déclaration du Kaw-djer, puis un grand cri s’éleva de la foule. Applaudissements, vivats, hourras partirent à la fois en ouragan. On se serrait les mains, on se congratulait, les mères embrassaient leurs enfants. Ce fut un enthousiasme frénétique.

Ces pauvres gens passaient du découragement à l’espoir. Du moment que le Kaw-djer prenait leurs affaires en mains, ils étaient sauvés. Il saurait bien les tirer de leur misère. Comment?…

Par quel moyen?… Personne n’en avait aucune idée, mais là n’était pas la question. Puisqu’il se chargeait de tout, il n’y avait pas à chercher plus loin.

Quelques-uns, cependant, étaient sombres. Toutefois, si les partisans, dispersés, noyés dans la foule, de Beauval et de Lewis Dorick ne poussaient pas de vivats, ils ne se risquaient pas à manifester autrement que par leur silence. Qu’eussent-ils pu faire de plus? Leur minorité infime devait compter avec la majorité, depuis que celle-ci avait un chef. Ce grand corps possédait une tête désormais, et le cerveau rendait redoutable ces innombrables bras jusqu’ici dédaignés.

Le Kaw-djer étendit la main. Le silence s’établit comme par enchantement.

“Hosteliens, dit-il, le nécessaire sera fait pour améliorer la situation, mais j’exige l’obéissance de tous et je compte que personne ne m’obligera à employer la force. Que chacun de vous rentre chez soi et attende les instructions qui ne tarderont pas à être données.”

L’énergique laconisme de ce discours eut les plus heureux effets. On comprit qu’on allait être dirigé, et qu’il suffirait dorénavant de se laisser conduire. Rien ne pouvait mieux réconforter des malheureux qui venaient de faire de la liberté une si déplorable expérience et qui l’eussent volontiers aliénée contre la certitude d’un morceau de pain. La liberté est un bien immense, mais qu’on ne peut goûter qu’à la condition de vivre. Et vivre, à cela se réduisaient pour l’instant les aspirations de ce peuple en détresse.

On obéit avec célérité, sans faire entendre le plus léger murmure. La place se vida, et tous, jusqu’à Lewis Dorick, se conformant aux ordres reçus, s’enfermèrent dans les maisons ou sous les tentes.

Le Kaw-djer suivit des yeux la foule qui s’écoulait, et ses lèvres eurent un imperceptible pli d’amertume. S’il lui était resté des illusions, elles se fussent envolées. L’homme, décidément, ne haïssait pas la contrainte autant qu’il se l’était imaginé. Tant de veulerie — de lâcheté presque! — ne s’accordait pas avec l’exercice d’une liberté sans limite.

Une centaine de colons n’avaient pas suivi les autres. Le Kaw-djer se tourna en fronçant les sourcils vers ce groupe indocile. Aussitôt, un de ceux qui le composaient s’avança en avant de ses compagnons et prit la parole en leur nom. S’ils n’allaient pas, eux aussi, s’enfermer dans leurs demeures, c’est qu’ils n’en avaient pas. Chassés de leurs fermes envahies par une horde de pillards, ils venaient d’arriver à la côte, ceux-là depuis quelques jours, ceux-ci de la veille, et ils ne possédaient plus d’autre abri que le ciel.

Le Kaw-djer, les ayant assurés qu’il serait promptement statué sur leur sort, les invita à dresser les tentes qui existaient encore en réserve, puis, tandis qu’ils se mettaient en devoir d’obéir, il s’occupa sans plus tarder des victimes de l’émeute.

Il y en avait sur le terre-plein même et dans la campagne environnante. On partit à la recherche de ces dernières, et bientôt toutes furent ramenées au campement. Vérification faite, les troubles coûtaient la vie à douze colons, en y comprenant les trois pillards qui avaient trouvé la mort dans l’assaut de la ferme des Rivière. En général, il n’y avait pas lieu de beaucoup regretter les défunts. Un d’entre eux seulement, un des émigrants revenus de l’intérieur au cours de l’hiver, devait être compté dans la portion saine du peuple hostelien. Quant aux autres, ils appartenaient aux clans de Beauval et de Dorick, et le parti du travail et de l’ordre ne pouvait qu’être fortifié par leur disparition.

Les dommages les plus sérieux avaient été soufferts, en effet, par les émeutiers eux-mêmes, acharnés dans l’attaque comme dans la défense. Parmi les curieux inoffensifs qu’ils avaient assaillis avec tant de sauvagerie après l’incendie du “palais”, tout se réduisait, hormis le colon assassiné, à des blessures: contusions, fractures, voire quelques coups de couteau, qui fort heureusement ne mettaient en danger la vie de personne.

C’était de la besogne pour le Kaw-djer. Il n’en fut pas effrayé. Ce n’est pas en aveugle qu’il avait pris en charge l’existence d’un millier d’êtres humains, et, quelle que fût la grandeur de la tâche, elle ne serait pas au-dessus de son courage.

Les blessés examinés, pansés quand il y avait lieu, et enfin dirigés sur leurs demeures habituelles, le terre-plein fut complètement vide. Y laissant cinq hommes en surveillance, le Kaw-djer reprit, avec les dix autres, le chemin du Bourg-Neuf. Là-bas, un autre devoir l’appelait; là-bas, il y avait Halg, mourant, mort peut-être…

Halg était dans le même état, et les soins intelligents ne lui manquaient pas. Graziella et sa mère étaient accourues rejoindre Karroly au chevet du blessé, et l'on pouvait compter sur le dévouement de telles gardes-malades. Élevée à une rude école, la jeune fille y avait appris à commander à sa douleur. Elle montra au Kaw-djer un visage tranquille et répondit avec calme à ses questions. Halg, ainsi qu'elle le lui dit, n'avait que peu de fièvre, mais il ne sortait de sa continuelle somnolence que pour pousser de temps à autre quelques faibles gémissements. Une mousse sanguinolente coulait toujours entre ses lèvres pâlies. Toutefois, elle était moins abondante et sa coloration moins prononcée. Il y avait là un symptôme favorable.

Pendant ce temps, les dix hommes qui avaient accompagné le Kaw-djer s'étaient chargés de vivres prélevés sur la réserve du Bourg-Neuf. Sans s'accorder un instant de repos, on repartit pour Libéria, où on alla de porte en porte donner à chacun sa ration. La répartition terminée, le Kaw-djer distribua la garde pour la nuit, puis, s'enroulant dans une couverture, il s'étendit sur le sol et chercha le sommeil.

Il ne put le trouver. En dépit de sa lassitude physique, son cerveau s'obstinait à élaborer la pensée.

À quelques pas, les deux hommes de veille gardaient une immobilité de statue. Rien ne troublait le silence. Les yeux ouverts dans l'ombre, le Kaw-djer rêva.

Que faisait-il là?… Pourquoi avait-il permis que sa conscience fût violentée par les faits et qu'une telle souffrance lui fût imposée?… S'il vivait auparavant dans l'erreur, du moins y vivait-il heureux… Heureux! qui l'empêchait de l'être encore? il lui suffirait de vouloir. Que fallait-il pour cela? Moins que rien. Se lever, fuir, demander l'oubli de cette cruelle aventure à l’ivresse des courses vagabondes qui, si longtemps, lui avaient donné le bonheur…

Hélas! maintenant, lui rendraient-elles ses illusions détruites? Et quelle serait sa vie, avec le remords de tant de vies immolées à la gloire d’un faux dieu?… Non, cette foule qu’il avait prise en charge, il en était comptable vis-à-vis de lui-même. Il ne serait quitte envers elle que lorsque, d’étape en étape, il l’aurait conduite jusqu’au port.

Soit! Mais quelle route choisir?… N’était-il pas trop tard?… Avait-il le pouvoir, un homme quel qu’il fût avait-il le pouvoir de faire remonter la pente à ce peuple, que ses tares, ses vices, son infériorité intellectuelle et morale semblaient vouer d’avance à un inévitable anéantissement?

Froidement, le Kaw-djer évalua le poids du fardeau qu’il entreprenait de porter. Il fit le tour de son devoir et chercha les meilleurs moyens de l’accomplir. Empêcher ces pauvres gens de mourir de faim?… Oui, cela d’abord. Mais c’était peu de chose en regard de l’ensemble de l’œuvre. Vivre, ce n’est pas seulement satisfaire aux besoins matériels des organes, c’est aussi, plus encore peut-être, être conscient de la dignité humaine; c’est ne compter que sur soi et se donner aux autres; c’est être fort; c’est être bon. Après avoir sauvé de la mort ces vivants, il resterait à faire, de ces vivants, des hommes.

Étaient-ils capables, ces dégénérés, de s’élever à un tel idéal? Tous, non assurément, mais quelques-uns peut-être, si on leur montrait l’étoile qu’ils n’avaient pas su voir dans le ciel, si on les conduisait au but en les tenant par la main.

Ainsi, dans la nuit, songeait le Kaw-djer. Ainsi, l’une après l’autre, ses dernières résistances furent renversées, ses dernières révoltes vaincues, et peu à peu s’élabora dans son esprit le plan directeur auquel il allait désormais conformer tous ses actes.

L’aube le trouva debout et revenant déjà du Bourg-Neuf, où il avait eu la joie de constater que l’état de Halg avait une légère tendance à s’améliorer. Aussitôt de retour à Libéria, il entra dans son rôle de chef.

Son premier acte fut de nature à étonner ceux-là mêmes qui le touchaient de plus près. Il commença par battre le rappel des vingt ou vingt-cinq ouvriers maçons et des menuisiers faisant partie du personnel de la colonie, puis, leur ayant adjoint une vingtaine de colons choisis parmi ceux auxquels était familier le maniement de la pelle et de la pioche, il distribua à chacun sa besogne. En un point qu’il indiqua, des tranchées devaient être ouvertes, en vue de recevoir les murailles de l’une des maisons démontables qui serait édifiée à cet endroit. La maison une fois en place, les maçons en consolideraient les parois au moyen de contre-murs et la diviseraient par des cloisons selon un plan qui fut séance tenante tracé sur le sol. Ces instructions données, tandis qu’on se mettait à l’œuvre sous la direction du charpentier Hobart promu aux fonctions de contremaître, le Kaw-djer s’éloigna avec dix hommes d’escorte.

À quelques pas s’élevait la plus vaste des maisons démontables. Là demeuraient cinq personnes. En compagnie des frères Moore, de Sirdey et de Kennedy, Lewis Dorick y avait élu domicile. C’est là que le Kaw-djer se rendit en droite ligne.

Au moment où il entra, les cinq hommes étaient engagés dans une discussion véhémente. En l’apercevant, ils se levèrent brusquement.

“Que venez-vous faire ici?” demanda Lewis Dorick d’un ton rude.

Du seuil, le Kaw-djer répondit froidement:

“La colonie hostelienne a besoin de cette maison.

— Besoin de cette maison!… répéta Lewis Dorick qui n’en pouvait croire, comme on dit, ses oreilles. Pourquoi faire?

— Pour y loger ses services. Je vous invite à la quitter sur-le-champ.

— Comment donc!… approuva ironiquement Dorick. Où irons-nous?

— Où il vous plaira. Il ne vous est pas interdit de vous en bâtir une autre.

— Vraiment!… Et en attendant?

— Des tentes seront mises à votre disposition.

— Et moi, je mets la porte à la vôtre”, s’écria Dorick rouge de colère.

Le Kaw-djer s’effaça, démasquant son escorte armée qui était restée au dehors.

“Dans ce cas, dit-il posément, je serai dans la nécessité d’employer la force.”

Lewis Dorick comprit d’un coup d’œil que toute résistance était impossible. Il battit en retraite.

“C’est bon, grommela-t-il. On s’en va… Le temps seulement de réunir ce qui nous appartient, car on nous permettra bien, je suppose, d’emporter…

— Rien, interrompit le Kaw-djer. Ce qui vous est personnel vous sera remis par mes soins. Le reste est la propriété de la colonie.”

C’en était trop. Dans sa rage, Dorick en oublia la prudence.

“C’est ce que nous verrons!” s’écria-t-il en portant la main à sa ceinture.

Le couteau n’était pas hors de sa gaine qu’il lui était arraché. Les frères Moore s’élancèrent à la rescousse. Saisi à la gorge par le Kaw-djer, le plus grand fut renversé sur le sol. Au même instant, les gardes du nouveau chef faisaient irruption dans la pièce. Ils n’eurent pas à intervenir. Les cinq émigrants, tenus en respect, renonçaient à la lutte. Ils sortirent sans opposer une plus longue résistance.

Le bruit de l’altercation avait attiré un certain nombre de curieux. On se pressait devant la porte. Les vaincus durent se frayer un passage dans ce populaire, dont ils étaient jadis si redoutés. Le vent avait tourné. On les accabla de huées.

Le Kaw-djer, aidé de ses compagnons, procéda rapidement à une visite minutieuse de la maison dont il venait de prendre possession. Ainsi qu’il l’avait promis, tout ce qui pouvait être considéré comme la propriété personnelle des précédents occupants fut mis de côté pour être ultérieurement rendu aux ayants-droit. Mais, en dehors de cette catégorie d’objets, il fit d’intéressantes trouvailles. L’une des pièces, la plus reculée, avait été transformée en véritable garde-manger. Là s’amoncelait une importante réserve de vivres. Conserves, légumes secs, corned-beef, thé et café, les provisions étaient aussi abondantes qu’intelligemment choisies. Par quel moyen Lewis Dorick et ses acolytes se les étaient-ils procurées? Quel que fût ce moyen, ils n’avaient jamais eu à souffrir de la disette générale, ce qui ne les avait pas empêchés, d’ailleurs, de crier plus fort que les autres et d’être les fauteurs des troubles dans lesquels avait sombré le pouvoir de Beauval.

Le Kaw-djer fit transporter ces vivres sur le terre-plein, où ils furent déposés sous la protection des fusils, puis des ouvriers réquisitionnés à cet effet, et auxquels le serrurier Lawson fut adjoint à titre de contremaître, commencèrent le démontage de la maison.

Pendant que ce travail se poursuivait, le Kaw-djer, accompagné de quelques hommes d’escorte, entreprit, par tout le campement, une série de visites domiciliaires qui fut continuée sans interruption jusqu’à son complet achèvement. Maisons et tentes furent fouillées de fond en comble. Le produit de ces investigations, qui occupèrent la majeure partie de la journée, fut d’une richesse inespérée. Chez tous les émigrants se rattachant plus ou moins étroitement à Lewis Dorick ou à Ferdinand Beauval, et aussi chez quelques autres qui avaient réussi à se constituer une réserve en se privant aux jours d’abondance relative, on découvrit des cachettes analogues à celle qu’on avait déjà trouvée.

Pour échapper aux soupçons sans doute, leurs possesseurs ne s’étaient pas montrés les derniers à se plaindre, lorsque la famine était venue. Le Kaw-djer en reconnut plus d’un, parmi eux, qui avaient imploré son aide et qui avaient accepté sans scrupule sa part des vivres prélevés sur ceux du Bourg-Neuf. Se voyant dépistés, ils étaient fort embarrassés maintenant, bien que le Kaw-djer ne manifestât par aucun signe les sentiments que leur ruse pouvait lui faire éprouver.

Elle était cependant de nature à lui ouvrir de profondes perspectives sur les lois inflexibles qui gouvernent le monde. En fermant l’oreille aux cris de détresse que la faim arrachait à leurs compagnons de misère, en y mêlant hypocritement les leurs afin d’éviter le partage de ce qu’ils réservaient pour eux-mêmes, ces hommes avaient démontré une fois de plus l’instinct de féroce égoïsme qui tend uniquement à la conservation de l’individu. En vérité, leur conduite eût été la même s’ils eussent été, non des créatures raisonnables et sensibles, mais de simples agrégats de substance matérielle contraints d’obéir aveuglément aux fatalités physiologiques de la cellule initiale dont ils étaient sortis.

Mais le Kaw-djer n’avait plus besoin, pour être convaincu, de cette démonstration supplémentaire et qui ne serait malheureusement pas la dernière. Si son rêve en s’écroulant n’avait laissé qu’un vide affreux dans son cœur, il ne songeait pas à le réédifier. L’éloquente brutalité des choses lui avait prouvé son erreur. Il comprenait qu’en imaginant des systèmes il avait fait œuvre de philosophe, non de savant, et qu’il avait ainsi péché contre l’esprit scientifique qui, s’interdisant les spéculations hasardeuses, s’attache à l’expérience et à l’examen purement objectif des faits. Or, les vertus et les vices de l’humanité, ses grandeurs et ses faiblesses, sa diversité prodigieuse, sont des faits qu’il faut savoir reconnaître et avec lesquels il faut compter.

Et, d’ailleurs, quelle faute de raisonnement n’avait-il pas commise en condamnant en bloc tous les chefs, sous prétexte qu’ils ne sont pas impeccables et que la perfection originelle des hommes les rend inutiles! Ces puissants, envers lesquels il s’était montré si sévère, ne sont-ils pas des hommes comme les autres? Pourquoi auraient-ils le privilège d’être imparfaits? De leur imperfection, n’aurait-il pas dû, au contraire, logiquement conclure à celle de tous, et n’aurait-il pas dû reconnaître, par suite, la nécessité des lois et de ceux qui ont mission de les appliquer?

Sa formule fameuse s’effritait, tombait en poussière. “Ni Dieu, ni maître”, avait-il proclamé, et il avait dû confesser la nécessité d’un maître. De la deuxième partie de la proposition il ne subsistait rien, et sa destruction ébranlait la solidité de la première. Certes, il n’en était pas à remplacer sa négation par une affirmation. Mais, du moins, il connaissait la noble hésitation du savant qui, devant les problèmes dont la solution est actuellement impossible, s’arrête au seuil de l’inconnaissable et juge contraire à l’essence même de la science de décréter sans preuves qu’il n’y a dans l’univers rien d’autre que de la matière et que tout est soumis à ses lois. Il comprenait qu’en de telles questions une prudente expectative est de mise, et que, si chacun est libre de jeter son explication personnelle du mystère universel dans la bataille des hypothèses, toute affirmation catégorique ne peut être que présomption ou sottise.

De toutes les trouvailles, la plus remarquable fut faite dans la bicoque que l’Irlandais Patterson occupait avec Long, seul survivant de ses deux compagnons. On y était entré par acquit de conscience. Elle était si petite qu’il semblait difficile qu’une cachette de quelque importance pût y être ménagée. Mais Patterson avait remédié par son industrie à l’exiguïté du local, en y creusant une manière de cave que dissimulait un plancher grossier.

Prodigieuse fut la quantité de vivres qu’on y trouva. Il y avait là de quoi nourrir la colonie entière pendant huit jours. Cet incroyable amas de provisions de toute nature prenait une signification tragique, quand on évoquait le souvenir du malheureux Blaker, mort de faim au milieu de ces richesses, et le Kaw-djer ressentit comme un sentiment d’effroi, en songeant à ce que devait être, pour avoir laissé le drame s’accomplir, l’âme ténébreuse de Patterson.

L’Irlandais, d’ailleurs, n’avait aucunement figure de coupable. Il se montra arrogant, au contraire, et protesta avec énergie contre la spoliation dont il était victime. Le Kaw-djer, faisant en vain preuve de longanimité, eut beau lui expliquer la nécessité où chacun était de contribuer au salut commun, Patterson ne voulut rien entendre. La menace d’employer la force n’eut pas un meilleur succès. On ne réussit pas à l’intimider comme Lewis Dorick. Que lui importait l’escorte du nouveau chef? L’avare eût défendu son bien contre une armée. Or, elles étaient à lui, elles étaient son bien, ces provisions accumulées au prix de privations sans nombre. Ce n’est pas dans l’intérêt général, mais dans le sien propre, qu’il ne se les était imposées. S’il était inévitable qu’il fût dépouillé, encore fallait-il lui verser en argent l’équivalent de ce qu’on lui prenait.

Une pareille argumentation eût fait rire autrefois le Kaw-djer. Elle le faisait réfléchir aujourd’hui. Après tout, Patterson avait raison. Si l’on voulait rendre confiance aux Hosteliens désemparés, il convenait de remettre en honneur les règles qu’ils avaient coutume de voir universellement respectées. Or, la première de toutes ces règles consacrées par le consentement unanime des peuples de la terre, c’est le droit de propriété.

C’est pourquoi le Kaw-djer écouta avec patience le plaidoyer de Patterson, et c’est pourquoi il l’assura qu’il ne s’agissait nullement de spoliation, tout ce qui était réquisitionné dans l’intérêt général devant être payé à son juste prix par la communauté. L’avare aussitôt cessa de protester, mais ce fut pour se mettre à gémir. Toutes les marchandises étaient si rares et, partant, si chères à l’île Hoste!… La moindre des choses y acquérait une incroyable valeur!… Avant d’avoir la paix, le Kaw-djer dut longuement discuter l’importance de la somme à payer. Par exemple, quand on fut d’accord, Patterson aida lui-même au déménagement.

Vers six heures du soir, toutes les provisions retrouvées étaient enfin déposées sur le terre-plein. Elles y formaient un amoncellement respectable. Les ayant évaluées d’un coup d’œil, et leur ajoutant par la pensée les réserves du Bourg-Neuf, le Kaw-djer estima qu’un rationnement sévère les ferait durer près de deux mois.

On procéda immédiatement à la première distribution. Les émigrants défilèrent, et chacun d’eux reçut pour lui-même et pour sa famille la part qui lui était attribuée. Ils ouvraient de grands yeux en découvrant une telle accumulation de richesses, alors qu’ils se croyaient à la veille de mourir de faim. Cela tenait du miracle, un miracle dont le Kaw-djer eût été l’auteur.

La distribution terminée, celui-ci retourna au Bourg-Neuf en compagnie d’Harry Rhodes, et tous deux se rendirent auprès de Halg. Ainsi qu’ils eurent la joie de le constater, l’amélioration persistait dans l’état du blessé, que continuaient à veiller Tullia et Graziella.

Tranquillisé de ce côté, le Kaw-djer reprit avec une froide obstination l’exécution du plan qu’il s’était tracé pendant sa longue insomnie de la nuit précédente. Il se tourna vers Harry Rhodes et dit d’une voix grave:

“L’heure est venue de parler, monsieur Rhodes. Suivez-moi, je vous prie.”

L’expression sévère, douloureuse même, de son visage frappa Harry Rhodes qui obéit en silence. Tous deux disparurent dans la chambre du Kaw-djer, dont la porte fut soigneusement verrouillée.

La porte se rouvrit une heure plus tard, sans que rien eût transpiré de ce qui s’était dit au cours de cette entrevue. Le Kaw-djer avait son air habituel, plus glacé encore peut-être, mais Harry Rhodes semblait transfiguré par la joie. Devant son hôte, qui l’avait reconduit jusqu’au seuil de la maison, il s’inclina avec une sorte de déférence, avant de serrer chaleureusement la main que celui-ci lui tendait, puis, au moment de le quitter:

“Comptez sur moi, dit-il.

— J’y compte”, répondit le Kaw-djer qui suivit des yeux son ami s’éloignant dans la nuit.

Quand Harry Rhodes eut disparu, ce fut au tour de Karroly.

Il le prit à l’écart et lui donna ses instructions que l’Indien écouta avec son respect habituel; puis, infatigable, il traversa une dernière fois la plaine et alla, comme la veille, chercher le sommeil sur le terre-plein de Libéria.

Ce fut lui qui, dès l’aube, donna le signal du réveil. Bientôt, tous les colons convoqués par lui étaient réunis sur la place.

“Hosteliens, dit-il au milieu d’un profond silence, il va vous être fait, pour la dernière fois, une distribution de vivres. Dorénavant les vivres seront vendus, à des prix que j’établirai, au profit de l’État. L’argent ne manquant à personne, nul ne risque de mourir de faim. D’ailleurs, la colonie a besoin de bras. Tous ceux d’entre vous qui se présenteront seront employés et payés. À partir de ce moment, le travail est la loi.”

On ne saurait contenter tout le monde, et il n’est pas douteux que ce bref discours déplût cruellement à quelques-uns; mais il galvanisa littéralement par contre la majorité des auditeurs. Leurs fronts se relevèrent, leurs torses se redressèrent, comme si une force nouvelle leur eût été infusée. Ils sortaient donc enfin de leur inaction! On avait besoin d’eux. Ils allaient servir à quelque chose. Ils n’étaient plus inutiles. Ils acquéraient à la fois la certitude du travail et de la vie.

Un immense “hourra!” sortit de leurs poitrines, et, vers le Kaw-djer, les bras se tendirent, muscles durcis, prêts à l’action. Au même instant, comme une réponse à la foule, un faible cri d'appel retentit dans le lointain.

Le Kaw-djer se retourna et, sur la mer, il aperçut la Wel-Kiej dont Karroly tenait la barre; Harry Rhodes, debout à l'avant, agitait la main en geste d'adieu, tandis que la chaloupe, toutes voiles dehors, s'éloignait dans le soleil.

CHAPITRE II

II

La cité naissante

Immédiatement, le Kaw-djer organisa le travail. De tous ceux qui les offrirent, et ce fut, il faut le dire, l’immense majorité des colons, les bras furent acceptés. Divisés par équipes sous l’autorité de contremaîtres, les uns amorcèrent une route charretière qui réunirait Libéria au Bourg-Neuf, les autres furent affectés au transfert des maisons démontables jusqu’ici édifiées au hasard et qu’il s’agissait de disposer d’une manière plus logique. Le Kaw-djer indiqua les nouveaux emplacements, ceux-là parallèlement, ceux-ci à l’opposé de l’ancienne demeure de Dorick, laquelle commençait déjà à s’élever à peu près à l’endroit occupé antérieurement par le “palais” de Beauval.

Une difficulté se révéla tout de suite. Pour ces divers travaux, on manquait d’outils. Les émigrants qui, pour une cause ou une autre, avaient dû abandonner leurs exploitations de l’intérieur, ne s’étaient pas mis en peine de rapporter ceux qu’ils y avaient emportés. Force leur fut d’aller les rechercher, si bien que le premier travail de la majeure partie des travailleurs fut précisément de se procurer des outils de travail.

Il leur fallut refaire une fois de plus le chemin si péniblement parcouru lorsqu’ils étaient venus se réfugier à Libéria. Mais les circonstances n’étaient plus les mêmes, et il leur parut infiniment moins pénible. Le printemps avait remplacé l’hiver, ils ne manquaient plus de vivres, et la certitude de gagner leur vie au retour leur faisait un cœur joyeux. En une dizaine de jours, les derniers étaient rentrés. Les chantiers battirent alors leur plein. La route s'allongea à vue d'œil. Les maisons se groupèrent peu à peu harmonieusement, entourées de vastes espaces qui seraient dans l'avenir des jardins, et séparées par de larges rues, qui donnaient à Libéria des airs de ville au lieu de son aspect de campement provisoire. En même temps, on procédait à l'enlèvement des détritus et des immondices que l'incurie des habitants avait laissés s'amonceler.

Commencée la première, l'ancienne maison de Dorick fut également la première à être à peu près habitable. Il n'avait pas fallu beaucoup de temps pour démonter cette construction légère et pour la réédifier à son nouvel emplacement, bien qu'on l'eût notablement agrandie. Certes elle n'était pas terminée, mais ses parois, encastrées dans le sol, étaient debout et le toit était en place, de même que les cloisons séparatives de l'intérieur. Pour s'installer dans la maison, il n'était pas nécessaire d'attendre l'achèvement des contre-murs extérieurs.

Ce fut le 7 novembre que le Kaw-djer en prit possession. Le plan en était des plus simples. Au centre, un entrepôt dans lequel fut déposé le stock de provisions, et, autour de cet entrepôt, une série de pièces communiquant entre elles. Ces pièces s'ouvraient sur les façades Nord, Est et Ouest; une seule, au Sud, sans issue à l'extérieur, était commandée par les autres. Des inscriptions, tracées en lettres peintes sur des panneaux de bois, indiquaient la destination de ces diverses salles. Gouvernement, Tribunal, Police, disaient respectivement les inscriptions du Nord, de l'Ouest et de l'Est. Quant au dernier de ces locaux rien n'en révélait l'usage, mais le bruit courut bientôt que là se trouverait la Prison.

Ainsi donc, le Kaw-djer ne s'en reposait plus uniquement sur la sagesse de ses semblables, et, pour que l'Autorité fût solidement assise, il la fondait sur ce trépied: la Justice, au sens social du mot, la Force et le Châtiment. Sa longue et stérile révolte n'aboutissait qu'à appliquer, jusque dans ce qu'elles ont de plus absolu, les règles hors desquelles l'imperfection humaine a, depuis l'origine des temps, rendu toute civilisation et tout progrès impossibles.

Mais des locaux, des inscriptions précisant l'usage qu'on en devait faire, tout cela n'était en somme qu'un squelette d'administration. Il fallait des fonctionnaires pour exercer les fonctions. Le Kaw-djer les désigna sans tarder. Hartlepool fut placé à la tête de la police portée à quarante hommes choisis, après une sélection rigoureuse, exclusivement parmi les gens mariés. Quant au Tribunal, le Kaw-djer, tout en s'en réservant personnellement la présidence, en confia le service courant à Ferdinand Beauval.

Assurément, la seconde de ces désignations avait de quoi étonner. Pourtant, ce n'était pas la première de ce genre. Quelques jours auparavant, le Kaw-djer en avait fait une autre au moins aussi surprenante.

Le paiement des salaires et la vente des rations représentaient maintenant une besogne absorbante. L'échange du travail et des vivres, bien que l'opération fût simplifiée par l'intermédiaire de l'argent, exigeait une véritable comptabilité, et cette comptabilité un comptable. Le Kaw-djer nomma en cette qualité ce John Rame, à qui une existence de plaisirs avait coûté à la fois santé et fortune. Quel but avait poursuivi ce dégénéré en participant à une entreprise de colonisation? Sans doute, il ne le savait pas lui-même, et il avait obéi à des rêves imprécis de vie facile dans un pays vague et chimérique. La réalité, infiniment plus rude, lui avait donné les hivers de l'île Hoste, et c'était miracle que cet être débile y eût résisté. Poussé par la nécessité, il avait vainement essayé, depuis l'établissement du nouveau régime, de se mêler aux terrassiers occupés à la construction de la route. Dès le soir du premier jour, il avait dû y renoncer, surmené, brisé de fatigue, ses blanches mains déchirées par les quartiers de roc. Il fut trop heureux d'accepter l'emploi que le Kaw-djer lui attribuait et par lequel son insignifiante personnalité fut rapidement absorbée. Il se rétrécit encore, s'identifia à ses colonnes de chiffres, disparut dans sa fonction comme dans un tombeau. On ne devait plus entendre parler de lui.

Savoir utiliser pour la grandeur de l'État jusqu'à la plus infime des forces sociales dont il dispose est peut-être la qualité maîtresse d'un conducteur d'hommes. Devant l'impossibilité de tout faire par soi-même, il lui faut nécessairement s'entourer de collaborateurs, et c'est dans leur choix que se manifeste avec le plus d'évidence le génie du chef.

Pour singuliers qu'ils fussent, ceux du Kaw-djer étaient les meilleurs qu'il pût faire dans la situation où le sort le plaçait. Il n'avait qu'un but: obtenir de chacun le maximum de rendement au profit de la collectivité. Or, Beauval, malgré son incapacité à d'autres égards, n'en restait pas moins un avocat de valeur. Il était donc, plus que tout autre, qualifié pour assurer le cours de la justice, la surveillance du maître devant au besoin tenir en bride ses fantaisies.

Quant à John Rame, c'était le plus inutile des colons. Il y avait lieu d'admirer qu'on eût réussi à tirer quelque chose de ce chiffon sans énergie ni vouloir, qui n'était bon à rien.

Pendant que l'administration de l'État hostelien s'organisait de cette manière, le Kaw-djer déployait une activité prodigieuse.

Il avait définitivement quitté le Bourg-Neuf. Ses instruments, livres, médicaments transportés au “gouvernement”, — ainsi qu'on désignait déjà l’ancienne maison de Lewis Dorick — il y prenait chaque jour quelques heures de sommeil. Le reste du temps, il était partout à la fois. Il encourageait les travailleurs, résolvait les difficultés au fur et à mesure qu’elles se présentaient, maintenait avec calme et fermeté le bon ordre et la concorde. Nul ne se fût avisé d’élever une contestation, d’entamer une dispute en sa présence. Il n’avait qu’à paraître pour que le travail s’activât, pour que les muscles rendissent leur maximum de force.

Certes, dans ce peuple misérable qu’il avait entrepris de conduire vers de meilleures destinées, la plupart ignoraient de quel drame sa conscience avait été le théâtre, et, l’eussent-ils connu, ils n’étaient pas assez psychologues et manquaient par trop d’idéalité pour soupçonner seulement quels ravages y avait fait un conflit de pures abstractions si différent de leurs soucis matériels. Du moins, il leur suffirait de regarder leur chef pour comprendre qu’une douleur secrète le dévorait. Si le Kaw-djer n’avait jamais été un homme expansif, il semblait maintenant de marbre. Son visage impassible ne souriait plus, ses lèvres ne s’entrouvraient que pour dire l’indispensable avec le minimum de mots. Autant peut-être à cause de son aspect qu’en raison de sa vigueur herculéenne et de la force armée dont il disposait, il apparaissait redoutable. Mais, si on le craignait, on admirait en même temps son intelligence et son énergie, et on l’aimait pour la bonté qu’on sentait vivante sous son attitude glaciale, pour tous les services qu’on avait reçus de lui et qu’on en recevait encore.

La multiplicité de ses occupations n’épuisait pas, en effet, l’activité du Kaw-djer, et le chef n’avait pas fait tort au médecin. Pas un jour il ne manquait d’aller voir les malades et les blessés de l’émeute. Il avait, d’ailleurs, de moins en moins à faire. Sous la triple influence de la saison plus clémente, de la paix morale et du travail, la santé publique s’améliorait rapidement.

De tous les malades et blessés, Halg était, bien entendu, le plus cher à son cœur. Quelque temps qu’il fit, quelle que fût sa fatigue, il passait matin et soir au chevet du jeune Indien, d’où Graziella et sa mère ne s’éloignaient pas. Il avait le bonheur de constater un mieux progressif. On fut bientôt certain que la blessure du poumon commençait à se fermer. Le 15 novembre, Halg put enfin quitter le lit sur lequel il gisait depuis près d’un mois.

Ce jour-là, le Kaw-djer se rendit à la maison habitée par la famille Rhodes.

“Bonjour, madame Rhodes!… Bonjour, les enfants! dit-il en entrant.

— Bonjour, Kaw-djer!” lui répondit-on à l’unisson.

Dans cette atmosphère si cordiale, il perdait toujours un peu de sa froideur. Edward et Clary se pressèrent contre lui. Paternellement il embrassa la jeune fille et caressa la joue du jeune garçon.

“Enfin, vous voici, Kaw-djer!… s’écria Mme Rhodes. Je vous croyais mort.

— J’ai eu beaucoup à faire, madame Rhodes.

— Je le sais, Kaw-djer, je le sais, approuva Mme Rhodes. C’est égal, je suis contente de vous voir… J’espère que vous allez me donner des nouvelles de mon mari.

— Votre mari est parti, madame Rhodes. Voilà tout ce que je peux vous dire.

— Grand merci du renseignement!… Reste à savoir quand il doit revenir.

— Pas de si tôt, madame Rhodes. Votre veuvage est loin d’être fini.”

Mme Rhodes soupira tristement.

“Il ne faut pas être triste, madame Rhodes, reprit le Kaw-djer. Tout s’arrangera avec un peu de patience… D’ailleurs, je vous apporte de l’occupation, c’est-à-dire de la distraction. Vous allez déménager, madame Rhodes.

— Déménager!…

— Oui… Pour aller vous fixer à Libéria.

— À Libéria!… Qu’irais-je y faire, Seigneur?

— Du commerce, madame Rhodes. Vous serez tout simplement la plus notable commerçante du pays, d’abord — et c’est une raison! — parce qu’il n’y en a pas d’autres, et aussi, je l’espère bien, parce que vos affaires vont étonnamment prospérer.

— Commerçante!… Mes affaires?… répéta Mme Rhodes étonnée. Quelles affaires, Kaw-djer?

— Celles du bazar Harry Rhodes. Vous n’avez pas oublié, je suppose, que vous possédez une pacotille magnifique? Le moment est venu de l’utiliser.

— Comment!… objecta Mme Rhodes, vous voulez que toute seule… sans mon mari…

— Vos enfants vous aideront, interrompit le Kaw-djer. Ils sont en âge de travailler, et tout le monde travaille ici. Je ne veux pas d’oisifs sur l’île Hoste.”

La voix du Kaw-djer s’était faite plus sérieuse. Sous l’ami qui conseillait perçait le chef qui allait ordonner.

“Tullia Ceroni et sa fille, reprit-il, vous donneront aussi un coup de main, quand Halg sera complètement guéri… D’autre part, vous n’avez pas le droit de laisser plus longtemps inutilisés des objets susceptibles d’accroître le bien-être de tous.

— Mais ces objets représentent presque toute notre fortune, objecta Mme Rhodes qui paraissait fort émue. Que dira mon mari, quand il apprendra que je les ai risqués dans un pays si troublé, où la sécurité…

— Est parfaite, madame Rhodes, termina le Kaw-djer, parfaite, vous pouvez m’en croire. Il n’y a pas de pays plus sûr.

— Mais enfin, que voulez-vous que j’en fasse, de toutes ces marchandises? demanda Mme Rhodes.

— Vous les vendrez.

— À qui?

— Aux acheteurs.

— Il y en a donc, et ils ont donc de l’argent?

— En doutez-vous? Vous savez bien que tout le monde en avait au départ. Maintenant on en gagne.

— On gagne de l’argent à l’île Hoste!…

— Parfaitement. En travaillant pour la colonie qui emploie et qui paie.

— La colonie a donc de l’argent, elle aussi?… Voilà du nouveau, par exemple!

— La colonie n’a pas d’argent, expliqua le

Kaw-djer, mais elle s’en procure en vendant les vivres qu’elle est seule à posséder. Vous devez en savoir quelque chose, puisqu’il vous faut payer les vôtres.

— C’est vrai, reconnut Mme Rhodes. Mais s’il ne s’agit que d’un échange, si les colons sont obligés de rendre pour se nourrir ce qu’ils ont gagné par leur travail, je ne vois pas très bien comment ils deviendront mes clients.

— Soyez tranquille, madame Rhodes. Les prix ont été établis par moi, et ils sont tels que les colons peuvent faire de petites économies.

— Alors, qui donne la différence?

— C’est moi, madame Rhodes.

— Vous êtes donc bien riche, Kaw-djer?

— Il paraît.”

Mme Rhodes regarda son interlocuteur d’un air ébahi. Celui-ci ne sembla pas s’en apercevoir.

“Je considère comme très important, madame Rhodes, reprit-il avec fermeté, que votre magasin soit ouvert à bref délai.

— Comme il vous plaira, Kaw-djer”, accorda Mme Rhodes sans enthousiasme.

Cinq jours plus tard, le Kaw-djer était obéi. Quand, le 20 novembre, Karroly revint avec la Wel-Kiej, il trouva le bazar Rhodes en plein fonctionnement.

Karroly revenait seul, après avoir débarqué M. Rhodes à Punta-Arenas; il ne put répondre autre chose aux questions anxieuses de Mme Rhodes, qui demanda tout aussi vainement des explications au Kaw-djer. Celui-ci se contenta de l'assurer qu'elle ne devait concevoir aucune inquiétude, mais simplement s'armer de patience, l'absence de M. Rhodes devant se prolonger assez longtemps encore.

Quant à Karroly, il était émerveillé de ce qu'il voyait. Quel changement en moins d'un mois! Libéria n'était plus reconnaissable. À peine si quelques rares maisons étaient encore à leurs anciennes places. La plupart étaient maintenant groupées autour de celle qu'on désignait sous le nom de gouvernement. Les plus voisines abritaient les quarante ménages, dont les chefs, armés aux dépens de la réserve de fusils, constituaient la police de la colonie. Les huit fusils sans emploi avaient été déposés dans le poste situé entre le logis du Kaw-djer et celui d'Hartlepool, et que plusieurs hommes gardaient jour et nuit. Quant à la provision de poudre, on l'avait mise à l'abri dans l'entrepôt ménagé au centre de l'immeuble et sans aucune issue à l'extérieur.

Un peu plus loin, s'ouvrait le bazar Rhodes. Ce bazar surtout émerveillait Karroly. Aucun des magasins de Punta-Arenas, seule ville que l'Indien eût jamais vue, n'en égalait à ses yeux la splendeur.

Au-delà, vers l'Est et vers l'Ouest, le travail se poursuivait. On aplanissait le sol destiné à recevoir les dernières maisons démontables et, plus loin, de tous les côtés, on travaillait également. Déjà d’autres maisons, celles-ci en bois, celles-là en maçonnerie, commençaient à s’élever hors de terre.

Entre les maisons disposées selon un plan rigoureux qui ne laissait aucune place aux fantaisies individuelles, de véritables rues se croisaient à angles droits, suffisamment larges pour permettre le passage simultané de quatre véhicules. À vrai dire, ces rues étaient bien encore quelque peu boueuses et ravinées, mais le piétinement des colons en durcissait le sol de jour en jour.

La route commencée dans la direction du Bourg-Neuf avait traversé la plaine marécageuse et rejoignait déjà obliquement la rivière. Sur les berges s’amoncelaient une multitude de pierres, en vue de la construction d’un pont plus solide que le ponceau existant.

Le Bourg-Neuf était à peu près déserté. À l’exception de quatre marins du Jonathan et de trois autres colons résolus à gagner leur vie en pêchant, ses anciens habitants l’avaient quitté pour Libéria, où les appelaient leurs occupations. Du Bourg-Neuf devenu ainsi exclusivement un port de pêche, les embarcations partaient chaque matin pour y entrer aux approches du soir, chargées de poissons qui trouvaient aisément preneurs.

Toutefois, malgré la diminution de sa population, aucune des maisons du faubourg n’avait été abattue. Ainsi l’avait décidé le Kaw-djer. Celle de Karroly était donc toujours debout, et l’Indien eut la joie d’y trouver Halg presque entièrement guéri.

Ce lui fut, par contre, un grand chagrin d’y rentrer sans le Kaw-djer, dont la nouvelle existence le séparait à jamais. Finie, cette vie commune de tant d’années!… Comme il était changé!… En revoyant son fidèle Indien, à peine avait-il esquissé un sourire, à peine avait-il consenti à interrompre quelques minutes sa dévorante activité.

Ce jour-là, comme tous les autres jours, le Kaw-djer, après une matinée consacrée aux divers travaux en cours, examina la situation de la colonie, tant au point de vue financier qu'au point de vue de l'état du stock des vivres, puis il retourna sur le chantier de la route.

C'était l'heure du repos. Pics et pioches abandonnés, la plupart des terrassiers sommeillaient sur les bas côtés, en offrant au soleil leurs poitrines velues; d'autres mâchaient lentement leur ration en échangeant des mots vides et rares. À mesure que le Kaw-djer passait, les gens étendus se redressaient, les causeurs s'interrompaient, et tous soulevaient leurs casquettes, en accompagnant le geste d'une parole de bon accueil.

"Salut, gouverneur!" disaient l'un après l'autre ces hommes rudes.

Sans s'arrêter, le Kaw-djer répondait de la main.

Il avait déjà parcouru la moitié du chemin, quand il aperçut, non loin de la rivière, un groupe d'une centaine d'émigrants, parmi lesquels on distinguait quelques femmes. Il pressa le pas. Bientôt, partis de ce groupe, les sons d'un violon vinrent frapper son oreille.

Un violon?… C'était la première fois qu'un violon chantait sur l'île Hoste depuis la mort de Fritz Gross.

Il se mêla à l'attroupement, dont les rangs s'ouvrirent devant lui. Au centre, il y avait deux enfants. C'était l'un d'eux qui jouait, assez gauchement d'ailleurs. L'autre, pendant ce temps, disposait sur le sol des corbeilles de joncs tressés et des bouquets de fleurs des champs: séneçons, bruyères et branches de houx.

Dick et Sand… Le Kaw-djer, dans cette tourmente qui avait bouleversé sa vie, les avait oubliés. Au reste, pourquoi eût-il songé à ceux-ci plutôt qu'aux autres enfants de la colonie? Eux aussi, ils avaient une famille, dans la personne du brave et honnête Hartlepool. En vérité, le petit Sand n'avait pas perdu son temps. Moins de trois mois s'étaient écoulés depuis qu'il avait hérité du violon du Fritz Gross, et il fallait qu'il eût de bien rares dispositions musicales pour être arrivé si vite, sans maître, sans conseils, à un pareil résultat. Certes il n'était pas un virtuose, et même il n'y avait pas lieu de croire qu'il le devînt jamais, car la technique élémentaire lui ferait toujours défaut, mais il jouait avec justesse et trouvait, sans paraître les chercher, des mélodies naïves, ingénieuses et charmantes, qu'il engrenait les unes aux autres par des modulations d'une audace heureuse.

Le violon se tut. Dick, ayant terminé son inventaire, prit la parole.

“Honorables Hosteliens! dit-il avec une comique emphase, en redressant de son mieux sa petite taille, mon associé plus spécialement chargé du rayon artistique et musical de la maison Dick and C°, l'illustre maestro Sand, violoniste ordinaire de Sa Majesté le Roi du cap Horn et autres lieux, remercie vos Honneurs de l'attention qu'on a bien voulu lui accorder…”

Dick poussa un ouf! sonore, reprit sa respiration, et repartit de plus belle.

“Le concert, honorables Hosteliens, est gratuit, mais il n'en est pas de même de nos autres marchandises, lesquelles sont, j'ose le dire, plus merveilleuses encore et surtout plus solides. La Maison Dick and C° met aujourd'hui en vente des bouquets et des paniers. Ceux-ci seront de la plus grande commodité pour aller au marché… quand il y en aura un à l'île Hoste! Un cent1, le bouquet!… Un cent, le panier!… Allons!

1 Environ cinq centimes. honorables Hosteliens! la main à la poche, je vous prie!…”

Ce disant, Dick faisait le tour du cercle, en présentant des échantillons de sa marchandise, tandis que, pour chauffer l’enthousiasme, le violon se mettait à chanter de plus belle.

Quant aux spectateurs, ils riaient, et, d’après leurs propos, le Kaw-djer comprenait qu’ils n’assistaient pas pour la première fois à une scène de ce genre. Dick et Sand avaient sans doute l’habitude de parcourir les chantiers aux heures de repos et de faire ce singulier commerce. C’était miracle qu’il ne les eût pas encore aperçus.

Cependant, Dick eut en un clin d’œil vendu bouquets et corbeilles.

“Il ne reste plus qu’un panier, mesdames et messieurs, annonça-t-il. C’est le plus beau! À deux cents, le dernier et le plus beau panier!”

Une ménagère versa les deux cents.

“Merci bien, messieurs et dames! Huit cents!… C’est la fortune!…” s’écria Dick en esquissant un pas de gigue.

La gigue fut arrêtée net. Le Kaw-djer avait saisi le danseur par l’oreille.

“Que veut dire ceci?” interrogea-t-il sévèrement.

D’un coup d’œil sournois, l’enfant s’efforça de deviner l’humeur réelle du Kaw-djer, puis, rassuré sans doute, il répondit avec le plus grand sérieux:

“Nous travaillons, gouverneur.

— C’est ça que tu appelles travailler!” s’écria le Kaw-djer qui lâcha son prisonnier.

Celui-ci en profita pour se retourner complètement, et, regardant le Kaw-djer bien en face:

“Nous nous sommes établis, dit-il en se rengorgeant. Sand joue du violon, et moi je suis marchand de fleurs et de vannerie… Quelquefois, nous faisons des commissions… ou nous vendons des coquillages… Je sais aussi la danse… et des tours… C’est des professions, ça, peut-être, gouverneur!”

Le Kaw-djer sourit malgré lui.

“En effet!… reconnut-il. Mais qu’avez-vous besoin d’argent?

— C’est pour votre subrécargue[1], pour M. John Rame, gouverneur.

— Comment!… s’écria le Kaw-djer, John Rame vous prend votre argent!…

— Il ne nous le prend pas, gouverneur, répliqua Dick, vu que c’est nous qui le donnons pour les rations.”

Cette fois, le Kaw-djer fut tout à fait abasourdi. Il répéta: “Pour les rations?… Vous payez votre nourriture!… N’habitez-vous donc plus avec M. Hartlepool?

— Si, gouverneur, mais ça ne fait rien…”

Dick gonfla ses joues, puis imitant le Kaw-djer lui-même à s’y méprendre malgré la réduction de l’échelle, il dit avec une impayable gravité:

[1] Comptable qui existe parfois à bord des navires.

“Le travail est la loi!”

Sourire ou se fâcher?… Le Kaw-djer prit le parti de sourire. Aucune hésitation n’était possible, en effet. Dick n’avait évidemment nulle intention de railler. Dès lors, pourquoi blâmer ces deux enfants si ardents à se “débrouiller”, alors que tant de leurs aînés avaient une telle propension à s’en reposer sur autrui.

Il demanda:

“Votre “travail” vous rapporte-t-il au moins de quoi vivre?

— Je crois bien! affirma Dick avec importance. Des douze cents, par jour, quelquefois quinze, voilà ce qu’il nous rapporte, notre travail, gouverneur!… Avec ça, un homme peut vivre, ajouta-t-il le plus sérieusement du monde.”

Un homme!… Les auditeurs partirent d’un éclat de rire, Dick, offensé, regarda les rieurs.

“Qu’est-ce qu’ils ont, ces idiots-là?” murmura-t-il entre ses dents d’un air vexé.

Le Kaw-djer le ramena à la question.

“Quinze cents, ce n’est pas mal, en effet, reconnut-il. Vous gagneriez davantage cependant, si vous aidiez les maçons ou les terrassiers.

— Impossible, gouverneur, répliqua Dick vivement.

— Pourquoi impossible? insista le Kaw-djer.

— Sand est trop petit. Il n’aurait pas la force, expliqua Dick, dont la voix exprima une véritable tendresse qui ne laissait pas d’être nuancée d’un soupçon de dédain.

— Et toi?

— Oh!… moi!…”

Il fallait entendre ce ton!… Lui, il aurait la force, assurément. C’eût été lui faire injure que d’en douter.

“Alors?…

— Je ne sais pas… balbutia Dick tout songeur. Ça ne me dit rien…”

Puis, dans une explosion:

“Moi, gouverneur, j’aime la liberté!”

Le Kaw-djer considérait avec intérêt le petit bonhomme, qui, tête nue, les cheveux emmêlés par la brise, se tenait droit devant lui, sans baisser ses yeux brillants. Il se reconnaissait dans cette nature généreuse mais excessive. Lui aussi avait par-dessus tout aimé la liberté, lui aussi s’était montré impatient de toute entrave, et la contrainte lui avait paru si haïssable qu’il avait prêté à l’humanité entière ses répugnances. L’expérience lui avait démontré son erreur, en lui donnant la preuve que les hommes, loin d’avoir l’insatiable besoin de liberté qu’il leur supposait, peuvent aimer, au contraire, un joug qui les fait vivre, et qu’il est bon parfois que les enfants grands et petits aient un maître.

Il répliqua:

“La liberté, il faut d’abord la gagner, mon garçon, en se rendant utile aux autres et à soi-même, et, pour cela, il est nécessaire de commencer par obéir. Vous irez trouver Hartlepool de ma part, et vous lui direz qu’il vous emploie selon vos forces. Je veillerai, d’ailleurs, à ce que Sand puisse continuer à travailler sa musique. Allez, mes enfants!”

Cette rencontre attira l’attention du Kaw-djer sur un problème qu’il importait de résoudre. Les enfants pullulaient dans la colonie. Désœuvrés, loin de la surveillance des parents, ils vagabondaient du matin au soir. Pour fonder un peuple, il fallait préparer les générations futures à recueillir la succession de leurs devanciers. La création d’une école s’imposait à bref délai.

Mais on ne saurait tout faire à la fois. Quelle que fût l’importance de cette question, il en remit l’examen à son retour d’une tournée qu’il désirait accomplir dans l’intérieur de l’île. Depuis qu’il avait assumé la charge du pouvoir, il projetait ce voyage d’inspection, que de plus pressants soucis l’avaient forcé à remettre de jour en jour. Maintenant, il pouvait s’éloigner sans imprudence. La machine avait reçu une impulsion suffisante pour fonctionner toute seule pendant quelque temps.

Deux jours après l’arrivée de Karroly, il allait enfin partir, quand un incident l’obligea à un nouveau retard. Un matin, son attention fut attirée par le bruit d’une altercation violente. S’étant dirigé du côté d’où venait le vacarme, il aperçut une centaine de femmes discutant avec animation devant une clôture de forts madriers qui leur barrait la route. Le Kaw-djer ne comprit pas tout d’abord. Cette clôture, c’était celle qui limitait l’enclos de Patterson, mais elle ne lui avait pas semblé, les jours précédents, s’avancer aussi loin.

Il fut bientôt renseigné.

Patterson, qui, dès le printemps précédent, s’était adonné à la culture maraîchère, avait vu, cette année, ses efforts couronnés de succès. Travailleur infatigable, il avait obtenu une abondante récolte, et, depuis le renversement de Beauval, les autres habitants de Libéria s’approvisionnaient couramment chez lui de légumes frais.

Son succès était dû, pour une grande part, à l’emplacement qu’il avait choisi. Au bord même de la rivière, il y trouvait de l’eau en abondance. C’est précisément cette situation privilégiée qui était cause du conflit actuel.

Les cultures de Patterson, étendues sur un espace de deux ou trois cents mètres, commandaient le seul point où la rivière fût accessible, dans le voisinage immédiat de Libéria. En aval, elle était bordée, sur la rive droite, par une plaine marécageuse qui en interdisait l’approche jusqu’au ponceau établi près de l’embouchure, c’est-à-dire à plus de quinze cents mètres dans l’Ouest. En amont, la berge brusquement relevée tombait, pendant plus d’un mille, à pic dans le courant.

Les ménagères de Libéria étaient donc dans l’obligation de traverser l’enclos de Patterson pour aller puiser l’eau nécessaire aux besoins de leurs ménages, et c’est pourquoi, jusqu’alors, le propriétaire de cet enclos avait ménagé un hiatus dans la barrière qui le délimitait. Mais, à la fin, il s’était avisé que ce passage incessant à travers sa propriété était attentatoire à ses droits et causait de multiples dommages. La nuit précédente, il avait donc, avec l’aide de Long, barré solidement l’ouverture, d’où grave déception et grande colère des ménagères venues de bon matin chercher de l’eau.

Le calme se rétablit quand on aperçut le Kaw-djer, et l’on s’en rapporta à sa justice.

Patiemment, il écouta les arguments pour et contre, puis il rendit sa sentence. À la surprise générale, elle fut favorable à Patterson. À la vérité, le Kaw-djer décida que la clôture devait être abattue sur-le-champ et qu'une voie de vingt mètres de large devait être rendue à la circulation publique, mais il reconnut les droits de l'occupant à une indemnité pour la parcelle de terrain cultivé dont il était privé dans l'intérêt public. Quant à l'importance de cette indemnité, elle serait fixée dans les formes régulières. Il y avait des juges à l'île Hoste. Patterson était invité à s'adresser à eux.

La cause fut plaidée le jour même. Ce fut la première que Beauval eut à juger. Après débat contradictoire, il condamna l'État hostelien à payer une indemnité de cinquante dollars. Cette somme fut aussitôt versée à l'Irlandais qui ne chercha pas à dissimuler sa satisfaction.

L'incident fut diversement commenté, mais, en général, on goûta fort la manière dont il avait été réglé. On eut le sentiment que nul ne pourrait désormais être dépouillé de ce qu'il possédait, et la confiance publique en fut énormément accrue. C'est ce résultat qu'avait voulu le Kaw-djer.

Cette affaire terminée, celui-ci se mit en route. Pendant trois semaines, il sillonna l'île en tous sens, jusqu'à son extrémité Nord-Ouest, jusqu'aux pointes orientales des presqu'îles Dumas et Pasteur. L'une après l'autre, il visita toutes les exploitations, sans en omettre une seule, tant celles qui avaient été volontairement délaissées au cours du précédent hiver que celles dont les tenanciers avaient été chassés au moment des troubles.

De son enquête, il résulta finalement que cent soixante et un colons, formant quarante-deux familles, séjournaient encore dans l'intérieur. Ces quarante-deux familles pouvaient toutes être considérées comme ayant réussi dans leur exploitation, mais à des degrés très inégaux. Les unes devaient borner leur espoir à assurer leur propre subsistance, tandis que d’autres, les mieux pourvues en garçons robustes, auraient pu agrandir considérablement leurs cultures.

De vingt-huit familles, comptant cent dix-sept autres colons, contraintes, au moment des troubles, de se réfugier à Libéria, les exploitations, aujourd’hui très compromises, semblaient également avoir été prospères au moment où on avait dû les abandonner.

Enfin, cent quatre-vingt-dix-sept tentatives d’exploitation n’avaient abouti qu’à un échec. De leurs propriétaires, une quarantaine étaient morts, et le surplus, au nombre de plus de sept cent quatre-vingts, avait successivement cherché refuge à la côte au cours de l’hiver.

Les renseignements ne manquaient pas au Kaw-djer. Les colons se mettaient avec empressement à sa disposition. L’enthousiasme était unanime, quand on apprenait la nouvelle organisation de la colonie, et cet enthousiasme croissait encore à mesure qu’il faisait part de ses projets. Lui parti, on reprenait le travail avec une ardeur décuplée par l’espoir.

De tout ce qu’il observait, de tout ce qu’il entendait, le Kaw-djer prit soigneusement note. En même temps, il relevait un plan grossier des diverses exploitations et de leurs situations respectives.

Ces documents, il les utilisa dès son retour. En quelques jours il dressa une carte de l’île, carte approximative au point de vue géographique, mais d’une exactitude plus que suffisante au point de vue des exploitations agricoles qui se limitaient les unes les autres, puis il répartit la moitié de l’île entre cent soixante-cinq familles qu’il choisit sans appel, et auxquelles il délivra des concessions régulières.

Donner à la propriété cette base solide, c’était accomplir une véritable révolution. Au régime du bon plaisir, il substituait la légalité, à la possession de fait, un titre inattaquable par celui-là même qui l’avait délivré. Aussi ces simples feuilles de papier furent-elles reçues par leurs bénéficiaires avec autant de joie peut-être que les champs qu’elles représentaient.

Jusqu’alors ils avaient vécu instables, dans l’incertitude du lendemain. Ces feuilles de papier changeaient tout. Cette terre était à eux. Ils pourraient la léguer à leurs enfants. Ils se fixaient, prenaient racine, et devenaient vraiment de colons, des Hosteliens.

Le Kaw-djer commença par consolider les droits des quarante-deux familles qui étaient demeurées attachées à la glèbe et par rétablir dans les leurs les vingt-huit exploitants qui ne l’avaient quittée que sous la menace des émeutiers. Cela fait, il sélectionna entre toutes quatre-vingt-quinze autres familles, qui lui parurent dignes d’en appeler de leur échec. Il ne s’occupa aucunement des autres.

C’était de l’arbitraire. Ce ne fut pas le seul. Si l’égalité n’eut rien à voir dans la répartition des concessions, elle ne fut pas mieux respectée au point de vue de leur importance. À ceux-ci le Kaw-djer laissa juste le terrain sur lequel ils s’étaient d’abord établis, tandis qu’il diminuait la surface attribuée à ceux-là. En même temps, il augmentait considérablement certaines exploitations. Dans toutes ses décisions, il n’obéit qu’à une unique loi, l’intérêt supérieur de la colonie. À ceux qui avaient montré le plus d’intelligence, de force et de vaillance, les concessions les plus vastes. Rien au contraire à ceux dont il avait pu constater l’incapacité, et qu’il condamnait sans appel à rester des prolétaires et des salariés jusqu’à la mort.

Le salariat, en effet, allait nécessairement faire son apparition sur l’île Hoste. Quelques exploitations, celles par exemple des quatre familles dont les Rivière formaient le centre, étaient d’une telle étendue et d’une telle prospérité, qu’elles eussent suffi à occuper plusieurs centaines d’ouvriers. L’ouvrage ne manquerait donc pas à ceux qui préféreraient le travail des champs à celui de la ville.

Pour la deuxième fois, Libéria se dépeupla. Son titre de concession à peine en poche, chaque titulaire partait avec les siens, bien pourvu de vivres, dont la provision pourrait, — d’ailleurs, le Kaw-djer l’affirmait — être ultérieurement renouvelée. Quelques-uns de ceux qui n’avaient pas été favorisés les imitèrent, et allèrent louer leurs bras dans la campagne.

Le 10 janvier, la population fut réduite à quatre cents habitants environ, dont deux cent cinquante hommes en âge de travailler. Les autres, soit un peu moins de six cents, y compris les femmes et les enfants, étaient maintenant disséminés dans l’intérieur. Ainsi que le Kaw-djer avait pu s’en assurer au cours de son voyage, la population totale n’atteignait plus en effet le millier. Le surplus était mort, dont près de deux cents dans le seul hiver qui venait de finir. Encore quelques hécatombes de ce genre, et l’île Hoste redeviendrait un désert.

L’avancement du travail se ressentit de la diminution du nombre des travailleurs. Le Kaw-djer ne parut pas s’en soucier. On comprit bientôt sa tranquillité. Quelques jours plus tard, le 17 janvier, un vapeur mouillait en face du Bourg-Neuf. C’était un grand navire de deux mille tonneaux. Dès le lendemain son déchargement commençait, et les Libériens émerveillés virent défiler d’incalculables richesses. Ce fut d’abord du bétail, des moutons, des chevaux et jusqu’à deux chiens de berger. Puis, ce fut du matériel agricole: charrues, herses, batteuses, faneuses; des semences de toute nature; des vivres en quantité considérable, des voitures et des chariots; des métaux: plomb, fer, acier, zinc, étain, etc.; du petit outillage: marteaux, scies, burins, limes, et cent autres; des machines-outils: forge, perceuse, fraiseuse, tours à bois et à métaux, et beaucoup d'autre choses encore.

En outre, le steamer ne contenait pas que ces objets matériels. Deux cents hommes, composés par moitié de terrassiers et d'ouvriers de bâtiment avaient été amenés par lui. Quand le déchargement du navire fut terminé, ils se joignirent aux colons, et les travaux menés par quatre cent cinquante bras robustes recommencèrent à avancer rapidement.

En quelques jours la route du Bourg-Neuf fut terminée. Pendant que les maçons s'occupaient, les uns, de la construction du pont, les autres, de celle des maisons, on amorça vers l'intérieur une seconde route qui, divisée en nombreuses branches, serpenterait plus tard entre les exploitations, et porterait la vie à travers l'île, artères et veines de ce grand corps jusque-là inerte.

Les Libériens n'étaient pas au bout de leurs surprises. Le 30 janvier, un second steamer arriva. Il provenait de Buenos-Ayres et apportait dans ses flancs, outre des objets analogues aux précédents, une cargaison importante destinée au bazar Rhodes. Il y avait de tout dans cette cargaison, jusqu'à des futilités: plumes, dentelles, rubans, dont pourrait désormais se parer la coquetterie des Hosteliennes.

Deux cents nouveaux travailleurs débarquèrent de ce deuxième steamer, et deux cents encore d'un troisième qui mouilla en rade le 15 février. À dater de ce jour, on disposa de plus de huit cents bras. Le Kaw-djer estima ce nombre suffisant pour commencer la réalisation d'un grand projet. À l'ouest de l'embouchure de la rivière, furent jetées les premières assises d'une digue, qui, dans un avenir prochain, transformerait l’anse du Bourg-Neuf en un port vaste et sûr.

Ainsi peu à peu, sous l’effort de ces centaines de bras que dirigeait une volonté, la ville se bâtissait, se redressait, s’assainissait, se vivifiait. Ainsi peu à peu, surgissait du néant, la cité.

CHAPITRE III

III

L’attentat

“Ça ne peut pas durer comme ça!” s’écria Lewis Dorick, que ses compagnons approuvèrent d’un geste énergique.

La journée de travail finie, ils se promenaient tous les quatre, Dorick, les frères Moore et Sirdey, au sud de Libéria, sur les premières pentes des montagnes détachées de la chaîne centrale de la presqu’île Hardy, qui allaient plus loin se perdre dans la mer en formant l’ossature de la pointe de l’Est.

“Non! ça ne peut pas durer comme ça! répéta Lewis Dorick avec une colère croissante. Nous ne sommes pas des hommes, si nous ne mettons pas à la raison ce sauvage qui prétend nous faire la loi!

— Il vous traite comme des chiens, renchérit

Sirdey. On est moins que rien… “Faites ci”… “Faites ça”, qu’il dit, sans même vous regarder… On le dégoûte, quoi, ce peau-rouge-là!

— À quel titre nous commande-t-il? interrogea rageusement Dorick. Qui est-ce qui l’a nommé gouverneur?

— Pas moi, dit Sirdey.

— Ni moi, dit Fred Moore.

— Ni moi, dit son frère William.

— Ni vous, ni personne, conclut Dorick. Pas si bête, le gaillard!… Il n’a pas attendu qu’on lui donne la place. Il l’a prise.

— Ça n’est pas légal, protesta doctoralement Fred Moore.

— Légal!… Parbleu! il s’en moque bien! riposta Dorick. Pourquoi se gênerait-il avec des moutons qui tendent le dos pour qu’on les tonde?… A-t-il demandé notre avis pour rétablir la propriété? Avant, on était tous pareils. Maintenant, il y a des riches et des pauvres.

— C’est nous, les pauvres, constata mélancoliquement Sirdey… Il y a trois jours, ajouta-t-il avec indignation, il m’a annoncé que ma journée serait réduite de dix cents…

— Comme ça?… Sans donner de raisons?…

— Si. Il prétend que je ne travaille pas assez… J’en fais toujours autant que lui, qui se promène du matin au soir les mains dans les poches… Dix cents de rabais sur une journée d’un demi-dollar!… S’il compte sur moi pour les travaux du port, il peut attendre!…

— Tu crèveras de faim, répliqua Dorick d’un ton glacial.

— Misère!… jura Sirdey en serrant les poings.

— Avec moi, dit William Moore, c’est il y a quinze jours qu’il a fait ses embarras. Il a trouvé que je rouspétais trop fort contre John Rame, son garde-magasin. Paraît que je dérangeais Monsieur… Si vous aviez vu ça!… Un empereur!… Faut payer leur camelote et dire encore merci!

— Moi, dit à son tour Fred Moore, c’était la semaine dernière… sous prétexte que je me battais avec un collègue… On n’a donc plus le droit maintenant de se battre de bonne amitié?… Non, mais, ce que ses flics m’ont empoigné!… Un peu plus ils me faisaient coucher au poste!

— On est des domestiques, quoi! conclut Sirdey.

— Des esclaves”, gronda William Moore.

Ce sujet, ils le traitaient pour la centième fois ce soir-là. C’était le thème presque exclusif de leurs conversations quotidiennes.

En édictant, puis en imposant la loi du travail, le Kaw-djer avait nécessairement lésé un certain nombre d’intérêts particuliers, ceux notamment des paresseux qui eussent préféré vivre aux frais d’autrui. De là, grandes colères.

Autour de Dorick gravitaient tous les mécontents. Sa bande et lui-même avaient inutilement essayé de continuer les errements passés. Les anciennes victimes, jadis si dociles, avaient pris conscience de leurs droits en même temps que de leurs devoirs, et la certitude d’être au besoin soutenus avait donné des griffes à ces agneaux. Les exploiteurs en avaient donc été pour leurs tentatives d’intimidation et s’étaient vu contraints de gagner, comme les autres, leur vie par le travail.

Aussi étaient-ils furieux et se répandaient-ils en récriminations, par lesquelles se soulageait et s’entretenait à la fois leur exaspération grandissante.

Jusqu’ici, à vrai dire, tout s’était passé en paroles. Mais, ce soir-là, les choses devaient tourner d’autre sorte. Les plaintes cent fois ressassées allaient se muer en actes, les colères amassées conduire aux résolutions les plus graves.

Dorick avait écouté ses compagnons sans les interrompre. Ceux-ci s'étaient tournés vers lui, comme s'ils eussent fait appel à son témoignage et quêté son approbation.

“Tout ça, ce sont des mots, dit-il d'une voix mordante. Vous êtes des esclaves qui méritez l'esclavage. Si vous aviez du cœur au ventre, il y a longtemps que vous seriez libres. Vous êtes mille et vous supportez la tyrannie d'un seul!

— Qu'est-ce que tu veux qu'on fasse? objecta piteusement Sirdey. Il est le plus fort.

— Allons donc! répliqua Dorick. Sa force, c'est la faiblesse des poules mouillées qui l'entourent.”

Fred Moore hocha la tête d'un air sceptique.

“Possible!… dit-il. N'empêche qu'il y en a beaucoup de son bord. Nous ne pouvons cependant pas, à nous quatre…

— Imbécile!… interrompit durement Dorick. Ce n'est pas le Kaw-djer, c'est le gouverneur qu'ils soutiennent. On le conspuerait, s'il était renversé. Si j'étais à sa place, on serait à plat ventre devant moi, comme on l'est devant lui.

— Je ne dis pas non, accorda William Moore un peu goguenard. Mais, voilà le hic, c'est lui qui tient la place, et pas toi.

— Je ne t’ai pas attendu pour le savoir, répliqua Dorick pâle de colère. C’est précisément la question. Je ne dis qu’une chose, c’est que nous n’avons pas à nous occuper du tas de caniches qui suivent le Kaw-djer et qui marcheraient aussi bien derrière son successeur. C’est le chef seul qui les rend redoutables, c’est le chef seul qui nous gêne… Eh bien! supprimons-le!”

Il y eut un instant de silence. Les trois compagnons de Dorick échangèrent un regard peureux.

“Le supprimer! dit enfin Sirdey. Comme tu y vas!… Ne compte pas sur moi pour ce travail-là!”

Lewis Dorick haussa les épaules.

“On se passera de toi, voilà tout, dit-il avec mépris.

— Et de moi, ajouta William Moore.

— Moi, j’en suis, affirma énergiquement son frère, qui n’avait pas oublié l’humiliation que le Kaw-djer lui avait autrefois infligée. Seulement… voilà… ça ne me paraît pas commode…

— Très facile, au contraire, répliqua Dorick.

— Comment?

— C’est bien simple… «

Sirdey intervint.

“Ta! ta! ta!… Vous allez!… Vous allez!… Qu’est-ce que vous ferez, quand le Kaw-djer sera… supprimé, comme dit Dorick?

— Ce que nous ferons?…

— Oui… Un homme de moins, c’est un homme de moins, pas plus. Il restera les autres. Dorick a beau dire, je ne suis pas si sûr que ça qu’ils marcheraient avec nous.

— Ils marcheront, affirma Dorick.

— Hum! fit Sirdey sceptique. Pas tous, en tous cas.

— Pourquoi pas?… La veille, on n’a personne, et, le lendemain, on a tout le monde… D’ailleurs, pas besoin de les avoir tous. Il suffit de quelques-uns pour donner le mouvement. Le reste suit.

— Et ces quelques-uns?…

— On les a.

— Hum!… fit de nouveau Sirdey.

— Il y a nous quatre, d’abord, dit Dorick que cette discussion échauffait.

— Ça ne fait que quatre, observa placidement

Sirdey.

— Et Kennedy?… Peut-on le compter, celui-là?…

— Oui, accorda Sirdey. Cinq.

— Et Jackson, énuméra Dorick, Smirnoff, Reede, Blumenfeldt, Loreley?

— Dix.

— Il y en a d’autres. C’est un compte à faire.

— Comptons alors, proposa Sirdey.

— Soit!” accorda Dorick en tirant de sa poche un crayon et un calepin.

Tous quatre s’assirent sur le sol, et, à tête reposée, firent le dénombrement des forces dont ils croyaient pouvoir disposer, après la disparition de l’homme, qui seul, d’après Dorick, rendait redoutable la puissance éparse de la foule. Chacun citait des noms, qu’on n’inscrivait sur le carnet qu’après discussion approfondie.

Du point élevé qu’ils occupaient, un vaste panorama se développait sous leurs yeux. La rivière, venue de l’Ouest, passait à leurs pieds, puis, se recourbant, repartait dans le Nord-Ouest, c’est-à-dire presque parallèlement à elle-même, vers le Bourg-Neuf où elle se jetait dans la mer. Au coude de la rivière, Libéria s’étendait, déployée comme une carte, puis, au-delà, la plaine marécageuse qui séparait la ville du rivage.

On était au 25 février 1884. Depuis le jour où le Kaw-djer avait pris le pouvoir, plus de dix-huit mois s’étaient écoulés. L’œuvre accomplie pendant ce court espace de temps tenait réellement du prodige.

De nouveaux contingents d’ouvriers comblant perpétuellement les vides laissés par ceux qui ne pouvaient se faire à l’existence de l’île Hoste, le nombre des habitants de Libéria s’était encore accru et dépassait le millier. Mais les maisons, en bois pour la plupart, s’étaient multipliées elles aussi et suffisaient à abriter tout le monde. Limitée à l’Ouest par la rivière, la ville s’était largement développée dans la direction opposée et vers le Sud.

C’était une ville et non plus un campement, en effet. Rien n’y manquait maintenant de ce qui est nécessaire ou seulement agréable à la vie. Boulangers, épiciers, bouchers, assuraient l’alimentation publique. Des produits qu’ils mettaient en vente, la campagne hostelienne fournissait déjà sa part, et cette part représentait largement la consommation des producteurs. Dès l’année suivante, selon toute probabilité, l’île se suffirait à elle-même, en fait de froment, légumes et viandes de boucherie, en attendant le jour prochain où on pourrait passer de l’importation à l’exportation.

Les enfants ne vagabondaient plus. Une école avait été ouverte, dont M. et Mme Rhodes assumaient alternativement la direction.

Après toute une année d’absence, Harry Rhodes était revenu au mois d’octobre précédent, en rapportant avec lui une quantité considérable de marchandises. Aussitôt de retour, il avait eu une longue conférence avec le Kaw-djer, puis il s’était consacré à ses affaires, sans donner aucune explication sur la durée insolite de son voyage.

Le temps que M. et Mme Rhodes consacraient à l’école n’était aucunement préjudiciable au bazar, dont Edward et Clary, aidés de Tullia et Graziella Ceroni, s’occupaient activement, et dont le succès allait grandissant.

Un médecin, le Dr Samuel Arvidson, et un pharmacien étaient venus de Valparaiso s’installer à Libéria et y faisaient des affaires d’or. Un magasin de confections et un magasin de chaussures s’étaient ouverts et prospéraient. Ceux des émigrants qui, une première fois, avaient essayé de s’établir à leur compte dans leurs parties, avaient recommencé leur tentative avec un meilleur résultat. Libéria possédait plusieurs entrepreneurs employant un assez grand nombre d’ouvriers: un maçon, un charpentier, deux menuisiers, un tourneur sur bois, deux serruriers, dont l’un, très sérieusement outillé, eût mérité le qualificatif de constructeur.

À proximité de la ville, vers le Sud, non loin de l’endroit où stationnaient alors Lewis Dorick et ses compagnons, une briqueterie s’était ouverte et produisait des briques d’excellente qualité. Vers l’Est, dans les contreforts des montagnes de la pointe, on avait découvert des gisements considérables de ces corps si abondants dans la nature: le sulfate et le carbonate de chaux. On ne manquait, par conséquent, ni de plâtre, ni de chaux, et même il s’était trouvé un audacieux pour entreprendre, par des moyens rudimentaires, la fabrication du ciment, dont le port en construction absorbait de grandes quantités.

La large route qui passait au bas de la pente était celle-là même par où était venu le quatuor de mécontents, jusqu’au moment où ceux-ci l’avaient quittée pour un raidillon escaladant la montagne. Cette route, qui épousait toutes les sinuosités de la rivière disparaissait dans l’Ouest, un kilomètre plus loin, entre deux collines. Mais ils n’ignoraient pas, et personne n’ignorait qu’elle se prolongeait au-delà et qu’on y travaillait sans relâche. Deux mois auparavant elle avait atteint, puis dépassé l’exploitation des Rivière, et depuis lors elle continuait, en se ramifiant sans cesse, à se dérouler vers le Nord.

Une autre route, complètement achevée, traversait la rivière sur un solide pont de pierre et réunissait la capitale à son faubourg.

Ce dernier n’avait subi que peu de changements, mais la digue soudée au rivage gagnait progressivement sur la mer. Déjà, elle abritait contre les vents d’Est l’anse du Bourg-Neuf, qu’elle transformait par degrés en un port vaste et tranquille. Ce jour-là précisément, on avait commencé à battre des pieux, première armature d’un batardeau destiné à l’édification d’un quai, le long duquel les navires pourraient un jour s’amarrer en eau profonde.

Ils n’avaient pas attendu l’achèvement de ce quai, ni celui de la digue, pour trafiquer à l’île Hoste. L’année précédente, il en était venu trois, au compte exclusif du Kaw-djer. Cette année, il en était venu sept, dont deux seulement affrétés par l’administration de la Colonie, le voyage des cinq autres étant motivé par des opérations privées et des entreprises individuelles.

En ce moment, un grand voilier stationnait en face du Bourg-Neuf, à demi chargé des planches débitées par la scierie des Rivière, tandis qu’un autre voilier, qui, son plein fait de la même marchandise, avait levé l’ancre quelques heures plus tôt, disparaissait derrière la pointe de l’Est.

Tout, dans le spectacle offert à Lewis Dorick et à ses compagnons, exprimait éloquemment la prospérité grandissante de la Colonie. Mais, ce spectacle éloquent, aucun d’eux ne voulait le voir ni l’entendre. Il leur était familier, d’ailleurs, et l’accoutumance en diminuait beaucoup la valeur. Des changements progressifs passent aisément inaperçus, et, ce qu’ils découvraient, ils l’avaient vu naître jour par jour. Même s’ils se fussent reportés par la pensée au lendemain du naufrage, dont près de trois ans les séparaient alors, se fussent-ils rendu compte du progrès accompli? Ce n’est pas sûr. Habitués à ce spectacle, ils l’eussent, sans doute, trouvé naturel, et il leur eût semblé que les choses avaient toujours été ainsi.

Pour le moment, du reste, ils avaient d’autres pensées en tête. Soigneusement ils énuméraient les habitants de Libéria et pointaient les noms au passage.

“Je ne vois plus personne, dit enfin Sirdey. Où en sommes-nous?”

Dorick compta les noms inscrits sur le carnet.

“Cent dix-sept, dit-il.

— Sur mille!… acheva Sirdey.

— Et après?… répliqua Dorick. Cent dix-sept, c’est quelque chose. Croyez-vous que le Kaw-djer en ait davantage, j’entends des gens décidés, prêts à tout? Les autres sont des moutons qui suivront n’importe qui.”

Sirdey ne répondit pas, mais il ne paraissait pas convaincu.

“Et puis, assez causé, trancha violemment Dorick. Nous sommes quatre. Mettons la chose aux voix.

— Moi, s’écria Fred Moore en brandissant son gros poing, j’en ai assez. Il arrivera ce qui arrivera. Je vote pour qu’on marche.

— Moi de même, dit son frère.

— Avec moi, ça fait trois voix… Et toi, Sirdey?…

— Je ferai comme les autres, dit sans enthousiasme l’ancien cuisinier. Mais…”

Dorick lui coupa la parole:

“Pas de mais. Ce qui est voté est voté.

— Il faut bien cependant, insista Sirdey sans se laisser intimider, convenir des moyens. Se débarrasser du Kaw-djer, c’est bientôt dit. Reste à savoir comment.

— Ah!… si nous avions des armes… un fusil… un revolver… un pistolet seulement!… s’écria Fred Moore.

— Mais voilà, on n’en a pas, dit Sirdey avec flegme.

— Le couteau?… suggéra William Moore.

— Excellent pour te faire pincer, le couteau, mon vieux, répliqua Sirdey. Tu sais bien que le Kaw-djer est gardé comme un roi… Sans compter qu’il est de taille à donner du fil à retordre, quand même on s’y mettrait à quatre.”

Fred Moore fronça les sourcils et serra les dents, en ponctuant cette mimique d’un geste violent. Sirdey avait raison. Il connaissait la poigne du Kaw-djer et se rappelait combien peu son grand corps avait pesé entre ses mains.

“J’ai mieux que ça à vous offrir, dit tout à coup Dorick au milieu du silence qui avait suivi la réplique de Sirdey.”

Ses compagnons se tournèrent vers lui, l’interrogeant du regard.

“La poudre.

— La poudre?…” répétèrent-ils tous trois sans comprendre.

L’un d’eux demanda:

“Qu’en ferons-nous?

— Une bombe… Ah! le Kaw-djer est, dit-on, un anarchiste repenti. Eh bien! nous emploierons contre lui l’arme des anarchistes.”

Les auditeurs de Dorick ne semblaient pas très emballés.

“Qui est-ce qui la fera, cette bombe? bougonna Fred Moore. Pas moi, toujours.

— Moi, dit Dorick. Sans compter que ça ne sera peut-être pas la peine. J’ai une idée, et, si elle est bonne, le Kaw-djer ne sautera pas tout seul. Hartlepool et les hommes qui seront dans le poste sauteront en même temps… Autant d’ennemis en moins que nous aurons le lendemain.”

Les trois hommes regardèrent leur camarade avec admiration. Sirdey lui-même fut gagné.

“Comme ça!… murmura-t-il à bout d’arguments contraires. Il se ravisa.

— Sapristi! s’écria-t-il. Nous parlons de poudre comme si nous en avions.

— Il y en a dans l’entrepôt, répliqua Dorick. Nous n’avons qu’à la prendre.

— Tu en parles à ton aise!… riposta Sirdey qui jouait décidément le rôle de l’opposition. Avec ça que c’est commode!… Qui est-ce qui se chargera de la besogne?

— Pas moi, dit Dorick.

— Naturellement! approuva Sirdey d’un ton railleur.

— Non, expliqua Dorick, je ne suis pas assez fort. Pas toi non plus: tu es trop poltron. Et pas davantage Fred Moore ni William: ils sont trop brutaux et trop maladroits.

— Qui, alors?

— Kennedy.”

Personne ne fit d’objection. Oui, Kennedy, ancien matelot, leste, débrouillard, habile de ses doigts, apte à tous les métiers, pouvait réussir là où d’autres échoueraient. Le choix de Dorick était bon.

Celui-ci interrompit leurs réflexions.

“Voilà qu’il se fait tard, dit-il; si vous voulez, rendez-vous ici demain à la même heure. Kennedy sera là. Nous nous expliquerons, et nous conviendrons de tout.”

En approchant des premières maisons, ils estimèrent prudent de s’écarter les uns des autres, et, le lendemain, ils prirent une précaution semblable pour se rendre à l’endroit convenu. Chacun sortit de la ville isolément, et c’est seulement quand ils furent hors de vue qu’ils laissèrent peu à peu décroître les distances qui les séparaient.

Ils étaient cinq, ce soir-là, Kennedy, averti par Dorick, s’étant joint au quatuor.

“Il est des nôtres”, annonça Dorick en frappant sur l’épaule du matelot.

On échangea des poignées de mains, puis, sans perdre de temps, on examina le moyen d’exécuter le projet de la veille. La conversation fut longue. Il faisait nuit noire, quand les cinq hommes commencèrent à redescendre vers la ville. Leur accord était complet. On allait agir le soir même.

Bien que l’obscurité fût profonde, ils se divisèrent comme ils l’avaient fait le jour précédent. Laissant entre eux un intervalle de quelques minutes, ils quittèrent la route, s’engagèrent à travers champs et contournèrent les maisons par le Sud jusqu’à la rivière, puis, revenant sur leurs pas, ils pénétrèrent en ville, en longeant l’enclos de Patterson. Tout était silencieux. Sans être vus, ils arrivèrent jusqu’au gouvernement, où dormaient en ce moment le Kaw-djer, Hartlepool et les mousses. À l’ombre d’une maison, leur groupe se reforma, invisible. Là, ils s’immobilisèrent, l’oreille tendue, leurs yeux fouillant la nuit…

Ils avaient devant eux la porte du Tribunal. Du poste de police, situé sur la façade opposée, de faibles bruits leur parvenaient. Là-bas, des hommes veillaient. Mais, de ce côté, il n’y avait personne. La rue était silencieuse et déserte.

Pourquoi eût-on gardé la salle du Tribunal? Elle ne contenait rien qu’une table, un siège grossier, et quelques bancs fixés dans le plancher.

Lorsqu’ils furent bien certains que la solitude était complète, Dorick et Kennedy quittèrent leur abri et traversèrent rapidement l’espace découvert. En un instant, ils atteignirent la porte du Tribunal, que Kennedy entreprit de forcer, tandis que Dorick faisait le guet. Pendant ce temps, les frères Moore, laissant Sirdey à la place qu’ils occupaient tous auparavant, s’éloignaient à leur tour, l’un à gauche, l’autre à droite, pour s’arrêter au bout de quelques pas. D’où ils étaient maintenant, ils pouvaient surveiller, celui-ci, la façade principale et la place ménagée devant le gouvernement, celui-là, le mur sans issue, qui, au Sud, clôturait la prison, et la rue séparant ce mur des autres maisons. Kennedy était bien gardé. Au moindre danger, il serait prévenu à temps pour s’enfuir.

Aucun incident ne survint. L’ancien matelot put travailler tout à son aise. Travail facile au surplus, car ce n’était pas une serrure bien solide qui fermait la porte du Tribunal. Celle-ci céda aux premières pesées et s’ouvrit béante sur les ténèbres intérieures.

Kennedy entra, laissant Dorick en surveillance au dehors.

On ne voyait goutte dans la salle. Kennedy frotta une allumette et alluma une bougie. Il savait où il allait, Dorick lui ayant soigneusement fait sa leçon. Des trois cloisons limitant la pièce dans laquelle il pénétrait, celle de droite séparait le Tribunal de la prison; celle de gauche était commune avec le gouvernement proprement dit qui servait en même temps de domicile au Kaw-djer. Derrière celle qui lui faisait face, c’était l’entrepôt.

Kennedy traversa obliquement la salle, jusqu’à l’encoignure formée par la jonction de cette dernière cloison avec celle de la prison. La prison étant vide pour l’instant, personne, par conséquent, ne pourrait l’entendre. Là, il fit halte et, promenant sa bougie contre la paroi, examina la manière dont il convenait de procéder.

Il sourit joyeusement. Percer cette cloison ne serait qu’un jeu. Bâtie dès les premiers jours qui avaient suivi le coup d’État du Kaw-djer, à un moment où l’essentiel était d’aller vite, cette cloison ne constituait pas un bien sérieux obstacle. Elle était faite de madriers verticaux encastrés à leurs extrémités dans le plafond et dans le plancher, et laissant entre eux des intervalles qu’on avait remplis avec des pierrailles noyées dans un mortier de qualité médiocre et dont la dureté n’était pas des plus grandes. Le couteau de Kennedy entama sans peine ce mortier, et peu à peu les pierres descellées sortirent de leurs alvéoles. Il n’y avait à craindre que le bruit de leur chute. C’est pourquoi, dès qu’elles étaient ébranlées, Kennedy les arrachait une à une et les déposait doucement sur le sol.

En une heure il eut pratiqué un trou de taille à lui livrer passage dans le sens de la hauteur. En largeur également, ce trou eût été suffisant, sans un madrier qui le traversait, et qu'il était, par conséquent, nécessaire de couper. Ce fut la partie la plus pénible du travail. Une heure encore fut employée à le mener à bonne fin.

De temps à autre, Kennedy s'arrêtait et prêtait l'oreille aux bruits extérieurs. Tout était tranquille. Aucun appel des guetteurs n'annonçait l'approche d'un danger.

Lorsque le trou fut assez grand, il passa de l'autre côté de la cloison. Là, les choses se compliquèrent. Au milieu des caisses et des marchandises de toutes sortes qui remplissaient l'entrepôt, se mouvoir sans bruit était fort difficile. Une extrême prudence était de rigueur.

Où avait-on placé les barils de poudre?… Nulle part il ne les apercevait… Les barils devaient être là, cependant…

Il se mit à leur recherche. Lentement, surveillant le moindre de ses gestes, il s'insinua entre les caisses, obligé d'en déplacer parfois pour gagner du terrain.

Près de deux heures s'écoulèrent. Au dehors, on devait ne rien comprendre à ce retard, et lui-même commençait à désespérer. Il s'énervait. La nuit avançait; le jour ne tarderait pas à se lever. Lui faudrait-il donc partir sans avoir réussi dans une entreprise que trahirait l'effraction de la porte et qu'il serait par conséquent impossible de renouveler?

De guerre lasse, il allait se résigner à battre en retraite, quand il découvrit enfin ce qu'il cherchait. Les tonnelets de poudre étaient là, sous ses yeux. Il y en avait cinq, rangés en bon ordre près d'une porte qui s'ouvrait de l'autre côté dans le poste de police. Kennedy, retenant son souffle, entendait les hommes de veille causer entre eux. Il distinguait nettement leurs paroles. Plus que jamais, il était nécessaire d'agir en silence. Kennedy souleva un des barils, mais ce fut pour le reposer tout de suite sur le sol. Ce baril était trop lourd pour qu'un seul homme pût l'emporter sans bruit par le chemin compliqué qu'il fallait suivre. Se glissant entre les caisses, il regagna la salle du Tribunal et, passant dans le trou de la cloison, appela Dorick, dont la silhouette noire se découpait sur la nuit moins profonde de l'extérieur.

Celui-ci se rendit à l'appel du marin. "Comme tu as été long! dit-il à voix basse, en se penchant vers l'ouverture. Que t'est-il donc arrivé?

— Rien, répondit Kennedy sur le même ton, mais ce n'est pas facile de naviguer là-dedans.

— As-tu les barils?

— Non. Ils sont trop lourds… Il faut être deux… Viens!"

Dorick s'introduisit dans l'ouverture et, guidé par Kennedy, traversa l'entrepôt. Les deux hommes saisirent un des barils, et, le faisant passer par-dessus les caisses, l'amenèrent dans la salle du Tribunal. Dorick, aussitôt, franchit de nouveau la cloison.

"Où vas-tu? demanda Kennedy en étouffant sa voix.

— Chercher un second baril, répondit Dorick. Dépêchons-nous. Le jour va se lever.

— Un baril? répéta Kennedy étonné. Avec celui-ci on ferait sauter Libéria tout entière!

— Nous emporterons l’autre, dit Dorick.

— Pourquoi faire?

— C’est mon idée… Quand on sera débarrassé du Kaw-djer, il faudra être les maîtres… La poudre pourra nous servir.

— Où la mettras-tu, en attendant?

— J’ai une cachette sûre. Ne t’inquiète pas.”

Kennedy obéit de mauvaise grâce. Un quart d’heure plus tard, le second baril était déposé à côté du premier.

L’un d’eux fut rapidement placé contre la cloison de gauche, puis, vers le bas, Kennedy le perça d’un trou, par où une petite quantité de poudre s’écoula.

Pendant ce temps, Dorick avait sorti de sa poche une sorte de tresse faite de brins de coton lâchement entrelacés. Cette tresse, qu’il avait eu soin d’humecter au préalable, il la roula dans la poudre, puis, en prélevant un bout d’un coup de couteau, il alluma cet échantillon à titre d’expérience. Le feu grésilla, courut, s’éteignit.

“Parfait! déclara Dorick. Cinq centimètres pour une minute. Donc, la mèche entière en durera vingt. C’est plus qu’il ne nous en faut.”

Il se rapprocha du baril…

À ce moment, un bruit violent se fit entendre. Dorick s’arrêta sur place. Kennedy et lui se regardèrent. Ils étaient livides…

Leur angoisse fut courte. Dorick, reprenant son sang-froid, se mit à rire.

“La pluie”, dit-il en haussant les épaules.

Il alla jusqu’à la porte et regarda au dehors. La pluie tombait à verse, en effet, et le bruit qui les avait épouvantés était celui des gouttes qui crépitaient furieusement contre le toit. En somme, c’était une circonstance favorable. La pluie effacerait toutes les traces, et rien ne pourrait les dénoncer, si par hasard les soupçons se portaient sur eux. D’autre part, ce vacarme couvrirait l’inévitable pétillement de la mèche.

Par exemple, il n’y avait pas de temps à perdre. Le ciel s’empourprait déjà vers l’Est. Dans quelques instants, il ferait grand jour, et

Dorick connaissait assez les habitudes du Kaw-djer pour savoir que celui-ci ne tarderait pas beaucoup à paraître au dehors.

“Vite!” dit-il.

La mèche déroulée, l’un des bouts fut introduit dans le tonneau, puis Dorick enflamma une allumette qu’il approcha de l’autre extrémité. Hâtivement, les deux hommes sortirent alors, Kennedy le premier en emportant le second baril, puis Dorick qui tira de son mieux la porte derrière lui.

Les frères Moore et Sirdey étaient fidèlement à leurs postes.

Dorick, appelant leur attention par un léger sifflement, leur apprit d’un geste le succès de la tentative.

Aussitôt, tous s’éloignèrent rapidement, tandis que, sur la place déserte, l’orage continuait à verser son déluge.

CHAPITRE IV

IV

Dans les grottes

Quand le Kaw-djer sortit du gouvernement, l’orage était apaisé. Il ne pleuvait plus. Chassant devant lui les nuages, le soleil avait jailli de la mer et dorait Libéria de ses rayons obliques.

Le Kaw-djer regarda autour de lui. Il ne vit personne. Comme chaque jour, il sortait le premier du sommeil.

Aspirant largement l’air matinal, il s’avança de quelques pas sur la place transformée par l’orage en un lac de boue. La porte entrouverte du Tribunal attira aussitôt son attention. Sans attacher à cette négligence beaucoup d’importance, il s’approcha de la porte dans l’intention de la fermer. Il aperçut alors qu’elle avait été fracturée, ce qui le surprit grandement. Quel était le sens d’une telle infraction? Y avait- il donc des gens si dénués de tout que le misérable contenu de cette salle eût été capable de les tenter?

Le Kaw-djer poussa la porte et, dès le seuil, vit le tonnelet. Il ne comprit pas tout d’abord, mais un rapide examen l’eut bientôt renseigné. Cette poudre répandue… cette mèche aux trois quarts consumée qui traînait sur le parquet… Il n’y avait pas à s’y tromper: on avait voulu le faire sauter, et le gouvernement avec lui.

Cette découverte le plongea dans la stupéfaction. Eh quoi! il existait des colons qui le haïssaient à ce point!… Puis il réfléchit, cherchant quels pouvaient être les auteurs d’un pareil attentat. Certes, il n’était en état d’accuser personne. Mais il connaissait trop bien cependant la population de la ville, pour que ses soupçons pussent s’égarer hors d’un cercle assez restreint. Ferdinand Beauval, malgré ses nouvelles fonctions?… Peut-être, à la rigueur. Lewis Dorick?… Plus probablement. En tous cas, quelqu’un de ceux qui évoluaient dans leurs sillages. Le Kaw-djer fit du regard le tour de la salle et remarqua le trou pratiqué dans la cloison. L’aventure était limpide. Ce tonneau, on l’avait dérobé dans l’entrepôt, amené où il se trouvait maintenant, puis le coupable s’était enfui, après avoir allumé la mèche qui devait provoquer la déflagration de la poudre… Mais, contrairement à l’espoir du criminel, l’explosion ne s’était pas produite. La mèche, après avoir brûlé sur les deux tiers de sa longueur, s’était éteinte au contact d’une flaque d’eau qui recouvrait son dernier tiers.

D’où venait cette eau? Pour le savoir, le Kaw-djer n’eut qu’à lever la tête. Elle était venue du ciel, par une fissure du toit, à travers le plafond fait de planches à peine assemblées. Entre deux lames disjointes, des traces d’humidité étaient visibles. De là, l’eau était tombée goutte à goutte, jusqu’à former cette flaque qui avait opposé au feu une infranchissable barrière.

Le Kaw-djer ne put réprimer un frisson, sinon pour lui-même, du moins pour ceux que le gouvernement abritait avec lui, c’est-à-dire pour Hartlepool, qui y avait élu domicile avec ses deux enfants adoptifs, et pour les hommes de garde la nuit précédente. Leur vie n’avait dépendu que d’une circonstance fortuite. Sans l’orage qui avait éclaté aux premières lueurs de l’aube, tous seraient morts à l’heure actuelle.

Réflexions faites, le Kaw-djer jugea préférable de tenir secrète cette tentative avortée. Il n’avait nul besoin de ce surcroît de popularité, et mieux valait, en dernière analyse, ne pas jeter le trouble dans cette population paisible.

Tirant la porte derrière lui, il alla réveiller Hartlepool, qu’il conduisit au Tribunal et qu’il mit au courant des événements. Hartlepool fut atterré. Pas plus que son chef, il ne pouvait désigner les coupables, mais, pas plus que lui, il n’hésitait sur les noms de ceux qu’il était logique de suspecter.

Le Kaw-djer ayant résolu de ne pas ébruiter cette affaire, il lui fallait boucher l’ouverture de la cloison sans aucun concours étranger. Hartlepool partit donc à la recherche des matériaux nécessaires, tandis que le Kaw-djer transportait le baril de poudre à l’endroit qu’il occupait antérieurement dans l’entrepôt.

Il put ainsi constater qu’un autre des tonnelets avait disparu. En y comprenant celui qu’il avait trouvé dans la salle du Tribunal, il n’en restait que quatre, au lieu de cinq. Que voulait-on faire de cette poudre? Pas un bon usage assurément. Pourtant, en l’absence de toute arme à feu, elle n’était guère utilisable, les voleurs devant bien supposer qu’on allait rendre impossible une tentative semblable à celle qu’un hasard favorable venait de faire échouer.

Dès qu’Hartlepool fut de retour, les deux maçons improvisés remirent en place le morceau de madrier coupé par Kennedy, puis le vide fut bouché comme précédemment avec des pierrailles noyées dans du mortier. Bientôt il ne subsista aucune trace de l’attentat. Alors seulement le Kaw-djer se retira chez lui, en se faisant suivre d’Hartlepool qu’il informa de la disparition d’un second baril de poudre.

La chose méritait considération. Puisque les coupables s’étaient emparés de cette poudre, c’est qu’ils méditaient de recommencer leur tentative, et il convenait d’aviser aux moyens de se protéger contre eux.

Après que la question eut été examinée sous toutes ses faces, il fut définitivement convenu que l’attentat ne serait pas ébruité, et qu’on agirait avec prudence de façon à ne pas attirer l’attention. En premier lieu, on résolut d’augmenter les forces de police et de les porter de quarante à soixante hommes, en attendant mieux, si la nécessité en était ultérieurement démontrée. Pour l’instant, il faudrait se contenter de huit gardes supplémentaires, puisqu’on ne possédait en réserve que ce nombre d’armes à feu, mais il fut entendu que le Kaw-djer ferait venir deux cents nouveaux fusils de manière à pouvoir parer dans l’avenir à toutes les éventualités. Il s’était créé à Libéria des intérêts déjà considérables et qui grandissaient de jour en jour. Il importait d’être en mesure de les défendre au besoin.

On convint, en outre, que les hommes de veille monteraient dorénavant leur garde en plein air et non dans le poste de police. Ils se relèveraient deux par deux et, pendant leur faction, feraient les cent pas autour du gouvernement, qui serait ainsi à l’abri d’une surprise.

Le Kaw-djer ne crut pas devoir s’arrêter pour l’instant à d’autres mesures, mais Hartlepool se promit in petto de les compléter en entourant son chef d’une protection aussi vigilante que discrète.

Quant à découvrir les coupables, il n’y fallait pas compter, sous peine de mettre la ville en ébullition. Ils n’avaient laissé aucune trace, et seule la découverte du baril de poudre dérobé les eût démasqués. Mais, pour trouver ce baril, il aurait fallu se livrer à de nombreuses perquisitions, qui eussent causé une émotion que le Kaw-djer entendait éviter à tout prix.

Les choses ainsi réglées, la vie reprit son cours normal. Les jours passèrent après les jours, effaçant le souvenir d’un incident auquel le temps écoulé enlevait beaucoup de son importance première et dont la nouvelle organisation rendait le retour impossible.

Le Kaw-djer, tout au moins, cessa bientôt d’y penser. Il avait d’autres soucis en tête. Emporté par son œuvre comme par un torrent, il goûtait l’ivresse sublime des créateurs. Son cerveau surchauffé élaborait sans cesse de nouvelles entreprises, et l’exécution d’un projet n’était pas terminée qu’il passait au projet suivant.

Il n’avait même pas attendu que le batardeau du futur quai fût achevé, pour concevoir d’autres rêves. L’un, très réalisable à coup sûr, consistait à utiliser une chute de la rivière située à quelques kilomètres en amont, pour y établir une station électrique qui distribuerait partout la lumière et la force. Libéria éclairée à l’électricité!… Qui, deux ans auparavant, eût pu prévoir cela?

Pourtant ce projet n’était pas celui qui passionnait le plus le Kaw-djer. Il en rêvait un autre plus grandiose. Éclairer Libéria, cela était utile, certes, mais utile seulement à une très petite fraction de l’humanité, et, d’autre part, l’entreprise présentait si peu de difficultés qu’on pouvait la considérer comme une simple distraction. L’œuvre qui le passionnait réellement était plus générale et plus vaste. Elle intéressait l’humanité tout entière.

Il en devait la première pensée au naufrage même du Jonathan. Quand les coups de canon s’étaient fait entendre dans la nuit, le Kaw-djer avait, on s’en souvient, allumé un feu au sommet du cap Horn. Mais ce n’était là qu’un expédient, et, après comme avant, rien n’avertissait du péril les navires en détresse. L’agonie du Jonathan n’avait été, en effet, qu’une des innombrables scènes du drame qui se joue perpétuellement dans ces parages. Des centaines de bâtiments doublent, au milieu des tourmentes, l’extrême pointe de l’Amérique. Moins heureux que le Jonathan, ils n’ont pas de feu pour les guider, et trop souvent ils couvrent de leurs débris les récifs de l’archipel. Il en serait autrement si un phare s’allumait chaque soir au coucher du soleil. Prévenus à temps, les bâtiments prendraient le large, et une multitude de naufrages seraient évités.

Depuis que le Kaw-djer avait mis le pied sur le cap Horn, pas un jour ne s’était écoulé sans qu’il fût tenté par cette grande œuvre. Toutefois il n’en méconnaissait pas les difficultés, et longtemps il y avait pensé comme à une irréalisable chimère. Mais les choses étaient changées à présent. Gouverneur d’un État en voie d’ascension rapide, il pouvait employer un nombre presque illimité de travailleurs. La chimère cessait d’être irréalisable.

D’autre part, la question d’argent, qui se fût autrefois posée, était désormais résolue. Il est à croire, en effet, que le Kaw-djer avait à sa disposition des ressources considérables, puisqu’il avait pu faire à l’État hostelien les avances qui en avaient permis le développement. Longtemps il s’était refusé à puiser dans ces richesses dont il avait volontairement oublié l’existence, mais, maintenant qu’il les avait une première fois utilisées, ses répugnances n’avaient plus de raison d’être. Le sacrifice était accompli; il n’y avait aucun motif de ne pas faire encore ce qu’il avait déjà fait.

D’ailleurs, sa prospérité croissante permettrait bientôt à l’État hostelien de commencer le remboursement des avances que son créateur lui avait consenties. Ces capitaux, celui-ci n’allait pas les placer à la manière d’un bourgeois. Il n’allait pas thésauriser, lui qui professait pour l’argent un si dédaigneux mépris. Quel meilleur usage pourrait-il en faire que de les utiliser à la construction d’un phare au sommet du tragique promontoire sur la rude écorce duquel tant de navires viennent s’écraser?

Une grave difficulté subsistait cependant. Si l’île Hoste était libre, l’île Horn demeurait chilienne. Mais cette difficulté n’était peut-être pas insurmontable. Il n’était pas impossible que le Chili consentît à un abandon de ses droits sur un rocher inculte, en considération de l’usage que s’engagerait à en faire le nouveau possesseur. Cette négociation, il convenait de la tenter, tout au moins. Et c’est pourquoi le premier navire en partance emporta une note officielle adressée sur ce sujet par le gouverneur de l’État hostelien à la République du Chili.

Pendant que le Kaw-djer s’absorbait ainsi dans son œuvre, le danger dont il perdait le souvenir restait suspendu au-dessus de sa tête. Les auteurs de l’attentat étaient demeurés inconnus. Impunis, et ayant toujours en leur possession le baril de poudre qui constituait entre leurs mains la plus terrible des menaces, ils vivaient librement, noyés dans la foule des colons.

Si le Kaw-djer, justifiant par la crainte de troubler la population de Libéria la répugnance de toute mesure policière, qui subsistait au fond de son cœur comme un vieux reste de ses anciennes idées libertaires, ne se fût pas interdit, dès le début, de procéder à une enquête sérieuse, peut-être eût-il mis la main sur les coupables. Le baril de poudre n’était pas loin, en effet, Dorick et Kennedy l’ayant transporté, le matin même de leur attentat, dans une de ces grottes de la pointe de l’Est que le Kaw-djer ne pouvait ignorer, puisque c’est dans l’une d’elles qu’Hartlepool avait autrefois déposé la réserve de fusils.

Ces grottes, on ne l’aura peut-être pas oublié, étaient au nombre de trois: deux inférieures, dont l’une prenant jour sur le versant Sud, communiquait avec la seconde, évidée en plein cœur de la montagne, et une supérieure, située une cinquantaine de mètres plus haut, cette dernière s’ouvrant au contraire sur le versant Nord et dominant par conséquent Libéria. Une étroite fissure réunissait les deux systèmes. Praticable à la rigueur malgré sa forte inclination, cette fissure présentait, vers le milieu de son parcours, un étranglement qui obligeait à ramper pendant quelques mètres, en évitant soigneusement de toucher, de frôler même un bloc instable qui supportait seul la voûte en cet endroit et dont la chute eût risqué de provoquer une catastrophe.

C’est dans la grotte supérieure que les fusils avaient été déposés autrefois par Hartlepool. C’est dans l’une des deux grottes inférieures que Dorick et Kennedy avaient porté la poudre.

Ils n’avaient même pas jugé utile de la dissimuler dans la seconde, creusée en plein massif par un caprice de la nature. Après avoir rapidement examiné celle-ci sans remarquer la fissure qui allait s’épanouir sur l’autre versant à une altitude plus élevée, ils s’étaient contentés de cacher le baril sous un amoncellement de branches et l’avaient laissé dans la première grotte où, par une haute et large arcade, l’air et la lumière pénétraient à flots.

Grande avait été leur surprise, quand, en revenant de cette expédition le matin du 27 février, ils avaient constaté que le gouvernement était toujours debout. Pendant qu’ils s’éloignaient de la ville pour se débarrasser de leur baril, puis, tandis qu’ils s’en rapprochaient, ils avaient, de seconde en seconde, attendu l’explosion. Cette explosion ne devait pas se produire, on le sait, et les deux malfaiteurs parvinrent à leurs domiciles respectifs sans que rien d’insolite fût arrivé.

C’était à n’y rien comprendre.

Quelle que fût leur curiosité, les coupables ne se hâtèrent pas, cependant, de chercher à la satisfaire. L’échec de leur tentative justifiait toutes les craintes, et leur unique objectif fut d’abord de passer inaperçus. Ils se mêlèrent donc aux autres travailleurs et s’appliquèrent à éviter tout ce qui eût été susceptible d’attirer l’attention sur eux.

Ce fut seulement au cours de l’après-midi que

Lewis Dorick osa passer devant le gouvernement. De loin, il lança un rapide coup d’œil du côté du Tribunal et vit le serrurier Lawson en train de réparer la porte fracturée. Lawson ne semblait pas attacher à son travail une importance particulière. On lui avait dit de mettre une serrure neuve; il la mettait, voilà tout.

La tranquillité de Lawson ne rassura nullement Dorick. Puisqu’on réparait la porte, c’est que l’effraction était connue. Par conséquent, on avait nécessairement découvert le baril de poudre et la mèche consumée. Qui avait fait cette découverte? Dorick n’en savait rien. Mais il ne pouvait douter qu’un événement aussi grave n’eût été immédiatement porté à la connaissance du gouverneur, et il en concluait avec raison que des mesures allaient être prises, qu’on allait exercer une surveillance rigoureuse, et, se sachant coupable, il s’estimait en grand péril.

Une plus juste notion des choses lui rendit le sang-froid. Rien ne prouvait sa culpabilité après tout. Quand bien même on le soupçonnerait, ce n’est pas sur des soupçons qu’on peut arrêter, emprisonner, ni surtout condamner les gens. Pour cela, il faut des preuves. Et, des preuves, il n’en existerait pas contre lui, tant que ses complices garderaient le silence.

Ces réflexions rassurantes ne l’empêchèrent pas d’éprouver une violente émotion lorsque, vers la fin du jour, il se trouva à l’improviste face à face avec le Kaw-djer, qui venait, comme de coutume, surveiller les travaux du port. Celui-ci avait son air habituel, et l’on n’eût pas deviné, en le voyant, que rien d’insolite fût arrivé! Dorick jugea ce calme plus effrayant que la colère. Il se dit que, pour être si paisible, le gouverneur devait avoir la certitude de mettre la main sur les coupables. Tremblant, il feignit de s’absorber dans son travail, en évitant de relever les yeux sur le Kaw-djer dont il n’aurait pu supporter le regard. Si celui-ci lui avait parlé, le misérable se fût trahi.

Mais, le Kaw-djer ne lui adressant pas la parole, il reprit confiance. Cette confiance ne fit que croître à mesure que les jours s’écoulaient.

Sans parvenir à le comprendre, il constatait que rien n’était changé dans la ville, bien que l’attentat fût certainement connu, ainsi que le prouvaient les modifications apportées à la garde de nuit.

Longtemps, toutefois, la peur fut la plus forte. Pendant quinze jours, les cinq complices s’évitèrent et menèrent une vie exemplaire qui eût suffi à les rendre suspects à des observateurs plus attentifs. Puis, ces deux semaines écoulées, ils commencèrent à s’enhardir. Ils échangèrent d’abord quelques mots au passage, et enfin, la sécurité persistante leur donnant du courage, ils reprirent leurs promenades du soir et leurs anciens conciliabules.

Leur assurance grandissant de jour en jour, ils ne tardèrent pas alors à s’aventurer dans la grotte où le baril de poudre était caché. Ils le trouvèrent tel qu’ils l’y avaient mis, ce qui acheva de les tranquilliser.

Peu à peu, la caverne devint le but ordinaire de leurs promenades. Un mois après leur tentative avortée, ils s’y réunissaient tous les soirs.

Le sujet qu’ils y traitaient était toujours le même. Il n’avait pas plus changé que les causes de leur mécontentement. Ce qu’était leur vie avant l’attentat, elle l’était restée après. Ils continuaient à être soumis, comme tout le monde, à la loi du travail, et c’est bien cela, au fond qui les exaspérait, en dépit de leurs grandiloquentes diatribes.

S’excitant réciproquement de leurs récriminations incessantes, ils oublièrent graduellement leur échec et commencèrent à chercher les moyens de le réparer. Enfin, leur rage impuissante augmentant sans cesse, le jour vint où ils furent mûrs pour un nouvel acte de révolte.

Ce jour-là, le 30 mars, les cinq compagnons avaient quitté isolément Libéria et s’étaient, comme de coutume, rejoints à quelque distance de la ville. Leur groupe était au complet quand ils arrivèrent au lieu habituel de leurs séances.

La route s’était faite en silence. Dorick n’ayant pas ouvert la bouche et semblant perdu dans ses méditations, les autres avaient imité son mutisme. Et, de même que les lèvres, les visages étaient fermés. L’orage était dans l’air. Des pensées de haine gonflaient les âmes ulcérées.

Dorick, en pénétrant le premier dans la grotte, eut un geste d’effroi. Un feu brûlait près de l’entrée. Quelqu’un était donc venu là, et la flamme encore claire prouvait qu’il s’était écoulé peu de temps depuis le départ de l’intrus.

Un feu!… Dorick songea tout à coup à la poudre. Si le foyer avait été placé quelques mètres plus loin, l’imprudent qui l’avait allumé eût sauté sans recours. Quel danger il avait frôlé, sans le savoir!

Dorick courut au baril… Non, on ne l’avait pas découvert… Il était toujours sous l’amoncellement de branchages, dont on n’avait prélevé qu’un petit nombre pour former le foyer qui pétillait joyeusement.

Pendant ce temps, Kennedy, s’éclairant avec une des branches enflammées, visitait la deuxième grotte. Il en ressortit bien rassuré. Il n’y avait personne. Le visiteur inconnu était décidément parti.

Cette nouvelle transmise à ses compagnons, il éparpilla d’un coup de pied le feu qui, malgré son éloignement de la poudre, ne laissait pas de constituer un danger. Mais Dorick l’arrêta et, rassemblant les tisons dispersés, reconstitua le foyer sur lequel il jeta de nouveaux branchages, tandis que ses compagnons le regardaient faire avec surprise.

“Camarades, dit-il en se relevant, je suis à bout… Déjà, tout à l’heure, j’étais décidé à l’action… Ce que nous avons vu me confirme dans mon projet… On est venu ici… c’est une raison de plus de se hâter, car on peut revenir, et ce qu’on n’a pas trouvé aujourd’hui, on peut le trouver demain.”

La voix de Dorick était fébrile, sa parole haletante, ses gestes violents. Visiblement, il était à bout, ainsi qu’il le disait.

À l’exception de Sirdey qui demeura impassible, les autres approuvèrent bruyamment.

“Pour quand, l’opération? demanda Fred Moore.

— Pour ce soir même…” répondit Dorick.

Il ajouta, hachant les mots comme un homme dominé par ses nerfs:

“J’ai bien réfléchi… Puisque nous n’avons pas d’armes, je m’en fabriquerai… Une bombe… ce soir même… en comprimant par couches successives de la poudre entre des toiles trempées dans du goudron… C’est pour cela que j’ai besoin de feu… pour faire fondre le goudron… Certes, ma bombe ne vaudra pas les engins perfectionnés à mouvement d’horlogerie ou à renversement… Mais on fait ce qu’on peut… Je ne suis pas un chimiste, moi… Telle quelle, d’ailleurs, elle fera son effet… Une mèche la traversera de part en part… La mèche durera trente secondes… J'en ai fait l'expérience… Juste le temps d'allumer et de lancer…"

Les auditeurs de Dorick étaient frappés malgré eux de son air étrange. Son regard était brûlant et, dans une certaine mesure, égaré. Lewis Dorick était-il donc fou?

Non, il n'était pas fou, ou du moins il ne l'était pas au sens pathologique du mot. Si toute sa vie d'amertume et d'envie lui remontait aux lèvres à cette heure et donnait à son attitude cette fébrilité, il gardait autant de lucidité qu'en peut conserver un homme devenu la proie de la fureur.

"Qui la jettera, cette bombe? demanda Sirdey froidement.

— Moi, répondit Dorick.

— Quand.

— Cette nuit… Vers deux heures, j'irai frapper au gouvernement… Le Kaw-djer viendra ouvrir… Aussitôt que je l'entendrai, j'allumerai la mèche… j'aurai ce qu'il faut pour cela… la porte ouverte, je lancerai la bombe dans l'intérieur…

— Et toi?

— J'aurai le temps de me sauver… D'ailleurs, quand je devrais sauter aussi, il faut en finir."

Un silence tomba sur le groupe. On se regardait avec stupeur, épouvantés du projet de Dorick.

"Dans ce cas, dit Sirdey d'une voix calme, tu n'as pas besoin de nous.

— Je n’ai besoin de personne, répliqua violemment Dorick. Les lâches peuvent s’en aller, s’ils le veulent.”

Le mot fouetta les amours-propres.

“Moi, je reste, dit Kennedy.

— Moi aussi, dit William Moore.

— Moi aussi”, dit Fred Moore. Seul, Sirdey ne dit rien.

Les voix s’étaient enflées peu à peu. Sans même s’en apercevoir, on en était arrivé au ton de la dispute. Malgré l’avertissement donné par le feu qu’on avait trouvé allumé, on ne se disait pas qu’il pouvait y avoir à proximité des écouteurs pour recueillir ces paroles imprudentes.

Il y en avait cependant, mais un seul, à vrai dire, et qui était de taille trop réduite pour inspirer des craintes, alors même qu’on eût connu sa présence. Celui qui, bien involontairement au surplus, se tenait aux écoutes, n’était autre que Dick, et cinq hommes robustes n’avaient, en effet, rien à redouter d’un enfant.

Le 30 mars étant pour eux jour de congé, Dick et Sand avaient quitté la ville de bonne heure, en ayant pour objectif les grottes qu’ils avaient autrefois fait retentir si souvent de leurs ébats. L’enfance est capricieuse. Les amusements qu’elle aime avec le plus de passion, elle les délaisse un beau jour subitement, la lassitude venue, pour les reprendre ensuite avec la même soudaineté, quand d’autres distractions ont à leur tour cessé de lui plaire. Après avoir eu leur succès, les grottes avaient été abandonnées. Elles redevenaient à la mode.

Tout en marchant d’un pas vif, Dick et Sand traitaient l’importante question du jeu qui allait être pratiqué ce jour-là. Plus exactement, Dick, comme c’était assez la coutume, formulait d’autorité des ukases que Sand enregistrait d’un air soumis.

“Mon vieux, prononça Dick, lorsqu’ils eurent dépassé les dernières maisons, je vais te dire une bonne chose.”

Sand alléché tendit l’oreille.

“On va jouer au restaurant.”

Sand approuva de la tête. Mais, en réalité, il ne comprenait pas, il faut l’avouer.

“Pige-moi ça, mon vieux! annonça Dick triomphalement.

— Des allumettes!… s’écria Sand émerveillé par un si prodigieux joujou.

— Et ça!… reprit Dick en sortant péniblement de sa poche la demi-douzaine de pommes de terre qu’il y avait fait entrer de force avant de partir.”

Sand battit des mains.

“Comme ça, décréta Dick dominateur, tu seras le patron du restaurant. Moi, je serai le client.

— Pourquoi?… demanda Sand avec innocence.

— Parce que!…” répondit Dick.

Devant cet argument péremptoire, il ne restait à Sand qu’à s’incliner. C’est pourquoi, lorsqu’ils furent tous deux dans la grotte, les choses se passèrent comme l’avait arrêté son tyrannique camarade. Dans un coin, il y avait un tas de branches venues on ne savait d’où. Quelques-unes de ces branches furent bientôt transformées en un feu magnifique, et les pommes de terre commencèrent à cuire.

Quand elles furent cuites, le véritable jeu commença. Sand joua à merveille le rôle du restaurateur, et Dick ne lui fut pas inférieur dans celui du client de passage. Il aurait fallu voir avec quelle désinvolture il entra dans la grotte, — car, bien entendu, il en était ressorti pour augmenter la vraisemblance — avec quelle distinction il s’assit par terre devant l’illusion d’une table, avec quelle autorité il réclama tous les mets qui lui venaient à l’esprit. Il demanda des œufs, du jambon, du poulet, du corned-beef, du riz, du pudding, et plusieurs autres choses. Dieu merci, le client pouvait impunément se montrer exigeant. Jamais on n’avait vu un restaurant si bien garni. Le restaurateur avait de tout. Quelle que fût la commande, il répondait sans hésiter par des “Voilà, monsieur!”, en apportant sans aucun retard les mets indiqués, qui étaient en effet, il n’en faut pas douter, des œufs, du jambon ou du poulet, bien qu’un observateur superficiel les eût peut-être confondus avec de simples pommes de terre.

Malheureusement, il n’est pas d’office si merveilleusement garni qu’il ne s’épuise, comme il n’est pas d’appétit si robuste qu’il ne finisse par être rassasié. Par une étonnante coïncidence, ces deux événements se produisirent en même temps, et, phénomène non moins merveilleux, ce fut au moment précis où il ne restait plus une seule pomme de terre.

Sand éprouva un gros chagrin en faisant cette désolante constatation.

“Tu les as toutes mangées!…” soupira-t-il d’un air désappointé.

Dick daigna s’expliquer.

“Puisque c’est moi le client… répondit-il comme si la chose allait de soi. Un patron ne mange pas sa marchandise, peut-être!”

Mais Sand, cette fois, ne parut pas convaincu.

“En attendant, moi, je n’ai rien eu”, fit-il remarquer tout penaud.

Dick le prit de très haut.

“Non, mais, dis donc un peu que je suis un gourmand!… Et puis, zut! je ne joue plus, là!

— Dick!…” implora Sand terrifié par cette menace.

Il n’en fallut pas davantage. Dick renonça immédiatement à ses projets de vengeance.

“Alors, dit-il d’un air magnanime, c’est moi qui ferai le patron… C’est à toi d’être le client.”

Le jeu s’organisa d’après ce nouveau programme. Ce fut Sand qui sortit de la grotte, y rentra et s’assit par terre devant la table imaginaire. Cette mise en scène terminée, Dick s’approcha de son client ravi en lui présentant un caillou. Mais Sand, dont l’intelligence était moins vive, ne comprit pas tout de suite et regarda le caillou d’un air ahuri.

“Bête!… expliqua Dick. C’est la note.

— Je n’ai rien eu, objecta Sand révolté.

— Puisqu’il n’y a plus rien… il n’y a plus qu’à payer le dîner… Dans un restaurant, on paie, peut-être!… Tu diras: “Garçon, donnez-moi la note, je vous prie”. Moi, je dirai: “Voilà, monsieur!” Toi, tu diras: “Voilà, garçon, un cent pour le dîner et un cent pour vous.” Moi, je dirai: “Merci, monsieur.” Et tu me donneras deux cents.”

Tout se passa conformément à ce plan fort logique. Sand eut le ton qu’il fallait pour demander: “Garçon, donnez-moi la note, je vous prie”, et Dick cria si parfaitement: “Voilà, monsieur!”, qu’on l’eût pris pour un garçon véritable. C’était à s’y méprendre. Sand enchanté donna les deux cents.

Une réflexion ne laissa pas toutefois de gâter son plaisir.

“C’est toi qui as mangé les pommes de terre, et c’est moi qui les paie! dit-il un peu mélancoliquement.”

Dick n’eut pas l’air d’entendre. Il avait parfaitement entendu cependant. Et la preuve en est qu’il avait rougi jusqu’aux oreilles.

“Nous achèterons un réglisse au bazar Rhodes”, promit-il pour se mettre en repos avec sa conscience.

Puis, en profond politique, afin de couper court à l’incident:

“On va jouer à autre chose, déclara-t-il.

— À quoi? demanda Sand.

— Au lion, décida Dick, qui, sans hésiter, se distribua le beau rôle. Tu seras un voyageur. Moi, je suis un lion. Tu vas sortir. Alors, tu entreras dans la grotte pour te reposer, et je sauterai sur toi pour te manger. Alors, tu crieras: “Au secours!…” Alors, je m’en irai et je reviendrai en courant. Je serai un chasseur et je tuerai le lion.

— Puisque c’est toi, le lion! objecta Sand non sans une certaine logique.

— Non, je serai un chasseur.

— Alors, qui est-ce qui me mangera?

— Bête!… c’est moi, quand je serai le lion.”

Sand se plongea en de profondes réflexions, en regardant son camarade d’un air rêveur. Celui-ci interrompit sa recherche.

“Tu n’as pas besoin de comprendre, dit-il. Va-t’en. Après, tu reviendras. Le lion te guettera dans les rochers… Tu as le temps… Une demi-heure au moins… C’est moi, le lion, tu sais…

Alors, je suis à l’affût… Un lion, ça n’y reste pas deux minutes à l’affût… Monte par la galerie jusqu’à la grotte d’en haut, et reviens par dehors… Mais tu ne te méfies pas, tu comprends, tu ne te doutes de rien… C’est seulement quand tu entendras le rugissement du lion…”

Et Dick poussa un rugissement terrifiant.

Sand était déjà parti. Il remontait la galerie et tout à l’heure il redescendrait docilement pour se faire dévorer par le lion.

Pendant que son camarade s’éloignait, Dick s’était tapi entre les rochers. Il avait une demi-heure à attendre, mais cela ne lui semblait pas long. Il était le lion. Or, ainsi qu’il l’avait fait observer précieusement, un lion doit savoir garder l’affût avec patience. Pour rien au monde il n’eût montré le bout de sa frimousse, et consciencieusement il poussait de temps à autre, bien qu’il fût tout seul, de petits rugissements, préludes du grand, du terrible, qui éclaterait quand le lion dévorerait le malheureux voyageur.

Il fut interrompu dans ces exercices préparatoires. Plusieurs personnes gravissaient la pente de la montagne. Dick, absolument convaincu qu’il était un lion véritable, n’eut garde de se montrer, mais sa transformation en roi du désert ne l’empêcha pas de reconnaître au passage Lewis Dorick, les frères Moore, Kennedy et Sirdey. Dick fit la grimace. Il n’aimait pas tous ces gens-là et particulièrement Fred Moore qu’il considérait comme son ennemi personnel.

Les cinq hommes disparurent dans la grotte, à la grande colère de Dick, qui entendit leurs exclamations d’étonnement lorsqu’ils découvrirent le feu.

“Elle n’est pas à eux, la grotte”, murmura-t-il entre ses dents.

Mais d’autres paroles arrivèrent jusqu’à lui et lui firent dresser l’oreille. On parlait de poudre et de bombe, et ce dernier mot, qu’il comprenait mal, on le mêlait aux noms du gouverneur et d’Hartlepool.

Peut-être était-il trop loin et avait-il mal entendu… Avec précaution il s’approcha de l’entrée de la grotte, jusqu’à une place d’où il pouvait entendre distinctement tout ce qu’on y disait.

Quelqu’un parlait précisément en ce moment. Dick reconnut la voix de Sirdey.

“Et après?… demandait l’ancien cuisinier qui continuait à jouer auprès de Dorick le rôle du critique.

— Après?… répéta Dorick d’un ton interrogateur.

— Oui… reprit Sirdey. Ta bombe, ce n’est pas comme le baril. Tu n’as pas la prétention de les tuer tous… Quand tu auras fait sauter le Kaw-djer, il restera Hartlepool et les hommes du poste.

— Qu’importe!… répondit Dorick avec violence. Je ne les crains pas… La tête coupée, le corps ne compte plus.”

Tuer!… Couper la tête au gouverneur!… Dick, devenu soudain sérieux, écoutait en tremblant ces paroles terribles.

CHAPITRE V

V

Un héros

Couper la tête du gouverneur!… Dick, en oubliant son rôle de lion, ne pensa plus qu’à s’enfuir. Il fallait courir à Libéria… raconter ce qu’il venait d’entendre…

Malheureusement pour lui, l’excès de sa précipitation l’empêcha de calculer ses mouvements avec assez de prudence. Une pierre se détacha et dégringola bruyamment. Aussitôt quelqu’un se montra sur le seuil de la caverne, en lançant de tous côtés des regards soupçonneux. Dick effrayé reconnut Fred Moore.

De son côté, celui-ci avait aperçu l’enfant.

“Ah!… c’est toi, moucheron!… dit-il. Que fais-tu là?”

Dick, paralysé par la terreur, ne répondit pas.

“Tu as donc ta langue dans ta poche, aujourd’hui? reprit la grosse voix de Fred Moore. Elle est bien pendue, pourtant… Attends un peu. Je vais t’aider à la retrouver, moi…”

La peur rendit à Dick l’usage de ses jambes. Il reprit sa course et s’élança sur la pente. Mais en quelques enjambées son ennemi l’eut rejoint. Saisi à la ceinture par une main robuste, il fut soulevé comme une plume.

“Voyez-vous ça!… grondait Fred Moore en élevant à la hauteur de son visage l’enfant terrifié. Je t’apprendrai à espionner, petite vipère!”

En un instant, Dick fut transporté dans la grotte et jeté comme un paquet aux pieds de Lewis Dorick.

“Voilà, dit Fred Moore, ce que j’ai trouvé dehors, en train de nous écouter!”

D’une taloche, Dorick releva l’enfant.

“Qu’est-ce que tu faisais là?” demanda-t-il sévèrement.

Dick avait grand-peur. Même, pour être franc, il tremblait comme la feuille. Malgré tout, cependant, son orgueil fut plus fort. Il se redressa sur ses petites jambes, tel un coq de combat sur ses ergots.

“Ça ne vous regarde pas, répliqua-t-il avec arrogance… On a bien le droit de jouer au lion dans la grotte… Elle n’est pas à vous, la grotte.

— Tâche de répondre poliment, morveux, dit Fred Moore, en administrant une nouvelle taloche à son captif.”

Mais les coups n’étaient pas des arguments à employer avec Dick. On l’eût haché comme chair à pâté, qu’on ne l’eût pas fait céder. Au lieu de plier l’échine, il grandit au contraire de tout son pouvoir sa taille exiguë, serra les poings, puis, regardant son adversaire bien en face:

“Grand lâche!…” dit-il.

Fred Moore ne parut pas autrement sensible à cette injure.

“Qu’est-ce que tu as entendu? demanda-t-il. Tu vas nous le dire, ou sinon!…”

Mais Fred Moore eut beau lever la main, et même la faire retomber à plusieurs reprises avec une force toujours croissante, Dick s’obstina dans un silence farouche.

Dorick intervint.

“Laissez cet enfant, dit-il. Vous n’en tirerez rien… D’ailleurs, peu nous importe. Qu’il ait entendu ou non, je présume que nous ne serons pas assez bêtes pour lui rendre la clef des champs…

— On ne va pas le tuer, je pense? interrompit Sirdey qui semblait décidément peu enclin aux solutions violentes.

— Il n’en est pas question, répondit Dorick en haussant les épaules. On va le boucler simplement… Quelqu’un a-t-il sur lui un bout de corde?

— Voilà, dit Fred Moore en tirant de sa poche l’objet demandé.

— Et voilà”, ajouta son frère William, en offrant sa ceinture de cuir.

En un tour de main, Dick fut étroitement ligoté. Les chevilles serrées l’une contre l’autre, les mains liées derrière le dos, il ne pouvait plus faire un mouvement. Puis Fred Moore le transporta dans la seconde grotte où il le jeta sur le sol comme un paquet.

“Tâche de te tenir tranquille, recommanda-t-il à son prisonnier avant de s’éloigner. Sans ça, tu auras affaire à moi, mon garçon!”

Cette recommandation donnée, il retourna près de ses compagnons, et l’éternelle conversation fut reprise. Toutefois, elle était proche de son terme, et l’heure de l’action allait de nouveau sonner. Pendant qu’on parlait autour de lui, Dorick avait placé le goudron sur le feu, et bientôt, avec des soins méticuleux, il commença la fabrication de son engin meurtrier.

Tandis que les cinq misérables se préparaient ainsi au crime, leur destinée s’élaborait à leur insu. La capture de Dick avait eu un témoin. Sand, en allant au rendez-vous, où, selon les conventions, il devait être victime de la férocité du lion, avait assisté à toute la scène. Il avait vu son camarade capturé, emporté, ligoté et enfin jeté dans la deuxième grotte.

Sand fut plongé dans un affreux désespoir. Pourquoi s’était-on emparé de Dick?… Pourquoi l’avait-on frappé?… Pourquoi Fred Moore l’avait-il emporté?… Qu’avait-on fait de lui?… On l’avait tué, peut-être!… À moins qu’il fût seulement blessé, et qu’il attendît du secours.

Dans ce cas, Sand lui en apporterait. Il s’élança à l’assaut de la montagne, grimpa comme un chamois jusqu’à la grotte supérieure, redescendit la galerie étroite qui réunissait les deux systèmes. Moins d’un quart d’heure plus tard, il arrivait au bas de la pente, à l’endroit où la galerie s’épanouissait pour former le ténébreux évidement creusé en plein massif, dans lequel Dick avait été incarcéré.

Par le passage faisant communiquer cet évidement avec la caverne extérieure, un peu de lumière filtrait. Par là arrivaient également, sourdes, effacées, les voix de Lewis Dorick et de ses quatre complices. Sand, comprenant la nécessité de la prudence, ralentit son allure et s’approcha de son ami à pas de loup.

Les mousses, en leur qualité d’apprentis marins, ont toujours un couteau en poche. Sand eut tôt fait d’ouvrir le sien et de couper les liens du prisonnier. À peine libre de ses mouvements, celui-ci, sans prononcer un seul mot, courut vers la galerie par laquelle lui était venu le salut. Il ne s’agissait pas d’une plaisanterie. Lui seul savait, grâce aux quelques mots surpris, à quel point la situation était grave et combien il importait d’agir vite. C’est pourquoi, sans perdre son temps à de vains remerciements, il s’élança dans la galerie et en escalada la pente en toute hâte, tandis que, sur ses talons, s’époumonait le pauvre Sand.

La double évasion aurait facilement réussi, si le malheur n’avait voulu que Fred Moore, en cet instant précis, n’eût la fantaisie de venir jeter un coup d’œil sur son prisonnier. Dans la lumière incertaine qui arrivait de la première grotte, il crut voir remuer une forme vague. À tout hasard, il s’élança sur ses traces et découvrit ainsi la galerie ascendante dont il n’avait pas jusqu’alors soupçonné l’existence. Comprenant aussitôt qu’il était joué et que son prisonnier s’échappait, il poussa un furieux juron et se mit, lui troisième, à gravir la pente.

Si les enfants avaient une quinzaine de mètres d’avance, Fred Moore, d’un autre côté, possédait de longues jambes, et le passage étant relativement vaste, dans sa partie inférieure tout au moins, rien ne s’opposait à ce qu’il profitât de cet avantage. L’obscurité profonde qui l’entourait constituait, il est vrai, un sérieux obstacle à sa marche dans cette galerie inconnue, que Dick et Sand connaissaient si bien au contraire. Mais Fred Moore était en colère, et, quand on est en colère, on n’écoute pas les conseils de la prudence. Aussi courait-il à corps perdu dans les ténèbres, les mains étendues en avant, au risque de se briser la tête contre une saillie de la voûte.

Fred Moore ignorait qu’il y eût deux fugitifs devant lui. Il ne voyait absolument rien, et les enfants n’avaient garde de parler. Seul, le bruit des pierres qui roulaient sur la pente lui indiquait qu’il était en bonne voie, et, ce bruit devenant plus proche d’instant en instant, il en concluait qu’il gagnait du terrain.

Les enfants faisaient de leur mieux. Ils savaient qu’on était à leur poursuite et comprenaient parfaitement qu’on les rattrapait progressivement. Ils ne désespéraient pas cependant. Tous leurs efforts tendaient à atteindre cet étranglement de la galerie où le toit n’était supporté que par un rocher que le moindre choc eût fait basculer. Au-delà, la galerie était plus basse et plus étroite, et leur petite taille les servirait. Ils pourraient continuer à courir, tandis que leur ennemi serait dans l’obligation de se courber.

Cet étranglement, objet de leurs voeux, ils l’atteignirent enfin. Plié en deux, Dick le franchit heureusement le premier. Sand, marchant sur les mains et sur les genoux, se glissait à sa suite, quand il se sentit tout à coup immobilisé, sa cheville saisie par une main brutale.

“Je te tiens, bandit!…” disait en même temps derrière lui une voix furieuse.

Fred Moore était, en effet, au comble de la fureur. Rien ne l’ayant averti que la galerie fût brusquement abaissée et rétrécie en un point de son parcours, il s’en était fallu de peu qu’il ne se fracassât la tête. Son front était entré en contact avec la voûte si rudement que le contrecoup l’avait fait choir à demi assommé. Ce fut précisément à cette chute qu’il dut le succès de sa poursuite, la main qu’il étendait instinctivement étant tombée par fortune sur la jambe du fuyard.

Sand se vit perdu… On allait se débarrasser de lui et on repartirait à la poursuite de Dick qui serait rejoint à son tour… Alors, que ferait-on à Dick?… On l’emprisonnerait… on le tuerait peut-être!… Il fallait empêcher cela, l’empêcher à tout prix!…

Sand fit-il, en réalité, cette série de raisonnements? Même, fut-ce de propos délibéré qu’il adopta le moyen désespéré auquel il eut recours? Ce n’est pas sûr, car le temps de la réflexion lui manqua, et, de son commencement à sa fin, le drame tout entier n’eut pas la durée d’une seconde.

Il semblerait que nous ayons en nous-même un autre être qui, dans certains cas, agit pour notre compte. Ce serait lui, le subconscient des philosophes, qui nous fait trouver soudain, alors que nous n’y pensons plus, la solution d’un problème longtemps cherchée en vain. Ce serait lui qui gouvernerait nos réflexes et serait cause des gestes instinctifs que peuvent provoquer les excitations extérieures. Ce serait lui enfin qui nous déciderait parfois à l’improviste à des actes dont la source profonde est en nous, mais que notre volonté n’a pas formellement décidés.

Sand n’eut qu’une idée claire: la nécessité de sauver Dick et d’arrêter la poursuite. Le sub-conscient fit le reste. D’eux-mêmes ses bras s’étendirent et s’accrochèrent au bloc instable qui soutenait le toit de la galerie, tandis que Fred Moore, ignorant du danger, le tirait violemment en arrière.

Le bloc glissa. La voûte s’écroula en faisant un bruit sourd.

À ce bruit, Dick, saisi d’un trouble vague, s’arrêta sur place, écoutant. Il n’entendit plus rien. Le silence était revenu, profond comme les ténèbres dans lesquelles il était plongé. Il appela Sand, à voix basse d’abord, puis plus fort, puis encore plus fort… Enfin, comme il n’obtenait pas de réponse, il revint sur ses pas et se heurta à un amoncellement de rocs qui ne laissaient entre eux aucune issue. Il comprit aussitôt. La galerie s’était écroulée, Sand était là-dessous…

Un instant, Dick resta immobile, hébété, puis il repartit brusquement à toute vitesse, et, parvenu au jour, se rua sur la descente comme un fou.

Le Kaw-djer était en train de lire paisiblement avant de se mettre au lit, quand la porte du gouvernement s’ouvrit avec violence. Une sorte de boule d’où sortaient des cris et des mots inarticulés vint rouler à ses pieds. La première surprise passée, il reconnut Dick.

“Sand… gouverneur… Sand!…” gémissait celui-ci.

Le Kaw-djer prit une voix sévère.

“Que signifie cela?… Qu’y a-t-il?”

Mais Dick ne parut pas comprendre. Il avait des yeux égarés, les larmes ruisselaient de son visage, et de sa poitrine haletante s’échappaient des mots sans suite.

“Sand… gouverneur!… Sand… disait-il en tirant le Kaw-djer par la main comme s’il eût voulu l’entraîner. La grotte… Dorick… Moore… Sirdey… la bombe… couper la tête… Et Sand… écrasé!… Sand… gouverneur!… Sand!…”

En dépit de leur incohérence, ces mots étaient clairs, cependant. Quelque chose d’insolite avait dû se produire aux grottes, une chose à laquelle, d’une manière ou d’une autre, Dorick, Moore et Sirdey étaient mêlés et dont Sand avait été la victime. Quant à tirer de Dick des renseignements plus précis, il n’y fallait pas songer. Le petit garçon, au paroxysme de l’épouvante, continuait à prononcer les mêmes paroles qu’il répétait interminablement et semblait avoir perdu la raison.

Le Kaw-djer se leva, et appelant Hartlepool, il lui dit rapidement:

“Il se passe quelque chose aux grottes… Prenez cinq hommes, munissez-vous de torches, et venez m’y rejoindre. Hâtez-vous.”

Puis, sans attendre la réponse, il obéit à l’appel de la petite main dont la sollicitation se faisait de plus en plus pressante, et partit en courant dans la direction de la pointe. Deux minutes plus tard,

Hartlepool, à la tête de cinq hommes armés, se mettait en marche à son tour.

Malheureusement, dans la nuit presque complète, le Kaw-djer était déjà hors de vue. “Aux grottes”, avait-il dit. Hartlepool alla donc vers les grottes, c’est-à-dire vers celle qu’il connaissait le mieux et dans laquelle jadis il avait caché les fusils, tandis que le Kaw-djer, guidé par Dick, se dirigeait plus au Nord, de manière à contourner l’extrémité de la pointe et à atteindre, sur l’autre versant, celle des deux grottes inférieures dont Dorick avait fait son quartier général.

Celui-ci, à l’exclamation poussée par Fred Moore en découvrant la fuite du prisonnier, avait interrompu son travail et, suivi de ses trois compagnons, il s’était avancé jusqu’à la seconde grotte, prêt à donner mains forte au camarade qui venait d’y entrer. Toutefois, Fred Moore n’ayant affaire qu’à un enfant, il ne s’était pas attardé, et, après un rapide coup d’œil que l’obscurité avait rendu inutile, il s’était remis à son travail.

Fred Moore n’étant pas revenu quand ce travail fut terminé, on commença à s’étonner de la prolongation de son absence; s’éclairant avec un brandon, on pénétra de nouveau dans la grotte intérieure, William Moore en tête, Dorick, puis Kennedy derrière lui. Sirdey suivit ses camarades, mais ce fut pour se raviser et rebrousser chemin presque aussitôt. Puis, tandis que ses amis s’aventuraient dans la deuxième grotte, il sortit de la première au contraire, et, profitant de la nuit tombante, se dissimula dans les rochers de l’extérieur. Cette disparition de Fred Moore ne lui disait rien de bon. Il prévoyait des complications désagréables. Or, ce n’était pas un foudre de guerre, que Sirdey, loin de là. La ruse, la tromperie, les moyens cauteleux et sournois, rien de mieux! mais les coups n’étaient pas son affaire. Il garait donc sa précieuse personne, bien décidé à ne se compromettre qu’à coup sûr et selon la tournure qu’allaient prendre les événements.

Pendant ce temps, Dorick et ses deux compagnons découvraient la galerie dans laquelle Fred Moore s’était engagé à la suite de Dick et de Sand. La grotte n’ayant pas d’autre issue, aucune erreur n’était possible. Celui qu’on cherchait en était nécessairement sorti par là. Ils s’y engagèrent donc à leur tour, mais, après une centaine de mètres, il leur fallut s’arrêter. Une masse de rochers entassés les uns sur les autres leur barrait le passage. La galerie n’était qu’une impasse dont ils avaient atteint le fond.

Devant cet obstacle inattendu, ils se regardèrent, littéralement ahuris. Où diable pouvait bien être Fred Moore?… Incapables de répondre à cette question, ils redescendirent la pente sans soupçonner que leur camarade fût enseveli sous cet amas de décombres.

Fort troublés par cet indéchiffrable mystère, ils regagnèrent en silence la première grotte. Une désagréable surprise les y attendait. Au moment même où ils y mettaient le pied, deux formes humaines, celles d’un homme et d’un enfant, apparurent tout à coup sur le seuil.

Le feu brillait joyeusement, et sa flamme claire dissipait les ténèbres. Les misérables reconnurent l’homme et reconnurent l’enfant.

“Dick!…” firent-ils tous trois, stupéfaits de voir revenir de ce côté le mousse que, moins d’une demi-heure plus tôt, on avait enfermé et si solidement garotté.

“Le Kaw-djer!…” grondèrent-ils ensuite, avec un mélange de colère et d’effroi.

Un instant ils hésitèrent, puis la rage fut la plus forte, et, d’un même mouvement, William Moore et Kennedy se ruèrent en avant.

Immobile sur le seuil, sa haute silhouette vivement éclairée par la flamme, le Kaw-djer attendit ses adversaires de pied ferme. Ceux-ci avaient tiré leurs couteaux. Il ne leur laissa pas le temps de s’en servir. Saisis à la gorge par des mains de fer, le crâne de l’un heurta rudement la tête de l’autre. Ensemble, ils tombèrent, assommés.

Kennedy avait son compte, comme on dit. Il demeura étendu, inerte, tandis que William Moore se relevait en chancelant.

Sans s’occuper de lui, le Kaw-djer fit un premier pas vers Dorick…

Celui-ci, affolé par la foudroyante rapidité de ces événements, avait assisté à la bataille sans y prendre part. Il était resté en arrière, tenant à la main sa bombe d’où pendaient quelques centimètres de mèche. Paralysé par la surprise, il n’avait pas eu le temps d’intervenir, et le résultat de la lutte lui montrait maintenant de quelle inutilité serait une plus longue résistance. Au mouvement que fit le Kaw-djer, il comprit que tout était perdu…

Alors, une folie le saisit… Une vague de sang monta à son cerveau: selon l’énergique expression populaire, il vit rouge… Une fois au moins dans sa vie, il vaincrait… Dût-il périr, l’autre périrait!…

Il bondit vers le feu et saisit un tison qu’il approcha de la mèche, puis son bras ramené en arrière se détendit pour lancer le terrible projectile…

Le temps manqua à son geste de meurtre. Fut-ce par suite d’une maladresse, d’une défectuosité de la mèche, ou pour toute autre cause? La bombe éclata dans ses mains. Soudain, une violente détonation retentit… Le sol trembla. La gueule béante de la grotte vomit une gerbe de feu…

À l’explosion, un cri d’angoisse répondit au dehors. Hartlepool et ses hommes, ayant enfin reconnu leur erreur, arrivaient au pas de course, juste à temps pour assister au drame. Ils virent la flamme, divisée en deux langues ardentes, jaillir de part et d’autre du Kaw-djer, dont le petit Dick terrifié embrassait les genoux, et qui demeurait debout, immobile comme un marbre, au milieu de ce cercle de feu. Ils s’élancèrent au secours de leur chef.

Mais celui-ci n’avait pas besoin d’être secouru. L’explosion l’avait miraculeusement épargné. L’air déplacé s’était séparé en deux courants qui l’avaient frôlé sans l’atteindre. Immobile et debout comme on l’avait aperçu au moment du péril, on le trouva, le péril passé. Il arrêta de la main ceux qui accouraient à son aide.

“Gardez l’entrée, Hartlepool”, ordonna-t-il de sa voix habituelle.

Stupéfaits de cet incroyable sang-froid, Hartlepool et ses hommes obéirent, et une barrière humaine se tendit en travers de l’ouverture de la grotte. La fumée se dissipait peu à peu, mais, le feu ayant été éteint par l’explosion, l’obscurité était profonde.

“De la lumière, Hartlepool”, dit le Kaw-djer.

Une torche fut allumée. On pénétra dans la caverne.

Aussitôt, profitant de la solitude et de l’obscurité revenues, une ombre se détacha des roches de l’entrée. Sirdey était renseigné maintenant. Dorick tué ou pris, il jugeait opportun, dans tous les cas, de se mettre à l’abri. Lentement, d’abord, il s’éloigna. Puis, quand il estima la distance suffisante, il accéléra sa fuite. Il disparut dans la nuit.

Pendant ce temps, le Kaw-djer et ses hommes exploraient le théâtre du drame. Le spectacle y était affreux. Sur le sol éclaboussé de sang, traînaient partout d’effroyables débris. On eut peine à identifier Dorick, dont les bras et la tête avaient été emportés par l’explosion. À quelques pas, gisait William Moore, le ventre ouvert. Plus loin, Kennedy, sans blessure apparente, semblait dormir. Le Kaw-djer s’approcha de ce dernier.

“Il vit”, dit-il.

Vraisemblablement, l’ancien matelot, à demi étranglé par le Kaw-djer et incapable par suite de se relever, avait dû le salut à cette circonstance.

“Je ne vois pas Sirdey, fit observer le Kaw-djer en regardant autour de lui. Il en était, pourtant, paraît-il.”

La grotte fut en vain méticuleusement visitée. On ne releva aucune trace du cuisinier du Jonathan. Par contre, sous l’amas de branches qui le dissimulait, Hartlepool découvrit le baril de poudre dont Dorick n’avait prélevé qu’une faible partie.

“Voilà l’autre baril!…” s’écria-t-il triomphalement. Ce sont nos gens de l’autre fois.

À ce moment, une main saisit celle du Kaw-djer, tandis qu’une faible voix gémissait doucement.

“Sand!… gouverneur!… Sand!…”

Dick avait raison. Tout n’était pas fini. Il restait encore à trouver Sand, puisque, d’après son ami, il était mêlé à cette affaire.

“Conduis-nous, mon garçon”, dit le Kaw-djer.

Dick s’engagea dans le passage intérieur, et sauf un homme qui fut laissé à la garde de Kennedy, tout le monde s’y engagea derrière lui. À sa suite, on traversa la seconde grotte, puis on remonta la galerie, jusqu’au point où l’éboulement s’était produit.

“Là!…” fit Dick en montrant de la main l’amoncellement de rochers.

Il semblait en proie à une affreuse douleur, et son air égaré fit pitié à ces hommes forts dont il implorait l’assistance. Il ne pleurait plus, mais ses yeux secs brûlaient de fièvre, et ses lèvres avaient peine à prononcer les mots.

“Là?… répondit le Kaw-djer avec douceur. Mais tu vois bien, mon petit, qu’on ne peut avancer plus loin.

— Sand! répéta Dick avec obstination en tendant dans la même direction sa main tremblante.

— Que veux-tu dire, mon garçon? insista le Kaw-djer. Tu ne prétends pas, je suppose, que ton ami Sand soit là-dessous?

— Si!… articula péniblement Dick. Avant, on passait… Ce soir… Dorick m’avait pris… Je me suis sauvé… Sand était derrière moi… Fred Moore allait nous attraper… Alors Sand… a fait tomber tout… et tout s’est écroulé… sur lui… pour me sauver!…”

Dick s’arrêta, et, se jetant aux pieds du Kaw-djer.

“Oh!… gouverneur… implora-t-il, Sand!…”

Le Kaw-djer, vivement ému, s’efforça d’apaiser l’enfant.

“Calme-toi, mon garçon, dit-il avec bonté, calme-toi!… Nous tirerons ton ami de là, sois tranquille… Allons! à l’œuvre, nous autres!…” commanda-t-il, en se tournant vers Hartlepool et ses hommes.

On se mit fiévreusement au travail. Un à un, les rochers furent arrachés et évacués en arrière. Les blocs fort heureusement n’étaient pas de grande taille, et ces bras robustes pouvaient les mouvoir.

Dick, obéissant aux instructions du Kaw-djer, s’était docilement retiré dans la première grotte, où Kennedy, surveillé par son gardien, reprenait conscience de lui-même. Là, il s’était assis sur une pierre, près de l’entrée, et, le regard fixe, sans faire un mouvement, il attendait que la promesse du gouverneur fût accomplie.

Pendant ce temps, à la lueur des torches, on travaillait avec acharnement dans la galerie. Dick n’avait pas menti. Il y avait des corps là-dessous. À peine les premiers rochers eurent-ils été enlevés qu’on aperçut un pied. Ce n’était pas un pied d’enfant, et il ne pouvait appartenir à Sand. C’était un pied d’homme et même d’un homme de grande taille.

On se hâta. Après le pied, une jambe, puis un torse, et enfin le corps d’un homme allongé sur le ventre apparurent. Mais lorsqu’on voulut tirer l’homme à la lumière, on rencontra une résistance. Sans doute, son bras, étendu en avant et s’enfonçant entre les pierres, était accroché à quelque chose. Il en était ainsi, en effet, et, quand le bras fut complètement dégagé, on vit que la main étreignait une cheville d’enfant.

La main détachée, l’homme fut retourné sur le dos. On reconnut Fred Moore. La tête en bouillie, la poitrine défoncée, il était mort.

Alors, on travailla plus fiévreusement encore. Ce pied, que tenait Fred Moore dans ses doigts crispés ne pouvait être que celui de Sand.

Les découvertes se succédèrent dans le même ordre que tout à l’heure. Après le pied, la jambe apparut. Toutefois, elles se succédaient plus vite, la seconde victime étant moins grande que la première.

Le Kaw-djer tiendrait-il la promesse qu’il avait faite à Dick de lui rendre son ami? Cela paraissait peu croyable, à en juger par ce qu’on voyait déjà du malheureux enfant. Meurtries, écrasées, aplaties, les os brisés, ses jambes n’étaient plus que d’informes lambeaux, et l’on pouvait prévoir par là dans quel état on allait trouver le reste du corps.

Quelque grande que fût leur hâte, les travailleurs durent cependant s’arrêter et prendre le temps de la réflexion, au moment de s’attaquer à un bloc plus gros que les précédents qui broyait de sa masse énorme les genoux du pauvre Sand. Ce bloc soutenant ceux qui l’entouraient, il importait d’agir avec prudence afin d’éviter un nouvel éboulement.

La durée du travail fut augmentée par cette complication, mais enfin, centimètre par centimètre, le bloc fut enlevé à son tour…

Les sauveteurs poussèrent une exclamation de surprise. Derrière, c’était le vide, et, dans ce vide, Sand gisait comme dans un tombeau. De même que

Fred Moore, il était couché sur le ventre, mais des rochers, en s’arc-boutant les uns contre les autres, avaient protégé sa poitrine. La partie supérieure de son corps semblait intacte, et, n’eût été l’état pitoyable de ses jambes, il fût sorti sans dommage de sa terrible aventure.

Avec mille précautions, il fut tiré en arrière et étendu sous la lumière de la torche. Ses yeux étaient clos, ses lèvres blanches et fortement serrées, son visage d’une pâleur livide. Le Kaw-djer se pencha sur l’enfant…

Longtemps, il écouta. Si un souffle restait à cette poitrine, le souffle était à peine perceptible…

“Il respire!…” dit-il enfin.

Deux hommes soulevèrent le léger fardeau et l’on descendit la galerie en silence. Sinistre descente sur cette route souterraine dont la torche fuligineuse semblait rendre tangibles les profondes ténèbres! La tête inerte oscillait lamentablement, et plus lamentablement encore les jambes broyées, d’où coulait, à grosses gouttes, du sang.

Quand le triste cortège apparut dans la grotte extérieure, Dick se leva en sursaut et regarda avidement. Il vit les jambes mortes, le visage exsangue…

Alors, dans ses yeux exorbités passa un regard d’agonie, et, poussant un cri rauque, il s’écroula sur le sol.

CHAPITRE VI

VI

Pendant dix-huit mois

L’aube du 31 mars se leva sans que le Kaw-djer, agité par les rudes émotions de la veille, eût trouvé le sommeil. Quelles épreuves il venait de traverser! Quelle expérience il venait de faire! Il avait touché le fond de l’âme humaine capable à la fois du meilleur et du pire, des instincts les plus féroces et de la plus pure abnégation.

Avant de s’occuper des coupables, il s’était hâté de secourir les innocentes victimes de cet épouvantable drame. Deux brancards improvisés les avaient rapidement transportées au gouvernement.

Lorsque Sand fut déshabillé et reposa sur sa couchette, son état parut plus effrayant encore. Les jambes, littéralement en bouillie, n’existaient plus. Le spectacle de ce jeune corps martyrisé était si pitoyable qu’Hartlepool en eut le cœur chaviré, et que de grosses larmes coulèrent sur ses joues tannées par toutes les brises de la mer.

Avec une patience maternelle, le Kaw-djer pansa cette pauvre chair en lambeaux. De ses jambes terriblement laminées, Sand était condamné, de toute évidence, à ne jamais plus se servir, et, jusqu’à son dernier jour, il lui faudrait mener une vie d’infirme. À cela, rien à faire, mais ce serait quand même un résultat appréciable, si l’on pouvait éviter une amputation qui eût risqué d’être fatale à ce frêle organisme.

Le pansement terminé, le Kaw-djer fit couler quelques gouttes d'un cordial entre les lèvres décolorées du blessé qui commença à pousser de faibles plaintes et à murmurer de confuses paroles.

Dick, dont le Kaw-djer s'occupa en second lieu, paraissait également en grand danger. Ses yeux clos, son visage d'un rouge brique parcouru de frémissements nerveux, une respiration courte sifflant entre ses dents serrées, il brûlait d'une fièvre intense. Le Kaw-djer, en constatant ces divers symptômes, hocha la tête d'un air inquiet. En dépit de l'intégrité de ses membres et de son aspect moins impressionnant, l'état de Dick était en réalité beaucoup plus grave que celui de son sauveur.

Les deux enfants couchés, le Kaw-djer, malgré l'heure tardive, se rendit chez Harry Rhodes et le mit au courant des événements. Harry Rhodes fut bouleversé par ce récit et ne marchanda pas le concours des siens. Il fut convenu que Mme Rhodes et Clary, Tullia Ceroni et Graziella, veilleraient à tour de rôle au chevet des deux enfants, les jeunes filles pendant le jour, et leurs mères pendant la nuit. Mme Rhodes prit la garde la première. Habillée en un instant, elle partit avec le Kaw-djer.

Alors seulement celui-ci, ayant paré de cette manière au plus pressé, alla chercher un repos qu'il ne devait pas réussir à trouver. Trop d'émotions agitaient son cœur, un trop grave problème était posé devant sa conscience.

Des cinq assassins, trois étaient morts, mais deux subsistaient. Il fallait prendre un parti à leur sujet. Si l'un, Sirdey, avait disparu et errait à travers l'île, où on ne tarderait pas sans doute à le reprendre, l'autre, Kennedy, attendait, solidement verrouillé dans la prison, que l'on statuât sur son sort.

Le bilan de l'affaire se soldant par trois hommes tués, un autre en fuite et deux enfants en péril de mort, il ne pouvait, cette fois, être question de l’étouffer. Pour que l’on pût espérer la tenir secrète, trop de personnes, d’ailleurs, étaient dans la confidence. Il fallait donc agir. Dans quel sens?

Certes les moyens d’action adoptés par les gens qu’il venait de combattre n’avaient rien de commun avec ceux que le Kaw-djer était enclin à employer, mais, au fond, le principe était le même. Il se réduisait en somme à ceci, que ces gens, comme lui-même, répugnaient à la contrainte et n’avaient pu s’y résigner. La différence des tempéraments avait fait le reste. Ils avaient voulu abattre la tyrannie, tandis qu’il s’était contenté de la fuir. Mais, au demeurant, leur besoin de liberté, quelque opposé qu’il fût dans ses manifestations, était pareil dans son essence, et ces hommes n’étaient après tout que des révoltés comme il avait été lui-même un révolté. Alors qu’il se reconnaissait en eux, allait-il, sous prétexte qu’il était le plus fort, s’arroger le droit de punir?

Le Kaw-djer, dès qu’il fut levé, se rendit à la prison, où Kennedy avait passé la nuit, effondré sur un banc. Celui-ci se leva avec empressement à son approche, et, non content de cette marque de respect, il retira humblement son béret. Pour faire ce geste, l’ancien matelot dut élever ensemble ses deux mains qu’unissait une courte et solide chaîne de fer. Après quoi, il attendit, les yeux baissés.

Kennedy ressemblait ainsi à un animal pris au piège. Autour de lui, c’était l’air, l’espace, la liberté… Il n’avait plus droit à ces biens naturels dont il avait voulu priver d’autres hommes et dont d’autres hommes le privaient à son tour.

Sa vue fut intolérable au Kaw-djer.

“Hartlepool!…” appela-t-il en avançant la tête dans le poste.

Hartlepool accourut.

“Retirez cette chaîne, dit le Kaw-djer en montrant les mains entravées du prisonnier.

— Mais, monsieur… commença Hartlepool.

— Je vous prie…” interrompit le Kaw-djer d’un ton sans réplique.

Puis, s’adressant à Kennedy, lorsque celui-ci fut libre.

“Tu as voulu me tuer. Pourquoi?” interrogea-t-il.

Kennedy, sans relever les yeux, haussa les épaules, en se dandinant gauchement et en roulant entre les doigts son béret de marin, par manière de dire qu’il n’en savait rien.

Le Kaw-djer, après l’avoir considéré un instant en silence, ouvrit toute grande la porte donnant sur le poste, et, s’effaçant:

“Va-t’en!” dit-il.

Puis, Kennedy le regardant d’un air indécis:

“Va-t’en!” dit-il une seconde fois d’une voix calme.

Sans se faire prier, l’ancien matelot sortit en arrondissant le dos. Derrière lui, le Kaw-djer referma la porte, et se rendit auprès de ses deux malades, en abandonnant à ses réflexions Hartlepool fort perplexe.

L’état de Sand était stationnaire, mais celui de Dick semblait très aggravé. En proie à un furieux délire, ce dernier, s’agitait sur sa couche en prononçant des paroles sans suite. On ne pouvait plus en douter, l’enfant avait une congestion cérébrale d’une telle violence qu’une terminaison fatale était à craindre. La médication habituelle était inapplicable dans la circonstance présente. Où se fût-on procuré de la glace pour rafraîchir son front brûlant? Les progrès réalisés sur l’île Hoste n’étaient pas tels encore qu’il fût possible d’y trouver cette substance, en dehors de la période hivernale.

Cette glace, dont le Kaw-djer déplorait l’absence, la nature n’allait pas tarder à la lui fournir en quantités illimitées. L’hiver de l’année 1884 devait être d’une extrême rigueur et fut aussi exceptionnellement précoce. Il débuta dès les premiers jours d’avril par de violentes tempêtes qui se succédèrent pendant un mois, presque sans interruption. À ces tempêtes fit suite un excessif abaissement de température qui provoqua finalement des chutes de neige telles que le Kaw-djer n’en avait jamais vu de pareilles depuis qu’il s’était fixé en Magellanie. Tant que cela fut au pouvoir des hommes, on lutta courageusement contre cette neige, mais, dans le courant du mois de juin, les implacables flocons tombèrent en tourbillons si épais qu’il fallut se reconnaître vaincu. Malgré tous les efforts, la couche neigeuse atteignit, vers le milieu de juillet, une épaisseur de plus de trois mètres, et Libéria fut ensevelie sous un linceul glacé. Aux portes habituelles furent substituées les fenêtres des premiers étages. Quant aux maisons limitées à un simple rez-de-chaussée, elles n’eurent plus d’autre issue qu’un trou percé dans le toit. La vie publique fut, on le conçoit, entièrement arrêtée, et les relations sociales réduites au minimum indispensable pour assurer la subsistance de chacun.

La santé générale se ressentit nécessairement de cette rigoureuse claustration. Quelques maladies épidémiques firent de nouveau leur apparition, et le Kaw-djer dut venir en aide à l’unique médecin de Libéria qui ne suffisait plus à la peine.

Heureusement pour le repos de son esprit, il n’avait plus, à ce moment d’inquiétudes pour Dick ni pour Sand. Des deux, Sand avait été le premier à s’acheminer vers la guérison. Une dizaine de jours après le drame dont il avait été la victime volontaire, on fut en droit de le considérer comme hors de danger, et il n’y eut plus de motif de mettre en doute que l’amputation serait évitée. Les jours suivants, en effet, la cicatrisation gagna de proche en proche avec cette rapidité, on peut dire cette fougue qui est l’apanage des tissus jeunes. Deux mois ne s’étaient pas écoulés que Sand fut autorisé à quitter le lit.

Quitter le lit?… L’expression est impropre, à vrai dire. Sand ne pouvait plus, ne pourrait plus jamais quitter le lit, ni se mouvoir d’aucune manière sans un secours étranger. Ses jambes mortes ne supporteraient jamais plus son corps d’infirme condamné désormais à l’immobilité.

Le jeune garçon ne semblait pas, d’ailleurs, s’en affecter outre mesure. Lorsqu’il eut repris conscience des choses, sa première parole ne fut pas pour gémir sur lui-même, mais pour s’informer du sort de Dick, au salut duquel il s’était si héroïquement dévoué. Un pâle sourire entrouvrit ses lèvres quand on lui donna l’assurance que Dick était sain et sauf, mais bientôt cette assurance ne lui suffit plus, et, à mesure que les forces lui revenaient, il commença à réclamer son ami avec une insistance grandissante.

Longtemps, il fut impossible de le satisfaire. Pendant plus d’un mois, Dick ne sortit pas du délire. Son front fumait littéralement, malgré la glace que le Kaw-djer pouvait maintenant employer sans ménagement. Puis, lorsque cette période aiguë se résolut enfin, le malade était si faible que sa vie paraissait ne tenir qu’à un fil.

À dater de ce jour, toutefois, la convalescence fit de rapides progrès. Le meilleur des remèdes fut, pour lui, d’apprendre que Sand était également sauvé. À cette nouvelle, le visage de Dick s’illumina d’une joie céleste, et, pour la première fois depuis tant de jours, il s’endormit d’un paisible sommeil.

Dès le lendemain, il put assurer lui-même Sand qu’on ne l’avait pas trompé, et celui-ci, à partir de cet instant, fut délivré de tout souci. Quant à son malheur personnel, il en faisait bon marché. Rassuré sur le sort de Dick, il réclama aussitôt son violon, et, lorsqu’il tint entre ses bras l’instrument chéri, il parut au comble du bonheur.

Quelques jours plus tard, il fallut céder aux instances des deux enfants et les réunir dans la même pièce. Dès lors, les heures coulèrent pour eux avec la rapidité d’un rêve. Dans leurs couchettes placées proches l’une de l’autre, Dick lisait tandis que Sand faisait de la musique, et, de temps en temps, pour se reposer, ils se regardaient en souriant. Ils s’estimaient parfaitement heureux.

Un triste jour fut celui où Sand quitta le lit. La vue de son ami ainsi martyrisé jeta Dick, alors levé depuis une semaine, dans un abîme de désespoir. L’impression qu’il reçut de ce spectacle fut aussi durable que profonde. Il fut transformé soudainement, comme s’il eût été touché par une baguette de fée. Un autre Dick naquit, plus déférent, plus réfléchi, d’allures moins effrontées et moins combatives.

On était alors au début du mois de juin, c’est-à-dire au moment où la neige commençait à bloquer les Libériens dans leurs demeures. Un mois plus tard, on entra dans la période la plus froide de ce rude hiver. Il n’y avait plus à compter sur le dégel avant le printemps.

Le Kaw-djer s’efforça de réagir contre les effets déprimants de ce long emprisonnement. Sous sa direction, des jeux en plein air furent organisés. Par une saignée faite à grand renfort de bras dans la berge de la rivière, l’eau, prise au-dessous de la glace, se répandit sur la plaine marécageuse, qui fut ainsi transformée en un admirable champ de patinage. Les adeptes de ce sport, très pratiqué en Amérique, purent s’en donner à cœur joie. Pour ceux auxquels il n’était pas familier, on institua des courses de skis ou des glissades vertigineuses en traîneaux le long des pentes des collines du Sud.

Peu à peu, les hivernants s’endurcirent à ces sports de la glace et y prirent goût. La gaieté et en même temps la santé publique en reçurent la plus heureuse influence. Vaille que vaille, on atteignit ainsi le 5 octobre.

Ce fut à cette date qu’apparut le dégel. La neige qui recouvrait la plaine située du côté de la mer fondit tout d’abord. Le lendemain celle qui encombrait Libéria fondit à son tour, changeant les rues en torrents, tandis que la rivière brisait sa prison de glace. Puis, le phénomène se généralisant, la fonte des premières pentes du Sud alimenta pendant plusieurs jours les torrents boueux qui s’écoulaient à travers la ville, et enfin, le dégel continuant à se propager dans l’intérieur, la rivière se mit à gonfler rapidement. En vingt-quatre heures, elle atteignit le niveau des rives. Bientôt, elle se déverserait sur la ville. Il fallait intervenir, sous peine de voir détruite l’œuvre de tant de jours.

Le Kaw-djer mit à contribution tous les bras. Une armée de terrassiers éleva un barrage suivant un angle qui embrassait la ville, et dont le sommet fut placé au Sud-Ouest. L’une des branches de cet angle se dirigeait obliquement vers les monts du Sud, tandis que l’autre, tracée à une certaine distance de la rivière, en épousait sensiblement le cours. Un petit nombre de maisons, et notamment celle de Patterson, édifiées trop près de la rive, restaient hors du périmètre de protection. On avait dû se résigner à ce sacrifice nécessaire.

En quarante-huit heures, ce travail poursuivi de jour et de nuit fut terminé. Il était temps. De l’intérieur, un déluge accourait vers la mer. Le barrage fendit comme un coin cette immense nappe d’eau. Une partie en fut rejetée dans l’Ouest, vers la rivière, tandis que, dans l’Est, l’autre s’écoulait en grondant vers la mer.

Malgré l’inclinaison du sol, Libéria devint en quelques heures une île dans une île. De tous côtés on n’apercevait que de l’eau, d’où, vers l’Est et le Sud, émergeaient les montagnes, et, vers le Nord-Ouest, les maisons du Bourg-Neuf protégé par son altitude relative. Toutes communications étaient coupées. Entre la ville et son faubourg, la rivière précipitait en mugissant des flots centuplés.

Huit jours plus tard, l’inondation ne montrait encore aucune tendance à décroître, quand se produisit un grave accident. À la hauteur du clos de Patterson, la berge, minée par les eaux furieuses, s’écroula tout à coup, en entraînant la maison de l’Irlandais. Celui-ci et Long disparurent avec elle et furent emportés dans un irrésistible tourbillon.

Depuis le commencement du dégel, Patterson, sourd à toutes les objurgations, s’était énergiquement refusé à quitter sa demeure. Il n’avait pas cédé en se voyant exclu de la protection du barrage, ni même quand le bas de son enclos eut été envahi. Il ne céda pas davantage lorsque l’eau vint battre le seuil de sa maison.

En un instant, sous les yeux de quelques spectateurs qui, du haut du barrage, assistaient impuissants à la scène, maison et habitants furent engloutis.

Comme si le double meurtre eût satisfait sa colère, l’inondation montra bientôt après une tendance à décroître. Le niveau de l’eau baissa peu à peu, et enfin, le 5 novembre, un mois jour pour jour après le commencement du dégel, la rivière reprit son lit habituel.

Mais quels ravages le phénomène laissait après lui! Les rues de Libéria étaient ravinées comme si la charrue y avait passé. Des routes, emportées par endroits, et recouvertes en d’autres points par une épaisse couche de boue, il ne restait que des vestiges.

On s’occupa tout d’abord de rétablir les communications supprimées. Construite en plein marécage, la route qui conduisait au Bourg-Neuf était celle qui avait subi les plus sérieux dommages. Ce fut elle aussi qui revint au jour la dernière. Plus de trois semaines furent nécessaires pour rendre le passage de nouveau praticable.

À la surprise générale, la première personne qui l’utilisa fut précisément Patterson. Aperçu par les pêcheurs du Bourg-Neuf, au moment où, désespérément cramponné à un morceau de bois, il arrivait à la mer, l’Irlandais avait eu la chance d’être sorti sain et sauf de ce mauvais pas. Par contre, Long n’avait pas eu le même bonheur. Toutes les recherches faites pour retrouver son corps étaient restées infructueuses.

Ces renseignements, on les eut ultérieurement des sauveteurs, mais non de Patterson, qui, sans donner la plus mince explication, s’était rendu en droite ligne à l’ancien emplacement de sa maison. Quand il vit qu’il n’en subsistait aucune trace, son désespoir fut immense. Avec elle, disparaissait tout ce qu’il avait possédé sur la terre. Ce qu’il avait apporté à l’île Hoste, ce qu’il avait accumulé depuis, à force de labeur, de privations, d’impitoyable dureté envers les autres et envers lui-même, tout était perdu sans retour. À lui, dont l’or était l’unique passion, dont le seul but avait toujours été d’amasser et d’amasser plus encore, il ne restait rien, et il était le plus pauvre parmi les plus pauvres de ceux qui l’entouraient. Nu et démuni de tout comme en arrivant sur la terre, il lui fallait recommencer sa vie.

Quel que fût son accablement, Patterson ne se permit ni gémissements, ni plaintes. En silence, il médita d’abord, les yeux fixés sur la rivière qui avait emporté son bien, puis il alla délibérément trouver le Kaw-djer. L’ayant abordé avec une humble politesse, et après s’être excusé de la liberté grande, il exposa que l’inondation, après avoir failli lui coûter la vie, le réduisait à la plus affreuse misère.

Le Kaw-djer, à qui le requérant inspirait une profonde antipathie, répondit d’une voix froide:

“C’est fort regrettable, mais que puis-je à cela? Est-ce un secours que vous demandez?”

Contrepartie de son implacable avarice, Patterson avait une qualité: l’orgueil. Jamais il n’avait imploré personne. S’il s’était montré peu scrupuleux sur le choix des moyens, du moins avait-il à lui seul tenu tête au reste du monde, et sa lente ascension vers la fortune, il ne la devait qu’à lui-même.

“Je ne demande pas la charité, répliqua-t-il en redressant son échine courbée. Je réclame justice.

— Justice!… répéta le Kaw-djer surpris. Contre qui?

— Contre la ville de Libéria, répondit Patterson, contre l’État hostelien tout entier.

— À propos de quoi?” demanda le Kaw-djer de plus en plus étonné.

Reprenant son attitude obséquieuse, Patterson expliqua sa pensée en termes doucereux. À son sens, la responsabilité de la Colonie était engagée, d’abord parce qu’il s’agissait d’un malheur général et public, dont le dommage devait être supporté proportionnellement par tous, ensuite parce qu’elle avait gravement manqué à son devoir, en n’élevant pas le barrage, qui avait sauvé la ville, en bordure même de la rivière, de manière à protéger toutes les maisons sans exception.

Le Kaw-djer eut beau répliquer que le tort dont il se plaignait était imaginaire, que, si la digue avait été élevée plus près de la rivière, elle se fût écroulée avec la berge, et que le reste de la ville eût été par conséquent envahi, Patterson ne voulut rien entendre, et s’entêta à ressasser ses précédents arguments. Le Kaw-djer, à bout de patience, coupa court à cette discussion stérile.

Patterson n’essaya pas de la prolonger. Tout de suite, il alla reprendre sa place parmi les travailleurs du port. Sa vie détruite, il s’employait, sans perdre une heure, à la réédifier.

Le Kaw-djer, considérant cet incident comme clos, avait immédiatement cessé d’y penser. Le lendemain, il fallut déchanter. Non, l’incident n’était pas clos, ainsi que le prouvait une plainte reçue par Ferdinand Beauval en sa qualité de président du Tribunal. Puisqu’on avait une première fois démontré à l’Irlandais qu’il y avait une justice à l’île Hoste, il y recourait une seconde fois.

Bon gré, mal gré, on fut obligé de plaider ce singulier procès, que Patterson perdit, bien entendu. Sans montrer la colère que devait lui faire éprouver son échec, sourd aux brocards qu'on ne ménageait pas à une victime universellement détestée, il se retira, la sentence rendue, et retourna paisiblement à son poste de travailleur.

Mais un levain nouveau fermentait dans son âme. Jusqu'alors il avait vu la terre divisée en deux camps: lui d'un côté, le reste de l'humanité de l'autre. Le problème à résoudre consistait uniquement à faire passer le plus d'or possible du second camp dans le premier. Cela impliquait une lutte perpétuelle, cela n'impliquait pas la haine. La haine est une passion stérile; ses intérêts ne se paient pas en monnaie ayant cours. Le véritable avare ne la connaît pas. Or, Patterson haïssait désormais. Il haïssait le Kaw-djer qui lui refusait justice; il haïssait tout le peuple hostelien qui avait allégrement laissé périr le produit si durement acquis de tant de peines et tant d'efforts.

Sa haine, Patterson l'enferma en lui-même, et, dans cette âme, serre chaude favorable à la végétation des pires sentiments, elle devait prospérer et grandir. Pour le moment, il était impuissant contre ses ennemis. Mais les temps pouvaient changer… Il attendrait.

La plus grande partie de la belle saison fut employée à réparer les dommages causés par l'inondation. On procéda à la réfection des routes, au relèvement des fermes quand il y avait lieu. Dès le mois de février 1885, il ne restait plus trace de l'épreuve que la colonie venait de subir.

Pendant que ces travaux s'accomplissaient, le Kaw-djer sillonna l'île en tous sens selon sa coutume. Il pouvait maintenant multiplier ces excursions, qu'il faisait à cheval, une centaine de ces animaux ayant été importés. Au hasard de ses courses, il eut, à plusieurs reprises, l'occasion de s'informer de Sirdey. Les renseignements qu'il obtint furent des plus vagues. Rares étaient les émigrants qui pouvaient donner la moindre nouvelle du cuisinier du Jonathan. Quelques-uns seulement se rappelèrent l’avoir aperçu, l’automne précédent, remontant à pied vers le Nord. Quant à dire ce qu’il était devenu, personne n’en fut capable.

Dans le dernier mois de 1884, un navire apporta les deux cents fusils commandés après le premier attentat de Dorick. L’État hostelien possédait désormais près de deux cent cinquante armes à feu, non compris celles qu’un petit nombre de colons pouvaient s’être procurées.

Un mois plus tard, au début de l’année 1885, l’île Hoste reçut la visite de plusieurs familles fuégiennes. Comme chaque année, ces pauvres Indiens venaient demander secours et conseils au Bienfaiteur, puisque telle était la signification du nom indigène que leur reconnaissance avait décerné au Kaw-djer. S’il les avait abandonnés, eux n’avaient pas oublié et n’oublieraient jamais celui qui leur avait donné tant de preuves de son dévouement et de sa bonté.

Toutefois, quel que fût l’amour que lui portaient les Fuégiens, le Kaw-djer n’avait jamais réussi jusqu’alors à décider un seul d’entre eux à se fixer à l’île Hoste. Ces peuplades sont trop indépendantes pour se plier à une règle quelconque. Pour elles, il n’est pas d’avantage matériel qui vaille la liberté. Or, avoir une demeure, c’est déjà être esclave. Seul est vraiment libre l’homme qui ne possède rien. C’est pourquoi, à la certitude du lendemain, ils préfèrent leurs courses vagabondes à la poursuite d’une nourriture rare et incertaine.

Pour la première fois, le Kaw-djer décida, cette année-là, trois familles de Pêcherais à planter leur tente et à faire l’essai d’une vie sédentaire. Ces trois familles, comptant parmi les plus intelligentes de celles qui erraient à travers l’archipel, se fixèrent sur la rive gauche de la rivière, entre Libéria et le Bourg-Neuf, et fondèrent un hameau, qui fut l’amorce des villages indigènes qui devaient s’établir par la suite.

Cet été vit encore s’accomplir deux événements remarquables à des titres divers.

L’un de ces événements est relatif à Dick.

Depuis le 15 juin précédent, les deux enfants pouvaient être considérés comme rétablis. Dick, en particulier était complètement guéri, et, s’il était encore un peu maigre, ce reste d’amaigrissement ne pouvait résister longtemps au formidable appétit dont il faisait preuve. Quant à Sand, son état général ne laissait plus rien à désirer, et, pour le surplus, il n’y avait pas lieu de s’en préoccuper, car la science humaine était impuissante à empêcher qu’il fût condamné à l’immobilité jusqu’à la fin de ses jours. Le petit infirme acceptait, d’ailleurs, fort paisiblement cet inévitable malheur. La nature lui avait donné une âme douce et aussi peu encline à la révolte que son ami Dick y était porté. Sa douceur le servit dans cette circonstance. Non, en vérité, il ne regrettait pas les jeux violents auxquels il se livrait autrefois, plutôt pour faire plaisir aux autres que pour satisfaire ses goûts personnels. Cette vie de reclus lui plaisait et elle lui plairait toujours, à la condition qu’il eût son violon et que son ami Dick fût près de lui, lorsque l’instrument cessait exceptionnellement de chanter.

À cet égard, il n’avait pas à se plaindre. Dick s’était constitué son garde-malade de tous les instants. Il n’eût cédé sa place à personne pour aider Sand à sortir du lit et à gagner le fauteuil sur lequel celui-ci passait ses longues journées. Il restait ensuite près du blessé, attentif à ses moindres désirs, faisant montre d’une patience inaltérable, dont on n’eût pas cru capable le bouillant petit garçon de jadis.

Le Kaw-djer assistait à ce touchant manège. Pendant la maladie des deux enfants, il avait eu tout le loisir de les observer, et il s’était également attaché à eux. Mais Dick, outre l’affection paternelle qu’il lui portait, l’intéressait en même temps. Jour par jour, il avait pu reconnaître quelle âme droite, quelle exquise sensibilité et quelle vive intelligence possédait ce jeune garçon, et, peu à peu, il en était arrivé à trouver lamentable que des dons aussi rares demeurassent improductifs.

Pénétré de cette idée, il résolut de s’occuper tout particulièrement de cet enfant qui deviendrait ainsi l’héritier de ses connaissances dans les diverses branches de l’activité humaine. C’est ce qu’il avait fait pour Halg. Mais, avec Dick, les résultats seraient tout autres. Sur ce terrain préparé par une longue suite d’ascendants civilisés, la semence lèverait plus énergiquement, à la seule condition que Dick voulût bien mettre en œuvre les dons exceptionnels que la nature lui avait départis.

C’est vers la fin de l’hiver, que le Kaw-djer avait commencé son rôle d’éducateur. Un jour, emmenant Dick avec lui, il fit appel à son cœur.

“Voilà Sand guéri, lui dit-il, alors qu’ils étaient seuls tous deux dans la campagne. Mais il restera infirme. Il ne faudra jamais oublier, mon garçon, que c’est pour sauver ta vie qu’il a perdu ses jambes.”

Dick leva vers le Kaw-djer un regard déjà mouillé. Pourquoi le gouverneur lui parlait-il ainsi? Ce qu’il devait à Sand, il n’y avait aucun danger qu’il l’oubliât jamais.

“Tu n’as qu’une bonne manière de le remercier, reprit le Kaw-djer, c’est de faire en sorte que son sacrifice serve à quelque chose, en rendant ta vie utile à toi-même et aux autres. Jusqu’ici, tu as vécu en enfant. Il faut te préparer à être un homme.”

Les yeux de Dick brillèrent. Il comprenait ce langage.

“Que faut-il faire pour cela, gouverneur? demanda-t-il.

— Travailler, répondit le Kaw-djer d’une voix grave. Si tu veux me promettre de travailler avec courage, c’est moi qui serai ton professeur. La science est un monde que nous parcourrons ensemble.

— Ah! Gouverneur!…” fit Dick, incapable d’ajouter autre chose.

Les leçons commencèrent immédiatement. Chaque jour, le Kaw-djer consacrait une heure à son élève. Après quoi, Dick étudiait auprès de Sand. Tout de suite, il fit des progrès merveilleux qui frappaient d’étonnement son professeur. Les leçons achevaient la transformation que le sacrifice de Sand avait commencée. Il n’était plus question maintenant de jouer au restaurant, ni au lion, ni à aucun autre jeu de l’enfance. L’enfant était mort, engendrant un homme prématurément mûri par la douleur.

Le second événement remarquable fut le mariage de Halg et de Graziella Ceroni. Halg avait alors vingt-deux ans, et Graziella approchait de ses vingt ans.

Ce mariage n’était pas, de beaucoup, le premier célébré à l’île Hoste. Dès le début de son gouvernement, le Kaw-djer avait organisé l’état civil, et l’établissement de la propriété avait eu pour conséquence immédiate de donner aux jeunes gens en âge de le faire, le désir de fonder des familles. Mais celui de Halg avait une importance toute particulière aux yeux du Kaw-djer. C’était la conclusion de l’une de ses œuvres, de celle qui, pendant longtemps, avait été la plus chère à son cœur. Le sauvage transformé par lui en créature pensante allait se perpétuer dans ses enfants.

L’avenir du nouveau ménage était largement assuré. L’entreprise de pêche conduite par Halg avec son père Karroly donnait les meilleurs résultats. Il était même question d’installer à proximité du Bourg-Neuf une fabrique de conserves, d’où les produits maritimes de l’île Hoste se répandraient sur le monde entier. Mais, quand bien même ce projet encore vague ne dût jamais être réalisé, Halg et Karroly trouvaient sur place des débouchés assez larges pour ne pas redouter la gêne.

Vers la fin de l’été, le Kaw-djer reçut du gouvernement chilien une réponse à ses propositions relatives au cap Horn. Rien de décisif dans cette réponse. On demandait à réfléchir. On ergotait. Le Kaw-djer connaissait trop bien les usages officiels pour s’étonner de ces atermoiements. Il s’arma de patience et se résigna à continuer une conversation diplomatique, qui, en raison des distances, n’était pas près d’arriver à sa conclusion.

Puis l’hiver revint, ramenant les frimas. Les cinq mois qu’il dura n’eussent rien présenté de saillant, si, pendant cette période, une agitation d’ordre politique, au demeurant assez anodine, ne se fût révélée dans la population.

Circonstance curieuse, l’auteur occasionnel de cette agitation n’était autre que Kennedy. Le rôle de l’ancien marin n’était ignoré de personne. La mort de Lewis Dorick et des frères Moore, l’héroïque dévouement de Sand, la longue maladie de Dick, la disparition de Sirdey n’avaient pu passer inaperçus. Toute l’histoire était connue, y compris la manière quasi miraculeuse dont le Kaw-djer avait échappé à la mort.

Aussi, quand Kennedy revint se mêler aux autres colons, l’accueil qu’il en reçut ne fut pas des plus chauds. Mais, peu à peu, l’impression première s’effaça, tandis que, par un étrange phénomène de cristallisation, tous les mécontentements épars s’amalgamaient autour de lui. En somme, son aventure n’était pas ordinaire. C’était un personnage en vue. Criminel pour l’immense majorité des Hosteliens, nul du moins ne pouvait contester qu’il fût un homme d’action, prêt aux résolutions énergiques. Cette qualité fit de lui le chef naturel des mécontents.

Des mécontents, il y en a toujours et partout. Satisfaire tout le monde est, pour le moment du moins, un rêve irréalisable. Il y en avait donc à Libéria.

Outre les paresseux, qui formaient, bien entendu, le gros de cette armée, on y comptait ceux qui n’avaient pas réussi à sortir de l’ornière, ou qui, après en être sortis, y étaient retombés pour une cause quelconque. Les uns et les autres rendaient, comme c’est l’usage, l’administration de la colonie responsable de leur déception. À ce premier noyau, venaient s’ajouter ceux que leur tempérament entraînait à se nourrir de verbiage, les politiques purs, ceux-ci professant ces mêmes doctrines, considérées malheureusement d’un point de vue moins élevé, qui avaient eu jadis les préférences du Kaw-djer, ceux-là communistes à l’exemple de Lewis Dorick, ou collectivistes selon l’évangile de Karl Marx et de Ferdinand Beauval.

Ces divers éléments, quelque hétérogènes qu’ils fussent, s’accordaient très bien entre eux, pour cette raison qu’il ne s’agissait que de faire œuvre d’opposition. Tant qu’il n’est question que de détruire, toutes les ambitions s’allient aisément. C’est au jour de la curée que les appétits se donnent libre carrière et transforment en implacables adversaires les alliés de la veille.

Pour le moment, l’accord était donc complet, et il en résultait une agitation, d’ailleurs superficielle, qui, au cours de l’hiver, se traduisit par des réunions et des meetings de protestation. Les citoyens présents à ces séances n’étaient jamais très nombreux, une centaine tout au plus, mais ils faisaient du bruit comme mille, et le Kaw-djer les entendit nécessairement.

Loin de s’indigner de cette nouvelle preuve de l’ingratitude humaine, il examina froidement les revendications formulées, et, sur un point tout au moins, il les trouva fondées. Les mécontents avaient raison, en effet, en soutenant que le gouverneur ne tenait son mandat de personne et, qu’en se l’attribuant de sa propre volonté, il avait commis un acte de tyran.

Certes, le Kaw-djer ne regrettait nullement d’avoir violenté la liberté. Les circonstances ne permettaient pas alors l’hésitation. Mais la situation était fort différente aujourd’hui. Les Hosteliens s’étaient canalisés d’eux-mêmes, chacun dans sa direction préférée, et la vie sociale battait son plein. La population était peut-être mûre pour qu’une organisation plus démocratique pût être tentée sans imprudence.

Il résolut donc de donner satisfaction aux protestations, en se soumettant de lui-même à l’épreuve de l’élection et en faisant nommer en même temps par les électeurs un Conseil de trois membres qui assisterait le gouverneur dans l’exercice de ses fonctions.

Le collège électoral fut convoqué pour le 20 octobre 1885, c’est-à-dire dans les premiers jours du printemps. La population totale de l’île Hoste s’élevait alors à plus de deux mille âmes, dont douze cent soixante-quinze hommes majeurs; mais, certains électeurs trop éloignés de Libéria ne s’étant pas rendus à la convocation, mille vingt-sept suffrages seulement furent exprimés, sur lesquels neuf cent soixante-huit firent masse sur le nom du Kaw-djer. Pour former le Conseil, les électeurs eurent le bon sens de choisir Harry Rhodes par huit cent trente-deux voix, Hartlepool qui le suivit de près avec huit cent quatre bulletins, et enfin Germain Rivière qui fut désigné par sept cent dix-huit votants. C’étaient là d’écrasantes majorités, et, quelle que fût sa mauvaise humeur, le parti de l’opposition dut reconnaître son impuissance.

Le Kaw-djer mit à profit la liberté relative que lui assurait la collaboration du Conseil pour accomplir un voyage qu'il désirait faire depuis longtemps. En vue de la discussion engagée avec le Chili au sujet du cap Horn, il n'estimait pas inutile de parcourir l'archipel et d'examiner tout particulièrement l'île formant l'objet des négociations en cours.

Le 25 novembre, il partit sur la Wel-Kiej en compagnie de Karroly, pour ne revenir, ses idées définitivement fixées, que le 10 décembre, après quinze jours de navigation qui n'avait pas toujours été des plus faciles.

Au moment où il débarquait, un cavalier entrait dans Libéria par la route du Nord. À la poussière dont ce cavalier était couvert, on pouvait connaître qu'il venait de loin et qu'il avait couru à toute bride.

Ce cavalier se dirigea directement vers le gouvernement et l'atteignit en même temps que le Kaw-djer. S'annonçant porteur de graves nouvelles, il demanda une audience particulière qui lui fut accordée sur-le-champ.

Un quart d'heure plus tard, le Conseil était réuni et des émissaires partaient de tous côtés à la recherche des hommes de la police. Une heure ne s'était pas écoulée depuis l'arrivée du Kaw-djer, que celui-ci, à la tête de vingt-cinq cavaliers, s'élançait vers l'intérieur de l'île à toute vitesse.

Le motif de ce départ précipité ne fut pas longtemps un secret. Bientôt les bruits les plus sinistres commencèrent à courir. On disait que l'île Hoste était envahie, et qu'une armée de Patagons, ayant traversé le canal du Beagle, avait débarqué sur la côte nord de la presqu'île Dumas et marchait sur Libéria.

CHAPITRE VII

VII

L'invasion

Ces bruits étaient justifiés, mais la rumeur publique exagérait. Comme d'usage, la vérité s'amplifiait en passant de bouche en bouche. La horde de Patagons, qui, au nombre de sept cents environ, avait débarqué, vingt-quatre heures plus tôt, sur le rivage nord de l'Île ne méritait nullement l'appellation d'armée.

Sous le nom de Patagons, on comprend, dans le langage courant, l'ensemble des peuplades, en réalité fort différentes les unes des autres au point de vue ethnologique, qui vivent dans les pampas de l'Amérique du Sud. De ces peuplades, les plus septentrionales, c'est-à-dire les plus voisines de la République Argentine, sont relativement pacifiques. Adonnées à l'agriculture, elles ont formé de nombreux villages, et leur pays n'est même pas dépourvu de villes d'une importance plus ou moins grande. Mais, à mesure qu'on descend vers le Sud, elles tendent à changer de caractère. Les plus australes sont à la fois moins sédentaires et infiniment plus redoutables. Vivant surtout du produit de leur chasse, les indigènes qui les composent, les Patagons proprement dits, sont en général d'habiles tireurs et d'incomparables cavaliers. Ils pratiquent encore l'esclavage, que de perpétuels pillages alimentent. Chez eux, les guerres de tribu à tribu sont incessantes, et ils n'épargnent guère les rares étrangers qui s'aventurent dans ces régions presque inexplorées. Ce sont des sauvages.

L’absence de tout gouvernement régulier, une complète anarchie entretenue jusque dans ces dernières années par la rivalité des États civilisés limitrophes, ont permis à cette sauvagerie et à ce brigandage de se perpétuer trop longtemps. Nul doute que la République Argentine et le Chili enfin d’accord ne sachent y mettre un terme, mais il ne faut pas se dissimuler que l’œuvre sera longue et laborieuse, dans une contrée immense, à population clairsemée, sans moyens de communications, et qui, depuis l’origine du monde, a joui d’une indépendance illimitée.

Les envahisseurs de l’île Hoste appartenaient à cette catégorie d’Indiens. Comme on l’a déjà vu au début de ce récit, les Patagons sont coutumiers de ces incursions en territoires voisins, et bien souvent ils franchissent le détroit de Magellan pour razzier avec une cruauté impitoyable cette grande île de la Magellanie à laquelle appartient plus spécialement le nom de Terre de Feu. Toutefois, ils ne s’étaient jamais aventurés aussi loin jusqu’alors.

Pour arriver à l’île Hoste, ils avaient dû, soit traverser la Terre de Feu de part en part et ensuite le canal du Beagle, soit suivre depuis le littoral américain les canaux sinueux de l’archipel. Dans tous les cas, ils n’avaient accompli un pareil exode qu’au prix des plus grandes difficultés, tant pour se ravitailler pendant leur route terrestre, que pour naviguer dans les bras de mer, au risque de voir chavirer leurs légères pirogues sous le poids des chevaux.

Tout en galopant à la tête de ses vingt-cinq compagnons, le Kaw-djer se demandait quel motif avait décidé les Patagons à une entreprise si en dehors de leurs habitudes séculaires? Sans doute, la fondation de Libéria pouvait expliquer dans une certaine mesure ce fait anormal. Il est à croire que la réputation de la cité nouvelle s’était répandue dans les contrées environnantes et que la renommée lui avait attribué de merveilleuses richesses. L’imagination sauvage les amplifiant encore, rien de plus naturel qu’elles eussent excité des convoitises.

Oui, les choses pouvaient à la rigueur s’expliquer ainsi. Mais malgré tout, cependant, l’audace des envahisseurs demeurait surprenante, et, quelle que soit leur rapacité bien connue, il était difficile de concevoir qu’ils se fussent risqués à affronter une si nombreuse agglomération d’hommes blancs. Pour se lancer dans une telle aventure, ils avaient eu vraisemblablement des raisons particulières que le Kaw-djer cherchait sans les trouver.

Il ignorait en quel point de l’île il rencontrerait les ennemis. Peut-être ceux-ci étaient-ils déjà en marche. Peut-être n’avaient-ils pas quitté le lieu de leur débarquement. Dans ce cas, en s’en référant aux renseignements fournis par le porteur de la nouvelle, il s’agissait d’un parcours de cent vingt à cent vingt-cinq kilomètres. Les grandes vitesses étant interdites sur les routes hosteliennes, qui laissaient encore beaucoup à désirer au point de vue de la viabilité, le voyage exigerait au moins deux jours. Parti de bonne heure le 10 décembre, le Kaw-djer n’arriverait au but que le 11 dans la soirée.

À quelque distance de Libéria, la route, après avoir traversé la presqu’île Hardy dans sa largeur, s’orientait vers le Nord-Ouest et en suivait d’abord pendant une trentaine de kilomètres le rivage ouest battu par les flots du Pacifique, puis elle remontait au Nord, et, traversant une seconde fois l’île en sens contraire selon le caprice des vallées, elle allait frôler, trente-cinq kilomètres plus loin, le fond du Tekinika Sound, profonde indentation de l’Atlantique délimitant le sud de la presqu’île Pasteur, qu’un autre golfe plus profond encore, le Ponsonby Sound, sépare au Nord de la presqu’île Dumas. Au-delà, la route, faisant de nombreux lacets, empruntait un col élevé de l’importante chaîne de montagnes qui, venues de l’Ouest, se prolongent jusqu’à l’extrémité orientale de la presqu’île Pasteur, puis elle s’infléchissait de nouveau dans l’Ouest à la hauteur de l’isthme qui réunit cette presqu’île à l’ensemble de l’île Hoste. Enfin, après avoir laissé en arrière le fond du Ponsonby Sound, elle se recourbait dans l’Est, et, franchissant, à quatre vingt-quinze kilomètres de Libéria, l’isthme étroit de la presqu’île Dumas, elle en côtoyait ensuite le rivage nord baigné par les eaux du canal du Beagle.

Telle est la route que dut suivre le Kaw-djer. Chemin faisant, la troupe qu’il commandait s’accrut de quelques unités. Ceux des colons qui possédaient un cheval se joignirent à elle. Quant aux autres, le Kaw-djer leur donnait ses instructions au passage. Ils devaient battre le rappel et réunir le plus possible de combattants. Ceux qui avaient un fusil se porteraient de part et d’autre de la chaussée, en choisissant les endroits les plus inaccessibles, de telle sorte que des cavaliers ne pussent les y poursuivre. De là, ils enverraient du plomb aux envahisseurs, quand ceux-ci apparaîtraient, et battraient aussitôt en retraite vers un point plus élevé de la montagne. La consigne était de viser de préférence les chevaux, un Patagon démonté cessant d’être à redouter. Quant aux colons qui n’avaient que leurs bras, ils couperaient la route par des tranchées aussi rapprochées que possible et se retireraient en ne laissant derrière eux qu’un désert. Sur une étendue d’un kilomètre de part et d’autre du chemin, les champs devaient être saccagés dans les vingt-quatre heures, les fermes vidées de leurs ustensiles et de leurs provisions. Ainsi serait rendu plus difficile le ravitaillement des envahisseurs. Tout le monde irait ensuite s’enfermer dans l’enclos des Rivière, ceux qui pouvaient faire parler la poudre comme ceux n’ayant d’autres armes que la hache et la faux. Cet enclos, entouré d’une solide palissade et défendu par cette nombreuse garnison, deviendrait une véritable place forte qui ne courrait aucun risque d’être enlevée d’assaut.

Conformément à ses prévisions, le Kaw-djer atteignit l'isthme de la presqu'île Dumas le 11 décembre vers six heures du soir. On n'avait encore aperçu nulle trace des Patagons. Mais, à partir de ce point, on approchait du lieu de leur débarquement, et une extrême prudence était nécessaire. On se trouvait, en effet, dans la période des longs jours, et on n'aurait que très tard la protection de l'obscurité. On mit près de cinq heures pour arriver en vue du camp adverse. Il était alors près de minuit, et une obscurité relative couvrait la terre. On apercevait nettement la lueur des foyers. Les Patagons n'avaient pas bougé de place. Par nécessité sans doute de laisser reposer les chevaux, ils étaient restés à l'endroit même où ils avaient atterri.

La petite armée du Kaw-djer comptait maintenant trente-deux fusils, le sien compris. Mais, en arrière, des centaines de bras s'employaient à défoncer la route, à y accumuler des troncs d'arbres, à y élever des barricades, de manière à compliquer le plus possible la marche des envahisseurs.

Le camp de ceux-ci reconnu, on rétrograda, et on fit halte cinq ou six kilomètres en avant de l'isthme de la presqu'île Dumas. Les chevaux furent alors ramenés en deçà de cet isthme par quelques colons qui les tiendraient en réserve dans les montagnes, puis les cavaliers devenus piétons, dissimulés sur les pentes abruptes qui bordaient le sud de la route, attendirent l'ennemi.

Le Kaw-djer n'avait pas l'intention d'engager une bataille franche, que la disproportion des forces eût rendue insensée. Une tactique de guérillas était tout indiquée. De leurs postes élevés les défenseurs de l'île tireraient à loisir leurs adversaires, puis, pendant que ceux-ci perdraient leur temps à se dépêtrer des obstacles accumulés devant eux, ils se replieraient de crête en crête, par échelons qui s'assureraient successivement une mutuelle protection. On ne courrait aucun danger sérieux tant que les Patagons ne se résoudraient pas à abandonner leurs montures pour se lancer à la poursuite des tirailleurs. Mais cette éventualité n’était pas à craindre. Les Patagons ne renonceraient évidemment pas à leur habitude invétérée de ne combattre qu’à cheval, pour s’aventurer sur un terrain chaotique, où chaque rocher pouvait dissimuler une embuscade.

Il était neuf heures du matin, quand, le lendemain 12 décembre, les premiers d’entre eux apparurent. Partis à six heures, ils avaient employé trois heures à parcourir vingt-cinq kilomètres. Inquiets de se voir si loin de leur pays dans une contrée totalement inconnue, ils suivaient avec circonspection cette route bordée d’un côté par la mer et, de l’autre, par d’abruptes montagnes. Ils marchaient coude à coude, dans une formation serrée qui allait rendre plus facile la tâche des tireurs.

Trois détonations éclatant sur leur gauche jetèrent tout à coup le trouble parmi eux. La tête de colonne recula, mettant le désordre dans les rangs suivants. Mais, d’autres détonations n’ayant pas suivi les trois premières, ils reprirent confiance et s’ébranlèrent de nouveau. Tous les coups avaient porté. Un homme se tordait sur le bord du chemin dans les convulsions de l’agonie. Deux chevaux gisaient, l’un le poitrail troué, l’autre une jambe cassée.

Cinq cents mètres plus loin, les Patagons se heurtaient à une barricade de troncs d’arbres amoncelés. Pendant qu’ils s’occupaient de la détruire, des coups de fusils résonnèrent encore. L’une des balles fut efficace et mit un troisième cheval hors de service.

Dix fois, on avait renouvelé la manœuvre avec succès, quand la tête de colonne parvint à l’isthme de la presqu’île Dumas. En ce point, où la route encaissée n’avait d’autre issue qu’une gorge étroite, la défense s’était faite plus sérieuse. En avant d’une barricade plus épaisse et plus haute que les précédentes, une large et profonde excavation coupait la route. Au moment où les Patagons abordaient cet ouvrage, la fusillade crépita sur leur flanc gauche. Après un mouvement de recul, ils revinrent à la charge et ripostèrent au jugé, tandis qu'une centaine des leurs faisaient de leur mieux pour rétablir le passage.

Aussitôt la fusillade redoubla d'intensité. Une véritable pluie de balles siffla en travers du chemin et le rendit intenable. Les premiers qui s'aventurèrent dans la zone dangereuse ayant été frappés sans merci, cela donna à réfléchir à leurs compagnons, et la horde tout entière parut hésiter à pousser plus avant.

Les tireurs hosteliens la découvraient de bout en bout. Elle occupait plus de six cents mètres de route. Parcourue de violents remous, elle oscillait parfois en masse, tandis que des cavaliers galopaient d'une extrémité à l'autre, comme s'ils eussent été porteurs des ordres d'un chef.

Chaque fois qu'un de ces cavaliers arrivait à la tête de la colonne, une nouvelle tentative était faite contre la barricade, tentative bientôt suivie d'un nouveau recul quand un homme ou un cheval, blessé ou tué, démontrait en tombant combien la place était périlleuse.

Les heures s'écoulèrent ainsi. Enfin, aux approches du soir, la barricade fut renversée. Seule, la pluie des balles barrait désormais la route. Les Patagons prirent alors une résolution désespérée. Soudain, ils rassemblèrent leurs chevaux, et, partant au galop de charge, foncèrent en trombe dans la trouée. Trois hommes et douze chevaux y restèrent, mais la horde passa.

Cinq kilomètres plus loin, profitant d'un endroit découvert, où elle n'avait à redouter aucune surprise, elle fit halte et prit ses dispositions pour la nuit. Les Hosteliens, sans s'accorder un instant de repos, continuèrent au contraire leur retraite savante et allèrent se mettre en position pour le lendemain. La journée était bonne. Elle coûtait aux envahisseurs trente chevaux et cinq hommes hors combat, contre un seul des leurs légèrement blessé. Il n'y avait pas à s'occuper des hommes démontés. Mauvais marcheurs, ils resteraient en arrière, et on aurait facilement raison de ces traînards.

Le jour suivant, la même manœuvre fut adoptée. Vers deux heures de l'après-midi, les Patagons, ayant fait au total une soixantaine de kilomètres depuis qu'ils s'étaient ébranlés, atteignirent le sommet du col emprunté par la route pour franchir la chaîne centrale de l'île. Depuis près de trois heures, ils montaient alors sans interruption. Gens et bêtes étaient pareillement exténués. Au moment de s'engager dans le défilé qui commençait en cet endroit, ils firent halte. Le Kaw-djer en profita pour se poster à quelque distance en avant.

Sa troupe, grossie de tirailleurs ralliés pendant la retraite et de ceux qui se trouvaient déjà au sommet, comptait alors près de soixante fusils. Ces soixante hommes, il les disposa sur une centaine de mètres, au point où la tranchée était la plus profonde, tous du même côté de la route. Bien abrités derrière les énormes rocs qui la surplombaient, les Hosteliens se riraient des projectiles ennemis. Ils allaient tirer presque à bout portant, comme à l'affût.

Dès que les Patagons se remirent en mouvement, le plomb jaillit de la crête et faucha leurs premiers rangs. Ils reculèrent en désordre, puis revinrent à la charge sans plus de succès. Pendant deux heures, cette alternative se renouvela. Si les Patagons étaient braves, ils ne brillaient pas précisément par l'intelligence. Ce fut seulement quand ils eurent vu tomber un grand nombre des leurs, qu'ils s'avisèrent de la manœuvre qui leur avait si bien réussi la veille. Des appels retentirent. Les chevaux se rapprochèrent les uns des autres. Les naseaux touchant les croupes, la horde fut un bloc. Puis, prête enfin pour la charge, elle s'ébranla tout entière à la fois et partit dans un galop furieux. Les sabots frappaient le sol avec un bruit de tonnerre, la terre tremblait. Aussitôt les fusils hosteliens crachèrent plus hâtivement la mort.

C'était un spectacle admirable. Rien n'arrêtait ces cavaliers changés en météores. L'un d'eux vidait-il les arçons? Ceux qui venaient à sa suite le piétinaient sans pitié. Un cheval blessé ou tué tombait-il? Les autres bondissaient par-dessus l'obstacle et continuaient sans arrêt leur course enragée.

Les Hosteliens ne songeaient guère à admirer ces prouesses. Pour eux, c'était une question de vie ou de mort. Ils ne pensaient qu'à ceci: charger, viser, tirer, puis charger, et viser, et tirer, et ainsi de suite, sans un instant d'interruption. Les canons brûlaient leurs mains; ils tiraient toujours. Dans la folie de la bataille, ils en oubliaient toute prudence. Ils s'écartaient de leurs abris, s'offraient aux coups de l'ennemi. Celui-ci aurait eu la partie belle, s'il lui eût été possible de riposter.

Mais, au train qu'ils menaient, les Patagons ne pouvaient faire usage de leurs armes. À quoi bon, d'ailleurs? La médiocre étendue du front de bataille révélant le petit nombre des adversaires, leur seul objectif était de franchir la zone dangereuse, quitte à faire pour cela les sacrifices qui seraient nécessaires.

Ils la franchirent en effet. Bientôt les balles ne sifflèrent plus. Ils ralentirent alors leur allure et suivirent au grand trot la route qui, après avoir dépassé le point culminant du col, descendait maintenant en lacets. Tout était tranquille autour d'eux. De loin en loin, un coup de feu éclatait sur leur gauche ou sur leur droite, lorsque des rochers surplombaient la chaussée. D'ailleurs, ce coup de feu, tiré par l'un des colons transformés en guérillas, manquait généralement le but. Dans tous les cas, les Patagons ripostaient par une grêle de balles qu'ils envoyaient au jugé, et ils poursuivaient leur chemin.

Instruits par l'expérience, ils ne commirent pas, cette fois, la faute de s'arrêter à trop faible distance du lieu du dernier combat. Jusqu'à une heure avancée de la nuit, ils dévalèrent rapidement la pente et ne s'arrêtèrent pour camper que parvenus en terrain plat.

C'était pour eux une rude journée. Ils avaient franchi soixante-cinq kilomètres, dont trente-cinq depuis le sommet du col. À leur droite, ils apercevaient les flots du Pacifique venant battre un rivage sablonneux. À leur gauche, c'était un pays de plaine, où les surprises cessaient d'être à craindre. Le lendemain, ils seraient de bonne heure au but, devant Libéria, éloigné de trente kilomètres à peine.

Désormais, il ne pouvait plus être question pour le Kaw-djer de se porter en avant des envahisseurs. Outre que la nature du pays ne se prêtait plus à la manœuvre qui lui avait si bien réussi jusque-là, trop grande était la distance qui le séparait d'eux. Sur son ordre, on ne s'entêta pas dans une poursuite inutile, et l'on prit, couchés sur la terre nue, à la lueur des étoiles, quelques heures d'un repos que rendaient nécessaire les fatigues supportées pendant trois nuits consécutives.

Le Kaw-djer n'avait pas lieu d'être mécontent du résultat de sa tactique. Au cours de cette dernière journée, les ennemis avaient perdu au moins cinquante chevaux et une quinzaine d'hommes. C'est donc diminuée d'une centaine de cavaliers et moralement ébranlée que leur troupe arriverait devant Libéria. Contrairement à son attente sans doute, elle n'y entrerait pas sans peine.

Le lendemain matin, on fit rallier les chevaux, mais on ne put les avoir avant le milieu du jour. Il était près de midi quand les tirailleurs redevenus cavaliers, et réduits par conséquent au nombre de trente-deux, purent à leur tour commencer la descente.

Rien ne s'opposait à ce qu'on avançât rapidement. La prudence n'était plus nécessaire. On était renseigné par ceux des colons qui, en embuscade sur les bords de la route, avaient salué l'ennemi au passage. On savait que les Patagons avaient continué leur marche en avant et qu'on ne courait pas le risque de se heurter tout à coup à la queue de leur colonne.

Vers trois heures, on atteignit l'endroit où la horde avait campé. Nombreuses étaient ses traces, et on ne pouvait s'y méprendre. Mais, depuis les premières heures du matin, elle s'était remise en mouvement, et, selon toute probabilité, elle devait être maintenant sous Libéria.

Deux heures plus tard, on commençait à longer la palissade limitant l'enclos des Rivière, quand on aperçut, sur la route, un fort parti d'hommes à pied. Leur nombre dépassait certainement la centaine. Lorsqu'on en fut plus près, on vit qu'il s'agissait des Patagons démontés au cours des rencontres précédentes.

Soudain, des coups de feu furent tirés de l'enclos. Une dizaine de Patagons tombèrent. Des survivants, les uns ripostèrent et envoyèrent contre la palissade des balles inoffensives, les autres esquissèrent un mouvement de fuite. Ils découvrirent alors les trente-deux cavaliers qui leur interdisaient la retraite et dont les rifles se mirent à leur tour à parler.

Au bruit de ces détonations, plus de deux cents hommes armés de fourches, de haches et de faux firent irruption hors de l’enclos, barrant la route vers Libéria. Cernés de toutes parts, à droite par des rocs infranchissables, en avant par les paysans que leur nombre rendait redoutables, à gauche par les fusils dont les canons luisaient au-dessus de la palissade, en arrière enfin par le Kaw-djer et ses cavaliers, les Patagons perdirent courage et jetèrent leurs armes sur le sol. On les captura sans autre effusion de sang. Pieds et mains entravés, ils furent enfermés dans une grange à la porte de laquelle on plaça des factionnaires.

C’était une opération merveilleuse. Non seulement les envahisseurs avaient perdu une centaine de cavaliers, mais aussi une centaine de fusils, et ces fusils, de médiocre valeur assurément, allaient au contraire accroître la force des Hosteliens. Ceux-ci pourraient disposer de trois cent cinquante armes à feu, contre six cents environ qui leur étaient opposées. La partie devenait presque égale.

La garnison réunie à l’enclos des Rivière put renseigner le Kaw-djer sur la marche des Patagons. En passant devant la palissade au cours de la matinée, ils n’avaient fait que de timides tentatives pour la franchir. Dès les premiers coups de fusils, ils y avaient renoncé et s’étaient contentés d’envoyer quelques balles sans se livrer à une attaque plus sérieuse. Décidément, ces sauvages étaient peut-être des guerriers, mais sûrement ils n’étaient pas des hommes de guerre. Leur objectif étant Libéria, ils y allaient tout droit, sans inquiéter des ennemis qu’ils laissaient derrière eux.

Puisqu’on avait la chance d’avoir fait d’aussi nombreux prisonniers, le Kaw-djer ne voulut pas s’éloigner sans essayer de les interroger. Il se rendit donc au milieu d’eux.

Dans la grange où on les avait enfermés régnait un silence profond. Accroupis le long des murailles, cette centaine d'hommes attendaient, dans une immobilité farouche, que l'on décidât de leur sort. Vainqueurs, ils eussent des vaincus fait des esclaves. Vaincus, ils estimaient naturel qu'un pareil traitement leur fût infligé. Pas un seul d'entre eux ne daigna remarquer la présence du Kaw-djer.

“Quelqu'un de vous comprend-il l'espagnol? demanda celui-ci à voix haute.

— Moi, dit un des prisonniers en relevant la tête.

— Ton nom?

— Athlinata.

— Qu'es-tu venu faire dans ce pays?”

L'Indien, sans un geste, répondit:

“La guerre.

— Pourquoi nous faire la guerre? objecta le Kaw-djer. Nous ne sommes pas tes ennemis.”

Le Patagon garda le silence. Le Kaw-djer reprit:

“Jamais tes frères ne sont venus jusqu'ici. Pourquoi sont-ils allés, cette fois, si loin de leur pays?

— Le chef a commandé, dit l'Indien avec calme. Les guerriers ont obéi.

— Mais enfin, insista le Kaw-djer, quel est votre but?

— La grande ville du Sud, répondit le prisonnier. Là, sont des richesses, et les Indiens sont pauvres.

— Mais ces richesses, il faut les prendre, répliqua le Kaw-djer, et les habitants de cette ville se défendront.”

Le Patagon sourit ironiquement.

“La preuve, c’est que toi et tes frères êtes maintenant prisonniers, ajouta le Kaw-djer sous forme d’argument ad hominem.

— Les guerriers patagons sont nombreux, riposta l’Indien sans se laisser troubler. Les autres retourneront dans leur patrie en traînant tes frères à la queue de leurs chevaux.”

Le Kaw-djer haussa les épaules.

“Tu rêves, mon garçon, dit-il. Pas un de vous n’entrera dans Libéria.”

Le Patagon sourit de nouveau d’un air incrédule.

“Tu ne me crois pas? interrogea le Kaw-djer.

— L’homme blanc a promis, répliqua l’Indien avec assurance. Il donnera la grande ville aux Patagons.

— L’homme blanc?… répéta le Kaw-djer étonné. Il y a donc un blanc parmi vous?”

Mais toutes ses questions demeurèrent vaines. L’Indien avait dit évidemment tout ce qu’il savait, et il fut impossible d’en obtenir plus de détails.

Le Kaw-djer se retira soucieux. Quel était cet homme blanc, traître à sa race, qui s’alliait contre d’autres blancs à une bande de sauvages? En tous cas, c’était une nouvelle raison de se hâter. Bien qu’Hartlepool, se conformant aux ordres reçus, eût sûrement pris les mesures les plus urgentes, il n’était pas sans intérêt d’apporter du renfort à la garnison de Libéria.

Vers huit heures du soir, on partit. La troupe commandée par le Kaw-djer comptait maintenant cent cinquante-six hommes, dont cent deux armés aux dépens des Patagons. Des fantassins la composaient exclusivement, les chevaux ayant été laissés à l’enclos des Rivière. Pour s’introduire dans Libéria et franchir la ligne des ennemis, le Kaw-djer n’avait pas l’intention, en effet, d’appliquer la méthode, assurément courageuse, mais insensée, que ceux-ci avaient mise en pratique lorsqu’il s’était agi de forcer les passages difficiles. Son plan étant d’employer la ruse plutôt que la force, les chevaux eussent été plus gênants qu’utiles.

En trois heures de marche, on arriva en vue de la ville. Dans la nuit alors complètement tombée, une ligne de feux dessinait le camp des Patagons, établi selon un vaste demi-cercle, qui à droite, s’arrêtait au commencement du marécage et s’appuyait, à gauche, sur la rivière. L’investissement était complet. Se glisser inaperçus entre les postes espacés de cent en cent mètres était impraticable.

Le Kaw-djer fit faire halte à son monde. Avant de pousser plus loin, il fallait décider quelle tactique il convenait d’adopter.

Mais les envahisseurs n’étaient pas tous sur la rive droite de la rivière. Quelques-uns au moins avaient dû traverser l’eau en amont de la ville. Tandis que le Kaw-djer réfléchissait, une vive lumière éclata tout à coup dans le Nord-Ouest. C’étaient les maisons du Bourg-Neuf qui brûlaient.

CHAPITRE VIII

VIII

Un traître

Harry Rhodes et Hartlepool, auxquels, en l’absence du Kaw-djer, revenait naturellement l’autorité, n’avaient pas perdu leur temps, pendant que celui-ci retardait de son mieux la marche des Patagons. Les quatre jours de répit qu’ils devaient à la tactique savante de leur chef leur avaient suffi pour mettre la ville en état de défense.

Deux larges et profonds fossés, en arrière desquels les terres rejetées formaient un épaulement à l’épreuve de la balle, rendaient un coup de main impossible. L’un de ces fossés, celui du Sud, long de deux mille pas environ, partait de la rivière, puis, se recourbant en demi-cercle, embrassait la ville et allait jusqu’au marécage, qui constituait à lui seul un obstacle infranchissable. L’autre, celui du Nord, long de cinq cents pas à peine, naissait pareillement à la rivière pour aller mourir au marécage, en traversant la route réunissant Libéria au Bourg-Neuf.

La ville était ainsi défendue sur toutes les faces. Au Nord et au Nord-Est, par le marais, où un cheval se fût enlisé jusqu’au ventre; au Nord-Ouest, et du Sud-Ouest à l’Est par les remparts improvisés; à l’Ouest, par le cours d’eau qui opposait sa barrière liquide aux assiégeants.

Le Bourg-Neuf avait été évacué. Les habitants s’étaient réfugiés à Libéria avec tout ce qu’ils possédaient, laissant leurs maisons condamnées à une destruction certaine.

Dès le premier soir, avant même que les travaux fussent achevés et alors que le péril n’avait rien d’imminent, on commença à monter autour de la ville une garde vigilante. Une cinquantaine d’hommes étaient constamment affectés à ce service. Espacés de trente en trente mètres au sommet des épaulements et sur la berge de la rivière, ils surveillaient les environs et devaient appeler à leur aide au premier signe de danger. Cent soixante-quinze hommes, armés du reste des fusils et massés au cœur de la ville, se tenaient en réserve, prêts à se porter du côté où l’alarme serait donnée. Le surplus de la population dormait pendant ce temps. Tous les citoyens figuraient à tour de rôle dans ces trois groupes.

La défense n’aurait pu être mieux organisée. En avant, la ligne de couverture formée par les cinquante sentinelles que relevaient à intervalles fixes les cent soixante-quinze hommes de la réserve centrale. En troisième plan, le reste des Libériens, qui ne seraient pas longs à prêter main forte à la moindre alerte. Ces derniers, il est vrai, ne possédaient guère, en fait d’armes offensives, que des haches, des barres d’anspect ou des couteaux, mais ces armes n’eussent pas été négligeables dans le cas d’un assaut amenant un combat corps à corps.

L’obligation de la garde était générale. Personne ne pouvait s’y soustraire. Patterson y était donc astreint comme les autres. D’ailleurs, quels que fussent ses sentiments, il avait paru se résigner de bonne grâce à cette corvée, et, en vérité, ses pensées intimes étaient si contradictoires qu’il eût été incapable de dire s’il en était fâché ou satisfait.

Pendant ses heures de faction, il réfléchissait à ce problème, et, pour la première fois de sa vie, il faisait de l’analyse.

L’animosité qu’il avait conçue contre ses concitoyens, contre la ville de Libéria, contre l’île Hoste tout entière, était toujours aussi vivante au fond de son cœur, et il lui semblait dur, par conséquent, de contribuer dans une mesure quelconque au salut de gens qu'il exécrait. Considérée à ce point de vue, sa faction l'exaspérait.

Mais la haine ne venait qu'en troisième ligne chez Patterson. Pour la haine franche, comme pour l'amour véritable, il faut des cœurs ardents et vastes, et l'âme étriquée d'un avare ne saurait loger d'aussi amples passions. Après la cupidité, le sentiment dominant chez lui, c'était la peur.

Or, son sort étant lié à celui de ses concitoyens, et tous les Libériens étant solidaires, la peur lui conseillait d'étouffer sa haine. S'il lui eût été agréable de voir flamber une ville qu'il abhorrait, c'était à la condition qu'il en fût sorti au préalable, et il n'y avait aucune possibilité de la quitter. Dans l'île, erraient des bandes de Patagons dont la férocité était légendaire et qui seraient bientôt en vue de Libéria. En la défendant, Patterson, après tout, se défendait lui-même.

Tout compte fait, il préférait donc, en somme, monter la garde, bien qu'elle fût pour lui la source des plus pénibles sensations. Il n'éprouvait aucun plaisir, en effet, à rester seul, parfois la nuit, au premier rang, au risque d'être surpris par un ennemi. Aussi, la peur faisait-elle de lui une excellente sentinelle. Avec quelle énergie il ouvrait les yeux dans l'ombre! Avec quelle conscience il fouillait les ténèbres, le fusil à l'épaule et le doigt sur la gâchette au moindre bruit suspect!

Les quatre premiers jours se passèrent sans incident, mais il n'en fut pas de même du cinquième. Vers midi, ce jour-là, on avait vu les Patagons apparaître et installer leur camp au sud de la ville. La faction devenait tout à fait sérieuse. Désormais, l'ennemi était là, sans cesse menaçant.

Le soir de ce jour, Patterson venait de prendre la garde sur l’épaulement du Nord, entre la rivière et la route du Bourg-Neuf, quand une lueur intense brilla dans la direction du port. Il n’y avait pas à se faire d’illusion, les Patagons commençaient la danse. Peut-être allaient-ils donner l’assaut sans plus attendre, et vraisemblablement en face de lui, puisque sa mauvaise étoile l’avait placé tout près de la route du Bourg-Neuf.

Quelle ne fut pas sa terreur lorsque, précisément sur cette route, un vacarme éclata tout à coup. Une troupe qui paraissait nombreuse courait sur la chaussée et approchait rapidement. Certes, et Patterson le savait, la route était coupée par un fossé qu’une dérivation de la rivière avait rempli d’eau. Mais combien cette défense, qui lui inspirait tant de confiance pendant le jour, lui parut faible au moment du danger! Il vit le fossé traversé, l’épaulement escaladé, la ville envahie…

Cependant les assaillants présumés avaient fait halte au bord du fossé. Patterson, placé trop loin pour entendre les mots, comprit qu’on parlementait. Puis il y eut un remue-ménage. On apportait des planches, des madriers, des perches, afin d’établir un passage de fortune. Quelques instants plus tard, Patterson rassuré vit de loin défiler les nouveaux venus. Ils étaient nombreux, en effet, et leurs fusils jetaient de faibles éclairs sous la lumière de la lune qui allait entrer dans son dernier quartier. À leur tête marchait un homme de haute taille autour duquel on se pressait. Son nom courait de bouche en bouche. C’était le Kaw-djer.

Patterson en conçut à la fois de la joie et de la colère. De la colère, parce que c’était le Kaw-djer qu’il détestait par-dessus tous les autres. De la joie aussi, parce qu’il était rassuré par l’appoint de si importants renforts.

Si le Kaw-djer arrivait de ce côté, c’est qu’il venait effectivement du Bourg-Neuf. En apercevant dans la nuit la lumière de l’incendie qui dévorait le faubourg, il avait improvisé un plan d'action. Passant, à l'exemple des Patagons, la rivière à trois kilomètres en amont avec sa petite armée, il s'était dirigé, à travers la campagne, vers la flamme qui le guidait comme un phare.

D'après le nombre des feux de bivouac qui brillaient au sud de la ville, il supposait justement que le gros des envahisseurs y était campé. Dans ce cas, on n'en rencontrerait, dans la direction du Bourg-Neuf, qu'un faible parti qu'il serait aisé de dispenser. Cela fait, on entrerait dans Libéria tout bonnement par la route.

Les événements s'étaient déroulés conformément à ses prévisions. On surprit les incendiaires du port, alors que, dans leur rage de n'y avoir rien découvert qui valût la peine d'être pillé, ils étaient encore fort occupés à en activer la destruction. Arrivés sans rencontrer la plus légère résistance jusqu'à cette agglomération de maisons et l'ayant trouvée complètement déserte, ils étaient si tranquilles qu'ils n'avaient même pas jugé utile de se garder.

Le Kaw-djer tomba sur eux comme la foudre. Autour d'eux, la fusillade crépita soudain de tous côtés. Les Patagons éperdus prirent la fuite, en laissant entre les mains du vainqueur quinze nouveaux fusils et cinq prisonniers. On n'essaya pas de les poursuivre. Les coups de feu avaient pu être entendus de l'autre côté de la rivière, et un retour offensif était à redouter. Sans s'attarder, les Hosteliens se replièrent sur Libéria. La bataille n'avait pas duré dix minutes.

Le retour inopiné du Kaw-djer ne fut pas la seule émotion que le sort ménageait à Patterson. Trois jours plus tard, il en éprouva une seconde beaucoup plus intense et dont les conséquences devaient être autrement graves.

Son tour de garde le plaçait, cette fois, de six heures du soir à deux heures du matin, sur la berge de la rivière, à une centaine de mètres du point où l’épaulement du Nord venait s’appuyer. Entre cet épaulement et lui, trois autres sentinelles s’échelonnaient. Cette place n’était pas mauvaise. On s’y trouvait gardé soi-même de tous côtés.

Quand Patterson arriva à son poste, il faisait jour encore, et la situation lui parut des plus rassurantes. Mais, peu à peu, la nuit tomba, et il fut repris alors de ses habituelles terreurs. De nouveau, il prêta l’oreille au moindre bruit et jeta des coups d’œil rapides dans toutes les directions, en s’efforçant de voir si un mouvement suspect ne se dessinait pas quelque part.

Il regardait bien loin, alors que le danger était tout près. Quelle ne fut pas son épouvante, quand il s’entendit tout à coup appelé à mi-voix!

“Patterson!…” murmurait-on à deux pas de lui.

Il étouffa un cri prêt à jaillir de ses lèvres, car déjà, sur un ton menaçant, on commandait sourdement:

“Silence!”

La voix demanda:

“Me reconnais-tu?”

Et comme l’Irlandais, incapable d’articuler un mot, ne répondait pas.

“Sirdey”, dit-on dans la nuit.

Patterson reprit sa respiration. Celui qui parlait était un camarade. Le dernier, par exemple, qu’il se fût attendu à trouver là.

“Sirdey?… répéta-t-il d’un ton interrogateur en se mettant au diapason.

— Oui… Sois prudent… Parle bas… Es-tu seul?… N’y a-t-il personne autour de toi?”

Patterson fouilla la nuit des yeux.

“Personne, dit-il.

— Ne bouge pas… recommanda Sirdey. Reste debout… Qu’on te voie… Je vais m’approcher, mais ne te retourne pas de mon côté.”

Il y eut un glissement dans l’herbe de la berge.

“M’y voici, dit Sirdey, qui resta étendu sur le sol. Malgré la défense faite, Patterson risqua un coup d’œil du côté de son visiteur inattendu, et constata que celui-ci était trempé des pieds à la tête.

— D’où viens-tu? demanda-t-il en reprenant son attitude précédente.

— De la rivière… Je suis avec les Patagons.

— Avec les Patagons!… s’exclama sourdement Patterson.

— Oui!… Il y a dix-huit mois, quand j’ai quitté l’île Hoste, des Indiens m’ont fait passer le canal du Beagle. Je voulais aller à Punta-Arenas et, de là, en Argentine ou ailleurs. Mais les Patagons m’ont cueilli en route.

— Qu’ont-ils fait de toi?

— Un esclave.

— Un esclave!… répéta Patterson. Tu es libre, cependant, il me semble.

— Regarde”, répondit simplement Sirdey.

Patterson, obéissant à l’invitation, distingua une corde que son interlocuteur lui montrait et qui paraissait fixée à sa ceinture. Mais celui-ci ayant agité cette prétendue corde, il reconnut que c’était une mince chaîne de fer.

“Voilà comme je suis libre, reprit Sirdey. Sans compter que j’ai là, à dix pas, deux Patagons qui me guettent, cachés dans l’eau jusqu’au cou. Quand même j’arriverais à briser cette chaîne dont ils tiennent l’autre bout, ils sauraient bien me rattraper avant que je sois loin.”

Patterson trembla d’une manière si évidente que Sirdey s’en aperçut.

“Qu’as-tu? demanda-t-il.

— Des Patagons… bégaya Patterson épouvanté.

— N’aie pas peur, dit Sirdey. Ils ne te feront rien. Ils ont besoin de nous. Je leur ai dit que je pouvais compter sur toi, et c’est pourquoi ils m’ont envoyé ici en ambassadeur.

— Qu’est-ce qu’ils veulent?” balbutia Patterson.

Il y eut un instant de silence avant que Sirdey se décidât à répondre:

“Que tu les fasses entrer dans la ville.

— Moi!… protesta Patterson.

— Oui, toi. Il le faut… Écoute!… C’est pour moi une question de vie ou de mort. Quand je suis tombé entre leurs mains, je suis devenu leur esclave, je te l’ai dit. Ils m’ont torturé de cent façons. Un jour, ils ont appris, par quelques mots qui m’ont échappé, que j’arrivais de Libéria. Ils ont eu l’idée de se servir de moi pour piller la ville qu’ils connaissaient déjà de réputation, et ils m’ont offert la liberté si je pouvais les y aider. Moi, tu comprends…

— Chut!” interrompit Patterson.

Une des sentinelles voisines, lassée de son immobilité, s’avançait de leur côté. Mais, à une quinzaine de mètres des causeurs, elle s’arrêta, parvenue à la limite du secteur dont la surveillance lui était attribuée.

“Un peu frisquet, ce soir, dit l’Hostelien avant de retourner sur ses pas.

— Oui, répondit Patterson d’une voix étranglée.

— Bonsoir, camarade!

— Bonsoir!”

La sentinelle fit volte-face, s’éloigna et disparut dans l’ombre. Sirdey reprit aussitôt:

“Moi, tu comprends, j’ai promis… Alors ils ont organisé cette expédition, et ils m’ont traîné avec eux en me surveillant nuit et jour.

Maintenant, ils me somment de tenir ma promesse. Au lieu de trouver un passage facile, ils ont perdu beaucoup de monde, et on leur a fait plus de cent prisonniers. Ils sont furieux… Ce soir, je leur ai dit que j’avais des intelligences dans la place, un camarade qui ne me refuserait pas un coup de main… Je t’avais reconnu de loin… S’ils découvrent que je les ai trompés, mon affaire est claire!”

Pendant que Sirdey le mettait au courant de son histoire. Patterson réfléchissait. Certes il aurait eu plaisir à voir cette ville détruite, et tous ses habitants, y compris spécialement leur chef, massacrés ou dispersés. Mais que de risques à courir dans une pareille aventure! Tous comptes faits, Patterson opta pour la sécurité.

“Que puis-je à cela? demanda-t-il froidement.

— Nous aider à passer, répondit Sirdey.

— Vous n’avez pas besoin de moi, objecta Patterson. La preuve, c’est que tu es là.

— Un homme seul passe sans être vu, répliqua

Sirdey. Cinq cents hommes, c’est autre chose.

— Cinq cents!…

— Parbleu!… T’imagines-tu que c’est dans le but de faire une promenade dans la ville que je m’adresse à toi? Pour moi, Libéria est aussi malsaine que la compagnie des Patagons… À propos…

— Silence!” commanda brusquement Patterson.

On entendait un bruit de pas qui s’approchait. Bientôt, trois hommes sortirent de l’ombre. L’un deux aborda Patterson, et, démasquant une lanterne qu’il tenait cachée sous son manteau, en projeta un instant la lumière sur le visage de la sentinelle.

“Rien de neuf? demanda le nouveau venu qui n’était autre qu’Hartlepool.

— Rien.

— Tout est tranquille?

— Oui.”

La ronde continua son chemin.

“Tu disais?… interrogea Patterson, quand elle fut suffisamment éloignée.

— Je disais: à propos, que sont devenus les autres?

— Quels autres?

— Dorick?

— Mort.

— Fred Moore?

— Mort.

— William Moore?

— Mort.

— Bigre!… Et Kennedy?

— Il se porte comme toi et moi.

— Pas possible!… Il a donc réussi à s’en tirer?

— Probable.

— Sans être même soupçonné?

— C’est à croire, car il n’a jamais cessé de circuler librement.

— Où est-il maintenant?

— Il monte la garde quelque part, d’un côté ou de l’autre… Je ne sais où.

— Tu ne pourrais pas t’en informer?

— Impossible. Il m’est interdit de quitter mon poste. D’ailleurs, que lui veux-tu, à Kennedy?

— M’adresser à lui, puisque ma proposition ne semble pas te plaire.

— Et tu crois que je t’y aiderai? protesta Patterson. Tu crois que j’aiderai les Patagons à venir nous massacrer tous?

— Pas de danger, affirma Sirdey. Les camarades n’auront rien à craindre. Au contraire, ils auront leur part du pillage. C’est convenu.

— Hum!…” fit Patterson qui ne semblait pas convaincu.

Il était ébranlé cependant. Se venger des Hosteliens et s’enrichir en même temps de leurs dépouilles, c’était tentant… Mais se fier à la parole de ces sauvages!… Une fois de plus, la prudence l’emporta.

“Tout ça, c’est des mots en l’air, dit-il d’un ton décidé. Quand même on le voudrait, ni

Kennedy ni moi ne pourrions faire entrer cinq cents hommes incognito.

— Pas besoin qu’ils entrent tous à la fois, objecta Sirdey. Une cinquantaine, trente même, ce serait suffisant. Pendant que les premiers tiendraient le coup, les autres passeraient.

— Cinquante, trente, vingt, dix, c’est encore trop.

— C’est ton dernier mot?

— Le premier et le dernier.

— C’est non?

— C’est non.

— N’en parlons plus”, conclut Sirdey qui commença à ramper dans la direction de la rivière.

Mais presque aussitôt il s’arrêta, et, relevant les yeux vers Patterson:

“Les Patagons paieraient, tu sais.

— Combien?”

Le mot jaillit tout seul des lèvres de Patterson. Sirdey se rapprocha.

“Mille piastres”, dit-il.

Mille piastres!… Cinq mille francs!… Malgré l’importance de la somme, Patterson autrefois n’en eût pas été ébloui. La rivière lui avait pris bien davantage. Mais, maintenant, il ne possédait plus rien. À peine si, depuis un an, au prix d’un travail acharné, il avait réussi à économiser vingt-cinq piastres. Ces vingt-cinq misérables piastres constituaient à cette heure toute sa fortune. Sans doute elle croîtrait désormais plus vite. Les occasions de l’augmenter ne manqueraient pas. Le plus dur, il le savait par expérience, c’est la première mise. Mais mille piastres!… Gagner en un instant quarante fois le produit de dix-huit mois d’efforts!… Sans compter qu’il était peut-être possible d’obtenir mieux encore, car, dans tout marché, il est classique de marchander.

“Ce n’est pas lourd, dit-il d’un air dégoûté. Pour une affaire où on risque sa peau, il faudrait jusqu’à deux mille…

— Dans ce cas, bonsoir, répliqua Sirdey en esquissant un nouveau mouvement de retraite.

— Ou au moins jusqu’à quinze cents”, poursuivit Patterson sans se laisser intimider par cette menace de rupture.

Il était maintenant sur son terrain: le terrain du négoce. Il avait l’expérience de ces transactions. Que l’objet en jeu fût une marchandise ou une conscience, c’était toujours d’un achat et d’une vente qu’il s’agissait. Or, les achats et les ventes sont soumis à des règles immuables qu’il connaissait dans leurs détails. Il est d’usage, tout le monde le sait bien, que le vendeur demande trop, et que l’acheteur n’offre pas assez. La discussion établit l’équilibre. À marchander, il y a toujours quelque chose à gagner et jamais rien à perdre. Le temps pressant, Patterson s’était exceptionnellement résigné à doubler les étapes, et c’est pourquoi il était descendu d’un seul coup de deux mille piastres à quinze cents.

“Non, dit Sirdey d’un ton ferme.

— Si c’était au moins quatorze cents, soupira Patterson, on pourrait voir!… Mais mille piastres!…

— C’est mille et pas une de plus”, affirma

Sirdey en continuant son mouvement de recul.

Patterson eut, comme on dit, de l’estomac.

“Alors, ça ne va pas”, déclara-t-il tranquillement.

Ce fut au tour de Sirdey d’être inquiet. Une affaire si bien emmanchée!… Allait-il la faire échouer pour quelques centaines de piastres?… Il se rapprocha.

“Coupons la poire en deux, proposa-t-il. On arrivera à douze cents.”

Patterson s’empressa d’accepter.

“C’est uniquement pour te faire plaisir, acquiesça-t-il enfin. Va pour douze cents piastres!

— Convenu?… demanda Sirdey.

— Convenu”, affirma Patterson.

Il restait, cependant, à régler les détails.

“Qui me paiera? reprit Patterson. Les Patagons sont donc riches pour semer comme ça des douze cents piastres?

— Très pauvres au contraire, répliqua Sirdey, mais ils sont nombreux. Ils se saigneront aux quatre veines pour réunir la somme. S’ils le font, c’est qu’ils n’ignorent pas que le sac de Libéria leur en donnera cent fois plus.

— Je ne dis pas non, accorda Patterson. Ça ne me regarde pas. Mon affaire, c’est d’être payé. Comment me paiera-t-on? Avant ou après?

— Moitié avant, moitié après.

— Non, déclara Patterson. Voici mes conditions, dès demain soir, huit cents piastres…

— Où? interrompit Sirdey.

— Où je serai de garde. Cherche moi… Pour le reste, au jour convenu, dix hommes passeront d’abord, et l’un d’eux me versera la somme. Si on ne paie pas, j’appelle. Si on paie, bouche cousue, et je file d’un autre côté.

— Entendu, accorda Sirdey. Pour quand, le passage?

— La cinquième nuit après celle-ci. La lune sera nouvelle.

— Où?

— Chez moi… Dans mon enclos.

— Au fait!… dit Sirdey, je n’ai plus aperçu ta maison.

— La rivière l’a emportée, il y a un an, expliqua Patterson. Mais nous n’avons pas besoin de maison. La palissade suffira.

— Elle est aux trois quarts démolie.

— Je la réparerai.

— Parfait! approuva Sirdey. À demain!

— À demain”, répondit Patterson.

Il entendit un glissement dans l’herbe puis un faible gouglou lui fit comprendre que Sirdey entrait prudemment dans la rivière, et rien ne troubla plus le silence de la nuit.

Le lendemain, on fut très étonné de voir Patterson commencer à réparer la palissade à demi renversée qui limitait son ancien enclos.

La circonstance parut, en général, singulièrement choisie pour se livrer à un semblable travail. Mais le terrain lui appartenait, après tout. Il en avait en poche les titres de propriété, dont un duplicata lui avait été délivré, sur sa demande, après l'inondation. C'était, par conséquent, son droit de l'utiliser à sa convenance.

Toute la journée, il s'activa à ce travail. Du matin au soir, il releva les pieux, les réunit à l'aide de solides traverses, obtura les fentes par des couvre-joints, indifférent aux réflexions que sa conduite pouvait susciter.

Le soir, le hasard du roulement voulut qu'il fût placé en sentinelle sur l'épaulement Sud, face aux montagnes qui s'élevaient de ce côté. Il prit la garde sans mot dire, et attendit patiemment les événements.

Son tour étant venu plus tôt que la veille, il était de bonne heure et il faisait encore grand jour au début de sa faction. Mais celle-ci ne s'achèverait pas avant que la nuit fût complète, et Sirdey aurait, par conséquent, toutes facilités pour s'approcher de l'épaulement. À moins…

À moins que la proposition de l'ancien maître coq du Jonathan ne fût pas sérieuse. Était-il impossible, en effet, qu'ont eût tendu un piège à

Patterson, et qu'il s'y fût stupidement laissé prendre? L'Irlandais fut bientôt rassuré à ce sujet. Sirdey était là, en face de lui, tapi entre les herbes, invisible pour tous, mais visible pour un regard prévenu.

Peu à peu, la nuit tomba. La lune, dans son dernier quartier, n'élèverait qu'à l'aube son mince croissant au-dessus de l'horizon. Dès que l'obscurité fut profonde, Sirdey rampa jusqu'à son complice, puis repartit sans éveiller l'attention.

Tout s'était passé conformément aux conventions. Les deux parties étaient d'accord.

“La quatrième nuit après celle-ci, avait murmuré Patterson dans un souffle.

— Entendu, avait répondu Sirdey.

— Qu'on n'oublie pas les piastres!… Sans ça, rien de fait!

— Sois tranquille.”

Ce court dialogue échangé, Sirdey s'était éloigné. Mais, auparavant, il avait déposé aux pieds du traître un sac qui, en touchant le sol, rendit un son cristallin. C'étaient les huit cents piastres promises. C'était le salaire de Judas.

CHAPITRE IX

IX

La patrie hostelienne

Le lendemain, Patterson continua à réparer sa palissade. Toutefois, il n’était pas sans deviner les commentaires que son insolite occupation était de nature à provoquer. Ces commentaires, il avait, maintenant qu’il était en partie payé, grand intérêt à les éviter. C’est pourquoi il profita de la première occasion qui lui fut offerte pour donner de sa conduite une explication très simple.

Il fit même naître cette occasion, en allant trouver Hartlepool de bon matin et en lui demandant hardiment d’être placé désormais en faction exclusivement dans son enclos. Propriétaire riverain, il était plus logique qu’il fût de garde chez lui et qu’un autre ne vînt pas l’y remplacer, tandis qu’il serait envoyé ailleurs.

Hartlepool, qui n’éprouvait pas une vive sympathie pour le personnage, n’avait cependant aucun reproche précis à formuler contre lui. À certains égards même, Patterson méritait l’estime. C’était un homme paisible et un travailleur infatigable. D’ailleurs, il n’y avait pas d’inconvénient à accueillir favorablement sa requête.

“C’est un drôle de moment que vous avez choisi pour faire vos réparations”, fit cependant observer Hartlepool.

L’Irlandais lui répondit tranquillement qu’il n’aurait pu en trouver de plus propice. Les travaux publics étant arrêtés, il en profitait pour s’occuper de ses intérêts personnels. Ainsi, il ne perdrait pas son temps. L’explication était des plus naturelles, et cadrait avec les habitudes laborieuses de Patterson. Hartlepool en fut satisfait.

“Pour le reste, c’est entendu”, conclut-il sans insister.

Il attachait si peu d’importance à sa décision qu’il ne jugea même pas utile d’en informer le Kaw-djer.

Fort heureusement pour l’avenir de la colonie hostelienne, un autre se chargeait au même instant de faire naître les soupçons de son gouverneur.

La veille, au moment où Patterson arrivait à son poste de faction, il ne s’y trouvait pas seul, comme il le croyait à tort. À moins de vingt mètres, Dick était couché dans l’herbe. Ce n’était, d’ailleurs, nullement pour espionner l’Irlandais qu’il était là. Le hasard avait tout fait. Dick ne s’inquiétait guère de Patterson. Quand celui-ci vint se poster à quelques pas de lui, il n’eut à son adresse qu’un regard distrait, et, tout de suite, il se remit à son absorbante occupation, qui consistait à surveiller — oh! à titre officieux, car son âge le dispensait de la garde — les faits et gestes des Patagons, ces ennemis farouches qui faisaient énormément travailler sa jeune imagination. Si l’Irlandais eût été moins appliqué à distinguer Sirdey dans le lointain, il eût peut-être vu l’enfant, car celui-ci ne se cachait pas, et les broussailles ne le dissimulaient qu’à demi.

Par contre, Dick, ainsi qu’il a été dit, vit parfaitement Patterson, mais sans le remarquer plus qu’il n’eût remarqué une autre sentinelle hostelienne. Bientôt, du reste, il oublia sa présence, car il venait de faire une découverte extraordinaire qui absorbait toute son attention.

Qu’avait-il donc aperçu, là bas, très loin, du côté des Patagons, caché derrière un des innombrables taillis qui parsemaient les premières pentes des montagnes? Un homme?… Non, pas un homme, un visage. Pas même un visage, rien qu’un front et deux yeux ouverts dans la direction de Libéria. Appartenaient-ils, ce front et ces yeux, à un des Indiens dont on voyait au-delà évoluer des groupes nombreux? Sans hésiter, Dick répondait négativement. Et non seulement il avait la certitude que ce front et ces deux yeux-là n’étaient pas ceux d’un Indien, mais encore il mettait un nom sur cette fraction de visage, un nom qui était le vrai, le nom de Sirdey.

Parbleu! il le connaissait bien, il l’eût reconnu entre mille, ce Sirdey qui était avec les autres dans la grotte, le jour où le pauvre Sand avait failli mourir. Que venait faire là cet être abominable? Instinctivement, Dick s’était aplati derrière les touffes d’herbes. Sans savoir très bien pourquoi, il ne voulait pas être vu maintenant.

Les heures passèrent; le long crépuscule des hautes latitudes devint peu à peu une nuit profonde. Dick resta obstinément tapi dans sa cachette, l’œil et l’oreille aux aguets. Mais le temps s’écoula sans qu’il aperçût aucune lueur, sans qu’il entendît aucun bruit. À un certain moment, cependant, il crut distinguer dans l’ombre une ombre mouvante qui rampait sur le sol et s’approchait de Patterson, il crut entendre des frôlements, des voix chuchotantes, un tintement métallique comme en produiraient des pièces d’or entrechoquées… Mais ce n’était là qu’une impression, une sensation vague et imprécise.

À la relève, l’Irlandais s’éloigna. Dick ne quitta pas son poste et, jusqu’à l’aube, tint les oreilles et les yeux ouverts aux surprises des ténèbres. Persévérance inutile. La nuit s’écoula tranquillement. Quand le soleil se leva, rien d’insolite n’était survenu.

Le premier soin de Dick fut alors d’aller trouver le Kaw-djer. Toutefois, ne sachant pas au juste si passer la nuit à la belle étoile était ou non une chose licite, avant de le mettre au courant, il tâta le terrain avec prudence. Il annonça tout d’abord:

“Gouverneur, j’ai quelque chose à vous dire…”

Puis, après une suspension savante, il ajouta précipitamment:

“Mais vous ne me gronderez pas!…

— Ça dépend, répondit le Kaw-djer en souriant. Pourquoi ne te gronderais-je pas, si tu as fait quelque chose de mal?”

À une question, Dick répondit par une question. C’était un fin politique que maître Dick.

“Passer toute la nuit sur l’épaulement du Sud, est-ce mal, gouverneur?

— Ça dépend encore, dit le Kaw-djer. C’est selon ce que tu y faisais, sur l’épaulement du Sud.

— Je regardais les Patagons, gouverneur.

— Toute la nuit?

— Toute la nuit, gouverneur.

— Pour quoi faire?

— Pour les surveiller, gouverneur.

— Et pourquoi surveillais-tu les Patagons? Il y a des hommes de garde pour cela.

— Parce que j’avais vu quelqu’un que je connais avec eux, gouverneur.

— Quelqu’un que tu connais avec les Patagons!… s’écria le Kaw-djer au comble de la stupeur.

— Oui, gouverneur.

— Qui donc?

— Sirdey, gouverneur.”

Sirdey!… Le Kaw-djer pensa sur-le-champ à ce que lui avait dit Athlinata. Sirdey serait-il donc l’homme blanc dans les promesses duquel l’Indien avait tant de confiance?

“Tu en es sûr? demanda-t-il vivement.

— Sûr, gouverneur, affirma Dick. Mais le reste je n’en suis pas sûr… Je crois seulement, gouverneur.

— Le reste? Qu’y a-t-il encore?

— Quand il a fait nuit, gouverneur, j’ai cru voir quelqu’un s’approcher de l’épaulement…

— Sirdey?

— Je ne sais pas, gouverneur… Quelqu’un… Après, il m’a semblé qu’on parlait et qu’on remuait quelque chose… comme qui dirait des dollars… Mais je ne suis pas sûr…

— Qui était de garde à cet endroit?

— Patterson, gouverneur.”

Ce nom-là était de ceux qui sonnaient le plus mal aux oreilles du Kaw-djer, que ces étranges nouvelles plongeaient en de profondes réflexions. Ce qu’avait vu et entendu Dick, ce qu’il avait cru voir et entendre plutôt, avait-il quelque rapport avec le travail entrepris par Patterson? Cela pouvait-il expliquer, d’autre part, l’inaction des assiégeants, inaction dont les assiégés commençaient à être grandement surpris? Les Patagons comptaient-ils donc sur d’autres moyens que la force pour se rendre maîtres de Libéria, et poursuivaient-ils dans l’ombre l’exécution de quelque plan ténébreux?

Autant de questions qui restaient encore sans réponse. En tous cas, les renseignements étaient trop vagues et trop incertains pour qu’il fût possible de prendre une résolution dans un sens quelconque. Il fallait attendre, et surtout surveiller Patterson, puisque, injustement peut-être, son attitude semblait louche et prêtait aux soupçons.

“Je n’ai pas à te gronder, dit le Kaw-djer à Dick qui attendait son arrêt. Tu as très bien fait. Mais, il me faut ta parole de ne répéter à personne ce que tu m’as raconté.”

Dick étendit solennellement la main.

“Je le jure, gouverneur.”

Le Kaw-djer sourit.

“C’est bon, dit-il. Va te coucher, maintenant, pour regagner le temps perdu. Mais n’oublie pas. À personne, tu m’entends. Ni à Hartlepool, ni à Rhodes… J’ai dit: à personne.

— Puisque c’est juré, gouverneur”, fit remarquer Dick avec importance.

Désireux d’obtenir quelques informations complémentaires sans rien révéler de ce qu’il avait appris, le Kaw-djer se mit à la recherche d’Hartlepool.

“Rien de neuf? lui demanda-t-il en l’abordant.

— Rien, monsieur, répondit Hartlepool.

— La garde est faite régulièrement?… C’est le point important, vous le savez. Il faut procéder vous-même à des rondes, et vous assurer personnellement que chacun remplit son devoir.

— Je n’y manque pas, monsieur, affirma Hartlepool. Tout va bien.

— On ne récrimine pas contre ce service fatigant?

— Non, monsieur. Tout le monde y a trop d’intérêt.

— Même pas Kennedy?

— Lui… C’est un des meilleurs. Une vue excellente. Et une attention!… On a beau être un pas grand-chose, le matelot se retrouve toujours quand il le faut, monsieur.

— Ni Patterson?

— Non plus. Rien à dire… Ah! à propos de Patterson, ne soyez pas étonné si vous ne l’apercevez plus. Il montera désormais la garde chez lui, puisqu’il est en bordure de la rivière.

— Pourquoi cela?

— Il vient de me le demander. Je n’ai pas cru devoir refuser.

— Vous avez bien fait, Hartlepool, approuva le Kaw-djer en s’éloignant. Continuez à veiller. Mais, si d’ici à quelques jours les Patagons font toujours les morts, c’est nous qui irons les chercher.”

Les choses se corsaient décidément. Patterson avait eu un but en présentant à Hartlepool une requête, à laquelle celui-ci, n’étant pas prévenu, ne pouvait trouver aucun caractère suspect. Pour le Kaw-djer, il en allait autrement. La réapparition de Sirdey, les conciliabules probables entre les deux hommes, la réfection de la palissade, et enfin cette demande de Patterson qui montrait son désir de ne pas quitter son enclos et d’en éloigner les autres, tous ces faits convergeaient et tendaient à prouver… Mais non, ils ne prouvaient rien, en somme. Tout cela n’était pas suffisant pour incriminer l’Irlandais. On ne pouvait que redoubler de prudence et veiller au grain plus attentivement que jamais.

Ignorant des soupçons qui pesaient sur lui, Patterson continuait tranquillement l’œuvre qu’il avait commencée. Les pieux se redressaient, s’ajoutaient les uns aux autres. Les derniers furent enfin plantés dans l’eau même de la rivière et rendirent l’enclos impénétrable aux regards.

Au jour fixé par lui, le quatrième après sa seconde entrevue avec Sirdey, ce travail était achevé. En loyal commerçant il avait tenu ses engagements à bonne date. Les acheteurs n’avaient plus qu’à prendre livraison.

Le soleil se coucha. La nuit vint. C’était une nuit sans lune pendant laquelle l’obscurité serait profonde. Derrière la palissade de son enclos, Patterson, fidèle au rendez-vous, attendit.

Mais on ne saurait penser à tout. Cette clôture si opaque qui le mettait à l’abri des regards des autres, mettait en même temps les autres à l’abri des siens. Si nul ne pouvait voir ce qui se passait chez lui, il ne pouvait pas voir davantage ce qui se passait à l’extérieur. Fort attentif à surveiller le bord opposé de la rivière, il ne s’aperçut donc pas qu’une troupe nombreuse cernait silencieusement son enclos, ni que des hommes prenaient position aux deux extrémités de la palissade.

L’achèvement des travaux de Patterson avait été, pour le Kaw-djer, le signal du danger. En admettant que l’Irlandais projetât quelque traîtrise, l’heure de l’action ne tarderait pas à sonner.

Il était près de minuit, quand dix premiers Patagons, ayant traversé la rivière à la nage, abordèrent dans l’enclos. Personne n’avait pu les voir, ils le croyaient tout au moins. Derrière eux, quarante guerriers, et, derrière ces quarante guerriers, toute la horde suivait. Peu importait qu’elle fût découverte avant d’avoir atterri tout entière, pourvu qu’assez d’hommes eussent passé à ce moment pour donner à leurs frères le temps de passer à leur tour. Dussent les premiers se faire tuer, la moisson serait pour les autres.

L’un des Indiens tendit à Patterson une poignée d’or que celui-ci trouva bien légère.

“Il n’y a pas le compte”, dit-il à tout hasard.

Le Patagon n’eut pas l’air de comprendre.

Patterson s’efforça d’expliquer par gestes qu’on n’était pas d’accord, et, à titre d’argument probant, il se mit en devoir de contrôler la somme, en faisant glisser une à une de la main droite dans la gauche les pièces qu’il suivait du regard, la tête baissée.

Un choc violent sur la nuque l’assomma tout à coup. Il tomba. Bâillonné, ligoté, il fut jeté dans un coin sans autre forme de procès. Était-il mort? Les Indiens n’en avaient cure. S’il vivait encore, c’était partie remise, voilà tout. Pour le moment, le temps de s’en assurer manquait. Plus tard, on achèverait le traître à loisir, s’il en était besoin, après quoi on dépouillerait son cadavre du prix de la trahison.

Les Patagons se rapprochèrent de la rive en rampant. Élevant leurs armes au-dessus de l’eau, d’autres fantômes abordaient les uns après les autres et remplissaient l’enclos. Leur nombre dépassa bientôt deux cents.

Soudain, venant des deux extrémités de la palissade, une violente fusillade éclata. Les Hosteliens étaient entrés dans l’eau jusqu’à mi-corps et prenaient l’ennemi à revers. Frappés de stupeur, les Indiens, d’abord, demeurèrent immobiles, puis, les balles ouvrant dans leur masse des sillons sanglants, ils coururent vers la palissade. Mais, aussitôt, sa crête fut couronnée de fusils qui vomirent la mort à leur tour. Alors, épouvantés, affolés, éperdus, ils se mirent à tourner stupidement en rond dans l’enclos, gibier qui s’offrait au plomb du chasseur. En quelques minutes, ils perdirent la moitié de leur effectif. Enfin, retrouvant un peu de sang-froid, les survivants se ruèrent vers la rivière, malgré les feux convergents qui en défendaient l’approche, et nagèrent vers l’autre bord de toute la vigueur de leurs bras.

À ces coups de fusils, d’autres détonations avaient répondu au loin, écho d’un second combat dont la route était le théâtre.

Supposant que les Patagons concentreraient tout leur effort au point où ils croyaient pénétrer sans coup férir et qu'ils ne laisseraient par conséquent que des forces insignifiantes à la garde de leur camp, le Kaw-djer avait arrêté son plan en conséquence. Tandis que le plus grand nombre des hommes dont il pouvait disposer étaient réunis sous ses ordres directs autour de l'enclos de Patterson, où il prévoyait que se déroulerait l'action principale, et guettaient les Indiens qui allaient tomber dans un piège, une autre expédition se tenait prête à franchir l'épaulement du Sud sous le commandement d'Hartlepool, pour opérer une diversion au camp des Patagons.

C'est cette deuxième troupe qui signalait maintenant sa présence. Sans doute, elle était aux prises avec les rares guerriers laissés à la garde des chevaux. Cette fusillade ne dura d'ailleurs que peu d'instants. Les deux combats avaient été aussi brefs l'un et l'autre.

Les Patagons disparus, le Kaw-djer se porta dans la direction du Sud. Il rencontra la troupe commandée par Hartlepool comme elle franchissait de nouveau l'épaulement pour rentrer dans la ville.

L'expédition avait merveilleusement réussi. Hartlepool n'avait pas perdu un seul homme. Les pertes de l'ennemi étaient d'ailleurs également nulles. Mais, résultat beaucoup plus utile, on avait capturé près de trois cents chevaux qu'on ramenait avec soi.

La leçon reçue par les Patagons était trop sévère pour qu'un retour offensif de leur part fût dans l'ordre des événements probables. La garde toutefois fut organisée comme les soirs précédents. Ce fut seulement après avoir ainsi assuré la sécurité générale que le Kaw-djer retourna dans l'enclos de Patterson. À la pâle lueur des étoiles, le sol lui en apparut jonché de cadavres. De blessés aussi, car des plaintes s'élevaient dans la nuit. On s'occupa de les secourir.

Mais où était Patterson? On le découvrit enfin, sous un tas de corps amoncelés, bâillonné, ligoté, évanoui. N'était-il donc qu'une victime? Le Kaw-djer se reprochait déjà de l'avoir jugé injustement, quand, au moment où on relevait l'Irlandais, des pièces d'or coulèrent de sa ceinture et tombèrent sur le sol. Le Kaw-djer, écœuré, détourna les yeux. À la surprise générale, Patterson fut transporté à la prison, où le médecin de Libéria dut aller lui donner des soins. Celui-ci ne tarda pas à venir rendre compte de sa mission au gouverneur. L'Irlandais n'était pas en danger et serait complètement remis à bref délai.

Le Kaw-djer fut peu satisfait de la nouvelle. Il eût préféré de beaucoup que cette lamentable affaire fût réglée par la mort du coupable. Celui-ci vivant, au contraire, elle allait avoir nécessairement des suites. Il ne pouvait être question de la résoudre, en effet, par une mesure de clémence, comme celle dont avait bénéficié Kennedy. Cette fois, la population entière était intéressée, et personne n'eût compris l'indulgence à l'égard du misérable qui avait froidement sacrifié un si grand nombre d'hommes à son insatiable cupidité. Il faudrait donc procéder à un jugement et punir, faire acte de juge et de maître. Or, malgré l'évolution de ses idées, c'étaient là besognes qui répugnaient fort au Kaw-djer.

La nuit s'écoula sans autre incident. Néanmoins, il est superflu de le dire, on dormit peu cette nuit-là à Libéria. On s'entretenait fébrilement dans les maisons et dans les rues des graves événements qui venaient de se dérouler, en s'applaudissant de la manière dont ils avaient tourné. On en faisait remonter l'honneur au Kaw-djer qui avait si exactement deviné le plan des ennemis.

On touchait au solstice d’été. À peine si la nuit franche durait quatre heures. Dès deux heures du matin, le ciel fut éclairé par les premières lueurs de l’aube. D’un même élan, les Hosteliens se portèrent alors sur l’épaulement du Sud, d’où on apercevait la longue ligne du camp ennemi.

Une heure plus tard, des hourras sortaient de toutes les poitrines. Il n’y avait pas à en douter, les Patagons faisaient leurs préparatifs de départ. On n’en était pas surpris, la tuerie de la nuit précédente ayant dû leur prouver qu’il n’y avait rien à faire pour eux à l’île Hoste. Avec une joie orgueilleuse, on dressait à satiété le bilan de leurs pertes. Plus de quatre cent vingt chevaux, dont trois cents pris et les autres tués pendant l’invasion ou lors de l’escarmouche du Bourg-Neuf. À peine, s’il en restait trois cents à ces intrépides cavaliers. Plus de deux cents hommes, soit une centaine de prisonniers à la ferme Rivière, et un plus grand nombre tués ou blessés dans les rencontres successives et notamment dans l’hécatombe dont l’enclos de Patterson avait été le théâtre. Réduits de près d’un tiers de leur effectif, près de la moitié des survivants transformés en fantassins, il était naturel que les Indiens ne fussent pas désireux de s’éterniser dans une contrée lointaine où ils avaient reçu un si rude accueil.

Vers huit heures, un grand mouvement parcourut la horde, et la brise apporta jusqu’à Libéria d’effroyables vociférations. Tous les guerriers se pressaient au même point, comme s’ils eussent voulu assister à un spectacle que les Hosteliens ne pouvaient voir. La distance ne permettait pas, en effet, de distinguer les détails. On apercevait seulement le grouillement général de la horde, et tous ses cris individuels se fondaient en une immense clameur.

Que faisaient-ils? Dans quelle discussion violente étaient-ils engagés?

Cela dura longtemps. Une heure au moins. Puis la colonne parut s’organiser. Elle se divisa en trois groupes, les guerriers démontés au centre, précédés et suivis par un escadron de cavaliers. Un des cavaliers d'avant-garde portait haut par-dessus les têtes quelque chose dont on ne pouvait reconnaître la nature. C'était une chose ronde… On eût dit une boule fichée sur un bâton…

La horde s'ébranla vers dix heures. Se réglant sur la vitesse de ses piétons, elle défila lentement sous les yeux des Libériens. Le silence était profond, maintenant, de part et d'autre. Plus de vociférations du côté des vaincus, plus de hourras parmi les vainqueurs.

Au moment où l'arrière-garde des Patagons se mettait en marche, un ordre courut parmi les Hosteliens. Le Kaw-djer demandait à tous les colons sachant monter à cheval de se faire immédiatement connaître. Qui eût jamais cru que Libéria possédât un si grand nombre d'habiles écuyers? Chacun brûlant de jouer un rôle dans le dernier acte du drame, presque tout le monde se présentait. Il fallut procéder à une sélection. En moins d'une heure, une petite armée de trois cents hommes fut réunie. Elle comprenait cent piétons et deux cents cavaliers. Le Kaw-djer en tête, les trois cents hommes s'ébranlèrent, gagnèrent le chemin, disparurent, en route pour le Nord, à la suite de la horde en retraite. Sur des brancards, ils transportaient les quelques blessés recueillis dans l'enclos de Patterson, et dont la plupart n'atteindraient pas vivants le littoral américain.

Ils firent une première halte à la ferme des Rivière. Trois quarts d'heure plus tôt, les Patagons étaient passés le long de la palissade, sans essayer, cette fois, de la franchir. Abritée derrière les pieux de la clôture, la garnison les avait regardés défiler, et, bien qu'elle ne fût pas au courant des événements de la nuit précédente, personne de ceux qui la composaient n'avait eu la pensée d'envoyer un coup de fusil aux Indiens. Ils avançaient, l'air si déprimé et si las qu'on ne douta pas de leur défaite. Ils n'avaient plus rien de redoutable. Ce n’étaient plus des ennemis, mais seulement des hommes malheureux qui n’inspiraient que la pitié.

Un des cavaliers de tête portait toujours au bout d’une pique cette chose ronde que l’on avait aperçue de l’épaulement. Mais, pas plus que les Libériens au moment du départ, la garnison de la ferme Rivière n’avait pu reconnaître la nature de cet objet singulier.

Sur l’ordre du Kaw-djer, on débarrassa les prisonniers patagons de leurs entraves, et, devant eux, les portes furent ouvertes toutes grandes. Les Indiens ne bougèrent pas. Évidemment, ils ne croyaient pas à la liberté, et, jugeant les autres d’après eux-mêmes, ils redoutaient de tomber dans un piège.

Le Kaw-djer s’approcha de cet Athlinata, avec lequel il avait déjà échangé quelques mots.

“Qu’attendez-vous? demanda-t-il.

— De connaître le sort qu’on nous réserve, répondit Athlinata.

— Vous n’avez rien à craindre, affirma le Kaw-djer. Vous êtes libres.

— Libres!… répéta l’Indien surpris.

— Oui, les guerriers patagons ont perdu la bataille et retournent dans leurs pays. Partez avec eux: vous êtes libres. Vous direz à vos frères que les hommes blancs n’ont pas d’esclaves et qu’ils savent pardonner. Puisse cet exemple les rendre plus humains!”

Le Patagon regarda le Kaw-djer d’un air indécis, puis, suivi de ses compagnons, il se mit en marche à pas lents. La troupe désarmée passa entre la double haie de la garnison silencieuse, sortit de l’enceinte, et prit à droite, vers le Nord. À cent mètres en arrière, le Kaw-djer et ses trois cents hommes l’escortaient, barrant la route du

Sud.

Aux approches du soir, on aperçut le gros des envahisseurs campé pour la nuit. Personne ne les avait inquiétés pendant leur retraite, pas un coup de fusil n’avait été tiré. Mais cette preuve de la miséricorde de leurs adversaires ne les avait pas rassurés, et ils manifestèrent une vive inquiétude, en voyant approcher une masse si importante de cavaliers et de fantassins. Afin de leur donner confiance, les Hosteliens firent halte à deux kilomètres, tandis que les prisonniers libérés, emmenant avec eux les blessés, continuaient leur marche et allaient se réunir à leurs compatriotes.

Quelles durent être les pensées de ces Indiens sauvages, lorsque revinrent librement ceux qu’ils pensaient réduits en esclavage? Athlinata fut-il un fidèle mandataire, et connurent-ils les paroles qu’il avait mission de leur redire? Ses frères comparèrent-ils, ainsi que l’espérait son libérateur, leur conduite habituelle avec celle de ces blancs qu’ils avaient voulu détruire et qui les traitaient avec tant de clémence?

Le Kaw-djer l’ignorerait toujours, mais, dût sa générosité être inutile, il n’était pas homme à la regretter. C’est à force de répandre le bon grain qu’une semence finit par tomber dans un sillon fertile.

Pendant trois jours encore, la marche vers le Nord se continua sans incident. Sur les pentes, des colons apparaissaient parfois et, tant qu’elles étaient visibles, suivaient des yeux la horde et la troupe attachée à ses pas. Le soir du quatrième jour, on arriva enfin au point même où les Patagons avaient débarqué. Le lendemain, dès l’aube, ils poussèrent à l’eau les pirogues qu’ils avaient cachées dans les rochers du littoral. Les unes, chargées seulement d’hommes, mirent le cap à l’Ouest afin de contourner la Terre de Feu, les autres, franchissant le canal du Beagle, allèrent directement aborder la grande île que les cavaliers traverseraient. Mais, derrière eux, ils laissaient quelque chose. Au bout d’une longue perche plantée dans le sable du rivage, ils abandonnaient cette chose ronde qu’ils avaient portée depuis Libéria avec une si étrange obstination.

Lorsque la dernière pirogue fut hors de portée, les Hosteliens s’approchèrent du bord de la mer et virent alors avec horreur que la chose ronde était une tête humaine. Quelques pas de plus, et ils reconnurent la tête de Sirdey.

Cette découverte les remplit d’étonnement. On ne s’expliquait pas comment Sirdey, disparu depuis de longs mois, pouvait se trouver avec les Patagons. Seul, le Kaw-djer ne fut pas surpris. Il connaissait, en partie tout au moins, le rôle joué par l’ancien cuisinier du Jonathan, et le drame était clair pour lui. Sirdey, c’était l’homme blanc, en qui les Indiens avaient eu tant de confiance. Ils s’étaient vengés de leur déception.

Le lendemain matin, le Kaw-djer se mit en route pour Libéria. Il y entrait le soir du 30 décembre avec son escorte exténuée.

L’île Hoste avait connu la guerre. Grâce à lui, elle sortait indemne de l’épreuve, les envahisseurs chassés jusqu’au dernier de son territoire. Mais le point final de la terrible aventure n’était pas apposé. Un devoir cruel restait à remplir.

Dans la prison où il était détenu, Patterson avait éprouvé une succession de sentiments divers. Le premier de tous fut l’étonnement de se voir sous les verrous. Que lui était-il donc arrivé? Puis, la mémoire lui revenant peu à peu, il se rappela Sirdey, les Patagons et leur abominable trahison.

Ensuite, que s’était-il passé? Si les Patagons avaient été vainqueurs, ils eussent sans doute achevé ce qu’ils avaient commencé, et il serait mort à l’heure actuelle. Puisqu’il se réveillait en prison, il en devait conclure qu’ils avaient été repoussés.

S’il en était effectivement ainsi, puisqu’on l’avait incarcéré, c’est donc que sa trahison était connue? Dans ce cas, que n’avait-il pas à craindre? Patterson alors trembla.

Toutefois, à la réflexion, il se rassura. Que l’on eût des soupçons, soit! mais non pas une certitude. Personne ne l’avait vu, personne ne l’avait pris sur le fait, cela était sûr. Il sortirait donc indemne d’une aventure qui ne laisserait pas de se solder par un sérieux profit.

Patterson chercha son or et ne le trouva pas. Il n’avait pas rêvé pourtant! Cet or, il l’avait reçu. Combien? Il ne le savait pas exactement. Pas les douze cents piastres stipulées, à la vérité, puisque ces gredins l’avaient volé, mais neuf cents au moins, ou même mille. Qui lui avait enlevé son or? Les Patagons? Peut-être. Mais plus vraisemblablement ceux qui l’avaient emprisonné.

Le cœur de Patterson fut alors gonflé de colère et de haine. Indiens et colons, rouges et blancs, tous pareillement voleurs et lâches, il les détesta avec une égale fureur.

Dès lors, il ne connut plus le repos. Angoissé, ne vivant que pour haïr, hésitant entre cent hypothèses, il attendit dans une impatience fébrile que la vérité lui fût révélée. Mais ceux qui le tenaient ne se souciaient guère de sa rage impuissante. Les jours s’ajoutèrent aux jours, sans que sa situation fût modifiée. On semblait l’avoir oublié.

Ce fut seulement le 31 décembre, plus d’une semaine après son incarcération, que, sous la garde de quatre hommes armés, il sortit enfin de la prison. Il allait donc savoir!… En arrivant sur la place du gouvernement, Patterson s’arrêta, interdit.

Le spectacle était imposant, en effet, le Kaw-djer ayant voulu entourer de solennité le jugement qu’on allait rendre contre le traître. Les circonstances venaient de lui démontrer quelle force donne à une collectivité la communauté des sentiments et des intérêts. Les Patagons auraient-ils été repoussés avec cette facilité, si chacun, au lieu de se plier à des lois générales, avait tiré de son côté et n’en avait fait qu’à sa tête? Il cherchait à donner une impulsion nouvelle à ce sentiment naissant de solidarité, en flétrissant avec apparat un crime commis contre tous. On avait adossé au gouvernement une estrade élevée sur laquelle prirent place, outre le Kaw-djer, les trois membres du Conseil et le juge titulaire Ferdinand Beauval. Au pied du tribunal, une place était réservée pour l’accusé. En arrière, contenue par des barrières, se pressait la population entière de Libéria.

Lorsque Patterson apparut, un immense cri de réprobation jaillit de ces centaines de poitrines. Un geste du Kaw-djer imposa le silence. L’interrogatoire de l’accusé commença.

L’Irlandais eut beau nier systématiquement. Il était trop facile de le convaincre de mensonge. Les unes après les autres, le Kaw-djer énuméra les charges qui pesaient sur lui. D’abord, la présence de Sirdey parmi les Patagons. Sirdey avait été aperçu, en effet, et d’ailleurs sa présence n’était pas douteuse, puisque les Indiens, furieux de leur échec, avaient arboré sa tête comme un trophée de vengeance.

À la nouvelle de la mort de son complice, Patterson tressaillit. Cette mort, c'était pour lui un funèbre présage.

Le Kaw-djer continua son réquisitoire.

Non seulement Sirdey était parmi les Patagons, mais il s'était abouché avec Patterson, et c'est à la suite d'un accord conclu entre eux que celui-ci avait repris possession de son terrain, qu'il en avait relevé la clôture, et qu'il avait demandé enfin à y être exclusivement de garde.

La preuve de cette criminelle entente, les Patagons eux-mêmes l'avaient donnée en abordant dans l'enclos, et l'or saisi sur Patterson en donnait une autre preuve plus forte encore. Pouvait-il indiquer, lui qui, de son propre aveu, avait, un an auparavant, perdu tout ce qu'il possédait, la provenance de cet or trouvé en sa possession?

Patterson baissa la tête. Il se sentait perdu.

L'interrogatoire terminé, le Tribunal délibéra, puis le Kaw-djer prononça la sentence. Les biens du coupable étaient confisqués. Son terrain, de même que la somme dont on avait payé son crime, faisaient retour à l'État. En outre, Patterson était condamné au bannissement perpétuel, et le territoire de l'île Hoste lui était à jamais interdit.

La sentence reçut une exécution immédiate. L'Irlandais fut conduit en rade à bord d'un navire en partance. Jusqu'au moment du départ, il y resterait prisonnier, les pieds bridés par des fers qui ne lui seraient enlevés que hors des eaux hosteliennes.

Pendant que la foule s'écoulait, le Kaw-djer se retira dans le gouvernement. Il avait besoin d'être seul pour apaiser son âme troublée. Qui eût dit, autrefois, qu’il en arriverait, lui, le farouche égalitaire, à s’ériger en juge des autres hommes, lui, l’amant passionné de la liberté, à morceler d’une division de plus la terre, cette propriété commune de l’humanité, à se décréter le maître d’une fraction du vaste monde, à s’arroger le droit d’en interdire l’accès à un de ses semblables? Il avait fait tout cela, cependant, et, s’il en était ému, il n’éprouvait pas de regret. Cela était bon, il en était sûr. La condamnation du traître achevait le miracle commencé par la lutte contre les Patagons. L’aventure coûtait le Bourg-Neuf réduit en cendres, mais c’était payer bon marché la transformation accomplie. Le danger que tous avaient couru, les efforts accomplis en commun avaient créé un lien entre les émigrants, dont eux-mêmes ne soupçonnaient pas la force. Avant cette succession d’événements, l’île Hoste n’était qu’une colonie où se trouvaient fortuitement réunis des hommes de vingt nationalités différentes. Maintenant, les colons avaient fait place aux Hosteliens. L’île Hoste, désormais, c’était la patrie.

CHAPITRE X

X

Cinq ans après

Cinq ans après les événements qui viennent d’être racontés, la navigation dans les parages de l’île Hoste ne présentait plus les difficultés ni les dangers d’autrefois. À l’extrémité de la presqu’île Hardy, un feu lançait au large ses multiples éclats, non pas un feu de Pêcherais tel que ceux des campements de la terre fuégienne, mais un vrai phare éclairant les passes et permettant d’éviter les écueils pendant les sombres nuits de l’hiver.

Par contre, celui que le Kaw-djer projetait d’élever au cap Horn n’avait reçu aucun commencement d’exécution. Depuis six ans, il poursuivait en vain la solution de cette affaire avec une inlassable persévérance, sans arriver à la faire aboutir. D’après les notes échangées entre les deux gouvernements, il semblait que le Chili ne pût se résigner à l’abandon de l’îlot du cap Horn et que cette condition essentielle posée par le Kaw-djer fût un obstacle invincible.

Celui-ci s’étonnait fort que la République Chilienne attachât tant d’importance à un rocher stérile dénué de la moindre valeur. Il aurait eu plus de surprise encore s’il avait connu la vérité, s’il avait su que la longueur démesurée des négociations était due, non à des considérations patriotiques, défendables en somme, fussent-elles erronées, mais simplement à la légendaire nonchalance des bureaux.

Les bureaux chiliens se comportaient dans cette circonstance comme tous les bureaux du monde. La diplomatie a pour coutume séculaire de faire traîner les choses, d’abord parce que l’homme s’inquiète assez mollement, d’ordinaire, des affaires qui ne sont pas les siennes propres, et ensuite parce qu’il a une tendance naturelle à grossir de son mieux la fonction dont il est investi. Or, de quoi dépendrait l’ampleur d’une décision, si ce n’est de la durée des pourparlers qui l’ont précédée, de la masse de paperasses noircies à son sujet, de la sueur d’encre qu’elle a fait couler? Le Kaw-djer, qui formait à lui seul le gouvernement hostelien, et qui, par conséquent, n’avait pas de bureaux, ne pouvait évidemment attribuer un pareil motif, le vrai cependant, à cette interminable discussion.

Toutefois, le phare de la presqu’île Hardy n’était pas l’unique feu qui éclairât ces mers. Au Bourg-Neuf, relevé de ses ruines et triplé d’importance, un feu de port s’allumait chaque soir et guidait les navires vers le musoir de la jetée.

Cette jetée, entièrement terminée, avait transformé la crique en un port vaste et sûr. À son abri, les bâtiments pouvaient charger ou décharger en eau tranquille leurs cargaisons sur le quai également achevé. Aussi le Bourg-Neuf était-il maintenant des plus fréquentés. Peu à peu, des relations commerciales s’étaient établies avec le Chili, l’Argentine, et jusqu’avec l’Ancien Continent. Un service mensuel régulier avait même été créé, reliant l’île Hoste à Valparaiso et à Buenos-Ayres. Sur la rive droite du cours d’eau, Libéria s’était énormément développée. Elle était en passe de devenir une ville de réelle importance dans un avenir peu éloigné. Ses rues symétriques, se coupant à angle droit suivant la mode américaine, étaient bordées de nombreuses maisons en pierre ou en bois, avec cour par devant et jardinets en arrière. Quelques places étaient ombragées de beaux arbres, pour la plupart des hêtres antarctiques à feuilles persistantes. Libéria avait deux imprimeries et comptait même un petit nombre de monuments véritables. Entre autres, elle possédait une poste, une église, deux écoles et un tribunal moins modeste que la salle décorée de ce nom dont Lewis Dorick avait tenté jadis de provoquer la destruction. Mais, de tous ces monuments, le plus beau était le gouvernement. La maison improvisée qu'on désignait autrefois sous ce nom avait été abattue et remplacée par un édifice considérable, où continuait à résider le Kaw-djer et dans lequel tous les services publics étaient centralisés.

Non loin du gouvernement s'élevait une caserne, où plus de mille fusils et trois pièces de canon étaient entreposés. Là, tous les citoyens majeurs venaient à tour de rôle passer un mois, de temps à autre. La leçon des Patagons n'avait pas été perdue. Une armée, qui eût compté tous les Hosteliens dans ses rangs, se tenait prête à défendre la patrie.

Libéria avait même un théâtre, fort rudimentaire, il est vrai, mais de proportions assez vastes, et, qui plus est, éclairé à l'électricité.

Le rêve du Kaw-djer était réalisé. D'une usine hydro-électrique, installée à trois kilomètres en amont, arrivaient à la ville la force et la lumière à profusion.

La salle du théâtre rendait de grands services, surtout pendant les longs jours de l'hiver. Elle servait aux réunions, et le Kaw-djer ou Ferdinand Beauval, bien assagi maintenant et devenu un personnage, y faisaient parfois des conférences. On y donnait aussi des concerts sous la direction d'un chef comme il ne s'en rencontre pas souvent.

Ce chef, vieille connaissance du lecteur, n'était autre que Sand, en effet. À force de persévérance et de ténacité, il avait réussi à recruter parmi les Hosteliens les éléments d'un orchestre symphonique qu'il conduisait d'un bâton magistral. Les jours de concert, on le transportait à son pupitre, et, quand il dominait le bataillon des musiciens, son visage se transfigurait, et l'ivresse sacrée de l'art faisait de lui le plus heureux des hommes. Les œuvres anciennes et modernes alimentaient ces concerts, où figuraient de temps à autre des œuvres de Sand lui-même, qui n'étaient ni les moins remarquables, ni les moins applaudies.

Sand était alors âgé de dix-huit ans. Depuis le drame terrible qui lui avait coûté l'usage de ses jambes, tout bonheur autre que celui de l'art lui étant à jamais interdit, il s'était jeté dans la musique à plein cœur. Par l'étude attentive des maîtres, il avait appris la technique de cet art difficile, et, appuyés sur cette base solide, ses dons naturels commençaient à mériter le nom de génie. Il ne devait pas en rester là. Un jour prochain devait venir, où les chants de cet infirme inspiré, perdu aux confins du monde, ces chants aujourd'hui célèbres bien que nul ne puisse en désigner l'auteur, seraient sur toutes les lèvres et feraient la conquête de la terre.

Il y avait un peu plus de neuf ans que le Jonathan s'était perdu sur les récifs de la presqu'île Hardy. Tel était le résultat obtenu en ces quelques années, grâce à l'énergie, à l'intelligence, à l'esprit pratique de l'homme qui avait pris en charge la destinée des Hosteliens, alors que l'anarchie menait l'île à sa ruine. De cet homme, on continuait à ne rien savoir, mais personne ne songeait à lui demander compte de son passé. La curiosité publique, si tant est qu'elle eût jamais existé, s'était émoussée par l'habitude, et l'on se disait avec raison que, pour ne pas ignorer ce qu'il était essentiel de connaître, il suffisait de se souvenir des innombrables services rendus.

Les accablants soucis de ces neufs ans de pouvoir pesaient lourdement sur le Kaw-djer. S'il conservait intacte sa vigueur herculéenne, si la fatigue de l'âge n'avait pas fléchi sa stature quasi gigantesque, sa barbe et ses cheveux avaient maintenant la blancheur de la neige et des rides profondes sillonnaient son visage toujours majestueux et déjà vénérable.

Son autorité était sans limite. Les membres qui composaient le Conseil dont il avait lui-même provoqué la formation, Harry Rhodes, Hartlepool et Germain Rivière, régulièrement réélus à chaque élection, ne siégeaient que pour la forme. Ils laissaient à leur chef et ami carte blanche, et se bornaient à donner respectueusement leur avis quand ils en étaient priés par lui.

Pour le guider dans l’œuvre entreprise, le Kaw-djer, d’ailleurs, ne manquait pas d’exemples. Dans le voisinage immédiat de l’île Hoste, deux méthodes de colonisation opposées étaient concurremment appliquées. Il pouvait les comparer et en apprécier les résultats.

Depuis que la Magellanie et la Patagonie avaient été partagées entre le Chili et l’Argentine, ces deux États avaient très diversement procédé pour la mise en valeur de leurs nouvelles possessions. Faute de bien connaître ces régions, l’Argentine faisait des concessions comprenant jusqu’à dix ou douze lieues carrées, ce qui revenait à décréter qu’il y avait lieu de les laisser en friche. Quand il s’agissait de ces forêts qui comptent jusqu’à quatre mille arbres à l’hectare, il aurait fallu trois mille ans pour les exploiter. Il en était de même pour les cultures et les pâturages, trop largement concédés, et qui eussent nécessité un personnel, un matériel agricole et, par suite, des capitaux trop considérables.

Ce n’est pas tout. Les colons argentins étaient tenus à des relations lentes, difficiles et coûteuses avec Buenos-Ayres. C’est à la douane de cette ville, c’est-à-dire à quinze cents milles de distance, que devait être envoyé le connaissement d’un navire arrivant en Magellanie, et six mois au moins se passaient avant qu’il pût être retourné, les droits de douane liquidés, droits qu’il fallait alors payer au change du jour à la Bourse de la capitale! Or, ce cours du change, quel moyen de le connaître à la Terre de Feu, dans un pays où parler de Buenos-Ayres, c’est parler de la Chine ou du Japon?

Qu’a fait le Chili, au contraire, pour favoriser le commerce, pour attirer les émigrants, en dehors de cette hardie tentative de l’île Hoste? Il a déclaré Punta-Arenas port franc, de telle sorte que les navires y apportent le nécessaire et le superflu, et qu’on y trouve de tout en abondance dans d’excellentes conditions de prix et de qualité. Aussi, les productions de la Magellanie argentine affluent-elles aux maisons anglaises ou chiliennes dont le siège est à Punta-Arenas et qui ont établi, sur les canaux, des succursales en voie de prospérité.

Le Kaw-djer connaissait depuis longtemps le procédé du gouvernement chilien, et lors de ses excursions à travers les territoires de la Magellanie, il avait pu constater que leurs produits prenaient tous le chemin de Punta-Arenas. À l’exemple de la colonie chilienne, le Bourg-Neuf fut donc déclaré port franc, et cette mesure fut la cause première du rapide enrichissement à l’île Hoste.

Le croirait-on? La République Argentine, qui a fondé Ushaia sur la Terre de Feu, de l’autre côté du canal du Beagle, ne devait pas profiter de ce double exemple. Comparée à Libéria et à Punta-Arenas, cette colonie, de nos jours encore, est restée en arrière, à cause des entraves que le gouvernement apporte au commerce, de la cherté des droits de douane, des formalités excessives auxquelles est subordonnée l’exploitation des richesses naturelles, et de l’impunité dont jouissent forcément les contrebandiers, l’administration locale étant dans l’impossibilité matérielle de surveiller les sept cents kilomètres de côtes soumises à sa juridiction.

Les événements dont l’île Hoste avait été le théâtre, l’indépendance que lui avait accordée le Chili, sa prospérité qui allait toujours en croissant sous la ferme administration du Kaw-djer, la signalèrent à l’attention du monde industriel et commercial. De nouveaux colons y furent attirés, auxquels on concéda libéralement des terres à des conditions avantageuses. On ne tarda pas à savoir que ses forêts, riches en bois de qualité supérieure à celle des bois d’Europe, rendaient jusqu’à quinze et vingt pour cent, ce qui amena l’établissement de plusieurs scieries. En même temps, on trouvait preneur de terrains à mille piastres la lieue superficielle pour des faire-valoir agricoles, et le nombre des têtes de bétail atteignit bientôt plusieurs milliers sur les pâturages de l’île.

La population s’était rapidement augmentée. Aux douze cents naufragés du Jonathan étaient venus s’ajouter, en nombre triple et quadruple du leur, des émigrants de l’ouest des États-Unis, du Chili et de l’Argentine. Neuf ans après la proclamation d’indépendance, huit ans après le coup d’état du Kaw-djer, cinq ans après l’invasion de la horde patagone, Libéria comptait plus de deux mille cinq cents âmes, et l’île Hoste plus de cinq mille.

Il va de soi qu’il s’était fait bien des mariages depuis que Halg avait épousé Graziella. Il convient de citer entre autres ceux d’Edward et de Clary Rhodes. Le jeune homme avait épousé la fille de Germain Rivière, et la jeune fille le Dr Samuel Arvidson. D’autres unions avaient créé des liens entre les familles.

Maintenant, pendant la belle saison, le port recevait de nombreux navires. Le cabotage faisait d’excellentes affaires entre Libéria et les différents comptoirs fondés sur d’autres points de l’île, soit aux environs de la pointe Roons, soit sur les rivages septentrionaux que baigne le canal du Beagle. C’étaient, pour la plupart, des bâtiments de l’archipel des Falkland, dont le trafic prenait chaque année une extension nouvelle.

Et non seulement l’importation et l’exportation s’effectuaient par ces bâtiments des îles anglaises de l’Atlantique, mais de Valparaiso, de Buenos-Ayres, de Montevideo, de Rio de Janeiro, venaient des voiliers et des steamers, et, dans toutes les passes voisines, à la baie de Nassau, au Darwin Sound, sur les eaux du canal du Beagle, on voyait les pavillons danois, norvégien et américain.

Le trafic, pour une grande part, s’alimentait aux pêcheries qui, de tout temps, ont donné d’excellents résultats dans les parages magellaniques. Il va de soi que cette industrie avait dû être sévèrement réglementée par les arrêtés du Kaw-djer. En effet, il ne fallait pas provoquer à court délai, par une destruction abusive, la disparition, l’anéantissement des animaux marins qui fréquentent si volontiers ces mers. Sur le littoral, il s’était fondé, en divers points, des colonies de louvetiers, gens de toute origine, de toute espèce, des sans-patrie, qu’Hartlepool eut, au début, le plus grand mal à tenir en bride. Mais, peu à peu, les aventuriers s’humanisèrent, se civilisèrent sous l’influence de leur nouvelle vie. À ces vagabonds sans feu ni lieu, une existence sédentaire donna progressivement des moeurs plus douces. Ils étaient plus heureux, d’ailleurs, ayant moins de misère à souffrir en exerçant leur rude métier. Ils opéraient, en effet, dans de meilleures conditions qu’autrefois. Il ne s’agissait plus de ces expéditions entreprises à frais communs qui les amènent sur quelque île déserte où, trop souvent, ils périssent de froid et de faim. À présent, ils étaient assurés d’écouler les produits de leur pêche, sans avoir à attendre pendant de longs mois le retour d’un navire qui ne revient pas toujours. Par exemple, la manière d’abattre les inoffensifs amphibies n’avait pas été modifiée. Rien de plus simple: salir a dar una paliza, aller donner des coups de bâton, comme les louvetiers le disent eux-mêmes, telle était encore la méthode usitée, car il n’y a pas lieu d’employer d’autre arme contre ces pauvres animaux.

À ces pêcheries alimentées par l’abattage des loups marins, il y a lieu d’ajouter les campagnes des baleiniers, qui sont des plus lucratives en ces parages. Les canaux de l’archipel peuvent fournir annuellement un millier de baleines. Aussi, les bâtiments armés pour cette pêche, certains de trouver maintenant à Libéria les avantages que leur offrait Punta-Arenas, fréquentaient-ils assidûment, pendant la belle saison, les passes voisines de l’île Hoste.

Enfin, l’exploitation des grèves, que couvrent par milliards des coquillages de toute espèce, avait donné naissance à une autre branche de commerce. Parmi ces coquillages, une mention est due à ces myillones, mollusques de qualité excellente et d’une telle abondance qu’on ne saurait l’imaginer. Les navires en exportaient de pleins chargements, qu’ils vendaient jusqu’à cinq piastres le kilogramme dans les villes du Sud-Amérique. Aux mollusques s’ajoutaient les crustacés. Les criques de l’île Hoste sont particulièrement recherchées par un crabe gigantesque habitué des algues sous-marines, le centoya, dont deux suffisent à la nourriture quotidienne d’un homme de grand appétit.

Mais ces crabes ne sont pas les uniques représentants du genre. Sur la côte, on trouvait également en abondance les homards, les langoustes et les moules. Ces richesses étaient largement exploitées. Réalisation de l’un des projets autrefois formés par le Kaw-djer, Halg dirigeait au Bourg-Neuf une usine prospère, d’où, sous forme de conserves, on expédiait ces crustacés dans le monde entier. Halg, alors âgé de près de vingt-huit ans, réunissait toutes les conditions de bonheur. Femme aimante, trois beaux enfants: deux filles et un garçon, santé parfaite, fortune rapidement ascendante, rien ne lui manquait. Il était heureux, et le Kaw-djer pouvait s’applaudir dans son œuvre achevée.

Quant à Karroly, non seulement il n’était pas associé à son fils dans la direction de l’usine du Bourg-Neuf, mais il avait même renoncé à la pêche. Étant donné l’importance maritime du port de l’île Hoste, situé entre le Darwin Sound et la baie de Nassau, les navires y venaient nombreux, et de préférence même à Punta-Arenas. Ils y trouvaient une excellente relâche, plus sûre que celle de la colonie chilienne, surtout fréquentée, d’ailleurs, par les steamers qui passent d’un océan à l’autre en suivant le détroit de Magellan. Karroly avait été pour cette raison amené à reprendre son ancien métier. Devenu capitaine de port et pilote-chef de l’île Hoste, il était très demandé par les bâtiments à destination de Punta-Arenas ou des comptoirs établis sur les canaux de l’archipel, et l’occupation ne lui manquait pas.

Il avait maintenant à son service un côtre de cinquante tonneaux, construit à l’épreuve des plus violents coups de mer. C’est avec ce solide bateau, que manœuvrait un équipage de cinq hommes, et non avec la chaloupe, qu’il se portait par tous les temps à la rencontre des navires. La

Wel-Kiej existait toujours cependant, mais on ne l’utilisait plus guère. En général, elle restait au port, vieille et fidèle servante qui avait bien gagné le repos.

Comme ces bons ouvriers qui s’empressent d’entreprendre un nouveau travail aussitôt que le précédent est terminé, le Kaw-djer, quand le temps fut arrivé de laisser Halg, devenu un homme à son tour, librement évoluer dans la vie, s’était imposé les devoirs d’une seconde adoption. Dick n’avait pas remplacé Halg, il s’y était ajouté dans son cœur agrandi. Dick avait alors près de dix-neuf ans, et depuis plus de six ans il était l’élève du Kaw-djer. Le jeune homme avait tenu les promesses de l’enfant. Il s’était assimilé sans effort la science du maître et commençait à mériter pour son propre compte le nom de savant. Bientôt le professeur, qui admirait la vivacité et la profondeur de cette intelligence, n’aurait plus rien à apprendre à l’élève.

Déjà ce nom d’élève ne convenait plus à Dick. Précocement mûri par la rude école de ses premiers ans et par les terribles drames auxquels il avait été mêlé, il était, malgré son jeune âge, plutôt que l’élève, le disciple et l’ami du Kaw-djer, qui avait en lui une confiance absolue, et qui se plaisait à le considérer comme son successeur désigné. Germain Rivière et Hartlepool étaient de braves gens assurément, mais le premier n’aurait jamais consenti à délaisser son exploitation forestière, qui donnait des résultats merveilleux, pour se consacrer exclusivement à la chose publique, et Hartlepool, admirable et fidèle exécuteur d’ordres, n’était à sa place qu’au deuxième plan. Tous deux, au surplus, manquaient par trop d’idées générales et de culture intellectuelle pour gouverner un peuple qui avait d’autres intérêts que des intérêts matériels. Harry Rhodes eût été mieux qualifié peut-être. Mais Harry Rhodes, vieillissant, et manquant, d’ailleurs, de l’énergie nécessaire, se fût récusé de lui-même.

Dick réunissait, au contraire, toutes les qualités d’un chef. C’était une nature de premier ordre. Comme savoir, intelligence et caractère, il avait l’étoffe d’un homme d’État, et il y avait lieu seulement de regretter que de si brillantes facultés fussent destinées à être utilisées dans un si petit cadre. Mais une œuvre n’est jamais petite quand elle est parfaite, et le Kaw-djer estimait avec raison que, si Dick pouvait assurer le bonheur des quelques milliers d’êtres dont il était entouré, il aurait accompli une tâche qui ne le céderait en beauté à nulle autre.

Au point de vue politique, la situation était également des plus favorables. Les relations entre l’île Hoste et le gouvernement chilien étaient excellentes de part et d’autre. Le Chili ne pouvait que s’applaudir chaque année davantage de sa détermination. Il obtenait des profits moraux et matériels qui manqueront toujours à la République Argentine, tant qu'elle ne modifiera pas ses méthodes administratives et ses principes économiques.

Tout d'abord, en voyant à la tête de l'île Hoste ce mystérieux personnage, dont la présence dans l'archipel magellanique lui avait paru à bon droit suspecte, le gouvernement chilien n'avait pas dissimulé son mécontentement et ses inquiétudes. Mécontentement forcément platonique. Sur cette île indépendante où il s'était réfugié, on ne pouvait plus rechercher la personne du Kaw-djer, ni vérifier son origine, ni lui demander compte de son passé. Que ce fût un homme incapable de supporter le joug d'une autorité quelconque, qu'il eût été jadis en rébellion contre toutes les lois sociales, qu'il eût peut-être été chassé de tous les pays soumis sous n'importe quel régime aux lois nécessaires, son attitude autorisait ces hypothèses, et s'il fût resté sur l'île Neuve, il n'eût pas échappé aux enquêtes de la police chilienne. Mais, lorsqu'on vit, après les troubles provoqués par l'anarchie du début, la tranquillité parfaite due à la ferme administration du Kaw-djer, le commerce naître et grandir, la prospérité largement s'accroître, il n'y eut plus qu'à laisser faire. Et, au total, il ne s'éleva jamais aucun nuage entre le gouverneur de l'île Hoste et le gouverneur de Punta-Arenas.

Cinq ans s'écoulèrent ainsi, pendant lesquels les progrès de l'île Hoste ne cessèrent de se développer. En rivalité avec Libéria, mais une rivalité généreuse et féconde, trois bourgades s'étaient fondées, l'une sur la presqu'île Dumas, une autre sur la presqu'île Pasteur, et la troisième à l'extrême pointe occidentale de l'île, sur le Darwin Sound, en face de l'île Gordon. Elles relevaient de la capitale, et le Kaw-djer s'y transportait, soit par mer, soit par les routes tracées à travers les forêts et les plaines de l'intérieur.

Sur les côtes, plusieurs familles de Pêcherais s’étaient également établies et y avaient fondé des villages fuégiens, à l’exemple de ceux qui, les premiers, avaient consenti à rompre avec leurs séculaires habitudes de vagabondage pour se fixer dans le voisinage du Bourg-Neuf.

Ce fut à cette époque, au mois de décembre de l’année 1890, que Libéria reçut pour la première fois la visite du gouverneur de Punta-Arenas, M. Aguire. Celui-ci ne put qu’admirer cette nation si prospère, les sages mesures prises pour en augmenter les ressources, la parfaite homogénéité d’une population d’origines différentes, l’ordre, l’aisance, le bonheur qui régnaient dans toutes les familles. On le comprend, il observa de près l’homme qui avait accompli de si belles choses, et auquel il suffisait d’être connu sous ce titre de Kaw-djer.

Il ne lui marchanda pas ses compliments.

“Cette colonie hostelienne, c’est votre œuvre, monsieur le gouverneur, dit-il, et le Chili ne peut que se féliciter de vous avoir fourni l’occasion de l’accomplir.

— Un traité, se contenta de répondre le Kaw-djer, avait fait entrer sous la domination chilienne cette île qui n’appartenait qu’à elle-même. Il était juste que le Chili lui restituât son indépendance.”

M. Aguire sentit bien ce que cette réponse contenait de restrictif. Le Kaw-djer ne considérait pas que cet acte de restitution dût valoir au gouvernement chilien un témoignage de reconnaissance.

“Dans tous les cas, reprit M. Aguire en se tenant prudemment sur la réserve, je ne crois pas que les naufragés du Jonathan puissent regretter leur concession africaine de la baie de Lagoa…

— En effet, monsieur le gouverneur, puisque là ils eussent été sous la domination portugaise, alors qu’ici ils ne dépendent de personne.

— Ainsi tout est pour le mieux.

— Pour le mieux, approuva le Kaw-djer.

— Nous espérons, d’ailleurs, ajouta obligeamment M. Aguire, voir se continuer les bons rapports entre le Chili et l’île Hoste.

— Nous l’espérons aussi, répondit le Kaw-djer, et peut-être, en constatant les résultats du système appliqué à l’île Hoste, la République Chilienne sera-t-elle portée à l’étendre aux autres îles de l’archipel magellanique.”

M. Aguire ne répondit que par un sourire qui signifiait tout ce qu’on voulait.

Désireux d’entraîner la conversation hors de ce terrain brûlant, Harry Rhodes, qui assistait à l’entrevue avec ses deux collègues du Conseil, aborda un autre sujet.

“Notre île Hoste, dit-il, comparée aux possessions argentines de la Terre de Feu, peut donner matière à intéressantes réflexions. Comme vous le voyez, monsieur, d’un côté la prospérité, de l’autre le dépérissement. Les colons argentins reculent devant les exigences du gouvernement de Buenos-Ayres, et, devant les formalités qu’il impose, les navires font de même. Malgré les réclamations de son gouverneur, la Terre de Feu ne fait aucun progrès.

— J’en conviens, répondit M. Aguire. Aussi le gouvernement chilien a-t-il agi tout autrement avec Punta-Arenas. Sans aller jusqu’à rendre une colonie complètement indépendante, il est possible de lui accorder bon nombre de privilèges qui assurent son avenir.

— Monsieur le gouverneur, intervint le Kaw-djer, il est cependant une des petites îles de l'archipel, un simple rocher stérile, un îlot sans valeur, dont je demande au Chili de nous consentir l'abandon.

— Lequel? interrogea M. Aguire.

— L'îlot du cap Horn.

— Que diable voulez-vous en faire? s'écria M. Aguire étonné.

— Y établir un phare qui est de toute nécessité à cette dernière pointe du continent américain.

Éclairer ces parages serait d'un grand avantage pour les navires, non seulement ceux qui viennent à l'île Hoste, mais aussi ceux qui cherchent à doubler le cap entre l'Atlantique et le Pacifique."

Harry Rhodes, Hartlepool et Germain Rivière, qui étaient au courant des projets du Kaw-djer, appuyèrent sa remarque, en faisant valoir la réelle importance, que M. Aguire n'avait, d'ailleurs, nulle envie de contester.

"Ainsi, demanda-t-il, le gouvernement de l'île Hoste serait disposé à construire ce phare?

— Oui, dit le Kaw-djer.

— À ses frais?

— À ses frais, mais sous la condition formelle que le Chili lui concéderait l'entière propriété de l'île Horn. Voilà plus de six ans que j'ai fait cette proposition à votre gouvernement, sans arriver à un résultat quelconque.

— Que vous a-t-on répondu? demanda M. Aguire.

— Des mots, rien que des mots. On ne dit pas non, mais on ne dit pas oui. On ergote. La discussion ainsi comprise peut durer des siècles. Et, pendant ce temps, les navires continuent à se perdre sur cet îlot sinistre que rien ne leur signale dans l'obscurité.”

M. Aguire exprima un grand étonnement. Mieux instruit que le Kaw-djer des méthodes chères aux administrations du monde entier, il ne l'éprouvait peut-être pas au fond du cœur. Tout ce qu'il put faire, fut de promettre qu'il appuierait de tout son crédit cette proposition auprès du gouvernement de Santiago, où il se rendait en quittant l'île Hoste.

Il faut croire qu'il tint parole et que son appui fut efficace, car, moins d'un mois plus tard, cette question qui traînait depuis tant d'années fut enfin résolue, et le Kaw-djer fut informé officiellement que ses propositions étaient acceptées. Le 25 décembre, entre le Chili et l'île Hoste, un acte de cession fut signé, aux termes duquel l'État hostelien devenait propriétaire de l'île Horn, à la condition qu'il élèverait et entretiendrait un phare au point culminant du cap.

Le Kaw-djer, dont les préparatifs étaient faits depuis longtemps, commença immédiatement les travaux. Selon les prévisions les plus pessimistes, deux ans devaient suffire pour les mener à bon terme et pour assurer la sécurité de la navigation aux abords de ce cap redoutable.

Cette entreprise, dans l'esprit du Kaw-djer, serait le couronnement de son œuvre. L'île Hoste pacifiée et organisée, le bien-être de tous remplaçant la misère d'autrefois, l'instruction répandue à pleines mains, et enfin des milliers de vies humaines sauvées au terrible point de rencontre des deux plus vastes océans du globe, telle aurait été sa tâche ici-bas.

Elle était belle. Achevée, elle lui conférerait le droit de penser à lui-même, et de résigner des fonctions auxquelles, jusque dans ses dernières fibres, répugnait tout son être.

Si le Kaw-djer gouvernait, s’il était pratiquement le plus absolu des despotes, il n’était pas, en effet, un despote heureux. Le long usage du pouvoir ne lui en avait pas donné le goût, et il ne l’exerçait qu’à contrecœur. Réfractaire pour son compte personnel à toute autorité, il lui était toujours aussi cruel d’imposer la sienne à autrui. Il était resté le même homme énergique, froid et triste, qu’on avait vu apparaître comme un sauveur en ce jour lointain où le peuple hostelien avait failli périr. Il avait sauvé les autres, ce jour-là, mais il s’était perdu lui-même. Contraint de renier sa chimère, obligé de s’incliner devant les faits, il avait accompli courageusement le sacrifice, mais, dans son cœur, le rêve abjuré protestait. Quand nos pensées, sous l’apparence trompeuse de la logique, ne sont que l’épanouissement de nos instincts naturels, elles ont une vie propre, indépendante de notre raison et de notre volonté. Elles luttent obscurément, fût-ce contre l’évidence, comme des êtres qui ne voudraient pas mourir. La preuve de notre erreur, il faut alors qu’elle nous soit donnée à satiété, pour que nous en soyons convaincus, et tout nous est prétexte à revenir à ce qui fut notre foi.

Le Kaw-djer avait immolé la sienne à ce besoin de se dévouer, à cette soif de sacrifice, à cette pitié de ses frères malheureux, qui, au-dessus même de sa passion de la liberté, formait le fond de sa magnifique nature. Mais, maintenant que le dévouement n’était plus en jeu, maintenant qu’il ne pouvait plus être question de sacrifice et que les Hosteliens n’inspiraient plus rien qui ressemblât à de la pitié, la croyance ancienne reprenait peu à peu son apparence de vérité, et le despote redevenait par degrés le passionné libertaire d’antan.

Cette transformation, Harry Rhodes l’avait constatée avec une netteté croissante, à mesure que s’affermissait la prospérité de l’île Hoste. Elle devint plus évidente encore, quand, le phare du cap Horn commencé, le Kaw-djer put considérer comme près d’être rempli le devoir qu’il s’était imposé. Il exprima enfin clairement sa pensée à cet égard. Harry Rhodes ayant, au hasard d’une causerie où on évoquait les jours passés, glorifié les bienfaits dont on lui était redevable, le Kaw-djer répondit par une déclaration qui ne prêtait plus à l’équivoque.

“J’ai accepté la tâche d’organiser la colonie, dit-il. Je m’applique à la remplir. L’œuvre terminée, mon mandat cessera. Je vous aurai prouvé ainsi, je l’espère, qu’il peut y avoir au moins un endroit de cette terre, où l’homme n’a pas besoin de maître.

— Un chef n’est pas un maître, mon ami, répliqua avec émotion Harry Rhodes, et vous le démontrez vous-même. Mais il n’est pas de société possible sans une autorité supérieure, quel que soit le nom dont on la revêt.

— Ce n’est pas mon avis, répondit le Kaw-djer. J’estime, moi, que l’autorité doit prendre fin dès qu’elle n’est plus impérieusement nécessaire.”

Ainsi donc, le Kaw-djer caressait toujours ses anciennes utopies, et, malgré l’expérience faite, il s’illusionnait encore sur la nature des hommes, au point de les croire capables de régler, sans le secours d’aucune loi, les innombrables difficultés qui naissent du conflit des intérêts individuels. Harry Rhodes constatait avec mélancolie le sourd travail qui s’accomplissait dans la conscience de son ami et il en augurait les pires conséquences. Il en arrivait à souhaiter qu'un incident, dût-il jeter passagèrement le trouble dans l'existence paisible des Hosteliens, vînt donner à leur chef une nouvelle démonstration de son erreur.

Son désir devait malheureusement être réalisé. Cet incident allait naître plus tôt qu'il ne le pensait.

Dans les premiers jours du mois de mars 1891, le bruit courut tout à coup qu'on avait découvert un gisement aurifère d'une grande richesse. Cela n'avait en soi rien de tragique. Tout le monde, au contraire, fut en joie, et les plus sages, Harry Rhodes lui-même, partagèrent l'ivresse générale. Ce fut un jour de fête pour la population de Libéria.

Seul, le Kaw-djer fut plus clairvoyant. Seul, il prévit en un instant les conséquences de cette découverte et comprit quelle en était la force latente de destruction. C'est pourquoi, tandis que l'on se congratulait autour de lui, lui seul demeura sombre, accablé déjà des tristesses que réservait l'avenir.

CHAPITRE XI

XI

La fièvre de l’or

C’est dans la matinée du 6 mars, que la découverte avait été faite.

Quelques personnes, parmi lesquelles Edward Rhodes, ayant projeté une partie de chasse, avaient quitté Libéria de bonne heure en voiture et s’étaient rendues à une vingtaine de kilomètres dans le Sud-Ouest, sur le revers occidental de la presqu’île Hardy, au pied des montagnes, les Sentry Boxes, qui la terminent. Là s’étendait une forêt profonde non encore exploitée, où se réfugiaient d’ordinaire les fauves de l’île Hoste, des pumas et des jaguars qu’il convenait de détruire jusqu’au dernier, car nombre de moutons avaient été leurs victimes.

Les chasseurs battirent la forêt; ayant tué deux pumas chemin faisant, ils atteignaient un ruisseau torrentueux qui délimitait la lisière opposée, lorsqu’apparut un jaguar de grande taille.

Edward Rhodes, l’estimant à bonne portée, lui envoya un premier coup de fusil, qui l’atteignit au flanc gauche. Mais l’animal n’avait pas été blessé mortellement. Après un rugissement de colère plutôt que de douleur, il fit un bond dans la direction du torrent, rentra sous bois et disparut.

Pas si vite, cependant, qu’Edward Rhodes n’eût le temps de tirer un second coup. La balle, manquant le but, alla frapper un angle de roche. La pierre vola en éclats.

Peut-être les chasseurs eussent-ils alors quitté la place, si un des éclats projetés ne fût tombé aux pieds d'Edward Rhodes, qui, intrigué par l'aspect particulier de ce fragment de roche, le ramassa et l'examina.

C'était un petit morceau de quartz, strié de veines caractéristiques, dans lesquelles il lui fut facile de discerner des parcelles d'or.

Edward Rhodes fut très ému de sa découverte.

De l'or!… Il y avait de l'or dans le sol de l'île Hoste! Rien que cet éclat de roche en témoignait.

Y a-t-il lieu, d'ailleurs, de s'en étonner? N'a-t-on pas trouvé des filons du précieux métal autour de Punta-Arenas comme à la Terre de Feu, en Patagonie comme en Magellanie? N'est-ce pas une chaîne d'or, cette gigantesque épine dorsale des deux Amériques qui, sous le nom de Montagnes Rocheuses et de Cordillère des Andes, va de l'Alaska au cap Horn, et dont, en quatre siècles, on a extrait pour quarante-cinq milliards de francs?

Edward Rhodes avait compris l'importance de sa découverte. Il aurait voulu la tenir secrète, n'en parler qu'à son père, qui eût mis le Kaw-djer au courant. Mais il n'était pas seul à la connaître. Ses compagnons de chasse avaient examiné le morceau de roche et avaient ramassé d'autres éclats qui tous renfermaient de l'or.

Il ne fallait donc pas compter sur le secret, et, le jour même, en effet, l'île entière savait qu'elle n'avait rien à envier aux Klondyke, aux Transvaal, ni aux El Dorado. Ce fut la traînée de poudre, dont la flamme courut en un instant de Libéria aux autres bourgades.

Toutefois, dans cette saison, il ne pouvait être question de tirer un parti quelconque de la découverte. Dans quelques jours, on serait à l’équinoxe d’automne, et ce n’est pas sous le parallèle de l’île Hoste qu’il est possible d’entreprendre des exploitations de plein air aux approches de l’hiver. La trouvaille d’Edward Rhodes n’eut donc et ne pouvait avoir aucune conséquence immédiate.

L’été s’acheva dans des conditions climatériques assez favorables. Cette année, la dixième depuis la fondation de la colonie, avait eu le bénéfice d’une récolte exceptionnelle. D’autre part, de nouvelles scieries s’étaient établies à l’intérieur de l’île, les unes mues par la vapeur, les autres employant l’électricité engendrée par les chutes des cours d’eau. Les pêcheries et les fabriques de conserves avaient donné lieu à un trafic considérable, et le chargement des navires, à l’entrée et à la sortie du port, s’était chiffré par trente-deux mille sept cent soixante-quinze tonnes.

Avec l’hiver, il fallut interrompre les travaux entrepris au cap Horn pour l’érection du phare et la construction des salles où devaient être installées les machines motrices et les dynamos. Ces travaux avaient marché jusqu’alors d’une manière très satisfaisante, malgré l’éloignement de l’île Horn, située à environ soixante-quinze kilomètres de la presqu’île Hardy, et l’obligation de transporter le matériel à travers une mer semée de récifs, que les tempêtes de l’hiver allaient rendre impraticable.

Si la mauvaise saison amena, comme de coutume, nombre de coups de vent et des tourmentes de grande violence, elle ne provoqua pas de froids excessifs, et, même en juillet, la température ne dépassa pas dix degrés sous zéro.

Les habitants de Libéria ne redoutaient plus alors le froid ni les intempéries, l’aisance générale ayant permis à toutes les familles de s’installer confortablement. Il n’y avait pas de misère sur l’île Hoste, et les crimes contre les personnes ou les propriétés n’y avaient jamais troublé l’ordre public. On n’y connaissait que de rares contestations civiles, transigées en général avant même d’arriver au Tribunal.

Il semblait donc qu’aucun trouble n’eût menacé la colonie, sans cette découverte d’un gisement aurifère, dont les conséquences, étant donné l’avidité humaine, pouvaient être extrêmement graves.

Le Kaw-djer ne s’y était pas trompé. La nouvelle lui avait fait concevoir les plus sombres pronostics, et la réflexion les assombrit encore. À la première réunion du Conseil, il ne cacha pas ses craintes.

“Ainsi, dit-il, c’est au moment où notre œuvre est achevée, lorsque nous n’avons plus qu’à recueillir le fruit de nos efforts, que le hasard, un hasard maudit, jette parmi nous ce ferment de troubles et de ruines…

— Notre ami va trop loin, intervint Harry Rhodes, qui considérait l’événement d’une manière moins pessimiste. Que la découverte de l’or soit une cause de troubles, c’est possible, mais de ruines!…

— Oui, de ruines, affirma le Kaw-djer avec force. La découverte de l’or n’a jamais laissé que la ruine après elle!

— Cependant, objecta Harry Rhodes, l’or est une marchandise comme une autre…

— La plus inutile.

— Du tout. La plus utile, puisqu’elle peut s’échanger contre toutes les autres.

— Qu’importe, répliqua le Kaw-djer avec chaleur, si, pour l’obtenir, il faut tout lui sacrifier! Des chercheurs d’or, l’immense majorité périt dans la misère. Quant à ceux qui réussissent, la facilité de leur succès détruit à jamais leur jugement. Ils prennent goût aux plaisirs aisément obtenus. Le superflu devient pour eux le nécessaire, et, quand ils sont amollis par les jouissances matérielles, ils deviennent incapables du moindre effort. Ils se sont enrichis peut-être, au sens social du mot. Ils se sont appauvris selon sa signification humaine, la vraie. Ce ne sont plus des hommes.

— Je suis de l’avis du Kaw-djer, dit alors

Germain Rivière. Sans compter que, si on délaisse les champs, l’on ne remplacera pas les récoltes perdues. C’est peu de choses que d’être riche quand on crève de faim. Or, je crains bien que notre population ne résiste pas à cette influence funeste. Qui sait si les cultivateurs ne vont pas abandonner la campagne, et les ouvriers leur travail, pour courir aux placers?

— L’or!… l’or!… la soif de l’or! répétait le Kaw-djer. Aucun plus terrible fléau ne pouvait s’abattre sur notre pays.”

Harry Rhodes était ébranlé.

“En admettant que vous ayez raison, dit-il, il n’est pas en notre pouvoir de conjurer ce fléau.

— Non! mon cher Rhodes, répondit le Kaw-djer. Il est possible de lutter contre une épidémie, de l’enrayer. Mais à cette fièvre de l’or, il n’y a pas de remède. C’est l’agent le plus destructif de toute organisation. En peut-on douter après ce qui s’est passé dans les districts aurifères de l’Ancien ou du Nouveau Monde, en Australie, en Californie, dans le Sud de l’Afrique? Les travaux utiles ont été abandonnés du jour au lendemain, les colons ont déserté les champs et les villes, les familles se sont dispersées sur les gisements. Quant à l'or extrait avec tant d'avidité, on l'a stupidement dissipé, comme tout gain trop facile, en abominables folies, et il n'en est rien resté à ces malheureux insensés.”

Le Kaw-djer parlait avec une animation qui montrait la force de sa conviction et la vivacité de ses inquiétudes.

“Et non seulement il y a le danger du dedans, ajouta-t-il, mais il y a le danger du dehors: tous ces aventuriers, tous ces déclassés qui envahissent les pays aurifères, qui les troublent, les bouleversent pour arracher de ses entrailles le métal maudit. Il en accourt de tous les points du monde. C'est une avalanche qui ne laisse que le néant après son passage. Ah! pourquoi faut-il que notre île soit menacée de pareils désastres!

— Ne pouvons-nous encore espérer? demanda Harry Rhodes très ému. Si la nouvelle ne s'ébruite pas, nous serons préservés de cette invasion.

— Non, répondit le Kaw-djer, il est déjà trop tard pour empêcher le mal. On ne se figure pas avec quelle rapidité le monde entier apprend que des gisements aurifères viennent d'être découverts dans une contrée quelconque, si lointaine soit-elle. On croirait vraiment que cela se transmet par l'air, que les vents apportent cette peste si contagieuse que les meilleurs et les plus sages en sont atteints et y succombent!”

Le Conseil fut levé sans qu'aucune décision eût été arrêtée. Et, en vérité, il n'y avait lieu d'en prendre aucune. Comme le Kaw-djer l'avait dit avec raison, on ne lutte pas contre la fièvre de l'or.

Rien, d’ailleurs, n’était perdu encore. Ne pouvait-il se faire, en effet, que le gisement n’eût pas la richesse qu’on lui attribuait de confiance, et que les parcelles d’or fussent disséminées dans un état d’éparpillement tel que toute exploitation fût impossible. Pour être fixé à ce sujet, il fallait attendre la disparition de la neige qui, pendant l’hiver, recouvrait l’île de son manteau glacé.

Au premier souffle du printemps, les craintes du Kaw-djer commencèrent à se réaliser. Dès que le dégel fit son apparition, les colons les plus entreprenants et les plus aventureux se transformèrent en prospecteurs, quittèrent Libéria et partirent à la chasse de l’or. Puisqu’il avait été trouvé au Golden Creek — ainsi fut dénommé le petit ruisseau dont la balle malencontreuse d’Edward Rhodes avait effleuré la berge — c’est là que se portèrent les plus impatients. Leur exemple fut suivi, malgré tous les efforts du Kaw-djer et de ses amis, et les départs se multiplièrent rapidement. Dès le cinq novembre, plusieurs centaines d’Hosteliens, en proie à l’idée fixe de l’or, s’étaient rués vers les gisements et erraient dans les montagnes à la recherche d’un filon ou d’une poche riche en pépites.

L’exploitation des placers ne comporte pas de grandes difficultés en principe. S’il s’agit d’un filon, il suffit de le suivre en attaquant la roche avec le pic, puis de concasser les morceaux obtenus pour en extraire les parcelles de métal qu’ils renferment. C’est ainsi qu’on procède dans les mines du Transvaal.

Toutefois, suivre un filon, c’est bientôt dit. En pratique, cela n’est pas fort aisé. Parfois les filons se brouillent et disparaissent, et ce n’est pas trop, pour les retrouver, de la science de techniciens expérimentés. À tout le moins, ils s’enfoncent très profondément dans les entrailles de la terre. Les suivre, cela revient par conséquent à ouvrir une mine, avec toutes les surprises et tous les dangers inhérents à ce genre d'entreprise. D'autre part, le quartz est une roche d'une extrême dureté, et, pour le concasser, on ne saurait se passer de machines coûteuses. Il en résulte que l'exploitation d'une mine d'or est interdite aux travailleurs isolés, et que des sociétés puissantes disposant d'une abondante main-d'œuvre et de capitaux considérables peuvent seules y trouver profit.

Aussi les chercheurs d'or, les prospecteurs, pour leur donner le nom sous lequel on les désigne d'ordinaire, lorsqu'ils ont eu la chance de découvrir un gisement, se contentent-ils de s'en assurer la concession, qu'ils rétrocèdent le plus vite possible aux banquiers et aux lanceurs d'affaires.

Ceux qui préfèrent, au contraire, exploiter pour leur propre compte et avec leurs ressources personnelles, renoncent délibérément à toute exploitation minière. Ils recherchent dans le voisinage des roches aurifères, des terrains d'alluvion formés aux dépens de ces roches par l'action séculaire des eaux. En délitant la roche, l'eau — glace, pluie ou torrent — a nécessairement emporté avec elle les parcelles d'or qu'il est très facile d'isoler. Il suffit d'un simple plat pour recueillir les sables, et d'un peu d'eau pour les laver.

C'est bien entendu, avec cet outillage si rudimentaire qu'opéraient les Hosteliens. Les premiers résultats furent assez encourageants. En bordure du Golden Creek, sur une longueur de plusieurs kilomètres et une largeur de deux ou trois cents mètres, s'étendait une couche de boue de huit pieds de profondeur. À raison de neuf à dix plats par pied cube, la réserve était donc abondante, car il était bien rare qu'un plat n'assurât pas au moins quelques grains d'or. Les pépites, il est vrai, n'étaient qu'à l'état de poussière, et ces placers n'en étaient pas à produire les centaines de millions que ses pareils ont donnés dans d'autres régions. Tels quels, cependant, ils étaient assez riches pour tourner la tête à de pauvres gens, qui jusqu’alors n’avaient réussi à assurer leur subsistance qu’au prix d’un travail opiniâtre.

Il eût été de mauvaise administration de ne pas réglementer l’exploitation des placers. Le gisement était, en somme, une propriété collective, et il appartenait à la collectivité de l’aliéner au profit des individus. Quelles que fussent ses idées personnelles, le Kaw-djer en avait fait table rase, et, s’obligeant à considérer le problème sous le même angle que la généralité des humains, il avait cherché la solution la plus utile, selon l’opinion courante, au groupe social dont il était le chef. Au cours de l’hiver, il avait eu à ce sujet de nombreuses conférences avec Dick, qu’il associait de parti pris à toutes ses décisions. De leur échange de vues, la conclusion fut qu’il importait d’atteindre un triple but: limiter autant qu’on le pourrait le nombre des Hosteliens qui partiraient à la recherche de l’or, faire bénéficier l’ensemble de la colonie des richesses arrachées à la terre, et enfin restreindre, repousser même si c’était réalisable, l’afflux des étrangers peu recommandables qui allaient accourir de tous les points du monde.

La loi qui fut affichée, à la fin de l’hiver, satisfaisait à ces trois desiderata. Elle subordonnait d’abord le droit d’exploitation à la délivrance préalable d’une concession, puis elle fixait l’étendue maxima de ces concessions et édictait, à la charge des preneurs, tant une indemnité d’acquisition que le versement au profit de la collectivité du quart de leur extraction métallique. Aux termes de cette loi, les concessions étaient réservées exclusivement aux citoyens hosteliens, titre qui ne pourrait être acquis à l’avenir qu’après une année d’habitation effective et sur une décision conforme du gouverneur.

La loi promulguée, il restait à l’appliquer.

Dès le début, elle se heurta à de grandes difficultés. Indifférents aux dispositions qu’elle contenait en leur faveur, les colons ne furent sensibles qu’aux obligations qu’elle leur imposait. Quel besoin d’obtenir et de payer une concession, alors qu’on n’avait qu’à la prendre? Creuser la terre, laver les boues des rivières, n’est-ce pas le droit de tout homme? Pourquoi seraiton contraint, pour exercer librement ce droit naturel, de verser une fraction quelconque du produit de son travail à ceux qui n’y avaient aucunement participé? Ces idées, le Kaw-djer les partageait au fond du cœur. Mais celui qui a assumé la mission redoutable de gouverner ses semblables doit savoir oublier ses préférences personnelles et sacrifier, quand il le faut, les principes dont il se croit le plus sûr aux nécessités de l’heure.

Or, cela sautait aux yeux, il était de première importance qu’un encouragement fût donné aux colons les plus sages qui auraient l’énergie de résister à la contagion et de rester appliqués à leur travail habituel, et le meilleur encouragement était qu’ils fussent assurés d’avoir leur part, réduite assurément, mais certaine, tout en demeurant chez eux.

La loi n’étant pas obéie de bonne grâce, on dut employer la contrainte.

Le Kaw-djer ne disposait, à Libéria, que d’une cinquantaine d’hommes formant le corps de la police permanente, mais neuf cent cinquante autres Hosteliens figuraient sur une liste d’appel, dont les plus anciens étaient éliminés à tour de rôle, à mesure que des jeunes gens arrivés à l’âge d’homme venaient s’y ajouter. Ainsi mille hommes armés pouvaient toujours être rapidement réunis. Une convocation générale fut lancée.

Sept cent cinquante Hosteliens seulement y répondirent. Les deux cents réfractaires étaient partis eux aussi pour les mines, et battaient la campagne aux environs du Golden Creek.

Le Kaw-djer divisa en deux groupes les forces dont il disposait. Cinq cents hommes furent répartis le long des côtes, avec mission de s’opposer au départ clandestin de l’or. Il se mit à la tête des trois cents autres, qu’il fractionna en vingt escouades sous les ordres de ceux dont il était le plus sûr, et se rendit avec eux dans la région des placers.

La petite armée répressive fut disposée en travers de la presqu’île, au pied des Sentry Boxes, et, de là, remonta vers le Nord, en balayant tout devant elle. Les laveurs d’or rencontrés au passage étaient impitoyablement repoussés, à moins qu’ils ne consentissent à se mettre en règle.

Cette méthode obtint d’abord quelques succès. Certains furent contraints de payer à deniers comptants le droit d’exploitation, et les limites du claim choisi par eux furent soigneusement indiquées. D’autres, par contre — et c’était la majorité — ne possédant pas la somme exigée pour la délivrance d’une concession, durent renoncer à leur entreprise. Le nombre des mineurs décrut sensiblement pour cette raison.

Mais bientôt la situation s’aggrava. Ceux qui n’avaient pu obtenir une concession tournaient pendant la nuit les troupes commandées par le Kaw-djer et revenaient s’établir en arrière sur le bord du Golden Creek, précisément à l’endroit d’où l’on venait de les chasser. En même temps, le mal se répandait comme une marée montante.

Excités par les trouvailles des premiers prospecteurs, une deuxième série d’Hosteliens entraient en scène. D’après les nouvelles qui parvenaient au Kaw-djer, l’île entière était attaquée par la contagion. Le mal n’était plus localisé au Golden Creek, et d’innombrables chercheurs d’or fouillaient les montagnes du centre et du Nord.

On s’était fait cette réflexion bien naturelle que les gisements aurifères ne devaient pas, selon toute vraisemblance, se rencontrer exclusivement dans cette plaine marécageuse située à la base des Sentry Boxes. La présence de l’or sur l’île Hoste étant démontrée, tout portait à croire qu’on en trouverait également le long des autres cours d’eau dépendant du même système orographique. On s’était donc mis en chasse de tous côtés, de la pointe de la presqu’île Hardy et de l’extrémité de la presqu’île Pasteur au Darwin Sound.

Quelques prospections ayant abouti à de petits succès, la fièvre générale en fut augmentée, et la fascination de l’or devint plus impérieuse encore. Ce fut une irrésistible folie qui, en quelques semaines, vida Libéria, les bourgades et les fermes de la plupart de leurs habitants. Hommes, femmes et enfants allaient travailler sur les placers. Quelques-uns s’enrichissaient en découvrant une de ces poches où les pépites se sont accumulées sous l’action des pluies torrentielles. Mais l’espoir n’abandonnait pas ceux qui, pendant de longs jours, au prix de mille fatigues, avaient travaillé en pure perte. Tous y courraient, de la capitale, des bourgades, des champs, des pêcheries, des usines et des comptoirs du littoral. Cet or, il semblait doué d’un pouvoir magnétique, auquel la raison humaine n’avait pas la force de résister. Bientôt, il ne resta plus à Libéria qu’une centaine de colons, les derniers à demeurer fidèles à leurs familles et à continuer leurs affaires bien éprouvées cependant par un tel état de choses.

Quelque pénible, quelque désolant que soit cet aveu, il faut bien reconnaître que, seuls de tous les habitants de l’île Hoste, les Indiens qui s’y étaient fixés résistèrent à l’entraînement général. Seuls, ils ne s’abandonnèrent pas à ces furieuses convoitises. Que ceci soit à l’honneur de ces humbles Fuégiens, si plusieurs pêcheries, si plusieurs établissements agricoles ne furent pas entièrement délaissés, c’est que leur honnête nature les préserva de la contagion. D’ailleurs, ces pauvres gens n’avaient pas désappris d’écouter le Bienfaiteur, et la pensée ne leur venait pas de payer en ingratitude les innombrables bienfaits qu’ils en avaient reçus.

Les choses allèrent plus loin encore. Le moment arriva où les équipages des navires en rade commencèrent à suivre le funeste exemple qui leur était donné. Il y eut des désertions qui se multiplièrent de jour en jour. Sans crier gare, les marins abandonnaient leurs bâtiments et s'enfonçaient dans l'intérieur, grisés par l'affolant mirage de l'or. Les capitaines, effrayés par cet émiettement de leurs équipages, s'empressèrent les uns après les autres de quitter le Bourg-Neuf sans même attendre la fin de leurs opérations de chargement ou de déchargement. Nul doute qu'ils ne fissent connaître au dehors le danger qu'ils avaient couru. L'île Hoste allait être mise en quarantaine par toutes les marines de la terre.

La contagion n'épargna même pas ceux dont le devoir était de la combattre. Ce corps organisé par le Kaw-djer pour la surveillance des côtes disparut aussitôt que formé. Des cinq cents hommes qui le composaient, il n'y en eut pas vingt à rejoindre le poste qui leur était assigné. En même temps, la troupe qu'il commandait directement fondait comme un morceau de glace au soleil. Il n'était pas de nuit que plusieurs fuyards ne missent à profit. En quinze jours, elle fut réduite, de trois cents hommes, à moins de cinquante.

En dépit de son indomptable énergie, le Kaw-djer fut alors profondément découragé. À lui qui, poussé par une irrésistible passion du bien, s'était rattaché à l'humanité après une si longue rupture, voici qu'elle se dévoilait cyniquement et montrait à nu tous ses défauts, toutes ses hontes, tous ses vices! Ce qu'il avait bâti avec tant de peine croulait en un instant, et, parce que le hasard avait fait jaillir quelques parcelles d'or d'un éclat de roche, les ruines allaient s'accumuler sur cette malheureuse colonie.

Lutter, il ne le pouvait même plus. Les plus fidèles le quittaient comme les autres. Ce n'est pas avec la poignée d'hommes dont il disposait encore, et qui l’abandonneraient peut-être demain, qu’il ramènerait à la raison une multitude égarée.

Le Kaw-djer revint à Libéria. Il n’y avait rien à faire. Comme un torrent dévastateur, le fléau s’était répandu à travers l’île et la ravageait tout entière. Il fallait attendre qu’il eût épuisé sa violence.

On put croire un instant que ce moment était arrivé. Vers la mi-décembre, quinze jours après le retour du Kaw-djer au gouvernement, quelques rares Libériens commencèrent à regagner la capitale. Les jours suivants, le mouvement s’accentua. Pour un colon qui se mettait tardivement en campagne, deux rentraient et reprenaient, l’oreille basse, leurs occupations antérieures.

Deux causes motivaient ces revirements. En premier lieu, le métier de prospecteur était moins facile à exercer qu’on ne l’avait supposé. Briser la roche à coups de pic ou laver des sables du matin au soir sont des besognes pénibles que l’espoir d’un gain rapide permet seul de supporter. Or, il n’avait pas suffi de se baisser pour ramasser des pépites, ainsi qu’on se l’était imaginé. Pour quelques-uns que leur heureuse étoile avait conduits sur une poche, on en comptait des centaines auxquels le métier de prospecteur, bien qu’infiniment plus dur que leur travail habituel, avait rapporté beaucoup moins. Sur la foi des racontars, on avait attribué aux gisements une richesse incalculable. Il fallait en rabattre. Qu’il y eût de l’or sur l’île Hoste, cela n’était pas contestable, mais on ne l’y ramassait pas à la pelle, comme on l’avait cru naïvement de prime abord. De là, pour certains colons, un découragement d’autant plus rapide que les illusions avaient été plus grandes.

D’autre part, le ralentissement des transactions commerciales et l’arrêt presque total des exploitations agricoles commençaient à produire leurs effets. Certes, on ne manquait encore de rien. Mais le prix de tous les objets de première nécessité avait énormément augmenté. Seuls pouvaient s'en rire ceux à qui la chasse à l'or avait été profitable. Ce renchérissement concourait, au contraire, à augmenter la misère des autres, pour qui la trouvaille de quelques pépites de valeur n'avait pas compensé la suppression des salaires habituels.

De là ces reculades, dont le nombre fut d'ailleurs restreint. Elles se limitèrent aux plus faibles et aux plus pauvres, et, en quelques jours, le mouvement s'arrêta.

Le Kaw-djer n'en éprouva pas de déception, parce qu'il ne s'était jamais illusionné sur son ampleur. Loin de considérer la crise comme près de s'apaiser, son regard clairvoyant découvrait de nouveaux dangers dans les ténèbres de l'avenir. Non, la crise n'était pas finie. Elle ne faisait que commencer, au contraire. Jusqu'ici, on n'avait eu à compter qu'avec les Hosteliens, mais il n'en serait pas toujours ainsi. De toutes les contrées du monde, la redoutable race des chercheurs d'or s'abattrait inévitablement sur la malheureuse île, dès que ceux-ci connaîtraient l'existence du nouveau champ ouvert à leur insatiable rapacité.

Ce fut le dix-sept janvier qu'en arriva au Bourg-Neuf le premier convoi. Ils débarquèrent d'un steamer au nombre de deux cents environ, deux cents hommes plus ou moins déguenillés, d'aspect solide, l'air résolu, brutal et farouche. Quelques-uns avaient de larges couteaux passés à la ceinture, mais de tous, sans exception, le pantalon, si minable qu'il fût, comportait une poche spéciale que gonflait la crosse d'un revolver. Ils portaient sur l'épaule un pic et un sac où étaient incluses leurs misérables nippes, et sur leur hanche gauche, une gourde, un plat et une écuelle s'entrechoquaient avec un bruit de ferraille.

Le Kaw-djer les regarda tristement débarquer. Ces deux cents aventuriers, c’était le premier tour de la chaîne dans laquelle l’île Hoste allait être garrottée.

À partir de ce jour, les arrivées se succédèrent à intervalles rapprochés. Aussitôt débarqués, les chercheurs d’or, en gens ayant l’habitude des formalités à remplir, se rendaient directement au gouvernement et s’enquéraient des prescriptions légales en vigueur. Ils s’accordaient unanimement à les trouver exorbitantes. Remettant alors à régulariser leur situation, ils se répandaient par la ville. Le petit nombre de ses habitants et les informations qu’ils recueillaient habilement avaient tôt fait de les convaincre de la faiblesse de l’Administration hostelienne. C’est pourquoi ils se décidaient tous à passer outre à des lois que bravaient impunément les Hosteliens eux-mêmes, et, après avoir erré un ou deux jours dans les rues désertes de Libéria, ils quittaient la ville et s’éloignaient sans autre formalité à la recherche d’un claim.

Mais l’hiver vint, et, au même instant que les travaux miniers étaient arrêtés, le flot des arrivants fut tari. Le 24 mars, le dernier navire s’éloigna du Bourg-Neuf, où il avait débarqué son contingent de prospecteurs. Plus de deux mille aventuriers foulaient à ce moment le sol de l’île.

Ce navire emportait, à de nombreux exemplaires, un décret notifié par le gouvernement de l’île Hoste à tous les États du globe. Le Kaw-djer, qui avait assisté à l’invasion avec une douleur grandissante, faisait savoir urbi et orbi que, l’île Hoste ayant une population surabondante, il serait mis obstacle, fût-ce par la force, au débarquement de tout nouvel étranger.

Cette mesure serait-elle efficace? L’avenir le dirait, mais, en son for intérieur, le Kaw-djer en doutait. Trop puissante est l’attirance de l’or sur certaines natures pour que rien ait le pouvoir de les arrêter.

D’ailleurs, le mal était fait déjà. La révolte des Hosteliens qui rejetaient toute discipline, l’inévitable misère à laquelle ils étaient condamnés, l’invasion de cette tourbe d’aventuriers, de ces gens de sac et de corde apportant avec eux tous les vices de la terre, c’était un désastre.

À cela, que pouvait-on? Rien. On ne pouvait que temporiser et attendre des jours meilleurs, s’il en devait jamais naître. Halg, Karroly, Hartlepool, Harry et Edward Rhodes, Dick, Germain Rivière et une trentaine d’autres étaient seuls contre tous. C’étaient les derniers fidèles, le bataillon sacré groupé autour du Kaw-djer, qui assistait impuissant à la destruction de son œuvre.

CHAPITRE XII

XII

L’île au pillage

Tel fut le premier acte du drame de l’or, qui devait, comme une pièce bien charpentée, en comporter trois, correctement séparés par les entractes des hivers.

Les déplorables événements qui avaient constitué la trame de ce premier acte eurent forcément une immédiate répercussion sur la vie jusque-là heureuse des Hosteliens. Un petit nombre d’entre eux avaient disparu. Qu’étaient-ils devenus? On l’ignorait, mais tout portait à croire qu’ils avaient été victimes de quelque rixe ou de quelque accident. Plusieurs familles étaient donc en deuil d’un père, d’un fils, d’un frère ou d’un mari.

D’autre part, le bien-être jadis si universellement répandu sur l’île Hoste était grandement diminué. Rien ne manquait encore, à vrai dire, de ce qui est essentiel ou seulement utile à la vie, mais tout avait atteint des prix triples et quadruples de ceux pratiqués antérieurement.

Les pauvres eurent à souffrir de cet état de choses. Les efforts du Kaw-djer, qui s’ingéniait à leur procurer du travail, n’obtenaient que peu de succès. L’arrêt presque complet des transactions particulières incitait tout le monde à la prudence, et personne n’osait rien entreprendre. Quant aux travaux exécutés pour le compte de l’État, celui-ci, dont les caisses étaient vides, ne pouvait plus les continuer. Ironique conséquence de la découverte des mines, l’État manquait d’or depuis qu’on en trouvait dans le sol en abondance.

Où s’en serait-il procuré? Si quelques rares Hosteliens s’étaient résignés à payer leur concession, pas un n’avait versé, sur son extraction, la redevance fixée par la loi, et la misère générale, en supprimant toute contribution des citoyens, avait tari la source où s’alimentait jusqu’alors la caisse publique.

Quant aux fonds personnels du Kaw-djer, quelques jours suffirent à les épuiser. Il les avait largement entamés au cours de l’été, afin que les travaux du cap Horn ne fussent pas interrompus, malgré les graves difficultés au milieu desquelles il se débattait. Ce n’est pas sans mal qu’il y était parvenu. Pas plus que les autres Hosteliens, la fièvre de l’or n’épargna les ouvriers qu’on y employait. Les travaux subirent de ce chef un retard important. Au mois d’avril 1892, huit mois après le premier coup de pioche, le gros œuvre arrivait à peine à la hauteur d’un premier étage, alors que, selon les prévisions du début, il eût dû être entièrement achevé.

Parmi la vingtaine d’Hosteliens, pour qui le métier de prospecteur avait eu des résultats favorables, figurait Kennedy, l’ancien matelot du Jonathan, transformé en nabab par un heureux coup de pic, et qui se faisait suffisamment remarquer pour que sa chance ne fût ignorée de personne.

Combien possédait-il? Personne n’en savait rien, et pas même lui, peut-être, car il n’est pas certain qu’il fût capable de compter, mais beaucoup en tout cas, à en juger par ses dépenses. Il semait l’or à pleines mains. Non pas l’or monnayé ayant cours légal dans tous les pays civilisés, mais le métal en pépites ou en paillettes dont il semblait abondamment pourvu.

Ses allures étaient ébouriffantes. Il pérorait avec autorité, tranchait du milliardaire, et annonçait à qui voulait l’entendre son intention de quitter prochainement une ville où il ne pouvait se procurer l’existence convenant à sa fortune.

Pas plus que l’importance de cette fortune, personne n’en connaissait exactement l’origine, et personne n’aurait pu dire où était situé le claim d’où elle avait été extraite. Quand on interrogeait Kennedy à cet égard, il prenait des airs de mystère et rompait les chiens sans donner de réponse précise. Pourtant, on l’avait rencontré au cours de l’été. Des Libériens l’avaient aperçu, non pas travaillant d’une manière quelconque, mais en train de se promener les mains dans les poches, tout simplement.

Ils n’avaient pu oublier cette rencontre, qui, pour plusieurs, avait coïncidé avec un grand malheur qui leur était arrivé. Peu d’heures ou peu de jours après qu’ils avaient vu Kennedy, l’or arraché par eux à la terre en quantités parfois considérables leur avait été volé sans qu’on découvrit le coupable. Quand les victimes se trouvèrent réunies, la régulière concordance des vols et de la présence de Kennedy à proximité des endroits où ils avaient été commis, les frappa nécessairement, et des soupçons que n’étayait aucune preuve commencèrent à planer sur l’ancien matelot.

Celui-ci ne s’en préoccupait guère, et se contentait de l’admiration des gogos, dont la race est universelle. Ceux de Libéria se laissaient prendre à son verbiage, et son aplomb leur en imposait. Bien que tout le monde connût Kennedy pour ce qu’il valait, quelques-uns lui accordaient malgré tout une certaine considération, il recrutait une clientèle et devenait une manière de personnage.

Le Kaw-djer excédé se résolut à un acte d’autorité. Kennedy et ses pareils se riaient aussi par trop ouvertement des lois. Tant qu’il n’y avait pas eu moyen de faire autrement, on avait subi leur révolte. On devait la réprimer, du moment qu’on en possédait le pouvoir. Or, tous les colons, chassés par l’hiver, étaient de nouveau groupés, et la plupart, n’ayant pas eu à se louer de leur campagne de prospection, avaient été trop heureux de reprendre leurs fonctions régulières. La milice notamment était reconstituée, et les hommes qui la composaient semblaient, pour l’instant tout au moins, animés du meilleur esprit.

Un matin, sans que rien eût averti les intéressés du coup qui les menaçait, la police envahit le domicile de ceux des Libériens qui faisaient plus spécialement étalage de leurs richesses, et sous la direction d’Hartlepool, on y pratiqua des perquisitions en règle. De l’or qui fut trouvé en leur possession, on confisqua impitoyablement le quart, et, sur le surplus, on préleva encore les deux cents pesos ou piastres argentines auxquelles le Kaw-djer avait tarifé les concessions.

Kennedy ne se vantait pas à tort. C’est en effet chez lui que fut faite la moisson la plus abondante. La valeur de l’or qu’on y découvrit n’était pas inférieure à cent soixante-quinze mille francs en monnaie française. C’est aussi chez lui qu’on se heurta à la plus vive résistance. Pendant que l’on procédait à la visite de son domicile, on dut tenir en respect l’ancien matelot, qui écumait de rage et hurlait de furieuses imprécations.

“Tas de voleurs! criait-il, en montrant le poing à Hartlepool.

— Parle toujours, mon garçon, répondit celui-ci, tout en continuant sa perquisition sans s’émouvoir autrement.

— Vous me le paierez! menaça Kennedy que le sang-froid de son ancien chef exaspérait plus encore.

— Eh! Eh! il me semble que c’est toi qui paies, pour l’instant, railla impitoyablement Hartlepool.

— On se reverra!

— Quand tu voudras. Le plus tard possible à mon goût.

— Voleur!… cria Kennedy au paroxysme de la colère.

— Tu te trompes, répliqua Hartlepool d’un ton bonhomme, et la preuve en est que, sur tes cinquante-trois kilos d’or, je ne prends que treize kilos deux cent cinquante grammes exactement, soit le quart, plus la valeur des deux cents piastres que tu sais. Il va de soi que, pour ton argent…

— Misérable!…

— Tu as droit à une concession en règle.

— Brigand!…

— Tu n’as qu’à nous dire où est ton claim.

— Bandit!…

— Tu ne veux pas?…

— Canaille!…

— À ton aise, mon garçon!” conclut Hartlepool en mettant fin à cette scène.

Tout compte fait, les perquisitions rapportèrent au trésor près de trente-sept kilos d’or, représentant en monnaie française une valeur d’environ cent vingt-deux mille francs. En échange, des concessions régulières furent délivrées. Seul Kennedy n’eut même pas cet avantage, en raison de son obstination à ne pas désigner l’emplacement du claim où il avait fait une si belle récolte.

La somme ainsi recueillie fut placée dans la caisse de l’État. Quand, au printemps, les relations seraient reprises avec le reste du monde, on l’échangerait contre des espèces ayant cours. En attendant, le Kaw-djer, ayant largement publié le résultat des perquisitions, créa pour une somme égale du papier-monnaie auquel on accorda toute confiance, ce qui lui permit de soulager bien des misères.

L’hiver s’écoula vaille que vaille, et l’on atteignit le printemps. Aussitôt, les mêmes causes produisirent les mêmes effets. Comme l’année précédente, Libéria fut désertée. La leçon n’était pas suffisante. On se ruait à la conquête de l’or, avec plus de frénésie encore peut-être, comme ces joueurs aux trois quarts ruinés qui jettent sur le tapis leurs derniers sous dans l’espoir absurde de se refaire.

Kennedy fut un des premiers à partir. Ayant mis bien à l’abri l’or qui lui restait, il disparut un matin, en route sans doute vers le claim mystérieux dont il s’était obstiné à ne pas révéler l’emplacement. Ceux qui s’étaient promis de le suivre en furent pour leurs frais.

La milice elle-même, cette garde si dévouée et si fidèle tant qu’avait duré la mauvaise saison, fondit de nouveau avec la neige, et, réduit au seul secours de ses amis les plus proches, le Kaw-djer dut assister en spectateur au second acte du drame.

Les scènes, toutefois, s’en déroulèrent plus rapidement que celles du premier. Moins de huit jours après leur départ, quelques Libériens commencèrent déjà à revenir, puis les retours se succédèrent selon une progression accélérée. La milice se reconstitua pour la deuxième fois. Les hommes reprenaient en silence le poste qu’ils avaient abandonné, sans que le Kaw-djer leur fît aucune observation. Ce n’était pas le moment de se montrer sévère.

Tous les renseignements concordaient à établir que la situation se modifiait d’une manière identique dans l’intérieur. Les fermes, les usines, les comptoirs se repeuplaient. Le mouvement était général comme la cause qui le motivait.

Les chercheurs d’or avaient trouvé, en effet, une situation tout autre que celle de l’année précédente. Alors, ils étaient entre Hosteliens. Maintenant, l’élément étranger était entré en scène et il fallait compter avec lui. Et quels étrangers! Le rebut de l’humanité. Des êtres frustes, demi-brutes, habitués à la dure et ne craignant ni la souffrance ni la mort, impitoyables pour eux-mêmes et pour autrui. Il fallait se battre, pour la possession des claims, contre ces hommes avides qui s’étaient assuré les meilleures places dès le début de la saison. Après une lutte plus ou moins longue selon les caractères, la plupart des Hosteliens y avaient renoncé.

Il était temps que ce renfort arrivât. L’invasion commencée à la fin de l’été précédent avait déjà repris d’une manière beaucoup plus intense. Chaque semaine, deux ou trois steamers amenaient leur cargaison de prospecteurs étrangers. Le Kaw-djer avait vainement tenté de s’opposer à leur débarquement. Les aventuriers passant outre à une interdiction que la force n’appuyait pas, débarquaient malgré lui et sillonnaient Libéria de leurs bandes bruyantes avant de se mettre en route pour les placers.

Les navires affectés au transport des chercheurs d’or étaient presque les seuls qu’on aperçût au port du Bourg-Neuf. Que fussent venus faire les autres, en effet? Les affaires étaient complètement arrêtées. Ils n’eussent pas trouvé à charger. Les stocks de bois de construction et de fourrures avaient été épuisés dès la première semaine. Quant au bétail, aux céréales et aux conserves, le Kaw-djer s’était énergiquement opposé à leur exportation qui eût réduit la population à toutes les horreurs de la famine.

Dès que le Kaw-djer put disposer de deux cents hommes, les envahisseurs de l’île eurent la partie moins belle. Lorsque deux cents baïonnettes appuyèrent les arrêtés du gouverneur, ces arrêtés devinrent du coup respectables et furent respectés. Après avoir essayé vainement d’en faire fléchir la rigueur, les steamers durent reprendre le large avec la détestable cargaison qu’ils avaient apportée.

Mais, ainsi qu’on ne tarda pas à le savoir, leur retraite n’était qu’une ruse. Obligés de céder devant la force, les navires s’élevaient le long de la côte orientale ou occidentale de l’île, et, profitant de l’abri d’une crique, ils débarquaient leur chargement humain en pleine campagne, à l’aide de leurs embarcations. Les brigades volantes que l’on créa pour la surveillance du littoral ne servirent à rien. Elles furent débordées. Ceux qui voulaient mettre pied sur l’île réussissaient toujours à y atterrir, et le flot des aventuriers ne cessa de grossir.

Le désordre atteignait au comble dans l’intérieur. Ce n’étaient qu’orgies et plaisirs crapuleux, coupés de disputes, voire de batailles sanglantes au revolver ou au couteau. Comme les cadavres attirent les hyènes et les vautours des confins de l’horizon, ces milliers d’aventuriers avaient attiré toute une population plus dégradée encore. Ceux qui composaient cette seconde série d’immigrés ne songeaient pas à trimer à la recherche de l’or. Leurs mines, leurs claims, c’étaient les chasseurs d’or eux-mêmes, d’une exploitation infiniment plus aisée. Sur tous les points de l’île, à l’exception de Libéria où l’on n’eût pas osé braver si ouvertement le Kaw-djer, les cabarets et les tripots pullulaient. On y trouvait jusqu’à des music-halls de bas étage, élevés en pleine campagne à l’aide de quelques planches, où de malheureuses femmes charmaient les mineurs ivres de leurs voix éraillées et de leurs grossiers refrains. Dans ces tripots, dans ces music-halls, dans ces cabarets, l’alcool, ce générateur de toutes les hontes, ruisselait et coulait à pleins bords.

En dépit de si grandes tristesses, le Kaw-djer ne perdait pas courage. Ferme à son poste, contre autour duquel on se réunirait quand, la tourmente passée, il s’agirait de reconstruire, il s’ingéniait à reconquérir la confiance des Hosteliens, qui, lentement, mais sûrement, revenaient à la raison. Rien ne semblait avoir de prise sur lui, et, volontairement aveugle aux défections, il continuait imperturbablement son métier de gouverneur. Il n’avait même pas négligé la construction du phare qui lui tenait si fort à cœur. Par son ordre, Dick fit, au cours de l’été, un voyage d’inspection à l’île Horn. Malgré tout, les travaux, assurément ralentis, n’avaient pas été arrêtés un seul jour. À la fin de l’été, le gros œuvre serait terminé et les machines seraient en place. Un mois suffirait alors pour mener à bien le montage.

Vers le 15 décembre la moitié des Hosteliens étaient rentrés dans le devoir, tandis que s’exaspérait encore l’infernal sabbat de l’intérieur. Ce fut à cette époque que le Kaw-djer reçut une visite inattendue dont les conséquences devaient être des plus heureuses. Deux hommes, un Anglais et un Français, arrivés par le même bateau, se présentèrent ensemble au gouvernement. Immédiatement admis près du Kaw-djer, ils déclinèrent leurs noms, Maurice Reynaud, pour le Français, Alexander Smith, pour l’Anglais, et, sans paroles superflues, firent connaître qu’ils désiraient obtenir une concession.

Le Kaw-djer sourit amèrement.

“Permettez-moi de vous demander, messieurs, dit-il, si vous êtes au courant de ce qui se passe en ce moment sur l’île Hoste?

— Oui, répondit le Français.

— Mais nous préférons tout de même être en règle”, acheva l’Anglais.

Le Kaw-djer considéra plus attentivement ses interlocuteurs. De races différentes, ils avaient entre eux quelque chose de commun: cet air de famille des hommes d’action. Tous deux étaient jeunes, trente ans à peine. Ils avaient les épaules larges, le sang à fleur de peau. Leur front, que découvraient des cheveux taillés en brosse, dénotait l’intelligence, et leur menton saillant une énergie qui eût confiné à la dureté si le regard très droit de leurs yeux bleus ne l’avait adouci.

Pour la première fois, le Kaw-djer avait devant lui des chercheurs d’or sympathiques.

“Ah! vous savez cela, dit-il. Vous ne faites qu’arriver, je crois, cependant.

— C’est-à-dire que nous revenons, expliqua Maurice Reynaud. L’année dernière, nous avons déjà passé quelques jours ici. Nous n’en sommes repartis qu’après avoir prospecté et reconnu l’emplacement que nous désirons exploiter.

— Ensemble? demanda le Kaw-djer.

— Ensemble”, répondit Alexander Smith.

Le Kaw-djer reprit, avec une expression de regret qui n’était pas feinte:

“Puisque vous êtes si bien renseignés, vous devez également savoir que je ne puis vous donner satisfaction, la loi que vous désirez respecter réservant toute concession aux citoyens hosteliens.

— Pour les claims, objecta Maurice Reynaud.

— Eh bien? interrogea le Kaw-djer.

— Il s’agit d’une mine, expliqua Alexander Smith. La loi est muette sur ce point.

— En effet, reconnut le Kaw-djer, mais une mine est une lourde entreprise, qui exige d’importants capitaux…

— Nous les possédons, interrompit Alexander Smith. Nous ne sommes partis que pour nous les procurer.

— Et c’est chose faite, dit Maurice Reynaud. Nous représentons ici la Franco-English Gold Mining Company, dont mon camarade Smith est l’ingénieur en chef, et dont je suis le directeur, société constituée à Londres le 10 septembre dernier, au capital de quarante mille livres sterling, sur lesquelles moitié représentent notre apport, et vingt mille livres le working-capital. Si nous traitons, comme je n’en doute pas, le steamer qui nous a amenés emportera nos commandes. Avant huit jours, les travaux seront commencés, dans un mois nous aurons les premières machines, et dès l’année prochaine notre outillage sera au complet.”

Le Kaw-djer très intéressé par l’offre qui lui était faite, réfléchissait à la manière dont il devait l’accueillir. Il y avait du pour et du contre. Ces jeunes gens lui plaisaient. Il était enchanté de leur caractère décidé et de leur aspect de saine franchise. Mais permettre à une société franco- anglaise de s’implanter dans l’île Hoste et de s’y créer des intérêts considérables, n’était-ce pas ouvrir la porte à de futures complications internationales? La France et l’Angleterre, sous prétexte de soutenir leurs nationaux, n’auraient-elles pas un jour la tentation de s’ingérer dans l’administration intérieure de l’île? Le Kaw-djer, en fin de compte, se résolut à donner une réponse affirmative. La proposition était trop sérieuse pour être rejetée, et, puisque la maladie de l’or était désormais inévitable, mieux valait, au lieu de la laisser éparse à travers tout le territoire, la localiser dans quelques foyers faciles à surveiller, en divisant au besoin tous les gisements entre un petit nombre de sociétés importantes.

“J’accepte, dit-il. Toutefois, puisqu’il s’agit de travaux en profondeur, j’estime que les conditions prévues pour des concessions de claims doivent être modifiées.

— Comme il vous plaira, répondit Maurice Reynaud.

— Il y a lieu de fixer un prix à l’hectare.

— Soit!

— Cent piastres argentines par exemple.

— C’est entendu.

— Quelle serait l’étendue de votre concession?

— Cent hectares.

— Ce serait donc dix mille piastres.

— Les voici, dit Maurice Reynaud en libellant rapidement un chèque.

— Par contre, reprit le Kaw-djer, on pourrait, en raison des frais qui seront plus élevés que pour une exploitation de surface, abaisser le taux de notre participation à votre extraction. Je vous propose vingt pour cent.

— Nous acceptons, déclara Alexander Smith.

— Nous sommes donc d'accord?

— Sur tous les points.

— Il est de mon devoir de vous prévenir, ajouta le Kaw-djer, que, pendant un certain temps tout au moins, l'État hostelien est dans l'impossibilité de vous garantir la libre disposition de la concession qu'il vous accorde et de protéger efficacement vos personnes."

Les deux jeunes gens sourirent avec assurance.

"Nous saurons nous protéger nous-mêmes", répondit tranquillement Maurice Reynaud.

La concession signée, le titre en fut remis aux deux amis, qui prirent aussitôt congé. Trois heures plus tard, ils avaient quitté Libéria, en route pour l'extrémité occidentale de la chaîne médiane de l'île, où se trouvait leur concession.

Loin de s'apaiser, l'anarchie de l'intérieur ne fit que s'accroître à mesure que l'été s'avançait. L'exagération s'en mêlant, les imaginations se montant dans l'Ancien et dans le Nouveau Monde, on y regardait l'île Hoste comme une poche extraordinaire, comme une île en or. Aussi les prospecteurs affluaient-ils. Repoussés du port, ils filtraient par toutes les baies de la côte. Dans les derniers jours de janvier, le Kaw-djer, s'en référant aux renseignements qui lui arrivaient de divers côtés, ne put évaluer à moins de vingt mille le nombre des étrangers entassés sur quelques points où ils finiraient par s’entre-dévorer. Que n’avait-on pas à redouter de ces forcenés déjà en lutte sanglante pour la possession des claims, lorsque la famine les jetterait les uns sur les autres!

Ce fut vers cette époque que le désordre atteignit son maximum. Dans cette foule sans frein, il se déroula de véritables scènes de sauvagerie dont plusieurs Hosteliens furent les victimes. Dès que la nouvelle lui en parvint, le Kaw-djer se rendit courageusement aux placers et se lança au milieu de cette tourbe. Tous ses efforts furent inutiles, et son intervention faillit même tourner très mal pour lui. On le repoussa, on le menaça, et peu s’en fallut qu’elle ne lui coûtât la vie.

Elle eut par contre un résultat auquel il était loin de s’attendre. La foule hétérogène des aventuriers comprenait des gens, non seulement de toutes les races du monde, mais aussi de toutes les conditions. Semblables dans leur déchéance actuelle, ils étaient au contraire fort différents par leurs origines. Si la plupart sortaient du ruisseau et de ces repaires où se terrent entre deux crimes les bandits des grandes villes, quelques-uns étaient nés dans de plus hautes sphères sociales.

Plusieurs, même, portaient des noms connus et avaient possédé une fortune considérable, avant de rouler dans l’abîme, ruinés, déshonorés, avilis par la débauche et par l’alcool.

Certains de ces derniers, on ne sut jamais lesquels, reconnurent le Kaw-djer, comme l’avait autrefois reconnu le commandant du Ribarto, mais avec plus d’assurance que le capitaine chilien qui s’en référait uniquement à une photographie déjà ancienne. Eux, au contraire, ils avaient vu le Kaw-djer en chair et en os au cours de leurs pérégrinations à travers le monde, et, quelle que fût la longueur du temps écoulé, ils ne pouvaient s’y tromper, car celui-ci occupait alors une situation trop en évidence pour que ses traits ne se fussent pas gravés dans leur mémoire. Son nom courut aussitôt de bouche en bouche.

C’était un illustre nom qu’on lui attribuait, et disons-le tout de suite, on le lui attribuait justement.

Descendant de la famille régnante d’un puissant empire du Nord, voué par sa naissance à commander en maître, le Kaw-djer avait grandi sur les marches d’un trône. Mais le sort, qui se complaît parfois à ces ironies, avait donné à ce fils des Césars l’âme d’un Saint-Vincent de Paul anarchiste. Dès qu’il eut l’âge d’homme, sa situation privilégiée fut pour lui une source, non de bonheur, mais de souffrance. Les misères dont il était entouré l’obscurcirent à ses yeux. Ces misères, il s’efforça d’abord de les soulager. Il dut reconnaître bientôt qu’une telle entreprise excédait son pouvoir. Ni sa fortune, bien qu’elle fût immense, ni la durée de sa vie n’eussent suffi à atténuer seulement la cent-millionième partie du malheur humain. Pour s’étourdir, pour endormir la douleur que lui causait le sentiment de son impuissance, il se jeta dans la Science, comme d’autres se seraient jetés dans le plaisir. Mais, devenu médecin, ingénieur, sociologue de haute valeur, son savoir ne lui donna pas davantage le moyen d’assurer à tous l’égalité dans le bonheur. De déception en déception, il perdit peu à peu son clair jugement. Prenant l’effet pour la cause, au lieu de considérer les hommes comme des victimes luttant en aveugles à travers les siècles contre la matière impitoyable, et faisant, après tout, de leur mieux, il en vint à rendre responsables de leur malheur les diverses formes d’association auxquelles les collectivités se sont résignées, faute d’en connaître de meilleures. La haine profonde qu’il en conçut contre toutes ces institutions, toutes ces organisations sociales qui, d’après lui, créaient la pérennité du mal, lui rendit impossible de continuer à subir leurs lois détestées.

Pour s’en affranchir, il ne vit pas d’autre moyen que de se retrancher volontairement des vivants. Sans prévenir personne, il était donc parti un beau jour, abandonnant son rang et ses biens, et il avait parcouru le monde jusqu’au moment où s’était rencontrée une région, la seule peut-être, où régnât une indépendance absolue. C’est ainsi qu’il avait échoué en Magellanie, où, depuis six ans, il prodiguait sans mesure aux plus déshérités des humains, lorsque l’accord chilo-argentin, puis le naufrage du Jonathan étaient venus troubler son existence.

Ces disparitions princières, causées par des motifs, sinon identiques, du moins analogues à ceux qui avaient déterminé le Kaw-djer, ne sont pas absolument rares. Tout le monde a dans la mémoire le nom de plusieurs de ces princes, d’autant plus célèbres — tant leur renoncement a semblé prodigieux! — qu’ils ont avec plus de passion cherché à s’effacer. Il en est qui ont embrassé une profession active et l’ont exercée comme le commun des mortels. D’autres se sont confinés dans l’obscurité d’une vie bourgeoise. Un autre de ces grands seigneurs revenus des vanités d’ici-bas s’est consacré à la Science et a produit de nombreux et magnifiques ouvrages qui sont universellement admirés. Du Kaw-djer, qui avait fait de l’altruisme le pôle et la raison d’être de sa vie, la part n’était pas assurément la moins belle.

Une seule fois, au moment où il avait pris le gouvernement de la colonie, il avait consenti à se souvenir de sa grandeur passée. Il connaissait assez l’esprit des lois humaines pour savoir quelles conséquences avait eues son départ. Si elles s’occupent assez peu des personnes, ces lois sont fort attentives à la conservation des biens qu’elles protègent avec sollicitude. C’est pourquoi, alors même qu’on l’aurait profondément oublié, il n’y avait pas lieu de douter que sa fortune n’eût été scrupuleusement respectée. Une partie de cette fortune pouvant être alors d’un puissant secours, il avait passé outre à ses répugnances en dévoilant sa véritable personnalité à Harry Rhodes, et celui-ci, muni de ses instructions, était parti à la recherche de cet or que l'île Hoste rendait maintenant avec une si déplorable abondance.

L'effet produit sur les Hosteliens et sur les aventuriers par la divulgation du nom du Kaw-djer fut diamétralement opposé. Ni les uns ni les autres ne virent juste, d'ailleurs, et par tous le côté sublime de ce grand caractère fut également méconnu.

Les prospecteurs étrangers, vieux routiers qui avaient parcouru la Terre en tous sens et s'étaient trop frottés à tous les mondes pour être épatés, comme on dit, par les distinctions sociales, détestèrent plus encore celui qu'ils considéraient comme leur ennemi. Pas étonnant qu'il inventât des lois si dures aux pauvres gens. C'était un aristocrate. Cela expliquait tout à leurs yeux.

Les Hosteliens, au contraire, ne restèrent pas insensibles à la gloire d'être gouvernés par un chef de si haut lignage. Leur vanité en fut agréablement flattée, et l'autorité du Kaw-djer en bénéficia.

Celui-ci était revenu à Libéria désespéré, écœuré des abominations qu'il avait constatées, à ce point que, dans son entourage, on se prit à envisager l'éventualité d'un abandon de l'île Hoste. Toutefois, avant d'en arriver à cette extrémité, Harry Rhodes agita la question de recourir au Chili. Peut-être convenait-il de tenter cette suprême chance de salut.

“Le gouvernement chilien ne nous abandonnera pas, fit-il observer. Il est de son intérêt que la colonie retrouve sa tranquillité.

— Un appel à l'étranger! s'écria le Kaw-djer.

— Il suffirait, reprit Harry Rhodes, qu’un des navires de Punta-Arenas vînt croiser en vue de l’île. Il n’en faudrait pas plus pour mettre ces misérables à la raison.

— Que Karroly parte pour Punta-Arenas, dit Hartlepool, et avant quinze jours…

— Non, interrompit le Kaw-djer d’un ton sans réplique. Dût la nation hostelienne périr, jamais une pareille démarche ne sera faite de mon consentement. Mais, d’ailleurs, tout n’est pas perdu encore. Avec du courage, nous nous sauverons, comme nous nous sommes faits, nous-mêmes?”

Devant une volonté si nettement exprimée, il n’y avait qu’à s’incliner.

Quelques jours plus tard, comme pour justifier cette énergie que rien ne pouvait abattre, un courant de réaction beaucoup plus important que les précédents se dessina parmi les Hosteliens. C’est qu’aussi la situation devenait impossible sur les placers. En compétition avec des aventuriers sans scrupule, qui considéraient un coup de couteau comme un très naturel argument de discussion, la partie pour eux était trop inégale. Ils renonçaient donc à la lutte, et venaient se réfugier près d’un chef à qui ils n’étaient pas loin d’attribuer un pouvoir sans limites, depuis qu’ils en connaissaient le véritable nom. En quelques jours, tant à Libéria que dans le reste de l’île, tout le monde eut repris sa situation antérieure.

Parmi ceux qui revenaient, on eût vainement cherché Kennedy, demeuré sur les placers avec les aventuriers ses pareils. De mauvais bruits continuaient à courir sur l’ancien matelot. Comme l’année précédente, personne ne l’avait vu laver ni prospecter pour son compte, et sa présence avait encore coïncidé à plusieurs reprises avec des vols, et même, par deux fois, avec des assassinats ayant le vol pour mobile. De ces racontars à une accusation franche, il n'y avait qu'un pas.

Ce pas, on ne pouvait, pour l'instant tout au moins, espérer le franchir. Dans ce pays troublé, toute enquête eût été impossible. Que les bruits fussent fondés ou non, il fallait renoncer à les tirer au clair.

La nature du Kaw-djer était trop haute pour connaître la rancune. Mais, quand bien même il en eût été capable, l'aspect des colons eût suffi à la dissiper. Ils revenaient déchus, dans un état de misère et d'épuisement lamentables. Dans cette population nomade, qui avait ramassé les germes morbides de tous les ciels, et qui grouillait sur les placers, presque sans abri, exposée aux intempéries d'un climat souvent orageux en été, respirant l'air des marécages dont elle remuait les boues malsaines, la maladie s'était déchaînée avec rage. Les Libériens regagnaient leur ville, amaigris, tremblants de fièvre, et, durant un long mois, le Dr Arvidson ne suffisant pas à la tâche, le Kaw-djer fut plutôt médecin que gouverneur.

Malgré tout, cependant un grand espoir le transportait. Cette fois, il avait conscience que son peuple lui était rendu. Il le sentait vibrant dans sa main, accablé de ses fautes et frémissant du désir de se les faire pardonner. Encore un peu de patience, et il disposerait de la force nécessaire pour lutter contre le cancer immonde qui s'était attaqué à son œuvre.

Vers la fin de l'été, l'île Hoste était en fait divisée en deux zones bien distinctes. Dans l'une, la plus grande, cinq mille Hosteliens, hommes, femmes et enfants, revenus à leur vie normale et reprenant peu à peu leurs occupations régulières. Dans l'autre, sur quelques espaces étroits autour des terrains aurifères, vingt mille aventuriers, prêts à tout, et dont l'impunité accroissait l'audace. Ils osaient maintenant venir à Libéria et traitaient la ville en pays conquis. Ils parcouraient insolemment les rues, la tête haute, en faisant résonner leurs talons, et s’appropriaient sans scrupule où ils le trouvaient ce qui était à leur convenance. Si l’intéressé protestait, ils répondaient par des coups.

Mais le jour vint enfin où le Kaw-djer, se sentant assez fort pour entamer la lutte, se résolut à faire un exemple. Ce jour-là, les chercheurs d’or qui s’aventurèrent dans Libéria furent appréhendés et incarcérés, sans autre forme de procès, dans l’unique steamer qui se trouvât alors au Bourg-Neuf, et que le Kaw-djer affréta dans ce but. L’opération fut renouvelée les jours suivants, si bien que, le 15 mars, au moment où le steamer appareilla, il emportait plus de cinq cents de ces passagers involontaires solidement bouclés à fond de cale.

Ces expulsions sommaires eurent leur écho dans l’intérieur et y déchaînèrent de furieuses colères. D’après les nouvelles qu’on en recevait, toute la région aurifère était en fermentation, et on devait s’attendre à une révolte générale. Déjà, il n’y avait plus de sécurité dans aucune partie de l’île. Signes prémonitoires des crimes collectifs, les crimes individuels se multipliaient. Des fermes étaient pillées, des têtes de bétail enlevées. Coup sur coup, à vingt kilomètres de Libéria, trois assassinats furent commis. Puis on apprit que les prospecteurs étrangers se concertaient, qu’ils tenaient des meetings, que, devant des milliers d’auditeurs, des discours d’une incroyable violence étaient prononcés. Les orateurs ne parlaient de rien moins que de marcher sur la capitale et de la détruire de fond en comble. Or, pour les esprits clairvoyants, cela était peu de chose encore. Bientôt les vivres allaient manquer. Quand la faim tenaillerait les entrailles de cette populace en délire, sa rage serait décuplée. Il fallait s’attendre au pire…

Soudain tout s’apaisa. L’hiver était revenu, glaçant l’âme tumultueuse des hommes. Et, du ciel gris, tout ouaté de neige, l’avalanche implacable des flocons tombait, comme un rideau, sur le deuxième acte du drame.

CHAPITRE XIII

XIII

Une “journée”

Non seulement l’égarement des Hosteliens avait presque entièrement supprimé la production de l’île, mais encore une population quintuplée devait vivre sur les stocks à peu près épuisés. Aussi la misère fut-elle atroce pendant l’hiver de 1893. Les cinq mois qu’il dura, le Kaw-djer accomplit une tâche formidable. Il lui fallut résoudre au jour le jour des difficultés sans cesse renaissantes, venir au secours des affamés, soigner les innombrables malades, être, en un mot, partout à la fois. En constatant cette indomptable énergie et ce dévouement inaltérable, les Libériens furent frappés d’admiration et écrasés de remords. Voilà comment se vengeait celui qui avait renoncé, on le savait maintenant, à une si merveilleuse existence pour partager leur vie de misère, et qu’ils avaient pourtant si lâchement renié!

Malgré tous les efforts du Kaw-djer, c’est à grand-peine qu’on put se procurer le strict nécessaire à Libéria. Que devait-ce être dans les campagnes? Que devait-ce être surtout aux placers, où s’entassaient des milliers d’hommes qui n’avaient sûrement pris aucune mesure pour combattre un climat dont ils ignoraient les rigueurs?

Il était trop tard pour réparer leur imprévoyance. Ils étaient bloqués par les neiges et ne pouvaient plus compter que sur les ressources de leurs alentours les plus proches. Ces ressources, tant de bouches affamées les auraient épuisées en quelques jours.

Ainsi qu’on l’apprit plus tard, quelques-uns réussirent cependant à vaincre tous les obstacles et s’avancèrent parfois fort loin à travers l’île. Entre eux et plusieurs fermiers, il y eut des batailles sanglantes. La férocité humaine dépassait celle de la nature. L’hiver avait diminué, mais non tari le flot de sang qui rougissait la terre.

Toutefois, peu nombreux furent ceux qui bravèrent à la fois, dans ces incursions audacieuses, l’hostilité des hommes et celle des choses. Comment vécurent les autres? Tout ce qu’on en devait jamais savoir, c’est que beaucoup étaient morts de froid et de faim. Quant à la manière dont leurs compagnons plus heureux avaient assuré leur existence, cela demeura toujours un mystère.

Mais le Kaw-djer n’avait pas besoin de connaître les choses dans le détail pour concevoir de quelles tortures ces misérables étaient la proie. Il devinait leur désespoir et comprenait que ce désespoir se changerait en fureur aux premiers rayons du printemps. C’est alors que le danger deviendrait réellement menaçant. Les routes rendues libres par la fonte des neiges, cette populace affamée se répandrait de tous côtés et mettrait l’île au saccage…

Deux jours après le dégel, on apprit, en effet, que la concession de la Franco-English Gold Mining Company, que dirigeaient le Français

Maurice Reynaud et l’Anglais Alexander Smith, avait été attaquée par une bande de forcenés. Mais, ainsi qu’ils l’avaient dit au Kaw-djer, les deux jeunes gens avaient su se défendre eux-mêmes. Réunissant leurs ouvriers, au nombre déjà de plusieurs centaines, ils avaient repoussé les assaillants, non sans leur infliger des pertes sérieuses.

Quelques jours après, on reçut la nouvelle d’une série de crimes commis dans la région du Nord. Des fermes avaient été pillées, et les propriétaires chassés de chez eux, ou même parfois assommés purement et simplement. Si on laissait faire ces bandits, il ne leur faudrait pas un mois pour dévaster l’île entière. Il était temps d’agir.

La situation était infiniment meilleure que celle de l’année précédente. Si le printemps avait déterminé de violents remous dans la foule éparse des aventuriers, il n’avait eu aucune influence sur la manière d’être des Hosteliens. Cette fois, la leçon était suffisante. À l’exception de la centaine d’égarés qui s’étaient obstinés à demeurer aux placers et qui sans doute avaient péri à l’heure actuelle, la population de Libéria n’avait pas diminué d’une unité. Personne n’avait eu la pensée d’entamer une troisième campagne de prospection. Pour quelques rares colons servis par un hasard favorable, la plupart étaient revenus ruinés, leur santé compromise, leur avenir à jamais perdu. Et encore, des modestes fortunes récoltées sur les placers, la plus grande part avait été dissipée, ainsi que cela arrive fatalement, dans les cabarets, dans les tripots de bas étage, où les détonations des revolvers se mêlaient aux hurlements des joueurs. Tous se rendaient compte de leur folie et nul n’avait envie de recommencer l’expérience.

Le Kaw-djer disposait donc de la milice au complet. Mille hommes enrégimentés, disciplinés, obéissant à des chefs reconnus, c’est une force sérieuse, et, bien que les adversaires fussent vingt fois plus nombreux, il ne doutait pas de les mettre à la raison. Quelques jours de patience, afin de laisser aux routes détrempées par la fonte des neiges le temps de sécher un peu, et des colonnes sillonneraient l’île, la balayeraient de bout en bout des aventuriers qui l’infestaient…

Ceux-ci le devancèrent. Ce furent eux qui provoquèrent la tragédie rapide et terrible qui décida du sort de l’île.

Le 3 novembre, alors que les chemins étaient encore transformés en marécages, des Hosteliens de la campagne, accourus au galop de leurs chevaux, avertirent le Kaw-djer qu'une colonne, forte d'un millier de chercheurs d'or, marchait contre la ville. Les intentions de ces hommes, on les ignorait, mais elles ne devaient pas être pacifiques, à en juger par leur attitude et par leurs cris menaçants.

Le Kaw-djer prit ses mesures en conséquence. Par son ordre, la milice fut rassemblée devant le gouvernement et barra les rues qui débouchaient sur la place. Puis on attendit les événements.

La colonne annoncée atteignit vers la fin du jour Libéria, où l'écho de ses chants et de ses cris l'avait précédée. Les prospecteurs, qui croyaient surprendre, eurent au contraire la surprise de se heurter à la milice hostelienne rangée en bataille, et leur élan en fut brisé. Ils s'arrêtèrent interdits. Au lieu d'agir à l'improviste, comme tel était leur projet, voilà qu'ils étaient obligés de parlementer!

D'abord, ils discutèrent entre eux à grand renfort de gestes et de cris, puis ceux qui se trouvaient en tête firent connaître à Hartlepool qu'ils désiraient parler au gouverneur. Leur requête transmise de proche en proche obtint un accueil favorable. Le Kaw-djer consentait à recevoir dix délégués.

Ces dix délégués, il fallut les désigner, ce qui motiva une recrudescence de discussions et de clameurs. Enfin ils se présentèrent devant le front de la milice qui ouvrit ses rangs pour les laisser passer. Le mouvement, sur un bref commandement d'Hartlepool, fut exécuté avec une perfection remarquable. De vieux soldats n'eussent pas mieux fait. Les délégués des prospecteurs en furent impressionnés. Ils le furent plus encore, quand, sur un nouveau commandement de son chef, la milice, manœuvrant avec une égale sûreté, referma ses rangs derrière eux.

Le Kaw-djer se tenait debout au centre de la place, dans l’espace restant libre en arrière des troupes. Tandis que les délégués se dirigeaient vers lui, on put les contempler à loisir. Vus de près, leur aspect n’était pas rassurant. Grands, les épaules larges, ils paraissaient robustes, bien que les privations de l’hiver les eussent amaigris. Pour la plupart vêtus de cuir dont une épaisse couche de crasse uniformisait la couleur première, ils avaient des chevelures hirsutes et des barbes touffues qui faisaient ressembler leurs visages à des mufles de fauves. Au fond de leurs orbites caves luisaient des yeux de loups, et ils serraient les poings en marchant.

Le Kaw-djer demeura immobile, sans avancer d’un pas au-devant d’eux, et, quand ils furent arrivés près de lui, il attendit tranquillement qu’ils lui fissent connaître le but de leur démarche.

Mais les délégués des prospecteurs ne se pressaient pas de parler. Ils s’étaient découverts instinctivement en abordant le Kaw-djer, et, rangés en demi-cercle autour de lui, ils se dandinaient gauchement d’une jambe sur l’autre. Leur apparence farouche était trompeuse. Ils semblaient, au contraire, assez petits garçons et fort embarrassés de leur personne, en se voyant isolés de leurs camarades, dans la solitude de cette vaste place, devant cet homme qui les dominait de la tête, à l’attitude grave et froide, et dont la majesté leur en imposait.

Enfin, leur trouble s’atténua, ils retrouvèrent leur langue et l’un d’eux prit la parole.

“Gouverneur, dit-il, nous venons au nom de nos camarades…”

L’orateur, intimidé, s’interrompit. Le Kaw-djer ne fit rien pour l’aider à renouer le fil de son discours. Le prospecteur reprit:

“Nos camarades nous ont envoyés…”

Nouvel arrêt de l’orateur et pareil mutisme du Kaw-djer.

“Enfin, nous sommes leurs délégués, quoi! expliqua un autre aventurier impatient de ces hésitations.

— Je sais, dit le Kaw-djer froidement. Après?”

Les délégués furent interloqués. Eux qui pensaient faire trembler!… Voilà comment on les redoutait!… Il y eut encore un silence. Puis un troisième prospecteur, remarquable par l’ampleur de sa barbe inculte, réunit tout son courage et entra dans le vif de la question.

“Après?… Il y a, après, que nous avons à nous plaindre. Voilà ce qu’il y a, après.

— De quoi?

— De tout. Nous ne pouvons pas nous en tirer, tant on nous montre ici de mauvais vouloir.”

Quelque sérieuse que fût la situation, le Kaw-djer ne put s’empêcher d’être intérieurement égayé par la plaisante ironie d’une telle récrimination dans la bouche d’un des envahisseurs de l’île Hoste.

“Est-ce tout? demanda-t-il.

— Non, répondit le troisième prospecteur, qui possédait décidément la langue la mieux pendue. On voudrait aussi, nous autres, que les claims ne soient pas à qui veut les prendre. Il faut se battre pour les avoir. Les gentlemen — l’aventurier, un Américain de l’Ouest, employa ce mot le plus sérieusement du monde — préféreraient des concessions, comme ça se fait partout… Ce serait plus… officiel, ajouta-t-il après un moment de réflexion avec une conviction divertissante.

— Est-ce tout? répéta le Kaw-djer.

— Savoir!… répondit le prospecteur à la grande barbe. Mais, avant de passer à autre chose, les gentlemen voudraient une réponse au sujet des concessions.

— Non, dit le Kaw-djer.

— Non?…

— La réponse est: non”, précisa le Kaw-djer.

Les délégués relevèrent la tête avec ensemble. Des lueurs mauvaises commencèrent à passer dans leurs yeux.

“Pourquoi? demanda l’un de ceux qui n’avaient pas encore parlé. Il faut une raison aux gentlemen.”

Le Kaw-djer garda le silence. Vraiment! ils étaient osés de lui demander ses raisons. Ne les connaissait-on pas? La loi, que personne n’avait respectée, ne fixait-elle pas un prix pour la délivrance des concessions? Bien plus! cette loi connue de tous ne réservait-elle pas ces concessions aux Hosteliens, et n’interdisait-elle pas à ces gens qui l’avaient audacieusement bravée le territoire hostelien?

“Pourquoi?” répéta le prospecteur en constatant que sa question restait sans effet.

Puis, la seconde interrogation n’ayant pas plus de succès que la première, il y répondit lui-même.

“La loi?… dit-il. Eh! on la connaît, la loi… Mais on n’a qu’à nous naturaliser… La terre est à tout le monde, et nous sommes des hommes comme les autres, peut-être!”

Jadis, le Kaw-djer ne se fût pas exprimé différemment. Mais ses idées étaient bien changées maintenant, et il ne comprenait plus ce langage. Non, la terre n’est pas à tout le monde. Elle appartient à ceux qui la défrichent, la cultivent, à ceux dont le travail opiniâtre la transforme en mère nourricière et oblige le sol à tisser le tapis doré des moissons.

“Et puis, reprit le prospecteur barbu, si on parle de loi, il faudrait voir d’abord à la respecter, la loi. Quand ceux qui la fabriquent s’en moquent, qu’est-ce que feront les autres, je le demande? On est le 3 novembre. Pourquoi qu’il n’y a pas eu d’élection le 1er, puisque le gouvernement a fini son temps?”

Cette remarque inattendue surprit le Kaw-djer. Qui avait pu renseigner aussi bien ce mineur? Kennedy, sans doute, qu’on n’avait pas revu à Libéria. L’observation était juste, au surplus. La période qu’il avait fixée quand il s’était volontairement soumis aux suffrages des électeurs était expirée, en effet, et, aux termes de la loi autrefois promulguée par lui-même, on aurait dû procéder deux jours plus tôt à une nouvelle élection. S’il s’en était dispensé, c’est qu’il n’avait pas jugé opportun de compliquer encore une situation déjà si troublée, pour respecter une simple formalité, le renouvellement de son mandat étant absolument certain. Mais, d’ailleurs, en quoi cela regardait-il des gens qui n’étaient ni éligibles, ni électeurs?

Cependant, le chercheur d’or, enhardi par le calme du Kaw-djer, continuait sur un ton plus assuré:

“Les gentlemen réclament cette élection, et ils veulent que leurs voix comptent. Leurs voix valent celles des autres, pas vrai? Pourquoi qu’il y en aurait cinq mille qui feraient la loi à vingt? Ça n’est pas juste…”

L’aventurier fit une pause et attendit inutilement la réponse du Kaw-djer. Embarrassé par ce silence persistant, et désireux de faire comprendre que sa mission était terminée, il conclut:

“Et voilà!

— Est-ce tout? interrogea pour la troisième fois le Kaw-djer.

— Oui… répondit le délégué. C’est tout, sans être tout… Enfin, c’est tout pour le moment.”

Le Kaw-djer, regardant bien en face les dix hommes attentifs, déclara d’un ton froid:

“Voici ma réponse: Vous êtes ici malgré nous. Je vous donne vingt-quatre heures pour vous soumettre tous sans condition. Passé ce délai, j’aviserai.”

Il fit un signe. Hartlepool et une vingtaine d’hommes accoururent.

“Hartlepool, dit-il, veuillez reconduire ces messieurs hors des rangs.”

Les délégués étaient stupéfaits. Quelque assurés qu’ils fussent de leur force, ce calme glacial les déconcertait. Encadrés par les Hosteliens, ils s’éloignèrent docilement.

Par exemple, quand ils furent réunis à ceux qu’ils désignaient sous le nom générique de “gentlemen”, le ton changea. Tandis qu’ils rendaient compte de leur mission, leur colère, jusque-là dominée, éclata sans contrainte, et, pour exprimer leur indignation, ils trouvèrent une quantité suffisante de paroles irritées et de jurons sonores.

Cette éloquence spéciale eut de l’écho dans la foule, et bientôt un concert de vociférations apprit au Kaw-djer qu’on connaissait sa réponse. Cette agitation fut longue à se calmer. La nuit la diminua sans l’apaiser entièrement. Jusqu’au matin, l’ombre fut pleine de cris furieux. Si on ne voyait plus les mineurs, on les entendait. Évidemment ils s’entêtaient dans leur entreprise et campaient en plein air.

La milice fit comme eux. Se relayant par quarts, elle veilla toute la nuit, l’arme au pied.

La colonne ne s’était pas retirée, en effet. À l’aube, les rues apparurent noires de monde. Bon nombre de prospecteurs, lassés par cette nuit d’attente, s’étaient couchés sur le sol. Mais tous furent debout au premier rayon du jour, et le vacarme de la veille reprit de plus belle.

Dans les rues dont ils occupaient la chaussée, les maisons étaient soigneusement closes. Personne ne se risquait au dehors. Si, d’un premier étage, un Hostelien plus curieux risquait un coup d’œil par l’entrebâillement des volets, un ouragan de huées l’obligeait aussitôt à les refermer en hâte.

Le début de la matinée fut relativement calme. Les aventuriers ne semblaient pas être d’accord sur ce qu’il convenait de faire et discutaient avec animation. À mesure que le temps s’écoulait, leur nombre augmentait. Autant qu’on en pouvait juger, il s’élevait maintenant à quatre ou cinq mille. Des émissaires envoyés pendant la nuit avaient battu le rappel dans la campagne et ramené du renfort. Les prospecteurs de la région du Golden Creek avaient eu le temps d’arriver, mais non pas ceux qui travaillaient dans les montagnes du centre ou à la pointe du Nord-Ouest, et dont le voyage, en admettant qu’ils dussent venir, exigerait un ou plusieurs jours selon leur éloignement.

Leurs compagnons qui avaient déjà envahi la ville eussent sagement fait de les attendre. Quand ils seraient dix ou quinze mille, la situation déjà si grave de Libéria deviendrait presque désespérée.

Mais ces cerveaux brûlés, incapables de résister à la violence de leurs passions, n’avaient jamais la patience d’attendre. Plus la matinée s’avança, plus leur agitation grandit. Sous le coup de fouet de la fatigue et des excitations répétées des orateurs en plein vent, la foule s’énervait à vue d’œil.

Vers onze heures, un élan général la jeta tout à coup sur la milice hostelienne. Celle-ci se hérissa immédiatement de baïonnettes. Les assaillants reculèrent précipitamment, s’efforçant de vaincre la poussée de ceux qui se trouvaient en queue. Afin d’éviter des malheurs involontaires, le Kaw-djer fit reculer sa troupe, qui se replia en bon ordre et alla prendre position devant le gouvernement. Les rues aboutissant à la place furent ainsi dégagées. Les mineurs, se trompant sur le sens de ce mouvement, poussèrent une assourdissante clameur de victoire.

L’espace rendu libre par la retraite de la milice hostelienne fut en un instant rempli d’une foule grouillante. Cette foule ne tarda pas à reconnaître son erreur. Non, elle n’était pas victorieuse encore. La milice intacte lui barrait toujours le passage. Si les mille hommes dont elle était formée, modelant leur attitude sur celle de leur chef, gardaient, impassibles, l’arme au pied, ils n’en disposaient pas moins de la foudre. Leurs mille fusils, des carabines américaines, que beaucoup de prospecteurs connaissaient bien, auxquelles un magasin assure une réserve de sept cartouches, étaient capables de tirer en moins d'une minute leurs sept mille coups, qui seraient, dans ce cas, tirés à bout portant. Il y avait là de quoi faire réfléchir les plus braves.

Mais les aventuriers n'étaient plus dans un état d'esprit leur permettant la réflexion. Ils s'excitaient, se grisaient les uns les autres. Leur grand nombre leur donnant confiance, ils cessèrent de craindre cette troupe dont l'immobilité leur parut de la faiblesse. Le moment vint où ce qui leur restait de raison fut définitivement aboli.

Le spectacle était tragique. À la périphérie de la place, une foule hurlante et débraillée, criant de ses milliers de bouches des mots que personne n'entendait, tendant ses milliers de poings en des gestes de menace. À trente mètres d'elle, lui faisant face, la milice hostelienne rangée en bon ordre le long de la façade du gouvernement, ses hommes conservant une immobilité de statue.

Derrière la milice, le Kaw-djer, seul, debout sur le dernier degré du perron qui donnait accès au gouvernement, contemplant d'un air soucieux ce tableau mouvementé, et cherchant un moyen de dénouer pacifiquement une situation dont il comprenait toute la gravité.

Il était une heure de l'après-midi quand des injures directes commencèrent à partir de la foule enfiévrée. Les Hosteliens, contenus par leur chef, n'y répondirent pas.

Au premier rang de leurs insulteurs, ils pouvaient voir une figure de connaissance. Les révoltés avaient poussé en avant Kennedy, dont les conseils insidieux n'étaient pas sans avoir contribué à les engager dans cette aventure. C'est par lui qu'ils connaissaient la loi relative aux élections, c'est lui qui leur avait suggéré de réclamer la qualité de citoyens et d’électeurs, en leur affirmant que le Kaw-djer, abandonné de tout le monde, n’aurait pas la force de leur résister. La réalité se montrait différente. Ils se heurtaient à mille fusils, et il semblait juste que celui qui les avait menés là fût exposé aux coups.

L’ancien matelot, qui avait voulu se venger, était le mauvais marchand de cette affaire. Il n’avait plus sa jactance de nabab. Pâle, tremblant, il n’en menait pas large, comme on dit familièrement.

La foule perdant de plus en plus la tête, les injures ne suffirent bientôt plus à satisfaire sa colère grandissante, et il fallut passer aux actes. Des volées de pierres commencèrent à s’abattre sur la milice impassible. Les choses prenaient décidément une mauvaise tournure.

Pendant une heure, cette pluie meurtrière tomba. Plusieurs hommes furent blessés et deux d’entre eux durent quitter le rang. Une pierre atteignit au front le Kaw-djer lui-même. Il chancela, mais se redressant d’un énergique effort, il essuya paisiblement le sang qui rougissait son visage et reprit son attitude d’observateur.

Après une heure de cet exercice qui ne pouvait mener à rien, les assaillants parurent se lasser. Les projectiles devinrent moins nombreux, et on sentait qu’ils allaient cesser de pleuvoir, quand une énorme clameur jaillit tout à coup de la foule. Qu’était-il arrivé? Le Kaw-djer se haussant sur la pointe des pieds, s’efforça vainement de voir dans les rues avoisinantes. Il ne put y réussir. Au loin, les remous de la foule semblaient plus violents, voilà tout, sans qu’il fût possible d’en discerner la cause.

On ne devait pas tarder à la connaître. Quelques minutes plus tard, trois prospecteurs taillés en hercule, s’ouvrant un passage à coups de coude, venaient se placer en avant de leurs compagnons, comme s’ils eussent voulu montrer qu’ils se riaient des balles. Ils ne les craignaient plus, en effet, car ils portaient devant eux, en guise de boucliers, des otages qui les protégeaient contre elles.

Les assaillants avaient eu une idée diabolique. Ayant enfoncé la porte d’une maison, ils s’étaient emparés de ses habitants, deux jeunes femmes, deux sœurs, qui y vivaient seules avec un petit enfant, le mari de l’une d’elles étant mort au cours de l’hiver précédent. Deux mineurs avaient saisi les femmes, un autre l’enfant, et, chacun avec son fardeau, ils bravaient maintenant le Kaw-djer et sa milice. Qui oserait tirer, alors les premiers coups seraient pour ces créatures innocentes?

Les deux femmes, terrorisées, s’abandonnaient sans résistance. Quant au bébé, qu’une sorte de brute gigantesque tenait à bout de bras comme pour l’offrir en holocauste, il riait.

Cela dépassait en horreur tout ce que le Kaw-djer eût été capable d’imaginer. L’atroce aventure fit trembler cet homme si fort. Il eut peur. Il pâlit.

C’était l’heure pourtant des décisions promptes. Il fallait prendre d’urgence une résolution. Déjà les mineurs, poussant des vociférations furieuses, avaient fait un pas.

Leur affolement était tel qu’il leur fut impossible d’attendre d’en arriver au corps à corps, dans lequel la supériorité du nombre leur eût assuré la victoire. Ils étaient à vingt mètres de la milice figée dans son attitude de marbre, quand des détonations éclatèrent. Les revolvers faisaient parler la poudre. Un Hostelien tomba.

L’hésitation n’était plus de mise. Dans moins d’une minute on serait débordé, et toute la population de Libéria, hommes, femmes et enfants, serait massacrée sans recours.

“En joue!…” commanda le Kaw-djer qui devint plus pâle encore.

La milice obéit avec la précision d’un exercice d’entraînement. Ensemble, les crosses se haussèrent aux épaules, et les canons se dirigèrent menaçants, vers la foule.

Mais celle-ci était désormais trop affolée pour que la crainte pût l’arrêter. De nouveaux coups de revolvers résonnèrent. Trois autres miliciens furent atteints. Ivre, déchaînée, la foule n’était plus qu’à dix pas. “Feu!” commanda le Kaw-djer d’une voix rauque. Par leur calme héroïque au milieu de cette longue tourmente, ses hommes venaient de le payer en une fois de tout ce qu’il avait fait pour eux. On était quitte. Mais, s’ils avaient puisé dans la reconnaissance et dans l’affection qu’il leur inspirait la force de se conduire en soldats, ils n’étaient pas des soldats après tout. Dès qu’ils eurent pressé la gâchette, l’affolement les gagna à leur tour. Ils ne tirèrent pas un coup, ils les tirèrent tous. Ce fut le roulement de tonnerre. En trois secondes, les carabines crachèrent leurs sept mille balles. Puis, un silence énorme tomba…

Les hommes de la milice regardaient, hébétés. Au loin, des fuyards disparaissaient. Devant eux, il n’y avait plus personne. La place était déserte.

Déserte?… Oui, sauf cet amoncellement, cette montagne de cadavres d’où ruisselait un torrent de sang! Combien y en avait-il?… Mille?… Quinze cents?… Davantage?… On ne savait.

Au bas de ce tas hideux, à côté de Kennedy, mort, les deux jeunes femmes étaient tombées. L'une une balle dans l'épaule, était morte ou évanouie. L'autre se releva sans blessure et courut, affolée, frappée d'épouvante. L'enfant était là, lui aussi, parmi les morts, dans le sang. Mais — c'était un miracle! — il n'avait rien, et, fort amusé par ce jeu inconnu, il continuait à rire de tout son cœur…

Le Kaw-djer, en proie à une effroyable douleur, avait caché son visage entre ses mains pour fuir l'horrible spectacle. Un instant, il demeura prostré, puis, lentement, il redressa la tête.

D'un même mouvement, les Hosteliens se tournèrent vers lui et le regardèrent en silence.

Lui n'eut pas un regard pour eux. Immobile, il contemplait le sinistre charnier, et, sur la face ravagée, vieillie de dix ans, de grosses larmes coulaient goutte à goutte.

Le Kaw-djer, désespérément, pleurait.

CHAPITRE XIV

XIV

L’abdication

Le Kaw-djer pleurait…

Combien poignantes les larmes d’un tel homme! Avec quelle éloquence, elles criaient sa douleur!

Il avait commandé: “Feu!”, lui! Par son ordre, les balles avaient tracé leurs sillons rouges! Oui, les hommes l’avaient réduit à cela, et, par leur faute, il était désormais pareil aux plus odieux de ces tyrans qu’il avait haïs d’une haine si farouche, puisqu’il sombrait comme eux dans le meurtre, dans le sang!

Bien plus, il fallait en répandre encore. L’œuvre n’était qu’ébauchée. Il restait à la parfaire. En dépit de toutes les apparences contraires, là était le devoir certain.

Ce devoir, le Kaw-djer le regarda courageusement en face. Son abattement fut de courte durée, et bientôt il reconquit toute son énergie. Laissant aux vieillards et aux femmes le soin d’ensevelir les morts et de relever les blessés, il se lança sans retard à la poursuite des fuyards. Ceux-ci, frappés de terreur, ne songeaient plus à opposer la moindre résistance. De jour et de nuit, on les chassa comme du bétail.

À plusieurs reprises, les forces hosteliennes se heurtèrent à des bandes venant trop tard à la rescousse. Celles-ci furent dispersées sans difficulté l’une après l’autre et successivement rejetées vers le Nord.

L’île fut sillonnée en tous sens. On en trouvait le sol parsemé des restes de ceux des prospecteurs que la faim avait poussés hors de leurs tanières et qui avaient péri dans la neige au cours de l’hiver précédent. Longtemps, le froid avait conservé leurs dépouilles. Elles se liquéfiaient au dégel, et cette boue humaine se mêlait à celle de la terre. En trois semaines, les aventuriers, au nombre de près de dix-huit mille, furent refoulés dans la presqu’île Dumas dont le Kaw-djer occupa l’isthme.

À la milice s’étaient joints trois cents hommes fournis par la Franco-English Gold Mining Company, qui apportèrent un secours efficace aux défenseurs du bon ordre. Malgré ce renfort, la situation demeurait inquiétante. Si les prospecteurs avaient été déprimés tout d’abord par la nouvelle du carnage de leurs compagnons, et si on les avait ensuite aisément vaincus en détail, il pouvait ne plus en être ainsi, maintenant qu’ils se sentaient les coudes et qu’il leur était loisible de se concerter. Or, leur supériorité numérique était si grande qu’il y avait lieu de craindre un retour offensif de leur part.

L’intervention de la Société franco-anglaise para à ce danger. Désireux de s’assurer la main-d’œuvre qui leur était nécessaire, ses deux directeurs, Maurice Reynaud et Alexander Smith, proposèrent au Kaw-djer de procéder à une sélection parmi les aventuriers et de choisir, après sévère enquête, un millier d’hommes qui seraient autorisés à rester sur l’île Hoste. Ces hommes, la

Gold Mining Company les emploierait sous sa responsabilité, étant bien entendu qu’ils seraient impitoyablement expulsés à la première incartade.

Le Kaw-djer accueillit favorablement ces ouvertures qui lui fournissaient un moyen de diviser les forces de l’adversaire. Sans hésiter, Maurice Reynaud et Alexander Smith, faisant ainsi preuve d’un courage assurément plus grand que celui du dompteur qui entre dans la cage de ses fauves, s’engagèrent alors sur la presqu’île Dumas, où pullulait la foule des prospecteurs révoltés. Huit jours plus tard, on les vit revenir à la tête de mille hommes triés soigneusement entre tous.

Cet exploit changea la face des choses. Les mille hommes que perdaient les insurgés, les Hosteliens les gagnaient, tout en conservant l’avantage de leur discipline et de leur armement supérieur. Le Kaw-djer franchit à son tour l’isthme dont il confia la garde à Hartlepool. Il rencontra dans la presqu’île moins de résistance qu’il ne le redoutait. Les mineurs n’avaient pas eu le temps encore de reprendre possession d’eux-mêmes. On réussit à les diviser, et chaque fraction fut successivement contrainte de s’embarquer sur des navires expédiés du Bourg-Neuf, qui croisaient dans ce but en vue de la côte. En quelques jours l’opération fut terminée. Exception faite de ceux dont répondaient Maurice Reynaud et Alexander Smith, et qui étaient d’ailleurs en trop petit nombre pour constituer un sérieux danger, le sol de l’île était purgé du dernier des aventuriers qui l’avaient infestée.

Dans quel état lamentable ne la laissaient-ils pas! La terre n’avait pas été cultivée, et la prochaine récolte était perdue comme l’avait été la précédente. Abandonnés à eux-mêmes dans les pâturages, beaucoup d’animaux avaient péri. On revenait en somme à plusieurs années en arrière, et, de même que dans les premiers temps de leur indépendance, la famine menaçait les colons de l’île Hoste.

Le Kaw-djer voyait nettement ce danger, mais il n’excédait pas son courage. L’important était de ne pas perdre de temps. Il le comprit, et agit, dans ce but, en dictateur, quelque pénible que ce rôle lui parût.

Comme autrefois, il fallut d’abord grouper toutes les ressources de l’île, afin de les répartir suivant les besoins de chaque famille. Cela ne se fit pas sans provoquer des murmures.

Mais cette mesure s’imposait et on passa outre aux protestations des récalcitrants.

Elle ne devait avoir, d’ailleurs, qu’une durée éphémère. Tandis qu’on procédait au récolement des réserves, des achats étaient effectués dans l’Amérique du Sud, tant pour le compte de l’État que pour celui des particuliers. Un mois plus tard, on débarquait au Bourg-Neuf les premières cargaisons, et la situation commençait dès lors à s’améliorer rapidement.

Grâce à ce bienfaisant despotisme, Libéria et son faubourg ne tardèrent pas à recouvrer leur animation d’autrefois. Le port reçut même, au cours de l’été, des navires en plus grand nombre que jamais. Par une heureuse chance, la pêche de la baleine s’annonça particulièrement fructueuse, cette année-là. Bâtiments américains et norvégiens affluèrent au Bourg-Neuf, et la préparation de l’huile occupa une centaine d’Hosteliens avec des salaires très rémunérateurs. En même temps, une impulsion nouvelle était donnée aux scieries et aux usines de conserves, et le nombre de louvetiers doubla pour la chasse des loups-marins. Plusieurs centaines de Pêcherais, ne pouvant accommoder leurs habitudes nomades aux sévérités de l’administration argentine, quittèrent la Terre de Feu, traversèrent le canal du Beagle et transportèrent leurs campements sur le littoral de l’île Hoste où ils se fixèrent définitivement.

Vers le 15 décembre, les plaies de la colonie étaient, sinon guéries, du moins pansées. Certes, elle avait souffert un profond dommage qui ne serait pas réparé avant plusieurs années, mais déjà il n’en subsistait aucune trace extérieure. Le peuple était retourné à ses occupations coutumières, et la vie normale avait repris son cours.

L’État hostelien fit à cette époque l’acquisition d’un steamer de six cents tonneaux qui reçut le nom de Yacana. Ce steamer permettrait l’établissement d’un service régulier avec les bourgades du littoral et les divers établissements et comptoirs de l’archipel. Il servirait en outre à assurer les communications avec le cap Horn dont le phare venait enfin d’être achevé.

Dans les derniers jours de l’année 1893, le Kaw-djer en avait reçu la nouvelle. Tout était terminé: le logement des gardiens, le magasin de réserve, le pylône de métal haut d’une vingtaine de mètres, le bâtiment et le montage des dynamos, auxquelles un ingénieux dispositif imaginé par Dick transmettait l’énergie des vagues et des marées. Le fonctionnement de ces machines serait ainsi assuré, sans combustible d’aucune sorte. Pour rendre ce fonctionnement éternel, il suffirait de procéder aux réparations nécessaires et d’être bien pourvu de pièces de rechange.

L’inauguration, que le Kaw-djer résolut d’entourer d’une certaine solennité, fut fixée au 15 janvier 1894. Ce jour-là, le Yacana emporterait à l’île Horn deux ou trois cents

Hosteliens, devant lesquels jaillirait le premier rayon du phare. Après les tristesses qu’il venait de traverser, le Kaw-djer se faisait une fête de cette inauguration qui réaliserait un de ses rêves, si longtemps caressé.

Tel était le programme, et personne n’imaginait que rien pût en entraver l’exécution, quand, soudainement, brutalement, les événements le modifièrent d’étrange façon.

Le 10 janvier, cinq jours avant la date choisie, un vaisseau de guerre entra dans le port du Bourg-Neuf. À son mât d'artimon flottait le pavillon chilien. De l'une des fenêtres du gouvernement, le Kaw-djer, qui avait aperçu ce navire entrer dans le port, le suivit, à l'aide d'une longue-vue, dans ses diverses manœuvres d'atterrissage, puis il crut distinguer à son bord comme un remue-ménage, dont la distance l'empêchait de reconnaître la nature.

Il était depuis une heure absorbé dans cette contemplation, quand on vint le prévenir qu'un homme, hors d'haleine, arrivait du Bourg-Neuf et demandait à lui parler sur-le-champ de la part de

Karroly.

"Qu'y a-t-il? interrogea le Kaw-djer, lorsque cet homme fut introduit.

— Un bâtiment chilien vient d'entrer au Bourg-Neuf, dit l'homme essoufflé par sa course rapide.

— Je l'ai vu. Ensuite?

— C'est un navire de guerre.

— Je le sais.

— Il s'est affourché sur deux ancres au milieu du port, et, avec ses canots, il débarque des soldats.

— Des soldats!… s'écria le Kaw-djer.

— Oui, des soldats chiliens… en armes… Cent… deux cents… trois cents… Karroly ne s'est pas amusé à les compter… Il a préféré m'envoyer pour vous mettre au courant."

L’incident en valait la peine et justifiait amplement l’émotion de Karroly. Depuis quand des soldats armés pénètrent-ils en temps de paix sur un territoire étranger? Le fait que ces soldats fussent chiliens ne laissait pas que de rassurer le

Kaw-djer. Selon toute probabilité, on n’avait rien à craindre du pays auquel l’île Hoste devait son indépendance. Le débarquement de ces soldats n’en était pas moins anormal, et la prudence voulait que l’on prît, à tout hasard, les précautions nécessaires.

“Ils viennent!…” s’écria l’homme tout à coup, en montrant du doigt, par la fenêtre ouverte, la direction du Bourg-Neuf.

Sur la route, un groupe nombreux s’avançait, en effet, que le Kaw-djer évalua d’un coup d’œil. L’Hostelien avait exagéré quelque peu. Il s’agissait bien d’une troupe de soldats, car les fusils étincelaient au soleil, mais leur nombre atteignait cent cinquante tout au plus.

Le Kaw-djer, stupéfait, donna rapidement une série d’ordres clairs et précis. Des émissaires partirent de tous côtés. Cela fait, il attendit tranquillement.

En un quart d’heure, la troupe chilienne, suivie des yeux par les Hosteliens étonnés, arrivait sur la place et prenait position devant le gouvernement. Un officier en grande tenue, qui devait être d’un grade élevé, à en juger par les dorures dont il était chamarré, s’en détacha, heurta du pommeau de son sabre la porte qui s’ouvrit aussitôt, et demanda à parler au gouverneur.

Il fut conduit dans la pièce où se tenait le Kaw-djer, et dont la porte se referma silencieusement derrière lui. Une minute plus tard, un sourd grondement indiqua que les portes extérieures étaient fermées à leur tour. Sans qu’il s’en doutât, l’officier chilien était virtuellement prisonnier.

Mais celui-ci ne semblait éprouver aucun souci de sa situation personnelle. Il s’était arrêté à quelques pas du seuil, la main à son bicorne emplumé, les yeux fixés sur le Kaw-djer qui, debout entre les deux fenêtres, gardait une complète immobilité.

Ce fut le Kaw-djer qui prit la parole le premier.

“M’expliquerez-vous, monsieur, dit-il d’une voix brève, ce que signifie ce débarquement d’une force armée sur l’île Hoste? Nous ne sommes pas en guerre avec le Chili, que je sache?”

L’officier chilien tendit une large enveloppe au Kaw-djer.

“Monsieur le gouverneur, répondit-il, permettez-moi de vous présenter tout d’abord la lettre par laquelle mon gouvernement m’accrédite auprès de vous.”

Le Kaw-djer rompit les cachets et lut attentivement, sans que rien dans l’expression de son visage trahît les sentiments que sa lecture pouvait lui faire éprouver.

“Monsieur, dit-il avec calme lorsqu’elle fut achevée, le gouvernement chilien, ainsi que vous le savez sans doute, vous met par cette lettre à ma disposition en vue du rétablissement de l’ordre à l’île Hoste.”

L’officier s’inclina silencieusement en signe d’assentiment.

“Le gouvernement chilien, monsieur, a été mal renseigné, continua le Kaw-djer. Comme tous les pays du monde, l’île Hoste a connu, il est vrai, des périodes troublées. Mais ses habitants ont su rétablir eux-mêmes l’ordre qui est actuellement parfait.”

L’officier, qui paraissait embarrassé, ne répondit pas.

“Dans ces conditions, reprit le Kaw-djer, tout en étant reconnaissant à la République du Chili de ses intentions bienveillantes, je crois devoir décliner ses offres et vous prie de bien vouloir considérer votre mission comme terminée.”

L’officier semblait de plus en plus embarrassé.

“Vos paroles, monsieur le gouverneur, seront fidèlement transmises à mon gouvernement, dit-il, mais vous comprendrez que je ne puisse me soustraire, tant que je n’aurai pas sa réponse, à l’accomplissement des instructions qui m’ont été données.

— Instructions qui consistent?…

— À installer sur l’île Hoste une garnison, qui, sous votre haute autorité et sous mon commandement direct, devra coopérer au rétablissement et au maintien de l’ordre.

— Fort bien! dit le Kaw-djer. Mais, si je m’opposais par hasard à l’établissement de cette garnison?… Vos instructions ont-elles prévu le cas?

— Oui, monsieur le gouverneur.

— Quelles sont-elles, dans cette hypothèse?

— De passer outre.

— Par la force?

— Au besoin par la force, mais je veux espérer que je n’en serai pas réduit à cette extrémité.

— Voilà qui est net, approuva le Kaw-djer sans s’émouvoir. À vrai dire, je m’attendais un peu à quelque chose de ce genre… N’importe! la question est clairement posée. Vous admettrez, toutefois, que, dans une matière aussi grave, je ne veuille pas agir à la légère, et vous souffrirez par conséquent, je pense, que je prenne le temps de la réflexion.

— J’attendrai donc, monsieur le gouverneur, répondit l’officier, que vous me fassiez connaître votre décision.”

Ayant de nouveau salué militairement, il pivota sur ses talons et se dirigea vers la porte. Mais cette porte était fermée et résista à ses efforts. Il se retourna vers le Kaw-djer.

“Suis-je tombé dans un guet-apens? demanda-t-il d’un ton nerveux.

— Vous me permettrez de trouver la question plaisante, répondit ironiquement le Kaw-djer. Quel est celui de nous qui s’est rendu coupable d’un guet-apens? Ne serait-ce pas celui qui, en pleine paix, a envahi, les armes à la main, un pays ami?”

L’officier rougit légèrement.

“Vous connaissez, monsieur le gouverneur, dit-il avec une gêne évidente, la raison de ce qu’il vous plaît d’appeler une invasion. Ni mon gouvernement, ni moi-même ne pouvons être responsables de votre interprétation d’un événement des plus simples.

— En êtes-vous sûr? répliqua le Kaw-djer de sa voix tranquille. Oseriez-vous donner votre parole d’honneur que la République du Chili ne poursuit aucun but autre que le but officiel et avoué? Une garnison opprime aussi aisément qu’elle protège. Celle que vous avez mission de placer ici ne pourrait-elle pas aider puissamment le Chili, s’il en arrivait jamais à regretter le traité du 26 octobre 1881, auquel nous devons notre indépendance?”

L’officier rougit de nouveau et plus visiblement que la première fois.

“Il ne m’appartient pas, dit-il, de discuter les ordres de mes chefs. Mon seul devoir est de les exécuter aveuglément.

— En effet, reconnut le Kaw-djer, mais j’ai, moi aussi, à remplir mon devoir, qui se confond avec l’intérêt du peuple placé sous ma garde. Il est donc tout simple que j’entende peser mûrement ce que cet intérêt me commande de faire.

— M’y suis-je opposé? répliqua l’officier. Soyez sûr, monsieur le gouverneur, que j’attendrai votre bon plaisir tout le temps qu’il faudra.

— Cela ne suffit pas, dit le Kaw-djer. Il faut encore l’attendre ici.

— Ici?… Vous me considérez donc comme un prisonnier?

— Parfaitement”, déclara le Kaw-djer.

L’officier chilien haussa les épaules.

“Vous oubliez, s’écria-t-il en faisant un pas vers la fenêtre, qu’il me suffirait d’un cri d’appel…

— Essayez!… interrompit le Kaw-djer qui lui barra le passage.

— Qui m’en empêcherait?

— Moi.”

Les yeux dans les yeux, les deux hommes se regardèrent comme des lutteurs prêts à en venir aux mains. Après un long moment d'attente, ce fut l'officier chilien qui recula. Il comprit que, malgré sa jeunesse relative, il n'aurait pas raison de ce grand vieillard aux épaules d'athlète, dont l'attitude majestueuse l'impressionnait malgré lui.

“C'est cela, approuva le Kaw-djer. Reprenons chacun notre place, et attendez patiemment ma réponse.”

Tous deux étaient debout. L'officier, à faible distance de la porte d'entrée, s'efforçait d'adopter, en dépit de ses inquiétudes, une contenance dégagée. En face de lui, le Kaw-djer, entre les deux fenêtres, réfléchissait si profondément qu'il en oubliait la présence de son adversaire. Avec calme et méthode, il étudiait le problème qui lui était posé.

Le mobile du Chili, d'abord. Ce mobile, il n'était pas difficile de le deviner. Le Chili invoquait en vain la nécessité de mettre fin aux troubles. Ce n'était là qu'un prétexte. Une protection qu'on impose ressemble trop à une annexion pour qu'il fût possible de s'y tromper. Mais pourquoi le Chili manquait-il ainsi à la parole donnée? Par intérêt évidemment, mais quelle sorte d'intérêt? La prospérité de l'île Hoste ne suffisait pas à expliquer ce revirement. Jamais, malgré les progrès réalisés par les Hosteliens, rien n'avait autorisé à croire que la République Chilienne regrettât l'abandon de cette contrée jadis sans la moindre valeur. Au reste, le Chili n'avait pas eu à se plaindre de son geste généreux. Il avait bénéficié du développement de ce peuple dont il était par la force des choses le fournisseur principal. Mais un facteur nouveau était intervenu. La découverte des mines d'or changeait du tout au tout la situation. Maintenant qu'il était démontré que l'île Hoste recelait dans ses flancs un trésor, le Chili entendait en avoir sa part et déplorait son imprévoyance passée. C'était limpide.

La question importante n’était pas, d’ailleurs, de déterminer la cause du revirement, quelle qu’elle fût. L’ultimatum étant nettement posé, l’important était d’arrêter la manière dont il convenait d’y répondre.

Résister?… Pourquoi pas? Les cent cinquante soldats alignés sur la place n’étaient pas de taille à effrayer le Kaw-djer, et pas davantage le bâtiment de guerre embossé devant le Bourg-Neuf. Alors même que ce navire eût contenu d’autres soldats, ceux-ci n’étaient évidemment pas en nombre tel que la victoire ne pût tourner finalement en faveur de la milice hostelienne. Quant au navire lui-même, il était assurément capable d’envoyer jusqu’à Libéria quelques obus qui feraient plus de bruit que de mal. Mais après?… Les munitions finiraient par s’épuiser, et il lui faudrait alors appareiller, en admettant que les trois canons hosteliens n’aient réussi à lui causer aucune avarie sérieuse.

Non, en vérité, résister n’eût pas été présomptueux. Mais résister, c’était des batailles, c’était du sang. Allait-il donc en faire couler encore sur cette terre, hélas! saturée? Pour défendre quoi? L’indépendance des Hosteliens? Les Hosteliens étaient-ils donc libres, eux qui s’étaient si docilement courbés sous la férule d’un maître? Serait-ce donc alors sa propre autorité qu’il s’agissait de sauvegarder? Dans quel but? Ses mérites exceptionnels justifiaient-ils que tant de vies fussent sacrifiées à sa cause? Depuis qu’il exerçait le pouvoir, s’était-il montré différent de tous les autres potentats qui tiennent l’univers en tutelle?

Le Kaw-djer en était là de ses réflexions, quand l’officier chilien fit un mouvement. Il commençait à trouver le temps long. Le Kaw-djer se contenta de l’exhorter du geste à la patience et poursuivit sa méditation silencieuse.

Non, il n’avait été ni meilleur ni pire que les maîtres de tous les temps, et cela, simplement parce que la fonction de maître impose des obligations auxquelles nul ne peut se flatter d’échapper. Que ses intentions eussent toujours été droites, ses vues désintéressées, cela ne l’avait nullement empêché de commettre à son tour ces mêmes crimes nécessaires qu’il reprochait à tant de chefs. Le libertaire avait commandé, l’égalitaire avait jugé ses semblables, le pacifique avait fait la guerre, le philosophe altruiste avait décimé la foule, et son horreur du sang versé n’avait abouti qu’à en verser plus encore.

Aucun de ses actes qui n’eût été en contradiction avec ses théories, et, sur tous les points, il avait touché du doigt son erreur de jadis. D’abord les hommes s’étaient révélés dans leur imperfection et leur incapacité natives, et il avait dû les mener par la main comme de petits enfants. Puis les appétits qui forment le fond de certaines natures avaient, pour se satisfaire, causé une succession de drames et démontré la légitimité de la force. Une triple preuve, enfin, lui avait été donnée que la solidarité des groupes sociaux n’est pas moindre que celle des individus, et qu’un peuple ne saurait s’isoler au milieu des autres peuples. C’est pourquoi, quand bien même l’un d’eux arriverait à se hausser à l’idéal inaccessible que le Kaw-djer avait autrefois considéré comme une vérité objective, le peuple devrait encore compter avec le reste de la terre, dont le progrès moral excède les forces humaines et ne peut être que le résultat de siècles d’efforts accumulés.

La première de ces preuves, c’était l’invasion des Patagons. Semblable à tous les chefs, et ni plus ni moins qu’eux, le Kaw-djer avait dû combattre et tuer. À cette occasion, Patterson lui avait démontré à quel degré d’abaissement une créature peut s’avilir, et il avait dû, indulgent encore, s’arroger le droit de disposer d’un coin de la planète comme de sa propriété personnelle. Il avait jugé, condamné, banni, au même titre que tous ceux qu’il appelait des tyrans.

La deuxième preuve, la découverte des mines d’or la lui avait fournie. Ces milliers d’aventuriers qui s’étaient abattus sur l’île Hoste établissaient, sous la forme la plus éloquente, l’inévitable solidarité des nations. Contre le fléau, il n’avait pas trouvé de remède qui ne fût connu. Ce remède, c’est toujours la force, la violence et la mort. Par son ordre, le sang humain avait coulé à flots.

La troisième preuve enfin, l’ultimatum du gouvernement chilien la lui apportait, péremptoire.

Allait-il donc donner une fois de plus le signal de la lutte, d’une lutte plus sanglante peut-être que les précédentes, et cela pour conserver aux Hosteliens, un chef si pareil en somme à tous les chefs de tous les pays et de tous les temps? À sa place, un autre que lui en aurait fait autant, et, quel que fût son successeur, qu’il fût le Chili ou tout autre, il ne pouvait être amené à employer des moyens pires que ceux auxquels la fatalité des choses l’avait contraint.

Dès lors, à quoi bon lutter?

Et puis, comme il était las! L’hécatombe dont il avait donné l’ordre, ce carnage monstrueux, cette effroyable tuerie, c’était une obsession qui ne le lâchait pas. De jour en jour, sous le poids du lourd souvenir, sa haute taille se voûtait, ses yeux perdaient de leur flamme, et sa pensée de sa clarté. La force abandonnait ce corps d’athlète et ce cœur de héros. Il n’en pouvait plus. Il en avait assez.

Voilà donc à quelle impasse il aboutissait! D’un regard effaré il suivait la longue route de sa vie. Les idées dont il avait fait la base de son être moral et auxquelles il avait tout sacrifié la jonchaient de leurs débris lamentables. Derrière lui, il n’y avait plus que le néant. Son âme était dévastée; c’était un désert parsemé de ruines où rien ne restait debout.

Que faire à cela?… Mourir?… Oui, cela eût été logique, et pourtant il ne pouvait s’y résoudre. Non pas qu’il eût peur de la mort. À cet esprit lucide et ferme, elle apparaissait comme une fonction naturelle, sans plus d’importance et nullement plus à redouter que la naissance. Mais toutes ses fibres protestaient contre un acte qui eût volontairement abrégé son destin. De même qu’un ouvrier consciencieux ne saurait se résoudre à laisser un travail inachevé, c’était un besoin pour cette puissante personnalité d’aller jusqu’au bout de sa vie, c’était une nécessité pour ce cœur abondant de donner à autrui la somme entière, sans en rien excepter, de dévouement et d’abnégation qui s’y trouvait contenue en puissance, et il considérait n’avoir pas fait assez tant qu’il n’aurait pas fait tout.

Ces contradictions, était-il donc impossible de les concilier?…

Le Kaw-djer parut enfin s’apercevoir de la présence de l’officier chilien qui rongeait impatiemment son frein.

“Monsieur, dit-il, vous m’avez tout à l’heure menacé d’employer la force. Vous êtes-vous bien rendu compte de la nôtre?

— La vôtre?… répéta l’officier surpris.

— Jugez-en”, dit le Kaw-djer en faisant signe à son interlocuteur de s’approcher de la fenêtre.

La place s’étendait sous leurs yeux. En face du gouvernement, les cent cinquante soldats chiliens étaient correctement alignés, sous le commandement de leurs chefs. Leur position ne laissait pas toutefois d’être critique, car plus de cinq cents Hosteliens les cernaient, fusils chargés, baïonnettes au canon.

“L’armée hostelienne compte aujourd’hui cinq cents fusils, dit froidement le Kaw-djer. Demain elle en comptera mille. Après demain quinze cents.”

L’officier chilien était livide. Dans quel guêpier s’était-il fourré! Sa mission lui semblait bien compromise. Il voulut cependant faire contre mauvaise fortune bon visage.

“Le croiseur… dit-il d’une voix mal affermie.

— Nous ne le craignons pas, interrompit le Kaw-djer. Nous ne craignons pas davantage ses canons, n’en étant pas nous-mêmes dépourvus.

— Le Chili… essaya encore de glisser l’officier, qui ne voulait pas se reconnaître vaincu.

— Oui, interrompit de nouveau le Kaw-djer, le Chili a d’autres navires et d’autres soldats. C’est entendu. Mais il ferait une mauvaise affaire en les employant contre nous. Il ne réduira pas aisément l’île Hoste, que peuplent maintenant plus de six mille habitants. Sans compter que les cent cinquante hommes que vous avez débarqués vont être pour nous de merveilleux otages!”

L’officier garda le silence. Le Kaw-djer ajouta d’une voix grave:

“Enfin, savez-vous qui je suis?”

Le Chilien considéra son adversaire qui se révélait si redoutable. Sans doute lut-il dans le regard de celui-ci une réponse éloquente à la question qui lui était posée, car il se troubla plus encore.

“Qu’entendez-vous par cette question? balbutia-t-il. Il y a douze ou treize ans, au retour du Ribarto, dont le commandant avait cru vous reconnaître, des bruits ont couru. Mais ils devaient être erronés, puisque vous les aviez, paraît-il, démentis par avance.

— Ces bruits étaient fondés, dit le Kaw-djer. S’il m’a plu alors, s’il me convient toujours d’oublier qui je suis, je pense que vous ferez sagement de vous en souvenir. Vous en conclurez, j’imagine, qu’il ne me serait pas impossible de trouver des concours assez puissants pour faire réfléchir le gouvernement chilien.”

L’officier ne répondit pas. Il semblait accablé.

“Estimez-vous, reprit le Kaw-djer, que je sois en situation, non pas de céder purement et simplement, mais de traiter d’égal à égal?”

L’officier chilien avait relevé la tête. Traiter?… Avait-il bien entendu?… La fâcheuse aventure dans laquelle il s’était si inconsidérément embarqué pouvait donc tourner d’une manière favorable?…

“Reste à savoir si cela est possible, continuait cependant le Kaw-djer, et de quels pouvoirs vous êtes investi.

— Les plus étendus, affirma vivement l’officier chilien.

— Écrits?

— Écrits.

— Dans ce cas, veuillez me les communiquer”, dit le Kaw-djer avec calme.

L’officier tira d’une poche intérieure de sa tunique un second pli qu’il remit au Kaw-djer.

“Les voici”, dit-il.

Si le Kaw-djer avait cédé sans résistance à la première injonction, jamais il n’aurait connu ce document qu’il lut avec une extrême attention.

“C’est parfaitement en règle, déclara-t-il. Votre signature aura par conséquent toute la valeur compatible avec les engagements humains, dont votre présence ici prouve, d’ailleurs, la fragilité.”

L’officier se mordit les lèvres sans répondre. Le Kaw-djer fit une pause, puis reprit:

“Parlons net. Le gouvernement chilien désire redevenir suzerain de l’île Hoste. Je pourrais m’y opposer; j’y consens. Mais j’entends faire mes conditions.

— J’écoute, dit l’officier.

— En premier lieu, le gouvernement chilien n’établira aucun impôt à l’île Hoste autre que ceux concernant les mines d’or, et il devra en être ainsi alors même qu’elles seront épuisées. Par contre, en ce qui regarde les mines d’or, il sera entièrement libre et fixera à son profit telle redevance qui lui conviendra.”

L’officier n’en croyait pas ses oreilles. Voilà que, sans difficulté, sans discussion d’aucune sorte, on lui abandonnait l’essentiel! Dès lors, tout le reste irait de soi.

Cependant, le Kaw-djer continuait:

“À la perception d’un impôt sur les mines devra se limiter la suzeraineté du Chili. Pour le surplus, l’île Hoste conservera sa complète autonomie et gardera son drapeau. Le Chili pourra y entretenir un résident, étant bien entendu que ce résident n’aura qu’un simple droit de conseil, et que le gouvernement effectif sera exercé par un comité nommé à l’élection et par un gouverneur désigné par moi.

— Ce gouverneur, ce serait vous, sans doute? interrogea l’officier.

— Non, protesta le Kaw-djer. À moi, il faut la liberté totale, intégrale, sans limite, et d’ailleurs je suis aussi las de donner des ordres qu’incapable d’en recevoir. Je me retire donc, mais je me réserve de choisir mon successeur.”

L’officier écoutait sans les interrompre ces déclarations. Cet amer désenchantement était-il sincère, et le Kaw-djer n’allait-il rien stipuler pour lui même?

“Mon successeur s’appelle Dick, reprit mélancoliquement celui-ci après un court silence, et n’a pas d’autre nom. C’est un jeune homme. À peine s’il a vingt-deux ans — mais c’est moi qui l’ai formé, et j’en réponds. C’est entre ses mains, entre ses mains seules, que je résignerai le pouvoir… Telles sont mes conditions.

— Je les accepte, dit vivement l’officier chilien trop heureux d’avoir triomphé sur la question principale.

— Fort bien, approuva le Kaw-djer. Je vais donc rédiger nos conventions par écrit.”

Il se mit au travail, puis le traité fut signé en triple expédition par les parties contractantes.

“Un de ces exemplaires est pour votre gouvernement, expliqua le Kaw-djer, un deuxième pour mon successeur. Quant au troisième, je le garde, et, si les engagements qu’il constate n’étaient pas tenus, je saurais, soyez-en certain, en assurer le respect… Mais tout n’est pas fini entre nous, ajouta-t-il en présentant un autre document à son interlocuteur. Il reste à nous occuper de ma situation personnelle. Veuillez jeter les yeux sur ce deuxième traité qui la règle conformément à ma volonté.”

L’officier obéit. À mesure qu’il lisait, son visage exprimait un étonnement grandissant.

“Quoi! s’écria-t-il quand sa lecture fut achevée, c’est sérieusement que vous proposez cela!

— Si sérieusement, répondit le Kaw-djer, que j’en fais la condition sine qua non de mon consentement au surplus de notre accord. Êtes- vous disposé à l’accepter?

— À l’instant”, affirma l’officier.

Les signatures furent de nouveau échangées.

“Nous n’avons plus rien à nous dire, conclut alors le Kaw-djer. Faites rembarquer vos hommes, qui, sous aucun prétexte, ne doivent plus remettre le pied sur l’île Hoste. Demain, le nouveau régime pourra être inauguré. Je ferai le nécessaire pour qu’il ne s’élève aucune difficulté. Jusque-là, par exemple, j’exige le secret le plus absolu.”

Dès qu’il fut seul, le Kaw-djer envoya chercher Karroly. Pendant qu’on exécutait cet ordre, il écrivit quelques mots qu’il plaça sous enveloppe, en y joignant un exemplaire du traité conclu avec le gouvernement chilien. Ce travail, qui n’exigea que peu de minutes, était depuis longtemps terminé quand l’Indien fut introduit.

“Tu vas charger la Wel-Kiej de ces objets, dit le Kaw-djer qui tendit à Karroly une liste sur laquelle figuraient, outre une certaine quantité de vivres, de la poudre, des balles et des sacs de semences de diverses sortes.”

Malgré ses habitudes d’aveugle dévouement, Karroly ne put s’empêcher de poser quelques questions. Le Kaw-djer allait donc partir pour un voyage? Pourquoi alors ne prenait-il pas le cotre du port, au lieu de la vieille chaloupe? Mais, à ces questions, le Kaw-djer ne répondit que par un mot:

“Obéis.”

Karroly parti, il fit appeler Dick.

“Mon enfant, dit-il en lui remettant le pli qu’il venait de clore, voici un document que je te donne. Il t’appartient. Tu l’ouvriras demain au lever du soleil.

— Il sera fait ainsi”, promit Dick simplement.

La surprise qu’il devait éprouver, il ne l’exprima pas. Si grand était l’empire qu’il avait acquis sur lui-même qu’il ne la trahit par aucun signe. C’était un ordre qu’il avait reçu. Un ordre s’exécute et ne se discute pas.

“Bien! dit le Kaw-djer. Maintenant, va, mon enfant, et conforme-toi scrupuleusement à mes instructions.”

Seul, le Kaw-djer s’approcha de la fenêtre et souleva le rideau. Longuement, il regarda au dehors, afin de graver dans sa mémoire ce qu’il ne devait plus revoir. Devant lui, c’était Libéria, et, plus loin, le Bourg-Neuf, et, plus loin encore, les mâts des navires amarrés dans le port. Le soir tombait, arrêtant le travail du jour. D’abord, la route du Bourg-Neuf s’anima, puis les fenêtres des maisons brillèrent dans l’ombre grandissante. Cette ville, cette activité laborieuse, ce calme, cet ordre, ce bonheur, c’était son œuvre. Tout le passé s’évoqua à la fois, et il soupira de fatigue et d’orgueil.

Le temps était enfin venu de songer à lui-même. Sans marchander, il allait disparaître de cette foule dont il avait fait un peuple riche, heureux, puissant. Maître pour maître, ce peuple ne s’apercevrait pas du changement. Lui, du moins, il irait mourir, comme il avait vécu, dans la liberté.

Il n’attristerait d’aucun adieu ce départ qui était une délivrance. Avant de partir, il ne serrerait dans ses bras, ni le fidèle Karroly, ni Harry Rhodes son ami, ni Hartlepool ce loyal et dévoué serviteur, ni Halg, ni Dick, ses enfants. À quoi bon cela? Pour la seconde fois, il s’évadait de l’humanité. Son amour s’amplifiait de nouveau, devenait vaste comme le monde, impersonnel comme celui d’un dieu, et n’avait plus besoin, pour se satisfaire, de ces gestes puérils. Il disparaîtrait sans un mot, sans un signe.

La nuit devint profonde. Comme des paupières que ferme le sommeil, les fenêtres des maisons s’éteignirent une à une. La dernière s’endormit enfin. Tout fut noir.

Le Kaw-djer sortit du gouvernement et marcha vers le Bourg-Neuf. La route était déserte. Jusqu’au faubourg, il ne rencontra personne.

La Wel-Kiej se balançait près du quai. Il s’y embarqua et largua l’amarre. Au milieu du port, il distinguait la masse sombre du vaisseau chilien, à bord duquel un timonier piquait minuit au même instant. Détournant la tête, le Kaw-djer poussa au large et hissa la voile.

La Wel-Kiej prit son erre, évolua, sortit des jetées. Là, son allure s’accéléra sous l’effort d’une fraîche brise du Nord-Ouest. Le Kaw-djer pensif tenait la barre, en écoutant la chanson de l’eau contre le bordage.

Quand il voulut jeter un regard en arrière, il était trop tard. La pièce était jouée, le rideau tiré. Le Bourg-Neuf, Libéria, l’île Hoste avaient disparu dans la nuit. Tout s’évanouissait déjà dans le passé.

CHAPITRE XV

XV

Seul!

Dick, attentif à ne pas devancer le moment fixé, ouvrit, au premier rayon du soleil, le pli que lui avait donné le Kaw-djer. Il lut:

“Mon fils,

“Je suis las de vivre et j’aspire au repos. Quand tu liras ces mots, j’aurai quitté la colonie sans esprit de retour. Je remets son sort entre tes mains. Tu es bien jeune encore pour assumer cette tâche, mais je sais que tu ne lui seras pas inférieur.

“Exécute loyalement le traité signé par moi avec le Chili, mais exige rigoureusement la réciproque. Quand les gisements aurifères seront épuisés, nul doute que le gouvernement chilien ne renonce de lui-même à une suzeraineté purement nominale.

“Ce traité coûte temporairement aux Hosteliens l’île Horn qui devient ma propriété personnelle. Elle leur retournera après moi. C’est là que je me retire. C’est là que j’entends vivre et mourir.

“Si le Chili manquait à ses engagements, tu te souviendrais du lieu de ma retraite. Hors ce cas, je veux que tu m’effaces de ta mémoire. Ce n’est pas une prière. C’est un ordre, le dernier.

“Adieu. N’aie qu’un seul objectif: la Justice; qu’une seule haine: l’Esclavage; qu’un seul amour: la Liberté.”

À l’heure où Dick, bouleversé, lisait ce testament de l’homme à qui il devait tant, celui-ci, le front appesanti par de lourdes pensées, continuait à fuir, point imperceptible, sur la vaste plaine de la mer. Rien n’était changé à bord de la Wel-Kiej, dont il tenait toujours la barre d’une main ferme.

Mais l’aube empourpra le ciel, et un frisson de rayons d’or courut sur la surface palpitante de la mer. Le Kaw-djer releva la tête; ses yeux fouillèrent l’horizon du Sud. Au loin, l’île Horn apparut dans la lumière grandissante. Le Kaw-djer regarda passionnément cette vapeur confuse, qui marquait le terme du voyage, non pas de celui qu’il accomplissait en ce moment, mais du long voyage de la vie.

Vers dix heures du matin, il vint aborder au fond d’une petite crique à l’abri du ressac. Aussitôt, il mit pied à terre et procéda au débarquement de sa cargaison. Une demi-heure suffit à ce travail.

Alors, en homme pressé de se débarrasser d’une besogne pénible qu’il a résolu d’accomplir, il saborda la chaloupe d’un furieux coup de hache. L’eau pénétra en bouillonnant par la blessure. La Wel-Kiej, comme eût chancelé un être frappé à mort, s’inclina sur bâbord, oscilla, coula dans l’eau profonde… D’un air sombre, le Kaw-djer la regarda s’engloutir. Quelque chose saignait en lui. De cette destruction de la fidèle chaloupe qui l’avait porté si longtemps, il éprouvait de la honte et du remords comme d’un meurtre. Par ce meurtre, il avait tué en même temps le passé. Le dernier fil qui le rattachait au reste du monde était définitivement coupé.

La journée tout entière fut employée à monter jusqu’au phare les objets qu’il avait apportés et à visiter son domaine. Le phare, les machines prêtes à fonctionner, le logement meublé, tout y était complètement achevé. D’autre part, au point de vue matériel, il lui serait facile de vivre là, grâce au magasin largement pourvu de vivres, aux oiseaux marins qu’abattrait son fusil, aux graines dont il s’était muni et qu’il sèmerait dans les creux du rocher.

Un peu avant la fin du jour, son installation terminée, il sortit. À quelque distance du seuil, il aperçut un tas de pierres, où l’on avait amoncelé les débris retirés des fondations.

L’une de ces pierres attira plus vivement son attention. Elle avait roulé sur le bord du plateau. Il eût suffi de la pousser du pied pour qu’elle s’engloutît dans la mer.

Le Kaw-djer s’approcha. Une flamme de mépris et de haine brillait dans son regard…

Il ne s’était pas trompé. Cette pierre zébrée de lignes brillantes, c’était du quartz aurifère. Peut-être contenait-elle toute une fortune que les ouvriers n’avaient pas su reconnaître. Elle gisait là, délaissée comme un bloc sans valeur.

Ainsi le métal maudit le poursuivait jusque-là!… Il revit les désastres qui s’étaient abattus sur l’île Hoste, l’affolement de la colonie, l’envahissement des aventuriers accourus de tous les coins du monde, la faim,… la misère,… la ruine…

Du pied, il poussa l’énorme pépite dans l’abîme, puis, haussant les épaules, il s’avança jusqu’à l’extrême pointe du cap.

Derrière lui se dressait le pylône métallique portant à son sommet le lanterneau, d'où, pour la première fois, allait jaillir tout à l'heure un puissant rayon qui montrerait la bonne route aux navires.

Le Kaw-djer, face à la mer, parcourut des yeux l'horizon.

Un soir, il était déjà venu à cette fin du monde habitable. Ce soir-là, le canon du Jonathan en détresse tonnait lugubrement dans la tempête. Quel souvenir!… Il y avait treize ans de cela!

Mais, aujourd'hui, l'étendue était vide. Autour de lui, si loin qu'allât son regard, partout, de tous côtés, il n'y avait rien que la mer. Et, quand bien même il eût franchi la barrière de ciel qui limitait sa vue, nulle vie ne lui fût encore apparue. Au-delà, très loin, dans le mystère de l'Antarctique, c'était un monde mort, une région de glace où rien de ce qui vit ne saurait subsister.

Il avait donc atteint le but, et tel était le refuge. Par quel sinistre chemin y avait-il été conduit? Il n'avait pas souffert, pourtant, des douleurs coutumières des hommes. Lui-même était l'auteur et la victime de ses maux. Au lieu d'aboutir à ce rocher perdu dans un désert liquide, il n'eût tenu qu'à lui d'être un de ces heureux qu'on envie, un de ces puissants devant lesquels les fronts se courbent. Et cependant il était là!…

Nulle part ailleurs, en effet, il n'aurait eu la force de supporter le fardeau de la vie. Les drames les plus poignants sont ceux de la pensée. Pour qui les a subis, pour qui en sort, épuisé, désemparé, jeté hors des bases sur lesquelles il a fondé, il n'est plus de ressource que la mort ou le cloître. Le Kaw-djer avait choisi le cloître. Ce rocher, c'était une cellule aux infranchissables murs de lumière et d'espace.

Sa destinée en valait une autre, après tout. Nous mourons, mais nos actes ne meurent pas, car ils se perpétuent dans leurs conséquences infinies. Passants d’un jour, nos pas laissent dans le sable de la route des traces éternelles. Rien n’arrive qui n’ait été déterminé par ce qui l’a précédé, et l’avenir est fait des prolongements inconnus du passé. Quel que fût cet avenir, quand bien même le peuple qu’il avait créé devrait disparaître après une existence éphémère, quand bien même la terre abolie s’en irait dispersée dans l’infini cosmique, l’œuvre du Kaw-djer ne périrait donc pas.

Debout comme une colonne hautaine au sommet de l’écueil, tout illuminé des rayons du soleil couchant, ses cheveux de neige et sa longue barbe blanche flottant dans la brise, ainsi songeait le Kaw-djer, en contemplant l’immense étendue devant laquelle, loin de tous, utile à tous, il allait vivre, libre, seul, — à jamais.

THE SECRET OF WILHELM STORITZ

Published by Louis-Jules Hetzel in 1910, Verne's manuscript of this novel was written in 1897. The narrative concerns railway engineer Henri Vidal, who is invited by his younger brother Marc to pay him a visit in Hungary. Marc is engaged to Myra Roderich, the daughter of highly praised Dr. Roderich. Before leaving Paris, he learns that a man named William Storitz has proposed to Myra, but he was refused.

Verne's son Michel later revised the novel, which now exists in two states, Verne's original manuscript and his son's edited version. There is no English translation available in this edition.

The novel was first translated into English in 1963 and so only the revised Michel Verne version in French appears in this edition, due to copyright restrictions.

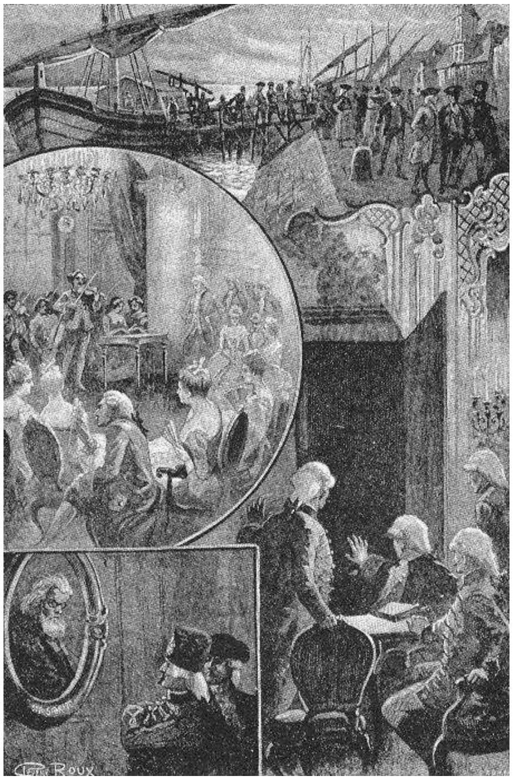

The original frontispiece

LE SECRET DE WILHELM STORITZ

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I

“… Et arrive le plus tôt que tu pourras, mon cher Henri. Je t’attends avec impatience. D’ailleurs, le pays est magnifique, et cette région de la Basse Hongrie est de nature à intéresser un ingénieur. Ne serait-ce qu’à ce point de vue, tu ne regretteras pas ton voyage.

“À toi de tout cœur,

“Marc VIDAL.”

Ainsi se terminait la lettre que je reçus de mon frère, le 4 avril 1757.

Aucun signe prémonitoire ne marqua l’arrivée de cette lettre, qui me parvint de la manière habituelle, c’est-à-dire par l’entremise successive du piéton, du portier et de mon valet, lequel, sans se douter de l’importance de son geste, me la présenta sur un plateau avec sa tranquillité coutumière.

Et pareille fut ma tranquillité, tandis que j’ouvrais le pli et que je le lisais jusqu’au bout, jusqu’à ces dernières lignes, qui contenaient pourtant en germe les événements extraordinaires auxquels j’allais être mêlé.

Tel est l’aveuglement des hommes! C’est ainsi que se tisse sans cesse, à leur insu, la trame mystérieuse de leur destin!

Mon frère disait vrai. Je ne regrette pas ce voyage. Mais ai-je raison de le raconter? N’est-il pas de ces choses qu’il vaut mieux taire? Qui ajoutera foi à une histoire si étrange, que les plus audacieux poètes n’eussent sans doute pas osé l’écrire?

Eh bien, soit! J’en courrai le risque. Qu’on doive ou non me croire, je cède à un irrésistible besoin de revivre cette série d’événements extraordinaires, dont la lettre de mon frère constitue en quelque sorte le prologue.

Mon frère Marc, alors âgé de vingt-huit ans, avait déjà obtenu des succès flatteurs comme peintre de portraits. La plus tendre, la plus étroite affection nous liait l’un à l’autre. De ma part, un peu d’amour paternel, car j’étais son aîné de huit ans. Nous avions été, jeunes encore, privés de notre père et de notre mère, et c’était moi, le grand frère, qui avais dû faire l’éducation de Marc. Comme il montrait d’étonnantes dispositions pour la peinture, je l’avais poussé vers cette carrière, où il devait obtenir des succès si personnels et si mérités.

Mais voici que Marc était à la veille de se marier. Depuis quelque temps déjà, il résidait à Ragz, une importante ville de la Hongrie méridionale. Plusieurs semaines passées à Budapest, la capitale, où il avait fait un certain nombre de portraits très réussis, très largement payés, lui avaient permis d’apprécier l’accueil que reçoivent en Hongrie les artistes. Puis, son séjour achevé, il avait descendu le Danube de Budapest à Ragz.

Parmi les premières familles de la ville, on citait celle du docteur Roderich, l’un des médecins les plus renommés de toute la Hongrie. À un patrimoine considérable, il joignait une fortune importante acquise dans la pratique de son art. Pendant les vacances qu’il s’accordait chaque année et qu’il employait à des voyages, poussant parfois jusqu’en France, en Italie ou en Allemagne, les riches malades déploraient vivement son absence. Les pauvres aussi, car il ne leur refusait jamais ses services, et sa charité ne dédaignait pas les plus humbles, ce qui lui valait l’estime de tous.

La famille Roderich se composait du docteur, de sa femme, de son fils, le capitaine Haralan, et de sa fille Myra. Marc n’avait pu fréquenter cette hospitalière maison sans être touché de la grâce et de la beauté de la jeune fille, ce qui avait infiniment prolongé son séjour à Ragz. Mais, si Myra Roderich lui avait plu, ce n'est pas trop s'avancer de dire qu'il avait plu à Myra Roderich. On voudra bien m'accorder qu'il le méritait, car Marc était – il l'est encore, Dieu merci!

— un brave et charmant garçon, d'une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, les yeux bleus très vifs, les cheveux châtains, le front d'un poète, la physionomie heureuse de l'homme à qui la vie s'offre sous ses plus riants aspects, le caractère souple, le tempérament d'un artiste fanatique des belles choses.

Quant à Myra Roderich, je ne la connaissais que par les lettres enflammées de Marc, et je brûlais du désir de la voir. Mon frère désirait encore plus vivement me la présenter. Il me priait de venir à Ragz comme chef de la famille, et il n'entendait pas que mon séjour durât moins d'un mois. Sa fiancée – il ne cessait de me le répéter – m'attendait avec impatience. Dès mon arrivée, on fixerait la date du mariage. Auparavant, Myra voulait avoir vu, de ses yeux vu, son futur beau-frère, dont on lui disait tant de bien sous tous les rapports – en vérité, c'est ainsi qu'elle s'exprimait, paraît-il!… C'est le moins qu'on puisse juger par soi-même les membres de la famille dans laquelle on va entrer.

Assurément, elle ne prononcerait le oui fatal, qu'après qu'Henri lui aurait été présenté par Marc…

Tout cela, mon frère me le contait dans ses fréquentes lettres avec beaucoup d'entrain, et je le sentais éperdument amoureux de Myra Roderich.

J'ai dit que je ne la connaissais que par les phrases enthousiastes de Marc. Et cependant, puisque mon frère était peintre, il lui eût été facile de la prendre pour modèle, n’est-il pas vrai, et de la transporter sur la toile, ou tout au moins sur le papier, dans une pose gracieuse, revêtue de sa plus jolie robe. J’aurais pu l’admirer *de visu*, pour ainsi dire… Myra ne l’avait pas voulu. C’est en personne qu’elle apparaîtrait à mes yeux éblouis, affirmait Marc, qui, je le pense, n’avait pas dû insister pour la faire changer d’avis. Ce que tous deux prétendaient obtenir, c’était que l’ingénieur Henri Vidal mit de côté ses occupations, et vînt se montrer dans les salons de l’hôtel Roderich en tenue de premier invité.

Fallait-il tant de raisons pour me décider? Non certes, et je n’aurais pas laissé mon frère se marier sans être présent à son mariage. Dans un délai assez court, je comparaîtrais donc devant Myra Roderich, et avant qu’elle ne fût devenue ma belle-sœur.

Du reste, ainsi que me le marquait la lettre, j’aurais grand plaisir et grand profit à visiter cette région de la Hongrie. C’est par excellence le pays magyar, dont le passé est riche de tant de faits héroïques, et qui, rebelle à tout mélange avec les races germaniques, occupe une place considérable dans l’histoire de l’Europe centrale.

Quant au voyage, voici dans quelles conditions je résolus de l’effectuer: moitié en poste, moitié par le Danube à l’aller, uniquement en poste au retour. Tout indiqué, ce magnifique fleuve que je ne prendrais qu’à Vienne. Si je ne parcourais pas les sept cents lieues de son cours, j’en verrais du moins la partie la plus intéressante, à travers l’Autriche et la Hongrie, jusqu’à Ragz, près de la frontière serbienne. Là serait mon terminus. Le temps me manquerait pour visiter les villes que le Danube arrose encore de ses eaux puissantes, alors qu’il sépare la Valachie et la Moldavie de la Turquie, après avoir franchi les fameuses Portes de Fer: Viddin, Nicopoli, Roustchouk, Silistrie, Braila, Galatz, jusqu’à sa triple embouchure sur la mer Noire.

Il me sembla que trois mois devaient suffire au voyage tel que je le projetais. J’emploierais un mois entre Paris et Ragz. Myra Roderich voudrait bien ne pas trop s’impatienter et accorder ce délai au voyageur. Après un séjour d’égale durée dans la nouvelle patrie de mon frère, le reste du temps serait consacré au retour en France.

Ayant mis ordre à quelques affaires urgentes et m’étant procuré les papiers réclamés par Marc, je me préparai donc au départ.

Mes préparatifs, fort simples, n’exigeraient que peu de temps, et je ne comptais pas m’encombrer de bagages. Je n’emporterais qu’une seule malle, de taille fort exiguë, contenant l’habit de cérémonie que rendait nécessaire l’événement solennel qui m’appelait en Hongrie.

Je n’avais point à m’inquiéter de la langue du pays, l’allemand m’étant familier depuis un voyage à travers les provinces du Nord. Quant à la langue magyare, peut-être n’éprouverais-je pas trop de difficulté à la comprendre. D’ailleurs, le français est couramment parlé en Hongrie, du moins dans les hautes classes, et mon frère n’avait jamais été gêné, de ce chef, au-delà des frontières autrichiennes.

“Vous êtes Français, vous avez droit de cité en Hongrie”, a dit jadis un hospodar à l’un de nos compatriotes, et, dans cette phase très cordiale, il se faisait l’interprète des sentiments du peuple magyar à l’égard de la France.

J’écrivis donc à Marc, en réponse à sa dernière lettre, en le priant de déclarer à Myra Roderich que mon impatience égalait la sienne, et que le futur beau-frère brûlait du désir de connaître sa future belle-sœur. J’ajoutais que j’allais partir sous peu, mais que je ne pouvais préciser le jour de mon arrivée à Ragz, ce jour étant livré aux hasards du voyage. J’assurais toutefois mon frère que je ne m’attarderais certainement pas en route. Si donc la famille Roderich le voulait, elle pouvait sans plus attendre fixer aux derniers jours de mai la date du mariage. “Prière de ne point me couvrir de malédictions, lui disais-je en manière de conclusion, si chacune de mes étapes n’est pas marquée par l’envoi d’une lettre indiquant ma présence en telle ou telle ville. J’écrirai quelquefois, juste assez pour permettre à Mlle Myra d’évaluer le nombre de lieues qui me sépareront encore de sa ville natale. Mais, dans tous les cas, j’annoncerai en temps voulu mon arrivée, à l’heure, et, s’il est possible, à la minute près.”

La veille de mon départ, le 13 avril, j’allai au bureau du lieutenant de police, avec lequel j’étais en relation d’amitié, lui faire mes adieux et retirer mon passeport. En me le remettant, il me chargea de mille compliments pour mon frère, qu’il connaissait de réputation et personnellement, et dont il avait appris les projets de mariage.

“Je sais en outre, ajouta-t-il, que la famille du docteur Roderich, dans laquelle va entrer votre frère, est une des plus honorables de Ragz.

— On vous en a parlé? demandai-je.

— Oui, précisément hier, à la soirée de l’ambassade d’Autriche, où je me trouvais.

— Et de qui tenez-vous vos renseignements?

— D’un officier de la garnison de Budapest, qui s’est lié avec votre frère pendant son séjour dans la capitale hongroise, et qui m’en a fait le plus grand éloge. Son succès y fut très vif, et l’accueil qu’il avait reçu à

Budapest, il l’a retrouvé à Ragz, ce qui ne saurait vous surprendre, mon cher Vidal.

— Et, insistai-je, cet officier n’a pas été moins élogieux en ce qui concerne la famille Roderich?

— Assurément. Le docteur est un savant dans toute l’acception du mot. Son renom est universel dans le royaume d’Autriche-Hongrie. Toutes les distinctions lui ont été accordées, et, au total, c’est un beau mariage que fait là votre frère, car, paraît-il, Mlle Myra Roderich est fort jolie personne.

— Je ne vous étonnerai pas, mon cher ami, répliquai-je, en vous affirmant que Marc la trouve telle, et qu’il me semble en être très épris.

— C’est au mieux, mon cher Vidal, et vous voudrez bien transmettre mes félicitations et mes souhaits à votre frère, dont le bonheur aura ce raffinement suprême qu’il fera des jaloux… Mais, s’interrompit mon interlocuteur en hésitant, je ne sais si je ne commets pas une indiscrétion… en vous disant…

— Une indiscrétion?… fis-je, étonné.

— Votre frère ne vous a jamais écrit que quelques fois avant son arrivée à Ragz…

— Avant son arrivée?… répétai-je.

— Oui… Mlle Myra Roderich… Après tout, mon cher Vidal, il est possible que votre frère n’en ait rien su.

— Expliquez-vous, cher ami, car je ne vois absolument pas à quoi vous faites allusion.

— Eh bien, il paraît – ce qui ne saurait surprendre – que Mlle Roderich avait été déjà très recherchée, et plus spécialement par un personnage qui, d’ailleurs, n’est pas le premier venu. C’est, du moins, ce que m’a raconté mon officier de l’ambassade, lequel, il y a cinq semaines, se trouvait encore à Budapest.

— Et ce rival?…

— Il a été éconduit par le docteur Roderich.

— Par conséquent, il n’y a pas lieu de s’en préoccuper. Du reste, si Marc se fût connu un rival, il m’en eût parlé dans ses lettres. Or, il ne m’en a pas soufflé mot. C’est donc que la chose est sans importance.

— En effet, mon cher Vidal, et cependant les prétentions de ce personnage à la main de Mlle Roderich ont fait quelque bruit à Ragz, et mieux vaut, en somme, que vous en soyez informé…

— Sans doute, et vous avez bien fait de me prévenir, puisqu’il ne s’agit pas là d’un simple racontar.

— Non, l’information est très sérieuse…

— Mais l’affaire ne l’est plus, répondis-je, et c’est le principal.”

Comme j’allais prendre congé:

“À propos, mon cher ami, demandai-je, votre officier a-t-il prononcé devant vous le nom de ce rival éconduit?

— Oui.

— Il se nomme?…

— Wilhelm Storitz.

— Wilhelm Storitz?… Le fils du chimiste, de l’alchimiste plutôt?

— Précisément.

— Eh mais! c’est un nom!… Celui d’un savant que ses découvertes ont rendu célèbre.

— Et dont l’Allemagne est très fière à juste titre, mon cher Vidal.

— N’est-il pas mort?

— Oui, il y a quelques années, mais son fils est vivant, et même, d’après mon interlocuteur, ce Wilhelm Storitz serait un homme inquiétant.

— Inquiétant?… Qu’entendez-vous par cette épithète, cher ami?

— Je ne saurais dire… Mais, à en croire mon officier de l’ambassade, Wilhelm Storitz ne serait pas comme tout le monde.

— Fichtre! m’écriai-je plaisamment, voilà qui devient palpitant d’intérêt! Notre amoureux évincé aurait-il donc trois jambes, ou quatre bras, ou seulement un sixième sens?

— On n’a pas précisé, répondit en riant mon interlocuteur. Toutefois, je suis porté à supposer que le jugement s’appliquait plutôt à la personne morale qu’à la personne physique de Wilhelm Storitz, dont, si j’ai bien compris, il conviendrait de se défier…

— On s’en défiera, mon cher ami, au moins jusqu’au jour où Mlle Myra Roderich sera devenue Mme Marc Vidal.”

Là-dessus, et sans m’inquiéter autrement de cette information, je serrai cordialement la main du lieutenant de police, et je rentrai chez moi achever mes préparatifs de départ.

II

Je quittai Paris le 14 avril, à sept heures du matin, dans une berline attelée en poste. En une dizaine de jours, je serais arrivé dans la capitale de l’Autriche.

Je glisserai rapidement sur cette première partie de mon voyage. Elle ne fut marquée d’aucun incident, et les contrées que je parcourais commencent à être trop connues pour mériter une description en règle.

Strasbourg fut ma première halte sérieuse. Au sortir de cette ville, je me penchai à la portière. La grande flèche de la cathédrale, le Munster, m’apparut toute baignée des rayons du soleil, qui lui venaient du Sud-Est.

Je passai plusieurs nuits, bercé par la chanson des roues écrasant le gravier de la route, par cette monotonie bruyante, qui, mieux que le silence, finit par vous endormir. Je traversai successivement Oos, Bade, Carlsruhe et quelques autres villes. Puis je laissai en arrière Stuttgart et Ulm en Wurtemberg, en Bavière Augsbourg et Munich. Près de la frontière autrichienne, une halte plus prolongée m’arrêta à Salzbourg, et enfin, le 25 avril, à six heures trente-cinq du soir, les chevaux tout fumants pénétraient dans la cour de la meilleure hôtellerie de Vienne.

Je ne restai que trente-six heures, dont deux nuits, dans cette capitale. C’est à mon retour que je comptais la visiter en détail.

Vienne n’est ni traversée ni bordée par le Danube. Je dus faire environ une lieue en voiture pour atteindre la rive du fleuve dont les eaux complaisantes allaient me descendre jusqu’à Ragz.

La veille, je m’étais assuré d’une place dans une gabare, la *Dorothée*, aménagée pour le transport des passagers. À bord de cette gabare, il y avait un peu de tout, j’entends par là toutes sortes de gens, des Allemands, des Autrichiens, des Hongrois, des Russes, des Anglais. Les passagers occupaient l’arrière, car les marchandises encombraient l’avant, au point que personne n’y eût trouvé place.

Mon premier soin fut de retenir une couchette pour la nuit dans le dortoir commun. De faire entrer ma malle dans ce dortoir, il n’y fallait pas songer. Je dus la déposer en plein air, près d’un banc sur lequel je comptais bien faire de longues stations au cours du voyage, tout en surveillant ma propriété du coin de l’œil.

Sous la double impulsion du courant et d’un vent assez vif, la gabare descendait rapidement, fendant de son étrave les eaux jaunâtres du beau fleuve, car elles paraissent plutôt teintes d’ocre que d’outremer, quoi qu’en dise la légende. Nous croisions de nombreux bateaux, leurs voiles tendues à la brise, transportant les produits de la campagne qui s’étend à perte de vue sur les deux rives. On passa également près d’un de ces immenses radeaux, trains de bois formés d’une forêt entière, où sont établis des villages flottants, bâtis au départ, détruits à l’arrivée, et qui rappellent les prodigieuses jangadas brésiliennes de l’Amazone. Puis les îles succèdent aux îles, capricieusement semées, grandes ou petites, la plupart émergeant à peine, et si basses parfois qu’une crue de quelques pouces les eût submergées. Le regard se réjouissait à les voir si verdoyantes, si fraîches, avec leurs lignes de saules, de peupliers, de trembles, leurs humides herbages piqués de fleurs aux couleurs vives.

Nous longions aussi des villages aquatiques, élevés tout au bord de la rive. Il semble que le remous des bateaux les fasse osciller sur leur pilotis. Plus d’une fois, nous passâmes sous une corde tendue d’une berge à l’autre, au risque d’y accrocher notre mât, la corde d’un bac que supportaient deux perches surmontées du pavillon national.

Pendant cette journée, nous perdîmes de vue Fischamenan, Rigelsbrun, et la *Dorothée* relâcha, le soir, à l’embouchure de la March, un affluent de gauche, qui descend de la Moravie, à peu près à la frontière du royaume magyar. C’est là qu’on passa la nuit du 27 au 28 avril, pour repartir le matin, dès l’aube, entraîné par le courant à travers ces territoires, où au XVIe siècle les français et les Turcs se battirent avec tant d’acharnement. Enfin, après avoir franchi le défilé de la Porte de Hongrie, après que le pont de bateaux se fut ouvert devant elle, la gabare arriva au quai de Presbourg.

Une relâche de vingt-quatre heures nécessité par le mouvement des marchandises me permit de visiter cette ville, digne de l’attention des voyageurs. Elle a véritablement l’air d’être bâtie sur un promontoire. Ce serait la mer qui s’étendrait à ses pieds et dont les lames roulantes baigneraient sa base, au lieu des eaux calmes d’un fleuve, qu’il n’y aurait pas lieu d’en être surpris. Au-dessus de la ligne de ses magnifiques quais se dessinent des silhouettes de maisons construites avec une remarquable régularité dans un beau style.

J’admirai la cathédrale, dont la coupole se termine par une couronne dorée, et de nombreux hôtels, quelquefois des palais, qui appartiennent à l’aristocratie hongroise. Puis je fis l’ascension de la colline à laquelle s’accroche le château et visitai cette vaste bâtisse quadrangulaire, flanquée de tours à ses angles comme une ruine féodale. Peut-être pourrait-on regretter d’être monté jusque-là, si la vue ne s’étendait largement sur les superbes vignobles des environs et la plaine infinie où se déroule le Danube.

En aval de Presbourg, dans la matinée du 30 avril, la *Dorothée* s'engagea à travers la puszta. C'est la steppe russe, c'est la savane américaine, que cette puszta, dont les plaines immenses s'étendent dans toute la Hongrie centrale. Un territoire extrêmement curieux, avec ses pâturages dont on ne voit pas la fin, que parcourent quelquefois dans une galopade échevelée d'innombrables bandes de chevaux, et qui nourrit des troupeaux de bœufs et de buffles par milliers de têtes.

Là se développe en ses multiples zigzags le véritable Danube hongrois. Déjà grossi de puissants tributaires venus des petites Karpathes ou des Alpes Styriennes, il y prend des allures de grand fleuve, après n'avoir guère été que rivière dans sa traversée de l'Autriche.

En imagination, j'en remontais le cours, jusqu'à sa source lointaine, presque à la frontière française, dans le grand-duché de Bade limitrophe de l'Alsace, et je pensais que c'étaient les pluies de France qui lui apportaient ses premières eaux.

Arrivée le soir à Raab, la gabare s'amarra au quai pour la nuit, la journée du lendemain et la nuit suivante. Douze heures me suffirent pour visiter cette cité, plus forteresse que ville, le Gyor des Magyars.

À quelques lieues au-dessous de Raab, le lendemain, je pus, sans m'y arrêter, apercevoir la célèbre citadelle de Kromorn, créée de toutes pièces au XVe siècle par Mathias Corvin, et où se joua le dernier acte de l'insurrection.

Je ne sais rien de plus beau que de s'abandonner au courant du Danube en cette partie du territoire magyar. Toujours des méandres capricieux, des coudes brusques qui varient le paysage, des îles basses à demi noyées, au-dessus desquelles voltigent grues et cigognes. C'est la puszta dans toute sa magnificence, tantôt en prairies luxuriantes, tantôt en collines qui ondulent à l’horizon. Là prospèrent les vignobles des meilleurs crus de la Hongrie. On peut estimer à plus d’un million de pipes, dont le Tokay a sa part, la production de ce pays qui vient après la France, avant l’Italie et l’Espagne, sur la liste des régions viticoles. Cette récolte, dit-on, est presque entièrement consommée sur place. Je ne cacherai pas que je m’en suis offert quelques bouteilles dans les auberges du rivage. Autant de moins pour les gosiers magyars!

À noter que les méthodes de culture s’améliorent d’année en année dans la puszta. Mais il y a encore beaucoup à faire. Il faudrait créer un réseau de canaux d’irrigation qui lui assureraient une extrême fertilité, planter des milliers d’arbres, et les disposer en longs et épais rideaux, comme une barrière contre les mauvais vents. Ainsi les céréales ne tarderaient pas à doubler et tripler leurs rendements.

Par malheur, la propriété n’est pas assez divisée en Hongrie. Les biens de main-morte y sont considérables, il est tel domaine de vingt-cinq milles carrés que son propriétaire n’a jamais pu explorer dans toute son étendue, et les petits cultivateurs ne détiennent pas même le quart de ce vaste territoire.

Cet état de choses, si préjudiciable au pays, changera graduellement, et rien que par cette logique forcée que possède l’avenir. D’ailleurs, le paysan hongrois n’est point réfractaire au progrès. Il est plein de bon vouloir, de courage et d’intelligence. Peut-être est-il un peu trop content de lui-même, moins toutefois que ne l’est le paysan germanique. Entre eux, il y a cette différence que si le premier croit pouvoir tout apprendre, le second croit déjà tout savoir.

Ce fut à Gran, sur la rive droite, que je remarquai un changement dans l’aspect général. Aux plaines de la puszta succédèrent de longues et épaisses collines, extrêmes ramifications des Karpathes et des Alpes Noriques qui enserrent le fleuve et l'obligent à traverser d'étroits défilés.

Gran est le siège de l'évêché primatial de Hongrie, et sans doute le plus envié de tous les évêchés du globe si les biens de ce monde ont quelque attrait pour un prélat catholique. En effet, le titulaire de ce siège, cardinal, primat, légat, prince de l'Empire et chancelier du royaume, est doté d'un revenu qui peut dépasser un million de livres.

En aval de Gran recommence la puszta. Il faut reconnaître que la nature est très artiste. La loi des contrastes, elle la pratique, en grand d'ailleurs, comme tout ce qu'elle fait. Ici, elle a voulu que le paysage, après les aspects si variés entre Presbourg et Gran, fût triste, chagrin, monotone.

En cet endroit, la *Dorothée* dut choisir l'un des bras qui forment l'île de Saint-André, et qui, d'ailleurs, sont tous les deux praticables à la navigation. Elle prit celui de gauche, ce qui me permit d'apercevoir la ville de Waitzen, dominée par une demi-douzaine de clochers, et dont une église, édifiée sur la rive même, se reflète dans les eaux, entre de grandes masses de verdure.

Au-delà, l'aspect du pays commence à se modifier. Dans la plaine s'échantillonnent des cultures maraîchères, sur le fleuve glissent des embarcations plus nombreuses. L'animation succède au calme. Il est visible que nous approchons d'une capitale. Et quelle capitale! Double comme certaines étoiles, et si ces étoiles ne sont pas de première grandeur, du moins brillent-elles avec éclat dans la constellation hongroise.

La gabare a contourné une dernière île boisée. Bude apparaît d'abord, Pest ensuite, et c'est dans ces deux cités, inséparables comme des sœurs siamoises, que, du 3 au 6 mai, j'allais prendre quelque repos, en me fatiguant au-delà de toute raison à les visiter consciencieusement.

Entre Bude et Pest, entre la cité turque et la cité magyare passent les flottilles de barques, qui composent la batellerie de l’amont et de l’aval, sortes de galiotes surmontées d’un mât de pavillon à l’avant, et munies d’un large gouvernail dont la barre s’allonge démesurément. L’une et l’autre rive sont transformées en quais, que bordent des habitations d’aspect architectural, au-dessus desquelles pointent flèches et clochers.

Bude, la ville turque, est située sur la rive droite, Pest sur la rive gauche, et le Danube, toujours semé d’îles verdoyantes, forme la corde de la demi-circonférence occupée par la cité hongroise. De son côté, c’est la plaine, où la ville a pu et pourra s’étendre à son aise. Du côté de Bude, c’est une succession de collines bastionnées, que couronne la citadelle.

De turque qu’elle était, Bude tend à devenir hongroise, et même, à bien l’observer, autrichienne. Plus militaire que commerçante, l’animation des affaires lui fait défaut. Qu’on ne s’étonne pas si l’herbe pousse dans ses rues et encadre ses trottoirs. Pour habitants, surtout des soldats. On dirait qu’ils circulent dans une ville en état de siège. En maint endroit flotte le drapeau national dont la soie se déroule à la brise. C’est, à tout prendre, une cité un peu morte à laquelle fait face la si vivante Pest. Ici, pourrait-on dire, le Danube coule entre l’avenir et le passé.

Cependant, si Bude possède un arsenal, et si les casernes ne lui manquent point, on peut y visiter aussi plusieurs palais qui ont fort grand air. J’ai ressenti quelque impression devant ses vieilles églises, devant sa cathédrale qui fut changée en mosquée sous la domination ottomane. J’ai suivi une large rue dont les maisons, à terrasses comme en Orient, sont entourées de grilles. J’ai parcouru les salles de la Maison de Ville, ceinte de barrières aux bigarrures jaunes et noires. J’ai contemplé ce tombeau de Gull-Baba que visitent les pèlerins turcs.

Mais il en fut pour moi comme pour le plus grand nombre des étrangers, et Pest me prit le meilleur de mon temps. Ce temps ne fut point perdu, on peut m'en croire, car, en vérité, deux jours ne suffisent pas à visiter la capitale hongroise, la noble cité universitaire.

Il convient, d'abord, de gravir la colline située au sud de Bude, à l'extrémité du faubourg de Taban, afin d'avoir la vue complète des deux villes. De ce point, on aperçoit les quais de Pest et ses places bordées de palais et d'hôtels d'une belle disposition architecturale. Çà et là, des dômes aux nervures dorées, des flèches hardiment dressées vers le ciel. L'aspect de Pest est assurément grandiose, et ce n'est pas sans raison qu'on l'a quelquefois préféré à celui de Vienne.

Dans la campagne environnante, semée de villas, se développe cette immense plaine de Rakos où, jadis, les cavaliers hongrois tenaient à grand bruit leurs diètes nationales.

On ne peut ensuite négliger de voir avec soin le Musée, les toiles et statues, les salles d'histoire naturelle et d'antiquités préhistoriques, les inscriptions, les monnaies, les collections ethnographiques de grande valeur qu'il contient. Puis, il faut visiter l'île Marguerite, ses bosquets, ses prairies, ses bains alimentés par une source thermale, et aussi le Jardin public, le Stadtwaldchen, arrosé par une petite rivière praticable aux légères embarcations, ses beaux ombrages, ses tentes, ses jeux, et dans lequel s'ébat une foule vive, cavalière, où se rencontrent en grand nombre de remarquables types d'hommes et de femmes.

La veille de mon départ, j'entrai dans une des principales hôtelleries de la ville pour me reposer un instant. La boisson favorite des Magyars, vin blanc mélangé d'une eau ferrugineuse, m'avait agréablement rafraîchi, et j'allais continuer mes courses à travers la ville, lorsque mes regards tombèrent sur une gazette déployée. Je la pris machinalement, et ce titre en grosses lettres gothiques: “Anniversaire Storitz”, attira aussitôt mon attention.

Ce nom était celui qu’avait prononcé le lieutenant de police, celui du fameux alchimiste allemand et aussi de ce prétendant évincé à la main de Myra Roderich. Il ne pouvait y avoir doute à cet égard.

Voici ce que je lus:

“Dans une vingtaine de jours, le 25 mai, l’anniversaire d’Otto Storitz sera célébré à Spremberg. On peut affirmer que la population se portera en foule au cimetière de la ville natale du célèbre savant.

“On le sait, cet homme extraordinaire a illustré l’Allemagne par ses travaux merveilleux, par ses découvertes étonnantes, par ses inventions qui ont tant contribué aux progrès des sciences physiques.”

L’auteur de l’article n’exagérait pas, en vérité. Otto Storitz était justement célèbre dans le monde scientifique. Mais, ce qui me donna le plus à penser, ce furent les lignes suivantes:

“Personne n’ignore que, de son vivant, près de certains esprits enclins au surnaturel, Otto Storitz a passé pour être quelque peu sorcier. Un ou deux siècles plus tôt, il n’est pas bien sûr qu’il n’eût pas été arrêté, condamné, brûlé en place publique. Nous ajouterons que, depuis sa mort, nombre de gens, évidemment disposés à la crédulité, le tiennent plus que jamais pour un faiseur de sortilèges et d’incantations, ayant possédé un pouvoir surhumain. Ce qui les rassure, c’est qu’il a emporté ses secrets dans la tombe. Il ne faut pas compter que ces braves gens ouvriront jamais les yeux, et pour eux Otto Storitz restera bel et bien un kabaliste, un magicien, voire un démoniaque.”

Qu’il soit ce que l’on voudra, pensai-je, l’important est que son fils ait été définitivement éconduit par le docteur Roderich. Quant au reste, peu me chaud!

La gazette concluait en ces termes:

“Il y a donc lieu de croire que la foule sera considérable, comme tous les ans, à la cérémonie de l’anniversaire, sans parler des amis sérieux restés fidèles au souvenir d’Otto Storitz. Il n’est pas téméraire de penser que la population on ne peut plus superstitieuse de Spremberg s’attend à quelque prodige et désire en être témoin. D’après ce qu’on répète couramment en ville, le cimetière doit être le théâtre des plus invraisemblables et des plus extraordinaires phénomènes. Personne ne s’étonnerait si, au milieu de l’épouvante générale, la pierre du tombeau se soulevait et si le fantastique savant ressuscitait dans toute sa gloire.

“Selon l’opinion de quelques-uns, Otto Storitz ne serait même pas mort, et on aurait procédé à de fausses funérailles le jour de ses obsèques.

“Nous ne nous attarderons pas à discuter de pareilles sornettes. Mais, comme chacun sait, les superstitions n’ont que faire de la logique, et bien des années s’écouleront avant que le bon sens ait détruit ces ridicules légendes.”

Cette lecture ne laissa pas de me suggérer quelques réflexions pessimistes. Que Otto Storitz fût mort et enterré, rien de plus certain. Que son tombeau dût se rouvrir le 25 mai, et qu’il dût apparaître comme un nouveau Lazare aux regards de la foule, cela ne valait pas la peine qu’on s’y arrêtât un instant. Mais, si le décès du père n’était pas contestable, il ne l’était pas davantage qu’il eût un fils vivant et bien vivant, ce Wilhelm Storitz repoussé par la famille Roderich. N’y avait-il lieu de craindre qu’il ne causât des ennuis à Marc, qu’il ne créât des difficultés à son mariage?…

“Bon! me dis-je à moi-même en rejetant la gazette, voici que je déraisonne. Wilhelm Storitz a demandé la main de Myra… on la lui a refusée… Et après? On ne l’a plus revu, ce Storitz, et, puisque Marc ne m’a jamais dit un mot de cette affaire, je ne vois pas pourquoi j’y attacherais quelque importance.”

Je me fis apporter papier, plume, encre, et j’écrivis à mon frère pour lui annoncer que je quitterais Pest le lendemain et que j’arriverais dans l’après-midi du 11 mai, car je n’étais plus qu’à soixante-quinze lieues de Ragz, tout au plus. Je lui marquais que jusqu’ici mon voyage s’était effectué sans incidents ni retards, et que je ne voyais aucune raison à ce qu’il ne s’achevât pas de même. Je n’oubliais pas de présenter mes hommages à M. et à Mme Roderich, et j’y joignais, pour Mlle Myra, l’assurance de mon affectueuse sympathie, que Marc voudrait bien lui transmettre.

Le lendemain, à huit heures, la *Dorothée* démarra de l’appontement installé le long du quai et prit le courant.

Il va de soi que, depuis Vienne, il s’était fait à chaque escale un renouvellement dans le personnel des passagers. Les uns avaient débarqué à Presbourg, à Raab, à Gran, à Budapest; les autres s’étaient embarqués au départ des susdites villes. Il n’en était que cinq ou six, ayant pris le bateau dans la capitale autrichienne, entre autres des Anglais, qui devaient descendre jusqu’à la mer Noire.

À Pest comme aux escales de l’amont, la *Dorothée* avait donc reçu de nouveaux passagers. L’un de ceux-ci attira plus particulièrement mon attention, tant son allure me sembla bizarre.

C’était un homme de trente-cinq ans environ, grand, d’un blond ardent, de figure dure, le regard impérieux, au total, des moins sympathiques. Son attitude indiquait l’homme hautain et dédaigneux. À plusieurs reprises, il s’adressa au personnel du bord, ce qui me permit d’entendre sa voix sèche, désagréable et le ton cassant dont ses questions étaient faites.

Ce passager paraissait ne vouloir frayer avec personne. Peu m’importait, puisque, jusqu’alors, je m’étais tenu moi-même dans une extrême réserve vis-à-vis de mes compagnons de voyage. Le patron de la *Dorothée* était le seul à qui j’eusse demandé quelques renseignements de route.

À bien considérer ce personnage, j’avais lieu de penser que c’était un Allemand, très probablement originaire de la Prusse. Cela se sentait, comme on dit, et tout en lui portait la marque teutonne. Impossible de le confondre avec ces braves Hongrois, ces sympathiques Magyars, vrais amis de la France.

La gabare, en quittant Budapest, ne marchait guère plus vite que le courant. La brise, très légère, ne lui imprimait qu’une faible vitesse propre. De là toute facilité pour observer en détail les paysages offerts à nos regards. Après que la double ville eut été laissée en arrière, la *Dorothée*, arrivant à l’île Czepel qui sépare le Danube en deux bras, s’engagea dans celui de gauche.

Peut-être le lecteur s’étonne-t-il – en admettant que je doive avoir jamais des lecteurs! – de la complète banalité d’un voyage dont j’ai commencé par vanter l’étrangeté? S’il en est ainsi, qu’il prenne patience. Avant qu’il soit longtemps, on aura de l’étrange autant qu’on en peut désirer.

Précisément, ce fut au moment où la *Dorothée* contournait l’île Czepel, que se produisit le premier incident dont j’aie gardé la mémoire. Un incident des plus insignifiants, d’ailleurs. Ai-je même le droit d’appeler “incident” un fait de si peu d’importance, et, au surplus, totalement imaginaire, ainsi que j’en eus la preuve sur-le-champ? Quoi qu’il en soit, voici la chose.

J’étais alors à l’arrière du bateau, debout, près de ma petite malle, sur le couvercle de laquelle était cloué un papier où qui voulait pouvait lire mes nom, prénom, adresse et qualité. Accoudé au garde-fou, je laissais béatement errer mes yeux sur la puszta qui se développe en aval de Pest, et je ne pensais à rien, je l’avoue.

Tout à coup, j’eus l’obscure sensation qu’il y avait quelqu’un derrière moi.

Chacun connaît, pour l’avoir goûtée, cette gêne sourde que nous ressentons, quand nous sommes regardés à notre insu par quelqu’un dont nous ignorons la présence. C’est un phénomène mal ou pas expliqué et, au demeurant, assez mystérieux. Eh bien! à ce moment, j’éprouvai une gêne de ce genre.

Je me retournai brusquement. Dans mon voisinage immédiat, il n’y avait personne.

L’impression avait été si nette, que je restai quelques minutes bouche bée, en constatant ma solitude. Mais enfin il fallait bien me rendre à l’évidence, et reconnaître que plus de dix toises me séparaient des passagers les plus proches.

En me gourmandant de ma sotte nervosité, je repris donc ma posture première, et bien certainement je n’eusse gardé aucun souvenir de ce futile incident, si des événements, auxquels j’étais alors bien loin de m’attendre, ne se fussent chargés de me le remettre en mémoire.

En tout cas, sur le moment, je cessai aussitôt d’y penser, et mes regards se reportèrent vers la puszta, qui se déroulait devant moi, avec ses curieux effets de mirage, ses longues plaines, ses pâturages verdoyants, ses cultures plus serrées, plus riches dans le voisinage de la grande ville. Sur le fleuve, c’était toujours le chapelet des îles basses, hérissées de saules, dont la tête émergeait comme de grosses touffes d’un gris pâle.

Au cours de cette journée du 7 mai, nous fîmes près de vingt lieues, en suivant les multiples replis du fleuve, sous un ciel incertain, qui donna plus d’heures humides que d’heures sèches. Le soir venu, on s’arrêta pour la nuit entre Duna Pentele et Duna Foldrar. La journée du lendemain fut en tous points semblable, et de nouveau on fit halte en rase campagne, une dizaine de lieues au-dessus de Batta.

Le 9 mai, le temps rasséréné, on partit avec la certitude d’arriver à Mohacz avant le soir.

Vers neuf heures, au moment où j’entrais dans le rouf, le passager allemand en sortait. Nous faillîmes nous heurter, et je fus surpris du regard singulier qu’il m’adressa. C’était la première fois que le hasard nous rapprochait l’un de l’autre, et pourtant, non seulement il y avait de l’insolence dans ce regard, mais – je rêvais sans doute – on eût juré qu’il y avait aussi de la haine.

Que me voulait-il, cet individu? Me haïssait-il simplement parce que j’étais Français? La pensée me vint, en effet, qu’il avait pu lire mon nom sur le couvercle de ma malle, ou même sur la plaque de mon sac de voyage, déposé sur une des banquettes du rouf. C’était peut-être cela qui me valait d’être dévisagé de cette façon.

Eh bien, s’il savait mon nom, j’étais décidé à ignorer le sien, car le personnage m’intéressait fort peu.

La *Dorothée* fit escale à Mohacz, mais assez tard pour que, de cette ville assez importante, je n’aie vu que deux flèches aiguës, au-dessus d’une masse déjà noyée d’ombre. Je descendis cependant, et, après une excursion d’une heure, je rentrai à bord.

Embarquement de quelques passagers, et démarrage au point du jour, le 10 mai.

Pendant cette journée, l’individu en question me croisa plusieurs fois sur le pont, en affectant de me regarder d’un air qui décidément me déplaisait. Je n’aime pas à chercher querelle aux gens, mais je n’aime pas non plus qu’on m’observe avec cette persistance désobligeante. S’il avait quelque chose à dire, pourquoi cet impertinent ne me le disait-il? Ce n’est pas avec les yeux que l’on parle dans ce cas, et, s’il ne comprenait pas le français, j’aurais bien su lui répondre en sa langue.

Toutefois, si j’en arrivais à interpeller le Teuton, mieux valait que j’eusse obtenu préalablement quelque renseignement à son sujet.

J’interrogeai le patron de la gabare, et lui demandai s’il connaissait ce passager:

“Je le vois pour la première fois, me répondit-il.

— C’est un Allemand? repris-je.

— À n’en pas douter, monsieur Vidal, et je pense même qu’il l’est deux fois, car il doit être Prussien.

— Eh! c’est déjà trop d’une!” m’écriai-je, réponse peu digne, je le concède, d’un esprit cultivé, mais que parut goûter le capitaine, qui était d’origine hongroise.

Dans l’après-midi, le bateau évolua à la hauteur de Zombor, trop éloignée de la rive gauche du fleuve pour qu’il soit possible de l’apercevoir. C’est une cité très importante, située, comme Szegedin, dans cette vaste presqu’île formée par les deux cours du Danube et de la Theiss, l’un de ses plus considérables affluents.

Le lendemain, en suivant les nombreuses sinuosités du fleuve, la *Dorothée* se dirigea vers Vukovar, bâtie sur la rive droite. Nous longions alors cette frontière de la Slavonie, où le fleuve modifie sa direction Nord-Sud pour courir vers l’Est. Là s’étendait aussi le territoire des Confins militaires. De distance en distance on voyait, un peu en arrière de la berge, de nombreux corps de garde, toujours en communication par le va-et-vient des sentinelles qui occupent des cabanes de bois et des guérites de branchages.

Ce territoire est administré militairement. Tous les habitants désignés sous le nom de *grenzer*, y sont soldats. Les provinces, les districts, les paroisses, s’effacent pour faire place aux régiments, aux compagnies de cette armée spéciale. On comprend sous la dénomination de Confins militaires, depuis les rivages de l’Adriatique jusqu’aux montagnes de la Transylvanie, une aire de six cent dix milles carrés, dont la population, soit plus de onze mille âmes, est soumise à une sévère discipline. Cette institution date d’avant le présent règne de Marie-Thérèse, et elle a sa raison d’être, non seulement contre les Turcs, mais aussi, comme cordon sanitaire, contre la peste. L’une ne vaut pas mieux que les autres.

À partir de Vukovar, je cessai d’apercevoir l’Allemand à bord. Sans doute, il avait débarqué dans cette ville. Je fus ainsi délivré de sa présence, ce qui m’épargna toute explication avec lui.

Maintenant, d’ailleurs, d’autres pensées occupaient mon esprit. Dans peu d’heures, le bateau serait arrivé à Ragz. Quelle joie de revoir mon frère dont j’étais séparé depuis plus d’un an, de le presser dans mes bras, de causer tous les deux de choses pour nous si intéressantes, de faire connaissance avec sa nouvelle famille!

Vers cinq heures de l’après-midi, sur la rive gauche, entre les saules de la berge et derrière un rideau de peupliers, apparurent quelques églises, les unes couronnées de dômes, les autres dominées par des flèches, qui se découpaient sur un fond de ciel où couraient de rapides nuages.

C’étaient les premiers linéaments d’une grande ville, c’était Ragz. Au dernier tournant du fleuve, elle apparut tout entière, pittoresquement assise au pied de hautes collines dont l’une portait l’ancien château féodal, l’acropole traditionnelle des vieilles cités de la Hongrie.

Poussée par la brise, la gabare se rapprocha du débarcadère. Elle accosta. C’est à cet instant précis que survint le deuxième incident de mon voyage. Mérite-t-il, cette fois, d’être raconté?… Qu’on en juge.

J’étais debout, près du bastingage de bâbord, regardant la ligne des quais, tandis que la plupart des passagers gagnaient la coupée. À la sortie de l’appontement se tenaient de nombreux groupes, et je ne doutais pas que Marc en fit partie.

Or, comme je cherchais à l’apercevoir, j’entendis, près de moi, distinctement prononcés en langue allemande, ces mots inattendus:

“Si Marc Vidal épouse Myra Roderich, malheur à elle, malheur à lui!”

Je me retournai vivement… J’étais seul à cette place. Pourtant quelqu’un venait de me parler! Oui, on m’avait parlé, et, j’irai plus loin, la voix ne m’était pas inconnue!…

Cependant, personne, je le répète, personne!… Évidemment, je m’étais trompé en croyant entendre cette phrase menaçante… Une espèce d’hallucination, rien de plus… Il fallait que mes nerfs fussent en fâcheux état, pour me jouer de pareils tours à deux jours d’intervalle!… Stupéfait, je regardai de nouveau autour de moi… Non, il n’y avait personne… Que pouvais-je faire, sinon hausser les épaules et débarquer purement et simplement?

Et c’est bien ce que je fis, en effet, en me frayant avec peine un passage au milieu de la foule assourdissante qui encombrait l’appontement.

III

Marc m’attendait, comme je l’avais pensé, au débarcadère et me tendait les bras. Nous nous serrâmes cœur contre cœur.

“Henri… mon cher Henri! répétait-il, la voix émue, les yeux humides, bien que toute sa physionomie exprimât le bonheur.

— Mon cher Marc, disais-je de mon côté, que je t’embrasse encore!”

Puis, après les premières effusions:

“Allons! en route! m’écriais-je. Tu m’emmènes chez toi, je pense?

— Oui, à l’hôtel, l’hôtel Temesvar, à dix minutes d’ici, rue du Prince-Miloch… mais non sans t’avoir présenté auparavant à mon futur beau-frère.”

Je n’avais pas remarqué un officier qui se tenait un peu en arrière de Marc. C’était un capitaine. Il portait l’uniforme de l’infanterie des Confins militaires. Vingt-huit ans au plus, d’une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, belle prestance, la moustache et la barbiche châtain, l’air fier et aristocratique du Magyar, mais les yeux accueillants, la bouche souriante, d’abord très sympathique.

“Le capitaine Haralan Roderich”, prononça Marc.

Je pris la main que me tendait le capitaine Haralan.

“Monsieur Vidal, me dit-il, nous sommes heureux de vous voir, et vous ne vous imaginez pas quel plaisir votre arrivée si impatiemment attendue va causer à toute ma famille.

— Y compris Mlle Myra? demandai-je.

— Je le crois bien! s’écria mon frère, et ce n’est point sa faute, mon cher Henri, si la *Dorothée* n’a pas fait ses dix lieues à l’heure depuis ton départ de Vienne!”

À noter que le capitaine Haralan parlait couramment le français, comme son père, sa mère, sa sœur, qui avaient voyagé en France. D’autre part, puisque Marc et moi nous avions une parfaite connaissance de la langue allemande, avec quelque teinture de la langue hongroise, dès ce jour-là et dans la suite nous pûmes converser indifféremment dans ces diverses langues, qui s’entremêlaient parfois.

Une voiture prit mon bagage. Le capitaine Haralan et Marc y montèrent avec moi, et, quelques minutes après, elle s’arrêta devant l’hôtel Temesvar.

Rendez-vous fixé au lendemain pour ma première visite à la famille Roderich, je restai seul avec mon frère, dans une chambre assez confortable, voisine de celle qu’il occupait depuis son installation à Ragz.

Notre entretien se poursuivit jusqu’à l’heure du dîner.

“Mon cher Marc, lui dis-je, nous voici donc enfin réunis tous deux en bonne santé, n’est-ce pas?… Si je ne me trompe, c’est une grande année qu’aura duré notre séparation.

— Oui, Henri, et le temps m’a paru long, bien que la présence de ma chère Myra en ait joliment abrégé les derniers mois… Mais, te voilà, et l’absence ne m’a pas fait oublier que tu es mon grand frère.

— Ton meilleur ami, Marc.

— Aussi, Henri, tu le comprends, mon mariage ne pouvait s’accomplir sans que tu fusses là, près de moi!… Ne devais-je pas, d’ailleurs, te demander ton consentement?

— Mon consentement?

— Oui, comme je le demanderais à notre père, s’il était là. Mais, pas plus que lui, tu n’aurais eu à me le refuser, et, quand tu la connaîtras…

— Je la connais déjà par tes lettres, et je sais que tu es heureux.

— Plus que je ne saurais dire. Tu la verras, tu la jugeras, et tu l’aimeras, j’en suis sûr! C’est la meilleure des sœurs que je te donne.

— Et que j’accepte, mon cher Marc, sachant d’avance que tu ne peux faire qu’un choix excellent. Mais pourquoi ne pas rendre visite au docteur Roderich dès ce soir?

— Non, demain… Nous ne pensions pas que le bateau arriverait de si bonne heure, et on ne t’attendait que dans la soirée. C’est seulement par excès de prudence que nous sommes venus sur le quai, Haralan et moi, et bien nous en a pris, puisque nous avons assisté au débarquement. Ah! si ma chère Myra avait su!… Comme elle regrettera!… Mais, je le répète, tu n’es attendu que pour demain. Mme Roderich et sa fille ont disposé de leur soirée, et demain elles t’en feront toutes leurs excuses.

— C’est convenu, Marc, répondis-je, et puisque nous nous appartenons pour quelques heures aujourd’hui, employons-les à causer, à parler du passé et de l’avenir, à échanger tout ce que deux frères peuvent avoir de souvenirs, après une année de séparation.”

Marc me raconta alors son voyage depuis qu’il avait quitté Paris, toutes ses étapes marquées par le succès, son séjour à Vienne, à Presbourg, où les portes du monde artiste s’étaient grandes ouvertes devant lui. Il ne m’apprit rien, en somme. Un portrait signé de Marc Vidal ne peut être que très recherché, très disputé, et avec la même ardeur par les riches Autrichiens que par les riches Magyars.

“Je n’y pouvais suffire mon cher Henri. Des demandes et. même des enchères de toutes parts! Que veux-tu, le mot avait été dit par un brave bourgeois de Presbourg: “Marc Vidal fait plus ressemblant que nature.” Aussi, ajouta mon frère en plaisantant, il ne me paraît pas impossible qu’on m’enlève un de ces jours pour portraiturer toute la Cour de Vienne!

— Prends garde, Marc, prends garde! Voilà qui t’occasionnerait quelque embarras s’il te fallait maintenant quitter Ragz pour te rendre à la Cour!

— Je déclinerais l’invitation le plus respectueusement du monde, mon ami. À présent il ne peut être question de portraits… ou plutôt je viens d’achever le dernier.

— Le sien, n’est-ce pas?

— Le sien, et ce n’est sans doute pas ce que j’ai fait de plus mal.

— Qui sait? m’écriai-je. Lorsqu’un peintre est plus préoccupé du modèle que du portrait…

— Enfin, Henri, tu verras!… Je te le répète: plus ressemblant que nature!… C’est mon genre, paraît-il… Oui, tout le temps que ma chère Myra posait, mes yeux ne pouvaient se détacher d’elle. Mais elle ne plaisantait pas. Ce n’était pas au fiancé, c’était au peintre, qu’elle entendait consacrer ces heures trop courtes… Et mon pinceau courait sur la toile… Avec quelle passion!… Parfois, il me semblait que le portrait allait s’animer, prendre vie, comme la statue de Galathée…

— Du calme, Pygmalion, du calme. Dis-moi plutôt comment tu es entré en relation avec la famille Roderich.

— C’était écrit.

— Je n’en doute pas, mais encore…

— Plusieurs salons de Ragz m’avaient fait l’honneur de m’admettre dès les premiers jour de mon arrivée. Rien ne pouvait m’être plus agréable, ne fût-ce que pour y passer les soirées toujours longues dans une ville étrangère. Je fréquentais assidûment ces salons où je trouvais bon accueil, et c’est dans l’un d’eux que j’ai renouvelé connaissance avec le capitaine Haralan.

— Renouvelé?… demandai-je.

— Oui, Henri, car je l’avais déjà plusieurs fois rencontré à Pest. Un officier du plus grand mérite, destiné à un bel avenir, en même temps le plus aimable des hommes, et auquel il n’a manqué, pour se conduire en héros lors des guerres de Mathias Corvin…

— Que d’être né à cette époque! répliquai-je en riant.

— Comme tu dis, reprit Marc sur le même ton. Bref, ici nous nous sommes vus tous les jours, et nos relations d’abord un peu vagues se sont peu à peu changées en une étroite amitié. Il a voulu me présenter à sa famille, et j’ai accepté d’autant plus volontiers que j’avais déjà rencontré Myra dans quelques réceptions, et…

— Et, continuai-je, la sœur n’étant pas moins charmante que le frère, tes visites se sont multipliées à l’hôtel du docteur Roderich…

— Oui, Henri, depuis trois mois, je n’ai pas laissé passer une soirée sans m’y rendre. Après cela, lorsque je parle de ma chère Myra, peut-être crois-tu que j’exagère…

— Mais non, mon ami, mais non! tu n’exagères pas… Je suis certain qu’il ne serait pas possible d’exagérer en parlant d’elle. Et même, si tu veux connaître mon avis sincère, je t’avouerai que je te trouve modéré.

— Ah! cher Henri, que je l’aime!

— Cela se voit. D’autre part, je suis satisfait de penser que tu vas entrer dans la plus honorable des familles…

— Et la plus honorée, répondit Marc. Le docteur Roderich est un médecin très estimé, et ses confrères font de lui le plus grand cas. En même temps le meilleur des hommes et bien digne d’être le père…

— De sa fille, dis-je, comme Mme Roderich est non moins digne, sans doute, d’en être la mère.

— Elle! l’excellente femme! s’écria Marc. Adorée de tous les siens, pieuse, charitable, s’occupant de bonnes œuvres…

— Une perfection, quoi! et qui sera une belle-mère comme il ne s’en trouve plus en France, n’est-ce pas, Marc!

— Plaisante!… Plaisante!… D’abord, Henri, ici, nous ne sommes pas en France, mais en Hongrie, dans ce pays magyar où les mœurs ont gardé quelque chose de la sévérité d’autrefois, où la famille est encore patriarcale…

— Allons, futur patriarche, car tu le seras à ton tour…

— C’est une situation sociale qui en vaut bien une autre!

— Oui, émule de Mathusalem, de Noé, d’Abraham, d’Isaac, de Jacob! Enfin, ton histoire, ce me semble, n’a rien de bien extraordinaire. Grâce au capitaine Haralan, tu as été introduit dans cette famille et on t’y a fait le meilleur accueil, ce qui ne saurait m’étonner, tel que je te connais; tu n’as pu voir Mlle Myra sans être séduit par ses qualités physiques et morales…

— Comme tu dis, frère!

— Les qualités morales, c’était pour le fiancé. Les qualités physiques, c’était pour le peintre, et celles-ci ne s’effaceront pas plus de la toile que celles-là de ton cœur… Que penses-tu de ma phrase?

— Boursouflée, mais juste, mon cher Henri!

— Juste aussi ton appréciation, et, pour conclure, de même que Marc Vidal n’a pu voir Mlle Myra Roderich sans être touché de sa grâce, Mlle Myra Roderich n’a pu voir Marc Vidal sans être touchée de…

— Je ne dis pas cela, Henri!

— Mais je le dis, moi, ne fût-ce que par respect pour la sainte vérité des choses… Et M. et Mme Roderich, après s’être aperçus de ce qui se passait, n’en ont point pris ombrage. Et Marc n’a pas tardé à s’en ouvrir au capitaine Haralan. Et le capitaine Haralan n’a point vu cela d’un mauvais œil. Il a parlé de cette petite affaire à ses parents, et ceux-ci en ont parlé à leur fille. Puis, Marc Vidal a fait officiellement sa demande qui fut agréée, et ce roman va finir comme tant d’autres du même genre…

— Ce que tu appelles la fin, mon cher Henri, interrompit Marc, c’est, à mon avis, le commencement.

— Tu as raison, Marc, et j’en suis à ne plus connaître la valeur des mots… À quand le mariage?

— On attendait ton arrivée pour en fixer définitivement la date.

— Eh bien, quand vous voudrez… dans six semaines… dans six mois… dans six ans…

— Mon cher Henri, répondit Marc, tu voudras bien dire au docteur, j’y compte, que le temps d’un ingénieur est très précieux, et que si tu prolongeais outre mesure ton séjour à Ragz, le fonctionnement du système solaire, n’étant plus soumis à tes savants calculs, pourrait être détraqué.

— En un mot, que je serais responsable des tremblements de terre, inondations, raz-de-marée et autres cataclysmes?

— C’est cela… Qu’on ne peut donc reculer la cérémonie plus tard…

— Qu’après-demain ou même ce soir, n’est-ce pas?… Sois rassuré, mon cher Marc, je dirai tout ce qu’il faudra, bien que mes calculs ne soient pas, en réalité, si nécessaires que tu le supposes au bon ordre de l’univers, ce qui me permettra de passer un bon mois près de ta femme et près de toi.

— Ce serait parfait.

— Mais, mon cher Marc, quels sont tes projets? As-tu l’intention de quitter Ragz aussitôt après ton mariage?

— Voilà ce qui n’est pas encore décidé, répondit Marc, et nous avons le temps d’étudier la question. Je ne m’occupe que du présent. Quant à l’avenir, il se borne pour moi à mon mariage. Rien n’existe au-delà.

— Le passé n’est plus, m’écriai-je, l’avenir n’est pas, le présent est seul! Il y a là-dessus un concerto italien que tous les amoureux récitent aux étoiles.”

La conversation se continua sur ce ton jusqu’à l’heure du dîner. Puis Marc et moi, fumant notre cigare, nous allâmes faire les cent pas en suivant le quai qui longe la rive gauche du Danube.

Ce n’est pas cette première promenade nocturne qui pouvait me donner un aperçu de la ville. Mais, le lendemain et les jours suivants, j’aurais tout le temps de la visiter en détail, plus probablement en compagnie du capitaine Haralan que de Marc.

Il va de soi que le sujet de notre conversation n’avait pas changé et que Myra Roderich ne cessa d’en être l’objet.

Un mot, je ne sais lequel, me rappela ce que m’avait dit à Paris, la veille de mon départ, le lieutenant de police. Rien dans les paroles de mon frère n’indiquait que son roman eût été troublé, fût-ce un jour. Et pourtant, si Marc n’avait pas de rival, du moins ce rival avait-il existé, puisque Myra Roderich avait été recherchée par le fils d’Otto Storitz. Rien d’étonnant, au surplus, qu’on eût demandé la main d’une jeune fille accomplie et dans une belle situation de fortune.

Naturellement, les paroles que j’avais cru entendre au moment où j’allais débarquer me revinrent alors à l’esprit. Je persistais à croire que j’avais été dupe d’une illusion. D’ailleurs, en admettant qu’elles eussent été réellement prononcées, quelle conclusion pouvais-je en tirer, puisque je ne savais à qui les attribuer? J’aurais été assez porté à incriminer l’antipathique Allemand que nous avions embarqué à Pest. Mais il me fallait y renoncer, cet impertinent ayant quitté le bateau à Vukovar. Restait donc seulement, dans ce cas, l’hypothèse d’un mauvais plaisant.

Sans faire connaître cet incident à mon frère, je crus devoir lui toucher un mot de ce que j’avais appris relativement à Wilhelm Storitz.

Marc répondit d’abord par un geste de dédain des plus caractéristiques. Puis il me dit:

“En effet, Haralan m’a parlé de cet individu. C’est, paraît-il, le fils unique de ce savant, Otto Storitz, auquel, en Allemagne, on a fait une réputation de sorcier, réputation injustifiée d’ailleurs, car il a réellement tenu une place considérable dans les sciences naturelles, et il a fait des découvertes importantes en chimie et en physique. Mais la demande de son fils a été repoussée.

— Bien avant que la tienne eût été agréée, n’est-ce pas?

— Quatre ou cinq mois avant, si je ne me trompe, répondit mon frère.

— Les deux faits n’ont donc aucun rapport?

— Aucun.

— Mlle Myra a-t-elle su que Wilhelm Storitz avait aspiré à l’honneur de devenir son époux, comme on dit dans la chanson?

— Je ne le crois pas.

— Et, depuis, il n’a jamais fait de démarche?

— Jamais. Il a dû comprendre qu’il n’avait aucune chance.

— Pourquoi cela? Est-ce que sa réputation?…

— Non. Wilhelm Storitz est une sorte d’original dont l’existence est assez mystérieuse, et qui vit très retiré…

— À Ragz?

— Oui, à Ragz, dans une maison isolée du boulevard Tékéli, où personne ne pénètre. On le tient pour un garçon bizarre, voilà tout. Mais c’est un Allemand, et cela eût suffi à motiver le refus de M. Roderich, car les Hongrois n’aiment guère les représentants de la race teutonne.

— L’as-tu rencontré?

— Quelquefois, et un jour, au musée, le capitaine Haralan me l’a montré, sans qu’il ait paru nous apercevoir.

— Est-il en ce moment à Ragz?

— Je ne puis te répondre exactement, Henri, mais je crois qu’on ne l’y a pas vu depuis deux ou trois semaines.

— Cela vaudrait mieux qu’il eût quitté la ville.

— Bon! fit Marc, laissons cet homme où il est, et si jamais il y a une dame Wilhelm Storitz, tu peux être sûr que ce ne sera pas Myra Roderich, puisque…

— Oui, répliquai-je, puisqu’elle sera Mme Marc Vidal!”

Notre promenade se poursuivit sur le quai jusqu’au pont de bateaux qui réunit la rive hongroise à la rive serbienne… J’avais un but en la prolongeant ainsi. Depuis quelques instants, il me semblait que nous étions suivis par un individu qui marchait derrière nous, comme s’il eût cherché à entendre notre conversation. Je voulais en avoir le cœur net. Nous fîmes une halte de quelques minutes sur le pont, admirant le grand fleuve qui, par cette nuit pure, reflétait par milliers les astres du ciel, pareils à des poissons aux écailles lumineuses. Je profitai de cette halte pour inspecter le quai d’où nous venions. À quelque distance, j’aperçus un homme de taille moyenne, et, si j’en jugeai par sa démarche pesante, d’un certain âge.

Du reste, je cessai bientôt d’y penser. Pressé de questions par Marc, je dus lui donner des renseignements sur mes propres affaires, des nouvelles de nos amis communs, du monde artiste avec lequel j’avais de fréquents rapports. Nous parlâmes beaucoup de Paris, où il retournerait se fixer après son mariage. Myra, paraît-il, se faisait une joie de revoir ce Paris qu’elle connaissait déjà, et de le revoir au bras d’un époux.

J’informai Marc que j’avais apporté tous les papiers que me réclamait sa dernière lettre. Il pouvait être tranquille, rien ne lui manquerait des passeports exigés pour le grand voyage matrimonial.

En somme, la conversation revenait sans cesse vers cette étoile de première grandeur, l’étincelante Myra, comme l’aiguille aimantée vers la Polaire. Marc ne se lassait pas de me parler d’elle, et je ne me lassais pas de l’entendre. Depuis si longtemps qu’il voulait me dire toutes ces choses!… Cependant, c’était à moi d’être raisonnable, ou bien notre causerie eût duré jusqu’au jour.

Nous reprîmes donc le chemin de l’hôtel. En y arrivant, je jetai un dernier coup d’œil en arrière. Le quai était désert. En admettant qu’il eût jamais existé autrement que dans mon imagination, le suiveur avait disparu.

À six heures et demie, Marc et moi nous étions dans nos chambres à l’hôtel Temesvar. Je me mis au lit et commençai incontinent à m’endormir…

Je me redressai tout à coup d’une secousse. Rêve?… Cauchemar?… Obsession?… Les paroles que j’avais cru entendre à bord de la *Dorothée,* je crus les entendre encore dans mon demi-sommeil, ces paroles qui menaçaient Marc et Myra Roderich!

IV

Le lendemain – grand jour – je rendis officiellement visite à la famille Roderich.

L’habitation du docteur s’élève à l’extrémité du quai Batthyani, à l’angle du boulevard Tékéli, lequel, sous différents noms, fait le tour de la ville. C’est un hôtel moderne, d’une ornementation riche et sévère à l’intérieur, meublé avec un goût qui témoigne d’un sens artiste très affiné.

Par une porte cochère flanquée d’une petite porte de service, on pénètre dans une cour pavée qui se prolonge en un vaste jardin ceinturé d’ormes, d’acacias, de marronniers et de hêtres, dont les cimes dépassent le mur de clôture. En face de ces deux portes sont les communs, tapissés d’aristoloche et de vigne vierge, et réunis au corps de logis principal par un couloir à vitraux de couleur, qui aboutit à la base d’une tour ronde, haute d’une soixantaine de pieds, dans laquelle se déroule l’escalier.

En avant de l’habitation règne une galerie vitrée, sur laquelle s’ouvrent les portes drapées de vieilles tapisseries, qui conduisent au cabinet du docteur Roderich, aux salons et à la salle à manger, ces diverses pièces prenant jour sur le quai Batthyani par les six fenêtres de façade et sur le boulevard Tékéli.

Le premier et le second étage reproduisent la même disposition. Au-dessus du grand salon et de la salle à manger, les chambres de M. et de Mme Roderich; au second, celle du capitaine Haralan; au-dessus du cabinet du docteur, la chambre de Mlle Myra et son cabinet de toilette.

Je connaissais cet hôtel avant de l’avoir visité. Au cours de notre entretien de la veille, Marc n’en avait pas oublié un détail. Il me l’avait décrit pièce par pièce, y compris son original escalier surmonté d’un belvédère et d’une terrasse circulaire d’où l’on domine la ville et le cours du Danube. Je savais même de la façon la plus précise quelle était la place préférée de Mlle Myra à table ou dans le grand salon, et sur quel banc elle aimait à s’asseoir au fond du jardin, à l’ombre d’un marronnier superbe.

Vers une heure de l’après-midi, nous fûmes reçus, Marc et moi, dans la vaste galerie vitrée, construite en avant du principal corps de bâtiment. Au milieu, une jardinière en cuivre ouvragé, où s’épanouissaient dans tout leur éclat des fleurs de printemps. Pour garnir les angles, quelques arbrisseaux de la zone tropicale: palmiers, dracenas et araucarias. Aux panneaux, plusieurs toiles des écoles hongroise et hollandaise, dont Marc appréciait la grande valeur.

Sur un chevalet, je vis et j’admirai le portrait de Mlle Myra, œuvre d’une facture superbe, digne du nom qui la signait, et qui m’est le plus cher au monde.

Le docteur Roderich atteignait la cinquantaine, mais c’est à peine si on lui eût donné cet âge. Il avait la taille haute, le corps droit, la chevelure épaisse et grisonnante, le teint de la bonne et inaltérable santé, la constitution vigoureuse sur laquelle aucune maladie n’a prise. On reconnaissait en lui le véritable type magyar dans son originale pureté, l’œil ardent, la démarche résolue, l’attitude noble, et en toute sa personne une sorte de fierté naturelle que tempérait l’expression souriante de son visage. Dès que je lui fus présenté, je sentis à la chaude étreinte de sa main que j’étais en présence du meilleur des hommes.

Mme Roderich, à quarante-cinq ans, avait conservé de notables restes de sa grande beauté d’autrefois, des traits réguliers, des yeux d’un bleu sombre, une magnifique chevelure qui commençait à blanchir, une bouche finement dessinée laissant voir une denture intacte, une taille encore élégante.

Marc m’en avait fait un portrait fidèle. Elle donnait l’impression d’être une excellente femme, douée de toutes les vertus familiales, ayant trouvé le bonheur complet près de son mari, adorant son fils et sa fille de toute la tendresse d’une mère sage et prévoyante.

Mme Roderich me témoigna beaucoup d’amitié, ce dont je fus profondément touché. Elle serait heureuse de l’arrivée du frère de Marc Vidal dans sa maison, à la condition qu’il voulût bien la considérer comme la sienne.

Mais que dire de Myra Roderich? Elle vint à moi, souriante, la main ou plutôt les bras tendus. Oui, c’était bien une sœur que j’allais avoir en cette jeune fille, une sœur qui m’embrassa et que j’embrassai sans plus de cérémonies. Et j’ai lieu de croire que Marc, en me voyant faire, connut l’aiguillon de l’envie.

“Moi, je n’en suis pas encore là! soupira-t-il, non sans jalousie.

— Parce que vous n’êtes pas mon frère”, expliqua plaisamment ma future belle-sœur.

Mlle Roderich était bien telle que Marc me l’avait dépeinte, telle que la représentait cette toile que je venais d’admirer. Une jeune fille à la tête charmante couronnée d’une fine chevelure blonde, avenante, enjouée, ses beaux yeux d’un bleu noir pétillants d’esprit, le teint chaud de la carnation hongroise, la bouche d’un dessin très pur, des lèvres rosées s’ouvrant sur les dents d’une éclatante blancheur. D’une taille un peu au-dessus de la moyenne, la démarche élégante, elle était la grâce en personne, d’une distinction parfaite, sans afféterie ou pose.

En vérité, si l’on disait des portraits de Marc qu’ils étaient plus ressemblants que leurs modèles, on eût pu dire plus justement encore que Mlle Myra était plus naturelle que nature!

Comme sa mère, Myra Roderich portait le costume magyar: la chemisette fermée au cou, les manches assujetties au poignet par des broderies, le corsage soutaché à boutons de métal, la ceinture nouée d’un nœud de rubans à filets d’or, la jupe aux plis flottants et s’arrêtant à la cheville, les brodequins de cuir mordoré – tout compte fait, un ensemble fort agréable où le goût le plus délicat n’eût rien trouvé à reprendre.

Le capitaine Haralan était là, superbe dans son uniforme, et d’une ressemblance frappante avec sa sœur. Il m’avait tendu la main, il m’avait traité en frère, lui aussi, et nous étions déjà deux amis, bien que notre amitié datât de la veille. Je n’avais donc plus à connaître aucun membre de la famille.

La conversation se poursuivit à l’aventure, passant sans ordre d’un sujet à l’autre. Nous parlâmes de mon voyage, de la navigation à bord de la *Dorothée*, de mes occupations en France, du temps dont je pouvais disposer, de cette belle ville de Ragz qu’on me ferait visiter en détail, du grand fleuve que je devrais bien descendre au moins jusqu’aux Portes de Fer, ce magnifique Danube dont les eaux semblent imprégnées de rayons d’or, de tout ce pays magyar si plein de souvenirs historiques, de cette fameuse puszta, qui devrait attirer les curieux du monde entier, etc.

“Avec quelle joie nous vous voyons près de nous, monsieur Vidal! répétait Myra Roderich, en joignant les mains dans un geste gracieux. Votre voyage se prolongeait, et nous n’étions pas sans inquiétude. Nous n’avons été rassurés qu’en recevant votre lettre écrite de Pest.

— Je suis très coupable, mademoiselle Myra, répondis-je, très coupable de m’être attardé en route. Il y a longtemps que je serais à Ragz, si j’avais pris la poste après Vienne. Mais des Hongrois ne m’eussent pas pardonné d’avoir dédaigné le Danube dont ils sont fiers à si juste titre, et qui vaut sa réputation.

— En effet, monsieur Vidal, approuva le docteur, c’est notre glorieux fleuve, et il est bien à nous depuis Presbourg jusqu’à Belgrade.

— Nous vous pardonnons en sa faveur, monsieur Vidal, concéda Mme Roderich, puisque enfin vous êtes là et que rien ne retardera plus maintenant le bonheur de ces deux enfants.”

Tout en parlant, Mme Roderich couvait d’un regard attendri sa fille et Marc déjà unis dans son cœur. M.

Roderich faisait de même. Quant aux “deux enfants”, ils se mangeaient réciproquement des yeux, comme on dit familièrement. Et moi, j’étais tout ému de l’innocent bonheur de cette heureuse famille.

Il ne fut pas question de sortir pendant cet après-midi. Si le docteur dut retourner à ses occupations habituelles, Mme Roderich et sa fille n’avaient aucune affaire qui les attirât au-dehors. En leur compagnie, je parcourus l’hôtel et admirai les belles choses qu’il renferme, tableaux et bibelots de choix, dressoirs chargés de vaisselle d’argent de la salle à manger, vieux coffres et vieux bahuts de la galerie.

“Et la tour? s’écria Myra, M. Vidal s’imagine-t-il que sa première visite s’achèvera sans qu’il soit monté à notre tour?

— Mais non, mademoiselle Myra, mais non! répondis-je, il n’y a pas une des lettres de Marc qui ne me parle de cette tour en termes élogieux, et, à vrai dire, je ne suis venu à Ragz que pour y monter.

— Vous le ferez donc sans moi, dit Mme Roderich; car c’est un peu haut.

— Oh! mère, cent soixante marches seulement!…

— À ton âge, ça ne fait même pas quatre marches par année, dit le capitaine Haralan. Mais reste, chère mère, nous te retrouverons dans le jardin.

— En route pour le ciel!” s’écria Myra.

Elle s’élança, et nous avions peine à la suivre dans sa légère envolée. En deux minutes, nous eûmes atteint le belvédère, puis la terrasse, d’où un panorama superbe s’offrit à nos regards.

Vers l’Ouest, toute la ville et ses faubourgs, que domine la colline de Wolkang, couronnée par le vieux château dont le donjon s’abrite sous les plis du pavillon hongrois. Vers le Sud, le cours sinueux du Danube, large de cent soixante-quinze toises, sans cesse sillonné par le va-et-vient des embarcations qui le remontent ou le descendent et, au-delà, les lointaines montagnes de la province serbienne. Au Nord, la puszta, avec ses bois resserrés comme les massifs d’un parc, ses plaines, ses cultures, ses pâturages, précédée de toute une banlieue de maisons de campagne et de fermes reconnaissables à leurs pigeonniers pointus.

J’étais ravi par cette vue admirable, si variée d’aspects, et qui, par ce beau temps, aux rayons d’un clair soleil, s’étendait jusqu’aux dernières limites de l’horizon.

Mlle Myra crut devoir me donner quelques explications:

“Ceci, dit-elle, c’est le quartier aristocratique, avec ses palais, ses hôtels, ses places, ses statues… De ce côté, en descendant, monsieur Vidal, vous apercevez le quartier commerçant, ses rues pleines de monde, ses marchés… Et le Danube, car il faut toujours en revenir à notre Danube, est-il assez animé en ce moment!… Et l’île Svendor, toute verte, avec ses bosquets et ses prairies en fleurs!… Mon frère n’oubliera pas de vous y conduire.

— Sois tranquille, répondit le capitaine Haralan, je ne ferai pas grâce à M. Vidal d’un seul coin de Ragz.

— Et nos églises, reprit Mlle Myra, voyez-vous nos églises, et leurs clochers pleins de sonneries et de carillons? Vous entendrez cela le dimanche! Et notre Maison de Ville, avec sa cour d’honneur entre les deux pavillons, sa haute toiture, ses grandes fenêtres et son beffroi dont la grosse voix sonne les heures!

— Dès demain, dis-je, elle aura reçu ma visite.

— Eh bien, monsieur, demanda Mlle Myra en se retournant vers Marc, tandis que je montre la Maison de Ville à votre frère, que regardez-vous donc?

— La cathédrale, mademoiselle Myra… sa masse imposante, les tours de sa façade, sa flèche centrale qui monte vers le ciel comme pour y conduire la prière et, pardessus tout, son escalier monumental.

— Et pourquoi, dit Myra, tant d'enthousiasme pour cet escalier?

— Parce qu'il conduit, juste sous la flèche, à un certain endroit du chœur, répondit Marc en regardant sa fiancée dont la jolie figure se colora d'une légère rougeur, où…

— Où?… interrogea Myra.

— Où j'entendrai de votre bouche le plus grand de tous les mots, bien qu'il n'ait qu'une syllabe, et le plus beau!"

Après une assez longue station sur la terrasse du belvédère, nous redescendîmes au jardin où nous attendait Mme Roderich.

Ce jour-là, je dînai à la table de famille, et nous passâmes la soirée entre nous. À plusieurs reprises Mlle Myra se mit au clavecin et s'accompagna en chantant d'une voix pénétrante ces originales mélodies hongroises, odes, élégies, épopées, ballades, qu'on ne peut entendre sans émotion. Ce fut un ravissement, qui se serait prolongé jusqu'à une heure avancée de la nuit si le capitaine Haralan n'eût donné le signal du départ.

Lorsque nous fûmes rentrés à l'hôtel Temesvar, dans ma chambre où me suivit Marc:

"Avais-je exagéré, me dit-il, et crois-tu qu'il y ait au monde une autre jeune fille…

— Une autre! répondis-je. Mais j'en suis à me demander si même il y en a une, et si Mlle Myra Roderich existe réellement!

— Ah! mon cher Henri, que je l’aime!

— Parbleu! voilà qui ne m’étonne pas, mon cher Marc! Je te renierais pour mon frère, s’il en était autrement!”

Là-dessus, nous gagnâmes nos lits, sans qu’aucun nuage eût assombri cette heureuse et paisible journée.

V

Je commençai, dès le lendemain, à visiter Ragz en compagnie du capitaine Haralan. Pendant ce temps, Marc s’occupait de diverses démarches relatives à son mariage dont la date venait d’être fixée au 1er juin, soit dans une vingtaine de jours. Le capitaine Haralan tenait à me faire les honneurs de sa ville natale, à me la montrer dans tous ses détails. Je n’aurais pu trouver un guide plus consciencieux, plus érudit et d’une plus complète obligeance.

Bien que le souvenir m’en revînt parfois avec une obstination qui ne laissait pas de m’étonner, je ne lui parlai point de ce Wilhelm Storitz dont j’avais dit un mot à mon frère. De son côté, il resta muet à cet égard. Il était donc probable qu’il n’en serait plus jamais question.

Ainsi que la plupart des villes de la Hongrie, Ragz a successivement porté plusieurs noms. Ces cités peuvent exhiber un acte de baptême en quatre ou cinq langues, latine, allemande, slave, magyare, presque aussi compliqué que ceux de leurs princes, grands-ducs et archiducs.

“Notre cité n’a pas l’importance de Budapest, me dit le capitaine Haralan. Toutefois sa population dépasse quarante mille âmes et, grâce à son industrie, à son commerce, elle tient un bon rang dans le royaume de Hongrie.

— C’est une ville bien magyare, fis-je observer.

— Assurément, autant par ses mœurs et ses coutumes que par le costume de ses habitants. Si l’on peut dire avec quelque vérité qu’en Hongrie ce sont les Magyars qui ont fondé l’État, et les Allemands qui ont fondé les villes, cette affirmation n’est rien moins qu’exacte en ce qui concerne Ragz. Sans doute, vous rencontrerez dans la classe marchande des individus de race germanique, mais ils y sont en infime minorité.

— Je le savais, comme je savais aussi que les Ragziens sont très fiers de leur cité pure de tout mélange.

— D’ailleurs, les Magyars – ne pas les confondre avec les Huns, ainsi qu’on l’a fait parfois –, ajouta le capitaine Haralan, forment la plus forte cohésion politique, et, à ce point de vue, la Hongrie est supérieure à l’Autriche.

— Et les Slaves? demandai-je.

— Les Slaves, moins nombreux que les Magyars, mon cher Vidal, le sont encore plus que les Allemands.

— Enfin, ceux-ci, dans le royaume hongrois, comment sont-ils considérés?

— Assez mal, je l’avoue, surtout de la population magyare, car il est manifeste que les gens d’origine teutonne vivent parmi nous comme exilés de leur véritable patrie.”

Le capitaine Haralan me parut ne pas éprouver une plus grande affection pour les Autrichiens. Quant aux Allemands, c’est de longue date qu’il y a antipathie de race entre eux et les Magyars. Cette antipathie se traduit sous mille formes, et il n’est pas jusqu’aux dictons qui ne l’expriment d’une façon parfois fort brutale:

“*Eb a német Kutya nélkitl*”, dit l’un de ces dictons.

Ce qui signifie en bon français:

“Partout où il y a un Allemand, il y a un chien.”

La part faite de l’exagération que contiennent certains proverbes, celui-ci témoigne tout au moins du peu d’entente entre les deux races.

La ville de Ragz est assez régulièrement construite, sauf en sa partie basse, au bord du fleuve. Les hauts quartiers affectent même une rectitude presque géométrale.

Par le quai et la rue Étienne-1er, le capitaine Haralan me conduisit au marché Coloman, à l’heure où il est le plus fréquenté.

En ce marché Coloman, où abondaient les diverses productions du pays, j’observai à loisir le paysan dans son costume traditionnel. Il a gardé le caractère très pur de sa race, la tête forte, le nez légèrement camard, les yeux ronds, la moustache tombante. Il est généralement coiffé d’un chapeau à larges bords d’où s’échappent deux nattes de cheveux. Sa veste et son gilet à boutons d’os sont en peau de mouton; sa culotte est faite de cette grosse toile qui rivaliserait avec le velours à côte de nos campagnes du Nord, et une ceinture de couleur variée la maintient solidement à la taille; ses pieds sont chaussés de lourdes bottes qui, au besoin, portent l’éperon.

Il me parut que les femmes, d’un joli type, vêtues d’une jupe courte aux couleurs éclatantes, le corsage agrémenté de broderies, le chapeau orné d’une aigrette de plumes et à bords relevés sur une opulente chevelure, étaient de plus vive allure que les hommes.

Là passaient également de nombreux Tziganes. C’étaient de pauvres hères, très misérables, très dignes de pitié, hommes, femmes, vieillards, enfants, conservant encore quelque originalité sous leurs lamentables guenilles, qui montrent plus de trous que d’étoffe.

En quittant le marché, le capitaine Haralan me fit traverser un dédale de rues étroites, bordées de boutiques aux enseignes pendantes. Puis le quartier s’élargit pour aboutir à la place Kurtz, l’une des plus grandes de la ville.

Au milieu de cette place s’élève une jolie fontaine, bronze et marbre, dont la vasque est alimentée par de fantaisistes gargouilles. Au-dessus se détache la statue de Mathias Corvin, héros du XXe siècle, roi à quinze ans, qui sut résister aux attaques des Autrichiens, des Bohémiens, des Polonais et sauva la chrétienté européenne de la barbarie ottomane.

Place vraiment belle. D’un côté, s’élève le palais du gouverneur, avec ses hauts combles à girouettes, qui a conservé le caractère des anciennes constructions de la Renaissance. Au bâtiment principal accède un escalier à rampe de fer, et une galerie, décorée de statues de marbre, dessert son premier étage. La façade est percée de fenêtres à croisillons de pierre, fermées de vieux vitraux. Au centre, se dresse une sorte de donjon, coiffé d’un dôme à lucarnes, abrité sous les plis du pavillon national. En retour, deux bâtiments forment avant-corps, réunis par une grille dont la porte s’ouvre sur une vaste cour ornée aux angles de verdoyants massifs.

Nous avions fait halte sur la place Kurtz.

“Voici le palais, me dit le capitaine Haralan. C’est là que, dans une vingtaine de jours, Marc et Myra viendront comparaître devant le gouverneur et solliciter son agrément avant de se rendre à la cathédrale.

— Solliciter son agrément?… répétai-je, surpris.

— Oui. C’est un usage local fort ancien. Aucun mariage ne peut être célébré qu’on n’en ait obtenu la permission de la plus haute autorité de la ville. À elle seule, cette autorisation est, d’ailleurs, un lien très fort entre ceux à qui elle est donnée. Ils ne sont pas tout à fait des époux, mais ils ne sont plus des fiancés, et, dans le cas où un obstacle inattendu s'opposerait à leur mariage, il leur serait impossible de prendre d'autres engagements.”

Tout en m'expliquant de la sorte cette singulière coutume, le capitaine Haralan m'entraînait par la rue Ladislas. Cette rue se termine à la cathédrale de Saint-Michel, un monument du XIIIe siècle où se mélangent le roman et le gothique, et dont le style manque de pureté. Cependant, cette cathédrale a de belles parties qui méritent l'attention des connaisseurs, sa façade flanquée de deux tours, sa flèche, posée au transept, haute de trois cent quinze pieds, son portail central aux voussures très fouillées, sa grande rosace que traversent les rayons du soleil couchant, et dont s'éclaire largement alors la grande nef, enfin son abside arrondie entre ses multiples arcs-boutants.

“Nous aurons le temps d'en visiter plus tard l'intérieur, me fit observer le capitaine Haralan.

— Ce sera comme vous voudrez, répondis-je. Vous me guidez, mon cher capitaine, et je vous suis…

— Eh bien, remontons jusqu'au château; puis nous contournerons la ville par les boulevards, et nous arriverons chez ma mère, juste pour l'heure du déjeuner.”

Ragz possède quelques temples des rites luthérien et grec, sans aucune valeur architecturale, et plusieurs autres églises, car les catholiques y sont en grande majorité. La Hongrie appartient surtout à la religion apostolique et romaine, bien que Budapest, sa capitale, soit, après Cracovie, la cité qui renferme le plus grand nombre de juifs. Là, comme bien souvent ailleurs, la fortune des magnats est passée presque tout entière entre leurs mains.

En nous dirigeant vers le château, nous dûmes traverser un faubourg assez animé, où se pressaient vendeurs et acheteurs. Et, précisément à l’instant où nous arrivions sur une petite place, il s’y faisait un tapage plus tumultueux que ne le comporte le brouhaha des achats et des ventes.

Quelques femmes, ayant abandonné leurs étalages, entouraient un homme, un paysan qui venait de choir sur le sol et se relevait avec peine. Cet homme semblait fort en colère:

“Je vous dis qu’on m’a frappé… qu’on m’a poussé, et que j’en suis tombé du coup!

— Qui donc t’aurait frappé? répliqua une de ces femmes… Tu étais seul à ce moment-là… Je te voyais bien de mon échoppe… Il n’y avait personne en cet endroit…

— Si, affirmait l’homme, une poussée, là, en pleine poitrine… je l’ai bien sentie, que diable!”

Le capitaine Haralan, qui interrogea ce paysan, en obtint l’explication suivante: il marchait paisiblement, lorsqu’il avait ressenti soudain une violente secousse, comme si un homme vigoureux l’eût heurté par-devant, secousse si violente qu’il en avait été renversé. Quant à dire quel était son agresseur, cela lui était impossible, car, en se relevant, il n’avait aperçu personne à proximité.

Quelle part de vérité contenait ce récit? Le paysan avait-il réellement reçu un choc aussi brutal qu’imprévu? Mais une poussée ne se produit pas sans qu’il y ait un pousseur, ne fût-ce que le vent. Or, l’air était parfaitement calme. Une seule chose était donc certaine, c’est qu’il y avait eu chute, et une chute en somme assez inexplicable.

De là cet attroupement. Décidément, il fallait, ou que l’homme eût été en proie à une hallucination, ou qu’il fût pris de boisson. Un ivrogne tombe de lui-même, rien qu’en vertu de la loi de la chute des corps. Ce fut, sans doute, l’opinion générale, bien que le paysan se défendît d’avoir bu, et, malgré ses protestations, la maréchaussée l’invita un peu rudement à circuler. L’incident clos, nous suivîmes une des voies montantes qui se dirigent vers l’est de la ville. Il y a là un lacis de rues et de ruelles, un vrai labyrinthe dont un étranger ne pourrait sortir.

Enfin nous arrivâmes devant le château, solidement campé sur une des croupes de la colline de Wolkang.

C’était bien la forteresse des villes hongroises, l’acropole, le “Var”, pour employer le mot magyar, la citadelle du temps féodal, aussi menaçante pour les ennemis du dehors, Huns ou Turcs, que pour les vassaux du seigneur. Hautes murailles crénelées, bordées de mâchicoulis, percées de meurtrières, flanquées de grosses tours, dont la plus élevée, le donjon, dominait toute la contrée environnante.

Le pont-levis, jeté au-dessus de la douve hérissée de mille arbustes sauvages, nous conduisit à la poterne entre deux gros mortiers hors d’usage. Au-dessus s’allongeaient des gueules de canons.

Le grade du capitaine Haralan lui ouvrait naturellement la porte de cette vieille bastide dont la valeur militaire n’est plus très grande. Les quelques soldats qui la gardaient lui firent l’accueil militaire auquel il avait droit, et, une fois sur la place d’armes, il me proposa de monter au donjon qui en occupe un des angles.

Il ne fallut pas gravir moins de deux cent quarante marches de l’escalier tournant qui accède à la plate-forme supérieure. En circulant le long du parapet, mes regards embrassèrent un horizon plus étendu que celui de la tour à l’hôtel Roderich. Je n’estimai pas à moins de sept lieues la partie visible du Danube, dont le cours obliquait alors vers l’Est dans la direction de Neusatz.

“Maintenant, mon cher Vidal, me dit le capitaine Haralan, que vous connaissez notre ville en partie, voici qu’elle se déroule tout entière à nos pieds.

— Et ce que j’en ai vu, répondis-je, m’a paru très intéressant, même après Budapest, après Presbourg.

— Je suis heureux de vous l’entendre dire, et, quand vous aurez achevé de visiter Ragz, que vous serez familiarisé avec ses mœurs, ses coutumes, ses originalités, je ne doute pas que vous n’en conserviez un excellent souvenir. C’est que nous aimons nos cités, nous autres Magyars, et d’un amour filial! Ici, d’ailleurs, les rapports sont d’une parfaite entente entre les diverses classes. La classe aisée est très secourable aux malheureux, dont le chiffre décroît chaque année, grâce aux institutions de charité. À vrai dire, vous ne rencontrerez ici que peu de misérables, et en tout cas la misère y est aussitôt secourue que signalée.

— Je le sais, mon cher capitaine, comme je sais que le docteur Roderich ne s’épargne point pour venir en aide aux pauvres gens; comme je sais aussi que Mme Roderich, Mlle Myra sont à la tête des œuvres de bienfaisance.

— Ma mère et ma sœur ne font que ce que doivent faire les personnes de leur condition et de leur situation. À mes yeux, la charité est le plus impérieux des devoirs.

— Sans doute, ajoutai-je, mais il y a tant de manières de le remplir!

— C’est la le secret des femmes, mon cher Vidal, et une de leurs fonctions ici-bas.

— Oui, la plus noble, assurément.

— Enfin, reprit le capitaine Haralan, nous habitons une ville paisible, que les passions politiques ne troublent plus ou ne troublent guère, très jalouse cependant de ses droits et de ses privilèges qu’elle défendrait contre tout empiétement du pouvoir central. Je ne connais à nos concitoyens qu’un défaut…

— C’est?…

— C’est d’être quelque peu enclins à la superstition et de croire trop volontiers au surnaturel. Les légendes avec revenants et fantômes, évocations et diableries ont le don de leur plaire plus qu’il ne convient.

— Ainsi, dis-je, non point le docteur Roderich – un médecin doit, par définition, avoir la tête solide – mais votre mère… votre sœur…

— Oui, et tout le monde avec elles. Contre cette faiblesse, car c’en est une, je ne réussis point à réagir… Marc m’y aidera peut-être.

— À moins, dis-je, que Mlle Myra ne le pervertisse!

— Maintenant, mon cher Vidal, penchez-vous au dessus du parapet… Dirigez vos regards vers le Sud-Est… là… à l’extrémité de la ville, apercevez-vous la terrasse d’un belvédère?

— Oui, répondis-je, et il me semble bien que ce doit être la tour de l’hôtel Roderich.

— Vous ne vous trompez pas. Or, dans cet hôtel, il y a une salle à manger, et, dans cette salle, un déjeuner va être servi tout à l’heure. Or, comme vous êtes un des convives…

— À vos ordres, mon cher capitaine.

— Eh bien, descendons, laissons le Var à sa solitude féodale que nous avons interrompue un instant, et revenons en suivant la ligne des boulevards, ce qui vous fera traverser le Nord de la ville.”

Quelques minutes après, nous avions franchi la poterne.

Au-delà d’un beau quartier qui s’étend jusqu’à l’enceinte de Ragz, les boulevards, dont le nom change à chacune des grandes rues qui les recoupent, décrivent, sur une longueur de plus d’une lieue, les trois quarts d’un cercle fermé par le Danube. Ils sont plantés d’un quadruple rang d’arbres dans la force de l’âge, hêtres, marronniers et tilleuls. D’un côté se continue l’épaulement des courtines au-dessus duquel on aperçoit la campagne; de l’autre, se succèdent les habitations luxueuses, pour la plupart précédées d’une cour, où s’épanouissent des corbeilles de fleurs, et dont la façade postérieure donne sur de frais jardins, arrosés d’eaux vives.

À cette heure, sur la chaussée des boulevards, passaient déjà quelques équipages bien attelés et, dans la contre-allée, des groupes de cavaliers et d’amazones en tenue élégante.

Au dernier tournant, nous prîmes à gauche afin de redescendre le boulevard Tékéli, dans la direction du quai Batthyani.

Quelques pas plus loin, j’aperçus une maison isolée au centre d’un jardin. D’un aspect triste, comme si elle eût été délaissée, ses fenêtres fermées de persiennes qui ne devaient presque jamais s’ouvrir, son soubassement envahi par la lèpre des mousses et le fouillis des ronces, elle contrastait étrangement avec les autres hôtels du boulevard.

Par la grille, au pied de laquelle poussaient des chardons, on pénétrait dans une petite cour, plantée de deux ormes que la vieillesse avait déjetés, et dont le tronc, fendu de longues entailles, laissait voir la pourriture intérieure.

Sur la façade, s’ouvrait une porte déteinte par les intempéries, les bises et les neiges de l’hiver, à laquelle on montait par un perron de trois marches délabrées.

Au-dessus du rez-de-chaussée se développait un premier étage, avec toit en grosses pannes et belvédère carré, dont les étroites fenêtres étaient drapées d’épais rideaux.

Il ne semblait pas que cette maison fût habitée, en admettant qu’elle fût habitable.

“À qui appartient cette maison? demandai-je.

— À un original, me répondit le capitaine Haralan.

— Elle dépare le boulevard, dis-je. La ville devrait l’acheter et la démolir.

— D’autant plus, mon cher Vidal, que, la maison démolie, son propriétaire quitterait sans doute la ville et s’en irait au diable – son plus proche parent, à en croire les commères de Ragz!

— Bah!… Quel est donc ce remarquable personnage?

— Un Allemand.

— Un Allemand?

— Oui, un Prussien.

— Il se nomme?…”

Au moment où le capitaine Haralan allait répondre à ma question, la porte de la maison s’ouvrit. Deux hommes sortirent. Le plus âgé, qui paraissait avoir une soixantaine d’années, resta sur le perron, tandis que l’autre traversait la cour et franchissait la grille.

“Tiens! murmura le capitaine Haralan, il est donc ici?… Je le croyais absent…”

L’individu, en se retournant, nous aperçut. Connaissait-il le capitaine Haralan? Je n’en doutai pas, car tous deux échangèrent un regard d’antipathie, auquel je ne pus me tromper.

Mais, de mon côté, je l’avais reconnu, et, lorsqu’il se fut éloigné de quelques pas:

“C’est bien lui! m’écriai-je.

— Vous avez déjà rencontré cet homme? interrogea le capitaine Haralan, non sans manifester quelque surprise.

— Sans doute, répondis-je, j’ai voyagé avec lui de Budapest à Vukovar sur la *Dorothée*. Je ne m’attendais guère, je l’avoue, à le retrouver à Ragz.

— Et mieux vaudrait qu’il n’y fût pas! s’écria le capitaine Haralan.

— Vous ne paraissez pas, dis-je, avoir des rapports agréables avec cet Allemand.

— Qui pourrait en avoir?… D’ailleurs, moi, j’ai des raisons spéciales d’être en mauvais termes avec lui. Autant vous dire qu’il a eu l’impudence de demander la main de ma sœur. Mais mon père et moi nous avons refusé de façon à lui ôter toute envie de renouveler sa demande…

— Quoi! c’est cet homme!…

— Vous saviez donc?…

— Oui… mon cher capitaine, et je n’ignore pas que je viens de voir Wilhelm Storitz, le fils d’Otto Storitz, l’illustre chimiste de Spremberg.”

VI

Deux jours se passèrent, pendant lesquels je consacrai toutes mes heures libres à courir la ville. Je faisais aussi de longues stations sur le pont qui unit les deux rives du Danube à l’île Svendor, et ne me lassais pas d’admirer ce magnifique fleuve.

Je l’avouerai, le nom de Wilhelm Storitz me revenait malgré moi fréquemment à l’esprit. C’était donc à Ragz qu’il demeurait d’habitude, et, ainsi que je l’appris bientôt, avec un seul serviteur connu sous le nom d’Hermann, ni plus sympathique, ni plus abordable, ni plus communicatif que son maître. Il me sembla même que cet Hermann rappelait par sa tournure et sa démarche l’homme qui, le jour de mon arrivée, avait paru nous suivre, mon frère et moi, tandis que nous longions le quai Batthyani.

J’avais cru devoir ne rien dire à Marc de la rencontre que le capitaine Haralan et moi nous avions faite sur le boulevard Tékéli. Peut-être cela l’eût-il inquiété de savoir que Wilhelm Storitz était revenu à Ragz. Pourquoi obscurcir son bonheur d’une ombre d’inquiétude? Mais je regrettais que ce rival éconduit ne fût pas absent de la ville, tout au moins jusqu’au jour où le mariage de Marc et de Myra serait un fait accompli.

Le 16, dans la matinée, j’allais descendre pour ma promenade habituelle, que je comptais, ce jour-là, prolonger à travers la campagne, aux environs de Ragz, lorsque mon frère entra dans ma chambre.

“J’ai fort à faire, mon ami, me dit-il, et tu ne m’en voudras pas si je te laisse seul.

— Va, mon cher Marc, lui répondis-je, et ne t’occupe pas de moi.

— Haralan ne doit-il pas venir te prendre?

— Non, il n’est pas libre. Mais peu importe, j’irai déjeuner seul dans quelque cabaret, sur l’autre rive du Danube.

— Surtout, mon cher Henri, sois revenu à sept heures!

— La table du docteur est trop bonne pour que je puisse l’oublier.

— Gourmand!… J’espère que tu n’oublies pas davantage la soirée qui sera donnée après-demain à l’hôtel. Tu pourras en profiter pour étudier la haute société de Ragz.

— Une soirée de fiançailles, Marc?

— Si tu veux, mais plutôt de contrat. Il y a longtemps que ma chère Myra et moi nous sommes fiancés… Il me semble même que nous l’avons toujours été.

— Oui, de naissance.

— Peut-être bien!

— Adieu donc, ô le plus heureux des hommes!

— Tu es trop pressé. Tu me diras cela quand ma fiancée sera ma femme!”

Marc se retira après m’avoir serré la main, et j’étais sur le point de partir, lorsque le capitaine Haralan parut. J’en fus assez étonné, puisqu’il était convenu que je ne devais pas le voir ce jour-là.

“Vous? m’écriai-je. Eh bien, mon cher capitaine, voilà une agréable surprise!”

Me trompais-je, mais il me sembla que le capitaine Haralan était soucieux. Il se contenta de me répondre:

“Mon cher Vidal, mon père désire vous parler. Il vous attend à l’hôtel.

— Je suis à vous”, répondis-je, fort surpris, inquiet même sans trop savoir pourquoi.

Tandis que nous suivions côte à côte le quai Batthyani, le capitaine Haralan ne prononça pas une parole. Que se passait-il donc, et quelle communication le docteur Roderich pouvait-il avoir à me faire? S’agissait-il du mariage de Marc?

Dès que nous fûmes arrivés, le domestique nous introduisit dans le cabinet du docteur.

Mme et Mlle Roderich avaient déjà quitté l’hôtel, et, probablement, Marc devait les rejoindre au cours de leur promenade matinale.

Le docteur était seul dans son cabinet, assis devant sa table. Lorsqu’il se retourna, il me parut aussi soucieux que son fils.

“Il y a quelque chose, pensais-je, et assurément Marc n’en savait rien quand je l’ai vu ce matin.”

Je pris place dans un fauteuil en face du docteur, tandis que le capitaine Haralan restait debout, accoudé à la cheminée, puis j’attendis, non sans anxiété, que le docteur m’adressât la parole.

“Tout d’abord, monsieur Vidal, me dit-il, je vous remercie d’être venu à l’hôtel.

— Je suis tout à vos ordres, monsieur Roderich, répondis-je.

— J’ai désiré causer avec vous en présence d’Haralan.

— S’agit-il du mariage de Marc et de Mlle Myra?

— En effet.

— Ce que vous avez à me dire est donc bien grave?

— Oui et non, répondit le docteur. Quoi qu’il en soit, ni ma femme, ni ma fille, ni votre frère ne sont au courant. J’ai préféré leur laisser ignorer ce que je vais vous apprendre. Vous pourrez, d’ailleurs, juger si j’ai eu tort ou raison.”

Instinctivement, il se fit un rapprochement dans mon esprit entre cette communication et la rencontre que le capitaine Haralan et moi nous avions faite devant la maison du boulevard Tékéli.

“Hier, dans l’après-midi, reprit le docteur, alors que Mme Roderich et Myra étaient sorties, à l’heure de ma consultation, le domestique m’a annoncé un visiteur que j’eusse souhaité ne pas recevoir. Ce visiteur était Wilhelm Storitz… Mais peut-être ignorez-vous que cet Allemand?…

— Je suis au courant, répondis-je.

— Vous savez donc qu’il y a près de six mois, bien avant que la demande de votre frère eût été faite et accueillie, Wilhelm Storitz a sollicité la main de ma fille. Après avoir consulté ma femme et mon fils, qui partagèrent mon éloignement pour un tel mariage, je répondis à Wilhelm Storitz qu’il ne pouvait être donné suite à sa proposition. Au lieu de s’incliner devant ce refus, il renouvela sa demande en termes formels, et je lui répétai non moins formellement ma réponse de manière à ne lui laisser aucun espoir.”

Tandis que parlait le docteur Roderich, le capitaine Haralan allait et venait à travers la pièce et s’arrêtait parfois à l’une des fenêtres pour regarder dans la direction du boulevard Tékéli.

“Monsieur Roderich, dis-je, j’avais eu connaissance de cette demande et je savais qu’elle s’est produite antérieurement à la demande de mon frère.

— À peu près trois mois avant, monsieur Vidal.

— Ainsi, repris-je, ce n’est pas parce que Marc était déjà agréé que Wilhelm Storitz s’est vu refuser la main de Mlle Myra, mais uniquement parce que ce mariage n’entrait pas dans vos vues.

— Assurément. Jamais nous n’aurions consenti à cette union qui ne pouvait nous convenir sous aucun rapport, et à laquelle Myra eût opposé un refus catégorique.

— Est-ce la personne ou la situation de Wilhelm Storitz qui vous a dicté cette résolution?

— Sa situation est probablement assez belle, répondit le docteur Roderich. On croit volontiers que son père lui a légué une fortune considérable, due à de fructueuses découvertes. Quant à sa personne…

— Je le connais, monsieur Roderich.

— Vous le connaissez?”

Je racontai dans quelles conditions j'avais rencontré Wilhelm Storitz sur la *Dorothée*, sans me douter alors de qui il s'agissait. Pendant plus de quatre jours, cet Allemand avait été mon compagnon de voyage entre Budapest et Vukovar, où je pensais qu'il avait débarqué, puisqu'il ne se trouvait plus à bord lors de mon arrivée à Ragz.

“Et enfin, ces jours-ci, ajoutai-je, pendant une de nos promenades, le capitaine Haralan et moi nous sommes passés devant sa maison, et j'ai reconnu ce Wilhelm Storitz au moment où il sortait.

— On disait pourtant qu'il avait quitté la ville depuis quelques semaines, dit le docteur Roderich.

— On le croyait, et il s'est évidemment absenté, puisque Vidal l'a vu à Budapest, intervint le capitaine Haralan, mais ce qui est certain, c'est qu'il est revenu.”

La voix du capitaine Haralan dénotait une grande irritation.

Le docteur reprit en ces termes:

“Je vous ai répondu, monsieur Vidal, sur la situation de Wilhelm Storitz. Quant à son existence, qui se flatterait de la connaître? Elle est absolument énigmatique. Il semble que cet homme vive en dehors de l'humanité.

— N'y a-t-il pas là quelque exagération? fis-je observer au docteur.

— Quelque exagération sans doute, me répondit-il. Cependant, il appartient à une famille assez suspecte, et, avant lui, son père, Otto Storitz, prêtait aux plus singulières légendes.

— Qui lui ont survécu, docteur, si j'en juge par ce que j'ai lu dans une gazette à Budapest. C'est à propos de l'anniversaire qui est célébré tous les ans à Spremberg, dans le cimetière de la ville. À en croire cette gazette, le temps n'a point affaibli les superstitieuses légendes auxquelles vous faites allusion. Le savant mort a hérité du savant vivant. C'était un sorcier, dit-on, qui possédait des secrets de l'autre monde et disposait d'un pouvoir surnaturel. Chaque année on s'attend, paraît-il, à voir quelque phénomène extraordinaire se produire autour de sa tombe.

— Donc, monsieur Vidal, conclut le docteur Roderich, vous ne vous étonnerez pas, d'après ce qu'on raconte à Spremberg, si, à Ragz, ce Wilhelm Storitz est regardé comme un personnage étrange… Tel est l'homme qui a demandé la main de ma fille, et qui, hier, a eu l'audace de renouveler sa demande.

— Hier? m'écriai-je.

— Hier même pendant sa visite.

— Et, ne fût-il pas ce qu'il est, dit le capitaine Haralan, il resterait encore que c'est un Prussien, et cela eût suffi à nous faire repousser une pareille alliance."

Toute l'antipathie que, par tradition et par instinct, la race magyare éprouve pour la race germanique éclatait dans ces paroles.

"Voici comment les choses se sont passées, reprit le docteur Roderich, il est bon que vous le sachiez. Lorsque Wilhelm Storitz me fut annoncé, j'hésitai… Fallait-il l'introduire près de moi ou lui faire répondre que je ne pouvais le recevoir?

— Peut-être cela eût-il été préférable, mon père, dit le capitaine Haralan, car, après l’insuccès de sa première démarche, cet homme aurait dû comprendre qu’il lui était interdit de remettre les pieds ici sous quelque prétexte que ce soit.

— Oui, peut-être, dit le docteur, mais j’ai craint de le pousser à bout et qu’il s’ensuivît quelque scandale…

— Auquel j’eusse mis promptement terme, mon père!

— Et c’est précisément parce que je te connais, dit le docteur, en prenant la main du capitaine Haralan, c’est pour cela que j’ai préféré agir avec prudence… À ce propos, quoi qu’il puisse arriver, je fais appel à ton affection pour ta mère, pour moi, pour ta sœur, dont la situation serait très pénible, si son nom était prononcé, si ce Wilhelm Storitz faisait un éclat…”

Bien que je ne connusse le capitaine Haralan que depuis peu de temps, je le jugeais de caractère très vif, et soucieux jusqu’à l’extrême de ce qui touchait à sa famille. Aussi considérais-je comme déplorable que le rival de Marc fût revenu à Ragz et surtout qu’il eût renouvelé sa demande.

Le docteur acheva de nous raconter en détail cette visite. C’était dans le cabinet même où nous étions en ce moment. Wilhelm Storitz avait tout d’abord pris la parole sur un ton qui témoignait d’une ténacité peu ordinaire. M. Roderich ne pouvait, d’après lui, s’étonner qu’il eût voulu le revoir, et qu’il eût désiré faire une seconde tentative dès son retour à Ragz, retour qu’il faisait remonter à quarante-huit heures. Le docteur s’était en vain montré très formel dans son refus, Wilhelm Storitz n’avait pas voulu se reconnaître battu, et, en arrivant peu à peu au ton de la colère, il avait finalement déclaré que les fiançailles de mon frère et de Mlle Myra ne sauraient le faire renoncer à ses prétentions, qu’il aimait la jeune fille et que, si elle n’était pas à lui, elle ne serait jamais, du moins, à un autre.

“L’insolent… le misérable! répétait le capitaine Haralan. Il a osé parler de la sorte, et je n’étais pas là pour le jeter dehors!”

“Décidément, pensai-je, si ces deux hommes se trouvent en face l’un de l’autre, il sera difficile d’empêcher l’éclat que redoute tant le docteur.”

“Ces derniers mots prononcés, poursuivit celui-ci, je me levai et signifiai que je ne voulais pas en écouter davantage. Le mariage de Myra était décidé et serait célébré dans quelques jours. “Ni dans quelques jours, ni plus tard, répondit Wilhelm Storitz. – Monsieur, dis-je, en lui montrant la porte, veuillez sortir!” Tout autre que lui eût compris que sa visite ne pouvait se prolonger. Eh bien, il resta, son ton baissa, il essaya d’obtenir par la douceur ce qu’il n’avait pas obtenu par la violence, tout au moins la promesse qu’il fût sursis au mariage. Alors, j’allai vers la cheminée pour sonner le domestique. Il me saisit le bras, la colère le reprit, sa voix retentit au point qu’on devait l’entendre du dehors. Heureusement, ma femme et ma fille n’étaient pas encore rentrées à l’hôtel. Wilhelm Storitz consentit enfin à se retirer, mais non sans proférer des menaces insensées. Myra n’épouserait pas Marc. Il surgirait de tels obstacles que le mariage serait impossible. Les Storitz disposaient de moyens qui pouvaient défier toute puissance humaine, et il n’hésiterait pas à s’en servir contre l’imprudente famille qui le repoussait… Il ouvrit alors la porte du cabinet et sortit furieusement, au milieu de quelques personnes qui attendaient dans la galerie me laissant très effrayé de ses énigmatiques paroles.”

Ainsi que le docteur nous le répéta, pas un mot de toute cette scène n’avait été rapporté ni à Mme Roderich, ni à sa fille, ni à mon frère. Mieux valait leur épargner cette inquiétude. D’ailleurs, je connaissais assez Marc pour craindre qu’il ne voulût donner une suite à cette affaire, tout comme le capitaine Haralan. Ce dernier se rendit cependant aux raisons de son père.

“Soit, dit-il, je n’irai pas châtier cet insolent. Mais, si c’est lui qui vient à moi?… Si c’est lui qui s’en prend à Marc?… Si c’est lui qui nous provoque?…”

Le docteur Roderich ne sut que répondre. Notre conversation prit fin. Dans tous les cas, il fallait attendre. L’incident n’aurait aucune suite, en effet, et demeurerait ignoré de tous, si Wilhelm Storitz ne passait pas des paroles aux actes. Or, que pouvait-il? Quel moyen avait-il d’empêcher le mariage? Serait-ce en obligeant Marc, par une insulte publique, à se rencontrer avec lui?… Ne serait-ce pas plutôt en exerçant quelque violence contre Myra Roderich?… Mais comment parviendrait-il à pénétrer dans l’hôtel où il ne serait plus reçu?… Il n’était pas en son pouvoir, j’imagine, d’enfoncer les portes! D’ailleurs, le docteur Roderich n’hésiterait pas, s’il le fallait, à prévenir l’autorité, qui saurait bien mettre cet Allemand à la raison.

Avant de nous séparer, le docteur adjura une dernière fois son fils de ne point prendre à partie cet insolent personnage, et, je le répète, ce ne fut pas sans peine que se rendit le capitaine Haralan.

Notre entretien s’était assez prolongé pour que Mme Roderich, sa fille et mon frère fussent rentrés à l’hôtel. Je dus rester à déjeuner, en sorte qu’il fallut remettre à l’après-midi mon excursion aux environs de Ragz.

Il va sans dire que j’imaginai une raison plausible pour expliquer ma présence, ce matin-là, dans le cabinet du docteur. Marc n’eut aucun soupçon, et le déjeuner se passa très agréablement.

Lorsqu’on se leva de table, Mlle Myra me dit:

“Monsieur Henri, puisque nous avons eu le plaisir de vous trouver ici, vous ne nous quitterez plus de toute la journée.

— Et ma promenade? objectai-je.

— Nous la ferons ensemble.

— C’est que je comptais aller un peu loin…

— Nous irons un peu loin.

— À pied.

— À pied… Mais est-il nécessaire d’aller si loin? Je suis sûre que vous n’avez pas encore admiré dans toute sa beauté l’île Svendor.

— Je devais le faire demain.

— Eh bien, ce sera pour aujourd’hui.”

C’est donc en compagnie de ces dames et de Marc, que je visitai l’île Svendor transformée en jardin public, une sorte de parc, avec bosquets, chalets, et distractions de toutes sortes. Cependant, mon esprit n’était pas tout à cette promenade. Marc s’en aperçut, et je dus lui faire quelque réponse évasive. Était-ce donc la crainte de rencontrer Wilhelm Storitz sur notre route?… Non, je songeais plutôt à ce qu’il avait dit au docteur Roderich:

“Il surgirait de tels obstacles que le mariage serait rendu impossible… Les Storitz disposaient de moyens qui pouvaient défier toute puissance humaine!”

Que signifiaient ces paroles?… Fallait-il les prendre au sérieux?… Je me promis de m’en expliquer avec le docteur, lorsque nous serions seuls. Cette journée et celle du lendemain s’écoulèrent. Je commençais à me rassurer. On n’avait point revu Wilhelm Storitz. Toutefois, il n’avait point quitté la ville. La maison du boulevard Tékéli était toujours habitée. En passant, je vis son domestique Hermann en sortir. Une fois même, Wilhelm Storitz apparut à l’une des fenêtres du belvédère, le regard tourné vers l’extrémité du boulevard, dans la direction de l’hôtel Roderich.

Les choses en étaient là, lorsque, dans la nuit du 17 au 18 mai, il arriva ceci:

Bien que la porte de la cathédrale fût verrouillée, et que personne ne put y entrer nuitamment sans être vu, l’affiche de mariage au nom de Marc Vidal et de Myra Roderich fut arrachée du cadre des publications. Au matin, on en retrouva les morceaux déchirés et froissés. Le dommage fut aussitôt réparé. Mais une heure plus tard, en plein jour cette fois, la nouvelle affiche eut le sort de la précédente, et trois fois de suite, au cours de cette journée du 18 mai, il en fut ainsi sans que l’on parvînt à mettre la main sur le coupable. De guerre lasse, on dut se résoudre à protéger par un fort grillage le cadre réservé aux publications.

Cet attentat stupide fit marcher les langues quelques instants, puis on n’y pensa plus. Mais le docteur Roderich, capitaine Haralan et moi, lui accordâmes plus sérieuse attention. Nous ne mîmes pas un instant en doute que ce fût là le premier acte des hostilités annoncées, comme une escarmouche d’avant-garde, en quelque sorte, de la guerre que nous avait déclarée Wilhelm Storitz.

VII

Cet acte inqualifiable, qui pouvait en être l’auteur, en effet, si ce n’est celui-là seul qui avait intérêt à le commettre? Cette première attaque serait-elle suivie d’autres actes plus graves? N’était-ce, comme nous le pensions, que le commencement des représailles contre la famille Roderich?

Le docteur Roderich fut informé de l’incident dès la première heure par son fils, qui vint aussitôt après à l’hôtel Temesvar.

On imagine aisément dans quel état d’irritation était le capitaine Haralan.

“C’est ce coquin qui a fait le coup! s’écria-t-il. Comment s’y est-il pris, je l’ignore. Il ne s’en tiendra pas là, sans doute, mais je ne le laisserai pas faire!

— Gardez votre sang-froid, mon cher Haralan, dis-je, et ne commettez pas quelque imprudence qui pourrait compliquer la situation.

— Mon cher Vidal, si mon père m’avait prévenu avant que cet homme fût sorti de l’hôtel, ou si, depuis, on m’eût laissé agir, nous serions débarrassés de lui.

— Je persiste à penser, mon cher Haralan, qu’il vaut mieux que vous ne vous soyez pas mis en évidence.

— Et s’il continue?

— Il sera temps de réclamer l’intervention de la police. Songez à votre mère, à votre sœur.

— Ne vont-elles pas apprendre ce qui s’est passé?

— On ne le leur dira pas, pas plus à elles qu’à Marc. Après le mariage, nous verrons quelle attitude il conviendra d’adopter.

— Après?… répondit le capitaine Haralan, et s’il est trop tard?”

Ce jour-là, à l’hôtel, quels que fussent les soucis cachés de M. Roderich, sa femme et sa fille ne s’occupaient que de la soirée de contrat qui allait être donnée le soir même. Elles avaient voulu “faire bien les choses”, pour employer une manière de parler toute française. Le docteur, qui ne comptait que des amis dans la société ragzienne, avait lancé des invitations en assez grand nombre. Ici, comme sur un terrain neutre, l’aristocratie magyare se rencontrerait avec l’armée, la magistrature et les fonctionnaires. Le gouverneur de Ragz avait accepté l’invitation du docteur, auquel l’unissait une amitié personnelle déjà ancienne.

Les salons de l’hôtel suffiraient largement à contenir les cent cinquante invités qui devaient s’y réunir ce soir-là. Quant au souper, il serait servi dans la galerie à la fin de la soirée.

Personne ne songera à s’étonner que la question de toilette eût occupé Myra Roderich dans une juste mesure, ni que Marc eût voulu y apporter son goût d’artiste, ce qu’il avait déjà fait à propos du portrait de sa fiancée. D’ailleurs, Myra était Magyare, et le Magyar, quel que soit son sexe, a le grand souci de l’habillement. C’est dans le sang, comme l’amour de la danse, amour qui va jusqu’à la passion. Aussi, ce que j’ai dit de Myra s’appliquant à toutes les dames et à tous les hommes, cette soirée promettait d’être très brillante.

L’après-midi, les préparatifs furent achevés. Je restai toute cette journée chez le docteur, en attendant l’heure d’aller procéder, moi aussi, à ma toilette, comme un vrai Magyar.

À un instant où j’étais accoudé à l’une des fenêtres donnant sur le quai Batthyani, j’eus l’extrême déplaisir d’apercevoir Wilhelm Storitz. Était-ce le hasard qui l’amenait là? Non, sans doute. Il suivait le quai le long du fleuve, la tête baissée, il se redressa, et quel regard s’échappa de ses yeux! Il passa à plusieurs reprises, et Mme Roderich ne fut pas sans le remarquer. Elle le signala au docteur, qui se contenta de la rassurer, sans lui rien dire de la récente visite de l’énigmatique personnage.

J’ajouterai que, lorsque Marc et moi nous sortîmes pour aller à l’hôtel Temesvar, cet homme nous rencontra sur la place Magyare. Dès qu’il aperçut mon frère, il s’arrêta d’un mouvement brusque et parut hésiter comme s’il voulait venir à nous. Mais il resta immobile, la face pâle, les bras d’une raideur cataleptique… Allait-il donc tomber sur place? Ses yeux, ses yeux fulgurants, quel regard ils jetaient à Marc, qui affectait de ne point faire attention à lui! Et, lorsque nous l’eûmes laissé de quelques pas en arrière:

“Tu as remarqué cet individu? me demanda mon frère.

— Oui, Marc.

— C’est ce Wilhelm Storitz dont je t’ai parlé.

— Je le sais.

— Tu le connais donc?

— Le capitaine Haralan me l’a montré une ou deux fois déjà.

— Je croyais qu’il avait quitté Ragz? dit Marc.

— Il paraît que non, ou, du moins, qu’il y est revenu…

— Peu importe, après tout!

— Oui, peu importe”, répondis-je. Mais, à mon avis, l’absence de Wilhelm Storitz eût été plus rassurante. Vers neuf heures du soir, les premières voitures s’arrêtèrent devant l’hôtel Roderich, et les salons commencèrent à se remplir. Le docteur, sa femme, sa fille, recevaient leurs invités à l’entrée de la galerie resplendissante de l’éclat des lustres. Le gouverneur de Ragz ne tarda pas à être annoncé; ce ne fut pas sans grandes marques de sympathie que Son Excellence présenta ses compliments à la famille. Mlle Myra fut particulièrement l’objet de ses prévenances, ainsi que mon frère. D’ailleurs les félicitations vinrent de toutes parts aux fiancés.

Entre neuf et dix heures affluèrent les autorités de la ville, les officiers, les camarades du capitaine Haralan, qui, bien que son visage me parût encore soucieux, mettait beaucoup de bonne grâce à recevoir les invités. Les toilettes des dames resplendissaient au milieu des uniformes et des habits de cérémonie. Tout ce monde allait et venait à travers les salons et la galerie. On admirait les cadeaux exposés dans le cabinet du docteur, les bijoux et bibelots de prix, parmi lesquels ceux qui venaient de mon frère témoignaient d’un goût exquis. Sur une des consoles du grand salon était déposé le contrat qui serait signé au cours de la soirée. Sur une autre était placé un magnifique bouquet de roses et de fleurs d’oranger, le bouquet des fiançailles, et, suivant la coutume magyare, auprès du bouquet, sur un coussin de velours, reposait la couronne nuptiale que porterait Myra, le jour du mariage, lorsqu’elle se rendrait à la cathédrale.

La soirée comprenait trois parties, un concert et un bal, séparés par la signature solennelle du contrat. Les danses ne devaient pas commencer avant minuit, et peut-être la plupart des invités regrettaient-ils que l’heure en fût si tardive, car, je le répète, il n’est pas de divertissement auquel Hongrois et Hongroises se livrent avec plus de plaisir et de passion.

La partie musicale avait été confiée à un remarquable orchestre de tziganes. Cet orchestre, en grand renom dans le pays magyar, ne s’était pas encore fait entendre à Ragz. Les musiciens et leur chef prirent place à l’heure dite dans la salle.

Je ne l’ignorais pas, les Hongrois sont enthousiastes de musique. Mais, suivant une juste remarque, il existe entre les Allemands et eux une différence très sensible dans leur manière d’en goûter le charme. Le Magyar est un dilettante, non un exécutant. Il ne chante pas, ou chante peu, il écoute, et lorsqu’il s’agit de la musique nationale, écouter est à la fois pour lui une affaire sérieuse et un plaisir d’une extraordinaire intensité.

L’orchestre se composait d’une douzaine d’exécutants sous la direction d’un chef. Ce qu’ils allaient jouer, c’étaient leurs plus jolis morceaux, ces “Hongroises” qui sont des chants guerriers, des marches militaires, que le Magyar, homme d’action, préfère aux rêveries de la musique allemande.

Peut-être s’étonnera-t-on que, pour une soirée de contrat, on n’eût pas choisi une musique plus nuptiale, mieux appropriée à ce genre de cérémonie. Mais ce n’est pas la tradition, et la Hongrie est le pays des traditions. Elle est fidèle à ses mélodies populaires, comme la Serbie à ses pesmas, comme la Valachie à ses doimas. Ce qu’il lui faut, ce sont ces airs entraînants, ces marches rythmées, qui évoquent le souvenir des champs de bataille et célèbrent les exploits inoubliables de son histoire.

Les tziganes avaient revêtu leurs costumes d’origine bohémienne. Je ne me lassais pas d’observer ces types si curieux, leurs visages hâlés, leurs yeux brillants sous de gros sourcils, leurs pommettes saillantes, la denture aiguë et blanche que découvre leur lèvre, leurs cheveux noirs dont la crêpelure ondulait sur un front un peu fuyant.

Le répertoire de cet orchestre produisit un grand effet. Toute l’assistance écoutait religieusement, puis s’abandonnait à des applaudissements frénétiques. Ainsi furent accueillis les morceaux les plus populaires, que les tziganes enlevèrent avec une maestria capable de réveiller tous les échos de la puszta.

Le temps réservé à ces auditions était écoulé. Pour mon compte, j’avais éprouvé un plaisir des plus vifs, en ce milieu magyar, alors que, dans certaines accalmies de l’orchestre, le lointain murmure du Danube arrivait jusqu’à moi.

Je n’oserais affirmer que Marc eût goûté le charme de cette étrange musique. Il en était une autre, plus douce, plus intime qui enivrait son âme. Assis près de Myra Roderich, leurs regards se parlaient, ils se chantaient ces romances sans paroles qui ravissent le cœur des fiancés.

Après les derniers applaudissements, le chef des tziganes se leva, ses compagnons l’imitèrent. Puis le docteur Roderich et le capitaine Haralan les ayant remerciés en termes flatteurs, auxquels ils parurent très sensibles, ils se retirèrent.

On procéda alors sans tarder à la signature du contrat, ce qui fut fait avec toute la solennité désirable, puis il y eut ce que j’appellerai un entracte, pendant lequel les invités quittèrent leurs places, se recherchèrent, formèrent des groupes sympathiques, quelques-uns se dispersant à travers le jardin brillamment illuminé, tandis que les plateaux circulaient chargés de boissons rafraîchissantes.

Jusqu’à ce moment, rien n’avait troublé l’ordonnance de cette fête, et, bien commencée, il n’y avait aucune raison pour qu’elle ne finît pas de même. Vraiment, si j’avais pu le craindre, si quelques appréhensions étaient nées dans mon esprit, je devais avoir repris toute assurance.

Aussi, je ne marchandai pas les félicitations à Mme Roderich.

“Je vous remercie, monsieur Vidal, me répondit-elle, et je suis satisfaite que mes invités aient passé là une heure agréable. Mais, au milieu de tout ce monde joyeux, je ne vois que ma chère fille et votre frère. Ils sont si heureux!…

— Madame, répliquai-je, c’est un bonheur qui vous était dû. Le plus grand que puissent rêver un père et une mère n’est-il pas celui de leurs enfants?”

Par quelle bizarre association d’idées, cette phrase assez banale me rappela-t-elle le souvenir de Wilhelm Storitz? En tout cas, le capitaine Haralan ne paraissait plus songer à lui. Son détachement était-il naturel ou simulé? Je ne sais, mais il allait d’un groupe à l’autre, animant cette fête de sa joie entraînante, et, sans doute, plus d’une jeune Hongroise le regardait avec quelque admiration. Puis, il jouissait de la sympathie que la ville entière, on peut le dire, avait voulu en cette circonstance témoigner à sa famille.

“Mon cher capitaine, lui dis-je, lorsqu’il passa près de moi, si la fin de la soirée vaut le commencement…

— N’en doutez pas! s’écria-t-il. La musique, c’est bien, mais la danse, c’est mieux!

— Parbleu! repris-je, un Français ne reculera pas devant un Magyar. Sachez que votre sœur m’a accordé la deuxième valse.

— Pourquoi pas la première?

— La première?… Mais elle est à Marc de droit et de tradition!… Oubliez-vous donc Marc, et voulez-vous que je me fasse une affaire avec lui?

— C’est juste, mon cher Vidal. Aux deux fiancés d’ouvrir le bal!”

L’orchestre des tziganes reparut et s’installa au fond de la galerie. Des tables étaient disposées dans le cabinet du docteur, de telle sorte que les gens à ce point sérieux qu’ils s’interdisaient valses et mazurkas, pourraient se livrer aux plaisirs du jeu.

Or, l’orchestre était prêt à préluder, attendant que le capitaine Haralan lui en donnât le signal, lorsque du côté de la galerie, dont la porte s’ouvrait sur le jardin, se fit entendre une voix lointaine encore, d’une sonorité puissante et rude. C’était un chant étrange, d’un rythme bizarre, auquel la tonalité manquait, des phrases que ne reliait aucun lien mélodique.

Les couples formés pour la première valse s’étaient arrêtés… On écoutait… Ne s’agissait-il pas d’une surprise ajoutée à la soirée?… Le capitaine Haralan s’étant approché de moi.

“Qu’est-ce donc? lui demandai-je.

— Je ne sais, répondit-il d’un ton où perçait une certaine inquiétude.

— D’où vient ce chant?… De la rue?…

— Non… je ne crois pas.”

En effet, celui dont la voix arrivait jusqu’à nous, devait être dans le jardin, en marche vers la galerie. Peut-être même était-il sur le point d’y entrer.

Le capitaine Haralan me saisit le bras et m’entraîna près de la porte du jardin.

Il n’y avait alors dans la galerie qu’une dizaine de personnes, sans compter l’orchestre installé au fond derrière les pupitres. Les autres invités étaient groupés dans les salons et dans la salle. Ceux qui s’étaient promenés au-dehors, pendant l’entracte, venaient de rentrer.

Le capitaine Haralan alla se placer sur le perron. Je le suivis, et nos regards purent parcourir le jardin éclairé dans toute son étendue…

Nous ne découvrîmes personne.

M. et Mme Roderich nous rejoignirent en ce moment, et le docteur dit à son fils quelques mots auxquels celui-ci répondit par un geste négatif.

Cependant, la voix continuait à se faire entendre, plus accentuée, plus impérieuse, en se rapprochant toujours…

Marc, ayant Myra à son bras, vint près de nous dans la galerie, tandis que Mme Roderich restait au milieu des autres dames, qui l’interrogeaient, et auxquelles elle ne pouvait répondre.

“Je saurai bien!…” s’écria le capitaine Haralan, en descendant le perron.

Le docteur Roderich, plusieurs domestiques et moi, nous le suivîmes. Soudain, alors que le chanteur semblait ne plus être qu’à quelques pas de la galerie, la voix se tut.

Le jardin fut visité, ses massifs furent fouillés. Les illuminations n’y laissant pas un coin dans l’ombre, la recherche put être faite minutieusement… Et, pourtant, on ne trouva personne…

Était-il possible que cette voix fût celle d’un passant attardé suivant le boulevard Tékéli?

Cela paraissait peu vraisemblable, et d’ailleurs on put constater que le boulevard était absolument désert à cette heure.

Une seule lumière brillait à cinq cents pas sur la gauche, la lumière à peine visible qui s’échappait du belvédère de la maison Storitz.

Dès que nous fûmes rentrés dans la galerie, nous ne pûmes répondre à ceux des invités qui nous interrogeaient qu’en donnant le signal de la valse.

C’est ce que fit le capitaine Haralan, et les groupes aussitôt se reformèrent.

“Eh bien, me demanda Myra en riant, vous n’avez pas choisi votre valseuse?

— Ma valseuse, c’est vous, mademoiselle, mais pour la deuxième seulement.

— Alors, mon cher Henri, dit Marc, nous n’allons pas te faire attendre!”

Marc se trompait. Je devais attendre plus longtemps qu’il ne croyait la valse que Myra m’avait promise. Je l’attends même toujours, à vrai dire.

L’orchestre venait d’achever le prélude, lorsque, sans qu’on aperçût le chanteur, la voix retentit de nouveau, et cette fois au milieu du salon…

Au trouble des invités se joignit alors un vif sentiment d’indignation. La voix lançait à pleins poumons le *Chant de la Haine* de Frédéric Margrade, cet hymne allemand qui doit à sa violence une abominable célébrité. Il y avait là une provocation au patriotisme magyar, une insulte directe et voulue!

Et celui dont la voix éclatait au milieu de ce salon… on ne le voyait pas!… Il était là pourtant, et nul ne pouvait l’apercevoir!…

Les valseurs s’étaient dispersés, refluant dans la salle et dans la galerie. Une sorte de panique gagnait les invités, surtout les dames.

Le capitaine Haralan allait à travers le salon, l’œil en feu, les mains tendues comme pour saisir l’être qui échappait à nos regards…

En ce moment la voix cessa avec le dernier refrain du Chant de la Haine.

Et alors, j’ai vu… oui! cent personnes ont vu comme moi ce qu’elles se refusaient à croire…

Voici que le bouquet déposé sur la console, le bouquet de fiançailles, est brusquement arraché, déchiré, et que ses fleurs sont comme piétinées!… Voici que les morceaux du contrat jonchent le parquet!…

Cette fois, ce fut l’épouvante qui frappa tous les esprits! Chacun voulut fuir le théâtre de si étranges phénomènes. Pour moi, je me demandais si j’avais bien toute ma raison et si je devais ajouter foi à ces incohérences.

Le capitaine Haralan venait de me rejoindre. Il me dit, pâle de colère:

“C’est Wilhelm Storitz!”

Wilhelm Storitz?… Était-il fou?…

S’il ne l’était pas, j’allais le devenir à coup sûr. J’étais bien éveillé, je ne rêvais pas, et pourtant j’ai vu, oui j’ai vu de mes yeux, à cet instant, la couronne nuptiale s’enlever du coussin sur lequel elle était placée, sans qu’on pût apercevoir la main qui la tenait, traverser le salon, puis la galerie, et disparaître entre les massifs du jardin!…

“C’en est trop!…” s’écria le capitaine Haralan, qui sortit rapidement du salon, traversa comme une trombe le vestibule, et s’élança sur le boulevard Tékéli.

Je me précipitai à sa suite.

L’un suivant l’autre, nous courûmes vers la maison de Wilhelm Storitz, dont une fenêtre en haut du belvédère brillait toujours faiblement dans la nuit. Le capitaine saisit la poignée de la grille et la secoua rudement. Sans bien savoir ce que je faisais, je joignis mes efforts aux siens. Mais la porte était solide, et c’est à peine si nous parvenions à l’ébranler.

Depuis quelques minutes, nous nous épuisions ainsi en vain. Notre rage croissante nous enlevait tout reste de bon sens…

Soudain, la porte tourna sourdement sur ses gonds…

Le capitaine Haralan s’était évidemment trompé en accusant Wilhelm Storitz… Wilhelm Storitz n’avait pas quitté sa maison, puisque c’est lui-même qui nous ouvrait la porte, puisqu’il était en personne devant nous.

VIII

Dès les premières heures du jour, le bruit des incidents dont l’hôtel Roderich venait d’être le théâtre se répandit par la ville. Tout d’abord, ainsi que je m’y attendais, le public ne voulut pas admettre que ces phénomènes fussent naturels. Cependant, ils l’étaient, ils ne pouvaient pas ne pas l’être. Quant à en donner une explication acceptable, c’était autre chose.

Je n’ai pas besoin de dire que la soirée avait pris fin après la scène que j’ai racontée. Marc et Myra en avaient paru désolés. Ce bouquet de fiançailles piétiné, ce contrat déchiré, cette couronne nuptiale volée sous leurs yeux!… À la veille du mariage quel mauvais augure!

Pendant la journée, des groupes nombreux stationnèrent devant l’hôtel Roderich, sous les fenêtres du rez-de-chaussée qui n’avaient pas été rouvertes. Les gens du peuple, en majorité des femmes, affluaient sur le quai Batthyani.

Dans ces groupes, on causait avec une extrême animation. Les uns s’abandonnaient aux idées les plus extravagantes; les autres se contentaient de jeter des regards peu rassurés sur l’hôtel.

Ni Mme Roderich ni sa fille n’étaient sorties ce matin-là suivant leur habitude. Myra était restée près de sa mère, dangereusement impressionnée par les scènes de la veille, et qui avait besoin du plus grand repos.

À huit heures, Marc ouvrit la porte de ma chambre. Il amenait avec lui le docteur et le capitaine Haralan. Nous avions à causer, peut-être à convenir de quelques mesures urgentes, et mieux valait que cet entretien n’eût pas lieu à l’hôtel Roderich. Mon frère et moi, nous étions rentrés ensemble dans la nuit, et, de très bonne heure, il était allé prendre des nouvelles de Mme

Roderich et de sa fiancée. Puis, sur sa proposition, le docteur et le capitaine Haralan s’étaient empressés de le suivre.

La conversation s’engagea aussitôt:

“Henri, me dit Marc, j’ai donné l’ordre de ne laisser monter personne. Ici, on ne peut nous entendre, et nous sommes seuls… bien seuls… dans cette chambre.”

En quel état se trouvait mon frère! Sa figure, rayonnante de bonheur la veille, était défaite, affreusement pâle. En somme, il me sembla plus accablé que ne le comportaient les circonstances.

Le docteur Roderich faisait des efforts pour se contenir, très différent de son fils, qui, les lèvres serrées, le regard troublé, laissait voir à quelle obsession il était en proie.

Je me promis de conserver tout mon sang-froid.

Mon premier soin fut de m’informer de Mme Roderich et de sa fille:

“Toutes deux ont été fort éprouvées par les incidents d’hier, me répondit le docteur, et quelques jours seront nécessaires pour qu’elles puissent se remettre. Cependant Myra, très affectée d’abord, a fait appel à son énergie et s’efforce de rassurer sa mère, plus frappée qu’elle. J’espère que le souvenir de cette soirée s’effacera bientôt de son esprit, et, à moins que ces déplorables scènes ne se renouvellent…

— Se renouveler? dis-je. Il n’y a pas lieu de le craindre, docteur. Les circonstances dans lesquelles se sont produits ces phénomènes – puis-je appeler autrement ce qui s’est passé? – ne se représenteront pas.

— Qui sait? répliqua le docteur Roderich, qui sait? Aussi ai-je grande hâte que le mariage soit accompli, car je commence à croire que les menaces qui m'ont été faites…”

Le docteur n'acheva pas cette phrase dont le sens n'était que trop compréhensible pour le capitaine Haralan et pour moi. Quant à Marc, qui ne savait rien encore des dernières démarches de Wilhelm Storitz, il parut ne pas avoir entendu.

Le capitaine Haralan, lui, avait son opinion. Toutefois, il garda un silence absolu, attendant sans doute que j'eusse donné mon avis sur les événements de la veille.

“Monsieur Vidal, reprit le docteur Roderich, que pensez-vous de tout cela?”

J'estimai que j'avais plutôt à jouer le rôle d'un sceptique, qui n'entend point prendre au sérieux les étrangetés dont nous avions été témoins. Mieux valait affecter de n'y rien voir d'extraordinaire, en raison même de leur inexplicabilité, si l'on veut me permettre d'inventer ce mot. D'ailleurs, à vrai dire, la demande du docteur ne laissait pas de m'embarrasser.

“Monsieur Roderich, dis-je, je vous l'avoue, “tout cela”, pour employer votre expression, ne me semble pas mériter qu'on s'y arrête longtemps. Que penser, si ce n'est que nous avons été victimes d'un mauvais plaisant? Un mystificateur s'est glissé parmi vos invités et s'est permis d'ajouter aux distractions de la soirée une scène de ventriloquie d'un effet déplorable… Vous savez combien ces exercices s'exécutent maintenant avec un art merveilleux…”

Le capitaine Haralan s'était retourné vers moi, il me regardait les yeux dans les yeux, comme pour lire plus avant dans ma pensée. Son regard signifiait clairement:

“Nous ne sommes pas ici pour nous payer d’explications de ce genre!”

Le docteur répondit:

“Vous me permettrez, monsieur Vidal, de ne pas croire à quelque tour de passe-passe…

— Docteur, répliquai-je, je ne saurais imaginer autre chose… à moins d’une intervention que je repousse pour ma part… une intervention surnaturelle…

— Naturelle, interrompit le capitaine Haralan, mais due à des procédés dont nous n’avons pas le secret.

— Cependant, insistai-je, en ce qui concerne la voix entendue hier, cette voix qui était bien une voix humaine, pourquoi ne serait-ce pas un effet de ventriloquie?”

Le docteur Roderich secouait la tête en homme absolument réfractaire à cette explication.

“Je le répète, dis-je, il n’est pas impossible qu’un intrus ait pénétré dans le salon, avec l’intention de braver le sentiment national des Magyars, de blesser leur patriotisme avec ce *Chant de la Haine*, venu d’Allemagne.”

Après tout, cette hypothèse était plausible, du moment que l’on voulait se tenir dans la limite des faits purement humains. Mais, même en l’admettant, le docteur Roderich avait une réponse très simple à faire, et il la fit en ces termes:

“Si je vous accorde, monsieur Vidal, qu’un mystificateur, ou plutôt un insulteur, a pu s’introduire dans l’hôtel, et que nous ayons été dupes d’une scène de ventriloquie – ce que je me refuse à croire –, que diriez-vous du bouquet et du contrat déchirés, de la couronne emportée par une main invisible?”

En effet, attribuer ces deux incidents à quelque escamoteur, si adroit qu’il fût, la raison s’y refusait. Et pourtant, il est de si habiles magiciens!

Le capitaine Haralan d’ajouter:

“Parlez, mon cher Vidal. Est-ce votre ventriloque qui a détruit ce bouquet fleur à fleur, qui a déchiré ce contrat en mille morceaux, qui a enlevé cette couronne, l’a promenée à travers les salons, et l’a emportée comme un voleur?”

Je ne répondis pas.

“Prétendriez-vous, par hasard, reprit-il en s’animant, que nous ayons été victimes d’une illusion?”

Non, assurément, l’illusion n’était pas admissible, le fait s’étant passé devant plus de cent personnes!

Après quelques instants d’un silence que je ne cherchai point à rompre, le docteur conclut:

“Acceptons les choses comme elles sont et n’essayons pas de nous abuser. Nous sommes en présence de faits qui semblent échapper à toute explication naturelle, et qui ne sont pas niables. Cependant, en restant dans le domaine du réel, voyons si quelqu’un, non pas un mauvais plaisant, mais un ennemi, aurait voulu, par vengeance, troubler cette soirée de fiançailles.”

En somme, c’était placer la question sur son véritable terrain.

“Un ennemi?… s’écria Marc. Un ennemi de votre famille ou de la mienne, monsieur Roderich? En connaîtriez-vous?

— Oui, affirma le capitaine Haralan. Celui qui avant vous, Marc, avait demandé la main de ma sœur.

— Wilhelm Storitz?

— Wilhelm Storitz.”

Marc fut alors mis au courant de ce qu’il ignorait encore. Le docteur lui raconta la nouvelle tentative qu’avait faite Wilhelm Storitz quelques jours auparavant. Mon frère connut la réponse si catégorique du docteur, puis les menaces proférées par son rival contre la famille Roderich, menaces de nature à justifier dans une certaine mesure le soupçon que celui-ci avait participé d’une manière quelconque aux scènes de la veille.

“Et vous ne m’avez rien dit de tout cela!… s’écria Marc. C’est aujourd’hui seulement, lorsque Myra est menacée, que vous m’avertissez!… Eh bien, ce Wilhelm Storitz, je vais aller le trouver, et je saurai…

— Laissez-nous ce soin, Marc, dit le capitaine Haralan. C’est la maison de mon père qu’il a souillée de sa présence…

— C’est ma fiancée qu’il a insultée!” répondit Marc, qui ne se contenait plus.

Évidemment, la colère les égarait tous deux. Que Wilhelm Storitz eût l’intention de se venger de la famille Roderich et de mettre ses menaces à exécution, soit! Mais qu’il fût intervenu dans les scènes de la veille, qu’il y eût joué personnellement un rôle, il était impossible de l’établir. Ce n’est pas sur de simples présomptions que l’on pouvait l’accuser et lui dire: “Vous étiez là, hier soir, au milieu des invités. C’est vous qui avez déchiré le bouquet de fiançailles et le contrat. C’est vous qui avez enlevé la couronne nuptiale.” Personne ne l’avait vu, personne.

D’ailleurs, ne l’avions-nous pas trouvé chez lui? N’était-ce pas lui-même qui nous avait ouvert la porte de la grille? Assurément, il nous avait fait attendre un temps appréciable, très suffisant, en tout cas, pour lui permettre de revenir de l’hôtel Roderich; mais comment admettre qu’il eût pu faire le trajet sans être aperçu du capitaine Haralan ni de moi?

Tout cela, je le répétai, et j’insistai pour que Marc et le capitaine Haralan tinssent compte de mes observations dont le docteur Roderich reconnaissait la logique. Mais ils étaient trop montés pour m’entendre et voulaient se rendre sur-le-champ à la maison du boulevard Tékéli.

Enfin, après une longue discussion, on s’arrêta au seul parti raisonnable, celui que je proposai en ces termes:

“Mes amis, venez à la Maison de Ville. Mettons le chef de police au courant de l’affaire, s’il ne l’est déjà. Apprenons-lui quelle est la situation de cet Allemand vis-à-vis de la famille Roderich, quelles menaces il a proférées contre Marc et sa fiancée. Faisons connaître les présomptions qui pèsent sur lui. Disons même qu’il prétend disposer de moyens pouvant défier toute puissance humaine – pure vanterie de sa part, d’ailleurs. Il appartiendra au chef de police de voir s’il n’y a pas des mesures à prendre contre cet étranger.”

N’était-ce pas ce qu’il y avait de mieux à faire, et même tout ce qu’il y avait à faire dans cette circonstance? La police peut intervenir plus efficacement que des particuliers. Si le capitaine Haralan et Marc se fussent rendus à la maison Storitz, peut-être la porte ne se serait-elle pas ouverte devant eux. Auraient-ils donc essayé d'entrer par la force?… De quel droit?… Or, ce droit, la police le possédait. C'est donc à elle, à elle seule, qu'il convenait de s'adresser.

D'accord sur ce point, il fut décidé que Marc retournerait à l'hôtel Roderich, tandis que le docteur, le capitaine Haralan et moi, nous irions à la Maison de Ville.

Il était dix heures et demie. Tout Ragz, ainsi que je l'ai dit, connaissait alors les incidents de la veille. En voyant le docteur et son fils se diriger vers la Maison de Ville, on devinait aisément les motifs qui les y conduisaient..

Lorsque nous fûmes arrivés, le docteur se fit annoncer auprès du directeur de la police, qui donna l'ordre de nous introduire immédiatement dans son cabinet.

M. Henrich Stepark était un homme de petite taille, à la physionomie énergique, au regard interrogateur, d'une finesse et d'une intelligence remarquables, d'un esprit très pratique, d'un flair très sûr. En maintes occasions, il avait fait preuve d'une grande habileté. Tout ce qu'il serait possible de faire pour éclaircir cette obscure histoire de l'hôtel Roderich, on pouvait être assuré qu'il le ferait. Mais, était-il en son pouvoir d'intervenir utilement dans des circonstances si particulières qu'elles franchissaient les limites de la vraisemblance?

Le chef de police était instruit comme tout le monde des détails de cette affaire, sauf de ce qui n'était connu que du docteur, du capitaine Haralan et de moi.

“Je comptais sur votre visite, monsieur Roderich, dit-il en nous accueillant, et, si vous n’étiez pas venu à mon cabinet, c’est moi qui serais allé vous voir. J’ai su, cette nuit même, que d’étranges choses s’étaient passées dans votre hôtel, et à quel propos vos invités ont éprouvé une terreur assez naturelle en somme. J’ajoute que cette terreur a gagné la ville, et Ragz ne me paraît pas être près de se calmer.”

Nous comprîmes, à cette entrée en matière, que le plus simple serait d’attendre les questions de M. Stepark.

“Je vous demanderai tout d’abord, monsieur le docteur, si vous avez encouru la haine de quelqu’un, si vous pensez que, par suite de cette haine, une vengeance ait pu être exercée contre votre famille, et précisément à propos du mariage de Mlle Myra Roderich et de M. Marc Vidal?

— Je le crois, répondit le docteur.

— Quelle serait cette personne?

— Un nommé Wilhelm Storitz.”

Ce fut le capitaine Haralan qui prononça ce nom. Le chef de police ne sembla nullement surpris. Le docteur apprit alors à M. Stepark que Wilhelm Storitz avait recherché la main de Myra Roderich, qu’il avait renouvelé sa demande, et qu’après un nouveau refus il avait menacé d’empêcher le mariage par des moyens qui défiaient toute puissance humaine.

“Oui, oui, dit M. Stepark, et il a commencé en lacérant l’affiche de mariage sans qu’on ait pu l’apercevoir.”

Nous fûmes tous de cet avis.

Toutefois, notre unanimité ne rendait pas le phénomène plus explicable, à moins de l'attribuer à quelque sorcellerie. Mais c'est dans le domaine de la réalité que se meut la police. C'est au collet des gens en chair et en os qu'elle met sa main brutale. Elle n'a point l'habitude d'arrêter des spectres ou des fantômes. L'arracheur de l'affiche, le destructeur du bouquet, le voleur de la couronne, était un être humain parfaitement saisissable. Il ne restait qu'à le saisir.

M. Stepark reconnut ce qu'il y avait de bien fondé dans nos soupçons et dans les présomptions qui s'élevaient contre Wilhelm Storitz.

“Cet individu, dit-il, m'a toujours paru suspect, bien que je n'aie jamais reçu de plaintes à son sujet. Son existence est cachée. On ne sait trop comment il vit ni de quoi il vit. Pourquoi a-t-il quitté Spremberg, sa ville natale? Pourquoi, lui, un Prussien de la Prusse méridionale, est-il venu s'établir en ce pays magyar peu sympathique à ses compatriotes? Pourquoi s'est-il renfermé avec un vieux serviteur dans cette maison du boulevard Tékéli, où personne ne pénètre jamais? Je le répète, tout cela est suspect… très suspect…

— Que comptez-vous faire, monsieur Stepark? demanda le capitaine Haralan.

— Ce qui est tout indiqué, répondit le chef de police, opérer une descente dans cette maison où nous trouverons peut-être quelque document… quelque indice…

— Mais, pour cette descente, demanda le docteur Roderich, ne vous faut-il pas une autorisation du gouverneur?

— Il s’agit d’un étranger, et d’un étranger qui a menacé votre famille. Son Excellence accordera cette autorisation, n’en doutez pas.

— Le gouverneur était hier à la soirée des fiançailles, fis-je observer.

— Je le sais, monsieur Vidal, et il m’a déjà fait appeler au sujet des faits dont il a été témoin.

— Se les expliquait-il? demanda le docteur.

— Non! il ne leur trouvait aucune explication raisonnable.

— Mais, dis-je, lorsqu’il saura que Wilhelm Storitz est mêlé à cette affaire…

— Il n’en sera que plus désireux de l’éclaircir, répondit M. Stepark. Veuillez m’attendre, messieurs. Je vais directement au palais, et, avant une demi-heure, j’aurai rapporté l’autorisation de perquisitionner dans la maison du boulevard Tékéli.

— Où nous vous accompagnerons, dit le capitaine Haralan.

— Si cela vous plaît, capitaine, et vous aussi, monsieur Vidal, accorda le chef de police.

— Moi, dit le docteur Roderich, je vous laisserai aller avec M. Stepark et ses agents. J’ai hâte de retourner à l’hôtel, où vous reviendrez, après la perquisition terminée.

— Et après arrestation faite, s’il y a lieu” déclara M. Stepark, qui me parut décidé à mener rondement cette affaire.

Il partit pour le palais, et le docteur sortit en même temps que lui, se rendant à l’hôtel, où nous irions le retrouver.

Le capitaine Haralan et moi nous restâmes dans le cabinet du chef de police. Peu de propos furent échangés. Nous allions donc franchir la porte de cette maison… Son propriétaire s’y trouvait-il en ce moment?… Je me demandais si le capitaine Haralan pourrait se contenir lorsqu’il serait en sa présence.

M. Stepark reparut après une demi-heure d’absence. Il rapportait l’autorisation de perquisitionner, et avait mandat de prendre toutes mesures qui lui sembleraient nécessaires.

“Maintenant, messieurs, nous dit-il, veuillez sortir avant moi. J’irai d’un côté, mes agents de l’autre, et, dans vingt minutes, nous serons à la maison Storitz. Est-ce convenu?

— C’est convenu”, répondit le capitaine Haralan.

Et tous deux, quittant la Maison de Ville, nous descendîmes vers le quai Batthyani.

IX

La direction prise par M. Stepark le faisait passer par le nord de la ville, tandis que ses agents, deux à deux, traversaient les quartiers du centre. Le capitaine Haralan et moi, après avoir atteint l’extrémité de la rue Étienne-1er, nous suivîmes le quai le long du Danube.

Le temps était couvert. Les nuages grisâtres et boursouflés chassaient rapidement de l’Est. Sous la fraîche brise, les embarcations donnaient une forte bande, en sillonnant les eaux jaunâtres du fleuve. Des couples de cigognes et de grues, faisant tête au vent, jetaient des cris aigus. Il ne pleuvait pas, mais les hautes vapeurs menaçaient de se résoudre en averses torrentielles.

Excepté dans le quartier commerçant, rempli à cette heure de la foule des citadins et des paysans, les passants étaient rares. Cependant, si le chef de la police et ses agents fussent venus avec nous, cela aurait pu attirer l’attention, et mieux valait s’être séparés en quittant la Maison de Ville.

Le capitaine Haralan continuait à garder le silence. Je craignais toujours qu’il ne fût pas maître de lui et qu’il ne se livrât à quelque acte de violence s’il rencontrait Wilhelm Storitz. Aussi regrettais-je presque que M. Stepark nous eût permis de l’accompagner.

Un quart d’heure nous suffit pour atteindre, au bout du quai Batthyani, l’angle occupé par l’hôtel Roderich. Aucune des fenêtres du rez-de-chaussée n’était encore ouverte, pas plus que celles des chambres de Mme Roderich et de sa fille. Quel contraste avec l’animation de la veille!

Le capitaine Haralan s’arrêta, et ses regards s’attachèrent un instant à ces persiennes closes. Un soupir s’échappa de sa poitrine, sa main esquissa un geste menaçant, mais il ne prononça pas une parole.

Le coin tourné, nous remontâmes le boulevard Tékéli, et nous fîmes halte près de la maison Storitz.

Un homme se promenait devant la porte, les mains dans les poches, en indifférent. C’était le chef de police. Le capitaine Haralan et moi nous le rejoignîmes ainsi qu’il était convenu.

Presque aussitôt, apparurent six agents en bourgeois, qui, sur un signe de M. Stepark, se rangèrent le long de la grille. Avec eux se trouvait un serrurier, réquisitionné pour le cas où la porte ne s’ouvrirait pas.

Les fenêtres de la maison Storitz étaient fermées comme d’habitude. Les rideaux du belvédère, tirés intérieurement, rendaient les vitres opaques.

“Il n’y a personne, sans doute, dis-je à M. Stepark.

— Nous allons le savoir, me répondit-il. Mais je serais étonné que la maison fût vide. Voyez cette fumée qui s’échappe de la cheminée, à gauche.”

En effet, un filet de vapeur fuligineuse s’échevelait au-dessus du toit.

“Si le maître n’est pas chez lui, ajouta M. Stepark, il est probable que le domestique est là, et, pour nous ouvrir, peu importe que ce soit l’un ou l’autre.”

À part moi, étant donné la présence du capitaine Haralan, j’eusse préféré que Wilhelm Storitz fût absent et même qu’il eût quitté Ragz.

Le chef de la police fit résonner le heurtoir fixé à l’un des panneaux de la grille. Puis nous attendîmes que quelqu’un parût ou que la porte fût ouverte de l’intérieur.

Une minute s’écoula. Personne. Second coup de heurtoir…

“On a l’oreille dure dans cette maison”, murmura M. Stepark.

Puis, se retournant vers le serrurier:

“Faites”, dit-il.

Cet homme choisit un outil dans son trousseau. Le bec-de-cane seul étant engagé dans la gâche, la porte céda sans difficulté.

Le chef de police, le capitaine Haralan et moi, nous entrâmes dans la cour. Quatre des agents nous accompagnaient, tandis que les deux autres restaient à l’extérieur.

Au fond, un perron de trois marches montait à la porte d’entrée de l’habitation, fermée comme celle de la grille.

M. Stepark heurta deux fois avec sa canne.

Il ne fut pas répondu. Aucun bruit ne se fit entendre à l’intérieur de la maison.

Le serrurier gravit les degrés du perron et introduisit une de ses clefs dans la serrure. Il était possible que celle-ci fût fermée à plusieurs tours, et même que les verrous eussent été poussés en dedans, si Wilhelm Storitz, ayant aperçu les agents, voulait les empêcher d’entrer.

Il n’en fut rien. La serrure joua. La porte s’ouvrit aussitôt.

“Entrons”, dit M. Stepark.

Le corridor était éclairé à la fois par l’imposte grillagé ménagé au-dessus de la porte, et, au fond, par le vitrage d’une seconde porte donnant accès dans le jardin.

Le chef de police fit quelques pas dans ce corridor, et cria d’une voix forte:

“Y a-t-il quelqu’un ici?”

Pas de réponse, même quand cet appel eut été jeté une seconde fois. Aucun bruit à l’intérieur de cette maison. À peine si, en prêtant l’oreille, en y appliquant toute notre attention, nous crûmes percevoir comme une sorte de glissement dans une des chambres latérales… Mais c’était une illusion, sans doute.

M. Stepark s’avança jusqu’au fond du corridor. Je marchais derrière lui, et le capitaine Haralan me suivait. Un des agents était resté de garde sur le perron de la cour.

La porte ouverte, on put d’un coup d’œil parcourir tout le jardin. Il était enclos de murs sur une superficie d’environ deux à trois mille toises. Une pelouse, qui n’avait pas été fauchée depuis longtemps, et dont les hautes herbes traînaient, à demi flétries, en occupait le centre. Tout autour courait une allée sinueuse bordée de taillis fort épais. Au-delà de ces taillis on apercevait des arbres élevés, plantés sans doute le long des murs, et dont les têtes devaient dominer l’épaulement des fortifications.

Tout dénotait l’incurie et l’abandon.

Le jardin fut visité. Les agents n’y découvrirent personne, bien que les allées fussent marquées de pas récents.

Les fenêtres, de ce côté, étaient closes de contrevents, sauf la dernière du premier étage, par laquelle s’éclairait l’escalier.

“Ces gens-là ne devaient pas tarder à rentrer, fit observer le chef de police, puisque la porte était simplement tirée et non fermée à double tour… à moins qu’ils n’aient eu l’éveil, et qu’ils n’aient pris la clef des champs.

— Vous pensez qu’ils ont pu savoir?… répliquai-je. Non, je m’attends plutôt à ce qu’ils reviennent d’un instant à l’autre.”

M. Stepark secoua la tête d’un air de doute.

“D’ailleurs, ajoutai-je, cette fumée qui s’échappe de l’une des cheminées prouve qu’il y a du feu quelque part.

— Cherchons le feu”, répondit le chef de police. Après avoir constaté que le jardin était désert comme la cour, et que personne n’y était caché, M. Stepark nous pria de rentrer dans la maison, et la porte du corridor fut refermée derrière nous. Ce corridor desservait quatre pièces. De l’une d’elles, du côté du jardin, on avait fait la cuisine. Une autre n’était à vrai dire que la cage de l’escalier qui montait au premier étage, puis au grenier.

Ce fut par la cuisine que la perquisition débuta. Un des agents alla ouvrir la fenêtre et en repoussa les contrevents, percés d’une étroite ouverture en losange, qui ne laissait pas pénétrer assez de jour.

Rien de plus simple, de plus rudimentaire que le mobilier de cette cuisine, – un fourneau de fonte, dont le tuyau se perdait sous l’auvent d’une vaste cheminée, de chaque côté une armoire, au milieu une table, deux chaises paillées et deux escabeaux de bois, divers ustensiles accrochés aux murs, dans un angle, une horloge au tic-tac régulier, et dont les poids indiquaient qu’elle avait été remontée de la veille.

Dans le fourneau brûlaient encore quelques morceaux de charbon qui produisaient la fumée vue du dehors.

“Voici la cuisine, dis-je, mais le cuisinier?…

— Et son maître?… ajouta le capitaine Haralan.

— Continuons nos recherches”, répondit M. Stepark. Les deux autres chambres du rez-de-chaussée, qui prenaient jour sur la cour, furent visitées successivement. L’une, le salon, était garnie de meubles d’un travail ancien, en vieilles tapisseries d’origine allemande très usées par place. Sur la tablette de la cheminée à gros chenets de fer, reposait une pendule rocaille d’assez mauvais goût. Ses aiguilles arrêtées et la poussière étalée sur le cadran indiquaient qu’elle ne servait plus depuis longtemps. À l’un des panneaux, en face de la fenêtre, était appendu un portrait dans son cadre ovale, avec ce nom, dans un cartouche: Otto Storitz. Nous regardions cette peinture, vigoureuse de dessin, rude de couleurs, signée d’un artiste inconnu, une véritable œuvre d’art.

Le capitaine Haralan ne pouvait détacher ses yeux de cette toile.

Pour mon compte, la figure d’Otto Storitz me causait une impression profonde. Était-ce la disposition de mon esprit qui m’y poussait?… Ou plutôt ne subissais-je pas, à mon insu, l’influence du milieu?… Quoi qu’il en soit, ici, dans ce salon abandonné, le savant m’apparaissait comme un être fantastique. Avec cette tête puissante, cette chevelure en broussaille, ce front démesuré, ces yeux d’une ardeur de braise, cette bouche aux lèvres frémissantes, il me semblait que le portrait était vivant, qu'il allait s'élancer hors de son cadre, et s'écrier d'une voix venue de l'autre monde:

“Que faites-vous ici?… Quelle audace est la vôtre de troubler mon repos!”

La fenêtre du salon, fermée de persiennes, laissait passer la lumière. Il n'avait pas été nécessaire de l'ouvrir, et, dans cette pénombre relative, peut-être le portrait gagnait-il en étrangeté et nous impressionnait-il davantage.

Le chef de police parut frappé de la ressemblance qui existait entre Otto et Wilhelm Storitz.

“À la différence d'âge près, me fit-il observer, ce portrait pourrait être aussi bien celui du fils que celui du père. Ce sont les mêmes yeux, le même front, la même tête placée sur de larges épaules. Et cette physionomie diabolique!… On serait tenté de les exorciser l'un comme l'autre.

— Oui, répliquai-je, cette ressemblance est surprenante.”

Le capitaine Haralan semblait cloué devant cette toile, comme si l'original eût été devant lui.

“Venez-vous, capitaine?” lui dis-je.

Nous passâmes de ce salon dans la chambre voisine, en traversant le corridor. C'était le cabinet de travail, très en désordre. Des rayons de bois blanc, encombrés de volumes non reliés pour la plupart, des ouvrages de mathématiques, de chimie et de physique principalement. Dans un coin, plusieurs instruments, des appareils, des machines, des bocaux, un fourneau portatif, quelques cornues et alambics, divers échantillons de métaux dont quelques-uns m'étaient inconnus, tout ingénieur que je sois. Au milieu de la pièce, sur une table chargée de papiers et d'ustensiles de bureau, trois ou quatre volumes des œuvres complètes d'Otto Storitz. À côté de ces volumes, un manuscrit. En me penchant, je pus constater que ce manuscrit, signé également de ce nom célèbre, était relatif à une étude sur la lumière. Papiers, volumes et manuscrit furent saisis et mis sous scellés.

La perquisition faite dans ce cabinet ne donna aucun autre résultat qui pût être de nature à nous édifier. Nous allions en sortir, lorsque M. Stepark aperçut sur la cheminée une fiole de forme bizarre en verre bleuté.

Fut-ce pour obéir à un sentiment de curiosité ou à ses instincts de policier, M. Stepark avança la main pour prendre cette fiole afin de l'examiner de plus près. Mais il est à croire qu'il fit un faux mouvement, car la fiole, qui était posée sur le bord de la tablette, tomba au moment où il allait la saisir et se brisa sur le carreau.

Une liqueur très fluide de couleur jaunâtre s'en échappa. Extrêmement volatile, elle se réduisit aussitôt en une vapeur d'une odeur singulière que je n'aurais pu comparer à aucune autre, mais faible en somme, car notre odorat n'en fut que peu affecté.

“Ma foi, dit M. Stepark, elle est tombée à propos, cette fiole.

— Elle renfermait, sans doute, quelque composition inventée par Otto Storitz, dis-je.

— Son fils doit en avoir la formule, et il saura bien en refaire”, répondit M. Stepark. Puis, se dirigeant vers la porte: “Au premier étage”, dit-il, en recommandant à deux de ses agents de rester dans le corridor.

Au fond, en face de la cuisine, se trouvait la cage d'un escalier à rampe de bois, dont les marches craquaient sous le pied.

Sur le palier s’ouvraient deux chambres contiguës, dont les portes n’étaient point fermées à clef, et il suffit d’en tourner le bouton de cuivre pour s’y introduire.

La première, au-dessus du salon, devait être la chambre de Wilhelm Storitz. Elle ne contenait qu’un lit de fer, une table de nuit, une armoire à linge en chêne, une toilette montée sur pieds de cuivre, un canapé, un fauteuil de gros velours, et deux chaises. Pas de rideaux au lit, pas de rideaux aux fenêtres, un mobilier, on le voit, réduit au strict nécessaire. Aucun papier, ni sur la cheminée, ni sur une petite table ronde placée dans un angle. La couverture était encore défaite à cette heure matinale, mais que le lit eût été occupé pendant la nuit, nous ne pouvions que le supposer.

Toutefois, en s’approchant de la toilette, M. Stepark observa que la cuvette contenait de l’eau avec quelques bulles savonneuses à sa surface.

“À supposer, dit-il, que vingt-quatre heures se fussent écoulées depuis que l’on s’est servi de cette eau, les bulles seraient dissoutes. D’où je conclus que notre homme a fait sa toilette ici-même, ce matin, avant de sortir.

— Aussi est-il possible qu’il rentre, répétai-je, à moins qu’il n’aperçoive vos agents.

— S’il voit mes agents, mes agents le verront, et ils ont ordre de me l’amener. Mais je ne compte guère qu’il se laisse prendre.”

En ce moment, on entendit un bruit comme le craquement d’un parquet mal assujetti sur lequel on marche. Ce bruit semblait venir de la pièce à côté, au-dessus du cabinet de travail.

Il existait une porte de communication entre la chambre à coucher et cette pièce, ce qui évitait de revenir au palier pour passer de l’une à l’autre.

Avant le chef de police, le capitaine Haralan s’élança d’un bond vers cette porte, l’ouvrit brusquement…

Mais nous nous étions trompés. Il n’y avait personne.

Il était possible, après tout, que ce bruit fût venu de l’étage supérieur, c’est-à-dire du grenier par lequel on accédait au belvédère.

Cette seconde chambre était encore plus sommairement meublée que la première, un cadre tendu d’une sangle de forte toile, un matelas très aplati par l’usage, de gros draps rugueux, une couverture de laine, deux chaises dépareillées, un pot à eau et une cuvette de grès sur la cheminée dont l’âtre ne renfermait pas la moindre parcelle de cendres, quelques vêtements d’étoffe épaisse accrochés aux patères d’un portemanteau, un bahut, ou plutôt un coffre de chêne, qui servait à la fois d’armoire et de commode, et dans lequel M. Stepark trouva du linge en assez grande quantité.

Cette chambre était évidemment celle du vieux serviteur Hermann. Le chef de police savait d’ailleurs, par les rapports de ses agents, que si la fenêtre de la première chambre à coucher s’ouvrait quelquefois pour l’aération, celle de cette seconde chambre donnant aussi sur la cour demeurait invariablement fermée. On put le constater matériellement en examinant l’espagnolette, d’un jeu très difficile, et les ferrures des persiennes, mangées de rouille.

En tout cas, ladite chambre était vide, et pour peu qu’il en fût ainsi du grenier, du belvédère et de la cave située sous la cuisine, c’est que, décidément, le maître et le serviteur avaient quitté la maison et peut-être avec l’intention de n’y plus rentrer.

“Vous n’admettez pas, demandai-je à M. Stepark, que Wilhelm Storitz ait pu être informé de cette perquisition?

— Non, à moins qu’il n’ait été caché dans mon cabinet, monsieur Vidal, ou dans celui de son Excellence, lorsque nous causions de cette affaire!

— Quand nous sommes arrivés sur le boulevard Tékéli, il est possible qu’ils nous aient aperçus.

— Soit! mais comment seraient-ils sortis?

— En gagnant la campagne par-derrière.

— Ils n’auraient pas eu le temps de passer par-dessus les murs du jardin, qui sont très élevés, et, de l’autre côté, d’ailleurs, c’est le fossé des fortifications qu’on ne peut franchir.”

L’opinion du chef de police était donc bien que Wilhelm Storitz et Hermann étaient déjà hors de la maison avant que nous y fussions entrés.

Nous sortîmes de cette chambre par la porte du palier. À l’instant précis où nous attaquions la première marche pour monter au second étage, nous entendîmes tout à coup l’escalier réunissant le premier au rez-de-chaussée craquer fortement, comme si quelqu’un l’eût monté ou descendu à pas rapides. Presque aussitôt, il y eut un bruit de chute suivi d’un cri de douleur.

Nous nous penchâmes sur la rampe, et nous aperçûmes un des agents restés en surveillance dans le couloir qui se relevait en se frottant les reins.

“Qu’y a-t-il, Ludwig?” interrogea M. Stepark.

L’agent expliqua qu’il se tenait debout sur la deuxième marche de l’escalier, quand son attention avait été attirée par les craquements que nous avions entendus. En se retournant alors brusquement pour en reconnaître la cause, il est à supposer qu’il avait mal calculé ses mouvements, car, ses deux talons glissant à la fois, il était tombé à la renverse, au grand dommage de ses reins. Cet homme ne pouvait s’expliquer sa chute. Il eût juré qu’on lui avait tiré ou poussé les pieds, pour lui faire perdre l’équilibre. Mais cela n’était pas admissible, puisqu’il était seul au rez-de-chaussée, avec son collègue resté en surveillance à la porte principale donnant sur la cour.

“Hum!…” fit M. Stepark d’un air soucieux.

En une minute, le second étage fut atteint.

Cet étage ne comprenait que le grenier qui s’étendait d’un pignon à l’autre, éclairé par d’étroits vasistas ménagés dans la toiture, et il fut aisé de constater d’un coup d’œil que personne ne s’y était réfugié.

Au centre, une échelle assez raide conduisait au belvédère qui dominait les combles, et à l’intérieur duquel on s’introduisait par une trappe qui basculait au moyen d’un contrepoids.

“Cette trappe est ouverte, fis-je observer à M. Stepark, qui avait déjà mis un pied sur l’échelle.

— En effet, monsieur Vidal, et il vient par là un courant d’air. D’où ce bruit que nous avons entendu. La brise est forte aujourd’hui, et la girouette crie à la pointe du toit.

— Cependant, répondis-je, on eût dit plutôt un bruit de pas.

— Qui donc aurait marché, puisqu’il n’y a personne?

— À moins que là-haut, monsieur Stepark?…

— Dans cette niche aérienne?…”

Le capitaine Haralan écoutait les propos échangés entre le chef de police et moi. Il se contenta de dire en indiquant le belvédère:

“Montons.”

M. Stepark gravit le premier les échelons, en s’aidant d’une grosse corde qui pendait jusqu’au plancher.

Le capitaine Haralan d’abord, moi ensuite, nous grimpions après lui. Il était probable que trois personnes suffiraient à remplir cet étroit lanterneau.

En effet, ce n’était qu’une sorte de cage carrée de huit pieds sur huit, et haute d’une dizaine.

Il y faisait assez sombre, bien qu’un vitrage fût établi entre les montants solidement encastrés dans les poutres du faîtage.

Cette obscurité tenait à ce que d’épais rideaux de laine étaient rabattus, ainsi que nous l’avions remarqué du dehors. Mais, dès qu’ils furent relevés, la lumière pénétra largement à travers le vitrage.

Par les quatre faces du belvédère, le regard pouvait parcourir tout l’horizon de Ragz. Rien ne gênait la vue, plus étendue qu’à la terrasse de l’hôtel Roderich, moins toutefois qu’à la tour de Saint-Michel et au donjon du château.

Je revis de là le Danube à l’extrémité du boulevard, la cité se développant vers le Sud, dominée par le beffroi de la Maison de Ville, par la flèche de la cathédrale, par le donjon de la colline de Wolkang, et autour, les vastes prairies de la puszta, bordée de ses lointaines montagnes.

J’ai hâte de dire qu’il en fut du belvédère comme du restant de la maison. On n’y trouva personne. Il fallait que M. Stepark en prît son parti, cette descente de police ne donnerait aucun résultat, et on ne saurait rien encore des mystères de la maison Storitz.

J’avais pensé que ce belvédère servait peut-être à des observations astronomiques et qu’il renfermait des appareils pour l’étude du ciel. Erreur. Pour tout meuble, une table et un fauteuil en bois.

Sur la table, se trouvaient quelques papiers, et, entre autres, un numéro de la gazette qui m’avait appris, à Budapest, le prochain anniversaire d’Otto Storitz. Ces papiers furent saisis, comme les précédents.

Sans doute, c’était ici que le fils se reposait, au sortir de son cabinet de travail, ou, plus exactement, de son laboratoire. Dans tous les cas, il avait lu cet article, qui était marqué, de sa main évidemment, par une croix à l’encre rouge.

Soudain une violente exclamation se fit entendre, une exclamation de surprise et de colère.

Le capitaine Haralan avait aperçu, sur une tablette fixée à l’un des montants, une boîte en carton qu’il venait d’ouvrir…

Et qu’avait-il retiré de cette boîte?…

La couronne nuptiale enlevée pendant la soirée des fiançailles à l’hôtel Roderich.

X

Ainsi, plus de doute sur l’intervention de Wilhelm Storitz. Nous étions en possession d’une preuve matérielle, et nous n’étions plus réduits à de simples présomptions. Que lui ou un autre fût le coupable, c’était, en tout cas, à son profit qu’avait été accompli ce vol bizarre, dont le mobile et l’explication nous échappaient d’ailleurs.

“Doutez-vous toujours, mon cher Vidal?” s’écria le capitaine Haralan, dont la voix tremblait de colère.

M. Stepark gardait le silence. Dans cette étrange affaire, il y avait encore une grande part d’inconnu. Si la culpabilité de Wilhelm Storitz était incontestable, on ignorait par quels moyens il avait agi, et il n’était pas certain qu’on réussît jamais à le savoir.

Pour moi, à qui le capitaine Haralan s’adressait d’une manière plus directe, je ne répondis pas. Qu’aurais-je pu répondre en effet?…

“N’est-ce pas ce misérable, continua-t-il, qui est venu nous insulter, en nous jetant à la face ce *Chant de la Haine*, comme un outrage au patriotisme magyar? Vous ne l’avez pas vu, mais vous l’avez entendu!… Il était là, s’il échappait à nos regards!… Quant à cette couronne souillée par sa main, je ne veux pas qu’il en reste une feuille!…”

M. Stepark l’arrêta, au moment où il allait la déchirer.

“N’oubliez pas que c’est une pièce à conviction, dit-il, et qui peut servir si, comme je le pense, cette affaire a des suites.”

Le capitaine Haralan lui remit la couronne, et nous descendîmes l’escalier, après avoir une dernière fois visité inutilement toutes les chambres de la maison. Les portes du perron et de la grille furent fermées à clef, les scellés y furent apposés et la maison resta en l'état d'abandon où nous l'avions trouvée. Toutefois, sur l'ordre de leur chef, deux agents demeurèrent en surveillance aux environs, Après avoir pris congé de M. Stepark, qui nous demanda de garder le secret sur cette perquisition, le capitaine Haralan et moi, nous revînmes à l'hôtel Roderich, en suivant le boulevard. Mon compagnon ne pouvait se contenir, et sa colère débordait en phrases et en gestes d'une grande violence. J'eusse vainement essayé de le calmer. J'espérais, d'ailleurs, que Wilhelm Storitz avait quitté ou quitterait la ville, lorsqu'il saurait que sa demeure avait été visitée et que la police possédait la preuve du rôle joué par lui dans cette affaire.

Je me bornai à dire:

"Mon cher Haralan, je comprends votre colère, je comprends que vous ne vouliez pas laisser impunies ces insultes. Mais n'oubliez pas que M. Stepark nous a demandé le secret.

— Et mon père?… Et votre frère?… Ne vont-ils pas s'informer du résultat de la perquisition?

— Évidemment, mais nous leur répondrons tout simplement que nous n'avons pu rencontrer Wilhelm Storitz, et qu'il ne doit plus être à Ragz, ce qui me paraît probable, d'ailleurs.

— Vous ne direz pas que la couronne a été découverte chez lui?

— Si, mieux vaut qu'ils le sachent. Mais inutile d'en parler à votre mère et à votre sœur. À quoi bon aggraver leurs inquiétudes? À votre place, je dirais que la couronne a été retrouvée dans le jardin de l'hôtel et je la rendrais à votre sœur."

Malgré sa répugnance, le capitaine Haralan convint que j'avais raison, et il fut convenu que j'irais chercher la couronne chez M. Stepark, qui ne refuserait sans doute pas de s'en dessaisir.

Cependant, il me tardait d'avoir revu mon frère, de l'avoir mis au courant, et il me tardait plus encore que son mariage fût accompli.

Dès notre arrivée à l'hôtel, le domestique nous introduisit dans le cabinet où le docteur nous attendait avec Marc. Leur impatience était extrême, et nous fûmes interrogés avant même d'avoir franchi la porte.

Quelles furent leur surprise, leur indignation, au récit de ce qui venait de se passer dans la maison du boulevard Tékéli! Mon frère ne parvenait pas à se maîtriser. Comme le capitaine Haralan, il voulait châtier Wilhelm Storitz avant que la justice fût intervenue. En vain je lui objectai que son ennemi avait sûrement quitté la ville.

“S'il n'est pas à Ragz, s'écriait-il, il est à Spremberg!”

J'eus grand-peine à le modérer, et il fallut que le docteur joignît ses instances aux miennes.

“Mon cher Marc, dit le docteur, écoutez les conseils de votre frère, et laissons s'éteindre cette affaire si pénible pour notre famille. Le silence sur tout ceci, et on aura bientôt oublié.”

Mon frère, la tête entre ses mains, faisait peine à voir. Je sentais tout ce qu'il devait souffrir. Que n'aurais-je pas donné pour être plus vieux de quelques jours, pour que Myra Roderich fût enfin Myra Vidal!

Le docteur ajouta qu'il verrait le gouverneur de Ragz. Wilhelm Storitz était étranger, et son Excellence n'hésiterait pas à prendre un arrêté d'expulsion contre lui. L’urgent, c’était d’empêcher que les faits dont l’hôtel Roderich avait été le théâtre pussent se renouveler, dût-on renoncer à en donner une explication satisfaisante. Quant à croire que Wilhelm Storitz disposât, comme il s’en était vanté, d’un pouvoir surhumain, personne ne pouvait l’admettre.

En ce qui concerne Mme Roderich et sa fille, je fis valoir les raisons qui commandaient un silence absolu. Elles ne devaient savoir, ni que la police eût agi, ni qu’elle eût démasqué Wilhelm Storitz.

Ma proposition relative à la couronne fut acceptée. Marc l’aurait, par hasard, retrouvée dans le jardin de l’hôtel. Il serait ainsi démontré que tout cela provenait d’un mauvais plaisant, que l’on finirait par découvrir et que l’on châtierait comme il le méritait.

Le jour même, je retournai à la Maison de Ville, où je réclamai la couronne à M. Stepark. Il consentit à me la remettre, et je la rapportai à l’hôtel.

Le soir, nous étions réunis dans le salon avec Mme Roderich et sa fille, lorsque Marc, après s’être absenté un instant, rentra en disant:

“Myra… ma chère Myra… voyez ce que je vous rapporte!…

— Ma couronne!… s’écria Myra, en s’élançant vers mon frère.

— Oui, répondit Marc, là… dans le jardin… je l’ai trouvée derrière un massif où elle était tombée.

— Mais comment?… comment?… répétait Mme Roderich.

— Comment? répondait le docteur. Un intrus qui s’était introduit parmi nos invités. Il ne faut plus penser à cette absurde aventure.

— Merci, merci, mon cher Marc”, dit Myra, tandis qu’une larme coulait de ses yeux.

Les journées qui suivirent n’amenèrent aucun nouvel incident. La ville reprenait sa tranquillité habituelle. Rien n’avait transpiré de la perquisition opérée dans la maison du boulevard Tékéli, et personne ne prononçait le nom de Wilhelm Storitz. Il n’y avait plus qu’à attendre patiemment – ou plutôt impatiemment – le jour où serait célébré le mariage de Marc et de Myra Roderich.

Je consacrai tout le temps que me laissait mon frère à différentes promenades aux environs de Ragz. Quelquefois, le capitaine Haralan m’accompagnait. Il était rare alors que nous ne prissions pas le boulevard Tékéli pour sortir de la ville. Visiblement, la maison suspecte l’attirait. D’ailleurs, cela nous permettait de voir qu’elle était toujours déserte, et toujours gardée par deux agents. Si Wilhelm Storitz avait paru, la police aurait été immédiatement avertie de son retour et on l’eût mis en état d’arrestation.

Mais nous eûmes bientôt une preuve de son absence et la certitude qu’on ne pouvait, actuellement du moins, le rencontrer dans les rues de Ragz.

En effet, convoqué le 29 mai par M. Stepark, j’appris de sa bouche que la cérémonie d’anniversaire d’Otto Storitz avait eu lieu, le 25, à Spremberg. La cérémonie avait attiré, paraît-il, un nombre considérable de spectateurs, non seulement la population de Spremberg, mais aussi des milliers de curieux venus des villes voisines et même de Berlin. Le cimetière n’avait pu contenir une telle foule. De là, accidents multiples, quelques personnes étouffées, lesquelles trouvèrent, le lendemain, dans le cimetière une place qu’elles n’avaient pu y trouver ce jour-là.

On ne l’a pas oublié, Otto Storitz avait vécu et était mort en pleine légende. Tous ces superstitieux s’attendaient à quelque prodige posthume. Des phénomènes fantastiques devaient s’accomplir à cet anniversaire. À tout le moins, le savant Prussien sortirait de sa tombe, et il ne serait pas surprenant qu’à ce moment l’ordre universel fût singulièrement dérangé. La terre, modifiant son mouvement sur son axe, se mettrait à tourner de l’Est à l’Ouest, rotation anormale dont les conséquences amèneraient un bouleversement universel du système solaire!… Etc.

Tels étaient les bruits qui couraient la foule. Toutefois, en dernière analyse, les choses s’étaient passées de la manière la plus régulière. La pierre tombale ne s’était pas soulevée. Le mort n’avait point quitté sa demeure sépulcrale, et la terre avait continué de se mouvoir suivant les règles établies depuis le commencement du monde.

Mais, ce qui nous touchait davantage, c’est que le fils d’Otto Storitz assistait en personne à cette cérémonie. C’était la preuve matérielle qu’il avait effectivement quitté Ragz. J’espérais, quant à moi, que c’était avec la formelle intention de n’y plus jamais revenir.

Je m’empressais de communiquer cette nouvelle à Marc et au capitaine Haralan.

Cependant, bien que le bruit de cette affaire se fût notablement assoupi, le gouverneur de Ragz ne laissait pas de s’en inquiéter encore. Que les prodigieux phénomènes, dont personne n’avait pu donner une explication plausible, fussent dus à quelque tour d’adresse merveilleusement exécuté ou à toute autre cause, ils n’en avaient pas moins troublé la ville, et il convenait d’empêcher qu’ils vinssent à se renouveler.

Qu’on ne s’étonne donc pas si son Excellence fut vivement impressionnée, lorsque le chef de police lui fit connaître la situation de Wilhelm Storitz vis-à-vis de la famille Roderich et quelles menaces il avait proférées!

Aussi, lorsque le gouverneur connut les résultats de la perquisition, résolut-il de sévir contre cet étranger. En somme, il y avait eu vol, vol commis par Wilhelm Storitz, ou à son profit par un complice. Si donc il n’eût pas quitté Ragz, on l’aurait arrêté, et, une fois entre les quatre murs d’une prison, il n’est pas probable qu’il en eût pu sortir sans être vu, comme il était entré dans les salons de l’hôtel Roderich.

C’est pourquoi, le 30 mai, la conversation suivante s’engagea entre son Excellence et M. Stepark.

«Vous n’avez rien appris de nouveau?

— Rien, monsieur le gouverneur.

— Il n’y a aucune raison de croire que Wilhelm Storitz ait l’intention de revenir à Ragz?

— Aucune.

— Sa maison est toujours surveillée?

— Jour et nuit.

— J’ai dû écrire à Budapest, reprit le gouverneur, à propos de cette affaire dont le retentissement a été plus considérable peut-être qu’elle ne le mérite, et je suis invité à prendre des mesures pour y mettre fin.

— Tant que Wilhelm Storitz n’aura pas reparu à Ragz, répondit le chef de police, il n’y aura rien à craindre de lui, et nous savons de source certaine qu’il était à Spremberg le 25.

— En effet, monsieur Stepark, mais il peut être tenté de reparaître ici, et c’est cela qu’il faut empêcher.

— Rien de plus facile, monsieur le gouverneur. Comme il s’agit d’un étranger, il suffira d’un arrêté d’expulsion…

— Un arrêté, interrompit le gouverneur, qui lui interdira, non seulement la ville de Ragz, mais tout le territoire austro-hongrois.

— Dès que j’aurai cet arrêté, monsieur le gouverneur, répondit le chef de police, je le ferai signifier à tous les postes de la frontière.”

L’arrêté fut signé séance tenante, et le territoire du royaume interdit à Wilhelm Storitz.

Ces mesures étaient de nature à rassurer le docteur, sa famille, ses amis. Mais nous étions loin d’avoir pénétré les secrets de cette affaire, et plus loin encore d’imaginer les péripéties qu’elle nous réservait.

XI

La date du mariage approchait. Bientôt, le soleil du 1er juin, date définitivement choisie, se lèverait sur l’horizon de Ragz.

Je constatais, non sans une vive satisfaction, que Myra, si impressionnable qu’elle fût, semblait n’avoir pas gardé souvenir de ces inexplicables incidents. Il est vrai que le nom de Wilhelm Storitz n’avait jamais été prononcé ni devant elle, ni devant sa mère.

J’étais son confident. Elle me parlait de ses projets d’avenir, sans trop savoir s’ils se réaliseraient. Marc et elle iraient-ils s’installer en France? Oui, mais pas immédiatement. Se séparer de son père et de sa mère serait pour elle un trop gros chagrin.

“Mais, disait-elle, il n’est question maintenant que d’aller pour quelques semaines à Paris, où vous nous accompagnerez, n’est-ce pas?

— Certes!… À moins que vous ne vouliez pas de moi, cependant.

— C’est que, deux nouveaux époux, c’est une assez maussade compagnie en voyage.

— Je tâcherai de m’y faire”, répondis-je d’un ton résigné.

Le docteur approuvait ce départ. Quitter Ragz un mois ou deux, cela valait mieux à tous égards. Sans doute Mme Roderich serait très affectée de l’absence de sa fille, mais elle aurait le bon sens de s’y résigner.

De son côté, pendant les heures qu’il passait près de Myra, Marc oubliait, ou plutôt il s’efforçait d’oublier. Par contre, lorsqu’il se retrouvait seul avec moi, il lui revenait des craintes que j’essayais vainement de dissiper.

Invariablement, il me disait:

“Tu ne sais rien de nouveau, Henri?

— Rien, mon cher Marc”, répondais-je non moins invariablement, et c’était la pure vérité. Un jour, il crut devoir ajouter:

“Si tu savais quelque chose, si, en ville, ou par M. Stepark, tu entendais parler…

— Je t’avertirais, Marc.

— Je t’en voudrais de me cacher quoi que ce soit.

— Je ne te cacherai rien, sois tranquille. Mais je t’assure qu’on ne s’occupe plus de cette affaire. Jamais la ville n’a été plus calme. Les uns vont à leurs affaires, les autres à leurs plaisirs, et les cours du marché se maintiennent en grande hausse.

— Tu plaisantes, Henri…

— C’est pour te prouver que je n’ai plus aucune appréhension.

— Et pourtant, dit Marc dont le visage s’assombrit, si cet homme…

— Bah! il n’est pas si bête. Il se doute bien qu’il serait arrêté s’il mettait le pied sur le territoire austro-hongrois, et il y a en Allemagne nombre de foires où il aura l’occasion d’exercer ses talents de bateleur.

— Ainsi, cette puissance dont il parle…

— C’est bon pour les enfants, cela!

— Tu n’y crois pas?

— Pas plus que tu n’y crois toi-même. Donc, mon cher Marc, borne-toi à compter les heures, à compter les minutes qui te séparent du grand jour… Tu n’as rien de mieux à faire, sinon recommencer le calcul quand il est fini.

— Ah! mon ami!… s’écria Marc tristement.

— Tu n’es pas raisonnable, Marc. Myra l’est plus que toi.

— C’est qu’elle ne sait pas ce que je sais.

— Ce que tu sais?… Parbleu, tu sais que le personnage en question n’est plus à Ragz, qu’il ne peut y revenir, que nous ne le reverrons jamais, entends-tu bien! Si cela ne suffit pas à te tranquilliser!…

— Que veux-tu, Henri, j’ai des pressentiments… Il me semble…

— C’est insensé, mon pauvre Marc! Tiens! crois-moi, retourne près de Myra. Cela te fera voir la vie plus en rose.

— Oui, tu as raison. Je ne devrais jamais la quitter, pas un instant!”

Pauvre frère! Il me faisait mal à voir, mal à entendre. Ses craintes s’accroissaient à mesure que s’approchait le jour de son mariage. Et, moi-même, pour être franc, j’attendais ce jour avec une involontaire angoisse.

D’autre part, si je pouvais compter sur Myra, sur son influence pour calmer mon frère, je ne savais plus quel moyen employer à l’égard du capitaine Haralan.

Le jour où il avait appris que Wilhelm Storitz était à Spremberg, ce n’était pas sans peine que j’étais parvenu à empêcher son départ. Il n’y a guère que deux cents lieues tout au plus entre Spremberg et Ragz. En quatre jours cette distance peut être franchie. Enfin, nous l’avions retenu, mais, malgré les raisons que son père et moi nous faisions valoir, en dépit de l’évidente utilité de laisser cette affaire tomber dans l’oubli, il y revenait sans cesse, et je craignais toujours qu’il ne nous échappât.

Un matin, il vint me trouver, et, dès le début de la conversation, je compris qu’il avait résolu de partir.

“Vous ne ferez pas cela, mon cher Haralan, déclarai-je, vous ne le ferez pas… Une rencontre entre ce Prussien et vous est impossible. Je vous supplie de ne pas quitter Ragz.

— Mon cher Vidal, me répondit le capitaine d’un ton qui indiquait une résolution farouche, il faut que ce misérable soit puni.

— Et il le sera tôt ou tard, n’en doutez pas! m’écriai-je. Mais la seule main qui doive s’abattre sur lui, c’est la main de la police.”

Le capitaine Haralan sentait que j’avais raison. Toutefois, il ne voulait pas se rendre.

“Mon cher Vidal, répondit-il d’un ton qui ne laissait pas d’espoir, nous ne voyons pas, nous ne pouvons voir les choses de la même façon. Ma famille, qui va devenir celle de votre frère, a été outragée, et je ne tirerais pas vengeance de ces outrages?…

— Non, c’est à la justice de le faire.

— Comment le ferait-elle, si cet homme ne revient pas?… Or, le gouverneur a signé ce matin un arrêté d’expulsion qui rend impossible le retour de Storitz. Il faut donc que j’aille où il est, où il doit être du moins, à Spremberg.

— Soit, répliquai-je, en dernier argument, mais attendez au moins le mariage de votre sœur. Encore quelques jours de patience et, alors, je serai le premier à vous conseiller de partir. Je vous accompagnerai même à Spremberg.”

Je le pressai avec tant de chaleur que l’entretien se termina par sa promesse formelle qu’il se ferait violence, à la condition que, le mariage célébré, je ne m’opposerais plus à son projet, et que je partirais avec lui.

Elles allaient me paraître interminables, les heures qui nous séparaient du 1er juin. Car en somme, tout en regardant comme un devoir de rassurer les autres, je n’étais pas sans éprouver quelques inquiétudes. Aussi m’arrivait-il souvent de remonter ou de descendre le boulevard Tékéli, poussé par je ne sais quel pressentiment.

La maison Storitz était toujours telle qu’on l’avait laissée après la descente de police, portes fermées, fenêtres closes, cour et jardin déserts. Sur le boulevard, quelques agents dont la surveillance s’étendait jusqu’au parapet des anciennes fortifications et sur la campagne environnante. Aucune tentative pour rentrer dans cette maison n’avait été faite ni par le maître, ni par le serviteur. Et pourtant, ce que c’est que l’obsession, malgré tout ce que je disais à Marc et au capitaine Haralan, en dépit de ce que je me disais à moi-même, j’aurais vu une fumée s’échapper de la cheminée du laboratoire, une figure apparaître derrière les vitres du belvédère, je n’en eusse pas été surpris.

En réalité, alors que la population ragzienne, revenue de sa première épouvante, ne parlait plus de cette affaire, c’était le docteur Roderich, c’était mon frère, c’était le capitaine Haralan, c’était moi-même que hantait le fantôme de Wilhelm Storitz.

Ce jour-là, 30 mai, afin de me distraire dans l’après-midi, je me dirigeai vers le pont de l’île Svendor pour gagner la rive droite du Danube.

Avant d’arriver au pont, je passai devant le débarcadère au moment où une gabare à passagers arrivait de l’amont.

Alors revinrent à ma mémoire les incidents de mon voyage, ma rencontre avec cet Allemand, son attitude provocante, le sentiment d’antipathie qu’il m’avait inspiré à première vue, puis, quand je le croyais débarqué à Vukovar, les paroles qu’il avait prononcées. Car c’était bien lui qui les avait prononcées, ces paroles menaçantes. J’avais reconnu sa voix dans le salon de l’hôtel Roderich. Même articulation, même dureté, même rudesse teutonne.

Sous l’empire de ces idées, je regardais un à un les passagers qui s’arrêtaient à Ragz. Je cherchais la pâle figure, les yeux étranges, la physionomie diabolique de ce personnage… Mais, comme on dit, j’en fus pour ma peine.

À six heures, j’allai, suivant mon habitude, prendre place à la table de famille. Mme Roderich me sembla mieux portante, à peu près remise de ses émotions. Mon frère oubliait tout auprès de Myra, à la veille du jour où elle serait sa femme. Le capitaine Haralan lui-même paraissait plus calme, quoique un peu sombre.

J’étais décidé à faire l’impossible pour animer ce petit monde et dissiper les derniers nuages du souvenir. Je fus heureusement secondé par Myra, charme et joie de cette soirée qui se prolongea assez tard. Sans se faire prier, elle se mit au clavecin, et nous chanta de vieilles chansons magyares, comme pour effacer cet abominable *Chant de la Haine*, qui avait retenti dans ce salon.

Au moment de nous retirer, elle me dit en souriant:

“Demain, monsieur Henri, n’allez pas oublier…

— Oublier, mademoiselle?… répondis-je sur le ton plaisant qu’elle venait de prendre.

— Oui, oublier que c’est le jour de l’audience du gouverneur, du “baillage de licence”, pour employer l’expression consacrée.

— Ah! vraiment! c’est demain!…

— Et que vous êtes un des témoins de votre frère…

— Vous avez raison de me le rappeler, mademoiselle Myra. Témoin de mon frère!… Je ne m’en souvenais déjà plus.

— Cela ne m’étonne pas. J’ai remarqué que vous aviez parfois des distractions…

— Je m’en accuse, mais je n’en aurai pas demain, je vous le promets… Et pourvu que Marc n’en ait pas plus que moi…

— Je réponds de lui. Ainsi donc, à quatre heures précises.

— Quatre heures, mademoiselle Myra?… Et moi qui croyais que c’était à cinq heures et demie!… Soyez donc sans crainte. Je serai là à quatre heures moins dix.

— Bonsoir!… Bonsoir au frère de Marc, qui va devenir le mien.

— Bonsoir, mademoiselle Myra, bonsoir!”

Le lendemain, Marc eut quelques courses à faire dans la matinée. Il me parut avoir repris toute sa tranquillité, et je le laissai aller seul.

De mon côté, d’ailleurs, par surcroît de prudence, et pour avoir, si c’était possible, la certitude que Wilhelm Storitz n’avait pas été revu à Ragz, je me rendis à la Maison de Ville.

À M. Stepark, auprès de qui je fus immédiatement introduit, je demandai s’il avait quelque nouvelle information.

“Aucune, monsieur Vidal, me répondit-il, vous pouvez être certain que notre homme n’a pas reparu à Ragz.

— Est-il encore à Spremberg?

— Tout ce que je puis affirmer, c’est qu’il y était encore, il y a quatre jours.

— Vous en avez reçu l’avis?

— Oui, par un courrier de la police allemande, qui me confirme le fait.

— Cela me rassure.

— Et moi, cela m’ennuie, monsieur Vidal. Ce diable d’homme – et diable est le mot – me paraît peu disposé à jamais franchir la frontière.

— C’est tant mieux, monsieur Stepark!

— C’est tant mieux pour vous, mais, comme policier, j’aurais aimé à lui mettre la main au collet, à tenir cette espèce de sorcier entre quatre murs!… Enfin, plus tard, peut-être…

— Oh! plus tard, après le mariage, tant que vous voudrez, monsieur Stepark.”

Je me retirai en remerciant le chef de police.

À quatre heures de l’après-midi, nous étions réunis dans le salon de l’hôtel Roderich. Deux carrosses attendaient sur le boulevard Tékéli, – l’un pour Myra, son père, sa mère et un ami de la famille, le juge Neuman, l’autre pour Marc, le capitaine Haralan, un de ses camarades, le lieutenant Armgard, et moi. M. Neuman et le capitaine Haralan étaient les témoins de la mariée, le lieutenant Armgard et moi, ceux de Marc.

Ainsi que le capitaine Haralan me l’avait expliqué, il ne s’agissait pas, ce jour-là, de procéder au mariage proprement dit, mais à une cérémonie préparatoire en quelque sorte. C’est seulement après en avoir reçu l’autorisation du gouverneur, que le mariage pourrait être célébré le lendemain à la cathédrale. Jusque-là, les fiancés, s’ils n’étaient pas mariés au sens parfait du mot, n’en seraient pas moins fortement liés l’un à l’autre, puisque, dans le cas où un obstacle imprévu viendrait ensuite empêcher l’union projetée, ils seraient condamnés à un célibat perpétuel.

Il serait possible de retrouver dans la féodalité française quelques traces de cette coutume, qui a quelque chose de paternel, puisque le chef paraît ainsi se considérer comme le père des citoyens, et qui s’était perpétuée à Ragz jusqu’à nos jours.

La jeune fiancée portait une robe charmante et de bon goût, Mme Roderich une toilette très simple bien que très riche. Le docteur et le juge étaient, comme mon frère et moi, en habit de cour, et les deux officiers en uniforme de grande tenue.

Quelques personnes attendaient sur le boulevard la sortie des voitures, femmes et jeunes filles du peuple, dont un mariage excite toujours la curiosité. Mais, il était probable que le lendemain, à la cathédrale, la foule serait considérable, juste hommage rendu à la famille Roderich.

Les deux carrosses franchirent la porte principale de l'hôtel, tournèrent le coin du boulevard, suivirent le quai Batthyani, la rue du Prince-Miloch, la rue Ladislas, et arrivèrent à la grille du palais du gouverneur.

Les curieux se trouvaient en plus grand nombre sur la place et dans la cour du palais. Peut-être, après tout, le souvenir des premiers incidents les avait-il attirés. Peut-être se demandaient-ils si un nouveau phénomène n'allait pas s'accomplir.

Les voitures pénétrèrent dans la cour d'honneur et stationnèrent devant le perron.

Un instant après, Mlle Myra au bras de son père, Mme Roderich au bras de M. Neuman, puis Marc, le capitaine Haralan, le lieutenant Armgard et moi, nous avions pris place dans la salle des fêtes, éclairée de hautes fenêtres à vitraux de couleur et boisée de panneaux sculptés du plus grand prix. Au centre, une large table portait deux magnifiques corbeilles de fleurs.

En qualité de père et de mère, M. et Mme Roderich vinrent s'asseoir de chaque côté des fauteuils réservés aux fiancés. En arrière, prirent place les quatre témoins, M. Neuman et le capitaine Haralan à gauche, le lieutenant Armgard et moi, à droite.

Un maître des cérémonies annonça le gouverneur. Tout le monde se leva à son entrée.

Celui-ci s’assit sur son trône, puis demanda aux parents s’ils consentaient au mariage de leur fille avec Marc Vidal.

Ce fut ensuite aux deux fiancés que le gouverneur posa les questions d’usage:

“Marc Vidal, promettez-vous de prendre Myra Roderich pour épouse?

— Je le jure, répondit mon frère, à qui on avait fait la leçon.

— Myra Roderich, promettez-vous de prendre Marc Vidal pour époux?

— Je le jure, répondit Mlle Myra.

— Nous, gouverneur de Ragz, prononça alors Son Excellence, en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous ont été conférés par l’Impératrice-Reine, et conformément aux franchises séculaires de la ville de Ragz, baillons licence de mariage à Marc Vidal et à Myra Roderich. Voulons et ordonnons que ledit mariage soit célébré dès demain, en la forme régulière, dans l’église cathédrale de la ville.”

Ainsi s’étaient passées les choses dans leur simplicité habituelle. Aucun prodige n’avait troublé l’audience, et, bien que cette idée m’eût un instant traversé l’esprit, ni l’acte sur lequel furent apposées les signatures ne fut déchiré, ni les plumes arrachées de la main des mariés ou des témoins.

Décidément, Wilhelm Storitz était à Spremberg – il pouvait y rester pour la joie de ses compatriotes! – ou, s’il était à Ragz, c’est alors qu’il avait épuisé son pouvoir.

Maintenant, que ce sorcier surfait le voulût ou non, Myra Roderich serait la femme de Marc Vidal, ou elle ne le serait de personne.

XII

Nous étions au 1er juin. Cette date si impatiemment attendue, il avait semblé qu’elle n’arriverait jamais!

Nous y étions enfin. Quelques heures encore, et la cérémonie du mariage allait s’accomplir à la cathédrale de Ragz.

L’appréhension qu’avait pu laisser dans notre esprit le souvenir des inexplicables incidents qui remontaient alors à une douzaine de jours, s’était entièrement effacée après l’audience du gouverneur.

Je me levai de bonne heure. Mais si pressé que je fusse, Marc l’était plus encore, et il m’avait devancé. Je n’avais pas fini de m’habiller lorsqu’il entra chez moi.

Il était déjà en tenue de marié. Il rayonnait de bonheur, et pas une ombre n’obscurcissait ce rayonnement. Il m’embrassa avec effusion, et je le pressai sur mon cœur.

“Myra, me dit-il, m’a recommandé de te rappeler…

— Que c’est pour aujourd’hui, répondis-je en riant. Eh bien, dis-lui que si je n’ai pas manqué l’heure de l’audience du gouverneur, je ne manquerai pas celle de la cathédrale. Hier, j’ai réglé ma montre sur le beffroi. Mais toi-même, mon cher Marc, tâche de ne pas te faire attendre! Tu sais que ta présence est indispensable, et qu’on ne pourrait commencer sans toi!”

Il me quitta, et je me hâtai d’achever ma toilette, bien qu’il fût à peine neuf heures du matin.

Nous avions pris rendez-vous à l’hôtel. C’est de là que devaient partir les voitures. Ne fût-ce que pour mettre mon exactitude en valeur, j’arrivai plus tôt qu’il ne fallait – ce qui me vaudrait un joli sourire de la mariée –, et je m’installai dans le salon.

L’une après l’autre se présentèrent les personnes – disons les personnages, étant donné la solennité de la circonstance – qui avaient figuré la veille à la cérémonie du palais. Tous étaient, comme la veille, en costumes de gala. Les deux officiers portaient croix et médailles sur leurs splendides uniformes du régiment des Confins militaires.

Myra Roderich, – et pourquoi ne dirais-je pas Myra Vidal, puisque les deux fiancés étaient déjà liés en fait par l’ordonnance du gouverneur – Myra, en toilette blanche, robe de moire à traîne, corsage brodé de fleurs d’oranger, était habillée à ravir. À son côté s’épanouissait le bouquet de mariée, et sur sa chevelure blonde reposait la couronne nuptiale, d’où retombait en longs plis son voile de tulle blanc. Cette couronne, c’était celle que lui avait rapportée mon frère. Elle n’en avait pas voulu d’autre.

En entrant dans le salon avec sa mère, elle vint vers moi et me tendit la main. Je la lui serrai affectueusement, fraternellement. Puis, la joie éclatant dans ses yeux:

“Ah! frère, s’écria-t-elle, que je suis heureuse!”

Ainsi, des vilains jours passés, des tristes épreuves auxquelles avait été soumise cette honnête famille, il ne restait aucune trace. Il n’était pas jusqu’au capitaine Haralan qui ne parût avoir tout oublié. La preuve en est qu’il me dit en me serrant la main:

“Non… N’y pensons plus!”

Voici quel était le programme de cette journée, programme qui avait reçu l’approbation générale. À dix heures moins le quart, départ pour la cathédrale, où le gouverneur de Ragz, les autorités et les notabilités de la ville se trouveraient à l’arrivée des jeunes époux. Présentations et compliments, après la messe de mariage, à la signature des actes dans la sacristie de Saint-Michel. Retour pour le déjeuner qui devait réunir une cinquantaine de convives. Le soir, dans les salons de l’hôtel, fête pour laquelle avaient été envoyées près de deux cents invitations.

Les carrosses furent occupés de la même manière que la veille: le premier par la mariée, le docteur, Mme Roderich et M. Neuman; le second par Marc et les trois autres témoins. En revenant de la cathédrale, Marc et Myra Vidal, à jamais unis, prendraient place dans la même voiture. D’autres équipages étaient allés chercher les personnes qui devaient composer le cortège.

À neuf heures trois quarts, les voitures quittèrent l’hôtel Roderich et suivirent le quai Batthyani. Après avoir atteint la place Magyare, elles la traversèrent et remontèrent le beau quartier de Ragz, par la rue du Prince-Miloch.

Le temps était superbe, le ciel égayé des rayons du soleil. Sous les galeries de la rue, les passants en grand nombre se dirigeaient vers la cathédrale. Tous les regards de sympathie et d’admiration pour la jeune mariée, et je dois constater que mon cher Marc en eut aussi sa part. Les fenêtres laissaient apercevoir des visages souriants, et de partout il tombait des saluts auxquels on n’eût pas suffi à répondre.

“Ma foi, dis-je, j’emporterai de cette ville d’agréables souvenirs!

— Les Hongrois honorent en vous cette France qu’ils aiment, monsieur Vidal, me répondit le lieutenant Armgard, et ils sont heureux d’une union qui fait entrer un Français dans la famille Roderich.”

En approchant de la place, il fallut marcher au pas des attelages, tant la circulation devenait difficile.

Des tours de la cathédrale s’échappait la joyeuse volée des cloches que la brise de l’Est emportait toute vibrante, et, un peu avant dix heures, le carillon du beffroi mêla ses notes aiguës aux voix sonores de Saint-Michel.

Il était exactement dix heures cinq, quand nos deux carrosses vinrent s’arrêter aux pieds des marches, devant le portail central ouvert à deux battants.

Le docteur Roderich descendit le premier, puis sa fille, qui lui prit le bras. M. Neuman offrit le sien à Mme Roderich. Nous sautâmes aussitôt à terre et nous avançâmes, à la suite de Marc, entre les rangs des spectateurs qui s’échelonnaient le long du parvis.

À ce moment, les grandes orgues résonnèrent à l’intérieur, et c’est aux sons de leurs majestueux accords que le cortège pénétra dans l’église.

Marc et Myra se dirigèrent vers les deux fauteuils placés côte à côte devant le grand autel. Derrière eux, les parents et les témoins trouvèrent les sièges qui leur étaient destinés.

Toutes les chaises et les stalles du chœur étaient déjà occupées par une nombreuse réunion, le gouverneur de Ragz, les magistrats, les officiers de la garnison, le bailli et les syndics, les principaux fonctionnaires de l’administration, les amis de la famille, les notables de l’industrie et du commerce. Aux dames, en brillantes toilettes, des places spéciales avaient été aussi réservées le long des stalles, et il n’en restait pas une de libre.

Derrière les grilles du chœur, un chef-d’œuvre de la serrurerie du XIIIe siècle, se pressait la foule des curieux. Quant aux personnes qui n’avaient pu s’en approcher, elles s’étaient casées dans la grande nef dont toutes les chaises étaient prises.

Dans les contre-nefs du transept, dans les bas-côtés, était tassé le populaire, qui refluait jusque sur les marches du parvis.

Si quelques-uns des assistants conservaient à ce moment le souvenir des phénomènes qui avaient troublé la ville, pouvait-il leur venir à la pensée qu’on les verrait se reproduire à la cathédrale? Non, évidemment, pour peu qu’ils les eussent attribués à une intervention démoniaque, car ce n’était pas dans une église que cette intervention aurait pu s’exercer. La puissance du Diable ne s’arrête-t-elle pas, en effet, au seuil du sanctuaire?

Un mouvement se fit à droite du chœur, et la foule dut s’ouvrir pour livrer passage à l’archiprêtre, au diacre, au sous-diacre, aux bedeaux, aux enfants de la maîtrise.

L’archiprêtre s’arrêta devant les marches de l’autel, s’inclina, et dit les premières phrases de *l’Introït*, tandis que les chantres entonnaient les versets du *Confiteor*.

Myra était agenouillée sur le coussin de son prie-Dieu, la tête baissée, dans une attitude fervente. Marc se tenait debout près d’elle, et ses yeux ne la quittaient pas.

La messe était dite avec toute la pompe dont l’église catholique a voulu entourer ses cérémonies solennelles.

L’orgue alternait avec le plain-chant des *Kyrie* et les strophes du *Gloria in Excelsis*, qui éclataient sous les hautes voûtes.

Il se produisait parfois un vague bruit de foule remuante, de chaises déplacées, de sièges rabattus, que scandaient les pas des officiers de l’église veillant à ce que le passage de la grande nef demeurât libre sur toute sa longueur.

D’ordinaire, l’intérieur de la cathédrale est plongé dans une pénombre où l’âme se livre avec plus d’abandon aux impressions religieuses. À travers les anciens vitraux où se dessine en couleurs somptueuses la silhouette des personnages bibliques, par les étroites fenêtres du style ogival de la première époque, par les verrières latérales, il ne vient qu’un jour incertain. Pour peu que le temps soit couvert, la grande nef, les bas-côtés, l’abside, restent sombres, et cette mystique obscurité n’est piquée que des pointes de feu qui brillent au sommet des longs cierges de l’autel.

Aujourd’hui, il en était autrement. Sous ce magnifique soleil, les fenêtres tournées vers l’Est et la rosace du transept s’embrasaient. Un faisceau de rayons, traversant une des baies de l’abside, tombait directement sur la chaire suspendue à l’un des piliers de la nef, et semblait animer la face tourmentée du géant qui la soutient de ses énormes épaules.

Lorsque la sonnette se fit entendre, l’assistance se leva; et, aux mille bruits qui en résultèrent, succéda le silence, pendant que le diacre lut en psalmodiant l’Évangile de saint Matthieu.

Puis l’archiprêtre, se retournant, adressa une allocution aux fiancés. Il parlait d’une voix un peu faible, la voix d’un vieillard couronné de cheveux blancs. Il dit des choses très simples qui devaient aller au cœur de Myra. Il fit l’éloge de ses vertus familiales, de la famille Roderich, de son dévouement envers les malheureux et de son inépuisable charité. Il sanctifia ce mariage qui unissait un Français et une Hongroise, et il appela la bénédiction céleste sur les nouveaux époux.

L’allocution terminée, le vieux prêtre, tandis que le diacre et le sous-diacre reprenaient place à ses côtés, se retourna vers l’autel pour les prières de l’offertoire.

Si je note pas à pas les détails de cette messe nuptiale, c’est qu’ils sont restés profondément gravés dans mon esprit, c’est que leur souvenir ne devait jamais s’effacer de ma mémoire.

Alors, de la tribune de l’orgue s’éleva une voix superbe, accompagnée d’un quatuor d’instruments à cordes. Un ténor très en renom dans le monde magyar chantait l’hymne de l’offrande.

Marc et Myra quittèrent leurs fauteuils et vinrent se placer devant les marches de l’autel. Et là, après que le sous-diacre eut reçu leur riche aumône, ils appuyèrent leurs lèvres, comme en un baiser, sur la patène que présentait l’officiant. Puis, ils allèrent reprendre leur place en marchant l’un près de l’autre. Jamais, non, jamais Myra n’avait paru plus rayonnante de beauté, plus auréolée de bonheur!

Ce fut alors aux quêteuses de recueillir la part des malades et des pauvres. Précédées des bedeaux, elles se glissèrent au milieu des rangs du chœur et de la nef, et on entendait le bruit des chaises déplacées, le frou-frou des robes, le bourdonnement de la foule, tandis que les piécettes tombaient dans la bourse des jeunes filles.

Enfin, l’archiprêtre, accompagné de ses deux assistants, se dirigea vers les fiancés. Il s’arrêta devant eux.

“Marc Vidal, interrogea sa voix chevrotante qui fut néanmoins entendue par tous, tant le silence était profond, consentez-vous à prendre Myra Roderich pour épouse?

— Oui, répondit mon frère.

— Myra Roderich, consentez-vous à prendre Marc Vidal pour époux?

— Oui”, dit Myra dans un souffle. Avant de prononcer les paroles sacramentelles, l’archiprêtre reçut les alliances que lui donna mon frère et les bénit. Puis il se disposa à passer l’une d’elles au doigt de la jeune épouse… À ce moment, un cri retentit, un cri d’angoisse et d’horreur. Et voici ce que je vis, ce que mille personnes virent comme moi: Le diacre et le sous-diacre reculant en chancelant, comme repoussés par une force supérieure; l’archiprêtre, la bouche tremblante, les traits décomposés, le regard effaré, paraissant lutter contre un fantôme invisible, et finalement s’écroulant à genoux… Puis, immédiatement après, car les événements se déroulèrent avec la rapidité de la foudre et personne n’eut le temps d’intervenir ni même de comprendre, ce furent mon frère et Myra qui tombèrent sur les dalles, à demi renversés…

Puis ce furent les alliances qui volèrent à travers la nef et dont l’une m’atteignit violemment au visage…

Et, à ce moment, voici ce que j’entendis. Mille personnes entendirent, comme moi, ces paroles prononcées d’une voix terrible, la voix que nous connaissions bien, la voix de Wilhelm Storitz:

“Malheur sur les époux… malheur!…”

À cette malédiction qui semblait venir de l’au-delà, un souffle d’épouvante passa sur la foule. De toutes les poitrines, une sourde clameur jaillit, et Myra, qui se redressait, poussant un cri déchirant, retomba évanouie entre les bras de Marc terrifié.

XIII

Les phénomènes auxquels nous avions assisté à la cathédrale de Ragz et ceux dont l’hôtel Roderich avait été le théâtre tendaient au même but. Leur origine était la même. C’est Wilhelm Storitz, lui seul, qui en était l’auteur. Admettre qu’ils fussent dus à quelque tour d’adresse?… J’étais bien obligé de me répondre négativement. Non, ni le scandale de l’église, ni l’enlèvement de la couronne nuptiale ne pouvaient être attribués à un escamotage. J’en arrivais à supposer sérieusement que cet Allemand tenait de son père quelque secret scientifique, celui d’une découverte ignorée qui lui aurait donné le pouvoir de se rendre invisible… Pourquoi pas, après tout?… Pourquoi certains rayons lumineux n’auraient-ils pas la propriété de traverser les corps opaques, comme si ces corps étaient translucides?… Mais où allais-je m’égarer!… Billevesées que tout cela, billevesées dont je me gardai de rien dire à personne.

Nous avions ramené Myra sans qu’elle eût repris connaissance. On la transporta dans sa chambre, on la déposa sur son lit, mais les soins qui lui furent prodigués ne réussirent pas à la ranimer. Elle restait inerte, insensible, malgré les efforts du docteur impuissant. Toutefois, elle respirait, elle vivait. J’en étais à me demander comment elle avait pu survivre à tant d’épreuves, comment cette dernière émotion ne l’avait pas tuée.

Plusieurs des confrères du docteur Roderich étaient accourus à l’hôtel. Ils entouraient le lit de Myra, étendue sans mouvement, les paupières abaissées, la figure d’une pâleur de cire, la poitrine soulevée par les battements irréguliers du cœur, la respiration réduite à un souffle, un souffle qui pouvait s’éteindre d’un instant à l’autre!…

Marc lui tenait les mains. Il pleurait. Il la suppliait, l’appelait:

“Myra… ma chère Myra!…”

D’une voix étouffée par les sanglots, Mme Roderich, répétait en vain:

“Myra… mon enfant… Je suis là… près de toi… ta mère…”

La jeune fille ne rouvrait pas les yeux, et certainement elle ne l’entendait pas.

Cependant les médecins avaient essayé des remèdes les plus énergiques. Il sembla que la malade allait reprendre connaissance… Ses lèvres balbutièrent de vagues mot dont il fut impossible de saisir le sens, ses doigts s’agitèrent entre les mains de Marc, ses yeux se rouvrirent à demi… Mais quel regard incertain, sous ces paupières à demi relevées! Quel regard où manquait l’intelligence!…

Marc ne le comprit que trop. Tout à coup, il recula, en poussant ce cri:

“Folle… Folle!…”

Je me précipitai sur lui et le maintins avec l’aide du capitaine Haralan, en me demandant si, lui aussi, il n’allait pas perdre la raison. Il fallut l’entraîner dans une autre pièce où les médecins luttèrent contre cette crise, dont l’issue aurait pu être fatale.

Que serait le dénouement de ce drame? Y avait-il lieu d’espérer que Myra recouvrerait avec le temps son intelligence, que les soins triompheraient de l’égarement de son esprit, que cette folie ne serait que passagère?

Le capitaine Haralan, lorsqu’il se retrouva seul avec moi, me dit:

“Il faut en finir!…”

En finir?… Comment l’entendait-il? Que Wilhelm Storitz fût revenu à Ragz, qu’il fût l’auteur de cette profanation, nous n’en pouvions douter. Mais où le rencontrer, et avait-on prise sur cet être insaisissable?

D’autre part, à quelle impression allait s’abandonner la ville? Voudrait-elle accepter une explication naturelle de ces faits? Ici nous n’étions pas en France, où, à n’en pas douter, ces prodiges eussent été tournés en plaisanterie et ridiculisés par des chansons. Il devait en être tout autrement en ce pays. J’ai déjà eu l’occasion de le noter, les Magyars ont une tendance naturelle au merveilleux, et la superstition, dans la classe ignorante, est indéracinable. Pour les gens instruits, ces étrangetés ne pouvaient résulter que d’une découverte physique ou chimique. Mais, quand il s’agit d’esprits peu éclairés, tout s’explique avec l’intervention du diable, et Wilhelm Storitz allait passer pour être le diable en personne.

En effet, il ne fallait plus songer à cacher dans quelles conditions cet étranger, contre lequel le gouverneur de Ragz avait signé un arrêté d’expulsion, était mêlé à cette affaire. Ce que nous avions tenu secret jusqu’alors ne pouvait plus rester dans l’ombre, après le scandale de Saint-Michel.

Dès le lendemain, la ville fut en ébullition. On rattacha les événements de l’hôtel Roderich à ceux de la cathédrale. L’apaisement qui s’était fait dans le public fit place à de nouveaux troubles. Le lien qui unissait ces divers incidents, on le connut enfin. Ce nom de Wilhelm Storitz, dans toutes les maisons, dans toutes les familles, on ne le prononça plus sans qu’il évoquât le souvenir, on pourrait dire le fantôme d’un personnage étrange, dont l’existence s’écoulait entre les murs muets et les fenêtres closes de l’habitation du boulevard Tékéli.

Qu’on ne soit donc pas surpris si, dès que la nouvelle fut connue, la population se porta vers ce boulevard, entraînée par une force irrésistible, dont elle ne se rendait peut-être pas compte.

C’est ainsi que la foule s’était amassée dans le cimetière de Spremberg. Mais, là, les compatriotes du savant espéraient assister à quelque prodige, et aucun sentiment d’animosité ne les poussait. Ici au contraire, il y avait une explosion de haine, un besoin de vengeance, justifiés par les actes d’un être malfaisant.

Qu’on n’oublie pas, d’autre part, l’horreur que devait inspirer à cette ville si religieuse le scandale dont la cathédrale venait d’être le théâtre.

Cette surexcitation ne pouvait que s’accroître. Le plus grand nombre ne voudrait jamais accepter une explication naturelle de ces incompréhensibles phénomènes.

Le gouverneur de Ragz dut se préoccuper de ces dispositions de la ville, et enjoindre au chef de police de prendre toutes les mesures que réclamait la situation. Il fallait être prêt à se défendre contre les excès d’une panique, qui aurait pu avoir les conséquences les plus graves. En outre, à peine le nom de Wilhelm Storitz eut-il été révélé, qu’il fallut protéger la maison du boulevard Tékéli, devant laquelle se rassemblèrent des centaines d’ouvriers, de paysans, et la défendre contre l’envahissement et le pillage.

Cependant, mes idées évoluaient, et j’en arrivais à discuter sérieusement une hypothèse que j’avais, au premier abord, repoussée *de piano*. Si donc cette hypothèse était fondée, si un homme avait le pouvoir de se rendre invisible, ce qui était incroyable, peut-être, mais ne me paraissait décidément plus contestable, si la fable de l’anneau de Gygès à la cour du roi Candaule était devenue une réalité, c’était la tranquillité publique absolument compromise. Plus de sécurité personnelle. Puisque Wilhelm Storitz était venu à Ragz et que nul n’avait pu l’y voir, rien ne s’opposait à ce qu’il y fût encore, sans qu’on eût le moyen de s’en assurer. Autre sujet de crainte, avait-il gardé pour lui seul le secret de cette découverte que lui avait probablement léguée son père? Son serviteur Hermann ne l’utilisait-il pas comme lui? D’autres n’en feraient-ils pas usage à son profit ou au leur? Qui les empêcherait dès lors de pénétrer dans les maisons quand et comme il leur plairait, de se mêler à l’existence des occupants? L’intimité des familles n’allait-elle pas être détruite? Pour s’être enfermé chez soi, serait-on assuré d’y être seul, assuré de n’y point être entendu, comme de n’y point être vu à moins de se tenir en une obscurité profonde? Et, dehors, dans les rues, cette crainte perpétuelle d’être suivi, sans le savoir, par quelqu’un d’invisible, qui ne vous perd pas des yeux et peut faire de vous ce qu’il veut!… Quel moyen de se soustraire aux attentats de toutes sortes rendus si faciles? N’était-ce pas, à bref délai, l’anéantissement de la vie sociale?

On se rappela alors ce qui s’était passé sur la place du marché Coloman, ce dont le capitaine Haralan et moi nous avions été témoins. Un homme avait été violemment renversé, prétendait-il, par un agresseur invisible. Tout portait à croire, maintenant, que cet homme avait dit la vérité. Sans doute, il avait été heurté au passage par Wilhelm Storitz, par Hermann ou par tout autre. Chacun eut la pensée que cela pouvait lui arriver. À chaque pas, on était exposé à de pareilles rencontres.

Puis, certaines particularités revinrent à la mémoire, l’affiche des publications arrachée de son cadre à la cathédrale, et, lors de la perquisition du boulevard Tékéli, un bruit de pas entendu dans les chambres, cette fiole inopinément tombée et brisée.

Eh bien, il était là, lui, et, vraisemblablement, Hermann y était aussi. Ils n’avaient point quitté la ville aussitôt après la soirée des fiançailles, ainsi que nous le supposions, et cela expliquait l’eau savonneuse de la chambre à coucher, le feu sur le fourneau de la cuisine. Oui! tous deux assistaient aux perquisitions faites dans la cour, dans le jardin, dans la maison, et c’est en s’enfuyant qu’ils avaient fait choir l’agent de police de garde au pied de l’escalier. Si nous avions trouvé la couronne nuptiale dans le belvédère, c’est que Wilhelm Storitz, surpris par la perquisition, n’avait pas eu le temps de l’enlever.

En ce qui me concernait, les incidents qui avaient marqué mon voyage à bord de la *Dorothée*, lorsque je descendais le Danube de Pest à Ragz, s’expliquaient désormais. Le passager, que je croyais débarqué à Vukovar, était toujours à bord, et on ne l’y voyait pas!…

Ainsi, me disais-je, cette invisibilité, il sait la produire instantanément. Il paraît ou disparaît à son gré, comme les magiciens grâce à leur baguette enchantée, et, en même temps que lui-même, il peut rendre invisibles les vêtements qui le couvrent, mais non pas les objets qu’il tient à la main, puisque nous avons vu le contrat et le bouquet déchirés, la couronne emportée, les alliances lancées à travers la nef. Toutefois, il ne s’agit pas ici de magie, de mots cabalistiques, d’incantations, ni de sorcellerie. Restons dans le domaine des faits matériels. Évidemment, Wilhelm Storitz possède la formule d’une composition qu’il suffit d’absorber… Laquelle? Sans doute, celle que renfermait cette fiole brisée et qui s’est évaporée presque instantanément. Quelle est la formule de cette composition, voilà ce que nous ne savons pas, ce qu’il importerait de savoir, ce qu’on ne saura jamais peut-être!…

Quant à la personne de Wilhelm Storitz, alors même qu'elle est invisible, est-il donc impossible de la saisir? Si elle se dérobe au sens de la vue, elle ne se dérobe pas, j'imagine, au sens du toucher. Son enveloppe matérielle ne perd aucune des trois dimensions communes à tous les corps, longueur, largeur, profondeur. Il est toujours là, en chair et en os, comme on dit. Invisible, soit, intangible, non! Cela, c'est pour les fantômes, et nous n'avons pas affaire à un fantôme!

Que le hasard permette de le saisir par le bras, par les jambes, par la tête, si on ne le voit pas, du moins le tiendra-t-on. Et si étonnante que soit la faculté dont il dispose, elle ne lui permettra pas de passer à travers les murs d'une prison.

Ce n'était là que raisonnements, en somme acceptables, que chacun faisait probablement, mais la situation n'en restait pas moins inquiétante, la sécurité publique compromise. On ne vivait plus que dans les transes. On ne se sentait en sûreté, ni au-dehors, ni à l'intérieur des maisons, ni la nuit, ni le jour. Le moindre bruit dans les chambres, un craquement du plancher, une persienne agitée par le vent, un gémissement de la girouette sur le toit, le bourdonnement d'un insecte aux oreilles, le sifflement de la brise par une porte ou une fenêtre mal fermée, tout paraissait suspect. Pendant le va-et-vient de la vie domestique, à table pendant les repas, le soir pendant la veillée, la nuit pendant le sommeil, en admettant que le sommeil fût possible, on ne savait jamais si quelque intrus ne s'était pas introduit dans la maison, si Wilhelm Storitz ou quelque autre n'était pas là, épiant vos démarches, écoutant vos paroles, pénétrant enfin les plus intimes secrets des familles.

Sans doute, il pouvait se faire que cet Allemand eût quitté Ragz et fût retourné à Spremberg. Toutefois, en y réfléchissant – ce fut l'avis du docteur et du capitaine Haralan, et aussi celui du gouverneur et du chef de police –, pouvait-on raisonnablement admettre que Wilhelm Storitz en eût fini avec ses déplorables attaques? S’il avait laissé le “baillage de licence” s’accomplir, c’est qu’il n’était pas encore revenu de Spremberg. Mais, le mariage même, il en avait interrompu la célébration, et, dans le cas où Myra recouvrerait la raison, ne chercherait-il pas à l’empêcher encore? Pourquoi la haine qu’il avait vouée à la famille Roderich serait-elle éteinte, puisqu’elle n’était pas satisfaite? Les menaces qui avaient retenti dans la cathédrale ne répondaient-elles pas éloquemment à ces questions?

Non, le dernier mot de cette affaire n’était pas dit, et on était en droit de tout craindre en pensant aux moyens dont disposait cet homme pour la réalisation de ses projets de vengeance.

En effet, si surveillé jour et nuit que fût l’hôtel Roderich, ne parviendrait-il pas à s’y introduire? Une fois dans l’hôtel, n’agirait-il pas comme il lui conviendrait?

On peut juger, d’après cela, de l’obsession des esprits, aussi bien de ceux qui se maintenaient dans le domaine des faits positifs, que de ceux qui s’abandonnaient aux exagérations d’une imagination superstitieuse.

Mais enfin, existait-il un remède à cette situation? Je n’en voyais aucun, je l’avoue. Le départ de Marc et de Myra ne l’eût pas changée. Wilhelm Storitz n’avait-il pas, en effet, le pouvoir de les suivre en toute liberté? Sans compter que l’état dans lequel se trouvait Myra ne lui permettait guère de quitter Ragz.

Pour l’instant, où était-il, notre insaisissable ennemi? Nul n’eût été capable de le dire avec certitude, si une série d’événements ne nous eussent prouvé coup sur coup qu'il s'obstinait à séjourner au milieu d'une population qu'il bravait et terrorisait impunément.

Le premier de ces événements faillit mettre notre désespoir au comble. Deux jours pleins s'étaient alors écoulés depuis la terrible scène de l'église Saint-Michel, sans qu'aucune amélioration se fût manifestée dans la santé de Myra, toujours entre la vie et la mort. Nous étions au 4 juin. Après le déjeuner, toute la famille Roderich, mon frère et moi compris, était réunie dans la galerie, et nous discutions avec animation la meilleure conduite à adopter, quand un éclat de rire véritablement satanique retentit à nos oreilles.

Nous nous levâmes tous épouvantés. Marc et le capitaine Haralan, pris d'une sorte de frénésie, s'élancèrent d'un même mouvement vers la partie de la galerie d'où semblait venir cet effrayant éclat de rire, mais ce fut pour s'arrêter au bout de quelques pas. Tout se passa en deux secondes. En deux secondes, je vis fulgurer un éclair, comme celui d'une lame brillante décrivant dans la lumière sa courbe homicide; je vis mon frère chanceler, et le capitaine Haralan le recevoir dans ses bras…

Je me précipitai à leurs secours, au moment même où une voix – cette voix que nous connaissions tous, à présent! – prononçait avec l'accent d'une indomptable volonté:

“Jamais Myra Roderich ne sera la femme de Marc Vidal!… jamais!”

Aussitôt, une violente poussée d'air fit vaciller les lustres, la porte du jardin rapidement ouverte et refermée battit à grand bruit, et nous comprîmes que notre implacable adversaire nous échappait une fois de plus.

Le capitaine Haralan et moi, nous étendîmes mon frère sur un divan, et le docteur Roderich examina sa blessure. Elle n’était pas grave heureusement. La lame du poignard avait glissé sur l’omoplate gauche de haut en bas, et tout se réduisait à une longue estafilade, qui, bien que fort impressionnante d’aspect, n’en serait pas moins guérie en peu de jours. Pour cette fois, l’assassin avait manqué son but. Mais en serait-il toujours ainsi?

Marc fut pansé, puis transporté à l’hôtel Temesvar, et je m’installai à son chevet, où, tout en le veillant, je m’absorbai dans l’examen du problème posé à ma sagacité et qu’il fallait résoudre coûte que coûte sous peine de mort pour tant d’êtres qui m’étaient chers.

Je n’avais pas encore fait, je le confesse, le premier pas sur le chemin de la solution cherchée, lorsque d’autres événements survinrent, nullement dramatiques ceux-ci, mais plutôt bizarres, incohérents même, et qui me donnèrent fort à penser.

Le soir de ce même jour, 4 juin, une lueur puissante, qui fut aperçue de la place Kurtz et du marché Coloman, apparut à la plus haute fenêtre du beffroi. Une torche enflammée s’abaissait, se relevait, s’agitait, comme si quelque incendiaire eût voulu mettre le feu à l’édifice.

Le chef de police et ses agents, se jetant hors du poste central, atteignirent rapidement les combles du beffroi. La lumière avait disparu, et, comme M. Stepark s’y attendait d’ailleurs, on ne trouva personne. Sur le plancher gisait la torche éteinte d’où une odeur fuligineuse se dégageait, des étincelles résineuses glissaient encore sur la toiture, mais l’incendiaire avait disparu. Ou l’individu – disons Wilhelm Storitz – avait eu le temps de s’enfuir, ou il se dissimulait, introuvable, en un coin du beffroi.

La foule amassée sur la place en fut pour ses cris de vengeance dont se riait le coupable.

Le lendemain, dans la matinée, nouvelle bravade jetée à la cité entière prise d'affolement.

Dix heures et demie venaient de sonner, lorsque retentit une sinistre volée de cloches, un funèbre glas, une sorte de tocsin d'épouvante.

Cette fois, ce n'était pas un homme seul qui aurait pu mettre en branle l'appareil campanaire de la cathédrale. Il fallait que Wilhelm Storitz fût aidé de plusieurs complices, ou tout au moins de son serviteur Hermann.

Les habitants se portèrent en foule sur la place Saint-Michel, accourant même des quartiers éloignés où ces coups de tocsin avaient jeté l'effroi. De nouveau, M. Stepark et ses agents s'élancèrent. Ils se précipitèrent vers l'escalier de la tour du Nord, en franchirent rapidement les marches, arrivèrent à la cage des cloches, tout inondée du jour qui passait à travers ses auvents…

Mais en vain visitèrent-ils cet étage de la tour et la galerie supérieure… Personne! Personne!… Lorsque les agents étaient entrés dans la cage où les cloches muettes achevaient de se balancer, les invisibles sonneurs avaient déjà disparu.

XIV

Ainsi donc, mes craintes se réalisaient. Wilhelm Storitz n’avait pas quitté Ragz et il était entré sans difficulté dans l’hôtel Roderich. Qu’il eût manqué son coup, soit! Mais cela ne garantissait nullement l’avenir. Ce qu’il avait essayé vainement de faire une première fois, il essaierait de le refaire, et peut-être avec un meilleur succès. Il importait donc d’arrêter un plan de conduite qui nous garantît contre les attaques ultérieures de ce misérable.

Il ne me fut pas très difficile d’imaginer ce plan de conduite. Je résolus tout d’abord de réunir les diverses personnes menacées à un titre quelconque et d’organiser un système de défense tel qu’il fût impossible à personne de les approcher. J’étudiai soigneusement les moyens d’atteindre cet idéal, et, dès qu’ils furent trouvés, je les mis sans tarder à exécution.

Le matin du 6 juin, moins de quarante-huit heures après l’attentat, mon frère, dont la blessure toute superficielle se cicatrisait déjà, fut transporté à l’hôtel Roderich et couché dans une chambre voisine de celle de Myra. Cela fait, j’exposai mon plan au docteur, qui, l’ayant approuvé entièrement, me donna carte blanche et déclara me considérer, à partir de ce moment, en quelque sorte comme le commandant d’une garnison assiégée.

Je fis aussitôt acte d’autorité. Laissant un seul domestique à la garde de Marc et de Myra – il me fallait courir ce risque!

— je commençai une visite minutieuse et méthodique de l’hôtel, avec l’aide de tous ses habitants, y compris le capitaine Haralan et Mme Roderich elle-même, qui dut, sur mon injonction, abandonner le chevet de sa fille.

Nous commençâmes par les combles. Nous tenant coude à coude, nous les parcourûmes de bout en bout. Puis nous visitâmes toutes les pièces, sans oublier le plus petit recoin et sans laisser entre nous aucun intervalle par lequel il eût été possible à une créature humaine de se glisser. Au passage, il est superflu de le dire, nous soulevions les rideaux, déplacions les sièges, inspections le dessous des lits et le dessus des armoires, tout cela sans quitter le contact une seconde. De chaque pièce ainsi visitée la porte était ensuite fermée, et la clef m'en était remise.

Ce travail exigea plus de deux heures, mais il fut enfin achevé, et nous arrivâmes à la porte extérieure, certains, rigoureusement certains, matériellement certains qu'aucun étranger ne pouvait être caché dans l'hôtel. Cette porte extérieure fut verrouillée, et j'en mis la clef dans ma poche. Désormais, personne n'entrerait sans ma permission, et je me promettais de faire en sorte qu'aucun intrus, fût-il cent fois invisible, ne réussît à s'insinuer incognito en même temps que le visiteur par moi reconnu et accueilli.

Et, de fait, à partir de cet instant, c'est moi, moi seul qui répondis aux coups de heurtoir. Pour remplir mon office de portier, je me faisais accompagner par le capitaine Haralan, ou, en son absence, par un domestique de confiance. L'huis n'était d'abord qu'entrebâillé, puis, tandis que mon compagnon le maintenait à l'intérieur, je me glissai par l'hiatus que j'obturais à l'extérieur. Le visiteur était-il admis? Nous reculions pas à pas tous les trois, serrés l'un contre l'autre, tandis que la porte se refermait peu à peu.

Nous étions évidemment en parfaite sécurité dans cette maison ainsi transformée en forteresse.

J’entends d’ici l’objection qu’on peut me faire, à juste titre je le reconnais. Plutôt que le nom de forteresse, notre hôtel eût mérité celui de prison. C’est vrai, mais un emprisonnement est supportable quand il ne doit pas s’éterniser. Or, le nôtre serait-il de longue durée? Je ne le pensais pas.

Je ne cessais, en effet, de réfléchir à notre situation singulière, et, sans prétendre avoir pénétré le mystère indéchiffrable de Wilhelm Storitz, je n’étais pas sans faire un certain progrès dans cette voie.

Quelques mots d’explication, un peu arides peut-être, me paraissent ici nécessaires.

Quand on fait tomber sur un prisme un faisceau de rayons solaires, celui-ci se décompose, on le sait, en sept couleurs, dont l’ensemble donne la lumière blanche. Ces couleurs – violet, indigo, bleu, vert, jaune, orangé, rouge – constituent le “spectre solaire”. Mais cette gamme visible n’est peut-être qu’une partie du spectre complet. Il peut exister d’autres couleurs non perceptibles à nos sens. Pourquoi ces rayons, encore inconnus à l’heure actuelle, n’auraient-ils pas de propriétés entièrement différentes de ceux que nous connaissons? Alors que ceux-ci ne sont capables de traverser qu’un petit nombre de corps solides, le verre par exemple, pourquoi ceux-là ne traverseraient-ils pas indistinctement tous les corps matériels[1]? Si les choses se passaient réellement ainsi, rien ne nous en avertirait, puisque nos sens ne sont pas sensibles à ces rayons, supposé qu’ils existent. Il pouvait donc se faire qu’Otto Storitz eût découvert des rayons jouissant de ce pouvoir, et qu’il eût trouvé la formule d’une substance, qui, introduite dans l’organisme, aurait la double faculté de se répandre à sa périphérie et de modifier la nature des divers rayons contenus dans le spectre solaire.

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[1] Depuis que ce manuscrit a été écrit, la découverte des rayons infrarouges et ultraviolets a vérifié partiellement cette hypothèse.

Ceci admis, tout s’expliquait. La lumière, en atteignant la surface du corps opaque imprégné de cette substance, se décomposait, et les rayons qui la constituent se transformaient tous indistinctement en ces radiations inconnues dont j’imaginais l’existence. Ces radiations traversaient donc librement ce corps, puis, subissant, au moment d’en sortir, une transformation en sens contraire, reprenaient leurs différentes formes premières et impressionnaient nos yeux comme si le corps opaque n’eût pas existé.

Sans doute, bien des points demeuraient obscurs. Comment expliquer qu’on n’aperçût pas plus les vêtements de Wilhelm Storitz que lui-même, et que cependant les objets qu’il tenait à la main demeurassent visibles?

D’autre part, quelle était la substance capable d’engendrer des effets aussi miraculeux? Cela, je ne le savais pas, et c’était fort regrettable en vérité, attendu que, si je l’avais su, j’aurais pu en faire usage et lutter contre notre ennemi à armes égales. Mais peut-être, après tout, était-il possible de le vaincre, sans posséder cet avantage? Je me posais, en effet, ce dilemme: Quelle que fût cette substance inconnue, ou son action était transitoire, ou elle était perpétuelle. Dans le premier cas, Wilhelm Storitz était obligé d’en absorber de nouvelles doses à intervalles plus ou moins rapprochés. Dans le second, il lui fallait nécessairement détruire parfois l’effet de sa drogue par une autre drogue antagoniste, un contrepoison en quelque sorte, car il est des circonstances où l’invisibilité serait, non une supériorité, mais une infériorité véritable. Dans les deux cas, Wilhelm Storitz était astreint, soit à fabriquer, soit à prendre dans une réserve préexistante la substance qu’il désirait employer, la quantité qu’il en pouvait posséder sur sa personne n’étant évidemment pas illimitée.

Ce jalon posé, je me demandai quel sens avaient ces sonneries de cloches, ces lumières agitées frénétiquement Cela ne rimait à rien. C’était incohérent, comme je l’ai déjà fait observer. Qu’en conclure, sinon que Wilhelm Storitz, grisé par la toute-puissance qu’il s’attribuait, en arrivait à des gestes d’insensé, qu’il glissait à la folie? C’était là une éventualité favorable et que l’examen des faits tendait à rendre plausible.

C’est en vertu de ces divers raisonnements que j’allai trouver M. Stepark. Je lui fis part de mes réflexions, et, d’un commun accord, il fut décidé que la maison du boulevard Tékéli serait gardée jour et nuit par un cordon d’agents de police ou de soldats, de telle sorte qu’il fût matériellement impossible à son propriétaire de s’y introduire. Ainsi ce dernier serait privé à la fois de son laboratoire et de sa réserve secrète, si tant est que celle-ci existât. Il serait donc condamné, par la force des choses, soit à reprendre l’apparence humaine dans un délai plus ou moins long, soit à rester éternellement invisible, ce qui, le cas échéant, pourrait devenir pour lui une cause de faiblesse. Nul doute d’ailleurs, si l’hypothèse d’une folie naissante était fondée, que cette folie ne fût surexcitée par les obstacles opposés au dément, et que celui-ci n’en vînt à commettre des imprudences qui nous le livreraient désarmé.

M. Stepark ne fit aucune difficulté pour me donner satisfaction. Lui aussi, mais pour d’autres motifs, il avait déjà pensé à isoler la maison de Wilhelm Storitz. Il jugeait cette mesure propre à calmer dans une certaine mesure la ville, si tranquille d’ordinaire, heureuse au point d’être enviée des autres cités magyares, et maintenant troublée au-delà de toute imagination. Je ne saurais mieux la comparer qu’à une ville d’un pays envahi, sous la crainte perpétuelle du bombardement, alors que chacun se demande où tombera le premier boulet, et si sa maison ne sera pas la première détruite.

En effet, que n’avait-on pas à redouter de Wilhelm Storitz puisqu’il n’avait point quitté la ville, ainsi qu’il avait pris soin lui-même de le faire connaître à tous?

À l’hôtel Roderich, la situation était encore plus grave. La raison n’était pas revenue à l’infortunée Myra. Ses lèvres ne s’ouvraient que pour des paroles incohérentes, ses yeux hagards ne se fixaient sur personne. Elle ne nous entendait pas. Elle ne reconnaissait ni sa mère, ni Marc, qui fut bientôt capable de venir rejoindre Mme Roderich au chevet de la malade, dans cette chambre de jeune fille, si joyeuse autrefois, si triste à présent. Était-ce un délire passager, une crise dont les soins triompheraient? Était-ce une folie incurable? Qui l’eût pu dire?

Sa faiblesse était extrême, comme si les ressorts de la vie eussent été brisés en elle. Étendue sur son lit, presque sans mouvement, à peine si elle esquissait parfois un geste de la main. On était en droit de se demander alors si elle ne cherchait pas à déchirer ce voile de l’inconscience qui l’enveloppait, si elle n’essayait pas de manifester sa volonté. Marc se penchait, il lui parlait, il s’efforçait de surprendre une réponse sur ses lèvres, un signe dans ses yeux… Mais les yeux restaient fermés, et la main, à peine soulevée, retombait aussitôt.

Mme Roderich se soutenait par une extraordinaire force morale. À peine si elle donnait quelques heures au repos, parce que son mari l’y obligeait, et quel sommeil troublé par les cauchemars, interrompu au moindre bruit! Elle croyait entendre marcher dans sa chambre. Malgré les précautions prises, elle se disait qu’il était là, lui, l’ennemi insaisissable, invisible, qu’il avait pénétré dans l’hôtel, qu’il rôdait autour de sa fille!… Elle se relevait épouvantée, et ne retrouvait un peu de tranquillité qu’après avoir vu le docteur ou Marc veillant au chevet de Myra. Si cette situation se prolongeait, il lui serait impossible d'y résister.

Chaque jour, plusieurs des confrères du docteur Roderich venaient en consultation. La malade longuement et minutieusement examinée, on n'avait pu se prononcer sur cette inertie intellectuelle. Pas de réaction, pas de crise. Non, une indifférence à toutes les choses extérieures, une inconscience complète, une tranquillité de morte, devant laquelle l'art demeurait impuissant.

Dès qu'il fut en état de se tenir debout, et ce fut au bout de trois jours, mon frère ne quitta plus la chambre de Myra. De mon côté, je ne m'absentais guère de l'hôtel, si ce n'est pour me rendre à la Maison de Ville. M. Stepark me tenait au courant de tout ce qui se disait à Ragz. Par lui, je savais que la population était en proie aux plus vives appréhensions. Dans l'imagination populaire, ce n'était plus seulement Wilhelm Storitz, mais une bande d'invisibles formée par lui, qui avait envahi la ville livrée sans défense à leurs infernales machinations.

Le capitaine Haralan, par contre, était le plus souvent hors de notre forteresse. Sous l'obsession d'une idée fixe, il parcourait incessamment les rues. Il ne me demandait pas de l'accompagner. Avait-il donc en tête quelque projet dont il craignait que je ne voulusse le détourner? Comptait-il sur le plus invraisemblable des hasards pour rencontrer Wilhelm Storitz? Attendait-il que celui-ci fût signalé à Spremberg ou autre part, pour tenter de le rejoindre? Certes, je n'aurais plus essayé de le retenir. Je l'aurais accompagné, au contraire, et je l'aurais aidé à nous débarrasser de ce malfaiteur.

Mais cette éventualité avait-elle quelque chance de se produire? Non, assurément. Ni à Ragz, ni ailleurs.

Dans la soirée du 11 juin, j’eus une longue conversation avec mon frère. Il m’avait paru plus accablé que jamais, et j’appréhendais qu’il ne tombât sérieusement malade. Il aurait fallu l’entraîner loin de cette ville, le ramener en France, mais il n’eût jamais consenti à se séparer de Myra. Cependant, était-il donc impossible que la famille Roderich s’éloignât de Ragz pour quelque temps? La question ne méritait-elle pas d’être étudiée? J’y pensais et je me promettais d’en parler au docteur.

Ce jour-là, en terminant notre entretien, je dis à Marc:

“Mon pauvre frère, je te vois prêt à perdre tout espoir; tu as tort. La vie de Myra n’est pas en danger, les médecins sont d’accord là-dessus. Si sa raison l’a abandonnée, c’est momentanément, crois-le bien. Elle reprendra possession de son intelligence, elle reviendra à elle, à toi, à tous les siens…

— Tu veux que je ne désespère pas, me répondit Marc, d’une voix étouffée par les sanglots. Mais, quand bien même ma pauvre Myra recouvrerait la raison, ne sera-t-elle pas toujours à la merci de ce monstre? Crois-tu donc que sa haine soit apaisée par ce qu’il a fait jusqu’ici? Et s’il veut pousser plus loin sa vengeance?… S’il veut?… Tu me comprends, Henri… Il peut tout, et nous sommes sans défense contre lui.

— Non, m’écriai-je, non, Marc, il n’est pas impossible de le combattre.

— Et comment?… Comment?… reprit Marc en s’animant. Non, Henri, tu ne dis pas ce que tu penses. Non! nous sommes désarmés devant ce misérable. Nous ne pouvons lui échapper qu’en nous enfermant dans une prison. Et rien ne dit qu’il n’arrivera pas, malgré tout, à pénétrer dans l’hôtel.”

L’exaltation de Marc ne me permettait plus de lui répondre. Il n’écoutait que lui. Il ajouta, en m’étreignant les mains:

“Qui te dit que nous sommes seuls en ce moment? Je ne vais pas d’une chambre à l’autre, dans le salon, dans la galerie, sans me dire qu’il me suit peut-être!… Il me semble que quelqu’un marche près de moi… quelqu’un qui m’évite… qui recule lorsque j’avance… et qui disparaît quand je veux le saisir…”

Tout en parlant d’une voix saccadée, Marc avançait, reculait, comme s’il eût été à la poursuite d’un être invisible. Je ne savais plus que faire pour le calmer. Le mieux eût été de l’entraîner hors de l’hôtel, de l’emmener loin, bien loin…

“Qui sait, reprit-il, s’il n’a pas surpris tout ce que nous venons de dire? Nous le croyons loin. Il est peut-être ici. Tiens!… derrière cette porte, j’entends des pas… Il est là… Viens!… Frappons!… Tuons!… Mais est-ce possible?… Ce monstre, la mort a-t-elle prise sur lui?”

Voilà où en était mon frère! N’avais-je pas lieu de redouter que, dans une de ces crises, sa raison ne succombât comme avait succombé celle de Myra?

Pourquoi fallait-il qu’Otto Storitz eût fait cette découverte maudite? Pourquoi fallait-il qu’il eût mis une telle arme entre les mains de l’homme déjà trop armé pour le mal!

En ville, la situation ne s’améliorait pas. Bien qu’aucun autre incident ne se fût produit depuis que Wilhelm Storitz avait pour ainsi dire crié du haut du beffroi: “Je suis là”, l’épouvante avait envahi toute la population. Pas une maison qu’on ne crût hantée par l’invisible. Les églises n’offraient même pas un asile où l’on pût se réfugier, après ce qui s’était passé à la cathédrale.

Les autorités essayaient en vain de réagir, elles n’y réussissaient pas, car on est sans pouvoir contre la terreur.

Voici un fait, entre cent autres, qui montre à quel degré d’affolement les esprits en étaient arrivés.

Le 12, dans la matinée, j’avais quitté l’hôtel pour aller voir le chef de police. En débouchant dans la rue du Prince-Miloch, deux cents pas avant la place Saint-Michel, j’aperçus le capitaine Haralan. L’ayant rejoint:

“Je vais chez M. Stepark, lui dis-je. M’y accompagnez-vous, capitaine?”

Sans me répondre, machinalement, il prit la même direction que moi. Nous approchions de la place Kurtz, lorsque des cris d’effroi se firent entendre.

Un char à bancs attelé de deux chevaux descendait la rue avec une vitesse excessive. Les passants se sauvaient à droite et à gauche. Sans doute le conducteur avait été jeté à terre, et les chevaux, abandonnés à eux-mêmes, s’étaient emportés.

Eh bien, le croirait-on, l’idée vint à quelques passants, non moins emballés que l’attelage, qu’un être invisible conduisait cette voiture, et que Wilhelm Storitz en occupait le siège. Ce cri arriva jusqu’à nous:

“Lui… lui!… c’est lui!”

Je n’avais pas eu le temps de me retourner vers le capitaine Haralan, que celui-ci n’était déjà plus à côté de moi. Je le vis se précipiter à la rencontre du char à bancs, dans l’évidente intention de l’arrêter au moment où celui-ci passerait près de lui.

La rue était très fréquentée à cette heure. Le nom de Wilhelm Storitz retentissait de toutes parts. Des pierres volèrent contre l'attelage emporté. Telle était la surexcitation publique, que des coups de mousquet partirent du magasin situé à l'angle de la rue du Prince-Miloch.

Un des chevaux tomba, frappé d'une balle à la cuisse. La voiture, heurtant le corps de l'animal, fut culbutée.

Aussitôt, la foule de s'élancer, de s'accrocher aux roues, à la caisse, aux brancards. Cent bras s'ouvrirent pour saisir Wilhelm Storitz… Ils n'étreignirent que le vide.

Le conducteur invisible avait-il donc réussi à sauter du char à bancs, avant que celui-ci n'eût été renversé, car on ne pouvait pas douter qu'il avait voulu épouvanter la ville une fois de plus.

Il n'en était rien, il fallut bien le reconnaître. Bientôt accourut un paysan de la puszta, dont les chevaux, arrêtés au marché Coloman, s'étaient emportés en son absence. Quelle ne fut pas sa colère, lorsqu'il vit l'un d'eux étendu sur le sol! On ne voulait pas l'entendre, et je crus que la foule allait maltraiter ce pauvre homme que nous eûmes quelque peine à protéger contre ces aveugles fureurs.

J'entraînai le capitaine Haralan, qui me suivit sans mot dire à la Maison de Ville.

M. Stepark était déjà informé de ce qui venait de se passer rue du Prince-Miloch.

“La ville est affolée, me dit-il, et on ne peut prévoir jusqu'où ira cet affolement.”

Je posai mes questions habituelles:

“Avez-vous appris quelque chose de nouveau?

— Oui, répondit M. Stepark, on m’a informé de la présence de Wilhelm Storitz à Spremberg.

— À Spremberg!… s’écria le capitaine Haralan, en se retournant vers moi. Partons! J’ai votre promesse.”

Je ne savais que répondre, car j’étais certain de l’inutilité de ce voyage.

“Attendez, capitaine, intervint M. Stepark, j’ai demandé à Spremberg la confirmation de cette nouvelle, et un courrier doit m’arriver d’un instant à l’autre.”

Une demi-heure ne s’était pas écoulée que le planton remettait au chef de police un pli apporté à franc étrier. La nouvelle ne reposait sur rien de sérieux. Non seulement la présence de Wilhelm Storitz n’avait pas été constatée à Spremberg, mais on croyait qu’il n’avait jamais dû quitter Ragz.

Deux jours s’écoulèrent sans qu’il se produisît aucun changement dans l’état de Myra Roderich. Quant à mon frère, il me parut un peu plus calme. Moi, j’attendais l’occasion d’entretenir le docteur d’un projet de départ auquel j’espérais le rallier.

La journée du 14 juin fut moins paisible que les précédentes. Les autorités sentirent, cette fois, leur impuissance à retenir une foule montée à un tel degré d’exaltation.

Vers onze heures, alors que je me promenais sur le quai Batthyani, ces propos frappèrent mon oreille:

“Il est revenu… il est revenu!…”

Qui était cet “il”, cela se devinait, et, des deux ou trois passants auxquels je m’adressai:

“On vient de voir une fumée à la cheminée de sa maison! dit l’un.

— On a vu sa figure derrière les rideaux du belvédère!” affirma l’autre.

Qu’il fallût ou non ajouter foi à ces racontars, je me dirigeai vers le boulevard Tékéli.

Et pourtant, quelle apparence que Wilhelm Storitz se fût si imprudemment montré? Il ne pouvait ignorer ce qui l’attendait si l’on parvenait à mettre la main sur lui. Et il aurait couru ce risque, lorsque rien ne l’y obligeait? Il se serait laissé apercevoir à l’une des fenêtres de son habitation?

Vraie ou fausse, la nouvelle avait produit son effet. Lorsque j’arrivai, plusieurs milliers de personnes, que le cordon d’agents s’efforçait inutilement de contenir, entouraient déjà la maison par le boulevard et par le chemin de ronde. De tous les côtés accouraient des masses d’hommes et de femmes, surexcités au dernier point et faisant entendre des cris de mort.

Que pouvaient les arguments devant cette conviction, irraisonnée mais indéracinable, qu’il était là, “lui!”, et peut-être avec toute la bande de ses complices invisibles? Que pouvait la police contre cette foule innombrable qui assiégeait la maison maudite de si près, que Storitz, s’il y était enfermé, ne parviendrait pas à s’enfuir? D’ailleurs, si Wilhelm Storitz avait été aperçu aux fenêtres du belvédère, c’était sous sa forme matérielle. Avant qu’il ait réussi à se rendre invisible, il serait pris, et, cette fois, il n’échapperait pas à la vengeance populaire.

Malgré la résistance des agents, malgré les efforts du chef de police, la grille fut forcée, la maison envahie, les portes enfoncées, les fenêtres arrachées, les meubles jetés dans le jardin et dans la cour, les appareils du laboratoire mis en pièces. Puis les flammes jaillirent du rez-de-chaussée, gagnèrent l’étage supérieur, tourbillonnèrent au-dessus de la toiture, et bientôt le belvédère s’écroula dans la fournaise.

Quant à Wilhelm Storitz, c’est en vain qu’on l’avait cherché dans l’habitation, dans la cour, dans le jardin. Il n’y était pas, ou, du moins, il fut impossible de le découvrir.

Maintenant, l’incendie allumé en dix endroits anéantissait sa maison. Une heure après, il n’en restait plus que les quatre murs.

Peut-être valait-il mieux, en somme, qu’elle fût détruite. Qui sait s’il ne s’ensuivrait pas une détente des esprits, si la population ragzienne n’en arriverait pas à croire que Wilhelm Storitz, tout invisible qu’il fût, avait péri dans les flammes?

XV

Après la destruction de la maison Storitz, il m’a semblé que la surexcitation de Ragz s’était quelque peu calmée. On se rassurait en ville. Ainsi que je l’avais supposé, un certain nombre d’habitants inclinaient à croire que le “sorcier” se trouvait réellement dans sa demeure au moment où elle était envahie par la foule, et qu’il avait péri au milieu des flammes.

La vérité est qu’en fouillant les décombres, en remuant les cendres, on ne découvrit rien qui fût de nature à justifier cette opinion. Si Wilhelm Storitz avait assisté à l’incendie, c’était de quelque endroit où le feu ne pouvait l’atteindre.

Cependant, de nouvelles lettres reçues de Spremberg s’accordèrent sur ce point: c’est qu’il n’y avait pas reparu, que son serviteur Hermann n’y avait pas été signalé, et qu’on ignorait absolument où tous deux s’étaient réfugiés.

Par malheur, si un calme relatif régnait dans la ville, il n’en était pas ainsi à l’hôtel Roderich. L’état mental de notre pauvre Myra ne s’améliorait aucunement. Inconsciente, indifférente aux soins qu’on ne cessait de lui donner, elle ne reconnaissait personne. Aussi les médecins n’osaient-ils exprimer le moindre espoir.

Toutefois, bien qu’elle fût toujours d’une extrême faiblesse, sa vie ne paraissait pas menacée. Elle restait étendue sur son lit, presque sans mouvement, pâle comme une morte. Si l’on essayait de la soulever, des sanglots gonflaient sa poitrine, l’effroi se peignait dans ses yeux, ses bras se tordaient, des phrases décousues s’échappaient de ses lèvres. La mémoire lui revenait-elle alors? Revoyait-elle, au milieu des troubles de son esprit, les scènes de la soirée de fiançailles, les scènes de la cathédrale? Entendait-elle les menaces proférées contre elle et contre Marc? Il eût été désirable qu’il en fût ainsi, et que son intelligence eût conservé le souvenir du passé.

On voit quelle était l’existence de cette malheureuse famille. Mon frère ne quittait pas l’hôtel. Il restait près de Myra, avec le docteur, avec Mme Roderich, faisant prendre de sa main à la malade un peu de nourriture, cherchant sans cesse si quelque lueur de raison reparaissait dans son regard.

L’après-midi du 16, j’errais seul par les rues de la ville, au hasard. L’idée me vint de passer sur la rive droite du Danube. C’était une excursion toujours projetée, que les circonstances ne m’avaient pas encore permis de faire, et dont je ne profiterais guère, d’ailleurs, dans l’état d’esprit où je me trouvais. Je me dirigeai donc vers le pont, je traversai l’île Svendor, et je mis le pied sur la rive serbienne.

Ma promenade se prolongea plus que je n’en avais l’intention. Les horloges avaient sonné la demie de huit heures quand je revins au pont, après avoir dîné dans un cabaret serbe riverain du fleuve. Je ne sais quelle fantaisie me prit alors. Au lieu de rentrer directement, je ne franchis que la première partie du pont, et je descendis la grande allée centrale de l’île Svendor.

À peine avais-je fait une dizaine de pas, que j’aperçus M. Stepark. Il était seul, il m’aborda, et la conversation s’engagea aussitôt sur le sujet qui nous préoccupait tous les deux.

Notre promenade durait depuis une vingtaine de minutes, lorsque nous atteignîmes la pointe septentrionale de l’île. La nuit achevait de tomber, l’ombre s’épaississait sous les arbres et dans les allées désertes. Les chalets s’étaient fermés, et nous ne rencontrions plus personne.

L’heure était venue de rentrer à Ragz, et nous allions nous y décider, lorsque quelques paroles arrivèrent à nos oreilles.

Je m’arrêtai soudain, et j’arrêtai M. Stepark en le saisissant par le bras, puis, me penchant de manière à n’être entendu que de lui:

“Écoutez!… On parle… et cette voix… c’est la voix de Wilhelm Storitz.

— Wilhelm Storitz! répondit le chef de police sur le même ton.

— Oui.

— Il ne nous a pas aperçus.

— Non, la nuit égalise les chances et nous rend invisibles comme lui.”

Cependant la voix continuait à parvenir jusqu’à nous, indistincte, les voix plutôt, car il y avait sûrement deux interlocuteurs.

“Il n’est pas seul, murmura M. Stepark.

— Non… Son serviteur probablement.”

M. Stepark m’entraîna sous le couvert des arbres, en se courbant au ras du sol. Grâce à l’obscurité qui nous protégeait, peut-être pourrions-nous approcher les causeurs d’assez près pour entendre sans être vus.

Bientôt nous étions cachés à dix pas environ de l’endroit où devait se trouver Wilhelm Storitz. Naturellement nous ne vîmes personne, mais nous nous y attendions, et cela ne nous causa aucune déception.

Jamais pareille occasion ne s’était encore offerte de savoir où demeurait notre ennemi depuis l’incendie de sa maison, d’apprendre ce qu’il projetait, voire de s’emparer de sa personne.

Il ne pouvait soupçonner que nous fussions là, l’oreille tendue. À demi couchés entre les branches, osant à peine respirer, nous écoutions avec une indicible émotion les paroles échangées, plus ou moins distinctes selon que le maître et le serviteur s’éloignaient ou se rapprochaient en se promenant le long du massif.

Voici la première phrase qui nous arriva, prononcée par Wilhelm Storitz:

“Nous pourrons y entrer dès demain?…

— Dès demain, répondit son interlocuteur invisible – le serviteur Hermann selon toute vraisemblance –, et personne ne saura qui nous sommes.

— Depuis quand es-tu revenu à Ragz?

— Depuis ce matin.

— Bien… Et cette maison, elle est louée?…

— Sous un nom de fantaisie.

— Tu es certain que nous pouvons l’habiter au vu et au su de tous, que nous ne sommes pas connus à…”

Le nom de la ville qu’allait prononcer Wilhelm Storitz, à notre grande déception, il nous fut impossible de le distinguer. Mais, des mots entendus, il résultait ceci, que notre adversaire comptait reprendre l’apparence humaine dans un délai plus ou moins long. Pourquoi commettait-il cette imprudence? Je supposai que son invisibilité ne pouvait être maintenue au-delà d’un certain temps sans devenir préjudiciable à sa santé. Je donne pour ce qu’elle vaut cette explication qui me paraît plausible, mais que je n’eus jamais l’occasion de vérifier.

Lorsque les voix se rapprochèrent, Hermann disait, achevant une phrase commencée:

“La police de Ragz ne nous découvrira pas sous ces noms-là.”

La police de Ragz?… C’était donc dans une ville hongroise qu’ils allaient encore habiter?

Puis le bruit des pas diminua, et ils s’éloignèrent, ce qui permit à M. Stepark de me dire:

“Quelle ville?… quels noms?… Voilà ce qu’il faudrait apprendre.”

Avant que je n’eusse eu le temps de répondre, les deux causeurs se rapprochèrent et firent halte à quelques pas de nous…

“Ce voyage de Spremberg, interrogeait Hermann, est-il donc absolument nécessaire?

— Absolument, puisque c’est là que mes fonds sont déposés. Ici, d’ailleurs, je ne me montrerais pas impunément. Tandis que là-bas…

— Auriez-vous l’intention de vous y laisser voir en chair et en os?

— Le moyen de l’éviter?… Personne ne paierait, j’imagine, sans voir le preneur.”

Ainsi donc, ce que j’avais prévu se réalisait. Storitz était acculé à une de ces situations où l’invisibilité cesse d’être un avantage. Il manquait d’argent, et, pour s’en procurer, il lui fallait renoncer à son pouvoir. Cependant, il continuait:

“Le pis, c’est que je ne sais comment faire. Ces imbéciles ont détruit mon laboratoire, et je ne possède pas un seul flacon n° 2. Heureusement, ils n’ont pu découvrir la cachette du jardin, mais elle est sous les décombres, et j’ai besoin de toi pour la dégager.

— À vos ordres, fit Hermann.

— Viens après-demain matin vers dix heures. Le jour ou la nuit, c’est la même chose pour nous, et au moins nous y verrons clair.

— Pourquoi pas demain?

— Demain, j’ai autre chose à faire. Je médite un coup de ma façon, dont ne s’applaudira pas quelqu’un que je sais.”

Les deux interlocuteurs reprirent leur promenade. Quand ils revinrent:

“Non, je ne quitterai pas Ragz, disait Wilhelm Storitz d’une voix où grondait la colère, tant que ma haine contre cette famille ne sera pas assouvie, tant que Myra et ce Français…”

Il n’acheva pas, ou plutôt ce fut comme un rugissement qui s’échappa de sa poitrine. À ce moment, il passait tout près de nous. Peut-être eût-il suffi d’étendre la main pour le saisir. Mais notre attention fut alors attirée par ces paroles d’Hermann:

“On sait maintenant à Ragz que vous avez le pouvoir de vous rendre invisible, mais on ignore par quel moyen.

— Et cela, on l’ignorera toujours, répondit Wilhelm Storitz. Ragz n’en a pas fini avec moi. Parce qu’ils ont brûlé ma maison, ils croient qu’ils ont brûlé mes secrets!… Les fous!… Non, Ragz n’évitera pas ma vengeance, et je n’en laisserai pas pierre sur pierre!…”

Cette phrase si menaçante pour la ville était à peine prononcée, que les branches du massif s’écartaient violemment. M. Stepark venait de s’élancer dans la direction des voix. Tout à coup, il cria:

“J’en tiens un, monsieur Vidal. À vous l’autre!”

Pas de doute, ses mains s’étaient abattues sur un corps parfaitement tangible, sinon visible. Mais il fut repoussé avec une extrême violence et serait tombé si je ne l’eusse retenu par le bras.

Je crus alors que nous allions être attaqués dans des conditions très désavantageuses, puisque nous ne pouvions voir nos agresseurs. Il n’en fut rien. Un rire ironique retentit sur la gauche, et nous entendîmes un bruit de pas qui s’éloignaient.

“Coup manqué! s’écria M. Stepark, mais nous sommes sûrs, maintenant, que leur invisibilité ne les empêche pas d’être appréhendés au corps!”

Par malheur, ils nous avaient échappé, et nous ignorions le lieu de leur retraite. M. Stepark n’en paraissait pas moins enchanté.

“Nous les tenons, dit-il à voix basse, tandis que nous regagnions le quai Batthyani. Nous connaissons le point faible de l’adversaire et nous savons que Storitz doit se rendre après-demain sur les ruines de sa maison. Cela nous donne deux moyens de le vaincre. Si l’un échoue, l’autre réussira.”

En quittant M. Stepark, je rentrai à l’hôtel, et, tandis que Mme Roderich et Marc veillaient au chevet de Myra, je m’enfermai avec le docteur. Il importait qu’il fût immédiatement mis au courant de ce qui venait de se passer à l’île Svendor.

Je lui dis tout, sans oublier la conclusion optimiste de M. Stepark, mais non sans ajouter que je m’en sentais fort peu rassuré. Le docteur estima que devant les menaces de Wilhelm Storitz, devant sa volonté de poursuivre son œuvre de vengeance contre la famille Roderich et contre la ville entière, l’obligation de quitter Ragz s’imposait. Il fallait partir, partir secrètement, et le plus tôt serait le mieux.

“Je suis de votre avis, dis-je, et ne ferai que cette seule objection: Myra est-elle à même de supporter les fatigues d’un voyage?

— La santé de ma fille n’est point altérée, me répondit le docteur. Elle ne souffre pas. Sa raison seule a été atteinte.

— Elle la retrouvera avec le temps, affirmai-je énergiquement, et surtout dans un autre pays, où elle n’aura plus rien à craindre.

— Hélas! s’écria le docteur, le danger sera-t-il évité par notre départ? Wilhelm Storitz ne nous suivra-t-il pas?

— Non, si nous gardons le secret sur la date du départ et sur le but du voyage.

— Le secret!…” murmura tristement le docteur Roderich.

Comme mon frère, il se demandait si un secret pouvait être gardé vis-à-vis de Wilhelm Storitz, si, en ce moment, celui-ci n’était pas dans ce cabinet, entendant ce que nous disions et préparant quelque nouvelle machination.

Bref, le départ fut décidé. Mme Roderich n’y fit pas d’objection. Il lui tardait que Myra eût été transportée dans un autre milieu.

Marc l’approuva de son côté. Je ne lui parlai pas de notre aventure de l’île Svendor. Cela me parut inutile. Par contre, je la racontai au capitaine Haralan. Lui non plus ne fit aucune objection à notre projet de voyage. Il se contenta de me demander:

“Vous accompagnerez sans doute votre frère?

— Puis-je faire autrement, et ma présence n’est-elle pas indispensable près de lui, comme la vôtre près de…

— Je ne partirai pas, répondit-il du ton d’un homme dont la résolution est absolument irrévocable.

— Vous ne partirez pas?…

— Non, je veux, je dois rester à Ragz, puisqu’il est à Ragz, et j’ai le pressentiment que je fais bien d’y rester.”

Il n’y avait pas à discuter, et je ne discutai pas.

“Soit, capitaine.

— Je compte sur vous, mon cher Vidal, pour me remplacer auprès de ma famille, qui est déjà la vôtre.

— Comptez sur moi”, répondis-je.

Je m’occupai aussitôt des préparatifs du départ. Dans la journée, je me procurai deux berlines de voyage très confortables. Puis j’allai voir M.

Stepark que j’instruisis de nos projets.

“Vous faites bien, me dit-il, et il est regrettable que toute la ville ne puisse en faire autant!”

Le chef de police était visiblement préoccupé. Je trouvai que ce n’était pas sans motif, après ce que nous avions entendu la veille.

Je fus de retour à l’hôtel Roderich vers sept heures, et je m’assurai que tout était prêt.

À huit heures, arrivèrent les berlines. Dans l’une prendraient place M. et Mme Roderich avec leur fille. Marc et moi, nous monterions dans la seconde, qui sortirait de la ville par un chemin différent, afin de ne point éveiller l’attention.

C’est alors que se produisit le plus imprévu, hélas! le plus terrible des coups de théâtre.

Les voitures nous attendaient. La première stationnait devant la porte principale, l’autre devant la petite porte, au bout du jardin. Le docteur et mon frère montèrent auprès de Myra pour la transporter dans l’une des berlines.

Frappés d’épouvante, ils s’arrêtèrent sur le seuil. Le lit était vide. Myra avait disparu!

XVI

Myra disparue!…

Lorsque ce cri retentit dans l’hôtel, il sembla qu’on n’en comprît pas d’abord la signification. Disparue? Cela n’avait pas de sens. C’était invraisemblable.

Une demi-heure plus tôt, Mme Roderich et Marc étaient encore dans la chambre où Myra reposait sur son lit, déjà revêtue de son costume de voyage, calme, la respiration régulière à faire croire qu’elle dormait. Un peu auparavant, elle avait pris quelque nourriture de la main de Marc, qui était ensuite descendu pour le dîner. Le repas achevé, le docteur et mon frère étaient remontés afin de la transporter dans la berline.

C’est alors que se produit le coup de théâtre. Ils ne la voient plus sur son lit. La chambre est vide!

“Myra!” s’écrie Marc, en se précipitant vers la fenêtre, dont il saisit la poignée. Mais la fenêtre résiste. Elle est close, L’enlèvement, si enlèvement il y a, n’a pas été fait par cette voie.

Mme Roderich accourt, puis le capitaine Haralan, et des appels sont jetés à travers l’hôtel:

“Myra!… Myra!…”

Qu’elle ne réponde pas, cela se comprend, et ce n’est pas une réponse qu’on attend d’elle. Mais qu’elle ne soit plus dans sa chambre, comment l’expliquer? Est-il possible qu’elle ait quitté son lit, traversé la chambre de sa mère, descendu l’escalier, sans avoir été aperçue?

Je m’occupais à disposer les menus bagages dans la berline lorsque j’entendis tout à coup des cris. Je remontai au premier étage.

Le docteur et mon frère, qui répétait d’une voix brisée le nom de sa femme, allaient et venaient comme des fous.

“Myra?… demandai-je, que veux-tu dire, Marc?”

Le docteur eut à peine la force de me répondre:

“Ma fille… disparue!”

Il fallut déposer sur son lit Mme Roderich qui avait perdu connaissance. Le capitaine Haralan, la figure convulsée, les yeux hagards, vint à moi, et me dit:

“Lui… lui toujours!”

Cependant j’essayais de réfléchir. L’opinion du capitaine Haralan était difficilement soutenable. Il n’était pas admissible que Wilhelm Storitz eût réussi à s’introduire dans l’hôtel, malgré les précautions prises. Évidemment, il était à la rigueur concevable qu’il eût profité du désordre inévitable que cause un départ. Mais il aurait fallu pour cela qu’il se tînt à l’affût en guettant le moment propice, et qu’il opérât avec une rapidité prodigieuse.

D’ailleurs, même en acceptant toutes ces hypothèses, un enlèvement demeurait inexplicable. Je n’avais pas, en effet, quitté la porte de la galerie devant laquelle stationnait la berline. Comment Myra aurait-elle pu franchir cette porte pour gagner celle du jardin sans être vue de moi? Wilhelm Storitz invisible, soit! Mais elle?…

Je redescendis dans la galerie et j'appelai le domestique. La porte du jardin donnant sur le boulevard Tékéli fut fermée à double tour, et j'en retirai la clef. Puis la maison tout entière, les combles, les caves, les annexes, la tour jusqu'à la terrasse, je la parcourus en ne laissant pas un coin inexploré.

Après la maison, ce fut le jardin…

Je ne trouvai personne.

Je revins près de Marc. Mon pauvre frère pleurait à chaudes larmes, il éclatait en sanglots.

Prévenir le chef de la police était la première chose à faire à mon avis.

“Je cours à la Maison de Ville. Venez avec moi”, dis-je au capitaine Haralan.

La berline attendait toujours. Nous y prîmes place. Dès que la grande porte nous eut livré passage, la voiture partit au galop de son attelage et en quelques minutes arriva sur la place Kurtz.

M. Stepark était encore dans son cabinet. Je le mis au courant. Cet homme habitué à ne s'étonner de rien ne put dissimuler sa stupéfaction.

“Mlle Roderich disparue!… s'écria-t-il.

— Oui, répondis-je. Cela paraît impossible, et cela est! En fuite ou enlevée, elle n'est plus là!

— Il y a du Storitz là-dessous”, murmura M. Stepark. L'opinion du chef de police était la même que celle d'Haralan. Après un instant de silence, il ajouta:

“C’est sans doute le coup de maître dont il parlait à son âme damnée.”

M. Stepark avait raison. Oui, Wilhelm Storitz nous avait prévenus, en quelque sorte, du mal qu’il se proposait de nous faire. Et nous, insensés, nous n’avions pris aucune mesure pour nous défendre.

“Messieurs, dit M. Stepark, voulez-vous m’accompagner à l’hôtel?

— À l’instant, répondis-je.

— Je suis à vous, messieurs… Le temps de donner quelques ordres.”

M.

Stepark fit appeler un brigadier et lui commanda de diriger sur l’hôtel Roderich une escouade de police, qui devrait y demeurer en surveillance toute la nuit. Il eut ensuite avec le sous-directeur de la police un long conciliabule à voix basse, puis la berline nous ramena tous trois chez le docteur.

L’hôtel fut en vain visité une seconde fois. Mais une observation fut faite par M. Stepark, dès son entrée dans la chambre de Myra.

“Monsieur Vidal, me dit-il, ne sentez-vous pas une odeur particulière, et qui a déjà affecté notre odorat quelque part?”

En effet, il restait dans l’air comme une vague senteur. Le souvenir me revint. Je m’écriai:

“L’odeur de cette liqueur contenue dans la fiole qui s’est brisée, monsieur Stepark, au moment où vous alliez la prendre dans le laboratoire de Storitz?

— C’est cela, monsieur Vidal, et ce fait autorise bien des hypothèses. Si cette liqueur est, comme je le suppose, celle qui produit l’invisibilité, peut-être Wilhelm Storitz en a-t-il fait absorber à Mlle Roderich et l’a-t-il emportée aussi invisible que lui-même.”

Nous étions atterrés. Oui, les choses avaient dû se passer ainsi. Il me paraissait certain, maintenant, que Wilhelm Storitz était dans son laboratoire pendant la perquisition et qu’il avait brisé cette fiole, dont la liqueur s’était si vite évaporée, plutôt que de la laisser tomber entre nos mains. Oui! C’était bien cette odeur si caractéristique dont nous retrouvions ici la trace. Oui! Wilhelm Storitz, à la faveur des allées et venues nécessitées par le départ, était entré dans cette chambre, et il avait enlevé Myra Roderich.

Quelle nuit, moi près de mon frère, le docteur près de Mme Roderich! Avec quelle impatience nous attendions le jour!

Le jour?… Et à quoi nous servirait qu’il fit jour?… La lumière existait-elle pour Wilhelm Storitz? Ne savait-il pas s’entourer d’une nuit impénétrable?

M. Stepark ne nous quitta qu’à l’aube pour se rendre à la Résidence. Avant de partir, il me prit à part et me tint ce discours inexplicable, inexplicable surtout en de telles circonstances:

“Un seul mot, monsieur Vidal, me dit-il. Ne perdez pas courage, car, ou je me trompe fort, ou vous touchez à la fin de vos peines.”

Je ne répondis pas à ces paroles encourageantes qui me parurent dénuées de sens, et je me contentai de regarder le chef de police d’un air stupide. Avais-je entendu seulement? J’étais complètement désemparé, à bout de force et d’énergie, et il n’y avait rien à tirer de moi en ce moment.

Vers huit heures, le gouverneur vint assurer au docteur que tout serait fait dans le but de retrouver sa fille. M. Roderich et moi eûmes un sourire d’amère incrédulité. Que pouvait le gouverneur, en vérité?

Cependant, dès les premières heures de la matinée, la nouvelle de l’enlèvement avait couru les divers quartiers de Ragz, et, l’effet qu’elle produisit, je renonce à le dépeindre.

Avant neuf heures, le lieutenant Armgard se présenta à l’hôtel et se mit à la disposition de son camarade. Pour quoi faire, grand Dieu!

Il est à croire que le capitaine Haralan n’estima pas comme moi inutile cette offre amicale, car il remercia brièvement son camarade. Puis, se coiffant de son kolbach, bouclant le ceinturon de son sabre, il ajouta cet unique mot:

“Viens.”

Pendant que les deux officiers se dirigeaient vers la porte, je fut pris d’un irrésistible désir de les suivre. Je proposai à Marc de nous accompagner. Me comprit-il? Je ne sais. En tout cas, il ne me fit aucune réponse.

Quand je sortis, les deux officiers étaient déjà sur le quai. Les rares passants regardaient l’hôtel avec un effroi mêlé d’horreur. N’était-ce pas de là que s’échappait cette tempête d’épouvante qui bouleversait la ville?

Lorsque je rejoignis le lieutenant Armgard et le capitaine Haralan, ce dernier me regarda, mais on ne m’aurait pas étonné en m’affirmant qu’il ne s’était pas aperçu de ma présence.

“Vous venez avec nous, monsieur Vidal? me demanda le lieutenant Armgard.

— Oui. Vous allez?…”

Le lieutenant répondit par un geste d’ignorance… Où on allait?… Au hasard, sans doute. Et le hasard n’était-il pas, en effet, le plus sûr guide que nous puissions suivre? Au bout de quelques pas, le capitaine Haralan, s’arrêtant brusquement, demanda d’une voix brève:

“Quelle heure est-il?

— Neuf heures et quart”, répondit son ami après avoir consulté sa montre. Nous nous remîmes en route.

Nous marchions d’un pas incertain, sans échanger une parole. Après avoir traversé la place Magyare et remonté la rue du Prince-Miloch, nous fîmes le tour de la place Saint-Michel sous ses arcades. Parfois, le capitaine Haralan s’arrêtait comme si ses pieds eussent été cloués au sol, et de nouveau il demandait l’heure. “Neuf heures vingt-cinq, neuf heures et demie, dix heures moins vingt”, répondit successivement son camarade. Sitôt le renseignement obtenu, le capitaine reprenait sa marche indécise.

Tournant à gauche, nous passâmes derrière le chevet de la cathédrale. Après une courte hésitation, le capitaine Haralan s’engagea dans la rue Bihar.

Il était comme mort, ce quartier aristocratique de Ragz; à peine quelques passants hâtifs, la plupart des hôtels fenêtres closes, ainsi qu’en un jour de deuil public.

À l’extrémité de la rue, le boulevard Tékéli nous apparut dans toute son étendue. Il était désert ou plutôt déserté. On le fuyait depuis l’incendie de la maison Storitz.

Quelle direction allait choisir le capitaine Haralan, vers le haut de la ville, du côté du château, ou vers le quai Batthyani, du côté du Danube?

Une fois de plus, il s’était arrêté, comme incertain du parti qu’il devait prendre. La question habituelle tomba de ses lèvres:

“Quelle heure est-il, Armgard?

— Dix heures moins dix, répondit le lieutenant.

— C’est l’heure”, prononça Haralan, qui remonta le boulevard d’un pas rapide.

Nous passâmes devant la grille de la maison Storitz. Le capitaine n’eut pas un regard pour elle. Du même train, il contourna la propriété et ne fit halte que parvenu au chemin de ronde dont le jardin était séparé par un mur de deux mètres cinquante environ.

“Aidez-moi”, dit-il, en montrant de la main le sommet du mur.

Ce mot valait toutes les explications du monde. Je compris le but du malheureux frère de Myra.

Dix heures, n’était-ce pas l’heure fixée par Storitz lui-même, lors de la conversation que M. Stepark et moi nous avions entendue l’avant-veille? N’en avais-je pas instruit le capitaine Haralan? Oui, en ce moment, le monstre était là, derrière ce mur, en train de découvrir l’orifice de la cachette qui recelait la réserve de ces substances inconnues dont il faisait un si malfaisant usage. Réussirions-nous à le surprendre pendant qu’il s’activerait à ce travail? En vérité, ce n’était guère probable. Mais n’importe, il y avait là une occasion unique qu’il ne fallait à aucun prix laisser échapper.

Nous aidant les uns les autres, nous eûmes franchi le mur en quelques minutes, et nous retombâmes de l’autre côté, dans une allée étroite bordée de massifs touffus. Ni Storitz, ni personne n’avait pu nous apercevoir.

“Restez là”, commanda le capitaine Haralan, qui, longeant le mur de clôture dans la direction de la maison, disparut bientôt à nos regards.

Un instant, nous demeurâmes immobiles, puis, cédant à un irrésistible instinct de curiosité, nous nous mîmes en marche à notre tour. À travers le massif dont le feuillage épais nous dérobait à tous les yeux, passant en nous courbant sous les branches inférieures, étouffant le bruit de nos pas, nous commençâmes à nous rapprocher, nous aussi, de la maison.

Elle nous apparut quand nous fûmes parvenus à la lisière du massif. Un espace découvert, large d’une vingtaine de mètres, nous en séparait. Aplatis contre le sol, retenant notre respiration, nous regardâmes avidement.

Il ne restait plus que des pans de murailles noircies par les flammes, au pied desquelles gisaient des pierres, des morceaux de charpentes carbonisées, des ferrures tordues, des tas de cendres, des débris de mobilier.

Nous contemplions cet amoncellement de choses détruites. Ah! que n’avait-on brûlé cet Allemand maudit comme on avait brûlé sa maison, et avec lui le secret de l’effroyable invention!

Le lieutenant et moi, nous fîmes, des yeux, le tour de l’espace découvert, et soudain nous tressaillîmes violemment. À moins de trente pas de nous, nous venions d’apercevoir le capitaine Haralan, aux aguets comme nous-mêmes à la lisière du taillis. À l’endroit où notre compagnon s’était arrêté, le massif se rapprochait par une courbe harmonieuse de l’angle de la maison, dont, seule, une allée large de six mètres environ le séparait. C’est vers cet angle, le plus proche de lui, que le capitaine Haralan tenait les yeux fixés. Il ne faisait pas un mouvement. Replié sur lui-même, les muscles tendus, prêt à bondir, il ressemblait à un fauve à l’affût.

Nous suivîmes la direction de ses regards, et nous comprîmes aussitôt ce qui les attirait. Un singulier phénomène se passait là, en effet. Bien qu’on ne vît personne, les décombres étaient animés de mouvements étranges. Lentement. prudemment, comme si les travailleurs eussent voulu éviter d’attirer l’attention, les pierres, les ferrures, les mille débris divers amoncelés en ce point étaient déplacés, repoussés, mis en tas.

Étreints d’une mystérieuse épouvante, nous regardions, les yeux exorbités. La vérité nous éblouissait. Wilhelm Storitz était là. Si les ouvriers étaient invisibles, leur ouvrage ne l’était pas…

Tout à coup, un cri retentit, poussé par une voix furieuse… De notre place, nous voyons le capitaine Haralan s’élancer et franchir l’allée d’un seul bond… Il retombe au bord des ruines et semble se heurter à un obstacle invisible… Il avance, il recule, ouvre les bras et les referme, il se courbe et se redresse, comme un lutteur combattant corps à corps.

“À moi! crie le capitaine Haralan. Je le tiens!”

Le lieutenant Armgard et moi, nous précipitons vers lui.

“Je le tiens, le misérable… Je le tiens… répète-t-il. À moi, Vidal!… À moi, Armgard!”

Soudain, je me sens repoussé par un bras que je ne vois pas, tandis qu’une bruyante respiration m’arrive en pleine figure.

Oui, c’est bien une lutte corps à corps. Il est là, l’être invisible… Wilhelm Storitz ou tout autre!… Qui que ce soit, nos mains l’ont saisi, nous ne le lâcherons plus et nous saurons le contraindre à dire où est Myra.

Ainsi donc, comme l’a déjà constaté M. Stepark, s’il a le pouvoir de détruire sa visibilité, du moins sa matérialité subsiste. Ce n’est pas un fantôme, c’est un corps, dont nous essayons – au prix de quels efforts! – de paralyser les mouvements.

Nous y parvenons enfin. Je tiens par un bras notre invisible adversaire. Le lieutenant Armgard le tient par l’autre.

“Où est Myra?… où est Myra?…” interroge d’une voix fiévreuse le capitaine Haralan.

Aucune réponse. Le misérable lutte et cherche à se dégager. Nous avons affaire à un être très vigoureux qui se débat violemment pour nous échapper. S’il y réussit, il s’élancera à travers le jardin ou les ruines, il gagnera le boulevard, et on devra renoncer à l’espoir de jamais le reprendre.

“Diras-tu où est Myra? répète le capitaine Haralan au comble de la fureur.

Enfin, ces mots se font entendre:

“Jamais!… jamais!…”

Autant que peut nous permettre de l’affirmer le timbre de cette voix haletante, c’est bien Wilhelm Storitz!

Cette lutte ne peut durer. Nous sommes trois contre un, et si robuste que soit notre adversaire, il ne saurait nous résister longtemps. À cet instant, le lieutenant Armgard est repoussé et tombe sur la pelouse. Presque aussitôt je me sens saisi par la jambe. Je suis littéralement culbuté et contraint de lâcher le bras que je tenais. Le capitaine Haralan est violemment frappé en plein visage. Il chancelle et bat l’air de ses mains étendues.

“Il m’échappe!… Il m’échappe!…” rugit-il plutôt qu’il ne crie.

À l’improviste, Hermann, sans doute, est venu au secours de son maître.

Je me relève, tandis que le lieutenant, aux trois quarts évanoui, reste étendu sur le sol, et je cours prêter main-forte au capitaine… Tout est inutile. Nous n’étreignons plus que le vide. Wilhelm Storitz s’est enfui!…

Mais alors, voici qu’à la lisière des massifs des hommes apparaissent. D’autres entrent par la grille, d’autres franchissent les murs, d’autres sortent des ruines de la maison. Il en surgit de tous côtés, de partout. Ils sont des centaines. Ils se tiennent coude à coude, sur trois rangs, le premier rang portant l’uniforme de la police de Ragz, les deux derniers l’uniforme de l’infanterie des Confins militaires. En un instant, ils forment un vaste cercle qui se rétrécit par degrés…

Je comprends les paroles optimistes de M. Stepark. Instruit des projets de Storitz par Storitz lui-même, il a pris ses mesures en conséquence, et avec une virtuosité dont je suis émerveillé. De ces hommes, au nombre de plusieurs centaines, nous n’avons pas vu un seul en pénétrant dans le jardin.

Le cercle dont nous semblons former le centre se resserre, se resserre… Non, Storitz n’échappera pas! Il est pris!…

Il le comprend bien, le misérable, car, tout près de nous, une exclamation de rage retentit. Puis, au moment même où le lieutenant Armgard, qui commence à revenir à lui, essaie de se relever, son sabre est brusquement tiré hors du fourreau. Une invisible main le brandit. Cette main, c’est celle de Wilhelm Storitz. La colère l’emporte. Puisqu’il ne peut fuir, il se vengera du moins, il tuera le capitaine Haralan…

À l’exemple de son ennemi, celui-ci a mis sabre au clair. Tous deux sont face à face comme dans un duel, l’un qu’on voit, l’autre qu’on ne voit pas!… Les deux sabres sont engagés, l’un tenu par une main visible, l’autre tenu par une main qu’on ne peut voir!…

Trop rapide est cet étrange combat pour que nous puissions intervenir.

Il est évident que Wilhelm Storitz connaît le maniement du sabre. Quant au capitaine Haralan, il attaque sans essayer de se défendre. Par un coup de manchette rapidement riposté, il est atteint à l’épaule. Mais son arme a foncé en avant… Un cri de douleur retentit… Les herbes de la pelouse s’inclinent…

Ce n’est pas le vent qui les courbe. Ainsi que nous allons bientôt en être sûrs, c’est le poids d’un corps humain, le poids du corps de Wilhelm Storitz transpercé d’outre en outre, en pleine poitrine… Un flot de sang a jailli, et, en même temps que la vie se retire, voici que ce corps invisible reprend peu à peu sa forme matérielle, voici qu’il reparaît dans les suprêmes convulsions de la mort.

Le capitaine Haralan s’est jeté sur Wilhelm Storitz. Il lui crie:

“Myra?… Où est Myra?…”

Mais il n’y a plus là qu’un cadavre, la figure convulsée, les yeux ouverts, le regard encore menaçant, le cadavre visible de l’étrange personnage qui fut Wilhelm Storitz!

XVII

Ainsi périt tragiquement Wilhelm Storitz. Hélas! sa mort survenait trop tard. Bien que la famille Roderich n'eût désormais plus rien à craindre, cette mort aggravait la situation plutôt qu'elle ne l'améliorait, puisqu'elle nous faisait perdre l'espoir de retrouver Myra.

Accablé par la responsabilité qui pesait sur lui, le capitaine Haralan contemplait d'un air morne son ennemi abattu. Enfin, prenant son parti de ce malheur irréparable, il eut un geste de désespoir et s'éloigna à pas lents dans la direction de l'hôtel Roderich, afin de mettre les siens au courant de ces déplorables événements.

Le lieutenant Armgard et moi restâmes sur place, au contraire, en compagnie de M. Stepark, venu, comme par miracle, nous ne savions d'où. Le silence était parfait, malgré ces centaines d'hommes, dont la curiosité était portée au paroxysme, qui se tassaient autour de nous, se serraient les uns contre les autres, s'efforçant de mieux voir.

Tous les regards étaient fixés sur le cadavre. Un peu retourné sur le côté gauche, ses vêtements souillés de sang, la face décolorée, la main droite tenant encore le sabre du lieutenant, le bras gauche à demi replié, Wilhelm Storitz était bon pour la tombe, dont son malfaisant pouvoir n'avait pas réussi à l'affranchir.

"C'est bien lui!" murmura M. Stepark, après l'avoir longuement regardé.

Les agents s'étaient approchés, non sans quelque appréhension. Ils le reconnurent aussi. Pour joindre à la certitude de la vue celle du toucher, M. Stepark tâta le cadavre de la tête aux pieds.

“Mort… bien mort!” dit-il, en se relevant.

Le chef de police donna un ordre, et aussitôt une dizaine d’hommes attaquèrent les décombres au point même où, avant la mort de Storitz, ceux-ci avaient paru animés de si étranges mouvements.

“D’après la conversation que nous avons surprise, me dit M. Stepark, répondant à une question que je lui posais, c’est là que doit se trouver la cachette dans laquelle le misérable recelait la substance qui lui permettait de nous braver. Je ne m’en irai pas d’ici avant d’avoir découvert cette cachette et avant d’avoir détruit tout ce qu’elle contient. Storitz est mort. Dût la science me maudire, je veux que son secret meure avec lui.”

En moi-même, je donnais pleinement raison à M. Stepark. Bien que la découverte d’Otto Storitz fût de nature à exciter l’intérêt d’un ingénieur, je ne pouvais lui reconnaître aucune utilité pratique, et je comprenais qu’elle favorisait seulement les plus mauvaises passions de l’humanité.

Bientôt une petite plaque de fer fut mise à nu. On la souleva, et les premières marches d’un étroit escalier nous apparurent.

À ce moment, une main saisit la mienne, tandis qu’une voix plaintive se faisait entendre.

“Pitié!… Pitié!…” disait-elle.

Je me retournai, mais je ne vis personne. Pourtant, ma main était toujours prisonnière; et la voix suppliante continuait à se faire entendre.

Les agents avaient interrompu leur travail. Tout le monde s’était tourné de mon côté. Avec une anxiété facile à comprendre, j’étendis celle de mes mains demeurée libre et j’explorai l’espace autour de moi.

À la hauteur de ma taille, mes doigts rencontrèrent une chevelure, et, plus bas, frôlèrent un visage inondé de larmes. Évidemment, il y avait là un homme que je ne pouvais voir, à genoux, et qui pleurait.

“Qui êtes-vous? balbutiai-je avec effort, la gorge étranglée par l’émotion.

— Hermann, me répondit-on.

— Que voulez-vous?”

En quelques phrases hachées, l’invisible serviteur de Storitz nous dit qu’il avait entendu M. Stepark formuler ses projets de destruction, et que, si ces projets étaient mis à exécution, il lui fallait renoncer à reprendre jamais l’apparence humaine. Que deviendrait-il, condamné ainsi à rester toujours seul au milieu des autres hommes? Il suppliait que le chef de police, avant de détruire les flacons qu’il trouverait dans la cachette, lui permît d’absorber le contenu de l’un d’eux.

M. Stepark promit d’y consentir, en prenant toutefois les précautions qui s’imposaient, Hermann ayant des comptes à régler avec la justice. Par son ordre, quatre agents robustes appréhendèrent l’invisible personnage. On pouvait être certain qu’ils ne le lâcheraient pas.

M. Stepark et moi, précédant les quatre agents qui maîtrisaient le prisonnier, nous descendîmes l’escalier. Quelques marches nous conduisirent dans un caveau que la lumière venue par la trappe éclairait faiblement. Là, sur une étroite étagère, étaient alignés une série de flacons étiquetés, les uns n° 1, les autres n° 2.

Hermann, d’un ton impatient, réclama un de ces derniers, que lui tendit le chef de police. Alors nous vîmes, avec une indicible stupéfaction – bien que nous dussions nous attendre à ce spectacle –, le flacon décrire tout seul une courbe dans l’air, puis se renverser, comme si quelqu’un, l’ayant porté à sa bouche, en eût avidement absorbé le contenu.

Ce fut aussitôt une étrange merveille. À mesure qu’il buvait, Hermann semblait sortir du néant. On distingua d’abord une vapeur légère dans la pénombre du caveau, puis les contours s’affirmèrent, et j’eus enfin devant moi ce même individu qui m’avait suivi le soir de mon arrivée à Ragz.

Sur un signe de M. Stepark, le reste des flacons fut immédiatement détruit, et les liquides qu’ils contenaient, répandus sur le sol, se volatilisèrent instantanément. Cette exécution terminée, nous remontâmes au jour.

“Et maintenant, qu’allez-vous faire, monsieur Stepark? interrogea le lieutenant Armgard.

— Je vais faire transporter ce corps à la Maison de Ville, lui fut-il répondu.

— Publiquement? demandai-je.

— Publiquement, dit le chef de police. Il faut que tout Ragz sache que Wilhelm Storitz est mort. On ne le croira qu’après avoir vu passer son cadavre.

— Et après qu’il sera enterré, ajouta le lieutenant.

— Si on l’enterre, dit M. Stepark.

— Si on l’enterre?… répétai-je.

— Oui, expliqua le chef de police, car il vaudrait mieux, selon moi, brûler ce cadavre et en jeter les cendres au vent, comme on faisait des sorciers du Moyen Âge.”

M.

Stepark envoya chercher une civière, et partit avec le plus grand nombre d’agents, en emmenant son prisonnier redevenu un vieux bonhomme très banal depuis qu’il avait cessé d’être invisible. De notre côté, le lieutenant Armgard et moi nous rentrâmes à l’hôtel Roderich.

Le capitaine Haralan était déjà près de son père, auquel il avait tout raconté. Dans l’état où se trouvait Mme Roderich, il avait paru prudent de ne lui rien dire. La mort de Wilhelm Storitz ne lui rendait pas sa fille.

Quant à mon frère, lui non plus ne savait rien encore. Il fallait cependant le mettre au courant, et c’est pourquoi nous le fîmes prévenir que nous l’attendions dans le cabinet du docteur.

Ce ne fut pas avec le sentiment de la vengeance satisfaite qu’il accueillit la nouvelle que nous lui apportions. Il éclata en sanglots, tandis que ces paroles désespérées s’échappaient de ses lèvres:

“Il est mort!… Vous l’avez tué!… Il est mort sans avoir parlé!… Myra!… Ma pauvre Myra!… Je ne la reverrai plus!…”

À cette explosion de douleur, que pouvait-on répondre?…

Je le tentai pourtant. Non, il ne fallait pas renoncer à tout espoir. Nous ne savions pas où était Myra, mais un homme le savait, Hermann, le serviteur de Wilhelm Storitz. Or, on tenait cet homme sous les verrous. On l’interrogerait, et, comme il n’avait pas le même intérêt que son maître à se taire, il parlerait… On l’y déciderait, fût-ce au prix d’une fortune… On l’y forcerait, au besoin, dût-on le mettre à la torture… Myra serait rendue à sa famille, à son mari, et la raison lui reviendrait à force de soins, de tendresse et d’amour…

Marc n’entendait rien. Il ne voulait rien entendre. Pour lui, le seul qui fût capable de parler était mort. On n’aurait pas dû le tuer avant de lui avoir arraché son secret.

Je ne savais comment calmer mon frère, lorsque notre conversation fut interrompue par un tumulte du dehors. Nous nous précipitâmes à la fenêtre qui s’ouvrait à l’angle du boulevard et du quai Batthyani.

Qu’y avait-il donc encore?… Dans la disposition d’esprit où nous étions, je crois que rien n’aurait pu nous surprendre, quand même il se fût agi de la résurrection de Wilhelm Storitz!

Ce n’était que son cortège mortuaire. Le cadavre, étendu sur une civière, était porté par quatre agents accompagnés d’une nombreuse escouade. Ainsi, Ragz allait savoir que Wilhelm Storitz était mort et que cette période de terreur avait pris fin.

M. Stepark avait voulu le montrer partout, ce cadavre. Après avoir suivi le quai Batthyani jusqu’à la rue Étienne-1er, le cortège devait traverser le marché Coloman, puis les quartiers les plus fréquentés, avant de s’arrêter à la Maison de Ville.

À mon avis, il eût mieux fait de ne point passer devant l’hôtel Roderich.

Mon frère nous avait rejoints à la fenêtre. Il poussa un cri de désespoir en apercevant ce corps ensanglanté, auquel il aurait voulu rendre la vie, fût-ce au prix de la sienne.

La foule s’abandonnait aux plus bruyantes démonstrations. Vivant, Wilhelm Storitz eût été écartelé par elle. Mort, son cadavre fut épargné. Mais, sans doute, ainsi que l’avait dit M. Stepark, la population ne voudrait pas qu’il fût inhumé comme le commun des mortels. Elle exigerait qu’il fût brûlé en place publique ou précipité dans le Danube, dont les eaux l’emporteraient jusqu’aux lointaines profondeurs de la Mer Noire.

Pendant un quart d’heure, les cris retentirent devant l’hôtel, puis le silence se fit.

Le capitaine Haralan nous dit alors qu’il allait se rendre à la Maison de Ville. Il entendait faire en sorte que l’interrogatoire d’Hermann eût lieu sur-le-champ. Nous l’approuvâmes, et il quitta l’hôtel en compagnie du lieutenant Armgard.

Moi, je restai près de mon frère. Ce que furent ces douloureuses heures passées avec lui!… Je ne pouvais le calmer, et cette surexcitation toujours croissante m’épouvantait. Il m’échappait, je le sentais bien, et je redoutais une crise à laquelle il ne résisterait peut-être pas. Il se refusait à m’entendre. Il ne discutait pas. Il n’avait qu’une idée, une idée fixe: partir à la recherche de Myra.

“Et tu m’accompagneras, Henri”, disait-il.

Tout ce que je pus obtenir, ce fut que nous attendrions le retour du capitaine Haralan. Celui-ci ne revint avec son camarade que vers quatre heures. Les nouvelles qu’ils rapportaient étaient les plus mauvaises que nous pussions attendre. L’interrogatoire d’Hermann avait eu lieu, en effet, mais il avait eu lieu inutilement. Le capitaine, M. Stepark, le gouverneur lui-même, avaient menacé, prié, supplié en vain. En vain on avait offert une fortune au domestique de Storitz, en vain on lui avait annoncé les pires châtiments s'il se refusait à parler. On n'avait rien obtenu. Hermann n'avait pas varié un seul instant. Il ne savait pas où était Myra. L'enlèvement même était inconnu de lui, son maître n'ayant pas cru devoir le mettre au courant de ses projets.

Après trois heures d'efforts et de lutte, il avait fallu se rendre à l'évidence. Hermann était de bonne foi et disait la vérité. Son ignorance était sincère. Dès lors, nous devions perdre tout espoir de revoir jamais la malheureuse Myra.

Quelle triste fin de journée nous passâmes! Écroulés dans des fauteuils, accablés de tristesse, nous laissions couler le temps sans prononcer une parole. Qu'aurions-nous pu nous dire, en effet, qui n'eût été dit et redit cent fois?

Un peu avant huit heures, un domestique apporta les lampes. Il n'y avait alors dans le salon, le docteur Roderich étant encore près de sa femme, que les deux officiers, mon frère et moi. Comme le domestique sortait, son service terminé, la pendule commença à égrener ses huit coups.

À ce moment précis, la porte de la galerie s'ouvrit assez vivement. Sans doute, quelque courant d'air venu du jardin l'avait poussée, car je ne vis personne. Par exemple, ce qu'il y eut de plus extraordinaire, c'est qu'elle se referma d'elle-même…

Et alors – non! je n'oublierai jamais cette scène! – une voix se fit entendre… Non pas, comme à la soirée des fiançailles, la voix rude qui nous insultait avec le *Chant de la Haine,* – mais une voix fraîche et joyeuse, une voix aimée entre toutes, la voix de notre chère Myra!…

“Marc, disait-elle, et vous monsieur Henri, et toi, Haralan, que faites-vous ici? C’est l’heure du dîner, et je meurs de faim.”

C’était Myra, Myra elle-même, Myra qui avait recouvré la raison, Myra guérie!… On eût dit qu’elle descendait de sa chambre comme d’habitude. C’était Myra qui nous voyait et que nous ne voyions pas!… C’était Myra invisible!…

Jamais mots aussi simples ne produisirent un tel effet. Stupéfaits, cloués à nos sièges, nous n’osions ni bouger, ni parler, ni aller du côté d’où venait cette voix. Pourtant, Myra était là, vivante, et, nous le savions, tangible dans son invisibilité…

D’où arrivait-elle?… De la maison où son ravisseur l’avait conduite?… Elle avait donc pu s’enfuir, traverser la ville, rentrer dans l’hôtel?… Pourtant, les portes en étaient fermées, et personne ne les lui avait ouvertes…

Non – et l’explication de sa présence ne tarda pas à nous être donnée –, Myra descendait de sa chambre où Wilhelm Storitz l’avait rendue et laissée invisible. Alors que nous la croyions hors de l’hôtel, elle n’avait pas quitté son lit. Elle y était restée étendue, immobile, toujours muette et inconsciente, pendant ces vingt-quatre heures. À personne n’était venue cette pensée qu’elle pouvait être là, et, en vérité, pourquoi cette pensée nous serait-elle venue?

Sans doute, Wilhelm Storitz n’avait pu l’enlever aussitôt, mais il aurait parachevé son crime, si, ce matin même, le coup de sabre du capitaine Haralan ne l’en eût pour jamais empêché.

Et voici que Myra ayant recouvré la raison – peut-être sous l’influence de cette liqueur que Storitz lui avait fait boire –, Myra, ignorante de ce qui s’était passé depuis la scène de la cathédrale, Myra était au milieu de nous, nous parlant, nous voyant, n’ayant pu, dans l’obscurité, se rendre compte encore qu’elle ne se voyait pas elle-même.

Marc s’était levé, les bras ouverts comme pour la saisir…

Elle reprit:

“Mais qu’avez-vous donc? je vous parle, et vous ne me répondez pas. Vous paraissez surpris de me voir. Qu’est-il donc arrivé?… Pourquoi maman n’est-elle pas là? Serait-elle souffrante?”

La porte s’ouvrit de nouveau, et le docteur Roderich entra. Aussitôt, Myra de s’élancer vers lui – nous le supposions du moins – car elle s’écria:

“Ah! mon père!… Qu’y a-t-il donc?… Pourquoi mon frère, mon mari ont-ils cet air étrange?”

Le docteur s’était arrêté, pétrifié, sur le seuil. Il avait compris.

Cependant Myra était près de lui. Elle l’embrassait et répétait:

“Qu’y a-t-il?… Maman?… Où est maman?

— Ta mère se porte bien, mon enfant, balbutia le docteur. Elle va descendre… Reste, mon enfant, reste!”

En ce moment, Marc, qui avait trouvé la main de sa femme, entraîna doucement celle-ci, comme s’il eût conduit une aveugle. Elle ne l’était pourtant pas, et ceux-là seuls l’étaient qui ne pouvaient la voir. Mon frère la fit asseoir près de lui…

Elle ne parlait plus, effrayée de l’effet que produisait sa présence, et Marc, d’une voix tremblante, murmura ces paroles auxquelles elle ne devait rien comprendre:

“Myra… ma chère Myra!… Oui!… C’est bien toi… Je te sens là… près de moi!… Oh! je t’en supplie, ma bien-aimée, ne me quitte plus!…

— Mon cher Marc… Cet air bouleversé… Tous… vous m’effrayez… Mon père… réponds-moi!… Il y a donc un malheur ici?…”

Marc sentit qu’elle se levait. Il la retint doucement.

“Non, dit-il, rassure-toi. Aucun malheur n’est arrivé, mais parle, Myra, parle encore!… Que j’entende ta voix… toi… toi… ma femme… ma bien-aimée Myra!…”

Oui, cette scène, nous l’avons vue, ces paroles, nous les avons entendues. Et nous restions là, les yeux fixes, immobiles, retenant le souffle, terrifiés par cette pensée que celui-là seul qui aurait pu nous rendre Myra sous sa forme visible était mort en emportant son secret!

XVIII

Cette situation, dont nous n’étions plus les maîtres, se terminerait-elle par un dénouement heureux? Qui aurait pu le croire? Comment ne pas se dire que Myra était à jamais rayée du monde visible? Aussi, à cet immense bonheur de l’avoir retrouvée, se mêlait cette immense douleur qu’elle ne fût pas rendue à nos regards dans toute sa grâce et sa beauté.

On imagine ce qu’allait être dans ces conditions l’existence de la famille Roderich.

Myra ne tarda pas à se rendre compte de son état. En passant devant la glace de la cheminée, elle n’avait pas aperçu son image… Elle se retourna vers nous, en jetant un cri d’angoisse, et ne vit pas son ombre à ses côtés…

Il fallut alors tout lui dire, tandis que des sanglots s’échappaient de sa poitrine, tandis que Marc, agenouillé près du fauteuil où elle venait de s’asseoir, essayait en vain de calmer sa douleur. Il l’aimait visible, il l’aimerait invisible. Cette scène nous déchirait le cœur.

Vers la fin de la soirée, le docteur voulut que Myra montât dans la chambre de sa mère. Mieux valait que Mme Roderich la sût près d’elle, l’entendît lui parler.

Quelques jours s’écoulèrent. Ce que n’avaient pu faire nos encouragements, le temps le fit; Myra s’était résignée. Grâce à sa force d’âme, il sembla bientôt que l’existence normale eût repris son cours. Myra nous prévenait de sa présence en parlant à l’un ou à l’autre. Je l’entends encore disant:

“Mes amis, je suis là… Avez-vous besoin de quelque chose?… Je vais vous l’apporter… Mon cher Henri, que cherchez-vous?… Ce livre que vous avez posé sur la table?… Le voici!… Votre gazette?… Elle est tombée près de vous… Mon père, c'est l'heure où, d'habitude, je vous embrasse. Pourquoi, Haralan, me regarder avec des yeux si tristes?… Je t'assure que je suis toute souriante. Pourquoi te faire de la peine?… Et vous, mon cher Marc, voici mes deux mains… Prenez-les!… Voulez-vous venir au jardin?… Donnez-moi votre bras, Henri, et nous causerons de mille et mille choses."

L'adorable et bonne créature n'avait pas voulu qu'il fût apporté aucun changement à la vie de famille. Elle et Marc passaient de longues heures ensemble. Elle ne cessait de lui murmurer d'encourageantes paroles. Elle essayait de le consoler, affirmant qu'elle avait confiance dans l'avenir, que cette invisibilité cesserait un jour… Cet espoir, l'avait-elle réellement?

Une modification, cependant, une seule, fut faite à notre vie familiale. Myra, comprenant combien sa présence dans ces conditions eût été pénible, ne vint plus prendre sa place à table au milieu de nous. Mais, le repas achevé, elle redescendait au salon. On l'entendait ouvrir et refermer la porte, disant: "Me voici, mes amis, je suis là!" et elle ne nous quittait plus qu'à l'heure de remonter dans sa chambre, après nous avoir souhaité le bonsoir. Il n'est pas besoin de le dire, si la disparition de Myra Roderich avait produit tant d'effet dans la ville, sa réapparition – je n'ai pas d'autre mot dans mon vocabulaire – en produisit plus encore. De toutes parts arrivèrent des témoignages de la plus vive sympathie, et les visites affluèrent à l'hôtel.

Myra avait renoncé à toute promenade à pied dans les rues de Ragz. Elle ne sortait qu'en voiture fermée, accompagnée de quelqu'un des siens. Mais elle préférait à tout s'asseoir dans le jardin, au milieu de ceux qu'elle aimait, et auxquels, moralement du moins, elle était rendue tout entière.

Pendant ce temps, M. Stepark, le gouverneur et moi-même, nous nous obstinions à faire subir au vieil Hermann des interrogatoires aussi nombreux que stériles. On ne pouvait rien en tirer d'utile dans les tristes circonstances que nous traversions.

Les événements ayant prouvé sa bonne foi en ce qui concernait l'enlèvement présumé de Myra, on ne l'inquiétait plus de ce chef, mais ne pouvait-il se faire qu'il fût au courant des secrets de son maître défunt? ou même qu'il fût détenteur de la formule d'Otto Storitz?

Quel remords pour M. Stepark et pour moi-même d'avoir agi avec tant de précipitation lors de la découverte du caveau! Sans cette précipitation déplorable, ce que nous avions fait pour Hermann, nous aurions pu le faire pour Myra. Un seul flacon de la mystérieuse liqueur, et toutes nos angoisses passées n'auraient plus été qu'un cauchemar effacé dans la joie du réveil.

Le crime involontaire que M. Stepark avait commis, et que j'avais, moi, laissé commettre, nous ne nous en vantions ni l'un ni l'autre. Il demeurerait à jamais enseveli entre nous, et, d'un tacite accord, nous n'avions même pas échangé le moindre mot à ce sujet.

Chacun de notre côté, nous nous acharnions l'un et l'autre à torturer de mille façons le malheureux Hermann, dans le chimérique espoir de lui arracher un secret qu'il ne possédait sans doute pas. Quelle chance y avait-il, en effet, qu'on eût révélé à un domestique dépourvu de la plus vulgaire culture les arcanes de la chimie transcendante, et, si on l'avait fait, quelle probabilité que celui-ci y eût compris quelque chose?

Le jour vint enfin où nous prîmes conscience de l'inanité de nos efforts, et, comme il ne subsistait, en somme, contre Hermann aucune charge qui fût justiciable des tribunaux, il fallut bien se résoudre en haut lieu à le remettre en liberté.

Mais le sort avait décidé que le pauvre diable ne profiterait pas de cette tardive mansuétude. Le matin où son gardien vint le chercher pour lui rendre la clef des champs, on le trouva mort dans sa cellule, foudroyé par une embolie, comme l’autopsie le démontra ultérieurement.

Ainsi s’évanouit notre dernier espoir. Ainsi nous fut démontré que le secret de Wilhelm Storitz demeurerait à jamais inconnu.

Dans les papiers saisis lors de la perquisition du boulevard Tékéli et déposés à la Maison de Ville, on ne trouva, après un minutieux examen, que de vagues formules, des notations à la fois physiques et chimiques, absolument incompréhensibles. Cela ne nous avançait à rien. Impossible de rien déduire de ce fatras, quant à la reconstitution de la diabolique substance dont Wilhelm Storitz avait fait un si criminel usage.

De même que son bourreau avait surgi du néant, en tombant frappé au cœur par le sabre d’Haralan, de même la malheureuse Myra ne reparaîtrait donc à nos yeux qu’étendue sur son lit de mort.

Dans la matinée du 24 juin, mon frère vint me trouver. Il me parut relativement plus calme.

“Mon cher Henri, me dit-il, j’ai voulu te faire part de la résolution que j’ai prise. Je pense que tu l’approuveras.

— N’en doute pas, répondis-je, et parle en pleine confiance. Je sais que tu n’auras écouté que la voix de la raison.

— De la raison et de l’amour, Henri. Myra n’est qu’à demi ma femme. Il manque à notre mariage la consécration religieuse, puisque la cérémonie a été interrompue avant que les paroles sacramentelles n’eussent été prononcées. Cela crée une situation fausse que je veux faire cesser, pour Myra, pour sa famille, pour tout le monde.”

J’attirai mon frère dans mes bras, et lui dis:

“Je te comprends, Marc, et je n’imagine pas ce qui pourrait faire obstacle à tes désirs…

— Ce serait monstrueux, répondit Marc. Si le prêtre ne voit pas Myra, il l’entendra du moins déclarer qu’elle me prend pour mari comme je la prends pour femme. Je ne pense pas que l’autorité ecclésiastique fasse aucune difficulté.

— Non, mon cher Marc, non, et je me charge de toutes les démarches.”

Ce fut d’abord au curé de la cathédrale que je m’adressai, à l’archiprêtre qui avait officié à cette messe de mariage interrompue par une profanation sans exemple. Le vénérable vieillard me répondit que le cas avait été préalablement examiné, et que l’archevêque de Ragz lui avait donné une solution favorable. Bien qu’elle fût invisible, il n’était pas douteux que la fiancée fût vivante, et, dès lors, apte à recevoir le sacrement du mariage.

Les bans ayant été publiés depuis longtemps, rien ne s’opposa à ce que la date de la cérémonie fût fixée au 2 juillet.

La veille, Myra me dit, ainsi qu’elle me l’avait dit une fois déjà:

“C’est pour demain, Henri… N’oubliez pas!”

Ce second mariage fut, comme le premier, célébré à la cathédrale Saint-Michel, et dans les mêmes conditions. Mêmes témoins, mêmes amis et invités de la famille Roderich, même affluence de la population.

Qu’il s’y soit mêlé une dose de curiosité plus grande, je l’accorde, et cette curiosité, on la comprendra, on l’excusera. Sans doute, il restait encore dans cette assistance des appréhensions dont le temps seul triompherait. Oui, Wilhelm Storitz était mort; oui, son serviteur Hermann était mort également… Et pourtant, plus d’un se demandait si cette seconde messe de mariage n’allait pas être interrompue comme la première, si des prodiges ne troubleraient pas de nouveau la cérémonie nuptiale.

Voici les deux époux dans le chœur de la cathédrale. Le fauteuil de Myra paraît inoccupé. Elle est là, cependant.

Marc est debout, tourné vers elle. Il ne peut la voir, mais il la sent près de lui. Il la tient par la main, comme pour attester sa présence devant l’autel.

Derrière, sont placés les témoins, le juge Neuman, le capitaine Haralan, le lieutenant Armgard et moi; puis M. et Mme Roderich, la pauvre mère agenouillée, implorant du Tout-Puissant un miracle pour sa fille!… Autour se pressent les amis, les notabilités de la ville, emplissant la grande nef, et les bas-côtés fourmillent de monde.

Les cloches sonnent à toute volée, les orgues résonnent à pleins jeux.

L’archiprêtre et ses acolytes sont arrivés. L’office commence, ses cérémonies se déroulent au chant de la maîtrise. À l’offrande, on voit Marc conduire Myra jusqu’à la première marche de l’autel et la ramener, après que son aumône est tombée dans l’aumônière du diacre.

La messe terminée, le vieux prêtre s’est retourné vers l’assistance.

“Myra Roderich, êtes-vous là?… interroge-t-il.

— Je suis là”, répond Myra. Puis, s’adressant à Marc:

“Marc Vidal, consentez-vous à prendre Myra Roderich ici présente pour épouse?

— Oui, répond mon frère.

— Myra Roderich, consentez-vous à prendre Marc Vidal ici présent pour époux?

— Oui, répond Myra d’une voix qui est entendue de tous.

— Marc Vidal et Myra Roderich, prononce l’archiprêtre, je vous déclare unis par le sacrement du mariage.”

Après la cérémonie, la foule s’empresse sur la route que doivent suivre les nouveaux époux. On n’entend pas le brouhaha confus de rigueur en de telles circonstances. On se tait, en tendant le cou, dans le fol espoir de voir quelque chose. Nul ne voudrait céder sa place et personne cependant ne désire être au premier rang. Tous sont à la fois poussés par la curiosité et retenus par une peur mystérieuse…

Entre la double haie de cette foule quelque peu craintive, les époux, leurs témoins, leurs amis se rendent à la sacristie. Là, sur les registres de la fabrique, à la signature de Marc Vidal vient se joindre un nom, celui de Myra Roderich, un nom tracé par une main qu’on ne peut voir, par une main qu’on ne verra jamais!

XIX

Tel fut, ce jour-là, 2 juillet, le dénouement de l’histoire étrange qu’il m’a pris fantaisie de raconter. Je conçois qu’elle paraisse incroyable. Il ne faudrait, dans ce cas, en accuser que l’insuffisance de l’auteur. L’histoire n’est malheureusement que trop vraie, bien qu’elle soit unique dans les annales du passé, bien qu’elle doive, je l’espère fermement, rester unique dans les annales de l’avenir.

Il va sans dire que mon frère et Myra avaient abandonné leurs projets d’autrefois. Il ne pouvait plus être question d’un voyage en France. Je prévoyais même que Marc ne ferait plus à Paris que de rares apparitions, et qu’il se fixerait définitivement à Ragz. Gros chagrin, pour moi, auquel je devais me résigner.

Le mieux, en effet, serait de vivre, sa femme et lui, près de M. et Mme Roderich. Le temps arrange tout, et Marc s’accoutumerait à cette existence. Myra s’ingéniait, d’ailleurs, à donner l’illusion de sa présence. On savait toujours où elle était, ce qu’elle faisait. Elle était l’âme de la maison, invisible comme une âme.

Au surplus, sa forme matérielle n’était pas entièrement disparue. N’avait-on pas l’admirable portrait d’elle fait par Marc? Myra aimait à s’asseoir près de cette toile, et, de sa voix réconfortante, elle disait:

“Je suis là, je suis redevenue visible, et vous me voyez comme je me vois.”

Je restai encore quelques semaines à Ragz, après le mariage, vivant à l’hôtel Roderich dans la plus complète intimité de cette famille si éprouvée, et je ne voyais pas s’approcher sans regret le jour où il faudrait partir. Cependant, il n’est pas de vacances si longues qu’elles ne s’achèvent, et il me fallut enfin regagner Paris.

J’y fus repris par mon métier, plus absorbant qu’un vain peuple ne pense. Toutefois, trop singuliers étaient les événements auxquels j’avais été mêlé, pour que mes préoccupations pussent me les faire oublier. J’y pensais donc sans cesse, et pas un jour ne s’écoula sans que mon souvenir ne s’envolât vers Ragz, près de mon frère et de sa femme, ensemble, présente et lointaine.

Dans le début du mois de janvier suivant, j’évoquais pour la centième fois la scène terrible dont la mort de Wilhelm Storitz avait été le dénouement, quand une idée me vint tout à coup, si simple, si évidente, en vérité, que je m’étonnais de ne pas l’avoir eue plus tôt. Dût mon aveuglement faire tenir en piètre estime mes facultés de logicien, je n’avais jamais songé à rapprocher l’une de l’autre les circonstances de ce drame. Ce jour-là, cette conclusion s’imposa à mon esprit que, si le corps de notre ennemi vaincu avait perdu le pouvoir d’invisibilité qu’il possédait vivant, l’abondante hémorragie consécutive au coup de sabre d’Haralan devait en être l’unique cause. Ce fut un éblouissement. Il m’apparut aussitôt avec certitude que la mystérieuse substance était tenue en suspension dans le sang et qu’elle s’était répandue avec lui.

Cette hypothèse admise, la conséquence s’en déduisait d’elle-même. Ce que le coup du sabre d’Haralan avait fait, le bistouri du chirurgien pouvait le faire. Ce n’était là, en somme, qu’une opération des plus bénignes, qu’il était aisé d’exécuter graduellement, et qu’on pourrait répéter autant qu’il serait nécessaire. Le sang que Myra aurait perdu, elle le remplacerait par du sang tout neuf, et un jour viendrait où ses veines ne contiendraient plus aucune trace de la substance maudite qui privait Marc du bonheur de la voir.

J’écrivis aussitôt à mon frère dans ce sens. Mais, au moment où ma lettre allait partir, j’en reçus une de lui, et je jugeai préférable de retarder l’envoi de la mienne. Dans sa lettre, mon frère m’annonçait, en effet, une nouvelle qui rendait, au moins pour l’instant, mes spéculations inutiles. Myra allait, me disait-il, le rendre père. Ce n’était pas le moment, on en conviendra, de la priver de la moindre goutte de son sang. Elle n’avait pas trop de toutes ses forces pour supporter la redoutable épreuve de la maternité.

La naissance de mon neveu – ou de ma nièce – m’était annoncée pour les derniers jours du mois de mai. L’affection que j’ai pour mon frère étant connue du lecteur, il est inutile de dire que je fus exact au rendez-vous. Dès le 15 mai, j’étais à Ragz, où j’attendis l’événement avec une impatience qui ne le cédait pas à celle du père.

Ce fut le 27 mai qu’il se produisit, et cette date ne sortira jamais de ma mémoire. On dit qu’il n’y a plus de miracle; il y en eut un cependant ce jour-là, un miracle dont je puis garantir personnellement l’authenticité. Ce que fut ce miracle, on le devine. La nature nous apporta le secours que je voulais demander à l’art, et Myra, comme Lazare, sortit vivante du tombeau. Marc, ébloui, affolé, enivré, la vit lentement surgir de l’ombre, et, doublement père, il vit naître en même temps son enfant et sa femme, qui lui parut plus belle encore d’avoir été si longtemps cachée à ses yeux.

Depuis, mon frère et Myra n’ont pas plus d’histoire que moi-même. Pendant que je m’épuise la cervelle à chercher la perfection mathématique idéale – et inaccessible, puisque les mathématiques sont, comme l’univers, infinies! – Marc poursuit sa carrière glorieuse de peintre célèbre. Il habite Paris, à deux pas de chez moi, dans un hôtel superbe, où, chaque année, M.

et Mme Roderich viennent passer deux mois avec le capitaine devenu le colonel Haralan. Chaque année, cette visite est rendue à Ragz par les deux époux. C’est le seul moment où je sois privé du babil de mon neveu – c’était un neveu, décidément! – que je chéris avec une tendresse qui tient à la fois de l’oncle et du grand-père. Marc et Myra sont heureux.

Fasse le Ciel que ce bonheur dure de longues années! Fasse le Ciel que personne ne connaisse les maux qu’ils ont soufferts! Fasse le Ciel, et ce sera mon dernier mot, que jamais ne soit retrouvé l’exécrable SECRET DE WILHELM STORITZ!

ASTONISHING ADVENTURES OF THE BARSAC MISSION

The first five chapters of this novel were penned by Verne and the rest were completed by his son Michel. The novel was first published in French in serial form in 1919, after the death of Verne. It recounts an expedition to Africa by the Niger River. The mission nearly ends in disaster when its members are captured and brought to Blackland, a mysterious city in the desert.

L'Etonnante aventure de la mission Barsac was first translated in English in 1960 and so only the original French text is available in this edition, due to copyright restrictions.

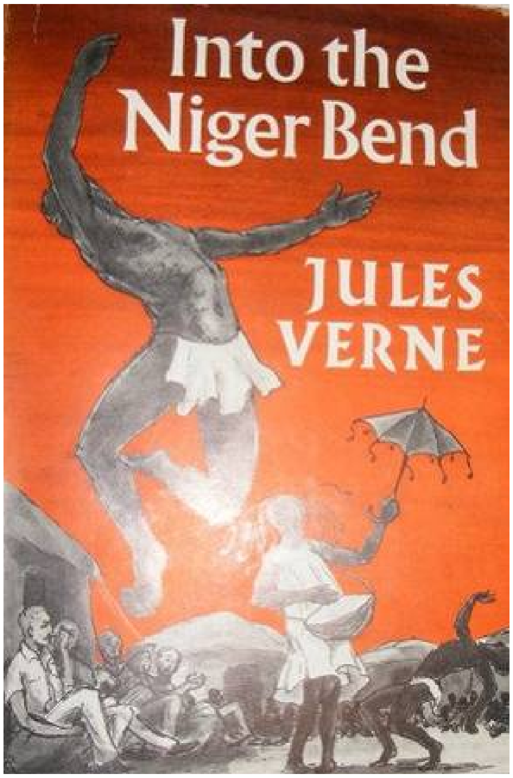
Into the
Niger Bend
JULES
VERNE

The first English edition, 1960

L'ÉTONNANTE AVENTURE DE LA MISSION BARSAC

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PREMIERE PARTIE

CHAPITRE 1

L’affaire de la Central Bank

Assurément, l’audacieux cambriolage qui a tant occupé la presse sous le nom de l’affaire de la Central Bank et qui a eu, quinze jours durant, l’honneur de ses manchettes, n’est pas effacé de toutes les mémoires, malgré les années écoulées. Peu de crimes, en effet, ont excité la curiosité publique autant que celui-ci, car il en est peu qui aient réuni au même degré l’attrait du mystère et l’ampleur du forfait, et dont l’accomplissement ait exigé une aussi incroyable audace, une aussi farouche énergie.

On en lira donc peut-être avec intérêt le récit incomplet encore, mais scrupuleusement véridique. Si ce récit n’éclaire pas absolument tous les points restés dans l’ombre jusqu’ici, il apportera du moins quelques précisions nouvelles, et redressera ou coordonnera les informations parfois contradictoires données à l’époque par les journaux.

Le vol, on le sait, a eu pour théâtre l’Agence DK de la Central Bank, située près de la Bourse de Londres, au coin de Threadneedle Street et de Old Broad Street, et dirigée alors par Mr Lewis Robert Buxton, fils du lord de ce nom.

Cette agence comporte essentiellement une vaste pièce, divisée en deux fractions inégales par un long comptoir de chêne, qui se développe parallèlement aux deux rues, lesquelles se coupent à angle droit. On y accède, au croisement de ces deux rues, par une porte vitrée, en pan coupé, précédée d’une sorte de tambour de plain-pied avec le trottoir. En entrant, on aperçoit à gauche, derrière un grillage à fortes mailles, la caisse, qui communique par une porte également grillagée avec le bureau proprement dit, où se tiennent les employés. À droite le comptoir de chêne est interrompu à son extrémité par un battant mobile, permettant au besoin d'aller de la partie destinée au public dans celle qui est réservée aux employés, ou vice versa. Au fond de cette dernière, s'ouvre d'abord, près du comptoir, le cabinet du chef de l'agence, lequel cabinet commande un réduit sans autre issue, puis, en suivant la muraille perpendiculaire à Threadneedle Street, un couloir donnant accès au vestibule commun à tout l'immeuble auquel appartient le local.

D'un côté, ce vestibule passe devant la loge du concierge et conduit à Threadneedle Street. De l'autre, après avoir desservi le grand escalier, il aboutit à une porte vitrée à deux battants, qui dissimule à la vue du dehors l'entrée des caves et l'escalier de service, qui fait face à celle-ci.

Tels sont les lieux où se sont déroulées les principales péripéties du drame.

Au moment où il commence, c'est-à-dire à cinq heures moins vingt exactement, les cinq employés de l'agence s'occupent de leurs travaux habituels. Deux d'entre eux sont plongés dans leurs écritures. Les trois autres répondent à autant de clients accoudés sur le comptoir. Quant au caissier, il fait, sous la protection de son grillage, le compte des espèces, qui, en ce jour de liquidation, atteignent le total imposant de soixante-douze mille soixante-dix-neuf livres, deux shillings et quatre pence, soit un million huit cent seize mille trois cent quatre-vingt-treize francs quatre-vingts centimes.

Ainsi qu'il a été dit, l'horloge de l'agence marque cinq heures moins vingt. Dans vingt minutes, par conséquent, on fermera; la devanture en fer sera baissée, puis, un peu plus tard, les employés se disperseront, leur journée de travail finie. Le sourd grondement des voitures et le bruit de la foule parviennent du dehors à travers les glaces de la vitrine, obscurcies par le crépuscule de ce dernier jour de novembre.

C’est à ce moment que la porte s’ouvrit et qu’un homme entra. Le nouveau venu, après avoir jeté un coup d’oeil rapide dans le bureau, se retourna à demi et fit au-dehors, à l’adresse, sans doute, d’un compagnon resté sur le trottoir, un geste de la main droite, dont le pouce, l’indicateur et le médius redressés mimaient d’une manière claire le nombre 3. Leur attention eût-elle été éveillée, les employés n’auraient pu voir ce geste que leur cachait la porte entrouverte, et l’eussent-ils vu, qu’ils n’auraient évidemment songé à établir aucune corrélation entre le nombre des personnes alors accoudées sur le comptoir et celui des doigts qui étaient ainsi montrés comme un signal.

Son signal donné, si c’en était un, l’homme acheva d’ouvrir la porte, la referma après s’être introduit dans le bureau, et alla prendre rang derrière l’un des clients précédents, indiquant ainsi son intention d’attendre, pour faire connaître ses désirs, que ce client eût terminé et se fût retiré.

Un des deux employés libres se leva, et, se dirigeant vers lui, demanda:

— Vous désirez, monsieur?…

— Merci, monsieur, j’attendrai, répondit le nouveau venu, en accompagnant sa réponse d’un mouvement de la main, destiné à faire entendre qu’il voulait précisément avoir affaire à l’employé à proximité duquel il s’était arrêté.

Celui qui avait obligeamment interpellé se rassit sans insister et reprit son travail, la conscience apaisée par cette tentative de zèle, et satisfait en somme qu’elle eût ce résultat négatif. L’homme attendit donc, sans que personne fît plus attention à lui.

La singularité de son aspect eût justifié cependant plus sérieux examen. C’était un gaillard de haute taille, qui à en juger par sa carrure, devait être d’une force peu commune. Une magnifique barbe blonde encadrait son visage au teint bronzé. Quant à son rang social, on ne pouvait le présumer d’après sa mise; un long cache-poussière en soie grège le recouvrant jusqu’aux pieds.

Le client derrière lequel il était placé ayant terminé ce qu’il avait à faire, l’homme au cache-poussière lui succéda et entretint, à son tour, le représentant de la Central Bank des opérations qu’il désirait entreprendre. Pendant ce temps, la personne qu’il avait remplacée ouvrait la porte extérieure et sortait de l’agence.

Cette porte se rouvrit immédiatement et livra passage à un deuxième personnage aussi singulier que le premier dont il semblait être, en quelque sorte, la copie. Même stature, même carrure, même barbe blonde entourant un visage sensiblement cuivré, même long cache-poussière de soie grège dissimulant les vêtements de son propriétaire.

Pour ce dernier personnage, il en fut comme pour son sosie. Comme celui-ci, il attendit patiemment derrière l’une des deux personnes encore accoudées au comptoir, puis son tour venu, il engagea conversation avec l’employé devenu libre, tandis que le client gagnait la rue.

De même que précédemment, la porte se rouvrit aussitôt. Un troisième individu fit son entrée et alla prendra rang à la suite du seul des trois clients primitifs qui restât. De taille médiocre, tout en largeur et trapu, son visage coloré encore assombri par une barbe noire, ses vêtements recouverts d’un long pardessus gris, celui-ci offrait à la fois des différences et des analogies avec ceux qui, avant lui, s'étaient livrés à semblable manège.

Enfin, lorsque la dernière des trois personnes qui se trouvaient précédemment dans l'agence eût terminé ses affaires et céda la place, ce fut à deux hommes que la porte aussitôt rouverte livra passage en même temps. Ces deux hommes, dont l'un semblait doué d'une vigueur herculéenne, étaient vêtus l'un et l'autre de ces longs paletots-sacs communément désignés sous le nom d'ulsters, que la rigueur de la saison ne justifiait pas encore, et, de même que pour les trois premiers, une barbe abondante garnissait leurs visages assez montés de ton.

Ils s'introduisirent d'une manière bizarre: le plus grand entra d'abord, puis à peine entré, s'arrêta dans une position telle qu'il masquait son compagnon, lequel, pendant ce temps, feignant de s'être accroché à la serrure, faisait subir à celle-ci un mystérieux travail. La halte, au surplus, ne dura qu'un instant, et la porte fut bientôt refermée. Mais, à ce moment, si elle avait toujours sa poignée à l'intérieur, ce qui permettait de sortir, la poignée de l'extérieur avait disparu. Du dehors, par conséquent, nul ne pouvait plus entrer dans le bureau. Quant à frapper à la vitre pour se faire ouvrir, personne n'aurait eu garde de le tenter, un avis collé sur la porte, à l'insu des intéressés, annonçant au public que l'agence était irrévocablement fermée pour ce jour-là.

Les employés n'avaient aucun soupçon qu'on les eût ainsi isolés du reste du monde. L'eussent-ils su, d'ailleurs, ils n'auraient fait qu'en rire. Comment se seraient-ils inquiétés, en pleine ville, au moment le plus actif de la journée, alors qu'arrivait jusqu'à eux l'écho de la vie intense de la rue, dont seule une mince pellicule de verre les séparait?

Les deux derniers employés s’avancèrent à la rencontre des nouveaux venus d’un air aimable, car ils avaient constaté que l’horloge marquait près de cinq heures. Par conséquent, brève serait la visite de ces gêneurs, qu’il allait être légitime d’expulser dans moins de cinq minutes. L’un des tardifs clients agréa les services qui lui étaient offerts, tandis que l’autre, le plus grand, les déclinait et demandait à parler au directeur.

— Je vais voir s’il est là, lui fut-il répondu.

L’employé ne disparut par la porte ménagée au fond de la partie du bureau interdite au public que pour revenir aussitôt.

— Si vous voulez prendre la peine d’entrer?… proposa-t-il, en ouvrant le petit battant articulé à l’extrémité du comptoir.

L’homme à l’ulster obéit à l’invitation et pénétra dans le cabinet du directeur, tandis que l’employé, en ayant refermé la porte derrière lui, retournait à son travail.

Que se passa-t-il entre le chef de l’agence et son visiteur? Le personnel déclara par la suite n’en rien savoir, ne pas même se l’être demandé, et cela doit être tenu pour exact. L’instruction en fut ultérieurement réduite aux hypothèses sur ce point, et à l’heure actuelle on est encore dans l’ignorance de la scène qui se déroula alors derrière la porte close.

Une chose certaine, à tout le moins, c’est qu’il ne s’était pas écoulé deux minutes depuis sa fermeture, quand cette porte se rouvrit, et quand l’homme à l’ulster reparut sur le seuil.

D’une manière impersonnelle et sans s’adresser plus particulièrement à aucun des employés:

— S’il vous plaît… dit-il d’un ton parfaitement calme, M. le directeur voudrait parler au caissier.

— Bien, monsieur, répondit celui des employés qui n’était pas occupé.

Se détournant, il appela:

— Store!

— Mr Barclay?…

— Le chef vous demande.

— On y va, répondit le caissier.

Avec la ponctualité inhérente aux gens de sa profession, il jeta une serviette et trois sacs, contenant, en billets et numéraire, l’encaisse du jour, dans le coffre-fort béant, dont la lourde porte battit avec un bruit sourd, puis ayant baissé son guichet, il sortit de sa cabine grillagée, qu’il ferma soigneusement derrière lui, et se dirigea vers le bureau du chef, devant lequel attendait l’étranger, qui s’effaça et entra sur ses talons.

En pénétrant dans le bureau, Store eut la surprise de constater que celui qu’on prétendait l’appeler ne s’y trouvait pas et que la pièce était vide. Mais le temps lui manqua pour éclaircir ce mystère. Attaqué par-derrière, la gorge prise dans une poigne d’acier, il essaya vainement de se débattre, de crier… Les mains meurtrières resserrèrent leur étreinte, jusqu’au moment où, perdant le souffle, il s’écroula, évanoui, sur le tapis.

Aucun bruit n’avait révélé cette lutte farouche. Dans la grande salle, les employés continuaient tranquillement leur travail, quatre formant autant de groupes avec les clients dont ils étaient séparés par le comptoir, le cinquième absorbé dans des calculs intéressant son service.

L’homme à l’ulster prit le loisir de s’essuyer le front où perlait un peu de sueur, puis il se pencha sur sa victime. En un tour de main, le caissier fut bâillonné et ligoté.

Cette besogne terminée, il entrouvrit doucement la porte et jeta un coup d’oeil dans la grande salle. L’examen l’ayant satisfait, il toussa légèrement, comme s’il eût voulu attirer l’attention des quatre singuliers clients qui s’y attardaient alors, puis, ce but atteint, il ouvrit d’une seule poussée, toute grande, la porte qui le dissimulait.

Ce fut le signal — convenu d’avance, sans nul doute — d’une scène littéralement fantastique. Tandis que l’homme à l’ulster traversait d’un bond toute la salle et, tombant comme la foudre sur le calculateur solitaire, l’étranglait impitoyablement, les quatre collègues de celui-ci subissaient un sort pareil.

Le client le plus près de l’extrémité du comptoir franchit la porte battante ménagée en cet endroit et terrassa, en le prenant à revers, l’employé qui lui faisait face. Des trois autres clients, deux allongèrent les bras en travers du comptoir, et leurs mains se nouèrent au cou de leurs interlocuteurs respectifs, qu’ils “sonnèrent” férocement sur l’appui de chêne. Quant au dernier, le plus petit de taille, ne pouvant appréhender son vis-à-vis dont une trop grande distance le séparait, il bondit par-dessus le comptoir et saisit son adversaire à la gorge avec une violence que son élan décuplait.

Pas un cri n’avait été poussé. Le drame n’avait pas duré trente secondes.

Quand leurs victimes eurent perdu connaissance, les étrangleurs achevèrent de les mettre hors de combat. Le plan avait été minutieusement étudié. Rien ne clocha. Il n’y eut aucune hésitation. De toutes les poches sortirent à la fois les accessoires nécessaires. Ensemble, dussent les patients périr par l’asphyxie, les bouches furent bourrées d’ouate et bâillonnées. Ensemble, les mains furent ramenées en arrière et ligotées, les pieds étroitement liés, les corps raidis dans la multiple étreinte d’une fine cordelette d’acier.

Le travail de tous fut terminé au même instant. D’un seul mouvement, les cinq assaillants se redressèrent.

— Le rideau! ordonna celui qui avait demandé à voir le directeur de l’agence et qui semblait commander aux autres.

Trois des bandits coururent actionner les manivelles de la devanture en fer. Les lames de tôle commencèrent à descendre, atténuant progressivement les bruits venant de l’extérieur.

L’opération était à demi effectuée, quand la sonnerie du téléphone retentit tout à coup.

— Stop! fit le chef de la bande.

Le rideau s’étant arrêté dans sa course descendante, il s’approcha de l’appareil et décrocha le récepteur. La conversation suivante s’engagea, dont la moitié seulement parvenait aux quatre étrangleurs maintenant inactifs.

— Allô!

— J’écoute.

— C’est vous, Buxton?

— Oui.

— C’est drôle. Je ne reconnais pas votre voix.

— Il y a de la friture.

— Pas chez nous.

— Il y en a ici. Moi non plus je ne reconnais pas votre voix.

— Mr Lasone.

— Ah! très bien!… très bien!… je reconnais maintenant.

— Dites donc, Buxton, la voiture est-elle passée?

— Pas encore, assura le bandit après une courte hésitation.

— Quand elle viendra, dites-lui de retourner à l’agence S. On me téléphone à l’instant qu’on vient d’y recevoir un versement important après la fermeture et le départ des fonds.

— La somme est forte?

— Assez. Dans les vingt mille livres.

— Fichtre!…

— Vous ferez la commission?… Je peux compter sur vous?

— Comptez sur moi.

— Bonsoir, Buxton.

— Bonsoir.

L’étranger raccrocha le récepteur et, un instant, demeura immobile, pensif.

Soudain, il prit son parti et, rassemblant ses complices autour de lui:

— Il s’agit de s’activer, camarades, leur dit-il à voix basse, en commençant à se déshabiller fébrilement. Ouste!… qu’on me donne la pelure de cet homme-là!

Du doigt, il désignait Store, toujours privé de sentiments.

En un clin d’oeil, celui-ci fut dépouillé de ses vêtements, que son agresseur endossa, bien que ces vêtements fussent un peu petits pour sa taille. Ayant trouvé dans une des poches les clés de la caisse, il ouvrit ensuite la cabine, puis le coffre-fort, dont furent extraits les sacs de numéraire, la serviette aux billets et les liasses de titres.

Il achevait à peine, quand on entendit une voiture qui s’arrêtait au bord du trottoir. Presque aussitôt, on frappa aux vitres de la porte à demi recouverte par la devanture métallique.

— Attention! dit rapidement le chef de cette bande d’étrangleurs, en commentant ses paroles de gestes expressifs. Bas les manteaux, montrez vos vestons, à vos places, et du coup d’oeil!… Qu’on ne rate pas le premier qui entrera!… Et sans bruit… Après, porte close, et qu’on n’ouvre qu’à moi!…

Chargé de la serviette et de plusieurs paquets de titres, il s’était, tout en parlant, rapproché de la porte, tandis que trois de ses complices s’asseyaient, sur un signe de lui, à la place des employés, poussés d’un coup de pied sous le comptoir, et que le quatrième se postait près de l’entrée. Il ouvrit cette porte d’une main ferme. Le vacarme de la rue parut grandir subitement.

Une voiture de livraison s’était en effet arrêtée devant l’agence. Dans la nuit, on voyait briller ses lanternes. Le cocher, resté sur son siège, causait avec un homme debout au bord du trottoir. C’était cet homme, un encaisseur de la Central Bank, qui avait frappé à la porte quelques instants plus tôt.

Sans se presser, évitant les passants dont le torrent coulait sans interruption, l’audacieux bandit traversa le trottoir et s’approcha de la voiture.

— Salut! dit-il.

— Salut! répondirent les deux hommes.

Le cocher, ayant regardé celui qui l’interpellait, parut étonné.

— Tiens!… ce n’est pas Store! s’écria-t-il.

— C’est son jour de congé. Je le remplace, expliqua le pseudo-caissier.

Puis, s’adressant à l’encaisseur debout auprès de lui.

— Eh!… Un coup de main, l’ami?

— Pour quoi faire?

— Pour un de nos sacs. On a reçu beaucoup d’argent aujourd’hui. Ça pèse.

— C’est que… dit l’encaisseur en hésitant, il m’est défendu de quitter la voiture.

— Bah! pour une minute!… D’ailleurs, je te remplace. Un des employés t’aidera pendant que je déposerai la serviette et les titres.

L’encaisseur s’éloigna sans insister davantage et franchit la porte, qui se referma derrière lui.

— À nous camarade, disait pendant ce temps au cocher le remplaçant de Store. Ouvre ta voiture.

— Allons-y! acquiesça le cocher.

La caisse de la voiture n’ayant aucune issue en arrière ni sur les côtés, la seule ouverture consistait en une petite porte à deux battants de tôle, ménagée derrière la banquette du conducteur. De cette manière, les risques de vol étaient réduits au minimum.

Pour pénétrer dans la voiture, il fallait donc nécessairement faire basculer la banquette, dont une moitié avait été rendue mobile dans ce but. Mais, comme il s’agissait seulement de placer quelques paquets dans un des casiers garnissant les côtés du véhicule, le cocher jugea superflu de se livrer à ce travail et se contenta de repousser les portes.

— Passe la serviette, dit-il.

Ayant reçu ce qu’il demandait, le cocher, à demi couché en travers de la banquette, disparut jusqu’à mi-corps dans l’intérieur de la voiture, ses jambes faisant contrepoids à l’extérieur. Dans cette position, il ne put voir son soi-disant collègue monter sur le marchepied, puis de là sur le siège, et se placer de manière à le séparer de ses guides. Par-dessus le cocher étendu, le faux caissier, comme s’il eût été curieux de voir ce que contenait la caisse de la voiture, y introduisit à son tour le haut du corps, et son bras, tout à coup, se détendit violemment dans l’ombre.

Si quelqu’un des nombreux passants qui circulaient avait eu l’idée de regarder de près à ce moment, il aurait vu les jambes du cocher se raidir d’une manière aussi subite du siège, tandis que le buste fléchissait de l’autre côté de la banquette.

Rapidement, l’homme saisit alors par la ceinture ce corps inerte, et l’envoya au milieu des sacs et des paquets déposés dans la voiture.

Cette série d’actes, exécutés avec une précision et une audace merveilleuses, n’avait demandé que quelques instants. Les passants continuaient à circuler paisiblement, sans aucun soupçon des événements anormaux qui se succédaient si près d’eux, en pleine foule.

L’homme se pencha plus encore dans la voiture, de manière à ne pas être aveuglé par les lumières de la rue, et regarda dans la caisse. Sur le plancher, au milieu d’une flaque de sang qui grandissait à vue d’oeil, le cocher gisait, un couteau fiché à la base du crâne, dans cet épanouissement de la moelle qui a reçu les divers noms de bulbe, de cervelet, de noeud vital. Il ne bougeait plus. La mort avait été foudroyante.

Le meurtrier, craignant que le sang ne finît par traverser le parquet et par couler sur le sol, enjamba la banquette, s’introduisit tout entier dans la voiture et dépouilla le mort de sa vareuse. Il s’en servit pour tamponner la terrible blessure, puis, ayant retiré le couteau de la plaie et l’ayant soigneusement essuyé, ainsi que ses mains rouges, il referma les portes de tôle, sûr que le sang, s’il continuait à couler, serait absorbé par la laine comme par une éponge.

Cette précaution prise, il descendit de la voiture, traversa le trottoir et frappa d’une manière particulière à la porte de l’agence, qui fut aussitôt ouverte, puis refermée.

— L’homme?… interrogea-t-il, en entrant.

On lui montra le comptoir.

— Avec les autres. Ficelé.

— Bon!… Ses vêtements!… Vite!

Pendant qu’on se hâtait d’obéir, il retirait le costume du caissier Store et le remplaçait par celui de l’encaisseur.

— Deux hommes resteront ici, commanda-t-il, tout en procédant à cette transformation. Les autres avec moi pour déménager la “bagnole”.

Sans attendre la réponse, il rouvrit la porte, sortit, suivi de ses deux acolytes, remonta sur le siège et s’introduisit dans la caisse de la voiture, dont le pillage commença.

L’un après l’autre, il donnait les paquets à ses complices, qui les transportaient dans l’agence. La porte de celle-ci, demeurée grande ouverte, découpait un carré brillant sur le trottoir. Les passants, venant de l’obscurité relative de la rue pour y retourner aussitôt, traversaient sans y prendre garde cette zone plus lumineuse. Rien ne les eût empêchés d’entrer. Mais cette idée ne venait à personne, et la foule s’écoulait indifférente à une manutention qui ne la regardait pas et que rien ne l’autorisait à suspecter.

En cinq minutes la voiture fut vide. Porte close, on procéda au tri. Les valeurs, actions ou obligations, furent mises d’un côté; les espèces de l’autre. Les premières, impitoyablement rejetées, allèrent joncher le parquet. Des billets de banque, on fit cinq parts, et chacun en prit une, dont il se matelassa la poitrine.

— Et les sacs?… demanda l’un des bandits.

— Bourrez vos poches, répondit le chef. Ce qui restera, dans la voiture. Je m’en charge.

On lui obéissait déjà.

— Minute!… s’écria-t-il. Convenons de tout auparavant. Quand je serai parti, vous rentrerez ici et vous finirez de baisser la devanture. Ensuite, expliqua-t-il, en montrant le couloir ouvrant dans le fond de la pièce, vous sortirez par là. Le dernier fermera à double tour et jettera la clé à l’égout. Au bout, c’est le vestibule et vous connaissez les aîtres.

Du doigt, il montra le cabinet du directeur.

— N’oubliez pas le bonhomme. Vous savez ce qui est convenu?…

— Oui, oui, lui répondit-on. Sois tranquille.

Au moment de partir, il s’arrêta encore.

— Diable!… fit-il. Je ne pensais plus au principal… Il doit bien y avoir ici une liste des autres Agences.

On lui montra, collé à l’intérieur de la vitrine, une affiche jaune qui donnait ce renseignement. Il la parcourut des yeux.

— Quant aux manteaux, dit-il, lorsqu’il eut découvert l’adresse de l’agence S, jetez-les dans un coin. Qu’on les trouve. L’essentiel est qu’on ne les voie pas sur notre dos. Rendez-vous où vous savez… En route!

Le surplus des sacs d’or et d’argent fut transporté dans la voiture.

— C’est tout?… interrogea l’un des porteurs.

Son chef réfléchit, puis, frappé d’une idée soudaine:

— Fichtre non! Et mes frusques!

L’autre partit en courant, pour revenir aussitôt, apportant les vêtements que ceux du caissier Store avait tout d’abord remplacés, et qu’il jeta à la volée dans la caisse de la voiture.

— Cette fois, c’est bien tout?… demanda-t-il de nouveau.

— Oui. Et ne traînez pas! lui fut-il répondu.

Il disparut dans l’agence. La devanture de fer acheva de descendre.

Pendant ce temps, le cocher improvisé saisissait les guides et réveillait les chevaux d’un coup de fouet. La voiture s’ébranla, remonta Old Broad Street, tourna dans Throgmorton Street, suivit Lothburg Street, puis Gresham Street, tourna dans Aldergate Street et s’arrêta enfin devant l’agence S, au n° 29 de cette dernière rue.

Le faux cocher y entra hardiment et se dirigea vers la caisse.

— Il paraît que vous avez un pli à me donner? dit-il.

Le caissier releva les yeux sur celui qui l’interpellait.

— Non, ma foi! reconnut l’encaisseur avec un gros rire.

— Je ne comprends pas que le siège, maugréait cependant le caissier d’un air mécontent, envoie comme ça des gens qu’on ne connaît pas…

— C’est parce que je ne fais pas le quartier d’habitude. C’est à l’agence B qu’on m’a dit de passer ici, d’après un coup de téléphone du siège. Paraît que vous avez eu un fort versement après la fermeture.

Il avait trouvé sur-le-champ cette réponse plausible, la liste des agences de la Central Bank étant encore toute fraîche dans sa mémoire.

— Oui… reconnut le caissier, malgré tout soupçonneux… C’est égal, ça m’ennuie de ne pas vous connaître.

— Qu’est-ce que ça peut vous faire, répliqua l’autre étonné.

— Il y a tant de voleurs!… Mais, au fait, il y a moyen de tout arranger. Vous avez votre commission sur vous, je suppose?

Si quelque chose était de nature à troubler le bandit, c’était bien une pareille question. Comment aurait-il eu sa “commission”? Il ne comprenait même pas ce que le mot signifiait. Il ne se troubla pas cependant. Quand on risque de telles aventures, il faut avoir des qualités spéciales, et, par-dessus toutes les autres, un absolu sang-froid. Cette qualité, le faux encaisseur de la Central Bank la possédait au suprême degré. Si donc il fut ému en entendant la question qu’on lui posait à l’improviste, il n’en laissa rien paraître, et répondit du ton le plus naturel:

— Parbleu! ça va sans dire.

Il s’était tenu ce raisonnement bien simple que cette “commission”, puisqu’on admettait comme probable qu’il l’eût sur lui, consistait forcément en quelque objet matériel, dont les employés de la Central Bank avaient coutume d’être toujours porteurs. En fouillant la vareuse de l’encaisseur auquel il s’était substitué, il trouverait donc, sans doute, cette fameuse

“commission”.

— Je vais voir, ajouta-t-il d’une voix calme, en s’asseyant sur un banc et en se mettant en devoir de vider ses poches.

Il en sortit de nombreuses paperasses, lettres, notes de service, ou autres, toutes fortement frangées et froissées, comme il arrive de celles qu’on a longtemps traînées avec soi. Simulant la maladresse des ouvriers, quand leurs gros doigts, plus habiles aux rudes travaux, sont dans le cas de manipuler des papiers, il dépliait les pièces l’une après l’autre.

Dès la troisième, il découvrit un document imprimé, avec des blancs remplis à la main, aux termes duquel le nommé Baudruc était commissionné à titre d’encaisseur de la Central Bank. C’était évidemment ce qu’il cherchait, et pourtant la difficulté restait la même. Le nom écrit sur le document constituait peut-être, en effet, le plus grand de tous les dangers, ce Baudruc étant bien connu du caissier de l’agence S, qui s’était étonné de ne pas avoir affaire à lui.

Sans rien perdre de son sang-froid, l’audacieux bandit imagina sur-le-champ l’expédient nécessaire. Profitant d’un moment d’inattention du caissier, il déchira en deux morceaux la pièce officielle, dont la moitié inférieure resta dans sa main droite.

— Pas de veine!… s’écria-t-il du ton d’un homme vexé, aussitôt que cette opération eut été menée à bonne fin. Je l’ai bien, ma commission, mais la moitié, pas plus.

— La moitié?… répéta le caissier.

— Oui, elle était vieille et tout usée, à force de traîner dans ma poche. Elle se sera coupée en deux et j'en ai laissé bêtement une moitié chez moi.

— Hum!… fit le caissier.

L'encaisseur parut froissé.

— Et puis en voilà assez, déclara-t-il en se dirigeant vers la porte. On m'a dit de venir chercher votre galette; je viens. Vous ne voulez pas me la donner? Gardez-la. Vous vous débrouillerez avec le siège. Moi, je m'en moque.

L'indifférence qu'il témoignait fit plus pour son succès que les meilleurs arguments et plus encore la phrase menaçante qu'il avait décochée, telle une flèche de Parthe, en s'éloignant. Pas d'histoires! c'est le but éternel de tous les employés de la terre.

— Minute!… s'écria le caissier en le rappelant. Montrez-la moi, votre "commission".

— La voilà! répondit l'encaisseur, qui présenta la moitié de ce document où n'était inscrit aucun nom.

— Il y a la signature du chef, constata le caissier avec satisfaction.

Puis, se décidant enfin:

— Voici l'argent, annonça-t-il, en présentant un paquet scellé. Si vous voulez me signer mon reçu?

L’encaisseur, ayant mis un nom quelconque sur la feuille qui lui était présentée, s’éloigna d’un air mécontent.

— Salut!… dit-il, d’une voix bourrue, en homme irrité de la suspicion dont il venait d’être l’objet.

Aussitôt dehors, il pressa le pas vers la voiture, monta sur le siège et disparut dans la nuit.

Ainsi fut accompli ce vol qui eut un si grand retentissement.

Comme on le sait, il fut découvert le soir même, plus tôt, à coup sûr, que ne l’avaient supposé ses auteurs. L’agence verrouillée à double tour, son personnel réduit à l’impuissance, le cocher de la voiture supprimé, ils pouvaient légitimement croire qu’on ne s’apercevrait de rien avant le lendemain matin. À ce moment, le garçon de bureau, en venant procéder au balayage quotidien, donnerait nécessairement l’éveil, mais il y avait de grandes chances pour que l’aventure demeurât secrète jusque-là.

Les choses se passèrent tout autrement dans la réalité.

À cinq heures et demie, Mr Lasone, ce contrôleur des agences qui avait téléphoné une première fois, vers cinq heures, pour aviser du passage de la voiture de récolement, inquiet de ne pas voir arriver celle-ci, téléphona de nouveau à l’agence DK. Il ne reçut pas de réponse, les voleurs, qui terminaient alors le partage du butin, ayant décroché simplement le récepteur, afin d’arrêter la sonnerie, dont la persistance aurait pu éveiller l’attention du voisinage. Sur le moment, le contrôleur n’insista pas et se contenta d’incriminer les employés du téléphone.

Cependant, le temps s’écoulant et la voiture n’arrivant toujours pas, il fit une seconde tentative. Celle-ci restant aussi vaine que la première, et le bureau du téléphone lui affirmant que l’agence DK ne répondait pas, le contrôleur envoya un garçon du siège voir pourquoi elle était ainsi muette. Avant six heures et demie, ce garçon était de retour. On sut par lui que l’agence était fermée et paraissait déserte.

Le contrôleur, fort étonné que Mr Buxton eût terminé ses opérations de si bonne heure, un de ces jours de fin de mois où le personnel est obligé parfois de veiller jusqu’à neuf heures, ne put qu’attendre la voiture de récolement avec une impatience grandissante.

Il l’attendait encore à sept heures et quart, quand une grave nouvelle lui parvint. La voiture avait été trouvée derrière Hyde Park dans une rue peu fréquentée de Kensington, Holland Street, par un employé du siège central qui, sa journée faite, regagnait son domicile. Cet employé, intrigué par le stationnement tardif d’une voiture de la Central Bank dans cette rue relativement obscure et déserte, était monté sur le siège, avait poussé les portes de tôle qui n’étaient pas fermées, et, à la lueur d’une allumette, il avait découvert le corps déjà froid du cocher. Il était alors revenu en courant au siège central, afin de donner l’alarme.

Aussitôt, le téléphone joua dans toutes les directions. Avant huit heures, une escouade de police entourait la voiture abandonnée, tandis que la foule s’amassait devant l’agence DK, dont une autre escouade faisait ouvrir les portes par un serrurier requis à cet effet.

Le lecteur sait déjà ce qu’on devait y trouver.

L’enquête commença sur-le-champ. Par bonheur, aucun des employés de l’agence n’était mort, bien qu’à vrai dire ils n’en valussent guère mieux.

Aux trois quarts étouffés par les bâillons, la bouche emplie d’ouate et de chiffon qu’on y avait enfoncés avec violence, ils gisaient évanouis, quand du secours leur arriva, et nul doute qu’ils ne fussent passés de vie à trépas s’ils étaient restés dans cette situation jusqu’au matin.

Lorsque, après une heure de soins, ils eurent repris conscience, ils ne purent donner que des renseignements fort vagues. Cinq hommes barbus, les uns recouverts de longs cache-poussière, les autres de ces pardessus de voyage vulgairement dénommés ulsters, les avaient assaillis et terrassés. Ils n’en savaient pas plus.

Il n’y avait pas à mettre leur sincérité en doute. Dès le début de l’enquête, on avait trouvé, en effet, les cinq manteaux bien en évidence, comme si les malfaiteurs avaient tenu à laisser une trace de leur passage. Au surplus, ces vêtements, examinés avec attention par les plus fins limiers de Scotland Yard, ne révélèrent rien touchant ceux qui les avaient abandonnés. Faits d’étoffes banales ou de magasin, ce qui expliquait qu’on les eût laissés sur les lieux du crime.

Tout cela n’apprenait pas grand-chose, et pourtant le magistrat enquêteur dut renoncer à en savoir davantage. Vainement il retourna les témoins dans tous les sens. Ils ne varièrent pas, et il fut impossible d’en rien tirer de plus.

Le dernier témoin entendu fut le concierge de l’immeuble. La devanture étant baissée, les malfaiteurs étaient forcément sortis par le vestibule commun à toute la maison. Le concierge avait donc dû les voir.

Celui-ci ne put que confesser son ignorance. Les appartements dont il avait la surveillance étaient trop nombreux pour qu’elle fût réellement efficace. Ce jour-là, il n’avait rien remarqué d’anormal. Si les voleurs étaient passés devant lui, ainsi qu’on devait le supposer en effet, il les avait pris pour les employés de l’agence.

Poussé dans ses derniers retranchements, invité à fouiller dans sa mémoire, il cita les noms de quatre locataires qui avaient traversé le vestibule à peu près à l’heure du crime, ou peu de temps après. Vérification faite séance tenante, ces quatre locataires, d’une honorabilité parfaite, étaient rentrés tout simplement pour dîner.

Le concierge parla aussi d’un garçon charbonnier qui s’était présenté, porteur d’un sac volumineux, vers sept heures et demie, un peu avant l’intervention de la police, et qu’il avait remarqué uniquement pour cette raison qu’il n’est pas d’usage de livrer du charbon à une pareille heure. Ce garçon charbonnier avait demandé un locataire du cinquième, et avec une telle insistance que le concierge avait autorisé la livraison et avait indiqué l’escalier de service.

Le garçon charbonnier était donc monté, mais pour redescendre un quart d’heure plus tard, toujours chargé de son sac. Interpellé par le concierge, il avait dit alors s’être trompé d’adresse. Tout en parlant d’une voix haletante, en homme qui vient de gravir cinq étages avec un lourd fardeau sur les épaules, il avait gagné la rue, puis ayant déposé son sac dans une voiture à bras en station au bord du trottoir, il était parti sans se presser.

— Savez-vous, demanda le magistrat enquêteur, à quelle maison appartient ce garçon?

Le concierge répondit qu’il l’ignorait.

Le magistrat, réservant ce point pour une vérification ultérieure, interrogea le locataire du cinquième. Il lui fut confirmé qu’un homme, se disant chargé d’effectuer une livraison de charbon, avait, en effet, sonné à la porte de service vers sept heures et demie. La bonne, qui lui avait ouvert, l’ayant assuré qu’il se trompait, il était reparti sans insister. Une différence existait, toutefois, entre les diverses dépositions relatives à cet incident, la bonne du cinquième soutenant, contrairement au dire du concierge, que l’homme n’était porteur d’aucun sac.

— Il l’aura laissé en bas pour monter, expliqua le magistrat.

Toutefois, il apparut que cette explication n’était pas suffisante, quand on découvrit, dans le couloir commun des caves, la valeur d’un sac d’anthracite, que le concierge affirmait ne pas s’y trouver quelques heures plus tôt. De toute évidence, le mystérieux garçon charbonnier avait vidé en cet endroit le sac qu’il apportait. Mais alors, qu’avait-il emporté, puisque — le concierge se montrait tout aussi affirmatif sur ce point — le sac paraissait n’être, au départ, ni moins plein, ni moins lourd qu’à l’arrivée?

— Ne nous occupons pas de cela pour l’instant, conclut le magistrat, renonçant à résoudre l’insoluble problème. Ce point sera tiré au clair demain.

Pour le moment, il avait à suivre une piste qu’il estimait plus sérieuse, et il entendait ne pas s’en écarter.

En effet, tout le personnel de l’agence n’avait pas été retrouvé. Le personnage le plus important, le directeur, manquait à l’appel. Mr Lewis Robert Buxton avait disparu.

Les employés ne purent fournir aucune indication à cet égard. Tout ce qu’ils savaient, c’est que, un peu avant cinq heures, un client, introduit auprès du directeur, avait, quelques minutes plus tard, appelé le caissier Store, que celui-ci s’était rendu à cet appel et n’avait pas reparu. C’est quelques instants après que l’agression s’était produite. Quant à Mr Buxton, nul ne l’avait revu.

La conclusion s’imposait. S’il était hors de doute que l’agence eût été prise d’assaut par cinq bandits plus ou moins déguisés ou maquillés, il ne l’était pas moins que ces bandits eussent un complice dans la place et que ce complice ne fût autre que son chef.

C’est pourquoi, sans attendre les résultats d’une enquête plus approfondie, mandat d’amener fut immédiatement lancé contre Lewis Robert Buxton, chef de l’agence DK de la Central Bank, inculpé de vol et de complicité de meurtre, et c’est pourquoi son signalement, que l’on connaissait bien, si on ignorait celui de ses complices, fut télégraphié dans toutes les directions.

Le coupable n’ayant pas encore quitté l’Angleterre, il allait être appréhendé, soit dans une ville de l’intérieur, soit à un port d’embarquement, succès rapide dont la police pourrait s’enorgueillir à juste titre.

Sur cette agréable perspective, magistrat et détectives gagnèrent leurs lits respectifs.

Or, cette même nuit, à deux heures du matin, cinq hommes, les uns complètement glabres, une forte moustache barrant le visage cuivré des autres, descendaient à Southampton de l’express de Londres, isolément, comme ils y étaient montés. Après avoir pris livraison de plusieurs colis, et notamment d’une grande malle très lourde, ils se firent conduire en voiture au bassin à flot, où attendait à quai un steamer de deux mille tonneaux environ, dont la cheminée vomissait une épaisse fumée.

À la marée de quatre heures, c’est-à-dire à un moment où tout dormait à Southampton et où le crime d’Old Broad Street y était encore inconnu, ce steamer se déhala du bassin, sortit des jetées et prit la mer.

Nul ne tenta de s’opposer à son départ. Et pourquoi, en vérité, aurait-on suspecté cet honnête bâtiment, chargé ouvertement de marchandises, disparates mais honorables, à destination de Cotonou, port du Dahomey?

Le steamer s’éloigna donc paisiblement, avec ses marchandises, ses cinq passagers, leurs colis et leur grande malle, que l’un d’eux, le plus grand, avait fait déposer dans sa cabine, tandis que la police, interrompant son enquête, cherchait dans le sommeil un repos bien gagné.

Cette enquête, elle fut reprise le lendemain et les jours suivants, mais, ainsi que chacun le sait, elle ne devait pas aboutir. Les jours s’ajoutèrent aux jours, les cinq malfaiteurs demeurèrent inconnus, Lewis Robert Buxton demeura introuvable. Aucune lueur ne vint éclairer l’impénétrable mystère. On ne parvint même pas à découvrir à quelle maison appartenait le garçon charbonnier qui avait attiré un moment l’attention de la police. De guerre lasse, l’affaire fut classée.

La solution de l’énigme, la suite de ce récit la donnera, pour la première fois, entière et complète. Il appartiendra au lecteur de dire si on pourrait en imaginer de plus inattendue et de plus étrange.

CHAPITRE 2

2

Un voyage d’étude

Conakry, chef-lieu de la Guinée française et résidence du lieutenant-gouverneur, est aujourd’hui une ville très agréable, dont les rues, intelligemment tracées d’après les plans du gouverneur Ballay, se coupent à l’angle droit et sont, en général, désignées par un simple numéro d’ordre, à la mode américaine. Bâtie sur l’île de Tombo, elle est séparée du continent par un étroit chenal, que franchit un pont, sur lequel passent cavaliers, piétons, véhicules, et aussi le chemin de fer qui aboutit près du Niger, à Kouroussa. C’est la station la plus salubre du littoral. Aussi les représentants de la race blanche y sont-ils nombreux, particulièrement les Français et les Anglais, ces derniers plus spécialement groupés dans le faubourg de Newtown.

Mais, à l’époque des événements qui forment le sujet de ce récit, Conakry n’avait pas encore atteint ce degré de prospérité et n’était guère qu’une grosse bourgade.

En cette journée du 27 novembre, cette bourgade était en fête. Obéissant à l’invitation que le gouverneur, M. Henry Valdonne, lui avait faite par voie d’affiches, la population se portait vers la mer, disposée à recevoir chaleureusement, ainsi qu’on l’en priait, les voyageurs notables qui allaient incessamment débarquer du Touat, un paquebot de la Compagnie Frayssinet.

Les personnages qui mettaient ainsi en rumeur la ville de Conakry étaient d’importance, en effet. Au nombre de sept, ils formaient le haut personnel de la commission extraparlementaire chargée par l’administration centrale d’effectuer un voyage d’étude dans la région du Soudan connue sous le nom de “boucle du Niger”. À vrai dire, ce n’était pas tout à fait de plein gré que le président du Conseil, M. Granchamp, et M. Chazelle, ministre des Colonies, avaient réuni cette mission et décrété ce voyage d’étude. Ils y avaient été contraints, en quelque sorte, par la pression de la Chambre et par la nécessité de clore une joute oratoire qui confinait à l’obstruction.

Quelques mois auparavant, à propos d’un débat relatif à la région africaine que la mission extraparlementaire avait mandat d’explorer, la Chambre s’était partagée en deux fractions numériquement égales, que menaient au combat deux irréductibles leaders.

L’un de ses leaders s’appelait Barsac; l’autre avait nom Baudrières.

Le premier, bien en chair, voire un tantinet bedonnant, portait en éventail une opulente barbe noire. C’était un Méridional de la Provence, au verbe sonore, doué, sinon d’éloquence, du moins d’une certaine faconde, un joyeux et sympathique garçon au demeurant. Le second représentait un département du Nord, et, si l’on autorise cette expression audacieuse, il le représentait en longueur. Sec de corps et de visage, une mince moustache tombante accentuant ses lèvres minces, anguleux et dogmatique, il faisait partie de la race des tristes. Autant son collègue s’épanouissait généreusement, autant il vivait replié sur lui-même, se livrant le moins possible, l’âme verrouillée comme le coffre-fort d’un avare.

Tous deux députés de vieille date, ils s’étaient spécialisés dans les questions coloniales, et on s’accordait à les regarder comme des autorités en la matière. Cependant — cette réflexion s’impose — il était réellement merveilleux que leurs patientes études les eussent conduits à des conclusions si opposées. Le certain, c’est qu’ils étaient rarement d’accord. Lorsque Barsac traitait une question quelconque, il y avait dix à parier contre un que Baudrières allait demander la parole pour dire juste le contraire, si bien que, leurs discours s’annulant, la Chambre en était généralement réduite à voter dans le sens indiqué par le Ministère.

Mais, cette fois, Barsac et Baudrières n’avaient pas voulu céder d’un pouce, et la discussion s’était éternisée. Elle avait commencé au sujet d’un projet de loi déposé par le premier, projet tendant à créer cinq sièges de députés dans la Sénégambie, la Haute-Guinée et la partie du Soudan français située à l’ouest du Niger, et à accorder l’électorat, voire l’éligibilité, aux gens de couleur, sans distinction de race. Aussitôt, ainsi qu’il en avait coutume, Baudrières s’était vigoureusement élevé contre la thèse de Barsac, et les deux irréconciliables adversaires s’étaient jeté à la tête toute une mitraille d’arguments.

L’un, citant à l’appui de son opinion celle d’un grand nombre de militaires et de civils qui avaient parcouru ces régions ou y avaient trafiqué, représenta les nègres comme parvenus à un degré de civilisation fort avancée. Il ajouta que c’était peu d’avoir supprimé l’esclavage si on ne donnait pas aux populations conquises les mêmes droits qu’à leurs conquérants, et il prononça à ce propos, dans une série de péroraisons que la Chambre applaudit bruyamment, les grands mots de liberté, d’égalité et de fraternité.

L’autre affirma, par contre, que les nègres croupissaient encore dans la plus honteuse barbarie et qu’il ne pouvait être question de les consulter, pas plus qu’on ne consulte un enfant malade sur le remède qu’il convient de lui appliquer. Il ajouta qu’en tout cas le moment n’était pas propice à une expérience aussi dangereuse et qu’il convenait plutôt de renforcer les troupes d’occupation, des signes inquiétants autorisant à redouter des troubles prochains dans ces contrées. Il invoqua un aussi grand nombre d’opinions militaires et civiles que son contradicteur, conclut en préconisant une nouvelle intervention armée et déclara avec une énergie patriotique que le patrimoine conquis par le sang français était sacré et devait demeurer intangible. Lui aussi fut applaudi frénétiquement.

Le ministre des Colonies fut très embarrassé pour départager ces orateurs passionnés. Il y avait du vrai dans les deux thèses. S’il était exact que les populations noires habitant la boucle du Niger et la Sénégambie parussent commencer à s’accommoder de la domination française, que l’instruction fît quelques progrès parmi ces peuplades jadis si profondément ignorantes, et que la sécurité y fût en voie de rapide amélioration, il ne l’était pas moins qu’actuellement la situation tendait à se modifier dans un sens défavorable. On avait reçu la nouvelle de troubles et de razzias; des villages entiers, on ignorait pour quelles raisons, avaient été abandonnés par leurs habitants, et enfin il convenait d’enregistrer, sans rien exagérer cependant, des bruits assez mystérieux et confus qui couraient la brousse, aux abords du Niger, et dont le sens général était qu’une puissance indépendante fût en train de se former en un point encore inconnu du sol africain.

Chacun des deux précédents orateurs pouvant à la rigueur trouver des arguments favorables à sa cause dans le discours ministériel, ils triomphèrent tous deux également, et la discussion se poursuivit, jusqu’au moment où un député, excédé, s’écria au milieu du bruit:

— Puisqu’on ne peut pas s’entendre, qu’on aille y voir!

M. Chazelle répondit que ces contrées avaient été si souvent explorées que la nécessité de les découvrir une fois de plus ne s’imposait pas, mais qu’il était prêt, néanmoins, à se conformer aux vues de la Chambre, si celle-ci estimait qu’un voyage d’étude eût quelque utilité, et qu’il serait heureux de l’associer, dans ce cas, à une telle entreprise, en plaçant l’expédition sous la direction de celui de ses membres qu’elle voudrait bien désigner.

La proposition eut beaucoup de succès. On vota séance tenante, et le Ministère fut invité à constituer une mission qui parcourrait la région comprise dans la boucle du Niger et qui rédigerait un rapport sur le vu duquel la Chambre statuerait ultérieurement.

On se mit moins facilement d’accord quand il s’agit de nommer le député qui serait le chef de cette mission et, par deux fois, Barsac et Baudrières recueillirent un nombre de suffrages mathématiquement égal.

Il fallait cependant en finir.

— Parbleu! qu’on les nomme tous les deux! s’écria un de ces plaisants qui ne manquent jamais dans une assemblée française.

Cette idée ayant été accueillie avec enthousiasme par la Chambre, qui, sans doute, y voyait un moyen de ne plus entendre parler des colonies pendant quelques mois, Barsac et Baudrières furent élus, l’âge devant décider lequel des deux aurait le pas sur l’autre. Vérification faite, ce privilège échut à Barsac, qui se trouva être l’aîné de trois jours. Baudrières dut donc se résigner à n’être que son coadjuteur, ce dont il fut extrêmement mortifié.

À ce rudiment de mission, le gouvernement avait adjoint par la suite quelques personnalités, moins décoratives assurément, mais peut-être mieux qualifiées, si bien qu'à son arrivée à Conakry elle comportait sept membres au total, y compris Barsac et Baudrières déjà nommés.

Parmi les autres, on remarquait le docteur Châtonnay, un grand médecin et un médecin grand, car il était fort savant et il élevait à plus de cinq pieds huit pouces son joyeux visage, que couronnait une chevelure frisée aussi blanche que la neige, bien qu'il n'eût pas tout à fait cinquante ans, et que barrait une moustache en broussaille de même couleur. C'était un excellent homme que ce docteur Châtonnay, sensible et gai, et riant à tout propos avec un bruit de vapeur qui fuse.

On remarquait encore à la rigueur M. Isidore Tassin, correspondant de la Société de géographie, un petit homme sec et tranchant, passionnément et exclusivement géographe.

Quant aux derniers membres de la mission, MM. Poncin, Quirieu et Heyrieux, tous trois fonctionnaires de divers ministères, on ne les remarquait pas. Sans particularité notable, c'étaient des gens comme tout le monde.

Autour de ce noyau officiel gravitait, très officieusement, un huitième voyageur. Celui-ci, un blond à l'air énergique et décidé, avait nom Amédée Florence, et son métier consistait à renseigner de son mieux le grand journal quotidien L'Expansion française, dont il était le reporter actif et débrouillard.

Tels furent les personnages qui débarquèrent, ce jour-là, 27 novembre, du paquebot le Touat, de la Compagnie Frayssinet.

L’événement devait nécessairement provoquer des discours. Pour peu que l’on fasse partie du personnel administratif ou gouvernemental, on ne se contente plus, lorsqu’on se rencontre, de se serrer la main et de se dire bonjour, et on considère comme indispensable d’échanger des paroles historiques, tandis qu’un auditoire, toujours amusé, malgré l’accoutumance, par le comique spécial de cette formalité, se range en cercle autour des orateurs.

C’est en vertu de ce protocole que, sur le lieu même du débarquement, M. Valdonne, escorté de ses principaux fonctionnaires, qu’il eut soin de présenter, souhaita solennellement la bienvenue aux visiteurs de marque qui lui arrivaient, sinon du ciel, du moins des lointains de l’océan. D’ailleurs, rendons-lui cette justice, il fut bref, et sa courte harangue obtint un succès mérité.

Barsac, qui lui répondit, en sa qualité de chef de la mission, prit ensuite la parole en ces termes:

— Monsieur le gouverneur, messieurs, prononça-t-il avec l’accent de la reconnaissance — et du Midi! — après avoir toussé pour s’éclaircir la voix, mes collègues et moi nous sommes profondément touchés des paroles que nous venons d’entendre. La cordialité de votre accueil est pour nous de favorable augure, au moment où commence réellement une entreprise dont nous ne nous exagérons pas, au surplus, les difficultés. Nous savons que, sous la généreuse administration de la métropole, ces contrées, jadis explorées au milieu de tant de périls par les hardis pionniers de la patrie, connaissent enfin la paix française, si vous voulez bien autoriser cette expression pompeuse empruntée à nos ancêtres les Romains. C’est pourquoi, ici, au seuil de cette belle ville de Conakry, entourés des rangs pressés de nos compatriotes, nous avons la sensation de n’avoir pas quitté la

France, et c’est pourquoi, en nous enfonçant dans l’intérieur, nous ne la quitterons pas davantage, car les laborieuses populations de ces contrées sont désormais formées des citoyens d’une France agrandie et prolongée. Puisse-t-elle augmenter encore, s’il est possible, leur attachement à la patrie, leur dévouement à la République.

M. le gouverneur Valdonne donna, comme il est d’usage, le signal des applaudissements “spontanés”, tandis que Barsac faisait, en arrière, un pas que Baudrières faisait aussitôt en avant.

À la suite d’interminables conciliabules dans le cabinet du ministre, on avait décidé que Baudrières serait non pas le sous-chef, mais le chef adjoint de l’expédition. Or — mystérieuse puissance des mots! — il en résultait, paraît-il, que si Barsac prenait la parole dans une cérémonie officielle, Baudrières la prendrait immédiatement après lui. Ainsi avait été résolu l’épineux problème des amours-propres.

— Monsieur le gouverneur, messieurs, commença Baudrières, coupant court, de cette manière, aux applaudissements dont on avait salué la péroraison de son prédécesseur, je m’associe pleinement aux éloquentes paroles de mon éminent collègue et ami. Ainsi qu’il l’a dit excellemment, chacun de nous se rend un compte exact des difficultés et des dangers que peut offrir notre exploration. Ces difficultés, nous les vaincrons de notre mieux. Quant aux dangers, ils ne sauraient nous émouvoir, puisque, entre eux et nous, des baïonnettes françaises seront interposées. Qu’il me soit donc permis d’envoyer, dès notre premier pas sur la terre d’Afrique, un salut cordial à l’escorte qui éloignera de nous jusqu’à la possibilité d’un péril. Et, ne vous y trompez pas, messieurs, en saluant cette escorte restreinte, c’est à l’armée — car n’est-elle pas tout entière, en vérité, dans l’humble troupier qui passe? — c’est à l’armée, dis-je, que j’adresse mon salut. C’est donc l’armée, si chère à tous les coeurs français, qui s’associera à nos travaux, et c’est par elle que s’accroîtront dans cette entreprise obscure, comme l’ont fait si souvent les aventures glorieuses dont elle est coutumière, le prestige de la patrie et la grandeur de la République!

De nouveau, les applaudissements éclatèrent, exactement aussi nourris et aussi “spontanés” que les premiers, puis on se mit en route pour la Résidence, où les principaux membres de la mission allaient être hébergés pendant les trois jours qui seraient consacrés à régler les derniers détails du programme de l’exploration.

Le programme était vaste. La région intéressée par le projet de loi de Barsac dépasse un million cinq cent mille kilomètres carrés. C’est à peu près trois fois la superficie de la France. S’il ne pouvait être question de visiter tous les points de cette immense étendue, du moins avait-on tracé un itinéraire assez capricieux pour que l’impression recueillie finalement par les explorateurs eût quelque chance d’être conforme à la vérité. Cet itinéraire se développait sur plus de deux mille cinq cents kilomètres pour certains membres de la mission, et sur près de trois mille cinq cents pour les autres.

L’expédition devait, en effet, se dédoubler en cours de route, de manière à étendre le plus possible le champ de l’enquête. Au départ de Conakry, on irait d’abord jusqu’à Kankan, en passant par Ouossou, Timbo, centre important du Fouta-Djalon méridional, et Kouroussa, station établie sur le Niger, à peu de distance de la source.

De Kankan, on traversait, par Foroba,

Forabokourou et Tiola, le Ouassoulou et le Kénédougou, jusqu’à Sikasso, chef-lieu de ce dernier pays.

C’est à Sikasso, à mille cent kilomètres de la mer, que l’expédition se diviserait en deux parties. L’une, sous la direction de Baudrières, redescendrait vers le sud, se dirigerait vers le pays de Kong et gagnerait sa capitale par Sitardougou, Niambouambo et diverses agglomérations plus ou moins importantes. De Kong, elle rayonnerait dans le Baoulé, pour gagner finalement, à Grand-Bassam, la côte de l’Ivoire. Avec Barsac, l’autre partie continuerait, au contraire, dans l’Est, passerait par Ouagadougou, et atteindrait le Niger à Saye, puis, marchant parallèlement au fleuve, elle traversait le Mossi, et enfin, par le Gourma et le Borgou, elle aboutirait à Cotonou, son point terminus, sur la côte du Dahomey.

En tenant compte des détours et des retards inévitables, on devait s’attendre à ce que le voyage durât au moins huit mois pour la première, et dix à douze mois pour la seconde.

Partis ensemble, le 1er décembre, de Conakry, ce ne serait pas avant le 1er août que Baudrières arriverait à Grand-Bassam, et avant le 1er octobre que Barsac atteindrait Cotonou.

Il s’agissait donc d’un long voyage. Et pourtant M. Isidore Tassin ne pouvait guère se flatter qu’il lui permît d’établir quelque importante vérité géographique ignorée jusqu’à lui. À vrai dire même, la présence d’un correspondant de la Société de Géographie s’expliquait mal, l’espoir de découvrir la boucle du Niger étant aussi peu réalisable que celui de découvrir l’Amérique. Mais M. Tassin n’était pas gourmand. Le globe ayant été sillonné en tous sens, il estimait qu’on devait savoir se contenter de peu.

Sagement pensait-il en limitant ainsi ses ambitions. Depuis longtemps, la boucle du Niger avait cessé d’être la contrée inaccessible et mystérieuse qu’elle fut pendant tant d’années. Depuis le docteur allemand Barth, qui, le premier, la traversa, en 1853 et 1854, une foule de braves l’ont graduellement conquise. C’est, en

1887, le lieutenant de vaisseau Caron et l’exploration magnifique à tous égards du capitaine Binger; en 1889, le lieutenant de vaisseau Jaime; en 1890, le docteur Crozat; en 1891, le capitaine Monteil; en 1893 et 1894, les morts glorieuses du lieutenant Aube et du colonel Bonnier, et la prise de Tombouctou par le lieutenant Boiteux, bientôt rejoint par le commandant Joffre. En cette même année 1894 et en 1895, c’est le capitaine Toutée et le lieutenant Targe; en 1896, le lieutenant de vaisseau Hourst, et tant d’autres, pour aboutir à la campagne au cours de laquelle, en 1898, le colonel Audéoud s’empara de Kong et acheva d’abattre la puissance de Samory. Dès lors, le Soudan occidental cesse de mériter l’épithète de sauvage; l’administration succède à la conquête, les postes se multiplient, assurant d’une manière de plus en plus solide la bienfaisante domination française.

Au moment où la mission extraparlementaire allait pénétrer à son tour dans ces régions, la pacification n’était pas encore complète, mais déjà la sécurité était plus grande, et il y avait tout lieu d’espérer que le voyage s’accomplirait, sinon sans incident, du moins sans accident, et que tout se réduirait à une promenade parmi des populations paisibles, que Barsac estimait mûres pour goûter les joies de la politique électorale.

Le départ était fixé au 1er décembre.

La veille du départ, le 30 novembre, un dîner officiel allait réunir une dernière fois les membres de la mission à la table du gouverneur. C’est à la suite de ce dîner que les toasts seraient échangés, ainsi qu’il est d’usage, avec l’accompagnement obligatoire de l’hymne national, et que l’on formulerait les ultimes voeux pour le succès de l’expédition et pour la gloire de la République.

Ce jour-là, Barsac, las d’avoir déambulé dans Conakry sous un soleil de feu, venait de regagner sa chambre. Il s’y éventait avec béatitude, en attendant que vînt l’heure d’endosser l’habit noir, dont aucune température ne saurait dispenser un personnage officiel dans l’exercice de son emploi, quand le planton de service — un rengagé de la coloniale, qui “la connaissait dans les coins” — vint le prévenir que deux personnes demandaient à être reçus.

— Qui est-ce? interrogea Barsac.

Le planton fit un geste d’ignorance.

— Un type et sa dame, dit-il simplement.

— Des colons?…

— C’est pas mon idée, vu leur dégaine, répondit le planton. L’homme est un grand, avec macache gazon sur le caillou…

— Le caillou?…

— Il est chauve, quoi! Avec des favoris filasse et des yeux en boule d’escalier.

— Vous avez des images!… fit Barsac. Et la femme?

— La femme?…

— Oui. Comment est-elle?… Jeune?

— Assez.

— Jolie?

— Oui, et nippée!…

Barsac se frisa machinalement la moustache et dit:

— Faites entrer.

Tout en donnant cet ordre, il envoya, sans même y penser, un coup d'oeil à la glace qui reflétait sa corpulente image. S'il n'avait eu l'esprit ailleurs, il aurait pu alors constater que la pendule marquait six heures. En raison de la différence des longitudes, c'est précisément à cet instant que commençait l'attaque de l'agence DK de la Central Bank qui forma la matière du premier chapitre de ce récit.

Les visiteurs, un homme d'une quarantaine d'années suivi d'une jeune fille de vingt à vingt-cinq ans, furent introduits dans la pièce où Barsac goûtait les charmes du farniente, avant d'aller affronter les fatigues d'un dîner officiel.

L'homme était très grand, en effet. Une paire de jambes interminables supportait un buste relativement exigu, qui s'achevait en un cou long et osseux, lequel servait de piédestal à une tête modelée en hauteur. Si les yeux n'étaient pas en boule d'escalier, ainsi que l'avait avancé le planton abusant des images outrancières, on ne pouvait contester qu'ils ne fussent saillants, ni que le nez ne fût gros, ni que les lèvres ne fussent épaisses et glabres, un impitoyable rasoir en ayant supprimé les moustaches. Par contre, de courts favoris, du modèle de ceux qu'il est classique d'attribuer aux Autrichiens, et une couronne de cheveux bouclés entourant la base du crâne merveilleusement nu et poli, permettaient d’affirmer que le planton manquait de précision dans le choix de ses qualificatifs. Filasse, avait-il dit. Le mot n’était pas exact. En bonne justice, le personnage était roux.

Ce portrait dispenserait, au besoin, de dire qu’il était laid, s’il ne convenait d’accoler à sa laideur l’épithète de sympathique. Ses grosses lèvres exprimaient, en effet, la franchise, et dans ses yeux luisait cette malicieuse bonté que nos pères désignaient sous le nom charmant de bonhomie.

À sa suite, venait la jeune fille. Il faut reconnaître que le planton, en la décrétant jolie, n’avait, cette fois, nullement exagéré. Grande, mince, la taille élégante, la bouche fraîche et bien meublée, le nez fin et droit, les yeux grands et surmontés de sourcils admirablement dessinés, une abondante chevelure d’un noir d’encre, tous les traits d’une régularité impeccable, c’était une parfaite beauté.

Barsac ayant offert un siège à ses visiteurs, ce fut l’homme, comme de raison, qui prit la parole.

— Vous nous pardonnerez, monsieur le député, de venir ainsi vous importuner, et, dans l’impossibilité où je suis de faire autrement, vous nous excuserez de vous dire nous-mêmes qui nous sommes. Je m’appelle — vous me permettez d’ajouter, suivant mon habitude: j’ai le regret de m’appeler, car ce nom est ridicule, Agénor de Saint-Bérain, propriétaire, célibataire et citoyen de la ville de Rennes.

Ayant ainsi débité son état civil, Agénor de Saint-Bérain fit une légère pause, puis, s’aidant du geste, présenta:

— Mlle Jane Mornas, ma tante.

— Votre tante… répéta Barsac.

— Oui, Mlle Mornas est bien ma tante, autant qu'on peut l'être de quelqu'un, affirma Agénor de Saint-Bérain, tandis qu'un gai sourire entrouvrait les lèvres de la jeune fille.

Ce fut comme un coup de soleil. Son beau visage, dont l'expression trop sérieuse était peut-être le seul défaut, en parut illuminé.

— M. de Saint-Bérain, expliqua-t-elle avec un léger accent anglais, tient essentiellement à son titre de neveu, et ne laisse passer aucune occasion de proclamer notre degré réel de parenté…

— Ça me rajeunit, interrompit le neveu.

— Mais, continua Jane Mornas, une fois l'effet produit et son droit légal bien établi, il consent à renverser les rôles et à redevenir l'oncle Agénor, ce que, par convention de famille, il a toujours été depuis ma naissance.

— Et ce qui est plus en rapport avec mon âge, expliqua l'oncle-neveu. Mais passons, et, les présentations étant faites, permettez-moi, monsieur le député, d'en arriver à ce qui nous amène, Mlle Mornas et moi. En bon oncle-neveu, je me suis laissé entraîner par elle jusqu'à ces lointaines contrées. Notre intention n'est pas de séjourner à Conakry, mais bien de nous aventurer dans l'intérieur, en quête d'émotions et de spectacles neufs. Nos préparatifs sont terminés, et nous étions sur le point de partir, quand nous avons appris qu'une mission allait suivre, sous vos ordres, une route analogue à la nôtre. J'ai fait alors observer à Mlle Mornas que, si tranquille que fût ce pays, il me paraissait préférable de nous joindre à cette mission, si l'on voulait bien nous y accueillir. Nous venons donc vous demander l'autorisation de faire route de conserve avec vous.

— En principe, répondit Barsac, je n’y vois pas d’inconvénient, mais je dois, vous le comprendrez, consulter mes collègues.

— C’est trop naturel, approuva Saint-Bérain.

— Peut-être, suggéra Barsac, craindront-ils que la présence d’une femme ne retarde notre marche et ne soit peu compatible avec l’exécution du programme qui nous a été tracé… Dans ce cas…

— Qu’ils perdent cette crainte! protesta l’oncle Agénor. Mlle Mornas est un vrai garçon. Elle vous demande elle-même de la traiter, non en compagne, mais en compagnon.

— Certes! approuva Jane Mornas. J’ajouterai que, même au point de vue matériel, nous ne vous causerons aucune gêne. Nous possédons chevaux et porteurs. Rien ne nous manque, et nous avons jusqu’à deux Bambaras, deux anciens tirailleurs sénégalais, que nous avons engagés en qualité de guides et d’interprètes. Vous voyez que vous pouvez nous accueillir sans crainte.

— Dans ces conditions, en effet… reconnut Barsac. Enfin, j’en parlerai ce soir même à mes collègues, et, s’ils sont de mon avis, c’est une affaire entendue. Où pourrai-je vous donner une réponse définitive?

— Demain, au moment du départ, car de toute façon nous quitterons Conakry dès demain.

Les choses étant ainsi convenues, les visiteurs prirent congé.

Au dîner du gouverneur, Barsac transmit, en effet, à ses collègues la requête qu’on lui avait présentée. Elle reçut un favorable accueil. Seul

Baudrières crut devoir faire ses réserves. Non pas qu'il se refusât positivement à agréer la demande de cette jolie compagne de route, dont Barsac prit la défense avec plus de chaleur peut-être qu'il n'était strictement nécessaire, mais enfin il manifesta une certaine hésitation. L'incident lui paraissait louche. Était-il admissible qu'une jeune fille s'aventurât dans un pareil voyage? Non, vraiment, le prétexte donné n'était pas sérieux, et l'on devait croire qu'on en dissimulait le véritable but. Ceci posé, n'était-on pas en droit de craindre que la requête ne cachât quelque piège? Qui sait, même, si elle n'avait aucune corrélation avec les bruits mystérieux dont le ministre s'était fait discrètement l'écho à la tribune de la Chambre?

On rassura Baudrières en riant.

— Je ne connais ni M. de Saint-Bérain, ni Mlle Mornas, déclara M. Valdonne, mais, depuis quinze jours qu'ils sont à Conakry, je les avais remarqués.

— On remarquerait à moins! s'écria Barsac avec conviction.

— Oui, la jeune fille est fort belle, approuva M. Valdonne. Ils arrivent, m'a-t-on assuré, de Saint-Louis du Sénégal, par le bateau qui dessert la côte, et, si singulier que cela paraisse, ils semblent bien faire un simple voyage d'agrément, ainsi qu'ils l'ont dit à M. Barsac. Pour ma part, je ne pense pas qu'il y ait le moindre inconvénient à leur donner satisfaction.

L'opinion du lieutenant-gouverneur prévalut sans autre opposition.

C'est ainsi que la mission dont Barsac était le chef s'augmenta de deux recrues et fut portée au total de dix membres, y compris Amédée Florence, reporter de l'Expansion française, mais non compris les porteurs et l'élément militaire. C'est ainsi que le hasard put, le lendemain matin, favoriser Pierre Marcenay, capitaine d’infanterie coloniale et commandant de l’escorte, en lui permettant de devancer Barsac, au moment où celui-ci se précipitait aussi vite que cela est possible à un quadragénaire légèrement ventripotent, en vue d’aider Mlle Mornas à se mettre en selle.

— Armis cedat insigne, dit, en montrant du doigt la place de son écharpe absente, Barsac, qui avait fait ses humanités.

Mais on voyait bien qu’il n’était pas content.

CHAPITRE 3

Lord Buxton Glenor

Au moment où débute ce récit, il y avait bien des années que Lord Buxton ne sortait plus, il y avait bien des années que la porte du château de Glenor qu’il habitait, au coeur de l’Angleterre, près de la petite ville d’Uttoxeter, ne s’était plus ouverte devant aucun visiteur, que les fenêtres de ses appartements particuliers étaient demeurées obstinément fermées. La claustration de lord Buxton était complète, absolue, depuis le drame qui avait terni l’honneur de sa famille, souillé son nom, brisé sa vie.

Plus de soixante ans avant les événements qui viennent d’être relatés, lord Buxton, frais émoulu de l’École militaire, entrait dans la ronde humaine par la grande porte, car il tenait de ses aïeux fortune, honneur immaculé, et la gloire.

L’histoire des Buxton se confond, en effet, avec l’histoire même de l’Angleterre, au profit de laquelle coula si souvent leur sang généreux. À une époque où le mot de patrie n’avait pas encore acquis la valeur qu’une longue vie nationale lui a donnée, l’idée en était déjà profondément gravée dans le coeur des hommes de cette famille qui, venue avec les conquérants normands, n’avait jamais vécu que pour l’épée, et par l’épée mise au service de son pays. Au cours des siècles, pas une défaillance, n’avait diminué l’éclat de son nom, jamais une tache n’avait éclaboussé son blason.

Edward Alan Buxton était le digne descendant de cette lignée de preux. À l’imitation de ses ancêtres, il n’imaginait d’autre but à la vie que le culte farouche de l’honneur et l’amour passionné de la patrie. Si l’atavisme, l’hérédité, de quelque nom que l’on veuille désigner ce mystérieux phénomène qui fait les fils semblables aux pères, n’avaient pas suffi à lui suggérer ces principes, l’éducation les lui eût inculqués. L’histoire anglaise, pleine de la gloire de ses ancêtres, lui eût nécessairement inspiré le désir de faire aussi bien, sinon mieux qu’eux.

À vingt-deux ans, il avait épousé une jeune fille appartenant à l’une des meilleures familles d’Angleterre, dont il eut une fille après un an de mariage. Ce fut une déception pour Edward Buxton, qui attendit impatiemment la naissance d’un second enfant.

Il l’attendit pendant vingt ans. Ce fut seulement après ce long intervalle que lady Buxton, dont la santé avait été gravement altérée par sa première maternité, lui donna le fils tant désiré, qui reçut le prénom de George, tandis que, presque en même temps, sa fille, récemment mariée à un Français, M. de Saint-Bérain, mettait au monde un garçon qui fut appelé Agénor, lequel Agénor devait, quarante ans plus tard, se présenter au député Barsac de la manière que l’on sait.

Cinq ans s’écoulèrent encore, et lord Glenor eut un second fils, Lewis Robert, que le destin devait, à trente-cinq ans de là, si fâcheusement mêler au drame de la Central Bank par lequel s’est ouvert ce récit.

Ce grand bonheur, avoir un second fils, c’est- à-dire un second continuateur du nom, fut accompagné du plus affreux des malheurs. La naissance de ce fils coûta la vie à sa mère, et lord Buxton vit disparaître à jamais celle qui, pendant plus d’un quart de siècle, avait été sa compagne.

Frappé d’une manière aussi rude, lord Buxton chancela sous le coup. Déprimé, découragé, il renonça à toute ambition, et, bien que relativement jeune encore, il quitta la marine où il servait depuis sa sortie de l’école, et dont il était à la veille d’atteindre les plus hauts grades.

Longtemps, à la suite de ce grand malheur, il vécut replié sur lui-même, puis, le temps ayant adouci son immense douleur, il essaya, après neuf ans de solitude, de reconstituer son foyer détruit, en épousant la veuve d’un de ses compagnons d’armes, Marguerite Ferney, qui lui apportait en mariage, pour toute fortune, un fils, William, alors âgé de seize ans.

Mais le sort avait décidé que lord Glenor vieillirait seul, et qu’il arriverait seul au terme du voyage. Quelques années plus tard, il lui naissait un quatrième enfant, une fille qui reçut le nom de

Jane, et il était veuf pour la seconde fois.

Lord Glenor avait alors dépassé la soixantaine. À cet âge, il ne pouvait songer à refaire sa vie. Si cruellement, si opiniâtrement frappé dans ses plus chères affections, il se consacra exclusivement à son devoir de père. Si sa première fille, Mme de Saint-Bérain, avait depuis longtemps échappé à sa direction, il lui restait quatre enfants, dont le plus âgé avait à peine vingt ans, que les deux mortes lui avaient laissés, car, dans son coeur, il ne séparait pas William Ferney des deux garçons et de la fille de son sang.

Mais la destinée n’avait pas épuisé sa rigueur, et lord Glenor devait connaître encore des douleurs auprès desquelles celles qu’il avait subies jusque-là lui paraîtraient bien légères.

Les premières amertumes que lui réservait l’avenir lui vinrent précisément de William Ferney, ce fils de la morte, qu’il chérissait comme s’il eût été le sien. Sournois, hargneux, hypocrite, le jeune homme ne répondit pas à la tendresse qu’on lui témoignait et demeura isolé au milieu de cette famille qui lui ouvrait si largement sa maison et son coeur. Il resta insensible à toutes les preuves d’affection qu’on lui donna. Bien au contraire, plus on s’intéressait à lui, plus il se retirait farouchement, plus on lui manifestait d’amitié, plus il semblait haïr ceux qui l’entouraient.

L’envie, une envie exaspérée, une envie furieuse, dévorait le coeur de William Ferney. Ce sentiment si méprisable, il l’avait éprouvé le premier jour où il était entré avec sa mère dans le château de Glenor. La comparaison s’était aussitôt imposée à son esprit du sort qui attendait les deux fils de celui-ci, et de son sort à lui, William Ferney. Dès lors, il conçut une haine violente pour George et pour Lewis, ces héritiers de lord Buxton, qui seraient riches un jour, tandis que resterait pauvre le descendant déshérité de Marguerite Ferney.

Sa haine grandit encore, quand naquit Jane, sa demi-sœur par le sang, qui aurait part, elle aussi, un jour, à cette fortune dont il serait exclu, ou dont il ne recevrait, par charité, qu’une infime partie. Elle fut portée au paroxysme lorsque sa mère mourut et que disparut ainsi le seul être qui eût chance de trouver le chemin de ce coeur ulcéré.

Rien ne l’apaisa, ni l’amitié fraternelle des deux fils de lord Buxton, ni la paternelle sollicitude de celui-ci. De jour en jour, l’envieux se retira davantage, se fit davantage une vie personnelle dont, seuls, des scandales successifs permirent de pénétrer le mystère. On apprit ainsi que William Ferney s’était lié avec les jeunes gens les plus tarés et qu’il avait choisi ses amis et ses compagnons de plaisir dans la partie la moins recommandable de la population de Londres.

Le bruit de ses excès parvint aux oreilles de lord Buxton, qui s'épuisa vainement en inutiles remontrances. Bientôt ce furent des dettes, qu'il solda, tout d'abord, en souvenir de la morte, mais auxquelles son devoir lui imposa bientôt de mettre un terme.

Ainsi réduit à la portion congrue, William Ferney ne changea rien à son genre de vie. On se demandait comment il se procurait les ressources nécessaires, quand fut présentée au château de

Glenor une traite d'une valeur considérable et sur laquelle figurait la signature habilement imitée de lord Buxton.

Celui-ci paya sans mot dire, mais, incapable de vivre en compagnie d'un faussaire, il fit comparaître le coupable devant lui et le chassa de sa présence, en lui garantissant toutefois une large pension.

William Ferney écouta du même air narquois les reproches et les conseils, puis sans répondre un mot, sans même toucher la première mensualité de sa pension, il quitta le château de Glenor et disparut.

Ce qu'il devint, lord Buxton l'ignorait au moment où débute ce récit. Jamais plus il n'avait entendu parler de lui, et peu à peu, au cours des années, ce souvenir pénible s'était atténué.

Fort heureusement, ses vrais enfants lui donnaient autant de satisfaction que l'enfant étranger lui avait causé de soucis. En même temps que ce dernier partait pour ne plus revenir, l'aîné, George, continuait la glorieuse tradition de sa famille, sortait le premier de l'école d'Ascott et s'enrôlait dans l'armée, en quête d'aventures coloniales. Au grand regret de lord Buxton, son second fils, Lewis, montrait des goûts moins belliqueux, mais à tous autres égards, il demeurait digne de son affection. C’était un garçon grave, méthodique, un de ces caractères sérieux sur lesquels on est en droit de compter.

Pendant les années qui suivirent le départ de William, tandis que s’effaçait par degrés le souvenir du transfuge, la vie des deux jeunes gens se développa suivant une courbe régulière et logique. Chez Lewis s’affirmait la vocation des affaires. Il entrait à la Central Bank, y était hautement apprécié et gravissait les degrés hiérarchiques de cet établissement colossal, dont on pronostiquait en général qu’il serait un jour le grand maître. Pendant ce temps, George, passant d’une colonie à l’autre, devenait une manière de héros et conquérait ses grades à la pointe de l’épée.

Lord Buxton pensait donc en avoir fini avec le sort contraire, et, parvenu à la vieillesse, il n’y découvrait plus que d’heureuses perspectives, quand un malheur, plus affreux qu’aucun de ceux qui l’avaient déjà frappé, vint tout à coup l’accabler. Cette fois, ce n’était pas au coeur seulement qu’il était atteint, mais aussi dans l’honneur, dans ce pur honneur des Glenor dont le nom allait être à jamais flétri par la plus abominable des trahisons.

Peut-être, malgré le temps écoulé, se souvient-on encore de ce drame terrible, dont le fils aîné de lord Glenor fut le triste héros.

George Buxton, placé, au point de vue militaire, en position de disponibilité, était alors au service d’une grande compagnie d’exploration. Depuis deux ans, il sillonnait pour le compte de cette compagnie, à la tête de troupes à demi régulières qu’elle avait réunies, le territoire des Achantis, lorsqu’on apprit tout à coup que, se muant en chef de bande, il s’était mis en révolte ouverte contre son pays. À l’époque, la nouvelle en parvint avec la brutalité d’un coup de foudre. On connut en même temps la rébellion et son implacable châtiment. On connut à la fois la trahison du capitaine Buxton et de ses hommes transformés en aventuriers, leurs pillages, leurs exactions, les actes de cruauté dont ils s’étaient rendus coupables, et la répression suivant de près ce crime.

Les journaux ont raconté le drame qui s’est alors déroulé. Ils en ont noté les péripéties. Ils ont montré la bande de rebelles pourchassée sans relâche et s’émiettant graduellement devant les soldats envoyés contre elle. Ils ont raconté comment le capitaine Buxton, refoulé avec quelques-uns de ses compagnons sur les territoires alors compris dans la zone d’influence française, avait été enfin rejoint près du village de Koubo, au pied des monts Hombori, et tué à la première décharge. Il n’est pas de hameau où l’on n’ait connu la mort du commandant de la troupe régulière anglaise terrassé par la fièvre pendant qu’il revenait à la côte, son triste devoir accompli, le massacre du chef révolté et de la majeure partie de ses complices, la dispersion des autres et l’anéantissement dans l’oeuf de l’abominable et chimérique entreprise. Si le châtiment coûtait cher, il était au moins complet et rapide.

On se souvient de l’émotion qui secoua l’Angleterre quand elle apprit cette surprenante aventure. Puis l’émotion s’apaisa, et le linceul de l’oubli tomba lentement sur les morts.

Approchant alors de soixante-quinze ans, lord Glenor reçut le coup comme parfois les grands arbres la foudre. Il arrive que le fluide les frappe à la cime, dévore leur coeur jusqu’aux racines, puis se perd dans la terre, ne laissant derrière lui qu’un colosse d’écorce, toujours debout, dont rien ne trahit la dévastation intérieure, mais vide en réalité, et que le premier vent un peu rude va renverser.

Ainsi en fut-il pour le vieux marin. Frappé à la fois dans son amour passionné pour son fils, et dans son honneur plus cher encore, il ne fléchit pas sous le choc, et c'est à peine si la pâleur de son visage trahit sa douleur. Sans poser une question, sans prononcer une parole sur l'intolérable sujet, il s'enferma dans une solitude hautaine et dans l'orgueil du silence.

C'est à partir de ce jour qu'on cessa de le voir, comme on en avait coutume, faire sa promenade quotidienne. C'est à partir de ce jour, que, dans sa maison fermée à tous, fût-ce à ses plus chers amis, il demeura claustré, presque immobile, muet, seul.

Seul? Non, pas entièrement. Trois êtres encore se relayaient auprès de lui, trouvant dans la vénération qu'il leur inspirait le courage de supporter cette existence effrayante avec une vivante statue, avec un spectre dont la personne physique avait gardé toute la vigueur de l'homme fait, mais qui s'était volontairement muré dans un éternel silence.

C'était son second fils, d'abord, Lewis Robert Buxton qui, pas une semaine, ne manqua jamais de venir passer à Glenor le jour de liberté que lui laissaient ses fonctions à la Central Bank.

C'était ensuite son petit-fils, Agénor de Saint-Bérain, qui tâchait d'égayer par sa bonhomie souriante ce logis lugubre comme un cloître.

Lors de l'inconcevable trahison de George Buxton, Agénor de Saint-Bérain ressemblait déjà trait pour trait au crayon peu flatteur qu'on a esquissé de sa personne physique, mais, au moral, c'était, dès cette époque, un excellent garçon, serviable, obligeant, au coeur sensible, d'une loyauté à toute épreuve.

Trois signes particuliers le distinguaient du reste des humains: une distraction poussée jusqu’à l’invraisemblance, une passion désordonnée — et d’ailleurs bien malheureuse — pour la pêche à la ligne, et par-dessus tout, une aversion farouche pour le sexe féminin.

Possesseur d’une jolie fortune héritée de ses parents, morts tous les deux, et par conséquent indépendant, il avait quitté la France à la première nouvelle du drame qui frappait son grand-père, et s’était installé dans une villa voisine du château de Glenor, où il passait, d’ailleurs, la majeure partie de son temps.

À sa villa attenait un jardin traversé par un cours d’eau, dans lequel Agénor plongeait ses lignes avec une ardeur aussi vive qu’inexplicable. Pourquoi mettre tant de passion à cet exercice, en effet, puisqu’il pensait régulièrement à autre chose et que tous les poissons du monde eussent pu “mordre” sans qu’il s’aperçût de la danse du bouchon? Et quand bien même, au surplus, un barbillon, une ablette ou un goujon, plus entêté encore qu’il n’était distrait, serait venu se ferrer de lui-même, à quoi cela eût-il avancé le sensible Agénor, qui se fût empressé sans aucun doute de rejeter la bestiole à l’eau, peut-être même en lui adressant des excuses?

Un brave garçon, nous l’avons dit. Et quel célibataire endurci! À qui voulait l’entendre, il affirmait son mépris pour les femmes. Il leur prêtait tous les défauts, tous les vices. “Trompeuses, perfides, menteuses, prodigues”, proclamait-il d’ordinaire, sans préjudice d’autres épithètes insultantes dont il n’était jamais à court.

Quand on lui conseillait de se marier:

— Moi! s’écriait-il, m’unir à l’un de ces êtres infidèles et volages!…

Et, si l’on insistait:

— Je ne croirai à l’amour d’une femme, déclarait-il sérieusement, que lorsque je l’aurai vue mourir de désespoir sur ma tombe.

Cette condition étant irréalisable, il était à parier qu’Agénor resterait garçon.

L’éloignement qu’il manifestait pour le beau sexe souffrait cependant une exception. La privilégiée était Jane Buxton, la dernière des enfants de lord Glenor, la tante d’Agénor, par conséquent, mais une tante de quinze à vingt ans plus jeune que lui, une tante qu’il avait connue toute petite, dont il avait guidé les premiers pas et dont il s’était institué le protecteur, lorsque le malheureux lord s’était retranché du monde. Il lui portait une tendresse véritablement paternelle, une affection profonde, que la jeune fille, d’ailleurs, lui rendait bien. En principe, c’était lui le mentor, mais, en fait, ce mentor faisait tout ce que voulait son disciple. Ils ne se quittaient guère. Ils sortaient ensemble, couraient les bois à pied ou à cheval, canotaient, chassaient, pratiquaient tous les sports, ce qui autorisait le vieux neveu à dire de sa jeune tante ainsi élevée en garçon: “Vous verrez que je finirai par en faire un homme!”

Jane Buxton était la troisième personne qui prodiguât ses soins au vieux lord, dont elle entourait la triste vieillesse d’une sollicitude quasi maternelle. Elle eût donné sa vie pour le voir sourire. Et cette idée: ramener un peu de bonheur dans l’âme ulcérée de son père, cette idée ne la quittait pas. C’était le but unique de toutes ses pensées, de tous ses actes.

À l’époque du drame dans lequel son frère avait trouvé la mort, elle avait vu son père pleurer plus encore sur son nom flétri, sur son honneur outragé, que sur la fin misérable d’un fils frappé d’un juste châtiment. Elle, par contre, n’avait pas pleuré.

Non pas qu’elle fût insensible à la perte d’un frère tendrement chéri et à la tache dont un tel crime souillait l’honneur de sa famille. Mais en même temps que la douleur, plus forte que la douleur, son coeur avait connu la révolte. Eh quoi! Lewis et son père croyaient si aisément à la honte de George! Sans contrôle, sans enquête personnelle, ils acceptaient comme démontrées des accusations venues des lointains d’outre-mer! Qu’importaient les rapports officiels? Contre ces rapports, contre l’évidence même, le passé de George protestait. Qu’il fût un traître, ce grand frère si droit, si bon, si pur, dont toute la vie attestait l’héroïsme et la loyauté, voilà qui était impossible! Alors que tout le monde reniait le pauvre mort, elle, du moins, honorerait sa mémoire, et sa foi en lui ne pâlirait jamais.

Cette première impression de Jane Buxton, le temps ne fit que la fortifier. À mesure que passaient les jours, plus ardente fut sa conviction de l’innocence de son frère, bien qu’elle ne pût l’étayer par aucune preuve. Le moment vint enfin — ce fut plusieurs années après le drame — où elle se hasarda à rompre pour la première fois le silence absolu que, par un accord tacite, tous les hôtes du château observaient sur la tragédie de Koubo.

— Mon oncle?… dit-elle ce jour-là, en manière d’interpellation, à Agénor de Saint-Bérain.

Bien que celui-ci fût, en réalité, son neveu, ils étaient convenus de renverser, dans la pratique, l’ordre des parentés, afin de le rendre plus conforme à celui des années. C’est pourquoi Agénor appelait d’ordinaire Jane sa nièce, tandis que celle-ci lui décernait le titre d’oncle. Il en était toujours ainsi…

Hors un cas, cependant.

S’il advenait, par grand hasard, que cet oncle de convention donnât de justes motifs de plainte à sa pseudo-nièce, ou s’avisât de résister à sa volonté, voire à l’un de ses caprices, cette dernière revendiquait incontinent le rang auquel elle avait droit et signifiait à son “neveu” qu’il eût à faire preuve du respect dû à un ascendant. Connaissant à ce signe que les choses se gâtaient, le “neveu” s’empressait de filer doux en vue d’apaiser sa vénérable “tante”. De cette dualité d’appellations contradictoires résultaient parfois des dialogues assez savoureux.

— Mon oncle?… interpella donc Jane, ce jour-là.

— Ma chérie?… répondit Agénor, alors absorbé dans la lecture d’un in-quarto consacré à l’art de la pêche à la ligne.

— Je voudrais vous parler de George.

Agénor, surpris, abandonna son livre.

— De George?… répéta-t-il un peu troublé. De quel George?

— De mon frère George, précisa Jane avec calme.

Agénor était devenu tout pâle.

— Mais tu sais bien, objecta-t-il d’une voix tremblante, que ce sujet est interdit, que ce nom-là ne doit pas être prononcé ici.

Jane rejeta l’objection d’un mouvement de tête.

— Il n’importe, dit-elle tranquillement. Parlez-moi de George, mon oncle.

— Et que veux-tu que je t’en dise?

— Tout. L’histoire entière. Tout.

— Jamais de la vie!

Jane fronça les sourcils.

— Mon neveu!… fit-elle d’un ton menaçant.

Il n’en fallut pas davantage.

— Voilà!… Voilà!… balbutia Agénor, qui se mit à raconter la triste histoire qui lui était demandée.

Il la raconta d’un bout à l’autre, sans rien omettre. Jane l’écouta en silence, et, quand il eut terminé, elle ne posa pas d’autres questions. Agénor crut en avoir fini, et poussa un soupir de soulagement.

Il se trompait. Quelques jours plus tard, Jane revint à la charge.

— Mon oncle?… interpella-t-elle de nouveau.

— Ma chérie?… répondit derechef Agénor.

— Si George, pourtant, n’était pas coupable?…

Agénor crut avoir mal entendu.

— Pas coupable!… répéta-t-il. Hélas! ma pauvre enfant, il n’y a aucun doute. La trahison et la mort du malheureux George sont des faits historiques, dont les preuves abondent.

— Lesquelles? interrogea Jane.

Agénor recommença son récit. Il cita les articles des journaux, les rapports officiels contre lesquels nul n’avait protesté. Il invoqua enfin l’absence du coupable, ce qui était une forte preuve de la réalité de sa mort.

— De sa mort, soit, objecta Jane, mais de sa trahison?

— L’une est la conséquence de l’autre, répondit Agénor confondu par tant d’obstination.

L’obstination de la jeune fille était encore plus grande qu’il ne le supposait. Fréquemment, à compter de ce jour, elle revint sur ce pénible sujet, harcelant Agénor de questions renaissantes, desquelles il était facile de conclure qu’elle conservait sa foi intacte dans l’innocence de son frère.

Sur ce point, toutefois, Agénor était irréductible. En réponse aux meilleurs arguments, il se contentait de hocher la tête avec mélancolie, en homme qui veut éviter une discussion inutile, mais Jane sentait bien que son opinion n’était pas ébranlée.

Il en fut ainsi jusqu’au jour où elle se décida à faire acte d’autorité.

— Mon oncle?… dit-elle encore, ce jour-là.

— Ma chérie?… répondit comme de coutume

Agénor.

— J’ai beaucoup réfléchi, mon oncle, et mon avis est décidément que George est innocent du crime affreux dont on l’accuse.

— Pourtant, ma chérie… commença Agénor.

— Il n’y a pas de pourtant, trancha Jane péremptoirement. George est innocent, mon oncle.

— Cependant…

Jane se redressa, les narines frémissantes.

— Je vous dis, mon neveu, prononça-t-elle d’un ton sec, que mon frère George est innocent.

Agénor s’effondra.

— Il l’est, ma tante, reconnut-il humblement.

Dès lors, l’innocence de George fut un fait acquis, et Agénor de Saint-Bérain ne se permit plus de la contester. Au surplus, les affirmations de Jane n’étaient pas sans avoir eu quelque influence sur son esprit. S’il ne possédait pas encore la belle certitude de celle-ci dans l’innocence du capitaine révolté, du moins sa conviction de la réalité du crime était-elle ébranlée.

Pendant les années suivantes, les pensées de Jane continuèrent à évoluer dans le sens de cette ardente foi plus sentimentale que raisonnée. Avoir gagné un partisan à la cause qu’elle soutenait, c’était quelque chose assurément, mais peu de chose. À quoi bon proclamer l’innocence de son frère, si l’on n’était pas en état de la prouver? Et, ces preuves, comment les réunir?

À force d’y rêver, elle crut en avoir trouvé le moyen.

— Il est bien entendu, n’est-ce pas, dit-elle un beau jour à Agénor, que George est innocent du crime dont on l’accuse.

— Oui, ma chérie, répondit Agénor qui, d'ailleurs, ne se sentait plus très assuré du contraire.

— Il était trop intelligent, continua Jane, pour commettre cette sottise, trop fier pour s'avilir ainsi. Il aimait trop son pays pour le trahir.

— C'est évident.

— Nous avons vécu côte à côte. Je connaissais ses pensées comme les miennes. Il n'avait d'autre culte que l'honneur, d'autre amour que celui qu'il portait à notre père, d'autre ambition que la gloire de sa patrie. Et vous voudriez qu'il eût conçu le projet de trahir, de se déshonorer dans une entreprise de flibustier, en couvrant ainsi de honte lui et sa famille? Dites! vous voudriez, Agénor?

— Moi!… Mais je ne veux rien, ma tante, protesta Agénor, qui considéra comme prudent d'adopter avant d'y être invité ce vocable respectueux.

— C'est que vous êtes là, à me regarder avec vos gros yeux ronds, comme si vous ne m'aviez jamais vue! Vous savez bien pourtant qu'un aussi abominable dessein ne pouvait naître dans son cerveau! Si vous savez, dites-le donc!

— Je le dis, ma tante, je le dis.

— Ce n'est pas malheureux!… Quant à ceux qui ont inventé cette légende de toutes pièces, ce sont des misérables!…

— Des bandits!…

— Qu'on devrait envoyer au bagne!

— Ou pendre!…

— Avec les journalistes qui ont répandu ces nouvelles mensongères, et ont ainsi causé notre désespoir et notre honte!

— Oui, tous les journalistes!… Qu’on les pende!… Qu’on les fusille!…

— Vous êtes donc enfin convaincu?

— Absolument!

— D’ailleurs, je voudrais bien voir que vous fussiez d’un autre avis que le mien sur ce sujet!

— Je n’aurais garde…

— À la bonne heure!… Sans quoi, vous me connaissez, je vous chasserais de ma présence et ne vous reverrais de ma vie.

— Le ciel m’en préserve! s’écria le pauvre Agénor, tout à fait ému par une aussi terrible menace.

Jane fit une pause et regarda sa victime du coin de l’oeil. Sans doute, elle la jugea à point, car elle mit une sourdine à sa violence moins sincère que calculée, et reprit d’un ton plus doux:

— Il ne suffit pas que, vous et moi, nous soyons convaincus de l’innocence de George. Il faudrait pouvoir en donner la preuve, vous en conviendrez, mon cher oncle.

À cette appellation, le visage d’Agénor s’éclaira. L’orage était passé décidément.

— C’est évident, dit-il en poussant un soupir de soulagement.

— Sans quoi, nous aurons beau crier sur les toits que George n’est pas coupable, personne ne nous croira.

— Ce n’est que trop certain, ma pauvre chérie.

— Quand mon père, lui-même — son père! — accueille comme vérités certains des bruits dont on ignore l’origine, quand il se meurt de chagrin et de honte sous nos yeux, sans avoir contrôlé ces racontars abominables, quand il ne s’écrie pas, en entendant accuser son fils: “Vous mentez! George est incapable d’un pareil crime!”, comment pourrions-nous convaincre les étrangers, sans leur donner les preuves indéniables de l’innocence de mon frère?

— C’est clair comme le jour, approuva Agénor en se grattant le menton. Mais voilà… ces preuves… où les trouver?…

— Pas ici, bien sûr…

Jane fit une pause puis ajouta à demi-voix:

— Ailleurs peut-être.

— Ailleurs?… Où donc, ma chère enfant?

— Où le drame se serait passé. À Koubo.

— À Koubo!…

— Oui, à Koubo. On y trouverait d’abord la tombe de George, puisque c’est là qu’il est mort, d’après ce qu’on raconte et, s’il l’est en effet, on verrait de quelle manière il est mort. Ensuite, on chercherait, on trouverait des survivants du drame. La troupe que George commandait était nombreuse. Il est impossible que tout le monde ait disparu. Ces témoins, on les interrogerait, et par eux on connaîtrait la vérité.

Le visage de Jane s’était illuminé, à mesure qu’elle parlait. Sa voix frémissait d’un enthousiasme contenu.

— Tu as raison, fillette, s’écria Agénor tombant ingénument dans le piège.

Jane reprit son air mutin.

— Eh bien! dit-elle, puisque j’ai raison, il faut y aller.

— Où ça? demanda Agénor abasourdi.

— Mais… à Koubo, mon oncle.

— À Koubo!… Et qui diable veux-tu envoyer à Koubo?

Jane noua ses deux bras au cou d’Agénor.

— Vous, mon bon oncle, glissa-t-elle d’une voix douce.

— Moi!…

Agénor s’était dégagé. Cette fois, il était sérieusement en colère.

— Tu es folle!… protesta-t-il, tout en faisant mine de s’éloigner.

— Pas si folle, répliqua Jane en lui barrant le passage. Pourquoi, s’il vous plaît, n’iriez-vous pas à Koubo? N’aimez-vous pas les voyages?

— Je les exècre. Prendre un train à heure fixe, c’est au-dessus de mes forces.

— Et la pêche, vous l’exécrez aussi, n’est-il pas vrai?

— La pêche?… Je ne vois pas…

— Que diriez-vous d’une friture pêchée dans le Niger? Voilà qui ne serait pas banal! Dans le Niger, où les goujons sont gros comme des requins, où les ablettes ressemblent à des thons! Et cela ne vous tenterait pas!…

— Je ne dis pas… Cependant…

— Tout en pêchant, vous feriez votre enquête, vous interrogeriez les indigènes…

— En quelle langue? interrompit railleusement Agénor. Je ne sache pas que ces cocos-là parlent anglais.

— C’est pourquoi, dit Jane sans avoir l’air d’y toucher, mieux vaudra les interroger en bambara.

— En bambara?… Est-ce que je sais le bambara, moi.

— Aussi allez-vous l’apprendre.

— À mon âge?

— Je l’ai bien appris, moi qui suis votre tante!

— Toi!… Tu parles bambara?…

— Sans doute. Écoutez plutôt: Dji lokho a bé na.

— Quel est ce charabia?

— Cela veut dire: “J’ai soif”. Et: I dou, nono i mita.

— J’avoue que… nono… mita…

— Cela signifie: “Entre, tu boiras du lait”. Et: Koukho bé na, Kounou ouarara uté a man doumouni. Ne cherchez pas. Traduction: “J’ai très faim, je n’ai pas mangé depuis hier soir”.

— Et il faudrait apprendre ça?…

— Ça et autre chose, et même sans perdre de temps, car le jour du départ approche.

— Comment, le jour du départ?… Mais je ne pars pas, moi!… En voilà une idée!… Non, mais, je ne me vois pas taillant une bavette avec tes sauvages.

Jane parut renoncer à le convaincre.

— Alors, j’irai seule, dit-elle tristement.

— Seule!… bégaya Agénor ahuri. Tu veux donc aller…

— À Koubo? Parfaitement.

— À quinze cents kilomètres de la côte!

— À dix-huit cents, mon oncle.

— Affronter les plus grands dangers!… Et cela toute seule!…

— Il le faut bien, puisque vous ne voulez pas venir avec moi, répliqua Jane d’un ton sec.

— C’est de la folie! de l’aberration mentale! du delirium tremens! s’écria Agénor, qui ne vit d’autre moyen que de s’enfuir en claquant la porte.

Mais quand le lendemain, il voulut voir Jane, celle-ci lui fit répondre qu’elle ne recevait pas, et il en fut de même les jours suivants. Agénor n’était pas de la force à ce jeu. En quatre jours, il dut amener son pavillon.

Au surplus, comme chaque fois que sa jeune tante désirait quelque chose, il en était arrivé graduellement à être de son avis. Ce voyage, jugé d’abord insensé, il l’estimait le lendemain possible à la rigueur, très faisable le troisième jour, extrêmement facile le quatrième.

C’est pourquoi il ne s’était pas écoulé quatre fois vingt-quatre heures, qu’il faisait amende honorable, confessait son erreur et se déclarait prêt à partir.

Jane eut la générosité de ne pas tenir rigueur.

— Apprenez d’abord la langue du pays, dit-elle en l’embrassant sur les deux joues.

Dès lors, on ne vit plus Agénor que piochant consciencieusement sa grammaire bambara.

Avant de se mettre en route, cependant, Jane devait s’assurer le consentement de son père. Ce consentement, elle l’obtint plus facilement qu’elle n’eût osé l’espérer. À peine lui avait-elle fait part, sans entrer dans aucun détail, de son intention d’entreprendre un voyage, que celui-ci acquiesça du geste, pour se replonger aussitôt dans sa morne tristesse.

L’avait-il même écoutée? De toute évidence, rien ne l’intéressait plus ici-bas.

En règle de ce côté, Jane et Agénor commencèrent les préparatifs de leur expédition. Ils ignoraient à ce moment quel appui allait leur donner la mission Barsac. Ils agirent donc comme s’ils devaient entreprendre seuls et avec leurs seules ressources cette folle randonnée de trois à quatre mille kilomètres.

Depuis plusieurs années, Jane avait soigneusement étudié la géographie des contrées qu’elle aurait à traverser. Les ouvrages de Flatters, du docteur Barth, du capitaine Binger, du colonel Monteil l’avaient exactement renseignée sur cette région et sur ses habitants. Elle avait appris ainsi que, si elle tentait une exploration à main armée, c’est-à-dire en s’entourant d’une troupe imposante de trois ou quatre cents volontaires, qu’il lui faudrait armer, nourrir et payer, elle serait entraînée d’abord à des dépenses considérables, et qu’elle se heurterait ensuite à des peuplades guerrières qui s’opposeraient par la force à un passage demandé par la force. Elle se verrait donc obligée de combattre pour atteindre son but, en admettant même qu’elle pût l’atteindre.

Le capitaine Binger déclare que, si les indigènes le veulent, ils empêcheront toujours une expédition de passer, soit en l’attaquant, soit en faisant le vide devant elle et en la forçant ainsi à rétrograder faute de vivres.

Jane, très frappée par cette remarque, avait donc décidé de tenter une exploration pacifique. Peu d’armes visibles, quelques hommes dévoués et sûrs, et le nerf de la guerre représenté ici, non seulement par de l’argent, mais aussi par des cadeaux destinés aux chefs des villages et à leurs administrés.

Après avoir fait confectionner des vêtements en toile pour la saison sèche, et en grosse laine pour la saison des pluies, Jane et Agénor les disposèrent dans des malles légères, dont ils réduisirent le nombre au strict nécessaire. Puis ils firent emballer les cadeaux destinés aux naturels: mauvais fusils hors d'usage, étoffes imprimées, voyantes, bariolées, foulards de soie et de coton, perles en verroterie, aiguilles, épingles, mercerie, articles de Paris, galons, boutons, crayons, etc. en somme la pacotille d'un bazar.

Ils emportaient encore avec eux une petite pharmacie, des armes, des longues-vues, des boussoles, des toiles de campement, quelques livres, des vocabulaires, les cartes les plus récentes, une batterie de cuisine, divers ustensiles de toilette, du thé, des vivres, en un mot une véritable cargaison, choisie avec discernement, d'objets indispensables pour un long séjour dans la brousse loin de tout centre de ravitaillement.

Enfin un étui de métal, dont le nickel étincelait au soleil, contenait un choix de cannes à pêche, de lignes et d'hameçons, en quantité suffisante pour équiper une demi-douzaine de pêcheurs. Cela, c'était le bagage particulier d'Agénor.

La tante et le neveu, ou l'oncle et la nièce, comme on voudra, étaient convenus de se rendre à Liverpool, d'où ils s'embarqueraient sur un navire de la White Star Line, The Ceres, pour la côte d'Afrique. Leur première intention était de partir de la Gambie anglaise. Mais, ayant appris, pendant une relâche à Saint-Louis, qu'une mission française était attendue à Conakry, et qu'elle devait suivre un itinéraire analogue au leur, ils résolurent de se joindre aux compatriotes de Saint-Bérain.

Vers la fin de septembre, ils expédièrent sur Liverpool leurs nombreux bagages, et le 2 octobre ils déjeunèrent pour la dernière fois en tête à tête, lord Buxton ne quittant plus jamais sa chambre, dans la grande salle à manger du château de Glenor. Ce dernier repas fut silencieux et triste. Quelle que fût la grandeur de la tâche qu'elle s'était imposée, Jane Buxton ne pouvait s'empêcher de songer qu'elle ne reverrait peut-être plus ce château, berceau de son enfance, et que, lorsqu'elle reviendrait, si elle revenait jamais, son vieux père ne serait peut-être plus là pour lui tendre les bras.

Et pourtant, c'était surtout pour lui qu'elle tentait cette aventure pleine de dangers et de fatigues. C'était pour rendre un peu de joie à cette âme désolée, qu'elle allait s'efforcer de réhabiliter le nom, d'effacer la boue qui avait jailli sur le blason.

L'heure du départ approchant, Jane fit demander à son père la permission de lui faire ses adieux. Elle fut introduite, ainsi qu'Agénor, dans la chambre du vieillard. Celui-ci était assis près d'une haute fenêtre qui donnait sur la campagne. Son regard fixe semblait perdu dans le lointain, comme s'il s'attendait à voir paraître quelqu'un. Qui cela? George, son fils, George le traître?

En entendant sa fille entrer, il tourna doucement la tête, et son oeil éteint s'éclaira. Mais ce ne fut qu'une lueur. La paupière retomba; le visage reprit son impassibilité coutumière.

— Adieu, mon père, murmura Jane en retenant ses larmes.

Lord Glenor ne répondit pas. Se soulevant sur son fauteuil, il tendit la main à la jeune fille, puis l'attirant doucement contre sa poitrine, lui mit un baiser sur le front.

De peur d'éclater en sanglots, Jane s'arracha à l'étreinte et s'enfuit en courant.

Le vieillard saisit alors la main de M. de Saint-Bérain, la lui serra avec force, et, comme pour réclamer sa protection, montra du geste la porte par laquelle Jane venait de disparaître.

— Comptez sur moi, balbutia Agénor.

Aussitôt, lord Buxton reprit sa position première, et son regard se perdit de nouveau dans la campagne, tandis que Saint-Bérain se retirait tout ému.

Une voiture attendait les voyageurs dans la cour du château, pour les conduire à la gare d’Uttoxeter, distante d’environ deux miles.

— Où va-t-on? demanda, en y montant, l’incorrigible Agénor, qui, encore troublé de la visite qu’il venait de faire, ne savait plus du tout pourquoi on quittait Glenor.

Jane se contenta de hausser les épaules. On partit.

Mais à peine avait-on fait cinq cents mètres que M. de Saint-Bérain manifesta soudain une agitation extraordinaire. Il ne pouvait parler, il suffoquait.

— Mes lignes!… Mes lignes!… s’écria-t-il enfin d’une voix déchirante.

Il fallut retourner au château chercher les fameuses lignes que le distrait avait oubliées, et l’on perdit ainsi un bon quart d’heure. Quand on arriva à la station, l’express était en gare. Les voyageurs eurent tout juste le temps d’y monter, ce qui fit dire à Agénor, non sans une certaine vanité:

— C’est exactement la deuxième fois de ma vie que je ne rate pas mon train.

Jane ne put s’empêcher de sourire à travers ses larmes, qu’elle laissait maintenant couler librement.

Ainsi commença ce voyage qui ménageait aux deux explorateurs des surprises dont ils étaient bien loin de se douter. Jane l’aurait-elle entrepris, si elle avait su ce qui devait se passer en son absence? Aurait-elle quitté son malheureux père, si elle avait pu soupçonner quel coup allait encore le frapper, tandis qu’elle risquait sa vie pour le sauver du désespoir?

Mais rien ne pouvait faire prévoir à Jane la tragédie qui devait se dérouler dans les bureaux de la Central Bank, non plus que l’accusation infamante dont son frère Lewis devait être l’objet, et, croyant servir son père, elle l’abandonna au moment même où son secours lui eût été le plus nécessaire.

Apportée par un domestique trop zélé, la nouvelle de la disparition de Lewis Robert Buxton parvint à lord Glenor dans la matinée qui suivit le crime de Old Broad Street, c’est-à-dire le 1er décembre. Le choc eut la brutalité d’un coup de massue. Ce descendant sans tache d’une longue suite de héros, ce farouche desservant du culte de l’honneur, apprit en un instant que, de ses deux fils, l’un était un traître et l’autre un voleur.

Le malheureux vieillard poussa un gémissement étouffé, porta les mains à sa gorge et tomba comme une masse sur le parquet.

On s’empressa autour de lui. On le releva. On lui prodigua des soins, jusqu’à ce qu’il rouvrit les yeux.

Le regard de ces yeux devait être désormais le seul signe que la vie n’eût point abandonné son coeur martyrisé. S’il vivait, son corps frappé de paralysie était condamné à une éternelle immobilité. Mais sans doute n’était-ce point encore assez pour épuiser la cruauté du sort. Dans ce corps à jamais immobile, le cerveau était demeuré lucide. Insensible, muet, inerte, lord Buxton pensait!

Or, par suite de la différence de longitude, c’est au moment où son père s’écroulait inanimé, que Jane Buxton, aidée par le capitaine Marcenay, mettait le pied à l’étrier, et, franchissant le pont qui relie Conakry au continent, commençait réellement son voyage et faisait les premiers pas dans les ténèbres de la mystérieuse Afrique.

CHAPITRE 4

Un article de l’Expansion française

Le 1er janvier, les lecteurs de l’Expansion française purent savourer, pour leurs étrennes, l’article suivant, dont le titre se détachait en gros caractères, et qui était dû à la plume parfois fantaisiste — à beau mentir qui vient de loin! — de son habile reporter, M. Amédée Florence, dont le lecteur voudra bien excuser le style parfois familier:

LA MISSION BARSAC

(Par dépêche de notre envoyé spécial)

La mission fait des petits — Nous partons —

Le coup de pied de l’âne — Un repas noir —

As-tu vu la lune? — Trop d’asticots —

Une élégante — Nouvelle recrue

Dans la brousse, 1er décembre — Comme je vous l’ai dit dans ma dernière dépêche, la mission Barsac devait se mettre en route aujourd’hui, 1er décembre, à six heures du matin. À l’heure dite, nous étions tous prêts, y compris deux volontaires qui sont venus se joindre aux huit membres tant officiels qu’officieux que l’on sait. Nul ne songe à s’en plaindre. L’un de ces volontaires est, en effet, une ravissante jeune fille, une Française élevée en Angleterre, d’où elle a rapporté un léger accent des plus agréables. Mlle

Jane Mornas, tel est son nom. L’autre volontaire, son oncle — à moins qu’il ne soit son neveu, car je n’ai pu débrouiller encore leurs liens de parenté — s’appelle Agénor de Saint-Bérain. C’est un franc original, dont les distractions, déjà légendaires à Conakry, nous permettent d’espérer quelques bons moments.

Mlle Mornas et M. de Saint-Bérain voyagent pour leur plaisir. Je manquerais à toutes les règles de la galanterie si je n’ajoutais pas: et pour le nôtre. Ils ont amené avec eux deux domestiques nègres, anciens tirailleurs sénégalais, qui devaient leur servir de guides, sinon d’interprètes, car nos deux globe-trotters parlent très suffisamment le bambara et divers dialectes des pays que nous allons traverser. Mlle Mornas, en particulier, a une façon à elle de vous aborder par un Ini-tié (bonjour)!… Je ne vous dis que ça!

M. Barsac a retenu le mot et le répète à tout propos, mais, dans sa bouche, il n’a plus le même charme.

Donc, ce matin, 1er décembre, dès cinq heures et demie, nous étions tous réunis sur la grande place de Conakry, devant la Résidence.

Ainsi que je vous l’ai expliqué précédemment, M. Barsac désirait faire une expédition pacifique au point d’être exclusivement civile. Aussi optimiste qu’à la tribune de la Chambre, il pensait n’avoir qu’à se présenter aux populations, un rameau d’olivier à la main, et faire ainsi, en marchant parallèlement au Niger, une promenade de santé de Conakry à Cotonou. C’était aussi l’idée de Mlle Mornas, qui craignait d’effrayer les indigènes par un trop grand déploiement de forces.

Mais le parti Barsac-Mornas s’est heurté à l’opposition du parti Baudrières. Le chef adjoint de la mission — en voilà un qui n’a pas le sourire! — fit un sombre tableau des dangers que nous allions courir, parla de la dignité d’une mission dirigée par deux représentants du peuple français, du prestige que lui donnerait une escorte de soldats réguliers, et ce qui nous étonna, il fut appuyé par le gouverneur, M. Valdonne.

Sans contester que la pénétration française n’eût pacifié dans une large mesure le pays noir, celui-ci répéta ce que le ministre des Colonies, M. Chazelle, a déjà avancé à la tribune de la Chambre. M. Valdonne nous dit que des faits assez mystérieux, ou du moins inexpliqués, autorisaient à craindre qu’un soulèvement ne fût en préparation. Il paraîtrait que, depuis une dizaine d’années et tout récemment encore, plus particulièrement dans la région du Niger, de Say à Djenné, des villages entiers ont été abandonnés subitement et que leurs habitants ont disparu, et que d’autres villages ont été pillés et brûlés, on ignore par qui. En somme, des rumeurs tendant à faire croire que quelque chose — nul ne sait trop quoi — s’apprêterait dans l’ombre.

La prudence la plus élémentaire obligeait donc la mission à se faire escorter par une troupe armée. Cet avis a prévalu, à la grande satisfaction de M. Baudrières, et M. Barsac doit se résigner à subir la protection du capitaine Marcenay et de ses deux cents cavaliers.

À six heures, tout est prêt. Le convoi se forme sous la direction d’un nègre qui a déjà fait plusieurs fois le voyage de Conakry à Sikasso, et qui doit nous servir de guide. Il se nomme Moriliré. C’est un grand gaillard de trente ans, ancien dou-goukoussadigui (officier) de Samory. Il est vêtu d’une culotte en guinée et d’une vieille vareuse d’infanterie coloniale aux galons élimés et crasseux. S’il a les pieds nus, sa tête, par contre, est couverte d’un casque en toile autrefois blanche orné d’un superbe plumet tricolore. Quant à l’insigne de ses fonctions, c’est une trique solide, qui lui servira à se faire mieux comprendre des porteurs et des âniers.

Aussitôt après lui se place Mlle Mornas, encadrée de M. Barsac et du capitaine Marcenay. Eh! eh! ils ne paraissent pas être restés insensibles à la beauté de la jeune fille. Parions que, le long du voyage, ils vont lutter de galanterie. Vos lecteurs peuvent être sûrs que je les tiendrai au courant des péripéties de ce match.

M. Baudrières suit ce premier groupe à une encolure (ai-je dit que nous étions tous à cheval?), mais son regard sévère semble désapprouver son collègue de montrer aussi visiblement combien notre aimable compagne est à son goût. Du coin de l'oeil, je le regarde, le chef adjoint. Qu'il est maigre! et froid! et triste!… Ah! fichtre non, il ne l'a pas, le sourire!

À trois pas derrière l'honorable député du Nord, viennent MM. Heyrieux, Poncin et Quirieu, puis le docteur Châtonnay et le géographe, M. Tassin, qui discutent — déjà! — ethnographie.

Le convoi proprement dit marchera à leur suite. Il est composé de cinquante ânes conduits par vingt-cinq âniers, et de cinquante porteurs, dont dix appartenant en propre à Mlle Mornas et à M. de Saint-Bérain. Sur les flancs, les cavaliers du capitaine Marcenay. Quant à votre serviteur, il se réserve de caracoler le long de la colonne et d'aller de l'un à l'autre. Tchoumouki et Tongané, les deux serviteurs de Mlle Mornas, forment l'arrière-garde.

À six heures juste, le signal du départ est donné. La colonne s'ébranle. À ce moment le drapeau tricolore est hissé sur la Résidence — pardon! soyons couleur locale: sur la case du gouverneur, qui, en grand uniforme, comme il convient, nous adresse un dernier salut du haut de son balcon. Les clairons et les tambours de la section d'infanterie coloniale détachée à Conakry sonnent et battent aux champs. Nous levons nos chapeaux. L'instant est un peu solennel, et — riez si vous voulez — j’ai la paupière humide, je l’avoue.

Pourquoi faut-il que cette solennité soit troublée par un incident ridicule?

Saint-Bérain? Où est Saint-Bérain? On a oublié Saint-Bérain. On le cherche, on l’appelle.

Les échos d’alentour retentissent de son nom. C’est en vain. Saint-Bérain ne répond pas.

On commence à craindre un malheur. Cependant, Mlle Mornas ne paraît pas inquiète et nous nous rassurons.

Non, Mlle Mornas n’est pas inquiète. Mais elle est furieuse, par exemple!

— Je ramène M. de Saint-Bérain dans trois minutes, dit-elle, les dents serrées.

Et elle pique des deux.

Auparavant, toutefois, elle a pris le temps de se tourner de mon côté et de me dire: “Monsieur Florence?…” avec un petit air de prière que j’ai parfaitement compris. C’est pourquoi je pique des deux, moi aussi, et m’élance à sa suite.

En quelques foulées, nous sommes au bord de la mer, côté du large — vous savez, sans doute, que Conakry est dans une île — et là, qu’est-ce que je vois?…

M. de Saint-Bérain. Oui, Mesdames et Messieurs, M. de Saint-Bérain en personne naturelle, comme vous et moi.

Que peut-il bien faire?… Pour le savoir, nous nous arrêtons un instant.

M. de Saint-Bérain est confortablement assis sur le sable du rivage et n’a pas du tout l’air de se douter qu’il fait attendre une mission officielle. Il cause amicalement avec un nègre, qui lui montre des hameçons, probablement d’une forme inconnue en Europe, et lui donne à leur sujet de verbeuses explications. Puis tous deux se lèvent et se dirigent vers un canot à demi échoué sur la grève, et dans lequel le nègre embarque. Dieu me pardonne! M. de Saint-Bérain ne fait-il pas mine d’embarquer, lui aussi?…

Il n’en a pas le temps.

— Mon neveu! appelle tout à coup Mlle Mornas d’une voix sévère.

(Décidément, c’est son neveu).

Ce mot suffit. M. de Saint-Bérain se retourne et aperçoit sa tante, puisque tante il y a. Il est à croire que cette vue lui rafraîchit la mémoire, car le voilà qui pousse des exclamations désespérées, lève les bras au ciel, jette à son ami nègre une poignée de monnaie, s’empare, en échange, d’un lot d’hameçons qu’il fourre pêle-mêle dans sa poche, et accourt vers nous à toute vitesse.

Il est si comique que nous éclatons de rire. Mlle Mornas découvre par ce moyen une double rangée de dents éblouissantes. Éblouissantes, je maintiens le mot.

Nous tournons bride, et M. de Saint-Bérain trottine à côté de nos chevaux. Mais Mlle Mornas a pitié du pauvre homme, et, mettant sa monture au pas:

— Ne courez pas ainsi, mon oncle, lui dit-elle tendrement. Vous allez être en nage.

(Alors, c’est son oncle?… Oh! ma tête!)

Nous retrouvons le convoi, où nous sommes accueillis par des sourires ironiques. M. de Saint-Bérain ne se trouble pas pour si peu. Il paraît seulement surpris de trouver sur la place autant de monde.

— Je suis donc en retard? demande-t-il avec innocence.

Alors, la colonne entière se met à rire, et

M. de Saint-Bérain fait chorus. Il me plaît, à moi, ce particulier-là.

Mais nous n’étions pas encore partis.

Au moment où M. de Saint-Bérain se penchait pour vérifier, en bon cavalier qu’il est, la sangle de sa selle, la malchance voulut que l’étui à lignes qu’il porte en bandoulière vînt heurter le flanc d’un des ânes. L’animal était sensible. Il détacha une ruade à l’infortuné Saint-Bérain, qui roula dans la poussière.

On se précipita à son secours. Mais notre original était déjà debout.

— Ça beaucoup bon!… Mossié avoir beaucoup veine, lui dit Tongané. Si y en a abeille piquer ou cheval donner coup de pied, grand voyage beaucoup bon.

Sans lui répondre, M. de Saint-Bérain, sérieusement brossé, épousseté, sauta en selle, et le convoi put enfin s’ébranler.

Pendant ce temps, le soleil s’était levé, et ses premières lueurs éclairaient gaiement notre route.

Celle que nous suivons, après avoir franchi le pont qui relie Conakry au continent, est assez bonne. C’est une vraie route large de cinq à six mètres, où une voiture pourrait aisément passer, que nous suivrons jusqu’à Timbo, c’est-à-dire pendant près de quatre cents kilomètres. Donc, jusqu’à Timbo tout au moins, nous n’avons à craindre aucune difficulté matérielle.

D’autre part, il fait beau, la température est agréable — à peine 17° à l’ombre — et nous n’avons pas à redouter les terribles pluies des tropiques, dont la saison est passée.

Allons! tout est pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes.

Vers dix heures, nous franchîmes, sur un pont, un cours d’eau que M. Tassin nous dit être un affluent de la Manéa, ou de la Morébaya, à moins que ce ne fût l’une de ces deux rivières. À l’heure actuelle, nous sommes encore dans une cruelle incertitude à ce sujet.

Au surplus, le passage des rivières est la monnaie courante des voyages dans cette partie de l’Afrique. Il n’y a, pour ainsi dire, pas de jour qu’il ne faille en traverser une ou plusieurs. Qu’il soit donc entendu, mes articles n’étant pas un cours de géographie, que je ne parlerai pas de cet exercice, à moins qu’il ne sorte, d’une manière ou de l’autre, de l’ordinaire.

Aux environs de Conakry, la route suit une ligne à peu près droite, dans un pays peu accidenté. Elle est bordée de terres assez bien cultivées. Champs de maïs ou de mil, et quelques bouquets d’arbres: cotonniers, bananiers, papayers. On rencontre de rares hameaux parfaitement insignifiants, auxquels M. Tassin attribue avec assurance des noms que je crois de pure fantaisie. Mais, pour nous, c’est exactement comme s’ils étaient authentiques.

Vers dix heures, la chaleur augmentant, le capitaine Marcenay commande la halte. Nous avons fait une vingtaine de kilomètres depuis Conakry, ce qui est très beau. Nous allons déjeuner et nous reposer, puis, après une nouvelle collation, nous repartirons vers cinq heures de l'après-midi, et nous camperons pour la nuit vers les neuf heures du soir.

Ce programme devant être celui de chaque jour, je n'y reviendrai pas. Qu'il soit bien entendu, d'ailleurs, que mon intention n'est pas d'ennuyer vos lecteurs avec les menus détails de la route. Je vois les choses de plus haut, et je n'inscrirai sur mes tablettes que les faits remarquables à un titre quelconque.

Cela dit, reprenons.

L'endroit de la halte a été heureusement choisi par le capitaine Marcenay. Nous nous installons à l'ombre d'un petit bois qui nous abritera très suffisamment contre les ardeurs du soleil. Tandis que les soldats se dispersent, nous — j'entends les membres de la mission, Mlle Mornas, le capitaine, M. de Saint-Bérain et votre serviteur — nous, dis-je, prenons place dans une jolie clairière. J'offre un coussin à notre compagne, mais le capitaine Marcenay et M. Barsac m'ont prévenu et ont apporté chacun un pliant. Embarras. Mlle Mornas ne sait lequel choisir. Déjà le capitaine et le chef de la mission se regardent de travers. Mlle Mornas les met d'accord en s'asseyant par terre sur mon coussin. Ses deux soupirants me font des yeux mauvais.

M. Baudrières s'assied à l'écart sur un petit tas d'herbe, au milieu d'un groupe composé de ceux que j'ai baptisés les “neutres”. Ce sont les délégués des divers ministères plus ou moins compétents, MM. Heyrieux, Quirieu et Poncin.

Ce dernier, le plus remarquable des trois, n’a cessé de prendre des notes depuis le départ. Je ne sais trop lesquelles, par exemple. S’il était moins “officiel”, j’oserais insinuer qu’il réalise à merveille le type de M. Prudhomme, mais sa grandeur me pose un boeuf sur la langue, comme eût dit le vieil Homère. Quel front! Avec un front pareil on est étonnamment intelligent ou prodigieusement bête. Pas de milieu. Dans laquelle de ces deux catégories faut-il ranger M. Poncin? Je le saurai à l’usage.

Le docteur Châtonnay et M. Tassin, que nous comparons à ces oiseaux qu’on nomme des inséparables, vont s’installer sous un figuier. Ils étalent sur le sol des cartes de géographie. J’espère pour eux qu’ils ne vont pas en faire leur unique nourriture!

Moriliré, qui est décidément un garçon débrouillard, fait apporter au milieu de notre groupe une table, puis un banc, sur lequel je m’installe, en réservant une place à M. de Saint-Bérain.

M. de Saint-Bérain n’est pas là. D’ailleurs, M. de Saint-Bérain n’est jamais là!

Moriliré prépare un fourneau de campagne. Aidé de Tchoumouki et de Tongané, il va nous faire la cuisine, car il a été décidé que l’on toucherait le moins possible aux conserves et aux provisions apportées d’Europe, et qu’on les réserverait pour les cas, que l’on espère rares, où le pays ne nous fournirait pas de vivres frais en quantité suffisante.

Moriliré a acheté de la viande à Conakry. Il nous la montre:

— Moi, y en a faire bon ragoût avec sodé (agneau), tendre comme un petit enfant, dit-il.

Tendre comme un enfant! Cette comparaison nous donne le frisson. Moriliré aurait-il donc goûté à la chair humaine? Nous le lui demandons. Il nous répond hypocritement qu'il n'en a jamais mangé lui-même, mais qu'il a entendu vanter l'exquise saveur. Hum!…

Notre premier repas ne rappelle en rien ceux du Café Anglais, mais il n'en est pas moins excellent. Qu'on en juge: quartier d'agneau grillé avec pâte de mil et sauce au beurre de karité, salade de coeurs de jeunes rôniers, gâteau de maïs, figues, bananes et noix de coco. Comme boisson, l'eau pure d'une source qui coule à nos pieds, et, pour ceux qui l'aiment, du vin de palme.

Ces divers mets furent précédés d'un hors-d'œuvre que notre maître d'hôtel n'avait pas prévu. Mais n'anticipons pas, comme on dit dans les romans bien charpentés.

Tandis que Moriliré et ses deux aides nous préparent le repas annoncé, le docteur Châtonnay, qui s'était rapproché, nous donne, à son sujet, des explications que je qualifierai de techniques.

— Pour l'agneau, dit-il, je n'en parle pas; vous en savez là-dessus autant que moi. Le mil, qui va l'accompagner sur notre table, est une céréale analogue au blé. Mélangé au beurre de karité ou de cé, car l'arbre qui le fournit porte ces deux noms, il constitue une sauce assez passable, à la condition que le beurre soit bon. Ce beurre est extrait du fruit de l'arbre, une sorte de noix ou de châtaigne. On l'obtient par une série de broyages et de fusions, et finalement on l'épure en le faisant fondre une dernière fois et en y jetant quelques gouttes d'eau froide pendant qu'il est en ébullition. Il devient alors fort appréciable.

— Vous savez tout, docteur, admire Mlle Mornas.

— Non, mademoiselle, mais j’ai beaucoup lu, et notamment l’ouvrage admirable du capitaine Binger. C’est encore lui qui va me permettre de vous apprendre ce qu’est la salade de rônier. Ces rôniers se divisent en mâles et en femelles. Les mâles ne produisent pas de fruits, mais fournissent un bois extraordinairement dense, qui a l’avantage de ne pas pourrir dans l’eau et d’être inattaquable aux termites. Le rônier femelle donne des fruits agréables au goût. Sa feuille se prête à divers usages: couverture des cases, fabrication des éventails, des nattes, des cordages. On peut même s’en servir comme papier à écrire. Voilà un végétal utile!… Quant à la salade, elle est fournie par le coeur d’un jeune rônier à la fleur de l’âge…

J’interromps:

— Eh mais! docteur, c’est de l’élégie, ma parole!

Le docteur a la bonté de sourire. Il reprend:

— La fin de mon discours sera moins poétique, puisqu’on met parfois ces coeurs dans du vinaigre, et qu’on en fait des cornichons!

L’excellent docteur en était là de ses explications scientifiques, lorsque notre attention fut attirée par des cris venant du bois. Nous reconnûmes sur-le-champ la voix qui les poussait.

Parions que, si je pose à vos lecteurs cette simple question: “À qui appartenait cette voix?” ils vont me répondre immédiatement en choeur: “Parbleu! à M. de Saint-Bérain!”

Vos lecteurs ne se trompent pas. C’était bien M. de Saint-Bérain qui demandait du secours.

Je me hâtai de courir à son appel suivi par le capitaine Marcenay et par M. Barsac. Nous le trouvâmes dans une mare, enfoncé dans la vase jusqu'au ventre.

Quand on l'eut tiré au sec:

— Comment êtes-vous tombé dans ce marécage, ou dans ce marigot, pour employer le terme du pays? lui demandai-je.

— J'ai glissé, répondit-il tout en m'éclaboussant, tandis que je pêchais.

— À la ligne?

— Vous n'y songez pas. À la main, mon cher.

— À la main?…

M. de Saint-Bérain nous montra son casque colonial enveloppé dans son veston de toile.

— Attendez, dit-il, sans me répondre autrement. Il faut déplier mon veston avec précaution, sinon elles vont se sauver.

— Qui, elles?

— Les grenouilles.

Tandis que nous devisions, M. de Saint-Bérain pêchait la grenouille. Quel enragé!

— Mes compliments, approuva M. Barsac. C'est succulent, la grenouille… Mais écoutez les coassements de celles que vous avez capturées. Elles ne veulent évidemment pas être mangées.

— À moins qu’elles ne crient pour demander un roi! hasardai-je.

Ce n’était pas très fort, je le reconnais. Mais, dans la brousse!…

Sur ce mot, nous retournâmes au campement. Saint-Bérain changea de vêtements, et Moriliré fit cuire le produit de sa pêche. La table étant mise, nous mangeâmes avec l’appétit des gens qui ont avalé une vingtaine de kilomètres à cheval en guise d’apéritif.

Mlle Mornas présidait, cela va de soi. Elle est vraiment délicieuse. (Je l’ai dit, je crois, mais je ne saurais trop le répéter.) Simple, bon enfant, gentiment garçonnière, elle nous a vite mis à l’aise.

— Mon oncle… (alors, c’est décidément son oncle? C’est bien vu? bien entendu?) Mon oncle, disait-elle, m’a élevée comme un garçon et il a fait de moi un homme. Oubliez mon sexe, je vous en prie, et considérez-moi comme un camarade.

Ce qui ne l’a pas empêchée d’adresser, ce disant, au capitaine Marcenay un de ces demi-sourires qui montrent clair comme le jour que, chez les garçons de cette espèce-là, la coquetterie ne perd jamais ses droits.

Nous prîmes le café. Après quoi, mollement étendus, dans les grandes herbes à l’ombre des palmiers, nous nous livrâmes aux douceurs de la sieste.

Le départ était, comme je l’ai dit, fixé à cinq heures; mais, quand il fallut reformer le convoi, il y eut du tirage, si j’ose employer cette forte expression.

C’est en vain que Moriliré, le moment venu, ordonna à ses hommes de se préparer. À notre grand étonnement, ils s’y refusèrent, en criant tous à la fois qu’ils ne voyaient pas la lune, qu’ils ne partiraient pas tant qu’ils n’auraient pas vu la lune!

Nous étions ahuris, mais le savant M. Tassin nous fit comprendre ce mystère.

— Je sais ce que c’est, nous expliqua-t-il, tous les explorateurs l’ont raconté dans leurs relations de voyage. Lorsque la lune est récente, et, ce soir, elle n’a que deux jours, les nègres ont coutume de dire: “C’est mauvais signe. Personne n’a encore vu la lune. Le chemin ne sera pas bon pour nous.”

— Ioo! Ioo! (Oui! oui!) approuvèrent bruyamment les âniers et les porteurs réunis autour de nous, et auxquels Moriliré avait traduit les paroles du docte géographe. Karo! Karo! (La lune! La lune!).

Il nous parut certain que si ce satellite continuait à refuser de se montrer, ces entêtés continueraient à refuser de partir. Or, il faisait encore jour, et le ciel était couvert.

De fait, les moricauds s’obstinèrent, et peut-être serions-nous encore à la même place, si, un peu avant six heures, le pâle croissant de la lune ne s’était enfin montré entre deux nuages. Les Noirs poussèrent des cris joyeux.

— Allah ma toula kendé, disaient-ils, en se frappant le front de la main droite, Karo koutayé. (Dieu m’a laissé bien portant: je vois la nouvelle lune.)

La colonne s’ébranla aussitôt sans autre difficulté. Seulement, on avait perdu deux heures, et l’étape du soir en fut raccourcie d’autant.

Vers neuf heures, on s’arrête en pleine brousse et l’on dresse les tentes. La contrée n’est pas tout à fait déserte, cependant. À droite du sentier, il y a une case indigène, d’ailleurs abandonnée, et, à notre gauche, on en distingue une autre, qui, celle-ci, paraît habitée.

Le capitaine Marcenay visite la première et, l’estimant suffisamment logeable, propose à Mlle Mornas d’y élire domicile pour la nuit. Celle-ci accepte et disparaît dans cet hôtel inespéré.

Elle ne nous avait pas quittés depuis dix minutes qu’elle nous rappelait à grands cris. Nous accourons, et la trouvons debout devant la case, dont elle nous désigne le sol d’un geste dégoûté.

— Qu’est-ce que cela? demanda-t-elle.

Cela, c’étaient d’innombrables vers blancs. Ils sortaient de la terre et se traînaient à la surface en quantité si prodigieuse que le sol semblait onduler.

— Pensez, messieurs, dit Mlle Mornas, si j’ai eu peur quand j’ai senti leur froid contact sur ma figure, sur mes mains! J’en avais partout, jusque dans mes poches! J’ai beau me secouer, il en tombe toujours de mes vêtements. Pouah! les vilaines bêtes!

M. de Saint-Bérain arrivait sur ces entrefaites. Il trouva sans effort le mot de la situation.

— Eh mais! s’exclama-t-il, le visage épanoui, ce sont des asticots!

Et c’étaient bien des asticots, en effet, car il s’y connaît, M. de Saint-Bérain.

Déjà il se baissait, afin d’en faire une ample provision.

— Toi, y en a pas besoin, lui dit Tongané. Y en a beaucoup dans route. Eux beaucoup mauvais, pousser partout. Pas moyen faire crever.

Voilà qui nous promet de belles nuits! Et les naturels, comment s’accommodent-ils de ces légions de vers? Sans doute, j’ai pensé tout haut.

— Eux manger, Mossié, fit Tongané. Y a bon!

Mlle Mornas, n’ayant pas les goûts simples des habitants de ces contrées, allait tout bonnement s’installer sous une des tentes, quand Moriliré vint lui dire qu’une jeune négresse, servante d’un cultivateur de même couleur, absent pour le moment, lui offrait l’hospitalité dans une case très propre et meublée — chose incroyable — d’une vraie couchette à l’européenne.

— Toi donner argent, ajouta le guide. Y a bon!

Mlle Mornas accepte l’hospitalité qui lui est offerte, et nous la conduisons processionnellement à sa nouvelle demeure. La servante annoncée nous attend. Elle est debout près d’un de ces karités dont j’ai parlé. C’est une fillette de taille moyenne, âgée de quinze ans environ. Elle n’est pas laide du tout. Comme elle n’a d’autre vêtement qu’une simple feuille qui ne vient évidemment ni du Louvre ni du Bon-Marché, “mais peut-être du Printemps”, suggère Saint-Bérain, elle ressemble à une jolie statue de marbre noir.

Pour l’instant, la statue est fort occupée à cueillir quelque chose dans le feuillage du karité.

— Elle ramasse des chenilles, qu’elle videra, fera sécher, et dont — ne vous récriez pas! — elle fera des sauces, nous apprend le docteur Châtonnay, décidément très fort en cuisine nègre. Ces chenilles s’appellent cétombo. Ce sont les seules qui soient comestibles. Elles ont, paraît-il, un goût agréable.

— Y en a vrai, confirme Moriliré. Y a bon!

La jeune négresse, nous ayant aperçus, vient au-devant de nous.

— Moi, dit-elle à Mlle Mornas, dans un français presque correct, à notre grand étonnement, moi élevée dans école française et avoir servi chez femme blanche, mariée à officier, moi retournée dans village et prisonnière dans grande bataille. Savoir faire lit comme Blancs. Toi contente.

Tout en parlant, elle avait pris gentiment la main de Mlle Mornas, qu’elle entraîna dans la case.

Nous nous retirâmes, heureux du confort assuré à notre compagne. Mais l’heure du sommeil n’avait encore sonné, ni pour elle ni pour nous.

En effet, avant que trente minutes se fussent écoulées, Mlle Mornas nous appelait à nouveau à son aide.

Nous accourons derechef, et, à la lumière des torches, nous découvrons un spectacle inattendu.

À même le sol, près du seuil de la case, la petite servante noire est étendue. Son dos est zébré de raies rouges. La malheureuse sanglote à fendre l’âme.

Devant elle, la couvrant de son corps, Mlle Mornas — superbe, vraiment, Mlle Mornas, quand elle est en colère — tenant en respect un affreux nègre, qui, à cinq pas, fait des grimaces horribles et tient encore à la main un bâton taché de sang.

Nous demandons des explications.

— Figurez-vous, nous dit Mlle Mornas, que je venais de prendre possession du lit. Malik — la petite négresse s'appelle Malik; un joli nom, n'est-ce pas, qui fait penser à la Bretagne — Malik, donc, m'éventait et je commençais à m'assoupir. Voici que cette brute, qui est son maître, revient à l'improviste. En m'apercevant, il entre en fureur, entraîne la pauvre enfant et se met à la rouer de coups pour lui apprendre à introduire une Blanche dans sa case.

— Jolies moeurs! murmure de ses lèvres minces le jovial M. Baudrières.

Il a raison, le jovial M. Baudrières. Mais il a tort, quand abusant de la situation, il prend la pose de l'orateur et lance cette surprenante apostrophe:

— Les voilà donc, messieurs, ces peuplades barbares qu'il vous plaît de transformer en pacifiques électeurs.

Évidemment, il se croit à la tribune.

M. Barsac a tressailli, comme si une mouche l'avait piqué. Il se redresse, et réplique d'un ton sec:

— Avec ça qu'on n'a jamais vu un Français battre sa femme! Il n'a pas tort, non plus, M. Barsac.

Nous faudra-t-il assister à un tournoi d'éloquence? Non. M. Baudrières n'ayant pas riposté, M. Barsac se retourne vers le nègre au bâton.

— Cette petite va te quitter, lui dit-il. Nous l’emmènerons avec nous.

Mais le nègre proteste. La négresse est son esclave. Il l’a payée. Allons-nous perdre notre temps à lui faire comprendre que l’esclavage est aboli en territoire français? Il ne comprendrait certainement pas. Ce n’est pas en un jour que les lois réforment les moeurs.

M. Barsac a trouvé mieux.

— J’achète ton esclave, lui dit-il. Combien?

Bravo, M. Barsac! Voilà une bonne idée.

Le nègre voit l’occasion de faire une affaire avantageuse et se rassérène. Il demande un âne, un fusil et cinquante francs.

— Cinquante coups de bâton! répond le capitaine. C’est tout ce que tu mérites.

On marchande. Enfin notre coquin cède sa servante pour un vieux fusil à pierre, une pièce d’étoffe et vingt-cinq francs. Réellement, c’est donné.

Pendant que cette discussion se poursuivait, Mlle Mornas avait relevé Malik et pansé ses blessures avec du beurre de karité. Le marché conclu, elle l’emmena jusqu’à notre campement, l’habilla d’une blouse blanche, puis, lui mettant quelque monnaie dans la main:

— Maintenant, lui dit-elle, tu n’es plus esclave. Je te rends ta liberté.

Mais ne voilà-t-il pas Malik éclate en sanglots! Elle est seule sur la terre et ne veut pas quitter “si bonne Blanche”. Elle lui servira de femme de chambre et lui sera dévouée jusqu’à la mort. Elle pleure, supplie.

— Garde-la, fillette, intervient Saint-Bérain. Elle te sera certainement utile. Elle te rendra ces mille petits services dont une femme, même quand elle est un homme, a toujours besoin.

Mlle Mornas se rendit d’autant plus volontiers qu’elle en mourait d’envie. Malik, ne sachant comment témoigner sa gratitude à Saint-Bérain qui avait intercédé pour elle, lui sauta au cou et l’embrassa sur les deux joues. Saint-Bérain m’avoua le lendemain que rien ne lui avait jamais été aussi désagréable.

Inutile d’ajouter que Mlle Mornas ne crut pas devoir goûter une troisième fois de l’hospitalité indigène. On lui dressa une tente où rien ne vint plus troubler son sommeil.

Telle fut notre première journée.

Les suivantes lui ressembleront beaucoup, sans aucun doute. Aussi ne les raconterai-je plus dans le détail, et, sauf indication contraire, ces mots seront toujours sous-entendus: Ab una disce omnes.

Amédée Florence.

CHAPITRE 5

Deuxième article de M. Amédée Florence

Le deuxième article de M. Amédée Florence fut publié dans l’Expansion française du 18 janvier. On en trouvera ci-dessous la reproduction in extenso.

LA MISSION BARSAC

(Par dépêche de notre envoyé spécial)

Les jours se suivent — Mon hôte — Ballet! — Je suis indiscret — Pêche miraculeuse de M. de Saint-Bérain — Borouya — Pour me faire honneur — Timbro! quarante-huit heures d’arrêt-buffet — Daouhériko — La vie en rose au pays noir — M. Barsac aurait-il raison? — Je suis perplexe

Daouhériko, 16 décembre — Depuis ma dernière dépêche écrite en pleine brousse le soir de notre départ, à la tremblante lumière d’une lanterne, le voyage fut heureux et, par suite, il n’a pas d’histoire.

Le 2 décembre, nous levons le camp à cinq heures du matin, et notre colonne, grossie d’une unité — oserai-je dire d’une demi-unité, puisqu’une blanche vaut deux noires? — se met en marche.

On a déchargé un âne et réparti sur les autres les ballots qu’il portait, afin de l’attribuer à Malik. Comme une enfant qu’elle est, la petite négresse semble avoir oublié ses malheurs passés. Elle ne fait que rire, heureuse nature!

Depuis, nous suivons toujours la route, qui continue à être bonne et facile, et, n’étaient la couleur des populations qui nous entourent et la pauvreté du paysage, nous pourrions nous imaginer n’avoir pas quitté la France.

Car le paysage n’est pas beau. Nous traversons une contrée plate, ou du moins faiblement vallonnée, avec, parfois, de médiocres hauteurs à l’horizon du nord, et, à perte de vue, nous n’apercevons que cette végétation rabougrie, mélange de broussailles et de graminées hautes de deux et trois mètres, qui porte le nom générique de brousse. De loin en loin un bouquet d’arbres, malingres à cause des incendies périodiques qui dévastent ces savanes pendant la saison sèche, et parfois des champs cultivés, des lougans, selon le mot indigène, auxquels succèdent généralement d’assez beaux arbres. C’est alors qu’on arrive à proximité d’un village.

Ils portent des noms absurdes, ces villages: Fongoumbi, Manfourou, Kafou, Ouossou, etc. j’en passe. Ils ne peuvent donc pas s’appeler Neuilly ou Levallois, comme tout le monde?

De ces noms de villages, un nous a divertis. Cette importante cité, située à la frontière anglaise du Sierra Leone, et que nous laissons, par conséquent, fort loin sur notre droite, se nomme Tassin. Notre éminent géographe n’a pas dû être médiocrement fier, en se découvrant un homonyme à cent trente-six kilomètres de Conakry.

Quant aux naturels, ils nous regardent passer avec sympathie et ils ont l’air vraiment inoffensifs. Je ne pense pas qu’ils aient l’intelligence d’un Victor Hugo ou d’un Pasteur, mais, comme l’intelligence n’est pas, ainsi que l’a prouvé une longue expérience, une condition de l’électorat, il pourrait se faire que M. Barsac fût dans le vrai.

Il est inutile de dire que le chef de la mission entre dans les plus misérables villages et tient des palabres avec ses habitants.

Derrière lui, M. Baudrières ne manque pas de faire sa contre-enquête.

M. Barsac et M. Baudrières tirent, ainsi qu'on peut le supposer, des conclusions diamétralement opposées de ce qu'ils entendent et de ce qu'ils voient, si bien qu'ils nous reviennent toujours également enchantés. Ainsi tout le monde est content. C'est parfait.

Pour le surplus, nous traversons ou nous suivons des rivières: Forécariah, Mellancorée, Scarie, Kaba, Diégounko, etc. et nous passons d'une vallée dans une autre sans trop nous en apercevoir. Tout cela n'est pas d'un intérêt palpitant.

J'ai beau consulter mes notes, je ne vois rien à confier à l'histoire de mon temps, jusqu'au 6 décembre, date à laquelle M. de Saint-Bérain, qui est en train de devenir mon ami Saint-Bérain, crut devoir imaginer un incident pour mon plaisir, et, je veux l'espérer, pour le vôtre.

Ce soir-là, nous campions à proximité d'un village, un peu moins insignifiant que les précédents, du nom de Oualia. Le moment venu, je rentre dans ma tente, dans le but légitime d'y chercher le sommeil. J'y trouve Saint-Bérain, déshabillé jusqu'à la chemise et jusqu'au caleçon exclusivement. Ses vêtements sont jetés à la volée un peu partout. La couverture est faite. De prime abord, il est évident que Saint-Bérain a l'intention de coucher chez moi. Je m'arrête sur le seuil de la tente, et contemple mon hôte inattendu dans l'exercice de ses fonctions.

Saint-Bérain ne paraît pas surpris de me voir. D'ailleurs, Saint-Bérain n'est jamais surpris. Il est fort affairé, s'agite, furète partout, et jusque dans ma cantine qu’il a ouverte, et dont il a répandu le contenu sur le sol. Mais il ne découvre pas ce qu’il désire, ce qui l’enrage. Il se tourne vers moi, et, sans paraître autrement étonné de me voir, me déclare du ton le plus convaincu:

— Je déteste les gens distraits. C’est odieux.

J’approuve sans broncher:

— Odieux!… Mais que vous arrive-t-il, ô Saint-Bérain?

— Figurez-vous, me répond-il, que je ne peux pas mettre la main sur mon pyjama… Je parie que cet animal de Tchoumouki l’a oublié à la dernière étape. C’est gai!

Je suggère:

— À moins qu’il ne soit dans votre cantine!

— Dans ma…

— Car celle-ci est à moi, cher ami, de même que cette tente hospitalière et ce lit virginal sont à moi.

Saint-Bérain roule des yeux égarés. Soudain, il prend conscience de son erreur, ramasse à la hâte ses vêtements épars et se sauve, comme s’il avait une meute de cannibales à ses trousses. Moi, je tombe sur mon lit et me roule.

Quel être délicieux!

Le lendemain, 7 décembre, nous venions de nous mettre à table, après l’étape du matin, quand nous aperçûmes des nègres qui semblaient nous épier. Le capitaine Marcenay ordonna à ses hommes de les chasser. Ils s'enfuirent, mais pour reparaître bientôt.

"Chassez le naturel, il revient au galop", crut devoir assurer à cette occasion le docteur Châtonnay, qui a la manie de citer à tout propos, et plus encore hors de propos, des vers qui n'ont généralement aucun rapport avec son sujet. Mais chacun a ses travers.

Moriliré, envoyé en reconnaissance, nous apprit que ces Noirs, au nombre d'une dizaine, étaient des marchands et des griots (sorciers), qui n'avaient aucune intention hostile et voulaient seulement, les uns nous vendre leurs produits, les autres nous divertir.

— Serrez l'argenterie! recommanda M. Barsac en riant, et introduisez-les dans la salle à manger.

On amena donc ces Noirs, tous plus laids et plus sordides les uns que les autres. Il y avait parmi eux des nounou, artisans de trente-six métiers, fabricants de poterie, de bijouterie, de vannerie, d'objets en bois ou en fer, des dioula ou marraba, qui vendent des armes, des étoffes, et surtout des noix de kola, donc nous fîmes une ample provision. On connaît les propriétés excitantes de ce fruit que le docteur Châtonnay appelle un "aliment d'épargne". Nous fûmes très heureux d'en acquérir une grande quantité en échange d'un peu de sel. Dans les contrées que nous parcourons, le sel est rare; il n'a, pour ainsi dire, pas de prix. Sa valeur augmentera de plus en plus, à mesure que nous nous éloignerons de la côte. Aussi en emportons-nous plusieurs barres.

Nous appelâmes ensuite les griots, et on leur ordonna de chanter leur plus belle chanson en l'honneur de notre gracieuse compagne.

Ces troubadours du pays noir étaient au nombre de deux. Le premier tenait à la main sa guitare. Quelle guitare!… Qu'on se figure une calebasse traversée par trois lamelles de bambou pourvues chacune d'une corde en boyau. On appelle cet instrument dianné. Le second griot, un vieux aux yeux atteints d'ophtalmie, comme il arrive souvent ici, était armé d'une sorte de flûte du nom de fabrésoro, en bambara. C'est un simple roseau à chaque bout duquel est adaptée une petite calebasse.

Le concert commença. Le second griot, qui n'était vêtu que d'un bila, sorte de ceinture large de trois doigts passant entre les jambes, se mit à danser, tandis que son camarade, plus décemment couvert d'une de ces longues blouses, d'ailleurs d'une saleté repoussante, appelées doroké, s'asseyait sur le sol, pinçait sa guitare et poussait des cris gutturaux qui avaient la prétention, du moins je le suppose, d'être un chant adressé au soleil, à la lune, aux étoiles et à Mlle Mornas.

Les contorsions de l'un, les hurlements de l'autre, les sons étranges que les deux virtuoses tiraient de leurs instruments, eurent le don d'exciter nos âniers. Ils abandonnèrent leur mil, leur riz et leur maïs, et organisèrent un ballet qui n'était pas ordinaire.

Entraînés par l'exemple, nous nous emparons des casseroles et des chaudrons, sur lesquels nous frappons à coups de cuillères et de fourchettes; M. de Saint-Bérain casse une assiette, en fait des castagnettes, perdant toute retenue, se confectionne un turban avec une serviette, et, tandis que M. Baudrières, l'honorable député du Nord, se voile la face, l'honorable député du Midi exécute un pas d'une fantaisie ultraméridionale.

Il n'existe de si bonne plaisanterie qui n'ait une fin. Après cinq minutes de ce charivari, nous dûmes nous arrêter, épuisés. Mlle Mornas pleurait à force de rire.

C’est le soir de ce même jour que fut commise par Amédée Florence, soussigné, la faute avouée en tête de cet article. À vrai dire, c’est une faute dont je suis coutumier, l’indiscrétion étant le péché mignon des reporters.

Donc, ce soir-là, le hasard ayant placé ma tente tout près de celle de Mlle Mornas, j’allais me coucher, quand j’entendis parler chez ma voisine. Au lieu de me boucher les oreilles, j’écoutai.

Telle fut ma faute.

Mlle Mornas causait avec son domestique, Tongané, qui lui répondait dans un anglais extrêmement fantaisiste, que je traduis en français correct pour l’agrément de vos lecteurs. La conversation durait sans doute depuis longtemps déjà. Mlle Mornas interrogeait Tongané sur sa vie antérieure. Au moment où je commençais à tendre l’oreille, elle demandait:

— Comment un Achanti tel que toi…

Tiens! Tongané n’est pas un Bambara. Je ne m’en doutais guère.

— … Est-il devenu tirailleur sénégalais? Tu me l’as déjà dit, quand je t’ai engagé, mais je ne m’en souviens plus.

Illusion ou non, il me semble que Mlle Mornas n’est pas sincère. Tongané répond:

— C’est après l’affaire Buxton…

Buxton?… Ce nom-là me dit quelque chose. Mais quoi?… Tout en écoutant, je fouille dans mes souvenirs.

— … J’étais engagé dans son expédition, continue Tongané, quand les Anglais sont venus et ont tiré sur nous.

— Sais-tu pourquoi ils ont tiré? questionna Mlle Mornas.

— Parce que le capitaine Buxton s’était révolté, qu’il pillait et massacrait tout.

— Était-ce vrai, cela?

— Très vrai. On brûlait les villages. On tuait les pauvres nègres, les femmes, les petits enfants…

— Et c’était le capitaine Buxton qui ordonnait ces atrocités? insiste Mlle Mornas, dont la voix me paraît altérée.

— Non, répond Tongané. On ne le voyait jamais. Il ne sortait plus de sa tente, depuis l’arrivée d’un autre blanc. C’est ce Blanc qui nous donnait des ordres au nom du capitaine.

— Il était avec vous depuis longtemps, cet autre Blanc?

— Très longtemps. Cinq ou six mois, peut-être plus.

— Où l’aviez-vous rencontré?

— Dans la brousse.

— Et le capitaine Buxton l’avait accueilli sans difficulté?

— Ils ne se quittaient pas, jusqu’au jour où le capitaine n’est plus sorti de sa tente.

— C’est sans doute à partir de ce jour-là que les cruautés ont commencé?

Tongané hésite.

— Je ne sais pas, avoue-t-il.

— Et ce Blanc, demande Mlle Mornas, te souviens-tu de son nom?

À ce moment, un bruit venu de l’extérieur couvre la voix de Tongané. J’ignore ce qu’il répond. Ça m’est égal, après tout. Quelle qu’elle soit, cette histoire-là n’est plus d’actualité, et ne m’intéresse pas beaucoup, par conséquent.

Mlle Mornas reprend:

— Après que les Anglais eurent tiré sur vous, qu’es-tu devenu?

— Je vous l’ai dit à Dakar où vous m’avez engagé, répond Tongané. Moi et beaucoup d’autres, nous avons eu peur, et nous nous sommes sauvés dans la brousse. Puis je suis revenu, mais il n’y avait plus personne à l’endroit où l’on s’était battu. Il n’y avait plus que les morts. J’en ai enterré quelques-uns, ceux qui étaient mes amis, et aussi le chef, le capitaine Buxton…

J’entends à cet endroit une exclamation étouffée.

— Après cela, continue Tongané, j’ai erré de village en village et j’ai atteint le Niger. Je l’ai remonté dans une pirogue que j’avais volée, et je suis arrivé enfin à Tombouctou, juste comme les Français y entraient. J’avais mis près de cinq ans à faire le voyage. À Tombouctou, je me suis engagé comme tirailleur, et, quand j’ai été libéré, j’ai gagné le Sénégal, où vous m’avez rencontré.

Après un instant de silence, Mlle Mornas demande:

— Alors, le capitaine Buxton était mort?

— Oui, maîtresse.

— Et c'est toi qui l'as enterré?

— Oui, maîtresse.

— Tu sais donc où est sa tombe?

Tongané rit.

— Bien sûr, dit-il. J'irais les yeux fermés.

Encore un silence, puis j'entends:

— Bonsoir, Tongané.

— Bonsoir, maîtresse, répond le nègre, qui sort de la tente et s'éloigne.

Mlle Mornas va se coucher, et moi j'en fais autant sans plus lambiner. Mais, à peine ai-je soufflé ma lanterne, que la mémoire me revient.

Buxton?… Parbleu! je ne connais que ça! Où donc avais-je la tête? Quel admirable reportage j'ai manqué, ce jour-là!

J'étais au Diderot à cette époque déjà reculée, et — qu'on excuse ces souvenirs personnels — j'avais proposé à mon directeur d'aller interviewer sur le théâtre même de ses crimes le capitaine révolté. Pendant des mois il recula devant les frais. Que voulez-vous? Tout le monde n'a pas le sens de l’actualité. Quand il consentit enfin, il était trop tard. J’appris à Bordeaux, au moment de m’embarquer, que le capitaine Buxton était mort.

Maintenant, tout ça, c’est de l’histoire ancienne et vous me demanderez peut-être pourquoi je vous ai raconté cette conversation surprise entre Tongané et sa maîtresse?… Vraiment, je ne le sais pas moi-même.

Le 8 décembre, je trouve encore sur mon carnet le nom de Saint-Bérain. Il est inépuisable, Saint-Bérain. Cette fois, c’est un rien, mais ce rien nous a beaucoup amusés. Puisse-t-il vous dérider quelques minutes!

Nous cheminions depuis deux heures à la première étape du matin, quand voilà Saint-Bérain qui pousse tout à coup des cris inarticulés et se trémousse sur son cheval de la manière la plus hilarante. Nous commençons déjà à rire, de confiance. Mais Saint-Bérain ne rit pas, lui. Péniblement, il met pied à terre et porte la main à cette partie de son individu sur laquelle il a coutume de s’asseoir, le tout en se livrant à des contorsions inexplicables.

On s’empresse. On s’informe. Que lui est-il arrivé?

— Les hameçons!… murmure Saint-Bérain d’une voix mourante.

Les hameçons?… Cela ne nous dit rien. C’est seulement plus tard, quand le dégât eut été réparé, que le sens de cette exclamation nous fut révélé.

On n’a peut-être pas oublié que, au moment où nous quittions Conakry, Saint-Bérain, rappelé à l’ordre par sa tante — ou sa nièce — s’était hâté d’accourir, en fourrant à pleines mains dans ses poches des hameçons qu’il venait d’acheter. Naturellement, il n’y avait plus pensé. C’étaient lesdits hameçons qui se vengeaient maintenant de ce sans gêne. Par suite d’un faux mouvement, ils s’étaient interposés entre la selle et le cavalier, et trois d’entre eux s’étaient implantés solidement dans la peau de leur propriétaire.

Il faut l’intervention du docteur Châtonnay pour délivrer Saint-Bérain. Trois coups de bistouri y suffisent, que le docteur ne se prive pas d’accompagner de commentaires. Et il rit, que c’est un plaisir!

— On peut dire que vous avez “mordu”! s’écrie-t-il d’abord avec conviction, tout en procédant à l’examen du champ opératoire.

— Aïe!… fait, pour toute réponse, Saint-Bérain qui vient d’être séparé du premier hameçon.

— Pour une belle pêche, c’est une belle pêche! proclame au deuxième le docteur.

— Aïe!… crie derechef Saint-Bérain.

Enfin, pour le troisième:

— Vous pouvez vous flatter d’avoir pris la grosse pièce, aujourd’hui, complimente l’excellent docteur.

— Aïe!… soupire une dernière fois Saint-Bérain. L’opération est terminée. Il n’y a plus qu’à panser le blessé, qui remonte ensuite à cheval, où il prendra, pendant deux jours, des attitudes très cocasses.

Le 12 décembre, nous sommes arrivés à Boronya. Boronya serait un petit village comme les autres, s’il n’avait l’avantage de posséder un chef particulièrement aimable. Ce chef, qui est tout jeune, car il n’a guère plus de dix-sept ou dix-huit ans, gesticule beaucoup et distribue des coups de fouet aux curieux qui nous approchent de trop près. Il s’élance au-devant de nous, une main sur son coeur, et nous fait mille protestations d’amitié, que nous reconnaissons en lui offrant du sel, de la poudre et deux rasoirs. À la vue de ces trésors, il danse de joie.

Pour nous remercier, il donne l’ordre de construire, en dehors du village, des paillotes dans lesquelles nous pourrons coucher. Lorsque je prends possession de la mienne, je vois les nounou très occupés à aplanir et à fouler le sol, qu’ils recouvrent de bouse de vache séchée. Je leur demande pourquoi le luxe de ce tapis; ils me répondent que c’est pour empêcher les vers blancs de sortir de terre. Je leur sais gré de l’attention, et les en récompense d’une poignée de cauries[1]. Ils en sont tellement enchantés qu’ils s’empressent de cracher sur les murs et d’étaler leurs crachats avec la paume de la main. Saint-Bérain, qui doit partager ma case — et qui est là par hasard! — me dit que, ce qu’ils en font, c’est pour m’honorer. Grand merci!

Le 13 décembre, dans la matinée, nous atteignons Timbo sans autre incident. Cette agglomération, la plus importante de celles que nous avons traversées jusqu’ici, est entourée d’un tata, c’est-à-dire d’un mur en pisé, d’épaisseur variable selon les contrées, derrière lequel est élevé un échafaudage en bois qui sert de chemin de ronde.

La tata de Timbo contient en réalité trois villages, séparés les uns des autres par de vastes espaces cultivés ou boisés, où les animaux domestiques flânent en liberté. Dans chacun de ces villages, il y a un petit marché quotidien, mais dans le plus étendu se tient un grand marché hebdomadaire.

Une case sur quatre est inoccupée. Elle est remplie d’immondices, d’ordres variées, ainsi, d’ailleurs, que les rues. Il est hors de doute que ce pays

[1] Caurie, monnaie indigène, donc seize cents valent cinq francs.

manque de balayeurs. Et autant que malpropre il est pauvre. Nous avons vu des enfants, la plupart d’une maigreur de squelettes, chercher leur nourriture dans le fumier. Quant aux femmes, elles sont d’une laideur repoussante.

Cela, du reste, ne les empêche pas d’être coquettes. Comme c’était jour de marché, les plus riches de l’endroit s’étaient mises sur leur trente et un. En toilette “habillée”, elles portent un pagne bleu rayé de blanc, le haut du corps étant enveloppé d’une pièce de calicot blanc ou de mauvais florence aux couleurs éclatantes, leurs oreilles sont chargées de lourds anneaux de métal soutenus par des chaînettes d’argent entrecroisées sur le dessus de la tête, et des bracelets et des colliers en corail ou en perles fausses décorent leurs cous, leurs poignets et leurs chevilles.

Presque toutes ont des coiffures en forme de casque. Certaines ont les pariétaux rasés et un cimier de cheveux orné de verroterie sur le sommet du crâne. D’autres sont complètement rasées. Les plus élégantes se font une tête de clown: toupet pointu et deux larges coques latérales. À leur façon d’arranger leur chevelure, on doit, paraît-il, reconnaître à quelle race elles appartiennent, peuls, mandé, bambara, etc. Mais je ne suis pas de cette force, et j’abrège ces détails ethnographiques, sur lesquels M. Tassin doit, à son retour, s’étendre dans un livre qui sera, à tout le moins, sérieusement documenté.

Les hommes sont vêtus de brayes, de blouses blanches ou de pagnes. Ils ornent leurs crânes des couvre-chefs les plus divers, depuis la chéchia jusqu’au chapeau de paille, en passant par le bonnet orné de ferblanterie ou de losanges d’étoffes de couleur. Pour vous saluer, ils se frappent la cuisse de la paume de la main pendant cinq bonnes minutes, en répétant le mot dagaré, qui doit, comme Ini-tié, signifier “bonjour”, ou bien Ini Sou-Khouma, qui le signifie certainement.

Nous nous rendons au grand marché, où nous trouvons réunie toute l’aristocratie de Timbo. Les vendeurs y sont installés depuis huit heures du matin dans deux rangées de paillotes, ou seulement assis sous des nattes soutenues par quatre piquets, mais le beau monde n’y arrive que vers onze heures.

On y vend un peu de tout: du mil, du riz, du beurre de karité à 0 fr. 50 centimes le kilo, du sel à raison de 11 fr. 50 la barre de vingt-cinq kilos, des boeufs, des chèvres, des moutons, des poulets à 3 fr. 30 la pièce, ce qui n’est pas donné, des fusils à pierre, des noix de kola, du tabac, des koyos ou bandes pour pagne, des niomi, galettes de farine de mil ou de maïs frites, des étoffes variées: guinée, calicot, des chapeaux, des turbans, du fil, des aiguilles, des épingles, de la poudre, des pierres à fusil, etc. et enfin, bien étalés sur des peaux desséchées, de petits tas de viande pourrie d’une odeur sui generis, pour les gourmets.

Timbo est, comme je vous l’ai dit, le premier centre un peu important que nous rencontrons. Aussi y sommes-nous restés deux jours, les 13 et 14 décembre. Ce n’est pas que nous soyons extrêmement fatigués, mais les animaux et les porteurs, ces autres bêtes de somme, manifestent une lassitude parfaitement légitime.

Pendant ces quarante-huit heures, nous avons fait, les uns et les autres, de nombreuses promenades dans l’enceinte du tata. J’ai consigné ci-dessus l’essentiel de mes observations. N’attendez pas de moi de plus amples descriptions, que vous trouverez sans peine, au surplus, dans les traités spéciaux. Mon rôle à moi, c’est d’être l’historiographe de la mission

Barsac, et ce rôle me plaît. Clio m’inspire, mais je n’ai pas l’âme d’un géographe. Que cela soit dit une fois pour toutes.

Le lendemain de notre arrivée, le 14, par conséquent, nous avons été fort inquiets au sujet de notre guide. Pendant toute la journée, on le chercha vainement. Moriliré avait disparu.

Rassurez-vous. Le 15 décembre, au moment du départ, il était à son poste, et, quand nous nous réveillâmes, il avait déjà distribué une suffisante quantité de coups de gourdin pour que les âniers ne missent pas en doute la réalité de sa présence. Questionné par M. Barsac, Moriliré soutint mordicus n’avoir pas quitté le camp de toute la journée de la veille. Comme nous n’avions, en somme, aucune certitude, et la chose étant, d’ailleurs, sans importance, car, Moriliré est bien excusable, après tout, d’avoir voulu tirer ce que les marins appellent une “bordée”, on n’insista pas, et l’incident fut clos.

Nous quittons donc Timbo le 15 décembre, à l’heure habituelle, et notre voyage se poursuit toute la journée sans difficulté particulière, et selon l’horaire accoutumé. Il y a lieu de noter, cependant, que les pieds de nos chevaux ne foulent plus le sol de la route qui nous a conduits jusqu’ici. La route, au-delà de Timbo, se transforme progressivement en un simple sentier. C’est donc à partir de Timbo que nous devenons vraiment des explorateurs.

Autre changement: le pays est maintenant accidenté. Ce ne sont que montées et descentes. Au sortir de Timbo, il nous faut d’abord gravir une colline assez haute que nous devons ensuite descendre. À la colline succède une plaine, puis c’est une nouvelle montée, jusqu’au village de Daouhériko, aux abords duquel nous devons nous arrêter afin de camper pour la nuit.

Gens et animaux étant bien reposés, le train est plus rapide que de coutume, et il n’est pas six heures du soir quand nous arrivons à ce village.

Les manifestations les plus amicales nous y attendaient. Le chef vint au-devant de nous et nous offrit des présents. M. Barsac le remercia. Des cris de bienvenue lui répondirent.

— Ils ne sont pas plus chauds pour moi à Aix, quand je passe sur le cours Sextius, dit M. Barsac avec satisfaction. J’en étais sûr. Il n’y a qu’à leur parler.

Il semble bien qu’il ait raison, M. Barsac, malgré que M. Baudrières hoche la tête d’un air sceptique.

Cependant, le chef du village continuait ses amabilités. Il offrait de nous loger dans les plus belles cases du village, priait notre compagne d’accepter l’hospitalité dans sa propre demeure. Cet accueil chaleureux nous allait au coeur, et la suite de notre voyage nous apparaissait en rose, lorsque Malik, s’approchant de Mlle Mornas, lui dit rapidement à voix basse:

— Toi pas aller, maîtresse! Sans ça, toi mourir!

Mlle Mornas regarde la petite négresse avec stupéfaction. Il va de soi que j’ai entendu, comme c’est le devoir d’un reporter qui se respecte. Mais le capitaine Marcenay a entendu, lui aussi, bien que ce ne soit pas son métier. D’abord, il paraît surpris. Puis, après une courte réflexion, il se décide.

Il se débarrasse en deux temps des importunités du chef et donne des ordres pour l’installation du camp. Je l’écoute, et conclus que nous serons bien gardés.

Ces précautions me font réfléchir. Le capitaine, qui a la pratique du pays noir, y croit donc, à ce danger signalé par Malik?

Alors?…

Alors, je me pose cette question avant de m’endormir: “Qui a raison, M. Barsac ou M. Baudrières?”

Peut-être le saurai-je demain.

En attendant, je suis perplexe.

Amédée Florence.

CHAPITRE 6

Troisième article de M. Amédée Florence

Le troisième article de son envoyé spécial auprès de la mission Barsac fut publié le 5 février par l’Expansion française. Pour des raisons qu’on ne tardera pas à connaître, ce fut le dernier que ce journal reçut jamais de son habile reporter. Par suite, les lecteurs de l’Expansion française durent rester de longs mois avant de connaître le mot de l’énigme que posait M. Amédée Florence dans les dernières lignes de son article, énigme dont ce récit donnera la complète solution.

LA MISSION BARSAC

(Par dépêche de notre envoyé spécial)

Ce que craignait Malik — Le doung-kono —

Soyons amis, Cinna — La Gueule-Tapée —

Le baptême de M. Aliboron — Patience!

Kankan — Un sorcier — Raisonnons —

Des bruits dans la nuit

Kankan, le 24 décembre. — Nous sommes arrivés ici hier matin, et nous en repartons demain matin, jour de Noël.

Noël!… Ma pensée se reporte vers la patrie, dont nous sommes si loin. (Six cent cinquante kilomètres depuis Conakry, d'après l'infaillible M. Tassin.) Je songe, avec une volupté que je ne croyais pas possible, aux plaines couvertes de neige, et, pour la première fois depuis bien des années, j'éprouve un violent désir de mettre mes souliers dans la cheminée, ce qui prouverait, du moins, que j'en ai une.

Mais ne nous attendrissons pas, et reprenons au point où nous les avons laissés ces fastes de la mission Barsac.

Donc, je vous ai raconté dans mon article précédent qu'au moment où le chef et les habitants de Daouhériko nous invitaient à accepter leur hospitalité, Malik avait dit dans son langage à Mlle Mornas:

— N'y allez pas! Il y va de la vie!

Sur cette phrase, entendue par le capitaine, il avait été décidé que nous camperions en dehors du village, à l'endroit même où nous nous étions arrêtés. Le capitaine Marcenay, après avoir conféré avec Malik, donna les ordres que comportait la situation et engagea les indigènes à s'éloigner. Ils ne le firent pas sans protester de leurs bonnes intentions à notre égard, mais le capitaine ne se laissa pas influencer, et les invita avec fermeté à rentrer chez eux et à ne pas s'approcher à moins de cinq cents mètres de notre camp. On verra bientôt que ces précautions n'étaient pas inutiles.

M. Baudrières, fidèle ami de la prudence, approuva hautement le parti adopté, bien qu'il n'en connût pas la raison. Par contre, M. Barsac, qui se voyait déjà porté en triomphe sous des arcs de feuillages ornés de rubans tricolores, ne put cacher son dépit.

Aussitôt que les indigènes se furent retirés, il s’avança vers le capitaine Marcenay, qui se trouvait à deux pas de moi, ce qui me permit de ne rien perdre de la scène, et lui demanda d’un ton bref où perçait une sourde colère:

— Qui donc commande ici, capitaine?

— Vous, monsieur le député, dit l’officier, froid mais poli.

— Dans ce cas, pourquoi avez-vous, sans me demander mon avis, donné l’ordre de camper, au lieu de loger chez les habitants, et de chasser ces braves nègres, animés pour nous des meilleures intentions?

Le capitaine prit un temps, comme on dit au théâtre, et répondit avec calme:

— Monsieur le député, si, en votre qualité de chef de la mission, vous en choisissez l’itinéraire et en réglez la marche à votre gré, j’ai, moi aussi, un devoir à remplir, celui de vous protéger. Il est certain que j’aurais dû vous prévenir et vous faire connaître les motifs de ma conduite, mais j’ai voulu d’abord aller au plus pressé. Je vous prie donc de m’excuser, si j’ai négligé cette…

Jusqu’ici, c’est très bien. Le capitaine Marcenay s’est excusé de sa faute, et M. Barsac peut se considérer comme satisfait. Malheureusement — et il est possible qu’une rivalité d’un autre ordre n’y soit pas étrangère — le capitaine est nerveux, quoiqu’il se contraigne, et il va lâcher un mot maladroit qui mettra le feu aux poudres.

— Si j’ai négligé cette formalité, achève-t-il.

— Formalité!… répète M. Barsac, rouge de colère.

Il est du Midi, M. Barsac, et les gens du Midi sont réputés pour avoir du vif-argent dans les veines. Je sens que les sottises vont commencer.

M. Barsac reprend, tout frémissant:

— Et maintenant, du moins, daignerez-vous me les faire connaître, ces motifs qui doivent être bien puissants pour vous avoir ému à ce point?

Là, qu’est-ce que je disais, voilà que ça se gâte. C’est au tour du capitaine d’être vexé. Il réplique d’un ton sec.

— J’avais appris qu’un complot se tramait contre nous.

— Un complot!… s’exclame ironiquement M. Barsac. Parmi ces braves nègres!… À trente-cinq kilomètres de Timbo!… En vérité!… Et qui donc vous l’a révélé, ce… complot?

Il faut voir comment M. Barsac prononce: complot! Il gonfle les joues, roule les yeux. Dieu! qu’il est de Marseille, en ce moment!

— Malik, répond laconiquement le capitaine.

M. Barsac se met à rire. De quel rire!

— Malik!… Cette petite esclave que j’ai payée vingt-cinq sous!…

M. Barsac exagère. D’abord, Malik n’est pas une esclave, vu qu’il n’y a pas d’esclave en territoire français. Un député devrait savoir ça. Et puis, Malik est une femme très chère. C’est bel et bien vingt-cinq francs qu’elle a coûté, plus un vieux fusil et une pièce d’étoffe.

Cependant, M. Barsac continue.

— … Vingt-cinq sous!… Voilà une belle autorité, en effet, et je conçois que vous ayez eu peur…

Le capitaine a senti le coup. Au mot “peur”, il a fait la grimace. Il se domine, mais on sent qu’il est furieux en dedans.

— Vous me permettrez de ne pas partager vos craintes, poursuit cependant M. Barsac, qui se monte de plus en plus. Je tiens à être un héros, moi. Je vais donc aller au village, y coucher, et conquérir ce repaire à moi tout seul.

Nous voici au moment des vraies bêtises. Je l’avais prévu.

— Je ne vous le conseille pas, réplique le capitaine du tac au tac. J’ignore si Malik s’est ou non trompée, mais, dans le doute, j’ai pris le parti qu’exigeait la prudence. Je suis responsable de votre sécurité, je vous l’ai dit. Mes instructions, sur ce point, sont formelles, et je n’y faillirai pas, fût-ce, au besoin, malgré vous.

— Malgré moi!…

— Si donc vous tentiez d’enfreindre les ordres du commandant militaire, et si vous sortiez du camp, j’aurais le regret de vous consigner dans votre tente sous bonne garde. Et maintenant, serviteur, monsieur le Député. Je dois veiller à l’installation du camp, et n’ai pas le loisir de discuter davantage. J’ai bien l’honneur de vous saluer.

Là-dessus, le capitaine porte la main à son képi, exécute un demi-tour à droite des plus réglementaires, et s’éloigne, laissant le député du Midi à deux doigts d’une attaque d’apoplexie.

D’ailleurs, pour être franc, je n’en mène pas large, moi non plus.

La colère de M. Barsac est d’autant plus grande que cette scène se passe en présence de Mlle Mornas. Il va s’élancer à la suite du capitaine dans l’intention évidente de lui chercher une querelle qui pourrait avoir un dénouement tragique, lorsque notre aimable compagne l’arrête d’un mot:

— Restez là, monsieur Barsac, dit-elle. Le capitaine a eu tort, il est vrai, de ne pas vous prévenir, mais il s’en est excusé, et, à votre tour, vous l’avez blessé. Pour le surplus, en vous protégeant malgré vous-même, il accomplit son devoir, au risque de s’attirer votre courroux et de nuire à son avancement. Si vous étiez un peu généreux, vous devriez le remercier.

— C’est trop fort!

— Reprenez votre calme, je vous en prie, et écoutez-moi. Je viens de causer avec Malik. C’est elle qui a donné l’éveil à M. Marcenay et l’a informé du complot qui se préparait contre nous. Avez-vous entendu parler du doung-kono?

M. Barsac secoue négativement la tête. Il n’écume plus, mais il boude.

— Je le sais, moi interrompt le docteur Châtonnay, qui s’est rapproché. C’est un poison mortel qui a cette particularité de ne tuer ses victimes qu’au bout d’une huitaine de jours. Savez-vous comment on l’obtient? C’est assez curieux.

M. Barsac n’a pas l’air d’entendre. Le volcan éteint fume encore.

Mlle Mornas répond pour lui.

— Non, docteur.

— Je vais tâcher de vous l’expliquer, dit le docteur Châtonnay non sans une certaine hésitation, bien que ce soit très délicat… Enfin! allons-y!… Sachez donc que, pour fabriquer du doung-kono, on prend une tige de petit mil (en nègre, samo) qu’on introduit dans l’intestin d’un cadavre. Vingt jours après, on la retire, on la fait sécher, on la pile. La poudre ainsi obtenue est versée dans du lait, dans une sauce, dans du vin, ou dans toute autre boisson, et, comme elle n’a aucun goût, on l’avale sans s’en apercevoir. Huit à dix jours plus tard, on enfle. L’abdomen surtout se gonfle d’une façon incroyable. Au bout de vingt-quatre heures, on succombe, et rien, pas un contrepoison, pas un remède, ne peut vous arracher à ce destin funeste, qui,

S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste!

Bon! encore un vers! Je vois bien qu’il rime, parbleu, mais à quoi?

— Voici maintenant, dit à son tour Mlle Mornas, le complot tramé par les habitants du village. En arrivant ici, Malik a entendu le chef de Daouhériko en parler avec d’autres chefs du voisinage. Dolo Saron, c’est le nom de ce roitelet, devait nous faire une réception amicale, un accueil des plus cordiaux, nous inviter à aller les uns dans sa maison, les autres dans celles de ses complices. Là, on nous aurait offert quelques mets ou quelque boisson du pays que nous n’aurions pas refusés. Pendant ce temps, on aurait fait boire les soldats. Demain, nous repartions sans nous être aperçus de rien, et, dans quelques jours, nous aurions commencé à ressentir les premières atteintes du poison. Bien entendu, tous les nègres des alentours auraient guetté ce moment, et, notre convoi désorganisé, ils auraient pillé nos bagages, auraient emmené nos âniers et nos porteurs en esclavage, se seraient emparés de nos chevaux et de nos ânes. Malik a surpris ce complot, en a avisé le capitaine Marcenay et vous savez le reste.

On pense si nous sommes émus par ce récit. M. Barsac est consterné.

— Hein! quand je vous le disais! fait M. Baudrières d’un air triomphant. Les voilà, vos populations civilisées! De fameux gredins!

— Je n’en reviens pas, gémit M. Barsac. Je suis atterré, littéralement atterré! Ce Dolo Sarron, avec son air bonhomme! Ah! mais! nous allons rire!… Dès demain, je fais brûler ce village, et, quant à ce misérable Dolo Sarron!…

— Y pensez-vous, monsieur Barsac! s’écria Mlle Mornas. Songez que nous avons à parcourir des centaines et de centaines de kilomètres. La prudence…

M. Baudrières interrompt. Il demande:

— Est-il bien nécessaire de nous obstiner dans ce voyage? Cette question a été posée: “Les populations de la boucle du Niger sont-elles ou non suffisamment civilisées pour que des droits politiques puissent leur être accordés?” Il me semble que nous connaissons la réponse. L’expérience de ces quelques jours, et notamment celle de ce soir, doit nous suffire.

Ainsi attaqué, M. Barsac se reprend. Il se redresse. Il va parler, il parle… Mlle Mornas le prévient.

— M. Baudrières n’est pas très exigeant, dit-elle. Pareil à l’Anglais qui prétendait que toutes les Françaises sont rousses, parce qu’il en avait rencontré une de cette couleur en débarquant à Calais. Il juge tout un peuple sur quelques malfaiteurs. Comme s’il ne se commettait pas de crimes en Europe!…

M. Barsac approuve avec conviction. Mais la langue lui démange. Il s’empare de la parole.

— Très juste! s’écrie-t-il. Mais il est, messieurs, une autre face de la question. Serait-il admissible que des représentants de la République, à peine au seuil d’une vaste entreprise, se laissassent…

Il parle bien, M. Barsac.

— … se laissassent décourager dès les premiers pas comme des enfants peureux? Non, messieurs, ceux qui ont l’honneur de porter le drapeau de la France doivent posséder un ferme bon sens et un courage que rien n’abat. Ainsi, ils apprécieront sainement la gravité des dangers qu’ils peuvent courir, et, ces dangers exactement reconnus, ils leur feront face sans pâlir. Mais ces pionniers de la civilisation…

Par le Ciel, c’est un discours!… En voilà pour quelque temps!

— … ces pionniers de la civilisation doivent, par-dessus tout, faire preuve de circonspection et ne pas se hâter de porter un jugement d’ensemble sur toute une immense contrée, en se basant sur un fait unique, dont la réalité même n’est pas certaine. Ainsi que l’a dit excellemment le précédent orateur…

Le précédent orateur, c’est Mlle Mornas, tout simplement. Il sourit, le précédent orateur, et, pour couper court à ce flot d’éloquence, s’empresse d’applaudir à grand bruit. Nous applaudissons tous à son exemple, hors M. Baudrières, cela va de soi.

— La cause est entendue, dit Mlle Mornas au milieu du vacarme, et le voyage continue. Je répète donc que la prudence nous commande d’éviter toute effusion de sang qui pourrait entraîner des représailles. Si nous sommes sages, nous aurons pour principal objectif de cheminer paisiblement. C’est du moins l’avis de M. Marcenay.

— Oh! alors! si c’est l’avis de

M. Marcenay!… approuve M. Barsac, moitié figue, moitié raisin.

— Ne prenez pas votre air ironique, monsieur Barsac, réplique Mlle Mornas. Vous feriez bien mieux d’aller trouver le capitaine, que vous avez passablement rabroué tout à l’heure, et de lui tendre la main. En somme, peut-être lui devons-nous la vie.

M. Barsac a la tête chaude, mais c’est un brave et excellent homme. Il hésita juste ce qu’il fallait pour donner du prix à son sacrifice, puis se dirigea vers le capitaine Marcenay qui achevait d’organiser la garde du camp.

— Capitaine, un mot, lui dit-il.

— À vos ordres, monsieur le député, répondit l’officier en prenant la position militaire.

— Capitaine, continue M. Barsac, nous avons eu tort l’un et l’autre, tout à l’heure, mais moi plus que vous. Je vous prie donc de m’excuser. Voulez-vous me faire l’honneur de me donner la main?

Cela fut dit avec beaucoup de dignité et n’eut rien d’humiliant, je vous assure. M. Marcenay en fut tout ému.

— Ah! monsieur le député, fit-il, c’est trop! J’avais déjà tout oublié!…

Ils se serrèrent la main, et je crois que, jusqu’à nouvel ordre, les voilà les meilleurs amis du monde.

L’incident Barsac-Marcenay terminé à la satisfaction générale, chacun de nous se retira sous l’abri qui lui était destiné. J’allais donc me coucher, lorsque je m’aperçus que, suivant sa coutume, M. de Saint-Bérain n’était pas là. Était-il donc sorti du camp, malgré la consigne?

Sans prévenir mes compagnons de voyage, je me mis à sa recherche. J’eus la chance de rencontrer tout de suite son domestique, Tongané, qui me dit:

— Toi vouloir voir mossié Agénor? Toi venir doucement. Nous voir lui cachément. Lui beaucoup rigolo!

Tongané me conduisit au bord d’un petit cours d’eau, en deçà de la ligne des sentinelles, et, dissimulé derrière un baobab, je vis, en effet, Saint-Bérain. Il paraissait fort occupé et tenait entre ses doigts un animal que je ne distinguais pas bien.

— Y en a ntori, me dit Tongané. Un ntori, c’est un crapaud.

Saint-Bérain ouvrit largement la gueule de la bête, et lui introduisit dans le corps une tige d’acier effilée à ses deux extrémités. Au milieu était attachée une forte ficelle, dont il tenait l’autre bout.

Le plus singulier, c’est que, pendant toute cette opération, Saint-Bérain ne cessa pas un instant de pousser des soupirs à fendre l’âme. Il avait l’air de cruellement souffrir, et je n’y comprenais rien. J’ai eu, depuis, le mot de l’énigme. Saint-Bérain souffrait, en effet, mais seulement d’infliger au malheureux ntori un traitement si barbare. Pendant qu’il cédait à sa passion pour la pêche, sa sensibilité protestait.

Après avoir déposé le crapaud dans les herbes de la rive, il se blottit derrière un arbre, un gros bâton à la main, et attendit. Nous fîmes comme lui.

Nous n’eûmes pas à attendre longtemps. Presque aussitôt, un animal bizarre, une sorte d’énorme lézard, apparut.

— Toi voir, me dit Tongané à voix basse, y en a belle “gueule-tapée”!

Gueule-tapée?… Le docteur me dit le lendemain qu’on désigne ainsi une variété d’iguane.

La gueule-tapée, donc, avala le crapaud, puis voulut retourner à l’eau. Se sentant alors retenue par la ficelle, elle se débattit, et les pointes d’acier lui pénétrèrent dans les chairs. Elle était prise. Saint-Bérain tira l’animal à lui, et leva son bâton…

Qu’est-ce à dire? Le bâton retombe sans force, tandis que Saint-Bérain pousse un véritable gémissement… Une fois, deux fois, trois fois, le bâton se lève menaçant; une fois, deux fois, trois fois, il retombe inoffensif, avec accompagnement d’un lamentable soupir.

Tongané perd patience. Il s’élance hors de notre cachette, et c’est lui qui, d’un coup vigoureux, met fin à l’incertitude de son maître et aux jours de la gueule-tapée, qui n’avait jamais aussi bien mérité son nom.

Saint-Bérain pousse encore un soupir, de satisfaction cette fois. Déjà Tongané s’est emparé de l’iguane.

— Demain, dit-il, y en a manger queule-tapée. Moi faire cuire. Y aura beaucoup bon.

Il y eut “beaucoup bon”, en effet.

Le 16 décembre, nous repartîmes dès l'aube. Nous contournâmes d'abord la ville, où l'on apercevait peu d'habitants à cette heure matinale. Ce vieux mécréant de Dolo Sarron nous regarda défiler, et je crus le voir esquisser à notre adresse un geste de menace.

À un kilomètre de là, nous traversâmes un bois composé de karités, de ntabas et de bans, à ce que nous apprit le docteur Châtonnay.

— Le ntaba, nous dit-il, est un ficus de grandes dimensions. Ses feuilles, larges de vingt-cinq à trente centimètres, sont employées pour abriter les campements. Ses fruits, qui mûrissent en juin, renferment trois ou quatre gros haricots qui baignent dans un jus très sucré. Les indigènes s'en régalent. Nous autres Européens, nous préférons le fruit du saba, qui rappelle notre cerise. Quant au ban, dont le fruit, vous le voyez, ressemble à notre pomme de pin, c'est un palmier. Ses branches sont employées à construire des toits de cases, des paniers servant aux transports, comme nous en avons quelques modèles dans notre convoi. Avec les feuilles, on fabrique des chapeaux, des nattes, des sacs à marchandises. Enfin, les branches séchées et fendillées font des torches excellentes. C'est avec ces torches, d'ailleurs, que nous nous éclairons.

Un peu avant neuf heures, le sentier fut coupé par une rivière, où grouillaient, comme d'habitude, hippopotames et caïmans. Il nous fallut la traverser à gué. Je remarquai alors que c'était la première fois que nous étions dans ce cas. Jusqu'ici, ou bien nous avions trouvé des ponts, ou bien les eaux étaient si basses que c'est tout juste si nos montures avaient pu y tremper leurs sabots. Cette fois, c'était différent, nous avions devant nous une véritable rivière.

Par bonheur, son niveau était moins haut que nous ne l’avions craint. Nos chevaux furent mouillés à peine jusqu’au poitrail, et notre passage s’accomplit sans difficulté.

Mais, pour les ânes, ce fut une autre chanson. Lorsque ces animaux, d’ailleurs très chargés, eurent atteint le milieu de la rivière, ils s’arrêtèrent d’un commun accord. Les âniers s’efforcèrent vainement de les faire avancer. Ils se montrèrent aussi insensibles aux cris d’encouragement qu’aux coups de bâton.

— Ah! moi connaître, fit l’un des âniers. Eux vouloir baptême.

— Oui! oui! répondirent ses collègues. Eux attendre baptême.

Chacun d’eux se baissant alors prit dans ses mains un peu d’eau, qu’il versa sur la tête des animaux dont il avait la garde, tout en prononçant des mots inintelligibles.

— C’est, expliqua M. Tassin, un usage immémorial dans ces pays. Au premier gué qu’il faut traverser, la règle est de baptiser les ânes. Vous allez voir que, maintenant que les rites sont accomplis, ils vont repartir sans difficulté.

Ce ne fut pas long, en effet.

Il faisait près de trente degrés à l’ombre. Les ânes, qui avaient probablement trouvé agréable la fraîcheur de l’eau, pensèrent sans doute qu’un bon bain leur serait plus agréable encore. Après deux ou trois joyeuses pétarades, ils se renversèrent gaiement dans la rivière, et se roulèrent avec tant de plaisir que leurs charges mal attachées commencèrent à s’en aller à la dérive.

Il fallut les repêcher. Les âniers s’y employèrent avec la sage lenteur qui les caractérise, de sorte que, sans les soldats du capitaine Marcenay, nous aurions perdu la moitié de nos provisions, de nos cadeaux, de nos marchandises d’échange, ce qui eût été un irréparable malheur.

Comme M. Barsac exhalait son impatience et sa mauvaise humeur en termes violents et qu’il apostrophait d’épithètes provençales mais injurieuses les âniers flegmatiques, Moriliré s’approcha de lui:

— Mani Tigui (commandant), lui dit-il doucement, toi pas crier.

— Que je ne me mette pas en colère!… Quand ces animaux-là vont me noyer pour cent mille francs de marchandises!…

— Pas bon, reprit le guide. Toi, beaucoup patience. Si charges tomber, indigènes disputer, toi pas crier. Eux parler beaucoup, mais pas méchants. Après, y a beaucoup bon.

Ce que je vous raconte là, pour exact que ce soit, ne vous amuse peut-être pas. S’il en est ainsi, je n’y peux rien. En m’embarquant pour suivre la mission Barsac, je m’attendais à un reportage passionnant, et je pensais vous envoyer de la copie bourrée d’aventures fabuleuses. Ombres mystérieuses des forêts vierges, luttes contre la nature, combats contre les animaux féroces, batailles avec d’innombrables armées de nègres, voilà de quoi étaient faits mes rêves. Il me faut déchanter. Nos forêts, c’est la brousse, et nous ne nous heurtons à aucune difficulté naturelle. En fait d’animaux, nous n’avons guère vu que des hippopotames et des caïmans, fort nombreux, il est vrai, auxquels il convient d’ajouter des troupeaux d’antilopes et, par-ci par-là, quelques éléphants. Quant aux nègres altérés de carnage, nous ne rencontrons que des amis, si j’en excepte ce vieux brigand de Dolo Sarron. C’est un voyage très monotone.

En quittant Daouhériko de fâcheuse mémoire, nous avons d'abord gravi une côte, puis nous sommes redescendus sur Bagareya, dans la vallée du Timkisso. Je remarque à ce moment, faute d'observation plus palpitante, que Tchoumouki a quitté l'arrière-garde et marche en compagnie de Moriliré. Il y a donc de la brouille avec Tongané? Tchoumouki et Moriliré causent ensemble, et semblent être les meilleurs amis du monde. Allons! tant mieux!

Quant à Tongané, il n'a pas l'air de beaucoup regretter son camarade. À l'arrière du convoi, il s'entretient avec la petite Malik, et la conversation paraît fort animée. Une idylle, peut-être?…

À partir de Bagareya, c'est de nouveau la brousse, qui se dessèche de plus en plus, à mesure que nous nous éloignons de la saison des pluies, et c'est de nouveau la plaine, que nous n'abandonnerons plus, autant dire, jusqu'à Kankan, que nous avons atteint hier, 23 décembre, et d'où je date cet article.

Dans la journée du 22, à Kouroussa, nous avons passé la Djoliba, que M. Tassin m'affirme être le Niger, mais, à Kankan, nous retrouvons une autre rivière aussi importante qui se dirige vers la première, qu'elle rejoint, paraît-il, à quatre-vingts kilomètres dans le Nord. Pourquoi ne serait-ce pas cette rivière, qu'on nomme le Milo, qui serait le Niger véritable et authentique? M. Tassin, non sans une expression assez méprisante, m'affirme qu'il n'en est rien, mais il ne me dit pas pourquoi. Peu m'importe, d'ailleurs.

Et les incidents? me direz-vous. Quoi! pendant ces neuf journées, il ne vous serait rien arrivé?

Rien du tout, ou si peu!

J’ai beau consulter à la loupe mon carnet de notes, je n’y trouve que deux faits dignes, à la rigueur, d’être relatés. Le premier est imperceptible. Quant à l’autre… Ah! dame! l’autre, je ne sais trop ce qu’il faut en penser.

Voici, d’abord, le bref récit du premier.

Trois jours après avoir quitté Daouhériko, nous cheminions sans fatigue entre les lougans assez bien cultivés, indice que nous approchions d’un village, quand des indigènes croisant notre route donnèrent tout à coup des signes manifestes de peur et prirent la fuite.

— Marfa! Marfa! criaient-ils, tout en jouant des jambes.

Marfa veut dire fusil en langage bambara. Or, nous comprendrons d’autant moins le sens de ces exclamations, que, pour ne pas effrayer les nègres, il avait été décidé par le capitaine Marcenay que ses hommes dissimuleraient les leurs dans des gaines de cuir fauve ne rappelant en rien la forme des armes. Il n’y avait donc pas de fusil apparent. D’où venait cette terreur des nègres que nous croisions?

Nous nous le demandions en vain, lorsque nous entendîmes un fracas métallique suivi d’un cri d’indignation poussé par M. de Saint-Bérain.

— Les coquins! hurlait-il, furieux. Ils jettent des pierres sur mon étui à lignes! Le voilà tout bosselé! Attendez! Attendez un peu, misérables!…

On eut toutes les peines du monde à l’empêcher de poursuivre ses agresseurs, et encore fallut-il que Mlle Mornas intervînt. Les nègres, voyant son bel étui nickelé étinceler au soleil, l’avaient pris pour un canon de fusil. De là leur effroi.

Pour éviter le retour de semblables méprises qui auraient pu nous attirer quelque méchante affaire, M. Barsac pria M. de Saint-Bérain de placer son trop brillant matériel dans les bagages, sur le dos d'un âne. Mais il n'y eut pas moyen de faire entendre raison à l'obstiné pêcheur, qui déclara que pour rien au monde il ne se débarrasserait de ses lignes. Tout ce que l'on put obtenir, ce fut qu'il enveloppât son étui nickelé dans un lambeau d'étoffe, de manière à en dissimuler l'éclat.

C'est un type, mon ami Saint-Bérain.

L'autre fait se passe à Kankan, où nous sommes arrivés, avec douze heures de retard sur nos prévisions, dans la matinée du 23, à cause d'un nouvelle fugue de Moriliré. Le 22, au moment de nous mettre en route pour la seconde étape de la journée, pas de Moriliré. On le cherche en vain de tous côtés, et il faut bien nous résigner à l'attendre.

Le lendemain, à la première heure, notre guide était d'ailleurs à son poste, et s'occupait du départ comme si de rien n'était. Cette fois, l'absence n'était pas niable. Aussi Moriliré ne perdit pas son temps en dénégations inutiles. Il expliqua qu'il avait dû retourner au précédent campement où il avait oublié les cartes du capitaine Marcenay. Ce dernier le tança vertement, et l'incident fut clos.

Je ne vous en aurais même pas parlé, si Saint-Bérain, avec sa fantaisie habituelle, n'avait essayé de le grossir en le dénaturant. Souffrant d'insomnie cette nuit-là, il avait, paraît-il, assisté au retour de notre guide. Or, n'est-il pas allé dire en grand mystère, au capitaine Marcenay, que Moriliré revenait non de l'ouest, d'où nous arrivions nous-mêmes, mais de l'est, c'est-à-dire du côté de Kankan où nous allions, qu'il ne pouvait, par conséquent, avoir été chercher un objet oublié, et que, par suite, il avait menti.

Sorti de toute autre source, un tel renseignement mériterait peut-être d’être tenu en considération, mais venant de Saint-Bérain!… Saint-Bérain est si distrait qu’il aura perdu le nord.

Revenons à nos moutons. Je vous disais donc que l’autre fait avait Kankan pour théâtre. Pendant que nous y errions, Mlle Mornas, M. Barsac, Saint-Bérain et moi, sous la conduite de Tchoumouki et de Moriliré…

Mais je m’aperçois que j’ai oublié d’éclairer ma lanterne, et qu’il convient de prendre les choses d’un peu plus loin.

Sachez donc que, les jours précédents, Moriliré n’avait cessé de nous importuner, les uns après les autres, en nous vantant les mérites d’un certain griot, plus spécialement un kéniélala (qui prédit l’avenir), domicilié à Kankan. À l’entendre, ce kéniélala posséderait une “double vue” étonnante, et, à maintes reprises, il nous avait pressés d’en faire personnellement l’expérience. Inutile de dire que, sans nous concerter, nous l’avions envoyé promener à l’unanimité. Nous ne sommes pas venus au coeur de l’Afrique pour consulter des somnambules plus ou moins extralucides.

Mais, tandis que nous nous promenons à travers Kankan sous leur direction, voilà que Moriliré et Tchoumouki s’arrêtent à deux pas d’une case, qui d’ailleurs n’offre rien de particulier. Par un hasard que je les soupçonne fort d’avoir aidé, il paraît que nous sommes précisément devant la demeure du fameux kéniélala qu’ils nous ont tant vanté. De nouveau, ils nous conseillent de lui rendre visite. De nouveau, nous refusons. Mais ils ne se tiennent pas pour battus et ils recommencent imperturbablement l’éloge du vénérable sorcier.

Qu’est-ce que ça peut bien faire à Moriliré ou à son camarade Tchoumouki que nous allions chez leur kéniélala? Les moeurs du pays seraient-elles à ce point policées que nos deux gaillards eussent une “commission” sur la recette de leur phénomène, et seraient-ils chargés de lui racoler des clients, comme les gondoliers de Venise en racolent pour les fabricants de verrerie et de dentelle? Voilà qui donnerait raison à M. Barsac!

Les deux compères ne se découragent pas. Ils insistent, insistent tellement que nous cédons, ne serait-ce que pour avoir la paix. Après tout, nous pouvons bien leur faire ce plaisir, et s’ils y gagnent quelques cauries, tant mieux pour eux.

Nous entrons dans une case d’une abominable saleté, et où ne pénètre qu’une lumière très atténuée. Le kéniélala est debout au milieu de la pièce. Après s’être tapé pendant cinq minutes sur la cuisse en nous disant Ini-tili, ce qui veut dire “bon midi” — il est cette heure-là, en effet — il s’accroupit sur une natte et nous invite à l’imiter.

Il commence par faire devant lui un tas de sable très fin, qu’il étale, d’un seul coup, en éventail, à l’aide d’un petit balai. Il nous demande ensuite une douzaine de noix de kola, moitié rouges, moitié blanches, qu’il fait passer vivement au-dessus du sable en marmottant des paroles incompréhensibles, puis, rangeant les fruits sur le sable suivant diverses figures, cercles, carrés, losanges, rectangles, triangles, etc. il fait des signes bizarres au-dessus d’eux comme pour les bénir. Enfin, il les ramasse précieusement, et tend sa main sale dans laquelle nous déposons le prix de la consultation.

Nous n’avons plus qu’à l’interroger. Il est inspiré. Il parlera.

Nous lui posons, à tour de rôle, quelques questions, qu’il écoute en silence. Il donnera toutes les réponses à la fois, nous annonce-t-il. Quand nous avons fini de parler, il parle aussitôt à son tour, avec une grande volubilité, très vivement, en homme sûr de ce qu'il avance. Pas gaies, les prédictions de notre magicien! Si nous avions la foi — qui nous manque heureusement — nous sortirions de son officine pleins de soucis et d'inquiétudes.

C'est par moi qu'il commence, par moi qui me suis enquis du sort réservé à ce que j'ai de plus cher au monde, c'est-à-dire aux articles que je vous envoie.

— Bientôt, me dit-il dans un charabia que je traduis en français clair, personne n'aura plus de tes nouvelles.

Voilà bien ma chance! Mais enfin, le sorcier a dit: bientôt. Je peux donc être tranquille pour la présente lettre. Le kéniélala passe à Saint-Bérain.

— Tu recevras, lui prédit-il, une blessure qui t'empêchera de t'asseoir.

Je pense aux hameçons. Il retarde, le vieux farceur. Il s'égare dans le passé, dont Moriliré et Tchoumouki n'ont sans doute pas manqué d'illuminer les ténèbres.

C'est maintenant le tour de Mlle Mornas.

— C'est au coeur que tu seras frappée, prononce le kéniélala.

Eh! eh! pas si bête! Remarquez qu'il n'a pas précisé. La blessure sera-t-elle physique ou morale? Moi, je penche pour la seconde hypothèse, et je soupçonne fort nos deux guides de s'être livrés à quelque “potin”. Mlle Mornas a sûrement interprété la prophétie comme moi, car elle a rougi. Parions qu'elle pense au capitaine Marcenay.

Mais notre magicien s’est tu, puis il a regardé M. Barsac d’un air menaçant. Il est clair que nous en sommes à la prédiction la plus importante. Il vaticine:

— Au-delà de Sikasso, je vois des Blancs. C’est pour vous tous l’esclavage ou la mort.

Il en a de gaies, le gros père.

— Des Blancs!… répète Mlle Mornas. Vous voulez dire: des Noirs.

— J’ai dit: des Blancs, affirme solennellement le kéniélala, qui singe l’inspiration de la manière la plus amusante. Ne dépassez pas Sikasso. Sinon, l’esclavage ou la mort.

Bien entendu, nous prîmes l’avis en plaisantant. À qui ce diseur de bonne aventure ferait-il croire qu’il peut exister en territoire français une troupe de Blancs assez nombreuse pour mettre en péril une colonne de l’importance de la nôtre? Au dîner, le soir, on s’amusa de cette histoire, même le craintif M. Baudrières, après quoi on n’y pensa plus.

Mais j’y pensais de nouveau, moi, le soir, en me couchant. J’y pensais très sérieusement, et, finalement, j’aboutis à des conclusions qui… que… Enfin, jugez vous-même.

Posons d’abord les termes du problème.

Il existe deux faits et demi.

Le demi-fait, c’est l’absence de Moriliré à Timbo et, lors de la dernière halte, avant Kankan.

Les deux faits sont l’empoisonnement au doung-kono et la sinistre prédiction du sorcier nègre.

Cela posé, raisonnons.

Premier fait. Est-il croyable que le chef d’un infime village ait conçu le projet insensé de s’attaquer à une région de la Sénégambie depuis longtemps occupée par nos troupes, à trente-cinq kilomètres de Timbo, où un important poste français tient garnison? Non, ce n’est pas croyable. C’est au contraire inadmissible, absolument inadmissible.

Deuxième fait. Est-il croyable qu’un vieux nègre stupide et ignorant ait le pouvoir de lire dans l’avenir? Non, il n’a pas ce pouvoir, c’est absolument certain.

Or, l’incident du doung-kono est tout aussi certain, ou, du moins, puisqu’il est avéré pour moi qu’un tel projet n’a jamais pu être conçu, on s’est arrangé de manière à nous faire croire à sa réalité.

Et, de même, il est certain que le kêniélala, qui, livré à lui-même, eût parlé au hasard, et nous eût dit tout autre chose, n’a pas dit, en fait, autre chose, mais s’est obstiné à nous prédire l’esclavage ou la mort au-delà de Sikasso.

La conclusion s’impose: on a voulu nous effrayer.

Qui? Pourquoi? me demandez-vous.

Qui? Je n’en sais rien.

Pourquoi? Dans le but de nous faire renoncer à notre voyage. Nous gênons quelqu’un, et ce quelqu’un ne veut pas que nous dépassions Sikasso.

Quant au demi-fait Moriliré, ou il ne signifie rien, ou, si Saint-Bérain n’a pas été aussi distrait que de coutume, Moriliré est complice de ceux qui tentent d’arrêter notre marche. Son insistance à nous conduire chez le kêniélala le rend déjà très suspect, et il est à croire qu’il a été, à tout le moins, payé dans ce but. Il conviendra d’élucider ce point.

Telles sont mes conclusions. L’avenir me dira si elles sont ou non fondées.

Qui vivra verra.

Amédée Florence.

Dans la brousse, à une journée de marche de Kankan, 26 décembre. — J’ajoute ce post-scriptum à ma lettre d’avant-hier, que Tchoumouki se charge de vous faire parvenir.

Ce qui nous est arrivé cette nuit est extraordinaire. Je vous le signale sans même essayer de l’expliquer.

Nous avons quitté Kankan hier matin, 25 décembre, et, après deux fortes étapes d’une trentaine de kilomètres au total, nous avons campé le soir en rase campagne. Le pays est peu peuplé. Le dernier village traversé, Diangana, est à près de vingt kilomètres en arrière, et cinquante kilomètres nous séparent du prochain, Sikoro.

À l’heure habituelle, le camp dormait.

Au milieu de la nuit, nous avons été réveillés tout à coup par un bruit étrange, que nul de nous ne put expliquer d’une manière plausible. C’était comme un ronflement colossal, analogue à celui d’une machine à vapeur, ou, plus exactement, au bourdonnement d’insectes, mais d’insectes gigantesques, d’insectes qui auraient une taille d’éléphants. D’après les renseignements donnés par les sentinelles, ce bruit insolite avait commencé dans la direction de l'ouest. D'abord très faible, il avait augmenté peu à peu d'intensité. Au moment où nous sortons de nos tentes, il atteint son maximum. Le plus singulier, c'est qu'il nous vient d'en haut, de l'air, du ciel. La cause qui le produit est juste au-dessus de nous. Mais quelle est-elle?

Nous écarquillons nos yeux en vain. Impossible de rien voir. De gros nuages masquent la lune, et la nuit est noire comme de l'encre.

Pendant que nous nous épuisons inutilement à percer les ténèbres, le ronflement s'éloigne dans l'est, diminue, meurt. Mais, avant qu'il ne soit complètement éteint, nous en percevons un deuxième qui nous arrive de l'ouest. Comme le premier, ce ronflement grandit, atteint son maximum, diminue et cesse, en s'éloignant du côté de l'est.

Le camp semble frappé de terreur. Tous les Noirs ont le visage contre terre. Quant aux Européens, ils se sont groupés autour du capitaine Marcenay. Avec eux, j'aperçois Tchoumouki et Tongané, qui, à force de vivre parmi les Blancs, ont acquis un peu de leur fermeté d'âme. Par contre, je ne peux découvrir Moriliré. Sans doute est-il à plat ventre quelque part avec ceux de sa couleur.

Par cinq fois, le terrifiant ronflement naît, grandit et s'éteint. Puis la nuit reprend son calme habituel et s'achève paisiblement.

Au matin, c'est toute une affaire que de reformer la colonne. Les nègres ont peur et se refusent obstinément à partir. Le capitaine Marcenay finit toutefois par les mettre à la raison. Il leur montre le soleil qui se lève dans un ciel sans nuages. À coup sûr, rien d'anormal ne se passe dans l'air, en ce moment.

Enfin nous partons avec trois heures de retard.

Le phénomène de cette nuit fait, bien entendu, l’objet de toutes les conversations, mais personne ne peut réussir à l’expliquer. Peu à peu, cependant, on commence à parler d’autre chose, quand, à deux kilomètres environ du campement que nous venons de quitter, le capitaine Marcenay, qui marche en tête, constate que le sol est creusé par des ornières longues d’une cinquantaine de mètres, et orientées de l’ouest à l’est. Ces ornières, profondes de dix centimètres environ du côté ouest, s’effacent insensiblement du côté est. Elles sont au nombre de dix réunies en cinq groupes de deux.

Ont-elles un rapport quelconque avec le phénomène de cette nuit? On est d’abord tenté de répondre: non.

Et pourtant il y a cette direction commune de l’ouest à l’est; il y a ces nombres semblables: cinq groupes d’ornières, cinq ronflements successifs…

Alors?…

Alors, je ne sais pas.

Amédée Florence.

CHAPITRE 7

À Sikasso

La mission Barsac parvint le 12 janvier à Sikasso. Elle avait donc parcouru en moins de six semaines, soit à raison de vingt-cinq kilomètres par jour en moyenne, les onze cents kilomètres séparant de la côte cette ancienne capitale du Kénédougou, devenue par la suite la dernière forteresse de Samory.

L'Expansion française ayant cessé, comme on l'a dit, de recevoir les articles d'Amédée Florence, après le troisième, envoyé par celui-ci le surlendemain de son départ de Kankan, on n'aurait, à dater de ce jour, aucun renseignement touchant la marche de la mission, sans le carnet sur lequel l'habile reporter consignait au jour le jour ses remarques et observations. Ce carnet, l'auteur du présent récit l'a sous les yeux et ne manquera pas d'y faire, le cas échéant, de larges emprunts.

De Kankan à Sikasso, le voyage paraît avoir été monotone et sans intérêt. Outre quelques plaisanteries à propos des distractions de Saint-Bérain et la relation minutieuse des petits incidents journaliers, incidents dont trop d'exemples ont été donnés au lecteur pour qu'il soit utile d'en citer d'autres, Amédée Florence se borne à décrire la route, plate jusqu'à Tiola, très accidentée à partir de cette bourgade, et à constater brièvement que Tchoumouki, continuant à fuir la compagnie de son camarade Tongané, paraît se lier avec le guide de tête Moriliré. Il ne fait, d'ailleurs, à ce sujet, aucune réflexion, et vraiment il n'y avait pas lieu d'en faire, l'état des relations entre ces trois nègres n’étant pas d’une gravité telle que ce problème dût retenir son attention.

Du silence d’Amédée Florence, on doit conclure qu’il ne s’était rien passé de plus important. Par conséquent, ainsi qu’on pouvait s’y attendre, aucune des prédictions du kéniélala n’avait reçu le plus petit commencement d’exécution: Amédée Florence continuait à rédiger ses articles et à les remettre à Tchoumouki, qui en garantissait toujours la bonne arrivée en Europe, et, si, pour une raison ou une autre, cette promesse n’était plus tenue, le reporter n’en savait rien; Saint-Bérain pouvait toujours enfourcher son cheval, et, de Jane Mornas — nous lui laisserons le pseudonyme qu’elle a choisi — le coeur n’avait reçu aucune blessure, ou, du moins, aucune blessure visible. Quant à une blessure morale, il semblerait résulter, au contraire, de quelques mots écrits par Amédée Florence, qu’il considérait la troisième prédiction comme plus près que les autres de se réaliser, à la condition qu’on la prît dans son sens figuré. Il consacre, en effet, deux lignes, d’ailleurs approbatives et sympathiques, à l’amitié de plus en plus intime de Jane Mornas et du capitaine Marcenay, et au plaisir grandissant que les deux jeunes gens semblaient y trouver.

En ce qui concerne la quatrième prédiction, la plus sérieuse et la plus sinistre, rien, absolument rien n’indique qu’un fait quelconque fût venu la confirmer. La mission n’était ni détruite, ni réduite en esclavage, elle s’avançait paisiblement sous la garde des deux cents sabres du capitaine Marcenay, ses animaux étaient en bonne santé, et ses bagages, en bon état, n’avaient été mouillés au passage des rivières que le minimum inévitable avec les nègres.

Pour juste qu’il lui eût paru au moment où il l’avait conçu, le raisonnement tenu par Amédée Florence à la fin de son article daté de Kankan n’avait pas davantage été confirmé par les événements ultérieurs. Nul ne s’était plus risqué à un attentat réel ou simulé contre la colonne, et on n’avait rencontré aucun autre kéniélala pour formuler à nouveau de menaçantes prophéties. Si donc Amédée Florence avait vu juste, et s’il existait quelque part un être qui eût formé le projet absurde d’épouvanter la mission au point de la décider à rétrograder, tout portait à croire qu’on y avait renoncé.

Au surplus, Amédée Florence lui-même n’avait plus, en arrivant à Sikasso, d’opinion très nette sur cette affaire. Les faits qui avaient motivé ses réflexions: tentative plus ou moins véritable d’empoisonnement au doung-kono et sombres prédictions du sorcier nègre, avaient perdu de leur valeur en devenant plus anciens. Bien qu’on ne fût pas encore à Sikasso et que le danger annoncé dût commencer seulement au-delà de cette ancienne capitale, il s’était rassuré de jour, tant il lui paraissait insensé d’admettre que ces nègres inoffensifs qu’on croisait de temps à autre se risquassent à attaquer une importante troupe de soldats réguliers. Une telle aventure n’aurait pas eu de précédent, en l’absence d’un tyran, tel que Samory, contraignant par la violence ces populations puériles à se muer en guerriers.

Toutefois, Amédée Florence se rassurait peut-être un peu trop, en basant sa tranquillité uniquement sur les hommes du capitaine Marcenay, puisque, à Sikasso précisément, cette force armée allait être réduite de moitié.

C’est à Sikasso, on ne l’a sans doute pas oublié, que la mission Barsac devait se dédoubler. Tandis qu’une première fraction, dirigée par Barsac en personne, allait pousser jusqu’au Niger, en passant par Ouagadougou, capitale du Mossi, et revenir à l’océan par le Borgou et le Dahomey, la seconde, sous la direction de Baudrières, descendrait tout de suite au sud et se dirigerait presque en ligne directe sur Grand-Bassam. Bien entendu, chacune de ces fractions de la mission ayant droit à une protection égale, l’escorte serait, par conséquent, réduite à une centaine d’hommes de part et d’autre.

Au moment où l’expédition, toujours entière, arrivait à Sikasso, il n’y avait pas très longtemps que cette forteresse de Samory, emportée d’assaut dans les premiers mois de 1898 par le colonel Audéoud, appartenait à la France. Aux environs, le pays se ressentait encore des pillages incessants que lui avait fait subir ce sinistre marchand d’esclaves décoré par nous-mêmes, on ne sait trop pourquoi, du nom pompeux d’Almany. De tous côtés, ce n’étaient que villages brûlés ou dévastés, et la misère était affreuse.

Quant à la ville même — s’il est permis d’appliquer cette expression à une cité noire — elle était restée à peu près dans l’état où l’avait trouvée le colonel Audéoud. C’était, et c’est encore, d’ailleurs, un simple groupement de plusieurs villages distincts, que séparent des champs cultivés et que réunit l’enceinte ordinaire des agglomérations de ces contrées, un tata, qui, à Sikasso, ne mesure pas moins de six mètres de hauteur et de huit mètres d’épaisseur à la base.

À l’intérieur de ce tata, l’administration française avait couru au plus pressé, et, jusqu’alors, outre les plus urgents travaux de nettoyage, elle n’avait guère élevé que les constructions nécessaires au logement des troupes formant la garnison.

Cette garnison comprenait, à cette époque, trois compagnies, une d’infanterie coloniale et deux de tirailleurs sénégalais, ces dernières encadrées par des officiers et des sous-officiers français. On juge quelle joie fut l’arrivée de la mission Barsac pour ces jeunes gens depuis si longtemps séparés de leurs pareils. Cette joie fut portée au comble par la présence, à la tête de l’escorte, du capitaine Marcenay, qui retrouva dans ce poste lointain plusieurs de ses meilleurs camarades, et elle devint du délire, quand on sut qu’une femme blanche faisait partie de l’expédition.

On ménagea à ces visiteurs de marque une entrée solennelle. Drapeaux claquant au vent, clairons sonnant, tambours battant, arcs de triomphe en feuillage, acclamations des nègres habilement massés, rien n’y manqua, pas même un discours de Barsac.

Le soir, les officiers offrirent un punch magnifique, où ne cessa de régner la plus franche gaieté. Ce fut Jane Mornas qui présida la fête. On s’imagine le succès qu’elle obtint. On l’entourait, on se pressait autour d’elle. Toute cette ardente jeunesse eût joyeusement combattu pour les beaux yeux de cette Blanche, qui venait apporter dans son exil un rayon de soleil.

Mais Jane Mornas ne se laissa pas griser par le succès. Parmi tous ces hommages, ce furent ceux dont le capitaine Marcenay ne se montra pas avare qui trouvèrent le plus aisément le chemin de son coeur.

Cette préférence, elle la manifesta même, sans le savoir, avec une telle innocence, que tout le monde s’en aperçut bientôt. Aussitôt, les camarades de Marcenay eurent, en vrais Français, la délicatesse de mettre progressivement une sourdine à leur enthousiasme, et, l’un après l’autre, ils adressèrent à l’heureux capitaine de discrètes félicitations, que celui-ci se défendit vainement de mériter.

Marcenay détournait les yeux, niait, assurait qu’il ne comprenait pas ce qu’on voulait lui dire. Il comprenait très bien, au contraire, et nageait en plein bonheur. Tous les rêves lui étaient donc permis, puisque les sentiments de Jane Mornas étaient si évidents qu’il était le seul à ne pas les connaître.

C’est ainsi que l’amour qu’éprouvaient l’un pour l’autre Jane Mornas et Marcenay leur fut révélé à eux-mêmes.

Le lendemain, on commença à s’occuper de la manière dont la mission allait être divisée, et, tout de suite, on se heurta à des difficultés imprévues.

Pour les Européens, rien de plus simple. Autour de Baudrières se groupèrent MM. Heyrieux et Quirieu, conformément à leurs instructions, et M. Tassin, conformément à ses préférences personnelles. À Barsac se réunirent M. Poncin et le docteur Châtonnay. Amédée Florence se joignit à cette fraction, dont l’itinéraire plus étendu était, par conséquent, susceptible de donner matière à plus ample copie.

Quant au capitaine Marcenay, il avait ordre d’affecter à l’escorte de Baudrières cent de ses hommes sous le commandement d’un lieutenant détaché de la garnison de Sikasso et de se joindre personnellement à la fraction Barsac avec les cent autres. Décidé, cela va de soi, à la plus stricte obéissance, il n’en était pas moins très troublé, et il ne se demandait pas sans une certaine angoisse quel parti allaient adopter Jane Mornas et Saint-Bérain.

Quel soupir de soulagement, quand il entendit la jeune fille, interrogée à ce sujet, déclarer qu’elle accompagnerait Barsac! Mais quel autre soupir, de déception celui-ci, succéda bientôt au premier, lorsque Jane ajouta qu’elle et Saint-Bérain ne resteraient que peu de jours avec l’honorable député du Midi, et que leur intention était de le quitter au bout de quelques étapes, afin de continuer leur exploration personnelle plus au nord.

Parmi les officiers, ce fut un tollé général. Il n’y eut personne qui ne blâmât la jeune fille d’avoir formé un projet aussi imprudent. Eh quoi! seule, sans escorte, elle voulait se risquer dans des régions presque complètement inconnues et dans lesquelles les armes françaises n'avaient jamais pénétré? On lui représenta qu'un tel voyage était irréalisable, qu'elle y risquait sa vie, ou que, tout au moins, les chefs des villages s'opposeraient à son passage.

Rien n'y fit, Jane Mornas demeura inébranlable, et nul, pas même le capitaine Marcenay, n'eut sur elle la moindre influence.

— Vous perdez votre temps, déclara-t-elle en riant. Vous n'arriverez, tout au plus, qu'à épouvanter mon oncle, qui roule là-bas de gros yeux effarés.

— Moi!!… protesta Agénor ainsi pris à partie.

— Oui, vous, insista Jane Mornas. Vous mourez de peur, c'est visible. Vous laisseriez-vous donc influencer par tous ces prophètes de malheur?

— Moi!… répéta le pauvre Saint-Bérain.

— Pourquoi auriez-vous peur? demanda Jane d'un air superbe. Je serai avec vous, mon neveu.

— Mais je n'ai pas peur! protesta Saint-Bérain, furieux d'être le point de mire de tous les regards.

Jane Mornas se retourna contre ses contradicteurs.

— Quant à moi, dit-elle, j'ai quitté l'Europe dans l'idée de traverser le Hombori et d'atteindre le Niger au sommet de sa boucle, à Gao. Je traverserai le Hombori et j'atteindrai le Niger à Gao.

— Et les Touaregs Aouelimmiden, qui, dans cette région, occupent les deux rives du Niger?

— Je me moque des Touaregs, répliqua Jane Mornas, et je passerai malgré eux.

— Mais pourquoi Gao plutôt que tout autre point? Quel motif si puissant avez-vous, puisque vous voyagez pour votre plaisir, d’aller là plutôt qu’ailleurs?

— Mon caprice, répondit Jane Mornas.

Le mot, que les officiers s’accordèrent à trouver d’allure crâne et, d’après eux, bien française, fut très applaudi.

— C’est, en effet, un puissant motif, proclama le commandant Vergèze. Le caprice d’une jolie femme est l’ultima ratio, ce n’est pas nous qui le contesterons.

La division du personnel dirigeant, tant officiel qu’officieux, de la mission étant terminée, il restait à répartir équitablement le personnel subalterne, ce qui semblait facile.

Tout d’abord les dix ânes, les cinq âniers et les dix porteurs appartenant en propre à Jane Mornas et à Saint-Bérain suivraient naturellement le sort de ceux qui les avaient engagés. Quant aux autres porteurs et conducteurs, et au surplus des bêtes de somme, on en ferait deux groupes inégaux, le plus nombreux devant être attribué à celle des deux missions ayant à effectuer le plus long parcours, c’est-à-dire à Barsac, à qui serait également laissé le concours du guide Moriliré. On se mit d’accord, sans peine, sur ces divers points.

Mais ce fut quand il s’agit de réaliser cette combinaison que les difficultés commencèrent.

Aux premiers mots qui lui furent dits à ce sujet, Moriliré opposa un refus catégorique, dont aucun argument ne put avoir raison. D'après lui, on ne l'avait engagé que jusqu'à Sikasso, et rien au monde ne le ferait aller plus loin. On insista en vain. En vain on employa tous les moyens, y compris l'intimidation, tout ce qu'on réussit à obtenir, ce fut qu'il accompagnerait la mission Baudrières. Quant à aller dans l'Est avec Barsac, il fut impossible de l'y décider.

Ce point à peine réglé, on éprouva des difficultés semblables avec les âniers et les porteurs. À l'exception de ceux directement engagés par Jane Mornas et son neveu, ils se refusèrent unanimement à dépasser Sikasso. Prières, promesses, menaces, tout fut inutile. On se heurtait contre une muraille, et il fallut renoncer à les convaincre.

Force fut donc de se mettre en quête d'un nouveau guide et d'autres serviteurs. On n'eut pas grand-peine à réunir la majeure partie de ces derniers, mais plusieurs jours s'écoulèrent avant qu'on eût trouvé un indigène inspirant une suffisante confiance. On le découvrit enfin. C'était un nègre de trente-cinq à quarante ans, du nom de Bala Konéré, originaire de Niélé, agglomération du Follona située sur l'itinéraire de Baudrières, mais qui n'était pas sans avoir fait quelques pointes dans le Mossi. Ce Bala Konéré fut engagé.

Aussitôt, brusque transformation de Moriliré. Celui-ci, qui avait assisté avec indifférence, un peu narquoisement même, semblait-il, aux recherches d'abord infructueuses de ses chefs, changea tout à coup d'attitude dès que ces recherches furent couronnées de succès. Il vint trouver Barsac, lui demanda humblement pardon de son entêtement, qu'il mit sur le compte de la peur, et s'offrit à conduire la mission jusqu'à Ouagadougou et jusqu'au Dahomey, comme il s'y était d'abord engagé. En même temps, toute résistance disparaissait parmi les anciens porteurs et âniers, qui se déclaraient prêts à suivre leur mantoba (guide) où il plairait à celui-ci de les mener, à la seule condition que ce guide fût Moriliré.

Cette subite unanimité prouvait à l'évidence que ledit Moriliré devait être tenu pour seul responsable de cette grève inattendue, et l'on eut un instant la pensée de décliner ses offres tardives. Il y avait cependant un tel intérêt à s'assurer le concours d'un personnel éprouvé et celui d'un guide né dans les pays mêmes que l'on allait traverser, qu'on se résigna finalement à fermer les yeux.

Il fut donc entendu que Bala Konéré serait attribué à Baudrières, avec une faible partie de l'ancien personnel, à laquelle on adjoignit quelques-uns des nouveaux porteurs, et que Barsac conserverait Moriliré et la majeure partie des porteurs et âniers primitifs.

Toutes ces hésitations, tous ces changements n'avaient pas laissé de prendre un temps considérable. Entrés ensemble à Sikasso le 12 janvier, ce fut seulement le 21 que Barsac et Baudrières purent le quitter séparément.

Ce matin-là, dès l'aube, les compagnies furent de nouveau sous les armes, et s'alignèrent sous le commandement de leurs officiers en tenue de parade, de nouveau les drapeaux claquèrent au vent, de nouveau les clairons sonnèrent aux champs, et la mission Barsac la première, la mission Baudrières ensuite, défilèrent entre une double haie de soldats. Puis la troupe, s'ébranlant derrière eux, leur fit cortège jusqu'à l'enceinte.

Hors du tata, ce fut l'échange des adieux. Les officiers de la garnison exprimèrent aux uns et aux autres leurs souhaits d'heureux voyage, et, non sans une vive émotion, Barsac et Baudrières se serrèrent la main.

Enfin, tandis que les troupes regagnaient leurs casernements, les deux convois s’ébranlèrent et se mirent en route, chacun de son côté.

Baudrières, ceux qui l’accompagnaient et leurs cent hommes d’escorte s’éloignèrent dans la direction du sud. Barsac, M. Poncin, le docteur Châtonnay, Amédée Florence, Jane Mornas et Saint-Bérain, également encadrés par cent cavaliers commandés par le capitaine Marcenay, tournèrent à gauche et disparurent dans la direction de l’est.

Or, à ces deux colonnes presque identiques étaient réservées des destinées très différentes. Si la première ne devait rencontrer sur son chemin aucun danger véritable, ni même aucune difficulté sérieuse, il n’allait pas en être ainsi pour la seconde. Tandis que Baudrières, accomplissant paisiblement sa mission, allait réunir sans peine les éléments du rapport qu’il s’était engagé à soumettre à la Chambre, et arriver finalement à Grand-Bassan à peu près dans les délais prévus, il était écrit que Barsac et ses amis seraient mêlés à l’aventure la plus terrible, la plus extraordinaire qui se puisse imaginer. Ainsi en avait décidé le sort.

C’est pourquoi, négligeant les incidents médiocres qui ont jalonné la marche tranquille de Baudrières, ce récit s’attachera désormais exclusivement à cette fraction de la mission qui s’éloigne dans l’Est, et qui, sous la conduite du guide Moriliré, s’enfonce toujours davantage dans la profondeur du pays noir.

CHAPITRE 8

Moriliré

(Carnet de notes d’Amédée Florence.)

22 janvier. — Voici deux jours que nous avons quitté Sikasso, et j’ai déjà l’impression qu’il y a quelque chose qui ne va plus. Ce n’est qu’une impression, je le répète, mais il me semble que l’esprit de nos serviteurs est moins bon, que les âniers, par exemple, mettent encore moins d’ardeur, s’il est possible, à presser le pas des ânes, que les porteurs se fatiguent plus vite et réclament de plus fréquents repos. Tout cela n’existe peut-être que dans mon imagination, et peut-être suis-je influencé à mon insu par les prédictions du kéniélala de Kankan. Il n’est pas impossible que ces prédictions, que j’avais presque oubliées, aient repris une certaine valeur depuis que nous avons dépassé Sikasso et que l’escorte a été réduite de moitié.

Aurais-je donc peur? Que non pas! Ou plutôt, si j’ai peur, c’est que cet imbécile de kéniélala, au lieu de répéter bêtement sa leçon, n’ait pas eu réellement le don de seconde vue. Qu’est-ce que je demande, moi? Des aventures, des aventures, et encore des aventures, que je transformerai en bonne copie, comme c’est mon métier. Or, des aventures, des vraies, j’en suis à les attendre.

23 janvier. — Je persiste à penser que nous allons comme un convoi de tortues. Il est vrai que la nature du terrain ne se prête pas à une marche rapide. Ce ne sont que montées et descentes. Malgré tout, la mauvaise volonté de nos nègres me paraît certaine.

24 janvier. — Qu’est-ce que je disais? Nous arrivons ce soir à Kafélé. Nous avons mis quatre jours à faire une cinquantaine de kilomètres. Douze kilomètres par jour, ce n’est pas mal, comme record.

31 janvier. — Eh bien! On l’a battu, ce record! Nous avons employé six jours pour faire cinquante autres kilomètres — total: cent kilomètres en dix jours! — et nous voici dans une petite villégiature du nom de Kokoro. Je vous prie de croire que je n’y louerai pas une villa pour passer l’été au bord de la mer. Quel trou!

Après avoir laissé en arrière, il y a trois jours, un village appelé Ngana — où diable vont-ils chercher ces noms-là? — nous avons encore gravi une dernière côte assez raide, puis nous sommes définitivement descendus dans la vallée, que nous suivons pour l’instant. Montagnes dans l’Ouest, le Nord et le Sud. Devant nous, vers l’est, la plaine.

Pour comble de malheur, nous allons être retenus un certain temps à Kokoro. Ce n’est pas que nous y soyons prisonniers. Au contraire, le chef du village, un certain Pintié-Ba, est notre ami tout à fait intime. Mais…

Mais je réfléchis que c’est un axiome littéraire de débuter par le plus ennuyeux. Je jette donc rapidement, à titre de mémorandum, quelques notes ethnographiques, avant de continuer mon histoire.

À Kokoro commence le pays des Bobos. Si le nom est plutôt drôle, les habitants le sont moins. De simples brutes.

Léger crayon de ces brutes:

Les hommes, en général assez bien faits, sont absolument nus. Les vieillards portent entre les jambes une bande d’étoffe appelée bila. Les vieilles femmes remplacent le bila par un bouquet de feuilles dans le bas du dos; c’est plus coquet. Quelques jeunes gens, ceux qui donnent le ton de la mode, ont adopté le bila, en l’ornant, par-derrière, d’une queue en cotonnade terminée par une petite houppe. Voilà le suprême du genre! Ajoutez à ce simple vêtement un collier de trois rangs de cauries, des jarretières, une feuille de palmier autour des chevilles, des boucles d’oreilles en fer et une flèche en corne ou un roseau traversant le nez, et vous aurez le type de l’élégant chez les Bobos.

Quant aux femmes, elles sont hideuses avec leurs bustes trop longs sur des jambes trop courtes, leur ventre proéminent pointu au nombril, et leur grosse lèvre inférieure traversée par une corne et un rouleau de feuilles de l’épaisseur d’une bougie. Il faut voir ça!

Quant aux armes: des sagaies et quelques fusils à pierre. Certains ont, en plus, un petit fouet auquel sont suspendus des gris-gris.

Ces gaillards-là ne sont pas difficiles sur l’article nourriture. Ils mangent sans répugnance de véritables charognes en putréfaction. Pouah! Et leur mentalité est à l’avenant. Qu’on en juge d’après la manière dont nous sommes entrés en relation.

Cette ingénieuse transition m’amène tout naturellement à reprendre le fil de mon histoire.

La scène est à Kokoro, hier, 30 janvier. Il fait nuit. Au moment où nous arrivons à proximité du village, nous nous heurtons à une foule hurlante de nègres — nous en comptons au moins huit cents à la lumière des torches — qui ne paraissent pas animés des intentions les plus conciliantes. C’est la première fois que nous avons une réception de ce genre. Aussi nous arrêtons-nous un peu surpris.

Surpris, mais pas très inquiets. Tous ces lascars-là ont beau brandir leurs armes, il est clair qu'avec une décharge de mousqueterie, on balaierait sans peine tout ce joli monde. Le capitaine Marcenay donne un ordre. Ses hommes prennent en main leurs fusils, dont ils débouclent les étuis. Toutefois, ils ne les sortent pas. Le capitaine hésite, en effet. Tirer sur son prochain est toujours une chose grave, même quand ce prochain est un Bobo. Jusqu'ici, la poudre est restée muette, et on voudrait bien ne pas la faire parler.

Les choses en sont là, quand le cheval de Saint-Bérain, effrayé par les clameurs, fait une pointe irrésistible et pare des quatre pieds. Désarçonné, Saint-Bérain pique une tête magistrale et tombe en plein dans le tas des nègres.

Ceux-ci poussent des hurlements féroces, et se précipitent sur notre malheureux ami, quand…

… quand Mlle Mornas lance à toute bride son cheval parmi les Noirs. Aussitôt, l'attention se détourne de Saint-Bérain. On entoure la courageuse écuyère. Vingt sagaies sont dirigées contre elle…

— Manto! crie-t-elle à ses agresseurs. Ntéa bé souba. (Silence! Je suis sorcière.)

Tout en parlant, elle tire de l'arçon de sa selle une lampe électrique de poche qui s'y trouvait par bonheur, et l'allume, puis l'éteint alternativement, pour bien montrer qu'elle dispose du feu et des éclairs.

À cette vue, les hurlements s'apaisent, et il se fait autour d'elle un grand cercle respectueux, au milieu duquel s'avance Pintié-Ba, déjà nommé. Il va nécessairement faire un discours. C'est la maladie de tous les gouvernants de la terre. Mais Mlle Mornas lui impose silence. Elle entend courir d’abord au secours de Saint-Bérain, qui n’a pas bougé depuis sa chute et doit être blessé, par conséquent.

Vérification faite par le docteur Châtonnay, qui a pénétré dans le cercle avec la même tranquillité que s’il entrait chez un client, Saint-Bérain est blessé. Il est même couvert de sang. Il est tombé si malencontreusement qu’un silex pointu lui a pratiqué une large entaille un peu plus bas que les reins.

Je songe à cet instant que voici réalisée l’une des prédictions du kéniélala. Tout arrive. Cela me donne bon espoir pour les autres, mais j’ai froid dans le dos en pensant au sort de mes articles.

Cependant le docteur Châtonnay a lavé la plaie. Il prend sa trousse et recoud le blessé, tandis que les nègres le contemplent avec une profonde stupéfaction.

Pendant que l’opération se poursuit, Mlle Mornas, qui est restée à cheval accorde à Pintié-Ba licence de parler. Celui-ci s’approche et lui demande en bambara, ou dans un charabia analogue, pourquoi le toubab (le toubab, c’est Saint-Bérain) les a attaqués avec un fusil. Mlle Mornas nie le fait. Le chef insiste et désigne l’étui que Saint-Bérain porte en bandoulière. On lui explique la vérité. Peine perdue, il faut, pour le convaincre, retirer l’enveloppe, ouvrir l’étui qui réfléchit à la lueur des torches et montrer les lignes que celui-ci contient.

À cette vue, les yeux de Pintié-Ba étincellent de convoitise. Ses mains se tendent vers cet objet brillant. Comme un enfant gâté, il le demande, il le veut, il l’exige. Saint-Bérain refuse avec indignation.

Mlle Mornas, qui voudrait consolider la paix toute récente, insiste en vain. À la fin elle se fâche.

— Mon neveu!… dit-elle sévèrement, en faisant de nouveau jouer sa lampe électrique dans la direction du pêcheur récalcitrant.

Saint-Bérain cède immédiatement et livre l’étui à lignes à Pintié-Ba, qui attribue son succès au pouvoir magique de la lampe électrique et à l’influence de la sorcière.

Quand cet imbécile est en possession de son trésor, c’est du délire. Il danse une gigue endiablée, puis, sur un signe de lui, toutes les armes disparaissent, et Pintié-Ba s’avance au milieu de nous.

Il nous tient un discours par lequel il nous invite, paraît-il, à circuler dans le village autant qu’il nous plaira et ordonne, pour le lendemain, un tam-tam en notre honneur.

Étant donné l’attitude pacifique des Bobos, le capitaine Marcenay, ne voit aucun inconvénient à ce que nous acceptions l’invitation. Le lendemain donc, c’est-à-dire aujourd’hui, au début de l’après-midi, nous rendons visite à nos nouveaux amis, tandis que notre escorte et notre personnel noir restent en dehors du tata.

Ah! mes très chers, quel patelin! Les goûts sont libres, mais, en ce qui me concerne, je préfère les Champs-Élysées.

Nous allons directement au “palais” du dougoutigui. C’est une agglomération de cases située au milieu du village, près du tas central des immondices, ce qui n’est pas pour l’embaumer. Extérieurement, ces cases, construites en pisé, sont badigeonnées avec de la cendre. Mais c’est l’intérieur qu’il faut voir! La cour n’est qu’un bourbier servant de parc à des boeufs et à des moutons. Tout autour, les pièces; il faut descendre pour y pénétrer. Ne l’essayez pas! On y respire une odeur abominable qui prend à la gorge, et on doit lutter avec les chèvres, les poules et autres animaux de basse-cour qui s’y promènent en liberté.

D’après la description du “palais”, il est aisé de concevoir ce que peuvent être les demeures des vulgaires citoyens. Ce sont des antres, où grouillent rats, lézards, mille-pattes et cancrelats, au milieu d’ordures de toute espèce, d’où se dégage une odeur fétide.

Charmant séjour!

C’est dans le “palais” qu’a lieu la réception “officielle”. Elle consiste à faire à Pintié-Ba des cadeaux, d’ailleurs sans valeur, depuis des morceaux d’étoffes jusqu’à des cadenas sans clé, depuis de vieux pistolets à pierre, jusqu’à du fil et des aiguilles.

Littéralement ébloui par ces présents magnifiques, le dougoutigui donne le signal du tam-tam.

Tout d’abord, des musiciens parcoururent le village, en jouant, qui du bodoto, trompe faite en corne d’antilope, qui du bouron, autre trompe en défense d’éléphant, qui encore du tabula, soit, en français, du tambour. Deux hommes portent ce tabala, sur lequel un troisième frappe à tour de bras avec une sorte de massue, dont le nom est tabala kalama. À ce propos, le capitaine Binger fait observer avec raison que kalama a tout l’air de venir de calamus, et que par suite, tabala kalama signifie littéralement: plume à écrire du tambour.

Aux sons de ces différents instruments, les Bobos se réunissent sur la place, et la fête commence.

Une sorte de polichinelle soudanais, le mokho missi kou, fait son entrée et danse avec force grimaces et contorsions. Il est vêtu d’un maillot en étoffe rouge et coiffé d’un bonnet orné de queues de vaches, duquel tombe un morceau d’étoffe qui recouvre son visage. Il porte en bandoulière un sac rempli de ferraille bruyante, et chacun de ses mouvements fait sonner des grelots et des sonnettes attachés à ses poignets et à ses chevilles. Avec de longues queues de vaches, il chatouille agréablement la figure des assistants.

Lorsqu’il a terminé ses exercices qui semblent amuser beaucoup Pintié-Ba et ses administrés, ces derniers, sur un signe du chef, poussent des rugissements de bêtes féroces, ce qui équivaut, j’imagine, à d’unanimes applaudissements.

Le silence rétabli, Pintié-Ba se fait apporter une ombrelle ornée de cauries et d’amulettes, non qu’il en ait besoin, mais parce qu’un dougoutigui n’est rien, s’il n’a, largement ouvert au-dessus de sa tête, le parasol, insigne du pouvoir.

Aussitôt, les danses reprennent. Hommes, femmes, enfants forment le cercle, les griots frappent sur des tabala, et deux danseuses accourent des extrémités opposées de la place. Après trois rapides pirouettes, elles s’élancent l’une contre l’autre, non pas face à face, mais, au contraire, en se tournant le dos, et, parvenues au contact, se heurtent réciproquement le plus fort possible.

À ces deux “danseuses” se succèdent deux autres, et enfin tous les assistants se livrent, en poussant des cris sauvages, à une sorte de quadrille échevelé, auprès duquel notre “chahut” paraîtrait bien terne et bien modeste.

La danse se termine par une procession. Les Bobos défilent devant Pintié-Ba en chantant un choeur accompagné du bruit assourdissant des tabula, des trompes et des flûtes de roseau, dont les sons stridents déchirent les oreilles.

Enfin, c’est l’heure du souper, et alors commence une scène de carnage, une orgie de sang.

On apporte sur la place une douzaine de moutons tués dans les cases. D’un arbre à l’autre, les indigènes tendent de longues cordes et délimitent ainsi un espace carré, au milieu duquel les femmes entassent du bois sec. Puis, armés de couteaux, les nègres dépècent les animaux, et les découpent en lanières que les femmes suspendent aux cordes, tandis que le feu est mis au bûcher. Quand il estime la cuisson suffisante, Pintié-Ba fait un signe, et tous les nègres se ruent sur les quartiers de viande, les saisissent à pleines mains et les déchirent avec leurs dents. Rien ne leur répugne. Le spectacle est horrible.

— Ce sont des cannibales! s’écrie Mlle Mornas, qui est toute pâle.

— Hélas, oui! ma chère enfant, répond le docteur Châtonnay. Mais, si manger est le seul plaisir de ces pauvres êtres, c’est qu’ils ont perpétuellement la même souffrance: la faim.

Écoeurés, nous ne tardâmes pas à regagner nos tentes, tandis que, pour les nègres, la fête se prolongeait fort tard. Elle dura même toute la nuit, ainsi que nous le prouvèrent les vociférations qui arrivaient jusqu’à nous.

2 février. — Nous sommes toujours à Kokoro, où nous retient la blessure de Saint-Bérain. L’oncle-neveu (je l’appelle ainsi définitivement) ne

pourrait se tenir à cheval.

3 février. — Toujours Kokoro. C’est gai!

4 février, 6 heures du matin — Enfin, nous partons!

Même jour, le soir. — Faux départ. Nous sommes encore à Kokoro.

Ce matin, dès l’aube, nous avons pourtant subi les adieux de nos amis les Bobos. (On a les amis qu’on peut.) Tout le village était debout, le dougoutigui en tête, et ce fut une litanie de souhaits. “Que N’yalla (Dieu) vous ramène en bonne santé!” “Qu’il vous donne un bon chemin!” “Qu’il vous donne un bon cheval!” À l’énoncé de ce dernier voeu, Saint-Bérain, dont la blessure est encore sensible, Saint-Bérain a fait la grimace.

Nous nous arrachons à ces démonstrations, et la colonne s’ébranle.

Elle s’ébranle, mais elle n’avance pas. C’est pire qu’avant Kokoro. La mauvaise volonté est criante. À tout instant, un porteur s’arrête, et il faut l’attendre, la charge d’un âne tombe, et il faut la remettre en place. À dix heures, au moment de la halte, on n’a pas fait six kilomètres.

J’admire la patience du capitaine Marcenay. Pas une fois il ne s’est départi du calme le plus parfait. Rien ne le rebute, rien ne le lasse. Il lutte avec une énergie froide et calme contre ce parti pris d’obstruction.

Mais, au moment de repartir pour l’étape du soir, c’est une autre chanson. Moriliré déclare qu’il s’est trompé. On consulte les deux guides de Mlle Mornas. Tchoumouki dit comme Moriliré.

Tongané affirme, au contraire, qu’on est en bonne voie. Nous voilà bien renseignés! Lequel croire?

Après beaucoup d'hésitations, on se rallie à l'avis de la majorité, et l'on revient en arrière. Alors c'est merveille de voir à quel train nous marchons. Les Noirs ne sont plus fatigués, les charges des ânes se sont consolidées toutes seules. En une heure, nous parcourons la distance qui en a exigé quatre en sens contraire, et, avant la nuit, nous reprenons notre campement du matin, près de Kokoro.

6 février. — Hier, 5 février, nous sommes repartis sans trop d'anicroches, et, chose admirable, par le même chemin auquel nous avions renoncé la veille. Moriliré nous déclare, en effet, au réveil, que, toute réflexion faite, c'est le soir et non le matin qu'il s'est trompé! De nouveau, Tchoumouki le soutient. Je suis fort enclin à croire que ces deux moricauds sont de mèche pour se payer notre tête.

Rien de particulier ce jour-là, sauf la mauvaise volonté à laquelle nous commençons à être habitués, mais deux incidents graves aujourd'hui.

Pendant l'étape du matin, un âne tombe tout à coup. On veut le relever. Il est mort. Bien entendu, cette mort peut être naturelle. J'avoue que je songe, cependant, au doung-kono ou à quelque autre saleté du pays.

On ne dit rien. On répartit la charge de l'âne défunt sur ses congénères, et nous reprenons notre marche.

Au départ de l'après-midi, deuxième incident. On constate qu'il manque un porteur. Qu'est-il devenu? Mystère. Le capitaine Marcenay mord sa moustache, je vois bien qu'il est soucieux. Si les nègres nous abandonnent, nous sommes frais. Or, rien de plus contagieux que le microbe de la désertion. Aussi, je m'aperçois que, depuis ce moment, la surveillance est devenue plus étroite. Nous sommes contraints de défiler comme à la parade, et les cavaliers de l'escorte ne permettent plus aucune fantaisie individuelle.

Cette discipline rigoureuse me gêne personnellement; je l’approuve cependant.

À l’arrivée, le soir, autre surprise. On s’aperçoit que plusieurs nègres sont ivres. Qui donc leur a donné à boire?

Le capitaine organise la garde du camp de la manière la plus méticuleuse, puis il va trouver M. Barsac, avec lequel je suis précisément, et l’entretient de la situation, qui va s’aggravant depuis Sikasso. Le docteur Châtonnay, M. Poncin, Mlle Mornas, puis Saint-Bérain, viennent nous rejoindre successivement, si bien que nous tenons, en somme, un vrai conseil de guerre.

Le capitaine expose en quelques mots les faits, dont il attribue la responsabilité à Moriliré. Il propose de soumettre le guide infidèle à un interrogatoire, et d’agir ensuite au besoin par la force. Chaque nègre serait individuellement accompagné d’un tirailleur, qui l’obligerait à marcher, fût-ce sous menace de mort.

M. Barsac n’est pas de cet avis, et Saint-Bérain pas davantage. Interroger Moriliré, c’est lui donner l’éveil, lui montrer qu’il est démasqué. Or, nous ne possédons aucune preuve contre lui, nous sommes même incapables d’imaginer dans quel but il nous trahirait. Moriliré n’aurait qu’à nier, nous ne pourrions rien lui répondre. Quant aux Noirs, quel moyen a-t-on de les contraindre? Que fera-t-on, s’ils se couchent, s’ils opposent seulement la force d’inertie? Les fusiller serait un mauvais moyen de nous assurer leurs services.

On conclut qu’il faut garder le silence, être de plus en plus ferme, tout en s’armant d’une patience invincible, et, par-dessus tout, surveiller soigneusement Moriliré.

C’est très bien, mais une réflexion me vient. Pourquoi s’entête-t-on dans ce voyage? La mission avait pour objet de s’assurer de la mentalité des nègres de la boucle du Niger et de leur degré de civilisation. Eh bien! on la connaît, leur mentalité. Que les populations habitant entre la côte et Kankan, voire, à la rigueur, jusqu’à Tiola ou même Sikasso, soient assez dégrossies pour être dignes de quelques droits politiques, je veux bien le concéder, malgré que ce ne soit pas mon avis. Mais depuis Sikasso?… Ce ne sont pas ces sauvages qui nous entourent, ces Bobos aussi proches de l’animal que de l’homme, qu’on songerait à transformer en électeurs, je suppose. Dès lors, à quoi bon s’obstiner? N’est-il pas évident que, plus on va s’avancer vers l’est, c’est-à-dire plus on va s’éloigner de la mer, moins les naturels auront eu de contacts avec les Européens, et que, par suite, leur vernis de civilisés (?) sera de plus en plus mince?

Ces vérités me paraissent éblouissantes, et je m’étonne que mes compagnons de voyage n’en soient pas, eux aussi, éblouis.

Au fait! peut-être le sont-ils, mais peut-être aussi ont-ils leurs raisons de fermer les yeux. Examinons cela.

Primo: le capitaine Marcenay. Pour lui, la question ne se pose pas. Le capitaine n’a pas à discuter; il obéit. Au surplus, je n’imagine pas qu’il lui viendrait, même en l’absence d’ordre, la pensée de reculer tant que Mlle Mornas ira de l’avant. La sympathie qu’ils éprouvent l’un pour l’autre a marché beaucoup plus vite que nous depuis Sikasso. Nous nous trouvons en présence d’une passion officielle, avouée de part et d’autre, et qui doit finir logiquement par un mariage, à telle enseigne que M. Barsac a, de lui-même, renoncé à ses allures conquérantes, pour redevenir uniquement l’excellent homme qu’il est en réalité. Donc, passons.

Secundo: M. Poncin. M. Poncin est, lui aussi, un subordonné et, lui aussi, il obéit. Quant à ce qu’il pense en son for intérieur, bien fin qui le dira. M. Poncin prend des notes du matin au soir, mais est d’un silencieux à rendre des points à Hermès lui-même. Je jurerais que depuis le départ il n’a pas prononcé dix paroles. Mon opinion personnelle est qu’il s’en fiche. Donc, passons sur M. Poncin.

Tertio: Saint-Bérain. Oh! ça, c’est une autre affaire. Saint-Bérain ne voit que par les yeux de sa tante-nièce; il n’existe que par elle. D’ailleurs, Saint-Bérain est si distrait qu’il ne sait peut-être pas qu’il est en Afrique. Donc, passons sur le numéro trois.

Quarto: Mlle Mornas. Nous connaissons la raison de son voyage. Elle nous l’a dit: son caprice. Cette raison suffirait, même si la délicatesse ne nous interdisait pas de chercher à savoir s’il en existe une autre en réalité.

Quinto: Moi. Ce numéro cinq est le seul dont la conduite soit parfaitement logique. Quelle est ma raison d’être, à moi? La copie. Donc, plus il y aura d’embêtements de toute sorte, plus je fabriquerai de copie, et plus je serai content. Il est, par conséquent, tout simple que je ne songe pas à revenir en arrière. Aussi je n’y songe pas.

Reste M. Barsac. Lui, il ne doit obéissance à personne, il n’est amoureux de personne, il a dû s’apercevoir que nous étions en Afrique, il est trop sérieux pour céder à un caprice, et il n’a pas de copie à placer. Alors?…

Ce problème me tracasse tellement que je vais délibérément lui poser la question à lui-même.

M. Barsac me regarde, hoche la tête de haut en bas, et me répond par un geste qui ne signifie rien. C’est tout ce que je peux en tirer. On voit que c’est un habitué de l’interview.

7 février. — Il y a du nouveau, et la nuit a été fort agitée. Conséquence: nous ne sommes pas partis à l’heure habituelle, et nous ne ferons aujourd’hui qu’une seule étape, celle du soir.

Relatons les faits dans leur ordre chronologique. On en tirera forcément cette conclusion que la distraction peut quelquefois avoir du bon.

On avait décidé, hier, de ne rien dire à Moriliré et de se borner à le surveiller plus étroitement. Dans ce but, et afin de garder l’individu à l’oeil sans mettre les hommes de l’escorte dans la confidence de nos craintes, nous étions convenus de veiller à tour de rôle. Comme nous sommes six, y compris Mlle Mornas qui tient à compter pour un homme, ce n’est vraiment pas une affaire.

Conformément à ce programme, on a divisé la nuit, de neuf heures à cinq heures, en six fractions sensiblement égales, puis on a tiré ces fractions au sort. Nous sortons de l’urne dans l’ordre suivant: Mlle Mornas, M. Barsac, le capitaine Marcenay, moi, Saint-Bérain et M. Poncin. Tel est l’arrêt du destin.

À une heure du matin, mon tour arrive, et je remplace le capitaine Marcenay. Celui-ci me dit que tout va bien et me montre, d’ailleurs, Moriliré, qui dort non loin de nous, enroulé dans son doroké. La lune, qui est précisément dans son plein aujourd’hui, permet de discerner le visage noir du drôle et fait ressortir la blancheur de son vêtement.

Rien d’anormal pendant mon tour de garde, si ce n’est que, vers une heure et demie, je crois entendre ce même ronflement qui nous a tant intrigués le soir de notre première journée après Kankan. Le bruit paraît venir de l’est, mais il est, cette fois, si lointain, si faible, si insaisissable, que je ne suis pas encore très sûr à l’heure actuelle de l’avoir réellement entendu.

À deux heures et quart, je passe la consigne à Saint-Bérain et je vais me coucher. Je ne peux dormir. Manque d’habitude sans doute, le sommeil interrompu ne veut plus revenir. Après une demi-heure de lutte, j’y renonce et, je me lève, dans l’intention d’aller finir ma nuit en plein air.

À ce moment, j’entends de nouveau — tellement faible que je peux croire à une seconde illusion — ce même bruit de ronflement qui a, tout à l’heure, attiré mon attention. Cette fois, j’en aurai le coeur net. Je m’élance au-dehors, et je tends l’oreille dans la nuit…

Rien, ou, du moins, si peu de chose! Un souffle qui décroît, décroît et meurt, par gradations insensibles dans la direction de l’est. Il faut me résigner à rester dans le doute.

Je me décide à aller retrouver Saint-Bérain, qui est en train de faire son tour de garde.

Surprise! — (au fait! est-ce une surprise?) — Saint-Bérain n’est pas à son poste. Gageons que l’incorrigible distrait a oublié la consigne et qu’il s’occupe de tout autre chose. Pourvu que Moriliré n’en ait pas profité pour nous brûler la politesse!

Je m’en assure. Non, Moriliré ne s’est pas enfui. Il est toujours là, qui dort béatement, à plat sur le sol. J’aperçois sa face noire et son doroké blanc vivement éclairés par la lune.

Tranquillisé de ce côté, je me mets en quête de Saint-Bérain, dans l’intention de le tancer d’importance. Je sais à peu près où le trouver, car j’ai remarqué qu’une rivière coule non loin de notre campement. J’y vais tout droit, et, conformément à mes prévisions, j’aperçois une ombre au milieu du courant. Comment l’enragé pêcheur peut-il être à cette distance de la rive? Il a donc le pouvoir de marcher sur les eaux?

Ainsi qu’il me l’a appris ce matin, Saint-Bérain a tout bonnement improvisé, avec trois bouts de bois, un radeau juste assez grand pour le porter, puis, à l’aide d’une longue branche en guise de gaffe, il s’est poussé à quelques mètres de la rive. Là, il a “mouillé” au moyen d’une grosse pierre jouant le rôle de l’ancre, et qu’une corde en fibre de rônier relie au radeau. La fabrication de ce matériel n’a pas exigé plus d’une demi-heure de travail. C’est très ingénieux.

Pour l’instant, ce n’est pas cela qui me préoccupe.

Je m’approche du bord, et j’appelle d’une voix assourdie:

— Saint-Bérain?…

— Présent! me répond l’ombre des eaux.

Je reprends:

— Qu’est-ce que vous faites, là, Saint-Bérain?

J’entends un petit rire, puis l’ombre répond:

— Je braconne, mon cher.

Je crois rêver. Braconner?… Au Soudan?… Je ne sache pas que la pêche y soit réglementée. Je répète:

— Vous braconnez?… Qu’est-ce que vous me chantez là?

— Sans doute, me répond Saint-Bérain, puisque je pêche, la nuit, à l’épervier. C’est absolument défendu.

Cette pensée l’amuse beaucoup. Il rit, l’animal.

— Et Moriliré?… dis-je, exaspéré.

C’est, dans la nuit, un formidable juron, que ma plume se refuse à transcrire, puis l’ombre se met en mouvement et Saint-Bérain, fait comme un voleur, trempé jusqu’aux genoux, saute sur la rive. Il est affolé, maintenant. C’est un peu tard.

— Moriliré!… répète-t-il d’une voix étranglée.

— Oui, Moriliré, lui dis-je. Qu’en avez-vous fait, malheureux?

Ici, nouveau juron, et Saint-Bérain prend sa course dans la direction du poste, qu’il n’aurait pas dû quitter.

Heureusement, Moriliré dort toujours. Je pourrais même affirmer qu’il n’a pas fait un mouvement depuis que j’ai relevé le capitaine Marcenay. C’est ce que constate Saint-Bérain.

— Vous m’avez fait une peur! soupire-t-il.

À ce moment, nous entendons un bruit assez violent du côté de la rivière que nous venons de quitter. On jurerait un homme qui se noie.

Nous courons, Saint-Bérain et moi, et, en effet, nous distinguons, au-delà du radeau improvisé, quelque chose de noir qui se débat.

— C’est un nègre, dit Saint-Bérain.

Il monte sur son radeau, et dégage le nègre, qu’il apporte à la rive, tout en m’expliquant:

— Le moricaud s’est empêtré dans mon épervier, que j’ai oublié. (Naturellement, mon brave Saint-Bérain.) Mais que diable faisait-il là, ce nègre?

Nous nous penchons sur le pauvre diable qui, d’ailleurs, respire avec une force suffisante pour que nous n’ayons aucune inquiétude sur son sort, et un même cri s’échappe de nos lèvres:

— Moriliré!…

C’est Moriliré, en effet, Moriliré complètement nu, mouillé de la tête aux pieds, à demi suffoqué par sa noyade. Il est clair que le guide a quitté le camp, qu’il a traversé la rivière à la nage, qu’il s’est offert une petite promenade dans la campagne, et qu’au retour il s’est embarrassé dans le filet providentiellement oublié par Saint-Bérain. Sans notre précieux distrait, la fugue du traître nous restait peut-être à jamais inconnue.

Mais, soudain, cette pensée me vient: et l’autre Moriliré, celui qui dort si bien à la clarté de la lune?

Je cours à ce dormeur obstiné, je le secoue… Bon! j’aurais dû m’en douter, le doroké est vide et me reste dans la main. Quant à la face noire, ce n’est qu’un morceau de bois surmonté du casque et du plumet dont l’ancien tirailleur orne ses avantages naturels.

Cette fois, le drôle est pris en flagrant délit. Il faudra bien qu’il s’explique.

Je retourne près de Saint-Bérain et de son prisonnier. Ce dernier semble revenir péniblement à la vie.

Je dis: semble, car, tout à coup, il saute sournoisement sur ses pieds et s’élance du côté de la rivière, dans l’intention évidente d’y prendre un nouveau bain.

Moriliré a compté sans son hôte. La main de Saint-Bérain s’abat sur le poignet du fugitif qui fait de vains efforts pour se dégager.

Sincèrement, je crois Saint-Bérain moins séduisant que l’Apollon du Belvédère, mais il est fort comme Hercule. Il doit avoir une pince terrible, si j’en juge par les contorsions et les grimaces du nègre. En moins d’une minute, Moriliré est vaincu, glisse sur les genoux et demande grâce. En même temps, de sa main inerte quelque chose tombe.

Je me baisse et ramasse l’objet. Malheureusement, nous ne nous méfions pas assez du nègre. Moriliré se dégage d’un effort désespéré, se jette sur moi et s’empare, avec sa main libre, dudit objet, qui disparaît dans sa bouche.

Troisième juron de Saint-Bérain. Je saute à la gorge du captif, dont mon compagnon empoigne l’autre bras.

Moriliré, étranglé, doit restituer. Il ne restitue, hélas! qu’à moitié. Avec ses dents d’acier, le nègre a coupé en deux l’objet suspect, dont une partie est engloutie dans les profondeurs de son estomac.

Je regarde ma conquête. C’est une petite feuille de papier, sur laquelle il y a quelque chose d’écrit.

— Tenez bien cette canaille, dis-je à Saint-Bérain.

Saint-Bérain me rassure d’un mot, et je cours chercher le capitaine Marcenay. Le premier soin de celui-ci est de déposer Moriliré congrûment ficelé dans une tente, autour de laquelle il place quatre hommes munis de la consigne la plus sévère. Après quoi, nous allons tous les trois chez le capitaine, très impatients de savoir ce qu’il y a sur la feuille de papier.

À la lueur d’une lanterne, on constate que ce sont des caractères arabes. Le capitaine, arabisant distingué, n’aurait aucune peine à les lire, s’ils étaient mieux tracés, et si le document était intact. Or, l’écriture est des plus imparfaites, et, comme je l’ai dit, nous ne possédons qu’une partie du texte. Dans l’état actuel, ce n’est qu’un rébus, que l’insuffisante lumière de la lanterne ne permet pas de déchiffrer. Il faut attendre le jour.

Mais, le jour venu, nous réfléchissons que nous allons sans doute nous donner une peine inutile. Tout porte à croire que Moriliré, ne pouvant plus espérer nous tromper, voudra tout au moins se valoir notre indulgence, qu’il avouera sa faute, par conséquent, et nous donnera lui-même la traduction complète du document.

Nous nous dirigeons vers la tente qui lui sert de prison, nous y pénétrons…

Stupéfaits, nous nous arrêtons sur le seuil: les liens du prisonnier jonchent le sol. La tente est vide.

CHAPITRE 9

Par ordre supérieur

(Carnet de notes d’Amédée Florence.)

Même jour. — Tout à l’heure, j’ai dû m’interrompre, le capitaine Marcenay m’ayant appelé pour me montrer la traduction du lambeau de document arraché à l’appétit de Moriliré. Je reprends le récit chronologique des événements.

Donc, nous trouvons la tente vide. Plus de Moriliré. Rien que ses liens sur le sol. Très irrité, le capitaine Marcenay interpelle les hommes de garde. Mais les pauvres diables sont aussi étonnés que lui. Ils affirment n’avoir pas quitté leur poste et n’avoir entendu aucun bruit suspect. C’est à n’y rien comprendre.

Nous rentrons dans la tente, et alors seulement nous remarquons qu’elle est percée, à son sommet, d’un trou assez large pour laisser passer un homme, et au-dessus duquel on aperçoit une grosse branche de bombax. Dès lors, tout s’explique. Moriliré, mal attaché, s’est débarrassé de ses liens et, grimpant le long du piquet central, il a repris sa liberté par le chemin des airs.

Faut-il courir après lui? À quoi bon? Le fugitif a près d’une heure d’avance et, d’ailleurs, comment trouver un homme au milieu des hautes graminées de la brousse? Il faudrait avoir des chiens.

D’accord sur ce point, nous nous résignons à l’inévitable. Le capitaine fait abattre la tente qui a si mal gardé Moriliré, renvoie les quatre tirailleurs, en leur ordonnant, sous peine d’un châtiment sévère, le plus profond silence sur ce qu’ils ont vu, et disparaît chez lui, où il va s’attaquer au mystérieux document. Moi, je m’attelle à la rédaction de mes notes. Pendant ce temps, Saint-Bérain mettra nos compagnons au courant des événements, s’il ne l’oublie pas, toutefois.

Une heure plus tard, le capitaine Marcenay m’envoie chercher, comme je l’ai dit. Je le trouve dans la tente de M. Barsac, où tous les Européens sont réunis. Les visages expriment un étonnement des plus naturels. À quoi rime, en effet, la trahison de Moriliré? Agirait-il pour le compte d’un tiers, dont, pour ma part, j’ai soupçonné l’intervention il y a déjà longtemps? Dans quelques minutes, nous le saurons peut-être.

— L’écriture arabe, nous explique le capitaine Marcenay, va de droite à gauche, mais il n’y a qu’à la lire par transparence, en tournant vers soi le verso du papier, pour la rétablir dans le sens qui nous est habituel. On obtient alors ceci.

Il nous remet un papier, calqué sur celui dont nous nous sommes emparés, et par conséquent irrégulièrement déchiré, sur lequel je lis les mots suivants, que je transcris en caractères latins:

Mansa a man grigni toubaboul

Mémou nimbé mando kafa batak manaéta sofa

A okata. Batou i a kafolo. Mansa a bé

S’il n’y a que moi pour déchiffrer ce grimoire!…

Le papier passe de main en main. Mlle Mornas et Saint-Bérain paraissent y comprendre quelque chose. J’admire l’étendue de leurs connaissances. Quant à MM. Barsac et Poncin, ils en savent juste autant que moi.

— Les derniers mots de la première et de la deuxième ligne sont incomplets, nous expose le capitaine Marcenay. L’un doit être lu toubaboulengo, qui veut dire “Européens”, littéralement “Européens rouges”, et l’autre Kafama, qui signifie “encore”. Voici maintenant la traduction du document ainsi complété: “Le maître (ou le roi) ne veut pas que les Européens… Puisqu’ils avancent encore… lettre amènera soldats… Il commandera. Obéis… tu as commencé. La maître (ou le roi) est…”

Nous faisons la grimace. Ce n’est pas beaucoup plus clair.

Cependant, le capitaine Marcenay continue sa démonstration.

— Le premier fragment de phrase se comprend aisément. Il y a quelque part un maître ou un roi qui ne veut pas que nous fassions telle ou telle chose. Quoi? Le second fragment nous le dit. Il ne veut pas que nous avancions dans le pays noir. Pour une raison quelconque, nous le gênons, probablement. Ce second fragment commençait sans doute l’énoncé d’un plan que nous ne connaîtrons pas. Les deux lignes suivantes sont moins limpides. “Une lettre qui amènera des soldats”, cela ne veut pas dire grand-chose; la quatrième n’est qu’un ordre adressé à Moriliré, et nous ignorons qui est cet “il”, qui commandera. Quant aux derniers mots, ils n’ont aucun sens, pour nous tout au moins.

On se regarde avec désappointement. Nous voici bien avancés! M. Barsac prend la parole et résume la situation.

— De ce que nous avons observé jusqu’ici, y compris les événements d’aujourd’hui, on peut conclure: Primo, que notre guide nous trahissait pour le compte d’un tiers, lequel, pour des raisons inconnues, cherche à s’opposer à notre passage. Secundo, que cet inconnu dispose d’un certain pouvoir, puisqu’il a réussi à nous donner, à Conakry, un guide de son choix. Tertio, que ce pouvoir n’est pas très grand, néanmoins, puisqu’il n’a trouvé, jusqu’ici, que des moyens enfantins pour parvenir à ses fins.

J’objecte:

— Pardon! Le mystérieux inconnu a fait, dans le même sens, des tentatives d’un autre ordre.

Et je communique à l’honorable auditoire mes réflexions touchant l’empoisonnement au doung-kono et les prédictions du kéniélala. Je suis loué pour ma perspicacité.

— Les ingénieuses déductions de M. Florence, ajoute M. Barsac, ne font en somme que confirmer les miennes. Je persiste donc à croire que notre adversaire, quel qu’il soit, n’est pas très à craindre, sans quoi il aurait employé contre nous des moyens plus efficaces et plus sérieux.

M. Barsac a raison. C’est la sagesse, Sophie, la grande Sophie des Grecs, qui parle par sa bouche. Il continue:

— Mon opinion est que, tout en ayant cette affaire en sérieuse considération, il convient de ne pas l’exagérer. Ce qui revient à dire: soyons prudents, mais ne nous laissons pas émouvoir.

Tout le monde approuve, ce qui ne m’étonne pas, car je connais les mobiles secrets de chacun. Ce qui m’étonne, par exemple, c’est l’obstination de M.

Barsac. Pourquoi ne saisit-il pas cette occasion d'interrompre un voyage dont l'inutilité n'est pas discutable?

Quoi qu'il en soit, nous sommes dans la nécessité de nous procurer de nouveaux guides. Mlle Mornas propose les siens, qui connaissent, ou tout au moins, doivent connaître le pays, puisque c'est pour cette raison qu'ils ont été engagés. Afin de trancher la question, on fait comparaître Tchoumouki et Tongané.

L'attitude du premier ne me plaît pas. Il répond qu'on peut compter sur lui, mais il semble gêné, embarrassé, et, pendant qu'il parle, je n'arrive pas à saisir son regard fuyant. Pour moi, le particulier sue le mensonge. M'est avis qu'il ne vaut pas mieux que Moriliré.

Tongané est, au contraire, très carré. Il affirme qu'il connaît parfaitement le pays et qu'il nous conduira où il nous plaira d'aller. Il assure également qu'il saura mettre à la raison porteurs et âniers. Ce garçon me fait bonne impression. Sa voix est franche, son regard droit.

Je décide qu'à partir de ce moment j'aurai confiance en Tongané et me méfierai de Tchoumouki.

Les deux nouveaux guides vont palabrer avec le personnel noir. Selon la version officielle, ils lui apprennent que Moriliré a été dévoré par un caïman, et qu'ils commanderont désormais en son lieu et place. Personne ne dit mot. Après la sieste, nous partirons.

9 février. — Moriliré n'est plus là, mais c'est exactement la même chose. Avec Tchoumouki et Tongané, nous n'avançons guère plus vite qu'avec leur prédécesseur.

Ce sont, entre les deux guides, des disputes continuelles à propos de la direction à prendre. Ils ne sont jamais d’accord, et leurs querelles sont interminables. Moi, j’opine systématiquement dans le sens de Tongané, bien que ce soit lui qui crie le plus fort, et l’expérience prouve que je vois juste. S’il arriva, en effet, par hasard, que la majorité décide en faveur de Tchoumouki, les renseignements que nous recueillons au premier village rencontré nous montrent invariablement notre erreur. Il faut alors biaiser, parfois à travers des terrains quasi impraticables, pour retrouver le bon chemin que nous avons quitté.

D’autres fois, la discussion des deux Noirs se prolonge tellement, que la grande chaleur arrive et qu’il faut s’arrêter où l’on est.

Dans ces conditions, on n’avance pas vite. Aussi, en deux jours et demi, avons-nous fait à peine une trentaine de kilomètres. C’est maigre.

Nous suivons toujours la vallée dans laquelle nous sommes entrés à Kokoro. Elle s’est élargie encore, et nous n’avons plus de hauteurs que sur notre droite, dans le Sud, par conséquent.

Le chemin est, en somme, des plus faciles, et n’étaient les éternels passages de rivières, rarement sur des ponts de bois aux trois quarts rompus, plus souvent au moyen de gués qui ne sont pas toujours très guéables et où les caïmans sont loin d’être rares, nous n’aurions à lutter contre aucune difficulté matérielle.

11 février. — De bonne heure ce matin, nous sommes au milieu de champs cultivés, ce qui indique la proximité d’un village. Ces champs seraient assez bien entretenus, si une grande partie d’entre eux n’étaient pas dévastés par les termites qui sont de terribles destructeurs.

Ces insectes bâtissent des termitières en forme de champignons, parfois de la hauteur d'un homme, qu'ils évacuent, au commencement de l'hiver, sous forme de fourmis ailées. Les villages en sont alors infestés. Mais l'homme ne perd aucune occasion de se distraire un peu. L'apparition de ces fourmis ailées est le signal de fêtes et d'orgies sans nom. On allume partout des feux, où les fourmis viennent se brûler les ailes. Les femmes et les enfants les ramassent et les font frire au beurre de cé. Or, ce n'est pas tout de manger, il faut boire. C'est pourquoi, le soir venu, tout le village est ivre.

Vers huit heures, nous apercevons celui que nous annonçaient les cultures. Il s'appelle Bama. Au moment où nous en approchons, nous rencontrons une procession de dou, en train de parcourir les lougans pour en chasser les mauvais esprits et demander la pluie. Ces dou sont des individus vêtus de blouses sur lesquelles on a cousu des brins de chanvre et des fibres de palmier. Leur tête est entièrement recouverte d'un bonnet de chanvre avec deux trous pour les yeux et surmontée d'un cimier en bois rouge ou d'un bec d'oiseau de proie.

Ils marchent en dansant, suivis de badauds et de gamins qu'ils ne se gênent pas pour frapper de leurs bâtons “sacrés”. Lorsqu'ils passent devant une case, on les gorge de dolo (bière de mil) et de vin de palme. C'est assez dire qu'après une heure de promenade, ils sont ivres morts.

Une demi-heure plus tard, nous arrivons à Bama. D'un air hypocrite, Tchoumouki expose alors au capitaine Marcenay que les nègres sont trop fatigués, qu'ils se refusent à faire une autre étape et qu'ils demandent à rester à Bama toute la journée. Le capitaine ne bronche pas, et, malgré les signes de réprobation que Tongané multiplie derrière le dos de son camarade, il prend un air étonné et répond que la demande est inutile, puisqu'il était déjà décidé qu'on ferait une longue halte ce jour-là.

Tchoumouki se retire interloqué, tandis que Tongané lève les bras au ciel et exprime à Malik son indignation.

Nous profitons de cet arrêt imprévu pour aller visiter le village, et bien nous en prend, car il est différent de ceux que nous avons déjà vus jusqu’ici.

Pour y entrer, on nous fait d’abord monter sur le toit d’une case, et on nous conduit ainsi de toit en toit, jusqu’à celle du dougoutigui.

Ce dougoutigui est un vieux nègre à fortes moustaches, et ressemble à un ancien sous-officier de tirailleurs. Il fume une longue pipe de cuivre, dont le feu est entretenu par un affreux petit négrillon.

Il nous reçoit avec beaucoup de cordialité, et nous offre du dolo. Pour ne pas être en reste de politesse, nous lui faisons quelques menus présents qui le comblent de joie, puis, ces rites accomplis, nous nous promenons en touristes.

Sur la place, un barbier ambulant opère en plein air. Près de lui, des gamins, pédicures et manucures, rognent à l’aide de vieux ciseaux, les ongles des pieds et des mains. Quatre cauries par tête, tel est le prix de leurs services, mais ils doivent rendre aux clients les rognures d’ongles, que ceux-ci s’empressent d’aller enterrer pieusement dans de petits trous. J’ai beau m’enquérir, par le canal de Saint-Bérain qui se fait à peu près comprendre, impossible de connaître les raisons de cette étrange coutume.

À quelques pas, un “médecin” traitait un malade suivant les prescriptions du Codex nègre. Nous assistons de loin à la “consultation”.

Le malade est un homme émacié, aux yeux caves, tout tremblant de fièvre. Le médecin le fait coucher sur le sol, au milieu d’un cercle de curieux, puis, s’étant blanchi la figure avec de la cendre délayée, car, ici, le blanc est “fétiche”, il place auprès de lui une petite statuette en bois grossièrement sculptée, image d’un dieu favorable. Il exécute ensuite autour du patient une danse échevelée, en poussant des cris sauvages. Enfin, il se fait indiquer la partie malade, la masse doucement, et soudain, avec un hurlement de joie, feint d’en retirer un fragment d’os dissimulé au préalable dans sa main. Le malade se lève aussitôt et s’en va, en se déclarant guéri, nouvelle preuve de la vérité de cet apophtegme: il n’y a que la foi qui sauve.

Celle de notre malade n’était-elle pas suffisante? Il y a lieu de le supposer, car l’amélioration par lui accusée n’a été que de courte durée. Le soir même, notre campement recevait sa visite. Ayant appris, de l’un ou l’autre de nos nègres, qu’un médecin toubab était parmi nous, il venait implorer le secours du sorcier blanc, puisque le sorcier noir n’avait pas réussi à le soulager.

Après un examen sommaire, le docteur Châtonnay lui administra tout simplement une dose de quinine. Le “client” ne fut pas avare de barka (merci), mais, tout en s’éloignant, il secouait la tête d’un ait sceptique, en homme qui ne compte guère sur un remède dont aucune incantation ni sortilège ne renforcent l’efficacité.

12 février. — Aujourd’hui, c’est “même chose” qu’hier comme disent nos hommes d’escorte. C’est même pis. Nous ne ferons encore qu’une seule étape, et nous n’en ferons pas demain.

Ce matin, le départ s’est accompli en bon ordre.

Au moment où notre colonne s’ébranlait, nous avons vu accourir le malade d’hier soir. Il allait tellement mieux qu’il voulait remercier son sauveur une fois de plus. Le docteur lui remit quelques paquets de quinine, avec la manière de s’en servir.

Tout va bien jusqu’à l’étape. Le train est vif. Pas une anicroche, pas une plainte parmi les nègres. C’est trop beau.

À l’heure de la halte, en effet, pendant qu’on s’installe, Tchoumouki aborde le capitaine Marcenay et lui tient un discours analogue à celui de la veille. Le capitaine répond que Tchoumouki a pleinement raison, qu’on ne repartira pas, ni ce soir, ni de toute la journée de demain, mais qu’ensuite, après ce grand repos, on ne s’arrêtera plus, le soir, avant d’avoir franchi un minimum de vingt kilomètres.

Le capitaine a prononcé ces mots à haute voix, de façon que nul n’en ignore. Les nègres savent donc qu’on va désormais inaugurer la manière forte. Mais le ton ferme du capitaine les a probablement impressionnés. Ils ne disent rien et font le gros dos, en échangeant des regards en dessous.

Même jour, onze heures du soir. — Cette histoire-là commence à m’agacer.

Ce soir, un peu avant six heures, en plein jour, par conséquent, nous entendons tout à coup le même bruit de ronflement, ou de bourdonnement, qui a, une première fois, frappé nos oreilles près de Kankan, et ensuite mon tympan personnel, le soir de l’incident Moriliré.

Aujourd’hui encore, ce bruit singulier nous arrive de l’est. Il est très faible, suffisamment fort, cependant, pour qu’une erreur ne soit pas admissible. Aussi bien, je ne suis pas seul à l’avoir entendu. Le camp entier lève la tête vers le ciel, et les Noirs donnent déjà des signes de terreur.

Il fait jour, ai-je dit, et pourtant nous n'apercevons rien. Où qu'on regarde, le ciel est désert. Il est vrai qu'une colline assez haute limite la vue, du côté de l'est précisément. Je me hâte vers son sommet.

Pendant que je la gravis de toute la vitesse de mes jambes, l'étrange bruit grandit peu à peu, puis cesse brusquement, et, quand j'atteins le point culminant, rien ne trouble le silence.

Mais, si je n'entends plus, je peux voir maintenant. Devant moi, c'est la plaine, c'est, à perte de vue, cette forêt de graminées démesurées qui constitue la brousse. Cette étendue est déserte.

J'écarquille en vain les yeux, en vain j'inspecte l'horizon. Je ne vois rien.

Je reste en sentinelle jusqu'au moment où la nuit tombe. Peu à peu, de profondes ténèbres recouvrent la campagne, car la lune va entrer dans son dernier quartier et se lève tard, par conséquent. Il est inutile de m'entêter davantage. Je redescends.

Or, je ne suis pas à moitié de la côte que le bruit reprend. C'est à devenir fou, ma parole. Il reprend de la même manière qu'il a cessé, brusquement, puis décroît peu à peu, comme s'il s'éloignait dans l'Est. En quelques minutes, c'est de nouveau le silence.

J'achève ma descente, tout pensif, et je rentre dans ma tente, où j'écris brièvement ces quelques notes.

13 février. — Aujourd'hui, repos. Chacun s'occupe de ses affaires.

M. Barsac se promène de long en large. Il paraît soucieux.

M. Poncin prend, sur un calepin de grand format, des notes sans doute relatives à ses fonctions. À en juger par les mouvements de son crayon, il semblerait qu'il se livre à des calculs. Quels calculs? Je le lui demanderais bien, mais me répondrait-il? Entre nous, je crains qu'il ne soit muet.

Saint-Bérain… Bon! où est-il, Saint-Bérain?… Je présume qu'il taquine le goujon quelque part.

Le capitaine Marcenay cause avec Mlle Mornas. Ne les troublons pas.

À l'autre extrémité du camp, Tongané tient compagnie à Malik. Ils n'ont pas l'air de trouver le temps long, eux non plus.

Le personnel nègre dort çà et là, et l'escorte, à l'exception des sentinelles, fait de même.

Moi, je passe une bonne partie de la journée à terminer un article, à l'aide des notes des jours précédents.

L'article fini et signé, j'appelle Tchoumouki, préposé au service de la poste. Tchoumouki ne répond pas. Je prie un tirailleur d'aller à sa recherche. Une demi-heure plus tard, le tirailleur revient et me dit qu'il n'a pu le découvrir. Je le cherche à mon tour sans plus de succès. Tchoumouki est devenu invisible, et je dois renoncer à expédier mon article.

14 février. — Ce matin, coup de théâtre.

Vers huit heures, car nous avons passé une partie de la matinée à chercher inutilement Tchoumouki, nous nous disposons à partir, de guerre lasse, quand, dans l'ouest, et, par conséquent, du côté de Bama que nous avons quitté il y a deux jours, nous voyons apparaître au loin une troupe nombreuse.

Le capitaine Marcenay l’a vue avant moi, et il a donné ses ordres en conséquence. En un clin d’oeil, notre escorte a pris ses positions de combat.

Ces précautions sont inutiles. Nous ne tardons pas à reconnaître des uniformes français, ou du moins ce qui en tient lieu dans ce pays, et, quand la troupe inconnue est plus près, nous constatons qu’elle se compose de vingt soldats réguliers de race noire, tous montés et armés du fusil réglementaire, et de trois Européens, également à cheval, deux sous-officiers et un lieutenant, qui porte la tenue de l’infanterie coloniale.

Un de nos sergents est envoyé à la rencontre des nouveaux venus, qui, eux-mêmes, détachent en avant un des leurs. Les deux parlementaires échangent quelques mots, puis la troupe, qui a fait halte pendant ces pourparlers, reprend sa marche dans notre direction.

Elle pénètre dans notre campement, les fusils en bandoulière, et le lieutenant qui la commande aborde le capitaine Marcenay. Le dialogue suivant parvient à nos oreilles:

— Le capitaine Marcenay?

— C’est moi, lieutenant…

— Lieutenant Laceur, du 72e d’infanterie coloniale, commandant actuellement un détachement monté de volontaires soudanais. J’arrive de Bamako, mon capitaine, et, depuis Sikasso, où je vous ai manqués de quelques jours, je suis à votre poursuite.

— Dans quel but?

— Ce pli vous l’apprendra, mon capitaine.

Le capitaine Marcenay prend la lettre qui lui est offerte. Pendant qu'il la lit, je constate que son visage exprime autant de surprise que de désappointement.

— C'est bien, lieutenant, dit-il. Permettez-moi de mettre M. Barsac et ses compagnons au courant. Je suis ensuite à vous.

Le lieutenant s'incline. Le capitaine donne un ordre à ses hommes, puis s'approche de notre groupe.

— J'ai à vous apprendre une nouvelle étonnante, monsieur le député, dit-il à M. Barsac. Il faut que je vous quitte.

— Nous quitter!…

Cette exclamation, je dois à la vérité de dire que c'est Mlle Mornas qui l'a poussée. Je la regarde. Elle est toute pâle et se mord les lèvres. Je ne connaîtrais pas son énergie, je jurerais qu'elle va pleurer.

Nous, nous sommes surtout ahuris, sauf M. Barsac, chez qui la colère domine.

— Qu'est-ce à dire, capitaine? demande-t-il.

— C'est-à-dire, monsieur le député, que je reçois l'ordre formel de me rendre à Tombouctou.

— C'est inimaginable! s'écrie M. Barsac, qui semble très blessé.

— Mais cela est, réplique le capitaine. Lisez plutôt.

Il tend à M. Barsac la lettre que le lieutenant lui a remise. Le chef de la mission la parcourt des yeux en donnant de multiples signes d'indignation, après quoi il nous la montre et nous prend à témoin du sans-gêne avec lequel on le traite.

Je m’arrange pour avoir la lettre le dernier, afin de pouvoir en prendre rapidement copie. Voici cette lettre:

République Française

Gouvernement général du Sénégal

Cercle de Bamako

Le colonel

Ordre au capitaine Pierre Marcenay et à son détachement de se rendre à marches forcées à Ségou-Sikoro et, de là, par la voie du Niger, à Tombouctou, où il se mettra à la disposition du colonel commandant la place. Les chevaux du détachement du capitaine Marcenay seront laissés en subsistance à Ségou-Sikoro.

Le lieutenant Lacour, du 72e régiment d’infanterie coloniale, commandant un détachement monté de vingt volontaires soudanais, portera le présent ordre au capitaine Marcenay, à Sikasso, et se mettra à la disposition de M. le député Barsac, chef de la mission extraparlementaire de la boucle du Niger (première section), qu’il escortera jusqu’à son point d’arrivée.

Le colonel commandant le cercle de Bamako.

Saint-Auban.

Pendant que je prends fébrilement copie, M. Barsac continue à exhaler sa mauvaise humeur.

— C’est inqualifiable! dit-il. Nous donner vingt hommes d’escorte!… Et précisément au moment où nous nous heurtons aux pires difficultés!… Ah! mais cela ne se passera pas ainsi!… Dès mon retour à Paris, nous verrons si la Chambre approuve qu’on traite un de ses membres avec une pareille désinvolture.

— En attendant, il faut obéir, dit le capitaine Marcenay, qui n’essaie même pas de cacher sa tristesse.

M. Barsac attire le capitaine à l’écart, mais j’ai une oreille de reporter et j’entends fort bien.

— Pourtant, capitaine, si l’ordre n’était pas authentique!… suggère M. Barsac à mi-voix.

Le capitaine a un haut-le-corps.

— Pas authentique!… répète-t-il. Vous n’y pensez pas, monsieur le député. Il n’y a malheureusement aucun doute. La lettre est munie de tous les cachets officiels. D’ailleurs, j’ai été sous les ordres du colonel Saint-Auban, et je connais parfaitement sa signature.

La mauvaise humeur excuse bien des choses. Je trouve cependant que M. Barsac va trop loin.

Heureusement que le lieutenant Lacour n’a pas entendu. Il ne serait pas flatté.

M. Barsac n’a rien trouvé à répondre et garde le silence.

— Voudriez-vous me permettre, monsieur le député, de vous présenter le lieutenant Lacour, dit le capitaine et de prendre ensuite congé de vous?

M. Barsac ayant acquiescé, les présentations sont faites.

— Connaissez-vous, lieutenant, interroge alors M. Barsac, les raisons qui ont motivé l’ordre dont vous êtes porteur?

— Certainement, monsieur le député, répond le lieutenant. Les Touaregs Aouelimmiden sont en effervescence et menacent nos lignes. D’où nécessité de renforcer la garnison de Tombouctou. Le colonel a pris ce qu’il avait sous la main.

— Et nous?… objecte le chef de la mission. Est-il prudent de réduire notre escorte à vingt hommes?

Le lieutenant Lacour sourit.

— Cela ne peut offrir aucun inconvénient, assure-t-il. Cette région est absolument tranquille.

— Ne disait-on pas, cependant, objecte M. Barsac — le ministre des Colonies lui-même a porté ces faits à la tribune de la Chambre, et le président de Conakry nous les a confirmés — que les abords du Niger étaient le théâtre d’événements des plus inquiétants?

— Cela a été vrai autrefois, répond le lieutenant Lacour, qui sourit toujours, mais il n’en est plus question. C’est de l’histoire ancienne.

— Pourtant, nous avons pu constater nous-mêmes… insiste M. Barsac, qui met le lieutenant au courant de nos aventures.

Celui-ci n’en paraît pas troublé.

— Vous voyez bien, dit-il, que l’inconnu qui semble vous préoccuper plus que de raison est en somme un bien petit personnage. Comment! il a, d’après vous, la prétention de vous barrer la route, et il n’a pas imaginé autre chose pour vous arrêter?… Ce n’est pas sérieux, monsieur le député.

Comme ce sont là ses propres conclusions, M. Barsac ne trouve rien à répliquer.

Le capitaine Marcenay s’approche.

— Permettez-moi, monsieur le député, de prendre congé de vous, dit-il.

— Eh quoi! si vite! s’écrie M. Barsac.

— Il le faut bien, répond le capitaine, mes ordres sont formels. Je dois gagner Ségou-Sikoro et Tombouctou sans perdre une heure.

— Faites donc, capitaine, concède, en lui tendant la main, M. Barsac, dont l’émotion apaise la colère, et soyez sûr que vous emportez avec vous tous nos voeux. Personne de nous n’oubliera ces quelques jours passés en commun, et je suis l’interprète de tous, j’en suis certain, en vous exprimant notre reconnaissance pour votre protection vigilante et votre dévouement sans défaillance.

— Merci, monsieur le député, dit le capitaine, sincèrement ému lui aussi.

Il nous fait ses adieux à chacun à tour de rôle, en finissant cela va de soi, par Mlle Mornas. Je les guigne de l’oeil, on le pense bien.

Mais j’en suis pour ma curiosité. Tout se passe le plus simplement du monde.

— Au revoir, mademoiselle, dit le capitaine.

— Au revoir, capitaine, répond Mlle Mornas.

Rien de plus. Toutefois pour nous qui sommes dans la confidence, ces pauvres mots ont une valeur qu’on ne leur accorde pas d’ordinaire. Nous comprenons tous qu’ils équivalent à une double et formelle promesse.

C’est bien ainsi que le comprend le capitaine, car son visage s’est rasséréné. Il prend la main que lui tend Mlle Mornas, y dépose respectueusement un baiser, s’éloigne, saute à cheval et se place à la tête de son détachement, qui s’est groupé pendant ce temps.

Un dernier salut à notre adresse, puis il lève son sabre. Les cent hommes s’ébranlent et partent au grand trot. Non sans un certain trouble, nous les suivons des yeux. En quelques minutes, ils sont hors de vue.

Nous voici seuls avec le lieutenant Lacour, ses deux sous-officiers et ses vingt hommes, dont nous ne soupçonnions pas l’existence il y a une heure. L’aventure s’est déroulée si rapidement que nous en sommes tout étourdis. Il s’agit, maintenant, de reprendre son calme.

Je reprends le mien assez vite, et je regarde nos nouveaux gardes du corps, afin de faire connaissance avec eux. Il se passe alors quelque chose de curieux. Au premier regard que je jette sur eux, j’ai un petit frisson — pas désagréable, ma foi! — car j’ai tout à coup l’impression très nette qu’ils ressemblent tout à fait à des gens avec lesquels je n’aimerais pas me trouver au coin d’un bois.

CHAPITRE 10

La nouvelle escorte

(Carnet de notes d’Amédée Florence.)

Même jour, le soir. — Non, je n’aimerais pas me trouver avec eux au coin d’un bois, et pourtant j’y suis, ou plutôt je suis avec eux en pleine brousse, ce qui est pire, infiniment. Aussi la situation est-elle, à mes yeux, remplie de charme. Avoir conscience qu’on court un danger, un vrai, et ne pas connaître ce danger; avoir l’intelligence tendue pour deviner ce qu’on vous cache, l’oeil et l’oreille aux aguets pour parer le coup qu’on pressent, sans savoir d’où il viendra, rien de plus “excitant”. C’est pendant ces heures-là qu’on vit d’une manière vraiment intensive, et ces sensations dégottent joliment le plaisir d’un café-crème sur la terrasse du

Napolitain.

Allons! Voilà que je m’emballe, selon ma coutume. En me montrant des bandits, alors que nous avons affaire, sans doute, à des tirailleurs très ordinaires et très quelconques, mon imagination ne me jouerait-elle pas un mauvais tour? Et la lettre, la lettre authentique du colonel Saint-Auban, qu’est-ce que j’en fais?

Ce qu’on voudra. La lettre du colonel Saint-Auban me gêne, je l’accorde, mais rien ne peut prévaloir contre l’impression que me causent notre nouvelle escorte et son commandant.

Et d’abord, cet officier, ces sous-officiers, ces soldats sont-ils des “militaires”? Pour les Noirs, on ne peut savoir. Ces nègres se ressemblent tous. Pour l’officier, on est tenté de répondre oui. Par contre, on répond non sans hésiter en ce qui concerne les deux sergents. Des tirailleurs, ces têtes-là? À d’autres! Nul besoin d’être phrénologiste, physiognomoniste, ni tout autre savant en iste, pour lire sur ces faces-là: inquiétude de la bête traquée, goût des plaisirs grossiers, impulsivité sans contrôle, violence et cruauté. Charmant portrait!

Ce qui m’a frappé en premier lieu n’est qu’un détail, mais c’est ce détail qui a ouvert le robinet de mes cogitations. N’est-il pas bizarre, en effet, que ces hommes, sous-officiers compris, soient couverts de poussière, ainsi qu’il sied à des gens courant après nous depuis quinze jours, et que leur chef soit frais comme s’il sortait d’une boîte? Car il est frais, et même à un point invraisemblable. Linge blanc, chaussures brillantes, moustache cirée, c’est tout à fait un joli garçon. Et sa tenue? On dirait que le lieutenant Lacour va passer une revue. Il est d’”ordonnance” de la tête aux pieds. Rien ne lui manque, pas un bouton, pas un fil, jusqu’à son pantalon qui a le pli marchand! On n’a pas souvent l’occasion, dans la brousse, d’admirer une telle élégance. Cet uniforme-là crie à qui veut l’entendre qu’on ne l’a jamais mis, qu’il est tout neuf, et celui qui le porte, dans son désir d’avoir l’air “officier”, me semble avoir dépassé les limites de la vraisemblance.

Pour être si pimpant pendant que ses subordonnés sont aussi poussiéreux, le lieutenant Lacour ne nous donnait donc pas la chasse avec eux?

Les deux sergents sont, au contraire, abondamment sales, mais, s’ils n’ont pas l’élégance exagérée de leur officier, ils pèchent, à mon avis, par l’excès opposé. Leurs uniformes (?) semblent venir du “décrochez-moi ça”. Ils sont en loques. Leurs pantalons sont beaucoup trop courts et largement rapiécés, et aucun numéro, aucun signe quelconque n’indique leur régiment. J’ai peine à croire qu’on entretienne aussi mal des soldats français, fussent-ils des engagés à court terme. Autre remarque plus difficile à traduire: il m’apparaît que les propriétaires de ces vieux uniformes n’ont pas l’habitude de les porter. Sans que je puisse expliquer très bien pourquoi, ils n’ont pas l’air d’être “chez eux” dans leurs vêtements.

Telle est la liste complète de mes remarques et observations. On trouvera peut-être que c’est maigre et que j’ai grandement tort de me laisser influencer par des particularités insignifiantes, qui s’expliquent peut-être le plus simplement du monde? Je ne dis pas non, car je ne suis pas loin d’avoir moi-même cette opinion. En cherchant à préciser, pour les noter sur ce carnet, les raisons de ma méfiance, je suis le premier à les trouver bien faibles. Mais c’est aussi que cette méfiance est surtout instinctive, et cela, je ne peux le rendre avec des mots.

Quoi qu’il en soit, je n’ai rien à ajouter à ce qui précède. Pour la discipline, notamment, rien à dire. Même, elle serait plutôt trop stricte, à mon idée. Les sentinelles sont à leur poste et se relèvent régulièrement. La tenue générale est parfaite, trop parfaite peut-être.

L’escorte se divise nettement en trois groupes qui ne fraient aucunement avec le surplus du convoi. Le premier comprend les vingt tirailleurs soudanais. En dehors de leurs heures de garde, ils ne se quittent pas, et, chose incroyable quand il s’agit de Noirs, ils parlent à peine. Ils font leur popote en silence, ou ils dorment. On ne les entend pas. Ils obéissent au doigt et à l’oeil à leurs sous-officiers, qu’ils paraissent beaucoup redouter. Il semblerait, en somme, que ces vingt nègres sont très tristes et qu’ils ont peur.

Le deuxième groupe réunit les sous-officiers. Ceux-ci causent, mais exclusivement ensemble, et toujours à mi-voix. Malgré mon oreille de reporter, je n’ai pu, jusqu’ici, saisir au vol que peu de mots sans importance.

Le troisième et dernier groupe est composé du lieutenant Lacour tout seul. Ce lieutenant Lacour est un homme de petite taille, qui me fait l’effet d’être un monsieur pas commode. Il a des yeux bleu pâle, des yeux d’acier, comme on dit, qui n’expriment pas précisément une bienveillance universelle. Pas bavard, et sauvage avec ça. De tout l’après-midi, je ne l’ai vu sortir de sa tente que deux fois, et uniquement pour inspecter ses hommes. Cette opération n’est pas variée. En apercevant leur chef, les tirailleurs se lèvent et se mettent en ligne. Le lieutenant, raide comme un piquet, passe devant eux, tandis que son regard glacé les parcourt de la tête aux pieds, puis il disparaît chez lui, sans avoir adressé la parole à personne. En mettant tout au mieux, j’ose dire que cet élégant officier ne sera pas, du moins, un joyeux compagnon.

De toute la journée, je n’ai pas aperçu Mlle Mornas.

Ni Tchoumouki non plus, ce qui fait que j’ai toujours mon article en poche.

15 février. — Au réveil, ce matin, je ne constate aucun préparatif de départ. Je m’informe auprès de Tongané, lequel m’apprend que nous ne bougerons pas de toute la journée. Après le repos d’hier, cette halte me paraît étrange.

Le hasard me fait croiser le lieutenant Lacour, toujours aussi raide et d’une aussi impeccable élégance. Je l’aborde, et lui demande la raison de cet arrêt supplémentaire.

— Ordre de M. Barsac, me répond-il laconiquement.

Quatre mots, après lesquels il fait le salut militaire et pivote sur ses talons. Le lieutenant Lacour n’est pas ce qu’on appelle un brillant causeur.

Pourquoi le chef de la mission nous fait-il ainsi marquer le pas? Renoncerait-il à poursuivre le voyage avec cette escorte réduite des quatre cinquièmes? Cela m’intrigue. Cela m’inquiète aussi, puisque cette décision mettrait le point final à un reportage que je pressens être sur le point de devenir sensationnel.

Précisément, vers dix heures, j’aperçois M. Barsac. Il se promène à grands pas, les mains derrière le dos, les yeux vers le sol, et n’a pas l’air de bonne humeur. Le moment n’est peut-être pas très bien choisi pour lui demander quels sont ses projets. Cette considération ne m’arrête pas, et je risque l’interview.

M. Barsac ne se fâche pas. Il s’arrête, et me regarde un bon moment en silence. Enfin, il me dit:

— Il y a quelques jours, monsieur Florence, vous m’avez déjà posé la même question. Je ne vous ai pas répondu. Je vous répondrai aujourd’hui que je ne sais pas moi-même quelle réponse je dois faire.

— Vous n’avez donc pris encore aucune décision, monsieur le député?

— Aucune. Je réfléchis, je tâtonne, je pèse le pour et le contre…

Nouveau silence, puis, tout à coup:

— Mais, au fait, s’écrie M. Barsac, pourquoi n’examinerions-nous pas la question ensemble? Vous êtes un garçon pratique et plein de bon sens. (Merci bien, monsieur Barsac.) Vous me donnerez votre avis.

Je m’incline.

— À vos ordres, monsieur le député.

— Examinons d’abord, reprend M. Barsac, si ce voyage peut être continué sans imprudence; en d’autres termes, s’il est possible.

Je suggère:

— Peut-être vaudrait-il mieux examiner d’abord s’il est utile.

— Du tout, réplique M. Barsac, son utilité est certaine.

Un homme étonné, c’est moi. Cependant, M. Barsac poursuit.

— Donc, ce voyage est-il faisable? voilà le problème. Hier encore, il ne se posait même pas, car, jusqu’ici, aucun incident vraiment sérieux n’avait marqué notre route. C’est bien votre opinion, n’est-ce pas?

— Tout à fait.

— Le premier incident qui ait une réelle gravité, c’est le changement inopiné de notre escorte et sa réduction à vingt hommes. Vingt hommes sont-ils capables d’assurer notre sécurité au milieu de cette population nègre? Je me le demande.

— Ainsi posée, dis-je, la question ne comporte qu’une réponse affirmative. Il me paraît certain que vingt hommes sont largement suffisants, si nous ne rencontrons que des nègres pour adversaires. D’autres explorateurs ont fait des voyages plus longs que le nôtre avec une escorte moindre, ou même absolument sans escorte. Mais…

— Je sais ce que vous allez dire, interrompt M. Barsac. Vous allez parler du mystérieux inconnu qui paraît mécontent de nous voir dans ce pays. Je n'ai pas caché mon sentiment à cet égard, et tout le monde m'a approuvé. Rien de nouveau n'est survenu depuis. Donc, inutile d'y revenir, selon moi.

Je réplique.

— Veuillez m'excuser, monsieur le député, mais je crois qu'il y a eu du nouveau, au contraire.

— Bah! fait M. Barsac, surpris. Du nouveau qu'on m'aurait caché, alors. Expliquez-vous.

Ainsi mis au pied du mur, je ne laisse pas d'être très embarrassé. Mes remarques, qui me semblaient si importantes, et leurs conséquences, que je jugeais si fortement déduites, lorsque j'examinais les unes et les autres en moi-même, m'apparaissent, maintenant qu'il me faut les exprimer à haute voix, encore plus insignifiantes et plus arbitraires qu'au moment où j'ai dû les préciser par écrit. Cependant, puisque j'ai sottement engagé le doigt dans l'engrenage — c'était mon devoir, au surplus — il faut bien m'exécuter.

Je m'exécute. Je communique à M. Barsac mes observations sur notre escorte et sur l'officier qui la commande, et, sous forme de conclusion, je formule timidement l'hypothèse que, si ces gens-là ne sont pas de véritables soldats, ils pourraient bien être à la solde de l'ennemi inconnu que nous n'avons pas voulu prendre au tragique jusqu'ici.

En entendant ces énormités, M. Barsac se met à rire.

— C’est du roman! s’écrie-t-il. Vous me paraissez avoir, monsieur Florence, une brillante imagination. Elle vous sera fort utile, s’il vous plaît jamais d’aborder le théâtre, mais je vous conseille de vous en méfier dans la vie réelle.

— Cependant… dis-je, piqué.

— Il n’y a pas de cependant. Il y a des faits. L’ordre écrit, d’abord…

— Il peut être faux.

— Non, réplique M. Barsac, puisque le capitaine Marcenay l’a estimé véritable et qu’il a obéi sans hésiter.

— Il a pu être volé…

— Encore du roman!… Comment, je vous prie, se serait-on substitué à la véritable escorte? Il aurait fallu, dans cette hypothèse, tenir prête une troupe assez nombreuse pour, premièrement, détruire les soldats authentiques jusqu’au dernier, jusqu’au dernier, vous entendez bien, et, deuxièmement, afin d’être d’accord avec l’ordre dont on se serait emparé, leur substituer un faux détachement absolument identique, et cela longtemps à l’avance, à un moment où personne ne pouvait savoir quelle serait la composition de la nouvelle escorte, ni même que cette escorte dût être jamais envoyée par le colonel Saint-Auban. Aucun des hommes du lieutenant Lacour n’étant blessé, cette troupe aurait dû être très nombreuse, car vous n’admettez pas, je pense, que les soldats véritables se seraient laissés massacrer sans se défendre. Et vous voudriez que la présence d’une bande aussi importante n’eût pas été remarquée, que le bruit d’un pareil combat ne fût pas parvenu jusqu’à nous, alors que les nouvelles, dans la brousse, se transmettent de village en village avec la rapidité du télégraphe? Voilà à quelles impossibilités on se heurte, quand on lâche la bride à son imagination!

M. Barsac a raison. L’ordre n’a pas été volé. Il continue:

— Quant à l’impression que vous ont faite les hommes et leurs chefs, sur quoi repose-t-elle? En quoi ces tirailleurs, que vous apercevez d’ici, diffèrent-ils de tous les tirailleurs noirs?

Je regarde comme j’y suis invité, et je suis forcé de reconnaître que M. Barsac a encore raison. Où donc avais-je l’esprit, hier soir? Je me suis suggestionné moi-même. Ces nègres-là sont pareils à tous les nègres.

M. Barsac a conscience de son avantage. Il reprend avec plus d’assurance (et Dieu sait pourtant si c’est l’assurance qui lui manque!):

— Passons aux sous-officiers. Qu’est-ce que vous leur trouvez de particulier? Ils sont très sales, c’est vrai, mais pas plus que certains sergents du capitaine Marcenay. On ne peut pas, en campagne, être très pointilleux sur le chapitre des uniformes.

C’est parler d’or. Je glisse timidement, car je suis réellement ébranlé:

— Le lieutenant Lacour, cependant…

— Oh! il est d’une correction extraordinaire, s’écrire M. Barsac en souriant. C’est évidemment un homme très soigné de sa personne et très porté sur l’article toilette. Ce n’est pas un crime.

Non, ce n’en est pas un. Je fais un dernier effort, et j’insinue:

— Tout de même, un uniforme tout battant neuf, c’est bizarre!

— Parce que l’autre est dans la cantine du lieutenant, explique M. Barsac qui a réponse à tout. Comme il était couvert de poussière, M. Lacour a voulu se mettre en grande tenue avant de se présenter devant moi.

M. Barsac a l’air de trouver cette préoccupation très naturelle. Après tout, c’est peut-être moi qui ne me rends pas exactement compte de l’importance du chef de la mission.

— D’ailleurs, j’ai longuement causé avec le lieutenant Lacour, hier, au cours de l’après-midi…

(Pendant que j’écrivais mes notes, probablement.)

— … C’est un homme charmant, malgré ses goûts d’élégance exagérés, je vous le concède. Poli, bien élevé, déférent, respectueux même…

Ici, M. Barsac se rengorge.

— … respectueux même, j’ai trouvé en lui une relation très agréable et un subordonné très souple.

Je demande:

— Le lieutenant Lacour ne voit-il, pour sa part, aucun inconvénient à poursuivre notre voyage dans ces conditions?

— Aucun.

— Vous hésitiez, cependant, monsieur le député.

— Je n’hésite plus, déclare M. Barsac, qui s’est convaincu lui-même en parlant. Nous partirons demain.

J’interroge:

— Sans même examiner l’utilité du voyage, après en avoir établi la possibilité?

L’ironie discrète de ma question passe inaperçue.

— À quoi bon? répond M. Barsac. Ce voyage n’est pas seulement utile, il est nécessaire.

Je répète, sans comprendre:

— Nécessaire?…

Tout à fait de bonne humeur, M. Barsac me prend familièrement le bras, et, sur le ton de la confidence, il m’explique:

— Entre nous, mon cher, je veux bien vous accorder que, depuis un certain temps déjà, les Noirs que nous rencontrons sont loin d’être assez dégrossis pour qu’on puisse en faire des électeurs. Je vous accorderai encore, si vous m’en pressez, que nous n’avons aucune chance d’être plus heureux, tant que nous tournerons le dos à la côte. Mais, ce que je vous dis à vous, je ne le dirai pas à la tribune de la Chambre. Or, si nous terminons ce voyage, les choses se passeront de la manière suivante: Baudrières et moi, nous déposerons un rapport dont les conclusions seront diamétralement opposées. Ces rapports seront renvoyés à une commission. Là, ou nous nous ferons de mutuelles concessions, et l’on accordera l’électorat à quelques nègres en bordure de l’océan, ce qui constituera une victoire à mon actif, ou nous ne ferons aucune concession, et l’affaire sera enterrée. Au bout de huit jours, on n’y pensera plus, et personne ne saura si les faits m’ont donné tort ou raison. Dans les deux cas, rien ne s’opposera à ce que Baudrières ou moi, selon le vent, nous ayons un jour ou l'autre le portefeuille des Colonies. Que je revienne, au contraire, sans avoir accompli ma mission jusqu'au bout, ce sera proclamer moi-même que je me suis fourvoyé, mes ennemis crieront à tue-tête que je ne suis qu'une vieille ganache, et je serai définitivement coulé.

M. Barsac fait une petite pause, puis il conclut par cette pensée profonde:

— N'oubliez jamais cette vérité, monsieur Florence: un homme politique peut se tromper. Cela n'a aucune importance. S'il reconnaît son erreur, il est perdu.

Je savoure la maxime et je m'en vais content. Je suis très content, en effet, car je connais maintenant les raisons de chacun.

En quittant M. Barsac, je tombe en arrêt sur le carnet de M. Poncin, que celui-ci a, par hasard, oublié sur un pliant. Mes instincts de journaliste prennent le pas sur ma bonne éducation, et j'ouvre délibérément le carnet. Il y a trop longtemps qu'il m'intrigue. Il y a trop longtemps que je me demande ce que notre silencieux compagnon peut bien y écrire du matin au soir. Je vais enfin le savoir.

Hélas! je suis puni de ma curiosité. Je n'aperçois qu'un hérissement de chiffres et de lettres embrouillés à plaisir et totalement incompréhensibles. Ce ne sont que des "p. j. 0,0009", des "p. K. c. 135,08" des "M. 76,18", et ainsi de suite.

Un mystère de plus! Pourquoi cette écriture secrète? M. Poncin aurait-il donc quelque chose à cacher? Trahirait-il, lui aussi?

Allons, encore une marotte. Il faudra soigner ça. Quelle idée de suspecter ce brave homme! Je lui fais trop d'honneur, car, je peux bien le dire à ce carnet sur lequel j'écris pour moi seul, il n'est pas fort, M. Poncin.

Mais on est journaliste ou on ne l'est pas. À tout hasard, je copie des exemples de ces hiéroglyphes choisis parmi ceux qui reviennent presque quotidiennement. J'obtiens:

5 D. V. t. 7. H. 3306. M. 472,28. F 1895. P. v. 1895: 7 = 270,71. K. c. 122. P. k. c. 3306: 122 = 27,09. P. t. 27,09 X 54,600 = 1 479114. 16 F. V. t. 81. H. 12 085. M. 149,19. F. 6654. P. v. 6654: 81 = 82,15. K c. 1401. P. K. c. 12 085: 1401 = 8,62. P. t. 8,62 X 54600 = 470 652.

Je remets le carnet en place, et je me sauve avec mon butin. Ça servira peut-être. On ne sait jamais.

Dans l'après-midi, promenade. Je me fais accompagner par Tongané, qui prend le cheval de Tchoumouki, meilleur que le sien. Nous allons dans la campagne au petit trot. Au bout de cinq minutes, Tongané, que la langue démange, me dit ex abrupto:

— Y en a bon Tchoumouki partir. Tchoumouki sale nègre. Lui trahir.

En voilà bien d'une autre! Comment! Tchoumouki nous trahissait, lui aussi? Je comprends que c'est le moment de me documenter. Je fais l'étonné.

— C'est Moriliré que tu veux dire.

— Y en a pas bon Moriliré, prononce énergiquement Tongané. Mais Tchoumouki même chose Moriliré. Dire nègres: “Y a pas bon marcher.” Donner beaucoup dolo toubab (eau-de-vie), beaucoup argent, beaucoup or.

De l’or entre les mains de Moriliré et de Tchoumouki? C’est invraisemblable.

— Tu veux dire qu’ils donnaient des cauries aux nègres, pour s’en faire bien voir?

— Pas cauries, insiste Tongané. Beaucoup or.

Et il ajoute ce détail, qui me renverse:

— Beaucoup or english.

— Tu connais donc l’or anglais, Tongané?

— Ioo, me répond le Noir. Moi Achanti. Moi connaître livchterlignes.

Je comprends que Tongané, par ce vocable singulier, nomme à sa manière les livres sterling. Le mot est drôle. J’ai tenté l’orthographe phonétique pour le transcrire, mais, dans la bouche de Tongané, c’est mieux. Toutefois, je n’ai pas envie de rire, en ce moment. De l’or — et de l’or anglais! — entre les mains de Tchoumouki et de Moriliré!… Je suis confondu. Bien entendu, je n’en laisse rien paraître, et j’ai l’air de n’attacher aucune importance au renseignement.

— Tu es un brave garçon, Tongané, dis-je à mon compagnon, et, puisque tu connais si bien les livchterlignes, prends cette petite pièce d’or à l’effigie de la République française.

— Y a bon République! crie, au comble de la joie, Tongané, qui fait sauter en l’air la pièce que je lui offre, la rattrape au vol et l’insinue dans une des fontes de la selle.

Son visage exprime aussitôt de l’étonnement, et, de la cavité dans laquelle il l’a introduite, sa main retire un gros rouleau de papier, objet peu courant chez les nègres, en effet. Je pousse un cri, et j’arrache à Tongané ce rouleau que j’ai parfaitement reconnu.

Mes articles! Ce sont mes articles! Mes articles si remarquables restés dans les fontes de ce coquin de Tchoumouki! Je vérifie. Hélas! ils y sont bien tous, à compter du cinquième inclusivement. Combien sévèrement ne doit-on pas me juger à l’Expansion française! Je suis déshonoré, à jamais perdu de réputation!

Tandis que je roule ces tristes pensées, nous continuons à nous éloigner au petit trot de nos chevaux. Nous devons être à six kilomètres du camp environ, lorsque je m’arrête soudainement. Je viens de découvrir quelque chose de curieux.

C’est, presque en bordure du chemin, un espace large de six à sept mètres, long de cinquante à peu près, tracé au milieu de la brousse. Dans cet espace, les hautes herbes sont couchées, écrasées, beaucoup même sont coupées net comme aurait pu le faire une faux gigantesque. Or, et c’est cela surtout qui a attiré mon attention, dans la partie ainsi dénudée, on distingue nettement deux ornières parallèles, semblables à celles que nous avons remarquées près de Kankan, c’est-à-dire profondes de huit à dix centimètres à l’une de leurs extrémités et s’effaçant insensiblement à l’autre bout. Cette fois, le côté profond est à l’est.

Je fais malgré moi un rapprochement entre cette couple d’ornières et le bourdonnement entendu l’autre soir. À Kankan aussi, nous l’avions entendu, le bourdonnement étrange, avant de constater sur le sol ces inexplicables traces.

Quel rapport y a-t-il entre ces deux phénomènes — bourdonnement, couple d’ornières — et le kéniélala de Kankan? Je n’en vois pas. Pourtant, ce rapport doit exister, puisque, tandis que je considère ces énigmatiques sillons, mon subconscient évoque de lui-même la vilaine figure du sorcier nègre. Et voilà que cette vérité m’apparaît soudain que, des quatre prédictions de ce farceur, la troisième, après les deux premières, vient de se réaliser!

Alors, seul avec mon noir compagnon dans cette immensité, déserte, un frisson — le second, en comptant celui d’hier — me parcourt de la nuque au talon, et, pendant un instant, songeant au mystère qui m’entoure, j’ai peur.

C’est exquis, surtout dans de pareilles conditions. Malheureusement, ça ne dure pas, car je ne suis pas très bien organisé pour la peur. Mon point faible, à moi, c’est la curiosité. Aussi, tandis que nous revenons, je ressasse à satiété les irritants problèmes qui me sont posés et m’entête à en poursuivre la solution. Cet exercice m’absorbe tellement que je ne vois plus rien autour de moi.

En arrivant au camp, je sursaute. Tongané, sans aucun préambule, m’a dit tout à coup:

— Toulatigui (lieutenant) y a pas bon. Sale tête singe.

Je réponds sans même y penser, ce qui est mon excuse:

— Tu parles!…

17 février. — Forte étape aujourd’hui, et plus forte encore hier. Cinquante kilomètres dans ces deux jours. Tchoumouki n’a pas reparu — la canaille!

On s’en aperçoit. Sous la direction unique de Tongané, nos âniers et porteurs font merveille, et marchent avec le maximum d’entrain dont ils sont capables.

Pendant ces deux jours, les craintes que j’avais conçues se sont atténuées, je le confesse. L’escorte a fait correctement son métier, qui, d’ailleurs, n’est pas difficile. Les vingt hommes, en deux files, encadrent le convoi, comme l’encadraient ceux du capitaine Marcenay. Je remarque seulement qu’ils n’échangent pas, avec notre personnel noir, ces facéties de même couleur dont leurs prédécesseurs n’étaient pas avares. Cela fait honneur, en somme, à leur discipline.

Les deux sous-officiers restent en général à l’arrière-garde, quand ils ne parcourent pas la ligne des tirailleurs. Ils ne parlent à personne, sauf à leurs hommes, auxquels ils adressent, de temps à autre, des ordres brefs aussitôt exécutés.

Il faut reconnaître que, si notre escorte est peu nombreuse, elle est du moins fortement commandée.

Le lieutenant Lacour se tient en tête, à peu près à la place qu’occupait le capitaine Marcenay, à côté de M. Barsac. Je remarque que Mlle Mornas a rétrogradé de quelques rangs. Elle est avec Saint-Bérain, derrière le docteur Châtonnay et M. Poncin. Mlle Mornas n’a pas l’air de priser beaucoup la société du lieutenant.

Rien à dire sur le compte de celui-ci, cependant. S’il parle peu, il agit. Il est certain que son attitude énergique n’est pas étrangère au résultat très satisfaisant de ces deux journées de marche.

Non, rien à dire. Et pourtant…

Mais ce doit être chez moi une idée fixe. Le mystère que je sens autour de nous, les faits bizarres que j'ai constatés m'ont sans doute troublé la cervelle, et je suis enclin, trop enclin sans doute à voir la trahison partout.

Quoi qu'il en soit, voici ce qui motive ma restriction.

C'était ce matin, vers neuf heures. Nous traversons alors un petit hameau de quelques feux complètement désert, quand nous entendons des gémissements sortir de l'une des cases. Sur l'ordre de M. Barsac, le convoi s'arrête, et le docteur Châtonnay, accompagné du lieutenant Lacour et de deux tirailleurs, pénètre dans la case d'où partent les plaintes. Bien entendu, la presse, c'est-à-dire moi, y pénètre avec eux.

Dans la pièce où nous entrons, un triste spectacle frappe nos regards. Il y a deux morts et un blessé. Chose affreuse, les deux cadavres, un homme et une femme, sont abominablement mutilés. Qui a tué et blessé ces pauvres gens? Qui s'est rendu coupable de ces atroces mutilations?

Le docteur Châtonnay s'occupe d'abord du blessé. Comme il fait trop noir dans la case, les tirailleurs le portent au-dehors sur son ordre. C'est un assez vieux nègre. Il est atteint à l'épaule, et la blessure est terrible. Les os de la clavicule sont à nu. Je me demande quelle arme a pu causer de tels ravages.

Le docteur nettoie la plaie et en extrait de multiples fragments de plomb. Il rapproche ensuite les chairs, les recoud et panse soigneusement la blessure, à l'aide de bandes que lui passe le lieutenant Lacour. Tant que dure l'opération, le patient ne cesse de faire entendre de lamentables gémissements. Il semble moins souffrir lorsque le pansement est terminé.

Mais le docteur paraît soucieux. Il entre une seconde fois dans la case, examine les deux cadavres, et, quand il sort, il est plus soucieux encore. Il s’approche du blessé, qu’il interroge par l’intermédiaire de Tongané.

Du récit de ce pauvre nègre, il résulte que, six jours plus tôt, le 11, par conséquent, soit trois jours avant notre changement d’escorte, le petit hameau a été attaqué par une troupe de Noirs commandé par deux Blancs. Les habitants se sont alors sauvés dans la brousse, à l’exception de l’homme et de la femme dont nous avons trouvé les cadavres, lesquels n’ont pas eu le temps de se mettre à l’abri. Le blessé était avec les autres.

Malheureusement, pendant qu’il fuyait, une balle l’a frappé à l’épaule. Il a eu, néanmoins, la force de se cacher dans la brousse, et a ainsi échappé à ses agresseurs. Lorsque ceux-ci se furent éloignés, ses compagnons l’ont rapporté au village, mais tout le monde a de nouveau pris la fuite, quand on a vu arriver une autre troupe, et précisément du côté par lequel la première s’était éloignée.

Tel est ce récit qui ne laisse pas de nous inquiéter. Il ne peut nous être agréable, en effet, d’apprendre qu’une bande de malfaiteurs court le pays. C’est même une vraie chance que nous n’ayons pas eu affaire à elle, puisque, d’après le blessé, elle allait à notre rencontre.

Cependant, le pauvre diable exprime d’une manière touchante sa reconnaissance au docteur Châtonnay, quand il se tait tout à coup, tandis que ses yeux expriment une profonde terreur et se fixent sur quelque chose ou quelqu’un qui est derrière nous. Nous nous retournons, et nous trouvons face à face avec un des deux sous-officiers de notre escorte. C’est la vue de cet homme qui a causé au nègre tant d’épouvante.

Le sous-officier, d’ailleurs, n’a pas l’air ému. Il s’émeut, toutefois, quand les yeux glacés du lieutenant Lacour lui lancent un regard terrible où se lisent à dose égale reproche et menace. Je surprends au passage ce regard que je ne m’explique pas. Le sergent se touche alors le front, de manière à nous faire entendre que le blessé délire, et va rejoindre ses hommes.

Nous revenons auprès de notre malade. Mais le charme est rompu. Il nous regarde avec terreur et il est impossible d’en tirer une parole. On le transporte donc dans sa case, et nous repartons, assez rassurés sur son sort, au surplus, car le docteur Châtonnay affirme qu’il guérira.

Je ne sais à quoi pensent mes compagnons. Pour ma part, je creuse, tout en marchant, ce nouveau problème offert à ma sagacité: Pourquoi le vieux nègre a-t-il manifesté pareille frayeur? Pourquoi, alors qu’il n’avait fait nulle attention au lieutenant Lacour, cette frayeur a-t-elle été provoquée, sans aucun doute possible, par la vue de l’un de nos sergents?

À ce problème nulle solution, pour changer. Toutes ces énigmes insolubles que le hasard nous pose, cela finit par être agaçant à la fin.

Ce soir, assez tard, nous avons dressé nos tentes auprès d’un autre petit village du nom de Kadou. Nous sommes fort tristes d’y être arrivés, car c’est à Kadou que Mlle Mornas et Saint-Bérain vont nous quitter. Tandis que nous continuerons tout droit vers Ouagadougou et le Niger, ils remonteront au nord, avec Gao et ce même Niger comme objectif.

Il est inutile de dire que nous avons fait tout au monde pour les décider à renoncer à ce projet insensé. Ainsi qu’on pouvait le présumer, nos efforts ont été vains. J’ose prévoir que la future moitié du capitaine Marcenay ne sera pas des plus maniables. Quand Mlle Mornas a quelque chose dans la tête, le diable ne l’en ferait pas démordre.

En désespoir de cause, on a demandé du renfort au lieutenant Lacour, et on l’a prié de montrer, à son tour, à notre compagne quelle folie elle était sur le point de commettre. Je suis convaincu qu’il aurait plaidé en pure perte, mais il n’a pas pris cette peine. Le lieutenant Lacour n’a pas prononcé une parole. Il a fait un geste évasif, et il a souri, d’un sourire que j’ai trouvé drôle, je ne saurais dire exactement pourquoi.

Donc, on a fait halte auprès de Kadou. Au moment où je vais me retirer sous ma toile particulière, le docteur Châtonnay me retient. Il me dit:

— Une chose dont je désire vous informer, monsieur Florence, c’est que les balles qui ont frappé les nègres de ce matin étaient des balles explosives.

Et il s’en va, sans attendre ma réponse.

Bon! encore un mystère! Des balles explosives, maintenant! Qui peut user de pareilles armes? Comment même de telles armes peuvent-elles exister dans cette contrée?

Deux questions de plus à ajouter à ma collection qui s’enrichit sans cesse. Par contre, c’est ma collection de réponses qui n’augmente pas!

18 février. — Dernière nouvelle du jour, sans commentaire: notre escorte est partie. Je dis bien: partie.

J’insiste, parce que ce n’est pas croyable, et je répète: l’escorte est partie. Au réveil, il y a de cela trois ou quatre heures, nous ne l’avons plus trouvée. Elle s’était évaporée, volatilisée pendant la nuit, et, avec elle, tous les porteurs et tous les âniers sans exception.

On a compris? Le lieutenant Lacour, ses deux sergents et ses vingt hommes ne sont pas allés faire un peu de footing matinal, pour revenir à l’heure du déjeuner. Ils sont partis, dé-fi-ni-ti-ve-ment par-tis.

Nous voici seuls dans la brousse, avec nos chevaux, nos armes personnelles, trente-six ânes, cinq jours de vivres, et Tongané.

Ah! je voulais des aventures!…

CHAPITRE 11

Que faire?

Quand les membres de la mission Barsac, arrivés de la veille à Kadou, constatèrent, en se réveillant, le 18 février, la disparition de leur escorte et de leur personnel noir au complet, ce fut une stupeur. Cette double défection, et en particulier celle de l’escorte, était si extraordinaire qu’ils se fussent pendant longtemps refusés à la croire définitive, si la preuve ne leur avait été aussitôt donnée que soldats et serviteurs étaient partis sans esprit de retour.

C’est Amédée Florence qui, sorti le premier de sa tente, avait donné l’éveil à ses compagnons. Tous, y compris Malik, qui avait passé la nuit dans la tente de Jane Mornas, furent réunis en un instant. Comme il arrive d’ordinaire, la discussion fut, au début, assez confuse. On échangeait plutôt des exclamations que des réflexions. Avant de chercher à organiser l’avenir, on commençait par s’étonner du présent.

Pendant qu’ils discouraient ainsi, un gémissement s’éleva d’un fourré voisin et leur apprit qu’ils n’étaient pas seuls, comme ils le supposaient. Saint-Bérain, Amédée Florence et le docteur Châtonnay coururent à l’endroit d’où le gémissement semblait provenir, et découvrirent Tongané, ficelé, bâillonné, et, qui plus est, portant une longue blessure au flanc gauche.

Tongané délivré de ses liens, ranimé et pansé, on l’interrogea. Moitié dans son petit nègre habituel, moitié en bambara, que traduisait, dans ce cas, Jane Mornas, Tongané raconta ce qu’il savait des événements de la nuit.

La désertion s’était accomplie entre une heure et deux heures du matin. À ce moment, Tongané, réveillé par des bruits insolites, que les Européens n’avaient pas entendus dans leur tente, avait eu la surprise de voir les vingt tirailleurs à cheval, et déjà à quelque distance du camp, tandis que le personnel noir, dirigé par le lieutenant Lacour et les deux sergents, s’agitait et semblait accomplir une besogne dont la nuit ne permettait pas de se rendre exactement compte. Intrigué, et, d’ailleurs, sans méfiance, Tongané s’était levé, et, dans l’intention de se renseigner, s’était dirigé vers les porteurs et les âniers. Il n’avait pu les atteindre. À mi-chemin, deux hommes s’étaient jetés sur lui, et l’un d’eux l’avait saisi à la gorge, sans lui laisser le temps de pousser un cri. En un instant, il fut renversé, bâillonné, ligoté. Avant de tomber, il avait pu reconnaître, cependant, que les Noirs, porteurs et âniers, étaient en train de se charger de nombreux ballots choisis parmi les autres. Tongané était donc réduit à l’impuissance, et déjà ses agresseurs s’éloignaient, quand ils furent abordés par une troisième personne. Ce nouveau venu, qui n’était autre que le lieutenant Lacour, demanda d’une voix brève:

— C’est fait?

— Oui, répondit un des agresseurs, dans lequel Tongané reconnut alors un des sergents.

Il y eut un silence. Tongané sentit qu’on se penchait sur lui. Des mains se promenèrent sur son corps, le palpèrent.

— Mais vous êtes fous, ma parole! reprit le lieutenant. Vous partiez en laissant derrière vous un gaillard qui en a peut-être trop vu. Robert, un coup de baïonnette dans cette vermine, s'il te plaît.

L'ordre avait été exécuté sur-le-champ, mais, Tongané ayant heureusement réussi à accomplir un mouvement de torsion, l'arme, au lieu de le frapper en pleine poitrine, avait glissé le long de ses côtes, en n'y faisant qu'une estafilade plus impressionnante que grave. En raison de l'obscurité, le lieutenant et ses deux acolytes s'y étaient trompés, d'autant mieux que l'astucieux guide avait eu la précaution de pousser un soupir, comme s'il rendait l'âme, et de retenir ensuite sa respiration. Le sang dont la baïonnette était couverte avait complété l'erreur des assassins.

— C'est fait? répéta la voix du lieutenant Lacour, quand le coup eut été porté.

— Eh bien! répondit l'homme qui avait frappé, et que son chef avait désigné sous le nom de

Robert.

Les trois hommes s'étaient alors en allés, et Tongané n'avait plus rien entendu. Bientôt, d'ailleurs, il avait perdu connaissance, tant à cause du bâillon qui l'étouffait, que par suite de la perte de son sang. Il n'en savait pas davantage.

C'en était assez assurément pour démontrer qu'il s'agissait, non d'une absence momentanée de l'escorte, mais d'un abandon définitif prémédité et préparé de longue main.

Ce point établi, on se regarda, stupéfait et consterné. La première parole qui rompit le silence sortit de la bouche d’Amédée Florence, pour qui on réclamera une fois encore l’indulgence du lecteur.

— Elle est raide, celle-là! s’écria le reporter, qui ne faisait en somme qu’exprimer la pensée générale sous une forme un peu familière.

Ce mot ayant amené une détente, on commença à prendre les mesures que comportait la situation. Avant tout, il convenait d’en établir le bilan. Vérification faite, on reconnut qu’on possédait encore sept fusils, dont six de chasse, et une dizaine de revolvers, toutes ces armes largement pourvues de munitions, sept chevaux, trente-six ânes, environ cent cinquante kilos de marchandises diverses et des vivres pour quatre jours. Les moyens de défense et de transport ne manquaient donc pas. Quant aux vivres, il n’y avait pas lieu de s’en inquiéter, puisqu’il serait aisé de s’en procurer dans les villages, comme on l’avait fait jusqu’ici. Au surplus, les six Européens étant tous en possession d’un excellent fusil, on était en droit de compter sur l’appoint de la chasse. On conclut, par conséquent, de cet inventaire, que le parti, quel qu’il fût, auquel on s’arrêterait finalement, ne se heurterait, au point de vue matériel, à aucun obstacle infranchissable.

Dans tous les cas, il convenait de se défaire des ânes, qui, en l’absence de conducteurs expérimentés, eussent été un sérieux impedimentum. Cela fait, on arrêterait un plan de conduite. Si la décision était telle que le voyage dût avoir encore une certaine durée, on chercherait à engager cinq ou six porteurs, qu’on chargerait des marchandises, lesquelles seraient, au fur et à mesure des besoins, échangées dans les villages contre les denrées nécessaires à la subsistance des explorateurs. Dans l’hypothèse contraire, on liquiderait immédiatement ces marchandises à n’importe quel prix, ce qui rendrait les porteurs inutiles et permettrait, par suite, une marche plus rapide.

Jane Mornas et Saint-Bérain, qui, seuls, étaient capables de se faire entendre des naturels, se mirent aussitôt en rapport avec les habitants de Kadou. Ils reçurent dans ce village un excellent accueil, et, quelques menus cadeaux leur ayant concilié les sympathies du dougoutigui, celui-ci les aida de son mieux. Grâce à son concours, les ânes furent vendus, tant à Kadou même que dans les villages environnants, au prix moyen de dix mille cauries (environ trente francs), soit plus de trois cent cinquante mille cauries au total. Rien qu'avec cette somme, l'existence des membres de la mission et le paiement de cinq porteurs eussent été assurés pendant près de vingt jours.

D'autre part, le dougoutigui se déclara prêt à fournir cinq porteurs, ou même davantage, si cela était utile.

Ces diverses négociations exigèrent quelques jours. Elles ne furent terminées que le soir du 22 février. Ce n'était pas là du temps perdu, car Tongané n'aurait pu se mettre en route plus tôt, mais, à cette date du 22 février, sa blessure, toute superficielle, était en bonne voie de cicatrisation, et rien ne s'opposait plus au départ.

Donc, dans la matinée du 23, on disposa six pliants suivant un cercle, au milieu duquel les cartes furent étalées, et, Tongané et Malik constituant l'auditoire, la discussion commença sous la présidence de Barsac.

— La séance est ouverte, dit machinalement celui-ci, en homme habitué au protocole de la Chambre. Quelqu'un demande-t-il la parole?

On sourit discrètement, Amédée Florence, en bon ironiste, répondit sans broncher:

— Nous parlerons après vous, monsieur le président.

— Comme il vous plaira, accorda Barsac, nullement surpris du titre qui lui était décerné.

Précisons d'abord la situation. Nous nous voyons abandonnés par notre escorte, mais bien munis d'armes et d'objets d'échange, en plein Soudan, à une grande distance de la côte…

À ces mots, M. Poncin tira de sa poche son vaste carnet, posa un binocle sur les ailes de son nez, et, lui qui ne parlait jamais, il dit:

— Exactement à mille quatre cent huit kilomètres, cinq cent quatre-vingt-trois mètres et dix-sept centimètres, détours compris, en comptant du piquet central de ma tente.

— Une pareille précision est inutile, monsieur Poncin, fit observer Barsac. Il suffit de dire que nous sommes à quatorze cents kilomètres environ de Conakry. Comme vous ne l'ignorez pas, notre intention était d'aller beaucoup plus loin encore, mais à situation nouvelle convient peut-être solution nouvelle. À mon sens, nous devons avoir pour objectif de gagner, sinon le plus rapidement, du moins le plus sûrement possible, une agglomération possédant un poste français. Là, nous aviserons, et nous examinerons en toute tranquillité ce qu'il y a lieu de faire.

L'approbation fut unanime.

— L'examen de la carte, reprit Barsac, nous montre que nous devons nous efforcer d'atteindre le Niger en un point quelconque de son cours. Ne serait-il pas possible d’aller jusqu’à Saye, par Ouagadougou et Nadiango? Depuis la prise de Tombouctou, les postes français n’ont cessé de gagner vers l’aval. J’ignore, je l’avoue, s’ils sont arrivés dès maintenant à Saye, mais cela est possible, je dirai même probable. Dans le cas où nous réussirons à nous assurer ultérieurement une autre escorte, cette combinaison aurait l’avantage de respecter le programme qui m’a été tracé.

— Mais elle aurait l’inconvénient, monsieur le président, s’écria avec impétuosité M. Poncin, tout en traçant fiévreusement des chiffres sur son carnet, de nous imposer un parcours de huit cents kilomètres. Or, nos pas, je m’en suis assuré, sont de soixante-douze centimètres, en moyenne. Huit cents kilomètres font donc un million cent onze mille cent onze pas et une fraction. Négligeons la fraction. Nous faisons à l’heure, en moyenne, cinq mille cent quarante-trois pas et une fraction.

Négligeons la fraction. Mais il y a les arrêts qui s’élèvent, par heure, je l’ai vérifié, à une moyenne de dix-huit minutes quatre secondes. Reste deux mille cinq cent vingt secondes, soit trois mille six cents pas et un dixième. Ce parcours de huit cents kilomètres exigera donc un million cent onze mille cent onze pas, divisés par trois mille six cent et un dixième, soit trois cent huit heures et vingt-deux mille huit cent deux, trente-six mille unièmes d’heure. Cela représente en tout un million cent onze mille six cent quatre-vingts secondes et une fraction. Négligeons la fraction. Or, nous marchons effectivement, en moyenne, cinq heures quarante-cinq minutes et douze secondes par jour, tous arrêts déduits, soit vingt mille sept cent douze secondes. Il faudra donc, pour franchir huit cents kilomètres, un million cent onze mille six cent quatre-vingts secondes divisées par vingt mille sept cent douze, ce qui nous donne cinquante-trois jours et treize millions neuf cent quatre-vingt mille sept cents douzièmes de jour. Pour apprécier la valeur de cette dernière fraction, il faut la réduire à son tour en heures, minutes et secondes. On obtient alors…

— Oh! oh!! oh!!! s’exclama crescendo Amédée Florence sur le point d’avoir une attaque de nerfs, ne pouvez-vous donc dire tout simplement qu’il faudra cinquante-trois jours à raison de quinze kilomètres par jour, et seulement quarante, si l’on en fait quotidiennement vingt? Mais où voulez-vous en venir avec ces effroyables calculs?

— À ceci, répondit d’un air pincé M. Poncin en faisant disparaître son imposant carnet, qu’il vaudrait mieux gagner le Niger par Djenné. On diminuerait ainsi de moitié la distance, qui serait réduite à quatre cents kilomètres.

— Mieux vaudrait encore, objecta Amédée Florence, en traçant du doigt sur la carte l’itinéraire qu’il préconisait, toucher le Niger à Ségou-Sikoro, en passant par Bama, Quattara, Djitamana, et caetera. Le trajet serait de cinq cents kilomètres environ, mais, outre qu’on suivrait ainsi le même itinéraire que le capitaine Marcenay, on regagnerait ces cent kilomètres supplémentaires, puisqu’on n’aurait pas à remonter le fleuve de Djenné à Ségou. De plus, ce dernier centre est relativement important, et nous vous trouverons sûrement du secours.

— Très bien raisonné, approuva le docteur Châtonnay. Toutefois, il est un parti que je crois meilleur encore. C’est de revenir tout bonnement sur nos pas, sinon jusqu’à la mer, du moins jusqu’à Sikasso, dont nous ne sommes distants que de deux cents kilomètres, et où nous retrouverons nos compatriotes qui nous ont si cordialement reçus. Là, nous déciderons s’il convient d’aller sur Bamako, ou s’il est préférable, comme le croit M. Amédée Florence, et comme c’est également mon avis, de remonter à Ségou-Sikoro.

— Le docteur a raison, approuva Florence. C’est le parti le plus sage.

Chacun ayant exprimé son opinion, il y eut un temps d’arrêt dans la discussion.

— Il peut se faire, monsieur Florence, reprit, après un instant de réflexion, Barsac, désireux de donner à ses compagnons une idée flatteuse de son héroïsme, que, le docteur et vous, vous ayez raison. Je vous prie de considérer, toutefois, que le retour à Sikasso signifie abandon, à tout le moins momentané, de la mission que j’ai acceptée. Or, messieurs, homme de devoir avant tout…

— Nous comprenons vos scrupules, monsieur Barsac, interrompit Florence, qui sentait venir le discours, mais il est des cas où le devoir, c’est la prudence.

— Reste à déterminer précisément, répliqua Barsac, si nous nous trouvons dans l’un de ces cas-là. Notre escorte a déserté, il est vrai, mais je cherche en vain quels dangers nous menacent. En somme, les seuls que nous ayons courus jusqu’ici proviennent d’un adversaire hypothétique, probable, j’y consens, mais non certain, puisque son existence ne nous est démontrée que par les coups, qu’il nous porte. Apprécions donc ces coups en eux-mêmes, et ils nous apparaîtront bien atténués. Qu’a-t-on fait de plus que nous créer des embarras? D’après M. Florence, on aurait, tout d’abord, essayé de nous effrayer; c’est encore notre ennemi inconnu, je l’admets, qui nous a, plus tard, suscité des difficultés avec notre personnel, à Sikasso, et au-delà, et, enfin, il s’est arrangé de manière à substituer, par un procédé que j’ignore, une fausse escorte à la véritable. Mais veuillez réfléchir qu’en agissant ainsi on a fait preuve d’une très grande modération. Cette fausse escorte, au lieu de se borner à déserter, pouvait si aisément nous massacrer tous! Elle n’en a rien fait. Bien plus, on a eu l’attention de nous laisser des vivres, nos armes, nos munitions, nos montures et une certaine quantité de marchandises. Ce ne sont pas là des procédés bien terribles.

— Il y a Tongané, objecta doucement le docteur Châtonnay.

— Tongané est un nègre, répliqua Barsac, et pour beaucoup de gens la vie d’un nègre ne compte guère.

— M. Barsac a raison, intervint Florence. Oui, les procédés employés contre nous portent la marque d’une véritable modération, et il est certain qu’on n’en a pas voulu à notre vie jusqu’ici. Je dis: jusqu’ici, parce que notre adversaire inconnu pourrait bien recourir à un système d’attaque plus efficace, si nous persistons à aller dans une direction qui lui déplaît. Dans ce cas, la blessure de Tongané suffit à nous prouver que ceux que nous gênons ont la main prompte.

— Très juste, approuva le docteur.

L’approbation du docteur Châtonnay fut suivie d’un silence de quelques minutes, que Barsac employa à de profondes réflexions. Certes, elles étaient justes, les déductions d’Amédée Florence, et, bien évidemment, l’honorable député du Midi n’allait pas compromettre sa précieuse existence dans l’unique but d’éviter les critiques qui l’attendaient à Paris, s’il y revenait sans avoir accompli entièrement sa mission. Ces critiques, d’ailleurs, était-il impossible d’y répondre?

— Toute réflexion faite, dit-il, pressé d’essayer sur ses auditeurs actuels l’effet des arguments qu’il servirait plus tard à ses collègues de la Chambre, je me rallie à la proposition de M. Amédée Florence, et plus particulièrement sous la forme que lui a donnée notre honorable collègue, le docteur Châtonnay. Je voterai donc pour le retour à Sikasso, avec Ségou-Sikoro pour objectif final. Que si, messieurs…

Ici, Amédée Florence, sentant poindre le discours, cessa d'écouter l'orateur et se mit à penser à autre chose.

— Que si, messieurs, quelqu'un était tenté de me blâmer d'avoir interrompu ce voyage sans absolue nécessité, je lui répondrais que la responsabilité de cette interruption incombe au gouvernement, dont le devoir était d'assurer à notre mission une protection efficace. Il aurait dû, par conséquent, puisque des nécessités supérieures le contraignaient à changer la composition de notre escorte, soit prendre toutes mesures utiles pour qu'une troupe d'aventuriers ne pût se substituer au véritable détachement qu'il nous destinait, soit, si une telle substitution n'a pas eu lieu, choisir le chef auquel il confiait notre sécurité avec assez de tact pour que celui-ci ne fût pas accessible à des sollicitations dont il ne nous appartient pas de rechercher l'origine. L'enquête qui me paraît s'imposer, l'enquête, messieurs, nous dira…

— Pardon, monsieur le président, interrompit Amédée Florence, si vous voulez bien le permettre…

Le reporter avait, dès l'abord, suggéré le plus sage parti, que son sens pratique lui avait fait découvrir tout de suite. Mais sa proposition cessa de l'intéresser, aussitôt qu'il comprit qu'on allait l'adopter. Quelques minutes plus tard, il n'aurait même pas fallu le presser beaucoup pour qu'il proclamât son regret de voir finir ce voyage, juste au moment où celui-ci promettait de devenir intéressant.

Il en était à ce point de ses réflexions, quand son regard était tombé, par hasard, sur Jane Mornas et Saint-Bérain. Il avait alors interrompu Barsac avec d’autant moins d’hésitation qu’il ne l’écoutait plus, ainsi qu’on l’a déjà fait remarquer.

— Si vous voulez bien le permettre, monsieur le président, dit-il, je ferai observer que nous prenons une décision sans avoir sollicité l’avis de Mlle Mornas et de M. de Saint-Bérain, qui doivent, j’imagine, avoir tout comme nous voix au chapitre.

L’observation était fondée. Depuis que la discussion durait, Jane Mornas et Saint-Bérain avaient écouté en silence, sans y prendre part en aucune manière.

— M. Florence a raison, reconnut Barsac, en s’adressant à Jane Mornas. Si donc il vous plaît, mademoiselle, de nous faire connaître votre sentiment…

— Je vous remercie de bien vouloir me consulter, monsieur Barsac, répondit tranquillement Jane Mornas, mais nous devons rester étrangers à cette discussion qui ne nous concerne pas.

— Qui ne vous concerne pas?… Pourquoi donc, mademoiselle? Il me semble que nous sommes tous logés à la même enseigne.

— Du tout, monsieur, répliqua Jane Mornas. Si, par suite des circonstances, vous renoncez au but que vous vous étiez proposé, le nôtre n’a pas changé. Nous n’avons pas voulu nous séparer de vous au moment où vous aviez le plus d’ennuis, mais nous avons toujours eu l’intention de continuer notre voyage selon l’itinéraire que nous nous sommes tracé.

— Vous persistez donc à aller jusqu’à Gao?

— Plus que jamais.

— Seuls? Sans escorte?

— Nous n’avons jamais compté y arriver autrement.

— Sans porteurs?

— Nous en engagerons d’autres. Si c’est impossible, nous nous en passerons.

— Malgré cette hostilité, dont nous ignorons l’origine, mais dont la réalité n’est plus contestable?

— Malgré cette hostilité, qui, d’ailleurs, me semble dirigée plutôt contre vous que contre nous.

— Comment le savoir, puisque nous suivions la même route? En tout cas, c’est à vous, j’en ai grand-peur, que s’attaquera notre adversaire inconnu, si vous seuls continuez dans la direction du Niger.

— S’il en est ainsi, nous braverons donc cet adversaire inconnu.

— Mais c’est de la folie! s’écrira Barsac. Dussions-nous user de contrainte, nous ne vous laisserons pas, mademoiselle, commettre une pareille imprudence, pour satisfaire ce que vous-même appelez un caprice.

Jane Mornas hésita un instant, puis répondit tristement:

— Il ne s’agit malheureusement pas d’un caprice, comme je vous l’ai dit jusqu’ici.

— De quoi s’agit-il donc? demanda Barsac, surpris.

Jane Mornas hésita de nouveau. Puis, après un court silence, elle prononça gravement:

— D’un devoir.

Barsac, le docteur Châtonnay et Amédée Florence regardèrent Jane Mornas, celui-ci avec intérêt, ceux-là avec étonnement. Les premiers se demandaient ce que la jeune fille entendait par le mot qu’elle venait de prononcer, et quel devoir pouvait être assez impérieux pour l’entraîner au point le plus extrême de la boucle du Niger? Le dernier, qui, par tempérament, avait toujours prêté à ses compagnons des raisons particulières d’accomplir ce voyage, n’éprouvait d’autre sentiment qu’une grande satisfaction, à la pensée qu’il allait connaître l’une de celles qui jusqu’alors lui étaient restées cachées.

Jane Mornas reprit:

— Pardonnez-moi, messieurs, je vous ai trompés…

— Trompés?… répéta Barsac dont l’étonnement grandissait.

— Oui, je vous ai trompés. Si M. de Saint-Bérain vous a donné son nom véritable et s’il est bien vrai qu’il soit Français comme vous-mêmes, je me suis, moi, présentée à vous sous un faux nom et sous une nationalité d’emprunt. Je suis Anglaise et je m’appelle Jane Buxton. Je suis la fille de lord Buxton, la sœur du capitaine George Buxton, et c’est auprès de Koubo que reposent les restes de mon malheureux frère. C’est donc là qu’il me faut aller, car c’est là seulement que j’entreprendrai vraiment l’œuvre que je me suis fixée.

Alors Jane Buxton — son nom lui sera restitué désormais — raconta le drame de Koubo, l’accusation infamante portée contre George Buxton, la mort de celui-ci, la honte et le désespoir de lord Glenor. Elle dit le but sacré qu’elle s’était proposé: réhabiliter son frère, effacer la tache faite à l’honneur de son nom, et rendre la paix au vieillard dont la vie s’achevait dans la morne solitude du château d’Uttoxeter.

Une vive émotion s’était emparée de ses auditeurs. Ils admiraient cette jeune fille qui, pour des raisons si nobles, avait osé affronter et allait affronter encore tant de fatigues et de dangers.

Quand elle eut fini de parler:

— Miss Buxton, dit Amédée Florence, non sans une certaine dureté, je me permettrai de vous faire un reproche.

— Un reproche?… À moi?… s’étonna Jane, qui attendait de son récit un effet tout autre.

— Oui, un reproche, et un sérieux encore!… Quelle singulière — et peu flatteuse — opinion vous faites-vous donc, miss Buxton, des Français en général et d’Amédée Florence en particulier?

— Que voulez-vous dire, monsieur Florence? balbutia Jane Buxton, troublée.

— Eh quoi! s’écria le reporter d’un ton indigné, vous vous êtes imaginée comme ça qu’Amédée Florence allait vous permettre d’aller sans lui faire un petit tour à Koubo?

— Oh! monsieur Florence… protesta avec émotion Jane, qui commençait à comprendre.

— C’est du joli!… continuait cependant Amédée Florence en simulant toujours une vive indignation. Et d’un égoïsme!…

— Je ne vois pas… essaya de placer Jane à demi souriante.

— Laissez-moi parler, je vous prie, interrompit Florence avec autorité. Vous avez donc oublié que je suis journaliste, plus spécialement reporter, et que j’ai cette particularité de posséder un directeur? Or, savez-vous ce qu’il me dirait, mon directeur, s’il apprenait que j’ai raté un reportage aussi sensationnel sur l’affaire Buxton? Eh bien! il me dirait: “Mon petit Florence, vous n’êtes qu’un âne!” Et il me flanquerait à la porte en deux temps. Or, je tiens à ma place, moi. Je partirai donc avec vous.

— Oh! monsieur Florence!… répéta Jane profondément émue.

Le reporter la regarda en face.

— Je pars avec vous, miss Buxton, affirma-t-il avec énergie. Et ne perdez pas votre temps à me soutenir le contraire, car je le sais mieux que vous, j’imagine.

Jane tendit la main au brave et courageux garçon.

— J’accepte, monsieur Florence, lui dit-elle, tandis que deux grosses larmes tombaient de ses yeux.

— Et moi, miss Buxton, m’acceptez-vous aussi? demanda tout à coup la grosse voix du docteur Châtonnay.

— Vous, docteur?…

— Sans doute, moi. Une pareille expédition ne peut se passer de médecin. Puisque vous allez vous faire hacher en menus morceaux, paraît-il, il faut bien que je sois là pour les recoudre.

— Oh! docteur!… répéta encore Jane, qui commençait à pleurer pour de bon.

Mais que devint cette émotion, quand elle entendit Barsac s’écrier d’une voix où grondait la colère:

— Eh bien! et moi?… Je ne compte plus, alors, que personne ne songe à me demander mon avis?

Barsac était réellement furieux. Lui aussi, il avait pensé tout de suite à se joindre à miss Buxton. Il ferait ainsi coup double, puisque l’itinéraire de la jeune fille était très analogue au sien, et que l’imprudence était justifiée par un but dont il appréciait la noblesse. Au surplus, quatre hommes, quatre Français, pouvaient-ils abandonner froidement cette jeune fille dans la brousse et la laisser courir seule sa dangereuse aventure? Florence et le docteur Châtonnay lui avaient donc coupé un effet, comme on dit au théâtre, ce qui est toujours une chose très désagréable.

— Je ne parle pas pour M. Florence, continua-t-il, en accentuant encore en apparence sa mauvaise humeur véritable, M. Florence est libre. Mais, vous, docteur, vous faites partie de la mission que je commande, je suppose. Auriez-vous donc le projet de déserter à votre tour, afin que votre chef soit abandonné du dernier de ses soldats?

— Je vous assure, monsieur Barsac… balbutia le docteur, qui n’avait pas réfléchi à ce côté de la question.

— Si telle n’est pas votre intention, monsieur, serait-ce donc que vous auriez la pensée que j’irais moi aussi à Koubo? Mais est-ce à vous qu’il appartient de décider de notre itinéraire? Vous appartient-il, surtout, en prenant une telle initiative, de me donner une leçon?

— Croyez, monsieur Barsac… essaya de placer le pauvre docteur.

— Non, docteur, non, je ne permets pas, répliqua Barsac dont la voix s’élevait graduellement. Et sachez bien ceci, c’est que, moi, chef responsable de la mission du Niger, je n’approuve pas vos projets. Bien au contraire, considérant que le seul guide qui nous reste a été engagé par miss Buxton et qu’il est à sa disposition exclusive, considérant que nous ne pouvons nous faire comprendre des indigènes sans le secours de miss Buxton et de M. de Saint-Bérain, qui sont les seuls d’entre nous à parler la langue bambara, je veux, j’entends, J’ORDONNE…

Barsac, dont la voix avait atteint une sonorité impressionnante, fit une pause savante, puis, d’un ton plus simple, il conclut:

— … que nous nous rendions tous au Niger en passant par Koubo.

— Comment, monsieur Barsac?… balbutia Jane qui craignait d’avoir mal entendu.

— C’est comme ça, miss Buxton, trancha Barsac. Il faudra vous résigner à nous supporter jusqu’au bout.

— Oh! monsieur Barsac… murmura une dernière fois Jane Buxton, qui se mit à pleurer tout à fait.

Elle n’était pas seule à avoir les yeux humides. L’émotion était générale. Les hommes s’efforçaient, toutefois, de la dissimuler, et elle se traduisait chez eux par une sorte d’énervement et par un flot de paroles inutiles. Ces répliques se croisaient:

— C’est un voyage des plus simples, proclamait Florence, puisque nous avons des vivres.

— Pour cinq jours, disait le docteur Châtonnay du même ton dont il eût dit pour six mois.

— Quatre seulement, rectifiait Barsac, mais nous en achèterons d’autres.

— D’ailleurs, il y a la chasse, suggérait le docteur.

— Et la pêche, ajoutait Saint-Bérain.

— Et les fruits, que je connais pas mal, affirmait le docteur.

— Moi savoir légumes: patates, ignames, glissait Tongané.

— Moi faire beurre de cé, renchérissait Malik.

— Hip! hip! hip! hourra! criait Amédée Florence. C’est Capoue, le pays de Chanaan, le paradis terrestre.

— Nous partirons demain, conclut enfin Barsac. Préparons-nous sans perdre une heure.

Une chose digne de remarque, c’est que M. Poncin n’avait pas ouvert la bouche. Par contre, dès qu’il eut été décidé que tout le monde irait à Koubo, M. Poncin avait tiré son carnet, qu’il couvrait depuis ce moment d’innombrables calculs.

— Tout cela est très bien, dit-il en réponse aux derniers mots de Barsac. Il n’empêche que la route de Koubo, comparée à celle de Ségou-Sikoro, représente une augmentation de quatre cents kilomètres. Nos pas étant, on le sait, de soixante-douze centimètres, cela fait cinq cent cinquante-cinq mille cinq cent cinquante-cinq pas, plus une fraction. Négligeons la fraction. Or, nous faisons à l’heure, je l’ai dit, trois mille six cents pas et un dixième, et nous marchons chaque jour cinq heures quarante-cinq minutes dix-huit secondes. Donc…

Mais personne n’écoutait M. Poncin. Barsac, le docteur Châtonnay, Amédée Florence, Jane Buxton et Saint-Bérain s’occupaient déjà activement à préparer le départ du lendemain, et M. Poncin parlait dans le désert.

CHAPITRE 12

Une tombe, des ossements

Accompagnés de six porteurs fournis par le dougoutigui de Kadou, les débris de la mission Barsac quittèrent ce village dans la matinée du 24 février. Pour troublants que fussent les derniers événements qui l’avaient désorganisée, le départ s’effectua dans la gaieté. Si on en excepte M. Poncin, dont les sentiments intimes demeuraient impénétrables, tous étaient agréablement surexcités par la perspective d’accomplir un acte généreux, voire héroïque en quelque manière, et se félicitaient réciproquement de la décision prise. Au surplus, rien n’était perdu encore. Les six Européens, de même que Tongané, qui avait pris Malik en croupe, possédaient toujours leurs montures, et on ne manquait ni d’armes, ni de vivres, ni d’objets d’échange. D’autre part, le pays paraissait tranquille, et on était en droit d’espérer que l’adversaire inconnu, contre lequel on s’était involontairement heurté jusqu’alors, mettrait un terme à ses persécutions, la mission n’étant plus capable d’inquiéter personne. Rien ne s’opposait donc, en principe, à ce qu’on atteignît Koubo sans avoir à subir d’épreuves vraiment sérieuses.

Rien, non plus, ne s’opposerait sans doute à ce qu’on y parvînt rapidement, maintenant qu’on ne serait plus retardé par un nombreux troupeau d’ânes, parmi lesquels il en est nécessairement de récalcitrants. Pour activer la marche, on s’était, d’ailleurs, imposé de lourds sacrifices. On avait laissé au dougoutigui de Kadou, à titre de rémunération pour ses bons offices, une partie de la pacotille, ce qu’on en conservait devant aisément permettre d’arriver à Gao. Sacrifice plus douloureux, on s’était résigné à abandonner les tentes, dont une seule avait été conservée pour l’usage exclusif de Jane Buxton, malgré que celle-ci s’en fût énergiquement défendue. Quant aux hommes, ou ils trouveraient à se loger dans les villages, ou ils dormiraient en plein air. Dans la saison sèche et pour un aussi court voyage, cela ne pouvait avoir grand inconvénient. Il ne s’agissait en somme que d’un parcours de cinq cents kilomètres environ, soit de quinze à vingt journées de marche. Selon toute vraisemblance, on serait donc à Koubo entre le 10 et le 15 mars.

Le début du voyage fut d’accord avec ces favorables auspices. Les porteurs, tout frais et pleins d’ardeur, gardaient un train soutenu, et on n’employa que cinq jours à franchir les cent quarante kilomètres séparant Kadou de Sanabo, où l’on arriva dans la journée du 28. Aucun incident n’était survenu pendant cette première partie du voyage. Conformément aux prévisions, on avait généralement trouvé à se loger, le soir venu, dans des cases indigènes, fort malpropres, à vrai dire, mais enfin suffisantes, et les nuits passées en plein air, lorsqu’il n’y avait aucun village à proximité lors de la seconde halte du jour, s’étaient écoulées paisiblement. Partout bien accueillis, les voyageurs avaient pu se ravitailler sans peine, et c’est toujours nantis de leur réserve de vivres qu’ils quittèrent Sanabo le matin du 1er mars. Ils n’avaient donc, jusque-là, aucune raison de regretter le parti qu’ils avaient adopté.

— C’est-à-dire que c’est trop beau! proclamait Amédée Florence parlant à son ami Saint-Bérain, pendant qu’ils faisaient côte à côte la seconde étape du 2 mars. Le profond penseur que je suis devrait même s’en inquiéter et calculer de quelle fraction le rapport habituel du bien et du mal est vicié à notre profit. J’aime mieux supposer, toutefois, que le destin peut, de temps en temps, prendre modèle sur M. Poncin et négliger la fraction à son exemple.

— Voilà le résultat d’une bonne action, cher ami, répondit Saint-Bérain. Vous n’avez pas voulu nous abandonner. Le Ciel vous en récompense.

— Du train dont vont les choses, nous n’aurons pas grand mérite, dit, en se retournant sur sa selle, le docteur Châtonnay qui précédait les deux amis.

— Qui sait? fit Saint-Bérain. Nous ne sommes pas encore au bout.

— Bah! s’écrira Amédée Florence, c’est tout comme. Nous avons le vent en poupe, cette fois.

Ces choses-là se sentent, que diable! Je soutiens que nous allons arriver à Koubo dans un fauteuil, sans la plus petite aventure au tableau, ce qui, d’ailleurs, n’est pas très réjouissant pour un journaliste, dont le directeur… Eh là! s’interrompit-il tout à coup, en adressant cette exclamation à son cheval qui venait de buter lourdement.

— Qu’y a-t-il? interrogea Barsac.

— C’est mon cheval, expliqua Florence. Je ne sais ce qu’il a. Il bute sans cesse, depuis ce matin. Il faudra que j’examine…

Il n’eut pas le temps d’achever sa pensée. Le cheval, qui s’était arrêté brusquement, tremblait et vacillait sur ses jambes. Le reporter eut tout juste le temps de mettre pied à terre. À peine avait-il quitté la selle, que l’animal pliait des genoux et s’allongeait sur le sol.

On s’empressa de secourir la pauvre bête, qui ahanait et soufflait péniblement. On relâcha la sangle de la selle, on lui mouilla les naseaux avec l’eau d’un petit cours d’eau voisin. Rien n’y fit. Une heure plus tard, elle était morte.

— J’aurais dû toucher du bois, tout à l’heure, dit piteusement Amédée Florence transformé en piéton. Se féliciter de sa veine appelle nécessairement la guigne, c’est bien connu.

— Seriez-vous superstitieux, monsieur Florence? demanda Jane Buxton en souriant.

— Pas précisément, mademoiselle. Embêté seulement, très embêté, par exemple!

Le cheval de Tongané fut attribué au reporter, Jane Buxton prit Malik en croupe, et l’on se remit en route après une halte de deux heures, en laissant en arrière le cadavre du cheval et son harnachement qu’on ne pouvait songer à emporter. L’étape en fut raccourcie d’autant.

À la tombée de la nuit, on s’arrêta au pied d’un bouquet d’arbres naturellement disposés suivant une demi-circonférence, en bordure immédiate du chemin. Situé au sommet d’une petite éminence, ce point, d’où on avait vue dans toutes les directions, ce qui mettait à l’abri d’une surprise toujours possible, était heureusement choisi pour y passer la nuit. Ses avantages avaient, d’ailleurs, frappé de précédents voyageurs, qui, ainsi qu’on ne tarda pas à le reconnaître, avaient campé au même point. À en juger par leurs traces, ces voyageurs étaient assez nombreux et possédaient des chevaux, dont les sabots avaient laissé de multiples empreintes. Qui étaient ces gens? Des nègres ou des Blancs? La seconde hypothèse, la plus probable, car les nègres ne font pas en général usage de chevaux, devint une certitude, quand Amédée Florence eut découvert et montré à ses compagnons un objet oublié par leurs prédécesseurs. Cet objet, tout insignifiant qu’il fût, puisqu’il s’agissait d’un simple bouton, n’en était pas moins un produit de la civilisation peu employé par les Noirs, et témoignait irrécusablement de la couleur de ses anciens propriétaires.

L’état des herbes foulées, qui se redressaient déjà, prouvait, d’ailleurs, que le passage de cette troupe, quelle qu’elle fût, remontait à une dizaine de jours, à tout le moins. Comme on ne l’avait pas croisée, on devait en conclure qu’elle aussi suivait la route du Nord-Est, et que, par conséquent, on n’était pas destiné à la rencontrer jamais.

La journée du 3 mars n’offrit rien de particulier, mais, le 4, les explorateurs eurent à déplorer un nouveau décès dans leur cavalerie. Vers le soir, le cheval de Barsac mourut exactement comme était mort celui d’Amédée Florence. Cela commençait à devenir singulier.

Le docteur Châtonnay, qui avait examiné l’animal défunt, saisit la première occasion de parler confidentiellement à Amédée Florence, et dit à celui-ci:

— J’ai attendu d’être seul avec vous, monsieur Florence, pour vous apprendre quelque chose d’assez sérieux.

— Quoi donc? interrogea Florence, surpris.

— C’est que les deux chevaux sont morts empoisonnés.

— Pas possible! s’écria le reporter. Qui les empoisonnerait? Les Noirs engagés à Kadou?… Ils n’ont aucun intérêt à nous créer des difficultés, au contraire.

— Je n’accuse personne, insista le docteur, mais je maintiens ce que j’ai dit. Après le premier décès, j’avais des soupçons. Après le second, j’ai une certitude. Les signes sont indéniables. Le dernier des ignorants ne s’y tromperait pas.

— Alors, votre avis, docteur?

— Sur quel sujet?

— Sur ce que nous devons faire.

— Je n’en sais pas plus que vous. Mon rôle consiste à vous prévenir, et si je m’en suis acquitté de cette manière confidentielle, c’est pour que vous mettiez nos compagnons au courant, à l’insu de miss Buxton, qu’il me paraît inutile d’effrayer.

— Tout à fait, approuva Florence. Mais, dites-moi, docteur, est-il donc nécessaire de faire intervenir la malveillance dans ces deux accidents? Ne peuvent-ils s’expliquer autrement? Nos chevaux n’ont-ils pu brouter, en même temps que leur provende, une herbe vénéneuse quelconque?

— Ce n’est pas seulement possible, dit le docteur, c’est certain. Reste à savoir si c’est le hasard qui a mêlé à leurs aliments cette plante vénéneuse, ou si ce hasard-là porte un nom d’homme. Là-dessus, je n’en sais pas plus long que vous.

On convint de surveiller plus rigoureusement que jamais les cinq chevaux survivants, afin d’éviter le retour de semblable malheur. Un des Européens ou Tongané resterait toujours auprès d’eux pendant les haltes, de telle sorte que personne ne pût en approcher sans être vu. Fût-ce à cause de ces précautions, ou simplement parce que les deux décès étaient accidentels, quoi qu’il en soit, il ne s’en produisit plus les deux jours suivants, si bien que l’on se rassura peu à peu.

Au surplus, la perte de ces chevaux était le seul incident fâcheux qui fût survenu jusqu'alors.

La contrée était très plate, on y cheminait sans fatigue, aussi vite que l'autorisait le train des porteurs, et on continuait à s'approvisionner facilement dans les villages, ce qui permettait de conserver intacte l'avance initiale de quatre jours de vivres.

Cependant, l'après-midi du 5 et toute la journée du 6 s'étant écoulées sans qu'on eût aperçu un seul village, force fut d'entamer cette réserve. On ne s'en inquiéta pas, au surplus, Tongané affirmant qu'on n'allait pas tarder à rencontrer une agglomération d'une certaine importance où il serait facile de se ravitailler.

On parvint, en effet, le soir du 6 mars, à cette bourgade, qui portait le nom de Yaho, mais les prévisions de Tongané ne se réalisèrent pas. Dès qu'on s'approcha du tata, des vociférations et même quelques coups de fusils à pierre partirent de son sommet, sur lequel se pressait une nombreuse foule de nègres. C'était la première fois qu'on recevait pareil accueil depuis le départ de Conakry, si on excepte la démonstration des naturels de Kokoro. Encore, à Kokoro, avait-il été possible de transformer leurs dispositions belliqueuses en sentiments plus amicaux, tandis qu'à Yaho on ne put même pas essayer d'arriver à un semblable résultat.

Barsac eut beau s'ingénier afin d'entrer en relation avec les habitants de ce village, les moyens employés échouèrent les uns après les autres. Un drapeau blanc fut en vain porté au bout d'un bâton. Cet emblème symbolique, dont le sens pacifique est compris sur toute la surface de la terre, provoqua un ouragan de hurlements, accompagnés d'une nuée de balles, qui eussent été mortelles pour le porteur du drapeau, s'il n'avait eu la prudence de se tenir à distance suffisante. Tongané, puis successivement deux des porteurs, gens de même race, ou à peu près, que les habitants de Yaho, furent sans plus de succès envoyés en parlementaires. On refusa de les écouter, et on ne leur répondit que par le jet de projectiles divers, que la maladresse seule des tireurs rendit inoffensifs. Il était évident que la population de ce village entendait, pour une raison ou pour une autre, n’avoir aucun rapport avec des étrangers, et qu’elle ne voulait même pas connaître leurs intentions. Il fallut y renoncer.

D’ailleurs, ces nègres inhospitaliers se bornèrent à faire bonne garde autour du tata, dont ils refusaient si formellement l’entrée, sans se livrer à aucun acte d’hostilité plus directe.

Quels que fussent les motifs d’une telle attitude, les voyageurs ne purent se ravitailler comme ils l’espéraient, et durent repartir le lendemain 7 mars, n’ayant plus que deux jours de vivres devant eux. La situation n’avait encore, du reste, rien d’inquiétant. On avait fait alors plus de trois cents kilomètres depuis Kadou, c’est-à-dire plus de la moitié du parcours total, et tout portait à croire que les prochains villages auraient une attitude plus amicale que celle de Yaho.

Le chemin n’en ayant traversé aucun, la question ne put être tranchée pendant la journée du 7 mars, qui fut bonne au point de vue du nombre de kilomètres parcourus, mais au cours de laquelle survint un nouveau malheur. Un troisième cheval mourut, de la même manière qu’étaient morts les deux premiers.

— Quelqu’un réussirait-il donc, demanda Florence au docteur Châtonnay, à empoisonner nos animaux, malgré la surveillance dont nous les entourons?

— C’est peu probable, répondit le docteur. L’empoisonnement doit être antérieur à notre départ de Kadou. Peut-être remonte-t-il au jour où notre escorte a déserté. Si nos chevaux meurent successivement, et non tous à la fois, cela doit tenir à la différence de leurs résistances individuelles et sans doute aussi à la différence des doses.

— En attendant, dit Amédée Florence, nous voici trois piétons contre quatre cavaliers. Ce n’est pas drôle!

Le 8 mars, ce ne fut pas sans inquiétude qu’on se remit en route. De quelque côté qu’on le considérât, l’avenir commençait à devenir sombre. On ne pouvait pas se dissimuler que la puissance adverse dont on se croyait à jamais débarrassé n’eût pris la précaution d’empoisonner les chevaux avant de disparaître, ce qui impliquait une persistance de haine aussi effrayante qu’inexplicable, et on s’attendait à voir tomber d’un instant à l’autre les quatre animaux survivants. D’autre part, on ne possédait plus qu’un seul jour de vivres, et on souffrirait de la faim, si un village n’était pas rencontré avant le coucher du soleil.

On n’eut même pas si longtemps à attendre. La première heure de marche n’était pas écoulée qu’une agglomération de cases apparaissait dans le lointain.

Les voyageurs s’arrêtèrent quelques instants, s’efforçant de prévoir l’accueil qui les attendait. Dans la vaste plaine qui se déployait sous leurs yeux, ils ne distinguèrent rien qui fût de nature à les renseigner. Autant qu’on en pouvait juger à cette distance, le village semblait mort, et l’étendue était déserte. On ne voyait que le haut tapis de la brousse, et la trouée du chemin, sur lequel, de place en place, on apercevait des taches noires, dont il était impossible de reconnaître la nature.

Après une courte halte, Barsac et ses compagnons se remirent en marche vers le village. Ils n’avaient pas fait un kilomètre qu’une odeur nauséabonde les saisit à la gorge. Quelques pas encore, et ils furent auprès d’une de ces taches noires qu’ils avaient remarquées de loin. Ils eurent un mouvement de recul. Cette tache noire, c’était le cadavre à demi putréfié d’un nègre. Jusqu’au village, le chemin était jalonné de la sorte. Ils purent compter dix de ces bornes funèbres.

— Voyez combien petite est l’entrée du projectile qui a frappé cet homme, dit à Amédée Florence le docteur Châtonnay qui examinait l’un des cadavres, et combien est grand au contraire son orifice de sortie, quand ces projectiles ont traversé les corps de part en part. D’autres ont rencontré des os et vous pouvez constater quels effroyables ravages ils ont produits dans ce cas. Ces hommes ont été tués par des balles explosibles.

— Encore! s’écria Amédée Florence.

— Encore.

— Comme le vieux nègre que nous avons soigné dans le petit hameau, pendant notre première étape avec la nouvelle escorte?

— Comme ce jour-là, répondit le docteur Châtonnay.

Amédée Florence et le docteur rejoignirent leurs compagnons en silence. Ils étaient pensifs, et se demandaient ce qu’il fallait conclure de l’explicable répétition d’un fait aussi anormal.

Dans le village, le spectacle était plus affreux encore. À de nombreux signes, on reconnaissait qu’il avait été le théâtre d’une lutte acharnée. En outre, après la bataille, les vainqueurs l’avaient incendié, et la plupart des cases étaient détruites par le feu. Dans celles qu’ils avaient épargnées, on trouva d’autres cadavres.

— La mort de ces malheureux remonte au moins à dix jours, dit le docteur Châtonnay, et, comme pour les autres, ce sont des balles explosibles qui l’ont provoquée.

— Mais quels peuvent bien être les misérables qui se sont livrés à un pareil carnage? s’écria Saint-Bérain.

— Peut-être, suggéra Amédée Florence, ceux dont nous avons remarqué les traces, il y a quelques jours. Nous estimions alors leur avance à une dizaine de jours. Cela coïnciderait avec le délai que fixe le docteur.

— Ce sont eux à n’en pas douter, dit Barsac indigné.

— Comme ce sont eux, ajouta Amédée

Florence, qui nous ont valu la fraîche réception de Yaho, qu’ils auront voulu traiter comme ils ont traité ce village. Yaho étant entouré d’un tata, ils n’auront pu y entrer, mais cela expliquerait que les nègres effrayés se soient tenus depuis ce moment sur la défensive.

— C’est assez logique, en effet, approuva le docteur Châtonnay.

— Mais qui peuvent bien être ces misérables, demanda Jane Buxton, et leur présence ne peut-elle être un danger pour nous?

— Qui ils sont, je n’en sais rien, répondit Amédée Florence, mais ils ne me paraissent pas à craindre en ce qui nous concerne. Tout concourt à nous démontrer qu’ils ont sur nous une avance de dix à douze jours, et, comme ils sont montés, il est peu probable que nous les rattrapions jamais.

On parcourut tout le village incendié sans y rencontrer aucun être vivant. Ceux des habitants que les balles n’avaient pas atteints s’étaient enfuis, et il était complètement désert. Il était aussi pillé de fond en comble, tout ce que le feu n’avait pas dévoré, on l’avait jeté aux quatre vents. Même spectacle aux alentours, dans les lougans saccagés, dévastés. La volonté de destruction était évidente.

C’est en proie aux plus tristes pensées qu’on laissa en arrière le malheureux village. Le soir, on fit halte en pleine campagne. Il ne restait alors de vivres que pour un seul repas. De cet unique repas, on fit deux parts, l’une qu’on mangea sur-le-champ, l’autre qui fut réservée pour le lendemain matin.

Au cours de la journée du 9 mars, deux villages furent rencontrés. On ne put s’approcher du premier, que défendait un petit tata, et dont l’accueil fut en tout point semblable à celui de Yaho. Quant au second, qu’aucune fortification ne protégeait, il était, comme celui du jour précédent, saccagé, incendié et vide d’habitants.

— On dirait vraiment, observa Barsac, que des gens s’ingénient à créer le désert devant nous.

L’observation était juste. On aurait voulu affamer les voyageurs qu’on n’aurait pas procédé autrement.

— Bah! fit Amédée Florence, avec une insouciance voulue, nous le traverserons malgré eux, ce désert. C’est à peine s’il y a cent cinquante kilomètres d’ici à Koubo. Ce n’est pas la mer à boire, après tout. Puisque les bouchers et les épiciers sont en grève, la chasse nous fournira nos biftecks.

À l’exception de M. Poncin, tout à fait incapable de manier un fusil, on suivit aussitôt cet excellent conseil. Malheureusement, les hautes herbes arrêtaient trop souvent la vue, et la contrée n’était pas très giboyeuse. De toute la journée, on n’eut qu’une outarde, deux pintades et deux perdrix au tableau. Pour nourrir quatorze personnes, c’était à peine l’indispensable minimum.

À l’étape du soir, Amédée Florence et le docteur Châtonnay constatèrent pour la seconde fois que l’endroit où l’on s’arrêtait avait antérieurement reçu la visite d’autres voyageurs. Les herbes paraissaient même plus récemment froissées, comme si l’avance de ceux-ci eût diminué.

Pendant qu’on échangeait des réflexions à ce sujet, Tongané, préposé à ce moment à la surveillance des chevaux, appela ses maîtres tout à coup. Deux des animaux venaient de tomber, comme étaient tombés les trois premiers. Comme ceux-ci, ils agonisèrent sans qu’il fût possible de les secourir, et moururent après une heure de souffrance.

Deux chevaux restaient encore, mais on ne devait pas garder longtemps ces deux animaux, qui succombèrent à leur tour pendant la journée du 10 mars.

Les porteurs engagés à Kadou furent-ils effrayés par ces décès successifs? Plus simplement, la chasse n’ayant, au cours de la journée du 10, produit qu’un résultat dérisoire, redoutèrent-ils de souffrir de la faim? Quoi qu’il en soit, ils disparurent dans la nuit du 10 au 11, et, le matin venu, les six Européens, Tongané et Malik, se réveillèrent sans porteurs, sans chevaux et sans vivres.

Ils éprouvèrent alors un moment de découragement bien naturel, qu’eût, d’ailleurs, suffi à expliquer la faiblesse qu’ils commençaient à ressentir. La plus accablée était Jane Buxton, qui se reprochait d’avoir entraîné ses compagnons dans ce déplorable voyage et se sentait responsable de leur misère. Elle s’accusait et sollicitait leur pardon.

Amédée Florence comprit la nécessité de réagir contre la dépression générale.

— Que de paroles inutiles! s’écria-t-il en s’adressant à Jane Buxton avec une affectueuse brutalité. Nous ne sommes pas encore morts, je suppose. Que la chasse n’ait pas été très bonne ces jours-ci, la belle affaire! Elle sera meilleure demain, voilà tout.

— N’oublions pas, fit observer le docteur Châtonnay venant au secours du reporter, que nos nègres, en nous laissant en plan, nous ont, du même coup, débarrassés de leurs six estomacs.

— C’est tout bénéfice, conclut Florence. S’ils n’étaient pas partis, j’allais vous proposer de les renvoyer à leurs aimables familles. J’estime que, dans les circonstances présentes, rien ne pouvait nous arriver de plus heureux.

— Merci, monsieur Florence, merci, messieurs, disait cependant Jane Buxton, profondément émue. Croyez que je n’oublierai jamais votre bonté et votre dévouement.

— Pas d’attendrissement! interrompit Florence. Rien n’est plus mauvais avant le déjeuner. Si vous voulez m’en croire, filons, mettons-nous en chasse, et mangeons jusqu’à l’indigestion inclusivement. Nous nous épancherons au dessert, si ça vous chante.

Le départ des porteurs rendant impossible le transport des colis, on dut abandonner la dernière tente et le reste de la pacotille d’échange. Jane Buxton dormirait désormais, elle aussi, en plein air, quand on ne pourrait trouver un abri dans un village abandonné. Quant à la perte des objets d’échange, on n’en éprouva pas de trop vifs regrets. À quoi eussent-ils été bons, le pays étant désert et toute transaction y étant impossible? D’ailleurs, n’avait-on pas de l’or, pour le cas où les circonstances viendraient à changer?

C’est dans ces tristes conditions que la marche fut reprise. Au cours de cette journée du 12 mars, le chemin traversa un village, où l’on découvrit encore de nombreux cadavres de nègres. Le docteur fit remarquer à ses compagnons que la mort de ces malheureux était plus récente et paraissait remonter à deux jours tout au plus. Devait-on en conclure que la bande des assassins était maintenant plus proche, et fallait-il s’attendre à se heurter contre elle un jour ou l’autre?

Malgré cette perspective peu rassurante, on continua à s’élever dans le nord. Quel moyen de faire autrement, au surplus? Revenir au sud, sur ce chemin jalonné de villages hostiles ou détruits, eût été impossible. Mieux valait gagner à tout prix le Niger, puisque là seulement on aurait du secours.

C’était toujours le désert que trouvaient devant eux les voyageurs épuisés. Pas un village qui ne fût hostile, quand un tata l’avait défendu contre la destruction, ou pillé, brûlé, dévasté, dans le cas contraire. Nulle part, il ne leur était possible de se procurer des vivres, et ils ne subsistaient que grâce à des hasards favorables: ignames, patates ou autres racines déterrées par chance dans un lougan saccagé, heureux coup de fusil, ou, parfois encore, quelque misérable poisson capturé par Saint-Bérain pendant la halte du jour.

Cette dernière ressource manquait, à vrai dire, le plus souvent. Outre que l’adversité n’avait en rien diminué la perpétuelle distraction, non plus que la sensibilité excessive du fantaisiste neveu de Jane Buxton, on traversait des territoires où les cours d’eau étaient rares. On eut plus d’une fois à souffrir de la soif, les puits qu’on découvrait de temps à autre étant invariablement comblés. La puissance malfaisante qui s’ingéniait à accabler les voyageurs n’avait rien oublié.

L’énergie de ceux-ci n’était pas entamée, cependant. Brûlés par un soleil de feu, se traînant péniblement quand le gibier avait fait défaut, réglant les étapes sur leur faiblesse croissante, ils gagnaient courageusement vers le nord, jour par jour, pas à pas, malgré la fatigue, malgré la soif, malgré la faim.

Les deux Noirs opposaient à ces épreuves une merveilleuse indifférence. Habitués aux privations, accoutumés à subir une vie de misère, peut-être souffraient-ils moins que leurs maîtres de la misère présente. Tous deux faisaient preuve du dévouement le plus touchant.

— Moi, y en a pas beaucoup faim, disait Tongané à Malik, pour l’engager à accepter quelque racine comestible qu’il avait découverte.

Malik acceptait le présent, mais pour l’offrir à Jane Buxton, qui, d’ailleurs, s’empressait de le joindre à la réserve collective dont serait composé le prochain repas de tous.

Ainsi chacun faisait son devoir, tout en réagissant selon son tempérament personnel.

Barsac inclinait plutôt vers la colère. Il ne parlait guère, et, si parfois un mot s’échappait de ses lèvres, ce mot s’adressait généralement au Gouvernement français, dont l’incapacité l’avait mis, lui Barsac, dans un pareil pétrin. Déjà, il se voyait à la tribune de la Chambre. En attendant, il préparait ses foudres, qu’il lancerait au retour, tel Jupiter, du haut de cet Olympe parlementaire.

Le docteur Châtonnay parlait peu lui aussi, mais, bien que fort inhabile à la chasse, il ne s'en rendait pas moins utile. Il cherchait les fruits comestibles, qu'il découvrait assez souvent, et, soucieux avant tout de conserver au moins l'apparence de la gaieté, il ne manquait jamais de rire, avec son éternel bruit de vapeur fusante, au moindre mot que prononçait Amédée Florence.

— Dommage, docteur, lui disait ce dernier, que vous n'ayez que l'échappement des gaz. Vous n'auriez pas le moteur sur vous, par hasard? C'est ça qui ferait notre affaire!

Et l'excellent docteur de rire de nouveau, par principe.

M. Poncin parlait moins encore, puisqu'il n'ouvrait pas la bouche. Il ne chassait pas, ne pêchait pas, et, d'ailleurs, ne se plaignait pas. Il ne faisait rien, M. Poncin, si ce n'est écrire de temps à autre quelque mention sur son mystérieux carnet, ce dont Amédée Florence était toujours fort intrigué.

Saint-Bérain se comportait comme à l'ordinaire, ni plus gai, ni plus triste qu'au moment du départ. Peut-être ignorait-il dans quelle situation il se trouvait, et était-il distrait au point de ne pas savoir qu'il avait faim.

À en juger par les apparences, il eût semblé que Jane Buxton supportait avec moins de philosophie les épreuves dont le sort l'accablait, et pourtant celles-ci étaient étrangères à la tristesse grandissante que reflétait son visage. N'ayant jamais espéré que le voyage s'accomplirait sans effort, elle acceptait d'un coeur ferme les obstacles qu'elle rencontrait sur sa route. Amaigrie, affaiblie par les privations et par les souffrances de toute espèce, son énergie, du moins, demeurait intacte, et sa pensée restait tendue vers le but qu'elle s'était fixé. Mais, à mesure qu'elle en approchait, son trouble, son angoisse augmentaient sans qu'elle pût s'en défendre. Quelle réponse allait donner la sépulture de Koubo? Que lui apprendrait l'enquête qu'elle entamerait ensuite, en prenant comme centre de ses recherches les lieux où son frère était tombé? Apprendrait-elle quelque chose seulement, et ne lui faudrait-il pas revenir les mains vides? Ces questions se pressaient dans son esprit, chaque jour plus impérieuses et plus absorbantes.

Amédée Florence n'était pas sans avoir remarqué la tristesse de Jane Buxton, et il la combattait de tout son pouvoir. En fait, il était l'âme de ce petit monde, et les pires épreuves n'avaient aucune influence sur sa persistante gaieté. À l'entendre, on devait remercier le Ciel pour sa paternelle bienveillance, aucun autre genre de vie ne pouvant être aussi rigoureusement conforme à une hygiène bien comprise. Quoi qu'il arrivât, il s'en applaudissait. Avait-on soif? Rien de plus favorable à sa dilatation d'estomac commençante. Avait-on faim? Rien de meilleur pour combattre l'arthritisme qui le guettait. Était-on exténué de fatigue? On n'en dormirait que mieux, d'après lui. Et il en appelait au docteur Châtonnay, qui approuvait, en admirant le courage et l'énergie du brave garçon.

Le mérite d'Amédée Florence était d'autant plus grand qu'il éprouvait, en fait, outre les soucis communs à tous, une inquiétude supplémentaire que ses compagnons ne soupçonnaient même pas. Cela remontait au 12 mars, c'est-à-dire au jour où, pour la première fois, on avait traversé un village dont le sac paraissait dater de la veille. Depuis ce jour, Amédée Florence avait acquis l'intime conviction qu'on était surveillé, suivi, épié. Des espions guettaient dans la brousse, il en était sûr, escortant pas à pas la mission désemparée, assistant à son agonie, prêts sans doute à annihiler l'effort de ces naufragés de la terre, au moment où ceux-ci atteindraient enfin le salut. L'oeil et l'oreille constamment au guet, il avait recueilli des preuves nombreuses à l'appui de ses soupçons: pendant le jour, nouvelles traces de campement récent, détonations à peine perceptibles, galops de chevaux dans le lointain; pendant la nuit, chuchotements, glissements, et, parfois, passage d’une ombre incertaine quand l’obscurité était profonde. De ses observations, de ses réflexions, de ses craintes, il s’était abstenu de rien dire à ses compagnons, afin de ne pas augmenter leurs angoisses, et il avait recommandé le silence à Tongané, dont les remarques étaient conformes aux siennes. Ils se contenteraient de faire tous deux une garde vigilante, jusqu’au moment où le reporter estimerait utile de mettre ses amis dans la confidence.

Le voyage, compliqué par de telles difficultés, ne put évidemment s’accomplir dans les délais prévus. Ce fut seulement le soir du 23 mars qu’on fit halte pour la dernière fois avant d’arriver à Koubo. Sept à huit kilomètres en séparaient encore les voyageurs exténués, mais, à moins de deux mille mètres, on devait trouver, d’après Tongané, la tombe où reposaient les restes du capitaine George Buxton. Le lendemain, dès l’aurore, on se remettrait en route. Quittant le chemin tracé, on irait d’abord jusqu’aux lieux où la troupe révoltée avait été anéantie, puis on se dirigerait vers le village. S’il était en meilleur état que les autres, on s’y ravitaillerait et l’on y prendrait un repos de plusieurs jours, pendant lesquels Jane Buxton poursuivrait son enquête. Dans le cas contraire, ou bien on obliquerait sur Gao, ou bien on se dirigerait sur Tombouctou ou sur Djenné, dans l’espoir de rencontrer vers le nord ou vers l’ouest des territoires moins ravagés.

C’est à ce moment qu’Amédée Florence crut devoir mettre ses compagnons au courant des faits qui le préoccupaient. Pendant qu’on se reposait des fatigues du jour et que Malik faisait cuire le frugal repas sur un feu d’herbes, il leur fit part de ses remarques nocturnes et diurnes, desquelles il résultait qu’on ne pouvait très probablement faire un pas sans qu’il fût connu d’ennemis invisibles mais toujours présents.

— J’irai plus loin, ajouta-t-il, et j’oserai prétendre que nos adversaires sont pour nous des relations déjà anciennes, presque de vieux camarades. Je soutiendrai mordicus, jusqu’à preuve du contraire, qu’ils se composent exactement de vingt Noirs et de trois Blancs, et que l’un de ceux-ci ressemble comme un frère à notre élégant ami, le soi-disant lieutenant Lacour, si avantageusement connu de l’honorable société ici présente.

— Sur quoi repose cette hypothèse, monsieur Florence, demanda Barsac.

— Sur ceci, d’abord, que notre prétendue escorte a pu aisément connaître nos intentions et nous précéder sur la route que nous devions suivre, afin d’y faire, contre nous, le joli travail que vous avez pu admirer, tandis qu’il serait difficile d’admettre la présence d’une autre troupe, qui se serait livrée, tout en ignorant notre existence, aux mêmes distractions, dans un but qui serait alors inexplicable. Il y a encore autre chose. Les habitants des villages détruits et le vieux nègre que le docteur a rafistolé avant Kadou ont été frappés de la même manière. Donc, les meurtriers étaient déjà dans nos environs avant l’arrivée de la deuxième escorte, de même qu’ils y sont après son départ.

— Peut-être avez-vous raison, monsieur Florence, reconnut Barsac, mais vous ne nous apprenez pas grand-chose, après tout. Personne de nous n’a jamais douté que la dévastation de ce pays ne fût dirigée contre nous. Que cette dévastation soit l’œuvre du lieutenant Lacour ou de tout autre, que ces bandits soient autour de nous, au lieu de nous précéder comme nous le supposions, cela ne change rien à notre situation.

— Ce n’est pas mon avis, répliqua Amédée

Florence. C’est si peu mon avis, que je me suis décidé à parler ce soir, après avoir longtemps gardé le silence pour ne pas accroître inutilement vos craintes. Mais nous voici arrivés au but, malgré tout. Demain, ou nous serons à Koubo, à l'abri, par conséquent, ou bien nous aurons changé de direction, et l'on cessera peut-être de nous persécuter. Je souhaiterais, je l'avoue, tromper pour une fois la surveillance dont nous sommes l'objet, afin que personne ne sache ce que nous sommes venus faire ici.

— Pour quel motif? demanda Barsac.

— Je n'en sais trop rien, avoua Florence. C'est une idée que j'ai comme ça. Mais il me paraît préférable, dans l'intérêt de miss Buxton, que le but de son voyage ne soit pas connu avant qu'elle ait pu mener à bien son enquête.

— Je suis d'accord avec M. Florence, approuva Jane Buxton. Qui sait si nos adversaires ne sont pas sur le point d'entamer plus franchement la lutte? Ce sera peut-être demain qu'ils nous attaqueront, et peut-être me feront-ils échouer au port. Je ne voudrais pourtant pas être venue si loin sans atteindre mon but. C'est pourquoi je pense que M. Florence a raison de vouloir échapper aux espions qui nous entourent. Malheureusement, je n'en vois guère le moyen.

— Rien de plus facile au contraire, à mon sens, expliqua Amédée Florence. Il est incontestable que, jusqu'ici tout au moins, ceux qui nous en veulent ne se sont risqués à aucune tentative directe. Ils se contentent de contrecarrer notre marche et de nous espionner, en se réservant, si l'idée de miss Buxton est juste, d'intervenir plus efficacement le jour où notre entêtement sera devenu supérieur à leur patience. Il est donc probable que leur surveillance se relâche quand ils sont certains que nous avons fait définitivement halte pour la nuit. La régularité de nos habitudes doit les rassurer, et ils ne mettent pas en doute, qu'ils nous retrouveront le matin là où ils nous ont quittés le soir. Il n'y a aucune raison pour que leur garde soit plus vigilante aujourd'hui que les autres jours, à moins qu'ils ne se soient résolus à une attaque immédiate. Encore, dans ce cas, serait-il plus opportun que jamais d’essayer de filer par la tangente. Mais, s’il n’en est pas ainsi, rien de plus simple que de partir tout à l’heure, en profitant de l’obscurité. Nous nous en irons successivement, en faisant le moins de bruit possible, tous dans la même direction, après être convenus d’un rendez-vous général. Après tout, ce n’est pas une armée innombrable que nous avons à nos trousses, et il faudrait une remarquable guigne pour que nous tombions juste sur le séduisant lieutenant Lacour.

Ce plan, chaudement approuvé par Jane Buxton, fut adopté. On convint que, les uns après les autres, on s’en irait dans l’Est, jusqu’à un fort bouquet d’arbres, distant d’un kilomètre environ, qu’on avait aperçu avant la tombée de la nuit. Ces arbres étaient maintenant invisibles, mais on savait dans quelle direction ils se trouvaient, et l’on pouvait les atteindre sûrement, en se guidant sur une étoile qui scintillait à l’horizon, au-dessous de gros nuages qui augmentaient encore l’obscurité. Tongané partirait le premier, puis Jane Buxton, puis Malik. Les autres Européens viendraient ensuite à tour de rôle, Amédée Florence devant fermer la marche.

Le départ s’effectua sans incident. Deux heures plus tard, les six Européens et les deux Noirs étaient réunis à la lisière du bouquet d’arbres. On se hâte de le traverser, de façon à placer cet impénétrable écran entre les fugitifs et leurs ennemis. On s’avança ensuite plus librement. La proximité du but rendait des forces aux moins valides. Personne ne sentait plus sa fatigue.

Après une demi-heure de marche rapide, Tongané s’arrêta. D’après lui, on devait être arrivé à l’endroit même où la troupe révoltée de George Buxton avait été exterminée; mais, dans cette nuit profonde, il ne pouvait indiquer avec exactitude le point précis qui intéressait Jane Buxton. Il fallait attendre le jour.

On prit donc quelques heures de repos. Seule, Jane Buxton, incertaine de ce que la prochaine aube lui réservait, ne put trouver le sommeil. Plus pressantes que jamais, cent questions se posaient pour elle. Son malheureux frère était-il réellement mort et en découvrirait-elle une preuve que le temps n’eût pas détruite? Si une telle preuve existait, tendrait-elle à confirmer le crime, à démontrer l’innocence, ou la laisserait-elle dans la même incertitude? Et demain, dans quel sens commencerait-elle l’enquête qu’elle avait résolue? Les derniers témoins du drame n’étaient-ils pas dispersés, disparus, morts peut-être à leur tour, ou bien serait-il possible de retrouver quelques-uns d’entre eux? Et si elle y parvenait, quelle serait la vérité qui sortirait de leur bouche?

Un peu avant six heures, tout le monde fut debout. Tandis que le jour se levait, on attendit, étreint par une vive émotion, les yeux fixés sur Tongané, qui examinait les alentours et cherchait ses points de repère.

— Là, dit enfin le nègre en désignant un arbre éloigné de trois à quatre cents mètres, qui s’élevait solitairement dans la plaine.

En quelques instants, on fut au pied de cet arbre. Tongané continuant à se montrer très affirmatif, on attaqua le sol au point qu’il désignait, bien que rien n’indiquât qu’une tombe eût jamais existé à cet endroit. Fébrilement, les couteaux fouillèrent la terre, qu’on rejetait à pleines mains sur les bords du trou qui se creusait rapidement.

— Attention! s’écria tout à coup le reporter… Voici des ossements…

Miss Buxton, très émue, dut s’appuyer au bras du docteur.

Avec précaution, on acheva de déblayer la fosse. Un corps apparut, ou plutôt un squelette merveilleusement conservé. Autour de ce qui avait été les bras, subsistaient des lambeaux d’étoffe et les broderies d’or, insignes de son grade. Parmi les os du thorax, on découvrit encore un portefeuille, presque entièrement détruit par le temps. On l’ouvrit. Il ne contenait qu’un unique document: une lettre adressée à George Buxton par sa sœur.

Les larmes jaillirent des yeux de la jeune fille. Elle porta à ses lèvres le papier jauni, qui s’effrita entre ses doigts; puis, défaillante, elle s’approcha de la tombe.

— Docteur, je vous en prie, dit-elle à

Châtonnay d’une voix tremblante, ne pourriez-vous avoir la bonté d’examiner les restes de mon malheureux frère?

— À vos ordres, miss Buxton, répondit le docteur, troublé au point d’en oublier la faim qui lui tenaillait les entrailles.

Le docteur Châtonnay descendit dans la tombe et procéda, avec le soin et la méthode d’un médecin légiste, à l’examen qui lui était demandé. Quand il l’eut terminé, son visage était grave et exprimait une intense émotion.

— Moi, Laurent Châtonnay, docteur en médecine de l’Université de Paris, prononça-t-il, non sans une certaine solennité, au milieu d’un profond silence, je certifie ce qui suit: premièrement, les ossements soumis à mon examen, et que miss Jane Buxton déclare être ceux de son frère George Buxton, ne portent la trace d’aucune blessure faite par une arme à feu; deuxièmement, l’homme de qui proviennent ces ossements a été assassiné; troisièmement, la mort a été provoquée par un coup de poignard porté de haut en bas, qui a traversé l’omoplate gauche et atteint un des lobes supérieurs du coeur; quatrièmement, voici l’arme du crime, retirée par moi-même de la gaine osseuse dans laquelle elle était restée plantée.

— Assassiné!… murmura Jane éperdue.

— Assassiné, je l’affirme, répéta le docteur Châtonnay.

— Et par-derrière!…

— Par-derrière.

— George serait donc innocent!… s’écrira Jane Buxton en éclatant en sanglots.

— L’innocence de votre frère est une question qui excède ma compétence, miss Buxton, répondit doucement le docteur Châtonnay, et je ne saurais l’affirmer avec la même rigueur que les faits matériels constatés par moi, mais elle me paraît, je dois vous le dire, infiniment probable. Il résulte, en effet, de mon examen, que votre frère n’est pas tombé les armes à la main, comme on l’avait cru jusqu’ici, mais qu’il a été assassiné par-derrière, avant, pendant ou après le feu de salve que l’histoire a enregistré. À quel moment exact et par qui a-t-il été frappé? Je l’ignore. Tout ce qu’on peut dire, c’est que le coup n’a pas été porté par un des soldats réguliers, car l’arme qui a tué votre frère est un poignard et non une arme de guerre.

— Merci, docteur, dit Jane qui se remettait peu à peu. Tels qu’ils sont, les premiers résultats de mon voyage sont de nature à me donner confiance… Encore un mot, docteur. Seriez-vous disposé à attester par écrit ce que vous avez vu aujourd’hui, et ces messieurs voudraient-ils avoir la bonté de servir de témoins?

Tous se mirent avec empressement à la disposition de Jane Buxton. Amédée Florence, sur une feuille que M. Poncin consentit à détacher de son carnet, rédigea une relation des faits constatés au cours de la matinée, et ce procès-verbal, signé par le docteur Châtonnay, puis par toutes les personnes présentes, fut remis à Jane Buxton avec l’arme trouvée dans la tombe de son frère.

Cette arme, la jeune fille frémit en la touchant. C’était un poignard dont une épaisse couche de rouille, peut-être mélangée de sang, recouvrait la forte lame quadrangulaire aux faces moulurées par de profondes gouttières. Sur le manche d’ébène, à demi rongé par l’humidité de la terre, on discernait encore la trace d’une inscription disparue.

— Voyez donc, messieurs, dit Jane en montrant ces linéaments presque invisibles, cette arme portait autrefois le nom du meurtrier.

— Dommage qu’il soit effacé, soupira Amédée Florence, en examinant l’arme à son tour. Mais attendez donc… On lit encore quelque chose… un i et un l, je crois.

— C’est maigre, dit Barsac.

— Peut-être n’en faut-il pas plus pour démasquer l’assassin, dit gravement Jane.

Sur son ordre, Tongané rejeta sur les restes de George Buxton la terre qu’on avait extraite et qui fut ensuite tassée avec soin; puis, laissant la tombe tragique à sa solitude, on se dirigea vers Koubo.

Mais, après trois ou quatre kilomètres, on dut s’arrêter. La force manquait à Jane Buxton, dont les genoux fléchissaient et qui dut s’étendre sur le sol.

— L’émotion, expliqua le docteur Châtonnay.

— Et la faim, ajouta avec juste raison Amédée Florence. Allons! vieux Saint-Bérain, nous n’allons pas laisser mourir d’inanition votre nièce, même si elle est votre tante, quand le diable y serait! En chasse! et tâchez de ne pas me prendre pour un gibier de choix!

Malheureusement, le gibier était rare. La plus grande partie de la journée s’écoula avant que les deux chasseurs eussent vu un animal quelconque au bout de leurs fusils. Ce fut seulement vers la fin du jour que le sort les favorisa. Par contre, le tableau n’avait jamais été aussi brillant, deux outardes et une perdrix étant, coup sur coup, tombées sur leur plomb. Pour la première fois depuis longtemps, on put donc faire un repas abondant. En revanche, on dut renoncer à atteindre Koubo le soir même, et se résoudre à passer une dernière nuit en plein air.

Épuisés de fatigue, et d’ailleurs convaincus d’avoir dépisté leurs adversaires, les voyageurs négligèrent ce soir-là la garde qu’ils s’imposaient d’habitude. C’est pourquoi personne ne vit les phénomènes bizarres qui survinrent pendant la nuit. Vers l’ouest, de faibles lueurs scintillèrent à plusieurs reprises dans la plaine. D’autres lumières, puissantes celles-ci, leur répondaient dans l’est, à une grande hauteur, bien qu’il n’y eût aucune montagne dans cette contrée remarquablement plate. Peu à peu ces faibles scintillements de l’ouest et les puissants éclats de l’est se rapprochèrent les uns des autres, les premiers lentement, les seconds très vite, tous deux convergeant vers le point occupé par les dormeurs.

Tout à coup, ceux-ci furent réveillés en sursaut par l’étrange ronflement qu’ils avaient déjà entendu après leur départ de Kankan, mais le ronflement était aujourd’hui plus proche et infiniment plus intense. À peine avaient-ils ouvert les yeux, que des lumières fulgurantes, émanant d’une dizaine de foyers de grande puissance tels que des projecteurs électriques, jaillissaient soudainement dans l’Est, à moins de cent mètres d’eux. Ils cherchaient encore à se rendre compte de la nature du phénomène, quand des hommes, sortant des ombres du nord et du sud, entrèrent dans le cône éclairé et bondirent sur les dormeurs étourdis, aveuglés. En un instant, ceux-ci furent renversés.

Dans la nuit, une voix brutale demanda en français:

— Y êtes-vous, les garçons?

Puis, après un silence:

— Le premier qui bouge, une balle dans la tête… Allons! en route, nous autres!

DEUXIÈME PARTIE

CHAPITRE 1

Blackland

Presque au croisement du deuxième degré de longitude ouest et du seizième degré de latitude nord, c’est-à-dire un peu en aval du point le plus septentrional atteint par le Niger, la ville de Gao-Gao s’élève sur la rive gauche de ce fleuve qui, dans cette partie de son cours, marque la limite sud-ouest du Sahara. Au-delà commence le Grand-Désert, qui se continue, dans le Nord, jusqu’au Maroc, l’Algérie et la Tripolitaine, dans l’Est, jusqu’à l’Égypte et la Nubie, dans le Sud, jusqu’aux possessions européennes de l’Afrique centrale, dans l’Ouest jusqu’à l’océan. Les oasis les plus voisines de Gao-Gao, l’Adrar, au nord, l’Aïr, à l’est, en sont encore séparées, la première par quatre cents, la seconde par neuf cents kilomètres de sable. Sur les cartes de géographie les plus exactes et les plus récentes, cette immense étendue de trois cent soixante mille kilomètres carrés n’est représentée que par un espace entièrement vierge. À l’époque où la mission commandée par le député Barsac subissait les épreuves qui ont été relatées dans la première partie de ce récit, personne ne l’avait traversée, personne n’y avait pénétré. Elle était complètement inconnue.

À cette époque, les plus étranges légendes couraient sur cette région inexplorée parmi les riverains du Niger. Parfois, racontaient les indigènes, on voyait passer, s’enfuyant à tire-d’aile vers ces plaines arides ou en arrivant, d’immenses oiseaux noirs aux yeux de feu. D’autres fois, à les entendre, c’était une horde de grands diables rouges, montés sur des chevaux fougueux dont les naseaux jetaient des flammes, qui sortaient tout à coup de la contrée mystérieuse. Ces cavaliers fantastiques traversaient les bourgades au galop, tuant, massacrant ceux qui se trouvaient sur leur passage, puis repartaient dans le désert, emportant en travers de leurs selles des hommes, des femmes, des enfants, qui ne revenaient jamais.

Quels étaient les êtres malfaisants qui détruisaient ainsi les villages, pillaient les cases, s’appropriaient les misérables richesses des pauvres nègres, et disparaissaient en laissant derrière eux la ruine, le désespoir et la mort? Nul ne le savait. Nul n’avait même cherché à le savoir. Qui eût osé suivre à la trace, en effet, des ennemis que l’imagination populaire douait d’un pouvoir surnaturel, et que beaucoup supposaient être les féroces divinités du désert?

Tels étaient les bruits qui couraient, à cette époque, le long du Niger, de l’Aribinda au Gourma, jusqu’à plus de cent cinquante kilomètres de sa rive droite.

Si, plus hardi que ces nègres pusillanimes, quelqu’un s’était aventuré dans le désert, et si cet audacieux avait atteint, au prix d’un parcours de deux cent soixante kilomètres, le point situé par un degré quarante minutes de longitude est et par quinze degrés cinquante minutes de latitude nord, il aurait eu la récompense de son courage, car il aurait vu ce qui n’avait jamais été vu, ni par les géographes, ni par les explorateurs, ni par les caravanes: une ville1.

Oui, une ville, une véritable ville, qui ne figurait sur aucune carte et dont personne ne soupçonnait l’existence, bien que sa population totale ne fût pas inférieure, non compris les enfants, à six mille huit cent huit habitants.

Si l’hypothétique voyageur avait alors demandé le nom de cette ville à l’un des habitants, et si celui-ci avait consenti à le renseigner, on lui aurait dit, peut-être, en anglais: “Blackland is the name of this city”, mais il aurait pu aussi arriver qu’on lui répondît en italien: “Questa città e Terra Nera”; en bambara: “Ni dougouba ntocko a bé Bankou Fing”; en portugais: “Hista cidada e Terranegra”; en espagnol: “Esta ciudad es Tierranegra”, ou en n’importe quelle autre

1 Depuis le moment où ces événements se sont déroulés, la région située dans l’est de Gao-Gao a été enfin reconnue. La suite du récit expliquera pour quelle raison il n’a été trouvé que peu de traces de la ville dont il est ici question. langue, toutes réponses qui eussent signifié en français: “Le nom de cette ville est Terre-Noire”.

Rien d’impossible même à ce que le renseignement eût été donné en latin: “Ista urbs Terra nigra est”. C’est que le questionneur aurait eu affaire en ce cas à Josias Eberly, un ancien professeur qui, n’ayant pas trouvé à Blackland l’emploi de son érudition, y avait ouvert boutique et s’était transformé en apothicaire et en marchand de produits pour la teinture, ainsi que l’indiquait cette enseigne: Josias Eberly. Druggist. Products for dye.

Toutes les langues étaient parlées dans cette nouvelle Tour de Babel, dont la population, au moment où la mission Barsac succombait près de Koubo, se composait, outre cinq mille sept cent soixante-dix-huit nègres et négresses, de mille trente Blancs, venus de tous les pays du monde, mais dont l’immense majorité avait ce trait commun d’être des échappés de bagne et de prison, des aventuriers capables de tout excepté du bien, des déclassés prêts aux pires besognes.

Toutefois, de même que les représentants de la race anglaise prédominaient dans cette foule hétéroclite, de même la langue anglaise avait le pas sur les autres. C’est en anglais qu’étaient rédigés les proclamations du chef, les actes de l’état civil, si tant est qu’il y eût un état civil, et le journal officiel de la localité: The Blackland’s Thunder (Le Tonnerre de Blackland).

Très curieux, ce journal, ainsi qu’on pourra juger par ces fragments, extraits de quelques-uns de ses numéros:

“Hier John Andrew a pendu le nègre Koromoko, qui avait oublié de lui apporter sa pipe après le lunch.”

“Demain soir, à six heures, départ pour Kourkoussou et Bidi de dix planeurs, avec dix Merry Fellows, sous le commandement du colonel Hiram Herbert. Razzia complète de ces deux villages que nous n’avons pas visités depuis trois ans. Retour dans la même nuit.”

“Nous avons appris qu’une mission française, dirigée par un député du nom de Barsac, doit prochainement partir de Conakry. Cette mission aurait, paraît-il, l’intention d’atteindre le Niger, en passant par Sikasso et Ouagadougou. Nos précautions sont prises. Vingt hommes de la Garde noire et deux Merry Fellows vont incessamment se mettre en route. Le capitaine Edward Rufus les rejoindra en temps opportun. Edward Rufus, qui est, ainsi qu’on le sait, un déserteur de l’infanterie coloniale, jouera, sous le nom de Lacour, le rôle d’un lieutenant français, et profitera de sa parfaite connaissance des usages militaires de cette nation, pour arrêter, d’une manière ou d’une autre, ledit Barsac, qui, on peut en être certain, n’arrivera pas jusqu’au Niger.”

“Hier, sur le Garden’s Bridge, à la suite d’une discussion, le conseiller Ehle Willis s’est vu dans la nécessité de mettre du plomb dans la tête du Merry Fellow Constantin Bernard. Celui-ci est tombé dans la Red River, où, emporté par le poids anormal de sa tête nouvellement plombée, il s’est noyé. Le concours a été aussitôt ouvert, afin de pourvoir au remplacement du défunt. C’est Gilman Ely qui a remporté la timbale, avec dix-sept condamnations prononcées par les tribunaux français, anglais et allemands, et atteignant le total de vingt-neuf années de prison et de trente-cinq années de bagne. Gilman Ely passe donc du Civil Body aux Merry Fellows. Nos meilleurs souhaits l’y accompagnent.”

Ainsi qu’on l’a sans doute remarqué, Josias Eberly, John Andrew, Hiram Herbert, Edward Rufus, Ehle Willis, Constantin Bernard, Gilman Ely n’étaient désignés que par l’association de deux prénoms. Cette pratique était d’un usage général à Blackland, où tout nouvel arrivant subissait un second baptême et perdait son nom patronymique, que personne, sauf le chef, ne connaissait. Seul de tous les habitants de race blanche, si l’on en excepte une fraction particulière de la population dont il sera bientôt question, ce chef était désigné à la manière ordinaire, et encore son nom devait-il être plutôt un sobriquet terrible et sinistre. On l’appelait Harry Killer, c’est-à-dire, d’après le sens littéral, Harry l’Assassin, Harry le Tueur.

Une dizaine d’années avant l’enlèvement des débris de la mission Barsac, par lequel s’est terminée la première partie de ce récit, Harry Killer, venant nul ne savait d’où, avec quelques individus de sa trempe, était arrivé à ce point du désert où devait s’élever Blackland, il y avait planté sa tente, et avait dit: “Là sera la ville.” Et Blackland était sortie du sable comme par enchantement.

C’était une ville très singulière. Bâtie en terrain parfaitement plat, sur la rive droite de l’oued Tafasasset, rivière éternellement à sec jusqu’au jour où la volonté d’Harry Killer l’avait remplie d’eau courante, elle affectait la forme d’un demi-cercle rigoureux et mesurait exactement douze cents mètres du nord-est au sud-ouest, c’est-à-dire parallèlement à cette rivière, et non moins exactement six cents mètres du nord-ouest au sud-est. Sa superficie, qui atteignait, par conséquent, cinquante-six hectares environ, était divisée en trois sections très inégales, que limitaient d’infranchissables murailles en pisé demi-circulaires et concentriques, hautes de dix mètres et d’une épaisseur presque égale à la base.

En bordure immédiate de la rivière, dont le nom primitif avait été changé par Harry Killer en celui de Red River, la rivière rouge, la première section avait été tracée avec un rayon de deux cent cinquante mètres. Un boulevard large de cent mètres, enlevé aux deux pointes de la deuxième section, et suivant la berge de la rivière jusqu’à ce qu’il rencontrât la troisième, augmentait notablement sa surface, dont le total approchait de dix-sept hectares.

C’est dans la première section qu’habitait l’aristocratie de Blackland, ceux qu’on désignait, par antiphrase, sous le nom de Merry Fellows[1]. À l’exception de quelques-uns d’entre eux appelés à des destinées plus hautes, les compagnons d’Harry Killer, au moment où il s’était résolu à fonder une ville en ce lieu, avaient été l’embryon de ce corps des Merry Fellows. Autour de ce premier noyau étaient venus bientôt se grouper une foule de bandits, échappés des prisons et des bagnes, que Killer avait attirés, en leur promettant la satisfaction sans limites de leurs détestables instincts. En peu de temps, les Merry Fellows avaient ainsi atteint le nombre de cinq cent soixante-six, qui, sous aucun prétexte, ne devait être dépassé.

Les fonctions des Merry Fellows étaient multiples. Organisés d’une façon militaire, puisqu’ils comprenaient un colonel, cinq capitaines, dix lieutenants et cinquante sergents, commandant respectivement à cinq cents, cent, cinquante et dix hommes, ils constituaient en premier lieu l’armée de Blackland et faisaient la guerre. Guerre sans grand mérite, au surplus, guerre de rapines, qui consistait uniquement à piller de misérables villages et à massacrer ceux de leurs habitants qu’on n’emmenait pas en esclavage. Les Merry Fellows exerçaient, en outre, la police de la ville, et dirigeaient, à coups de matraque, quand ce n’était pas à coups de revolver, les esclaves chargés de toutes les besognes sans exception, et notamment des travaux agricoles. Mais, par-dessus tout, ils formaient la garde du chef, et en exécutaient aveuglément les volontés.

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[1] Les Joyeux Garçons.

La troisième section, la plus éloignée du centre, ne comportait qu’un espace semi-circulaire, long de seize cents mètres, large de cinquante, dont les deux extrémités aboutissaient en même temps à la première et à la Red River, et qui suivait le pourtour de la ville, entre la muraille qui la ceinturait extérieurement et celle limitant la deuxième section, où les esclaves étaient parqués.

Dans cette troisième section habitaient, sous l’appellation commune de Civil Body[1], les Blancs qui n’avaient pu entrer dans la première. En attendant qu’une place devînt libre dans celle-ci, ce qui n’était jamais très long, les moeurs brutales pratiquées à Blackland y rendant les décès très fréquents, ils faisaient un stage dans le Civil Body, qui pouvait être considéré, par conséquent, comme un purgatoire, dont le corps des Merry Fellows eût été le paradis. Pour vivre jusqu’à ce moment, les Merry Fellows seuls étant entretenus par le chef sur le produit des affaires communes, ils se livraient au négoce. Leur section était donc le quartier commerçant de la ville, et c’est là que les Merry Fellows trouvaient contre argent une infinité de produits jusqu’aux plus luxueux, que le marchand avait achetés au chef suprême, lequel se les était procurés soit par le pillage, soit, quand il s’agissait d’objets de provenance européenne, par des moyens qui n’étaient connus que de lui et de son entourage immédiat.

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[1] Corps civil, corporation civile.

Au moment où il est, pour la première fois, parlé de Blackland dans ce récit, cette troisième section comptait deux cent quatre-vingt-six habitants, dont quarante-cinq femmes blanches, lesquelles ne valaient pas plus cher que leurs concitoyens mâles de même couleur.

Entre la première et la troisième section, la deuxième, dont la superficie dépassait trente et un hectares et demi, occupait tout le reste de la ville. C’était le quartier des esclaves, dont le nombre s’élevait alors à cinq mille sept cent soixante-dix-huit, dont quatre mille cent quatre-vingt-seize hommes et mille cinq cent quatre-vingt-deux femmes. C’est là qu’ils habitaient, à très peu d’exceptions près. Là étaient leurs cases. Là s’écoulait leur triste vie.

Chaque matin, les quatre portes percées dans la muraille de cet enfer s’ouvraient, et, sous la conduite de Merry Fellows armés de matraques et de revolvers, ceux des nègres qui n’étaient pas occupés aux soins de la ville allaient, par brigades, se livrer aux travaux agricoles. Le soir, le lamentable troupeau revenait de la même manière, et les lourdes portes se refermaient jusqu’au lendemain. Nulle issue sur l’extérieur. D’un côté, les Merry Fellows, de l’autre le Civil Body. De toutes parts, des êtres aussi sanguinaires et aussi féroces.

Beaucoup de ces misérables mouraient, soit en raison des privations qu’ils enduraient, soit sous les coups de leurs gardiens trop souvent transformés en meurtriers. C’était un petit malheur. Une razzia avait tôt fait de combler les vides et de remplacer par d’autres martyrs ceux que la mort avait délivrés.

Mais les quartiers de la rive droite, qui viennent d’être succinctement décrits, ne constituaient pas toute la ville de Blackland. Sur la rive gauche de la Red River, où le sol, se relevant brusquement, formait un monticule d’une quinzaine de mètres de hauteur, la muraille d’enceinte se continuait, en effet, et délimitait un rectangle, long de douze cents mètres suivant la rivière, et large de trois cents dans l’autre sens. Cette seconde ville, à peine moins grande que la première, puisque sa superficie atteignait trente-six hectares, se divisait elle-même en deux parties égales, que séparait une haute muraille transversale.

De l’une de ces moitiés, située sur la pente nord-est de la butte, on avait fait le Fortress’s Garden, jardin public, qui, à son extrémité septentrionale, communiquait de plain-pied par un pont, le Garden’s Bridge[1], avec les sections des Merry Fellows et du Civil Body. L’autre moitié, placée au sommet du monticule, contenait les organes vitaux de la cité.

Dans l’angle nord, contiguë au Jardin public,

[1] Pont du Jardin. s’élevait une vaste construction quadrangulaire, entourée de murailles à redans, dont la façade nord-ouest tombait à pic dans la Red River d’une hauteur de trente mètres environ, le Palais, ainsi qu’on l’appelait communément, où Harry Killer et neuf de ses compagnons du début, promus au rang de conseillers, avaient élu domicile. Singuliers conseillers, que ces complices les plus habituels des crimes de leur chef. Singuliers conseillers, dont la principale fonction était d’assurer l’exécution immédiate des ordres d’un maître inaccessible et presque toujours invisible, et de ses arrêts sans appel.

Un second pont, qu’une grille solide barrait pendant la nuit, le Castle’s Bridge[1], reliait le siège du gouvernement à la rive droite.

Au Palais étaient annexées deux casernes, l’une affectée à douze esclaves faisant fonction de domestiques et à cinquante nègres, choisis parmi ceux dont les instincts naturels avaient été reconnus les plus féroces, qui constituaient la Garde noire, l’autre à quarante Blancs sélectionnés de la même manière, auxquels était confiée la conduite d’un égal nombre de machines volantes, qu’on désignait, à Blackland, sous le nom de planeurs.

Admirable invention d’un cerveau de génie, ces planeurs étaient de prodigieux engins, capables, grâce à des procédés sur lesquels quelques lumières seront bientôt données, de parcourir sans ravitaillement jusqu’à cinq mille kilomètres à la moyenne de quatre cents kilomètres à l’heure. Le don d’ubiquité que les pirates de Blackland semblaient posséder, ils le devaient à ces planeurs, qui leur permettaient de disparaître sitôt le crime accompli, et le pouvoir despotique d’Harry Killer reposait principalement sur eux.

C’est par la terreur, en effet, que celui-ci gouvernait l’empire inconnu dont Blackland était la capitale, et c’est par la terreur qu’il avait établi et maintenait son autorité. Toutefois, l’autocrate n’avait pas laissé de prévoir la révolte de ses sujets blancs ou noirs. Prudemment, il avait placé le palais de telle sorte qu’il dominât et tînt perpétuellement sous la menace de ses canons ville, jardin, casernes. Toute révolte aurait donc été le signal d’un massacre, sans même que les révoltés eussent pu recourir à la fuite. Outre que le désert formait à lui seul une infranchissable barrière, on verra bientôt qu’une fois entré dans ce repaire, il fallait renoncer à tout espoir d’en sortir.

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[1] Pont du Château.

Pour le surplus, Blackland était une ville parfaitement propre, bien tenue et pourvue de toutes les commodités possibles. Pas un logement des Merry Fellows ou du Civil Body qui ne possédât le téléphone. Pas une rue, pas une maison, pas même une case du quartier des esclaves qui ne jouît de l'eau sous pression et ne fût éclairée à l'électricité.

Aux alentours de la cité, fondée dix ans plus tôt en plein désert, le prodige était plus grand encore. Si l'océan de sable l'entourait toujours, il ne commençait plus maintenant qu'à quelques kilomètres de son enceinte. Aux abords immédiats de la ville, sur une étendue si grande que l'horizon en cachait l'extrémité, le désert avait fait place à des champs cultivés selon les méthodes les plus parfaites, et dans lesquels poussaient, avec un succès croissant d'année en année, tous les végétaux d'Afrique et d'Europe.

Telle était, dans son ensemble, l'œuvre d'Harry Killer, œuvre qui eût été admirable si elle n'avait eu le crime pour base et pour objet. Mais comment l'avait-il réalisée? Comment avait-il transformé en campagne fertile ces plaines arides et desséchées? L'eau est l'élément indispensable à toute vie animale ou végétale. Pour que l'homme et les animaux subsistent, pour que la terre produise, il faut de l'eau. Comment Harry Killer en avait-il doté cette région où, jadis, des années entières s'écoulaient sans qu'il tombât une goutte de pluie? Était-il donc doué d'un pouvoir magique, pour avoir réalisé, à lui seul, ces miracles?

Non, Harry Killer ne possédait aucune puissance surnaturelle, et, abandonné à ses propres forces, il eût été assurément incapable d'accomplir de telles merveilles. Mais Harry

Killer n'était pas seul. Le Palais, où il demeurait avec ceux qu'il nommait effrontément ses conseillers, les casernes de la Garde noire et les remises des planeurs n'occupaient ensemble qu'une infime partie de la dernière section de Blackland. Au milieu du vaste espace demeuré libre, il existait d'autres constructions, une autre ville plutôt, incluse dans la première, dont les divers bâtiments, les cours et les jardins intérieurs couvraient à eux seuls neuf hectares. En face du Palais se dressait l'Usine.

L'Usine était une cité autonome, indépendante, à laquelle le chef prodiguait l'argent, qu'il respectait, que, sans se l'avouer, il redoutait même un peu. S'il avait conçu la ville, c'est l'Usine qui l'avait créée, qui l'avait dotée de tous les perfectionnements modernes, et, en outre, d'inventions extraordinaires que l'Europe ne devait connaître que plusieurs années après Blackland.

L'Usine avait une âme et un corps. L'âme, c'était son directeur. Le corps, c'était une centaine d'ouvriers appartenant à différentes nationalités, mais surtout à la France et à l'Angleterre, où ils avaient été choisis parmi les meilleurs dans leurs professions respectives, et d'où ils avaient été amenés sur un pont d'or. Chacun d'eux avait des appointements de ministre, en échange desquels il devait subir la règle inflexible de Blackland.

À peu près tous les corps de métier figuraient parmi ces ouvriers, dont les ajusteurs mécaniciens formaient toutefois la majorité. Quelques-uns d'entre eux étaient mariés, et, à cette date de l'histoire de Blackland, l'Usine contenait vingt-sept femmes, plus un petit nombre d'enfants.

Cette population d'honnêtes travailleurs, qui contrastaient si étrangement avec les autres habitants de la ville, logeaient tous dans l'Usine, d'où il leur était rigoureusement interdit de jamais sortir. L'eussent-ils voulu, qu'ils ne l'auraient pas pu, une surveillance sévère étant exercée nuit et jour par la Garde noire et par les Merry Fellows. Au surplus, on les avait prévenus en les embauchant, et nul n’était tenté d’enfreindre la règle portée à sa connaissance au moment de son engagement. En échange des appointements très élevés qui leur étaient offerts, ils devaient se considérer comme retranchés du monde pendant le temps qu’ils passeraient à Blackland. Non seulement ils ne pourraient quitter l’Usine, mais ils ne pourraient non plus écrire à personne, ni recevoir aucune lettre du dehors. Telles étaient les conditions posées au moment de l’engagement. Nombreux étaient ceux que leur rigueur faisait reculer. Quelques-uns se laissaient pourtant tenter de temps à autre par l’élévation du salaire offert. Qu’a-t-on à perdre, en somme, lorsqu’on est pauvre, et lorsqu’il faut lutter pour le pain? Courir la chance de s’enrichir valait bien le désagrément de s’en aller dans l’inconnu, et, après tout, se disaient-ils, on ne risquait, au maximum, que la vie dans l’aventure.

Le contrat conclu, il était aussitôt exécuté. L’homme embauché prenait passage sur un bateau qu’on lui indiquait, et qui le conduisait à l’une des îles Bissagos, archipel situé près de la côte de la Guinée portugaise, où il débarquait. Là, il devait consentir à ce qu’on lui bandât les yeux, et un des planeurs, pour lesquels un abri était aménagé sur un point désert des rivages de l’archipel l’emportait en moins de six heures à Blackland, distant de deux mille deux cents kilomètres à vol d’oiseau. Le planeur descendait dans l’esplanade séparant le Palais de l’Usine, et l’ouvrier, débarrassé de son bandeau, entrait dans cette dernière, pour n’en plus sortir, jusqu’au jour où il lui conviendrait de résilier son engagement et de retourner dans son pays.

Sur ce point, le contrat réservait, en effet, la liberté de l’ouvrier embauché. S’il était prisonnier, tant qu’il demeurait à Blackland, il lui était loisible à toute époque de quitter la ville pour toujours. Ce cas échéant, de cette même esplanade où l’avait déposé le planeur, un autre planeur l’emporterait vers les îles Bissagos, où il trouverait un steamer pour le ramener en Europe.

Telle était du moins l’assurance donnée aux ouvriers désireux de partir. Mais ce qu’ignoraient leurs camarades restés à l’Usine, c’est que les hommes ainsi partis n’étaient jamais arrivés à destination, que leurs os blanchissaient en quelque point du désert et que les salaires qu’ils emportaient avaient été invariablement repris par celui qui les avait distribués. Ainsi la caisse de ce dernier ne s’appauvrissait-elle pas, ainsi était gardée secrète l’existence de Blackland, ainsi l’empire d’Harry Killer demeurait inconnu.

Au surplus, ces départs étaient rares. Dans l’impossibilité de connaître, de soupçonner même quel genre de vie menaient les habitants d’une ville sur laquelle ils manquaient du renseignement le plus insignifiant, ces ouvriers ne demandaient qu’exceptionnellement à quitter leur petite cité particulière. Ils y vivaient entre eux, neuf esclaves noirs des deux sexes, prisonniers comme eux-mêmes, aidant les femmes dans les soins domestiques, heureux, en somme, plus heureux, en tout cas, qu’ils ne l’avaient été dans leur pays d’origine, tout à leurs travaux qui les passionnaient à ce point qu’ils les prolongeaient parfois spontanément fort avant dans la nuit.

Au-dessus d’eux, les ouvriers n’avaient qu’un chef, leur directeur, un Français, du nom de Marcel Camaret, qu’ils n’étaient pas loin de considérer comme un dieu.

Marcel Camaret était le seul habitant de l’Usine qui pût librement en sortir et errer à son gré, soit dans les rues, soit aux environs de Blackland. Bien qu’il ne se fît pas faute d’user de cette liberté et de promener de tous côtés ses rêveries, il ne faudrait pas en conclure qu’il fût mieux renseigné que le personnel placé sous ses ordres sur les moeurs particulières de cette ville, dont il ignorait jusqu’au nom.

Un des ouvriers lui ayant demandé un jour ce renseignement, Camaret avait cherché un instant, de bonne foi, puis, au grand étonnement de son subordonné, il avait répondu avec hésitation:

— Ma foi… je ne sais trop…

Jamais, jusqu’alors, il n’avait pensé à s’informer de ce détail. Il n’y pensa, d’ailleurs, pas davantage après que la question lui eut été posée.

C’était un être étrange que Marcel Camaret.

Il paraissait âgé d’une quarantaine d’années. De taille moyenne, ses épaules étroites, sa poitrine plate, ses cheveux ténus et rares d’un blond fade lui donnaient une apparence délicate et frêle. Ses gestes étaient mesurés, son calme inaltérable, et il parlait, avec une timidité d’enfant, d’une voix faible et douce, qui ne s’élevait jamais au ton de la colère, voire de l’impatience, dans aucune circonstance quelle qu’elle fût. Il tenait constamment un peu penchée sur l’épaule gauche sa tête trop lourde, et son visage, d’une pâleur mate, aux traits fins et maladifs, n’avait qu’une beauté: deux admirables yeux bleus pleins de ciel et de rêve.

Un observateur attentif eût découvert encore autre chose dans ces yeux magnifiques. À de certains moments, une lueur vague et trouble y passait, et, parfois, leur expression avait, pour un instant, quelque chose d’égaré. Qui eût surpris cette lueur n’eût pas manqué de soutenir que Marcel Camaret était fou, et peut-être, après tout, ce jugement n’eût-il pas été très loin de la vérité. N’est-elle pas bien petite, en effet, la distance qui sépare l’homme supérieur du dément? Par quelque côté le génie ne touche-t-il pas à la folie?

En dépit de sa timidité, de sa faiblesse physique et de sa douceur, Marcel Camaret était doué d’une énergie sans limites. Les plus grandes calamités, les dangers les plus imminents, les privations les plus cruelles le laissaient insensible. La raison en est qu’il les ignorait. Ses limpides yeux bleus ne regardaient qu’en dedans et ne voyaient rien des contingences extérieures. Il vivait hors du temps, dans un monde féerique tout peuplé de chimères. Il pensait. Il pensait fortement, il pensait uniquement et toujours. Marcel Camaret n’était qu’une machine à penser, machine prodigieuse, inoffensive — et terrible.

Distrait à rendre des points à Saint-Bérain, ou plutôt “étranger” à tout ce qui constitue la vie matérielle, il était plus d’une fois tombé dans la Red river, en croyant s’engager sur un pont. Son domestique, auquel un faciès simiesque avait valu le nom de Joko, ne pouvait arriver à le faire manger à des heures régulières. Marcel Camaret mangeait quand il avait faim, et dormait quand il avait sommeil, aussi bien à midi qu’à minuit.

Dix ans plus tôt, des circonstances qui ne tarderont pas à être connues l’avaient placé sur le chemin d’Harry Killer. À cette époque, un surprenant engin, capable, d’après son inventeur, de provoquer la pluie, était une des chimères de Camaret. Celui-ci ne se faisant pas faute de raconter ses rêveries à qui voulait les entendre, Harry Killer avait connu cette invention, encore toute théorique, en même temps que les autres auditeurs du rêveur. Mais, alors que ces derniers ne faisaient que rire de pareilles folies, Harry Killer les avait prises au sérieux, au point de baser sur elles le projet qu’il avait depuis réalisé.

Si Harry Killer était un bandit, du moins était-il un bandit de large envergure, et avait-il eu le mérite de comprendre quel parti il pouvait tirer du génie méconnu de tous. Le hasard ayant mis Camaret à sa merci, il avait fait miroiter aux yeux du savant la réalisation de ses rêves, il l’avait entraîné jusqu’à ce point du désert où s’élevait maintenant Blackland, et avait dit: “Qu’ici tombe la pluie promise!” Et la pluie, docilement, s’était mise à tomber.

Camaret, depuis lors, vivait dans une fièvre perpétuelle. Toutes ses chimères, il les avait matérialisées successivement. Après la machine à provoquer la pluie, son cerveau avait produit cent autres inventions dont Harry Killer avait bénéficié, sans que leur auteur s’inquiétât jamais de l’usage qui en était fait.

Certes, un inventeur ne saurait être tenu pour responsable du mal dont il fut, pourtant, la cause indirecte. Il ne viendra à l’esprit de personne d’accuser, par exemple, celui qui a imaginé le revolver, de tous les crimes commis à l’aide de cette arme qui n’aurait pas existé sans lui. Mais enfin, le créateur de cet agent de meurtre n’ignorait pas qu’un pareil instrument pouvait et devait tuer, et c’est évidemment dans ce but qu’il l’a conçu.

Rien de pareil chez Marcel Camaret. S’il avait eu jamais la fantaisie d’étudier un canon dont la portée fût plus grande et le projectile plus lourd qu’on ne l’avait fait jusqu’alors, il aurait calculé avec plaisir la forme de la pièce, le poids et le profil de l’obus et la charge de poudre, sans voir dans cette étude autre chose qu’une curiosité balistique. On l’aurait grandement étonné en lui apprenant que son enfant pouvait, le cas échéant, faire preuve de quelque brutalité.

Harry Killer avait désiré la pluie, et Camaret avait fait pleuvoir; Harry Killer avait désiré des instruments agricoles, et Camaret avait créé des bineuses, semeuses, sarcleuses, faucheuses et batteuses mécaniques perfectionnées qui binaient, semaient, sarclaient, fauchaient et battaient sans moteur autonome; Harry Killer avait désiré des machines volantes, et

Camaret lui avait donné ces planeurs capables de franchir cinq mille kilomètres à la vitesse d'un bolide.

Quant à l'usage que son compagnon pouvait faire de ces diverses inventions, l'idée n'était pas venue à Marcel Camaret de se le demander. Être de pure abstraction, il n'avait vu que les problèmes en eux-mêmes, sans s'occuper, ni de leur application pratique ni de l'origine des moyens matériels mis à sa disposition pour les résoudre. Ainsi qu'il avait assisté sans s'en apercevoir à la naissance de Blackland et à la substitution progressive d'une campagne fertile au désert, ainsi il n'avait jamais eu la moindre velléité de savoir par quels procédés Harry Killer lui avait fourni les premiers instruments et les premières machines avec lesquels l'Usine avait ensuite fabriqué les autres.

Tout d'abord, Marcel Camaret avait demandé, comme une chose toute simple, qu'une usine fût construite, et, aussitôt, des nègres, par centaines, l'avaient bâtie. Il avait ensuite demandé telle et telle machine-outil, des dynamos et un moteur à vapeur, et, sinon aussitôt, du moins quelques mois plus tard, les machines-outils, les dynamos et le moteur étaient arrivés miraculeusement dans le désert. Il avait demandé enfin des ouvriers, et, l'un suivant l'autre, les ouvriers étaient venus jusqu'au nombre fixé par lui-même. Comment ces étonnantes merveilles s'étaient-elles accomplies? Marcel Camaret n'en avait cure. Il avait demandé, il était servi. Rien ne lui paraissait plus simple.

Et, pas davantage, il n'avait songé à évaluer l'importance des capitaux absorbés par la réalisation de ses rêves, et jamais il ne s'était jamais posé cette question si naturelle: "D'où vient l'argent?"

Les principaux traits de Blackland et de ses habitants ayant été ainsi indiqués, il est possible d'en récapituler en peu de mots les caractéristiques essentielles.

Sur la rive gauche de la Red River, le Palais, avec Harry Killer, ses neuf acolytes et les douze domestiques noirs. À proximité, les cinquante hommes de la Garde noire et les quarante conducteurs de planeurs dans leurs casernes respectives.

Sur la même rive, en face du Palais, l'autre tête de la cité, l'Usine, son directeur, Marcel Camaret, “marchant, vivant dans un rêve étoilé”, le domestique Joko, les neuf autres serviteurs noirs et les cent ouvriers, dont vingt-sept mariés, tous prisonniers dans cette cité autonome et sans aucune communication avec le reste de Blackland.

Sur la rive droite, les Merry Fellows, au nombre de cinq cent soixante-six, officiers compris, tous gens de sac et de corde, les deux cent quarante et un Blancs et les quarante-cinq femmes blanches de même acabit formant le Civil Body, et enfin le vaste quartier central des Noirs, où vivent, peinent et souffrent le surplus des esclaves, soit cinq mille sept cent six nègres des deux sexes.

Tels sont les lieux où vont se dérouler les événements que la seconde partie de ce récit se propose de raconter.

Au moment où elle commence, tout était comme à l'ordinaire à Blackland. Le personnel de l'Usine travaillait, un certain nombre des Merry Fellows surveillaient les nègres employés aux travaux agricoles que nécessitait l'approche de la saison des pluies, tandis que les autres se livraient, de même que chaque jour, aux plus grossiers plaisirs, et le Civil Body s'occupait un peu vaguement de son négoce des plus restreints et des plus irréguliers.

Vers onze heures du matin environ, Harry Killer était seul dans son appartement personnel. Il réfléchissait profondément, et ses pensées ne devaient pas être plaisantes, à en juger par l'expression de son visage.

La sonnerie du téléphone retentit.

— J'écoute! dit Harry Killer en s'emparant du récepteur.

— Ouest, dix-sept degrés sud, dix planeurs en vue, lui annonça le téléphone.

— Je monte, répondit Harry Killer, qui raccrocha l'appareil. En quelques minutes, il atteignit le faîte du Palais, au-dessus duquel s'élevait une tour d'une dizaine de mètres de hauteur, où il monta également. Sur la plate-forme se trouvait le Merry Fellow qui l'avait averti:

— Là, fit celui-ci, en montrant un point de l'espace.

De nouveau, il fouilla l'horizon de l'ouest. Puis, abaissant la longue-vue:

— Appelle les conseillers, Roderik, dit-il. Je descends.

Tandis que le Merry Fellow exécutait l'ordre reçu en téléphonant aux divers membres du Conseil, Harry Killer descendit rapidement jusqu'à l'esplanade ménagée entre l'Usine et le Palais. Successivement les neuf conseillers vinrent l'y rejoindre. Les yeux levés vers le ciel, ils attendirent.

Leur attente fut brève. Les planeurs signalés grossissaient à vue d'oeil. Quelques minutes plus tard, ils atterrissaient doucement sur l'esplanade.

Les yeux d'Harry Killer brillèrent de plaisir. Si quatre des planeurs ne contenaient que leurs conducteurs respectifs, les six autres transportaient chacun deux passagers supplémentaires: un homme de la Garde noire et un prisonnier étroitement garrotté, et dont une étoffe disposée en forme de sac emprisonnait le buste.

Les six prisonniers furent délivrés de leurs entraves. Quand leurs yeux éblouis eurent repris l’habitude du grand jour, ils regardèrent autour d’eux avec surprise. Ils se trouvaient sur une vaste place entourée de tous côtés par d’infranchissables murailles. À quelques pas, les appareils étranges qui les avaient transportés dans les airs. Devant eux, la masse énorme du Palais surmonté de sa tour, et trente nègres de la Garde noire massés en un groupe compact. Plus près, un autre groupe de dix hommes d’aspect peu rassurant. Derrière eux, à plus de cent mètres, un mur long de deux cent cinquante mètres sans porte ni fenêtre, au-dessus duquel apparaissait une haute cheminée d’usine et un frêle pylône métallique plus élevé encore, dont l’usage leur était inconnu. Où étaient-ils? Quelle était cette forteresse que n’indiquait aucune des cartes de l’Afrique, dont, tous, ils avaient fait une étude attentive et patiente?

Tandis qu’ils se posaient ces questions, Harry Killer fit un signe, et, sur l’épaule de chaque prisonnier, une main brutale s’abattit. Bon gré, mal gré, il leur fallut marcher vers le Palais, dont la porte s’ouvrit devant eux et se referma derrière eux.

Jane Buxton, Saint-Bérain, Barsac, Amédée Florence, le docteur Châtonnay et M. Poncin étaient définitivement au pouvoir d’Harry Killer, autocrate de Blackland, capitale inconnue d’un empire inconnu.

CHAPITRE 2

À tire-d’aile

(Carnet de notes d’Amédée Florence.)

25 mars. — Voilà près de vingt-quatre heures que nous sommes à… Au fait, où sommes-nous? On me dirait que c’est dans la lune, je n’en serais pas autrement surpris, étant donné le mode de locomotion dont nous venons de goûter les charmes. La vérité est que je n’en ai aucune idée. Quoi qu’il en soit, je peux, sans crainte de me tromper, m’exprimer ainsi qu’il suit: Voilà près de vingt-quatre heures que nous sommes prisonniers, et c’est ce matin seulement, après une nuit d’ailleurs excellente, que je me sens la force d’ajouter ces notes à mon carnet, qui commence à en contenir de raides, j’ose le dire.

En dépit d’une leçon de voltige équestre qu’il nous a fallu prendre bon gré, mal gré, la santé générale serait satisfaisante, et nous serions tous à peu près en forme, si Saint-Bérain n’était cloué au lit par un féroce lumbago, mieux que par la meilleure chaîne d’acier. Le pauvre homme, aussi raide qu’un pieu, est incapable du moindre mouvement, et nous devons le faire manger comme un enfant. À cela, rien d’étonnant. L’étonnant, au contraire, c’est que nous puissions remuer encore, après la petite chevauchée d’hier matin.

En ce qui me concerne, j’ai été, toute la journée d’hier, brisé, moulu, hors d’état de rassembler deux idées. Aujourd’hui, ça va mieux, bien que pas très fort encore. Essayons, cependant, de retrouver nos esprits, comme dit le camarade, qui, à en juger par ce pluriel, en avait sans doute plusieurs, le veinard, et de récapituler les événements extraordinaires dont mes compagnons et moi avons été les déplorables héros.

Donc, avant-hier, nous nous étions couchés, rompus de fatigue, et nous dormions du sommeil du juste, quand, un peu avant l’aube, nous sommes réveillés par un bruit infernal. C’est ce même ronflement qui m’a déjà intrigué trois fois, mais aujourd’hui il est beaucoup plus intense. Nous n’ouvrons les yeux que pour les refermer aussitôt, car nous sommes éblouis par des lumières fulgurantes qui semblent projetées sur nous d’une certaine hauteur.

Nous ne sommes pas revenus de ce vacarme et de cette illumination également inexplicables, quand des hommes tombent sur nous à l’improviste. Nous sommes bousculés, renversés, ligotés, bâillonnés et aveuglés par une espèce de sac, dans lequel on nous introduit jusqu’à la taille. Tout cela en moins de temps qu’il n’en faut pour l’écrire. Il n’y a pas à dire, c’est de l’ouvrage bien faite.

En un tour de main, je suis ficelé comme un saucisson. À mes chevilles, à mes genoux, à mes poignets, qu’on a soigneusement croisés derrière le dos, des liens qui m’entrent dans la chair. C’est délicieux!

Tandis que je commence à apprécier cette agréable sensation, j’entends une voix, dans laquelle je reconnais immédiatement l’organe enchanteur du lieutenant Lacour, prononcer ces mots d’un ton rude:

— Y êtes-vous, les garçons?

Puis, presque aussitôt, sans laisser auxdits garçons — de charmants garçons, sans aucun doute — le temps de répondre, la même voix reprend, d’un ton plus rude encore:

— Le premier qui bouge, une balle dans la tête… Allons, en route, nous autres!

Nul besoin d’être licencié es lettres pour comprendre que la seconde phrase est pour nous. Il en a de bonnes, l’ex-commandant de notre escorte! Bouger?… Il en parle à son aise. Non, je ne bougerai pas, et pour cause. Mais j’écoute.

Précisément, quelqu’un répond au sémillant lieutenant:

— Wir können nicht hier heruntersteigen. Es sind zu viel Baume.

Bien que je n’entende goutte à ce jargon, je parie tout de suite avec moi-même que c’est de l’allemand. M. Barsac, très ferré sur cet idiome rocailleux, m’a dit depuis que j’avais gagné, et que cela signifie: “Nous ne pouvons pas descendre ici, il y a trop d’arbres.” C’est bien possible.

En tout cas, sur le moment, je n’y ai rien compris. Mais, ce qui m’a frappé, c’est que la phrase tudesque était criée de loin, je dirai même “d’en haut”, au milieu du vacarme qui continuait à sévir. À peine était-elle terminée qu’une troisième voix ajoute de la même manière, c’est-à-dire en hurlant:

— It’s necessary to take away your prisoners until the end of the trees.

Bon! de l’anglais, maintenant. Versé dans la langue de Shakespeare, je traduis sur-le-champ: “Il faut emmener vos prisonniers jusqu’à la fin des arbres”, tandis que le présumé lieutenant Lacour interroge:

— Dans quelle direction?

— Towards Kourkoussou (vers Kourkoussou), crie le fils de la perfide Albion.

— À quelle distance? demande encore le lieutenant.

— Circa venti chilometri, vocifère une quatrième voix.

Un latiniste de ma force n’a pas grand mal à deviner que ces trois mots sont italiens et signifient: “Environ vingt kilomètres”. Suis-je donc au pays des polyglottes? Dans la Tour, ou, du moins, dans la brousse de Babel?

Quoi qu’il en soit, le lieutenant Lacour a répondu: “C’est bon, je partirai au jour”, et on ne s’est plus occupé de moi. Je reste où je suis, à plat sur le dos, ficelé, ne voyant rien, respirant à peine, dans la cagoule très peu confortable dont on m’a affublé.

Sur la réponse du lieutenant, le bourdonnement a d’abord redoublé d’intensité, pour diminuer ensuite et s’éteindre graduellement. En quelques minutes, il a cessé d’être perceptible.

Quelle peut être la cause de ce bruit étrange?

Bien entendu, mon bâillon m’interdisant toute communication avec le reste du monde, c’est à moi seul que je pose cette question, et, naturellement, je n’y réponds pas.

Le temps s’écoule. Une heure passe, davantage peut-être, puis deux hommes me saisissent, l’un par les pieds, l’autre par les épaules, m’enlèvent, me balancent un instant, et me jettent comme un sac de son en travers d’une selle dont le troussequin me meurtrit le dos, sur un cheval qui s’élance dans un galop furieux.

Je n’avais jamais pensé, au sein de mes rêves les plus fantasques, que je jouerais un jour les Mazeppa dans le centre de l’Afrique, et je vous prie de croire que la gloire de ce Cosaque ne m’avait jamais empêché de dormir.

Je me demandais si j'arriverais à m'en tirer comme lui, et si ma destinée était de devenir hetman des Bambaras, quand une voix avinée, sortant d'une gorge qu'on devait rincer au pétrole, me dit d'un ton à faire frémir:

— Take care, old bloody toad! If you budge, this revolver shall hinder you to begin again.

Traduction:

— Prenez garde, vieux sanglant crapaud! Si vous bougez, ce revolver vous empêchera de recommencer.

Voilà deux fois qu'on me fait la même recommandation, toujours, d'ailleurs, avec une aussi exquise politesse. C'est du luxe.

Autour de moi, c'est un bruit de galops furieux, et j'entends parfois de sourds gémissements: mes compagnons, sans doute, qui doivent être aussi mal en point que je le suis moi-même. Car je suis fort mal, en vérité! J'étouffe, et je suis terriblement congestionné. C'est à croire que ma tête va éclater, ma pauvre tête qui pend lamentablement sur le flanc droit du cheval, tandis que mes pieds battent la mesure sur son flanc gauche à chaque foulée.

Après une heure environ de course folle, la cavalcade s'arrête brusquement. On me descend de cheval, ou plutôt on me jette à terre comme un paquet de linge. Quelques instants se passent, puis assez vaguement, car je suis mort aux trois quarts, je perçois des exclamations qui se croisent:

— She is dead! (Elle est morte).

— No. Ell'è solamente svenuta. (Non. Elle est seulement évanouie.)

— Détachez-la, commande en français la voix que j’attribue au lieutenant Lacour, et détachez aussi le médecin.

Ce féminin… Miss Buxton serait-elle en danger?

Je sens qu’on me débarrasse du sac et du bâillon qui m’empêche de voir et de respirer. Mes bourreaux s’imagineraient-ils, par hasard, que, sous ces peu recommandables articles de toilette, ils vont trouver le brave docteur Châtonnay? Oui, c’est bien pour cette raison qu’on s’occupe de ma modeste personne, car, dès que l’erreur est reconnue:

— Ce n’est pas celui-ci. À un autre, dit le chef, qui est bien le lieutenant Lacour, comme je le supposais.

Je le regarde, et je m’octroie intérieurement les plus virulentes injures. Quand je pense que j’ai pu prendre ça pour un officier français!… Certes, j’ai le droit de le dire à mon honneur, j’ai tout de suite soupçonné le subterfuge, mais soupçonné seulement, et je n’ai pas, sous son déguisement d’emprunt, démasqué le bandit, qui s’est ainsi payé, comme on dit, notre tête, ce dont j’enrage. Ah! la canaille!… Si je le tenais!…

À ce moment, un homme s’approche de lui et l’interpelle. J’entends son véritable nom: capitaine Edward Rufus. Va pour capitaine. Il pourrait bien être général qu’il n’en vaudrait pas plus cher.

Pendant qu’on lui parle, le capitaine Rufus a cessé de faire attention à moi. J’en profite pour respirer à pleins poumons. Il était temps. Encore un peu et j’allais périr asphyxié. Cela doit se voir et il est probable que je suis violet, car le capitaine, ayant jeté un coup d’oeil de mon côté, a donné un ordre que je n’ai pas entendu. Aussitôt, on me fouille. On me prend mes armes, mon argent, mais on me laisse ce carnet. Les brutes ne se rendent pas compte de la valeur d’une copie signée Amédée Florence. À quels stupides voleurs ai-je affaire, juste ciel!

Ces ânes bâtés me délient cependant bras et jambes, et je peux remuer. J’en profite sans tarder, tout en examinant les alentours.

Ce qui attire tout d’abord mes regards, ce sont dix… quoi?… dix… machines, dix… hum! choses… systèmes… dix objets, enfin, car le diable m’emporte si je me doute de leur usage, qui ne ressemblent à rien que j’aie jamais vu. Figurez-vous une assez vaste plate-forme reposant sur deux larges patins recourbés à l’une de leurs extrémités. De la plate-forme s’élève un pylône en treillis métallique haut de quatre à cinq mètres, qui porte, en son milieu, une grande hélice à deux branches, et, à son sommet, deux… (Allons! voilà que ça recommence. Impossible de trouver les mots convenables) deux… bras, deux… plans… non, je tiens le mot, car l’objet en question ressemble beaucoup à un héron colossal perché sur une patte, deux ailes, c’est bien cela, deux ailes en métal brillant, d’une envergure totale de six mètres environ. Vérification faite, il y a dix mécaniques conformes à cette description rangées en bataille l’une à côté de l’autre. À quoi cela peut-il bien servir?

Quand je suis rassasié de ce spectacle incompréhensible, je m’aperçois que la société qui m’entoure est assez nombreuse.

Il y a, d’abord, l’ex-lieutenant Lacour, récemment promu au grade de capitaine Rufus, les deux anciens sergents de notre seconde escorte, dont j’ignore la véritable dignité, leurs vingt tirailleurs noirs, dont je reconnais parfaitement la plupart, et enfin dix Blancs que je n’ai jamais vus, à figures plutôt patibulaires. Si la société est nombreuse, elle ne me paraît pas très choisie.

Au milieu de ces gens-là sont mes compagnons. Je les compte des yeux. Ils y sont tous. Miss Buxton est étendue sur le sol. Elle est livide. Le docteur Châtonnay et Malik, qui pleure à chaudes larmes, lui prodiguent leurs soins. Près d'elle, j'aperçois Saint-Bérain, assis par terre, qui reprend péniblement sa respiration. Il est dans un état pitoyable. Son crâne dénudé est d'un rouge brique, et ses gros yeux semblent près de jaillir de leurs orbites. Pauvre Saint-Bérain!

M. Barsac et M. Poncin me paraissent en meilleure condition. Ils sont debout et font jouer leurs articulations. Pourquoi ne ferais-je pas comme eux?

Mais je ne vois nulle part Tongané. Où peut-il être? Aurait-il été tué au cours de l'attaque que nous avons subie? Ce n'est que trop probable, et c'est peut-être pour cela que Malik sanglote si fort. J'éprouve un chagrin réel à cette pensée, et je donne un souvenir attendri au brave et fidèle Tongané.

Je me lève, et me dirige vers miss Buxton, sans que personne me dise rien. Mes jambes sont raides et je n'avance pas vite. Le capitaine Rufus me devance.

— Comment va Mlle Mornas? demande-t-il au docteur Châtonnay.

Au fait! c'est vrai, l'ex-lieutenant Lacour ne connaît notre compagne que sous son nom d'emprunt.

— Mieux, dit le docteur. La voici qui rouvre les yeux.

— Pouvons-nous partir? interroge le soi-disant capitaine.

— Pas avant une heure, déclare d’un ton ferme le docteur Châtonnay, et encore, si vous ne voulez pas nous tuer tous, je vous conseille d’adopter des moyens moins barbares que ceux employés jusqu’ici.

Le capitaine Rufus ne répond pas et s’éloigne. Je m’approche à mon tour, et constate que miss Buxton revient à elle, en effet. Bientôt, elle peut se redresser, et le docteur Châtonnay, qui était agenouillé auprès d’elle, se relève. À ce moment, M. Barsac et M. Poncin viennent nous rejoindre. Nous sommes au complet.

— Mes amis, pardonnez-moi! nous dit tout à coup miss Buxton, tandis que de grosses larmes s’échappent de ses yeux. C’est moi qui vous ai entraînés dans cette effroyable aventure. Sans moi, vous seriez en sûreté maintenant…

Nous protestons, comme bien on pense, mais miss Buxton continue à s’accuser et à nous demander pardon. Moi, qui n’ai pas la fibre de l’attendrissement très développée, j’estime que ce sont là des paroles inutiles, et je crois opportun de faire dévier la conversation.

Puisque miss Buxton n’est connue que sous le nom de Mornas, je suggère qu’il serait meilleur de lui laisser son pseudonyme. Est-il impossible, en effet, qu’il y ait des anciens subordonnés de son frère parmi les gredins qui nous entourent? À quoi bon, dans ce cas, risquer de courir un danger supplémentaire, quel qu’il soit? On approuve à l’unanimité. Il est convenu que miss Buxton redevient Mlle Mornas, comme devant.

Il était temps d’arriver à cette conclusion, car notre conversation est brusquement interrompue. Sur un ordre bref du capitaine Rufus, on s’empare brutalement de nous. Trois hommes s’occupent spécialement de ma modeste personne. Je suis ficelé de neuf et l’abominable sac me sépare de nouveau du monde extérieur. Avant d’être tout à fait aveugle, je constate que mes compagnons, y compris miss Buxton — pardon! Mlle Mornas — subissent le même traitement. Puis, comme tout à l’heure, on m’emporte… Vais-je donc recommencer la petite partie d’équitation à la manière de Mazeppa?

Non. On me dépose à plat ventre sur une surface dure, mais plane, qui ne rappelle en rien l’échine d’un cheval. Quelques minutes s’écoulent, et j’entends comme un violent battement d’ailes, tandis que la surface qui me porte se met à osciller faiblement dans tous les sens. Cela dure un instant, puis, tout à coup, c’est assourdissant, le fameux bourdonnement, mais quintuplé, décuplé, centuplé, et voici que le vent me frappe avec une violence extraordinaire qui s’accroît de seconde en seconde. En même temps, j’éprouve une impression… comment dirai-je?… une impression d’ascenseur, ou, plus exactement, de montagnes russes, quand le chariot monte et descend leurs collines artificielles, quand on a la respiration coupée, le coeur étreint d’une angoisse invincible… Oui, c’est bien cela, c’est quelque chose de ce genre que j’éprouve.

Cette sensation persiste cinq minutes peut-être, puis mon organisme retrouve peu à peu son équilibre habituel. Alors, l’avouerai-je, la tête enfouie dans ce maudit sac, privé d’air et de lumière, bercé par ce ronronnement devenu régulier, je crois que je glisse sur la pente du sommeil…

Une surprise me réveille brusquement. Une de mes mains a bougé. Oui, mes liens mal rattachés se sont desserrés, et, dans un effort inconscient, mes mains ont pu s’écarter l’une de l’autre.

D’abord, je me contrains à l’immobilité, car je ne suis pas seul, ainsi que me l’apprennent des voix qui hurlent dans le bruit auprès de moi. Il y a deux personnes qui parlent. L’une s’exprime en anglais, d’une voix éraillée telle qu’en peut émettre un gosier brûlé par l’alcool. L’autre répond dans la même langue, mais avec une grammaire de haute fantaisie, et mélangée de mots incompréhensibles pour moi, que je devine appartenir au bambara, pour en avoir souvent entendu les consonances depuis quatre mois que je suis dans ce joyeux pays. L’un des deux interlocuteurs est un véritable Anglais, l’autre un nègre. Je comprends de moins en moins. Peu importe, d’ailleurs. Que mes gardiens soient noirs ou blancs, il ne faut pas que le moindre mouvement du sac indique que j’ai reconquis partiellement ma liberté.

Lentement, prudemment, je tire sur mes liens qui glissent peu à peu autour de mes poignets. Lentement, prudemment, je parviens à ramener le long de mon corps mes deux mains enfin libérées.

Voilà qui est fait. Maintenant, il s’agit de voir.

Le moyen de voir, je le possède. Dans ma poche, j’ai un couteau… non, pas un couteau, un canif, qui a échappé à mes voleurs, tellement il est petit, un minuscule canif, que je ne saurais transformer en arme défensive, mais très suffisant pour ouvrir une petite fenêtre dans ce sac qui m’aveugle, qui m’étouffe. Reste à m’emparer de ce canif sans attirer l’attention.

J’y réussis, au prix d’un quart d’heure de patients efforts.

Ainsi armée, ma dextre remonte jusqu’à la hauteur de mon visage, et transperce le sac…

Juste ciel!… Qu’ai-je vu?… C’est tout juste si j’ai pu arrêter à temps un cri de surprise. Mes yeux, dirigés vers le sol, aperçoivent celui-ci à une distance énorme, plus de cinq cents mètres à mon estime. La vérité se révèle à moi. Je suis sur une machine volante, qui m’emporte à travers les airs avec la vitesse d’un express, plus vite encore peut-être.

À peine ouverts, mes yeux se sont refermés. Un frisson m’a parcouru des pieds à la tête. Sous le coup de la surprise, j’ai eu peur, je l’avoue.

Quand mon coeur a repris son rythme régulier, je regarde avec plus de calme. Sous mes yeux, le sol continue à fuir d’une manière vertigineuse. À quelle vitesse allons-nous? Cent, deux cents kilomètres à l’heure?… Davantage?… Quoi qu’il en soit, ce sol est celui du désert, c’est du sable, mêlé de cailloux, et parsemé de touffes assez nombreuses de palmiers nains. Triste pays.

Et pourtant je me l’imaginais plus triste encore. Ces palmiers nains sont d’un vert intense, et, entre les cailloux, l’herbe est abondante. Contrairement à la légende, pleuvrait-il donc parfois dans le désert?

Par moments, je distingue, quand leur altitude est moindre que la mienne, des appareils semblables à celui qui me porte. Mon oreille me dit que d’autres sont à une hauteur plus grande. C’est une escadrille d’oiseaux mécaniques qui vogue à travers l’espace. Quelque grave que soit ma situation personnelle, je suis enthousiasmé. Après tout, le spectacle est admirable, et nos ennemis, quels qu’ils soient, ne sont pas des gens ordinaires, eux qui ont réalisé l’antique légende d’Icare avec une pareille maestria.

Mon champ visuel n’est pas très grand, car ainsi que j’arrive à le constater, grâce à un petit mouvement qui reste inaperçu de mes gardiens, mon regard passe entre les lames d’une plateforme métallique, qui l’arrêtent de tous les côtés. En raison de la hauteur d’où il tombe, il embrasse cependant une certaine étendue.

Or, voici que le pays change. Après une heure de vol environ, voici que j’aperçois tout à coup des palmiers, des prairies, quelques jardins. C’est une oasis, mais une oasis de proportions restreintes, car son diamètre atteint au maximum cent cinquante mètres, elle disparaît aussitôt apparue. Mais, à peine l’avons-nous laissée en arrière, qu’une autre surgit de l’horizon devant nous, puis, après cette deuxième, c’en est une troisième, au-dessus de laquelle nous passons en trombe.

Chacune de ces oasis ne contient qu’une maisonnette. Un homme en sort, attiré par le bruit de notre appareil aérien. Je n’en aperçois pas d’autre. Ces îlots n’auraient-ils donc qu’un seul habitant?

Mais un nouveau problème se pose, encore plus insoluble. Depuis la première oasis, notre machine volante domine une ligne de poteaux si régulièrement espacés que je les imagine reliés par un fil métallique. Je crois rêver. Le télégraphe — à moins que ce ne soit le téléphone — en plein désert?

Après que nous avons dépassé la troisième oasis, une quatrième, beaucoup plus importante, surgit devant nous. J’aperçois des arbres, non seulement des palmiers, mais des essences variées, qui semblent être des karités, des bombax, des baobabs, des acacias. Je vois aussi des champs cultivés, merveilleusement cultivés même, où de nombreux nègres travaillent. Puis des murailles se lèvent à l’horizon, vers lesquelles nous nous précipitons.

C’est à cette cité inconnue que nous allons, car voici que notre oiseau féerique commence à descendre. Nous sommes bientôt au-dessus d’elle. C’est une ville de médiocre grandeur, mais combien singulière! Je distingue nettement ses rues demi-circulaires et concentriques, tracées suivant un plan rigoureux. La partie centrale est à peu près déserte, et ne contient à cette heure de la journée qu’un petit nombre de nègres qui se cachent dans leurs cases en entendant le ronronnement des machines volantes. Par contre, dans la périphérie, les habitants ne manquent pas. Ce sont des Blancs, qui nous regardent, et, Dieu me pardonne, paraissent nous montrer le poing. Je me demande en vain ce que nous leur avons fait.

Mais la machine qui me porte accentue sa descente. Nous franchissons une rivière étroite, puis, aussitôt, j’ai l’impression que nous tombons comme une pierre. En réalité, nous décrivons une spirale qui me donne la nausée. Le coeur me monte aux lèvres. Vais-je donc…?

Non, le bourdonnement de l’hélice a cessé et notre machine a touché terre. Elle glisse sur le sol pendant quelques mètres avec une vitesse décroissante, et s’arrête.

Une main tire le sac qui entoure ma tête et l’enlève. Je n’ai que le temps de rouler mes liens autour de mes mains, que je replace dans leur position primitive.

Le sac enlevé, on libère mes membres. Mais celui qui me délivre s’aperçoit de la fraude.

— Who is the damned dog’s son that has made this knot? (Quel est le damné fils de chien qui a fait ce noeud?) interroge une voix avinée.

Comme bien on pense, je n’ai garde de répondre. Après mes mains, on délie mes jambes. Je les agite avec un certain plaisir.

— Get up! (Debout!) commande avec autorité quelqu’un que je ne vois pas.

Je ne demande pas mieux, mais obéir n’est pas très aisé. Depuis le temps que la circulation du sang est arrêtée dans mes membres, ceux-ci me refusent leur service. Après quelques tentatives infructueuses, je parviens cependant à me lever et à jeter un premier coup d’oeil sur ce qui m’entoure.

Pas gai, le paysage. Devant moi, c’est une haute muraille sans la moindre ouverture, et, dans la direction opposée, le spectacle est rigoureusement identique. À ma gauche, c’est encore la même chose. La perspective n’est pas variée, décidément! Toutefois, au-dessus de ce troisième mur, qui règne à ma gauche, j’aperçois une espèce de tour et une haute cheminée. Serait-ce une usine? C’est possible, tout me paraît possible, excepté de concevoir l’usage de cet interminable pylône qui s’élève, s’élève, à cent mètres peut-être au-dessus de la tour.

À ma droite, le point de vue est différent, sans être pour cela plus enchanteur. Je compte deux vastes bâtiments et, en avant, une construction énorme, une espèce de forteresse avec redans et mâchicoulis.

Mes compagnons de captivité sont au complet, sauf Tongané, malheureusement, et sauf aussi Malik qui était cependant présente à l’étape de ce matin. Qu’en a-t-on fait?

N’ayant pas eu, comme moi, l’avantage de jouir d’une fenêtre ouvrant sur la campagne, mes amis semblent très incommodés par la lumière du jour. Ils ne doivent pas voir grand-chose, car leurs yeux papillotent, et ils les frottent énergiquement.

Ils les frottent encore, quand une main s’abat sur l’épaule de chacun de nous. On nous entraîne, on nous pousse, ahuris, désemparés…

Que nous veut-on enfin, et où diable pouvons-nous être?…

Hélas! Une minute plus tard, nous étions en prison.

CHAPITRE 3

Un despote

(Carnet de notes d’Amédée Florence.)

26 mars. — Me voici donc en prison. Après avoir joué les Mazeppa, je joue les Silvio Pellico.

Comme je viens de le coucher sur ces tablettes, c’est avant-hier, un peu avant midi, que nous avons été incarcérés. En ce qui me concerne, j’ai été empoigné par trois moricauds qui m’ont fait monter, non sans brutalité, un escalier, puis suivre un corridor sombre, aboutissant à une longue galerie, sur laquelle donnent nos cellules. Aux deux bouts de cette galerie, facile à surveiller, sont placées des sentinelles. Il est douteux que nous puissions nous échapper par là.

On m’introduit dans une pièce éclairée par un vitrail doublé d’une grille de fer, placé à quatre mètres au-dessus de ma tête, et on referme la porte sur moi à triple verrou. Je reste seul en compagnie de mes pensées, qui ne sont pas couleur de rose.

La cellule est vaste et bien aérée. Elle contient une table avec ce qu’il faut pour écrire, une chaise, un lit qui paraît propre et des ustensiles de toilette. Une ampoule électrique est fixée au plafond. En somme, la paille humide des cachots est assez confortable, et j’estimerais cette chambre d’étudiant fort suffisante, si j’étais libre.

Je m’assieds, j’allume une cigarette et j’attends — quoi? les événements, tout en réfléchissant aux charmes de voyages.

Deux heures plus tard, je suis tiré de ma méditation par le bruit de ma porte qu’on ouvre. Les verrous grincent, la serrure craque, l’huis s’entrebâille, et j’aperçois… Je vous le donne en mille. J’aperçois Tchoumouki, qui a disparu depuis le jour où, pour la troisième fois, j’ai entendu le mystérieux ronflement dont je connais maintenant la cause. Il ne manque pas d’un certain toupet. Oser se présenter devant moi, après la manière dont il a traité mes articles!

Tchoumouki s’attend, d’ailleurs, à un accueil plutôt frais. Avant de pénétrer dans ma cellule, il y jette d’abord un regard et examine prudemment le terrain. Bien lui en prend.

— Ah! te voilà, triple fripon! dis-je, en m’élançant à sa rencontre, dans l’intention de lui infliger la correction qu’il mérite.

Mais je me heurte à la porte, que le traître a vivement refermée. Tant mieux, après tout. Quand je m’offrirais le plaisir de lui allonger les oreilles, à quoi cela m’avancerait-il, sinon à compliquer encore ma situation, qui n’est déjà pas si drôle?

Tchoumouki devine-t-il cette réflexion pacifique? C’est à croire, car la porte s’entrebâille une seconde fois, et donne de nouveau passage à la tignasse crépue du coquin. Oh! il peut entrer, maintenant. J’ai repris ma place… et mon calme.

Je répète, mais d’un ton où ne gronde plus aucune menace:

— Ah! te voilà, triple fripon! Que viens-tu faire ici?

— Moi y en a domestique, répond, avec un regard en dessous, Tchoumouki, qui ouvre la porte toute grande.

Dans le couloir, il y a deux autres nègres portant des victuailles que Tchoumouki dépose sur ma table. À cette vue, l’eau me vient à la bouche, et je m’aperçois que je meurs de faim. Cela n’a rien d’étonnant; je suis à jeun, et il est au moins deux heures de l’après-midi.

Rejetant tout autre souci, je fais honneur au repas, respectueusement servi par Tchoumouki, que j’interroge, et qui ne se fait nullement prier pour répondre à mes questions. D’après lui, je suis l’hôte — très involontaire! — d’un puissant roi, S. M. Harry Killer — un bien vilain nom, entre nous — et on m’a conduit dans une ville extraordinaire, où “y en a beaucoup maisons grandes” et “beaucoup manières toubab”, c’est-à-dire remplie d’inventions européennes. Je n’ai pas de peine à l’en croire, après l’expérience des prodigieuses machines volantes dont je suis encore tout ébaubi.

Je continue mon enquête. Ce serait donc le roi en question qui l’aurait placé, lui, Tchoumouki, sur le chemin de Mlle Mornas, afin que celle-ci le prît pour guide, de même qu’on choisit malgré soi la “carte forcée” d’un prestidigitateur?

Tchoumouki m’affirme que non, et qu’il s’est engagé sans arrière-pensée. Il soutient même que son engagement n’est nullement rompu et qu’il se considère comme étant au service de Mlle Mornas et de Saint-Bérain pendant tout le temps que ses patrons resteront en Afrique. Tchoumouki se moquerait-il de moi? Je le regarde. Non, il parle sérieusement, ce qui est, d’ailleurs, beaucoup plus comique.

Il prétend avoir été entraîné par Moriliré, lequel était bien, lui, à la solde du monarque qui nous retient prisonniers. Non content de le couvrir d’or, Moriliré lui aurait décrit, paraît-il, dans les termes les plus dithyrambiques, la puissance et la générosité de cet Harry Killer, que

Tchoumouki n’a jamais vu, du reste, et il aurait promis à celui-ci une vie large et facile. Telles sont les raisons pour lesquelles Tchoumouki aurait tourné casaque.

Quand je lui demande s’il sait ce qu’est devenu son ancien camarade Tongané, sa vilaine figure prend une expression féroce, il se passe la main sur le cou, et fait:

— Couic!…

Mes conjectures étaient donc exactes. Le pauvre Tongané est bien mort.

Tchoumouki achève ses confidences. Le ronflement que j’ai entendu le jour de sa disparition provenait d’une machine volante qui amenait le lieutenant Lacour, ou plutôt le capitaine Edward Rufus, dont les hommes étaient venus à notre rencontre, par la voie terrestre, sous le commandement de deux sous-officiers, en mettant à sac, pour se distraire, les villages qui se trouvaient sur leur passage. Ce sont les patins de cette machine volante qui ont creusé dans la brousse, au moment de l’atterrissage, les ornières que j’ai remarquées le lendemain, au cours de ma promenade avec Tongané. Ainsi s’expliquent le délabrement des soldats et l’impeccable élégance de l’officier, ainsi s’expliquent la terreur du nègre blessé par une balle explosible, en reconnaissant l’un des assaillants de son village, et son indifférence pour le soi-disant lieutenant qu’il n’avait jamais vu. Quant à lui, Tchoumouki, il a été emmené par la même machine revenant à son port d’attache, ici, c’est-à-dire…

Tchoumouki prononce un nom qu’il écorche terriblement. Au prix d’une longue attention, je discerne enfin qu’il a l’intention de dire “Blackland”, mot composé anglais dont la traduction littérale est Terre noire. Le nom est plausible. Nous serions donc à Blackland, ville merveilleuse, au dire de Tchoumouki, bien qu’absolument inconnue des plus avisés géographes.

Tandis que le nègre me donne ces renseignements, je réfléchis. Puisqu’il a trahi par intérêt, pourquoi l’intérêt ne le ferait-il pas trahir ses nouveaux maîtres? Je fais aussitôt à Tchoumouki des ouvertures dans ce sens, et je parle d’une grosse somme, qui lui suffirait à passer sa vie entière dans une position toute naturelle, mais il hoche la tête, en homme qui ne voit pas la possibilité de gagner la timbale.

— Y en a pas moyen partir, me dit-il. Ici, y en a beaucoup soldats, beaucoup “manières toubab”, beaucoup grands murs.

Il ajoute que la ville est entourée par le désert, qu’il nous serait impossible de franchir. C’est exact, ainsi que j’ai pu m’en rendre compte pendant la traversée aérienne. Sommes-nous donc condamnés à rester ici jusqu’à la fin de nos jours?

Le repas terminé, Tchoumouki se retire et ma journée s’achève dans la solitude.

Le soir venu, il me sert à dîner (cuisine très suffisante, en somme), puis, au moment où ma montre marque neuf heures et quelques minutes, extinction subite de l’ampoule électrique. Je me couche à tâtons.

Après une nuit excellente, comme je l’ai dit, je me lève, le 25 mars, et rédige les notes portant cette date où sont relatées les péripéties de notre enlèvement. Je ne vois personne, à l’exception de Tchoumouki, qui me sert régulièrement mes repas. Le soir, instruit par l’expérience, je me couche plus tôt. J’ai lieu de m’en applaudir. À la même heure que la veille, l’électricité s’éteint. C’est évidemment la règle de la maison.

Deuxième nuit excellente, et me voici de nouveau, ce matin, 26 mars, frais et dispos, mais hélas! toujours prisonnier. Cette situation est absurde, car, enfin, que nous veut-on? Quand verrai-je seulement quelqu’un à qui je puisse le demander?

Même jour, dans la soirée. — Mes voeux ont été exaucés. Nous avons vu S. M. Harry Killer, et notre situation a subi des changements importants depuis cette entrevue, dont je suis encore tout ému, tout tremblant.

Il pouvait être trois heures de l’après-midi, quand ma porte s’est ouverte. Cette fois, ce n’était pas Tchoumouki qui se trouvait derrière, mais une autre de nos anciennes connaissances, Moriliré, pour ne pas le nommer. Moriliré est accompagné d’une vingtaine de nègres qu’il paraît commander. Au milieu de cette troupe, j’aperçois mes compagnons, y compris miss Buxton-Mornas, mais non compris Saint-Bérain, toujours dans l’impossibilité de remuer, à ce que me dit sa jeune tante. Je me joins à eux, pensant que notre dernière heure est venue et qu’on nous conduit au poteau d’exécution.

Il n’en est rien. Nous suivons une série de couloirs, et nous arrivons enfin à une pièce assez vaste, dans laquelle nous entrons, tandis que notre escorte s’arrête sur le seuil.

La pièce est exclusivement meublée d’un fauteuil en fibres de palmier et d’une table, sur laquelle reposent un verre et une bouteille à demi pleine, d’où nous parvient une odeur d’alcool. Le fauteuil est derrière la table, et, dans le fauteuil, un homme est assis. Nos yeux convergent vers cet homme. Il en vaut la peine.

S. M. Harry Killer doit avoir de quarante à quarante-cinq ans, bien que, par certains côtés, il puisse paraître plus âgé. Autant qu’on en peut juger, il est de haute taille, et sa carrure, ses mains énormes, ses membres épais et musclés, indiquent une vigueur peu commune, pour ne pas dire herculéenne.

Mais c’est la tête surtout qui retient l’attention. Le visage est glabre, d’un caractère complexe, puissant et vil à la fois. Une chevelure inculte et grisonnante la couronne, une véritable crinière qui semble brouillée avec le peigne depuis un temps immémorial. Le front dénudé est vaste et exprime l’intelligence, mais les maxillaires accusés, le menton lourd et carré indiquent des passions grossières et violentes. Les joues, fortement bronzées, aux pommettes saillantes, se creusent, puis s’affaissent en deux lobes alourdis. Elles sont parsemées de boutons presque sanglants à force d’être rouges. La bouche est lippue, la lèvre inférieure, un peu pendante, découvrant de fortes dents saines, mais jaunes et mal entretenues. Les yeux, profondément enfoncés dans les orbites, que surmontent des sourcils en broussailles, sont d’un éclat extraordinaire, et même, par instants, insoutenable. Le personnage n’est certes point banal. Tous les appétits, tous les vices, toutes les audaces, il les a sûrement. Hideux, oui, mais redoutable.

Sa Majesté est vêtue d’une sorte de complet de chasse en toile grise, culotte courte, leggings et vareuse, le tout crasseux et couvert de taches. Sur la table, elle a déposé un large chapeau de feutre, auprès duquel repose sa main droite qu’agite un perpétuel tremblement.

Du coin de l’oeil, le docteur Châtonnay me désigne cette main trémulante. J’entends ce que le docteur veut dire: c’est un alcoolique, sinon même un ivrogne, que nous avons devant nous.

Longtemps, cet individu nous considère en silence. Ses yeux vont de l’un à l’autre et nous passent en revue successivement. Nous attendons avec patience son bon plaisir.

— Vous êtes six, à ce qu’on m’a dit, prononce-t-il enfin, en français, avec un fort accent anglais, d’une voix au timbre grave, mais éraillée. Je n’en vois que cinq. Pourquoi?

— L’un de nous est malade, à la suite des souffrances que vos hommes lui ont fait endurer, répond M. Barsac.

Nouvel instant de silence, puis notre interlocuteur se redresse brusquement et demande ex abrupto:

— Qu’êtes-vous venus faire chez moi?

La question est si inattendue que nous avons tous envie de rire, malgré la gravité de la situation. Parbleu! si nous sommes chez lui, c’est bien malgré nous!

Il reprend, avec une expression menaçante:

— Espionner, sans doute!

— Pardon, monsieur… commence M. Barsac.

Mais l’autre l’interrompt. En proie à une subite fureur, il frappe du poing sur la table et dit d’une voix tonnante:

— On m’appelle maître.

Alors, M. Barsac est superbe. Orateur toujours et quand même, il se redresse, met la main gauche sur son coeur, et, balayant l’espace d’un large mouvement de sa dextre:

— Depuis l’an 1789, les Français n’ont plus de maître, monsieur, déclare-t-il avec emphase.

Partout ailleurs, elle prêterait à rire, je vous l’accorde, l’apostrophe un peu “pompier” de M. Barsac, mais dans les circonstances présentes, en face de cette espèce de bête fauve, elle a sa noblesse, je vous en donne mon billet. Elle signifie que nous ne consentirons jamais à nous humilier devant cet aventurier alcoolique. Nous approuvons tous l’orateur, jusqu’à M. Poncin, qui s’écrie, au comble de l’enthousiasme:

— Privez l’homme de son indépendance, vous lui ôtez sa liberté!

Brave M. Poncin! Toutefois, l’intention est bonne.

À l’énoncé de cette proposition par trop indiscutable, Harry Killer a haussé les épaules, puis il a recommencé à nous examiner successivement, comme s’il ne nous avait pas encore vus. Ses yeux passent de l’un à l’autre avec une rapidité extraordinaire. Ils s’arrêtent enfin à M. Barsac, sur lequel ils dardent leur regard le plus terrible. M. Barsac ne bronche pas. Mes compliments. Cet enfant du Midi n’a pas que de la faconde. Il a aussi du courage et de la dignité. Notre chef de mission monte à pas de géant dans mon estime.

Harry Killer réussit à se dominer, ce qui ne doit pas lui arriver tous les jours, et demande brusquement, avec un calme aussi subit que sa colère a été soudaine:

— Parlez-vous anglais?

— Oui, répond M. Barsac.

— Et vos compagnons?

— Également.

— Bien, approuve Harry Killer, qui, du même ton rogomme, répète aussitôt en anglais:

— Qu’êtes-vous venus faire chez moi?

La réponse est trop facile.

— C’est à nous de vous poser la question, réplique M. Barsac, et de vous demander de quel droit vous nous y retenez par la force.

— De celui que je prends, tranche Harry Killer, remonté d’un seul bond aux extrêmes limites de la violence. Moi vivant, personne n’approchera de mon empire.

Son empire?… Comprends pas.

Harry Killer s’est levé. S’adressant plus spécialement à M. Barsac, dont l’attitude continue à être très crâne, il poursuit d’une voix furieuse, en martelant la table de son énorme poing:

— Oui, oui, je sais que vos compatriotes sont à Tombouctou et gagnent sans cesse vers l’aval du Niger, mais qu’ils s’arrêtent, ou sinon!… Et voilà maintenant qu’ils osent envoyer des espions par terre jusqu’au fleuve!… Je les briserai, vos espions, comme je brise ce verre!…

Et, joignant le geste à la parole, Harry Killer brise effectivement le verre, qui se fracasse sur le sol en mille morceaux.

— Un verre!… hurle-t-il, en se tournant vers la porte.

Soulevé par une incroyable fureur, littéralement enragé, car un peu d'écume suinte aux commissures de ses lèvres crispées, il fait mal à voir en ce moment. Sa mâchoire inférieure, projetée en avant, lui donne l'air d'une bête féroce, son visage est cramoisi, ses yeux sont injectés de sang.

Un des gardes noirs s'est empressé d'obéir. Sans s'occuper de lui, l'énergumène, s'appuyant sur la table que ses mains pétrissent violemment, se penche de nouveau vers M. Barsac toujours impassible, et lui crie, les yeux dans les yeux:

— Ne vous ai-je pas assez prévenus, cependant?… L'histoire du doung-kono, inventée par mon ordre, vous a donné un premier avertissement. C'est moi qui ai placé sur votre route ce diseur de bonne aventure, dont, par votre faute, les prédictions se sont réalisées. C'est moi qui vous ai fourni votre guide, mon esclave Moriliré, qui, à Sikasso, a essayé, une dernière fois, de vous arrêter. Tout a été inutile. En vain, je vous ai privés de votre escorte, en vain je vous ai affamés, vous vous êtes obstinés à marcher vers le Niger… Eh bien! vous l'avez atteint, le Niger, vous l'avez même franchi, et vous savez ce que vous vouliez savoir… Vous voilà bien avancés!… Comment ferez-vous pour raconter ce que vous avez vu à ceux qui vous paient?…

En proie à une agitation désordonnée, Harry Killer se promène maintenant à grands pas. Pour moi, aucun doute, c'est un fou. Soudain, il s'arrête, l'esprit traversé d'une idée subite.

— Mais, au fait, demande-t-il à M. Barsac, avec un calme surprenant, votre destination régulière n’était-elle pas Saye?

— Oui, répondit M. Barsac.

— Pour quelles raisons, dans ce cas, avez-vous suivi une direction tout autre? Qu’alliez-vous faire à Koubo?

Harry Killer accompagne cette dernière question d’un coup d’oeil perçant, tandis que nous échangeons des regards embarrassés. La question est gênante, en effet, puisque nous sommes convenus de ne pas prononcer le nom de miss Buxton. Heureusement, M. Barsac trouve une réponse plausible.

— Abandonnés par notre escorte, nous nous dirigions sur Tombouctou, dit-il.

— Pourquoi pas sur Sikasso? C’était beaucoup moins loin.

— Nous avons cru mieux faire en allant à Tombouctou.

— Hum!… fait d’un air indécis Harry Killer, qui reprend après un court silence: Votre intention n’était donc pas d’aller dans l’Est, jusqu’au Niger?

— Non, affirme M. Barsac.

— Si j’avais pu le deviner, nous apprend Harry Killer, vous ne seriez pas ici aujourd’hui.

La bonne farce!… Comme s’il avait pris la peine de nous le demander!…

Je profite d’un nouveau silence, qui succède à la réflexion saugrenue d’Harry Killer, pour prendre la parole à mon tour. Je suis un garçon extrêmement logique, moi qui vous parle. Tout ce qui n'est pas logique me choque. Cela me fait l'effet d'une armoire en désordre. Or, dans cette histoire, il y a un point qui me tarabuste. J'interviens donc, et:

— Pardon, mon cher monsieur, dis-je avec une exquise politesse, je serais curieux de savoir pourquoi vous avez pris la peine de nous y amener, au lieu de nous occire tout simplement. Votre capitaine Edward Rufus et ses hommes avaient la partie belle, puisque nous étions sans méfiance, et c'était encore le meilleur moyen de vous débarrasser de nous.

Harry Killer a froncé les sourcils et me regarde avec mépris. Quel est ce pygmée qui ose lui adresser la parole? Il daigne cependant me répondre:

— Pour éviter l'enquête des autorités françaises, que le massacre d'une mission n'eût pas manqué de provoquer.

Je suis en partie satisfait. Pas tout à fait cependant. J'objecte:

— Il me semble que notre disparition aura le même résultat.

— Évidemment, reconnaît Harry Killer, qui, pour l'instant, fait preuve d'un grand bon sens. Aussi aurais-je préféré vous voir renoncer à votre voyage. C'est votre entêtement seul qui m'a forcé à vous amener ici.

L'adversaire me tend la perche. Il faut se hâter de la saisir.

— Tout peut encore s'arranger, dis-je. Puisque vous savez maintenant que nous ne voulions nullement aller jusqu'au Niger, vous n'avez qu'à nous faire déposer où vous nous avez pris, et ainsi il ne sera plus question…

— Pour que vous alliez raconter partout ce que vous avez appris? Pour que vous révéliez l'existence de cette ville ignorée du monde entier?

interrompit violemment Harry Killer. Non, il est trop tard. Qui entre à Blackland n’en sort jamais plus.

Qu’il s’époumone tant qu’il voudra. Moi, je commence à être habitué à ses bourrasques. Je ne me trouble donc pas, et j’insiste:

— Alors l’enquête aura lieu?

— Probablement, répond Harry Killer, dont l’aiguille barométrique est déjà revenue au beau fixe, mais ma position sera meilleure. Si je suis découvert, et s’il faut enfin combattre, j’aurai du moins quelque chose de plus que si vous étiez morts.

— Quoi donc?

— Des otages.

Très fort, ce potentat. Il a tout à fait raison. Mais j’ai eu raison, moi aussi, de l’interviewer, puisqu’il résulte de ses réponses qu’il n’a pas l’intention de nous faire passer de vie à trépas. C’est toujours agréable à apprendre.

Harry Killer a repris place derrière la table, dans son fauteuil. C’est un individu déconcertant. Le voici, maintenant, parfaitement calme et maître de soi.

— Précisons la situation, dit-il d’un ton glacial qui est pour nous une nouveauté. Vous êtes à Blackland, et vous n’en sortirez plus, ni les uns, ni les autres. Quant à votre existence, elle sera ce que vous la ferez vous-mêmes. Je n’ai de compte à rendre à personne. Je peux vous maintenir en prison ou vous supprimer, si cela me plaît, comme je peux vous laisser la liberté dont je jouis moi-même dans les limites de l’empire.

Encore ce mot. C’est à se tordre.

— Cela dépend de vous, continue Harry Killer, en s’adressant plus particulièrement à M. Barsac qu’il considère décidément comme notre chef de file. Vous serez pour moi des otages ou…

Harry Killer fait une pose. M. Barsac le regarde avec un étonnement que je conçois. Que pourrions-nous bien être?

— Ou des collaborateurs, achève froidement Harry Killer.

Dire que la proposition d’Harry Killer nous étonne serait faible. Nous en sommes positivement “épatés”.

Cependant, il poursuit avec la même froideur:

— Il ne faudrait pas croire que je m’illusionne sur la marche progressive des troupes françaises. Si l’on ignore encore mon existence, on la connaîtra forcément un jour ou l’autre. Ce jour-là, il faudra se battre ou négocier. Ne pensez pas que je redoute la bataille. Je suis en état de me défendre, mais la guerre n’est pas la seule solution possible. La colonisation de la boucle du Niger suffira à occuper la France pendant de longues années. Quel intérêt aurait-elle à courir le risque d’une défaite pour progresser malgré moi dans l’Est, à travers un océan de sable que je suis en train de transformer en plaines fertiles? Des négociations bien conduites pourraient donc aboutir à une alliance…

Il ne doute de rien, le particulier! Il sue la vanité par tous les pores. Non mais, voit-on la République française s’alliant à ce tyranneau pustuleux?

— Avec vous!… s’exclame avec ahurissement M. Barsac traduisant la pensée de tous.

Il n’en faut pas plus pour déchaîner la tempête. Au fait, le calme durait depuis trop longtemps. Ça commençait à devenir monotone.

— Vous ne m’en trouvez peut-être pas digne? rugit Harry Killer, les yeux étincelants, en martelant de nouveau sa table qui n’en peut mais. Ou bien vous espérez m’échapper?… C’est que vous ignorez ma puissance.

Il se lève, et achève d’une voix où gronde la menace:

— Vous allez la connaître!

À son appel, les gardes sont entrés. On s’empare de nous, on nous entraîne. Nous montons d’interminables escaliers, puis on nous fait traverser au pas de course une vaste terrasse, à laquelle succèdent d’autres escaliers. Nous débouchons enfin sur la plate-forme d’une tour, où Harry Killer ne tarde pas à nous rejoindre.

Cet homme est variable comme l’onde. Avec lui, pas de demi-mesure. Il passe sans transition d’une fureur folle à un calme glacial, et réciproquement. Pour l’instant, il ne reste aucune trace de sa dernière colère.

— Vous êtes ici à quarante mètres de hauteur, nous dit-il du ton d’un cicérone expliquant un point de vue. L’horizon est donc distant de vingt-trois kilomètres environ. Vous pouvez constater, cependant, que, si loin que portent vos regards, le désert qui nous entoure a fait place à une campagne fertile. L’empire dont je suis le chef aurait donc, au minimum, plus de seize cents kilomètres carrés. Il en a trois mille, en réalité. Telle est l’œuvre accomplie en dix ans.

Harry Killer s’interrompt un instant. Quand il a suffisamment joui dans son orgueil, légitime cette fois après tout, il reprend:

— Si quelqu’un tentait de pénétrer sur cette étendue de trois mille kilomètres carrés ou essayait d’en sortir, je serais immédiatement prévenu par un triple rang de postes établis en plein désert, et que le téléphone relie à ce palais…

Voilà donc l’explication des oasis et des poteaux télégraphiques que j’ai vus avant-hier matin. Mais écoutons Harry Killer, qui, nous montrant une sorte de lanterneau de verre, comparable à celui d’un phare, bien que de dimensions plus importantes, élevé au milieu de la plate-forme, continue sur le même ton:

— N’en serait-il pas ainsi, que personne ne pourrait encore franchir malgré moi une zone de protection large d’un kilomètre, située à cinq kilomètres des murailles de Blackland, que les rayons de puissants projecteurs parcourent pendant la nuit. Grâce à sa disposition optique, cet instrument, qui a reçu le nom de cycloscope, redresse suivant la verticale cette bande de terrain circulaire, dont le veilleur, qui se trouve au centre de l’appareil, a constamment sous les yeux tous les points énormément grossis. Entrez dans le cycloscope, je vous y autorise, et rendez-vous compte par vous-mêmes.

Notre curiosité vivement excitée, nous profitons de la permission, et nous pénétrons dans le lanterneau par une porte faite d’une énorme lentille jouant sur des charnières. À peine y sommes-nous enfermés, que le monde extérieur change d’aspect à nos yeux. De quelque côté qu’ils se portent, nous n’apercevons d’abord qu’une muraille verticale, qu’un réseau de traits noirs divisé en une multitude de petits carrés distincts. Cette muraille, dont la base est séparée de nous par un abîme de ténèbres, et dont le sommet nous paraît s’élever à une hauteur prodigieuse, semble faite d’une sorte de lumière laiteuse. Toutefois, nous ne tardons pas à constater que sa couleur est loin d’être uniforme, mais qu’elle est, au contraire, la résultante d’une infinité de taches de tonalités différentes, aux contours assez indécis. Un instant d’attention nous montre que ces taches sont, les unes, des arbres, les autres, des champs ou des chemins, d’autres encore, des hommes en train de travailler la terre, le tout suffisamment grossi pour être reconnu sans effort.

— Vous voyez ces nègres, dit Harry Killer, en nous désignant deux des taches en question, que sépare un grand intervalle. Admettons qu’ils aient l’idée de s’enfuir. Ce ne serait pas long.

Tout en parlant, il a saisi un transmetteur téléphonique.

— Cent onzième cercle; rayon quinze cent vingt-huit, dit-il. Puis, s’emparant d’un autre transmetteur, il ajoute:

— Quatorzième cercle. Rayon six mille quatre cent deux. Enfin, se tournant vers nous:

— Regardez bien, nous recommande-t-il.

Après quelques instants d’attente, pendant lesquels il ne survient rien de particulier, l’une des taches est masquée tout à coup par un nuage de fumée. Quand la fumée s’est dissipée, la tache a disparu.

— Qu’est devenu l’homme qui travaillait là? demande Mlle Mornas d’une voix étranglée par l’émotion.

— Il est mort, répondit froidement Harry Killer.

— Mort!… nous écrions-nous. Vous avez tué sans raison ce malheureux!…

— Rassurez-vous, ce n’est qu’un nègre, explique Harry Killer avec une parfaite simplicité. Marchandise sans valeur. Quand il n’y en a plus, il y en a encore. Celui-ci a été démoli par une torpille aérienne. C’est une sorte de fusée qui porte jusqu’à vingt-cinq kilomètres, et dont vous avez pu apprécier la rapidité et la précision.

Pendant que nous écoutons ces explications, autant du moins que nous le permet le trouble que nous cause une aussi abominable cruauté, quelque chose est entré dans notre champ visuel, s’est élevé rapidement le long de la muraille laiteuse, et la seconde tache a disparu à son tour.

— Et cet homme? interroge Mlle Mornas, haletante. Est-il mort, lui aussi?

— Non, répond Harry Killer, celui-là est vivant. Vous allez le voir dans un instant.

Il sort, entouré de sa garde qui nous pousse au-dehors. Nous voici de nouveau sur la plate-forme de la tour. Nous regardons autour de nous, et, à quelque distance, nous voyons accourir, avec la vitesse d’un météore, un appareil semblable à celui qui nous a transportés ici. Suspendu au-dessous du plateau inférieur, nous distinguons un objet qui se balance.

— Voici le planeur, dit Harry Killer, qui nous apprend ainsi le nom de la machine volante. Dans moins d’une minute, vous saurez s’il est possible d’entrer ici ou d’en sortir malgré moi.

Le planeur s’approche rapidement, en effet. Il grossit à vue d’oeil… Nous frissonnons soudain: l’objet qui oscille au-dessous de lui, c’est un nègre, qu’une espèce de tenaille géante a saisi par le milieu du corps.

Le planeur s’approche encore… Il passe au-dessus de la tour… Horreur! la tenaille s’est ouverte, et le malheureux nègre est venu s’écraser à nos pieds. Hors de sa tête broyée, la cervelle a jailli de toutes parts, et nous sommes éclaboussés de sang.

Un cri d’indignation est sorti de nos poitrines. Mais Mlle Mornas ne se contente pas de crier, elle agit. Les yeux étincelants, pâle, les lèvres exsangues, elle bouscule ses gardiens surpris et se précipite sur Harry Killer.

— Lâche!… Misérable assassin!… lui crie-t-elle en plein visage, tandis que ses petites mains se nouent à la gorge du bandit.

Celui-ci s’est dégagé sans effort, et nous tremblons pour l’audacieuse. Hélas! nous ne pourrions lui porter secours. Les gardes se sont emparés de nous et nous maintiennent à demi renversés.

Heureusement, il ne semble pas que le despote ait, pour le moment du moins, l’intention de punir notre courageuse compagne, que deux hommes ont entraînée en arrière. Si sa bouche a un rictus cruel, quelque chose comme une expression de plaisir passe dans ses yeux, qu’il tient fixés sur la jeune fille encore toute frémissante.

— Eh! eh!… fait-il, d’un ton assez bonhomme, elle a du sang, la pouliche.

Puis, repoussant du pied les restes du misérable nègre:

— Ça!… dit-il. Il ne faut pas vous émouvoir pour si peu, ma petite.

Il descend, on nous entraîne à sa suite, et on nous ramène dans cette salle, si richement meublée d’une table et d’un unique siège, que j’appellerai désormais pour cette raison la salle du Trône. Harry Killer prend place sur ledit trône et nous regarde.

Quand je dis qu’il nous regarde!… À la vérité, il ne fait attention qu’à Mlle Mornas. Il tient, fixés sur elle, ses yeux effrayants, dans lesquels s’allume peu à peu une lueur mauvaise.

— Vous connaissez maintenant mon pouvoir, dit-il enfin, et je vous ai prouvé que mes offres ne sont pas à dédaigner. Je les renouvelle pour la dernière fois. On m’a dit qu’il y avait parmi vous un député, un médecin, un journaliste et deux imbéciles…

Pour M. Poncin, soit! Mais pour le pauvre Saint-Bérain, quelle injustice!

— Le député négociera, le cas échéant, avec la France, je construirai un hôpital pour le médecin, le journaliste entrera au Blackland’s Thunder, et je verrai à utiliser les deux autres. Reste la petite. Elle me plaît… Je l’épouse.

On pense si nous tombons des nues, en entendant cette conclusion inattendue. Mais, avec un fou!…

— Rien de tout cela ne se réalisera, répond M. Barsac avec fermeté. Les crimes abominables dont vous nous avez rendu témoins ne nous ont pas ébranlés, au contraire. Nous subirons la force autant qu’il le faudra, mais nous ne serons jamais, quoi qu’il arrive, que vos prisonniers ou vos victimes. Quant à Mlle Mornas…

— Ah! c’est Mornas, qu’elle s’appelle, ma future femme? interrompit Harry Killer.

— Que je m’appelle Mornas ou autrement, s’écrie notre compagne absolument folle de colère, sachez que je vous considère comme une bête féroce, comme un être abject et repoussant, et que je tiens votre proposition pour l’injure la plus vile, la plus honteuse, la plus…

La voix s’étrangle dans la gorge de Mlle Mornas, qui éclate en sanglots convulsifs. Quant à Harry Killer, il se contente de rire. Le vent est à la clémence, décidément.

— C’est bon… c’est bon!… dit-il. Rien ne presse. Je vous donne à tous un mois de réflexion.

Mais le baromètre a baissé soudain, et c’est la fin du beau temps. Il se redresse, et, s’adressant aux gardes:

— Qu’on les emmène! crie-t-il d’une voix tonnante.

M. Barsac résiste un instant aux gardes qui l’entraînent. Il interpelle Harry Killer.

— Et, dans un mois, que ferez-vous de nous? lui demande-t-il.

Déjà, le vent a tourné. Le despote ne s’occupe plus de nous, et sa main tremblante élève vers sa bouche une rasade d’alcool qu’il vient de se verser. À la question de M. Barsac, il éloigne le verre de ses lèvres, puis, sans donner aucune marque de colère:

— Je ne sais trop… dit-il d’un ton indécis, en levant les yeux au plafond. Peut-être bien que je vous ferai pendre…

CHAPITRE 4

Du 26 mars au 8 avril

Ainsi que le dit Amédée Florence dans ses notes, les six prisonniers sortirent bouleversés de leur entrevue avec Harry Killer. La mort des deux malheureux nègres, et surtout l’effroyable fin du second, les avait profondément émus. Se pouvait-il qu’il existât des êtres assez féroces pour causer de pareilles souffrances, sans raison, par caprice, dans le seul but de prouver un détestable pouvoir?

Une surprise, d’ailleurs agréable, les attendait au sortir de cette entrevue mouvementée. Sans doute, Harry Killer, qui venait de leur accorder un mois de réflexion, voulait-il essayer de les gagner par de bons procédés. Quoi qu’il en fût, les portes de leurs cellules respectives ne furent plus verrouillées comme elles l’avaient été jusqu’alors, et ils purent, à partir de cet instant, circuler librement dans la galerie, qui devint une pièce commune, où il leur fut loisible de se réunir autant qu’il leur plaisait.

À l’une des extrémités de cette galerie s’amorçait un escalier débouchant, à l’étage immédiatement supérieur, sur le sommet du bastion d’angle dans lequel leurs cellules étaient situées. La jouissance de cette plate-forme leur fut également laissée. Si, pendant les heures de soleil, ils ne pouvaient guère profiter de cet avantage, ils apprécièrent au contraire très vivement le plaisir de passer en plein air leurs soirées, qu’ils prolongeaient à leur gré, sans que personne leur fît la moindre observation.

Dans ces conditions, la vie n’avait, en somme, rien de très pénible, et ils se trouvaient aussi heureux que le permettaient la privation de leur liberté et l’inquiétude légitime qu’ils concevaient de l’avenir. L’ensemble des cellules, de la galerie et de la terrasse constituait un véritable appartement autonome, où rien ne rappelait la prison, si ce n’est la porte fermée à l’autre extrémité de la galerie faisant face à l’escalier dont l’accès leur était permis. C’est derrière cette porte close que se tenaient leurs gardiens. Les voix de ceux-ci, le cliquetis de leurs armes rappelaient constamment aux prisonniers que cette limite était infranchissable.

Le service domestique était assuré par Tchoumouki, qui faisait preuve d’un grand zèle. On ne le voyait, d’ailleurs, que pendant le temps du service. Hors les heures consacrées au nettoyage des cellules et aux repas, il n’était jamais là, et l’on n’avait pas à subir la présence de ce coquin, auquel, pour une part tout au moins, les prisonniers devaient leurs malheurs présents.

Pendant le jour, ceux-ci voisinaient ou faisaient les cent pas dans la galerie, puis, au coucher du soleil, ils montaient sur la plate-forme, où, parfois, Tchoumouki servait même le dîner.

Le bastion, de forme carrée, dans lequel ils étaient incarcérés, occupait l’angle occidental du Palais, et dominait de deux côtés la grande terrasse, dont une série de cours intérieures le séparait, qu’ils avaient traversée pour gagner la tour centrale où ils avaient vu le cycloscope. De ses deux autres façades, l’une s’élevait de l’esplanade ménagée entre le Palais et l’Usine, esplanade qu’une énorme muraille limitait du côté de la Red River, l’autre prolongerait cette dernière muraille et tombait à pic dans la rivière d’une hauteur de trente mètres environ.

Toute évasion devait donc être considérée comme impossible. Sans parler de la difficulté d’échapper à la surveillance, dont Harry Killer avait si cruellement prouvé l’efficacité, on ne pouvait même pas songer à sortir du Palais. Passer du bastion sur la terrasse, que sillonnaient incessamment les conseillers, les Merry Fellows de service et des nègres appartenant à la domesticité ou à la Garde noire, n’eût servi de rien, en admettant que ce tour de force fût réalisable. On n’eût pas gagné davantage en s’échappant sur l’esplanade, ceinturée de tous les côtés par des murailles infranchissables. Seule la Red River eût peut-être offert une issue, mais les prisonniers ne possédaient ni bateau, ni même aucun moyen de descendre les trente mètres qui les en séparaient verticalement.

Du haut de la plate-forme, ils pouvaient suivre du regard le cours de cette rivière, qui, vers l’amont et vers l’aval, disparaissait entre deux rangées d’arbres dont la taille commençait à être respectable, bien qu’ils ne fussent plantés que depuis dix ans. À l’exception du jardin public, que leur masquait le reste du Palais, la ville de Blackland se déployait également sous leurs yeux. Ils en voyaient les trois sections séparées par de hautes murailles, les rues semi-circulaires et concentriques, les quartiers de l’Ouest et de l’Est, avec leur population blanche assez clairsemée, et le centre où grouillait, à l’aube, une nombreuse foule de Noirs, avant qu’elle ne s’éparpillât dans la campagne environnante.

Leurs regards plongeaient aussi partiellement dans l’Usine, mais ce qu’ils en apercevaient ne leur donnait que peu d’éclaircissements sur cette seconde ville incluse dans la première, avec laquelle elle semblait n’avoir aucune communication. Quel était l’usage de ces constructions diverses, que surmontait une cheminée d’où ne s’échappait jamais aucun panache de fumée, et une tour identique à celle du Palais, mais surélevée, jusqu’à plus de cent mètres de hauteur par ce pylône inexplicable qu’Amédée Florence avait remarqué au moment de son arrivée? Que signifiaient ces vastes bâtiments, élevés dans la partie de l’enclos en bordure de la Red River, dont plusieurs étaient recouverts d’une épaisse couche de terre gazonnée? À quels besoins répondait cette autre partie, la plus grande, qui contenait des jardins maraîchers et fruitiers? Pourquoi ce revêtement métallique au faîte de la haute muraille formant l’enceinte particulière de cet enclos? Pourquoi, à sa base, ce large et profond fossé? Pourquoi même cette muraille, puisque sur les deux côtés que ne bordaient ni la rivière, ni l’esplanade, il en existait une seconde, après laquelle commençait la campagne? Il semblait qu’on avait voulu à la fois, et doter cette petite cité particulière d’une défense supplémentaire, et la mettre dans l’impossibilité de communiquer directement avec l’extérieur. Tout cela était inexplicable.

Questionné à ce sujet, Tchoumouki n’avait pu qu’indiquer le nom de cette ville intérieure. Work House, avait-il dit seulement, avec une espèce de crainte superstitieuse, en écorchant terriblement ce nom, qu’on a traduit dans ce récit par le mot français d’usine. D’ailleurs, Tchoumouki, nouvelle recrue d’Harry Killer, ne devait pas en savoir davantage, et lui-même sans doute aurait été bien incapable de donner les raisons de la crainte qu’il manifestait, et qui n’était vraisemblablement que le reflet du sentiment général de la ville. Une force était donc cachée derrière cette muraille sans ouverture qui faisait face au Palais. Quelle était la nature de cette force? Parviendrait-on jamais à la connaître, et serait-il possible de se la rendre favorable?

Si la liberté de tous avait été notablement accrue, ainsi qu’il vient d’être dit, celle de Jane Buxton l’avait été beaucoup plus encore. Sur l’ordre d’Harry Killer, Tchoumouki lui avait notifié qu’elle pouvait aller et venir sans restriction et sans avoir rien à craindre pour sa personne, tant dans le Palais que sur la surface de l’esplanade. Il lui était simplement interdit de franchir la Red River, ce qu’elle n’aurait pu faire, au surplus, un poste de Merry Fellows étant perpétuellement de garde sur le Castle’s Bridge.

Il est inutile de dire que la jeune fille n’avait aucunement profité de la permission ainsi donnée. Quoi qu’il arrivât, son sort serait pareil à celui de ses compagnons d’infortune. Elle restait donc, comme eux, prisonnière, au grand étonnement de Tchoumouki, qui estimait, pour sa part, tout à fait magnifiques les propositions dont son ex-maîtresse était l’objet.

— Toi y a pas bon rester prison, lui disait-il. Quand toi mariée maître, y en a bon. Toi y en a délivrer toubabs.

Mais Jane Buxton ne prêtait qu’une oreille indifférente à ce plaidoyer en style nègre, et Tchoumouki en était pour ses frais d’éloquence.

Quand ils n’étaient pas réunis dans la galerie ou sur la plateforme du bastion, les prisonniers occupaient leurs loisirs, chacun suivant ses goûts particuliers.

Barsac avait la faiblesse de s’enorgueillir outre mesure de sa ferme attitude au cours de l’entrevue avec Harry Killer. Les compliments mérités qu’elle lui avait valus le gonflaient de vanité, et il eût marché sans sourciller au supplice pour en récolter de nouveaux. Tous les sentiments prenant chez lui une forme oratoire, il ne cessait de travailler, depuis lors, le discours qu’il servirait au tyran à la première occasion, et il polissait et repolissait l’apostrophe vengeresse qu’il “improviserait” et qu’il lui jetterait à la face, si celui-ci osait rééditer ses propositions déshonorantes.

Le docteur Châtonnay et Saint-Bérain, complètement guéri de son lumbago, tous deux un peu désoeuvrés, l’un faute de malades, l’autre, en raison des circonstances qui rendaient impossible l’exercice de son sport favori, tenaient le plus généralement compagnie à Jane Buxton et s’efforçaient de la consoler. Le souvenir de son père abandonné dans la solitude du château de Glenor accablait d’autant plus la jeune fille, qu’elle se croyait capable maintenant d’adoucir l’incurable désespoir du vieillard. Pourrait-elle jamais lui apporter les preuves, incomplètes encore, mais déjà troublante, de l’innocence de

George Buxton?

Amédée Florence occupait une bonne partie de son temps à la rédaction de ses notes quotidiennes. Pas un seul jour, il ne manqua à ce devoir professionnel. Si on avait la chance de revoir l’Europe, les aventures de la mission Barsac seraient du moins connues dans leurs plus infimes détails.

Quant à M. Poncin, il ne disait et ne faisait rien, si ce n’est de porter de temps en temps sur son volumineux carnet une de ces annotations cabalistiques par lesquelles Amédée Florence continuait à être fort intrigué.

— Serait-il indiscret, monsieur Poncin, osa-t-il, un beau jour, dire à son silencieux compagnon, de vous demander ce que vous notez avec tant de soin?

Le visage de M. Poncin s’illumina. Oh! non, ce n’était pas indiscret. M. Poncin était, au contraire, infiniment flatté que quelqu’un fît attention à ses travaux et en appréciât l’intérêt.

— Pour l’instant, je fais des problèmes, dit-il d’un air important.

— Bah! fit le reporter.

— Oui, monsieur. Ainsi je viens de résoudre celui-ci: “A a deux fois l’âge que B avait quand A avait l’âge que B a. Quand B aura l’âge que A a, la somme de leurs âges fera N années. Quel est l’âge de A et de B?” En représentant par x l’âge de A…

— Mais ce n’est pas un problème, votre petite machine, monsieur Poncin! s’écria Florence. C’est un simple casse-tête de fabrication chinoise! Et ça vous amuse, cet exercice?

— Dites que c’est passionnant! Ce problème-là est même tout particulièrement élégant. Je le résous depuis mon enfance, sans m’en lasser.

— Depuis votre enfance?… répéta Florence abasourdi.

— Oui, monsieur! affirma M. Poncin non sans vanité. J’en suis aujourd’hui à ma onze cent quatre-vingt-dix-septième solution, qui me donne, pour A, quatre mille sept cent quatre-vingt-huit ans, et trois mille cinq cent quatre- vingt-onze ans pour B.

— Ce ne sont pas des jeunes gens, fit observer Amédée Florence sans broncher. Mais les onze cent quatre-vingt-seize autres solutions…

— N’étaient pas moins justes. Tous les multiples de 9 satisfaisant à l’équation, le nombre des solutions exactes est infini. Quand je vivrais dix mille ans, je n’en verrai pas le bout. Si, en effet, nous représentons l’âge de A par x, et l’âge de B par y…

— Ah! non, monsieur Poncin, interrompit Florence épouvanté. Mieux vaut que je vous propose un autre problème qui aura, du moins, pour vous, le mérite de la nouveauté.

— Avec plaisir, répondit M. Poncin, qui, la main armée du crayon, se tint prêt à écrire l’énoncé.

— Trois personnes, dicta Amédée Florence, grandes, l’une de un mètre quatre-vingt-dix, la deuxième, de un mètre soixante-huit, la dernière de vingt-sept centimètres, ont parcouru trois cent trente-deux kilomètres en vingt-huit jours.

Combien de kilomètres parcourront en une seconde huit personnes, dont deux culs-de-jatte, sachant que leur âge moyen est de quarante-cinq ans!

— C’est une règle de trois, dit M. Poncin, dont le front profondément plissé indiquait la réflexion.

— Vous étudierez ça à tête reposée, se hâta de conseiller Amédée Florence. Alors, tout le long du voyage, ce sont des calculs de ce genre que vous avez notés sur ce calepin?

— Que non pas, monsieur Florence! protesta M. Poncin d’un air important. Les problèmes ne sont, pour moi, qu’une distraction, un délassement, un jeu de l’esprit. D’ordinaire, je m’occupe de questions plus hautes et plus sérieuses, je vous prie de le croire.

— Oserais-je…?

— Je suis statisticien, confessa M. Poncin avec une feinte modestie.

— C’est donc de la statistique que contient ceci, demanda Florence en montrant le fameux carnet.

— Oui, monsieur, répondit M. Poncin, positivement ivre d’enthousiasme. Ces notes sont une mine de renseignements inépuisable! J’ai trouvé des choses étonnantes, monsieur!

M. Poncin avait ouvert le carnet, dont il feuilletait rapidement les pages.

— Tenez, monsieur, ceci, s’écria-t-il en montrant une des mentions datée du 16 février. En soixante-dix jours, nous avons vu neuf troupeaux d’antilopes comptant en tout trois mille neuf cent sept têtes, je les ai comptées, ce qui fait une moyenne de quatre cent trente-quatre antilopes et onze centièmes par troupeau. En un an, nous aurions donc rencontré, c’est mathématique, quarante-six troupeaux et quatre-vingt-treize centièmes de troupeau, soit vingt mille trois cent soixante-douze antilopes et soixante-dix-huit centièmes. Il en résulte ma-thé-ma-ti-que-ment que les cinquante-quatre mille six cents kilomètres carrés auxquels j’évalue la superficie de la boucle du Niger contiennent cinq cent cinquante-six mille cent soixante-treize antilopes et huit cent quatre-vingt-quatorze millièmes d’antilope. Voilà un renseignement qui a son prix au point de vue zoologique, j’imagine!

— En effet… en effet, balbutia Amédée Florence ahuri.

— Des choses étonnantes, je vous dis! continuait cependant M. Poncin avec volubilité. Je sais, par exemple, que dans la boucle du Niger il y a une moyenne de neuf millièmes de caïman et de vingt-sept dix millièmes d’hippopotame par mètre courant de rivière! Qu’elle a produit, cette année, six cent quatre-vingt-deux trilliards trois cent vingt et un billiards deux cent trente-trois milliards cent sept millions quatre cent quatre-vingt-cinq mille un grains de mil! Qu’il y naît chaque jour, en moyenne, vingt-huit millièmes d’enfant par village et que ces vingt-huit millièmes contiennent deux cent soixante dix-sept millièmes de fille et cent quatre-vingt-dix-neuf dix-sept millièmes de garçon! Que les tatouages des nègres de cette région, mis bout à bout, feraient les cent trois mille cinq cent vingt-huitièmes du tour de la terre! Que…

— Assez!… assez!… monsieur Poncin, interrompit Florence, en se bouchant les oreilles. C’est admirable, en effet, mais trop fort pour moi, je l’avoue. Une dernière question. Ces hiéroglyphes, que j’ai pris la liberté de relever un jour, auraient donc un sens analogue.

— Parfaitement, déclara M. Poncin. 5 D et 16 F représentant la date et signifient tout bonnement 5 décembre et 16 février. V. t. veut dire villages traversés, H. hommes, M. moyenne, F. femmes, P. v. par village, K. c. kilomètres carrés, etc. etc. Tout cela est très simple. Ce qu’il y a de plus intéressant, c’est la conclusion, c’est-à-dire la population totale de la boucle du Niger. Vous voyez, au 5 décembre, P. t. c’est-à-dire population totale: 1 479 114.

— Oui, je vois, dit Florence, mais je vois aussi, à la date du 16 février: P. t. 470 652. Lequel de ces nombres est le bon?

— Tous les deux, affirma M. Poncin. Le premier était vrai le 5 décembre, et le second le 16 février.

— Il y avait donc eu, sans que je m’en doute, une effroyable épidémie dans l’intervalle?

— Je l’ignore et veux l’ignorer, déclara superbement M. Poncin. Un statisticien digne de ce nom doit s’interdire de raisonner, monsieur. Il regarde, il observe, il compte surtout, il compte, tout est là, et, de son examen, de ses observations, de ses dénombrements, les résultats découlent d’eux-mêmes. Qu’importe qu’ils changent! Cela est ma-thé-ma-ti-que-ment inévitable, si leurs facteurs ont changé. Ce détail ne saurait empêcher une addition d’être une addition, une soustraction d’être une soustraction, une multiplication…

— D’être une multiplication, et cætera.

— Et cætera, répéta machinalement M. Poncin. La statistique est une science immuable, mais elle évolue sans cesse, monsieur.

Sa curiosité satisfaite mieux qu’il ne l’espérait, Amédée Florence, se hâte de clore l’entretien sur cette admirable maxime.

Quand les prisonniers étaient réunis, le sujet de leurs conversations était plus sérieux. Ainsi qu’on peut le penser, ils parlaient, le plus ordinairement, de leur situation et de celui dont elle dépendait, c’est-à-dire d’Harry Killer, qui leur avait fait une impression que le temps n’atténuait pas.

— Qui peut bien être cet individu? demandait un jour Barsac.

— Un Anglais, répondit Jane Buxton. Son accent ne permet pas l’hésitation.

— Anglais, soit, répliqua Barsac, mais cela ne nous apprend pas grand-chose. En tout cas, ce n’est pas un homme ordinaire. Avoir, en dix ans, créé cette ville, transformé le désert comme il l’a fait, amené l’eau là où elle était inconnue depuis des siècles, une pareille œuvre suppose un véritable génie servi par des connaissances scientifiques étendues. Il est inconcevable que cet aventurier possède des dons aussi merveilleux.

— C’est d’autant plus incompréhensible pour moi, dit Amédée Florence, que je tiens Harry Killer pour un fou.

— Un demi-fou, tout au moins, rectifia le docteur Châtonnay, mais un demi-fou alcoolique, ce qui est terrible.

— La réunion de ces deux qualités, dit Amédée Florence, fait de lui le type classique du despote, c’est-à-dire d’un impulsif que la fatalité a doué du pouvoir, et qui en dispose à la manière d’un enfant gâté. Incapable de supporter la moindre résistance, il passe sans transition de la fureur au calme, et réciproquement, et professe un profond mépris pour la vie humaine, celle des autres s’entend.

— Un pareil type n’est pas rare en Afrique, expliqua le docteur Châtonnay. L’habitude de vivre perpétuellement en compagnie d’hommes, en somme inférieurs, qu’ils commandent sans contrôle, transforme trop souvent en satrapes cruels les Européens qu’un caractère ferme et une âme élevée ne défendent pas contre cet entraînement. Le despotisme est une maladie endémique aux colonies. Harry Killer le pousse un peu loin, voilà tout.

— Pour moi, il est fou, je le répète, conclut Amédée Florence, et on ne peut pas compter sur un fou. Je suis sûr qu’il nous a oubliés, et rien ne dit que, dans cinq minutes, il ne va pas commander notre exécution sans phrases.

Pendant une huitaine, les conjectures pessimistes d’Amédée Florence ne se réalisèrent pas, et la vie se déroula jusqu’au 3 avril sans qu’il survînt rien de nouveau. Ce jour-là fut, en revanche, marqué par deux événements de nature différente. Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, les prisonniers furent agréablement surpris en voyant arriver Malik. Dès qu’elle aperçut Jane Buxton, Malik se précipita à ses pieds, et baisa, avec une ardeur touchante, les mains de sa bonne maîtresse également fort émue.

On apprit de la petite négresse qu’au lieu d’être transportée par les planeurs comme les autres prisonniers, elle était revenue avec quatorze hommes et les deux sergents de l’ancienne escorte, par étapes, aux cours desquelles les mauvais traitements ne lui avaient pas été épargnés. On évita d'interroger la jeune fille au sujet de Tongané, dont, à en juger par sa tristesse, elle était certainement sans nouvelles.

Deux heures après l'arrivée de Malik surgit un second incident d'une tout autre nature. Il était environ cinq heures, quand Tchoumouki accourut dans la galerie. En donnant les signes d'une vive agitation, il informa les prisonniers qu'il était dépêché par Harry Killer, avec ordre d'amener au maître Mlle Mornas, que celui-ci s'entêtait à considérer comme sa future femme.

Les prisonniers furent unanimes à répondre par un refus formel à la communication de Tchoumouki, qui dut se retirer, malgré son insistance. Dès qu'il fut parti, on commenta avec vivacité l'étrange invitation d'Harry Killer. Tous étaient d'accord sur ce point, que leur compagne ne devait sous aucun prétexte se séparer d'eux.

— Je vous remercie, mes amis, leur dit Jane Buxton, de la protection courageuse dont vous m'entourez, mais ne croyez pas que je serais sans défense, quand bien même je me trouverais seule en présence de cette brute, qui n'est pas invulnérable, après tout. Si l'on vous a fouillés, on n'a pas jugé utile de prendre une pareille précaution avec une femme, et on m'a laissé cette arme.

Jane Buxton, tout en parlant, montra le poignard trouvé dans la tombe de son frère, et qu'elle portait depuis à la ceinture.

— Soyez sûrs, conclut-elle, que je saurais m'en servir, le cas échéant.

À peine avait-elle remis à sa place le poignard que dissimulaient les basques de son corsage, que Tchoumouki revenait tout à fait affolé. Harry

Killer était entré dans une colère furieuse en entendant la réponse de Mlle Mornas, et il mettait celle-ci en demeure de se rendre auprès de lui sur l’heure. Si elle persistait à s’y refuser, les six prisonniers seraient immédiatement pendus.

L’hésitation n’était plus de mise, et Jane Buxton, dans l’impossibilité de faire courir un pareil danger à ceux qu’elle avait entraînés dans cette aventure, se résolut à céder, malgré les objurgations de ses compagnons. Ceux-ci essayèrent vainement de s’opposer par la force à son départ. À l’appel de Tchoumouki, une douzaine de nègres firent irruption dans la galerie et réduisirent les cinq hommes à l’impuissance, jusqu’au moment où Jane Buxton eut disparu.

Elle ne revint que vers huit heures du soir, après une absence de trois longues heures, pendant lesquelles ses compagnons, et surtout le malheureux Saint-Bérain, qui pleurait à chaudes larmes, éprouvèrent à son sujet les pires inquiétudes.

— Eh bien?… demandèrent-ils d’une seule voix, en l’apercevant.

— Eh bien! ça c’est très bien passé, répondit la jeune fille encore toute frémissante.

— Que vous voulait-il enfin?

— Rien du tout, ou plutôt, il voulait me voir, pas davantage. Quand je suis arrivée, il avait déjà commencé à boire, comme il en a l’habitude, paraît-il, et il était à moitié ivre. Il m’a fait asseoir et s’est mis à m’adresser des compliments à sa manière. Il m’a dit que j’étais à son goût, qu’il lui serait agréable d’avoir une petite ménagère dans mon genre, et il a vanté sa puissance et ses richesses, qui sont immenses à l’entendre, et dont je jouirai comme lui quand je serai sa femme. Je l’ai écouté tranquillement, et me suis bornée à lui répondre qu’il nous avait accordé un mois de réflexion, dont une semaine seulement était écoulée. Si étrange que cela vous paraisse, il ne s’est pas révolté. Il m’a confirmé qu’il laisserait s’écouler un mois avant de prendre une décision, mais à la condition que je lui consacre toutes mes après-midi…

— Il faudra donc que tu y retournes, ma pauvre petite! s’écria Saint-Bérain désolé.

— C’est indispensable, répondit Jane Buxton, mais je n’imagine pas que je courrai grand risque, à en juger par cette première journée. Avant sept heures, son ivresse était complète, et mon rôle n’a plus consisté qu’à bourrer ses pipes et à remplir son verre, jusqu’au moment où cette brute s’est mise à ronfler, ce dont j’ai profité pour venir vous rejoindre.

À partir de ce jour, Jane Buxton dut, en effet, aller retrouver quotidiennement, vers trois heures, Harry Killer, auprès duquel elle demeurait jusqu’à huit heures. D’après le récit qu’elle faisait chaque soir, le traité continuait à recevoir une exécution pacifique. Toutes les après-midi se passaient de la même manière. Quand elle arrivait, elle trouvait le despote en compagnie de ses conseillers, auxquels il distribuait ses ordres, qui témoignaient, d’ailleurs, d’une intelligence lumineuse. Rien de particulier dans ces instructions, qui avaient trait à l’administration de la ville ou aux travaux agricoles, et le gouvernement de Blackland n’aurait été nullement mystérieux, si Harry Killer ne s’était, de temps à autre, penché à l’oreille de l’un de ses conseillers, pour lui faire une confidence secrète, dont Jane ignorait la nature.

Le Conseil durait régulièrement jusqu’à quatre heures, puis tout le monde se retirait, tandis que Jane Buxton demeurait avec Harry Killer. Mais celui-ci ne tardait pas à la laisser seule. Tous les jours, en effet, à quatre heures et demie précises, il disparaissait par une petite porte dont la clé ne le quittait pas. Où allait-il ainsi? Jane n’en savait absolument rien.

Les trois premiers jours, elle avait attendu le retour d’Harry Killer, et, quelques instants après le départ de celui-ci, son oreille avait été frappée par des bruits singuliers ressemblant à des plaintes lointaines, telles qu’en pousserait un homme soumis à la torture. Ces gémissements duraient un quart d’heure environ, puis ils cessaient, et, au bout d’une demi-heure d’absence, Harry Killer, ouvrant la petite porte par laquelle il était parti, revenait d’excellente humeur. Jane lui bourrant ses pipes et lui remplissant son verre, il se mettait alors à boire jusqu’à complète ivresse.

Pendant trois jours, Jane Buxton avait donc attendu le retour d’Harry Killer dans la pièce où celui-ci la laissait, mais bientôt ces plaintes lointaines, qui recelaient une souffrance qu’il n’était pas en son pouvoir de soulager, lui étaient devenues intolérables, et elle avait pris l’habitude de circuler, pendant sa demi-heure de solitude, dans le Palais, dont le personnel, conseillers, domestiques noirs et Merry Fellows de service, commençait à la connaître et lui témoigner même une certaine déférence.

Chaque soir, un moment arrivait où l’ivresse laissait Harry Killer à sa merci. Il eût été alors bien facile à la jeune fille de supprimer ce tyran alcoolique, en le frappant avec le poignard qui constituait tout l’héritage de son malheureux frère. Elle n’en avait rien fait, cependant. Outre la répugnance naturelle qu’elle éprouvait à frapper un homme sans défense, si abominable fût-il, à quoi ce meurtre eût-il servi? Harry Killer mort, il n’en serait pas moins resté cette bande de brigands qu’il appelait ses conseillers, les nègres aux mufles de fauves de sa Garde noire, et toute cette tourbe interlope qui formait la population de Blackland. La situation des prisonniers eût été, non pas améliorée, mais, au contraire, rendue pire par la mort du seul homme, peut-être, de cette ville, qui, dans ses heures de lucidité, fit preuve d'une réelle intelligence et fût capable de comprendre les avantages d'une clémence relative. Consultés à ce sujet, les compagnons de Jane Buxton étaient tombés d'accord avec elle. Non, il ne fallait, à aucun prix, frapper Harry Killer.

Mais un autre projet était meilleur peut-être. Puisque Jane jouissait de la confiance du despote, était-il impossible d'en profiter pour s'emparer de sa personne? Dès lors, les otages en auraient un, à leur tour, et ils pourraient traiter de puissance à puissance.

Malheureusement, ce projet se heurtait à de grandes difficultés. Comment s'emparer d'Harry Killer, malgré le personnel qui circulait dans le Palais et malgré les hommes qui montaient la garde à la porte des prisonniers? Cette première difficulté vaincue, ne pourrait-il pas arriver que la population de Blackland fût, en fait, heureuse d'être débarrassée de lui, et ne se prêtât à aucune négociation dont la liberté du despote fût l'enjeu? Enfin, quand bien même cette hypothèse ne se réaliserait pas, et si un traité de paix était finalement conclu, par quel moyen en assurerait-on l'exécution, autant de problèmes dont la solution était malaisée.

Outre ce projet d'enlèvement, Jane Buxton en caressait personnellement un autre, dont elle n'avait pas fait confidence à ses compagnons. Sa curiosité et sa pitié étaient fort éveillées, celle-là par les absences régulières d'Harry Killer, celle-ci par les plaintes lointaines qui ne manquaient jamais de se faire entendre à cet instant de la journée. Quand, le soir, Harry Killer, complètement ivre, s'abandonnait, elle avait eu, plus d'une fois, le désir de lui dérober la clé de la porte par laquelle il disparaissait chaque après-midi, et d'aller voir ce qu'il y avait derrière cette porte. Jusque-là, cependant, le courage lui avait manqué, et elle avait résisté à ce désir, dont la satisfaction pouvait avoir de graves conséquences.

Cinq jours se passèrent de cette façon, et on parvint au 8 avril.

Ce jour-là, un peu après neuf heures du soir, les prisonniers, y compris Malik, réunis sur la plate-forme du bastion, s’enquéraient auprès de Jane Buxton des péripéties de la journée, qui s’était, d’ailleurs, déroulée comme les précédentes. À l’étage en dessous, Tchoumouki achevait son service, avant de s’en aller jusqu’au lendemain.

De lourds nuages, qui ne tarderaient pas, selon toute vraisemblance, à se résoudre en pluie, rendaient la nuit fort obscure, bien que la lune ne fût pas encore dans son dernier quartier. Sur la plate-forme, où n’atteignaient pas les lumières de l’autre rive de la Red River, régnaient de profondes ténèbres.

Tout à coup, quelque chose tomba sur les dalles et fit un bruit sec en les heurtant. Les prisonniers surpris interrompirent aussitôt leur conversation. D’où leur arrivait et quel pouvait être cet objet que leurs yeux ne distinguaient même pas?

Amédée Florence fut le premier à reprendre son sang-froid. En quelques instants, il découvrit le mystérieux projectile. C’était un caillou de forte taille, auquel était attachée une ficelle, dont l’autre extrémité, passant par-dessus le parapet, devait plonger dans la Red River.

Que signifiait cet incident? Ne cachait-il pas quelque piège, ou bien les prisonniers auraient-ils, dans Blackland, un ami inconnu qui leur faisait tenir un message? Pour le savoir, il n’y avait qu’à remonter la ficelle, à l’extrémité de laquelle un billet serait, dans ce cas, attaché. Amédée

Florence se mit sans plus attendre en devoir de haler cette ficelle, mais il dut se faire aider par le docteur Châtonnay. Trop fine, elle lui glissait entre les doigts, en raison du poids qu'elle supportait. Il ne pouvait donc être question d'un simple billet.

On en eut bientôt le bout, auquel était attachée une corde beaucoup plus grosse. Ainsi qu'on l'avait fait pour la ficelle, on hala sur cette corde. Quand on en eut remonté trente ou trente-cinq mètres sans difficulté, on éprouva une résistance, non pas ferme, comme cela se fût produit si la corde eût été amarrée à un objet fixe, mais élastique, telle qu'en aurait pu produire un homme tirant sur son extrémité inférieure. Pendant quelques instants, on se trouva fort embarrassé. Que fallait-il faire?

— Attachons la corde, proposa Amédée Florence. Nous verrons bien si c'est cela que désire celui qui nous l'envoie.

Ainsi fut-il fait.

Aussitôt la corde se tendit. Quelqu'un y grimpait certainement, que les prisonniers, penchés sur le parapet, s'efforçaient d'apercevoir. Bientôt, ils distinguèrent en effet une forme humaine qui s'élevait rapidement le long de la muraille.

Le visiteur inconnu acheva son ascension. Un instant plus tard, il escaladait le parapet et retombait au milieu des prisonniers stupéfaits.

— Tongané!… s'exclamèrent-ils en étouffant leurs voix.

CHAPITRE 5

Nouvelle prison

Non seulement Tongané n’était pas mort, mais, ainsi qu’il l’expliqua plus tard, il n’avait même pas été blessé, lors de la surprise de Koubo. Les rayons des projecteurs ne l’ayant pas atteint, il avait pu se glisser inaperçu sous le couvert des arbres, et les assaillants ne s’étaient pas occupés de lui.

En agissant ainsi, Tongané n’avait jamais eu l’intention d’abandonner ses maîtres, et cela d’autant moins que Malik était avec eux. Il n’avait en vue que de leur venir en aide, au contraire, mais il avait justement pensé qu’il serait mieux à même de le faire, s’il conservait sa liberté.

Loin de prendre la fuite, il s’était attaché aux ravisseurs. Il les avait rejoints à la piste, puis, au prix de privations sans nombre pendant la traversée du désert, il avait suivi pas à pas ceux d’entre eux qui emmenaient Malik à Blackland, ne vivant guère que des miettes qu’il ramassait aux endroits où ils avaient fait halte avant lui. À pied, il avait marché aussi vite que leurs chevaux, et quotidiennement abattu une cinquantaine de kilomètres.

Il ne s’était laissé volontairement distancer qu’aux approches immédiats de Blackland. Dès qu’on avait pénétré dans une campagne cultivée, il s’était arrêté, et avait attendu la nuit pour se risquer sur ce territoire inconnu. Jusqu’au matin, il s’était caché dans un buisson touffu. Se mêlant alors à la foule des nègres, comme eux il avait travaillé la terre, comme eux il avait reçu les coups de trique dont les gardiens n’étaient pas avares, et, le soir, il était rentré avec eux dans le quartier central, sans que personne fît attention à lui.

Quelques jours s'étaient passés ainsi, pendant lesquels il avait dérobé cette corde dans une case déserte. Muni de son butin, il avait réussi, en suivant le Civil Body, à gagner la rivière, où, pendant deux longues journées, il s'était dissimulé sous la voûte d'un égout, en guettant l'occasion favorable.

Pendant ces deux jours, il avait vu, chaque soir, les prisonniers aller et venir sur la plate-forme du bastion, mais il s'était vainement efforcé d'attirer leur attention. L'occasion attendue ne s'était présentée que le troisième jour, le 8 avril. De gros nuages rendant la nuit très obscure, il en avait profité pour sortir de sa cachette et pour lancer à ses maîtres la corde dont il s'était ensuite servi pour arriver jusqu'à eux.

Comme on peut le penser, ces explications ne furent données que plus tard. Sur le moment, Tongané se contenta de suggérer que tout le monde pourrait sans doute s'enfuir par le même chemin que lui-même avait suivi pour venir. En bas, on trouverait un bateau dont il était parvenu à s'emparer, et on n'aurait plus ensuite qu'à descendre la Red River.

Ce projet fut adopté sans discussion, il est inutile de le dire. Avec quatre hommes aux avirons, on ferait bien, le courant aidant, six miles à l'heure. Si donc on partait avant onze heures, on aurait franchi à l'aube plus de soixante-quinze kilomètres, c'est-à-dire qu'on aurait dépassé depuis longtemps, non seulement la zone de protection située dans le champ du cycloscope, à la surveillance duquel on réussirait sans doute à échapper, en se tenant à l'abri des rives, mais aussi la limite des terres cultivées et même le dernier des postes élevés en plein désert. Il suffirait ensuite, pour ne pas être aperçus par les planeurs, de se cacher, le jour durant, dans une anfractuosité quelconque, et de reprendre la navigation les nuits suivantes, jusqu’au moment où l’on aurait atteint le Niger. La Red River devant s’y jeter dans les environs de Bikini, village en aval de Saye, puisqu’elle épousait l’ancien lit de l’oued Tafasasset, il s’agissait donc d’un voyage de quatre cent cinquante kilomètres au total, qui exigerait de quatre à cinq nuits de navigation.

Ce plan, rapidement discuté, fut rapidement adopté. Avant de le mettre en exécution, toutefois, il convenait de se débarrasser de Tchoumouki. Il arrivait parfois que le nègre s’éternisât, le soir, dans la galerie ou sur la plate-forme. On ne pouvait attendre son bon plaisir. Il fallait agir, et agir vite.

Laissant Jane Buxton, l’inutile M. Poncin et Tongané sur le sommet du bastion, les autres prisonniers s’engagèrent dans l’escalier. Dès les premières marches, ils virent, à l’étage inférieur, Tchoumouki en train de finir avec une sage lenteur son travail de la journée. Il ne s’occupa nullement de la présence des quatre hommes, dont il n’avait, d’ailleurs, aucune raison de se méfier. Ceux-ci purent donc s’approcher de lui sans éveiller son attention.

Conformément au plan préalablement arrêté, ce fut Saint-Bérain qui dessina l’attaque. Ses mains robustes se nouèrent tout à coup à la gorge du nègre, qui n’eut pas le temps de pousser un cri. Les trois autres saisirent alors par les bras et les jambes le coquin, qui fut ligoté et bâillonné soigneusement. On le déposa enfin dans une cellule, qu’on verrouilla, et dont la clé fut jetée dans la Red River. Ainsi serait retardée, autant qu’il était possible, la découverte de l’évasion.

En remontant sur la plate-forme, cette première opération terminée, les quatre Européens y furent assaillis par une pluie diluvienne. Comme on l’avait prévu, les gros nuages se résolvaient en eau, et il tombait du ciel de véritables cataractes que chassaient de violentes rafales. La chance se déclarait décidément pour les fugitifs. La vue était arrêtée à vingt mètres par cet écran liquide, et c’est à peine si on distinguait, confuses et vagues, les lumières du quartier des Merry Fellows allumées sur l’autre rive.

La descente commença aussitôt et s’effectua sans incident. L’un après l’autre, Amédée Florence le premier, Tongané le dernier, les fugitifs se laissèrent glisser le long de la corde, dont l’extrémité inférieure était fixée à une embarcation de taille suffisante pour les contenir tous. On proposa en vain à Jane Buxton de l’attacher. Elle s’y refusa énergiquement et tint à prouver que son habileté sportive était égale à celle de ses compagnons.

Avant de quitter la plate-forme, Tongané eut le soin de délier la corde du créneau où elle était fixée et autour duquel il ne laissa subsister qu’un demi-tour. En réunissant ensuite les deux parties dans ses mains, il descendit, rejoignit ses compagnons, et ramena toute la corde à lui en tirant sur l’un des brins. Il ne restait ainsi aucune trace de l’évasion.

Un peu après dix heures, l’amarre fut larguée, et l’embarcation, entraînée par le courant, commença à dériver. Les fugitifs se tenaient tapis derrière les bordages, la tête au ras du plat-bord. Quand ils seraient hors de la ville, dont la muraille extérieure était distante de six cents mètres à peine, ils se mettraient aux avirons, et la vitesse serait augmentée. Jusque-là, bien que la pluie torrentielle formât un impénétrable rideau, mieux valait éviter de se montrer.

Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent, et déjà on s’estimait au-delà de l’enceinte, quand l’embarcation heurta un obstacle et fut subitement immobilisée. À tâtons les fugitifs constatèrent avec désespoir qu’elle s’était arrêtée contre une grille de fer très élevée, garnie de panneaux de tôle dans sa partie supérieure, et dont la base disparaissait sous l'eau. Vainement ils se déhalèrent le long de cette grille. Ses extrémités allaient se souder à la muraille extérieure, limitant, d'un côté, les quartiers du Civil Body et des Merry Fellows, de l'autre, le chemin de ronde ménagé autour de l'enceinte particulière de l'Usine. Force leur fut de reconnaître que l'impasse était sans issue.

Harry Killer avait raison. Ses précautions étaient bien prises. Libre pendant le jour, le cours de la Red River était barré pendant la nuit.

Un long moment s'écoula avant que les fugitifs consternés eussent repris courage. Profondément abattus, ils ne sentaient pas la pluie qui les inondait et se laissaient tremper jusqu'aux os sans en avoir conscience. Revenir en arrière, se présenter l'oreille basse à la porte du Palais, et tendre eux-mêmes leurs mains aux entraves? Ils n'arrivaient pas à s'y résoudre. Et cependant, que pouvaient-ils faire? Franchir ces panneaux de tôle qui n'offraient aucune saillie était, de toute évidence, impossible. A fortiori ne fallait-il pas songer à transporter l'embarcation par-dessus l'obstacle. Or, sans embarcation, fuir devenait irréalisable. Quant à prendre pied sur l'une des rives, à gauche c'était l'Usine, et les Merry Fellows à droite. De tous côtés, la route était fermée.

— Nous n'allons pas coucher ici, j'imagine, dit enfin Amédée Florence.

— Où voulez-vous que nous allions? demanda Barsac fort embarrassé.

— N'importe où, excepté chez S. M. Harry Killer, répliqua le reporter. Puisque nous n'avons pas l'embarras du choix, pourquoi n'essaierions-nous pas de louer un nouvel appartement dans ce bâtiment qu'on désigne, paraît-il, sous le nom d'Usine?

C’était à tenter, en effet. Peut-être, dans ce microcosme si différent du reste de la ville, trouverait-on du secours. La situation ne pouvant, en aucun cas, être rendue pire, on ne risquait rien à l’essayer.

On se déhala donc vers la rive gauche, où l’on accosta au coin de l’enceinte, dans la partie aval, par conséquent, du chemin de ronde, large de cinquante mètres environ, existant autour de l’Usine. Si opaque était le rideau de pluie, qu’à cette faible distance de cinquante mètres on n’apercevait même pas celle-ci.

Bien que le vacarme des éléments déchaînés dût dominer tous les bruits aussi sûrement que le tourbillon des gouttes d’eau arrêtait la vue, on s’engagea avec circonspection sur ce chemin de ronde, qu’on était dans l’obligation de traverser.

À mi-route, on fit halte.

On commençait alors à distinguer, à une vingtaine de mètres tout au plus, l’angle où se soudaient les murailles ouest et nord de l’Usine, celle-ci arrivant de la droite, parallèlement à l’enceinte de la ville, celle-là se prolongeant vers l’amont, en bordure de la Red River. Contrairement à la façade du Palais orientée de la même manière, cette dernière partie de la muraille ne tombait pas directement dans l’eau, dont un assez large quai la séparait.

Les lieux reconnus, les fugitifs ne se décidaient pas encore à se remettre en marche. C’est qu’ils avaient aperçu, à l’angle même du mur de l’Usine, un objet des plus inquiétants: une guérite, dont les lignes classiques se dessinaient confusément à travers la pluie. Or, toute guérite implique un factionnaire, et, si on ne voyait pas celui-ci, c’est, on devait du moins le supposer, qu’il avait cherché refuge dans la sienne.

Cependant, on ne pouvait s’éterniser dans cet endroit. C’eût été le meilleur moyen d’être surpris, dans le cas où la sentinelle présumée fût sortie de son abri, comme dans le cas où la pluie eût cessé à l’improviste.

Faisant signe à ses compagnons de le suivre, Amédée Florence remonta pendant quelques mètres le chemin de ronde, en s’éloignant de la Red River, puis il acheva de le traverser, et revint sur ses pas en longeant le mur de l’Usine. De cette manière, on prendrait à revers la guérite, dont l’ouverture était vraisemblablement du côté de la rivière.

Arrivés à l’angle du mur, on s’arrêta de nouveau pour tenir conseil, puis, tout étant bien convenu, Amédée Florence, Saint-Bérain et Tongané tournèrent le coin, s’engagèrent sur le quai, et coururent jusqu’à la guérite, dans laquelle ils se jetèrent impétueusement.

Un homme, un Merry Fellow, s’y trouvait en effet. Surpris par cette attaque soudaine, que rien ne lui permettait de soupçonner, il n’eut pas le temps de faire usage de ses armes, et le cri qu’il poussa se perdit dans la rafale. Déjà Saint-Bérain, le prenait à la gorge et le terrassait, comme il avait terrassé Tchoumouki. Le Blanc s’écroula comme s’était écroulé le nègre.

Tongané courut alors au bateau, d’où il rapporta la corde, avec laquelle le Merry Fellow fut congrûment ficelé, puis, sans plus attendre, les fugitifs remontèrent la rivière dans la direction du Palais, en longeant, l’un derrière l’autre, le mur de l’Usine.

L’une des singularités de cette usine, c’était une absence jusqu’ici complète d’ouvertures donnant sur l’extérieur. Du côté de l’esplanade, il n’en existait pas, ainsi qu’on avait pu le constater du sommet du bastion. Du côté opposé, on n’en avait pas aperçu davantage, aussi loin que les regards avaient réussi à percer l’épais rideau de pluie. Et il semblait bien qu’il en fût de même pour cette façade nord qui donnait sur la rivière.

Pourtant, puisqu’on avait fait un quai, ce quai devait servir à quelque chose. Or, à quoi pouvait-il servir, sinon à décharger des marchandises apportées par des bateaux? Il existait donc nécessairement un moyen quelconque de les introduire dans l’Usine. Ce raisonnement était juste. Après avoir parcouru cent cinquante mètres, les fugitifs découvrirent, en effet, une porte à double battant, paraissant faite de lames de fer aussi rigides et aussi épaisses que des plaques de cuirasse. Comment ouvrir cette porte qui ne possédait aucune serrure extérieure? Comment l’ébranler? Comment même attirer l’attention des habitants, sans attirer en même temps celle des autres sentinelles qui, selon toute vraisemblance, montaient la garde aux environs?

À côté de cette porte cochère, à quelques pas en aval, il en existait une autre, de construction identique, mais beaucoup plus petite et ne comportant qu’un seul battant, que traversait le canon d’une serrure. En l’absence de clé, voire de tout instrument pouvant servir à la crocheter, cette particularité n’avançait pas à grand-chose.

Après de longues hésitations, les fugitifs allaient se résoudre à heurter cette porte avec leurs poings, et, au besoin, avec leurs pieds, quand une ombre, venant de l’esplanade, apparut en amont. Indécise au milieu de ces torrents de pluie, l’ombre se dirigeait de leur côté. Or, le quai n’ayant d’autre issue que le chemin de ronde, qui, après avoir fait le tour de l’Usine, revenait à l’esplanade d’où arrivait le promeneur nocturne, il y avait chance que la destination de celui-ci fût l’une des deux portes ouvrant sur ce quai.

Les fugitifs, à qui le temps manquait pour reculer, s’effacèrent de leur mieux dans l’embrasure de la porte cochère, se tenant prêts à bondir sur l’intrus au moment opportun.

Mais celui-ci s’avançait avec tant d’insouciance, il passa devant eux, à les toucher, en faisant montre d’une si parfaite ignorance de leur présence, qu’ils renoncèrent à un acte de violence dont la nécessité n’était rien moins que démontrée. Enhardis par l’extraordinaire aveuglement du promeneur, ils lui emboîtèrent le pas à tour de rôle, au fur et à mesure qu’il dépassait chacun d’eux, si bien que lorsque celui-ci s’arrêta, comme on l’avait prévu, devant la plus petite des deux portes, et qu’il introduisit la clé dans la serrure, il avait derrière lui, rangés en demi-cercle, huit spectateurs attentifs, dont il ne soupçonnait pas l’existence.

La porte s’ouvrit. Bousculant sans scrupule celui qui l’avait ouverte, les fugitifs se ruèrent à sa suite, et le dernier d’entre eux repoussa le battant, qui se referma en faisant un bruit sourd.

Ils se trouvèrent alors dans une obscurité profonde, d’où s’élevait une voix douce, qui prononçait, sur un ton exprimant quelque surprise, des exclamations dont la modération ne laissait pas d’être assez surprenante.

— Eh bien! disait cette voix. Qu’est-ce que cela signifie?… Que me veut-on?… Qu’y a-t- il?…

Tout à coup brilla une faible lumière, qui parut éclatante dans ces épaisses ténèbres. Jane Buxton avait eu l’idée de faire jouer la lampe électrique de poche qui lui avait déjà rendu un service signalé à Kokoro. Dans le cône de lumière, apparurent à la fois Tongané et, en face de lui, un homme fluet, aux cheveux d’un blond pâle, aux vêtements ruisselants d’eau, qui, un peu essoufflé, s’appuyait à la muraille.

En s’apercevant mutuellement, Tongané et l’homme blanc poussèrent simultanément, mais sur un mode fort différent, une exclamation analogue.

— Le sergent Tongané! dit le second, avec la même voix douce et le même accent de surprise modérée.

— Mossié Camaret! s’écria le nègre en roulant des yeux effarés.

Camaret!… Jane Buxton tressaillit, en entendant ce nom, qu’elle connaissait bien, ce nom d’un ancien compagnon de son frère.

Cependant, Amédée Florence jugea opportun d’intervenir. Puisqu’on se trouvait en pays de connaissance, on pouvait brusquer les présentations. Il fit un pas en avant et entra dans le cône de lumière.

— Monsieur Camaret, dit-il, mes compagnons et moi serions désireux de vous parler.

— Rien n’est plus facile, répondit Camaret sans s’émouvoir. Il toucha un bouton, et des ampoules électriques brillèrent au plafond. Les fugitifs reconnurent qu’ils étaient dans une pièce voûtée que ne garnissait aucun objet d’ameublement. Quelque vestibule, selon toute vraisemblance.

Marcel Camaret ouvrit une porte, derrière laquelle s’amorçait un escalier, et, s’effaçant:

— Si vous voulez prendre la peine d’entrer, dit-il, avec une parfaite simplicité.

CHAPITRE 6

Marcel Camaret

Stupéfiés par cet accueil, dont la banale courtoisie devenait extraordinaire en de telles circonstances, les six Européens, suivis des deux nègres, s’engagèrent dans l’escalier, que de nombreuses ampoules électriques éclairaient largement. Après avoir gravi une vingtaine de marches, ils pénétrèrent dans un second vestibule, où ils firent halte. Monté le dernier, Marcel Camaret traversa ce vestibule, et, ouvrant une nouvelle porte, s’effaça comme précédemment pour livrer passage à ses hôtes inattendus.

Ceux-ci entrèrent dans une immense pièce où régnait un grand désordre. Une table à dessin en occupait l’un des côtés, et une grande bibliothèque les trois autres. Une dizaine de sièges y erraient au hasard, tous encombrés par des piles de livres et de papiers. Marcel Camaret enleva une de ces piles, la déposa tranquillement par terre et prit possession du siège ainsi rendu libre. Encouragés par cet exemple, ses hôtes l’imitèrent, et bientôt tout le monde fut assis, à l’exception de Malik et de Tongané, restés respectueusement debout.

— Que puis-je pour votre service? demanda alors Marcel Camaret qui paraissait vraiment trouver des plus naturelles cette visite insolite.

Pendant les quelques minutes employées à leur installation, les fugitifs avaient eu le temps d’examiner le personnage dont ils violaient si audacieusement le domicile, et cet examen ne laissait pas de les avoir rassurés. Qu’il fût étrange, cet inconnu salué par Tongané du nom de Camaret, que sa distraction, si grande qu’il les avait frôlés sur le quai sans les voir, que son air “absent” et détaché de toutes les contingences, que le calme et la simplicité avec lesquels il accueillait des gens qui avaient fait irruption chez lui d’une manière aussi brutale, fussent extraordinaires, cela n’était pas contestable. Mais ces particularités assurément anormales n’étaient pas contradictoires avec l’honnêteté, plus exactement avec “l’innocence” évidente de cet homme, dont le corps à peine formé ressemblait à celui d’un adolescent. Non, le propriétaire de ce front largement modelé et du limpide regard de ces yeux admirables ne pouvait appartenir à la même famille morale qu’un Harry Killer, bien que tout démontrât qu’il en partageait la vie.

— Monsieur Camaret, répondit Barsac, mis en confiance, nous venons solliciter votre protection.

— Ma protection?… répéta Camaret avec un accent de légère surprise. Contre qui, mon Dieu?

— Comme le maître ou plutôt le despote de cette ville, contre Harry Killer.

— Harry Killer!… Un despote!… répéta encore Camaret qui semblait n’y rien comprendre.

— Ne le saviez-vous pas? demanda Barsac surpris à son tour.

— Ma foi non.

— Vous ne pouvez ignorer, cependant, qu’il existe une ville dans votre voisinage? insista

Barsac un peu impatienté.

— Certes! reconnut Marcel Camaret.

— Ni que cette ville s’appelle Blackland?

— Ah! c’est Blackland qu’on l’a nommée?… fit Camaret. Le nom n’est pas mauvais, en effet… Non, je ne le connaissais pas, mais je le connais maintenant, puisque vous me l’avez appris. Cela m’est, d’ailleurs, fort indifférent.

— Si vous ne saviez pas le nom de cette ville, reprit Barsac, non sans une certaine ironie, vous saviez, du moins, je suppose, qu’elle est habitée, qu’elle possède même une population assez nombreuse?

— Évidemment, répondit Camaret avec sérénité.

— Or, à toute ville, il faut une administration, un gouvernement.

— En effet…

— À Blackland, le gouvernement tient tout entier dans la personne d’Harry Killer, lequel n’est qu’un bandit, un despote cruel et sanguinaire, une brute alcoolique, pour ne pas dire un fou.

Marcel Camaret avait relevé vers Barsac ses yeux qu’il avait tenus baissés jusqu’alors. Il semblait éperdu, stupéfait surtout, et avait positivement l’air de tomber de la lune.

— Oh! oh!… murmura-t-il avec un peu d’égarement. Vous employez des expressions…

— Très insuffisantes encore au regard des faits qui les motivent, continua Barsac qui s’échauffait, mais, tout d’abord, permettez-moi de vous dire qui nous sommes.

Camaret ayant acquiescé d’un geste d’indifférence polie qui n’était pas des plus encourageants, il procéda aux présentations. Laissant à Jane Buxton le pseudonyme qu’elle avait choisi, il désigna successivement ses compagnons et soi-même, en indiquant après chaque nom, la qualité de la personne présentée.

— Et enfin, conclut-il, voici Tongané, sur lequel je n’ai pas à insister, puisque vous le connaissez, paraît-il.

— Oui… oui… dit doucement Camaret, dont les regards étaient de nouveau tournés vers le sol.

— Chargé par le Gouvernement français… Mais, au fait, vous devez être Français, monsieur Camaret?

— Oui… oui… murmura encore l’ingénieur d’un ton sans chaleur.

— Chargé, comme je vous le disais, par le Gouvernement français de diriger, dans la boucle du Niger, une mission dont mes compagnons ici présents faisaient partie, reprit Barsac, nous avons eu à lutter sans cesse contre les obstacles qu’Harry Killer accumulait à plaisir devant nous.

— Dans quel but aurait-il agi ainsi? objecta Camaret, faisant preuve d’un commencement d’attention.

— Dans le but de nous barrer la route du Niger, car Harry Killer veut que son repaire reste ignoré de tous. C’est pourquoi il s’est efforcé de nous écarter de cette région, de peur que nous n'entendions parler de Blackland, dont personne, en Europe, ne soupçonne même l'existence.

— Que me dites-vous là?… s'écria Camaret avec une vivacité qui ne lui était pas habituelle. Il est impossible qu'on ignore cette ville en Europe, où de nombreux ouvriers sont retournés, après avoir séjourné ici un temps plus ou moins long.

— Il en est cependant ainsi, répliqua Barsac.

— Vous m'affirmez, insista Camaret de plus en plus troublé, que personne, je dis: personne, ne nous connaît?

— Absolument personne.

— Et qu'on considère toujours cette partie du désert comme tout à fait inhabitée?

— Oui, monsieur, je l'affirme.

Camaret s'était levé. En proie à une émotion violente, il marchait de long en large à travers la pièce.

— Inconcevable!… Inconcevable!… murmurait-il.

Son agitation ne dura que quelques instants. Bientôt, ayant retrouvé le calme par un effort de volonté, il reprit son siège.

— Continuez, monsieur, je vous en prie, dit-il, un peu plus pâle seulement que de coutume.

— Je ne vous ennuierai pas, reprit Barsac, déférant à cette invitation, avec le récit de toutes les vexations que nous avons eu à subir. Il me suffira de vous dire, qu’après avoir réussi à nous séparer de notre escorte, Harry Killer, furieux de voir que nous persistions dans la direction qu’il nous interdisait, nous a fait enlever en pleine nuit par ses hommes et nous a transportés ici, où, depuis quinze jours, il nous retient prisonniers, en nous menaçant de la corde à tout propos.

Un peu de sang était monté au visage de Marcel Camaret, dont le regard commençait à prendre une expression menaçante.

— Ce que vous me dites là est inimaginable!… s’écria-t-il, quand Barsac eut fini de parler. Comment!… Harry Killer se serait conduit de la sorte!…

— Et ce n’est pas tout, dit Barsac, qui raconta l’odieuse violence dont Jane Buxton était victime et le massacre des deux nègres, l’un frappé par une torpille aérienne, l’autre saisi par un planeur et précipité sur la plate-forme de la tour, où il s’était affreusement broyé.

Marcel Camaret était bouleversé. Pour la première fois peut-être, il quittait le domaine de la pure abstraction et prenait contact avec la réalité. Son honnêteté latente avait fort à souffrir de cette rencontre. Eh quoi! lui qui n’eût pas écrasé un insecte, il avait, sans se douter de rien, vécu de longues années auprès d’un être capable de pareilles atrocités!

— C’est abominable… affreux!… disait-il.

L’horreur que lui inspirait le récit de Barsac était, à n’en pas douter, aussi sincère que profonde. Comment concilier cette sensibilité, cette droiture morale certaine avec sa présence dans une ville que la qualité du chef rendait aussi suspecte?

— Mais enfin, monsieur, fit observer Barsac, traduisant la pensée de tous, un homme qui commet froidement de tels actes n'en est pas à son coup d'essai. Harry Killer a sûrement d'autres crimes sur la conscience. Vous les ignorez donc?

— Et vous, vous osez me poser cette question! protesta Camaret révolté. Certes, oui, je les ignore, comme j'ignorais ceux que vous venez de me révéler et ceux, plus terribles encore, que je soupçonne maintenant. Ne sortant guère de cette usine qui repose tout entière sur moi, occupé à enfanter des choses, dont plusieurs sont étonnantes, je peux le dire, je n'ai rien vu, rien su, jamais rien.

— Si nous vous comprenons bien, dit Barsac, vous répondriez indirectement, au moins en partie, à une question que nous nous posons depuis que nous sommes ici. C'est pour nous un grand étonnement que cette ville et la campagne environnante puissent être l'œuvre d'un Harry Killer. Quand on songe qu'il y a dix ans c'était ici un océan de sable! Dans quel but qu'elle ait été accomplie, la transformation est prodigieuse. Or, quand bien même Harry Killer aurait été doué, dans le principe, d'une véritable intelligence, il y a longtemps que cette intelligence serait noyée dans l'alcool, et nous ne nous expliquons pas comment ce dégénéré peut être l'auteur de telles merveilles.

— Lui!… s'écria Marcel Camaret, emporté par une soudaine indignation. Lui!… Ce néant, ce zéro!… Y pensez-vous!… L'œuvre est belle, en effet, mais, pour la réaliser, il fallait autre chose qu'un Harry Killer.

— Quel en serait donc l'auteur? demanda Barsac.

— Moi!… prononça superbement Marcel Camaret, le visage étincelant d'orgueil. C'est moi qui ai créé tout ce qui existe ici. C'est moi qui ai répandu la pluie bienfaisante sur le sol aride et brûlé du désert. C’est moi qui l’ai transformé en campagne verdoyante et fertile. C’est moi qui, de rien, ai fait cette ville, ainsi que Dieu, du néant, a fait l’univers!

Barsac et ses compagnons échangèrent un regard inquiet. Tandis que, tout frémissant d’un maladif enthousiasme, il chantait cet hymne à sa propre gloire, Marcel Camaret levait vers le ciel des yeux égarés, comme s’il y eût cherché celui auquel il osait se comparer. N’avait-on donc fait que passer d’un fou à un fou?

— Puisque, dit le docteur Châtonnay après un instant de silence, vous êtes l’auteur de ce que nous avons vu ici, comment avez-vous pu abandonner votre œuvre à Harry Killer, sans vous inquiéter de l’usage qu’il en ferait?

— Quand elle a lancé les astres dans l’infini, répliqua superbement Camaret, la puissance éternelle s’est-elle inquiétée du mal qui en résulterait?

— Elle punit quelquefois, murmura le docteur.

— Et je punirai comme elle, s’il y a lieu, affirma Camaret, dont les yeux eurent de nouveau une inquiétante lueur.

Les fugitifs étaient démoralisés. Quel fond pouvaient-ils faire sur cet homme, génial peut-être, mais assurément déséquilibré, capable, à la fois, d’un aussi complet aveuglement et de cet orgueil démesuré?

— Serait-il indiscret, monsieur Camaret, dit Amédée Florence, désireux de ramener la conversation vers des sujets plus concrets, de vous demander comment vous avez connu Harry Killer et comment le projet de fonder Blackland a pu naître dans votre cerveau?

— En aucune façon, répondit avec douceur Marcel Camaret, qui revenait graduellement à son calme habituel. Le projet est d’Harry Killer. L’exécution seule est de moi. J’ai connu Harry Killer lorsque je faisais partie d’une expédition organisée par une compagnie anglaise, et que commandait un capitaine en disponibilité, du nom de George Buxton…

À ce nom, tous les regards convergèrent vers Jane. Mais celle-ci demeura impassible.

— Tongané faisait partie de cette expédition en qualité de sergent, continuait cependant Camaret, et c’est pourquoi je l’ai reconnu tout à l’heure, bien qu’il se soit écoulé, depuis lors, pas mal d’années. En ce qui me concerne, j’avais été engagé à titre d’ingénieur, avec mission d’étudier l’orographie, l’hydrographie et surtout la minéralogie des régions traversées. Partis d’Acera, dans la colonie des Achantis, nous nous dirigions vers le nord depuis déjà deux mois, quand, un beau jour, Harry Killer arriva parmi nous. Bien accueilli par notre chef, il fut incorporé à notre colonne et ne la quitta plus.

— N’est-il pas exact, même, demande Jane, qu’il se substitua peu à peu au capitaine Buxton qu’on cessa bientôt d’apercevoir?

Camaret se tourna du côté de la jeune fille.

— Je ne pourrais vous dire… lui répondit-il avec hésitation, sans manifester, d’ailleurs, aucun étonnement de la question. Fort occupé par mes études, je n’ai pu, vous le comprendrez, remarquer ces détails, et je ne voyais guère plus Harry Killer que George Buxton. Quoi qu’il en soit, en revenant, un jour, d’une excursion personnelle de quarante-huit heures, je n’ai plus trouvé la colonne au campement où je l’avais laissée. Il n’y avait plus rien, ni hommes, ni matériel. Fort ennuyé, cela se conçoit, je me demandais dans quelle direction je devais aller, quand je fus abordé par Harry Killer. Il me dit que le capitaine Buxton était retourné à la côte, en emmenant la majeure partie du personnel, et qu'il était chargé de terminer, avec une quinzaine d'hommes et moi, l'itinéraire de l'expédition. Que m'importait, à moi, Harry Killer ou le capitaine Buxton, que d'ailleurs, je n'aurais su où rejoindre? Je suivis donc Harry Killer sans difficulté. Celui-ci avait eu vent de quelques inventions assez intéressantes que je portais en moi, à ce moment. Il me conduisit ici et me proposa de les réaliser. J'acceptai. Telle est l'origine de mes rapports avec Harry Killer.

— Vous me permettrez, monsieur Camaret, de compléter vos renseignements et de vous apprendre ce que vous paraissez ignorer, dit Jane Buxton d'une voix grave. Du jour où Harry Killer fit partie de l'expédition du capitaine Buxton, la colonne que celui-ci commandait devint une troupe de bandits. Des villages furent incendiés par elle, des hommes massacrés en grand nombre, des femmes éventrées, des enfants coupés en morceaux.

— Impossible!… protesta Camaret. J'étais là, que diable! et je n'ai rien vu de tout cela.

— Comme vous ne nous avez pas vus tout à l'heure en passant devant nous, comme vous avez ignoré, pendant dix ans, les actes d'Harry Killer. Hélas! les événements que je vous révèle ne sont pas contestables. Ce sont malheureusement des faits historiques connus du monde entier.

— Et je n'en aurais rien su!… balbutia Marcel Camaret atterré.

— Quoi qu'il en soit, reprit Jane Buxton, le bruit de ces atrocités parvint en Europe. Des soldats furent envoyés contre la colonne révoltée de George Buxton, qui fut anéantie. Le jour où vous n'avez plus trouvé personne en revenant au campement que vous aviez quitté, George Buxton n’était pas parti. Il était mort.

— Mort!… répéta Camaret stupéfait.

— Oui, mais non pas frappé, comme on l’avait cru jusqu’ici, par les balles des soldats envoyés à sa poursuite. George Buxton était mort assassiné.

— Assassiné!…

— On vous a trompé tout à l’heure. Je ne m’appelle pas Mornas. Je m’appelle Jane Buxton, et suis la sœur de votre ancien chef. C’est pourquoi j’ai reconnu votre nom quand Tongané l’a prononcé devant moi. Si je suis venue en Afrique, c’est pour y chercher les preuves de l’innocence de mon malheureux frère, accusé de crimes certainement commis par un autre.

— Assassiné!… répétait Camaret, accablé sous le poids de ces révélations successives.

— Et assassiné par-derrière, précisa Jane, qui retira de sa ceinture l’arme qui avait tué George Buxton. En compagnie de ces messieurs, je suis allée à la tombe de mon frère, et, en leur présence, j’ai exhumé ses ossements. Nous en avons rapporté ce poignard, qui, traversant l’omoplate dans laquelle il était encore fixé, l’avait frappé en plein coeur. Le nom du meurtrier était jadis gravé sur le manche. Le temps malheureusement l’a effacé. Deux lettres en subsistent cependant, un i et un l, et, après ce que vous nous avez appris, je ne crois pas me tromper en disant que ce nom doit être lu: Harry Killer.

En entendant cette tragique histoire, Marcel Camaret manifestait une agitation croissante. Il croisait et désunissait fébrilement ses doigts, passait fiévreusement les mains sur son visage, où perlaient des gouttes de sueur.

— C’est horrible!… horrible!… Moi, j’aurais fait ça!… Moi!… répétait-il à satiété, tandis qu’une lueur trouble s’allumait de nouveau dans ses yeux dilatés.

— Nous accordez-vous asile? demanda Barsac sous forme de conclusion.

— Si je vous l’accorde!… répondit Camaret avec une chaleur qui ne lui était pas habituelle. Est-il utile de me le demander? Pouvez-vous me croire complice de ces crimes abominables, que je punirai, au contraire, soyez-en sûr!

— Avant de parler de punir, il faut songer à nous défendre, fit observer Amédée Florence toujours pratique. N’y a-t-il pas à craindre, en effet, qu’Harry Killer ne cherche à nous reprendre?

Marcel Camaret sourit.

— Il ne sait pas que vous êtes ici, dit-il, et, quand bien même il le saurait…

Un geste, montrant qu’il se souciait peu de cette éventualité, acheva sa pensée.

— Pour le moment, reprit-il, reposez-vous paisiblement. Vous êtes en sûreté, n’en doutez pas.

Il appuya sur un bouton de sonnerie. Un domestique noir parut.

— Joko, dit Camaret comme une chose toute simple, au nègre qui roulait des yeux effarés, tu vas conduire ces messieurs et cette dame dans leurs chambres.

Il se leva et se dirigea vers une porte qu’il ouvrit.

— Bonsoir, messieurs, dit-il poliment.

Et il disparut, laissant ses hôtes aussi étonnés que le nègre, auquel était dévolue la difficile mission de leur indiquer un lit.

Car, des lits, où en aurait-il trouvé, le malheureux Joko? Aucun n’était libre dans l’Usine, où rien n’avait été prévu pour d’impossibles étrangers. Serait-il donc obligé d’aller de porte en porte et de réveiller tous les ouvriers les uns après les autres?

Voyant son embarras, Barsac l’assura que ses compagnons et lui se passeraient fort bien d’un lit. Ils resteraient où ils étaient et priaient simplement Joko de réunir tout ce qu’il pourrait, en fait de fauteuils et de couvertures. On s’en accommoderait d’autant mieux que la nuit était fort avancée.

On atteignit ainsi l’aube. À six heures précises, Marcel Camaret rouvrit la porte par laquelle il s’était retiré la veille. Il ne parut nullement surpris de voir son cabinet transformé en dortoir.

— Bonjour, messieurs, dit-il à ses hôtes, aussi tranquillement que, la veille, il leur avait souhaité le bonsoir.

— Bonjour, monsieur Camaret, lui répondit-on d’une seule voix.

— Messieurs, reprit Camaret, j’ai réfléchi à ce que vous m’avez raconté cette nuit. Cette situation ne peut se prolonger. Nous allons agir immédiatement.

Il appuya sur un bouton. Une violente sonnerie retentit aussitôt de tous côtés.

— Veuillez me suivre, messieurs, dit-il.

Après avoir parcouru plusieurs couloirs, on arriva dans un vaste atelier que garnissaient de nombreuses machines-outils, immobiles pour l’instant. Autour d’elles se pressait une foule d’hommes et de femmes.

— Tout le monde est-il là? demanda Marcel Camaret. Rigaud, fais l’appel, je te prie.

L’appel ayant permis de constater que le personnel de l’Usine était au complet, Camaret prit la parole. Il présenta d’abord les étrangers qui étaient venus réclamer sa protection. Puis il exposa ce qu’il avait appris au cours de la nuit précédente. Atrocités commises par la troupe de George Buxton tombée pour un motif ou un autre sous la direction d’Harry Killer, assassinat, vraisemblablement imputable à celui-ci, du commandant de cette expédition, enlèvement puis internement de la mission Barsac, violence faite par Killer à Jane Buxton, et enfin meurtre aussi cruel qu’injustifié de deux Noirs, il n’oublia rien de ce qui pouvait frapper l’esprit de ses auditeurs. De tous ces faits, il résulta qu’ils étaient tous, à leur insu, au service d’un véritable bandit, et il y avait lieu de craindre, par conséquent, que le travail de l’Usine ne servît à l’accomplissement de nouveaux crimes. Une telle situation ne pouvant se prolonger, et l’honneur interdisant, au surplus, de rendre à Harry Killer les prisonniers qu’il détenait sans droit, il y avait lieu, d’après lui, de rompre toute relation avec le Palais et d’exiger un rapatriement général.

Écouté au milieu d’un profond silence, le récit de Camaret provoqua d’abord un étonnement bien naturel parmi ces honnêtes travailleurs. Quand leur agitation fut un peu calmée, sa conclusion obtint leur complète approbation. Auquel des ouvriers, d'ailleurs, la pensée aurait-elle pu venir d'exprimer un avis contraire à celui de leur directeur unanimement admiré et respecté?

Celui-ci acheva de frapper l'imagination de ses auditeurs, en leur faisant part de la très juste réflexion suivante:

— Ce qui m'a le plus surpris, leur dit-il, parmi les choses incroyables que j'ai apprises cette nuit, c'est qu'on ignore en Europe l'existence de cette ville, que Killer aurait nommée Blackland, paraît- il. Je ne suis pas sans savoir qu'elle a été fondée, hors de toute route suivie par les caravanes, au coeur d'un désert où personne ne vient jamais, et pour cause. Mais il n'en est pas moins certain que plusieurs de vos camarades, après avoir passé ici un temps plus ou moins long, ont été pris du mal du pays et ont désiré y retourner. J'en ai fait le compte cette nuit. Depuis l'origine, il y a eu exactement cent trente-sept départs. Or, si quelques-uns seulement de ces cent trente-sept ouvriers étaient arrivés en Europe, l'existence de cette ville ne pourrait plus être ignorée. Puisque personne ne l'y connaît, il faut nécessairement qu'aucun des cent trente-sept ouvriers partis ne soit jamais arrivé à destination.

Pas un cri ne s'éleva de la foule des ouvriers, que ce raisonnement rigoureux semblait avoir frappé de stupeur.

— Il résulte par conséquent du passé, conclut Camaret, qu'aucun de vous ne peut espérer revoir son pays, tant que subsistera le pouvoir d'Harry Killer, et que nous ne devons nous attendre à aucune pitié, si nous tombons entre ses mains.

Dans notre intérêt, comme dans celui de la justice, il convient donc d’engager la lutte.

— Oui!… Oui!… Comptez sur nous!… s’écria-t-on de toutes parts.

Telle était leur confiance en Marcel Camaret, que les ouvriers, d’abord accablés d’être ainsi séparés du reste du monde, avaient déjà repris courage, à la pensée qu’il était avec eux. Tous les bras se tendirent vers lui en signe d’inébranlable fidélité.

— Que le travail reprenne comme de coutume, et comptez sur moi, mes amis, dit Camaret, dont une formidable ovation accompagna la sortie.

Dès qu’il eut quitté l’atelier de mécanique, il s’entretint quelques instants avec le contremaître à qui il avait donné le nom de Rigaud. Puis, pendant que celui-ci allait exécuter les ordres qu’il venait de recevoir, Camaret, suivi de ses protégés, revint dans son cabinet de travail.

À peine y avait-on pris place que la sonnerie du téléphone retentit. Il saisit le récepteur et on l’entendit répondre d’une voix douce par des

“oui”, des “non”, des “bon!”, des “comme vous voudrez”, à la communication qui lui était faite. Enfin, il se mit à rire et raccrocha l’appareil, qu’il isola, en manoeuvrant un interrupteur intercalé dans le circuit.

— C’est Harry Killer qui me téléphone, dit-il avec cette voix singulière dont aucune émotion n’altérait d’ordinaire la tranquille douceur. Il sait que vous êtes ici.

— Déjà! s’écria Barsac.

— Oui. Il paraît qu’on a trouvé un certain Tchoumouki. On aurait aussi découvert une barque abandonnée dans la rivière et, au coin de l’Usine, un factionnaire ligoté comme ce Tchoumouki. Sortir de la ville pendant la nuit étant impossible au dire de Killer, il en a conclu nécessairement que vous étiez ici. Je ne l’ai pas détrompé. Il m’a demandé alors de vous remettre entre ses mains. J’ai refusé. Il a insisté, et j’ai persisté dans mon refus. De là, grande colère. Harry Killer m’a menacé de venir vous prendre de force. Cela m’a fait rire, et j’ai interrompu la communication.

Les protégés de Camaret s’étaient levés d’un même mouvement.

— Inutile de vous dire que vous pouvez compter sur nous, affirma Barsac au nom de tous. Mais il nous faudrait des armes…

— Des armes?… répéta Camaret en souriant. Pour quoi faire?… Je ne pense pas qu’il y en ait une seule ici. Néanmoins, ne vous inquiétez pas, messieurs. Nous disposons d’autres moyens.

— Des moyens capables de lutter contre les canons du Palais?

— De cela et de bien autre chose encore. S’il me prenait fantaisie de détruire toute la ville, ce serait fait en un instant. Mais je ne pense pas que nous en soyons réduits à cette extrémité. Les canons du Palais resteront muets, soyez-en certains. Outre que Killer connaît mon pouvoir, et que l’Usine est en grande partie construite à l’épreuve du canon, il n’aura garde de la détruire, attendu que toute sa puissance repose sur elle. Il va essayer plutôt d’entrer de vive force. Seulement, il n’y réussira pas.

Comme une réponse à l’affirmation de Camaret, on entendit des coups sourds, qui provenaient de l’étage inférieur.

— Qu’est-ce que je vous disais? fit l’ingénieur en souriant doucement. Le voilà qui s’attaque à la porte. Mais la mâtine est solide, je vous le garantis.

— S’il braque un canon contre elle, cependant? interrogea Saint-Bérain que la tranquillité de Camaret ne rassurait qu’à demi.

— Même dans ce cas, il ne serait pas très facile de la forcer, répondit celui-ci. Mais amener sur le quai un canon du palais, cela demande du temps, et nous n’en sommes encore qu’au bélier manoeuvré à bras d’hommes. Avec ça, ils frapperaient pendant un siècle sans être plus avancés. D’ailleurs, si vous voulez m’accompagner, vous pourrez assister aux péripéties du siège. Je crois que le spectacle vous intéressera.

On revint à l’atelier de mécanique, qu’on traversa sans s’y arrêter. Les machines tournaient maintenant, mais les ouvriers ne s’occupaient pas de leur travail avec leur zèle habituel. Réunis par groupes, ils commentaient les nouvelles qu’ils avaient apprises, et il régnait dans l’atelier un certain désordre que les événements actuels expliquaient trop aisément et sur lequel Camaret ferma les yeux.

L’atelier traversé, on gravit un escalier tournant et on arriva sur la plate-forme d’une tour, qui n’offrait d’autre différence avec celle du Palais que d’être surmontée de cet inexplicable pylône métallique dont l’extrémité s’élevait à plus de cent mètres dans les airs. Comme la tour du Palais, celle-ci était armée d’un cycloscope logé entre les arêtiers du pylône, et dans lequel Camaret invita ses compagnons à entrer.

— Ce cycloscope, leur expliqua-t-il, n’est pas orienté à cinq kilomètres comme celui que j’ai construit pour Harry Killer. Grâce à une série de miroirs obliques disposés au faîte de la muraille de l’Usine, il nous permet de surveiller ce qui se passe à nos abords immédiats. Vous voyez d’ici la face extérieure de notre mur d’enceinte jusqu’à sa base.

L’esplanade, le quai et le chemin de ronde apparaissaient, en effet, dans ce cycloscope, dont les images, plus petites que celles données par l’instrument du Palais, étaient en revanche beaucoup plus nettes. Dans ses lentilles, on aperçut un grand nombre d’hommes, dont plusieurs portaient des échelles, courant sur toute la périphérie de l’Usine, tandis qu’une trentaine d’autres continuaient à s’épuiser en vains efforts contre la porte.

— Comme je le prévoyais, dit Camaret, ils vont donner l’assaut. C’est maintenant que cela va devenir intéressant.

L’assaut commençait, en effet. Déjà étaient dressées contre le mur plusieurs échelles, auxquelles montaient un grand nombre de Merry Fellows. Parvenus au sommet, quelques-uns y posèrent leurs mains sans défiance. Aussitôt, chargement à vue. À peine ces hommes avaient-ils touché la crête du mur, qu’ils se livrèrent à de surprenantes contorsions. Suspendus au faîte, comme si leurs mains eussent été collées à la muraille, ils dansaient une gigue endiablée, à la manière de ces pantins qui s’agitent quand on en tire la ficelle.

— C’est bête comme tout, expliqua Camaret. La crête du mur est tout bonnement recouverte d’un métal de ma composition, dont la conductibilité électrique est à celle du cuivre comme cent est à un. Je fais passer dans ce revêtement un courant alternatif de voltage convenable, et vous en voyez les résultats.

Pendant que Camaret donnait cette explication, des assaillants restés sur les échelons inférieurs, avaient saisi par les jambes ceux qui les avaient précédés et dont ils ne pouvaient comprendre les mouvements désordonnés.

Aussitôt, ces imprudents exécutèrent les mêmes contorsions, au grand ébahissement de ceux de leurs compagnons qui ne les avaient pas imités.

— Mais pourquoi ces imbéciles ne se laissent-ils pas tomber tout simplement? s'écria Saint-Bérain.

— Ils ne le peuvent pas, les pauvres diables, dit Marcel Camaret. Ils resteront fixés à la muraille aussi longtemps que cela me plaira… Mais je peux faire mieux encore.

Il manoeuvra une manette. À l'instant, les échelles furent renversées, comme repoussées par une main invisible, et ceux qu'elles supportaient encore retombèrent pêle-mêle, ne laissant contre la muraille que les grappes humaines qui y étaient attachées et qui continuaient à s'agiter désespérément.

— Je ne garantis pas la casse, fit observer doucement Camaret. Quant à ce qui vient de se produire sous vos yeux, seriez-vous désireux d'en connaître la cause?

Tous ayant répondu affirmativement, il reprit:

— C'est fort simple. Selon moi, toutes les roches, quelles qu'elles soient, ne sont que des vibrations éthériques d'une nature ou d'une autre. On est généralement d'accord pour attribuer la lumière à une série de vibrations comprises entre un certain minimum et un certain maximum de fréquence, et les phénomènes électriques à une autre série de vibrations séparée de la première par un intervalle qu'on suppose appartenir à d'autres vibrations dont la nature est inconnue.

Sans me prononcer formellement, j'incline à croire que ces dernières ont quelque rapport avec la chaleur. Quoi qu'il en soit, je sais les provoquer, les manier et leur faire produire des effets assez curieux, ainsi que je viens de vous en donner la preuve.

Pendant cette explication succincte, les grappes humaines continuaient leur danse échevelée.

— Le petit jeu a assez duré, dit Marcel Camaret en manoeuvrant une autre manette.

Immédiatement, les pantins humains se détachèrent de la muraille, et, d'une hauteur de dix mètres, tombèrent, à sa base, où ils restèrent inanimés. Après un instant d'hésitation assez compréhensible, leurs compagnons se décidèrent à venir les prendre et à les emporter.

— Fin du premier acte, annonça Camaret de sa voix ordinaire. Je pense qu'il ne se termine pas à l'avantage d'Harry Killer, qui a déjà une trentaine d'hommes hors de combat. Si nous nous occupions maintenant de ces imbéciles qui s'acharnent bêtement contre la porte?

Marcel Camaret s'empara d'un transmetteur de téléphone.

— Es-tu prêt, Rigaud? demanda-t-il.

— Oui, monsieur, répondit une voix qui fut entendue dans toutes les parties du cycloscope.

— Envoie! commanda Camaret.

Comme s'il eût obéi de lui-même à cet ordre, un instrument bizarre sortit aussitôt et s'éloigna de la base de la tour. C'était une sorte de cylindre vertical dont l’extrémité dirigée vers le sol s’évasait en un large cône. À l’autre extrémité, quatre hélices, dont une horizontale et trois verticales, tournaient avec une rapidité vertigineuse. Le singulier engin s’élevait dans l’air, tout en s’éloignant dans la direction du mur de clôture. Quand il l’eut atteint, voire dépassé de quelques mètres, sa course devint horizontale, et il se met à suivre rigoureusement la périphérie de l’Usine.

Mais déjà, à la suite de ce premier engin, un deuxième était parti, puis un troisième, puis d’autres encore. Les hôtes de Camaret en comptèrent vingt, qui, à intervalles réguliers, s’échappèrent de la tour, comme les oiseaux d’un nid, et accomplirent successivement la même manœuvre.

— Ce sont mes “guêpes”, dit Marcel Camaret, en appuyant un peu sur le possessif. Je vous expliquerai plus tard comment on les dirige. Pour le moment, contentons-nous de les voir à l’œuvre.

Il prit de nouveau le transmetteur téléphonique.

— Un avertissement, Rigaud, dit-il.

Puis, s’adressant à ses nouveaux amis:

— À quoi bon tuer ces pauvres diables qui ne m’ont rien fait, après tout? Un avertissement suffira, s’ils veulent le comprendre.

Depuis l’échec de leur tentative, ceux des assaillants qui avaient essayé d’escalader l’enceinte demeuraient inactifs. Emportant leurs camarades hors de combat, dont plusieurs étaient sans doute tués ou, tout au moins, grièvement blessés, ils avaient évacué le chemin de ronde, et se tenaient massés sur l’esplanade, à respectueuse distance de l’Usine, dont ils contemplaient la muraille d’un air hébété.

Par contre, ceux qui s’attaquaient à la porte n’avaient pas interrompu leur travail. Ils s’entêtaient à lancer sur cette porte, qui ne semblait pas, d’ailleurs, en souffrir, une lourde poutre que balançaient une quarantaine de bras robustes. Dans leur promenade autour de l’enceinte, les guêpes, puisque tel est le nom dont Marcel Camaret les avait baptisées, passaient l’une après l’autre, au-dessus de ce groupe, qui n’y prêtait nulle attention.

Tout à coup, une détonation partit de l’une d’elles, et une grêle de mitraille couvrit le sol, sur un espace circulaire d’une cinquantaine de mètres de rayon.

Au bruit, ceux qui manoeuvraient le bélier avaient relevé la tête. Ils ne s’étaient pas encore rendu compte de la nature du phénomène, quand une seconde détonation partit d’un second engin arrivé à son tour dans le voisinage, détonation suivie, comme la première, d’une seconde grêle de mitraille.

Cette fois, le champ meurtrier s’était rapproché d’eux. Quelques hommes furent même atteints par les projectiles. Les autres n’attendirent pas plus longtemps. Abandonnant le bélier, ils ramassèrent leurs blessés et s’enfuirent à toutes jambes.

Les spectateurs de cette scène ne pouvaient en croire leurs yeux. Chaque guêpe, après s’être déchargée, était docilement revenue dans son alvéole au pied de la tour, puis, une minute plus tard, ayant reçu une nouvelle charge, elle s’était envolée pour reprendre son rang dans la ronde générale.

— Je ne crois pas qu’il faille nous occuper de ces gens-là, dit Marcel Camaret. Si donc il vous plaisait, par hasard, de visiter l’Usine…

CHAPITRE 7

L’usine de Blackland

Ses hôtes s’étant empressés d’accepter:

— Avant de descendre de cette tour, où nous reviendrons, d’ailleurs, en terminant notre visite, dit Camaret, rendez-vous compte, d’abord, de la disposition générale de l’Usine. Dans son ensemble, elle couvre, ainsi que vous le voyez, une surface rectangulaire, mesurant en largeur deux cent cinquante mètres, et trois cent soixante mètres parallèlement à la rivière. Sa superficie totale est donc de neuf hectares exactement, la partie occidentale, qui représente les trois cinquièmes de ce quadrilatère, étant consacrée à des jardins.

— Pourquoi des jardins? interrompit Amédée Florence.

— Ils assurent en partie notre subsistance, le surplus nous venant du dehors. C’est donc seulement l’autre partie, large de cent mètres et desservie par le quai, c’est-à-dire celle où nous sommes, qui constitue l’Usine proprement dite. Au milieu, sur une longueur de deux cent cinquante mètres, les ateliers et mon domicile particulier sont groupés au pied de cette tour, qui en occupe le centre. À chaque extrémité, où restait libre, par conséquent, un espace de cinquante-cinq mètres, on a élevé, perpendiculairement à la rivière, deux rangées de maisons ouvrières séparées par une large rue. Chaque rangée ayant sept maisons, et chaque maison ayant quatre étages, rez-de-chaussée compris, nous disposons, en tout, de cent douze logements.

— Quelle est donc l’importance de votre personnel? demanda Barsac.

— Cent hommes, exactement, mais quelques-uns sont mariés et plusieurs ont des enfants. Comme vous pouvez le constater, les ateliers ne comportent qu’un seul étage et sont recouverts d’une épaisse couche de terre gazonnée. Des obus seraient donc à peu près impuissants contre eux. Maintenant que vous connaissez les grandes lignes, nous pouvons descendre, si vous le voulez, et procéder à une visite détaillée.

Avant d’obéir à cette invitation, les auditeurs de Camaret jetèrent un dernier regard autour d’eux. La situation n’avait pas changé. Les guêpes continuaient leur promenade circulaire, et les assaillants, instruits par l’expérience, ne se hasardaient plus à pénétrer dans la zone dangereuse. Cette double constatation les ayant rassurés, ils quittèrent la plate-forme à la suite de l’ingénieur.

Guidés par lui, ils visitèrent tout d’abord cet étage de la tour qu’il appelait la “ruche”, d’où les vingt guêpes s’étaient envolées d’un même nombre d’alvéoles, entre lesquelles était située la réserve de mitraille. On traversa ensuite une série d’ateliers: ajustage, menuiserie, forge, fonderie, etc. et on déboucha dans les jardins, du côté le plus rapproché du Palais.

En cet endroit, la haute muraille ceinturant l’Usine masquait la vue de celui-ci. Mais, quand on se fut éloigné d’une cinquantaine de mètres de cette muraille, la tour d’Harry Killer commença à poindre au-dessus de la crête. Aussitôt, une explosion retentit au sommet de cette tour et fut suivie du bruit caractéristique d’une balle qui passa au-dessus du groupe des promeneurs. Ceux-ci reculèrent avec précipitation.

— L’imbécile!… murmura tranquillement Camaret, qui se contenta de lever le bras sans interrompre sa marche.

À ce signal, un violent sifflement se fit entendre. Les hôtes de Camaret se tournèrent instinctivement du côté de l’Usine. Mais celui-ci leur montra le Palais. Le cycloscope qui en couronnait la tour avait disparu.

— Ça lui apprendra, dit Camaret. Moi aussi, j’ai des torpilles aériennes, j’en ai même plus que lui, puisque c’est moi qui les fabrique. Quant au cycloscope, j’en ferai un autre, voilà tout.

— Mais, monsieur, fit observer Amédée Florence, puisque vous possédez de ces projectiles que vous appelez des torpilles aériennes, pourquoi ne s’en servirait-on pas contre Harry Killer?

Un instant, Marcel Camaret regarda fixement celui qui lui posait cette question, et, une fois encore, une expression d’égarement passa dans ses yeux.

— Moi!… dit-il enfin d’une voix sourde. Moi, m’attaquer à mon œuvre!…

Sans insister, Amédée Florence échangea un regard avec ses compagnons. Décidément, cet homme surprenant à beaucoup d’égards avait une fêlure, et cette fêlure s’appelait l’orgueil.

On se remit en marche en silence. La leçon avait été comprise par le Palais. Aucune autre attaque ne fut tentée contre le groupe des promeneurs, tandis que ceux-ci continuaient à s’éloigner dans le jardin, qu’ils quittèrent du côté opposé à celui par lequel ils étaient entrés.

— Nous arrivons dans la partie intéressante, dit Camaret en ouvrant une porte. Ici, c’est l’ancienne machinerie, moteur et générateur à vapeur, que nous chauffions au bois, faute d’autre combustible. C’était toute une affaire, car le bois venait de loin, et nous en consommions de grandes quantités. Heureusement, cela n’a pas duré longtemps. Dès que la rivière eut de l’eau, après les premières pluies provoquées par moi, la station hydroélectrique que j’avais installée, pendant ce temps, à une dizaine de kilomètres en aval de la ville, commença à fonctionner. Depuis, nous n’utilisons plus ce matériel archaïque, et aucune fumée ne sort plus de cette cheminée devenue inutile. Nous nous contentons de transformer selon nos besoins l’énergie que la station génératrice nous envoie.

À la suite de Camaret, on passa dans une autre salle.

— Ici, dit-il, et dans les salles suivantes, remplies comme celle-ci de dynamos réceptrices, d’alternateurs, de transformateurs et de bobines, parfois assez imposantes, c’est le pays de la foudre. C’est ici que nous recevons et transformons le courant primaire qui nous parvient de la station.

— Comment! s’écria Florence abasourdi. On a pu transporter toutes ces machines ici!

— Un petit nombre d’entre elles seulement, répondit Camaret. Nous en avons fabriqué nous-mêmes le plus grand nombre.

— Il vous a fallu tout au moins la matière première, objecta Amédée Florence. Comment diable vous l’êtes-vous procurée en plein désert?

— Au fait!… dit Camaret, qui s’arrêta, pensif, comme si cette difficulté eût été pour lui toute nouvelle, vous avez raison, monsieur Florence. Comment ont pu être amenées jusqu’ici les premières machines et la matière première avec laquelle nous avons créé les autres? Je n’avais jamais réfléchi, je l’avoue, à ce côté de la question. Je demandais, j’étais servi. Je ne cherchais pas plus loin. Mais, maintenant que vous attirez mon attention…

— Et quelle hécatombe d’hommes pour transporter tout cela à travers le désert, avant que vous n’ayez les planeurs!

— C’est vrai… reconnut Camaret qui pâlit un peu.

— Et l’argent?… Ça en a mangé, tout ça, de la galette! s’écria encore Florence dans son langage audacieusement familier.

— L’argent?… balbutia Camaret.

— Oui, l’argent. Vous êtes donc bien riche?

— Moi!… protesta Camaret. Je crois que je n’ai jamais eu cinq centimes en poche depuis que je suis ici.

— Alors?

— C’est Harry Killer… commença timidement Camaret.

— Bien sûr! Mais où le prenait-il? C’est donc un milliardaire, votre Harry Killer?

Camaret ouvrit les bras en signe d’ignorance. Il semblait démoralisé par la question d’Amédée Florence, et ses yeux avaient, de nouveau, cette expression égarée qui faisait vaciller son regard à toute émotion un peu vive. Pressant les solutions possibles du problème, si différent de ceux qu’il résolvait d’ordinaire, qui lui était brusquement posé, il éprouvait une sorte de vertige devant les horizons insoupçonnés qu'il découvrait. Il avait l'air si réellement éperdu, que le docteur Châtonnay eut pitié de lui.

— C'est un point qu'on élucidera avec les autres, dit-il. Pour le moment, ne nous éternisons pas là-dessus et continuons notre visite.

Comme pour chasser une pensée importune, Camaret se passa la main sur le front et entra silencieusement dans la salle suivante.

— Ici, dit-il, d'une voix que l'émotion altérait encore, sont les compresseurs. Nous employons beaucoup, en effet, l'air et d'autres gaz à l'état liquide. Ainsi que vous le savez, tous les gaz sont liquéfiables, pourvu qu'on les comprime et qu'on abaisse leur température d'une manière suffisante, mais, dès qu'on abandonne à eux-mêmes les liquides obtenus, ils se réchauffent et retournent plus ou moins vite à l'état gazeux. S'ils étaient alors contenus dans un récipient clos, les parois de celui-ci auraient bientôt à subir une pression telle qu'il volerait en éclats. Une de mes inventions a changé cela. J'ai, en effet, découvert une substance absolument anti-diathermane, c'est-à-dire, absolument imperméable aux rayons calorifiques. Il en résulte qu'un gaz liquéfié, l'air, par exemple, introduit dans les récipients fabriqués avec cette substance, conserve toujours la même température et reste, par conséquent, à l'état liquide, sans aucune tendance à l'éclatement. Cette invention m'a permis d'en réaliser plusieurs autres, et notamment celle des planeurs à grand rayon d'action que vous connaissez.

— Si nous les connaissons!… s'exclama Amédée Florence. Dites que nous les connaissons trop! Ils sont donc aussi de vous, ces planeurs?

— Et de qui voudriez-vous qu'ils fussent? répliqua Camaret, soudainement atteint d'un nouvel accès de son maladif orgueil.

À mesure qu'il parlait, son émotion s'était dissipée peu à peu. Il n'en restait plus trace maintenant, et c'est tout entier à son sujet qu'il reprit:

— Mes planeurs ont trois particularités principales, relatives à la stabilité, au départ et à la force motrice, dont je vous donnerai une idée en peu de mots. Commençons par la stabilité.

Quand un oiseau subit la poussée d'une brusque rafale, il n'a pas besoin de calculer pour retrouver son équilibre. Son système nerveux, ou plutôt la partie de ce système nerveux qui constitue ce qu'on appelle les réflexes en physiologie, travaille et le redresse d'une manière tout instinctive. Afin que la stabilité de mes oiseaux mécaniques fût automatique, j'ai voulu les doter d'un pareil système de réflexes. Puisque vous les avez vus, vous savez qu'ils sont constitués par deux ailes placées au sommet d'un pylône haut de cinq mètres, à la base duquel est la plateforme qui supporte le moteur, le conducteur et les passagers. Il résulte déjà de cette disposition un notable abaissement du centre de gravité. Mais le pylône n'est nullement fixe relativement aux ailes. À moins qu'on ne l'immobilise, en totalité ou en partie, par la manœuvre de l'un des gouvernails de direction et de profondeur, il peut, au contraire, décrire de petits arcs dans tous les sens autour de la verticale. Si donc les ailes, hors de l'action d'un gouvernail, s'inclinent latéralement et longitudinalement, le pylône, entraîné par son poids, tend à faire avec elles un nouvel angle. Par ce mouvement, il actionne aussitôt des masses d'une pesanteur déterminée coulissant parallèlement et perpendiculairement aux ailes, lesquelles sont en même temps déformées de la manière convenable. Ainsi sont immédiatement — automatiquement, ai-je dit — corrigées les inclinaisons accidentelles du planeur.

Marcel Camaret, les yeux baissés vers le sol, donnait ces explications avec la sérénité d’un professeur faisant un cours. Il n’hésitait pas, ne cherchait pas ses mots, qui lui arrivaient d’eux-mêmes. Sans s’interrompre, il poursuivit de la même manière:

— Passons au deuxième point. Au moment du départ, les ailes du planeur s’abaissent et se replient contre le pylône. En même temps, l’axe de l’hélice, rendu mobile dans un plan vertical perpendiculaire à ces ailes, se relève, et celle-ci devient horizontale. L’appareil est alors un hélicoptère, et son hélice est uniquement suspensive. Mais, quand on a atteint une hauteur suffisante, les ailes s’ouvrent, tandis que, simultanément, l’axe de l’hélice s’incline vers l’avant jusqu’à ce qu’il soit horizontal. Graduellement, celle-ci devient ainsi propulsive, et l’hélicoptère se transforme en planeur.

Quant à l’énergie motrice, elle m’est fournie par l’air liquide. D’un réservoir fabriqué avec la substance anti-diathermane dont je vous ai parlé, l’air liquide, dont l’écoulement est réglé par un jeu de soupapes, arrive dans un tube très fin perpétuellement chauffé. L’air retourne aussitôt à l’état gazeux, sous une pression formidable, et actionne le moteur.

— Quelle vitesse obtenez-vous avec ces planeurs? demanda Amédée Florence.

— Quatre cents kilomètres à l’heure pendant cinq mille kilomètres, sans ravitaillement, répondit Camaret.

Nil mirari, a dit Horace: il ne faut s’étonner de rien. Les auditeurs de Camaret ne purent cependant retenir l’expression de leur admiration. On ne trouvait pas de termes assez enthousiastes pour célébrer son génie, tandis qu’on retournait à la tour. Mais cet homme étrange, qui, parfois, pourtant, faisait montre d’une si excessive vanité, demeura indifférent à ces éloges, comme s’il n’eût été sensible qu’à ceux qu’il se décernait lui-même.

— Nous arrivons maintenant au coeur même de l’Usine, dit Camaret, quand on fut à la tour. Cette tour comporte dix étages semblables à celui-ci et contenant des appareils analogues. Vous avez certainement remarqué que son sommet est surmonté d’un pylône métallique très élevé. Ce pylône est un “projecteur d’ondes”. La tour est, en outre, hérissée sur toute sa surface d’une multitude de pointes, qui sont autant d’autres projecteurs de taille réduite.

— Projecteurs d’ondes, dites-vous?… demanda le docteur Châtonnay.

— Je ne voudrais pas vous faire un cours de physique, répondit Marcel Camaret en souriant. Quelques explications de principe sont cependant nécessaires. Je vous rappellerai donc, si vous le savez, je vous apprendrai, si vous l’ignorez, qu’un célèbre physicien allemand du nom de Hertz, a remarqué, il y a de cela déjà longtemps, que, lorsqu’on fait éclater l’étincelle d’une bobine d’induction dans le petit intervalle séparant les deux branches d’un condensateur, résonateur ou oscillateur, selon le mot qui vous conviendra le mieux, cette étincelle provoque, entre les deux pôles de cet instrument, une décharge oscillante, ce qui revient à dire qu’il est parcouru par un courant alternatif, ou, en d’autres termes, que ses deux pôles sont, à tour de rôle, positifs ou négatifs au cours d’une même décharge, jusqu’au moment où il est revenu à un état d’équilibre. La rapidité de ces oscillations, autrement dit, leur fréquence, peut être très grande et atteindre jusqu’à cent milliards par seconde. Or, celles-ci ne sont pas limitées aux points où elles se produisent. Elles ébranlent, au contraire, le milieu ambiant, c’est-à-dire l’air, ou, plus exactement, le fluide impondérable, qui remplit à la fois les espaces célestes et les vides intermoléculaires des corps matériels, auquel on a donné le nom d’éther. À chaque oscillation correspond donc une vibration éthérique qui se transmet, de proche en proche, toujours plus loin. Ce sont ces vibrations qu’on appelle avec juste raison des ondes hertziennes. Me suis-je fait comprendre?

— Admirablement, proclama Barsac, qui en sa qualité d’homme politique, était peut-être, de tous les auditeurs de Camaret, le moins préparé aux questions scientifiques.

— Jusqu’à moi, reprit celui-ci, ces ondes n’étaient qu’une curiosité de laboratoire. On s’en servait pour électriser, sans contact matériel, des corps métalliques situés plus ou moins loin de leur point d’émission. Elles avaient, en effet, le défaut capital de se répandre dans tous les sens autour de ce point, absolument comme les ronds concentriques qui se forment dans une mare quand on y jette une pierre. Il en résultait que l’énergie initiale se diluait, s’émiettait, se vaporisait, pour ainsi dire, en se divisant sur une étendue de plus en plus grande, et, qu’à quelques mètres seulement de la source on ne pouvait plus en obtenir que des manifestations insignifiantes. Vous comprenez toujours? Je suis clair?

— Lumineux, affirma Amédée Florence.

— Bien avant moi, on avait remarqué que ces ondes sont comme la lumière, susceptibles d’être réfléchies, mais on n’avait tiré aucune conclusion de cette propriété. Or, grâce au métal extra-conducteur que j’ai découvert — celui-là même dont j’ai garni la crête de notre muraille — j’ai pu établir des réflecteurs tels que la presque totalité des ondes émises est dirigée dans le sens qui me convient. La force initiale est ainsi intégralement envoyée dans cette direction, et s’y transmet de proche en proche tant qu’elle n’a pas été consommée dans un travail quelconque. Le moyen de faire varier la fréquence de ces oscillations étant, d’une part, bien connu, j’ai pu imaginer des récepteurs d’ondes qui ne sont sensibles qu’à une fréquence déterminée. C’est ce qu’on appelle en physique la “syntonisation”. Un récepteur donné réagira donc à toutes les ondes ayant la fréquence pour laquelle il a été construit, et à celles-ci seulement. Le nombre des fréquences possibles étant infini, je peux établir, par suite, une infinité de moteurs parmi lesquels il n’en existera pas deux qui soient sensibles à des ondes identiques. On me comprend toujours?

— C’est plus dur, reconnut Barsac. On suit tout de même.

— J’ai fini, d’ailleurs, dit Camaret. C’est par ce moyen que nous actionnons une quantité considérable de machines agricoles qui, toutes, reçoivent leur énergie à distance de l’un ou de l’autre des projecteurs qui hérissent cette tour. C’est également par ce moyen que nous dirigeons les guêpes. Chacune d’elles a quatre hélices et contient quatre petits moteurs de syntonisation différente, dont nous excitons, à notre choix, un ou plusieurs. C’est, enfin, par ce moyen que je pourrais détruire la ville entière, si la fantaisie m’en prenait.

— Vous pourriez d’ici détruire la ville!… s’écria Barsac.

— Très aisément. Harry Killer m’a demandé de la rendre imprenable, et je l’ai rendue imprenable. Sous toutes les rues, sous toutes les maisons, sous le Palais et sous cette usine même, sont déposées de fortes charges d’explosif accompagnées d’un détonateur en syntonisation avec des ondes de fréquences connues de moi seul. Pour faire sauter la ville, il me suffirait donc d’envoyer dans la direction de chaque mine des ondes de la fréquence correspondant à son détonateur.

Amédée Florence, qui prenait fiévreusement des notes, eut la velléité d’insinuer qu’on ferait peut-être bien d’user de ce procédé pour venir à bout d’Harry Killer, mais il se souvint à temps du peu de succès qu’avait rencontré sa suggestion d’employer les torpilles aériennes dans le même but, et il s’abstint prudemment.

— Et le grand pylône qui surmonte la tour? demanda le docteur Châtonnay.

— J’y arrive, et ce sera ma conclusion, répondit Camaret. Pour ces ondes dites hertziennes, tout se passe, c’est même assez curieux, comme si elles étaient soumises à l’attraction, et, parties de leur point d’émission, elles retombaient lentement vers la terre, où elles iraient finalement se perdre. Si, donc, on veut qu’elles aillent loin, il faut les produire à une certaine hauteur. Pour moi, c’était d’autant plus nécessaire que je désirais les envoyer, non pas très loin, mais très haut, ce qui est encore moins facile. J’y ai réussi, cependant, tant grâce à un pylône d’une centaine de mètres relié à l’oscillateur, que grâce au réflecteur de mon invention dont l’extrémité du pylône est armée.

— Pourquoi envoyer des ondes en hauteur? demanda Florence, qui ne comprenait plus.

— Pour faire pleuvoir. Tel est, en effet, le principe de l’invention que je projetais, quand j’ai connu Harry Killer, et que celui-ci m’a aidé à réaliser. Par le pylône et le miroir, j’envoie des ondes aux nuages, et j’électrise ainsi jusqu’à saturation l’eau qu’ils contiennent à l’état globulaire. Quand la différence de potentiel de ce nuage avec la terre ou avec un nuage voisin est devenue suffisant, ce qui n’est jamais très long, un orage éclate, et la pluie tombe. La transformation de ce désert en campagne fertile prouve, au surplus, l’efficacité du procédé.

— Encore faut-il avoir des nuages, fit observer le docteur Châtonnay.

— Bien entendu, ou tout au moins une atmosphère suffisamment humide. Mais, des nuages, il en vient nécessairement, un jour ou l’autre. Le problème était de les faire crever ici et non ailleurs. Maintenant que la campagne est cultivée, que les arbres commencent à pousser, un régime de pluies régulières a une tendance à s’établir, et les nuages deviennent de plus en plus fréquents. Dès qu’il en arrive un, je n’ai que ceci à faire, expliqua Camaret, en déplaçant une manette, et aussitôt, des ondes, issues d’une force électromotrice de mille chevaux, vont le bombarder de leurs milliards de vibrations.

— Merveilleux! s’extasièrent les auditeurs de l’ingénieur.

— En ce moment, sans que vous en ayez la moindre conscience, poursuivit Camaret, que cette revue de ses inventions exaltait progressivement, les ondes s’écoulent par le sommet du pylône et vont se perdre dans l’infini. Mais je leur rêve un autre avenir. Je sens, je sais, je suis certain qu’elles pourraient s’adapter à cent usages divers, qu’il serait possible, par exemple, de correspondre sur toute la surface de la terre, par téléphone ou par télégraphe, sans qu’il soit besoin de fil pour réunir les postes correspondants.

— Sans fil!… s’écrient ses auditeurs.

— Sans fil. Que faudrait-il pour cela? Peu de chose. Simplement que l’on imaginât un appareil récepteur convenable. Je le cherche, je suis même près du but, mais je ne l’ai pas encore atteint.

— Nous commençons à ne plus comprendre, avoua Barsac.

— Rien n’est plus simple, cependant, affirma Camaret, qui s’excitait de plus en plus. Tenez, voici un appareil Morse, couramment employé dans la télégraphie ordinaire, que j’ai intercalé pour mes expériences dans un circuit particulier. Je n’ai qu’à manœuvrer ces leviers — et, tout en parlant, il les manoeuvrait en effet — pour que le courant traducteur des ondes soit sous la dépendance de ce circuit. Tant que le manipulateur du Morse sera relevé, les ondes hertziennes ne passeront pas. Quand il sera baissé, au contraire, et seulement pendant qu’il le sera, les ondes s’échapperont par le pylône. Toutefois, ce n’est plus vers le ciel qu’il s’agirait de les projeter, mais dans la direction du récepteur supposé, en orientant convenablement le miroir qui les concentre et les réfléchit, si la direction de ce récepteur n’était pas connue, il suffirait de supprimer purement et simplement le miroir, comme je le fais en actionnant cet autre levier. Maintenant, les ondes que j’émettrais se répandraient dans l’espace de tous côtés autour de nous, et je pourrais télégraphier, sûr d’atteindre le récepteur où qu’il soit, s’il existait. Malheureusement, il n’existe pas.

— Télégraphier, dites-vous?… demanda Jane Buxton. Qu’entendez-vous par là?

— Ce qu’on entend d’ordinaire. Je n’aurais qu’à manœuvrer le manipulateur à la manière habituelle, en me conformant à l’alphabet Morse bien connu de tous les télégraphistes. Mais un exemple vous fera mieux comprendre. Si le récepteur hypothétique existait, vous vous empresseriez d’en profiter pour sortir de votre situation actuelle, j’imagine?

— Sans aucun doute, dit Jane.

— Eh bien! Agissons comme s’il en était ainsi, proposa Camaret en s’asseyant devant l’appareil

Morse. À qui télégraphieriez-vous, dans ce cas?

— Dans ce pays où nous ne connaissons personne… dit Jane en souriant, je me demande à qui… Je ne vois guère que le capitaine Marcenay, ajouta-t-elle en rougissant légèrement.

— Va pour le capitaine Marcenay, fit Camaret, qui manoeuvra, tout en parlant, le manipulateur du Morse suivant les longues et les brèves de cet alphabet. Où est-il, ce capitaine?

— À Tombouctou, pour le moment, je crois, dit Jane, hésitante.

— Tombouctou, répéta Camaret en continuant à faire jouer le manipulateur. Maintenant, que lui diriez-vous, au capitaine Marcenay? Quelque chose dans ce genre, je suppose: Jane Buxton…

— Pardon, interrompit Jane, le capitaine Marcenay ne me connaît que sous le nom de Mornas.

— Cela n’a aucune importance, puisque la dépêche n’arrivera pas, mais enfin, mettons Mornas. Je télégraphierais donc: Venez au secours de Jane Mornas, prisonnière à

Blackland…

Marcel Camaret s’interrompit.

— Et, comme Blackland est inconnue du monde entier, paraît-il, j’en préciserais la situation, et j’ajouterais: latitude 15° 50’ nord, longitude…

Marcel Camaret quitta brusquement son siège.

— Bon! s’écria-t-il, Harry Killer a coupé le courant.

Ses hôtes se pressaient autour de lui, ne comprenant pas.

— Comme je vous l’ai dit, expliqua-t-il, l’énergie nous arrive d’une station hydroélectrique installée à une dizaine de kilomètres en aval. Harry Killer nous a isolés de cette station, voilà tout.

— Mais alors, dit le docteur Châtonnay, les machines vont s’arrêter.

— Elles le sont déjà, répondit Camaret.

— Et les guêpes?

— Elles sont tombées, cela n’est pas douteux.

— Harry Killer va donc pouvoir s’en emparer, s’écria Jane Buxton.

— C’est moins sûr, répliqua l’ingénieur. Montons au sommet, et vous verrez qu’il n’en sera rien.

On gravit rapidement les étages supérieurs, et on entra dans le cycloscope. Comme précédemment, on aperçut aussitôt la face extérieure de la muraille, y compris le fossé qui la bordait et au fond duquel gisaient les guêpes immobiles.

Sur l’Esplanade, les Merry Fellows poussaient des clameurs de triomphe. Déjà ils revenaient à la charge. Plusieurs d’entre eux sautèrent dans le fossé et portèrent la main sur ces guêpes mortes, qui les terrifiaient si fort quand la vie les animait.

Mais, à peine les avaient-ils touchées, qu’ils donnèrent des signes de malaise. S’en écartant avec effroi, ils s’efforcèrent de sortir du fossé. Aucun d’eux n’eut la force d’y parvenir, et, l’un après l’autre, ils retombèrent inanimés.

— Je ne donnerais pas deux sous de leur peau, dit froidement Marcel Camaret. Vous devez bien penser que j’avais prévu ce qui arrive, et que j’avais pris mes mesures en conséquence. En coupant le courant de la station, Harry Killer a déclenché ipso facto un dispositif grâce auquel des bonbonnes d’acide carbonique liquide ont déversé dans le fossé leur contenu qui est retourné immédiatement à l’état gazeux. Ce gaz, plus lourd que l’air, est resté dans le fossé, et ceux qui s’y trouvent maintenant vont inévitablement périr asphyxiés.

— Pauvres gens! fit Jane Buxton.

— Tant pis pour eux, déclara Camaret, je ne peux rien pour les sauver. Quant à nos machines, j’avais également pris mes précautions. Depuis ce matin, on se tient prêt à substituer l’air liquide, dont j’ai fait une provision inépuisable, au courant de la station, comme agent moteur des appareils électriques. C’est fait maintenant, et voici les machines qui tournent. Les guêpes vont s’envoler de nouveau.

Les hélices des guêpes étaient, en effet, reparties dans leur giration vertigineuse, et ces engins avaient recommencé leur ronde protectrice, tandis que reculait jusqu’au Palais la foule des Merry Fellows abandonnant ceux des leurs qui gisaient dans le fossé.

Marcel Camaret se retourna vers ses hôtes. Il paraissait nerveux, agité même, d’une manière anormale, et la lueur inquiétante qu’on avait remarquée à plusieurs reprises troublait une fois de plus son regard.

— Nous pouvons dormir tranquilles, ce me semble, dit-il, tout gonflé d’une vanité un peu ingénue.

CHAPITRE 8

Un appel dans l’espace

C’est fort tristement que le capitaine Pierre Marcenay avait quitté la mission Barsac, et plus particulièrement celle qu’il ne connaissait que sous le nom de Jane Mornas. Il s’était mis en route, pourtant, sans l’ombre d’une hésitation, et jusqu’à Ségou-Sikoro il avait doublé les étapes, comme il lui était prescrit. Avant tout, le capitaine Marcenay était un soldat, en effet, et c’est peut-être la plus grande beauté du métier militaire que cette abnégation complète de soi et cette obéissance passive qu’il impose, en vue d’un but dont, parfois, on n’a pas une claire conscience, mais au-dessus duquel on sait que plane toujours l’idée de patrie.

Quelle que fût sa hâte, cependant, il lui fallut neuf jours pour abattre les quatre cent cinquante kilomètres qui le séparaient de Ségou-Sikoro, où il n’arriva que le 22 février, à une heure fort avancée de la soirée. Ce fut donc seulement le lendemain matin qu’il put se présenter devant le colonel Sergines, commandant la place, et lui remettre l’ordre du colonel Saint-Auban.

Le colonel Sergines lut cet ordre trois fois de suite avec un étonnement croissant. Il paraissait n’y rien comprendre.

— Quelle drôle de combinaison!… dit-il enfin. Aller chercher des hommes à Sikasso pour les envoyer à Tombouctou!… C’est inimaginable!…

— Vous n’étiez donc pas avisé de notre passage, mon colonel? demanda le capitaine Marcenay.

— Nullement.

— Le lieutenant qui m’a remis cet ordre, expliqua le capitaine, m’a dit que des troubles avaient éclaté à Tombouctou, et que les Touaregs Aouelimmiden s’agitaient d’une manière menaçante.

— C’est la première nouvelle, déclara le colonel. Hier encore, le capitaine Peyrolles… Vous le connaissez peut-être?

— Oui, mon colonel. Nous avons servi dans le même régiment, il y a deux ans.

— Eh bien! il est passé ici, Peyrolles, en allant de Tombouctou à Dakar. Il n’est parti qu’hier, et ne nous a rien dit de tout cela.

Le capitaine Marcenay ne put que décliner, du geste, toute responsabilité.

— Vous avez raison, capitaine, dit le colonel Sergines. Nous n’avons pas à discuter. L’ordre est là, il n’y a qu’à s’y conformer. Mais, du diable si je sais quand vous pourrez partir, par exemple!

On eut beaucoup de peine, en effet à préparer cette expédition imprévue. Plus de huit jours furent employés à loger les chevaux, qu’on avait ordre de laisser à Ségou-Sikoro, et à réunir le matériel nécessaire au transport, et des vivres en quantité suffisante. Ce fut seulement le 2 mars que le capitaine Marcenay put s’embarquer et commencer à descendre le Niger.

Le voyage, souvent contrarié par les basses eaux dans ces derniers mois de la saison sèche, exigea à son tour deux longues semaines, et l’ancienne escorte de la mission Barsac ne débarqua finalement que le 17 mars à Kabara, port de Tombouctou, dont le séparent une quinzaine de kilomètres.

Lorsque le capitaine Marcenay se présenta au colonel Allègre qui commandait la place, cet officier supérieur fit montre de la même surprise que son collègue de Ségou-Sikoro. Il lui affirma qu’aucun trouble n’avait été constaté dans la région, qu’il n’avait jamais demandé de renfort, et il déclara ne pas s’expliquer pourquoi le colonel Saint-Auban lui envoyait, sans le prévenir, cent hommes dont il n’avait aucun besoin.

Cela commençait à devenir singulier, et le capitaine Marcenay en arrivait à se demander s’il n’avait pas été joué par un habile faussaire. Mais pourquoi? Dans quel but? La réponse s’imposait. Si inexplicable que parût un tel projet, le faussaire, s’il existait, ne pouvait en avoir eu d’autre que la destruction de la mission Barsac désarmée. Logiquement amené à cette conclusion, le capitaine Marcenay éprouvait de cruelles angoisses, en pensant à la grave responsabilité qu’il encourrait dans ce cas, et aux dangers qui eussent alors menacé Mlle Mornas, dont le souvenir emplissait son esprit et son coeur.

Ses craintes étaient d’autant plus vives que, pas plus à Tombouctou qu’à Ségou-Sikoro, il n’avait pu recueillir le moindre renseignement sur le lieutenant Lacour. Personne ne le connaissait. Bien plus! personne n’avait jamais entendu parler d’un corps de volontaires soudanais, bien que cette expression fût employée par le colonel Saint-Auban lui-même.

Toutefois, l’ordre du colonel ayant, après vérification minutieuse, tous les caractères matériels de l’authenticité, cet ordre devait être tenu pour bon et valable, jusqu’à preuve du contraire. Un logement fut donc assuré au capitaine Marcenay et à ses hommes, et, dès que l’occasion s’en présenta, l’ordre du colonel Saint-Auban fut envoyé à son auteur, qui, seul, pouvait dire s’il était ou non apocryphe.

Mais, de Tombouctou à Bamako, il faut compter mille kilomètres, tant à la montée qu’à la descente. Il s’écoulerait donc beaucoup de temps avant qu’on reçût la réponse du colonel.

Ce temps, le capitaine Marcenay, désoeuvré, sans fonctions précises, et surtout dévoré d’inquiétudes, allait le trouver bien long. Fort heureusement, dans les derniers jours de mars, une distraction lui arriva dans la personne du capitaine Perrigny, un de ses camarades de Saint-Cyr, avec lequel il n’avait jamais cessé d’entretenir d’intimes relations. Les deux amis furent très heureux de se revoir, et le temps, depuis ce moment, passa plus rapidement pour le capitaine Marcenay.

Mis au courant des soucis de son camarade, Perrigny rassura celui-ci. La fabrication d’un ordre faux, assez bien imité pour que tout le monde s’y fût trompé, lui parut tenir du roman. À son avis, il était plus raisonnable d’admettre que le lieutenant Lacour, mal renseigné sur les véritables mobiles de la décision du colonel, en avait donné une raison inexacte. Quant à la surprise du colonel Allègre, elle pouvait s’expliquer très simplement. Dans cette région à peine organisée, il n’y avait rien d’étonnant à ce que l’ordre le concernant se fût égaré.

Le capitaine Perrigny, qui devait séjourner deux ans à Tombouctou, amenait avec lui d’assez nombreux colis, que son ami l’aida à déballer. Plusieurs d’entre eux étaient plutôt des instruments de laboratoire que des bagages proprement dits. S’il n’eût porté l’uniforme, Perrigny eût été classé, en effet, parmi les savants. Passionné de science, il se tenait au courant de toutes les questions à l’ordre du jour, et particulièrement de celles se rattachant, de près ou de loin, à l’électricité. Dans leur association, Perrigny représentait l’étude, et Marcenay l’action. Cette différence de leurs penchants était même pour eux le fréquent prétexte de disputes amicales. Couramment, ils se traitaient en riant, l’un, de “vieux rat de bibliothèque”, l’autre, de “vil traîneur de sabre”, bien certains, au fond, que l’activité de Marcenay ne l’empêchait pas d’être un homme cultivé et instruit, et que la science de Perrigny n’empêchait pas davantage ce dernier d’être un excellent et brave officier.

Quelques jours après l’arrivée de son ami, le capitaine Marcenay trouva celui-ci en train d’achever de monter, à la suite de plusieurs autres, un nouvel appareil dans la cour de la maison où il avait fixé ses pénates.

— Tu tombes à pic, lui cria Perrigny, dès qu’il l’aperçut. Je vais te montrer quelque chose d’intéressant.

— Cela? demanda Marcenay, en indiquant l’appareil, composé de deux piles électriques, d’électroaimants, d’un petit tube de verre contenant de la grenaille métallique, et surmonté d’une tige de cuivre haute de plusieurs mètres.

— Cela même, répondit Perrigny. Ce bibelot, tel que tu le vois, est une vraie trouvaille de sorcellerie. C’est tout simplement un poste récepteur de télégraphie, mais, tu m’entends bien, de télégraphie sans fil.

— Il y a quelques années qu’on en parle, dit Marcenay intéressé. Le problème serait-il donc résolu?

— Et comment! s’écria Perrigny. Oui, deux hommes se sont rencontrés sur notre boule terraquée, au même instant de son histoire. L’un, un Italien, du nom de Marconi, a trouvé le moyen d’émettre dans l’espace les ondes dites hertziennes… Connaîtrais-tu ça, par hasard, soldateste effrénée?

— Oui, oui, fit Marcenay. Je l’ai appris au collège. D’ailleurs, on parlait déjà de Marconi quand j’étais en France. Mais l’autre inventeur à qui tu faisais allusion?

— C’est un Français, le physicien Branly. Lui, il a trouvé le récepteur, une petite merveille d’ingénieuse simplicité.

— Et l’appareil que je vois là?

— Est précisément le récepteur, dont tu vas comprendre le principe en un clin d’oeil. M. Branly a observé que, si la limaille de fer était naturellement mauvaise conductrice de l’électricité, elle devenait bonne conductrice quand elle était influencée par une onde hertzienne, l’effet de cette onde étant de douer les grains de la limaille d’une attraction réciproque et d’augmenter leur cohésion. Ceci posé, tu vois ce petit tube?

— Je le vois.

— C’est un cohéreur, ou détecteur d’ondes, comme tu voudras. Ce tube contenant de la limaille de fer est intercalé dans le circuit d’une pile ordinaire que j’ai l’honneur de te présenter. Le tube, étant mauvais conducteur, interrompt, par conséquent, le circuit, et le courant de la pile ne passe pas. C’est compris?

— Oui, après.

— Or, vienne une onde hertzienne, elle sera captée par cette tige de cuivre, qui s’appelle une antenne. Aussitôt, le tube, qui est en connexion avec elle, deviendra conducteur, le circuit de la pile sera fermé et le courant passera. Tu comprends toujours, buveur de sang?

— Oui, vieux savant à lunettes. Continue.

— Alors intervient le narrateur ici présent. Grâce à un dispositif de mon invention personnelle, combiné avec la découverte de Branly, ce courant mettra en action un récepteur Morse, dont la bande en papier se déroulera imprimée à la manière ordinaire. Mais, simultanément, ce petit marteau que tu vois heurtera le cohéreur, dont les grains seront séparés par le choc, et qui reprendra, par conséquent, sa résistance habituelle. Le courant de la pile ne passera plus, et le récepteur Morse cessera d’imprimer. On aura donc ainsi obtenu un unique point sur la bande de papier, me diras-tu? En effet, mais la même succession de phénomènes se reproduira immédiatement, tant que l’antenne continuera à recueillir des ondes. Quand celles-ci viendront à cesser, rien ne s’imprimera plus sur la bande de papier du Morse, jusqu’au passage des ondes suivantes. On obtiendra finalement, par ce procédé, une série de points réunis par groupes inégaux, représentant les longues et les brèves de l’alphabet Morse, qu’un télégraphiste lit aussi aisément que l’écriture ordinaire.

— Toi, par exemple?

— Moi, par exemple.

— Et pourquoi as-tu apporté cet instrument, extraordinaire je le reconnais, dans ces contrées barbares?

— Lui et son frère, le producteur d’ondes, c’est-à-dire le transmetteur, dont je commencerai dès demain le montage. Parce que cette question de la télégraphie sans fil me passionne. Je veux être le premier à l’installer au Soudan. C’est pourquoi j’ai apporté ici ces deux appareils, dont les semblables, encore fort rares, du reste, de par le monde, n’existent pas en Afrique, je te le garantis. Songe donc! Si l’on pouvait communiquer directement avec Bamako!… Avec Saint-Louis, peut-être!…

— Oh! avec Saint-Louis!… C’est un peu loin.

— Pas du tout, protesta Perrigny. On a déjà correspondu à de très grandes distances.

— Pas possible!

— Très possible, soudard, et, moi, je compte faire mieux encore. Incessamment, je commencerai, le long du Niger, une série d’expériences…

Le capitaine Perrigny s’arrêta tout à coup. Ses yeux écarquillés, sa bouche entrouverte exprimaient une stupéfaction profonde. Du côté de l’appareil Branly, un petit bruit sec venait de se faire entendre, que son oreille exercée avait bien reconnu.

— Qu’est-ce que tu as? demanda Marcenay étonné.

Son ami dut faire un effort pour lui répondre. La surprise l’étranglait littéralement.

— Il marche! balbutia-t-il enfin en désignant l’appareil.

— Comment! il marche, se récria ironiquement le capitaine Marcenay. Tu rêves, futur membre de l’Institut. Puisque ton appareil est le seul qui existe en Afrique, il ne peut pas marcher, ainsi que tu t’exprimes avec tant d’élégance. Il se sera détraqué, voilà tout.

Sans répondre, le capitaine Perrigny courut au récepteur.

— Détraqué!… protesta-t-il en proie à une violente surexcitation. Il est si peu détraqué que je lis clairement sur la bande: capi… taine… capitaine Mar… capitaine Marcenay!

— Mon nom! railla celui-ci. Je crains fort, mon vieux, que tu ne te paies ma tête, comme on dit.

— Ton nom! affirma Perrigny, avec une émotion si évidemment sincère que son camarade en fut frappé.

L’appareil s’était arrêté, et demeurait maintenant muet sous les yeux des deux officiers qui ne le quittaient pas du regard. Mais bientôt le tic-tac significatif se fit de nouveau entendre.

— Le voilà qui repart!… s’exclama Perrigny, en se penchant sur la bande. Bon! ton adresse, maintenant: Tombouctou.

— Tombouctou!… répéta machinalement Marcenay, tremblant à son tour d’une sorte d’émotion mystérieuse.

L’appareil s’était arrêté une seconde fois, puis, après une courte interruption, la bande imprimée recommença à se dérouler, pour s’immobiliser encore au bout de quelques instants.

— Jane Buxton, lut Perrigny.

— Connais pas, déclara Marcenay, qui poussa, sans trop savoir pourquoi, un soupir de soulagement. C’est une farce que quelqu’un nous fait.

— Une farce? répéta Perrigny, songeur. Comment cela se pourrait-il?… Ah! voilà que ça recommence!…

Et, penché sur la bande, il lut, épelant les mots, à mesure qu’ils se révélaient à lui:

— Venez… au… se… cours… de… Jane… Mor… nas…

— Jane Mornas! s’écria le capitaine Marcenay, qui, suffoquant tout à coup, dut dégrafer le col de sa vareuse.

— Tais-toi, commanda Perrigny. Pri… son… nière… à Black… land…

Pour la quatrième fois, le tic-tac s’interrompit. Perrigny se redressa et regarda son camarade. Celui-ci était livide.

— Qu’as-tu? demanda-t-il affectueusement.

— Je t’expliquerai… répondit péniblement Marcenay. Mais Blackland, où prends-tu Blackland?

Perrigny n’eut pas le temps de répondre. L’appareil fonctionnait de nouveau. Il lut:

— La… ti… tude… Quinze… de… grés… Cin… quante… mi… nutes… nord… Lon… gi… tude…

Penchés sur l’instrument devenu soudain silencieux, les deux officiers attendirent en vain pendant quelques minutes. Cette fois, l’arrêt était définitif, et le récepteur Morse demeura muet.

Le capitaine Perrigny murmura, tout songeur:

— Voilà qui est un peu fort de café, comme dit l’autre!… Il y aurait donc un second amateur de télégraphie sans fil dans ce pays perdu?… Et quelqu’un qui te connaît, mon cher, ajouta-t-il, en se tournant vers son ami.

Il remarqua aussitôt l’altération de son visage.

— Qu’est-ce que tu as? lui demanda-t-il. Tu es tout pâle.

En quelques mots rapides, le capitaine Marcenay expliqua à son camarade la cause de son trouble. S'il avait été surpris, quand il avait su que son propre nom figurait sur la bande télégraphique, sa surprise était devenue de l'émotion, et une émotion profonde, quand Perrigny avait prononcé celui de Jane Mornas. Il connaissait Jane Mornas, il l'aimait, et, bien qu'aucune parole n'eût été prononcée entre eux, il espérait fermement qu'elle serait un jour sa femme.

Marcenay rappela les craintes qui le tenaillaient depuis qu'il avait tant de raisons de croire faux l'ordre du colonel Saint-Auban. Le mystérieux message qui lui arrivait aujourd'hui de l'espace ne les confirmait que trop. Jane Mornas était en danger.

— Et c'est à moi qu'elle demande du secours! conclut-il, avec une angoisse où se mêlait quand même un peu de joie.

— Eh bien! c'est très simple, répondit Perrigny. Il faut le lui donner, ce secours qu'elle te demande.

— Cela va de soi! s'écria Marcenay, que la perspective de l'action faisait renaître, mais comment?

— Nous allons examiner cela, dit Perrigny. Tirons d'abord des faits que nous connaissons leurs conclusions logiques. Elles sont, d'après moi, rassurantes.

— Tu trouves?… répliqua amèrement Marcenay.

— Je trouve. Primo, Mlle Mornas n'est pas toute seule, car elle ne possède pas, que tu saches, d'appareil de télégraphie sans fil. Sans parler des compagnons avec lesquels tu l'as laissée, elle a donc au moins un protecteur, celui qui possède cet appareil. Et celui-là est un lapin, tu peux m’en croire.

Marcenay ayant approuvé de la tête, Perrigny continua:

— Secundo, Mlle Mornas n’est pas exposée à un péril pressant. Elle te télégraphie à Tombouctou. C’est qu’elle présume que tu y es, c’est-à-dire qu’elle sait très bien que tu n’es pas de l’autre côté de la porte et qu’il te faudra un certain temps pour te rendre à son appel. Puisque, cependant, elle te télégraphie quand même, c’est qu’elle estime que ce n’est pas inutile. Donc, si un danger la menace, ce danger n’a rien d’imminent.

— Où veux-tu en venir? demanda nerveusement Marcenay.

— À ceci, qu’il y a lieu de te calmer, d’avoir bon espoir dans la fin de cette aventure… et d’aller de ce pas trouver le colonel, pour lui demander d’organiser une expédition qui délivrera M. le député Barsac et Mlle Mornas par-dessus le marché.

Les deux capitaines se rendirent sur-le-champ près du colonel Allègre, auquel ils exposèrent l’événement prodigieux dont ils venaient d’être les témoins. Ils mirent sous ses yeux la bande imprimée par le récepteur Morse, que Perrigny traduisit en langage clair.

— Il n’est pas question de M. Barsac là-dedans, fit observer le colonel.

— Non, répondit Perrigny, mais comme Mlle Mornas était avec lui…

— Qui vous dit qu’elle ne l’a pas quitté? objecta le colonel. Je connais parfaitement l’itinéraire de la mission Barsac, et je peux vous garantir qu’il ne s’élève pas si haut, en latitude. Cette mission doit passer par Ouagadougou, qui est sensiblement sur le douzième degré, et aboutir à

Saye, qui est au treizième. Cette dépêche mystérieuse parle de quinze degrés cinquante, de seize degrés, autant dire.

Cette remarque réveilla les souvenirs de Marcenay.

— Vous avez raison, mon colonel, dit-il. Il peut se faire, en effet, que Mlle Mornas ait quitté la mission Barsac. Je me souviens qu'elle devait s'en séparer, deux ou trois cents kilomètres après Sikasso, pour remonter seule dans le Nord, avec l'intention d'atteindre le Niger à Gao.

— Ceci change la face des choses, dit le colonel, soucieux. Pour dégager M. Barsac, député, délégué officiel de la France, une expédition se comprendrait, tandis que pour Mlle Mornas, simple particulière…

— Cependant, fit observer vivement Marcenay, si l'ordre dont j'étais porteur est faux, comme tout nous incite à le croire, M. Barsac a nécessairement été victime du gredin qui s'est substitué à moi.

— Peut-être… peut-être, concéda dubitativement le colonel. En tout cas, pour avoir une opinion sur ce point, il faut attendre la réponse de Bamako.

— C'est désespérant, s'écria Marcenay accablé. Nous ne pouvons cependant laisser périr cette pauvre enfant, qui m'appelle à son secours.

— Il n'est pas question de périr, objecta le colonel qui, lui du moins, avait tout son calme. Cette demoiselle dit seulement qu'elle est prisonnière, rien de plus… Et, d'ailleurs, où iriez-vous à son secours? Quel est ce Blackland dont elle parle?

— Elle en donne la latitude.

— Mais pas la longitude. Or vous avez quitté Mlle Mornas après Sikasso. Elle n’est pas revenue dans l’Ouest, je suppose. Le seizième degré traverse d’abord le Macina, puis franchit le Niger, et s’enfonce dans une région désertique absolument inconnue. Blackland ne pouvait être dans le Macina, sans quoi nous connaîtrions cette ville, c’est donc en plein désert qu’il conviendrait de la chercher.

— Eh bien! mon colonel?… balbutia Marcenay.

— Eh bien! capitaine, je ne vois guère la possibilité d’envoyer une colonne dans cette direction, ce qui reviendrait à risquer la vie de cent ou deux cents hommes pour sauver la vie d’une seule personne.

— Pourquoi deux cents hommes? demanda Marcenay, qui sentait s’évanouir son espoir. Peut-être suffirait-il de beaucoup moins.

— Je ne le pense pas, capitaine. Vous n’ignorez pas plus que moi les bruits qui courent le long du Niger. Les Noirs prétendent qu’il s’est fondé quelque part, sans que personne puisse dire exactement où, un empire indigène dont la réputation ne serait pas des meilleures. Ce nom de Blackland étant tout à fait inconnu, il n’y aurait rien d’impossible à ce qu’il fût celui de la capitale ou d’une des villes de l’empire en question, et la latitude donnée rend encore l’hypothèse plus plausible, puisqu’elle correspond à la seule région où une puissance aurait pu se fonder sans être aussitôt connue de tout le monde. Enfin, n’êtes-vous pas frappé par la consonance anglaise de ce mot: Blackland?… Le Sokoto, colonie anglaise, n’est pas si éloigné de son emplacement supposé… Il peut y avoir là une autre difficulté, non des moins épineuses… Bref! dans ces conditions, je pense qu’il serait imprudent de s’aventurer dans une région totalement inexplorée, sans disposer de forces suffisantes pour faire face à toutes les éventualités.

— Alors, mon colonel, vous refusez? insista Marcenay.

— Avec regret, mais je refuse, répondit le colonel Allègre.

Le capitaine Marcenay insista encore. Il raconta à son chef, comme il l’avait raconté à son camarade, quels liens l’unissaient à Mlle Mornas. Ce fut en vain. Il fit aussi vainement valoir qu’il avait amené avec lui cent hommes dont on pouvait se priver, puisqu’on ne comptait pas sur eux. Le colonel Allègre ne se laissa pas ébranler.

— Je suis désolé, profondément désolé, capitaine, mais j’ai le devoir de vous répondre négativement. Que vos hommes ne me soient pas nécessaires, c’est possible, mais ce sont des hommes, et je n’ai pas le droit de risquer leur existence à la légère. Au surplus, rien ne presse. Attendons une nouvelle communication de Mlle Mornas. Puisqu’elle a télégraphié une première fois, il est probable qu’elle télégraphiera encore.

— Et si elle ne le peut pas, s’écria Marcenay avec désespoir, comme tendrait à le faire croire la brusque interruption de sa dépêche?

Le colonel fit comprendre du geste que cette éventualité serait infiniment regrettable, mais qu’elle ne saurait modifier sa décision.

— Alors, j’irai seul, déclara fermement Marcenay.

— Seul?… répéta le colonel.

— Oui, mon colonel. Je vous demanderai un congé que vous ne me refuserez pas…

— Que je vous refuserai, au contraire, répliqua le colonel. Croyez-vous que je vous donnerai les moyens d’aller vous jeter dans une aventure d’où vous ne reviendriez pas?

— Dans ce cas, mon colonel, je vous prierai d’avoir la bonté d’accepter ma démission.

— Votre démission!…

— Oui, mon colonel, dit Marcenay avec calme.

Le colonel Allègre ne répondit pas tout de suite. Il regarda son subordonné, et comprit que celui-ci n’était pas dans son état normal.

— Vous savez bien, capitaine, lui dit-il paternellement, que votre démission devrait suivre la voie hiérarchique, et je n’ai pas qualité pour l’accepter. En tout cas, c’est une chose qui demande réflexion. Laissez passer la nuit là-dessus, et revenez me trouver demain. Nous en causerons.

Exécutant correctement le salut militaire, les deux officiers se retirèrent. Perrigny accompagna son camarade en lui prodiguant tous les réconforts qu’il put imaginer. Mais le malheureux ne l’entendait même pas.

Quand le capitaine Marcenay fut arrivé devant sa porte, il prit congé de son ami et se verrouilla chez lui. Seul enfin, il se jeta sur son lit et, à bout de courage, n’en pouvant plus, il éclata en sanglots.

CHAPITRE 9

Un désastre

L’interruption du courant de la station hydroélectrique ne dura pas longtemps. Supprimé le 9 avril, vers midi, le courant était rendu dès le lendemain matin.

C’est qu’en effet Harry Killer était la première victime de cette manœuvre, qu’il avait d’abord crue fort habile. S’il ne fournissait plus à l’Usine l’énergie dont elle avait besoin, celle-ci ne lui rendait plus, en revanche, aucun des services qu’il en recevait d’ordinaire.

Les machines agricoles, privées des ondes qui leur donnaient la vie, s’étaient arrêtées subitement.

Les pompes électriques qui puisaient l’eau dans la rivière pour la refouler dans deux réservoirs, l’un situé dans l’Usine même, d’où elle se rendait dans un autre placé au-dessus de la caserne de la Garde noire, avaient également cessé de fonctionner. En deux jours, ce second réservoir, d’où l’eau était distribuée partout, serait épuisé, et Blackland manquerait d’eau.

Enfin, quand la nuit fut venue, on avait été privé de lumière électrique, et, comme on ne possédait aucun autre moyen d’éclairage, toute la ville fut plongée dans l’obscurité, ce dont Harry Killer enrageait d’autant plus qu’il voyait, pendant ce temps, l’Usine illuminée et défendue par les feux de ses puissants projecteurs.

Comprenant que la partie n’était pas égale, le despote s’était résigné à rendre, dès l’aube du 10 avril, le courant qu’il avait supprimé le jour précédent. En même temps, il appela au téléphone Marcel Camaret, qui se trouvait précisément alors dans son cabinet de travail avec ceux qu’il avait accepté de protéger. On entendit l’ingénieur répondre, comme la veille, les “oui”, les “non”, les “bon!”, qui sont monnaie courante de ces sortes de conversation dont une moitié reste forcément inconnue des auditeurs, et, comme la veille, celui-ci se mit à rire, en interrompant brusquement le dialogue.

D’après le résumé qu’il en donna, Harry Killer et lui avaient conclu un accord. Il était convenu que le premier rétablirait le courant de la station hydroélectrique, et que l’Usine assurerait, de son côté, comme d’habitude, les services généraux de Blackland. Cet accord, d’ailleurs, ne modifiait en rien le surplus de la situation, qui ne laissait pas d’être fort singulière. La paix était limitée au contrat intervenu. Pour le reste, c’était toujours la guerre. Harry Killer persistait notamment à réclamer les prisonniers, et Marcel Camaret à refuser de les livrer.

À la fin de la conversation, Harry Killer avait demandé à l’ingénieur de lui fournir l’air liquide nécessaire à la marche des planeurs. Chaque fois que ceux-ci revenaient de voyage, leurs réservoirs étaient, en effet, déposés à l’Usine, qui les remplissait à nouveau. Harry Killer n’en possédait donc pas une goutte, ce qui rendait inutilisables ses quarante machines volantes.

Sur ce point, Marcel Camaret, soucieux, et de ménager sa réserve de force motrice, et de ne pas fournir à l’ennemi des armes aussi puissantes, avait refusé net. De là, violente colère du despote, qui avait juré de le réduire par la famine. C’est alors que l’ingénieur avait raccroché le téléphone, en riant de cette menace aussi vaine à ses yeux que les précédentes.

Ses auditeurs la prirent, au contraire, fort au sérieux. Si l’Usine paraissait réellement inexpugnable, en raison des armes défensives imaginées par Camaret, celui-ci semblait beaucoup moins riche en armes offensives, et encore ne voulait-il à aucun prix se servir de celles qu’il possédait. Dans ces conditions, la situation pouvait se prolonger indéfiniment, et, dès lors, un jour viendrait où la faim obligerait l’Usine à capituler.

Camaret, à qui Barsac soumit cette réflexion, haussa les épaules.

— Nous avons des vivres pour longtemps, assura-t-il.

— Pour combien de temps? insista Barsac.

Camaret eut un geste évasif.

— Je ne sais pas exactement. Quinze jours, peut-être trois semaines. Cela n’a aucune importance, puisque, dans quarante-huit heures, nous aurons terminé un planeur que nous avons en construction. Dès à présent, je vous invite aux essais, que nous ferons de nuit, afin de ne pas être aperçus du Palais, et qui auront lieu après-demain, 12 avril, à quatre heures du matin.

C’était là une heureuse nouvelle, à laquelle les prisonniers étaient loin de s’attendre. La possession de ce planeur améliorait certainement leur situation dans une large mesure. Apporterait-il, cependant, le salut?

— Il y a plus de cent personnes dans l’Usine, fit remarquer Barsac. Si puissant soit-il, votre planeur ne pourra emmener tout le monde.

— Il portera seulement dix personnes, répondit Camaret, non compris le conducteur, ce qui n’est déjà pas mal.

— Certes! approuva Barsac, et pourtant c’est encore insuffisant pour nous tirer d’affaire.

— Nullement, répliqua Camaret. D’ici Saye, il y a environ trois cent cinquante kilomètres à vol d’oiseau, et sept cents d’ici Tombouctou, qui serait peut-être préférable. Comme on ne voyagerait que pendant la nuit, afin d’éviter les torpilles, le planeur pourrait faire, en vingt-quatre heures, trois voyages à Saye ou deux à Tombouctou. Les cent cinquante personnes auxquelles j’évalue approximativement la population de l’Usine, femmes et enfants compris, seraient donc délivrées en cinq jours dans le premier cas, et en moins de huit, dans le second.

L’énoncé de ce plan, très réalisable, en effet, atténua les craintes que les menaces d’Harry Killer avaient fait naître, et l’on attendit impatiemment de pouvoir le mettre à exécution.

Les deux jours qu’il leur fallait attendre parurent interminables aux assiégés. Ils occupèrent le temps de leur mieux, et, le plus souvent, en promenades dans le jardin, à l’abri du mur qui les dissimulait à la vue du Palais. M. Poncin, en particulier, y restait du matin au soir. Constamment penché sur les diverses plantes qui le garnissaient, il procédait à des mesures qu’il lisait à la loupe, à de minutieuses pesées à l’aide d’une petite balance de précision.

— Que diable faites-vous là? lui demanda Florence, qui le surprit livré à cette occupation.

— Mon métier, monsieur Florence, répondit M. Poncin, non sans importance.

— De la statistique? interrogea Florence étonné.

— Pas autre chose. Je suis en train d’établir, tout simplement, le nombre d’habitants que pourrait nourrir la boucle du Niger.

— Ah! ah! toujours la boucle, dit Amédée Florence, qui ne paraissait pas apprécier bien vivement les travaux de son interlocuteur. Ici, pourtant, nous n’y sommes plus, dans cette fameuse boucle, ce me semble.

— Il n’est pas défendu de procéder par analogie, professa doctoralement M. Poncin.

— “Courtisans! attablés dans la splendide orgie!” prononça une voix derrière eux.

À ce vers des Châtiments amenés par la rime, Amédée Florence reconnut le docteur Châtonnay. C’était bien lui, en effet.

— Que faites-vous là? demanda l’excellent homme, achevant ainsi son apostrophe.

— M. Poncin m’expose ses méthodes de statistique, répondit Florence d’un ton sérieux. Continuez donc, M. Poncin, je vous prie.

— C’est fort simple, expliqua celui-ci. Voici un pied d’épinard, il occupe un décimètre carré. Un peu plus loin, voici un chou-fleur; il occupe quatre décimètres carrés. J’ai mesuré cent plantes choisies au hasard, et j’ai fait la moyenne des surfaces occupées par elles. J’ai également mesuré leur pousse quotidienne. Cette salade, par exemple, elle a augmenté exactement de quatre grammes neuf cent vingt-sept milligrammes depuis hier. Bref! j’ai reconnu, ma-thé-ma-ti-que-ment reconnu, que l’accroissement journalier moyen s’élevait à vingt-deux milligrammes par centimètre carré.

— Très curieux, déclara sans broncher le docteur Châtonnay.

— N’est-ce pas? Ces questions scientifiques sont toujours très intéressantes, dit M. Poncin qui se rengorgea. La boucle du Niger comptant cinq cent quarante-six trillions de centimètres carrés, sa production sera donc, quotidiennement, de douze millions douze mille tonnes et annuellement de un milliard cent quarante-quatre millions trois cent quatre-vingt mille tonnes.

— “Je ne puis vous celer que ce calcul m’étonne”, chantonna le docteur, en parodiant un vers de Corneille que l’assonance lui remettait en mémoire.

— Sachant la quantité de nourriture nécessaire pour assurer la vie d’un seul homme, il sera facile d’en déduire la population qui peut subsister dans la boucle du Niger, conclut M. Poncin avec aplomb. Tels sont les services que la science est capable de rendre, et ainsi notre temps de détention ne sera pas entièrement perdu.

— Grâce à vous, monsieur Poncin, déclarèrent à l’unisson Amédée Florence et le docteur, qui laissèrent le statisticien à ses savantes déductions.

Heure par heure, la journée du 10, puis celle du 11, s’écoulèrent.

Un incident, d’ailleurs sans gravité, interrompit la monotonie de cette dernière. Vers cinq heures de l’après-midi, on informa Camaret que la pompe refoulant l’eau de la rivière dans le réservoir ne fonctionnait plus.

Vérification faite, l’ingénieur reconnut que la nouvelle était exacte. La pompe était affolée, comme si elle eût tourné à vide, sans avoir à vaincre aucune résistance. Sur son ordre, on procéda au démontage du piston, dont les garnitures, probablement endommagées, ne devaient plus s’appliquer exactement sur la paroi du cylindre. Il ne s’agissait, en somme, que d’une réparation insignifiante, qui serait achevée en moins de quarante-huit heures.

Avant l’aube du lendemain, se termina enfin cette attente énervante. Ainsi qu’on peut le croire, personne ne manqua au rendez-vous, malgré l’heure matinale fixée par Marcel Camaret. De son côté, celui-ci avait tenu sa promesse. Quand on arriva dans le jardin, où l’essai devait avoir lieu, le planeur y était déjà transporté par les ouvriers qui l’avaient construit.

L’ingénieur monta sur la plate-forme, et mit le moteur en marche. Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent, trop lentement au gré des spectateurs, qui redoutaient une déception toujours possible. Ils furent bientôt rassurés. L’appareil s’enleva tout à coup sans effort, puis, déployant ses ailes, il glissa sur les couches d’air et revint se poser juste à l’endroit d’où il était parti. Marcel Camaret, emmenant cette fois dix hommes avec lui, s’éleva de nouveau, et, à trois reprises, accomplit le tour entier du jardin. L’expérience était concluante.

— Ce soir, à neuf heures, le premier départ, annonça-t-il en descendant de la plate-forme.

Alors, tout fut oublié, le siège, la captivité, ces jours d’inquiétude et d’ennui. Dans quelques heures, ce cauchemar serait fini. On serait libre. On se congratulait, on se félicitait réciproquement, pendant que les mécaniciens rentraient le planeur dans sa remise, d’où il sortirait, la nuit venue, pour s’envoler vers Tombouctou.

L’évacuation de l’Usine devant exiger plusieurs jours, les travaux habituels ne furent pas interrompus. On acheva donc, notamment, pendant cette journée du 12 avril, le démontage de la pompe. Quand il fut terminé, force fut de constater qu’elle n’avait aucune avarie. Il fallait donc chercher ailleurs la cause du trouble, et, pour l'instant, il n'y avait qu'à la remonter, travail qui fut entrepris sur-le-champ.

À huit heures et demie du soir, l'obscurité étant complète, Marcel Camaret donna enfin le signal du départ. Depuis longtemps déjà, les huit prisonniers échappés aux griffes d'Harry Killer et deux femmes d'ouvriers, qui devaient former le premier convoi, attendaient dans le jardin, d'où, sous la direction d'un conducteur éprouvé, le planeur allait s'envoler. Obéissant à l'ordre de leur chef, une dizaine de mécaniciens se dirigèrent vers la remise. Ils en ouvrirent la porte…

Ce fut à cet instant précis qu'arriva le désastre.

Au moment où la porte s'ouvrait, une formidable explosion retentit tout à coup. La remise s'effondra comme un château de cartes. À sa place, il n'y avait plus qu'un monceau de décombres.

Après un instant de stupeur bien naturelle, on se précipita au secours des dix ouvriers. Fort heureusement, sauf l'un d'eux légèrement blessé, ils étaient indemnes, l'explosion s'étant produite avant qu'ils fussent entrés dans la remise.

Mais, bien qu'ils n'eussent pas de mort à déplorer, ce n'en était pas moins un grand malheur, un irréparable désastre même, qui atteignait les assiégés. Il n'en subsistait que des débris inutilisables.

— Rigaud, dit Camaret avec le calme qui ne le quittait jamais dans les circonstances vraiment graves, fais commencer le déblaiement. Il faut connaître la cause de cette explosion.

On attaqua l’amoncellement de ruines au point même qu’occupait le planeur. Les bras étaient nombreux, et le travail avança rapidement. Vers onze heures, cette partie du sol de la remise était à nu, et l’on y constatait l’existence d’une profonde excavation.

— De la dynamite, dit froidement Camaret. Elle n’est pas venue toute seule, je suppose.

Les taches de sang qui constellaient les décombres prouvant que l’explosion avait fait des victimes, le déblaiement fut continué avec la même ardeur. On commença bientôt, en effet, à faire de macabres trouvailles. Un peu avant minuit, ce fut la jambe déchiquetée d’un nègre. Puis, ce fut un bras violemment arraché, et enfin on découvrit la tête de ce corps mutilé.

Amédée Florence, qui, en bon reporter, suivait attentivement les travaux, reconnut sur-le-champ le lugubre trophée.

— Tchoumouki! s’écria-t-il sans hésiter.

Il expliqua à Camaret qui était ce Tchoumouki, un traître passé du service de miss Buxton à celui d’Harry Killer. Dès lors, tout s’expliquait. Tchoumouki était évidemment, à la fois, l’auteur et la première victime de l’explosion. Restait à savoir comment il avait pénétré dans l’Usine.

Dans tous les cas, puisqu’il était entré, d’autres pouvaient le suivre par la même voie. Il importait donc d’en ôter la velléité aux adversaires, en les frappant d’une salutaire terreur.

Dans ce but, les misérables restes de Tchoumouki furent, par ordre de Camaret, jetés par-dessus le mur, sur l’esplanade, où les gens d’Harry Killer ne pourraient manquer de les trouver. Ils apprendraient ainsi d'indubitable manière que s'introduire dans l'Usine n'était pas sans danger.

Cependant, le déblaiement continuait. Les ouvriers faisant la chaîne, les décombres s'amoncelaient dans le jardin, et une plus grande surface du sol de la remise se découvrait peu à peu.

— En voici un autre! s'écria tout à coup l'un des travailleurs.

Marcel Camaret s'approcha. Un pied humain apparaissait, en effet, entre les pierres. En quelques instants, le corps tout entier fut mis à découvert. C'était un Blanc dans la force de l'âge, dont l'épaule avait été affreusement broyée par la chute de la toiture.

Le docteur Châtonnay se pencha sur le blessé.

— Il vit, dit-il.

L'homme fut retiré des décombres et transporté chez Camaret, où le docteur appliquerait un premier pansement. Le lendemain, on procéderait à son interrogatoire, s'il avait la force de parler.

— Et s'il y consent, fit observer Amédée Florence.

— Je me charge de l'y faire consentir, dit Marcel Camaret entre ses dents.

Le déblaiement pouvait être considéré comme terminé. Du moins était-il assez avancé pour qu'on fût certain que personne ne se trouvait plus sous les ruines. Marcel Camaret interrompit donc le travail et envoya ses ouvriers prendre un repos bien gagné.

À leur exemple, l’ingénieur et ses hôtes s’éloignèrent du lieu du désastre et se dirigèrent, en passant par le jardin, vers leurs chambres respectives.

Mais, au bout de quelques pas, Amédée Florence s’arrêta, et s’adressant à Camaret:

— Qu’allons-nous faire, monsieur, maintenant que nous voici sans planeur? lui demanda-t-il.

— Nous en fabriquerons un autre, répondit Camaret.

— Vous en avez les éléments? interrogea Barsac.

— Certes.

— Combien de temps vous faudra-t-il?

— Deux mois.

— Hum!… fit simplement Florence, qui, sans insister, se remit en marche, tout pensif.

Deux mois!… Et l’on avait quinze jours de vivres! Pour sortir de ce dilemme, le reporter était déjà à la recherche d’une idée.

CHAPITRE 10

Une idée d’Amédée Florence

Combien différente de celle de la veille fut la matinée du 13 avril! Hier, se croyant sûrs de toucher à la fin de leurs épreuves, les assiégés exultaient. Aujourd’hui, tout espoir envolé, ils étaient tristes et découragés.

Peu d’entre eux avaient trouvé le sommeil pendant les dernières heures de la nuit qui venait de s’écouler. Pour la plupart, ils les avaient employées à examiner sous toutes ses faces leur situation présente, sans découvrir aucun moyen d’en surmonter les difficultés.

Marcel Camaret lui-même était en défaut. Hors la construction d’un nouveau planeur, il n’imaginait rien pour sortir des embarras actuels. Mais placer son espoir dans un appareil dont la fabrication devait exiger deux longs mois, quand on avait à peine pour quinze jours de vivres, c’était se leurrer sciemment.

Vérification faite, on reconnut que ce moyen de salut était moins réalisable encore qu’on ne le supposait. Un méticuleux inventaire des réserves et un examen attentif des produits horticoles en voie de maturité démontrèrent, en effet, qu’on disposait seulement, non pas de quinze, mais de neuf à dix jours de vivres tout au plus. Non pas même avant deux mois, mais avant le dernier jour de ce présent mois d’avril, on souffrirait donc nécessairement de la faim.

Afin de retarder autant qu’il était possible cette inévitable échéance, on résolut de se rationner immédiatement. S’ils ne pouvaient se flatter d’échapper à leur destin, ainsi, du moins, les assiégés prolongeraient-ils leur agonie.

La matinée du 13 ayant été consacrée à cet inventaire et à la mise en train du planeur que Marcel Camaret s’entêtait à construire, bien que, selon toute apparence, on ne dût en espérer aucun secours, ce fut seulement au cours de l’après-midi qu’on put s’occuper du prisonnier.

Après le déjeuner, qui fut, pour la première fois, d’une excessive frugalité, Marcel Camaret, accompagné de ses hôtes dont la subite intrusion dans sa vie menaçait de lui coûter si cher, se rendit auprès du blessé, que le docteur Châtonnay affirmait être en état de supporter un interrogatoire.

— Qui êtes-vous? lui demande Camaret, qui, en posant cette question, sans intérêt apparent, obéissait à un plan mûrement médité.

Le blessé ayant gardé le silence, Camaret renouvela sa question sans plus de succès.

— Je dois vous prévenir, dit doucement l’ingénieur, que je vais vous contraindre à parler.

À cette menace, l’homme n’ouvrit pas davantage la bouche, et ses lèvres esquissèrent furtivement un sourire ironique. Le contraindre à parler? Cela lui paraissait évidemment peu croyable. Et, de fait, à en juger par son aspect, on était en présence d’un individu d’une rare énergie.

Marcel Camaret haussa les épaules, puis, sans insister, il appliqua contre les pouces et sous les pieds du récalcitrant quatre petites plaques métalliques qu’il relia aux bornes d’un tableau. Cela fait, il manoeuvra un interrupteur d’un coup sec.

Aussitôt, l’homme se tordit en d’affreuses convulsions, les veines de son cou se gonflèrent à éclater, et sa figure violacée exprima une intolérable souffrance.

L’épreuve fut brève. Après quelques secondes, Camaret interrompait le courant.

— Parlerez-vous? demanda-t-il.

Puis, l’homme demeurant muet:

— Fort bien! dit-il. Recommençons.

Il rétablit le contact, et les mêmes phénomènes se reproduisirent avec plus de violence encore. La sueur inondait le visage du patient, dont les yeux étaient révulsés et dont la poitrine haletait comme un soufflet de forge.

— Parlerez-vous? répéta Camaret, en coupant de nouveau le courant.

— Oui… oui… balbutia l’homme à bout de forces.

— Parbleu!… fit Camaret, votre nom?

— Fergus David, lui fut-il répondu.

— Ce n’est pas un nom, objecta Camaret. Ce sont deux prénoms.

— On m’appelle comme ça, à Blackland. Personne n’y connaît mon vrai nom.

— Peu importe. Quel est-il?

— Daniel Frasne.

— Anglais.

Daniel Frasne, puisque tel était son nom, résolu maintenant à parler aussi nettement qu’il était auparavant résolu à se taire, répondait du tac au tac aux questions qui lui étaient posées.

— Mon garçon, dit d’abord Camaret, j’ai besoin d’avoir quelques renseignements. Si vous me les refusez, je recommence le petit jeu de tout à l’heure. Êtes-vous disposé à me les donner?

— Oui, répondit le blessé.

— Tout d’abord, quelle est votre situation à Blackland? Quel rôle y jouez-vous?

— Conseiller.

— Conseiller?… répéta interrogativement Camaret.

Frasne parut surpris que l’ingénieur ne comprît pas ce mot. Il expliqua néanmoins:

— On appelle comme ça ceux qui gouvernent avec Killer.

— Si je vous entends bien, vous faites donc partie du gouvernement de Blackland?

— Oui.

Marcel Camaret parut très satisfait de la réponse. Il reprit:

— Y a-t-il longtemps que vous êtes ici?

— Depuis le commencement.

— Vous connaissiez donc Harry Killer auparavant?

— Oui.

— Où l’aviez-vous connu?

— À la colonne Buxton.

Jane tressaillit en entendant ces mots. Le sort lui fournissait un nouveau témoin.

— À la colonne Buxton!… répétait cependant Camaret. Comment se fait-il que je ne vous reconnaisse pas?

— Faut croire que j’ai changé, dit philosophiquement Frasne. J’y étais pourtant avec vous, monsieur Camaret.

Incapable d’attendre plus longtemps, Jane Buxton intervint.

— Pardon, monsieur Camaret, dit-elle, voudriez-vous me permettre de dire quelques mots à cet homme?

Marcel Camaret ayant acquiescé, elle demanda au blessé:

— Puisque vous étiez à la colonne Buxton, vous y avez donc vu arriver Harry Killer?

— Oui.

— Pourquoi le capitaine Buxton l’a-t-il aussi facilement accueilli?

— Je n’en sais rien.

— Est-il exact, poursuivit Jane, que du jour où

Harry Killer fit partie de la colonne, il en fut le véritable chef?

— Très exact, répondit Frasne, qui manifesta quelque surprise d’être interrogé sur des faits aussi anciens.

— C’est donc par les ordres d’Harry Killer seul que la colonne Buxton se livra aux actes de pillage qui motivèrent sa destruction?

— Oui, affirma Frasne.

— Le capitaine Buxton n’y était pour rien?

— Non.

— Vous entendez, messieurs? dit Jane, en se retournant vers ses compagnons.

Puis, continuant la série de ses questions:

— Pour quelle raison, dit-elle, le capitaine Buxton avait-il abdiqué son autorité au profit d’Harry Killer?

— Comment voulez-vous que je sache ça? dit Frasne impatienté.

Il paraissait sincère. Jane estima inutile d’insister.

— Savez-vous, du moins, comment est mort le capitaine Buxton, demanda-t-elle, passant à un autre sujet.

— Mais… dans la bataille, répondit Frasne, comme si la chose allait de soi. Bien d’autres sont tombés avec lui.

Jane Buxton soupira. Ce n’était pas encore cette fois qu’elle éluciderait les quelques points restés dans l’ombre.

— Je vous remercie, monsieur, dit-elle à Camaret. J’ai terminé.

L’ingénieur reprit aussitôt son interrogatoire au point où il avait été interrompu.

— Comment s’est-on, au début, procuré les nègres qui ont bâti la ville? demanda-t-il.

Frasne ouvrit de grands yeux. Pouvait-on lui poser une question aussi bête! Eh quoi! c’était pour ça qu’on l’avait, tout à l’heure, soumis à la torture!

— Pardi! fit-il, dans les villages. Pas besoin d’être fort pour savoir ça.

— Par quel moyen?

Frasne haussa son épaule valide.

— Cette malice!… dit-il. Comme si vous ne le saviez pas. On les prenait, quoi!

— Ah!… fit Camaret, qui baissa la tête d’un air accablé.

Il continua:

— Au début, il a fallu des machines. D’où venaient-elles?

— Pas de la lune, bien sûr, ricana Frasne.

— Elles venaient d’Europe?

— C’est à croire.

— Par quel moyen en arrivaient-elles?

— Probablement que c’était pas en volant… Voyons, monsieur Camaret, en voilà des drôles de questions! Comment vouliez-vous qu’elles viennent, ces machines? Elles venaient dans des bateaux, ça va de soi.

— Où les débarquait-on? continua Camaret tranquillement.

— À Cotonou.

— Mais, de Cotonou à Blackland, il y a loin. Comment les transportait-on jusqu’ici?

— Chameaux, chevaux, boeufs, nègres, répondit laconiquement Frasne, dont la patience semblait à bout.

— Au cours de ce long voyage, il mourait un grand nombre de ces nègres, je pense?

— Plus qu’il n’en naissait, bougonna Frasne. Je ne me suis pas amusé à les compter.

Camaret passa à un autre sujet:

— Ces machines, il fallait les payer?

— Dame!… fit Frasne, qui trouvait les questions de plus en plus saugrenues.

— Il y a donc de l’argent à Blackland?

— Pour sûr que ce n’est pas ça qui manque.

— D’où vient-il?

Cette fois, Frasne perdit patience.

— Quand vous aurez fini de me faire marcher, monsieur Camaret, dit-il avec une mauvaise humeur qui n’était pas feinte, en me demandant un tas de choses que vous savez mieux que moi?

Ce n’est pas pour des prunes que vous avez fait les planeurs. Vous savez bien que, de temps en temps, ils transportent Harry Killer et d’autres, jusqu’aux îles Bissagos où un vapeur vient les prendre et les ramène, après un petit tour en Europe, en Angleterre, le plus souvent. Ce n’est pas à vous que j’apprendrai qu’en Europe il y a des banques, des vieilles richissimes, etc. etc. enfin, un tas de gens à qui il est profitable de rendre visite… sans être invité. La visite faite, on revient, et ni vu, ni connu.

— Ces voyages-là sont fréquents? demanda Camaret, dont la honte empourprait le visage.

Frasne eut un geste résigné.

— Enfin! puisque ça vous amuse!… murmura-t-il. Ça dépend. Trois, quatre fois par an.

— Le dernier voyage, quand a-t-il eu lieu?

— Le dernier?… répondit Frasne, qui cherchait consciencieusement dans ses souvenirs. Attendez!… Dans les quatre mois, quatre mois et demi.

— Qui a-t-on visité, cette fois?

— Je ne sais pas très bien, dit Frasne. Je n’en étais pas, de celui-là. Une banque, je crois. Mais, ce que je sais, c’est qu’on n’a jamais fait un coup pareil.

Marcel Camaret garda un instant le silence. Il était livide, maintenant, et semblait vieilli de dix ans.

— Un dernier mot, Frasne, dit-il. Combien avez-vous de nègres pour travailler dans la campagne?

— Dans les quatre mille. Peut-être plus.

— Et les femmes?

— Dans les quinze cents.

— On se les procure sans doute de la même manière que les premiers?

— Non, répondit Frasne du ton le plus naturel. Maintenant qu’on a des planeurs, on les enlève avec.

— Ah!… fit Camaret.

Après une nouvelle pause, il reprit:

— Comment vous êtes-vous introduit ici?

Avant de répondre, Frasne hésita pour la première fois. Cette question était enfin sérieuse. Autant il avait donné aisément les autres renseignements, autant il était furieux d'avoir à donner celui-ci. Il fallait bien, pourtant, s'exécuter.

— Par le réservoir, dit-il de mauvaise grâce.

— Par le réservoir? répéta Camaret surpris.

— Oui. Avant-hier, on a fermé les vannes de la rivière, afin que vous ne puissiez plus monter l'eau, et l'on a vidé le réservoir du Palais. Celui de l'Usine s'est vidé par la même occasion, puisqu'ils communiquent par une conduite sous l'esplanade. Tchoumouki et moi, nous sommes venus par cette conduite.

Quelques heures plus tôt, l'ingénieur avait appris avec indifférence que la pompe était remontée et fonctionnait à merveille. Il comprenait pourquoi maintenant Harry Killer, impressionné par l'affreuse mort de Tchoumouki, qu'il attribuait aux défenseurs de l'Usine, avait rouvert les vannes, et l'eau arrivait comme de coutume.

— C'est bon. Je vous remercie, dit Camaret, qui, fixé sur tous les points qui l'intéressaient, se retira sans poser d'autres questions.

La journée du 13 s'acheva, celle du 14 s'écoula sans nouvel incident. L'investissement était toujours aussi rigoureux. Sur le quai d'aval et sur l'esplanade, des postes de Merry Fellows, dont les regards enfilaient de ces points les deux branches du chemin de ronde, continuaient à surveiller les abords de l'Usine, dont personne n'aurait pu sortir. Il n'y avait aucune raison pour que cette situation changeât, jusqu'au jour où la faim obligerait les assiégés à se rendre.

Telle était la très juste réflexion que ne cessait de se faire Amédée Florence. Depuis la destruction du planeur, il était à la poursuite d’un moyen de sortir d’affaire, et il enrageait de ne pas en trouver. Cependant, une idée lui vint enfin, le soir du 14 avril. Cette idée, examinée sous toutes ses faces, lui ayant paru bonne, il eut, dans la matinée du 15, de longs conciliabules avec Tongané, puis il demanda à ses amis de l’accompagner chez Camaret, à qui il désirait faire une communication très urgente.

Depuis l’interrogatoire de Frasne, on n’avait plus revu l’ingénieur, qui s’était aussitôt retiré dans son domicile particulier et s’y était claustré. Là, dans la solitude, il s’assimilait douloureusement les notions nouvellement acquises, pris de vertige devant l’abîme que Frasne lui avait révélé.

Il connaissait la vérité tout entière. Il savait que Blackland n’avait été fondée et ne s’était maintenue que par la violence, le vol et le meurtre. Il savait que l’Europe et l’Afrique avaient été, chacune à sa manière, le théâtre des exploits d’Harry Killer et de sa bande. Il n’ignorait plus la honteuse origine de l’or si abondant dans la ville et grâce auquel son œuvre avait été réalisée. Excès et cruautés de la colonne Buxton, assassinat de son chef, hécatombe permanente des malheureux nègres enlevés à leurs villages, pillages, rapines, assassinats en Afrique et en Europe, et, pour finir, cet abominable attentat contre la pacifique mission Barsac, il connaissait tout cela.

De ces innombrables crimes, il se sentait complice. Ne l’était-il pas, en effet, malgré son innocence, lui qui avait fourni les moyens de les accomplir? En pensant à ce qu’avait été sa vie depuis dix ans, il était envahi par une véritable terreur, et sa raison déjà chancelante fléchissait sous le choc. Par moments, il en arrivait à détester cette ville de Blackland, son œuvre pourtant, cette chair de sa chair, cet entassement de merveilles élevé par lui-même à sa propre gloire. Mais vraiment, les atrocités dont ses habitants s'étaient rendus coupables pouvaient-elles rester impunies? Et n'était-elle pas maudite, la ville même où étaient éclos de tels crimes?

Amédée Florence et ses compagnons trouvèrent Camaret absorbé dans ces lugubres pensées. À demi étendu dans un fauteuil, immobile, l'oeil atone, il semblait accablé et sans force. Depuis deux jours qu'on ne l'avait vu, peut-être, au surplus, n'avait-il pris aucune nourriture.

Un tel interlocuteur ne pouvait convenir à Florence, qui désirait avoir en face de lui l'habile inventeur d'autrefois. Sur son ordre, Tongané alla chercher quelques aliments qui furent servis à Camaret. Celui-ci mangea docilement, mais sans manifester l'avidité qu'eût justifiée sa longue abstinence. Après ce repas, cependant, un peu de sang revint à ses joues décolorées.

— Si je vous ai tous réunis ici, dit alors Florence, c'est qu'il m'est venu à l'idée un moyen de sortir de cette situation actuellement sans issue. À force d'y réfléchir, il m'est apparu, en effet, que nous pouvions nous assurer le concours de nombreux alliés que nous avons pour ainsi dire sous la main.

— Quels alliés? demandèrent à la fois Barsac et le docteur Châtonnay.

— Les nègres du quartier des esclaves, répondit Amédée Florence. D'après ce que nous avons appris avant-hier, ils seraient au moins quatre mille, sans compter les femmes, qui valent bien deux hommes quand elles sont déchaînées. C'est une force qui n'est pas à dédaigner, il me semble.

— Évidemment, reconnut Barsac, mais ces nègres n'ont pas d'armes, et ils ignorent probablement jusqu'à notre existence.

— C’est pourquoi, dit Florence, il faudrait entrer en communication avec eux et les armer.

— C’est facile à dire! s’écria Barsac.

— Et peut-être à faire, répliqua Florence.

— Vraiment?… fit Barsac. Sans parler de la question des armes, qui donc irait trouver ces nègres?

— Un nègre comme eux: Tongané.

— Comment passera-t-il? Vous savez bien que l’Usine est investie. Qu’il se montre, et il sera accueilli par une grêle de balles.

— Aussi ne s’en irait-il pas par la porte, répondit Florence. Cela d’ailleurs ne l’avancerait à rien, puisque, en face de l’Usine, ce sont les quartiers des Blancs. Or, c’est celui des Noirs qu’il lui faut atteindre. Pour cela, le seul moyen est d’agir comme il l’a déjà fait, c’est-à-dire de gagner la campagne pendant la nuit, de se mêler à la foule des Noirs, et d’entrer dans la ville confondu avec eux.

— Il passerait donc, alors, par-dessus le chemin de ronde et par-dessus l’enceinte? objecta Barsac.

— Ou par-dessous, répliqua Florence, qui se tourna du côté de Marcel Camaret.

Celui-ci, absorbé dans ses pensées, était resté étranger à la discussion, qu’il semblait même n’avoir pas entendue.

— Monsieur Camaret, lui demanda Florence, serait-il possible de percer, sous les murailles de l’Usine et de la ville, un tunnel qui traversait le chemin de ronde et aboutirait dans la campagne?

— Sans aucun doute, affirma Camaret en relevant la tête.

— Combien de temps? demanderait ce travail.

Camaret réfléchit un instant.

— Par les procédés ordinaires, il faudrait boiser, et ce serait assez long, dit-il enfin. Mais le temps serait fort abrégé par une machine que je viens d’imaginer et qui donnerait de bons résultats dans ce sol sablonneux. Pour tracer cette machine, la construire et exécuter le tunnel, quinze jours seraient nécessaires et suffisant.

— Vous pourriez donc avoir terminé pour la fin du mois?

— Assurément, affirma Camaret.

Du moment qu’on lui proposait des problèmes à résoudre, il se retrouvait dans son élément. Son cerveau s’excitait peu à peu. Il renaissait à vue d’oeil.

— Second point, monsieur Camaret, reprit Florence: ce tunnel exigerait-il le concours de tout votre personnel?

— Il s’en faudrait de beaucoup, répondit Camaret.

— Ceux qui ne seraient pas occupés par ce travail arriveraient-ils à fabriquer trois ou quatre mille armes dans le même délai?

— Quelles armes? Pas des armes à feu, en tout cas.

— Des piques, des couteaux, des haches, des massues, tous les instruments perçants, coupants et contondants qui vous plairaient.

— Dans ce cas, oui, dit Camaret.

— Et ces armes, pourriez-vous les faire parvenir à jour fixe, et sans être aperçu, ni entendu des gens d'Harry Killer, aux Noirs du quartier des esclaves?

— C'est plus difficile, dit paisiblement Camaret.

Il garda le silence quelques instants, puis il répondit de sa voix douce:

— Oui, je le pourrais, à la condition que la nuit soit obscure.

Amédée Florence poussa un soupir de soulagement.

— Alors, nous sommes sauvés! s'écria-t-il. Vous comprenez, monsieur Camaret, Tongané filera par le tunnel, attendra dans la campagne l'arrivée des travailleurs noirs auxquels il se mêlera, et, le soir, il rentrera avec eux. Pendant la nuit, il préparera la révolte. Tous ces gens-là sont horriblement malheureux et ne demanderaient qu'à secouer le joug, s'ils avaient des armes. Du moment que nous leur en fournirons, ils n'hésiteront plus. Il faudrait vous mettre au travail tout de suite, monsieur Camaret.

— J'y suis déjà, répondit simplement l'ingénieur, qui, pendant qu'Amédée Florence parlait, s'était installé à sa table à dessin.

Les assiégés se retirèrent très surexcités par l'heureuse perspective qu'Amédée Florence avait fait miroiter à leurs yeux. Oui, certes, son idée était bonne, et il eût été stupide de ne pas s'assurer le concours de ces milliers d'alliés naturels qui peinaient de l'autre côté de la rivière. Quant à entrer en rapport avec eux, on ne doutait plus que ce fût possible, après les affirmations de Camaret. À cet égard, celui-ci avait fait ses preuves.

Dès le lendemain, la construction du planeur fut abandonnée, et tous les ouvriers furent occupés, les uns à forger, aiguiser des armes pointues ou tranchantes, d'autres à établir la machine nouvelle imaginée par Camaret, d'autres encore à forer un tronc de rônier dans un but que personne ne connaissait, tandis que les derniers creusaient, hors de la vue du Palais, au pied de la muraille de l'Usine, un puits de grande section qui s'approfondissait rapidement.

Le 21 avril, ce puits ayant atteint une profondeur de dix mètres, Camaret l'estimât suffisante, et le percement de la galerie horizontale fut aussitôt commencé. Pour le réaliser, l'ingénieur avait imaginé un cône d'acier long de cinq mètres, et d'un mètre trente centimètres de diamètre, sur la surface duquel alternaient des fentes et des aspérités, les unes et les autres disposées suivant un même pas hélicoïdal régulier. Un moteur électrique faisait tourner cet engin qui, pénétrant par sa pointe dans le sol friable, s'y vissait littéralement, tandis que, par les orifices ménagés à cet effet, le sable coulait à l'intérieur du cône, d'où il était constamment évacué par le puits.

Quand cette vis gigantesque aurait entièrement pénétré dans le sol, qu'elle soutiendrait en même temps, et qu'elle défendrait contre tout affaissement, il lui serait ajouté un cylindre de même diamètre, que de puissants vérins pousseraient à sa suite. Le tunnel horizontal, une fois terminé, consisterait donc en un tube métallique long de quatre-vingts mètres environ.

Quand on en serait là, le cône perforant serait tourné de telle sorte qu'une ouverture plus grande que les autres, maintenue fermée jusqu'alors, se trouvât à sa partie supérieure, et l'on ferait passer par cette ouverture un autre cône plus petit que le premier, qu’on visserait de bas en haut, jusqu’à la surface du sol.

Pendant que ces divers travaux s’accomplissaient, c’est à peine si l’on aperçut Camaret. Il n’apparaissait, l’air sombre et absorbé, que lorsque la solution d’une difficulté quelconque rendait sa présence indispensable, et, cette difficulté résolue, il se claustrait à nouveau dans son domicile particulier, où son domestique Joko lui servait solitairement ses repas.

Le tunnel fut toutefois achevé conformément à ses prévisions.

Dès l’aube du 30 avril, les quatre-vingts mètres de tubage horizontal étaient terminés. On procéda sans tarder à l’installation du petit cône destiné à forer le puits de sortie, cette dernière opération devant nécessairement être achevée avant le lever du jour.

Il était temps. Depuis le 27 avril, c’est-à-dire depuis trois jours, les vivres commençaient à manquer, et les rations, déjà insuffisantes, étaient réduites à presque rien.

La bonne humeur, ou seulement le calme devant les difficultés de la vie, s’accommode mal d’ordinaire d’estomacs affamés. Aussi, l’esprit du personnel de l’Usine se modifiait-il progressivement. Si l’on travaillait toujours avec acharnement, la vie de tous en dépendant, les visages étaient sombres et les ouvriers échangeaient souvent des paroles pleines d’amertume. Visiblement, ils avaient perdu, au moins en partie, leur aveugle confiance dans leur chef, auquel ils n’étaient pas loin, jusqu’alors, d’attribuer un pouvoir quasi surnaturel. Or, ce magicien n’avait pas été capable, malgré tout son génie, de les empêcher de mourir de faim, et son prestige en souffrait.

D’autre part, une légende avait pris corps peu à peu, dont il fallait chercher l’origine dans les quelques mots relatifs à Jane Buxton prononcés par Camaret dans son discours initial, avant l’ouverture des hostilités avec le Palais. Tout d’abord, on avait accordé au caprice d’Harry Killer pour sa prisonnière sa véritable importance, qui n’était pas très grande. Cette preuve particulière de despotisme avait été mise à son rang, parmi les autres, ni plus, ni moins.

Mais, à mesure que la situation s’aggravait, que les souffrances augmentaient, à mesure surtout que l’inanition rendait les intelligences moins lucides, on avait une tendance générale à porter au premier plan cette fantaisie d’Harry Killer, alors que celui-ci n’y pensait peut-être déjà plus. Cette idée, une fois ancrée dans les cerveaux n’en était plus sortie, et, par un phénomène de cristallisation bien connu, elle avait absorbé toutes les autres.

À présent, c’était un fait acquis. On ne mettait plus en discussion, parmi les ouvriers, que, si l’on avait faim, c’était uniquement pour les beaux yeux de miss Buxton. Que celle-ci se rendît, et la paix serait aussitôt conclue. De là à se dire que le sacrifice était hors de proportion avec son objet, et qu’il était exagéré de faire périr cent cinquante personnes pour en sauver une seule, il n’y avait qu’un pas, qui fut vite franchi.

Jane Buxton n’était pas sans avoir conscience de cette évolution de la pensée des ouvriers. À quelques mots entendus, à quelques regards malveillants surpris pendant qu’elle traversait l’un ou l’autre des ateliers, elle avait deviné leur hostilité, et compris qu’ils la rendaient responsable des dangers qu’ils couraient.

Bien que très loin de s’accorder à soi-même l’importance que cette opinion impliquait, elle fut nécessairement influencée par l’unanimité de celle-ci, et, peu à peu, elle finit par admettre que, si elle se rendait à Harry Killer, ce sacrifice pourrait avoir, en effet, pour résultat de libérer les autres assiégés.

Sans doute, dans ce cas, il serait affreux de vivre auprès de celui qu'elle soupçonnait véhémentement d'avoir assassiné son frère. Mais, outre que cette accusation n'était rien moins que démontrée, elle aurait toujours la mort pour refuge, si l'effort excédait son courage. Au surplus, quelque cruel que ce fût, là sans doute était son devoir.

Cette idée acquit progressivement tant de force, qu'elle ne put s'empêcher de s'en ouvrir à ses amis. Elle s'accusa de lâcheté, et parla de se livrer à Harry Killer, à la condition que le salut de tous fût assuré. En l'écoutant, le pauvre Saint-Bérain pleurait à fendre l'âme.

— Vous voulez donc nous déshonorer, Mademoiselle! s'écria Amédée Florence indigné, et nous déshonorer inutilement, par-dessus le marché! Harry Killer est trop certain de vous avoir un jour ou l'autre à ses ordres pour payer cette satisfaction du moindre prix. Du reste vous pouvez être sûre qu'il ne tiendrait pas ses promesses, s'il en faisait.

Barsac, le docteur Châtonnay, et jusqu'à M. Poncin firent chorus, et Jane dut renoncer à son projet aussi généreux qu'insensé.

Maintenant que le tunnel était terminé, ce projet, d'ailleurs, n'avait plus de raison d'être. Dans quelques heures, Tongané allait s'échapper, et, dès le lendemain sans doute, il donnerait le signal de la révolte et de la délivrance des assiégés.

Dans l'après-midi du 30 avril, le petit cône fut mis en place par l'ouverture ménagée à cet effet dans la paroi du premier, et, au coucher du soleil, on commença le forage du puits vertical. Aucun incident ne retarda cette dernière partie du travail. Avant minuit, le tube débouchait à l’air libre, et le fidèle Tongané disparaissait dans l’obscurité.

Le tube vertical fut alors retiré, et le sable, en s’éboulant de lui-même, combla aussitôt le trou qu’il laissait derrière lui. À la surface du sol, il subsistait sans doute une dépression en entonnoir plus ou moins accusée, mais, en l’absence de toute autre indication, il était impossible que les assiégeants établissent aucune relation entre cet affaissement et l’Usine, qui en était distante de plus de quatre-vingts mètres.

Si le plan de la ville de Blackland a été décrit avec assez de clarté, on sait que la partie le plus en aval de l’Usine proprement dite avait en face d’elle un angle de la muraille séparant les quartiers des Blancs de celui des esclaves.

C’est de cet angle que Tongané devait donner, dès qu’il en trouverait l’occasion favorable, le signal d’envoyer les armes. C’est donc vers lui que, dès le soir du 1er mai, se tendirent les regards des assiégés réunis sur un échafaudage, élevé par ordre de Camaret au-dessus des maisons ouvrières les plus proches de la Red River.

Ainsi qu’on le supposait, d’ailleurs, cette première attente fut vaine. En admettant que Tongané eût réussi dans son entreprise, il arrivait à peine, en effet, dans le quartier des Noirs. Il lui fallait le temps de s’expliquer et de fomenter la révolte.

Le lendemain, non plus, on n’aperçut aucun signal, et l’on commença à être inquiet. On se rassura, cependant, en se disant que cette nuit de pleine lune était vraiment trop claire, quel que fût le moyen imaginé par Camaret, pour permettre l’envoi des armes qu’on avait amoncelées au sommet de l’échafaudage.

Par exemple, l’inquiétude des assiégés devint sérieuse le 3 mai. Ce soir-là, grâce à d’épais nuages, la nuit était sombre malgré la lune.

L’inaction de Tongané était d’autant plus grave, qu’au cours de cette journée du 3 mai, on avait dévoré les dernières miettes que contînt l’Usine. Avant deux jours, trois au plus, il fallait triompher, se rendre, ou se résigner à mourir de faim.

La journée du 4 mai parut interminable aux assiégés qui attendaient l’obscurité avec une impatience fiévreuse. Mais, ce soir-là encore, aucun signal n’apparut au-dessus de la muraille du quartier noir.

La journée du 5 mai débuta sous de tristes auspices. On était à jeun depuis l’avant-veille, et les estomacs criaient famine. Les ateliers étaient désertés. Les ouvriers, leurs femmes et leurs enfants erraient d’un air farouche à travers l’Usine. Avant quarante-huit heures, si rien ne survenait, il faudrait bien enfin se livrer, pieds et poings liés, au vainqueur.

Des groupes se formaient, où s’échangeaient des paroles amères. On ne se gênait pas pour accuser Tongané d’avoir oublié ceux qu’il avait prétendu délivrer. Parbleu! le nègre eût été bien bête de se soucier d’eux.

En passant auprès de l’un de ces groupes, Jane Buxton entendit son nom. Entourés de quelques-uns de leurs camarades, un ouvrier et une femme se disputaient avec autant de violence que le permettait leur faiblesse, si animés que Jane put s’arrêter et prêter l’oreille sans qu’ils y fissent attention.

— On dira ce qu’on voudra, cria l’homme sans souci d’être ou non entendu, c’est raide tout de même d’être obligé d’en passer par là pour cette pimbêche. Si ça ne tenait qu’à moi!…

— Vous n’êtes pas honteux de parler comme ça? répondit la femme.

— Honteux!… Vous voulez rire, la mère!… J’ai un gosse à la niche, moi, et il réclame sa pâtée.

— Et moi, est-ce que je n’en ai pas? protesta la femme.

— Si ça vous convient qu’il meure de faim, vous êtes libre. N’empêche que, si demain nous sommes encore ici, c’est moi qui irai trouver le patron, et nous nous expliquerons tous les deux. On ne peut pas y rester tous pour l’agrément de cette demoiselle, quand le diable y serait!

— Vous n’êtes qu’un lâche! dit la femme indignée. Moi aussi, j’en ai, des gosses, mais j’aimerais mieux les voir en terre que de faire cette saleté-là.

— Chacun son goût, conclut l’ouvrier. Nous verrons ça demain.

Jane Buxton avait chancelé, frappée en plein coeur. Voici maintenant qu’on parlait d’elle sans se gêner, et que, dans l’opinion de tous ces malheureux, elle était décidément l’unique cause de leurs souffrances! Cette idée lui était intolérable. Que faire, pourtant, pour leur démontrer qu’ils se trompaient?

Heure par heure, minute par minute, cette journée du 5 mai s’écoula à son tour. Le soleil se coucha. La nuit vint. Pour la troisième fois depuis le départ de Tongané, de gros nuages masquaient la lune et l’obscurité était profonde. Le nègre profiterait-il de cette circonstance favorable et donnerait-il enfin le signal attendu?

Bien qu’on ne l’espérât guère, tous les yeux étaient fixés, comme chaque soir, sur cet angle de la muraille, d’où ce signal devait venir. Sept heures, huit heures, huit heures et demie sonnèrent à l’horloge de l’Usine. On attendait toujours en vain.

Quelques minutes après la demie de huit heures, un frémissement parcourut la foule anxieuse des assiégés. Non, Tongané ne les avait pas abandonnés. Au-dessus de la muraille du quartier noir, le signal venait d’apparaître enfin!

Sans perdre un instant, on agit. Sur l’ordre de Camaret, un bizarre engin fut transporté au sommet de l’échafaudage. C’était un canon, un véritable canon, sans roues ni affût, mais c’était un canon en bois. Dans l’âme de cette bombarde étrange, faite avec le tronc évidé d’un rônier, on introduisit un projectile, qu’un puissant jet d’air comprimé lança silencieusement dans l’espace.

Avec lui, il entraînait une double cordelette d’acier munie d’un crampon, qui, si tout allait bien, s’accrocherait à la crête de la muraille du quartier des esclaves.

Poids du projectile, pression de l’air propulseur, pointage du canon, forme et position du crampon, tout avait été méticuleusement calculé par Camaret, qui ne laissa à personne le soin de manœuvrer sa singulière artillerie.

Silencieusement, le projectile traversa le quai, la rivière, le quartier des Merry Fellows et retomba dans celui des Noirs. Avait-on réussi, et le crampon était-il fixé à la muraille?

Camaret fit mouvoir prudemment le tambour sur lequel la cordelette d’acier était enroulée. Bientôt, celle-ci se tendit et résista à ses efforts. Oui, la tentative était couronnée de succès. Désormais, un chemin aérien unissait les assiégés aux esclaves.

Par ce chemin, le transport des armes commença aussitôt. Un paquet d’explosifs, d’abord, puis quatre mille couteaux, haches ou piques, furent successivement envoyés. Avant onze heures, l’opération était terminée. Tous quittèrent alors l’échafaudage, et, s’armant au hasard de ce qui leur tombait sous la main, se massèrent derrière la grande porte. Réunis en un groupe compact, les femmes au centre, on se tint prêt à intervenir au moment opportun.

Quelqu’un manquait, pourtant, à ce groupe: une femme, Jane Buxton.

Saint-Bérain, Amédée Florence, Barsac et le docteur Châtonnay crièrent inutilement son nom à tous les échos et la cherchèrent vainement de tous côtés. Ils ne purent la découvrir.

Aidés de plusieurs ouvriers de bonne volonté, ils recommencèrent encore leurs recherches sans plus de succès. L’Usine fut, sans résultat, fouillée de fond en comble.

Il leur fallut enfin se rendre à l’évidence. Jane Buxton avait disparu.

CHAPITRE 11

Ce qu’il y avait derrière la porte

Jane Buxton était partie, en effet, et de la manière la plus simple. Elle était sortie tout bonnement par la porte, que l’on trouva fermée au pêne, et non plus verrouillée comme auparavant. Renseignements pris, l’homme qui veillait au cycloscope avait vu la jeune fille quitter l’Usine, sans la reconnaître néanmoins. Ses instructions lui prescrivant d’éviter les meurtres qui ne seraient pas absolument nécessaires, il n’avait pas voulu employer l’une des guêpes contre cette unique personne, qui, d’ailleurs, loin de chercher à s’introduire dans l’Usine, en sortait au contraire.

Le rapport du veilleur permit d’établir que Jane, en quittant l’Usine, avait suivi le quai dans la direction de l’amont. Il n’y avait donc aucune illusion à se faire; Jane Buxton avait mis, sans nul doute possible, à exécution le projet contre lequel on s’était précédemment élevé, et elle était allée follement se rendre à Harry Killer, juste au moment où ce sacrifice devenait inutile.

Le quai, qui, vers l’aval, aboutissait au chemin de ronde, était barré, en amont, par la muraille de l’esplanade, qui, de ce côté, le transformait en impasse. Une porte blindée perçait, toutefois, la muraille en ce point. Cette porte, constamment fermée, et dont seuls Marcel Camaret et Harry Killer avaient la clé, en temps ordinaire, demeurait ouverte depuis le commencement des hostilités. Jane Buxton avait donc pu gagner l’esplanade, la traverser, et arriver jusqu’au Palais, à moins que les Merry Fellows ne l’eussent arrêtée au passage.

C’est dans un véritable accès de folie qu’elle avait pris la fuite. Que tout le monde crût se sacrifier pour elle seule et qu’on l’accusât d’être la cause du malheur général, cette pensée lui était odieuse, de même qu’il lui était odieux de se sentir haïe par tous les pauvres gens qu’elle voyait souffrir autour d’elle. S’ils avaient raison, cependant? Si vraiment elle était l’unique butin qu’Harry Killer espérât de la lutte? Il suffisait que cela fût possible pour que tout retard devînt un crime, et elle se reprochait de tant hésiter à courir cette chance de sauver un si grand nombre de ses semblables. Et quand bien même les assiégés se fussent trompés, comme ce n’était que trop probable, en faisant dépendre leur salut d’elle seule, son honneur n’exigeait-il pas encore qu’elle leur démontrât leur erreur, fût-ce au prix de sa vie?

Le retard mis par Tongané à donner le signal si fiévreusement attendu avait laissé aux réflexions de Jane Buxton le temps de s’imposer à son jugement que les privations rendaient moins lucide, et enfin, dans cette soirée du 5 mai, elle avait tout à coup perdu la tête et s’était enfuie vers ce qu’elle considérait être son devoir.

Sans s’en rendre compte, sachant à peine ce qu’elle faisait, elle avait entrebâillé la porte, s’était glissée au-dehors, puis, la porte refermée silencieusement, elle s’était élancée vers le

Palais, en s’efforçant de se confondre avec la muraille qu’éclairaient violemment les projecteurs électriques de l’Usine.

De même que le veilleur du cycloscope, les Merry Fellows, postés sur le mur d’enceinte de la ville, au croisement du quai et du chemin de ronde, l’avaient aisément aperçue. Mais ceux-ci n’avaient pas cru devoir faire usage de leurs armes contre une ombre isolée, qui pouvait, en somme, appartenir à leur parti.

Jane Buxton était donc parvenue sans encombre jusqu'à l'esplanade, dont elle avait franchi la porte ouverte. En longeant la muraille qui la limitait du côté de la Red River, elle s'était alors engagée hardiment sur cette vaste place, sans s'occuper des groupes de Merry Fellows entre lesquels il lui fallait passer. En raison même de son audace, elle fit, sans être inquiétée, la plus grande partie du parcours. Elle n'était plus à vingt pas du Palais, quand deux hommes se détachèrent de l'un des groupes et se décidèrent à venir à sa rencontre.

Il se trouva que ces deux hommes l'avaient vue, avant l'évasion des prisonniers, circuler librement de tous côtés. En la reconnaissant, ils poussèrent une exclamation d'étonnement, et incertains de ses intentions, troublés par la faveur que le chef lui avait témoignée, ne sachant que faire, non seulement ils la laissèrent passer sans difficulté, mais encore ils l'escortèrent jusqu'au Palais, dont ils firent ouvrir la porte devant elle.

Cette porte se referma dès qu'elle en eut franchi le seuil. Qu'elle le voulût ou non, désormais, elle était de nouveau au pouvoir d'Harry Killer et sans aucun secours à espérer de personne.

Son arrivée provoqua, dans le Palais, la même surprise que sur l'esplanade. Le serviteur noir qui lui avait ouvert s'empressa de la conduire auprès du maître. À sa suite, elle gravit des escaliers, traversa des galeries et des corridors obscurs, et entra enfin dans une pièce violemment éclairée, qu'elle reconnut sur-le-champ. C'était la salle du Trône, ainsi que le nommait plaisamment Amédée Florence, où les prisonniers avaient été introduits lors de leur unique entrevue avec le despote de Blackland, et dont l'ameublement se composait exclusivement alors d'une table et d'un fauteuil.

Le fauteuil y était toujours, et, comme ce jour-là, Harry Killer s’y vautrait, derrière la table chargée de bouteilles et de verres. Mais ce fauteuil et cette table ne constituaient plus tout l’ameublement. Neuf sièges supplémentaires avaient été apportés. L’un d’eux était inoccupé. Sur les autres, huit hommes d’aspect brutal se prélassaient en buvant, Harry Killer se distrayait avec ses conseillers.

En apercevant la jeune fille dans le cadre de la porte, ces neuf hommes à demi ivres eurent une exclamation de stupeur. Rien n’aurait pu les étonner autant que cette entrée subite de l’un des assiégés de l’Usine.

Ils se levèrent en tumulte.

— Miss Mornas!… s’écrièrent-ils tous à l’unisson.

— Seule!… demanda Harry Killer, qui, le buste perché au-dessus de la table, jeta un regard inquiet dans la direction du couloir sur lequel la porte découpait un rectangle obscur.

— Seule, répondit d’une voix tremblante mais ferme Jane Buxton, dont les jambes fléchissaient, et qui dut s’appuyer au chambranle.

Un long moment, les neuf hommes stupéfaits regardèrent la jeune fille en silence. Qu’elle fût là, toute seule, l’aventure était extraordinaire. Celle-ci, point de mire de tous les regards, perdait de plus en plus contenance et commençait à regretter amèrement sa démarche audacieuse.

— Vous venez de là-bas?… articula enfin d’une voix pâteuse Harry Killer, en montrant du doigt la direction de l’Usine.

— Oui, murmura Jane Buxton.

— Qu’est-ce que vous venez faire ici?

L’intonation n’était rien moins qu’aimable. Oui, certes, ils se trompaient, selon toute apparence, les pauvres affamés de l’Usine, quand ils faisaient retomber sur elle seule la responsabilité de leurs malheurs, et, plus que jamais, elle craignait que son renoncement ne fût incapable d’améliorer leur sort.

— Je viens me rendre, murmura-t-elle cependant, malgré la profonde humiliation que lui causait le peu de prix qu’on semblait attribuer à son sacrifice.

— Tiens! tiens!… fit Harry Killer d’un air sardonique.

Il se tourna vers ses compagnons.

— Laissez-nous, camarades, dit-il.

Les huit conseillers se levèrent. Ils titubaient tous plus ou moins.

— C’est bon, on te laisse, répondit l’un d’eux, en riant grossièrement.

Ils atteignaient déjà la porte. Harry Killer les arrêta du geste, et, se tournant vers Jane Buxton:

— Je ne vous demande pas des nouvelles de Tchoumouki, lui dit-il. J’en ai trouvé les morceaux. Mais, l’autre, qu’est-il devenu?

— Ce n’est pas nous qui avons tué Tchoumouki, répondit Jane. Il est mort dans l’explosion, en voulant faire sauter le planeur.

Son compagnon a été blessé en même temps. On le soigne à l’Usine.

— Ah! ah!… fit Harry Killer. Et le planeur?…

— Il est détruit, répondit Jane.

Harry Killer, très satisfait, se frotta les mains, pendant que disparaissaient ses huit conseillers.

— Alors, comme ça, vous vous rendez? demanda-t-il à sa prisonnière, quand il fut seul avec elle. Pourquoi vous rendez-vous?

— Pour sauver les autres, dit Jane bravement.

— Pas possible!… s'écria Harry Killer en ricanant. Ils sont donc au bout du rouleau, les autres?

— Oui, avoua Jane, qui baissa les yeux.

De joie, Harry Killer se versa une large rasade d'alcool, qu'il avala d'un trait.

— Et alors?… demanda-t-il quand il eut fini de boire.

— Il y a quelque temps, murmura Jane dont la honte empourprait le visage, vous vouliez faire de moi votre femme. J'accepterai, à la condition que vous laissiez la liberté à tous les autres.

— Des conditions!… s'exclama Harry Killer stupéfait. Vous croyez-vous donc en situation d'en faire, ma petite? Puisque les gens de l'Usine sont à bout, je les aurai demain ou après-demain, et vous avec eux. Ce n'était pas la peine de venir ce soir, je ne suis pas à un jour près.

Il se leva et s'avança vers elle en chancelant.

— Vous en avez un aplomb, de poser des conditions!… s’écria-t-il. Des conditions pour être ma femme!… Ah! ah! mais vous serez ma femme quand il me plaira. Non, mais, que feriez-vous pour m’en empêcher? Je serais curieux de le savoir.

Il marchait sur Jane Buxton, qui reculait, terrifiée, en étendant vers elle ses mains tremblantes. Il la touchait presque. Bientôt la jeune fille acculée à la muraille, reçut en plein visage son haleine brûlante empuantie d’alcool.

— On peut toujours mourir, dit-elle.

— Mourir!… répéta Harry Killer qui restait immobile sur ses jambes flageolantes, arrêté net par ce mot prononcé avec une froide énergie.

— Mourir!… répéta-t-il en se grattant le menton d’un air indécis.

Puis, après un nouveau silence, il s’écria, sautant à une autre idée:

— Bah!… On verra ça demain. On s’entendra, tous les deux, ma fille… En attendant, soyons gais et confortables.

Il reprit place dans son fauteuil, et, tendant son verre:

— À boire!… dit-il.

Les verres succédèrent aux verres. Un quart d’heure plus tard, Harry Killer, déjà à peu près ivre lors de l’arrivée de Jane Buxton, ronflait comme un orgue.

Une fois de plus, la jeune fille avait à sa merci cette brute qui était peut-être le meurtrier de son frère. Elle aurait pu le frapper en plein coeur, avec l’arme même qui avait frappé George Buxton. Mais à quoi bon? N’eût-elle pas, au contraire, détruit ainsi le faible espoir qui lui restait de venir en aide à ceux qu’elle souhaitait secourir?

Longtemps, elle resta pensive, les yeux fixés sur le despote endormi. Mais une souffrance soudaine la fit pâlir tout à coup. La faim, une faim impérieuse et cruelle lui tenaillait les entrailles.

Pour un instant, elle oublia sa situation, les lieux où elle se trouvait, Harry Killer lui-même, elle oublia tout ce qui n’était pas la faim. Manger, il lui fallait manger sur-le-champ, à tout prix.

Prudemment, elle ouvrit la porte par où les huit conseillers venaient de sortir, et, dans la pièce attenante, elle aperçut une table couverte de reliefs. On y avait fait ripaille, ce soir-là, avant de terminer la fête dans la salle du trône.

Jane Buxton se précipita vers cette table et s’empara au hasard de quelques aliments qu’elle dévora en hâte. À mesure qu’elle mangeait, la vie revenait à son organisme épuisé, elle se réchauffait, son coeur chassait à plus larges ondes le sang dans les artères, elle retrouvait sa force physique et morale.

Réconfortée, elle revint dans la salle où elle avait laissé Harry Killer. Celui-ci dormait toujours et continuait à ronfler bruyamment. Elle s’assit en face de lui, décidée à attendre son réveil.

Quelques minutes s’écoulèrent, puis Harry Killer fit un mouvement et quelque chose roula sur le sol. Jane, se baissant, ramassa l’objet tombé de la poche du dormeur. C’était une clé de petite taille.

À la vue de cette clé, les souvenirs affluèrent dans son esprit. Elle se rappela les absences régulières d’Harry Killer, et combien elle avait désiré savoir ce qu’il y avait derrière la porte, dont cette clé, qui ne le quittait jamais, ouvrait la serrure. Et voici que le hasard lui donnait le moyen de satisfaire sa curiosité! La tentation était trop forte. Il fallait profiter d’une occasion, qui, sans doute, ne se renouvellerait pas.

À pas légers, elle atteignit la porte par laquelle jadis Harry Killer disparaissait chaque jour, et introduisit la clé dans la serrure. Le ventail tourna sans bruit sur ses gonds. Derrière, elle trouva un palier où s’amorçait un escalier desservant les étages inférieurs. Ayant doucement repoussé la porte sans la fermer, et marchant sur la pointe des pieds, Jane Buxton descendit cet escalier à peine éclairé par une lumière qui arrivait d’en bas.

La pièce qu’elle quittait était située au deuxième étage du Palais, mais, quand elle eut franchi ces deux étages, elle n’aboutit qu’à un nouveau palier, au-delà duquel continuait l’escalier, qui, par conséquent, devait aller jusqu’aux sous-sols. Après un instant d’hésitation, elle descendit encore.

Elle déboucha enfin dans une sorte de vestibule rectangulaire, au seuil duquel elle s’arrêta, interdite. Un nègre, qui veillait, assis dans une encoignure, près d’une porte fermée, s’était brusquement levé à son approche.

Mais elle se rassura bientôt. Le gardien ne paraissait pas avoir d’intention hostile. Bien au contraire, il s’effaçait respectueusement contre la muraille pour laisser à la visiteuse nocturne un plus large passage. Celle-ci comprit la raison de cette déférence inattendue, en reconnaissant dans ce gardien un homme de la Garde noire. Comme les Merry Fellows qui l’avaient escortée sur l’esplanade, le nègre l’avait trop souvent vue circuler librement dans le Palais pour ne pas être convaincu de son pouvoir sur le maître.

D’un pas ferme, elle passa devant lui, sans qu’il y fît aucune opposition. Tout n’était pas dit encore, cependant. Après l’homme, il y avait la porte.

Simulant une assurance qui était loin de son esprit, Jane Buxton introduisit la clé d’Harry Killer dans la serrure, qui s’ouvrit comme s’était ouverte la première. Elle se vit alors dans un assez long couloir, simple prolongement du vestibule qu’elle venait de traverser, dont, à droite et à gauche, une dizaine de portes trouaient les murs.

Toutes, sauf une, étaient grandes ouvertes. Jane Buxton jeta un coup d’oeil dans les pièces auxquelles elles donnaient accès, et vit que ces pièces étaient des cellules, des cachots plutôt, sans air ni lumière, meublés d’une table et d’un misérable grabat. Les cachots, d’ailleurs, étaient vides, et rien n’indiquait qu’ils eussent été occupés depuis longtemps.

Restait l’unique porte fermée. Jane Buxton essaya, pour la troisième fois, le pouvoir de sa clé, et, comme les deux précédentes, cette porte s’ouvrit sans difficulté.

D’abord, elle ne distingua rien dans ce cachot, plongé dans une nuit profonde. Puis, ses yeux s’habituant peu à peu à l’obscurité, elle finit par deviner, dans l’ombre, une personne endormie.

Comme si une puissance surnaturelle l’eût avertie, sans qu’elle en eût conscience, qu’elle allait faire une découverte prodigieuse, Jane se sentait défaillir. Tremblante, le coeur battant, éperdue, sans force, elle restait immobile au seuil de ce cachot, dont son oreille et son regard s’efforçaient en vain de fouiller l’ombre impénétrable.

Elle se souvint, enfin, d’avoir vu, près de l’entrée, dans le couloir, un interrupteur électrique qu’elle manoeuvra à tâtons, sans détacher ses yeux de l’ombre.

Quel saisissement éprouva Jane Buxton! De quelle épouvante, plutôt, ne fut-elle pas frappée!

Elle eût trouvé, dans cet in pace du Palais de Blackland, l’un de ceux qu’elle venait de quitter à l’Usine quelques instants plus tôt, ou même elle y eût trouvé son frère, George Buxton, qu’elle savait mort, pourtant, depuis six ans, qu’elle eût été moins stupéfaite.

Réveillé en sursaut par l’éclat soudain de la lumière, un homme s’était soulevé sur le grabat qui occupait un des angles du cachot. Vêtu de haillons, par les trous desquels apparaissait un corps couvert d’innombrables plaies, d’une maigreur de squelette, il essayait péniblement de se redresser, en tournant vers la lumière ses yeux agrandis par la terreur.

Mais, malgré ces effroyables stigmates d’une longue torture, malgré ce visage émacié, malgré la barbe et les cheveux incultes, Jane Buxton ne pouvait s’y tromper, et reconnut sans hésiter le misérable prisonnier.

Si incroyable, si merveilleux que fût le prodige qui lui faisait reconnaître au fond d’un cachot de Blackland celui qu’elle avait six mois plus tôt laissé en Angleterre occupé à de paisibles travaux, cette épave humaine, cet être martyrisé, c’était Lewis Robert Buxton, c’était son frère.

Haletante, les yeux exorbités, en proie à une sorte de mystérieuse épouvante, Jane demeura un instant sans mouvement et sans voix.

— Lewis!… s’écria-t-elle enfin, en se précipitant vers son malheureux frère, qui balbutiait d’un air égaré:

— Jane!… Vous ici!… Ici!…

Ils tombèrent dans les bras l’un de l’autre, et longtemps, agités tous deux de sanglots convulsifs, ils mêlèrent leurs larmes, sans trouver une parole à dire.

— Jane, murmura enfin Lewis, comment peut-il se faire que vous soyez venue à mon secours?

— Je vous le dirai, répondit Jane. Parlons de vous, plutôt. Expliquez-moi…

— Que voulez-vous que je vous dise? s’écria Lewis avec un geste de désespoir. Je n’y comprends rien moi-même. Il y a cinq mois, le 30 novembre dernier, dans mon bureau, j’ai reçu sur la nuque un coup violent qui m’a assommé.

Quand j’ai repris connaissance, j’étais bâillonné, ligoté et enfermé dans une caisse. Comme un colis, j’ai été transporté de vingt façons différentes. Dans quel pays suis-je? Je l’ignore. Depuis plus de quatre mois, je n’ai pas quitté ce cachot, où, chaque jour, on me déchire la chair avec des tenailles, ou bien ce sont des coups de fouet…

— Oh!… Lewis!… Lewis!… gémit Jane, qui sanglotait. Mais quel est donc le bourreau?…

— C’est bien là le pire, répondit tristement Lewis. Vous ne le devineriez jamais, celui qui se livre à ces atrocités, c’est…

Lewis s’interrompit brusquement. Son bras étendu désignait quelque chose dans le couloir, et ses yeux, tout son visage, exprimaient une affreuse épouvante.

Jane regarda dans la direction que lui montrait son frère. Elle pâlit, et sa main, glissée sous les basques de son corsage, alla saisir l’arme trouvée dans la tombe de Koubo. L’oeil sanglant, sa bouche, d’où coulait un filet de bave, crispée en un rictus de fauve féroce, terrifiant, hideux, Harry Killer était là.

CHAPITRE 12

Harry Killer

— Harry Killer! s’écria Jane.

— Harry Killer?… répéta sur un ton interrogatif Lewis Buxton, qui regarda sa sœur avec étonnement.

— Lui-même, gronda Killer d’une voix rauque.

Il fit un pas en avant, et, s’arrêtant dans l’embrasure de la porte, que sa stature athlétique obstruait tout entière, il s’appuya contre le chambranle, en vue d’affermir son équilibre fortement compromis par les libations de la soirée.

— C’est ça que vous appelez vous rendre?… bégaya-t-il avec une colère concentrée. Eh! eh! Mademoiselle a des rendez-vous à l’insu de son futur mari!…

— Son mari?… répéta Lewis, qui parut surpris plus encore.

— Pensez-vous donc que je sois si commode?… ajouta Harry Killer, qui entra dans le cachot en tendant vers Jane ses énormes mains velues.

Mais celle-ci brandit l’arme retirée de sa ceinture.

— N’approchez pas!… s’écria-t-elle.

— Oh! oh!… fit ironiquement Harry Killer. La guêpe a son aiguillon.

En dépit de son ironie, il ne s’en était pas moins prudemment arrêté, et il demeurait immobile, au milieu du cachot, surveillant de l’oeil le poignard dont Jane Buxton le menaçait.

Profitant de ce moment d’indécision, celle-ci, entraînant son frère avec elle, se rapprocha de la porte, coupant ainsi la retraite à l’adversaire qu’elle tenait en respect.

— Oui, j’ai trouvé ce poignard dans une tombe… à Koubo!

— À Koubo!… répéta Lewis. N’est-ce pas là que George…

— Oui, dit Jane, c’est à Koubo que George est tombé, c’est là qu’il est mort, non pas frappé par des balles, mais par cette arme sur laquelle un nom: Killer, celui de l’assassin, est encore écrit.

Harry Killer avait fait un pas en arrière à cette évocation du drame de Koubo. Pâle, défait, il s’appuyait maintenant à la muraille de cachot, en regardant Jane avec une sorte de crainte.

— Killer, dites-vous? s’écria Lewis à son tour. Vous vous trompez, Jane. Tel n’est pas le nom de cet homme. Il en a un autre, pire encore que celui de Killer, un autre qui ne sera pas nouveau pour vous.

— Un autre?…

— Oui… Vous étiez trop petite, quand il nous a quittés, pour le reconnaître aujourd’hui, mais, bien des fois, vous avez entendu parler de lui. Votre mère avait un fils quand elle a épousé notre père. Ce fils, c’est l’homme que vous voyez là, c’est William Ferney, votre frère.

La révélation faite par Lewis Buxton avait des effets opposés sur les deux autres acteurs de cette scène. Tandis que Jane, anéantie, laissait retomber sa main sans force, William Ferney — on lui laissera désormais son nom véritable — semblait avoir reconquis toute son assurance. Son ivresse même paraissait dissipée. Il s’était redressé, et se tenait droit maintenant en face du groupe formé par Jane et Lewis, qu’il couvrait d’un regard étincelant de haine et pleine d’une implacable cruauté.

— Ah! vous êtes Jane Buxton!… prononça-t-il d’une voix sifflante.

Il répéta encore, en grinçant des dents:

— Ah! vous êtes Jane Buxton!…

Et, soudain, tous les mauvais sentiments qui l’étouffaient faisant explosion, il parla, parla, si vite qu’il n’avait pas le temps d’articuler les mots, en phrases coupées, hachées, la poitrine haletante, la voix sourde, les yeux fous.

— J’en suis ravi!… Oui, en vérité, j’en suis ravi!… Ah! vous êtes allée à Koubo!… Oui, certes, c’est moi qui l’ai tué… votre frère

George… le beau George… dont la famille Buxton était si fière!… Je l’ai même tué deux fois… dans son âme d’abord… dans son corps ensuite… Et maintenant, je vous tiens là, tous les deux… en mon pouvoir, sous ma botte! Vous êtes ma chose!… Je peux faire de vous ce qui me plaît!…

À peine si les mots qui sortaient de sa gorge contractée étaient compréhensibles. Il bégayait, ivre de joie, exultant, triomphant!

— Quand je pense que j’ai pris l’un… et que l’autre est venue toute seule chez moi!… C’est trop drôle!…

Il avança d’un pas, sans que Jane, ni Lewis, enlacés, fissent un mouvement, et, se penchant vers eux:

— Vous croyez, peut-être, savoir beaucoup de choses? Vous ne savez rien… Mais je vais tout vous dire… Tout!… Et avec quel plaisir! Ah! il m’a chassé, votre père!… Il doit s’en applaudir!… Une chose manque à ma joie… cependant… Je veux qu’il sache… avant de mourir… quelle main lui a porté les coups… Cette main… la voici… c’est la mienne!…

Il avança encore. Il touchait presque maintenant le frère et la sœur, épouvantés par cet accès de sauvage démence.

— Ah! on m’a chassé!… Qu’aurais-je fait des sommes misérables qu’on m’offrait? À moi, il faut de l’or, beaucoup d’or, des montagnes d’or!… J’en ai eu… de l’or… à remuer à la pelle… en monceaux… sans vous… sans le secours de personne… à moi seul!… Ce que j’ai fait pour m’en procurer?… Ah! ah!… Ce que les gens de votre espèce appellent des crimes… J’ai volé… tué… assassiné… tous… tous les crimes!… Ah! ah!…

“Mais l’or n’était pas tout pour moi… Quelque chose de plus fort encore, c’était la haine que je vous porte… à tous… exécrable famille des Glenor!… C’est pourquoi je suis venu en Afrique. J’ai rôdé autour de la colonne de George Buxton… et je me suis présenté à lui… J’ai joué la comédie… regrets… repentir… remords… J’ai été menteur… fourbe, hypocrite… C’est de bonne guerre, pas vrai?… L’imbécile s’y est laissé prendre… Il m’a ouvert les bras… J’ai partagé sa tente… sa table… Ah! ah! j’en ai profité, de sa stupide confiance!… Chaque jour un peu plus de poudre dans ses aliments… Quelle poudre?… Que vous importe? Opium… hachisch… ou autre de ce genre… c’est mon affaire… Cherchez George Buxton… Un enfant, un petit enfant sans force…

“Le chef?… Moi!… Alors, quels exploits!… Les journaux en étaient pleins… George Buxton le fou… George Buxton l’assassin… George Buxton le traître… ils ne parlaient que de ça… Qui a ri, plus tard, en lisant ces tirades?… Moi, je pense… Mais passons… Un jour, des soldats sont arrivés… George Buxton mort, c’était bien… déshonoré, c’était mieux… Je l’ai donc tué pour qu’il se taise…

“Alors, je suis venu ici, et j’ai fondé cette ville… Pas mal, n’est-ce pas, pour celui qu’on avait honteusement chassé? Ici, je suis le chef… le maître, le roi… l’empereur… Je commande, on obéit… Pourtant, ma joie n’était pas complète… À votre père, il restait encore un fils et une fille.

Cela ne pouvait pas durer… Le fils, d’abord… Un jour où j’avais besoin d’argent j’ai pris le sien… et lui par-dessus le marché… Ah! ah! assommé, le fils… ficelé comme un jambon, le fils… au fond d’une malle, le fils… Et en route!… Trains, bateaux, planeurs, en route! jusqu’ici… chez moi… dans mon empire!… Et je le tuerai… comme l’autre… mais moins vite… lentement… jour par jour!… Pendant ce temps… là-bas… en Angleterre… le père… Oh! un lord… et riche!… le père sait que son fils est parti… en emportant la caisse… Pas mal charpenté, tout ça, Dieu me damne!…

“Restait la fille… ma sœur… Ah! ah! ma sœur!… C’était son tour… Que lui faire, à celle-là?… J’y pensais, je cherchais… Parbleu! la voilà qui arrive!… C’est ma chance!… Un peu plus, j’en faisais ma femme!… C’est à se tordre!… Ma femme?… Allons donc!… Celle du dernier de mes esclaves!… du plus hideux de mes nègres!…

“Que lui restera-t-il après… au vieux lord… en dépit de son titre et de ses richesses?… Ses deux fils?… un traître… un voleur… Sa fille?…

Disparue… traînant on ne sait où… Et lui… tout seul… avec ses idées de l’autre monde… Elle finit bien, la race des Glenor!… Et comme vengeance, c’est assez réussi, je pense!…”

Ces affreuses imprécations proférées d’une voix haletante s’achevèrent en un véritable hurlement.

William Ferney s’arrêta hors d’haleine, étranglant de rage. Ses yeux sortaient de leurs orbites. Il tendait vers ses victimes des mains crispées, avides de torturer une chair détestée. Ce n’était plus une créature humaine. C’était un fou furieux en pleine crise, une bête féroce acharnée à détruire.

Épouvantés plus encore pour lui que pour eux-mêmes, Jane et Lewis Buxton contemplaient le dément avec horreur. Comment une âme d’homme pouvait-elle recéler une aussi effroyable haine?

— Pour ce soir, conclut le monstre, quand il eut repris haleine, je vais vous laisser ensemble, puisque ça vous amuse. Mais demain…

Le bruit d’une explosion, qui devait être formidable pour arriver jusqu’à ce cachot, couvrit tout à coup la voix de William Ferney. Il s’arrêta brusquement, étonné, inquiet, prêtant l’oreille…

À l’explosion succédèrent quelques minutes d’un profond silence, puis on entendit une rumeur… C’était des cris, des hurlements lointains, tout un bruit de foule en délire, auquel se mêlaient de rares coups de revolvers ou de fusils…

William Ferney ne pensait plus à Jane ni à Lewis Buxton. Il écoutait, cherchant à deviner ce que signifiaient ces clameurs.

L’homme de la Garde noire posté à l’entrée des cachots accourut tout à coup.

— Maître! cria-t-il, affolé, la ville est en feu!

William Ferney proféra un horrible juron, puis, rejetant d’une poussée Jane et Lewis Buxton qui lui barraient le passage, il s’élança dans le couloir et disparut.

Ce dénouement était intervenu si rapidement que le frère et la sœur n’avaient eu le temps d’y rien comprendre. À peine si, dans leur égarement, ils avaient entendu l’explosion et les clameurs qui les avaient débarrassés de leur bourreau. Ils étaient seuls depuis un instant qu’ils ne s’en étaient pas encore aperçus. Ils se tenaient toujours étroitement enlacés, et, accablés par la scène atroce dont ils venaient d’être les témoins, affaiblis par leurs récentes souffrances, pensant au vieillard qui se mourait dans le désespoir et la honte, ils sanglotaient éperdument.

CHAPITRE 13

La nuit de sang

Bouleversés par l'effroyable scène qu'ils venaient de subir, oubliant tout ce qui n'était pas leur douleur, Jane et Lewis Buxton demeurèrent longtemps ainsi enlacés. Puis, peu à peu, leurs larmes tarirent, et enfin, poussant un profond soupir, ils s'écartèrent l'un de l'autre et reprirent conscience du monde extérieur.

Ce qui les frappa tout d'abord, ce fut, malgré les bruits confus qui grondaient autour d'eux, une troublante sensation de silence. Dans le couloir vivement éclairé par les ampoules électriques, une paix de tombe. Le Palais semblait mort. Au dehors, au contraire, des clameurs confuses, des détonations d'armes à feu, tout un tumulte qui grandissait de minute en minute.

Un instant, ils prêtèrent l'oreille à ces rumeurs inexplicables, dont Jane comprit le sens tout à coup. Elle se tourna vers son frère.

— Pouvez-vous marcher? demanda-t-elle.

— J'essaierai, répondit Lewis.

— Venez! dit-elle.

Tous deux, groupe lamentable, la jeune fille soutenant l'homme épuisé par quatre mois de souffrances, ils sortirent du cachot, suivirent le couloir, arrivèrent dans le vestibule, où le gardien veillait tout à l’heure.

Le gardien avait disparu. Le vestibule était désert maintenant.

Péniblement, ils gravirent l’escalier jusqu’au troisième et dernier palier. Avec la clé dérobée à William Ferney, Jane ouvrit la porte que le palier desservait, et, suivie de Lewis, elle se retrouva dans la même pièce, où, peu auparavant, elle avait laissé, cuvant son ivresse, le monstrueux dément qu’elle ignorait alors être son frère.

Comme le vestibule, cette pièce était vide. Rien n’y était changé depuis qu’elle l’avait quittée. Le fauteuil de William Ferney était toujours derrière la table chargée de bouteilles et de verres, et les neuf autres sièges étaient toujours disposés en une demi-circonférence en face d’elle.

Jane, ayant fait asseoir son frère dont les jambes fléchissaient, eut enfin conscience de l’étrangeté de leur situation. Pourquoi cette solitude et ce silence? Qu’était devenu leur bourreau?

Obéissant à une impulsion soudaine, elle osa se séparer de Lewis et s’aventura hardiment dans le Palais, qu’elle sillonna en tous sens.

Elle commença par le rez-de-chaussée, sans en laisser un coin inexploré. En passant devant la porte extérieure, elle put remarquer d’un coup d’oeil que celle-ci était soigneusement fermée. Elle ne vit personne dans ce rez-de-chaussée, dont toutes les portes intérieures étaient grandes ouvertes, ainsi que les aurait laissées la fuite éperdue de ses habitants. Avec un étonnement grandissant, elle parcourut les trois autres étages, et les trouva pareillement déserts. Si incroyable que cela fût, le Palais semblait abandonné.

Les trois étages visités, il ne restait plus que la tour centrale et la terrasse qui la commandait. Au bas de l’escalier conduisant à celle-ci, Jane s’arrêta un instant puis elle s’y engagea et le gravit.

Non, le Palais n’était pas déserté, comme elle aurait pu le croire. Quand elle fut arrivée près du sommet de l’escalier, un bruit de voix lui parvint du dehors. Avec prudence, elle franchit les dernières marches, et, protégée par l’ombre, inspecta des yeux la terrasse, où venait mourir la lumière des projecteurs de l’Usine.

La population entière du Palais y était réunie. Avec un frisson d’horreur, Jane reconnut William Ferney. Elle reconnut aussi les huit conseillers qu’elle avait trouvés en compagnie de celui-ci deux heures auparavant. Plus loin, en deux groupes, quelques hommes de la Garde noire et les neuf domestiques nègres.

Tous penchés sur le parapet, ils semblaient se montrer réciproquement quelque chose dans le lointain, en échangeant des cris, plutôt que des paroles, accompagnés de grands gestes. Que se passait-il donc enfin qui pût les passionner à ce point?

Tout à coup, William Ferney se redressa, donna un ordre d’une voix tonnante, et, suivi de ceux qui étaient avec lui sur la terrasse, se précipita vers l’escalier dont Jane occupait les dernières marches. Celle-ci vit alors qu’ils étaient armés, chacun de deux revolvers passés à la ceinture et d’un fusil, qu’ils brandissaient au-dessus de leur tête avec colère.

Une seconde encore, et sa cachette serait découverte. Que feraient d’elle, alors, ces hommes qui semblaient en proie à une violente surexcitation? Elle était perdue.

Tandis qu’elle regardait autour d’elle, cherchant inconsciemment un impossible secours, ses yeux tombèrent soudain sur une porte placée en haut de l’escalier, qu’elle séparait de la terrasse. Voir et pousser cette porte qui se ferma bruyamment, ce fut pour Jane Buxton une seule et même chose. Sa situation était déjà profondément changée par son geste tout instinctif, qu’elle ignorait encore l’avoir accompli.

À ce geste, des cris de fureur, de terribles imprécations répondirent au-dehors. Elle n’avait pas eu le temps de faire jouer les derniers verrous, que les gens de la terrasse heurtaient violemment à coups de crosse l’obstacle inattendu qu’elle venait de leur opposer.

Épouvantée par ces hurlements, par ces chocs répétés, par tout ce vacarme, Jane restait, immobile, tremblante, à la même place. Pour sauver sa vie, elle n’eût pas eu la force de faire un mouvement. Elle tenait ses yeux fixés sur cette porte, qu’elle s’attendait à voir tomber d’une minute à l’autre, sous l’effort de ses redoutables ennemis.

Mais la barrière qui la séparait d’eux ne tomba pas. Elle ne paraissait même pas être ébranlée par les coups furieux dont on la martelait. Jane reprit peu à peu son calme, et s’aperçut alors que cette porte était faite, comme celle de l’Usine et comme celle de l’entrée du Palais, d’une épaisse plaque de blindage capable de défier tous les assauts. Il n’y avait donc pas à craindre que

William Ferney pût la forcer avec les faibles moyens dont il disposait.

Rassurée, elle descendait retrouver son frère, quand elle remarqua, au passage, que l’escalier, entre le dernier étage du Palais et la terrasse, pouvait être successivement barré par cinq autres portes semblables. Tout avait été prévu par William Ferney pour se mettre à l’abri d’une surprise. Son palais était divisé en de nombreuses sections séparées par des barrages, qu’il eût fallu emporter l’un après l’autre. Aujourd’hui, ces précautions se retournaient contre lui.

Jane verrouilla les cinq autres portes comme elle avait verrouillé la première, et redescendit au rez-de-chaussée.

Les ouvertures du Palais étaient défendues par de solides grilles et, en dedans de ces grilles, par de forts volets de fer. Sans perdre un instant, elle ferma, aux divers étages, tous ces volets jusqu’au dernier.

Où trouvait-elle la force de mouvoir ces lourdes plaques de métal? Elle agissait dans la fièvre, sans même s’en rendre compte, comme si elle eût été en état de somnambulisme, avec adresse et rapidité. En une heure, le travail était accompli. Elle était maintenant au centre d’un véritable bloc de pierre et d’acier absolument inexpugnable.

Alors seulement, elle sentit sa fatigue. Ses jambes flageolaient. Les mains en sang, épuisée, elle eut peine à descendre auprès de son frère.

— Qu’y a-t-il donc? demanda anxieusement celui-ci, effrayé de la voir dans un pareil état.

Quand elle eut repris haleine, Jane lui raconta ce qu’elle avait fait.

— Nous sommes les maîtres du Palais, conclut-elle.

— N’ont-ils pas d’autre issue que cet escalier? interrogea son frère, qui ne pouvait croire à un pareil coup de théâtre.

— Pas d’autre, affirma Jane, j’en suis certaine. William est bloqué sur la terrasse, et je le défie d’en sortir.

— Mais pourquoi y étaient-ils tous réunis? interrogea Lewis. Que se passe-t-il donc?

Cela, Jane l’ignorait. Tout entière à ses préparatifs de défense, elle n’avait rien vu. Mais, ce qu’elle ne savait pas, il était aisé de l’apprendre. Il suffisait de jeter un coup d’oeil au-dehors. Tous deux montèrent à l’étage supérieur, au-dessus duquel il n’y avait plus que la terrasse, et entrebâillèrent l’un des volets de fer que Jane venait de fermer.

Ils comprirent alors l’agitation de William Ferney et de ses compagnons. Si, à leurs pieds, l’esplanade était noire et silencieuse, de vives lueurs et de violentes clameurs leur arrivaient de la rive droite de la Red River. Toutes les cases des nègres brûlaient. Le centre de la ville, c’est-à-dire le quartier des esclaves, n’était plus qu’un immense brasier.

L’incendie faisait également rage dans la Civil Body, et même, vers l’amont et vers l’aval, les deux extrémités du quartier des Merry Fellows commençaient aussi à flamber.

De la partie de ce dernier quartier non encore atteinte par le feu, un vacarme effroyable s’élevait. On entendait des cris, des jurons, des plaintes, des hurlements confus, mêlés au bruit incessant de la fusillade.

— C’est Tongané, dit Jane. Les esclaves se sont révoltés.

— Les esclaves?… Tongané?… répéta Lewis pour qui ces mots n’avaient aucun sens.

Sa sœur lui expliqua l’organisation de Blackland, ce qu’elle en savait, tout au moins, d’après les renseignements donnés par Marcel Camaret, par Tongané et par le blessé soigné à l’Usine. Elle lui raconta ensuite en quelques mots comment elle-même se trouvait dans cette ville et par quel concours de circonstances elle y était prisonnière. Elle lui dit pourquoi elle avait entrepris ce voyage, comment elle était parvenue à établir l’innocence désormais certaine de leur frère George Buxton, et comment, après s’être jointe à la mission commandée par le député Barsac, elle avait été enlevée avec les débris de cette mission. Elle lui montra, au-delà de l’esplanade, l’Usine étincelante du feu de ses projecteurs, elle lui en exposa le rôle, et lui nomma ses compagnons, qui tous, sauf un nègre nommé Tongané, y étaient encore réfugiés. Quant à Tongané, c’est lui qui avait entrepris de soulever la population noire de Blackland, et le spectacle qu’on avait sous les yeux prouvait qu’il y avait réussi. Mais elle n’avait pas eu la patience d’attendre, et elle s’était enfuie seule, ce soir même, dans l’espoir de sauver les autres assiégés. C’est ainsi qu’elle était arrivée jusqu’à son malheureux frère. Pendant ce temps, Tongané donnait évidemment le signal attendu, on lui envoyait des armes, et maintenant la révolte était déchaînée. C’est vers la bataille, à laquelle ils assistaient du haut de la terrasse, que voulaient sans doute s’élancer William Ferney et ses compagnons, quand elle leur avait brusquement barré le passage.

— Et maintenant, qu’allons-nous faire? demanda Lewis.

— Attendre, répondit Jane. Les esclaves ne nous connaissent pas, et ils ne feraient, dans la bagarre, aucune différence entre nous et les autres. Au surplus, nous leur serions d’un bien faible secours, puisque nous n’avons pas d’armes.

Lewis ayant fait justement remarquer qu’il pourrait être utile d’en posséder, Jane procéda à une nouvelle visite du Palais. Sa récolte ne fut pas abondante. Toutes les armes, sauf celles que leurs propriétaires avaient sur eux, étant centralisées dans la tour élevée au-dessus de la terrasse, elle ne trouva qu’un seul fusil et deux revolvers avec un petit nombre de cartouches.

Quand elle revint, munie de son butin, la situation avait bien changé. Les nègres s’étaient ouvert un passage et avaient envahi l’Esplanade, sur laquelle ils grouillaient au nombre de plus de trois mille. En un instant, ils eurent pris d’assaut, tant la caserne de la Garde noire, dont tous les hommes furent massacrés séance tenante, que la remise des quarante planeurs, d’où des gerbes de flammes ne tardèrent pas à jaillir. Ivres de saccage et de sang, en démence, ils se vengeaient en une fois de leurs longues souffrances, et, de toute évidence, leur fureur ne serait satisfaite que par la destruction totale de la ville et par le massacre du dernier de ses habitants.

William Ferney devait, en contemplant ce spectacle, écumer de rage impuissante. On l’entendait hurler, vociférer, sans comprendre les mots qu’il prononçait. Sur la terrasse, crépitait une incessante fusillade, et les balles, frappant dans la foule grouillante des nègres, y faisaient de nombreuses victimes.

Mais les autres ne semblaient pas s’en apercevoir. Après la caserne de la Garde noire et la remise des planeurs, dont les flammes éclairaient l’Esplanade comme une torche gigantesque, ils s’étaient attaqués au Palais lui-même, et, avec tout ce qui leur tombait sous la main, ils s’efforçaient, d’ailleurs inutilement, d’en ébranler la porte.

Ils étaient tout à cette occupation, quand de violents feux de salve partirent du côté de la Red River. Ayant enfin réussi à se reformer, les Merry Fellows avaient franchi le pont, et, se déployant sur l’Esplanade, ils tiraient au hasard, dans le tas. Bientôt des cadavres jonchèrent le sol par centaines.

Les Noirs, poussant une clameur féroce, s’étaient jetés sur leurs adversaires. Pendant quelques instants, ce fut une lutte atroce, une indescriptible tuerie. Ne disposant pas d’armes à feu, les nègres cherchaient les corps à corps, combattant avec leurs dents. Les Merry Fellows répliquaient par des coups de baïonnettes et par des balles tirées à bout portant.

L’issue du combat ne pouvait être douteuse. La supériorité des armes devait triompher du nombre. Un certain flottement ne tarda pas, en effet, à se manifester dans la masse décimée des nègres, ils reculèrent, et enfin s’enfuirent sur la rive droite, abandonnant l’Esplanade aux vainqueurs.

Ceux-ci s’élancèrent à leur poursuite, afin de sauver ce qui pouvait l’être, c’est-à-dire le centre du quartier des Merry Fellows, que l’incendie n’avait pas encore atteint.

Au moment où ils franchissaient le pont sur les talons des fuyards, une formidable explosion retentit. Du haut du Palais, Jane et Lewis purent reconnaître qu’elle avait eu lieu à une grande distance, dans la partie la plus éloignée du Civil Body. À la lueur des incendies qui brûlaient de toutes parts, ils virent qu’une fraction de ce quartier et une notable partie de la muraille d’enceinte venaient de s’écrouler dans cette direction.

Quelle que fût la cause de cette explosion, son résultat le plus certain était d’ouvrir aux nègres en déroute une large issue vers la campagne. Par la brèche ainsi faite, les esclaves vaincus purent donc se réfugier dans les champs et les taillis environnants, et échapper à leurs ennemis. Au surplus, la poursuite de ceux-ci s’était ralentie. Un quart d’heure plus tard, ils quittaient même la rive droite de la Red River et revenaient sur l’Esplanade. Outre qu’ils ne trouvaient plus d’adversaires devant eux, ils étaient, à leur tour, frappés de terreur par de nouvelles explosions, qui succédaient incessamment à la première.

Quelle était l’origine de ces explosions? Nul n’aurait pu le dire. Il était clair, en tout cas, qu’elles ne se produisaient pas au hasard, mais qu’une volonté les dirigeait. La première avait eu lieu, on le sait, à la périphérie de la ville, au point de la demi-circonférence décrite par le quartier du Civil Body le plus éloigné du Palais.

Cinq minutes plus tard, on en entendit deux autres à droite et à gauche de ce point. Puis, après une seconde interruption de cinq minutes, deux autres éclatèrent encore en se rapprochant de la rivière, suivant la courbe du Civil Body.

C’est alors que les Merry Fellows lancés aux trousses des esclaves avaient cherché refuge sur l’Esplanade.

À partir de ce moment, les explosions inexplicables continuèrent à intervalles réguliers. Une demi-heure désormais séparait chacune de la suivante. Toutes les trente minutes, on entendait un nouveau fracas, et une nouvelle portion du Civil Body était transformée en décombres.

Massée sur l’Esplanade, la population blanche de Blackland, ce qui en subsistait tout au moins, assistait avec stupeur à cet inexplicable phénomène. Il eût semblé vraiment qu’une puissance supérieure et formidable avait entrepris la destruction méthodique de la ville. Tous ces bandits, si hardis jadis contre les faibles, tremblaient de peur maintenant. S’écrasant contre le Palais, ils essayaient en vain d’en ébranler la porte, et interpellaient avec fureur William Ferney, qu’ils apercevaient sur la terrasse, et dont ils ne pouvaient s’expliquer l’abandon. Celui-ci s’épuisait inutilement en gestes qu’on ne comprenait pas, en paroles qui se perdaient dans l’assourdissant vacarme.

La nuit s’acheva ainsi. L’aube, en se levant, éclaira un spectacle terrible. Le sol de l’Esplanade était littéralement jonché de morts, noirs et blancs confondus, au nombre de plusieurs centaines. Si ces derniers avaient remporté la victoire, ils l’avaient chèrement payée. À peine s’il restait quatre cents hommes valides sur plus de huit cents que contenaient hier encore les deux quartiers du Civil Body et des Merry Fellows. Les autres avaient péri, tant au début de la révolte, au moment de la première surprise, que sur l’Esplanade même, lorsque cette révolte avait été réprimée.

Quant aux esclaves, Jane et Lewis, du point élevé qu’ils occupaient, les apercevaient dans la campagne environnante. Beaucoup d’entre eux étaient partis. Les uns s’éloignaient dans l’Ouest, se dirigeant droit vers le Niger, dont un océan de sable les séparait. Combien de ceux-ci parviendraient à faire le voyage, sans eau, sans vivres, sans armes? D’autres, préférant une route plus longue, mais plus sûre, suivaient le cours de la Red River et commençaient à disparaître dans le Sud-Ouest.

Mais le plus grand nombre n’avait pu se décider à s’éloigner de Blackland. On les voyait, au milieu des champs, réunis par groupes, contemplant d’un air stupide la ville, d’où s’échappaient d’épaisses volutes de fumée et que les explosions successives transformaient en un monceau de ruines.

Pendant toute la nuit, elles n’avaient pas cessé. Chaque demi-heure avait eu la sienne. Quand le soleil se leva, tout le Civil Body et la moitié du quartier des esclaves n’étaient plus qu’un amas de décombres sans nom.

À ce moment, une violente détonation retentit sur la terrasse du Palais. Puis, coup sur coup, d’autres lui succédèrent, dont la dernière fut suivie d’un fracas de tonnerre.

Sans s’éloigner de la fenêtre, d’où, par l’entrebâillement des volets, ils avaient assisté à une série de drames, Lewis Buxton saisit la main de sa sœur, en interrogeant celle-ci d’un regard inquiet.

— William, dit Jane, qui connaissait trop la disposition du Palais pour ne pas deviner la raison de ces détonations, vient de forcer à coups de canon la porte de la terrasse.

Jane Buxton parlait d’une voix calme. Elle examinait la situation et l’appréciait avec un parfait sang-froid.

— Mais alors, s’écria Lewis, ils vont descendre?…

Il saisit l’un des revolvers que sa sœur avait découverts.

— Mieux vaut mourir que de retomber entre leurs mains!

Jane l’arrêta du geste.

— Ils ne sont pas encore là, dit-elle tranquillement. Il y a cinq autres portes pareilles, et placées de telle sorte, les trois dernières surtout, qu’il sera impossible de braquer le canon contre elles.

Comme pour lui donner raison, les détonations avaient fait trêve, en effet. Un sourd grognement qui arrivait de la terrasse, accompagné de vociférations furieuses, montrait que William Ferney et ses compagnons s’efforçaient de pointer leur canon sur la deuxième porte, et que l’opération ne s’accomplissait pas sans difficultés.

Au surplus, ce travail fut bientôt interrompu. Un nouvel incident venait de survenir, qui, sans doute, attirait leur attention, comme il attirait celle de Jane et de Lewis Buxton.

Les explosions extérieures, qui n’avaient pas cessé d’éclater à intervalles réguliers d’une demi-heure, venaient d’aboutir à une dernière plus violente et surtout plus proche que les précédentes. Le pouvoir destructeur qui les provoquait s’attaquait maintenant à la rive gauche. C’est du jardin de l’Usine même qu’une gerbe de terre et de pierres avait jailli vers le ciel.

Quand la fumée se fut dissipée, il fut possible de constater que ce jardin était ravagé sur une assez grande étendue et qu’une faible partie de l’Usine proprement dite s’était effondrée.

La poussière de cette explosion flottait encore dans l’air, quand Lewis et Jane virent une véritable foule s’élancer sur le quai par la porte largement ouverte de l’Usine. Cette foule, Jane la reconnut. C’étaient ses compagnons de captivité, c’étaient les ouvriers de Camaret, réunis en un groupe compact au centre duquel étaient placés les femmes et les enfants. Pourquoi ces malheureux quittaient-ils leur abri et se dirigeaient-ils vers l’Esplanade, où ils allaient se heurter aux Merry Fellows, qui s’acharnaient toujours aussi vainement contre la porte du Palais?

Ceux-ci ne pouvaient voir ces nouveaux adversaires, dont la muraille de l’Esplanade les séparait. Mais, de la terrasse, William Ferney, dont le regard passait par-dessus cette muraille, les avait vus et les montrait de la main.

Ses gestes ne furent pas compris. La foule sortie de l’Usine atteignit sans encombre la porte faisant communiquer le quai avec l’Esplanade, et pénétra sur celle-ci.

Quand les Merry Fellows l’aperçurent, ce fut parmi eux une tempête de cris. Délaissant leur inutile travail, ils saisirent leurs armes, et se ruèrent contre les envahisseurs.

Mais ce n’est plus à des nègres qu’ils avaient affaire. Armés de ce qu’ils avaient trouvé sous la main, celui-ci d’un marteau de forge, cet autre d’une pince, cet autre encore d’une simple barre de fer, les gens de l’Usine se ruèrent en avant, eux aussi. La lutte fut terrible. D’assourdissantes clameurs déchiraient l’air. Des ruisseaux de sang rougissaient le sol de l’Esplanade, déjà pleine des morts de la nuit.

Se voilant les yeux des deux mains, Jane Buxton s’efforçait de ne pas voir cet affreux spectacle. Parmi les combattants, que d’amis elle comptait! Elle tremblait pour Barsac, pour Amédée Florence, pour l’excellent docteur Châtonnay, pour Saint-Bérain surtout, qu’elle chérissait tendrement.

Mais des hurlements plus violents éclatèrent tout à coup.

Le nombre et l’armement supérieur triomphaient. La colonne sortie de l’Usine était coupée en deux. Une de ses moitiés reculait vers le quai, défendant le terrain pied à pied, tandis que l’autre était refoulée dans la direction du Palais.

Celle-ci, tout au moins, ne devait conserver aucun espoir de salut. Arrêtée par la muraille, non seulement elle avait les Merry Fellows en face d’elle, mais encore, du haut de la terrasse, William Ferney et ses compagnons fusillaient sans risque ces malheureux auxquels la fuite même était interdite.

Un cri de joie jaillit soudain de leurs poitrines. La porte à laquelle ils étaient acculés venait de s’ouvrir toute grande derrière eux, et, sur le seuil, Jane Buxton leur était apparue. Serrés de près par leurs ennemis, ils se réfugièrent dans le Palais, tandis que Jane et Lewis déchargeaient fusils et revolvers afin de protéger leur retraite.

Stupéfaits de cette intervention à laquelle ils ne pouvaient rien comprendre, les Merry Fellows avaient hésité un instant. Quand, revenus de leur surprise, ils s'élancèrent à l'assaut, il était trop tard. La porte était refermée et bravait de nouveau leurs efforts.

CHAPITRE 14

La fin de Blackland

Lorsque la porte eut été solidement refermée, il fallut tout d'abord s'occuper des blessés, qui étaient assez nombreux. Aidée d'Amédée Florence atteint lui-même d'une blessure, d'ailleurs très légère, et entraîné, avec Barsac, parmi ceux qu'un sort ironique obligeait à chercher refuge précisément chez leur plus implacable ennemi, Jane Buxton leur prodigua ses soins.

Les pansements terminés, un autre souci s'imposa à la jeune fille, celui de nourrir ces malheureux qui, depuis plusieurs jours déjà, souffraient cruellement de la faim. Mais pourrait-elle y réussir, et le Palais contiendrait-il assez de provisions pour tant de bouches?

La quantité de vivres qu'elle y découvrit, après en avoir soigneusement visité tous les étages, assura tout au plus un médiocre repas. La situation restait donc des plus graves, et il semblait bien qu'on eût simplement reculé de quelques heures l'inévitable solution.

Il était onze heures du matin, quand on en eut terminé avec ces diverses occupations. Pendant ce temps, les explosions se succédaient toujours au-dehors, on continuait à entendre, sur l'Esplanade, la rumeur des Merry Fellows qui, à intervalles irréguliers, faisaient contre la porte une nouvelle tentative aussi vaine que les précédentes, et, sur la terrasse, les vociférations de William Ferney et de ses compagnons. L'accoutumance aidant, on finissait par ne plus faire attention à ce vacarme, et, sachant la forteresse à peu près inexpugnable, on s’inquiétait de moins en moins de la colère des assiégeants.

Dès qu’elle en eut le loisir, Jane Buxton demanda à Amédée Florence pourquoi on avait quitté l’abri de l’Usine pour s’aventurer sur l’Esplanade dans de telles conditions d’infériorité. Le reporter lui fit alors connaître les événements qui s’étaient déroulés depuis qu’elle-même était partie.

Il lui dit comment Tongané ayant donné, un peu après huit heures et demie, le signal qu’on attendait, Marcel Camaret avait envoyé jusqu’au quartier central quelques cartouches de dynamite et une grande quantité d’armes, à l’insu des autres habitants de Blackland. Cette première opération terminée vers onze heures du soir, les assiégés s’étaient réunis, prêts à intervenir dans la bataille qui allait s’engager. C’est alors qu’on s’était aperçu de l’absence de Jane Buxton.

Amédée Florence dépeignit à la jeune fille le désespoir de Saint-Bérain, qui devait être encore dévoré d’inquiétude à l’heure actuelle, s’il avait survécu au dernier combat.

Quoi qu’il en soit, une demi-heure après l’envoi des armes, une forte explosion avait retenti. Tongané venait de faire sauter une des portes du quartier noir, dont toutes les cases commençaient à brûler à la fois, tandis que les esclaves se répandaient dans le Civil Body et y faisaient un terrible massacre, à en juger par les cris qu’on avait alors entendus.

Le reste, Jane le connaissait. Elle savait que les nègres, après avoir envahi l’Esplanade, avaient été refoulés si rapidement qu’on n’avait pas eu le temps de courir à leur aide. On était sorti de l’Usine, toutefois, mais on avait dû battre précipitamment en retraite, la plupart des Noirs ayant déjà évacué l’Esplanade quand on y était arrivé.

Obligés de réintégrer l’Usine, les assiégés y avaient passé une nuit d’angoisse. L’échec de la révolte des esclaves ne leur permettait plus, en effet, d’espérer qu’ils viendraient jamais à bout d’Harry Killer. En outre, ils assistaient, comme Jane elle-même, à la destruction méthodique de la ville par ces explosions successives que celle-ci ne pouvait s’expliquer.

Amédée Florence lui apprit qu’elles étaient l’œuvre de Marcel Camaret devenu complètement fou.

De tout temps, Camaret, inventeur assurément génial, n’en avait pas moins côtoyé les limites de la folie, ainsi le prouvaient nombre de ses anomalies incompatibles avec une intelligence saine et bien équilibrée. Les incidents qui s’étaient multipliés depuis près d’un mois avaient achevé de lui troubler la cervelle.

Les révélations faites par les prisonniers d’Harry Killer, lorsqu’ils s’étaient réfugiés à l’Usine après leur évasion, avaient donné le premier choc. Le second, infiniment plus violent, lui avait été porté par ce Daniel Frasne, recueilli blessé après la destruction du planeur. Depuis qu’il connaissait la vérité tout entière, Marcel Camaret avait glissé de jour en jour à la démence. Jane Buxton devait se rappeler combien fréquemment depuis lors il s’était cloîtré dans son domicile personnel et de quel air triste et sombre il parcourait les ateliers, quand il s’y montrait par hasard.

L’envoi des armes à Tongané avait été son dernier acte lucide. Lorsque la détonation avait éclaté, quand, surtout, les premières flammes avaient jailli du quartier des esclaves et du Civil Body, ceux qui se trouvaient près de lui à ce moment l’avaient vu pâlir tout à coup, en portant la main à sa gorge à la manière de quelqu’un qui étouffe. En même temps, il murmurait très vite des mots à peine articulés et, par suite, difficiles à saisir. On avait cru comprendre, cependant, cette exclamation: “La mort de mon œuvre!… La mort de mon œuvre!…” répétée sans relâche à voix basse.

Pendant longtemps, un quart d’heure peut-être, Marcel Camaret, affectueusement surveillé par ceux qui l’entouraient, avait prononcé ces mots en agitant la tête sans arrêt, puis, tout à coup, il s’était redressé et s’était frappé la poitrine, en criant:

— Dieu a condamné Blackland!…

Dans son esprit, Dieu, c’était lui-même, évidemment, à en juger par le geste dont il accompagnait la sentence de condamnation.

Sans qu’on eût le temps de le retenir, il avait alors pris la fuite, en répétant, toujours d’une voix forte qu’on ne lui connaissait pas.

— Dieu a condamné Blackland!… Dieu a condamné Blackland!…

Il s’était réfugié dans la tour, dont il avait gravi les étages, en fermant toutes les portes derrière lui. Le système défensif de la tour étant identique à celui du Palais, on s’était heurté, pour le rejoindre, à la même impossibilité qui empêchait Harry Killer de quitter la terrasse sur laquelle il était bloqué. Tandis que Camaret s’élevait vers le sommet, on entendait sa voix décroissante répéter toujours:

— Dieu a condamné Blackland!… Dieu a condamné Blackland!…

Presque aussitôt, la première explosion avait retenti.

Sous la conduite de Rigaud, désespéré de voir dans un tel état l’homme génial qu’il adorait, plusieurs ouvriers s’étaient alors, malgré leur faiblesse, élancés dans l’Usine, et avaient essayé d’isoler la tour, en coupant le courant électrique. Mais celle-ci, possédant une réserve d’énergie, et même quelques machines génératrices actionnées par l’air liquide, pouvait se suffire à elle-même pendant plusieurs jours. Les explosions ne s’étaient donc pas interrompues. En revanche, les guêpes, cessant leur ronde protectrice, étaient immédiatement tombées dans le fossé de l’Usine. Force avait donc été de rendre le courant à Camaret, qui, comprenant, malgré sa folie, le marché qu’on lui proposait, avait aussitôt remis en action ces engins défensifs.

La nuit s’était ainsi écoulée, dans un perpétuel énervement, quand, à l’aube, Camaret était apparu sur la plate-forme de la tour. De ce point élevé, il avait prononcé un long discours, dont on n’avait compris que peu de mots isolés. Certains d’entre eux, tels que “colère divine”, “feu du ciel”, “destruction totale”, prouvaient du moins que sa démence n’avait aucune tendance à s’apaiser. Comme conclusion à son discours, Camaret avait crié: “Fuyez!… fuyez tous!…” d’une voix si forte qu’on l’avait entendu de toutes les parties de l’Usine. Puis il était rentré dans la tour, dont il n’était plus sorti.

C’est peu après que s’était produite la première explosion sur la rive gauche. Cette explosion, survenue dans l’Usine même, en avait terrorisé les habitants. Au risque d’être massacrés, ceux-ci s’étaient alors résolus à tenter une sortie, puisqu’ils n’avaient plus de choix qu’entre deux façons de mourir.

Malheureusement, en arrivant sur l’Esplanade, ils s’étaient heurtés aux Merry Fellows, que la muraille leur avait cachés jusque-là, une bataille qui avait fait de nombreuses victimes s’était engagée, et, séparés en deux tronçons, les uns avaient dû se réfugier chez Harry Killer lui-même, tandis que les autres étaient contraints de regagner le quai, non sans parvenir toutefois à fermer la porte de communication de l’Esplanade.

Du Palais, on apercevait ces derniers, en effet. N’osant plus ni se risquer à une nouvelle tentative dont l’inutilité leur était démontrée, ni rentrer dans l’Usine, qui était à la merci du geste d’un fou, mourants de faim, sans force, ils restaient en plein air, étendus sur le sol, exposés aux attaques de leurs ennemis, qui pouvaient à leur gré, soit les fusiller sans risque de l’autre rive de la Red River ou de la terrasse du Palais, soit les prendre à revers par le chemin de ronde.

Parmi eux, Jane Buxton eut la joie d’apercevoir Saint-Bérain et le docteur Châtonnay. Aucun de ses amis, et notamment celui qui, de tous, était le plus cher à son coeur, n’avait donc jusqu’ici perdu la vie dans cette aventure.

Elle venait à peine d’éprouver cette satisfaction relative, quand des coups sourds retentirent aux étages supérieurs du Palais. On reconnut aisément que ces coups provenaient de la terrasse, dont ceux qui y étaient prisonniers s’efforçaient de desceller les dalles. Mais la construction était solide et résistait vaillamment.

Si William Ferney et ses compagnons, qui devaient manquer de vivres eux aussi, n’étaient pas réduits à l’impuissance par leur faiblesse, nul doute, cependant, qu’ils ne dussent finalement réussir dans leur tentative. En effet, un peu après six heures du soir, le plancher de la terrasse était traversé, et on devait évacuer le troisième étage.

On se réfugia au deuxième, sans oublier de fermer derrière soi les portes blindées, puis on attendit.

Jane Buxton profita de ce répit pour mettre Barsac et Amédée Florence au courant de ses aventures personnelles depuis qu’elle avait quitté l’Usine. Elle leur expliqua la constitution de sa famille, et, invoquant le témoignage de son frère Lewis, dont elle raconta l’audacieux enlèvement et le long martyre, elle leur dit quelle douloureuse découverte elle avait faite en reconnaissant, dans Harry Killer, son autre frère, William Ferney, depuis longtemps disparu. Si donc le sort voulait qu’elle ne revît pas l’Angleterre, Amédée Florence et Barsac pourraient ainsi être garants de George et de Lewis Buxton, accusés tous deux de crimes qu’ils n’avaient pas commis.

Vers sept heures du soir, le plafond du deuxième étage commença à être ébranlé par des coups sourds, comme l’avait été précédemment celui du troisième. William Ferney et sa bande, après un repos nécessité par leur fatigue, s’étaient remis au travail. Il fallut descendre encore.

Le percement du second plafond exigea les mêmes efforts que celui du premier. Jusqu’à deux heures du matin, les coups résonnèrent sans interruption à travers le Palais. Il y eut alors un silence de deux heures, que William Ferney employa à passer du troisième étage au deuxième et à prendre un nouveau repos, de plus en plus nécessaire.

Les coups ne recommencèrent à retentir, au plafond du premier étage cette fois, que vers quatre heures du matin. Sans attendre que ce plafond fût traversé, tout le monde se réfugia au rez-de-chaussée, non sans barrer le chemin, comme on l’avait fait jusqu’ici, au moyen des portes blindées que personne n’essayait même plus, d’ailleurs, de forcer.

C’était la dernière retraite qui fût permise aux assiégés. Quand William Ferney serait venu à bout des deux plafonds qui les séparaient encore de lui, quand les canons des fusils apparaîtraient au-dessus de leurs têtes, il leur faudrait, soit se réfugier dans les cachots du sous-sol, soit reculer, reculer toujours jusqu’au moment où ils seraient arrêtés par la muraille extérieure du Palais. Il ne leur resterait plus alors qu’à mourir.

Pendant que William Ferney s’efforçait de supprimer l’avant-dernier des obstacles qui barraient sa route, le soleil se leva dans un ciel sans nuages. On put alors se rendre compte de l’étendue du désastre. Quoi qu’il fît, le despote de Blackland ne régnerait plus désormais que sur des ruines.

La ville était entièrement détruite. Deux uniques maisons étaient encore debout, au centre du quartier des Merry Fellows, juste en face du Palais. Quelques minutes après le lever du soleil, elles s’effondraient à leur tour, achevant ainsi la complète dévastation de la rive droite.

Non seulement les explosions n’en furent pas interrompues, mais elles se précipitèrent de plus en plus, au contraire. Après la rive droite, Marcel Camaret s’attaquait à la rive gauche, et c’était au tour de l’Usine de tomber progressivement en ruines. Il dirigeait, d’ailleurs, avec une prudente habileté l’œuvre de destruction. S’il abattait les maisons ouvrières, les ateliers, les magasins de réserve, petit à petit, par morceaux, comme s’il eût voulu prolonger son plaisir, il n’avait garde de toucher aux parties essentielles, c’est-à-dire aux machines produisant l’énergie dont il faisait un si terrible usage.

À la première explosion qui retentit sur la rive gauche, les Merry Fellows de l’Esplanade, qui pendant les dernières heures de la nuit étaient restés assez tranquilles et paraissaient avoir renoncé à leurs infructueuses tentatives contre la porte, répondirent par de violentes clameurs et se ruèrent de nouveau contre le Palais.

Leur acharnement avait vraiment de quoi surprendre les assiégés. Pourquoi s’obstinaient-ils ainsi? Maintenant que Blackland n’existait plus, que pouvaient-ils espérer? N’eussent-ils pas mieux fait d’abandonner cette ville morte et de chercher à gagner le Niger?

Quelques mots prononcés sur l’Esplanade, et qu’on surprit à travers la porte, expliquèrent la conduite des Merry Fellows. Ceux-ci ne songeaient guère à délivrer leur chef, qu’ils accusaient, d’ailleurs, de trahison, et ne pensaient, en effet, qu’à s’éloigner de ces lieux désolés, mais, auparavant, ils entendaient s’emparer des trésors, que, d’après la légende ayant cours parmi eux, celui qu’ils appelaient Harry Killer devait avoir ramassés dans son Palais. Quand ils se les seraient partagés, ils s’empresseraient de déguerpir et d’aller chercher fortune sous d’autres cieux.

Les assiégés leur eussent bien volontiers donné cette satisfaction. Malheureusement, leur ignorance de l’endroit où se trouvait la cachette, si elle existait toutefois, de l’ex-despote de Blackland, ne leur permettait pas de se débarrasser ainsi de leurs ennemis.

Jusqu’à neuf heures du matin, sauf les explosions de plus en plus précipitées qu’on entendait du côté de l’Usine, la situation demeura stationnaire. William Ferney travaillait toujours à percer le plafond du premier étage, dans lequel il n’avait pas encore pénétré, tandis que les Merry Fellows continuaient à s’acharner contre la porte, qui ne semblait pas s’en porter plus mal.

Mais, à ce moment, ces derniers modifièrent leur tactique. Cessant de s’épuiser en vain contre la porte elle-même, ils s’attaquèrent à la maçonnerie qui l’entourait. Pendant une heure, on entendit le bruit de leurs outils effritant la pierre, puis, cette heure écoulée, une forte explosion fit voler en éclats la partie inférieure d’un pied-droit. Les Merry Fellows s’étaient enfin avisés de forer un trou de mine, et, avec la poudre de plusieurs cartouches, ils avaient fait sauter l'obstacle qu'ils ne pouvaient forcer.

La porte tenait bon, cependant, mais elle était ébranlée, et une seconde charge d'explosif la ferait irrémédiablement tomber. Déjà, par le trou pratiqué dans la maçonnerie, des gueules de fusils apparaissaient, menaçantes.

Les assiégés durent quitter le vestibule et se réfugier dans une partie plus reculée du Palais, tandis que les Merry Fellows commençaient le second trou de mine.

Presque au même instant, un bruit d'éboulement démontra que le troisième plafond attaqué venait de céder à son tour. Quelques minutes plus tard, les assiégés entendaient marcher au premier étage, et les coups reprenaient directement au-dessus de leur tête.

La situation commençait à devenir réellement désespérée. Au-dehors, trois ou quatre cents Merry Fellows, qui seraient dans la place avant une demi-heure. Au-dessus d'eux, une vingtaine de bandits déterminés, qui, dans le même laps de temps peut-être, fusilleraient librement le rez-de-chaussée à travers le plafond. Les malheureux n'essayaient même plus de lutter contre le sort. Jane et Lewis Buxton, Amédée Florence et Barsac, s'efforçaient en vain de les réconforter. Étendus sur le sol, ils attendaient, résignés, le coup qui allait les frapper.

Mais la face des choses fut soudain changée du tout au tout. Simultanément, les Merry Fellows et William Ferney interrompirent leur travail. Une détonation, qu'on ne pouvait confondre avec les explosions qui continuaient à se produire dans le voisinage, venait de retentir et s'était répercutée dans tout le Palais. Cette détonation, provenant d'un coup de canon, selon toute apparence, fut suivie de plusieurs autres, et il ne s’était pas écoulé cinq minutes, que la muraille séparant, dans le Sud-Est, l’Esplanade de la campagne s’écroulait tout à coup sur une assez grande longueur.

Un concert d’horribles imprécations partit alors du groupe des Merry Fellows, dont quelques-uns allèrent jeter par la brèche un coup d’oeil au-dehors. Il est à supposer que ce qu’ils aperçurent ne fut pas de leur goût, car ils se mirent aussitôt à gesticuler comme des gens affolés, et coururent retrouver leurs compagnons, avec lesquels ils tinrent un rapide conciliabule. Bientôt après, tandis que William Ferney, renonçant à atteindre le rez-de-chaussée, remontait dans la tour en toute hâte, ils se précipitaient en désordre vers l’autre rive. Se pressant, se bousculant dans une inexplicable panique, ils s’efforçaient d’y arriver, quand une nouvelle explosion, qui coûta la vie à une cinquantaine des leurs, détruisit à la fois le Castle’s Bridge et le Garden’s Bridge. Toute communication étant ainsi coupée avec la rive droite, ceux des Merry Fellows qui n’étaient pas encore engagés sur le pont, au moment où celui-ci avait sauté, n’hésitèrent pas à se jeter dans la rivière, qu’ils franchirent à la nage.

En un instant, l’Esplanade fut déserte, et, sauf les explosions qui continuaient à éclater à intervalles réguliers, un grand silence succéda brusquement à tout ce vacarme. Les assiégés, étonnés, ne savaient que faire, lorsqu’un angle du palais même s’écroula tout à coup. Marcel Camaret, parachevant son œuvre de destruction, commençait à rendre la place intenable. Il fallait fuir.

Ils s’élancèrent donc sur l’Esplanade, et, curieux de connaître les causes de la panique des Merry Fellows, ils coururent, à leur tour, vers la brèche de l’enceinte. Ils ne l’avaient pas atteinte, qu’une sonnerie de clairon retentissait au-dehors, de l’autre côté de la muraille encore partiellement debout.

Ne pouvant croire à la délivrance que cette sonnerie leur annonçait, ils s’arrêtèrent interdits, de même que s’arrêtaient ceux de leurs compagnons qui s’étaient réfugiés sur le quai, et qui en arrivaient au même moment.

C’est donc groupés au milieu de l’Esplanade que le capitaine Marcenay, car c’était lui, ainsi qu’on l’a aisément deviné, dont les coups de canon et les sonneries de clairon annonçaient l’intervention, aperçut tout d’abord ces malheureux, hâves, amaigris, défaits, tremblants de fatigue et d’inanition.

Ceux-ci, quand les tirailleurs apparurent sur la brèche, voulurent aller à leur rencontre, mais si grandes étaient la faiblesse et l’émotion de ces pauvres gens qu’ils purent seulement tendre les bras à leurs sauveurs, tandis que plusieurs d’entre eux tombaient sur le sol et y restaient inanimés.

Tel est le spectacle lamentable que le capitaine Marcenay eut sous les yeux, quand, à la tête de ses hommes, il arriva sur l’Esplanade. Au-delà de la rivière, une énorme étendue de ruines, d’où s’échappaient des tourbillons de fumée; à droite et à gauche, deux imposantes constructions, en partie écroulées, dominées l’une et l’autre par une tour élevée encore intacte; devant lui, une vaste place jonchée de corps au nombre de plusieurs centaines, les uns à jamais immobiles rejetés sur le pourtour, les autres, au milieu de cette place, réunis en un groupe compact, d’où s’élevaient des gémissements et des plaintes.

C’est vers ce groupe que le capitaine Marcenay se dirigea, puisque c’est là seulement qu’il y avait des vivants. Aurait-il du moins le bonheur d’y trouver celle qu’il cherchait, celle qu’il voulait sauver avant tous les autres?

Il fut bientôt rassuré. En apercevant le capitaine Marcenay, Jane Buxton, dans un sursaut d'énergie, s'était redressée et s'avançait au-devant de lui! Le capitaine eut peine à reconnaître dans cette pauvre créature au teint livide, aux joues creuses, aux yeux brillants de fièvre, celle qu'il avait quittée, moins de trois mois auparavant, si resplendissante de force et de santé. Il s'élança vers elle, juste à temps pour la recevoir évanouie dans ses bras.

Pendant qu'il s'empressait à la secourir, deux terribles explosions firent trembler le sol de chaque côté de l'Esplanade. L'Usine et le Palais s'étaient écroulés à la fois. Au-dessus de leurs ruines, seules, les deux tours s'élevaient, hautes, solides, intactes.

Au sommet de celle du Palais, on apercevait

William Ferney, les huit conseillers, les neuf domestiques nègres et cinq hommes de la Garde noire, soit, en tout, vingt-trois personnes, qui, penchées sur le parapet, semblaient appeler à leur secours.

Sur le sommet de l'autre, il n'y avait qu'un homme. Trois fois de suite, cet homme fit le tour de la plate-forme, en adressant à l'horizon un incompréhensible discours accompagné de grands gestes. Il devait le hurler cependant, ce discours, puisque, malgré la distance, on entendit, à deux reprises, ces mots distinctement prononcés:

— Malheur!… Malheur à Blackland!

Ces mots, William Ferney dut les entendre, lui aussi, car on le vit faire tout à coup un mouvement de fureur, saisir un fusil, et tirer sans viser dans la direction de la tour de l'Usine, dont près de quatre cents mètres le séparaient.

Bien qu’envoyée au jugé, la balle dut, pourtant, arriver à son adresse. Marcel Camaret porta, en effet, la main à sa poitrine, et disparut en chancelant dans la tour.

Presque aussitôt retentit une double explosion, plus violente qu’aucune de celles qui l’avaient précédée, et, simultanément, les deux tours, écrasant sous leurs ruines, l’une William Ferney et ses compagnons, l’autre Marcel Camaret lui-même, s’abîmèrent dans un formidable fracas.

À ce bruit assourdissant, succéda un profond silence. Terrifiés, les spectateurs de la catastrophe regardaient encore quand il n’y avait plus rien à voir, et ils écoutaient quand il n’y avait plus rien à entendre.

Tout était terminé maintenant. Blackland, détruite de fond en comble par celui-là même qui l’avait créée, n’était plus que ruines et décombres. De l’œuvre admirable mais néfaste de Marcel Camaret, il ne subsistait rien.

CHAPITRE 15

Conclusion

Ainsi périrent Marcel Camaret et William Ferney, alias Harry Killer. Ainsi périrent également cette étonnante ville de Blackland, qui avait pu naître à l’insu de tous, et les merveilleuses inventions qu’elle contenait.

De l’une et des autres, il ne restait qu’un monceau de ruines, qui ne tarderait pas à disparaître sous un linceul de sable. Les nuages allaient cesser de déverser la pluie bienfaisante, la Red River serait tarie et redeviendrait un oued aride que n’humecterait plus la moindre goutte d’eau, les champs se dessécheraient, et le désert, reprenant son empire, monterait à l’assaut de cette création des hommes dont bientôt la dernière trace serait effacée.

Par la volonté de son auteur, l’œuvre de

Camaret était morte tout entière, et rien ne transmettrait aux âges futurs le nom de l’inventeur génial et dément.

Le capitaine Marcenay abrégea autant que cela fut en son pouvoir son séjour dans ces lieux désolés. Plus d’un mois s’écoula, cependant avant qu’on pût s’engager sur la route du retour. Il fallut inhumer les cadavres au nombre de plusieurs centaines, panser les blessés, attendre que ceux-ci fussent en état de supporter le voyage, et aussi laisser le temps de reprendre des forces à ceux qu’on venait de délivrer, à la dernière minute on peut le dire.

Beaucoup, parmi l’ancien personnel de l’Usine, ne reverraient pas leur patrie. Une vingtaine d’ouvriers, trois femmes et deux enfants étaient morts, tombés sous les coups des Merry Fellows. Mais le sort avait protégé les membres officiels et officieux de la mission Barsac. Sauf Amédée Florence, atteint d’une blessure insignifiante, ils étaient tous indemnes, jusqu’à Tongané et à Malik, qui avaient repris le cours de leur idylle, laquelle consistait à se donner réciproquement de bonnes bourrades en riant de toutes leurs dents.

Pendant que ceux qu’il avait sauvés se remettaient de leurs épreuves, pendant que les blessures se cicatrisaient, le capitaine Marcenay fit la chasse à la population dispersée de Blackland. À ceux des Blancs qui résistèrent, une balle eut bientôt fait entendre raison. On entrava les autres, sur le sort desquels il serait statué ultérieurement. Quant aux anciens esclaves, on parvint à les rassurer et à les réunir peu à peu. Ramenés au Niger, ils se disperseraient à leur gré, et chacun regagnerait son village et sa famille.

Ce fut seulement le 10 juin que put s’ébranler la colonne, d’ailleurs bien pourvue de vivres trouvés en abondance dans les ruines de la ville et dans la campagne environnante. Quelques blessés, les plus grièvement touchés, n’étaient pas encore en état de marcher et durent être transportés sur des brancards. Mais il était grand temps de se mettre en route. On entrait dans la saison des pluies, qui, au Soudan, s’appelle l’hivernage, bien qu’elle coïncide avec l’été astronomique. Pour l’une et pour l’autre raison, le train allait donc être assez lent.

On ne suivra pas, étape par étape, ce voyage de retour, qui, s’il fut parfois pénible, s’accomplit du moins sans incident grave et sans danger vraiment sérieux. Six semaines après avoir quitté les ruines de Blackland, la colonne commandée par le capitaine Marcenay arrivait à Tombouctou. Deux mois plus tard, les héros de ces dramatiques aventures débarquaient en Europe, les uns en Angleterre, les autres en France.

Il suffira de peu de mots pour renseigner le lecteur sur ce qui leur advint ultérieurement.

À tout seigneur, tout honneur. M. Poncin réintégra son ministère, et se livra, comme devant, aux douceurs de la statistique. Il continue à découvrir de temps à autre des choses réellement “étonnantes”. Le nombre moyen des cheveux dans les diverses races du monde et l’allongement moyen des ongles, par an, par mois, par heure et par seconde, aux diverses saisons de l’année, constituent ses dernières trouvailles.

M. Poncin est donc heureux et le restera tant qu’il y aura sur la terre quelque chose à compter.

Un point noir, pourtant, dans son existence: il n’a pu résoudre jusqu’ici le problème posé par Amédée Florence. Mais rien n’est parfait ici-bas.

Le docteur Châtonnay a repris le collier professionnel et retrouvé ses clients, dont la santé commençait à devenir par trop insolente. Depuis qu’ils ont leur thérapeute, tout est remis en bon ordre; ils peuvent se payer le luxe d’être malades, et, selon leur caprice, mais toujours avec profit, puisque c’est maintenant par ordre du médecin, aller et venir ou garder, soit le lit, soit la chambre.

M. le député Barsac, tout au moins, “garde la chambre”, mais la sienne a un grand C. Bien que la question de l’électorat des nègres ait été enterrée pour longtemps, la défaite de la théorie soutenue par le député du Midi n’a aucunement desservi son auteur. Il apparut, bien au contraire, que les épreuves subies, que les dangers courus lui donnaient droit à une compensation. Sa situation est donc plus solide que jamais, et l'on commence à parler de lui pour le prochain ministère des Colonies.

Malik et Tongané ont quitté l'Afrique. Ils ont suivi leur maîtresse en Angleterre et se sont mariés. Sur le sol britannique prospère actuellement une assez jolie collection de négrillons, dont les premiers sont déjà grands.

Saint-Bérain… Mais Saint-Bérain n'a pas d'histoire. Il pêche, il chasse, il appelle "Madame" ses interlocuteurs moustachus, et "Monsieur" ceux du sexe opposé. Telles sont ses occupations principales. Pour le surplus, l'histoire de Saint-Bérain est celle même de Jane Buxton, et, comme celle de Jane Buxton est intimement unie à ce qui concerne son frère Lewis et le capitaine Marcenay, le sort de ces quatre personnes peut être indiqué en même temps.

Ainsi qu'on peut le supposer, le capitaine Marcenay, ayant, dès son retour à Tombouctou, demandé au colonel Allègre un congé, qui fut, cette fois, accordé sans difficulté, accompagna Jane Buxton, Lewis et Saint-Bérain en

Angleterre.

Pendant le mois passé sur les ruines de Blackland, il avait eu tout le loisir de raconter à celle qui était désormais sa fiancée par quel merveilleux prodige la dépêche de Marcel Camaret était arrivée à son adresse à travers l'impondérable éther, sa démarche aussitôt faite auprès du colonel Allègre, et quelles avaient été ses angoisses en se heurtant au refus catégorique de celui-ci. Heureusement, dès le lendemain, on avait eu la réponse du colonel Saint-Auban. Non seulement le colonel déclarait faux l'ordre remis par le soi-disant lieutenant Lacour, mais encore il prescrivait de se porter immédiatement au secours de M. le député Barsac, sur le sort duquel il y avait lieu de concevoir des inquiétudes légitimes. L’expédition avait été aussitôt organisée, et, en descendant d’abord le Niger jusqu’à Gao, en traversant ensuite le désert, le capitaine Marcenay, amenant, au prix d’énormes difficultés, un canon de campagne avec lui, avait gagné Blackland à marches forcées.

À peine débarquée en Angleterre, Jane

Buxton, accompagnée de son frère, du capitaine Marcenay et de Saint-Bérain, se rendit par les voies les plus rapides au château de Glenor, où une dépêche l’avait précédée. Près d’un an s’était alors écoulé, depuis qu’elle l’avait quitté. Elle y revenait ayant réussi dans son entreprise, l’honneur de sa famille restauré par elle ad integrum.

Comment allait-elle trouver son père? Le vieillard, alors âgé de quatre-vingt-quatre ans, avait-il eu la force de supporter l’absence de sa fille, et de résister à la honte nouvelle que le pillage de l’agence de la Central Bank avait nécessairement fait rejaillir sur son second fils? Certes, les journaux, après avoir fait le mal, s’étaient efforcés de le réparer. Par les soins d’Amédée Florence, dès que celui-ci avait eu la possibilité de communiquer avec l’Europe, ils avaient proclamé urbi et orbi l’innocence de George et de Lewis Buxton. Mais lord Glenor avait-il lu ces journaux, et ce grand bonheur ne venait-il pas trop tard? Jane Buxton n’ignorait pas dans quel état était son père depuis le drame de la Central Bank. Quel que fût son chagrin, sa hâte de le revoir n’en était que plus grande.

Elle arriva enfin, et put s’agenouiller au chevet du vieillard condamné à l’immobilité définitive. Les yeux de celui-ci, toutefois, brillants d’intelligence, montraient que la lucidité du cerveau était intacte.

Jane Buxton, entourée de Lewis, de Saint-Bérain et du capitaine Marcenay, dont elle expliqua le rôle, fit à son père le récit complet de son voyage. Elle nomma ceux dont elle possédait le témoignage, et montra le procès-verbal rédigé au bord de la tombe de Koubo. Elle révéla ce que les journaux avaient tu jusqu'alors, la haine que le misérable William Ferney avait vouée à la famille Buxton et par quels procédés il l'avait si affreusement satisfaite.

Tout se tenait. Lord Glenor ne pouvait conserver aucun doute. Si l'un de ses fils était mort, l'honneur de tous deux était sauf.

Le vieillard, les yeux fixés sur sa fille, avait écouté attentivement. Quand elle eut terminé, un peu de sang rougit son visage, ses lèvres tremblèrent, un frémissement le parcourut de la tête aux pieds. Visiblement, sa volonté luttait contre le poids des chaînes dont son corps épuisé subissait l'implacable étreinte.

Ceux qui assistaient à ce combat tragique eurent tout à coup une indicible émotion. La volonté, plus forte, triomphait. Pour la première fois, depuis tant de mois, lord Glenor faisait un mouvement. Il parlait!

Son visage transfiguré se tourna vers Jane, et, tandis que sa main tremblante allait chercher celle de la courageuse fille qui s'était dévouée pour lui, sa bouche murmura:

— Merci!

Puis, comme s'il eût perdu, à partir de cet instant, toute raison de vivre, il poussa un profond soupir, ferma les yeux et cessa de respirer.

On se précipita vainement à son secours. Lord Buxton Glenor était entré dans la paix éternelle comme on glisse au sommeil du soir. Il était mort, doucement, comme on s’endort.

Ici se termine cette histoire.

De tous ses personnages, on connaît maintenant le sort: Barsac, futur ministre; M. Poncin, ivre de statistique; le docteur Châtonnay, retourné à ses malades; Saint-Bérain, heureux près de sa tante-nièce, et celle-ci heureuse femme du capitaine Marcenay; Lewis Buxton, arrivé au sommet de la Central Bank; Malik et Tongané enfin, mère et père d’une flatteuse progéniture.

Quant à moi…

Allons bon!… Voilà que je vends la mèche avant l’heure!… Disons donc: quant à Amédée Florence, il reprit ses fonctions à l’Expansion française, où il publia le récit de ses aventures, que son directeur estima valoir trente centimes la ligne. Afin d’augmenter sa pécune, le reporter, qui n’est pas riche, eut l’idée de tirer deux moutures d’un seul sac, et, sur le même sujet, tenta de faire un roman.

Un roman, dites-vous?… Quel roman?…

Eh! mais, celui-ci même, amis lecteurs, celui que vous venez de lire d’un bout à l’autre, puisque vous en arrivez à ces lignes.

En profond psychologue, Amédée Florence a judicieusement pensé que, s’il racontait tout bonnement des faits véritables, on bâillerait à se décrocher la mâchoire, tandis que ces mêmes faits, racontés sous le voile de la fiction, auraient chance de distraire un instant le lecteur. Le monde est ainsi fait. L’Histoire, avec un grand H, nous assomme. Les histoires seules nous amusent… quelquefois! Que voulez-vous, on n’est pas sérieux en France!

Ces aventures étant authentiques, malheureusement pour lui, Amédée Florence, dissimulant sa personnalité avec une adresse à laquelle il rend tout le premier un public hommage, les a donc “camouflées” en roman, dont il espère bien vendre un nombre respectable d’éditions. Cette façon de passer d’un article de journal à des notes écrites au jour le jour, puis à un récit de forme impersonnelle, cette malice de “blaguer” son style un peu audacieux et d’aller jusqu’à se traiter de brave et spirituel garçon, ces petits coups de patte, ces petits coups d’encensoir, autant de ficelles, de “trucs”, de procédés, d’artifices littéraires, pour mieux cacher le véritable auteur.

Mais voici que celui-ci est parvenu à la fin de sa tâche. Bon ou mauvais, amusant ou ennuyeux, le livre est là, maintenant. Sans inconvénients ni dangers, l’incognito peut donc être dévoilé, l’histoire peut être proclamée véritable, et celui qui la rédigea, votre très humble et respectueux serviteur, peut la signer de son nom: Amédée Florence, reporter à l’Expansion française, avant d’écrire le grand mot, le mot sublime, le roi des mots, le mot:

FIN

The Short Stories

MARTIN PAZ

Translated by Anne T. Wilbur

This novella was written in 1851 and appeared in *Musée des Familles*. It tells the story of an Indian in Lima, Peru, called Martin, who is in love with the daughter of Samuel, a businessman whose only concern is to obtain a large dowry for her. At the time of publication, the Indians fought against the Spanish rule, which considerably increased the interest of readers for this book.

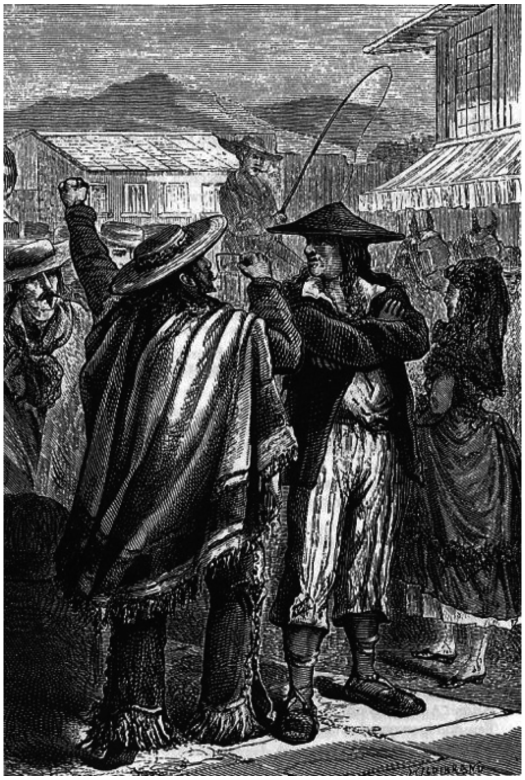

An original illustration

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CHAPTER I.

THE PLAZA-MAYOR.

The sun had disappeared behind the snowy peaks of the Cordilleras; but the beautiful Peruvian sky long retains, through the transparent veil of night, the reflection of his rays; the atmosphere is impregnated with a refreshing coolness, which in these burning latitudes affords freedom of breath; it is the hour in which one can live a European life, and seek without on the verandas some cooling gentle zephyr; it seems as if a metallic roof was then interposed between the sun and the earth, which, retaining the heat and suffering only the light to pass, offers beneath its shelter a reparative repose.

This much desired hour had at last sounded from the clock of the cathedral. While the earliest stars were rising above the horizon, the numerous promenaders were traversing the streets of Lima, wrapped in their light mantles, and conversing gravely on the most trivial affairs. There was a great movement of the populace on the Plaza-Mayor, that forum of the ancient city of kings; artisans were profiting by the coolness to quit their daily labors; they circulated actively among the crowd, crying their various merchandise; the ladies of Lima, carefully enveloped in the mantillas which mask their countenances, with the exception of the right eye, darted stealthy glances on the surrounding masses; they undulated through the groups of smokers, like foam at the will of the waves; other señoras, in ball costume, *coiffed* only with their abundant hair or some natural flowers, passed in large calêches, throwing on the *caballeros* nonchalant regards.

But these glances were not bestowed indiscriminately upon the young cavaliers; the thoughts of the noble ladies could rest only on aristocratic heights. The Indians passed without lifting their eyes upon them, knowing themselves to be beneath their notice; betraying by no gesture or word, the bitter envy of their hearts. They contrasted strongly with the half-breeds, or mestizoes, who, repulsed like the former, vented their indignation in cries and protestations.

The proud descendants of Pizarro marched with heads high, as in the times when their ancestors founded the city of kings; their traditional scorn rested alike on the Indians whom they had conquered, and the mestizoes, born of their relations with the natives of the New World. The Indians, on the contrary, were constantly struggling to break their chains, and cherished alike aversion toward the conquerors of the ancient empire of the Incas and their haughty and insolent descendants.

But the mestizoes, Spanish in their contempt for the Indians, and Indian in their hatred which they had vowed against the Spaniards, burned with both these vivid and impassioned sentiments.

A group of these young people stood near the pretty fountain in the centre of the Plaza-Mayor. Clad in their *poncho*, a piece of cloth or cotton in the form of a parallelogram, with an opening in the middle to give passage to the head, in large pantaloons, striped with a thousand colors, *coiffed* with broad-brimmed hats of Guayaquil straw, they were talking, declaiming, gesticulating.

“You are right, André,” said a very obsequious young man, whom they called Milleflores.

This was the friend, the parasite of André Certa, a young mestizo of swarthy complexion, whose thin beard gave a singular appearance to his countenance.

André Certa, the son of a rich merchant killed in the last *émeute* of the conspirator Lafuente, had inherited a large fortune; this he freely scattered among his friends, whose humble salutations he demanded in exchange for handfuls of gold.

“Of what use are these changes in government, these eternal *pronunciamentos* which disturb Peru to gratify private ambition?” resumed André, in a loud voice; “what is it to me whether Gambarra or Santa Cruz rule, if there is no equality.”

“Well said,” exclaimed Milleflores, who, under the most republican government, could never have been the equal of a man of sense.

“How is it,” resumed André Certa, “that I, the son of a merchant, can ride only in a calêche drawn by mules? Have not my ships brought wealth and prosperity to the country? Is not the aristocracy of piasters worth all the titles of Spain?”

“It is a shame!” resumed the young mestizo. “There is Don Fernand, who passes in his carriage drawn by two horses! Don Fernand d’Aiquillo! He has scarcely property enough to feed his coachman and horses, and he must come to parade himself proudly about the square. And, hold! here is another! the Marquis Don Vegal!”

A magnificent carriage, drawn by four fine horses, at that moment entered the Plaza-Mayor; its only occupant was a man of proud mien, mingled with sadness; he gazed, without seeming to see them, on the multitude assembled to breathe the coolness of the evening. This man was the Marquis Don Vegal, knight of Alcantara, of Malta, and of Charles III. He had a right to appear in this pompous equipage; the viceroy and the archbishop could alone take precedence of him; but this great nobleman came here from ennui and not from ostentation; his thoughts were not depicted on his countenance, they were concentrated beneath his bent brow; he received no impression from exterior objects, on which he bestowed not a look, and heard not the envious reflections of the mestizoes, when his four horses made their way through the crowd.

“I hate that man,” said André Certa.

“You will not hate him long.”

“I know it! All these nobles are displaying the last splendors of their luxury; I can tell where their silver and their family jewels go.”

“You have not your entrée with the Jew Samuel for nothing.”

“Certainly not! On his account-books are inscribed aristocratic creditors; in his strong-box are piled the wrecks of great fortunes; and in the day when the Spaniards shall be as ragged as their Cæsar de Bazan, we will have fine sport.”

“Yes, we will have fine sport, dear André, mounted on your millions, on a golden pedestal! And you are about to double your fortune! When are you to marry the beautiful young daughter of old Samuel, a Limanienne to the end of her nails, with nothing Jewish about her but her name of Sarah?”

“In a month,” replied André Certa, proudly, “there will be no fortune in Peru which can compete with mine.”

“But why,” asked some one, “do you not espouse some Spanish girl of high descent?”

“I despise these people as much as I hate them.”

André Certa concealed the fact of his having been repulsed by several noble families, into which he had sought to introduce himself.

His interlocutor still wore an expression of doubt, and the brow of the mestizo had contracted, when the latter was rudely elbowed by a man of tall stature, whose gray hairs proclaimed him to be at least fifty, while the muscular force of his firmly knit limbs seemed undiminished by age.

This man was clad in a brown vest, through which appeared a coarse shirt with a broad collar; his short breeches, striped with green, were fastened by red garters to stockings of clay-color; on his feet were sandals made of *ojotas*, ox-hide prepared for this purpose; beneath his high-pointed hat gleamed large ear-rings. His complexion was dark. After having jostled André Certa, he looked at him fixedly, but with no particular expression.

“Miserable Indian!” exclaimed the mestizo, raising his hand upon him.

His companions restrained him. Milleflores, whose face was pale with terror, exclaimed:

“André! André! take care.”

“A vile slave! to presume to elbow me!”

“It is a madman! it is the *Sambo*!”

The *Sambo*, as the name indicated, was an Indian of the mountains; he continued to fix his eyes on the mestizo, whom he had intentionally jostled. The latter, whose anger was unbounded, had seized a poignard at his girdle, and was about to have rushed on the impassable aggressor, when a guttural cry, like that of the *cilguero*, (a kind of linnet of Peru,) re-echoed in the midst of the tumult of promenaders, and the Sambo disappeared.

“Brutal and cowardly!” exclaimed André.

“Control yourself,” said Milleflores, softly. “Let us leave the Plaza-Mayor; the Limanienne ladies are too haughty here.”

As he said these words, the brave Milleflores looked cautiously around to see whether he was not within reach of the foot or arm of some Indian in the neighborhood.

“In an hour, I must be at the house of Jew Samuel,” said André.

“In an hour! we have time to pass to the *Calle del Peligro*; you can offer some oranges or ananas to the charming *tapadas* who promenade there. Shall we go, gentlemen?”

The group directed their steps toward the extremity of the square, and began to descend the street of Danger, where Milleflores hoped his good looks would be appreciated; but it was nightfall, and the young Limaniennes merited better than ever their name of *tapadas* (hidden), for they drew their mantles more closely over their countenances.

The Plaza-Mayor was all alive; the cries and the tumult were redoubled; the guards on horseback, stationed before the central portico of the viceroy’s palace, situated on the north side of the square, could scarcely maintain their position amid the shifting crowd; there were merchants for all customers and customers for all merchants. The greatest variety of trades seemed to be congregated there, and from the *Portal de Escribanos* to the *Portal de Botoneros*, there was one immense display of articles of every kind, the Plaza-Mayor serving at once as promenade, bazaar, market and fair. The ground-floor of the viceroy’s palace is occupied by shops; along the first story runs an immense gallery where the crowd can promenade on days of public rejoicing; on the east side of the square rises the cathedral, with its steeples and light balustrades, proudly adorning its two towers; the basement story of the edifice being ten feet high, and containing warehouses full of the products of tropical climates.

In the centre of this square is situated the beautiful fountain, constructed in 1653, by the orders of the viceroy, the Comte de Salvatierra. From the top of the pillar, which rises in the middle of the fountain and is surmounted with a statue of Fame, the water falls in sheets, and is discharged into a basin beneath through the mouths of lions. It is here that the water-carriers (*aguadores*) load their mules with barrels, attach a bell to a hoop, and mount behind their liquid merchandise.

This square is therefore noisy from morning till evening, and when the stars of night rise above the snowy summits of the Cordilleras, the tumult of the *élite* of Lima equals the matinal hubbub of the merchants.

Nevertheless, when the *oracion* (evening *angelus*) sounds from the bell of the cathedral, all this noise suddenly ceases; to the clamor of pleasure succeeds the murmur of prayer; the women pause in their walk and put their hands on their rosaries, invoking the Virgin Mary. Then, not a merchant dares sell his merchandise, not a customer thinks of buying, and this square, so recently animated, seems to have become a vast solitude.

While the Limanians paused and knelt at the sound of the *angelus*, a young girl, carefully surrounded by her discreet mantle, sought to pass through the praying multitude; she was followed by a mestizo woman, a sort of duenna, who watched every glance and step. The duenna, as if she had not understood the warning bell, continued her way through the devout populace: to the general surprise succeeded harsh epithets. The young girl would have stopped, but the duenna kept on.

“Do you see that daughter of Satan?” said some one near her.

“Who is that *balarina* — that impious dancer?”

“It is one of the Carcaman women.” (A reproachful name bestowed upon Europeans.)

The young girl at last stopped, blushing and confused.

Suddenly a *gaucho*, a merchant of mules, seized her by the shoulder, and would have compelled her to kneel; but he had scarcely laid his hand upon her when a vigorous arm rudely felled him to the ground. This scene, rapid as lightning, was followed by a moment of confusion.

“Save yourself, miss,” said a gentle and respectful voice in the ear of the young girl.

The latter turned, pale with terror, and saw a young Indian of tall stature, who, with his arms tranquilly folded, was awaiting with firm foot the attack of his adversary.

“We are lost!” exclaimed the duenna; “*niña, niña,* let us go, for the love of God!” and she seized the arm of the young girl, who disappeared, while the crowd rose and dispersed.

The *gaucho* had risen, bruised with his fall, and thinking it not prudent to seek revenge, rejoined his mules, muttering threats.

CHAPTER II.

EVENING IN THE STREETS OF LIMA.

Night had succeeded, almost without intervening twilight, the glare of day. The two women quickened their pace, for it was late; the young girl, still under the influence of strong emotion, maintained silence, while the duenna murmured some mysterious paternosters — they walked rapidly through one of the sloping streets leading from the Plaza-Mayor.

This place is situated more than four hundred feet above the level of the sea, and about a hundred and fifty rods from the bridge thrown over the river Rimac, which forms the diameter of the city of Lima, arranged in a semicircle.

The city of Lima lies in the valley of the Rimac, nine leagues from its mouth; at the north and east commence the first undulations of ground which form a part of the great chain of the Andes: the valley of Lungaucho, formed by the mountains of San Cristoval and the Amancaës, which rise behind Lima, terminates in its suburbs. The city lies on one bank of the river; the other is occupied by the suburb of San Lazaro, and is united to the city by a bridge of five arches, the upper piers of which are triangular to break the force of the current; while the lower ones present to the promenaders circular benches, on which the fashionables may lounge during the summer evenings, and where they can contemplate a pretty cascade.

The city is two miles long from east to west, and only a mile and a quarter wide from the bridge to the walls; the latter, twelve feet in height, ten feet thick at their base, are built of *adobes*, a kind of brick dried in the sun, and made of potter’s clay mingled with a great quantity of chopped straw: these walls are calculated to resist earthquakes; the enclosure, pierced with seven gates and three posterns, terminates at its south-east extremity by the little citadel of Santa Caterina.

Such is the ancient city of kings, founded in 1534 by Pizarro, on the day of Epiphany; it has been and is still the theatre of constantly renewed revolutions. Lima, situated three miles from the sea, was formerly the principal storehouse of America on the Pacific Ocean, thanks to its Port of Callao, built in 1779, in a singular manner. An old vessel, filled with stones, sand, and rubbish of all sorts, was wrecked on the shore; piles of the mangrove-tree, brought from Guayaquil and impervious to water, were driven around this as a centre, which became the immovable base on which rose the mole of Callao.

The climate, milder and more temperate than that of Carthagena or Bahia, situated on the opposite side of America, makes Lima one of the most agreeable cities of the New World: the wind has two directions from which it never varies; either it blows from the south-east, and becomes cool by crossing the Pacific Ocean; or it comes from the south-west, impregnated with the mild atmosphere of the forests and the freshness which it has derived from the icy summits of the Cordilleras.

The nights beneath tropical latitudes are very beautiful and very clear; they mysteriously prepare that beneficent dew which fertilizes a soil exposed to the rays of a cloudless sky — so the inhabitants of Lima prolong their nocturnal conversations and receptions; household labors are quietly finished in the dwellings refreshed by the shadows, and the streets are soon deserted; scarcely is some *pulperia* still haunted by the drinkers of *chica* or *quarapo*.

These, the young girl, whom we have seen, carefully avoided; crossing in the middle of the numerous squares scattered about the city, she arrived, without interruption, at the bridge of the Rimac, listening to catch the slightest sound — which her emotion exaggerated, and hearing only the bells of a train of mules conducted by its *arriero*, or the joyous *stribillo* of some Indian.

This young girl was called Sarah, and was returning to the house of the Jew Samuel, her father; she was clad in a *saya* of satin — a kind of petticoat of a dark color, plaited in elastic folds, and very narrow at the bottom, which compelled her to take short steps, and gave her that graceful delicacy peculiar to the Limanienne ladies; this petticoat, ornamented with lace and flowers, was in part covered with a silk mantle, which was raised above the head and enveloped it like a hood; stockings of exquisite fineness and little satin shoes peeped out beneath the graceful *saya*; bracelets of great value encircled the arms of the young girl, whose rich toilet was of exquisite taste, and her whole person redolent of that charm so well expressed by the Spanish word *donaire*.

Milleflores might well say to André Certa that his betrothed had nothing of the Jewess but the name, for she was a faithful specimen of those admirable señoras whose beauty is above all praise.

The duenna, an old Jewess, whose countenance was expressive of avarice and cupidity, was a devoted servant of Samuel, who paid her liberally.

At the moment when these two women entered the suburb of San Lazaro, a man, clad in the robe of a monk, and with his head covered with a cowl, passed near them and looked at them attentively. This man, of tall stature, possessed a countenance expressive of gentleness and benevolence; it was

Padre Joachim de Camarones; he threw a glance of intelligence on Sarah, who immediately looked at her follower.

The latter was still grumbling, muttering and whining, which prevented her seeing any thing; the young girl turned toward the good father and made a graceful sign with her hand.

“Well, señora,” said the old woman, sharply, “is it not enough to have been insulted by these Christians, that you should stop to look at a priest?”

Sarah did not reply.

“Shall we see you one day, with rosary in hand, engaged in the ceremonies of the church?”

The ceremonies of the church — *las funciones de iglesia* — are the great business of the Limanian ladies.

“You make strange suppositions,” replied the young girl, blushing.

“Strange as your conduct! What would my master Samuel say, if he knew what had taken place this evening?”

“Am I to blame because a brutal muleteer chose to address me?”

“I understand, señora,” said the old woman, shaking her head, “and will not speak of the *gaucho*.”

“Then the young man did wrong in defending me from the abuse of the populace?”

“Is it the first time the Indian has thrown himself in your way?”

The countenance of the young girl was fortunately sheltered by her mantle, for the darkness would not have sufficed to conceal her emotion from the inquisitive glance of the duenna.

“But let us leave the Indian where he is,” resumed the old woman, “it is not my business to watch him. What I complain of is, that in order not to disturb these Christians, you wished to remain among them! Had you not some desire to kneel with them? Ah, señora, your father would soon dismiss me if I were guilty of such apostasy.”

But the young girl no longer heard; the remark of the old woman on the subject of the young Indian had inspired her with sweeter thoughts; it seemed to her that the intervention of this young man was providential; and she turned several times to see if he had not followed her in the shadow. Sarah had in her heart a certain natural confidence which became her wonderfully; she felt herself to be the child of these warm latitudes, which the sun decorates with surprising vegetation; proud as a Spaniard, if she had fixed her regards on this man, it was because he had stood proudly in the presence of her pride, and had not begged a glance as a reward of his protection.

In imagining that the Indian was near her, Sarah was not mistaken; Martin Paz, after having come to the assistance of the young girl, wished to ensure her safe retreat; so when the promenaders had dispersed, he followed her, without being perceived by her, but without concealing himself; the darkness alone favoring his pursuit.

This Martin Paz was a handsome young man, wearing with unparalleled nobility the national costume of the Indian of the mountains; from his broad-brimmed straw hat escaped fine black hair, whose curls harmonized with the bronze of his manly face. His eyes shone with infinite sweetness, like the transparent atmosphere of starry nights; his well-formed nose surmounted a pretty mouth, unlike that of most of his race. He was one of the noblest descendants of Manco-Capac, and his veins were full of that ardent blood which leads men to the accomplishment of lofty deeds.

He was proudly draped in his *poncho* of brilliant colors; at his girdle hung one of those Malay poignards, so terrible in a practiced hand, for they seem to be riveted to the arm which strikes. In North America, on the shores of Lake Ontario, Martin Paz would have been a great chief among those wandering tribes which have fought with the English so many heroic combats.

Martin Paz knew that Sarah was the daughter of the wealthy Samuel; he knew her to be the most charming woman in Lima; he knew her to be betrothed to the opulent mestizo André Certa; he knew that by her birth, her position and her wealth she was beyond the reach of his heart; but he forgot all these impossibilities in his all-absorbing passion. It seemed to him that this beautiful young girl belonged to him, as the llama to the Peruvian forests, as the eagle to the depths of immensity.

Plunged in his reflections, Martin Paz hastened his steps to see the *saya* of the young girl sweep the threshold of the paternal dwelling; and Sarah herself, half-opening then her mantilla, cast on him a bewildering glance of gratitude.

He was quickly joined by two Indians of the species of *zambos*, pillagers and robbers, who walked beside him.

“Martin Paz,” said one of them to him, “you ought this very evening to meet our brethren in the mountains.”

“I shall be there,” coldly replied the other.

“The schooner *Annonciation* has appeared in sight from Callao, tacked for a few moments, then, protected by the point, rapidly disappeared. She will undoubtedly approach the land near the mouth of the Rimac, and our bark canoes must be there to relieve her of her merchandise. We shall need your presence.”

“You are losing time by your observations. Martin Paz knows his duty and he will do it.”

“It is in the name of the Sambo that we speak to you here.”

“It is in my own name that I speak to you.”

“Do you not fear that he will find your presence in the suburb of San Lazaro at this hour unaccountable?”

“I am where my fancy and my will have brought me.”

“Before the house of the Jew?”

“Those of my brethren who are disposed to find fault can meet me to-night in the mountain.”

The eyes of the three men sparkled, and this was all. The *zambos* regained the bank of the Rimac, and the sound of their footsteps died away in the darkness.

Martin Paz had hastily approached the house of the Jew. This house, like all those of Lima, had but two stories; the ground floor, built of bricks, was surmounted with walls formed of canes tied together and covered with plaster; all this part of the building, constructed to resist earthquakes, imitated, by a skillful painting, the bricks of the lower story; the square roof, called *asoetas*, was covered with flowers, and formed a terrace full of perfumes and pretty points of view.

A vast gate, placed between two pavilions, gave access to a court; but as usual, these pavilions had no window opening upon the street.

The clock of the parish church was striking eleven when Martin Paz stopped before the dwelling of Sarah. Profound silence reigned around; a flickering light within proved that the saloon of the Jew Samuel was still occupied.

Why does the Indian stand motionless before these silent walls? The cool atmosphere woos him with its transparency and its perfumes; the radiant stars send down upon the sleeping earth rays of diaphanous mildness; the white constellations illumine the darkness with their enchanting light; his heart believes in those sympathetic communications which brave time and distance.

A white form appears upon the terrace amid the flowers to which night has only left a vague outline, without diminishing their delicious perfumes; the dahlias mingle with the mentzelias, with the helianthus, and, beneath the occidental breeze, form a waving basket which surrounds Sarah, the young and beautiful Jewess.

Martin Paz involuntarily raises his hands and clasps them with adoration. Suddenly the white form sinks down, as if terrified.

Martin Paz turns, and finds himself face to face with André Certa.

“Since when do the Indians pass their nights in contemplation?”

André Certa spoke angrily.

“Since the Indians have trodden the soil of their ancestors.”

“Have they no longer, on the mountain side, some *yaravis* to chant, some *boleros* to dance with the girls of their caste?”

“The *cholos,*” replied the Indian, in a high voice, “bestow their devotion where it is merited; the Indians love according to their hearts.”

André Certa became pale with anger; he advanced a step toward his immovable rival.

“Wretch! will you quit this place?”

“Rather quit it yourself,” shouted Martin Paz; and two poignards gleamed in the two right hands of the adversaries; they were of equal stature, they seemed of equal strength, and the lightnings of their eyes were reflected in the steel of their arms.

André Certa rapidly raised his arm, which he dropped still more quickly. But his poignard had encountered the Malay poignard of the Indian; at the fire which flashed from this shock, André saw the arm of Martin Paz suspended over his head, and immediately rolled on the earth, his arm pierced through.

“Help, help!” he exclaimed.

The door of the Jew’s house opened at his cries. Some mestizoes ran from a neighboring house; some pursued the Indian, who fled rapidly; others raised the wounded man. He had swooned.

“Who is this man?” said one of them. “If he is a sailor, take him to the hospital of Spiritu Santo; if an Indian, to the hospital of Santa Anna.”

An old man advanced toward the wounded youth; he had scarcely looked upon him when he exclaimed:

“Let the poor young man be carried into my house. This is a strange mischance.”

This man was the Jew Samuel; he had just recognized the betrothed of his daughter.

Martin Paz, thanks to the darkness and the rapidity of his flight, may hope to escape his pursuers; he has risked his life; an Indian assassin of a mestizo! If he can gain the open country he is safe, but he knows that the gates of the city are closed at eleven o’clock in the evening, not to be re-opened till four in the morning.

He reaches at last the stone bridge which he had already crossed. The Indians, and some soldiers who had joined them, pursue him closely; he springs upon the bridge. Unfortunately a patrol appears at the opposite extremity; Martin Paz can neither advance nor retrace his steps; without hesitation he clears the parapet and leaps into the rapid current which breaks against the corners of the stones.

The pursuers spring upon the banks below the bridge to seize the swimmer at his landing.

But it is in vain; Martin Paz does not re-appear.

CHAPTER III.

THE JEW EVERY WHERE A JEW.

André Certa, once introduced into the house of Samuel, and laid in a bed hastily prepared, recovered his senses and pressed the hand of the old Jew. The physician, summoned by one of the domestics, was promptly in attendance. The wound appeared to be a slight one; the shoulder of the mestizo had been pierced in such a manner that the steel had only glided among the flesh. In a few days, André Certa might be once more upon his feet.

When Samuel was left alone with André, the latter said to him:

“You would do well to wall up the gate which leads to your terrace, Master Samuel.”

“What fear you, André?”

“I fear lest Sarah should present herself there to the contemplation of the Indians. It was not a robber who attacked me; it was a rival, from whom I have escaped but by miracle!”

“By the holy tables, it is a task to bring up young girls!” exclaimed the Jew. “But you are mistaken, señor,” he resumed, “Sarah will be a dutiful spouse. I spare no pains that she may do you honor.”

André Certa half raised himself on his elbow.

“Master Samuel, there is one thing which you do not enough remember, that I pay you for the hand of Sarah a hundred thousand piasters.”

“Señor,” replied the Jew, with a miserly chuckle, “I remember it so well, that I am ready now to exchange this receipt for the money.”

As he said this, Samuel drew from his pocket-book a paper which André Certa repulsed with his hand.

“The bargain is not complete until Sarah has become my wife, and she will never be such if her hand is to be disputed by such an adversary. You know, Master Samuel, what is my object; in espousing Sarah, I wish to be the equal of this nobility which casts such scornful glances upon us.”

“And you will, señor, for you see the proudest grandees of Spain throng our saloons, around the pearl of Lima.”

“Where has Sarah been this evening?”

“To the Israelitish temple, with old Ammon.”

“Why should Sarah attend your religious rites?”

“I am a Jew, señor,” replied Samuel proudly, “and would Sarah be my daughter if she did not fulfill the duties of my religion?”

The old Jew remained sad and silent for several minutes. His bent brow rested on one of his withered hands. His face usually bronze, was now almost pale; beneath a brown cap appeared locks of an indescribable color. He was clad in a sort of great-coat fastened around the waist.

This old man trafficked every where and in every thing; he might have been a descendant of the Judas who sold his Master for thirty pieces of silver. He had been a resident of Lima ten years; his taste and his economy had led him to choose his dwelling at the extremity of the suburb of San Lazaro, and from thence he entered into various speculations to make money. By degrees, Samuel assumed a luxury uncommon in misers; his house was sumptuously furnished; his numerous domestics, his splendid equipages betokened immense revenues. Sarah was then eight years of age. Already graceful and charming, she pleased all, and was the idol of the Jew. All her inclinations were unhesitatingly gratified. Always elegantly dressed, she attracted the eyes of the most fastidious, of which her father seemed strangely careless. It will readily be understood how the mestizo, André Certa, became enamored of the beautiful Jewess. What would have appeared inexplicable to the public, was the hundred thousand piasters, the price of her hand; but this bargain was secret. And besides, Samuel trafficked in sentiments as in native productions. A banker, usurer, merchant, ship-owner, he had the talent to do business with everybody. The schooner *Annonciation*, which was hovering about the mouth of the Rimac, belonged to the Jew Samuel.

Amid this life of business and speculation this man fulfilled the duties of his religion with scrupulous punctuality; his daughter had been carefully instructed in the Israelitish faith and practices.

So, when the mestizo had manifested his displeasure on this subject, the old man remained mute and pensive, and André Certa broke the silence, saying:

“Do you forget that the motive for which I espouse Sarah will compel her to become a convert to Catholicism? It is not my fault,” added the mestizo; “but in spite of you, in spite of me, in spite of herself, it will be so.”

“You are right,” said the Jew sadly; “but, by the Bible, Sarah shall be a Jewess as long as she is my daughter.”

At this moment the door of the chamber opened, and the major-domo of the Jew Samuel respectfully entered.

“Is the murderer arrested?” asked the old man.

“We have reason to believe he is dead!”

“Dead!” repeated André, with a joyful exclamation.

“Caught between us and a company of soldiers,” replied the major-domo, “he was obliged to leap over the parapet of the bridge.”

“He has thrown himself into the Rimac!” exclaimed André.

“And how do you know that he has not reached the shore?” asked Samuel.

“The melting of the snow has made the current rapid at that spot; besides, we stationed ourselves on each side of the river, and he did not re-appear. I have left sentinels who will pass the night in watching the banks.”

“It is well,” said the old man; “he has met with a just fate. Did you recognize him in his flight?”

“Perfectly, sir; it was Martin Paz, the Indian of the mountains.”

“Has this man been observing Sarah for some time past?”

“I do not know,” replied the servant.

“Summon old Ammon.”

The major-domo withdrew.

“These Indians,” said the old man, “have secret understandings among themselves; I must know whether the pursuit of this man dates from a distant period.”

The duenna entered, and remained standing before her master.

“Does my daughter,” asked Samuel, “know any thing of what has taken place this morning?”

“When the cries of your servants awoke me, I ran to the chamber of the señora, and found her almost motionless and of a mortal paleness.”

“Fatality!” said Samuel; “continue,” added he, seeing that the mestizo was apparently asleep.

“To my urgent inquiries as to the cause of her agitation, the señora would not reply; she retired without accepting my services, and I withdrew.”

“Has this Indian often thrown himself in her way?”

“I do not know, master; nevertheless I have often met him in the streets of San Lazaro.”

“And you have told me nothing of this?”

“He came to her assistance this evening on the Plaza-Mayor,” added the old duenna.

“Her assistance! how?”

The old woman related the scene with downcast head.

“Ah! my daughter wish to kneel among these Christians!” exclaimed the Jew, angrily; “and I knew nothing of all this! You deserve that I should dismiss you.”

The duenna went out of the room in confusion.

“Do you not see that the marriage should take place soon?” said André Certa. “I am not asleep, Master Samuel! But I need rest, now, and I will dream of our espousals.”

At these words, the old man slowly retired. Before regaining his room, he wished to assure himself of the condition of his daughter, and softly entered the chamber of Sarah.

The young girl was in an agitated slumber, in the midst of the rich silk drapery around her; a watch-lamp of alabaster, suspended from the arabesques of the ceiling, shed its soft light upon her beautiful countenance; the half-open window admitted, through lowered blinds, the quiet coolness of the air, impregnated with the penetrating perfumes of the aloes and magnolia; creole luxury was displayed in the thousand objects of art which good taste and grace had dispersed on richly carved *étagères*; and, beneath the vague and placid rays of night, it seemed as if the soul of the child was sporting amid these wonders.

The old man approached the bed of Sarah: he bent over her to listen. The beautiful Jewess seemed disturbed by sorrowful thoughts, and more than once the name of Martin Paz escaped her lips.

Samuel regained his chamber, uttering maledictions.

At the first rays of morning, Sarah hastily arose. Liberta, a full-blooded Indian attached to her service, hastened to her; and, in pursuance of her orders, saddled a mule for his mistress and a horse for himself.

Sarah was accustomed to take morning-rides, accompanied by this Indian, who was entirely devoted to her.

She was clad in a *saya* of a brown color, and a mantle of cashmere with long tassels; her head was not covered with the usual hood, but sheltered beneath the broad brim of a straw hat, which left her long black tresses to float over her shoulders; and to conceal any unusual pre-occupation, she held between her lips a *cigarette* of perfumed tobacco.

Liberta, clad like an Indian of the mountains, prepared to accompany his mistress.

“Liberta,” said the young girl to him, “remember to be blind and dumb.”

Once in the saddle, Sarah left the city as usual, and began to ride through the country; she directed her way toward Callao. The port was in full animation: there had been a conflict during the night between the revenue-officers and a schooner, whose undecided movements betrayed a fraudulent speculation. The *Annonciation* seemed to have been awaiting some suspicious barks near the mouth of the Rimac; but before the latter could reach her, she had been compelled to flee before the custom-house boats, which had boldly given her chase.

Various rumors were in circulation respecting the destination of this vessel — which bore no name on her stern. According to some, this schooner, laden with Colombian troops, was seeking to seize the principal vessels of

Callao; for Bolivar had it in his heart to revenge the affront given to the soldiers left by him in Peru, and who had been driven from it in disgrace.

According to others, the schooner was simply a smuggler of European goods.

Without troubling herself about these rumors, more or less important, Sarah, whose ride to the port had been only a pretext, returned toward Lima, which she reached near the banks of the Rimac.

She ascended them toward the bridge: numbers of soldiers, mestizoes, and Indians, were stationed at various points on the shore.

Liberta had acquainted the young girl with the events of the night. In compliance with her orders, he interrogated some Indians leaning over the parapet, and learned that although Martin Paz had been undoubtedly drowned, his body had not yet been recovered.

Sarah was pale and almost fainting; it required all her strength of soul not to abandon herself to her grief.

Among the people wandering on the banks, she remarked an Indian with ferocious features — the Sambo! He was crouched on the bank, and seemed a prey to despair.

As Sarah passed near the old mountaineer, she heard these words, full of gloomy anger:

“Wo! wo! They have killed the son of the Sambo! They have killed my son!”

The young girl resolutely drew herself up, made a sign to Liberta to follow her; and this time, without caring whether she was observed or not, went directly to the church of Santa Anna; left her mule in charge of the Indian, entered the Catholic temple, and asking for the good Father Joachim, knelt on the stone steps, praying to Jesus and Mary for the soul of Martin Paz.

CHAPTER IV.

A SPANISH GRANDEE.

Any other than the Indian, Martin Paz, would have, indeed, perished in the waters of the Rimac; to escape death, his surprising strength, his insurmountable will, and especially his sublime coolness, one of the privileges of the free hordes of the *pampas* of the New World, had all been found necessary.

Martin knew that his pursuers would concentrate their efforts to seize him below the bridge; it seemed impossible for him to overcome the current, and that the Indian must be carried down; but by vigorous strokes he succeeded in stemming the torrent; he dived repeatedly, and finding the under-currents less strong, at last ventured to land, and concealed himself behind a thicket of mangrove-trees.

But what was to become of him? Retreat was perilous; the soldiers might change their plans and ascend the river; the Indian must then inevitably be captured; he would lose his life, and, worse yet, Sarah. His decision was rapidly made; through the narrow streets and deserted squares he plunged into the heart of the city; but it was important that he should be supposed dead; he therefore avoided being seen, since his garments, dripping with water and covered with sea-weed, would have betrayed him.

To avoid the indiscreet glances of some belated inhabitants, Martin Paz was obliged to pass through one of the widest streets of the city; a house still brilliantly illuminated presented itself: the *port-cochere* was open to give passage to the elegant equipages which were issuing from the court, and conveying to their respective dwellings the nobles of the Spanish aristocracy.

The Indian adroitly glided into this magnificent dwelling; he could not remain in the street, where curious *zambos* were thronging around, attracted by the carriages. The gates of the hotel were soon carefully closed, and the Indian found flight impossible.

Some lacqueys were going to and fro in the court; Martin Paz rapidly passed up a rich stairway of cedar-wood, ornamented with valuable tapestry; the saloons, still illuminated, presented no convenient place of refuge; he crossed them with the rapidity of lightning, and disappeared in a room filled with protecting darkness.

The last lustres were quickly extinguished, and the house became profoundly silent.

The Indian Paz, as a man of energy to whom moments are precious, hastened to reconnoitre the place, and to find the surest means of evasion; the windows of this chamber opened on an interior garden; flight was practicable, and Martin Paz was about to spring from them, when he heard these words:

“Señor, you have forgotten to take the diamonds which I had left on that table!”

Martin Paz turned. A man of noble stature and of great pride of countenance was pointing to a jewel-case.

At this insult Martin Paz laid his hand on his poignard. He approached the Spaniard, who stood unmoved, and, in a first impulse of indignation, raised his arm to strike him; but turning his weapon against himself, said, in a deep tone, “Señor, if you repeat such words, I will kill myself at your feet.”

The Spaniard, astonished, looked at the Indian more attentively, and through his tangled and dripping locks perceived so lofty a frankness, that he felt a strange sympathy fill his heart. He went toward the window, gently closed it, and returned toward the Indian, whose poignard had fallen to the ground.

“Who are you?” said he to him.

“The Indian, Martin Paz. I am pursued by soldiers for having defended myself against a mestizo who attacked me, and levelled him to the ground with a blow from my poignard. This mestizo is the betrothed of a young girl whom I love. Now, señor, you can deliver me to my enemies, if you judge it noble and right.”

“Sir,” replied the Spaniard, gravely, “I depart to-morrow for the Baths of Chorillos; if you please to accompany me, you will be for the present safe from pursuit, and will never have reason to complain of the hospitality of the Marquis Don Vegal.”

Martin Paz bent coldly without manifesting any emotion.

“You can rest until morning on this bed,” resumed Don Vegal; “no one here will suspect your retreat. Good-night, señor!”

The Spaniard went out of the room, and left the Indian, moved to tears by a confidence so generous; he yielded himself entirely to the protection of the marquis, and without thinking that his slumbers might be taken advantage of to seize him, slept with peaceful security.

The next day, at sunrise, the marquis gave the last orders for his departure, and summoned the Jew Samuel to come to him; in the meantime he attended the morning mass.

This was a custom generally observed by the aristocracy. From its very foundation Lima had been essentially Catholic. Besides its numerous churches, it numbered twenty-two convents, seventeen monasteries, and four *beaterios*, or houses of retreat for females who did not take the vows. Each of these establishments possessed a chapel, so that there were at Lima more than a hundred edifices for worship, where eight hundred secular or regular priests, three hundred *religieuses*, lay-brothers and sisters, performed the duties of religion.

As Don Vegal entered the church of Santa Anna, he noticed a young girl kneeling in prayer and in tears. There was so much of grief in her depression, that the marquis could not look at her without emotion; and he was preparing to console her by some kind words, when Father Joachim de Camarones approached him, saying in a low voice:

“Señor Don Vegal, pray do not approach her.”

Then he made a sign to Sarah, who followed him to an obscure and deserted chapel.

Don Vegal directed his steps to the altar and listened to the mass; then, as he was returning, he thought involuntarily of the deep sadness of the kneeling maiden. Her image followed him to his hotel, and remained deeply engraven in his soul.

Don Vegal found in his saloon the Jew Samuel, who had come in compliance with his request. Samuel seemed to have forgotten the events of the night; the hope of gain animated his countenance with a natural gayety.

“What is your lordship’s will?” asked he of the Spaniard.

“I must have thirty thousand piasters within an hour.”

“Thirty thousand piasters! And who has them! By the holy king David, my lord, I am far from being able to furnish such a sum.”

“Here are some jewels of great value,” resumed Don Vegal, without noticing the language of the Jew; “besides I can sell you at a low price a considerable estate near Cusco.”

“Ah! señor, lands ruin us — we have not arms enough left to cultivate them; the Indians have withdrawn to the mountains, and our harvests do not pay us for the trouble they cost.”

“At what value do you estimate these diamonds?”

Samuel drew from his pocket a little pair of scales and began to weigh the stones with scrupulous skill. As he did this, he continued to talk, and, as was his custom, depreciated the pledges offered him.

“Diamonds! a poor investment! What would they bring? One might as well bury money! You will notice, señor, that this is not of the purest water. Do you know that I do not find a ready market for these costly ornaments? I am obliged to send such merchandise to the United Provinces! The Americans would buy them, undoubtedly, but to give them up to the sons of Albion. They wish besides, and it is very just, to gain an honest per centage, so that the depreciation falls upon me. I think that ten thousand piasters should satisfy your lordship. It is little, I know; but — — ”

"Have I not said," resumed the Spaniard, with a sovereign air of scorn, "that ten thousand piasters would not suffice?"

"Señor, I cannot give you a half real more!"

"Take away these caskets and bring me the sum I ask for. To complete the thirty thousand piasters which I need, you will take a mortgage on this house. Does it seem to you to be solid?"

"Ah, señor, in this city, subject to earthquakes, one knows not who lives or dies, who stands or falls."

And, as he said this, Samuel let himself fall on his heels several times to test the solidity of the floors.

"Well, to oblige your lordship, I will furnish you with the required sum; although, at this moment I ought not to part with money; for I am about to marry my daughter to the *caballero* André Certa. Do you know him, sir?"

"I do not know him, and I beg of you to send me this instant, the sum agreed upon. Take away these jewels."

"Will you have a receipt for them?" asked the Jew.

Don Vegal passed into the adjoining room, without replying.

"Proud Spaniard!" muttered Samuel, "I will crush thy insolence, as I disperse thy riches! By Solomon! I am a skillful man, since my interests keep pace with my sentiments."

Don Vegal, on leaving the Jew, had found Martin Paz in profound dejection of spirits, mingled with mortification.

“What is the matter?” he asked affectionately.

“Señor, it is the daughter of the Jew whom I love.”

“A Jewess!” exclaimed Don Vegal, with disgust.

But seeing the sadness of the Indian, he added:

“Let us go, *amigo*, we will talk of these things afterward!”

An hour later, Martin Paz, clad in Spanish costume, left the city, accompanied by Don Vegal, who took none of his people with him.

The Baths of Chorillos are situated at two leagues from Lima. This Indian parish possesses a pretty church; during the hot season it is the rendezvous of the fashionable Limanian society. Public games, interdicted at Lima, are permitted at Chorillos during the whole summer. The señoras there display unwonted ardor, and, in decorating himself for these pretty partners, more than one rich cavalier has seen his fortune dissipated in a few nights.

Chorillos was still little frequented; so Don Vegal and Martin Paz retired to a pretty cottage, built on the sea-shore, could live in quiet contemplation of the vast plains of the Pacific Ocean.

The Marquis Don Vegal, belonging to one of the most ancient families of Peru, saw about to terminate in himself the noble line of which he was justly proud; so his countenance bore the impress of profound sadness. After having mingled for some time in political affairs, he had felt an inexpressible disgust for the incessant revolutions brought about to gratify personal ambition; he had withdrawn into a sort of solitude, interrupted only at rare intervals by the duties of strict politeness.

His immense fortune was daily diminishing. The neglect into which his vast domains had fallen for want of laborers, had compelled him to borrow at a disadvantage; but the prospect of approaching mediocrity did not alarm him; that carelessness natural to the Spanish race, joined to the ennui of a useless existence, had rendered him insensible to the menaces of the future. Formerly the husband of an adored wife, the father of a charming little girl, he had seen himself deprived, by a horrible event, of both these objects of his love. Since then, no bond of affection had attached him to earth, and he suffered his life to float at the will of events.

Don Vegal had thought his heart to be indeed dead, when he felt it palpitate at contact with that of Martin Paz. This ardent nature awoke fire beneath the ashes; the proud bearing of the Indian suited the chivalric hidalgo; and then, weary of the Spanish nobles, in whom he no longer had confidence, disgusted with the selfish mestizoes, who wished to aggrandize themselves at his expense, he took a pleasure in turning to that primitive race, who have disputed so valiantly the American soil with the soldiers of Pizarro.

According to the intelligence received by the marquis, the Indian passed for dead at Lima; but, looking on his attachment for the Jewess as worse than death itself, the Spaniard resolved doubly to save his guest, by leaving the daughter of Samuel to marry André Certa.

While Martin Paz felt an infinite sadness pervade his heart, Don Vegal avoided all allusion to the past, and conversed with the young Indian on indifferent subjects.

Meanwhile, one day, saddened by his gloomy preoccupations, the Spaniard said to him:

“Why, my friend, do you lower the nobility of your nature by a sentiment so much beneath you? Was not that bold Manco-Capac, whom his patriotism placed in the rank of heroes, your ancestor? There is a noble part left for a valiant man, who will not suffer himself to be overcome by an unworthy passion. Have you no heart to regain your independence?”

“We are laboring for this, señor,” said the Indian; “and the day when my brethren shall rise *en masse* is perhaps not far distant.”

“I understand you; you allude to the war for which your brethren are preparing among their mountains; at a signal they will descend on the city, arms in hand — and will be conquered as they have always been! See how your interests will disappear amid these perpetual revolutions of which Peru is the theatre, and which will ruin it entirely, Indians and Spaniards, to the profit of the mestizoes, who are neither.”

“We will save it ourselves,” exclaimed Martin Paz.

“Yes, you will save it if you understand how to play your part! Listen to me, Paz, you whom I love from day to day as a son! I say it with grief; but, we Spaniards, the degenerate sons of a powerful race, no longer have the energy necessary to elevate and govern a state. It is therefore yours to triumph over that unhappy Americanism, which tends to reject European colonization. Yes, know that only European emigration can save the old Peruvian empire. Instead of this intestine war which tends to exclude all castes, with the exception of one, frankly extend your hands to the industrious population of the Old World.”

“The Indians, señor, will always see in strangers an enemy, and will never suffer them to breathe with impunity the air of their mountains. The kind of dominion which I exercise over them will be without effect on the day when I do not swear death to their oppressors, whoever they may be! And, besides, what am I now?" added Martin Paz, with great sadness; "a fugitive who would not have three hours to live in the streets of Lima."

"Paz, you must promise me that you will not return thither."

"How can I promise you this, Don Vegal? I speak only the truth, and I should perjure myself were I to take an oath to that effect."

Don Vegal was silent. The passion of the young Indian increased from day to day; the marquis trembled to see him incur certain death by re-appearing at Lima. He hastened by all his desires, he would have hastened by all his efforts, the marriage of the Jewess!

To ascertain himself the state of things he quitted Chorillos one morning, returned to the city, and learned that André Certa had recovered from his wound. His approaching marriage was the topic of general conversation.

Don Vegal wished to see this woman whose image troubled the mind of Martin Paz. He repaired, at evening, to the Plaza-Mayor. The crowd was always numerous there. There he met Father Joachim de Camarones, his confessor and his oldest friend; he acquainted him with his mode of life. What was the astonishment of the good father to learn the existence of Martin Paz. He promised Don Vegal to watch also himself over the young Indian, and to convey to the marquis any intelligence of importance.

Suddenly the glances of Don Vegal rested on a young girl, enveloped in a black mantle, reclining in a calêche.

"Who is that beautiful person?" asked he of the father.

"It is the betrothed of André Certa, the daughter of the Jew Samuel."

“She! the daughter of the Jew!”

The marquis could hardly suppress his astonishment, and, pressing the hand of Father Joachim, pensively took the road to Chorillos.

He had just recognized in Sarah, the pretended Jewess, the young girl whom he had seen praying with such Christian fervor, at the church of Santa Anna.

CHAPTER V.

THE HATRED OF THE INDIANS.

Since the Colombian troops, confided by Bolivar to the orders of General Santa Cruz, had been driven from lower Peru, this country, which had been incessantly agitated by *pronunciamentos,* military revolts, had recovered some calmness and tranquillity.

In fact, private ambition no longer had any thing to expect; the president Gambarra seemed immovable in his palace of the Plaza-Mayor. In this direction there was nothing to fear; but the true danger, concealed, imminent, was not from these rebellions, as promptly extinguished as kindled, and which seemed to flatter the taste of the Americans for military parades.

This unknown peril escaped the eyes of the Spaniards, too lofty to perceive it, and the attention of the mestizoes, who never wished to look beneath them.

And yet there was an unusual agitation among the Indians of the city; they often mingled with the *serranos*, the inhabitants of the mountains; these people seemed to have shaken off their natural apathy. Instead of rolling themselves in their *ponchos,* with their feet turned to the spring sun, they were scattered throughout the country, stopping one another, exchanging private signals, and haunting the least frequented *pulperias,* in which they could converse without danger.

This movement was principally to be observed on one of the squares remote from the centre of the city. At the corner of a street stood a house, of only one story, whose wretched appearance struck the eye disagreeably.

A tavern of the lowest order, a *chingana*, kept by an old Indian woman, offered to the lowest *zambos* the *chica*, beer of fermented maize, and the *quarapo*, a beverage made of the sugar-cane.

The concourse of Indians on this square took place only at certain hours, and principally when a long pole was raised on the roof of the inn as a signal of assemblage, then the *zambos* of every profession, the *capataz*, the *arrieros*, muleteers, the *carreteros*, carters, entered the *chingana*, one by one, and immediately disappeared in the great hall; the *padrona* (hostess) seemed very busy, and leaving to her servant the care of the shop, hastened to serve herself her usual customers.

A few days after the disappearance of Martin Paz, there was a numerous assembly in the hall of the inn; one could scarcely through the darkness, rendered still more obscure by the tobacco-smoke, distinguish the frequenters of this tavern. Fifty Indians were ranged around a long table; some were chewing the *coca*, a kind of tea-leaf, mingled with a little piece of fragrant earth called *manubi*; others were drinking from large pots of fermented maize; but these occupations did not distract their attention, and they were closely listening to the speech of an Indian.

This was the Sambo, whose fixed eyes were strangely wild. He was clad as on the Plaza-Mayor.

After having carefully observed his auditors, the Sambo commenced in these terms:

“The children of the Sun can converse on grave affairs; there is no perfidious ear to hear them; on the square, some of our friends, disguised as street-singers, will attract the attention of the passers-by, and we shall enjoy entire liberty.”

In fact the tones of a mandoline and of a *viguela* were echoing without.

The Indians within, knowing themselves in safety, lent therefore close attention to the words of the Sambo, in whom they placed entire confidence.

“What news can the Sambo give us of Martin Paz?” asked an Indian.

“None — is he dead or not? The Great Spirit only knows. I am expecting some of our brethren, who have descended the river to its mouth, perhaps they will have found the body of Martin Paz.”

“He was a good chief,” said Manangani, a ferocious Indian, much dreaded; “but why was he not at his post on the day when the schooner brought us arms?”

The Sambo cast down his head without reply.

“Did not my brethren know,” resumed Manangani, “that there was an exchange of shots between the *Annonciation* and the custom-house officers, and that the capture of the vessel would have ruined our projects of conspiracy?”

A murmur of approbation received the words of the Indian.

“Those of my brethren who will wait before they judge will be the beloved of my heart,” resumed the Sambo; “who knows whether my son Martin Paz will not one day re-appear? Listen now; the arms which have been sent us from Sechura are in our power; they are concealed in the mountains of the Cordilleras, and ready to do their office when you shall be prepared to do your duty.”

“And what delays us?” said a young Indian; “we have sharpened our knives and are waiting.”

“Let the hour come,” said the Sambo; “do my brethren know what enemy their arms should strike first?”

“Those mestizoes who treat us as slaves, and strike us with the hand and whip, like restive mules.”

“These are the monopolizers of the riches of the soil, who will not suffer us to purchase a little comfort for our old age.”

“You are mistaken; and your first blows must be struck elsewhere,” said the Sambo, growing animated; “these are not the men who have dared for three hundred years past to tread the soil of our ancestors; it is not these rich men gorged with gold who have dragged to the tomb the sons of Manco-Capac; no, it is these proud Spaniards whom Fate has thrust on our independent shores! These are the true conquerors of whom you are the true slaves! If they have no longer wealth, they have authority; and, in spite of Peruvian emancipation, they crush and trample upon our natural rights. Let us forget what we are, to remember what our fathers have been!”

“*Anda! anda!*” exclaimed the assembly, with stamps of approbation.

After a few moments of silence, the Sambo assured himself, by interrogating various conspirators, that the friends of Cusco and of all Bolivia were ready to strike as a single man.

Then, resuming with fire:

“And our brethren of the mountains, brave Manangani, if they have all a heart of hatred equal to thine, a courage equal to thine, they will fall on

Lima like an avalanche from the summit of the Cordilleras."

"The Sambo shall not complain of their boldness on the day appointed. Let the Indian leave the city, he shall not go far without seeing throng around him *zambos* burning for vengeance! In the gorges of San Cristoval and the Amancaës, more than one is couched on his *poncho*, with his poignard at his girdle, waiting until a long carbine shall be confided to his skillful hand. They also have not forgotten that they have to revenge on the vain Spaniards the defeat of Manco-Capac."

"Well said! Manangani; it is the god of hatred who speaks from thy mouth. My brethren shall know before long him whom their chiefs have chosen to lead this great vengeance. President Gambarra is seeking only to consolidate his power; Bolivar is afar, Santa Cruz has been driven away; we can act with certainty. In a few days, the fête of the Amancaës will summon our oppressors to pleasure; then, let each be ready to march, and let the news be carried to the most remote villages of Bolivia."

At this moment three Indians entered the great hall. The Sambo hastened to meet them.

"Well?" said he to them.

"The body of Martin Paz has not been recovered; we have sounded the river in every direction; our most skillful divers have explored it with religious care, and the son of the Sambo cannot have perished in the waters of the Rimac."

"Have they killed him? What has become of him? Oh! wo, wo to them if they have killed my son! Let my brethren separate in silence; let each return to his post, look, watch and wait!"

The Indians went out and dispersed; the Sambo alone remained with Manangani, who asked him:

“Does the Sambo know what sentiment conducted his son to San Lazaro? The Sambo, I trust, is sure of his son?”

The eyes of the Indian flashed, and the blood mounted to his cheek. The ferocious Manangani recoiled.

But the Indian controlled himself, and said:

“If Martin Paz has betrayed his brethren, I will first kill all those to whom he has given his friendship, all those to whom he has given his love! Then I will kill him, and myself afterward, that nothing may be left beneath the sun of an infamous, and dishonored race.”

At this moment, the *padrona* opened the door of the room, advanced toward the Sambo, and handed him a billet directed to his address.

“Who gave you this?” said he.

“I do not know; this paper may have been designedly forgotten by a *chica*-drinker. I found it on the table.”

“Have there been any but Indians here?”

“There have been none but Indians.”

The *padrona* went out; the Sambo unfolded the billet, and read aloud:

“A young girl has prayed for the return of Martin Paz, for she has not forgotten that the young Indian protected her and risked his life for her. If the Sambo has any news of his poor son, or any hope of finding him, let him surround his arm with a red handkerchief; there are eyes which see him pass daily.”

The Sambo crushed the billet in his hand.

“The unhappy boy,” said he, “has suffered himself to be caught by the eyes of a woman.”

“Who is this woman?” asked Manangani.

“It is not an Indian,” replied the Sambo, observing the billet; “it is some young girl of the other classes. Martin Paz, I no longer know thee!”

“Shall you do what this woman requests?”

“No,” replied the Indian, violently; “let her lose all hope of seeing him again; let her die, if she will.”

And the Sambo tore the billet in a rage.

“It must have been an Indian who brought this billet,” observed Manangani.

“Oh, it cannot have been one of ours! He must have known that I often came to this inn, but I will set my foot in it no more. We have occupied ourselves long enough with trifling affairs,” resumed he, coldly; “let my brother return to the mountains; I will remain to watch over the city. We shall see whether the fête of the Amancaës will be joyous for the oppressors or the oppressed!”

The two Indians separated.

The plan of the conspiracy was well conceived and the hour of its execution well chosen. Peru, almost depopulated, counted only a small number of

Spaniards and mestizoes. The invasion of the Indians, gathered from every direction, from the forests of Brazil, as well as the mountains of Chili and the plains of La Plata, would cover the theatre of war with a formidable army. The great cities, like Lima, Cusco, Puña, might be utterly destroyed; and it was not to be expected that the Colombian troops, so recently driven away by the Peruvian government, would come to the assistance of their enemies in peril.

This social overturn might therefore have succeeded, if the secret had remained buried in the hearts of the Indians, and there surely could not be traitors among them?

But they were ignorant that a man had obtained private audience of the President Gambarra. This man informed him that the schooner *Annonciation* had been captured from him by Indian pirates! That it had been laden with arms of all sorts; that canoes had unloaded it at the mouth of the Rimac; and he claimed a high indemnity for the service he thus rendered to the Peruvian government.

And yet this man had let his vessel to the agents of the Sambo; he had received for it a considerable sum, and had come to sell the secret which he had surprised.

By these traits the reader will recognize the Jew Samuel.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BETROTHAL.

André Certa, entirely recovered, sure of the death of Martin Paz, pressed his marriage: he was impatient to parade the young and beautiful Jewess through the streets of Lima.

Sarah constantly manifested toward him a haughty indifference; but he cared not for it, considering her as an article of sale, for which he had paid a hundred thousand piasters.

And yet André Certa suspected the Jew, and with good reason; if the contract was dishonorable, the contractors were still more so. So the mestizo wished to have a secret interview with Samuel, and took him one day to the Baths of Chorillos.

He was not sorry, besides, to try the chances of play before his wedding: public gaming, prohibited at Lima, is perfectly tolerated elsewhere. The passion of the Limanian ladies and gentlemen for this hazardous amusement is singular and irresistible.

The games were open some days before the arrival of the Marquis Don Vegal; thenceforth there was a perpetual movement of the populace on the road from Lima: some came on foot, who returned in carriages; others were about to risk and lose the last remnants of their fortunes.

Don Vegal and Martin Paz took no part in these exciting pleasures. The reveries of the young Indian had more noble causes; he was thinking of Sarah and of his benefactor.

The concourse of the Limanians to the Baths of Chorillos was without danger for him; little known by the inhabitants of the city, like all the mountain Indians he easily concealed himself from all eyes.

After his evening walk with the marquis, Martin Paz would return to his room, and leaning his elbow on the window, pass long hours in allowing his tumultuous thoughts to wander over the Pacific Ocean. Don Vegal lodged in a neighboring chamber, and guarded him with paternal tenderness.

The Spaniard always remembered the daughter of Samuel, whom he had so unexpectedly seen at prayer in the Catholic temple. But he had not dared to confide this important secret to Martin Paz while instructing him by degrees in Christian truths; he feared to re-animate sentiments which he wished to extinguish — for the poor Indian, unknown and proscribed, must renounce all hope of happiness! Father Joachim kept Don Vegal informed of the progress of affairs: the police had at last ceased to trouble themselves about Martin Paz; and with time and the influence of his protector, the Indian, become a man of merit and capable of great things, might one day take rank in the highest Peruvian society.

Weary of the uncertainty into which his incognito plunged him, Paz resolved to know what had become of the young Jewess. Thanks to his Spanish costume, he could glide into a gaming-saloon, and listen to the conversation of its various frequenters. André Certa was a man of so much importance, that his marriage, if it was approaching, would be the subject of conversation.

One evening, instead of directing his steps toward the sea, the Indian climbed over the high rocks on which the principal habitations of Chorillos are built; a house, fronted by broad stone steps, struck his eyes — he entered it without noise.

The day had been hard for many of the wealthy Limanians; some among them, exhausted with the fatigues of the preceding night, were reposing on the ground, wrapped in their *ponchos*.

Other players were seated before a large green table, divided into four compartments by two lines, which intersected each other at the centre in right angles; on each of these compartments were the first letters of the words *azar* and *suerte*, (chance and fate,) A and S.

At this moment, the parties of the *monte* were animated; a mestizo was pursuing the unfavorable chance with feverish ardor.

“Two thousand piasters!” exclaimed he.

The banker shook the dice, and the player burst into imprecations.

“Four thousand piasters!” said he, again. And he lost once more.

Martin Paz, protected by the obscurity of the saloon, could look the player in the face, and he turned pale.

It was André Certa!

Near him, was standing the Jew Samuel.

“You have played enough, Señor André,” said Samuel to him; “the luck is not for you.”

“What business is it of yours?” replied the mestizo, roughly.

Samuel bent down to his ear.

“If it is not my business, it is your business to break off these habits during the days which precede your marriage.”

“Eight thousand piasters!” resumed André Certa.

He lost again: the mestizo suppressed a curse and the banker resumed — ”Play on!”

André Certa, drawing from his pocket some bills, was about to have hazarded a considerable sum; he had even deposited it on one of the tables, and the banker, shaking his dice, was about to have decided its fate, when a sign from Samuel stopped him short. The Jew bent again to the ear of the mestizo, and said —

“If nothing remains to you to conclude our bargain, it shall be broken off this evening!”

André Certa shrugged his shoulders, took up his money, and went out.

“Continue now,” said Samuel to the banker; “you may ruin this gentleman after his marriage.”

The banker bowed submissively. The Jew Samuel was the founder and proprietor of the games of Chorillos. Wherever there was a *real* to be made this man was to be met with.

He followed the mestizo; and finding him on the stone steps, said to him —

“I have secrets of importance to communicate. Where can we converse in safety?”

“Wherever you please,” replied Certa, roughly.

“Señor, let not your passions ruin your prospects. I would neither confide my secret to the most carefully closed chambers, nor the most lonely plains. If you pay me dearly for it, it is because it is worth telling and worth keeping.”

As they spoke thus, these two men had reached the sea, near the cabins destined for the use of the bathers. They knew not that they were seen, heard and watched by Martin Paz, who glided like a serpent in the shadow.

“Let us take a canoe,” said André, “and go out into the open sea; the sharks may, perhaps, show themselves discreet.”

André detached from the shore a little boat, and threw some money to its guardian. Samuel embarked with him, and the mestizo pushed off. He vigorously plied two flexible oars, which soon took them a mile from the shore.

But as he saw the canoe put off, Martin Paz, concealed in a crevice of the rock, hastily undressed, and precipitating himself into the sea, swam vigorously toward the boat.

The sun had just buried his last rays in the waves of the ocean, and darkness hovered over the crests of the waves.

Martin Paz had not once reflected that sharks of the most dangerous species frequented these fatal shores. He stopped not far from the boat of the mestizo, and listened.

“*But what proof of the identity of the daughter shall I carry to the father?*” asked André Certa of the Jew.

"You will recall to him the circumstances under which he lost her."

"What were these circumstances?"

Martin Paz, now scarcely above the waves, listened without understanding. In a girdle attached to his body, he had a poignard; he waited.

"Her father," said the Jew, "lived at Concencion, in Chili: he was then the great nobleman he is now; only his fortune equalled his nobility. Obliged to come to Lima on business, he set out alone, leaving at Concencion his wife, and child aged fifteen months. The climate of Peru agreed with him, and he sent for the marchioness to rejoin him. She embarked on the *San-José* of Valparaiso, with her confidential servants.

"I was going to Peru in the same ship. The *San-José* was about to enter the harbor of Lima; but, near Juan Fernandez, was struck by a terrific hurricane, which disabled her and threw her on her side — it was the affair of half an hour. The *San-José* filled with water and was slowly sinking; the passengers and crew took refuge in the boat, but at sight of the furious waves, the marchioness refused to enter it; she pressed her infant in her arms, and remained in the ship. I remained with her — the boat was swallowed up at a hundred fathoms from the *San-José,* with all her crew. We were alone — the tempest blew with increasing violence. As my fortune was not on board, I had nothing to lose. The *San-José,* having five feet of water in her hold, drifted on the rocks of the shore, where she broke to pieces. The young woman was thrown into the sea with her daughter: fortunately, for me," said the Jew, with a gloomy smile, "I could seize the child, and reach the shore with it."

"All these details are exact?"

“Perfectly so. The father will recognize them. I had done a good day’s work, señor; since she is worth to me the hundred thousand piasters which you are about to pay me. Now, let the marriage take place to-morrow.”

“What does this mean?” asked Martin Paz of himself, still swimming in the shadow.

“Here is my pocket-book, with the hundred thousand piasters — take it, Master Samuel,” replied André Certa to the Jew.

“Thanks, Señor André,” said the Israelite, seizing the treasure; “take this receipt in exchange — I pledge myself to restore you double this sum, if you do not become a member of one of the proudest families of Spain.”

But the Indian had not heard this last sentence; he had dived to avoid the approach of the boat, and his eyes could see a shapeless mass gliding rapidly toward him. He thought it was the canoe — he was mistaken.

It was a *tintorea*; a shark of the most ferocious species.

Martin Paz did not quail, or he would have been lost. The animal approached him — the Indian dived; but he was obliged to come up, in order to breathe... He looked at the sky, as if he was never to behold it again. The stars sparkled above his head; the *tintorea* continued to approach. A vigorous blow with his tail struck the swimmer; Martin Paz felt his slimy scales brush his breast. The shark, in order to snatch at him, turned on his back and opened his jaws, armed with a triple row of teeth. Martin Paz saw the white belly of the animal gleam beneath the wave, and with a rapid hand struck it with his poignard.

Suddenly he found the waters around him red with blood. He dived — came up again at ten fathoms' distance — thought of the daughter of Samuel; and seeing nothing more of the boat of the mestizo, regained the shore in a few strokes, already forgetting that he had just escaped death.

He quickly rejoined Don Vegal. The latter, not having found him on his return, was anxiously awaiting him. Paz made no allusion to his recent adventures; but seemed to take a lively pleasure in his conversation.

But the next day Martin Paz had left Chorillos, and Don Vegal, tortured with anxiety, hastily returned to Lima.

The marriage of André Certa with the daughter of the wealthy Samuel, was an important event. The beautiful señoras had not given themselves a moment's rest; they had exhausted their ingenuity to invent some pretty corsage or novel head-dress; they had wearied themselves in trying without cessation the most varied toilets.

Numerous preparations were also going on in the house of Samuel; it was a part of the Jew's plan to give great publicity to the marriage of Sarah. The frescoes which adorned his dwelling according to the Spanish custom, had been newly painted; the richest hangings fell in large folds at the windows and doors of the habitation. Furniture carved in the latest fashion, of precious or fragrant wood, was crowded in vast saloons, impregnated with a delicious coolness. Rare shrubs, the productions of warm countries, seized the eye with their splendid colors, and one would have thought Spring had stolen along the balconies and terraces, to inundate them with flowers and perfumes.

Meanwhile, amid these smiling marvels, the young girl was weeping; Sarah no longer had hope, since the Sambo had none; and the Sambo had no hope, since he wore no sign of hope! The negro Liberta had watched the steps of the old Indian; he had seen nothing. Ah! if the poor child could have followed the impulses of her heart, she would have immured herself in one of those tranquil *beaterios*, to die there amid tears and prayer.

Urged by an irresistible attraction to the doctrines of Catholicism, the young Jewess had been secretly converted; by the cares of the good Father Joachim, she had been won over to a religion more in accordance with her feelings than that in which she had been educated. If Samuel had destined her for a Jew, she would have avowed her faith; but, about to espouse a Catholic, she reserved for her husband the secret of her conversion.

Father Joachim, in order to avoid scandal, and besides, better read in his breviary than in the human heart, had suffered Sarah to believe in the death of Martin Paz. The conversion of the young girl was the most important thing to him; he saw it assured by her union with André Certa, and he sought to accustom her to the idea of this marriage, the conditions of which he was far from respecting.

At last the day so joyous for some, so sad for others, had arrived. André Certa had invited the entire city to his nuptials; his invitations were refused by the noble families, who excused themselves on various pretexts. The mestizo, meanwhile, proudly held up his head, and scarcely looked at those of his own class. The little Milleflores in vain essayed his humblest vows; but he consoled himself with the idea that he was about to figure as an active party in the repast which was to follow.

In the meantime, the young mestizoes were discoursing with him in the brilliant saloons of the Jew, and the crowd of guests thronged around André Certa, who proudly displayed the splendors of his toilet.

The contract was soon to be signed; the sun had long been set, and the young girl had not appeared.

Doubtless she was discussing with her duenna and her maids the place of a ribbon or the choice of an ornament. Perhaps, that enchanting timidity which so beautifully adorns the cheeks of a young girl, detained her still from their inquisitive regards.

The Jew Samuel seemed a prey to secret uneasiness; André Certa bent his brow in an impatient manner; a sort of embarrassment was depicted on the countenance of more than one guest, while the thousand of wax-lights, reflected by the mirrors, filled the saloon with dazzling splendor.

Without, a man was wandering in mortal anxiety; it was the Marquis Don Vegal.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL INTERESTS AT STAKE.

Meanwhile, Sarah was left alone, alone with her anguish and her grief! She was about to give up her whole life to a man whom she did not love! She leaned over the perfumed balcony of her chamber, which overlooked the interior gardens. Through the green jalousies, her ear listened to the sounds of the slumbering country. Her lace mantle, gliding over her arms, revealed a profusion of diamonds sparkling on her shoulders. Her sorrow, proud and majestic, appeared through all her ornaments, and she might have been taken for one of those beautiful Greek slaves, nobly draped in their antique garments.

Suddenly her glance rested on a man who was gliding silently among the avenues of the magnolia; she recognized him; it was Liberta, her servant. He seemed to be watching some invisible enemy, now sheltering himself behind a statue, now crouching on the ground.

Sarah was afraid, and looked around her. She was alone, entirely alone. Her eyes rested on the gardens, and she became pale, paler still! Before her was transpiring a terrible scene. Liberta was in the grasp of a man of tall stature, who had thrown him down; stifled sighs proved that a robust hand was pressing the lips of the Indian.

The young girl, summoning all her courage, was about to cry out, when she saw the two men rise! The negro was looking fixedly at his adversary.

“It is you, then! it is you!” exclaimed he.

And he followed this man in a strange stupefaction. They arrived beneath the balcony of Sarah. Suddenly, before she had time to utter a cry, Martin Paz appeared to her, like a phantom from another world; and, like the negro when overthrown by the Indian, the young girl, bending before the glance of Martin Paz, could in her turn only repeat these words,

“It is you, then! it is you!”

The young Indian fixed on her his motionless eyes, and said:

“Does the betrothed hear the sound of the festival? The guests are thronging into the saloons to see happiness radiate from her countenance! Is it then a victim, prepared for the sacrifice, who is about to present herself to their impatient eyes? Is it with these features, pale with sorrow, with eyes in which sparkle bitter tears, that the young girl is to appear herself before her betrothed?”

Martin Paz spoke thus, in a tone full of sympathizing sadness, and Sarah listened vaguely as to those harmonies which we hear in dreams!

The young Indian resumed with infinite sweetness:

“Since the soul of the young girl is in mourning, let her look beyond the house of her father, beyond the city where she suffers and weeps; beyond the mountains, the palm-trees lift up their heads in freedom, the birds strike the air with an independent wing; men have immensity to live in, and the young girls may unfold their spirits and their hearts!”

Sarah raised her head toward Martin Paz. The Indian had drawn himself up to his full height, and with his arm extended toward the summits of the Cordilleras, was pointing out to the young girl the path to liberty.

Sarah felt herself constrained by an irresistible force. Already the sound of voices reached her; they approached her chamber; her father was undoubtedly about to enter; perhaps her lover would accompany him! The Indian suddenly extinguished the lamp suspended above his head. A whistling, similar to the cry of the *cilguero*, and reminding one of that heard on the Plaza-Mayor, pierced the silent darkness of night; the young girl swooned.

The door opened hastily; Samuel and André Certa entered. The darkness was profound; some servants ran with torches. The chamber was empty.

“Death and fury!” exclaimed the mestizo.

“Where is she?” asked Samuel.

“You are responsible for her,” said André, brutally.

At these words, the Jew felt a cold sweat freeze even his bones.

“Help! help!” he exclaimed.

And, followed by his domestics, he sprang out of the house.

Martin Paz fled rapidly through the streets of the city. The negro Liberta followed him; but did not appear disposed to dispute with him the possession of the young girl.

At two hundred paces from the dwelling of the Jew, Paz found some Indians of his companions, who had assembled at the whistle uttered by him.

“To our mountain *ranchos*!” exclaimed he.

"To the house of the Marquis Don Vegal!" said another voice behind him.

Martin Paz turned; the Spaniard was at his side.

"Will you not confide this young girl to me?" asked the marquis.

The Indian bent his head, and said in a low voice to his companions:

"To the dwelling of the Marquis Don Vegal!"

They turned their steps in this direction.

An extreme confusion reigned then in the saloons of the Jew. The news of Sarah's disappearance was a thunderbolt; the friends of André hastened to follow him. The *faubourg* of San Lazaro was explored, hastily searched; but nothing could be discovered. Samuel tore his hair in despair. During the whole night the most active research was useless.

"Martin Paz is living!" exclaimed André Certa, in a moment of fury.

And the presentiment quickly acquired confirmation. The police were immediately informed of the elopement; its most active agents bestirred themselves; the Indians were closely watched, and if the retreat of the young girl was not discovered, evident proofs of an approaching revolt came to light, which accorded with the denunciations of the Jew.

André Certa lavished gold freely, but could learn nothing. Meanwhile, the gate-keepers declared that they had seen no person leave Lima; the young girl must therefore be concealed in the city.

Liberta, who returned to his master, was often interrogated; but no person seemed more astonished than himself at the elopement of Sarah.

Meanwhile, one man besides André Certa had seen in the disappearance of the young Jewess, a proof of the existence of Martin Paz; it was the Sambo. He was wandering in the streets of Lima, when the cry uttered by the Indian fixed his attention; it was a signal of rally well known to him! The Sambo was therefore a spectator of the capture of the young girl, and followed her to the dwelling of the marquis.

The Spaniard entered by a secret door, of which he alone had the key; so that his domestics suspected nothing. Martin Paz carried the young girl in his arms and laid her on a bed.

When Don Vegal, who had returned to re-enter by the principal door, reached the chamber where Sarah was reposing, he found Martin Paz kneeling beside her. The marquis was about to reproach the Indian with his conduct, when the latter said to him:

“You see, my father, whether I love you! Ah! why did you throw yourself in my way? We should have been already free in our mountains. But how, should I not have obeyed your words?”

Don Vegal knew not what to reply, his heart was seized with a powerful emotion. He felt how much he was beloved by Martin Paz.

“The day on which Sarah shall quit your dwelling to be restored to her father and her betrothed,” sighed the Indian, “you will have a son and a friend less in the world.”

As he said these last words, Paz moistened with his tears the hand of Don Vegal. They were the first tears this man had shed!

The reproaches of Don Vegal died away before this respectful submission. The young girl had become his guest; she was sacred! He could not help admiring Sarah, still in a swoon; he was prepared to love her, of whose conversion he had been a witness, and whom he would have been pleased to bestow as a companion upon the young Indian.

It was then that, on opening her eyes, Sarah found herself in the presence of a stranger.

“Where am I?” said she, with a sentiment of terror.

“With a generous man who has permitted me to call him my father,” replied Martin Paz, pointing to the Spaniard.

The young girl, restored by the voice of the Indian to a consciousness of her position, covered her face with her trembling hands, and began to sob.

“Withdraw, friend,” said Don Vegal to the young man; “withdraw.”

Martin Paz slowly left the room, not without having pressed the hand of the Spaniard, and cast on Sarah a lingering look.

Then Don Vegal bestowed upon this poor child consolations of exquisite delicacy; he conveyed in suitable language his sentiments of nobility and honor. Attentive and resigned, the young girl comprehended what danger she had escaped; and she confided her future happiness to the care of the Spaniard. But amid phrases interrupted by sighs and mingled with tears, Don Vegal perceived the intense attachment of this simple heart for him whom she called her deliverer. He induced Sarah to take some repose, and watched over her with the solicitude of a father.

Martin Paz comprehended the duties that honor required of him, and, in spite of perils and dangers, would not pass the night beneath the roof of Don Vegal.

He therefore went out; his head was burning, his blood was boiling with fever in his veins.

He had not gone a hundred paces in the street, when five or six men threw themselves upon him, and, notwithstanding his obstinate defense, succeeded in binding him. Martin Paz uttered a cry of despair, which was lost in the night. He believed himself in the power of his enemies, and gave a last thought to the young girl.

A short time afterward the Indian was deposited in a room. The bandage which had covered his eyes was taken off. He looked around him, and saw himself in the lower hall of that tavern where his brethren had organized their approaching revolt.

The Sambo, Manangani, and others, surrounded him. A gleam of indignation flashed from his eyes, which was reciprocated by his captors.

“My son had then no pity on my tears,” said the Sambo, “since he suffered me for so long a time to believe in his death?”

“Is it on the eve before a revolt that Martin Paz, our chief, should be found in the camp of our enemies?”

Martin Paz replied neither to his father, nor to Manangani.

“So our most important interests have been sacrificed to a woman!”

As he spoke thus, Manangani had approached Martin Paz; a poignard was gleaming in his hand. Martin Paz did not even look at him.

“Let us first speak,” said the Sambo; “we will act afterward. If my son fails to conduct his brethren to the combat, I shall know now on whom to avenge his treason. Let him take care! the daughter of the Jew Samuel is not so well concealed that she can escape our hatred. My son will reflect. Struck with a mortal condemnation, proscribed, wandering among our masters, he will not have a stone on which to rest his sorrows. If, on the contrary, we resume our ancient country and our ancient power, Martin Paz, the chief of numerous tribes, may bestow upon his betrothed both happiness and glory.”

Martin Paz remained silent; but a terrific conflict was going on within him. The Sambo had roused the most sensitive chords of his proud nature to vibrate; placed between a life of fatigues, of dangers, of despair, and an existence happy, honored, illustrious, he could not hesitate. But should he then abandon the Marquis Don Vegal, whose noble hopes destined him as the deliverer of Peru!

“Oh!” thought he, as he looked at his father, “they will kill Sarah, if I forsake them.”

“What does my son reply to us?” imperiously demanded the Sambo.

“That Martin Paz is indispensable to your projects; that he enjoys a supreme authority over the Indians of the city; that he leads them at his will, and, at a sign, could have them dragged to death. He must therefore resume his place in the revolt, in order to ensure victory.”

The bonds which still enchained him were detached by order of the Sambo; Martin Paz arose free among his brethren.

"My son," said the Indian, who was observing him attentively, "to-morrow, during the fête of the Amancaës, our brethren will fall like an avalanche on the unarmed Limanians. There is the road to the Cordilleras, there is the road to the city; you will go wherever your good pleasure shall lead you. To-morrow! to-morrow! you will find more than one mestizo breast to break your poignard against. You are free."

"To the mountains!" exclaimed Martin Paz, with a stern voice.

The Indian had again become an Indian amid the hatred which surrounded him.

"To the mountains," repeated he, "and wo to our enemies, wo!"

And the rising sun illumined with its earliest rays the council of the Indian chiefs in the heart of the Cordilleras.

These rays were joyless to the heart of the poor young girl, who wept and prayed. The marquis had summoned Father Joachim; and the worthy man had there met his beloved penitent. What happiness was it for her to kneel at the feet of the old priest, and to pour out her anguish and her afflictions.

But Sarah could not longer remain in the dwelling of the Spaniard. Father Joachim suggested this to Don Vegal, who knew not what part to take, for he was a prey to extreme anxiety. What had become of Martin Paz? He had fled the house. Was he in the power of his enemies? Oh! how the Spaniard regretted having suffered him to leave it during that night of alarms! He sought him with the ardor, with the affection of a father; he found him not.

"My old friend," said he to Joachim, "the young girl is in safety near you; do not leave her during this fatal night."

“But her father, who seeks her — her betrothed, who awaits her?”

“One day — one single day! You know not whose existence is bound to that of this child. One day — one single day! at least until I find Martin Paz, he whom my heart and God have named my son!”

Father Joachim returned to the young girl; Don Vegal went out and traversed the streets of Lima.

The Spaniard was surprised at the noise, the commotion, the agitation of the city. It was that the great fête of the Amancaës, forgotten by him alone, the 24th of June, the day of St. John, had arrived. The neighboring mountains were covered with verdure and flowers; the inhabitants, on foot, on horseback, in carriages, were repairing to a celebrated table-land, situated at half a league from Lima, where the spectators enjoyed an admirable prospect; mestizoes and Indians mingled in the common fête; they walked gayly by groups of relatives or friends; each group, calling itself by the name of *partida*, carried its provisions, and was preceded by a player on the guitar, who chanted, accompanying himself, the most popular *yaravis* and *llantos*. These joyous promenaders advanced with cries, sports, endless jests, through the fields of maize and of *alfalfa*, through the groves of banana, whose fruits hung to the ground; they traversed those beautiful *alamedas*, planted with willows, and forests of citron, and orange-trees, whose intoxicating perfumes were mingled with the wild fragrance from the mountains. All along the road, traveling cabarets offered to the promenaders the brandy of *pisco* and the *chica*, whose copious libations excited to laughter and clamor; cavaliers made their horses caracole in the midst of the throng, and rivaled each other in swiftness, address, and dexterity; all the dances in vogue, from the *loudon* to the *mismis*, from the *boleros* to the *zamacuecas*, agitated and hurried on the *caballeros* and black-eyed *sambas*.

The sounds of the *viguela* were soon no longer sufficient for the disordered movements of the dancers; the musicians uttered wild cries, which stimulated them to delirium; the spectators beat the measure with their feet and hands, and the exhausted couples sunk one after another to the ground.

There reigned in this fête, which derives its name from the little mountain-flowers, an inconceivable transport and freedom; and yet no private brawl mingled among the cries of public rejoicing; a few lancers on horseback, ornamented with their shining cuirasses, maintained here and there order among the populace.

The various classes of Limanian society mingled in these rejoicings, which are repeated every day throughout the month of July. Pretty *tapadas* laughingly elbow beautiful girls, who bravely come, with uncovered faces, to meet joyous cavaliers; and when at last this multitude arrive at the *plateau* of the Amancaës, an immense clamor of admiration is repeated by the mountain echoes.

At the feet of the spectators extends the ancient city of kings, proudly lifting toward heaven its towers and its steeples, whose bells are ringing joyous peals. San Pedro, Saint Augustine, the Cathedral, attract the eye to their roofs, resplendent with the rays of the sun. San Domingo, the rich church, the Madonna of which is never clad in the same garments two days in succession, raises above her neighbors her tapering spire; on the right, the vast plains of the Pacific Ocean are undulating to the breath of the occidental breeze, and the eye, as it roves from Callao to Lima, rests on those funereal *chulpas*, the last remains of the great dynasty of the Incas; at the horizon, Cape Morro-Solar frames, with its sloping hills, the wonderful splendors of this picture.

So the Limanians are never satisfied with these admirable prospects, and their noisy approbation deafens every year the echoes of San Cristoval and the Amancaës.

Now, while they fearlessly enjoyed these picturesque views, and were giving themselves up to an irresistible delight, a gloomy bloody funereal drama was preparing on the snowy summits of the Cordilleras.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONQUERORS AND CONQUERED.

A prey to his blind grief, Don Vegal walked at random. After having lost his daughter, the hope of his race and of his love, was he about to see himself also deprived of the child of his adoption whom he had wrested from death? Don Vegal had forgotten Sarah, to think only of Martin Paz.

He was struck with the great number of Indians, of *zambos*, of *chiños*, who were wandering about the streets; these men, who usually took an active part in the sports of the Amancaës, were now walking silently with singular pre-occupation. Often some busy chief gave them a secret order, and went on his way; and all, notwithstanding their *detours*, were assembling by degrees in the wealthiest quarters of Lima, in proportion as the Limanians were scattered abroad in the country.

Don Vegal, absorbed in his own researches, soon forgot this singular state of things. He traversed San Lazaro throughout, saw André Certa there, enraged and armed, and the Jew Samuel, in the extremity of distress, not for the loss of his daughter, but for the loss of his hundred thousand piasters; but he found not Martin Paz, whom he was impatiently seeking. He ran to the consistorial prison. Nothing! He returned home. Nothing! He mounted his horse and hastened to Chorillos. Nothing! He returned at last, exhausted with fatigue, to Lima; the clock of the cathedral was striking four.

Don Vegal remarked some groups of Indians before his dwelling; but he could not, without compromising the man of whom he was in search, ask them —

“Where is Martin Paz?”

He re-entered, more despairing than ever.

Immediately a man emerged from a neighboring alley, and came directly to the Indians. This man was the Sambo.

“The Spaniard has returned,” said he to them; “you know him now; he is one of the representatives of the race which crushes us — wo to him!”

“And when shall we strike?”

“When five o’clock sounds, and the tocsin from the mountain gives the signal of vengeance.”

Then the Sambo marched with hasty steps to the *chingana*, and rejoined the chief of the revolt.

Meanwhile the sun had begun to sink beneath the horizon; it was the hour in which the Limanian aristocracy went in its turn to the Amancaës; the richest toilets shone in the equipages which defiled to the right and left beneath the trees along the road; there was an inextricable mêlée of foot-passengers, carriages, horses; a confusion of cries, songs, instruments, and vociferations.

The clock on the tower of the cathedral suddenly struck five! and a shrill funereal sound vibrated through the air; the tocsin thundered over the crowd, frozen in its delirium.

An immense cry resounded in the city. From every square, every street, every house issued the Indians, with arms in their hands, and fury in their eyes. The principal places of the city were thronged with these men, some of whom shook above their heads burning torches!

“Death to the Spaniards! death to the oppressors!” such was the watch-word of the rebels.

Those who attempted to return to Lima must have recoiled before these masses; but the summits of the hills were quickly covered with other enemies, and all retreat was impossible; the *zambos* precipitated themselves like a thunderbolt on this crowd, exhausted with the fatigues of the festival, while the mountain Indians cleared for themselves a bloody path to rejoin their brethren of the city.

Imagine the aspect presented by Lima at this terrible moment. The rebels had left the square of the tavern, and were scattered in all quarters; at the head of one of the columns, Martin Paz was waving the black flag — the flag of independence; while the Indians in the other streets were attacking the houses appointed to ruin, Martin Paz took possession of the Plaza-Mayor with his company; near him, Manangani was uttering ferocious yells, and proudly displaying his bloody arms.

But the soldiers of the government, forewarned of the revolt, were ranged in battle array before the palace of the president; a frightful *fusillade* greeted the insurgents at their entrance on the square; surprised by this unexpected discharge, which extended a goodly number of them on the ground, they sprang upon the troops with insurmountable impatience; a horrible mêlée followed, in which men fought body to body. Martin Paz and Manangani performed prodigies of valor, and escaped death only by miracle.

It was necessary at all hazards that the palace should be taken and occupied by their men.

“Forward!” cried Martin Paz, and his voice led the Indians to the assault. Although they were crushed in every direction, they succeeded in making the body of troops around the palace recoil. Already had Manangani sprang on the first steps; but he suddenly stopped as the opening ranks of soldiers unmasked two pieces of cannon ready to fire on the assailants.

There was not a moment to lose; the battery must be seized before it could be discharged.

“On!” cried Manangani, addressing himself to Martin Paz.

But the young Indian had just stooped and no longer heard him, for an Indian had whispered these words in his ear:

“They are pillaging the house of Don Vegal, perhaps assassinating him!”

At these words Martin Paz recoiled. Manangani seized him by the arm; but, repulsing him with a vigorous hand, the Indian darted toward the square.

“Traitor! infamous traitor!” exclaimed Manangani, discharging his pistols at Martin Paz.

At this moment the cannons were fired, and the grape swept the Indians on the steps.

“This way, brethren,” cried Martin Paz, and a few fugitives, his devoted companions, joined him; with this little company he could make his way through the soldiers.

This flight had all the consequences of treason; the Indians believed themselves abandoned by their chief. Manangani in vain attempted to bring them back to the combat; a rapid *fusillade* sent among them a shower of balls; thenceforth it was no longer possible to rally them; the confusion was at its height and the rout complete. The flames which arose in certain quarters attracted some fugitives to pillage; but the conquering soldiers pursued them with the sword, and killed a great number without mercy.

Meanwhile, Martin Paz had gained the house of Don Vegal; it was the theatre of a bloody struggle, headed by the Sambo himself; he had a double interest in being there; while contending with the Spanish noblemen, he wished to seize Sarah, as a pledge of the fidelity of his son.

On seeing Martin Paz return, he no longer doubted his treason, and turned his brethren against him.

The overthrown gate and walls of the court revealed Don Vegal, sword in hand, surrounded by his faithful servants, and contending with an invading mass. This man's courage and pride were sublime; he was the first to present himself to mortal blows, and his formidable arm had surrounded him with corpses.

But what could be done against this crowd of Indians, which was then increasing with all the conquered of the Plaza-Mayor. Don Vegal felt that his defenders were becoming exhausted, and nothing remained for him but death, when Martin Paz arrived, rapid as the thunderbolt, charged the aggressors from behind, forced them to turn against him, and, amid balls, poignard-strokes and maledictions, reached Don Vegal, to whom he made a rampart of his body. Courage revived in the hearts of the besieged.

"Well done, my son, well done!" said Don Vegal to Martin Paz, pressing his hand.

But the young Indian was gloomy.

“Well done! Martin Paz,” exclaimed another voice which went to his very soul; he recognized Sarah, and his arm traced a bloody circle around him.

The company of Sambo gave way in its turn. Twenty times had this modern Brutus directed his blows against his son, without being able to reach him, and twenty times Martin had turned away the weapon about to strike his father.

Suddenly the ferocious Manangani, covered with blood, appeared beside the Sambo.

“Thou hast sworn,” said he, “to avenge the treason of a wretch on his kindred, on his friends, on himself. Well, it is time! the soldiers are coming; the mestizo, André Certa, is with them.”

“Come then,” said the Sambo, with a ferocious laugh: “come then, for our vengeance approaches.”

And both abandoned the house of Don Vegal, while their companions were being killed there. They went directly to the company who were arriving. The latter aimed at them; but without being intimidated, the Sambo approached the mestizo.

“You are André Certa,” said he; “well, your betrothed is in the house of Don Vegal, and Martin Paz is about to carry her to the mountains.”

This said, the Indians disappeared. Thus the Sambo had put face to face two mortal enemies, and, deceived by the presence of Martin Paz in the house of Don Vegal, the soldiers rushed upon the dwelling of the marquis.

André Certa was intoxicated with rage. As soon as he perceived Martin Paz, he rushed upon him.

“Here!” exclaimed the young Indian, and quitting the stone steps which he had so valiantly defended, he joined the mestizo. Meanwhile the companions of Martin Paz were repulsing the soldiers body to body.

Martin Paz had seized André Certa with his powerful hand, and clasped him so closely that the mestizo could not use his pistols. They were there, foot against foot, breast against breast, their faces touched, and their glances mingled in a single gleam; their movements became rapid, even invisible; neither friends nor enemies could approach them; in this terrible embrace respiration failed, both fell. André Certa raised himself above Martin Paz, whose poignard had escaped his grasp. The mestizo raised his arm, but the Indian succeeded in seizing it before it had struck. The moment was horrible. André Certa in vain attempted to disengage himself; Martin Paz, with supernatural strength, turned against the mestizo the poignard and the arm which held it, and plunged it into his heart.

Martin Paz arose all bloody. The place was free, the soldiers flying in every direction. Martin Paz might have conquered had he remained on the Plaza-Mayor. He fell into the arms of Don Vegal.

“To the mountains, my son; flee to the mountains! now I command it.”

“Is my enemy indeed dead?” said Martin Paz, returning to the corpse of André Certa.

A man was that moment searching it, and held a pocket-book which he had taken from it. Martin Paz sprang on this man and overthrew him; it was the Jew Samuel.

The Indian picked up the pocket-book, opened it hastily, searched it, uttered a cry of joy, and springing toward the marquis, put in his hand a paper on which were written these words:

“Received of the Señor André Certa the sum of 100,000 piasters; I pledge myself to restore this sum doubled, if Sarah, whom I saved from the shipwreck of the *San-José*, and whom he is about to espouse, is not the daughter and only heir of the Marquis Don Vegal.

“Samuel.”

“My daughter! my daughter!” exclaimed the Spaniard, and he fell into the arms of Martin Paz, who carried him to the chamber of Sarah.

Alas! the young girl was no longer there; Father Joachim, bathed in his own blood, could articulate only these words:

“The Sambo! — carried off! — toward the river of Madeira! — ”

And he fainted.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CATARACTS OF THE MADEIRA.

“On! on!” Martin Paz had exclaimed. And without saying a word, Don Vegal followed the Indian. His daughter! — he must find again his daughter! Mules were brought, prepared for a long journey among the Cordilleras; the two men mounted them, wrapped in their *ponchos*; large gaiters were attached by thongs above their knees; immense stirrups, armed with long spurs, surrounded their feet, and broad-brimmed Guayaquil hats sheltered their heads. Arms filled the holsters of each saddle; a carbine, formidable in the hands of Don Vegal, was suspended at his side. Martin Paz had encircled himself with his lasso, one extremity of which was fixed to the harness of his mule.

The Spaniard and the Indian spurred their horses to their utmost speed. At the moment of leaving the walls of the city they were joined by an Indian equipped like themselves. It was Liberta — Don Vegal recognized him; the faithful servant wished to share in their pursuit.

Martin Paz knew all the plains, all the mountains, which they were to traverse; he knew among what savage tribes, into what desert country the Sambo had conveyed his betrothed. His betrothed! he no longer dared give this name to the daughter of Don Vegal.

“My son,” said the latter, “have you any hope in your heart?”

“As much as hatred and tenderness.”

“The daughter of the Jew, in becoming my blood, has not ceased to be thine.”

“Let us press on!” hastily replied Martin Paz.

On their way the travelers saw a great number of Indians flying to regain their *ranchos* amid the mountains. The defection of Martin Paz had been followed by defeat. If the *émeute* had triumphed in some places, it had received its death-blow at Lima.

The three cavaliers traveled rapidly, having but one idea, one object. They soon buried themselves among the almost impracticable passes of the Cordilleras. Difficult pathways circulated through these reddish masses, planted here and there with cocoanut and pine trees; the cedars, cotton-trees, and aloes were left behind them, with the plains covered with maize and lucerne; some thorny cactuses sometimes pricked their mules, and made them hesitate on the verge of precipices.

It was a difficult task to traverse the Cordilleras during these summer months; the melting of snows beneath the sun of June often made unforeseen cataracts spout from beneath the steps of the traveler; often frightful masses, detaching themselves from the summits of the peaks, were engulfed near them in fathomless abysses!

But they continued their march, fearing neither the hurricane nor the cold of these high solitudes; they traveled day and night, finding neither cities nor dwellings where they might for a moment repose; happy if in some deserted hut they found a mat of *tortora* upon which to extend their wearied limbs, some pieces of meat dried in the sun, some calabashes full of muddy water.

They reached at last the summit of the Andes, 14,000 feet above the level of the sea. There, no more trees, no more vegetation; sometimes an *oso* or *ucuman*, a sort of enormous black bear, came to meet them. Often, during the afternoon, they were enveloped in those formidable storms of the

Cordilleras, which raise whirlwinds of snow from the loftiest summits. Don Vegal sometimes paused, unaccustomed to these frightful perils. Martin Paz then supported him in his arms, and sheltered him against the drifting snow. And yet lightnings flashed from the clouds, and thunders broke over these barren peaks, and filled the mountain recesses with their terrific roar.

At this point, the most elevated of the Andes, the travelers were seized with a malady called by the Indians *soroche*, which deprives the most intrepid man of his courage and his strength. A superhuman will is then necessary to keep one from falling motionless on the stones of the road, and being devoured by those immense condors which display above their vast wings! These three men spoke little; each wrapped himself in the silence which these vast deserts inspired.

On the eastern slope of the Cordilleras, they hoped to find traces of their enemies; they therefore traveled on, and were at last descending the chain of mountains; but the Andes are composed of a great number of salient peaks, so that inaccessible precipices were constantly rising before them.

Nevertheless they soon found the trees of inferior levels; the llamas, the vigonias, which feed on the thin grass, announced the neighborhood of men. Sometimes they met *gauchos* conducting their *arias* of mules; and more than one *capataz* (leader of a convoy) exchanged fresh animals for their exhausted ones.

In this manner they reached the immense virgin forests which cover the plains situated between Peru and Brazil; they began thenceforth to recover traces of the captors; and it was in the midst of these inextricable woods that Martin Paz recovered all his Indian sagacity.

Courage returned to the Spaniard, strength returned to Liberta, when a half-extinct fire and prints of footsteps proved the proximity of their enemies. Martin Paz noted all and studied all, the breaking of the little branches, the nature of the vestiges.

Don Vegal feared lest his unfortunate daughter should have been dragged on foot through the stones and thorns; but the Indian showed him some pebbles strongly imbedded in the earth, which indicated the pressure of an animal’s foot; above, branches had been pushed aside in the same direction, which could have been reached only by a person on horseback. The poor father comforted himself and recovered life and hope, and then Martin Paz was so confident, so skillful, so strong, that there were for him neither impassable obstacles nor insurmountable perils.

Nevertheless immense forests contracted the horizon around them, and trees multiplied incessantly before their fatigued eyes.

One evening, while the darkness was gathering beneath the opaque foliage, Martin Paz, Liberta and Don Vegal were compelled by fatigue to stop. They had reached the banks of a river; it was the river Madeira, which the Indian recognized perfectly; immense mangrove trees bent above the sleeping wave and were united to the trees on the opposite shore by capricious *lianes* (vines), on which were balancing the *titipaying* and the *concoulies*.

Had the captors ascended the banks? had they descended the course of the river? had they crossed it in a direct line? Such were the questions with which Martin Paz puzzled himself. He stepped a little aside from his companions, following with infinite difficulty some fugitive tracks; these brought him to a clearing a little less gloomy. Some footsteps indicated that a company of men had, perhaps, crossed the river at this spot, which was the opinion of the Indian, although he found around him no proof of the construction of a canoe; he knew that the Sambo might have cut down some tree in the middle of the forest, and having spoiled it of its bark, made of it a boat, which could have been carried on the arms of men to the shores of the Madeira. Nevertheless, he was still hesitating, when he saw a sort of black mass move near a thicket; he quickly prepared his lasso and made ready for an attack; he advanced a few paces, and perceived an animal lying on the ground, a prey to the final convulsions — it was a mule. The poor, expiring beast had been struck at a distance from the spot whither it had been dragged, leaving long traces of blood on its passage. Martin Paz no longer doubted that the Indians, unable to induce it to cross the river, had killed it with the stroke of a poignard, as a deep wound indicated. From this moment he felt certain of the direction of his enemies; and returned to his companions, who were already uneasy at his long absence.

“To-morrow, perhaps, we shall see the young girl!” said he to them.

“My daughter! Oh! my son! let us set out this instant,” said the Spaniard; “I am no longer fatigued, and strength returns with hope — let us go!”

“But we must cross this river, and we cannot lose time in constructing a canoe.”

“We will swim across.”

“Courage, then, my father! Liberta and myself will sustain you.”

All three laid aside their garments, which Martin Paz carried in a bundle upon his head; and all three glided silently into the water, for fear of awakening some of these dangerous *caïmans* so numerous in the rivers of Brazil and Peru.

They arrived safely at the opposite shore: the first care of Martin Paz was to recover traces of the Indians; but in vain did he scrutinize the smallest leaves, the smallest pebbles — he could discover nothing; as the rapid current had carried them down in crossing, he ascended the bank of the river to the spot opposite that where he had found the mule, but nothing indicated the direction taken by the captors. It must have been that these, that their tracks might be entirely lost, had descended the river for several miles, in order to land far from the spot of their embarkation.

Martin Paz, that his companions might not be discouraged, did not communicate to them his fears; he said not even a word to Don Vegal respecting the mule, for fear of saddening him still more with the thought that his daughter must now be dragged through these difficult passes.

When he returned to the Spaniard, he found him asleep — fatigue had prevailed over grief and resolution; Martin Paz was careful not to awaken him; a little sleep might do him much good; but, while he himself watched, resting the head of Don Vegal on his knees and piercing with his quick glances the surrounding shadows, he sent Liberta to seek below on the river some trace which might guide them at the first rays of the sun.

The Indian departed in the direction indicated, gliding like a serpent between the high brush with which the shores were bristling, and the sound of his footsteps was soon lost in the distance.

Thenceforth Martin Paz remained alone amid these gloomy solitudes: the Spaniard was sleeping peacefully; the names of his daughter and the Indian sometimes mingled in his dreams, and alone disturbed the silence of these obscure forests.

The young Indian was not mistaken; the Sambo had descended the Madeira three miles, then had landed with the young girl and his numerous companions, among whom might be numbered Manangani, still covered with hideous wounds.

The company of Sambo had increased during the journey. The Indians of the plains and the mountains had awaited with impatience the triumph of the revolt; on learning the failure of their brethren, they fell a prey to a gloomy despair; hearing that they had been betrayed by Martin Paz, they uttered yells of rage; when they saw that they had a victim to be sacrificed to their anger, they burst forth in cries of joy and followed the company of the old Indian.

They marched thus to the approaching sacrifice, devouring the young girl with sanguinary glances — it was the betrothed, the beloved of Martin Paz whom they were about to put to death; abuse was heaped upon her, and more than once the Sambo, who wished his revenge to be public, with difficulty wrested Sarah from their fury.

The young girl, pale, languishing, was without thought and almost without life amid this frightful horde; she had no longer the sentiment of motion, of will, of existence — she advanced, because bloody hands urged her onward; they might have abandoned her in the midst of these great solitudes — she could not have taken a step to have escaped death. Sometimes the remembrance of her father and of the young Indian passed before her eyes, but like a gleam of lightning bewildering her; then she fell again an inert mass on the neck of the poor mule, whose wounded feet could no longer sustain her. When beyond the river she was compelled to follow her captors on foot, two Indians taking her by the arm dragged her rapidly along, and a trace of blood marked on the sand and dead leaves her painful passage.

But the Sambo was no longer afraid of pursuit; he cared little that this blood betrayed the direction he had taken — he was approaching the termination of his journey, and soon the cataracts which abound in the currents of the great river sent up their deafening clamor.

The numerous company of Indians arrived at a sort of village, composed of a hundred huts, made of reeds interlaced and clay; at their approach, a multitude of women and children darted toward them with loud cries of joy — more than one found there his anxious family — more than one wife missed the father of her children!

These women soon learned the defeat of their party; their sadness was transformed into rage on learning the defection of Martin Paz, and on seeing his betrothed devoted to death.

Sarah remained immovable before these enemies and looked at them with a dim eye; all these hideous faces were making grimaces around her, and the most terrific threats were uttered in her ears — the poor child might have thought herself delivered over to the torturers of the infernal regions.

“Where is my husband?” said one; “it is thou who hast caused him to be killed!”

“And my brother, who will never again return to the cabin — what hast thou done with him? Death! death! Let each of us have a piece of her flesh! let each of us have a pain to make her suffer! Death! death!”

And these women, with dishevelled hair, brandishing knives, waving flaming brands, bearing enormous stones, approached the young girl, surrounded her, pressed her, crushed her.

“Back!” cried the Sambo, “back! and let all await the decision of their chiefs! This girl must disarm the anger of the Great Spirit, which has rested upon our arms; and she shall not serve for private revenge alone!”

The women obeyed the words of the old Indian, casting frightful glances on the young girl; the latter, covered with blood, remained extended on the pebbly shore.

Above this village, plunges, from a height of more than a hundred feet, a foaming cataract, which breaks against sharp rocks; the Madeira, contracted into a deep bed, precipitates this dense mass of water with frightful rapidity; a cloud of mist is eternally suspended above this torrent, whose fall sends its formidable and thundering roar afar.

It was in the midst of this foaming tempest that the unfortunate young girl was destined to die; at the first rays of the sun, exposed in a bark canoe above the cataract, she was to be precipitated with the mass of waters on the rude rocks against which the Madeira broke.

So the council of chiefs had decided; and they had delayed until the morrow the punishment of their victim, to give her a night of anguish, of torment, and of terror.

When the sentence was made known, cries of joy welcomed it, and a furious delirium seized the Indians.

It was a night of orgies — a night of blood and of horror; brandy increased the excitement of these wild natives; dances, accompanied with perpetual yells, surrounded the young girl, and wound their fantastic chains about the stake to which she was fastened. Sometimes the circle narrowed, and enlaced her in its furious whirls: the Indians ran through the uncultivated fields, brandishing blazing pine-branches, and surrounding the victim with light.

And it was thus until sunrise, and worse yet when its first rays illuminated the scene. The young girl was detached from the stake, and a hundred arms were stretched out to drag her to execution, when the name of Martin Paz involuntarily escaped her lips, and cries of hatred and of vengeance responded.

It was necessary to climb by steep paths the immense pile of rocks which led to the upper level of the river, and the victim arrived there all bloody; a canoe of bark awaited her a hundred paces above the fall; she was deposited in it, and fastened by bonds which entered her flesh.

“Vengeance and death!” exclaimed the whole tribe, with one voice.

The canoe was hurried on with increasing rapidity and began to whirl.

Suddenly a man appeared on the opposite shore — It is Martin Paz! Beside him, are Don Vegal and Liberta.

“My daughter! my daughter!” exclaims the father, kneeling on the shore.

“My father!” replied Sarah, raising herself up with superhuman strength.

The scene was indescribable. The canoe was rapidly hastening to the cataract, in whose foam it was already enveloped.

Martin Paz, standing on a rock, balanced his lasso which whistled around his head. At the instant the boat was about to be precipitated, the long leathern thong unfolded from above the head of the Indian, and surrounded the canoe with its noose.

“My daughter! my daughter!” exclaimed Don Vegal.

“My betrothed! my beloved!” cried Martin Paz.

“Death!” yelled the savage multitude.

Meanwhile Martin Paz redoubles his efforts; the canoe remains suspended over the abyss; the current cannot prevail over the strength of the young Indian; the canoe is drawn to him; the enemies are far on the opposite shore; the young girl is saved.

Suddenly an arrow whistles through the air, and pierces the heart of Martin Paz. He falls forward in the bark of the victim; and, re-descending the current of the river in her arms, is engulfed with Sarah in the vortex of the cataract.

A yell of triumph is heard above the sound of the torrent.

Liberta bore off the Spaniard amid a cloud of arrows, and disappeared with him.

Don Vegal regained Lima, where he died with grief and exhaustion.

The Sambo, who remained among his sanguinary tribes, was never heard of more.

The Jew Samuel kept the hundred thousand piasters he had received, and continued his usuries at the expense of the Limanian nobles.

Martin Paz and Sarah were, in their brief and final re-union, betrothed for eternity.

THE BLOCKADE RUNNERS

Translation by Mrs Arthur Bell

This 1865 short story is set during the American civil war and concerns the exploits of James Playfair, who must break the Union blockade of the harbour of Charleston in South Carolina.

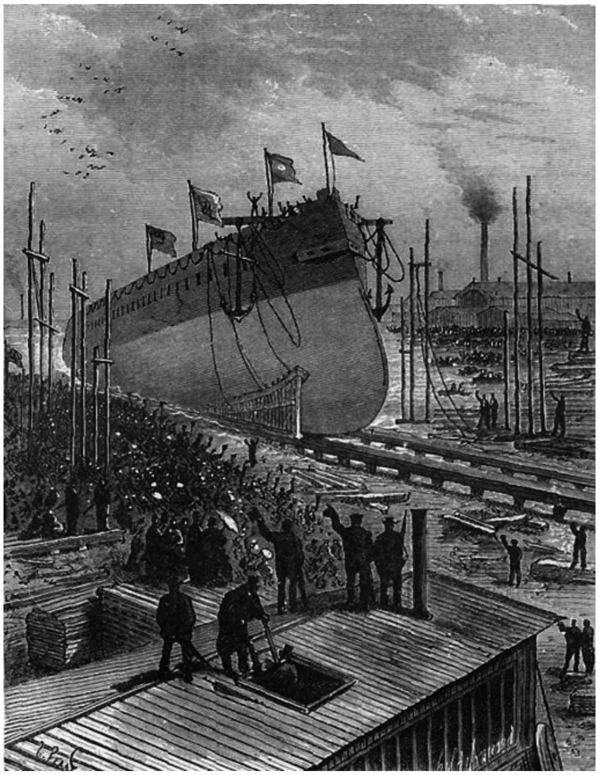

An original illustration

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CHAPTER I

THE *DOLPHIN*

The Clyde was the first river whose waters were lashed into foam by a steam-boat. It was in 1812 when the steamer called the *Comet* ran between Glasgow and Greenock, at the speed of six miles an hour. Since that time more than a million of steamers or packet-boats have plied this Scotch river, and the inhabitants of Glasgow must be as familiar as any people with the wonders of steam navigation.

However, on the 3rd of December, 1862, an immense crowd, composed of shipowners, merchants, manufacturers, workmen, sailors, women, and children, thronged the muddy streets of Glasgow, all going in the direction of Kelvin Dock, the large shipbuilding premises belonging to Messrs. Tod & MacGregor. This last name especially proves that the descendants of the famous Highlanders have become manufacturers, and that they have made workmen of all the vassals of the old clan chieftains.

Kelvin Dock is situated a few minutes’ walk from the town, on the right bank of the Clyde. Soon the immense timber-yards were thronged with spectators; not a part of the quay, not a wall of the wharf, not a factory roof showed an unoccupied place; the river itself was covered with craft of all descriptions, and the heights of Govan, on the left bank, swarmed with spectators.

There was, however, nothing extraordinary in the event about to take place; it was nothing but the launching of a ship, and this was an everyday affair with the people of Glasgow. Had the *Dolphin*, then — for that was the name of the ship built by Messrs. Tod & MacGregor — some special peculiarity? To tell the truth, it had none.

It was a large ship, about 1,500 tons, in which everything combined to obtain superior speed. Her engines, of 500 horse-power, were from the workshops of Lancefield Forge; they worked two screws, one on either side the stern-post, completely independent of each other. As for the depth of water the *Dolphin* would draw, it must be very inconsiderable; connoisseurs were not deceived, and they concluded rightly that this ship was destined for shallow straits. But all these particulars could not in any way justify the eagerness of the people: taken altogether, the *Dolphin* was nothing more or less than an ordinary ship. Would her launching present some mechanical difficulty to be overcome? Not any more than usual. The Clyde had received many a ship of heavier tonnage, and the launching of the *Dolphin* would take place in the usual manner.

In fact, when the water was calm, the moment the ebb-tide set in, the workmen began to operate. Their mallets kept perfect time falling on the wedges meant to raise the ship's keel: soon a shudder ran through the whole of her massive structure; although she had only been slightly raised, one could see that she shook, and then gradually began to glide down the well greased wedges, and in a few moments she plunged into the Clyde. Her stern struck the muddy bed of the river, then she raised herself on the top of a gigantic wave, and, carried forward by her start, would have been dashed against the quay of the Govan timber-yards, if her anchors had not restrained her.

The launch had been perfectly successful, the *Dolphin* swayed quietly on the waters of the Clyde, all the spectators clapped their hands when she took possession of her natural element, and loud hurrahs arose from either bank.

But wherefore these cries and this applause? Undoubtedly the most eager of the spectators would have been at a loss to explain the reason of his enthusiasm. What was the cause, then, of the lively interest excited by this ship? Simply the mystery which shrouded her destination; it was not known to what kind of commerce she was to be appropriated, and in questioning different groups the diversity of opinion on this important subject was indeed astonishing.

However, the best informed, at least those who pretended to be so, agreed in saying that the steamer was going to take part in the terrible war which was then ravaging the United States of America, but more than this they did not know, and whether the *Dolphin* was a privateer, a transport ship, or an addition to the Federal marine was what no one could tell.

“Hurrah!” cried one, affirming that the *Dolphin* had been built for the Southern States.

“Hip! hip! hip!” cried another, swearing that never had a faster boat crossed to the American coasts.

Thus its destination was unknown, and in order to obtain any reliable information one must be an intimate friend, or, at any rate, an acquaintance of Vincent Playfair & Co. of Glasgow.

A rich, powerful, intelligent house of business was that of Vincent Playfair & Co. in a social sense, an old and honourable family, descended from those tobacco lords who built the finest quarters of the town. These clever merchants, by an act of the Union, had founded the first Glasgow warehouse for dealing in tobacco from Virginia and Maryland. Immense fortunes were realised; mills and foundries sprang up in all parts, and in a few years the prosperity of the city attained its height.

The house of Playfair remained faithful to the enterprising spirit of its ancestors, it entered into the most daring schemes, and maintained the honour of English commerce. The principal, Vincent Playfair, a man of fifty, with a temperament essentially practical and decided, although somewhat daring, was a genuine shipowner. Nothing affected him beyond commercial questions, not even the political side of the transactions, otherwise he was a perfectly loyal and honest man.

However, he could not lay claim to the idea of building and fitting up the *Dolphin*; she belonged to his nephew, James Playfair, a fine young man of thirty, the boldest skipper of the British merchant marine.

It was one day at the Tontine coffee-room under the arcades of the town hall, that James Playfair, after having impatiently scanned the American journal, disclosed to his uncle an adventurous scheme.

“Uncle Vincent,” said he, coming to the point at once, “there are two millions of pounds to be gained in less than a month.”

“And what to risk?” asked Uncle Vincent.

“A ship and a cargo.”

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing, except the crew and the captain, and that does not reckon for much.”

“Let us see,” said Uncle Vincent.

“It is all seen,” replied James Playfair. “You have read the *Tribune*, the *New York Herald*, *The Times*, the *Richmond Inquirer*, the *American Review*?”

“Scores of times, nephew.”

“You believe, like me, that the war of the United States will last a long time still?”

“A very long time.”

“You know how much this struggle will affect the interests of England, and especially those of Glasgow?”

“And more especially still the house of Playfair & Co.” replied Uncle Vincent.

“Theirs especially,” added the young Captain.

“I worry myself about it every day, James, and I cannot think without terror of the commercial disasters which this war may produce; not but that the house of Playfair is firmly established, nephew; at the same time it has correspondents which may fail. Ah! those Americans, slave-holders or Abolitionists, I have no faith in them!”

If Vincent Playfair was wrong in thus speaking with respect to the great principles of humanity, always and everywhere superior to personal interests, he was, nevertheless, right from a commercial point of view. The most important material was failing at Glasgow, the cotton famine became every day more threatening, thousands of workmen were reduced to living upon public charity. Glasgow possessed 25,000 looms, by which 625,000 yards of cotton were spun daily; that is to say, fifty millions of pounds yearly. From these numbers it may be guessed what disturbances were caused in the commercial part of the town when the raw material failed altogether. Failures were hourly taking place, the manufactories were closed, and the workmen were dying of starvation.

It was the sight of this great misery which had put the idea of his bold enterprise into James Playfair’s head.

“I will go for cotton, and will get it, cost what it may.”

But, as he also was a merchant as well as his uncle Vincent, he resolved to carry out his plan by way of exchange, and to make his proposition under the guise of a commercial enterprise.

“Uncle Vincent,” said he, “this is my idea.”

“Well, James?”

“It is simply this: we will have a ship built of superior sailing qualities and great bulk.”

“That is quite possible.”

“We will load her with ammunition of war, provisions, and clothes.”

“Just so.”

“I will take the command of this steamer, I will defy all the ships of the Federal marine for speed, and I will run the blockade of one of the southern ports.”

“You must make a good bargain for your cargo with the Confederates, who will be in need of it,” said his uncle.

“And I shall return laden with cotton.”

“Which they will give you for nothing.”

“As you say, Uncle. Will it answer?”

“It will; but shall you be able to get there?”

“I shall, if I have a good ship.”

“One can be made on purpose. But the crew?”

“Oh, I will find them. I do not want many men; enough to work with, that is all. It is not a question of fighting with the Federals, but distancing them.”

“They shall be distanced,” said Uncle Vincent, in a peremptory tone; “but now, tell me, James, to what port of the American coast do you think of going?”

“Up to now, Uncle, ships have run the blockade of New Orleans, Wilmington, and Savannah, but I think of going straight to Charleston; no English boat has yet been able to penetrate into the harbour, except the *Bermuda*. I will do like her, and, if my ship draws but very little water, I shall be able to go where the Federalists will not be able to follow.”

“The fact is,” said Uncle Vincent, “Charleston is overwhelmed with cotton; they are even burning it to get rid of it.”

“Yes,” replied James; “besides, the town is almost invested; Beauregard is running short of provisions, and he will pay me a golden price for my cargo!”

“Well, nephew, and when will you start?”

“In six months; I must have the long winter nights to aid me.”

“It shall be as you wish, nephew.”

“It is settled, then, Uncle?”

“Settled!”

“Shall it be kept quiet?”

“Yes; better so.”

And this is how it was that five months later the steamer *Dolphin* was launched from the Kelvin Dock timber-yards, and no one knew her real destination.

CHAPTER II

GETTING UNDER SAIL

The *Dolphin* was rapidly equipped, her rigging was ready, and there was nothing to do but fit her up. She carried three schooner-masts, an almost useless luxury; in fact, the *Dolphin* did not rely on the wind to escape the Federalists, but rather on her powerful engines.

Towards the end of December a trial of the steamer was made in the gulf of the Clyde. Which was the more satisfied, builder or captain, it is impossible to say. The new steamer shot along wonderfully, and the patent log showed a speed of seventeen miles an hour, a speed which as yet no English, French, or American boat had ever obtained. The *Dolphin* would certainly have gained by several lengths in a sailing match with the fastest opponent.

The loading was begun on the 25th of December, the steamer having ranged along the steamboat-quay a little below Glasgow Bridge, the last which stretches across the Clyde before its mouth. Here the wharfs were heaped with a heavy cargo of clothes, ammunition, and provisions which were rapidly carried to the hold of the *Dolphin*. The nature of this cargo betrayed the mysterious destination of the ship, and the house of Playfair could no longer keep it secret; besides, the *Dolphin* must not be long before she started. No American cruiser had been signalled in English waters; and, then, when the question of getting the crew came, how was it possible to keep silent any longer? They could not embark them, even, without informing the men whither they were bound, for, after all, it was a matter of life and death, and when one risks one’s life, at least it is satisfactory to know how and wherefore.

However, this prospect hindered no one; the pay was good, and everyone had a share in the speculation, so that a great number of the finest sailors soon presented themselves. James Playfair was only embarrassed which to choose, but he chose well, and in twenty-four hours his muster-roll bore the names of thirty sailors who would have done honour to her Majesty”s yacht.

The departure was settled for the 3rd of January; on the 31st of December the *Dolphin* was ready, her hold full of ammunition and provisions, and nothing was keeping her now.

The skipper went on board on the 2nd of January, and was giving a last look round his ship with a captain’s eye, when a man presented himself at the fore part of the *Dolphin*, and asked to speak with the Captain. One of the sailors led him on to the poop.

He was a strong, hearty-looking fellow, with broad shoulders and ruddy face, the simple expression of which ill-concealed a depth of wit and mirth. He did not seem to be accustomed to a seafaring life, and looked about him with the air of a man little used to being on board a ship; however, he assumed the manner of a Jack-tar, looking up at the rigging of the *Dolphin*, and waddling in true sailor fashion.

When he had reached the Captain, he looked fixedly at him, and said, “Captain James Playfair?”

“The same,” replied the skipper. “What do you want with me?”

“To join your ship.”

“There is no room; the crew is already complete.”

“Oh, one man, more or less, will not be in the way; quite the contrary.”

“You think so?” said James Playfair, giving a sidelong glance at his questioner.

“I am sure of it,” replied the sailor.

“But who are you?” asked the Captain.

“A rough sailor, with two strong arms, which, I can tell you, are not to be despised on board a ship, and which I now have the honour of putting at your service.”

“But there are other ships besides the *Dolphin*, and other captains besides James Playfair. Why do you come here?”

“Because it is on board the *Dolphin* that I wish to serve, and under the orders of Captain James Playfair.”

“I do not want you.”

“There is always need of a strong man, and if to prove my strength you will try me with three or four of the strongest fellows of your crew, I am ready.”

“That will do,” replied James Playfair. “And what is your name?”

“Crockston, at your service.”

The Captain made a few steps backwards in order to get a better view of the giant who presented himself in this odd fashion. The height, the build, and the look of the sailor did not deny his pretensions to strength.

“Where have you sailed?” asked Playfair of him.

“A little everywhere.”

“And do you know where the *Dolphin* is bound for?”

“Yes; and that is what tempts me.”

“Ah, well! I have no mind to let a fellow of your stamp escape me. Go and find the first mate, and get him to enrol you.”

Having said this, the Captain expected to see the man turn on his heels and run to the bows, but he was mistaken. Crockston did not stir.

“Well! did you hear me?” asked the Captain.

“Yes, but it is not all,” replied the sailor. “I have something else to ask you.”

“Ah! You are wasting my time,” replied James, sharply; “I have not a moment to lose in talking.”

“I shall not keep you long,” replied Crockston; “two words more and that is all; I was going to tell you that I have a nephew.”

“He has a fine uncle, then,” interrupted James Playfair.

“Hah! Hah!” laughed Crockston.

“Have you finished?” asked the Captain, very impatiently.

“Well, this is what I have to say, when one takes the uncle, the nephew comes into the bargain.”

“Ah! indeed!”

“Yes, that is the custom, the one does not go without the other.”

“And what is this nephew of yours?”

“A lad of fifteen whom I am going to train to the sea; he is willing to learn, and will make a fine sailor some day.”

“How now, Master Crockston,” cried James Playfair; “do you think the *Dolphin* is a training-school for cabin-boys?”

“Don’t let us speak ill of cabin-boys: there was one of them who became Admiral Nelson, and another Admiral Franklin.”

“Upon my honour, friend,” replied James Playfair, “you have a way of speaking which I like; bring your nephew, but if I don’t find the uncle the hearty fellow he pretends to be, he will have some business with me. Go, and be back in an hour.”

Crockston did not want to be told twice; be bowed awkwardly to the Captain of the *Dolphin*, and went on to the quay. An hour afterwards he came on board with his nephew, a boy of fourteen or fifteen, rather delicate and weakly looking, with a timid and astonished air, which showed that he did not possess his uncle’s self-possession and vigorous corporeal qualities. Crockston was even obliged to encourage him by such words as these:

“Come,” said he, “don’t be frightened, they are not going to eat us, besides, there is yet time to return.”

“No, no,” replied the young man, “and may God protect us!”

The same day the sailor Crockston and his nephew were inscribed in the muster-roll of the *Dolphin*.

The next morning, at five o’clock, the fires of the steamer were well fed, the deck trembled under the vibrations of the boiler, and the steam rushed hissing through the escape-pipes. The hour of departure had arrived.

A considerable crowd, in spite of the early hour, flocked on the quays and on Glasgow Bridge; they had come to salute the bold steamer for the last time. Vincent Playfair was there to say good-bye to Captain James, but he conducted himself on this occasion like a Roman of the good old times. His was a heroic countenance, and the two loud kisses with which he gratified his nephew were the indication of a strong mind.

“Go, James,” said he to the young Captain, “go quickly, and come back quicker still; above all, don’t abuse your position. Sell at a good price, make a good bargain, and you will have your uncle’s esteem.”

On this recommendation, borrowed from the manual of the perfect merchant, the uncle and nephew separated, and all the visitors left the boat.

At this moment Crockston and John Stiggs stood together on the forecastle, while the former remarked to his nephew, “This is well, this is well; before two o’clock we shall be at sea, and I have a good opinion of a voyage which begins like this.”

For reply the novice pressed Crockston’s hand.

James Playfair then gave the orders for departure.

“Have we pressure on?” he asked of his mate.

“Yes, Captain,” replied Mr. Mathew.

“Well, then, weigh anchor.”

This was immediately done, and the screws began to move. The *Dolphin* trembled, passed between the ships in the port, and soon disappeared from the sight of the people, who shouted their last hurrahs.

The descent of the Clyde was easily accomplished, one might almost say that this river had been made by the hand of man, and even by the hand of a master. For sixty years, thanks to the dredges and constant dragging, it has gained fifteen feet in depth, and its breadth has been tripled between the quays and the town. Soon the forests of masts and chimneys were lost in the smoke and fog; the noise of the foundry hammers and the hatchets of the timber-yards grew fainter in the distance. After the village of Partick had been passed the factories gave way to country houses and villas. The *Dolphin*, slackening her speed, sailed between the dykes which carry the river above the shores, and often through a very narrow channel, which, however, is only a small inconvenience for a navigable river, for, after all, depth is of more importance than width. The steamer, guided by one of those excellent pilots from the Irish sea, passed without hesitation between floating buoys, stone columns, and *biggings*, surmounted with lighthouses, which mark the entrance to the channel. Beyond the town of Renfrew, at the foot of Kilpatrick hills, the Clyde grew wider. Then came Bouling Bay, at the end of which opens the mouth of the canal which joints Edinburgh to Glasgow. Lastly, at the height of four hundred feet from the ground, was seen the outline of Dumbarton Castle, almost indiscernible through the mists, and soon the harbour-boats of Glasgow were rocked on the waves which the *Dolphin* caused. Some miles farther on Greenock, the birthplace of James Watt, was passed: the *Dolphin* now found herself at the mouth of the Clyde, and at the entrance of the gulf by which it empties its waters into the Northern Ocean. Here the first undulations of the sea were felt, and the steamer ranged along the picturesque coast of the Isle of Arran. At last the promontory of Cantyre, which runs out into the channel, was doubled; the Isle of Rattelin was hailed, the pilot returned by a shore-boat to his cutter, which was cruising in the open sea; the *Dolphin*, returning to her Captain’s authority, took a less frequented route round the north of Ireland, and soon, having lost sight of the last European land, found herself in the open ocean.

CHAPTER III

THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

The *Dolphin* had a good crew, not fighting men, or boarding sailors, but good working men, and that was all she wanted. These brave, determined fellows were all, more or less, merchants; they sought a fortune rather than glory; they had no flag to display, no colours to defend with cannon; in fact, all the artillery on board consisted of two small swivel signal-guns.

The *Dolphin* shot bravely across the water, and fulfilled the utmost expectations of both builder and captain. Soon she passed the limit of British seas; there was not a ship in sight; the great ocean route was free; besides, no ship of the Federal marine would have a right to attack her beneath the English flag. Followed she might be, and prevented from forcing the blockade, and precisely for this reason had James Playfair sacrificed everything to the speed of his ship, in order not to be pursued.

Howbeit a careful watch was kept on board, and, in spite of the extreme cold, a man was always in the rigging ready to signal the smallest sail that appeared on the horizon. When evening came, Captain James gave the most precise orders to Mr. Mathew.

“Don’t leave the man on watch too long in the rigging; the cold may seize him, and in that case it is impossible to keep a good look-out; change your men often.”

“I understand, Captain,” replied Mr. Mathew.

“Try Crockston for that work; the fellow pretends to have excellent sight; it must be put to trial; put him on the morning watch, he will have the morning mists to see through. If anything particular happens call me.”

This said, James Playfair went to his cabin. Mr. Mathew called Crockston, and told him the Captain’s orders.

“To-morrow, at six o’clock,” said he, “you are to relieve watch of the main masthead.”

For reply, Crockston gave a decided grunt, but Mr. Mathew had hardly turned his back when the sailor muttered some incomprehensible words, and then cried:

“What on earth did he say about the mainmast?”

At this moment his nephew, John Stiggs, joined him on the forecastle.

“Well, my good Crockston,” said he.

“It’s all right, all right,” said the seaman, with a forced smile; “there is only one thing, this wretched boat shakes herself like a dog coming out of the water, and it makes my head confused.”

“Dear Crockston, and it is for my sake.”

“For you and him,” replied Crockston, “but not a word about that, John. Trust in God, and He will not forsake you.”

So saying, John Stiggs and Crockston went to the sailor’s berth, but the sailor did not lie down before he had seen the young novice comfortably settled in the narrow cabin which he had got for him.

The next day, at six o’clock in the morning, Crockston got up to go to his place; he went on deck, where the first officer ordered him to go up into the rigging, and keep good watch.

At these words the sailor seemed undecided what to do; then, making up his mind, he went towards the bows of the *Dolphin*.

“Well, where are you off to now?” cried Mr. Mathew.

“Where you sent me,” answered Crockston.

“I told you to go to the mainmast.”

“And I am going there,” replied the sailor, in an ununconcerned tone, continuing his way to the poop.

“Are you a fool?” cried Mr. Mathew, impatiently; “you are looking for the bars of the main on the foremast. You are like a cockney, who doesn’t know how to twist a cat-o’-nine-tails, or make a splice. On board what ship can you have been, man? The mainmast, stupid, the mainmast!”

The sailors who had run up to hear what was going on burst out laughing when they saw Crockston’s disconcerted look, as he went back to the forecastle.

“So,” said he, looking up the mast, the top of which was quite invisible through the morning mists; “so, am I to climb up here?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Mathew, “and hurry yourself! By St. Patrick, a Federal ship would have time to get her bowsprit fast in our rigging before that lazy fellow could get to his post. Will you go up?”

Without a word, Crockston got on the bulwarks with some difficulty; then he began to climb the rigging with most visible awkwardness, like a man who did not know how to make use of his hands or feet. When he had reached the topgallant, instead of springing lightly on to it, he remained motionless, clinging to the ropes, as if he had been seized with giddiness. Mr. Mathew, irritated by his stupidity, ordered him to come down immediately.

“That fellow there,” said he to the boatswain, “has never been a sailor in his life. Johnston, just go and see what he has in his bundle.”

The boatswain made haste to the sailor’s berth.

In the meantime Crockston was with difficulty coming down again, but, his foot having slipped, he slid down the rope he had hold of, and fell heavily on the deck.

“Clumsy blockhead! land-lubber!” cried Mr. Mathew, by way of consolation. “What did you come to do on board the *Dolphin!* Ah! you entered as an able seaman, and you cannot even distinguish the main from the foremast! I shall have a little talk with you.”

Crockston made no attempt to speak; he bent his back like a man resigned to anything he might have to bear; just then the boatswain returned.

“This,” said he to the first officer, “is all that I have found; a suspicious portfolio with letters.”

“Give them here,” said Mr. Mathew. “Letters with Federal stamps! Mr. Halliburtt, of Boston! An Abolitionist! a Federalist! Wretch! you are nothing but a traitor, and have sneaked on board to betray us! Never mind, you will be paid for your trouble with the cat-o’-nine-tails! Boatswain, call the Captain, and you others just keep an eye on that rogue there.”

Crockston received these compliments with a hideous grimace, but he did not open his lips. They had fastened him to the capstan, and he could move neither hand nor foot.

A few minutes later James Playfair came out of his cabin and went to the forecastle, where Mr. Mathew immediately acquainted him with the details of the case.

“What have you to say?” asked James Playfair, scarcely able to restrain his anger.

“Nothing,” replied Crockston.

“And what did you come on board my ship for?”

“Nothing.”

“And what do you expect from me now?”

“Nothing.”

“Who are you? An American, as letters seem to prove?” Crockston did not answer.

“Boatswain,” said James Playfair, “fifty lashes with the cat-o’-nine-tails to loosen his tongue. Will that be enough, Crockston?”

“It will remain to be seen,” replied John Stiggs’ uncle without moving a muscle.

“Now then, come along, men,” said the boatswain.

At this order, two strong sailors stripped Crockston of his woollen jersey; they had already seized the formidable weapon, and laid it across the prisoner’s shoulders, when the novice, John Stiggs, pale and agitated, hurried on deck.

“Captain!” exclaimed he.

“Ah! the nephew!” remarked James Playfair.

“Captain,” repeated the novice, with a violent effort to steady his voice, “I will tell you what Crockston does not want to say. I will hide it no longer; yes, he is American, and so am I; we are both enemies of the slave-holders, but not traitors come on board to betray the *Dolphin* into the hands of the Federalists.”

“What did you come to do, then?” asked the Captain, in a severe tone, examining the novice attentively. The latter hesitated a few seconds before replying, then he said, “Captain, I should like to speak to you in private.”

Whilst John Stiggs made this request, James Playfair did not cease to look carefully at him; the sweet young face of the novice, his peculiarly gentle voice, the delicacy and whiteness of his hands, hardly disguised by paint, the large eyes, the animation of which could not bide their tenderness — all this together gave rise to a certain suspicion in the Captain’s mind. When John Stiggs had made his request, Playfair glanced fixedly at Crockston, who shrugged his shoulders; then he fastened a questioning look on the novice, which the latter could not withstand, and said simply to him, “Come.”

John Stiggs followed the Captain on to the poop, and then James Playfair, opening the door of his cabin, said to the novice, whose cheeks were pale with emotion, “Be so kind as to walk in, miss.”

John, thus addressed, blushed violently, and two tears rolled involuntarily down his cheeks.

“Don’t be alarmed, miss,” said James Playfair, in a gentle voice, “but be so good as to tell me how I come to have the honour of having you on board?”

The young girl hesitated a moment, then, reassured by the Captain’s look, she made up her mind to speak.

“Sir,” said she, “I wanted to join my father at Charleston; the town is besieged by land and blockaded by sea. I knew not how to get there, when I heard that the *Dolphin* meant to force the blockade. I came on board your ship, and I beg you to forgive me if I acted without your consent, which you would have refused me.”

“Certainly,” said James Playfair.

“I did well, then, not to ask you,” resumed the young girl, with a firmer voice.

The Captain crossed his arms, walked round his cabin, and then came back.

“What is your name?” said he.

“Jenny Halliburtt.”

“Your father, if I remember rightly the address on the letters, is he not from Boston?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And a Northerner is thus in a southern town in the thickest of the war?”

“My father is a prisoner; he was at Charleston when the first shot of the Civil War was fired, and the troops of the Union driven from Fort Sumter by the Confederates. My father’s opinions exposed him to the hatred of the slavist part, and by the order of General Beauregard he was imprisoned. I was then in England, living with a relation who has just died, and left alone, with no help but that of Crockston, our faithful servant, I wished to go to my father and share his prison with him.”

“What was Mr. Halliburtt, then?” asked James Playfair.

“A loyal and brave journalist,” replied Jenny proudly, one of the noblest editors of the *Tribune*, and the one who was the boldest in defending the cause of the negroes.”

“An Abolitionist,” cried the Captain angrily; “one of those men who, under the vain pretence of abolishing slavery, have deluged their country with blood and ruin.”

“Sir!” replied Jenny Halliburtt, growing pale, “you are insulting my father; you must not forget that I stand alone to defend him.”

The young Captain blushed scarlet; anger mingled with shame struggled in his breast; perhaps he would have answered the young girl, but he succeeded in restraining himself, and, opening the door of the cabin, he called “Boatswain!”

The boatswain came to him directly.

“This cabin will henceforward belong to Miss Jenny Halliburtt. Have a cot made ready for me at the end of the poop; that’s all I want.”

The boatswain looked with a stupefied stare at the young novice addressed in a feminine name, but on a sign from James Playfair he went out.

“And now, miss, you are at home,” said the young Captain of the *Dolphin*. Then he retired.

CHAPTER IV

CROCKSTON’S TRICK

It was not long before the whole crew knew Miss Halliburtt’s story, which Crockston was no longer hindered from telling. By the Captain’s orders he was released from the capstan, and the cat-o’-nine-tails returned to its Place.

“A pretty animal,” said Crockston, “especially when it shows its velvety paws.”

As soon as he was free, he went down to the sailors’ berths, found a small portmanteau, and carried it to Miss Jenny; the young girl was now able to resume her feminine attire, but she remained in her cabin, and did not again appear on deck.

As for Crockston, it was well and duly agreed that, as he was no more a sailor than a horse-guard, he should be exempt from all duty on board.

In the meanwhile the *Dolphin*, with her twin screws cutting the waves, sped rapidly across the Atlantic, and there was nothing now to do but keep a strict look-out. The day following the discovery of Miss Jenny’s identity, James Playfair paced the deck at the poop with a rapid step; he had made no attempt to see the young girl and resume the conversation of the day before.

Whilst he was walking to and fro, Crockston passed him several times, looking at him askant with a satisfied grin. He evidently wanted to speak to the Captain, and at last his persistent manner attracted the attention of the latter, who said to him, somewhat impatiently:

“How now, what do you want? You are turning round me like a swimmer round a buoy: when are you going to leave off?”

“Excuse me, Captain,” answered Crockston, winking, “I wanted to speak to you.”

“Speak, then.”

“Oh, it is nothing very much. I only wanted to tell you frankly that you are a good fellow at bottom.”

“Why at bottom?”

“At bottom and surface also.”

“I don’t want your compliments.”

“I am not complimenting you. I shall wait to do that when you have gone to the end.”

“To what end?”

“To the end of your task.”

“Ah! I have a task to fulfil?”

“Decidedly, you have taken the young girl and myself on board; good! You have given up your cabin to Miss Halliburtt; good! You released me from the cat-o’-nine-tails; nothing could be better. You are going to take us straight to Charleston; that’s delightful, but it is not all.”

“How not all?” cried James Playfair, amazed at Crockston’s boldness.

“No, certainly not,” replied the latter, with a knowing look, “the father is prisoner there.”

“Well, what about that?”

“Well, the father must be rescued.”

“Rescue Miss Halliburtt’s father?”

“Most certainly, and it is worth risking something for such a noble man and courageous citizen as he.”

“Master Crockston,” said James Playfair, frowning, “I am not in the humour for your jokes, so have a care what you say.”

“You misunderstand me, Captain,” said the American. “I am not joking in the least, but speaking quite seriously. What I have proposed may at first seem very absurd to you; when you have thought it over, you will see that you cannot do otherwise.”

“What, do you mean that I must deliver Mr. Halliburtt?”

“Just so. You can demand his release of General Beauregard, who will not refuse you.”

“But if he does refuse me?”

“In that case,” replied Crockston, in a deliberate tone, “we must use stronger measures, and carry off the prisoner by force.”

“So,” cried James Playfair, who was beginning to get angry, “so, not content with passing through the Federal fleets and forcing the blockade of Charleston, I must run out to sea again from under the cannon of the forts, and this to deliver a gentleman I know nothing of, one of those

Abolitionists whom I detest, one of those journalists who shed ink instead of their blood!”

“Oh, it is but a cannon-shot more or less!” added Crockston.

“Master Crockston,” said James Playfair, “mind what I say: if ever you mention this affair again to me, I will send you to the hold for the rest of the passage, to teach you manners.”

Thus saying, the Captain dismissed the American, who went off murmuring, “Ah, well, I am not altogether displeased with this conversation: at any rate, the affair is broached; it will do, it will do!”

James Playfair had hardly meant it when he said an Abolitionist whom I detest; he did not in the least side with the Federals, but he did not wish to admit that the question of slavery was the predominant reason for the civil war of the United States, in spite of President Lincoln’s formal declaration. Did he, then, think that the Southern States, eight out of thirty-six, were right in separating when they had been voluntarily united? Not so; he detested the Northerners, and that was all; he detested them as brothers separated from the common family — true Englishmen — who had thought it right to do what he, James Playfair, disapproved of with regard to the United States: these were the political opinions of the Captain of the *Dolphin*. But, more than this, the American war interfered with him personally, and he had a grudge against those who had caused this war; one can understand, then, how he would receive a proposition to deliver an Abolitionist, thus bringing down on him the Confederates, with whom he pretended to do business.

However, Crockston’s insinuation did not fail to disturb him; he cast the thought from him, but it returned unceasingly to his mind, and when Miss

Jenny came on deck the next day for a few minutes, he dared not look her in the face.

And really it was a great pity, for this young girl, with the fair hair and sweet, intelligent face, deserved to be looked at by a young man of thirty. But James felt embarrassed in her presence; he felt that this charming creature who had been educated in the school of misfortune possessed a strong and generous soul; he understood that his silence towards her inferred a refusal to acquiesce in her dearest wishes; besides, Miss Jenny never looked out for James Playfair, neither did she avoid him. Thus for the first few days they spoke little or not at all to each other. Miss Halliburtt scarcely ever left her cabin, and it is certain she would never have addressed herself to the Captain of the *Dolphin* if it had not been for Crockston's strategy, which brought both parties together.

The worthy American was a faithful servant of the Halliburtt family; he had been brought up in his master's house, and his devotion knew no bounds. His good sense equalled his courage and energy, and, as has been seen, he had a way of looking things straight in the face. He was very seldom discouraged, and could generally find a way out of the most intricate dangers with a wonderful skill.

This honest fellow had taken it into his head to deliver Mr. Halliburtt, to employ the Captain's ship, and the Captain himself for this purpose, and to return with him to England. Such was his intention, so long as the young girl had no other object than to rejoin her father and share his captivity. It was this Crockston tried to make the Captain understand, as we have seen, but the enemy had not yet surrendered; on the contrary.

"Now," said he, "it is absolutely necessary that Miss Jenny and the Captain come to an understanding; if they are going to be sulky like this all the passage we shall get nothing done. They must speak, discuss; let them dispute even, so long as they talk, and I'll be hanged if during their conversation James Playfair does not propose himself what he refused me to-day."

But when Crockston saw that the young girl and the young man avoided each other, he began to be perplexed.

"We must look sharp," said he to himself, and the morning of the fourth day he entered Miss Halliburtt's cabin, rubbing his hands with an air of perfect satisfaction.

"Good news!" cried he, "good news! You will never guess what the Captain has proposed to me. A very noble young man he is. Now try."

"Ah!" replied Jenny, whose heart beat violently, "has he proposed to — "

"To deliver Mr. Halliburtt, to carry him off from the Confederates, and bring him to England."

"Is it true?" cried Jenny.

"It is as I say, miss. What a good-hearted man this James Playfair is! These English are either all good or all bad. Ah! he may reckon on my gratitude, and I am ready to cut myself in pieces if it would please him."

Jenny's joy was profound on hearing Crockston's words. Deliver her father! She had never dared to think of such a plan, and the Captain of the *Dolphin* was going to risk his ship and crew!

"That's what he is," added Crockston; "and this, Miss Jenny, is well worth an acknowledgment from you."

“More than an acknowledgment,” cried the young girl; “a lasting friendship!”

And immediately she left the cabin to find James Playfair, and express to him the sentiments which flowed from her heart.

“Getting on by degrees,” muttered the American.

James Playfair was pacing to and fro on the poop, and, as may be thought, he was very much surprised, not to say amazed, to see the young girl come up to him, her eyes moist with grateful tears, and, holding out her hand to him, saying:

“Thank you, sir, thank you for your kindness, which I should never have dared to expect from a stranger.”

“Miss,” replied the Captain, as if he understood nothing of what she was talking, and could not understand, “I do not know — “

“Nevertheless, sir, you are going to brave many dangers, perhaps compromise your interests for me, and you have done so much already in offering me on board an hospitality to which I have no right whatever — “

“Pardon me, Miss Jenny,” interrupted James Playfair, “but I protest again I do not understand your words. I have acted towards you as any well-bred man would towards a lady, and my conduct deserves neither so many thanks nor so much gratitude.”

“Mr. Playfair,” said Jenny, “it is useless to pretend any longer; Crockston has told me all!”

“Ah!” said the Captain, “Crockston has told you all; then I understand less than ever the reason for your leaving your cabin, and saying these words which — “

Whilst speaking the Captain felt very much embarrassed; he remembered the rough way in which he had received the American’s overtures, but Jenny, fortunately for him, did not give him time for further explanation; she interrupted him, holding out her hand and saying:

“Mr. James, I had no other object in coming on board your ship except to go to Charleston, and there, however cruel the slave-holders may be, they will not refuse to let a poor girl share her father’s prison; that was all. I had never thought of a return as possible; but, since you are so generous as to wish for my father’s deliverance, since you will attempt everything to save him, be assured you have my deepest gratitude.”

James did not know what to do or what part to assume; he bit his lip; he dared not take the hand offered him; he saw perfectly that Crockston had compromised him, so that escape was impossible. At the same time he had no thoughts of delivering Mr. Halliburtt, and getting complicated in a disagreeable business: but how dash to the ground the hope which had arisen in this poor girl’s heart? How refuse the hand which she held out to him with a feeling of such profound friendship? How change to tears of grief the tears of gratitude which filled her eyes?

So the young man tried to reply evasively, in a manner which would ensure his liberty of action for the future.

“Miss Jenny,” said he, “rest assured I will do everything in my power for — “

And he took the little hand in both of his, but with the gentle pressure he felt his heart melt and his head grow confused: words to express his thoughts failed him. He stammered out some incoherent words:

“Miss — Miss Jenny — for you — “

Crockston, who was watching him, rubbed his hands, grinning and repeating to himself:

“It will come! it will come! it has come!”

How James Playfair would have managed to extricate himself from his embarrassing position no one knows, but fortunately for him, if not for the *Dolphin*, the man on watch was heard crying:

“Ahoy, officer of the watch!”

“What now?” asked Mr. Mathew.

“A sail to windward!”

James Playfair, leaving the young girl, immediately sprang to the shrouds of the mainmast.

CHAPTER V

THE SHOT FROM THE *IROQUOIS*, AND MISS JENNY’S ARGUMENTS

Until now the navigation of the *Dolphin* had been very fortunate. Not one ship had been signalled before the sail hailed by the man on watch.

The *Dolphin* was then in 32° 51’ lat. and 57° 43’ W. longitude. For forty-eight hours a fog, which now began to rise, had covered the ocean. If this mist favoured the *Dolphin* by hiding her course, it also prevented any observations at a distance being made, and, without being aware of it, she might be sailing side by side, so to speak, with the ships she wished most to avoid.

Now this is just what had happened, and when the ship was signalled she was only three miles to windward.

When James Playfair had reached the cross-trees, he saw distinctly, through an opening in the mist, a large Federal corvette in full pursuit of the *Dolphin*.

After having carefully examined her, the Captain came down on deck again, and called to the first officer.

“Mr. Mathew,” said he, “what do you think of this ship?”

“I think, Captain, that it is a Federal cruiser, which suspects our intentions.”

“There is no possible doubt of her nationality,” said James Playfair. “Look!”

At this moment the starry flag of the North United States appeared on the gaff-yards of the corvette, and the latter asserted her colours with a cannon-shot.

“An invitation to show ours,” said Mr. Mathew. “Well, let us show them; there is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“What’s the good?” replied James Playfair. “Our flag will hardly protect us, and it will not hinder those people from paying us a visit. No; let us go ahead.”

“And go quickly,” replied Mr. Mathew, “for, if my eyes do not deceive me, I have already seen that corvette lying off Liverpool, where she went to watch the ships in building: my name is not Mathew, if that is not the *Iroquois* on her taffrail.”

“And is she fast?”

“One of the fastest vessels of the Federal marine.”

“What guns does she carry?”

“Eight.”

“Pooh!”

“Oh, don’t shrug your shoulders, Captain,” said Mr. Mathew, in a serious tone; “two out of those eight guns are rifled, one is a sixty-pounder on the forecastle, and the other a hundred-pounder on deck.”

“Upon my soul!” exclaimed James Playfair, “they are Parrott’s, and will carry three miles.”

“Yes, and farther than that, Captain.”

“Ah, well! Mr. Mathew, let their guns be sixty or only four-pounders, and let them carry three miles or five hundred yards, it is all the same if we can go fast enough to avoid their shot. We will show this *Iroquois* how a ship can go when she is built on purpose to go. Have the fires drawn forward, Mr. Mathew.”

The first officer gave the Captain’s orders to the engineer, and soon volumes of black smoke curled from the steamer’s chimneys.

This proceeding did not seem to please the corvette, for she made the *Dolphin* the signal to lie to, but James Playfair paid no attention to this warning, and did not change his ship’s course.

“Now,” said he, “we shall see what the *Iroquois* will do; here is a fine opportunity for her to try her guns. Go ahead full speed!”

“Good!” exclaimed Mr. Mathew; “she will not be long in saluting us.”

Returning to the poop, the Captain saw Miss Halliburtt sitting quietly near the bulwarks.

“Miss Jenny,” said he, “we shall probably be chased by that corvette you see to windward, and as she will speak to us with shot, I beg to offer you my arm to take you to your cabin again.”

“Thank you, very much, Mr. Playfair,” replied the young girl, looking at him, “but I am not afraid of cannon-shots.”

“However, miss, in spite of the distance, there may be some danger.”

"Oh, I was not brought up to be fearful; they accustom us to everything in America, and I assure you that the shot from the *Iroquois* will not make me lower my head."

"You are brave, Miss Jenny."

"Let us admit, then, that I am brave, and allow me to stay by you."

"I can refuse you nothing, Miss Halliburtt," replied the Captain, looking at the young girl's calm face.

These words were hardly uttered when they saw a line of white smoke issue from the bulwarks of the corvette; before the report had reached the *Dolphin* a projectile whizzed through the air in the direction of the steamer.

At about twenty fathoms from the *Dolphin* the shot, the speed of which had sensibly lessened, skimmed over the surface of the waves, marking its passage by a series of water-jets; then, with another burst, it rebounded to a certain height, passed over the *Dolphin*, grazing the mizzen-yards on the starboard side, fell at thirty fathoms beyond, and was buried in the waves.

"By Jove!" exclaimed James Playfair, "we must get along; another slap like that is not to be waited for."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Mathew, "they will take some time to reload such pieces."

"Upon my honour, it is an interesting sight," said Crockston, who, with arms crossed, stood perfectly at his ease looking at the scene.

"Ah! that's you," cried James Playfair, scanning the American from head to foot.

“It is me, Captain,” replied the American, undisturbed. “I have come to see how these brave Federals fire; not badly, in truth, not badly.”

The Captain was going to answer Crockston sharply, but at this moment a second shot struck the sea on the starboard side.

“Good!” cried James Playfair, “we have already gained two cables on this *Iroquois*. Your friends sail like a buoy; do you hear, Master Crockston?”

“I will not say they don’t,” replied the American, “and for the first time in my life it does not fail to please me.”

A third shot fell still farther astern, and in less than ten minutes the *Dolphin* was out of range of the corvette’s guns.

“So much for patent-logs, Mr. Mathew,” said James Playfair; “thanks to those shot we know how to rate our speed. Now have the fires lowered; it is not worth while to waste our coal uselessly.”

“It is a good ship that you command,” said Miss Halliburtt to the young Captain.

“Yes, Miss Jenny, my good *Dolphin* makes her seventeen knots, and before the day is over we shall have lost sight of that corvette.”

James Playfair did not exaggerate the sailing qualities of his ship, and the sun had not set before the masts of the American ship had disappeared below the horizon.

This incident allowed the Captain to see Miss Halliburtt’s character in a new light; besides, the ice was broken, henceforward, during the whole of the voyage; the interviews between the Captain and his passenger were frequent and prolonged; be found her to be a young girl, calm, strong, thoughtful, and intelligent, speaking with great ease, having her own ideas about everything, and expressing her thoughts with a conviction which unconsciously penetrated James Playfair's heart.

She loved her country, she was zealous in the great cause of the Union, and expressed herself on the civil war in the United States with an enthusiasm of which no other woman would have been capable. Thus it happened, more than once, that James Playfair found it difficult to answer her, even when questions purely mercantile arose in connection with the war: Miss Jenny attacked them none the less vigorously, and would come to no other terms whatever. At first James argued a great deal, and tried to uphold the Confederates against the Federals, to prove that the Secessionists were in the right, and that if the people were united voluntarily they might separate in the same manner. But the young girl would not yield on this point; she demonstrated that the question of slavery was predominant in the struggle between the North and South Americans, that it was far more a war in the cause of morals and humanity than politics, and James could make no answer. Besides, during these discussions, which he listened to attentively, it is difficult to say whether he was more touched by Miss Halliburtt's arguments or the charming manner in which she spoke; but at last he was obliged to acknowledge, among other things, that slavery was the principal feature in the war, that it must be put an end to decisively, and the last horrors of barbarous times abolished.

It has been said that the political opinions of the Captain did not trouble him much. He would have sacrificed his most serious opinion before such enticing arguments and under like circumstances; he made a good bargain of his ideas for the same reason, but at last he was attacked in his tenderest point; this was the question of the traffic in which the *Dolphin* was being employed, and, consequently, the ammunition which was being carried to the Confederates.

“Yes, Mr. James,” said Miss Halliburtt, “gratitude does not hinder me from speaking with perfect frankness; on the contrary, you are a brave seaman, a clever merchant, the house of Playfair is noted for its respectability; but in this case it fails in its principles, and follows a trade unworthy of it.”

“How!” cried James, “the house of Playfair ought not to attempt such a commercial enterprise?”

“No! it is taking ammunition to the unhappy creatures in revolt against the government of their country, and it is lending arms to a bad cause.”

“Upon my honour, Miss Jenny, I will not discuss the right of the Confederates with you; I will only answer you with one word: I am a merchant, and as such I only occupy myself with the interests of my house; I look for gain wherever there is an opportunity of getting it.”

“That is precisely what is to be blamed, Mr. James,” replied the young girl; “profit does not excuse it; thus, when you supply arms to the Southerners, with which to continue a criminal war, you are quite as guilty as when you sell opium to the Chinese, which stupefies them.”

“Oh, for once, Miss Jenny, this is too much, and I cannot admit — “

“No; what I say is just, and when you consider it, when you understand the part you are playing, when you think of the results for which you are responsible, you will yield to me in this point, as in so many others.”

James Playfair was dumfounded at these words; he left the young girl, a prey to angry thoughts, for he felt his powerlessness to answer; then he sulked like a child for half an hour, and an hour later he returned to the singular young girl who could overwhelm him with convincing arguments with quite a pleasant smile.

In short, however it may have come about, and although he would not acknowledge it to himself, Captain James Playfair belonged to himself no longer; he was no longer commander-in-chief on board his own ship.

Thus, to Crockston’s great joy, Mr. Halliburtt’s affairs appeared to be in a good way; the Captain seemed to have decided to undertake everything in his power to deliver Miss Jenny’s father, and for this he would be obliged to compromise the *Dolphin*, his cargo, his crew, and incur the displeasure of his worthy Uncle Vincent.

CHAPTER VI

SULLIVAN ISLAND CHANNEL

Two days after the meeting with the *Iroquois*, the *Dolphin* found herself abreast of the Bermudas, where she was assailed by a violent squall. These isles are frequently visited by hurricanes, and are celebrated for shipwrecks. It is here that Shakespeare has placed the exciting scene of his drama, *The Tempest*, in which Ariel and Caliban dispute for the empire of the floods.

The squall was frightful; James Playfair thought once of running for one of the Bermudas, where the English had a military post: it would have been a sad waste of time, and therefore especially to be regretted; happily the *Dolphin* behaved herself wonderfully well in the storm, and, after flying a whole day before the tempest, she was able to resume her course towards the American coast.

But if James Playfair had been pleased with his ship, he had not been less delighted with the young girl's bravery; Miss Halliburtt had passed the worst hours of the storm at his side, and James knew that a profound, imperious, irresistible love had taken possession of his whole being.

"Yes," said he, "this brave girl is mistress on board; she turns me like the sea a ship in distress — I feel that I am foundering! What will Uncle Vincent say? Ah! poor nature, I am sure that if Jenny asked me to throw all this cursed cargo into the sea, I should do it without hesitating, for love of her."

Happily for the firm of Playfair & Co. Miss Halliburtt did not demand this sacrifice; nevertheless, the poor Captain had been taken captive, and

Crockston, who read his heart like an open book, rubbed his hands gleefully.

“We will hold him fast!” he muttered to himself, “and before a week has passed my master will be quietly installed in one of the best cabins of the *Dolphin*.”

As for Miss Jenny, did she perceive the feelings which she inspired? Did she allow herself to share them? No one could say, and James Playfair least of all; the young girl kept a perfect reserve, and her secret remained deeply buried in her heart.

But whilst love was making such progress in the heart of the young Captain, the *Dolphin* sped with no less rapidity towards Charleston.

On the 13th of January, the watch signalled land ten miles to the west. It was a low-lying coast, and almost blended with the line of the sea in the distance. Crockston was examining the horizon attentively, and about nine o’clock in the morning he cried:

“Charleston lighthouse!”

Now that the bearings of the *Dolphin* were set, James Playfair had but one thing to do, to decide by which channel he would run into Charleston Bay.

“If we meet with no obstacles,” said he, “before three o’clock we shall be in safety in the docks of the port.”

The town of Charleston is situated on the banks of an estuary seven miles long and two broad, called Charleston Harbour, the entrance to which is rather difficult. It is enclosed between Morris Island on the south and Sullivan Island on the north. At the time when the *Dolphin* attempted to force the blockade Morris Island already belonged to the Federal troops, and General Gillmore had caused batteries to be erected overlooking the harbour. Sullivan Island, on the contrary, was in the hands of the Confederates, who were also in possession of Moultrie Fort, situated at the extremity of the island; therefore it would be advantageous to the *Dolphin* to go as close as possible to the northern shores to avoid the firing from the forts on Morris Island.

Five channels led into the estuary, Sullivan Island Channel, the Northern Channel, the Overall Channel, the Principal Channel, and lastly, the Lawford Channel; but it was useless for strangers, unless they had skilful pilots on board, or ships drawing less than seven feet of water, to attempt this last; as for Northern and Overall Channels, they were in range of the Federalist batteries, so that it was no good thinking of them. If James Playfair could have had his choice, he would have taken his steamer through the Principal Channel, which was the best, and the bearings of which were easy to follow; but it was necessary to yield to circumstances, and to decide according to the event. Besides, the Captain of the *Dolphin* knew perfectly all the secrets of this bay, its dangers, the depths of its water at low tide, and its currents, so that he was able to steer his ship with the greatest safety as soon as he entered one of these narrow straits. The great question was to get there.

Now this work demanded an experienced seaman, and one who knew exactly the qualities of the *Dolphin*.

In fact, two Federal frigates were now cruising in the Charleston waters. Mr. Mathew soon drew James Playfair’s attention to them.

“They are preparing to ask us what we want on these shores,” said he.

“Ah, well! we won’t answer them,” replied the Captain, “and they will not get their curiosity satisfied.”

In the meanwhile the cruisers were coming on full steam towards the *Dolphin*, who continued her course, taking care to keep out of range of their guns. But in order to gain time James Playfair made for the south-west, wishing to put the enemies’ ships off their guard; the latter must have thought that the *Dolphin* intended to make for Morris Island Channel. Now there they had batteries and guns, a single shot from which would have been enough to sink the English ship; so the Federals allowed the *Dolphin* to run towards the south-west, contenting themselves by observing her without following closely.

Thus for an hour the respective situations of the ships did not change, for James Playfair, wishing to deceive the cruisers as to the course of the *Dolphin*, had caused the fires to be moderated, so that the speed was decreased. However, from the thick volumes of smoke which escaped from the chimneys, it might have been thought that he was trying to get his maximum pressure, and, consequently his maximum of rapidity.

“They will be slightly astonished presently,” said James Playfair, “when they see us slip through their fingers!”

In fact, when the Captain saw that he was near enough to Morris Island, and before a line of guns, the range of which he did not know, he turned his rudder quickly, and the ship resumed her northerly course, leaving the cruisers two miles to windward of her; the latter, seeing this manoeuvre, understood the steamer’s object, and began to pursue her in earnest, but it was too late. The *Dolphin* doubled her speed under the action of the screws, and distanced them rapidly. Going nearer to the coast, a few shell were sent after her as an acquittal of conscience, but the Federals were outdone, for their projectiles did not reach half-way. At eleven o'clock in the morning, the steamer ranging near Sullivan Island, thanks to her small draft, entered the narrow strait full steam; there she was in safety, for no Federalist cruiser dared follow her in this channel, the depth of which, on an average, was only eleven feet at low tide.

“How!” cried Crockston, “and is that the only difficulty?”

“Oh! oh! Master Crockston,” said James Playfair, “the difficulty is not in entering, but in getting out again.”

“Nonsense!” replied the American, “that does not make me at all uneasy; with a boat like the *Dolphin* and a Captain like Mr. James Playfair, one can go where one likes, and come out in the same manner.”

Nevertheless, James Playfair, with telescope in his hand, was attentively examining the route to be followed. He had before him excellent coasting guides, with which he could go ahead without any difficulty or hesitation.

Once his ship was safely in the narrow channel which runs the length of Sullivan Island, James steered bearing towards the middle of Fort Moultrie as far as the Pickney Castle, situated on the isolated island of Shute's Folly; on the other side rose Fort Johnson, a little way to the north of Fort Sumter.

At this moment the steamer was saluted by some shot which did not reach her, from the batteries on Morris Island. She continued her course without any deviation, passed before Moultrieville, situated at the extremity of Sullivan Island, and entered the bay.

Soon Fort Sumter on the left protected her from the batteries of the Federalists.

This fort, so celebrated in the civil war, is situated three miles and a half from Charleston, and about a mile from each side of the bay: it is nearly pentagonal in form, built on an artificial island of Massachusetts granite; it took ten years to construct and cost more than 900,000 dollars.

It was from this fort, on the 13th of April, 1861, that Anderson and the Federal troops were driven, and it was against it that the first shot of the Confederates was fired. It is impossible to estimate the quantity of iron and lead which the Federals showered down upon it. However, it resisted for almost three years, but a few months after the passage of the *Dolphin* it fell beneath General Gillmore's three hundred-pounders on Morris Island.

But at this time it was in all its strength, and the Confederate flag floated proudly above it.

Once past the fort, the town of Charleston appeared, lying between Ashley and Cooper Rivers.

James Playfair threaded his way through the buoys which mark the entrance of the channel, leaving behind the Charleston lighthouse, visible above Morris Island. He had hoisted the English flag, and made his way with wonderful rapidity through the narrow channels. When he had passed the quarantine buoy, he advanced freely into the centre of the bay. Miss Halliburtt was standing on the poop, looking at the town where her father was kept prisoner, and her eyes filled with tears.

At last the steamer's speed was moderated by the Captain's orders; the *Dolphin* ranged along the end of the south and east batteries, and was soon moored at the quay of the North Commercial Wharf.

CHAPTER VII

A SOUTHERN GENERAL

The *Dolphin*, on arriving at the Charleston quay, had been saluted by the cheers of a large crowd. The inhabitants of this town, strictly blockaded by sea, were not accustomed to visits from European ships. They asked each other, not without astonishment, what this great steamer, proudly bearing the English flag, had come to do in their waters; but when they learned the object of her voyage, and why she had just forced the passage Sullivan, when the report spread that she carried a cargo of smuggled ammunition, the cheers and joyful cries were redoubled.

James Playfair, without losing a moment, entered into negotiation with General Beauregard, the military commander of the town. The latter eagerly received the young Captain of the *Dolphin*, who had arrived in time to provide the soldiers with the clothes and ammunition they were so much in want of. It was agreed that the unloading of the ship should take place immediately, and numerous hands came to help the English sailors.

Before quitting his ship James Playfair had received from Miss Halliburtt the most pressing injunctions with regard to her father, and the Captain had placed himself entirely at the young girl’s service.

“Miss Jenny,” he had said, “you may rely on me; I will do the utmost in my power to save your father, but I hope this business will not present many difficulties. I shall go and see General Beauregard to-day, and, without asking him at once for Mr. Halliburtt’s liberty, I shall learn in what situation he is, whether he is on bail or a prisoner.”

“My poor father!” replied Jenny, sighing; “he little thinks his daughter is so near him. Oh that I could fly into his arms!”

“A little patience, Miss Jenny; you will soon embrace your father. Rely upon my acting with the most entire devotion, but also with prudence and consideration.”

This is why James Playfair, after having delivered the cargo of the *Dolphin* up to the General, and bargained for an immense stock of cotton, faithful to his promise, turned the conversation to the events of the day.

“So,” said he, “you believe in the triumph of the slave-holders?”

“I do not for a moment doubt of our final success, and, as regards Charleston, Lee’s army will soon relieve it: besides, what do you expect from the Abolitionists? Admitting that which will never be, that the commercial towns of Virginia, the two Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, fall under their power, what then? Will they be masters of a country they can never occupy? No, certainly not; and for my part, if they are ever victorious, they shall pay dearly for it.”

“And you are quite sure of your soldiers?” asked the Captain. “You are not afraid that Charleston will grow weary of a siege which is ruining her?”

“No, I do not fear treason; besides, the traitors would be punished remorselessly, and I would destroy the town itself by sword or fire if I discovered the least Unionist movement. Jefferson Davis confided Charleston to me, and you may be sure that Charleston is in safe hands.”

“Have you any Federal prisoners?” asked James Playfair, coming to the interesting object of the conversation.

“Yes, Captain,” replied the General, “it was at Charleston that the first shot of separation was fired. The Abolitionists who were here attempted to resist, and, after being defeated, they have been kept as prisoners of war.”

“And have you many?”

“About a hundred.”

“Free in the town?”

“They were until I discovered a plot formed by them: their chief succeeded in establishing a communication with the besiegers, who were thus informed of the situation of affairs in the town. I was then obliged to lock up these dangerous guests, and several of them will only leave their prison to ascend the slope of the citadel, where ten confederate balls will reward them for their federalism.”

“What! to be shot!” cried the young man, shuddering involuntarily.

“Yes, and their chief first of all. He is a very dangerous man to have in a besieged town. I have sent his letters to the President at Richmond, and before a week is passed his sentence will be irrevocably passed.”

“Who is this man you speak of?” asked James Playfair, with an assumed carelessness.

“A journalist from Boston, a violent Abolitionist with the confounded spirit of Lincoln.”

“And his name?”

“Jonathan Halliburtt.”

“Poor wretch!” exclaimed James, suppressing his emotion. “Whatever he may have done, one cannot help pitying him. And you think that he will be shot?”

“I am sure of it,” replied Beauregard. “What can you expect? War is war; one must defend oneself as best one can.”

“Well, it is nothing to me,” said the Captain. “I shall be far enough away when this execution takes place.”

“What! you are thinking of going away already.”

“Yes, General, business must be attended to; as soon as my cargo of cotton is on board I shall be out to sea again. I was fortunate enough to enter the bay, but the difficulty is in getting out again. The *Dolphin* is a good ship; she can beat any of the Federal vessels for speed, but she does not pretend to distance cannon-balls, and a shell in her hull or engine would seriously affect my enterprise.”

“As you please, Captain,” replied Beauregard; “I have no advice to give you under such circumstances. You are doing your business, and you are right. I should act in the same manner were I in your place; besides, a stay at Charleston is not very pleasant, and a harbour where shells are falling three days out of four is not a safe shelter for your ship; so you will set sail when you please; but can you tell me what is the number and the force of the Federal vessels cruising before Charleston?”

James Playfair did his best to answer the General, and took leave of him on the best of terms; then he returned to the *Dolphin* very thoughtful and very depressed from what he had just heard.

"What shall I say to Miss Jenny? Ought I to tell her of Mr. Halliburtt's terrible situation? Or would it be better to keep her in ignorance of the trial which is awaiting her? Poor child!"

He had not gone fifty steps from the governor's house when he ran against Crockston. The worthy American had been watching for him since his departure.

"Well, Captain?"

James Playfair looked steadily at Crockston, and the latter soon understood he had no favourable news to give him.

"Have you seen Beauregard?" he asked.

"Yes," replied James Playfair.

"And have you spoken to him about Mr. Halliburtt?"

"No, it was he who spoke to me about him."

"Well, Captain?"

"Well, I may as well tell you everything, Crockston."

"Everything, Captain."

"General Beauregard has told me that your master will be shot within a week."

At this news anyone else but Crockston would have grown furious or given way to bursts of grief, but the American, who feared nothing, only said, with almost a smile on his lips:

“Pooh! what does it matter?”

“How! what does it matter?” cried James Playfair. “I tell you that Mr. Halliburtt will be shot within a week, and you answer, what does it matter?”

“And I mean it — if in six days he is on board the *Dolphin*, and if in seven days the *Dolphin* is on the open sea.”

“Right!” exclaimed the Captain, pressing Crockston’s hand. “I understand, my good fellow, you have got some pluck; and for myself, in spite of Uncle Vincent, I would throw myself overboard for Miss Jenny.”

“No one need be thrown overboard,” replied the American, “only the fish would gain by that: the most important business now is to deliver Mr. Halliburtt.”

“But you must know that it will be difficult to do so.”

“Pooh!” exclaimed Crockston.

“It is a question of communicating with a prisoner strictly guarded.”

“Certainly.”

“And to bring about an almost miraculous escape.”

“Nonsense,” exclaimed Crockston; “a prisoner thinks more of escaping than his guardian thinks of keeping him; that’s why, thanks to our help, Mr. Halliburtt will be saved.”

“You are right, Crockston.”

“Always right.”

“But now what will you do? There must be some plan: and there are precautions to be taken.”

“I will think about it.”

“But when Miss Jenny learns that her father is condemned to death, and that the order for his execution may come any day — “

“She will know nothing about it, that is all.”

“Yes, it will be better for her and for us to tell her nothing.”

“Where is Mr. Halliburtt imprisoned?” asked Crockston.

“In the citadel,” replied James Playfair.

“Just so!... On board now?”

“On board, Crockston!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE ESCAPE

Miss Jenny, sitting at the poop of the *Dolphin*, was anxiously waiting the Captain's return; when the latter went up to her she could not utter a word, but her eyes questioned James Playfair more eagerly than her lips could have done. The latter, with Crockston's help, informed the young girl of the facts relating to her father's imprisonment. He said that he had carefully broached the subject of the prisoners of war to Beauregard, but, as the General did not seem disposed at all in their favour, he had thought it better to say no more about it, but think the matter over again.

"Since Mr. Halliburtt is not free in the town, his escape will be more difficult; but I will finish my task, and I promise you, Miss Jenny, that the *Dolphin* shall not leave Charleston without having your father on board."

"Thank you, Mr. James; I thank you with my whole heart."

At these words James Playfair felt a thrill of joy through his whole being.

He approached the young girl with moist eyes and quivering lips; perhaps he was going to make an avowal of the sentiments he could no longer repress, when Crockston interfered:

"This is no time for grieving," said he; "we must go to work, and consider what to do."

"Have you any plan, Crockston?" asked the young girl.

"I always have a plan," replied the American: "it is my peculiarity."

“But a good one?” said James Playfair.

“Excellent! and all the ministers in Washington could not devise a better; it is almost as good as if Mr. Halliburtt was already on board.”

Crockston spoke with such perfect assurance, at the same time with such simplicity, that it must have been the most incredulous person who could doubt his words.

“We are listening, Crockston,” said James Playfair.

“Good! You, Captain, will go to General Beauregard, and ask a favour of him which he will not refuse you.”

“And what is that?”

“You will tell him that you have on board a tiresome subject, a scamp who has been very troublesome during the voyage, and excited the crew to revolt. You will ask of him permission to shut him up in the citadel; at the same time, on the condition that he shall return to the ship on her departure, in order to be taken back to England, to be delivered over to the justice of his country.”

“Good!” said James Playfair, half smiling, “I will do all that, and Beauregard will grant my request very willingly.”

“I am perfectly sure of it,” replied the American.

“But,” resumed Playfair, “one thing is wanting.”

“What is that?”

“The scamp.”

“He is before you, Captain.”

“What, the rebellious subject?”

“Is myself; don’t trouble yourself about that.”

“Oh! you brave, generous heart,” cried Jenny, pressing the American’s rough hands between her small white palms.

“Go, Crockston,” said James Playfair; “I understand you, my friend; and I only regret one thing — that is, that I cannot take your place.”

“Everyone his part,” replied Crockston; “if you put yourself in my place you would be very much embarrassed, which I shall not be; you will have enough to do later on to get out of the harbour under the fire of the Feds and Rebs, which, for my part, I should manage very badly.”

“Well, Crockston, go on.”

“Once in the citadel — I know it — I shall see what to do, and rest assured I shall do my best; in the meanwhile, you will be getting your cargo on board.”

“Oh, business is now a very unimportant detail,” said the Captain.

“Not at all! And what would your Uncle Vincent say to that? We must join sentiment with work; it will prevent suspicion; but do it quickly. Can you be ready in six days?”

“Yes.”

“Well, let the *Dolphin* be ready to start on the 22nd.”

“She shall be ready.”

“On the evening of the 22nd of January, you understand, send a gig with your best men to White Point, at the end of the town; wait there till nine o’clock, and then you will see Mr. Halliburtt and your servant.”

“But how will you manage to effect Mr. Halliburtt’s deliverance, and also escape yourself?”

“That’s my look-out.”

“Dear Crockston, you are going to risk your life then, to save my father!”

“Don’t be uneasy, Miss Jenny, I shall risk absolutely nothing, you may believe me.”

“Well,” asked James Playfair, “when must I have you locked up?”

“To-day — you understand — I demoralise your crew; there is no time to be lost.”

“Would you like any money? It may be of use to you in the citadel.”

“Money to buy the gaoler! Oh, no, it would be a poor bargain; when one goes there the gaoler keeps the money and the prisoner! No, I have surer means than that; however, a few dollars may be useful; one must be able to drink, if needs be.”

“And intoxicate the gaoler.”

“No, an intoxicated gaoler would spoil everything. No, I tell you I have an idea; let me work it out.”

“Here, my good fellow, are ten dollars.”

“It is too much, but I will return what is over.”

“Well, then, are you ready?”

“Quite ready to be a downright rogue.”

“Let us go to work, then.”

“Crockston,” said the young girl, in a faltering voice, “you are the best man on earth.”

“I know it,” replied the American, laughing good-humouredly. “By the by, Captain, an important item.”

“What is that?”

“If the General proposes to hang your rebel — you know that military men like sharp work — “

“Well, Crockston?”

“Well, you will say that you must think about it.”

“I promise you I will.”

The same day, to the great astonishment of the crew, who were not in the secret, Crockston, with his feet and hands in irons, was taken on shore by a dozen sailors, and half an hour after, by Captain James Playfair’s request, he was led through the streets of the town, and, in spite of his resistance, was imprisoned in the citadel.

During this and the following days the unloading of the *Dolphin* was rapidly accomplished; the steam cranes lifted out the European cargo to make room for the native goods. The people of Charleston, who were present at this interesting work, helped the sailors, whom they held in great respect, but the Captain did not leave the brave fellows much time for receiving compliments; he was constantly behind them, and urged them on with a feverish activity, the reason of which the sailors could not suspect.

Three days later, on the 18th of January, the first bales of cotton began to be packed in the hold: although James Playfair troubled himself no more about it, the firm of Playfair and Co. were making an excellent bargain, having obtained the cotton which encumbered the Charleston wharves at very far less than its value.

In the meantime no news had been heard of Crockston. Jenny, without saying anything about it, was a prey to incessant fears; her pale face spoke for her, and James Playfair endeavoured his utmost to ease her mind.

“I have all confidence in Crockston,” said he; “he is a devoted servant, as you must know better than I do, Miss Jenny. You must make yourself quite at ease; believe me, in three days you will be folded in your father’s arms.”

“Ah! Mr. James,” cried the young girl, “how can I ever repay you for such devotion? How shall we ever be able to thank you?”

“I will tell you when we are in English seas,” replied the young Captain.

Jenny raised her tearful face to him for a moment, then her eyelids drooped, and she went back to her cabin.

James Playfair hoped that the young girl would know nothing of her father's terrible situation until he was in safety, but she was apprised of the truth by the involuntary indiscretion of a sailor.

The reply from the Richmond cabinet had arrived by a courier who had been able to pass the line of outposts; the reply contained Jonathan Halliburtt's death-warrant. The news of the approaching execution was not long in spreading through the town, and it was brought on board by one of the sailors of the *Dolphin*; the man told the Captain, without thinking that Miss Halliburtt was within hearing; the young girl uttered a piercing cry, and fell unconscious on the deck. James Playfair carried her to her cabin, but the most assiduous care was necessary to restore her to life.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw the young Captain, who, with a finger on his lips, enjoined absolute silence. With difficulty she repressed the outburst of her grief, and James Playfair, leaning towards her, said gently:

"Jenny, in two hours your father will be in safety near you, or I shall have perished in endeavouring to save him!"

Then he left the cabin, saying to himself, "And now he must be carried off at any price, since I must pay for his liberty with my own life and those of my crew."

The hour for action had arrived, the loading of the cotton cargo had been finished since morning; in two hours the ship would be ready to start.

James Playfair had left the North Commercial Wharf and gone into the roadstead, so that he was ready to make use of the tide, which would be high at nine o'clock in the evening.

It was seven o’clock when James left the young girl, and began to make preparations for departure. Until the present time the secret had been strictly kept between himself, Crockston, and Jenny; but now he thought it wise to inform Mr. Mathew of the situation of affairs, and he did so immediately.

“Very well, sir,” replied Mr. Mathew, without making the least remark, “and nine o’clock is the time?”

“Nine o’clock, and have the fires lit immediately, and the steam got up.”

“It shall be done, Captain.”

“The *Dolphin* may remain at anchor; we will cut our moorings and sheer off, without losing a moment.”

“Just so.”

“Have a lantern placed at the mainmast-head; the night is dark, and will be foggy; we must not risk losing our way in returning. You had better have the bell for starting rung at nine o’clock.”

“Your orders shall be punctually attended to, Captain.”

“And now, Mr. Mathew, have a shore-boat manned with six of our best men. I am going to set out directly for White Point. I leave Miss Jenny in your charge, and may God protect us!”

“May God protect us!” repeated the first officer.

Then he immediately gave the necessary orders for the fires to be lighted, and the shore-boat provided with men. In a few minutes the boat was ready, and James Playfair, after bidding Jenny good-bye, stepped into it, whilst at the same time he saw volumes of black smoke issuing from the chimneys of the ship, and losing itself in the fog.

The darkness was profound; the wind had fallen, and in the perfect silence the waters seemed to slumber in the immense harbour, whilst a few uncertain lights glimmered through the mist. James Playfair had taken his place at the rudder, and with a steady hand he guided his boat towards White Point. It was a distance of about two miles; during the day James had taken his bearings perfectly, so that he was able to make direct for Charleston Point.

Eight o'clock struck from the church of St. Philip when the shore-boat ran aground at White Point.

There was an hour to wait before the exact time fixed by Crockston; the quay was deserted, with the exception of the sentinel pacing to and fro on the south and east batteries. James Playfair grew impatient, and the minutes seemed hours to him.

At half-past eight he heard the sound of approaching steps; he left his men with their oars clear and ready to start, and went himself to see who it was; but he had not gone ten feet when he met a band of coastguards, in all about twenty men. James drew his revolver from his waist, deciding to make use of it, if needs be; but what could he do against these soldiers, who were coming on to the quay?

The leader came up to him, and, seeing the boat, asked:

“Whose craft is that?”

“It is a gig belonging to the *Dolphin*,” replied the young man.

“And who are you?”

“Captain James Playfair.”

“I thought you had already started, and were now in the Charleston channels.”

“I am ready to start. I ought even now to be on my way but — “

“But — “persisted the coastguard.

A bright idea shot through James’s mind, and he answered:

“One of my sailors is locked up in the citadel, and, to tell the truth, I had almost forgotten him; fortunately I thought of him in time, and I have sent my men to bring him.”

“Ah! that troublesome fellow; you wish to take him back to England?”

“Yes.

“He might as well be hung here as there,” said the coast-guard, laughing at his joke.

“So I think,” said James Playfair, “but it is better to have the thing done in the regular way.”

“Not much chance of that, Captain, when you have to face the Morris Island batteries.”

“Don’t alarm yourself. I got in and I’ll get out again.”

“Prosperous voyage to you!”

“Thank you.”

With this the men went off, and the shore was left silent.

At this moment nine o’clock struck; it was the appointed moment. James felt his heart beat violently; a whistle was heard; he replied to it, then he waited, listening, with his hand up to enjoin perfect silence on the sailors. A man appeared enveloped in a large cloak, and looking from one side to another. James ran up to him.

“Mr. Halliburtt?”

“I am he,” replied the man with the cloak.

“God be praised!” cried James Playfair. “Embark without losing a minute. Where is Crockston?”

“Crockston!” exclaimed Mr. Halliburtt, amazed. “What do you mean?”

“The man who has saved you and brought you here was your servant Crockston.”

“The man who came with me was the gaoler from the citadel,” replied Mr. Halliburtt.

“The gaoler!” cried James Playfair.

Evidently he knew nothing about it, and a thousand fears crowded in his mind.

“Quite right, the gaoler,” cried a well-known voice. “The gaoler is sleeping like a top in my cell.”

“Crockston! you! Can it be you?” exclaimed Mr. Halliburtt.

“No time to talk now, master; we will explain everything to you afterwards. It is a question of life or death. Get in quick!”

The three men took their places in the boat.

“Push off!” cried the captain.

Immediately the six oars dipped into the water; the boat darted like a fish through the waters of Charleston Harbour.

CHAPTER IX

BETWEEN TWO FIRES

The boat, pulled by six robust oarsmen, flew over the water. The fog was growing dense, and it was with difficulty that James Playfair succeeded in keeping to the line of his bearings. Crockston sat at the bows, and Mr. Halliburtt at the stern, next the Captain. The prisoner, only now informed of the presence of his servant, wished to speak to him, but the latter enjoined silence.

However, a few minutes later, when they were in the middle of the harbour, Crockston determined to speak, knowing what thoughts were uppermost in Mr. Halliburtt's mind.

"Yes, my dear master," said he, "the gaoler is in my place in the cell, where I gave him two smart blows, one on the head and the other on the stomach, to act as a sleeping draught, and this when he was bringing me my supper; there is gratitude for you. I took his clothes and his keys, found you, and let you out of the citadel, under the soldiers' noses. That is all I have done."

"But my daughter — ?" asked Mr. Halliburtt.

"Is on board the ship which is going to take you to England."

"My daughter there! there!" cried the American, springing from his seat.

"Silence!" replied Crockston, "a few minutes, and we shall be saved."

The boat flew through the darkness, but James Playfair was obliged to steer rather by guess, as the lanterns of the *Dolphin* were no longer visible through the fog. He was undecided what direction to follow, and the darkness was so great that the rowers could not even see to the end of their oars.

“Well, Mr. James?” said Crockston.

“We must have made more than a mile and a half,” replied the Captain. “You don’t see anything, Crockston?”

“Nothing; nevertheless, I have good eyes; but we shall get there all right. They don’t suspect anything out there.”

These words were hardly finished when the flash of a gun gleamed for an instant through the darkness, and vanished in the mist.

“A signal!” cried James Playfair.

“Whew!” exclaimed Crockston. “It must have come from the citadel. Let us wait.”

A second, then a third shot was fired in the direction of the first, and almost the same signal was repeated a mile in front of the gig.

“That is from Fort Sumter,” cried Crockston, “and it is the signal of escape. Urge on the men; everything is discovered.”

“Pull for your lives, my men!” cried James Playfair, urging on the sailors, “those gun-shots cleared my route. The *Dolphin* is eight hundred yards ahead of us. Stop! I hear the bell on board. Hurrah, there it is again! Twenty pounds for you if we are back in five minutes!”

The boat skimmed over the waves under the sailors’ powerful oars. A cannon boomed in the direction of the town. Crockston heard a ball whiz past them.

The bell on the *Dolphin* was ringing loudly. A few more strokes and the boat was alongside. A few more seconds and Jenny fell into her father’s arms.

The gig was immediately raised, and James Playfair sprang on to the poop.

“Is the steam up, Mr. Mathew?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Have the moorings cut at once.”

A few minutes later the two screws carried the steamer towards the principal channel, away from Fort Sumter.

“Mr. Mathew,” said James, “we must not think of taking the Sullivan Island channel; we should run directly under the Confederate guns. Let us go as near as possible to the right side of the harbour out of range of the Federal batteries. Have you a safe man at the helm?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Have the lanterns and the fires on deck extinguished; there is a great deal too much light, but we cannot help the reflection from the engine-rooms.”

During this conversation the *Dolphin* was going at a great speed; but in altering her course to keep to the right side of the Charleston Harbour she was obliged to enter a channel which took her for a moment near Fort Sumter; and when scarcely half a mile off all the guns bearing on her were discharged at the same time, and a shower of shot and shell passed in front of the *Dolphin* with a thundering report.

“Too soon, stupids,” cried James Playfair, with a burst of laughter. “Make haste, make haste, Mr. Engineer! We shall get between two fires.”

The stokers fed the furnaces, and the *Dolphin* trembled all over with the effort of the engine as if she was on the point of exploding.

At this moment a second report was heard, and another shower of balls whizzed behind the *Dolphin*.

“Too late, stupids,” cried the young Captain, with a regular roar.

Then Crockston, who was standing on the poop, cried, “That’s one passed. A few minutes more, and we shall have done with the Rebs.”

“Then do you think we have nothing more to fear from Fort Sumter?” asked James.

“Nothing at all, but everything from Fort Moultrie, at the end of Sullivan Island; but they will only get a chance at us for half a minute, and then they must choose their time well, and shoot straight if they want to reach us. We are getting near.”

“Right; the position of Fort Moultrie will allow us to go straight for the principal channel. Fire away then, fire away!”

At the same moment, and as if in obedience to James Playfair, the fort was illuminated by a triple line of lightning. A frightful crash was heard; then a crackling sound on board the steamer.

“Touched this time!” exclaimed Crockston.

“Mr. Mathew!” cried the Captain to his second, who was stationed at the bows, “what has been damaged?”

“The bowsprit broken.”

“Any wounded?”

“No, Captain.”

“Well, then, the masts may go to Jericho. Straight into the pass! Straight! and steer towards the island.”

“We have passed the Rebs!” cried Crockston; “and, if we must have balls in our hull, I would much rather have the Northerners; they are more easily digested.”

In fact, the *Dolphin* could not yet consider herself out of danger; for, if Morris Island was not fortified with the formidable pieces of artillery which were placed there a few months later, nevertheless its guns and mortars could easily have sunk a ship like the *Dolphin*.

The alarm had been given to the Federals on the island, and to the blockading squadron, by the firing from Forts Sumter and Moultrie. The besiegers could not make out the reason of this night attack; it did not seem to be directed against them. However, they were obliged to consider it so, and were ready to reply.

It occupied James Playfair’s thoughts whilst making towards the passes of Morris Island; and he had reason to fear, for in a quarter of an hour’s time lights gleamed rapidly through the darkness. A shower of small shell fell round the steamer, scattering the water over her bulwarks; some of them even struck the deck of the *Dolphin,* but not on their points, which saved the ship from certain ruin. In fact, these shell, as it was afterwards discovered, could break into a hundred fragments, and each cover a superficial area of a hundred and twenty square feet with Greek fire, which would burn for twenty minutes, and nothing could extinguish it. One of these shell alone could set a ship on fire. Fortunately for the *Dolphin*, they were a new invention, and as yet far from perfect. Once thrown into the air, a false rotary movement kept them inclined, and, when falling, instead of striking on their points, where is the percussion apparatus, they fell flat. This defect in construction alone saved the *Dolphin*. The falling of these shells did her little harm, and under the pressure of her over-heated boilers she continued to advance into the pass.

At this moment, and in spite of his orders, Mr. Halliburtt and his daughter went to James Playfair on the poop; the latter urged them to return to their cabins, but Jenny declared that she would remain by the Captain. As for Mr. Halliburtt, who had just learnt all the noble conduct of his deliverer, he pressed his hand without being able to utter a word.

The *Dolphin* was speeding rapidly towards the open sea. There were only three miles more before she would be in the waters of the Atlantic; if the pass was free at its entrance, she was saved. James Playfair was wonderfully well acquainted with all the secrets of Charleston Bay, and he guided his ship through the darkness with an unerring hand. He was beginning to think his daring enterprise successful, when a sailor on the forecastle cried:

“A ship!”

“A ship?” cried James.

“Yes, on the larboard side.”

The fog had cleared off, and a large frigate was seen making towards the pass, in order to obstruct the passage of the *Dolphin*. It was necessary, cost what it might, to distance her, and urge the steam-engine to an increase of speed, or all was lost.

“Port the helm at once!” cried the Captain.

Then he sprang on to the bridge above the engine. By his orders one of the screws was stopped, and under the action of the other the *Dolphin*, veering with an extraordinary rapidity, avoided running foul of the frigate, and advanced like her to the entrance of the pass. It was now a question of speed.

James Playfair understood that in this lay his own safety, Miss Jenny’s, her father’s, and that of all his crew.

The frigate was considerably in advance of the *Dolphin*. It was evident from the volumes of black smoke issuing from her chimneys that she was getting up her steam. James Playfair was not the man to be left in the background.

“How are the engines?” cried he to the engineer.

“At the maximum speed,” replied the latter; “the steam is escaping by all the valves.”

“Fasten them down,” ordered the Captain.

And his orders were executed at the risk of blowing up the ship.

The *Dolphin* again increased her speed; the pistons worked with frightful rapidity; the metal plates on which the engine was placed trembled under the terrific force of their blows. It was a sight to make the boldest shudder.

“More pressure!” cried James Playfair; “put on more pressure!”

“Impossible!” replied the engineer. “The valves are tightly closed; our furnaces are full up to the mouths.”

“What difference! Fill them with cotton soaked in spirits; we must pass that frigate at any price.”

At these words the most daring of the sailors looked at each other, but did not hesitate. Some bales of cotton were thrown into the engine-room, a barrel of spirits broached over them, and this expensive fuel placed, not without danger, in the red-hot furnaces. The stokers could no longer hear each other speak for the roaring of the flames. Soon the metal plates of the furnaces became red-hot; the pistons worked like the pistons of a locomotive; the steamgauge showed a frightful tension; the steamer flew over the water; her boards creaked, and her chimneys threw out volumes of smoke mingled with flames. She was going at a headlong speed, but, nevertheless, she was gaining on the frigate — passed her, distanced her, and in ten minutes was out of the channel.

“Saved!” cried the Captain.

“Saved!” echoed the crew, clapping their hands.

Already the Charleston beacon was disappearing in the south-west; the sound of firing from the batteries grew fainter, and it might with reason be thought that the danger was all past, when a shell from a gun-boat cruising at large was hurled whizzing through the air. It was easy to trace its course, thanks to the line of fire which followed it.

Then was a moment of anxiety impossible to describe; every one was silent, and each watched fearfully the arch described by the projectile. Nothing could be done to escape it, and in a few seconds it fell with a frightful noise on the fore-deck of the *Dolphin*.

The terrified sailors crowded to the stern, and no one dared move a step, whilst the shell was burning with a brisk crackle.

But one brave man alone among them ran up to the formidable weapon of destruction. It was Crockston; he took the shell in his strong arms, whilst showers of sparks were falling from it; then, with a superhuman effort, he threw it overboard.

Hardly had the shell reached the surface of the water when it burst with a frightful report.

“Hurrah! hurrah!” cried the whole crew of the *Dolphin* unanimously, whilst Crockston rubbed his hands.

Some time later the steamer sped rapidly through the waters of the Atlantic; the American coast disappeared in the darkness, and the distant lights which shot across the horizon indicated that the attack was general between the batteries of Morris Island and the forts of Charleston Harbour.

CHAPTER X

ST. MUNGO

The next day at sunrise the American coast had disappeared; not a ship was visible on the horizon, and the *Dolphin*, moderating the frightful rapidity of her speed, made quietly towards the Bermudas.

It is useless to recount the passage across the Atlantic, which was marked by no accidents, and ten days after the departure from Queenstown the French coast was hailed.

What passed between the Captain and the young girl may be imagined, even by the least observant individuals. How could Mr. Halliburtt acknowledge the devotion and courage of his deliverer, if it was not by making him the happiest of men? James Playfair did not wait for English seas to declare to the father and daughter the sentiments which overflowed his heart, and, if Crockston is to be believed, Miss Jenny received his confession with a happiness she did not try to conceal.

Thus it happened that on the 14th of February, 18 — , a numerous crowd was collected in the dim aisles of St. Mungo, the old cathedral of Glasgow. There were seamen, merchants, manufacturers, magistrates, and some of every denomination gathered here. There was Miss Jenny in bridal array and beside her the worthy Crockston, resplendent in apple-green clothes, with gold buttons, whilst Uncle Vincent stood proudly by his nephew.

In short, they were celebrating the marriage of James Playfair, of the firm of Vincent Playfair & Co. of Glasgow, with Miss Jenny Halliburtt, of Boston.

The ceremony was accomplished amidst great pomp. Everyone knew the history of the *Dolphin*, and everyone thought the young Captain well recompensed for his devotion. He alone said that his reward was greater than he deserved.

In the evening there was a grand ball and banquet at Uncle Vincent’s house, with a large distribution of shillings to the crowd collected in Gordon Street. Crockston did ample justice to this memorable feast, while keeping himself perfectly within bounds.

Everyone was happy at this wedding; some at their own happiness, and others at the happiness around them, which is not always the case at ceremonies of this kind.

Late in the evening, when the guests had retired, James Playfair took his uncle’s hand.

“Well, Uncle Vincent,” said he to him.

“Well, Nephew James?”

“Are you pleased with the charming cargo I brought you on board the *Dolphin*?” continued Captain Playfair, showing him his brave young wife.

“I am quite satisfied,” replied the worthy merchant; “I have sold my cotton at three hundred and seventy-five per cent. profit.”

DR. OX AND OTHER STORIES

Translated by George M. Towle

This collection of short stories was first published in 1874. The main story features Doctor Ox and his assistant Ygene, who arrive in a small quiet community in Flanders, promising to light the town with a network of gas pipes.

JULES VERNE
LE DOCTEUR OX
COLLECTION·HETZEL

The original title page

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DOCTOR OX’S EXPERIMENT.

CHAPTER I.

HOW IT IS USELESS TO SEEK, EVEN ON THE BEST MAPS, FOR THE SMALL TOWN OF QUIQUENDONE.

If you try to find, on any map of Flanders, ancient or modern, the small town of Quiquendone, probably you will not succeed. Is Quiquendone, then, one of those towns which have disappeared? No. A town of the future? By no means. It exists in spite of geographies, and has done so for some eight or nine hundred years. It even numbers two thousand three hundred and ninety-three souls, allowing one soul to each inhabitant. It is situated thirteen and a half kilometres north-west of Oudenarde, and fifteen and a quarter kilometres south-east of Bruges, in the heart of Flanders. The Vaar, a small tributary of the Scheldt, passes beneath its three bridges, which are still covered with a quaint mediæval roof, like that at Tournay. An old château is to be seen there, the first stone of which was laid so long ago as 1197, by Count Baldwin, afterwards Emperor of Constantinople; and there is a Town Hall, with Gothic windows, crowned by a chaplet of battlements, and surrounded by a turreted belfry, which rises three hundred and fifty-seven feet above the soil. Every hour you may hear there a chime of five octaves, a veritable aerial piano, the renown of which surpasses that of the famous chimes of Bruges. Strangers — if any ever come to Quiquendone — do not quit the curious old town until they have visited its “Stadtholder’s Hall”, adorned by a full-length portrait of William of Nassau, by Brandon; the loft of the Church of Saint Magloire, a masterpiece of sixteenth century architecture; the cast-iron well in the spacious Place Saint Ernuph, the admirable ornamentation of which is attributed to the artist-blacksmith, Quentin Metsys; the tomb formerly erected to Mary of

Burgundy, daughter of Charles the Bold, who now reposes in the Church of Notre Dame at Bruges; and so on. The principal industry of Quiquendone is the manufacture of whipped creams and barley-sugar on a large scale. It has been governed by the Van Tricasses, from father to son, for several centuries. And yet Quiquendone is not on the map of Flanders! Have the geographers forgotten it, or is it an intentional omission? That I cannot tell; but Quiquendone really exists; with its narrow streets, its fortified walls, its Spanish-looking houses, its market, and its burgomaster — so much so, that it has recently been the theatre of some surprising phenomena, as extraordinary and incredible as they are true, which are to be recounted in the present narration.

Surely there is nothing to be said or thought against the Flemings of Western Flanders. They are a well-to-do folk, wise, prudent, sociable, with even tempers, hospitable, perhaps a little heavy in conversation as in mind; but this does not explain why one of the most interesting towns of their district has yet to appear on modern maps.

This omission is certainly to be regretted. If only history, or in default of history the chronicles, or in default of chronicles the traditions of the country, made mention of Quiquendone! But no; neither atlases, guides, nor itineraries speak of it. M. Joanne himself, that energetic hunter after small towns, says not a word of it. It might be readily conceived that this silence would injure the commerce, the industries, of the town. But let us hasten to add that Quiquendone has neither industry nor commerce, and that it does very well without them. Its barley-sugar and whipped cream are consumed on the spot; none is exported. In short, the Quiquendonians have no need of anybody. Their desires are limited, their existence is a modest one; they are calm, moderate, phlegmatic — in a word, they are Flemings; such as are still to be met with sometimes between the Scheldt and the North Sea.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE BURGOMASTER VAN TRICASSE AND THE COUNSELLOR NIKLAUSSE CONSULT ABOUT THE AFFAIRS OF THE TOWN.

“You think so?” asked the burgomaster.

“I — think so,” replied the counsellor, after some minutes of silence.

“You see, we must not act hastily,” resumed the burgomaster.

“We have been talking over this grave matter for ten years,” replied the Counsellor Niklausse, “and I confess to you, my worthy Van Tricasse, that I cannot yet take it upon myself to come to a decision.”

“I quite understand your hesitation,” said the burgomaster, who did not speak until after a good quarter of an hour of reflection, “I quite understand it, and I fully share it. We shall do wisely to decide upon nothing without a more careful examination of the question.”

“It is certain,” replied Niklausse, “that this post of civil commissary is useless in so peaceful a town as Quiquendone.”

“Our predecessor,” said Van Tricasse gravely, “our predecessor never said, never would have dared to say, that anything is certain. Every affirmation is subject to awkward qualifications.”

The counsellor nodded his head slowly in token of assent; then he remained silent for nearly half an hour. After this lapse of time, during which neither the counsellor nor the burgomaster moved so much as a finger, Niklausse asked Van Tricasse whether his predecessor — of some twenty years before — had not thought of suppressing this office of civil commissary, which each year cost the town of Quiquendone the sum of thirteen hundred and seventy-five francs and some centimes.

“I believe he did,” replied the burgomaster, carrying his hand with majestic deliberation to his ample brow; “but the worthy man died without having dared to make up his mind, either as to this or any other administrative measure. He was a sage. Why should I not do as he did?”

Counsellor Niklausse was incapable of originating any objection to the burgomaster’s opinion.

“The man who dies,” added Van Tricasse solemnly, “without ever having decided upon anything during his life, has very nearly attained to perfection.”

This said, the burgomaster pressed a bell with the end of his little finger, which gave forth a muffled sound, which seemed less a sound than a sigh. Presently some light steps glided softly across the tile floor. A mouse would not have made less noise, running over a thick carpet. The door of the room opened, turning on its well-oiled hinges. A young girl, with long blonde tresses, made her appearance. It was Suzel Van Tricasse, the burgomaster’s only daughter. She handed her father a pipe, filled to the brim, and a small copper brazier, spoke not a word, and disappeared at once, making no more noise at her exit than at her entrance.

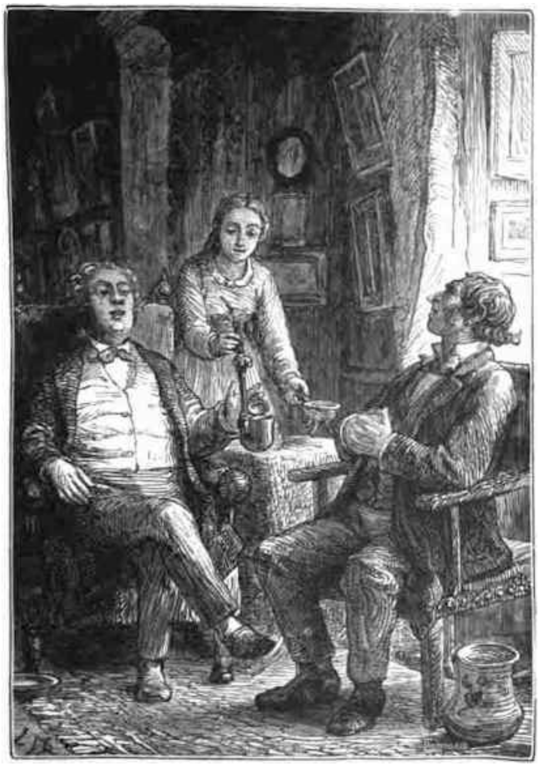

She handed her father a pipe

The worthy burgomaster lighted his pipe, and was soon hidden in a cloud of bluish smoke, leaving Counsellor Niklausse plunged in the most absorbing thought.

The room in which these two notable personages, charged with the government of Quiquendone, were talking, was a parlour richly adorned with carvings in dark wood. A lofty fireplace, in which an oak might have been burned or an ox roasted, occupied the whole of one of the sides of the room; opposite to it was a trellised window, the painted glass of which toned down the brightness of the sunbeams. In an antique frame above the chimney-piece appeared the portrait of some worthy man, attributed to Memling, which no doubt represented an ancestor of the Van Tricasses, whose authentic genealogy dates back to the fourteenth century, the period when the Flemings and Guy de Dampierre were engaged in wars with the Emperor Rudolph of Hapsburgh.

This parlour was the principal apartment of the burgomaster’s house, which was one of the pleasantest in Quiquendone. Built in the Flemish style, with all the abruptness, quaintness, and picturesqueness of Pointed architecture, it was considered one of the most curious monuments of the town. A Carthusian convent, or a deaf and dumb asylum, was not more silent than this mansion. Noise had no existence there; people did not walk, but glided about in it; they did not speak, they murmured. There was not, however, any lack of women in the house, which, in addition to the burgomaster Van Tricasse himself, sheltered his wife, Madame Brigitte Van Tricasse, his daughter, Suzel Van Tricasse, and his domestic, Lotchè Janshéu. We may also mention the burgomaster’s sister, Aunt Hermance, an elderly maiden who still bore the nickname of Tatanémance, which her niece Suzel had given her when a child. But in spite of all these elements of discord and noise, the burgomaster’s house was as calm as a desert.

The burgomaster was some fifty years old, neither fat nor lean, neither short nor tall, neither rubicund nor pale, neither gay nor sad, neither contented nor discontented, neither energetic nor dull, neither proud nor humble, neither good nor bad, neither generous nor miserly, neither courageous nor cowardly, neither too much nor too little of anything — a man notably moderate in all respects, whose invariable slowness of motion, slightly hanging lower jaw, prominent eyebrows, massive forehead, smooth as a copper plate and without a wrinkle, would at once have betrayed to a physiognomist that the burgomaster Van Tricasse was phlegm personified. Never, either from anger or passion, had any emotion whatever hastened the beating of this man’s heart, or flushed his face; never had his pupils contracted under the influence of any irritation, however ephemeral. He invariably wore good clothes, neither too large nor too small, which he never seemed to wear out. He was shod with large square shoes with triple soles and silver buckles, which lasted so long that his shoemaker was in despair. Upon his head he wore a large hat which dated from the period when Flanders was separated from Holland, so that this venerable masterpiece was at least forty years old. But what would you have? It is the passions which wear out body as well as soul, the clothes as well as the body; and our worthy burgomaster, apathetic, indolent, indifferent, was passionate in nothing. He wore nothing out, not even himself, and he considered himself the very man to administer the affairs of Quiquendone and its tranquil population.

The town, indeed, was not less calm than the Van Tricasse mansion. It was in this peaceful dwelling that the burgomaster reckoned on attaining the utmost limit of human existence, after having, however, seen the good Madame Brigitte Van Tricasse, his wife, precede him to the tomb, where, surely, she would not find a more profound repose than that she had enjoyed on earth for sixty years.

This demands explanation.

The Van Tricasse family might well call itself the “Jeannot family.” This is why: —

Every one knows that the knife of this typical personage is as celebrated as its proprietor, and not less incapable of wearing out, thanks to the double operation, incessantly repeated, of replacing the handle when it is worn out, and the blade when it becomes worthless. A precisely similar operation had been going on from time immemorial in the Van Tricasse family, to which Nature had lent herself with more than usual complacency. From 1340 it had invariably happened that a Van Tricasse, when left a widower, had remarried a Van Tricasse younger than himself; who, becoming in turn a widow, had married again a Van Tricasse younger than herself; and so on, without a break in the continuity, from generation to generation. Each died in his or her turn with mechanical regularity. Thus the worthy Madame Brigitte Van Tricasse had now her second husband; and, unless she violated her every duty, would precede her spouse — he being ten years younger than herself — to the other world, to make room for a new Madame Van Tricasse. Upon this the burgomaster calmly counted, that the family tradition might not be broken. Such was this mansion, peaceful and silent, of which the doors never creaked, the windows never rattled, the floors never groaned, the chimneys never roared, the weathercocks never grated, the furniture never squeaked, the locks never clanked, and the occupants never made more noise than their shadows. The god Harpocrates would certainly have chosen it for the Temple of Silence.

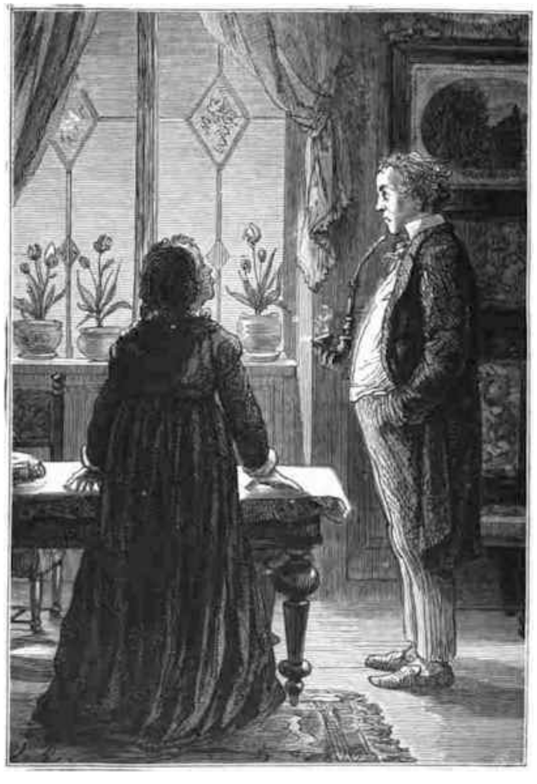

the worthy Madame Brigitte Van Tricasse had now her second husband

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE COMMISSARY PASSAUF ENTERS AS NOISILY AS UNEXPECTEDLY.

When the interesting conversation which has been narrated began, it was a quarter before three in the afternoon. It was at a quarter before four that Van Tricasse lighted his enormous pipe, which could hold a quart of tobacco, and it was at thirty-five minutes past five that he finished smoking it.

All this time the two comrades did not exchange a single word.

About six o'clock the counsellor, who had a habit of speaking in a very summary manner, resumed in these words, —

"So we decide — "

"To decide nothing," replied the burgomaster.

"I think, on the whole, that you are right, Van Tricasse."

"I think so too, Niklausse. We will take steps with reference to the civil commissary when we have more light on the subject — later on. There is no need for a month yet."

"Nor even for a year," replied Niklausse, unfolding his pocket-handkerchief and calmly applying it to his nose.

There was another silence of nearly a quarter of an hour. Nothing disturbed this repeated pause in the conversation; not even the appearance of the house-dog Lento, who, not less phlegmatic than his master, came to pay his respects in the parlour. Noble dog! — a model for his race. Had he been made of pasteboard, with wheels on his paws, he would not have made less noise during his stay.

Towards eight o’clock, after Lotchè had brought the antique lamp of polished glass, the burgomaster said to the counsellor, —

“We have no other urgent matter to consider?”

“No, Van Tricasse; none that I know of.”

“Have I not been told, though,” asked the burgomaster, “that the tower of the Oudenarde gate is likely to tumble down?”

“Ah!” replied the counsellor; “really, I should not be astonished if it fell on some passer-by any day.”

“Oh! before such a misfortune happens I hope we shall have come to a decision on the subject of this tower.”

“I hope so, Van Tricasse.”

“There are more pressing matters to decide.”

“No doubt; the question of the leather-market, for instance.”

“What, is it still burning?”

“Still burning, and has been for the last three weeks.”

“Have we not decided in council to let it burn?”

“Yes, Van Tricasse — on your motion.”

“Was not that the surest and simplest way to deal with it?”

“Without doubt.”

“Well, let us wait. Is that all?”

“All,” replied the counsellor, scratching his head, as if to assure himself that he had not forgotten anything important.

“Ah!” exclaimed the burgomaster, “haven’t you also heard something of an escape of water which threatens to inundate the low quarter of Saint Jacques?”

“I have. It is indeed unfortunate that this escape of water did not happen above the leather-market! It would naturally have checked the fire, and would thus have saved us a good deal of discussion.”

“What can you expect, Niklausse? There is nothing so illogical as accidents. They are bound by no rules, and we cannot profit by one, as we might wish, to remedy another.”

It took Van Tricasse’s companion some time to digest this fine observation.

“Well, but,” resumed the Counsellor Niklausse, after the lapse of some moments, “we have not spoken of our great affair!”

“What great affair? Have we, then, a great affair?” asked the burgomaster.

“No doubt. About lighting the town.”

“O yes. If my memory serves me, you are referring to the lighting plan of Doctor Ox.”

“Precisely.”

“It is going on, Niklausse,” replied the burgomaster. “They are already laying the pipes, and the works are entirely completed.”

“Perhaps we have hurried a little in this matter,” said the counsellor, shaking his head.

“Perhaps. But our excuse is, that Doctor Ox bears the whole expense of his experiment. It will not cost us a sou.”

“That, true enough, is our excuse. Moreover, we must advance with the age. If the experiment succeeds, Quiquendone will be the first town in Flanders to be lighted with the oxy — What is the gas called?”

“Oxyhydric gas.”

“Well, oxyhydric gas, then.”

At this moment the door opened, and Lotchè came in to tell the burgomaster that his supper was ready.

Counsellor Niklausse rose to take leave of Van Tricasse, whose appetite had been stimulated by so many affairs discussed and decisions taken; and it was agreed that the council of notables should be convened after a reasonably long delay, to determine whether a decision should be provisionally arrived at with reference to the really urgent matter of the Oudenarde gate.

The two worthy administrators then directed their steps towards the street-door, the one conducting the other. The counsellor, having reached the last step, lighted a little lantern to guide him through the obscure streets of Quiquendone, which Doctor Ox had not yet lighted. It was a dark October night, and a light fog overshadowed the town.

Niklausse’s preparations for departure consumed at least a quarter of an hour; for, after having lighted his lantern, he had to put on his big cow-skin socks and his sheep-skin gloves; then he put up the furred collar of his overcoat, turned the brim of his felt hat down over his eyes, grasped his heavy crow-beaked umbrella, and got ready to start.

When Lotchè, however, who was lighting her master, was about to draw the bars of the door, an unexpected noise arose outside.

Yes! Strange as the thing seems, a noise — a real noise, such as the town had certainly not heard since the taking of the donjon by the Spaniards in 1513 — terrible noise, awoke the long-dormant echoes of the venerable Van Tricasse mansion.

Some one knocked heavily upon this door, hitherto virgin to brutal touch! Redoubled knocks were given with some blunt implement, probably a knotty stick, wielded by a vigorous arm. With the strokes were mingled cries and calls. These words were distinctly heard: —

“Monsieur Van Tricasse! Monsieur the burgomaster! Open, open quickly!”

The burgomaster and the counsellor, absolutely astounded, looked at each other speechless.

This passed their comprehension. If the old culverin of the château, which had not been used since 1385, had been let off in the parlour, the dwellers in the Van Tricasse mansion would not have been more dumbfoundered.

Meanwhile, the blows and cries were redoubled. Lotchè, recovering her coolness, had plucked up courage to speak.

“Who is there?”

“It is I! I! I!”

“Who are you?”

“The Commissary Passauf!”

The Commissary Passauf! The very man whose office it had been contemplated to suppress for ten years. What had happened, then? Could the Burgundians have invaded Quiquendone, as they did in the fourteenth century? No event of less importance could have so moved Commissary Passauf, who in no degree yielded the palm to the burgomaster himself for calmness and phlegm.

On a sign from Van Tricasse — for the worthy man could not have articulated a syllable — the bar was pushed back and the door opened.

Commissary Passauf flung himself into the antechamber. One would have thought there was a hurricane.

“What’s the matter, Monsieur the commissary?” asked Lotchè, a brave woman, who did not lose her head under the most trying circumstances.

“What’s the matter!” replied Passauf, whose big round eyes expressed a genuine agitation. “The matter is that I have just come from Doctor Ox’s, who has been holding a reception, and that there — ”

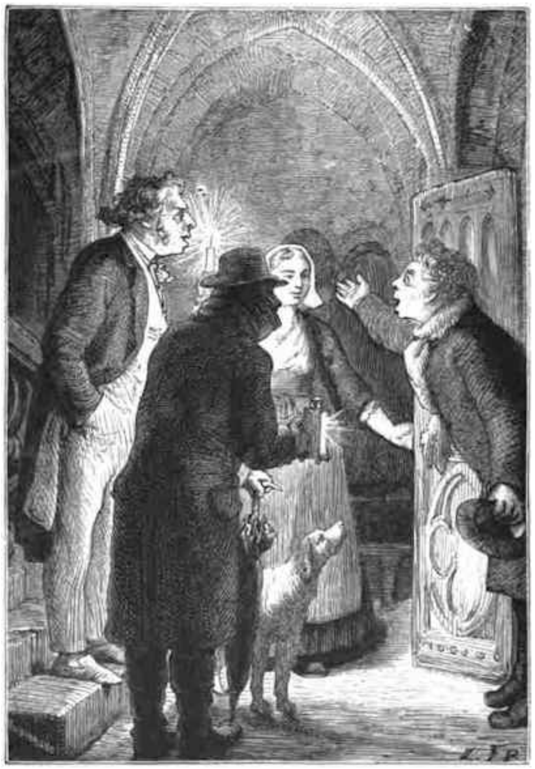

I have just come from Doctor Ox's

"There?"

"There I have witnessed such an altercation as — Monsieur the burgomaster, they have been talking politics!"

"Politics!" repeated Van Tricasse, running his fingers through his wig.

"Politics!" resumed Commissary Passauf, "which has not been done for perhaps a hundred years at Quiquendone. Then the discussion got warm, and the advocate, André Schut, and the doctor, Dominique Custos, became so violent that it may be they will call each other out."

"Call each other out!" cried the counsellor. "A duel! A duel at Quiquendone! And what did Advocate Schut and Doctor Gustos say?"

“Just this: ‘Monsieur advocate,’ said the doctor to his adversary, ‘you go too far, it seems to me, and you do not take sufficient care to control your words!’”

The Burgomaster Van Tricasse clasped his hands — the counsellor turned pale and let his lantern fall — the commissary shook his head. That a phrase so evidently irritating should be pronounced by two of the principal men in the country!

“This Doctor Custos,” muttered Van Tricasse, “is decidedly a dangerous man — a hare-brained fellow! Come, gentlemen!”

On this, Counsellor Niklausse and the commissary accompanied the burgomaster into the parlour.

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH DOCTOR OX REVEALS HIMSELF AS A PHYSIOLOGIST OF THE FIRST RANK, AND AS AN AUDACIOUS EXPERIMENTALIST.

Who, then, was this personage, known by the singular name of Doctor Ox?

An original character for certain, but at the same time a bold savant, a physiologist, whose works were known and highly estimated throughout learned Europe, a happy rival of the Davys, the Daltons, the Bostocks, the Menzies, the Godwins, the Vierordts — of all those noble minds who have placed physiology among the highest of modern sciences.

Doctor Ox was a man of medium size and height, aged — : but we cannot state his age, any more than his nationality. Besides, it matters little; let it suffice that he was a strange personage, impetuous and hot-blooded, a regular oddity out of one of Hoffmann’s volumes, and one who contrasted amusingly enough with the good people of Quiquendone. He had an imperturbable confidence both in himself and in his doctrines. Always smiling, walking with head erect and shoulders thrown back in a free and unconstrained manner, with a steady gaze, large open nostrils, a vast mouth which inhaled the air in liberal draughts, his appearance was far from unpleasing. He was full of animation, well proportioned in all parts of his bodily mechanism, with quicksilver in his veins, and a most elastic step. He could never stop still in one place, and relieved himself with impetuous words and a superabundance of gesticulations.

Was Doctor Ox rich, then, that he should undertake to light a whole town at his expense? Probably, as he permitted himself to indulge in such extravagance, — and this is the only answer we can give to this indiscreet question.

Doctor Ox had arrived at Quiquendone five months before, accompanied by his assistant, who answered to the name of Gédéon Ygène; a tall, dried-up, thin man, haughty, but not less vivacious than his master.

And next, why had Doctor Ox made the proposition to light the town at his own expense? Why had he, of all the Flemings, selected the peaceable Quiquendonians, to endow their town with the benefits of an unheard-of system of lighting? Did he not, under this pretext, design to make some great physiological experiment by operating _in anima vili?_ In short, what was this original personage about to attempt? We know not, as Doctor Ox had no confidant except his assistant Ygène, who, moreover, obeyed him blindly.

In appearance, at least, Doctor Ox had agreed to light the town, which had much need of it, “especially at night,” as Commissary Passauf wittily said. Works for producing a lighting gas had accordingly been established; the gasometers were ready for use, and the main pipes, running beneath the street pavements, would soon appear in the form of burners in the public edifices and the private houses of certain friends of progress. Van Tricasse and Niklausse, in their official capacity, and some other worthies, thought they ought to allow this modern light to be introduced into their dwellings.

If the reader has not forgotten, it was said, during the long conversation of the counsellor and the burgomaster, that the lighting of the town was to be achieved, not by the combustion of common carburetted hydrogen, produced by distilling coal, but by the use of a more modern and twenty-fold more brilliant gas, oxyhydric gas, produced by mixing hydrogen and oxygen.

The doctor, who was an able chemist as well as an ingenious physiologist, knew how to obtain this gas in great quantity and of good quality, not by using manganate of soda, according to the method of M. Tessié du Motay, but by the direct decomposition of slightly acidulated water, by means of a battery made of new elements, invented by himself. Thus there were no costly materials, no platinum, no retorts, no combustibles, no delicate machinery to produce the two gases separately. An electric current was sent through large basins full of water, and the liquid was decomposed into its two constituent parts, oxygen and hydrogen. The oxygen passed off at one end; the hydrogen, of double the volume of its late associate, at the other. As a necessary precaution, they were collected in separate reservoirs, for their mixture would have produced a frightful explosion if it had become ignited. Thence the pipes were to convey them separately to the various burners, which would be so placed as to prevent all chance of explosion. Thus a remarkably brilliant flame would be obtained, whose light would rival the electric light, which, as everybody knows, is, according to Cassellmann’s experiments, equal to that of eleven hundred and seventy-one wax candles, — not one more, nor one less.

It was certain that the town of Quiquendone would, by this liberal contrivance, gain a splendid lighting; but Doctor Ox and his assistant took little account of this, as will be seen in the sequel.

The day after that on which Commissary Passauf had made his noisy entrance into the burgomaster’s parlour, Gédéon Ygène and Doctor Ox were talking in the laboratory which both occupied in common, on the ground-floor of the principal building of the gas-works.

“Well, Ygène, well,” cried the doctor, rubbing his hands. “You saw, at my reception yesterday, the cool-bloodedness of these worthy Quiquendonians. For animation they are midway between sponges and coral! You saw them disputing and irritating each other by voice and gesture? They are already metamorphosed, morally and physically! And this is only the beginning. Wait till we treat them to a big dose!”

“Indeed, master,” replied Ygène, scratching his sharp nose with the end of his forefinger, “the experiment begins well, and if I had not prudently closed the supply-tap, I know not what would have happened.”

“You heard Schut, the advocate, and Custos, the doctor?” resumed Doctor Ox. “The phrase was by no means ill-natured in itself, but, in the mouth of a Quiquendonian, it is worth all the insults which the Homeric heroes hurled at each other before drawing their swords, Ah, these Flemings! You’ll see what we shall do some day!”

“We shall make them ungrateful,” replied Ygène, in the tone of a man who esteems the human race at its just worth.

“Bah!” said the doctor; “what matters it whether they think well or ill of us, so long as our experiment succeeds?”

“Besides,” returned the assistant, smiling with a malicious expression, “is it not to be feared that, in producing such an excitement in their respiratory organs, we shall somewhat injure the lungs of these good people of Quiquendone?”

“So much the worse for them! It is in the interests of science. What would you say if the dogs or frogs refused to lend themselves to the experiments of vivisection?”

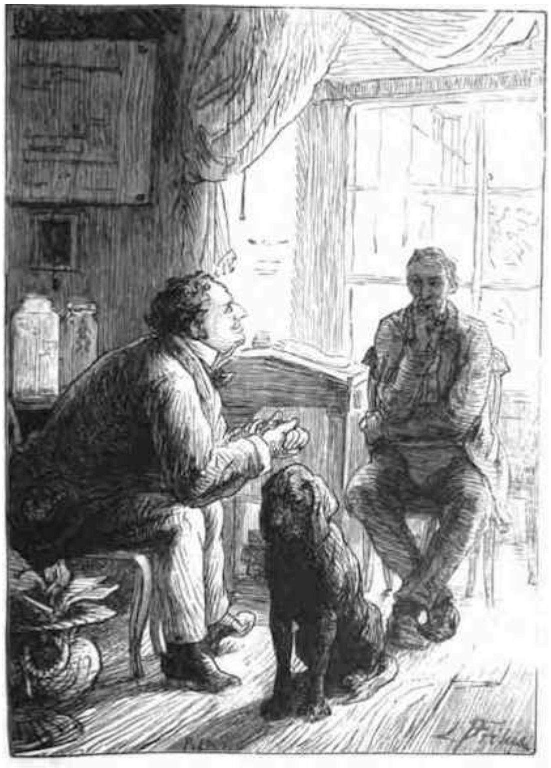

It is in the interests of Science.

It is probable that if the frogs and dogs were consulted, they would offer some objection; but Doctor Ox imagined that he had stated an unanswerable argument, for he heaved a great sigh of satisfaction.

“After all, master, you are right,” replied Ygène, as if quite convinced. “We could not have hit upon better subjects than these people of Quiquendone for our experiment.”

“We — could — not,” said the doctor, slowly articulating each word.

“Have you felt the pulse of any of them?”

“Some hundreds.”

“And what is the average pulsation you found?”

“Not fifty per minute. See — this is a town where there has not been the shadow of a discussion for a century, where the carmen don’t swear, where the coachmen don’t insult each other, where horses don’t run away, where the dogs don’t bite, where the cats don’t scratch, — a town where the police-court has nothing to do from one year’s end to another, — a town where people do not grow enthusiastic about anything, either about art or business, — a town where the gendarmes are a sort of myth, and in which an indictment has not been drawn up for a hundred years, — a town, in short, where for three centuries nobody has struck a blow with his fist or so much as exchanged a slap in the face! You see, Ygène, that this cannot last, and that we must change it all.”

“Perfectly! perfectly!” cried the enthusiastic assistant; “and have you analyzed the air of this town, master?”

“I have not failed to do so. Seventy-nine parts of azote and twenty-one of oxygen, carbonic acid and steam in a variable quantity. These are the ordinary proportions.”

“Good, doctor, good!” replied Ygène. “The experiment will be made on a large scale, and will be decisive.”

“And if it is decisive,” added Doctor Ox triumphantly, “we shall reform the world!”

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH THE BURGOMASTER AND THE COUNSELLOR PAY A VISIT TO DOCTOR OX, AND WHAT FOLLOWS.

The Counsellor Niklausse and the Burgomaster Van Tricasse at last knew what it was to have an agitated night. The grave event which had taken place at Doctor Ox’s house actually kept them awake. What consequences was this affair destined to bring about? They could not imagine. Would it be necessary for them to come to a decision? Would the municipal authority, whom they represented, be compelled to interfere? Would they be obliged to order arrests to be made, that so great a scandal should not be repeated? All these doubts could not but trouble these soft natures; and on that evening, before separating, the two notables had “decided” to see each other the next day.

On the next morning, then, before dinner, the Burgomaster Van Tricasse proceeded in person to the Counsellor Niklausse’s house. He found his friend more calm. He himself had recovered his equanimity.

“Nothing new?” asked Van Tricasse.

“Nothing new since yesterday,” replied Niklausse.

“And the doctor, Dominique Custos?”

“I have not heard anything, either of him or of the advocate, André Schut.”

After an hour’s conversation, which consisted of three remarks which it is needless to repeat, the counsellor and the burgomaster had resolved to pay a visit to Doctor Ox, so as to draw from him, without seeming to do so, some details of the affair.

Contrary to all their habits, after coming to this decision the two notables set about putting it into execution forthwith. They left the house and directed their steps towards Doctor Ox's laboratory, which was situated outside the town, near the Oudenarde gate — the gate whose tower threatened to fall in ruins.

They did not take each other's arms, but walked side by side, with a slow and solemn step, which took them forward but thirteen inches per second. This was, indeed, the ordinary gait of the Quiquendonians, who had never, within the memory of man, seen any one run across the streets of their town.

From time to time the two notables would stop at some calm and tranquil crossway, or at the end of a quiet street, to salute the passers-by.

"Good morning, Monsieur the burgomaster," said one.

"Good morning, my friend," responded Van Tricasse.

"Anything new, Monsieur the counsellor?" asked another.

"Nothing new," answered Niklausse.

But by certain agitated motions and questioning looks, it was evident that the altercation of the evening before was known throughout the town. Observing the direction taken by Van Tricasse, the most obtuse Quiquendonians guessed that the burgomaster was on his way to take some important step. The Custos and Schut affair was talked of everywhere, but the people had not yet come to the point of taking the part of one or the other. The Advocate Schut, having never had occasion to plead in a town where attorneys and bailiffs only existed in tradition, had, consequently, never lost a suit. As for the Doctor Custos, he was an honourable practitioner, who, after the example of his fellow-doctors, cured all the illnesses of his patients, except those of which they died — a habit unhappily acquired by all the members of all the faculties in whatever country they may practise.

On reaching the Oudenarde gate, the counsellor and the burgomaster prudently made a short detour, so as not to pass within reach of the tower, in case it should fall; then they turned and looked at it attentively.

“I think that it will fall,” said Van Tricasse.

“I think so too,” replied Niklausse.

“Unless it is propped up,” added Van Tricasse. “But must it be propped up? That is the question.”

“That is — in fact — the question.”

Some moments after, they reached the door of the gasworks.

“Can we see Doctor Ox?” they asked.

Doctor Ox could always be seen by the first authorities of the town, and they were at once introduced into the celebrated physiologist’s study.

Perhaps the two notables waited for the doctor at least an hour; at least it is reasonable to suppose so, as the burgomaster — a thing that had never before happened in his life — betrayed a certain amount of impatience, from which his companion was not exempt.

Doctor Ox came in at last, and began to excuse himself for having kept them waiting; but he had to approve a plan for the gasometer, rectify some of the machinery — But everything was going on well! The pipes intended for the oxygen were already laid. In a few months the town would be splendidly lighted. The two notables might even now see the orifices of the pipes which were laid on in the laboratory.

Then the doctor begged to know to what he was indebted for the honour of this visit.

“Only to see you, doctor; to see you,” replied Van Tricasse. “It is long since we have had the pleasure. We go abroad but little in our good town of Quiquendone. We count our steps and measure our walks. We are happy when nothing disturbs the uniformity of our habits.”

Niklausse looked at his friend. His friend had never said so much at once — at least, without taking time, and giving long intervals between his sentences. It seemed to him that Van Tricasse expressed himself with a certain volubility, which was by no means common with him. Niklausse himself experienced a kind of irresistible desire to talk.

As for Doctor Ox, he looked at the burgomaster with sly attention.

Van Tricasse, who never argued until he had snugly ensconced himself in a spacious armchair, had risen to his feet. I know not what nervous excitement, quite foreign to his temperament, had taken possession of him. He did not gesticulate as yet, but this could not be far off. As for the counsellor, he rubbed his legs, and breathed with slow and long gasps. His look became animated little by little, and he had “decided” to support at all hazards, if need be, his trusty friend the burgomaster.

Van Tricasse got up and took several steps; then he came back, and stood facing the doctor.

“And in how many months,” he asked in a somewhat emphatic tome, “do you say that your work will be finished?”

“In three or four months, Monsieur the burgomaster,” replied Doctor Ox.

“Three or four months, — it’s a very long time!” said Van Tricasse.

“Altogether too long!” added Niklausse, who, not being able to keep his seat, rose also.

“This lapse of time is necessary to complete our work,” returned Doctor Ox. “The workmen, whom we have had to choose in Quiquendone, are not very expeditious.”

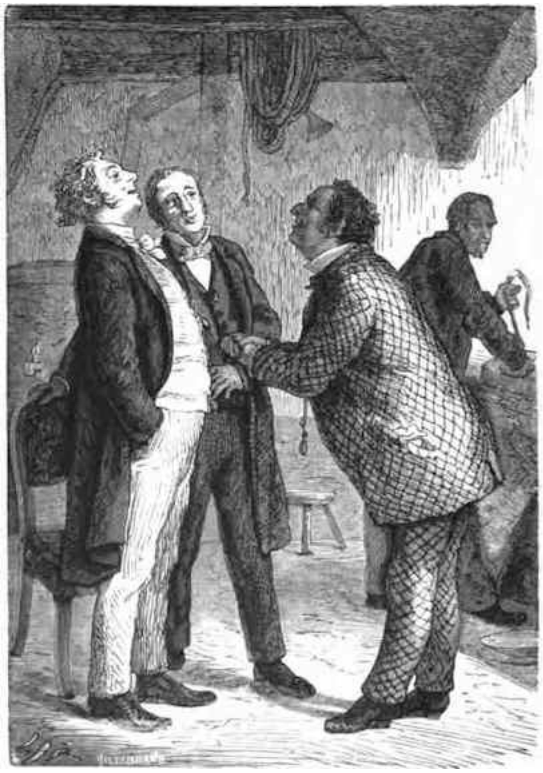

“The workmen, whom we have had to choose in Quiquendone, are not very expeditious.”

“How not expeditious?” cried the burgomaster, who seemed to take the remark as personally offensive.

“No, Monsieur Van Tricasse,” replied Doctor Ox obstinately. “A French workman would do in a day what it takes ten of your workmen to do; you know, they are regular Flemings!”

“Flemings!” cried the counsellor, whose fingers closed together. “In what sense, sir, do you use that word?”

“Why, in the amiable sense in which everybody uses it,” replied Doctor Ox, smiling.

“Ah, but doctor,” said the burgomaster, pacing up and down the room, “I don’t like these insinuations. The workmen of Quiquendone are as efficient as those of any other town in the world, you must know; and we shall go neither to Paris nor London for our models! As for your project, I beg you to hasten its execution. Our streets have been unpaved for the putting down of your conduit-pipes, and it is a hindrance to traffic. Our trade will begin to suffer, and I, being the responsible authority, do not propose to incur reproaches which will be but too just.”

Worthy burgomaster! He spoke of trade, of traffic, and the wonder was that those words, to which he was quite unaccustomed, did not scorch his lips. What could be passing in his mind?

“Besides,” added Niklausse, “the town cannot be deprived of light much longer.”

“But,” urged Doctor Ox, “a town which has been un-lighted for eight or nine hundred years — ”

“All the more necessary is it,” replied the burgomaster, emphasizing his words. “Times alter, manners alter! The world advances, and we do not wish to remain behind. We desire our streets to be lighted within a month, or you must pay a large indemnity for each day of delay; and what would happen if, amid the darkness, some affray should take place?”

“No doubt,” cried Niklausse. “It requires but a spark to inflame a Fleming! Fleming! Flame!”

“Apropos of this,” said the burgomaster, interrupting his friend, “Commissary Passauf, our chief of police, reports to us that a discussion took place in your drawing-room last evening, Doctor Ox. Was he wrong in declaring that it was a political discussion?”

“By no means, Monsieur the burgomaster,” replied Doctor Ox, who with difficulty repressed a sigh of satisfaction.

“So an altercation did take place between Dominique Gustos and André Schut?”

“Yes, counsellor; but the words which passed were not of grave import.”

“Not of grave import!” cried the burgomaster. “Not of grave import, when one man tells another that he does not measure the effect of his words! But of what stuff are you made, monsieur? Do you not know that in Quiquendone nothing more is needed to bring about extremely disastrous results? But monsieur, if you, or any one else, presume to speak thus to me — ”

“Or to me,” added Niklausse.

As they pronounced these words with a menacing air, the two notables, with folded arms and bristling air, confronted Doctor Ox, ready to do him some violence, if by a gesture, or even the expression of his eye, he manifested any intention of contradicting them.

But the doctor did not budge.

“At all events, monsieur,” resumed the burgomaster, “I propose to hold you responsible for what passes in your house. I am bound to insure the tranquillity of this town, and I do not wish it to be disturbed. The events of last evening must not be repeated, or I shall do my duty, sir! Do you hear? Then reply, sir.”

The burgomaster, as he spoke, under the influence of extraordinary excitement, elevated his voice to the pitch of anger. He was furious, the worthy Van Tricasse, and might certainly be heard outside. At last, beside himself, and seeing that Doctor Ox did not reply to his challenge, “Come, Niklausse,” said he.

And, slamming the door with a violence which shook the house, the burgomaster drew his friend after him.

Little by little, when they had taken twenty steps on their road, the worthy notables grew more calm. Their pace slackened, their gait became less feverish. The flush on their faces faded away; from being crimson, they became rosy. A quarter of an hour after quitting the gasworks, Van Tricasse said softly to Niklausse, “An amiable man, Doctor Ox! It is always a pleasure to see him!”

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH FRANTZ NIKLAUSSE AND SUZEL VAN TRICASSE FORM CERTAIN PROJECTS FOR THE FUTURE.

Our readers know that the burgomaster had a daughter, Suzel But, shrewd as they may be, they cannot have divined that the counsellor Niklausse had a son, Frantz; and had they divined this, nothing could have led them to imagine that Frantz was the betrothed lover of Suzel. We will add that these young people were made for each other, and that they loved each other, as folks did love at Quiquendone.

It must not be thought that young hearts did not beat in this exceptional place; only they beat with a certain deliberation. There were marriages there, as in every other town in the world; but they took time about it. Betrothed couples, before engaging in these terrible bonds, wished to study each other; and these studies lasted at least ten years, as at college. It was rare that any one was "accepted" before this lapse of time.

Yes, ten years! The courtships last ten years! And is it, after all, too long, when the being bound for life is in consideration? One studies ten years to become an engineer or physician, an advocate or attorney, and should less time be spent in acquiring the knowledge to make a good husband? Is it not reasonable? and, whether due to temperament or reason with them, the Quiquendonians seem to us to be in the right in thus prolonging their courtship. When marriages in other more lively and excitable cities are seen taking place within a few months, we must shrug our shoulders, and hasten to send our boys to the schools and our daughters to the *pensions* of Quiquendone.

For half a century but a single marriage was known to have taken place after the lapse of two years only of courtship, and that turned out badly!

Frantz Niklausse, then, loved Suzel Van Tricasse, but quietly, as a man would love when he has ten years before him in which to obtain the beloved object. Once every week, at an hour agreed upon, Frantz went to fetch Suzel, and took a walk with her along the banks of the Vaar. He took good care to carry his fishing-tackle, and Suzel never forgot her canvas, on which her pretty hands embroidered the most unlikely flowers.

Frantz was a young man of twenty-two, whose cheeks betrayed a soft, peachy down, and whose voice had scarcely a compass of one octave.

As for Suzel, she was blonde and rosy. She was seventeen, and did not dislike fishing. A singular occupation this, however, which forces you to struggle craftily with a barbel. But Frantz loved it; the pastime was congenial to his temperament. As patient as possible, content to follow with his rather dreamy eye the cork which bobbed on the top of the water, he knew how to wait; and when, after sitting for six hours, a modest barbel, taking pity on him, consented at last to be caught, he was happy — but he knew how to control his emotion.

On this day the two lovers — one might say, the two betrothed — were seated upon the verdant bank. The limpid Vaar murmured a few feet below them. Suzel quietly drew her needle across the canvas. Frantz automatically carried his line from left to right, then permitted it to descend the current from right to left. The fish made capricious rings in the water, which crossed each other around the cork, while the hook hung useless near the bottom.

From time to time Frantz would say, without raising his eyes, —

“I think I have a bite, Suzel.”

“Do you think so, Frantz?” replied Suzel, who, abandoning her work for an instant, followed her lover’s line with earnest eye.

“N-no,” resumed Frantz; “I thought I felt a little twitch; I was mistaken.”

“You *will* have a bite, Frantz,” replied Suzel, in her pure, soft voice. “But do not forget to strike at the right moment. You are always a few seconds too late, and the barbel takes advantage to escape.”

“Would you like to take my line, Suzel?”

“Willingly, Frantz.”

“Then give me your canvas. We shall see whether I am more adroit with the needle than with the hook.”

And the young girl took the line with trembling hand, while her swain plied the needle across the stitches of the embroidery. For hours together they thus exchanged soft words, and their hearts palpitated when the cork bobbed on the water. Ah, could they ever forget those charming hours, during which, seated side by side, they listened to the murmurs of the river?

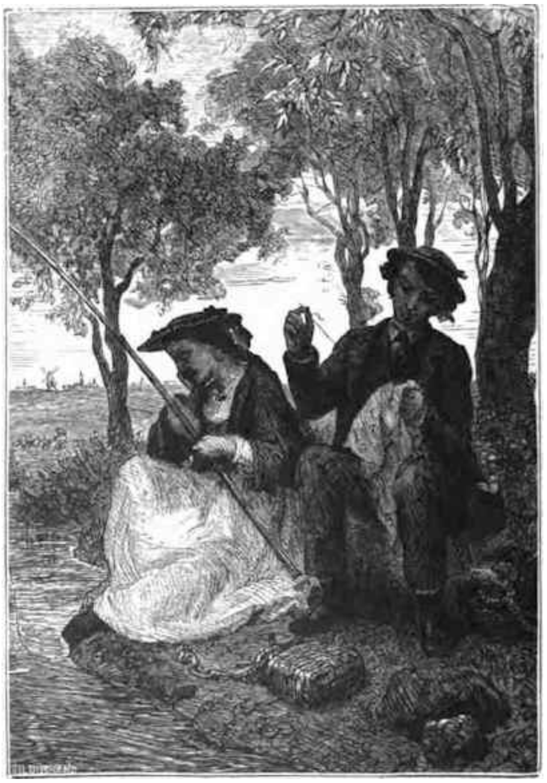

the young girl took the line

The sun was fast approaching the western horizon, and despite the combined skill of Suzel and Frantz, there had not been a bite. The barbels had not shown themselves complacent, and seemed to scoff at the two young people, who were too just to bear them malice.

“We shall be more lucky another time, Frantz,” said Suzel, as the young angler put up his still virgin hook.

“Let us hope so,” replied Frantz.

Then walking side by side, they turned their steps towards the house, without exchanging a word, as mute as their shadows which stretched out before them. Suzel became very, very tall under the oblique rays of the setting sun. Frantz appeared very, very thin, like the long rod which he held in his hand.

They reached the burgomaster’s house. Green tufts of grass bordered the shining pavement, and no one would have thought of tearing them away, for they deadened the noise made by the passers-by.

As they were about to open the door, Frantz thought it his duty to say to Suzel, —

“You know, Suzel, the great day is approaching?”

“It is indeed, Frantz,” replied the young girl, with downcast eyes.

“Yes,” said Frantz, “in five or six years — ”

“Good-bye, Frantz,” said Suzel.

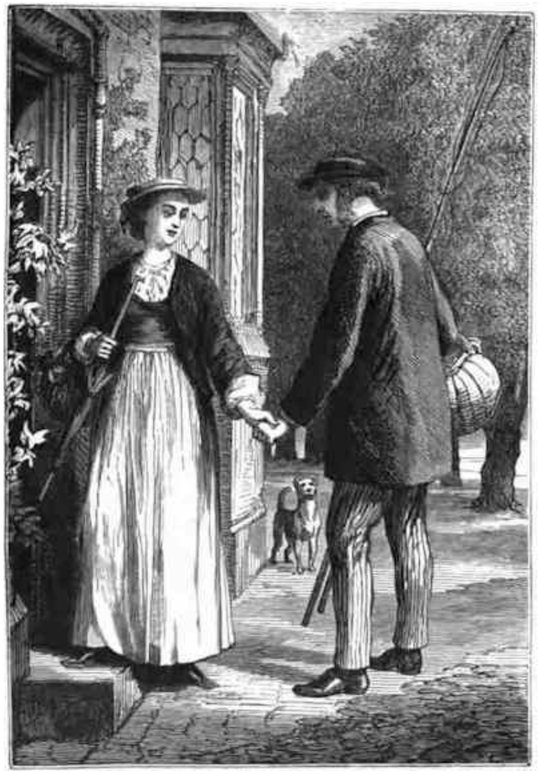

“Good-bye, Frantz,” said Suzel.

“Good-bye, Suzel,” replied Frantz.

And, after the door had been closed, the young man resumed the way to his father’s house with a calm and equal pace.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH THE ANDANTES BECOME ALLEGROS, AND THE ALLEGROS VIVACES.

The agitation caused by the Schut and Custos affair had subsided. The affair led to no serious consequences. It appeared likely that Quiquendone would return to its habitual apathy, which that unexpected event had for a moment disturbed.

Meanwhile, the laying of the pipes destined to conduct the oxyhydric gas into the principal edifices of the town was proceeding rapidly. The main pipes and branches gradually crept beneath the pavements. But the burners were still wanting; for, as it required delicate skill to make them, it was necessary that they should be fabricated abroad. Doctor Ox was here, there, and everywhere; neither he nor Ygène, his assistant, lost a moment, but they urged on the workmen, completed the delicate mechanism of the gasometer, fed day and night the immense piles which decomposed the water under the influence of a powerful electric current. Yes, the doctor was already making his gas, though the pipe-laying was not yet done; a fact which, between ourselves, might have seemed a little singular. But before long, — at least there was reason to hope so, — before long Doctor Ox would inaugurate the splendours of his invention in the theatre of the town.

For Quiquendone possessed a theatre — a really fine edifice, in truth — the interior and exterior arrangement of which combined every style of architecture. It was at once Byzantine, Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, with semicircular doors, Pointed windows, Flamboyant rose-windows, fantastic bell-turrets, — in a word, a specimen of all sorts, half a Parthenon, half a Parisian Grand Café. Nor was this surprising, the theatre having been commenced under the burgomaster Ludwig Van Tricasse, in 1175, and only finished in 1837, under the burgomaster Natalis Van Tricasse. It had required seven hundred years to build it, and it had, been successively adapted to the architectural style in vogue in each period. But for all that it was an imposing structure; the Roman pillars and Byzantine arches of which would appear to advantage lit up by the oxyhydric gas.

Pretty well everything was acted at the theatre of Quiquendone; but the opera and the opera comique were especially patronized. It must, however, be added that the composers would never have recognized their own works, so entirely changed were the "movements" of the music.

In short, as nothing was done in a hurry at Quiquendone, the dramatic pieces had to be performed in harmony with the peculiar temperament of the Quiquendonians. Though the doors of the theatre were regularly thrown open at four o'clock and closed again at ten, it had never been known that more than two acts were played during the six intervening hours. "Robert le Diable," "Les Huguenots," or "Guillaume Tell" usually took up three evenings, so slow was the execution of these masterpieces. The *vivaces*, at the theatre of Quiquendone, lagged like real *adagios*. The *allegros* were "long-drawn out" indeed. The demisemiquavers were scarcely equal to the ordinary semibreves of other countries. The most rapid runs, performed according to Quiquendonian taste, had the solemn march of a chant. The gayest shakes were languishing and measured, that they might not shock the ears of the *dilettanti*. To give an example, the rapid air sung by Figaro, on his entrance in the first act of "Le Barbiér de Séville," lasted fifty-eight minutes — when the actor was particularly enthusiastic.

Artists from abroad, as might be supposed, were forced to conform themselves to Quiquendonian fashions; but as they were well paid, they did not complain, and willingly obeyed the leader’s baton, which never beat more than eight measures to the minute in the *allegros*.

But what applause greeted these artists, who enchanted without ever wearying the audiences of Quiquendone! All hands clapped one after another at tolerably long intervals, which the papers characterized as “frantic applause;” and sometimes nothing but the lavish prodigality with which mortar and stone had been used in the twelfth century saved the roof of the hall from falling in.

Besides, the theatre had only one performance a week, that these enthusiastic Flemish folk might not be too much excited; and this enabled the actors to study their parts more thoroughly, and the spectators to digest more at leisure the beauties of the masterpieces brought out.

Such had long been the drama at Quiquendone. Foreign artists were in the habit of making engagements with the director of the town, when they wanted to rest after their exertions in other scenes; and it seemed as if nothing could ever change these inveterate customs, when, a fortnight after the Schut-Custos affair, an unlooked-for incident occurred to throw the population into fresh agitation.

It was on a Saturday, an opera day. It was not yet intended, as may well be supposed, to inaugurate the new illumination. No; the pipes had reached the hall, but, for reasons indicated above, the burners had not yet been placed, and the wax-candles still shed their soft light upon the numerous spectators who filled the theatre. The doors had been opened to the public at one o’clock, and by three the hall was half full. A queue had at one time been formed, which extended as far as the end of the Place Saint Ernuph, in front of the shop of Josse Lietrinck the apothecary. This eagerness was significant of an unusually attractive performance.

“Are you going to the theatre this evening?” inquired the counsellor the same morning of the burgomaster.

“I shall not fail to do so,” returned Van Tricasse, “and I shall take Madame Van Tricasse, as well as our daughter Suzel and our dear Tatanémance, who all dote on good music.”

“Mademoiselle Suzel is going then?”

“Certainly, Niklausse.”

“Then my son Frantz will be one of the first to arrive,” said Niklausse.

“A spirited boy, Niklausse,” replied the burgomaster sententiously; “but hot-headed! He will require watching!”

“He loves, Van Tricasse, — he loves your charming Suzel.”

“Well, Niklausse, he shall marry her. Now that we have agreed on this marriage, what more can he desire?”

“He desires nothing, Van Tricasse, the dear boy! But, in short — we’ll say no more about it — he will not be the last to get his ticket at the box-office.”

“Ah, vivacious and ardent youth!” replied the burgomaster, recalling his own past. “We have also been thus, my worthy counsellor! We have loved — we too! We have danced attendance in our day! Till to-night, then, till to-night! By-the-bye, do you know this Fiovaranti is a great artist? And what a welcome he has received among us! It will be long before he will forget the applause of Quiquendone!”

The tenor Fiovaranti was, indeed, going to sing; Fiovaranti, who, by his talents as a virtuoso, his perfect method, his melodious voice, provoked a real enthusiasm among the lovers of music in the town.

For three weeks Fiovaranti had been achieving a brilliant success in “Les Huguenots.” The first act, interpreted according to the taste of the Quiquendonians, had occupied an entire evening of the first week of the month. — Another evening in the second week, prolonged by infinite *andantes*, had elicited for the celebrated singer a real ovation. His success had been still more marked in the third act of Meyerbeer’s masterpiece. But now Fiovaranti was to appear in the fourth act, which was to be performed on this evening before an impatient public. Ah, the duet between Raoul and Valentine, that pathetic love-song for two voices, that strain so full of *crescendos*, *stringendos*, and *piu crescendos* — all this, sung slowly, compendiously, interminably! Ah, how delightful!

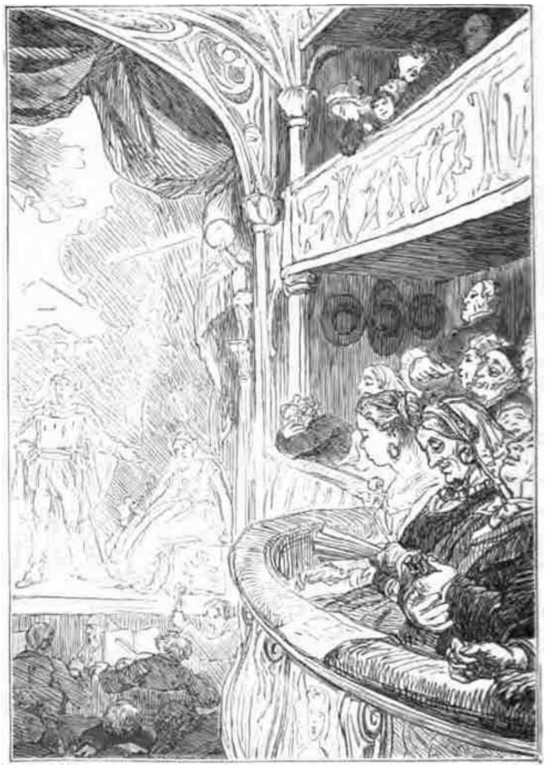

Fiovaranti had been achieving a brilliant success in “Les Huguenots.”

At four o’clock the hall was full. The boxes, the orchestra, the pit, were overflowing. In the front stalls sat the Burgomaster Van Tricasse, Mademoiselle Van Tricasse, Madame Van Tricasse, and the amiable Tatanémance in a green bonnet; not far off were the Counsellor Niklausse and his family, not forgetting the amorous Frantz. The families of Custos the doctor, of Schut the advocate, of Honoré Syntax the chief judge, of Norbet Sontman the insurance director, of the banker Collaert, gone mad on German music, and himself somewhat of an amateur, and the teacher Rupp, and the master of the academy, Jerome Resh, and the civil commissary, and so many other notabilities of the town that they could not be enumerated here without wearying the reader’s patience, were visible in different parts of the hall.

It was customary for the Quiquendonians, while awaiting the rise of the curtain, to sit silent, some reading the paper, others whispering low to each other, some making their way to their seats slowly and noiselessly, others casting timid looks towards the bewitching beauties in the galleries.

But on this evening a looker-on might have observed that, even before the curtain rose, there was unusual animation among the audience. People were restless who were never known to be restless before. The ladies’ fans fluttered with abnormal rapidity. All appeared to be inhaling air of exceptional stimulating power. Every one breathed more freely. The eyes of some became unwontedly bright, and seemed to give forth a light equal to that of the candles, which themselves certainly threw a more brilliant light over the hall. It was evident that people saw more clearly, though the number of candles had not been increased. Ah, if Doctor Ox’s experiment were being tried! But it was not being tried, as yet.

The musicians of the orchestra at last took their places. The first violin had gone to the stand to give a modest la to his colleagues. The stringed instruments, the wind instruments, the drums and cymbals, were in accord. The conductor only waited the sound of the bell to beat the first bar.

The bell sounds. The fourth act begins. The *allegro appassionato* of the inter-act is played as usual, with a majestic deliberation which would have made Meyerbeer frantic, and all the majesty of which was appreciated by the Quiquendonian dilettanti.

But soon the leader perceived that he was no longer master of his musicians. He found it difficult to restrain them, though usually so obedient and calm. The wind instruments betrayed a tendency to hasten the movements, and it was necessary to hold them back with a firm hand, for they would otherwise outstrip the stringed instruments; which, from a musical point of view, would have been disastrous. The bassoon himself, the son of Josse Lietrinck the apothecary, a well-bred young man, seemed to lose his self-control.

Meanwhile Valentine has begun her recitative, "I am alone," etc.; but she hurries it.

The leader and all his musicians, perhaps unconsciously, follow her in her *cantabile*, which should be taken deliberately, like a 12/8 as it is. When Raoul appears at the door at the bottom of the stage, between the moment when Valentine goes to him and that when she conceals herself in the chamber at the side, a quarter of an hour does not elapse; while formerly, according to the traditions of the Quiquendone theatre, this recitative of thirty-seven bars was wont to last just thirty-seven minutes.

Saint Bris, Nevers, Cavannes, and the Catholic nobles have appeared, somewhat prematurely, perhaps, upon the scene. The composer has marked *allergo pomposo* on the score. The orchestra and the lords proceed *allegro* indeed, but not at all *pomposo*, and at the chorus, in the famous scene of the "benediction of the poniards," they no longer keep to the enjoined *allegro*. Singers and musicians broke away impetuously. The leader does not even attempt to restrain them. Nor do the public protest; on the contrary, the people find themselves carried away, and see that they are involved in the movement, and that the movement responds to the impulses of their souls.

"Will you, with me, deliver the land,

From troubles increasing, an impious band?"

They promise, they swear. Nevers has scarcely time to protest, and to sing that "among his ancestors were many soldiers, but never an assassin." He is arrested. The police and the aldermen rush forward and rapidly swear "to strike all at once." Saint Bris shouts the recitative which summons the Catholics to vengeance. The three monks, with white scarfs, hasten in by the door at the back of Nevers's room, without making any account of the stage directions, which enjoin on them to advance slowly. Already all the artists have drawn sword or poniard, which the three monks bless in a trice. The soprani tenors, bassos, attack the *allegro furioso* with cries of rage, and of a dramatic 6/8 time they make it 6/8 quadrille time. Then they rush out, bellowing, —

"At midnight,

Noiselessly,

God wills it,

Yes,

At midnight.”

At this moment the audience start to their feet. Everybody is agitated — in the boxes, the pit, the galleries. It seems as if the spectators are about to rush upon the stage, the Burgomaster Van Tricasse at their head, to join with the conspirators and annihilate the Huguenots, whose religious opinions, however, they share. They applaud, call before the curtain, make loud acclamations! Tatanémance grasps her bonnet with feverish hand. The candles throw out a lurid glow of light.

Raoul, instead of slowly raising the curtain, tears it apart with a superb gesture and finds himself confronting Valentine.

At last! It is the grand duet, and it starts off *allegro vivace*. Raoul does not wait for Valentine’s pleading, and Valentine does not wait for Raoul’s responses.

The fine passage beginning, “Danger is passing, time is flying,” becomes one of those rapid airs which have made Offenbach famous, when he composes a dance for conspirators. The *andante amoroso,* “Thou hast said it, aye, thou lovest me,” becomes a real *vivace furioso,* and the violoncello ceases to imitate the inflections of the singer’s voice, as indicated in the composer’s score. In vain Raoul cries, “Speak on, and prolong the ineffable slumber of my soul.” Valentine cannot “prolong.” It is evident that an unaccustomed fire devours her. Her *b’s* and her *c’s* above the stave were dreadfully shrill. He struggles, he gesticulates, he is all in a glow.

The alarum is heard; the bell resounds; but what a panting bell! The bell-ringer has evidently lost his self-control. It is a frightful tocsin, which violently struggles against the fury of the orchestra.

Finally the air which ends this magnificent act, beginning, “No more love, no more intoxication, O the remorse that oppresses me!” which the composer marks *allegro con moto*, becomes a wild *prestissimo*. You would say an express-train was whirling by. The alarum resounds again. Valentine falls fainting. Raoul precipitates himself from the window.

It was high time. The orchestra, really intoxicated, could not have gone on. The leader’s baton is no longer anything but a broken stick on the prompter’s box. The violin strings are broken, and their necks twisted. In his fury the drummer has burst his drum. The counter-bassist has perched on the top of his musical monster. The first clarionet has swallowed the reed of his instrument, and the second hautboy is chewing his reed keys. The groove of the trombone is strained, and finally the unhappy cornist cannot withdraw his hand from the bell of his horn, into which he had thrust it too far.

And the audience! The audience, panting, all in a heat, gesticulates and howls. All the faces are as red as if a fire were burning within their bodies. They crowd each other, hustle each other to get out — the men without hats, the women without mantles! They elbow each other in the corridors, crush between the doors, quarrel, fight! There are no longer any officials, any burgomaster. All are equal amid this infernal frenzy!

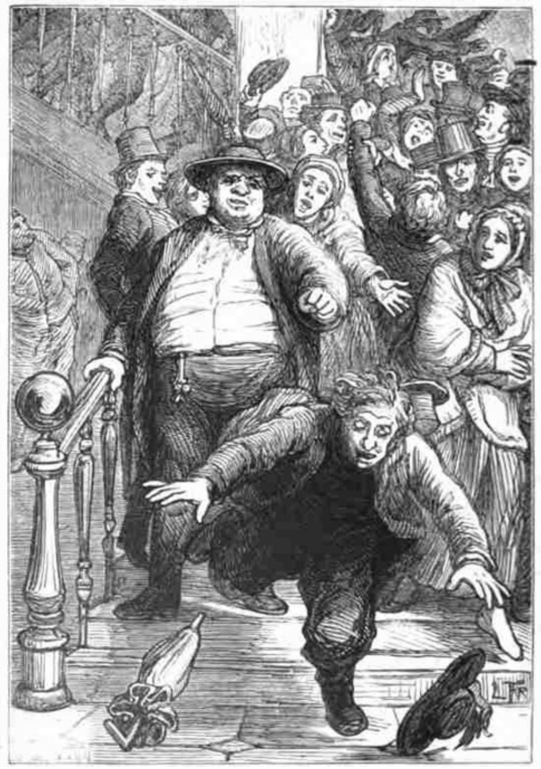

They hustle each other to get out

Some moments after, when all have reached the street, each one resumes his habitual tranquillity, and peaceably enters his house, with a confused remembrance of what he has just experienced.

The fourth act of the “Huguenots,” which formerly lasted six hours, began, on this evening at half-past four, and ended at twelve minutes before five.

It had only lasted eighteen minutes!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH THE ANCIENT AND SOLEMN GERMAN WALTZ BECOMES A WHIRLWIND.

But if the spectators, on leaving the theatre, resumed their customary calm, if they quietly regained their homes, preserving only a sort of passing stupefaction, they had none the less undergone a remarkable exaltation, and overcome and weary as if they had committed some excess of dissipation, they fell heavily upon their beds.

The next day each Quiquendonian had a kind of recollection of what had occurred the evening before. One missed his hat, lost in the hubbub; another a coat-flap, torn in the brawl; one her delicately fashioned shoe, another her best mantle. Memory returned to these worthy people, and with it a certain shame for their unjustifiable agitation. It seemed to them an orgy in which they were the unconscious heroes and heroines. They did not speak of it; they did not wish to think of it. But the most astounded personage in the town was Van Tricasse the burgomaster.

The next morning, on waking, he could not find his wig. Lotchè looked everywhere for it, but in vain. The wig had remained on the field of battle. As for having it publicly claimed by Jean Mistrol, the town-crier, — no, it would not do. It were better to lose the wig than to advertise himself thus, as he had the honour to be the first magistrate of Quiquendone.

The worthy Van Tricasse was reflecting upon this, extended beneath his sheets, with bruised body, heavy head, furred tongue, and burning breast. He felt no desire to get up; on the contrary; and his brain worked more during this morning than it had probably worked before for forty years. The worthy magistrate recalled to his mind all the incidents of the incomprehensible performance. He connected them with the events which had taken place shortly before at Doctor Ox's reception. He tried to discover the causes of the singular excitability which, on two occasions, had betrayed itself in the best citizens of the town.

"What *can* be going on?" he asked himself. "What giddy spirit has taken possession of my peaceable town of Quiquendone? Are we about to go mad, and must we make the town one vast asylum? For yesterday we were all there, notables, counsellors, judges, advocates, physicians, schoolmasters; and ail, if my memory serves me, — all of us were assailed by this excess of furious folly! But what was there in that infernal music? It is inexplicable! Yet I certainly ate or drank nothing which could put me into such a state. No; yesterday I had for dinner a slice of overdone veal, several spoonfuls of spinach with sugar, eggs, and a little beer and water, — that couldn't get into my head! No! There is something that I cannot explain, and as, after all, I am responsible for the conduct of the citizens, I will have an investigation."

But the investigation, though decided upon by the municipal council, produced no result. If the facts were clear, the causes escaped the sagacity of the magistrates. Besides, tranquillity had been restored in the public mind, and with tranquillity, forgetfulness of the strange scenes of the theatre. The newspapers avoided speaking of them, and the account of the performance which appeared in the "Quiquendone Memorial," made no allusion to this intoxication of the entire audience.

Meanwhile, though the town resumed its habitual phlegm, and became apparently Flemish as before, it was observable that, at bottom, the character and temperament of the people changed little by little. One might have truly said, with Dominique Custos, the doctor, that “their nerves were affected.”

Let us explain. This undoubted change only took place under certain conditions. When the Quiquendonians passed through the streets of the town, walked in the squares or along the Vaar, they were always the cold and methodical people of former days. So, too, when they remained at home, some working with their hands and others with their heads, — these doing nothing, those thinking nothing, — their private life was silent, inert, vegetating as before. No quarrels, no household squabbles, no acceleration in the beating of the heart, no excitement of the brain. The mean of their pulsations remained as it was of old, from fifty to fifty-two per minute.

But, strange and inexplicable phenomenon though it was, which would have defied the sagacity of the most ingenious physiologists of the day, if the inhabitants of Quiquendone did not change in their home life, they were visibly changed in their civil life and in their relations between man and man, to which it leads.

If they met together in some public edifice, it did not “work well,” as Commissary Passauf expressed it. On ‘change, at the town-hall, in the amphitheatre of the academy, at the sessions of the council, as well as at the reunions of the *savants*, a strange excitement seized the assembled citizens. Their relations with each other became embarrassing before they had been together an hour. In two hours the discussion degenerated into an angry dispute. Heads became heated, and personalities were used. Even at church, during the sermon, the faithful could not listen to Van Stabel, the minister, in patience, and he threw himself about in the pulpit and lectured his flock with far more than his usual severity. At last this state of things brought about altercations more grave, alas! than that between Gustos and Schut, and if they did not require the interference of the authorities, it was because the antagonists, after returning home, found there, with its calm, forgetfulness of the offences offered and received.

This peculiarity could not be observed by these minds, which were absolutely incapable of recognizing what was passing in them. One person only in the town, he whose office the council had thought of suppressing for thirty years, Michael Passauf, had remarked that this excitement, which was absent from private houses, quickly revealed itself in public edifices; and he asked himself, not without a certain anxiety, what would happen if this infection should ever develop itself in the family mansions, and if the epidemic — this was the word he used — should extend through the streets of the town. Then there would be no more forgetfulness of insults, no more tranquillity, no intermission in the delirium; but a permanent inflammation, which would inevitably bring the Quiquendonians into collision with each other.

“What would happen then?” Commissary Passauf asked himself in terror. “How could these furious savages be arrested? How check these goaded temperaments? My office would be no longer a sinecure, and the council would be obliged to double my salary — unless it should arrest me myself, for disturbing the public peace!”

These very reasonable fears began to be realized. The infection spread from ‘change, the theatre, the church, the town-hall, the academy, the market, into private houses, and that in less than a fortnight after the terrible performance of the “Huguenots.”

Its first symptoms appeared in the house of Collaert, the banker.

That wealthy personage gave a ball, or at least a dancing-party, to the notabilities of the town. He had issued, some months before, a loan of thirty thousand francs, three quarters of which had been subscribed; and to celebrate this financial success, he had opened his drawing-rooms, and given a party to his fellow-citizens.

Everybody knows that Flemish parties are innocent and tranquil enough, the principal expense of which is usually in beer and syrups. Some conversation on the weather, the appearance of the crops, the fine condition of the gardens, the care of flowers, and especially of tulips; a slow and measured dance, from time to time, perhaps a minuet; sometimes a waltz, but one of those German waltzes which achieve a turn and a half per minute, and during which the dancers hold each other as far apart as their arms will permit, — such is the usual fashion of the balls attended by the aristocratic society of Quiquendone. The polka, after being altered to four time, had tried to become accustomed to it; but the dancers always lagged behind the orchestra, no matter how slow the measure, and it had to be abandoned.

These peaceable reunions, in which the youths and maidens enjoyed an honest and moderate pleasure, had never been attended by any outburst of ill-nature. Why, then, on this evening at Collaert the banker's, did the syrups seem to be transformed into heady wines, into sparkling champagne, into heating punches? Why, towards the middle of the evening, did a sort of mysterious intoxication take possession of the guests? Why did the minuet become a jig? Why did the orchestra hurry with its harmonies? Why did the candles, just as at the theatre, burn with unwonted refulgence? What electric current invaded the banker's drawing-rooms? How happened it that the couples held each other so closely, and clasped each other's hands so convulsively, that the "cavaliers seuls" made themselves conspicuous by certain extraordinary steps in that figure usually so grave, so solemn, so majestic, so very proper?

Alas! what OEdipus could have answered these unsolvable questions? Commissary Passauf, who was present at the party, saw the storm coming distinctly, but he could not control it or fly from it, and he felt a kind of intoxication entering his own brain. All his physical and emotional faculties increased in intensity. He was seen, several times, to throw himself upon the confectionery and devour the dishes, as if he had just broken a long fast.

The animation of the ball was increasing all this while. A long murmur, like a dull buzzing, escaped from all breasts. They danced — really danced. The feet were agitated by increasing frenzy. The faces became as purple as those of Silenus. The eyes shone like carbuncles. The general fermentation rose to the highest pitch.

And when the orchestra thundered out the waltz in “Der Freyschütz,” — when this waltz, so German, and with a movement so slow, was attacked with wild arms by the musicians, — ah! it was no longer a waltz, but an insensate whirlwind, a giddy rotation, a gyration worthy of being led by some Mephistopheles, beating the measure with a firebrand! Then a galop, an infernal galop, which lasted an hour without any one being able to stop it, whirled off, in its windings, across the halls, the drawing-rooms, the antechambers, by the staircases, from the cellar to the garret of the opulent mansion, the young men and young girls, the fathers and mothers, people of every age, of every weight, of both sexes; Collaert, the fat banker, and Madame Collaert, and the counsellors, and the magistrates, and the chief justice, and Niklausse, and Madame Van Tricasse, and the Burgomaster Van Tricasse, and the Commissary Passauf himself, who never could recall afterwards who had been his partner on that terrible evening.

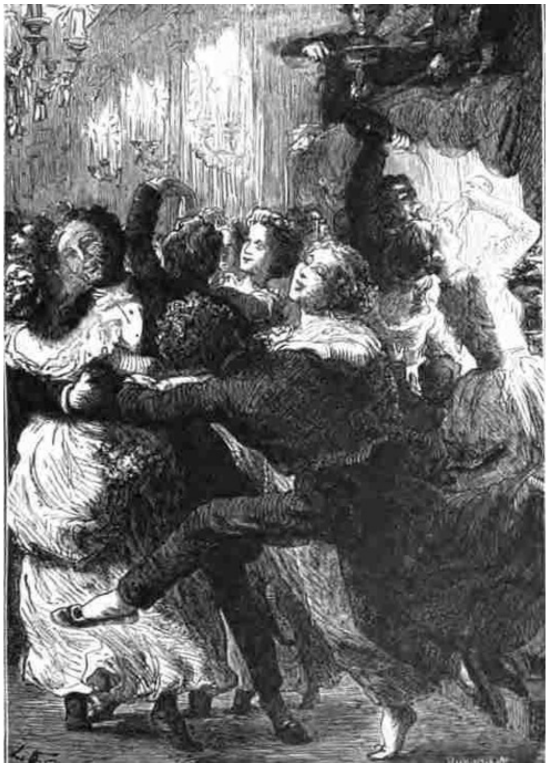

it was no longer a waltz

But she did not forget! And ever since that day she has seen in her dreams the fiery commissary, enfolding her in an impassioned embrace! And “she” — was the amiable Tatanémance!

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH DOCTOR OX AND YGÈNE, HIS ASSISTANT, SAY A FEW WORDS.

“Well, Ygène?”

“Well, master, all is ready. The laying of the pipes is finished.”

“At last! Now, then, we are going to operate on a large scale, on the masses!”

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH IT WILL BE SEEN THAT THE EPIDEMIC INVADES THE ENTIRE TOWN, AND WHAT EFFECT IT PRODUCES.

During the following months the evil, in place of subsiding, became more extended. From private houses the epidemic spread into the streets. The town of Quiquendone was no longer to be recognized.

A phenomenon yet stranger than those which had already happened, now appeared; not only the animal kingdom, but the vegetable kingdom itself, became subject to the mysterious influence.

According to the ordinary course of things, epidemics are special in their operation. Those which attack humanity spare the animals, and those which attack the animals spare the vegetables. A horse was never inflicted with smallpox, nor a man with the cattle-plague, nor do sheep suffer from the potato-rot. But here all the laws of nature seemed to be overturned. Not only were the character, temperament, and ideas of the townsfolk changed, but the domestic animals — dogs and cats, horses and cows, asses and goats — suffered from this epidemic influence, as if their habitual equilibrium had been changed. The plants themselves were infected by a similar strange metamorphosis.

In the gardens and vegetable patches and orchards very curious symptoms manifested themselves. Climbing plants climbed more audaciously. Tufted plants became more tufted than ever. Shrubs became trees. Cereals, scarcely sown, showed their little green heads, and gained, in the same length of time, as much in inches as formerly, under the most favourable circumstances, they had gained in fractions. Asparagus attained the height of several feet; the artichokes swelled to the size of melons, the melons to the size of pumpkins, the pumpkins to the size of gourds, the gourds to the size of the belfry bell, which measured, in truth, nine feet in diameter. The cabbages were bushes, and the mushrooms umbrellas.

The fruits did not lag behind the vegetables. It required two persons to eat a strawberry, and four to consume a pear. The grapes also attained the enormous proportions of those so well depicted by Poussin in his "Return of the Envoys to the Promised Land."

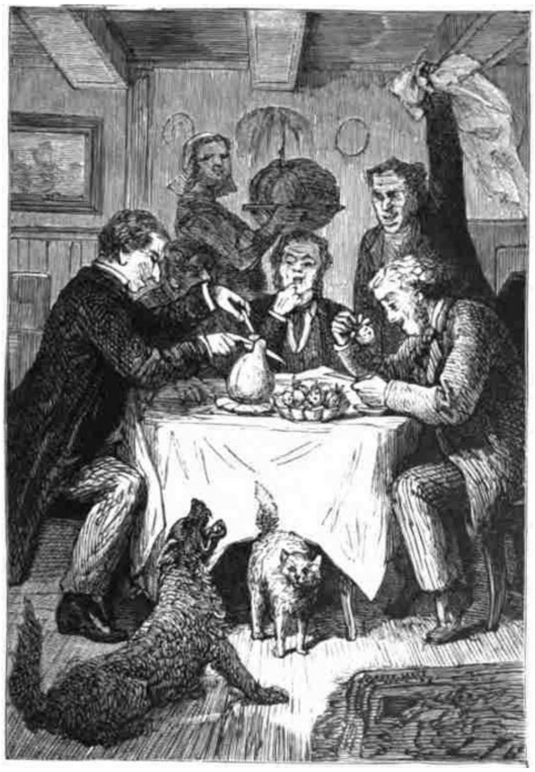

It required two persons to eat a strawberry

It was the same with the flowers: immense violets spread the most penetrating perfumes through the air; exaggerated roses shone with the brightest colours; lilies formed, in a few days, impenetrable copses;

geraniums, daisies, camelias, rhododendrons, invaded the garden walks, and stifled each other. And the tulips, — those dear liliaceous plants so dear to the Flemish heart, what emotion they must have caused to their zealous cultivators! The worthy Van Bistrom nearly fell over backwards, one day, on seeing in his garden an enormous “Tulipa gesneriana,” a gigantic monster, whose cup afforded space to a nest for a whole family of robins!

The entire town flocked to see this floral phenomenon, and renamed it the “Tulipa quiquendonia”.

But alas! if these plants, these fruits, these flowers, grew visibly to the naked eye, if all the vegetables insisted on assuming colossal proportions, if the brilliancy of their colours and perfume intoxicated the smell and the sight, they quickly withered. The air which they absorbed rapidly exhausted them, and they soon died, faded, and dried up.

Such was the fate of the famous tulip, which, after several days of splendour, became emaciated, and fell lifeless.

It was soon the same with the domestic animals, from the house-dog to the stable pig, from the canary in its cage to the turkey of the back-court. It must be said that in ordinary times these animals were not less phlegmatic than their masters. The dogs and cats vegetated rather than lived. They never betrayed a wag of pleasure nor a snarl of wrath. Their tails moved no more than if they had been made of bronze. Such a thing as a bite or scratch from any of them had not been known from time immemorial. As for mad dogs, they were looked upon as imaginary beasts, like the griffins and the rest in the menagerie of the apocalypse.

But what a change had taken place in a few months, the smallest incidents of which we are trying to reproduce! Dogs and cats began to show teeth and claws. Several executions had taken place after reiterated offences. A horse was seen, for the first time, to take his bit in his teeth and rush through the streets of Quiquendone; an ox was observed to precipitate itself, with lowered horns, upon one of his herd; an ass was seen to turn himself ever, with his legs in the air, in the Place Saint Ernuph, and bray as ass never brayed before; a sheep, actually a sheep, defended valiantly the cutlets within him from the butcher's knife.

Van Tricasse, the burgomaster, was forced to make police regulations concerning the domestic animals, as, seized with lunacy, they rendered the streets of Quiquendone unsafe.

But alas! if the animals were mad, the men were scarcely less so. No age was spared by the scourge. Babies soon became quite insupportable, though till now so easy to bring up; and for the first time Honoré Syntax, the judge, was obliged to apply the rod to his youthful offspring.

There was a kind of insurrection at the high school, and the dictionaries became formidable missiles in the classes. The scholars would not submit to be shut in, and, besides, the infection took the teachers themselves, who overwhelmed the boys and girls with extravagant tasks and punishments.

Another strange phenomenon occurred. All these Quiquendonians, so sober before, whose chief food had been whipped creams, committed wild excesses in their eating and drinking. Their usual regimen no longer sufficed. Each stomach was transformed into a gulf, and it became necessary to fill this gulf by the most energetic means. The consumption of the town was trebled. Instead of two repasts they had six. Many cases of indigestion were reported. The Counsellor Niklausse could not satisfy his hunger. Van Tricasse found it impossible to assuage his thirst, and remained in a state of rabid semi-intoxication.

In short, the most alarming symptoms manifested themselves and increased from day to day. Drunken people staggered in the streets, and these were often citizens of high position.

Dominique Custos, the physician, had plenty to do with the heartburns, inflammations, and nervous affections, which proved to what a strange degree the nerves of the people had been irritated.

There were daily quarrels and altercations in the once deserted but now crowded streets of Quiquendone; for nobody could any longer stay at home. It was necessary to establish a new police force to control the disturbers of the public peace. A prison-cage was established in the Town Hall, and speedily became full, night and day, of refractory offenders. Commissary Passauf was in despair.

A marriage was concluded in less than two months, — such a thing had never been seen before. Yes, the son of Rupp, the schoolmaster, wedded the daughter of Augustine de Rovere, and that fifty-seven days only after he had petitioned for her hand and heart!

Other marriages were decided upon, which, in old times, would have remained in doubt and discussion for years. The burgomaster perceived that his own daughter, the charming Suzel, was escaping from his hands.

As for dear Tatanémance, she had dared to sound Commissary Passauf on the subject of a union, which seemed to her to combine every element of happiness, fortune, honour, youth!

At last, — to reach the depths of abomination, — a duel took place! Yes, a duel with pistols — horse-pistols — at seventy-five paces, with ball-cartridges. And between whom? Our readers will never believe!

Between M. Frantz Niklausse, the gentle angler, and young Simon Collaert, the wealthy banker's son.

And the cause of this duel was the burgomaster's daughter, for whom Simon discovered himself to be fired with passion, and whom he refused to yield to the claims of an audacious rival!

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH THE QUIQUENDONIANS ADOPT A HEROIC RESOLUTION.

We have seen to what a deplorable condition the people of Quiquendone were reduced. Their heads were in a ferment. They no longer knew or recognized themselves. The most peaceable citizens had become quarrelsome. If you looked at them askance, they would speedily send you a challenge. Some let their moustaches grow, and several — the most belligerent — curled them up at the ends.

This being their condition, the administration of the town and the maintenance of order in the streets became difficult tasks, for the government had not been organized for such a state of things. The burgomaster — that worthy Van Tricasse whom we have seen so placid, so dull, so incapable of coming to any decision — the burgomaster became intractable. His house resounded with the sharpness of his voice. He made twenty decisions a day, scolding his officials, and himself enforcing the regulations of his administration.

Ah, what a change! The amiable and tranquil mansion of the burgomaster, that good Flemish home — where was its former calm? What changes had taken place in your household economy! Madame Van Tricasse had become acrid, whimsical, harsh. Her husband sometimes succeeded in drowning her voice by talking louder than she, but could not silence her. The petulant humour of this worthy dame was excited by everything. Nothing went right. The servants offended her every moment. Tatanémance, her sister-in-law, who was not less irritable, replied sharply to her. M. Van Tricasse naturally supported Lotchè, his servant, as is the case in all good households; and this permanently exasperated Madame, who constantly disputed, discussed, and made scenes with her husband.

“What on earth is the matter with us?” cried the unhappy burgomaster. “What is this fire that is devouring us? Are we possessed with the devil? Ah, Madame Van Tricasse, Madame Van Tricasse, you will end by making me die before you, and thus violate all the traditions of the family!”

The reader will not have forgotten the strange custom by which M. Van Tricasse would become a widower and marry again, so as not to break the chain of descent.

Meanwhile, this disposition of all minds produced other curious effects worthy of note. This excitement, the cause of which has so far escaped us, brought about unexpected physiological changes. Talents, hitherto unrecognized, betrayed themselves. Aptitudes were suddenly revealed. Artists, before common-place, displayed new ability. Politicians and authors arose. Orators proved themselves equal to the most arduous debates, and on every question inflamed audiences which were quite ready to be inflamed. From the sessions of the council, this movement spread to the public political meetings, and a club was formed at Quiquendone; whilst twenty newspapers, the “Quiquendone Signal,” the “Quiquendone Impartial,” the “Quiquendone Radical,” and so on, written in an inflammatory style, raised the most important questions.

But what about? you will ask. Apropos of everything, and of nothing; apropos of the Oudenarde tower, which was falling, and which some wished to pull down, and others to prop up; apropos of the police regulations issued by the council, which some obstinate citizens threatened to resist; apropos of the sweeping of the gutters, repairing the sewers, and so on. Nor did the enraged orators confine themselves to the internal administration of the town. Carried on by the current they went further, and essayed to plunge their fellow-citizens into the hazards of war.

Quiquendone had had for eight or nine hundred years a *casus belli* of the best quality; but she had preciously laid it up like a relic, and there had seemed some probability that it would become effete, and no longer serviceable.

This was what had given rise to the *casus belli*.

It is not generally known that Quiquendone, in this cosy corner of Flanders, lies next to the little town of Virgamen. The territories of the two communities are contiguous.

Well, in 1185, some time before Count Baldwin’s departure to the Crusades, a Virgamen cow — not a cow belonging to a citizen, but a cow which was common property, let it be observed — audaciously ventured to pasture on the territory of Quiquendone. This unfortunate beast had scarcely eaten three mouthfuls; but the offence, the abuse, the crime — whatever you will — was committed and duly indicted, for the magistrates, at that time, had already begun to know how to write.

“We will take revenge at the proper moment,” said simply Natalis Van Tricasse, the thirty-second predecessor of the burgomaster of this story, “and the Virgamenians will lose nothing by waiting.”

The Virgamenians were forewarned. They waited thinking, without doubt, that the remembrance of the offence would fade away with the lapse of time; and really, for several centuries, they lived on good terms with their neighbours of Quiquendone.

But they counted without their hosts, or rather without this strange epidemic, which, radically changing the character of the Quiquendonians, aroused their dormant vengeance.

It was at the club of the Rue Monstrelet that the truculent orator Schut, abruptly introducing the subject to his hearers, inflamed them with the expressions and metaphors used on such occasions. He recalled the offence, the injury which had been done to Quiquendone, and which a nation "jealous of its rights" could not admit as a precedent; he showed the insult to be still existing, the wound still bleeding: he spoke of certain special head-shakings on the part of the people of Virgamen, which indicated in what degree of contempt they regarded the people of Quiquendone; he appealed to his fellow-citizens, who, unconsciously perhaps, had supported this mortal insult for long centuries; he adjured the "children of the ancient town" to have no other purpose than to obtain a substantial reparation. And, lastly, he made an appeal to "all the living energies of the nation!"

With what enthusiasm these words, so new to Quiquendonian ears, were greeted, may be surmised, but cannot be told. All the auditors rose, and with extended arms demanded war with loud cries. Never had the Advocate Schut achieved such a success, and it must be avowed that his triumphs were not few.

The burgomaster, the counsellor, all the notabilities present at this memorable meeting, would have vainly attempted to resist the popular outburst. Besides, they had no desire to do so, and cried as loud, if not louder, than the rest, —

"To the frontier! To the frontier!"

As the frontier was but three kilometers from the walls of Quiquendone, it is certain that the Virgamenians ran a real danger, for they might easily be invaded without having had time to look about them.

Meanwhile, Josse Liefrinck, the worthy chemist, who alone had preserved his senses on this grave occasion, tried to make his fellow-citizens comprehend that guns, cannon, and generals were equally wanting to their design.

They replied to him, not without many impatient gestures, that these generals, cannons, and guns would be improvised; that the right and love of country sufficed, and rendered a people irresistible.

Hereupon the burgomaster himself came forward, and in a sublime harangue made short work of those pusillanimous people who disguise their fear under a veil of prudence, which veil he tore off with a patriotic hand.

At this sally it seemed as if the hall would fall in under the applause.

The vote was eagerly demanded, and was taken amid acclamations.

The cries of “To Virgamen! to Virgamen!” redoubled.

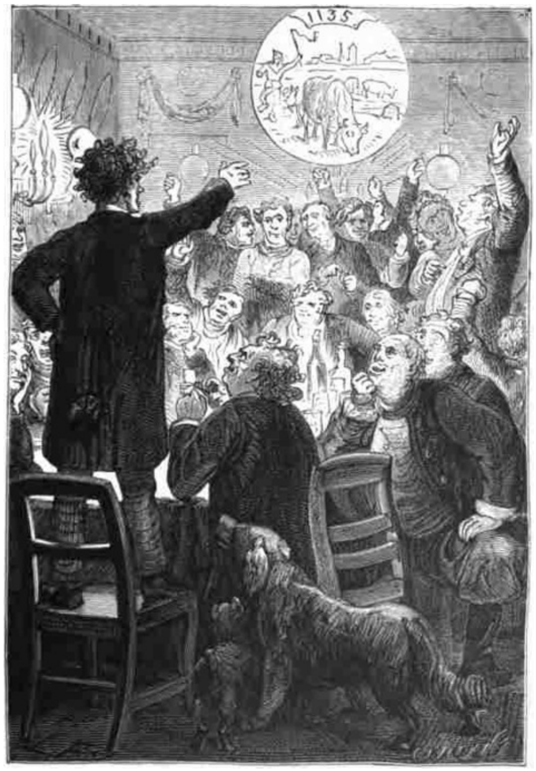

“To Virgamen! to Virgamen!”

The burgomaster then took it upon himself to put the armies in motion, and in the name of the town he promised the honours of a triumph, such as was given in the times of the Romans to that one of its generals who should return victorious.

Meanwhile, Josse Liefrinck, who was an obstinate fellow, and did not regard himself as beaten, though he really had been, insisted on making another observation. He wished to remark that the triumph was only accorded at Rome to those victorious generals who had killed five thousand of the enemy.

“Well, well!” cried the meeting deliriously.

“And as the population of the town of Virgamen consists of but three thousand five hundred and seventy-five inhabitants, it would be difficult, unless the same person was killed several times — ”

But they did not let the luckless logician finish, and he was turned out, hustled and bruised.

“Citizens,” said Pulmacher the grocer, who usually sold groceries by retail, “whatever this cowardly apothecary may have said, I engage by myself to kill five thousand Virgamenians, if you will accept my services!”

“Five thousand five hundred!” cried a yet more resolute patriot.

“Six thousand six hundred!” retorted the grocer.

“Seven thousand!” cried Jean Orbideck, the confectioner of the Rue Hemling, who was on the road to a fortune by making whipped creams.

“Adjudged!” exclaimed the burgomaster Van Tricasse, on finding that no one else rose on the bid.

And this was how Jean Orbideck the confectioner became general-in-chief of the forces of Quiquendone.

CHAPTER XII.

IN WHICH YGÈNE, THE ASSISTANT, GIVES A REASONABLE PIECE OF ADVICE, WHICH IS EAGERLY REJECTED BY DOCTOR OX.

“Well, master,” said Ygène next day, as he poured the pails of sulphuric acid into the troughs of the great battery.

“Well,” resumed Doctor Ox, “was I not right? See to what not only the physical developments of a whole nation, but its morality, its dignity, its talents, its political sense, have come! It is only a question of molecules.”

“No doubt; but — ”

“But — ”

“Do you not think that matters have gone far enough, and that these poor devils should not be excited beyond measure?”

“No, no!” cried the doctor; “no! I will go on to the end!”

“As you will, master; the experiment, however, seems to me conclusive, and I think it time to — ”

“To — ”

“To close the valve.”

“You’d better!” cried Doctor Ox. “If you attempt it, I’ll throttle you!”

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH IT IS ONCE MORE PROVED THAT BY TAKING HIGH GROUND ALL HUMAN LITTLENESSES MAY BE OVERLOOKED.

“You say?” asked the Burgomaster Van Tricasse of the Counsellor Niklausse.

“I say that this war is necessary,” replied Niklausse, firmly, “and that the time has come to avenge this insult.”

“Well, I repeat to you,” replied the burgomaster, tartly, “that if the people of Quiquendone do not profit by this occasion to vindicate their rights, they will be unworthy of their name.”

“And as for me, I maintain that we ought, without delay, to collect our forces and lead them to the front.”

“Really, monsieur, really!” replied Van Tricasse. “And do you speak thus to *me*?”

“To yourself, monsieur the burgomaster; and you shall hear the truth, unwelcome as it may be.”

“And you shall hear it yourself, counsellor,” returned Van Tricasse in a passion, “for it will come better from my mouth than from yours! Yes, monsieur, yes, any delay would be dishonourable. The town of Quiquendone has waited nine hundred years for the moment to take its revenge, and whatever you may say, whether it pleases you or not, we shall march upon the enemy.”

“Ah, you take it thus!” replied Niklausse harshly. “Very well, monsieur, we will march without you, if it does not please you to go.”

“A burgomaster’s place is in the front rank, monsieur!”

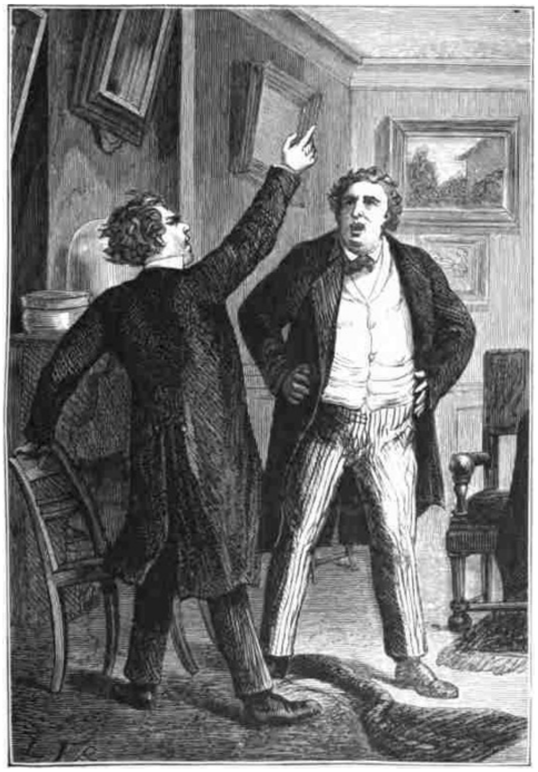

“A burgomaster’s place is in the front rank, monsieur!”

“And that of a counsellor also, monsieur.”

“You insult me by thwarting all my wishes,” cried the burgomaster, whose fists seemed likely to hit out before long.

“And you insult me equally by doubting my patriotism,” cried Niklausse, who was equally ready for a tussle.

“I tell you, monsieur, that the army of Quiquendone shall be put in motion within two days!”

“And I repeat to you, monsieur, that forty-eight hours shall not pass before we shall have marched upon the enemy!”

It is easy to see, from this fragment of conversation, that the two speakers supported exactly the same idea. Both wished for hostilities; but as their excitement disposed them to altercation, Niklausse would not listen to Van Tricasse, nor Van Tricasse to Niklausse. Had they been of contrary opinions on this grave question, had the burgomaster favoured war and the counsellor insisted on peace, the quarrel would not have been more violent. These two old friends gazed fiercely at each other. By the quickened beating of their hearts, their red faces, their contracted pupils, the trembling of their muscles, their harsh voices, it might be conjectured that they were ready to come to blows.

But the striking of a large clock happily checked the adversaries at the moment when they seemed on the point of assaulting each other.

“At last the hour has come!” cried the burgomaster.

“What hour?” asked the counsellor.

“The hour to go to the belfry tower.”

“It is true, and whether it pleases you or not, I shall go, monsieur.”

“And I too.”

“Let us go!”

“Let us go!”

It might have been supposed from these last words that a collision had occurred, and that the adversaries were proceeding to a duel; but it was not so. It had been agreed that the burgomaster and the counsellor, as the two principal dignitaries of the town, should repair to the Town Hall, and there show themselves on the high tower which overlooked Quiquendone; that they should examine the surrounding country, so as to make the best strategetic plan for the advance of their troops.

Though they were in accord on this subject, they did not cease to quarrel bitterly as they went. Their loud voices were heard resounding in the streets; but all the passers-by were now accustomed to this; the exasperation of the dignitaries seemed quite natural, and no one took notice of it. Under the circumstances, a calm man would have been regarded as a monster.

The burgomaster and the counsellor, having reached the porch of the belfry, were in a paroxysm of fury. They were no longer red, but pale. This terrible discussion, though they had the same idea, had produced internal spasms, and every one knows that paleness shows that anger has reached its last limits.

At the foot of the narrow tower staircase there was a real explosion. Who should go up first? Who should first creep up the winding steps? Truth compels us to say that there was a tussle, and that the Counsellor Niklausse, forgetful of all that he owed to his superior, to the supreme magistrate of the town, pushed Van Tricasse violently back, and dashed up the staircase first.

Both ascended, denouncing and raging at each other at every step. It was to be feared that a terrible climax would occur on the summit of the tower, which rose three hundred and fifty-seven feet above the pavement.

The two enemies soon got out of breath, however, and in a little while, at the eightieth step, they began to move up heavily, breathing loud and short.

Then — was it because of their being out of breath? — their wrath subsided, or at least only betrayed itself by a succession of unseemly epithets. They became silent, and, strange to say, it seemed as if their excitement diminished as they ascended higher above the town. A sort of lull took place in their minds. Their brains became cooler, and simmered down like a coffee-pot when taken away from the fire. Why?

We cannot answer this “why;” but the truth is that, having reached a certain landing-stage, two hundred and sixty-six feet above ground, the two adversaries sat down and, really more calm, looked at each other without any anger in their faces.

“How high it is!” said the burgomaster, passing his handkerchief over his rubicund face.

“Very high!” returned the counsellor. “Do you know that we have gone fourteen feet higher than the Church of Saint Michael at Hamburg?”

“I know it,” replied the burgomaster, in a tone of vanity very pardonable in the chief magistrate of Quiquendone.

The two notabilities soon resumed their ascent, casting curious glances through the loopholes pierced in the tower walls. The burgomaster had taken the head of the procession, without any remark on the part of the counsellor. It even happened that at about the three hundred and fourth step, Van Tricasse being completely tired out, Niklausse kindly pushed him from behind. The burgomaster offered no resistance to this, and, when he reached the platform of the tower, said graciously, —

“Thanks, Niklausse; I will do the same for you one day.”

A little while before it had been two wild beasts, ready to tear each other to pieces, who had presented themselves at the foot of the tower; it was now two friends who reached its summit.

The weather was superb. It was the month of May. The sun had absorbed all the vapours. What a pure and limpid atmosphere! The most minute objects over a broad space might be discerned. The walls of Virgamen, glistening in their whiteness, — its red, pointed roofs, its belfries shining in the sunlight — appeared a few miles off. And this was the town that was foredoomed to all the horrors of fire and pillage!

The burgomaster and the counsellor sat down beside each other on a small stone bench, like two worthy people whose souls were in close sympathy. As they recovered breath, they looked around; then, after a brief silence, —

“How fine this is!” cried the burgomaster.

“Yes, it is admirable!” replied the counsellor. “Does it not seem to you, my good Van Tricasse, that humanity is destined to dwell rather at such heights, than to crawl about on the surface of our globe?”

“I agree with you, honest Niklausse,” returned the burgomaster, “I agree with you. You seize sentiment better when you get clear of nature. You breathe it in every sense! It is at such heights that philosophers should be formed, and that sages should live, above the miseries of this world!”

“Shall we go around the platform?” asked the counsellor.

“Let us go around the platform,” replied the burgomaster.

And the two friends, arm in arm, and putting, as formerly, long pauses between their questions and answers, examined every point of the horizon.

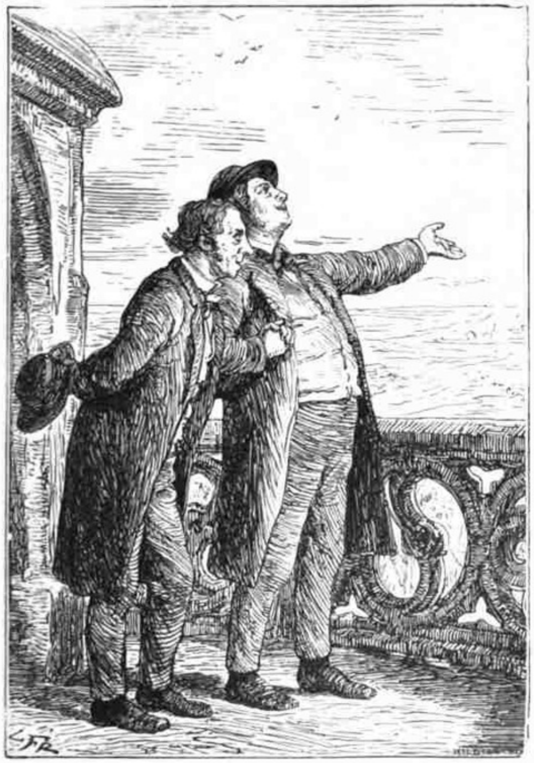

The two friends, arm in arm

“It is at least seventeen years since I have ascended the belfry tower,” said Van Tricasse.

“I do not think I ever came up before,” replied Niklausse; “and I regret it, for the view from this height is sublime! Do you see, my friend, the pretty stream of the Vaar, as it winds among the trees?”

“And, beyond, the heights of Saint Hermandad! How gracefully they shut in the horizon! Observe that border of green trees, which Nature has so picturesquely arranged! Ah, Nature, Nature, Niklausse! Could the hand of man ever hope to rival her?”

“It is enchanting, my excellent friend,” replied the counsellor. “See the flocks and herds lying in the verdant pastures, — the oxen, the cows, the sheep!”

“And the labourers going to the fields! You would say they were Arcadian shepherds; they only want a bagpipe!”

“And over all this fertile country the beautiful blue sky, which no vapour dims! Ah, Niklausse, one might become a poet here! I do not understand why Saint Simeon Stylites was not one of the greatest poets of the world.”

“It was because, perhaps, his column was not high enough,” replied the counsellor, with a gentle smile.

At this moment the chimes of Quiquendone rang out. The clear bells played one of their most melodious airs. The two friends listened in ecstasy.

Then in his calm voice, Van Tricasse said, —

“But what, friend Niklausse, did we come to the top of this tower to do?”

“In fact,” replied the counsellor, “we have permitted ourselves to be carried away by our reveries — ”

“What did we come here to do?” repeated the burgomaster.

“We came,” said Niklausse, “to breathe this pure air, which human weaknesses have not corrupted.”

“Well, shall we descend, friend Niklausse?”

“Let us descend, friend Van Tricasse.”

They gave a parting glance at the splendid panorama which was spread before their eyes; then the burgomaster passed down first, and began to descend with a slow and measured pace. The counsellor followed a few steps behind. They reached the landing-stage at which they had stopped on ascending. Already their cheeks began to redden. They tarried a moment, then resumed their descent.

In a few moments Van Tricasse begged Niklausse to go more slowly, as he felt him on his heels, and it “worried him.” It even did more than worry him; for twenty steps lower down he ordered the counsellor to stop, that he might get on some distance ahead.

The counsellor replied that he did not wish to remain with his leg in the air to await the good pleasure of the burgomaster, and kept on.

Van Tricasse retorted with a rude expression.

The counsellor responded by an insulting allusion to the burgomaster’s age, destined as he was, by his family traditions, to marry a second time.

The burgomaster went down twenty steps more, and warned Niklausse that this should not pass thus.

Niklausse replied that, at all events, he would pass down first; and, the space being very narrow, the two dignitaries came into collision, and found themselves in utter darkness. The words “blockhead” and “booby” were the mildest which they now applied to each other.

“We shall see, stupid beast!” cried the burgomaster, — ”we shall see what figure you will make in this war, and in what rank you will march!”

“In the rank that precedes yours, you silly old fool!” replied Niklausse.

Then there were other cries, and it seemed as if bodies were rolling over each other. What was going on? Why were these dispositions so quickly changed? Why were the gentle sheep of the tower's summit metamorphosed into tigers two hundred feet below it?

However this might be, the guardian of the tower, hearing the noise, opened the door, just at the moment when the two adversaries, bruised, and with protruding eyes, were in the act of tearing each other's hair, — fortunately they wore wigs.

"You shall give me satisfaction for this!" cried the burgomaster, shaking his fist under his adversary's nose.

"Whenever you please!" growled the Counsellor Niklausse, attempting to respond with a vigorous kick.

The guardian, who was himself in a passion, — I cannot say why, — thought the scene a very natural one. I know not what excitement urged him to take part in it, but he controlled himself, and went off to announce throughout the neighbourhood that a hostile meeting was about to take place between the Burgomaster Van Tricasse and the Counsellor Niklausse.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH MATTERS GO SO FAR THAT THE INHABITANTS OF QUIQUENDONE, THE READER, AND EVEN THE AUTHOR, DEMAND AN IMMEDIATE DÉNOUEMENT.

The last incident proves to what a pitch of excitement the Quiquendonians had been wrought. The two oldest friends in the town, and the most gentle — before the advent of the epidemic, to reach this degree of violence! And that, too, only a few minutes after their old mutual sympathy, their amiable instincts, their contemplative habit, had been restored at the summit of the tower!

On learning what was going on, Doctor Ox could not contain his joy. He resisted the arguments which Ygène, who saw what a serious turn affairs were taking, addressed to him. Besides, both of them were infected by the general fury. They were not less excited than the rest of the population, and they ended by quarrelling as violently as the burgomaster and the counsellor.

Besides, one question eclipsed all others, and the intended duels were postponed to the issue of the Virgamenian difficulty. No man had the right to shed his blood uselessly, when it belonged, to the last drop, to his country in danger. The affair was, in short, a grave one, and there was no withdrawing from it.

The Burgomaster Van Tricasse, despite the warlike ardour with which he was filled, had not thought it best to throw himself upon the enemy without warning him. He had, therefore, through the medium of the rural policeman, Hottering, sent to demand reparation of the Virgamenians for the offence committed, in 1195, on the Quiquendonian territory.

The authorities of Virgamen could not at first imagine of what the envoy spoke, and the latter, despite his official character, was conducted back to the frontier very cavalierly.

Van Tricasse then sent one of the aides-de-camp of the confectioner-general, citizen Hildevert Shuman, a manufacturer of barley-sugar, a very firm and energetic man, who carried to the authorities of Virgamen the original minute of the indictment drawn up in 1195 by order of the Burgomaster Natalís Van Tricasse.

The authorities of Virgamen burst out laughing, and served the aide-de-camp in the same manner as the rural policeman.

The burgomaster then assembled the dignitaries of the town.

A letter, remarkably and vigorously drawn up, was written as an ultimatum; the cause of quarrel was plainly stated, and a delay of twenty-four hours was accorded to the guilty city in which to repair the outrage done to Quiquendone.

The letter was sent off, and returned a few hours afterwards, torn to bits, which made so many fresh insults. The Virgamenians knew of old the forbearance and equanimity of the Quiquendonians, and made sport of them and their demand, of their *casus belli* and their *ultimatum*.

There was only one thing left to do, — to have recourse to arms, to invoke the God of battles, and, after the Prussian fashion, to hurl themselves upon the Virgamenians Before the latter could be prepared.

This decision was made by the council in solemn conclave, in which cries, objurgations, and menacing gestures were mingled with unexampled violence. An assembly of idiots, a congress of madmen, a club of maniacs, would not have been more tumultuous.

As soon as the declaration of war was known, General Jean Orbideck assembled his troops, perhaps two thousand three hundred and ninety-three combatants from a population of two thousand three hundred and ninety-three souls. The women, the children, the old men, were joined with the able-bodied males. The guns of the town had been put under requisition. Five had been found, two of which were without cocks, and these had been distributed to the advance-guard. The artillery was composed of the old culverin of the château, taken in 1339 at the attack on Quesnoy, one of the first occasions of the use of cannon in history, and which had not been fired off for five centuries. Happily for those who were appointed to take it in charge there were no projectiles with which to load it; but such as it was, this engine might well impose on the enemy. As for side-arms, they had been taken from the museum of antiquities, — flint hatchets, helmets, Frankish battle-axes, javelins, halberds, rapiers, and so on; and also in those domestic arsenals commonly known as “cupboards” and “kitchens.” But courage, the right, hatred of the foreigner, the yearning for vengeance, were to take the place of more perfect engines, and to replace — at least it was hoped so — the modern mitrailleuses and breech-loaders.

The troops were passed in review. Not a citizen failed at the roll-call. General Orbideck, whose seat on horseback was far from firm, and whose steed was a vicious beast, was thrown three times in front of the army; but he got up again without injury, and this was regarded as a favourable omen. The burgomaster, the counsellor, the civil commissary, the chief justice, the school-teacher, the banker, the rector, — in short, all the notabilities of the town, — marched at the head. There were no tears shed, either by mothers, sisters, or daughters. They urged on their husbands, fathers, brothers, to the combat, and even followed them and formed the rear-guard, under the orders of the courageous Madame Van Tricasse.

The crier, Jean Mistrol, blew his trumpet; the army moved off, and directed itself, with ferocious cries, towards the Oudenarde gate.

At the moment when the head of the column was about to pass the walls of the town, a man threw himself before it.

“Stop! stop! Fools that you are!” he cried. “Suspend your blows! Let me shut the valve! You are not changed in nature! You are good citizens, quiet and peaceable! If you are so excited, it is my master, Doctor Ox’s, fault! It is an experiment! Under the pretext of lighting your streets with oxyhydric gas, he has saturated — ”

The assistant was beside himself; but he could not finish. At the instant that the doctor’s secret was about to escape his lips, Doctor Ox himself pounced upon the unhappy Ygène in an indescribable rage, and shut his mouth by blows with his fist.

It was a battle. The burgomaster, the counsellor, the dignitaries, who had stopped short on Ygène’s sudden appearance, carried away in turn by their exasperation, rushed upon the two strangers, without waiting to hear either the one or the other.

Doctor Ox and his assistant, beaten and lashed, were about to be dragged, by order of Van Tricasse, to the round-house, when, —

CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH THE DÉNOUEMENT TAKES PLACE.

When a formidable explosion resounded. All the atmosphere which enveloped Quiquendone seemed on fire. A flame of an intensity and vividness quite unwonted shot up into the heavens like a meteor. Had it been night, this flame would have been visible for ten leagues around.

The whole army of Quiquendone fell to the earth, like an army of monks. Happily there were no victims; a few scratches and slight hurts were the only result. The confectioner, who, as chance would have it, had not fallen from his horse this time, had his plume singed, and escaped without any further injury.

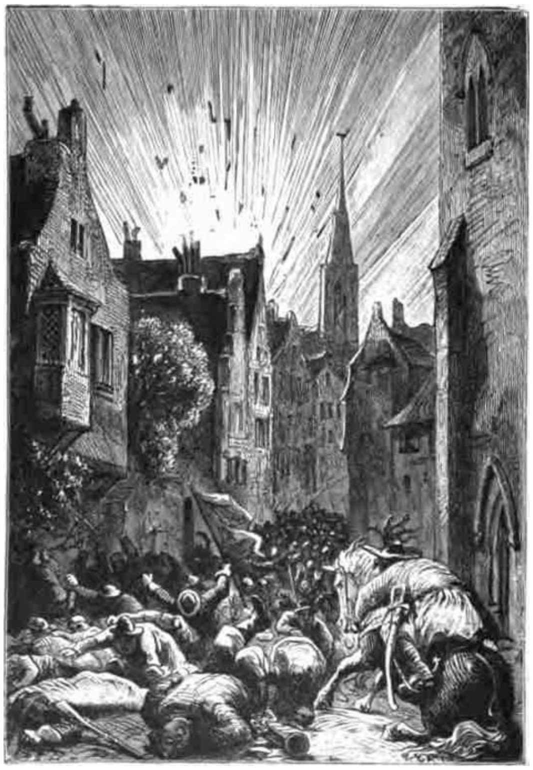

The whole army of Quiquendone fell to the earth

What had happened?

Something very simple, as was soon learned; the gasworks had just blown up. During the absence of the doctor and his assistant, some careless mistake had no doubt been made. It is not known how or why a communication had been established between the reservoir which contained the oxygen and that which enclosed the hydrogen. An explosive mixture had resulted from the union of these two gases, to which fire had accidentally been applied.

This changed everything; but when the army got upon its feet again, Doctor Ox and his assistant Ygène had disappeared.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN WHICH THE INTELLIGENT READER SEES THAT HE HAS GUESSED CORRECTLY, DESPITE ALL THE AUTHOR'S PRECAUTIONS.

After the explosion, Quiquendone immediately became the peaceable, phlegmatic, and Flemish town it formerly was.

After the explosion, which indeed did not cause a very lively sensation, each one, without knowing why, mechanically took his way home, the burgomaster leaning on the counsellor's arm, the advocate Schut going arm in arm with Custos the doctor, Frantz Niklausse walking with equal familiarity with Simon Collaert, each going tranquilly, noiselessly, without even being conscious of what had happened, and having already forgotten Virgamen and their revenge. The general returned to his confections, and his aide-de-camp to the barley-sugar.

Thus everything had become calm again; the old existence had been resumed by men and beasts, beasts and plants; even by the tower of Oudenarde gate, which the explosion — these explosions are sometimes astonishing — had set upright again!

And from that time never a word was spoken more loudly than another, never a discussion took place in the town of Quiquendone. There were no more politics, no more clubs, no more trials, no more policemen! The post of the Commissary Passauf became once more a sinecure, and if his salary was not reduced, it was because the burgomaster and the counsellor could not make up their minds to decide upon it.

From time to time, indeed, Passauf flitted, without any one suspecting it, through the dreams of the inconsolable Tatanémance.

As for Frantz’s rival, he generously abandoned the charming Suzel to her lover, who hastened to wed her five or six years after these events.

And as for Madame Van Tricasse, she died ten years later, at the proper time, and the burgomaster married Mademoiselle Pélagie Van Tricasse, his cousin, under excellent conditions — for the happy mortal who should succeed him.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN WHICH DOCTOR OX’S THEORY IS EXPLAINED.

What, then, had this mysterious Doctor Ox done? Tried a fantastic experiment, — nothing more.

After having laid down his gas-pipes, he had saturated, first the public buildings, then the private dwellings, finally the streets of Quiquendone, with pure oxygen, without letting in the least atom of hydrogen.

This gas, tasteless and odorless, spread in generous quantity through the atmosphere, causes, when it is breathed, serious agitation to the human organism. One who lives in an air saturated with oxygen grows excited, frantic, burns!

You scarcely return to the ordinary atmosphere before you return to your usual state. For instance, the counsellor and the burgomaster at the top of the belfry were themselves again, as the oxygen is kept, by its weight, in the lower strata of the air.

But one who lives under such conditions, breathing this gas which transforms the body physiologically as well as the soul, dies speedily, like a madman.

It was fortunate, then, for the Quiquendonians, that a providential explosion put an end to this dangerous experiment, and abolished Doctor Ox’s gas-works.

To conclude: Are virtue, courage, talent, wit, imagination, — are all these qualities or faculties only a question of oxygen?

Such is Doctor Ox’s theory; but we are not bound to accept it, and for ourselves we utterly reject it, in spite of the curious experiment of which the worthy old town of Quiquendone was the theatre.

MASTER ZACHARIUS

CHAPTER I.

A WINTER NIGHT.

The city of Geneva lies at the west end of the lake of the same name. The Rhone, which passes through the town at the outlet of the lake, divides it into two sections, and is itself divided in the centre of the city by an island placed in mid-stream. A topographical feature like this is often found in the great depôts of commerce and industry. No doubt the first inhabitants were influenced by the easy means of transport which the swift currents of the rivers offered them — those “roads which walk along of their own accord,” as Pascal puts it. In the case of the Rhone, it would be the road that ran along.

Before new and regular buildings were constructed on this island, which was enclosed like a Dutch galley in the middle of the river, the curious mass of houses, piled one on the other, presented a delightfully confused *coup-d’oeil*. The small area of the island had compelled some of the buildings to be perched, as it were, on the piles, which were entangled in the rough currents of the river. The huge beams, blackened by time, and worn by the water, seemed like the claws of an enormous crab, and presented a fantastic appearance. The little yellow streams, which were like cobwebs stretched amid this ancient foundation, quivered in the darkness, as if they had been the leaves of some old oak forest, while the river engulfed in this forest of piles, foamed and roared most mournfully.

One of the houses of the island was striking for its curiously aged appearance. It was the dwelling of the old clockmaker, Master Zacharius, whose household consisted of his daughter Gerande, Aubert Thun, his apprentice, and his old servant Scholastique.

There was no man in Geneva to compare in interest with this Zacharius. His age was past finding out. Not the oldest inhabitant of the town could tell for how long his thin, pointed head had shaken above his shoulders, nor the day when, for the first time, he had-walked through the streets, with his long white locks floating in the wind. The man did not live; he vibrated like the pendulum of his clocks. His spare and cadaverous figure was always clothed in dark colours. Like the pictures of Leonardo di Vinci, he was sketched in black.

Gerande had the pleasantest room in the whole house, whence, through a narrow window, she had the inspiriting view of the snowy peaks of Jura; but the bedroom and workshop of the old man were a kind of cavern close on to the water, the floor of which rested on the piles.

From time immemorial Master Zacharius had never come out except at meal times, and when he went to regulate the different clocks of the town. He passed the rest of his time at his bench, which was covered with numerous clockwork instruments, most of which he had invented himself. For he was a clever man; his works were valued in all France and Germany. The best workers in Geneva readily recognized his superiority, and showed that he was an honour to the town, by saying, “To him belongs the glory of having invented the escapement.” In fact, the birth of true clock-work dates from the invention which the talents of Zacharius had discovered not many years before.

After he had worked hard for a long time, Zacharius would slowly put his tools away, cover up the delicate pieces that he had been adjusting with glasses, and stop the active wheel of his lathe; then he would raise a trap-door constructed in the floor of his workshop, and, stooping down, used to inhale for hours together the thick vapours of the Rhone, as it dashed along under his eyes.

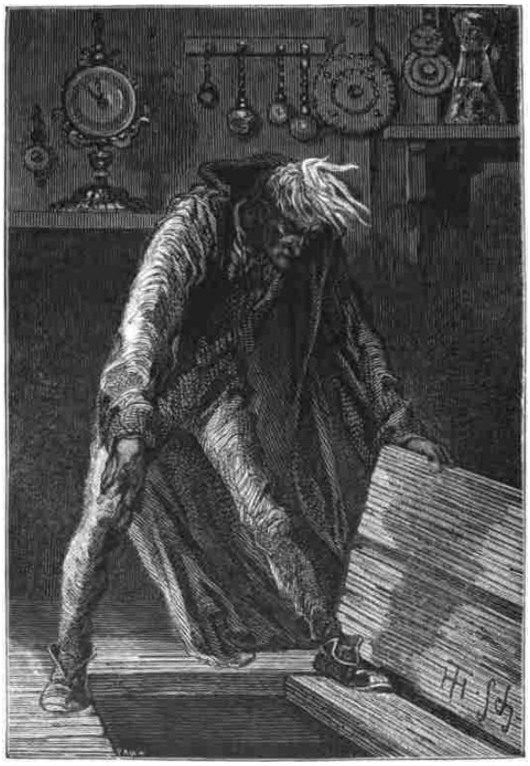

he would raise the trap door constructed in the floor of his workshop.

One winter’s night the old servant Scholastique served the supper, which, according to old custom, she and the young mechanic shared with their master. Master Zacharius did not eat, though the food carefully prepared for him was offered him in a handsome blue and white dish. He scarcely answered the sweet words of Gerande, who evidently noticed her father’s silence, and even the clatter of Scholastique herself no more struck his ear than the roar of the river, to which he paid no attention.

After the silent meal, the old clockmaker left the table without embracing his daughter, or saying his usual “Good-night” to all. He left by the narrow door leading to his den, and the staircase groaned under his heavy footsteps as he went down.

Gerande, Aubert, and Scholastique sat for some minutes without speaking. On this evening the weather was dull; the clouds dragged heavily on the Alps, and threatened rain; the severe climate of Switzerland made one feel sad, while the south wind swept round the house, and whistled ominously.

“My dear young lady,” said Scholastique, at last, “do you know that our master has been out of sorts for several days? Holy Virgin! I know he has had no appetite, because his words stick in his inside, and it would take a very clever devil to drag even one out of him.”

“My father has some secret cause of trouble, that I cannot even guess,” replied Gerande, as a sad anxiety spread over her face.

“Mademoiselle, don’t let such sadness fill your heart. You know the strange habits of Master Zacharius. Who can read his secret thoughts in his face? No doubt some fatigue has overcome him, but to-morrow he will have forgotten it, and be very sorry to have given his daughter pain.”

It was Aubert who spoke thus, looking into Gerande’s lovely eyes. Aubert was the first apprentice whom Master Zacharius had ever admitted to the intimacy of his labours, for he appreciated his intelligence, discretion, and goodness of heart; and this young man had attached himself to Gerande with the earnest devotion natural to a noble nature.

Gerande was eighteen years of age. Her oval face recalled that of the artless Madonnas whom veneration still displays at the street corners of the antique towns of Brittany. Her eyes betrayed an infinite simplicity. One would love her as the sweetest realization of a poet’s dream. Her apparel was of modest colours, and the white linen which was folded about her shoulders had the tint and perfume peculiar to the linen of the church. She led a mystical existence in Geneva, which had not as yet been delivered over to the dryness of Calvinism.

While, night and morning, she read her Latin prayers in her iron-clasped missal, Gerande had also discovered a hidden sentiment in Aubert Thun's heart, and comprehended what a profound devotion the young workman had for her. Indeed, the whole world in his eyes was condensed into this old clockmaker's house, and he passed all his time near the young girl, when he left her father's workshop, after his work was over.

Old Scholastique saw all this, but said nothing. Her loquacity exhausted itself in preference on the evils of the times, and the little worries of the household. Nobody tried to stop its course. It was with her as with the musical snuff-boxes which they made at Geneva; once wound up, you must break them before you will prevent their playing all their airs through.

Finding Gerande absorbed in a melancholy silence, Scholastique left her old wooden chair, fixed a taper on the end of a candlestick, lit it, and placed it near a small waxen Virgin, sheltered in her niche of stone. It was the family custom to kneel before this protecting Madonna of the domestic hearth, and to beg her kindly watchfulness during the coming night; but on this evening Gerande remained silent in her seat.

"Well, well, dear demoiselle," said the astonished Scholastique, "supper is over, and it is time to go to bed. Why do you tire your eyes by sitting up late? Ah, Holy Virgin! It's much better to sleep, and to get a little comfort from happy dreams! In these detestable times in which we live, who can promise herself a fortunate day?"

“Ought we not to send for a doctor for my father?” asked Gerande.

“A doctor!” cried the old domestic. “Has Master Zacharius ever listened to their fancies and pompous sayings? He might accept medicines for the watches, but not for the body!”

“What shall we do?” murmured Gerande. “Has he gone to work, or to rest?”

“Gerande,” answered Aubert softly, “some mental trouble annoys your father, that is all.”

“Do you know what it is, Aubert?”

“Perhaps, Gerande”

“Tell us, then,” cried Scholastique eagerly, economically extinguishing her taper.

“For several days, Gerande,” said the young apprentice, “something absolutely incomprehensible has been going on. All the watches which your father has made and sold for some years have suddenly stopped. Very many of them have been brought back to him. He has carefully taken them to pieces; the springs were in good condition, and the wheels well set. He has put them together yet more carefully; but, despite his skill, they will not go.”

“The devil’s in it!” cried Scholastique.

“Why say you so?” asked Gerande. “It seems very natural to me. Nothing lasts for ever in this world. The infinite cannot be fashioned by the hands of men.”

“It is none the less true,” returned Aubert, “that there is in this something very mysterious and extraordinary. I have myself been helping Master Zacharius to search for the cause of this derangement of his watches; but I have not been able to find it, and more than once I have let my tools fall from my hands in despair.”

“But why undertake so vain a task?” resumed Scholastique. “Is it natural that a little copper instrument should go of itself, and mark the hours? We ought to have kept to the sun-dial!”

“You will not talk thus, Scholastique,” said Aubert, “when you learn that the sun-dial was invented by Cain.’’

“Good heavens! what are you telling me?”

“Do you think,” asked Gerande simply, “that we might pray to God to give life to my father’s watches?”

“Without doubt,” replied Aubert.

“Good! They will be useless prayers,” muttered the old servant, “but Heaven will pardon them for their good intent.”

The taper was relighted. Scholastique, Gerande, and Aubert knelt down together upon the tiles of the room. The young girl prayed for her mother’s soul, for a blessing for the night, for travellers and prisoners, for the good and the wicked, and more earnestly than all for the unknown misfortunes of her father.

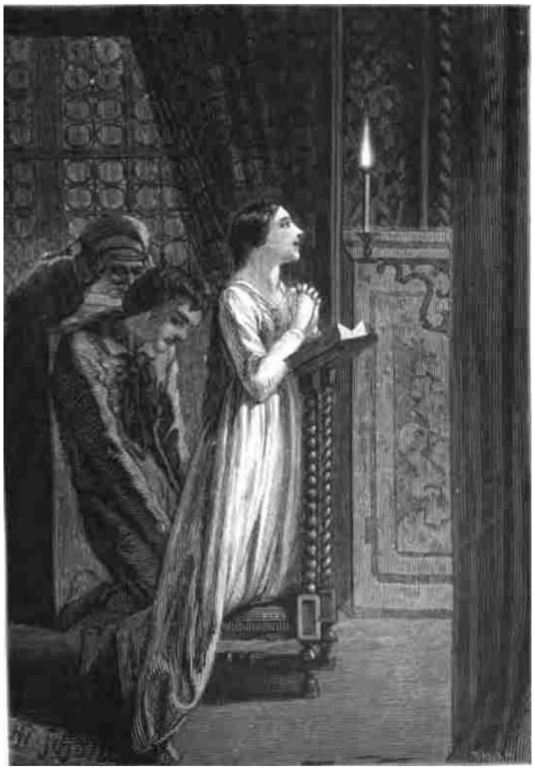

The young girl prayed

Then the three devout souls rose with some confidence in their hearts, because they had laid their sorrow on the bosom of God.

Aubert repaired to his own room; Gerande sat pensively by the window, whilst the last lights were disappearing from the city streets; and Scholastique, having poured a little water on the flickering embers, and shut the two enormous bolts on the door, threw herself upon her bed, where she was soon dreaming that she was dying of fright.

Meanwhile the terrors of this winter’s night had increased. Sometimes, with the whirlpools of the river, the wind engulfed itself among the piles, and the whole house shivered and shook; but the young girl, absorbed in her sadness, thought only of her father. After hearing what Aubert told her, the malady of Master Zacharius took fantastic proportions in her mind; and it seemed to her as if his existence, so dear to her, having become purely mechanical, no longer moved on its worn-out pivots without effort.

Suddenly the pent-house shutter, shaken by the squall, struck against the window of the room. Gerande shuddered and started up without understanding the cause of the noise which thus disturbed her reverie. When she became a little calmer she opened the sash. The clouds had burst, and a torrent-like rain pattered on the surrounding roofs. The young girl leaned out of the window to draw to the shutter shaken by the wind, but she feared to do so. It seemed to her that the rain and the river, confounding their tumultuous waters, were submerging the frail house, the planks of which creaked in every direction. She would have flown from her chamber, but she saw below the flickering of a light which appeared to come from Master Zacharius's retreat, and in one of those momentary calms during which the elements keep a sudden silence, her ear caught plaintive sounds. She tried to shut her window, but could not. The wind violently repelled her, like a thief who was breaking into a dwelling.

Gerande thought she would go mad with terror. What was her father doing? She opened the door, and it escaped from her hands, and slammed loudly with the force of the tempest. Gerande then found herself in the dark supper-room, succeeded in gaining, on tiptoe, the staircase which led to her father's shop, and pale and fainting, glided down.

The old watchmaker was upright in the middle of the room, which resounded with the roaring of the river. His bristling hair gave him a sinister aspect. He was talking and gesticulating, without seeing or hearing anything. Gerande stood still on the threshold.

"It is death!" said Master Zacharius, in a hollow voice; "it is death! Why should I live longer, now that I have dispersed my existence over the earth?

For I, Master, Zacharius, am really the creator of all the watches that I have fashioned! It is a part of my very soul that I have shut up in each of these cases of iron, silver, or gold! Every time that one of these accursed watches stops, I feel my heart cease beating, for I have regulated them with its pulsations!”

As he spoke in this strange way, the old man cast his eyes on his bench. There lay all the pieces of a watch that he had carefully taken apart. He took up a sort of hollow cylinder, called a barrel, in which the spring is enclosed, and removed the steel spiral, but instead of relaxing itself, according to the laws of its elasticity, it remained coiled on itself like a sleeping viper. It seemed knotted, like impotent old men whose blood has long been congealed. Master Zacharius vainly essayed to uncoil it with his thin fingers, the outlines of which were exaggerated on the wall; but he tried in vain, and soon, with a terrible cry of anguish and rage, he threw it through the trap-door into the boiling Rhone.

Gerande, her feet riveted to the floor, stood breathless and motionless. She wished to approach her father, but could not. Giddy hallucinations took possession of her. Suddenly she heard, in the shade, a voice murmur in her ears, —

“Gerande, dear Gerande! grief still keeps you awake. Go in again, I beg of you; the night is cold.”

“Aubert!” whispered the young girl. “You!”

“Ought I not to be troubled by what troubles you?”

These soft words sent the blood back into the young girl’s heart. She leaned on Aubert’s arm, and said to him, —

“My father is very ill, Aubert! You alone can cure him, for this disorder of the mind would not yield to his daughter’s consolings. His mind is attacked by a very natural delusion, and in working with him, repairing the watches, you will bring him back to reason. Aubert,” she continued, “it is not true, is it, that his life is mixed up with that of his watches?”

Aubert did not reply.

“But is my father’s a trade condemned by God?” asked Gerande, trembling.

“I know not,” returned the apprentice, warming the cold hands of the girl with his own. “But go back to your room, my poor Gerande, and with sleep recover hope!”

Gerande slowly returned to her chamber, and remained there till daylight, without sleep closing her eyelids. Meanwhile, Master Zacharius, always mute and motionless, gazed at the river as it rolled turbulently at his feet.

CHAPTER II.

THE PRIDE OF SCIENCE.

The severity of the Geneva merchant in business matters has become proverbial. He is rigidly honourable, and excessively just. What must, then, have been the shame of Master Zacharius, when he saw these watches, which he had so carefully constructed, returning to him from every direction?

It was certain that these watches had suddenly stopped, and without any apparent reason. The wheels were in a good condition and firmly fixed, but the springs had lost all elasticity. Vainly did the watchmaker try to replace them; the wheels remained motionless. These unaccountable derangements were greatly to the old man's discredit. His noble inventions had many times brought upon him suspicions of sorcery, which now seemed confirmed. These rumours reached Gerande, and she often trembled for her father, when she saw malicious glances directed towards him.

Yet on the morning after this night of anguish, Master Zacharius seemed to resume work with some confidence. The morning sun inspired him with some courage. Aubert hastened to join him in the shop, and received an affable "Good-day."

"I am better," said the old man. "I don't know what strange pains in the head attacked me yesterday, but the sun has quite chased them away, with the clouds of the night."

"In faith, master," returned Aubert, "I don't like the night for either of us!"

“And thou art right, Aubert. If you ever become a great man, you will understand that day is as necessary to you as food. A great savant should be always ready to receive the homage of his fellow-men.”

“Master, it seems to me that the pride of science has possessed you.”

“Pride, Aubert! Destroy my past, annihilate my present, dissipate my future, and then it will be permitted to me to live in obscurity! Poor boy, who comprehends not the sublime things to which my art is wholly devoted! Art thou not but a tool in my hands?”

“Yet. Master Zacharius,” resumed Aubert, “I have more than once merited your praise for the manner in which I adjusted the most delicate parts of your watches and clocks.”

“No doubt, Aubert; thou art a good workman, such as I love; but when thou workest, thou thinkest thou hast in thy hands but copper, silver, gold; thou dost not perceive these metals, which my genius animates, palpitating like living flesh! So that thou wilt not die, with the death of thy works!”

Master Zacharius remained silent after these words; but Aubert essayed to keep up the conversation.

“Indeed, master,” said he, “I love to see you work so unceasingly! You will be ready for the festival of our corporation, for I see that the work on this crystal watch is going forward famously.”

“No doubt, Aubert,” cried the old watchmaker, “and it will be no slight honour for me to have been able to cut and shape the crystal to the durability of a diamond! Ah, Louis Berghem did well to perfect the art of diamond-cutting, which has enabled me to polish and pierce the hardest stones!”

Master Zacharius was holding several small watch pieces of cut crystal, and of exquisite workmanship. The wheels, pivots, and case of the watch were of the same material, and he had employed remarkable skill in this very difficult task.

“Would it not be fine,” said he, his face flushing, “to see this watch palpitating beneath its transparent envelope, and to be able to count the beatings of its heart?”

“I will wager, sir,” replied the young apprentice, “that it will not vary a second in a year.”

“And you would wager on a certainty! Have I not imparted to it all that is purest of myself? And does my heart vary? My heart, I say?”

Aubert did not dare to lift his eyes to his master’s face.

“Tell me frankly,” said the old man sadly. “Have you never taken me for a madman? Do you not think me sometimes subject to dangerous folly? Yes; is it not so? In my daughter’s eyes and yours, I have often read my condemnation. Oh!” he cried, as if in pain, “to be misunderstood by those whom one most loves in the world! But I will prove victoriously to thee, Aubert, that I am right! Do not shake thy head, for thou wilt be astounded. The day on which thou understandest how to listen to and comprehend me, thou wilt see that I have discovered the secrets of existence, the secrets of the mysterious union of the soul with the body!”

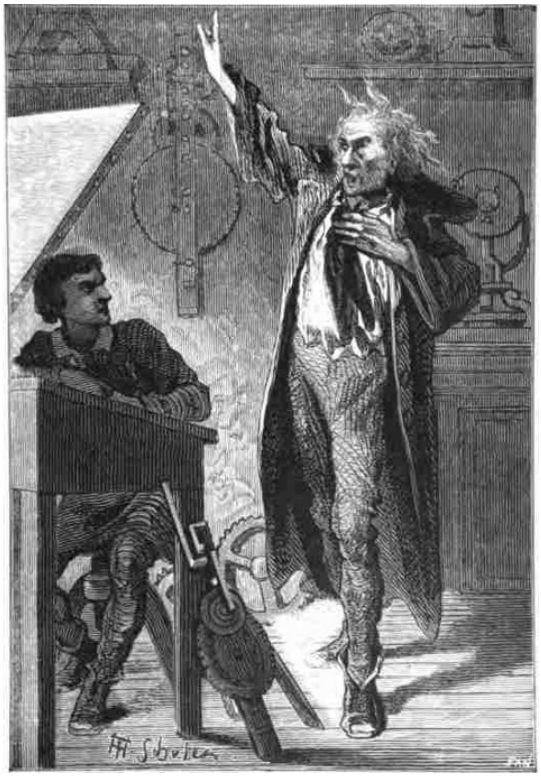

“Thou wilt see that I have discovered the secrets of existence.”

As he spoke thus, Master Zacharius appeared superb in his vanity. His eyes glittered with a supernatural fire, and his pride illumined every feature. And truly, if ever vanity was excusable, it was that of Master Zacharius!

The watchmaking art, indeed, down to his time, had remained almost in its infancy. From the day when Plato, four centuries before the Christian era, invented the night watch, a sort of clepsydra which indicated the hours of the night by the sound and playing of a flute, the science had continued nearly stationary. The masters paid more attention to the arts than to mechanics, and it was the period of beautiful watches of iron, copper, wood, silver, which were richly engraved, like one of Cellini’s ewers. They made a masterpiece of chasing, which measured time imperfectly, but was still a masterpiece. When the artist’s imagination was not directed to the perfection of modelling, it set to work to create clocks with moving figures and melodious sounds, whose appearance took all attention. Besides, who troubled himself, in those days, with regulating the advance of time? The delays of the law were not as yet invented; the physical and astronomical sciences had not as yet established their calculations on scrupulously exact measurements; there were neither establishments which were shut at a given hour, nor trains which departed at a precise moment. In the evening the curfew bell sounded; and at night the hours were cried amid the universal silence. Certainly people did not live so long, if existence is measured by the amount of business done; but they lived better. The mind was enriched with the noble sentiments born of the contemplation of chefs-d'oeuvré. They built a church in two centuries, a painter painted but few pictures in the course of his life, a poet only composed one great work; but these were so many masterpieces for after-ages to appreciate.

When the exact sciences began at last to make some progress, watch and clock making followed in their path, though it was always arrested by an insurmountable difficulty, — the regular and continuous measurement of time.

It was in the midst of this stagnation that Master Zacharius invented the escapement, which enabled him to obtain a mathematical regularity by submitting the movement of the pendulum to a sustained force. This invention had turned the old man's head. Pride, swelling in his heart, like mercury in the thermometer, had attained the height of transcendent folly. By analogy he had allowed himself to be drawn to materialistic conclusions, and as he constructed his watches, he fancied that he had discovered the secrets of the union of the soul with the body.

Thus, on this day, perceiving that Aubert listened to him attentively, he said to him in a tone of simple conviction, —

“Dost thou know what life is, my child? Hast thou comprehended the action of those springs which produce existence? Hast thou examined thyself? No. And yet, with the eyes of science, thou mightest have seen the intimate relation which exists between God’s work and my own; for it is from his creature that I have copied the combinations of the wheels of my clocks.”

“Master,” replied Aubert eagerly, “can you compare a copper or steel machine with that breath of God which is called the soul, which animates our bodies as the breeze stirs the flowers? What mechanism could be so adjusted as to inspire us with thought?”

“That is not the question,” responded Master Zacharius gently, but with all the obstinacy of a blind man walking towards an abyss. “In order to understand me, thou must recall the purpose of the escapement which I have invented. When I saw the irregular working of clocks, I understood that the movements shut up in them did not suffice, and that it was necessary to submit them to the regularity of some independent force. I then thought that the balance-wheel might accomplish this, and I succeeded in regulating the movement! Now, was it not a sublime idea that came to me, to return to it its lost force by the action of the clock itself, which it was charged with regulating?”

Aubert made a sign of assent.

“Now, Aubert,” continued the old man, growing animated, “cast thine eyes upon thyself! Dost thou not understand that there are two distinct forces in us, that of the soul and that of the body — that is, a movement and a regulator? The soul is the principle of life; that is, then, the movement. Whether it is produced by a weight, by a spring, or by an immaterial influence, it is none the less in the heart. But without the body this movement would be unequal, irregular, impossible! Thus the body regulates the soul, and, like the balance-wheel, it is submitted to regular oscillations. And this is so true, that one falls ill when one’s drink, food, sleep — in a word, the functions of the body — are not properly regulated; just as in my watches the soul renders to the body the force lost by its oscillations. Well, what produces this intimate union between soul and body, if not a marvellous escapement, by which the wheels of the one work into the wheels of the other? This is what I have discovered and applied; and there are no longer any secrets for me in this life, which is, after all, only an ingenious mechanism!”

Master Zacharius looked sublime in this hallucination, which carried him to the ultimate mysteries of the Infinite. But his daughter Gerande, standing on the threshold of the door, had heard all. She rushed into her father’s arms, and he pressed her convulsively to his breast.

“What is the matter with thee, my daughter?” he asked.

“If I had only a spring here,” said she, putting her hand on her heart, “I would not love you as I do, father.”

Master Zacharius looked intently at Gerande, and did not reply. Suddenly he uttered a cry, carried his hand eagerly to his heart, and fell fainting on his old leathern chair.

“Father, what is the matter?”

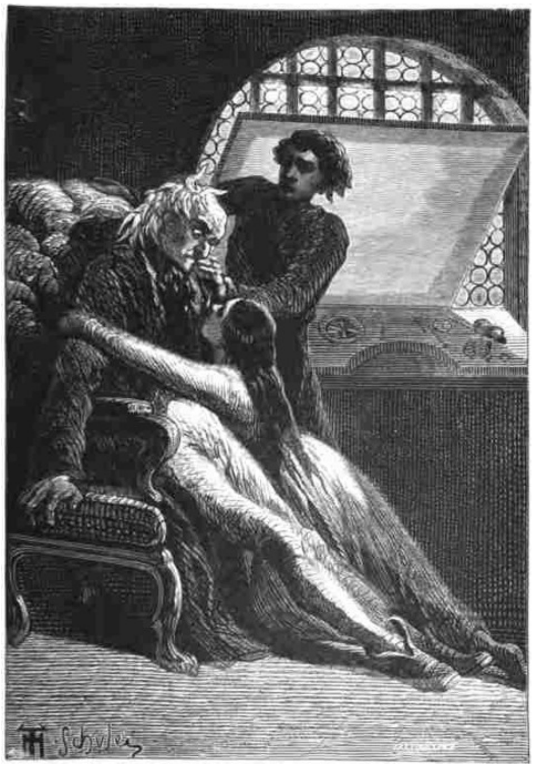

“Father, what is the matter?”

“Help!” cried Aubert. “Scholastique!”

But Scholastique did not come at once. Some one was knocking at the front door; she had gone to open it, and when she returned to the shop, before she could open her mouth, the old watchmaker, having recovered his senses, spoke: —

“I divine, my old Scholastique, that you bring me still another of those accursed watches which have stopped.”

“Lord, it is true enough!” replied Scholastique, handing a watch to Aubert.

“My heart could not be mistaken!” said the old man, with a sigh.

Meanwhile Aubert carefully wound up the watch, but it would not go.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE VISIT.

Poor Gerande would have lost her life with that of her father, had it not been for the thought of Aubert, who still attached her to the world.

The old watchmaker was, little by little, passing away. His faculties evidently grew more feeble, as he concentrated them on a single thought. By a sad association of ideas, he referred everything to his monomania, and a human existence seemed to have departed from him, to give place to the extra-natural existence of the intermediate powers. Moreover, certain malicious rivals revived the sinister rumours which had spread concerning his labours.

The news of the strange derangements which his watches betrayed had a prodigious effect upon the master clockmakers of Geneva. What signified this sudden paralysis of their wheels, and why these strange relations which they seemed to have with the old man’s life? These were the kind of mysteries which people never contemplate without a secret terror. In the various classes of the town, from the apprentice to the great lord who used the watches of the old horologist, there was no one who could not himself judge of the singularity of the fact. The citizens wished, but in vain, to get to see Master Zacharius. He fell very ill; and this enabled his daughter to withdraw him from those incessant visits which had degenerated into reproaches and recriminations.

Medicines and physicians were powerless in presence of this organic wasting away, the cause of which could not be discovered. It sometimes seemed as if the old man’s heart had ceased to beat; then the pulsations were resumed with an alarming irregularity.

A custom existed in those days of publicly exhibiting the works of the masters. The heads of the various corporations sought to distinguish themselves by the novelty or the perfection of their productions; and it was among these that the condition of Master Zacharius excited the most lively, because most interested, commiseration. His rivals pitied him the more willingly because they feared him the less. They never forgot the old man’s success, when he exhibited his magnificent clocks with moving figures, his repeaters, which provoked general admiration, and commanded such high prices in the cities of France, Switzerland, and Germany.

Meanwhile, thanks to the constant and tender care of Gerande and Aubert, his strength seemed to return a little; and in the tranquillity in which his convalescence left him, he succeeded in detaching himself from the thoughts which had absorbed him. As soon as he could walk, his daughter lured him away from the house, which was still besieged with dissatisfied customers. Aubert remained in the shop, vainly adjusting and readjusting the rebel watches; and the poor boy, completely mystified, sometimes covered his face with his hands, fearful that he, like his master, might go mad.

Gerande led her father towards the more pleasant promenades of the town. With his arm resting on hers, she conducted him sometimes through the quarter of Saint Antoine, the view from which extends towards the Cologny hill, and over the lake; on fine mornings they caught sight of the gigantic peaks of Mount Buet against the horizon. Gerande pointed out these spots to her father, who had well-nigh forgotten even their names. His memory wandered; and he took a childish interest in learning anew what had passed from his mind. Master Zacharius leaned upon his daughter; and the two heads, one white as snow and the other covered with rich golden tresses, met in the same ray of sunlight.

So it came about that the old watchmaker at last perceived that he was not alone in the world. As he looked upon his young and lovely daughter, and on himself old and broken, he reflected that after his death she would be left alone without support. Many of the young mechanics of Geneva had already sought to win Gerande's love; but none of them had succeeded in gaining access to the impenetrable retreat of the watchmaker's household. It was natural, then, that during this lucid interval, the old man's choice should fall on Aubert Thun. Once struck with this thought, he remarked to himself that this young couple had been brought up with the same ideas and the same beliefs; and the oscillations of their hearts seemed to him, as he said one day to Scholastique, "isochronous."

The old servant, literally delighted with the word, though she did not understand it, swore by her holy patron saint that the whole town should hear it within a quarter of an hour. Master Zacharius found it difficult to calm her; but made her promise to keep on this subject a silence which she never was known to observe.

So, though Gerande and Aubert were ignorant of it, all Geneva was soon talking of their speedy union. But it happened also that, while the worthy folk were gossiping, a strange chuckle was often heard, and a voice saying, "Gerande will not wed Aubert."

If the talkers turned round, they found themselves facing a little old man who was quite a stranger to them.

How old was this singular being? No one could have told. People conjectured that he must have existed for several centuries, and that was all.

His big flat head rested upon shoulders the width of which was equal to the height of his body; this was not above three feet. This personage would have made a good figure to support a pendulum, for the dial would have naturally been placed on his face, and the balance-wheel would have oscillated at its ease in his chest. His nose might readily have been taken for the style of a sun-dial, for it was narrow and sharp; his teeth, far apart, resembled the cogs of a wheel, and ground themselves between his lips; his voice had the metallic sound of a bell, and you could hear his heart beat like the tick of a clock. This little man, whose arms moved like the hands on a dial, walked with jerks, without ever turning round. If any one followed him, it was found that he walked a league an hour, and that his course was nearly circular.

This strange being had not long been seen wandering, or rather circulating, around the town; but it had already been observed that, every day, at the moment when the sun passed the meridian, he stopped before the Cathedral of Saint Pierre, and resumed his course after the twelve strokes of noon had sounded. Excepting at this precise moment, he seemed to become a part of all the conversations in which the old watchmaker was talked of; and people asked each other, in terror, what relation could exist between him and Master Zacharius. It was remarked, too, that he never lost sight of the old man and his daughter while they were taking their promenades.

One day Gerande perceived this monster looking at her with a hideous smile. She clung to her father with a frightened motion.

“What is the matter, my Gerande?” asked Master Zacharius.

“I do not know,” replied the young girl.

“But thou art changed, my child. Art thou going to fall ill in thy turn? Ah, well,” he added, with a sad smile, “then I must take care of thee, and I will do it tenderly.”

“O father, it will be nothing. I am cold, and I imagine that it is — ”

“What, Gerande?”

“The presence of that man, who always follows us,” she replied in a low tone.

Master Zacharius turned towards the little old man.

“Faith, he goes well,” said he, with a satisfied air, “for it is just four o’clock. Fear nothing, my child; it is not a man, it is a clock!”

Gerande looked at her father in terror. How could Master Zacharius read the hour on this strange creature’s visage?

“By-the-bye,” continued the old watchmaker, paying no further attention to the matter, “I have not seen Aubert for several days.”

“He has not left us, however, father,” said Gerande, whose thoughts turned into a gentler channel.

“What is he doing then?”

“He is working.”

“Ah!” cried the old man. “He is at work repairing my watches, is he not? But he will never succeed; for it is not repair they need, but a resurrection!”

Gerande remained silent.

“I must know,” added the old man, “if they have brought back any more of those accursed watches upon which the Devil has sent this epidemic!”

After these words Master Zacharius fell into complete silence, till he knocked at the door of his house, and for the first time since his convalescence descended to his shop, while Gerande sadly repaired to her chamber.

Just as Master Zacharius crossed the threshold of his shop, one of the many clocks suspended on the wall struck five o’clock. Usually the bells of these clocks — admirably regulated as they were — struck simultaneously, and this rejoiced the old man’s heart; but on this day the bells struck one after another, so that for a quarter of an hour the ear was deafened by the successive noises. Master Zacharius suffered acutely; he could not remain still, but went from one clock to the other, and beat the time to them, like a conductor who no longer has control over his musicians.

When the last had ceased striking, the door of the shop opened, and Master Zacharius shuddered from head to foot to see before him the little old man, who looked fixedly at him and said, —

“Master, may I not speak with you a few moments?”

“Who are you?” asked the watchmaker abruptly.

“A colleague. It is my business to regulate the sun.”

“Ah, you regulate the sun?” replied Master Zacharius eagerly, without wincing. “I can scarcely compliment you upon it. Your sun goes badly, and in order to make ourselves agree with it, we have to keep putting our clocks forward so much or back so much.”

“And by the cloven foot,” cried this weird personage, “you are right, my master! My sun does not always mark noon at the same moment as your clocks; but some day it will be known that this is because of the inequality of the earth’s transfer, and a mean noon will be invented which will regulate this irregularity!”

“Shall I live till then?” asked the old man, with glistening eyes.

“Without doubt,” replied the little old man, laughing. “Can you believe that you will ever die?”

“Alas! I am very ill now.”

“Ah, let us talk of that. By Beelzebub! that will lead to just what I wish to speak to you about.”

Saying this, the strange being leaped upon the old leather chair, and carried his legs one under the other, after the fashion of the bones which the painters of funeral hangings cross beneath death’s heads. Then he resumed, in an ironical tone, —

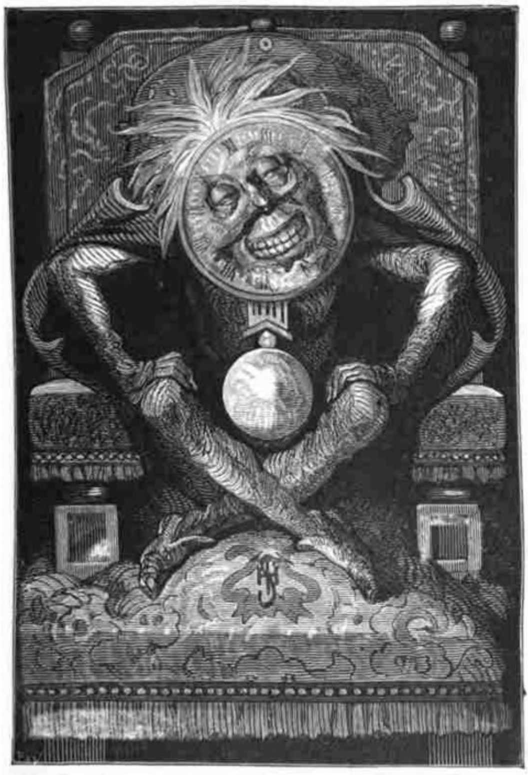

Then he resumed, in an ironical tone

“Let us see, Master Zacharius, what is going on in this good town of Geneva? They say that your health is failing, that your watches have need of a doctor!”

“Ah, do you believe that there is an intimate relation between their existence and mine?” cried Master Zacharius.

“Why, I imagine that these watches have faults, even vices. If these wantons do not preserve a regular conduct, it is right that they should bear the consequences of their irregularity. It seems to me that they have need of reforming a little!”

“What do you call faults?” asked Master Zacharius, reddening at the sarcastic tone in which these words were uttered. “Have they not a right to be proud of their origin?”

“Not too proud, not too proud,” replied the little old man. “They bear a celebrated name, and an illustrious signature is graven on their cases, it is true, and theirs is the exclusive privilege of being introduced among the noblest families; but for some time they have got out of order, and you can do nothing in the matter, Master Zacharius; and the stupidest apprentice in Geneva could prove it to you!”

“To me, to me, — Master Zacharius!” cried the old man, with a flush of outraged pride.

“To you, Master Zacharius, — you, who cannot restore life to your watches!”

“But it is because I have a fever, and so have they also!” replied the old man, as a cold sweat broke out upon him.

“Very well, they will die with you, since you cannot impart a little elasticity to their springs.”

“Die! No, for you yourself have said it! I cannot die, — I, the first watchmaker in the world; I, who, by means of these pieces and diverse wheels, have been able to regulate the movement with absolute precision! Have I not subjected time to exact laws, and can I not dispose of it like a despot? Before a sublime genius had arranged these wandering hours regularly, in what vast uncertainty was human destiny plunged? At what certain moment could the acts of life be connected with each other? But you, man or devil, whatever you may be, have never considered the magnificence of my art, which calls every science to its aid! No, no! I, Master Zacharius, cannot die, for, as I have regulated time, time would end with me! It would return to the infinite, whence my genius has rescued it, and it would lose itself irreparably in the abyss of nothingness! No, I can no more die than the Creator of this universe, that submitted to His laws! I have become His equal, and I have partaken of His power! If God has created eternity, Master Zacharius has created time!"

The old watchmaker now resembled the fallen angel, defiant in the presence of the Creator. The little old man gazed at him, and even seemed to breathe into him this impious transport.

"Well said, master," he replied. "Beelzebub had less right than you to compare himself with God! Your glory must not perish! So your servant here desires to give you the method of controlling these rebellious watches."

"What is it? what is it?" cried Master Zacharius.

"You shall know on the day after that on which you have given me your daughter's hand."

"My Gerande?"

"Herself!"

"My daughter's heart is not free," replied Master Zacharius, who seemed neither astonished nor shocked at the strange demand.

"Bah! She is not the least beautiful of watches; but she will end by stopping also — "

"My daughter, — my Gerande! No!"

“Well, return to your watches, Master Zacharius. Adjust and readjust them. Get ready the marriage of your daughter and your apprentice. Temper your springs with your best steel. Bless Aubert and the pretty Gerande. But remember, your watches will never go, and Gerande will not wed Aubert!”

Thereupon the little old man disappeared, but not so quickly that Master Zacharius could not hear six o’clock strike in his breast.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHURCH OF SAINT PIERRE.

Meanwhile Master Zacharius became more feeble in mind and body every day. An unusual excitement, indeed, impelled him to continue his work more eagerly than ever, nor could his daughter entice him from it.

His pride was still more aroused after the crisis to which his strange visitor had hurried him so treacherously, and he resolved to overcome, by the force of genius, the malign influence which weighed upon his work and himself. He first repaired to the various clocks of the town which were confided to his care. He made sure, by a scrupulous examination, that the wheels were in good condition, the pivots firm, the weights exactly balanced. Every part, even to the bells, was examined with the minute attention of a physician studying the breast of a patient. Nothing indicated that these clocks were on the point of being affected by inactivity.

Gerande and Aubert often accompanied the old man on these visits. He would no doubt have been pleased to see them eager to go with him, and certainly he would not have been so much absorbed in his approaching end, had he thought that his existence was to be prolonged by that of these cherished ones, and had he understood that something of the life of a father always remains in his children.

The old watchmaker, on returning home, resumed his labours with feverish zeal. Though persuaded that he would not succeed, it yet seemed to him impossible that this could be so, and he unceasingly took to pieces the watches which were brought to his shop, and put them together again.

Aubert tortured his mind in vain to discover the causes of the evil.

“Master,” said he, “this can only come from the wear of the pivots and gearing.”

“Do you want, then, to kill me, little by little?” replied Master Zacharius passionately. “Are these watches child’s work? Was it lest I should hurt my fingers that I worked the surface of these copper pieces in the lathe? Have I not forged these pieces of copper myself, so as to obtain a greater strength? Are not these springs tempered to a rare perfection? Could anybody have used finer oils than mine? You must yourself agree that it is impossible, and you avow, in short, that the devil is in it!”

From morning till night discontented purchasers besieged the house, and they got access to the old watchmaker himself, who knew not which of them to listen to.

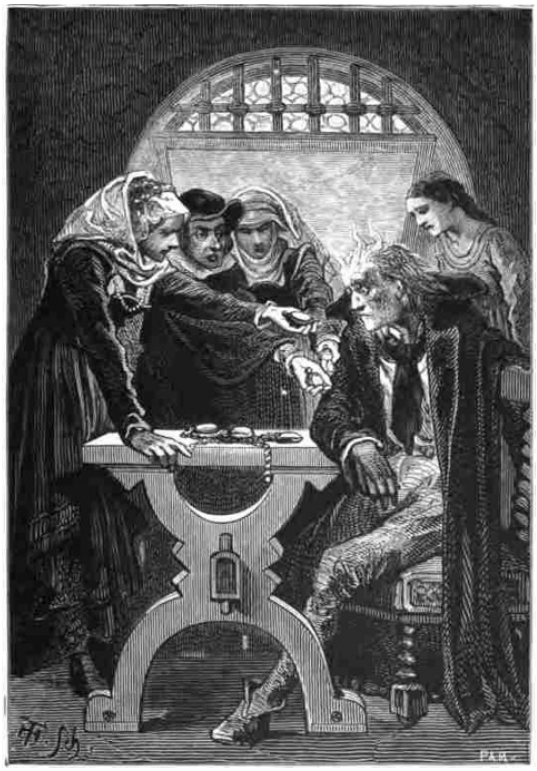

From morning till night discontented purchasers besieged the house

“This watch loses, and I cannot succeed in regulating it,” said one.

“This,” said another, “is absolutely obstinate, and stands still, as did Joshua’s sun.”

“If it is true,” said most of them, “that your health has an influence on that of your watches, Master Zacharius, get well as soon as possible.”

The old man gazed at these people with haggard eyes, and only replied by shaking his head, or by a few sad words, —

“Wait till the first fine weather, my friends. The season is coming which revives existence in wearied bodies. We want the sun to warm us all!”

“A fine thing, if my watches are to be ill through the winter!” said one of the most angry. “Do you know, Master Zacharius, that your name is inscribed in full on their faces? By the Virgin, you do little honour to your signature!”

It happened at last that the old man, abashed by these reproaches, took some pieces of gold from his old trunk, and began to buy back the damaged watches. At news of this, the customers came in a crowd, and the poor watchmaker’s money fast melted away; but his honesty remained intact. Gerande warmly praised his delicacy, which was leading him straight towards ruin; and Aubert soon offered his own savings to his master.

“What will become of my daughter?” said Master Zacharius, clinging now and then in the shipwreck to his paternal love.

Aubert dared not answer that he was full of hope for the future, and of deep devotion to Gerande. Master Zacharius would have that day called him his son-in-law, and thus refuted the sad prophecy, which still buzzed in his ears, —

“Gerande will not wed Aubert.”

By this plan the watchmaker at last succeeded in entirely despoiling himself. His antique vases passed into the hands of strangers; he deprived himself of the richly-carved panels which adorned the walls of his house; some primitive pictures of the early Flemish painters soon ceased to please his daughter’s eyes, and everything, even the precious tools that his genius had invented, were sold to indemnify the clamorous customers.

Scholastique alone refused to listen to reason on the subject; but her efforts failed to prevent the unwelcome visitors from reaching her master, and from soon departing with some valuable object. Then her chattering was heard in all the streets of the neighbourhood, where she had long been known. She eagerly denied the rumours of sorcery and magic on the part of Master Zacharius, which gained currency; but as at bottom she was persuaded of their truth, she said her prayers over and over again to redeem her pious falsehoods.

It had been noticed that for some time the old watchmaker had neglected his religious duties. Time was, when he had accompanied Gerande to church, and had seemed to find in prayer the intellectual charm which it imparts to thoughtful minds, since it is the most sublime exercise of the imagination. This voluntary neglect of holy practices, added to the secret habits of his life, had in some sort confirmed the accusations levelled against his labours. So, with the double purpose of drawing her father back to God, and to the world, Gerande resolved to call religion to her aid. She thought that it might give some vitality to his dying soul; but the dogmas of faith and humility had to combat, in the soul of Master Zacharius, an insurmountable pride, and came into collision with that vanity of science which connects everything with itself, without rising to the infinite source whence first principles flow.

It was under these circumstances that the young girl undertook her father's conversion; and her influence was so effective that the old watchmaker promised to attend high mass at the cathedral on the following Sunday. Gerande was in an ecstasy, as if heaven had opened to her view. Old Scholastique could not contain her joy, and at last found irrefutable arguments' against the gossiping tongues which accused her master of impiety. She spoke of it to her neighbours, her friends, her enemies, to those whom she knew not as well as to those whom she knew.

"In faith, we scarcely believe what you tell us, dame Scholastique," they replied; "Master Zacharius has always acted in concert with the devil!"

"You haven't counted, then," replied the old servant, "the fine bells which strike for my master's clocks? How many times they have struck the hours of prayer and the mass!"

"No doubt," they would reply. "But has he not invented machines which go all by themselves, and which actually do the work of a real man?"

"Could a child of the devil," exclaimed dame Scholastique wrathfully, "have executed the fine iron clock of the château of Andernatt, which the town of Geneva was not rich enough to buy? A pious motto appeared at each hour, and a Christian who obeyed them, would have gone straight to Paradise! Is that the work of the devil?"

This masterpiece, made twenty years before, had carried Master Zacharius's fame to its acme; but even then there had been accusations of sorcery against him. But at least the old man’s visit to the Cathedral ought to reduce malicious tongues to silence.

Master Zacharius, having doubtless forgotten the promise made to his daughter, had returned to his shop. After being convinced of his powerlessness to give life to his watches, he resolved to try if he could not make some new ones. He abandoned all those useless works, and devoted himself to the completion of the crystal watch, which he intended to be his masterpiece; but in vain did he use his most perfect tools, and employ rubies and diamonds for resisting friction. The watch fell from his hands the first time that he attempted to wind it up!

The old man concealed this circumstance from every one, even from his daughter; but from that time his health rapidly declined. There were only the last oscillations of a pendulum, which goes slower when nothing restores its original force. It seemed as if the laws of gravity, acting directly upon him, were dragging him irresistibly down to the grave.

The Sunday so ardently anticipated by Gerande at last arrived. The weather was fine, and the temperature inspiriting. The people of Geneva were passing quietly through the streets, gaily chatting about the return of spring. Gerande, tenderly taking the old man’s arm, directed her steps towards the cathedral, while Scholastique followed behind with the prayer-books. People looked curiously at them as they passed. The old watchmaker permitted himself to be led like a child, or rather like a blind man. The faithful of Saint Pierre were almost frightened when they saw him cross the threshold, and shrank back at his approach.

The chants of high mass were already resounding through the church. Gerande went to her accustomed bench, and kneeled with profound and simple reverence. Master Zacharius remained standing upright beside her.

The ceremonies continued with the majestic solemnity of that faithful age, but the old man had no faith. He did not implore the pity of Heaven with cries of anguish of the “Kyrie;” he did not, with the “Gloria in Excelsis,” sing the splendours of the heavenly heights; the reading of the Testament did not draw him from his materialistic reverie, and he forgot to join in the homage of the “Credo.” This proud old man remained motionless, as insensible and silent as a stone statue; and even at the solemn moment when the bell announced the miracle of transubstantiation, he did not bow his head, but gazed directly at the sacred host which the priest raised above the heads of the faithful. Gerande looked at her father, and a flood of tears moistened her missal. At this moment the clock of Saint Pierre struck half-past eleven. Master Zacharius turned quickly towards this ancient clock which still spoke. It seemed to him as if its face was gazing steadily at him; the figures of the hours shone as if they had been engraved in lines of fire, and the hands shot forth electric sparks from their sharp points.

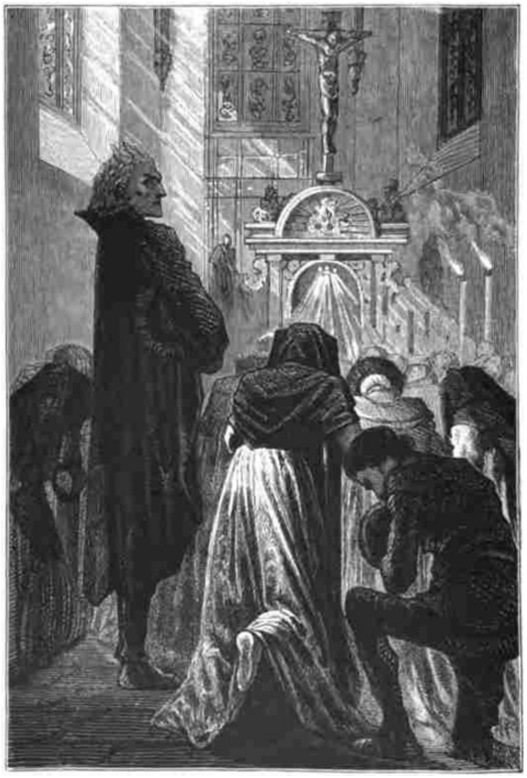

This proud old man remained motionless

The mass ended. It was customary for the “Angelus” to be said at noon, and the priests, before leaving the altar, waited for the clock to strike the hour of twelve. In a few moments this prayer would ascend to the feet of the Virgin.

But suddenly a harsh noise was heard. Master Zacharius uttered a piercing cry.

The large hand of the clock, having reached twelve, had abruptly stopped, and the clock did not strike the hour.

Gerande hastened to her father’s aid. He had fallen down motionless, and they carried him outside the church.

“It is the death-blow!” murmured Gerande, sobbing.

When he had been borne home, Master Zacharius lay upon his bed utterly crushed. Life seemed only to still exist on the surface of his body, like the last whiffs of smoke about a lamp just extinguished. When he came to his senses, Aubert and Gerande were leaning over him. In these last moments the future took in his eyes the shape of the present. He saw his daughter alone, without a protector.

“My son,” said he to Aubert, “I give my daughter to thee.”

So saying, he stretched out his hands towards his two children, who were thus united at his death-bed.

But soon Master Zacharius lifted himself up in a paroxysm of rage. The words of the little old man recurred to his mind.

“I do not wish to die!” he cried; “I cannot die! I, Master Zacharius, ought not to die! My books — my accounts! — ”

With these words he sprang from his bed towards a book in which the names of his customers and the articles which had been sold to them were inscribed. He seized it and rapidly turned over its leaves, and his emaciated finger fixed itself on one of the pages.

“There!” he cried, “there! this old iron clock, sold to Pittonaccio! It is the only one that has not been returned to me! It still exists — it goes — it lives! Ah, I wish for it — I must find it! I will take such care of it that death will no longer seek me!”

And he fainted away.

Aubert and Gerande knelt by the old man’s bed-side and prayed together.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOUR OF DEATH.

Several days passed, and Master Zacharius, though almost dead, rose from his bed and returned to active life under a supernatural excitement. He lived by pride. But Gerande did not deceive herself; her father’s body and soul were for ever lost.

The old man got together his last remaining resources, without thought of those who were dependent upon him. He betrayed an incredible energy, walking, ferreting about, and mumbling strange, incomprehensible words.

One morning Gerande went down to his shop. Master Zacharius was not there. She waited for him all day. Master Zacharius did not return.

Gerande wept bitterly, but her father did not reappear.

Aubert searched everywhere through the town, and soon came to the sad conviction that the old man had left it.

“Let us find my father!” cried Gerande, when the young apprentice told her this sad news.

“Where can he be?” Aubert asked himself.

An inspiration suddenly came to his mind. He remembered the last words which Master Zacharius had spoken. The old man only lived now in the old iron clock that had not been returned! Master Zacharius must have gone in search of it.

Aubert spoke of this to Gerande.

“Let us look at my father’s book,” she replied.

They descended to the shop. The book was open on the bench. All the watches or clocks made by the old man, and which had been returned to him because they were out of order, were stricken out excepting one: —

“Sold to M. Pittonaccio, an iron clock, with bell and moving figures; sent to his château at Andernatt.”

It was this “moral” clock of which Scholastique had spoken with so much enthusiasm.

“My father is there!” cried Gerande.

“Let us hasten thither,” replied Aubert. “We may still save him!”

“Not for this life,” murmured Gerande, “but at least for the other.”

“By the mercy of God, Gerande! The château of Andernatt stands in the gorge of the ‘Dents-du-Midi’ twenty hours from Geneva. Let us go!”

That very evening Aubert and Gerande, followed by the old servant, set out on foot by the road which skirts Lake Leman. They accomplished five leagues during the night, stopping neither at Bessinge nor at Ermance, where rises the famous château of the Mayors. They with difficulty forded the torrent of the Dranse, and everywhere they went they inquired for Master Zacharius, and were soon convinced that they were on his track.

The next morning, at daybreak, having passed Thonon, they reached Evian, whence the Swiss territory may be seen extended over twelve leagues. But the two betrothed did not even perceive the enchanting prospect. They went straight forward, urged on by a supernatural force. Aubert, leaning on a knotty stick, offered his arm alternately to Gerande and to Scholastique, and he made the greatest efforts to sustain his companions. All three talked of their sorrow, of their hopes, and thus passed along the beautiful road by the water-side, and across the narrow plateau which unites the borders of the lake with the heights of the Chalais. They soon reached Bouveret, where the Rhone enters the Lake of Geneva.

On leaving this town they diverged from the lake, and their weariness increased amid these mountain districts. Vionnaz, Chesset, Collombay, half lost villages, were soon left behind. Meanwhile their knees shook, their feet were lacerated by the sharp points which covered the ground like a brushwood of granite; — but no trace of Master Zacharius!

He must be found, however, and the two young people did not seek repose either in the isolated hamlets or at the château of Monthay, which, with its dependencies, formed the appanage of Margaret of Savoy. At last, late in the day, and half dead with fatigue, they reached the hermitage of Notre-Dame-du-Sex, which is situated at the base of the Dents-du-Midi, six hundred feet above the Rhone.

The hermit received the three wanderers as night was falling. They could not have gone another step, and here they must needs rest.

The hermit could give them no news of Master Zacharius. They could scarcely hope to find him still living amid these sad solitudes. The night was dark, the wind howled amid the mountains, and the avalanches roared down from the summits of the broken crags.

Aubert and Gerande, crouching before the hermit’s hearth, told him their melancholy tale. Their mantles, covered with snow, were drying in a corner;

and without, the hermit’s dog barked lugubriously, and mingled his voice with that of the tempest.

“Pride,” said the hermit to his guests, “has destroyed an angel created for good. It is the stumbling-block against which the destinies of man strike. You cannot reason with pride, the principal of all the vices, since, by its very nature, the proud man refuses to listen to it. It only remains, then, to pray for your father!”

All four knelt down, when the barking of the dog redoubled, and some one knocked at the door of the hermitage.

“Open, in the devil’s name!”

The door yielded under the blows, and a dishevelled, haggard, ill-clothed man appeared.

“My father!” cried Gerande.

It was Master Zacharius.

“Where am I?” said he. “In eternity! Time is ended — the hours no longer strike — the hands have stopped!”

“Father!” returned Gerande, with so piteous an emotion that the old man seemed to return to the world of the living.

“Thou here, Gerande?” he cried; “and thou, Aubert? Ah, my dear betrothed ones, you are going to be married in our old church!”

“Father,” said Gerande, seizing him by the arm, “come home to Geneva, — come with us!”

The old man tore away from his daughter’s embrace and hurried towards the door, on the threshold of which the snow was falling in large flakes.

“Do not abandon your children!” cried Aubert.

“Why return,” replied the old man sadly, “to those places which my life has already quitted, and where a part of myself is for ever buried?”

“Your soul is not dead,” said the hermit solemnly.

“My soul? O no, — its wheels are good! I perceive it beating regularly — ”

“Your soul is immaterial, — your soul is immortal!” replied the hermit sternly.

“Yes — like my glory! But it is shut up in the château of Andernatt, and I wish to see it again!”

The hermit crossed himself; Scholastique became almost inanimate. Aubert held Gerande in his arms.

“The château of Andernatt is inhabited by one who is lost,” said the hermit, “one who does not salute the cross of my hermitage.”

“My father, go not thither!”

“I want my soul! My soul is mine — ”

“Hold him! Hold my father!” cried Gerande.

But the old man had leaped across the threshold, and plunged into the night, crying, “Mine, mine, my soul!”

Gerande, Aubert, and Scholastique hastened after him. They went by difficult paths, across which Master Zacharius sped like a tempest, urged by an irresistible force. The snow raged around them, and mingled its white flakes with the froth of the swollen torrents.

As they passed the chapel erected in memory of the massacre of the Theban legion, they hurriedly crossed themselves. Master Zacharius was not to be seen.

At last the village of Evionnaz appeared in the midst of this sterile region. The hardest heart would have been moved to see this hamlet, lost among these horrible solitudes. The old man sped on, and plunged into the deepest gorge of the Dents-du-Midi, which pierce the sky with their sharp peaks.

Soon a ruin, old and gloomy as the rocks at its base, rose before him.

“It is there — there!” he cried, hastening his pace still more frantically.

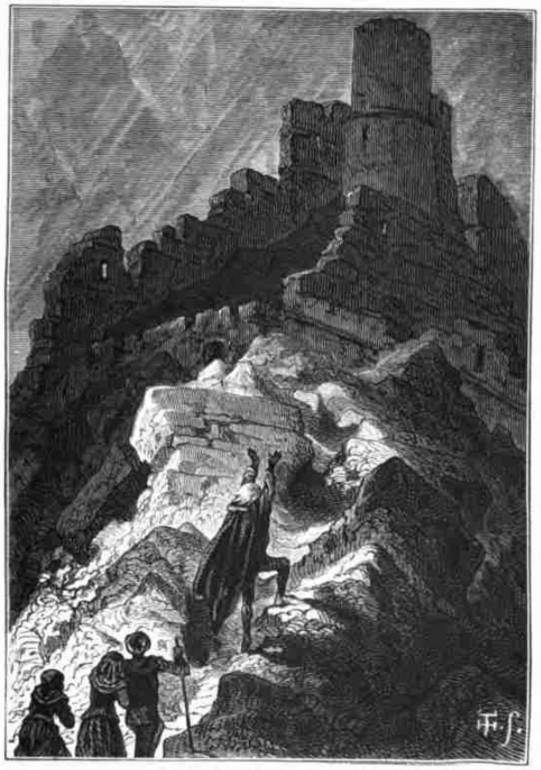

“It is there — there!”

The château of Andernatt was a ruin even then. A thick, crumbling tower rose above it, and seemed to menace with its downfall the old gables which reared themselves below. The vast piles of jagged stones were gloomy to look on. Several dark halls appeared amid the debris, with caved-in ceilings, now become the abode of vipers.

A low and narrow postern, opening upon a ditch choked with rubbish, gave access to the château. Who had dwelt there none knew. No doubt some margrave, half lord, half brigand, had sojourned in it; to the margrave had succeeded bandits or counterfeit coiners, who had been hanged on the scene of their crime. The legend went that, on winter nights, Satan came to lead his diabolical dances on the slope of the deep gorges in which the shadow of these ruins was engulfed.

But Master Zacharius was not dismayed by their sinister aspect. He reached the postern. No one forbade him to pass. A spacious and gloomy court presented itself to his eyes; no one forbade him to cross it. He passed along the kind of inclined plane which conducted to one of the long corridors, whose arches seemed to banish daylight from beneath their heavy springings. His advance was unresisted. Gerande, Aubert, and Scholastique closely followed him.

Master Zacharius, as if guided by an irresistible hand, seemed sure of his way, and strode along with rapid step. He reached an old worm-eaten door, which fell before his blows, whilst the bats described oblique circles around his head.

An immense hall, better preserved than the rest, was soon reached. High sculptured panels, on which serpents, ghouls, and other strange figures seemed to disport themselves confusedly, covered its walls. Several long and narrow windows, like loopholes, shivered beneath the bursts of the tempest.

Master Zacharius, on reaching the middle of this hall, uttered a cry of joy.

On an iron support, fastened to the wall, stood the clock in which now resided his entire life. This unequalled masterpiece represented an ancient Roman church, with buttresses of wrought iron, with its heavy bell-tower, where there was a complete chime for the anthem of the day, the “Angelus,” the mass, vespers, compline, and the benediction. Above the church door, which opened at the hour of the services, was placed a “rose,” in the centre of which two hands moved, and the archivault of which reproduced the twelve hours of the face sculptured in relief. Between the door and the rose, just as Scholastique had said, a maxim, relative to the employment of every moment of the day, appeared on a copper plate. Master Zacharius had once regulated this succession of devices with a really Christian solicitude; the hours of prayer, of work, of repast, of recreation, and of repose, followed each other according to the religious discipline, and were to infallibly insure salvation to him who scrupulously observed their commands.

Master Zacharius, intoxicated with joy, went forward to take possession of the clock, when a frightful roar of laughter resounded behind him.

He turned, and by the light of a smoky lamp recognized the little old man of Geneva.

“You here?” cried he.

Gerande was afraid. She drew closer to Aubert.

“Good-day, Master Zacharius,” said the monster.

“Who are you?”

“Signor Pittonaccio, at your service! You have come to give me your daughter! You have remembered my words, ‘Gerande will not wed Aubert.’”

The young apprentice rushed upon Pittonaccio, who escaped from him like a shadow.

“Stop, Aubert!” cried Master Zacharius.

“Good-night,” said Pittonaccio, and he disappeared.

“My father, let us fly from this hateful place!” cried Gerande. “My father!”

Master Zacharius was no longer there. He was pursuing the phantom of Pittonaccio across the rickety corridors. Scholastique, Gerande, and Aubert remained, speechless and fainting, in the large gloomy hall. The young girl had fallen upon a stone seat; the old servant knelt beside her, and prayed; Aubert remained erect, watching his betrothed. Pale lights wandered in the darkness, and the silence was only broken by the movements of the little animals which live in old wood, and the noise of which marks the hours of "death watch."

When daylight came, they ventured upon the endless staircase which wound beneath these ruined masses; for two hours they wandered thus without meeting a living soul, and hearing only a far-off echo responding to their cries. Sometimes they found themselves buried a hundred feet below the ground, and sometimes they reached places whence they could overlook the wild mountains.

Chance brought them at last back again to the vast hall, which had sheltered them during this night of anguish. It was no longer empty. Master Zacharius and Pittonaccio were talking there together, the one upright and rigid as a corpse, the other crouching over a marble table.

Master Zacharius, when he perceived Gerande, went forward and took her by the hand, and led her towards Pittonaccio, saying, "Behold your lord and master, my daughter. Gerande, behold your husband!"

Gerande shuddered from head to foot.

"Never!" cried Aubert, "for she is my betrothed."

"Never!" responded Gerande, like a plaintive echo.

Pittonaccio began to laugh.

“You wish me to die, then!” exclaimed the old man. “There, in that clock, the last which goes of all which have gone from my hands, my life is shut up; and this man tells me, ‘When I have thy daughter, this clock shall belong to thee.’ And this man will not rewind it. He can break it, and plunge me into chaos. Ah, my daughter, you no longer love me!”

“My father!” murmured Gerande, recovering consciousness.

“If you knew what I have suffered, far away from this principle of my existence!” resumed the old man. “Perhaps no one looked after this timepiece. Perhaps its springs were left to wear out, its wheels to get clogged. But now, in my own hands, I can nourish this health so dear, for I must not die, — I, the great watchmaker of Geneva. Look, my daughter, how these hands advance with certain step. See, five o’clock is about to strike. Listen well, and look at the maxim which is about to be revealed.”

Five o’clock struck with a noise which resounded sadly in Gerande’s soul, and these words appeared in red letters:

“YOU MUST EAT OF THE FRUITS OF THE TREE OF SCIENCE.”

Aubert and Gerande looked at each other stupefied. These were no longer the pious sayings of the Catholic watchmaker. The breath of Satan must have passed over it. But Zacharius paid no attention to this, and resumed —

“Dost thou hear, my Gerande? I live, I still live! Listen to my breathing, — see the blood circulating in my veins! No, thou wouldst not kill thy father, and thou wilt accept this man for thy husband, so that I may become immortal, and at last attain the power of God!”

At these blasphemous words old Scholastique crossed herself, and Pittonaccio laughed aloud with joy.

“And then, Gerande, thou wilt be happy with him. See this man, — he is Time! Thy existence will be regulated with absolute precision. Gerande, since I gave thee life, give life to thy father!”

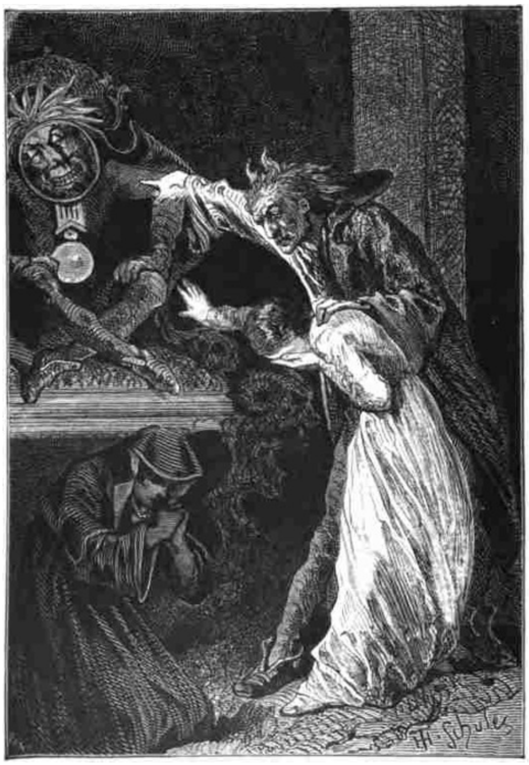

“See this man, — he is Time!”

“Gerande,” murmured Aubert, “I am thy betrothed.”

“He is my father!” replied Gerande, fainting.

“She is thine!” said Master Zacharius. “Pittonaccio, them wilt keep thy promise!”

“Here is the key of the clock,” replied the horrible man.

Master Zacharius seized the long key, which resembled an uncoiled snake, and ran to the clock, which he hastened to wind up with fantastic rapidity. The creaking of the spring jarred upon the nerves. The old watchmaker wound and wound the key, without stopping a moment, and it seemed as if the movement were beyond his control. He wound more and more quickly, with strange contortions, until he fell from sheer weariness.

“There, it is wound up for a century!” he cried.

Aubert rushed from the hall as if he were mad. After long wandering, he found the outlet of the hateful château, and hastened into the open air. He returned to the hermitage of Notre-Dame-du-Sex, and talked so despairingly to the holy recluse, that the latter consented to return with him to the château of Andernatt.

If, during these hours of anguish, Gerande had not wept, it was because her tears were exhausted.

Master Zacharius had not left the hall. He ran every moment to listen to the regular beating of the old clock.

Meanwhile the clock had struck, and to Scholastique’s great terror, these words had appeared on the silver face: — ”MAN OUGHT TO BECOME THE EQUAL OF GOD.”

The old man had not only not been shocked by these impious maxims, but read them deliriously, and flattered himself with thoughts of pride, whilst

Pittonaccio kept close by him.

The marriage-contract was to be signed at midnight. Gerande, almost unconscious, saw or heard nothing. The silence was only broken by the old man’s words, and the chuckling of Pittonaccio.

Eleven o’clock struck. Master Zacharius shuddered, and read in a loud voice: —

“MAN SHOULD BE THE SLAVE OF SCIENCE, AND

SACRIFICE TO IT RELATIVES AND FAMILY.”

“Yes!” he cried, “there is nothing but science in this world!”

The hands slipped over the face of the clock with the hiss of a serpent, and the pendulum beat with accelerated strokes.

Master Zacharius no longer spoke. He had fallen to the floor, his throat rattled, and from his oppressed bosom came only these half-broken words: “Life — science!”

The scene had now two new witnesses, the hermit and Aubert. Master Zacharius lay upon the floor; Gerande was praying beside him, more dead than alive.

Of a sudden a dry, hard noise was heard, which preceded the strike.

Master Zacharius sprang up.

“Midnight!” he cried.

The hermit stretched out his hand towards the old clock, — and midnight did not sound.

Master Zacharius uttered a terrible cry, which must have been heard in hell, when these words appeared: —

“WHO EVER SHALL ATTEMPT TO MAKE HIMSELF THE EQUAL OF GOD, SHALL BE FOR EVER DAMNED!”

The old clock burst with a noise like thunder, and the spring, escaping, leaped across the hall with a thousand fantastic contortions; the old man rose, ran after it, trying in vain to seize it, and exclaiming, “My soul, — my soul!”

The spring bounded before him, first on one side, then on the other, and he could not reach it.

At last Pittonaccio seized it, and, uttering a horrible blasphemy, ingulfed himself in the earth.

Master Zacharius fell backwards. He was dead.

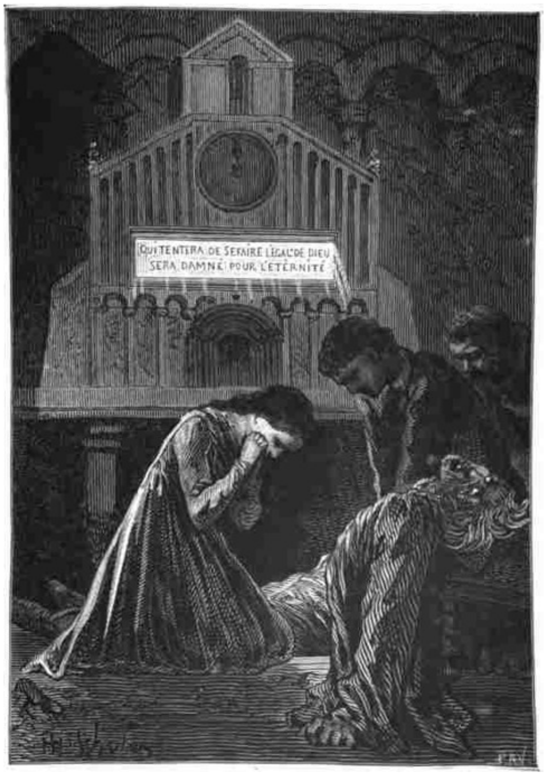
QUI TENTERA DE SE FAIRE L'ÉGAL DE DIEU
SERA DAMNÉ POUR L'ÉTERNITÉ

He was dead.

The old watchmaker was buried in the midst of the peaks of Andernatt.

Then Aubert and Gerande returned to Geneva, and during the long life which God accorded to them, they made it a duty to redeem by prayer the soul of the castaway of science.

A DRAMA IN THE AIR.

In the month of September, 185 — , I arrived at Frankfort-on-the-Maine. My passage through the principal German cities had been brilliantly marked by balloon ascents; but as yet no German had accompanied me in my car, and the fine experiments made at Paris by MM. Green, Eugene Godard, and Poitevin had not tempted the grave Teutons to essay aerial voyages.

But scarcely had the news of my approaching ascent spread through Frankfort, than three of the principal citizens begged the favour of being allowed to ascend with me. Two days afterwards we were to start from the Place de la Comédie. I began at once to get my balloon ready. It was of silk, prepared with gutta percha, a substance impermeable by acids or gasses; and its volume, which was three thousand cubic yards, enabled it to ascend to the loftiest heights.

The day of the ascent was that of the great September fair, which attracts so many people to Frankfort. Lighting gas, of a perfect quality and of great lifting power, had been furnished to me in excellent condition, and about eleven o'clock the balloon was filled; but only three-quarters filled, — an indispensable precaution, for, as one rises, the atmosphere diminishes in density, and the fluid enclosed within the balloon, acquiring more elasticity, might burst its sides. My calculations had furnished me with exactly the quantity of gas necessary to carry up my companions and myself.

We were to start at noon. The impatient crowd which pressed around the enclosed space, filling the enclosed square, overflowing into the contiguous streets, and covering the houses from the ground-floor to the slated gables, presented a striking scene. The high winds of the preceding days had subsided. An oppressive heat fell from the cloudless sky. Scarcely a breath animated the atmosphere. In such weather, one might descend again upon the very spot whence he had risen.

I carried three hundred pounds of ballast in bags; the car, quite round, four feet in diameter, was comfortably arranged; the hempen cords which supported it stretched symmetrically over the upper hemisphere of the balloon; the compass was in place, the barometer suspended in the circle which united the supporting cords, and the anchor carefully put in order. All was now ready for the ascent.

Among those who pressed around the enclosure, I remarked a young man with a pale face and agitated features. The sight of him impressed me. He was an eager spectator of my ascents, whom I had already met in several German cities. With an uneasy air, he closely watched the curious machine, as it lay motionless a few feet above the ground; and he remained silent among those about him.

Twelve o’clock came. The moment had arrived, but my travelling companions did not appear.

I sent to their houses, and learnt that one had left for Hamburg, another for Vienna, and the third for London. Their courage had failed them at the moment of undertaking one of those excursions which, thanks to the ability of living aeronauts, are free from all danger. As they formed, in some sort, a part of the programme of the day, the fear had seized them that they might be forced to execute it faithfully, and they had fled far from the scene at the instant when the balloon was being filled. Their courage was evidently the inverse ratio of their speed — in decamping.

The multitude, half deceived, showed not a little ill-humour. I did not hesitate to ascend alone. In order to re-establish the equilibrium between the specific gravity of the balloon and the weight which had thus proved wanting, I replaced my companions by more sacks of sand, and got into the car. The twelve men who held the balloon by twelve cords fastened to the equatorial circle, let them slip a little between their fingers, and the balloon rose several feet higher. There was not a breath of wind, and the atmosphere was so leaden that it seemed to forbid the ascent.

“Is everything ready?” I cried.

The men put themselves in readiness. A last glance told me that I might go.

“Attention!”

There was a movement in the crowd, which seemed to be invading the enclosure.

“Let go!”

The balloon rose slowly, but I experienced a shock which threw me to the bottom of the car.

When I got up, I found myself face to face with an unexpected fellow-voyager, — the pale young man.

“Monsieur, I salute you,” said he, with the utmost coolness.

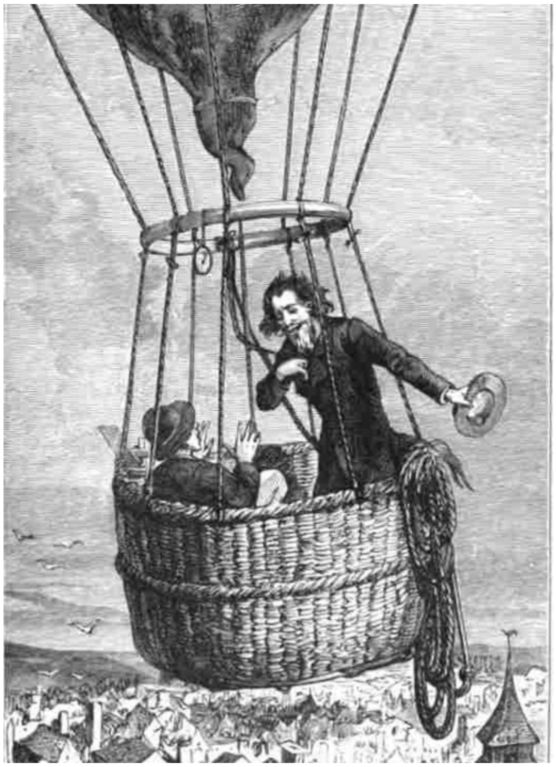

“Monsieur, I salute you,”

“By what right — ”

“Am I here? By the right which the impossibility of your getting rid of me confers.”

I was amazed! His calmness put me out of countenance, and I had nothing to reply. I looked at the intruder, but he took no notice of my astonishment.

“Does my weight disarrange your equilibrium, monsieur?” he asked. “You will permit me — ”

And without waiting for my consent, he relieved the balloon of two bags, which he threw into space.

“Monsieur,” said I, taking the only course now possible, “you have come; very well, you will remain; but to me alone belongs the management of the balloon.”

“Monsieur,” said he, “your urbanity is French all over: it comes from my own country. I morally press the hand you refuse me. Make all precautions, and act as seems best to you. I will wait till you have done — ”

“For what?”

“To talk with you.”

The barometer had fallen to twenty-six inches. We were nearly six hundred yards above the city; but nothing betrayed the horizontal displacement of the balloon, for the mass of air in which it is enclosed goes forward with it. A sort of confused glow enveloped the objects spread out under us, and unfortunately obscured their outline.

I examined my companion afresh.

He was a man of thirty years, simply clad. The sharpness of his features betrayed an indomitable energy, and he seemed very muscular. Indifferent to the astonishment he created, he remained motionless, trying to distinguish the objects which were vaguely confused below us.

“Miserable mist!” said he, after a few moments.

I did not reply.

“You owe me a grudge?” he went on. “Bah! I could not pay for my journey, and it was necessary to take you by surprise.”

“Nobody asks you to descend, monsieur!”

“Eh, do you not know, then, that the same thing happened to the Counts of Laurencin and Dampierre, when they ascended at Lyons, on the 15th of January, 1784? A young merchant, named Fontaine, scaled the gallery, at the risk of capsizing the machine. He accomplished the journey, and nobody died of it!”

“Once on the ground, we will have an explanation,” replied I, piqued at the light tone in which he spoke.

“Bah! Do not let us think of our return.”

“Do you think, then, that I shall not hasten to descend?”

“Descend!” said he, in surprise. “Descend? Let us begin by first ascending.”

And before I could prevent it, two more bags had been thrown over the car, without even having been emptied.

“Monsieur!” cried I, in a rage.

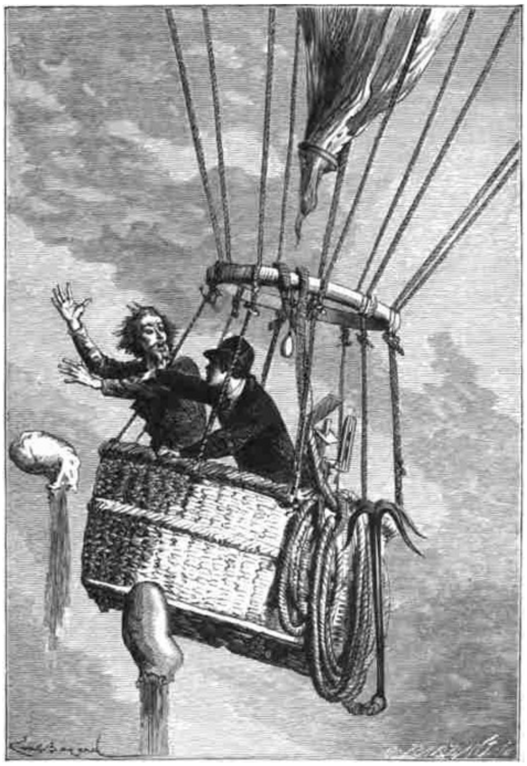

“Monsieur!” cried I, in a rage.

“I know your ability,” replied the unknown quietly, “and your fine ascents are famous. But if Experience is the sister of Practice, she is also a cousin of Theory, and I have studied the aerial art long. It has got into my head!” he added sadly, falling into a silent reverie.

The balloon, having risen some distance farther, now became stationary. The unknown consulted the barometer, and said, —

“Here we are, at eight hundred yards. Men are like insects. See! I think we should always contemplate them from this height, to judge correctly of their proportions. The Place de la Comédie is transformed into an immense ant-hill. Observe the crowd which is gathered on the quays; and the mountains also get smaller and smaller. We are over the Cathedral. The Main is only a line, cutting the city in two, and the bridge seems a thread thrown between the two banks of the river.”

The atmosphere became somewhat chilly.

“There is nothing I would not do for you, my host,” said the unknown. “If you are cold, I will take off my coat and lend it to you.”

“Thanks,” said I dryly.

“Bah! Necessity makes law. Give me your hand. I am your fellow-countryman; you will learn something in my company, and my conversation will indemnify you for the trouble I have given you.”

I sat down, without replying, at the opposite extremity of the car. The young man had taken a voluminous manuscript from his great-coat. It was an essay on ballooning.

“I possess,” said he, “the most curious collection of engravings and caricatures extant concerning aerial manias. How people admired and scoffed at the same time at this precious discovery! We are happily no longer in the age in which Montgolfier tried to make artificial clouds with steam, or a gas having electrical properties, produced by the combustion of moist straw and chopped-up wool.”

“Do you wish to depreciate the talent of the inventors?” I asked, for I had resolved to enter into the adventure. “Was it not good to have proved by experience the possibility of rising in the air?”

“Ah, monsieur, who denies the glory of the first aerial navigators? It required immense courage to rise by means of those frail envelopes which only contained heated air. But I ask you, has the aerial science made great progress since Blanchard’s ascensions, that is, since nearly a century ago? Look here, monsieur.”

The unknown took an engraving from his portfolio.

“Here,” said he, “is the first aerial voyage undertaken by Pilâtre des Rosiers and the Marquis d’Arlandes, four months after the discovery of balloons. Louis XVI. refused to consent to the venture, and two men who were condemned to death were the first to attempt the aerial ascent. Pilâtre des Rosiers became indignant at this injustice, and, by means of intrigues, obtained permission to make the experiment. The car, which renders the management easy, had not then been invented, and a circular gallery was placed around the lower and contracted part of the Montgolfier balloon. The two aeronauts must then remain motionless at each extremity of this gallery, for the moist straw which filled it forbade them all motion. A chafing-dish with fire was suspended below the orifice of the balloon; when the aeronauts wished to rise, they threw straw upon this brazier, at the risk of setting fire to the balloon, and the air, more heated, gave it fresh ascending power. The two bold travellers rose, on the 21st of November, 1783, from the Muette Gardens, which the dauphin had put at their disposal. The balloon went up majestically, passed over the Isle of Swans, crossed the Seine at the Conference barrier, and, drifting between the dome of the Invalides and the Military School, approached the Church of Saint Sulpice. Then the aeronauts added to the fire, crossed the Boulevard, and descended beyond the Enfer barrier. As it touched the soil, the balloon collapsed, and for a few moments buried Pilâtre des Rosiers under its folds.”

“Unlucky augury,” I said, interested in the story, which affected me nearly.

“An augury of the catastrophe which was later to cost this unfortunate man his life,” replied the unknown sadly. “Have you never experienced anything like it?”

“Never,”

“Bah! Misfortunes sometimes occur unforeshadowed!” added my companion.

He then remained silent.

Meanwhile we were advancing southward, and Frankfort had already passed from beneath us.

“Perhaps we shall have a storm,” said the young man.

“We shall descend before that,” I replied.

“Indeed! It is better to ascend. We shall escape it more surely.”

And two more bags of sand were hurled into space.

The balloon rose rapidly, and stopped at twelve hundred yards. I became colder; and yet the sun’s rays, falling upon the surface, expanded the gas within, and gave it a greater ascending force.

“Fear nothing,” said the unknown. “We have still three thousand five hundred fathoms of breathing air. Besides, do not trouble yourself about what I do.”

I would have risen, but a vigorous hand held me to my seat.

“Your name?” I asked.

“My name? What matters it to you?”

“I demand your name!”

“My name is Erostratus or Empedocles, whichever you choose!”

This reply was far from reassuring.

The unknown, besides, talked with such strange coolness that I anxiously asked myself whom I had to deal with.

“Monsieur,” he continued, “nothing original has been imagined since the physicist Charles. Four months after the discovery of balloons, this able man had invented the valve, which permits the gas to escape when the balloon is too full, or when you wish to descend; the car, which aids the management of the machine; the netting, which holds the envelope of the balloon, and divides the weight over its whole surface; the ballast, which enables you to ascend, and to choose the place of your landing; the india-rubber coating, which renders the tissue impermeable; the barometer, which shows the height attained. Lastly, Charles used hydrogen, which, fourteen times lighter than air, permits you to penetrate to the highest atmospheric regions, and does not expose you to the dangers of a combustion in the air. On the 1st of December, 1783, three hundred thousand spectators were crowded around the Tuileries. Charles rose, and the soldiers presented arms to him. He travelled nine leagues in the air, conducting his balloon with an ability not surpassed by modern aeronauts. The king awarded him a pension of two thousand livres; for then they encouraged new inventions.”

The unknown now seemed to be under the influence of considerable agitation.

“Monsieur,” he resumed, “I have studied this, and I am convinced that the first aeronauts guided their balloons. Without speaking of Blanchard, whose assertions may be received with doubt, Guyton-Morveaux, by the aid of oars and rudder, made his machine answer to the helm, and take the direction he determined on. More recently, M. Julien, a watchmaker, made some convincing experiments at the Hippodrome, in Paris; for, by a special mechanism, his aerial apparatus, oblong in form, went visibly against the wind. It occurred to M. Petin to place four hydrogen balloons together; and, by means of sails hung horizontally and partly folded, he hopes to be able to disturb the equilibrium, and, thus inclining the apparatus, to convey it in an oblique direction. They speak, also, of forces to overcome the resistance of currents, — for instance, the screw; but the screw, working on a moveable centre, will give no result. I, monsieur, have discovered the only means of guiding balloons; and no academy has come to my aid, no city has filled up subscriptions for me, no government has thought fit to listen to me! It is infamous!"

The unknown gesticulated fiercely, and the car underwent violent oscillations. I had much trouble in calming him.

Meanwhile the balloon had entered a more rapid current, and we advanced south, at fifteen hundred yards above the earth.

"See, there is Darmstadt," said my companion, leaning over the car. "Do you perceive the château? Not very distinctly, eh? What would you have? The heat of the storm makes the outline of objects waver, and you must have a skilled eye to recognize localities."

"Are you certain it is Darmstadt?" I asked.

"I am sure of it. We are now six leagues from Frankfort."

"Then we must descend."

“Descend! You would not go down, on the steeples,” said the unknown, with a chuckle.

“No, but in the suburbs of the city.”

“Well, let us avoid the steeples!”

So speaking, my companion seized some bags of ballast. I hastened to prevent him; but he overthrew me with one hand, and the unballasted balloon ascended to two thousand yards.

“Rest easy,” said he, “and do not forget that Brioschi, Biot, Gay-Lussac, Bixio, and Barral ascended to still greater heights to make their scientific experiments.”

“Monsieur, we must descend,” I resumed, trying to persuade him by gentleness. “The storm is gathering around us. It would be more prudent — ”

“Bah! We will mount higher than the storm, and then we shall no longer fear it!” cried my companion. “What is nobler than to overlook the clouds which oppress the earth? Is it not an honour thus to navigate on aerial billows? The greatest men have travelled as we are doing. The Marchioness and Countess de Montalembert, the Countess of Podenas, Mademoiselle la Garde, the Marquis de Montalembert, rose from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine for these unknown regions, and the Duke de Chartres exhibited much skill and presence of mind in his ascent on the 15th of July, 1784. At Lyons, the Counts of Laurencin and Dampierre; at Nantes, M. de Luynes; at Bordeaux, D’Arbelet des Granges; in Italy, the Chevalier Andreani; in our own time, the Duke of Brunswick, — have all left the traces of their glory in the air. To equal these great personages, we must penetrate still higher than they into the celestial depths! To approach the infinite is to comprehend it!”

The rarefaction of the air was fast expanding the hydrogen in the balloon, and I saw its lower part, purposely left empty, swell out, so that it was absolutely necessary to open the valve; but my companion did not seem to intend that I should manage the balloon as I wished. I then resolved to pull the valve cord secretly, as he was excitedly talking; for I feared to guess with whom I had to deal. It would have been too horrible! It was nearly a quarter before one. We had been gone forty minutes from Frankfort; heavy clouds were coming against the wind from the south, and seemed about to burst upon us.

“Have you lost all hope of succeeding in your project?” I asked with anxious interest.

“All hope!” exclaimed the unknown in a low voice. “Wounded by slights and caricatures, these asses’ kicks have finished me! It is the eternal punishment reserved for innovators! Look at these caricatures of all periods, of which my portfolio is full.”

While my companion was fumbling with his papers, I had seized the valve-cord without his perceiving it. I feared, however, that he might hear the hissing noise, like a water-course, which the gas makes in escaping.

“How many jokes were made about the Abbé Miolan!” said he. “He was to go up with Janninet and Bredin. During the filling their balloon caught fire, and the ignorant populace tore it in pieces! Then this caricature of ‘curious animals’ appeared, giving each of them a punning nickname.”

I pulled the valve-cord, and the barometer began to ascend. It was time. Some far-off rumblings were heard in the south.

“Here is another engraving,” resumed the unknown, not suspecting what I was doing. “It is an immense balloon carrying a ship, strong castles, houses, and so on. The caricaturists did not suspect that their follies would one day become truths. It is complete, this large vessel. On the left is its helm, with the pilot’s box; at the prow are pleasure-houses, an immense organ, and a cannon to call the attention of the inhabitants of the earth or the moon; above the poop there are the observatory and the balloon long-boat; in the equatorial circle, the army barrack; on the left, the funnel; then the upper galleries for promenading, sails, pinions; below, the cafés and general storehouse. Observe this pompous announcement: ‘Invented for the happiness of the human race, this globe will depart at once for the ports of the Levant, and on its return the programme of its voyages to the two poles and the extreme west will be announced. No one need furnish himself with anything; everything is foreseen, and all will prosper. There will be a uniform price for all places of destination, but it will be the same for the most distant countries of our hemisphere — that is to say, a thousand louis for one of any of the said journeys. And it must be confessed that this sum is very moderate, when the speed, comfort, and arrangements which will be enjoyed on the balloon are considered — arrangements which are not to be found on land, while on the balloon each passenger may consult his own habits and tastes. This is so true that in the same place some will be dancing, others standing; some will be enjoying delicacies; others fasting. Whoever desires the society of wits may satisfy himself; whoever is stupid may find stupid people to keep him company. Thus pleasure will be the soul of the aerial company.’ All this provoked laughter; but before long, if I am not cut off, they will see it all realized.”

We were visibly descending. He did not perceive it!

“This kind of ‘game at balloons,’” he resumed, spreading out before me some of the engravings of his valuable collection, “this game contains the entire history of the aerostatic art. It is used by elevated minds, and is played with dice and counters, with whatever stakes you like, to be paid or received according to where the player arrives.”

“Why,” said I, “you seem to have studied the science of aerostation profoundly.”

“Yes, monsieur, yes! From Phaethon, Icarus, Architas, I have searched for, examined, learnt everything. I could render immense services to the world in this art, if God granted me life. But that will not be!”

“Why?”

“Because my name is Empedocles, or Erostratus.”

Meanwhile, the balloon was happily approaching the earth; but when one is falling, the danger is as great at a hundred feet as at five thousand.

“Do you recall the battle of Fleurus?” resumed my companion, whose face became more and more animated. “It was at that battle that Contello, by order of the Government, organized a company of balloonists. At the siege of Manbenge General Jourdan derived so much service from this new method of observation that Contello ascended twice a day with the general himself. The communications between the aeronaut and his agents who held the balloon were made by means of small white, red, and yellow flags. Often the gun and cannon shot were directed upon the balloon when he ascended, but without result. When General Jourdan was preparing to invest

Charleroi, Contello went into the vicinity, ascended from the plain of Jumet, and continued his observations for seven or eight hours with General Morlot, and this no doubt aided in giving us the victory of Fleurus. General Jourdan publicly acknowledged the help which the aeronautical observations had afforded him. Well, despite the services rendered on that occasion and during the Belgian campaign, the year which had seen the beginning of the military career of balloons saw also its end. The school of Meudon, founded by the Government, was closed by Buonaparte on his return from Egypt. And now, what can you expect from the new-born infant? as Franklin said. The infant was born alive; it should not be stifled!"

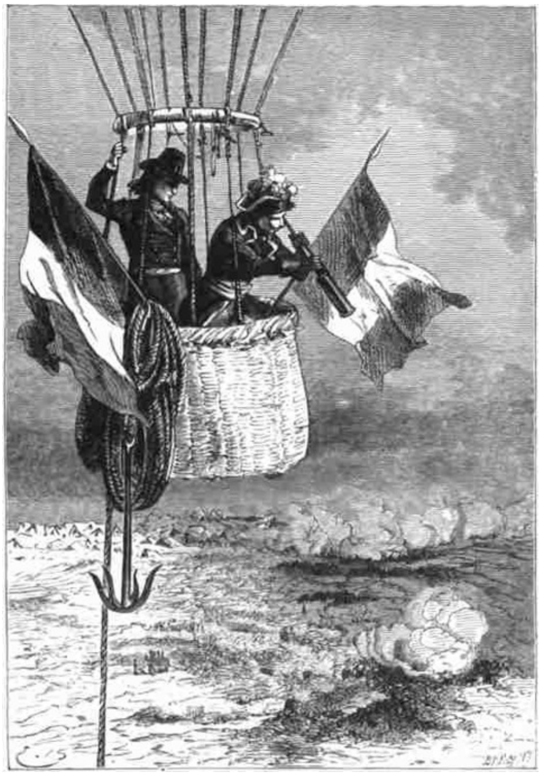

"He continued his observations for seven or eight hours with General Morlot"

The unknown bowed his head in his hands, and reflected for some moments; then raising his head, he said, —

“Despite my prohibition, monsieur, you have opened the valve.”

I dropped the cord.

“Happily,” he resumed, “we have still three hundred pounds of ballast.”

“What is your purpose?” said I.

“Have you ever crossed the seas?” he asked.

I turned pale.

“It is unfortunate,” he went on, “that we are being driven towards the Adriatic. That is only a stream; but higher up we may find other currents.”

And, without taking any notice of me, he threw over several bags of sand; then, in a menacing voice, he said, —

“I let you open the valve because the expansion of the gas threatened to burst the balloon; but do not do it again!”

Then he went on as follows: —

“You remember the voyage of Blanchard and Jeffries from Dover to Calais? It was magnificent! On the 7th of January, 1785, there being a north-west wind, their balloon was inflated with gas on the Dover coast. A mistake of equilibrium, just as they were ascending, forced them to throw out their ballast so that they might not go down again, and they only kept thirty pounds. It was too little; for, as the wind did not freshen, they only advanced very slowly towards the French coast. Besides, the permeability of the tissue served to reduce the inflation little by little, and in an hour and a half the aeronauts perceived that they were descending.

“‘What shall we do?’ said Jeffries.

“‘We are only one quarter of the way over,’ replied Blanchard, ‘and very low down. On rising, we shall perhaps meet more favourable winds.’

“‘Let us throw out the rest of the sand.’

“The balloon acquired some ascending force, but it soon began to descend again. Towards the middle of the transit the aeronauts threw over their books and tools. A quarter of an hour after, Blanchard said to Jeffries, —

“‘The barometer?’

“‘It is going up! We are lost, and yet there is the French coast.’

“A loud noise was heard.

“‘Has the balloon burst?’ asked Jeffries.

“‘No. The loss of the gas has reduced the inflation of the lower part of the balloon. But we are still descending. We are lost! Out with everything useless!’

“Provisions, oars, and rudder were thrown into the sea. The aeronauts were only one hundred yards high.

“‘We are going up again,’ said the doctor.

“‘No. It is the spurt caused by the diminution of the weight, and not a ship in sight, not a bark on the horizon! To the sea with our clothing!’

“The unfortunates stripped themselves, but the balloon continued to descend.

“‘Blanchard,’ said Jeffries, ‘you should have made this voyage alone; you consented to take me; I will sacrifice myself! I am going to throw myself into the water, and the balloon, relieved of my weight, will mount again.’

“‘No, no! It is frightful!’

“The balloon became less and less inflated, and as it doubled up its concavity pressed the gas against the sides, and hastened its downward course.

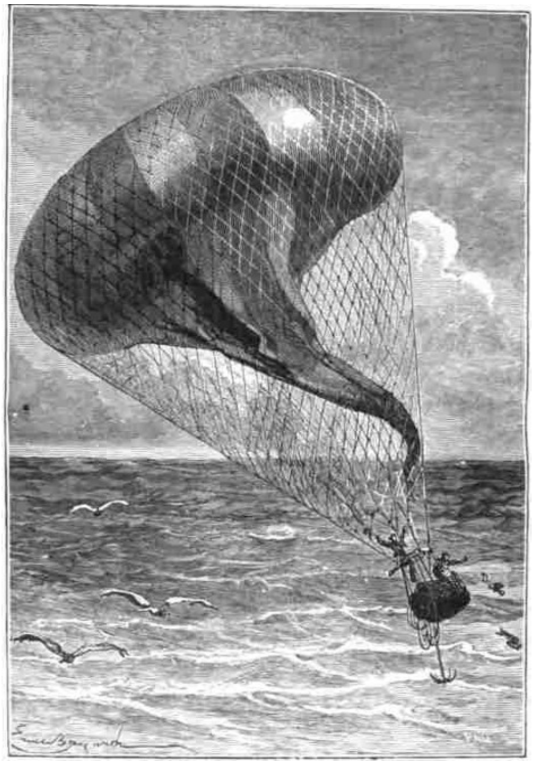

The balloon became less and less inflated

“‘Adieu, my friend,” said the doctor. ‘God preserve you!’

“He was about to throw himself over, when Blanchard held him back.

"'There is one more chance,' said he. 'We can cut the cords which hold the car, and cling to the net! Perhaps the balloon will rise. Let us hold ourselves ready. But — the barometer is going down! The wind is freshening! We are saved!'

"The aeronauts perceived Calais. Their joy was delirious. A few moments more, and they had fallen in the forest of Guines. I do not doubt," added the unknown, "that, under similar circumstances, you would have followed Doctor Jeffries' example!"

The clouds rolled in glittering masses beneath us. The balloon threw large shadows on this heap of clouds, and was surrounded as by an aureola. The thunder rumbled below the car. All this was terrifying.

"Let us descend!" I cried.

"Descend, when the sun is up there, waiting for us? Out with more bags!"

And more than fifty pounds of ballast were cast over.

At a height of three thousand five hundred yards we remained stationary.

The unknown talked unceasingly. I was in a state of complete prostration, while he seemed to be in his element.

"With a good wind, we shall go far," he cried. "In the Antilles there are currents of air which have a speed of a hundred leagues an hour. When Napoleon was crowned, Garnerin sent up a balloon with coloured lamps, at eleven o'clock at night. The wind was blowing north-north-west. The next morning, at daybreak, the inhabitants of Rome greeted its passage over the dome of St. Peter's. We shall go farther and higher!"

I scarcely heard him. Everything whirled around me. An opening appeared in the clouds.

“See that city,” said the unknown. “It is Spires!”

I leaned over the car and perceived a small blackish mass. It was Spires. The Rhine, which is so large, seemed an unrolled ribbon. The sky was a deep blue over our heads. The birds had long abandoned us, for in that rarefied air they could not have flown. We were alone in space, and I in presence of this unknown!

“It is useless for you to know whither I am leading you,” he said, as he threw the compass among the clouds. “Ah! a fall is a grand thing! You know that but few victims of ballooning are to be reckoned, from Pilâtre des Rosiers to Lieutenant Gale, and that the accidents have always been the result of imprudence. Pilâtre des Rosiers set out with Romain of Boulogne, on the 13th of June, 1785. To his gas balloon he had affixed a Montgolfier apparatus of hot air, so as to dispense, no doubt, with the necessity of losing gas or throwing out ballast. It was putting a torch under a powder-barrel. When they had ascended four hundred yards, and were taken by opposing winds, they were driven over the open sea. Pilâtre, in order to descend, essayed to open the valve, but the valve-cord became entangled in the balloon, and tore it so badly that it became empty in an instant. It fell upon the Montgolfier apparatus, overturned it, and dragged down the unfortunates, who were soon shattered to pieces! It is frightful, is it not?”

I could only reply, “For pity’s sake, let us descend!”

The clouds gathered around us on every side, and dreadful detonations, which reverberated in the cavity of the balloon, took place beneath us.

“You provoke me,” cried the unknown, “and you shall no longer know whether we are rising or falling!”

The barometer went the way of the compass, accompanied by several more bags of sand. We must have been 5000 yards high. Some icicles had already attached themselves to the sides of the car, and a kind of fine snow seemed to penetrate to my very bones. Meanwhile a frightful tempest was raging under us, but we were above it.

“Do not be afraid,” said the unknown. “It is only the imprudent who are lost. Olivari, who perished at Orleans, rose in a paper ‘Montgolfier;’ his car, suspended below the chafing-dish, and ballasted with combustible materials, caught fire; Olivari fell, and was killed! Mosment rose, at Lille, on a light tray; an oscillation disturbed his equilibrium; Mosment fell, and was killed! Bittorf, at Mannheim, saw his balloon catch fire in the air; and he, too, fell, and was killed! Harris rose in a badly constructed balloon, the valve of which was too large and would not shut; Harris fell, and was killed! Sadler, deprived of ballast by his long sojourn in the air, was dragged over the town of Boston and dashed against the chimneys; Sadler fell, and was killed! Cokling descended with a convex parachute which he pretended to have perfected; Cokling fell, and was killed! Well, I love them, these victims of their own imprudence, and I shall die as they did. Higher! still higher!”

All the phantoms of this necrology passed before my eyes. The rarefaction of the air and the sun’s rays added to the expansion of the gas, and the balloon continued to mount. I tried mechanically to open the valve, but the unknown cut the cord several feet above my head. I was lost!

“Did you see Madame Blanchard fall?” said he. “I saw her; yes, I! I was at Tivoli on the 6th of July, 1819. Madame Blanchard rose in a small sized balloon, to avoid the expense of filling, and she was forced to entirely inflate it. The gas leaked out below, and left a regular train of hydrogen in its path. She carried with her a sort of pyrotechnic aureola, suspended below her car by a wire, which she was to set off in the air. This she had done many times before. On this day she also carried up a small parachute ballasted by a firework contrivance, that would go off in a shower of silver. She was to start this contrivance after having lighted it with a port-fire made on purpose. She set out; the night was gloomy. At the moment of lighting her fireworks she was so imprudent as to pass the taper under the column of hydrogen which was leaking from the balloon. My eyes were fixed upon her. Suddenly an unexpected gleam lit up the darkness. I thought she was preparing a surprise. The light flashed out, suddenly disappeared and reappeared, and gave the summit of the balloon the shape of an immense jet of ignited gas. This sinister glow shed itself over the Boulevard and the whole Montmartre quarter. Then I saw the unhappy woman rise, try twice to close the appendage of the balloon, so as to put out the fire, then sit down in her car and try to guide her descent; for she did not fall. The combustion of the gas lasted for several minutes. The balloon, becoming gradually less, continued to descend, but it was not a fall. The wind blew from the north-west and drove it towards Paris. There were then some large gardens just by the house No. 16, Rue de Provence. Madame Blanchard essayed to fall there without danger: but the balloon and the car struck on the roof of the house with a light shock. ‘Save me!’ cried the wretched woman. I got into the street at this moment. The car slid along the roof, and encountered an iron cramp. At this concussion, Madame Blanchard was thrown out of her car and precipitated upon the pavement. She was killed!”

These stories froze me with horror. The unknown was standing with bare head, dishevelled hair, haggard eyes!

There was no longer any illusion possible. I at last recognized the horrible truth. I was in the presence of a madman!

He threw out the rest of the ballast, and we must have now reached a height of at least nine thousand yards. Blood spurted from my nose and mouth!

“Who are nobler than the martyrs of science?” cried the lunatic. “They are canonized by posterity.”

But I no longer heard him. He looked about him, and, bending down to my ear, muttered, —

“And have you forgotten Zambecarri’s catastrophe? Listen. On the 7th of October, 1804, the clouds seemed to lift a little. On the preceding days, the wind and rain had not ceased; but the announced ascension of Zambecarri could not be postponed. His enemies were already bantering him. It was necessary to ascend, to save the science and himself from becoming a public jest. It was at Boulogne. No one helped him to inflate his balloon.

“He rose at midnight, accompanied by Andreoli and Grossetti. The balloon mounted slowly, for it had been perforated by the rain, and the gas was leaking out. The three intrepid aeronauts could only observe the state of the barometer by aid of a dark lantern. Zambecarri had eaten nothing for twenty-four hours. Grossetti was also fasting.

“‘My friends,’ said Zambecarri, ‘I am overcome by cold, and exhausted. I am dying.’

“He fell inanimate in the gallery. It was the same with Grossetti. Andreoli alone remained conscious. After long efforts, he succeeded in reviving Zambecarri.

“‘What news? Whither are we going? How is the wind? What time is it?’

“‘It is two o’clock.’

“‘Where is the compass?’

“‘Upset!’

“‘Great God! The lantern has gone out!’

“‘It cannot burn in this rarefied air,’ said Zambecarri.

“The moon had not risen, and the atmosphere was plunged in murky darkness.

“‘I am cold, Andreoli. What shall I do?’

“They slowly descended through a layer of whitish clouds.

“‘Sh!’ said Andreoli. ‘Do you hear?’

“‘What?’ asked Zambecarri.

“‘A strange noise.’

“‘You are mistaken.’

“‘No.’

“Consider these travellers, in the middle of the night, listening to that unaccountable noise! Are they going to knock against a tower? Are they about to be precipitated on the roofs?

“‘Do you hear? One would say it was the noise of the sea.’

“‘Impossible!’

“‘It is the groaning of the waves!’

“‘It is true.’

“‘Light! light!’

“After five fruitless attempts, Andreoli succeeded in obtaining light. It was three o’clock.

“The voice of violent waves was heard. They were almost touching the surface of the sea!

“‘We are lost!’ cried Zambecarri, seizing a large bag of sand.

“‘Help!’ cried Andreoli.

“The car touched the water, and the waves came up to their breasts.

“‘Throw out the instruments, clothes, money!’

“The aeronauts completely stripped themselves. The balloon, relieved, rose with frightful rapidity. Zambecarri was taken with vomiting. Grossetti bled profusely. The unfortunate men could not speak, so short was their breathing. They were taken with cold, and they were soon crusted over with ice. The moon looked as red as blood.

“After traversing the high regions for a half-hour, the balloon again fell into the sea. It was four in the morning. They were half submerged in the water, and the balloon dragged them along, as if under sail, for several hours.

“At daybreak they found themselves opposite Pesaro, four miles from the coast. They were about to reach it, when a gale blew them back into the open sea. They were lost! The frightened boats fled at their approach. Happily, a more intelligent boatman accosted them, hoisted them on board, and they landed at Ferrada.

“A frightful journey, was it not? But Zambecarri was a brave and energetic man. Scarcely recovered from his sufferings, he resumed his ascensions. During one of them he struck against a tree; his spirit-lamp was broken on his clothes; he was enveloped in fire, his balloon began to catch the flames, and he came down half consumed.

“At last, on the 21st of September, 1812, he made another ascension at Boulogne. The balloon clung to a tree, and his lamp again set it on fire. Zambecarri fell, and was killed! And in presence of these facts, we would still hesitate! No. The higher we go, the more glorious will be our death!”

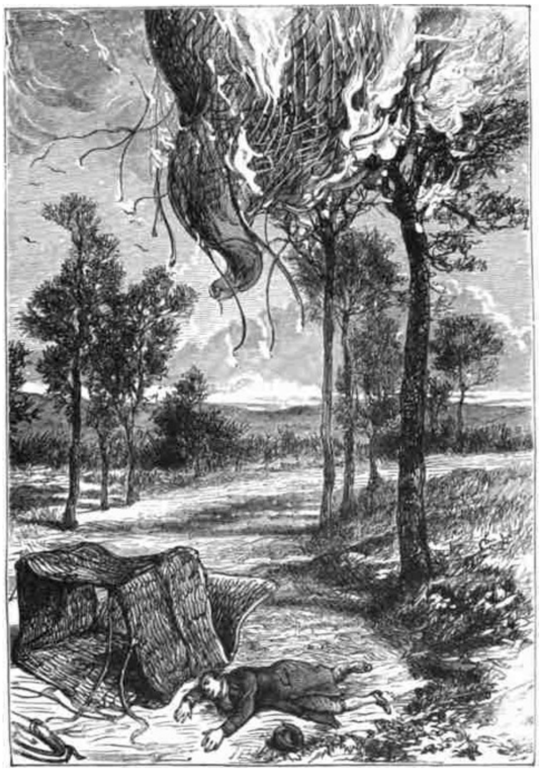

“Zambecarri fell, and was killed!”

The balloon being now entirely relieved of ballast and of all it contained, we were carried to an enormous height. It vibrated in the atmosphere. The least noise resounded in the vaults of heaven. Our globe, the only object which caught my view in immensity, seemed ready to be annihilated, and above us the depths of the starry skies were lost in thick darkness.

I saw my companion rise up before me.

“The hour is come!” he said. “We must die. We are rejected of men. They despise us. Let us crush them!”

“Mercy!” I cried.

“Let us cut these cords! Let this car be abandoned in space. The attractive force will change its direction, and we shall approach the sun!”

Despair galvanized me. I threw myself upon the madman, we struggled together, and a terrible conflict took place. But I was thrown down, and while he held me under his knee, the madman was cutting the cords of the car.

“One!” he cried.

“My God!”

“Two! Three!”

I made a superhuman effort, rose up, and violently repulsed the madman.

“Four!”

The car fell, but I instinctively clung to the cords and hoisted myself into the meshes of the netting.

The madman disappeared in space!

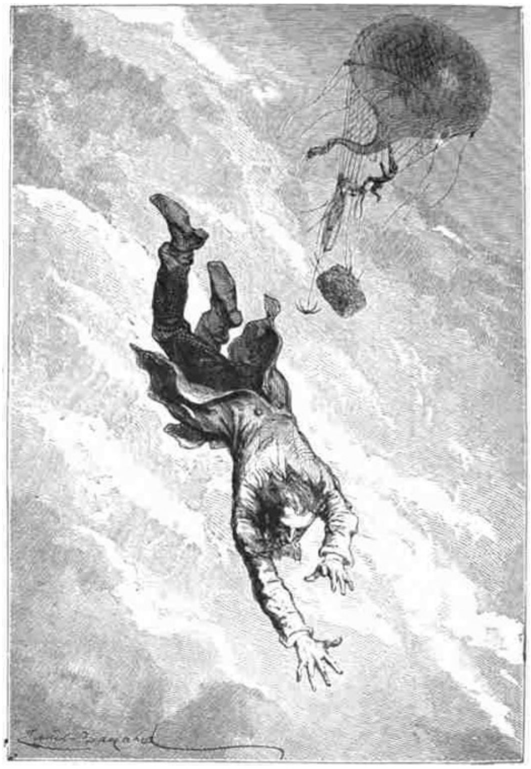

The madman disappeared in space!

The balloon was raised to an immeasurable height. A horrible cracking was heard. The gas, too much dilated, had burst the balloon. I shut my eyes —

Some instants after, a damp warmth revived me. I was in the midst of clouds on fire. The balloon turned over with dizzy velocity. Taken by the wind, it made a hundred leagues an hour in a horizontal course, the lightning flashing around it.

Meanwhile my fall was not a very rapid one. When I opened my eyes, I saw the country. I was two miles from the sea, and the tempest was driving me violently towards it, when an abrupt shock forced me to loosen my hold. My hands opened, a cord slipped swiftly between my fingers, and I found myself on the solid earth!

It was the cord of the anchor, which, sweeping along the surface of the ground, was caught in a crevice; and my balloon, unballasted for the last time, careered off to lose itself beyond the sea.

When I came to myself, I was in bed in a peasant's cottage, at Harderwick, a village of La Gueldre, fifteen leagues from Amsterdam, on the shores of the Zuyder-Zee.

A miracle had saved my life, but my voyage had been a series of imprudences, committed by a lunatic, and I had not been able to prevent them.

May this terrible narrative, though instructing those who read it, not discourage the explorers of the air.

A WINTER AMID THE ICE

CHAPTER I

THE BLACK FLAG

The curé of the ancient church of Dunkirk rose at five o’clock on the 12th of May, 18 — , to perform, according to his custom, low mass for the benefit of a few pious sinners.

Attired in his priestly robes, he was about to proceed to the altar, when a man entered the sacristy, at once joyous and frightened. He was a sailor of some sixty years, but still vigorous and sturdy, with, an open, honest countenance.

“Monsieur the curé,” said he, “stop a moment, if you please.”

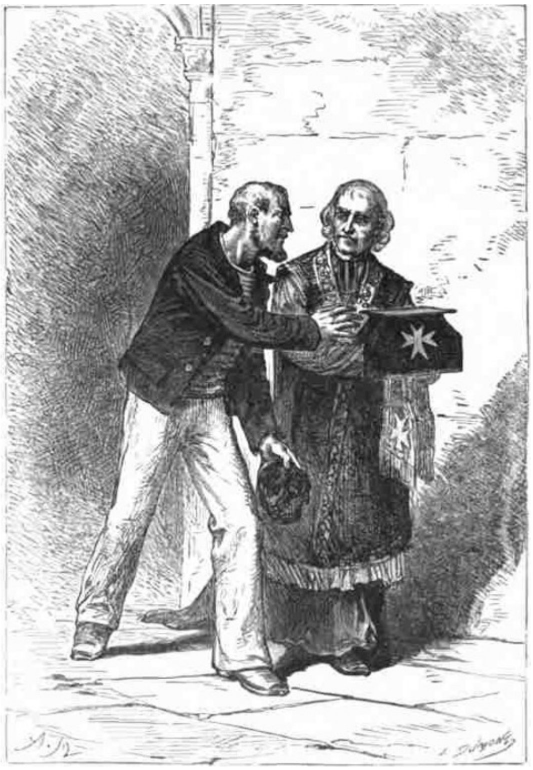

“Monsieur the curé,” said he, “stop a moment, if you please.”

“What do you want so early in the morning, Jean Cornbutte?” asked the curé.

“What do I want? Why, to embrace you in my arms, i’ faith!”

“Well, after the mass at which you are going to be present — ”

“The mass?” returned the old sailor, laughing. “Do you think you are going to say your mass now, and that I will let you do so?”

“And why should I not say my mass?” asked the curé. “Explain yourself. The third bell has sounded — ”

“Whether it has or not,” replied Jean Cornbutte, “it will sound many more times to-day, monsieur the curé, for you have promised me that you will bless, with your own hands, the marriage of my son Louis and my niece Marie!”

“He has arrived, then,” said the curé “joyfully.

“It is nearly the same thing,” replied Cornbutte, rubbing his hands. “Our brig was signalled from the look out at sunrise, — our brig, which you yourself christened by the good name of the ‘Jeune-Hardie’!”

“I congratulate you with all my heart, Cornbutte,” said the curé, taking off his chasuble and stole. “I remember our agreement. The vicar will take my place, and I will put myself at your disposal against your dear son’s arrival.”

“And I promise you that he will not make you fast long,” replied the sailor. “You have already published the banns, and you will only have to absolve him from the sins he may have committed between sky and water, in the Northern Ocean. I had a good idea, that the marriage should be celebrated the very day he arrived, and that my son Louis should leave his ship to repair at once to the church."

"Go, then, and arrange everything, Cornbutte."

"I fly, monsieur the curé. Good morning!"

The sailor hastened with rapid steps to his house, which stood on the quay, whence could be seen the Northern Ocean, of which he seemed so proud.

Jean Cornbutte had amassed a comfortable sum at his calling. After having long commanded the vessels of a rich shipowner of Havre, he had settled down in his native town, where he had caused the brig "Jeune-Hardie" to be constructed at his own expense. Several successful voyages had been made in the North, and the ship always found a good sale for its cargoes of wood, iron, and tar. Jean Cornbutte then gave up the command of her to his son Louis, a fine sailor of thirty, who, according to all the coasting captains, was the boldest mariner in Dunkirk.

Louis Cornbutte had gone away deeply attached to Marie, his father's niece, who found the time of his absence very long and weary. Marie was scarcely twenty. She was a pretty Flemish girl, with some Dutch blood in her veins. Her mother, when she was dying, had confided her to her brother, Jean Cornbutte. The brave old sailor loved her as a daughter, and saw in her proposed union with Louis a source of real and durable happiness.

The arrival of the ship, already signalled off the coast, completed an important business operation, from which Jean Cornbutte expected large profits. The "Jeune-Hardie," which had left three months before, came last from Bodoë, on the west coast of Norway, and had made a quick voyage thence.

On returning home, Jean Cornbutte found the whole house alive. Marie, with radiant face, had assumed her wedding-dress.

“I hope the ship will not arrive before we are ready!” she said.

“Hurry, little one,” replied Jean Cornbutte, “for the wind is north, and she sails well, you know, when she goes freely.”

“Have our friends been told, uncle?” asked Marie.

“They have.”

“The notary, and the curé?”

“Rest easy. You alone are keeping us waiting.”

At this moment Clerbaut, an old crony, came in.

“Well, old Cornbutte,” cried he, “here’s luck! Your ship has arrived at the very moment that the government has decided to contract for a large quantity of wood for the navy!”

“What is that to me?” replied Jean Cornbutte. “What care I for the government?”

“You see, Monsieur Clerbaut,” said Marie, “one thing only absorbs us, — Louis’s return.”

“I don’t dispute that,” replied Clerbaut. “But — in short — this purchase of wood — ”

“And you shall be at the wedding,” replied Jean Cornbutte, interrupting the merchant, and shaking his hand as if he would crush it.

“This purchase of wood — ”

“And with all our friends, landsmen and seamen, Clerbaut. I have already informed everybody, and I shall invite the whole crew of the ship.”

“And shall we go and await them on the pier?” asked Marie.

“Indeed we will,” replied Jean Cornbutte. “We will defile, two by two, with the violins at the head.”

Jean Cornbutte’s invited guests soon arrived. Though it was very early, not a single one failed to appear. All congratulated the honest old sailor whom they loved. Meanwhile Marie, kneeling down, changed her prayers to God into thanksgivings. She soon returned, lovely and decked out, to the company; and all the women kissed her on the check, while the men vigorously grasped her by the hand. Then Jean Cornbutte gave the signal of departure.

It was a curious sight to see this joyous group taking its way, at sunrise, towards the sea. The news of the ship’s arrival had spread through the port, and many heads, in nightcaps, appeared at the windows and at the half-opened doors. Sincere compliments and pleasant nods came from every side.

The party reached the pier in the midst of a concert of praise and blessings. The weather was magnificent, and the sun seemed to take part in the festivity. A fresh north wind made the waves foam; and some fishing-smacks, their sails trimmed for leaving port, streaked the sea with their rapid wakes between the breakwaters.

The two piers of Dunkirk stretch far out into the sea. The wedding-party occupied the whole width of the northern pier, and soon reached a small house situated at its extremity, inhabited by the harbour-master. The wind freshened, and the “Jeune-Hardie” ran swiftly under her topsails, mizzen, brigantine, gallant, and royal. There was evidently rejoicing on board as well as on land. Jean Cornbutte, spy-glass in hand, responded merrily to the questions of his friends.

“See my ship!” he cried; “clean and steady as if she had been rigged at Dunkirk! Not a bit of damage done, — not a rope wanting!”

“Do you see your son, the captain?” asked one.

“No, not yet. Why, he’s at his business!”

“Why doesn’t he run up his flag?” asked Clerbaut.

“I scarcely know, old friend. He has a reason for it, no doubt.”

“Your spy-glass, uncle?” said Marie, taking it from him. “I want to be the first to see him.”

“But he is my son, mademoiselle!”

“He has been your son for thirty years,” answered the young girl, laughing, “and he has only been my betrothed for two!”

The “Jeune-Hardie” was now entirely visible. Already the crew were preparing to cast anchor. The upper sails had been reefed. The sailors who were among the rigging might be recognized. But neither Marie nor Jean Cornbutte had yet been able to wave their hands at the captain of the ship.

“Faith! there’s the first mate, André Vasling,” cried Clerbaut.

“And there’s Fidèle Misonne, the carpenter,” said another.

“And our friend Penellan,” said a third, saluting the sailor named.

The “Jeune-Hardie” was only three cables’ lengths from the shore, when a black flag ascended to the gaff of the brigantine. There was mourning on board!

A shudder of terror seized the party and the heart of the young girl.

The ship sadly swayed into port, and an icy silence reigned on its deck. Soon it had passed the end of the pier. Marie, Jean Cornbutte, and all their friends hurried towards the quay at which she was to anchor, and in a moment found themselves on board.

“My son!” said Jean Cornbutte, who could only articulate these words.

The sailors, with uncovered heads, pointed to the mourning flag.

Marie uttered a cry of anguish, and fell into old Cornbutte’s arms.

André Vasling had brought back the “Jeune-Hardie,” but Louis Cornbutte, Marie’s betrothed, was not on board.

CHAPTER II.

Jean Cornbutte's Project.

As soon as the young girl, confided to the care of the sympathizing friends, had left the ship, André Vasling, the mate, apprised Jean Cornbutte of the dreadful event which had deprived him of his son, narrated in the ship's journal as follows: —

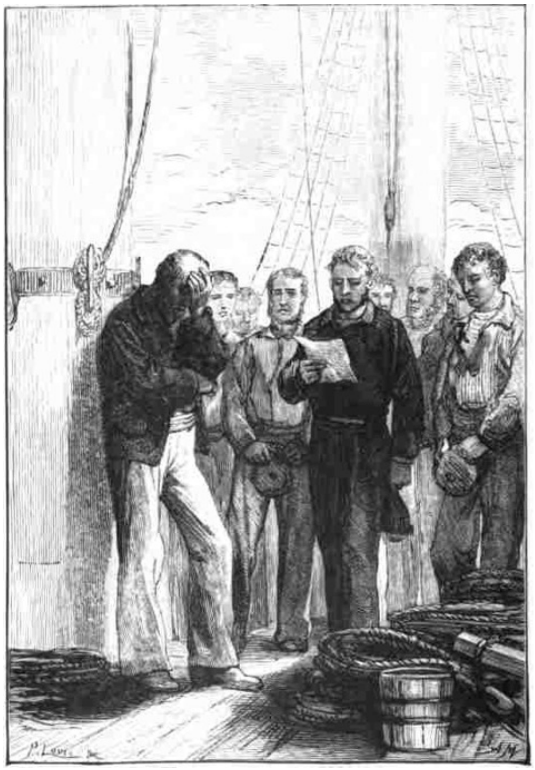

André Vasling, the mate, apprised Jean Cornbutte of the dreadful event

"At the height of the Maëlstrom, on the 26th of April, the ship, putting for the cape, by reason of bad weather and south-west winds, perceived signals of distress made by a schooner to the leeward. This schooner, deprived of its mizzen-mast, was running towards the whirlpool, under bare poles. Captain Louis Cornbutte, seeing that this vessel was hastening into imminent danger, resolved to go on board her. Despite the remonstrances of his crew, he had the long-boat lowered into the sea, and got into it, with the sailor Courtois and the helmsman Pierre Nouquet. The crew watched them until they disappeared in the fog. Night came on. The sea became more and more boisterous. The “Jeune-Hardie”, drawn by the currents in those parts, was in danger of being engulfed by the Maëlstrom. She was obliged to fly before the wind. For several days she hovered near the place of the disaster, but in vain. The long-boat, the schooner, Captain Louis, and the two sailors did not reappear. André Vasling then called the crew together, took command of the ship, and set sail for Dunkirk.”

After reading this dry narrative, Jean Cornbutte wept for a long time; and if he had any consolation, it was the thought that his son had died in attempting to save his fellow-men. Then the poor father left the ship, the sight of which made him wretched, and returned to his desolate home.

The sad news soon spread throughout Dunkirk. The many friends of the old sailor came to bring him their cordial and sincere sympathy. Then the sailors of the “Jeune-Hardie” gave a more particular account of the event, and André Vasling told Marie, at great length, of the devotion of her betrothed to the last.

When he ceased weeping, Jean Cornbutte thought over the matter, and the next day after the ship’s arrival, when Andre came to see him, said, —

“Are you very sure, André, that my son has perished?”

“Alas, yes, Monsieur Jean,” replied the mate.

“And you made all possible search for him?”

"All, Monsieur Cornbutte. But it is unhappily but too certain that he and the two sailors were sucked down in the whirlpool of the Maëlstrom."

"Would you like, André, to keep the second command of the ship?"

"That will depend upon the captain, Monsieur Cornbutte."

"I shall be the captain," replied the old sailor. "I am going to discharge the cargo with all speed, make up my crew, and sail in search of my son."

"Your son is dead!" said André obstinately.

"It is possible, Andre," replied Jean Cornbutte sharply, "but it is also possible that he saved himself. I am going to rummage all the ports of Norway whither he might have been driven, and when I am fully convinced that I shall never see him again, I will return here to die!"

André Vasling, seeing that this decision was irrevocable, did not insist further, but went away.

Jean Cornbutte at once apprised his niece of his intention, and he saw a few rays of hope glisten across her tears. It had not seemed to the young girl that her lover's death might be doubtful; but scarcely had this new hope entered her heart, than she embraced it without reserve.

The old sailor determined that the "Jeune-Hardie" should put to sea without delay. The solidly built ship had no need of repairs. Jean Cornbutte gave his sailors notice that if they wished to re-embark, no change in the crew would be made. He alone replaced his son in the command of the brig. None of the comrades of Louis Cornbutte failed to respond to his call, and there were hardy tars among them, — Alaine Turquiette, Fidèle Misonne the carpenter, Penellan the Breton, who replaced Pierre Nouquet as helmsman, and Gradlin, Aupic, and Gervique, courageous and well-tried mariners.

Jean Cornbutte again offered André Vasling his old rank on board. The first mate was an able officer, who had proved his skill in bringing the "Jeune-Hardie" into port. Yet, from what motive could not be told, André made some difficulties and asked time for reflection.

"As you will, André Vasling," replied Cornbutte. "Only remember that if you accept, you will be welcome among us."

Jean had a devoted sailor in Penellan the Breton, who had long been his fellow-voyager. In times gone by, little Marie was wont to pass the long winter evenings in the helmsman's arms, when he was on shore. He felt a fatherly friendship for her, and she had for him ah affection quite filial. Penellan hastened the fitting out of the ship with all his energy, all the more because, according to his opinion, André Vasling had not perhaps made every effort possible to find the castaways, although he was excusable from the responsibility which weighed upon him as captain.

Within a week the "Jeune-Hardie" was ready to put to sea. Instead of merchandise, she was completely provided with salt meats, biscuits, barrels of flour, potatoes, pork, wine, brandy, coffee, tea, and tobacco.

The departure was fixed for the 22nd of May. On the evening before, André Vasling, who had not yet given his answer to Jean Cornbutte, came to his house. He was still undecided, and did not know which course to take.

Jean was not at home, though the house-door was open. André went into the passage, next to Marie's chamber, where the sound of an animated conversation struck his ear. He listened attentively, and recognized the voices of Penellan and Marie.

The discussion had no doubt been going on for some time, for the young girl seemed to be stoutly opposing what the Breton sailor said.

“How old is my uncle Cornbutte?” said Marie.

“Something about sixty years,” replied Penellan.

“Well, is he not going to brave danger to find his son?”

“Our captain is still a sturdy man,” returned the sailor. “He has a body of oak and muscles as hard as a spare spar. So I am not afraid to have him go to sea again!’”

“My good Penellan,” said Marie, “one is strong when one loves! Besides, I have full confidence in the aid of Heaven. You understand me, and will help me.”

“No!” said Penellan. “It is impossible, Marie. Who knows whither we shall drift, or what we must suffer? How many vigorous men have I seen lose their lives in these seas!”

“Penellan,” returned the young girl, “if you refuse me, I shall believe that you do not love me any longer.”

André Vasling understood the young girl’s resolution. He reflected a moment, and his course was determined on.

“Jean Cornbutte,” said he, advancing towards the old sailor, who now entered, “I will go with you. The cause of my hesitation has disappeared, and you may count upon my devotion.”

“I have never doubted you, André Vasling,” replied Jean Cornbutte, grasping him by the hand. “Marie, my child!” he added, calling in a loud voice.

Marie and Penellan made their appearance.

“We shall set sail to-morrow at daybreak, with the outgoing tide,” said Jean. “My poor Marie, this is the last evening that we shall pass together.

“Uncle!” cried Marie, throwing herself into his arms.

“Marie, by the help of God, I will bring your lover back to you!”

“Yes, we will find Louis,” added André Vasling.

“You are going with us, then?” asked Penellan quickly.

“Yes, Penellan, André Vasling is to be my first mate,” answered Jean.

“Oh, oh!” ejaculated the Breton, in a singular tone.

“And his advice will be useful to us, for he is able and enterprising.

“And yourself, captain,” said André. “You will set us all a good example, for you have still as much vigour as experience.”

“Well, my friends, good-bye till to-morrow. Go on board and make the final arrangements. Good-bye, André; good-bye, Penellan.”

The mate and the sailor went out together, and Jean and Marie remained alone. Many bitter tears were shed during that sad evening. Jean Cornbutte, seeing Marie so wretched, resolved to spare her the pain of separation by leaving the house on the morrow without her knowledge. So he gave her a last kiss that evening, and at three o’clock next morning was up and away.

The departure of the brig had attracted all the old sailor’s friends to the pier. The curé, who was to have blessed Marie’s union with Louis, came to give a last benediction on the ship. Rough grasps of the hand were silently exchanged, and Jean went on board.

The crew were all there. André Vasling gave the last orders. The sails were spread, and the brig rapidly passed out under a stiff north-west breeze, whilst the cure, upright in the midst of the kneeling spectators, committed the vessel to the hands of God.

Whither goes this ship? She follows the perilous route upon which so many castaways have been lost! She has no certain destination. She must expect every peril, and be able to brave them without hesitating. God alone knows where it will be her fate to anchor. May God guide her!

CHAPTER III.

A RAY OF HOPE.

At that time of the year the season was favourable, and the crew might hope promptly to reach the scene of the shipwreck.

Jean Cornbutte’s plan was naturally traced out. He counted on stopping at the Feroë Islands, whither the north wind might have carried the castaways; then, if he was convinced that they had not been received in any of the ports of that locality, he would continue his search beyond the Northern Ocean, ransack the whole western coast of Norway as far as Bodoë, the place nearest the scene of the shipwreck; and, if necessary, farther still.

André Vasling thought, contrary to the captain’s opinion, that the coast of Iceland should be explored; but Penellan observed that, at the time of the catastrophe, the gale came from the west; which, while it gave hope that the unfortunates had not been forced towards the gulf of the Maëlstrom, gave ground for supposing that they might have been thrown on the Norwegian coast.

It was determined, then, that this coast should be followed as closely as possible, so as to recognize any traces of them that might appear.

The day after sailing, Jean Cornbutte, intent upon a map, was absorbed in reflection, when a small hand touched his shoulder, and a soft voice said in his ear, —

“Have good courage, uncle.”

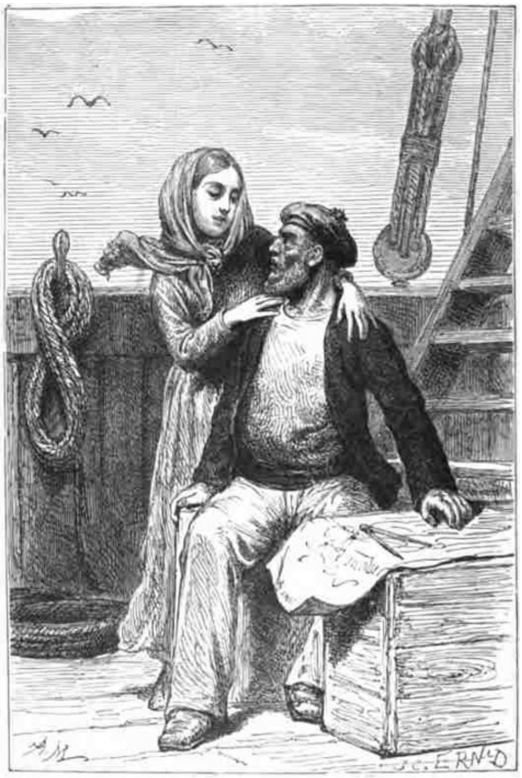

A soft voice said in his ear, "Have good courage, uncle."

He turned, and was stupefied. Marie embraced him.

"Marie, my daughter, on board!" he cried.

"The wife may well go in search of her husband, when the father embarks to save his child."

"Unhappy Marie! How wilt thou support our fatigues! Dost thou know that thy presence may be injurious to our search?"

"No, uncle, for I am strong."

"Who knows whither we shall be forced to go, Marie? Look at this map. We are approaching places dangerous even for us sailors, hardened though we are to the difficulties of the sea. And thou, frail child?"

“But, uncle, I come from a family of sailors. I am used to stories of combats and tempests. I am with you and my old friend Penellan!”

“Penellan! It was he who concealed you on board?”

“Yes, uncle; but only when he saw that I was determined to come without his help.”

“Penellan!” cried Jean.

Penellan entered.

“It is not possible to undo what you have done, Penellan; but remember that you are responsible for Marie’s life.”

“Rest easy, captain,” replied Penellan. “The little one has force and courage, and will be our guardian angel. And then, captain, you know it is my theory, that all in this world happens for the best.”

The young girl was installed in a cabin, which the sailors soon got ready for her, and which they made as comfortable as possible.

A week later the “Jeune-Hardie” stopped at the Feroë Islands, but the most minute search was fruitless. Mo wreck, or fragments of a ship had come upon these coasts. Even the news of the event was quite unknown. The brig resumed its voyage, after a stay of ten days, about the 10th of June. The sea was calm, and the winds were favourable. The ship sped rapidly towards the Norwegian coast, which it explored without better result.

Jean Cornbutte determined to proceed to Bodoë. Perhaps he would there learn the name of the shipwrecked schooner to succour which Louis and the sailors had sacrificed themselves.

On the 30th of June the brig cast anchor in that port.

The authorities of Bodoë gave Jean Cornbutte a bottle found on the coast, which contained a document bearing these words: —

“This 26th April, on board the ‘Froöern,’ after being accosted by the long-boat of the ‘Jeune-Hardie,’ we were drawn by the currents towards the ice. God have pity on us!”

Jean Cornbutte’s first impulse was to thank Heaven. He thought himself on his son’s track. The “Froöern” was a Norwegian sloop of which there had been no news, but which had evidently been drawn northward.

Not a day was to be lost. The “Jeune-Hardie” was at once put in condition to brave the perils of the polar seas. Fidèle Misonne, the carpenter, carefully examined her, and assured himself that her solid construction might resist the shock of the ice-masses.

Penellan, who had already engaged in whale-fishing in the arctic waters, took care that woollen and fur coverings, many sealskin moccassins, and wood for the making of sledges with which to cross the ice-fields were put on board. The amount of provisions was increased, and spirits and charcoal were added; for it might be that they would have to winter at some point on the Greenland coast. They also procured, with much difficulty and at a high price, a quantity of lemons, for preventing or curing the scurvy, that terrible disease which decimates crews in the icy regions. The ship’s hold was filled with salt meat, biscuits, brandy, etc. as the steward’s room no longer sufficed. They provided themselves, moreover, with a large quantity of “pemmican,” an Indian preparation which concentrates a great deal of nutrition within a small volume.

By order of the captain, some saws were put on board for cutting the ice-fields, as well as picks and wedges for separating them. The captain determined to procure some dogs for drawing the sledges on the Greenland coast.

The whole crew was engaged in these preparations, and displayed great activity. The sailors Aupic, Gervique, and Gradlin zealously obeyed Penellan's orders; and he admonished them not to accustom themselves to woollen garments, though the temperature in this latitude, situated just beyond the polar circle, was very low.

Penellan, though he said nothing, narrowly watched every action of André Vasling. This man was Dutch by birth, came from no one knew whither, but was at least a good sailor, having made two voyages on board the "Jeune-Hardie". Penellan would not as yet accuse him of anything, unless it was that he kept near Marie too constantly, but he did not let him out of his sight.

Thanks to the energy of the crew, the brig was equipped by the 16th of July, a fortnight after its arrival at Bodoë. It was then the favourable season for attempting explorations in the Arctic Seas. The thaw had been going on for two months, and the search might be carried farther north. The "Jeune-Hardie" set sail, and directed her way towards Cape Brewster, on the eastern coast of Greenland, near the 70th degree of latitude.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE PASSES.

About the 23rd of July a reflection, raised above the sea, announced the presence of the first icebergs, which, emerging from Davis' Straits, advanced into the ocean. From this moment a vigilant watch was ordered to the look-out men, for it was important not to come into collision with these enormous masses.

The crew was divided into two watches. The first was composed of Fidèle Misonne, Gradlin, and Gervique; and the second of Andre Vasling, Aupic, and Penellan. These watches were to last only two hours, for in those cold regions a man's strength is diminished one-half. Though the "Jeune-Hardie" was not yet beyond the 63rd degree of latitude, the thermometer already stood at nine degrees centigrade below zero.

Rain and snow often fell abundantly. On fair days, when the wind was not too violent, Marie remained on deck, and her eyes became accustomed to the uncouth scenes of the Polar Seas.

On the 1st of August she was promenading aft, and talking with her uncle, Penellan, and André Vasling. The ship was then entering a channel three miles wide, across which broken masses of ice were rapidly descending southwards.

"When shall we see land?" asked the young girl.

"In three or four days at the latest," replied Jean Cornbutte.

"But shall we find there fresh traces of my poor Louis?"

“Perhaps so, my daughter; but I fear that we are still far from the end of our voyage. It is to be feared that the ‘Froöern’ was driven farther northward.”

“That may be,” added André Vasling, “for the squall which separated us from the Norwegian boat lasted three days, and in three days a ship makes good headway when it is no longer able to resist the wind.”

“Permit me to tell you, Monsieur Vasling.” replied Penellan, “that that was in April, that the thaw had not then begun, and that therefore the ‘Froöern’ must have been soon arrested by the ice.”

“And no doubt dashed into a thousand pieces,” said the mate, “as her crew could not manage her.”

“But these ice-fields,” returned Penellan, “gave her an easy means of reaching land, from which she could not have been far distant.”

“Let us hope so,” said Jean Cornbutte, interrupting the discussion, which was daily renewed between the mate and the helmsman. “I think we shall see land before long.”

“There it is!” cried Marie. “See those mountains!”

“No, my child,” replied her uncle. “Those are mountains of ice, the first we have met with. They would shatter us like glass if we got entangled between them. Penellan and Vasling, overlook the men.”

These floating masses, more than fifty of which now appeared at the horizon, came nearer and nearer to the brig. Penellan took the helm, and Jean Cornbutte, mounted on the gallant, indicated the route to take.

Towards evening the brig was entirely surrounded by these moving rocks, the crushing force of which is irresistible. It was necessary, then, to cross this fleet of mountains, for prudence prompted them to keep straight ahead. Another difficulty was added to these perils. The direction of the ship could not be accurately determined, as all the surrounding points constantly changed position, and thus failed to afford a fixed perspective. The darkness soon increased with the fog. Marie descended to her cabin, and the whole crew, by the captain's orders, remained on deck. They were armed with long boat-poles, with iron spikes, to preserve the ship from collision with the ice.

The ship soon entered a strait so narrow that often the ends of her yards were grazed by the drifting mountains, and her booms seemed about to be driven in. They were even forced to trim the mainyard so as to touch the shrouds. Happily these precautions did not deprive, the vessel of any of its speed, for the wind could only reach the upper sails, and these sufficed to carry her forward rapidly. Thanks to her slender hull, she passed through these valleys, which were filled with whirlpools of rain, whilst the icebergs crushed against each other with sharp cracking and splitting.

Jean Cornbutte returned to the deck. His eyes could not penetrate the surrounding darkness. It became necessary to furl the upper sails, for the ship threatened to ground, and if she did so she was lost.

“Cursed voyage!” growled André Vasling among the sailors, who, forward, were avoiding the most menacing ice-blocks with their boat-hooks.

“Truly, if we escape we shall owe a fine candle to Our Lady of the Ice!” replied Aupic.

“Who knows how many floating mountains we have got to pass through yet?” added the mate.

“And who can guess what we shall find beyond them?” replied the sailor.

“Don’t talk so much, prattler,” said Gervique, “and look out on your side. When we have got by them, it’ll be time to grumble. Look out for your boat-hook!”

At this moment an enormous block of ice, in the narrow strait through which the brig was passing, came rapidly down upon her, and it seemed impossible to avoid it, for it barred the whole width of the channel, and the brig could not heave-to.

“Do you feel the tiller?” asked Cornbutte of Penellan.

“No, captain. The ship does not answer the helm any longer.”

“*Ohé*, boys!” cried the captain to the crew; “don’t be afraid, and buttress your hooks against the gunwale.”

The block was nearly sixty feet high, and if it threw itself upon the brig she would be crushed. There was an undefinable moment of suspense, and the crew retreated backward, abandoning their posts despite the captain’s orders.

But at the instant when the block was not more than half a cable’s length from the “Jeune-Hardie,” a dull sound was heard, and a veritable waterspout fell upon the bow of the vessel, which then rose on the back of an enormous billow.

The sailors uttered a cry of terror; but when they looked before them the block had disappeared, the passage was free, and beyond an immense plain of water, illumined by the rays of the declining sun, assured them of an easy navigation.

“All’s well!” cried Penellan. “Let’s trim our topsails and mizzen!”

An incident very common in those parts had just occurred. When these masses are detached from one another in the thawing season, they float in a perfect equilibrium; but on reaching the ocean, where the water is relatively warmer, they are speedily undermined at the base, which melts little by little, and which is also shaken by the shock of other ice-masses. A moment comes when the centre of gravity of these masses is displaced, and then they are completely overturned. Only, if this block had turned over two minutes later, it would have fallen on the brig and carried her down in its fall.

CHAPTER V.

LIVERPOOL ISLAND.

The brig now sailed in a sea which was almost entirely open. At the horizon only, a whitish light, this time motionless, indicated the presence of fixed plains of ice.

Jean Cornbutte now directed the “Jeune-Hardie” towards Cape Brewster. They were already approaching the regions where the temperature is excessively cold, for the sun’s rays, owing to their obliquity when they reach them, are very feeble.

On the 3rd of August the brig confronted immoveable and united ice-masses. The passages were seldom more than a cable’s length in width, and the ship was forced to make many turnings, which sometimes placed her heading the wind.

Penellan watched over Marie with paternal care, and, despite the cold, prevailed upon her to spend two or three hours every day on deck, for exercise had become one of the indispensable conditions of health.

Marie’s courage did not falter. She even comforted the sailors with her cheerful talk, and all of them became warmly attached to her. André Vasling showed himself more attentive than ever, and seized every occasion to be in her company; but the young girl, with a sort of presentiment, accepted his services with some coldness. It may be easily conjectured that André’s conversation referred more to the future than to the present, and that he did not conceal the slight probability there was of saving the castaways. He was convinced that they were lost, and the young girl ought thenceforth to confide her existence to some one else.

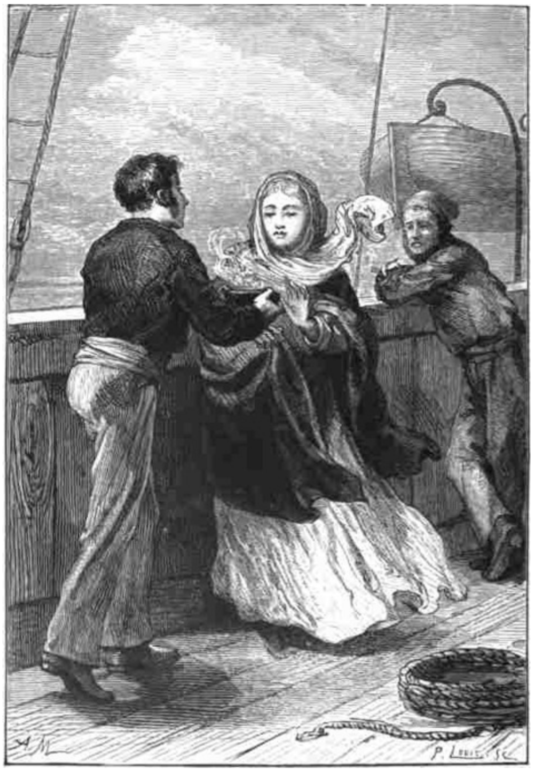

André Vasling showed himself more attentive than ever.

Marie had not as yet comprehended André’s designs, for, to his great disgust, he could never find an opportunity to talk long with her alone. Penellan had always an excuse for interfering, and destroying the effect of Andre’s words by the hopeful opinions he expressed.

Marie, meanwhile, did not remain idle. Acting on the helmsman’s advice, she set to work on her winter garments; for it was necessary that she should completely change her clothing. The cut of her dresses was not suitable for these cold latitudes. She made, therefore, a sort of furred pantaloons, the ends of which were lined with seal-skin; and her narrow skirts came only to her knees, so as not to be in contact with the layers of snow with which the winter would cover the ice-fields. A fur mantle, fitting closely to the figure and supplied with a hood, protected the upper part of her body.

In the intervals of their work, the sailors, too, prepared clothing with which to shelter themselves from the cold. They made a quantity of high seal-skin boots, with which to cross the snow during their explorations. They worked thus all the time that the navigation in the straits lasted.

André Vasling, who was an excellent shot, several times brought down aquatic birds with his gun; innumerable flocks of these were always careering about the ship. A kind of eider-duck provided the crew with very palatable food, which relieved the monotony of the salt meat.

At last the brig, after many turnings, came in sight of Cape Brewster. A long-boat was put to sea. Jean Cornbutte and Penellan reached the coast, which was entirely deserted.

The ship at once directed its course towards Liverpool Island, discovered in 1821 by Captain Scoresby, and the crew gave a hearty cheer when they saw the natives running along the shore. Communication was speedily established with them, thanks to Penellan’s knowledge of a few words of their language, and some phrases which we natives themselves had learnt of the whalers who frequented those parts.

These Greenlanders were small and squat; they were not more than four feet ten inches high; they had red, round faces, and low foreheads; their hair, flat and black, fell over their shoulders; their teeth were decayed, and they seemed to be affected by the sort of leprosy which is peculiar to ichthyophagous tribes.

In exchange for pieces of iron and brass, of which they are extremely covetous, these poor creatures brought bear furs, the skins of sea-calves, sea-dogs, sea-wolves, and all the animals generally known as seals. Jean

Cornbutte obtained these at a low price, and they were certain to become most useful.

The captain then made the natives understand that he was in search of a shipwrecked vessel, and asked them if they had heard of it. One of them immediately drew something like a ship on the snow, and indicated that a vessel of that sort had been carried northward three months before: he also managed to make it understood that the thaw and breaking up of the ice-fields had prevented the Greenlanders from going in search of it; and, indeed, their very light canoes, which they managed with paddles, could not go to sea at that time.

This news, though meagre, restored hope to the hearts of the sailors, and Jean Cornbutte had no difficulty in persuading them to advance farther in the polar seas.

Before quitting Liverpool Island, the captain purchased a pack of six Esquimaux dogs, which were soon acclimatised on board. The ship weighed anchor on the morning of the 10th of August, and entered the northern straits under a brisk wind.

The longest days of the year had now arrived; that is, the sun, in these high latitudes, did not set, and reached the highest point of the spirals which it described above the horizon.

This total absence of night was not, however, very apparent, for the fog, rain, and snow sometimes enveloped the ship in real darkness.

Jean Cornbutte, who was resolved to advance as far as possible, began to take measures of health. The space between decks was securely enclosed, and every morning care was taken to ventilate it with fresh air. The stoves were installed, and the pipes so disposed as to yield as much heat as possible. The sailors were advised to wear only one woollen shirt over their cotton shirts, and to hermetically close their seal cloaks. The fires were not yet lighted, for it was important to reserve the wood and charcoal for the most intense cold.

Warm beverages, such as coffee and tea, were regularly distributed to the sailors morning and evening; and as it was important to live on meat, they shot ducks and teal, which abounded in these parts.

Jean Cornbutte also placed at the summit of the mainmast a “crow’s nest,” a sort of cask staved in at one end, in which a look-out remained constantly, to observe the icefields.

Two days after the brig had lost sight of Liverpool Island the temperature became suddenly colder under the influence of a dry wind. Some indications of winter were perceived. The ship had not a moment to lose, for soon the way would be entirely closed to her. She advanced across the straits, among which lay ice-plains thirty feet thick.

On the morning of the 3rd of September the “Jeune-Hardie” reached the head of Gaël-Hamkes Bay. Land was then thirty miles to the leeward. It was the first time that the brig had stopped before a mass of ice which offered no outlet, and which was at least a mile wide. The saws must now be used to cut the ice. Penellan, Aupic, Gradlin, and Turquiette were chosen to work the saws, which had been carried outside the ship. The direction of the cutting was so determined that the current might carry off the pieces detached from the mass. The whole crew worked at this task for nearly twenty hours. They found it very painful to remain on the ice, and were often obliged to plunge into the water up to their middle; their seal-skin garments protected them but imperfectly from the damp.

Moreover all excessive toil in those high latitudes is soon followed by an overwhelming weariness; for the breath soon fails, and the strongest are forced to rest at frequent intervals.

At last the navigation became free, and the brig was towed beyond the mass which had so long obstructed her course.

CHAPTER VI.

THE QUAKING OF THE ICE.

For several days the “Jeune-Hardie” struggled against formidable obstacles. The crew were almost all the time at work with the saws, and often powder had to be used to blow up the enormous blocks of ice which closed the way.

On the 12th of September the sea consisted of one solid plain, without outlet or passage, surrounding the vessel on all sides, so that she could neither advance nor retreat. The temperature remained at an average of sixteen degrees below zero. The winter season had come on, with its sufferings and dangers.

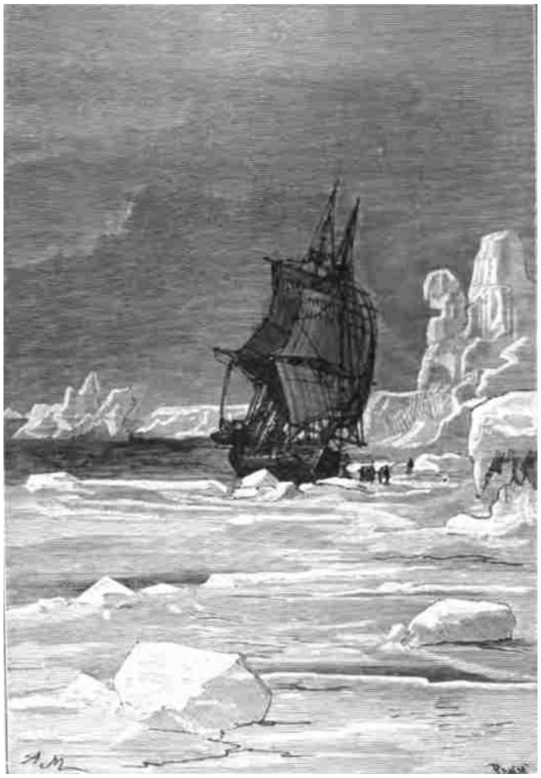

On the 12th of September the sea consisted of one solid plain.

The “Jeune-Hardie” was then near the 21st degree of longitude west and the 76th degree of latitude north, at the entrance of Gaël-Hamkes Bay.

Jean Cornbutte made his preliminary preparations for wintering. He first searched for a creek whose position would shelter the ship from the wind and breaking up of the ice. Land, which was probably thirty miles west, could alone offer him secure shelter, and he resolved to attempt to reach it.

He set out on the 12th of September, accompanied by André Vasling, Penellan, and the two sailors Gradlin and Turquiette. Each man carried provisions for two days, for it was not likely that their expedition would occupy a longer time, and they were supplied with skins on which to sleep.

Snow had fallen in great abundance and was not yet frozen over; and this delayed them seriously. They often sank to their waists, and could only advance very cautiously, for fear of falling into crevices. Penellan, who walked in front, carefully sounded each depression with his iron-pointed staff.

About five in the evening the fog began to thicken, and the little band were forced to stop. Penellan looked about for an iceberg which might shelter them from the wind, and after refreshing themselves, with regrets that they had no warm drink, they spread their skins on the snow, wrapped themselves up, lay close to each other, and soon dropped asleep from sheer fatigue.

The next morning Jean Cornbutte and his companions were buried beneath a bed of snow more than a foot deep. Happily their skins, perfectly impermeable, had preserved them, and the snow itself had aided in retaining their heat, which it prevented from escaping.

The captain gave the signal of departure, and about noon they at last descried the coast, which at first they could scarcely distinguish. High ledges of ice, cut perpendicularly, rose on the shore; their variegated summits, of all forms and shapes, reproduced on a large scale the phenomena of crystallization. Myriads of aquatic fowl flew about at the approach of the party, and the seals, lazily lying on the ice, plunged hurriedly into the depths.

“I’ faith!” said Penellan, “we shall not want for either furs or game!”

“Those animals,” returned Cornbutte, “give every evidence of having been already visited by men; for in places totally uninhabited they would not be so wild.”

“None but Greenlanders frequent these parts,” said André Vasling.

“I see no trace of their passage, however; neither any encampment nor the smallest hut,” said Penellan, who had climbed up a high peak. “O captain!” he continued, “come here! I see a point of land which will shelter us splendidly from the north-east wind.”

“Come along, boys!” said Jean Cornbutte.

His companions followed him, and they soon rejoined Penellan. The sailor had said what was true. An elevated point of land jutted out like a promontory, and curving towards the coast, formed a little inlet of a mile in width at most. Some moving ice-blocks, broken by this point, floated in the midst, and the sea, sheltered from the colder winds, was not yet entirely frozen over.

This was an excellent spot for wintering, and it only remained to get the ship thither. Jean Cornbutte remarked that the neighbouring ice-field was very thick, and it seemed very difficult to cut a canal to bring the brig to its destination. Some other creek, then, must be found; it was in vain that he explored northward. The coast remained steep and abrupt for a long distance, and beyond the point it was directly exposed to the attacks of the east-wind. The circumstance disconcerted the captain all the more because André Vasling used strong arguments to show how bad the situation was. Penellan, in this dilemma, found it difficult to convince himself that all was for the best.

But one chance remained — to seek a shelter on the southern side of the coast. This was to return on their path, but hesitation was useless. The little band returned rapidly in the direction of the ship, as their provisions had begun to run short. Jean Cornbutte searched for some practicable passage, or at least some fissure by which a canal might be cut across the ice-fields, all along the route, but in vain.

Towards evening the sailors came to the same place where they had encamped over night. There had been no snow during the day, and they could recognize the imprint of their bodies on the ice. They again disposed themselves to sleep with their furs.

Penellan, much disturbed by the bad success of the expedition, was sleeping restlessly, when, at a waking moment, his attention was attracted by a dull rumbling. He listened attentively, and the rumbling seemed so strange that he nudged Jean Cornbutte with his elbow.

“What is that?” said the latter, whose mind, according to a sailor’s habit, was awake as soon as his body.

“Listen, captain.”

The noise increased, with perceptible violence.

“It cannot be thunder, in so high a latitude,” said Cornbutte, rising.

“I think we have come across some white bears,” replied Penellan.

“The devil! We have not seen any yet.”

“Sooner or later, we must have expected a visit from them. Let us give them a good reception.”

Penellan, armed with a gun, lightly crossed the ledge which sheltered them. The darkness was very dense; he could discover nothing; but a new incident soon showed him that the cause of the noise did not proceed from around them.

Jean Cornbutte rejoined him, and they observed with terror that this rumbling, which awakened their companions, came from beneath them.

A new kind of peril menaced them. To the noise, which resembled peals of thunder, was added a distinct undulating motion of the ice-field. Several of the party lost their balance and fell.

“Attention!” cried Penellan.

“Yes!” some one responded.

“Turquiette! Gradlin! where are you?”

“Here I am!” responded Turquiette, shaking off the snow with which he was covered.

“This way, Vasling,” cried Cornbutte to the mate. “And Gradlin?”

“Present, captain. But we are lost!” shouted Gradlin, in fright.

“No!” said Penellan. “Perhaps we are saved!”

Hardly had he uttered these words when a frightful cracking noise was heard. The ice-field broke clear through, and the sailors were forced to cling to the block which was quivering just by them. Despite the helmsman’s words, they found themselves in a most perilous position, for an ice-quake had occurred. The ice masses had just “weighed anchor,” as the sailors say. The movement lasted nearly two minutes, and it was to be feared that the crevice would yawn at the very feet of the unhappy sailors. They anxiously awaited daylight in the midst of continuous shocks, for they could not, without risk of death, move a step, and had to remain stretched out at full length to avoid being engulfed.

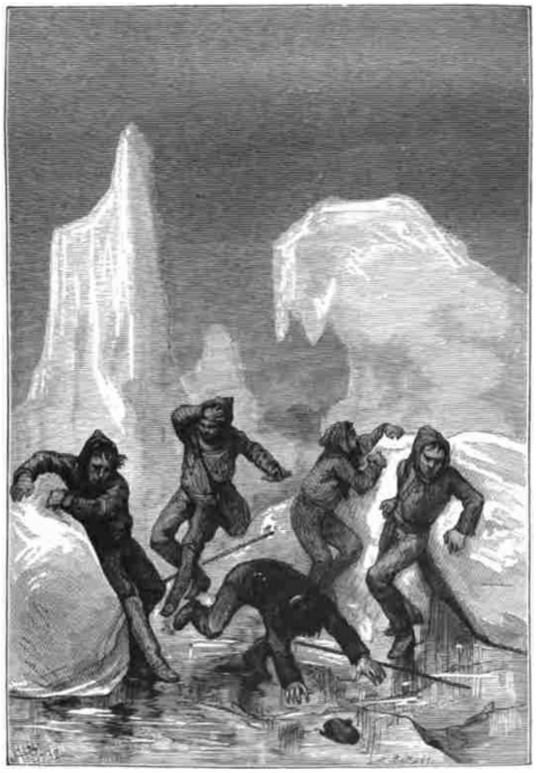

they found themselves in a most perilous position, for an ice-quake had occurred.

As soon as it was daylight a very different aspect presented itself to their eyes. The vast plain, a compact mass the evening before, was now separated in a thousand places, and the waves, raised by some submarine commotion, had broken the thick layer which sheltered them.

The thought of his ship occurred to Jean Cornbutte’s mind.

“My poor brig!” he cried. “It must have perished!”

The deepest despair began to overcast the faces of his companions. The loss of the ship inevitably preceded their own deaths.

“Courage, friends,” said Penellan. “Reflect that this night’s disaster has opened us a path across the ice, which will enable us to bring our ship to the bay for wintering! And, stop! I am not mistaken. There is the ‘Jeune-Hardie,’ a mile nearer to us!”

All hurried forward, and so imprudently, that Turquiette slipped into a fissure, and would have certainly perished, had not Jean Cornbutte seized him by his hood. He got off with a rather cold bath.

The brig was indeed floating two miles away. After infinite trouble, the little band reached her. She was in good condition; but her rudder, which they had neglected to lift, had been broken by the ice.

CHAPTER VII.

SETTLING FOR THE WINTER.

Penellan was once more right; all was for the best, and this ice-quake had opened a practicable channel for the ship to the bay. The sailors had only to make skilful use of the currents to conduct her thither.

On the 19th of September the brig was at last moored in her bay for wintering, two cables' lengths from the shore, securely anchored on a good bottom. The ice began the next day to form around her hull; it soon became strong enough to bear a man's weight, and they could establish a communication with land.

The rigging, as is customary in arctic navigation, remained as it was; the sails were carefully furled on the yards and covered with their casings, and the "crow's-nest" remained in place, as much to enable them to make distant observations as to attract attention to the ship.

The sun now scarcely rose above the horizon. Since the June solstice, the spirals which it had described descended lower and lower; and it would soon disappear altogether.

The crew hastened to make the necessary preparations. Penellan supervised the whole. The ice was soon thick around the ship, and it was to be feared that its pressure might become dangerous; but Penellan waited until, by reason of the going and coming of the floating ice-masses and their adherence, it had reached a thickness of twenty feet; he then had it cut around the hull, so that it united under the ship, the form of which it assumed; thus enclosed in a mould, the brig had no longer to fear the pressure of the ice, which could make no movement.

The sailors then elevated along the wales, to the height of the nettings, a snow wall five or six feet thick, which soon froze as hard as a rock. This envelope did not allow the interior heat to escape outside. A canvas tent, covered with skins and hermetically closed, was stretched aver the whole length of the deck, and formed a sort of walk for the sailors.

They also constructed on the ice a storehouse of snow, in which articles which embarrassed the ship were stowed away. The partitions of the cabins were taken down, so as to form a single vast apartment forward, as well as aft. This single room, besides, was more easy to warm, as the ice and damp found fewer corners in which to take refuge. It was also less difficult to ventilate it, by means of canvas funnels which opened without.

Each sailor exerted great energy in these preparations, and about the 25th of September they were completed. André Vasling had not shown himself the least active in this task. He devoted himself with especial zeal to the young girl's comfort, and if she, absorbed in thoughts of her poor Louis, did not perceive this, Jean Cornbutte did not fail soon to remark it. He spoke of it to Penellan; he recalled several incidents which completely enlightened him regarding his mate's intentions; André Vasling loved Marie, and reckoned on asking her uncle for her hand, as soon as it was proved beyond doubt that the castaways were irrevocably lost; they would return then to Dunkirk, and André Vasling would be well satisfied to wed a rich and pretty girl, who would then be the sole heiress of Jean Cornbutte.

But André, in his impatience, was often imprudent. He had several times declared that the search for the castaways was useless, when some new trace contradicted him, and enabled Penellan to exult over him. The mate, therefore, cordially detested the helmsman, who returned his dislike heartily. Penellan only feared that André might sow seeds of dissension among the crew, and persuaded Jean Cornbutte to answer him evasively on the first occasion.

When the preparations for the winter were completed, the captain took measures to preserve the health of the crew. Every morning the men were ordered to air their berths, and carefully clean the interior walls, to get rid of the night’s dampness. They received boiling tea or coffee, which are excellent cordials to use against the cold, morning and evening; then they were divided into hunting-parties, who should procure as much fresh nourishment as possible for every day.

Each one also took healthy exercise every day, so as not to expose himself without motion to the cold; for in a temperature thirty degrees below zero, some part of the body might suddenly become frozen. In such cases friction of the snow was used, which alone could heal the affected part.

Penellan also strongly advised cold ablutions every morning. It required some courage to plunge the hands and face in the snow, which had to be melted within. But Penellan bravely set the example, and Marie was not the last to imitate him.

Jean Cornbutte did not forget to have readings and prayers, for it was needful that the hearts of his comrades should not give way to despair or weariness. Nothing is more dangerous in these desolate latitudes.

The sky, always gloomy, filled the soul with sadness. A thick snow, lashed by violent winds, added to the horrors of their situation. The sun would soon altogether disappear. Had the clouds not gathered in masses above their heads, they might have enjoyed the moonlight, which was about to become really their sun during the long polar night; but, with the west winds, the snow did not cease to fall. Every morning it was necessary to clear off the sides of the ship, and to cut a new stairway in the ice to enable them to reach the ice-field. They easily succeeded in doing this with snow-knives; the steps once cut, a little water was thrown over them, and they at once hardened.

Penellan had a hole cut in the ice, not far from the ship. Every day the new crust which formed over its top was broken, and the water which was drawn thence, from a certain depth, was less cold than that at the surface.

All these preparations occupied about three weeks. It was then time to go forward with the search. The ship was imprisoned for six or seven months, and only the next thaw could open a new route across the ice. It was wise, then, to profit by this delay, and extend their explorations northward.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLAN OF THE EXPLORATIONS.

On the 9th of October, Jean Cornbutte held a council to settle the plan of his operations, to which, that there might be union, zeal, and courage on the part of every one, he admitted the whole crew. Map in hand, he clearly explained their situation.

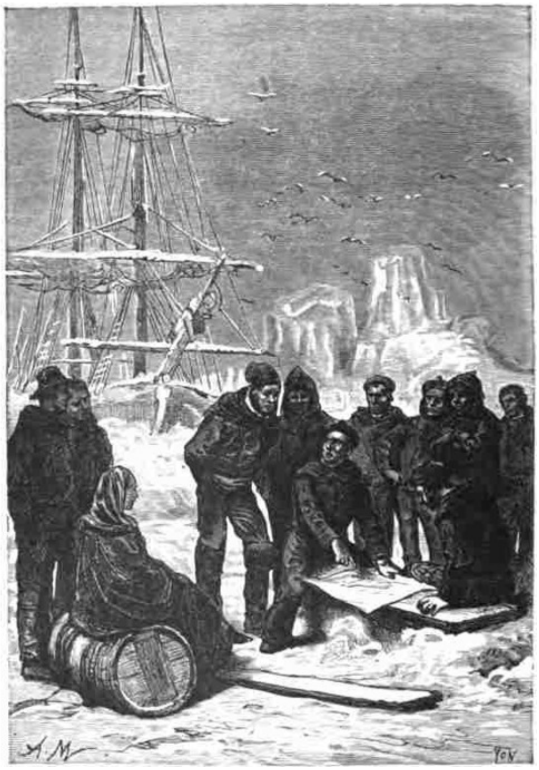

Map in hand, he clearly explained their situation.

The eastern coast of Greenland advances perpendicularly northward. The discoveries of the navigators have given the exact boundaries of those parts. In the extent of five hundred leagues, which separates Greenland from Spitzbergen, no land has been found. An island (Shannon Island) lay a hundred miles north of Gaël-Hamkes Bay, where the “Jeune-Hardie” was wintering.

If the Norwegian schooner, as was most probable, had been driven in this direction, supposing that she could not reach Shannon Island, it was here that Louis Cornbutte and his comrades must have sought for a winter asylum.

This opinion prevailed, despite André Vasling’s opposition; and it was decided to direct the explorations on the side towards Shannon Island.

Arrangements for this were at once begun. A sledge like that used by the Esquimaux had been procured on the Norwegian coast. This was constructed of planks curved before and behind, and was made to slide over the snow and ice. It was twelve feet long and four wide, and could therefore carry provisions, if need were, for several weeks. Fidèle Misonne soon put it in order, working upon it in the snow storehouse, whither his tools had been carried. For the first time a coal-stove was set up in this storehouse, without which all labour there would have been impossible. The pipe was carried out through one of the lateral walls, by a hole pierced in the snow; but a grave inconvenience resulted from this, — for the heat of the stove, little by little, melted the snow where it came in contact with it; and the opening visibly increased. Jean Cornbutte contrived to surround this part of the pipe with some metallic canvas, which is impermeable by heat. This succeeded completely.

While Misonne was at work upon the sledge, Penellan, aided by Marie, was preparing the clothing necessary for the expedition. Seal-skin boots they had, fortunately, in plenty. Jean Cornbutte and André Vasling occupied themselves with the provisions. They chose a small barrel of spirits-of-wine for heating a portable chafing-dish; reserves of coffee and tea in ample quantity were packed; a small box of biscuits, two hundred pounds of pemmican, and some gourds of brandy completed the stock of viands. The guns would bring down some fresh game every day. A quantity of powder was divided between several bags; the compass, sextant, and spy-glass were put carefully out of the way of injury.

On the 11th of October the sun no longer appeared above the horizon. They were obliged to keep a lighted lamp in the lodgings of the crew all the time. There was no time to lose; the explorations must be begun. For this reason: in the month of January it would become so cold that it would be impossible to venture out without peril of life. For two months at least the crew would be condemned to the most complete imprisonment; then the thaw would begin, and continue till the time when the ship should quit the ice. This thaw would, of course, prevent any explorations. On the other hand, if Louis Cornbutte and his comrades were still in existence, it was not probable that they would be able to resist the severities of the arctic winter. They must therefore be saved beforehand, or all hope would be lost. André Vasling knew all this better than any one. He therefore resolved to put every possible obstacle in the way of the expedition.

The preparations for the journey were completed about the 20th of October. It remained to select the men who should compose the party. The young girl could not be deprived of the protection of Jean Cornbutte or of Penellan; neither of these could, on the other hand, be spared from the expedition.

The question, then, was whether Marie could bear the fatigues of such a journey. She had already passed through rough experiences without seeming to suffer from them, for she was a sailor’s daughter, used from infancy to the fatigues of the sea, and even Penellan was not dismayed to see her struggling in the midst of this severe climate, against the dangers of the polar seas.

It was decided, therefore, after a long discussion, that she should go with them, and that a place should be reserved for her, at need, on the sledge, on which a little wooden hut was constructed, closed in hermetically. As for Marie, she was delighted, for she dreaded to be left alone without her two protectors.

The expedition was thus formed: Marie, Jean Cornbutte, Penellan, André Vasling, Aupic, and Fidèle Misonne were to go. Alaine Turquiette remained in charge of the brig, and Gervique and Gradlin stayed behind with him. New provisions of all kinds were carried; for Jean Cornbutte, in order to carry the exploration as far as possible, had resolved to establish depôts along the route, at each seven or eight days' march. When the sledge was ready it was at once fitted up, and covered with a skin tent. The whole weighed some seven hundred pounds, which a pack of five dogs might easily carry over the ice.

On the 22nd of October, as the captain had foretold, a sudden change took place in the temperature. The sky cleared, the stars emitted an extraordinary light, and the moon shone above the horizon, no longer to leave the heavens for a fortnight. The thermometer descended to twenty-five degrees below zero.

The departure was fixed for the following day.

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOUSE OF SNOW.

On the 23rd of October, at eleven in the morning, in a fine moonlight, the caravan set out. Precautions were this time taken that the journey might be a long one, if necessary. Jean Cornbutte followed the coast, and ascended northward. The steps of the travellers made no impression on the hard ice. Jean was forced to guide himself by points which he selected at a distance; sometimes he fixed upon a hill bristling with peaks; sometimes on a vast iceberg which pressure had raised above the plain.

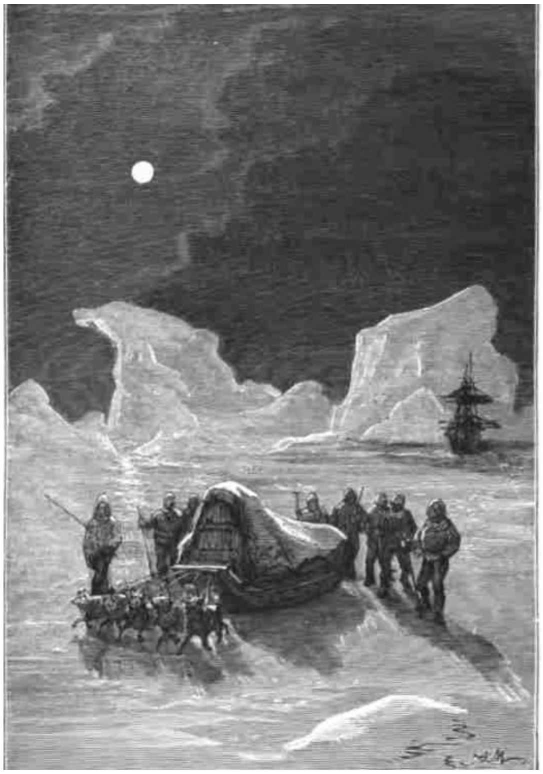

The caravan set out

At the first halt, after going fifteen miles, Penellan prepared to encamp. The tent was erected against an ice-block. Marie had not suffered seriously with the extreme cold, for luckily the breeze had subsided, and was much more bearable; but the young girl had several times been obliged to descend from her sledge to avert numbness from impeding the circulation of her blood. Otherwise, her little hut, hung with skins, afforded her all the comfort possible under the circumstances.

When night, or rather sleeping-time, came, the little hut was carried under the tent, where it served as a bed-room for Marie. The evening repast was composed of fresh meat, pemmican, and hot tea. Jean Cornbutte, to avert danger of the scurvy, distributed to each of the party a few drops of lemon-juice. Then all slept under God's protection.

After eight hours of repose, they got ready to resume their march. A substantial breakfast was provided to the men and the dogs; then they set out. The ice, exceedingly compact, enabled these animals to draw the sledge easily. The party sometimes found it difficult to keep up with them.

But the sailors soon began to suffer one discomfort — that of being dazzled. Ophthalmia betrayed itself in Aupic and Misonne. The moon's light, striking on these vast white plains, burnt the eyesight, and gave the eyes insupportable pain.

There was thus produced a very singular effect of refraction. As they walked, when they thought they were about to put foot on a hillock, they stepped down lower, which often occasioned falls, happily so little serious that Penellan made them occasions for bantering. Still, he told them never to take a step without sounding the ground with the ferruled staff with which each was equipped.

About the 1st of November, ten days after they had set out, the caravan had gone fifty leagues to the northward. Weariness pressed heavily on all. Jean

Cornbutte was painfully dazzled, and his sight sensibly changed. Aupic and Misonne had to feel their way: for their eyes, rimmed with red, seemed burnt by the white reflection. Marie had been preserved from this misfortune by remaining within her hut, to which she confined herself as much as possible. Penellan, sustained by an indomitable courage, resisted all fatigue. But it was André Vasling who bore himself best, and upon whom the cold and dazzling seemed to produce no effect. His iron frame was equal to every hardship; and he was secretly pleased to see the most robust of his companions becoming discouraged, and already foresaw the moment when they would be forced to retreat to the ship again.

On the 1st of November it became absolutely necessary to halt for a day or two. As soon as the place for the encampment had been selected, they proceeded to arrange it. It was determined to erect a house of snow, which should be supported against one of the rocks of the promontory. Misonne at once marked out the foundations, which measured fifteen feet long by five wide. Penellan, Aupic, and Misonne, by aid of their knives, cut out great blocks of ice, which they carried to the chosen spot and set up, as masons would have built stone walls. The sides of the foundation were soon raised to a height and thickness of about five feet; for the materials were abundant, and the structure was intended to be sufficiently solid to last several days. The four walls were completed in eight hours; an opening had been left on the southern side, and the canvas of the tent, placed on these four walls, fell over the opening and sheltered it. It only remained to cover the whole with large blocks, to form the roof of this temporary structure.

After three more hours of hard work, the house was done; and they all went into it, overcome with weariness and discouragement. Jean Cornbutte suffered so much that he could not walk, and André Vasling so skilfully aggravated his gloomy feelings, that he forced from him a promise not to pursue his search farther in those frightful solitudes. Penellan did not know which saint to invoke. He thought it unworthy and craven to give up his companions for reasons which had little weight, and tried to upset them; but in vain.

Meanwhile, though it had been decided to return, rest had become so necessary that for three days no preparations for departure were made.

On the 4th of November, Jean Cornbutte began to bury on a point of the coast the provisions for which there was no use. A stake indicated the place of the deposit, in the improbable event that new explorations should be made in that direction. Every day since they had set out similar deposits had been made, so that they were assured of ample sustenance on the return, without the trouble of carrying them on the sledge.

The departure was fixed for ten in the morning, on the 5th. The most profound sadness filled the little band. Marie with difficulty restrained her tears, when she saw her uncle so completely discouraged. So many useless sufferings! so much labour lost! Penellan himself became ferocious in his ill-humour; he consigned everybody to the nether regions, and did not cease to wax angry at the weakness and cowardice of his comrades, who were more timid and tired, he said, than Marie, who would have gone to the end of the world without complaint.

André Vasling could not disguise the pleasure which this decision gave him. He showed himself more attentive than ever to the young girl, to whom he even held out hopes that a new search should be made when the winter was over; knowing well that it would then be too late!

CHAPTER X.

BURIED ALIVE.

The evening before the departure, just as they were about to take supper, Penellan was breaking up some empty casks for firewood, when he was suddenly suffocated by a thick smoke. At the same instant the snow-house was shaken as if by an earthquake. The party uttered a cry of terror, and Penellan hurried outside.

It was entirely dark. A frightful tempest — for it was not a thaw — was raging, whirlwinds of snow careered around, and it was so exceedingly cold that the helmsman felt his hands rapidly freezing. He was obliged to go in again, after rubbing himself violently with snow.

“It is a tempest,” said he. “May heaven grant that our house may withstand it, for, if the storm should destroy it, we should be lost!”

At the same time with the gusts of wind a noise was heard beneath the frozen soil; icebergs, broken from the promontory, dashed away noisily, and fell upon one another; the wind blew with such violence that it seemed sometimes as if the whole house moved from its foundation; phosphorescent lights, inexplicable in that latitude, flashed across the whirlwinds of the snow.

“Marie! Marie!” cried Penellan, seizing the young girl’s hands.

“We are in a bad case!” said Misonne.

“And I know not whether we shall escape,” replied Aupic.

“Let us quit this snow-house!” said André Vasling.

“Impossible!” returned Penellan. “The cold outside is terrible; perhaps we can bear it by staying here.”

“Give me the thermometer,” demanded Vasling.

Aupic handed it to him. It showed ten degrees below zero inside the house, though the fire was lighted. Vasling raised the canvas which covered the opening, and pushed it aside hastily; for he would have been lacerated by the fall of ice which the wind hurled around, and which fell in a perfect hail-storm.

“Well, Vasling,” said Penellan, “will you go out, then? You see that we are more safe here.”

“Yes,” said Jean Cornbutte; “and we must use every effort to strengthen the house in the interior.”

“But a still more terrible danger menaces us,” said Vasling.

“What?” asked Jean.

“The wind is breaking the ice against which we are propped, just as it has that of the promontory, and we shall be either driven out or buried!”

“That seems doubtful,” said Penellan, “for it is freezing hard enough to ice over all liquid surfaces. Let us see what the temperature is.”

He raised the canvas so as to pass out his arm, and with difficulty found the thermometer again, in the midst of the snow; but he at last succeeded in seizing it, and, holding the lamp to it, said, —

“Thirty-two degrees below zero! It is the coldest we have seen here yet!”

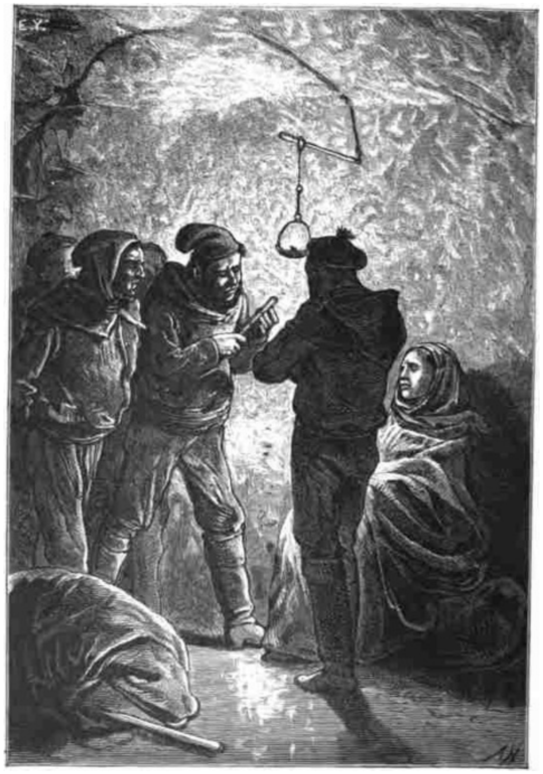

“Thirty-two degrees below zero!”

“Ten degrees more,” said Vasling, “and the mercury will freeze!”

A mournful silence followed this remark.

About eight in the morning Penellan essayed a second time to go out to judge of their situation. It was necessary to give an escape to the smoke, which the wind had several times repelled into the hut. The sailor wrapped his cloak tightly about him, made sure of his hood by fastening it to his head with a handkerchief, and raised the canvas.

The opening was entirely obstructed by a resisting snow. Penellan took his staff, and succeeded in plunging it into the compact mass; but terror froze his blood when he perceived that the end of the staff was not free, and was checked by a hard body!

“Cornbutte,” said he to the captain, who had come up to him, “we are buried under this snow!”

“What say you?” cried Jean Cornbutte.

“I say that the snow is massed and frozen around us and over us, and that we are buried alive!”

“Let us try to clear this mass of snow away,” replied the captain.

The two friends buttressed themselves against the obstacle which obstructed the opening, but they could not move it. The snow formed an iceberg more than five feet thick, and had become literally a part of the house. Jean could not suppress a cry, which awoke Misonne and Vasling. An oath burst from the latter, whose features contracted. At this moment the smoke, thicker than ever, poured into the house, for it could not find an issue.

“Malediction!” cried Misonne. “The pipe of the stove is sealed up by the ice!”

Penellan resumed his staff, and took down the pipe, after throwing snow on the embers to extinguish them, which produced such a smoke that the light of the lamp could scarcely be seen; then he tried with his staff to clear out the orifice, but he only encountered a rock of ice! A frightful end, preceded by a terrible agony, seemed to be their doom! The smoke, penetrating the throats of the unfortunate party, caused an insufferable pain, and air would soon fail them altogether!

Marie here rose, and her presence, which inspired Cornbutte with despair, imparted some courage to Penellan. He said to himself that it could not be that the poor girl was destined to so horrible a death.

“Ah!” said she, “you have made too much fire. The room is full of smoke!”

“Yes, yes,” stammered Penellan.

“It is evident,” resumed Marie, “for it is not cold, and it is long since we have felt too much heat.”

No one dared to tell her the truth.

“See, Marie,” said Penellan bluntly, “help us get breakfast ready. It is too cold to go out. Here is the chafing-dish, the spirit, and the coffee. Come, you others, a little pemmican first, as this wretched storm forbids us from hunting.”

These words stirred up his comrades.

“Let us first eat,” added Penellan, “and then we shall see about getting off.”

Penellan set the example and devoured his share of the breakfast. His comrades imitated him, and then drank a cup of boiling coffee, which somewhat restored their spirits. Then Jean Cornbutte decided energetically that they should at once set about devising means of safety.

André Vasling now said, —

“If the storm is still raging, which is probable, we must be buried ten feet under the ice, for we can hear no noise outside.”

Penellan looked at Marie, who now understood the truth, and did not tremble. The helmsman first heated, by the flame of the spirit, the iron point of his staff, and successfully introduced it into the four walls of ice, but he could find no issue in either. Cornbutte then resolved to cut out an opening in the door itself. The ice was so hard that it was difficult for the knives to make the least impression on it. The pieces which were cut off soon encumbered the hut. After working hard for two hours, they had only hollowed out a space three feet deep.

Some more rapid method, and one which was less likely to demolish the house, must be thought of; for the farther they advanced the more violent became the effort to break off the compact ice. It occurred to Penellan to make use of the chafing-dish to melt the ice in the direction they wanted. It was a hazardous method, for, if their imprisonment lasted long, the spirit, of which they had but little, would be wanting when needed to prepare the meals. Nevertheless, the idea was welcomed on all hands, and was put in execution. They first cut a hole three feet deep by one in diameter, to receive the water which would result from the melting of the ice; and it was well that they took this precaution, for the water soon dripped under the action of the flames, which Penellan moved about under the mass of ice. The opening widened little by little, but this kind of work could not be continued long, for the water, covering their clothes, penetrated to their bodies here and there. Penellan was obliged to pause in a quarter of an hour, and to withdraw the chafing-dish in order to dry himself. Misonne then took his place, and worked sturdily at the task.

In two hours, though the opening was five feet deep, the points of the staffs could not yet find an issue without.

“It is not possible,” said Jean Cornbutte, “that snow could have fallen in such abundance. It must have been gathered on this point by the wind. Perhaps we had better think of escaping in some other direction.”

“I don’t know,” replied Penellan; “but if it were only for the sake of not discouraging our comrades, we ought to continue to pierce the wall where we have begun. We must find an issue ere long.”

“Will not the spirit fail us?” asked the captain.

“I hope not. But let us, if necessary, dispense with coffee and hot drinks. Besides, that is not what most alarms me.”

“What is it, then, Penellan?”

“Our lamp is going out, for want of oil, and we are fast exhausting our provisions. — At last, thank God!”

Penellan went to replace André Vasling, who was vigorously working for the common deliverance.

“Monsieur Vasling,” said he, “I am going to take your place; but look out well, I beg of you, for every tendency of the house to fall, so that we may have time to prevent it.”

The time for rest had come, and when Penellan had added one more foot to the opening, he lay down beside his comrades.

CHAPTER XI.

A CLOUD OF SMOKE.

The next day, when the sailors awoke, they were surrounded by complete darkness. The lamp had gone out. Jean Cornbutte roused Penellan to ask him for the tinder-box, which was passed to him. Penellan rose to light the fire, but in getting up, his head struck against the ice ceiling. He was horrified, for on the evening before he could still stand upright. The chafing-dish being lighted up by the dim rays of the spirit, he perceived that the ceiling was a foot lower than before.

Penellan resumed work with desperation.

At this moment the young girl observed, by the light which the chafing-dish cast upon Penellan’s face, that despair and determination were struggling in his rough features for the mastery. She went to him, took his hands, and tenderly pressed them.

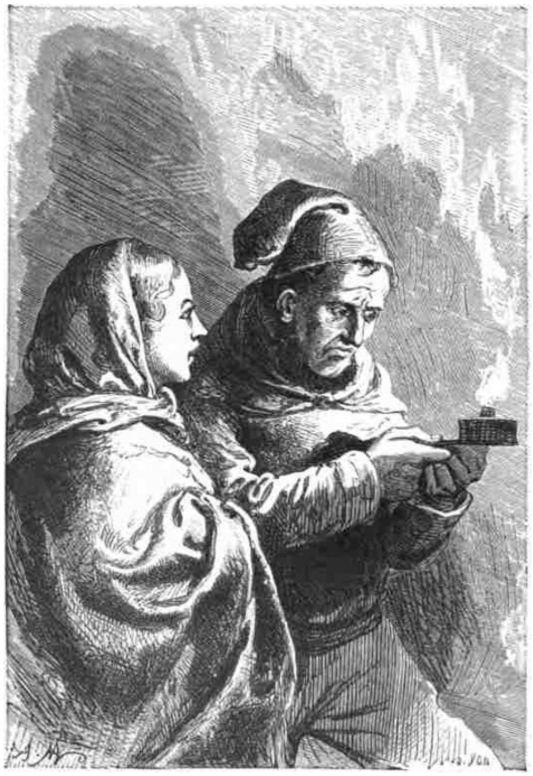

despair and determination were struggling in his rough features for the mastery.

“She cannot, must not die thus!” he cried.

He took his chafing-dish, and once more attacked the narrow opening. He plunged in his staff, and felt no resistance. Had he reached the soft layers of the snow? He drew out his staff, and a bright ray penetrated to the house of ice!

“Here, my friends!” he shouted.

He pushed back the snow with his hands and feet, but the exterior surface was not thawed, as he had thought. With the ray of light, a violent cold entered the cabin and seized upon everything moist, to freeze it in an instant. Penellan enlarged the opening with his cutlass, and at last was able to breathe the free air. He fell on his knees to thank God, and was soon joined by Marie and his comrades.

A magnificent moon lit up the sky, but the cold was so extreme that they could not bear it. They re-entered their retreat; but Penellan first looked about him. The promontory was no longer there, and the hut was now in the midst of a vast plain of ice. Penellan thought he would go to the sledge, where the provisions were. The sledge had disappeared!

The cold forced him to return. He said nothing to his companions. It was necessary, before all, to dry their clothing, which was done with the chafing-dish. The thermometer, held for an instant in the air, descended to thirty degrees below zero.

An hour after, Vasling and Penellan resolved to venture outside. They wrapped themselves up in their still wet garments, and went out by the opening, the sides of which had become as hard as a rock.

“We have been driven towards the north-east,” said Vasling, reckoning by the stars, which shone with wonderful brilliancy.

“That would not be bad,” said Penellan, “if our sledge had come with us.”

“Is not the sledge there?” cried Vasling. “Then we are lost!”

“Let us look for it,” replied Penellan.

They went around the hut, which formed a block more than fifteen feet high. An immense quantity of snow had fallen during the whole of the storm, and the wind had massed it against the only elevation which the plain presented. The entire block had been driven by the wind, in the midst of the broken icebergs, more than twenty-five miles to the north-east, and the prisoners had suffered the same fate as their floating prison. The sledge, supported by another iceberg, had been turned another way, for no trace of it was to be seen, and the dogs must have perished amid the frightful tempest.

André Vasling and Penellan felt despair taking possession of them. They did not dare to return to their companions. They did not dare to announce this fatal news to their comrades in misfortune. They climbed upon the block of ice in which the hut was hollowed, and could perceive nothing but the white immensity which encompassed them on all sides. Already the cold was beginning to stiffen their limbs, and the damp of their garments was being transformed into icicles which hung about them.

Just as Penellan was about to descend, he looked towards André. He saw him suddenly gaze in one direction, then shudder and turn pale.

“What is the matter, Vasling?” he asked.

“Nothing,” replied the other. “Let us go down and urge the captain to leave these parts, where we ought never to have come, at once!”

Instead of obeying, Penellan ascended again, and looked in the direction which had drawn the mate’s attention. A very different effect was produced on him, for he uttered a shout of joy, and cried, —

“Blessed be God!”

A light smoke was rising in the north-east. There was no possibility of deception. It indicated the presence of human beings. Penellan’s cries of joy reached the rest below, and all were able to convince themselves with their eyes that he was not mistaken.

Without thinking of their want of provisions or the severity of the temperature, wrapped in their hoods, they were all soon advancing towards the spot whence the smoke arose in the north-east. This was evidently five or six miles off, and it was very difficult to take exactly the right direction. The smoke now disappeared, and no elevation served as a guiding mark, for the ice-plain was one united level. It was important, nevertheless, not to diverge from a straight line.

“Since we cannot guide ourselves by distant objects,” said Jean Cornbutte, “we must use this method. Penellan will go ahead, Vasling twenty steps behind him, and I twenty steps behind Vasling. I can then judge whether or not Penellan diverges from the straight line.”

They had gone on thus for half an hour, when Penellan suddenly stopped and listened. The party hurried up to him.

“Did you hear nothing?” he asked.

“Nothing!” replied Misonne.

“It is strange,” said Penellan. “It seemed to me I heard cries from this direction.”

“Cries?” replied Marie. “Perhaps we are near our destination, then.”

“That is no reason,” said André Vasling. “In these high latitudes and cold regions sounds may be heard to a great distance.”

“However that may be,” replied Jean Cornbutte, “let us go forward, or we shall be frozen.”

“No!” cried Penellan. “Listen!”

Some feeble sounds — quite perceptible, however — were heard. They seemed to be cries of distress. They were twice repeated. They seemed like cries for help. Then all became silent again.

“I was not mistaken,” said Penellan. “Forward!”

He began to run in the direction whence the cries had proceeded. He went thus two miles, when, to his utter stupefaction, he saw a man lying on the ice. He went up to him, raised him, and lifted his arms to heaven in despair.

André Vasling, who was following close behind with the rest of the sailors, ran up and cried, —

“It is one of the castaways! It is our sailor Courtois!”

“He is dead!” replied Penellan. “Frozen to death!”

Jean Cornbutte and Marie came up beside the corpse, which was already stiffened by the ice. Despair was written on every face. The dead man was one of the comrades of Louis Cornbutte!

“Forward!” cried Penellan.

They went on for half an hour in perfect silence, and perceived an elevation which seemed without doubt to be land.

“It is Shannon Island,” said Jean Cornbutte.

A mile farther on they distinctly perceived smoke escaping from a snow-hut, closed by a wooden door. They shouted. Two men rushed out of the hut, and Penellan recognized one of them as Pierre Nouquet.

“Pierre!” he cried.

Pierre stood still as if stunned, and unconscious of what was going on around him. André Vasling looked at Pierre Nouquet’s companion with anxiety mingled with a cruel joy, for he did not recognize Louis Cornbutte in him.

“Pierre! it is I!” cried Penellan. “These are all your friends!”

Pierre Nouquet recovered his senses, and fell into his old comrade’s arms.

“And my son — and Louis!” cried Jean Cornbutte, in an accent of the most profound despair.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RETURN TO THE SHIP.

At this moment a man, almost dead, dragged himself out of the hut and along the ice.

It was Louis Cornbutte.

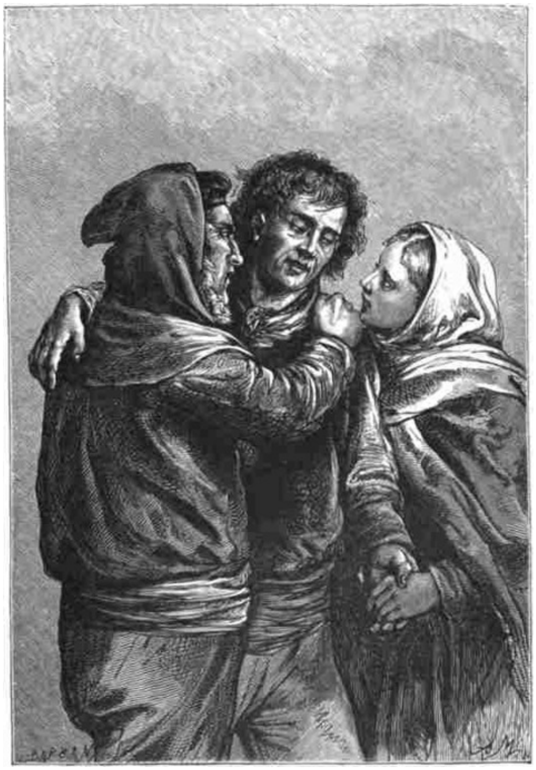

It was Louis Cornbutte.

“My son!”

“My beloved!”

These two cries were uttered at the same time, and Louis Cornbutte fell fainting into the arms of his father and Marie, who drew him towards the hut, where their tender care soon revived him.

“My father! Marie!” cried Louis; “I shall not die without having seen you!”

“You will not die!” replied Penellan, “for all your friends are near you.”

André Vasling must have hated Louis Cornbutte bitterly not to extend his hand to him, but he did not.

Pierre Nouquet was wild with joy. He embraced every body; then he threw some wood into the stove, and soon a comfortable temperature was felt in the cabin.

There were two men there whom neither Jean Cornbutte nor Penellan recognized.

They were Jocki and Herming, the only two sailors of the crew of the Norwegian schooner who were left.

“My friends, we are saved!” said Louis. “My father! Marie! You have exposed yourselves to so many perils!”

“We do not regret it, my Louis,” replied the father. “Your brig, the ‘Jeune-Hardie,’ is securely anchored in the ice sixty leagues from here. We will rejoin her all together.”

“When Courtois comes back he’ll be mightily pleased,” said Pierre Nouquet.

A mournful silence followed this, and Penellan apprised Pierre and Louis of their comrade’s death by cold.

“My friends,” said Penellan, “we will wait here until the cold decreases. Have you provisions and wood?”

“Yes; and we will burn what is left of the ‘Froöern.’”

The “Froöern” had indeed been driven to a place forty miles from where Louis Cornbutte had taken up his winter quarters. There she was broken up by the icebergs floated by the thaw, and the castaways were carried, with a part of the *débris* of their cabin, on the southern shores of Shannon Island.

They were then five in number — Louis Cornbutte, Courtois, Pierre Nouquet, Jocki, and Herming. As for the rest of the Norwegian crew, they had been submerged with the long-boat at the moment of the wreck.

When Louis Cornbutte, shut in among the ice, realized what must happen, he took every precaution for passing the winter. He was an energetic man, very active and courageous; but, despite his firmness, he had been subdued by this horrible climate, and when his father found him he had given up all hope of life. He had not only had to contend with the elements, but with the ugly temper of the two Norwegian sailors, who owed him their existence. They were like savages, almost inaccessible to the most natural emotions. When Louis had the opportunity to talk to Penellan, he advised him to watch them carefully. In return, Penellan told him of André Vasling’s conduct. Louis could not believe it, but Penellan convinced him that after his disappearance Vasling had always acted so as to secure Marie’s hand.

The whole day was employed in rest and the pleasures of reunion. Misonne and Pierre Nouquet killed some sea-birds near the hut, whence it was not prudent to stray far. These fresh provisions and the replenished fire raised the spirits of the weakest. Louis Cornbutte got visibly better. It was the first moment of happiness these brave people had experienced. They celebrated it with enthusiasm in this wretched hut, six hundred leagues from the North Sea, in a temperature of thirty degrees below zero!

This temperature lasted till the end of the moon, and it was not until about the 17th of November, a week after their meeting, that Jean Cornbutte and his party could think of setting out. They only had the light of the stars to guide them; but the cold was less extreme, and even some snow fell.

Before quitting this place a grave was dug for poor Courtois. It was a sad ceremony, which deeply affected his comrades. He was the first of them who would not again see his native land.

Misonne had constructed, with the planks of the cabin, a sort of sledge for carrying the provisions, and the sailors drew it by turns. Jean Cornbutte led the expedition by the ways already traversed. Camps were established with great promptness when the times for repose came. Jean Cornbutte hoped to find his deposits of provisions again, as they had become well-nigh indispensable by the addition of four persons to the party. He was therefore very careful not to diverge from the route by which he had come.

By good fortune he recovered his sledge, which had stranded near the promontory where they had all run so many dangers. The dogs, after eating their straps to satisfy their hunger, had attacked the provisions in the sledge. These had sustained them, and they served to guide the party to the sledge, where there was a considerable quantity of provisions left. The little band resumed its march towards the bay. The dogs were harnessed to the sleigh, and no event of interest attended the return.

It was observed that Aupic, André Vasling, and the Norwegians kept aloof, and did not mingle with the others; but, unbeknown to themselves, they were narrowly watched. This germ of dissension more than once aroused the fears of Louis Cornbutte and Penellan.

About the 7th of December, twenty days after the discovery of the castaways, they perceived the bay where the “Jeune-Hardie” was lying. What was their astonishment to see the brig perched four yards in the air on blocks of ice! They hurried forward, much alarmed for their companions, and were received with joyous cries by Gervique, Turquiette, and Gradlin. All of them were in good health, though they too had been subjected to formidable dangers.

The tempest had made itself felt throughout the polar sea. The ice had been broken and displaced, crushed one piece against another, and had seized the bed on which the ship rested. Though its specific weight tended to carry it under water, the ice had acquired an incalculable force, and the brig had been suddenly raised up out of the sea.

The first moments were given up to the happiness inspired by the safe return. The exploring party were rejoiced to find everything in good condition, which assured them a supportable though it might be a rough winter. The ship had not been shaken by her sudden elevation, and was perfectly tight. When the season of thawing came, they would only have to slide her down an inclined plane, to launch her, in a word, in the once more open sea.

But a bad piece of news spread gloom on the faces of Jean Cornbutte and his comrades. During the terrible gale the snow storehouse on the coast had been quite demolished; the provisions which it contained were scattered, and it had not been possible to save a morsel of them. When Jean and Louis Cornbutte learnt this, they visited the hold and steward’s room, to ascertain the quantity of provisions which still remained.

The thaw would not come until May, and the brig could not leave the bay before that period. They had therefore five winter months before them to pass amid the ice, during which fourteen persons were to be fed. Having made his calculations, Jean Cornbutte found that he would at most be able to keep them alive till the time for departure, by putting each and all on half rations. Hunting for game became compulsory to procure food in larger quantity.

For fear that they might again run short of provisions, it was decided to deposit them no longer in the ground. All of them were kept on board, and beds were disposed for the new comers in the common lodging. Turquiette, Gervique, and Gradlin, during the absence of the others, had hollowed out a flight of steps in the ice, which enabled them easily to reach the ship’s deck.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TWO RIVALS.

André Vasling had been cultivating the good-will of the two Norwegian sailors. Aupic also made one of their band, and held himself apart, with loud disapproval of all the new measures taken; but Louis Cornbutte, to whom his father had transferred the command of the ship, and who had become once more master on board, would listen to no objections from that quarter, and in spite of Marie's advice to act gently, made it known that he intended to be obeyed on all points.

Nevertheless, the two Norwegians succeeded, two days after, in getting possession of a box of salt meat. Louis ordered them to return it to him on the spot, but Aupic took their part, and André Vasling declared that the precautions about the food could not be any longer enforced.

It was useless to attempt to show these men that these measures were for the common interest, for they knew it well, and only sought a pretext to revolt.

Penellan advanced towards the Norwegians, who drew their cutlasses; but, aided by Misonne and Turquiette, he succeeded in snatching the weapons from their hands, and gained possession of the salt meat. André Vasling and Aupic, seeing that matters were going against them, did not interfere. Louis Cornbutte, however, took the mate aside, and said to him, —

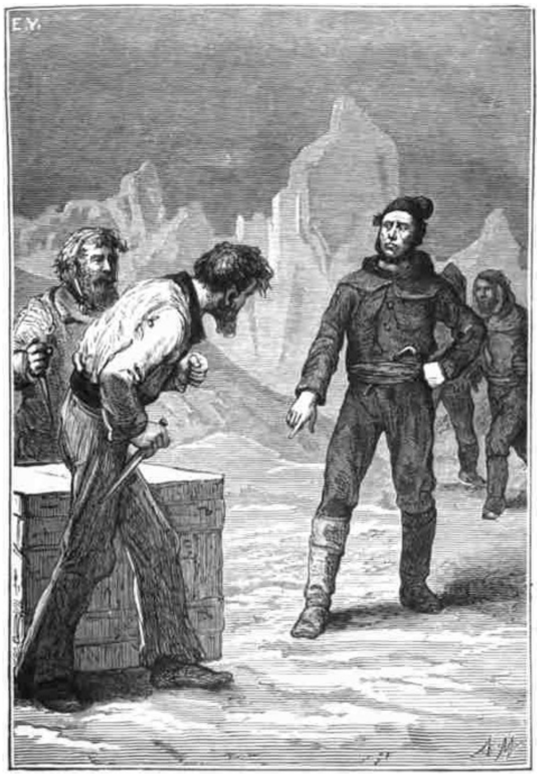

Penellan advanced towards the Norwegians.

“André Vasling, you are a wretch! I know your whole conduct, and I know what you are aiming at, but as the safety of the whole crew is confided to me, if any man of you thinks of conspiring to destroy them, I will stab him with my own hand!”

“Louis Cornbutte,” replied the mate, “it is allowable for you to act the master; but remember that absolute obedience does not exist here, and that here the strongest alone makes the law.”

Marie had never trembled before the dangers of the polar seas; but she was terrified by this hatred, of which she was the cause, and the captain’s vigour hardly reassured her.

Despite this declaration of war, the meals were partaken of in common and at the same hours. Hunting furnished some ptarmigans and white hares; but this resource would soon fail them, with the approach of the terrible cold weather. This began at the solstice, on the 22nd of December, on which day the thermometer fell to thirty-five degrees below zero. The men experienced pain in their ears, noses, and the extremities of their bodies. They were seized with a mortal torpor combined with headache, and their breathing became more and more difficult.

In this state they had no longer any courage to go hunting or to take any exercise. They remained crouched around the stove, which gave them but a meagre heat; and when they went away from it, they perceived that their blood suddenly cooled.

Jean Cornbutte's health was seriously impaired, and he could no longer quit his lodging. Symptoms of scurvy manifested themselves in him, and his legs were soon covered with white spots. Marie was well, however, and occupied herself tending the sick ones with the zeal of a sister of charity. The honest fellows blessed her from the bottom of their hearts.

The 1st of January was one of the gloomiest of these winter days. The wind was violent, and the cold insupportable. They could not go out, except at the risk of being frozen. The most courageous were fain to limit themselves to walking on deck, sheltered by the tent. Jean Cornbutte, Gervique, and Gradlin did not leave their beds. The two Norwegians, Aupic, and André Vasling, whose health was good, cast ferocious looks at their companions, whom they saw wasting away.

Louis Cornbutte led Penellan on deck, and asked him how much firing was left.

"The coal was exhausted long ago," replied Penellan, "and we are about to burn our last pieces of wood."

“If we are not able to keep off this cold, we are lost,” said Louis.

“There still remains a way — ” said Penellan, “to burn what we can of the brig, from the barricading to the water-line; and we can even, if need be, demolish her entirely, and rebuild a smaller craft.”

“That is an extreme means,” replied Louis, “which it will be full time to employ when our men are well. For,” he added in a low voice, “our force is diminishing, and that of our enemies seems to be increasing. That is extraordinary.”

“It is true,” said Penellan; “and unless we took the precaution to watch night and day, I know not what would happen to us.”

“Let us take our hatchets,” returned Louis, “and make our harvest of wood.”

Despite the cold, they mounted on the forward barricading, and cut off all the wood which was not indispensably necessary to the ship; then they returned with this new provision. The fire was started afresh, and a man remained on guard to prevent it from going out.

Meanwhile Louis Cornbutte and his friends were soon tired out. They could not confide any detail of the life in common to their enemies. Charged with all the domestic cares, their powers were soon exhausted. The scurvy betrayed itself in Jean Cornbutte, who suffered intolerable pain. Gervique and Gradlin showed symptoms of the same disease. Had it not been for the lemon-juice with which they were abundantly furnished, they would have speedily succumbed to their sufferings. This remedy was not spared in relieving them.

But one day, the 15th of January, when Louis Cornbutte was going down into the steward’s room to get some lemons, he was stupefied to find that the barrels in which they were kept had disappeared. He hurried up and told Penellan of this misfortune. A theft had been committed, and it was easy to recognize its authors. Louis Cornbutte then understood why the health of his enemies continued so good! His friends were no longer strong enough to take the lemons away from them, though his life and that of his comrades depended on the fruit; and he now sank, for the first time, into a gloomy state of despair.

CHAPTER XIV.

DISTRESS.

On the 20th of January most of the crew had not the strength to leave their beds. Each, independently of his woollen coverings, had a buffalo-skin to protect him against the cold; but as soon as he put his arms outside the clothes, he felt a pain which obliged him quickly to cover them again.

Meanwhile, Louis having lit the stove fire, Penellan, Misonne, and André Vasling left their beds and crouched around it. Penellan prepared some boiling coffee, which gave them some strength, as well as Marie, who joined them in partaking of it.

Louis Cornbutte approached his father’s bedside; the old man was almost motionless, and his limbs were helpless from disease. He muttered some disconnected words, which carried grief to his son’s heart.

“Louis,” said he, “I am dying. O, how I suffer! Save me!”

Louis took a decisive resolution. He went up to the mate, and, controlling himself with difficulty, said, —

“Do you know where the lemons are, Vasling?”

“In the steward’s room, I suppose,” returned the mate, without stirring.

“You know they are not there, as you have stolen them!”

“You are master, Louis Cornbutte, and may say and do anything.”

“For pity’s sake, André Vasling, my father is dying! You can save him, — answer!”

“I have nothing to answer,” replied André Vasling.

“Wretch!” cried Penellan, throwing himself, cutlass in hand, on the mate.

“Help, friends!” shouted Vasling, retreating.

Aupic and the two Norwegian sailors jumped from their beds and placed themselves behind him. Turquiette, Penellan, and Louis prepared to defend themselves. Pierre Nouquet and Gradlin, though suffering much, rose to second them.

“You are still too strong for us,” said Vasling. “We do not wish to fight on an uncertainty.”

The sailors were so weak that they dared not attack the four rebels, for, had they failed, they would have been lost.

“André Vasling!” said Louis Cornbutte, in a gloomy tone, “if my father dies, you will have murdered him; and I will kill you like a dog!”

Vasling and his confederates retired to the other end of the cabin, and did not reply.

It was then necessary to renew the supply of wood, and, in spite of the cold, Louis went on deck and began to cut away a part of the barricading, but was obliged to retreat in a quarter of an hour, for he was in danger of falling, overcome by the freezing air. As he passed, he cast a glance at the thermometer left outside, and saw that the mercury was frozen. The cold, then, exceeded forty-two degrees below zero. The weather was dry, and the wind blew from the north.

On the 26th the wind changed to the north-east, and the thermometer outside stood at thirty-five degrees. Jean Cornbutte was in agony, and his son had searched in vain for some remedy with which to relieve his pain. On this day, however, throwing himself suddenly on Vasling, he managed to snatch a lemon from him which he was about to suck.

Vasling made no attempt to recover it. He seemed to be awaiting an opportunity to accomplish his wicked designs.

The lemon-juice somewhat relieved old Cornbutte, but it was necessary to continue the remedy. Marie begged Vasling on her knees to produce the lemons, but he did not reply, and soon Penellan heard the wretch say to his accomplices, —

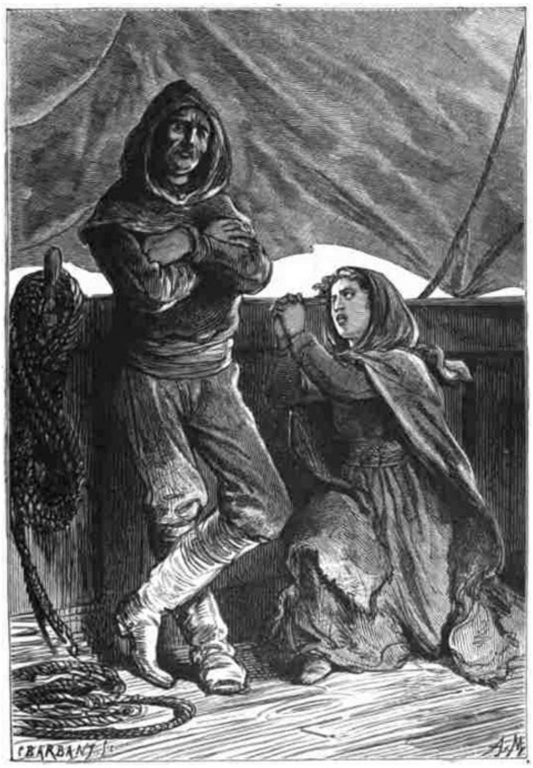

Marie begged Vasling on her knees to produce the lemons, but he did not reply.

“The old fellow is dying. Gervique, Gradlin, and Nouquet are not much better. The others are daily losing their strength. The time is near when their lives will belong to us!”

It was then resolved by Louis Cornbutte and his adherents not to wait, and to profit by the little strength which still remained to them. They determined to act the next night, and to kill these wretches, so as not to be killed by them.

The temperature rose a little. Louis Cornbutte ventured to go out with his gun in search of some game.

He proceeded some three miles from the ship, and often, deceived by the effects of the mirage and refraction, he went farther away than he intended. It was imprudent, for recent tracts of ferocious animals were to be seen. He did not wish, however, to return without some fresh meat, and continued on his route; but he then experienced a strange feeling, which turned his head. It was what is called “white vertigo.”

The reflection of the ice hillocks and fields affected him from head to foot, and it seemed to him that the dazzling colour penetrated him and caused an irresistible nausea. His eye was attacked. His sight became uncertain. He thought he should go mad with the glare. Without fully understanding this terrible effect, he advanced on his way, and soon put up a ptarmigan, which he eagerly pursued. The bird soon fell, and in order to reach it Louis leaped from an ice-block and fell heavily; for the leap was at least ten feet, and the refraction made him think it was only two. The vertigo then seized him, and, without knowing why, he began to call for help, though he had not been injured by the fall. The cold began to take him, and he rose with pain, urged by the sense of self-preservation.

Suddenly, without being able to account for it, he smelt an odour of boiling fat. As the ship was between him and the wind, he supposed that this odour proceeded from her, and could not imagine why they should be cooking fat, this being a dangerous thing to do, as it was likely to attract the white bears.

Louis returned towards the ship, absorbed in reflections which soon inspired his excited mind with terror. It seemed to him as if colossal masses were moving on the horizon, and he asked himself if there was not another ice-quake. Several of these masses interposed themselves between him and the ship, and appeared to rise about its sides. He stopped to gaze at them more attentively, when to his horror he recognized a herd of gigantic bears.

These animals had been attracted by the odour of grease which had surprised Lonis. He sheltered himself behind a hillock, and counted three, which were scaling the blocks on which the “Jeune-Hardie” was resting.

Nothing led him to suppose that this danger was known in the interior of the ship, and a terrible anguish oppressed his heart. How resist these redoubtable enemies? Would André Vasling and his confederates unite with the rest on board in the common peril? Could Penellan and the others, half starved, benumbed with cold, resist these formidable animals, made wild by unassuaged hunger? Would they not be surprised by an unlooked-for attack?

Louis made these reflections rapidly. The bears had crossed the blocks, and were mounting to the assault of the ship. He might then quit the block which protected him; he went nearer, clinging to the ice, and could soon see the enormous animals tearing the tent with their paws, and leaping on the deck. He thought of firing his gun to give his comrades notice; but if these came up without arms, they would inevitably be torn in pieces, and nothing showed as yet that they were even aware of their new danger.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WHITE BEARS.

After Louis Cornbutte’s departure, Penellan had carefully shut the cabin door, which opened at the foot of the deck steps. He returned to the stove, which he took it upon himself to watch, whilst his companions regained their berths in search of a little warmth.

It was then six in the evening, and Penellan set about preparing supper. He went down into the steward’s room for some salt meat, which he wished to soak in the boiling water. When he returned, he found André Vasling in his place, cooking some pieces of grease in a basin.

“I was there before you,” said Penellan roughly; “why have you taken my place?”

“For the same reason that you claim it,” returned Vasling: “because I want to cook my supper.”

“You will take that off at once, or we shall see!”

“We shall see nothing,” said Vasling; “my supper shall be cooked in spite of you.”

“You shall not eat it, then,” cried Penellan, rushing upon Vasling, who seized his cutlass, crying, —

“Help, Norwegians! Help, Aupic!”

These, in the twinkling of an eye, sprang to their feet, armed with pistols and daggers. The crisis had come.

Penellan precipitated himself upon Vasling, to whom, no doubt, was confided the task to fight him alone; for his accomplices rushed to the beds where lay Misonne, Turquiette, and Nouquet. The latter, ill and defenceless, was delivered over to Herming's ferocity. The carpenter seized a hatchet, and, leaving his berth, hurried up to encounter Aupic. Turquiette and Jocki, the Norwegian, struggled fiercely. Gervique and Gradlin, suffering horribly, were not even conscious of what was passing around them.

Nouquet soon received a stab in the side, and Herming turned to Penellan, who was fighting desperately. André Vasling had seized him round the body.

At the beginning of the affray the basin had been upset on the stove, and the grease running over the burning coals, impregnated the atmosphere with its odour. Marie rose with cries of despair, and hurried to the bed of old Jean Cornbutte.

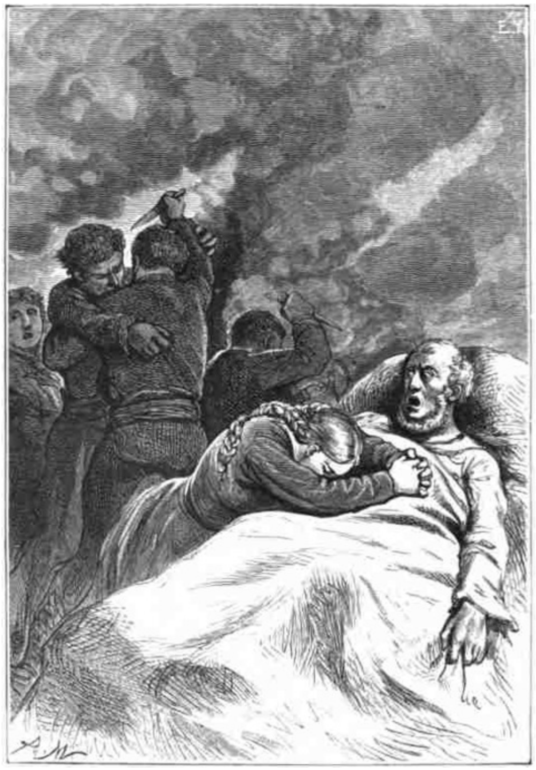

Marie rose with cries of despair, and hurried to the bed of old Jean Cornbutte.

Vasling, less strong than Penellan, soon perceived that the latter was getting the better of him. They were too close together to make use of their weapons. The mate, seeing Herming, cried out, —

“Help, Herming!”

“Help, Misonne!” shouted Penellan, in his turn.

But Misonne was rolling on the ground with Aupic, who was trying to stab him with his cutlass. The carpenter’s hatchet was of little use to him, for he could not wield it, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he parried the lunges which Aupic made with his knife.

Meanwhile blood flowed amid the groans and cries. Turquiette, thrown down by Jocki, a man of immense strength, had received a wound in the shoulder, and he tried in vain to clutch a pistol which hung in the Norwegian’s belt. The latter held him as in a vice, and it was impossible for him to move.

At Vasling’s cry for help, who was being held by Penellan close against the door, Herming rushed up. As he was about to stab the Breton’s back with his cutlass, the latter felled him to the earth with a vigorous kick. His effort to do this enabled Vasling to disengage his right arm; but the door, against which they pressed with all their weight, suddenly yielded, and Vasling fell over.

Of a sudden a terrible growl was heard, and a gigantic bear appeared on the steps. Vasling saw him first. He was not four feet away from him. At the same moment a shot was heard, and the bear, wounded or frightened, retreated. Vasling, who had succeeded in regaining his feet, set-out in pursuit of him, abandoning Penellan.

Penellan then replaced the door, and looked around him. Misonne and Turquiette, tightly garrotted by their antagonists, had been thrown into a corner, and made vain efforts to break loose. Penellan rushed to their assistance, but was overturned by the two Norwegians and Aupic. His exhausted strength did not permit him to resist these three men, who so clung to him as to hold him motionless Then, at the cries of the mate, they hurried on deck, thinking that Louis Cornbutte was to be encountered.

André Vasling was struggling with a bear, which he had already twice stabbed with his knife. The animal, beating the air with his heavy paws, was trying to clutch Vasling; he retiring little by little on the barricading, was apparently doomed, when a second shot was heard. The bear fell. André Vasling raised his head and saw Louis Cornbutte in the ratlines of the mizen-mast, his gun in his hand. Louis had shot the bear in the heart, and he was dead.

Hate overcame gratitude in Vasling’s breast; but before satisfying it, he looked around him. Aupic’s head was broken by a paw-stroke, and he lay lifeless on deck. Jocki, hatchet in hand, was with difficulty parrying the blows of the second bear which had just killed Aupic. The animal had received two wounds, and still struggled desperately. A third bear was directing his way towards the ship’s prow. Vasling paid no attention to him, but, followed by Herming, went to the aid of Jocki; but Jocki, seized by the beast’s paws, was crushed, and when the bear fell under the shots of the other two men, he held only a corpse in his shaggy arms.

“We are only two, now” said Vasling, with gloomy ferocity, “but if we yield, it will not be without vengeance!”

Herming reloaded his pistol without replying. Before all, the third bear must be got rid of. Vasling looked forward, but did not see him. On raising his eyes, he perceived him erect on the barricading, clinging to the ratlines and trying to reach Louis. Vasling let his gun fall, which he had aimed at the animal, while a fierce joy glittered in his eyes.

“Ah,” he cried, “you owe me that vengeance!”

Louis took refuge in the top of the mast. The bear kept mounting, and was not more than six feet from Louis, when he raised his gun and pointed it at the animal’s heart.

Vasling raised his weapon to shoot Louis if the bear fell.

Louis fired, but the bear did not appear to be hit, for he leaped with a bound towards the top. The whole mast shook.

Vasling uttered a shout of exultation.

“Herming,” he cried, “go and find Marie! Go and find my betrothed!”

Herming descended the cabin stairs.

Meanwhile the furious beast had thrown himself upon Louis, who was trying to shelter himself on the other side of the mast; but at the moment that his enormous paw was raised to break his head, Louis, seizing one of the backstays, let himself slip down to the deck, not without danger, for a ball hissed by his ear when he was half-way down. Vasling had shot at him, and missed him. The two adversaries now confronted each other, cutlass in hand.

The combat was about to become decisive. To entirely glut his vengeance, and to have the young girl witness her lover’s death, Vasling had deprived himself of Herming’s aid. He could now reckon only on himself.

Louis and Vasling seized each other by the collar, and held each other with iron grip. One of them must fall. They struck each other violently. The blows were only half parried, for blood soon flowed from both. Vasling tried to clasp his adversary about the neck with his arm, to bring him to the ground. Louis, knowing that he who fell was lost, prevented him, and succeeded in grasping his two arms; but in doing this he let fall his cutlass.

Piteous cries now assailed his ears; it was Marie’s voice. Herming was trying to drag her up. Louis was seized with a desperate rage. He stiffened himself to bend Vasling’s loins; but at this moment the combatants felt themselves seized in a powerful embrace. The bear, having descended from the mast, had fallen upon the two men. Vasling was pressed against the animal’s body. Louis felt his claws entering his flesh. The bear, was strangling both of them.

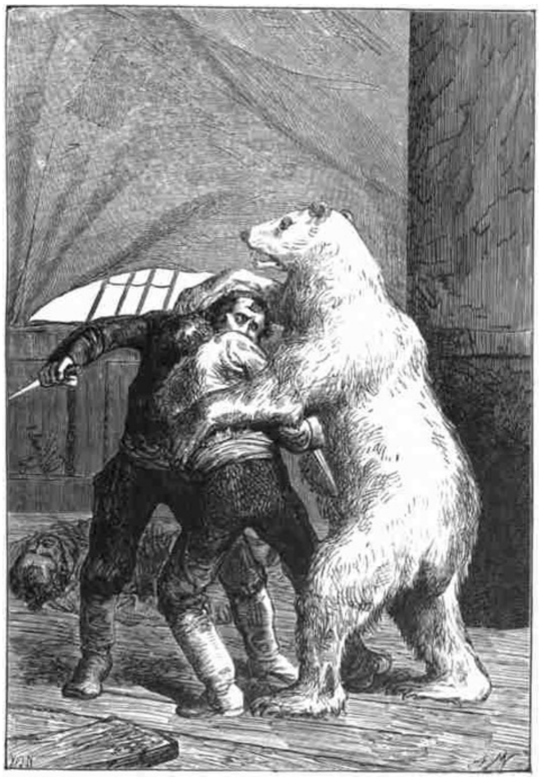

The bear, having descended from the mast, had fallen upon the two men.

“Help! help! Herming!” cried the mate.

“Help! Penellan!” cried Louis.

Steps were heard on the stairs. Penellan appeared, loaded his pistol, and discharged it in the bear’s ear; he roared; the pain made him relax his paws for a moment, and Louis, exhausted, fell motionless on the deck; but the bear, closing his paws tightly in a supreme agony, fell, dragging down the wretched Vasling, whose body was crushed under him.

Penellan hurried to Louis Cornbutte’s assistance. No serious wound endangered his life: he had only lost his breath for a moment.

“Marie!” he said, opening his eyes.

“Saved!” replied Perfellan. “Herming is lying there with a knife-wound in his stomach.”

“And the bears — ”

“Dead, Louis; dead, like our enemies! But for those beasts we should have been lost. Truly, they came to our succour. Let us thank Heaven!”

Louis and Penellan descended to the cabin, and Marie fell into their arms.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

Herming, mortally wounded, had been carried to a berth by Misonne and Turquiette, who had succeeded in getting free. He was already at the last gasp of death; and the two sailors occupied themselves with Nouquet, whose wound was not, happily, a serious one.

But a greater misfortune had overtaken Louis Cornbutte. His father no longer gave any signs of life. Had he died of anxiety for his son, delivered over to his enemies? Had he succumbed in presence of these terrible events? They could not tell. But the poor old sailor, broken by disease, had ceased to live!

At this unexpected blow, Louis and Marie fell into a sad despair; then they knelt at the bedside and wept, as they prayed for Jean Cornbutte's soul, Penellan, Misonne, and Turquiette left them alone in the cabin, and went on deck. The bodies of the three bears were carried forward. Penellan decided to keep their skins, which would be of no little use; but he did not think for a moment of eating their flesh. Besides, the number of men to feed was now much decreased. The bodies of Vasling, Aupic, and Jocki, thrown into a hole dug on the coast, were soon rejoined by that of Herming. The Norwegian died during the night, without repentance or remorse, foaming at the mouth with rage.

The three sailors repaired the tent, which, torn in several places, permitted the snow to fall on the deck. The temperature was exceedingly cold, and kept so till the return of the sun, which did not reappear above the horizon till the 8th of January.

Jean Cornbutte was buried on the coast. He had left his native land to find his son, and had died in these terrible regions! His grave was dug on an eminence, and the sailors placed over it a simple wooden cross.

From that day, Louis Cornbutte and his comrades passed through many other trials; but the lemons, which they found, restored them to health.

Gervique, Gradlin, and Nouquet were able to rise from their berths a fortnight after these terrible events, and to take a little exercise.

Soon hunting for game became more easy and its results more abundant. The water-birds returned in large numbers. They often brought down a kind of wild duck which made excellent food. The hunters had no other deprivation to deplore than that of two dogs, which they lost in an expedition to reconnoitre the state of the icefields, twenty-five miles to the southward.

The month of February was signalized by violent tempests and abundant snows. The mean temperature was still twenty-five degrees below zero, but they did not suffer in comparison with past hardships. Besides, the sight of the sun, which rose higher and higher above the horizon, rejoiced them, as it forecast the end of their torments. Heaven had pity on them, for warmth came sooner than usual that year. The ravens appeared in March, careering about the ship. Louis Cornbutte captured some cranes which had wandered thus far northward. Flocks of wild birds were also seen in the south.

The return of the birds indicated a diminution of the cold; but it was not safe to rely upon this, for with a change of wind, or in the new or full moons, the temperature suddenly fell; and the sailors were forced to resort to their most careful precautions to protect themselves against it. They had already burned all the barricading, the bulkheads, and a large portion of the bridge. It was time, then, that their wintering was over. Happily, the mean temperature of March was not over sixteen degrees below zero. Marie occupied herself with preparing new clothing for the advanced season of the year.

After the equinox, the sun had remained constantly above the horizon. The eight months of perpetual daylight had begun. This continual sunlight, with the increasing though still quite feeble heat, soon began to act upon the ice.

Great precautions were necessary in launching the ship from the lofty layer of ice which surrounded her. She was therefore securely propped up, and it seemed best to await the breaking up of the ice; but the lower mass, resting on a bed of already warm water, detached itself little by little, and the ship gradually descended with it. Early in April she had reached her natural level.

Torrents of rain came with April, which, extending in waves over the ice-plain, hastened still more its breaking up. The thermometer rose to ten degrees below zero. Some of the men took off their seal-skin clothes, and it was no longer necessary to keep a fire in the cabin stove day and night. The provision of spirit, which was not exhausted, was used only for cooking the food.

Soon the ice began to break up rapidly, and it became imprudent to venture upon the plain without a staff to sound the passages; for fissures wound in spirals here and there. Some of the sailors fell into the water, with no worse result, however, than a pretty cold bath.

The seals returned, and they were often hunted, and their grease utilized.

The health of the crew was fully restored, and the time was employed in hunting and preparations for departure. Louis Cornbutte often examined the channels, and decided, in consequence of the shape of the southern coast, to attempt a passage in that direction. The breaking up had already begun here and there, and the floating ice began to pass off towards the high seas. On the 25th of April the ship was put in readiness. The sails, taken from their sheaths, were found to be perfectly preserved, and it was with real delight that the sailors saw them once more swaying in the wind. The ship gave a lurch, for she had found her floating line, and though she would not yet move forward, she lay quietly and easily in her natural element.

In May the thaw became very rapid. The snow which covered the coast melted on every hand, and formed a thick mud, which made it well-nigh impossible to land. Small heathers, rosy and white, peeped out timidly above the lingering snow, and seemed to smile at the little heat they received. The thermometer at last rose above zero.

Twenty miles off, the ice masses, entirely separated, floated towards the Atlantic Ocean. Though the sea was not quite free around the ship, channels opened by which Louis Cornbutte wished to profit.

On the 21st of May, after a parting visit to his father’s grave, Louis at last set out from the bay. The hearts of the honest sailors were filled at once with joy and sadness, for one does not leave without regret a place where a friend has died. The wind blew from the north, and favoured their departure. The ship was often arrested by ice-banks, which were cut with the saws; icebergs not seldom confronted her, and it was necessary to blow them up with powder. For a month the way was full of perils, which sometimes brought the ship to the verge of destruction; but the crew were sturdy, and used to these dangerous exigencies. Penellan, Pierre Nouquet, Turquiette, Fidèle Misonne, did the work of ten sailors, and Marie had smiles of gratitude for each.

The “Jeune-Hardie” at last passed beyond the ice in the latitude of Jean-Mayer Island. About the 25th of June she met ships going northward for seals and whales. She had been nearly a month emerging from the Polar Sea.

On the 16th of August she came in view of Dunkirk. She had been signalled by the look-out, and the whole population flocked to the jetty. The sailors of the ship were soon clasped in the arms of their friends. The old curé received Louis Cornbutte and Marie with patriarchal arms, and of the two masses which he said on the following day, the first was for the repose of Jean Cornbutte’s soul, and the second to bless these two lovers, so long united in misfortune.

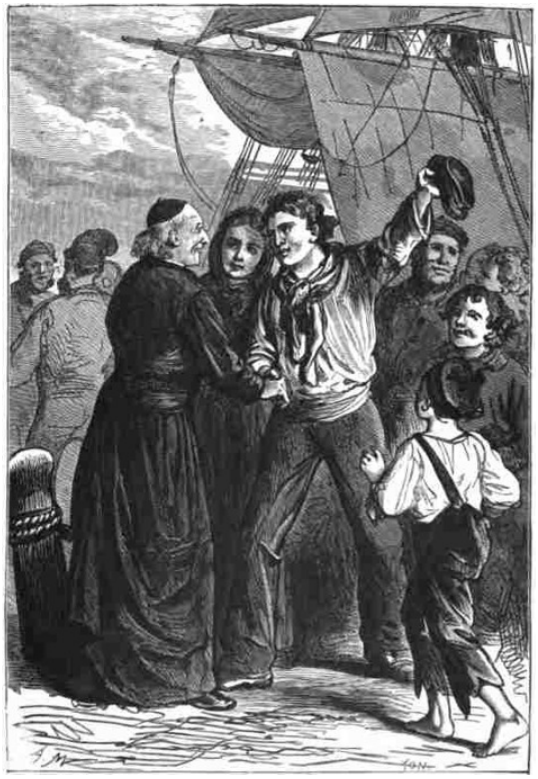

The old curé received Louis Cornbutte and Marie.

THE FORTIETH FRENCH ASCENT OF MONT BLANC BY PAUL VERNE.

I arrived at Chamonix on the 18th of August, 1871, fully decided to make the ascent of Mont Blanc, cost what it might. My first attempt in August, 1869, was not successful. Bad weather had prevented me from mounting beyond the Grands-Mulets. This time circumstances seemed scarcely more favourable, for the weather, which had promised to be fine on the morning of the 18th, suddenly changed towards noon. Mont Blanc, as they say in its neighbourhood, “put on its cap and began to smoke its pipe,” which, to speak more plainly, means that it is covered with clouds, and that the snow, driven upon it by a south-west wind, formed a long crest on its summit in the direction of the unfathomable precipices of the Brenva glaciers. This crest betrayed to imprudent tourists the route they would have taken, had they had the temerity to venture upon the mountain.

The next night was very inclement. The rain and wind were violent, and the barometer, below the “change,” remained stationary.

Towards daybreak, however, several thunder-claps announced a change in the state of the atmosphere. Soon the clouds broke. The chain of the Brevent and the Aiguilles-Rouges betrayed itself. The wind, turning to the north-west, brought into view above the Col de Balme, which shuts in the valley of Chamonix on the north, some light, isolated, fleecy clouds, which I hailed as the heralds of fine weather.

Despite this happy augury and a slight rise in the barometer, M. Balmat, chief guide of Chamonix, declared to me that I must not yet think of attempting the ascent.

“If the barometer continues to rise,” he added, “and the weather holds good, I promise you guides for the day after to-morrow — perhaps for to-morrow. Meanwhile, have patience and stretch your legs; I will take you up the Brevent. The clouds are clearing away, and you will be able to exactly distinguish the path you will have to go over to reach the summit of Mont Blanc. If, in spite of this, you are determined to go, you may try it!”

This speech, uttered in a certain tone, was not very reassuring, and gave food for reflection. Still, I accepted his proposition, and he chose as my companion the guide Edward Ravanel, a very sedate and devoted fellow, who perfectly knew his business.

M. Donatien Levesque, an enthusiastic tourist and an intrepid pedestrian, who had made early in the previous year an interesting and difficult trip in North America, was with me. He had already visited the greater part of America, and was about to descend the Mississippi to New Orleans, when the war cut short his projects and recalled him to France. We had met at Aix-les-Bains, and we had determined to make an excursion together in Savoy and Switzerland.

Donatien Levesque knew my intentions, and, as he thought that his health would not permit him to attempt so long a journey over the glaciers, it had been agreed that he should await my return from Mont Blanc at Chamonix, and should make the traditional visit to the Mer-de-Glace by the Montanvers during my absence.

On learning that I was going to ascend the Brevent, my friend did not hesitate to accompany me thither. The ascent of the Brevent is one of the most interesting trips that can be made from Chamonix. This mountain, about seven thousand six hundred feet high, is only the prolongation of the chain for the Aiguilles-Rouges, which runs from the south-west to the north-east, parallel with that of Mont Blanc, and forms with it the narrow valley of Chamonix. The Brevent, by its central position, exactly opposite the Bossons glacier, enables one to watch the parties which undertake the ascent of the giant of the Alps nearly throughout their journey. It is therefore much frequented.

We started about seven o’clock in the morning. As we went along, I thought of the mysterious words of the master-guide; they annoyed me a little. Addressing Ravanel, I said, —

“Have you made the ascent of Mont Blanc?”

“Yes, monsieur,” he replied, “once; and that’s enough. I am not anxious to do it again.”

“The deuce!” said I. “I am going to try it.”

“You are free, monsieur; but I shall not go with you. The mountain is not good this year. Several attempts have already been made; two only have succeeded. As for the second, the party tried the ascent twice. Besides, the accident last year has rather cooled the amateurs.”

“An accident! What accident?”

“Did not monsieur hear of it? This is how it happened. A party, consisting of ten guides and porters and two Englishmen, started about the middle of September for Mont Blanc. They were seen to reach the summit; then, some minutes after, they disappeared in a cloud. When the cloud passed over no one was visible. The two travellers, with seven guides and porters, had been blown off by the wind and precipitated on the Cormayeur side, doubtless into the Brenva glacier. Despite the most vigilant search, their bodies could not be found. The other three were found one hundred and fifty yards below the summit, near the Petits-Mulets. They had become blocks of ice."

"But these travellers must have been imprudent," said I to Ravanel. "What folly it was to start off so late in the year on such an expedition! They should have gone up in August."

I vainly tried to keep up my courage; this lugubrious story would haunt me in spite of myself. Happily the weather soon cleared, and the rays of a bright sun dissipated the clouds which still veiled Mont Blanc, and, at the same time, those which overshadowed my thoughts.

Our ascent was satisfactorily accomplished. On leaving the chalets of Planpraz, situated at a height of two thousand and sixty-two yards, you ascend, on ragged masses of rock and pools of snow, to the foot of a rock called "The Chimney," which is scaled with the feet and hands. Twenty minutes after, you reach the summit of the Brevent, whence the view is very fine. The chain of Mont Blanc appears in all its majesty. The gigantic mountain, firmly established on its powerful strata, seems to defy the tempests which sweep across its icy shield without ever impairing it; whilst the crowd of icy needles, peaks, mountains, which form its cortege and rise everywhere around it, without equalling its noble height, carry the evident traces of a slow wasting away.

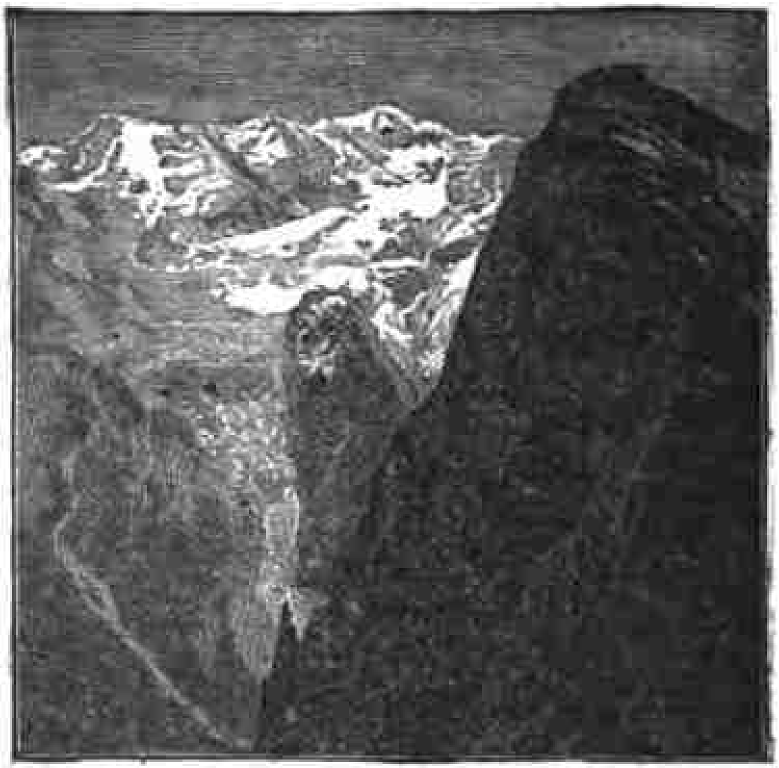

View of Mont Blanc from the Brevent.

From the excellent look-out which we occupied, we could reckon, though still imperfectly, the distance to be gone over in order to attain the summit. This summit, which from Chamonix appears so near the dome of the Goûter, now took its true position. The various plateaus which form so many degrees which must be crossed, and which are not visible from below, appeared from the Brevent, and threw the so-much-desired summit, by the laws of perspective, still farther in the background. The Bossons glacier, in all its splendour, bristled with icy needles and blocks (blocks sometimes ten yards square), which seemed, like the waves of an angry sea, to beat against the sides of the rocks of the Grands-Mulets, the base of which disappeared in their midst.

This marvellous spectacle was not likely to cool my impatience, and I more eagerly than ever promised myself to explore this hitherto unknown world.

My companion was equally inspired by the scene, and from this moment I began to think that I should not have to ascend Mont Blanc alone.

We descended again to Chamonix; the weather became milder every hour; the barometer continued to ascend; everything seemed to promise well.

The next day at sunrise I hastened to the master-guide. The sky was cloudless; the wind, almost imperceptible, was north-east. The chain of Mont Blanc, the higher summits of which were gilded by the rising sun, seemed to invite the many tourists to ascend it. One could not, in all politeness, refuse so kindly an invitation.

M. Balmat, after consulting his barometer, declared the ascent to be practicable, and promised me the two guides and the porter prescribed in our agreement. I left the selection of these to him. But an unexpected incident disturbed my preparations for departure.

As I came out of M. Balmat’s office, I met Ravanel, my guide of the day before.

“Is monsieur going to Mont Blanc?” he asked.

“Yes, certainly,” said I. “Is it not a favourable time logo?”

He reflected a few moments, and then said with an embarrassed air, —

“Monsieur, you are my traveller; I accompanied you yesterday to the Brevent, so I cannot leave you now; and, since you are going up, I will go with you, if you will kindly accept my services. It is your right, for on all dangerous journeys the traveller can choose his own guides. Only, if you accept my offer, I ask that you will also take my brother, Ambrose Ravanel, and my cousin, Gaspard Simon. These are young, vigorous fellows; they do not like the ascent of Mont Blanc better than I do; but they will not shirk it, and I answer for them to you as I would for myself."

This young man inspired me with all confidence. I accepted his proposition, and hastened to apprise M. Balmat of the choice I had made. But M. Balmat had meanwhile been selecting guides for me according to their turn on his list. One only had accepted, Edward Simon; the answer of another, Jean Carrier, had not yet been received, though it was scarcely doubtful, as this man had already made the ascent of Mont Blanc twenty-nine times. I thus found myself in an embarrassing position. The guides I had chosen were all from Argentière, a village six kilometres from Chamonix. Those of Chamonix accused Ravanel of having influenced me in favour of his family, which was contrary to the regulations.

To cut the discussion short, I took Edward Simon, who had already made his preparations as a third guide. He would be useless if I went up alone, but would become indispensable if my friend also ascended.

This settled, I went to tell Donatien Levesque. I found him sleeping the sleep of the just, for he had walked over sixteen kilometres on a mountain the evening before. I had some difficulty in waking him; but on removing first his sheets, then his pillows, and finally his mattress, I obtained some result, and succeeded in making him understand that I was preparing for the hazardous trip.

"Well," said he, yawning, "I will go with you as far as the Grands-Mulets, and await your return there."

"Bravo!" I replied. "I have just one guide too many, and I will attach him to your person."

We bought the various articles indispensable to a journey across the glaciers. Iron-spiked alpenstocks, coarse cloth leggings, green spectacles fitting tightly to the eyes, furred gloves, green veils, — nothing was forgotten. We each had excellent triple-soled shoes, which our guides roughed for the ice. This last is an important detail, for there are moments in such an expedition when the least slip is fatal, not only to yourself, but to the whole party with you.

Our preparations and those of the guides occupied nearly two hours. About eight o’clock our mules were brought; and we set out at last for the chalet of the Pierre-Pointue, situated at a height of six thousand five hundred feet, or three thousand above the valley of Chamonix, not far from eight thousand five hundred feet below the summit of Mont Blanc.

On reaching the Pierre-Pointue, about ten o’clock, we found there a Spanish tourist, M. N — — , accompanied by two guides and a porter. His principal guide, Paccard, a relative of the Doctor Paccard who made, with Jacques Balmat, the first ascent of Mont Blanc, had already been to the summit eighteen times. M. N — — was also getting himself ready for the ascent. He had travelled much in America, and had crossed the Cordilleras to Quito, passing through snow at the highest points. He therefore thought that he could, without great difficulty, carry through his new enterprise; but in this he was mistaken. He had reckoned without the steepness of the inclinations which he had to cross, and the rarefaction of the air. I hasten to add, to his honour, that, since he succeeded in reaching the summit of Mont Blanc, it was due to a rare moral energy, for his physical energies had long before deserted him.

We breakfasted as heartily as possible at the Pierre-Pointue; this being a prudent precaution, as the appetite usually fails higher up among the ice.

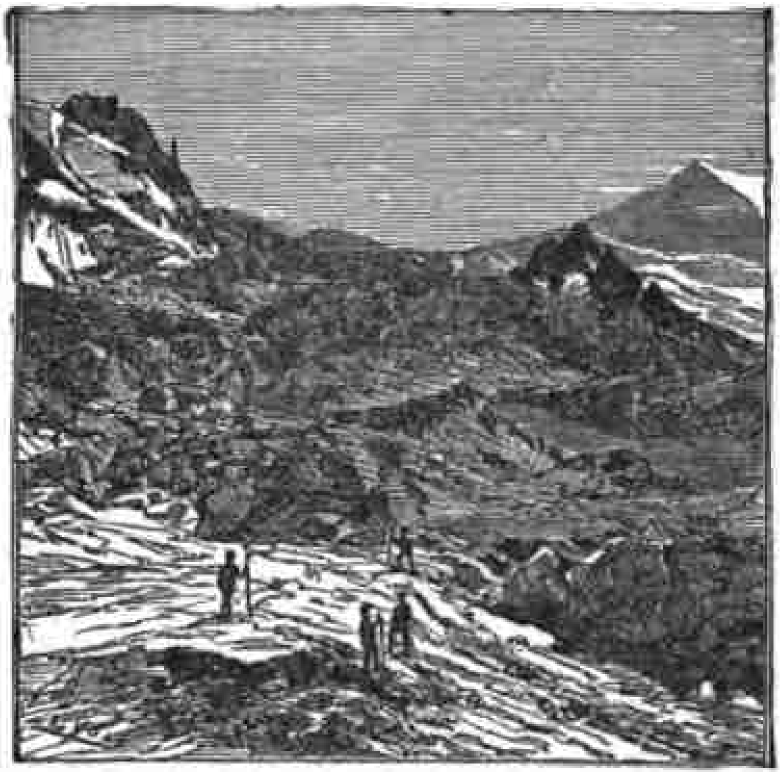

View Of Bossons Glacier, Near The Grands-Mulets.

M. N — — set out at eleven, with his guides, for the Grands-Mulets. We did not start until noon. The mule-road ceases at the Pierre-Pointue. We had then to go up a very narrow zigzag path, which follows the edge of the Bossons glacier, and along the base of the Aiguille-du-Midi. After an hour of difficult climbing in an intense heat, we reached a point called the Pierre-a-l'Echelle, eight thousand one hundred feet high. The guides and travellers were then bound together by a strong rope, with three or four yards between each. We were about to advance upon the Bossons glacier. This glacier, difficult at first, presents yawning and apparently bottomless crevasses on every hand. The vertical sides of these crevasses are of a glaucous and uncertain colour, but too seducing to the eye; when, approaching closely, you succeed in looking into their mysterious depths, you feel yourself irresistibly drawn towards them, and nothing seems more natural than to go down into them.

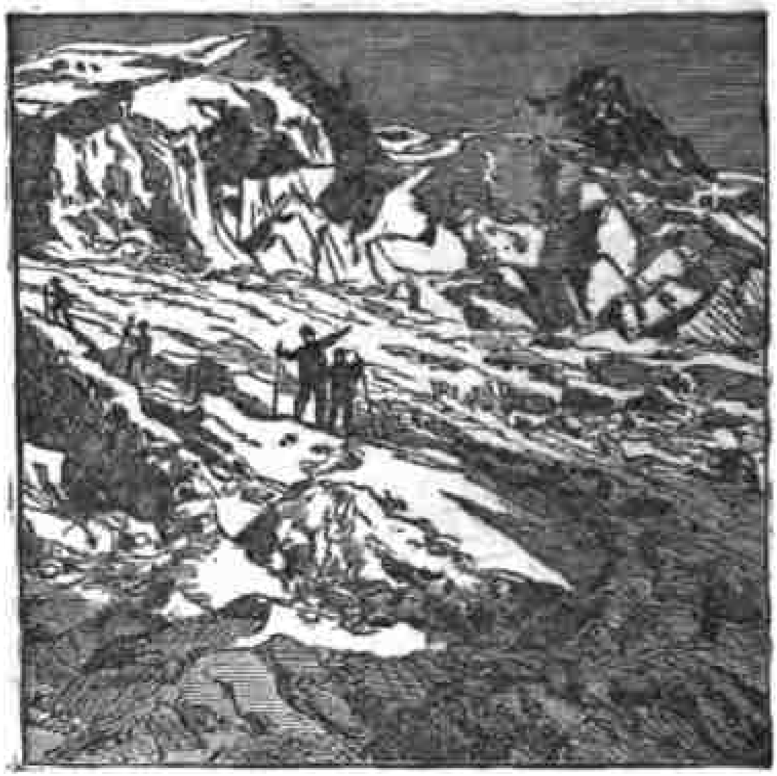

Passage Of The Bossons Glacier.

You advance slowly, passing round the crevasses, or on the snow bridges of dubious strength. Then the rope plays its part. It is stretched out over these dangerous transits; if the snow bridge yields, the guide or traveller remains hanging over the abyss. He is drawn beyond it, and gets off with a few bruises. Sometimes, if the crevasse is very wide but not deep, he descends to the bottom and goes up on the other side. In this case it is necessary to cut steps in the ice, and the two leading guides, armed with a sort of hatchet, perform this difficult and perilous task. A special circumstance makes the entrance on the Bossons dangerous. You go upon the glacier at the base of the Aiguille-du-Midi, opposite a passage whence stone avalanches often descend. This passage is nearly six hundred feet wide. It must be crossed quickly, and as you pass, a guide stands on guard to avert the danger from you if it presents itself. In 1869 a guide was killed on this spot, and his body, hurled into space by a stone, was dashed to pieces on the rocks nine hundred feet below.

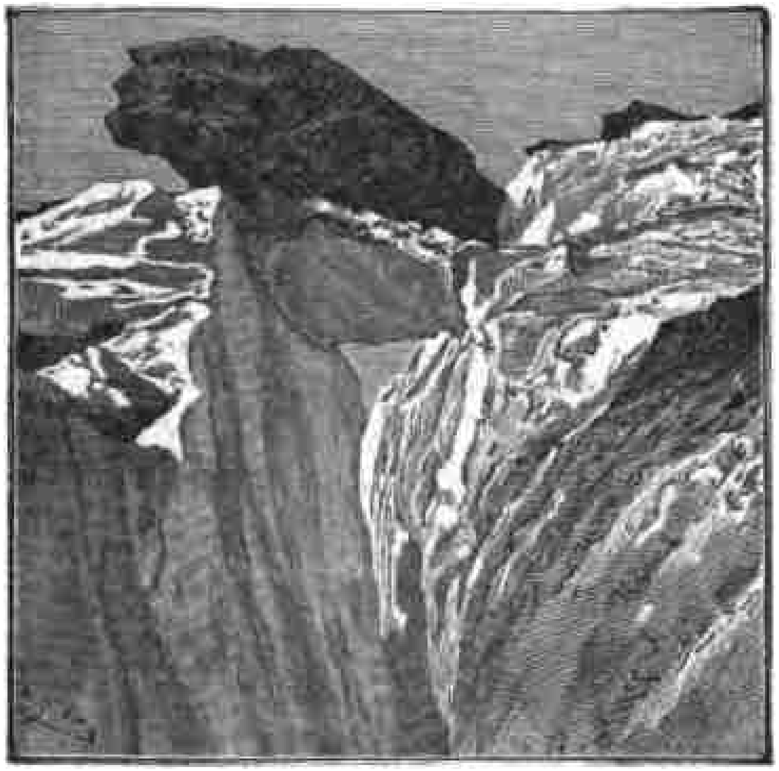

Crevasse and Bridge.

We were warned, and hastened our steps as fast as our inexperience would permit; but on leaving this dangerous zone, another, not less dangerous, awaited us. This was the region of the “seracs,” — immense blocks of ice, the formation of which is not as yet explained.

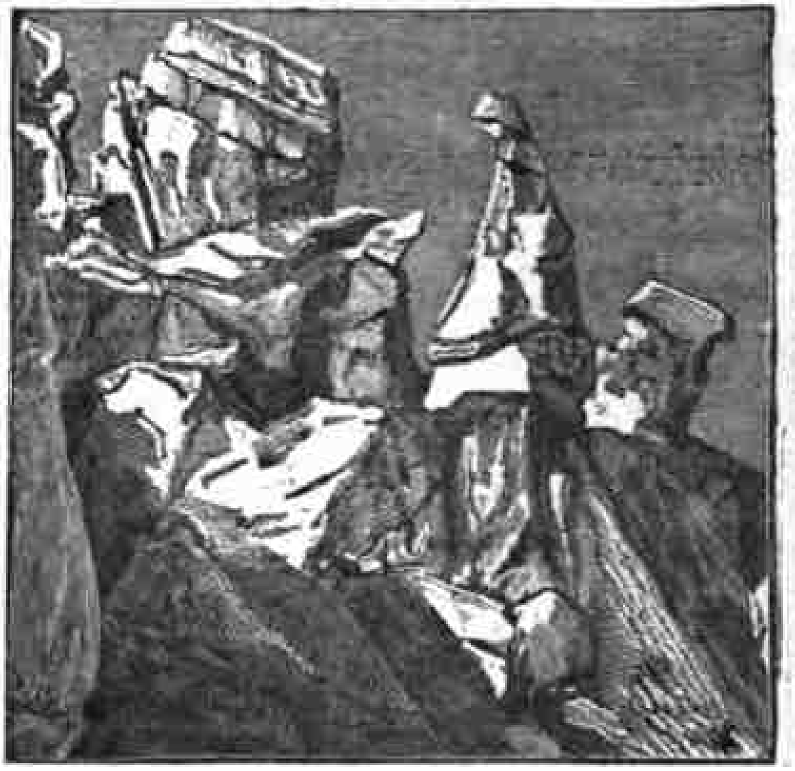

View of the “Seracs”.

These are usually situated on the edge of a plateau, and menace the whole valley beneath them. A slight movement of the glacier, or even a light vibration of the temperature, impels their fall, and occasions the most serious accidents.

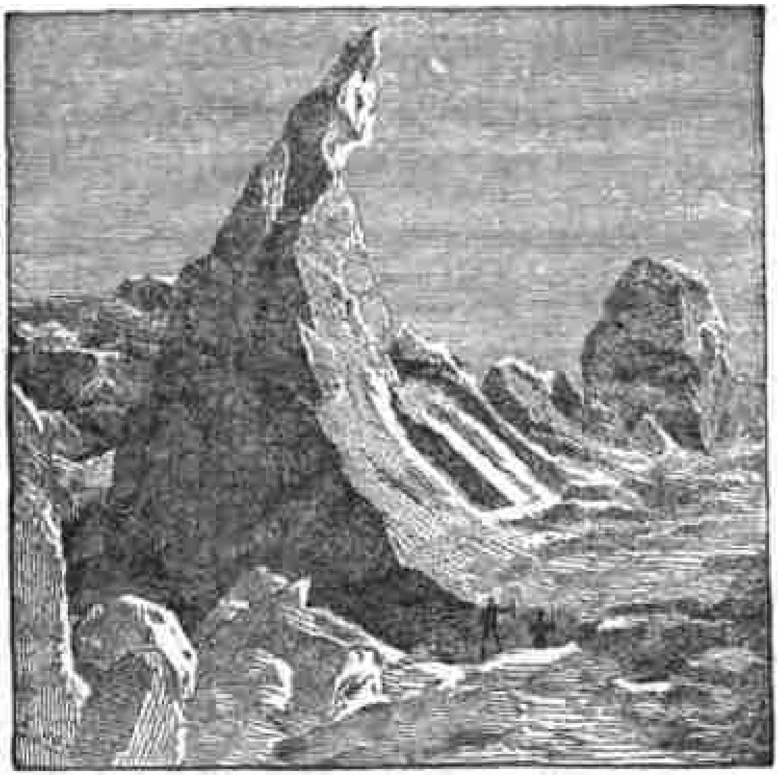

View of the “Seracs”.

“Messieurs, keep quiet, and let us pass over quickly.” These words, roughly spoken by one of the guides, checked our conversation. We went across rapidly and in silence. We finally reached what is called the “Junction” (which might more properly be called the violent “Separation”), by the Côte Mountain, the Bossons and Tacconay glaciers. At this point the scene assumes an indescribable character; crevasses with changing colours, ice-needles with sharp forms, seracs suspended and pierced with the light, little green lakes compose a chaos which surpasses everything that one can imagine. Added to this, the rush of the torrents at the foot of the glaciers, the sinister and repeated crackings of the blocks which detached themselves and fell in avalanches down the crevasses, the trembling of the ground which opened beneath our feet, gave a singular idea of those desolate places the existence of which only betrays itself by destruction and death.

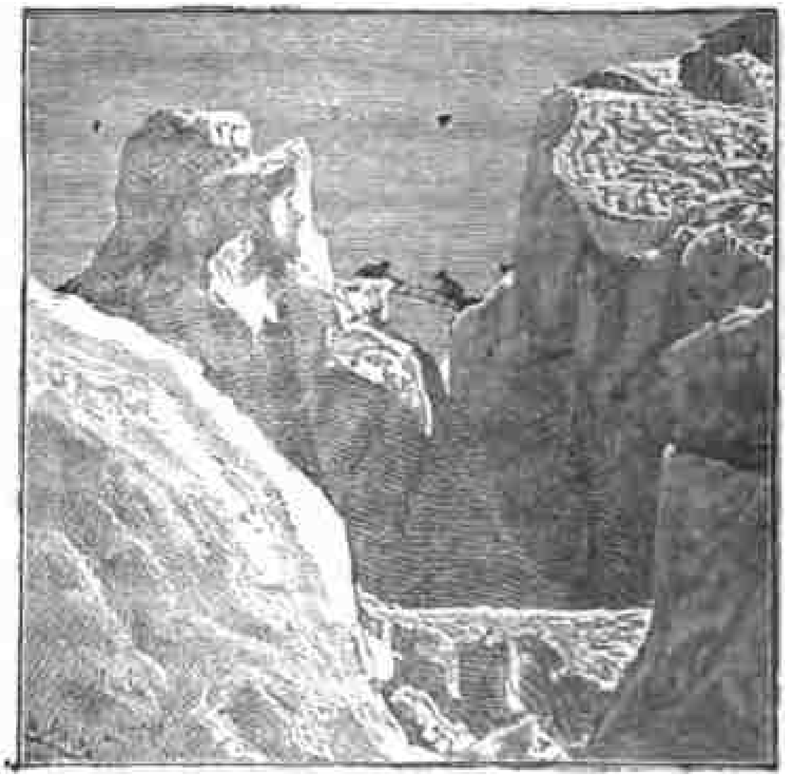

Passage of the “Junction”.

After passing the “Junction” you follow the Tacconay glacier for awhile, and reach the side which leads to the Grands-Mulets. This part, which is very sloping, is traversed in zigzags. The leading guide takes care to trace them at an angle of thirty degrees, when there is fresh snow, to avoid the avalanches.

After crossing for three hours on the ice and snow, we reach the Grands-Mulets, rocks six hundred feet high, overlooking on one side the Bossons glacier, and on the other the sloping plains which extend to the base of the Goûter dome.

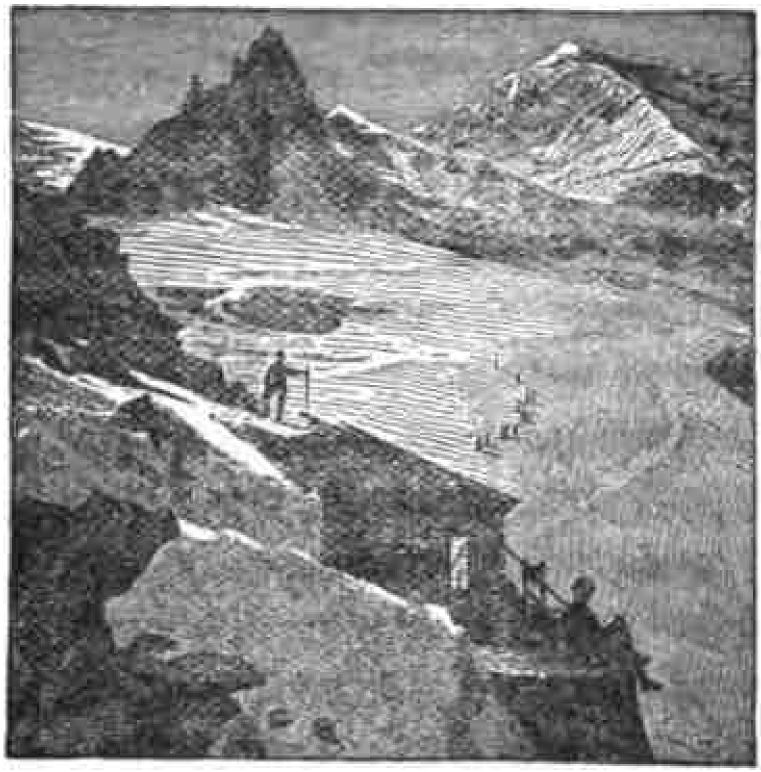

Hut At The Grands-Mulets.

A small hut, constructed by the guides near the summit of the first rock, gives a shelter to travellers, and enables them to await a favourable moment for setting out for the summit of Mont Blanc.

They dine there as well as they can, and sleep too; but the proverb, “He who sleeps dines,” does not apply to this elevation, for one cannot seriously do the one or the other.

“Well,” said I to Levesque, after a pretence of a meal, “did I exaggerate the splendour of the landscape, and do you regret having come thus far?”

“I regret it so little,” he replied, “that I am determined to go on to the summit. You may count on me.”

“Very good,” said I. “But you know the worst is yet to come.”

“Nonsense!” he exclaimed, “we will go to the end. Meanwhile, let us observe the sunset, which must be magnificent.”

The heavens had remained wonderfully clear. The chain of the Brevent and the Aiguilles-Rouges stretched out at our feet. Beyond, the Fiz rocks and the Aiguille-de-Varan rose above the Sallanche Valley, and the whole chains of Mont Fleury and the Reposoir appeared in the background. More to the right we could descry the snowy summit of the Buet, and farther off the Dents-du-Midi, with its five tusks, overhanging the valley of the Rhone. Behind us were the eternal snows of the Goûter, Mont Maudit, and, lastly, Mont Blanc.

Little by little the shadows invaded the valley of Chamonix, and gradually each of the summits which overlook it on the west. The chain of Mont Blanc alone remained luminous, and seemed encircled by a golden halo. Soon the shadows crept up the Goûter and Mont Maudit. They still respected the giant of the Alps. We watched this gradual disappearance of the light with admiration. It lingered awhile on the highest summit, and gave us the foolish hope that it would not depart thence. But in a few moments all was shrouded in gloom, and the livid and ghastly colours of death succeeded the living hues. I do not exaggerate. Those who love mountains will comprehend me.

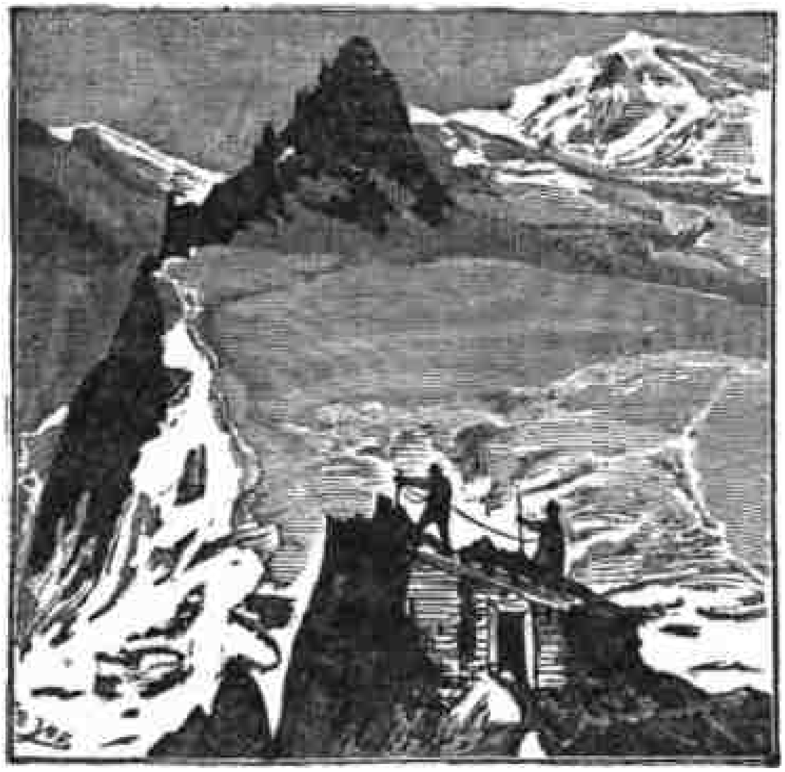

View of Mont Blanc from Grands-Mulets.

After witnessing this sublime scene, we had only to await the moment of departure. We were to set out again at two in the morning. Now, therefore, we stretched ourselves upon our mattresses.

It was useless to think of sleeping, much more of talking. We were absorbed by more or less gloomy thoughts. It was the night before the battle, with the difference that nothing forced us to engage in the struggle. Two sorts of ideas struggled in the mind. It was the ebb and flow of the sea, each in its turn. Objections to the venture were not wanting. Why run so much danger? If we succeeded, of what advantage would it be? If an accident happened, how we should regret it! Then the imagination set to work; all the mountain catastrophes rose in the fancy. I dreamed of snow bridges giving way under my feet, of being precipitated in the yawning crevasses, of hearing the terrible noises of the avalanches detaching themselves and burying me, of disappearing, of cold and death seizing upon me, and of struggling with desperate effort, but in vain!

A sharp, horrible noise is heard at this moment

“The avalanche! the avalanche!” I cry.

“What is the matter with you?” asks Levesque, starting up.

Alas! It is a piece of furniture which, in the struggles of my nightmare, I have just broken. This very prosaic avalanche recalls me to the reality. I laugh at my terrors, a contrary current of thought gets the upper hand, and with it ambitious ideas. I need only use a little effort to reach this summit, so seldom attained. It is a victory, as others are. Accidents are rare — very rare! Do they ever take place at all? The spectacle from the summit must be so marvellous! And then what satisfaction there would be in having accomplished what so many others dared not undertake!

My courage was restored by these thoughts, and I calmly awaited the moment of departure.

About one o’clock the steps and voices of the guides, and the noise of opening doors, indicated that that moment was approaching. Soon Ravanel came in and said, “Come, messieurs, get up; the weather is magnificent. By ten o’clock we shall be at the’ summit.”

At these words we leaped from our beds, and hurried to make our toilet. Two of the guides, Ambrose Ravanel and his cousin Simon, went on ahead to explore the road. They were provided with a lantern, which was to show us the way to go, and with hatchets to make the path and cut steps in the very difficult spots. At two o’clock we tied ourselves one to another: the order of march was, Edward Ravanel before me, and at the head; behind me Edward Simon, then Donatien Levesque; after him our two porters (for we took along with us the domestic of the Grands-Mulets hut as a second), and M. N — — 's party.

The guides and porters having distributed the provisions between them, the signal for departure was given, and we set off in the midst of profound darkness, directing ourselves according to the lantern held up at some distance ahead.

There was something solemn in this setting out. But few words were spoken; the vagueness of the unknown impressed us, but the new and strange situation excited us, and rendered us insensible to its dangers. The landscape around was fantastic. But few outlines were distinguishable. Great white confused masses, with blackish spots here and there, closed the horizon. The celestial vault shone with remarkable brilliancy. We could perceive, at an uncertain distance, the lantern of the guides who were ahead, and the mournful silence of the night was only disturbed by the dry, distant noise of the hatchet cutting steps in the ice.

We crept slowly and cautiously over the first ascent, going towards the base of the Goûter. After ascending laboriously for two hours, we reached the first plateau, called the "Petit-Plateau," at the foot of the Goûter, at a height of about eleven thousand feet. We rested a few moments and then proceeded, turning now to the left and going towards the edge which conducts to the "Grand-Plateau."

But our party had already lessened in number: M. N — — , with his guides, had stopped; his fatigue obliged him to take a longer rest.

About half-past four dawn began to whiten the horizon. At this moment we were ascending the slope which leads to the Grand-Plateau, which we soon safely reached. We were eleven thousand eight hundred feet high. We had well earned our breakfast. Wonderful to relate, Levesque and I had a good appetite. It was a good sign. We therefore installed ourselves on the snow, and made such a repast as we could. Our guides joyfully declared that success was certain. As for me, I thought they resumed work too quickly.

M. N — — rejoined us before long. We urged him to take some nourishment. He peremptorily refused. He felt the contraction of the stomach which is so common in those parts, and was almost broken down.

The Grand-Plateau deserves a special description. On the right rises the dome of the Goûter. Opposite it is Mont Blanc, rearing itself two thousand seven hundred feet above it. On the left are the “Rouges” rocks and Mont Maudit. This immense circle is one mass of glittering whiteness. On every side are vast crevasses. It was in one of these that three of the guides who accompanied Dr. Hamel and Colonel Anderson, in 1820, were swallowed up. In 1864 another guide met his death there.

This plateau must be crossed with great caution, as the crevasses are often hidden by the snow; besides, it is often swept by avalanches. On the 13th of October, 1866, an English traveller and three of his guides were buried under a mass of ice that fell from Mont Blanc. After a perilous search, the bodies of the three guides were found. They were expecting every moment to find that of the Englishman, when a fresh avalanche fell upon the first, and forced the searchers to abandon their task.

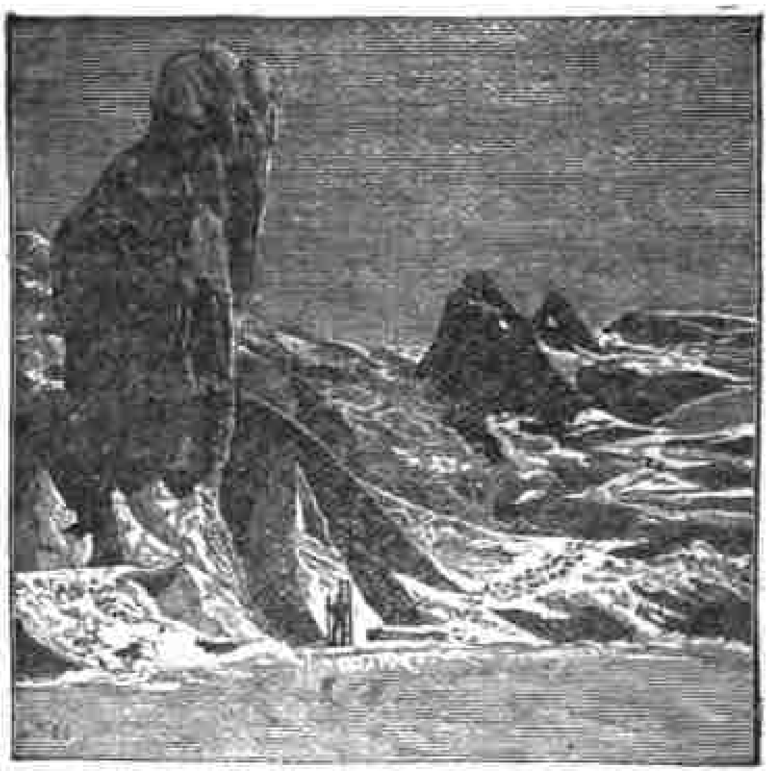

Crossing the Plateau.

Three routes presented themselves to us. The ordinary route, which passes entirely to the left, by the base of Mont Maudit, through a sort of valley called the “Corridor,” leads by gentle ascents to the top of the first escarpment of the Rouges rocks.

The second, less frequented, turns to the right by the Goûter, and leads to the summit of Mont Blanc by the ridge which unites these two mountains. You must pursue for three hours a giddy path, and scale a height of moving ice, called the “Camel’s Hump.”

The third route consists in ascending directly to the summit of the Corridor, crossing an ice-wall seven hundred and fifty feet high, which extends along the first escarpment of the Rouges rocks.

The guides declared the first route impracticable, on account of the recent crevasses which entirely obstructed it; the choice between the two others remained. I thought the second, by the “Camel’s Hump,” the best; but it was regarded as too dangerous, and it was decided that we should attack the ice-wall conducting to the summit of the Corridor.

When a decision is made, it is best to execute it without delay. We crossed the Grand-Plateau, and reached the foot of this really formidable obstacle.

The nearer we approached the more nearly vertical became its slope. Besides, several crevasses which we had not perceived yawned at its base.

We nevertheless began the difficult ascent. Steps were begun by the foremost guide, and completed by the next. We ascended two steps a minute. The higher we went the more the steepness increased. Our guides themselves discussed what route to follow; they spoke in patois, and did not always agree, which was not a good sign. At last the slope became such that our hats touched the legs of the guide just before us.

A hailstorm of pieces of ice, produced by the cutting of the steps, blinded us, and made our progress still more difficult. Addressing one of the foremost guides, I said, —

“Ah, it’s very well going up this way! It is not an open road, I admit: still, it is practicable. Only how are you going to get us down again?”

“O monsieur,” replied Ambrose Ravanel, “we will take another route going back.”

At last, after violent effort for two hours, and after having cut more than four hundred steps in this terrible mass, we reached the summit of the

Corridor completely exhausted.

We then crossed a slightly sloping plateau of snow, and passed along the side of an immense crevasse which obstructed our way. We had scarcely turned it when we uttered a cry of admiration. On the right, Piedmont and the plains of Lombardy were at our feet. On the left, the Pennine Alps and the Oberland, crowned with snow, raised their magnificent crests. Monte Rosa and the Cervin alone still rose above us, but soon we should overlook them in our turn.

This reflection recalled us to the end of our expedition. We turned our gaze towards Mont Blanc, and stood stupefied.

“Heavens! how far off it is still!” cried Levesque.

“And how high!” I added.

It was a discouraging sight. The famous wall of the ridge, so much feared, but which must be crossed, was before us, with its slope of fifty degrees. But after scaling the wall of the Corridor, it did not terrify us. We rested for half an hour and then continued our tramp; but we soon perceived that the atmospheric conditions were no longer the same. The sun shed his warm rays upon us; and their reflection on the snow added to our discomfort. The rarefaction of the air began to be severely felt. We advanced slowly, making frequent halts, and at last reached the plateau which overlooks the second escarpment of the Rouges rocks. We were at the foot of Mont Blanc. It rose, alone and majestic, at a height of six hundred feet above us. Monte Rosa itself had lowered its flag!

Levesque and I were completely exhausted. As for M. N — — , who had rejoined us at the summit of the Corridor, it might be said that he was insensible to the rarefaction of the air, for he no longer breathed, so to speak.

We began at last to scale the last stage. We made ten steps and then stopped, finding it absolutely impossible to proceed. A painful contraction of the throat made our breathing exceedingly difficult. Our legs refused to carry us; and I then understood the picturesque expression of Jacques Balmat, when, in narrating his first ascent, he said that "his legs seemed only to be kept up by his trousers!" But our mental was superior to our physical force; and if the body faltered, the heart, responding "Excelsior!" stifled its desperate complaint, and urged forward our poor worn-out mechanism, despite itself. We thus passed the Petits-Mulets, and after two hours of superhuman efforts finally overlooked the entire chain. Mont Blanc was under our feet!

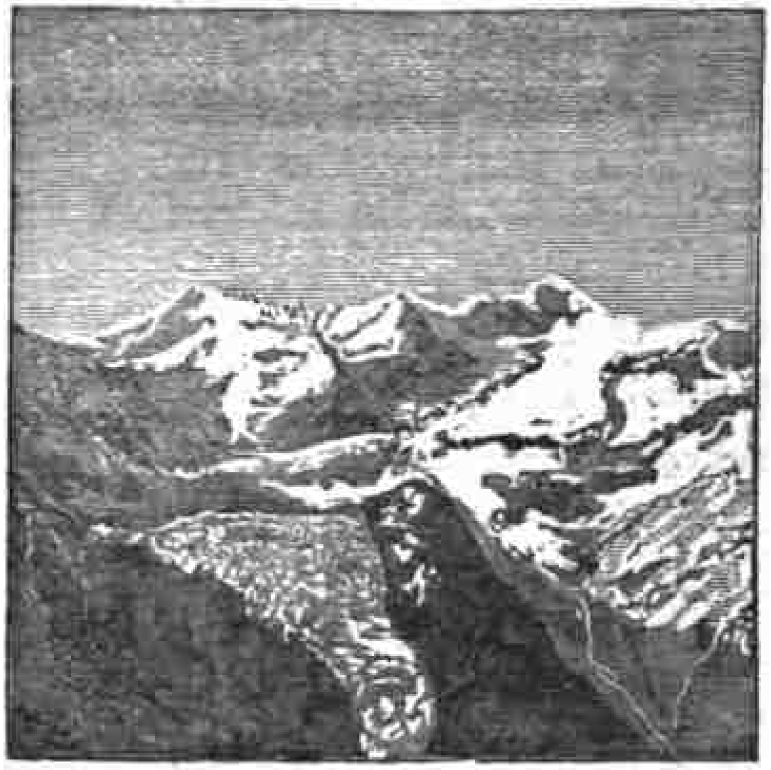

Summit of Mont Blanc.

It was fifteen minutes after twelve.

The pride of success soon dissipated our fatigue. We had at last conquered this formidable crest. We overlooked all the others, and the thoughts which Mont Blanc alone can inspire affected us with a deep emotion. It was ambition satisfied; and to me, at least, a dream realized!

Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Europe. Several mountains in Asia and America are higher; but of what use would it be to attempt them, if, in the absolute impossibility of reaching their summit, you must be content to remain at a lesser height?

Others, such as Mont Cervin, are more difficult of access; but we perceived the summit of Mont Cervin twelve hundred feet below us!

And then, what a view to reward us for our troubles and dangers!

The sky, still pure, had assumed a deep-blue tint. The sun, despoiled of a part of his rays, had lost his brilliancy, as if in a partial eclipse. This effect, due to the rarefaction of the air, was all the more apparent as the surrounding eminences and plains were inundated with light. No detail of the scene, therefore, escaped our notice.

In the south-east, the mountains of Piedmont, and farther off the plains of Lombardy, shut in our horizon. Towards the west, the mountains of Savoy and Dauphiné; beyond, the valley of the Rhone. In the north-west, the Lake of Geneva and the Jura; then, descending towards the south, a chaos of mountains and glaciers, beyond description, overlooked by the masses of Monte Rosa, the Mischabelhoerner, the Cervin, the Weishorn — the most beautiful of crests, as Tyndall calls it — and farther off by the Jungfrau, the Monck, the Eiger, and the Finsteraarhorn.

The extent of our range of vision was not less than sixty leagues. We therefore saw at least one hundred and twenty leagues of country.

A special circumstance happened to enhance the beauty of the scene. Clouds formed on the Italian side and invaded the valleys of the Pennine Alps without veiling their summits. We soon had under our eyes a second sky, a lower sky, a sea of clouds, whence emerged a perfect archipelago of peaks and snow-wrapped mountains. There was something magical in it, which the greatest poets could scarcely describe.

The summit of Mont Blanc forms a ridge from southwest to north-east, two hundred paces long and a yard wide at the culminating point. It seemed like a ship’s hull overturned, the keel in the air.

Strangely enough, the temperature was very high — ten degrees above zero. The air was almost still. Sometimes we felt a light breeze.

The first care of our guides was to place us all in a line on the crest opposite Chamonix, that we might be easily counted from below, and thus make it known that no one of us had been lost. Many of the tourists had ascended the Brevent and the Jardin to watch our ascent. They might now be assured of its success.

But to ascend was not all; we must think also of going down. The most difficult, if not most wearisome, task remained; and then one quits with regret a summit attained at the price of so much toil. The energy which urges you to ascend, the need, so natural and imperious, of overcoming, now fails you. You go forward listlessly, often looking behind you!

It was necessary, however, to decide, and, after a last traditional libation of champagne, we put ourselves in motion. We had remained on the summit an hour. The order of march was now changed. M. N — — 's party led off; and, at the suggestion of his guide Paccard, we were all tied together with a rope. M. N — — 's fatigue, which his strength, but not his will, betrayed, made us fear falls on his part which would require the help of the whole party to arrest. The event justified our foreboding. On descending the side of the wall, M. N — — made several false steps. His guides, very vigorous and skilful, were happily able to check him; but ours, feeling, with reason, that the whole party might be dragged down, wished to detach us from the rope. Levesque and I opposed this; and, by taking great precautions, we safely reached the base of this giddy ledge. There was no room for illusions. The almost bottomless abyss was before us, and the pieces of detached ice, which bounded by us with the rapidity of an arrow, clearly showed us the route which the party would take if a slip were made.

Once this terrible gap crossed, I began to breathe again. We descended the gradual slopes which led to the summit of the Corridor. The snow, softened by the heat, yielded beneath our feet; we sank in it to the knees, which made our progress very fatiguing. We steadily followed the path by which we ascended in the morning, and I was astonished when Gaspard Simon, turning towards me, said, —

"Monsieur, we cannot take any other road, for the Corridor is impracticable, and we must descend by the wall which we climbed up this morning."

I told Levesque this disagreeable news.

"Only," added Gaspard Simon, "I do not think we can all remain tied together. However, we will see how M. N — — bears it at first."

We advanced towards this terrible wall! M. N — — 's party began to descend, and we heard Paccard talking rapidly to him. The inclination became so steep that we perceived neither him nor his guides, though we were bound together by the same rope.

As soon as Gaspard Simon, who went before me, could comprehend what was passing, he stopped, and after exchanging’ some words in *patois* with his comrades, declared that we must detach ourselves from M. N — — ’s party.

“We are responsible for you,” he added, “but we cannot be responsible for others; and if they slip, they will drag us after them.”

Saying this, he got loose from the rope. We were very unwilling to take this step; but our guides were inflexible.

We then proposed to send two of them to help M. N — — ’s guides. They eagerly consented; but having no rope they could not put this plan into execution.

We then began this terrible descent. Only one of us moved at a time, and when each took a step the others buttressed themselves ready to sustain the shock if he slipped. The foremost guide, Edward Ravanel, had the most perilous task; it was for him to make the steps over again, now more or less worn away by the ascending caravan.

We progressed slowly, taking the most careful precautions. Our route led us in a right line to one of the crevasses which opened at the base of the escarpment. When we were going up we could not look at this crevasse, but in descending we were fascinated by its green and yawning sides. All the blocks of ice detached by our passage went the same way, and after two or three bounds, ingulfed themselves in the crevasse, as in the jaws of the minotaur, only the jaws of the minotaur closed after each morsel, while the unsatiated crevasse yawned perpetually, and seemed to await, before closing, a larger mouthful. It was for us to take care that we should not be this mouthful, and all our efforts were made for this end. In order to withdraw ourselves from this fascination, this moral giddiness, if I may so express myself, we tried to joke about the dangerous position in which we found ourselves, and which even a chamois would not have envied us. We even got so far as to hum one of Offenbach’s couplets; but I must confess that our jokes were feeble, and that we did not sing the airs correctly.

I even thought I discovered Levesque obstinately setting the words of “Barbe-Bleue” to one of the airs in “Il Trovatore,” which rather indicated some grave preoccupation of the mind. In short, in order to keep up our spirits, we did as do those brave cowards who sing in the dark to forget their fright.

We remained thus, suspended between life and death, for an hour, which seemed an eternity; at last we reached the bottom of this terrible escarpment. We there found M. N — — and his party, safe and sound.

After resting a little while, we continued our journey.

As we were approaching the Petit-Plateau, Edward Ravanel suddenly stopped, and, turning towards us, said, —

“See what an avalanche! It has covered our tracks.”

An immense avalanche of ice had indeed fallen from the Goûter, and entirely buried the path we had followed in the morning across the Petit-Plateau.

I estimated that the mass of this avalanche could not comprise less than five hundred cubic yards. If it had fallen while we were passing, one more catastrophe would no doubt have been added to the list, already too long, of the necrology of Mont Blanc.

This fresh obstacle forced us to seek a new road, or to pass around the foot of the avalanche. As we were much fatigued, the latter course was assuredly the simplest; but it involved a serious danger. A wall of ice more than sixty feet high, already partly detached from the Goûter, to which it only clung by one of its angles, overhung the path which we should follow. This great mass seemed to hold itself in equilibrium. What if our passing, by disturbing the air, should hasten its fall? Our guides held a consultation. Each of them examined with a spy-glass the fissure which had been formed between the mountain and this alarming ice-mass. The sharp and clear edges of the cleft betrayed a recent breaking off, evidently caused by the fall of the avalanche.

After a brief discussion, our guides, recognizing the impossibility of finding another road, decided to attempt this dangerous passage.

“We must walk very fast, — even run, if possible,” said they, “and we shall be in safety in five minutes. Come, messieurs, a last effort!”

A run of five minutes is a small matter for people who are only tired; but for us, who were absolutely exhausted, to run even for so short a time on soft snow, in which we sank up to the knees, seemed an impossibility. Nevertheless, we made an urgent appeal to our energies, and after two or three tumbles, drawn forward by one, pushed by another, we finally reached a snow hillock, on which we fell breathless. We were out of danger.

It required some time to recover ourselves. We stretched out on the snow with a feeling of comfort which every one will understand. The greatest difficulties had been surmounted, and though there were still dangers to brave, we could confront them with comparatively little apprehension.

We prolonged our halt in the hope of witnessing the fall of the avalanche, but in vain. As the day was advancing, and it was not prudent to tarry in these icy solitudes, we decided to continue on our way, and about five o’clock we reached the hut of the Grands-Mulets.

After a bad night, attended by fever caused by the sunstrokes encountered in our expedition, we made ready to return to Chamonix; but, before setting out, we inscribed the names of our guides and the principal events of our journey, according to the custom, on the register kept for this purpose at the Grands-Mulets.

About eight o’clock we started for Chamonix. The passage of the Bossons was difficult, but we accomplished it without accident.

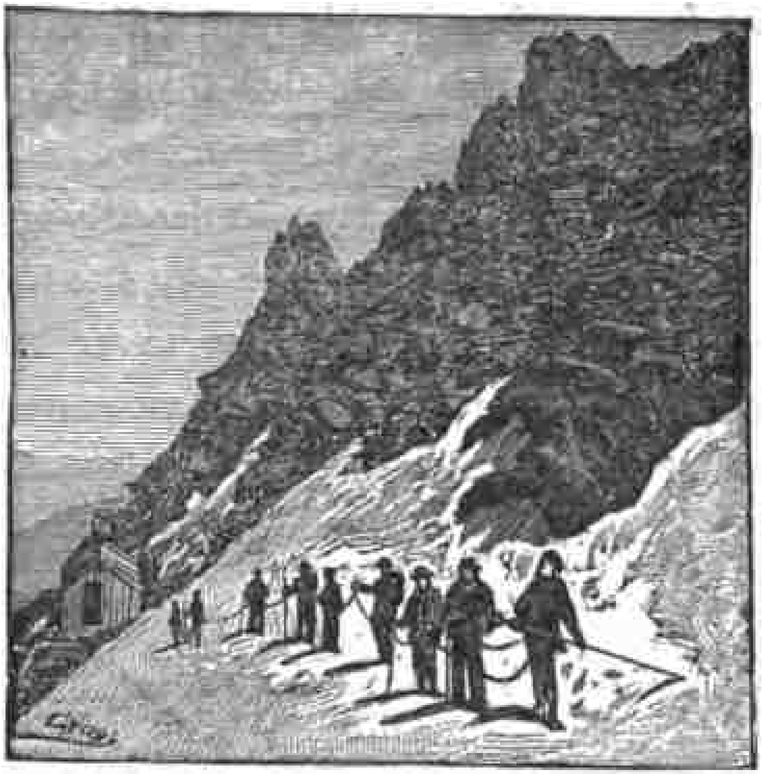

Grands-Mulets. — Party Descending From The Hut.

Half an hour before reaching Chamonix, we met, at the chalet of the Dard falls, some English tourists, who seemed to be watching our progress. When they perceived us, they hurried up eagerly to congratulate us on our success. One of them presented us to his wife, a charming person, with a well-bred air. After we had given them a sketch of our perilous peregrinations, she said to us, in earnest accents, —

"How much you are envied here by everybody! Let me touch your alpenstocks!"

These words seemed to interpret the general feeling.

The ascent of Mont Blanc is a very painful one. It is asserted that the celebrated naturalist of Geneva, De Saussure, acquired there the seeds of the disease of which he died in a few months after his return from the summit. I cannot better close this narrative than by quoting the words of M. Markham Sherwell: —

“However it may be,” he says, in describing his ascent of Mont Blanc, “I would not advise any one to undertake this ascent, the rewards of which can never have an importance proportionate to the dangers encountered by the tourist, and by those who accompany him.”

THE END.

FRRITT-FLACC

Anonymous translation, 1892

This fantastic tale was first published in 1884 in *Le Figaro,* and later in a different version in the novel The Lottery Ticket in 1886. A *Frritt* expresses the sounds of a roaring hurricane and *flacc* is the sound of falling streams of water during a rainstorm.

The story concerns Trifulgas, a physician, who lives in an unnamed coastal area, and the mysterious girl that knocks at his door on the night of a terrible storm.

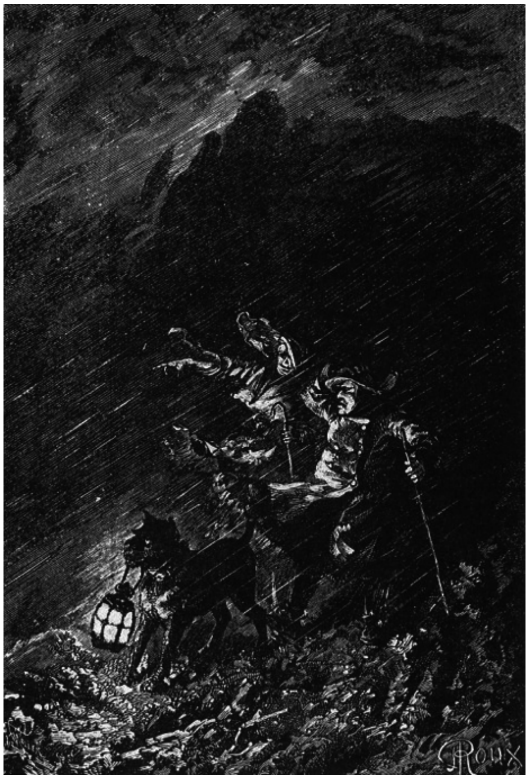

One of the original illustrations from the French edition

I.

Swish! It is the wind, let loose.

Swash! It is the rain, falling in torrents.

This shrieking squall bends down the trees of the Volsinian coast, and hurries on, flinging itself against the sides of the mountains of Crimma. Along the whole length of the littoral are high rocks, gnawed by the billows of the vast Sea of Megalocrida.

Swish! swash!

Down by the harbour nestles the little town of Luktrop; perhaps a hundred houses, with green palings, which defend them indifferently from the wild wind; four or five hilly streets - ravines rather than streets - paved with pebbles and strewn with ashes thrown from the active cones in the background. The volcano is not far distant; it is called the Vauglor. During the day it sends forth sulphurous vapours; at night, from time to time, great outpourings of flame. Like a lighthouse carrying a hundred and fifty kertzes, the Vauglor indicates the port of Luktrop to the coasters, felzans, verliches, and balanzes, whose keels furrow the waters of Megalocrida.

On the other side of the town are ruins dating from the Crimmarian era. Then a suburb, Arab in appearance, much like a casbah, with white walls, domed roofs, and sun-scorched terraces, which are all nothing but accumulations of square stones thrown together at random. Veritable dice are these, whose numbers will never be effaced by the rust of Time.

Among others we notice the Six-four, a name given to a curious erection, having six openings on one side and four on the other.

A belfry overlooks the town, the square belfry of Saint Philfilena, with bells hung in the thickness of the walls, which sometimes a hurricane will set in motion. That is a bad sign; the people tremble when they hear it.

Such is Luktrop. Then come the scattered habitations in the country, set amid heath and broom, as in Brittany. But this is not Brittany. Is it in France? I do not know. Is it in Europe? I cannot tell. At all events, do not look for Luktrop on any map.

II.

RAT-TAT! A discreet knock is struck upon the narrow door of Six-four, at the left corner of the Rue Messagliere. This is one of the most comfortable houses in Luktrop - if such a word is known there - one of the richest, if gaining some millions of fretzers, by hook or by crook, constitutes riches.

The rat-tat is answered by a savage bark, in which is much a lupine howl, as if a wolf should bark. Then a window is opened above the door of Six-four, and an ill-tempered voice says, “Deuce take people who come bothering here!”

A young girl, shivering in the rain wrapped in a thin cloak, asks if Dr. Trifulgas is at home.

“He is, or he is not, according to circumstances.”

“I want him to come to my father, who is dying.”

“Where is he dying?”

“At Val Karnion, four kertzes from here.”

“And his name?”

“Vort Kartif.”

“Vort Kartif, the herring-salter?”

“Yes; and if Dr. Trifulgas…”

“Dr. Trifulgas is not at home.”

And the window is closed with a slam, while the swishes of the wind and the swashes of the rain mingle in a deafening uproar.

III.

A hard man, this Dr. Trifulgas, with little compassion, and attending no one unless paid cash in advance. His old Hurzof, a mongrel of bulldog and spaniel, would have had more feeling than he. The house called Six-four admitted no poor, and opened only to the rich. Further, it had a regular tariff: so much for a typhoid fever, so much for a fit, so much for a pericarditis, and for other complaints which doctors invent by the dozen. Now, Vort Kartif, the herring-salter, was a poor man, and of low degree. Why should Dr. Trifulgas have taken any trouble, and on such a night?

“Is it nothing that I should have had to get up?” he murmured, as he went back to bed; “that alone is worth ten fretzers.”

Hardly twenty minutes had passed, when the iron hammer was again struck on the door of Six-four.

Much against his inclination the doctor left his bed, and leaned out of his window.

“Who is there?” he cried.

“I am the wife of Vort Kartif.”

“The herring-salter of Val Karnion?”

“Yes; and if you refuse to come, he will die.”

“All right; you will be a widow.”

“Here are twenty fretzers.”

“Twenty fretzers for going to Val Karnion, four kertzes from here! Thank you! Be off with you!”

And the window was closed again. Twenty fretzers! A grand fee! Risk a cold or lumbago for twenty fretzers, especially when to-morrow one has to go to Kiltreno to visit the rich Edzingov, laid up with gout, which is valued at fifty fretzers the visit! With this agreeable prospect before him, Dr. Trifulgas slept more soundly than before.

Swish! Swash! and then rat-tat! rat-tat! rat-tat! To the noises of the squall were now added three blows of the knocker, struck by a more decided hand.

The doctor slept. He woke, but in a fearful humour. When he opened the window the storm came in like a charge of shot.

“I am come about the herring-salter.”

“That wretched herring-salter again!”

“I am his mother.”

“May his mother, his wife, and his daughter perish with him!”

“He has had an attack…”

“Let him defend himself.”

“Some money has been paid us,” continued the old woman, “an instalment on the house sold to the camondeur Doutrup, of the Rue Messagliere. If you do not come, my granddaughter will no longer have a father, my daughter-in-law a husband, myself a son.”

It was piteous and terrible to hear the old woman’s voice - to know that the wind was freezing the blood in her veins, that the rain was soaking her very bones beneath her thin flesh.

“A fit! why, that would be two hundred fretzers!” replied the heartless Trifulgas.

“We have only a hundred and twenty.”

“Good-night,” and the window was again closed. But, after due reflection, it appeared that a hundred and twenty fretzers for an hour and a half on the road, plus half an hour of visit, made a fretzer a minute. A small profit, but still, not to be despised.

Instead of going to bed again, the doctor slipped into his coat of valveter, went down in his wading boots, stowed himself away in his great coat of lurtaine, with his sourouet on his head, and his mufflers on his hands. He left his lamp lighted close to the pharmacopoeia, open at page 197. Then, pulling the door of Six-four, he paused on the threshold. The old woman was there, leaning on her stick, bowed down by her eighty years of misery.

“The hundred and twenty fretzers.”

“Here is the money; and may God multiply it for you a hundredfold!”

“God! Who ever saw the colour of his money?”

The doctor whistled for Hurzof, gave him a small lantern to carry, and took the road towards the sea. The old woman followed.

IV.

What swishy-swashy weather! The bells of St. Philfilena are all swinging by reason of the gale. A bad sign! But Dr. Trifulgas is not superstitious. He believes in nothing - not even in his own science, except for what it brings him in. What weather, and also what a road! Pebbles and ashes; the pebbles slippery with seaweed, the ashes crackling with iron refuse. No other light than that from Hurzof’s lantern, vague and uncertain. At times jets of flame from Vauglor uprear themselves, and in the midst of them appear great comical silhouettes. In truth no one knows what is in the depths of those unfathomable craters. Perhaps spirits of the other world, which volatilise themselves as they come forth.

The doctor and the old woman follow the curves of the little bays of the littoral. The sea is white with livid whiteness - a mourning white. It sparkles as it throws off the crests of the surf, which seem like outpourings of glow-worms.

These two persons go on thus as far as the turn in the road between sand-hills, where the brooms and the reeds clash together with a shock like that of bayonets.

The dog had drawn near to his master, and seemed to say to him, “Come, come! a hundred and twenty fretzers for the strong box! That is the way to make a fortune. Another rood added to the vineyard; another dish added to our supper; another meat pie for the faithful Hurzof. Let us look after the rich invalids, and look after them - according to their purses!”

At that spot the old woman pauses. With her trembling finger she points out among the shadows a reddish light. There is the house of Vort Kartif, the herring-salter.

“There?” said the doctor.

“Yes,” said the old woman.

“Hurrah!” cries the dog Hurzof.

A sudden explosion from the Vauglor, shaken to its very base. A sheaf of lurid flame springs up to the zenith, forcing its way through the clouds. Dr. Trifulgas is hurled to the ground. He swears roundly, picks himself up, and looks about him.

The old woman is no longer there. Has she disappeared through some fissure of the earth, or has she flown away on the wings of the mist? As for the dog, he is there still, standing on his hind legs, his jaws apart, his lantern extinguished.

“Nevertheless, we will go on,” mutters Dr. Trifulgas. The honest man has been paid his hundred and twenty fretzers, and he must earn them.

V.

Only a luminous speck at the distance of half a kertz. It is the lamp of the dying -perhaps the dead. Of course, it is the herring-salter’s house; the old woman pointed to it with her finger; no mistake is possible. Through the whistling swishes and the dashing swashes, through the uproar of the tempest, Dr. Trifulgas tramps on with hurried steps. As he advances, the house becomes more distinct, being isolated in the midst of the landscape.

It is very remarkable how much it resembles that of Dr. Trifulgas, the Six-four of Luktrop. The same arrangement of windows, the same little arched door. Dr. Trifulgas hastens on as fast as the gale allows him. The door is ajar; he has but to push it. He pushes it, he enters, and the wind roughly closes it behind him. The dog Hurzof, left outside, howls, with intervals of silence.

Strange! One would have said that Dr. Trifulgas had come back to his own house. And yet he has not wandered; he has not even taken a turning. He is at Val Karnion, not at Luktrop. And yet, here is the same low, vaulted passage, the same wooden staircase, with high banisters, worn away by the constant rubbing of hands.

He ascends. He reaches the landing. Beneath the door a faint light filters through, as in Six-four. Is it a delusion? In the dimness he recognises his room - the yellow sofa, on the right the old chest of pearwood, on the left the brass-bound strong box, in which he intended to deposit his hundred and twenty fretzers. There is his armchair, with the leathern cushions; there is his table, with its twisted legs, and on it, close to the expiring lamp, his pharmacopoeia, open at page 197.

“What is the matter with me?” he murmurs.

What is the matter with him? Fear! His pupils are dilated; his body is contracted, shrivelled; an icy perspiration freezes his skin - every hair stands on end.

But hasten! For want of oil, the lamp expires; and also the dying man! Yes, there is the bed - his own bed - with posts and canopy; as wide as it is long, shut in by heavy curtains. Is it possible that this is the pallet of a wretched herring-salter? With a quaking hand Dr. Trifulgas seizes the curtains; he opens them; he looks in.

The dying man, his head uncovered, is motionless, as if at his last breath. The doctor leans over him…

Ah! what a cry, to which, outside, responds an unearthly howl from the dog.

The dying man is not the herring-salter, Vort Kartif - it is Dr. Trifulgas; it is he, whom congestion has attacked - he himself! Cerebral apoplexy, with sudden accumulation of serosity on the cavities of the brain, with paralysis of the body on the side opposite that of the seat of the lesion.

Yes, it is he, who was sent for, and for whom a hundred and twenty fretzers have been paid. He who, from hardness of heart, refused to attend the herring-salter - he who was dying.

Dr. Trifulgas is like a madman, he knows himself lost. At each moment the symptoms increase. Not only all the functions of the organs slacken, but the lungs and the heart cease to act. And yet he has not quite lost consciousness. What can be done? Bleed! If he hesitates, Dr. Trifulgas is dead. In those days they still bled; and then, as now, medical men cured all those apoplectic patients who were not going to die.

Dr. Trifulgas seizes his case, takes out his lancet, opens a vein in the arm of his double. The blood does not flow. He rubs his chest violently - his own breathing grows slower. He warms his feet with hot bricks - his own grow cold.

Then his double lifts himself, falls back, and draws one last breath. Dr. Trifulgas, notwithstanding all that his science has taught him to do, dies beneath his own hands.

VI.

In the morning a corpse was found in the house Six-four - that of Dr. Trifulgas. They put him in a coffin, and carried him with much pomp to the cemetery of Luktrop, wither he had sent so many others - in a professional manner.

As to old Hurzof, it is said that, to this day, he haunts the country with his lantern alight, and howling like a lost dog. I do not know if that be true; but strange things happen in Volsinia, especially in the neighbourhood of Luktrop.

And, again, I warn you not to hunt for that town on the map. The best geographers have not yet agreed as to its latitude - not even as to its longitude.

YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

Published in 1910, this collection of short stories includes the well-known fairy story *Famille Raton*, in which a family of rats evolves and becomes human.

Sadly, the collection was first translated in English in 1967 and so is only available in French in this edition due to copyright restrictions.

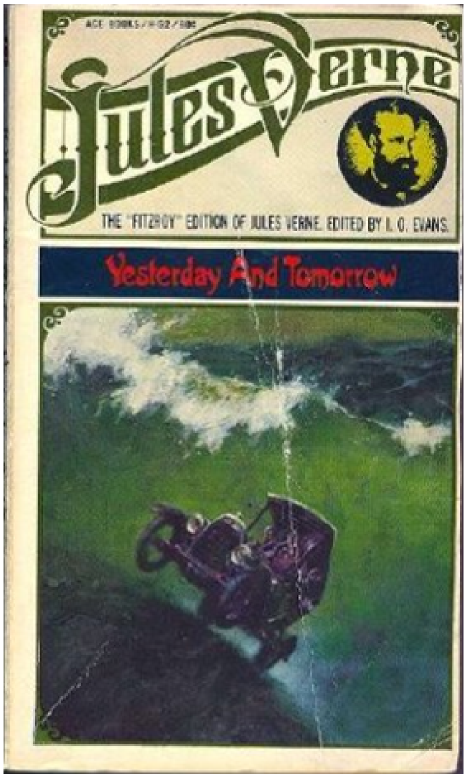
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Yesterday And Tomorrow

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AU XXIXe SIECLE

L’ÉTERNEL ADAM

LA FAMILLE RATON

I

Il y avait une fois une honnête famille de rats, composée du père Raton, de la mère Ratonne, de la fille Ratine et du cousin Raté. Ses deux domestiques, c’étaient le cuisinier Rata et la bonne Ratane. Or, il est arrivé à ces dignes rongeurs des aventures si extraordinaires, mes chers enfants, que je ne résiste pas au désir de vous les raconter.

Cela se passait au temps des fées et des enchanteurs, au temps aussi où les bêtes parlaient. C’est même de cette époque que date, sans doute, l’expression: dire des bêtises. Et cependant, ces bêtes n’en disaient pas plus que les hommes de jadis et d’aujourd’hui n’en ont dit et n’en disent! Écoutez donc, mes chers enfants, et surtout soyez sages. Je commence.

II

Dans une des plus belles villes de ce temps-là, et dans la plus belle maison de la ville demeurait une bonne fée. Elle s’appelait Firmenta. Elle faisait autant de bien qu’une fée en peut faire, et on l’aimait beaucoup.

À cette époque, paraît-il, tous les êtres vivants étaient soumis aux lois de la métempsychose. Ne vous effrayez pas de ce mot: cela signifie qu’il y avait une échelle de la création, dont chaque être devait franchir successivement les échelons, avant d’atteindre le dernier pour prendre rang dans l’humanité. Ainsi, on naissait mollusque, on devenait poisson, puis oiseau, puis quadrupède, puis homme ou femme. Comme vous le voyez, il fallait monter de l’état le plus rudimentaire à l’état le plus parfait. Toutefois, il pouvait arriver que l’on redescendît, grâce à la maligne influence de quelque enchanteur. Et alors, quelle triste existence! Par exemple, après avoir été homme, être redevenu huître! Heureusement, cela ne se voit plus de nos jours, physiquement du moins.

Sachez aussi que ces diverses métamorphoses s’opéraient par l’intermédiaire des génies. Les bons génies faisaient monter, les mauvais faisaient descendre, et si ces derniers abusaient parfois de leur puissance, le Créateur pouvait les en priver pour un certain temps.

Il va sans dire que la fée Firmenta était un bon génie, et jamais personne n’avait eu à se plaindre d’elle.

Or, un beau matin, elle se trouvait dans la salle à manger de son palais – une salle ornée de tapisseries superbes et de magnifiques fleurs. Les rayons du soleil se glissaient à travers la fenêtre, piquant çà et là de touches lumineuses les porcelaines et l’argenterie, placées sur la table.

La suivante venait d’annoncer à sa maîtresse que le déjeuner était servi, un joli déjeuner, comme les fées ont bien le droit d’en faire, sans être accusées de gourmandise. Mais, à peine la fée s’était-elle assise, que l’on frappa à la porte du palais.

Aussitôt la suivante d’aller ouvrir, et, un instant après, elle prévenait la fée Firmenta qu’un beau jeune homme désirait lui parler.

“Fais entrer ce beau jeune homme”, répondit Firmenta.

Beau, en effet, d’une taille au-dessus de la moyenne, l’air bon, l’air brave aussi. Si ce beau jeune homme avait vingt-deux ans, c’était tout. Mis très simplement, il se présentait avec grâce.

Tout d’abord, la fée eut bonne opinion de lui. Elle pensa qu’il venait pour quelque service, comme tant d’autres qu’elle avait obligés, et elle se sentait disposée à le lui rendre.

“Que ne voulez-vous, beau jeune homme? dit-elle de sa voix la plus douce. N’ayez crainte de me parler.

— Bonne fée, répondit-il, je suis bien malheureux, et je n’ai d’espoir qu’en vous!”

Et, comme il hésitait:

“Expliquez-vous, reprit Firmenta. Quel est votre nom?

— Je me nomme Ratin, répondit-il. Je ne suis pas riche, et, pourtant, ce n’est point la fortune que je viens vous demander. Non! c’est le bonheur.

— Pensez-vous donc que l’un puisse aller sans l’autre? répliqua la fée en souriant.

— Oui, certes!

— Et vous avez raison. Continuez.

— Il y a quelque temps, reprit-il, avant d’être homme, j’étais rat et, comme tel, très bien accueilli dans une excellente famille à laquelle je comptais m’attacher par les plus doux liens. Je plaisais au père, qui est un rat plein de bon sens. Peut-être la mère, un peu ambitieuse, me voyait-elle d’un moins bon œil, parce que je ne suis pas riche. Mais la fille Ratine me regardait si tendrement! Enfin j’allais être agréé lorsqu’un grand malheur vint couper court à toutes mes espérances!

— Qu’est-il donc arrivé? demanda la fée avec le plus vif intérêt.

— Et d’abord, je suis devenu homme, tandis que ma Ratine restait rate!

— Eh bien, répondit Firmenta, attendez que sa dernière transformation en ait fait une jeune fille…

— Sans doute, bonne fée! Malheureusement, Ratine a été également remarquée par un puissant seigneur qui pourrait être fils de roi. Habitué à satisfaire ses fantaisies, il ne souffre pas la moindre résistance. Tout doit plier devant ses volontés.

— Et quel est ce seigneur? demanda la fée.

— C’est le prince Kissador. Il proposa à ma chère Ratine de l’emmener dans son palais, où elle serait, disait-il, la plus heureuse des rates. Elle s’y refusa, bien que sa mère Ratonne fût très flattée de la demande. Le prince tenta alors de l’acheter à haut prix; mais le père Raton, sachant combien sa fille m’aimait, et que je mourais de douleur si on nous séparait, ne voulut point consentir. Je renonce à vous peindre la fureur du prince Kissador. Voyant Ratine si belle en rate, il se disait qu’elle serait encore plus belle en jeune fille! Oui, bonne fée, plus belle encore! Et il l’épouserait, – ce qui était bien raisonné pour lui, et bien malheureux pour nous!

— Sans doute, répondit la fée, mais puisque le prince a été éconduit!… qu’avez-vous à craindre?…

— Tout, reprit Ratin, car, pour arriver à ses fins, il s’est adressé à Gardafour…

— Cet enchanteur, s’écria Firmenta, ce mauvais génie qui ne se plaît qu’à faire le mal, et avec lequel je suis toujours en lutte?

— Lui-même, bonne fée!

— Ce Gardafour, dont la redoutable puissance ne cherche qu’à ramener au bas de l’échelle les êtres qui s’élèvent peu à peu vers les plus hauts degrés!

— Comme vous dites!

— Heureusement, Gardafour, ayant abusé de son pouvoir, vient d’en être privé pour quelque temps…

— Cela est vrai, répondit Ratin; mais, au moment où le prince a eu recours à lui, il le possédait encore tout entier. Aussi, alléché par les promesses de ce seigneur, autant qu’effrayé de ses menaces, promit-il de le venger des dédains de la famille Raton!

— Et il l’a fait?…

— Il l’a fait, bonne fée!

— Et comment?

— Il a métamorphosé ces braves rats!

— En quoi les a-t-il changés?

— En huîtres, et, maintenant, ils végètent sur le banc de Samobrives, où ces mollusques, je dois le dire, sont d’excellente qualité, à trois francs la douzaine, ce qui est bien naturel, puisque la famille Raton se trouve parmi eux! Vous voyez, bonne fée, toute l’étendue de mon malheur!”

Firmenta écoutait avec pitié et bienveillance ce récit du jeune Ratin. Elle compatissait volontiers, d’ailleurs, aux douleurs humaines, et surtout aux amours contrariées.

“Et que puis-je faire pour vous? demanda-t-elle.

— Bonne fée, répondit Ratin, puisque ma Ratine est attachée au banc de Samobrives, faites-moi huître à mon tour, afin que j’aie cette consolation d’y vivre près d’elle!”

Ce fut dit d’un ton si triste, que la fée Firmenta se sentit tout émue; et, prenant la main du beau jeune homme:

“Ratin, lui dit-elle, je consentirais à vous satisfaire, que je ne pourrais y réussir. Vous le savez, il m’est interdit de faire redescendre aux êtres vivants l’échelle de l’humanité! Mais, si je ne puis vous réduire à l’état de mollusque, – ce qui est un état bien humble, – je puis faire remonter Ratine…

— Oh! faites, bonne fée, faites!

— Mais il faudra qu’elle repasse par les degrés intermédiaires, avant de redevenir la charmante rate, destinée à être jeune fille un jour. Donc, soyez patient! Soumettez-vous aux lois de la nature! Ayez confiance aussi…

— En vous, bonne fée!…

— Oui, en moi! Je ferai tout pour vous venir en aide. Mais nous aurons à soutenir de violentes luttes. Vous avez dans le prince Kissador, bien qu’il soit le plus sot des princes, un ennemi puissant. Et si Gardafour recouvrait son pouvoir avant que vous ne fussiez l’époux de la belle Ratine, il me serait difficile de le vaincre, car il serait redevenu mon égal!”

La fée Firmenta et Ratin en étaient là de leur conversation, lorsqu’une petite voix se fit entendre. D’où sortait cette voix? Cela semblait difficile à deviner.

Et cette voix disait:

“Ratin!… Mon pauvre Ratin!… Je t’aime!…

— C’est la voix de Ratine! s’écria le beau jeune homme. Ah! madame la fée! Madame la fée, ayez pitié d’elle!”

En vérité, Ratin était comme fou. Il courait à travers la salle, il regardait sous les meubles, il ouvrait les dressoirs dans la pensée que Ratine pouvait y être cachée, et il ne la trouvait pas!

La fée l’arrêta d’un geste.

Et alors, mes chers enfants, il se produisit un singulier effet. Il y avait sur la table, rangées dans un plat d’argent, une demi-douzaine d’huîtres qui venaient précisément du banc de Samobrives. Au milieu se voyait la plus jolie, avec sa coquille bien luisante, bien ourlée. Et la voilà qui grossit, s’élargit, se développe, puis ouvre ses deux valves. Des plis de sa collerette se dégage alors une adorable figure, avec des cheveux blonds, comme les blés, deux yeux les plus doux du monde, un petit nez bien droit, une bouche charmante qui répète.

“Ratin!… mon cher Ratin!

— C’est elle!” s’écrie le beau jeune homme.

C’était Ratine, en effet. Il l’avait bien reconnue. Car, il faut vous dire, mes chers enfants, qu’en cet heureux temps de magie, les êtres avaient déjà visage humain, même avant d’appartenir à l’humanité.

Et que Ratine était jolie sous la nacre de sa coquille! On eût dit un bijou dans son écrin.

Et elle s’exprimait ainsi:

“Ratin, mon cher Ratin, j’ai entendu tout ce que tu viens de dire à madame la fée. Madame la fée, vous avez daigné promettre de réparer le mal que nous a fait ce méchant Gardafour! Oh! ne m’abandonnez pas, car, s’il m’a changée en huître, c’est pour que je ne puisse plus m’enfuir. Alors, le prince Kissador viendra me détacher du banc auquel est liée ma famille, il m’emportera, il me mettra dans son vivier, il attendra que je sois devenue jeune fille, et je serai à jamais perdue pour mon pauvre et cher Ratin!”

Elle parlait d’une voix si plaintive, que le jeune homme, profondément ému, pouvait à peine répondre:

“Oh! ma Ratine!” murmurait-il.

Dans un élan de tendresse, il étendait la main vers elle, lorsque la fée l’arrêta. Et, après avoir enlevé délicatement une perle magnifique qui s’était formée au fond de la valve:

“Prends cette perle, lui dit-elle.

— Cette perle, bonne fée?

— Oui, elle vaut toute une fortune. Cela pourra te servir plus tard. Maintenant nous allons reporter Ratine sur le banc de Samobrives, et là, je la ferai remonter d’un échelon…

— Pas seule, bonne fée! répondit Ratine d’une voix suppliante. Songez à mon bon père Raton, à ma bonne mère Ratonne, à mon cousin Raté! Songez à nos fidèles serviteurs Rata et Ratane!”

Mais, pendant qu’elle parlait ainsi, les deux valves de sa coquille se refermaient lentement et reprenaient leurs dimensions ordinaires.

“Ratine! s’écria le jeune homme.

— Emporte cette huître!” dit la fée.

Et, après l’avoir prise, Ratin la pressa sur ses lèvres. Ne contenait-elle pas tout ce qu’il avait de plus cher au monde!

III

La mer est basse. Le ressac bat doucement le pied du banc de Samobrives. Il y a des flaques d’eau entre les roches. Le granit brille comme de l’ébène ciré. On marche sur les goémons visqueux dont les cosses éclatent en faisant jaillir de petits jets liquides. Il faut prendre garde de glisser, car la chute serait douloureuse.

Quelle quantité de mollusques sur ce banc, des vigneaux, semblables à de gros limaçons, des moules, des clovisses, des mâcles, surtout des huîtres par millions.

Une demi-douzaine des plus belles se cache sous les plantes marines. Je me trompe: il n’y en a que cinq. La place de la sixième est vide!

Voilà, maintenant, que ces huîtres s’ouvrent aux rayons du soleil, afin de respirer la fraîche brise du large. En même temps, s’échappe un chant plaintif, comme une litanie de semaine sainte.

Les valves de ces mollusques se sont lentement écartées. Entre leurs franges transparentes se dessinent quelques figures faciles à reconnaître.

L’une est Raton, le père, un philosophe, un sage, qui sait accepter la vie sous toutes ses formes.

“Sans doute, pense-t-il, après avoir été rat, redevenir mollusque, cela ne laisse pas d’être pénible, mais il faut se faire une raison et prendre les choses comme elles viennent!”

Dans la deuxième huître s’agite une figure contrariée, dont les yeux jettent des éclairs. En vain cherche-t-elle à s’élancer hors de sa coquille! C’est dame Ratonne, et elle dit:

“Être enfermée dans cette prison humiliante, moi qui tenais le premier rang dans notre ville de Ratopolis! Moi qui, arrivée à la phase humaine, aurais été grande dame, princesse peut-être!… Ah! le misérable Gardafour!”

Dans la troisième huître grimace la face bébête du cousin Raté, un franc nigaud, quelque peu poltron, qui dresse l’oreille au moindre bruit, comme un lièvre! Il faut vous dire que, tout naturellement, en sa qualité de cousin, il faisait la cour à sa cousine. Ratine, on le sait, en aimait un autre, et cet autre, Raté le jalousait cordialement.

“Ah!… ah! faisait-il, être aplati entre deux coquilles, quelle destinée! Au moins, quand j’étais rat, je pouvais courir, me sauver, éviter les chats et les ratières! Mais, ici, il suffit que l’on me cueille avec une douzaine de mes semblables, et le couteau grossier d’une écaillère m’ouvrira brutalement, et j’irai figurer sur la table d’un riche, et je serai avalé… vivant peut-être!”

Dans la quatrième huître, c’est le cuisinier Rata, un chef très fier de ses talents, très vaniteux de son savoir.

“Le maudit Gardafour! s’écriait-il. Si jamais je le tiens d’une main, je lui tords le cou de l’autre! Moi, Rata, qui en faisais de si bons, que le nom leur en est resté, collé entre deux écailles. Et ma femme Ratane…

— Je suis là, dit une voix qui sortait de la cinquième huître. Ne te fais pas de chagrin, mon pauvre Rata! Si je ne puis me rapprocher de toi, je n’en suis pas moins à ton côté! Et quand tu remonteras l’échelle, nous la remonterons ensemble!

Bonne Ratane! Une grosse boulotte, toute simple, toute modeste, aimant bien son mari, et, comme lui, très dévouée à ses maîtres.

Puis, alors, la triste litanie reprit sur un mode lugubre. Quelques centaines d’huîtres, attendant leur délivrance, elles aussi, se joignirent à ce concert de lamentations. Cela vous serrait le cœur. Et quel surcroît de douleur pour Raton, le père, et pour dame Ratonne, s’ils avaient su que leur fille n’était plus avec eux!

Soudain, tout se tut. Les écailles se refermèrent.

Gardafour venait d’arriver sur la grève, vêtu de sa longue robe d’enchanteur, coiffé du bonnet traditionnel, il inquiétait par sa physionomie farouche. Près de lui marchait le prince Kissador, richement vêtu. On imaginerait difficilement à quel point ce seigneur était infatué de sa personne, et comme il se déhanchait ridiculement pour se donner des grâces.

“Où sommes-nous? demanda-t-il.

— Au banc de Samobrives, mon prince, répondit obséquieusement Gardafour.

— Et cette famille Raton?…

— Toujours à la place où je l’ai incrustée pour vous être agréable!

— Ah! Gardafour, reprit le prince en frisant sa moustache, cette petite Ratine! J’en suis ensorcelé! Il faut qu’elle soit à moi! Je te paye pour me servir, et si tu ne réussis pas, prends garde!…

— Prince, répondit Gardafour, avant que mon pouvoir fût suspendu, j’ai bien pu changer toute cette famille de rats en mollusques, mais je n’aurais pu en faire des êtres humains! Seule la fée Firmenta a cette puissance!…

— Eh bien, Gardafour, pourquoi ne t’es-tu pas uni à elle?

— Je le lui ai maintes fois proposé, mon prince. À nous deux, nous aurions été maîtres du monde!… Elle m’a repoussé!

— Maladroit! répondit le prince, dont la suffisance était sans égale, j’aurais réussi, moi! Enfin, où est l’huître de cette petite sotte?”

Tous deux prirent pied sur le banc pour se rendre à la place où Gardafour croyait trouver Ratine.

En ce moment, deux personnes parurent sur l’autre côté de la grève. C’étaient la fée Firmenta et le jeune Ratin. Celui-ci tenait précieusement sur son cœur la double coquille qui renfermait sa bien-aimée.

Soudain, ils aperçurent le prince et l’enchanteur. Le beau jeune homme devint tout pâle.

“Gardafour, dit la fée, que viens-tu faire ici? Préparer encore tes machinations criminelles?

— Firmenta, répondit l’enchanteur, pourquoi as-tu refusé d’unir ton pouvoir au mien?…

— Le génie du bien allié au génie du mal, jamais!

— Fée Firmenta, dit alors le prince Kissador, tu sais que je suis fou de cette gentille Ratine, assez peu avisée pour repousser un seigneur de ma tournure! Eh bien, tout ce que tu voudras, je te le donnerai, si elle est à moi, quand tu la rendras jeune fille…

— Quand je la rendrai jeune fille, répondit Firmenta, ce sera pour appartenir à celui qu’elle préfère.

— Cet impertinent! riposta le prince Kissador, ce Ratin dont Gardafour n’aura pas de peine à faire un âne, quand je lui aurai allongé les oreilles!”

À cette insulte, le jeune homme bondit. Il allait s’élancer sur le prince afin de châtier son insolence, lorsque la fée lui saisit la main.

“Calme ta colère, dit-elle. Il n’est pas temps de te venger, et les insultes du prince tourneront un jour contre lui. Fais ce que tu as à faire, et partons.”

Ratin obéit, et, après l’avoir pressée une dernière fois sur ses lèvres, il alla déposer l’huître à la place qu’elle occupait naguère au milieu de sa famille. Puis, la fée et lui se retirèrent.

Mais le prince Kissador et Gardafour avaient bien compris ce qui s’était passé. Il ne leur eût été que trop facile de s’emparer de Ratine, si, en ce moment, la marée n’eût commencé à recouvrir le banc de Samobrives. Tous deux n’eurent que le temps de se mettre à l’abri du flot.

Bientôt l’eau eut envahi les dernières pointes, et tout disparut jusqu’à l’horizon de la haute mer, dont le contour se confondait avec celui du ciel.

IV

Cependant, à droite, quelques roches plus élevées sont restées à découvert. La marée ne peut atteindre leur sommet, même lorsque la tempête pousse les lames à la côte.

C’est là que le prince et l’enchanteur se sont réfugiés. Aucun péril ne les y menace. En remontant, ils pourront toujours retrouver la terre ferme. Lorsque le banc sera à sec, ils iront chercher la précieuse huître et l’emporteront avec son trésor. Au fond, le prince est furieux. Si puissants que soient les princes et même les rois, ils ne pouvaient rien en ce temps-là contre les fées, et il en serait encore de même si nous revenions jamais à cette heureuse époque.

Mais voici que la fée et le jeune Ratin reparaissent sur le haut de la grève. Aussitôt le prince Kissador et Gardafour de se cacher, afin de les observer sans être vus.

Ils eurent d’abord raison, puis tort, ainsi qu’on va le voir.

Le beau jeune homme se tenait à côté de la fée Firmenta, qui lui disait:

“Oui, maintenant que la mer est haute, Raton et les siens vont remonter d’un échelon vers l’humanité. De mollusques, je vais les faire poissons, et, sous cette forme, ils n’auront plus rien à craindre de leurs ennemis.

— Même si on les pêche?… fit observer Ratin.

— Sois tranquille! Je veillerai sur eux.”

Par malheur, Gardafour avait entendu la fée et imaginé un plan.

“Suivez-moi, mon prince”, dit-il en se dirigeant vers la terre.

Le prince Kissador l’accompagna, non sans impatience.

Alors la fée Firmenta étendit sa baguette vers le banc de Samobrives, caché sous les eaux. Les huîtres de la famille Raton s’entrouvirent. Il en sortit des poissons frétillants, et tout heureux de cette nouvelle transformation.

Raton, le père: un brave et digne turbot, avec des tubercules sur son flanc brunâtre, et qui, s’il n’eût eu face humaine, vous aurait regardé de ses deux gros yeux placés sur le côté gauche.

Madame Ratonne: une vive, avec la forte épine de son opercule et les piquants acérés de sa première dorsale, très belle, d’ailleurs, sous ses couleurs changeantes.

Mademoiselle Ratine: une jolie et élégante dorade de Chine, presque diaphane et bien attrayante dans son vêtement mélangé de noir, de rouge et d’azur.

Rata: un farouche brochet de mer, corps allongé, bouche fendue jusqu’aux yeux, dents tranchantes, l’air furieux comme un requin en miniature, et d’une surprenante voracité.

Ratane: une grosse truite saumonée, avec ses taches ocellées, couleur vermillon, les deux croissants dessinés sur le fond argenté de ses écailles, et qui eût fait bonne figure sur la table d’un gourmet.

Enfin le cousin Raté: un merlan au dos d’un gris verdâtre. Mais, par une bizarrerie de la nature, ou peut-être une méchanceté de Gardafour, ne voilà-t-il pas qu’il n’est qu’à moitié poisson! Oui! l’extrémité de son corps, au lieu d’être terminée par une queue, est encore engagée entre deux écailles d’huître! N’est-ce pas là le comble du ridicule! Pauvre cousin!

Et alors, merlan, truite, brochet, dorade, vive, turbot, rangés sous les eaux claires, au pied de la roche où Firmenta agitait sa baguette, semblaient dire:

“Merci, bonne fée, merci!”

V

Gardafour n’avait attendu que cette occasion pour mener à bien ses indignes projets.

En effet, une masse, venant du large, s’approche et se dessine plus nettement. C’est une chaloupe, avec sa grande misaine rougeâtre et son foc au vent. Elle arrive au fond de la baie, poussée par une fraîche brise.

Le prince et l’enchanteur sont à bord, et c’est à eux que l’équipage doit vendre toute sa pêche.

Le chalut a été envoyé à la mer. Dans cette vaste poche que l’on promène sur le fond, se prennent par centaines toutes sortes de poissons, de mollusques et de crustacés, crabes, crevettes, homards, limandes, raies, soles, barbues, anges, vives, dorades, turbots, bars, rougets, grondins, mulets, surmulets et bien d’autres!

Aussi, quel danger menace la famille Raton, à peine délivrée de sa prison d’écaille! Si, par malheur, le chalut l’a ramassée, elle n’en pourra plus sortir!

Alors, le turbot, la vive, le brochet, la truite, le merlan, saisis par la grosse main des matelots, seront jetés dans les paniers des mareyeurs, expédiés vers quelque grande capitale, étalés, palpitants encore, sur le marbre des revendeuses, tandis que la dorade, emportée par le prince, sera à jamais perdue pour son bien-aimé Ratin!

Mais voici le temps qui change. La mer grossit et se démonte. Le vent siffle. L’orage éclate. C’est la rafale, c’est la tempête.

Le bateau est horriblement secoué par la houle. Il n’a pas le temps de relever son chalut qui se rompt, et, malgré les efforts du timonier, est drossé vers la côte, où il se fracasse sur les récifs. À peine si le prince Kissador et Gardafour peuvent échapper au naufrage. Malheureusement, ils sont sauvés, grâce au dévouement des pêcheurs.

C’est la bonne fée, mes chers enfants, qui a déchaîné cet orage pour le salut de la famille Raton. Elle est là, sur une haute roche, accompagnée du beau jeune homme, et sa merveilleuse baguette à la main.

Alors Raton et les siens frétillent joyeusement sous les eaux qui se calment. Le turbot se tourne et se retourne, la vive nage coquettement, le brochet ouvre et ferme ses vigoureuses mâchoires, dans lesquelles s’engouffrent de petits poissons, la truite fait des grâces, et le merlan, avec sa queue d’écaille, se meut gauchement. Quant à la jolie dorade, elle semble attendre que Ratin se précipite vers elle. Oui! il le voudrait, mais la fée le retient.

“Non, dit-elle, pas avant que Ratine n’ait repris la forme sous laquelle elle a d’abord su te plaire!”

VI

Une bien jolie ville, que la ville de Ratopolis. Elle est située dans un royaume dont j’ai oublié le nom, qui n’est ni en Europe, ni en Asie, ni en Afrique, ni en Océanie, ni en Amérique, bien qu’il se trouve quelque part.

En tout cas, le paysage, autour de Ratopolis, ressemble beaucoup à un paysage hollandais. C’est frais, c’est vert, c’est propre, avec des cours d’eau limpides, des canaux ombragés de beaux arbres, des prairies grasses où paissent les plus heureux troupeaux du monde.

Comme toutes les villes, Ratopolis a des rues, des places, des boulevards; mais ces boulevards, ces places, ces rues, sont bordés de fromages magnifiques, en guise de maisons, des gruyères, des croûte-rouges, des mareuils, des chesters, de vingt espèces. Ils sont creusés à l’intérieur en étages, appartements, chambres. C’est là que vit, en république, une nombreuse population de rats, sage, modeste et prévoyante.

Il pouvait être alors sept heures. La nuit ne tarderait pas à venir. C’était un dimanche. En famille, rats et rates se promenaient pour respirer la brise du soir. Après avoir bien travaillé toute la semaine à refaire les provisions du ménage, ils se reposaient le septième jour.

Or, le prince Kissador était alors à Ratapolis, accompagné de l’inséparable Gardafour. Ils avaient appris que les membres de la famille Raton, après avoir été poissons pendant quelque temps, étaient redevenus rats. Aussi venaient-ils leur préparer de secrètes embûches.

“Oui! répétait le prince, c’est encore à cette fée maudite qu’ils doivent leur nouvelle transformation!

— Et! tant mieux! répondit Gardafour. Ils seront maintenant plus faciles à prendre! Des poissons, cela s'échappe trop aisément! À présent, les voilà rats ou rates, et nous saurons bien nous en emparer!

— Puisses-tu dire vrai, Gardafour!

— Et, une fois en votre pouvoir, ajouta l'enchanteur, la belle Ratine finira par être folle de votre seigneurie!"

À ce discours, le fat se rengorgeait, se pavanait, et lançait des œillades aux jolies rates en promenade.

"Gardafour, dit-il, nous n'avons pas une minute à perdre!

— Tout est préparé, mon prince, et Ratine n'échappera pas au piège que je lui ai tendu!

— Ou est ce piège?…

— Le voici!"

Et Gardafour montrait un élégant berceau de feuillage, disposé au coin de la place.

"C'est avec ce berceau que tu comptes prendre Ratine?

— Oui, mon prince!

— Et comment?…

— Vous le verrez, et je vous promets que la belle sera aujourd'hui même dans le palais de votre seigneurie. Et alors, comment pourrait-elle résister aux grâces de votre esprit et aux séductions de votre personne?"

Et l’imbécile de gober ces grosses flatteries de l’enchanteur!

“La voilà, dit Gardafour. Venez, prince, il ne faut pas qu’elle nous aperçoive!”

Tous deux gagnèrent la rue voisine.

C’était Ratine, en effet, mais Ratin l’accompagnait pour entrer au logis. Qu’elle était charmante avec sa jolie figure de blonde et sa gracieuse tournure de rate! Et le jeune homme lui disait:

“Ah! chère Ratine, que n’es-tu déjà une demoiselle! Si, pour t’épouser tout de suite, j’avais pu redevenir rat, je n’aurais pas hésité! Mais cela est impossible…

— Eh bien, mon cher Ratin, il faut attendre…

— Attendre! Toujours attendre!

— Qu’importe, puisque tu sais que je t’aime et ne serai jamais qu’à toi! D’ailleurs, la bonne fée nous protège, et nous n’avons plus rien à craindre du méchant Gardafour ni du prince Kissador…

— Cet impertinent, s’écria Ratin, ce sot que je corrigerai…

— Non, mon Ratin, non! Ne lui cherche pas querelle! Il est puissant! Il a des gardes qui le défendraient!… Tu succomberais, et que deviendrais-je alors! Aie patience, puisqu’il le faut, et confiance, puisque je t’aime!…”

Ratine disait si gentiment ces choses que le jeune homme n’aurait pu lui résister? Il la pressait sur son cœur, il lui baisait ses petites pattes. Et, comme elle se sentait un peu fatiguée de sa promenade:

“Ratin, dit-elle, voilà le berceau sous lequel j’ai l’habitude de me reposer! Va à la maison prévenir mon père et ma mère que je les attends ici pour aller à la fête.”

Et Ratine se glissa sous le berceau.

Soudain il se fit un bruit sec, comme le craquement d’un ressort qui se détend…

C’est que le feuillage cachait une perfide ratière! Ratine, qui ne pouvait s’en défier, venait de toucher le ressort, une grille s’était abattue devant le berceau, et, maintenant, elle était prise!

Ratin jeta un cri de colère, auquel répondit le cri de désespoir de Ratine, auquel répondit le cri de triomphe de Gardafour, qui accourait avec le prince Kissador. En vain, le jeune homme, s’accrochait-il à la grille, pour en briser les barreaux, c’était peine perdue! Aussi, dans un accès de fureur, il voulut se jeter sur le prince pour l’étrangler…

Mais, à un signe de Gardafour, une douzaine de serviteurs se montrèrent. Ratin comprit que s’il se laissait arrêter, il ne pourrait plus quérir aide et assistance. Le mieux était d’aller chercher du secours pour délivrer la malheureuse Ratine à son ravisseur.

Et c’est ce qu’il fit en s’échappant par la grande rue de Ratopolis.

Pendant ce temps, Ratine était extraite de la ratière, et le prince Kissador lui disait le plus galamment du monde:

“Je te tiens, petite, et maintenant, tu ne m’échapperas plus!”

VII

C’était dans une des plus élégantes maisons de Ratopolis, un magnifique fromage de Hollande, que demeurait la famille Raton. Le salon, la salle à manger, les chambres à coucher, toutes les pièces nécessaires au service, étaient distribuées avec goût et confort! C’est que Raton et les siens comptaient parmi les notables de la ville, et jouissaient de l’estime universelle.

Ce retour à son ancienne situation n’avait point enflé le cœur de notre brave et digne philosophe. Ce qu’il avait été, il devait toujours l’être, modeste dans ses ambitions, un vrai sage, dont la Fontaine eût fait le président de son conseil de rats. On se fût toujours bien trouvé de suivre ses avis. Seulement, il était devenu goutteux et marchait avec une béquille, lorsque la goutte ne le retenait pas dans son grand fauteuil. Il attribuait cela à l’humidité du banc de Samobrives, où il avait végété plusieurs mois. Bien qu’il eût été aux eaux réputées les meilleures, il en était revenu plus goutteux encore. Cela était d’autant plus fâcheux pour lui, que, – phénomène très bizarre – cette goutte le rendait impropre à toute métamorphose ultérieure. En effet, la métempsychose ne pouvait s’exercer sur les individus atteints de cette maladie des riches. Raton resterait donc rat, tant qu’il serait goutteux.

Mais Ratonne, elle, n’était pas philosophe. Voyez-vous sa situation, alors que, devenue dame et grande dame, elle aurait pour mari un simple rat, et un rat goutteux encore! Ce serait à mourir de honte! Aussi était-elle plus acariâtre, plus irritable que jamais, cherchant noise à son époux, gourmandant ses servantes, à propos d’ordres mal exécutés parce qu’ils étaient mal donnés, faisant enfin la vie dure à toute la maison.

“Il faudra pourtant vous guérir, monsieur, disait-elle, et je saurai bien vous y contraindre!

— Je ne demanderais pas mieux, ma bonne, répondait Raton, mais je crains que ce ne soit impossible, et je devrai me résigner à rester rat…

— Rat! Moi, la femme d’un rat! De quoi aurais-je l’air! Et ne voilà-t-il pas, d’autre part, notre fille amoureuse d’un garçon qui n’a pas le sol! quelle honte! Supposez que je sois princesse un jour, Ratine sera princesse aussi!…

— C’est donc que je serai prince alors, répliqua Raton, non sans une pointe de malice.

— Vous, prince, avec une queue et des pattes! Voyez-vous le beau seigneur!”

C’était ainsi que, toute la journée, on entendait geindre dame Ratonne! Le plus souvent, elle essayait de passer sa mauvaise humeur sur le cousin Raté. Il est vrai, le pauvre cousin prêtait à la plaisanterie. Cette fois encore, la métamorphose n’avait pas été complète. Il n’était rat qu’à moitié, rat par devant, mais poisson par derrière, avec une queue de merlan, – ce qui le rendait absolument grotesque. Dans ces conditions, allez donc plaire à la belle Ratine, ou même aux jolies autres rates de Ratopolis!

“Mais, qu’ai-je donc fait à la nature, pour qu’elle me traite ainsi, s’écriait-il, qu’ai-je donc fait?

— Veux-tu bien cacher cette vilaine queue! disait Madame Ratonne.

— Je ne peux pas, ma tante!

— Eh bien, coupe-la, imbécile, coupe-la!”

Et le cuisinier Rata offrait de procéder à cette section. Mais la bonne Ratane intercédait pour le cousin. Et, cependant, l’habile chef aurait bien su accommoder cette queue de merlan d’une façon supérieure. Quel régal c’eût été pour un jour de fête, tel que celui-ci!

Jour de fête à Ratopolis? Oui, mes chers enfants! Aussi, la famille Raton se proposait-elle de prendre part aux réjouissances publiques. Elle n’attendait plus que le retour de Ratine pour partir.

En ce moment, un carrosse s’arrêta à la porte de la maison. C’était celui de la fée Firmenta, en costume de brocard et d’or, qui venait rendre visite à ses protégés. Son amitié pour eux n’avait point faibli. Si elle souriait parfois des ambitions risibles de Ratonne, des jactances ridicules de Rata, des bêtises de Ratane, des lamentations du cousin Raté, elle faisait grand cas du bon sens de Raton, elle adorait la charmante Ratine et s’employait au succès de son mariage. Et, en sa présence, dame Ratonne n’osait plus reprocher au beau jeune homme de ne pas même être prince!

On fit donc bon accueil à la fée, sans lui ménager les remerciements pour tout ce qu’elle avait fait et ce qu’elle ferait encore.

“Car nous avons bien besoin de vous, madame la fée! dit Ratonne. Ah! quand serai-je dame?

— Patience! patience! répondit Firmenta. Il faut que vous passiez par les derniers échelons, et cela demande un certain temps!

— Mais, ne pourrait-on abréger?…

— La nature s’y oppose.

— Elle veut donc aussi que j’aie une queue de merlan, quoique je sois redevenu rat, s’écria le cousin en faisant une mine pitoyable! Madame la fée, ne pourrait-on m’en débarrasser?…

— Hélas! non, répondit Firmenta. Cette queue fait partie de votre individu. Il faudrait qu’elle disparût à la prochaine transformation. Vraiment, vous n’avez pas de chance! C’est votre nom de Raté qui veut cela, probablement! Espérons, cependant, que vous n’aurez point une queue de rat quand vous deviendrez oiseau!

— On! lorsque nous en serons là, s’écria dame Ratonne, je voudrais être une reine de volière!

— Et moi, un roi de basse-cour! dit Rata.

— Et moi, une belle grosse dinde truffée! ajouta naïvement la bonne Ratane.

— Vous serez ce que vous serez! riposta Raton. Quant à moi, je suis rat, et le resterai sans doute, et, mieux vaut l’être, après tout, que de se retrousser les plumes, comme bien des oiseaux de ma connaissance?

— Quel être!” murmura dédaigneusement son épouse.

En ce moment, la porte s’ouvrit. Le jeune Ratin parut, pâle, défait. En quelques mots, il eut raconté l’histoire de la ratière, et comment Ratine était tombée dans le piège du perfide Gardafour!

“Ah! c’est ainsi, répondit la fée. Tu veux lutter encore, maudit enchanteur! Soit! À nous deux!”

VIII

Oui, mes chers enfants, tout Ratopolis est en fête, et cela vous eût bien amusés, si vos parents avaient pu vous y conduire. Jugez donc! Partout, de larges arceaux avec des transparents de mille couleurs, des arcs de feuillage au-dessus des rues pavoisées, des maisons tendues de tapisseries, des pièces d’artifices se croisant dans les airs, de la musique à chaque coin de carrefour, et, je vous prie de le croire, les rats en remontreraient aux meilleurs orphéons du monde. Ils ont de petites voix douces, douces, des voix de flûte d’un charme inexprimable. Aussi, lorsqu’ils chantent, on croirait entendre un orchestre d’harmonie. Et comme ils interprètent les œuvres de leurs compositeurs, les Rassini, les Ragner, les Rassenet et tant d’autres maîtres!

Mais ce qui eût excité votre admiration, c’est un cortège de tous les rats de l’univers et de tous ceux qui, sans être rats, ont mérité ce nom significatif.

On y voit des rats qui ressemblent à Harpagon, portant sous la patte leur précieuse cassette d’avare; des rats à poil, vieux grognards, dont la guerre a fait des héros, toujours prêts à égorger le genre humain pour conquérir un galon de plus; des rats à trompe, avec une vraie queue sur le nez, comme en fabriquent ces farceurs de zouaves africains, des rats d’église humbles et modestes; des rats de cave, habitués à fourrer leur museau dans la marchandise pour le compte des gouvernements; et surtout des quantités fabuleuses de ces gentils rats de la danse qui exécutent les passes et contrepasses d’un merveilleux ballet d’opéra!

C’est au milieu de ce concours de beau monde que s’avançait la famille Raton, conduite par la fée. Mais elle ne voyait rien de cet éblouissant spectacle. Elle ne songeait qu’à Ratine, la pauvre Ratine, enlevée à l’amour de ses père et mère comme à l’amour de son fiancé!

On arriva ainsi sur la grande place. Si la ratière était toujours là sous le berceau, Ratine ne s’y trouvait plus. Elle avait été entraînée loin, bien loin, sans doute.

“Rendez-moi ma fille!” s’écriait dame Ratonne, dont toute l’ambition n’allait plus qu’à retrouver son enfant.

Cela faisait réellement pitié de l’entendre et jetait comme un voile de tristesse sur la ville en fête!

La fée essayait vainement de dissimuler sa colère contre Gardafour. On le voyait à ses lèvres pincées, à ses yeux qui avaient perdu leur douceur habituelle.

Un grand brouhaha s’éleva alors au fond de la place. C’était un cortège de princes, de ducs, de marquis, enfin des plus magnifiques seigneurs en costumes superbes, précédés de gardes armés de toutes pièces.

En tête du principal groupe se détachait le prince Kissador, distribuant des sourires, des saluts protecteurs, à toutes ces petites gens qui lui faisaient la cour.

Puis, au milieu des serviteurs rangés en arrière, une pauvre et jolie rate se traînait à peine. C’était Ratine, si surveillée, si entourée, qu’elle ne pouvait songer à fuir. Ses jolis yeux, pleins de larmes, en disaient plus que je ne saurais vous en dire. Gardafour, marchant près d’elle, ne la quittait pas du regard. Ah! il la tenait bien, cette fois!

“Ratine… ma fille!…

— Ratine… ma fiancée!” s’écrièrent Ratonne et Ratin, qui essayèrent vainement d’arriver jusqu’à elle.

Il fallait voir les ricanements dont le prince Kissador saluait la famille Raton, et quel coup d’œil provocateur Gardafour lançait à la fée Firmenta. Elle était vaincue, l’impuissante enchanteresse! Bien qu’il fût privé de son pouvoir de génie, Gardafour avait triomphé, rien qu’en employant un piège naturel, une simple ratière. Et, en même temps, les seigneurs complimentaient le prince sur sa nouvelle conquête. Avec quelle fatuité ce sot recevait ces compliments, je le laisse à penser.

Tout à coup, la fée étend le bras, agite sa baguette, et aussitôt s’opère une nouvelle métamorphose.

Si le père Raton reste rat, grâce à sa goutte, voilà dame Ratonne changée en perruche, Rata en paon, Ratane en oie, et le cousin Raté en héron. Mais, cette fois encore, la mauvaise chance ne l’a pas abandonné, et au lieu d’une belle queue d’oiseau, c’est une piteuse queue de rat qui frétille sous son plumage!

Au même moment, une colombe s’enlève légèrement du groupe des seigneurs: c’est Ratine!

Que l’on juge de l’hébêtement du prince Kissador, de la colère de Gardafour! Et les voilà tous, courtisans et serviteurs, à la poursuite de Ratine, qui s’enfuit à tire d’aile.

Mais le décor a changé. Ce n’est plus la grande place de Ratopolis, c’est un paysage admirable dans un cadre de grands arbres. Et des divers coins du ciel s’approchent mille oiseaux, qui viennent faire accueil à leurs nouveaux frères aériens.

Alors dame Ratonne, fière de son plumage, heureuse de son caquetage, se livre aux ébats les plus gracieux, tandis que, toute honteuse d’être en oie, la bonne Ratane ne sait plus où se cacher.

De son côté, Rata – dom Rata, s’il vous plaît – fait la roue. On dirait vraiment qu’il a été paon toute sa vie! Et le pauvre cousin, considérant cette queue de rat qui lui reste, murmure à voix basse:

“Raté encore!… Raté toujours!”

Le ciel s’est éclairé de ses plus beaux feux, comme s’il était baigné des spendeurs d’une aurore boréale. Les feuilles des arbres deviennent lumineuses, et ce sont autant d’étoiles qui tremblent doucement à la brise, dont le souffle ravive leurs mille couleurs.

Mais voici qu’une colombe traverse l’espace, en poussant de petits cris joyeux; elle décrit les courbes les plus élégantes, et vient se poser légèrement sur l’épaule du beau jeune homme.

C’est la charmante Ratine, et on peut l’entendre qui murmure à l’oreille de son fiancé en battant de l’aile:

“Je t’aime, mon Ratin, je t’aime!”

IX

Où sommes-nous, mes chers enfants? Toujours dans un de ces pays que je ne connais pas, et dont je ne pourrais dire le nom! Mais celui-ci est très beau, et je vous engage à l’aller voir. Avec ses vastes paysages encadrés d’arbres de la zone tropicale, ses temples d’architecture bouddhique qui se découpent un peu crûment sur un ciel très bleu, il ressemble à l’Inde, et ses habitans à des Indous. On voit même la population, qui se plonge dans les fleuves sacrés pour adorer Wishnou en tirant sa coupe!

Entrons dans ce caravansérail. Une sorte d’immense auberge, ouverte à tout venant. C’est là qu’est réunie la famille Raton, au complet. Suivant le conseil de la fée Firmenta, elle s’est mise en voyage. Le plus sûr, en effet, c’était de quitter Ratopolis pour échapper aux vengeances du prince et aux colères de l’enchanteur, tant que l’on ne serait pas assez fort pour se défendre. Ratonne, Ratane, Ratine, Rata et Raté ne sont que de simples volatiles. Qu’ils deviennent des fauves, et il ne sera plus si facile de les vaincre!

Oui, de simples volatiles, et la bonne Ratane, changée en oie, a été une des moins favorisées. Aussi, se promène-t-elle seule dans la cour du caravansérail. Sa voix plaintive se fait entendre et toucherait les cœurs les plus durs. Il semble même qu’elle chante ses malheurs.

“Hélas! Hélas! Après avoir été une truite élégante, une rate qui a su plaire, devenir une oie, une oie domestique, une de ces oies de basse-cour, que n’importe quel cuisinier peut farcir de vulgaires marrons!”

Et elle soupirait à cette idée, ajoutant:

“Qui sait même si mon mari n’aura pas la pensée de le faire! C’est qu’il me dédaigne, à présent! Comment voulez-vous qu’un paon si majestueux ait la moindre considération pour une oie si commune! Ah! je suis bien malheureuse!”

Puis, réfléchissant et portant sa patte à son bec:

“Si encore j’étais dinde, ce serait plus distingué! Mais non! et Rata ne me trouve plus à son goût!”

Et cela ne parut que trop lorsque le vaniteux Rata entra dans la cour. Mais aussi, quel beau paon! Il agite sa légère et mobile aigrette, peinte des plus brillantes couleurs. Il hérisse son plumage, qui semble brodé de fleurs et chargé de pierres précieuses. Il déploie largement le superbe éventail de ses plumes et les barbes soyeuses qui recouvrent ses pennes caudales. Comment cet admirable oiseau pourrait-il s’abaisser jusqu’à cette oie, si peu attrayante sous son duvet gris cendré et son manteau brun?

“Mon cher Rata! dit-elle.

— Qui ose prononcer mon nom? répond le paon.

— Moi!

— Une oie! Quelle est cette oie?…

— Je suis votre Ratane!

— Ah! fi! quelle horreur! Passez votre chemin, je vous prie!

— Mon cher Rata…

— Non, vous dis-je. Je ne sais qui vous êtes, et je ne veux pas le savoir!”

Vraiment, la vanité fait dire bien des sottises!

C’est que l’exemple lui venait de haut, à cet orgueilleux! Est-ce que sa maîtresse Ratonne montrait plus de bon sens? Est-ce qu’elle ne traitait pas Raton son époux aussi dédaigneusement que Rata traitait Ratane?

Et, précisément, la voilà qui fait son entrée, accompagnée de son mari, de sa fille, de Ratin et du cousin Raté.

Ratine est ravissante en colombe, avec son plumage cendré-bleuâtre, le dessous de son cou vert-doré à nuances changeantes, sa poitrine d’un roux vénitien, et la délicate tache blanche qui la marque à chaque aile.

Aussi, comme Ratin la dévore des yeux! Et quel mélodieux ronron elle fait entendre en voletant autour du beau jeune homme!

Le digne Raton, appuyé sur sa béquille, regardait sa fille avec admiration. Comme il la trouvait belle! Mais ce qui est certain, c’est que dame Ratonne se trouvait plus belle encore?

Ah! que la nature avait bien fait de la métamorphoser en perruche! Elle bavardait, elle bavardait! Elle étageait sa queue à rendre jaloux dom Rata lui-même. Si vous l’aviez vue, quand elle se plaçait dans un rayon de soleil pour faire miroiter le duvet jaune de son cou, lorsqu’elle agitait coquettement ses plumes vertes et ses remiges bleuâtres! C’était, en vérité, un des plus admirables spécimens des perruches de l’Orient.

“Eh bien, es-tu contente de ta destinée, bobonne? lui demanda Raton.

— Il n’y a plus ici de bobonne! répondit-elle d’un ton sec. Je vous prie de mesurer vos expressions et de ne pas oublier la distance qui nous sépare maintenant!

— Moi! ton mari?…

— Un rat, le mari d'une perruche! Vous êtes fou, mon cher!"

Et dame Ratonne de se rengorger plus prétentieusement encore, tandis que Rata se pavanait près d'elle.

Raton fit alors un petit signe d'amitié à sa servante, qui n'avait point démérité à ses yeux.

Puis il se dit:

"Ah! les femmes! les femmes! Les voyez-vous, lorsque la vanité leur tourne la tête, – et même quand elle ne la leur tourne pas! – Mais, soyons philosophe!"

Et, pendant cette scène de famille, que devenait le cousin Raté? Franchement, il avait quelque droit de se plaindre des injustices du sort à son égard. Quoi! toujours cet appendice qui n'appartient même pas à son espèce! Après avoir été rat avec une queue de merlan, être héron avec une queue de rat! Mais, si cela continuait de la sorte, à mesure qu'il s'élèverait dans l'échelle des êtres, ce serait déplorable!

Aussi, ne cessait-il de gémir, l'infortuné. Son oncle Raton et sa cousine, qui avaient bon cœur, essayaient en vain de le consoler.

Il demeurait là, dans un coin de la cour, perché sur une patte, ainsi que font les hérons pensifs, montrant le devant de son corps dont la blancheur se relevait de petites lames noires, son plumage cendré, et sa huppe mélancoliquement rabattue en arrière.

“Non, oncle Raton, répondait-il. Non, cousine Ratine, laissez-moi!” Et il cherchait à se cacher afin que l’on ne vît point passer sa queue de rongeur! En vérité, il lui tardait d’être homme, espérant bien qu’il serait enfin délivré de cet ornement caudal, qui n’appartient qu’à l’animalité.

Il fut alors question de continuer le voyage, pour admirer le pays dans toute sa beauté.

Mais dame Ratonne n’admirait qu’elle, et dom Rata n’admirait que lui. Ni l’un ni l’autre ne regardaient ces incomparables paysages. Ce qu’ils cherchaient, c’était une glace pour se voir, et une foule pour les contempler.

Aussi, de préférence, voulaient-ils se diriger vers les villes et bourgades, afin d’y déplorer leurs grâces et humer l’encens des complimenteurs, – bien différents, en cela, du jeune Ratin et de sa douce colombe, pour lesquels la solitude offrait tant de charmes!

Enfin, on discutait là-dessus, lorsqu’un nouveau personnage parut à la porte du caravansérail.

C’était un de ces guides du pays, vêtu à la mode indoue, qui venait offrir ses services aux voyageurs.

“Mon ami, lui demanda Raton, qu’y-a-t-il de curieux à voir?

— Une merveille sans égale, répondit le guide, c’est le grand Sphinx du désert.

— Du désert! fit dédaigneusement dame Ratonne.

— Nous ne sommes pas venus pour visiter un désert! dit dom Rata.

— Oh! répondit le guide, un désert qui n’en sera plus un aujourd’hui, car c’est la fête du sphinx, et on vient l’adorer de tous les coins du monde!”

Cela était bien pour engager nos vaniteux volatiles à lui rendre visite. Peu importait, d’ailleurs, à Ratine et à son fiancé en quel endroit on les conduirait, pourvu qu’ils y allassent ensemble! Quant au cousin Raté et à cette pauvre oie Ratane, c’est bien au fond d’un désert qu’ils eussent voulu se réfugier.

— En route”, dit dame Ratonne.

— En route”, répondit le guide.

Un instant après, tous avaient quitté le caravansérail, sans se douter que ce guide fût l’enchanteur Gardafour, méconnaissable sous son déguisement, et qui les attirait dans un nouveau piège.

X

Quel superbe sphinx, infiniment plus beau que ces sphinx d’Egypte, dont la célébrité, pourtant, est universelle. Celui-là s’appelait le sphinx de Romiradour, et c’était la huitième merveille du monde.

La famille Raton, venait d’arriver à la lisière d’une vaste plaine, entourée de forêts épaisses, que dominait en arrière une chaîne de montagnes, revêtues de neiges éternelles.

Au milieu de cette plaine, figurez-vous un animal taillé dans le marbre. Il est couché sur l’herbe, la face droite, les pattes de devant croisées l’une sur l’autre, le corps allongé comme une colline. Il mesure au moins cinq cents pieds de longueur sur cent de large, et sa tête s’élève à quatre-vingts pieds au-dessus du sol.

Ce sphinx a bien l’air indéchiffrable qui distingue ses confrères. Jamais il n’a livré le secret qu’il garde depuis des milliers de siècles. Et, cependant, son vaste cerveau est ouvert à quiconque veut le visiter. On y pénètre par une porte ménagée entre les pattes. Des escaliers intérieurs donnent accès à ses yeux, à ses oreilles, à son nez, à sa bouche, et jusque dans cette forêt de cheveux qui hérisse son crâne.

Au surplus, pour bien vous rendre compte de l’énormité de ce monstre, sachez que dix personnes tiendraient à l’aise dans l’orbite de ses yeux, trente dans le pavillon de ses oreilles, quarante entre entre les cartilages de son nez, soixante dans sa bouche où l’on pourrait donner un bal, et une centaine dans sa chevelure touffue comme une forêt d’Amérique. Aussi, de partout, venait-on, non pas le consulter, puisqu’il ne veut rien répondre de crainte de se tromper, mais le visiter comme on fait de la statue de saint-

Charles, dans une des îles du lac Majeur. Seulement, cette statue-là si renommée qu'elle soit, ne lui irait pas à la cheville.

On me permettra, mes chers enfants, de ne pas insister davantage sur la description de cette merveille qui fait honneur au génie de l'homme. Ni les pyramides d'Egypte, ni les jardins suspendus de Babylone, ni le colosse de Rhodes, ni le Phare d'Alexandrie, ni la tour Eiffel, ne peuvent lui être comparés. Lorsque les géographes seront enfin fixés sur le pays où se trouve le grand sphinx de Romiradour, je vous le ferai savoir, et je compte bien que vous irez lui rendre visite pendant vos vacances.

Mais Gardafour le connaissait, lui, et c'est là qu'il conduisait la famille Raton. En lui disant qu'il y aurait grand concours de populaire dans le pays, il l'avait indignement trompée. Voilà qui allait singulièrement contrarier le paon et la perruche! Du superbe sphinx, ils ne se souciaient guère! Gardafour, il est vrai, ne s'inquiétait pas davantage des récriminations que dame Ratonne et dom Rata ne manqueraient pas de lui faire!

Comme vous le pensez, il y avait eu un plan arrêté entre l'enchanteur et le prince Kissador. Aussi le prince était-il là, sur la lisière d'une forêt voisine, avec une centaine de ses gardes. Dès que la famille Raton serait enfermée dans le sphinx, on l'y prendrait comme dans une ratière.

Si cent hommes ne parvenaient pas à s'emparer de cinq oiseaux, d'un rat et d'un jeune amoureux, c'est que ceux-ci seraient protégés par quelque puissance surnaturelle.

En les attendant, le prince allait et venait. Il donnait les signes de la plus vive impatience. D'avoir été vaincu dans ses entreprises contre la belle Ratine, cela l'enrageait. Ah! si Gardafour avait recouvré son pouvoir, quelle vengeance il eût tiré de cette famille! Mais, que voulez-vous! L'enchanteur était encore réduit à l’impuissance et il s’en fallait de quelques semaines que son pouvoir lui fût rendu.

Cependant, cette fois, toutes les mesures avaient été bien prises. Vraisemblablement, ni Ratine, ni les siens n’échapperaient aux machinations de leur persécuteur.

En ce moment, l’enchanteur se montra en tête de la petite caravane, et le prince, entouré de ses gardes, se tint prêt à intervenir.

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XI

Le père Raton marchait d’un bon pas, malgré sa goutte. La colombe décrivant de grands cercles dans l’espace, venait de temps en temps se poser sur l’épaule de Ratin. La perruche, voltigeant d’arbre en arbre, s’élevait pour tâcher d’apercevoir la foule promise. Le paon tenait sa queue soigneusement repliée pour ne point la déchirer aux épines, tandis que Ratane se dandinait sur ses larges pattes. Derrière eux allait le héron, bec baissé, frappant rageusement l’air de sa queue de rat. Il avait bien essayé de la fourrer dans sa poche, je veux dire sous son aile; mais il avait dû y renoncer, parce qu’elle était trop courte.

Enfin, les voyageurs arrivèrent au pied du sphinx. Jamais ils n’avaient rien vu de si beau.

Cependant, dame Ratonne et dom Rata interrogeaient le guide, disant: “Où est donc ce grand concours de monde que vous nous avez promis?

— Il se montrera, répondit Gardafour, dès que vous aurez atteint la tête du monstre. De là, vous dominerez la foule, et vous serez vus de plusieurs lieues à la ronde!

— Eh bien, entrons vite! dit dame Ratonne.

— Entrons,” répondit Gardafour.

Tous pénétrèrent à l’intérieur, sans défiance. Ils ne s’aperçurent même pas que le guide était resté en dehors, après avoir refermé sur eux la porte ménagée entre les pattes du gigantesque animal.

Au-dedans régnait une demi-clarté, grâce à la lumière qui se glissait par les ouvertures de la face, le long des escaliers intérieurs. Après quelques instants, on put voir le digne Raton se promenant entre les lèvres du sphinx, dame Ratonne voletant sur le bout du nez où elle se livrait aux plus coquets ébats, dom Rata au sommet du crâne, faisant une roue à éclipser les rayons du soleil.

Le jeune Ratin et la jeune Ratine étaient placés dans le pavillon de l’oreille droite, où ils se chuchotaient les plus douces choses.

Dans l’œil droit était Ratane, dont on ne pouvait apercevoir le modeste plumage; dans l’œil gauche, le cousin Raté, dont on ne pouvait apercevoir la queue lamentable.

De ces divers points de la face, la famille Raton se trouvait admirablement postée pour contempler le splendide panorama qui se déroulait jusqu’à l’extrême limite de l’horizon.

Le temps était superbe alors. Pas un seul nuage au ciel. Pas une vapeur à la surface du sol.

Soudain, une masse animée se montre sur la lisière de la forêt. Elle s’avance, elle s’approche. Est-ce donc la foule des adorateurs du sphinx de Romiradour?

Non! Ce sont des gens armés de piques, de sabres, d’arcs, d’arbalètes. Ils marchent en peloton serré. Ils ne peuvent avoir que de mauvais desseins.

En effet, le prince Kissador est à leur tête, suivi de l’enchanteur, qui a quitté son vêtement de guide. La famille Raton se sent perdue, à moins que ceux de ses membres qui ont des ailes, ne s’envolent à travers l’espace.

“Fuis, ma chère Ratine! s’écrie son fiancé. Fuis!… Laisse-moi aux mains de ces misérables!

— Jamais je ne t’abandonnerai!” répond Ratine.

Et d’ailleurs, c’eût été trop imprudent. Une flèche aurait pu percer la colombe, et aussi la perruche, le paon, l’oie, le héron. Mieux valait se cacher dans les profondeurs du sphinx. Peut-être pourrait-on échapper à la poursuite des gardes et, quand la nuit serait venue, se sauver par quelque issue secrète, sans rien craindre des arbalétriers du prince.

Ah! combien il était regrettable que la fée Firmenta n’eût pas accompagnée ses protégés pendant ce voyage!

Cependant, le jeune homme avait eu une idée, et très simple comme toutes les bonnes idées. C’était de barricader la porte à l’intérieur, et c’est ce qui fut fait sans retard.

Il était temps, car le prince Kissador, Gardafour et les gardes, après s’être arrêtés à quelques pas du sphinx, interpellaient les prisonniers pour les sommer de se rendre.

Un non! bien accentué, qui sortit des lèvres du monstre, ce fut la seule réponse qu’ils obtinrent.

Alors, les gardes de se précipiter vers la porte, et comme ils l’assaillirent avec d’énormes quartiers de roches, il fut manifeste qu’elle ne tarderait pas à céder.

Mais, en ce moment, voici qu’une légère vapeur enveloppe la chevelure du sphinx, et lorsqu’elle s’est dissipée, la fée Firmenta, se dégageant de ses dernières volutes, apparaît debout sur la tête de Romiradour.

À cette miraculeuse apparition, les gardes s’arrêtent, puis reculent. Mais Gardafour parvient à les ramener à l’assaut: les ais de la porte commencent à s’ébranler sous leurs coups.

Il n’y a plus rien à attendre que d’une intervention surnaturelle, et elle se produit dans toute sa puissance.

En effet, la fée abaisse vers le sol la baguette qui tremble dans sa main…

Soudain, quelle irruption inattendue se fait à travers la porte disjointe.

Une tigresse, un ours, une panthère, se précipitent sur les gardes. La tigresse, c’est Ratonne, avec son pelage fauve. L’ours, c’est Rata, le poil hérissé, les griffes ouvertes. La panthère, c’est Ratane qui bondit effroyablement. Cette dernière métamorphose les a changés tous trois en bêtes féroces.

En même temps, Ratine s’est transformée en une biche élégante, et le cousin Raté a pris la forme d’un baudet, qui brait avec une voix terrible. Mais voyez le mauvais sort! Il a conservé sa queue de héron, et, maintenant, c’est cette queue qui pend à l’extrémité de sa croupe! Décidément, il est impossible de fuir sa destinée!

Cependant, à la vue des trois formidables fauves, les gardes n’ont pas hésité un instant: ils ont détalé comme s’ils avaient le feu à leurs trousses. Rien n’aurait pu les retenir, d’autant plus que le prince Kissador et Gardafour leur ont tout d’abord donné l’exemple. D’être dévorés vivants, cela ne leur convenait pas, paraît-il.

Mais si le prince et l’enchanteur ont pu gagner la forêt, une vingtaine de leurs gardes ont été moins heureux. La tigresse, l’ours et la panthère étaient parvenus à leur barrer la route. Aussi, les pauvres diables ne songèrent-ils qu’à chercher refuge à l’intérieur du sphinx, et bientôt on les vit s’entasser dans sa vaste bouche.

Pour une mauvaise idée, c’était une mauvaise idée, et quand ils le reconnurent, il était trop tard.

En effet, la fée Firmenta étend de nouveau sa baguette, et des hurlements épouvantables se font entendre, qui se propagent comme les éclats de la foudre jusqu’aux dernières limites de l’espace.

Le sphinx vient de se changer en lion.

Et quel lion! Sa crinière se hérisse, ses yeux jettent des flammes. Puis, ses formidables mâchoires commencent leur œuvre de mastication… Un instant après, il ne reste plus rien des gardes du prince Kissador, broyés par les dents du formidable animal.

Alors la fée Firmenta saute légèrement sur le sol. À ses pieds viennent ramper la tigresse, l’ours, la panthère, comme les animaux féroces aux pieds de la dompteuse qui les tient sous son regard.

Et depuis cette époque, le sphinx est devenu le lion de Romiradour.

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XII

Un certain temps s’est écoulé. La famille Raton a définitivement conquis la forme humaine, sauf le père, qui, toujours aussi goutteux que philosophe, est resté rat. À sa place, d’autres se seraient dépités, ils auraient crié à l’injustice du sort et maudit l’existence. Lui se contentait de sourire, heureux, disait-il, de n’avoir rien à changer à ses habitudes.

Quoiqu’il en soit, tout rat qu’il est, c’est un riche seigneur. Comme sa femme n’eût pas consenti à habiter son vieux fromage de Ratopolis, c’est dans une grande cité, la capitale d’un pays encore inconnu, qu’il occupe un palais somptueux, sans en être plus fier pour cela. La fierté ou plutôt la vanité, il la laisse à dame Ratonne, devenue duchesse. Il faut la voir se promener dans ses appartements, dont elle finira par user les glaces à force de s’y regarder.

Ce jour-là, du reste, le duc Raton a brossé son poil avec le plus grand soin, et fait autant de toilette qu’on en peut attendre de lui. Quant à la duchesse, elle s’est parée de ses plus beaux atours, robe à ramages, où se mélangent le velours frappé, le crêpe de Chine, le surah, la peluche, le satin, le brocard et la moire, traîne brodée de jais, de saphirs et de perles, longue de plusieurs aunes, remplaçant les diverses queues qu’elle portait avant d’être femme, diamants qui jettent des feux étincelants, dentelles que l’habile Arachné n’aurait pu faire ni plus fines, ni plus riches, chapeau Rembrandt, sur lequel s’étage un parterre de fleurs – enfin, tout ce qu’il y a plus à la mode.

Mais, demanderez-vous, pourquoi ce luxe d’ajustements? Le voici:

C’est aujourd’hui que l’on va célébrer, dans la chapelle du palais, le mariage de la charmante Ratine avec le prince Ratin. Oui, il est devenu prince, pour plaire à sa belle-mère. Mais comment? En achetant une principauté. Bon! Les principautés, bien qu'elles soient en baisse, doivent coûter assez cher. Sans doute! Aussi, Ratin a-t-il consacré à cette acquisition une partie du prix de la perle, vous n'avez point oublié la fameuse perle, trouvée dans l'huître de Ratine, et qui valait plusieurs millions!

Il est donc riche. Pourtant n'attendez point que la richesse ait modifié ses goûts et ceux de sa fiancée qui va devenir princesse en l'épousant! Non! Bien que sa mère soit duchesse, elle est toujours la jeune fille modeste que vous connaissez, et le prince Ratin en est plus épris que jamais. Elle est si belle dans sa toilette blanche, enguirlandée de fleurs d'oranger!

Il va sans dire que la fée Firmenta est venue assister à ce mariage, qui est un peu son œuvre.

C'est donc un grand jour pour toute la famille. Aussi dom Rata est-il superbe. En sa qualité d'ex-cuisinier, il est devenu tout naturellement homme politique. Rien de beau comme son habit de pair, qui a dû lui coûter gros, car, en le retournant, on peut en faire un habit de sénateur, – ce qui est très avantageux.

Ratane, elle, n'est plus une oie, à sa grande satisfaction. C'est une dame pour accompagner. Son époux s'est fait pardonner ses dédaigneuses manières d'autrefois. Il lui est revenu tout entier, et se montre même un peu jaloux des seigneurs qui papillonnent autour de son épouse.

Quant au cousin Raté… Mais il va entrer tout à l'heure, et vous pourrez l'observer à votre aise.

Les invités sont réunis dans le grand salon, constellé de lumières, embaumé du parfum des fleurs, orné des meubles les plus riches, drapé de tentures comme on n’en fait plus de nos jours, car elles encadrent les fenêtres sans les alourdir et sont pénétrables à la lumière.

On est venu de tous les environs pour assister au mariage du prince Ratin. Les seigneurs, les grandes dames, ont voulu faire cortège à ce couple charmant. Un majordome annonce que tout est prêt pour la cérémonie. Alors commence le plus merveilleuse défilé que l’on puisse voir et qui se dirige vers la chapelle.

Une harmonieuse musique, due aux orchestres cachés sous les massifs du parc se fait entendre. On dirait que les fleurs elles-mêmes jouent une marche triomphale en l’honneur des jeunes époux.

Il ne fallut pas moins d’une heure pour le défilé de ces importants personnages. Enfin, dans un des derniers groupes, parut le cousin Raté.

Un fort joli jeune homme, ma foi, vêtu à la dernière mode, manteau de cour, chapeau orné d’une magnifique plume qui balaie le sol à chaque salut.

Le cousin est marquis, s’il vous plaît, et ne fait point tache dans la famille. Il a fort bonne mine, il se présente avec grâce. Aussi, les compliments ne lui manquent-ils pas. En somme, c’est une bonne nature, et il les reçoit non sans une certaine modestie. On peut observer, toutefois, que sa physionomie est empreinte de quelque tristesse, son attitude légèrement embarrassée. Il baisse volontiers les yeux et détourne son regard de ceux qui l’approchent. Pourquoi cette réserve? N’est-il pas homme, maintenant, et autant que n’importe quel duc ou prince de la cour?

Aussi, s’avance-t-il à son rang dans le cortège, marchant d’un pas rythmé, un pas de cérémonie. Peut-être eût-il préféré rester en arrière. Mais non, il doit suivre les autres seigneurs, et, arrivé à l’angle du salon, il est forcé de se retourné pour remonter… Horreur!…

Entre les pans de son habit, sous son manteau de cour, passe une queue, une queue de baudet! En vain cherche-t-il à dissimuler ce honteux témoignage de sa transformation précédente!… Il est dit qu’il ne s’en débarrassera jamais!

Voilà, mes chers enfants, lorsque l’on commence mal la vie, il est bien difficile de reprendre la bonne route. Le cousin est homme désormais. Il a atteint le dernier échelon! Il n’a plus à compter sur une métamorphose qui le délivrerait de cette queue! Il la gardera jusqu’à son dernier soupir!…

Pauvre cousin Raté!

XIII

C’est ainsi que fut célébré le mariage du prince Ratin et de la princesse Ratine avec une extrême magnificence, digne de ce beau jeune homme et de cette belle jeune fille, si bien faits l’un pour l’autre!

Au retour de la chapelle, le cortège revint dans le même ordre. Et toujours le même comme il faut, la même correction de tenue et d’allure, enfin une noblesse d’attitude qui ne se rencontre à un tel degré que dans les hautes classes, paraît-il.

Si on objecte que tous ces seigneurs ne sont pourtant que des parvenus, qu’en vertu des lois de la métempsychose, ils ont passé par bien des phases humiliantes, qu’ils ont été des mollusques sans esprit, des poissons sans intelligence, des volatiles sans cervelle, des quadrupèdes sans raisonnement, je répondrai qu’on ne s’en douterait guère à les voir si convenables. D’ailleurs, les belles manières, cela s’apprend comme l’histoire ou la géographie. Il suffit de s’y appliquer. Toutefois, en songeant à ce qu’il a pu être, l’homme ferait bien de se montrer plus modeste, et l’humanité y gagnerait.

Après la cérémonie du mariage, il y eut un repas splendide dans la grande salle du palais. Dire que l’on y mangea de l’ambroisie apprêtée par les premiers cuisiniers du siècle, que l’on y but du nectar puisé aux meilleures caves de l’Olympe, ce ne serait pas assez.

Enfin, la fête se termina par un bal, où de jolies bayadères et de gracieuses almées, vêtues de leurs costumes orientaux, vinrent émerveiller l’auguste assemblée par leurs ravissants ballets.

Le prince Ratin, comme il convient, avait ouvert le bal avec la princesse Ratine, dans un quadrille où la duchesse Ratonne figurait au bras d’un seigneur de sang royal. Dom Rata y prenait part avec une ambassadrice, et Ratane y fut conduite par le propre neveu d’un Grand Electeur.

Quant au cousin Raté, il hésita longtemps à payer de sa personne. Il lui en coûtait, pourtant, de se tenir à l’écart; mais il n’osait inviter les femmes charmantes auxquelles il eût été si heureux d’offrir son bras à défaut de sa main. Enfin, il se décida à faire danser une délicieuse comtesse d’une remarquable distinction. Cette aimable femme accepta… un peu légèrement peut-être, et voilà le nouveau couple lancé dans un tourbillon d’une valse de Gung’l.

Ah! quel effet! La place ne fut bientôt plus tenable! Vainement le cousin Raté avait voulu ramasser sous son bras sa queue de baudet, comme les valseuses font de leur traîne. Cette queue, emportée par un mouvement de force centrifuge, lui échappa. Et alors, la voilà qui se détend comme une lanière, qui cingle les groupes dansants, qui s’entortille à leurs jambes, qui provoque les chutes les plus compromettantes, et amène enfin celle du marquis Raté et de la délicieuse comtesse.

Il fallut l’emporter, à demi-pâmée de honte, pendant que le cousin s’enfuyait à toutes jambes, jurant mais un peu tard, qu’on ne le reprendrait plus à se fourrer au milieu des danses!

Cet épisode fâcheux termina la fête, et chacun se retira au moment où le bouquet d’un feu d’artifice développait sa gerbe éblouissante dans les profondeurs de la nuit.

XIV

La chambre du prince Ratin et de la princesse Ratine est certainement l’une des plus belles du palais. Le prince ne la considère-t-il pas comme l’écrin de l’inestimable joyau qu’il possède? En vain essaierais-je de la décrire. Imaginez-la aussi merveilleuse que vous le pourrez, mes chers enfants, et vous serez encore au-dessous de la réalité.

C’est donc là que les jeunes époux, la fête achevée, viennent d’être conduits en grand apparat. Le duc et la duchesse Raton les ont accompagnés, et la fée Firmenta qui n’a pas voulu quitter le beau jeune homme et la belle jeune fille dont elle a protégé les amours. Sans doute, ils n’ont plus rien à craindre du prince Kissador, ni de l’enchanteur Gardafour, qu’on n’a jamais vus dans le pays. Ils sont à l’abri de leurs atteintes… Et cependant, la fée éprouve une certaine inquiétude, comme un pressentiment secret. Sur quoi repose-t-il? Elle serait fort embarrassée de l’expliquer.

Il va sans dire que Ratane est là, offrant ses services à sa jeune maîtresse, et aussi dom Rata, qui n’abandonnait plus sa femme, et aussi le cousin Raté, bien qu’en ce moment, la vue de celle qu’il aimait toujours, dût lui briser le cœur.

Mais, avant eux, deux personnages ont pu pénétrer dans cette chambre sans avoir été aperçus. C’est même ce qui a produit chez la fée Firmenta ce singulier pressentiment. Si puissante qu’elle fût, elle n’avait pas le don de voir à travers les murailles, don qui n’appartient qu’aux génies d’un ordre supérieur.

Or, ces deux personnages, vous l’avez compris, sont le prince Kissador et l’enchanteur Gardafour.

Et voici les propos qu’ils ont échangés:

“Tu sais ce que tu m’as promis, Gardafour!

– Oui, mon prince, et, cette fois, rien ne pourra m’empêcher d’enlever Ratine et de vous venger.

– J’y compte, et quand elle sera la princesse Kissador, je crois qu’elle n’aura pas lieu de le regretter!”

On le voit, ce fat a toujours une excellente opinion de sa personne. Il y a de ces natures qui sont incorrigibles.

“C’est bien mon avis, répond ce flatteur de Gardafour.

– Tu es sûr de toi aujourd’hui? reprend le prince.

– Jugez-en! répond Gardafour, en tirant sa montre. Dans trois minutes, le temps pendant lequel j’ai été condamné à perdre mon pouvoir d’enchanteur, sera écoulé. Dans trois minutes, ma baguette sera redevenue aussi puissante que celle de la fée Firmenta, mais d’une autre manière. Si Firmenta a pu élever ces membres de la famille Raton jusqu’au rang des êtres humains, moi je puis les faire redescendre au rang des plus vulgaires animaux!

– Bien, Gardafour, je m’en rapporte à toi pour en faire des brutes!…

– À votre service, mon prince!

– Mais, Gardafour, j’entends que Ratin et Ratine ne restent pas seuls dans cette chambre!…

– Et ils n’y resteront pas, si j’ai recouvré tout mon pouvoir avant qu’ils n’arrivent!

– De combien de temps s’en faut-il encore?

– De deux minutes!…

– Deux minutes!… Et les voilà qui montent l’escalier!…

– Vite, mon prince, retirez-vous! dit Gardafour. Je vais me cacher dans ce cabinet et, lorsqu’il en sera temps, j’apparaîtrai. Quant à vous, tenez-vous derrière cette grande porte, et ne l’ouvrez qu’au moment où je crierai: à toi, Ratin! et vous assisterez à une scène comique!

– C’est convenu, mais, surtout, n’épargne pas cet inepte rival!

– Soyez tranquille!”

Et tous deux disparurent.

On voit quel danger menace encore cette honnête famille, si éprouvée déjà! Elle ne peut s’en douter! Elle ne sait pas le prince et l’enchanteur si près!

Elle ignore que Gardafour est à l’instant de recouvrer cette puissance, dont il va faire un si détestable usage!

Quant à la fée Firmenta, toujours anxieuse, elle n’a qu’une hâte: c’est de voir si Gardafour n’est pas caché quelque part, derrière un rideau, sous un meuble…

Elle regarde…

Personne!

Et, maintenant que le prince Ratin et la princesse Ratine sont dans cette chambre, où ils vont rester seuls, elle reprend tout à fait confiance.

Soudain, une porte latérale s’ouvre brusquement, au moment où la fée disait au jeune couple:

“Soyez heureux!

– Pas encore! crie une voix terrible, qui fait tressaillir tout le monde.

Gardafour vient d’apparaître! La fée comprend que sa puissance d’enchanteur lui est rendue, en voyant la baguette magique frémir dans sa main. Firmenta ne peut plus rien pour cette malheureuse famille!

Aussi, quelle stupeur les a frappés tous! Ils sont d’abord comme immobilisés. Puis, ils reculent en groupe, se pressant autour de la fée, de manière à faire face au redoutable Gardafour.

“Bonne fée, s’écrièrent-ils, est-ce que vous nous abandonnez? Bonne fée, protégez-nous!

– Vous protéger! répond Gardafour. Firmenta, tu as épuisé ton pouvoir en leur faveur, et j’ai retrouvé le mien tout entier pour les perdre! Ah! tu as voulu lutter! Eh bien, tu succomberas dans la lutte! Maintenant, ta baguette ne peut plus rien pour eux, tandis que la mienne!…”

Et ce disant, Gardafour l’agite, elle décrit des ronds, elle siffle à travers l’air. On dirait qu’elle est douée d’une existence surnaturelle.

Raton et les siens sont prêts à défaillir. Ils ont compris que la fée est désarmée, puisqu’elle ne peut plus les sauver par une métamorphose supérieure.

“Oui, s’écrie Gardafour. Fée Firmenta, tu en as fait des humains! Eh bien, moi, je vais en faire des brutes!

– Grâce! grâce! murmure Ratine, en tendant ses mains vers l’enchanteur.

– Pas de grâce!” répond Gardafour.

Et il ajoute:

“Le premier qui va être touché par ma baguette sera changé en un affreux singe!”

Cela dit, Gardafour marche sur le groupe infortuné qui se disperse à son approche.

Si vous les aviez vus courir à travers la chambre, d’où ils ne peuvent s’enfuir, car les portes sont fermées, Ratin entraînant Ratine sans songer au péril qui le menace, cherchant à lui faire un rempart de son corps.

Oui! péril pour lui-même, car l’enchanteur vient d’ajouter:

“Quant à toi, beau jeune homme, Ratine ne te regardera bientôt plus qu’avec dégoût!”

À ces paroles, Ratine tombe évanouie dans les bras de sa mère. Ratin fuit du côté de la porte, mais Gardafour se précipite vers lui:

“À toi, Ratin!” s’écrie-t-il.

Et il se fend en lui portant un coup de baguette, comme il eût fait d’une épée…

À cet instant, la porte s’ouvre, le prince paraît,… et c’est lui qui reçoit le coup destiné au jeune Ratin…

Le prince Kissador, qui a été touché par la baguette, n’est plus qu’un horrible chimpanzé!

À quelle fureur il s’abandonne alors! Lui, si vain de sa beauté physique, si plein de morgue et de jactance, maintenant, un singe avec une face grimaçante, des oreilles longues de ça, un museau proéminent, des bras qui lui descendent jusqu’aux genoux, un nez écrasé, une peau jaunâtre dont les poils se hérissent!

Une glace est là sur un des panneaux de la chambre. Il se regarde!… Il pousse un cri terrible. Il fond sur Gardafour, stupéfait de sa maladresse! Il le saisit au cou, et l’étrangle de son vigoureux bras de chimpanzé.

Alors, le parquet s’entrouve, comme cela se fait dans toutes les féeries, une vapeur s’en échappe, et le méchant Gardafour disparaît au milieu d’un tourbillon de flammes.

Puis, le prince Kissador pousse une fenêtre, la franchit d’une gambade et va rejoindre ses semblables dans la forêt voisine.

XV

Et alors, je ne surprendrai personne en disant que tout cela va finir dans une apothéose au milieu d’un éblouissant décor, pour la complète satisfaction de la vue, de l’ouïe, de l’odorat, et même du goût. L’œil admire les plus beaux sites du monde, sous un ciel de l’Orient. L’oreille s’emplit d’harmonies paradisiaques. Le nez aspire des parfums enivrants, distillés par des milliards de fleurs. Les lèvres se parfument d’un air chargé de la saveur des fruits les plus délicieux.

Enfin, toute l’heureuse famille est dans l’extase, à ce point que Raton, le père Raton lui-même, ne sent plus sa goutte! Il est guéri et envoie au diable sa bonne béquille!

“Ah! s’écrie la duchesse Ratonne, vous n’êtes donc plus goutteux, mon cher?…

– Eh non! dit Raton, et me voilà débarrassé…

– Et vous allez pouvoir prendre place dans l’humanité!

– Mon père! s’écrie la princesse Ratine.

– Ah! monsieur Raton!” ajoutent Rata et Ratane en le félicitant.

Aussitôt la fée Firmenta s’avance, disant:

“En effet, Raton, il ne dépend plus que de vous, maintenant, de devenir homme, et, si vous le voulez, je puis…

– Homme, madame la fée?…

– Eh oui! riposte dame Ratonne, homme et duc, comme je suis femme et duchesse!…

– Ma foi, non! répond notre philosophe. Rat je suis et rat je demeurerai. Cela est préférable, à mon sens, et comme le disait déjà le poète Ménandre, il y a bien des siècles, chien, cheval, bœuf, âne, tout vaut mieux que d’être homme, ne vous en déplaise!”

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XVI

Voilà, mes chers enfants, quel est le dénouement de ce conte. La famille Raton n’a plus rien à craindre, désormais, ni de Gardafour, étranglé par le prince Kissador, ni du prince Kissador, qui ne peut plus s’adorer.

Il s’ensuit donc qu’ils vont être maintenant très heureux, et goûter ce qu’on appelle proprement un bonheur sans mélange.

D’ailleurs, la fée Firmenta éprouve pour eux une véritable affection, et ne doit pas leur épargner ses bienfaits.

Seul, le cousin Raté a quelque droit de se plaindre, puisqu’il n’est pas arrivé à une métamorphose complète. Il ne peut se résigner, et cette queue de baudet fait son désespoir. En vain veut-il la dissimuler… Elle passe toujours!

Quant au bonhomme Raton, il sera rat pendant toute sa vie, en dépit de la duchesse Ratonne, qui lui reproche sans cesse son refus inconvenant de s’élever jusqu’au rang des humains. Et, quand l’acariâtre grande dame l’assomme par trop de ses récriminations, il se contente de répéter, en lui appliquant le mot du fabuliste: “Ah! les femmes! les femmes! De belles têtes souvent, mais de cervelles, point!”

Mentionnons, en passant, que Rata et Ratanne ne cessèrent plus de faire bon ménage.

Quant au prince Ratin et à la princesse Ratine, ils furent très heureux et eurent beaucoup d’enfants.

C’est ainsi que finissent généralement les contes de fées, et je m’en tiens à cette manière, parce que c’est la bonne.

FIN

M. RE-DIEZE ET MLLE MI-BEMOL

I

Nous étions une trentaine d’enfants à l’école de Kalfermatt, une vingtaine de garçons entre six et douze ans, une dizaine de filles entre quatre et neuf ans. Si vous désirez savoir où se trouve exactement cette bourgade, c’est, d’après ma Géographie (p. 47), dans un des cantons catholiques de la Suisse, pas loin du lac de constance, au pied des montagnes de l’Appenzell.

“Eh! donc, vous là-bas, Joseph Müller?

— Monsieur Valrügis? répondis-je.

— Qu’est-ce que vous écrivez pendant que je fais la leçon d’histoire?

— Je prends des notes, monsieur.

— Bien.”

La vérité est que je dessinais un bonhomme, tandis que le maître nous racontait pour la millième fois l’histoire de Guillaume Tell et du farouche Gessler. Personne ne la possédait comme lui. Le seul point qui lui restât à élucider était celui-ci: à quelle espèce, reinette ou calville, appartenait la pomme historique que le héros de l’Helvétie avait placée sur la tête, de son fils, pomme aussi discutée que celle dont notre mère Eve dépouilla l’arbre du bien et du mal?

Le bourg de Kalfermatt est agréablement situé au fond d’une de ces dépressions qu’on appelle “van “, creusée sur le côté d’avers de la montagne, celui que les rayons du soleil ne peuvent atteindre l’été. L’école, ombragée de larges frondaisons, à l’extrémité du bourg, n’a point l’aspect farouche d'une usine d'instruction primaire. Elle est gaie d'aspect, en bon air, avec une vaste cour plantée, un préau pour la pluie et un petit clocher où la cloche chante comme un oiseau dans les branches.

C'est M. Valrügis qui tient l'école, de compte à demi avec sa sœur Lisbeth, une vieille fille plus sévère que lui. Tous deux suffisent à l'enseignement: lecture, écriture, calcul, géographie, histoire - histoire et géographie de la Suisse s'entend. Nous avons classe tous les jours, sauf le jeudi et le dimanche. On vient à huit heures avec son panier et des livres sous la boucle de la courroie; dans le panier, il y a de quoi manger à midi: du pain, de la viande froide, du fromage, des fruits, avec une demi-bouteille de vin coupé. Dans les livres, il y a de quoi s'instruire: des dictées, des chiffres, des problèmes. À quatre heures, on remporte chez soi le panier vide jusqu'à la dernière miette.

"... Mademoiselle Betty Clère?...

— Monsieur Valrügis?... répondit la fillette.

— Vous n'avez pas l'air de prêter attention à ce que je dicte. Où en suis-je, s'il vous plaît?

— Au moment, dit Betty en balbutiant, où Guillaume refuse de saluer le bonnet...

— Erreur!... Nous n'en sommes plus au bonnet, mais à la pomme, de quelque espèce qu'elle soit!..."

Mlle Betty Clère, toute confuse, baissa les yeux, après m'avoir adressé ce bon regard que j'aimais tant.

“Sans doute, reprit ironiquement M. Valrügis, si cette histoire se chantait au lieu de se réciter, vous y prendriez plus de plaisir, avec votre goût pour les chansons! Mais jamais un musicien n’osera mettre pareil sujet en musique!”

Peut-être notre maître d’école avait-il raison? Quel compositeur prétendrait faire vibrer de telles cordes!... Et pourtant qui sait?... Dans l’avenir?...

Mais M. Valrügis continue sa dictée. Grands et petits, nous sommes tout oreilles. On aurait entendu siffler la flèche de Guillaume Tell à travers la classe... une centième fois depuis les dernières vacances.

II

Il est certain que M. Valrügis n’assigne à l’art de la musique qu’un rang très inférieur. A-t-il raison? Nous étions trop jeunes alors pour avoir une opinion là-dessus. Songez donc, je suis parmi les grands, et je n’ai pas encore atteint ma dixième année. Et pourtant, une bonne douzaine de nous aimait bien les chansons du pays, les vieux lieds des veillées, et aussi les hymnes des fêtes carillonnées, les antiennes de l’antiphonaire, lorsque l’orgue de l’église de Kalfermatt les accompagne. Alors les vitraux frémissent, les enfants de la maîtrise jettent leurs voix en fausset, les encensoirs se balancent, et il semble que les versets, les motets, les répons s’envolent au milieu des vapeurs parfumées...

Je ne veux pas me vanter, c’est un mauvais sentiment, et quoique je fusse un des premiers de la classe, ce n’est pas à moi de le dire. Maintenant, si vous me demandez pourquoi, moi, Joseph Müller, fils de Guillaume Müller et de Marguerite Has, actuellement, après son père, maître de poste à Kalfermatt, on m’avait surnommé Ré-Dièze, et pourquoi Betty Clère, fille de Jean Clère et de Jenny Rose, cabaretiers audit lieu, portait le surnom de Mi-Bémol je vous répondrai: patience, vous le saurez tout à l’heure. N’allez pas plus vite qu’il ne convient, mes enfants. Ce qui est certain, c’est que nos deux voix se mariaient admirablement, en attendant que nous fussions mariés l’un à l’autre. Et j’ai déjà un bel âge, mes enfants, à l’époque où j’écris cette histoire, sachant des choses que je ne savais pas alors - même en musique.

Oui! M. Ré-Dièze a épousé Mlle Mi-Bémol et nous sommes très heureux, et nos affaires ont prospéré avec du travail et de la conduite!... Si un maître de poste ne savait pas se conduire, qui le saurait?. . .

Donc, il y a quelque quarante ans, nous chantions à l’église, car il faut vous dire que les petites filles, comme les petits garçons, appartenaient à la manécanterie de Kalfermatt. On ne trouvait point cette coutume déplacée, et on avait raison. Qui s’est jamais inquiété de savoir si les séraphins descendus du ciel sont d’un sexe ou de l’autre?

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III

La maîtrise de notre bourgade avait grande réputation, grâce à son directeur, l'organiste Eglisak. Quel maître de solfège, et quelle habileté il mettait à nous faire vocaliser! Comme il nous apprenait la mesure, la valeur des notes, la tonalité, la modalité, la composition de la gamme! Très fort, très fort, le digne Eglisak. On disait que c'était un musicien de génie, un contrapontiste sans rival, et qu'il avait fait une fugue extraordinaire, une fugue à quatre parties.

Comme nous ne savions pas trop ce que c'était, nous le lui demandâmes un jour.

"Une fugue, répondit-il, en redressant sa tête en forme de coquille de contrebasse.

— C'est un morceau de musique? dis-je.

— De musique transcendante, mon garçon.

— Nous voudrions bien l'entendre, s'écria un petit Italien, du nom de Farina, doué d'une jolie voix de haute-contre et qui montait... , montait... , jusqu'au ciel.

— Oui, ajouta un petit Allemand, Albert Hoct, dont la voix descendait... , descendait... , jusqu'au fond de la terre.

— Allons, monsieur Eglisak?... répétèrent les autres garçonnets et fillettes.

— Non, mes enfants. Vous ne connaîtrez ma fugue que lorsqu'elle sera achevée. . .

— Et quand le sera-t-elle? demandai-je.

— Jamais.”

On se regarda, et lui de sourire finement.

“Une fugue n’est jamais achevée, nous dit-il. On peut toujours y ajouter de nouvelles parties.”

Donc, nous n’avions point entendu la fameuse fugue du profane Eglisak; mais il avait pour nous mis en musique l’hymne de saint Jean-Baptiste, vous savez ce psaume en vers, dont Gui d’Arrezo a pris les premières syllabes pour désigner les notes de la gamme:

Ut queant laxis

Resonare fibris

Mira gestorum

Famuli tuorum,

Solve polluti,

Labii reatum,

Sancte Joannes.

Le Si n’existait pas à l’époque de Gui d’Arrezo. Ce fut en 1026 seulement qu’un certain Guido compléta la gamme par l’adjonction de la note sensible, et m’est avis qu’il a bien fait.

Vraiment, quand nous chantions ce psaume, on serait venu de loin, rien que pour l’entendre. Quant à ce qu’ils signifiaient, ces mots bizarres, personne ne le savait à l’école, pas même M. Valrügis. On croyait que c’était du latin, mais ce n’était pas sûr. Et, cependant, il paraît que ce psaume sera chanté au Jugement dernier, et il est probable que le Saint-Esprit, qui parle toutes les langues, le traduira en langage édénique.

Il n’en reste pas moins que M. Eglisak passait pour être un grand compositeur. Par malheur, il était affligé d’une infirmité bien regrettable, et qui tendait à s’accroître. Avec l’âge, son oreille se faisait dure. Nous nous en apercevions, mais lui n’aurait pas voulu en convenir. D’ailleurs, afin de ne pas le chagriner, on criait quand on lui adressait la parole, et nos faussets parvenaient à faire vibrer son tympan. Mais l’heure n’était pas éloignée où il serait complètement sourd.

“Pas un son ne s’échappe...”

Cela arriva, un dimanche, à vêpres. Le dernier psaume des Complies venait d’être achevé, et Eglisak s’abandonnait sur l’orgue aux caprices de son imagination. Il jouait, il jouait, et cela n’en finissait pas. On n’osait pas sortir, crainte de lui faire de la peine. Mais voici que le souffleur, n’en pouvant plus, s’arrête. La respiration manque à l’orgue... Eglisak ne s’en est pas aperçu. Les accords, les arpèges se plaquent ou se déroulent sous ses doigts. Pas un son ne s’échappe, et cependant, dans son âme d’artiste, il s’entend toujours... On a compris: un malheur vient de le frapper. Nul n’ose l’avertir. Et pourtant le souffleur est descendu par l’étroit escalier de la tribune...

Eglisak ne cesse pas de jouer. Et toute la soirée ce fut ainsi, toute la nuit également, et, le lendemain encore, il promenait ses doigts sur le clavier muet. Il fallut l’entraîner.. le pauvre homme se rendit compte enfin. Il était sourd. Mais cela ne l’empêcherait pas de finir sa fugue. Il ne l’entendrait pas, voilà tout.

Depuis ce jour, les grandes orgues ne résonnaient plus dans l’église de Kalfermatt.

IV

Six mois se passèrent. Vint novembre, très froid. Un manteau blanc couvrait la montagne et traînait jusque dans les rues. Nous arrivions à l’école le nez rouge, les joues bleuies. J’attendais Betty au tournant de la place. Qu’elle était gentille sous sa capeline rabattue!

“C’est toi, Joseph? disait-elle.

— C’est moi, Betty. Cela pince, ce matin. Enveloppe-toi bien! Ferme ta pelisse. ..

— Oui, Joseph. Si nous courions?

— C’est cela. Donne-moi tes livres, je les porterai. Prends garde de t’enrhumer. Ce serait un vrai malheur de perdre ta jolie voix...

— Et toi, la tienne, Joseph!”

C’eût été malheureux, en effet. Et, après avoir soufflé dans nos doigts, nous filions à toutes jambes pour nous réchauffer. Par bonheur, il faisait chaud dans la classe. Le poêle ronflait. On n’y épargnait pas le bois. Il y en a tant, au pied de la montagne, et c’est le vent qui se charge de l’abattre. La peine de le ramasser seulement. Comme ces branches pétillaient joyeusement! On s’empilait autour. M. Valrügis se tenait dans sa chaire, sa toque fourrée jusqu’aux yeux. Des pétarades éclataient, qui accompagnaient comme une arquebusade l’histoire de Guillaume. Tell. Et je pensais que si Gessler ne possédait qu’un bonnet, il avait dû s’enrhumer pendant que le sien figurait au bout de la perche, si ces choses-là s’étaient passées l’hiver!

Et alors, on travaillait bien, la lecture, l’écriture, le calcul, la récitation, la dictée, et le maître était content. Par exemple, la musique chômait. On n’avait trouvé personne capable de remplacer le vieil Eglisak. Bien sûr, nous allions oublier tout ce qu’il nous avait appris! Quelle apparence qu’il vint jamais à Kalfermatt un autre directeur de manécanterie! Déjà le gosier se rouillait, l’orgue aussi, et cela coûterait des réparations, des réparations...

M. le curé ne cachait point son ennui. Maintenant que l’orgue ne l’accompagnait plus, ce qu’il détonnait, le pauvre homme, surtout dans la préface de la messe! Le ton baissait graduellement, et, quand il arrivait à supplici confessione dicentes, il avait beau chercher des notes sous son surplis, il n’en trouvait plus. Cela excitait à rire quelques-uns. Moi, cela me faisait pitié, - à Betty aussi. Rien de lamentable comme les offices à présent. À la Toussaint, il n’y avait eu aucune belle musique, et la Noël qui s’approchait avec ses Gloria, ses Adeste Fideles, ses Exultet!...

M. le curé avait bien essayé d’un moyen. Ç’avait été de remplacer l’orgue par un serpent. Au moins, avec un serpent, il ne détonnerait plus. La difficulté ne consistait pas à se procurer cet instrument antédiluvien. Il y en avait un pendu au mur de la sacristie, et qui dormait là depuis des années. Mais où trouver le serpentiste? Au fait, ne pourrait-on utiliser le souffleur d’orgue, maintenant sans ouvrage.

“Tu as du souffle? lui dit un jour M, le curé.

— Oui, répondit ce brave homme, avec mon soufflet, mais pas avec ma bouche.

— Qu’importe! essaie pour voir...

— J’essaierai.”

Et il essaya, il souffla dans le serpent, mais le son qui en sortit était abominable. Cela venait-il de lui, cela venait-il de la bête en bois? Question insoluble. Il fallut donc y renoncer, et il était probable que la prochaine Noël serait aussi triste que l’avait été la dernière Toussaint. Car, si l’orgue manquait faute d’Eglisak, la maîtrise ne fonctionnait pas davantage. Personne pour nous donner des leçons, personne pour battre la mesure, c’est pourquoi les Kalfermattiens étaient désolés, lorsqu’un soir, la bourgade fut mise en révolution.

On était au 15 décembre. Il faisait un froid sec, un de ces froids qui portent les brises au loin. Une voix, au sommet de la montagne, arriverait alors jusqu’au village; un coup de pistolet tiré de Kalfermatt s’entendrait à Reischarden, et il y a une bonne lieue.

J’étais allé souper chez M. Clère un samedi. Pas d’école le lendemain. Quand on a travaillé toute la semaine, il est permis, n’est-ce pas, de se reposer le dimanche? Guillaume Tell a également le droit de chômer, car il doit être fatigué après huit jours passés sur la sellette de M. Valrügis.

La maison de l’aubergiste était sur la petite place, au coin à gauche, presque en face de l’église, dont on entendait grincer la girouette au bout de son clocher pointu. Il y avait une demi-douzaine de clients chez Clère, des gens de l’endroit, et, ce soir-là, il avait été convenu que Betty et moi, nous leur chanterions un joli nocturne de Salviati.

Donc, le souper achevé, on avait desservi, rangé les chaises, et nous allions commencer, lorsqu’un son lointain parvint à nos oreilles.

“Qu’est-ce que cela? dit l’un.

— On croirait que ça vient de l’église, répondit l’autre.

— Mais c’est l’orgue!...

— Allons donc! l’orgue jouerait tout seul?...”

Cependant, les sons se propageaient nettement, tantôt crescendo, tantôt diminuendo, s’enflant parfois comme s’ils fissent sortis des grosses bombardes de l’instrument.

On ouvrit la porte de l’auberge, malgré le froid. La vieille église était sombre, aucune lueur ne perçait à travers les vitraux de la nef. C’était le vent, sans doute, qui se glissait par quelque hiatus de la muraille. Nous nous étions trompés, et la veillée allait être reprise, lorsque le phénomène se reproduisit avec une telle intensité que l’erreur ne fut pas possible.

“Mais on joue dans l’église! s’écria Jean Clère.

— C’est le diable, bien sûr, dit Jenny.

— Est-ce que le diable sait jouer de l’orgue?” répliqua l’aubergiste.

“Et pourquoi pas?” pensais-je à part moi.

Betty me prit la main.

“Le diable?”, dit-elle.

Cependant, les portes de la place se sont peu à peu ouvertes; des gens se montrent aux fenêtres. On s’interroge. Quelqu’un de l’auberge dit:

“M, le curé aura trouvé un organiste, et il l’a fait venir.”

Comment n’avions-nous pas songé à cette explication si simple? Justement M. le curé vient d’apparaître sur le seuil du presbytère.

“Qu’est-ce qui se passe? demande-t-il.

— On joue de l’orgue, monsieur le curé, lui crie l’aubergiste.

— Bon! c’est Eglisak qui s’est remis à son clavier.”

En effet, d’être sourd n’empêche pas de faire courir ses doigts sur les touches, et il est possible que le vieux maître ait eu cette fantaisie de remonter à la tribune avec le souffleur. Il faut voir. Mais le porche est clos.

“Joseph, me dit M. le curé, va donc chez Eglisak.”

J’y cours, en tenant Betty par la main, car elle n’a pas voulu me quitter.

Cinq minutes après, nous sommes de retour.

“Eh bien? me demande M. le curé.

— Le maître est chez lui”, dis-je hors d’haleine.

C’était vrai. Sa servante m’avait affirmé qu’il dormait dans son lit comme un sourd et tout le vacarme de l’orgue n’aurait pu le réveiller.

“Alors qui donc est là? murmure Mme Clère, peu rassurée.

— Nous le saurons!” s’écrie M. le curé, en boutonnant sa pelisse.

L’orgue continuait à se faire entendre. C’était comme une tempête de sons qui en sortait. Les seize-pieds travaillaient à plein vent; le gros nasard poussait des sonorités intenses; même le trente-deux-pieds, celui qui possède la note la plus grave, se mêlait à cet assourdissant concert. La place était comme balayée par une rafale de musique. On eût dit que l’église n’était plus qu’un immense buffet d’orgue, avec son clocher comme bourdon, qui donnait des contre-fa fantastiques.

J’ai dit que le porche était fermé, mais, en faisant le tour, la petite porte, précisément en face le cabaret Clère, était entrouverte. C’était par là que l’intrus avait dû pénétrer. D’abord M. le curé, puis le bedeau qui venait de le rejoindre, entrèrent. En passant, ils trempèrent leurs doigts dans la Coquille d’eau bénite, par précaution, et se signèrent. Puis, toute la suite en fit autant.

Soudain, l’orgue se tut. Le morceau joué par le mystérieux organiste s’arrêta sur un accord de quarte et sixte qui se perdit sous la sombre voûte.

Était-ce l’entrée de tout ce monde qui avait coupé court à l’inspiration de l’artiste? Il y avait lieu de le croire. Mais, à présent, la nef naguère pleine d’harmonies, était retombée au silence. Je dis le silence, car nous étions tous muets, entre les piliers, avec une sensation semblable à celle qu’on éprouve quand, après un vif éclair, on attend le fracas de la foudre.

“Ils ne trouvèrent personne...

Cela ne dura pas. Il fallait savoir à quoi s’en tenir. Le bedeau et deux ou trois des plus braves se dirigèrent vers la vis qui monte à la tribune, au fond de la nef Ils gravirent les marches, mais, arrivés à la galerie, ils ne trouvèrent personne. Le couvercle du clavier était rabattu. Le soufflet, à demi gonflé encore de l’air qui ne pouvait s’échapper faute d’issue, restait immobile, son levier en l’air.

Très probablement, profitant du tumulte et de l’obscurité, l’intrus avait pu descendre la vis, disparaître par la petite porte et s’enfuir à travers la bourgade.

N’importe! le bedeau pensa qu’il serait peut-être convenable d’exorciser par prudence. Mais M. le curé s’y opposa, et il eut raison, car il en aurait été pour ses exorcismes.

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V

Le lendemain, le bourg de Kalfermatt comptait un habitant de plus - et même deux. On put les voir se promener sur la place, aller et venir le long de la grande rue, pousser une pointe jusqu'à l'école, finalement retourner à l'auberge de Clère, où ils retinrent une chambre à deux lits, pour un temps dont ils n'indiquaient point la durée.

"Cela peut être un jour, une semaine, un mois, un an ", avait dit le plus important de ces personnages, à ce que me rapporta Betty lorsqu'elle m'eut rejoint sur la place.

"Est-ce que ce serait l'organiste d'hier? demandai-je.

— Dame, ça se pourrait, Joseph.

— Avec son souffleur?

— Sans doute le gros, répondit Betty.

— Et comment sont-ils?

— Comme tout le monde."

Comme tout le monde, c'est évident, puisqu'ils avaient une tête sur leurs épaules, des bras emmanchés à leur torse, des pieds au bout des jambes. Mais on peut posséder tout cela et ne ressembler à personne. Et c'était ce que je reconnus, lorsque, vers onze heures, j'aperçus enfin ces deux étrangers si étranges.

Ils marchaient l'un derrière l'autre.

L’un, de trente-cinq à quarante ans, efflanqué, maigre, une sorte de grand héron, emplumé d’une grande lévite jaunâtre, les jambes doublées d’un flottard étroit du bas et d’où sortaient des pieds pointus, coiffé d’une large toque avec aigrette. Quelle figure mince, glabre! Des yeux plissés, petits mais perçants, avec une braise au fond de leur pupille, des dents blanches et aiguës, un nez effilé, une bouche serrée, un menton en galoche. Et quelles mains! Des doigts longs, longs... de ces doigts qui sur un clavier peuvent prendre une octave et demie!

L’autre est trapu, tout en épaules, tout en buste, une grosse tête ébouriffée sous un feutre grisâtre, une face de taureau têtu, un ventre en clef de fa. C’est un gars d’une trentaine d’années, fort à pouvoir rosser les plus vigoureux de la commune.

Personne ne connaissait ces individus. C’était la première fois qu’ils venaient dans le pays. Pas des Suisses, à coup sûr, mais plutôt des gens de l’Est, par-delà les montagnes, du côté de la Hongrie. Et, de fait, cela était, ainsi que nous l’apprîmes plus tard.

Après avoir payé une semaine d’avance à l’auberge Clère, ils avaient déjeuné de grand appétit, sans épargner les bonnes choses. Et maintenant, ils faisaient un tour, l’un précédant l’autre, le grand ballant, regardant, baguenaudant, chantonnant, les doigts sans cesse en mouvement, et, par un geste singulier, se frappant parfois le bas de la nuque avec la main, et répétant:

“La naturel... la naturel!... Bien!”

Le gros roulait sur ses hanches, fumant une pipe en forme de saxophone, d’où s’échappaient des torrents de fumée blanchâtre.

Je les regardais à pleins yeux, lorsque le grand m’avisa et me fit signe d’approcher.

Ma foi, j’eus un peu peur, mais enfin je me risquai, et il me dit d’une voix comme le fausset d’un enfant de chœur:

“La maison du curé, petit?

— La maison du... le presbytère?...

— Oui. Veux-tu m’y conduire?”

Je pensai que M. le curé m’admonesterait de lui avoir amené ces personnes - le grand surtout, dont le regard me fascinait. J’aurais voulu refuser. Ce fut impossible, et me voilà filant vers le presbytère.

“Tandis que le marteau battait...”

Une cinquantaine de pas nous en séparaient. Je montrai la porte et m’ensauvai tout courant, tandis que le marteau battait trois croches suivies d’une noire.

Des camarades m’attendaient sur la place, M. Valrügis avec eux. Il m’interrogea. Je racontai ce qui s’était passé. On me regardait... Songez donc! Il m’avait parlé!

Mais ce que je pus dire n’avança pas beaucoup sur ce que ces deux hommes venaient faire à Kalfermatt. Pourquoi entretenir le curé? Quelle avait été la réception de celui-ci, et ne lui était-il pas arrivé malheur, ainsi qu’à sa servante, une vieille d’âge canonique dont la tête déménageait parfois?

Tout fut expliqué dans l’après-midi.

Ce type bizarre – le plus grand – se nommait Effarane. C’était un Hongrois, à la fois artiste, accordeur, facteur d’orgues, organier – comme on disait – se chargeant des réparations, allant de ville en ville et gagnant de quoi vivre à ce métier.

C’était lui, on le devine, qui, la veille, entré par la porte latérale, avec l’autre, son aide et souffleur, avait réveillé les échos de la vieille église, en déchaînant des tempêtes d’harmonie. Mais, à l’entendre, l’instrument, défectueux en de certaines parties, exigeait quelques réparations, et il offrait de les faire à très bas prix. Des certificats témoignaient de son aptitude aux travaux de ce genre.

“Faites.. faites!” avait répondu M, le curé, qui s’était empressé d’accepter cette offre. Et il avait ajouté: “Le Ciel soit deux fois béni, qui nous envoie un organier de votre valeur, et trois fois le serait-il, s’il nous gratifiait d’un organiste...”

— Ainsi ce pauvre Eglisak?... demanda maître Effarane.

— Sourd comme un mur. Vous le connaissiez?

— Eh! qui ne connaît l’homme à la figue!

— Voilà six mois qu’il ne joue plus à l’église, ni ne professe à l’école. Aussi avons-nous eu une messe sans musique à la Toussaint, et est-il probable qu’à la Noël...

— Rassurez-vous, monsieur le curé, répondit maître Effarane. En quinze jours les réparations peuvent être achevées, et, si vous le voulez, Noël venue, je tiendrai l’orgue... “

Et en disant cela, il agitait ses doigts interminables, il les décraquait aux phalanges, il les détirait comme des gaines de caoutchouc.

Le curé remercia l’artiste en bons termes et lui demanda ce qu’il pensait de l’orgue de Kalfermatt.

“Il est bon, répondit maître Ellarane, mais incomplet.

— Et que lui manque-t-il donc? N’a-t-il pas vingt-quatre jeux, sans oublier le jeu des voix humaines?

— Eh! ce qui lui manque, monsieur le curé, c’est précisément un registre que j’ai inventé, et dont je cherchais à doter ces instruments.

— Lequel?

— Le registre des voix enfantines, répliqua le singulier personnage en redressant sa longue taille. Oui! j’ai imaginé ce perfectionnement. Ce sera l’idéal, et alors mon nom dépassera les noms des Fabri, des Kleng, des Erhart Smid, des André, des Castendorter, des Krebs, des Müller, des Agricola, des Kranz, les noms des Antegnati, des Costanzo, des Graziadei, des Serassi, des Tronci, des Nanchinini, des Callido, les noms des Sébastien Erard, des Abbey, des Cavaillé-Coll...”

M. le curé dut croire que la nomenclature ne serait pas terminée pour l’heure des vêpres, qui approchait.

Et l’organier d’ajouter, en ébouriffant sa chevelure:

“Et si je réussis pour l’orgue de Kalfermatt, aucun ne pourra lui être comparé, ni celui de Saint-Alexandre à Bergame, ni celui de Saint-Paul à Londres, ni celui de Fribourg, ni celui de Haarlem, ni celui d’Amsterdam, ni celui de Francfort, ni celui de Weingarten, ni celui de Notre-Dame de Paris, de la Madeleine, de Saint-Roch, de Saint-Denis, de Beauvais...”

Et il disait ces choses d’un air inspiré, avec des gestes qui décrivaient des courbes capricieuses. Certes, il aurait fait peur à tout autre qu’à un curé, qui, avec quelques mots de latin, peut toujours réduire le diable à néant.

Heureusement la cloche des vêpres se fit entendre, et, prenant sa toque dont il frisa l’aigrette d’un léger coup de doigt, maître Effarane salua profondément et vint rejoindre son souffleur sur la place. N’empêche que, dès qu’il fut parti, la vieille bonne crut sentir comme une odeur de soufre.

La vérité, c’est que le poêle renvoyait.

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VI

Il va de soi que, dès ce jour, il ne fut plus question que du grave événement qui passionnait la bourgade. Ce grand artiste, qui avait nom Effarane, doublé d’un grand inventeur, se faisait fort d’enrichir notre orgue d’un registre de voix enfantines. Et alors, à la prochaine Noël, après les bergers et les mages accompagnés par les trompettes, les bourdons et les flûtes, on entendrait les voix fraîches et cristallines des anges papillonnant autour du petit Jésus et de sa divine Mère.

Les travaux de réparation avaient commencé dès le lendemain; maître Effarane et son aide s’étaient mis à l’ouvrage. Pendant les récréations, moi et quelques autres de l’école nous venions les voir. On nous laissait monter à la tribune sous condition de ne point gêner. Tout le buffet était ouvert, réduit à l’état rudimentaire. Un orgue n’est qu’une flûte de Pan adaptée à un sommier, avec soufflet et registre, c’est-à-dire une règle mobile qui régit l’entrée du vent. Le nôtre était d’un grand modèle comportant vingt-quatre jeux principaux, quatre claviers de cinquante-quatre touches, et aussi un clavier de pédales pour basses fondamentales de deux octaves Combien nous paraissait immense cette forêt de tuyaux à anches ou à bouches en bois ou en étain! On se serait perdu au milieu de ce massif touffu! Et quels noms drôles sortaient des lèvres de maître Ellarane: les doublettes, les larigots, les cromornes, les bombardes, les prestants, les gros nasards! Quand je pense qu’il y avait des seize-pieds en bois et des trente-deux-pieds en étain! Dans ces tuyaux-là, on aurait pu fourrer l’école tout entière et M. Valrügis en même temps I

Nous regardions ce fouillis avec une sorte de stupéfaction voisine de l’épouvante.

“Henri, disait Hoct, en risquant un regard en dessous, c’est comme une machine à vapeur...

— Non, plutôt comme une batterie, disait Farina, des canons qui vous jetteraient des boulets de musique!... “

Moi, je ne trouvais pas de comparaisons, mais, quand je songeais aux bourrasques que le double soufflet pouvait envoyer à travers cet énorme tuyautage, il me prenait un frisson dont j’étais secoué pendant des heures.

Maître Ellarane travaillait au milieu de ce pêle-mêle, et sans jamais être embarrassé. En réalité, l’orgue de Kalfermatt était en assez bon état et n’exigeait que des réparations peu importantes, plutôt un nettoyage des poussières de plusieurs années. Ce qui offrirait plus de difficultés, ce serait l’ajustement du registre des voix enfantines. Cet appareil était là, dans une boîte, une série de flûtes de cristal qui devaient produire des sons délicieux. Maître Effarane, aussi habile organier que merveilleux organiste, espérait enfin réussir là où il avait échoué jusqu’alors. Néanmoins, je m’en apercevais, il ne laissait pas que de tâtonner, essayant d’un côté, puis de l’autre, et lorsque cela n’allait pas, poussant des cris, comme un perroquet rageur, agacé par sa maîtresse.

Brrrr... Ces cris me faisaient passer des frissons sur tout le corps et je sentais mes cheveux se dresser électriquement sur ma tête.

J’insiste sur ce point que ce que je voyais m’impressionnait au dernier degré. L’intérieur du vaste buffet d’orgue, cet énorme animal éventré dont les organes s’étalaient, cela me tourmentait jusqu’à l’obsession. J’en rêvais la nuit, et, le jour, ma pensée y revenait sans cesse. Surtout la boîte aux voix enfantines, à laquelle je n’eusse pas osé toucher, me faisait l’effet d’une cage pleine d’enfants, que maître Effarane élevait pour les faire chanter sous ses doigts d’organiste.

“Qu’as-tu, Joseph? me demandait Betty.

— Je ne sais pas, répondais-je.

— C’est peut-être parce que tu montes trop souvent à l’orgue?

— Oui... peut-être.

— N’y va plus, Joseph.

— je n’irai plus, Betty.”

Et j’y retournais le jour même malgré moi. L’envie me prenait de me perdre au milieu de cette forêt de tuyaux, de me glisser dans les coins les plus obscurs, d’y suivre maître Effarane dont j’entendais le marteau claquer au fond du buffet. Je me gardais de rien dire de tout cela à la maison; mon père et ma mère m’auraient cru fou.

VII

Huit jours avant la Noël, nous étions à la classe du matin, les fillettes d’un côté, les garçons de l’autre. M. Valrügis trônait dans sa chaire; la vieille sœur, en son coin, tricotait avec de longues aiguilles, des vraies broches de cuisine. Et déjà Guillaume Tell venait d’insulter le chapeau de Gessler, lorsque la porte s’ouvrit.

C’était M. le curé qui entrait. Tout le monde se leva par convenance, mais derrière M. le curé, apparut maître Effarane.

Tout le monde baissa les yeux devant le regard perçant de l’organier. Que venait-il faire à l’école, et pourquoi M. le curé l’accompagnait-il?

Je crus m’apercevoir qu’il me dévisageait plus particulièrement. Il me reconnaissait sans doute, et je me sentis mal à l’aise.

Cependant, M. Valrügis, descendu de sa chaire, venait de se porter au-devant de M, le curé, disant:

“Qu’est-ce qui me procure l’honneur?...

— Monsieur le magister, j’ai voulu vous présenter martre Effarane, qui a désiré faire visite à vos écoliers.

— Et pourquoi?...

— Il m’a demandé s’il y avait une maîtrise à Kalfermatt, monsieur Valrügis. Je lui ai répondu affirmativement. J’ai ajouté qu’elle était excellente du temps où le pauvre Eglisak la dirigeait. Alors maître Effarane a manifesté le désir de l’entendre. Aussi l’ai-je amené ce matin à votre classe en vous priant de l’excuser. “

M. Valrügis n’avait point à recevoir d’excuses. Tout ce que faisait M. le curé était bien fait. Guillaume Tell attendrait cette fois.

Et alors, sur un geste de M. Valrügis, on s’assit. M. le curé dans un fauteuil que j’allai lui chercher, maître Effarane sur un angle de la table des fillettes qui s’étaient vivement reculées pour lui faire place.

La plus rapprochée était Betty, et je vis bien que la chère petite s’effrayait des longues mains et des longs doigts qui décrivaient près d’elle des arpèges aériens.

Maître Effarane prit la parole, et, de sa voix perçante, il dit:

“Ce sont là les enfants de la maîtrise?

— Ils n’en font pas tous partie, répondit M. Valrügis.

— Combien?

— Seize.

— Garçons et filles?

— Oui, dit le curé, garçons et filles, et, comme à cet âge ils ont la même voix...

— Erreur, répliqua vivement maître Effarane, et l’oreille d’un connaisseur ne s’y tromperait pas. “

Si nous fûmes étonnés de cette réponse? Précisément, la voix de Betty et la mienne avaient un timbre si semblable, qu’on ne pouvait distinguer entre elle et moi, lorsque nous parlions; plus tard, il devait en être différemment, car la mue modifie inégalement le timbre des adultes des deux sexes.

Dans tous les cas, il n’y avait pas à discuter avec un personnage tel que maître Effarane, et chacun se le tint pour dit.

“Faites avancer les enfants de la maîtrise”, demanda-t-il en levant son bras comme un bâton de chef d’orchestre.

Huit garçons, dont j’étais, huit filles, dont était Betty, vinrent se placer sur deux rangs, face à face. Et alors, maître Effarane de nous examiner avec plus de soin que nous ne l’avions jamais été du temps d’Eglisak. Il fallut ouvrir la bouche, tirer la langue, aspirer et expirer longuement, lui montrer jusqu’au fond de la gorge les cordes vocales qu’il semblait vouloir pincer avec ses doigts. J’ai cru qu’il allait nous accorder comme des violons ou des violoncelles. Ma foi, nous n’étions rassurés ni les uns ni les autres.

M. le curé, M. Valrügis et sa vieille sœur étaient là, interloqués, n’osant prononcer une parole.

“Attention! cria maître Effarane. La gamme d’ut majeur en solfiant. Voici le diapason.”

Le diapason? Je m’attendais à ce qu’il tirât de sa poche une petite pièce à deux branches, semblable à celle du bonhomme Eglisak et dont les vibrations donnent le La officiel, à Kalfermatt comme ailleurs.

Ce fut bien un autre étonnement.

Maître Effiarane venait de baisser la tête, et, de son pouce à demi fermé, il se frappa d’un coup sec la base du crâne.

Ô surprise! sa vertèbre supérieure rendit un son métallique, et ce son était précisément le la, avec ces huit cent soixante-dix vibrations normales.

Maître Effarane avait en lui le diapason naturel. Et alors, nous donnant l’ut une tierce mineure au-dessus, tandis que son index tremblotait au bout de son bras:

“Attention! répéta-t-il. Une mesure pour rien!”

Et nous voici, solfiant la gamme d’ut ascendante d’abord, descendante ensuite.

“Mauvais... mauvais... s’écria maître Effarane, lorsque la dernière note se fut éteinte. J’entends seize voix différentes et je devrais n’en entendre qu’une.”

Mon avis est qu’il se montrait trop difficile, car nous avions l’habitude de chanter ensemble avec grande justesse, ce qui nous avait toujours valu force compliments.

Maître Effarane secouait la tête, lançait à droite et à gauche des regards de mécontentement. Il me semblait que ses oreilles, douées d’une certaine mobilité, se tendaient comme celles des chiens, des chats et autres quadrupèdes.

“Reprenons! s’écria-t-il. L’un après l’autre maintenant. Chacun de vous doit avoir une note personnelle, une note physiologique, pour ainsi dire, et la seule qu’il devrait jamais donner dans un ensemble.”

Une seule note – physiologique! Qu’est-ce que ce mot signifiait? Eh bien, j’aurais voulu savoir quelle était la sienne, à cet original, çt aussi celle de

M. le curé, qui en possédait une jolie collection, pourtant, et toutes plus fausses les unes que les autres!

On commença, non sans de vives appréhensions – le terrible homme n’allait-il pas nous malmener? – et non sans quelque curiosité de savoir quelle était notre note personnelle, celle que nous aurions à cultiver dans notre gosier comme une plante dans son pot de fleur.

Ce fut Hoct qui débuta, et, après qu’il eut essayé les diverses notes de la gamme, le sol lui fut reconnu physiologique par maître Effarane, comme étant sa note la plus juste, la plus vibrante de celles que son larynx pouvait émettre.

Après Hoct, ce fut le tour de Farina, qui se vit condamné au la naturel à perpétuité.

Puis mes autres camarades suivirent ce minutieux examen, et leur note favorite reçut l’estampille officielle de maître Effarane.

Je m’avançai alors.

“Ah! c’est toi, petit!” dit l’organiste.

Et me prenant la tête, il la tournait et la retournait à me faire craindre qu’il ne finît par la dévisser.

“Voyons ta note”, reprit-il.

Je fis la gamme d’ut à ut en montant puis en descendant. Maître Effarane ne parut point satisfait. Il m’ordonna de recommencer... Ça n’allait pas... Ça n’allait pas. J’étais très mortifié. Moi, l’un des meilleurs de la manécanterie, est-ce que je serais dépourvu d’une note individuelle?

“Allons! s’écria maître Effarane, la gamme chromatique!... Peut-être y découvrirai-je ta note.”

Et ma voix, procédant par intervalles de demi-tons, monté l’octave.

“Bien.. bien! fit l’organiste, je tiens ta note, et toi, tiens-la pendant toute la mesure!

— Et c’est? demandai-je un peu tremblant.

— C’est le ré dièze.”

Et je filai sur ce ré dièze d’une seule haleine.

M. le curé et M. Valrügis ne dédaignèrent pas de faire un signe de satisfaction.

“Au tour des filles!” commanda maître Effarane.

Et moi je pensai:

“Si Betty pouvait avoir aussi le ré dièze.” Ça ne m’étonnerait pas, puisque nos deux voix se marient si bien! Les fillettes furent examinées l’une après l’autre. Celle-ci eut le si naturel celle-là le mi naturel. Quand ce fut à Betty Clère de chanter, elle vint se placer debout, très intimidée devant maître Effarane.

“Va, petite.”

Et elle alla de sa voix si douce, si agréablement timbrée qu’on eût dit un chant de chardonneret. Mais, voilà, ce fut de Betty comme de son ami Joseph Müller. Il fallut recourir à la gamme chromatique pour lui trouver sa note, et finalement le mi bémol finit par lui être attribué.

Je fils d’abord chagriné, mais en y réfléchissant bien je n’eus qu’à m’applaudir. Betty avait le mi bémol et moi le ré dièze. Eh bien, est-ce que ce n’est pas identique?... Et je me mis à battre des mains.

“Qu’est-ce qui te prend, petit? me demanda l’organiste, qui fronçait les sourcils. .

— Il me prend beaucoup de joie, monsieur, osai-je répondre, parce que Betty et moi nous avons la même note...

— La même?” s’écria maître Effarane.

Et il se redressa d’un mouvement si allongé que son bras toucha le plafond.

“La même note! reprit-il. Ah! tu crois qu’un ré dièze et un mi bémol c’est la même chose, ignare que tu es, oreilles d’âne que tu mérites! Est-ce que c’est votre Eglisak qui vous apprenait de telles stupidités? Et vous souffriez cela, curé?... Et vous aussi, magister... Et vous de même, vieille demoiselle?”

La sœur de M. Valrügis cherchait un encrier pour le lui jeter à la tête. Mais il continuait en s’abandonnant à tout l’éclat de sa colère.

“Petit malheureux, tu ne sais donc pas ce que c’est qu’un comma, ce huitième de ton qui différencie le ré dièze du mi bémol, le la dièze du si bémol, et autres? Ah ça! est-ce que personne ici n’est capable d’apprécier des huitièmes de ton? Est-ce qu’il n’y a que des tympans parcheminés, durcis, racornis, crevés dans les oreilles de Kalfermatt?”

On n’osait pas bouger. Les vitres des fenêtres grelottaient sous la voie aiguë de maître Effarane. J’étais désolé d’avoir provoqué cette scène, tout triste qu’entre la voix de Betty et la mienne il y eût cette différence, ne frit-elle que d’un huitième de ton. M. le curé me faisait de gros yeux, M. Valrügis me lançait des regards...

Mais l’organiste de se calmer soudain, et de dire:

“Attention! Et chacun à son rang dans la gamme!”

Nous comprîmes ce que cela signifiait, et chacun alla se placer suivant sa note personnelle, Betty à la quatrième place en sa qualité de mi bémol, et moi après elle, immédiatement après elle, en qualité de ré dièze. Autant dire que nous figurions une flûte de Pan, ou mieux les tuyaux d’un orgue avec la seule note que chacun d’eux peut donner.

“La gamme chromatique, s’écria maître Effarane, et juste. Ou sinon!...”

On ne se le fit pas dire deux fois. Notre camarade chargé de l’ut commença; cela suivit; Betty donna son mi bémol puis moi mon ré dièze, dont les oreilles de l’organiste, paraît-il, appréciaient la différence. Après être monté, on redescendit trois fois de suite.

Maître Effarane parut même assez satisfait.

“Bien, les enfants! dit-il. J’arriverai à faire de vous un clavier vivant!”

Et, comme M. le curé hochait la tête d’un air peu convaincu:

“Pourquoi pas? répondit maître Effarane. On a bien fabriqué un piano avec des chats, des chats choisis pour le miaulement qu’ils poussaient quand on leur pinçait la queue!” “Un piano de chats, un piano de chats!” répéta-t-il.

Nous nous mîmes à rire, sans trop savoir si maître Effarane parlait ou non sérieusement. Mais, plus tard, j’appris qu’il avait dit vrai en parlant de ce piano de chats qui miaulaient lorsque leur queue était pincée par un mécanisme! Seigneur Dieu! Qu’est-ce que les humains n’inventeront pas!

Alors, prenant sa toque, maître Elliarane salua, tourna sur ses talons et sortit en disant:

“N’oubliez pas votre note, surtout toi, monsieur Ré-Dièze, et toi aussi, mademoiselle Mi-Bémol!”

Et le surnom nous en est resté.

VIII

Telle fut la visite de maître Effarane à l’école de Kalfermatt. J’en étais demeuré très vivement impressionné. Il me semblait qu’un ré dièze vibrait sans cesse au fond de mon gosier.

Cependant les travaux de l’orgue avançaient. Encore huit jours, et nous serions à la Noël. Tout le temps que j’étais libre, je le passais à la tribune. C’était plus fort que moi. J’aidais même de mon mieux l’organier et son souffleur dont on ne pouvait tirer une parole. Maintenant les registres étaient en bon état, la soufflerie prête à fonctionner, le buffet remis à neuf ses cuivres reluisant sous la pénombre de la nef Oui, on serait prêt pour la fête, sauf peut-être en ce qui concernait le fameux appareil des voix enfantines.

En effet, c’est par là que le travail clochait. Cela ne se voyait que trop au dépit de maître Effarane. Il essayait, il réessayait... Les choses ne marchaient pas. Je ne sais ce qui manquait à son registre, lui non plus. De là un désappointement qui se traduisait par de violents éclats de colère. Il s’en prenait à l’orgue, à la soufflerie, au souffleur, à ce pauvre Ré-Dièze qui n’en pouvait mais, des fois, je croyais qu’il allait tout briser, et je m’ensauvais... Et que dirait la population kalfermatienne déçue dans son espérance, si le Grand annuel majeur n’était pas célébré avec toutes les pompes qu’il comporte?

Ne point oublier que la maîtrise ne devait pas chanter à cette Noël-là, puisqu’elle était désorganisée, et qu’on serait réduit au jeu de l’orgue.

Bref le jour solennel arriva. Pendant les dernières vingt-quatre heures, maître Effarane, de plus en plus désappointé, s’était abandonné à de telles fureurs qu’on pouvait craindre pour sa raison. Lui faudrait-il donc renoncer à ces voix enfantines? Je ne savais, car il m’épouvantait à ce point que je n’osais plus remettre les pieds dans la tribune, ni même dans l’église.

Le soir de la Noël, d’habitude on faisait coucher les enfants dès le crépuscule, et ils dormaient jusqu’au moment de l’office. Cela leur permettait de rester éveillés pendant la messe de minuit. Donc, ce soir-là, après l’école, je reconduisis jusqu’à sa porte la petite Mi-Bémol. j’en étais venu à l’appeler ainsi.

“Tu ne manqueras pas la messe, lui dis-je.

— Non, Joseph, et toi n’oublie pas ton paroissien.

— Sois tranquille!”

Je revins à la maison où l’on m’attendait.

“Tu vas te coucher, me dit ma mère.

— Oui, répondis-je, mais je n’ai pas envie de dormir.

— N’importe!

— Pourtant...

— Fais ce que dit ta mère, répliqua mon père, et nous te réveillerons lorsqu’il sera temps de te lever. “

J’obéis, j’embrassai mes parents et je montai à ma chambrette. Mes habits propres étaient posés sur le dos d’une chaise, et mes souliers cirés auprès de la porte. Je n’aurais qu’à mettre tout cela au saut du lit, après m’être lavé la figure et les mains.

En un instant, glissé sous mon drap, j’éteignis la chandelle, mais il restait une demi-clarté à cause de la neige qui recouvrait les toits voisins.

Il va sans dire que je n’étais plus d’âge à placer un soulier dans l’âtre, avec l’espoir d’y trouver un cadeau de Noël. Et le souvenir me reprit que c’était là le bon temps, et qu’il ne reviendrait plus. La dernière fois, il y avait trois ou quatre ans, ma chère Mi-Bémol avait trouvé une jolie croix d’argent dans sa pantoufle... Ne le dites pas, mais c’est moi qui l’y avais mise!

Puis ces joyeuses choses s’effacèrent de mon esprit. Je songeais à maître Effarane. Je le voyais assis près de moi, sa longue lévite, ses longues jambes, ses longues mains, sa longue figure... J’avais beau fourrer ma tête sous mon traversin, je l’apercevais toujours, je sentais ses doigts courir le long de mon lit...

Bref après m’être tourné et retourné, je parvins à m’endormir.

Combien de temps dura mon sommeil? Je l’ignore. Mais tout à coup, je fils brusquement réveillé, une main s’était posée sur mon épaule.

“Allons, Ré-Dièze!” me dit une voix que je reconnus aussitôt.

C’était la voix de maître Effarane.

“Allons donc, Ré-Diéze... il est temps... Veux-tu donc manquer la messe?”

J’entendais sans comprendre.

“Faut-il donc que je te tire du lit, comme on tire le pain du four?”

Mes draps furent vivement écartés. J’ouvris mes yeux, qui furent éblouis par la lueur d’un fanal, pendu au bout d’une main...

De quelle épouvante je fils saisi!... C’était bien maître Effarane qui me parlait.

“Habille-toi.”

“Allons, Ré-Dièze, habille-toi.

— M’habiller?...

— À moins que tu ne veuilles aller en chemise à la messe! Est-ce que tu n’entends pas la cloche?”

En effet, la cloche sonnait à toute volée.

“Dis donc, Ré-Dièze, veux-tu t’habiller?”

Inconsciemment, mais, en une minute, je fus vêtu. Il est vrai, maître Effarane m’avait aidé, et ce qu’il faisait, il le faisait vite.

“Viens, dit-il, en reprenant sa lanterne.

— Mais, mon père, ma mère? observai-je.

— Ils sont déjà à l’église.”

Cela m’étonnait qu’ils ne m’eussent point attendu. Enfin, nous descendons. La porte de la maison est ouverte, puis refermée, et nous voilà dans la rue.

Quel froid sec! La place est toute blanche, le ciel tout épinglé d’astres. Au fond se détache l’église, et son clocher dont la pointe semble allumée d’une étoile.

Je suivais maître Effarane. Mais au lieu de se diriger vers l’église, voici qu’il prend des rues, de-ci, de-là. Il s’arrête devant des maisons dont les portes s’ouvrent sans qu’il ait besoin d’y frapper. Mes camarades en sortent, vêtus de leurs habits de fête, Hoct, Farina, tous ceux qui faisaient partie de la maîtrise. Puis c’est le tour des fillettes, et, en premier lieu, ma petite Mi-Bémol. Je la prends par la main.

“J’ai peur!” me dit-elle.

je n’osais répondre: “Moi aussi!” par crainte de l’effrayer davantage. Enfin, nous sommes au complet. Tous ceux qui ont leur note personnelle, la gamme chromatique tout entière, quoi!

Mais quel est donc le projet de l’organiste? À défaut de son appareil de voix enfantines, est-ce qu’il voudrait former un registre avec les enfants de la maîtrise?

Qu’on le veuille ou non, il faut obéir à ce personnage fantastique, comme des musiciens obéissent à leur chef d’orchestre, lorsque le bâton frémit entre ses doigts. La porte latérale de l’église est là. Nous la franchissons deux à deux. Personne encore dans la nef qui est froide, sombre, silencieuse. Et lui qui m’avait dit que mon père et ma mère m’y attendaient!... Je l’interroge, j’ose l’interroger.

“Tais-toi, Ré-Dièze, me répond-il, et aide la petite Mi-Bémol à monter.”

C’est ce que je fis. Nous voici tous engagés dans l’étroite vis et nous arrivons au palier de la tribune. Soudain, elle s’illumine. Le clavier de l’orgue est ouvert, le souffleur est à son poste, on dirait que c’est lui qui est gonflé de tout le vent de la soufflerie, tant il paraît énorme!

Sur un signe de maître Effarane, nous nous rangeons en ordre. Il tend le bras; le buffet de l’orgue s’ouvre, puis se referme sur nous...

Tous les seize, nous sommes enfermés dans les tuyaux du grand jeu, chacun séparément, mais voisins les uns des autres. Betty se trouve dans le quatrième en sa qualité de mi bémol et moi dans le cinquième en ma qualité de ré dièze! J’avais donc deviné la pensée de maître Effarane. Pas de doute possible. N’ayant pu ajuster son appareil, c’est avec les enfants de la maîtrise qu’il a composé le registre des voix enfantines, et quand le souffle nous arrivera par la bouche des tuyaux, chacun donnera sa note! Ce ne sont pas des chats, c’est moi, c’est Betty, ce sont tous nos camarades qui vont être actionnés par les touches du clavier!

“Betty, tu es là? me suis-je écrié.

— Oui, Joseph.

— N’aie pas peur, je suis près de toi.

— Silence!” cria la voix de Maître Effarane.

Et on se tut.

IX

Cependant l’église s’est à peu près remplie. À travers la fente en sifflet de mon tuyau, je pus voir la foule des fidèles se répandre à travers la nef, brillamment illuminée maintenant. Et ces familles qui ne savent pas que seize de leurs enfants sont emprisonnés dans cet orgue! J’entendais distinctement le bruit des pas sur le pavé de la nef le choc des chaises, le cliquetis des souliers et aussi des socques, avec cette sonorité particulière aux églises. Les fidèles prenaient leur place pour la messe de minuit, et la cloche tintait toujours.

“Tu es là? demandai-je encore à Betty.

— Oui, Joseph, me répondit une petite voix tremblante.

— N’aie pas peur... n’aie pas peur, Betty!... Nous ne sommes ici que pour l’office... Après on nous relâchera.”

Au fond, je pensais qu’il n’en serait rien. Jamais maître Effarane ne donnerait la volée à ces oiseaux en cage, et sa puissance diabolique saurait nous y retenir longtemps... Toujours peut-être!

Enfin, la sonnette du chœur retentit. M. le curé et ses deux assistants arrivent devant les marches de l’autel. La cérémonie va commencer.

Mais comment nos parents ne s’étaient-ils pas inquiétés de nous? J’apercevais mon père et ma mère à leur place, tranquilles. – Tranquilles aussi M. et Mme Clère. – Tranquilles les familles de nos camarades. C’était inexplicable.

Or, je réfléchissais à cela, lorsqu’un tourbillon passa à travers le buffet de l’orgue. Tous les tuyaux frémirent comme une forêt sous une rafale. Le soufflet fonctionnait à pleins poumons.

Maître Effarane venait de débuter en attendant l’Introït. Les grands jeux, même le pédalier, donnaient avec des roulements de tonnerre. cela se termina par un formidable accord final, appuyé sur la basse des bourdons de trente-deux pieds. Puis M. le curé entonna l’Introït: Dominus dixit ad me: Filius meus es tu. Et, au Gloria, nouvelle attaque de maître Effarane avec le registre éclatant des trompettes.

J’épiais, épouvanté, le moment où les bourrasques de la soufflerie s’introduiraient dans nos tuyaux; mais l’organiste nous réservait sans doute pour le milieu de l’office...

Après l’Oraison, vient l’Épître. Après l’Épître, le Graduel terminé par deux superbes Alleluia avec accompagnement des grands jeux.

Et alors, l’orgue s’était tu pour un certain laps de temps, pendant l’Évangile et le Prône, dans lequel M. le curé félicita l’organiste d’avoir rendu à l’église de Kalfermatt ses voix éteintes...’

Ah! si j’avais pu crier, envoyer mon ré dièze par la fente du tuyau!...

On est à l’Offertoire. Sur ces paroles: Loetentur coeli, et exultet terra ante faciem Domini quoniam venit, admirable prélude de maître Effarane avec le jeu des prestants de flûte mariés aux doublettes. c’était magnifique, il faut en convenir. Sous ces harmonies d’un charme inexprimable, les cieux sont en joie, et il semble que les chœurs célestes chantent la gloire de l’enfant divin.

Cela dure cinq minutes, qui me paraissent cinq siècles, car je pressentais que le tour des voix enfantines allait venir au moment de l’Élévation, pour laquelle les grands artistes réservent les plus sublimes improvisations de leur génie...

En vérité, je suis plus mort que vif. Il me semble que jamais une note ne pourra sortir de ma gorge desséchée par les affres de l’attente. Mais je comptais sans le souffle irrésistible qui me gonflerait lorsque la touche qui me commandait fléchirait sous le doigt de l’organiste.

Enfin, elle arriva, cette Élévation redoutée. La sonnette fait entendre ses tintements aigrelets. Un silence de recueillement général règne dans la nef. Les fronts se courbent, tandis que les deux assistants soulèvent la chasuble de M. le curé...

Eh bien, quoique je fusse un enfant pieux, je ne suis pas recueilli, moi! Je ne songe qu’à la tempête qui va se déchaîner sous mes pieds! Et alors, à mi-voix, pour n’être entendu que d’elle:

“Betty? dis-je.

— Que veux-tu, Joseph?

— Prends garde, ça va être à nous!

— Ah! Jésus Marie!” s’écrie la pauvre petite.

Je ne me suis pas trompé. Un bruit sec retentit. c’est le bruit de la règle mobile qui distribue l’entrée du vent dans le sommier auquel aboutit le jeu des voix des enfantines. Une mélodie, douce et pénétrante, s’envole sous les voûtes de l’église au moment où s’accomplit le divin mystère. J’entends le sol de Hoct, le la de Farina; puis c’est le mi bémol de ma chère voisine, puis un souffle gonfla ma poitrine, un souffle doucement ménagé, qui emporte le ré dièze à travers mes lèvres. On voudrait se taire, on ne le pourrait. Je ne suis plus qu’un instrument dans la main de l’organiste. La touche qu’il possède sur son clavier, c’est comme une valve de mon cœur qui s’entrouvre...

Ah! que cela est déchirant! Non! s’il continue ainsi, ce qui sort de nous, ce ne sera plus des notes, ce seront des cris, des cris de douleur!... Et comment peindre la torture que j’éprouve lorsque maître Effarane plaque d’une main terrible un accord de septième diminué dans lequel j’occupais la seconde place, ut naturel, ré dièze, fa dièze, la naturel!...

Et comme le cruel, l’implacable artiste le prolonge interminablement, une syncope me saisit, je me sens mourir et je perds connaissance...

Ce qui fait que cette fameuse septième diminuée, n’ayant plus son ré dièze, ne peut être résolue suivant les règles de l’harmonie...

X

“... Eh bien, qu’as-tu donc? me dit mon père.

— Moi... je...

— Allons, réveille-toi, c’est l’heure d’aller à l’église...

— L’heure?...

— Oui... hors du lit, ou tu manqueras la messe, et, tu sais, pas de messe, pas de réveillon!...”

Où étais-je? Que s’était-il passé? Est-ce que tout cela n’était qu’un rêve... l’emprisonnement dans les tuyaux de l’orgue, le morceau de l’Élévation, mon cœur se brisant, mon gosier ne pouvant plus donner son ré dièze?... Oui, mes enfants, depuis le moment où je m’étais endormi jusqu’au moment où mon père venait de me réveiller, j’avais rêvé tout cela, grâce à mon imagination surexcitée outre mesure.

“Maître Effarane? demandai-je.

— Maître Effarane est à l’église, répondit mon père. Ta mère s’y trouve déjà... Voyons, t’habilleras-tu? “

Je m’habillai, comme si j’avais été ivre, entendant toujours cette septième diminuée, torturante et interminable...

J’arrivai à l’église. Je vis tout le monde à sa place habituelle, ma mère, M. et Mme Clère, ma chère petite Betty, bien emmitouflée, car il faisait très froid. La cloche bourdonnait encore derrière les abat-son du clocher, et je pus en entendre les dernières volées.

M. le curé, vêtu de ses ornements des grandes fêtes, arriva devant l’autel, attendant que l’orgue fit retentir une marche triomphale.

Quelle surprise! Au lieu de lancer les majestueux accords qui doivent précéder l’Introït, l’orgue se taisait. Rien! Pas une note!

Le bedeau monta jusqu’à la tribune... Maître Effarane détait pas là. On le chercha. Vainement. Disparu, l’organiste. Disparu, le souffleur. Furieux sans doute de n’avoir pu réussir à installer son jeu de voix enfantines, il avait quitté l’église, puis la bourgade, sans réclamer son dû, et, de fait, on ne le vit jamais reparaître à Kalfermatt.

Je n’en fus pas fâché, je l’avoue, mes enfants, car, dans la compagnie de cet étrange personnage, loin d’en être quitte pour un rêve, je serais devenu fou à mettre dans un cabanon!

Et, s’il était devenu fou, M. Ré-Dièze n’aurait pu, dix ans plus tard, épouser Mlle Mi-Bémol- mariage béni du Ciel, s’il en fut. Ce qui prouve que malgré la différence d’un huitième de ton, d’un “comma “, ainsi que disait maître Effarane, on peut tout de même être heureux en ménage.

Le Figaro illustré, Noël 1893

LA DESTINEE DE JEAN MORENAS

CHAPITRE I

Ce jour-là, – vers la fin du mois de septembre, il y a de cela déjà bien longtemps – un riche équipage s’arrêta devant l’hôtel du Vice-Amiral commandant la place de Toulon. Un homme de quarante ans environ, solidement charpenté, mais d’allures assez vulgaires, en descendit, et fit passer au Vice-Amiral, outre sa carte, des lettres d’introduction signées de noms tels que l’audience qu’il sollicitait lui fut immédiatement accordée.

“C’est à M. Bernardon, l’armateur bien connu à Marseille, que j’ai l’honneur de parler? demanda le Vice-Amiral quand son visiteur eut été introduit.

— A lui-même, répondit celui-ci.

— Veuillez prendre un siège, reprit le Vice-Amiral, et me croire tout à votre service.

— Je vous en sais gré, Amiral, remercia M. Bernardon, mais je ne crois pas que la requête que j’ai à vous présenter soit de celles qu’il vous est difficile d’accueillir favorablement.

— De quoi s’agit-il?

— Tout bonnement d’obtenir l’autorisation de visiter le bagne.

— Rien de plus simple, en effet, approuva le Vice-Amiral, et il était superflu de vous munir des lettres de recommandation que vous m’avez transmises. Un homme portant votre nom n’a que faire de ces passeports de courtoisie.”

M. Bernardon s’inclina, puis, ayant de nouveau exprimé sa gratitude, s’enquit des formalités à remplir.

— Il n’y en a pas, lui fit-il répondu. Allez trouver le Major Général avec ce mot de moi, et satisfaction vous sera donnée sur-le-champ.”

M. Bernardon prit congé, se fit conduire près le Major Général, et obtint aussitôt la permission d’entrer dans l’Arsenal. Un planton le mena chez le Commissaire du bagne, qui s’offrit à l’accompagner.

Le Marseillais, tout en remerciant chaleureusement, déclina l’offre qui lui était faite et manifesta le désir d’être seul.

“Comme il vous plaira, Monsieur, accorda le Commissaire.

— Il n’y a donc aucun inconvénient à ce que je circule librement dans l’intérieur du bagne?

— Aucun.

— Ni à ce que je communique avec les condamnés?

— Pas davantage. Les adjudants sont prévenus et ne vous susciteront pas de difficultés. Me permettrez-vous, cependant, de vous demander dans quelle intention vous faites cette visite peu réjouissante au demeurant?

— Dans quelle intention?…

— Oui. Serait-ce pure affaire de curiosité, ou poursuivez-vous un autre but… un but philanthropique, par exemple?

— Philanthropique, précisément, repartit vivement M. Bernardon.

— A merveille! dit le Commissaire. Nous sommes accoutumés à ces visites qu'on voit d'un fort bon œil en haut lieu, le Gouvernement recherchant sans cesse les améliorations à introduire dans le régime des bagnes. Beaucoup ont été déjà réalisées."

M. Bernardon approuva du geste, sans répondre, en homme que ces considérations n'intéressaient pas autrement; mais le Commissaire, tout plein de son sujet et trouvant l'occasion propice à une déclaration de principes, ne remarqua pas ce démarche de celui-ci, et poursuivit imperturbablement:

"La juste mesure est bien difficile à garder en pareille matière. S'il ne faut pas outrer les rigueurs de la loi, il convient aussi de se tenir en garde contre les critiques sentimentaux qui oublient le crime en voyant le châtiment. Toutefois, nous ne perdons jamais de vue ici que la justice doit être modérée.

— De tels sentiments vous honorent, répondit M. Bernardon, et, si mes remarques peuvent vous intéresser, j'aurai plaisir à vous communiquer celles que la visite du bagne m'aura suggérées."

Les deux interlocuteurs se séparèrent, et le Marseillais muni d'un laissez-passer en bonne forme, se dirigea du côté du bagne. Le port militaire de Toulon se composait principalement de deux immenses polygones appuyant au quai leur côté septentrional. L'un, désigné sous le nom Darse Neuve, était situé à l'Ouest de autre nommé Darse Vieille. La périphérie de ces enceintes, véritables prolongements des fortifications de la ville, était marquée par des digues assez larges pour supporter de longs bâtiments, ateliers de machines, casernes, magasins de la Marine, ect. Chacune de ces darses qui existent encore aujourd'hui, a, dans la partie sud, une ouverture suffisante pour le passage des vaisseaux de haut bord. Elles eussent aisément fait des bassins à flot, si le constance du niveau de la Méditerranée, qui n’est pas sujette à des marées appréciables, n’avait rendu leur fermeture inutile.

A l’époque des événements qui vont être racontés, la Darse Neuve était bornée, à l’Ouest par les Magasins et le Parc d’Artillerie, et, au Sud, à droite de l’entrée qui donne dans la petite rade, par les bagnes maintenant supprimés. Ceux-ci comprenaient deux bâtiments se réunissant à angle droit. Le premier, en avant de l’atelier des machines, était exposé au Midi; le second regardait la Vieille Darse et se continuait par les casernes et l’hôpital. Indépendamment de ces constructions, il existait trois bagnes flottants, où logeaient les condamnés à terme, tandis que les condamnés à vie étaient logés sur la terre ferme.

S’il est un endroit du monde où l’égalité ne doive pas régner, c’est à coup sûr au bagne. En rapport avec la grandeur des crimes et le degré de perversité des esprits, l’échelle des pénalités devrait impliquer des distinctions de castes et de rangs. Or, il est loin d’en être ainsi. Les condamnés de tout âge et de tous genres sont honteusement mêlés. De cette déplorable promiscuité, il ne peut résulter qu’une corruption hideuse, et la contagion du mal exerce ses ravages parmi ces masses gangrenées.

Au moment où débute ce récit, le bagne de Toulon contenait près de quatre mille forçats. Les Directions du Port, des Constructions Navales, de l’Artillerie, du Magasin Général, des Constructions Hydrauliques et des Bâtiments Civils, en occupaient trois mille, auxquels étaient réservés les travaux les plus pénibles. Ceux qui ne pouvaient trouver place dans ces cinq grandes divisions étaient employés, dans le port, au lestage, au délestage et à la remorque des navires, au transport des boues, au débarquement et à l’embarquement des munitions et des vivres. D’autres étaient infirmiers, employés spéciaux, ou condamnés à la double chaîne pour cause de tentative d’évasion.

Depuis assez longtemps, lors de la visite de M. Bernardon, on n’avait enregistré aucun incident de cette nature, et pendant plusieurs mois le canon d’alarme n’avait pas retenti dans le port de Toulon.

Ce n’est pas que l’industrieux amour de la liberté se fût affaibli dans le cœur des condamnés, mais le découragement semblait avoir alourdi leurs chaînes. Quelques gardiens, convaincus d’incurie ou de trahison, ayant été renvoyés de la chiourme, une sorte de point d’honneur rendait plus sévère et plus méticuleuse la surveillance des autres. Le Commissaire du bagne se félicitait fort de ce résultat, sans se laisser endormir dans une trompeuse sécurité, car, à Toulon, les évasions étaient plus fréquentes et plus faciles qu’en tout autre port de répression.

Midi et demi sonnait à l’horloge de l’Arsenal, lorsque M. Bernardon atteignit l’extrémité de la Darse Neuve. Le quai était désert. Une demi-heure plus tôt, la cloche avait rappelé dans leurs prisons respectives les forçats au travail depuis l’aube. Chacun d’eux avait alors reçu sa ration. Les condamnés à perpétuité étaient remontés sur leur banc, et un garde les y avait aussitôt enchaînés, tandis que les condamnés à temps pouvaient librement circuler dans toute la longueur de la salle. Au coup de sifflet de l’adjudant, ils s’étaient accroupis autour des gamelles, contenant une soupe faite, toute l’année, de fèves sèches.

Les travaux seraient repris à une heure, pour n’être abandonnés qu’à huit heures du soir. On ramènerait alors les condamnés à leurs prisons, où, pendant quelques heures de sommeil, il leur serait enfin loisible d’oublier leur destin.

CHAPITRE II

M. Bernardon profita de l’absence des forçats pour examiner la disposition du port. Il est à supposer, toutefois, que le spectacle ne l’intéressait que médiocrement, car il ne tarda pas à manœuvrer de façon à se trouver à proximité d’un adjudant auquel il s’adressa sans plus de façons:

“A quelle heure, Monsieur, les prisonniers reviennent-ils au port?

— A une heure, répondit l’adjudant.

— Sont-ils tous réunis et indistinctement soumis aux mêmes travaux?

— Non pas. Il en est qu’on emploie à des industries particulières sous la conduite de contremaîtres. Dans les ateliers de serrurerie, corderie, fonderie, qui exigent des connaissances spéciales se rencontrent d’excellents ouvriers.

— Ils y gagnent leur vie?

— Certes.

— Dans quelle mesure?

— C’est selon. A l’heure, la journée peut leur rapporter de cinq à vingt centimes. La tâche peut en produire jusqu’à trente.

— Ont-ils le droit d’employer ces quelques sous à l’amélioration de leur sort?

— Oui, répondit l’adjudant. Ils peuvent acheter du tabac, car, malgré les règlements contraires, on tolère qu’ils fument. Pour quelques centimes, ils peuvent aussi recevoir des portions de ragoût ou de légumes.

— Les condamnés à vie et les condamnés à temps ont-ils le même salaire?

— Non, ces derniers ont un supplément d’un tiers qu’on leur garde jusqu’à l’expiration de leur peine. Ils en reçoivent alors le montant, afin qu’ils ne soient pas dans un complet dénuement au sortir du bagne.

— Ah!… fit simplement M. Bernardon qui parut s’absorber dans ses pensées.

— Ma foi, Monsieur, reprit l’adjudant, ils ne sont pas tellement malheureux. Si, par leurs fautes ou leurs tentatives d’évasion, ils n’augmentaient pas eux-mêmes la sévérité du régime, ils seraient moins à plaindre que beaucoup d’ouvriers des villes.

— La prolongation de peine, demanda le Marseillais dont la voix sembla un peu altérée, n’est-elle donc pas la seule punition qu’on leur inflige, en cas de tentative d’évasion?

— Non. Ils ont droit aussi à la bastonnade et à la double chaîne.

— La bastonnade?… répéta M. Bernardon.

— Qui consiste en coups sur les épaules, de quinze à soixante suivant le cas, appliqués avec une corde goudronnée.

— Et, sans doute, toute fuite devient impossible pour un condamné mis à la double chaîne?

— A peu près, répondit l’adjudant. Les forçats sont alors attachés au pied de leur banc, et ne sortent jamais. Dans ces conditions, une évasion n’est pas chose facile.

— C’est donc pendant les travaux qu’ils s’échappent le plus aisément?

— Sans doute. Les couples quoique surveillés par un garde-chiourme, ont une certaine liberté qu’exige le travail, et telle est l’habileté de ces gens-là, qu’en dépit d’une surveillance active, en moins de cinq minutes, la chaîne la plus forte est coupée. Lorsque la clavette rivée dans le boulon mobile est trop dure, ils gardent l’anneau qui leur entoure la jambe, et rompent le premier maillon de leur chaîne. Beaucoup de forçats, employés aux ateliers de serrurerie, y trouvent sans peine les outils dont ils ont besoin. Souvent la plaque en fer-blanc qui porte leur numéro leur suffit. S’ils parviennent à se procurer un ressort de montre, le canon d’alarme ne tarde pas à tonner. Enfin, ils ont mille ressources, et un condamné n’a pas vendu moins de vingt-deux de ces secrets pour se soustraire à une bastonnade.

— Mais où peuvent-ils cacher leurs instruments?

— Partout et nulle part. Un forçat s’était taillé des fentes sous les aisselles, et glissait de petits morceaux d’acier entre chair et peau. Dernièrement, j’ai confisqué à un condamné un panier en paille, dont chaque brin renfermait des limes et des scies imperceptibles! Rien n’est impossible, Monsieur, à des hommes qui veulent reconquérir leur liberté.

En ce moment, une heure sonna. L’adjudant salua M. Bernardon et se rendit à son poste.

Les forçats sortaient alors du bagne, les uns seuls, les autres accouplés deux à deux, sous la surveillance des gardes-chiourme. Bientôt le port retentit du bruit des voix, du choc des fers, des menaces des argousins.

Dans le parc d’artillerie, où le hasard le conduisit, M. Bernardon trouva affiché le code pénal de la chiourme.

“Sera puni de mort tout condamné qui frappera un agent,

“qui tuera son camarade, qui se révoltera ou provoquera une révolte. Sera puni de trois ans “de double chaîne, le condamné à vie qui aura tenté de s’évader; de trois ans de “prolongation de peine, le condamné à temps qui aura commis le même crime, et d’une “prolongation déterminée par un jugement, tout forçat qui volera une somme au-dessus de cinq francs.

“Sera puni de la bastonnade tout condamné qui aura brisé ses fers ou employé un moyen “quelconque pour s’évader, sur lequel il sera trouvé des travestissements, qui volera une “somme au-dessous de cinq francs, qui s’enivrera, qui jouera à des jeux de hasard, qui “fumera dans le port, qui vendra ou dégradera ses hardes, qui écrira sans permission, sur “lequel il sera trouvé une somme au-dessus de dix francs, qui battra son camarade, qui “refusera de travailler, ou se montrera insubordonné.”

Ayant lu, le Marseillais demeure pensif. Il fut tiré de ses réflexions par l’arrivée d’une équipe de galériens. Le port était en pleine activité; le travail se distribuait sur tous les points. Les contremaîtres faisaient entendre çà et là leurs voix rudes:

“Dix couples pour Saint-Mandrier!”

“Quinze *chaussettes* pour la corderie!”

“Vingt couples à la mâture!”

“Un renfort de six rouges au bassin!”

Les travailleurs demandés se dirigeaient aux endroits désignés, excités par les injures des adjudants, et souvent par leurs redoutables bâtons. Le Marseillais considérait attentivement les galériens qui défilaient devant lui. Les uns s’attelaient à des charrettes pesamment chargées, les autres transportaient sur leurs épaules de lourdes pièces de charpente, empilaient et déblayaient les bois de construction, ou remorquaient des bâtiments à la cordelle.

Les forçats étaient indistinctement vêtus d’une casaque rouge, d’un gilet de même couleur, et d’un pantalon de grosse toile grise. Les condamnés à vie portaient un bonnet de laine entièrement vert. A moins de capacités particulières, ils étaient employés aux plus rudes travaux. Les condamnés suspects, à raison de leurs vicieux instincts ou de leurs tentatives d’évasion, étaient coiffés d’un bonnet vert bordé d’une large bande rouge. Aux condamnés à temps était réservé le bonnet uniformément rouge, agrémenté d’une plaque de fer-blanc portant le numéro d’immatriculation de chaque forçat. Ce sont ces derniers que M. Bernardon examinait avec le plus d’attention.

Les uns, enchaînés deux à deux, avaient des fers de huit à vingt-deux livres. La chaîne, partant du pied de l’un des condamnés, remontait à sa ceinture où elle était fixée, et allait s’attacher à la ceinture, puis au pied de l’autre. Ces malheureux se nommaient plaisamment les *Chevaliers de la Guirlande*. D’autres ne portaient qu’un anneau et une demi-chaîne de neuf à dix livres, ou même un seul anneau, appelé *chaussette*, pesant de deux à quatre livres. Quelques galériens redoutables avaient le pied pris dans un *martinet*, ferrement en forme de triangle, qui, rivé à chacune de ses extrémités autour de la jambe et trempé d’une manière spéciale, résiste à tous les efforts de rupture.

M. Bernardon, interrogeant tantôt les forçats, tantôt les gardes-chiourme, parcourut les divers travaux du port. Devant lui, se déroulait un navrant tableau bien propre à émouvoir le cœur d’un philantrope. Pourtant, en vérité, il n’avait pas l’air de le voir. Sans s’arrêter à l’ensemble de la scène, ses yeux furetaient de tous côtés, dénombrant les forçats l’un après l’autre, comme si, dans cette foule lamentable, il eût cherché quelqu’un qui ne l’attendait pas. Mais la recherche se prolongeait en vain, et, par instants, l’inquiet visiteur ne pouvait se défendre de gestes de découragement.

Le hasard de la promenade finit par le conduire du côté de la mâture. Soudain, il s’arrêta sur place, et ses yeux se fixèrent sur l’un des hommes attelés au cabestan. De l’endroit où il se trouvait il pouvait voir le numéro de ce galérien, le numéro 2224, gravé sur une plaque de fer-blanc fixée au bonnet rouge des condamnés à temps.

CHAPITRE III

Le numéro 2224 était un homme de trente-cinq ans, solidement bâti. Sa figure était franche et exprimait à la fois l'intelligence et la résignation. Non pas la résignation de la brute dont un travail dégradant a annihilé le cerveau, mais l'acceptation réfléchie d'un malheur inévitable, nullement incompatible avec la survivance de l'énergie intérieure, ainsi qu'en témoignait la fermeté de son regard.

Il était accouplé à un vieux condamné, qui, plus endurci, et plus bestial, contrastait fortement avec lui, et dont le front déprimé ne devait abriter que d'abjectes pensées.

Les couples hissaient alors les bas-mâts d'un vaisseau nouvellement lancé, et, pour mesurer leur effort, ils chantaient la chanson de la *Veuve*. *La Veuve*, c'est la guillotine, veuve de tous ceux qu'elle tue.

Oh! Oh! Oh! Jean-Pierre, oh!

Fais toilette!

V'là! V'là! l'barbier! oh!

Oh! Oh! Oh! Jean-Pierre, oh!

V'là la charrette!

Ah! ah! ah!

Fauchez Colas!

M. Bernardon attendit patiemment que les travaux fussent interrompus. Le couple qui l'intéressait profita du répit pour se reposer. Le plus vieux des deux forçats s'étendit de tout son long sur le sol, le plus jeune, s'appuyant sur les pattes d'une ancre, resta debout.

Le Marseillais s'approcha de lui.

“Mon ami, dit-il, je voudrais vous parler.”

Pour s'avancer vers son interlocuteur, le numéro 2224 dut tendre sa chaîne, dont le mouvement tira le vieux forçat de sa somnolence.

“Hé donc! fit-il, vas-tu te tenir tranquille?…Que tu vas nous faire *serrer* par les *renards*!

— Tais-toi, Romain. Je veux parler à ce monsieur.

— Eh non, que je te dis!

— File un peu de ta chaîne par le bout.

— Non! j'embraque ma moitié.

— Romain!… Romain!… fit le numéro 2224 qui commençait à se fâcher.

— Eh bien! jouons-là, dit Romain, en sortant de sa poche un jeu de cartes crasseuses.

— Ça va”, répliqua le plus jeune condamné.

La chaîne des deux forçats comportait dix-huit maillons de six pouces. Chacun en possédait neuf, et par conséquent disposait d’un rayon correspondant de liberté.

M. Bernardon s’avança vers Romain.

“Je vous achète votre part de chaîne, dit-il.

— Y a-t-il gras?”

Le négociant prit cinq francs dans sa bourse.

“*Une thune*!… s’écria le vieux forçat. C’est dit!”

Il se saisit de l’argent, qui disparut on ne sait où, puis, développant ses maillons qu’il avait enroulés devant lui, il reprit sa place et se coucha le dos au soleil.

“Que me voulez-vous?” demanda le numéro 2224 au Marseillais.

Celui-ci, le regardant fixement, prononça:

“Vous vous nommez Jean Morénas. Vous êtes condamné à vingt ans de galère pour meurtre et vol qualifié. Actuellement, vous avez fait la moitié de votre peine.

— C’est vrai, dit Jean Morénas.

— Vous êtes le fils de Jeanne Morénas, du village de Sainte-Marie-des-Maures.

— Ma pauvre bonne femme, de mère! dit le condamné tristement. Ne m’en parlez plus! Elle est morte!

— Depuis neuf ans, dit M. Bernardon.

— C’est encore vrai. Qui donc êtes-vous, Monsieur, pour connaître si bien mes affaires?

— Que vous importe? répliqua M. Bernardon. L’essentiel est ce que je veux faire pour vous. Écoutez, et veillons à ne pas causer trop longtemps ensemble. D’ici deux jours, préparez-vous à fuir. Achetez le silence de votre compagnon. Promettez, je tiendrai vos promesses. Quand vous serez prêt, vous recevrez les instructions nécessaires. A bientôt!”

Le Marseillais continua tranquillement son inspection, laissant le condamné stupéfait de ce qu’il venait d’entendre. Il fit quelques tours dans l’arsenal, visita divers ateliers, et rejoignit bientôt son équipage, dont les chevaux l’emportèrent au grand trot.

CHAPITRE IV

Quinze ans avant le jour où M. Bernardon devait avoir avec le forçat 2224 ce bref dialogue dans le bagne de Toulon, la famille Morénas, composée d'une veuve et de ses deux fils, Pierre, alors âgé de vingt-cinq ans, et Jean, de cinq ans plus jeune, vivait heureuse au village de Sainte-Marie-des-Maures.

Les jeunes gens exerçaient l'un et l'autre le métier de menuisier, et, tant sur place que dans les villages environnants, le travail ne leur manquait pas. Tous deux également habiles, ils étaient également recherchés.

Inégale, par contre, était la place qu'ils occupaient dans l'estime publique, et il faut reconnaître que cette différence de traitement était justifiée. Tandis que le cadet, assidu à l'ouvrage et adorant passionnément sa mère, eût pu servir de modèle à tous les fils, l'aîné ne laissait pas de se permettre quelques incartades de temps à autre. Violent, la tête près du bonnet, il était souvent, après boire, le héros de querelles, voire de rixes, et sa langue lui faisait encore plus de tort que ses actes. Il se répandait couramment, en effet, en propos inconsidérés. Il maudissait son existence bornée dans ce petit coin de montagnes et proclamait son désir d'aller sous d'autres cieux conquérir une fortune vite acquise. Or, il n'en faut pas plus pour inspirer de la méfiance aux âmes traditionnelles des paysans. Toutefois, les griefs qu'on pouvait élever à son rencontre n'étaient pas bien graves. C'est pourquoi, tout en accordant à son frère une plus entière sympathie, on se contentait d'ordinaire de le considérer comme un cerveau brûlé, aussi capable du bien que du mal, selon les hasards que lui offrirait l'existence.

La famille Morénas était donc heureuse, en dépit de ces légers nuages. Son bonheur, elle le devait à sa parfaite union. Fils, les deux jeunes gens ne méritaient, en somme, aucune critique sérieuse. Frères, ils s’aimaient de tout leur cœur, et qui eût attaqué l’un, aurait eu deux adversaires à combattre.

Le premier malheur qui frappa la famille Morénas fut la disparition du fils aîné. Le jour même où il atteignait vingt-cinq ans, il partit comme de coutume à son travail, qui l’appelait, ce jour-là, dans un village voisin. Le soir, sa mère et son frère attendirent vainement son retour: Pierre Morénas ne revint pas.

Que lui était-il arrivé? Avait-il succombé dans une de ses habituelles batteries? Avait-il été victime d’un accident ou d’un crime? S’agissait-il simplement d’une fugue? Aucune réponse ne devait jamais être faite à ces questions.

Le désespoir de la mère fut poignant. Puis le temps fit son œuvre, et peu à peu l’existence reprit son paisible cours. Graduellement, soutenue par l’amour de son second fils, Mme Morénas connut cette mélancolie résignée qui est la seule joie permise aux cœurs meurtris par le malheur.

Cinq années s’écoulèrent ainsi, cinq années pendant lesquelles le dévouement filial de Jean Morénas ne se démentit pas un instant. Ce fut à l’expiration de la dernière de ces cinq années, au moment où celui-ci atteignit à son tour vingt-cinq ans, qu’un deuxième et plus terrible malheur fondit sur cette famille déjà si cruellement éprouvée.

A quelque distance de la maisonnette qu’elle habitait, le propre frère de la veuve, Alexandre Tisserand, tenait l’unique auberge du village. Avec l’oncle Sandre, ainsi que Jean avait coutume de l’appeler, vivait sa filleule, Marie. Bien longtemps auparavant, il l’avait recueillie, à la mort des parents de la fillette. Entrée dans l’auberge, elle n’en était plus sortie. Aidant son bienfaiteur et parrain dans l’exploitation de la modeste hôtellerie, elle y avait vécu, franchissant successivement les étapes de l’enfance et de l’adolescence. Au moment où Jean Morénas atteignait vingt-cinq ans, elle en avait dix-huit, et la fillette de jadis était devenue une jeune fille aussi douce et tendre que jolie.

Elle et Jean avaient grandi côte à côte. Ils s’étaient divertis ensemble aux jeux de l’enfance, et la vieille auberge avait maintes fois retenti de leurs ébats. Puis, par degrés, les distractions avaient changé de nature, en même temps que se modifiait lentement, tout au moins dans le cœur de Jean, l’enfantine amitié d’autrefois.

Un jour vint où Jean aima comme une fiancée celle qu’il avait jusqu’alors traitée en sœur chérie. Il l’aima selon son honnête nature, ainsi qu’il aimait sa mère, avec la même abnégation, avec le même élan, dans un pareil don de tout son être.

Il garda pourtant le silence, et ne dit rien de ses projets à celle dont il souhaitait faire sa femme. C’est, il ne le comprenait que trop, que la tendresse de la jeune fille n’avait pas évolué comme la sienne. Alors que son amitié fraternelle s’était graduellement transformée en amour, le cœur de Marie était resté le même. Avec la même tranquillité, ses yeux regardaient le compagnon de son enfance, sans que nul trouble nouveau en obscurcît le pur azur.

Conscient de ce désaccord, Jean gardait donc le silence et cachait son espérance secrète, au grand chagrin de l’oncle Sandre, qui, professant pour son neveu la plus entière estime, eût été heureux de lui confier à la fois sa filleule et les quelques sous amassés en quarante ans d’un travail opiniâtre. L’oncle ne désespérait pas, cependant. Tout pouvait s’arranger, Marie était encore bien jeune. L’âge aidant, elle reconnaîtrait les mérites de Jean

Morénas, et celui-ci, enhardi, formulerait alors sa demande qui serait favorablement accueillie.

Les choses en étaient là, quand un drame imprévu bouleversa Sainte-Marie-des-Maures. Un matin, l'oncle Sandre fut trouvé mort, étranglé, devant son comptoir, dont le tiroir avait été vidé jusqu'à la dernière piécette. Quel était l'auteur de ce meurtre? La justice l'eût peut-être longtemps cherché en vain, si le mort lui-même n'avait pris soin de le désigner. Dans la main crispée du cadavre, on trouva, en effet, un papier froissé, sur lequel, avant d'expirer, Alexandre Tisserand avait tracé ces mots: "C'est mon neveu qui…" Il n'avait pas eu la force d'en écrire davantage, et la mort avait arrêté sa main au milieu de la phrase accusatrice.

Cela, d'ailleurs, suffisait amplement. Alexandre Tisserand ne possédant qu'un unique neveu, aucune hésitation n'était possible.

Le crime fut reconstitué sans peine. La veille au soir, il n'y avait personne dans l'auberge. L'assassin était donc venu du dehors, et il devait être bien connu de la victime, puisque celle-ci, très méfiante de son naturel, avait ouvert sans difficulté. Il était également certain que le crime avait été commis de bonne heure, Alexandre Tisserand étant encore habillé. A en juger par des comptes inachevés restés sur le comptoir, il était en train de vérifier sa recette au moment où son visiteur était survenu. En allant ouvrir, il avait emporté machinalement le crayon dont il se servait, et dont il devait ensuite faire usage pour désigner son meurtrier.

Ce dernier avait, à peine entré, saisi la victime par le cou, et l'avait terrassée. Le drame avait dû se dérouler en quelques minutes. Il ne subsistait, en effet, aucune trace de lutte, et Marie, dans sa chambre, assez distante il est vrai, n'avait entendu aucun bruit.

Estimant l’aubergiste mort, l’assassin avait vidé le tiroir, consciencieusement fouillé la chambre à coucher, ainsi qu’en témoignaient le lit retourné et les armoires bouleversées. Enfin, son butin recueilli, il s’était empressé de fuir, sans laisser aucune trace de nature à le compromettre.

Il le supposait du moins, mais le misérable avait compté sans la justice immanente. Celui qu’il croyait mort vivait encore et avait retrouvé quelques minutes de conscience. Il avait eu la force de tracer ces quatre mots qui allaient orienter les recherches, et qu’un ultime spasme de l’agonie avait tragiquement interrompus.

Dans le village, ce fut une stupeur. Jean Morénas, ce bon ouvrier, ce bon fils, un assassin! Il fallait bien, cependant, se rendre à l’évidence, et l’accusation du mort était trop formelle pour permettre le doute. Tel fut du moins l’avis de la justice. Malgré ses protestations, Jean Morénas fut arrêté, jugé et condamné à vingt ans de galère.

Ce drame monstrueux fut le coup de grâce pour sa mère. A partir de ce jour, elle déclina rapidement. Moins d’un an plus tard, elle suivait dans la tombe son frère assassiné.

Le sort impitoyable la faisait mourir trop tôt. Elle disparaissait à l’instant où, après tant d’épreuves, une joie allait enfin lui advenir. La terre était à peine retombée sur son cercueil, que son fils aîné, Pierre, reparaissait dans le pays.

D’où venait-il? Qu’avait-il fait pendant les six années qu’avait duré son absence? Quelles contrées avait-il parcourues? Dans quelle situation rentrait-il au village? Il ne s’expliqua pas là-dessus, et, quelle que fût la curiosité publique, un jour arriva où, de guerre lasse, on cessa de se poser ces questions.

Au reste, s’il n’avait pas fait fortune, au sens complet du mot, il semblait du moins qu’il ne fût pas revenu dépourvu. Il n’exerçait, en effet, que d’une manière intermittente son ancien métier de menuisier, et, deux années durant, il vécut presque en rentier à Sainte-Marie-des-Maures, ne s’absentant que rarement pour aller à Marseille, où, disait-il, l’appelaient ses affaires.

Pendant ces deux années, le plus clair de son temps, il le passa, non pas dans la maison qu’il avait héritée de sa mère, mais à l’auberge de l’oncle Sandre, devenue propriété de Marie, et que celle-ci, depuis la mort tragique de son parrain, gérait avec l’aide d’un valet.

Ainsi qu’il était aisé de le prévoir, une idylle se noua peu à peu entre les deux jeunes gens. Ce que n’avait pu faire la calme énergie de Jean, la faconde et le caractère un peu brutal de Pierre le firent. A l’amour grandissant de celui-ci, Marie répondit par un semblable amour. Deux ans après la mort de la veuve Morénas, trois ans après le meurtre de l’oncle Sandre et la condamnation de l’assassin, le mariage des deux jeunes gens fut célébré.

Sept années s’écoulèrent, pendant lesquelles trois enfants leur naquirent, le dernier six mois à peine avant le jour où commence ce récit. Heureuse épouse, heureuse mère, Marie avait alors vécu sept années de bonheur.

Elle eût été moins heureuse, si elle avait pu lire dans le cœur de son mari, si elle avait su l’existence vagabonde que, pendant six années, allant du charpardage à la rapine, de la rapine à l’escroquerie, de l’escroquerie au vol pur et simple, avait menée celui à qui sa vie était liée, si elle avait connu surtout quelle part il avait prise à la mort de son parrain.

Alexandre Tisserand avait dit la vérité en dénonçant son neveu, mais combien il était déplorable que les affres de l’agonie, troublant son cerveau et sa main, l’eussent empêché de mieux préciser! C’était bien son neveu, en effet, qui était l’auteur du crime abominable, mais, ce neveu, ce n’était pas Jean, c’était Pierre Morénas.

A bout de ressources, réduit au dernier degré de la misère, Pierre était alors revenu pendant la nuit à Sainte-Marie-des-Maures, dans l’intention bien arrêtée de faire main basse sur le pécule de son oncle. La résistance de la victime avait fait du voleur un assassin.

L’aubergiste terrassé, il avait procédé à un pillage en règle puis il s’était enfui dans la nuit. De la mort de son oncle, qu’il supposait seulement évanoui, de l’arrestation et de la condamnation de son frère, il n’avait rien su. C’est donc en toute tranquillité qu’un an après son crime et voyant diminuer son butin, il revint au pays, ne doutant pas qu’après tant de temps écoulé, il n’obtînt aisément son pardon. C’est à ce moment qu’il connut la mort de son oncle et de sa mère et la condamnation de son frère.

Il en fut tout d’abord accablé. La situation de son cadet, à qui, pendant vingt ans, l’avait uni une si réelle et si profonde affection, devint pour lui une source de cruels remords. Que pouvait-il, cependant, pour y remédier, sinon révéler la vérité, se dénoncer et prendre au bagne la place de l’innocent injustement condamné?

Sous l’influence du temps, regrets et remords s’atténuèrent. L’amour fit le reste.

Mais le remords revint quand la vie conjugale eut pris son paisible cours. De jour en jour, le souvenir du forçat innocent s’imposa davantage à l’esprit du coupable impuni. Les années d’enfance s’évoquèrent avec une force sans cesse plus grande, et le jour vint où Pierre Morénas commença à rêver au moyen de délivrer son frère du boulet auquel lui-même l’avait rivé. Après tout, il n’était plus le gueux dépourvu de tout, qui avait quitté Sainte-Marie-des-Maures pour chercher dans le vaste monde une introuvable fortune. Maintenant le gueux était propriétaire, le premier de son village, et l’argent ne lui manquait pas. Cet argent ne pouvait-il servir à le libérer de son remords?

CHAPITRE V

Jean Morénas suivit des yeux M. Bernardon. Il avait peine à comprendre ce qui lui arrivait. Comment cet homme connaissait-il si bien les diverses circonstances de sa vie?

C’était là un problème insoluble. Toutefois, qu’il comprit ou non, il fallait dans tous les cas accepter l’offre qui lui était faite. Il résolut donc de se préparer à fuir.

Avant tout, il était dans la nécessité d’instruire son compagnon du coup qu’il méditait. Aucun moyen n’existait de s’en dispenser, le lien qui les enchaînait ne pouvant être rompu par l’un sans que l’autre s’en aperçût. Peut-être Romain voudrait-il profiter de l’occasion, ce qui diminuerait les chances de réussite.

Le vieux forçat n’ayant plus que dix-huit mois de fers, Jean s’efforça de lui démontrer que, pour si peu, il ne devait pas risquer une augmentation de peine. Mais Romain, qui voyait de l’argent au bout de tout cela, ne voulait pas entendre raison, et refusait obstinément de se prêter aux combinaisons de son camarade. Cependant, lorsque celui-ci parla d’un millier de francs payables sur-le-champ et d’une somme égale qui pourrait bien attendre le vieux à la sortie du bagne, Romain commença à ne plus faire la sourde oreille et à donner dans les idées de son compagnon de chaîne.

Ce point réglé, il restait à décider du mode d’évasion. L’essentiel était de sortir du port sans être aperçu, et par conséquent d’échapper aux regards exercés des factionnaires et des gardes-chiourme. Une fois dans la campagne, avant que les brigades de gendarmerie fussent prévenues, il serait facile d’en imposer aux paysans, et, quant à ceux que l’espoir de la prime rendrait plus clairvoyants, ils ne résisteraient certainement pas à l’appât d’une somme supérieure.

Jean Morénas résolut de s’évader pendant la nuit. Bien qu’il fût condamné à terme, il n’était pas logé dans un des vieux navires transformés en bagnes flottants. Par exception, il habitait une des prisons situées à terre. En sortir eût été difficile. L’important était donc de n’y pas entrer le soir. La rade étant à peu près déserte à cette heure, il ne lui serait sans doute pas impossible de la traverser à la nage. Il ne pouvait, en effet, songer à quitter l’arsenal autrement que par mer. La terre une fois gagnée, il appartiendrait à son protecteur de lui venir en aide.

Ainsi ramené par ses réflexions à compter sur l’inconnu, il résolut d’attendre les conseils de celui-ci, et de savoir tout d’abord si les promesses faites à Romain seraient ratifiées. Le temps s’écoula lentement au gré de son impatience.

Ce fut seulement le surlendemain qu’il vit réapparaître son mystérieux ami.

“Eh bien?… demanda M. Bernardon.

— Tout est convenu, Monsieur, et, puisque vous désirez m’être utile, je peux vous assurer que tout ira bien.

— Que vous faut-il?

— J’ai promis deux mille francs à mon compagnon, soit mille francs à sa sortie du bagne…

— Il les aura. Après?

— Et mille francs tout de suite.

— Les voici, dit M. Bernardon, en remettant la somme demandée que le vieux forçat fit instantanément disparaître.

— Voilà, reprit le Marseillais, de l’or et une lime des mieux trempées. Cela vous suffira-t-il pour venir à bout de vos fers?

— Oui, Monsieur. Où vous reverrai-je?

— Au cap Brun. Vous me trouverez sur le rivage, au fond de l’anse appelée Port Mejean. Vous la connaissez?

— Oui. Comptez sur moi.

— Quand partirez-vous?

— Ce soir, à la nage.

— Vous êtes bon nageur?

— De première force.

— Tout est pour le mieux. A ce soir donc.

— A ce soir!”

M. Bernardon se sépara des deux forçats qui retournèrent au travail. Sans plus s’occuper d’eux, le Marseillais continua longtemps sa promenade, interrogeant les uns et les autres, et sortit enfin de l’Arsenal sans s’être fait aucunement remarquer.

CHAPITRE VI

Jean Morénas s’étudia à paraître le plus tranquille des prisonniers. Malgré ses efforts, cependant, un observateur attentif aurait été frappé de son agitation inaccoutumée. L’amour de la liberté lui faisait battre le cœur, et toute sa volonté était impuissante à dominer sa fiévreuse impatience. Combien elle était loin, cette résignation de surface, dont, pendant dix ans, il s’était cuirassé contre le désespoir!

Pour cacher quelques instants son absence à la rentrée du soir, il imagina de se faire remplacer par un camarade près de son compagnon de chaîne. Un forçat *chaussette* – ainsi nommé du léger anneau que les galériens de cette catégorie portent à la jambe – n’ayant plus que quelques jours à rester au bagne, et, comme tel, découplé, entra pour trois pièces d’or dans les idées de Jean et consentit à rattacher à son pied pendant quelques minutes la chaîne de celui-ci, lorsqu’elle serait rompue.

Un peu après sept heures du soir, Jean profita d’un repos pour scier son ferrement. Grâce à la perfection de sa lime, et quoique la manille fût d’une trempe particulière, il s’acquitta promptement de ce travail. Au moment de la rentrée dans les salles, le forçat *chaussette* ayant pris sa place, il se blottit derrière une pile de bois.

Non loin de lui se trouvait une immense chaudière destinée à un navire en construction. Ce vaste réservoir était placé sur sa base, et l’ouverture des fourneaux offrait au fugitif un asile impénétrable. Profitant d’un instant favorable, celui-ci s’y glissa sans bruit, en emportant un bout de madrier qu’il creusa hâtivement en forme de bonnet et qu’il perça de trous. Puis, il attendit, l’œil et l’oreille au guet, les nerfs tendus.

La nuit tomba. Le ciel chargé de nuages augmentait l’obscurité et favorisait Jean Morénas. De l’autre côté de la rade, la presqu’île de Saint-Madrier disparaissait dans les ténèbres.

Lorsque l’Arsenal fut désert, Jean sortit de sa cachette, et, rampant prudemment, se dirigea du côté des bassins de carénage. Quelques adjudants erraient encore çà et là. Jean faisait halte parfois et s’aplatissait sur le sol. Heureusement, il avait pu rompre ses fers, ce qui lui permettait de se mouvoir sans bruit.

Il parvint enfin au bord de l’eau, sur un quai de la Darse Neuve, non loin de l’ouverture donnant accès dans la rade. Son espèce de bonnet de bois à la main, il s’affala le long d’une corde et s’enfonça sous les flots.

Quand il revint à la surface, il se couvrit prestement la tête de cette coiffure bizarre et disparut ainsi à tous les regards. Les trous pratiqués d’avance lui permettaient de se diriger. On l’eût pris pour une bouée en dérive.

Soudain, un coup de canon retentit.

“C’est la fermeture du port”, pensa Jean Morénas.

Un deuxième coup, puis un troisième éclatèrent.

Il n’y avait pas à s’y tromper, c’était le canon d’alarme. Jean comprit que sa fuite était découverte.

Évitant avec soin l’approche des navires et les chaînes des ancres, il s’avança dans la petite rade, du côté de la poudrière de Millau. La mer était un peu dure, mais le vigoureux nageur se sentait de force à la vaincre. Ses habits, gênant sa marche, furent abandonnés à la dérive, et il ne conserve que la bourse d’or attachée sur sa poitrine.

Il arriva sans encombre jusqu’au milieu de la petite rade. Là, s’appuyant sur une de ces bouées de fer appelées *corps morts*, il ôta avec précaution le bonnet qui le protégeait et reprit haleine.

“Ouf! se dit-il, cette promenade n’est qu’une partie de plaisir auprès de ce qui me reste à faire. En pleine mer, je n’aurai pas de rencontres à craindre, mais il faut passer le goulet, et, là, bon nombre d’embarcations vont de la Grosse Tour au Fort de l’Aiguillette. Ce sera bien le diable si je leur échappe… En attendant, orientons-nous, et n’allons pas nous jeter bêtement dans la gueule du loup.”

Jean, par la poudrière de Lagoubran et le fort Saint-Louis, releva sa position exacte, puis il se remit à l’eau.

La tête abritée sous son appareil, il nageait avec prudence. Le bruit du vent qui fraîchissait pouvant l’empêcher d’entendre d’autres bruits plus dangereux, il se tenait sur ses gardes, et, quelque important qu’il fût pour lui d’être sorti de la petite rade, il n’avançait que lentement, afin de ne pas doter la fausse bouée qui le cachait d’une invraisemblable vitesse.

Une demi-heure s’écoula. A son estime, il devait être près de la passe, lorsque, sur la gauche, il crut entendre un bruit de rames. Il s’arrêta, prêtant l’oreille.

“Oh! cria-t-on d’un canot, quelles nouvelles?

— Rien de neuf, répondit-on d’une autre embarcation, sur la droite du fugitif.

— Jamais nous ne pourrons le retrouver!

— Mais est-il sûr qu’il se soit évadé par mer?

— Sans doute! On a repêché ses habits.

— Il fait assez noir pour qu’il nous mène jusqu’aux Grandes Indes!

— Hardi! nageons ferme!”

Les embarcations se séparèrent. Dès qu’elles se furent suffisamment éloignées, Jean hasarda quelques brasses vigoureuses et fila rapidement vers le goulet.

A mesure qu’il en approchait, les cris se multipliaient autour de lui, les embarcations qui sillonnaient la rade concentrant nécessairement en ce point leur surveillance. Sans se laisser intimider par le nombre de ses ennemis, Jean continuait à nager.

Quelques adjudants erraient encore çà et là…de toutes ses forces. Il avait décidé en lui-même qu’il se noierait plutôt que d’être repris, et que les chasseurs ne l’auraient pas vivant.

Bientôt la Grosse Tour et le Fort de l’Aiguillette se dessinèrent à ses yeux.

Des torches couraient sur ta digue et sur le rivage; les brigades de gendarmerie étaient déjà sur pied. Le fugitif ralentit sa marche et se laissa pousser par les vagues et le vent d’ouest, qui le drossaient vers la mer.

La lueur d’une torche éclaira tout à coup les flots, et Jean aperçut quatre embarcations qui le cernaient. Il ne bougea plus, le moindre mouvement pouvant le perdre.

“Oh… du canot! héla-t-on de l’une des embarcations.

— Rien!

— En route!”

Jean respira. Les embarcations allaient s’éloigner. Il était temps. Elles n’étaient pas à dix brasses de lui, et leur proximité l’obligeait, à nager perpendiculairement.

“Tiens! qu’y a-t-il là bas? cria un matelot.

— Quoi? répondit-on.

— Ce point noir qui nage.

— Ce n’est rien. Une bouée en dérive.

— Eh bien! rattrapez-la!”

Jean se tint prêt à plonger. Mais le sifflet d’un quartier-maître se fit entendre.

“Nagez, les enfants! Nous avons autre chose à faire qu’à repêcher un bout de madrier… Avant partout…”

Les avirons frappèrent l’eau à grand bruit. Le malheureux reprit courage. Sa ruse n’était pas découverte. Les forces lui revinrent avec l’espoir, et il se remit en route vers le Fort de l’Aiguillette dont la masse sombre se dressait devant lui.

Soudain il se trouva dans des ténèbres profondes. Un corps opaque interceptait à ses yeux la vue du Fort. C’était une des embarcations, qui, lancée à toute vitesse, se heurta contre lui. Au choc, un des matelots se pencha par dessus le bord.

“C’est une bouée”, dit-il à son tour.

Le canot reprit sa marche. Par malheur, un des avirons, frappant la fausse bouée, la renversa. Avant que l’évadé pût songer à disparaître, sa tête rasée s’était montrée au-dessus de l’eau.

“Nous le tenons! s’écrièrent les marins. Hardi-là!…”

Jean plongea, et, pendant que les sifflets appelaient de toutes parts les embarcations dispersées, il nagea entre deux eaux du côté de la plage du Lazaret. Il s’éloignait ainsi du lieu de rendez-vous, car cette plage est située à droite en entrant dans la grande rade, tandis que le cap Brun s’avançait sur sa gauche. Mais il espérait donner le change à ses ennemis, en se dirigeant du côté le moins propice à son évasion.

L’endroit désigné par le Marseillais devait être atteint cependant. Après quelques brasses faites à l’opposé, Jean Morénas revint sur ses pas. Les embarcations se croisaient autour de lui. A chaque instant, il lui fallait plonger pour ne pas être vu. Enfin, ses habiles manœuvres trompèrent les poursuivants, et il réussit à s’éloigner en bonne direction.

N’était-il pas trop tard? Lassé par cette longue lutte contre les hommes et les éléments, Jean se sentait défaillir. Il perdait ses forces. Plusieurs fois ses yeux se fermèrent, et son cerveau s’emplit de tournoiements vertigineux; plusieurs fois ses mains se détendirent, et ses pieds alourdis s’enfoncèrent vers l’abîme…

Par quel miracle atteignit-il la terre? Il n’eût pu le dire lui-même. Il l’atteignit pourtant. Soudain, il sentit le sol ferme. Il se redressa, fit quelques pas incertains, tourna sur lui-même et retomba évanoui, mais hors de l’atteinte des vagues.

Lorsqu’il reprit ses sens, un homme était penché sur lui et appliquait contre ses lèvres serrées le goulot d’une gourde, d’où coulaient quelques gouttes d’eau-de-vie.

CHAPITRE VII

Le pays situé à l’est de Toulon, hérissé de bois et de montagnes, sillonné de ravins et de cours d’eau, offrait au fugitif de nombreuses chances de salut. Maintenant qu’il avait pris terre, il pouvait espérer reconquérir pleinement sa liberté. Rassuré de ce côté, Jean Morénas sentit renaître la curiosité que lui inspirait son généreux protecteur. Il ne devinait pas son but. Le Marseillais avait-il besoin d’un gaillard entreprenant, décidé à tout, ayant le cœur au bout des bras, qu’il était allé le choisir au bagne? Dans ce cas, il aurait fait un mauvais calcul, Jean Morénas étant fermement décidé à repousser toute proposition suspecte.

“Vous sentez-vous mieux? interrogea M. Bernardon, après avoir laissé au fugitif le temps de se remettre. Avez-vous la force de marcher?

— Oui, répondit Jean en se relevant.

— Dans ce cas, habillez-vous de ce costume de paysan que j’ai apporté à votre intention. Puis, en route! Nous n’avons pas une minute à perdre.”

Il était onze heures du soir, lorsque les deux hommes s’aventurèrent dans la campagne, évitant les sentiers battus, se jetant dans les fossés et les taillis dès qu’un bruit de pas ou celui d’une charrette résonnait au milieu du silence. Quoique le déguisement du fugitif rendit celui-ci méconnaissable, ils redoutaient une inspection trop attentive, le costume provençal qu’il avait revêtu pouvant avoir quelque chose d’emprunté.

Outre les brigades de gendarmerie, qui sont sur pied dès le premier coup du canon d’alarme, Jean Morénas avait à redouter n’importe quel passant. Le souci de leur sécurité et aussi l’appât de la prime allouée par le gouvernement pour la capture d’un forçat évadé accroissent l’acuité des regards des paysans, la rapidité de leurs jambes, la vigueur de leurs bras. Or, tout fugitif risque fort d’être reconnu, soit qu’habitué au poids des fers, il traîne un peu la jambe, soit qu’un trouble délateur lui monte au visage.

Après trois heures de marche, les deux hommes s’arrêtèrent sur un signe de M. Bernardon. Celui-ci tira d’un bissac qu’il portait sur l’épaule quelques victuailles qui furent avidement dévorées à l’abri d’une haie touffue.

“Dormez maintenant, dit le Marseillais, quand ce court repas fut terminé. Vous avez à faire une longue route, et il faut ménager vos forces.”

Jean ne se fit pas répéter l’invitation, et, s’étendant sur le sol, il tomba, comme une masse, dans un sommeil de plomb.

Le jour était levé quand M. Bernardon le réveilla. Tous deux se remirent en marche aussitôt. Il ne s’agissait plus maintenant de filer à travers champs. Ne pas se cacher, en se montrant toutefois le moins possible, ne pas éviter les regards tout en ne se laissant pas examiner de près, suivre ostensiblement les grandes routes, telle devait être désormais la ligne de conduite à adopter.

M. Bernardon et Jean Morénas marchaient depuis longtemps déjà, lorsque ce dernier crut entendre le pas de plusieurs chevaux.

Il monta sur un talus pour dominer la route, mais la courbe de celle-ci l’empêcha de rien voir. Cependant, il ne pouvait s’être trompé. Se couchant, l’oreille près de terre, il s’efforça de reconnaître le bruit qui l’avait frappé.

Avant qu’il se fût relevé, M. Bernardon s’était précipité sur lui. En un tour de main, Jean se vit bâillonné et étroitement ligoté.

Au même instant, deux gendarmes à cheval débouchaient sur la route. Ils arrivèrent à la hauteur de M. Bernardon qui maintenait solidement son prisonnier ahuri. L’un d’eux interpella le Marseillais:

“Eh là, l’homme! Que signifie ceci?

— C’est un forçat évadé, gendarme, un forçat évadé que je viens de prendre, répondit M. Bernardon.

— Oh! oh!… fit le gendarme. Celui de cette nuit?

— Ça se peut bien. En tout cas, lui ou un autre, je le tiens.

— Une bonne prime pour vous, camarade!

— Ça n’est pas de refus, sans compter que ses habits n’appartiennent pas à la chiourme. On me les donnera par-dessus le marché.

— Avez-vous besoin de nous? demanda l’un des gendarmes.

— Ma foi non! Il est solidement amarré, et je le mènerai bien tout seul!

— C’est au mieux, répondit le gendarme. Au revoir, et bonne chance!”

Les gendarmes s’éloignèrent. Quand ils eurent disparu, M. Bernardon s’arrêta dans un taillis en bordure de la route. En un instant, les liens de Jean Morénas tombèrent.

“Vous êtes libre, lui dit son compagnon en lui montrant la direction de l’Ouest. Suivez la route de ce côté. Avec du courage, vous pouvez être cette nuit à Marseille. Cherchez dans le vieux port la *Marie-Magdeleine*, un trois-mâts barque chargé pour Valparaiso du Chili. Le capitaine est prévenu. Il vous prendra à son bord. Vous vous nommez Jacques Reynaud. Voici des papiers à ce nom. Vous avez de l’or. Tâchez de vous refaire une vie. Adieu.”

Avant que Jean Morénas ait eu le temps de répondre, M. Bernardon avait disparu sous les arbres. Le fugitif était seul sur le bord de la route.

CHAPITRE VIII

Un long moment, Jean Morénas demeura immobile, stupéfait du dénouement de son inexplicable aventure. Pourquoi, après l’avoir aidé dans sa fuite, son protecteur l’abandonnait-il? Pourquoi, surtout, cet inconnu s’était-il intéressé au sort d’un condamné que rien ne désignait spécialement à son attention? Comment s’appelait-il seulement? Jean s’aperçut qu’il n’avait même pas pensé à demander le nom de son sauveur.

Si, à cet oubli, il n’était plus de remède, cela, en somme, n’importait guère. L’essentiel était de ne plus traîner les fers qui lui avaient si longtemps meurtri les os. Le reste s’expliquerait plus tard ou jamais. Une chose sûre, en tous cas, c’est qu’il était seul au bord d’une route déserte, de l’or en poche, nanti de papiers réguliers, et aspirant à pleins poumons l’air enivrant de la liberté.

Jean Morénas se mit en marche. On lui avait dit d’aller du côté de Marseille. C’est donc vers Marseille qu’il se dirigea, sans même y penser. Mais ce fut pour s’arrêter dès les premiers pas.

Marseille, la *Marie-Magdeleine*, Valparaiso du Chili, se refaire une vie, chansons que tout cela! Était-ce pour se “refaire une vie” dans des contrées lointaines qu’il avait souhaité si fort la liberté? Non, non! pendant son long emprisonnement, il n’avait rêvé que d’un seul pays: Sainte-Marie-des-Maures, que d’un seul être au monde: Marguerite. C’était le regret du village et le souvenir de Marguerite qui avaient fait le bagne si cruel, les chaînes si pesantes. Et maintenant, il partirait sans même essayer de les revoir? Allons donc! mieux vaudrait retourner tendre l’échine au bâton des gardes-chiourme!

Non, revoir son village, s’agenouiller sur la tombe de sa mère, et surtout, surtout, revoir Marguerite, voilà ce qu’il fallait faire à tout prix. Quand il serait en présence de la jeune fille, il trouverait le courage qui lui avait manqué jadis. Il s’expliquerait, il parlerait, il démontrerait son innocence. Marguerite n’était plus une enfant. Peut-être l’aimerait-elle à présent. Dans ce cas, il la déciderait à le suivre. Quel bel avenir s’ouvrirait alors devant lui! Si, au contraire, elle ne l’aimait pas, il arriverait ce qui arriverait. Cela n’aurait plus aucune espèce d’importance.

Jean, quittant la grande route, prit le premier sentier qu’il croisa, se dirigeant vers le Nord. Mais bientôt il fit halte de nouveau, ramené à la prudence par le désir même de réussir dans son entreprise. Il connaissait trop le pays qu’il traversait, et qu’il avait si souvent parcouru dans son enfance, pour ignorer que le but qu’il voulait atteindre n’était pas fort éloigné de lui. En deux heures, il pouvait être à Sainte-Marie-des-Maures. Il importait de n’y pas pénétrer avant qu’il fît nuit noire, sous peine d’être arrêté au premier pas.

Jean s’attarda donc dans la campagne, et ne se mit sérieusement en route qu’au crépuscule, après un long sommeil et un repas réconfortant dans une guinguette.

Neuf heures sonnaient, et l’obscurité était profonde quand il atteignit les maisons de Sainte-Marie-des-Maures. Par les ruelles désertes et silencieuses, Jean se glissa, sans être vu de personne, jusqu’à l’auberge de l’oncle Sandre.

Comment s’y introduire? Par la porte? Assurément non. Savait-il qui se trouvait dans la grande salle, et si, derrière la porte, il n’allait pas se heurter à un ennemi? D’ailleurs, l’auberge appartenait-elle toujours à Marguerite?

Pourquoi, depuis tant d’années écoulées, n’aurait-elle pas passé en d’autres mains?

Fort heureusement, il avait un meilleur et plus sûr moyen que la porte d’entrer dans la place.

Il n’est pas rare que les mas provençaux possèdent des issues secrètes permettant à leurs habitants d’entrer et de sortir incognito. Ces “trucs”, plus ou moins ingénieux selon le cas, ont sans doute été imaginés au cours des guerres de religion qui ont mis cette contrée à feu et à sang. Rien de plus naturel que les contemporains de ces époques troublées aient cherché des procédés pour échapper, le cas échéant, à leurs ennemis.

Le secret de l’auberge de l’oncle Sandre, secret resté bien certainement ignoré du propriétaire, Jean et Marguerite l’avaient découvert au hasard de leurs jeux d’enfants, et, fiers d’être seuls à le connaître, ils s’étaient gardés de le révéler à qui que ce fût. Devenus grands, ils l’avaient oublié à leur tour, si bien que Jean pouvait légitimement espérer trouver le mécanisme intact au moment où il avait besoin de l’utiliser.

Le secret consistait dans la mobilité du fond de la cheminée de la grande salle. Comme dans beaucoup de bâtiments de campagne, cette cheminée était immense, assez large et profonde – le foyer minuscule n’en occupant que le centre – pour contenir plusieurs personnes à son abri. Le fond en était fait de deux vastes plaques de fonte parallèles et séparées par un intervalle de quelques décimètres. Ces deux plaques étaient mobiles et pouvaient pivoter légèrement sous l’impulsion d’une poignée manœuvrée d’une manière convenable. Il était donc loisible à tout possesseur du secret, que rien d’ailleurs ne permettait de soupçonner, de s’introduire dans l’espace ménagé entre les deux plaques, puis, ayant refermé celle qui d’abord lui avait livré passage, d'entr'ouvrir la seconde et de passer ainsi du dedans au dehors ou réciproquement.

Jean contourna la maison, et, en promenant la main sur la surface du mur, trouva sans trop de peine la plaque extérieure. Quelques minutes de recherche lui firent reconnaître la poignée qu'il sollicita dans le sens nécessaire. Décidément, rien n'avait été changé. La poignée obéit, et la plaque, avec un grondement sourd, s'écarta sous la poussée.

Jean s'introduisit par cet hiatus, puis, l'ayant refermé, reprit haleine.

Il convenait d'agir avec une prudence croissante. Un rayon de lumière filtrait dans la cachette par le pourtour de la plaque intérieure, et un bruit de voix venait de la grande salle. On ne dormait pas encore dans l'auberge. Avant de se montrer, il était nécessaire de savoir à qui on aurait affaire.

Malheureusement, Jean eut beau appliquer son œil tout autour de la plaque, il lui fut impossible de rien apercevoir. De guerre lasse, il se décida à l'entre-bâiller à tout risque…

A ce moment précis, un vacarme s'éleva dans la grande salle. Ce fut d'abord un cri déchirant, un cri d'appel et d'agonie, immédiatement suivi d'une sorte de râle, puis il y eut des halètements, pareils à des souffles de forge, comme en pousseraient deux lutteurs aux prises, qu'accompagna le fracas d'un meuble renversé.

Jean, après un court instant d'hésitation, pesa sur la poignée. La plaque pivota, découvrant dans toute son étendue la salle commune de l'auberge.

Au moment de s'y élancer, Jean recula sous la protection de l'ombre emplissant la cheminée et de la fumée de quelques sarments restés dans l’âtre, terrifié par le spectacle qu’il avait sous les yeux.

CHAPITRE IX

A la lourde table occupant le centre de la salle, un homme était assis, qu’un autre homme, debout derrière lui, étranglait, dans un grand effort de tout son être. C’est le premier qui, se sentant saisi par le cou, avait crié d’abord, râlé ensuite. C’est de la poitrine du second que s’échappait ce rauque souffle d’athlète s’épuisant à vaincre un adversaire. Dans la lutte, une chaise était tombée.

Devant l’homme assis, un encrier, du papier à lettres, montraient qu’il était en train d’écrire quand son ennemi l’avait surpris. A portée de sa main, sur la table, une sacoche entr’ouverte laissait apercevoir les papiers dont elle était pleine.

La scène ne durait que depuis une minute à peine, et elle s’achevait déjà. Déjà l’homme assis avait cessé de se débattre, et on ne percevait plus que le halètement du meurtrier. La scène, d’ailleurs, n’aurait pu se prolonger davantage. Le cri de la victime avait été entendu. On s’agitait au dehors. Dans une chambre du premier étage de l’auberge, desservi par une galerie de bois, à laquelle on accédait par un escalier prenant naissance dans la grande salle, Jean entendit deux pieds nus tomber lourdement sur le carreau. Quelqu’un se levait là-haut. Encore un instant, une porte allait s’ouvrir, un témoin survenir.

Le meurtrier comprit le danger. Ses mains relâchèrent leur étreinte, et, tandis que la tête de la victime retombait inerte sur la table, plongèrent dans la sacoche, dont elles ressortirent crispées sur une liasse de billets de banque. Puis l’homme bondit en arrière, disparut par une petite porte ouvrant sous l’escalier et qui conduisait à la cave.

Une seconde, son visage apparut ainsi en pleine lumière. Il n’en fallut pas davantage pour que Jean Morénas, éperdu, affolé, le reconnût.

Cet homme, c’était celui qui venait de faire tomber les fers du galérien innocent, qui lui avait remis de l’or, qui l’avait protégé, guidé à travers la campagne jusqu’à quelques kilomètres de Sainte-Marie-des-Maures. C’est en vain qu’il avait supprimé la barbe postiche et la perruque avec lesquelles il avait essayé de son visage. Il restait les yeux, le front, le nez, la bouche, la stature, et Jean ne pouvait s’y tromper.

Mais la suppression de la barbe postiche et de la perruque avait une autre conséquence plus surprenante et plus troublante encore. Dans cet homme, auquel était ainsi rendu son aspect naturel, dans cet homme qui venait de se révéler à la fois comme son sauveur et comme un assassin, Jean avait la stupeur de reconnaître son frère, Pierre, jadis disparu et qu’il n’avait pas vu depuis quinze ans!

Pour quelles raisons mystérieuses son frère et son sauveur ne faisaient-ils qu’une seule et même personne? Par quel concours de circonstances Pierre Morénas se trouvait-il précisément ce jour-là dans l’auberge de l’oncle Sandre? A quel titre y était-il? Pourquoi l’avait-il choisi comme théâtre de son crime?

Ces questions se pressaient tumultueusement dans l’esprit de Jean. Les faits y répondirent d’eux-mêmes.

Le meurtrier avait à peine disparu qu’une porte s’ouvrit au premier étage.

Sur la galerie de bois, apparut une jeune femme, auprès de laquelle se pressaient deux enfants en toilette de nuit, et qui tenait dans ses bras un troisième enfant tout petit. Jean reconnut Marguerite. Marguerite avec ses enfants!… Les siens de toute évidence!… Elle avait donc renié, oublié l’innocent qui, loin d’elle, agonisait au bagne? Le malheureux comprit sur-le-champ l’inanité de son espoir.

“Pierre!… mon Pierre!… appela la jeune femme d’une voix que l’angoisse faisait tremblante.

Tout à coup elle avisa le corps écroulé sur la table. Elle murmura: “O mon Dieu!…”, et descendit précipitamment, son petit enfant dans les bras, les deux autres se bousculant à sa suite en pleurant.

Elle courut jusqu’à l’homme étranglé, lui souleva la tête et poussa un soupir de soulagement. Elle ne comprenait rien à ce qui était survenu, mais tout valait mieux que ce qu’elle avait craint. L’homme mort n’était pas son mari.

Au même instant, on frappa rudement à la porte extérieure et plusieurs voix se firent entendre au dehors, Redoutant elle ne savait quoi, Marguerite recula vers l’escalier, comme un animal se rapproche de son refuge quand menace le danger, et resta debout sur la première marche, ses deux enfants cramponnés à sa jupe, tenant toujours le troisième dans ses bras.

De sa place, elle ne pouvait apercevoir la porte de la cave. Elle ne vit donc pas cette porte s’entr’ouvrir, et Pierre Morénas insinuer par l’ouverture sa tête que verdissait une peur bestiale. Mais Jean, par contre, découvrait l’ensemble du tableau: l’homme mort, Marguerite et ses enfants battant en retraite, Pierre, son frère – un assassin! – à l’affût et sentant venir, menaçant, le châtiment suivant de près le crime. Dans son cerveau, les pensées se précipitèrent en tourbillon. Il comprit.

La présence de Pierre, son forfait d’aujourd’hui, l’incomplète accusation de l’oncle Sandre, éclairaient le passé. L’assassin d’aujourd’hui était l’assassin d’autrefois, et c’est pour son frère coupable que l’innocent avait payé. Puis, après que le temps eut apaisé le retentissement du drame, Pierre était revenu, il s’était fait aimer de Marguerite et avait une seconde fois détruit le bonheur du misérable qui se désespérait sous la rude férule des gardes-chiourme.

Ah mais!… tout cela allait finir!… Jean n’avait qu’un mot à dire pour renverser cet échafaudage d’infamies et se venger en une fois de toutes les tortures subies. Un mot?… Même pas. Il n’avait qu’à se taire, à disparaître sans bruit comme il était venu. L’assassin ne pouvait échapper. Il était pris. Bientôt, il connaîtrait le bagne, lui aussi…

Et après?…

Ce mot, Jean l’entendit, comme si un ironique contradicteur l’eût prononcé à son oreille. Oui vraiment, et après?… Qu’arriverait-il quand Pierre et Jean seraient tous deux revêtus de la livrée des galères? Cela rendrait-il au second son bonheur perdu. Hélas! Marguerite l’en aimerait-elle davantage, et n’en aurait-elle pas moins aimé cet homme qui tremblait en ce moment de la plus abjecte terreur? Car elle l’aimait, elle l’aimait de tout son être, la misérable femme. Sa voix, quand elle avait appelé Pierre, avait crié son amour. Elle l’exprimait encore maintenant par son attitude, debout, étreignant ses enfants dans ses bras, obstruant l’escalier de son corps, comme si elle eût voulu défendre l’accès du foyer contre un péril inconnu mais pressenti.

Dès lors, à quoi bon?… La vengeance lui rendrait-elle un impossible bonheur? Cela le sauverait-il du désespoir d’y plonger Marguerite à son tour. N’y avait-il pas mieux à faire: laisser à celle qu’il adorait l’illusion de sa vie heureuse et conserver pour lui la douleur, toute la douleur, dont il avait, hélas! une si longue habitude? A quoi sa triste destinée pourrait-elle être mieux employée? Il n’était plus, ne pouvait plus être jamais rien. La route était barrée devant lui et rien n’existait plus qu’il lui fût permis d’espérer. Quel meilleur emploi de son être inutile que de le donner pour le salut d’un autre, d’un autre être qui déjà possédait son cœur, dont la vie serait sa vie, dont le bonheur serait le sien?…

Cependant, on s’acharnait au dehors. La porte forcée s’ouvrit. Quatre ou cinq hommes entrèrent, coururent à la victime, dont ils soulevèrent le visage.

“*Bou Diou*! s’écria l’un d’eux. C’est M. Cliquet!

— Le notaire!” s’exclama un autre.

Ils s’empressèrent. M. Cliquet fut étendu sur la table. Sa poitrine se dilata aussitôt et un profond soupir sortit de ses lèvres.

“Dieu garde! dit un paysan, il n’est pas mort!”

On aspergea d’eau froide le visage du notaire, qui ne tarda pas à ouvrir les yeux. Jean soupira tristement. Le meurtre n’étant pas complet. La victime ayant survécu, ce ne serait que le bagne pour le meurtrier. Il eût préféré l’échafaud.

“Qui est-ce qui vous a arrangé comme ça, M. Cliquet?” demanda un paysan.

Le notaire, qui reprenait péniblement sa respiration, esquissa un geste d’ignorance. De fait, il n’avait pas vu son assaillant.

“Cherchons!” proposa un autre.

En vérité, il ne leur faudrait pas chercher longtemps. Le coupable n’était pas loin, et, d’ailleurs, il allait sottement se livrer lui-même.

Comptant, en effet, profiter du premier désordre pour prendre la clef des champs, Pierre avait ouvert plus largement la petite porte qui l’abritait, et déjà il posait un pied sur le carreau de la salle, prêt à prendre son élan. Sans nul doute, il serait happé au passage. Et quand bien même il échapperait à ce danger, il en était un autre qu’il ne pourrait éviter. Nécessairement il lui faudrait passer devant Marguerite, qui n’avait pas quitté sa place, où elle gardait une immobilité de marbre. Celle-ci comprendrait alors.

Or, sauver le coupable était peu de chose, si le bonheur de Marguerite n’était pas sauvé en même temps. Pour cela, il fallait qu’elle pût continuer à aimer celui à qui elle s’était donnée, il fallait qu’elle ignorât, qu’elle ignorât toujours… Qui sait? Peut-être était-il trop tard… Peut-être le soupçon naissait-il déjà derrière ce front que pâlissait une mystérieuse épouvante…

Jean sortit brusquement de la pénombre projetée par le manteau de la cheminée et s’avança dans la lumière de la salle. Tous le reconnurent aussitôt: Pierre et Marguerite, qui fixèrent sur lui des yeux dilatés par l’étonnement, et les cinq paysans dont les visages eurent une expression complexe faite à la fois de la sympathie subsistant du passé et de l’horreur invincible qu’inspire nécessairement un forçat.

“Ne cherchez pas, dit Jean. C’est moi qui ai fait le coup.”

Personne ne dit mot. Non qu’on ne le crût pas. L’aveu était plausible, au contraire, car qui a tué peut tuer encore. Mais il était si inattendu que la surprise paralysait les poitrines.

Cependant, la scène avait changé dans ses détails. Pierre, maintenant se montrait tout entier hors de la porte et, sans que personne fit attention à lui, se rapprochait de Marguerite qui ne semblait pas s’apercevoir de sa présence. Celle-ci s’était redressée, le visage illuminé de bonheur et de haine. Bonheur de voir détruit, à peine formé, le soupçon qui l’avait effleurée; haine pour celui dont le crime avoué était cause qu’elle eût conçu l’abominable pensée.

C’est elle, c’est Marguerite que Jean regardait uniquement.

La jeune femme tendit le poing vers lui.

“Canaille!” cria-t-elle.

Sans répondre, Jean détourna la tête et offrit ses bras aux rudes poignes qui s’abattirent sur eux. On l’entraîna.

La porte, grande ouverte, découpait un rectangle noir, que Jean regardait avec passion. Sur ce fond obscur, un tableau cruel et doux se dessinait pour lui en traits précis. C’était, sous un implacable ciel bleu, un quai tout brûlé de soleil… Et, sur ce quai, se croisaient, portant de lourds fardeaux, des hommes aux pieds chargés de fers… Mais, au-dessus d’eux, brillait une éblouissante image, l’image d’une jeune femme qui tenait un petit enfant dans ses bras…

Jean, les yeux fixés sur cette image, disparut dans la nuit.

FIN

LE HUMBUG

MŒURS AMERICAINES

Au mois de mars 1863, je m'embarquai sur le steamboat *Kentucky*, qui fait le service entre New-York et Albany.

A cette époque de l'année, des arrivages considérables provoquaient entre les deux villes un grand mouvement commercial, qui n'avait, d'ailleurs, rien de très exceptionnel. Les négociants de New-York entretiennent, en effet, par leurs correspondants, des relations incessantes avec les provinces les plus éloignées et répandent ainsi les produits de l'Ancien Monde, en même temps qu'ils exportent à l'étranger les marchandises de provenance nationale.

Mon départ pour Albany m'était une nouvelle occasion d'admirer l'activité de New-York. De tous côtés affluaient les voyageurs, les uns gourmandant les porteurs de leurs nombreux bagages, les autres seuls, comme de véritables touristes anglais, dont la garde-robe tient dans un sac imperceptible. On se précipitait, chacun se hâtant de retenir sa place à bord du paquebot, que la spéculation douait d'une élasticité toute américaine.

Déjà deux premiers coups de la cloche avaient porté l'effroi parmi les retardataires. L'embarcadère pliait sous le poids des derniers arrivants, qui sont, en général et partout, des gens dont le voyage ne peut se remettre sans notable préjudice. Cependant cette foule finit se caser. Paquets et voyageurs s'empilèrent, s'emboîtèrent. La flamme grondait dans les tubes de la chaudière, le pont du *Kentucky* frémissait. Le soleil, s'efforçant de percer la brume du matin, réchauffait un peu cette atmosphère de mars, qui vous oblige à relever le collet de votre habit, à emprisonner vos mains dans vos poches, tout en disant: il fera beau aujourd'hui.

Comme mon voyage n'était point un voyage d'affaires, comme mon porte-manteau suffisait à contenir tout mon nécessaire et mon superflu, comme mon esprit ne se préoccupait ni de spéculations à tenter, ni de marchés à surveiller, je flânais à travers mes pensées, m'en remettant au hasard, cet ami intime des touristes, du soin de rencontrer en route quelque sujet de plaisir et de distraction, quand j'aperçus à trois pas de moi Mrs Melvil, qui souriait de l'air le plus charmant du monde.

“Quoi! vous, Mistress, m'écriai-je avec une surprise que ma joie seule pouvait égaler, vous affrontez les dangers et la foule d'un steamboat de l'Hudson!

— Sans doute, cher Monsieur, me répondit Mrs. Melvil en me donnant la main à la façon anglaise. D'ailleurs, je ne suis pas seule; ma vieille et bonne Arsinoé m'accompagne.”

Elle me montra, assise sur un ballot de laine, sa fidèle négresse qui la considérait avec attendrissement. Le mot attendrissement méritait d'être souligné dans cette circonstance, car il n'y a que les domestiques noirs qui sachent regarder ainsi.

“Quelque secours et quelque appui que puisse vous prêter Arsinoé, Mistress, dis-je, je m'estime heureux du droit qui m'appartient d'être votre protecteur pendant cette traversée.

— Si c’est un droit, me répondit-elle en riant, je ne vous en aurai aucune obligation. Mais comment se fait-il que je vous trouve ici? D’après ce que vous nous aviez dit, vous ne deviez faire ce voyage que dans quelques jours. Pourquoi ne nous avez-vous pas parlé de votre départ hier?

— Je n’en savais rien, répliquai-je. Je me suis décidé à partir pour Albany uniquement parce que la cloche du paquebot m’a tiré de mon sommeil à six heures du matin. Vous voyez à quoi cela tient. Si je ne m’étais réveillé qu’à sept heures, j’aurais peut-être pris la route de Philadelphie! Mais vous-même, Mistress, vous paraissiez hier soir la femme la plus sédentaire qui fût au monde.

— Sans doute! Aussi ne voyez-vous point ici Mrs. Melvil, mais seulement le premier commis d’Henri Melvil, négociant armateur de New-York; allant surveiller l’arrivée d’un chargement à Albany. Vous ne comprenez pas cela, vous, l’habitant des pays trop civilisés du vieux monde!… Mon mari ne pouvant quitter New-York ce matin, je vais le remplacer. Je vous prie de croire que les livres n’en seront pas moins bien tenus, ni les additions moins exactes.

— Je suis décidé à ne plus m’étonner de rien, m’écriai-je. Cependant, si pareille chose se passait en France, si les femmes faisaient les affaires de leurs maris, les maris ne tarderaient pas à faire celles de leurs femmes. Ce seraient eux qui joueraient du piano, découperaient des fleurs, broderaient des paires de bretelles…

— Vous ne flattez pas beaucoup vos compatriotes, répliqua Mrs. Melvil en riant.

— Au contraire! puisque je suppose que leurs femmes leur brodent des bretelles.”

En ce moment, le troisième coup de la cloche se fit entendre. Les derniers voyageurs se précipitèrent sur le pont du *Kentucky*, au milieu des cris des marins, qui s'armaient de longues gaffes pour éloigner le bateau du quai.

J'offris mon bras à Mrs. Melvil et la conduisis un peu plus à l'arrière, où la foule était moins compacte.

"Je vous ai donné des lettres de recommandation pour Albany… commença-t-elle.

— Sans doute. Désirez-vous que je vous en remercie une millième fois?

— Non certainement, car elles vous deviennent complètement inutiles. Comme je me rends auprès de mon père, à qui elles sont adressées, vous me permettez, non plus seulement de vous présenter, mais bien de vous offrir l'hospitalité en son nom?

— J'avais donc raison, dis-je, de compter sur le hasard pour faire un voyage charmant. Et cependant, vous et moi, nous avons failli ne pas partir.

— Pourquoi cela?

— Un certain voyageur, amateur de ces excentricités dont les Anglais avaient l'exclusif privilège avant la découvert de l'Amérique, voulait retenir pour lui seul le *Kentucky* tout entier.

— C'est donc un fils des Indes Orientales, qui voyage avec une suite d'éléphants et de bayadères?

— Ma foi non! J'assistais à son débat avec le capitaine qui repoussait sa demande, et je n'ai vu aucun éléphant se mêler à la conversation. Cet original semblait un gros homme fort réjoui, qui tenait à avoir ses coudées franches, voilà tout…Hé mais! c'est lui, Mistress! Je le reconnais… Apercevez-vous ce voyageur qui accourt sur le quai avec force gesticulations et clameurs? Il va nous retarder encore, car le steamboat commence à quitter le bord."

Un homme de taille moyenne, avec une tête énorme, ornée de deux buissons ardents de favoris rouges, vêtu d'une longue redingote à double collet, et coiffé d'un chapeau de gaucho à larges bords, arrivait, en effet, tout essoufflé sur le débarcadère, dont le pont volant venait d'être retiré. Il gesticulait, il se démenait, il criait, sans se préoccuper des rires de la foule amassée autour de lui.

"Ohé! du *Kentucky*!… Mille diables! ma place est retenue, enregistrée, payée, et on me laisse à terre!… Mille diables! capitaine, je vous rends responsable devant le Grand-Juge et ses assesseurs.

— Tant pis pour les retardataires! s'écria le capitaine en montant sur l'un des tambours. Il nous faut arriver à heure fixe, et la marée commence à perdre.

— Mille diables!… hurla de nouveau le gros homme, j'obtiendrai cent mille dollars et plus de dommages-intérêts contre vous!… Boby, s'écria-t-il, en se retournant vers l'un des deux noirs qui l'accompagnaient, occupe-toi des bagages et cours à l'hôtel, tandis que Dacopa démarrera quelque canot pour rejoindre ce damné *Kentucky*.

— C'est inutile, cria le capitaine, qui ordonna de larguer la dernière amarre.

— Hardi! Dacopa!" fit le gros homme, en encourageant son nègre.

Celui-ci s’empara du câble au moment où le paquebot l’entraînait et en tourna vivement le bout sur l’un des organeaux du quai. En même temps, l’obstiné voyageur se précipita dans une embarcation aux applaudissements de la foule, et, en quelques coups de godille, atteignit l’escalier du *Kentucky*. Il s’élança sur le pont, courut au capitaine et l’interpella vigoureusement, faisant à lui seul autant de bruit que dix hommes et parlant avec plus de volubilité que vingt commères. Le capitaine, ne pouvant placer un quart d’argument et voyant du reste que le voyageur avait fait acte de possession, résolut de ne plus s’en inquiéter. Il reprit son porte-voix et se dirigea vers la machine. Au moment où il allait donner le signal du départ, le gros homme revint sur lui, en s’écriant:

“Et mes colis, mille diables?

— Comment! vous colis!… riposta le capitaine. Seraient-ce eux, par hasard, qui arrivent?”

Des murmures éclatèrent parmi les voyageurs que ce nouveau retard impatientait.

“A qui en veut-on? s’écria l’intrépide passagers. Ne suis-je pas un libre citoyen des États-Unis d’Amérique? Je m’appelle Augustus Hopkins, et si ce nom vous en dit pas assez…”

J’ignore si ce nom jouissait d’une influence réelle sur la masse des spectateurs. Quoi qu’il en soit, le capitaine du *Kentucky* fut forcé d’accoster pour embarquer les bagages d’Augustus Hopkins, libre citoyen des États-Unis d’Amérique.

“Il faut avouer, dis-je à Mrs. Melvil, que voilà un singulier homme.

— Moins singulier que ses colis”, me répondit-elle, en me montrant deux camions qui amenaient à l’embarcadère deux énormes caisses de vingt pieds de haut, recouvertes de toiles cirées et ficelées au moyen d’un inextricable réseau de cordes et de nœuds. Le haut et le bas étaient indiqués en lettres rouges, et la mot “fragile”, inscrit en caractères d’un pied, faisait trembler à cent pas à la ronde les représentants des administration responsables.

Malgré les grognements provoqués par l’apparition de ces colis monstres, le sieur Hopkins fit tant, des pieds, des mains, de la tête et des poumons, qu’ils furent déposés sur le pont, après des peines et des retards considérables. Enfin le *Kentucky* put quitter le quai, et remonta l’Hudson au milieu des navires de toutes sortes qui le sillonnaient.

Les deux noirs d’Augustus Hopkins s’étaient installés à poste fixe auprès dés caisses de leur maître. Celles-ci avaient le privilège d’exciter au plus haut point la curiosité des passagers. La plupart se pressaient aux alentours, en se laissant aller à toutes les suppositions excentriques que peut fournir une imagination d’outre-mer. Mrs. Melvil elle-même semblait s’en préoccuper vivement, tandis que, en ma qualité de Français, je mettais tous mes soins à feindre l’indifférence la plus complète.

“Quel singulier homme vous faites, me dit Mrs. Melvil. Vous ne vous inquiétez pas du contenu de ces deux monuments. Pour mon compte, la curiosité me dévore.

— Je vous avouerai, répondis-je, que tout ceci m’intéresse peu. En voyant arriver ces deux immensités, j’ai fait tout de suite les suppositions les plus hasardées. Ou elles contiennent une maison à cinq étages avec ses locataires, me suis-je dit, ou elles ne renferment rien du tout. Or, dans ces deux cas, qui sont les plus bizarres qu’on puisse imaginer, je n’éprouverais pas une surprise extraordinaire. Cependant, Mistress, si vous le désirez, je vais recueillir quelques renseignements que je vous transmettrai.

— Volontiers, me répondit-elle, et, pendant votre absence, je vérifierai ces bordereaux.”

Je laissai ma singulière compagne de voyage repasser ses additions avec la rapidité des caissiers de la Banque de New-York, lesquels, dit-on, n’ont qu’à jeter un coup d’œil sur une colonne de chiffres pour en connaître immédiatement le total.

Tout en songeant à cette organisation bizarre, à cette dualité de l’existence chez ces charmantes femmes américaines, je me dirigeai vers celui qui servait de cible à tous les regards, de sujet à toutes les conversations.

Quoique ses deux caisses dérobassent complètement à la vue l’avant du navire et le cours de l’Hudson, le timonier dirigeait le steamboat avec une confiance absolue, sans se préoccuper des obstacles. Pourtant, ils devaient être nombreux, car jamais fleuves, sans en excepter la Tamise, ne furent sillonnés par plus de bâtiments que ceux des États-Unis. A une époque où la France ne comptait en douane que douze à treize mille navires, où l’Angleterre atteignait un chiffre de quarante mille, les États-Unis en comptaient déjà soixante mille, parmi lesquels deux mille bateaux à vapeur allaient troubler les flots de toutes les mers du monde. On peut juger, par ces nombres, du mouvement commercial et s’expliquer aussi les fréquents accidents dont les fleuves américains sont le théâtre.

Il est vrai que ces catastrophes, ces rencontres, ces naufrages, sont de peu d’importance aux yeux de ces hardis négociants. C’est même une activité nouvelle donnée aux Sociétés d’assurances, qui feraient de bien mauvaises affaires, si leurs primes n’étaient pas exorbitantes. A poids et à volume égaux, un homme, en Amérique, a moins de valeur et d’importance qu’un sac de charbon de terre ou qu’une balle de café.

Peut-être les Américains ont-ils raison, mais, moi, comme j’aurais donné toutes les mines de houille et tous les champs de caféiers du globe pour ma petite personne française! Or, je n’étais pas sans inquiétude sur l’issue de notre voyage a toute vapeur à travers une multitude d’obstacles.

— Augustus Hopkins ne semblait pas partager mes craintes. Il devait être des ces gens qui sautent, déraillent, sombrent, plutôt que de manquer une affaire. En tout cas, il ne se préoccupait nullement de la beauté des rives de l’Hudson, qui s’enfuyaient rapidement vers la mer. Entre New-York, le point de départ, et Albany, le point d’arrivée, il n’y avait pour lui que dix-huit heures de temps perdu. Les délicieuses stations de la rive, les bourgs groupés d’une façon pittoresque, les bois jetés çà et là dans la campagne comme des bouquets au pied d’une *prima donna*, le cours animé d’un fleuve magnifique, les premières émanations du printemps, rien ne pouvait tirer cet homme de ses préoccupations spéculatives. Il allait et venait d’un bout à l’autre du *Kentucky*, en marmottant des phrases inachevées, ou bien, s’asseyant précipitamment sur un ballot de marchandises, il retirait de l’une de ses nombreuses poches un large et épais portefeuille bourré de papiers de mille sortes. Je crus même voir qu’il étalait à dessein cette collection de toutes les paperasses de la bureaucratie commerciale. Il furetait avidement dans une correspondance énorme et déployait des lettres datées de tous les pays, stygmatisées par les timbres de tous les bureaux de poste du monde, et dont il parcourait les lignes serrées avec un acharnement fort remarquable et je crois, fort remarqué.

Il me parut donc impossible de m’adresser à lui pour apprendre quelque chose. En vain plusieurs curieux avaient voulu faire jaser les deux noirs mis en faction auprès des caisses mystérieuses; ces deux enfants de l’Afrique avaient gardé un mutisme absolu, en contradiction avec leur loquacité habituelle.

Je me disposais donc à retourner auprès de Mrs. Melvil, et à lui rapporter mes impressions personnelles, quand je me trouvai dans un groupe au centre duquel pérorait le capitaine du *Kentucky*. Il était question d’Hopkins.

“Je vous le répète, disait le capitaine, cet original n’en fait jamais d’autres. Voilà dix fois qu’il remonte l’Hudson, de New-York à Albany, voilà dix fois qu’il s’arrange pour arriver en retard, voilà dix fois qu’il transporte des chargements pareils. Qu’est-ce que tout cela devient? Je l’ignore. Le bruit court que Mr. Hopkins monte une grande entreprise à quelques lieues d’Albany, et que, de toutes les parties du monde, on lui expédie des marchandises inconnues.

— Ce doit être un des principaux agents de la Compagnie des Indes, dit l’un des assistants, qui vient fonder un comptoir en Amérique.

— Ou plutôt un riche propriétaire de placers californiens, répondit un autre. Il doit y avoir sous jeu quelque fourniture…

— Ou quelque adjudication que l’on pourrait soumissionner, riposta un troisième. Le *New York Herald* semblait le faire pressentir ces jours derniers.

— Nous ne tarderons pas, reprit un quatrième, à voir émettre les actions d’une nouvelle compagnie au capital de cinq cents millions. Je m’inscris le premier pour cent actions de mille dollars.

— Pourquoi le premier? répliqua quelqu’un. Auriez-vous déjà des promesses dans cette affaire? Moi, je suis tout prêt à verser le montant de deux cents actions, et davantage au besoin.

— S’il en reste après moi! s’écria de loin quelqu’un dont je ne pus apercevoir la figure. C’est évidemment de l’établissement d’un chemin de fer d’Albany à San-Francisco qu’il s’agit, et le banquier qui en sera l’adjudicataire est mon meilleur ami.

— Que parlez-vous de chemin de fer! Ce Mr. Hopkins vient installer un câble électrique à travers le lac Ontario, et ces grandes caisses contiennent des lieues de fils et de gutta percha.

— A travers le lac Ontario! Mais c’est une affaire d’or! Où est ce gentleman? s’écrièrent plusieurs négociants pris du démon de la spéculation. Mr. Hopkins voudra bien nous exposer son entreprise. A moi les premières actions!…

— A moi, s’il vous plaît, Mr. Hopkins!…

— Non, à moi!…

— Non, à moi! J’offre mille dollars de prime!…”

Les demandes, les réponses se croisaient, et la confusion devenait générale. Bien que la spéculation de me tentât pas, je suivis le groupe d’agioteurs qui se dirigeaient vers le héros du *Kentucky*. Hopkins fut bientôt entouré d’une foule compacte sur laquelle il ne daigna même pas lever les yeux. De longues files de chiffres, des nombres qui possédaient d’imposantes suites de zéros, s’allongeaient sur son vaste portefeuille. Les quatre opérations de l’arithmétique pullulaient sous son crayon. Les millions s’échappaient de ses lèvres avec la rapidité d'un torrent; il semblait en proie à la frénésie des calculs. Le silence s'établit autour de lui, en dépit des orages soulevés dans toutes ces têtes américaines par la passion du commerce.

Enfin, après une opération monstre, dans laquelle maître Augustus Hopkins écrasa trois fois son crayon sur un majestueux qui commandait une armée de huit zéros magnifiques, il prononça ces deux mots sacramentels:

"Cent millions."

Puis il replia rapidement ses papiers dans son terrible portefeuille et tira de sa poche une montre ornée d'un double rang de perles fines.

"Neuf heures! Déjà neuf heures! s'écria-t-il. Ce maudit bateau ne marche donc pas! Le capitaine?… Où est le capitaine?"

Ce disant, Hopkins traversa brusquement le triple rang de la foule qui l'assiégeait, et aperçut le capitaine penché sur l'écoutille de la machine, d'où celui-ci donnait quelques ordres au mécanicien.

"Savez-vous, capitaine, fit-il avec importance, savez-vous qu'un retard de dix minutes peut me faire manquer une affaire considérable?

— A qui parlez-vous de retard, répondit le capitaine stupéfait d'un pareil reproche, quand vous seul en êtes la cause?

— Si vous ne vous étiez pas entêté à me laisser à terre, riposta Hopkins, en élevant la voix à un diapason supérieur, vous n'auriez pas perdu un temps qui vaut cher à cette époque l'année.

— Et si, vous et vos caisses, vous aviez pris la précaution d'arriver à l'heure, répliqua le capitaine irrité, nous eussions pu profiter de la marée montante, et nous serions de trois bons milles plus loin.

— Je n’entre point dans ces considérations. Je dois être avant minuit à l’hôtel Washington, à Albany, et, si j’arrive après minuit, il vaudrait mieux pour moi n’avoir pas quitté New-York. Je vous préviens que, dans ce cas, j’attaquerai votre administration et vous en dommages-intérêts.

— Vous me laisserez en repos, peut-être! s’écria le capitaine qui commençait à se fâcher.

— Non, certainement, tant que votre pusillanimité et vos économies de combustible me mettront en danger de perdre dix fortunes!… Allons! chauffeurs, quatre ou cinq bonnes pelletées de charbon dans vos fourneaux, et vous, mécanicien, mettez-moi le pied sur la soupape de votre chaudière, pour que nous regagnions le temps perdu!”

Et Hopkins jeta dans la chambre de la machine une bourse où brillaient quelques dollars.

Le capitaine entra dans une violente colère, mais notre enragé voyageur trouva moyen de crier plus haut et plus longtemps que lui. Quant à moi, je m’éloignai rapidement du lieu du conflit, sachant que cette recommandation faite au mécanicien de charger la soupape, pour augmenter la pression de la vapeur et accélérer la marche du navire, ne tendait à rien moins qu’à faire éclater la chaudière.

Il est inutile de dire que nos compagnons de voyage trouvèrent l’expédient tout simple. Aussi n’en parlai-je pas à Mrs. Melvil, qui eût ri aux larmes de mes craintes chimériques.

Quand je la rejoignis, ses vastes calculs étaient terminés, et les soucis commerciaux ne plissaient plus son front charmant.

“Vous avez quitté le négociant, dit-elle, et vous retrouvez la femme du monde. Vous pouvez donc l’entretenir de ce qui vous plaira, lui parler art, sentiment, poésie…

— Parler d’art, m’écriai-je, de rêves et de poésie, après ce que j’ai vu, ce que j’ai entendu! Non, non! je suis tout imprégné d’un esprit mercantile, je n’entends plus que le son des dollars et je suis ébloui par leur éclat splendide. Je ne vois plus dans ce beau fleuve qu’une route très commode pour les marchandises, dans ces rives charmantes qu’un chemin de halage, dans ces jolis bourgs qu’une série de magasins à sucre et à coton, et je songe sérieusement à jeter un barrage sur l’Hudson et à utiliser ses eaux pour faire tourner un moulin à café!

— Eh mais! moulin à café à part, c’est une idée, cela!

— Pourquoi, s’il vous plaît, n’aurais-je pas des idées comme un autre?

— Vous avez donc été piqué par le taon de l’industrie? demanda Mrs. Melvil en riant.

— Jugez-en vous-même” répondis-je.

Je lui racontai les diverses scènes dont j’avais été témoin. Elle écouta mon récit gravement, comme il convient à toute intelligence américaine, et se mit à réfléchir. Une Parisienne ne m’en aurait pas laissé dire la moitié.

“Eh bien, Mistress, que pensez-vous de cet Hopkins?

— Cet homme, me répondit-elle, peut être un grand génie spéculateur qui fonde une entreprise gigantesque, ou tout bonnement un montreur d’ours de la dernière foire de Baltimore.”

Je me mis à rire et la conversation aiguilla vers d’autres sujets.

Notre voyage se termina sans nouveaux incidents, si ce n’est qu’Hopkins faillit jeter une de ses immenses caisses à l’eau, en voulant la déplacer malgré le capitaine. La discussion qui suivit lui servit encore à proclamer l’importance de ses affaires et la valeur de ses colis. Il déjeuna et dîna comme un homme qui n’a pas pour but de réparer ses forces, mais bien de dépenser le plus d’argent possible. Enfin, lorsque nous arrivâmes à destination, il n’était pas un voyageur qui ne fût disposé à raconter des merveilles de ce personnage extraordinaire.

Le *Kentucky* accosta le quai d’Albany avant l’heure fatale de minuit. J’offris mon bras à Mrs. Melvil, tout en m’estimant heureux d’être débarqué sain et sauf, tandis que maître Augustus Hopkins, après avoir fait enlever à grand bruit ses deux caisses merveilleuses, entrait triomphalement, suivi d’une foule considérable, à l’hôtel *Washington*.

Je fus reçu par Mr. Francis Wilson, père de Mrs. Melvil, avec cette grâce et cette franchise qui ajoutent tant de prix à l’hospitalité. Malgré mes défaites, je fus obligé d’accepter une jolie chambre bleue dans la demeure de l’honorable négociant. Je ne puis donner le nom d’hôtel à cette maison immense, dont les spacieux appartements paraissent sans importance auprès des vastes magasins où regorgent les marchandises de tous les pays. Un monde d’employés, d’ouvriers, de commis, de manœuvres, fourmille dans cette véritable cité, dont les maisons de commerce du Havre et de Bordeaux ne donnent qu’une imparfaite idée. Malgré les occupations de tout genre du maître de la maison, je fus traité comme un évêque, et je n’eus pas même besoin de demander, voire de désirer. Au surplus, le service était fait par des noirs, et, quand une fois on a été servi par des noirs, on ne peut plus l’être que par soi-même.

Le lendemain, je me promenai dans la délicieuse ville d’Albany dont le nom seul m’avait toujours charmé. J’y retrouvai toute l’activité de New-York. Pareil mouvement d’affaires, égale multiplicité des intérêts. La soif de gain des gens de commerce, leur ardeur au travail, leur besoin d’extraire l’argent par tous les procédés que l’industrie ou la spéculation découvre, n’ont pas chez les commerçants du Nouveau-Monde l’aspect répulsif qu’ils produisent parfois chez leurs collègues d’outre-mer. Il y a dans leur manière d’agir une certaine grandeur très sympathique. On conçoit que ces gens-là aient besoin de beaucoup gagner, parce qu’ils dépensent de même.

A l’heure des repas, qui furent ordonnés avec luxe, et pendant la soirée, la conversation, d’abord générale, ne tarda pas à se spécialiser. On en vint à causer de la ville, de ses plaisirs, de son théâtre. Mr. Wilson me sembla très au courant de ces amusements mondains, mais il me parut aussi Américain qu’on peut l’être, quand nous en arrivâmes à parler de ces excentricités de villes entières, dont on s’est fort occupé en Europe.

“Vous faites allusion, me dit Mr. Wilson, à notre attitude à l’égard de la célèbre Lola Montès?

— Sans doute, répondis-je. Il n’y a que les Américains qui aient pu prendre au sérieux la comtesse de Lansfeld.

— Nous la prenions au sérieux, répondit Mr. Wilson, parce qu’elle agissait sérieusement, de même que nous n’accordons aucune importance aux affaires les plus graves, lorsqu’elles sont traitées légèrement.

— Ce qui vous choque sans doute, dit Mrs. Melvil d’un ton moqueur, c’est que Lola Montès, entre autres choses, ait visité nos pensionnats de jeunes files?

— J’avouerai franchement, répondis-je, que le fait m’a paru bizarre, car cette charmante danseuse n’est pas un exemple à proposer aux jeunes filles.

— Nos jeunes filles, répliqua Mr. Wilson, sont élevées d’une façon plus indépendante que les vôtres. Quand Lola Montès visita leurs pensionnats, ce ne fut ni la danseuse de Paris, ni la comtesse de Lansfeld de Bavière, qui s’y présenta, mais une femme célèbre dont la vue ne pouvait être que très agréable. Il n’en résulta aucune fâcheuse conséquence pour les enfants qui l’observaient avec curiosité. C’était une fête, un plaisir, une distraction, voilà tout. Où est le mal dans tout cela?

— Le mal est que ces ovations extraordinaires gâtent les grands artistes. Ils ne seront plus possibles, quand ils reviendront de leurs tournées aux États-Unis.

— Ont-ils donc eu à se plaindre? demanda Mr. Wilson vivement.

— Au contraire, répondis-je, mais comment Jenny Lind, par exemple, pourra-t-elle se trouver honorée d’une hospitalité européenne, quand, ici, elle voit les hommes les plus recommandables s’atteler à sa voiture au milieu des fêtes publique? Quelle réclame, vaudra jamais la célèbre fondation des hôpitaux faite par son impresario?

— Vous parlez comme un jaloux, riposta Mrs. Melvil. Vous en voulez à cette éminente artiste de n’avoir jamais consenti à se faire entendre à Paris.

— Non, certainement, Mistress, et d’ailleurs je ne lui conseille pas d’y venir, car elle n’y rencontrerait pas l’accueil que vous lui avez fait ici.

— Vous y perdez, dit Mr. Wilson.

— Moins qu’elle-même, selon moi.

— Vous y perdez au moins des hôpitaux”, dit en riant Mrs. Melvil.

La discussion se prolongea sur un ton enjoué. Au bout de quelques instants, Mr. Wilson me dit:

“Puisque ces exhibitions et ces réclames vous intéressent, vous tombez à merveille. Demain a lieu l’adjudication des premiers billets pour le concert de Mme Sontag.

— Une adjudication, ni plus ni moins que s’il s’agissait d’un chemin de fer? Sans doute, et l’acquéreur qui s’est posé jusqu’ici avec les plus audacieuses prétentions est tout simplement un honnête chapelier d’Albany.

— C’est donc un mélomane, demandais-je.

— Lui, ce John Turner!… il déteste la musique. C’est pour lui le plus désagréable des bruits.

— Alors, quel est son but?

— Se bien poser dans l’esprit du public. C’est de la réclame. On parlera de lui, non seulement dans la ville, mais dans toutes les provinces de l’Union, en Amérique comme en Europe, et on lui achètera des chapeaux, et il en expédiera des pacotilles, et il en fournira le monde entier!

— Pas possible!

— Vous verrez ça demain, et si vous avez besoin d’un chapeau…

— Je n’en achèterai pas chez lui! Ils doivent être détestables.

— Ah! l’enragé Parisien!” s’écria Mrs. Melvil en se levant.

Je pris congé de mes hôtes, et j’allai rêver de ces étrangetés américaines.

Le lendemain, j’assistai à l’adjudication du fameux premier billet pour le concert de Mme Sontag, avec un sérieux qui eût fait honneur au plus flegmatique habitant de l’Union. Le chapelier John Turner, le héros de cette nouvelle excentricité, attirait tous les regards. Ses amis l’abordaient et le complimentaient comme s’il eût sauvé l’indépendance de son pays. D’autres l’encourageaient. Il s’établit des paris sur sa chance et sur celle de plusieurs concurrents au même honneur.

L’enchère commença. Le premier billet monta rapidement de quatre dollars à deux et trois cents. John Turner se considérait comme assuré d’enchérir le dernier. Il n’ajoutait jamais qu’une faible somme au prix fixé par ses adversaires, car il suffisait à ce brave homme de l’emporter d’un seul dollar, et il comptait en consacrer, s’il le fallait, un millier à l’acquisition de cette précieuse place. Les nombres trois, quatre, cinq et six cents se succédèrent avec assez de rapidité. L’assistance était surexcitée au plus haut point, et des grognements approbateurs saluaient chaque enchérisseur un peu audacieux. Ce premier billet avait un prix infini aux yeux de tous, et on s’inquiétait fort peu des autres. En un mot, c’était une affaire d’honneur.

Tout à coup, un hurrah plus prolongé que les autres retentit. Le chapelier s’était écrié d’une voix forte:

“Mille dollars!

— Mille dollars, répétait l’agent du contrôle. Personne ne met rien au-dessus?… Mille dollars le premier billet du concert!… Personne ne dit mot?…”

Pendant le silence qui séparait ces diverses exclamations, on sentait un sourd frémissement courir dans la salle. J’étais impressionné en dépit de moi-même. Turner, certain de son triomphe, promenait un regard satisfait sur ses admirateurs. Il tenait à la main une liasse de billets de l’une des six cents banques des États-Unis, et les agitait, tandis que ces mots retentissaient encore une fois:

“Mille dollars!…

— Trois mille dollars! cria une voix qui me fit tourner la tête.

— Hurrah! s’écria la salle enthousiasmée.

— Trois mille dollars”, répéta l’agent.

Devant un pareil acquéreur, le chapelier avait baissé la tête et s’était enfui, inaperçu au milieu de l’enthousiasme universel.

“Adjugé à trois mille dollars!” dit l’agent.

Je vis alors s’avancer Augustus Hopkins en personne, le libre citoyen des États-Unis d’Amérique. Évidemment, il passait à l’état d’homme célèbre, et il ne restait plus qu’à composer des hymnes en son honneur.

Je m’échappai difficilement de la salle, et c’est à grand’peine que je parvins à me frayer un chemin parmi les dix mille personnes qui attendaient à la porte le triomphant acquéreur. Dès qu’il parut, des acclamations le saluèrent. Pour la seconde fois depuis la veille, il fut reconduit à l’hôtel

Washington par la population très emballée. Cependant, il saluait d’un air à la fois modeste et superbe, et, le soir, à la demande générale, il parut au grand balcon de l’hôtel, applaudi par une foule en délire.

“Eh bien, qu’en pensez-vous? me dit Mr. Wilson, quand, après le dîner je le mis au courant des incidents de la journée.

— Je pense qu’en ma qualité de Français et de Parisien, Mme Sontag mettra très gracieusement une place à ma disposition, sans que j’aie besoin de la payer une quinzaine de mille francs.

— Je le pense aussi, me répondit Mr. Wilson, mais, si ce Mr. Hopkins est un homme habile, ces trois mille dollars peuvent lui en rapporter cent mille. Un homme qui est parvenu à son degré d’excentricité n’a qu’à se baisser pour ramasser des millions.

— Que peut-il être, cet Hopkins?” demanda Mrs. Melvil.

C’est ce que la ville d’Albany tout entière se demandait en même temps.

Les événements se chargèrent de répondre. Quelques jours plus tard, en effet, de nouvelles caisses de forme et de dimension encore plus extraordinaires arrivèrent par la steamboat de New-York. L’une d’entre elles, qui avait l’aspect d’une maison, s’engagea imprudemment, ou prudemment comme on voudra, dans une des rues étroites des faubourgs d’Albany. Bientôt, elle ne put avancer, et il lui fallut demeurer là, immobile comme un quartier de roche. Pendant vingt-quatre heures, toute la population de la ville se porta sur le théâtre de l’événement. Hopkins profitait de ces attroupements pour faire des speechs éblouissants. Il tonnait contre les architectes ignares de l’endroit et ne parlait de rien moins que de faire changer l’alignement des rues de la ville pour donner passage à ses colis.

Il devint évident bientôt qu’il fallait opter entre deux partis, ou démolir la caisse dont le contenu piquait la curiosité, ou abattre la masure qui lui faisait obstacle. Les curieux d’Albany auraient sans doute préféré le premier parti, mais Hopkins ne l’entendait pas ainsi. Les choses cependant ne pouvaient demeurer en cet état. La circulation était interrompue dans le quartier, et la police menaçait de faire procéder juridiquement à la démolition de la damnée caisse. Hopkins trancha la difficulté en achetant la maison qui le gênait, puis il la fit abattre.

Je laisse à penser si ce dernier trait le plaça au plus haut point de la célébrité. Son nom et son histoire circulèrent dans tous les salons. Il ne fut question que de lui au Cercle des *Indépendants* et au Cercle de l’Union. De nouveaux paris s’établirent dans les cafés d’Albany sur les projets de cet homme mystérieux. Les journaux se livrèrent aux suppositions les plus hasardées, qui détournèrent momentanément l’attention publique de difficultés survenues entre Cuba et les États-Unis. Je crois même qu’un duel eut lieu entre un négociant et un officier de la ville, et que le champion d’Hopkins triompha en cette occasion.

Aussi, lorsque eut lieu le concert de Mme Sontag, auquel j’assistais d’une façon moins bruyante que notre héros, celui-ci faillit par sa présence changer le but de la réunion.

Enfin le mystère fut expliqué, et bientôt Augustus Hopkins ne cherche plus à le dissimuler. Cet homme était tout simplement un entrepreneur qui venait fonder une sorte d’Exposition Universelle aux environs d’Albany. Il tentait pour son propre compte une de ces entreprises colossales, dont jusqu’ici les gouvernements s’étaient réserve le monopole.

Dans ce but, il avait acheté, à trois lieues d'Albany, une immense plaine inculte. Sur ce terrain abandonné ne s'élevaient plus que les ruines du fort William, qui protégeait autrefois les comptoirs anglais sur la frontière du Canada. Hopkins s'occupait déjà d'embrigader des ouvriers pour commencer ses travaux gigantesques. Ses immenses caisses renfermaient sans doute des outils, des machines, en vue de ses constructions.

Dès que cette nouvelle se répandit à la Bourse d'Albany, les négociants s'en préoccupèrent au plus haut point. Chacun deux chercha à s'entendre avec le grand entrepreneur pour lui arracher des promesses d'actions. Mais Hopkins répondait évasivement a toutes les demandes. Cela n'empêcha pas un cours fictif de s'établir pour ces actions imaginaires, et l'affaire commença dès lors à prendre une extension énorme.

"Cet homme, me dit un jour Mr. Wilson, est un spéculateur très habile. J'ignore s'il est millionnaire ou gueux, car il faut être Job ou Rothschild pour tenter de telles entreprises, mais il fera certainement une immense fortune.

— Je ne sais plus que croire, mon cher Mr. Wilson, ni lequel des deux admirer, de l'homme qui ose de semblables affaires, ou du pays qui les soutient et les préconise, sans en demander davantage.

— C'est ainsi que l'on réussit, mon cher Monsieur.

— Ou qu'on se ruine, répondis-je.

— Eh bien, répliqua Mr. Wilson, sachez qu'en Amérique une faillite enrichit tout le monde et ne ruine personne."

Je ne pouvais avoir raison contre Mr. Wilson que par les faits eux-mêmes. Aussi, j’attendis impatiemment le résultat de ces manœuvres et de ces réclames m’intéressaient au plus haut point. Je recueillais les moindres nouvelles sur l’entreprise d’Augustus Hopkins, et je lisais les journaux qui nous en entretenaient chaque jour. Un premier départ d’ouvriers avait eu lieu, et les ruines du fort William commençaient à disparaître. Il n’était plus question que de ces travaux dont le but excitait un véritable enthousiasme. Les propositions arrivaient de tous côtés de New-York comme d’Albany, de Boston et de Baltimore. Les “musical instruments”, les “daguerreotype pictures”, les “abdominal supporters”, les “centrifugal pumps”, les “squave pianos” s’inscrivaient pour figurer aux meilleures places, et l’imagination américaine allait toujours bon train. On assura qu’autour de l’Exposition s’élèverait une ville tout entière. On prêtait à Augustus Hopkins le projet de fonder une cité rivale de la Nouvelle-Orléans et de lui donner son nom. On ajouta bientôt que cette ville, fortifiée bien entendu à cause de sa proximité de la frontière ne tarderait pas à devenir la capitale des États-Unis! etc. etc.

Pendant que ces exagérations, couraient et se multipliaient dans les cerveaux, le héros du mouvement demeurait à peu près silencieux. Il venait régulièrement à la Bourse d’Albany, s’enquérait des affaires, prenait note des arrivages, mais il n’ouvrait pas la bouche sur ses vastes desseins. On s’étonnait même qu’un homme de sa force ne fît aucune publicité proprement dite. Peut-être dédaignait-il ces moyens ordinaires de lancer une entreprise et s’en remettait-il à son propre mérite.

Or, les choses en étaient à ce point, quand un beau matin le *New York Herald* inséra dans ses colonnes la nouvelle suivante:

“Chacun sait que les travaux de l’Exposition Universelle d’Albany avancent avec rapidité. “Déjà les ruines du vieux fort William ont disparu, et les fondations de merveilleux “monuments se creusent au milieu de l’enthousiasme général. L’autre jour, la pioche d’un “ouvrier a mis à découvert les restes d’un squelette énorme évidemment enfoui depuis des “milliers d’années. Empressons-nous d’ajouter que cette découverte ne retardera en rien les “travaux qui doivent donner aux États-Unis d’Amérique une huitième merveille du monde.” J’accordai à ces quelques lignes l’indifférente attention due aux innombrables faits divers qui pullulent dans les journaux américains. Je ne me doutais pas du parti qu’on en devait tirer plus tard. Il est vrai que cette découverte prit dans la bouche d’Augustus Hopkins une importance extraordinaire. Autant il avait montré de réserve à s’expliquer sur ses projets ultérieurs relativement à sa grande entreprise, autant il fut prodigue de discours, de narrations, de réflexions, de déductions, sur l’exhumation de ce prodigieux squelette. On eût dit qu’il rattachait à cette trouvaille tous ses plans de fortune et de spéculation.

Il paraît, du reste, que cette trouvaille était véritablement miraculeuse. Les fouilles étaient pratiquées, suivant les ordres d’Hopkins, de façon à rencontrer l’autre extrémité du fossile gigantesque, et trois jours de travail opiniâtre n’amenaient encore aucun résultat. On ne pouvait donc prévoir jusqu’où allaient ses dimensions surprenantes, quand Hopkins, qui faisait exécuter lui-même de profondes excavations à deux cents pieds des premières, aperçut enfin le bout de cette carcasse cyclopéenne. La nouvelle s’en répandit aussitôt avec une rapidité électrique, et ce fait unique dans les annales de la géologie prit le caractère d’un événement mondial.

Avec leur humeur impressionnable, *exagérante* et mobile, les Américains ne tardèrent pas à répandre la nouvelle, dont ils accrurent l’importance à plaisir. On se demanda d’où pouvaient provenir ces vastes débris, ce qu’il fallait conclure de leur existence dans le sol indigène, et des études furent entreprises à ce sujet par *l’Albany Institute*.

Cette question, je l’avoue, m’intéressait autrement que les splendeurs futures du Palais de l’Industrie et les spéculations excentriques du Nouveau-Monde. Je me mis à l’affût des plus petits incidents de l’affaire. Ce ne fut pas difficile, car les journaux la traitèrent sous toutes les formes possibles. Je fus d’ailleurs assez heureux pour en apprendre le détail du citoyen Hopkins lui-même.

Depuis son apparition dans la cité d’Albany, cet homme extraordinaire avait été recherché par la meilleure société de la ville. Aux États-Unis où la classe noble est la classe commerçante, il était tout naturel qu’un si hardi spéculateur fût reçu avec les honneurs dus à son rang. Aussi fut-il accueilli dans les cercles, dans les thés de famille, avec un empressement fort caractéristique. Un soir, je le rencontrai dans le salon de Mr. Wilson. Naturellement, on ne s’entretenait que du fait du jour, et d’ailleurs, Mr. Hopkins allait de lui-même au-devant de toutes les interrogations.

Il nous fit une description intéressante, profonde, érudite, et pourtant spirituelle, de sa découverte, de la manière dont elle s’était produite et de ses conséquences incalculables. Il laissa en même temps entrevoir qu’il méditait d’en tirer un parti spéculatif.

“Seulement, nous dit-il, nos travaux sont momentanément arrêtés, car, entre les premières et les dernières fouilles qui ont mis à découvert les extrémités de ce squelette, s’étend une certaine quantité de terrain, sur lequel s’élèvent déjà quelques-unes de mes constructions nouvelles.

— Mais êtes-vous certain, lui demanda-t-on, que les deux extrémités de l’animal se rejoignent sous cette portion inexplorée du sol?

— Cela ne peut faire le moindre doute, répondit Hopkins avec assurance. A en juger par les fragments osseux que nous avons déterrés, cet animal doit avoir des proportions gigantesques et dépassera de beaucoup la taille du fameux mastodonte découvert autrefois dans la vallée de l’Ohio.

— Vous croyez! s’écria un certain Mr. Cornut, espèce de naturaliste qui faisait de la science comme ses compatriotes font du commerce.

— J’en suis certain, répondit Hopkins. Par sa structure, ce monstre appartient évidemment à l’ordre des pachydermes, car il possède tous les caractères si bien décrits par M. de Humboldt.

— Quel malheur, m’écriai-je, qu’on ne puisse le déterrer tout entier!

— Et qui nous en empêche? demanda vivement le Cornut.

— Mais… ces constructions nouvellement élevées…”

A peine avais-je énoncé cette énormité qui me semblait, à moi, tomber sous le sens, que je me vis le centre d’un cercle de sourires dédaigneux. Il paraissait très simple à ces braves négociants de tout abattre, voire un monument, pour déterrer un contemporain du déluge. Personne ne fut donc surpris d’entendre Hopkins dire qu’il avait déjà donné des ordres à ce sujet. Chacun l’en félicita du fond du cœur, et trouva que le hasard, avait raison de favoriser les hommes entreprenants et audacieux. Pour mon compte, je le complimentai sincèrement, et je m’engageai à visiter l’un des premiers sa merveilleuse découverte. Je lui promis même de me rendre à *Exhibition Parc*, dénomination déjà tombée dans le domaine public, mais il me pria d’attendre que les fouilles fussent complètement terminées, car on ne pouvait juger encore de l’énormité du fossile.

Quatre jours après, le *New York Herald* donnait des détails nouveaux sur le monstrueux squelette. Ce n’était la carcasse, ni d’un mammouth, ni d’un mastodonte, ni d’un mégathérium, ni d’un ptérodactyle, ni d’un plésiausaure, car tous les noms étranges de la paléontologie furent invoqués par antiphrase. Les débris sus-mentionnés appartiennent tous à la troisième, au plus à la deuxième époque géologique, tandis que les fouilles dirigées par Hopkins avaient été poussées jusqu’aux terrains primitifs qui constituent l’écorce du globe, et dans lequel aucun fossile n’avait été découvert jusqu’alors. Cet étalage de science, auquel les négociants des États-Unis ne comprirent pas grand’chose, fit un effet considérable. Qu’en conclure, sinon que ce monstre, n’étant ni un mollusque, ni un pachyderme, ni un rongeur, ni un ruminant, ni un carnassier, ni un mammifère amphibie, était un homme? Et cet homme, un géant de plus de quarante mètres de haut! On ne pouvait donc plus nier l’existence d’une race titanesque antérieure à la nôtre. Si le fait était vrai, et tout le monde l’acceptait comme tel, les théories géologiques les mieux assises devaient être changées, puisqu’on retrouvait des fossiles bien au-dessous des dépôts diluviens, ce qui indiquait qu’ils avaient été enfouis à une époque antérieure au déluge.

L’article du *New York Herald* produisit une immense sensation. Le texte en fut reproduit par tous les journaux d’Amérique. Ce sujet de conversation devint à l’ordre du jour, et les plus jolies bouches du Nouveau-Monde prononcèrent les vocables les plus rébarbatifs de la science. De grandes discussions s’ouvrirent. On déduisit de la découverte les conséquences les plus honorables pour le sol de l’Amérique, qu’on sacra berceau du genre humain au détriment de l’Asie. Dans les congrès et les Académies, on prouva jusqu’à l’évidence que l’Amérique, peuplée dès les premiers jours du monde, avait été le point de départ des migrations successives. Le Nouveau Continent enlevait au Vieux Monde les honneurs de l’antiquité. Des mémoires volumineux, inspirés par une ambition patriotique, furent écrits sur cette question si grave. Enfin une réunion de savants, dont le procès-verbal fut publié et commenté par tous les organes de la Presse américaine, prouva, clair comme le jour, que le Paradis terrestre, bordé par la Pennsylvanie, la Virginie et le lac Erié, occupait jadis l'étendue actuelle de la province d'Ohio.

J'avoue que toutes ces rêveries me séduisirent au plus haut point. Je voyais Adam et Eve commandant à des troupeaux de bêtes féroces, qui n'étaient plus une fiction en Amérique comme sur les bords de l'Euphrate, où l'on n'en trouve pas le moindre vestige. Le serpent tentateur prenait dans ma pensée la forme du constrictor ou du crotale. Mais, ce qui m'étonnait le plus, c'est qu'on ajoutait foi à cette découverte avec une obéissance et un laisser-aller merveilleux. Il ne venait à personne l'idée que le fameux squelette pouvait être un puff, un bluff, un humbug, comme disent les Américains, et pas un de ces savants si enthousiastes ne songeait à voir de ses propres yeux le miracle qui mettait sa cervelle en ébullition. Je fis part de cette remarque à Mrs. Melvil.

“A quoi bon se déranger? me dit-elle. Nous verrons notre cher monstre lorsqu'il sera temps. Quant à sa structure et son aspect, on les connaît, car on ne ferait pas un mille dans l'Amérique tout entière sans le retrouver reproduit sous les formes les plus ingénieuses.”

C'est bien là, en effet, qu'éclatait le génie du spéculateur. Autant Augustus Hopkins s'était montré réservé pour lancer l'affaire de l'Exposition, autant il déployait d'ardeur, d'invention, d'imagination pour *poser* son miraculeux squelette dans l'esprit de ses compatriotes. Tout lui était permis, du reste, depuis que ses originalités avaient attiré sur lui l'attention publique.

Bientôt les murs de la ville furent couverts d'immenses affiches multicolores qui reproduisaient le monstre sous les aspects les plus variés. Hopkins épuisa toutes les formules connues dans le genre affiche. Il employa les couleurs les plus saisissantes. Il tapissa de ces affiches les murailles, les parapets des quais, les troncs d'arbres des promenades. Dans les unes, les lignes étaient tracées diagonalement. Dans les autres, la réclame s'étalait en lettres monstrueuses, peintes à la brosse, qui forçaient l'attention du passant. Des hommes se promenaient dans toutes les rues, vêtus de blouses et de paletots qui représentaient le squelette. Le soir, des transparents immenses le projetaient en noir sur un fond de lumière.

Hopkins ne se contenta pas de ces moyens de publicité ordinaires en Amérique. Les affiches et les quatrièmes pages des journaux ne lui suffisaient plus. Il fit un véritable cours de "squeletologie", dans lequel il invoqua les Cuvier, les Blumenbach, le Backland, les Link, les Stemberg, les Brongnart, et cent autres ayant écrit sur la paléontologie. Ses cours furent suivis et applaudis à ce point que deux personnes furent un jour écrasées à la porte.

Il va sans dire que Maître Hopkins leur fit des funérailles magnifiques, et que les bannières du cortège mortuaire reproduisirent encore les formes inévitables du fossile à la mode.

Tous ces moyens étaient excellents pour la ville même d'Albany et pour ses environs, mais il importait de lancer l'affaire dans l'Amérique entière. Mr. Lumley, en Angleterre, lors des débuts de Jenny Lind, proposa aux marchands de savon de leur fournir leurs moules, à la condition que ces moules porteraient en creux le portrait de l'illustre *prima donna*, ce qui fut accepté et produisit des résultats excellents, puisqu'on se lavait les mains avec les traits de l'éminente cantatrice. Hopkins se servit d'un moyen analogue. Suivant des traités passés avec les fabricants, les étoffes d'habillement offrirent au bon goût des acheteurs l'image de l'être préhistorique. Le fond des chapeaux en fut revêtu. Jusqu'aux assiettes, qui reçurent l’empreinte de l’étourdissant phénomène! J’en passe et des meilleurs. Il était impossible de l’éviter. S’habillait-on, se coiffait-on, dinaît-on, c’était toujours dans son intéressante compagnie.

L’effet de cette publicité à haute pression fut immense. Aussi, lorsque le journal, le tambour, les trompettes, les décharges de mousqueterie, anonncèrent que le miracle serait prochainement livré à l’admiration du public, ce fut un hourrah universel. 0n s’occupa dès lors de préparer une salle immense pour contenir, disait la réclame, “non pas les spectateurs enthousiastes dont le nombre serait infini, mais le squelette de l’un de ces géants que la fable accuse d’avoir voulu escalader le ciel.”

Je devais quitter Albany dans quelques jours. Je regrettais vivement que mon séjour ne pût se prolonger, assez pour me permettre d’assister à l’inauguration de ce spectacle unique. D’un autre côté, ne voulant pas partir sans en avoir au moins vu quelque chose, je résolus de me rendre en secret à Exhibition Parc.

Un matin, mon fusil sur l’épaule, je me dirigeai de ce côté. Je marchai pendant trois heures environ vers le Nord, sans avoir pu obtenir de renseignements précis touchant le but que je désirais atteindre. Cependant, à force de chercher l’emplacement de l’ancien fort William, j’arrivai, après avoir fait cinq ou six milles, au terme de mon voyage.

J’étais au milieu d’une immense plaine, dont une faible partie avait été bouleversée par quelques travaux récents mais de peu d’importance. Un espace considérable était hermétiquement fermé par une palissade. J’ignorais si elle délimitait l’emplacement de l’Exposition, mais ce fait me fut confirmé par un chasseur de castors que je rencontrai aux environs, et qui se dirigeait sur la frontière du Canada.

“C’est bien ici, me dit-il, mais je ne sais ce qu’on y prépare, car, ce matin, j’y ai entendu pas mal de coups de carabine.”

Je le remerciai et je continuai mes recherches.

Je ne voyais pas la moindre trace de travaux au dehors. Un silence complet régnait sur cette plaine inculte, à laquelle des constructions gigantesques devaient donner la vie et le mouvement.

Ne pouvant satisfaire ma curiosité sans pénétrer dans l’enceinte, je résolus d’en faire le tour pour voir si je ne découvrirais pas quelque moyen d’accès. Je marchai longtemps sans apercevoir l’apparence d’une porte. Assez désappointé, j’en arrivai à ne plus demander au ciel qu’une fente, un simple trou pour y appliquer mon œil, quand, à un angle de la clôture, j’aperçus des planches et des poteaux renversés.

Je n’hésitai pas à m’introduire dans l’enclos. Je foulai alors un terrain dévasté. Des quartiers de roche que la poudre avait arrachés gisaient çà et là. Des monticules de terre accidentaient le sol, pareils aux vagues d’une mer agitée. J’arrivai enfin sur les bords d’une excavation profonde, au fond de laquelle gisait une grande quantité d’ossements.

J’avais donc devant les yeux l’objet de tant de bruit, de tant de réclames. Ce spectacle n’avait rien de curieux assurément. C’était un amoncellement de fragments osseux de toutes sortes, brisés en mille pièces. La cassure de quelques-uns paraissait même toute récente. Je n’y reconnaissais pas les parties les plus importantes du squelette humain, qui d’après les dimensions annoncées auraient dû être établies sur une échelle monstrueuse. Sans beaucoup d’efforts d’imagination, je pouvais me croire dans un fabrique de noir animal, et voilà tout!

Je demeurais très confus, comme on peut le croire. Je m'imaginais même être le jouet d'une erreur quand j'aperçus sur un talus fortement labouré par des empreintes de pas quelques gouttes de sang. En suivant ces traces, j'arrivai à l'ouverture, où de nouvelles taches de sang, auxquelles je n'avais pas pris garde en entrant, me frappèrent tout à coup. A côté de ses taches, un fragment de papier noirci par la poudre, et qui provenait sans doute de la bourre d'une arme à feu, attira mon attention. Tout cela concordait avec ce que m'avait dit le chasseur de castors.

Je ramassai le fragment de papier. Non sans peine, je déchiffrai quelques-uns des mots qui y étaient tracés. C'était un mémoire de fourniture faite à Mr. Augustus Hopkins par un certain Mr. Barckley. Rien n'indiquait la nature des objets fournis, mais de nouveaux fragments, que je trouvais épars çà et là, me firent comprendre de quoi il s'agissait. Si mon désappointement fut grand, je ne pus, en revanche, maîtriser un rire inextinguible. J'étais bien en présence du géant et de son squelette, mais d'un squelette composé de parties fort hétérogènes, qui avaient jadis vécu sous le nom de buffles, de génisses, de bœufs et de vaches dans les plaines du Kentucky. Mr. Barckley était tout simplement un boucher de New-York qui avait livré d'immenses fournitures d'os au célèbre Mr. Augustus Hopkins! Ces fossiles-là n'avaient certainement jamais entassé Pelion sur Ossa pour escalader l'Olympe! Leurs restes ne se trouvaient en ce lieu que par les soins de l'illustre puffiste, qui s'attendait à les découvrir par hasard, en creusant les fondations de palais qui ne devaient jamais exister!

J'en étais là de mes réflexions et de mon hilarité, qui eût été plus sincère, si, comme mes hôtes eux-mêmes, je n'eusse pas été la victime de cet incroyable humbug, quand des cris de joie éclatèrent au dehors.

J’accourus sur la brèche, et j’aperçus maître Augustus Hopkins en personne, qui accourait, la carabine à la main, en faisant de grandes démonstrations de plaisir. Je me dirigeai vers lui. Il ne sembla nullement inquiet de me voir sur le théâtre de ses exploits.

“Victoire!… Victoire!…” s’écria-t-il.

Les deux nègres Bobby et Dacopa marchaient à une certaine distance derrière lui. Quant à moi, instruit par l’expérience, je me mis sur mes gardes, pensant que l’audacieux mystificateur allait me prendre pour plastron.

“Je suis heureux, me dit-il, d’avoir un témoin de ce qui m’arrive. Vous voyez un homme qui revient de la chasse au tigre.

— De la chasse au tigre!… répétai-je, décidé à ne pas en croire un mot.

— Et au tigre rouge, ajouta-t-il, autrement dit le couguar, qui jouit d’une assez belle renommée de cruauté. Le diable d’animal a pénétré dans mon enclos, comme vous pouvez le constater. Il a brisé ces barrières, qui jusqu’ici avaient résisté à la curiosité générale, et il a mis en pièces mon merveilleux squelette. Aussitôt prévenu, je n’ai pas hésité à le poursuivre jusqu’à la mort. Je l’ai rencontré à trois milles d’ici dans un fourré; je l’ai regardé; il a fixé sur moi ses deux yeux fauves. Il s’est élancé d’un bond qu’il n’a pu achever qu’en se retournant sur lui-même, car je l’ai abattu d’une balle au défaut de l’épaule. C’est le premier coup de fusil que j’aie tiré de ma vie, mais, mille diables! il me fera quelque honneur, et je ne le donnerais pas pour un milliard de dollars.

“Voici les millions qui vont revenir”, pensai-je.

En ce moment, les deux noirs arrivaient, traînant effectivement le cadavre d’un tigre rouge de grande taille, animal à peu près inconnu dans cette partie de l’Amérique. Son pelage était d’un fauve uniforme, ses oreilles noires, et l’extrémité de sa queue noire également. Je ne m’occupai pas de savoir si Hopkins l’avait tué, ou s’il lui avait été fourni convenablement mort, voire empaillé, par un Barckley quelconque, car je fus frappé de la légèreté et de l’indifférence avec laquelle mon spéculateur parlait de son squelette. Et pourtant, il était clair que toute cette affaire lui coûtait alors plus de cent mille francs!

Ne voulant pas lui faire savoir que le hasard m’avait rendu maître du secret de ses mystifications – il eût été capable d’en rendre grâce à la Providence –, je lui dis simplement:

“Comment allez-vous sortir de cette impasse?

— Parbleu! me répondit-il, de quelle impasse parlez-vous? Quoique je fasse maintenant, je réussirai. Une brute a détruit le merveilleux fossile qui eût fait l’admiration du monde entier, car il était absolument unique, mais elle n’a pas détruit mon prestige, mon influence, et je garde le bénéfice de ma position d’homme célèbre.

— Mais comment vous en tirerez-vous vis-à-vis du public enthousiaste et impatient? demandai-je gravement.

— En lui disant la vérité, rien que la vérité.

— La vérité! m’écriai-je, désireux de savoir ce qu’il entendait par ce mot.

— Sans doute, expliqua-t-il le plus tranquillement du monde. N’est-il pas vrai que cet animal a pénétré dans mon enceinte? N’est-il pas vrai qu’il a mis en pièces ces merveilleux ossements que j’avais eu tant de peine à extraire? N’est-il pas vrai que je l’ai poursuivi et tué?

“Voilà, pensai-je, une foule de choses dont je ne jurerais pas.”

— Le public, continua-t-il, ne peut élever ses prétentions au-delà, puisqu’il connaîtra toute l’affaire. J’y gagnerai même une réputation de bravoure, et je ne vois plus guère quel genre de célébrité il me manquera.

— Mais que vous donnera la célébrité?

— La fortune, si je sais en jouer. A l’homme connu, tous les espoirs sont permis. Il peut tout oser, tout entreprendre. Si Washington avait voulu montrer des veaux à deux têtes, après la capitulation de York Town, il eût évidemment gagné beaucoup d’argent.

— C’est possible, répondis-je sérieusement.

— C’est certain, répliqua Augustus Hopkins. Aussi ne suis-je embarrassé que du choix du sujet à montrer, à lancer, à exhiber.

— Oui, dis-je, le choix est difficile. Les ténors sont bien usés, les danseuses ont fait leur temps, et ce qui leur reste de jambes est hors de prix; les frères Siamois ont vécu, et les phoques demeurent muets en dépit des professeurs distingués qui font leur éducation.

— Je ne m’adresserai pas à de semblables merveilles. Quelque usés, éreintés, morts, muets que soient les phoques, les Siamois, les danseuses et les ténors, ils sont encore trop bons pour un homme comme moi, qui vaut tant par lui-même! Je pense donc avoir le plaisir de vous voir à Paris, mon cher Monsieur!

— Compteriez-vous trouver à Paris, lui demandai-je, cet objet de peu de valeur qui doit s’illustrer par votre propre mérite?

— Peut-être, répondit-il sérieusement. Si je mets la main sur quelque fille de portière qui n’ait jamais pu être reçue au Conservatoire, j’en ferai la plus grande cantatrice des deux Amériques!”

Sur ce propos, nous nous saluâmes et je revins à Albany. Le jour même, la terrible nouvelle éclatait. Hopkins fut considéré comme un homme ruiné. Des souscriptions considérables s’ouvrirent en sa faveur. Chacun alla juger à Exhibition parc de l’étendue du désastre, ce qui rapporta pas mal de dollars au spéculateur. Il vendit un prix fou la peau de couguar qui l’avait ruiné si à propos et conserva sa réputation d’homme le plus entreprenant du Nouveau-Monde. Pour moi, je revins à New-York, puis en France, laissant les États-Unis riches sans le savoir d’un superbe humbug de plus. Mais ils n’en sont plus à les compter! J’en rapportais cette conclusion que l’avenir des artistes sans talent, des chanteurs sans gosier, des danseurs sans jarret et des sauteurs sans corde, serait bien affreux, si Christophe Colomb n’avait pas découvert l’Amérique.

AU XXIXe SIECLE

La Journée d’un journaliste américain en 2889

Note de l’édition originale: Cette fantaisie a paru pour la première fois, en langue anglaise, en février 1889, dans la Revue américaine The Forum, puis elle a été reproduite, avec quelques modifications, en langue française. Dans la version actuelle, on s’est parfois référé au texte primitif anglais. M.J.V.

Les hommes de ce XXIXe siècle vivent au milieu d’une féerie continuelle, sans avoir l’air de s’en douter. Blasés sur ces merveilles, ils restent froids devant celles que le progrès leur apporte chaque jour. Tout leur semble naturel. S’ils la comparaient au passé, ils apprécieraient mieux notre civilisation, et ils se rendraient compte du chemin parcouru. Combien leur apparaîtraient plus admirables nos cités modernes aux voies larges de cent mètres, aux maisons hautes de trois cents, à la température toujours égale, au ciel sillonné par des milliers d’aéro-cars et d’aéro-omnibus! Auprès de ces villes, dont la population atteint parfois jusqu’à dix millions d’habitants, qu’étaient ces villages, ces hameaux d’il y a mille ans, ces Paris, ces Londres, ces Berlin, ces New York, bourgades mal aérées et boueuses, où circulaient des caisses cahotantes traînées par des chevaux — oui! des chevaux! c’est à ne pas le croire! S’ils se représentaient le défectueux fonctionnement des paquebots et des chemins de fer, leurs collisions fréquentes, leur lenteur aussi, quel prix les voyageurs n’attacheraient-ils pas aux aéro-trains, et surtout à ces tubes pneumatiques, jetés à travers les océans, et dans lesquels on les transporte avec une vitesse de quinze cents kilomètres à l’heure? Enfin ne jouirait-on pas mieux du téléphone et du téléphote, en se disant que nos pères en étaient réduits à cet appareil antédiluvien qu’ils appelaient le “télégraphe”?

Chose étrange! Ces surprenantes transformations reposent sur des principes parfaitement connus de nos aïeux, qui n’en tiraient, pour ainsi dire, aucun parti. En effet, la chaleur, la vapeur, l’électricité, sont aussi vieilles que l’homme. A la fin du XIXe siècle, les savants n’affirmaient-ils pas déjà que la seule différence entre les forces physiques et chimiques réside dans un mode de vibration, propre à chacune d’elles, des particules éthériques?

Puisqu’on avait fait ce pas énorme de reconnaître la parenté de toutes ces forces, il est vraiment inconcevable qu’il ait fallu un temps si long pour arriver à déterminer chacun des modes de vibration qui les différencient. Il est extraordinaire, surtout, que le moyen de passer directement de l’un à l’autre et de les produire les uns sans les autres aient été découverts tout récemment.

C’est cependant ainsi que les choses se sont passées, et c’est seulement en 2790, il y a cent ans, que le célèbre Oswald Nyer y est parvenu.

Un véritable bienfaiteur de l’humanité, ce grand homme! Sa trouvaille de génie fut la mère de toutes les autres! Une pléiade d’inventeurs en naquit, aboutissant à notre extraordinaire James Jackson. C’est à ce dernier que nous devons les nouveaux accumulateurs qui condensent, les uns la force contenue dans les rayons solaires, les autres l’électricité emmagasinée au sein de notre globe, ceux-là, enfin, l’énergie provenant d’une source quelconque, chutes d’eau, vents, rivières et fleuves, etc. C’est de lui que nous vient également le transformateur qui, obéissant à l’ordre d’une simple manette, puise sa force vive dans les accumulateurs et la rend à l’espace, sous forme de chaleur, de lumière, d’électricité, de puissance mécanique, après en avoir obtenu le travail désiré.

Oui! c’est du jour où ces deux instruments furent imaginés que date véritablement le progrès. Ils ont donné à l’homme une puissance à peu près infinie. Leurs applications ne se comptent plus. En atténuant les rigueurs de l’hiver par la restitution du trop-plein des chaleurs estivales, ils ont révolutionné l’agriculture. En fournissant la force motrice aux appareils de navigation aérienne, ils ont permis au commerce de prendre un magnifique essor. C’est à eux que l’on doit la production incessante de l’électricité sans piles ni machines, la lumière sans combustion ni incandescence, et enfin cette intarissable source d’énergie, qui a centuplé la production industrielle.

Et bien! l’ensemble de ces merveilles, nous allons le rencontrer dans un hôtel incomparable — l’hôtel du Earth Herald, récemment inauguré dans la 16 823e Avenue.

Si le fondateur du New-York Herald, Gordon Bennett, renaissait aujourd’hui, que dirait-il, en voyant ce palais de marbre et d’or, qui appartient à son illustre petit-fils, Francis Bennett? Trente générations se sont succédé, et le New-York Herald s’est maintenu dans cette famille des Bennett. Il y a deux cents ans, lorsque le gouvernement de l’Union fut transféré de Washington à Centropolis, le journal suivit le gouvernement — à moins que ce ne soit le gouvernement qui ait suivi le journal — et il prit pour titre: Earth Herald.

Et que l’on ne s’imagine pas qu’il ait périclité sous l’administration de Francis Bennett. Non! Son nouveau directeur allait au contraire lui inculquer une puissance et une vitalité sans égales, en inaugurant le journalisme téléphonique.

On connaît ce système, rendu pratique par l'incroyable diffusion du téléphone. Chaque matin, au lieu d'être imprimé comme dans les temps antiques, le Earth Herald est “parlé”. C'est dans une rapide conversation avec un reporter, un homme politique ou un savant, que les abonnés apprennent ce qui peut les intéresser. Quant aux acheteurs au numéro, on le sait, pour quelques cents, ils prennent connaissance de l'exemplaire du jour dans d'innombrables cabinets phonographiques.

Cette innovation de Francis Bennett galvanisa le vieux journal. En quelques mois, sa clientèle se chiffra par quatre-vingt-cinq millions d'abonnés, et la fortune du directeur s'éleva progressivement à trente milliards, de beaucoup dépassés aujourd'hui. Grâce à cette fortune, Francis Bennett a pu bâtir son nouvel hôtel -colossale construction à quatre façades, mesurant chacune trois kilomètres, et dont le toit s'abrite sous le glorieux pavillon soixante-quinze fois étoilé de la Confédération.

A cette heure, Francis Bennett, roi des journalistes, serait le roi des deux Amériques, si les Américains pouvaient jamais accepter un souverain quelconque. Vous en doutez? Mais les plénipotentiaires de toutes les nations et nos ministres eux-mêmes se pressent à sa porte, mendiant ses conseils, quêtant son approbation, implorant l'appui de sont tout-puissant organe. Comptez les savants qu'il encourage, les artistes qu'il entretient, les inventeurs qu'il subventionne! Royauté fatigante que la sienne, travail sans repos, et, bien certainement, un homme d'autrefois n'aurait pu résister à un tel labeur quotidien. Très heureusement, les hommes d'aujourd'hui sont de constitution plus robuste, grâce aux progrès de l'hygiène et de la gymnastique, qui de trente-sept ans ont fait monter à soixante-huit la moyenne de la vie humaine — grâce aussi à la préparation des aliments aseptiques, en attendant la prochaine découverte de l'air nutritif, qui permettra de se nourrir... rien qu'en respirant.

Et maintenant, s’il vous plaît de connaître tout ce que comporte la journée d’un directeur du Earth Herald, prenez la peine de le suivre dans ses multiples occupations — aujourd’hui même, ce 25 juillet de la présente année 2889.

Francis Bennett, ce matin-là, s’est réveillé d’assez maussade humeur. Voilà huit jours que sa femme est en France et il se trouve un peu seul. Le croirait-on? Depuis dix ans qu’ils sont mariés, c’était la première fois que Mrs. Edith Bennett, la professional beauty, fait une si longue absence. D’ordinaire, deux ou trois jours suffisent à ses fréquents voyages en Europe, et plus particulièrement à Paris, où elle va acheter ses chapeaux.

Dès son réveil, Francis Bennett mit donc en action son photo-téléphote, dont les fils aboutissent à l’hôtel qu’il possède aux Champs-Elysées.

Le téléphone, complété par le téléphote, encore une conquête de notre époque! si la transmission de la parole par les courants électriques est déjà fort ancienne, c’est d’hier seulement que l’on peut aussi transmettre l’image. Précieuse découverte, dont Francis Bennett ne fut pas le dernier à bénir l’inventeur, lorsqu’il aperçut sa femme, reproduite dans un miroir téléphotique, malgré l’énorme distance qui l’en séparait.

Douce vision! Un peu fatiguée du bal ou du théâtre de la veille, Mrs Bennett est encore au lit. Bien qu’il soit près de midi là-bas, elle dort, sa tête charmante enfouie sous les dentelles de l’oreiller.

Mais la voilà qui s’agite.. ses lèvres tremblent... Elle rêve sans doute?...Oui! elle rêve... Un nom s’échappe de sa bouche: “Francis... mon cher Francis!...”

Son nom, prononcé par cette douce voix, a donné à l’humeur de Francis Bennett un tour plus heureux. Ne voulant pas réveiller la jolie dormeuse, il saute rapidement hors du lit, et pénètre dans son habilleuse mécanique.

Deux minutes après, sans qu’il eût recours à l’aide d’un valet de chambre, la machine le déposait, lavé, coiffé, chaussé, vêtu et boutonné du haut en bas, sur le seuil de ses bureaux. La tournée quotidienne allait commencer.

Ce fut dans la salle des romanciers-feuilletonistes que Francis Bennett pénétra tout d’abord.

Très vaste, cette salle, surmontée d’une large coupole translucide. Dans un coin, divers appareils téléphoniques, par lesquels les cent littérateurs du Earth Herald racontent cent chapitres de cent romans au public enfièvré.

Avisant un des feuilletonistes qui prenait cinq minutes de repos: “Très bien, mon cher, lui dit Francis Bennett, très bien, votre dernier chapitre! La scène où la jeune villageoise aborde avec son galant quelques problèmes de philosophie transcendante est d’une très fine observation. On n’a jamais mieux peint les mœurs champêtres! Continuez, mon cher Archibald, bon courage! Dix mille abonnés nouveaux depuis hier, grâce à vous!

— Mr. John Last, reprit-il en se tournant vers un autre de ses collaborateurs, je suis moins satisfait de vous! Ca n’est pas vécu, votre roman! Vous courez trop vite au but! Eh bien! et les procédés documentaires? Il faut disséquer, John Last, il faut disséquer! Ce n’est pas avec une plume qu’on écrit de notre temps, c’est avec un bistouri! Chaque action dans la vie réelle est la résultante de pensées fugitives et successives, qu’il faut dénombrer avec soi, pour créer un être vivant! Et quoi de plus facile en se servant de l’hypnotisme électrique, qui dédouble l’homme et sépare ses deux personnalités! Regardez-vous vivre, mon cher John Last!

Imitez votre confrère que je complimentais tout à l’heure! Faites-vous hypnotiser... Hein?... Vous le faites, dites vous?... Pas assez, alors, pas assez! “

Cette petite leçon donnée, Francis Bennett poursuit son inspection et pénètre dans la salle du reportage. Ses quinze cents reporters, placés devant un égal nombre de téléphones, communiquaient alors aux abonnés les nouvelles reçues pendant la nuit des quatre coins du monde. L’organisation de cet incomparable service a été souvent décrite. Outre son téléphone, chaque reporter a devant lui une série de commutateurs, permettant d’établir la comunication avec telle ou telle ligne téléphonique. Les abonnés ont donc non seulement le récit, mais la vue des événements. Quant il s’agit d’un “fait divers” déjà passé au moment où on le raconte, on en transmet les phases principales, obtenues par la photographie intensive.

Francis Bennett interpelle un des dix reporters astronomiques — un service qui s’accroîtra avec les récentes découvertes faits dans le monde stellaire.

“Eh bien, Cash, qu’avez-vous reçu?...

— Des phototélégrammes de Mercure, de Vénus et de Mars, Monsieur.

— Intéressant, ce dernier?...

— Oui! une révolution dans le Central Empire, au profit des réactionnaires libéraux contre les républicains conservateurs.

— Comme chez nous, alors! — Et de Jupiter?...

— Rien encore! Nous n’arrivons pas à comprendre les signaux des Joviens. Peut-être les nôtres ne leur parviennent-ils pas?...

— Cela vous regarde, et je vous en rends responsable, monsieur Cash!” répondit Francis Bennett, qui, fort mécontent, gagna la salle de rédaction scientifique.

Penchés sur leurs compteurs, trente savants s’y absorbaient dans des équations du quatre-vingt-quinzième degré. Quelques uns se jouaient même au milieu des formules de l’infini algébrique et de l’espace à vingt-quatre dimensions, comme un élève d’élémentaires avec les quatre règles de l’arithmétique.

Francis Bennett tomba parmi eux à la façon d’une bombe.

“Eh bien, Messieurs, que me dit-on? Aucune réponse de Jupiter?... Ce sera donc toujours la même chose! Voyons, Corley, depuis vingt ans que vous potassez cette planète, il me semble...

— Que voulez-vous, Monsieur, répondit le savant interpellé, notre optique laisse encore beaucoup à désirer, et, même avec nos télescopes de trois kilomètres...

— Vous entendez, Peer! interrompit Francis Bennett, en s’adressant au voisin de Corley. L’optique laisse à désirer!... C’est votre spécialité, cela, mon cher! Mettez des lunettes, que diable! mettez des lunettes! “

Puis, revenant Corley:

“Mais, à défaut de Jupiter, obtenons-nous au moins un résultat du côté de la Lune?...

— Pas davantage, monsieur Bennett!

— Ah, cette fois, vous n’accuserez pas l’optique! La lune est six cent fois moins éloignée que Mars, avec lequel, cependant, notre service de correspondance est régulièrement établi. Ce ne sont pas les télescopes qui manquent...

— Non! mais ce sont les habitants, répondit Corley avec un fin sourire de savant truffé d’X!

— Vous osez affirmer que la Lune est inhabitée?

— Du moins, monsieur Bennett, sur la face qu’elle nous présente. Qui sait si de l’autre côté...

— Et bien, Corley, il y a un moyen très simple de s’en assurer...

— Et lequel?...

— C’st de retourner la Lune! “

Et, ce jour-là, les savants de l’usine Bennett piochèrent les moyens mécaniques qui devaient amener le retournement de notre satellite.

Du reste Francis Bennett avait lieu d’être satisfait. L’un des astronomes du Earth Hearld venait de déterminer les éléments de la nouvelle planète Gandini. C’est à douze trillions, huit cent quarante et un billions, trois cent quarante-huit millions, deux cent quatre-vingt-quatre mille six cent vingt-trois mètres et sept décimètres, que cette planète décrit son orbite autour du Soleil, en cinq cent soixante-douze minutes, neuf secondes et huit dixièmes de seconde.

Francis Bennett fut enchanté de cette précision.

“Bien! sécria-t-il. hâtez-vous d’en informer le service de reportage. Vous savez quelle passion le public apporte à ces questions astronomiques. Je tiens à ce que la nouvelle paraisse dans le numéro d’aujourd’hui! “

Avant de quitter la salle des reporters, Francis Bennett poussa une pointe vers le groupe spécial des interviewers, et s’adressant à celui qui était chargé des personnages célèbres:

“Vous avez interviewé le président Wilcox? demanda-t-il.

— Oui, monsieur Bennett, et je publie dans la colonne des informations que c’est décidément une dilatation de l’estomac dont il souffre, et qu’il se livre aux lavages tubiques les plus consciencieux.

— Parfait. Et cette affaire de l’assassin Chapmann?... Avez-vous interviewé les jurés qui doivent siéger aux Assises?

— Oui, et tous sont d’accord sur la culpabilité, de telle sorte que l’affaire ne sera même pas renvoyée devant eux. L’accusé sera exécuté avant d’avoir été condamné...

— Parfait!... Parfait!...”

La salle adjacente, vaste galerie longue d’un demi-kilomètre, était consacrée la publicité, et l’on imagine aisément ce que doit être la publicité d’un journal tel que le Earth Herald. elle rapporte en moyenne trois millions de dollars par jour. Grâce à un ingénieux système, d’ailleurs, une partie de cette publicité se propage sous une forme absolument nouvelle, due à un brevet acheté au prix de trois dollars à un pauvre diable qui est mort de faim. Ce sont d’immenses affiches, réfléchies par les nuages, et dont la dimension est telle que l’on peut les apercevoir d’une contrée toute entière.

De cette galerie, mille projecteurs étaient sans cesse occupés à envoyer aux nues, qui les reproduisaient en couleur, ces annonces démesurées.

Mais, ce jour-là, lorsque Francis Bennett entre dans la salle de publicité, il voit que les mécaniciens se croisent les bras auprès de leurs projecteurs inactifs. Il s’informe... Pour toute réponse, on lui montre le ciel d’un bleu pur.

“Oui!... du beau temps, murmure-t-il, et pas de publicité aérienne possible! Que faire? Q’il ne s’agissait que de pluie, on pourrait la produire! Mais ce n’est pas de la pluie, ce sont des nuages qu’il nous faudrait!...

— Oui... de beaux nuages bien blancs! répond le mécanicien-chef.

— Eh bien! monsieur Samuel Mark, vous vous adresserez à la rédaction scientifique, service météorologique. Vous lui direz de ma part qu’elle s’occupe activement de la question des nuages artificiels. On ne peut vraiment pas rester ainsi à la merci du beau temps!”

Après avoir achevé l’inspection des diverses branches du journal, Francis Bennett passa au salon de réception, où l’attendaient les ambassadeurs et ministres plénipotentiaires, accrédités auprès du gouvernement américain. Ces messieurs venaient chercher les conseils du tout-puissant directeur. Au moment où Francis Bennett entrait dans ce salon, on y discutait avec une certaine vivacité.

“Que Votre Excellence me pardonne, disait l’ambassadeur de la France à l’ambassadeur de Russie, mais je ne vois rien à changer à la carte de l’Europe. Le Nord aux Slaves, soit! Mais le Midi aux Latins! Notre commune frontière du Rhin me paraît excellente! D’ailleurs, sachez-le bien, mon gouvernement résistera à toute entreprise qui serait faite contre nos préfectures de Rome, de Madrid et de Vienne!

— Bien parlé! dit Francis Bennett, en intervenant dans le débat. Comment, monsieur l’ambassadeur de Russie, vous n’êtes pas satisfait de votre vaste empire, qui, des bords du Rhin, s’étend jusqu’aux frontières de la Chine, un empire dont l’Océan glacial, l’Atlantique, la mer Noire, le Bosphore, l’océan Indien, baignent l’immense littoral? Et puis, à quoi bon des menaces? La guerre est-elle possible avec les inventions modernes, ces obus asphyxiants qu’on envoie à des distances de cent kilomètres, ces étincelles électriques longues de vingt lieux, qui peuvent anéantir d’un seul coup tout un corps d’armée, ces projectiles que l’on charge avec les microbes de la peste, du choléra, de la fièvre jaune, et qui détruiraient toute une nation en quelques heures?

— Nous le savons, monsieur Bennett! répondit l’ambassadeur de Russie. Mais fait-on ce que l’on veut?... Poussés nous-mêmes par les Chinois sur notre frontière orientale, il nous faut bien, coûte que coûte, tenter quelque effort vers l’ouest...

— N’est-ce que cela, Monsieur? répliqua Francis Bennett d’un ton protecteur. Eh bien! puisque la prolification chinoise est un danger pour le monde, nous pèserons sur le Fils du ciel! Il faudra bien qu’il impose à ses sujets un maximum de natalité qu’ils ne pourront dépasser sous peine de mort! Un enfant de trop?... Un père de moins! Cela fera compensation. — Et vous, dit le directeur du Earth Herald en s’adressant au Consul d’Angleterre, que puis-je pour votre service?...

— Beaucoup, monsieur Benett, répondit ce personnage. Il suffirait que votre journal voulût bien entamer une campagne en notre faveur...

— Et à quel propos?...

— Tout simplement pour protester contre l’annexion de la Grande-Bretagne aux Etats-Unis...

— Tout simplement! s’écria Francis Bennett, en haussant les épaules. Une annexion vieille de cent cinquante ans déjà! Mais messieurs les Anglais ne se résigneront donc jamais à ce que, par un juste retour des choses d’ici-bas, leur pays soit devenu colonie américaine? C’est de la folie pure! Comment votre gouvernement a-t-il pu croire que j’entamerais cette antipatriotique campagne...

— Monsieur Bennett, la doctrine de Monroe, c’est toute l’Amérique aux Américains, vous le savez, mais rien que l’Amérique, et non pas...

— Mais l’Angleterre n’est qu’une de nos colonies, Monsieur, l’une des plus belles. Ne comptez pas que nous consentions jamais à la rendre!

— Vous refusez?...

— Je refuse, et si vous insistiez, nous ferions naître un casus belli, rien que sur l’interview d’un de nos reporters!

— C’est donc la fin! murmura le conseil accablé. Le Royaume-Uni, le Canada et la Nouvelle-Bretagne sont aux Américains, les Indes sont aux Russes, l’Australie et la Nouvelle-Zélande sont à elles-mêmes! De tout ce qui fut autrefois l’Angleterre, que nous reste-t-il?... Plus rien!

— Plus rien, Monsieur! riposta Francis Bennett. Eh bien! Et Gibraltar? “

Midi sonnait en ce moment. Le directeur du Earth Herald terminant l’audience d’un geste, quitta le salon, s’assit sur un fauteuil roulant et gagna en quelques minutes sa salle à mander, située à un kilomètre de là, à l’extrémité de l’hôtel.

La table est dressée. Francis Bennett y prend place. A portée de sa main est disposée une série de robinets, et, devant lui, s’arrondit la glace d’un phonotéléphote, sur laquelle apparaît la salle à manger de son hôtel de Paris. Malgré la différence d’heures, Mr. et Mrs. Bennett se sont entendus pour déjeuner en même temps. Rien de charmant comme d’être ainsi en tête à tête malgré la distance, de se voir, de se parler au moyen des appareils phonotéléphoniques.

Mais, en ce moment, la salle de Paris est vide.

“Edith se sera mise en retard! se dit Francis Bennett. Oh! l’exactitude des femmes! Tout progresse, excepté cela!...”

Et, en faisant cette trop juste réflexion, il tourne un des robinets.

Comme tous les gens à leur aise de notre époque, Francis Bennett, renonçant à la cuisine domestique, est une des abonnés de la grande Société d’alimentation à domicile. Cette Société distribue par un réseau de tubes pneumatiques des mets de mille espèces. Ce système est coûteux, sans doute, mais la cuisine est meilleure, et il a cet avantage qu’il supprime la race horripilante des cordons bleus des deux sexes.

Francis Bennett déjeuna donc seul, non sans quelque regret. Il achevait son café, lorsque Mrs. Bennett, rentrant chez elle apparut dans la glace du téléphote.

“D’où viens-tu donc, ma chère Edith? demanda Francis Bennett.

— Tiens! répondit Mrs. Bennett, tu as fini?... Je suis donc en retard?... D’où je viens?... Mais de chez mon modiste!... Il y a cette année, des chapeaux ravissants! Ce ne sont même plus des chapeaux... ce sont des dômes, des coupoles!... Je me serai un peu oubliée!...

— Un peu, ma chère, si bien que voici mon déjeuner fini...

— Eh bien, va, mon ami... va à tes occupations, répondit Mrs. Bennett. J’ai encore une visite à faire chez mon couturier-modeleur.”

Et ce couturier n’était rien moins que le célèbre Wormspire, celui qui a judicieusement dit: “La femme n’est qu’une question de formes!”.

Francis Bennett baisa la joue de Mrs. Bennett sur la glace du téléphone, et se dirigea vers la fenêtre, où l’attendait son aéro-car.

“Où va Monsieur? demanda l’aéro-coachman.

— Voyons... j’ai le temps... répondit Francis Bennett. conduisez-moi à mes fabriques d’accumulateurs du Niagara. “

L’aéro-car, machine admirable fondée sur le principe du plus lourd que l’air, s’élança à travers l’espace, à raison de six cents kilomètres à l’heure. Au-dessous de lui défilaient les villes avec leurs trottoirs mouvants qui transportent les passants le long des rues, les campagnes recouvertes comme d’une immense toile d’araignée du réseau des fils électriques.

En une demi-heure, Francis Bennett eut atteint sa fabrique du Niagara, dans laquelle, après avoir utilisé la force des cataractes à produire de l’énergie, il la vend ou la loue aux consommateurs. Puis, sa visite achevée, il revint par Philadelphie, Boston et New York à Centropolis, où son aéro-car le déposa vers cinq heures.

Il y avait foule dans la salle d’attente du Earth Herald. On guettait le retour de Francis Bennett pour l’audience quotidienne qu’il accorde aux solliciteurs. C’étaient des inventeurs quémandant des capitaux, des brasseurs d’affaires proposant des opérations, toutes excellentes à les entendre. Parmi ces propositions diverses, il faut faire un choix, rejeter les mauvaises, examiner les douteuses, accueillir les bonnes.

Francis Bennett eut rapidement expédié ceux qui n’apportaient que des idées inutiles ou impraticables. L’un ne prétendait-il pas faire revivre la peinture, cet art tombé en telle désuétude que L’Angélus de Millet venait d’être vendu quinze francs, et cela, grâce aux progrès de la photographie en couleur, inventée à la fin du XXe siècle par le Japonais Aruziswa-Riochi-Nichome-Sanjukamboz-Kio-Baski-Kû, dont le nom est devenu si facilement populaire? L’autre n’avait-il pas trouvé le bacille biogène, qui devait rendre l’homme immortel, après avoir été introduit dans l’organisme humain? Celui-ci, un chimiste, ne venait-il pas de découvrir un nouveau corps, le nihilium, dont le gramme ne coûtait que trois millions de dollars? Celui-là, un médecin audacieux, ne prétendait-il pas qu’il possédait un spécifique contre le rhume de cerveau?...

Tous ces rêveurs furent promptement éconduits.

Quelques autres reçurent meilleur accueil, et, d’abord, un jeune homme, dont le vaste front annonçait la vive intelligence.

“Monsieur, dit-il, si autrefois on comptait soixante-quinze corps simples, ce nombre est réduit à trois aujourd’hui, vous le savez?

— Parfaitement, répondit Francis Bennett.

— Eh bien, Monsieur, je suis sur le point de ramener ces trois à un seul. Si l’argent ne me manque pas, dans quelques semaines, j’aurai réussi.

— Et alors?...

— Alors, Monsieur, j’aurai tout bonnement déterminé l’absolu.

— Et la conséquence de cette découverte? ..

— Ce sera la création facile de toute matière, pierre, bois, mtal, fibrine...

— Prétendriez-vous donc parvenir à fabriquer une créature humaine?...

— Entièrement... Il n’y manquera que l’âme!...

— Que cela!” répondit ironiquement Francis Bennett qui attacha cependant ce jeune chimiste à la rédaction scientifique du journal.

Un second inventeur, se basant sur de vieilles expériences, qui dataient du XIXe siècle, et souvent renouvelées depuis, avait l’idée de déplacer une ville entière d’un seul bloc. Il s’agissait, en l’espèce, de la ville de Saaf, située à une quinzaine de milles de la mer, et qu’on transformerait en station balnéaire, après l’avoir amenée sur rails jusqu’au littoral. D’où une énorme plus-value pour les terrains bâtis et à bâtir.

Francis Bennett, séduit par ce projet, consentit à se mettre de moitié dans l’affaire.

“Vous savez, Monsieur, lui dit un troisième postulant, que, grâce à nos accumulateurs et transformateurs solaires et terrestres, nous avons pu égaliser les saisons. Je me propose de faire mieux encore. Transformons en chaleur une part de l’énergie dont nous disposons, et envoyons cette chaleur aux contrées polaires dont elle fondra les glaces...

— Laissez-moi vos plans, répondit Francis Bennett, et revenez dans huit jours!”

Enfin, un quatrième savant apportait la nouvelle que l’une des questions qui passionnait le monde entier allait recevoir sa solution ce soir même.

On sait qu’il y a un siècle, une hardie expérience avait attiré l’attention publique sur le docteur Nathaniel Faithburn. Partisan convaincu de l’hibernation humaine c’est à dire de la possibilité de suspendre les fonctions vitales, puis de les faire renaître après un certain temps, il s’était décidé à expérimenter sur lui-même l’excellence de sa méthode. Après avoir, par testament olographe, indiqué les opérations propres à le ramener à la vie dans cent ans jour pour jour, il s’était soumis à un froid de 172 degrés; réduit alors à l’état de momie, le docteur Faithburn avait été enfermé dans un tombeau pour la période convenue.

Or, c’était précisément ce jour-ci, le 25 juillet2889, que le délai expirait, et l’on venait offrir à Francis Bennett de procéder dans l’une des salles du Earth Herald à la résurrection si impatiemment attendue. Le public pourrait de la sorte être tenu au courant seconde par seconde.

La proposition fut acceptée, et, comme l’opération ne devait pas se faire avant dix heures du soir, Francis Bennett vint s’étendre dans le salon d’audition sur une chaise longue. Puis, tournant un bouton, il se mit en communication avec le Central Concert.

Après une journée si occupée, quel charme il trouva aux œuvres de nos meilleurs maestros, basées, comme on le sait, sur une succession de délicieuses formules harmonico-algébriques!

L’obscurité s’était faite, et, plongé dans un sommeil demi-extatique, Francis Bennett ne s’en apercevait même pas. Mis une porte s’ouvrit soudain.

“Qui va là?” dit-il en touchant un commutateur, placé sous sa main.

Aussitôt par un ébranlement électrique produit sur l’éther, l’air devint lumineux.

“Ah! c’est vous docteur? dit Francis Bennett.

— Mois-même, répondit le docteur Sam, qui venait faire sa visite quotidienne (abonnement à l’année). Comment va?

— Bien!

— Tant mieux... Voyons cette langue?

Et il la regarde au microscope.

— Bonne... Et ce pouls?...

Il le tâta avec un pulsographe, analogue aux instruments qui enregistrent les trépidations du sol.

— Excellent!... Et l’appétit?..

— Euh!

— Oui... l’estomac!... Il ne va plus bien l’estomac! Il vieillit, l’estomac!... Il faudra décidément vous en faire remettre un neuf!...

— Nous verrons! répondit Francis Bennett. En attendant, docteur, vous dînez avec moi!”

Pendant le repas, la communication phonotéléphotique avait été établie avec Paris. Cette fois, Mrs. Bennett était devant sa table, et le dîner, entremêlé des bons mots du docteur Sam, fut charmant. Puis, à peine terminé:

“Quand comptes-tu revenir à Centropolis, ma chère Edith? demanda Francis Bennett.

— Je vais partir à l’instant.

— Par le tube ou l’aéro-train? ..

— Par le tube.

— Alors tu seras ici?...

— A onze heure cinquante neuf du soir.

— Heure de Paris?...

— Non, non!... Heure de Centropolis.

— A bientôt donc, et surtout ne manque pas le tube!”

Ces tubes sous-marins, par lesquels on vient d’Europe en deux cent quatre-vingt-quinze minutes, sont infiniment préférables en effet aux aéro-trains, qui ne font que mille kilomètres à l’heure.

Le docteur s’étant retiré, après avoir promis de revenir pour assister à la résurrection de son confrère Nathaniel Faihtburn, Francis Bennett, voulant arrêter les comptes du jour, passa dans son bureau. Opération énorme, quand il s’agit d’une entreprise dont les frais quotidiens s’élèvent à huit cent mille dollars. Très heureusement, les progrès de la mécanique moderne facilitent singulièrement ce genre de travail. A l’aide du piano-compteur-électrique, Francis Bennett eut bientôt achevé sa besogne.

Il était temps. A peine avait-il frappé la dernière touche de l’appareil totalisateur, que sa présence était réclamée au salon d’expérience. Il s’y rendit aussitôt et fut accueilli par un nombreux cortège de savants, auxquels s’était joint le docteur Sam.

Le corps de Nathaniel Faithburn est là, dans sa bière, qui est placée sur des tréteaux au milieu de la salle.

Le téléphote est actionné. Le monde entier va pouvoir suivre les diverses phases de l’opération.

On ouvre le cercueil... On en sort Nathaniel Faithburn.. Il est toujours comme une momie, jaune, dur, sec. Il résonne comme du bois.. On le soumet à la chaleur, à l’électricité... Aucun résultat.. On l’hypnotise.. On le suggestionne.. Rien n ‘a raison de cet état ultra-cataleptique...

“Eh bien, docteur Sam? » demande Francis Bennett.

Le docteur se penche sur le corps, il l’examine avec la plus vive attention.. Il lui introduit, au moyen d’une injection hypodermique quelques gouttes du fameux élixir Brown-Séquard, qui est encore à la mode.. La momie est momifiée plus que jamais.

“Eh bien, répond le docteur Sam, je crois que l’hibernation a été trop prolongée...

— Ah! ah!...

— Et que Nathaniel Faitburn est mort.

— Mort?...

— Aussi mort qu’on peut l’être!

— Depuis quand serait-il mort?...

— Depuis quand?... répond le docteur Sam. Mais... depuis cent ans, c’est-à-dire depuis qu’il a eu la fâcheuse idée de se faire congeler par amour de la science!...

— Allons, dit Francis Bennett, voilà une méthode qui a besoin d’être perfectionnée!

— Perfectionnée est le mot”, répond le docteur Sam, tandis que la commission scientifique d’hibernation remporte son funèbre colis.

Francis Bennett, suivi du docteur Sam, regagna sa chambre et, comme il paraissait très fatigué après une journée si bien remplie, le docteur lui conseilla de prendre un bain avant de se coucher.

“Vous avez raison, docteur... cela me reposera...

— Tout à fait, monsieur Bennett, et, si vous le voulez, je vais commander en sortant...

— C’est inutile, docteur. Il y a toujours un bain préparé dans l’hôtel, et je n’ai même pas l’ennui d’aller le prendre hors de ma chambre. Tenez, rien qu’en touchant ce bouton, la baignoire va se mettre en mouvement, et vous la verrez se présenter toute seule avec de l’eau à la température de trente-sept degrés!”

Francis Bennett venait de presser le bouton. Un bruit sourd naissait, s’enflait, grandissait... Puis, une des portes s’ouvrit, et la baignoire apparut, glissant sur ses rails...

Ciel! Tandis que le docteur Sam se voile la face, de petits cris de pudeur effarouchée s’échappent de la baignoire..

Arrivée depuis une demi-heure à l’hôtel par le tube trans-océanique, Mrs. Bennett était dedans...

Le lendemain, 26 juillet 2889, le directeur du Earh Herald recommençait, sa tournée de vingt kilomètres à travers ses bureaux, et, le soir, quand son totalisateur eu opéré, ce fut par deux cent cinquante mille dollars qu’il chiffra le bénéfice de cette journée — cinquante mille de plus que la veille.

Un bon métier, le métier de journaliste à la fin du vingt-neuvième siècle!

L’ÉTERNEL ADAM

Le zartog Sofr-Aï-Sr – c’est-à-dire “le docteur troisième représentant mâle de la cent-unième génération de la lignée des Sofr” – suivait à pas lents la principale rue de Basidra, capitale du Hars-Iten-Schu, – autrement dit “l’Empire-des-Quatre-Mers”. Quatre mers, en effet, la Tubélone ou septentrionale, la Ehone ou australe, la Spone ou orientale, et la Mérone ou occidentale, limitaient cette vaste contrée, de forme très irrégulière, dont les pointes extrêmes (à compter d’après les mesures connues du lecteur) atteignaient, en longitude, le quatrième degré Est et le soixante-deuxième degré Ouest, et, en latitude, le cinquante-quatrième degré Nord et le cinquante-cinquième degré Sud. Quant à l’étendue respective de ces mers, comment l’évaluer, fût-ce d’une manière approximative, puisqu’elles se rejoignaient toutes, et qu’un navigateur, quittant l’un quelconque de leurs rivages et voguant toujours devant lui, fût nécessairement arrivé au rivage diamétralement opposé? Car, sur toute la surface du globe, il n’existait pas d’autre terre que celle du Hars-Iten-Schu.

Sofr marchait à pas lents, d’abord parce qu’il faisait très chaud: on entrait dans la saison brûlante, et, sur Basidra, située au bord de la Spone-Schu, ou mer orientale, à moins de vingt degrés au Nord de l’Équateur, une terrible cataracte de rayons tombait du soleil, proche alors du zénith.

Mais, plus que la lassitude et la chaleur, le poids de ses pensées ralentissait les pas de Sofr, le savant zartog. Tout en s’épongeant le front d’une main distraite, il se remémorait la séance qui venait de prendre fin, où tant d’orateurs éloquents, parmi lesquels il s’honorait d’être compté, avaient magnifiquement célébré le cent-quatre-vingt-quinzième anniversaire de la fondation de l’empire.

Les uns en avaient retracé l’histoire, c’est-à-dire celle même de l’humanité tout entière. Ils avaient montré la Mahart-Iten-Schu, la Terre-des-Quatre-Mers, divisée, à l’origine, entre un nombre immense de peuplades sauvages qui s’ignoraient les unes les autres. C’est à ces peuplades que remontaient les plus antiques traditions. Quant aux faits antérieurs, nul ne les connaissait, et c’est à peine si les sciences naturelles commençaient à discerner une faible lueur dans les ténèbres impénétrables du passé. En tout cas, ces temps reculés échappaient à la critique historique, dont les premiers rudîments se composaient de ces vagues notions relatives aux anciennes peuplades éparses.

Pendant plus de huit mille ans, l’histoire, par degrés plus complète et plus exacte, de la Mahart-Iten-Schu ne relatait que combats et guerres, d’abord d’individu à individu, puis de famille à famille, enfin de tribu à tribu, chaque être vivant, chaque collectivité, petite ou grande, n’ayant, dans le cours des âges, d’autre objectif que d’assurer sa suprématie sur ses compétiteurs, et s’efforçant, avec des fortunes diverses et souvent contraires, de les asservir à ses lois.

En deçà de ces huit mille ans, les souvenirs des hommes se précisaient un peu. Au début de la deuxième des quatre périodes en lesquelles on divisait communément les annales de la Mahart-Iten-Schu, la légende commençait à mériter plus justement le nom d’histoire. D’ailleurs, histoire ou légende, la matière des récits ne changeait guère: c’étaient toujours des massacres et des tueries, – non plus, il est vrai, de tribu à tribu, mais de peuple à peuple désormais, – si bien que cette deuxième période n’était pas, à tout prendre, fort différente de la première.

Et il en était de même de la troisième, close il y avait deux cents ans à peine, après avoir duré près de six siècles. Plus atroce encore peut-être, cette troisième époque, pendant laquelle, groupes en armées innombrables, les hommes, avec une rage insatiable, avaient abreuvé la terre de leur sang.

Un peu moins de huit siècles, en effets, avant le jour où le zartog Sofr suivait la principale rue de Basidra, l'humanité s'était trouvée prête pour les vastes convulsions. A ce moment, les armes, le feu, la violence ayant déjà accompli une partie de leur œuvre nécessaire, les faibles ayant succombé devant les forts, les hommes peuplant la Mahart-Iten-Schu formaient trois nations homogènes, dans chacune desquelles le temps avait atténué les différences entre les vainqueurs et les vaincus d'autrefois. C'est alors que l'une de ces nations avait entrepris de soumettre ses voisines. Situés vers le centre de la Mahart-Iten-Schu, les Andarti-Ha-Sammgor, ou Hommes-à-Face-de-Bronze, luttèrent sans merci pour élargir leurs frontières, entre lesquelles étouffait leur race ardente et prolifique. Les uns après les autres, au prix de guerres séculaires, ils vainquirent les Andarti-Mahat-Horis, les Hommes-du-Pays-de-la-Neige, qui habitaient les contrées du Sud, et les Andarti-Mitra-Psul, les Hommes-de-l'Étoile-Immobile, dont l'empire était situé vers le Nord et vers l'Ouest.

Près de deux cents ans s'étaient écoulés depuis que l'ultime révolte de ces deux derniers peuples avait été noyée dans des torrents de sang, et la terre avait connu enfin une ère de paix. C'était la quatrième période de l'histoire. Un seul empire remplaçant les trois nations de jadis, tous obéissant à la loi de Basidra, l'unité politique tendait à fondre les races. Nul ne parlait plus des Hommes-à-Face-de-Bronze, des Hommes-du-Pays-de-la-Neige, des Hommes-de-l'Étoile-Immobile, et la terre ne portait plus qu'un peuple unique, les Andart'-Iten-Schu, les Hommes-des-Quatre-Mers, qui résumait tous les autres en lui.

Mais voici qu’après ces deux cents années de paix une cinquième période semblait s’annoncer. Des bruits fâcheux, venus on ne savait d’où, circulaient depuis quelque temps. Il s’était révélé des penseurs pour réveiller dans les âmes des souvenirs ancestraux qu’on eût pu croire abolis. L’ancien sentiment de la race ressuscitait sous un forme nouvelle, caractérisée par des mots nouveaux. On parlait couramment d’”atavisme”, d’”affinités”, de “nationalités”, etc. – tous vocables de création récente, qui, répondant à un besoin, avaient aussitôt conquis droit de cité. – Suivant les communautés d’origine, d’aspect physique, de tendances, morales, d’intérêts ou simplement de région et de climat, des groupements apparaissaient qu’on voyait grandir peu à peu et qui commençaient a s’agiter. Comment cette évolution naissante tournerait-elle? L’empire allait-il se désagréger à peine formé? La Mahart-Iten-Schu allait-elle être divisée, comme jadis, entre un grand nombre de nations, ou du moins, pour en maintenir l’unité, faudrait-il avoir encore recours aux effroyables hécatombes qui, durant tant de millénaires, avaient fait de la terre un charnier?…

Sofr, d’un mouvement de tête, rejeta ces pensées. L’avenir, ni lui ni personne ne le connaissait. Pourquoi donc s’attrister à l’avance d’événements incertains? D’ailleurs, ce n’était pas le jour de méditer ces sinistres hypothèses. Aujourd’hui, tout était à la joie, et l’on ne devait songer qu’à la grandeur auguste de Mogar-Si, douzième empereur de Hars-Iten-Schu, dont le sceptre menait l’univers à de glorieuses destinées.

Au surplus, pour un zartog, les raisons de se réjouir ne manquaient pas. Outre l’historien qui avait retracé les fastes de la Mahart-Iten-Schu, une pléïade de savants, à l’occasion du grandiose anniversaire, avaient établi, chacun dans sa spécialité, le bilan du savoir humain et marqué le point où son effort séculaire avait amené l’humanité. Or, si le premier avait suggéré, dans une certaine mesure, de tristes réflexions, en racontant par quelle route lente et tortueuse elle s’était évadée de sa bestialité originelle, les autres avaient donné un aliment au légitime orgueil de leur auditoire.

Oui, en vérité, la comparaison entre ce qu’était l’homme, arrivant nu et désarmé sur la terre, et ce qu’il était aujourd’hui, incitait à l’admiration. Pendant des siècles, malgré ses discordes et ses haines fratricides, pas un instant il n’avait interrompu la lutte contre la nature, augmentant sans cesse l’ampleur de sa victoire. Lente tout d’abord, sa marche triomphale s’était étonnamment accélérée depuis deux cents ans, la stabilité des institutions politiques et la paix universelle, qui en était résultée, ayant provoqué un merveilleux essor de la science. L’humanité avait vécu par le cerveau, et non plus seulement par les membres; elle avait réfléchi, au lieu de s’épuiser en guerres insensées, – et c’est pourquoi, au cours des deux derniers siècles, elle avait avancé d’un pas toujours plus rapide vers la connaissance et vers la domestication de la matière…

A grands traits, Sofr, tout en suivant sous le brûlant soleil la longue rue de Basidra, esquissait dans son esprit le tableau des conquêtes de l’homme…

Celui-ci avait d’abord – cela se perdait dans la nuit des temps – imaginé l’écriture, afin de fixer la pensée; puis – l’invention remontait à plus de cinq cents ans – il avait trouvé le moyen de répandre la parole écrite en un nombre infini d’exemplaires, à l’aide d’un moule disposé une fois pour toutes. C’est de cette invention que découlaient en réalité toutes les autres. C’est grâce à elle que les cerveaux s’étaient mis en branle, que l’intelligence de chacun s’était accrue de celle du voisin, et que les découvertes, dans l’ordre théorique et pratique, s’étaient prodigieusement multipliées. Maintenant, on ne les comptait plus.

L’homme avait pénétré dans les entrailles de la terre et il en extrayait la houille, généreuse dispensatrice de chaleur; il avait libéré la force latente de l’eau, et la vapeur tirait désormais sur des rubans de fer des convois pesants ou actionnait d’innombrables machines puissantes, délicates et précises; grâce à ces machines, il tissait les fibres végétales et pouvait travailler à son gré les métaux, le marbre et la roche. Dans un domaine moins concret ou tout au moins d’une utilisation moins directe et moins immédiate, il pénétrait graduellement le mystère des nombres et explorait toujours plus avant l’infini des vérités mathématiques. Par elles, sa pensée avait parcouru le ciel. Il savait que le soleil n’était qu’une étoile gravitant à travers l’espace selon des lois rigoureuses, entraînant les sept planètes2 de son cortège dans son orbe enflammé. Il connaissait l’art, soit de combiner certains corps bruts de manière à en former de nouveaux n’ayant plus rien de commun avec les premiers, soit de diviser certains autres corps en leurs éléments constitutifs et primordiaux. Il soumettait à l’analyse le son, la chaleur, la lumière, et commençait à en déterminer la nature et les lois. Cinquante ans plus tôt, il avait appris à produire cette force dont le tonnerre et les éclairs sont les terrifiantes manifestations, et aussitôt il en avait fait son esclave; déjà cet agent mystérieux transmettait à d’incalculables distances la pensée écrite; demain il transmettrait le son; après-demain, sans doute, la lumière…3 Oui, l’homme était grand, plus grand que l’univers immense, auquel il commanderait en maître, un jour prochain…

Alors pour que l’on possédât la vérité intégrale, ce dernier problème resterait à résoudre: “Cet homme, maître du monde, qui était-il? D’où venait-il? Vers quelles fins inconnues tendait son inlassable effort?”

C’est justement ce vaste sujet que le zartog Sofr venait de traiter au cours de la cérémonie dont il sortait. Certes il n’avait fait que’ l’effleurer car un tel problème était actuellement insoluble et le demeurerait sans doute longtemps encore. Quelques vagues lueurs commençaient pourtant à éclairer le mystère. Et, de ces lueurs, n'était-ce pas le zartog Sofr qui avait projeté les plus puissantes, lorsque, systématisant codifiant les patientes observations de ses remarques personnelles, il avait abouti à sa loi de l'évolution de la matière vivante, loi universellement admise maintenant et qui ne rencontrait plus un seul contradicteur?

Cette théorie reposait sur une triple base.

Sur la science géologique, tout d'abord, qui, née du jour où l'on avait fouillé les entrailles du sol, s'était perfectionnée selon le développement des exploitations minières. L'écorce du globe était si parfaitement connue que l'on osait fixer son âge à quatre cent mille ans, et à vingt mille ans celui de la Mahart-Iten-Schu telle qu'elle existait aujourd'hui. Auparavant, ce continent dormait sous les easb de la mer, comme en témoignait l'épaisse couche de limon marin qui recouvrait, sans aucune interruption, les couches rocheuses sous-jacentes. Par quel mécanisme avait-il jailli hors des flots? Sans doute, par suite d'une contraction du globe refroidi. Quoi qu'il en fût à cet égard, l'émersion de la Mahart-Iten-Schu devait être considérée comme certaine.

Les sciences naturelles avaient fourni à Sofr les deux autres fondements de son système, en démontrant l'étroite parenté des plantes entre elles, des animaux entre eux. Sofr était allé plus loin: il avait prouvé jusqu'à l'évidence que presque tous les végétaux existants se reliaient à une plante marine leur ancêtre, et que presque tous les animaux terrestres ou aériens dérivaient d'animaux marins, hune lente mais incessante évolution, ceux-ci s'étaient adaptés peu à pu à dés conditions de vie, d'abord voisines, ensuite plus éloignées, de celles de leur vie primitive, et, de stade en stade, ils avaient donné naissance à la plupart des formes vivantes qui peuplaient la terre et le ciel.

Malheureusement, cette théorie ingénieuse n’était pas inattaquable. Que les êtres vivants de l’ordre animal ou végétal procédassent d’ancêtres marins, cela paraissait incontestable pour presque tous, mais non pour tous. Il existait, en effet, quelques plantes et quelques animaux qu’il semblait impossible de rattacher à des formes aquatiques. Là était un des deux points faibles du système.

L’homme – Sofr ne se le dissimulait pas – était l’autre point faible. Entre l’homme et les animaux, aucun rapprochement n’était possible. Certes les fonctions et les propriétés primordiales, telles que la respiration, la nutrition, la motilité étaient les mêmes et s’accomplissaient ou se révélaient sensiblement de pareille manière, mais un abîme infranchissable subsistait entre les formes extérieures, le nombre et la disposition des organes. Si, par une chaîne dont peu de maillons manquaient, on pouvait rattacher la grande majorité des animaux à des ancêtres issus de la mer, une pareille filiation était inadmissible en ce qui concernait l’homme. Pour conserver intacte la théorie de l’évolution, on était donc dans la nécessité d’imaginer gratuitement l’hypothèse d’une souche commune aux habitants des eaux et à l’homme, souche dont rien, absolument rien, ne démontrait l’existence antérieure.

Un moment, Sofr avait espéré trouver dans le sol des arguments favorables à ses préférences. A son instigation et sous sa direction, des fouilles avaient été faites pendant une longue suite d’années, mais pour aboutir à des résultats diamétralement opposés à ceux qu’en attendait le promoteur.

Après avoir traversé une mince pellicule d’humus formée par la décomposition de plantes et d’animaux semblables ou analogues à ceux qu’on voyait tous les jours, on était arrivé à l’épaisse couche de limon, où les vestiges du passé avaient changé de nature. Dans ce limon, plus rien de la flore ni de la faune existantes, mais un amas colossal de fossiles exclusivement marins et dont les congénères vivaient encore, le plus souvent, dans les océans ceinturant la Mahart-Iten-Schu.

Qu’en fallait-il conclure, sinon que les géologues avaient raison en professant que le continent avait jadis servi de fond à ces mêmes océans, et que Sofr, non plus, n’avait pas tort en affirmant l’origine marine de la faune et de la flore contemporaines? Puisque, sauf des exceptions si rares qu’on était en droit de les considérer comme des monstruosités, les formes aquatiques et les formes terrestres étaient les seules dont on relevât la trace, celles-ci avaient été nécessairement engendrées par celles là…

Malheureusement pour la généralisation du système, on fit encore d’autres trouvailles. Épars dans toute l’épaisseur de l’humus, et jusque dans la partie la plus superficielle du dépôt de limon, d’innombrables ossements humains furent ramenés au jour. Rien d’exceptionnel dans la structure de ces fragments de squelettes, et Sofr dut renoncer à leur demander les organismes intermédiaires dont l’existence eût affirmé sa théorie: ces ossements étaient des ossements d’homme, ni plus, ni moins.

Cependant une particularité assez remarquable ne tarda pas à être constatée. Jusqu’à une certaine antiquité, qui pouvait être grossièrement évaluée à deux ou trois mille ans, plus l’ossuaire était ancien, plus les crânes découverts étaient de petite taille. Par contre, au delà de ce stade, la progression se renversait, et, dès lors, plus on reculait, dans le passe, plus augmentait la capacité de ces crânes et, par suite, la grandeur des cerveaux qu’il avaient contenus. Le maximum fut rencontré précisément parmi les débris, d’ailleurs fort rares, trouvés à la superficie de la couche de limon.

L’examen consciencieux de ces restes vénérables ne permit pas de douter que les hommes vivant à cette lointaine époque n’eussent dès lors acquis un développement cérébral de beaucoup supérieur à celui de leurs successeurs, – y compris les contemporains du zartog Sofr eux-mêmes. – Il y avait donc eu, pendant cent soixante ou cent soixante-dix siècles, régression manifeste, suivie d’une nouvelle ascension.

Sofr, troublé par ces faits étranges, poussa ses recherches plus avant. La couche de limon fut traversée de part en part, sur une épaisseur telle que, selon les avis les plus modérés, le dépôt n’en avait pas exigé moins de quinze ou vingt mille ans. Au delà, on eut la surprise de trouver de faibles restes d’une ancienne couche d’humus, puis, au-dessous de cet humus, ce fut la roche, de nature variable selon le siège des recherches. Mais, ce qui porta l’étonnement à son comble, ce fut de ramener quelques débris d’origine incontestablement humaine arrachés à ces profondeurs mystérieuses. C’étaient des parcelles d’ossements ayant appartenu à des hommes, et aussi des fragments d’armes ou de machines, des morceaux de poterie, des lambeaux d’inscriptions en langage inconnu, des pierres dures finement travaillées, parfois sculptées en forme de statues presque intactes, des chapiteaux délicatement ouvragés, etc. etc. De l’ensemble de ces trouvailles, on fut logiquement amené à induire qu’environ quarante mille ans plus tôt, c’est-à-dire vingt mille avant le moment où avaient surgi, on ne savait d’où ni comment, les premiers représentants de la race contemporaine, des hommes avaient déjà vécu dans ces mêmes lieux et y étaient parvenus à un degré de civilisation fort avancée.

Telle fut, en effet, la conclusion généralement admise. Toutefois il y eut au moins un dissident.

Ce dissident n’était autre que Sofr. Admettre que d’autres hommes, séparés de leurs successeurs par un abîme de vingt mille ans, eussent une première fois peuplé la terre, c’était, à son estime, pure folie. D’où seraient venus, dans ce cas, ces descendants d’ancêtres depuis longtemps disparus et auxquels nul lien ne les rattachait? Plutôt que d’accueillir une hypothèse aussi absurde, mieux valait rester dans l’expectative. De ce que ces faits singuliers ne fussent pas expliqués, il ne fallait pas conclure qu’ils fussent inexplicables. On les interpréterait un jour. Jusque-là, il convenait de n’en tenir aucun compte et de rester attaché à ces principes, qui satisfont pleinement la raison pure:

La vie planétaire se divise en deux phases: avant l’homme, depuis l’homme. Dans la première, la terre, en état de perpétuelle transformation, est, pour cette cause, inhabitable et inhabitée. Dans la seconde, l’écorce du globe est arrivée à un degré de cohésion permettant la stabilité. Aussitôt, ayant enfin un substratum solide, la vie apparaît. Elle débute par les formes les plus simples, et va toujours se compliquant pour aboutir finalement à l’homme, son expression dernière et la plus parfaite. L’homme, à peine apparu sur la terre, commence aussitôt et poursuit sans arrêt son ascension. D’une marche lente mais sûre, il s’achemine vers sa fin, qui est la connaissance parfaite et la domination absolue de l’univers…

Emporté par la chaleur de ses convictions, Sofr avait dépassé sa maison. Il fit volte-face en maugréant.

“Eh quoi! se disait-il, admettre que l’homme – il y aurait quarante mille ans! – soit parvenu à une civilisation comparable, sinon supérieure à celle dont nous jouissons présentement, et que ses connaissances, ses acquisitions aient disparu sans laisser la moindre trace, au point de contraindre ses descendants à recommencer l’œuvre par la base, comme s’ils étaient les pionniers d’un monde inhabité avant eux?… Mais ce serait nier l’avenir, proclamer que notre effort est vain et que tout progrès est aussi précaire et peu assuré qu’une bulle d’écume à la surface des flots!”

Sofr fit halte devant sa maison.

“Upsa ni!… hartchok!… (Non, non!… en vérité!…), Andart mir’hoë spha!…” (L’homme est le maître des choses!…) – murmura-t-il en poussant la porte.

* * *

Quand le zartog se fut reposé quelques instants, il déjeuna de bon appétit, puis s’étendit pour faire sa sieste quotidienne. Mais les questions qu’il avait agitées en regagnant son domicile continuaient à l’obséder et chassaient le sommeil.

Quel que fût son désir d’établir l’irréprochable unité des méthodes dé la nature, il avait trop d’esprit critique pour méconnaître combien était faible son système dès qu’on abordait le problème de l’origine et de la formation de l’homme. Contraindre les faits à cadrer avec une hypothèse préalable, c’est une manière d’avoir raison contre les autres, ce n’en est pas une d’avoir raison contre soi-même.

Si, au lieu d’être un savant, un très éminent zartog, Sofr avait fait partie de la classe des illettrés, il eût été moins embarrassé. Le peuple, en effet, sans perdre son temps à de profondes spéculations, se contentait d’accepter, les yeux fermés, la vieille légende que, de temps immémorial, on se transmettait de père en fils. Expliquant le mystère par un autre mystère, elle faisait remonter l’origine de l’homme à l’intervention d’une volonté supérieure. Un jour, cette puissance extra-terrestre avait créé de rien Hedom et Hiva, le premier homme et la première femme, dont les descendants avaient peuplé la terre. Ainsi tout s’enchaînait très simplement.

Trop simplement songeait Sofr. Quand on désespère de comprendre quelque chose, il est vraiment trop facile de faire intervenir la divinité: de cette façon, il devient inutile de chercher la solution des énigmes de l’univers, les problèmes étant supprimés aussitôt que posés.

Si encore la légende populaire avait eu, ne fût-ce que l’apparence d’une base sérieuse!… Mais elle ne reposait sur rien. Ce n’était qu’une tradition, née aux époques d’ignorance, et transmise ensuite d’âge en âge. Jusqu’à ce nom: “Hedom!…” D’où venait ce vocable bizarre à la consonance étrangère, qui ne semblait pas appartenir à la langue des Andart’-Iten-Schu? Rien que sur cette petite difficulté philologique, une infinité de savants avaient pâli, sans trouver de réponse satisfaisante… Allons! billevesées que tout cela, indignes de retenir l’attention d’un zartog!…

Sofr, agacé, descendit dans son jardin. Aussi bien était-ce l’heure où il avait coutume de le faire. Le soleil déclinant versait sur la terre une chaleur moins brûlante, et une brise tiède commençait à souffler de la Spone-Schu. Le zartog erra par les allées, à l’ombre des arbres, dont les feuilles frissonnantes murmuraient au vent du large, et, peu à peu, ses nerfs retrouvèrent leur équilibre habituel. Il put secouer ses absorbantes pensées, jouir paisiblement du plein air, s’intéresser aux fruits, richesse des jardins, aux fleurs, leur parure. Le hasard de la promenade l’ayant ramené vers sa maison, il s’arrêta au bord d’une profonde excavation, où gisaient de nombreux outils. Là seraient jetés à bref délai les fondements d’une construction neuve qui doublerait la surface de son laboratoire. Mais, en ce jour de fête, les ouvriers avaient abandonné leur travail pour se livrer au plaisir.

Sofr estimait machinalement l’ouvrage déjà fait et l’ouvrage qui restait à faire, quand, dans la pénombre de l’excavation, un point brillant attira ses yeux. Intrigué, il descendit au fond du trou et dégagea un objet singulier de la terre qui le recouvrait aux trois quarts.

Remonté au jour, le zartog examina sa trouvaille. C’était une sorte d’étui, fait d’un métal inconnu, de couleur grise, de texture granuleuse, et dont un long séjour dans le sol avait atténué l’éclat. Au tiers de sa longueur, une fente indiquait que l’étui était formé de deux parties s’emboîtant l’une dans l’autre: Sofr essaya de l’ouvrir.

A sa première tentative, le métal, désagrégé par le temps, se réduisit en poussière, découvrant un second objet qui y était inclus.

La substance de cet objet était aussi nouvelle pour le zartog que le métal qui l’avait protégé jusqu’alors. C’était un rouleau de feuillets superposés et criblés de signes étranges, dont la régularité montrait qu’ils étaient des caractères d’écriture, mais d’une écriture inconnue, et telle que Sofr n’en avait jamais vu de semblable, ni même d’analogue.

Le zartog, tout tremblant d’émotion, courut s’enfermer dans son laboratoire, et, ayant étalé avec soin le précieux document, il le considéra.

Oui, c’était bien de l’écriture, rien de plus certain. Mais il ne l’était pas moins que cette écriture ne ressemblait en rien à aucune de celles que, depuis l’origine des temps historiques, on avait pratiquées sur toute la surface de la terre.

D’où venait ce document? Que signifiait-il? Telles furent les deux questions qui se posèrent d’elles-mêmes à l’esprit de Sofr.

Pour répondre à la première il fallait nécessairement être en état de répondre à la seconde. Il s’agissait donc, tout d’abord, de lire, de traduire ensuite, – car on pouvait affirmer *a priori* que la langue du document serait aussi ignorée que son écriture.

Cela était-il impossible? Le zartog Sofr ne le pensa pas, et, sans plus tarder, il se mit fiévreusement au travail.

Ce travail dura longtemps, longtemps. des années entières. Sofr ne se lassa point. Sans se décourager, il poursuivit l’étude méthodique du mystérieux document, avançant pas à pas vers la lumière. Un jour vint enfin où il posséda la clef de l’indéchiffrable rébus, un jour vint où, avec beaucoup d’hésitation et beaucoup de peine encore, il put le traduire dans la langue des Hommes-des-Quatre-Mers.

Or, quand ce jour arriva, le zartog Sofr-Aï-Sr lut ce qui suit:

Rosario, le 24 mai 2…

Je date de cette façon le début de mon récit, bien qu’en réalité il ait été rédigé à une autre date beaucoup plus récente et en des lieux bien différents. Mais, en pareille matière, l’ordre est, à mon sens, impérieusement nécessaire, et c’est pourquoi j’adopte la forme d’un “journal”, écrit au jour le jour.

C’est donc le 24 mai que commence le récit des effroyables événements que j’entends ici rapporter pour l’enseignement de ceux qui viendront après moi, si toutefois l’humanité est encore en droit de compter sur un avenir quelconque.

En quelle langue écrirai-je? En anglais ou en espagnol, que je parle couramment? Non! j’écrirai dans la langue de mon pays: en français.

Ce jour-là, le 24 mai, j’avais réuni quelques amis dans ma villa de Rosario.

Rosario est ou plutôt était une ville du Mexique, sur le rivage du Pacifique, un peu au sud du golfe de Californie. Une dizaine d’années auparavant, je m’y étais installé pour diriger l’exploitation d’une mine d’argent qui m’appartenait en propre. Mes affaires avaient étonnamment prospéré. J’étais un homme riche, très riche même, – ce mot-là me fait bien rire aujourd’hui! – et je projetais de rentrer à bref délai en France, ma patrie d’origine.

Ma villa, des plus luxueuses, était située au point culminant d’un vaste jardin qui descendait en pente vers la mer et finissait brusquement en une falaise à pic, de plus de cent mètres de hauteur. En arrière de ma villa, le terrain continuait à monter, et, par des routes en lacets, on pouvant atteindre la crête de montagnes dont l’altitude dépassait quinze cent mètres. Souvent, c’était une agréable promenade, – j’en avais fait l’ascension dans mon automobile, un superbe et puissant double phaéton de trente-cinq chevaux, de l’une des meilleures marques françaises.

J’étais installé à Rosario avec mon fils, Jean, un beau garçon de vingt ans, quand, à la mort de parents éloignés par le sang, mais près de mon cœur, je recueillis leur fille, Hélène, restée orpheline et sans fortune. Depuis cette époque, cinq ans s’étaient écoulés. Mon fils Jean avait vingt-cinq ans; ma pupille Hélène, vingt ans. Dans le secret de mon âme, je les destinais l’un à l’autre.

Notre service était assuré par un valet de chambre, Germain, par Modeste Simonat, un chauffeur des plus débrouillards, et par deux femmes, Edith et Mary, filles de mon jardinier, George Raleigh, et de son épouse, Anna.

Ce jour-là, 24 mai, nous étions huit assis autour de ma table, à la lumière des lampes qu’alimentaient des groupes électrogènes installés dans le jardin. Il y avait, outre le maître de céans, son fils et sa pupille, cinq autres convives, dont trois appartenaient à la race anglo-saxonne et deux à la nation mexicaine.

Le docteur Bathurst figurait parmi les premiers, et le docteur Moreno parmi les seconds. C’étaient deux savants, dans la plus large acception du mot, ce qui ne les empêchait pas d’être rarement d’accord. Au demeurant, de braves gens et les meilleurs amis du monde.

Les deux autres Anglo-Saxons avaient nom Williamson, propriétaire d’une importante pêcherie de Rosario, et Rowling, un audacieux qui avait fondé aux environs de la ville un établissement de primeurs, où il était en train de récolter une sérieuse fortune.

Quant au dernier convive, c’était le señor Mendoza, président du tribunal de Rosario, homme estimable, esprit cultivé, juge intègre.

Nous arrivâmes sans incident notable à la fin du repas. Les paroles qu’on avait prononcées jusque-là, je les ai oubliées. Par contre, il n’en est pas ainsi de ce qui fut dit au moment des cigares.

Non pas que ces propos eussent par eux-mêmes une importance particulière, mais le commentaire brutal qui devait bientôt en être fait ne laisse pas de leur donner quelque piquant, et c’est pourquoi ils ne sont jamais sortis de mon esprit.

On en était venu – comment, peu importe! – à parler des progrès merveilleux accomplis par l’homme. Le docteur Bathurst dit, à un certain moment:

“Il est de fait que si Adam (naturellement, en sa qualité d’Anglo-Saxon, il prononçait *Edem*) et Eve (il prononçait *Iva*, bien, entendu) revenaient sur la terre, ils seraient joliment étonnés!”

Ce fut l’origine de la discussion. Fervent darwiniste, partisan convaincu de la sélection naturelle, Moreno demanda d’un ton ironique à Bathurst si celui-ci croyait sérieusement à la légende du Paradis terrestre. Bathurst répondit qu’il croyait du moins en Dieu, et que, l’existence d’Adam et d’Eve étant affirmée par la Bible, il s’interdisait de la discuter. Moreno repartit qu’il croyait en Dieu au moins autant que son contradicteur, mais que le premier homme et la première femme pouvaient fort bien n’être que des mythes, des symboles, et qu’il n’y avait rien d’impie, par conséquent, à supposer que la Bible eût voulu figurer ainsi le souffle de vie introduit par la puissance créatrice dans la première cellule, de laquelle toutes les autres avaient ensuite procédé. Bathurst riposta que l’explication était spécieuse, et que, en ce qui le concernait, il estimait plus flatteur d’être l’œuvre directe de la divinité que d’en descendre par l’intermédiaire de primates plus ou moins simiesques…

Je vis le moment où la discussion allait s’échauffer, quand elle cessa tout à coup, les deux adversaires ayant par hasard trouvé un terrain d’entente. C’est ainsi, d’ailleurs, que les choses finissaient d’ordinaire.

Cette fois, revenant à leur premier thème, les deux antagonistes s'accordaient à admirer, quelle que fût l'origine de l'humanité, la haute culture ou elle était parvenue; ils énuméraient ses conquêtes avec orgueil. Toutes y passèrent. Bathurst vanta la chimie, poussée à un tel degré de perfection qu'elle tendait à disparaître pour se confondre avec la physique, les deux sciences n'en formant plus qu'une, ayant pour objet l'étude de l'immanente énergie. Moreno fit l'éloge de la médecine et de la chirurgie, grâce auxquelles on avait pénétré l'intime nature du phénomène de la vie et dont les prodigieuses découvertes permettaient d'espérer, pour un avenir prochain, l'immortalité des organismes animés. Après quoi, tous deux se congratulèrent des hauteurs atteintes par l'astronomie. Ne conversait-on pas maintenant, en attendant les étoiles, avec sept des planètes du système solaire?…,".4

Fatigués par leur enthousiasme, les deux apologistes prirent un petit temps de repos. Les autres convives en profitèrent pour placer un mot, à leur tour, et l'on entra dans le vaste champ des inventions pratiques qui avaient si profondément modifié la condition de l'humanité. On célébra les chemins de fer et les steamers, affectés au transport des marchandises lourdes et encombrantes, les aéronefs économique, utilisées par les voyageur à qui le temps ne manque pas, les tubes pneumatiques ou électronique sillonnant tous les continents et toutes les mers, adoptés par les gens pressés. On célébra les innombrables machines, plus ingénieuses les unes que les autres, dont une seule, dans certaines industries, exécute le travail de cent hommes. On célébra l'imprimerie, la photographie des couleurs et de la lumière, celle du son, de la chaleur et de toutes les vibrations de l'éther. On célébra surtout l'électricité, cet agent si souple, si docile et si parfaitement connu dans ses propriétés et dans son essence, qui permet, sans le moindre connecteur matériel, soit d'actionner un mécanisme quelconque, soit de diriger un vaisseau marin, sous-marin ou aérien, soit de s’écrire, de se parler ou de se voir, et cela quelque grande que soit la distance.

Bref, ce fut un vrai dithyrambe, dans lequel je fis ma partie, je l’avoue. On s’accorda sur ce point que l’humanité avait atteint un niveau intellectuel inconnu avant notre époque, et qui autorisait à croire à sa victoire définitive sur la nature.

“Cependant, fit de sa petite voix flûtée le président Mendoza, profitant de l’instant de silence qui suivit cette conclusion finale, je me suis laissé dire que des peuples, aujourd’hui disparus sans laisser la moindre trace, étaient déjà parvenus à une civilisation égale ou analogue à la nôtre.

— Lesquels? - interrogea la table, tout d’une voix.

— Eh mais!… les Babyloniens, par exemple.”

Ce fut une explosion d’hilarité. Oser comparer les Babyloniens aux hommes modernes!

“Les Égyptiens”, continuait don Mendoza tranquillement.

On rit plus fort autour de lui.

“Il y a aussi les Atlantes, que notre ignorance seule rend légendaires, poursuivit le président. Ajoutez qu’une infinité d’autres humanités, antérieures aux Atlantes eux-mêmes, ont pu naître, prospérer et s’éteindre sans que nous en ayons aucune connaissance!”

Don Mendoza persistant dans son paradoxe, on consentit, afin de ne pas le froisser, à faire semblant de le prendre au sérieux.

“Voyons, mon cher président, insinua Moreno, du ton que l’on a soin d’adopter pour faire entendre raison à un enfant, vous ne voulez pas prétendre, j’imagine, qu’aucun de ces anciens peuples puisse être comparé à nous?… Dans l’ordre moral, j’admets qu’ils se soient élevés à un égal degré de culture, mais dans l’ordre matériel!…

— Pourquoi pas? objecta don Mendoza.

— Parce que, s’empressa d’expliquer Bathurst, le propre de nos inventions est qu’elles se répandent instantanément par toute la terre: la disparition d’un seul peuple, ou même d’un grand nombre de peuples, laisserait donc intacte la somme de progrès accomplis. Pour que l’effort humain fût perdu, il faudrait que toute l’humanité disparût à la fois. Est-ce là, je vous le demande, une hypothèse admissible?…”

Pendant que nous causions ainsi, les effets et les causes continuaient à s’engendrer réciproquement dans l’infini de l’univers, et, moins d’une minute après la question que venait de poser le docteur Bathurst, leur résultante totale n’allait que trop justifier le scepticisme de Mendoza. Mais nous n’en avions aucun soupçon, et nous discourions paisiblement, les uns renversés sur le dossier de leur siège, les autres accoudés sur la table, tous faisant converger des regards compatissants vers Mendoza que nous supposions accablé par la réplique de Bathurst.

“D’abord, répondit le président sans s’émouvoir, il est à croire que la terre avait jadis moins d’habitants qu’elle n’en a aujourd’hui, de telle sorte qu’un peuple pouvait fort bien posséder à lui seul le savoir universel. Ensuite, je ne vois rien d’absurde, *a priori*, à admettre que toute la surface du globe soit bouleversée en même temps.

— Allons donc! nous écriâmes-nous, à l’unisson.

Ce fut à cet instant précis que survint le cataclysme.

Nous prononcions encore tous ensemble cet: “Allons donc!” qu’un vacarme effroyable s’éleva. Le sol trembla et manqua sous nos pieds, fa villa oscilla sur ses fondements.

Nous heurtant, nous bousculant, en proie à une terreur indicible, nous nous précipitâmes au dehors.

A peine avions-nous franchi le seuil, que la maison s’écroulait, d’un seul bloc, ensevelissant sous ses décombres le président Mendoza et mon valet de chambre Germain, qui venaient les derniers. Après quelques secondes d’un affolement bien naturel, nous nous disposions à leur porter secours, quand nous aperçûmes Raleigh, mon jardinier, qui accourait, suivi de sa femme, du bas du jardin, où il habitait.

“La mer!… la mer!…” criait-il à pleins poumons.

Je me retournai du côté de l’océan et demeurai sans mouvement, frappé de stupeur. Ce n’est pas que je me rendisse nettement compte de ce que je voyais, mais j’eus sur-le-champ la claire notion que la perspective coutumière était changée. Or, cela ne suffisait-il pas à glacer le cœur d’épouvante que l’aspect de la nature, de cette nature que nous considérons comme immuable par essence, eût été si étrangement modifié en quelques secondes?

Cependant je ne tardai pas à recouvrer mon sang-froid. La véritable supériorité de l’homme, ce n’est pas de dominer, de vaincre la nature; c’est pour le penseur, de la comprendre, de faire tenir l’univers immense dans le microcosme de son cerveau; c’est, pour l’homme d’action, de garder une âme sereine devant la révolte de la matière, c’est de lui dire: “Me détruire, soit! m’émouvoir, jamais!…”

Dès que j’eus reconquis mon calme, je compris en quoi le tableau que j’avais sous les yeux différait de celui que j’étais accoutumé de contempler. La falaise avait disparu, tout simplement, et mon jardin s’était abaissé jusqu’au ras de la mer, dont les vagues, après avoir anéanti la maison du jardinier, battaient furieusement mes plates-bandes les plus basses. Comme il était peu admissible que le niveau de l’eau eût monté, il fallait nécessairement que celui de la terre eût descendu. La descente dépassait cent mètres, puisque la falaise avait précédemment cette hauteur, mais elle avait dû ce faire avec une certaine douceur, car nous ne nous en étions guère aperçus, ce qui expliquait le calme relatif de l’océan.

Un bref examen me convainquit que mon hypothèse était juste et me permit, en outre, de constater que la descente n’avait pas cessé, La mer continuait à gagner, en effet, avec une vitesse qui me parut voisine de deux mètres à la seconde, – soit sept ou huit kilomètres à l’heure. – Étant donné la distance qui nous séparait des premières vagues, nous allions par conséquent être engloutis en moins de trois minutes, si la vitesse de chute demeurait uniforme.

Ma décision fut rapide:

“A l’auto!” m’écriai-je.

On me comprit. Nous nous élançâmes tous vers la remise, et l’auto fut traînée au dehors. En un clin d’œil, on fit le plein d’essence, puis nous nous entassâmes au petit bonheur. Mon chauffeur Simonat actionna le moteur, sauta au volant, embraya et partit sur la route en quatrième vitesse, tandis que Raleigh, ayant ouvert la grille, agrippait l’auto au passage et se cramponnait aux ressorts d’arrière.

Il était temps! Au moment où l’auto atteignait la route, une lame vint, en déferlant, mouiller les roues jusqu’au moyeu. Bah! désormais nous tions nous rire de la poursuite de la mer. En dépit de sa charge excessive, ma bonne machine saurait nous mettre hors de ses atteintes, et, à moins que la descente vers l’abîme ne dût indéfiniment continuer… En somme, nous avions du champ devant nous: deux heures au moins de montée et une altitude disponible de près de quinze cents mètres.

Pourtant je ne tardai pas à reconnaître qu’il ne convenait pas encore de crier victoire. Après que le premier bond de la voiture nous eut portés à une vingtaine de mètres de la frange d’écume, c’est en vain que Simonat ouvrit les gaz en grand: cette distance ne s’accrut pas. Sans doute, le poids des douze personnes ralentissait l’allure de la voiture. Quoi qu’il en fût, cette allure était tout juste égale à celle de l’eau envahissante, qui restait invariablement à la même distance.

Cette inquiétante situation fut bientôt connue, et tous, sauf Simonat, appliqué à diriger sa voiture, nous nous retournâmes vers le chemin que nous laissions en arrière. On n’y voyait plus rien que de l’eau. A mesure que nous l’avions conquise, la route disparaissait sous la mer qui la conquérait à son tour. Celle-ci s’était calmée. A peine si quelques rides venaient doucement mourir sur une grève toujours nouvelle. C’était un lac paisible qui gonflait, gonflait toujours, d’un mouvement uniforme, et rien n’était tragique comme la poursuite de cette eau calme. En vain nous fuyions devant elle, l’eau montait, implacable, avec nous…

Simonat, qui tenait les yeux fixés sur la route, dit, à un tournant:

“Nous voici à moitié de la pente. Encore une heure de montée.”

Nous frissonnâmes: eh quoi! dans une heure, nous allions atteindre le sommet, et il nous faudrait redescendre, chassés, rejoints alors, quelle que fût notre vitesse, par les masses liquides qui s’écrouleraient en avalanche à notre suite!…

L’heure s’écoula sans que rien fût changé dans notre situation. Déjà, nous distinguions le point culminant de la côte, quand la voiture éprouva une violente secousse et fit une embardée qui faillit la fracasser sur le talus de la route. En même temps, une vague énorme s’enfla derrière nous, courut à l’assaut de la route, se creusa, et déferla finalement sur l’auto, qui fut entourée d’écume… Allions-nous donc être engloutis?…

Non! l’eau se retira en bouillonnant, tandis que le moteur, précipitant tout à coup ses halètements, augmentait notre allure.

D’où provenait ce subit accroissement de vitesse? Un cri d’Anna Raleigh nous le fit comprendre: ainsi que la pauvre femme venait de constater, son mari n’était plus cramponné aux ressorts. Sans doute, le remous avait arraché le malheureux, et c’est pourquoi ta voiture délestée gravissait plus allégrement la pente.

Soudain, elle s’arrêta sur place.

“Qu’y a-t-il? demandai-je à Simonat. Une panne?”

Même dans ces circonstances tragiques, l’orgueil professionnel ne perdit pas ses droits: Simonat haussa les épaules avec dédain, entendant par là me signifier que la panne était inconnue d’un chauffeur de sa sorte, et, de la main, il montra silencieusement la route. L’arrêt me fut alors expliqué.

La route était coupée à moins de dix mètres en avant de nous. “Coupée” est le mot juste: on l’eût dite tranchée au couteau. Au delà d’une arête vive qui la terminait brusquement, c’était le vide, un abîme de ténèbres, au fond duquel il était impossible de rien distinguer.

Nous nous retournâmes, éperdus, certains que notre dernière heure avait sonné. L’océan, qui nous avait poursuivis jusque sur ces hauteurs, allait nécessairement nous atteindre en quelques secondes…

Tous, sauf la malheureuse Anna et ses filles, qui sanglotaient à fendre l’âme, nous poussâmes un cri de joyeuse surprise. Non, l’eau n’avait pas continué son mouvement ascensionnel, ou, plus exactement, la terre avait cessé de s’enfoncer. Sans doute, la secousse que nous venions de ressentir avait été l’ultime manifestation du phénomène. L’océan s’était arrêté, et son niveau restait en contre-bas de près de cent mètres du point sur lequel nous étions groupés autour de l’auto encore trépidante, pareille à un animal essoufflé par une course rapide.

Réussirions-nous à nous tirer de ce mauvais pas? Nous ne le saurions qu’au jour. Jusque-là, il fallait attendre. L’un après l’autre, nous nous étendîmes donc sur le sol, et je crois, Dieu me pardonne, que je m’endormis!…

Dans la nuit.

Je suis réveillé en sursaut par un bruit formidable. Quelle heure est-il? Je l’ignore. En tout cas, nous sommes toujours noyés dans les ténèbres de la nuit.

Le bruit sort de l’abîme impénétrable dans lequel la route s’est effondrée. Que se passe-t-il?… On jurerait que des masses d’eau y tombent en cataractes, que des lames gigantesques s’y entrechoquent avec violence… Oui, c’est bien cela, car des volutes d’écume arrivent jusqu’à nous, et nous sommes couverts par les embruns.

Puis le calme renaît peu à peu… Tout rentre dans le silence… Le ciel pâlit… C’est le jour.

25 mai.

Quel supplice que la lente révélation de notre situation véritable! D’abord, nous ne distinguons que nos environs immédiats, mais le cercle grandit, grandit sans cesse, comme si notre espoir toujours déçu avait soulevé l’un après l’autre un nombre infini de voiles légers: – et c’est enfin la pleine lumière, qui détruit nos dernières illusions.

Notre situation est des plus simples et peut se résumer en quelques mots: nous sommes sur une île. La mer nous entoure de toutes parts. Hier encore, nous aurions aperçu tout un océan de sommets, dont plusieurs dominaient celui sur lequel nous nous trouvons: ces sommets ont disparu, tandis que, pour des raisons qui resteront à jamais inconnues, le nôtre, plus humble cependant, s’est arrêté dans sa chute tranquille; à leur place, s’étale une nappe d’eau sans limite. De tous côtés, rien que la mer. Nous occupons le seul point solide du cercle immense décrit par l’horizon.

Il nous suffit d’un coup d’œil pour connaître dans toute son étendue l’îlot où une chance extraordinaire nous a fait trouver asile. Il est de petite taille, en effet: mille mètres, au plus en longueur, et cinq cents dans l’autre dimension. Vers le Nord, l’Ouest et le Sud, son sommet, élevé d’à peu près cent mètres au-dessus des flots, les rejoint par une pente assez douce. A l’Est, au contraire, l’îlot se termine en une falaise qui tombe à pic dans l’océan.

C’est de ce côté surtout que nos yeux se tournent. Dans cette direction, nous devrions voir des montagnes étagées, et, au delà, le Mexique tout entier. Quel changement dans l’espace d’une courte nuit de printemps! Les montagnes ont disparu, le Mexique a été englouti! A leur place, c’est un désert infini, le désert aride de la mer!

Nous nous regardons, épouvantés. Parqués, sans vivres, sans eau, sur ce roc étroit et nu, nous ne pouvons conserver le moindre espoir. Farouches, nous nous couchons sur le sol, et nous commençons à attendre la mort.

A bord de la Virginia, 4 juin.

Que s’est-il passé pendant les jours suivants? Je n’en ai pas gardé le souvenir. Il est à supposer que je perdis finalement connaissance; je ne retrouve conscience qu’à bord du navire qui nous a recueillis. Alors seulement, j’apprends que nous avons séjourné dix jours entiers sur l’îlot et que deux d’entre nous, Williamson et Rowling, y sont morts de soif et de faim. Des quinze êtres vivants qu’abritait ma villa au moment du cataclysme, il n’en reste que neuf: mon fils Jean et ma pupille Hélène, mon chauffeur Simonat, inconsolable de la perte de sa machine, Anna Raleigh et ses deux filles, les docteurs Bathurst et Moreno, – et moi enfin, moi, qui me hâte de rédiger ces lignes pour l’édification des races futures; en admettant qu’il en doive naître.

La *Virginia*, qui nous porte, est un bâtiment mixte, – à vapeur et à voiles, – de deux mille tonneaux environ, consacré au transport des marchandises. C’est un assez vieux navire, médiocre marcheur. Le capitaine Morris a vingt hommes sous ses ordres. Le capitaine et l’équipage sont anglais.

La *Virginia* a quitté Melbourne sur lest, il y a un peu plus d'un mois, à destination de Rosario. Aucun incident n'a marqué son voyage, sauf, dans la nuit du 24 au 25 mai, une série de lames de fond d'une hauteur prodigieuse, mais d'une longueur proportionnée, ce qui les a rendues inoffensives. Quelque singulières qu'elles fussent, ces lames ne pouvaient faire prévoir au capitaine le cataclysme qui s'accomplissait au même instant. Aussi a-t-il été très surpris en ne voyant que la mer à l'endroit où il comptait rencontrer Rosario et le littoral mexicain. De ce littoral, il ne subsistait plus qu'un îlot. Un canot de la *Virginia* aborda cet îlot, sur lequel onze corps inanimés furent découverts. Deux n'étaient plus que des cadavres; on embarqua les neuf autres. C'est ainsi que nous fûmes sauvés.

A terre. – *Janvier ou février*.

Un intervalle de huit mois sépare les dernières lignes qui précèdent des premières qui vont suivre. Je date celles-ci de janvier ou février, dans l'impossibilité où je suis d'être plus précis, car je n'ai plus une exacte notion du temps.

Ces huit mois constituent la période la plus atroce de nos épreuves, celle où, par degrés cruellement ménagés, nous avons connu tout notre malheur.

Après nous avoir recueillis, la *Virginia* continua sa route vers l'Est, à toute vapeur. Quand je revins à moi, l'îlot où nous avions failli mourir était depuis longtemps sous l'horizon. Comme l'indiqua le point, que le capitaine prit par un ciel sans nuages, nous naviguions alors juste à l'endroit où aurait dû être Mexico. Mais, de Mexico, il ne demeurait aucune trace, – pas plus qu'on n'en avait trouvé, pendant mon évanouissement, des montagnes du centre, pas plus qu'on n'en distinguait maintenant d'une terre quelconque, si loin que portât la vue; de tous côtés, ce n’était que l’infini de la mer.

Il y avait, dans cette constatation, quelque chose de véritablement affolant. Nous sentions la raison près de nous échapper. Eh quoi! le Mexique entier englouti!… Nous échangions des regards épouvantés, en nous demandant jusqu’où s’étaient étendus les ravages de l’effroyable cataclysme…

Le capitaine voulut en avoir le cœur net; modifiant sa route, il mit le cap au Nord; si le Mexique n’existait plus, il n’était pas admissible qu’il en fût de même de tout le continent américain.

Il en était de même, pourtant. Nous remontâmes vainement au Nord pendant douze jours, sans rencontrer la terre, et nous ne la rencontrâmes pas davantage après avoir viré cap pour cap et nous être dirigés vers le Sud pendant près d’un mois. Quelque paradoxale qu’elle nous parût, force nous fut de nous rendre à l’évidence: oui, la totalité du continent américain s’était abîmée sous les flots!

N’avions-nous donc été sauvés que pour connaître une seconde fois les affres de l’agonie? En vérité, nous avions lieu de le craindre. Sans parler des vivres qui manqueraient un jour ou l’autre, un danger pressant nous menaçait; que deviendrions-nous quand l’épuisement du charbon frapperait la machine d’immobilité? Ainsi cesse de battre le cœur d’un animal exsangue. C’est pourquoi, le 14 juillet, – nous nous trouvions alors à peu près sur l’ancien emplacement de Buenos-Ayres, – le capitaine Morris laissa tomber les feux et mit à la voile. Cela fait, il réunit tout le personnel de la *Virginia*, équipage et passagers, et, nous ayant exposé en peu de mots la situation, il nous pria d’y réfléchir mûrement et de proposer la solution qui aurait nos préférences au conseil qui serait tenu le lendemain.

Je ne sais si quelqu'un de mes compagnons d'infortune se fût avisé d'un expédient plus ou moins ingénieux. Pour ma part, hésitais, je l'avoue, très incertain du meilleur parti à prendre, quand une tempête qui s'éleva dans la nuit trancha la question; il nous fallut fuir dans l'Ouest, emportés par un vent déchaîné, à chaque instant sur le point d'être engloutis par une mer furieuse.

L'ouragan dura trente-cinq jours, sans une minute d'interruption, voire même de détente. Nous commencions à désespérer qu'il finît jamais, lorsque, le 19 août, le beau temps revint avec la même soudaineté qu'il avait cessé. Le capitaine en profita pour faire le point: le calcul lui donna 40° de latitude Nord et 114° de longitude Est. C'étaient les coordonnées de Pékin!

Donc, nous avions passé au-dessus de la Polynésie, et peut-être de l'Australie, sans même nous en rendre compte, et là nous voguions maintenant s'étendait jadis la capitale d'un empire de quatre cents millions d'âmes!

L'Asie avait-elle donc eu le sort de l'Amérique?

Nous en fûmes bientôt convaincus. La *Virginia*, continuant sa route cap au Sud-Ouest, arriva à la hauteur du Thibet, puis à celle de l'Himalaya. Ici auraient dû s'élever les plus hauts sommets du globe. Eh bien, dans toutes les directions, rien n'émergeait de la surface de l'océan. C'était à croire qu'il n'existait plus, sur la terre, d'autre point solide que l'îlot qui nous avait sauvés, – que nous étions les seuls survivants du cataclysme, les derniers habitants d'un monde enseveli dans le mouvant linceul de la mer!

S’il en était ainsi, nous ne tarderions pas à périr à notre tour. Malgré un rationnement sévère, les vivres du bord s’épuisaient, en effet, et nous devions perdre, en ce cas, tout espoir de les renouveler…

J’abrège le récit de cette navigation effarante. Si, pour la raconter en détail, j’essayais de la revivre jour par jour, le souvenir me rendrait fou. Pour étranges et terribles que soient les événements qui l’ont précédée et suivie, quelque lamentable que m’apparaisse l’avenir, – un avenir que je ne verrai pas, – c’est encore durant cette navigation infernale que nous avons connu le maximum de l’épouvante. Oh! cette course éternelle sur une mer sans fin! S’attendre tous les jours à aborder quelque part et voir sans cesse reculer le terme du voyage! Vivre penchés sur des cartes où les hommes avaient gravé la ligne sinueuse des rivages, et constater que rien, absolument rien, n’existe plus de ces lieux qu’ils pensaient éternels! Se dire que la terre palpitait de vies innombrables, que des millions d’hommes et des myriades d’animaux la parcouraient en tous sens ou en sillonnaient l’atmosphère, et que tout est mort à la fois, que toutes ces vies se sont éteintes ensemble comme une petite flamme au souffle du vent! Acquérir peu à peu la certitude qu’autour de soi il n’existe rien de vivant, et prendre graduellement conscience de sa solitude au milieu d’un impitoyable univers!…

Ai-je trouvé les mots convenables pour exprimer notre angoisse? Je ne sais. Dans aucune langue il n’en doit exister d’adéquats à une situation sans précédent.

Après avoir reconnu la mer où était jadis la péninsule indienne, nous remontâmes au Nord pendant dix jours, puis nous mîmes le cap à l’Ouest. Sans que notre condition changeât le moins du monde, nous franchîmes la chaîne de l’Oural devenue montagnes sous-marines, et nous naviguâmes au-dessus de ce qui avait été l’Europe. Nous descendîmes ensuite vers le Sud, jusqu’à vingt degrés au delà de l’Équateur; après quoi, lassés de notre inutile recherche nous reprîmes la route du Nord et traversâmes, jusque passé les Pyrénées, une étendue d’eau qui recouvrait l’Afrique et l’Espagne. En vérité nous commencions à nous habituer à notre épouvante. A mesure que nous avancions, nous pointions notre route sur les cartes, et nous disions: “Ici, c’était Moscou… Varsovie… Berlin… Vienne… Rome… Tunis… Tombouctou… Saint-Louis… Oran… Madrid…”, mais avec une indifférence croissante, et, l’accoutumance aidant, nous en arrivions à prononcer sans émotion ces paroles, en réalité si tragiques.

Pourtant, moi tout au moins, je n’avais pas épuisé ma capacité de souffrance. Je m’en aperçus, le jour – c’était à peu près le 11 décembre – où le capitaine Morris me dit: “Ici, c’était Paris…” A ces mots, je crus qu’on m’arrachait l’âme. Que l’univers entier fût englouti, soit! Mais la France – ma France! – et Paris, qui la symbolisait!…

A mes côtés, j’entendis comme un sanglot. Je me retournai; c’était Simonat qui pleurait.

Pendant quatre jours encore, nous poursuivîmes notre route vers le Nord; puis, arrivés à la hauteur d’Edimbourg, on redescendit vers le Sud-Ouest, en quête de l’Irlande, puis la route fut donnée à l’Est… En réalité, nous errions au hasard, car il n’y avait pas plus de raison d’aller dans une direction que dans une autre…

On passa au-dessus de Londres, dont la tombe liquide fut saluée de tout l’équipage. Cinq jours après, nous étions à la hauteur de Dantzig, quand le capitaine Morris fit virer cap pour cap et ordonna de gouverner au Sud-

Ouest. Le timonier obéit passivement. Qu’est-ce que cela pouvait bien lui faire? De tous côtés, ne serait-ce pas la même chose?…

Ce fut le neuvième jour de navigation à cette aire de compas que nous mangeâmes notre dernier morceau de biscuit.

Comme nous nous regardions avec des yeux hagards, le capitaine Morris commanda tout à coup de rallumer les feux. A quelle pensée obéissait-il? j’en suis encore à me le demander; mais l’ordre fut exécuté: la vitesse du navire s’accéléra…

Deux jours plus tard, nous souffrions déjà cruellement de la faim. Le surlendemain, presque tous refusèrent obstinément de se lever; il n’y eut que le capitaine, Simonat, quelques hommes de l’équipage et moi, pour avoir l’énergie d’assurer la direction du navire.

Le lendemain, cinquième jour de jeûne, le nombre des timoniers et des mécaniciens bénévoles décrut encore. Dans vingt-quatre heures, personne n’aurait plus la force de se tenir debout.

Nous naviguions alors depuis plus de sept mois. Depuis plus de sept mois, nous labourions la mer en tous sens. Nous devions être, je crois, le 8 janvier, – je dis: “Je crois”, dans l’impossibilité où je suis d’être plus précis, le calendrier ayant dès lors perdu pour nous beaucoup de sa rigueur.

Or, ce fut ce jour-là, pendant que je tenais la barre et que je consacrais à garder la ligne de foi toute mon attention défaillante, qu’il me sembla discerner quelque chose dans l’Ouest. Croyant être le jouet d’une erreur, j’écarquillai les yeux…

Non, je ne m’étais pas trompé!

Je poussais un véritable rugissement, puis, me cramponnant à la barre, je criai d’une voix forte:

“Terre par tribord devant!

Quel effet magique eurent ces mots! Tous les moribonds ressuscitèrent à la fois, et leurs figures hâves apparurent au-dessus de la lisse de tribord.

“C’est bien la terre,” dit le capitaine Morris, après avoir examiné le nuage qui émergeait à l’horizon.

Une demi-heure plus tard, il était impossible de conserver le moindre doute. C’était bien la terre que nous trouvions en plein océan Atlantique, après l’avoir vainement cherchée sur toute la surface des anciens continents!

Vers trois heures de l’après-midi, le détail du littoral qui nous barrait la route devint perceptible, et nous sentîmes renaître notre désespoir. C’est qu’en vérité ce littoral ne ressemblait à aucun autre, et nul d’entre nous n’avait souvenir d’en avoir jamais vu d’une si absolue, d’une si parfaite sauvagerie.

Sur la terre, telle que nous l’habitions avant le désastre, le vert était une couleur très abondante. Nul d’entre nous ne connaissait de côte si déshéritée, de contrée si aride, qu’il s’y rencontrât quelques arbustes, voire quelques touffes d’ajoncs, voire simplement des traînées de lichens ou de mousses. Ici, rien de tel. On ne distinguait qu’une haute falaise noirâtre, au pied de laquelle gisait un chaos de rochers, sans une plante, sans un seul brin d’herbe. C’était la désolation dans ce qu’elle peut avoir de plus total, de plus absolu.

Pendant deux jours, nous longeâmes cette falaise abrupte sans y découvrir la moindre fissure. Ce fut seulement vers le soir du second que nous découvrîmes une vaste baie, bien abritée contre tous les vents du large, au fond de laquelle nous laissâmes tomber l’ancre.

Après avoir gagné la terre dans les canots, notre premier soin fut de récolter notre nourriture sur la grève. Celle-ci était couverte de tortues par centaines et de coquillages par millions. Dans les interstices des récifs, on voyait des crabes, des homards et des langoustes en quantité fabuleuse, sans préjudice d’innombrables poissons. De toute évidence, cette mer si richement peuplée suffirait, à défaut d’autres ressources, à assurer notre subsistance pendant un temps illimité.

Quand nous fûmes restaurés, une coupure de la falaise nous permit d’atteindre le plateau, où nous découvrîmes un large espace. L’aspect du rivage ne nous avait pas trompés; de tous côtés, dans toutes les directions, ce n’étaient que roches arides, recouvertes d’algues et de goëmons généralement desséchés, sans le plus petit brin d’herbe, sans rien de vivant, ni sur la terre, ni dans le ciel. De place en place, de petits lacs, des étangs plutôt, brillaient aux rayons du soleil. Ayant voulu nous désaltérer nous reconnûmes que l’eau en était salée.

Nous n’en fûmes pas surpris, à vrai dire. La fait confirmait ce que nous avions supposé de prime abord, à savoir que ce continent inconnu était né d’hier et qu’il était sorti, d’un seul bloc, des profondeurs de la mer. Cela expliquait son aridité, comme sa parfaite solitude. Cela expliquait encore cette épaisse couche de vase uniformément répandue, qui, par la suite de l’évaporation, commençait à se craqueler et à se réduire en poussière…

Le lendemain, à midi, le point donna 17° 20’ de latitude Nord et 23° 55’ de longitude Ouest. En le reportant sur la carte, nous pûmes voir qu’il se trouvait bien en pleine mer, à peu près à la hauteur du Cap Vert. Et pourtant, la terre, dans l’Ouest, la mer, dans l’Est, s’étendaient maintenant à perte de vue.

Quelque rébarbatif et inhospitalier que fût le continent sur lequel nous avions pris pied, force nous était de nous en contenter. C’est pourquoi le déchargement de la *Virginia* fut entrepris sans plus attendre. On monta sur le plateau tout ce qu’elle contenait, sans choix. Auparavant, on avait affourché solidement le bâtiment sur quatre ancres, par quinze brasses de fond. Dans cette baie tranquille, il ne courait aucun risque, et nous pouvions sans inconvénient l’abandonner à lui-même.

Dès que le débarquement fut achevé, notre nouvelle vie commença. En premier lieu, il convenait…

Arrivé à ce point de sa traduction, le zartog Sofr dut l’interrompre. Le manuscrit avait à cet endroit une première lacune, probablement fort importante d’après la quantité de pages intéressées, lacune suivie de plusieurs autres plus considérables encore, autant qu’il était possible d’en juger. Sans doute, un grand nombre de feuillets avaient été atteints par l’humidité, malgré la protection de l’étui: il ne subsistait, en somme, que des fragments plus ou moins étendus, dont le contexte était à jamais détruit. Ils se succédaient dans cet ordre:

… commençons à nous acclimater.

Combien y a-t-il de temps que nous avons débarqué sur cette côte? Je n’en sais plus rien. Je l’ai demandé au docteur Moreno, qui tient un calendrier des jours écoulés. Il m’a dit: “Six mois…”, en ajoutant: “à quelques jours près”, car il craint de s’être trompé.

Nous en sommes déjà là! Il n’a fallu que six mois pour que nous ne soyons plus très sûrs d’avoir mesuré exactement le temps. Cela promet!

Notre négligence n’a, au surplus, rien de bien étonnant. Nous employons toute notre attention, toute notre activité, à conserver notre vie. Se nourrir est un problème dont la solution exige la journée entière. Que mangeons-nous? Des poissons, quand nous en trouvons, ce qui devient chaque jour moins facile, car notre poursuite incessante les effarouche. Nous mangeons aussi des œufs de tortue et certaines algues comestibles. Le soir, nous sommes repus, mais exténués, et nous ne pensons qu’à dormir.

On a improvisé des tentes avec les voiles de la *Virginia*. J’estime qu’il faudra construire à bref délai un abri plus sérieux.

Parfois nous tirons un oiseau: l’atmosphère n’est pas si déserte que nous l’avions supposé d’abord; une dizaine d’espèces connues sont représentées sur ce continent nouveau. Ce sont exclusivement des longs courriers: hirondelles, albatros, cordonniers et quelques autres. Il faut croire qu’ils ne trouvent pas leur nourriture sur cette terre sans végétation, car ils ne cessent de tournoyer autour de notre campement, à l’affût des reliefs de nos misérables repas. Parfois nous en ramassons un que la faim a tué, ce qui épargne notre poudre et nos fusils.

Heureusement, il y a des chances pour que la situation devienne moins mauvaise. Nous avons découvert un sac de blé dans la cale de la *Virginia*, et nous en avons semé la moitié. Ce sera une grande amélioration, quand ce blé aura poussé. Mais germera-t-il? Le sol est recouvert d’une couche épaisse d’alluvion, vase sableuse engraissée par la décomposition des algues. Si médiocre qu’en soit la qualité, c’est de l’humus tout de même. Lorsque nous avons abordé, il était imprégné de sel; mais, depuis, des pluies diluviennes en ont copieusement lavé la surface, puisque toutes les dépressions sont maintenant pleines d’eau douce.

Toutefois la couche alluvionnaire n’est débarrassée de sel que sur une très faible épaisseur: les ruisseaux, les rivières même, qui commencent à se former, sont tous fortement saumâtres, et cela prouve qu’elle est encore saturée en profondeur.

Pour semer le blé et pour conserver l’autre moitié en réserve, il a presque fallu se battre: une partie de l’équipage de la *Virginia* voulait en faire du pain tout de suite. Nous avons été contraints de…

… que nous avions à bord de la *Virginia*. Ces deux couples de lapins se sont sauvés dans l’intérieur, et on ne les a plus revus. Il faut croire qu’ils ont trouvé de quoi se nourrir. La terre, à notre insu, produirait-elle donc…

… deux ans, au moins que nous sommes ici!… Le blé a réussi admirablement. Nous avons du pain presque à discrétion, et nos champs gagnent toujours en étendue. Mais quelle lutte contre les oiseaux! Ils se sont étrangement multipliés, et, tout autour de nos cultures…

Malgré les décès que j'ai relatés ci-dessus, la petite tribu que nous formons n'a pas diminué, au contraire. Mon fils et ma pupille ont trois enfants. et chacun des trois autres ménages en a autant. Toute cette marmaille éclate de santé. C'est à croire que l'espèce humaine possède une vigueur plus grande, une vitalité plus intense, depuis qu'elle est si réduite en nombre. Mais que de causes…

… ici depuis dix ans, et nous ne savions rien de ce continent. Nous ne le connaissions que sur un rayon de quelques kilomètres autour du lieu de notre débarquement. C'est le docteur Bathurst qui nous a fait honte de notre veulerie: à son instigation, nous avons armé la *Virginia,* ce qui a demandé près de six mois, et nous avons fait un voyage d'exploration.

Nous voilà revenus d'avant-hier. Le voyage a duré plus que nous ne pensions, parce que nous avons voulu qu'il fût complet.

Nous avons fait le tour du continent qui nous porte et qui, tout nous incite à le croire, doit être, avec notre îlot, la dernière parcelle solide existant à la surface du globe. Ses rivages nous ont semblé partout pareils, c'est-à-dire très heurtés et très sauvages.

Notre navigation a été coupée de plusieurs excursions dans l'intérieur: nous espérions, notamment, trouver trace des Açores et de Madère, – situées, avant le cataclysme, dans l'Océan Atlantique, et qui doivent, en conséquence, faire nécessairement partie du continent nouveau. – Nous n'en avons pas reconnu le moindre vestige. Tout ce que nous avons pu constater, c'est que le sol était bouleversé et recouvert d'une épaisse couche de lave, sur l'emplacement de ces îles, qui, sans doute, ont été le siège de violents phénomènes volcaniques.

Par exemple, si nous n’avons pas découvert ce que nous cherchions, nous avons découvert ce que nous ne cherchions pas! A moitié pris dans la lave, a la hauteur des Açores, des témoignages d’un travail humain nous sont apparus, – mais non pas du travail des Açoriens, nos contemporains d’hier. – C’étaient des débris de colonnes ou de poteries, telles que nous n’en avions jamais vu. Examen fait, le docteur Moreno émit l’idée que ces débris devaient provenir de l’antique Atlantide, et que le flux volcanique les aurait ramenés au jour.

Le docteur Moreno a peut-être raison. La légendaire Atlantide aurait occupé, en effet, si elle a jamais existé, à peu près la place du nouveau continent. Ce serait, dans ce cas, une chose singulière que la succession aux mêmes lieux de trois humanités ne procédant pas l’une de l’autre.

Quoi qu’il en soit, j’avoue que le problème me laisse froid: nous avons assez à faire avec le présent, sans nous occuper du passé.

Au moment où nous avons regagné notre campement, ceci nous a frappés que, par rapport au reste du pays, nos alentours semblaient une région favorisée. Cela tient uniquement à ce que la couleur verte, jadis si abondante dans la nature, n’y est pas tout à fait inconnue, tandis qu’elle est radicalement supprimée dans le reste du continent. Nous n’avions jamais fait cette observation jusqu’alors, mais la chose est indéniable. Des brins d’herbe, qui n’existaient pas lors de notre débarquement, jaillissent maintenant assez nombreux autour de nous. Ils n’appartiennent, d’ailleurs, qu’à un petit nombre l’espèces parmi les plus vulgaires dont les oiseaux auront, sans doute, transporté les graines jusqu’ici.

Il ne faudrait pas conclure de ce qui précède qu’il n’y a pas de végétation hormis ces quelques espèces anciennes. Par suite d’un travail d’adaptation des plus étrange, il existe, au contraire, une végétation, à l’état, tout au moins, de rudiment, de promesse, sur tout le continent.

Les plantes marines, dont celui-ci était couvert quand il a jailli hors des flots, sont mortes, pour la plupart, à la lumière du soleil. Quelques-unes cependant ont persisté, dans les lacs, les étangs et les flaques d’eau que la chaleur a progressivement desséchés. Mais, à cette époque, des rivières et des ruisseaux commençaient à naître, d’autant plus propres à la vie des goëmons et des algues que l’eau en était salée. Lorsque la surface, puis la profondeur du sol eurent été privées de sel, et que l’eau devint douce, l’immense majorité de ces plantes furent détruites. Un petit nombre d’entre elles, cependant, ayant pu se prêter aux nouvelles conditions de vie, prospérèrent dans l’eau douce comme elles avaient prospéré dans l’eau salée. Mais le phénomène ne s’est pas arrêté là: quelques-unes de ces plantes, douées d’un pouvoir d’accommodation plus grand, se sont adaptées au plein air, après s’être adaptées à l’eau douce, et, sur les berges tout d’abord, puis de proche en proche, ont gagné vers l’intérieur.

Nous avons surpris cette transformation sur le vif, et nous avons pu constater combien les formes se modifiaient en même temps que le fonctionnement physiologique. Déjà quelques tiges s’érigent timidement vers le ciel. On peut prévoir qu’un jour une flore sera ainsi créée de toutes pièces, et qu’une lutte ardente s’établira entre les espèces nouvelles et celles provenant de l’ancien ordre de choses.

Ce qui se passe pour la flore se passe aussi pour la faune. Dans le voisinage des cours d’eau, on voit d’anciens animaux marins, mollusques et crustacés pour la plupart, en train de devenir terrestres. L’air est sillonné de poissons volants, beaucoup plus oiseaux que poissons, leurs ailes ayant démesurément grandi et leur queue incurvée leur permettant…

Le dernier fragment contenait, intacte, la fin du manuscrit:

… tous vieux. Le capitaine Morris est mort. Le docteur Bathurst a soixante-cinq ans; le docteur Moreno, soixante; moi, soixante-huit. Tous, nous aurons bientôt fini de vivre. Auparavant, néanmoins, nous accomplirons la tâche résolue, et, autant que cela est en notre pouvoir, nous viendrons en aide aux générations futures dans la lutte qui les attend.

Mais verront-elles le jour, ces générations de l’avenir?

Je suis tenté de répondre oui, si je ne tiens compte que de la multiplication de mes semblables: les enfants pullulent, et, d’autre part, sous ce climat sain, dans ce pays où les animaux féroces sont inconnus, grande est la longévité. Notre colonie a triplé d’importance.

Par contre, je suis tenté de répondre non, si je considère la profonde déchéance intellectuelle de mes compagnons de misère.

Notre petit groupe de naufragés était pourtant dans des conditions favorables pour tirer parti du savoir humain: il comprenait un homme particulièrement énergique, – de capitaine Morris, aujourd’hui décédé, – deux hommes plus cultivés qu’on ne l’est d’ordinaire, – mon fils et moi, – et deux savants véritables, – le docteur Bathurst et le docteur Moreno. – Avec de pareils éléments, on aurait pu faire quelque chose. On n’a rien fait. La conservation de notre vie matérielle a été, depuis l’origine, elle est encore notre unique souci. Comme au début, nous employons notre temps à chercher notre nourriture, et, le soir, nous tombons, épuisés, dans un lourd sommeil.

Il est, hélas! trop certain que l’humanité, dont nous sommes les seuls représentants, est en voie de régression rapide et tend à se rapprocher de la brute. Chez les matelots de la *Virginia*, gens déjà incultes autrefois, les caractères de l’animalité se sont marqués davantage; mon fils et moi, nous avons oublié ce que nous savions; le docteur Bathurst et le docteur Moreno eux-mêmes ont laissé leur cerveau en friche. On peut dire que notre vie cérébrale est abolie.

Combien il est heureux que nous ayons opéré, il y a de cela bien des années, le périple de ce continent! Aujourd’hui, nous n’aurions plus le même courage… Et, d’ailleurs, le capitaine Morris est mort, qui conduisait l’expédition, – et morte aussi de vétusté, la *Virginia*, qui nous portait.

Au début de notre séjour, quelques-uns d’entre nous avaient entrepris de se bâtir des maisons. Ces constructions inachevées tombent en ruine, à présent. Nous dormons tous à même la terre, en toutes saisons.

Depuis longtemps, il ne reste plus rien des vêtements qui nous couvraient. Pendant quelques années, on s’est ingénié à les remplacer par des algues tissées d’une façon d’abord ingénieuse, puis plus grossière. Ensuite on s’est lassé de cet effort, que la douceur du climat rend superflu: nous vivons nus, comme ceux que nous appelions des sauvages.

Manger, manger, c’est notre but perpétuel, notre préoccupation exclusive.

Cependant il subsiste encore quelques restes de nos anciennes idées et de nos anciens sentiments. Mon fils Jean, homme mûr maintenant et grand-père, n’a pas perdu tout sentiment affectif, et mon ex-chauffeur, Modeste Simonat, conserve une vague souvenance que je fus le maître jadis.

Mais avec eux, avec nous, ces traces légères des hommes que nous fûmes – car nous ne sommes plus des hommes, en vérité – vont disparaître à jamais. Ceux de l’avenir, nés ici, n’auront jamais connu d’autre existence. L’humanité sera réduite à ces adultes – j’en ai sous les yeux, tandis que j’écris – qui ne savent pas lire, ni compter, à peine parler; à ces enfants aux dents aiguës, qui semblent n’être qu’un ventre insatiable. Puis, après ceux-ci, il y aura d’autres adultes et d’autres enfants, puis d’autres adultes et d’autres enfants encore, toujours plus proches de l’animal, toujours plus loin de leurs aïeux pensants.

Il me semble les voir, ces hommes futurs, oublieux du langage articulé, l’intelligence éteinte, le corps couvert de poils rudes, errer dans ce morne désert…

Eh bien! nous voulons essayer qu’il n’en soit pas ainsi. Nous voulons faire tout ce qu’il est en notre pouvoir de faire pour que les conquêtes de l’humanité dont nous fûmes ne soient pas à jamais perdues. Le docteur Moreno, le docteur Bathurst et moi, nous réveillons notre cerveau engourdi, nous l’obligeons à se rappeler ce qu’il a su. Nous partageant le travail, sur ce papier et avec cette encre provenant de la *Virginia*, nous énumérerons tout ce que nous connaissons dans les diverses catégories de la science, afin que, plus tard, les hommes, s’ils perdurent, et si, après une période de sauvagerie plus ou moins longue, ils sentent renaître leur soif de lumière, trouvent ce résumé de ce qu’ont fait leurs devanciers. Puissent-ils alors bénir la mémoire de ceux qui s’évertuèrent, à tout hasard, pour abréger la route douloureuse de frères qu’ils ne verront pas!

Au seuil de la mort.

Il y a maintenant à peu près quinze ans que les lignes ci-dessus furent écrites. Le docteur Bathurst et le docteur Moreno ne sont plus. De tout ceux qui débarquèrent ici, moi, l’un des plus vieux, je reste presque seul. Mais la mort va me prendre, à mon tour. Je la sens monter de mes pieds glacés à mon cœur qui s’arrête.

Notre travail est terminé. J’ai confié les manuscrits qui renferment le résumé de la science humaine à une caisse de fer débarquée de la *Virginia*, et que j’ai enfoncée profondément dans le sol. A coté, je vais enfouir ces quelques pages roulées dans un étui d’aluminium.

Quelqu’un trouvera-t-il jamais le dépôt commis à la terre? Quelqu’un ne cherchera-t-il seulement?…

C’est affaire à la destinée. A Dieu vat!

A mesure que le zartog Sofr traduisait ce bizarre document, une sorte d’épouvante étreignait son âme.

Eh quoi! la race des Andart’-Iten-Schu descendait de ces hommes, qui, après avoir erré de longs mois sur le désert des océans, étaient venus échouer en ce point du rivage ou s’élevait maintenant Basidra? Ainsi, ces créatures misérables avaient fait partie d’une humanité glorieuse, au regard de laquelle l’humanité actuelle balbutiait à peine! Et cependant, pour que fussent abolis à jamais la science et jusqu’au souvenir de ces peuples si puissants, qu’avait-il fallu? Moins que rien: qu’un imperceptible frisson parcourût l’écorce du globe.

Quel irréparable malheur que les manuscrits signalés par le document eussent été détruits avec la caisse de fer qui les contenait! Mais, si grand que fût ce malheur, il était impossible de conserver le moindre espoir, les ouvriers ayant, pour creuser les fondations, retourné le sol en tous sens. A n'en pas douter, le fer avait été corrodé par le temps, alors que l'étui d'aluminium résistait victorieusement.

Au reste, il n'en fallait pas plus pour que l'optimisme de Sofr fût irrémédiablement bouleversé. Si le manuscrit ne présentait aucun détail technique, il abondait en indications générales et prouvait d'une manière péremptoire que l'humanité s'était jadis avancée plus avant sur la route de la vérité qu'elle ne l'avait fait depuis. Tout y était, dans ce récit, les notions que possédait Sofr, et d'autres qu'il n'aurait pas même osé imaginer, – jusqu'à l'explication de ce nom d'Hedom, c'était la déformation d'Edem, – lui-même déformation d'Adam, – lequel Adam n'était peut-être que la déformation de quelque autre mot plus ancien.

Hedom, Edem, Adam, c'est le perpétuel symbole du premier homme, et c'est aussi une explication de son arrivée sur la terre. Sofr avait donc eu tort de nier cet ancêtre, dont la réalité se trouvait établie péremptoirement par le manuscrit, et c'est le peuple qui avait eu raison de se donner des ascendants pareils à lui-même. Mais, pas plus pour cela que pour tout le reste, les Andart'-Iten-Schu n'avaient rien inventé. Ils s'étaient contentés de redire ce qu'on avait dit avant eux.

Et peut-être, après tout, les contemporains du rédacteur de ce récit n'avaient-ils pas inventé davantage. Peut-être n'avaient-ils fait que refaire, eux aussi, le chemin parcouru par d'autres humanités venues avant eux sur la terre. Le document ne parlait-il pas d'un peuple qu'il nommait Atlantes? C'était de ces Atlantes, sans doute, que les fouilles de Sofr avaient permis de découvrir quelques vestiges presque impalpables au-dessous du limon marin. A quelle connaissance de la vérité cette antique nation était-elle parvenue, quand l’invasion de l’océan la balaya de la terre?

Quelle qu’elle fût, il ne subsistait rien de son œuvre après la catastrophe, et l’homme avait dû reprendre du bas de la montée son ascension vers la lumière.

Peut-être en serait-il encore ainsi après eux, jusqu’au jour…

Mais le jour viendrait-il jamais où serait satisfait l’insatiable désir de l’homme? Le jour viendrait-il jamais où celui-ci, ayant achevé de gravir la pente, pourrait se reposer sur le sommet enfin conquis?…

Ainsi songeait le Zartog Sofr, penché sur le manuscrit vénérable.

Par ce récit d’outre-tombe, il imaginait le drame terrible qui se déroule perpétuellement dans l’univers, et son cœur était plein de pitié. Tout saignant des maux innombrables dont ce qui vécut avait souffert avant lui, pliant sous le poids de ces vains efforts accumulés dans l’infini des temps, le zartog Sofr-Aï-Sr acquérait, lentement, douloureusement, l’intime conviction de l’éternel recommencement des choses.

A DRAMA IN MEXICO

Translated by W. H. G. Kingston

This historical short story was first published in 1851. It tells the story of Lieutenant Martinez and his associates, who plot a mutiny on board two Spanish warships in 1825.

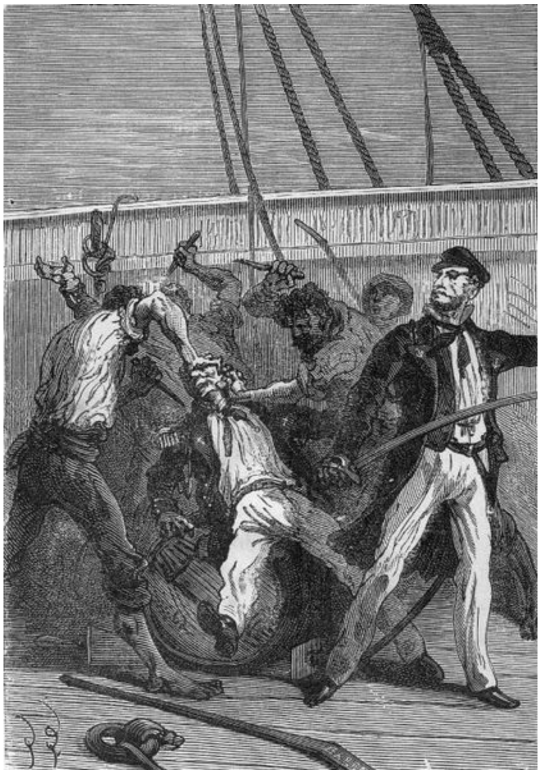

An original illustration

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CHAPTER I.

FROM GUAJAN TO ACAPULCO

On the 18th of October, 1825, the Asia, a high-built Spanish ship, and the Constanzia, a brig of eighteen guns, cast anchor off the island of Guajan, one of the Mariannas. The crews of these vessels, badly-fed, ill-paid, and harassed with fatigue during the six months occupied by their passage from Spain, had been secretly plotting a mutiny.

The spirit of insubordination more especially exhibited itself on board the Constanzia, commanded by Captain Don Orteva, a man of iron will, whom nothing could bend. The brig had been impeded in her progress by several serious accidents, so unforseen that they could alone, it was evident, have been caused by intentional malice. The Asia, commanded by Don Roque de Guzuarte, had been compelled consequently to put into port with her. One night the compass was broken, no one knew how; on another the shrouds of the foremast gave way as if they had been cut, and the mast with all its rigging fell over the side. Lastly, during important maneuvers, on two occasions the rudder-ropes broke in the most unaccountable manner.

Don Orteva had especially to keep an eye on two men of his crew - his lieutenant Martinez and Jose the captain of the maintop. Lieutenant Martinez, who had already compromised his character as an officer by joining in the cabals of the forecastle, had in consequence been several times under arrest, and during his imprisonment, the midshipman Pablo had done duty as lieutenant of the Constanzia.

Young Pablo was one of those gallant natures whose generosity prompts them to dare anything. He was an orphan who, saved and brought up by Captain Orteva, would readily have given his life for that of his benefactor.

The evening before they were to leave Guajan, Lieutenant Martinez went to a low tavern, where he met several petty officers, and seamen of both ships.

“Comrades!” exclaimed Martinez, “thanks to the accidents which so opportunely happened, the ship and the brig were compelled to put into port, and I have been enabled to come here that I might discuss secretly with you some important matters!”

“Bravo!” replied the party of men, with one voice.

“Speak, lieutenant,” exclaimed several of the sailors, “and let us hear your plans.”

“This is my scheme,” answered Martinez. “As soon as we shall have made ourselves masters of the two vessels, we will steer a course for the coast of Mexico. You must know that the new Confederation possesses no ships of war; she will, therefore, be eager to buy our ships without asking questions, and not only shall we regularly receive our pay for the future, but the price we obtain for the ships will be fairly divided among us.”

“Agreed!”

“And what shall be the signal for acting in concert on board the two ships?” asked Jose the topman.

“A rocket fired from the Asia,” answered Martinez; “that shall be the moment for action. We are ten to one, and the officers of the ship and the brig will be made prisoners before they will have time to know what is happening.”

“When shall we look out for the signal?” asked one of the boatswain’s mates of the Constanzia.

“In a few days hence, when we shall be off the island of Mindanao.”

“But the Mexicans, will they not receive our ships with’ cannon shots?” inquired Jose in a hesitating tone. “If I mistake not, the Confederation has issued a decree to prohibit any Spanish ships from entering her harbors, and instead of gold it will be iron and lead they will be sending on board us!”

“Don’t trouble yourself about that, Jose. We will let them know who we are from a distance,” answered Martinez.

“How is that to be done?”

“By hoisting the Mexican colors at the gaffs of our ships;” and saying this. Lieutenant Martinez displayed before the eyes of the mutineers, a green, white, and red flag.

The exhibition of this emblem of Mexican independence was received with gloomy silence.

“Do you already regret the flag of Spain?” cried the lieutenant in a mocking tone. “Very well, let those who feel such regrets at once separate from us, and pleasantly continue the voyage under the orders of Captain Don Roque, or Commander Don Orteva. As for us, who do not wish any longer to obey them, we shall soon find the means of rendering them helpless.”

“We’ll stick by you,” cried the whole party with one accord.

During this time Don Orteva was sadly troubled with sinister forebodings. He was well aware how completely fallen was the Spanish navy; that insubordination had greatly contributed to its destruction. On the other hand his patriotism would not allow him to reflect calmly on the successive reverses which had overtaken his country, to which, as it seemed to him, the revolt of the Mexican States had put the finishing stroke. He was frequently in the habit of conversing with the midshipman Pablo on these serious matters, and he especially took a satisfaction in talking to him of the former supremacy of the Spanish navy in every part of the ocean.

“My boy,” said he one day, “we have no longer discipline among our sailors. There are, especially, signs of mutiny on board this vessel; and it is possible - indeed I have a foreboding - that some abominable treason will deprive me of life! But you will avenge me, will you not? You will at the same time avenge Spain; for will not the blow which strikes me, be really aimed at her?”

“I swear it, Captain Orteva!” answered Pablo.

“Do not make yourself the enemy of anyone on board the brig, but remember when the day comes, my boy - that unhappy time - the best mode of serving one’s country is first to watch, and then to chastise, the wretched beings who would betray her.”

“I promise you that I will die!” answered the midshipman, “yes, that I will die, should it be necessary, to punish the traitors!”

Pablo went below. Martinez remained alone on the poop and turned his eyes toward the Asia, which was sailing to leeward of the brig. The evening was magnificent, and presaged one of those lovely nights in the tropics which are both fresh and calm.

The lieutenant endeavored to ascertain in the gloom who were the men on watch. He recognized Jose and those sailors with whom he had held the meeting at the island of Guajan. Martinez immediately approached the man at the helm. He spoke two words to him in a low voice, and that was all. But it might have been observed that the helm was put a little more a-weather than before, so that the brig sensibly drew nearer the larger ship.

Contrary to the usual custom on board ship, Martinez paced up and down on the lee side, in order that he might obtain an uninterrupted view of the Asia. Restless and agitated, he kept turning a speaking-trumpet round and round in his hand.

Suddenly a report was heard on board the ship.

At this signal Martinez leaped on to the hammock-nettings, and in a loud voice, “All hands on deck!” he cried. “Brail up the courses!”

At that moment Don Orteva, followed by his officers, came out of his cabin, and addressing himself to the lieutenant, “Why was that order given?”

At this moment some fresh reports were heard from on board the Asia.

Don Orteva, turning to the few men who remained near him, “Stand by me, my brave lads!” he cried. And advancing towards Martinez, “Seize that officer!” he exclaimed.

“Death to the commander!” replied Martinez.

Pablo and two officers drew their swords and held their pistols in their hands. Some seamen, led by the honest boatswain Jacopo, were rushing to their support, but, quickly stopped by the mutineers, were disarmed and rendered incapable of giving assistance.

The marines and the crew, drawn up across the entire width of the deck, advanced towards their officers. The men who had remained staunch to their duty, driven into a corner of the poop, had but one course to take - it was to throw themselves on the mutineers. Don Orteva pointed the muzzle of his pistol at Martinez.

At that moment a rocket was seen to rise from the deck of the Asia.

“Our friends have succeeded!” cried Martinez.

The bullet from Don Orteva’s pistol was lost in space. The captain crossed swords with the lieutenant, but, overwhelmed by numbers and severely wounded, he was borne to the deck. His officers in a few seconds shared his fate.

Blue lights were now let off in the rigging of the brig, and replied to by others from the Asia. The mutiny had at the same moment broken out and proved triumphant on board the ship. Lieutenant Martinez was master of the Constanzia, and his prisoners were thrust pell mell into the main cabin.

“To the yard-arm with them!” shouted several of the most savage.

“Trice them up, trice them up! Dead men tell no tales!”

Lieutenant Martinez, at the head of these bloodthirsty mutineers, was rushing towards the main cabin, but the rest of the crew strongly objected to so cruel a massacre, and the officers were saved.

“Bring Don Orteva up on deck,” cried Martinez.

His orders were obeyed; and the captain was bound to the rail of the brig, concealed by the mainsail. While there he was heard to shout out to his lieutenant, “Oh, you scoundrel! You base traitor!”

Martinez, losing all control over himself, leaped on the poop with an axe in his hand. Being prevented from reaching the captain, with a single vigorous stroke he cut the main sheet. The main boom, forced violently by the wind, struck the hapless Don Orteva on the head, and he fell lifeless on the deck.

A cry of horror rose from the crew of the brig.

“His death was accidental!” exclaimed Lieutenant Martinez. “Heave the body overboard!”

The two vessels, keeping close together, ran towards the coast of Mexico. The next morning an island was seen abeam. The boats of the Asia and Constanzia were lowered, and the officers, with the exception of the midshipman Pablo and Jacopo the boatswain, who had both submitted to Martinez, were landed on its desert shore. But a few days subsequently they were all happily taken off by an English whaler and conveyed to Manilla.

Some weeks after the events which have been described, the two vessels anchored in the Bay of Monterey, on the coast of Old California. Martinez, going on shore, informed the military governor of the port of his intentions. He offered to carry to Mexico the two Spanish vessels with their stores and guns, and to place their crews at the command of the Confederation. In return, all he asked was that the Mexican government should pay the whole of the wages due to them since they quitted Spain.

In reply to these overtures, the governor said that he had not sufficient authority to treat with him. He recommended Martinez to sail for Mexico, where he could himself easily settle the matter. The lieutenant followed this advice, and leaving the Asia at Monterey, after a month devoted to pleasure on shore, he again sailed in the Constanzia. Pablo, Jacopo, and Jose formed part of the crew of the brig, which with a fair wind under all sail, made the best of her way for the port of Acapulco.

CHAPTER II.

FROM ACAPULCO TO CIGUALAN

Of the four ports which Mexico possesses on the side of the Pacific Ocean, namely, San Blas, Zacatula, Tehuantepec, and Acapulco, the last offers the greatest accommodation to shipping. The town, it is true, is badly built and unhealthy, but the anchorage is secure, and the harbor can easily contain a hundred vessels. Lofty cliffs shelter the ships at anchor from every wind, and form so tranquil a basin, that a stranger arriving by land looks down upon what he may suppose to be a lake surrounded by mountains.

Acapulco was at this time protected by three forts flanking it on the right side, while the entrance was defended by a battery of seven guns which could, when necessary, cross their fire at a right angle with those of Fort San Diego. That fort, armed with thirty pieces of artillery, completely commanded the harbor, and would inevitably have sent to the bottom any craft which might have attempted to force an entrance into the port.

The town had therefore nothing to fear, notwithstanding which, a universal panic seized the inhabitants three months after the events which have just been related.

It happened thus: A ship was signaled approaching the port. So completely did the people of Acapulco doubt the intentions of the stranger, that nothing would make them believe that she came as a friend. That which the new Confederation mostly feared, and not without reason, was to be again brought under the dominion of Spain. This was because, notwithstanding that a treaty of commerce had been signed with Great Britain, and a charge d’affaires had arrived from London, which court had acknowledged the Republic, the Mexican Government did not possess a single ship to protect their coast. However that might be, the strange vessel was evidently some hardy adventurer, which the northwesterly gales, blustering on their shores from the autumnal equinox to the spring, had probably driven hither with shivered canvas.

If this was not the case, the people of Acapulco could not tell what to think, and at all events they were making every possible preparation to resist the expected attack of the stranger, when the suspicious vessel ran up to her peak the flag of Mexican independence!

Having got to about half cannon-shot from the port, the Constanzia, whose name could be clearly read on her counter, suddenly came to an anchor, her sails were furled, and a boat, which was at once lowered, pulled rapidly towards the harbor.

Lieutenant Martinez, having disembarked from her, proceeded at once to the governor, to whom he explained the circumstances which brought him to the place. The latter highly approved of the resolution taken by the lieutenant to join the Mexicans, and assured him that General Guadalupe, President of the Confederation, would certainly agree to purchase the two vessels.

No sooner was the news known in the town than the people broke out into transports of joy. The whole population turned out to admire the first vessel of the Mexican navy, and saw in their new possession, with this proof of the disorganization prevailing in the Spanish service, the means of more completely defeating all fresh attempts which might be made by their former and much hated oppressors to overcome them.

Martinez returned on board the brig. Some hours afterwards the Constanzia was anchored in the port, and her crew were quartered among the inhabitants of Acapulco. When, however, Martinez called over the roll of his followers, neither Pablo nor Jacopo answered to their names. They had both disappeared!

The following day two horsemen set out from Acapulco on the deserted and mountainous road for Mexico City. The horsemen were Martinez and Jose. The sailor was well acquainted with the road. He had on numerous occasions climbed these mountains of Anahuac. So well did he know it, that although an Indian guide had offered his services they had been declined.

“Let us ride faster!” said Martinez, sticking his spurs into his horse’s flanks. “I have my doubts about this disappearance of Pablo and Jacopo. Can they mean to make the bargain for themselves, and rob us of our shares?”

“By St. Jago! they won’t be very far wrong there,” sulkily replied the seaman. “It will be a case of thieves robbing thieves, such as we are.”

“How many days will it take us to reach Mexico?”

“Four or five, lieutenant - a mere walk; but not so fast; you surely see what a steep hill there is before us.”

In reality they had reached the first slopes which form the sides of the mountains rising above the wide plains.

“Our horses are not shod,” said the seaman, pulling up, “and their hoofs will soon be worn out on these granite rocks.”

“Let us push on,” exclaimed Martinez, setting the example. “Our horses come from the farms of Southern Mexico, and in their journeys across the Savannahs they are unaccustomed to these inequalities in the ground. Let us profit therefore by the evenness of the road, and make the best of our way out of these vast solitudes, which are not formed to put us in good spirits."

"Does Lieutenant Martinez feel any remorse?" asked Jose, shrugging his shoulders.

"Remorse! No."

Martinez fell back into perfect silence, and the two travelers made their steeds move on at a rapid trot. The sun had sunk beneath the horizon when they reached the village of Cigualan. The village is composed of a few huts inhabited by poor Indians, who are generally known as tame Indians - that is to say, they cultivate the soil.

The two Spaniards were received with but scant hospitality. The Indians recognized them as belonging to the nation of their ancient oppressors, and showed themselves but little inclined to render them assistance. This was in consequence of the fact, that two other travelers had a short time before passed through the village, and had laid violent hands on the small amount of available food which they could discover. The lieutenant and his comrade paid no attention to these circumstances, which indeed appeared to them nothing extraordinary.

In a short time they secured food, and dined, as men do after a long journey, with sharp appetites. The repast finished, they stretched themselves on the ground with their daggers in their hands; they then, notwithstanding the hardness of their couches, and the incessant biting of the mosquitos, overcome by fatigue, quickly fell asleep.

During the night Martinez frequently started up and, in an agitated voice, repeated the names of Jacopo and Pablo, whose disappearance so completely occupied his mind.

CHAPTER III.

FROM CIGUALAN TO CUERNAVACA

The next morning at daybreak, the horses were saddled and bridled. The travelers, taking a worn-away path which wound like a serpent before them, directed their course towards the east, where the sun was just then seen ascending above the mountain tops.

“When shall we get over the mountains, Jose?”

“By to-morrow evening, lieutenant, and from their summit - although too far off it is true - we shall perceive the end of our journey, that golden town of Mexico. Do you know what I am thinking of, lieutenant?”

Martinez did not reply.

“I ask myself what can have become of the officers of the ship and brig which we abandoned on the desert island.”

Martinez trembled. “I do not know,” he answered sullenly.

“I most heartily hope that all those great persons have died of hunger,” continued Jose,” or perhaps when we landed them, some of them may have tumbled into the sea, and there is on those shores a kind of shark - the tintorea, who never lets anybody escape him. Holy Mary! should Captain Don Orteva have come to life he may have the chance of being swallowed up by a fish. But, happily, his head was struck by the mainboom, and by the noise it made must have been completely crushed.”

“Hold your tongue!” replied Martinez.

The sailor rode on with closed mouth. “See what curious scruples this man has,” said Jose to himself; he then added in his usual voice, “On my return I shall settle down in this charming country of Mexico, where one can enjoy, without stint, these beautiful ananas and bananas, and where one can eat off plates of gold and silver.”

“Was it for this you mutinied?” asked Martinez.

“Why not, lieutenant? it was an affair of dollars.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Martinez with disgust.

“And you, why did you mutiny?” inquired Jose.

“I! It was an affair of wounded honor. The lieutenant wished to be revenged on his captain.”

“Ah!” exclaimed Jose with contempt.

There was not much difference between these two men whatever were their motives.

“Hold!” cried Martinez, pulling up short, “what do I see down there?”

Jose rode towards the edge of the cliff. “I can see no one,” he replied.

“I saw a man suddenly disappear,” repeated Martinez.

“Imagination!”

“I did see him,” replied the lieutenant impatiently.

“Very well, look for him at your leisure,” and Jose continued to ride on.

Martinez proceeded towards a clump of mangroves, the branches of which, taking root as they touched the ground, formed an impenetrable thicket. The lieutenant dismounted. It was a perfect solitude. Suddenly he perceived a spiral form moving about in the shade. It was a small species of serpent, the head held fast under a piece of rock, while the hinder part twisted about as if it had been galvanized.

“There has been someone here,” cried the lieutenant. Guilty and superstitious, he looked around in every direction. He began to tremble. “Who, who can they be?” he murmured.

“Well! what is the matter?” asked Jose, who had now rejoined him.

“It is nothing,” answered Martinez; “let us go on.”

The evening approached. Martinez followed some paces behind his guide Jose, and the latter, not without difficulty, found his way in the midst of the increasing darkness.

Looking out for a practicable path, swearing now at a stump against which he ran, now at the branch of a tree which struck him, threatening to put out the excellent cigar he was smoking, the lieutenant let his horse follow that of his companion. Useless remorse agitated him, and he gave himself up to the melancholy forebodings with which he was oppressed.

The night had now completely set in. The travelers pushed forward. They traversed without stopping, the little villages of Contepec and Iguala, and at length arrived at the town of Tasco. Here, little as they relished their food, their hunger was satisfied, and fatigue made even Martinez and Jose sleep until an hour after sunrise the next morning.

The lieutenant was the first to awake. “Let us start, Jose,” he cried out.

The two Spaniards hastened to the stable, ordered their horses to be saddled, filled their saddle-bags with cakes of maize, grenadas, and dried meat, for among the mountains they would run a great risk of finding nothing to eat. The bill paid, they mounted their beasts and took the road once more.

“Have we nothing to fear among these solitudes?” asked Martinez.

“Nothing, excepting it may be a Mexican dagger!”

“That is true,” answered Martinez, “the Indians of these elevated regions are still attached to the use of the dagger.”

“Yes, indeed,” replied the seaman, laughing. “What a number of words they have to designate their favorite arm - estoqe, verdugo, puna, anchillo, beldoque, navaja. The names come as quickly to their lips as the dagger does to their hands. Very well! so much the better. Holy Mary! at least we shall not have to fear those invisible balls from long carbines. I do not know anything more provoking than not to be able to discover the wretch who has killed one!”

“Who are the Indians who inhabit these mountains?” asked Martinez.

“Indeed, lieutenant, who can count the different races which have multiplied so rapidly in this El Dorado of Mexico? Just consider the various crosses, which I have studied carefully, with the intention of some day making an advantageous marriage. We here find the Mestisa, born of a Spaniard and an Indian woman; the Castisa, of a Castilian woman and a Spaniard; the Mulatto, of a Spanish woman and a Negro; the Monisque, born of a Mulatto woman and a Spaniard; the Albino, of a Monisque woman and a Spaniard; the Tintinclaire, of a Tornatras man and a Spanish woman; the Lovo, born of an Indian woman and a Negro; the Caribujo, of an Indian woman and a Lovo; the Barsino, born of a Coyote and a Mulatto woman; the Grifo, born of a Negress and a Lovo; the Albarazado, born of a Coyote and an Indian woman; the Chanesa, born of a Metis and an Indian man; the Mechino, born of a Lovo and a Coyote!"

Jose spoke the truth; the mixture of races in this country causes wonderful difficulties to anthropological students. Notwithstanding this learned conversation of the seaman, Martinez continually fell again into his previous taciturnity; he indeed sometimes pushed on ahead of his companion, whose presence seemed to annoy him.

In a short time two torrents crossed the road before them. The lieutenant pulled up at the first, disappointed on seeing that its bed was dry, for he had reckoned on watering his horse at it.

"Here we are, in a fix, lieutenant, without food and without water!" exclaimed Jose. "Never mind; follow me. We will look among these rocks and cliffs for the tree which is called the 'ahuehuelt,' which advantageously takes the place of the wisps of straw which decorate the fronts of inns. Under its shade one can always enjoy a cool draught, and, in a word, it is not only what some call water, but it is the wine of the desert."

The horsemen hunted about, and before long discovered the tree in question, but the promised fountain had been emptied, and they discovered it must have been visited only a short time previously.

"It is singular," observed Jose.

“It is indeed singular,” said Martinez, growing pale. “Let us push forward.”

The country now assumed an extremely rugged aspect. Gigantic peaks rose up before them, their basaltic summits stopping the clouds wafted by the winds from the Pacific. Doubling a large rock there appeared high above them the Fort of Cochicalcho, built by the ancient Mexicans on a spot elevated nineteen thousand feet above the sea. The travelers directed their course towards the base of this vast cone, which was crowned by tottering rocks and crumbling ruins.

After having dismounted and fastened their horses to the trunk of a tree, Martinez and Jose, wishing to ascertain the direction of their road, climbed up to the summit of the cone, assisted by the ruggedness of the sides.

Night now coming on made the outline of objects appear very indistinct, and assume the most fantastic forms. The old fort did not ill-resemble an enormous bison, crouching down, its head immovable; but as Martinez looked at the figure, his disordered imagination made him fancy that he saw the body of the monstrous animal move. He did not, however, say anything lest he should lay himself open to the railleries of the unscrupulous Jose. The latter hastily made his way round a part of the hill, and after he had disappeared for some time behind some broken fragments, he summoned his companion with the loudness of his “Saint Iagos!” and “Saint Marias!”

All of a sudden, an enormous night-bird, uttering a hoarse shriek, slowly rose on its outstretched wings.

Martinez stopped short; a vast mass of rock was seen to shake about thirty feet above him, then a portion of the mass became detached, and, shattering everything in its passage with the rapidity of a cannon-ball, came crashing downwards, and was engulfed in the abyss below.

“Santa Maria!” cried the seaman. “Hello, lieutenant, what has happened?”

“Jose!”

“Here!” The two Spaniards joined each other.

“What a fearful avalanche descended on us!” exclaimed the seaman. Martinez followed him without saying a word, and the two soon regained the lower plateau.

Here a large furrow marked the passage of the rock.

“Santa Maria!” exclaimed Jose. “Look here! Our two horses have disappeared - crushed dead!”

“It is too true!” said Martinez.

“See here!” The tree to which the two animals had been fastened had been indeed carried away with them.

“If we had been under it!” philosophically observed the seaman, with a shrug of his shoulder.

Martinez was seized with a violent feeling of terror. “The serpent! - the fountain! - the avalanche!” he murmured.

Then he turned his haggard eyes on Jose.

“How is it that you do not speak to me of Captain Orteva?” he cried, his lips contracted with anger.

Jose drew back. “Oh, do not talk nonsense, lieutenant! Let us give the finishing stroke to our poor steeds and then push on. It will not do to stop here while the old mountain is combing her hair.”

The two Spaniards proceeded on their road without saying a word, and in the middle of the night they arrived at Cuernavaca; but it was impossible to procure horses, so the next morning they directed their course on foot towards the heights of Popocatepetl.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM CUERNAVACA TO POPOCATEPETL

The temperature was cold and the country was devoid of vegetation. These inaccessible heights belonged to the icy zones, known as the cold territory. Already the fir trees of the foggy regions showed their withered outlines among the last oaks of these lofty elevations, and springs became more and more rare among the rugged rocks, consisting chiefly of porphyry and granite.

After six long hours the lieutenant and his companion began to drag themselves forward with difficulty, tearing their hands against rough masses of rock, and cutting their feet on the sharp stones in their path. At length fatigue compelled them to sit down. Jose occupied himself in preparing something to eat “What a cursed idea not to have taken the ordinary road!” he murmured.

They both, however, hoped to find at Aracopistla - a village completely shut in among the mountains - the means of transport to enable them to reach the end of their journey. But, after all, they might deceive themselves, and meet with the same want of accommodation and hospitality which they had encountered at Cuernavaca. They must, however, at all events, get there.

The road was fearfully parched and dry; on every side fathomless precipices were to be seen in the sides of the mountains, and rocks appeared ready to fall on the heads of the travelers. To regain the chief road it was necessary to cross a portion of these mountains at a height of five thousand four hundred feet, near a rock known by the Indians as the “smoking rock,” for it still exhibited signs of recent volcanic action. Dark chasms yawned on every side. Since the last journey of the seaman Jose some fresh outbreaks had completely changed the appearance of these solitudes, so that he could not recognize them; thus he completely lost himself among the inaccessible cliffs. He stopped to listen to some rumbling sounds which came issuing forth here and there from the cliffs.

“I can do no more!” at length cried Jose, sinking to the ground with fatigue.

“Push on!” cried Martinez with feverish impatience.

Some claps of thunder reverberated amid the gorges of Popocatepetl. “Now may Satan take me, for I may count myself among the lost souls!”

“Rise up and push on,” roughly exclaimed Martinez.

He compelled Jose to get up, and the sailor stumbled forward. “And not a human being to guide us,” murmured Jose.

“So much the better,” observed the lieutenant gruffly as he moved forward.

“You do not know, then, that every year a thousand murders are committed in Mexico, and how many in the environs nobody can calculate!” said Jose.

“So much the better,” answered Martinez.

Large drops of rain began to fall on the rocks around them, brightened by the last fading light in the sky.

“The points we lately saw so clearly around us, where are they now?” asked the lieutenant.

“Mexico is on the left, Puebla on the right,” replied Jose, “if we could see anything, but nothing can now be distinguished.”

It became fearfully dark. “Before us should be the mountain of Icetacihualt, and in the ravine at its base a good road; but what if we should not reach it!”

“Push on!” cried the lieutenant.

The thunder claps were now repeated with extreme violence among the mountains. The rain and the wind, which had hitherto been silent, increased the loudness of the echoes. Jose went swearing on at every step. Lieutenant Martinez, pale and silent, gazed with sinister looks at his companion, whom he regarded as an accomplice he would gladly get rid of.

Suddenly a flash of lightning illuminated the obscurity. The seaman and the lieutenant were on the edge of an abyss.

Martinez hurried up to Jose, and after the last clap of thunder he said to him, “Jose, I am afraid!”

“Do you dread the storm?”

“I do not dread the storm in the sky, Jose; but I fear the storm which agitates my breast!”

“Oh, you are still thinking of Don Orteva! Come on, lieutenant! you make me laugh,” answered Jose. He, however, did not laugh, as Martinez surveyed him with his haggard eyes,

A terrible clap of thunder burst over them.

“Hold your tongue! hold your tongue!” cried Martinez, who appeared to be no longer master of himself.

“The night is a favorable one for preaching to me!” replied the seaman. “If you have any fear, lieutenant, shut up your eyes and your ears.”

“It seems to me,” cried Martinez, “that I see the captain - Don Orteva - with his head crushed - there, there!”

A dark shadow, illuminated the next moment by a flash of lightning, arose within twenty feet of the lieutenant and his companion.

At the same instant Jose saw close to him Martinez, his countenance pale and distorted with passion, his hand grasping a dagger.

“What is there!” he cried out.

A flash of lightning environed them both.

“What! Kill me!” cried Jose. The next moment he fell, a corpse, and Martinez fled in the midst of the tempest, his bloody weapon in his hand.

A few moments afterwards two men hung over the dead body of the seaman, saying, “This is one of them!”

Martinez fled like a madman across the dark solitudes; his head uncovered, regardless of the rain, which came down in torrents.

“Kill! kill!” he shrieked out, stumbling over the slippery rocks.

Suddenly he heard a hoarse sound in the depths beneath his feet. He stopped, knowing that it was the roaring of a torrent.

It was the little river Ixtolucca, which rushed on five hundred feet below him. Some paces off, over the torrent, was thrown a bridge formed of ropes.

It was secured on both sides by some piles driven into the rock. The bridge oscillated in the wind like a thread extended in space.

Clinging to the ropes, Martinez made his way across the bridge, and by a great effort he reached the opposite bank.

There, a shadow rose before him.

Martinez retreated, without saying a word, towards the bank he had just left.

There, another human form appeared.

Martinez fell upon his knees in the middle of the bridge, his hands clasped in despair.

“Martinez, I am Pablo!” said a voice.

“Martinez, I am Jacopo!” said another voice.

“You are a traitor! You shall die!”

“You are a murderer! You shall die!”

Two loud blows were heard, the piles which secured the ropes at the extremity of the bridge fell beneath the ax. A horrible shriek rent the air, and Martinez, his hands extended, was precipitated into the abyss.

A league higher up, the midshipman and the boatswain rejoined each other, after having passed by a ford the river Ixtolucca.

“I have avenged Don Orteva!” said Jacopo. “And I,” replied Pablo, “have avenged Spain!”

It was thus that the navy of the Mexican Confederation had its origin. The two Spanish ships, delivered up by the traitors, were taken possession of by the new Republic, and became the nucleus of that small fleet which fought unsuccessfully for Texas and California, against the fleet of the United States of America.

THE MUTINEERS OF THE BOUNTY

Translated by Agnes Kingloch. Kingston

Published in 1879, this short story is an historical account of the H.M.S. Bounty from the maritime annals of Great Britain.

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CHAPTER I. TURNED ADRIFT

Not a breath of wind, not a ripple on the surface of the ocean, not a cloud in the sky. The splendid constellations of the Southern Hemisphere shone with exquisite brilliancy. The Bounty lay motionless, with drooping sails, as the night wore on; and the moon, turning pale at the approach of dawn, filled the air with dim and uncertain light.

The Bounty, a vessel of two hundred and fifteen tons burden, manned by a crew of forty-six, had left Spithead on the 23rd of December, 1787, under the command of Captain Bligh, a rough, but experienced seaman, who had accompanied Captain Cook on his last voyage of discovery.

The special object of this voyage of the Bounty was to obtain plants of the bread-fruit tree, which grows in profusion in the Tahitian Archipelago, and to carry them to the Antilles.

After remaining for six months in the Bay of Matavai, Captain Bligh, with a cargo of a thousand bread-fruit trees, set sail for the West Indies, stopping at the Friendly Islands for a short time.

The suspicious and passionate character of the captain had repeatedly occasioned disagreeable scenes between him and his officers; but, when the sun rose on the morning of the 28th of April, 1789, the perfect tranquility which prevailed on board the Bounty was disturbed by no token of the serious events about to take place.

By-and-by the apparent tranquility was broken by unwonted animation among the crew: the seamen met, exchanged two or three words in whispers, and then separated quietly. What could be going on?

“Above all things, make no noise, friends,” said Fletcher Christian, the second officer of the Bounty. “Load your pistol, Bob; but do not fire till I give the word. Churchill, take a hatchet to burst open the lock of the captain’s cabin door, and, mark me, I must have him alive.”

Followed by a dozen seamen, armed with sabres, cutlasses, and pistols, Christian glided between decks, where he placed two sentinels before the cabins of Stewart and Peter Heywood, the one the boatswain, the other a midshipman of the Bounty, and then, passing on, he stopped at the captain’s door.

“Come, lads!” he cried, “one good shove all together!” The door yielded to their vigorous blows, and the seamen rushed into the cabin.

Confused by the darkness, and, perhaps, reflecting on the serious nature of the step they had taken, they hesitated for a moment.

“Hullo! What’s the matter? Who dares — ?” exclaimed the captain, jumping out of his cot.

“Silence, Captain Bligh!” answered Churchill. “Silence, and do not attempt to resist, or I will gag you!”

“You needn’t trouble yourself to dress,” added Bob; “you will cut quite a good enough figure as you are when you are dangling at the yard-arm!”

“Lash his hands behind his back, Churchill,” said Christian, “and hoist him up on deck!”

“The most tyrannical captains need be feared no longer, when one knows how to set about dealing with them,” remarked John Smith, the philosopher of the crew.

Then, without caring whether or not they awoke the rest of the crew, they returned on deck.

It was a regular mutiny. Of the officers on board besides Christian, Young alone, one of the midshipmen, had made common cause with the mutineers.

As to the crew, those who hesitated at first had been obliged to give in, whilst the other officers, without arms, and without a leader, remained spectators of the drama which was being acted before their eyes.

All were drawn up in silence on the deck, and gazed at their captain, who, half-naked, held his head high in the midst of these men, who usually trembled before him.

“Captain Bligh,” said Christian, roughly, “you are deprived of your command.”

“I do not recognise your right,” replied the captain.

“Do not waste time in useless protestations,” interrupted Christian. “I now speak the sentiments of the Bounty’s crew. We had scarcely left England when we had already reason to complain of your insulting suspicions, your brutal proceedings. When I say we, I mean the officers as well as the seamen. We not only could not obtain the satisfaction which was our due, but you set aside our complaints with contempt! Are we dogs, that we should be abused on every occasion? Scoundrels, ruffians, liars, thieves, you had no expression strong enough, no abuse coarse enough for us! Indeed, had we patiently borne such a life, we should have been unworthy to be called men! And I, I your countryman, who know your family, and have already made two voyages under you, have you spared me? Did you not accuse me, only yesterday, of stealing some wretched fruit? And the men, they are put in irons when guiltless of a fault. For a trifle they are condemned to receive two dozen lashes. Well, everything is paid for in this world! You have been too liberal with us, Bligh! It is our turn now! You are about to expiate the insults, the injustice, the mad accusations, the moral and physical tortures with which you have overwhelmed your crew during a year and a half, and you shall pay dearly for them! Captain, you have been judged by those whom you have offended, and you are condemned. Is that right, shipmates?”

“Yes, yes, death, death to the tyrant!” shouted the greater number of the seamen, threatening their captain.

“Captain Bligh,” resumed Christian, “some have spoken of hoisting you dangling to the yard-arm, between sky and sea; others propose to make your back taste the cat you have so freely bestowed on theirs, until you die under the infliction. They lack imagination. I have a better plan than that. Besides, you are not alone guilty in this matter. Those who have always faithfully executed your orders, however cruel they were, would be in despair at having to submit to my command. They deserve to bear you company wherever the wind may drive you. Lower the long boat!”

Christian’s last words were received with a murmur of disapprobation, which, however, did not seem to trouble him. Captain Bligh, who was not intimidated by these menaces, profited by the moment’s silence to speak.

“Officers and men,” he said, in a firm voice, “in my character of officer in the royal navy, commander of the Bounty, I protest against the treatment with which I am threatened. If you have had reason to complain of the way I have exercised my power, you might have had me tried by a court-martial. But, doubtless, you have not reflected on the serious consequences of the act you are about to commit. To lay hand on your captain is to put yourself in revolt against existing laws; it will render a return to your native country impossible, and will cause you to be treated like pirates! Sooner or later you will come to an ignominious death, the death of traitors and rebels! In the name of honour and the obedience you swore to me, I summon you to return to your duty!"

"We know perfectly well to what we expose ourselves," replied Churchill.

"Enough! Enough!" cried the crew, ready for any deed of violence.

"Well," said Bligh, "if you must have a victim, let it be me, but me alone! Those of my companions whom you condemn with me have only obeyed my orders!"

The voice of the captain was now drowned by a chorus of vociferations, and he was obliged to renounce the hope of moving those pitiless hearts.

While this was going on, arrangements for the execution of Christian's orders had been made.

However, a lively dispute had arisen among the mutineers, some of whom wished to abandon Captain Bligh and his friends without giving them a weapon, or leaving them an ounce of bread.

Some - and it was also Churchill's advice - thought that the number of those who ought to leave the ship was not large enough. They must get rid, he said, of all the men who, not being directly implicated in the plot, were not safe. They could not depend on those who contented themselves with merely accepting accomplished facts. As to himself, his back was still sore from the lashes he had received for deserting at Tahiti. The best, and the most rapid way of healing it would be to deliver the captain over to him! He would know well how to revenge himself, with his own hand!

“Hayward! Hallett!” exclaimed Christian, addressing two of the officers, without taking any notice of Churchill’s observations, “get into the boat.”

“What have I done to you, Christian, that you should treat me thus?” said Hayward. “You are sending me to my death!”

“Recriminations are useless! Obey, or else -! Fryer, in with you too!”

But these officers, instead of going towards the boat, approached Captain Bligh, and Fryer, who seemed the most determined, bent forward, saying -

“Captain, will you try to retake the ship? We have no arms, it is true, but the mutineers, if surprised, could not resist. If a few of us are killed, what matter! We can but try! What do you think?”

The officers were already preparing to throw themselves on the mutineers, who were now busily engaged in making ready the long boat, when Churchill, whose notice these words, brief as they were, had not escaped, summoning several well-armed men, forced them into the boat.

“Millward, Muspratt, Birket, and you others,” said Christian, addressing some of the seamen who had not taken part in the mutiny, “go below and choose whatever you value most! You are to accompany Captain Bligh. You, Morrison, look after those fellows! Purcell, take your carpenter’s ‘chest, I will allow you to have that.”

Two masts with their sails, nails, a saw, a piece of sail cloth, four small kegs, each containing twenty-four quarts of water, a hundred and fifty pounds of biscuit, thirty-two pounds of salt pork, six bottles of wine, six bottles of rum, the captain’s wine case, were all the stores and provisions they were to be allowed to take.

They were given, besides, two or three old swords, but fire-arms of any description were refused them.

“Where are Peter Hey wood and Stewart?” asked Bligh, when he was in the boat. “Have they also betrayed me?”

They had not betrayed him, but Christian had resolved to keep them on board.

The captain now had a moment of discouragement and very pardonable weakness, which, however, did not last.

“Christian,” he said,” I give you my word of honour to forget all that has just occurred, if you will give up your abominable plan! I beseech you, think of my wife and family! Should I perish, what will become of them?”

“If you possessed any honour,” answered Christian, “things would not have reached this pitch. If you yourself had thought a little more often of your wife, of your family, and of the wives and families of others, you would not have been so harsh, so unjust, towards all of us!”

The boatswain’s mate, as he was embarking, endeavoured in his turn to soften Christian. All in vain.

“I have been suffering too long,” he replied, bitterly. “You do not know what my tortures have been! No, it cannot last a day longer; and, besides, you are not ignorant that, all this voyage, I, the second officer of the ship, have been treated like a dog! However, in separating myself from Captain Bligh, whom, in all probability, I shall never see again, I wish from pity, not to take from him all hope of safety. Smith, go to the captain’s cabin, and bring him his clothes, his commission, his journal, and his portfolio. Also, give him my nautical charts, and my own sextant. He will thus have some chance of being able to save his companions, and get out of the scrape himself!”

Christian’s orders were performed, though not without many objections from the crew.

“And now, Morrison, cast off,” exclaimed the master’s mate, now the commander of the Bounty, “and leave them to the mercy of God!”

Whilst the mutineers saluted Captain Bligh and his unfortunate companions with ironical cheers, the unhappy Christian, leaning against the hammock nettings, could not take his eyes from the departing boat. This brave officer, whose conduct, loyal and open, had always, till then, merited the praises of all the commanders under whom he had served, was to-day no better than the chief of a band of pirates. He could never see again either his old mother, or his betrothed, or the Isle of Man, his native place. He had sunk in his own self-esteem, and was dishonoured in the eyes of everyone.

Chastisement was already following his crime!

CHAPTER II. VOYAGE OF THE LONG BOAT

With her eighteen passengers, officers and men, and the scanty provisions she contained, the boat which carried Bligh was so loaded that her gunwale was only fifteen inches above the level of the sea. Twenty-one feet long and six wide, she was a useful ship's boat for so numerous a crew, but for such a voyage as she was destined to perform, she appeared utterly unsuitable.

The sailors, confident in the skill and energy of their captain and officers, who were now all joined in the same fate, rowed vigorously, and the boat rapidly sped through the waves.

Bligh had no hesitation about what he was to do. He wished first of all to regain as soon as possible the island of Tofoa, the nearest of the Friendly Islands, which they had only left a few days before; they would there collect bread-fruit, and renew their store of water, and then run for Tonga-Tabou. They would there obtain a sufficient quantity of provisions to last them till they could reach the Dutch settlements in Timor, if, through fear of savages, they did not wish to touch at any of the numerous archipelagos scattered here and there on their way.

The first day passed without incident, and night was falling when they sighted the coast of Tofoa. Unfortunately, the shore was so rocky, and the cliffs so steep, that it was impossible to disembark that night. They must wait for day.

Unless it was absolutely necessary, Bligh did not mean to touch their provisions. The island would have to nourish his men and himself. That seemed difficult, for, on first landing, not a trace of inhabitants was to be met with. Some, however, soon made their appearance, and, being well received, others came, who brought them water and a few cocoa-nuts.

Bligh’s perplexity was great. What was he to say to these natives, who had already trafficked with the Bounty on her last visit? At any cost it was necessary to hide the truth, so as not to destroy the prestige which the strangers had before acquired. Could they say that they were sent for provisions for their ship, which was out at sea?

That was impossible, for the Bounty was not visible, even from the tops of the hills! Should they state that their vessel was wrecked, and they were the only survivors? That was the story most likely to be credited. Perhaps that would touch the hearts of the natives and induce them to complete the provisioning of the boat. Bligh determined to say this, though it was dangerous, and he cautioned his men to adhere to the statement, so that they might all agree.

On hearing this the natives made no sign of either joy or sorrow. Their faces only expressed profound astonishment, and it was impossible to guess what they thought.

On the 2nd of May, the number of natives from other parts of the island increased to an alarming extent, and Bligh soon guessed that they had hostile intentions. Some even tried to haul the boat up on the shore, and only drew back before the energetic demonstrations of the captain, who menaced them with his cutlass. Whilst this was going on, some of the men, whom Bligh had sent to search, brought back three gallons of water.

The time had come for quitting this inhospitable island. At sunset all was ready; but it was not easy to gain the boat. The beach was covered with natives, clashing stones against each other, ready to throw. The boat kept off a few fathoms from the shore, and only touched just as the men were ready to embark.

The English, really uneasy at the hostile look of the savages, walked down the beach, in the midst of two hundred natives, who were evidently only waiting a signal to rush upon them. However, all got safely into the boat, when one of the sailors, named Bancroft, imprudently returned to fetch some article he had forgotten. In a second, the foolish man was surrounded and felled with stones, his companions, having no firearms, being unable to help him. At the same time they themselves were attacked, and stones rained upon them.

“Come, lads,” shouted Bligh, “bend to your oars and pull hard!”

The natives followed them into the sea, and showers of pebbles fell upon them. Many men were wounded; but Thomas Hayward (there were two midshipmen of that name belonging to the Bounty), picking up a stone which had fallen into the boat, took aim at one of their assailants and hit him between the eyes. The savage fell back with a cry, which was answered by a cheer from the English. Their unfortunate comrade was avenged.

By this time several canoes had left the shore and were giving chase. This pursuit could have only ended in a combat, the issue of which could not have been favourable, when the master had a bright idea. Without suspecting that he was imitating Hippomenes in his race with Atalanta, he stripped off his jacket, which he threw into the sea. The natives, leaving the prey for the shadow, stopped to pick it up, and this expedient permitted the boat to double the point of the bay.

In the meantime night came on, and the savages discouraged, abandoned the chase.

This first attempt at landing was too unlucky to be renewed; such at least was the opinion of Captain Bligh.

“We must now come to a resolution,” he said. “The scene which has just passed at Tofoa will occur again, I am certain, at Tonga Tabou, and wherever else we may touch. So small a number as we are, without firearms, would be absolutely at the mercy of the savages. Having no articles for barter, we could not buy provisions, and it is impossible for us to procure them by force. We are reduced to our own resources; and you, my friends, know as well as I do, how miserable they are! But would it not be better to be contented with them, rather than at each landing to risk the lives of some of our party? However, I do not wish to hide anything of the horror of our situation from you. To reach Timor we have nearly twelve hundred leagues to run, and you must be satisfied with one ounce of biscuit and a quarter of a pint of water a day! Safety can be obtained at this price only, and also on the condition that you yield me implicit obedience. Answer me without reserve! Do you consent to attempt the enterprise? Will you swear to obey my orders, whatever they may be? Will you promise to submit without murmuring to these privations?”

“Yes, yes, we swear it!” exclaimed Bligh’s companions, with one voice.

“My friends,” resumed the captain,” we must also forget our reciprocal wrongs, our antipathies, and our hates, in one word, sacrifice our personal grudges to the interest of all, which must alone guide us!”

“We promise.”

“If you keep your word,” added Bligh, “and if need be, I can force you to do so, I will answer for your safety.”

A course was now steered to the W.N.W. The wind, which was strong, blew a regular gale by the evening of the 4th of May. The waves were so high that the boat disappeared between them, and could hardly struggle up again. Every moment the danger increased. Drenched and chilled, the unfortunate men had nothing to comfort them on that day but a glass of rum and the quarter of a half-rotten bread-fruit.

During the next and following days their condition did not improve. The boat passed by a few islands, from which several canoes put off.

Was it to give chase, or to try and barter? In any case it would be imprudent to stop. The boat, therefore, her sails filled with a fair breeze, soon left them far behind.

On the 9th of May again a terrible storm broke over them. Thunder and lightning succeeded without interruption. The rain fell with a force, of which even the most violent storms of our climate fail to give an idea. It was impossible to dry their clothes. Bligh then thought of plunging them into the sea, and thus to impregnate them with salt, so as to bring back to the skin a little of the warmth carried away by the rain. These torrents of rain, however, which caused so much suffering to the captain and his companions, spared them other tortures still more horrible, the tortures of thirst, which unbearable heat would soon have produced.

On the morning of the 17th of May, after a frightful gale, complaints became general.

“We shall never have strength to reach New Holland,” cried the unfortunate crew. “Wet through by the rain, exhausted by fatigue, we shall never have a moment’s rest! We are half dead with hunger; will you not increase our rations, captain? What matters it if our provisions do fail? We can easily replace them on arriving at New

Holland!”

“I refuse,” replied Bligh. “That would be to act like fools. What! We have only crossed half the distance we had to run when cast adrift to reach Australia, and you are already discouraged! Do you think, besides, that you will find it easy to obtain provisions on the coast of New Holland? You know neither the country nor the inhabitants!”

And Bligh described in a graphic way the nature of the soil, the manners and customs of the natives, the small dependence they must place on a friendly reception, everything, indeed, that his voyage with Captain Cook had taught him. For this time his companions listened and were silenced.

For the next fifteen days they were cheered by a bright sun, which dried their clothes. On the 27th they crossed the reefs which border the eastern coast of New Holland. The sea was calm behind this coral belt, and several groups of islands, covered with exotic vegetation, rejoiced their sight.

They landed, and advanced cautiously. No traces of the natives did they find, except some signs of fires. It was, therefore, possible to pass a good night on shore. But they had to eat. By great good luck one of the sailors discovered a bed of oysters, which furnished them with a regular feast.

The next day Bligh found in the boat a magnifying glass and a tinder-box. This enabled them to procure fire to cook game or fish.

Bligh then proposed to divide his crew into three parties; one to stay and put everything in order in the boat, the two others to go and search for food. But several men complained bitterly, declaring that they would rather go without their dinner than venture into the country.

One of them, more violent or more bold than his companions, went so far as to say to the captain -

“One man is as good as another, and I don’t see why you should always take your ease! If you are hungry go and get something to eat! For all the good you do I could do as well!”

Bligh, knowing that this mutinous spirit must be put a stop to, immediately seized a cutlass, and throwing another at the rebel’s feet, he exclaimed -

“Defend yourself, or I will kill you like a dog!”

This energetic attitude soon brought the mutineer back to reason, and the general discontent was calmed.

During this rest the boat’s crew collected an abundance of oysters and other shell-fish, as well as a supply of fresh water.

A little further on, in the Endeavour Straits, of two detachments, sent out to chase tortoises and noddies (a species of sea-fowl), the first returned with empty hands, the second with only six noddies; but they would have taken many more had it not been for the obstinacy of one of the hunters, who, straying from his comrades, frightened the birds. This man acknowledged afterwards that he had managed to get hold of nine noddies, and had eaten them raw on the spot.

Without the food and fresh water they found on the coast of New Holland, it is very certain that Bligh and his companions would have perished. As it was, they were in a most pitiable condition, so exhausted and emaciated as to resemble skeletons rather than living men.

The voyage to Timor, through a little-known sea, was but a mournful repetition of the sufferings already endured by these unfortunate men before they reached the coasts of New Holland. The only difference was that the strength of all, without exception, was much diminished. In the course of a few days their legs became swollen, and while in this prostrate condition they were overwhelmed with an incessant longing for sleep. These symptoms, it was conjectured, foreboded a termination to their sufferings, which could not be long in coming. As soon as Captain Bligh perceived these alarming symptoms he distributed double rations to the weakest, and strove to inspire them with some hope.

At last, on the morning of the 12th of June, the coast of Timor appeared, after a voyage of three thousand six hundred miles had been accomplished under the most frightful and trying circumstances.

The English received an excessively sympathetic reception at Coupang; and remained there two months to recruit. Captain Bligh, having here purchased a small schooner, sailed for Batavia, which place was reached in safety, and thence he embarked for England.

On the I4th of March, 1790, the deserted men landed at Portsmouth. The recital of the tortures they had endured excited universal sympathy and indignation. The Admiralty almost immediately fitted out the frigate Pandora, of twenty-four guns, which, with a crew of a hundred and sixty men, was sent out in pursuit of the mutineers of the Bounty.

We will now see what had become of them.

CHAPTER III. THE MUTINEERS

After Captain Bligh had been deserted in the open sea, the Bounty set sail for Tahiti. The same day she reached Toubouai. The smiling aspect of this little island, surrounded by a belt of coral rocks, invited Christian to touch there; but the demonstrations of the inhabitants appearing too threatening, a landing was not effected.

On the 6th of June, 1789, the anchor was dropped in the roads of Matavai. Great was the surprise of the Tahitians on recognising the Bounty. The mutineers soon fell in with the natives, whose friendship they had gained on a previous occasion, and to them they told a story, into which they took care to bring the name of Captain Cook, whom the Tahitians well remembered.

On the 29th of June the mutineers departed for Toubouai and began a search for some island out of the ordinary route of ships, where the soil was fertile enough to supply them with food, and where they might live in security. They roved thus from one group of islands to another, committing excesses of all sorts, which Christian’s authority was rarely sufficient to prevent. Then, attracted once more by the fertility of Tahiti, and by the gentle and easy nature of the inhabitants, they returned to the Bay of Matavai. There two-thirds of the crew landed, but that same evening the Bounty weighed anchor and disappeared, before the men suspected Christian of any intention of going without them.

Left to their own resources, the seamen established themselves without much regret in different parts of the island. George Stewart and Peter Heywood, the two midshipmen whom Christian had excepted from the sentence pronounced against Bligh, and had brought in spite of themselves, remained at Matavai near the king Tippao, whose sister Stewart soon afterwards married. Morrison and Milward joined the chief Peno, who received them well. As to the others they went inland, and before long took Tahitian wives.

Churchill and a mad fellow named Thompson, after having committed all sorts of crimes, came at last to blows. Churchill was killed in the struggle, and Thompson was stoned to death by the natives.

Thus perished two of the persons who had taken the greatest share in the mutiny. The others, on the contrary, by their good conduct, endeared themselves to the Tahitians.

However, Morrison and Milward, always seeing chastisement suspended over their heads, could not live quietly in an island where they might be so easily discovered. They, therefore, conceived the idea of building a schooner, in which to reach Batavia, there to conceal themselves in the midst of a civilised community. With eight of their companions, having only a few ordinary carpenters’ tools, they contrived, not without difficulty, to construct a small vessel, which they called the Resolution, mooring her in a bay behind Venus Point; but the impossibility of procuring sails prevented them from putting to sea.

All this time, strong in their innocence, Stewart cultivated a garden, and Peter Heywood collected materials for a vocabulary, which, later, was of great assistance to the English missionaries.

Eighteen months had thus passed away, when, on the 23rd of March, 1791, a vessel doubled Venus Point, and anchored in Matavai Bay. This was the Pandora, sent in pursuit of the mutineers by the English Admiralty.

Heywood and Stewart hastened on board, declared their names and rank, and said that they had taken no part in the mutiny; but they were not believed, and were immediately put in irons, as were the rest of the men found on shore, without the least enquiry having been made as to the truth of their statements. Loaded with chains, and threatened that they would be shot should they converse in the Tahitian language among themselves, they were shut up in a cage eleven feet long, placed at the end of the quarter-deck, to which some one versed in mythology gave the name of Pandora's box.

On the 19th of May, the Resolution, which had been provided with sails, and the Pandora, put to sea. For three months they cruised among the Friendly Isles, where it was supposed that Christian and the rest of the mutineers had taken refuge. As the Resolution did not draw much water, she was of great use in this cruise; but she disappeared near Chatham Island, and although the Pandora remained in the neighbourhood for several days, nothing was ever again heard of her or of the five seamen by whom she was manned.

The Pandora was on her way back to Europe with the prisoners, when, in Torres Straits, she struck on a coral reef, and went down with thirty-one of her own men, and four of the mutineers.

The crew and the prisoners who escaped gained a sandy island. There the officers and seamen sheltered themselves under tents; but the mutineers, exposed to the heat of a vertical sun, were obliged, in order to obtain a little relief, to bury themselves up to their necks in sand.

The castaways remained on this islet for some days, and then all reached Timor in the Pandora's boats, the strict watch kept over the mutineers, notwithstanding the fearful circumstances in which they were placed, never being for a moment relaxed.

Reaching England in the month of June, 1792, the mutineers were brought before a court-martial, presided over by Admiral Hood. The trial lasted six days, and was terminated by the acquittal of four of the accused, and the condemnation to death of six others, for the crime of desertion and carrying off of the vessel given to their charge. Four of the condemned were hung on board a ship of war; the two others, Stewart and Peter Heywood, whose innocence was at last acknowledged, were pardoned.

But what had become of the Bounty? Had she been wrecked with the last of the mutineers? This no one could tell.

In 1814, twenty-five years after the scene with which this narrative commences, two English ships of war were cruising in Oceania, under the command of Captain Staines. They found themselves to the south of the dangerous archipelago, in sight of a mountainous and volcanic island, discovered by Carteret in his voyage round the world, and by him given the name of Pitcairn Island. It was a mere islet, almost without a shore, rising perpendicularly from the sea, and clothed to its summit with forests of palms and bread-fruit trees.

This island had never before been visited; it was twelve hundred miles from Tahiti, 25 4’ south latitude, and 180 8’ west longitude; it measured four miles and a half in circumference, and only a mile and a half across in its widest part. No one knew what report Carteret had given of it.

Captain Staines resolved to survey it, and ascertain if a suitable place for landing existed.

On approaching the shore, he was surprised at seeing huts, plantations, and on the beach, two natives, who, having launched a boat and skilfully crossed the surf, came towards his vessel. But his astonishment was boundless when they addressed him in excellent English with the words -

“Hullo, you there! Will you heave us a rope, that we may get on board!”

Directly they reached the deck, the two sturdy rowers were surrounded by the wondering sailors, who overwhelmed them with questions. Brought before the captain, they were interrogated in form -

“Who are you?”

“My name is Thursday October Christian, and my mate here is Ned Young.”

These names told nothing to Captain Staines, who was far from thinking of the survivors of the Bounty.

“How long have you lived here?”

“We were born here.”

“How old are you?”

“I am five-and-twenty, and Young is eighteen.”

“Were your parents wrecked on this island?”

The son of Fletcher Christian, for such the young man was, then gave Captain Staines the following narrative -

On leaving Tahiti, where he abandoned twenty-one of his comrades, Christian, who had on board an account of Cartaret's voyage, steered towards Pitcairn Island, the position of which appeared to him suitable for the plan he proposed. Twenty-eight men now composed the crew of the Bounty. They were Fletcher Christian, the midshipman Young, and seven seamen, six Tahitians, three with wives, a child of ten months old, and three men and six women, natives of Roubouai.

The first care of Christian and his companions on reaching Pitcairn had been to destroy the Bounty, so as not to be discovered. This, of course, prevented their leaving the island again, but it was necessary for their safety.

The establishment of the little colony was not made without difficulty among persons whose only bond of union was their common crime. Bloody quarrels soon broke out between the Tahitians and the English. In 1794 only four of the mutineers survived. Christian had fallen by the knife of one of the natives he had brought to the island. All the Tahitians had been massacred.

One of the English, who had discovered a way of manufacturing spirits from the root of a plant, became brutalised by drunkenness, and, in a fit of delirium tremens, threw himself from the top of a cliff into the sea.

Another, in a fit of madness, attacked Young, and one of the sailors, named John Adams, was obliged to kill him. In 1800 Young died from a violent attack of asthma.

John Adams was then the sole survivor of the mutineers. Remaining alone, with several women and twenty children, the offspring of marriages between his shipmates and the natives, the character of John Adams underwent a complete change. He was then not more than thirty-six; but during those years he had been present at so many scenes of violence and bloodshed, he had seen human nature under so many sad aspects, that, on looking back on his conduct, he became an altered man.

In the library of the Bounty, kept on the island, were a Bible and several Prayer-books. John Adams, who read them frequently, became converted, brought up the youthful population, who considered him as a father, in excellent principles, and became, in the nature of things, the legislator, the high priest, and, so to speak, the king of Pitcairn.

However, up to 1814, his alarms had been constant. In 1795, a vessel had approached Pitcairn, and the four survivors of the Bounty hid themselves in inaccessible woods, not daring to descend to the bay until after the departure of the ship. John Adams acted in the same way, when, in 1808, an American captain landed on the island, from which he carried off a chronometer and a compass, which he sent to the British Admiralty; but the Admiralty were not affected at the sight of these relics of the Bounty, there being something more important to think of in Europe just at that time.

Such was the narrative given to Captain Staines by the two natives, English on their father's side, one the son of Christian, the other the son of Young; but when Captain Staines asked to see John Adams, the latter refused to come on board, until he knew how he was likely to be treated.

The captain, having assured the two young men that John Adams was safe, as twenty-five years had passed since the mutiny of the Bounty, went on shore, where he was received by a population composed of forty-six adults, and a large number of children. All were tall and strong, of a clearly-marked English type, the girls especially being remarkably pretty, the modesty of their manners making them altogether charming.

The laws in force in the island were of the simplest character. On a register was noted all that each one gained by his work. Money was unknown, all transactions being made by means of exchange; but there was no manufactory, as no materials were to be had. For clothing the inhabitants wore large hats and belts of grass. Fishing and agriculture were their principal occupations. Marriages were only made with the permission of Adams, and when the man had cleared and planted ground sufficient for the support of his future family.

Captain Staines, having collected much curious information relating to this island, thus long concealed from the civilised world in the most unfrequented part of the Pacific, put to sea, and returned to Europe.

Since that time the venerable John Adams has terminated his checkered career. He died in 1829, and was replaced by the Reverend John Nobbs, who then fulfilled in the island the functions of pastor, doctor, and schoolmaster.

In 1853, the descendants of the mutineers of the Bounty numbered a hundred and seventy individuals. Since then the population had increased and become so numerous that, three years later, it was decided to remove a number to Norfolk Island, which until then had been used for convicts. But the party of emigrants regretted Pitcairn so much, although Norfolk was four times larger, its soil remarkable for its richness, and living there was far easier, that after a couple of years’ stay, several families returned to Pitcairn, where they continue to prosper.

Such was the issue of an adventure which had begun in so tragic a way.

At first, mutineers, murderers, madmen, and now, under the influence of Christian morals, and instruction given by a poor converted sailor, Pitcairn Island has become the fatherland of a gentle, hospitable, and happy population, among whom are found the primitive manners of the patriarchal ages.

IN THE YEAR 2889

This short story was first published in the *Forum* in 1889. Although published under the name of Jules Verne, it is now believed to be the work of his son, Michel.

IN THE YEAR 2889

Little though they seem to think of it, the people of this twenty-ninth century live continually in fairyland. Surfeited as they are with marvels, they are indifferent in presence of each new marvel. To them all seems natural. Could they but duly appreciate the refinements of civilization in our day; could they but compare the present with the past, and so better comprehend the advance we have made! How much fairer they would find our modern towns, with populations amounting sometimes to 10,000,000 souls; their streets 300 feet wide, their houses 1000 feet in height; with a temperature the same in all seasons; with their lines of aërial locomotion crossing the sky in every direction! If they would but picture to themselves the state of things that once existed, when through muddy streets rumbling boxes on wheels, drawn by horses — yes, by horses! — were the only means of conveyance. Think of the railroads of the olden time, and you will be able to appreciate the pneumatic tubes through which to-day one travels at the rate of 1000 miles an hour. Would not our contemporaries prize the telephone and the telephote more highly if they had not forgotten the telegraph?

Singularly enough, all these transformations rest upon principles which were perfectly familiar to our remote ancestors, but which they disregarded. Heat, for instance, is as ancient as man himself; electricity was known 3000 years ago, and steam 1100 years ago. Nay, so early as ten centuries ago it was known that the differences between the several chemical and physical forces depend on the mode of vibration of the etheric particles, which is for each specifically different. When at last the kinship of all these forces was discovered, it is simply astounding that 500 years should still have to elapse before men could analyze and describe the several modes of vibration that constitute these differences. Above all, it is singular that the mode of reproducing these forces directly from one another, and of reproducing one without the others, should have remained undiscovered till less than a hundred years ago. Nevertheless, such was the course of events, for it was not till the year 2792 that the famous Oswald Nier made this great discovery.

Truly was he a great benefactor of the human race. His admirable discovery led to many another. Hence is sprung a pleiad of inventors, its brightest star being our great Joseph Jackson. To Jackson we are indebted for those wonderful instruments the new accumulators. Some of these absorb and condense the living force contained in the sun’s rays; others, the electricity stored in our globe; others again, the energy coming from whatever source, as a waterfall, a stream, the winds, etc. He, too, it was that invented the transformer, a more wonderful contrivance still, which takes the living force from the accumulator, and, on the simple pressure of a button, gives it back to space in whatever form may be desired, whether as heat, light, electricity, or mechanical force, after having first obtained from it the work required. From the day when these two instruments were contrived is to be dated the era of true progress. They have put into the hands of man a power that is almost infinite. As for their applications, they are numberless. Mitigating the rigors of winter, by giving back to the atmosphere the surplus heat stored up during the summer, they have revolutionized agriculture. By supplying motive power for aërial navigation, they have given to commerce a mighty impetus. To them we are indebted for the continuous production of electricity without batteries or dynamos, of light without combustion or incandescence, and for an unfailing supply of mechanical energy for all the needs of industry.

Yes, all these wonders have been wrought by the accumulator and the transformer. And can we not to them also trace, indirectly, this latest wonder of all, the great “Earth Chronicle” building in 253d Avenue, which was dedicated the other day? If George Washington Smith, the founder of the Manhattan “Chronicle”, should come back to life to-day, what would he think were he to be told that this palace of marble and gold belongs to his remote descendant, Fritz Napoleon Smith, who, after thirty generations have come and gone, is owner of the same newspaper which his ancestor established!

For George Washington Smith’s newspaper has lived generation after generation, now passing out of the family, anon coming back to it. When, 200 years ago, the political center of the United States was transferred from Washington to Centropolis, the newspaper followed the government and assumed the name of Earth Chronicle. Unfortunately, it was unable to maintain itself at the high level of its name. Pressed on all sides by rival journals of a more modern type, it was continually in danger of collapse. Twenty years ago its subscription list contained but a few hundred thousand names, and then Mr. Fritz Napoleon Smith bought it for a mere trifle, and originated telephonic journalism.

Every one is familiar with Fritz Napoleon Smith’s system — a system made possible by the enormous development of telephony during the last hundred years. Instead of being printed, the Earth Chronicle is every morning spoken to subscribers, who, in interesting conversations with reporters, statesmen, and scientists, learn the news of the day. Furthermore, each subscriber owns a phonograph, and to this instrument he leaves the task of gathering the news whenever he happens not to be in a mood to listen directly himself. As for purchasers of single copies, they can at a very trifling cost learn all that is in the paper of the day at any of the innumerable phonographs set up nearly everywhere.

Fritz Napoleon Smith's innovation galvanized the old newspaper. In the course of a few years the number of subscribers grew to be 80,000,000, and Smith's wealth went on growing, till now it reaches the almost unimaginable figure of $10,000,000,000. This lucky hit has enabled him to erect his new building, a vast edifice with four *façades* each 3,250 feet in length, over which proudly floats the hundred-starred flag of the Union. Thanks to the same lucky hit, he is to-day king of newspaperdom; indeed, he would be king of all the Americans, too, if Americans could ever accept a king. You do not believe it? Well, then, look at the plenipotentiaries of all nations and our own ministers themselves crowding about his door, entreating his counsels, begging for his approbation, imploring the aid of his all-powerful organ. Reckon up the number of scientists and artists that he supports, of inventors that he has under his pay.

Yes, a king is he. And in truth his is a royalty full of burdens. His labors are incessant, and there is no doubt at all that in earlier times any man would have succumbed under the overpowering stress of the toil which Mr. Smith has to perform. Very fortunately for him, thanks to the progress of hygiene, which, abating all the old sources of unhealthfulness, has lifted the mean of human life from 37 up to 52 years, men have stronger constitutions now than heretofore. The discovery of nutritive air is still in the future, but in the meantime men today consume food that is compounded and prepared according to scientific principles, and they breathe an atmosphere freed from the micro-organisms that formerly used to swarm in it; hence they live longer than their forefathers and know nothing of the innumerable diseases of olden times.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding these considerations, Fritz Napoleon Smith's mode of life may well astonish one. His iron constitution is taxed to the utmost by the heavy strain that is put upon it. Vain the attempt to estimate the amount of labor he undergoes; an example alone can give an idea of it. Let us then go about with him for one day as he attends to his multifarious concernments. What day? That matters little; it is the same every day. Let us then take at random September 25th of this present year 2889.

This morning Mr. Fritz Napoleon Smith awoke in very bad humor. His wife having left for France eight days ago, he was feeling disconsolate. Incredible though it seems, in all the ten years since their marriage, this is the first time that Mrs. Edith Smith, the professional beauty, has been so long absent from home; two or three days usually suffice for her frequent trips to Europe. The first thing that Mr. Smith does is to connect his phonotelephote, the wires of which communicate with his Paris mansion. The telephote! Here is another of the great triumphs of science in our time. The transmission of speech is an old story; the transmission of images by means of sensitive mirrors connected by wires is a thing but of yesterday. A valuable invention indeed, and Mr. Smith this morning was not niggard of blessings for the inventor, when by its aid he was able distinctly to see his wife notwithstanding the distance that separated him from her. Mrs. Smith, weary after the ball or the visit to the theater the preceding night, is still abed, though it is near noontide at Paris. She is asleep, her head sunk in the lace-covered pillows. What? She stirs? Her lips move. She is dreaming perhaps? Yes, dreaming. She is talking, pronouncing a name his name — Fritz! The delightful vision gave a happier turn to Mr. Smith's thoughts.

And now, at the call of imperative duty, light-hearted he springs from his bed and enters his mechanical dresser.

Two minutes later the machine deposited him all dressed at the threshold of his office. The round of journalistic work was now begun. First he enters the hall of the novel-writers, a vast apartment crowned with an enormous transparent cupola. In one corner is a telephone, through which a hundred Earth Chronicle *littérateurs* in turn recount to the public in daily installments a hundred novels. Addressing one of these authors who was waiting his turn, “Capital! Capital! my dear fellow,” said he, “your last story. The scene where the village maid discusses interesting philosophical problems with her lover shows your very acute power of observation. Never have the ways of country folk been better portrayed. Keep on, my dear Archibald, keep on! Since yesterday, thanks to you, there is a gain of 5000 subscribers.”

“Mr. John Last,” he began again, turning to a new arrival, “I am not so well pleased with your work. Your story is not a picture of life; it lacks the elements of truth. And why? Simply because you run straight on to the end; because you do not analyze. Your heroes do this thing or that from this or that motive, which you assign without ever a thought of dissecting their mental and moral natures. Our feelings, you must remember, are far more complex than all that. In real life every act is the resultant of a hundred thoughts that come and go, and these you must study, each by itself, if you would create a living character. ‘But,’ you will say, ‘in order to note these fleeting thoughts one must know them, must be able to follow them in their capricious meanderings.’ Why, any child can do that, as you know. You have simply to make use of hypnotism, electrical or human, which gives one a two-fold being, setting free the witness-personality so that it may see, understand, and remember the reasons which determine the personality that acts. Just study yourself as you live from day to day, my dear Last. Imitate your associate whom I was complimenting a moment ago. Let yourself be hypnotized. What’s that? You have tried it already? Not sufficiently, then, not sufficiently!”

Mr. Smith continues his round and enters the reporters’ hall. Here 1500 reporters, in their respective places, facing an equal number of telephones, are communicating to the subscribers the news of the world as gathered during the night. The organization of this matchless service has often been described. Besides his telephone, each reporter, as the reader is aware, has in front of him a set of commutators, which enable him to communicate with any desired telephotic line. Thus the subscribers not only hear the news but see the occurrences. When an incident is described that is already past, photographs of its main features are transmitted with the narrative. And there is no confusion withal. The reporters’ items, just like the different stories and all the other component parts of the journal, are classified automatically according to an ingenious system, and reach the hearer in due succession. Furthermore, the hearers are free to listen only to what specially concerns them. They may at pleasure give attention to one editor and refuse it to another.

Mr. Smith next addresses one of the ten reporters in the astronomical department — a department still in the embryonic stage, but which will yet play an important part in journalism.

“Well, Cash, what’s the news?”

“We have phototelegrams from Mercury, Venus, and Mars.”

“Are those from Mars of any interest?”

“Yes, indeed. There is a revolution in the Central Empire.”

“And what of Jupiter?” asked Mr. Smith.

“Nothing as yet. We cannot quite understand their signals. Perhaps ours do not reach them.”

“That’s bad,” exclaimed Mr. Smith, as he hurried away, not in the best of humor, toward the hall of the scientific editors.

With their heads bent down over their electric computers, thirty scientific men were absorbed in transcendental calculations. The coming of Mr. Smith was like the falling of a bomb among them.

“Well, gentlemen, what is this I hear? No answer from Jupiter? Is it always to be thus? Come, Cooley, you have been at work now twenty years on this problem, and yet — ”

“True enough,” replied the man addressed. “Our science of optics is still very defective, and through our mile-and-three-quarter telescopes.”

“Listen to that, Peer,” broke in Mr. Smith, turning to a second scientist. “Optical science defective! Optical science is your specialty. But,” he continued, again addressing William Cooley, “failing with Jupiter, are we getting any results from the moon?”

“The case is no better there.”

“This time you do not lay the blame on the science of optics. The moon is immeasurably less distant than Mars, yet with Mars our communication is fully established. I presume you will not say that you lack telescopes?”

“Telescopes? O no, the trouble here is about inhabitants!”

“That’s it,” added Peer.

“So, then, the moon is positively uninhabited?” asked Mr. Smith.

“At least,” answered Cooley, “on the face which she presents to us. As for the opposite side, who knows?”

“Ah, the opposite side! You think, then,” remarked Mr. Smith, musingly, “that if one could but — ”

“Could what?”

“Why, turn the moon about-face.”

“Ah, there’s something in that,” cried the two men at once. And indeed, so confident was their air, they seemed to have no doubt as to the possibility of success in such an undertaking.

“Meanwhile,” asked Mr. Smith, after a moment’s silence, “have you no news of interest to-day’?”

“Indeed we have,” answered Cooley. “The elements of Olympus are definitively settled. That great planet gravitates beyond Neptune at the mean distance of 11,400,799,642 miles from the sun, and to traverse its vast orbit takes 1311 years, 294 days, 12 hours, 43 minutes, 9 seconds.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that sooner?” cried Mr. Smith. “Now inform the reporters of this straightaway. You know how eager is the curiosity of the public with regard to these astronomical questions. That news must go into to-day’s issue.”

Then, the two men bowing to him, Mr. Smith passed into the next hall, an enormous gallery upward of 3200 feet in length, devoted to atmospheric advertising. Every one has noticed those enormous advertisements reflected from the clouds, so large that they may be seen by the populations of whole cities or even of entire countries. This, too, is one of Mr. Fritz Napoleon Smith's ideas, and in the Earth Chronicle building a thousand projectors are constantly engaged in displaying upon the clouds these mammoth advertisements.

When Mr. Smith to-day entered the sky-advertising department, he found the operators sitting with folded arms at their motionless projectors, and inquired as to the cause of their inaction. In response, the man addressed simply pointed to the sky, which was of a pure blue. "Yes," muttered Mr. Smith, "a cloudless sky! That's too bad, but what's to be done? Shall we produce rain? That we might do, but is it of any use? What we need is clouds, not rain. Go," said he, addressing the head engineer, "go see Mr. Samuel Mark, of the meteorological division of the scientific department, and tell him for me to go to work in earnest on the question of artificial clouds. It will never do for us to be always thus at the mercy of cloudless skies!"

Mr. Smith's daily tour through the several departments of his newspaper is now finished. Next, from the advertisement hall he passes to the reception chamber, where the ambassadors accredited to the American government are awaiting him, desirous of having a word of counsel or advice from the all-powerful editor. A discussion was going on when he entered. "Your Excellency will pardon me," the French Ambassador was saying to the Russian, "but I see nothing in the map of Europe that requires change. 'The North for the Slavs?' Why, yes, of course; but the South for the Matins. Our common frontier, the Rhine, it seems to me, serves very well. Besides, my government, as you must know, will firmly oppose every movement, not only against Paris, our capital, or our two great prefectures, Rome and Madrid, but also against the kingdom of Jerusalem, the dominion of Saint Peter, of which France means to be the trusty defender."

"Well said!" exclaimed Mr. Smith. "How is it," he asked, turning to the Russian ambassador, "that you Russians are not content with your vast empire, the most extensive in the world, stretching from the banks of the Rhine to the Celestial Mountains and the Kara-Korum, whose shores are washed by the Frozen Ocean, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean? Then, what is the use of threats? Is war possible in view of modern inventions-asphyxiating shells capable of being projected a distance of 60 miles, an electric spark of 90 miles, that can at one stroke annihilate a battalion; to say nothing of the plague, the cholera, the yellow fever, that the belligerents might spread among their antagonists mutually, and which would in a few days destroy the greatest armies?"

"True," answered the Russian; "but can we do all that we wish? As for us Russians, pressed on our eastern frontier by the Chinese, we must at any cost put forth our strength for an effort toward the west."

"O, is that all? In that case," said Mr. Smith, "the thing can be arranged. I will speak to the Secretary of State about it. The attention of the Chinese government shall be called to the matter. This is not the first time that the Chinese have bothered us."

"Under these conditions, of course — " And the Russian ambassador declared himself satisfied.

"Ah, Sir John, what can I do for you?" asked Mr. Smith as he turned to the representative of the people of Great Britain, who till now had remained silent.

“A great deal,” was the reply. “If the Earth Chronicle would but open a campaign on our behalf — ”

“And for what object?”

“Simply for the annulment of the Act of Congress annexing to the United States the British islands.”

Though, by a just turn-about of things here below, Great Britain has become a colony of the United States, the English are not yet reconciled to the situation. At regular intervals they are ever addressing to the American government vain complaints.

“A campaign against the annexation that has been an accomplished fact for 150 years!” exclaimed Mr. Smith. “How can your people suppose that I would do anything so unpatriotic?”

“We at home think that your people must now be sated. The Monroe doctrine is fully applied; the whole of America belongs to the Americans. What more do you want? Besides, we will pay for what we ask.”

“Indeed!” answered Mr. Smith, without manifesting the slightest irritation. “Well, you English will ever be the same. No, no, Sir John, do not count on me for help. Give up our fairest province, Britain? Why not ask France generously to renounce possession of Africa, that magnificent colony the complete conquest of which cost her the labor of 800 years? You will be well received!”

“You decline! All is over then!” murmured the British agent sadly. “The United Kingdom falls to the share of the Americans; the Indies to that of

— ”

“The Russians,” said Mr. Smith, completing the sentence.

“Australia — ”

“Has an independent government.”

“Then nothing at all remains for us!” sighed Sir John, downcast.

“Nothing?” asked Mr. Smith, laughing. “Well, now, there’s Gibraltar!”

With this sally, the audience ended. The clock was striking twelve, the hour of breakfast. Mr. Smith returns to his chamber. Where the bed stood in the morning a table all spread comes up through the floor. For Mr. Smith, being above all a practical man; has reduced the problem of existence to its simplest terms. For him, instead of the endless suites of apartments of the olden time, one room fitted with ingenious mechanical contrivances is enough. Here he sleeps, takes his meals, in short, lives.

He seats himself. In the mirror of the phonotelephote is seen the same chamber at Paris which appeared in it this morning. A table furnished forth is likewise in readiness here, for notwithstanding the difference of hours, Mr. Smith and his wife have arranged to take their meals simultaneously. It is delightful thus to take breakfast *tête-a-tête* with one who is 3000 miles or so away. Just now, Mrs. Smith’s chamber has no occupant.

“She is late! Woman’s punctuality! Progress everywhere except there!” muttered Mr. Smith as he turned the tap for the first dish. For like all wealthy folk in our day, Mr. Smith has done away with the domestic kitchen and is a subscriber to the Grand Alimentation Company, which sends through a great network of tubes to subscribers’ residences all sorts of dishes, as a varied assortment is always in readiness. A subscription costs money, to be sure, but the *cuisine* is of the best, and the system has this advantage, that it, does away with the pestering race of the *cordons-bleus*. Mr. Smith received and ate, all alone, the *hors-d'oeuvre, entrées, rôti* and *legumes* that constituted the repast. He was just finishing the dessert when Mrs. Smith appeared in the mirror of the telephote.

"Why, where have you been?" asked Mr. Smith through the telephone.

"What! You are already at the dessert? Then I am late," she exclaimed, with a winsome *naïveté*. "Where have I been, you ask? Why, at my dress-maker's. The hats are just lovely this season! I suppose I forgot to note the time, and so am a little late."

"Yes, a little," growled Mr. Smith; "so little that I have already quite finished breakfast. Excuse me if I leave you now, but I must be going."

"O certainly, my dear; good-by till evening."

Smith stepped into his air-coach, which was in waiting for him at a window. "Where do you wish to go, sir?" inquired the coachman.

"Let me see; I have three hours," Mr. Smith mused. "Jack, take me to my accumulator works at Niagara."

For Mr. Smith has obtained a lease of the great falls of Niagara. For ages the energy developed by the falls went unutilized. Smith, applying Jackson's invention, now collects this energy, and lets or sells it. His visit to the works took more time than he had anticipated. It was four o'clock when he returned home, just in time for the daily audience which he grants to callers.

One readily understands how a man situated as Smith is must be beset with requests of all kinds. Now it is an inventor needing capital; again it is some visionary who comes to advocate a brilliant scheme which must surely yield millions of profit. A choice has to be made between these projects, rejecting the worthless, examining the questionable ones, accepting the meritorious. To this work Mr. Smith devotes every day two full hours.

The callers were fewer to-day than usual — only twelve of them. Of these, eight had only impracticable schemes to propose. In fact, one of them wanted to revive painting, an art fallen into desuetude owing to the progress made in color-photography. Another, a physician, boasted that he had discovered a cure for nasal catarrh! These impracticables were dismissed in short order. Of the four projects favorably received, the first was that of a young man whose broad forehead betokened his intellectual power.

“Sir, I am a chemist,” he began, “and as such I come to you.”

“Well!”

“Once the elementary bodies,” said the young chemist, “were held to be sixty-two in number; a hundred years ago they were reduced to ten; now only three remain irresolvable, as you are aware.”

“Yes, yes.”

“Well, sir, these also I will show to be composite. In a few months, a few weeks, I shall have succeeded in solving the problem. Indeed, it may take only a few days.”

“And then?”

“Then, sir, I shall simply have determined the absolute. All I want is money enough to carry my research to a successful issue.”

“Very well,” said Mr. Smith. “And what will be the practical outcome of your discovery?”

“The practical outcome? Why, that we shall be able to produce easily all bodies whatever — stone, wood, metal, fibers — ”

“And flesh and blood?” queried Mr. Smith, interrupting him. “Do you pretend that you expect to manufacture a human being out and out?”

“Why not?”

Mr. Smith advanced $100,000 to the young chemist, and engaged his services for the Earth Chronicle laboratory.

The second of the four successful applicants, starting from experiments made so long ago as the nineteenth century and again and again repeated, had conceived the idea of removing an entire city all at once from one place to another. His special project had to do with the city of Granton, situated, as everybody knows, some fifteen miles inland. He proposes to transport the city on rails and to change it into a watering-place. The profit, of course, would be enormous. Mr. Smith, captivated by the scheme, bought a half-interest in it.

“As you are aware, sir,” began applicant No. 3, “by the aid of our solar and terrestrial accumulators and transformers, we are able to make all the seasons the same. I propose to do something better still. Transform into heat a portion of the surplus energy at our disposal; send this heat to the poles;

then the polar regions, relieved of their snow-cap, will become a vast territory available for man's use. What think you of the scheme?"

"Leave your plans with me, and come back in a week. I will have them examined in the meantime."

Finally, the fourth announced the early solution of a weighty scientific problem. Every one will remember the bold experiment made a hundred years ago by Dr. Nathaniel Faithburn. The doctor, being a firm believer in human hibernation — in other words, in the possibility of our suspending our vital functions and of calling them into action again after a time — resolved to subject the theory to a practical test. To this end, having first made his last will and pointed out the proper method of awakening him; having also directed that his sleep was to continue a hundred years to a day from the date of his apparent death, he unhesitatingly put the theory to the proof in his own person.

Reduced to the condition of a mummy, Dr. Faithburn was coffined and laid in a tomb. Time went on. September 25th, 2889, being the day set for his resurrection, it was proposed to Mr. Smith that he should permit the second part of the experiment to be performed at his residence this evening.

"Agreed. Be here at ten o'clock," answered Mr. Smith; and with that the day's audience was closed.

Left to himself, feeling tired, he lay down on an extension chair. Then, touching a knob, he established communication with the Central Concert Hall, whence our greatest *maestros* send out to subscribers their delightful successions of accords determined by recondite algebraic formulas. Night was approaching. Entranced by the harmony, forgetful of the hour, Smith did not notice that it was growing dark. It was quite dark when he was aroused by the sound of a door opening. “Who is there?” he asked, touching a commutator.

Suddenly, in consequence of the vibrations produced, the air became luminous.

“Ah! you, Doctor?”

“Yes,” was the reply. “How are you?”

“I am feeling well.”

“Good! Let me see your tongue. All right! Your pulse. Regular! And your appetite?”

“Only passably good.”

“Yes, the stomach. There’s the rub. You are over-worked. If your stomach is out of repair, it must be mended. That requires study. We must think about it.”

“In the meantime,” said Mr. Smith, “you will dine with me.”

As in the morning, the table rose out of the floor. Again, as in the morning, the *potage*, *rôti*, *ragoûts*, and *legumes* were supplied through the food-pipes. Toward the close of the meal, phonotelephotic communication was made with Paris. Smith saw his wife, seated alone at the dinner-table, looking anything but pleased at her loneliness.

“Pardon me, my dear, for having left you alone,” he said through the telephone. “I was with Dr. Wilkins.”

“Ah, the good doctor!” remarked Mrs. Smith, her countenance lighting up.

“Yes. But, pray, when are you coming home?”

“This evening.”

“Very well. Do you come by tube or by air-train?”

“Oh, by tube.”

“Yes; and at what hour will you arrive?”

“About eleven, I suppose.”

“Eleven by Centropolis time, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“Good-by, then, for a little while,” said Mr. Smith as he severed communication with Paris.

Dinner over, Dr. Wilkins wished to depart. “I shall expect you at ten,” said Mr Smith. “To-day, it seems, is the day for the return to life of the famous Dr. Faithburn. You did not think of it, I suppose. The awakening is to take place here in my house. You must come and see. I shall depend on your being here.”

“I will come back,” answered Dr. Wilkins.

Left alone, Mr. Smith busied himself with examining his accounts — a task of vast magnitude, having to do with transactions which involve a daily expenditure of upward of $800,000. Fortunately, indeed, the stupendous progress of mechanic art in modern times makes it comparatively easy. Thanks to the Piano Electro-Reckoner, the most complex calculations can be made in a few seconds. In two hours Mr. Smith completed his task. Just in time. Scarcely had he turned over the last page when Dr. Wilkins arrived. After him came the body of Dr. Faithburn, escorted by a numerous company of men of science. They commenced work at once. The casket being laid down in the middle of the room, the telephote was got in readiness. The outer world, already notified, was anxiously expectant, for the whole world could be eye-witnesses of the performance, a reporter meanwhile, like the chorus in the ancient drama, explaining it all *viva voce* through the telephone.

“They are opening the casket,” he explained. “Now they are taking Faithburn out of it — a veritable mummy, yellow, hard, and dry. Strike the body and it resounds like a block of wood. They are now applying heat; now electricity. No result. These experiments are suspended for a moment while Dr. Wilkins makes an examination of the body. Dr. Wilkins, rising, declares the man to be dead. ‘Dead! ‘exclaims every one present. ‘Yes,’ answers Dr. Wilkins, ‘dead!’ ‘And how long has he been dead?’ Dr. Wilkins makes another examination. ‘A hundred years,’ he replies.”

The case stood just as the reporter said. Faithburn was dead, quite certainly dead! “Here is a method that needs improvement,” remarked Mr. Smith to Dr. Wilkins, as the scientific committee on hibernation bore the casket out. “So much for that experiment. But if poor Faithburn is dead, at least he is sleeping,” he continued. “I wish I could get some sleep. I am tired out, Doctor, quite tired out! Do you not think that a bath would refresh me?”

“Certainly. But you must wrap yourself up well before you go out into the hall-way. You must not expose yourself to cold.”

“Hall-way? Why, Doctor, as you well know, everything is done by machinery here. It is not for me to go to the bath; the bath will come to me.

Just look!” and he pressed a button. After a few seconds a faint rumbling was heard, which grew louder and louder. Suddenly the door opened, and the tub appeared.

Such, for this year of grace 2889, is the history of one day in the life of the editor of the Earth Chronicle. And the history of that one day is the history of 365 days every year, except leap-years, and then of 366 days — for as yet no means has been found of increasing the length of the terrestrial year.

AN EXPRESS OF THE FUTURE

Translation from Strand Magazine 1895

Although this story was in fact written by Verne’s son Michel, it is still of interest to admirers of science fiction and his father’s work.

AN EXPRESS OF THE FUTURE

Take care!” cried my conductor, “there’s a step!”

Safely descending the step thus indicated to me, I entered a vast room,illuminated by blinding electric reflectors, the sound of our feet alone breaking the solitude and silence of the place.

Where was I? What had I come there to do? Who was my mysterious guide? Questions unanswered. A long walk in the night, iron doors opened and reclosed with a clang, stairs descending, it seemed to me, deep into the earth - that is all I could remember. I had, however, no time for thinking.

“No doubt you are asking yourself who I am?” said my guide: “Colonel Pierce, at your service. Where are you? In America, at Boston - in a station.”

“A station?”

“Yes, the starting-point of the `Boston to Liverpool Pneumatic Tubes Company.’”

And, with an explanatory gesture, the Colonel pointed out to me two long iron cylinders, about a metre and a half in diameter, lying upon the ground a few paces off.

I looked at these two cylinders, ending on the right in a mass of masonry, and closed on the left with heavy metallic caps, from which a cluster of tubes were carried up to the roof; and suddenly I comprehended the purpose of all this.

Had I not, a short time before, read, in an American newspaper, an article describing this extraordinary project for linking Europe with the New World by means of two gigantic submarines tubes? An inventor had claimed to have accomplished the task; and that inventor, Colonel Pierce, I had before me.

In thought I realized the newspaper article.

Complaisantly the journalist entered into the details of the enterprise. He stated that more than 3,000 miles of iron tubes, weighing over 13,000,000 tons, were required, with the number of ships necessary, for the transport of this material - 200 ships of 2,000 tons, each making thirty-three voyages. He described this Armada of science bearing the steel to two special vessels, on board of which the ends of the tubes were joined to each other, and incased in a triple netting of iron, the whole covered with a resinous preparation to preserve it from the action of the seawater.

Coming at once to the question of working, he filled the tubes - transformed into a sort of pea-shooter of interminable length - with a series of carriages, to be carried with their travellers by powerful currents of air, in the same way that despatches are conveyed pneumatically round Paris.

A parallel with the railways closed the article, and the author enumerated with enthusiasm the advantages of the new and audacious system. According to him, there would be, in passing through these tubes, a suppression of all nervous trepidation, thanks to the interior surface being of finely polished steel; equality of temperature secured by means of currents of air, by which the heat could be modified according to the seasons; incredibly low fares, owing to the cheapness of construction and working expenses - forgetting, or waving aside, all considerations of the question of gravitation and of wear and tear.

All that now came back to my mind.

So, then, this “Utopia” had become a reality, and these two cylinders of iron at my feet passed thence under the Atlantic and reached to the coast of England!

In spite of the evidence, I could not bring myself to believe in the thing having been done. That the tubes had been laid I could not doubt; but that men could travel by this route - never!

“Was it not impossible even to obtain a current of air of that length?” - I expressed that opinion aloud.

“Quite easy, on the contrary!” protested Colonel Pierce; “to obtain it, all that is required is a great number of steam fans similar to those used in blast furnaces. The air is driven by them with a force which is practically unlimited, propelling it at the speed of 1,800 kilometres an hour - almost that of a cannon-ball! - so that our carriages with their travellers, in the space of two hours and forty minutes, accomplish the journey between Boston and Liverpool.”

“Eighteen hundred kilometres an hour!” I exclaimed.

“Not one less. And what extraordinary consequences arise from such a rate of speed! The time at Liverpool being four hours and forty minutes in advance of ours, a traveller starting from Boston at nine o’clock in the morning, arrives in England at 3.53 in the afternoon. Isn’t that a journey quickly made? In another sense, on the contrary, our trains, in this latitude, gain over the sun more than 900 kilometres an hour, beating that planet hand over hand: quitting Liverpool at noon, for example, the traveller will reach the station where we now are at thirty-four minutes past nine in the morning - that is to say, earlier than he started! Ha! Ha! I don’t think one can travel quicker than *that*!”

I did not know what to think. Was I talking with a madman? - or must I credit these fabulous theories, in spite of the objections which rose in my mind?

“Very well, so be it!” I said. “I will admit that travellers may take this madbrained route, and that you can obtain this incredible speed. But, when you have got this speed, how do you check it? When you come to a stop, everything must be shattered to pieces!”

“Not at all,” replied the Colonel, shrugging his shoulders. “Between our tubes - one for the out, the other for the home journey - consequently worked by currents going in opposite directions - a communication exists at every joint. When a train is approaching, an electric spark advertises us of the fact; left to itself, the train would continue its course by reason of the speed it had acquired; but, simply by the turning of a handle, we are able to let in the opposing current of compressed air from the parallel tube, and, little by little, reduce to nothing the final shock or stopping. But what is the use of all these explanations? Would not a trial be a hundred timesbetter?”

And, without waiting for an answer to his questions, the Colonel pulled sharply a bright brass knob projecting from the side of one of the tubes: a panel slid smoothly in its grooves, and in the opening left by its removal I perceived a row of seats, on each of which two persons might sit comfortably side by side.

“The carriage!” exclaimed the Colonel. “Come in.”

I followed him without offering any objection, and the panel immediately slid back into its place.

By the light of an electric lamp in the roof I carefully examined the carriage I was in.

Nothing could be more simple: a long cylinder, comfortably upholstered, along which some fifty arm-chairs, in pairs, were ranged in twenty-five parallel ranks. At either end a valve regulated the atmospheric pressure, that at the farther end allowing breathable air to enter the carriage, that in front allowing for the discharge of any excess beyond a normal pressure.

After spending a few moments on this examination, I became impatient.

“Well,” I said, “are we not going to start?”

“Going to start?” cried the Colonel. “We *have* started!”

Started - like that - without the least jerk, was it possible? I listened attentively, trying to detect a sound of some kind that might have guided me.

If we had really started - if the Colonel had not deceived me in talking of a speed of eighteen hundred kilometres an hour - we must already be far from any land, under the sea; above our heads the huge, foam-crested waves; even at that moment, perhaps taking it for a monstrous sea-serpent of an unknown kind - whales were battering with their powerful tails our long, iron prison!

But I heard nothing but a dull rumble, produced, no doubt, by the passage of our carriage, and, plunged in boundless astonishment, unable to believe in the reality of all that had happened to me, I sat silently, allowing the time to pass.

At the end of about an hour, a sense of freshness upon my forehead suddenly aroused me from the torpor into which I had sunk by degrees.

I raised my hand to my brow: it was moist.

Moist! Why was that? Had the tube burst under pressure of the waters - a pressure which could not but be formidable, since it increases at the rate of “an atmosphere” every ten metres of depth? Had the ocean broken in upon us?

Fear seized upon me. Terrified, I tried to call out - and - and I found myself in my garden, generously sprinkled by a driving rain, the big drops of which had awakened me. I had simply fallen asleep while reading the article devoted by an American journalist to the fantastic projects of Colonel Pierce - who also, I much fear, has only dreamed.

The Poetry

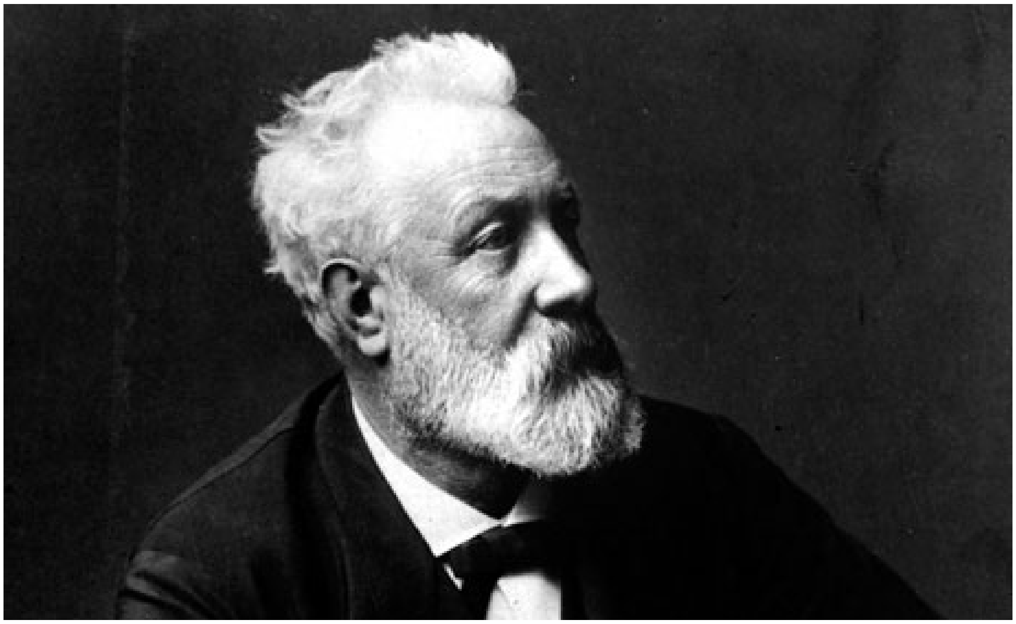

VERNE’S POETRY

Verne wrote very little poetry in his life, concentrating more on his series of sciene-fiction novels. No English translation of Verne’s poetry is available, so the original French texts have been provided here instead.

LISTE DES POEMES PAR ORDRE ALPHABÉTIQUE

À la morphine

La Cloche du soir

Connaissez-vous mon Andalouse

La Fille de l’air

Le Génie

Hésitation

J’aime ces doux oiseaux

Lorsque la douce nuit

La Lune

La Mort

La Nuit

Ô toi, que mon amour profond

Quand par le dur hiver

Le Silence dans une église

La Vapeur

Vous êtes jeune et belle

À la morphine

Sonnet

Prends, s’il le faut, docteur, les ailes de Mercure
Pour m’apporter plus tôt ton baume précieux!
Le moment est venu de faire la piqûre
Qui, de ce lit d’enfer, m’enlève vers les cieux.

Merci, docteur, merci! qu’importe que la cure
Maintenant se prolonge en des jours ennuyeux!
Le divin baume est là, si divin qu’Epicure
Aurait dû l’inventer pour l’usage des Dieux!

Je le sens qui circule, qui me pénètre!
De l’esprit et du corps ineffable bien-être,
c’est le calme absolu dans la sérénité.

Ah! perce-moi cent fois de ton aiguille fine

Et je te bénirai cent fois, Sainte Morphine,

Dont Esculape eût fait une Divinité.

La Cloche du soir

Sonnet

La barque s’enfuyait sur l’onde fugitive;
La nuit se prolongeant comme un paisible soir
A la lune du ciel pâle, méditative,
Prêtait un doux abri dans son vêtement noir;

Dans le lointain brumeux une cloche plaintive
Soupire un son pieux au clocher du manoir;
Le saint bruit vient passer à l’oreille attentive,
Comme une ombre que l’oeil croit parfois entrevoir;

A la pieuse voix la nacelle docile
Sur l’onde qui frémit s’arrête, puis vacille,
Et sur le flot dormant, sans l’éveiller, s’endort;

Le nautonnier ému d’une main rude et digne

Courbe son front ridé, dévotement se signe...

Et la barque reprend sa marche vers le port.

Connaissez-vous mon Andalouse

Connaissez-vous mon Andalouse,
Plus belle que les plus beaux jours,
Folle amante, plus folle épouse,
Dans ses amours, toute jalouse,
Toute lascive en ses amours!

Vrai dieu! de ce que j’ai dans l’âme,
Eussé-je l’enfer sous mes pas,
Car un mot d’amour de ma dame
A seul allumé cette flamme,
Mon âme ne se plaindra pas!

C’est que ma belle amante est belle,
Lorsqu’elle se mire en mes yeux!
L’étoile ne luit pas tant qu’elle,

Et quand sa douce voix m’appelle,
Je crois qu’on m’appelle des Cieux!

C’est que sa taille souple et fine
Ondule en tendre mouvement,
Et parfois de si fière mine,
Que sa tête qui me fascine
Eblouit comme un diamant!

C’est que la belle créature
Déroule les flots ondoyants
D’une si noire chevelure
Qu’on la couvre, je vous jure,
De baisers tout impatients!

C’est que son oeil sous sa paupière
Lance un rayon voluptueux,
Qui fait bouillir en mon artère,

Tout ce que Vénus de Cythère
Dans son sein attise de feux!

C’est que sur ses lèvres de rose
Le sourire de nuit, de jour
Brille comme une fleur éclose
Et quand sur mon cœur il se pose,
Il le fait palpiter d’amour!

C’est que lorsqu’elle m’abandonne
Sa blanche main pour la baiser,
Que le ciel se déchaîne et tonne,
Que m’importe, - Dieu me pardonne,
Il ne peut autant m’embraser!

C’est que sa bouche bien-aimée
Laisse tomber comme une fleur

Douce haleine parfumée,

Et que son haleine embaumée

Rendrait aux roses leur couleur!

C’est que sa profonde pensée

Vient se peindre en son beau regard,

Et que son âme est caressée,

Comme la douce fiancée

Quand l’amant vient le soir bien tard!

Allons l’amour, les chants, l’ivresse!

Il faut jouir de la beauté!

Amie! oh que je te caresse!

Que je te rende, ô ma maîtresse,

Palpitante de volupté!

Oh! viens! viens toute frémissante,

Qu’importe qu’il faille mourir,

Si je te vois toute expirante

Sous mes baisers, ma belle amante,

Si nous mourons dans le plaisir!

La Fille de l’air

À Herminie.

Je suis blonde et charmante,
Ailée et transparente,
Sylphe, follet léger, je suis fille de l’air,
Que puis-je avoir à craindre?
Une nuit de m’éteindre?
Qu’importe de mourir comme meurt un éclair!

Je vole sur la nue;
Aux mortels inconnue,
Je dispute en riant la vitesse aux zéphirs!
Il n’est point de tempête
Qui pende sur ma tête;
Je plane, et n’entends plus des trop lointains soupirs.

Je vais où va l’aurore;
On me retrouve encore
Aux mers où tout en feu se plonge le soleil!
Quand son tour le ramène,
Prompte, sans perdre haleine,
je le joins, et c’est moi qu’on salue au réveil.

Qui suis-je? où suis-je? où vais-je?
N’ayant pour tout cortège
Que les oiseaux de l’air, les étoiles aux cieux?
Je ne sais; mais tranquille,
Aux pensers indocile,
Je m’envole au zénith, au fronton radieux!

Parfois je suis contrainte;
Mais c’est la molle étreinte
De l’amour qui me berce en ses vives ardeurs!
J’en connais tous les charmes;

J’en ignore les larmes,
Et toujours en riant, je vais de fleurs en fleurs

Vive, alerte et folâtre
De l’air pur idolâtre
Je vole avec Iris aux couleurs sans pareil;
Souvent je me dérobe
Dans les plis de sa robe
Faite d’un clair tissu des rayons du soleil.

Souvent dans mon courage,
Je rencontre au passage
Une âme qui s’envole au céleste séjour;
Je ne puis, bonne et tendre,
Lorsqu’elle peut m’entendre,
Ne pas lui souhaiter vers moi le gai retour!

Des échos la tristesse
M’apprend que l’allégresse
Ne règne pas toujours aux choses d’ici-bas,
Et que parfois la guerre
Va remuer la terre.
La faim, le froid, la soif! qu’on ne m’en parle pas!

Si jadis quelque chose
Me venait; de la rose
C’était le doux parfum que le vent m’apportait!
Je croyais, pauvre folle,
La rose, le symbole
Du bonheur que la terre à mes yeux présentait!

La terre par l’espace
Dans l’ordre qu’elle trace
Traîne trop de malheurs et de peine en son vol;
Le bruit souvent l’atteste,

Son spectacle est funeste,

Et certes ne vaut pas un détour de mon col!

Pourquoi m’occuper d’elle,

Je suis jeune, et suis belle;

Mes lèvres sont de rose, et mes yeux sont d’azur:

A mes traits si limpides

L’honneur mettrait des rides;

La terre ternirait l’éclat de mon ciel pur!

Parfois vive et folette,

Poursuivant la comète,

Dans l’espace inconnu nous prenons notre essor!

A mon front je mesure

Sa blonde chevelure

Qui traîne dans les airs un ardent sillon d’or!

Lorsque je me promène,
Pour qu’elle m’entretienne,
Pourquoi pas de compagne aux mots doux et vermeils?
Quoi! n’en aurais-je aucune?
Ah! pardon, j’ai la lune,
L’étoile, la planète, et mes mille soleils!

J’ai quelquefois des anges,
Car leurs saintes phalanges,
Je les suis en priant; plus prompte que l’éclair;
Sans leur porter envie,
Je préfère ma vie:
Rien n’est si doux aux sens que de nager dans l’air.

Si le sommeil me gagne,
Ma couche m’accompagne,
Couverte d’un manteau brodé de bleus saphirs;
Dans les flots de lumière,

Je ferme ma paupière,

Laissant flotter ma robe entrouverte aux zéphirs.

Le Génie

Sonnet

Comme un pur stalactite, œuvre de la nature,
Le génie incompris apparaît à nos yeux.
Il est là, dans l’endroit où l’ont placé les Cieux,
Et d’eux seuls, il reçoit sa vie et sa structure.

Jamais la main de l’homme assez audacieuse
Ne le pourra créer, car son essence est pure,
Et le Dieu tout-puissant le fit à sa figure;
Le mortel pauvre et laid, pourrait-il faire mieux?

Il ne se taille pas, ce diamant byzarre,
Et de quelques couleurs dont l’azur le chamarre,
Qu’il reste tel qu’il est, que le fit l’éternel!

Si l’on veut corriger le brillant stalactite,

Ce n’est plus aussitôt qu’un caillou sans mérite,

Qui ne réfléchit plus les étoiles du ciel.

Hésitation

À une jeune personne à la noble tournure, aux yeux grands et noirs.

Celle que j’aime a de grands yeux
Sous de brunes prunelles;
Celle que j’aime sous les cieux
Est la belle des belles.
Elle dore, embellit mes jours,
Oh! si j’étais à même,
Mon Dieu, je voudrais voir toujours
Celle que j’aime.

Celle que j’aime est douce à voir,
Il est doux de l’entendre;
Sa vue au cœur fixe l’espoir
Que sa voix fait comprendre.
Son amour sera-t-il pour moi,

Pour moi seul, pour moi-même?
Si j’aime, c’est que je la vois
Celle que j’aime.

Auprès d’elle, hélas! je ressens
Une émotion douce;
Absente, vers elle en mes sens
Quelque chose me pousse.
Pour moi dans le fond de son cœur
S’il en était de même?
Aurait-elle un regard trompeur,
Celle que j’aime?

Celle que j’aime, hélas! hélas!
A son tour m’aime-t-elle?
Je ne sais; je ne lui dis pas
Que son oeil étincelle.
Est-ce pour moi qu’il brille ainsi?

Félicité suprême!...
Ailleurs l’enflamme-t-elle aussi,
Celle que j’aime?

Si trompant ma naïveté
Par son hypocrisie,
Elle se sert de sa beauté
Pour me briser ma vie!
Son cœur peut-il être si noir?
Oh! non; c’est un blasphème!
Un blasphème!... il ne faut que voir
Celle que j’aime.

Non, non, amour, amour à nous
Car en te faisant femme,
Dieu, je lui rends grâce à genoux,
Te donna de mon âme.

Accours! je m’attache à tes pas

Dans mon ardeur extrême...

Peut-être, elle ne m’aime pas,

Celle que j’aime.

J’aime ces doux oiseaux

J’aime ces doux oiseaux, qui promènent dans l’air
Leur vie et leur amour, et plus prompts que l’éclair,
  Qui s’envolent ensemble!
J’aime la fleur des champs, que l’on cueille au matin,
Et que le soir, au bal, on pose sur son sein
  Qui d’enivrement tremble!

J’aime les tourbillons des danses, des plaisirs,
Les fêtes, la toilette, et les tendres désirs
  Qui s’éveillent dans l’âme!
J’aime l’ange gardien qui dirige mes pas,
Qui me presse la main, et me donne tout bas
  Pour les maux un dictame!

J’aime du triste saule, au soir muet du jour,

La tête chaude encor, pleine d’ombre et d’amour,
  Qui se penche et qui pense!
J’aime la main de Dieu, laissant sur notre cœur
Tomber en souriant cette amoureuse fleur
  Qu’on nomme l’espérance!

J’aime le doux orchestre, en larmes, gémissant
Qui verse sur mon âme un langoureux accent,
  Une triste harmonie!
J’aime seule écouter le langage des cieux
Qui parlent à la terre, et l’emplissent de feux
  De soleil et de vie.

J’aime aux bords de la mer, regardant le ciel bleu,
Qui renferme en son sein la puissance de Dieu,
  M’asseoir toute pensive!
J’aime à suivre parfois en des rêves dorés
Mon âme qui va perdre en des flots azurés

Sa pensée inactive!

J’aime l’effort secret du cœur, qui doucement
S’agite, la pensée au doux tressaillement,
Que l’on sent en soi-même!
Mieux que l’arbre, l’oiseau, la fleur qui plaît aux yeux,
Le saule tout en pleurs, l’espérance des Cieux...
J’aime celui qui m’aime.

Lorsque la douce nuit

Lorsque la douce nuit, comme une douce amante,
S’avance pas à pas, à la chute du jour,
S’avance dans le ciel, tendre, timide et lente,
Toute heureuse d’un fol amour;

Lorsque les feux muets sortent du ciel propice,
Pointillent dans la nuit, discrets, étincelants,
Eparpillent au loin leurs gerbes d’artifices,
Dans les espaces purs et blancs;

Quand le ciel amoureux au sein des rideaux sombres,
Tout chaud de ce soleil qui vient de l’embraser,
A la terre, pour lui pleine d’amour et d’ombres,
S’unit dans un brûlant baiser;

Quand se réfléchissant comme en un lac limpide,
L’étoile de l’azur, sur le sol transparent,
Allume au sein de l’herbe une étoile timide,
Cette étoile du ver luisant;

Quand aux brises du soir, la feuille frémissante,
A ce tendre contact a refermé son sein,
Et garde en s’endormant la fraîcheur odorante
Qui doit parfumer le matin;

Quand sur le sombre azur, comme un triste fantôme,
Le cyprès de ce champ où finit la douleur,
Est là, plus triste et froid qu’un mystérieux psaume
Qui tombe sur un ton mineur;

Lorsque courbant sa tête à des plaintes secrètes,
L’if, comme de grands bras agite ses rameaux,
Et tout mélancolique, en paroles muettes,

Cause bas avec les tombeaux;

Quand au berceau de Dieu, sur la branche endormante,
L’oiseau paisible, heureux a trouvé le sommeil,
Quand le fil de la Vierge a regagné sa tente
En attendant quelque soleil;

Quand la croix déployant dans sa forme incertaine,
Sur le chemin du ciel ses deux bras de douleurs,
Dans la nuit qui l’entoure en son humide haleine
Est ruisselante de pleurs;

Quand toute la nature, et l’étoile de la pierre,
Et l’arbre du chemin, la croix du carrefour,
Se sont tous revêtus de l’ombre, du mystère,
Après les fatigues du jour;

Quand tout nous parle au cœur, quand la tremblante femme,

A plus de volupté que le soleil de jour,

Oh! viens, je te dirai tout ce que j’ai dans l’âme,

Tout ce que j’ai de tendre amour.

La Lune

Sonnet

Bien des gens en ce monde ont une humeur byzarre,
Et dont on cherche en vain la cause et le secret;
Sans qu'on sache pourquoi, leur esprit douceret
En un instant hargneux, coléreux se déclare;

L'un défend une chose, et puis il la permet;
L'autre Anglais le matin, le soir se fait Tartare.
L'un à l'esprit posé devient brouillon, distrait,
L'autre, grand orateur, est muet à la barre;

L'un change d'habitude aussitôt déjeuner;
Et l'autre pour le faire attend après dîner;
Avare, celui-ci prodigue sa fortune;

L’un progressiste à fond tourne aux conservateurs;

D’où viennent les reflux et flux de ces humeurs?

Comme ceux de la mer, n’est-ce pas de la lune?

La Mort

Sonnet

Dans ce pauvre village où la vie est amère,
Le triste champ de mort, à l’aspect maladif,
Vient étaler les pleurs du cyprès et de l’if
A l’âme du passant qui pâlit et se serre!

Là, point de ces tombeaux, au chapiteau plaintif,
Où des riches s’endort la gloire mensongère,
Mais de fragiles croix, indice si naïf
De l’endroit où du pauvre a fini la misère!

A la ville où toujours pétille le plaisir,
Où l’abondance obvie au plus simple désir,
La mort n’est pas la fin d’un esclavage!

Mais au triste village, où gît l’accablement,

Oh! la mort ne saurait venir trop promptement!...

Et pourtant à la ville, on meurt comme au village!

La Nuit

Le soleil entraînant dans sa course lointaine
Les brûlantes vapeurs, vers d’autres horizons,
Ne dorait déjà plus la neige des tisons
Que les brebis laissaient aux buissons de la plaine.

L’âme était plus tranquille, et l’air était plus doux!
Loin du regard de feu du soleil, l’atmosphère
Des fleurs qui respiraient, à l’ombre de la terre,
Exhalait la fraîcheur, et le parfum dissous.

La nuit tranquillement laissant ses tièdes voiles
Confondre des objets les contours indécis,
De moments en moments, dans les cieux obscurcis,
Faisait étinceler de brillantes étoiles.

L’œil les allait chercher, et dans l’azur bruni
Apercevait bientôt leurs nombreuses phalanges; -
Parfois, il croyait voir la main sûre des anges
Allumer les flambeaux de l’espace infini.

Dans leur scintillement, les astres semblaient craindre
De montrer à la nuit leur fragile lueur,
Car elles vacillaient, et changeaient leur couleur,
Comme un feu, quand le vent menace de l’éteindre.

Les étoiles au loin s’enflammaient plus encore;
Comme une aigrette ignée, à l’horizon plus sombre,
Débordaient sur le ciel, et projetaient dans l’ombre
Qui tremblait sous leur vol, une lumière d’or!

Au zénith, s’arrêtait la lune ronde et pâle
Laissant tomber sur terre un paisible rayon;
Rien n’était aussi doux, aussi pur, aussi blond!

La lune teignait tout de son reflet d’opale.

De même qu’un métal laisse en sa fusion
Échapper et briller comme une girandole
Sa chaleur lumineuse, ainsi d’une auréole
La lune s’entourait dans sa combustion.

Elle était reine au ciel; sa lumière argentée
Etalait sa splendeur et son rayon si blanc
Traçait jusqu’à la terre une route lactée,
Faite du pâle azur, et des feux de son flanc.

Le ciel adoucissait la fugitive teinte
De sa robe azurée, en fuyant ce foyer,
Brunissait, noircissait, puis allait s’oublier
De l’horizon obscur dans la lointaine enceinte.

Tout dormait en silence en la tranquille nuit;
Rien ne venait troubler le repos solitaire;
Sur ses bords éclairés, au sein de la rivière,
Les arbres se penchaient et se miraient sans bruit.

L’onde dormait aussi; limpide et transparente,
La lune y projetait ses éblouissements;
Ses rayons brillaient comme un feu de diamants,
Et formaient un brasier au sein de l’eau dormante.

Le coteau du vallon plutôt bruni que noir,
Se dessinait à peine, et de sa teinte obscure
Parfois une lumière au fond d’une ouverture
Comme un oeil lumineux se laissait entrevoir.

Du sol indifférent, au sein de la nuit sombre
Une clarté soudaine submergeait l’occident,
Courait sur un toit, comme une plaque d’argent,

Le faisait resplendir et scintiller dans l’ombre.

De temps en temps, au sein du temps silencieux,
De sa gueule d’airain, qui dirige sa note,
Un cor lançant, tantôt de sa voix qui chevrote,
Un son, clair, aigre, fort, qui s’entendait aux cieux;

Et tantôt retournant son pavillon mobile,
Vers un autre horizon, on n’entendait dès lors
Comme d’un faible écho que les lointains accords;
Ce n’était qu’un son doux pour l’oreille docile.

Ou bien, aussi d’un chien le fidèle aboîment,
Qui, répétant au loin sa prompte inquiétude,
Venait parfois troubler la vaste solitude;
Des grenouilles, c’était l’aigre croassement.

Ou bien l’exacte voix de l’horloge voisine
Qui jetait aux humains le temps sonore et clair;
Ce temps qui dans la nuit s’enfuit comme l’éclair,
Mais qui souvent, hélas, à pas tardifs chemine!...

Et cependant la lune en son muet sommeil
De sa lumière pâle, aimée, indifférente,
Arbres, rivière, toits, d’un argent doux argente:
Cette lune qui dort n’a jamais de réveil!

Tous ces bruissements, fourmillements sans nombre,
Ces cris, vifs, éclatants, ou faibles, adoucis,
Cherchent en vain l’écho dans les cieux obscurcis,
Et viennent expirer dans l’immensité sombre!

Ô toi, que mon amour profond

À Herminie.

Ô toi, que mon amour profond et sans mélange
Formé de ton image et de ton souvenir,
Avait su distinguer en l’auguste phalange
Des jeunes beautés dont nous faisons notre ange
Pour nous guider dans l’avenir,

Toi que tout rappelait à mon âme inquiète,
Et dont l’âme sans cesse assise auprès de moi,
Me dérobait du temps, qu’à présent je regrette,
Le cours lent à mes vœux, quand la bouche muette,
Je ne pouvais penser qu’à toi,

Qu’as-tu fait - loin de moi, tu fuis, et ton sourire
Vers moi se tourne encor, adorable et moqueur,

Tu sais ce que toujours, tout-puissant, il m’inspire,
Tu l’adresses, hélas! il me paraît me dire:
Je te quitte de gaîté de cœur!

Tu me railles, méchante, ah! de ta moquerie,
Si tu voyais combien l’aiguillon me fait mal,
Ce qu’à l’âme, il me met de douleur, de furie!
D’amour! tu cesserais ta vile fourberie!...
Mais non! - cela t’est bien égal!

C’est trop te demander - pars, fuis où bon te semble;
Ailleurs, va-t’en verser la joie et le plaisir;
Cherche un autre amant; Dieu fasse qu’il me ressemble!...
Nous pouvions dans l’amour vivre longtemps ensemble...
Seul, dans l’ennui, je vais mourir!

Quand par le dur hiver

Sonnet

Quand par le dur hiver tristement ramenée

La neige aux longs flocons tombe, et blanchit le toit,

Laissez geindre du temps la face enchifrenée.

Par nos nombreux fagots, rendez-moi l’âtre étroit!

Par le rêveur oisif, la douce après-dînée!

Les pieds sur les chenets, il songe, il rêve, il croit

Au bonheur! — il ne veut devant sa cheminée

Qu’un voltaire bien doux, pouvant railler le froid!

Il tisonne son feu du bout de sa pincette;

La flamme s’élargit, comme une étoile jette

L’étincelle que l’oeil dans l’ombre fixe et suit;

Il lui semble alors voir les astres du soir poindre;

L’illusion redouble; heureux! il pense joindre

A la chaleur du jour le charme de la nuit!

Le Silence dans une église

Sonnet

Au levant de la nef, penchant son humide urne,
La nuit laisse tomber l’ombre triste du soir;
Chasse insensiblement l’humble clarté diurne;
Et la voûte s’endort sur le pilier tout noir;

Le silence entre seul sous l’arceau taciturne,
L’ogive aux vitraux bruns ne se laisse plus voir;
L’autel froid se revêt de sa robe nocturne;
L’orgue s’éteint; tout dort dans le sacré dortoir!

Dans le silence, un pas résonne sur la dalle;
Tout s’éveille, et le son élargit sa spirale,
L’orgue gémit, l’autel tressaille de ce bruit;

Le pilier le répète en sa cavité sombre;

La voûte le redit, et s’agite dans l’ombre...

Puis tout s’éteint, tout meurt, et retombe en la nuit!

La Vapeur

Sonnet

Maintenant la vapeur est à l’ordre du jour.
Tout marche par son aide! Est-ce un bien pour le monde?
Pour bien choisir sur terre où toute chose abonde,
Faut-il donc se hâter, lorsqu’on en fait le tour.

On vole désormais sur la terre et sur l’onde;
On fait sans y penser l’aller et le retour;
On singe le soleil qui, lorsqu’il fait sa ronde,
Mesure en une nuit le céleste séjour.

Ce ne peut être un bien que dans ces temps de guerre,
Où sont anéantis ces hommes qui naguère
Marchaient contre la mort sans reproche et sans peur,

Si trompant l’ennemi par sa subtile ruse,

Refaisant des guerriers autant que l’on en use,

L’amour toutes les nuits marchait à la vapeur!

Vous êtes jeune et belle

Sonnet

Vous êtes jeune et belle, et vos lèvres rieuses
N’ont que charmants souris tout fraîchement éclos;
Le temps sonne pour vous ses heures folles, joyeuses
Qui vont se succédant comme les flots aux flots.

L’amour pour vos plaisirs rend plus voluptueuses
Ces langueurs qui s’en vont en de tendres sanglots;
La fortune, les ris, et les choses heureuses,
Catinetta mia, voilà quels sont vos lots!

Quand vous prendrez le deuil d’une prompte jeunesse,
Et que vous sentirez les doigts de la vieillesse
De jours d’or et de soie, hélas! brouiller le fil!

Quand tout vous fera mal, et le bonheur des autres,

Ces plaisirs enivrants qui ne sont plus les vôtres,

Tout, jusqu’au souvenir? — Que vous restera-t-il?

The Plays

Verne, 1890

VERNE’S PLAYS

Verne wrote numerous plays throughout his life, with several being based on his novels, but unfortunately there are no English translations available. However, to give you a sample of his work in this medium, two of his plays in the original French have been provided below.

ONZE JOURS DE SIÈGE

Par Jules Verne et Charles Wallut

1861

TABLE DES MATIERES

PERSONNAGES

ACTE premier

Scène première

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Scène VI

Scène VII

Scène VIII

Scène IX

Scène X

Scène XI

Scène XII

Scène XIII

Scène XIV

ACTE deuxième

Scène première

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Scène VI

Scène VII

Scène VIII

Scène IX

Scène X

Scène XI

Scène XII

Scène XIII

Scène XIV

ACTE troisième

Scène première

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Scène VI

Scène VII

Scène VIII

Scène IX

Scène X

Scène XI

Scène XII

Scène XIII

Scène XIV

Scène XV

Scène XVI

Scène XVII

Scène XVIII

Scène XIX

Scène XX

Scène XXI

PERSONNAGES

Roquefeuille, notaire.

Robert Maubray, 30 ans.

Maxime Duvernet, son ami, médecin.

Baptiste, domestique.

Laurence, femme de Maubray, 22 ans.

Léonie de Vanvres, son amie, 24 ans.

Thérèse, femme de chambre.

La scène se passe de nos jours, à Paris.

Tous les indications sont prises de la gauche du spectateur.

ACTE premier

Un salon chez Robert: au fond, portes à droite et à gauche; au milieu, une cheminée; pendule; vases de fleurs; bougies allumées; à gauche, une porte, un guéridon; au milieu du théâtre, une table, sonnette; siège de chaque côté; à droite, une porte, un canapé.

Scène première

Baptiste, *seul.*

(Au lever du rideau. Baptiste sort du fond à gauche, et écoute à la porte.)

On les entend d’ici! *(Descendant en scène)*. Ma foi! m’est avis que quand les maîtres se disputent à table, les domestiques font sagement de s’en aller. *(On sonne. Il hausse les épaules et va s’asseoir sur le canapé.)* C’est vrai, cela trouble le service; on ignore si monsieur ou madame parlent sérieusement ou plaisantent, *(on resonne)* et l’on ne sait plus quelle contenance garder, s’il faut sourire ou prendre son air grave.

Scène II

Baptiste, Robert, puis Laurence.

Robert, *entrant.*

Ah! c’est ainsi que vous venez lorsqu’on vous appelle?

Baptiste

Monsieur, c’est que…

Robert

C’est bien… Apportez-moi mon pardessus et mon chapeau. *(Laurence entre et congédie du geste Baptiste qui s’incline et sort.)*

Scène III

Robert, Laurence.

Laurence

Ainsi, vous êtes bien décidé, Robert, à vous rendre à cette soirée de garçons? *(Elle descend à droite.)*

Robert

Encore! Ah çà! nous allons recommencer! Ce n’est pas chose convenue?

Laurence

J’espérais, au contraire, que mes observations…

Robert

Mais vos observations sont des enfantillages, ma chère amie; je ne veux pas, en les prenant au sérieux, nous rendre aussi ridicules l’un que l’autre!

Laurence

Ridicules!… parce que vous m’auriez fait un petit sacrifice?

Robert

Eh! mon Dieu! demandez-moi des choses raisonnables!… Mais, j’en appelle à vous, voyons!… m’empêcher de sortir ce soir, d’aller à ce rendez-vous… une fantaisie pareille! un caprice aussi puéril!

Laurence

J’ai vu le temps où vous n’auriez même pas songé à le discuter.

Robert

Ah! voilà bien mon tort, parbleu! C’est d’avoir fait, dès les premiers jours, une telle abnégation de mon autorité, que, de concession en concession, nous en sommes aujourd’hui, vous, à la tyrannie, et moi, à l’humiliation!

Laurence

Oh!

Robert, *appuyant.*

Oui! à l’humiliation! En vérité, si je vous laissais faire, je ne serais plus un homme, mais un enfant mené à la lisière… Je ne pourrais ni sortir ni rentrer sans consulter votre bon plaisir! Et je n’irais plus voir de bons amis, le soir, qu’à la dérobée, et en me glissant le long des murs, comme un homme qui va commettre un crime!

Laurence

Oh! ce n’est pas un crime!

Robert

Vous êtes bien bonne!

Laurence

Mais c’est une faute!

Robert

Eh bien, ma chère Laurence, le sage pèche sept fois par jour; or, je suis dans les limites de la sagesse, puisque, depuis ce matin, je n’ai encore commis que deux fautes!

Laurence

Vous êtes modeste! Lesquelles?

Robert

La première, c’est de vous avoir parlé de cette partie projetée, au lieu d’imaginer quelque prétexte; la seconde, c’est d’avoir discuté avec vous mon droit d’y aller!… Je me permettrai donc d’en commettre une troisième, qui sera de me rendre à cette soirée quand l’heure en sera venue.

Laurence

Vous me faites comprendre un peu cruellement que vous êtes le maître absolu de vos actions.

Robert

Voyons, Laurence, ce n’est pas sérieux, n’est- ce pas? Et cette méchante querelle a trop duré! Donne-moi ta petite main, et n’en parlons plus! Je suis vif, je m’emporte… j’ai tort… mais aussi sois raisonnable… et ne me boude pas comme un enfant! Tu as assez de confiance en moi pour que ces idées d’indépendance ne te portent aucun ombrage; je t’accorde les mêmes droits, parce que j’ai la même confiance. Et de tout cela il résulte, en y songeant bien, que nous avons été tout à l’heure aussi fous et aussi maladroits l’un que l’autre *(Il va pour l’embrasser.)*

Laurence, *se levant.*

Parlez pour vous!

Robert, *un peu piqué.*

Soit! comme vous voudrez! Baptiste!… *(Baptiste entre avec les objets et sort.)*

Laurence

Je croyais que cette petite débauche ne commençait qu’à neuf heures, et il est à peine…

Robert

Il est l’heure à laquelle s’envolent les maris que l’on veut garder en cage!

Laurence

Trop d’esprit!

Robert

Esprit dé liberté, voilà tout! J’aurais eu plaisir à vous tenir encore compagnie, si vous aviez voulu être plus aimable; mais j’aime mieux vous quitter que de continuer la conversation sur ce ton; je pars donc, je vais à mon cercle, parce que mon ami Maxime Duvernet m’y a donné rendez-vous; mon ami Maxime m’y a donné rendez-vous, parce que je dois le présenter chez mon autre ami Horace. Je ne sais quand je reviendrai, parce que j’ignore à quelle heure finira cette orgie romaine; et maintenant, ma chère Laurence, que j’ai répondu à mon juge d’instruction, mes parce que ont l’honneur de tirer la révérence à vos pourquoi! *(Il sort par le fond.)*

Scène IV

Laurence

Non… il s’éloigne!… *(Écoutant.)* Il est parti!… C’est la première fois qu’il ne revient pas m’embrasser et me demander pardon. J’ai peut-être été trop sévère aussi? Si je l’appelais?… Il est trop loin… Et puis, enfin, c’est lui qui a tort, ce n’est pas moi! Me laisser seule!… une soirée entière! Oh! si l’on m’avait dit cela il y a un an seulement! Et pourtant j’aurais dû me douter que la troisième année de ménage serait difficile à traverser, les deux autres étaient si douces… cela ne pouvait pas durer! (Entendant ouvrir.) Qu’est-ce que c’est? je n’y suis pour personne!

Scène V

Laurence, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille

Pas même pour votre vieil ami Roquefeuille?

Laurence

Ah! excepté pour lui! *(Elle lui tend la main.)*

Roquefeuille

Merci de la faveur! Mais permettez à l’élu de protester pour les réprouvés: une jolie femme n’a pas le droit de fuir ainsi le monde, et de se dérober à l’admiration de tous. Voici pour moi! *(Il lui tend la main.)* Et voici pour les autres! *(Il baise l’autre à plusieurs reprises.)*

Laurence, *retirant sa main.*

Eh bien, eh bien! encore?

Roquefeuille, *continuant.*

Dame! il y a foule!

Léonie

Vous êtes galant, ce soir, mon cher notaire!

Roquefeuille

Ah! voilà un mot qui fait sur moi l’effet de la glace! Ne m’appelez pas notaire, si vous appréciez quelque peu ma galanterie. Est-ce que je ressemble à un notaire? Maxime devait me prendre ici, où est-il?

Laurence

Il n’y est pas.

Roquefeuille

Et Robert?

Laurence

Il n’y est plus.

Roquefeuille

Oh! oh! comme vous dites cela!

Laurence

Ah! mon cher Roquefeuille, tâchez de me distraire, et soyez gai pour nous deux, car je suis bien triste.

Roquefeuille

Est-ce possible? Contez-moi cela bien vite!… Qu’avez-vous?

Laurence

Je n’ai rien… pas même… mon mari!

Roquefeuille

Robert le diable?

Laurence

Voilà que vous plaisantez!

Roquefeuille

Ah! ah! le cas est grave. Vous me dites: Soyez gai, sans vous informer si c’est mon heure! Je fais tous mes efforts, et vous n’êtes pas contente. Il y a donc quelque chose?

Laurence

Oui.

Roquefeuille

Eh bien, confessez-vous! Je sais plus d’une oreille qui serait friande d’entendre ces jolis péchés de femme! Je vous prête la mienne. Avouez que votre mari est sorti à la suite d’une petite discussion.

Laurence

Oui.

Roquefeuille

Je m’en doutais. Et cette discussion est venue de ce que vous n’avez jamais bien compris le rôle respectif des époux. Tenez, regardez la première voiture qui passe. Il y a un homme sur le siège et un cheval dans les brancards.

Laurence

C’est leur place!

Roquefeuille

D’accord! Mais pourquoi? Le cheval est le plus fort, et, s’il le voulait, il emporterait la voiture et l’homme, et c’est lui qui conduirait. Or l’homme, qui le sait, se garde bien d’irriter le cheval; il le flatte, il le caresse de la voix, de la main, et, grâce à cet accord mutuel, la voiture marche sans accident. Eh bien! chère dame, vous avez trop appuyé sur la bride, et votre mari se sera cabré.

Laurence

Je le crains!

Roquefeuille

J’en étais sûr! Robert n’est pas parti… Il s’est évadé… Il a le mors aux dents!

Laurence

Le croyez-vous?

Roquefeuille

C’est évident! Ah! qu’un grand moraliste a donc eu raison de dire: “Le mariage est un combat à outrance, avant lequel les époux demandent au ciel sa bénédiction!”

Laurence

Merci, mon cher notaire!

Roquefeuille

Encore! Pas de notaire, ou je ne ris plus! Et ne me rappelez pas une profession que j’ai en horreur!

Laurence

En horreur!

Roquefeuille

En horreur! Le notaire sérieux, officiel, convaincu, zélé, celui qui rédige, qui fait des actes et qui entasse d’affreux dossiers dans les cartons de son affreuse étude, celui-là est une calamité publique! Je le dénonce à la haine de ses concitoyens, auxquels il prête son ministère pour tous les désastres de la vie: les hypothèques, les testaments et les mariages!… Le bon, le vrai, le parfait notaire, c’est moi! Je ne me prends pas au sérieux, moi!… Jamais!… Qu’un client me consulte pour l’acquisition d’un immeuble, je lui prouve par A plus B que la terre est un médiocre placement, où il récoltera moins de blé que de procès, et le client remporte son argent… Qu’un autre m’appelle pour recevoir son testament, je lui démontre qu’il s’apprête à faire des ingrats, et il prend le parti de guérir… Tout profit! Enfin, qu’un troisième me demande de dresser un contrat de mariage, je le conduis chez l’avoué, mon voisin, qui a la spécialité des séparations, et de là au café Anglais, où je lui montre les joies du célibat à travers les fumées du champagne! Et il se marie tout de même… Mais enfin, il se marie!…

Laurence

Vous devez avoir une jolie clientèle?

Roquefeuille

La plus belle clientèle de Paris. L’honnête homme fait toujours son chemin.

Laurence

Vous finiriez par me convertir… et si mon contrat était à refaire…

Roquefeuille

Vous jetteriez la plume au feu?

Laurence

Je le signerais des deux mains! J’aime tant mon pauvre Robert!

Roquefeuille

Il vous aime aussi, parbleu!

Laurence

Sans doute, mais pas comme autrefois.

Roquefeuille

Il a raison de varier: “L’ennui naquit un jour de l’uniformité!”

Laurence

Qu’il y a loin de Paris à Maurice, où nous nous sommes connus, où nous nous sommes aimés!

Roquefeuille

Trois mille lieues, si vous consultez Malte-Brun!

Laurence

L’immensité, si je consulte son cœur!

Roquefeuille

C’est la loi! Vous me parlez de Maurice! Voyez Paul et Virginie. Si Virginie eût épousé Paul, où serait Virginie, ce soir?… Au coin du feu!… et Paul, au cercle!

Laurence

Encore s’il n’y avait que le cercle! Mais, après le cercle, Robert et son ami Maxime doivent finir leur nuit dans une réunion de garçons!

Roquefeuille

Eh bien, tant mieux!

Laurence

Tant mieux… pour qui?

Roquefeuille

Pour vous! Votre mari redevient garçon, et vous, vous redevenez demoiselle. À son retour, ce sera un nouveau mariage que vous contracterez tous deux.

Laurence

Mon cher Roquefeuille, je ne tiens pas à me remarier si souvent.

Roquefeuille

C’est pourtant ce qu’on a de mieux à faire quand on a commis la maladresse de se marier une première fois.

Laurence, *riant.*

Tenez, vous êtes insupportable!

Roquefeuille

Allons donc! voilà un sourire!

Laurence

Ah! si vous me donniez le moyen d’empêcher Robert d’aller à cette soirée!

Roquefeuille

Obtenez un mandat d’arrêt!

Laurence

Je voudrais quelque chose de moins violent!

Roquefeuille

Cherchons!

Scène VI

Les mêmes, Baptiste.

Baptiste

Madame… je demande pardon à madame… madame sait-elle si monsieur rentrera bientôt?

Laurence

Je l’ignore… Pourquoi cette question?

Baptiste

C’est que… c’est un billet très pressé pour monsieur.

Laurence

Eh bien?

Baptiste

On l’a apporté ce matin; mais, je ne sais comment cela s’est fait…

Roquefeuille

Vous l’avez oublié dans votre poche?

Baptiste

Oui, monsieur.

Roquefeuille

Quelle race!… Tous les mêmes!

Laurence

Donnez-moi ce billet. *(Baptiste sort. — À Roquefeuille.)* Cet empressement à sortir… Si c'était un rendez-vous?… Une lettre…

Roquefeuille

Allons, du calme! du calme! du calme!

Laurence

Ah! je n'ai pas la force… Tenez, regardez vous-même.

Roquefeuille

Un billet!…

Laurence, *vivement.*

Un billet?

Roquefeuille

De garde!

Laurence, *avec joie.*

De garde?

Roquefeuille

Et pour cette nuit, encore… Madame, ce n’est pas un tambour, c’est la fortune en bonnet de police qui a apporté ce billet.

Laurence

Que voulez-vous dire?

Roquefeuille

Permettez-moi de donner des ordres en votre nom. *(Il appelle.)* Baptiste! *(Baptiste paraît.)* Vous allez porter ce billet à monsieur, à son cercle, et vous le remettrez en mains propres.

Baptiste

Monsieur va me recevoir bien mal.

Roquefeuille

Ah! c’est votre affaire, cela?

Laurence

Allez! *(Baptiste fait quelques pas.)*

Baptiste, *revenant.*

Ah! M. le docteur Duvernet fait demander si M. Roquefeuille est ici.

Laurence

Monsieur Maxime?… Faites entrer! *(Baptiste sort.)*

Laurence

Mais, mon ami, quel est votre projet?

Roquefeuille

Vous n’avez pas compris, votre mari est en état de récidive; il y va pour lui de la prison. Il ne peut donc se dispenser d’obéir, et, ma foi, s’il ne passe pas sa soirée en tête-à-tête avec sa femme, il ne la passera du moins ni au cercle, ni dans une soirée de garçons.

Laurence

Ah! c’est vrai!… Va-t-il être de mauvaise humeur!… Eh bien, tant mieux, qu’il enrage! (Elle sort à droite.)

Roquefeuille

Voilà une scélératesse de femme, par exemple! Et l’on veut que je me marie?… Oh! non!

Scène VII

Roquefeuille, Maxime.

Maxime

Je viens de chez toi!

Roquefeuille

Je comptais te trouver ici.

Maxime

J’avais hâte de t’annoncer mon bonheur! Elle arrive, mon ami.

Roquefeuille

Elle arrive! Ah bah! Qui Elle?

Maxime

Mais Léonie!… L’amie de madame Maubray!

Roquefeuille

Madame de Vanvres! Elle! Léonie! Un pronom! Un nom de baptême! Mais, qu’est-ce que ces manières-là?

Maxime

Eh! quel plus joli mot que celui-là! Elle! Il dit tout! il résume tout! Elle! c’est-à-dire la beauté, la grâce, l’esprit… la femme aimée, adorée, vénérée.

Elle, la seule, l’unique, la divine, l’idéal, la perfection!… Elle! elle, enfin!…

Roquefeuille

Et lui… le cerveau brûlé!… lui… l’évaporé! lui, l’insensé, le toqué, le fou, lui, lui, enfin!

Maxime

Oui, oui, raille-moi!… Je suis heureux, je te le permets! Je suis jeune, je suis riche, je ne suis ni bossu, ni bancal, ni tortu! Je suis médecin, estimé, aimé, et je n’ai qu’une passion au monde: les voyages! Elle semblait me défendre l’amour, et surtout le mariage: comment espérer qu’une femme voulût unir son sort à celui d’un être si remuant, si coureur, si nomade?… Eh bien, non! la fortune, ou plutôt le ciel m’a fait rencontrer, dans madame de Vanvres, une veuve plus passionnée que moi pour les déplacements continuels, une voyageuse effrénée, enragée, endiablée!… Et cette femme, mon ami, j’ai l’espoir d’obtenir sa main, de la posséder et de faire le tour du monde avec elle!

Roquefeuille

C’est enchanteur!

Maxime

Elle arrive! Je puis publier les bans, dresser le contrat, acheter les gants et commander la corbeille!

Roquefeuille

Et comment sais-tu?…

Maxime

Ah! par une lettre écrite à madame Maubray, qui me l’a fait tenir ce matin… et que voilà!…

Roquefeuille

Tapissée de timbres de toutes couleurs et de toutes formes, sale, jaunie de la poussière de toutes les chancelleries! À ta place, je la passerais au vinaigre; on ne la prendrait qu’avec des pincettes!

Maxime

Lis, lis, âme froide et vulgaire!

Roquefeuille

Elle est datée?

Maxime

Du mois dernier. Elle s’est égarée en route, en venant de Séville.

Roquefeuille

Ah bah! Séville! Je croyais que ça n’existait que dans les romances. *(Chantant.)*

Connaissez-vous dans Barcelone…

(Se reprenant.) Non!… Et cette lettre?

Maxime

Ah! deux lignes seulement; mais deux lignes qui, sans prononcer mon nom, révèlent pourtant la passion la plus tendre, l’amour le plus vrai!

Roquefeuille

Voyons cela. *(Il lit.).* “En quittant Séville, je me rendrai immédiatement à Paris, en passant par Naples et la Suisse.”

Maxime

Ah!

Roquefeuille

Ah! c’est ça la passion la plus tendre, et l’amour le plus vrai? Une feuille de route!

Maxime

Quoi! tu ne trouves pas cela adorable? Revenir à Paris… elle… pour moi! et revenir directement, encore!…

Roquefeuille

Avec un tout petit détour…

Maxime

Pour arriver plus vite! pour me voir plus tôt!

Roquefeuille

Ah! vous faites deux jolis fous, tous les deux.

Maxime

Non pas, deux comètes; tout bonnement deux comètes: moi, celle de 1828; elle, celle de 1832. Nous décrivons des courbes immenses dans le monde entier, mais parfois nos orbites se croisent, et…

Roquefeuille

Ah! bien, non, non!… tu deviens trop léger!

Scène VIII

Les mêmes, Robert.

Robert

C’est jouer de malheur! Comprend-on rien à ce qui m’arrive?… Bonjour, Maxime! Au moment où je vais partir… Bonjour, Roquefeuille!

Maxime

Qu’as-tu donc?

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Je m’en doute!

Robert

Ce que j’ai?… Je viens de recevoir un billet au cercle!

Maxime

Un billet doux?

Roquefeuille

Un billet à payer?

Robert

Un billet de garde!

Roquefeuille

Ah! diable!

Robert

Et, le pis, c’est que j’ai épuisé l’indulgence des conseils de discipline! Impossible, maintenant, d’aller à cette soirée!

Roquefeuille

Allons donc!

Maxime

Oh! pour moi, j’y renonce bien volontiers!

Robert

Ce n’est pas que j’y tienne plus que de raison; car la perspective d’une nuit passée côte à côte avec mon bottier et mon tailleur, n’a rien de vraiment réjouissant.

Roquefeuille

C’est même dur, un lit de camp!

Robert

Que le diable les emporte! Je n’irai pas!

Roquefeuille

Et la prison?

Robert

C’est vrai, la prison! Ah! si je le tenais, ce tambour!

Roquefeuille

Tu battrais le tambour?

Robert

Et, ce qui est plus irritant encore, c’est que, pour cette maudite soirée à laquelle je ne puis plus aller, je me suis presque fâché avec ma femme!

Maxime

Comment! tu en es déjà aux discussions avec madame Maubray?

Roquefeuille

S’il en est là, parbleu! Où veux-tu qu’il en soit? Vous vous mariez, voilà ce que c’est! De grands enfants qui ne se jetteraient pas à l’eau sans savoir nager, et qui se précipitent tête baissée dans le gouffre du mariage! Vous étudiez dix ans pour être ingénieur des ponts et chaussées, médecin ou pianiste, et vous voulez deviner, sans l’apprendre, cet art bien autrement difficile… être heureux en ménage!… heureux en ménage!

Maxime

Toujours la même note!

Roquefeuille

Mais, ignorants! ânes bâtés que vous êtes!… savez-vous qu’un physiologiste allemand a publié un ouvrage rien que sur les devoirs conjugaux, et qu’il a douze volumes?

Maxime

Un vrai dictionnaire!

Roquefeuille

Oui, un dictionnaire depuis A, amour! jusqu’à Z, zéro! Tout le mariage est là!

Robert

Voyons, je suis marié, n’est-il pas vrai? Ce n’est donc pas la qualité de mari qui m’inquiète ce soir, c’est la qualité de citoyen.

Maxime

Attends donc, je fais une réflexion!

Robert

Laquelle?

Maxime

Ah çà! comment es-tu de la garde nationale, toi?

Robert

C’est là ce que tu appelles une réflexion?

Maxime

Tu t’es donc fait naturaliser Français, depuis ton mariage?

Robert

À quoi bon? Où veux-tu en venir?

Maxime

À ceci: les Français seuls sont admis à l’honneur de figurer dans cette institution: or Robert n’est pas Français; donc il n’est pas de la garde nationale.

Robert

Tu me ferais grand plaisir de me prouver ce paradoxe, par exemple; j’ai été élevé à Maurice, c’est vrai, mais je suis né à Paris, faubourg Saint-Germain; mon père et ma mère étaient Français.

Roquefeuille

En effet! La cause me semble jugée. Tu es Français, mon cher, va monter ta garde!

Maxime

Un instant!

Roquefeuille

Esculape demande la parole.

Maxime

Ce que Robert a dit est parfaitement exact; mais ce qu’il ne dit pas, c’est que, s’il est né à Paris, faubourg Saint-Germain, s’il avait une mère

Française, il avait un père parfaitement Anglais, un Anglais pur sang.

Robert

D’accord! Mais mon père s’est fait naturaliser Français.

Roquefeuille

Un instant! Ceci devient sérieux. Est-ce avant ou après la naissance que ton père s’est fait naturaliser.

Maxime

C’est après.

Robert

C’est possible; un an ou deux, peut-être! Je crois me rappeler que ce fut dans l’année qui précéda notre départ pour Maurice.

Roquefeuille

Alors, mon cher, ne va pas monter ta garde, tu n’es pas Français.

Robert

Quelle plaisanterie! Suis-je Parisien?

Roquefeuille

Tu es Parisien, parce que tu es né à Paris, c’est évident; mais tu es Anglais, parce que ton père était Anglais au moment de ta naissance. Tu es un Anglais-Parisien, voilà tout, ou un Parisien-Anglais, comme tu voudras, cela m’est égal!

Maxime

Tu vois, tu consultes la loi, et la loi te répond!

Robert

Cependant…

Roquefeuille

Ah! je te comprends! Il te semble étrange qu'un moutard de deux ans ait une personnalité aussi définie; mais le père qui a le droit de lui donner le fouet, n'a pas le droit de lui donner sa nationalité… Voilà!

Robert

Tiens, tiens! Cela me fait un drôle d'effet!… je suis Anglais… me voilà Anglais!

Roquefeuille

Perfectly well! sir!

Robert

Cela ne me change pas.

Maxime

Fais voir?

Roquefeuille

Fais voir? Tu as absolument la même tête; seulement, tu ne seras plus électeur en France, ni juré, ni garde national.

Maxime, *appuyant.*

Ni garde national!

Robert

Je ne suis plus garde national! je ne monte plus ma garde! Vive John Bull! Un grognement pour John Bull!

Roquefeuille

Je connais pas ton John Bull.

Robert

Ça ne fait rien… Hourra! hourra! *(Tout trois crient.)*

Maxime

Stope! stope!

Roquefeuille

Ah! mari, va! si tu n’es pas Français, tu es bien digne de l’être!

Robert

Ma femme! Tiens, au fait, maintenant que je suis Anglais… Est-ce qu’elle est Anglaise, elle?

Roquefeuille

Chut!

Scène IX

Les mêmes, Laurence.

Maxime

Ah! madame, nous avons une chose curieuse à vous apprendre.

Robert

Eh bien, ne vas-tu pas… Et ma soirée?

Maxime

Sois tranquille, je m’arrêterai à temps.

Laurence

Et moi une grande nouvelle à vous annoncer.

Robert

Je doute que la vôtre vaille la nôtre.

Laurence

Vous allez en juger.

Roquefeuille

Devinez ce qu’est votre mari?

Laurence

C’est?…

Robert, *bas, à Laurence.*

Le plus repentant des hommes.

Laurence

Le plus sûr de son pardon.

Maxime

Mais non, mais non!

Laurence

Mais si!

Maxime

Je veux dire que Robert s’est trompé de nationalité, qu’il est Anglais. Vous avez épousé un Anglais!

Laurence

Ah! un Anglais! Quelle folie!

Maxime

Que pensez-vous de ma nouvelle?

Laurence

Et vous, de la mienne: Léonie est en France!

Maxime

Serait-il vrai?

Laurence

Mieux encore! elle est ici, et… *(Léonie paraît.)* la voici!

Scène X

Les mêmes, Léonie.

Maxime et Robert

Madame de Vanvres!

Roquefeuille

Elle, comme dit l’ami Maxime.

Léonie

Moi-même. (À Robert.) Mon cher Maubray!… mon cher Roquefeuille!…

Roquefeuille

Ah! par exemple, voilà une aimable surprise!

Robert

Soyez la bienvenue, madame.

Léonie

J’arrive de Genève à l’instant, et, vous le voyez, ma première visite est pour ma meilleure amie.

Laurence, *l’embrassant.*

Et tes meilleurs amis t’en remercient!

Maxime

Pas un mot pour moi, madame?

Léonie

Monsieur Maxime, mon intrépide voyageur!

Maxime

Vous ne vous attendiez pas à me revoir?

Léonie

Mais non, je vous assure; et même…

Maxime

Quoi! ces mots que vous avez daigné prononcer un jour!… cette promesse de mariage?…

Léonie

Me marier, quand je suis libre, indépendante? Oh! non, non!…

Roquefeuille, *à Maxime.*

Qu'est-ce que tu me contais donc, toi, avec ton tour du monde?

Maxime

Mais, j'ai cru…

Roquefeuille

Une veuve! Chatte… chatte échaudée!

Léonie

Comment! Il vous a conté… Ah! ah! ah!… Figurez-vous que la première fois que le hasard nous mit en présence, c'était à Lisbonne. Nous nous reconnaissons pour des compatriotes, et, loin de France, un compatriote, c'est un peu la patrie, et puis, aux premiers mots échangés, nous nous trouvons soudain en pays de connaissance; nous causons de toi, de ton mari, du notaire, de Roquefeuille, dis-je… Le lendemain…

Robert

Le lendemain…

Léonie

Nous nous serrons la main comme de vieux amis, puis la vapeur emporte M. Duvernet à Rotterdam, et je fais voile pour Alger.

Roquefeuille

Et c'est tout? Un roman qui s'arrête au premier chapitre!

Maxime

Mais non, ce n'est pas tout!… Un an après, nouvelle rencontre sur le Vésuve!

Roquefeuille

Diable!

Maxime

Cette fois, j’exprime à madame toute l’ardeur des sentiments que sa vue a fait naître en moi. Je lui parle amour, passion, feux et flammes… Elle me répond…

Roquefeuille

Volcan!

Maxime

Et le lendemain, nouveau départ, nouvelle séparation!…

Léonie

Oui, mais au lieu de prendre la main que je lui tends en camarade, n’a-t-il pas l’audace de me la demander?

Laurence

Et tu lui réponds?…

Maxime

Oh! une chose inouïe, étrange, incroyable!

Madame répond qu’elle n’a pas le temps; mais que si le hasard nous réunit seulement onze jours à Paris, elle me donnera le droit de courir le monde avec elle.

Tous

Onze jours!

Maxime

L’avez-vous dit?

Léonie

Assurément!… Ne savez-vous pas qu’il faut onze jours pour se marier?

Roquefeuille

Le fait est que si les hommes étaient sages, il faudrait onze ans!

Maxime

Et bien, nous y sommes, à Paris, et…

Léonie

Oui, mais je pars demain.

Maxime

Demain! *(Baptiste apporte un plateau sur lequel se trouve le thé, le pose sur la table et sort.)*

Laurence, *à part.*

Nous verrons cela.

Léonie

Ma place est retenue au Havre, sur le Panama, en charge pour Maurice.

Tous

Maurice!

Maxime

Et vous croyez que je vous laisserai partir? Non, madame, dussé-je, en ma qualité de médecin, empoisonner le second et le capitaine du Panama, il ne partira pas!

Léonie

De la violence!

Roquefeuille

Oui, madame; il est décidé à faire mettre l’embargo sur tous les bâtiments qui voudraient quitter la France avant onze jours! comme le duc de Buckingham!

Maxime

Et je partirai avec vous! bon gré! mal gré!

Roquefeuille

Il est dans son rôle! un rôle absurde, mais il est dedans!

Léonie

Pour ne pas vous répondre, j’accepterai une tasse de thé.

Laurence

Voici, ma chère Léonie.

Maxime

Car enfin vos promesses… Voulez-vous du sucre?

Léonie

Merci!

Robert

Épousera!

Roquefeuille

Épousera pas!

Maxime

Vos promesses?

Léonie

Oui, donnez-moi du lait.

Robert, *riant.*

Épousera!

Roquefeuille

Épousera pas!

Léonie

Ah! pendant que j'y pense, mon cher Maubray, j'ai un service à vous demander, une lettre de recommandation! Vous connaissez probablement notre consul de France à Maurice?

Robert

Parfaitement! monsieur de La Salle.

Léonie

C’est bien cela!

Robert

Si je le connais! C’est lui qui nous a mariés.

Roquefeuille, *avalant de travers.*

Hein?

Robert

Eh bien, qu’est-ce qu’il y a?

Maxime

Une malice rentrée.

Roquefeuille

C’est le consul de France qui vous a mariés?

Robert

Oui. Qu’est-ce que cela te fait?

Roquefeuille

À moi? Oh! rien! moins que rien!

Léonie

Qu’a-t-il donc?

Laurence

Il ne peut entendre parler de mariage sans avaler de travers.

Léonie

Et maintenant, voulez-vous permettre un peu de repos à une voyageuse qui n’a pas fermé l’œil de la nuit?

Laurence

Mais il n’est pas tard! Onze heures!

Robert

Onze heures!… et l’honneur qui m’appelle sous les drapeaux! Allons revêtir mon uniforme, et veiller au salut de l’empire.

Maxime

Me permettez-vous, madame, de vous offrir mon bras jusqu’à votre voiture?

Léonie

Du moment où ce n’est que le bras, j’accepte. *(À Laurence.)* Au revoir! *(Elle l’embrasse.)*

Laurence

Au revoir! À demain, n’est ce pas?

Léonie

À demain… Eh! mais, Roquefeuille est devenu muet. Méfiez-vous! il y a quelque anguille sous roche.

Roquefeuille, *préoccupé.*

Moi, je…

Léonie

Nous ne vous demandons pas vos secrets. Adieu! *(Elle lui tend la main. Roquefeuille, d’un air distrait, lui donne sa tasse et s’aperçoit de sa méprise. Il se confond en excuses; Léonie, en riant, remoule près de Maxime.)*

Maxime, *bas à Robert.*

Décidément, je ne vais pas chez Horace. *(Il sort avec Léonie.)*

Robert

Bonsoir, Roquefeuille! *(Il parle à sa femme.)* Ma chère Laurence, que je vais donc m’ennuyer loin de toi!… *(Il l’embrasse; Laurence le conduit près de la porte. — Roquefeuille, qui avait fait quelques pas, profite du moment où Laurence accompagne Robert, qui rentre chez lui, pour revenir et déposer sa canne sur le canapé, et sort en marchant sur la pointe des pieds.)*

Scène XI

Léonie, *seul.*

Si mon mari s’ennuie au corps de garde, il y aura du moins sympathie entre nous.

Scène XII

Laurence, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille

Mais qu'est-ce que j'ai donc fait de ma canne?

Laurence

La voilà!

Roquefeuille

Je le sais bien!

Laurence

Comment?

Roquefeuille

Chut! *(Il écoute.)* On n'imagine pas les services que cette canne m'a déjà rendus dans des circonstances analogues.

Laurence

Ah çà!… expliquez-moi…

Roquefeuille

Oui, je vais vous expliquer le fait le plus singulier, le plus incroyable, le plus incompréhensible… le plus…

Laurence

Vite, au fait! M. de Sévigné!…

Roquefeuille

Il faut d’abord m’assurer que je ne me trompe pas moi-même. Permettez-moi donc quelques questions. Nous sommes seuls?

Laurence

Absolument seuls! Parlez vite… Vous commencez à me faire peur!

Roquefeuille

Vous savez ce que M. Duvernet vous a dit de la nationalité de votre mari?… de Robert, veux-je dire?

Laurence

Pourquoi vous reprendre? Robert et mon mari ne font qu’un!

Roquefeuille

Un notaire… *(permettez-moi de redevenir notaire pour un instant)* est tenu à la plus grande rigueur dans le choix de ses termes. Donc, je le répète, avez-vous ici l’acte de naissance de Robert?

Laurence

Il doit être dans le secrétaire de sa chambre.

Roquefeuille

Alors, veuillez me l’aller chercher.

Laurence

Mais, encore une fois…

Roquefeuille

Faites, je vous prie, ma chère dame, ce que je vous demande; je répondrai ensuite à toutes vos questions… Ah! veuillez m’apporter votre acte de mariage. *(Laurence sort.)* D’honneur! ce serait bien drôle. Mais c’est impossible; si Robert est un ignorant, le consul doit connaître la loi.

Laurence, *revenant avec une liasse de papiers.*

Voici ce que j’ai trouvé.

Roquefeuille

Merci! *(Feuilletant.)* L’acte de naissance et l’acte de naturalisation. Maxime a dit vrai! Robert avait deux ans quand son père s’est fait naturaliser Français. Donc, Robert est Anglais. L’acte de mariage! Il est bien passé devant le consul français de Maurice… Mais comment le consul n’a-t-il pas exigé la production de l’acte de naissance? Ah! voici! Robert se donne la qualité de Français, et l’acte de naissance, étant en France, est remplacé par un acte de notoriété… *(À part.)* Je comprends maintenant!

Laurence

Eh bien! aurai-je le mot de l’énigme?

Roquefeuille

Le mot!… Vous me promettez que vous n’allez pas crier?

Laurence

Mais non, mon Dieu!…

Roquefeuille

Et que vous n’allez pas vous évanouir?

Laurence

Ah! vous m’impatientez… Parlez vite; je le veux!

Roquefeuille

Eh bien, mademoiselle…

Laurence

Mademoiselle!

Roquefeuille

Vous n’êtes pas mariée.

Laurence

Je ne suis pas mariée!

Roquefeuille

Car votre mariage est radicalement nul. Article 170.

Laurence

Nul!

Roquefeuille, *lui fermant la bouche.*

Chut! vous m’avez promis de ne pas crier!

Laurence, *chancelant.*

Ah! mon Dieu!

Roquefeuille

Vous m’avez promis de ne pas vous évanouir!

Laurence

Ce n’est pas possible! Vous vous jouez de moi! c’est une plaisanterie indigne!

Roquefeuille

Je ne plaisante jamais après minuit.

Laurence

Mais ne me dites donc pas cela! Je suis une folle de vous avoir cru un seul instant… Vous tenez entre les mains les preuves mêmes de mon mariage.

Roquefeuille

C’est précisément parce que j’ai ces preuves en main, que je vous répète: “Vous n’êtes pas mariée.”

Laurence

Ah! pour le coup!…

Roquefeuille

L’officier public était incompétent. C’est comme si vous étiez mariée devant un garde champêtre!

Laurence, *perdant la tête.*

Mais c’est horrible cela!… Mais ce n’est pas de ma faute!… Mais c’est affreux!… Mais, comment cela a-t-il pu se faire?

Roquefeuille

Eh! mon Dieu! bien simplement!… Robert s’est cru Français, et il ne l’était pas!

Laurence

Oh! mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Mais qu’est-ce que je vais devenir, alors?… Mais je ne suis pas la femme de Robert, je ne suis que sa…

Roquefeuille

Allons! courage, calmez-vous, nous aviserons à réparer cela! Vous avez heureusement la nuit entière pour réfléchir.

Laurence

Oui, vous avez raison; je vais… *(On entend la voix de Robert.)*

Roquefeuille

Hein!

Laurence, *effrayée.*

La voix de Robert!

Roquefeuille

Déjà!… Remettez-vous, et recevez-le!

Laurence

Oh! non.

Roquefeuille

Comment?

Laurence

Lui parler maintenant! Mais est-ce que je puis?

Roquefeuille

Mais, pourtant…

Laurence

Non, je ne veux pas le voir! Je n’ai plus la tête à moi! je ne saurais que lui dire! il devinerait tout!… Oh! mais non, je ne veux pas le voir!

Roquefeuille

Mais un mari…

Laurence

Mais est-ce qu’il est mon mari, maintenant?

Et, pensez donc… Ah! mais non! *(Elle se sauve à droite.)*

Roquefeuille, *ahuri.*

Ah! c’est juste!

Scène XIII

Roquefeuille, Robert.

Robert, *au dehors.*

C’est bien, c’est bien! vous pouvez aller vous coucher… (Entrant.) Tiens! tu es encore là, toi?

Roquefeuille

Eh! sapristi! oui… Voilà une demi-heure que je cherche ma canne… Où diable ai-je fourré ma canne?

Robert

Mais, la voilà!

Roquefeuille

Tiens! c’est vrai, la voilà!… Merci! bonsoir!

Robert

Écoute donc!

Roquefeuille

Ah! oui, j’ai bien le temps!

Robert

Deux mots!

Roquefeuille

Ta, ta, un rendez-vous. On m’attend, un rendez-vous d’amour!

Robert

Mais…

Roquefeuille

Et, tu comprends, je tenais à ma canne; un rendez-vous d’amour, on ne sait pas ce qui peut arriver; je tenais à ma canne. (Roquefeuille va prendre son chapeau sur la cheminée.)

Robert

C’est mon chapeau!

Roquefeuille

Ah! (Il le repose et prend le sien.)

Robert

Et ta canne?

Roquefeuille

Je sais où elle est, ça me suffit. Bonne nuit, et toi aussi!… Merci!… Ouf! (il se sauve.)

Scène XIV

Robert, *seul.*

Est-ce qu’il est fou? Pas tant que moi, toujours! Que nous sommes absurdes! Je fais un mensonge à ma femme, je la trompe pour une heure de liberté, et je ne suis pas plus tôt chez Horace que l’ennui me prend à la gorge et m’étouffe. C’est vraiment stupide, ces soirées de garçons, et je ne comprends pas comment j’ai pu… Mais le repentir a suivi de près la faute, et je viens tout avouer. Laurence doit être dans sa chambre, et je… (Il va pour ouvrir la porte; elle est fermée; il frappe, pas de réponse; étonné.) Ah! fermée!

ACTE deuxième

Même décor.

Scène première

Laurence, Roquefeuille.

Laurence

Ainsi, même si j’avais eu des enfants, le mariage était nul?

Roquefeuille

À coup sûr, leur présence n’y eût rien fait; seulement, la loi, qui est sévère sans être injuste, leur eût reconnu les droits d’enfants légitimes.

Laurence

C’est cependant le mariage qui fait les enfants légitimes!

Roquefeuille, *riant.*

Oui, plus souvent que le mari!

Laurence

Et il n’y avait pas mariage?

Roquefeuille

Pardonnez-moi; il y avait, mais il n’y a plus mariage.

Laurence

C’est vrai, vous m’avez expliqué… la bonne foi!… Savez-vous, mon pauvre Roquefeuille, que si vous ne m’aviez rien dit il y a huit jours, je serais encore mariée?…

Roquefeuille

D’idée, oui; mais de fait, non! Et eussiez-vous préféré que Robert fît avant vous l’horrible découverte?

Laurence

Oh! non!

Roquefeuille

Et qu’à la première discussion un peu vive?…

Laurence, *se récriant.*

Oh!

Roquefeuille

Eh! mon Dieu! il faut tout prévoir et tout craindre dans cette vie! Et prévenus à temps, armés en guerre, avec l’avantage énorme de l’offensive, il ne tient plus qu’à nous d’écarter le péril avant même qu’on le soupçonne!

Laurence

C’est vrai! Vous êtes un véritable ami, mon cher Roquefeuille! Vous n’avez pas besoin d’autres papiers que ceux que je vous ai remis?

Roquefeuille

Non!

Laurence

Les publications?…

Roquefeuille

Sont faites.

Laurence

Vous n’avez pas d’autres recommandations à…?

Roquefeuille

Vous avez supprimé les journaux?

Laurence

Oui, mais sans trop savoir pourquoi.

Roquefeuille

J’ai mes raisons; la presse est si indiscrète. Avez-vous vu hier l’homme de la mairie?

Laurence

Non!

Roquefeuille

Ah! Ainsi, personne ne se doute de rien?

Laurence

Si, j’ai cru devoir tout écrire à Léonie.

Roquefeuille

Tant pis!

Laurence

Je suis sûre de sa discrétion.

Roquefeuille

J’en serais encore bien plus sûr si elle ne savait rien.

Laurence

C’était forcé, mon ami! (Embarrassée.) J’avais des motifs, des raisons que je ne saurais vous expliquer.

Roquefeuille

C’est différent!

Laurence

Chut! c’est elle!

Scène II

Les mêmes, Léonie.

Léonie

Ah! ma chère Laurence, ma pauvre amie!

Laurence

Ah! ma pauvre Léonie!

Léonie

Comment! Je quitte hier une femme mariée, et je retrouve une jeune fille!

Roquefeuille

Une veuve, madame!… une déplorable veuve!

Léonie

N’est-ce pas une mystification de cet affreux notaire? Il est capable de tout.

Laurence

Hélas! non!

Léonie

Et voilà huit grands jours que cela dure?

Laurence

Huit jours!

Léonie

Et ton mari ne sait rien?

Laurence

Rien.

Léonie

Pourquoi ne lui avoir pas tout avoué?

Roquefeuille

Je l'avais conseillé… mais…

Laurence

Je n'ai pas osé.

Léonie

Pourquoi?

Laurence

Le soir où Roquefeuille m'apprit le fatal secret, Robert devait passer la nuit dehors. Je comptais donc avoir quelques heures pour réfléchir à mon étrange position et aux nouveaux devoirs qu'elle m'imposait, quand j'entendis la voix de mon mari; ma première, ma seule idée alors fut de me précipiter dans ma chambre et de m'y barricader.

Léonie

Ah!

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Et dire que Robert n’a pas enfoncé la porte!… Maladroit! la violence avec sa femme, c’eût été délicieux!

Laurence

Mon Dieu! après avoir frappé plusieurs fois, voyant que je ne répondais pas, il prit le parti de se retirer. Pour moi, je ne fermai pas l’œil de la nuit; les idées les plus folles se succédèrent dans ma tête, et je n’avais pu encore voir clair dans ce chaos lorsque le jour vint. Je me levai ne sachant quel parti prendre, confiant presque ma destinée au hasard ou à l’inspiration du moment. Je rencontrai Robert, et déjà mon secret montait à mes lèvres, quand son air froid et sévère l’arrêta. M’avait-il gardé rancune de mes torts de la veille? m’en voulait-il de ma porte fermée à son retour? Je ne sais; mais en le trouvant si froid, si sévère… je demeurai tremblante, mon cœur se serra… je ne vis que dangers à parler! Je gardai mon secret, et, depuis ce moment, chaque jour augmente mon embarras et diminue mon courage!

Léonie

Mais que crains-tu?

Laurence

Que sais-je? Tu connais mon mari; il n’est ni meilleur ni plus mauvais qu’un autre, bien qu’il ait des idées un peu créoles sur les choses de ce monde… Mais, dites à la plupart des maris, après trois ans de mariage: Vous êtes libres!

Roquefeuille

Ah! quelle course! Quel sauve-qui-peut!

Léonie

Monsieur exagère. Beaucoup reprendraient le chemin de la mairie.

Roquefeuille

Oui… avec d'autres femmes!…

Laurence, *à Léonie.*

Tu vois comme il est rassurant! Et il a peut-être raison, ma chère. Robert m'aime, je le crois… il est homme d'honneur, j'en suis sûre; mais, après trois ans, le mariage n'est-il pas comme un arbre qui a donné toutes ses fleurs, tous ses fruits… et que l'on voit tomber sans regrets? Pourquoi risquer tout mon bonheur sur un mot?

Léonie

Mais ce silence ne peut toujours durer. Quelle sera la fin de cette comédie?

Roquefeuille

La fin de toutes les comédies, un mariage!

Laurence

Voici ce que Roquefeuille m’a conseillé… Taire mon secret pendant onze jours.

Léonie

Onze jours!… Le temps nécessaire…

Roquefeuille

Aux publications, oui… et, pendant ce temps, me laisser faire les démarches, fournir les papiers, afficher les bans, etc. Le maire de notre arrondissement est mon ami, ce qui simplifie bien les choses.

Léonie

Et le onzième jour?…

Roquefeuille

Le onzième jour, conduire Robert à la mairie, sous un prétexte quelconque, toujours sans lui rien dire, et là… brusquement, lui apprendre la vérité.

Léonie

Comme cela, tout à coup?

Roquefeuille

Vlan!

Léonie

Quel avantage?

Roquefeuille

Immense! C’est de ne pas lui laisser le temps de réfléchir.

Léonie

Mais, c’est…

Roquefeuille

C’est un guet-apens, je le sais bien; mais il n’y a que ce moyen-là! Car, si on lui laisse onze jours de réflexion… Oh!

Léonie

Quel monstre que ce notaire!

Roquefeuille

Oui, mais quel notaire que ce monstre!

Laurence

Bref! tout est convenu de la sorte, et je ne regrette qu’une seule chose, c’est de n’avoir pas une mère, une sœur, chez laquelle je puisse me retirer pendant ce temps, sous le premier prétexte venu.

Léonie

Pourquoi? N’es-tu pas bien ici?

Roquefeuille

Oui!… Ce scrupule de jeune fille me semble un peu tardif!

Laurence

Cela ne vous regarde pas, mon cher Roquefeuille, ce sont des secrets de femme que vos oreilles ne peuvent entendre… et, si vous étiez bien aimable…

Roquefeuille

Très bien! Serviteur, Roquefeuille!

Laurence

Oh! mon ami!

Roquefeuille

Bon! bon! J’entre chez Robert.

Laurence

Merci!

Roquefeuille

Vous pouvez causer sans crainte. Vous savez, je n’oublie pas ma canne. (Il sort.)

Scène III

Laurence, Léonie, puis Baptiste.

Léonie

Eh bien, que voulais-tu dire?

Laurence

Vois l'étrange position qui m'est faite: depuis que je sais la nullité de mon mariage, je ne suis plus de bonne foi, et je n'ai plus le droit de me considérer comme mariée…

Léonie

Eh bien?

Laurence

Tandis que mon mari, à qui l'ignorance assure la bonne foi, se croit toujours…

Léonie

Comment, tu pousses le sérieux jusqu'à…

Laurence

Mais enfin, pense donc, je ne suis pas mariée!… et je ne sais pas ce qu'une autre femme ferait à ma place; pour moi, au risque de te paraître bien ridicule, je t'avoue qu'un scrupule… bizarre peut-être… une délicatesse exagérée c'est possible… mais enfin… Non!… non!… non!…

Léonie

Et que dit ton mari?

Laurence

II ne dit rien.

Léonie

Il est donc fâché tout de bon?

Laurence

Je l’ai cru le premier jour, je te l’ai dit; mais, le soir même, sa mauvaise humeur avait disparu, et si bien disparu, que ma situation est devenue très difficile…

Léonie

Comment! depuis huit jours… tu te retires chaque soir dans tes retranchements?

Laurence

Oui.

Léonie

Et M. Maubray dans son camp?

Laurence

Oui.

Léonie

Et, passé le couvre-feu, toute communication est interrompue entre les deux places?

Laurence

Oui.

Léonie

Ah! mais, ah! mais, voilà une situation délicate!

Laurence

D’autant plus délicate que, pendant le jour, je me fais aussi douce, aussi aimable, aussi prévenante que possible!

Léonie

Tu sors de tes retranchements?

Laurence

Et le soir…

Léonie

Tu rentres dans tes lignes?

Laurence

Tu l’as dit.

Léonie

Et l’assiégeant?

Laurence, *baissant les yeux.*

Ah!… il est parfois de fort mauvaise humeur!

Léonie

Dame! il est dans son droit!

Laurence

Mais voilà justement ce qui me fait peur; et c’est précisément pour cela que j’ai besoin de ton aide!

Léonie

Parle! (Baptiste entre, des journaux à la main.)

Laurence

Que voulez-vous?

Baptiste

Ce sont les journaux que je porte à monsieur.

Laurence

Mettez-les là!

Baptiste

Mais, madame, monsieur a l’habitude…

Laurence

C’est bien, vous dis-je; mettez-les là! (Baptiste sort.)

Léonie

Que prétends-tu faire de ces journaux?

Laurence

C’est Roquefeuille qui m’a recommandé de les supprimer avec le plus grand soin.

Léonie

Et pourquoi?

Laurence

Je ne sais.

Léonie

Ah! les publications, sans doute… (Elle prend un journal; Laurence va porter les autres journaux dans un petit meuble placé à droite.)

Laurence

Tu as raison.

Léonie

Voyons! (Lisant.) Premier Paris. — Faits divers. Ce n’est pas cela. Ah! Publications de mariages: “Entre M. Lenormand, 5, rue Coquillière, et mademoiselle Danjou, même maison, M. de Valois, rue Royale, et mademoiselle Laurent, même maison.”

Laurence

Pourquoi donc toujours: même maison?

Léonie

On n’a jamais pu savoir… Ah! voici!

Laurence

Poursuis.

Léonie

“M. Robert Maubray, 8, rue de Londres, et mademoiselle Laurence de Croix.” (Léonie lui donne le journal.)

Laurence, *lisant.*

Même maison!

Léonie

Comprends-tu, maintenant?

Laurence

Ah! oui… Prends garde! mon mari! (Elle cache le journal.)

Scène IV

Les mêmes, Robert.

Robert, *à part.*

Avec quelqu'un! toujours!… (Haut.) Madame!…

Léonie

Mon cher Maubray!

Robert

Vous vous faites rare; on ne vous voit presque jamais.

Léonie

Vous êtes trop bon de vous en apercevoir!

Robert

Et toi, ma chère Laurence, cette névralgie?…

Léonie

Une névralgie?

Laurence, *à Robert.*

Toujours bien souffrante, mon ami,

Robert

Soigne-toi. Tu sais combien ta santé m'est chère! (Il va pour l'embrasser.)

Laurence, *criant.*

Oh! prenez garde!

Robert, *de mauvaise humeur.*

C'est étonnant comme cette névralgie persiste!… Tu n'as pas vu mes journaux?

Laurence, *les cachant derrière elle.*

Non!

Robert

C'est étrange; voilà déjà deux ou trois jours que cela m'arrive!… Madame!… (À lui-même.) Oh! cette névralgie!… Il faut absolument que je sache à quoi m'en tenir!

Scène V

Léonie, Laurence.

Laurence

(Après s’être assurée du départ de Robert, reprend le journal.) “M. Robert Maubray, 8, rue de Londres, et mademoiselle de Croix, même maison.” Ça y est… Ah!… “M. Maxime Duvernet, 17, rue Louis-le-Grand, et madame de Vanvres.”

Léonie, *lui prenant le journal.*

Comment! j’y suis! nous y sommes!… Ah! M. Duvernet ne s’est pas déclaré battu! Il y tient; il veut m’épouser malgré moi!

Laurence

Il t’aime, c’est son excuse.

Léonie

Eh bien, il en sera quitte pour ses frais; car je reçois ce matin une lettre du Havre qui m’apprend que le Panama part dans trois jours.

Laurence

Tu t’en vas?

Léonie

Veux-tu donc que j’épouse ce monsieur?

Laurence

Je veux… je veux que tu restes!

Léonie

Tu ne comprends donc pas que si je reste, j’arrive tout bonnement au onzième jour, et je…

Laurence

Tu ne comprends donc pas que si tu pars, je suis perdue?

Léonie

Perdue!

Laurence

Oui, perdue!… Robert s’est étonné d’abord, puis inquiété de la nouvelle position qui lui était faite. Il a bien fallu inventer quelque chose… J’ai supposé…

Léonie

Ah! oui, la névralgie!

Laurence

Mais, maintenant…

Léonie

Il te croit moins?

Laurence

Il ne me croit plus du tout.

Léonie

Le drame se complique.

Laurence

Et le siège continue!… et je perds du terrain à tous moments!… et il faut que la place tienne encore trois jours, comprends-tu, trois jours?… Je suis perdue si tu ne viens pas à mon aide!

Léonie

Comment?

Laurence

Il faut que tu renonces à ton départ, que tu viennes habiter cette maison, et que tu ne me quittes pas!

Léonie

Oh! oh! oh!

Laurence

Tu hésites?

Léonie

Mais, je crois bien!… Et puis, si cette comédie traîne quelque peu en longueur, c’est ma liberté elle-même qui se trouve compromise, sans parler de l’abominable rancune que M. Maubray va me vouer.

Laurence

Tu refuses?

Léonie

Mais, dame! songe donc… Eh bien, non! il ne sera pas dit dans les âges futurs que madame de Vanvres aura refusé des renforts à sa meilleure amie! J’entre chez toi avec armes et bagages; nous ravitaillons la place, et tout est sauvé, même l’honneur!

Laurence

Ah! que tu es bonne! (Elle l’embrasse.)

Léonie

Voilà un baiser que je n’aurai pas volé.

Scène VI

Laurence, Léonie, Maxime.

Baptiste, *annonçant.*

M. Duvernet!

Maxime

Madame!…

Laurence

Pardonnez-moi, monsieur Maxime, si je vous quitte si précipitamment!

Maxime

Madame!…

Léonie

Nous avons quelques dispositions à prendre…

Maxime

Elle aussi?

Les deux femmes

Et nous vous présentons nos très humbles excuses. (Elles sortent.)

Scène VII

Maxime, puis Roquefeuille et Robert.

Maxime

Voilà une femme qui me fera damner avant le mariage!

Roquefeuille, *entrant.*

Il y a des gens bien pressés!

Robert, *entrant.*

Ah! Maxime! Parbleu! j’allais envoyer chez toi!… Sommes-nous seuls?

Roquefeuille

Oui.

Robert

Eh bien, je suis charmé de vous avoir tous les deux! J’ai à vous consulter!

Maxime

Comme médecin?

Roquefeuille

Comme notaire?

Maxime

Ou comme amis?

Robert

Comme amis avant tout! Comme notaire, peut-être! mais surtout comme médecin!

Roquefeuille

C’est la consultation de Panurge?

Robert

Et sur la même question, le mariage!

Roquefeuille

Seulement, Panurge était plus fin, il consultait avant.

Maxime

On t’écoute, parle!

Robert

Aux amis, d’abord. Figurez-vous qu’il règne dans cette maison, depuis huit jours, un mystère que j’ai vainement essayé de percer. Ma femme n’est plus la même; elle me fuit, elle m’évite. Rien ne marche comme d’habitude; ce sont des allées et venues continuelles de gens que je ne connais pas. Hier, un monsieur fort mal habillé est venu m’offrir les services de son administration, et, après une longue conversation où il n’a été question que de mairie, de voiture de cérémonie, etc. j’ai cru comprendre qu’il s’agissait d’enterrement.

Maxime

Tiens!

Roquefeuille

Et tu n’as pas profité de l’occasion?

Robert

Ce n’est pas tout!… Ma femme s’enferme des heures entières pour lire, et sais-tu quel roman j’ai trouvé sur son bureau? Le Code civil… ouvert au titre du mariage… Des droits respectifs des époux!

Roquefeuille

Ah! c’est curieux!… Y avait-il une corne?

Robert

Mauvais plaisant!… Enfin, il n’y a pas jusqu’à mes journaux, sur lesquels je ne puis mettre la main depuis huit jours.

Roquefeuille

Étrange! étrange!

Maxime

Et ta conclusion?

Robert

La vôtre?

Roquefeuille

Tu n’as pas d’autres indices?

Robert

Si! il y en a d’autres, mais…

Maxime

Mais…

Robert

C’est délicat à dire!

Maxime

On peut tout dire à son notaire.

Roquefeuille

Et à son médecin.

Robert

Eh bien, soit! Tu vois bien cette porte?

Maxime

Je la vois.

Robert

C’est la porte de la chambre de ma femme.

Maxime

Eh bien?

Robert

Eh bien, fais-moi le plaisir de l’ouvrir.

Maxime

Hein! Pourquoi faire?

Robert

Fais toujours!

Roquefeuille

Ouvre-lui la porte, pour l’amour de Dieu!

Maxime, *allant à la porte de droite.*

Soit!… Fermée!

Robert

Eh bien, oui, fermée! mais fermée comme on ne ferme pas une porte, à un mari surtout! Or, voilà huit jours qu’il en est ainsi.

Roquefeuille et Maxime, *riant.*

Ah bah!

Robert

Je vous avouerai, mes chers amis, que votre rire m’agace!

Roquefeuille

Quoi! elle ne s’est pas même ouverte à cette heure discrète où Psyché éteignait sa lampe?

Robert

Non!

Roquefeuille

Eh bien, que veux-tu que nous y fassions, mon pauvre ami? Nous ne pouvons pourtant pas…

Robert

Parbleu! je le sais bien! Mais je veux un conseil, un bon conseil!

Maxime

Quel conseil?

Robert

Celui du notaire d’abord!

Roquefeuille

Marche!

Robert

Ma femme a-t-elle le droit de me refuser…

Roquefeuille

L’obéissance? Non! Article 213.

Robert

Ai-je le droit d’exiger…

Roquefeuille

L’obéissance? Oui!… Même article 213.

Robert

Bon! Me voilà tranquille sur le fait de la légalité!

Roquefeuille

Tu citeras ta femme en justice pour la…

Robert

Non, non, non! Seulement, je connais mon droit. C’est énorme!

Roquefeuille

Va toujours! Tu t’amuses infiniment!

Robert, *à Maxime.*

Tu comprends bien que je ne me suis pas facilement résigné à ce rôle de…

Maxime

De Tantale?

Robert

De Tantale, soit! Et que j’ai demandé à ma femme la cause de ce divorce anticipé…

Maxime

Et elle t’a répondu qu’elle était souffrante?

Robert

Qu’elle était souffrante… des nerfs!

Roquefeuille

et

Maxime

Des nerfs.

Robert

Des nerfs!

Maxime

Eh bien, la raison en vaut une autre!

Robert

La raison est pitoyable, mon cher. Jamais Laurence n’a eu les apparences d’une plus magnifique santé. Elle est fraîche comme à quinze ans, et jolie comme les amours!

Roquefeuille

Tu la vois à travers les lunettes d’un célibataire!

Maxime

Voyons, soyons sérieux! Te connais-tu quelques torts? Ta femme est-elle fâchée contre toi?

Robert

Mais non! Et la preuve, c’est que, pendant le jour, elle est charmante, presque coquette avec moi; mais à mesure que le soleil descend sur l’horizon…

Maxime

Les belles de jour se ferment au coucher du soleil! Et cela a commencé?…

Robert

Le jour même de mon billet de garde, vous vous rappelez… cette curieuse découverte sur ma nationalité.

Maxime, *riant.*

Parbleu! voilà la raison! N’en cherche pas d’autres! Elle veut rompre toutes relations avec toi… depuis que tu es Anglais!

Roquefeuille

Oh! oh! oh! Au moment du traité de commerce? C’est invraisemblable!

Robert, *impatienté.*

Mon Dieu! vous plaisantez, là!…

Maxime

Sérieusement, je m’y perds!

Robert

Je n’ai donc plus qu’une ressource, c’est de m’adresser à toi, mon ami. Je veux qu’adroitement, et sans que Laurence s’en doute, tu puisses me dire si ma femme est malade, oui ou non.

Maxime

Comment! sans qu’elle s’en doute? Mais, malheureux, as-tu songé que notre seul thermomètre, à nous, médecins, c’est le pouls et la langue?

Roquefeuille

Et si elle ne s’y prête pas?

Maxime

S’il ne faut pas qu’elle s’en doute?…

Robert

Ta, ta, ta, arrange-toi à ta guise; trouve quelque moyen adroit, détourné, pour arriver à ton but.

Maxime

Mais…

Roquefeuille

Chut! la porte s’ouvre!

Maxime

Il est grand jour!

Robert

Voici ma femme; je te laisse avec elle. Viens, Roquefeuille.

Maxime

Non, parbleu! Mieux vaut que tu sois là!

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Et moi aussi!

Scène VIII

Les mêmes, Laurence.

Laurence

Vous ne m'en voulez pas, monsieur Maxime, de vous avoir laissé seul un instant?

Maxime

Robert m'a tenu compagnie.

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Attention! Roquefeuille… prévenons-la! (Bas à Laurence.) Méf…

Laurence

Plaît-il?

Roquefeuille, *toussant.*

Moi?… Ah! mes amis, je crois que je me grippe.

Maxime

Mais ce que je ne vous pardonnerais pas, madame, c'est de nous avoir enlevé madame de Vanvres, si je n'étais assuré que c'est pour empêcher son départ.

Laurence

Précisément!

Roquefeuille, *même jeu.*

Méfiez-vous.

Laurence

Vous dites?…

Roquefeuille, *faisant semblant de croire qu'elle a interrompu Robert.*

Tu dis?

Robert

Moi, je n'ai pas soufflé mot.

Roquefeuille, *à Laurence.*

Il n'a pas soufflé mot!

Laurence

Ah! je croyais. (À part.) Qu'est-ce qu'ils ont donc?

Robert, *bas à Maxime.*

Va donc!

Laurence

Et de quoi parliez-vous quand j'ai interrompu votre conversation? Y a-t-il de l'indiscrétion à vous le demander?

Maxime, *à part.*

Comment arriver?

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Voyons donc comment il va se tirer de là?

Maxime, *haut.*

Ah! oui, madame, je racontais à ces messieurs quelques particularités de mes voyages. Je disais que l'Europe, qui se croit à la tête de la civilisation, a été distancée sur certaines sciences par quelques peuplades océaniennes. La divination, par exemple.

Laurence

La divination!

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Voilà le moyen détourné.

Laurence

Vous croyez à cette science?

Maxime

Oui, madame; mais je fais une différence extrême entre la science de M. Desbarolles et celle des naturels de Nouka-Riva.

Robert, *bas.*

Au fait!

Maxime

Exemple, la chiromancie!

Roquefeuille

Ah! l’y voilà!

Maxime, *reprenant.*

La chiromancie peut, tout au plus, faire connaître le passé. Donnez-moi votre main, s’il vous plaît!

Roquefeuille, *bas, à Laurence.*

Ne la donnez pas!

Laurence

Ma main!

Robert, *à part.*

Enfin!

Roquefeuille, *bas.*

Ne la donnez pas!

Laurence, *sans comprendre.*

Mais…

Robert

Donne donc ta main, chère amie!

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Alors, il n’y a qu’un moyen. (À Laurence.) Donnez-moi l’autre.

Maxime, *bas, à Robert.*

Prends ta montre et compte une minute.

Robert

Je comprends!

Maxime

Main de race, madame. Hum!

Roquefeuille, *prenant l’autre main.*

Tout à fait aristocratique! (Robert compte, et regarde Roquefeuille.)

Maxime

Eh bien, qu’est-ce qu’il fait donc, lui?

Roquefeuille

Je fais la contre-épreuve.

Laurence

Expliquez-moi donc?

Roquefeuille

Nous allons vous dire la bonne aventure, belle dame!… Laissez faire!

Robert, *bas, à Maxime.*

Compte!

Maxime

Eh bien, madame, vous avez la main longue, les doigts effilés… vingt…

Roquefeuille

Quarante!

Maxime

Et, ce que nous appelons la main psychique… quarante.

Roquefeuille

Quatre-vingt!

Maxime

Qui doit servir merveilleusement les conceptions d'une intelligence supérieure.

Robert, *bas, à Maxime.*

Ça y est!

Maxime, *de même.*

Soixante pulsations!… Le pouls est excellent!

Roquefeuille

Ça y est! Cent vingt! Une fièvre de cheval!

Robert

Comment?

Roquefeuille

Une fièvre de cheval!

Robert

Tu es fou, ou ta montre ne va pas!

Roquefeuille

Ma montre ne va pas? La montre de ma mère!

Robert

Au diable! Voyons la langue!

Roquefeuille

Voyons la langue! (À part.) Ouf! et d’une! (À Laurence.) Oh! vous n’en êtes pas quitte, madame… il paraît que ce n’est pas fini.

Laurence

Comment?

Maxime

Dans l’art de la divination, madame, la main n’est que la première page du livre…

Laurence

Quelle est la seconde?

Maxime

C’est… ne riez pas d’avance… c’est la langue!

Roquefeuille, *à Laurence.*

Fermez la bouche!

Robert

Ah! pour le coup, tu ne me persuaderas pas!

Maxime

Et pourquoi non? La langue n’est-elle pas l’expression véritable de nos pensées? Tous nos organes obéissent à notre volonté, la langue seule est indépendante, et, partant, ne saurait mentir, au physique, bien entendu! On dit: une langue effilée, pour une personne fine et spirituelle; une langue épaisse, pour un ignorant et un imbécile.

Roquefeuille

Et une langue bien pendue pour un bavard.

Maxime

Oui!

Roquefeuille

Oui!

Maxime

Et qu’y a-t-il d’étonnant à ce que des peuples observateurs aient fait de la langue le miroir de l’avenir?

Robert

Je me rends! je me rends! Et, si Laurence veut bien se prêter…

Laurence

Comment, monsieur, vous voulez… que… (Riant.) Ah! ce n’est pas sérieux?

Roquefeuille

Fermez la bouche! (Elle repince les lèvres.)

Robert

Je te demande pardon, rien n’est plus sérieux!

Laurence

Ah! par exemple! (Elle rit.)

Roquefeuille, *mettant son binocle sur son nez.*

Allons, belle dame, allons, tirez-nous la langue!

Laurence, *éclatant de rire.*

Ah! ma foi! je ne puis pas!… Ah! ah! ah! (Elle va tomber en riant sur le canapé. Maxime et Robert se regardent, tandis que Roquefeuille leur tire la langue.)

Robert

Manqué!

Maxime, *à Roquefeuille.*

C’est ta faute!

Roquefeuille

Moi?

Maxime

et

Robert

Oui, tu l’as fait rire!

Roquefeuille

C’est vous!

Maxime et Robert

C’est toi!

Roquefeuille

C’est vous!

Scène IX

Les mêmes, Léonie.

Léonie

Mon Dieu! qu’est-ce donc?

Laurence, *riant.*

Ah! l’idée la plus bouffonne!

Maxime, *vite.*

Ce n’est rien… (À part.) Il ne manque plus que de me ridiculiser à ses yeux?

Léonie

Ma chambre est prête; si tu veux donner l’ordre à tes domestiques de porter mes bagages?

Maxime

Des domestiques? Ah! madame!… il n’en faut pas d’autre que moi!

Roquefeuille

Et moi? (À part.) Rompons les chiens!

Léonie

Ah! Vous êtes bien galants, tous deux! Eh bien, suivez-moi!

Maxime

Au bout du monde!

Roquefeuille, *bas, à Laurence.*

Ouf! et de deux! Mais, défiez-vous de ce gaillard-là, il a des idées… légères… (Il se sauve.)

Scène X

Robert, Laurence.

Robert

Ma femme se dit malade, et se porte à merveille! Nous allons bien voir… Vous me fuyez, Laurence?

Laurence

Moi?

Robert

Restez, je vous prie… on croirait que je vous fais peur.

Laurence

Oh!

Robert

Et j’avoue que je serais moi-même tenté de le croire un peu, à voir le soin avec lequel vous m’évitez.

Laurence

Je vous évite?

Robert

Vous ne direz pas, je suppose, que c’est le hasard seul qui met un tiers dans tous nos tête-à-tête, et élève sans cesse une barrière entre nous deux?

Laurence

Mais si, vraiment… Je n’ai pas remarqué…

Robert

Vous ne sauriez croire, ma chère Laurence, le plaisir que vous me faites en me parlant ainsi; car, d’honneur, j’en étais presque arrivé à douter de votre affection!

Laurence

Oh! quelle idée, Robert!

Robert

Ah! dame, chère amie, vous le savez, le cœur peut se lasser, à la fin, d’aimer seul, de battre seul, et sans qu’un autre cœur lui réponde, et, alors… Venez donc vous asseoir auprès de moi?

Laurence, *effrayée.*

Merci! merci!

Robert

Encore! Vous vous éloignez quand je vous appelle?

Laurence

Je ne m’éloigne pas! (Elle recule.)

Robert

Venez donc, je vous en prie!

Laurence, *s’asseyant.*

Il le faut bien!

Robert

Ah! Et maintenant, ma chère Laurence, que nous sommes l’un près de l’autre, non plus comme de vieux époux, mais comme de jeunes amants, me direz-vous quel est le sujet de vos préoccupations?

Laurence

Je vous assure…

Robert

Depuis huit grands jours, ne vivons-nous pas comme des étrangers?

Laurence, *voulant se lever.*

Robert!

Robert

Là! voyez, à l’instant même où, pour la première fois, je vous trouve seule, vous voulez déjà me quitter. Vous ne m’aimez pas.

Laurence

Je ne vous aime pas! (À part.) Quel supplice!

Robert

Est-ce une jeune fille? est-ce ma femme qui me parle?

Laurence, *à part.*

Oh! mon Dieu!

Robert

Je vous comprendrais si vous étiez mademoiselle de Croix au lieu d’être madame Maubray, et si mon amour…

Laurence

Mais, je vous assure qu’il n’en est rien, je…

Robert

Si vous m’aimiez, vos yeux se baisseraient-ils devant les miens?… Si vous m’aimiez, me trouveriez-vous ridicule et ennuyeux? Si vous m’aimiez, repousseriez-vous le bras qui enlace votre taille? (Il lui prend la taille.)

Laurence, *au comble de l’agitation.*

Robert! Robert!

Robert

Je vous aime, moi! (Il veut la prendre dans ses bras, elle se débat.)

Scène XI

Les mêmes, Léonie.

Léonie, *tenant un carton à chapeau.*

Ce n’est que moi, chers amis; ne vous dérangez pas!

Robert

La peste soit des importuns!

Léonie, *bas à Laurence.*

Il paraît que j’arrive à temps!

Robert

Comment se fait-il, ma chère Laurence, que vos domestiques n’aient pas annoncé madame de Vanvres?

Léonie

Comment, m’annoncer? On ne m’annonce plus maintenant que je suis de la maison.

Robert

De la maison?

Léonie

Mais, vous voyez bien, j’emménage!

Robert

Comment! cette chambre dont vous parliez?

Léonie

Mais c’est ici!

Robert

Ici!

Léonie

Votre femme ne vous l’a pas dit? C’est qu’elle voulait vous faire une surprise agréable.

Robert, *à part.*

C’est un garde du corps qu’elle se donne!

Léonie, *bas à Laurence.*

Il est furieux!

Laurence

M’en voudrais-tu, mon ami, de ce que j’ai fait?

Robert

Nullement! J’en suis enchanté, enchanté!

Léonie

J’ai dit à ces messieurs de monter mes effets dans ma chambre.

Robert

La chambre d’amis, à l’autre bout de l’appartement?

Léonie

Y pensez-vous? À une lieue de tout pays habité. Je mourrais de peur la première nuit. Non, non! la chambre qui touche à celle de votre femme (Fausse sortie.)

Robert, *furieux.*

Dites tout de suite sa chambre, et n’en parlons plus! (À Laurence.) Enfin, je vous disais, ma chère Laurence…

Léonie

Par ici, monsieur Maxime, par ici!

Scène XII

Les mêmes, Maxime.

Maxime, *avec ironie.*

Me voilà, madame!

Robert, *se promenant avec agitation.*

À l’autre!… Ah! l’on veut me pousser à bout!

Maxime

Qu’est-ce qu’il a donc?

Léonie

Il a ses vapeurs. Eh bien, et mes cartons à chapeau, et mes robes, et M. Roquefeuille?

Scène XIII

Les mêmes, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille, *avec des cartons.*

Voilà, voilà, voilà!

Robert

Encore! Il ne manquait plus que lui! (Même jeu.)

Léonie

Par ici, messieurs!

Roquefeuille, *se débarrassant.*

Ouf! Et on veut que je me marie?

Robert

Allons! c’est fini!… je ne suis plus chez moi?… C’est une gare! c’est un débarcadère!… Oh! j’aurais du plaisir à casser quelque chose! (Il sonne.)

Laurence, *bas à Léonie.*

Comment cela finira-t-il?

Baptiste

Monsieur a sonné?

Robert

Mon Constitutionnel!

Baptiste

Mais, monsieur…

Robert

Je vous demande mon journal! Est-ce clair?

Baptiste

C’est que…

Robert

On ne répond pas c’est que… à un homme qui demande le Constitutionnel… Si mon journal n’arrive pas demain, vous serez congédié.

Laurence

On l’aura égaré, mon ami. (À Baptiste.) Allez, et taisez-vous! (Il sort.)

Roquefeuille, *à Robert.*

Depuis huit jours, les journaux sont d’une platitude…

Robert

Quelle patience il faut avoir!

Maxime, *riant.*

Et tout cela, parce que tu n’as pas lu ton journal. Tu peux te vanter d’être un fier original!

Robert

Est-ce que cela te regarde? Oui, je suis furieux, parce que les journaux ne disparaissent pas ainsi sans laisser de traces! Voilà huit jours que je n’en ai pas vu un seul!

Maxime

Si c’est là ce qui te chagrine, vois l’heureux hasard! je puis venir à ton aide.

Roquefeuille

Hein!

Maxime

J’ai précisément le journal les Débats de ce matin dans ma poche!

Laurence, *à part.*

Ah!

Léonie, *à part.*

Le maladroit!

Roquefeuille

Il avait bien besoin, celui-là!…

Robert

Ce n’est pas qu’au fond je tienne beaucoup…

Maxime

Si, si! Il y a précisément une ligne qui me concerne, et, à titre d’ami, tu dois y prendre intérêt.

Roquefeuille, *bas à Maxime.*

Mais tais-toi donc!

Léonie, *de même.*

Mais taisez-vous donc!

Maxime

Hein? Est-ce qu’il y a du mal à dire, madame, que votre nom figure auprès du mien dans les publications des Débats?

Léonie

À coup sûr, monsieur, vous me compromettez…

Laurence, *bas à Roquefeuille.*

Il va voir aussi les nôtres!

Roquefeuille

Sac à papier! Comment parer le coup?

Robert

Ah! ah! vous en êtes déjà là?… Mes compliments…

Roquefeuille

De condoleance!

Léonie, *passant entre Maxime et Robert.*

Ne lisez pas! Je n’ai jamais autorisé M. Duvernet… Ne lisez pas!

Robert

Si fait! si fait!

Laurence

Comment faire?

Léonie, *bas à Roquefeuille.*

Alerte! (Robert lit le journal.)

Roquefeuille

Du sang-froid! de l’audace! (À Léonie.) Qu’est-ce que vous cherchez, madame? un morceau de carton ou de papier pour dévider cette laine?

Léonie

Oui, précisément.

Roquefeuille, *à demi-voix.*

Le journal?

Léonie

Compris!

Robert

Où sont donc ces publications, je ne trouve pas?

Maxime

À la quatrième page!… Ignorant!

Robert

C’est juste!

Léonie, *prenant le journal.*

Pardon! mon cher Maubray, voilà ce qu’il nous faut!

Laurence

Oh!

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Bien exécuté!

Robert, *étonné, se contenant.*

Mais, madame, vous n’avez que faire d’un journal tout entier pour dévider un écheveau de laine!

Léonie

C’est parfaitement juste!… Vous voyez que quand j’ai tort je me rends! (Elle déchire le journal en deux et lui donne la première partie.) Tenez, lisez votre premier-Paris!

Roquefeuille, *à part.*

Bravo! Et on veut que je me marie?… Ah! non!

Maxime, *redescendant à Léonie et lui reprenant la moitié du journal.*

Mais non, mais non, madame! Le paragraphe que je veux faire lire à Robert est dans la seconde partie du journal.

Léonie, *bas.*

Mon Dieu, que vous êtes insupportable!

Maxime

Vous dites?…

Léonie

Je ne dis rien!

Maxime

J’ai mal entendu.

Roquefeuille

Animal!

Maxime

Hein?… (Il tient la moitié du journal, la déchire en deux, et rend à Léonie une partie.) Il y a encore là de quoi dévider dix écheveaux! (À Robert.) Et si tu veux jeter les yeux… (Il lui donne le quart du journal.)

Robert, *à part, regardant Léonie.*

Voilà une petite dame qui me fera tout bonnement commettre un crime. (Prenant le journal à Maxime.) Donne!

Laurence

Perdus!

Roquefeuille

Pas encore! (Il renverse l’encrier sur la table.) Ah!

Laurence

Ah!

Maxime

Qu’y a-t-il?

Robert

Il paraît que ce n’est pas fini.

Roquefeuille

Ah! mon Dieu! c’est madame qui vient de renverser l’encrier, et de faire une tache énorme sur la table. C’est la mer Noire. Comment réparer? Vite, madame, un chiffon!

Les femmes

Ah! mon Dieu! ça coule!… Vite donc!

Roquefeuille, *enlève lentement la feuille que Robert tient, et la donne à Léonie.*

Voilà, madame. Essuyez! essuyez!

Léonie

Essuyons! (Elle frotte avec le papier.)

Laurence

Il était temps!

Maxime

Mais, madame, pour l’amour de Dieu!…

Léonie

Mêlez-vous de ce qui vous regarde, mon cher monsieur.

Maxime

Mais.

Robert, *à Léonie.*

Ah çà! madame, vous moquez-vous de moi, par hasard?

Léonie

Y pensez-vous? Je vous assure qu’il n’y paraîtra rien; mais je suis désolée…

Roquefeuille

Ça ne paraîtra pas du tout.

Robert

Eh! il s’agit bien de cette table!

Léonie

De quoi s’agit-il donc? Ce n’est pas de ce chiffon de papier, je suppose?

Robert

Si fait, madame.

Léonie

C’est vrai? c’est celui que vous lisiez? Que vous êtes étourdi, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille

C’est donc moi… Mais le mal peut se réparer. Pouvais-je me douter qu’on attachât quelque importance à un méchant bout de journal? Où est-il passé, maintenant?

Maxime, *le ramassant.*

Le voici, mais dans un piteux état!

Roquefeuille

Il est légèrement maculé; mais avec un peu de bonne volonté!…

Maxime

Impossible d’en déchiffrer une ligne…

Laurence, *bas à Léonie.*

Je suis sauvée.

Robert, *à Léonie, éclatant.*

Madame!

Léonie

Mon Dieu! qu’y a-t-il?

Robert, *hors de lui.*

Il y a, madame, que je ne suis pas dupe de tout ceci! Ce journal n’est qu’un prétexte pour les persécutions continuelles dont je suis l’objet!…

Je ne sais quel mauvais vent a soufflé sur mon ménage, mais depuis huit jours, c’est-à-dire depuis votre arrivée, tout va ici de mal en pis. Ma femme oublie qu’elle est ma femme; mes amis oublient qu’ils sont mes amis! Je n’ose affirmer que tout ceci soit votre ouvrage…

Léonie

Mais vous le croyez?

Robert

Mais je le crois.

Léonie

C’est franc, du moins.

Maxime

Robert!

Laurence

Mon ami!

Robert

Laissez-moi! car vous êtes tous d’accord! Laissez-moi!

Laurence

Que voulez-vous faire?

Robert

Oh! rien, je ne veux même pas vous imposer le sacrifice d’une amie, et je lui cède la place. (Il sort.)

Maxime, *le suivant.*

Robert! Robert! (Robert lui a fermé la porte sur le nez. — Maxime sort par le fond à gauche. — Musique à l’orchestre jusqu’au baissé du rideau.)

Scène XIV

Roquefeuille, Léonie, Laurence.

Roquefeuille

Eh bien!

Léonie

Eh bien!

Laurence

Eh bien!

Roquefeuille

Encore une victoire comme celle-là, aurait dit Pyrrhus, et c’est fait de nous!

Léonie

Nous avons poussé les choses un peu loin!

Laurence

Ah! je le sens bien! Mais que faire maintenant?

Léonie

Dame!…

Roquefeuille

Il n’y a pas à hésiter. Il faut faire la paix, vite! vite!

Laurence

Et comment faire la paix?

Roquefeuille

Ceci, c’est votre affaire! Quand une place assiégée ne peut plus se défendre, elle arbore le pavillon parlementaire et capitule! Capitulez!

Léonie

Oui, capitule! capitule!

Laurence, *se dirigeant vers la porte de Robert.*

Au fait, vous avez raison! Qu’ai-je gagné jusqu’ici à cette comédie?… Aujourd’hui la colère, peut-être demain l’indifférence de Robert… J’ai déjà trop compromis mon bonheur.

Roquefeuille, *au fond.*

Capitulez!

Léonie, *de même.*

Capitule!

Laurence, *va droit à la porte et veut l’ouvrir.*

Fermée!

Roquefeuille

Fermée!

Tous trois

Ah!

ACTE troisième

Même décor.

Scène première

Léonie, Maxime.

Léonie

Eh bien, quelles nouvelles?

Maxime

Aucune!

Léonie

Aucune!

Maxime

Rien. Je viens de la préfecture de police, on m’a demandé mille renseignements. J’ai raconté tout ce que je savais: que notre ami Robert était un peu fantasque; qu’après une scène assez vive, il s’était retiré chez lui; que, le soir même, sa femme avait trouvé sa porte fermée; que, le lendemain, ne le voyant pas paraître, on s’était décidé à enfoncer la porte; que la chambre était vide, notre ami étant sorti par son escalier dérobé, et que depuis, on ne l’a plus revu chez lui, ni au cercle, ni à la Bourse… et, enfin, que sa femme était dans une mortelle inquiétude.

Léonie

Je crois bien!

Maxime

Tout cela était écrit au vol par un monsieur barbu qui m’a congédié avec ces mots: “C’est bien, monsieur, on le trouvera…” Et je suis venu en toute hâte vous rendre compte de ma démarche, tandis que Roquefeuille courait à Chatou, voir s’il n’est pas à sa maison de campagne.

Léonie

Quel événement! cette disparition! cette fuite!

Maxime

Et maintenant, madame, que j’ai fait ce que l’amitié me commandait, me sera-t-il permis de ne pas négliger tout à fait l’amour, et de vous faire remarquer que nous sommes précisément aujourd’hui à ce fameux onzième jour qui ne devait jamais luire pour moi.

Léonie

Ah! vous prenez bien votre temps! C’est au moment où votre ami…

Maxime

Oh! mon ami a l’âge de raison, madame, il sait se conduire: bonderie de ménage! Il aura voulu donner une leçon à sa femme; il va revenir tout à l’heure frais et vermeil comme un écolier qui a fait l’école buissonnière; mais moi, moi, madame, voilà onze jours que je ne mange pas! onze nuits que je ne dors plus!…

Léonie

Eh bien! vous devez commencer à vous y faire!

Maxime

Et que j’attends ce fameux délai qui expire enfin, et qui vous met dans l’absolue nécessité de tenir votre promesse.

Léonie

Moi?

Maxime

Oui, il n’y a plus à s’en défendre! Les onze jours sont révolus: j’ai tout prévu, tout préparé, pour ne vous laisser aucune défaite. Les bans sont publiés, M. le maire déploie son écharpe, l’église allume ses cierges, l’orgue prélude, et le suisse fait résonner sa hallebarde!

Léonie

Ah bien, il attendra, le suisse!

Maxime

Ah! madame, ce n’est pas possible!

Léonie

Mais conçoit-on cet entêtement?

Maxime

Ah! oui, on le conçoit quand on vous regarde!… Et si vous voulez m’écouter!…

Léonie

Mais, est-ce que je puis vous écouter dans la disposition d’esprit où je suis? Je n’ai pas seulement la tête à moi!

Maxime

Roquefeuille vous dira que c’est une excellente disposition pour se marier!

Léonie

Et le Panama qui m’attend et qui chauffe!

Maxime, *à part.*

Et moi, donc!

Léonie

Tenez! ne me parlez de rien tant que Robert ne sera pas retrouvé.

Maxime

Et après?

Léonie

Ah! après?

Scène II

Les mêmes, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille, *entrant précipitamment.*

Eh bien, l’avez-vous?… l’a-t-il?… l’a-t-on?…

Léonie

Rien. Et vous?

Roquefeuille

Rien… Et vous?

Maxime

Mais, à Chatou?

Roquefeuille

J’en viens! Rien! rien! rien!

Léonie

C’est effrayant!

Roquefeuille

C’est sinistre!

Maxime, *riant.*

Mais êtes-vous enfants avec vos inquiétudes! Pourquoi ne l’avez-vous pas mis dans les Petites-Affiches, à l’article des objets perdus.

Roquefeuille

Les femmes courraient après, et ne voudraient plus le rendre.

Léonie

Voulez-vous bien ne pas plaisanter!

Roquefeuille

Et madame Maubray?

Léonie

Ah! vous jugez! Elle en tombera malade!

Roquefeuille

On n’a qu’un mari et il s’envole!…

Léonie

Et au milieu de tout cela, M. Duvernet a le cœur de me parler mariage.

Roquefeuille

Dame! Cela lui donne l’espoir de vous égarer aussi un jour!

Maxime

Mais je ne vois pas…

Léonie

Plus un mot. Je ne consentirai à vous pardonner, que si vous me ramenez votre ami.

Maxime

Vous dites?

Roquefeuille

Va, marche… Et si tu le rapportes… récompense honnête!

Maxime

Voilà un espoir qui me donne des ailes!… J’ai une idée.

Roquefeuille

Saisis-la!

Maxime, regardant l’heure.

Dix heures! Le mariage est pour deux heures! j’ai le temps (Il se sauve.)

Léonie

Oui, oui, vous avez le temps!

Roquefeuille, *s’asseyant.*

De se marier! Ah! oui, il a le temps… Ah! en voilà un qui connaîtra la corde avant de se pendre.

Léonie

C’est elle! Laurence!

Scène III

Léonie, Roquefeuille, Laurence.

Laurence

Eh bien?

Léonie

Eh bien! ma pauvre Laurence, rien de nouveau.

Laurence

Mon Dieu!

Roquefeuille

C’est à n’y rien comprendre!

Laurence

Ah! je le comprends trop bien, moi!… Ce que nous voulions lui cacher, il le sait… et maintenant qu’il est libre, il est parti pour ne plus revenir!

Léonie

Mais non! Quelle idée!

Laurence

Ah! ne me dis pas que non, j’en suis sûre!

Autrement, est-ce qu’il ne serait pas déjà de retour, lui qui se faisait un scrupule de rentrer plus tard que l’heure dite, pour m’épargner la plus petite inquiétude?… Car il était si bon!… il était si tendre, si doux, parfois!… Ah! c’est fini, maintenant, c’est bien fini, va!… Je l’ai perdu, et pour toujours!…

Léonie

Mais veux-tu ne pas pleurer comme cela!

Laurence

Voilà ce que c’est que d’avoir voulu ruser avec lui, au lieu de lui tout dire!… Ah! si j’avais tout dit!… il m’aimait tant! et quelques instants encore avant son départ… Ah! si j’avais su!… C’était si facile!

Roquefeuille

Voyons, voyons, chère dame, ne nous désolons pas, et cherchons le remède! Vous êtes bien sûre qu’il n’a pas laissé le plus petit mot d’avis?

Laurence

Pas un! J’ai fouillé partout!

Léonie

Et, depuis ce temps, pas une lettre, pas un mot pour expliquer sa conduite?

Laurence

Rien!

Roquefeuille

C’est incompréhensible!… Et dire que cela nous arrive au moment de le marier sérieusement, de lui river la chaîne! Il a soupçonné l’embûche, le scélérat!… Un plan si joli, si bien conduit!… J’avais tout prévu… tout est prêt… le maire est prévenu; il nous attend pour deux heures; après deux heures, il serait trop tard: il a une assemblée d’actionnaires qu’il préside, et comme il ne donne jamais de dividende, il doit au moins être exact! Et le premier mariage dont je me sois occupé va manquer par l’absence inexplicable du futur!… et quel futur?… Un futur sérieux, éprouvé, garanti! un futur passé! un futur antérieur! Non! ce n’est pas possible! il va arriver! il arrivera! il arrive! le voilà! (Entrée de Thérèse.)

Scène IV

Les mêmes, Thérèse.

Roquefeuille

Non, ce n’est pas lui!

THÉRÈSE, un coffret à la main.

Pour madame!

Roquefeuille

Il ne peut pas tenir là-dedans!

Laurence

De quelle part?

THÉRÈSE

Je l’ignore! C’est un commissionnaire qui m’a dit: “Pour madame Maubray!”

Léonie

Qu’est-ce que cela peut bien être? (Thérèse sort.)

Roquefeuille

Voulez-vous permettre?… Ah! un écrin!

Léonie

Le magnifique écrin!

Laurence

Qu’est-ce que cela signifie?

Roquefeuille

Un écrin?… Ah! c’est toujours assez clair!

Léonie

Ouvre donc!

Léonie, Laurence et Roquefeuille

Des diamants!

Léonie

Quelle splendide rivière!

Roquefeuille

Rivière? C’est parbleu bien un fleuve!

Laurence, *à Léonie.*

Y comprends-tu quelque chose?

Léonie

Absolument rien!

Roquefeuille

Ah! je devine!… C’est un cadeau de l’ami Maxime à sa fiancée!

Laurence

C’est possible!

Léonie

De quel droit M. Duvernet se permettrait-il de m’envoyer des diamants?

Roquefeuille

Ma foi! du droit qu’ont les diamants de se présenter partout; d’ailleurs, au point où vous en êtes…

Léonie

Au point où nous en sommes, M. Duvernet serait un impertinent!… Non! cet écrin n’est pas pour moi, mais pour Laurence!

Laurence

Point; il y a erreur… C’est pour toi!

Roquefeuille

Ah! c’est bien la première fois que je vois deux femmes se renvoyer une parure!

Scène V

Les mêmes, Baptiste.

Baptiste, *entrant précipitamment.*

Madame! madame! le voilà!

Laurence

Mon mari?

Baptiste

Monsieur! c’est monsieur! Il descend de voiture!

Laurence

Lui! c’est lui!… Ah! que cela fait du bien!

Roquefeuille

Nous le tenons! Ne le laissez pas échapper!… Je cours à la mairie!… Par où sort-on pour ne pas le rencontrer?

Laurence

Par cette porte!

Roquefeuille

Il y passera, le misérable! (Il sort vivement.)

Baptiste, *annonçant.*

Monsieur! (Il sort avec Thérèse.)

Scène VI

Léonie, Laurence, Robert.

(Robert entre lentement par le fond, en costume anglais de voyage, gros paletot fourré, couverture, casquette, etc.)

Laurence, *courant à lui pour l'embrasser.*

Ah! mon ami, que je suis heureuse de vous voir!

Robert, *très froid et avec un léger accent anglais.*

Très heureux aussi!

Léonie, *à part.*

Ce ton!

Laurence

Ah! si vous saviez combien j'étais inquiète de votre absence!

Robert

Il n'y avait pas de quoi, madame.

Laurence

Madame!… Voilà trois jours que vous êtes loin de moi, et, au lieu de m'embrasser…

Robert

Que ne le disiez-vous tout de suite! Avec plaisir! (Il l'embrasse froidement sur le front et va s'asseoir.)

Laurence

Mais d'où venez-vous, mon Dieu?

Robert

Je viens de Londres!

Laurence

De Londres?

Léonie

Il s'est gelé en traversant le détroit!

Robert

Ah! madame de Vanvres, pardonnez-moi, je ne vous avais pas vue! (Il salue cérémonieusement.)

Léonie

Monsieur!

Laurence

Que faire à Londres, mon ami?

Robert

Mais, d’abord, faire une visite de politesse à mes concitoyens; car, vous savez, madame, que je suis Anglais, et puis y corriger, par la fréquentation d’un peuple calme et froid, cette pétulance de caractère dont je vous ai donné ici même un si fâcheux exemple!

Laurence

Eh bien, là, vraiment, je vous aimais mieux à la française!

Robert

Non, madame.

Laurence

Comment, non?

Robert

Vous m’avez suffisamment fait comprendre que mon éducation n’était pas complète, et qu’il me manquait ce vernis…

Laurence, *voulant parler.*

Mon Dieu!…

Robert

Ce vernis anglais!

Léonie

Ah çà, est-ce que vous allez toujours parler comme ça, maintenant?

Robert, *froidement.*

Toujours!

Laurence

Et vous serez toujours habillé comme cela?

Robert

Toujours!

Léonie

Et toujours aussi vif?

Laurence

Aussi aimable?

Robert

Toujours!… (Il remonte à la cheminée et va s’asseoir devant, dans un fauteuil, tenant ses jambes en l’air.)

LES DEUX FEMMES, effrayées.

Oh!

Léonie

Ma chère Laurence, mes sincères compliments! Je te vois déjà te promenant le long de Piccadilly ou sur les gazons d’Hyde-Park avec une capote rose ornée d’un voile vert, une robe groseille, et une écharpe jonquille, au bras de milord en waterproof et en mac-farlane. C’est splendide! Et, si je n’étais Française, je voudrais être Anglaise!

Scène VII

Les mêmes, Baptiste.

Baptiste

Madame!

Laurence

Qu’est-ce encore?

Baptiste

Un bouquet que l’on vient d’apporter pour madame.

Léonie

Qui on?

Baptiste

Madame me demande…

Laurence

De quelle part?

Baptiste

Je l’ignore. Voici le bouquet! (Il donne à Laurence le bouquet enveloppé dans du papier.)

Laurence

Je ne dois pas accepter.

Léonie

Un bouquet s’accepte toujours. (Baptiste sort.)

Laurence

Mais, mon mari?

Léonie, *montrant Robert qui a l’air de dormir.*

Est-ce qu’il pense à toi?

Laurence

Léonie!

Léonie

Tiens, regarde!

Laurence

(Elle a retiré le bouquet de son enveloppe et pousse un cri.) Ah!

Léonie

Un bouquet de fleurs d’oranger!

Laurence

Des fleurs d’oranger!

Léonie

En tous cas, qui est-ce qui a pu…

Scène VIII

Les mêmes, Maxime.

Maxime

Arrivé! Il est arrivé?

Laurence

Oui, d’Angleterre.

Maxime

Ce n’est pas possible! J’arrive du bureau des passeports, on ne lui en a pas délivré.

Robert, *sans bouger de place.*

Yes! on ne donne plus de passeports pour l’Angleterre.

Maxime, *lui serrant la main.*

Essoufflez-vous donc! Tu vas très bien?… Oui… Allons, tant mieux!

Laurence, *le faisant retourner vers elle.*

Pardon! Est-ce vous, monsieur Duvernet, qui nous avez envoyé ces bijoux?

Maxime

Quels bijoux?

Léonie

Est-ce vous, monsieur Duvernet, qui nous avez envoyé ce bouquet?

Maxime

Quels bijoux? Quel bouquet?

Laurence, *lui montrant le coffret.*

Ceux-ci!

Léonie, *lui montrant le bouquet.*

Celui-ci!

Maxime

Ces diamants! ces fleurs!

Léonie

Vous n'avez peut-être pas remarqué quelles sont ces fleurs?

Maxime

Des boutons de fleurs d'oranger! (Riant.) Ah! ah!

Laurence

Vous riez?

Maxime

Je ne sais qui peut vous avoir envoyé ce bouquet, mais je vous jure que ce n'est pas moi.

Léonie

Qui cela peut-il être, alors?

Scène IX

Les mêmes, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille, *entrant précipitamment et s’annonçant.*

C’est moi!

Léonie

Comment, c’est vous?

Roquefeuille

Eh! parbleu! oui, c’est moi!… Robert est-il prêt?

Laurence

Ah! vous êtes l’auteur d’une pareille mystification?

Roquefeuille

Quelle mystification?

Léonie

J’aurais dû m’en douter!

Roquefeuille, *ahuri.*

Mais quoi? (Léonie lui montre le bouquet.)

Léonie

Vous avez l’impertinence de m’adresser un bouquet de fleurs d’oranger à moi, madame de

Vanvres?

Roquefeuille

Des fleurs d’oranger! à vous, encore! Merci! Quelle plaisanterie! J’aurais compris une caisse d’oranges.

Léonie

Ainsi, ce n’est pas vous?

Maxime

Je vous jure…

Laurence, *à Roquefeuille.*

Ni vous?…

Roquefeuille

Mais, sac à papier! dépêchons-nous donc! Où est Robert?

Laurence et Léonie

Chut!

Roquefeuille

Dieu me pardonne! je crois qu’il dort!

Léonie

Il en a tout à fait l’air!

Roquefeuille

Il a bien choisi son temps! Je viens de la mairie, nous n’avons pas une minute à perdre. Réveillez-le, réveillez-le! Il ne peut paraître dans ce costume devant les autorités!

Laurence

Mais, comment?

Roquefeuille, *exaspéré.*

Eh! c’est votre affaire, sac à papier! Depuis ce matin, je ne fais que monter et descendre des escaliers, et courir de l’église à la mairie, et de la mairie à l’église! C’est le maire qui me renvoie à son vicaire, et l’adjoint qui me renvoie à son bedeau. Et les voitures et les cochers, et la marmaille!… Monsieur le marié!… monsieur le marié!… Oui! oui! je t’en moque!… le marié!… Tâche de m’y prendre!… va!…

Maxime

Mais alors, mais alors!… Madame consent!… Vous consentez donc?…

Léonie

Hein?

Maxime

Mais ce mariage!… cette église, cette mairie! C’est pour nous!

Léonie

Pour nous!

Maxime

Dame!

Roquefeuille

Tiens! c’est vrai, il ne sait rien, lui!… Laissons-lui son erreur!… le malheureux!

Maxime, *à Léonie.*

Ah! madame!… si vous consentez… un mot… un seul mot!…

Roquefeuille, *faisant passer Léonie.*

Allez vous habiller!

Maxime

En mariée?…

Léonie

Point, monsieur, en demoiselle de noces!

Roquefeuille, *lui donnant le bouquet.*

Alors, gardez le bouquet pour que l’illusion soit complète! (Léonie hausse les épaules.)

Léonie

Ah! vous êtes un impertinent. (Elle sort.)

Maxime

Mais, je n’y comprends rien! Mais si ce n’est pas moi, qui marie-t-on ici?

Roquefeuille

Cela ne te regarde pas! (À Laurence.) Dépêchez-vous, je vais faire patienter M. le maire!… (Montrant Robert.) Habillez-le!… (À Maxime.) Allons, marche!

Laurence

Mais, mon ami…

Roquefeuille

L’habit noir, c’est de rigueur! Un mariage, grand deuil! (Il entraîne Maxime.)

Scène X

Laurence, Robert.

Laurence

Une heure! Je n’ai plus qu’une heure, et Robert qui dort! Comment lui faire quitter ce costume pour endosser l’habit noir? (Elle s’approche et l’appelle doucement.) Robert, mon ami, Robert! (Il ronfle légèrement.) Oh! (Appelant de nouveau.) Robert!

Robert, *se réveillant et se levant.*

Ah! je crois, parbleu! que je dormais! Quel grossier personnage je fais!

Laurence

Il n’y a pas grand mal, mon ami, surtout si vous êtes fatigué!

Robert

C’est mon excuse, si je puis en invoquer une!

Laurence

Avez-vous besoin de quelque chose?

Robert

J’aurais besoin de mon lit. (Il s’assied sur le canapé.)

Laurence, *à part.*

De son lit! (Haut.) Ne croyez-vous pas que cela vous ferait du bien de quitter ces vêtements si lourds?

Robert

Je le croirais assez volontiers; mais, vous l’avouerai-je, je me sens si à l’aise dans cette excellente causeuse, que le moindre mouvement m’effraie.

Laurence

Qu’à cela ne tienne! Ne suis-je pas là?

Robert

Je ne veux pas abuser.

Laurence

Au contraire, c’est un plaisir pour moi. Entre jeunes époux, ces petits soins ne sont-ils pas une preuve de tendresse qu’on aime à se donner?

Robert, *incrédule.*

Oh! oh!

Laurence

Vous en doutez? Votre femme n’est-elle plus votre ménagère?

Robert

C’est très joli, ce que vous dites là, ma chère Laurence, et je vous fais mon sincère compliment, si vous voyez encore la vie éclairée des reflets de la lune de miel! Mais…

Laurence

Mais?…

Robert

Vous êtes en retard; les années se sont écoulées, et ce qui paraissait jadis un jeu charmant et plein de poésie, risquerait fort aujourd’hui de devenir un non-sens ridicule.

Laurence

Est-ce vous que j’entends?

Robert

Je vous étonne.

Laurence

Mais oui, je l’avoue… Et ce que vous me disiez, il y a trois jours à peine… (Elle s’assied sur la causeuse près de Robert.)

Robert, *se levant aussitôt.*

Pardon!

Laurence

Ah!… vous me quittez?…

Robert

Non… mais si on nous surprenait, on nous prendrait peut-être pour des amoureux!

Laurence

Eh bien, mon ami?

Robert

Eh bien, ce serait un peu ridicule!

Laurence

Ridicule! que vous aimiez votre femme et que votre femme vous aime?

Robert

Ai-je dit cela? En ce cas, je me serai fait bien mal comprendre.

Laurence, *ranimée.*

Ah!

Robert

Je vous aime, ma chère Laurence, je vous aime raisonnablement et sérieusement, comme on doit aimer sa femme, après trois ans de mariage.

Laurence

C’est-à-dire que l’amour ne résiste pas à trois ans de mariage, n’est-ce pas?

Robert

Cela dépend du régime auquel on l’a soumis, ma chère!… Il ressemble assez à l’eau que vous placez sur le feu. Plus le feu est ardent, plus vite l’eau se perd en vapeur! Ainsi l’amour…

Laurence

En sommes-nous là?

Robert

Pas encore!

Laurence

Pas encore est plein de promesses!

Robert

Mais c’est le sort qui attend l’homme assez fou pour croire la jeunesse éternelle; ne luttons donc pas, et obéissons aux lois de la nature.

Laurence

C’est charmant! C’est-à-dire que…

Robert

C’est-à-dire qu’à l’automne de la vie, il ne faut demander ni la poésie du printemps, ni les ardeurs de l’été.

Laurence, *troublée.*

Ah! Robert, que me dites-vous là?…

Robert

Ce que vous m’avez fait comprendre, si vous ne me l’avez dit, il y a trois jours. J’ai réfléchi, et j’ai vu combien vous étiez sage!

Laurence

Mais non!

Robert, *riant.*

Mais si!

Laurence

Êtes-vous sûr d’avoir bien compris?

Robert

Parfaitement! Décidément, vous aviez raison! Ces vêtements sont d’un poids… Aussi vais-je suivre votre avis, et en changer!… (Il entre à gauche.)

Scène XI

Laurence, puis Roquefeuille.

Laurence, *seule.*

Il ne m’aime plus! Je n’en puis plus douter maintenant! On ne raisonne pas ainsi quand on aime? Il ne m’aime plus!…

Roquefeuille, *entrant.*

Êtes-vous prête?

Laurence

Pas encore!

Roquefeuille

Ne plaisantons pas; les voitures me suivent. Je suis en nage!

Laurence

Robert est passé dans sa chambre; il va trouver son habit préparé sur son lit, entre ses gants et sa cravate blanche. J’ai caché les autres vêtements.

Roquefeuille

Bien, bien! encore une demi-heure! Vous savez… le maire… ses actionnaires… Pas de dividende! il faut qu’il soit exact! Je vais le faire patienter, il me fera patienter, nous nous ferons patienter. Mais, sac à papier! si on m’y reprend à marier quelqu’un!

Laurence

Nous marier!… Ah! mon ami! si Robert n’allait plus vouloir se marier, maintenant qu’il ne m’aime plus!

Roquefeuille

Comment?

Laurence

Une fois à la mairie, s’il allait dire: “Non!”

Roquefeuille

Non tout sec, comme ça?

Laurence

Je n’y avais jamais pensé. Mais c’est une peur horrible qui me vient tout à coup!

Roquefeuille, *effrayé.*

Mais non!… mais non! Quelle idée! En voilà une idée, par exemple!

Laurence

Chut! il vient!

Roquefeuille

Vous voyez bien, il a ses gants noirs, son habit blanc… c’est-à-dire non… Enfin, peu importe, il est habillé, nous sommes sauvés!

Scène XII

Les précédents, Robert, en robe de chambre et en pantoufles.

Robert, *entrant.*

Là!

Roquefeuille et Laurence

Ah!

Robert

Le fait est qu’on est ainsi plus à l’aise!

Laurence, *stupéfaite.*

En robe de chambre?

Robert

En robe de chambre, oui!

Roquefeuille

Et en pantoufles?

Robert

Et en pantoufles. Tiens, le voilà? Bonjour! J’ai même eu assez de peine à les trouver.

Laurence

Mais, mon ami, il est impossible que vous restiez ainsi!

Roquefeuille

C’est impraticable!

Robert

Impraticable, pourquoi?

Laurence

Mais, s’il vient une visite?…

Roquefeuille

Oui… plusieurs visites, une foule de visites?

Robert

Je ferai fermer la porte.

Laurence

Vous allez étouffer!

Roquefeuille

Il va étouffer! Il fait une chaleur…

Robert

Je ferai ouvrir la fenêtre!

Laurence

C’est impossible!

Roquefeuille

Impossible! Il fait un froid…

Robert, *sèchement.*

Impossible! Je ne vous comprends pas, ma chère Laurence: vous m’engagez à quitter mes vêtements de voyage pour me reposer, je vous écoute; je me coule dans ma robe de chambre, je me glisse dans mes pantoufles, et vous n’êtes pas satisfaite? En vérité, que voulez-vous donc? Que je mette une cravate blanche et un habit noir?

Roquefeuille

Mais, justement… Voilà… ce qu’on voudrait!

Robert

Vous ne me persuaderez jamais que ce soit une tenue de maître de maison. Alors, mettez une robe décolletée et allumez les lustres!

Laurence, *à part.*

Que faire, mon Dieu!

Roquefeuille, *à Laurence.*

Et le maire qui croque le marmot! Il faut avouer…

Laurence

Jamais! Ce serait tout risquer.

Robert

Mais qu’avez-vous donc?

Laurence

Moi, je…

Roquefeuille

Oh! une idée! — Parbleu, oui!

Robert

Eh bien?

Roquefeuille

Eh bien, oui, mon ami, j’ai perdu!

Robert

Perdu? Perdu quoi?

Roquefeuille

Une gageure que j’avais faite avec ces dames, et que tu m’as fait perdre!

Robert

Explique-toi!

Roquefeuille

Tu as à moitié deviné. Je voulais te faire quitter tes vêtements de voyage, non pas pour la robe de chambre, mais pour l'habit noir de cérémonie. J'avais parié avec ces dames arriver à ce résultat sans te prévenir. J'ai perdu!

Robert

Voyez-vous! Et quelle était la raison de cette mascarade?

Roquefeuille

On te la dira quand tu seras déguisé.

Robert

Non, avant, ou je ne me déguise pas!

Roquefeuille

Quel entêté! Avant, soit! Tu es le témoin de ton ami Maxime, qui se marie dans une demi- heure à la mairie du 9e arrondissement.

Laurence, *bas.*

Par exemple!

Roquefeuille, *bas.*

Chut!… Il n'y a que ça!

Robert

Il se marie?

Roquefeuille

Il se marie. Ah! je le crois bien, le gaillard! Tout le monde se marie, il se marie!

Laurence, *même jeu.*

Mais…

Roquefeuille, *même jeu.*

Chut!… Il n’y a que ça!

Robert

Madame de Vanvres s’est décidée avec…?

Roquefeuille

Non, sans enthousiasme!

Robert

Et c’est dans une demi-heure?

Roquefeuille

Dans une demi-heure!

Laurence, *bas.*

Mon Dieu! vous…

Roquefeuille, *bas.*

Je vous dis qu’il n’y a que ça!

Robert

Que ne le disiez-vous plus tôt, ma chère?

Laurence

Moi! vous dire que…

Roquefeuille

Et le pari?

Robert

Le pari, c’est juste!… Allons! tant mieux! voilà notre ami Maxime le plus heureux des hommes!

Roquefeuille

Après toi!

Robert

Après moi?

Roquefeuille

Allons, vite! cet habit, cette cravate!…

Robert

Noire, n’est-ce pas?

Roquefeuille

Blanche! malheureux!

Robert

Tu crois qu’une cravate longue…

Roquefeuille

Blanche! blanche! blanche! Un témoin, c’est presque un mari!

Robert

Sois tranquille! Dans cinq minutes, vous aurez un témoin irréprochable! (Il sort à gauche.)

Scène XIII

Laurence, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille

C’est fait! (Il tombe sur une chaise.)

Laurence

Mais, y pensez-vous? Lui dire que Léonie va se marier?

Roquefeuille

Je n’avais que ce moyen-là.

Laurence

Mais elle ne veut pas!

Roquefeuille

Il faut qu’elle le veuille!

Laurence

Mais pensez donc…

Roquefeuille

Je ne pense pas, je ne pense pas! Depuis ce matin, je ne sais plus ce que je fais… et vous le voyez bien, puisque je viens de marier quelqu’un… moi!

Laurence

Mais…

Roquefeuille

Ne dites pas mais… Vous m’avez rendu fou avec votre mariage. Et puisque c’est comme ca, eh bien, oui! je traînerai madame de Vanvres à l’autel, j’y traînerai Robert et je m’y traînerai moi-même, ou nous dirons tous pourquoi!…

Laurence

Il n’y a pas un instant à perdre! Il faut prévenir Léonie, au moins.

Roquefeuille

Prévenez-la, ne la prévenez pas, ça m’est égal!… Je cours à l’église faire patienter le suisse!

Laurence

Un instant!

Roquefeuille, *sans l’écouter.*

Je redoute le suisse! (Léonie entre.) Ah! madame de Vanvres! victoire! Il s’habille en marié! Voilà pourtant le plus beau jour de la vie! Sac à papier! comment donc est le plus laid? (Il se sauve.)

Scène XIV

Laurence, Léonie, Robert.

Léonie

Il s’habille en marié?

Laurence

Pas positivement!

Léonie

Que veux-tu dire?

Laurence

Mais c’est le même costume.

Léonie

Le même costume?

Laurence

Ma chère Léonie! ma seule, mon unique amie! mon sort est entre tes mains!

Léonie

Parle!

Laurence

Apprends donc… (Robert entre en grand costume.)

Robert, *saluant.*

Madame!…

Laurence, *à part.*

Pour cette fois, c’est fini!

Robert, *à Léonie.*

Vous voyez que je ne vous ai pas gardé rancune de vos torts envers moi?

Léonie

Je le vois… à quoi?

Robert

Vous n’avez donc pas remarqué cette tenue digne et solennelle?

Léonie

En quoi, je vous prie, cette tenue digne et solennelle est-elle une preuve que vous avez oublié mes torts?

Laurence, *bas, à Léonie.*

Tais-toi!

Léonie, *étonnée.*

Hein?

Robert

Comment! vous raillez encore à ce moment suprême?

Léonie

Quel moment suprême?

Robert

Mais il n’y a donc rien de sacré pour vous?

Léonie

Qu’est-ce qui n’est pas sacré?

Robert

Ah! par exemple, c’est trop fort! Si c’est ainsi que vous récompensez votre témoin…

Léonie

Quel témoin?

Laurence, *bas.*

Silence! malheureuse! Je n’ai pas eu le temps de te dire que tu te mariais dans dix minutes.

Léonie, *abasourdie.*

Moi?

Scène XV

Les mêmes, Maxime.

Maxime

Ah! Robert en habit noir!

Robert

Oui, mon cher, et à cause de toi!

Maxime

À cause de moi?

Robert

Allons-nous recommencer?… Ils sont fous, ma parole d’honneur!…

Léonie, *bas, à Laurence.*

Ceci passe la permission, et c’est abuser étrangement…

Laurence, *bas.*

Entends-moi!

Robert

Je suis le témoin de madame de Vanvres, que tu épouses dans sept minutes.

Maxime

Tu dis?

Robert

Le bonheur lui a mis la cervelle à l’envers!

Maxime, *à Léonie.*

Ah!… vous consentez, madame! La joie, le saisissement…

Léonie

Permettez, permettez!…

Laurence

Léonie!…

Maxime

Madame!…

Robert

Comment, encore des hésitations? Quand vous serez parfaitement décidés, vous me ferez prévenir! (Il rentre à gauche.)

Scène XVI

Laurence, Léonie, Maxime.

Léonie, *à Laurence.*

Mais sais-tu que tu me mets dans une affreuse position!

Laurence

C’était le seul moyen de lui faire endosser l’habit noir!

Maxime

Mon mariage dépend de l’habit noir de Robert!

Léonie

Me voici bel et bien compromise!

Maxime

Un mot, madame, et je vous rends l’honneur!

Léonie

Laissez-moi tranquille! Il s’agit bien de vous!

Laurence

Il le faut! En te voyant consentir à ton mariage, il sera forcé de consentir au sien.

Maxime

Qui il?

Léonie

Cela ne vous regarde pas. Écoute, Laurence, je consens à une transaction, je vous accompagne à la mairie, mais ne m’en demande pas davantage!

Laurence

Ce n’est pas assez!

Maxime, *sans savoir ce qu’il dit.*

Ce n’est pas assez!

Laurence

Si tu dis non, il dira non aussi.

Maxime, *abasourdi.*

Il dira non aussi!

Scène XVII

Les mêmes, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille

Partons! partons! Le maire s’impatiente et le suisse ne veut rien entendre.

Léonie

Il faut absolument que j’épouse M. Duvernet!

Roquefeuille

Deux mariages! Très bien! Plus on est de fous plus on rit. En route!

Maxime

Ah çà! mais quel est donc le second mariage? Est-ce le tien?

Roquefeuille

Pas de mauvaise plaisanterie!

Maxime

Cependant!…

Roquefeuille

Cela ne te regarde point. Partons! partons!

Laurence

Ma chère Léonie!…

Maxime

Madame!…

Léonie

Eh bien?

Laurence

Eh bien?

Roquefeuille

Allons donc! qu’est-ce que cela vous fait?

Léonie, *tendant la main à Maxime.*

Ce n’est pas pour vous, au moins, monsieur!

Roquefeuille

Et d’un!… À l’autre!

Laurence

Appelez Robert.

Roquefeuille

Robert! Robert!

Léonie

Aurait-il encore pris la fuite?

Roquefeuille

Je n’ai pas le temps de l’attendre, je cours à la mairie; vous n’avez plus que quelques minutes! En route! (Il sort.)

Léonie, *à Maxime*.

Allons, mon cher monsieur, le bonheur vous a-t-il paralysé? Trouvez-nous cet introuvable Robert!

Maxime

Robert! Robert!

Scène XVIII

Laurence, Léonie, puis Baptiste et Thérèse.

Laurence, *embrassant Léonie.*

Ah! c'est à toi que je devrai le bonheur!

Léonie

Puissé-je en dire autant!

Laurence

Il t'aime! il te rendra heureuse!

Léonie

Dieu le veuille!

Laurence

Mais Robert! où est Robert? (Elle sonne. — Baptiste et Thérèse entrent.) Où est monsieur?

Léonie

Avez-vous vu monsieur?

THÉRÈSE

Mais, madame…

Laurence

Au dernier moment! Courez! cherchez!

Scène XIX

Les mêmes, Maxime.

Léonie

Eh bien?

Maxime

Personne!

Léonie

Personne!

Laurence

C’est une fatalité!

Léonie

Et deux heures vont sonner!

Maxime

Robert!

Laurence

Robert!

Léonie

Monsieur Maubray!

Baptiste

et THÉRÈSE

Monsieur! monsieur!

Scène XX

Les mêmes, Robert.

Robert

On m’appelle?

Maxime

Nous le tenons.

Laurence

Enfin!

Léonie

Vite, donnez-moi votre bras et partons!

Robert

Le voilà! (Deux heures sonnent.)

Laurence

Deux heures!

Tous

Deux heures!

Scène XXI

Les mêmes, Roquefeuille.

Roquefeuille, *essoufflé.*

Trop tard! (Il tombe épuisé.)

Laurence

Tout est fini! (Elle tombe sur le canapé.)

Roquefeuille

Le maire est parti en colère, il ne reviendra pas!

Maxime

Et dire que je touchais au port! (Il tombe sur une chaise.)

Léonie

Pauvre Laurence! (Moment de silence et d’embarras.)

Robert, *tire des gants blancs de sa poche, les met lentement; il s’approche de Laurence.*

Mademoiselle?

Tous

Hein?

Robert

Mademoiselle Laurence de Croix veut-elle me faire l’honneur de m’accorder sa main?

Laurence, *se levant.*

Robert… tu savais donc?

Robert

Tout!

Laurence

Ah! que je t’aime! (Elle tombe dans ses bras.)

Roquefeuille

Bravo! Supérieurement joué!

Maxime

Si j’y comprends quelque chose…

Laurence

Mon cher mari!

Robert, *souriant.*

Pas encore!…

Léonie

Mais, comment avez-vous deviné?…

Roquefeuille

Oui, comment?

Robert, *tirant un journal de sa poche.*

Ce journal que vous vouliez me cacher, et que Baptiste m'a déterré il y a trois jours, m'a mis sur la voie, et le maire, à qui Roquefeuille avait dû tout dire, m'a appris le reste!

Roquefeuille

Et tu as voulu prendre ta revanche?

Robert

De vos mystères et de vos secrets!

Maxime

Quels mystères? quels secrets?

Laurence

Ainsi, ce départ?

Robert

Comédie!

Laurence

Cette froideur?

Robert

C’était là surtout qu’était la comédie! Eh quoi! petite tête folle, vous avez douté de moi un seul instant? Vous avez pu croire que je ne vous aimais plus?…

Laurence

Pardon!

Roquefeuille

Très bien! très bien! Mais, avec tout cela, M. le maire…

Robert

L’assemblée des actionnaires, c’était moi! Le maire nous attend!

Roquefeuille

Encore! (À Maxime.) Va toucher ton dividende! (Il le conduit près de madame de Vanvres.)

Maxime

Espérons qu’un jour on me dira le mot!

Roquefeuille

Qu’est-ce que cela fait, puisque, comme dans les comédies, cela finit par un mariage.

Robert

Par deux mariages!

Maxime, *prenant la main de Léonie.*

Le mien… et?…

Robert, *prenant la main de Laurence*.

Et le mien!

Maxime

Ah bah!

Roquefeuille

Votre exemple me gagne… J'en ferais bien autant… si l'on pouvait se marier… sans prendre une femme!

FIN

MICHEL STROGOFF

1880

TABLE DES MATIERES

PERSONNAGES

Acte premier

Scène I

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Scène VI

Scène VII

Scène VIII

Scène IX

Acte deuxième

Scène I

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Scène VI

Scène VII

Scène VIII

Scène IX

Scène X

Scène XI

Scène XII

Scène I

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Acte troisième

Scène I

Scène II

Scène III

Scène I

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Acte quatrième

Scène I

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Scène VI

Scène VII

Acte cinquième

Scène I

Scène II

Scène III

Scène IV

Scène V

Scène VI

Scène I

PERSONNAGES

Michel Strogoff, courrier du Czar,

Ivan Ogareff, colonel russe,

Harry Blount, reporter anglais,

Alcide Jollivet, reporter français,

Le Grand-Duc, gouverneur d’Irkoutsk,

Le gouverneur de Moscou,

Wassali Fédor,

Le maître de police,

L’émir Féofar, khan de Tartarie,

Le général Kissoff,

Un capitaine tartare, le maître de poste,

Le général Voronzoff,

Un employé du télégraphe,

Premier fugitif, deuxième fugitif,

Un aide de camp, un agent de police,

Un grand-prêtre, un sergent tartare,

Deuxième aide de camp, un sergent tartare,

Premier voyageur, deuxième voyageur,

Un bohémien,

Marfa Strogoff, Nadia Fédor, Sangarre.

Acte premier

Premier tableau – Le Palais Neuf.

Une galerie à arcades, splendidement parée et éclairée, attenant à droite aux salons de réception du palais, à gauche au cabinet du gouverneur de Moscou. Portes à droite et à gauche dans les pans coupés. À gauche une vaste fenêtre à large balcon.

Scène I

Jollivet, le général Kissoff, l'aide de camp, officiers, invités, etc.

Ces divers personnages, groupés à droite, près de la porte du salon, regardent danser. On entend l'orchestre du bal.

L'AIDE DE CAMP. – Les salons peuvent à peine contenir la foule des invités.

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Oui, et les groupes de danseurs finiront par refluer jusque dans cette galerie... C'est magnifique!

JOLLIVET. – Quel est donc le voyageur qui a osé parler des froids de la Russie, général?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – La Russie de juillet n’est pas la Russie de janvier, monsieur Jollivet.

JOLLIVET. – Non, certes, mais on croirait que monsieur le gouverneur a, pour cette nuit, transporté Moscou sous les tropiques! Ce jardin d’hiver qui relie les appartements privés de Son Excellence avec les grands salons de réception est vraiment merveilleux.

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Que pensez-vous de cette fête, monsieur le reporter?

JOLLIVET, *montrant son carnet*. – Voici ce que je viens de télégraphier, général: “Fête que gouverneur de Moscou donne en honneur de Sa Majesté Empereur de toutes les Russies, splendide!”

LE GÉNÉRAL. – À merveille! Les journaux français parleront de nous en bons termes. Il en sera de même des journaux anglais, je pense, grâce à M. Blount, votre confrère.

JOLLIVET. – L’orgueilleux et irascible M. Blount, qui prétend que l’Angleterre, cette reine de l’univers, comme il l’appelle, et le *Morning-Post*, ce roi des journaux, comme il le nomme aussi, doivent toujours être informés les premiers de tout ce qui se passe sur le globe terrestre!

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Ah! tenez, le voici.

Scène II

Les mêmes, Blount.

JOLLIVET. – Je parlais précisément de vous, monsieur Blount!

BLOUNT. – Oh! c’était une grande honneur que vous faisiez...

JOLLIVET. – Mais non, mais non!

BLOUNT. – Que vous faisiez à vous-même!

JOLLIVET, *riant*. – Merci! Il est charmant. Avouez, monsieur Blount, que si vous avez, comme je n’en doute pas, un excellent coeur, l’écorce en est furieusement rude!

BLOUNT. – Mister Jollivet, quand une bonne reporter anglais quittait son pétrie, il devait emporter beaucoup de guinées, de bons yeux, de bons oreilles, une bonne estomac, et laisser son coeur dans sa famille!

JOLLIVET. – Et c’est ainsi que vous voyagez, monsieur Blount?

BLOUNT. – Yes!... si vous permettez...

JOLLIVET. – Sans la moindre sympathie pour un confrère d’outre-Manche?

BLOUNT. – Si vous permettez, mister Jollivet!... et si vous permettez pas... ce était tout à fait la même chose!

JOLLIVET. – Vous êtes admirable de franchise et de bonhomie!

Musique au dehors.

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Si je ne me trompe, messieurs, ces Bohémiens qui ont demandé à se faire entendre au bal du gouverneur vont commencer leur concert. Je vous engage à écouter cela! C’est fort curieux!

JOLLIVET. – Certainement, certainement, général... *(Le général se dirige vers le salon et les invités se rapprochent de la porte. Blount et Jollivet restent en scène, Jolliver s’assied.)* Ma foi, il fait trop chaud par là, je reste ici. *(Blount s’assied de l’autre côté, tire son carnet et se met à écrire.)* Permettez-moi, monsieur Blount, de risquer une phrase toute française! “Cette petite fête est vraiment charmante.”

BLOUNT, *froidement*. – J’avais déjà télégraphié “splendide” aux lecteurs du *Morning-Post*.

JOLLIVET. – Très bien. Mais au milieu de cette splendeur, il y a un point noir. On parle tout bas d’un soulèvement tartare qui menace les provinces sibériennes... Aussi ai-je cru devoir écrire à ma cousine...

BLOUNT, *froidement*. – Cousine... Ah!... c’est avec son cousine... que M. Jollivet correspondait?

JOLLIVET. – Oui, monsieur Blount, oui!... Vous correspondez avec votre journal, moi, avec ma cousine Madeleine! C’est plus galant! Or, elle aime à être informée vite et bien, ma cousine! J’ai cru devoir lui marquer que, pendant cette fête, une sorte de nuage avait obscurci le front du gouverneur...

BLOUNT. – Il avait une front rayonnante, au contraire!

JOLLIVET, *riant*. – Et vous l’avez fait rayonner dans les colonnes du *Morning-Post*?...

BLOUNT. – Ce que je télégraphie intéresse mon journal et moi seulement, mister Jollivet!

JOLLIVET. – Votre journal et vous seulement, monsieur Blount? Eh bien, mais c’est avouer alors que cela n’intéresse guère vos lecteurs.

BLOUNT, *furieux*. – Mister Jollivet!

JOLLIVET, *souriant*. – Monsieur Blount!

BLOUNT. – Vous moquez toujours de moi, et je permettais pas, entendez-vous... Je permettais pas!

JOLLIVET. – Mais non... mais non!...

Scène III

Les mêmes, le général, le gouverneur, officiers, invités.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Bravo! bravo! Ces bohémiens sont vraiment pleins d’originalité et méritent leur réputation! *(Aux reporters.)* Ah! messieurs, vous étiez à votre poste pour les entendre!

JOLLIVET. – Ils sont charmants, monsieur le gouverneur!... C’est ce que me disait à l’instant mon excellent confrère et ami, M. Blount.

BLOUNT. – Confrère, oui... Ami, non.

LE GOUVERNEUR, *riant*. – Il y a là, ma foi, des types tout à fait réussis!... *(Il passe vers la gauche après avoir pris le bras du général Kissoff.)*

JOLLIVET. – Dites donc, monsieur Blount, il a l’air bien joyeux, le gouverneur! Il faut qu’il soit terriblement inquiet!... Qu’en pensez-vous, monsieur Blount?...

BLOUNT, *sèchement*. – Ce que je pensai ne regardait pas vous! *(Ils se séparent et se mêlent aux divers groupes.)*

LE GOUVERNEUR, *au général*. – Parle-t-on du soulèvement tartare, général?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Oui, et peut-être plus qu’il ne conviendrait! Je ne serais pas étonné qu’au sortir du bal, ces deux reporters n’allassent pas exercer leur métier de chroniqueurs de l’autre côté de la frontière.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Ils connaissent, sans aucun doute, cette grave nouvelle d’un soulèvement qui jette une moitié de l’Asie sur l’autre! Le télégraphe fonctionne toujours entre Moscou et Irkoutsk?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Oui! Votre Excellence peut le réquisitionner pour le compte du gouvernement et l’interdire au public.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – C’est inutile. L’important était que le Grand-Duc, en ce moment à Irkoutsk, fût averti. Il sait que Féofar-Khan, l’émir de Bouckara, a soulevé les populations tartares, qu’à sa voix elles ont envahi la Sibérie; mais il sait aussi, par notre dernier télégramme, que nos troupes des provinces du nord sont maintenant parties pour le secourir. Il sait le jour exact où cette armée arrivera en vue d’Irkoutsk, et où il devra faire une sortie générale pour écraser les Tartares!...

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Nos troupes auront facilement raison de ces hordes sauvages!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Ce qui m’étonne, c’est que ce Féofar ait pu concevoir le plan de ce soulèvement et le mettre à exécution. Lorsqu’il a tenté une première fois d’envahir nos provinces sibériennes, il avait, pour le seconder, ce général Ivan Ogareff, qui, maintenant, expie sa trahison dans la citadelle de Polstock; mais, cette fois, le khan de Tartarie, livré à ses propres inspirations, n’a plus Ogareff auprès de lui... et je ne puis m’expliquer...

Scène IV

Les mêmes, Ivan, Sangarre, tsiganes.

Ivan est sorti du salon et s’est approché du gouverneur. Sangarre et ses tsiganes sont restées au fond. – Les reporters et les officiers causent avec elles.

IVAN, *déguisé en vieux bohémien et parlant du ton le plus humble*. – Monsieur le gouverneur... monseigneur...

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Qu’est-ce? Ah! c’est toi, vieux bohémien! Que me veux-tu?

IVAN. – Je viens demander à Votre Excellence si elle est satisfaite des Tsiganes, auxquelles on a bien voulu réserver une place dans le programme de cette fête?

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Enchanté... et j’aime à croire que, de ton côté, tu n’auras pas à te plaindre!... Bien rafraîchis, bien payés?...

IVAN. – Oui, monseigneur, oui!... Aussi, je ne voulais pas prendre congé de Votre Excellence, sans l’avoir humblement remerciée! Sangarre se joint à moi!...

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Sangarre?... Ah! cette belle fille que j’aperçois là?

IVAN, *faisant signe à Sangarre de s’approcher*. – Oui... Sangarre est la véritable directrice de ces Tsiganes, Excellence!... À elle revient la meilleure part des compliments que vous avez dédaigné leur adresser!

Sangarre reste fièrement campée sans mot dire.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Elle ne parle pas le russe?

IVAN. – Hélas! non, monseigneur. Aussi, moi, le vieux bohémien, je suis leur factotum, j'organise les concerts, je traite pour les fêtes. Sans moi, la petite troupe serait souvent embarrassée. C'est même à ce propos que je venais solliciter une faveur de Votre Excellence...

LE GOUVERNEUR. – De quoi s'agit-il?...

IVAN. – C'est demain que finissent les fêtes en l'honneur du czar. Nous n'avons donc plus rien à faire ici, et notre intention est de repasser la frontière.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Ah! vous voulez retourner en Sibérie?

IVAN. – C'est un peu notre pays... Excellence. Or, la frontière va être encombrée par tous ces marchands d'origine asiatique, qui retournent dans leurs provinces. On sera arrêté à chaque instant aux postes de police, et...

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Eh bien! n'as-tu pas un passeport en règle?

IVAN. – Sans doute, monseigneur; mais, Votre excellence le sait mieux que moi, un passeport en règle, ça n'existe guère en Russie. Il y manque toujours quelque petite chose!... tandis que si Votre excellence, qui a daigné se montrer satisfaite de nous, voulait bien m'en donner un... spécial, revêtu de sa signature... avec ce précieux talisman, nul obstacle à redouter... et... je pourrais partir en avant afin de préparer les étapes de notre troupe!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Soit! Toi et les tiens, vous êtes de braves gens qui avez fait grand plaisir au Palais Neuf, et je ne refuse pas de vous être agréable.

IVAN. – Je baise humblement les mains de Votre Excellence.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Et quand comptes-tu quitter Moscou?

IVAN. – Moi?... demain... au lever du soleil, monseigneur, avant que les portes de la ville ne soient encombrées par les milliers d’étrangers qui vont partir.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Eh bien! dis à cette belle fille, ta compagne, que rien ne retardera ton voyage, ni le sien. Je vais d’abord faire préparer ton passeport, et celui-là... sera bien en règle.

(Le gouverneur sort par la gauche. Le général remonte vers les groupes d’invités.)

Scène V

Ivan, Sangarre

IVAN, *se redressant après avoir regardé si personne ne l'observe*. – Et dans quelques jours, j'aurai passé la frontière!

SANGARRE. – Et c'est alors, Ivan, que tu seras réellement libre.

IVAN. – Libre!... je le suis déjà, grâce à toi, qui m'as fait évader de la forteresse de Polstock, où le czar que je hais, me retenait prisonnier! C'est par toi, par tes Tsiganes dévouées, que j'ai pu correspondre avec Féofar-Khan! C'est grâce à toi, enfin, que j'ai pu pénétrer dans le palais du gouverneur, et que je vais obtenir ce passeport, sans lequel je n'aurais jamais pu franchir la frontière pour aller rejoindre les armées de l'émir!... Sangarre, je ne l'oublierai pas.

SANGARRE. – Depuis le jour où tu m'as sauvée, pendant cette guerre de Khiva, depuis que le colonel Ivan Ogareff a ramené à la vie la Tsigane que les Russes venaient de knouter comme espionne, la Tsigane t'appartient corps et âme! Elle est devenue la mortelle ennemie de ces Russes qu'elle hait autant que tu les hais toi-même! Ivan, il n'y a plus rien de moscovite en toi! Que ton épaule saigne toujours à l'endroit où l'on a arraché l'épaulette comme mon épaule saignera toujours à l'endroit où le knout l'a déchirée!

IVAN. – Ne crains rien!... ma vengeance marchera de pair avec la tienne!...

SANGARRE. – Ah! je la retrouverai cette Sibérienne... cette Marfa Strogoff qui m’a dénoncée aux Russes!... Je la retrouverai, dussé-je aller la saisir jusque dans Kolyvan dont les Tartares vont bientôt s’emparer!...

IVAN. – Comme ils s’empareront d’Irkoutsk, conduits par moi à l’assaut de cette capitale! Ah! Grand-Duc maudit, en me cassant de mon grade, en me faisant emprisonner, tu as fait manquer ce premier soulèvement que j’avais organisé! Mais, je suis libre maintenant! Rien ne pourra sauver Irkoutsk, et là, tu périras, d’une mort infamante, sur les murs mêmes de la ville en flammes!

SANGARRE. – Oui, mais il faudrait éviter tout retard, et ce passeport promis par le gouverneur...

IVAN. – Dans cinq minutes je l’aurai, et je m’élancerai, d’un seul vol, de Moscou aux avant-postes de l’émir! Prends garde, on vient!...

Scène VI

Les mêmes, le gouverneur, puis un aide de camp.

Le gouverneur rentre par la gauche, tenant un passeport à la main.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Tiens, es-tu content? Regarde. *(Il remet le passeport à Ivan.)*

IVAN, *après avoir lu*. – Ah! Excellence, avec un pareil permis, on passe partout! Il n’y manque plus...

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Que ma signature, et je vais à l’instant même... *(Il s’approche de la table, s’assied et prend la plume. Un aide de camp entre.)*

L’AIDE DE CAMP. – Un pli pour Son Excellence! *(Il remet un pli cacheté. Le gouverneur le lit.)*

SANGARRE, *à Ivan*. – Mais il ne signera donc pas!

IVAN, *bas*. – Patience!

LE GOUVERNEUR, *au général qu’il emmène à gauche*. – Général, nous parlions tout à l’heure du colonel Ivan Ogareff.

SANGARRE, *à part’*. – *Ton nom!*

IVAN, *bas*. – Tais-toi!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Ce traître qui fut cassé de son grade et condamné à mort pour avoir fomenté, une fois déjà, le soulèvement des Tartares...

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Oui, Ogareff, dont l’empereur a commué la peine en une perpétuelle détention dans la forteresse de Polstock.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Il s’est échappé récemment de sa prison. Voilà ce qu’on m’écrit du cabinet de Pétersbourg: *Ivan Ogareff s’est enfoui!*... Il faut mettre toute notre police sur sa trace.

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Nous ferons très sévèrement garder la frontière que, sans passeport, il ne pourra franchir.

LE GOUVERNEUR, *s’asseyant à la table et écrivant*. – Que les ordres soient transmis sans retard. Il importe que le Grand-Duc soit prévenu au plus tôt, car cette lettre du ministre me marque que, d’après une correspondance, saisie depuis l’évasion d’Ivan Ogareff, le plan de ce traître serait de pénétrer dans Irkoutsk, et s’il y parvient, c’est la mort du Grand-Duc, objet de sa haine personnelle!

IVAN, *à Sangarre*. – Mais ils savent donc tout?... Allons... *(S’approchant.)* Excellence!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Que me veut-on?... Qui ose se permettre?...

IVAN. – Pardon, monseigneur...

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Ah! c’est toi!... Eh bien!... Eh bien!... attends! *(Il continue d’écrire.)*

IVAN, *bas*. – Que va-t-il décider?

LE GOUVERNEUR, *se levant. Au général*. – Faites partir cette dépêche. Grâce à elle ce misérable ne passera pas la frontière, et toi... *(Ivan s'incline.)* tiens, voici ton permis... Personne n'entravera ta route!

IVAN, *avec ironie*. – Monseigneur, vous ne saurez jamais tout ce que je vous dois de reconnaissance!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – C'est bon, c'est bon!... Va!

IVAN, *à part*. – Viens, Sangarre... Libre maintenant, et bientôt vengé!

Ivan, Sangarre et les Tsiganes sortent par la porte de gauche, en même temps que Jollivet et Blount entrent par la droite.

Scène VII

Le gouverneur, le général, Jollivet, Blount, invités.

LE GOUVERNEUR, *aux invités*. – Eh bien, messieurs, n’entendez-vous pas l’orchestre qui vous appelle? Voulez-vous autoriser les journaux étrangers à dire qu’une fête donner en l’honneur de Sa Majesté n’a pas duré jusqu’au jour? Nous avons là des correspondants qui, j’en suis sûr, notent nos moindres impressions!

JOLLIVET. – Monsieur le gouverneur, les reporters sont curieux, mais non des indiscrets.

BLOUNT. – Curiousses toujours, indiscrètes jamais... les reporters anglais... jamais!

JOLLIVET. – D’ailleurs, en ce qui me concerne, je compte quitter Moscou après le bal, et je prie Votre Excellence de recevoir mes sincères remerciements.

BLOUNT. – Je priai de recevoir aussi les miennes... avant...

JOLLIVET *riant*. – Oui, ceux de monsieur... avant, pour votre bienveillant accueil...

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Et de quel côté dirigez-vous vos pas, messieurs?

BLOUNT. – Moi... côté de Sibérie.

JOLLIVET. – Moi, de même!... Nous allons voyager ensemble, cher collègue!

BLOUNT. – Dans le même temps, oui... ensemblement, non!

JOLLIVET. – Toujours charmant, M. Blount!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Bon, je comprends!... On a parlé d’un mouvement en Tartarie... Mais cela ne vaut pas la peine que vous vous dérangiez!

JOLLIVET. – Pardon, Excellence, mon métier est de tout voir...

BLOUNT. – Le mienne, de tout voir et de tout entendre... avant!

JOLLIVET. – Et mon journal... je veux dire... ma cousine, est très friande de ces nouvelles, dont elle recevra la primeur.

BLOUNT. – Le *Morning-Post* recevra...

JOLLIVET. – Avant?... Impossible, cher confrère... Les dames sont toujours servies les premières!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – En tout cas, messieurs, vous m’appartenez jusqu’au jour, et je veux qu’après avoir assisté à la fête officielle, vous assistiez, du haut de ce balcon, à la fête populaire qui va commencer à minuit.

JOLLIVET. – Soit, nous partirons demain!... Si vous me le permettez, je vous ferai une proposition, monsieur Blount! Nous sommes rivaux.

BLOUNT. – Ennemis, mister!

LE GOUVERNEUR, *riant*. – Ennemis!

JOLLIVET. – Ennemis, c’est convenu!... Mais, attendons, pour ouvrir les hostilités, que nous soyons sur le théâtre de la guerre... et une fois là, chacun pour soi, et Dieu pour...

BLOUNT. – Et Dieu pour moi.

JOLLIVET. – Et Dieu pour vous!... Pour vous tout seul!... Très bien. Cela va-t-il?

BLOUNT. – Non!... cela ne allait pas!

JOLLIVET. – Alors, la guerre tout de suite... mais je suis bon prince. *(Lui prenant le bras et l’emmenant à l’écart.)* Je vous annonce, petit père, comme disent les Russes, que les Tartares ont descendu le cours de l’Irtyche.

BLOUNT. – Ah! vous pensez que les Tertères...

JOLLIVET *riant*. – Et si je vous le dis, mon cher ennemi, c’est que j’en ai télégraphié la nouvelle à ma cousine, hier soir, à huit heures moins un quart! *(Riant.)* Ah! ah! ah!

BLOUNT. – Et moi, hier, je l’avais télégraphié au *Morning-Post*, à sept heures et demie... Ah! ah! ah!

JOLLIVET. – L’animal!... Je vous revaudrai ça, mon bon gros monsieur Blount!

BLOUNT. – Vous moquez-vous encore, monsieur?...

JOLLIVET. – Eh bien, non, mon bon petit monsieur Blount!... là!

BLOUNT. – Vous moquez toujours!

JOLLIVET. – Non...

BLOUNT *furieux*. – Vous moquez, je vous dis!... Vous moquez, monsieur, vous êtes une mauvaise vilaine homme!... une méchante personnage!... vous êtes une... (Tranquillement.) Comment vous appelez une personne qui parle sans politesse?...

JOLLIVET. – Un impertinent.

BLOUNT *tranquillement*. – Impertinente... Very well... merci! *(Reprenant un ton furieux.)* Vous êtes une impertinente, entendez-vous!...

JOLLIVET. – Très bien!

BLOUNT. – Et si vous continouyez!...

JOLLIVET. – Et si je continouye?...

BLOUNT. – Je finissais un jour par touyer vous!

JOLLIVET. – Me touyer?... Comprends pas.

BLOUNT. – Oui!... touyer avec une épi...

JOLLIVET. – Un épi de blé?

BLOUNT. – Non... une épi ou une pistolette...

JOLLIVET. – Épée! On dit une épée... ou un pistolet.

BLOUNT. – Épée vous dites?

JOLLIVET. – Oui.

BLOUNT. – Et pistolet?

JOLLIVET. – Oui.

BLOUNT. – Oh! Very well, merci. *(Avec colère.)* Eh bien, je tuerai vous, avec une épi... épée ou un pistolet!

JOLLIVET. – À la bonne heure!... Vous faites des progrès, élève Blount!... Je suis content de vous!

BLOUNT. – Mister Jollivette.

JOLLIVET. – Jollivet, s’il vous plaît!... Jollivette est ridicule.

BLOUNT. – Alors, j’appelai vous toujours Jollivette. *(Avec force.)* Jollivette!... Jollivette!... Jollivette!... Ah!...

LE GOUVERNEUR, *rentrant*. – Messieurs, j’entends les premiers accords de l’orchestre... C’est notre danse nationale.

JOLLIVET. – Nous sommes à la disposition de Votre Excellence.

Tous deux entrent dans le salon. Au moment où le gouverneur et le général vont franchir la porte, l’aide de camp rentre précipitamment par la gauche.

Scène VIII

Le gouverneur, le général, l'aide de camp.

L'AIDE DE CAMP, *à demi-voix*. – Excellence, le fil télégraphique de Moscou à Irkoutsk est coupé!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Que me dites-vous là?

L'AIDE DE CAMP. – Les dépêches s'arrêtent à Kolyvan, à mi-chemin de la route sibérienne, dont les Tartares sont les maîtres!

Sur un signe du gouverneur les portières retombent.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – En sorte que la dépêche que nous avons transmise au Grand-Duc, celle qui désignait le jour où doit arriver, en vue d'Irkoutsk, l'armée de secours?...

L'AIDE DE CAMP. – Cette dépêche n'a pu parvenir à Son Altesse.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Ainsi, les Tartares, maîtres de la route! La Sibérie orientale séparée du reste de l'empire moscovite! Le Grand-Duc, non prévenu du jour où il doit être secouru, où il doit opérer sa sortie!... Il faut à tout prix... *(Au général.)* Général, n'y a-t-il pas au palais une compagnie de courriers du czar?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Oui, Excellence.

LE GOUVERNEUR, *se mettant à écrire*. – Connaissez-vous, dans cette compagnie, un homme qui puisse, à travers mille dangers, porter une lettre à Irkoutsk?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Il en est un dont je répondrais à Votre Excellence, et qui a plusieurs fois rempli, avec succès, des missions difficiles.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – À l'étranger?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – En Sibérie même.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Qu'il vienne. *(Le général dit un mot à l'aide de camp qui sort par la droite.)* Il a du sang-froid, de l'intelligence, du courage?...

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Il a tout ce qu'il faut pour réussir là où d'autres échoueraient.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Son âge?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Trente ans.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – C'est un homme vigoureux?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Il a déjà prouvé qu'il peut supporter jusqu'aux dernières limites le froid, la faim et la fatigue! Il a un corps de fer, un coeur d'or!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Il se nomme?

LE GÉNÉRAL. – Michel Strogoff.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Il faut que ce courrier arrive jusqu'au Grand-Duc, ou la Sibérie est perdue!

Scène IX

Les mêmes, Strogoff.

Michel Strogoff entre, et reste immobile, militairement. Le gouverneur l’observe un moment sans parler.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Tu te nommes Michel Strogoff?

STROGOFF. – Oui, Excellence.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Ton grade?

STROGOFF. – Capitaine au corps des courriers du czar.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Tu connais la Sibérie?

STROGOFF. – Je suis né à Kolyvan.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – As-tu encore des parents dans cette ville?

STROGOFF. – Oui... ma mère!

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Tu ne l’as pas vue depuis?...

STROGOFF. – Depuis deux ans!... mais je viens d’obtenir un congé pour aller la revoir, et je vais partir.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Il n’est plus question de congé! Il n’est plus question de ta mère! Je vais te remettre une lettre que je te charge, toi, Michel Strogoff, de porter au Grand-Duc, frère du czar.

STROGOFF. – Je porterai cette lettre.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Le Grand-Duc est à Irkoutsk.

STROGOFF. – J’irai à Irkoutsk.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Mais, tu ignores que le pays est envahi par les Tartares, qui auront intérêt à intercepter ta lettre, et il faudra traverser ce pays!

STROGOFF. – Je le traverserai.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Passeras-tu par Kolyvan?

STROGOFF. – Oui, puisque c’est la route la plus directe.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Mais, si tu vois ta mère, tu risques d’être reconnu!
STROGOFF. – Je ne la verrai pas.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Tu seras pourvu d’argent et muni d’un passeport au nom de Nicolas Korpanoff, marchand sibérien. Ce passeport te permettra de requérir les chevaux de poste. Il autorisera, en outre, Nicolas Korpanoff à se faire accompagner, s’il le juge à propos, d’une ou plusieurs personnes, et il sera respecté même dans le cas où tout gouverneur ou maître de police prétendrait entraver ton passage. Tu voyageras donc sous le nom de Korpanoff.

STROGOFF. – Oui, Excellence.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Voici cette lettre de laquelle dépend, avec la vie du Grand-Duc, le salut de toute la Sibérie!

STROGOFF. – Elle sera remise à Son Altesse.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Il se peut que dans quelque circonstance grave, désespérée, tu sois contraint de l'anéantir!... Il faut donc que tu saches ce qu'elle renferme, afin de pouvoir le redire au Grand-Duc, si tu arrives jusqu'à lui.

STROGOFF. – J'écoute.

LE GOUVERNEUR, *lisant la lettre*. – "Le colonel Ivan Ogareff s'est enfui de la forteresse de Polstock. Il veut pénétrer dans Irkoutsk, et livrer la ville aux Tartares. Il importe donc de se défier de ce traître. Si, comme nous l'espérons, ce message arrive en temps utile à Son Altesse, le Grand-Duc est prévenu qu'une armée de secours sera en vue d'Irkoutsk, le 24 septembre, et qu'une sortie générale, exécutée ce jour-là, écrasera les ennemis entre deux feux..." *(Il referme la lettre. À Strogoff.)* Tu as entendu et tu te souviendras?

STROGOFF. – J'ai entendu et je me souviendrai.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Tu traverseras les lignes tartares! Tu passeras quand même!

STROGOFF. – Je passerai ou l'on me tuera.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Le czar a besoin que tu vives!

STROGOFF. – Je vivrai... et je passerai.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Jure-moi que rien ne pourra te faire avouer, ni qui tu es, ni où tu vas!

STROGOFF. – Je le jure.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – Pars donc, et quand il s’agira de surmonter les plus grands obstacles, de braver les plus menaçants périls, redis-toi ces paroles sacrées. – “Pour Dieu, pour le czar...

STROGOFF. – Pour la patrie!”

Strogoff sort par la droite, après avoir salué militairement. Alors les portières se relèvent, les invités rentrent dans le salon.

LE GOUVERNEUR. – La fête populaire va commencer. Mesdames, prenez place à ce balcon. *(Tous se dirigent vers le balcon.)*

Deuxième tableau – Moscou illuminé.

Grand concours de monde sur la place que domine le balcon du palais.

Ballet.

Troisième tableau – La retraite aux flambeaux.

Retraite aux flambeaux avec les tambours, les fifres et les trompettes des chevaliers-gardes du régiment de Préobrajinski.

Acte deuxième

Quatrième tableau – Le relais de poste.

La scène représente la cour d’un relais de poste à la frontière. À droite la maison de relais qui est en même temps une auberge. À gauche la maison du maître de police. Au fond la grande route, qui va se perdre dans les montagnes.

Scène I

Le maître de poste, le maître de police, un agent, voyageurs.

Un certain nombre de voyageurs sont groupés dans la cour du relais.

L'HÔTELLIER. – Les routes de l'Oural sont encombrées! C'est à peine si je peux fournir des chevaux!

PREMIER VOYAGEUR. – Et quels chevaux! Fourbus des quatre jambes!

L'AGENT. – Allons! Allons! les passeports! les passeports! On vous les rendra après qu'ils auront été visés!... *(Il recueille les passeports des divers voyageurs et rentre à gauche.)*

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Il y a encombrement.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Oui, monsieur le maître de police, et vous aurez fort à faire pour expédier tous ces gens-là... presque autant que moi à leur fournir des chevaux! Il ne m'en reste plus qu'un au relais, et encore a-t-il fait cinquante verstes la nuit dernière!

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Un seul?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Et il est retenu par un voyageur, arrivé il y a une heure.

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Quel est ce voyageur?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Un marchand qui se rend à Irkoutsk!

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Je vais viser les passeports et donner la volée à tous ces gens-là!... *(Il rentre dans la maison à gauche.)*

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – On aurait cent chevaux dans les écuries qu’on ne pourrait suffire à tout!

Scène II

Le maître de poste, Strogoff.

STROGOFF. – Le cheval que j’ai retenu?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – On le fait manger et boire.

STROGOFF. – Il faut que, dans une demi-heure, il soit attelé à mon tarentass.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Il le sera. Tu seras en règle avec le maître de police?

STROGOFF. – Oui!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Tu peux lui faire remettre ton passeport d’avance! Il le visera avec les autres.

STROGOFF. – Non! je le ferai viser moi-même.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Comme tu voudras, petit père.

STROGOFF. – Une bouteille de kwass.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – À l’instant!

Strogoff s’asseoit près d’une table à droite, et le maître de poste sort.

Scène III

Les mêmes, Jollivet.

Jollivet entre en scène par le fond. Il est exténué, et porte une valise de chaque main.

JOLLIVET. – Ouf!... Cent pas de plus et j’abandonnais mes valises sur la grande route... surtout celle-ci qui n’est pas à moi! *(Il dépose une des valises dans un coin, garde l’autre et va s’asseoir devant la table, en face de Strogoff.)* Excusez-moi, monsieur... Eh! mais, je vous reconnais... Vous êtes?...

STROGOFF. – Nicolas Korpanoff, marchand.

JOLLIVET. – Marchand... marchant comme l’éclair!... C’est bien vous qui m’avez dépassé, il y a deux heures, sur la route! Nous étions, vous en tarentass, et moi en télègue... ou plutôt je n’y étais plus, et une petite place dans votre voiture aurait joliment fait mon affaire, car je me trouvais en pleine détresse!

STROGOFF. – Pardon... monsieur?...

JOLLIVET. – Alcide Jollivet, correspondant de journaux français, en quête de chroniques!...

STROGOFF. – Eh bien, monsieur Jollivet, je regrette vivement de ne pas vous avoir aperçu! Entre voyageurs, on se doit de ces petits services.

JOLLIVET. – On se doit, mais on ne se paye pas toujours. J’ai fait vingt verstes à pied, et je l’ai mérité! Une mauvaise action ne profite jamais! Le ciel m’a puni en m’inspirant la pensée de prendre une télègue au lieu d’une tarentass.

Le maître de poste rentre apportant un broc et des verres.

STROGOFF. – Un verre de bière, monsieur?

JOLLIVET. – Volontiers.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *à Jollivet*. – Dois-je vous garder une chambre et prendre vos valises?

JOLLIVET. – Pas celle-là!... Elle n’est pas à moi.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – À qui donc?

JOLLIVET. – À mon ennemi intime, mon confrère Blount, qui doit, en ce moment, courir après moi!... Mais j’espère bien être parti avant qu’il arrive au relais!... À propos, une voiture et des chevaux dans une heure!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Il n’y a plus ni chevaux, ni voiture disponibles!

JOLLIVET. – Bon! il ne manquait plus que cela! Eh bien, gardez-moi les premiers qui rentreront au relais!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – C’est entendu!... mais ce ne sera pas avant demain. Je vais vous retenir une chambre.

JOLLIVET *au maître de poste qui rentre à droite*. – Oui!... Heureusement, j’ai une belle avance sur Blount!

STROGOFF. – Votre ennemi?

JOLLIVET. – Mon ennemi, mon rival! Un reporter anglais, qui veut me devancer sur la route d'Irkoutsk, et défraîchir mes nouvelles! Figurez-vous, monsieur Korpanoff, que je n'ai trouvé que ce moyen pour le distancer, lui voler sa voiture, qui était tout attelée, quand je suis arrivé au relais! Il n'y en avait pas d'autre, et pendant qu'il réglait sa note, j'ai glissé un paquet de roubles dans la poche de son cocher, – disons son iemskik, pour faire un peu de couleur locale... et en route!... Naturellement, j'emportais la valise de mon Anglais, mais je la lui renverrai intacte!... Ah! par exemple, il n'y a que sa voiture que je ne pourrai pas lui renvoyer!

STROGOFF. – Pourquoi donc?

JOLLIVET. – Parce que c'est... ou plutôt c'était une télègue! Vous savez, une télègue... une voiture à quatre roues?...

STROGOFF. – Parfaitement!... Mais je ne comprends pas...

JOLLIVET. – Vous allez comprendre. Nous partons... mon iemskik sur le siège de devant et moi sur le banc d'arrière! Trois bons chevaux dans les brancards! Nous filons comme l'ouragan! À peine s'il est nécessaire de stimuler du bout du fouet nos trois excellentes bêtes! De temps à autre seulement, quelques bonne paroles jetées par mon iemskik! Hardi, mes colombes!... Volez, mes doux agneaux! Houp, mon petit père de gauche!... Enfin l'attelage tirait, tant et si bien que, la nuit dernière, un fort cahot se produit... crac! les deux trains de la voiture s'étaient séparés... et mon iemskik... sans entendre mes cris, continuait à courir sur les train de devant, tandis que je restais en détresse sur le train de derrière! Et voilà comment je dus faire vingt verstes à pied, ma valise d'une main, celle de l'Anglais de l'autre, et voilà pourquoi je ne pourrai lui renvoyer qu'une demi-voiture!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *rentrant*. – Votre chambre est prête, monsieur.

JOLLIVET, *se dirigeant vers la porte*. – C'est bien... Au revoir, monsieur Korpanoff.

STROGOFF. – Au revoir, monsieur.

JOLLIVET, *revenant*. – Ah! j'ai trouvé!

STROGOFF. – Qui donc?

JOLLIVET. – La véritable définition de la télègue!... Ce sera le mot de la fin de ma prochaine chronique! *(Écrivant sur son carnet.)* "Télègue, voiture russe... à quatre roues quand elle part... et à deux quand elle arrive!..." Au revoir, monsieur Korpanoff! *(Il entre à droite.)*

STROGOFF, *se levant*. – Au revoir, monsieur. Un joyeux compagnon, ce Français!

Scène IV

Strogoff, Nadia.

Nadia arrive, à droite, par la grande route. Elle est épuisée et tombe à demi sur un banc, à gauche.

NADIA. – La fatigue m'accable!... Impossible d'aller plus loin... *(Essayant de se lever.)* Monsieur... monsieur!...

STROGOFF, *se retournant*. – C'est à moi que vous parlez, mon enfant?... *(À part.)* La charmante jeune fille!

NADIA. – Pardonnez-moi... Je voulais vous demander... Où sommes-nous ici?

STROGOFF. – Nous sommes à la frontière, et là est la maison de police...

NADIA. – Où se délivrent les visas pour passer en Sibérie?

STROGOFF. – Oui, et de ce côté, le relais de poste.

NADIA *se levant*. – Le relais de poste... Je vais d'abord m'assurer...

STROGOFF. – C'est inutile, mon enfant. Il n'y a plus ni chevaux, ni voitures, et bien des heures s'écouleront avant que le maître de poste puisse en tenir à votre disposition.

NADIA. – Eh bien, j'irai à pied, alors!...

STROGOFF. – À pied!...

NADIA. – Une charrette m’a amenée à quelques verstes de ce relais, et, pour aller plus loin, Dieu ne m’abandonnera pas!

STROGOFF, *à part*. – Pauvre enfant! *(Haut.)* D’où venez-vous ainsi?

NADIA. – De Riga.

STROGOFF. – Et vous allez?...

NADIA. – À Irkoutsk!

STROGOFF. – À Irkoutsk!... Seule... vous allez sans ami, sans guide, accomplir un aussi long, un aussi pénible voyage!

NADIA. – Je n’ai personne pour m’accompagner. De toute ma famille, il ne me reste que mon père que je vais rejoindre en Sibérie.

STROGOFF. – À Irkoutsk, avez-vous dit! Mais c’est quinze cents verstes à faire!

NADIA. – Oui!... C’est là que, pour un délit politique, mon père a été exilé, il y a deux ans. Jusqu’alors, à Riga, nous avions vécu heureux tous trois, lui, ma mère et moi, dans notre humble maison, ne demandant à Dieu que d’y rester toujours, puisqu’il l’avait emplie de bonheur... Mais l’épreuve allait venir! Mon père fut arrêté et, malgré les supplications de ma mère malade, malgré mes prières, il fut arraché de sa demeure et entraîné au delà de la frontière. Hélas! ma mère ne devait plus le revoir! Cette séparation aggrava sa maladie!... Quelques mois après, elle s’éteignait, et sa dernière pensée fut que j’allais être seule au monde!

STROGOFF. – Malheureuse enfant!

NADIA. – J’étais seule, en effet, dans cette ville, sans parents, sans amis! Je demandai alors et j’obtins l’autorisation d’aller retrouver le pauvre exilé au fond de la Sibérie. Je lui ai écrit que je partais!... Il m’attend. Après avoir réuni le peu dont je pouvais disposer, j’ai quitté Riga, et me voici maintenant sur la route que mon père a suivie deux années avant moi!

STROGOFF. – Mais il vous faudra traverser les montagnes de l’Oural, qui ont été funestes à tant de voyageurs!

NADIA. – Je le sais.

STROGOFF. – Et après l’Oural, les interminables steppes de la Sibérie! Ce sont d’écrasantes fatigues à subir, de terribles dangers à affronter!

NADIA. – Vous avez subi ces fatigues?... Vous avez affronté ces dangers?

STROGOFF. – Oui, mais je suis un homme... j’ai mon énergie, mon courage.

NADIA. – Moi, j’ai pour me soutenir l’espérance et la prière!

STROGOFF. – Ne savez-vous pas que le pays est envahi par les Tartares?

NADIA. – L’invasion n’était pas connue, quand j’ai quitté Riga. C’est à Nijni seulement que j’ai appris cette funeste nouvelle!

STROGOFF. – Et, malgré cela, vous avez continué votre route?

NADIA. – Pourquoi vous-même avez-vous déjà traversé l’Oural?

STROGOFF. – Pour aller revoir et embrasser ma mère, une vaillante Sibérienne qui demeur à Kolyvan!

NADIA. – Eh bien, moi, je vais revoir et embrasser mon père! Vous faisiez votre devoir, je fais le mien, et le devoir est tout.

STROGOFF. – Oui!... Tout!... *(À part.)* Cette jeune fille, si belle... seule... sans défenseur!... *(À Nadia qui se dirige vers la gauche.)* Où allez-vous?

NADIA. – Je vais faire viser mon permis! Des retards sont toujours à craindre, et si je ne partais pas aujourd'hui, qui sait si je pourrais partir demain!

STROGOFF. – Attendez donc. Il faut que, moi aussi, je fasse viser le mien. Peut-être obtiendrai-je du maître de police qu'il consente à vous expédier plus promptement, avant que la cloche rassemble tous les voyageurs qui attendent. Venez donc!... Nous sommes destinés, sans doute, à ne jamais nous revoir, mais je penserai souvent à vous, et je voudrais savoir votre nom.

NADIA. – Nadia Fédor.

STROGOFF. – Nadia.

NADIA. – Et le vôtre?

STROGOFF. – Moi... je... je m'appelle Nicolas Korpanoff.

Ils entrent au bureau de police.

Scène V

Blount, le maître de poste.

Blount, couvert de poussière, la tête enveloppée d’un voile à la mode anglaise, et monté sur un âne, arrive au fond par la grande route. Il entre dans la cour.

BLOUNT *au fond et appelant*. – Mister hôtelière! mister hôtelière! *(Descendant sur le devant.)* Dans quel déploreble situéchion nous étions, cette pauvre hâne et moi!... Impossibel de continouyer notre voyage! – *(Appelant.)* Mister hôtelière!... J’avais été forcé de prendre cette malheureuse animèle, parce qu’on avait volé mon voiture et mon chivaux!... Et nous avons fait une si longue trajette, nous étions si fatigués, toutes les deux, que lui ne pouvait plus porter moi, et que moi je pouvais plus descendre de lui!... *(Appelant.)* Mister hôtelière!... Nous étions collés ensemble, et ce hâne et moi, nous ne faisions plus qu’une seule ani... Non!... une seul person... *(Appelant plus fort.)* Mister hôtel... J’avais un grand mal de reins... C’était une cour... une courbé... – *(S’adressant à l’âne.)* Comment vous appelez... Oh! non... il ne sait pas... une courbétioure... Mais je pouvais pourtant pas rester toujours sur lui. *(Appelant très fort.)* Mister hôtelière... mister hôtelière!...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE *entrant, suivi d’un garçon*. – Tiens!... un voyageur?

BLOUNT. – Yes!... Une voyageur abandonné toute seule!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Pourquoi n’appeliez-vous pas, monsieur?

BLOUNT *très outré*. – Pourquoi je appelai pas?... Mais je criai plus qu’une heure: mister hôtelière!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Ah! je vais vous dire. – c’est que j’étais occupé en ma qualité de maître de poste pour vous servir.

BLOUNT. – Oh! very well... Alors, mister maître de poste, aidez à moi, pour descendre une peu.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Voilà, monsieur, voilà! *(Il le fait descendre non sans peine et avec toutes sortes de précautions.)*

BLOUNT. – All right... merci!...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Faut-il faire bassiner un lit?

BLOUNT, *étonné et regardant l’âne*. – Qu’est-ce que vous dites? bassiner un lit pour... *(À lui-même.)* bassiner une lit?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Un lit pour vous, monsieur, car je suis aussi hôtelier.

BLOUNT. – Oh! very well, une lit pour moi, et...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *montrant l’âne*. – Et une litière pour lui?

BLOUNT, riant. – Yes. Maintenant, je voulai déjeuner d’abord. Ensuite vous donner à moi une voiture et une chivau. *(Il entraîne son âne que le garçon emmène.)*

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Il n’en reste plus, monsieur.

BLOUNT. – Vous avez pas des chivaux?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Pas avant demain ou après-demain.

BLOUNT. – Oh! si je tenais celui qui avait volé moi!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – On vous a volé, monsieur?

BLOUNT. – Yes, mon voiture et mon valise... et si je découvrais mon coquine de voleur...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Que désire monsieur pour son déjeuner?

BLOUNT. – Vous servez à moi, là, sur ce table, vous servez... *(Cherchant.)* Vous servez... beefsteack, stockfish, côtelettes de mottonn, poum de terre, plumpudding, ale, porter et clarette... Vous avez bien entendu?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – J'ai très bien entendu. Monsieur a dit: beefsteack, stockfish, côtelettes...

BLOUNT. – Poum de terre, plumpudding, ale, porter et clarette!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Mais... c'est que nous n'avons rien de tout cela, monsieur!

BLOUNT. – Vous avez rien, et vous faites dire à moi ce que je préférais!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Je puis offrir à monsieur du koulbat.

BLOUNT. – Quelle est cette chose... koulbat?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Un pâté fait avec de la viande pilée et des oeufs.

BLOUNT, *notant sur son carnet*. – Oh! very well, koulbat... vous écrivez cela: *C, o, u, l*...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Non, non, par un *K*.

BLOUNT, *étonné*. – Oh! per oune *K*!... et c’était bonne tout de même!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Excellent!

BLOUNT. – Alors, servez koulbat. Et vous avez encore?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Du kwass.

BLOUNT. – Kwass... Vous écrivez. – *C, v, a*...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Non, par un *K*!

BLOUNT. – Encore une *K*?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Du caviar.

BLOUNT. – Par une *K*... toujours?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Non, par un *C*.

BLOUNT. – Per oune *C* à présent! Et c’était toujours bonne tout...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *riant*. – Et c’est très bon tout de même...

BLOUNT, *très sérieux*. – Oh! vous êtes une joyeuse hôtelière... Vous avez une chambre pour le toilette à moi?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – On va la préparer.

BLOUNT. – Attendez, attendez... Je payais d’avance pour être bien sûr.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Comme vous voudrez.

BLOUNT. – Combien?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Deux roubles pour le déjeuner, deux roubles pour la chambre.

BLOUNT. – Voilà! – Ah! mon hâne! Faites bouchonner, manger et buver lui. *(En ce moment, Blount, qui s’est dirigé vers l’auberge, se trouve devant la valise qui a été déposée par Jollivet.)* Aoh!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Qu’est-ce donc?

BLOUNT. – Ce vélise, mister, ce vélise!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Elle appartient à un voyageur qui l’a déposée là en arrivant.

BLOUNT. – Mais c’était la mienne!...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – La vôtre?

BLOUNT. – Et cette voyageur?...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Le voilà, monsieur.

Scène VI

Les mêmes, Jollivet

JOLLIVET, *sortant de la maison*. – Blount! mon ennemi!...

BLOUNT, *furieux*. – Ce vélise, monsieur, ce vélise!...

JOLLIVET, *tranquillement*. – Elle est à vous, monsieur Blount. Ah! j’ai eu assez de mal à la porter!

BLOUNT. – À l’emporter, vous voulez dire!

JOLLIVET. – Oh! une erreur! J’allais vous la renvoyer par la petite vitesse!

BLOUNT, *furieux*. – Petite vitesse!... Mister...

JOLLIVET, *à part*. – Dieu que c’est beau, un Anglais furieux!

BLOUNT. – Et le voiture, monsieur?...

JOLLIVET. – J’allais vous en renvoyer la moitié!

BLOUNT. – Le moitié?

JOLLIVET. – L’autre court encore!

BLOUNT. – Ah! c’est comme ça, mister. Eh bien, je ferai un procès à vous!...

JOLLIVET. – Un procès!... me faire un procès... en Russie!... Mais vous ne connaissez donc pas l'histoire de cette nourrice qui réclamait des gages pour la nourriture de son nourrisson qu'elle rendait à ses parents?...

BLOUNT, *hors de lui*. – Je connais pas!...

JOLLIVET. – Eh bien, le nourrisson, qui avait dix mois, lorsqu'on entama le procès... était colonel, lorsqu'il fut jugé... Ainsi je vous engage à ne pas plaider contre moi!...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *entrant, à Blount*. – Votre chambre est prête, monsieur.

BLOUNT. – Je vais faire mon toilette, et je revenai régler ma compte avec vous, mister!

JOLLIVET. – Je suis tout prêt à vous rembourser, monsieur.

BLOUNT. – Non, pas avec argent... Vous payer autrement, mister Jollivette.

JOLLIVET. – Jollivet, s'il vous plaît.

BLOUNT, *avec colère*. – Jollivette! Jollivette! Jollivette! *(Il sort.)*

Scène VII

Le maître de poste, Jollivet.

Le maître de poste commence à servir le déjeuner de Blount.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Il s’en va furieux, le gentleman.

JOLLIVET. – Et il reviendra de même!... Il y a de quoi!... À sa place, je serais hors de moi!... *(Au maître de poste.)* Qu’est-ce que vous servez donc là!...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Le déjeuner du gentleman.

JOLLIVET. – Ah! c’est son déjeuner... cela a l’air d’être bon. *(Il s’asseoit à la table.)*

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Permettez, monsieur, je vous l’ai dit. C’est le déjeuner du gentleman!

JOLLIVET. – Eh bien?... *(Il se met à manger.)*

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Mais, monsieur, il a payé d’avance.

JOLLIVET. – Ah! il a payé d’avance. Alors vous ne risquez plus rien!...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Mais le gentleman?

JOLLIVET. – Nous sommes en compte... C’est très bon!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Mais, monsieur, monsieur!...

JOLLIVET, *mangeant*. – Soyez donc tranquille, je me charge de tout. Décidément, vous cuisinez très bien, mon cher.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *flatté*. – Merci du compliment, monsieur.

JOLLIVET. – Ah! c'est que nous sommes connaisseurs en cuisine, nous autres Français.

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Oui, oui, de grands connaisseurs!

JOLLIVET, *mangeant*. – Et la vôtre, mon cher, est exquise!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Exquise... en vérité?... Vous trouvez cela?

JOLLIVET. – Exquise, vous dis-je!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Eh bien, si monsieur veut goûter ceci... je crois qu'il le trouvera encore meilleur. *(Il lui présente un second plat.)*

JOLLIVET. – Excellent, en effet... c'est fin, c'est délicat, c'est...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *présentant un troisième plat*. – Vous me direz encore ce que vous pensez de celui-ci.

JOLLIVET, *riant*. – Avec plaisir... Mais, dites donc... Eh bien, et le gentleman?...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Tiens, c'est vrai!... j'oubliais que c'est son déjeuner... Ah! bah!... tant pis.

JOLLIVET. – À propos, que dit-on des Tartares?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Que le pays est envahi tout entier, et que les troupes russes du Nord ne seront pas en force pour les repousser... On s’attend à une bataille avant deux jours.

JOLLIVET. – De quel côté?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Près de Kolyvan.

Scène VIII

Les mêmes, Blount

À ce moment, Blount sort de la maison de poste.

BLOUNT. – Aoh! mon toilette était faite... je mourais de faim... je... *(Voyant Jollivet.)* Aoh!

JOLLIVET. – À votre santé, monsieur Blount.

BLOUNT, *au maître de poste*. – Et ma déjeuner? Vous avez donc pas servi ma déjeuner?

JOLLIVET, *montrant les plats vides*. – Si fait, il est servi, monsieur Blount, et voilà ce qu'il en reste!

BLOUNT. – Alors, c'était ma déjeuner que vous aviez mangé?

JOLLIVET. – Il était excellent.

BLOUNT. – C'était ma koulbat?

JOLLIVET. – Exquis, le koulbat!

BLOUNT. – Vous me rendez raison ici même!...

JOLLIVET. – Non, pas ici... plus tard, après la bataille qui va avoir lieu et dont je tiens à rendre compte à ma cousine Madeleine.

BLOUNT, *étonné*. – La bataille?

JOLLIVET. – Apprenez, cher confrère, que les armées russe et tartare vont se rencontrer dans deux jours.

BLOUNT. – Ah! très biène!... Attendez un minute... *(Écrivant.)* “Rencontre prochain des armées ennemies...” Continouyez, mister!... je tourai vous après.

JOLLIVET. – Merci... Cette bataille aura lieu à Kolyvan.

BLOUNT, *écrivant*. – “À Kolyvan”... Kolyvan... per une *K*?

JOLLIVET. – Par oune *K*?... oui.

BLOUNT. – Well, merci.. C’était à l’épée, n’est-ce pas?...

JOLLIVET. – La bataille?

BLOUNT. – Notre douel. Mais je voulais être générouse, et puisque vous donnez à moi une renseignement pour mon journal, je laissai à vous le choix des armes.

JOLLIVET. – Du tout, du tout, je ne veux pas de faveur. Quelle est l’arme que vous préférez?

BLOUNT. – L’épée, mister.

JOLLIVET. – Très bien!... Moi, j’aime mieux le pistolet. Alors nous choisissons l’épée pour vous, le pistolet pour moi, et nous nous battrons à quinze pas.

BLOUNT. – Yes! comment vous arrangez cette chose. Vous disiez: une épée...

JOLLIVET. – Une épée pour vous...

BLOUNT. – Et une pistolet?...

JOLLIVET. – Le pistolet pour moi, et nous nous battons à quinze pas... *(Il éclate de rire.)*

BLOUNT. – Mais vous moquez encore, mister Jollivet?

JOLLIVET. – Croyez-moi, petit père, rendons-nous d'abord à Kolyvan, et nous nous battrons, quand nous aurons informé nos correspondants de l'issue de la bataille.

BLOUNT. – Yes!... Je attendrai vous là-bas.

JOLLIVET. – Si vous y arrivez avant moi!... ce dont je doute un peu!

Scène IX

Les mêmes, Nadia, le maître de police, voyageurs, un agent.

La cloche en ce moment, et tous les voyageurs accourent. Nadia sort de la maison de police, tenant son permis à la main.

L'AGENT, *criant*. – Les passeports, les passeports...

PREMIER VOYAGEUR. – On dit les nouvelles bien mauvaises, et le moindre retard nous perdrait!

L'agent distribue les passeports.

NADIA. – J'irai à pied jusqu'au prochain relais.

Au moment où les voyageurs vont quitter la cour, coup de trompette. Des Cosaques paraissent sur la route et ferment toute issue. Le maître de police sort de la maison, à gauche, et s'arrête sur les marches de la porte. Un des Cosaques lui remet un pli. Un roulement de tambour se fait entendre.

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Silence! Écoutez tous! *(Lisant.)* "Par arrêté du gouverneur de Moscou, défense à tout sujet russe, et sous quelque prétexte que ce soit, de passer la frontière."

Cri de désappointement dans la foule.

NADIA. – Mon Dieu! que dit-il?

JOLLIVET, *à Blount*. – Cela ne nous regarde pas!...

BLOUNT. – Je passai toujours, moi.

NADIA, *au maître de police*. – Monsieur... monsieur... mon passeport est en règle, je puis passer, n’est-il pas vrai?

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Vous êtes Russe... C’est impossible.

NADIA. – Monsieur... Je vais rejoindre mon père à Irkoutsk!... Il m’attend!... Chaque jour de retard, c’est un jour de douleur pour lui!... Il me sait partie!... Il peut me croire perdue, dans ce pays soulevé, au milieu de l’invasion tartare!... Laissez-moi passer, je vous en conjure!... Que peut faire au gouverneur qu’une pauvre fille comme moi se jette dans la steppe!... Si j’étais partie, il y a une heure, personne ne m’eût arrêtée!... Par pitié, monsieur, par pitié!

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Prières inutiles. L’ordre est formel. *(Aux Cosaques.)* Placez-vous à l’entrée de la route, et, à moins d’un permis spécial, que personne ne passe.

NADIA *se traînant à ses pieds*. – Monsieur!... monsieur!... Je vous en conjure, à mains jointes et à genoux, ayez pitié!... Ne nous condamnez pas, mon père et moi, à mourir désespérés et si loin l’un de l’autre!...

BLOUNT. – Oh! j’étais très émou...

À ce moment, Strogoff sort de la maison de police.

Scène X

Les mêmes, Strogoff.

STROGOFF, *allant à Nadia*. – Pourquoi ces supplications et ces larmes, Nadia?... Qu'importe que ton passeport soit valable ou non... puisque nous avons le mien qui est en règle.

NADIA, *à part*. – Que dit-il?

STROGOFF, *montrant son permis au maître de police*. – Et personne, entendez-vous, personne n'a le droit de nous empêcher de partir!

NADIA, *avec joie*. – Ah!

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Votre permis?...

STROGOFF. – Signé par le gouverneur général lui-même... Droit de passer partout, quelles que soient les circonstances, et sans que nul puisse s'y opposer!...

Le tarentass est amené au fond sur la route.

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Vous avez en effet le droit de passer... Mais elle...

STROGOFF, *montrant le permis*. – Autorisation d'être accompagné... Eh bien! quoi de plus naturel que... ma soeur m'accompagne!

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Votre?...

STROGOFF, *tendant la main à Nadia*. – Oui, ma soeur... Viens, Nadia.

NADIA, *la saisissant*. – Je te suis, frère!

BLOUNT. – Très fier... cette marchande!...

JOLLIVET. – Et très énergique... ami Blount.

BLOUNT. – Je n’étais pas votre ami, mister Jollivette.

JOLLIVET. – Jollivet!

BLOUNT. – Jollivette! Jollivette... for ever!

Scène XI

Les mêmes, Ivan.

Ivan est revêtu d’un uniforme militaire russe, en petite tenue, comme un officier qui voyage.

IVAN, *au maître de police*. – Permis spécial! *(Il lui montre son permis.)*

LE MAÎTRE DE POLICE. – Encore un signé par le gouverneur lui-même!

IVAN. – Un cheval!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Il n’y en a plus.

JOLLIVET. – S’il y en avait...

BLOUNT, *à Jollivet*. – J’aurais retenu eux, d’abord.

JOLLIVET. – Et je vous les aurais pris, ensuite.

Blount lui tourne le dos avec colère.

IVAN. – À qui ce tarentass?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE, *montrant Strogoff*. – À ce voyageur.

IVAN, *à Strogoff*. – Camarade, j’ai besoin de ta voiture et de ton cheval.

JOLLIVET, *à part*. – Il est sans gêne, ce monsieur...

STROGOFF. – Ce cheval est retenu par moi et pour moi. Je ne puis, ni ne veux le céder à personne.

IVAN. – Il me le faut, te dis-je.

STROGOFF. – Et je vous dis que vous ne l’aurez pas.

IVAN. – Prends garde!... Je suis homme à m’en emparer... fût-ce...

STROGOFF, *en colère*. – Fût-ce malgré moi?

IVAN. – Oui... malgré toi... Pour la dernière fois, veux-tu me céder ce cheval et cette voiture.

STROGOFF. – Non! vous dis-je, non!

IVAN. – Non? Eh bien, ils seront à celui de nous deux qui saura les garder!

NADIA. – Mon Dieu!

IVAN, *tirant son épée*. – Qu’on donne un sabre à cet homme et qu’il se défende!

STROGOFF, *avec force*. – Eh bien!... *(À part.)* Un duel!... et ma mission, si je suis blessé!... *(Haut et se croisant les bras.)* Je ne me battrai pas!

IVAN, *avec colère*. – Tu ne te battras pas?

STROGOFF. – Non!... et vous n’aurez pas mon cheval!

IVAN, *avec plus de force*. – Tu ne te battras pas, dis-tu?

STROGOFF. – Non.

IVAN. – Non... même après ceci. *(Il le frappe d’un coup de fouet.)* Eh bien, te battras-tu, lâche?

STROGOFF, *s’élançant sur Ivan*. – Miséra... *(S’arrêtant et se maîtrisant.)* Je ne me battrai pas!

TOUS. – Ah!

IVAN. – Tu subiras cette honte sans te venger?

STROGOFF. – Je la subirai... *(À part.)* Pour Dieu... pour le czar... pour la patrie!

IVAN. – Allons! à moi ton cheval! *(Il saute dans le tarentass. À l’hôtelier.)* Paye-toi! *(Le tarentass sort par la gauche.)*

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Merci, Excellence.

JOLLIVET. – Je n’aurais pas cru qu’il dévorerait une pareille honte!

BLOUNT. – Aoh! je sentais bouillir mon sang dans mon veine.

Scène XII

Les mêmes, moins Ivan.

STROGOFF. – Oh! cet homme... Je le retrouverai. *(À l'hôtelier.)* Quel est cet homme?

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Je ne le connais pas... mais c'est un seigneur qui sait se faire respecter!

STROGOFF, *bondissant*. – Tu te permets de me juger!

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Oui, car il est des choses qu'un homme de coeur ne reçoit jamais sans les rendre!

STROGOFF, *saisissant le maître de poste avec violence*. – Malheureux!... *(Froidement.)* Va-t'en, mon ami, va-t'en, je te tuerais!...

LE MAÎTRE DE POSTE. – Eh bien, vrai, je t'aime mieux ainsi!

JOLLIVET. – Moi aussi! Le courage a-t-il donc ses heures!

BLOUNT. – Jamais d'heure pour le courage anglaise!... Il était toujours prête!... toujours!...

JOLLIVET. – Nous verrons cela à Kolyvan, confrère! *(Il se dirige vers l'auberge et y entre.)*

NADIA à part. – Cette fureur qui éclatait dans ses yeux au moment de l’insulte!... cette lutte contre lui-même en refusant de se battre!... et maintenant... ce désespoir profond!...

STROGOFF, *assis près de la table*. – Oh! je ne croyais pas que l’accomplissement du devoir pût jamais coûter aussi cher!...

NADIA, *le regardant*. – Il pleure!... Oh! il doit y avoir un mystère que je ne puis comprendre... un secret qui enchaînait son courage! *(Allant à lui.)* Frère! *(Strogoff relève la tête.)* Il y a parfois des affronts qui élèvent, et celui-là t’a grandi à mes yeux!

En ce moment, Blount pousse un cri. On voit passer au fond Jollivet sur l’âne de Blount.

BLOUNT. – Ah! mon hâne! Arrêtez!... Il emportait mon hâne!...

JOLLIVET. – Je vous le rendrai à Kolyvan, confrère, à Kolyvan!

BLOUNT *accablé*. – Aoh!

Cinquième tableau – L’isba du télégraphe.

La scène représente un poste télégraphique près de Kolyvan, en Sibérie. Porte au fond, donnant sur la campagne; à droite un petit cabinet avec guichet, où se tient l’employé du télégraphe. Porte à gauche.

Scène I

L'employé, Jollivet.

On entend le bruit, sourd encore, de la bataille de Kolyvan.

JOLLIVET, *entrant par le fond*. – L'affaire est chaude! Une balle dans mon toquet!... Une autre dans ma casaque!... Le ville de Kolyvan va être emportée par ces Tartares! Enfin, j'aurai toujours la primeur de cette nouvelle... il faut l'expédier à Paris!... Voici le bureau du télégraphe! *(Regardant.)* Bon! l'employé est à son poste, et Blount est au diable!... Ca va bien! *(À l'employé.)* Le télégraphe fonctionne toujours?

L'EMPLOYÉ. – Il fonctionne du côté de la Russie, mais le fil est coupé du côté d'Irkoutsk.

JOLLIVET. – Ainsi les dépêches passent encore?

L'EMPLOYÉ. – Entre Kolyvan et Moscou, oui.

JOLLIVET. – Pour le gouvernement?...

L'EMPLOYÉ. – Pour le gouvernement, s'il en a besoin... pour le public, lorsqu'il paye! C'est dix kopeks par mot.

JOLLIVET. – Et que savez-vous?

L'EMPLOYÉ. – Rien.

JOLLIVET. – Mais les dépêches que vous...

L’EMPLOYÉ. – Je transmets les dépêches, mais je ne les lis jamais.

JOLLIVET, *à part*. – Un bon type! *(Haut.)* Mon ami, je désire envoyer à ma cousine Madeleine une dépêche relatant toutes les péripéties de la bataille.

L’EMPLOYÉ. – C’est facile... Dix kopeks par mot.

JOLLIVET. – Oui... je sais... mais une fois ma dépêche commencée, pouvez-vous me garder ma place, pendant que j’irai aux nouvelles?

L’EMPLOYÉ. – Tant que vous êtes au guichet, la place vous appartient... à dix kopeks par mot; mais, si vous quittez la place, elle appartient à celui qui la prend... à dix...

JOLLIVET. – À dix kopeks par mot!... oui... je sais!... Je suis seul!... commençons. *(Il écrit sur la tablette du guichet.)* “Mademoiselle Madeleine, faubourg Montmartre, Paris. – De Kolyvan, Sibérie...”

L’EMPLOYÉ. – Ça fait déjà quatre-vingt kopeks!

JOLLIVET. – C’est pour rien. *(Il lui remet une liasse de roubles papier, et continue à écrire.)* “Engagement des troupes russes et tartares...” *(À ce moment, la fusillade se fait entendre avec plus de force.)* Ah! Ah! voilà du nouveau!

Jollivet, quittant le guichet, court à la porte du fond pour voir ce qui se passe.

Scène II

Les mêmes, Blount.

Blount arrive par la porte de gauche.

BLOUNT. – C’est ici le bioureau télégraphique... *(Apercevant Jollivet.)* Jollivette!... *(Il va pour le saisir au collet, mais arrivé près de lui, il se met à lire tranquillement par-dessus son épaule ce que celui-ci à écrit.)* Aoh!... Il transmettait des nouvelles plus nouvelles que les miennes!

JOLLIVET, *écrivant*. – “Onze heures douze. – La bataille est engagée depuis ce matin...”

BLOUNT, *à part*. – Très bien... Je faisais mon profit. *(Il va au guichet, pendant que Jollivet continue d’observer ce qui se passe. À l’employé.)* Fil fonctionne?

L’EMPLOYÉ. – Toujours.

BLOUNT. – All right!

L’EMPLOYÉ. – Dix kopeks par mot.

BLOUNT. – Biène, très biène!... *(Écrivant sur la tablette.)* “*Morning-Post*, Londres. – De Kolyvan, Sibérie...”

JOLLIVET, *écrivant sur son carnet*. – “Grande fumée s’élève au-dessus de Kolyvan...”

BLOUNT, *écrivant au guichet et riant*. – Oh! bonne! “Grande fioumée s’élève au-dessus de Kolyvan...”

JOLLIVET. – Ah! ah! ah! “Le château est en flammes!...”

BLOUNT, *écrivant*. – Ah! ah! “Le château il est en flammes...”

JOLLIVET. – “Les Russes abandonnent la ville.”

BLOUNT, *écrivant*. – “Rousses abandonnent le ville.”

JOLLIVET. – Continuons notre dépêche. *(Jollivet quitte la fenêtre, revient au guichet et trouve sa place prise.)* Blount!

BLOUNT. – Yes, mister Blount!... Tout à l’heure... après mon dépêche... vous rendez raison à moi et mon hâne!

JOLLIVET. – Mais vous avez pris ma place!

BLOUNT. – La place il était libre.

JOLLIVET. – Ma dépêche était commencée.

BLOUNT. – Et le mien il commence.

JOLLIVET, *à l’employé*. – Mais vous savez bien que j’étais là avant monsieur.

L’EMPLOYÉ. – Place libre, place prise. Dix kopeks par mot.

BLOUNT, *payant*. – Et je payai pour mille mots d’avance.

JOLLIVET. – Mille mots!...

BLOUNT, *continuant d’écrire et à mesure qu’il écrit de passer ses dépêches à l’employé qui les transmet*. – “Bruit de la bataille se rapprochait... Au poste télégraphique, correspondant français guettait mon place, mais lui ne le aura pas...”

JOLLIVET, *furieux*. – Ah! monsieur, à la fin...

BLOUNT. – Il n’y avait de fin, mister. “Ivan Ogareff à la tête des Tartares, va rejoindre l’émir...”

JOLLIVET. – Est-ce fini?

BLOUNT. – Jamais fini.

JOLLIVET. – Vous n’avez plus rien à dire...

BLOUNT. – Toujours à dire... pour pas perdre le place. *(Écrivant.)* “Au commencement, Dieu créa le ciel et le terre...”

JOLLIVET. – Ah! il télégraphie la Bible maintenant!

BLOUNT. – Yes! le Bible, et il contenait deux cent soixante-treize mille mots!...

L’EMPLOYÉ. – À dix kopeks par...

BLOUNT. – J’ai donné une acompte... *(Il remet une nouvelle liasse de roubles.)* “Le terre était informe et...”

JOLLIVET. – Ah! l’animal! Je saurai bien te faire déguerpir! *(Il sort par le fond.)*

BLOUNT. – “Les ténèbres couvraient le face de le abîme... *(Continuant.)* “Onze heures vingt. – Cris des fouyards redoublent... Mêlée furiouse.”

Cris au dehors que Jollivet vient pousser à travers la fenêtre.

JOLLIVET. – Mort aux Anglais!... Tue! pille!... À bas l’Angleterre.

BLOUNT. – Aoh!... Qu’est-ce qu’on criait donc?... À bas l’Angleterre! Angleterre, jamais à bas! *(Il tire un revolver de sa ceinture et sort par la porte du fond. Jollivet rentre alors par la porte de gauche et prend la place de Blount au guichet.)*

JOLLIVET. – Pas plus difficile que cela!... À bas l’Angleterre, et l’Anglais quitte le guichet. *(Dictant.)* “Onze heures vingt-cinq. – Les obus tartares commencent à dépasser Kolyvan...”

BLOUNT, *revenant*. – Personne! Je avais bien cru entendre... *(Apercevant Jollivet.)* Aoh!

JOLLIVET, *saluant*. – Vive l’Angleterre, monsieur, vive les Anglais!

BLOUNT. – Vous avez pris mon place.

JOLLIVET. – C’est comme cela.

BLOUNT. – Vous allez me le rendre, mister.

JOLLIVET. – Quand j’aurai fini.

BLOUNT. – Et vous aurez fini?...

JOLLIVET. – Plus tard... beaucoup plus tard. *(Dictant.)* “Les Russes sont forcés de se replier encore...” *(Imitant l’accent de Blount.)* “Correspondant anglais guette ma place au télégraphe, mais lui ne le aura pas...”

BLOUNT. – Est-ce fini, mister?

JOLLIVET. – Jamais fini... *(Dictant.)*

Il était un p’tit homme.

Tout habillé de gris

Dans Paris...

BLOUNT, *furieux*. – Des chansons!...

JOLLIVET. – Du Béranger! Après le sacré, le profane!

BLOUNT. – Monsieur, battons-nous à l’instant!

JOLLIVET, *dictant*. –

Joufflu comme une pomme,

Qui sans un sou comptant...

L’EMPLOYÉ, *refermant brusquement le guichet*. – Ah!

JOLLIVET. – Quoi donc?

L’EMPLOYÉ, *sortant de son bureau*. – Le fil est coupé! Il ne fonctionne plus! Messieurs, j’ai bien l’honneur de vous saluer... *(Il salue et s’en va tranquillement. – Grands cris au dehors.)*

BLOUNT. – Plus dépêches possibles, à nous deux, mister. Sortons!

JOLLIVET. – Oui, sortons, et venez me touyer!...

BLOUNT. – On dit touer!... Il ne sait même pas son langue!

Ils sortent par le fond, en se provoquant.

Scène III

Sangarre, un bohémien.

SANGARRE, *arrivant par la gauche avec un bohémien*. – Les Tartares sont vainqueurs!

LE BOHÉMIEN. – Ivan Ogareff les a menés à l'assaut de Kolyvan.

SANGARRE. – Russes et Sibériens, ils ont tout écrasés!... La ville brûle, et les fuyards s'échappent de toutes parts!...

LE BOHÉMIEN, *regardant*. – Ils vont gagner de ce côté!

SANGARRE. – Oui, mais cette vieille Sibérienne, que j'ai enfin revue, cette Marfa Strogoff, qu'est-elle devenue? Elle était là, regardant sa maison qui brûlait!... Puis, tout à coup, elle a disparu!... Oh! je la retrouverai et alors!... Ah! tu m'as dénoncée, Marfa, tu m'as fait knouter par les Russes!... Malheur à toi!...

Scène IV

Les mêmes, Marfa, fugitifs.

Grand tumulte au dehors. – Le bruit de la fusillade se rapproche! Les fugitifs se précipitent dans le poste.

PREMIER FUGITIF. – Tout est perdu!

DEUXIÈME FUGITIF. – La cavalerie tartare sabre tous les malheureux qui sortent de Kolyvan!

TOUS. – Fuyons! fuyons!

Ils vont quitter le poste en désordre.

MARFA, *paraissant au fond*. – Arrêtez! Arrêtez.

TOUS. – Marfa Strogoff!

MARFA. – Lâches, qui fuyez devant les Tartares!

SANGARRE. – Ah! cette fois, tu ne m'échapperas pas!

MARFA. – Arrêtez! vous dis-je, n'êtes-vous plus les enfants de notre Sibérie?...

PREMIER FUGITIF. – Est-il encore une Sibérie? Les Tartares n'ont-ils pas envahi la province entière?

MARFA, *sombre*. – Hélas! oui! puisque la province entière est dévastée!

DEUXIÈME FUGITIF. – N’est-ce pas toute une armée de barbares qui s’est jetée sur nos villages?

MARFA. – Oui, puisque si loin que la vue s’étende, nous ne voyons que des villages en flammes!

PREMIER FUGITIF. – Et cette armée n’est-elle pas commandée par le cruel Féofar?

MARFA. – Oui! puisque nos rivières roulent des flots de sang!

PREMIER FUGITIF. – Eh bien! que pouvons-nous faire?

MARFA. – Résister encore, résister toujours, et mourir s’il le faut!

PREMIER FUGITIF. – Résister quand le Père ne vient pas à nous, et quand Dieu nous abandonne?

MARFA. – Dieu est bien haut, et le Père est bien loin! Il ne peut ni diminuer les distances, ni hâter davantage le pas de ses soldats! Les troupes sont en marche, elles arriveront! mais jusque-là, il faut résister!... Dût la vie d’un Tartare coûter la vie de dix Sibériens, que ces dix meurent en combattant! Qu’on ne puisse pas dire que Kolyvan s’est rendue, tant qu’il restait un de ses enfants pour la défendre!...

DEUXIÈME FUGITIF. – Ces barbares étaient vingt contre un!

PREMIER FUGITIF. – Et maintenant Kolyvan est en flammes!

MARFA. – Eh bien, si vous ne pouvez rentrer dans la ville, combattez au-dehors! Chaque heure gagnée peut donner aux troupes russes le temps de se rallier!... Barricadez ce poste! Fortifiez-le! Arrêtez ici cette tourbe! Tenez encore à l’abri de ces murs!... Mes amis, écoutez la voix de la vieille Sibérienne, qui demande à mourir avec vous, pour la défense de son pays!

SANGARRE, *à part*. – Non! ce n’est pas ici que tu mourras. *(Au bohémien qui l’accompagne.)* Reste et observe. *(Elle sort par le fond.)*

MARFA. – Mes amis! vous m’entendez, moi, la veuve de Pierre Strogoff que vous avez connu!... Ah! s’il était encore là, il se mettrait à votre tête! Il vous ramènerait au combat!... Écoutez-le! Mes amis! c’est lui qui vous parle par ma voix!

PREMIER FUGITIF. – Pierre Strogoff n’est plus! Peut-être avec un tel chef que lui aurions-nous pu tenir dans la steppe, harceler les soldats de l’émir...

LES FUGITIFS. – Oui, un chef! Il nous faudrait un chef!

MARFA. – Ah! tout est donc perdu!

Violente détonation au dehors.

Scène V

Les mêmes, Strogoff, Nadia, Blount, Jollivet, fugitifs.

JOLLIVET, *entrant par le fond*. – Les balles pleuvent sur la route.

BLOUNT, *le suivant*. – Forcés de remettre notre duel.

STROGOFF, *entrant par le fond avec Nadia*. – Ici, Nadia!... Ici, du moins, tu seras à l’abri, mais je suis forcé de me séparer de toi!

NADIA. – Tu vas m’abandonner?...

STROGOFF. – Écoute, les Tartares avancent!... ils marchent sur Irkoutsk!... Il faut que j’y sois avant eux!... Un devoir impérieux et sacré m’y appelle! Il faut que je passe, fût-ce à travers la mitraille, fût-ce au prix de mon sang, fût-ce au prix de ma vie!...

NADIA. – S’il en est ainsi, frère, pars, et que Dieu te protège!

STROGOFF. – Adieu, Nadia. *(Il va s’élancer vers la porte du fond, et se trouve face à face avec Marfa.)*

MARFA, *l’arrêtant*. – Mon fils!

JOLLIVET. – Tiens!... Nicolas Korpanoff!

MARFA. – Mon enfant!... *(Aux Sibériens.)* C’est lui, mes amis! C’est mon fils... C’est Michel Strogoff!

TOUS. – Michel Strogoff!

MARFA. – Ah! vous demandiez un chef pour vous conduire dans la steppe, un chef digne de vous commander! Le voilà... Michel, embrasse-moi! prends ce fusil, et sus aux Tartares.

STROGOFF, *à part*. – Non! non! je ne peux pas... j'ai juré... MARFA. – Eh bien, ne m'entends-tu pas? Michel! Tu me regardes sans me répondre?

STROGOFF, *froidement*. – Qui êtes-vous?... Je ne vous connais pas.

MARFA. – Qui je suis? Tu le demandes? Tu ne me reconnais plus... Michel! mon fils!...

STROGOFF. – Je ne vous connais pas.

MARFA. – Tu ne reconnais pas ta mère?

STROGOFF. – Je ne vous reconnais pas.

MARFA. – Tu n'es pas le fils de Pierre et de Marfa Strogoff?

STROGOFF. – Je suis Nicolas Korpanoff, et voici ma soeur Nadia.

MARFA. – Sa soeur! *(Allant à Nadia.)* Toi! sa soeur?

STROGOFF, *avec force*. – Oui, oui, réponds!... réponds, Nadia.

NADIA. – Je suis sa soeur!...

MARFA. – Tu mens!... Je n'ai pas de fille!... Je n'ai qu'un fils, et le voilà!

STROGOFF. – Vous vous trompez!... laissez-moi. *(Il va vers la porte.)*

MARFA. – Tu ne sortiras pas!

STROGOFF. – Laissez-moi... Laissez-moi!...

MARFA, *le ramenant*. – Tu ne sortiras pas! Écoute, tu n’es pas mon fils!... Une ressemblance m’égare, je me trompe, je suis folle, et tu n’es pas mon fils!... Pour cela, Dieu te jugera! Mais tu es un enfant de notre Sibérie. Eh bien, l’ennemi est là et je te tends cette arme!... Est-ce qu’après avoir renié ta mère, tu vas aussi renier ton pays? Michel, tu peux me déchirer l’âme, tu peux me briser le coeur, mais la patrie, c’est la première mère, plus sainte et plus sacrée mille fois!... Tu peux me tuer, moi, Michel, mais pour elle tu dois mourir!

STROGOFF, *à part*. – Oui!... c’est un devoir sacré... oui... mais je ne dois ni m’arrêter, ni combattre... Je n’ai pas une heure, pas une minute à perdre! *(À Marfa.)* Je ne vous connais pas!... et je pars!

MARFA. – Ah! malheureux qui es devenu à la fois fils dénaturé, et traître à la patrie!

Forte détonation au dehors. Un obus tombe près de Marfa, mèche fumante.

STROGOFF, *s’élançant*. – Prenez garde, Marfa!

MARFA. – Que cet obus me tue, puisque mon fils est un lâche!

STROGOFF. – Un lâche! Moi! Vois si j’ai peur! *(Il prend l’obus et le jette dehors. Il s’élance par le fond.)* Adieu, Nadia.

MARFA. – Ah! je le disais bien!... C’est mon fils! c’est Michel Strogoff, le courrier du csar!

TOUS. – Le courrier du csar!

MARFA. – Quelque secrète mission l'entraîne sans doute loin de moi!... Nous combattrons sans lui! Barricadons cette porte, et défendons-nous!...

Coups de fusils qui éclatent au dehors.

BLOUNT, *portant la main à sa jambe*. – Ah! blessé!...

JOLLIVET, *lui bandant sa blessure malgré lui*. – Ah! pauvre Blount.

MARFA. – Courage! mes amis!... Que chacun de nous sache mourir bravement, non plus pour le salut, mais pour l'honneur de la Russie!

TOUS. – Hurrah! Pour la Russie!

Le combat s'engage avec les Tartares qui apparaissent. Un brouillard de fumée emplit le poste qui s'effondre.

Sixième tableau – Le champ de bataille de Kolyvan.

Vue du champ de bataille de Kolyvan. Horizon en feu, au coucher du soleil. Morts et blessés étendus, cadavres de chevaux. Au-dessus du champ de bataille, des oiseaux de proie qui planent et s'abattent sur les cadavres.

STROGOFF, *paraissant au fond et traversant le champ de bataille*. – Ma mère! Nadia!... Elles sont ici peut-être, là parmi les blessés et les morts!... Et l'implacable devoir impose silence à mon coeur... Et je ne puis les rechercher ni les secourir!... Non... *(Se redressant.)* Non! Pour Dieu, pour le csar, pour la patrie!...

Il continue à marcher vers la droite et le rideau baisse.

Acte troisième

Septième tableau – La tente d’Ivan Ogareff.

Scène I

Jollivet, Blount.

Blount est à demi couché, et Jollivet s’occupe à le soigner.

BLOUNT, *le repoussant*. – Mister Jollivet, je priai vous de laisser moi tranquille!

JOLLIVET. – Monsieur Blount, je vous soignerai quand même, et je vous guérirai malgré vous, s’il le faut.

BLOUNT. – Ces bons soins de vous étaient odieuses!

JOLLIVET. – Odieux, mais salutaires! Et si je vous abandonnais, qui donc vous soignerait dans ce camp tartare?

BLOUNT. – Je prévenai vous que je n’étais pas reconnaissante du tout pour ce que vous faisiez!

JOLLIVET. – Est-ce que je vous demande de la reconnaissance?

BLOUNT. – Vous avez volé mon voiture, ma déjeuner, mon hâne et mon place au guichet du télégraphe! J’étais votre ennemi mortel, et je voulais...

JOLLIVET. – Et vous voulez touyer moi, c’est convenu! Mais pour que vous puissiez me touyer, il faut d’abord que je vous guérisse!

BLOUNT. – Ah! c’était un grand malheur que le obus il ait été pour moi!

JOLLIVET. – Ce n’était pas un obus, c’était un biscaïen.

BLOUNT. – Un bis...?

JOLLIVET. – Caïen!

BLOUNT. – Par oune *K*?

JOLLIVET. – Non par un *C*.

BLOUNT. – Par oune *C*. Oh! c’était mauvais tout de même!

JOLLIVET. – Voyons, prenez mon bras, et marchez un peu.

BLOUNT, *avec force*. – Non! Je marchai pas!

JOLLIVET. – Prenez mon bras, vous dis-je, ou je vous emporte sur mes épaules, comme un sac de farine!

BLOUNT. – Oh! sac de farine!... Vous insultez moi encore!

JOLLIVET. – Ne dites donc pas de bêtises! *(Il veut l’emmener. Un Tartare entre et les arrête.)*

LE TARTARE. – Restez. Le seigneur Ivan Ogareff veut vous interroger. *(Il sort.)*

JOLLIVET. – Nous interroger?... Lui, Ogareff!... ce traître!

BLOUNT. – Cette brigande!... cette bandite voulait interroger moi!

Ivan paraît, s’arrête à l’entrée de la tente et parle bas à deux Tartares qui l’accompagnent et sortent.

JOLLIVET. – Que vois-je? l’homme qui insultait brutalement le marchand Korpanoff?...

BLOUNT. – C’était cette colonel Ogareff!... Oh! je sentai une grosse indignéchione!

Scène II

Les mêmes, Ivan, Tartares

IVAN. – Approchez et répondez-moi. Qui êtes-vous?

JOLLIVET. – Alcide Jollivet, citoyen français, que personne n’a le droit de retenir prisonnier.

IVAN. – Peut-être. *(À Blount.)* Et vous?

BLOUNT. – Harry Blount!... une honnête homme, entendez-vous, une fidèle sujette de le Angleterre, entendez-vous, une loyale serviteur de son pétrie, entendez-vous!

IVAN. – Vous avez été pris, dit-on, parmi nos ennemis?

JOLLIVET, *avec ironie*. – Non, on vous a trompé.

IVAN. – Vous osez dire?...

JOLLIVET. – Je dis que ce ne peut être parmi les ennemis d’un colonel russe, puisque c’est au milieu de ses compatriotes, parmi les Russes eux-mêmes, qu’on nous a arrêtés! Vous voyez bien, monsieur, que l’on vous a trompé.

BLOUNT, *à part*. – Very well!... Très bon réponse!...

IVAN. – Quel motif vous a conduits sur le théâtre de la guerre?

JOLLIVET. – Nous sommes journalistes, monsieur... deux reporters.

IVAN, *avec mépris*. – Ah! oui, je sais, des reporters... c’est-à-dire une sorte d’espions!...

BLOUNT, *furieux*. – Espionne! Nous, espionne!

JOLLIVET, *avec force*. – Monsieur, ce que vous dites est infâme, et j’en prends à témoin l’Europe tout entière!

IVAN. – Que m’importe l’opinion de l’Europe! Je vous traite comme il me plaît, parce qu’on vous a pris parmi les Russes, qui sont mes ennemis, vous le savez bien!

JOLLIVET. – J’ignorais que la patrie devînt jamais l’ennemie d’un loyal soldat!

BLOUNT. – C’était le soldat déloyal qui devenait le ennemi de son pétrie!

JOLLIVET. – Et celui-là est un traître!

IVAN, *avec colère*. – Prenez garde et souvenez-vous que je suis tout-puissant ici!

JOLLIVET. – Vous devriez tâcher de le faire oubler.

IVAN, *avec colère*. – Monsieur... *(Se calmant.)* L’insulte d’un homme de votre sorte ne peut arriver jusqu’à moi!

JOLLIVET. – C’est naturel, colonel Ogareff, la voix ne descend pas, elle monte.

IVAN, *avec colère*. – C’en est trop!

BLOUNT, *à part*. – Il n’était pas satisfaite du tout!

IVAN. – Vous me payerez ce nouvel outrage et vous le payerez cher. *(Appelant.)* Garde! *(Un Tartare entre.)* Que l’Anglais soit conduit hors du camp, avant une heure... et qu’avant une heure, l’autre soit fusillé! *(Il sort avec le Tartare.)*

Scène III

Blount, Jollivet.

BLOUNT, *avec terreur*. – Fousillé! fousillé! fousillé!...

JOLLIVET. – Je n’ai pas été maître de mon indignation!

BLOUNT. – Fousillé!... Cette misérable coquine faisait fousillé vous!

JOLLIVET. – Hélas! oui!... Rien ne peut me sauver et le mieux est de me résigner courageusement!

BLOUNT. – Ah! Jollivet!

JOLLIVET. – Vous voilà débarrassé de votre rival, de votre ennemi!

BLOUNT, *se récriant*. – Débarrassé de mon hennemi!

JOLLIVET. – Et il était écrit que notre duel n’aurait jamais lieu!

BLOUNT, *ému*. – Notre douel?... Est-ce que vous aviez pensé que je battais jamais moi avec vous, Jollivet?

JOLLIVET. – Je sais qu’il y avait en vous plus d’emportement que de haine!

BLOUNT. – Oh! non! je vous haïssais pas, Jollivet, et si vous avez un peu moqué, vous avez défendu moi dans le bataille, vous avez soigné mon blessure, vous avez sauvé moi comme une bonne et brave gentleman, Jollivet!

JOLLIVET, *souriant tristement*. – Tiens! vous ne m’appelez plus Jollivette, monsieur Blount.

BLOUNT. – Et je demandai pardone à vous pour cette méchante plaisanterie!

JOLLIVET. – Alors nous voilà amis... tout à fait?

BLOUNT. – Oh! yes, amis jusqu’à la m...

JOLLIVET. – Jusqu’à la mort!... Ce ne sera pas long, hélas!... et je voudrais... avant... de mourir... vous demander un service, ami Blount.

BLOUNT *vivement*. – Une service! Oh! je promettai, je jurai d’avance!...

JOLLIVET. – Nous sommes ici, mon ami, comme deux sentinelles perdues et chargées l’une et l’autre d’éclairer notre pays sur les graves événements qui s’accomplissent. Eh bien, le devoir que je ne pourrai plus remplir, je vous demande de le remplir à ma place.

BLOUNT, *très ému*. – Oh! yes! yes!...

JOLLIVET. – Voulez-vous me promettre, Blount, qu’après avoir adressé chacune de vos correspondances en Angleterre, vous l’envoyez ensuite en France?

BLOUNT. – Ensuite! non!... Jollivet, non... pas ensuite. Je voulais remplacer vous, tout à faite, et comme vous étiez plus adroite que moi, vous aviez envoyé toujours les nouvelles le première, eh bien, je promettai que j’envoyai en France... d’abord!

JOLLIVET. – En même temps, Blount, en même temps... je le veux!...

BLOUNT. – Yes!... en même temps!... d’abord!... Êtes-vous satisfaite, Jollivet?

JOLLIVET. – Oui, mais ce n’est pas tout, Blount.

BLOUNT. – Parlez, je écoutai vous.

JOLLIVET. – Mon ami, j’ai laissé là-bas une femme!...

BLOUNT. – Une femme!

JOLLIVET. – Une jeune femme... et un petit enfant. Elle, bonne comme une sainte! lui, beau comme un ange!...

BLOUNT, *avec reproche*. – Oh! vous aviez une femme et une toute petite bébé, et vous avez quitté eux!... Oh! Jollivet! Jollivet.

JOLLIVET, *tristement*. – Que voulez-vous?... Nous étions pauvres, mon ami!

BLOUNT, *pleurant*. – Pauvres!... Et alors vous étiez forcé pour abandonner eux, et moi je reprochai à vous... J’accusai vous... Oh! my friend, my dear friend!... I am a very bad man... your pardon... for... having spoken as... I have done!... Je demandai pardone à vous. Jollivet, yes!... je demandai pardone, et quand le guerre était finie ici, je jurai que j’allai en France, je cherchai votre fémille, je servai pour père à votre pauvre petite bébé, et je servai pour méri... non!... je servai pour frère à votre bonne jolie femme... je promettai... je jurai... je... *(Il lui serre la main, se jette à son cou et l'embrasse. – On entend un bruit de fanfare.)*

JOLLIVET. – Qu'est-ce que cela?

UN TARTARE, *entrant*. – C'est l'arrivée de l'émir Féofar. Tous les prisonniers doivent se prosterner devant lui... Venez.

BLOUNT. – Prosterner!... je prosternerai pas!... je prosternerai jamais!... *(Ils sortent.)*

Le décor change à vue et représente le camp tartare.

Huitième tableau – Le camp de l'émir.

La scène représente une place, ornée de pylônes, recouverte d'un splendide velum. À droite, un trône magnifiquement orné; à gauche, une tente.

Scène I

Féofar, Ivan, les Tartares.

Grands fracas de trompettes et de tambours. Superbe cortège qui défile devant le trône. Féofar, accompagné d'Ivan et de toute sa maison militaire, arrive au camp. Réception solennelle.

IVAN. – Gloire à toi, puissant émir, qui viens commander en personne cette armée triomphante!

TOUS. – Gloire à Féofar! Gloire à l'émir!

IVAN. – Les provinces de la Sibérie sont maintenant en ton pouvoir. Tu peux pousser tes colonnes victorieuses aussi bien vers les contrées où se lève le soleil que dans celles où il se couche.

FÉOFAR. – Et si je marche avec le soleil?

IVAN. – C'est te jeter vers l'Europe, et c'est rapidement conquérir le pays jusqu'aux montagnes de l'Oural!

FÉOFAR. – Et si je vais au-devant du flambeau de lumière?

IVAN. – C'est soumettre à ta domination Irkoutsk et les plus riches provinces de l'Asie centrale.

FÉOFAR. – Quel avis t'inspire ton dévouement à notre cause?

IVAN. – Prendre Irkoutsk, la capitale, et avec elle l’otage précieux dont la possession vaut une province! Émir, il faut que le Grand-Duc tombe entre tes mains.

FÉOFAR. – Il sera fait ainsi.

IVAN. – Quel jour l’émir quittera-t-il ce camp?

FÉOFAR. – Demain, car aujourd’hui, c’est fête pour les vainqueurs.

TOUS. – Gloire à l’émir!

Scène II

Les mêmes, Blount, puis Jollivet.

BLOUNT. – L’émir! je voulais parler à l’émir.

FÉOFAR. – Qu’est-ce donc?

IVAN. – Que voulez-vous?

BLOUNT. – Je voulais parler à l’émir.

L’ÉMIR. – Parle.

BLOUNT. – Émir Féofar, je suppliai... non!... je conseillai à toi de entendre moi!

FÉOFAR. – Approche.

BLOUNT. – Je demandai au puissante Féofar d’empêcher le fousillement d’un gentleman!

FÉOFAR. – Que signifie?

IVAN. – Un étranger qui a osé m’insulter et dont j’ai ordonné le châtiment!

L’ÉMIR. – Qu’on amène cet homme.

Jollivet est amené et se place près de Blount.

BLOUNT. – Et si je conseillai à toi, grande Féofar, de rendre son liberté à mister Jollivet, c’était dans le intérêt de toi, de ton sécourité, car si une seule cheveu tombait de son tête à lui, il mettait en danger ton tête, à toi!

FÉOFAR. – Et qui donc aurai-je à redouter?

BLOUNT. – Le France!

FÉOFAR. – La France!

BLOUNT. – Oui, le France qui ne laisserait pas impiouni le assassinat d’une enfant à elle! Et je avertis toi, que si on ne rendait pas la liberté à lui, je restai prisonnier avec! Je prévenai toi que si on touyait lui, il fallait me touyer avec, et qu’au lieu de le France tout seule, tu auras sur les bras le France et le Angleterre avec!... Voilà ce que j’avais à dire à toi, émir Féofar. À présent, fais touyer nous si tu voulais!

FÉOFAR. – Ivan, que les paroles de cet homme s’effacent de ta mémoire et qu’on épargne sa vie!

IVAN. – Mais il m’a insulté!

FÉOFAR. – Je le veux.

IVAN. – Soit! Qu’on le chasse du camp à l’instant même.

JOLLIVET. – Vous prévenez mes désirs, monsieur Ogareff!... J’ai hâte de n’être plus en votre honorable compagnie!... Blount, je n’oublierai pas ce que vous venez de faire pour moi!

BLOUNT. – Nous étions quittes et très bonnes amis, Jollivet!

JOLLIVET. – Et nous continuerons la campagne ensemble!

BLOUNT. – All right!

Tous deux sortent par le fond. Féofar et ses officiers entrent avec lui sous une tente à gauche.

Scène III

Ivan, Sangarre.

IVAN, *voyant entrer Sangarre*. – Sangarre! Tu le vois, elle s’achèvera bientôt la tâche que je me suis imposée!

SANGARRE. – Parles-tu de ta vengeance?

IVAN. – Oui, oui, de cette vengeance qui est maintenant assurée!

SANGARRE. – Elle t’échappera, si le Grand-Duc est prévenu à temps, si un courrier russe parvient jusqu’à lui!

IVAN. – Comment un courrier passerait-il à travers nos armées?

SANGARRE. – Il en est un qui, sans moi, serait en ce moment sur la route d’Irkoutsk!

IVAN. – Parle, explique-toi.

SANGARRE. – Ivan, je suis près que toi du but que chacun de nous veut atteindre! Le Grand-Duc n’est pas encore entre tes mains, tandis que j’ai en mon pouvoir cette Marfa Strogoff, dont j’ai juré la mort!

IVAN. – Achève.

SANGARRE. – La vieille Sibérienne a été prise au poste de Kolyvan, avec beaucoup d’autres. Mais, dans ce poste, Marfa n’était pas la seule qui portât ce nom de Strogoff!

IVAN. – Que veux-tu dire?

SANGARRE. – Hier, un homme a refusé de reconnaître Marfa, qui l’appelait son fils!... Il l’a reniée publiquement. Mais une mère ne se trompe pas à une prétendue ressemblance. Cet homme qui ne voulait pas être reconnu était bien Michel Strogoff, un des courriers du csar.

IVAN. – Où est-il? Qu’est-il devenu? À t-on pu s’emparer de lui?

SANGARRE. – Après la victoire, tous ceux qui fuyaient le champ de bataille ont été arrêtés. Pas un des fugitifs n’a pu nous échapper, et Michel Strogoff doit être parmi les prisonniers!

IVAN. – Le reconnaîtrais-tu? Pourrais-tu le désigner?

SANGARRE. – Non.

IVAN. – Il me faut cet homme! Il doit être porteur de quelque important message. Qui donc pourra me le faire connaître?

SANGARRE. – Sa mère!

IVAN. – Sa mère?

SANGARRE. – Elle refusera de parler, mais...

IVAN. – Mais je saurai bien l’y forcer... Qu’on l’amène. *(Sangarre s’éloigne par le fond.)* Un courrier évidemment envoyé vers le Grand-Duc! Il est porteur d’un message! Ce message, je l’aurai!...

Scène IV

Ivan, Sangarre, Marfa, Nadia, puis des prisonniers, soldats, etc.

NADIA, *bas*. – Pourquoi nous conduit-on ici?

MARFA, *bas*. – Pour m’interroger, sans doute, sur le compte de mon fils, mais j’ai compris qu’il ne voulait pas être reconnu!... il est déjà loin... Ils ne m’arracheront pas mon secret.

SANGARRE. – Regarde-moi, Marfa, regarde-moi bien!... Sais-tu qui je suis?

MARFA, *regardant Sangarre*. – Oui! l’espionne tartare que j’ai fait châtier!

SANGARRE. – Et qui te tient à son tour en son pouvoir!

NADIA, *lui prenant la main*. – Marfa!

MARFA, *bas*. – Ne crains rien pour moi, ma fille!

IVAN, *à Marfa*. – Tu te nommes?...

MARFA. – Marfa Strogoff.

IVAN. – Tu as un fils?

MARFA. – Oui!

IVAN. – Où est-il maintenant?

MARFA. – À Moscou, je suppose.

IVAN. – Tu es sans nouvelles de lui?

MARFA. – Sans nouvelles.

IVAN. – Quel est donc cet homme que tu appelais ton fils, hier, au poste de Kolyvan?

MARFA. – Un Sibérien que j’ai pris pour lui. C’est le deuxième en qui je crois retrouver mon fils, depuis que Kolyvan est rempli d’étrangers.

IVAN. – Ainsi ce jeune homme n’était pas Michel Strogoff?

MARFA. – Ce n’était pas lui.

IVAN. – Et tu ignores ce que ton fils est devenu?

MARFA. – Je l’ignore.

IVAN. – Et depuis hier, tu ne l’as pas vu parmi les prisonniers?

MARFA. – Non!

IVAN. – Écoute. Ton fils est ici, car aucun des fugitifs n’a pu échapper à ceux de nos soldats qui cernaient le poste de Kolyvan. Tous ces prisonniers vont passer devant tes yeux, et si tu ne me désignes pas ce Michel Strogoff, je te ferai périr sous le knout!

NADIA. – Grand Dieu!

MARFA. – Quand tu voudras, Ivan Ogareff. J’attends.

NADIA. – Pauvre Marfa!

MARFA. – Je serai courageuse!... je n’ai rien à craindre pour lui!

IVAN. – Qu’on amène les prisonniers. *(À Sangarre.)* Et toi, observe bien si l’un deux se trahit!

Les prisonniers défilent. – Michel Strogoff est parmi eux, mais quand il passe devant elle, Marfa ne bouge pas.

IVAN. – Eh bien! ton fils?

MARFA. – Mon fils n’est pas parmi ces prisonniers!

IVAN. – Tu mens!... désigne-le... parle... je le veux.

MARFA, *résolument*. – Je n’ai rien à vous dire.

SANGARRE, *bas*. – Oh! je la connais, cette femme!... Sous le fouet, même expirante, elle ne parlera pas!...

IVAN. – Elle ne parlera pas, dis-tu!... Eh bien, il parlera, lui!... Saisissez cette femme, qu’elle soit frappée du knout jusqu’à ce qu’elle en meure!

Marfa est saisie par deux soldats et jetée à genoux sur le sol. Un soldat portant le knout se place derrière elle.

IVAN, *au soldat*. – Frappe!

Le knout est levé sur Marfa, Strogoff se précipite, arrache le knout et en frappe Ivan au visage.

STROGOFF. – Coup pour coup, Ogareff!

MARFA. – Qu’as-tu fait, malheureux!

IVAN. – L’homme du relais.

SANGARRE. – Michel Strogoff!

STROGOFF. – Moi-même! Oui, moi, que tu as insulté, outragé! moi dont tu veux assassiner la mère!

TOUS. – À mort! À mort!

IVAN. – Ne tuez pas cet homme! Qu’on prévienne l’émir!

MARFA. – Mon fils!... Ah! pourquoi t’es-tu trahi!

STROGOFF. – J’ai pu me contenir quand ce traître m’a frappé!... Mais le fouet levé sur toi, ma mère!... oh! c’était impossible!

IVAN. – Éloignez donc cette femme!... et qu’on le fouille!

Les soldats exécutent cet ordre.

STROGOFF, *résistant*. – Me fouiller! Lâche! misérable!

IVAN, *lui prend la lettre qu’il portait sur sa poitrine et la lit*. – Oh! il était temps!... Cette lettre perdait tout!... Maintenant le Grand-Duc est à moi!

Scène V

Les mêmes, Féofar, et sa suite.

IVAN. – Émir Féofar, tu as un acte de justice à accomplir.

FÉOFAR. – Contre cet homme?

IVAN. – Contre lui.

FÉOFAR. – Quel est-il?

IVAN. – Un espion russe.

TOUS. – Un espion!...

MARFA. – Non, non... mon fils n’est pas un espion! Cet homme a menti!...

IVAN. – Cette lettre, trouvée sur lui, indiquait le jour où une armée de secours doit arriver en vue d’Irkoutsk... le jour où faisant une sortie, le Grand-Duc nous aurait pris entre deux feux!

TOUS. – À mort! à mort!

NADIA. – Grâce pour lui!

MARFA. – Vous ne le tuerez pas!

TOUS. – À mort! à mort!

IVAN, *à Strogoff*. – Tu les entends?

STROGOFF, *à Ivan*. – Je mourrai, mais ta face de traître, Ivan, n’en portera pas moins, et à jamais, la marque infamante du knout!

IVAN. – Émir, nous attendons que ta justice prononce.

FÉOFAR. – Qu’on apporte le Koran.

TOUS. – Le Koran! Le Koran!

FÉOFAR. – Ce livre saint a des peines pour les traîtres et les espions!... C’est lui-même qui prononcera la sentence!

Des prêtres tartares apportent le livre sacré et le présentent à Féofar.

FÉOFAR, *à l’un des prêtres*. – Ouvre ce livre à l’endroit où il édicte les peines et châtiments. Mon doigt touchera un des versets... et ce verset contiendra sa sentence!

Le Koran est ouvert. Le doigt de Féofar se pose sur une des pages, et un prêtre lit à haute voix le verset touché par l’émir.

LE PRÊTRE, *lisant*. – “Ses yeux s’obscurciront comme les étoiles sous le nuage, et il ne verra plus les choses de la terre!”

TOUS. – Ah!

FÉOFAR *à Strogoff*. – Tu es venu pour voir ce qui se passe au camp tartare! Regarde! Maintenant que notre armée triomphante se réjouisse, que la fête ait lieu qui doit célébrer nos victoires!

TOUS. – Gloire à l’émir!

FÉOFAR, *prenant place sur son trône*. – Et toi, espion, pour la dernière fois de ta vie, regarde de tous tes yeux!... regarde!

Strogoff est conduit au pied de l'estrade. Marfa est à demi couchée sur le sol. Nadia est agenouillée près d'elle.

Neuvième tableau – La fête tartare.

Ballet.

Après la première reprise, la voix d'un prêtre se fait entendre et répète les paroles de l'émir.

LE PRÊTRE. – Regarde de tous tes yeux... Regarde!

Après la deuxième reprise, la voix du prêtre se fait encore entendre.

LE PRÊTRE. – Regarde de tous tes yeux... Regarde!

Le ballet fini, Strogoff est amené au milieu de la scène. Un trépied, portant des charbons ardents, est apporté près de lui, et le sabre de l'exécuteur est posé en travers sur les charbons.

Sur un signe de Féofar, l'exécuteur s'approche de Strogoff. Il prend le sabre qui est chauffé à blanc.

FÉOFAR. – Dieu a condamné cet homme! Il a dit que l’espion soit privé de la lumière!... Que son regard soit brûlé par cette lame ardente!

NADIA. – Michel! Michel!

STROGOFF, *se tournant vers Ivan*. – Ivan! Ivan le traître! la dernière menace de mes yeux sera pour toi!

MARFA *se précipitant vers son fils*. – Mon fils! mon fils!...

STROGOFF. – Ma mère!... ma mère! oui! oui! à toi mon suprême regard!... Reste là, devant moi!... Que je voie encore ta figure bien-aimée!... Que mes yeux se ferment en te regardant!

IVAN, *à Strogoff*. – Ah! tu pleures! Tu pleures comme une femme!

STROGOFF, *se redressant*. – Non! comme un fils!

IVAN. – Bourreau, accomplis ton oeuvre!

Les bras de Strogoff ont été saisis pas des soldats; il est tenu agenouillé de manière à ne pouvoir faire un mouvement. La lance incandescente passe devant ses yeux.

STROGOFF, *poussant un cri terrible*. – Ah!!!

Marfa tombe évanouie. Nadia se précipite sur elle.

IVAN. – À mort maintenant, à mort, l’espion!

TOUS. – À mort! à mort!

(Des soldats se jettent sur Strogoff pour le massacrer.)

FÉOFAR. – Arrêtez!... arrêtez!... Prêtre, achève le verset commencé.

LE PRÊTRE. – “... Et aveugle, il sera comme l’enfant, et comme l’être privé de raison, sacré pour tous!...”

FÉOFAR. – Que nul ne touche désormais à cet homme, car le Koran l’a dit: “Vous tiendrez pour sacrés les enfants, les fous et les aveugles.”

IVAN, *à Sangarre*. – Il n’est plus à craindre maintenant.

Féofar, Ivan et tout le cortège sortent par le fond. Une demi-nuit s’est faite, et il ne reste plus en scène que Strogoff, Marfa et Nadia.

Strogoff se relève et se dirige en tâtonnant vers l’endroit où est tombée sa mère.

STROGOFF. – Ma mère! Ma mère!... Ma mère!... ma pauvre mère!...

NADIA, *venant à lui*. – Frère! Frère! mes yeux seront désormais tes yeux!... je te conduirai...

STROGOFF. – À Irkoutsk! *(Il embrasse une dernière fois sa mère.)* À Irkoutsk!

Acte quatrième

Dixième tableau – La clairière.

La scène représente une berge sur la rive droite de l’Angara. Il fait encore jour.

Scène I

Ivan, Sangarre, un chef tartare, soldats.

IVAN, *au chef.* – C’est ici que nous allons nous séparer de toi et de tes soldats, et tu suivras fidèlement ensuite toutes mes instructions.

LE CHEF. – Compte sur nous, Ivan Ogareff.

SANGARRE. – Où donc irons-nous maintenant?

IVAN. – Écoutez! L’énergie de ce Grand-Duc renverse tous mes calculs, déjoue toutes mes prévisions. Chaque jour il opère de nouvelles sorties, dont la plus prochaine coïncidera peut-être avec l’apparition d’une armée de secours, et nous serons ainsi placés entre deux feux!... Il faut donc que sans tarder j’exécute le projet hardi que j’ai conçu.

SANGARRE. – Et ce projet, quel est-il?

IVAN. – Sangarre, j’entrerai seul aujourd’hui dans Irkoutsk. Les Russes accueilleront avec des transports de joie celui qui se présentera sous le nom de Michel Strogoff, le courrier du czar. Va! Tout est bien combiné et ma vengeance sera prompte à frapper! À l’heure convenue entre l’émir et moi, les Tartares attaqueront la porte de Tchernaïa qu’une main amie, la mienne, saura leur ouvrir.

SANGARRE. – Espères-tu donc que les Russes ne défendront pas cette porte?

IVAN. – Une terrible diversion les en empêchera et attirera tous les bras valides au quartier de l’Angara!

LE CHEF. – Cette diversion, quelle sera-t-elle?

IVAN. – Un incendie!

TOUS. – Un incendie?

IVAN. – Que vous autres, soldats, vous aurez allumé!

LE CHEF. – Nous! que veux-tu dire?

IVAN, *montrant l’Angara*. – Voyez ce fleuve qui coule et traverse la ville. C’est l’Angara et c’est lui... lui-même... qui va dévorer Irkoutsk!

SANGARRE. – Ce fleuve?

IVAN. – Au moment convenu, ce fleuve va rouler un torrent incendiaire. Des sources de naphte sont exploitées à trois verstes d’ici. Nous sommes maîtres des immenses réservoirs de Baïkal, qui contiennent tout un lac de ce liquide inflammable!... Un pan de mur démoli par vous, et un torrent de naphte se répandra à la surface de l’Angara. Alors il suffira d’une étincelle pour l’enflammer et porter l’incendie jusqu’au coeur d’Irkoutsk! Les maisons bâties sur pilotis, le palais du Grand-Duc lui-même seront dévorés, anéantis!... Ah! Russes maudits! Vous m’avez jeté dans le camp des Tartares! Eh bien, c’est en Tartare que je vous fais la guerre!

LE CHEF. – Tes ordres seront exécutés, Ivan, mais quel moment choisirons-nous pour renverser la muraille des réservoirs de Baïkal?

IVAN. – L’heure où le soleil aura disparu de l’horizon.

SANGARRE. – À cette heure la capitale de la Sibérie sera en flammes!

IVAN. – Et ma vengeance s’accomplira! Partons maintenant. *(Au chef.)* Tu te souviendras?

LE CHEF. – Je me souviendrai.

(Ivan et Sangarre sortent.)

Scène II

Le chef, les soldats, le sergent.

LE CHEF. – Prenons ici une demi-heure de repos, avant l’instant où nous devons remplir notre mission.

LE SERGENT. – Les hommes peuvent aller et venir?

L’OFFICIER. – Oui, mais qu’ils ne s’éloignent pas! Nous n’aurons pas trop de tous nos bras pour renverser le mur des réservoirs de naphte!

LE SERGENT. – C’est bien!... Allez vous autres.

Tous disparaissent après avoir déposé çà et là leurs fusils.

Scène III

Marfa, puis les Tartares.

MARFA, *entrant par la droite appuyée sur un bâton*. – Mon pauvre enfant, toi, dont le regard s'est éteint en se fixant pour la dernière fois sur ta mère, où es-tu?... Qu'es-tu devenu? *(Elle s'assied.)* Une jeune fille, m'a-t-on dit... Nadia, sans doute... guide les pas de l'aveugle!... Tous deux se sont dirigés vers Irkoutsk, et, depuis un mois, j'ai suivi la grande route sibérienne... Mon fils bien-aimé, c'est moi qui t'ai perdu! Je n'ai pu me contenir, en te retrouvant... là... devant moi... et tu n'as pas été maître de toi-même en voyant le knout levé sur ta mère! Ah! pourquoi n'as-tu pas laissé déchirer mes épaules! Aucune torture ne m'aurait arraché ton secret!... Allons! il faut marcher encore!... Je ne suis plus ici qu'à quelques verstes d'Irkoutsk! C'est là peut-être que je le retrouverai... Allons! *(Elle se lève et va sortir.)* Les Tartares!

L'OFFICIER, *voyant Marfa*. – Quelle est cette femme?

LE SERGENT. – Quelque mendiante!

MARFA. – Je ne tends pas la main! Je ne réclame pas la pitié d'un Tartare!

L'OFFICIER. – Tu es bien fière!... Que fais-tu ici? où vas-tu?

MARFA. – Je vais où vont ceux qui n'ont plus de patrie, qui n'ont plus de maison et qui fuit les envahisseurs! Je vais devant moi jusqu'à ce que les forces me manquent!... jusqu'à ce que je tombe... et que je meure!

LE SERGENT, *au capitaine*. – C’est une folle, capitaine.

L’OFFICIER. – Qui a de bons yeux et de bonnes oreilles! Je n’aime pas ces rôdeurs qui suivent notre arrière-garde!... Ce sont autant d’espions. *(À Marfa.)* Pars, et que je ne te revois pas, ou je te ferai attacher au pied d’un arbre, et là les loups affamés ne te feront pas grâce!

MARFA. – Loup ou Tartare, c’est tout un!... Mourir d’un coup de dent ou d’un coup de fusil, peu m’importe!

L’OFFICIER. – Oh! la vie a peu de prix à tes yeux!

MARFA. – Oui, depuis que j’ai perdu celui que je cherche vainement, mon fils que les tiens ont cruellement martyrisé!

Marfa a repris son bâton et va s’enfoncer à droite.

LE SERGENT, *à l’officier*. – Capitaine, encore des fugitifs, sans doute.

Il montre Strogoff et Nadia qui apparaissent au fond.

Scène IV

Les mêmes, Nadia, Strogoff.

MARFA, *à part et continuant*. – Lui!... mon fils!... mon fils!...

STROGOFF, *à Nadia*. – Qu’est-ce donc?

NADIA. – Des Tartares?

STROGOFF. – Ils nous ont vus?

NADIA. – Oui!...

MARFA, *à part*. – Oh! cette fois je ne me trahirai pas devant eux. *(Elle se cache au fond.)*

L’OFFICIER. – Faites approcher ces gens.

LE SERGENT. – Allons! approchez... approchez!

L’OFFICIER. – Qui êtes-vous?...

NADIA. – Mon frère est aveugle, et nous avons parcouru, malgré les terribles souffrances qu’il a subies, une route si pénible et si longue qu’il peut à peine se soutenir!

L’OFFICIER. – D’où venez-vous?

STROGOFF. – D’Irkoutsk, où nous n’avons pu pénétrer parce que les Tartares l’investissent.

L’OFFICIER. – Et vous allez?

STROGOFF. – Vers le lac Baïkal, où nous attendrons que la Sibérie soit redevenue tranquille.

L’OFFICIER. – Et elle le sera sous la domination tartare!

LE SERGENT, *observant Nadia*. – Elle est jolie, cette fille, capitaine!

L’OFFICIER, *à Strogoff*. – C’est vrai, tu as là une belle compagne!

Le sergent veut s’approcher de Nadia.

NADIA, *s’éloignant*. – Ah! *(Elle reprend la main de Strogoff.)*

STROGOFF. – C’est ma soeur!

LE SERGENT. – On pourrait un autre guide à l’aveugle, et cette belle fille resterait au bivouac! *(Il s’approche d’elle.)*

NADIA. – Laissez-moi, laissez-moi!

STROGOFF, *à part*. – Misérables!

LE SERGENT. – Elle est farouche, la jeune Sibérienne! Nous nous reverrons plus tard, la belle.

UN SOLDAT, *entrant*. – Capitaine, en montant sur une colline, à cent pas d’ici, on peut voir de grandes fumées qui s’élèvent dans l’air, et, en prêtant l’oreille, on entend au loin, le bruit du canon.

L’OFFICIER. – C’est que les nôtres donnent l’assaut à Irkoutsk!

STROGOFF, *à part*. – L’assaut à Irkoutsk!

L’OFFICIER. – Voyons cela. *(Aux soldats.)* Dans une heure le moment sera venu d’accomplir notre tâche, et, cela fait, nous rejoindrons les assaillants.

Il sort, les soldats l’accompagnent. Le sergent regarde une dernière fois Nadia et sort.

Scène V

Nadia, Strogoff, puis Marfa.

NADIA. – Ils sont partis, frère, nous pouvons continuer notre route.

STROGOFF. – Non!... j’ai dit que nous allions du côté du lac Baïkal!... Il ne faut pas qu’ils nous voient prendre un autre chemin!

NADIA. – Nous attendrons alors qu’ils soient tout à fait éloignés.

STROGOFF. – C’est aujourd’hui le 24 septembre, et aujourd’hui... je devrais être à Irkoutsk.

NADIA. – Espérons encore!... Ces Tartares vont partir... Cette nuit, quand on ne pourra plus nous voir, nous chercherons le moyen de descendre le fleuve... et tu pourras, avant demain, entrer dans la ville!... Essaye de prendre un peu de repos en attendant!

Elle le conduit au pied d’un arbre.

STROGOFF. – Me reposer... et toi, pauvre Nadia, n’es-tu pas plus brisée par la fatigue que je ne le suis moi-même?

NADIA. – Non... non... Je suis forte... tandis que toi, cette blessure que tu as reçue, cette fièvre qui te dévore!...

Strogoff s’asseoit au pied de l’arbre.

STROGOFF. – Ah! qu’importe, Nadia, qu’importe! Que j’arrive à temps auprès du Grand-Duc et je n’aurais plus rien à vous demander, mon Dieu, si ma mère existait encore!

NADIA. – Devant son fils que ces barbares allaient martyriser, elle est tombée... inanimée!... Mais qui te dit que la vie s’était brisée en elle?... Qui te dit qu’elle était morte?... Frère... je crois que tu la reverras... *(Se reprenant et le regardant avec douleur.)* Je crois, frère, que tu la presseras encore dans tes bras... et qu’elle couvrira de baisers et de larmes ces pauvres yeux où la lumière s’est éteinte!

STROGOFF. – Quand j’ai posé mes lèvres sur son front, je l’ai senti glacé!... Quand j’ai interrogé son coeur, il n’a pas battu sous ma main!... *(Marfa, qui a reparu, s’est approchée lentement de son fils.)* Hélas! ma mère est morte!

NADIA, *apercevant Marfa*. – Ah!

STROGOFF. – Qu’est-ce donc? qu’as-tu, Nadia?

NADIA. – Rien. Rien!

Marfa, qui s’est agenouillée, fait signe à Nadia, prête à se trahir, de garder le silence; puis, prenant une des mains de son fils, elle la porte en pleurant à ses lèvres. Strogoff, qui a étendu l’autre bras, s’est assuré que Nadia est bien à sa droite.

STROGOFF. – Oh!... Nadia!... Nadia!... ces baisers, ces larmes!... les sanglots que j’entends!... Ah!... c’est elle!... c’est elle, c’est ma mère!

MARFA. – Mon fils! mon fils! *(Ils tombent dans les bras l’un de l’autre.)*

NADIA. – Marfa...

MARFA. – Oui, oui, c’est moi, mon enfant bien-aimé, c’est moi, mon noble et courageux martyr!... Laisse-moi les baiser mille fois ces yeux, ces pauvres yeux éteints!... Et c’est pour moi, c’est parce qu’il a voulu défendre sa mère qu’ils l’ont ainsi torturé!... Ah! pourquoi ne suis-je pas morte avant ce jour fatal?... Pourquoi ne suis-je pas morte, mon Dieu?

STROGOFF. – Mourir!... toi, non... non!... Ne pleure pas, ma mère, et souviens-toi des paroles que je dis ici: Dieu réserve à ceux qui souffrent d’ineffables consolations!

MARFA. – De quelles consolations me parles-tu, à moi, dont les yeux ne doivent plus, sans pleurer, se fixer sur les tiens?

STROGOFF. – Le bonheur peut renaître en ton âme.

MARFA. – Le bonheur?

STROGOFF. – Dieu fait des miracles, ma mère...

MARFA. – Des miracles! Que signifie?... Réponds, réponds, au nom du ciel!

STROGOFF. – Eh bien! apprends donc!... je, je... Ah! la joie! l’émotion de te retrouver... ma mère... ma...

MARFA. – Mon Dieu! la parole expire sur ses lèvres... Il pâlit... il perd connaissance!...

NADIA. – C’est l’émotion après tant de fatigues!

MARFA. – Il faudrait pour le ranimer!... Ah! cette gourde! *(Elle prend la gourde que Strogoff porte à son côté.)* Rien! elle est vide... Là-bas, de l'eau!... Va... va... Nadia! *(Nadia prend la gourde et s'élance au fond sur le chemin qui monte vers la droite.)* Michel, mon enfant, entends-moi, parle-moi, Michel!... Dis encore que tu me pardonnes tout ce que, par moi, tu as souffert!...

STROGOFF, *d'une voix éteinte*. – Mère!... mère!...

MARFA. – Ah!... il revient à lui!... *(Regardant au fond.)* Nadia! Nadia! *(À ce moment Nadia qui a rempli la gourde se relève, mais aussitôt le sergent tartare reparaît et se précipite vers elle.)*

LE SERGENT. – À moi, la belle fille!...

NADIA. – Laissez-moi.

LE SERGENT. – Non!... tu viendras de gré ou de force!... *(Il veut l'entraîner.)*

NADIA. – Laissez-moi!... Laissez-moi!

MARFA, *apercevant Nadia*. – Le misérable... Nadia!... *(Elle court à Nadia.)*

LE SERGENT. – Arrière!... *(Il repousse Marfa, saisit Nadia dans ses bras et va l'enlever.)*

NADIA, *poussant un cri*. – À moi, pitié!... à moi!

STROGOFF. – Nadia!... *(Il se redresse, se lève; puis, par un mouvement irrésistible, il se jette sur un des fusils déposés près de l'arbre, il l'arme, il* *ajuste le sergent et fait feu. Le sergent tombe mort.)*

MARFA et NADIA. – Oh! *(Toutes deux, après être restées stupéfaites un instant, redescendent en courant auprès de Strogoff.)*

STROGOFF. – Que Dieu et le czar me pardonnent!... Cette contrainte nouvelle était au-dessus de mes forces!

MARFA. – Ah! Michel, mon fils, tes yeux voient la lumière du ciel!

NADIA. – Frère! Frère!... C’est donc vrai?

STROGOFF. – Oui, oui, je te vois, ma mère!... Oui, je te vois, Nadia!...

MARFA. – Mon enfant, mon enfant!... Quelle joie, quel bonheur, quelle ivresse!... Ah!... Je comprends tes paroles maintenant: Dieu garde aux affligés d’ineffables consolations...

NADIA. – Mais comment se fait-il?

MARFA. – Et d’où vient ce miracle?...

STROGOFF. – Quand je croyais te regarder pour la dernière fois, ma mère, mes yeux se sont inondés de tant de pleurs, que le fer rougi n’a pu que les sécher sans brûler mon regard!... Et comme il me fallait, pour sauver notre Sibérie, traverser les lignes tartares: “Je suis aveugle, disais-je. Le Koran me protège... Je suis aveugle...” et je passais!

NADIA. – Mais pourquoi ne m’avoir pas dit... à moi?...

STROGOFF. – Parce qu’un instant d’imprudence ou d’oubli aurait pu te perdre avec moi, Nadia!...

MARFA. – Silence!... Ils reviennent.

Scène VI

Les mêmes, le capitaine, soldats.

Le capitaine, suivi des soldats, arrive par le fond. On relève le cadavre du sergent.

LE CAPITAINE. – Qui a tué cet homme?

UN SOLDAT, *montrant Strogoff*. – Il n’y a ici que ce mendiant.

L’OFFICIER. – Qu’on s’empare de lui. Nous l’emmènerons au camp.

STROGOFF, *à part*. – M’emmener!... Et ma mission! tout est perdu!...

NADIA. – Ne savez-vous pas que mon frère est aveugle?...

MARFA. – Et qu’il n’a pu se servir de cette arme!

L’OFFICIER. – Aveugle?... Nous allons bien savoir s’il l’est réellement!

MARFA, *bas*. – Que va-t-il faire?

L’OFFICIER. – Tes yeux sont éteints, as-tu dit.

STROGOFF. – Oui.

L’OFFICIER. – Eh bien! je veux te voir marcher sans guide, sans appui!... Éloignez ces deux femmes, et toi, marche! *(Il tire son épée.)*

STROGOFF. – De quel côté?

L’OFFICIER, *tendant son épée en face de la poitrine de Strogoff*. – Droit devant toi.

NADIA. – Mon Dieu!

MARFA, *pousse un cri en fermant la bouche*. – Ah!...

STROGOFF, *marchant sur l’épée, et s’arrêtant au moment où la pointe lui entre dans la poitrine*. – Ah!... vous m’avez blessé!

MARFA, *s’élançant vers lui*. – Michel, mon pauvre enfant!...

NADIA. – Frère!

MARFA, *à l’officier*. – Vous êtes un assassin!

L’OFFICIER. – Alors, c’est une de ces femmes qui a tué ce soldat!

MARFA. – C’est moi!

STROGOFF, *à Marfa*. – Non, ma mère! Je ne veux pas... je ne veux pas...

MARFA, *à part, à Strogoff*. – Pour sauver notre Sibérie, il faut que tu sois libre!... Je te défends de parler!

L’OFFICIER. – Saisissez cette femme!... Attachez-la au pied de cet arbre, et qu’on la fusille!

STROGOFF. – Fusillée!... toi!...

NADIA. – Grâce!... pour elle!...

MARFA. – Dieu a compté mes jours!... Ils lui appartiennent!

Des soldats attachent Marfa à l'arbre; d'autres entraînent Strogoff et Nadia.

STROGOFF. – Ma mère! Ma mère!...

Onzième tableau – Le radeau.

Scène VII

Les mêmes, Jollivet, Blount, un batelier, plusieurs fugitifs.

Au moment où les Tartares vont fusiller Marfa, un radeau venant de la gauche apparaît sur l'Angara.

JOLLIVET. – Une femme que des Tartares veulent assassiner!... Arrière, misérables!

STROGOFF. – À moi!... mes amis!

L'OFFICIER, *aux tartares*. – Feu! vous autres!

BLOUNT. – Jollivet, tirez sur les soldats!... Je me charge, moi, du capitaine! *(Il tire.)*

L'OFFICIER, *blessé*. – Ah!

BLOUNT. – Je avais bien visé, n'est-ce pas?

JOLLIVET. – Très bien visé, ami Blount!

Les Tartares entourent leur chef, pendant que Strogoff et Nadia détachent Marfa.

L'OFFICIER. – Emmenez-moi aux réservoirs!... C'est l'ordre d'Ogareff!

Les Tartares l'emmènent.

BLOUNT, JOLLIVET. – Vive la France! vive l’Angleterre! hurrah! hip! hip!

JOLLIVET. – Tiens, Michel Strogoff!

STROGOFF. – Merci, monsieur Jollivet! Merci, monsieur Blount!

BLOUNT. – C’était nous, infortuné aveugle!

STROGOFF. – Ne perdons pas une minute!... Ce radeau vous conduisait...

JOLLIVET. – À Irkoutsk.

STROGOFF. – À Irkoutsk!... C’est le ciel qui vous envoie.

BLOUNT. – Oui, toujours très maligne, le ciel!

MARFA. – Vous nous emmenez avec vous!

JOLLIVET. – Certes!... En descendant le cours de l’Angara, nous pénétrerons dans Irkoutsk à la faveur de la nuit!

STROGOFF. – Embarquons!

JOLLIVET. – Il n’est donc pas aveugle!

MARFA. – Sa tendresse filiale a sauvé mon enfant! Ses yeux, en m’adressant un dernier adieu, étaient inondés de tant de larmes!...

BLOUNT. – Ah! bonne! très bien! je comprends, et je voulais instruire de cette chose notre Académie de médecine!

JOLLIVET. – Oui, oui, écrivez, Blount: Fer rouge excellent pour sécher les larmes...

BLOUNT. – Mais insioufﬁsant pour brûler la vue!

TOUS. – Embarquons.

Ils s'embarquent.

Douzième tableau – Les rives de l'Angara.

Le panorama du fond se déplace peu à peu, pendant que le radeau est immobile, et montre divers sites des rives du fleuve.

Treizième tableau – Le fleuve de naphte.

La nuit est venue. Le courant de naphte s'enflamme à la surface du fleuve, et le radeau, vigoureusement repoussé passe à travers.

Quatorzième tableau – La ville en feu.

Irkoutsk est en feu. La population se précipite de tous côtés. Strogoff apparaît et s'élance à travers une porte embrasée.

Acte cinquième

Quinzième tableau – Le palais du Grand-Duc.

Une chambre basse de la casemate de la porte Tchernaïa, à Irkoutsk. Porte au fond, portes latérales. Large fenêtre à droite, éclairée par le reflet de l’incendie. Tocsin sonnant à toute volée.

Scène I

Le Grand-Duc, le général Voronzoff, officiers.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Il a fallu la main d’un barbare pour répandre sur la surface du fleuve tout un courant de naphte.

VORONZOFF. – Les soldats de l’émir ont, sans doute, renversé la muraille de l’immense réservoir du Baïkal.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Et une étincelle a suffi pour embraser ce naphte et incendier les maisons dont les pilotis baignent dans le fleuve! Les misérables! employer de pareils moyens de destruction!

VORONZOFF. – C’est une guerre de sauvages qu’ils veulent nous faire! Altesse, ils ont juré l’extermination de la ville!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Ils ne sont pas encore les maîtres d’Irkoutsk. Général, le feu a-t-il fait de nombreuses victimes?

VORONZOFF. – Presque tous les habitants sont parvenus à se sauver.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Que l’on secoure ses pauvres gens... qu’ils soient logés dans mon palais, dans les établissements publics, chez tous ceux que l’incendie a épargnés!...

VORONZOFF. – Tous leur viennent en aide, Altesse, et rien ne leur manquera! Le dévouement de notre population égale son patriotisme!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Bien! Bien! Cet incendie doit être un moyen de diversion! Dès que le feu sera localisé, que tous les défenseurs retournent aux remparts!

VORONZOFF. – À ce sujet, Altesse, j’ai à vous faire connaître une supplique pour laquelle a été invoqué mon intermédiaire.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Par qui m’est-elle adressée?

VORONZOFF. – Par tous les exilés politiques qui au début de l’invasion ont reçu l’ordre de rentrer dans la ville. Votre Altesse sait qu’ils se sont bravement battus déjà et qu’elle peut compter sur leur patriotisme.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Je le sais!... Que demandent-ils?

VORONZOFF. – Ils demandent que Votre Altesse daigne leur faire l’honneur de recevoir une députation d’entre eux.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Quel est le chef de cette députation?

VORONZOFF. – Un exilé qui s’est particulièrement distingué depuis l’investissement de la ville.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Son nom!

VORONZOFF. – Wasili Fédor! Homme de valeur et de courage, son influence sur ses compagnons a toujours été très grande!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Faites entrer cette députation.

On introduit Wasili Fédor et ses compagnons.

Scène II

Les mêmes, Fédor, exilés

LE GRAND-DUC. – Wasili Fédor, tes compagnons et toi, vous vous êtes bravement battus depuis le commencement du siège! Votre patriotisme n’a jamais failli! La Russie ne l’oubliera pas!

FÉDOR. – Nous venons demander à Votre Altesse qu’elle nous permette de faire plus encore pour le salut de la patrie.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Que voulez-vous?

FÉDOR. – L’autorisation de former un corps spécial et le droit de marcher au premier rang.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Soit! Mais à un corps d’élite il faut un chef digne de le commander. Quel sera ce chef?

TOUS. – Wasili Fédor!

FÉDOR. – Moi?

TOUS. – Oui! oui!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Tu les entends! C’est toi qu’ils ont choisi! Acceptes-tu?

FÉDOR. – Oui... si le bien du pays l’exige! L’amour de la patrie est toujours vivace au coeur d’un exilé, et nous vous demandons à marcher en avant à la première sortie!

TOUS. – Oui! oui! en avant!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Wasili Fédor, tes compagnons sont courageux et forts! Je doublerai leur courage et leur force! Je leur donnerai à tous l’arme la plus puissante: la liberté!

TOUS. – La liberté!

LE GRAND-DUC. – À dater de ce moment il n’y a plus de proscrits en Sibérie!

TOUS. – Hurrah pour le Grand-Duc! Hurrah! pour la Russie.

FÉDOR. – Altesse, je ne serai pas seule de ma famille à bénir votre nom. J’ai ma fille Nadia, qui en ce moment traverse mille périls pour arriver jusqu’à moi!...

LE GRAND-DUC. – Et au lieu d’un proscrit, ta fille trouvera un homme libre!

UN AIDE DE CAMP, *entrant précipitamment*. – Altesse, un courrier du czar!

TOUS. – Un courrier!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Un courrier qui a pu arriver jusqu’à nous! Enfin!... Qu’il entre! Qu’il entre!...

Scène III

Les mêmes, Ivan.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Qui es-tu? Parle! parle vite.

IVAN. – Michel Strogoff, courrier du czar.

LE GRAND-DUC. – D’où viens-tu?

IVAN. – De Moscou.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Tu as quitté Moscou?

IVAN. – Le 22 août.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Et qui me prouve que tu es bien un courrier du czar, et que tu m’es envoyé de Russie?

IVAN, *tirant un papier*. – Ce permis signé du gouverneur de Moscou, et qui assurait mon passage à travers la Sibérie.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Mais ce permis porte le nom de Nicolas Korpanoff?

IVAN. – Je voyageais sous ce nom en qualité de marchand sibérien.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Tu as une lettre pour moi?

IVAN. – J’en avais une écrite de la main du gouverneur de Moscou, mais j’ai dû la détruire pour la soustraire aux Tartares qui m’avaient fait prisonnier.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Approche!... Que contenait cette lettre?

IVAN. – Ceci: Une armée de secours venue des provinces du Nord arrivera le 28 sptembre.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Le 28 septembre!

IVAN. – Que Son Altesse fasse ce jour-là, – mais ce jour-là seulement, – une vigoureuse sortie, et les Tartares seront écrasés!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Ainsi celle que nous devions tenter aujourd'hui, demain... et chaque jour, ne pourrait que nous être funeste?... C'est dans quatre jours seulement!... Eh bien, quoi qu'il arrive, nous tiendrons jusque-là!

IVAN, *à part*. – Et demain les Tartares seront maîtres d'Irkoutsk!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Est-ce tout ce que contenait cette lettre du gouverneur de Moscou?

IVAN. – Non!... Il était aussi question d'un homme dont Votre Altesse doit se défier... un officier russe.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Un Russe! un officier! Quel est le nom de ce traître?

IVAN. – Ivan Ogareff, maintenant le lieutenant de Féodar et organisateur de cette invasion.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Ivan Ogareff, jadis condamné par moi à la dégradation!

IVAN. – Il a juré de se venger de Votre Altesse et de livrer la ville aux Tartares!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Qu’il vienne donc, je l’attends! Ah! qu’il méritait bien, ce misérable, le châtiment qui l’a frappé, lui qui devait provoquer plus tard l’envahissement de son pays!

IVAN, *froidement*. – Il le méritait!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Mais, dis-moi, comment as-tu fait pour pénétrer dans Irkoutsk?

IVAN. – Pendant le dernier engagement qui vient d’avoir lieu, je me suis mêlé aux défenseurs de la ville, je me suis nommé, et l’on m’a conduit aussitôt devant Votre Altesse.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Tu as montré un grand courage, Michel Strogoff. Que demandes-tu pour prix de tes services?

IVAN. – Le droit de combattre pour la défense d’Irkoutsk.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Tu commanderas une des portes de la ville.

IVAN. – La porte Tchernaïa, Altesse, celle que les Tartares menacent le plus?

LE GRAND-DUC. – Soit! La porte Tchernaïa!

VORONZOFF, *qui s’est approché de la fenêtre*. – Altesse!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Qu’y a-t-il?

VORONZOFF. – Il semble que l’ennemi cherche à se rapprocher de nos murailles.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Il nous trouvera prêts à le recevoir! Venez, messieurs!

Tous sortent excepté Ivan.

Scène IV

IVAN, *seul*. – Oui, oui, nobles défenseurs de la patrie! Allez, invincibles héros! L'heure de la défaite et de la mort sonnera bientôt pour vous! Et toi, brûle, cité maudite, que tes palais soient anéantis par le feu! Que de tes maisons il ne reste plus que des cendres! Ce n'est pas une ville qu'il faut aux Tartares, c'est un monceau de ruines! Brûle donc, Irkoutsk, et périsse avec toi tout ce qui porte le nom détesté de Russe et de Sibérien!

Scène V

Ivan, Strogoff, un officier.

L’OFFICIER, *à Strogoff*. – Attendez ici!... Je vais aller prévenir Son Altesse le Grand-Duc de votre arrivée.

STROGOFF. – J’attends... Mais hâtez-vous.

IVAN, *à part au fond*. – Michel Strogoff. *(L’officier sort.)* Comment aveugle a-t-il pu arriver jusqu’ici?

STROGOFF. – Il n’y a pas un instant à perdre!...

IVAN. – Oh! non, pas un instant. *(Appuyant sa main sur l’épaule de Strogoff.)* Michel Strogoff, reconnais-tu ma voix?

STROGOFF. – Oui, c’est la voix d’un traître!... C’est la voix d’Ivan Ogareff.

IVAN. – Ogareff, auquel tu n’échapperas pas, cette fois!... Ogareff, que n’arrêtera pas ce vain commandement du Koran qui protège les aveugles!... Ah! tu te réjouis, n’est-ce pas? d’avoir pu arriver à temps pour accomplir ta mission et sauver à la fois Irkoutsk et le Grand-Duc?

STROGOFF. – Peut-être!

IVAN. – Tu espère encore!... mais sache donc que nous sommes seuls ici! Avant que nul ne vienne, mon poignard, fouillant dans ta poitrine, t’en arrachera le coeur.

STROGOFF, *froidement*. – Essaye.

IVAN. – Tu oses me braver... quand je te tiens seul et sans défense!... quand je n'ai qu'à choisir la place pour te frapper! Ah! comme je vais bien te tuer!

STROGOFF. – J'attends! *(Ivan s'approche de Strogoff, mais le coup est détourné, et Strogoff lui arrache son poignard.)*

STROGOFF. – Eh bien, j'attends toujours.

IVAN. – Est-ce un rêve!... Un miracle n'a pu se faire pour ce misérable!...

STROGOFF, *s'avançant vers lui et lui prenant le bras*. – Alors, pourquoi trembles-tu?

IVAN, *voulant se dégager*. – Non!... C'est impossible!...

STROGOFF. – Ivan Ogareff, ton heure suprême est arrivée!... Regarde de tous tes yeux, regarde!...

IVAN. – Miséricorde! Il voit! il voit! il voit!

STROGOFF. – Oui, je vois sur ton visage de traître la pâleur et l'épouvante! Je vois la trace du knout, le stigmate de honte dont j'ai marqué ton front! Je vois la place où je vais te frapper, misérable! Ah! comme je vais bien te tuer!

IVAN, *se redressant*. – Soit! Mais tu me frapperas debout! Je mourrai du moins en soldat!

STROGOFF. – En soldat, toi?... Non. Tu vas mourir comme doit mourir un traître, à genoux! Allons, à genoux! pour expier l’outrage que tu m’as infligé, à genoux! pour avoir fait honteusement knouter ma mère, à genoux! pour avoir trahi ta patrie... À genoux! misérable, à genoux!

Ivan cherche à s’emparer du poignard pour en frapper Strogoff, et parvient à le lui prendre. Mais Strogoff lui saisit la main et la dirige de telle sorte qu’Ivan se frappe lui-même et tombe.

Scène VI

Les mêmes, le Grand-Duc, officiers, Voronzoff, Jollivet, Blount, Marfa, Nadia, Fédor.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Emparez-vous de cet homme. *(À Strogoff.)* Qui es-tu, toi qui as assassiné un courrier du czar?

STROGOFF. – Michel Strogoff, Altesse, et voici Ivan Ogareff.

MARFA, *entrant*. – Oui! Michel Strogoff, mon enfant! Altesse, vous avez devant vous le dévouement et la trahison!

JOLLIVET, *montrant Strogoff*. – Et le dévouement, le voici!

BLOUNT, *montrant Ivan*. – Et le trahison, le voilà!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Quels sont ces hommes?

STROGOFF. – Mes braves compagnons de périls!

JOLLIVET, *désignant Blount*. – J'ai l'honneur de présenter à Votre Altesse monsieur Blount, un courageux Anglais!

BLOUNT, *même jeu*. – Mister Jollivet, une Française aussi coura... bien plus courageuse!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Et vous affirmez?...

BLOUNT. – Que celui-là était Ivan Ogareff!

JOLLIVET. – Et celui-ci est Michel Strogoff!

FÉDOR. – Le sauveur de ma fille, Altesse!

(Coups de canons rapprochés.)

STROGOFF. – Écoutez! C’est le canon qui tonne!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Oui!... Les colonnes ennemies attaquent la ville! Il faut défendre les remparts!

STROGOFF. – Non!... Écoutez encore!... Au canon qui gronde sous nos murs répond le canon plus lointain!... C’est aujourd’hui le 24 septembre!... Voilà l’armée de secours qui arrive!...

TOUS. – L’armée de secours!

STROGOFF. – Que Votre Altesse ordonne une sortie générale, et l’armée tartare sera anéantie!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Allons, mes amis, au combat!

TOUS. – Au combat!

(Tous sortent.)

Seizième tableau – L’assaut d’Irkoutsk.

La scène représente une plaine sous les murs d’Irkoutsk. Les Tartares ont été écrasés, et toute l’armée russe est en scène.

Scène I

Le Grand-Duc, Strogoff, Nadia, Marfa, Jollivet, Blount, Voronzoff, Fédor, troupes, etc, etc.

LE GRAND-DUC. – Soldats, grâce au courage et au dévouement de Michel Strogoff, nos troupes ont pu opérer leur jonction avec l’armée de secours! Les Tartares sont en déroute, l’émir Féofar est prisonnier, et Irkoutsk est délivré!

TOUS. – Hurrah! hurrah!

LE GRAND-DUC. – Michel Strogoff, quelle récompense demandes-tu?

STROGOFF. – Je ne veux rien!... Altesse, je n’ai fait que mon devoir de soldat... pour Dieu, pour le Czar, pour la Patrie.

Les fanfares éclatent et les drapeaux russes se balancent dans les airs au milieu des hurrahs.

FIN

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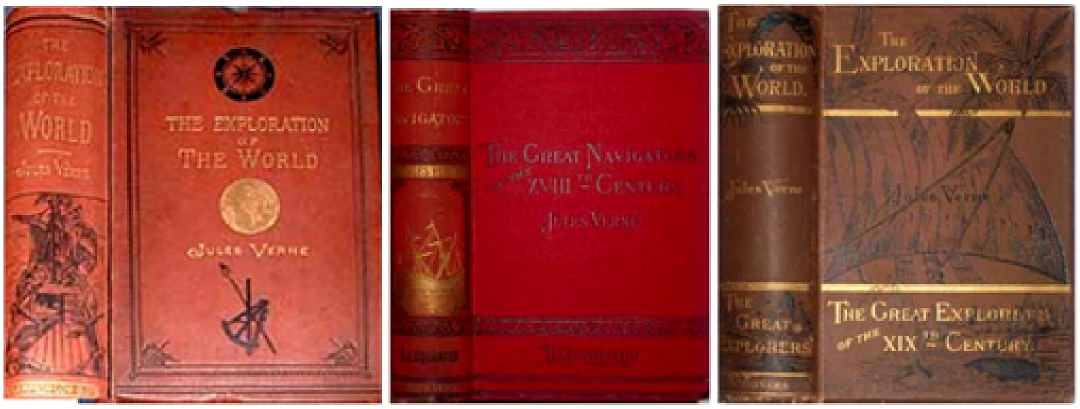
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I. THE EXPLORATION OF THE WORLD

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PREFACE.

This narrative will comprehend not only all the explorations made in past ages, but also all the new discoveries which have of late years so greatly interested the scientific world. In order to give to this work — enlarged perforce by the recent labours of modern travellers, — all the accuracy possible, I have called in the aid of a man whom I with justice regard as one of the most competent geographers of the present day: M. Gabriel Marcel, attached to the Bibliothèque Nationale.

With the advantage of his acquaintance with several foreign languages which are unknown to me, we have been able to go to the fountain-head, and to derive all information from absolutely original documents. Our readers will, therefore, render to M. Marcel the credit due to him for his share in a work which will demonstrate what manner of men the great travellers have been, from the time of Hanno and Herodotus down to that of Livingstone and Stanley.

JULES VERNE.

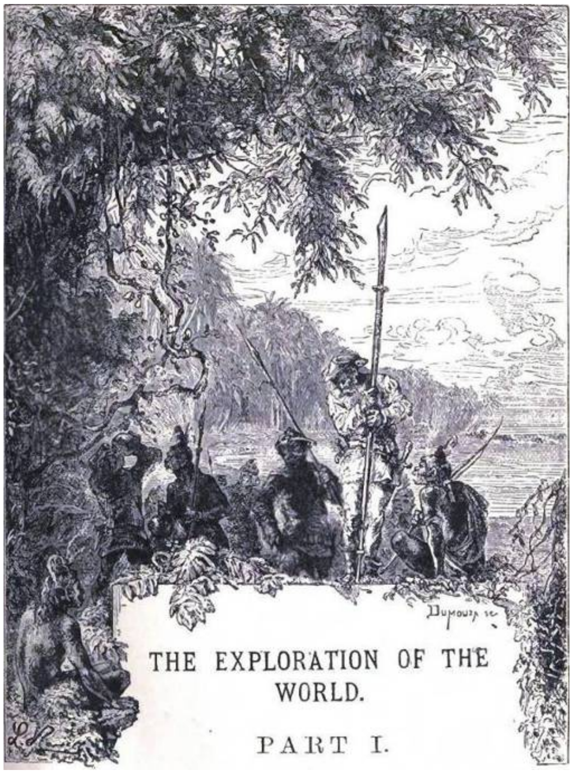

THE EXPLORATION OF THE WORLD.

PART I.

PART I

CHAPTER I.

CELEBRATED TRAVELLERS BEFORE THE CHRISTIAN ERA.

HANNO, 505; HERODOTUS, 484; PYTHEAS, 340; NEARCHUS, 326; EUDOXUS, 146; CÆSAR, 100; STRABO, 50.

Hanno, the Carthaginian — Herodotus visits Egypt, Lybia, Ethiopia, Phoenicia, Arabia, Babylon, Persia, India, Media, Colchis, the Caspian Sea, Scythia, Thrace, and Greece — Pytheas explores the coasts of Iberia and Gaul, the English Channel, the Isle of Albion, the Orkney Islands, and the land of Thule — Nearchus visits the Asiatic coast, from the Indus to the Persian Gulf — Eudoxus reconnoitres the West Coast of Africa — Cæsar conquers Gaul and Great Britain — Strabo travels over the interior of Asia, and Egypt, Greece, and Italy.

The first traveller of whom we have any account in history, is Hanno, who was sent by the Carthaginian senate to colonize some parts of the Western coast of Africa. The account of this expedition was written in the Carthaginian language and afterwards translated into Greek. It is known to us now by the name of the “Periplus of Hanno.” At what period this explorer lived, historians are not agreed, but the most probable account assigns the date B.C. 505 to his exploration of the African coast.

Hanno left Carthage with a fleet of sixty vessels of fifty oars each, carrying 30,000 persons, and provisions for a long voyage. These emigrants, for so we may call them, were destined to people the new towns that the

Carthaginians hoped to found on the west coast of Libya, or as we now call it, Africa.

The fleet successfully passed the Pillars of Hercules, the rocks of Gibraltar and Ceuta which command the Strait, and ventured on the Atlantic, taking a southerly course. Two days after passing the Straits, Hanno anchored on the coast, and laid the foundation of the town of Thumiaterion.

Then he put to sea again, and doubling the cape of Soloïs, made fresh discoveries, and advanced to the mouth of a large African river, where he found a tribe of wandering shepherds camping on the banks. He only waited to conclude a treaty of alliance with them, before continuing his voyage southward. He next reached the Island of Cerne, situated in a bay, and measuring five stadia in circumference, or as we should say at the present day, nearly 925 yards. According to Hanno's own account, this island should be placed, with regard to the Pillars of Hercules, at an equal distance to that which separates these Pillars from Carthage.

They set sail again, and Hanno reached the mouth of the river Chretes, which forms a sort of natural harbour, but as they endeavoured to explore this river, they were assailed with showers of stones from the native negro race, inhabiting the surrounding country, and driven back, and after this inhospitable reception they returned to Cerne. We must not omit to add that Hanno mentions finding large numbers of crocodiles and hippopotami in this river. Twelve days after this unsuccessful expedition, the fleet reached a mountainous region, where fragrant trees and shrubs abounded, and it then entered a vast gulf which terminated in a plain. This region appeared quite calm during the day, but after nightfall it was illumined by tongues of flame, which might have proceeded from fires lighted by the natives, or from the natural ignition of the dry grass when the rainy season was over.

In five days, Hanno doubled the Cape, known as the Hespera Keras, there, according to his own account, “he heard the sound of fifes, cymbals, and tambourines, and the clamour of a multitude of people.” The soothsayers, who accompanied the party of Carthaginian explorers, counselled flight from this land of terrors, and, in obedience to their advice, they set sail again, still taking a southerly course. They arrived at a cape, which, stretching southwards, formed a gulf, called Notu Keras, and, according to M. D’Avezac, this gulf must have been the mouth of the river Ouro, which falls into the Atlantic almost within the Tropic of Cancer. At the lower end of this gulf, they found an island inhabited by a vast number of gorillas, which the Carthaginians mistook for hairy savages. They contrived to get possession of three female gorillas, but were obliged to kill them on account of their great ferocity.

This Notu Keras must have been the extreme limit reached by the Carthaginian explorers, and though some historians incline to the belief that they only went to Bojador, which is two degrees North of the tropics, it is more probable that the former account is the true one, and that Hanno, finding himself short of provisions, returned northwards to Carthage, where he had the account of his voyage engraved in the temple of Baal Moloch.

After Hanno, the most illustrious of ancient travellers, was Herodotus, who has been called the “Father of History,” and who was the nephew of the poet Panyasis, whose poems ranked with those of Homer and Hesiod. It will serve our purpose better if we only speak of Herodotus as a traveller, not an historian, as we wish to follow him so far as possible through the countries that he traversed.

Herodotus was born at Halicarnassus, a town in Asia Minor, in the year B.C. 484. His family were rich, and having large commercial transactions they were able to encourage the taste for explorations which he showed. At this time there were many different opinions as to the shape of the earth: the Pythagorean school having even then begun to teach that it must be round, but Herodotus took no part in this discussion, which was of the deepest interest to learned men of that time, and, still young, he left home with a view of exploring with great care all the then known world, and especially those parts of it of which there were but few and uncertain data.

He left Halicarnassus in 464, being then twenty years of age, and probably directed his steps first to Egypt, visiting Memphis, Heliopolis, and Thebes. He seems to have specially turned his attention to the overflow of the banks of the Nile, and he gives an account of the different opinions held as to the source of this river, which the Egyptians worshipped as one of their deities. “When the Nile overflows its banks,” he says, “you can see nothing but the towns rising out of the water, and they appear like the islands in the Ægean Sea.” He tells of the religious ceremonies among the Egyptians, their sacrifices, their ardour in celebrating the feasts in honour of their goddess Isis, which took place principally at Busiris (whose ruins may still be seen near Bushir), and of the veneration paid to both wild and tame animals, which were looked upon almost as sacred, and to whom they even rendered funeral honours at their death. He depicts in the most faithful colours, the Nile crocodile, its form, habits, and the way in which it is caught, and the hippopotamus, the momot, the phoenix, the ibis, and the serpents that were consecrated to the god Jupiter. Nothing can be more life-like than his accounts of Egyptian customs, and the notices of their habits, their games, and their way of embalming the dead, in which the chemists of that period seem to have excelled. Then we have the history of the country from Menes, its first king, downwards to Herodotus’ time, and he describes the building of the Pyramids under Cheops, the Labyrinth that was built a little above the Lake Moeris (of which the remains were discovered in A.D.

1799), Lake Moeris itself, whose origin he ascribes to the hand of man, and the two Pyramids which are situated a little above the lake. He seems to have admired many of the Egyptian temples, and especially that of Minerva at Sais, and of Vulcan and Isis at Memphis, and the colossal monolith that was three years in course of transportation from Elephantina to Sais, though 2000 men were employed on the gigantic work.

After having carefully inspected everything of interest in Egypt, Herodotus went into Lybia, little thinking that the continent he was exploring, extended thence to the tropic of Cancer. He made special inquiries in Lybia as to the number of its inhabitants, who were a simple nomadic race principally living near the sea-coast, and he speaks of the Ammonians, who possessed the celebrated temple of Jupiter Ammon, the remains of which have been discovered on the north-east side of the Lybian desert, about 300 miles from Cairo. Herodotus furnishes us with some very valuable information on Lybian customs; he describes their habits; speaks of the animals that infest the country, serpents of a prodigious size, lions, elephants, bears, asps, horned asses (probably the rhinoceros of the present day), and cynocephali, “animals with no heads, and whose eyes are placed on their chest,” to use his own expression; foxes, hyenas, porcupines, wild zarus, panthers, etc. He winds up his description by saying that the only two aboriginal nations that inhabit this region are the Lybians and Ethiopians.

According to Herodotus the Ethiopians were at that time to be found above Elephantina, but commentators are induced to doubt if this learned explorer ever really visited Ethiopia, and if he did not, he may easily have learnt from the Egyptians the details that he gives of its capital, Meroe, of the worship of Jupiter and Bacchus, and the longevity of the natives. There can be no doubt, however, that he set sail for Tyre in Phoenicia, and that he was much struck with the beauty of the two magnificent temples of Hercules.

He next visited Tarsus and took advantage of the information gathered on the spot, to write a short history of Phoenicia, Syria, and Palestine.

We next find that he went southward to Arabia, and he calls it the Ethiopia of Asia, for he thought the southern parts of Arabia were the limits of human habitation. He tells us of the remarkable way in which the Arabs kept any vow that they might have made; that their two deities were Uranius and Bacchus, and of the abundant growth of myrrh, cinnamon and other spices, and he gives a very interesting account of their culture and preparation.

We cannot be quite sure which country he next visited, as he calls it both Assyria and Babylonia, but he gives a most minute account of the splendid city of Babylon (which was the home of the monarchs of that country, after the destruction of Nineveh), and whose ruins are now only in scattered heaps on either side of the Euphrates, which flowed a broad, deep, rapid river, dividing the city into two parts. On one side of the river the fortified palace of the king stood, and on the other the temple of Jupiter Belus, which may have been built on the site of the Tower of Babel. Herodotus next speaks of the two queens, Semiramis and Nitocris, telling us of all the means taken by the latter to increase the prosperity and safety of her capital, and passing on to speak of the natural products of the country, the wheat, barley, millet, sesame, the vine, fig-tree and palm-tree. He winds up with a description of the costume of the Babylonians, and their customs, especially that of celebrating their marriages by the public crier.

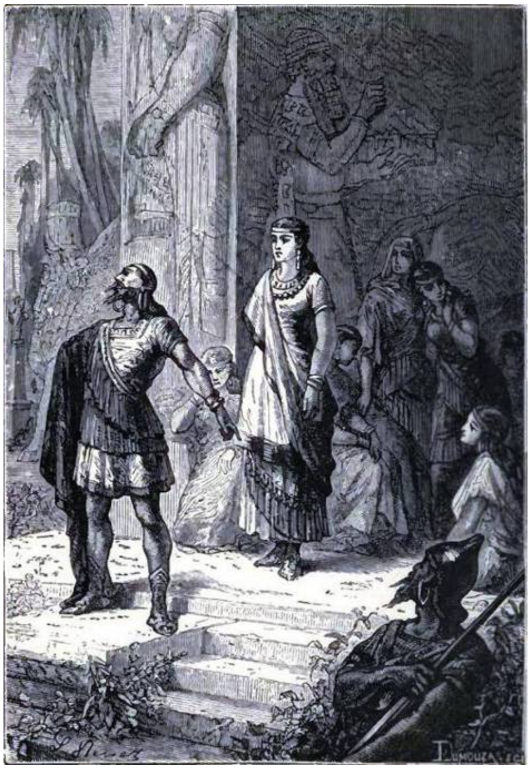

The Marriage Ceremony.

After exploring Babylonia he went to Persia, and as the express purpose of his travels was to collect all the information he could relating to the lengthy wars that had taken place between the Persians and Grecians, he was most anxious to visit the spots where the battles had been fought. He sets out by remarking upon the custom prevalent in Persia, of not clothing their deities in any human form, nor erecting temples nor altars where they might be worshipped, but contenting themselves with adoring them on the tops of the mountains. He notes their domestic habits, their disdain of animal food, their taste for delicacies, their passion for wine, and their custom of transacting business of the utmost importance when they had been drinking to excess; their curiosity as to the habits of other nations, their love of pleasure, their warlike qualities, their anxiety for the education of their children, their respect for the lives of all their fellow-creatures, even of their slaves, their horror both of debt and lying, and their repugnance to the disease of leprosy which they thought proved that the sufferer “had sinned in some way against the sun.” The India of Herodotus, according to M. Vivien de St. Martin, only consisted of that part of the country that is watered by the five rivers of the Punjaub, adjoining Afghanistan, and this was the region where the young traveller turned his steps on leaving Persia. He thought that the population of India was larger than that of any other country, and he divided it into two classes, the first having settled habitations, the second leading a nomadic life. Those who lived in the eastern part of the country killed their sick and aged people, and ate them, while those in the north, who were a finer, braver, and more industrious race, employed themselves in collecting the auriferous sands. India was then the most easterly extremity of the inhabited world, as he thought, and he observes, “that the two extremities of the world seem to have shared nature’s best gifts, as Greece enjoyed the most agreeable temperature possible,” and that was his idea of the western limits of the world.

Media is the next country visited by this indefatigable traveller, and he gives the history of the Medes, the nation which was the first to shake off the Assyrian yoke. They founded the great city of Ecbatana, and surrounded it with seven concentric walls. They became a separate nation in the reign of Deioces. After crossing the mountains that separate Media from Colchis, the Greek traveller entered the country, made famous by the valour of Jason, and studied its manners and customs with the care and attention that were among his most striking characteristics.

Herodotus seems to have been well acquainted with the geography of the Caspian Sea, for he speaks of it as a Sea “quite by itself” and having no communication with any other. He considered that it was bounded on the west by the Caucasian Mountains and on the east by a great plain inhabited by the Massagetæ, who, both Arian and Diodorus Siculus think, may have been Scythians. These Massagetæ worshipped the Sun as their only deity, and sacrificed horses in its honour. He speaks here of two large rivers, one of which, the Araxes, would be the Volga, and the other, that he calls the Ista, must be the Danube. The traveller then went into Scythia, and he thought that the Scythians were the different tribes inhabiting the country that lay between the Danube and the Don, in fact a considerable portion of European Russia. He found the barbarous custom of putting out the eyes of their prisoners was practised among them, and he notices that they only wandered from place to place without caring to cultivate their land. Herodotus relates many of the fables that make the origin of the Scythian nation so obscure, and in which Hercules plays a prominent part. He adds a list of the different tribes that composed the Scythian nation, but he does not seem to have visited the country lying to the north of the Euxine, or Black Sea. He gives a minute description of the habits of these people, and expresses his admiration for the Pontus Euxinus. The dimensions that he gives of the Black Sea, the Bosphorus, of the Propontis, the Palus Mæotis and of the Ægean Sea, are almost exactly the same as those given by geographers of the present day. He also names the large rivers that flow into these seas. The Ister or Danube, the Borysthenes or Dnieper, the Tanais, or Don; and he finishes by relating how the alliance, and afterwards the union between the Scythians and Amazons took place, which explains the reason why the young women of that country are not allowed to marry before they have killed an enemy and established their character for valour.

After a short stay in Thrace, during which he was convinced that the Getæ were the bravest portion of this race, Herodotus arrived in Greece, which was to be the termination of his travels, to the country where he hoped to collect the only documents still wanting to complete his history, and he visited all the spots that had become illustrious by the great battles fought between the Greeks and Persians. He gives a minute description of the Pass of Thermopylæ, and of his visit to the plain of Marathon, the battlefield of Platæa, and his return to Asia Minor, whence he passed along the coast on which the Greeks had established several colonies. Herodotus can only have been twenty-eight years of age when he returned to Halicarnassus in Caria, for it was in B.C. 456 that he read the history of his travels at the Olympic Games. His country was at that time oppressed by Lygdamis, and he was exiled to Samos; but though he soon after rose in arms to overthrow the tyrant, the ingratitude of his fellow-citizens obliged him to return into exile. In 444 he took part in the games at the Pantheon, and there he read his completed work, which was received with enthusiasm, and towards the end of his life he retired to Thurium in Italy, where he died, B.C. 406, leaving behind him the reputation of being the greatest traveller and the most celebrated historian of antiquity.

After Herodotus we must pass over a century and a half, and only note, in passing, the Physician Ctesias, a contemporary of Xenophon, who published the account of a voyage to India that he really never made; and we shall come in chronological order to Pytheas, who was at once a traveller, geographer, and historian, one of the most celebrated men of his time. It was about the year B.C. 340 that Pytheas set out from the columns of Hercules with a single vessel, but instead of taking a southerly course like his Carthaginian predecessors, he went northwards, passing by the coasts of Iberia and Gaul to the furthest points which now form the Cape of Finisterre, and then he entered the English Channel and came upon the

English coast — the British Isles — of which he was to be the first explorer. He disembarked at various points on the coast and made friends with the simple, honest, sober, industrious inhabitants, who traded largely in tin.

Pytheas ventured still further north, and went beyond the Orcades Islands to the furthest point of Scotland, and he must have reached a very high latitude, for during the summer the night only lasted two hours. After six days further sailing, he came to lands which he calls Thule, probably the Jutland or Norway of the present day, beyond which he could not pass, for he says, "there was neither land, sea, nor air there." He retraced his course, and changing it slightly, he came to the mouth of the Rhine, to the country of the Ostians, and, further inland, to Germany. Thence he visited the mouth of the Tanais, that is supposed to be the Elbe or the Oder, and he retuned to Marseilles, just a year after leaving his native town. Pytheas, besides being such a brave sailor, was a remarkably scientific man: he was the first to discover the influence that the moon exercises on the tides, and to notice that the polar star is not situated at the exact spot at which the axis of the globe is supposed to be. Some years after the time of Pytheas, about B.C. 326 a Greek traveller made his name famous. This was Nearchus, a native of Crete, one of Alexander's admirals, and he was charged to visit all the coast of Asia from the mouth of the Indus to that of the Euphrates. When Alexander first resolved that this expedition should take place, which had for its object the opening up of a communication between India and Egypt, he was at the upper part of the Indus. He furnished Nearchus with a fleet of thirty-three galleys, of some vessels with two decks, and a great number of transport ships, and 2000 men. Nearchus came down the Indus in about four months, escorted on either bank of the river by Alexander's armies, and after spending seven months in exploring the Delta, he set sail and followed the west line of what we call Beloochistan in the present day.

He put to sea on the second of October, a month before the winter storms had taken a direction that was favourable to his purpose, so that the commencement of his voyage was disastrous, and in forty days he had scarcely made eighty miles in a westerly direction. He touched first at Stura and at Corestis, which do not seem to answer to any of the now-existing villages on the coast; then at the Island of Crocala, which forms the bay of Caranthia. Beaten back by contrary winds, after doubling the cape of Monze, the fleet took refuge in a natural harbour that its commander thought that he could fortify as a defence against the attacks of the barbarous natives, who, even at the present day, keep up their character as pirates.

After spending twenty-four days in this harbour, Nearchus put to sea again on the 3rd of November. Severe gales often obliged him to keep very near the coast, and when this was the case he was obliged to take all possible precautions to defend himself from the attacks of the ferocious Beloochees, who are described by eastern historians "as a barbarous nation, with long dishevelled hair, and long flowing beards, who are more like bears or satyrs than human beings." Up to this time, however, no serious disaster had happened to the fleet, but on the 10th of November in a heavy gale two galleys and a ship sank. Nearchus then anchored at Crocala, and there he was met by a ship laden with corn that Alexander had sent out to him, and he was able to supply each vessel with provisions for ten days.

After many disasters and a skirmish with some of the natives, Nearchus reached the extreme point of the land of the Orites, which is marked in modern geography by Cape Morant. Here, he states in his narrative that the rays of the sun at mid-day are vertical, and therefore there are no shadows of any kind; but this is surely a mistake, for at this time in the Southern hemisphere the sun is in the Tropic of Capricorn; and, beyond this, his vessels were always some degrees distant from the Tropic of Cancer, therefore even in the height of summer this phenomenon could not have taken place, and we know that his voyage was in winter.

Circumstances seemed now rather more in his favour; for the time of the eastern monsoon was over, when he sailed along the coast which is inhabited by a tribe called Ichthyophagi, who subsist solely on fish, and from the failure of all vegetation are obliged to feed even their sheep upon the same food. The fleet was now becoming very short of provisions; so after doubling Cape Posmi Nearchus took a pilot from those shores on board his own vessel, and with the wind in their favour they made rapid progress, finding the country less bare as they advanced, a few scattered trees and shrubs being visible from the shore. They reached a little town, of the name of which we have no record, and as they were almost without food Nearchus surprised and took possession of it, the inhabitants making but little resistance. Canasida, or Churbar as we call it, was their next resting-place, and at the present day the ruins of a town are still visible in the bay. But their corn was now entirely exhausted, and though they tried successively at Canate, Trois, and Dagasira for further supplies, it was all in vain, these miserable little towns not being able to furnish more than enough for their own consumption. The fleet had neither corn nor meat, and they could not make up their minds to feed upon the tortoises that abound in that part of the coast.

Just as they entered the Persian Gulf they encountered an immense number of whales, and the sailors were so terrified by their size and number, that they wished to fly; it was not without much difficulty that Nearchus at last prevailed upon them to advance boldly, and they soon scattered their formidable enemies.

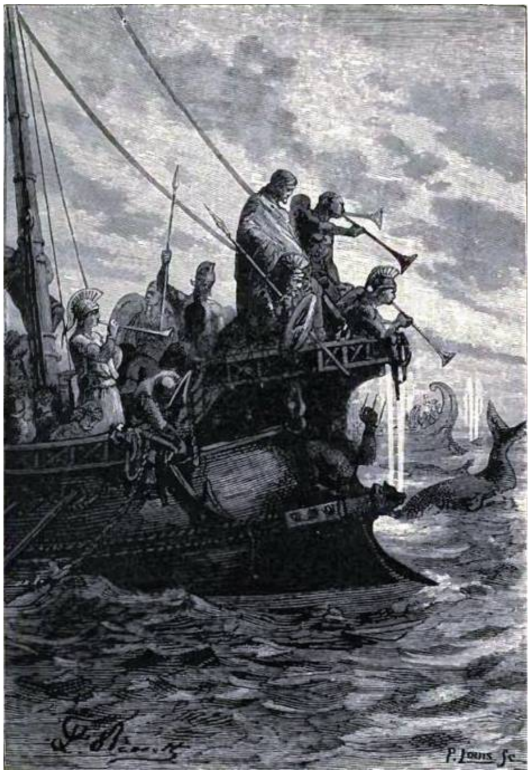

Nearchus leading on his followers against the monsters of the deep.

Having changed their westerly course for a north-easterly one, they soon came upon fertile shores, and their eyes were refreshed by the sight of corn-fields and pasture-lands, interspersed with all kinds of fruit-trees except the olive. They put into Badis or Jask, and after leaving it and passing Maceta or Mussendon, they came in sight of the Persian Gulf, to which Nearchus, following the geography of the Arabs, gave the misnomer of the Red Sea.

They sailed up the gulf, and after one halt reached Harmozia, which has since given its name to the little island of Ormuz. There he learnt that Alexander’s army was only five days’ march from him, and he disembarked at once, and hastened to meet it. No news of the fleet having reached the army for twenty-one weeks, they had given up all hope of seeing it again, and great was Alexander’s joy when Nearchus appeared before him, though the hardships he had endured had altered him almost beyond recognition. Alexander ordered games to be celebrated and sacrifices offered up to the gods; then Nearchus returned to Harmozia, as he wished to go as far as Susa with the fleet, and set sail again, having invoked Jupiter the Deliverer.

He touched at some of the neighbouring islands, probably those of Arek and Kismis, and soon afterwards the vessels ran aground, but the advancing tide floated them again, and after passing Bestion, they arrived at the island of Keish, that is sacred to Mercury and Venus. This was the boundary-line between Karmania and Persia. As they advanced along the Persian coast, they visited different places, Gillam, Indarabia, Shevou, &c. and at the last-named was found a quantity of wheat which Alexander had sent for the use of the explorers.

Some days after this they came to the mouth of the river Araxes, that separates Persia from Susiana, and thence they reached a large lake situated in the country now called Dorghestan, and finally anchored near the village of Degela, at the source of the Euphrates, having accomplished their project of visiting all the coast lying between the Euphrates and Indus. Nearchus returned a second time to Alexander, who rewarded him magnificently, and placed him in command of his fleet. Alexander’s wish, that the whole of the Arabian coast should be explored as far as the Red Sea, was never fulfilled, as he died before the expedition was arranged.

It is said that Nearchus became governor of Lysia and Pamphylia, but in his leisure time he wrote an account of his travels, which has unfortunately perished, though not before Arian had made a complete analysis of it in his

Historia Indica. It seems probable that Nearchus fell in the battle of Ipsu, leaving behind him the reputation of being a very able commander; his voyage may be looked upon as an event of no small importance in the history of navigation.

We must not omit to mention a most hazardous attempt made in B.C. 146, by Eudoxus of Cyzicus, a geographer living at the court of Euergetes II, to sail round Africa. He had visited Egypt and the coast of India, when this far greater project occurred to him, one which was only accomplished sixteen hundred years later by Vasco da Gama. Eudoxus fitted out a large vessel and two smaller ones, and set sail upon the unknown waters of the Atlantic. How far he took these vessels we do not know, but after having had communication with some natives, whom he thought were Ethiopians, he returned to Mauritania. Thence he went to Tiberia, and made preparations for another attempt to circumnavigate Africa, but whether he ever set out upon this voyage is not known; in fact some learned men are even inclined to consider Eudoxus an impostor.

We have still to mention two names of illustrious travellers, living before the Christian era; those of Cæsar and Strabo. Cæsar, born B.C. 100, was pre-eminently a *conqueror*, not an *explorer*, but we must remember, that in the year B.C. 58, he undertook the conquest of Gaul, and during the ten years that were occupied in this vast enterprise, he led his victorious Legions to the shores of Great Britain, where the inhabitants were of German extraction.

As to Strabo, who was born in Cappadocia B.C. 50, he distinguished himself more as a geographer than a traveller, but he travelled through the interior of Asia, and visited Egypt, Greece, and Italy, living many years in Rome, and dying there in the latter part of the reign of Tiberius. Strabo wrote a Geography in seventeen Books, of which the greater part has come down to us, and this work, with that of Ptolemy, are the two most valuable legacies of ancient to modern Geographers.

CHAPTER II.

CELEBRATED TRAVELLERS FROM THE FIRST TO THE NINTH CENTURY.

PAUSANIAS, 174; FA-HIAN, 399; COSMOS INDICOPLEUSTES, 500;
ARCULPHE, 700; WILLIBALD, 725; SOLEYMAN, 851.

Pliny, Hippalus, Arian, and Ptolemy — Pausanias visits Attica, Corinth, Laconia, Messenia, Elis, Achaia, Arcadia, Boeotia, and Phocis — Fa-Hian explores Kan-tcheou, Tartary, Northern India, the Punjaub, Ceylon, and Java — Cosmos Indicopleustes, and the Christian Topography of the Universe — Arculphe describes Jerusalem, the valley of Jehoshaphat, the Mount of Olives, Bethlehem, Jericho, the river Jordan, Libanus, the Dead Sea, Capernaum, Nazareth, Mount Tabor, Damascus, Tyre, Alexandria, and Constantinople — Willibald and the Holy Land — Soleyman travels through Ceylon, and Sumatra, and crosses the Gulf of Siam and the China Sea.

In the first two centuries of the Christian era, the study of geography received a great stimulus from the advance of other branches of science, but travellers, or rather explorers of new countries were very few in number. Pliny in the year A.D. 23, devoted the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth books of his Natural History to geography, and in A.D. 50, Hippalus, a clever navigator, discovered the laws governing the monsoon in the Indian Ocean, and taught sailors how they might deviate from their usual course, so as to make these winds subservient to their being able to go to and return from India in one year. Arian, a Greek historian, born A.D. 105, wrote an account of the navigation of the Euxine or Black Sea, and pointed out as nearly as possible, the countries that had been discovered by explorers who had lived before his time; and Ptolemy the Egyptian, about A.D. 175, making use of the writings of his predecessors, published a celebrated geography, in which, for the first time, places and cities were marked in their relative latitude and longitude on a mathematical plan.

The first traveller of the Christian era, whose name has been handed down to us, was Pausanias, a Greek writer, living in Rome in the second century, and whose account of his travels bears the date of A.D. 175. Pausanias did for ancient Greece what Joanne, the industrious and clever Frenchman did for the other countries of Europe, in compiling the "Traveller's Guide." His account, a most reliable one on all points, and most exact even in details, was one upon which travellers of the second century might safely depend in their journeys through the different parts of Greece.

Pausanias gives a minute description of Attica, and especially of Athens and its monuments, tombs, temples, citadel, academy, columns, and of the Areopagus.

From Attica Pausanias went to Corinth, and then explored the Islands of Ægina and Methana, Sparta, the Island of Cerigo, Messene, Achaia, Arcadia, Boeotia, and Phocis. The roads in the provinces and even the streets in the towns, are mentioned in his narrative, as well as the general character of the country through which he passed; although we can scarcely say that he added any fresh discoveries to those already made, he was one of those careful travellers whose object was more to obtain exact information, than to make new discoveries. His narrative has been of the greatest use to all geographers and writers upon Greece and the Peloponnesus, and an author of the sixteenth century has truly said that this book is "a most ancient and rare specimen of erudition."

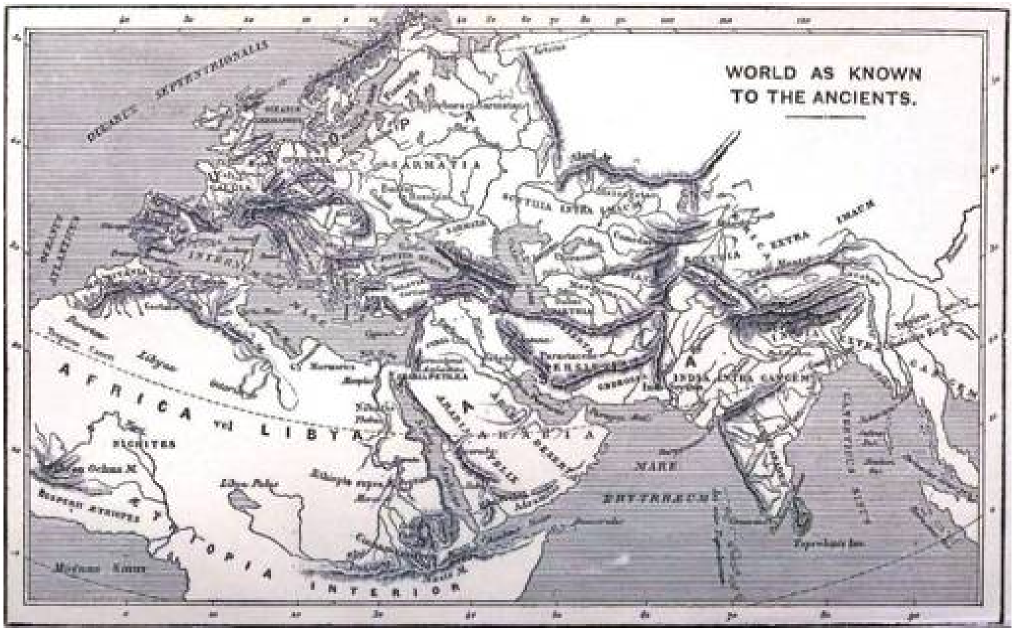

It was about a hundred and thirty years after the Greek historian, in the fourth century, that a Chinese monk undertook the exploration of the countries lying to the west of China. The account of his travels is still extant, and we may well agree with M. Charton when he says that “this is a most valuable work, carrying us beyond our ordinarily narrow view of western civilization.”

Fa-Hian, the traveller, was accompanied by several monks; wishing to leave China by the west, they crossed more than one chain of mountains, and reached the country now called Kan-tcheou, which is not far from the great wall. They crossed the river Cha-ho, and a desert that Marco Polo was to explore eight hundred years later. After seventeen days’ march they reached the Lake of Lobnor in Turkestan. From this point all the countries that the monks visited were alike as to manners and customs, the languages alone differing. Being dissatisfied with the reception that they met with in the country of the Ourgas, who are not a hospitable people, they took a south-easterly course towards a desert country, where they had great difficulty in crossing the rivers; and, after a thirty-five days' march, the little caravan reached Tartary in the kingdom of Khotan, which contained, according to Fa-Hian, "Many times ten thousand holy men." Here they met with a cordial welcome, and after a residence of three months were allowed to assist at the "Procession of the Images," a great feast, in which both Brahmins and Buddhists join, when all the idols are placed upon magnificently decorated cars, and paraded through streets strewn with flowers, amid clouds of incense.

The feast over, the monks left Khotan for Koukonyar, and after resting there fifteen days, we find them further south in the Balistan country of the present day, a cold and mountainous district, where wheat was the only grain cultivated, and where Fa-Hian found in use the curious cylinders on which prayers are written, and which are turned by the faithful with the most extraordinary rapidity. Thence they went to the eastern part of Afghanistan; it took them four weeks to cross the mountains, in the midst of which, and the never-melting snow they are said to have found venomous dragons.

On the further side of this rocky chain the travellers found themselves in Northern India, where the country is watered by the streams which, further on, form the Sinde or Indus. After traversing the kingdoms of On-tchang, Su-ho-to, and Kian-tho-wei, they arrived at Fo-loo-cha, which must be the town of Peshawur, standing between Cabul and the Indus, and twenty-four leagues farther west, they came to the town of Hilo, built on the banks of a tributary of the river Kabout. In these towns Fa-Hian specially notices the feasts and religious ceremonies practised in the worship of Fo or Buddha.

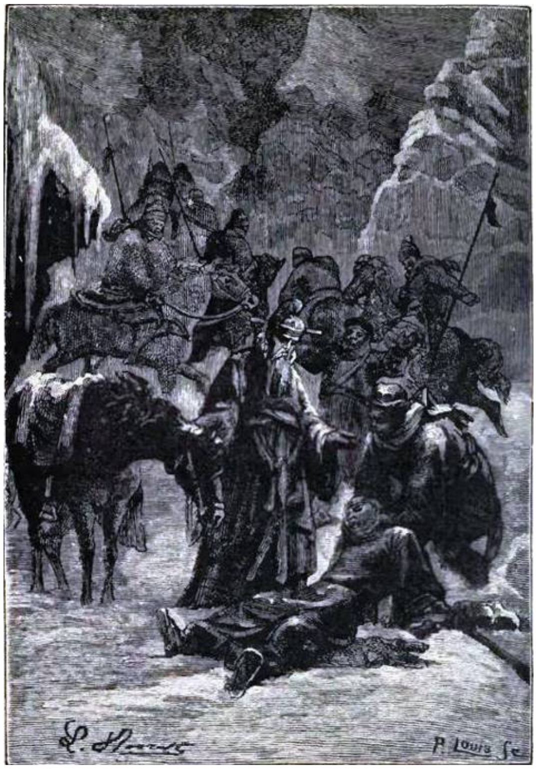

One of Fa-Hian’s companions falls.

When the monks left Kito, they were obliged to cross the Hindoo-Koosh mountains, lying between Turkestan and the Gandhara, the cold being so intense that one of their party sank under it. After enduring great hardships they reached Banoo, a town that is still standing, and then, after again crossing the Indus, they entered the Punjaub. Thence, descending towards the south-east, with a view of crossing the northern part of the Indian Peninsula, they reached Mathura, a town in the province of Agra, and crossing the great salt desert which lies to the east of the Indus, travelled through a country that Fa-Hian calls “a happy kingdom, where the inhabitants are good and honest, needing neither laws nor magistrates, and indebted to none for their support; without markets or wine merchants, and living happily, with plenty of all that they required, where the temperature was neither hot nor cold.” This happy kingdom was India. Fa-Hian followed a south-easterly route, and came to Feroukh-abad, where Buddha is said to have alighted as he came down from heaven, the Chinese traveller dwelling much upon the Buddhist Creed. Thence he visited the town of Kanoji, standing on the right bank of the Ganges, that he calls Heng, and this is the very centre of Buddhism. Wherever Buddha is supposed to have rested, his followers have erected high towers in his honour. The travellers visited the temple of Tchihouan, where for twenty-five years Fo practised the most severe mortifications, and where he is said to have given sight to five hundred blind men. They are said to have been much moved by the sight of this temple.

They set out again, passing Kapila and Goruckpoor, on the frontier of Nepaul, all made famous by Fo’s miracles, and then reached the celebrated town of Palian-foo, in the delta of the Ganges, in the kingdom of Magadha. This was a fertile tract of country inhabited by a civilized, upright people, who loved all philosophic researches. After climbing the peak of Vautour, which stands at the source of the Dyardanes and Banourah rivers, Fa-Hian descended the Ganges, visited the temple of Issi-paten that was frequented by magicians and astrologers, reached Benares, “the kingdom of splendours,” and a little lower down, the town of Tomo-li-ti, situated at the mouth of the river, a short distance from the site of Calcutta in the present day.

Fa-Hian found a party of merchants just preparing to put to sea with the intention of going to Ceylon; he sailed with them, and in fourteen days landed on the shores of the ancient Taprobana, of which the Greek merchant, Jamboulos, had given a curious account some centuries previously. Here the Chinese monk found all the traditions and legends regarding the god Fo, and passed two years in searching ancient manuscripts. He left Ceylon for Java, where he landed after a very rough voyage, in the course of which, when the sky was overclouded, he says, “we saw nothing but great waves dashing one against another, lightning, crocodiles, tortoises, and monsters of the deep.”

He spent five months in Java, and then set sail for Canton; but the winds were again unfavourable, and after undergoing great hardships he landed at the town of Chantoung of the present day; then having spent some time at Nankin he returned to Fi-an-foo, his native town, after an absence of eighteen months. Such is the account of Fa-Hian’s travels, which have been well translated by M. Abel de Rémusat, and which give very interesting details of Indian and Tartar customs, especially those relating to their religious ceremonies.

The next traveller to the Chinese monk, in chronological order, is an Egyptian called Cosmos Indicopleustes, a name that M. Charton renders as “Cosmographic traveller in India.” He lived in the sixth century, and was a merchant of Alexandria, who, on his return from visiting Ethiopia and part of Asia, entered a monastery.

His narrative is called the “Christian Topography of the Universe.” It gives no details of its author’s voyages, but begins with cosmographic discussions, to prove that the world is square, and enclosed in a great oblong coffer with all the other planets. This is followed by some dissertations on the function of the angels, and a description of the dress of the Jewish Priests. Cosmos also gives the natural history of the animals of India and Ceylon, and notices the rhinoceros and buffalo, which can be made of use for domestic purposes, the giraffe, the wild ox, the musk that is hunted for its “perfumed blood,” the unicorn, which he considers a real animal and not a myth, the wild boar, the hippopotamus, the phoca, the dolphin, and the tortoise. Afterwards, Cosmos describes the pepper-plant, as a frail and delicate shrub, like the smallest tendrils of the vine, and the cocoa-tree, whose fruit has a fragrance “equal to that of a nut.”

From the earliest times of the Christian era there has been a great love for visiting the Holy Land, the cradle of the new religion. These pilgrimages became more and more frequent, and we have many names left to us of those who visited Palestine during the first centuries of Christianity.

One of these pilgrims, the French Bishop Arculphe, who lived towards the end of the seventh century, has left us an account of his travels.

He sets out by giving a topographical description of the site of Jerusalem, and describes the wall that surrounds the holy city, then the circular church built over the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the stone that closed it, the church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the church built upon Calvary, and the basilica of Constantine on the site of the place where the real cross was found. These various churches are united in one building, which also encloses the Tomb of Christ, and Calvary, where our Lord was crucified.

Arculphe then descended into the Valley of Jehoshaphat, which is situated to the east of the city, and contains the church that covers the tomb of the Virgin; he also saw that of Absalom, which he calls the Tower of Jehoshaphat. He describes the Mount of Olives that faces the city beyond the valley, and he prayed in the cave where Jesus prayed. He also went to Mount Zion, which stands outside the town on the south side; he notices the gigantic fig-tree, on which, according to tradition, Judas Iscariot hanged himself, and he visited the church of the guest-chamber, now destroyed.

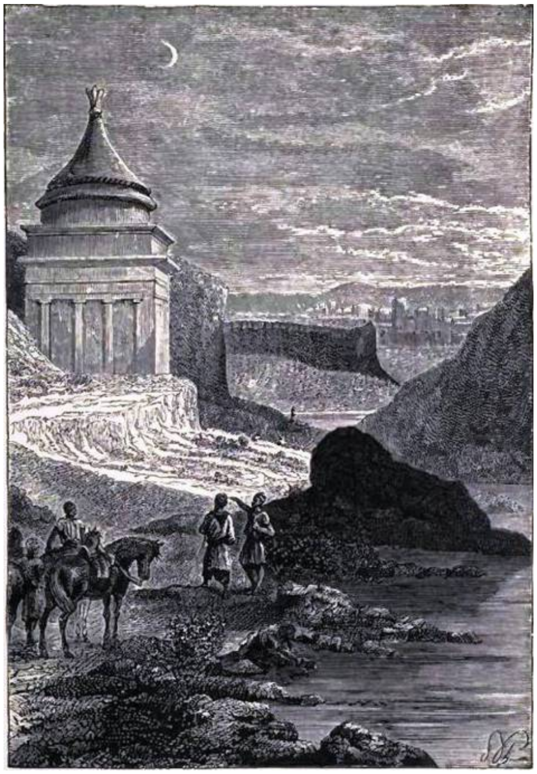

Absalom’s Tomb.

After making the tour of the city by the Valley of Siloam, and ascending by the brook Cedron, the bishop returned to the Mount of Olives, which was covered with waving wheat and barley, grass and wild flowers, and he describes the place where Christ ascended from the summit of the mountain. On this spot a large church has been built, with three arched porticoes that are not roofed over or covered in any way, but are open to the sky. “They have not roofed in this church,” says the bishop, “because it was the place whence our Saviour ascended upon a cloud, and the space open to heaven allows the prayers of the faithful to ascend thither. For when they paved this church they could not lay the pavement over the place where our

Lord's feet had rested, as, when the stones were laid upon that spot, the earth, as though impatient of anything not divine resting upon it, threw them up again before the workmen. Beyond this, the dust bears the impress of the divine feet, and though, day by day, the faithful who visit the spot efface the marks, they immediately reappear and may be seen perpetually."

After having explored the neighbourhood of Bethany in the midst of the grove of olives, where the grave of Lazarus is said to be, and where the church, standing on the right hand is supposed to mark the spot where our Lord usually conversed with His disciples, Arculphe went to Bethlehem, which is a short distance from the holy city. He describes the birthplace of our Lord, a natural cave, hollowed out of the rock at the eastern end of the village, the church, built by St. Helena, the tombs of the three shepherds, upon whom the heavenly light shone at the birth of our Saviour, the burial-places of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that of Rachel, and he visited the oak of Mamre, under which Abraham received the visit of the angels. Thence, Arculphe went to Jericho, or rather the place where the town once stood, whose walls fell at the sound of Joshua's trumpets. He explored the place where the children of Israel first rested in the land of Canaan after crossing the river Jordan, and he speaks of the church of Galgala, where the twelve stones are placed, which the children of Israel took from the river when they entered the promised land. He followed the course of the Jordan, and found near one of the bends of the river on the right bank, and among the most beautiful scenery, about an hour's walk from the Dead Sea, the place where our Lord was baptized by St. John the Baptist. A cross is placed to mark the spot, but when the river is swollen, it is covered by the water.

After examining the banks of the Dead Sea and tasting its brackish water, he viewed the source of the Jordan, at the foot of Libanus, and explored the greater part of the Lake of Tiberias, visiting the well where the woman of Samaria gave our Lord the water He so much needed, seeing the fountain in the desert of which St. John the Baptist drank, and the great plain of Gaza, where our Lord blessed the five loaves and two fishes, and fed the multitude. Next he went down to Capernaum, of which there are now no remains; then visited Nazareth, where our Lord spent His childhood, and ended his journey at Mount Tabor in Galilee.

The bishop's narrative contains both geographical and historical accounts of other places, beyond those immediately connected with our Lord's life on earth. He visited the royal city of Damascus, which is watered by four large rivers. Also Tyre, the chief town of Phoenicia, which, though once separated from the mainland, was joined to it again by the jetty or pier made by the orders of Nabuchodonosor. He speaks of Alexandria, once the capital of Egypt, which he reached forty days after leaving Jaffa, and lastly, of Constantinople, where he often visited the large church in which "the wood of the cross is preserved, upon which the Saviour suffered for the salvation of the human race."

The account of this journey was written by the Abbé de St. Columban at the dictation of the bishop, and not many years afterwards the same journey was undertaken by an English pilgrim, and accomplished in much the same way. The name of this pilgrim was Willibald, a member of a rich family living at Southampton, who, on his recovery from a long illness, dedicated him to God's service. All his early life was spent in holy exercises in the monastery of Woltheim; when he was grown up he had the most intense wish to see St. Peter's at Rome, and was so set upon this, that it induced his father, brother, and young sister to wish to go there also; they embarked at Southampton in the spring of 721, and making their way up the Seine, they landed at Rouen. We have but few details of the journey to Rome, but

Willibald mentions that after passing through Cortona and Lucca, at which latter place his father sank under the fatigue of the journey and died, he reached Rome in safety with his brother and sister, and passed the winter there, but they were all in turn attacked with fever. When Willibald regained his health, he determined to continue his journey to the Holy Land. He sent his brother and sister back to England, while he joined some monks who were going in the same direction as himself. They went by Terracina and Gaeta to Naples, and set sail for Reggio in Calabria, and Catania and Syracuse in Sicily, whence they again embarked, and, after touching at Cos and Samos, landed at Ephesus in Asia Minor, where they visited the tombs of St. John the Evangelist, of Mary Magdalene, and of the seven sleepers of Ephesus, that is, seven Christians martyred in the time of the Emperor Decius.

They made some stay at Patara and at Mitylene, and then went to Cyprus and Paphos; we next find the party, seven in number, at Edessa, visiting the tomb of St. Thomas the Apostle. Here they were arrested as spies, and thrown into prison by the Saracens, but the king, on the petition of a Spaniard, set them at liberty. As soon as they were set free they left the town in great haste, and from that time their route is almost the same as that of the Bishop Arculphe; they visited Damascus, Nazareth, Cana, where they saw a wonderful amphora on Mount Tabor, where our Lord was transfigured, and the Lake of Tiberias, where St. Peter walked upon the water; Magdala, where Lazarus and his sister dwelt; Capernaum, where our Lord raised to life the son of the nobleman; Bethsaida in Galilee, the native place of St. Peter and St. Andrew; Chorazin, where our Lord cured those possessed with devils; Cæsarea, and the spot where our Lord was baptized, as well as Jericho and Jerusalem.

They also went to the Valley of Jehoshaphat, the Mount of Olives, and to Bethlehem, the scene of the murder of the Innocents by Herod, and Gaza. While they were at Gaza, Willibald tells us that he suddenly became blind, while he was in the church of St. Matthias, and only recovered his sight two months afterwards, as he entered the church of the Holy Cross at Jerusalem. He went through the valley of Diospolis or Lydda, ten miles from Jerusalem, and then went to Tyre and Sidon, and thence, by Libanus, Damascus, Cæsarea, and Emmaus, back to Jerusalem, where the travellers spent the winter.

This was not to be the limit of their exploration, for we hear of them at Ptolemais, Emesa, Jerusalem, Damascus, and Samaria, where St. John the Baptist is said to have been buried, and at Tyre, where it must be confessed that Willibald defrauded the revenue of that time by smuggling some balsam that was very celebrated, and on which a duty was levied. On quitting Tyre they went to Constantinople and lived there for two years before returning by Sicily, Calabria, Naples, and Capua. The English pilgrim reached the monastery of Monte Cassino, just ten years after his first setting out on his travels; but his time of rest had not yet come, as he was appointed to a bishopric in Franconia by Pope Gregory III. He was forty-one years of age when he was made bishop, and he lived forty years afterwards. In 938 he was canonized by Leo VII.

We will conclude the list of celebrated travellers living between the first and ninth centuries, by giving a short account of Soleyman, a merchant of Bassorah, who, starting from the Persian Gulf, arrived eventually on the shores of China. This narrative is in two distinct parts, one written in 851, by Soleyman himself, who was the traveller, and the other in 878 by a geographer named Abou-Zeyd Hassan with the view of completing the first. Renaud, the orientalist, is of opinion that this narrative “has thrown quite a new light on the commercial transactions that existed in the ninth century between Egypt, Arabia, and the countries bordering on the Persian Gulf on one side, and the vast provinces of India and China on the other.”

Soleyman, as we have said, started from the Persian Gulf after having taken in a good supply of fresh water at Muscat, and visited first, the second sea, or that of Oman. He noticed a fish of enormous size, probably a spermaceti whale, which the seamen endeavoured to frighten away by ringing a bell, then a shark, in whose stomach they found a smaller shark, enclosing in its turn one still smaller, “both alive,” says the traveller, which is manifestly an exaggeration; then, after describing the remora, the dactyloptera, and the porpoise, he speaks of the sea near the Maldive Islands in which he counted an enormous number of islands, among them he mentions Ceylon by its Arabian name, with its pearl fisheries; Sumatra, inhabited by cannibals, and rich in gold-mines; Nicobar, and the Andaman Islands, where cannibalism still exists even at the present day. “This sea,” he says, “is subject to fearful water-spouts which wreck the ships, and throw on its shores an immense number of dead fish and sometimes even large stones. When these tempests are at their height the sea seethes and boils.” Soleyman imagined it to be infested by a sort of monster who preyed upon human beings; this is thought to have been a kind of dog-fish.

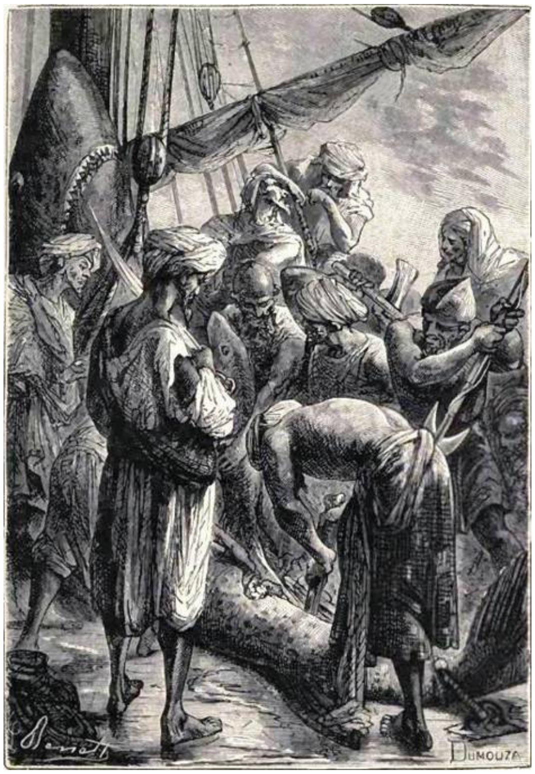

Soleyman noticed a shark in whose stomach they found a smaller shark.

Arrived at Nicobar, Soleyman traded with the inhabitants, bartering some iron for cocoa-nuts, sugar-cane, bananas, &c.; he then crossed the sea, and seems to have made for Singapore, and northwards by the Gulf of Siam. Soleyman put into a harbour, near Cape Varella, to revictual his ships, and thence he went by the China Sea to Jehan-fou the port of the present town of Tche-kiang. The remainder of the account of Soleyman’s travels, written by Abou-Zeyd Hassan, contains a detailed account of the manners and customs of the Indians and Chinese; but it is not the traveller himself who is speaking, and we shall find the same subjects spoken of in a more interesting manner by later authors.

We must add, in reviewing the discoveries made by travellers sixteen centuries before, and nine centuries after, the Christian era, that from Norway to the extreme boundaries of China, taking a line through the Atlantic ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Sea of China, the immense extent of coast bordering these seas had been in a great measure visited. Some explorations had been attempted in the interior of these countries; for instance, in Egypt as far as Ethiopia, in Asia Minor to the Caucasus, in India and China; and if these old travellers may not have quite understood mathematical precision, as to some of the points they visited, at all events the manners and customs of the inhabitants, the productions of the different countries, the mode of trading with them, and their religious customs, were quite sufficiently understood. Ships could sail with more safety when the change of winds was no longer a subject of mere speculation, the caravans could take a more direct route in the interior of the countries, and the great increase of trade which took place in the middle ages is surely owing to the facilities afforded by the writings of travellers.

CHAPTER III.

CELEBRATED TRAVELLERS BETWEEN THE TENTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES.

BENJAMIN OF TUDELA, 1159-1173; PLAN DE CARPIN, OR CARPINI, 1245-1247;RUBRUQUIS, 1253-1254.

The Scandinavians in the North, Iceland and Greenland — Benjamin of Tudela visits Marseilles, Rome, Constantinople, the Archipelago, Palestine, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Damascus, Baalbec, Nineveh, Baghdad, Babylon, Bassorah, Ispahan, Shiraz, Samarcand, Thibet, Malabar, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Egypt, Sicily, Italy, Germany, and France — Carpini explores Turkestan — Manners and customs of the Tartars — Rubruquis and the Sea of Azov, the Volga, Karakorum, Astrakhan, and Derbend.

In the course of the tenth, and at the beginning of the eleventh century, a considerable amount of ardour for exploration had arisen in Northern Europe. Some Norwegians and adventurous Gauls had penetrated to the Northern seas, and, if we may trust to some accounts, they had gone as far as the White Sea and visited the country of the Samoyedes. Some documents say that Prince Madoc may have explored the American continent.

At all events we may be tolerably certain that Iceland was discovered about A.D. 861 by some Scandinavian adventurers, and that it was soon after colonized by Normans. About this same time a Norwegian had taken refuge on a newly discovered land, and surprised by its verdure he gave it the name of Greenland.

The communication with this portion of the American continent was difficult and uncertain, and one geographer says “it took five years for a vessel to go from Norway to Greenland, and to return from Greenland to Norway.” Sometimes in severe winters the Northern Ocean was completely frozen over, and a certain Hollur-Geit, guided by a goat, was able to cross on foot from Norway to Greenland. We should keep in mind that the period of which we are speaking is the time when legends and traditions were very plentiful, and gained ready credence.

Let us return to well-authenticated facts, and relate the journey of a Spanish Jew, whose truthfulness is beyond question.

This Jew was the son of a rabbi of Tudela, a town in Navarre, and he was called Benjamin of Tudela. It seems probable that the object of his voyage was to make a census of his brother Jews scattered over the surface of the Globe, but whatever may have been his motive, he spent thirteen years, from 1160-1173, exploring nearly all the known world, and his narrative was considered the great authority on this subject up to the sixteenth century.

Benjamin of Tudela left Barcelona, and travelling by Tarragona, Gironde, Narbonne, Béziers, Montpellier, Sunel, Pousquiers, St. Gilles, and Arles, reached Marseilles. Here he visited the two synagogues in the town and the principal Jews, and then set sail for Genoa, arriving there in four days. The Genoese were masters of the sea at that time, and were at war with the people of Pisa, a brave people, who, like the Genoese, says the traveller, “owned neither kings nor princes, but only the judges whom they appointed at their own pleasure.”

After visiting Lucca, Benjamin of Tudela went to Rome. Alexander III. was Pope at that time, and according to this traveller, he included some Jews among his ministers. Among the monuments of special interest in the eternal city, he mentions St. Peter’s and St. John Lateran, but his descriptions are not interesting. From Rome by Capua, and Pozzuoli, then partly inundated, he went to Naples, where he seems to have seen nothing but the five hundred Jews living there; then by Salerno, Amalfi, Benevento, Ascoli, Trani, St. Nicholas of Bari, and Brindisi, he arrived at Otranto, having crossed Italy and yet found nothing interesting to relate of this splendid country.

The list of the places Benjamin of Tudela visited, is not interesting, but we must not omit to mention one of them, for his narrative is most precise, and it is useful to follow his route by the maps specially prepared for this purpose by Lelewel. From Otranto to Zeitun, his halting-places were Corfu, the Gulf of Arta, Achelous, an ancient town in Ætolia, Anatolia in Greece, on the Gulf of Patras, Patras, Lepanto, Crissa, at the foot of Mount Parnassus, Corinth, Thebes, whose two thousand Jewish inhabitants were the best makers of silk and purple in Greece, Negropont and Zeitoun. Here, according to the Spanish traveller, is the boundary-line of Wallachia; he says the Wallachians are as nimble as goats, and come down from the mountains to pillage the neighbouring Greek towns.

Benjamin of Tudela went on to Constantinople by way of Gardiki, a small township on the Gulf of Volo, Armyros, a port much frequented by the Venetians and Genoese, Bissina, a town of which no traces are left, Salonica, the ancient Thessalonica, and Abydos. He gives us some details of Constantinople; the Emperor Emmanuel Comnenus was reigning at that time and lived in a palace that he had built upon the sea-shore, containing columns of pure gold and silver, and “the golden throne studded with precious stones, above which a golden crown is suspended by a chain of the same precious metal, which rests upon the monarch’s head as he sits upon the throne.” In this crown are many precious stones, and one of priceless worth: “so brilliant are they,” says this traveller, “that at night, there is no occasion for any further light than that thrown back by these jewels.” He adds that there is a large population in the city, and for the number of merchants from all countries who assemble there, it can only be compared to Baghdad. The inhabitants are principally dressed in embroidered silk robes enriched with golden fringes, and to see them thus attired and mounted upon their horses, one would take them for princes, but they are not brave warriors, and they keep mercenaries from all nations to fight for them. One regret he expresses, and that is, that there are no Jews left in the City, and that they have all been transported to Galata, near the entrance of the port, where are nearly two thousand five hundred of the sects (Rabbinites and Caraites), and among them many rich merchants and silk manufacturers, but the Turks have a bitter hatred for them, and treat them with great severity. Only one of these rich Jews was allowed to ride on horseback, he was the Emperor’s physician, Solomon, the Egyptian. As to the remarkable buildings of Constantinople, he mentions the Mosque of St. Sophia, in which the number of altars answers to the number of days in a year, and the columns and gold and silver candlesticks, are too numerous to be counted; also the Hippodrome, which at the present day is used as a horse-market, but was then the scene of combats between “lions, bears, tigers, other wild beasts, and even birds.”

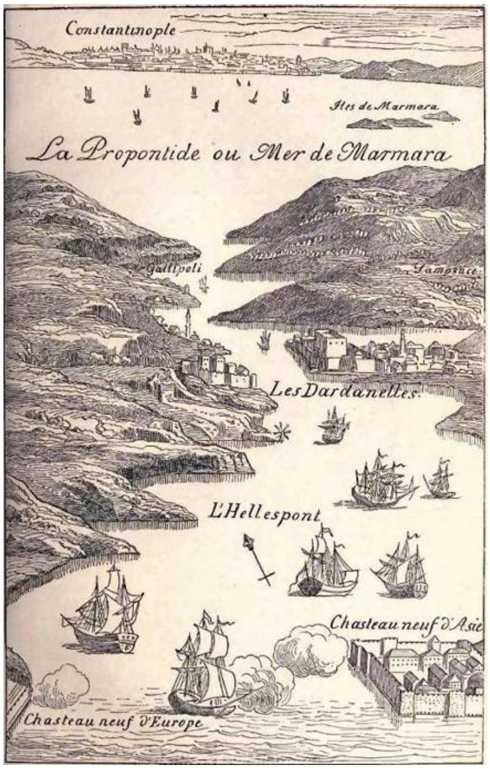
Constantinople
Iles de Marmara
La Propontide ou Mer de Marmara
Gallipoli
Lampsace
Les Dardanelles.
L'Hellespont
Chasteau neuf d'Asie
Chasteau neuf d'Europe

The approach to Constantinople.

When Benjamin of Tudela left Constantinople, he visited Gallipoli and Kilia, a port on the Eastern coast, and went to the islands in the Archipelago, Mitylene, Chios, whence there was much trade in the juice of the pistachio-tree, Samos, Rhodes, and Cyprus. As he sailed towards the land of Aram, he passed by Messis, by Antioch, where he admired the arrangements for supplying the city with water, and by Latakia on his way to Tripoli, which he found had been recently shaken by an earthquake, that had been felt for miles round. We next hear of him at Beyrout, at Sidon, and Tyre, celebrated for its glass manufactory, at Acre, at Jaffa near Mount Carmel, at Capernaum, at the beautiful town of Cæsarea, at Samaria, which is built in the midst of a fertile tract, where are vineyards, gardens, orchards, and olive-yards, at Nablous, at Gibeon, and then at Jerusalem.

In the holy city, it was but natural that the Jew could see nothing that would have interested a Christian visitor. For him, Jerusalem appeared only a small town, defended by three walls and peopled with Jews, Syrians, Greeks, Georgians, and Franks of all languages and nations. He found four hundred horse-soldiers in the city ready for war at any moment, a great temple in which is the tomb of “that man,” as the Talmud styles our Saviour, and a house in which the Jews had the privilege of carrying on the work of dyeing; but they were few in number, scarcely two hundred, and they lived under the tower of David at one corner of the city. Outside Jerusalem, the traveller mentions the tomb of Absalom, the sepulchre of Osias, the pool of Siloam, near the brook Cedron, the valley of Jehoshaphat, and the Mount of Olives, from whose summit one can see the Dead Sea. Two leagues from it stands the pillar of Lot’s wife, and the traveller adds, “that though the flocks and herds which pass this pillar of salt are continually licking it, yet it never diminishes in size.” From Jerusalem, Benjamin of Tudela went to Bethlehem, and inscribed his name on Rachel’s tomb, as it was customary for all Jews to do who passed by it; and from Bethlehem, after counting twelve Jewish dyeing establishments, he went on to Hebron, which is now deserted and in ruins.

After visiting, in the plain of Machpelah, the tombs of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah, and passing by Beth-Jairim, Scilo, Mount Moriah, Beth-Nubi, Ramah, Joppa, Jabneh, Azotus, Ascalon, built by Esdras, Lud, Tiberias, where are some hot springs, Gish and Merom, which is still a spot visited by Jewish pilgrims, Kedesh and Laish, near the cavern, where the Jordan takes its rise, the traveller left the land of Israel, and entered Damascus.

The following is his description of this city, where the Turkish rule begins. “It is a very large and beautiful city, walled round, and outside the walls for fifteen miles are gardens and orchards, and of all the surrounding country, this is the most fertile spot. The town stands at the foot of Mount Hermon, whence rise the two rivers, Abana and Pharpar; the first passes through the city, and its waters are taken into the larger houses by means of aqueducts, as well as through the streets and markets. This town trades with all the world. The river Pharpar fertilizes the orchards and gardens outside the town. There is an Ishmaelitish mosque, called Goman-Dammesec, meaning the synagogue of Damascus, and this building has not its equal; it is said to have been Benhadad’s palace, and it contains a glass wall, built apparently by magic. This wall has 365 holes in it, answering to the days of the year; as the sun rises and sets it shines through one or other of these holes, so that the hour of the day may thus always be known. Inside the palace or mosque are gold and silver houses, large enough to hold two or three persons at a time, if they wish to wash or bathe in them.”

After going to Galad and Salkah, which are two days’ journey from Damascus, Benjamin reached Baalbec, the Heliopolis of the Greeks and Romans, built by Solomon, in the valley of the Libanus, then to Tadmor, which is Palmyra, also built entirely of great stones. Then passing by Cariatin, he stopped at Hamah, which was partially destroyed by an earthquake in 1157, which overthrew many of the Syrian towns.

Now comes in the narrative a list of names, which are of no great interest: we may mention among them, Nineveh, whence the traveller returned towards the Euphrates; and finally that he reached Baghdad, the residence of the Caliph.

Baghdad was of great interest to the Jewish traveller; he says it is a large town three miles in circumference, containing a hospital both for Jews and sick people of any nation. It is the centre for learned men, philosophers, and magicians from all parts of the world. It is the residence of the Caliph, who at this time was probably Mostaidjed, whose dominion included western Persia and the banks of the Tigris. He had a vast palace, standing in a park watered by a tributary of the Tigris and filled with wild beasts, he may be taken as a model sovereign on some points; he was a good and very truthful man, kind and considerate to all with whom he came in contact. He lived on the produce of his own toil, and made blankets, which, marked with his own seal, were sold in the market by the princes of his court, to defray the expense of his living. He only left his palace once a year, at the feast of Ramadan, when he went to the mosque near the Bassorah gate, and there acting as Iman, he explained the law to his people. He returned to his palace by a different route which was carefully guarded all the rest of the year, so that no other passer by might profane the marks of his footsteps. All the brothers of the Caliph inhabit the same palace as he does; they are all treated with much respect, and have the government of provinces and towns in their hands, the revenues from them enabling them to pass a pleasant life; only, as they once rebelled against their sovereign, they are now all fettered with chains of iron, and have guards mounted before their houses.

Benjamin of Tudela visited that part of Turkey in Asia which is watered by the Euphrates and Tigris, and saw the ruined city of Babylon, passing by what is said to be the furnace into which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown, and the tower of Babel, which he describes as follows. “The tower built by the tribes that were dispersed is of bricks; its largest ground work must be two miles in circumference; its length is two hundred and forty cubits. At every ten cubits there is a passage leading to a spiral staircase, which goes to the upper part of the building; from the tower there is a view of the surrounding country for twenty miles; but the wrath of God fell upon it and it is now only a heap of ruins.”

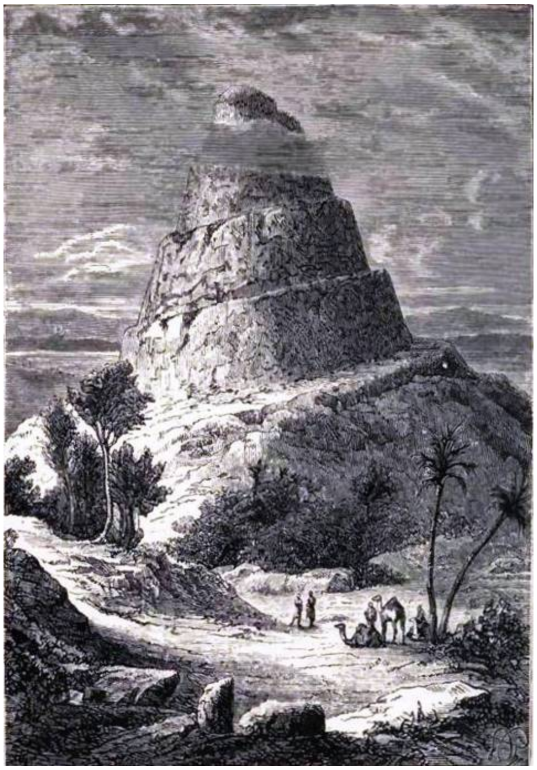

The Tower of Babel.

From Babel the traveller went to the Synagogue of Ezekiel, situated on the Euphrates, a real sanctuary where believers congregate to read the book written by the prophet. Then traversing Alkotzonath, &c. to Sura, once the site of a celebrated Jewish college, and Shafjathib, whose synagogue is built with stones from Jerusalem, and crossing the desert of Yemen he passed Themar, Tilimar, and Chaibar which contained a great number of Jewish inhabitants, to Waseth; and thence to Bassorah on the Tigris, nearly at the end of the Persian Gulf.

He gives no account of this important town; and thence he seems to have gone to Karna, to visit the tomb of the prophet Esdras; then he entered Persia and sojourned at Chuzestan, a large town, partly in ruins, which the river Tigris divides into two parts, one rich the other poor, joined by a bridge, over which hangs the coffin of Daniel the prophet. He went to Amaria, which is the boundary of Media, where he says the impostor David-el-roi appeared, the worker of false miracles, who is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, but called among the Jews of that part by the former name. Then he went to Hamadan, where the tombs of Mordecai and Esther are found, and by Dabrestan he reached Ispahan, the capital of the kingdom, a city measuring twelve miles in circumference. At this point the narrative of the traveller becomes somewhat obscure; according to his notes we find him at Shiraz, then at Samarcand, then at the foot of the mountains in Thibet. This seems to have been his farthest point towards the north-east; he must have come back to Nizapur and Chuzestan on the banks of the Tigris; thence after a sea voyage of two days to El-Cachif, an Arabian town on the Persian Gulf, where the pearl fishery is carried on. Then, after another voyage of seven days and crossing the Sea of Oman, he seems to have reached Quilon on the coast of Malabar.

He was at last in India, the kingdom of the worshippers of the Sun and of the descendants of Cush. This country produces pepper, ginger, and cinnamon. Twenty days after leaving Quilon he was among the fire-worshippers in Ceylon, and thence, perhaps, he went to China. He thought this voyage a very perilous one, and says that many vessels are lost on it, giving the following singular expedient for averting the danger. “You should take on board with you several skins of oxen, and, if the wind rises and threatens the vessel with danger, all who wish to escape envelope themselves each in a skin, sew up this skin so as to make it as far as possible water-tight, then throw themselves into the sea, and flocks of the great eagles called griffins, thinking that they are really oxen, will descend and bear them on their wings to some mountain or valley, there to devour their prey. Immediately on reaching land the man will kill the eagle with his knife, and leaving the skin, will walk towards the nearest habitation; many people," he adds, "have been saved by this means."

We find Benjamin of Tudela again at Ceylon, then at the Island of Socotra in the Persian Gulf, and after crossing the Red Sea he arrives in Abyssinia, which he styles "the India that is on terra firma." Thence he goes down the Nile, crosses the country of Assouan, reaches the town of Holvan, and by the Sahara, where the sand swallows up whole caravans, he goes to Zairlah, Kous, Faiouna and Misraim or Cairo.

This last is a large town containing fine squares and shops. It never rains there, but this want is supplied by the overflow of the Nile once a year, which waters the country and renders it very fertile.

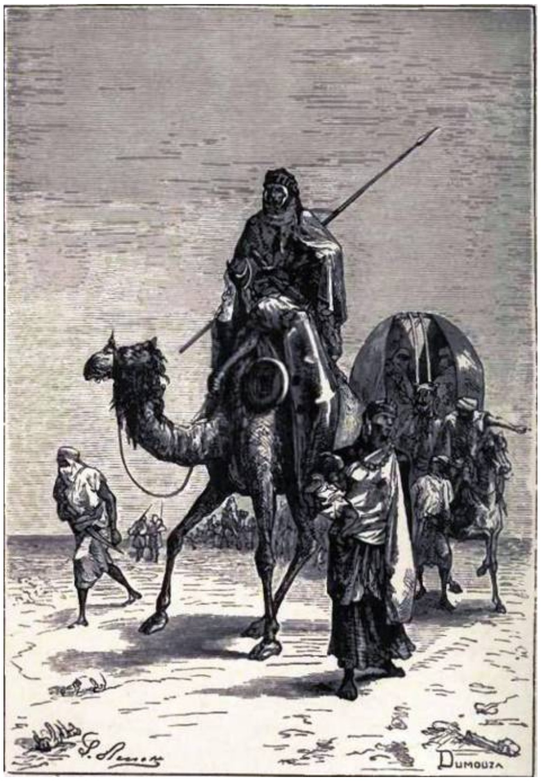

Benjamin of Tudela in the Desert of Sahara.

He passed Gizeh on leaving Misraim but does not mention the pyramids, and just names Ain-Schams, Boutig, Zefita, and Damira; he stopped at Alexandria, built by Alexander the Great, a city of great commerce, frequented by merchants from all parts of the world. Its squares and streets are thronged with people, and so long that one cannot see from one end to another. A dike or causeway runs out a mile into the sea, on which a high tower was built by the conqueror, and on the top of it a glass mirror was placed, by which all vessels could be seen while still fifty days' sail away, coming from Greece or the east on their way to make war upon or otherwise harm the town. “This tower,” if we may credit the writer, “is still of use as a signal to vessels coming to Alexandria, for it can be seen night or day, a great flaming torch being kept lighted at night, visible 100 miles off!” What are our light-houses when even with the electric light they are only visible thirty miles away? From Damietta, the traveller visited several neighbouring towns, then returning there he embarked on board a vessel and twenty days afterwards landed at Messina. He wished to continue the census that he was making, so by way of Rome and Lucca he went to St. Bernard. He mentions visiting several towns both in Germany and France, where Jews had settled, and according to Chateaubriand’s account, Benjamin of Tudela’s computation brought the number of Jews to about 768,165.

In conclusion the traveller speaks of Paris, which he seems to have visited; he says, “This great town numbers among its inhabitants some remarkably learned men, who are unequalled for learning by any in the world; they spend all their time studying law, and at the same time are very hospitable to all strangers, but especially to all their Jewish brethren.” Such is the account of Benjamin of Tudela’s travels; they form an important part of the geographical science of the middle of the twelfth century. As we have used the modern names, it is easy to follow the short account of his route that we have given, on any atlas of the present day.

Next in order of succession we come to the name of Jean du Plan de Carpin, or as some authors render it simply, Carpini. He was a Franciscan or Grey Friar, born in 1182, at Perugia in Italy. It is well known what inroads the Mongolians had made under Gengis-Khan, and in 1206 this chieftain had made Karakorum, an ancient Turkish town, his capital. This town was a little north of China. His successor Ojadaï, extended the Mongolian dominion into the centre of China, and, after raising an army of 600,000 men, he even invaded Europe. Russia, Georgia, Poland, Moravia, Silesia, and Hungary, all became the scenes of sanguinary conflicts which almost always ended in favour of the invaders. The Mongols were looked upon as demons possessed with superhuman power, and Western Europe was terrified at their approach.

Pope Innocent IV. sent an ambassador to the Tartars, but he was treated with arrogance; at the same time he sent other ambassadors to the Tartars living in North-Eastern Tartary, in the hope of stopping the Mongolian invasion, and as chief in this mission, the Franciscan Carpini was chosen, being known to be a clever and intelligent diplomatist. Carpini was accompanied by Stephen, a Bohemian; they set out on the 6th of April, 1245, and went first to Bohemia, where the king gave them letters to some relations living in Poland, who he hoped might facilitate their entrance into Russia. Carpini had no difficulty in reaching the territory of the Archduke of Russia, and by his advice they bought beaver and other furs as presents for the Tartar chiefs. Thus provided, they took a north-easterly route to Kiev, then the chief town of Russia and now the seat of Government of that part, but they travelled in fear of the Lithuanians, who scoured the country at that time.

The Governor of Kiev advised the Pope’s envoys to exchange their own for Tartar horses, who were accustomed to seek for their food under the snow, and thus mounted they had no difficulty in getting as far as Danilisha. There they both were attacked by severe illness; when nearly recovered they bought a carriage, and in spite of the intense cold set out again. Arrived at Kaniev, on the Dnieper, they found themselves in the frontier town of the Mongol empire, and hence they were conducted to the Tartar camp by one of the chiefs, whom they had made their friend by gifts. In the camp they were badly received at first, but being directed to the Duke of Corrensa, who commanded an army of 60,000 men forming the advanced guard: this general sent them with an escort of three Tartars to Prince Bathy, the next in command to the Emperor himself. Relays of horses were prepared for them on the road, they travelled night and day, and thus passed through the Comans' country lying between the Dnieper, the Tanais, the Volga, and the Yaik, frequently having to cross the frozen rivers, and finally reaching the court of Prince Bathy on the frontiers of the Comans' country. "As we were being conducted to the prince," says Carpini, "we were told that we should have to pass between two fires, in order to purify us from any infection we might carry, and also to do away with any evil designs we might have towards the prince, which we agreed to do that we might be freed from all suspicion."

The prince was seated on his throne in the midst of his courtiers and officers in a magnificent tent made of fine linen. He had the reputation of being a just and kind ruler of his people, but very cruel in war. Carpini and Stephen were placed on the left of the throne, and the papal letters, translated into a language composed of Tartar and Arabic, were presented to the prince. He read them attentively and then dismissed the envoys to their tents, where their only refreshment was a little porringer full of millet.

This interview took place on Good Friday, and the next day Bathy sent for the envoys, and told them they must go to the Emperor. They set out on Easter-day with two guides; but having lived upon nothing but millet, water, and salt, the travellers were but little fit for a journey; nevertheless their guides obliged them to travel very quickly, changing horses five or six times in a day. They passed through almost a desert country, the Tartars having driven away nearly all the inhabitants. They came next to the country of the Kangites to the east of Comania, where there was a great deficiency of water; in this province the people were mostly herdsmen, under the hard yoke of the Mongolians.

Carpini was travelling from Easter till Ascension-Day through the land of the Kangites, and thence he came into the Biserium country, or what we call Turkestan in the present day; on all sides the eye rested on towns and villages in ruins. After crossing a chain of mountains the envoys entered Kara-Kâty on the 1st of July; here the governor received them very hospitably, and made his sons and the principal officers of his court dance before them for their amusement.

On leaving Kara-Kâty the envoys rode for some days along the banks of a lake lying to the north of the town of Zeman, which must be, according to M. de Rémusat, the Lake Balkash. There lived Ordu, the eldest of the Tartar captains, and here Carpini and Stephen took a day’s rest before encountering the cold and mountainous country of the Maimans, a nomadic people living in tents. After some days the travellers reached the country of the Mongols, and on the 22nd of July arrived at the place where the Emperor was, or rather he who was to be Emperor, the election having not yet taken place.

This future Emperor was named Cunius; he received the envoys in a most friendly manner, a letter from Prince Bathy having explained to him the object of their visit; not being yet Emperor he could not entertain them nor take any part in public affairs, but from the time of Ojadaï’s death, his widow, the mother of Prince Cunius had been Regent; she received the travellers in a purple and white tent capable of holding 2000 persons. Carpini gives the following account of the interview: “When we arrived we saw a large assembly of dukes and princes who had come from all parts with their attendants, who were on horseback in the neighbouring fields and on the hills. The first day they were all dressed in white and purple, on the second when Cunius appeared in the tent, in red, on the third day they wore violet, and on the fourth, scarlet, or crimson. Outside the tent, in the surrounding palisade were two great gates, by one of which the Emperor alone might enter; it was unguarded, but none dared to enter or leave by it; while the other, which was the general entrance, was guarded by soldiers with swords, and bows and arrows; if any one approached within the prescribed limits he was beaten, or else shot to death with arrows. We noticed several horsemen there, on whose harness cannot have been less than twenty marks' worth of silver."

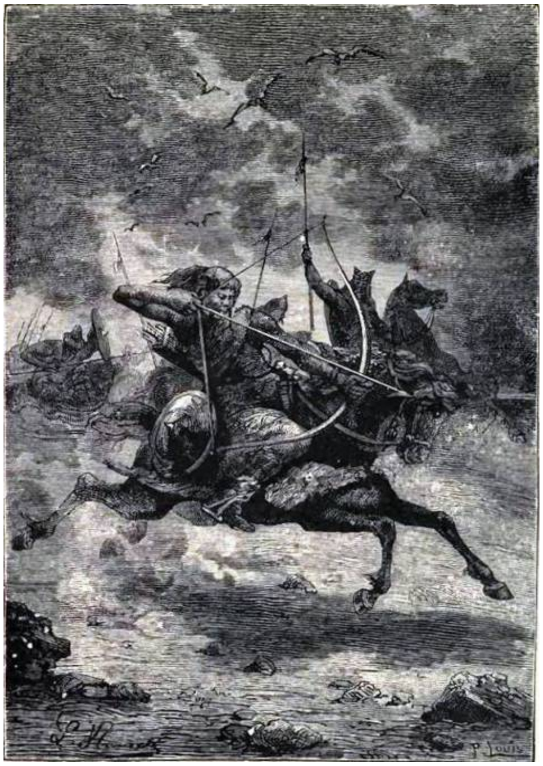

The Tartars.

A whole month passed away before Cunius was proclaimed Emperor, and the envoys were obliged to wait patiently for this before they could be received by him. Carpini turned this leisure time to account by studying the habits of the people; he has given much interesting information on the subject in his account of his travels.

The country seemed to him to be principally very hilly and the soil sandy, with but little vegetation. There is scarce any wood; but all classes are content with dung for fuel. Though the country is so bare, sheep seem to do well. The climate is very changeable; in summer, storms are very frequent, many fall victims to the vivid lightning, and the wind is often so strong as even to blow over men on horseback: during the winter there is no rain, which all falls in the summer, and then scarcely enough to lay the dust, while the storms of hail are terrible; during Carpini's residence in the country they were so severe that once 140 persons were drowned by the melting of the enormous mass of hail-stones that had fallen. It is a very extensive country, but miserable beyond expression.

Carpini who seems to have been a man of great discernment took a very just idea of the Tartars themselves. He says, "Their eyes are set very far apart; they have very high cheek-bones, their noses are small and flat; their eyes small, and their eye-lashes and eyebrows seem to meet; they are of middle height with slender waists, they have small beards, some wear moustaches, and what are now called imperials. On the top of the head the hair is shaved off like monks, and to the width of three fingers between their ears they also shave off the hair, letting what is between the tonsure and the back of the head grow to some length; in fact it is as long as a woman's in many cases, and plaited and tied in two tails behind the ear. They have small feet. He says there is but little difference perceptible in the dress of the men and women, all alike wearing long robes trimmed with fur, and high buckram caps enlarged towards the upper part. Their houses are built like tents of rods and stakes, so that they can be easily taken down and packed on the beasts of burden. Other larger dwellings are sometimes carried whole as they stand, on carts, and thus follow their owner about the country.

“The Tartars believe in God as the Creator of the universe and as the Rewarder and Avenger of all, but they also worship the sun, moon, fire, earth, and water, and idols made in felt, like human beings. They have little toleration, and put Michael of Turnigoo and Féodor to death for not worshipping the sun at midday at the command of Prince Bathy. They are a superstitious people, believing in enchantment and sorcery, and looking upon fire as the purifier of all things. When one of their chiefs dies he is buried with a horse saddled and bridled, a table, a dish of meat, a cup of mare’s milk, and a mare and foal.

“The Tartars are most obedient to their chiefs, and are truthful and not quarrelsome; murders and deeds of violence are rare, there is very little robbery, and articles of value are never guarded. They bear great fatigue and hunger without complaint, as well as heat and cold, singing and dancing under the most adverse circumstances. They are much prone to drink to excess; they are very proud and disdainful to strangers, and have no respect for the lives of human beings.”

Carpini completes his sketch of the Tartar character by adding that they eat all kinds of animals, dogs, wolves, foxes, horses, and even sometimes their fellow-creatures. Their principal beverage is the milk of the mare, sheep, goat, cow, and camel. They have neither wine, cervisia, (a beverage composed of grain and herbs,) nor mead, but only intoxicating liquors. They are very dirty in their habits, scarcely ever washing their porringers, or only doing so in their broth; they hardly ever wash their clothes, more especially “when there is thunder about;” and they eat rats, mice, &c. if they are badly off for other food. The men are not brought up to any manual labour, their whole occupation consisting in hunting, shooting with bow and arrows, watching the flocks, and riding. The women and girls are very athletic and very brave, they prepare furs and make clothes, drive carts and camels, and as polygamy is practised among them, and a man *buys* as many wives as he can keep, there are enough women for all these employments.

Such is the résumé of Carpini’s observations made during his residence at Syra-Orda while he was awaiting the Emperor’s election. Soon he found that the election was about to take place; he noticed that the courtiers always sang before Cunius when he came out of his tent, and bowed down before him with beautiful little wands in their hands, having small pieces of scarlet wool attached to them. On a plain about four leagues from Syra-Orda, beside a stream, a tent was prepared for the Coronation, carpeted with scarlet, and supported on columns covered with gold. On St. Bartholomew’s day a large concourse of people assembled, each one fell on his knees as he arrived, and remained praying towards the sun; but Carpini and his companion refused to join in this idolatrous worship of the sun. Then Cunius was placed on the imperial throne, and the dukes and all the assembled multitudes having done homage to him, he was consecrated.

As soon as this ceremony was over, Carpini and Stephen were commanded to appear before the Emperor. They were first searched and then entered the imperial presence at the same time as other Ambassadors, the bearers of rich presents; the poor papal envoys had nothing to present; whether this had anything to do with the length of time they had to wait before his Imperial Majesty could attend to their affairs we do not know; but days passed slowly by, and they were nearly dying of hunger and thirst, before they received a summons to appear before the Secretary of the Emperor, and letters to the Pope were given to them, ending with these words, “we worship GOD, and by His help we shall destroy the whole earth from east to west.”

The envoys had now nothing to wait for, and during the whole of the winter they travelled across icy deserts. About May they again arrived at the court of Prince Bathy, who gave them free passes, and they reached Kiev about the middle of June, 1247. On the 9th of October of the same year the Pope made Carpini Bishop of Antivari in Dalmatia, and this celebrated traveller died at Rome about the year 1251.

Carpini’s mission was not of much use, and the Tartars remained much as they were before, a savage and ferocious tribe; but six years after his return another monk of the minor order of Franciscans, named William Rubruquis, of Belgian origin, was sent to the barbarians who lived in the country between the Volga and the Don. The object of this journey was as follows,—

St. Louis was waging war against the Saracens of Syria at this time, and while he was engaging the Infidels, Erkalty, a Mongol prince, attacked them on the side nearest to Persia, and thus caused a diversion that was in favour of the King of France. The report arose that Prince Erkalty had become a Christian, and St. Louis, anxious to prove the truth of it, charged Rubruquis to go into the prince’s own country and there make what observations he could upon the subject.

In the month of June 1253, Rubruquis and his companions embarked for Constantinople. From thence they reached the mouth of the river Don on the Sea of Azov where they found a great number of Goths. On their arrival among the Tartars, their reception was at first very inhospitable, but after presenting the letters with which they were furnished, Zagathal, the governor of that province, gave them waggons, horses, and oxen for their journey.

Thus equipped they set out and were much surprised next day by meeting a moving village; that is to say, all the huts were placed on waggons and were being moved away. During the ten days that Rubruquis and his companions were passing through this part of the country they were very badly treated, and had it not been for their own store of biscuits, they must have died of starvation. After passing by the end of the Sea of Azov they went in an easterly direction and crossed a sandy desert on which neither tree nor stone was visible. This was the country of the Comans that Carpini had traversed, but in a more northerly part. Rubruquis left the mountains inhabited by the Circassians to the south, and after a wearisome journey of two months arrived at the camp of Prince Sartach on the banks of the Volga.

This was the court of the prince, the son of Baatu-Khan; he had six wives, each of whom possessed a palace of her own, some houses, and a great number of chariots, some of them very large, being drawn by a team of twenty-two oxen harnessed in pairs.

Sartach received the envoys of the King of France very graciously, and seeing their poverty, he supplied them with all that they required. They were to be presented to the prince in their sacerdotal dress, when, bearing on a cushion a splendid Bible, the gift of the King of France, a Psalter given by the Queen, a Missal, a crucifix and a censer, they entered the royal presence, taking good care not to touch the threshold of the door, which would have been considered profanation. Once in the royal presence, they sang the “Salve Regina.” After the prince and those of the princesses who were present at the ceremony had examined the books, &c. that the monks had brought with them, the envoys were allowed to retire; it being impossible for Rubruquis to form any opinion as to Sartach's being a Christian, or not; but his work was not yet finished, the prince having pressed the envoys to go to his father's court. Rubruquis complied with the request, and crossing the country lying between the Volga and the Don, they arrived at their destination. There the same ceremonies had to be gone through as at the court of Prince Sartach. The monks had to prepare their books, &c. and be presented to the Khan, who was seated on a large gilded throne, but not wishing to treat with the envoys himself, he sent them to Karakorum, to the court of Mangu-khan.

They crossed the country of the Bashkirs and visited Kenchat, Talach, passed the Axiartes and reached Equius, a town of which the position cannot be accurately ascertained in the present day; then by the land of Organum, by the Lake of Balkash, and the territory of the Uigurs, they arrived at Karakorum, the capital of the Mongolian empire, where Carpini had stopped without entering the town.

This town, says Rubruquis, was surrounded with walls of earth, and had four gates in the walls. The principal buildings it contained were two mosques and a Christian church. While in this city, the monk made many interesting observations on the surrounding people, especially upon the Tangurs, whose oxen, of a remarkable race, are no other than the Yaks, so celebrated in Thibet. In speaking of the Thibetans he notices their most extraordinary custom of eating the bodies of their fathers and mothers, in order to secure their having an honourable sepulture.

When Rubruquis and his companions reached Karakorum, they found that the great khan was not in his capital, but in one of his palaces which was situated on the further side of the mountains which rise in the northern part of the country. They followed him there, and the next day after their arrival presented themselves before him with bare feet, according to the Franciscan custom, so securing for themselves frozen toes. Rubruquis thus describes the interview: “Mangu-Khan is a man of middle height with a flat nose; he was lying on a couch clad in a robe of bright fur, which was speckled like the skin of a sea-calf.” He was surrounded with falcons and other birds. Several kinds of beverages, arrack punch, fermented mare’s milk, and ball, a kind of mead, were offered to the envoys; but they refused them all. The khan, less prudent than they, soon became intoxicated on these drinks, and the audience had to be ended without any result being arrived at. Rubruquis remained several days at Mangu-Khan’s court; he found there a great number of German and French prisoners, mostly employed in making different kinds of arms, or in working the mines of Bocol. The prisoners were well treated by the Tartars, and did not complain of their lot. After several interviews with the great khan, Rubruquis gained permission to leave, and he returned to Karakorum.

Near this town stood a magnificent palace, belonging to the khan; it was like a large church with nave and double aisles, here the sovereign sits at the northern end on a raised platform, the gentlemen being seated on his right, and the ladies on his left hand. It is at this palace that twice every year splendid fêtes are given, when all the nobles of the country are assembled round their sovereign.

While at Karakorum, Rubruquis collected many interesting documents relating to the Chinese, their customs, literature, &c.; then leaving the capital of the Mongols, he returned by the same route as he had come, as far as Astrakhan; but there he branched to the south and went to Syria with a Turkish escort, which was rendered necessary by the presence of tribes bent on pillage. He visited Derbend, and went thence by Nakshivan, Erzeroum, Sivas, Cæsarea, and Iconium, to the port of Kertch, whence he embarked for his own country. His route was much the same as that of Carpini, but his narrative is less interesting, and the Belgian does not seem to have been gifted with the spirit of observation which characterized the Italian monk.

With Carpini and Rubruquis closes the list of celebrated travellers of the thirteenth century, but we have the brilliant career of Marco Polo now before us, whose travels extended over part of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

CHAPTER IV.

MARCO POLO, 1253-1324.

I.

The interest of the Genoese and Venetian merchants in encouraging the exploration of Central Asia — The family of Polo, and its position in Venice — Nicholas and Matteo Polo, the two brothers — They go from Constantinople to the Court of the Emperor of China — Their reception at the Court of Kublaï-Khan — The Emperor appoints them his ambassadors to the Pope — Their return to Venice — Marco Polo — He leaves his father Nicholas and his uncle Matteo for the residence of the King of Tartary — The new Pope Gregory X. — The narrative of Marco Polo is written in French from his dictation, by Rusticien of Pisa.

The Genoese and Venetian merchants could not fail to be much interested in the explorations of the brave travellers in Central Asia, India, and China, for they saw that these countries would give them new openings for disposing of their merchandise, and also the great benefit to be derived by the West from being supplied with the productions of the East. The interests of commerce stimulated fresh explorations, and it was this motive that actuated two noble Venetians to leave their homes, and brave all the fatigue and danger of a perilous journey.

These two Venetians belonged to the family of Polo, which had come originally from Dalmatia, and, owing to successful trading, had become so opulent as to be reckoned among the patrician families of Venice. In 1260 the two brothers, Nicholas and Matteo, who had lived for some years in Constantinople, where they had established a branch house, went to the Crimea, with a considerable stock of precious stones, where their eldest brother, Andrea Polo, had his place of business. Thence, taking a north-easterly direction and crossing the country of the Comans, they reached the camp of Barkaï-Khan on the Volga. This Mongol prince received the two merchants very kindly, and bought all the jewels they offered him at double their value.

Nicolo and Matteo remained a year in the Mongolian camp, but a war breaking out at this time between Barkaï, and Houlagou, the conqueror of Persia, the two brothers, not wishing to be in the midst of a country where war was being waged, went to Bokhara, and there they remained three years. But when Barkaï was vanquished and his capital taken, the partisans of Houlagou induced the two Venetians to follow them to the residence of the grand Khan of Tartary, who was sure to give them a hearty welcome. This Kublaï-Khan, the fourth son of Gengis-Khan, was Emperor of China, and was then at his summer-palace in Mongolia, on the frontier of the Chinese empire.

The Venetian merchants set out, and were a whole year crossing the immense extent of country lying between Bokhara and the northern limits of China. Kublaï-Khan was much pleased to receive these strangers from the distant West. He fêted them, and asked, with much eagerness, for any information that they could give him of what was happening in Europe, requiring details of the government of the various kings and emperors, and their methods of making war; and he then conversed at some length about the Pope and the state of the Latin Church. Matteo and Nicolo fortunately spoke the Tartar language fluently, so they could freely answer all the emperor's questions.

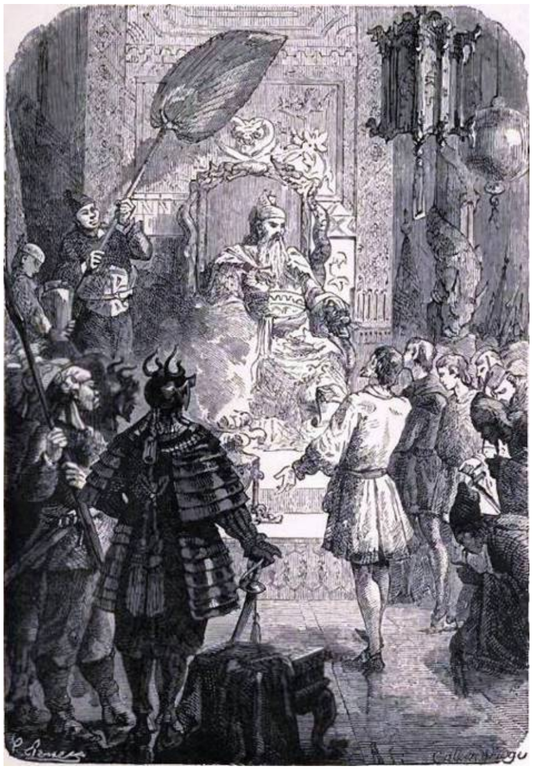

Kublaï-Khan’s feast on the arrival of the Venetian Merchants.

It had occurred to Kublaï-Khan to send messengers to the Pope; and he seized the opportunity to beg the two brothers to act as his ambassadors to his Holiness. The merchants thankfully accepted his proposal, for they foresaw that this new character would be very advantageous to them. The emperor had some charters drawn up in the Turkish language, asking the Pope to send a hundred learned men to convert his people to Christianity; then he appointed one of his barons named Cogatal to accompany them, and he charged them to bring him some oil from the sacred lamp, which is perpetually burning before the tomb of Christ at Jerusalem.

The two brothers took leave of the khan, having been furnished with passports by him, which put both men and horses at their disposal throughout the empire, and in 1266 they set out on their journey. Soon the baron Cogatal fell ill, and the Venetians were obliged to leave him and continue their journey; but in spite of all the aid that had been given to them, they were three years in reaching the port of Laïas, in Armenia, now known by the name of Issus. Leaving this port, they arrived at Acre in 1269, where they heard of the death of Pope Clement IV. to whom they were sent, but the legate Theobald lived in Acre and received the Venetians; learning what was the object of their mission he begged them to wait for the election of the new Pope.

The brothers had been absent from their country for fifteen years, so they resolved to return to Venice, and at Negropont they embarked on board a vessel that was going direct to their native town.

On landing there, Nicolo was met by news of the death of his wife, and of the birth of his son, who had been born shortly after his departure in 1254; this son was the celebrated Marco Polo. The two brothers waited at Venice for the election of the Pope, but at the end of two years, as it had not taken place, they thought they could no longer defer their return to the Emperor of the Mongols; accordingly they started for Acre, taking Marco Polo with them, who could not then have been more than seventeen. At Acre they had an interview with the legate Theobald, who authorized them to go to Jerusalem and there to procure some of the sacred oil. This mission accomplished, the Venetians returned to Acre and asked the legate to give them letters to Kublaï-Khan, mentioning the death of Pope Clement IV.; he complied with their request, and they returned to Laïas or Issus. There, to their great joy, they learnt that the legate Theobald had just been made Pope with the title of Gregory X. on the 1st of September, 1271. The newly-elected Pope sent at once for the Venetian envoys, and the King of Armenia placed a galley at their disposal to expedite their return to Acre. The Pope received them with much affection, and gave them letters to the Emperor of China; he added two preaching friars, Nicholas of Vicenza and William of Tripoli, to their party, and gave them his blessing on their departure. They went back to Laïas, but had scarcely arrived before they were made prisoners by the soldiers of the Mameluke Sultan Bibars, who was then ravaging Armenia. The two preaching friars were so discouraged at this outset of the expedition that they gave up all idea of going to China, and left the two Venetians and Marco Polo to prosecute the journey together as best they could.

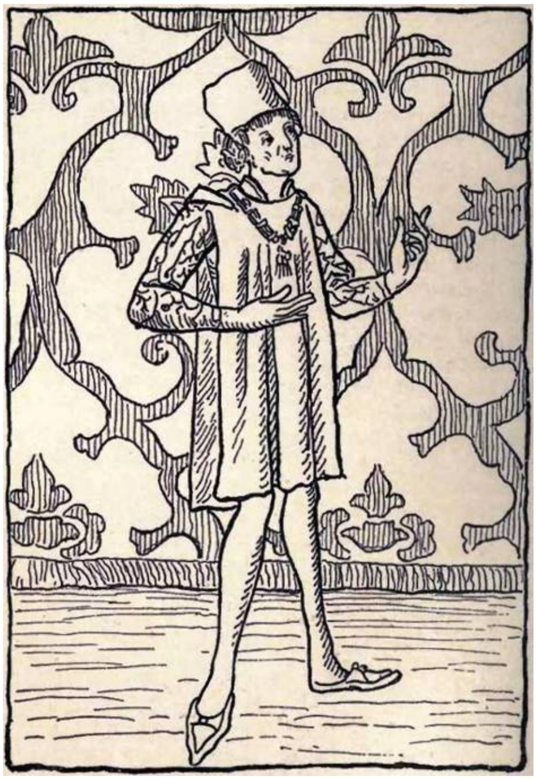

Marco Polo.

Here begins what may properly be called Marco Polo’s travels. It is a question if he really visited all the places that he describes, and it seems probable that he did not; in fact, in the narrative written at his dictation by Rusticien of Pisa it is stated “Marco-Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice, saw nearly all herein described with his own eyes, and what he did not see he learnt from the lips of truthful and credible witnesses;” but we must add that the greater part of the kingdoms and towns spoken of by Marco Polo he certainly did visit. We will follow the route he describes, simply pointing out what the traveller learnt by hearsay, during the important missions with which he was charged by Kublaï-Khan. During this second journey the travellers did not follow exactly the same road as on the first occasion of their visit to the Emperor of China. They had lengthened their route by passing to the north of the celestial mountains, but now they turned to the south of them, and though this route was shorter than the other, they were three years and a half in accomplishing their journey, being much impeded by the rains and the difficulty of crossing the great rivers. Their course may be easily followed with the help of a map of Asia, as we have substituted the modern names in place of the ancient ones used by Marco Polo in his narrative.

II.
MARCO POLO.

Armenia Minor — Armenia — Mount Ararat — Georgia — Mosul, Baghdad, Bussorah, Tauris — Persia — The Province of Kirman — Comadi — Ormuz — The Old Man of the Mountain — Cheburgan — Balkh — Cashmir — Kashgar — Samarcand — Kotan — The

Desert — Tangun — Kara-Korum — Signan-fu — The Great Wall — Chang-tou — The residence of Kublaï-Khan — Cambaluc, now Pekin — The Emperor’s fêtes — His hunting — Description of Pekin — Chinese Mint and bank-notes — The system of posts in the Empire.

Marco Polo left the town of Issus; he describes Armenia Minor as a very unhealthy place, the inhabitants of which, though once valiant, are now cowardly and wretched, their only talent seeming to lie in their capacity for drinking to excess. From Armenia Minor he went to Turcomania, whose inhabitants, though somewhat of savages, are clever in cultivating pastures and breeding horses and mules; and the townspeople excel in the manufacture of carpets and silk. Armenia Proper, that Marco Polo next visited, affords a good camping-ground to the Tartar armies during the summer. There the traveller saw Mount Ararat, where Noah’s Ark rested after the Deluge. He noticed that the lands bordering on the Caspian Sea afford large supplies of naphtha, which forms an important item in the trade of that neighbourhood.

When he left Armenia he took a north-easterly course towards Georgia, a kingdom lying on the south side of the Caucasus, whose ancient kings, says the legend, “were born with an eagle traced on their right shoulders.” The Georgians, he describes as good archers and men of war, and also as clever in working in gold and manufacturing silk. Here is a celebrated defile, four leagues in length, which lies between the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, that the Turks call the Iron Door, and Europeans the Pass of Derbend, and here too is the miraculous lake, where fish are said to exist only during Lent. Hence the travellers descended towards the kingdom of Mosul, and arrived at the town of the same name on the right bank of the Tigris, thence going to Baghdad, the residence of the Caliph of all the Saracens. Marco Polo gives an account of the taking of Baghdad by the Tartars in 1255; mentioning a wonderful story in support of the Christian idea of Faith, “that can remove mountains;” he points out the route from this town to the Persian Gulf, which may be reached in eighteen days by the river, passing Bussorah, the country of dates.

From this point to Tauris, a Persian town in the province of Adzer-baidjan, Marco Polo’s route seems to be doubtful. He takes up his narrative at Tauris, which he describes as a large flourishing town built in the midst of beautiful gardens and carrying on a great traffic in precious stones and other valuable merchandise, but its Saracen inhabitants are disloyal and treacherous. Here he seems to divide Persia geographically into eight provinces. The natives of Persia, according to him, are formidable enemies to the merchants, who are obliged to travel armed with bows and arrows. The principal trade of the country seems to be in horses and asses, which are sent to Kis or Ormuz and thence to India. The natural productions of the country are wheat, barley, millet, and grapes, which grow in abundance.

Marco Polo went next to Yezd, the most easterly town of Persia Proper; on leaving it, after a ride of seven days through magnificent forests abounding in game, he came to the province of Kirman. Here the mines yield large quantities of turquoise, as well as iron and antimony; the manufacture of arms and harness as well as embroidery and the training of falcons for hunting occupy a great number of the inhabitants. On leaving Kirman Marco Polo and his two companions set out on a nine days’ journey across a rich and populous country to the town of Comadi, which is supposed to be the Memaun of the present day, and was even then sinking into decay. The country was superb; on all sides were to be seen fine fat sheep, great oxen, white as snow, with short strong horns, and thousands of domestic fowls and other birds; also there were magnificent date, orange, and pistachio trees.

After travelling for five days they entered the beautiful and well watered plain of Cormos or Ormuz, and after two days' further march they reached the shores of the Persian Gulf and the town of Ormuz, which forms the sea-port of the kingdom of Kirman. This country they found very warm und unhealthy, but rich in date and spice trees, in grain, precious stones, silk and golden stuffs, and elephants' tusks, wine made from the date and other merchandise being brought into the town ready for shipment on board ships with but one mast, which came in numbers to the port; but many were lost on the voyage to India, as they were only built with wooden pegs, not iron nails, to fasten them together.

From Ormuz, Marco Polo, going up again towards the north-east, visited Kirman; then he ventured by dangerous roads across a sandy desert, where there was only brackish water to be found, the desert across which, 1500 years before, Alexander had led his army to meet Nearchus. Seven days afterwards he entered the town of Khabis. On leaving this town he crossed for eight days the great plains to Tonokan, the capital of the province of Kumis, probably Damaghan. At this point of his narrative Marco Polo gives an account of the "Old Man of the Mountain," the chief of the Mahometan sect called the Hashishins, who were noted for their religious fanaticism and terrible cruelty. He next visited the Khorassan town of Cheburgan, a city celebrated for its sweet melons, and then the noble city of Balkh, situated near the source of the Oxus. Next he crossed a country infested by lions to Taikan, a great salt-market frequented by a large number of merchants, and to Scasem; this town seems to be the Kashme spoken of by Marsden, the Kishin or Krishin of Hiouen-Tsang, which Sir Henry Rawlinson has identified with the hill of Kharesm of Zend-Avesta, that some commentators think must be the modern Koundouz. In this part of the country he says porcupines abound, and when they are hunted they curl themselves up, darting out the prickles on their sides and backs at the dogs that are hunting them. We now know how much faith to put in this pretended power of defence said to be possessed by the porcupine.

Marco Polo now entered the rocky mountainous kingdom of the Balkhs, whose kings claim descent from Alexander the Great; a cold country, producing good fast horses, excellent falcons, and all kinds of game. Here, too, are prolific ruby-mines worked by the king and which yield large quantities, but they are so strictly enclosed that no one on pain of death may set foot on the Sighinan mountain containing the mines. In other places silver is found, and many precious stones, of which he says “they make the finest azure in the world,” meaning lapis-lazuli; his stay in this part of the country must have been a long one to have enabled him to observe so many of its characteristics. Ten days’ journey from hence he entered a province which must be the Peshawur of the present day, whose dark-skinned inhabitants were idolaters; then after seven days’ further march, about mid-day he came to the kingdom of Cashmere, where the temperature is cool, and towns and villages are very numerous. Had Marco Polo continued his route in the same direction he would soon have reached the territory of India, but instead of that he took a northerly course, and in twelve days was in Vaccan, a land watered by the Upper Oxus, which runs through splendid pastures, where feed immense flocks of wild sheep, called mufflons. Thence he went through a mountainous country, lying between the Altai and Himalayan ranges to Kashgar. Here Marco Polo’s route is the same as that of his uncle and his father during their first voyage, when from Bokhara they were taken to the residence of the great khan. From Kashgar, Marco Polo diverged a little to the west, to Samarcand, a large town inhabited by Saracens and Christians, then to Yarkand, a city frequented by caravans trading between India and Northern Asia; passing by Khotan, the capital of the province of that name, and by Pein, a town whose situation is uncertain, but in a part of the country where chalcedony and jasper abound. He came to the kingdom of Kharachar, which extends along the borders of the desert of Jobe; then after five days' further travelling over sandy plains, where there was no water fit to drink, he rested for eight days in the city of Lob, a place now in ruins, while he prepared to cross the desert lying to the east, "so great a desert," he says, "that it would require a year to traverse its whole length, a haunted wilderness, where drums and other instruments are heard, though invisible."

After spending a year crossing this desert, Marco Polo reached Tcha-tcheou, in the province of Tangaut, a town built on the western limits of the Chinese empire. There are but few merchants here, the greater part of the population being agricultural. The custom that seems to have struck him the most in the province of Tangaut, was that of burning their dead only on a day fixed by the astrologers; "all the time that the dead remain in their houses, the relations stay there with them, preparing a place at each meal as well as providing both food and drink for the corpse, as though it were still alive."

Marco Polo and his companions made an excursion to the north-east, to the city of Amil, going on as far as Ginchintalas, a town inhabited by idolaters, Mahometans, and Nestorian Christians, whose situation is disputed. From this town Marco Polo returned to Tcha-tcheou, and went eastward across Tangaut, by the town of So-ceu, over a tract of country particularly favourable to the cultivation of rhubarb, and by Kanpiceon, the Khan-tcheou of the Chinese, then the capital of the province of Tangaut, an important town, whose numerous chiefs are idolaters and polygamists. The three Venetians remained a year in this large city; it is easy to understand, from their long halts and deviations, why they required three years for their journey across Central Asia.

They left Khan-tcheou, and after riding for twelve days they reached the borders of a sandy desert, and entered the city of Etzina. This was another détour, as it lay directly north of their route, but they wished to visit Kara-Korum, the celebrated capital of Tartary, where Rubruquis had been in 1254. Marco Polo was certainly an explorer by nature; fatigue was nothing to him if he had any geographical studies to complete, which is proved by his spending forty days crossing an uninhabited desert without vegetation, in order to reach the Tartar town.

When he arrived there, he found a city measuring three miles in circumference, which had been for a long time the capital of the Empire, before it was conquered by Gengis-Khan, the grandfather of the reigning emperor. Here Marco Polo makes an historical digression, in which he gives an account of the wars of the Tartar chiefs against the famous Prester John who held all this part of the country under his dominion.

Marco Polo after returning to Khan-tcheou left it again, marching five days towards the east, and arriving at the town of Erginul. Thence he went a little to the south to visit Sining-foo, across a tract of country where grazed great wild oxen and the valuable species of goat which is called the "musk-bearer." Returning to Erginul, they went eastward to Cialis, where there is the best manufactory of cloth made from camels' hair in the world, to Tenduc, a town in the province of the same name, where a descendant of Prester John reigned, but who had given in his submission to the great khan; this was a busy flourishing town: from hence the travellers went to Sinda-tchou, and on beyond the great wall of China as far as Ciagannor, which must be Tzin-balgassa, a pretty town where the emperor lives when he wishes to hawk; for cranes, storks, pheasants, and partridges abound in this neighbourhood.

At last Marco Polo, his father, and his uncle, reached Ciandu or Tchan-tchou of the present day, called elsewhere in this narrative Clemen-foo. Here Kublaï-Khan received the papal envoys, for he was occupying his summer palace beyond the great wall, north of Pekin, which was then the capital of the empire. The traveller does not tell us what reception he met with, but he describes most carefully the palace, the grandeur of the building of stone and marble, standing in the middle of a park surrounded by walls, enclosing menageries and fountains. Also a building made of reeds, so closely interlaced as to be impenetrable to water; it was a sort of movable kiosk that the great khan inhabited during the fine months of June, July, and August. The weather during the emperor’s sojourn in this summer palace could not but be beautiful, for, according to Marco Polo, the astrologers who were attached to the khan’s court were charged to scatter all rain and fog by their sorcery, and the travellers seem to believe in the power of these magicians. “These astrologers,” he says, “belong to two races, both idolaters; they are learned in all magic and enchantments, above any other men, and what they do is done by the aid of the devil, but they make others believe that they owe their power to the help of God, and their own holiness. These people have the following strange custom: when a man has been condemned and put to death, they take the body, cook, and eat it; but in the case of a natural death they do not eat the body. And you must know that these people of whom I am speaking, who know so many kinds of enchantments, work the wonder I am about to relate. When the great khan is seated at dinner in the principal dining-hall, the table of which is eight cubits in length, and the cups are on the floor ten paces from the table, filled with wine, milk, and other good beverages, these clever magicians, by their arts, make these cups rise by themselves, and without any one touching them, they are placed before the great khan. This has been done before an immense number of people, and is the exact truth; and those skilled in necromancy will tell you that it is quite possible to do this.”

Marco Polo next gives a history of Kublaï, whom he considers to possess more lands and treasures than any man since our first father, Adam. He tells how the great khan ascended the throne in the year 1256, being then eighty-five; he was a man of middle height, rather stout, but of a fine figure, with a good complexion and black eyes. He was a good commander in war, and his talents were put to the proof when his uncle Naïan, having rebelled against him, wished to dispute his power at the head of 400,000 cavalry. Kublaï-Khan collected (in secret) a force of 300,000 horsemen, and 100,000 foot-soldiers, and marched against his uncle. The battle was a most terrible one, so many men being killed, but the khan was victorious, and Naïan, as a prince of the blood royal, was condemned to be sewn up tightly in a carpet, and died in great suffering. After his victory the khan made a triumphal entry into Cathay, capital of Cambaluc, or, as it is now called, Pekin. When Marco Polo arrived at this city he made a long stay there, remaining until the emperor needed his services to undertake various missions into the interior of China. The emperor had a splendid palace at Cambaluc, and the traveller gives so graphic an account of the riches and magnificence of the Mongol sovereigns, that we give it word for word. “The palace is surrounded by a great wall, a mile long each way, four miles in length altogether, very thick, ten feet in height, all white and battlemented. At each corner of this wall is a palace beautiful and rich, in which all the trappings of war belonging to the great khan are kept; his bows, quivers, the saddles and bridles of the horses, the bow-strings, in fact everything that would be wanted in time of war; in the midst of each square is another building, like those at the corner, so that there are eight in all, and each building contains one particular kind of harness or trapping. In the wall on the south side are five doors, the middle or large door only being opened when the emperor wishes to go in or out; near this great gate on either side is a smaller one through which other people may pass, and two others for the same purpose. Inside this wall is another, having also eight buildings to be used in the same manner.”

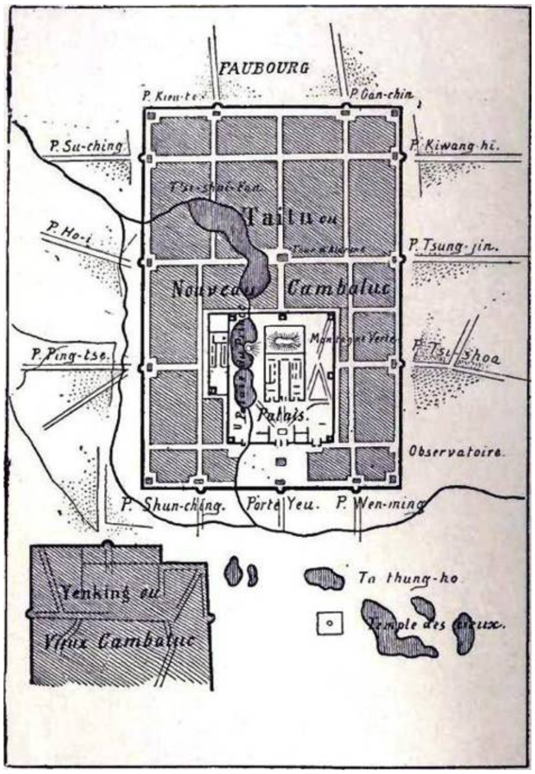
FAUBOURG
P. Kieu-te
P. Gan-chin
P. Su-ching
P. Kiwang-hi.
Taitu ou
P. Ho-i
P. Tsung-jin.
Nouveau Cambaluc
Montagne Verte
P. Ping-tse.
P. Tsi-shoa
Palais.
Observatoire.
P. Shun-ching.
Porte Yeu.
P. Wen-ming
Yenking ou
Vieux Cambaluc
Ta thung-ho
Temple des cieux.

Plan of Pekin.

Thus we see that all these buildings constituted the emperor’s armoury and harness-store; we shall not be surprised that there was so much harness to be kept when we know that the emperor possessed a race of horses white as snow, and among them ten thousand mares, whose milk was reserved for the sole use of princes of the blood royal.

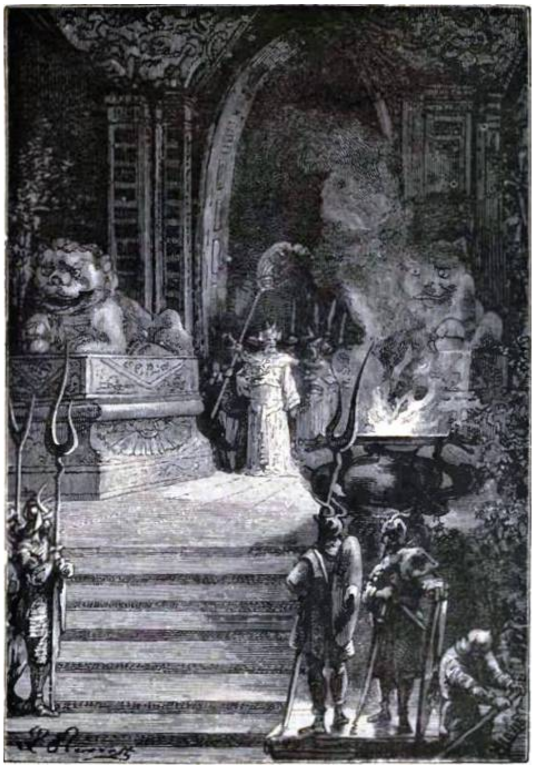

The Emperor’s palace at Pekin.

Marco Polo continues his narrative thus: — ”The inner wall has five gates on the south side, answering to those in the outer wall, but on the other sides the walls have only one gate each. In the centre of the enclosure made by these walls, stands the palace, the largest in the world. It has no second story, but the ground-floor is raised about eight feet above the ground. The roof is very high, the walls of the rooms are covered with gold and silver, and on this gold and silver are paintings of dragons, birds, horses, and other animals, so that nothing can be seen but gilding and pictures. The dining-hall is large enough to hold 6000 men, and the number of other rooms is marvellous, and all is so well arranged that it could not be improved. The ceilings are painted vermillion, green, blue, yellow, and all kinds of colours, varnished so as to shine like crystal, and the roof is so well built that it will last for many years. Between the two walls the land is laid out in fields with fine trees in them, containing different species of animals, the musk-ox, white deer, roe-buck, fallow-deer, and other animals, who fill the space between the walls, except the roads reserved for human beings. On the north-western side is a great lake, full of fishes of divers kinds, for the great khan has had several species placed there, and each time that he desires it to be done, he has his will in it. A river rises in this lake and flows out from the grounds of the palace, but no fish escape in it, there being iron and brass nets to prevent their doing so. On the northern side, near an arched doorway, the emperor has had a mound made, a hundred feet in height and more than a mile in circumference; it is covered with evergreen trees, and the emperor, being very fond of horticulture, whenever he hears of a fine tree, sends for it and has it brought by his elephants, with the roots and surrounding soil, the size of the tree being no impediment, and thus he has the finest collection of trees in the world. The hill is called ‘green hill,’ from its being covered with evergreen trees and green turf, and on the top of the hill is a house. This hill is altogether so beautiful that it is the admiration of every one.”

After Marco Polo has concluded his description of this palace, he gives one of that of the emperor’s son and heir; then he speaks of the town of Cambaluc, the old town which is separated from the modern town of Taidu by a canal, the same which divides the Chinese and Tartar quarters of Pekin. The traveller gives many particulars of the emperor’s habits, and among other things, he says that Kublaï-Khan has a body-guard of 2000 horse-soldiers; but he adds, “it is not fear that causes him to keep this guard.” His meals are real ceremonies, and etiquette is most rigidly enforced. His table is raised above the others, and he always sits on the north side with his principal wife on his right, and lower down his sons, nephews, and relations; he is waited upon by noble barons, who are careful to envelope their mouths and noses in fine cloth of gold, "so that their breath and their odour may not contaminate the food or drink of their lord." When the emperor is about to drink, a band of music plays, and when he takes the cup in his hand, all the barons and every one present, fall on their knees.

The principal fêtes given by the grand khan were on the anniversary of his birth, and on the first day of the year. At the first, 12,000 barons were accustomed to assemble round the throne, and to them were presented annually 150,000 garments made of gold and silk and ornamented with pearls, whilst the subjects, idolaters as well as Christians, offered up public prayers. At the second of these fêtes, on the first day of the year, the whole population, men and women alike, appeared dressed in white, following the tradition that white brings good fortune, and every one brought gifts to the king of great value. One hundred thousand richly-caparisoned horses, five thousand elephants covered with handsome cloths and carrying the imperial plate, as well as a large number of camels, passed in procession before the emperor.

During the three winter months of December, January, and February, when the khan is living in his winter palace, all the nobles within a radius of sixty days' march are obliged to supply him with boars, stags, fallow-deer, roes, and bears. Besides, Kublaï is a great huntsman himself, and his hunting-train is superbly mounted and kept up. He has leopards, lynxes and fine lions trained to hunt for wild animals, eagles strong enough to chase wolves, foxes, fallow and roe-deer, and, as Marco Polo says, "often to take them too," and his dogs may be counted by thousands. It is about March when the emperor begins his principal hunting in the direction of the sea, and he is accompanied by no less than 10,000 falconers, 500 gerfalcons, and many goshawks, peregrine, and sacred falcons. During the hunting excursion, a portable palace, covered outside with lions' skins and inside with cloth of gold, and carried on four elephants harnessed together, accompanies the emperor everywhere, who seems to enjoy all this oriental pomp and display. He goes as far as the camp of Chachiri-Mongou, which is situated on a stream, a tributary of the river Amoor, and the tent is set up, which is large enough to hold ten thousand nobles. This is his reception-saloon where he gives audiences; and when he wishes to sleep he goes into a tent which is hung all round with ermine and sable furs of almost priceless value. The emperor lives thus till about Easter, hunting cranes, swans, hares, stags, roebucks, &c. and then returns to his capital, Cambaluc.

Marco Polo now completes his description of this fine city and enumerates the twelve quarters it contains, in many of which the rich merchants have their palatial houses, for commerce flourishes in this town, and more valuable merchandise is brought to it than to any other in the world. It is the depôt and market for the richest productions of India, such as pearls and precious stones, and merchants come from long distances round to purchase them. The khan has established a mint here for the benefit of trade, and it is an inexhaustible source of revenue to him. The bank-notes, sealed with the emperor's seal, are made of a kind of card-board manufactured from the bark of the mulberry-tree. The card-board thus prepared is cut into various thicknesses according to the value of the money it is supposed to represent. The currency of this money is enforced, none daring to refuse it "on pain of death;" the emperor using it in all his payments, and enforcing its circulation throughout his dominions. Besides this, several times in the year the possessors of precious stones, pearls, gold, or silver, are obliged to bring their treasures to the mint and receive in exchange for them these pieces of card-board, so that, in fact, the emperor becomes the possessor of all the riches in his empire.

According to Marco Polo the system of the Imperial Government was wonderfully centralized. “The kingdom is divided into thirty-four provinces, and is governed by twelve of the greatest barons living in Cambaluc; in the same palace also reside the intendants and secretaries, who conduct the business of each province. From this central city a great number of roads diverge to the various parts of the kingdom, and on these roads are now post-houses stationed at intervals of twenty-two miles, where well-mounted messengers are always ready to carry the emperor’s messages. Besides this, at every three miles on the road there is a little hamlet of about fourteen houses where the couriers live, who carry messages on foot; these men wear a belt round their waists and have a girdle with bells attached to it, that are heard at a long distance; they start at a gallop, quickly accomplishing the three miles and giving the message to the courier who is waiting for it at the next hamlet; thus the emperor receives news from places at long distances from the capital in a comparatively short time.” This mode of communication also involved but small expense to Kublaï-Khan, as the only remuneration he gave these couriers was their exemption from taxation, and as to the horses, they were furnished gratuitously by the provinces.

But if the emperor used his power in this manner to lay heavy burdens upon his subjects, he exerted himself actively for their good, and was always ready to help them; for instance, when their crops were damaged by hail-storms, he not only remitted all taxes, but gave them corn from his own stores, and when there was any great mortality among the flocks and herds in any particular province, he always replaced them at his own expense. He was careful to have a large quantity of wheat, barley, millet, and rice, stored up in years of abundant harvest, so as to keep the price of grain at a uniform rate when the harvest failed. He was particularly careful of the poor who lived in Cambaluc. “He had a list made of all the poorest houses in the town, where they were usually short of food, and supplied them liberally with wheat and other grain according to the size of their families, and bread was never refused to any applying at the palace for it; it is computed that at least 30,000 persons avail themselves of this daily throughout the year. His kindness to his poor subjects makes them almost worship him.” The whole affairs of the empire are administered with great care, the roads well kept up and planted with fine trees, so that from a distance their direction can easily be traced. There is no want of wood, and in Cathay they work a number of coal-pits which supply abundance of coal.

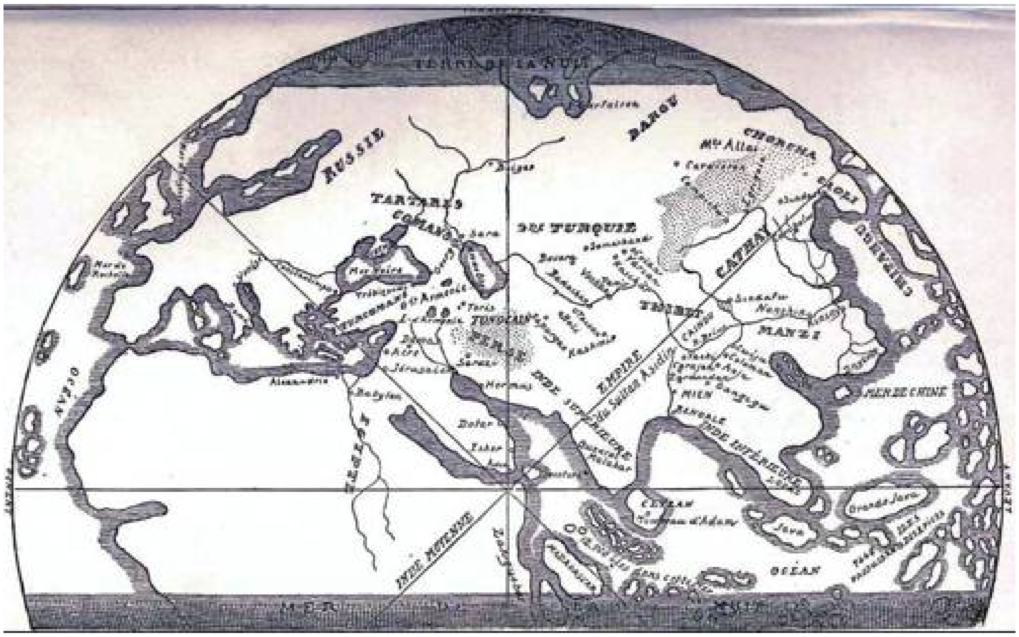
TERRE DE LA NUIT
RUSSIE
TARTARES
Sara
DU TURQUIE
Mt Altai
CATHAY
MANZI
Alexandrie
Babylon
EMPIRE
MER DE CHINE
INDE MOYENNE
CEYLAN
Java
Grande Java
OCEAN

Marco Polo remained a long time at Cambaluc, and his intelligence, spirit, and readiness in adapting himself, made him a great favourite with the emperor. He was intrusted with various missions, not only in China, but also to places on the coast of India, Ceylon, the Coromandel and Malabar coasts, and a part of Cochin-China near Cambogia, and between the years

1277 and 1280 he was made governor of Yang-tcheou, and of twenty-seven other towns which were joined with it under the same government. Thanks to the missions on which he was sent, he travelled over an immense extent of country, and gained a great amount of ethnological and geographical knowledge. We can now follow him map in hand through some of these journeys, which were of the greatest service to science.

III.

MARCO POLO.

Tso-cheu — Tai-yen-fou — Pin-yang-fou — The Yellow River — Signan-fou — Szu-tchouan — Ching-tu-fou — Thibet — Li-kiang-fou — Carajan — Yung-tchang — Mien — Bengal — Annam — Tai-ping — Cintingui — Sindifoo — Té-cheu — Tsi-nan-fou — Lin-tsin-choo — Lin-sing — Mangi — Yang-tcheu-fou — Towns on the coast — Quin-say or Hang-tcheou-foo — Fo-kien.

When Marco Polo had been at Cambaluc some time, he was sent on a mission that kept him absent from the capital for four months. Ten miles southwards from Cambaluc, he crossed the fine river Pe-ho-nor (which he calls the Pulisanghi), by a stone bridge of twenty-four arches, and 300 feet in length, which was then without parallel in the world. Thirty miles further on he came to the town of Tso-cheu, where a large trade in sandal-wood is carried on; at ten days’ journey from hence he came to the modern town of Tai-yen-fou, which was once the seat of an independent government. All the province of Shan-si seemed rich in vines and mulberry-trees; the principal industry in the towns was the making of armour for the emperor’s use.

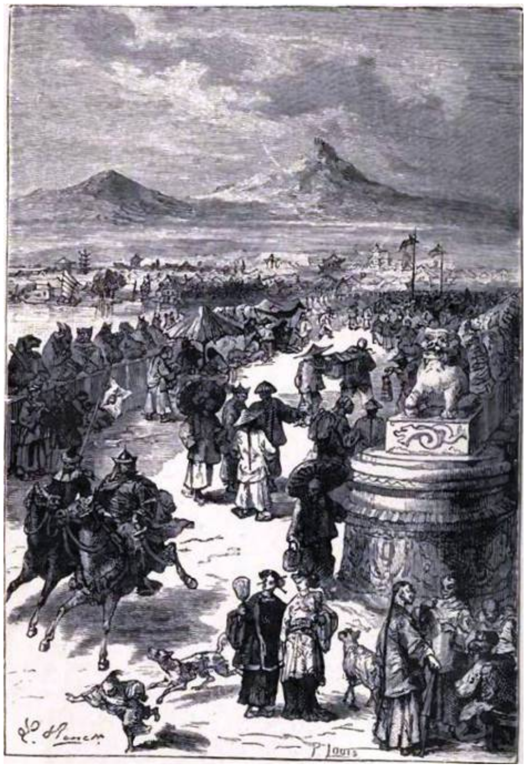

A fine bridge of stone built on twenty-four arches.

Seven days' journey further on they came to the beautiful commercial city of Pianfou, now called Pin-yang-foo, where the manufacture of silk was carried on. He soon afterwards came to the banks of the Yellow River, which he calls Caramoran or Black River, probably on account of its waters being darkened by the aquatic plants growing in them; at two days' journey from hence he came to the town of Cacianfu, whose position is not now clearly defined. He found nothing remarkable in this town, and leaving it he rode across a beautiful country, covered with towns, country-houses, and gardens, and abounding in game.

In eight days he reached the fine city of Quangianfoo, the ancient capital of the Tâng dynasty, now called Signanfoo, and the capital of Shensi; here reigned Prince Mangalai, the emperor’s son, an upright and amiable prince, much loved by his people. He lived in a magnificent palace outside the town, built in the midst of a park, of which the battlemented wall cannot have been less than five miles in circumference.

From Signanfoo, the traveller went towards Thibet, across the modern province of Szu-tchouan, a mountainous country intersected by deep valleys, where lions, bears, lynxes, &c. abounded, and after twenty-eight days’ march he found himself on the borders of the great plain of Acmelic-mangi. This is a fertile country and produces all kinds of vegetation; ginger is especially cultivated; there is sufficient to supply all the province of Cathay, and so fertile is the soil that according to a French traveller, M. E. Simon, an acre is now worth 15,000 francs, or three francs the metre. In the thirteenth century this plain was covered with towns and country-houses, and the inhabitants lived upon the fruits of the ground, and the produce of their flocks and herds, while the large quantity of game furnished hunters with abundant occupation.

Marco Polo next visited the town of Sindafou (now Tching-too-foo), the capital of the province of Se-tchu-an, whose population at the present day exceeds 1,500,000 souls. Sindafu, measuring at that time twenty miles round, was divided into three parts, each surrounded with its own wall, and each part had a king of its own before Kublaï-Khan took possession of the town. The great river Kiang ran through the town: it contained large quantities of fish, and from its size resembled a sea more than a river; its waters were covered by a vast number of vessels. Five days after leaving this busy, thriving town Marco Polo reached the province of Thibet, which he says “is very desolate, for it has been destroyed by the war.”

Thibet abounds in lions, bears, and other savage animals, from which the travellers would have much difficulty in defending themselves had it not been for the quantity of large thick canes that grow there, which are probably bamboos: he says, "the merchants and travellers passing through these countries at night collect a quantity of these canes and make a large fire of them, for when they are burning they make such a noise and crackle so much, that the lions, bears, and other wild beasts take flight to a distance, and would not approach these fires on any account; thus both men, horses, and camels are safe. In another way, too, protection is afforded by throwing a number of these canes on a wood fire, and when they become heated and split, and the sap hisses, the sound is heard at least ten miles off. When any one is not accustomed to this noise, it is so terrifying that even the horses will break away from their cords and tethers; so their owners often bandage their eyes and tie their feet together to prevent their running away." This method of burning canes is still used in countries where the bamboo grows, and indeed the noise may be compared to the loudest explosion of fire-works.

According to Marco Polo, Thibet is a very large province, having its own language; and its inhabitants, who are idolaters, are a race of bold thieves. A large river, the Khin-cha-kiang, flows over auriferous sands through the province; a quantity of coral is found in it which is much used for idols, and for the adornment of the women. Thibet was at this time under the dominion of the great khan.

The traveller took a westerly direction when he left Sindafou, and crossing the kingdom of Gaindu he must have come to Li-kiang-foo, the capital of the country that is now called Tsi-mong. In this province he visited a beautiful lake which produces pearl-oysters; the fishing is the emperor's property; he also found great quantities of cinnamon, ginger, cloves, and other spices under cultivation.

After leaving the province of Gaindu, and crossing a large river, probably the Irrawaddy, Marco Polo took a south-easterly course to the province of Carajan, which probably forms the north-western part of Yunnan. According to his account all the inhabitants of this province, who are mostly great riders, live on the raw flesh of fowls, sheep, buffaloes, and oxen; the rich seasoning their raw meat with garlic sauce and good spices. This country is infested with great adders, and serpents, “hideous to look upon.” These reptiles, probably alligators, were ten feet long, had two legs armed with claws, and with their large heads and great jaws could at one gulp swallow a man.

Five days’ journey west of Carajan, Marco Polo took a new route to the south, and entered the province of Zardandan, whose capital Nocian, is the modern town of Yung-chang. All the inhabitants of the city had teeth of gold; that is to say, they covered their teeth with little plates of gold which they removed before eating. The men of this province employed themselves only in hunting, catching birds, and making war, the hard work all devolving upon the women and slaves. These Zardanians have neither idols nor churches, but they each worship their ancestor, the patriarch of the family. Their tradesmen carry their goods about on barrows like the bakers in France. They have no doctors, but only enchanters, who jump, dance, and play musical instruments around the invalid’s bed till he either dies or recovers.

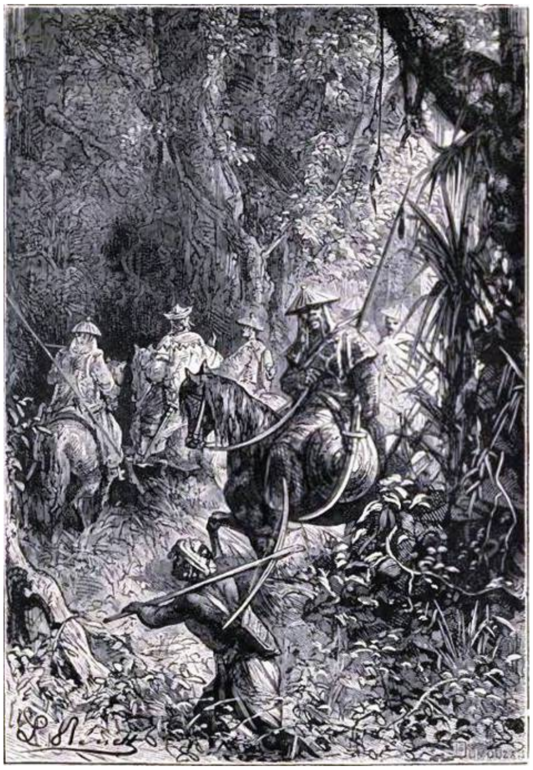

Marco Polo in the midst of the forests.

Leaving these people with gilded teeth, Marco Polo took the great road which conveys all the traffic between India and Indo-China, and passed by Bhamo, where a market is held three times a week, which attracts merchants from the most distant countries. After riding for fifteen days through forests filled with elephants, unicorns, and other wild animals, he came to the great city of Mien; that is to say, to that part of Upper Burmah, of which the present capital, of recent erection, is called Amarapura. This city of Mien, which may be, perhaps, the old town of Ava now in ruins, or the old town of Paghan situated on the Irrawaddy, possessed a veritable architectural marvel, in two towers, one built of fine stone, and entirely covered with a coating of gold about an inch in thickness, and the other, also of stone, coated with silver, both intended to serve as a tomb for the king of Mien, before his kingdom fell under the dominion of the khan. After visiting this province, the traveller went to Bangala, the Bengal of the present day, which at this time, 1290, did not belong to Kublaï-Khan. The emperor’s forces were then engaged in trying to conquer this fertile country, rich in cotton plants, in sugar-canes, &c. and whose magnificent oxen were like elephants in height. From thence, the traveller ventured as far as the city of Cancigu, in the province of the same name, probably the modern town of Kassaye. The natives here tattooed their bodies, and with needles drew pictures of lions, dragons, and birds on their faces, necks, bellies, hands, legs, and bodies, and he who had the greatest number of these pictures they considered the most beautiful of human beings.

Cancigu was the most southerly point visited by Marco Polo, during this journey. Leaving this city, he went towards the north-east, and by the country of Amu, Anam, and Tonkin, he reached Toloman, now called Tai-ping, after fifteen days’ march. There he found that fine race of men, of dark colour, who have crowned their mountains with strong castles, and whose ordinary food is the flesh of animals, milk, rice, and spices.

On leaving Toloman, he followed the course of a river for twelve days, and found numerous towns on its banks. Here, as M. Charton truly observes, the traveller is leaving the country known as India beyond the Ganges, and returning towards China. In fact, Marco Polo after leaving Toloman visited the province of Guigui with its capital of the same name, and what struck him most in this country, (and we cannot but think that the bold explorer was also a keen hunter) was the great number of lions that were to be seen about its mountains and plains. Only, commentators are of opinion that the lions he speaks of must have been tigers, for no lions are found in China, but we will give his own words: he says, “There are so many lions in this country, that it is not safe to sleep out of doors for fear of being devoured. And when you are on the river and stop for the night, you must be careful to anchor far from land, for otherwise the lions come to the vessel, seize upon a man, and devour him. The inhabitants of this part of the country are well aware of this, and so take measures to guard against it. These lions are very large and very dangerous, but there are dogs in this country brave enough to attack these lions; it requires two dogs and a man to overcome each lion.”

From this province Marco Polo returned to Sindifu, the capital of the province of Se-chuen, whence he had started on his excursion into Thibet; and retracing the route by which he had set out, he returned to Kublaï-Khan, after having brought his mission to Indo-China to a satisfactory termination. It was probably at this time that the traveller was first entrusted by the emperor with another mission to the south-east of China. M. Pauthier, in his fine work upon the Venetian traveller, speaks of this south-easterly part of China as “the richest and most flourishing quarter of this vast empire and that also about which, since the 16th century, Europeans have had the most information.”

As we return to the route that M. Pauthier has traced on his map, we find that Marco Polo went southwards to Ciangli, probably the town of Ti-choo, and at six days’ journey from thence he came to Condinfoo, the present city of Tsi-nan, the capital of the province of Shan-tung, the birthplace of Confucius. It was at that time a fine town and much frequented by silk-merchants, and its beautiful gardens produced abundance of excellent fruit. Three days’ march from hence, the traveller came to the town of Lin-tsing, standing at the mouth of the Yu-ho canal, the principal rendezvous for the innumerable boats that carry so much merchandise to the provinces of Mangi and Cathay. Eight days afterwards he passed by Ligui, which seems to correspond to the modern town of Lin-tsin, and the town of Piceu, the first city in the province of Tchang-su; then by the town of Cingui, he arrived at Caramoran, the Yellow River, which he had crossed higher up when he was on his way to Indo-China; here Marco Polo was not more than a league from the mouth of this great river. After crossing it he was in the province of Mangi, a territory included in the Empire of the Soongs.

Before this province of Mangi belonged to Kublaï-Khan it was governed by a very pacific king, who shunned war, and was very merciful to all his subjects. Marco Polo describes him so well that we will quote his own words. “This last emperor of the Soong dynasty was most generous, and I will cite but two noble traits to show this; every year he had nearly 20,000 infants brought up at the royal charge, for it was the custom in these provinces, when a poor woman could not bring up a child herself, to cast it away as soon as it was born, to die. The king had all these children taken care of, and a record kept of the sign and the planet under which each was born, and then they were sent to different places to be brought up, for there are a quantity of nurses. When a rich man had no sons, he came to the king and asked of him some of his wards, who were immediately given to him. As the children grew up they intermarried, and the king gave them sufficient incomes to live upon. When he went through his dominions and saw a small house among several much larger ones, he inquired why this house was smaller than those near it, and if he found it was on account of the poverty of the owner, he immediately had it made as large as the others at his own expense. He was always waited upon by a thousand pages and a thousand girls. He kept up such rigorous discipline throughout his kingdom that there was never any crime; at night, houses and shops remained open, and nothing was taken from them, and travelling was as safe by night as by day.”

Marco Polo came first to the town of Coigangui, now called Hoang-fou, on the banks of the Yellow River, where the principal industry is the preparation of the salt found in the salt marshes. One day’s journey from this town he came to Pau-in-chen, famous for its cloth of gold, and the town of Caiu, now Kao-yu, whose inhabitants are clever fishermen and hunters, then to the city of Tai-cheu, where numerous vessels are generally to be found, and at last to the city of Yangui.

This town of Yangui, of which Marco Polo was the governor for three years, is the modern Yang-tchou; it is a very populous and busy town, and cannot be less than two leagues in circumference. It was from Yangui that the traveller set out on the various expeditions which enabled him to see so much of the inland and sea-coast towns.

First, the traveller went westward to Nan-ghin, which must not be confounded with Nan-kin of the present day. Its modern name is Ngan-khing, and it stands in the midst of a remarkably fertile province. Further on in the same direction he came to Saianfu, which is now called Siang-yang, and is built in the northern part of the province of Hou-pe. This was the last town in the province of Mangi that resisted the dominion of Kublaï-Khan; he besieged it for three years, and he owed his taking it at last to the help of the three Polos, who constructed some powerful balistas and crushed the besieged under a perfect hail-storm of stones, some of which weighed as much as three hundred pounds. From Saianfu Marco Polo retraced his steps that he might visit some of the towns on the sea-coast. He visited Kui-kiang on the river Kiang, which is very broad here, and upon which 5000 ships can sail at the same moment; Kain-gui, which supplies the Emperor’s palace with corn; Ching-kiang where are two Nestorian Christian churches; Ginguigui, now Tchang-tcheou, a busy thriving city; and Singui, now called

Soo-choo, a large town, which, according to the very exaggerated account of the Venetian traveller, has no less than 6000 bridges.

After spending some time at Vugui, probably Hou-tcheou, and at Ciangan, now Kia-hing, Marco Polo reached the fine city of Quinsay, after three days' march. This name means the "City of Heaven," but it is now called Hang-chow-foo. It is six leagues round; the river Tsien-tang-kiang flows through it, and by its constant windings, makes Quinsay almost a second Venice. This ancient capital of the Soongs is almost as populous as Pekin; its streets are paved with stones and bricks, and if we may credit Marco Polo's statement, it contained "600,000 houses, 4000 bathing establishments, and 12,000 stone bridges." In this city dwell the richest merchants in the world with their wives, who are "beautiful and angelic creatures." It is the residence of a viceroy, who has besides, 140 other cities under his dominion. Here was to be seen also the palace of the Mangi sovereigns surrounded by beautiful gardens, lakes, and fountains, the palace itself containing more than a thousand rooms. Kublaï-Khan draws immense revenues from this town and province, and it is by tens of thousands of pounds we must reckon the income derived from the sugar, salt, spices, and silk, which form the principal productions of this country. At one day's journey south from Quinsay, Marco Polo visited Chao-hing, Vugui, or Hou-tcheou, Ghengui or Kui-tcheou, Cianscian or Yo-tcheou-fou (according to M. Charton), and Sonï-tchang-fou (according to M. Pauthier), and Cugui or Kiou-tcheou, the last town in the kingdom of Quinsay; thence he entered the kingdom of Fugui, whose chief town of the same name is now called Fou-tcheou-foo, the capital of the province of Fo-kien. According to Marco Polo, the inhabitants of this province are a cruel warlike race, never sparing their enemies, of whom, after they have killed them, they drink the blood and eat the flesh. After passing by Quenlifu, now Kien-ning-foo, and Unguen, the traveller entered Fugui, probably the modern town of Kuanttcheou (called Canton amongst us), and the chief town of the province, where a large trade in pearls and precious stones was carried on, and in five days he reached the port of Zaitem, probably the Chinese town of Tsiuen-tcheou, which was the extreme point reached by him in this exploration of south-eastern China.

IV.

MARCO POLO.

Japan — Departure of the three Venetians with the Emperor's daughter and the Persian ambassadors — Sai-gon — Java — Condor — Bintang — Sumatra — The Nicobar Islands — Ceylon — The Coromandel coast — The Malabar coast — The Sea of Oman — The island of Socotra — Madagascar — Zanzibar and the coast of Africa — Abyssinia — Yemen — Hadramaut and Oman — Ormuz — The return to Venice — A feast in the household of Polo — Marco Polo a Genoese prisoner — Death of Marco Polo about 1323.

Marco Polo returned to the court of Kublaï-Khan when he had finished the expedition of which we spoke in the last chapter. He was then entrusted with several other missions, in which he found his knowledge of the Turkish, Chinese, Mongolian, and Mantchorian languages of the greatest use. He seems to have taken part in an expedition to the islands in the Indian Ocean, and he brought back a detailed account of this hitherto little known sea. There is a want of clearness as to dates at this part of his life, which makes it difficult to give a correct narrative of these voyages in their right order. He gives a circumstantial account of the Island of Cipango, a name applying to the group of islands which make up Japan; but it does not appear that he actually entered that kingdom. This country was famous for its wealth, and about 1264, some years before Marco Polo arrived at the Tartar court, Kublaï-Khan had tried to conquer it and sent his fleet there with that purpose. They had taken possession of a citadel and put all its valiant defenders to the edge of the sword, but just at the moment of apparent victory a storm arose and dispersed all the enemy’s fleet, and thus the expedition was useless. Marco Polo gives a long account of this attempt, and adds many curious particulars as to Japanese customs.

Marco Polo, with his father and uncle, had now been seventeen years in the service of Kublaï-Khan, and even longer absent from their own country; they had a great wish to revisit it, but the Emperor had become so much attached to them, and valued their services so highly, that he could not make up his mind to part with them. He tried in every way to shake their resolution, offering them riches and honour if only they would remain with him, but they still held to their plan of returning to Europe; the Emperor then absolutely refused to allow them to go, and Marco Polo could find no means of eluding the surveillance of which he was the object, until circumstances arose which quite changed Kublaï-Khan’s resolution.

A Mongol prince, named Arghun, whose dominions were in Persia, had sent an ambassador to the Emperor to ask one of the princesses of the blood royal, in marriage. Kublaï-Khan acceded to his request and sent off his daughter Cogatra to Prince Arghun, attended by a numerous suite; but the countries by which they endeavoured to travel were not safe; the caravan was soon stopped by disturbances and rebellions, and after some months was obliged to return to the Emperor’s palace. The Persian ambassadors had heard Marco Polo spoken of as a clever navigator who had had some experience of the Indian Ocean, and they begged the Emperor to confide the

Princess Cogatra to his care, that he might conduct her to her future husband, thinking that the voyage by sea would probably be attended by less danger than a land journey.

After some demur Kublaï-Khan acceded to their request, and equipped a fleet of forty four-masted vessels, provisioning them for two years. Some of these were very large, having a crew of 250 men, for this was an important expedition worthy of the opulent Emperor of China. Matteo, Nicolo, and Marco Polo set out with the Chinese princess and the Persian ambassadors, and it was during this voyage, which lasted eighteen months, that it seems most probable that Marco Polo visited the islands of Sunda and other islands in the Indian Ocean, as well as Ceylon and the towns on the coast of India. We will follow him in his voyage and give his description of the places that he visited in this hitherto little known portion of the globe.

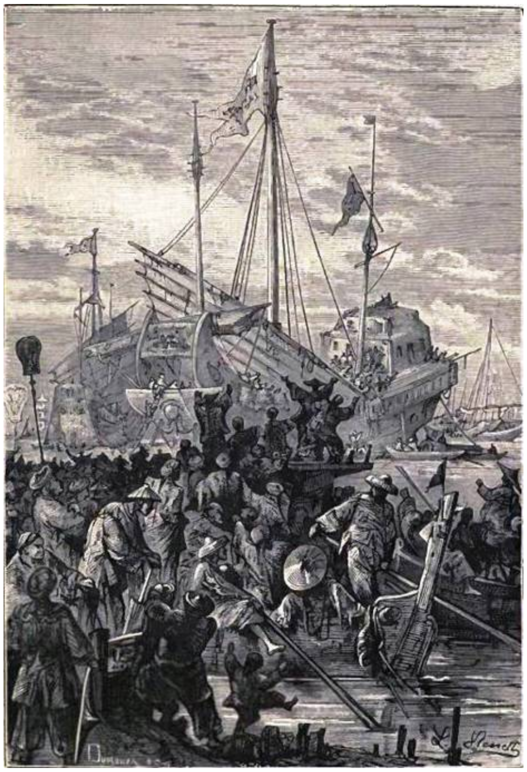

Kublaï-Khan equips a fleet.

It must have been about 1291 or 1292 that the fleet left the port of Zaitem, under the command of Marco Polo. He steered first for Tchampa, a great country situated at the south of Cochin China, and which contains the present province of Saïgon, belonging to France. This was not a new country to Marco Polo, as he had visited it about 1280, when he was on a mission for the Emperor. At this time, Tchampa was under the dominion of the grand khan, and paid him an annual tribute in elephants; when Marco Polo visited this country before its conquest by Kublaï-Khan, he found the reigning king had no less than 326 children, of whom 150 were old enough to carry arms.

Leaving the peninsula of Cambodia, the fleet went in the direction of Java, the rich island that Kublaï-Khan had never been able to subjugate, where abundance of pepper, cloves, nutmegs, &c. grew. After putting into port at Condor and Sandur, at the extremity of the peninsular of Cochin China, they reached the island of Pentam (Bintang), situated near the eastern entrance of the straits of Malacca, and the island of Sumatra, called Little Java. “This island is so much in the south,” he says, “that they never see there the polar star,” which is true as far as the inhabitants of the southern part are concerned. It is very fertile, aloes growing most luxuriantly; and here wild elephants and rhinoceroses (called by Marco Polo unicorns) are found, and apes, too, in large numbers. The fleet was detained five months on these shores by contrary winds, and the traveller made the most of his time in visiting the principal provinces of the island, such as Samara, Dagraian, and Labrin (which boasts a great number of men with tails —

evidently apes), and the island of Fandur or Panchor, where the sago-tree grows, from which a kind of flour is obtained that makes very good bread.

At last the wind changed, and enabled the vessels to leave Little Java, and after touching at Necaran, which must be one of the Nicobar Islands, and at the Andaman group, whose inhabitants are still cannibals, as they were in the time of Marco Polo, the fleet took a south-westerly course and arrived on the coast of Ceylon. “This island,” says the traveller in his narrative, “was once much larger, for according to the map of the world that the pilots of these seas carry, it was once 3600 miles in circumference but the north wind blows with such force in these parts that it caused a part of the island to be submerged.” This tradition is still held by the inhabitants of Ceylon. Here are collected in abundance, rubies, sapphires, topaz, amethysts, and other precious stones, such as garnets, opals, agates, and sardonyx. The king of the country was the possessor at this time of a most splendid ruby as long as the palm of the hand, as thick as a man’s arm, and red as fire, which excited the envy of the grand khan, who vainly tried to induce its possessor to part with it, offering a whole city in exchange, but that could not tempt the King to let him have the jewel.

Sixty miles west of Ceylon the travellers came to Maabar, a great province on the coast of India. This must not be mistaken for Malabar, which is situated on the west coast of the Indian peninsula. This Maabar forms the southern part of the Coromandel coast, and is celebrated for its pearl fisheries. Here the magicians are at work, and are said to render the monsters of the deep harmless to the fishermen; they are astrologers whose race is perpetuated even to modern times. Marco Polo gives some interesting details of the customs of the natives, one is that when a king dies, the nobles throw themselves into the fire in his honour; another strange custom is that of the religious purifications twice every day, and their blind faith in astrologers and diviners; he also speaks of the frequency of religious suicides, and the sacrifice of widows whom the funeral pile awaits on the death of their husbands. He also notices the skill in physiognomy evinced by the natives.

The next resting-place of the fleet was Muftili, of which the capital is now called Masulipatam, the chief city of the kingdom of Golconda. This country was well governed by a queen, a widow for forty years, who desired to remain faithful to the memory of her husband. The country contained many valuable diamond mines, but these were unfortunately among mountains where serpents abounded; the miners had recourse to a strange device when collecting the precious stones, to protect themselves from these reptiles, which we may believe or not as we choose. Marco Polo says: “They take several pieces of meat, and throw them among the pointed rocks, where no man can go, and the meat, falling upon the diamonds, they become attached to it. Now, among these mountains live a number of white eagles, who hunt the serpents, and when they see the meat at the foot of the precipices they swoop down and carry it away. At the moment the men who have been following the eagles’ movements see them alight to eat the meat, they raise fearful cries, the meat is dropped and the eagles take to flight, and thus the men have no difficulty in taking the diamonds that are attached to the meat. Diamonds are often found on the mountains, mingled with the excrement of the eagles.”

After visiting the small town of St. Thomas, situated some miles to the south of Madras, where St. Thomas the apostle is said to be buried, the travellers explored the kingdom of Maabar and especially the province of Lar, from whence spring all the “*Abrahamites*” of the world, probably the Brahmins. These men, he says, live to a great age, owing to their abstinence and sobriety; some have been known to attain 150 and even 200 years of age; their diet is principally rice and milk, and they drink a mixture of sulphur and quicksilver. These “Abrahamites” are clever merchants, superstitious, however, but remarkably sincere, and never guilty of theft of any kind; they never kill any living thing, and they worship the ox, which is a sacred animal among them.

The fleet now returned to Ceylon, where in 1284 Kublaï-Khan had sent an ambassador who had brought him back some pretended relics of Adam, and among other things two of his molar teeth; for, if we can believe the Saracen traditions, the tomb of our first father must have been on the summit of one of the precipitous mountains, which forms the highest ground in the island. After losing sight of Ceylon, Marco Polo went to Cail, a port that we do not find marked on any of the modern maps, but a place where all the vessels touched coming from Ormuz, Kiss, Aden, and the coasts of Arabia. Thence doubling Cape Comorin they came to Coilum, now Quilon, which was a very thriving city in the thirteenth century. It is there that a great quantity of sandal-wood and indigo is found, and merchants come in large numbers from the Levant and from the West to trade in both. The country of Malabar produces a great quantity of rice, and wild animals are found there, such as leopards, which Marco Polo calls “black lions,” also peacocks of much greater beauty than those of Europe, as well as different kinds of parroquets.

The fleet, leaving Coilum, and advancing northwards along the Malabar coast, arrived at the shores of the kingdom of Maundallay, which derives its name from a mountain situated on the borders of Kanara and Malabar; here pepper, ginger, saffron, and other spices abound. To the north of this kingdom extended that country which the Venetian traveller calls Melibar, and which is situated to the north of Malabar proper. The vessels of the Mangalore merchants came here to trade with the natives of this part of

India for cargoes of spices, a fine kind of cloth called buckram and other valuable wares; but their vessels were frequently attacked, and too often pillaged by the pirates who infested these seas, and who were justly regarded as formidable enemies. These pirates principally inhabit the peninsula of Gohourat, now called Gujerat, where the fleet was on its way after calling at Tana — a country where is collected the frankincense — and Canboat, now Kambay, a town where there is a great trade in leather. Visiting Sumenath, a city of the peninsula, whose inhabitants are cruel, ferocious, and idolaters, and Kesmacoran, the modern city of Kedje, the capital of Makran, situated on the Indus near the sea, and the last town in India on the northwest, Marco Polo went westward across the sea of Oman, instead of going to Persia, which was the destination of the princess.

His insatiable love of exploration led him 500 miles away to the shores of Arabia, where he stopped at the Male and Female Islands, so called from the men usually living on one island, and their wives on the other. Thence they sailed to the south towards the island of Socotra, at the entrance of the Gulf of Aden, which, Marco Polo partially explored. He speaks of the inhabitants of Socotra as clever magicians, who, by their enchantments, obtain the fulfilment of all their wishes as well as the power of stilling storms and tempests. Then, taking a southerly course of 1000 miles, he arrived at the shores of Madagascar. This island appeared to him to be one of the grandest in the world. Its inhabitants are very much occupied with commerce, especially in elephants’ tusks. They live principally upon camels’ flesh, which is better and more wholesome food than any other. The merchants on their way from the coast of India are usually only twenty days crossing the Sea of Oman; but when they return they are often three months on the voyage on account of the opposing currents which take them always southwards. Nevertheless, they visit Madagascar very constantly, for there are whole forests of sandal-wood, and amber is also found there, from which they can obtain great profit by bartering it for gold and silk stuffs. Wild animals and game are plentiful; according to Marco Polo, leopards, bears, lions, wild boars, giraffes, wild asses, roebucks, deer, stags, and cattle were to be found in great numbers; but what seemed most marvellous of all to him was the fabulous griffin, the roc, of which we hear so much in the "Thousand and one Nights," which is not, he says, "an animal, half-lion and half-bird, able to raise and carry away an elephant in its claws." It was probably the "*epyornis maximus*," for some eggs of this bird are still to be found in Madagascar.

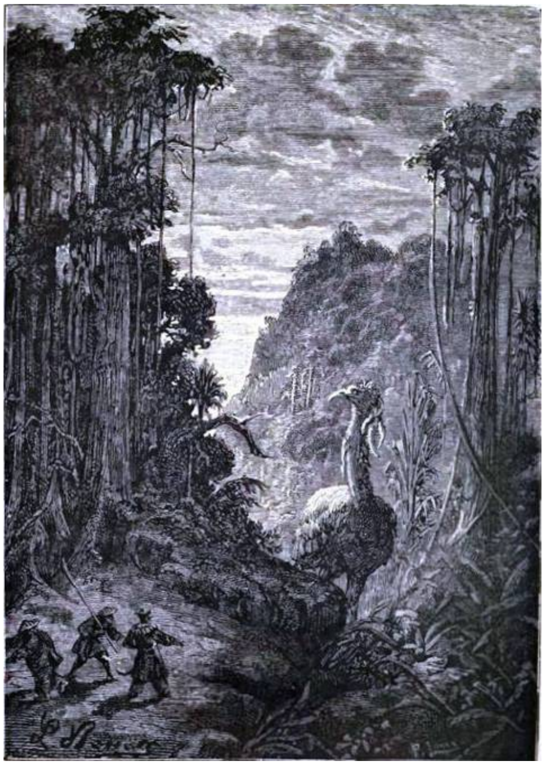

This wonderful bird was probably the *epyornis maximus*.

From this island Marco Polo went in a north-westerly direction to Zanzibar and the coast of Africa. The inhabitants seemed to him remarkably stout, but strong and able to carry the burdens of four ordinary men, “which is not strange,” he says, “for they each eat as much as five other men;” these natives were black and wore no clothing, they had large mouths and turned-up noses, thick lips, and large eyes, a description that agrees exactly with that of the natives of that part of Africa now. They live upon rice, meat, milk, and dates, and make a kind of wine of rice, sugar, and spices. They are brave warriors and fearless of death; they are usually in war mounted on camels and elephants, and armed with a leathern shield, a sword, and a lance; they give their animals an intoxicating drink to excite them on going into action.

In Marco Polo’s time, says M. Charton, the countries comprised under the title of India were divided into three parts; Greater India or Hindostan, that is, the country lying between the Indus and the Ganges; Lesser India, that is, all the country lying beyond the Ganges, between the western coast of the peninsula and the coast of Cochin China; lastly, Middle India, that is, Abyssinia and the Arabian coast to the Persian Gulf. After leaving Zanzibar it was Middle India whose coast Marco Polo explored, sailing towards the north, and first Abassy or Abyssinia, a fertile country where the manufacture of fine cotton cloths and buckram is largely carried on. Then the fleet went to Zaila, almost at the entrance of the straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, and at last by the coast of Yemen and Hadramaut they came to Aden, the port frequented by all the ships trading with India and China; then to Escier, whence a great quantity of fine horses are exported; Dafar, which produces incense of the finest quality, and Galatu, now Kalajate, on the coast of Oman; then to Ormuz, that Marco Polo had visited once before when he was on his way from Venice to the court of Kublaï-Khan. This was the furthest point that the fleet had to reach, as the princess was now on the borders of Persia, after a voyage of eighteen months. But on their arrival they were met by the sad news of the death of Prince Arghun, the fiancé of the princess, and they found the country involved in civil war. The poor princess was put under the care of Prince Ghazan, the son of Prince Arghun, who did not ascend the throne until 1295, when his uncle, the usurper, was strangled. What became of the princess we do not hear, but on parting with Nicolo, Matteo, and Marco Polo, she bestowed on them great marks of favour. It was probably during Marco Polo's residence in Persia that he collected some curious documents upon Turkey in Asia; they are disconnected pieces, which he gives at the close of his narrative, and they form a genuine history of the Mongol Khans of Persia. His travels for exploration were at an end, and after taking leave of the Tartar princess, the three Venetians well escorted, and with all expenses paid, set out on their way home. They went to Trebizond, then to Constantinople, and thence to Negropont, where they embarked for Venice.

It was in the year 1295, twenty-four years after leaving it, that Marco Polo and his companions returned to their native town. They were bronzed by exposure to the air and sun, coarsely clad in Tartar costume, and both in manners and language were so much more Mongolian than Venetian, that even their nearest relatives failed to recognize them. Beyond this, a report had been widely spread that they were dead, and it had gained so much credence that their friends never expected to see them again. They went to their own house in the part of Venice called St. John Chrysostom, and found it occupied by different members of the Polo family, who received the travellers with every mark of distrust, which their pitiable appearance did not tend to lessen, and placed no faith in the somewhat marvellous stories related to them by Marco Polo. After some persuasion, however, they gained admittance into their own house. When they had been a few days in Venice, the three travellers gave a magnificent banquet, followed by a splendid fête, to do away with any remaining doubts as to their identity. They invited the nobility of Venice and all the members of their own family, and when all the guests were assembled the three hosts appeared dressed in crimson satin robes; the guests then entered the dining-room, and the feast began. After the first course was over the three travellers retired for a few moments and then reappeared, clad in robes of splendid silk damask, which they proceeded to tear, and to present each of their guests with a piece. After the second course they dressed themselves in even more splendid robes of crimson velvet, which they wore until the feast was over, when they appeared in simple Venetian costume. The astonished guests marvelled at the magnificence of these garments, and wondered what their hosts would next show them; then the coarse rough clothes that they had worn on the voyage were brought in, and when the linings and seams were undone, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, diamonds, and carbuncles of great value were poured forth from them; great riches had been hidden in these rags. This unexpected sight cleared away all doubt; the three travellers were recognized at once as Marco, Nicolo, and Matteo Polo, and congratulations upon their return were showered upon them.

So celebrated a man as Marco Polo could not escape civic honours. He was made first magistrate in Venice, and as he was continually speaking of the “millions” of the Grand Khan, who commanded “millions” of subjects, he gained the soubriquet of Signor Million.

It was about 1296 that a war broke out between Venice and Genoa. A Genoese fleet under the command of Lamba Doria crossed the Adriatic, and threatened the sea coast. The Venetian Admiral Andrea Dandolo immediately manned a larger fleet and entrusted the command of a galley to Marco Polo who was justly considered an able commander. The Venetians were beaten in a naval battle on the 8th of September, 1296, and Marco

Polo, badly wounded, fell into the hands of the Genoese, who, knowing and appreciating the value of their prisoner, treated him with great kindness. He was taken to Genoa, and there met with a hearty welcome from the most distinguished people, who were anxious to hear the account of his travels. It was during his captivity, in 1298, that he made acquaintance with Pisano Rusticien, and, tired of repeating his story again and again, dictated his narrative to him.

About 1299 Marco Polo was set at liberty; he returned to Venice, and there married. From this time we hear no more of the incidents of his life, and only know from his will that he left three daughters; he is thought to have died about the 9th of January, 1323, at the age of seventy.

Such is the life of this celebrated traveller, whose narrative had a marked influence on the progress of geographical science. He was gifted with great power of observation, and could see and describe equally well; and all later explorers have confirmed the truth of his statements. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, the documents founded on this narrative formed the basis of geographical books, and were used as a guide in commercial expeditions to China, India, and Central Asia. Posterity will concur in the suitability of the title that the first copyists gave to Marco Polo’s work, that of “The Book of the Wonders of the World.”

CHAPTER V.

IBN BATUTA, 1328-1353.

Ibn Batuta — The Nile — Gaza, Tyre, Tiberias, Libanus, Baalbec, Damascus, Meshid, Bussorah, Baghdad, Tabriz, Mecca and Medina — Yemen — Abyssinia — The country of the Berbers — Zanguebar — Ormuz — Syria — Anatolia — Asia Minor — Astrakhan — Constantinople — Turkestan — Herat — The Indus — Delhi — Malabar — The Maldives — Ceylon — The Coromandel coast — Bengal — The Nicobar Islands — Sumatra — China — Africa — The Niger — Timbuctoo.

Marco Polo had returned to his native land now nearly twenty-five years, when a Franciscan monk traversed the whole of Asia, from the Black Sea to the extreme limits of China, passing by Trebizond, Mount Ararat, Babel, and the island of Java; but he was so credulous of all that was told him, and his narrative is so confused, that but little reliance can be placed upon it. It is the same with the fabulous travels of Jean de Mandeville. Cooley says of them, “They are so utterly untrue, that they have not their parallel in any language.”

But we find a worthy successor to the Venetian traveller in an Arabian theologian, named Abdallah El Lawati, better known by the name of Ibn Batuta. He did for Egypt, Arabia, Anatolia, Tartary, India, China, Bengal, and Soudan, what Marco Polo had done for Central Asia, and he is worthy to be placed in the foremost rank as a brave traveller and bold explorer. In the year 1324, the 725th year of the Hegira, he resolved to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, and starting from Tangier, his native town, he went first to Alexandria, and thence to Cairo. During his stay in Egypt he turned his attention to the Nile, and especially to the Delta; then he tried to sail up the river, but being stopped by disturbances on the Nubian frontier, he was obliged to return to the mouth of the river, and then set sail for Asia Minor.

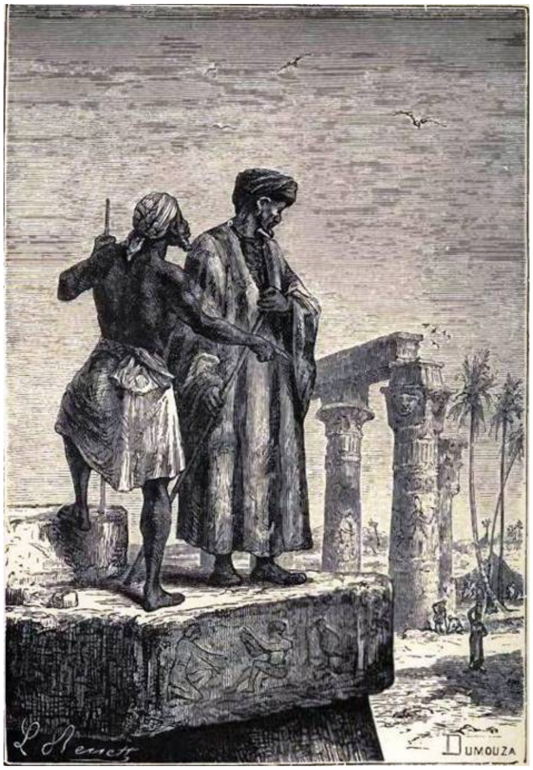

Ibn Batuta in Egypt.

After visiting Gaza, the tombs of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Tyre, then strongly fortified and unassailable on three sides, and Tiberias, which was in ruins, and whose celebrated baths were completely destroyed, Ibn Batuta was attracted by the wonders of Lebanon, the centre for all the hermits of that day, who had judiciously chosen one of the most lovely spots in the whole world wherein to end their days. Then passing Baalbec, and going on to Damascus, he found the city (in the year 1345) decimated by the plague. This fearful scourge devoured “24,000 persons daily,” if we may believe his report, and Damascus would have been depopulated, had not the prayers of all the people offered up in the mosque containing the stone with the print of Moses' foot upon it, been heard and answered. On leaving Damascus, Ibn Batuta went to Mesjid, where he visited the tomb of Ali, which attracts a large number of paralytic pilgrims who need only to spend one night in prayer beside it, to be completely cured. Batuta does not seem to doubt the authenticity of this miracle, well known in the East under the title of "the Night of Cure."

From Mesjid, the traveller went to Bussorah, and entered the kingdom of Ispahan, and then the province of Shiraz, where he wished to converse with the celebrated worker of miracles, Magd Oddin. From Shiraz he went to Baghdad, to Tabriz, then to Medina, where he prayed beside the tomb of the Prophet, and finally to Mecca, where he remained three years. It is well known that from Mecca, caravans are continually starting for the surrounding country, and it was in company with some of these bold merchants that Ibn Batuta was able to visit the towns of Yemen. He went as far as Aden, at the mouth of the Red Sea, and embarked for Zaila, one of the Abyssinian ports. He was now once more on African ground, and advanced into the country of the Berbers, that he might study the manners and customs of those dirty and repulsive tribes; he found their diet consisted wholly of fish and camels' flesh. But in the town of Makdasbu, there was an attempt at comfort and civilization, presenting a most agreeable contrast with the surrounding squalor. The inhabitants were very fat, each of them, to use Ibn's own expression, "eating enough to feed a convent;" they were very fond of delicacies, such as plantains boiled in milk, preserved citrons, pods of fresh pepper, and green ginger.

After seeing all he wished of the country of the Berbers, chiefly on the coast, he resolved to go to Zanguebar, and then, crossing the Red Sea and following the coast of Arabia, he came to Zafar, a town situated upon the Indian Ocean. The vegetation of this country is most luxuriant, the betel, cocoa-nut, and incense-trees forming there great forests; still the traveller pushed on, and came to Ormuz on the Persian Gulf, and passed through several provinces of Persia. We find him a second time at Mecca in the year 1332, three years after he had left it.

But this was only to be a short rest for the traveller, for now, leaving Asia for Africa, he went to Upper Egypt, a region but little known, and thence to Cairo. He next visited Syria, making a short stay at Jerusalem and Tripoli, and thence he visited the Turkomans of Anatolia, where the “confraternity of young men” gave him a most hearty welcome.

After Anatolia, the Arabian narrative speaks of Asia Minor. Ibn Batuta advanced as far as Erzeroum, where he was shown an aerolite weighing 620 pounds. Then, crossing the Black Sea, he visited the Crimea, Kaffa, and Bulgar, a town of sufficiently high latitude for the unequal length of day and night to be very marked; and at last he reached Astrakhan, at the mouth of the Volga, where the Khan of Tartary lived during the winter months.

The Princess Bailun, the wife of the khan, and daughter of the Emperor of Constantinople, was wishing to visit her father, and it was an opportunity not to be lost by Ibn Batuta for exploring Turkey in Europe; he gained permission to accompany the princess, who set out attended by 5000 men, and followed by a portable mosque, which was set up at every place where they stayed. The princess’s reception at Constantinople was very magnificent, the bells being rung with such spirit that he says, “even the horizon seemed full of the vibration.”

The welcome given to the theologian by the princes of the country was worthy of his fame; he remained in the city thirty-six days, so that he was able to study it in all its details.

This was a time when communication between the different countries was both dangerous and difficult, and Ibn Batuta was considered a very bold traveller. Egypt, Arabia, Turkey in Asia, the Caucasian provinces had all in turn been explored by him. After such hard work he might well have taken rest and been satisfied with the laurels that he had gained, for he was without doubt the most celebrated traveller of the fourteenth century; but his insatiable passion for travelling remained, and the circle of his explorations was still to widen considerably.

On leaving Constantinople, Ibn Batuta went again to Astrakhan, thence crossing the sandy wastes of the present Turkestan, he arrived at Khovarezen, a large populous town, then at Bokhara, half destroyed by the armies of Gengis-Khan. Some time after we hear of him at Samarcand, a religious town which greatly pleased the learned traveller, and then at Balkh which he could not reach without crossing the desert of Khorassan. This town was all in ruins and desolate, for the armies of the barbarians had been there, and Ibn Batuta could not remain in it, but wished to go westward to the frontier of Afghanistan. The mountainous country, near the Hindoo Koosh range, confronted him, but this was no barrier to him, and after great fatigue, which he bore with equal patience and good-humour, he reached the important town of Herat. This was the most westerly point reached by the traveller; he now resolved to change his course for an easterly one, and in going to the extreme limits of Asia, to reach the shores of the Pacific: if he could succeed in this he would pass the bounds of the explorations of the celebrated Marco Polo.

He set out, and following the course of the river Kabul and the frontiers of Afghanistan, he came to the Sindhu, the modern Indus, and descended it to its mouth. From the town of Lahore, he went to Delhi, which great and beautiful city had been deserted by its inhabitants, who had fled from the Emperor Mohammed.

This tyrant, who was occasionally both generous and magnificent, received the Arabian traveller very well, made him a judge in Delhi, and gave him a grant of land with some pecuniary advantages that were attached to the post, but these honours were not to be of any long duration, for Ibn Batuta being implicated in a pretended conspiracy, thought it best to give up his place, and make himself a fakir to escape the Emperor’s displeasure. Mohammed, however, pardoned him, and made him his ambassador to China.

Fortune again smiled upon the courageous traveller, and he had now the prospect of seeing these distant lands under exceptionally good and safe circumstances. He was charged with presents for the Emperor of China, and 2000 horse-soldiers were given him as an escort.

But Ibn Batuta had not thought of the insurgents who occupied the surrounding countries; a skirmish took place between the escort and the Hindoos, and the traveller, being separated from his companions, was taken prisoner, robbed, garotted, and carried off he knew not whither; but his courage and hopefulness did not forsake him, and he contrived to escape from the hands of these robbers. After wandering about for seven days, he was received into his house by a negro, who at length led him back to the emperor’s palace at Delhi.

Mohammed fitted out another expedition, and again appointed the Arabian traveller as his ambassador. This time they passed through the enemy’s country without molestation, and by way of Kanoje, Mersa, Gwalior, and Barun, they reached Malabar. Some time after, they arrived at the great port of Calicut, an important place which became afterwards the chief town of Malabar; here they were detained by contrary winds for three months, and made use of this time to study the Chinese mercantile marine which frequented this port. Ibn speaks with great admiration of these junks which are like floating gardens, where ginger and herbs are grown on deck; they are each like a separate village, and some merchants were the possessors of a great number of these junks.

At last the wind changed; Ibn Batuta chose a small junk well fitted up, to take him to China, and had all his property put on board. Thirteen other junks were to receive the presents sent by the King of Delhi to the Emperor of China, but during the night a violent storm arose, and all the vessels sank. Fortunately for Ibn he had remained on shore to attend the service at the mosque, and thus his piety saved his life, but he had lost everything except "the carpet which he used at his devotions." After this second misfortune he could not make up his mind to appear before the King of Delhi. This catastrophe was enough to weary the patience of a more long-suffering emperor than Mohammed.

Ibn soon made up his mind what to do. Leaving the service of the emperor, and the advantages attaching to the post of ambassador, he embarked for the Maldive Islands, which were governed by a woman, and where a large trade in cocoa was carried on. Here he was again made a judge, but this was only of short duration, for the vizier became jealous of his success, and, after marrying three wives, Ibn was obliged to take refuge in flight. He hoped to reach the Coromandel coast, but contrary winds drove his vessel towards Ceylon, where he was very well received, and gained the king's permission to climb the sacred mountain of Serendid, or Adam's Peak. His object was to see the wonderful impression of a foot at the summit, which the Hindoos call "Buddha's," and the Mahometans "Adam's, foot." He pretends, in his narrative, that this impression measures eleven hands in length, a very different account from that of an historian of the ninth century, who declared it to be seventy-nine cubits long! This historian also adds that while one of the feet of our forefather rested on the mountain, the other was in the Indian ocean.

Ibn Batuta speaks also of large bearded apes, forming a considerable item in the population of the island, and said to be under a king of their own, crowned with leaves. We can give what credit we like to such fables as these, which were propagated by the credulity of the Hindoos.

From Ceylon, the traveller made his way to the Coromandel coast, but not without experiencing some severe storms. He crossed to the other side of the Indian peninsula, and again embarked.

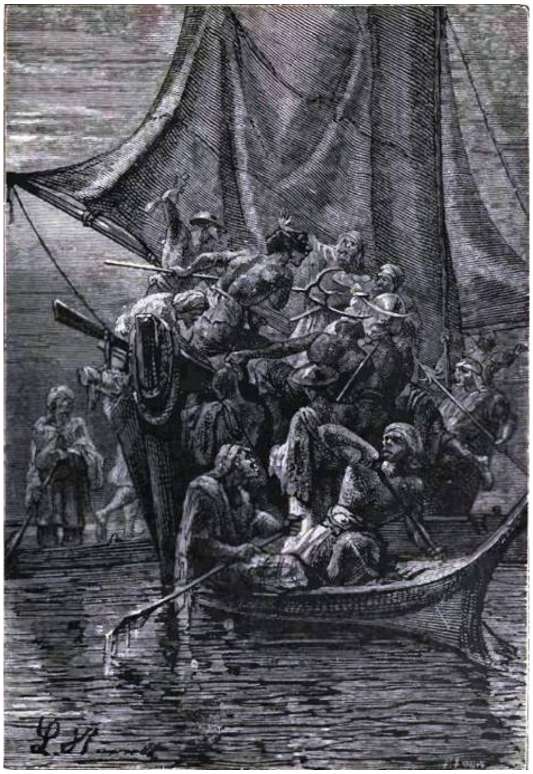

Ibn Batuta’s vessel was seized by pirates.

But his vessel was seized by pirates, and Ibn Batuta arrived at Calicut almost without clothes, robbed, and worn out with fatigue. No misfortune could damp his ardour, his was one of those great spirits which seem only invigorated by trouble and disasters. As soon as he was enabled by the kindness of some Delhi merchants to resume his travels, he embarked for the Maldive Islands, went on to Bengal, there set sail for Sumatra, and disembarked at one of the Nicobar Islands after a very bad passage which had lasted fifty days. Fifteen days afterwards he arrived at Sumatra, where the king gave him a hearty welcome and furnished him with means to continue his journey to China.

A junk took him in seventy-one days to the port Kailuka, capital of a country somewhat problematical, of which the brave and handsome inhabitants excelled in making arms. From Kailuka, Ibn passed into the Chinese provinces, and went first to the splendid town of Zaitem, probably the present Tsieun-tcheou of the Chinese, a little to the north of Nankin. He passed through various cities of this great empire, studying the customs of the people and admiring everywhere the riches, industry, and civilization that he found, but he did not get as far as the Great Wall, which he calls “The obstacle of Gog and Magog.” It was while he was exploring this immense tract of country that he made a short stay in the city of Tchensi, which is composed of six fortified towns standing together. It happened that during his wanderings he was able to be present at the funeral of a khan, who was buried with four slaves, six of his favourites, and four horses.

In the meanwhile, disturbances had occurred at Zaitem, which obliged Ibn to leave this town, so he set sail for Sumatra, and then after touching at

Calicut and Ormuz, he returned to Mecca in 1348, having made the tour of Persia and Syria.

But the time of rest had not yet come for this indefatigable explorer; the following year he revisited his native place Tangier, and then after travelling in the southern countries of Europe he returned to Morocco, went to Soudan and the countries watered by the Niger, crossed the Great Desert and entered Timbuctoo, thus making a journey which would have rendered illustrious a less ambitious traveller.

This was to be his last expedition. In 1353, twenty-nine years after leaving Tangier for the first time, he returned to Morocco, and settled at Fez. He has earned the reputation of being the most intrepid explorer of the fourteenth century, and well merits to be ranked next after Marco Polo, the illustrious Venetian.

CHAPTER VI.

JEAN DE BÉTHENCOURT, 1339-1425.

I.

The Norman cavalier — His ideas of conquest — What was known of the Canary Islands — Cadiz — The Canary Archipelago — Graciosa — Lancerota — Fortaventura — Jean de Béthencourt returns to Spain — Revolt of Berneval — His interview with King Henry III. — Gadifer visits the Canary Archipelago — Canary Island or “Gran Canaria” — Ferro Island — Palma Island.

Jean de Béthencourt was born about the year 1339, at Eu in Normandy. He was of good family, and Baron of St. Martin-le-Gaillard, and had distinguished himself both as a navigator and warrior; he was made chamberlain to Charles VI. But his tastes were more for travelling than a life at court; he resolved to make himself a still more illustrious name by further conquests, and soon an opportunity offered for him to carry out his plans.

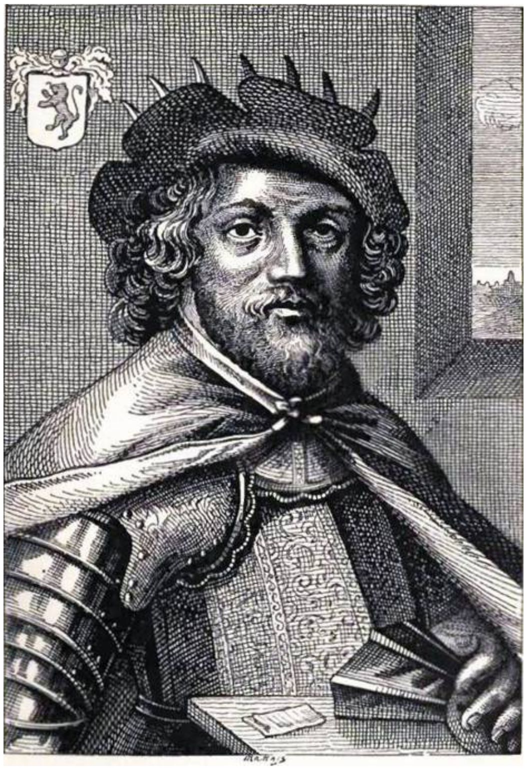

Jean de Béthencourt.

On the coast of Africa there is a group of islands called the Canaries, which were once known as the Fortunate Islands. Juba, a son of one of the Numidian kings, is said to have been their first explorer, about the year of Rome 776. In the middle ages, according to some accounts, Arabs, Genoese, Portuguese, Spaniards, and Biscayans, had partially visited this interesting group of islands. In 1393, a Spanish gentleman named Almonaster, who was commanding an expedition, succeeded in landing on Lancerota, one of these islands, and brought back, with several prisoners, some produce which was a sufficient guarantee of the fertility of this archipelago.

The Norman cavalier now found the opening that he sought, and he determined to conquer the Canary Islands and try to convert the inhabitants to the Catholic faith. He was as intelligent, brave, and full of resources as he was energetic; and leaving his house of Grainville-la-Teinturière at Caux, he went to La Rochelle, where he met the Chevalier Gadifer de la Salle, and having explained his project to him, they decided to go to the Canary Islands together. Jean de Béthencourt having collected an army and made his preparations, and had vessels fitted out and manned, Gadifer and he set sail; after experiencing adverse winds on the way to the Ile de Ré, and being much harassed by the constant dissensions on board, they arrived at Vivero, and then at Corunna. Here they remained eight days, then set sail again, and doubling Cape Finisterre, followed the Portuguese coast to Cape St. Vincent, and arrived at Cadiz, where they made a longer stay. Here Béthencourt had a dispute with some Genoese merchants, who accused him of having taken their vessel, and he had to go to Seville, where King Henry III. heard his complaint and acquitted him from all blame. On his return to Cadiz he found part of his crew in open mutiny, and some of his sailors so frightened that they refused to continue the voyage, so the chevalier sent back the cowardly sailors, and set sail with those who were more courageous.

The vessel in which Jean de Béthencourt sailed was becalmed for three days, then, the weather improving, he reached the island of Graziosa, one of the smaller of the Canary group, in five days, and then the larger island of Lancerota, which is nearly the same size as the island of Rhodes. Lancerota has excellent pasturage, and arable land, which is particularly good for the cultivation of barley; its numerous fountains and cisterns are well supplied with excellent water. The orchilla, which is so much used in dyeing, grows abundantly here. The inhabitants of this island, who as a rule wear scarce any clothing, are tall and well-made, and the women, who wear leathern great-coats reaching to the ground, are very good-looking and honest.

The traveller, prior to disclosing his plans of conquest, wished to possess himself of some of the natives, but his ignorance of the country made this a difficult matter, so, anchoring under the shelter of a small island in the archipelago, he called a meeting of his companions to decide upon a plan of action. They all agreed that the only thing to be done was to take some of the natives by fair means or foul. Guardafia, the king of the island, treated Béthencourt more as a friend than a subject. A castle or rather fort was built at the south-western extremity of the island, and some men left there under the command of Berthin de Berneval, while Béthencourt set out with the rest of his followers for the island of Erbania or Fortaventura. Gadifer counselled a debarcation by night, which was done, and then he took the command of a small body of men and scoured the island with them for eight days without meeting one native, they having all fled to the mountains. Provisions failing, Gadifer was forced to return, and he went to the island of Lobos between Lancerota and Fortaventura; but there his chief sailor mutinied and it was not without difficulty that Gadifer and Béthencourt reached the fort on Lancerota.

Béthencourt resolved to return to Spain to get provisions and a new contingent of soldiers, for his crew he could not depend upon; so he left Gadifer in command and set sail for Spain in one of Gadifer’s ships.

It will be remembered that Berthin de Berneval had been left in command of the fort on Lancerota Island. Unfortunately he was Gadifer’s bitter enemy, and no sooner had Béthencourt set out than he tried to poison the minds of Gadifer’s men against him; he succeeded in inducing some, especially the Gascons, to revolt against the governor, who, quite innocent of Berneval's base designs, was spending his time hunting sea-wolves on the island of Lobos with Remonnet de Levéden and several others. Remonnet having been sent to Lancerota for provisions, found no Berneval there, he having deserted the island with his accomplices for a port on Graziosa, where a coxswain, deceived by his promises, had placed his vessel at his disposal. From Graziosa, the traitor Berneval returned to Lancerota, and put the finishing stroke to his villany by pretending to make an alliance with the king of the island. The king, thinking that no officer of Béthencourt's, in whom he had implicit confidence, could deceive him, came with twenty-four of his subjects to see Berneval, who seized them when asleep, had them bound, and then carried them off to Graziosa. The king managed to break his bonds, set three of his men free, and succeeded in escaping, but the remainder of his unfortunate companions were still prisoners, and Berneval gave them up to some Spanish thieves, who took them away to sell in a foreign land.

Berneval's evil deeds did not stop here. By his order the vessel that Gadifer had sent to the fort at Lancerota was seized; Remonnet tried resistance, but his numbers were too small, and his supplications were useless to prevent Berneval's men, and even Berneval himself, from destroying all the arms, furniture, and goods, which Béthencourt had placed in the fort at Lancerota. Insults were showered upon the governor, and Berneval cried, "I should like Gadifer de la Salle to know that if he were as young as I, I would kill him, but as he is not, I will spare him. If he is put above me I shall have him drowned, and then he can fish for sea-wolves."

Meanwhile, Gadifer and his ten companions were in danger of perishing on the island of Lobos for want of food and fresh water, but happily the two chaplains of the fort of Lancerota had gone to Graziosa, and met the coxswain, who had been the victim of Berneval's treason, and he sent one of his men named Ximenes with them back to Lancerota. There they found a small boat which they filled with provisions, and embarking with four men who were faithful to Gadifer, they succeeded in reaching Lobos, four leagues off, after a most dangerous passage.

Gadifer and his companions were suffering fearfully from hunger and thirst, when Ximenes arrived just in time to save them from perishing, and the governor learning Berneval’s treachery embarked in the boat for Lancerota, as soon as he was a little restored to health. He was grieved at Berneval’s conduct towards the poor islanders whom Béthencourt and he had sworn to protect. No! he never could have expected such wickedness in one who was looked upon as the most able of the whole band.

But what was Berneval doing meanwhile? After having betrayed his master, he did the same to the companions who had aided him in his evil deeds; he had twelve of them killed and then he set out for Spain to rejoin Béthencourt and make his own case good by representing all that had happened in his own way. It was to his interest to get rid of inconvenient witnesses, and therefore he abandoned his companions. These unfortunate men at first meditated imploring the pardon of the governor; they confessed all to the chaplains, but then, fearing the consequences of their deeds, they seized a boat and fled towards Morocco. The boat reached the coast of Barbary, where ten of the crew were drowned and the two others taken for slaves.

While all this was happening at Lancerota, Béthencourt arrived at Cadiz, where he took strong measures against his mutinous crew, and had the ringleaders imprisoned. Then he sent his vessel to Seville, where King Henry III. was at that time; but the ship sank in the Guadalquiver, a great loss to Gadifer, her owner.

Béthencourt having arrived at Seville, met a certain Francisque Calve who had lately come from the Canaries, and who offered to return thither with all the things needed by the governor, but Béthencourt could not agree to this proposal before he had seen the king.

Just at this time, Berneval arrived with some of his accomplices, and some islanders whom he intended to sell as slaves. He hoped to be able to deceive Béthencourt, but he had not reckoned upon a certain Courtille who was with him, who lost no time in denouncing the villany of Berneval, and on whose word the traitors were all imprisoned at Cadiz. Courtille also told of the treatment that the poor islanders had received; as Béthencourt could not leave Seville till he had had an audience with the king, he gave orders that they should receive every kindness, but while these preliminaries were being concluded, the vessel that contained them was taken to Aragon, and they were sold for slaves.

Béthencourt obtained the audience that he sought with the king of Castille, and after telling him the result of his expedition he said, “Sire, I come to ask your assistance and your leave to conquer the Canary Islands for the Catholic faith, and as you are king and lord of all the surrounding country, and the nearest Christian king to these islands, I beg you to receive the homage of your humble servant.” The king was very gracious to him and gave him dominion over these islands, and beyond this, a fifth of all the merchandise that should be brought from them to Spain. He gave him 20,000 maravédis, about 600*l.* to buy all that he needed, and also the right to coin money in the Canary Islands. Most unfortunately these 20,000 maravédis were confided to the care of a dishonest man, who fled to France, carrying the money with him.

However, Henry III. gave Béthencourt a well-rigged vessel manned by eighty men, and stocked with provisions, arms, &c. He was most grateful for this fresh bounty, and sent Gadifer an account of all that had happened, and his extreme disappointment and disgust at Berneval's conduct, in whom he had so much confidence, announcing at the same time the speedy departure of the vessel given by the King of Castille.

JERVSALEM·C·D·
1. Porte de Jaffa.
2. Le Chateau.
3. Couvent d. Cordeliers.
4. l'Eglise du st sépulcre.
5. la maison de zébédée
6. la Porte Ferrée.
7. la maison de St Marc.
8. la maison de St Thomas.
9. l'Eglise de St Jacques.
10 la maison d'Anne pontife
11. la porte de David.
12. la maison de Caïphe.
13. le St Cenacle
14. où les Juifs voulurent ravir le corps de N. Dame
15. où St Pierre pleura son péché.
16. la fontaine de Siloé.
17. la fontaine de N. Dame.
18. Porte Sterquiline.
19. l'Eglise de la Présent. N. D.
20. la place du Temple
21 Temple de Salomon
22. la porte dorée.
23. la porte St Etienne.
24. l'Eglise St Anne.
25. la probatique Piscine
26. le pretoire de Pilate.
27. la maison d'Herode.
28. l'Arc de Pilate.
29. le Chap. de la pasmoison de notre Dame.
30. Simon Cyrénée
31. Maison du mauvais riche.
32. maison du Pharisien.
33. la maison de Véronique
34. Porte Judiciaire.
35. Porte d'Ephraim.
36 Place du marché.

Plan of Jerusalem.

But meanwhile very serious troubles had arisen on Lancerota. King Guardafia was so hurt at Berneval's conduct that he had revolted, and some of Gadifer's companions had been killed by the islanders. Gadifer insisted upon these subjects being punished, when one of the king's relations named

Ache, came to him proposing to dethrone the king, and put himself in his place. This Ache was a villain, who after having betrayed his king, proposed to betray the Normans, and to chase them from the country. Gadifer had no suspicion of his motives; wishing to avenge the death of his men, he accepted Ache’s proposal, and a short time afterwards, on the vigil of St. Catherine’s day, the king was seized, and conveyed to the fort in chains.

Some days afterwards, Ache, the new king of the island attacked Gadifer’s companions, mortally wounding several of them, but the following night Guardafia having made his escape from the fort seized Ache, had him stoned to death, and his body burnt. The governor (Gadifer) was so grieved by these scenes of violence, which were renewed daily, that he resolved to kill all the men on the island, and save only the women and children, whom he hoped to have baptized. But just at this time, the vessel that Béthencourt had freighted for the governor arrived, and brought besides the eighty men, provisions, &c. a letter which told him among other things that Béthencourt had done homage to the King of Castille for the Canary Islands. The governor was not well pleased at this news, for he thought that he ought to have had his share in the islands; but he concealed his displeasure, and gave the new comers a hearty welcome.

The arms were at once disembarked, and then Gadifer went on board the vessel to explore the neighbouring islands. Remonnet and several others joined him in this expedition, and they took two of the islanders with them to serve as guides.

They arrived safely at Fortaventura island; a few days after landing on the island, Gadifer set out with thirty-five men to explore the country; but soon the greater part of his followers deserted him, only thirteen men, including two archers, remaining with him. But he did not give up his project; after wading through a large stream, he found himself in a lovely valley shaded by numberless palm-trees; here having rested and refreshed himself, he set out again and climbed a hill. At the summit he found about fifty natives, who surrounded the small party and threatened to murder them. Gadifer and his companions showed no signs of fear, and succeeded in putting their enemies to flight; by the evening they were able to regain their vessel, carrying away four of the native women as prisoners.

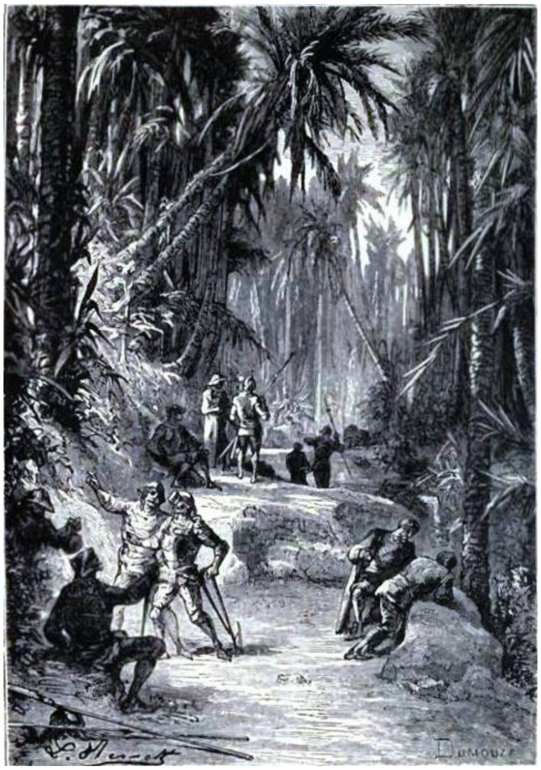

Gadifer found himself in a lovely valley.

The next day Gadifer left the island and went to the Gran Canaria island anchoring in a large harbour lying between Telde and Argonney. Five hundred of the natives confronted them, but apparently with no hostile intentions; they gave them some fish-hooks and old iron in exchange for some of the natural productions of the island, such as figs, and dragon’s blood, a resinous substance taken from the dragon-tree, which has a very pleasant balsamic odour. The natives were very much on their guard with the strangers, for twenty years before this some of Captain Lopez’ men had invaded the island; so they would not allow Gadifer to land.

The governor was obliged to weigh anchor without exploring the island; he went to Ferro Island, and coasting along it arrived next at Gomera; it was night, and the sailors were attracted by the fires that the natives had lighted on the shore. When day broke Gadifer and his companions wished to land; but the islanders would not allow them to proceed when they reached the shore, and drove them back to their vessel. Much disappointed by his reception, Gadifer determined to make another attempt at Ferro Island; there he found that he could land without opposition, and he remained on the island twenty-two days. The interior of the island was very beautiful. Pine-trees grew in abundance, and clear streams of water added to its fertility. Quails were found in large numbers, as well as pigs, goats, and sheep.

From this fertile island the party of explorers went to Palma, and anchored in a harbour situated to the right of a large river. This is the furthest island of the Canary group; it is covered with pine and dragon-trees; from the abundance of fresh water the pasturage is excellent and the land might be cultivated with much profit. Its inhabitants are a tall, robust race, well made, with good features and very white skin. Gadifer remained a short time on this island; on leaving it he spent two days and two nights sailing round the other islands, and then returned to the fort on Lancerota. They had been absent three months. In the meantime, those of the party who had been left in the fort had waged a petty war with the natives, and had made a great number of prisoners. The Canarians, demoralized, now came daily to cast themselves on their mercy, and to pray for the consecration of baptism. Gadifer was so pleased to hear of this, that he sent one of his companions to Spain to inform Béthencourt of the state of the colony.

II.
JEAN DE BÉTHENCOURT.

The return of Jean de Béthencourt — Gadifer's jealousy — Béthencourt visits his archipelago — Gadifer goes to conquer Gran Canaria — Disagreement of the two commanders — Their return to Spain — Gadifer blamed by the King — Return of Béthencourt — The natives of Fortaventura are baptized — Béthencourt revisits Caux — Returns to Lancerota — Lands on the African coast — Conquest of Gran Canaria, Ferro, and Palma Islands — Maciot appointed Governor of the archipelago — Béthencourt obtains the Pope's consent to the Canary Islands being made an Episcopal See — His return to his country and his death.

The envoy had not reached Cadiz when Béthencourt landed at the fort on Lancerota. Gadifer gave him a hearty welcome, and so did the Canary islanders who had been baptized. A few days afterwards, King Guardafia came and threw himself on their mercy. He was baptized on the 20th of February, 1404, with all his followers. Béthencourt's chaplains drew up a very simple form of instruction for their use, embracing the principal elements of Christianity, the creation, Adam and Eve's fall, the history of

Noah, the lives of the patriarchs, the life of our Saviour and His crucifixion by the Jews, finishing with an exhortation to believe the ten commandments, the Holy Sacrament of the Altar, Easter, confession, and some other points.

Béthencourt was an ambitious man. Not content with having explored, and so to speak, gained possession of the Canary Islands, he desired to conquer the African countries bordering on the ocean. This was his secret wish in returning to Lancerota, and meanwhile, he had full occupation in establishing his authority in these islands, of which he was only the nominal sovereign. He gave himself wholly to the task, and first visited the islands which Gadifer had explored.

But before he set out, a conversation took place between Gadifer and himself, which we must not omit to notice. Gadifer began boasting of all he had done, and asked for the gift of Fortaventura, Teneriffe, and Gomera Islands, as a recompense.

“My friend,” replied Béthencourt, “the islands that you ask me to give you are not yet conquered, but I do not intend you to be at any loss for your trouble, nor that you should be unrequited; but let us accomplish our project, and meanwhile remain the friends we have always been.”

“That is all very well,” replied Gadifer, “but there is one point on which I do not feel at all satisfied, and that is that you have done homage to the King of Castille for these islands, and so you call yourself absolute master over them.”

“With regard to that,” said Béthencourt, “I certainly have done homage for them, and so I am their rightful master, but if you will only patiently wait the end of our affair, I will give you what I feel sure will quite content you.”

“I shall not remain here,” replied Gadifer, “I am going back to France, and have no wish to be here any longer.”

Upon this they separated, but Gadifer gradually cooled down and agreed to accompany Béthencourt in his exploration of the islands.

They set out for Fortaventura well armed and with plenty of provisions. They remained there three months, and began by seizing a number of the natives, and sending them to Lancerota. This was such a usual mode of proceeding at that time that we are less surprised at it than we should be at the present day. The whole island was explored and a fort named Richeroque built on the slope of a high mountain; traces of it may still be found in a hamlet there.

Just at this time, and when he had scarcely had time to forget his grievances and ill-humour, Gadifer accepted the command of a small band of men who were to conquer Gran Canaria.

He set out on the 25th July, 1404, but this expedition was not fated to meet with any good results, winds and waves were against it. At last they reached the port of Telde, but as it was nearly dark and a strong wind blowing they dared not land, and they went on to the little town of Aginmez, where they remained eleven days at anchor; the natives, encouraged by their king, laid an ambush for Gadifer and his followers; there was a skirmish, blood was shed, and the Castilians, feeling themselves outnumbered, went to Telde for two days, and thence to Lancerota.

Gadifer was much disappointed at his want of success, and began to be discontented with everything around him. Above all, his jealousy of Béthencourt increased daily, and he gave way to violent recriminations, saying openly that the chief had not done everything himself, and that things would not have been in so advanced a stage as they were if others had not aided him. This reached Béthencourt’s ears; he was much incensed, and reproached Gadifer. High words followed, Gadifer insisted upon leaving the country, and as Béthencourt had just made arrangements for returning to Spain, he proposed to Gadifer to accompany him, that their cause of disagreement might be inquired into. This proposal being accepted, they set sail, but each in his own ship. When they reached Seville, Gadifer laid his complaints before the king, but as the king gave judgment against him, fully approving of Béthencourt’s conduct, he left Spain, and returning to France, never revisited the Canary Islands which he had so fondly hoped to conquer for himself.

Béthencourt took leave of the king almost at the same time, for the new colony demanded his immediate presence there; but before he left, the inhabitants of Seville, with whom he was a great favourite, showed him much kindness; what he valued more highly than anything else was the supply of arms, gold, silver, and provisions that they gave him. He went to Fortaventura, where his companions were delighted to see him. Gadifer had left his son Hannibal in his place, but Béthencourt treated him with much cordiality.

The first days of the installation of Béthencourt were far from peaceful; skirmishes were of constant occurrence, the natives even destroying the fortress of Richeroque, after burning and pillaging a chapel. Béthencourt was determined to overcome them, and in the end succeeded. He sent for several of his men from Lancerota, and gave orders that the fortress should be rebuilt.

In spite of all this the combats began again, and many of the islanders fell, among others a giant of nine feet high, whom Béthencourt would have liked to have made prisoner. The governor could not trust Gadifer's son nor the men who followed him, for Hannibal seemed to have inherited his father's jealousy, but as Béthencourt needed his help, he concealed his distrust. Happily, Béthencourt's men outnumbered those who were faithful to Gadifer, but Hannibal's taunts became so unbearable that Jean de Courtois was sent to remind him of his oath of obedience and to advise him to keep it.

Courtois was very badly received, he having a crow to pick with Hannibal with regard to some native prisoners whom Gadifer's followers had kept and would not give up. Hannibal was obliged to obey the orders, but Courtois represented his conduct to Béthencourt on his return in the very worst light, and tried to excite his master's anger against him. "No, sir," answered the upright Béthencourt, "I do not wish him to be wronged, we must never carry our power to its utmost limits, we should always endeavour to control ourselves and preserve our honour rather than seek for profit."

In spite of these intestine discords, the war continued between the natives and the conquerors, but the latter being well-armed always came off victorious. The kings of Fortaventura sent a native to Béthencourt saying that they wished to make peace with him, and to become Christians. This news delighted the conqueror, and he sent word that they would be well received if they would come to him. Almost immediately on receiving this reply, King Maxorata, who governed the north-westerly part of the island, set out, and with his suite of twenty-two persons, was baptized on the 18th of January, 1405. Three days afterwards twenty-two other natives received the sacrament of baptism. On the 25th of January the king who governed the peninsula of Handia, the south-eastern part of the island, came with twenty-six of his subjects, and was baptized. In a short time all the inhabitants of Fortaventura had embraced the Christian religion.

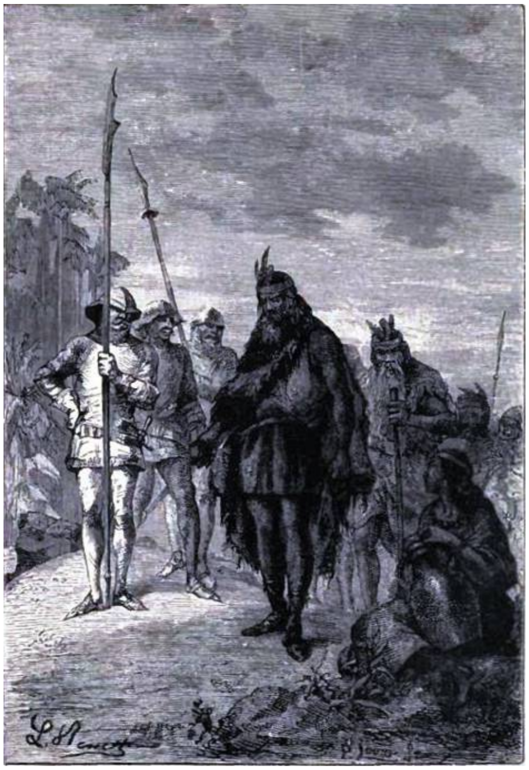

The King of Maxorata arrived with his suite.

Béthencourt was so elated with these happy results, that he arranged to revisit his own country, leaving Courtois as governor during his absence. He set out on the last day of January amid the prayers and blessings of his people, taking with him three native men and one woman, to whom he wished to show something of France. He reached Harfleur in twenty-one days, and two days later was at his own house, where he only intended making a short stay, and then returning to the Canary Islands. He met with a very warm reception from everybody. One of his chief motives in returning to France was the hope of finding people of all classes ready to return with him, on the promise of grants of land in the island. He succeeded in finding a certain number of emigrants, amongst whom were twenty-eight soldiers, of whom twenty-three took their wives. Two vessels were prepared to transport the party, and the 6th of May was the day named for them to set out. On the 9th of May they set sail, and landed on Lancerota just four mouths and a half after Béthencourt had quitted it.

He was received with trumpets, clarionets, tambourines, harps, and other musical instruments. Thunder could scarcely have been heard above the sound of this music. The natives celebrated his return by dancing and singing, and crying out, “Here comes our king.” Jean de Courtois hastened to welcome his master, who asked him how everything was going on; he replied, “Sir, all is going on as well as possible.”

Béthencourt’s companions stayed with him at the fort of Lancerota; they appeared much pleased with the country, enjoying the dates and other fruits on the island, “and nothing seemed to harm them.” After they had been a short time at Lancerota, Béthencourt went with them to see Fortaventura, and here his reception was as warm as it had been at Lancerota, especially from the islanders and their two kings. The kings supped with them at the fortress of Richeroque, which Courtois had rebuilt.

Béthencourt announced his intention of conquering Gran Canaria Island, as he had done Lancerota and Fortaventura; his hope was that his nephew Maciot, whom he had brought with him from France, would succeed him in the government of these islands, so that the name of Béthencourt might be perpetuated there. He imparted his project to Courtois, who highly approved of it, and added, “Sir, when you return to France, I will go with you. I am a bad husband. It is five years since I saw my wife, and, by my troth, she did not much care about it.”

The 6th of October, 1405, was the day fixed for starting for Gran Canaria, but contrary winds carried the ships towards the African coast, and they passed by Cape Bojador, where Béthencourt landed. He made an expedition twenty-four miles inland, and seized some natives and a great number of camels that he took to his vessels. They put as many of the camels as possible on board, wishing to acclimatize them in the Canary Islands, and the baron set sail again, leaving Cape Bojador, which he had the honour of seeing thirty years before the Portuguese navigators.

During this voyage from the coast of Africa to Gran Canaria, the three vessels were separated in stormy weather, one going to Palma, and another to Fortaventura, but finally they all reached Gran Canaria. This island is sixty miles long and thirty-six miles broad; at the northern end it is flat, but very hilly towards the south. Firs, dragon-trees, olive, fig, and date-trees form large forests, and sheep, goats, and wild dogs are found here in large numbers. The soil is very fertile, and produces two crops of corn every year, and that without any means of improving it. Its inhabitants form a large body of people, and consider themselves all on an equality.

When Béthencourt had landed he set to work at once to conquer the island. Unfortunately his Norman soldiers were so proud of their success on the coast of Africa, that they thought they could conquer this island with its ten thousand natives, with a mere handful of men. Béthencourt seeing that they were so confident of success, recommended them to be prudent, but they took no heed of this and bitterly they rued their confidence. After a skirmish, in which they seemed to have got the better of the islanders, they had left their ranks, when the natives surprised them, massacring twenty-two of them, including Jean de Courtois and Hannibal, Gadifer's son.

After this sad affair Béthencourt left Gran Canaria and went to try to subdue Palma. The natives of this island were very clever in slinging stones, rarely missing their aim, and in the encounters with these islanders many fell on both sides, but more natives than Normans, whose loss, however, amounted to one hundred.

After six weeks of skirmishing, Béthencourt left Palma, and went to Ferro for three months, a large island twenty-one miles long and fifteen broad. It is a flat table-land, and large woods of pine and laurel-trees shade it in many places. The mists, which are frequent, moisten the soil and make it especially favourable for the cultivation of corn and the vine. Game is abundant; pigs, goats, and sheep run wild about the country; there are also great lizards in shape like the iguana of America. The inhabitants both men and women are a very fine race, healthy, lively, agile and particularly well made, in fact Ferro is one of the pleasantest islands of the group.

Béthencourt returned to Fortaventura with his ships after conquering Ferro and Palma. This island is fifty-one miles in length by twenty-four in breadth, and has high mountains as well as large plains, but its surface is less undulating than that of the other islands. Large streams of fresh water run through the island; the euphorbia, a deadly poison, grows largely here, and date and olive-trees are abundant, as well as a plant that is invaluable for dyeing and whose cultivation would be most remunerative. The coast of Fortaventura has no good harbours for large vessels, but small ones can anchor there quite safely. It was in this island that Béthencourt began to make a partition of land to the colonists, and he succeeded in doing it so evenly that every one was satisfied with his portion. Those colonists whom he had brought with him were to be exempted from taxes for nine years.

The question of religion, and religious administration could not fail to be of the deepest interest to so pious a man as Béthencourt, so he resolved to go to Rome and try to obtain a bishop for this country, who "would order and adorn the Roman Catholic faith." Before setting out he appointed his nephew Maciot as lieutenant and governor of the islands. Under his orders two sergeants were to act, and enforce justice; he desired that twice a year news of the colony should be sent to him in Normandy, and the revenue from Lancerota and Fortaventura was to be devoted to building two churches. He said to his nephew Maciot, "I give you full authority in everything to do whatever you think best, and I believe you will do all for my honour and to my advantage. Follow as nearly as possible Norman and French customs, especially in the administration of justice. Above all things, try and keep peace and unity among yourselves, and care for each other as brothers, and specially try that there shall be no rivalry among the gentlemen; I have given to each one his share and the country is quite large enough for each to have his own sphere. I can tell you nothing further beyond again impressing the importance of your all living as good friends together, and then all will be well."

Béthencourt remained three months in Fortaventura and the other islands. He rode about among the people on his mule, and found many of the natives beginning to speak Norman-French. Maciot and the other gentlemen accompanied him, he pointing out what was best to be done and the most honest way of doing it. Then he gave notice that he would set out for Rome on the ensuing 15th of December. Returning to Lancerota, he remained there till his departure, and ordered all the gentlemen he had brought with him, the workmen, and the three kings to appear before him two days before his departure, to tell them what he wished done, and to commend himself and them to God’s protection.

None failed to appear at this meeting; they were all received at the fort on Lancerota, and sumptuously entertained. When the repast was over, he spoke to them, especially impressing the duty of obedience to his nephew Maciot upon them, the retention of the fifth of everything for himself, and also the exercise of all Christian virtues and of fervent love to God. This done, he chose those who were to accompany him to Rome, and prepared to set out.

His vessel had scarcely set sail when cries and groans were heard on all sides, both Europeans and natives alike regretting this just master, who they feared would never return to them. A great number waded into the water, and tried to stop the vessel that carried him away from them, but the sails were set and Béthencourt was really gone. “May God keep him safe from all harm,” was the utterance of many that day. In a week he was at Seville, from thence he went to Valladolid, where the king received him very graciously. He related the narrative of his conquests to the king, and requested from him letters recommending him to the Pope, that he might have a bishop appointed for the islands. The king gave him the letters, and loaded him with gifts, and then Béthencourt set out for Rome with a numerous retinue.

He remained three weeks in the eternal city, and was admitted to kiss Pope Innocent VII.’s foot, who complimented him on his having made so many proselytes to the Christian faith, and on his bravery in having ventured so far from his native country. When the bulls were prepared as Béthencourt had requested, and Albert des Maisons was appointed Bishop of the Canary Islands, the Norman took leave of the Pope after receiving his blessing.

The new prelate took leave of Béthencourt, and set out at once for his diocese. He went by way of Spain, taking with him some letters from Béthencourt to the king. Then he set sail for Fortaventura and arrived there without any obstacle. Maciot gave him a cordial reception, and the bishop at once began to organize his diocese, governing with gentleness and courtesy, preaching now in one island, now in another, and offering up public prayers for Béthencourt's safety. Maciot was universally beloved, but especially by the natives. This happy, peaceful time only lasted for five years, for later on, Maciot began to abuse his unlimited power, and levied such heavy exactions that he was obliged to fly the country to save his life.

Béthencourt after leaving Rome went to Florence and to Paris, and then to his own chateau, where a great number of people came to pay their respects to the king of the Canary Islands, and if on his return the first time he was much thought of, his reception this second time far exceeded it. Béthencourt established himself at Grainville; although he was an old man, his wife was still young. He had frequent accounts from Maciot of his beloved islands, and he hoped one day to return to his kingdom, but God willed otherwise. One day in the year 1425 he was seized with what proved to be fatal illness; he was aware that the end was near; and after making his will and receiving the last sacraments of the church he passed away. "May God keep him and pardon his sins," says the narrative of his life; "he is buried in the church of Grainville la Teinturière, in front of the high altar."

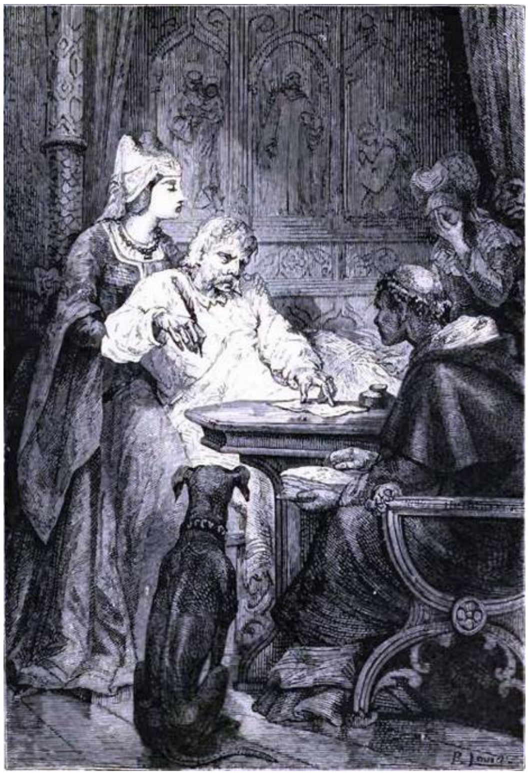

Jean de Béthencourt makes his will.

CHAPTER VII.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, 1436-1506.

I.

Discovery of Madeira, Cape de Verd Islands, the Azores, Congo, and Guinea — Bartholomew Diaz — Cabot and Labrador — The geographical and commercial tendencies of the middle ages — The erroneous idea of the distance between Europe and Asia — Birth of Christopher Columbus — His first voyages — His plans rejected — His sojourn at the Franciscan convent — His reception by Ferdinand and Isabella — Treaty of the 17th of April, 1492 — The brothers Pinzon — Three armed caravels at the port of Palos — Departure on the 3rd of August, 1492.

The year 1492 is an era in geographical annals. It is the date of the discovery of America. The genius of one man was fated to complete the terrestrial globe, and to show the truth of Gagliuffi's saying, —

Unus erat mundus; duo sint, ait iste; fuere.

The old world was to be entrusted with the moral and political education of the new. Was it equal to the task, with its ideas still limited, its tendencies still semi-barbarous, and its bitter religious animosities? We must leave the answer to these questions to the facts that follow.

Between the year 1405, when Béthencourt had just accomplished the colonization of the Canary Islands, and the year 1492, what had taken place? We will give a short sketch of the geographical enterprise of the intervening years. A considerable impetus had been given to science by the Arabs (who were soon to be expelled from Spain), and had spread throughout the peninsula. In all the ports, but more especially in those of

Portugal, there was much talk of the continent of Africa, and the rich and wonderful countries beyond the sea. “A thousand anecdotes,” says Michelet, “stimulated curiosity, valour and avarice, every one wishing to see these mysterious countries where monsters abounded and gold was scattered over the surface of the land.” A young prince, Don Henry, duke of Viseu, third son of John I. who was very fond of the study of astronomy and geography, exercised a considerable influence over his contemporaries; it is to him that Portugal owes her colonial power and wealth and the expeditions so repeatedly made, which were vividly described, and their results spoken of as so wonderful, that they may have aided in awakening Columbus’ love of adventure. Don Henry had an observatory built in the southern part of the province of Algarve, at Sagres, commanding a most splendid view over the sea, and seeming as though it must have been placed there to seek for some unknown land; he also established a naval college, where learned geographers traced correct maps and taught the use of the mariner’s compass. The young prince surrounded himself with learned men, and especially gathered all the information he could as to the possibility of circumnavigating Africa, and thus reaching India. Though he had never taken part in any maritime expedition, his encouragement and care for seamen gave him the soubriquet of “the Navigator,” by which name he is known in history. Two gentlemen belonging to Don Henry’s court, Juan Gonzales Zarco, and Tristram Vaz Teixeira had passed Cape Nun, the terror of ancient navigators, when they were carried out to sea and passed near an island to which they gave the name of Porto-Santo. Sometime afterwards, as they were sailing towards a black point that remained on the horizon, they came to a large island covered with splendid forests; this was Madeira.

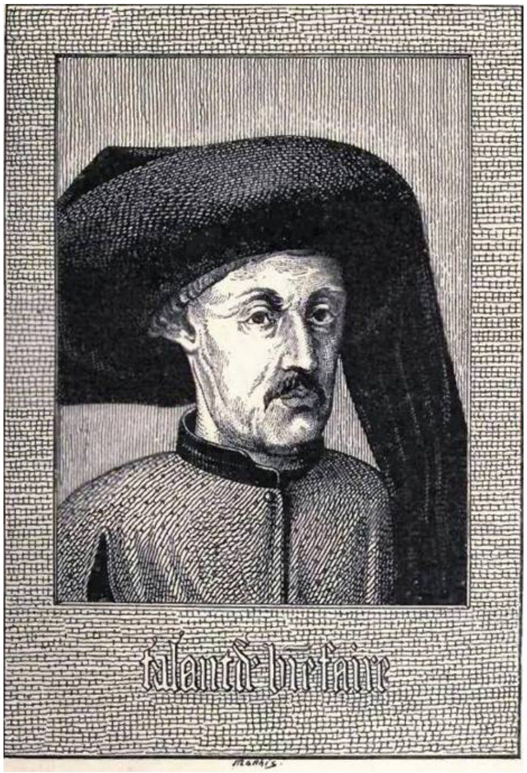

Prince Henry of Portugal — ”The Navigator.”

In 1433, Cape Bojador, which had for long been such a difficulty to navigators, was first doubled by the two Portuguese sailors, Gillianès and Gonzalès Baldaya, who passed more than forty leagues beyond it.

Encouraged by their example, Antonio Gonzalès, and Nuño Tristram, in 1441, sailed as far as Cape Blanco, “a feat,” says Faria y Souza “that is generally looked upon as being little short of the labours of Hercules,” and they brought back with them to Lisbon some gold-dust taken from the Rio del Ouro. In a second voyage Tristram noticed some of the Cape de Verd Islands, and went as far south as Sierra Leone. In the course of this expedition, he bought from some Moors off the coast of Guinea, ten negroes, whom he took back with him to Lisbon and parted with for a very high price, they having excited great curiosity. This was the origin of the slave-trade in Europe, which for the next 400 years robbed Africa of so many of her people, and was a disgrace to humanity.

In 1441, Cada Mosto doubled Cape Verd, and explored a part of the coast below it. About 1446, the Portuguese, advancing further into the open sea than their predecessors, came upon the group of the Azores. From this time all fear vanished, for the formidable line had been passed, beyond which the air was said to scorch like fire; expeditions succeeded each other without intermission, and each brought home accounts of newly-discovered regions. It seemed as if the African continent was really endless, for the further they advanced towards the south, the further the cape they sought appeared to recede. Some little time before this King John II. had added the title of Seigneur of Guinea to his other titles, and to the discovery of Congo had been added that of some stars in the southern hemisphere hitherto unknown, when Diogo Cam, in three successive voyages, went further south than any preceding navigator, and bore away from Diaz the honour of being the discoverer of the southern point of the African continent. This cape is called Cape Cross, and here he raised a monument called a padrao or padron in memory of his discovery, which is still standing. On his way back, he visited the King of Congo in his capital, and took back with him an ambassador and numerous suite of natives, who were all baptized, and taught the elements of the Christian religion, which they were to propagate on their return to Congo.

A short time after Diogo Cam’s return in the month of August, 1487, three caravels left the Tagus under the command of Bartholomew Diaz, a gentleman attached to the king’s household, and an old sailor on the Guinea seas. He had an experienced mariner under him, and the smallest of the three vessels freighted with provisions, was commanded by his brother Pedro Diaz. We have no record of the earlier part of this expedition; we only know, from Joao de Barros, to whom we owe nearly all we learn of Portuguese navigation, that beyond Congo he followed the coast for some distance, and came to an anchorage that he named “Das Voltas” on account of the manner in which he had to tack to reach it, and there he left the smallest of the caravels under the care of nine sailors. After having been detained here five days by stress of weather, Diaz stood out to sea, and took a southerly course, but for thirteen days his vessels were tossed hither and thither by the tempest.

As he went further south the temperature fell and the air became very cold; at last the fury of the elements abated, and Diaz took an easterly course hoping to sight the land, but after several days had passed, and being in about 42° south latitude, he anchored in the bay “dos Vaquieros,” so named from the numbers of horned animals and shepherds, who fled inland at the sight of the two vessels.

At this time Diaz was about 120 miles east of the Cape of Good Hope, which he had doubled without seeing it. They then went to Sam Braz (now Mossel) bay, and coasted as far as Algoa bay and to an island called Da Cruz where they set up a padrao. But here the crews being much discouraged by the dangers they had passed through, and feeling much the scarcity and bad quality of the provisions, refused to go any farther. “Besides,” they said, “as the land is now on our left, let us go back and see the Cape, which we have doubled without knowing it.”

Diaz called a council, and decided that they should go forwards in a north-easterly direction for two or three days longer. We owe it to his firmness of purpose that he was able to reach a river, 75 miles from Da Cruz that he called Rio Infante, but then the crew refusing to go farther, Diaz was obliged to return to Europe. Barros says, “When Diaz left the pillar that he had erected, it was with such sorrow and so much bitterness, that it seemed almost as though he were leaving an exiled son, and especially when he thought of all the dangers that he and his companions had passed through, and the long distance which they had come with only this memorial as a remembrance: it was indeed painful to break off when the task was but half completed.” At last they saw the Cape of Good Hope, or as Diaz and his followers called it then, the “Cape of Torments,” in remembrance of all the storms and tempests they had passed through before they could double it. With the foresight which so often accompanies genius, John II. substituted for the “Cape of Torments,” the name of the “Cape of Good Hope,” for he saw that now the route to India was open at last, and his vast plans for the extension of the commerce and influence of his country were about to be realized.

On the 24th of August, 1488, Diaz returned to Angra das Voltas, where he had left his smallest caravel. He found six of his nine men dead, and the seventh was so overcome with joy at seeing his companions again that he died also. No particular incident marked the voyage home; they reached Lisbon in December, 1488, after staying at Benin, where they traded, and at La Mina to receive the money gained by the commerce of the colony.

It is strange but true, that Diaz not only received no reward of any kind for this voyage which had been so successful, but he seemed to be treated rather as though he had disgraced himself, for he was not employed again for ten years. More than this the command of the expedition that was sent to double the cape which Diaz had discovered, was given to Vasco da Gama, and Diaz was only to accompany it to La Mina holding a subordinate position. He was to hear of the marvellous campaign of his successful rival in India, and to see what an effect such an event would have upon the destiny of his country.

He took part in Cabral's expedition which discovered Brazil, but he had not the pleasure of seeing the shores to which he had been the pioneer, for the fleet had only just left the American shore, when a fearful storm arose; four vessels sank, and among them the one that Diaz commanded. It is in allusion to his sad fate that Camoens puts the following prediction into the mouth of Adamastor, the spirit of the Cape of Tempests. "I will make a terrible example of the first fleet that shall pass near these rocks, and I will wreak my vengeance on him who first comes to brave me in my dwelling."

In fact it was only in 1497, maybe five years after the discovery of America, that the southern point of Africa was passed by Vasco da Gama, and it may be affirmed that if this latter had preceded Columbus, the discovery of the new continent might have been delayed for several centuries. The navigators of this period were very timorous, and did not dare to sail out into mid-ocean; not liking to venture upon seas that were but little known, they always followed the coast-line of Africa, rather than go further from land. If the Cape of Tempests had been doubled, the sailors would have gone by this route to India, and none would have thought of going to the "Land of Spices," that is to say Asia, by venturing across the Atlantic. Who, in fact, would have thought of seeking for the east by the route to the west? But in truth this *was* the great idea of that day, for Cooley says, "The principal object of Portuguese maritime enterprise in the fifteenth century was to search for a passage to India by the Ocean." The most learned men had not gone so far as to imagine the existence of another continent to complete the equilibrium and balance of the terrestrial globe. Some parts of the American continent had been already discovered, for an Italian navigator Sebastian Cabot had landed on Labrador in 1487, and the

Scandinavians had certainly disembarked on this unknown land. The colonists of Greenland, too had explored Winland, but so little disposition was there at this time to believe in the existence of a new world, that Greenland, Winland, and Labrador were all thought to be a continuation of the European continent.

The main question before the navigators of the fifteenth century was the opening up of an easier communication with the shores of Asia. The route to India, China, and Japan (countries already known through the wonderful narrative of Marco Polo), viâ, Asia Minor, Persia, and Tartary, was long and dangerous. The transport of goods was too difficult and costly for these "ways terrestrial" ever to become roads for commerce. A more practicable means of communication must be found. Thus all the dwellers on the coasts, from England to Spain, as well as the people living on the shores of the Mediterranean, seeing the great Atlantic ocean open to their vessels, began to inquire, whether indeed this new route might not conduct them to the shores of Asia.

The sphericity of the Globe being established, this reasoning was correct, for going always westward, the traveller must necessarily at last reach the east, and as to the route across the ocean, it would certainly be open. Who could, indeed, have suspected the existence of an obstacle 9750 miles in length, lying between Europe and Asia, and called America?

We must observe also that the scientific men of the Middle Ages believed that the shores of Asia were not more than 6000 miles distant from those of Europe. Aristotle supposed the terrestrial globe to be smaller than it really is. Seneca said "How far is it from the shores of Spain to India? *A very few days' sail*, should the wind be favourable." This was also the opinion of Strabo. So it seemed that the route between Europe and Asia *must* be short, and there being such places for ships to touch at as the Azores and Antilles, of which the existence was known in the fifteenth century, the transoceanic communication promised not to be difficult. This popular error as to distance had the happy effect of inducing navigators to try to cross the Atlantic, a feat which, had they been aware of the 15,000 miles of ocean separating Europe from Asia, they would scarcely have dared to attempt.

We must in justice allow that certain facts gave, or seemed to give, reason to the partisans of Aristotle and Strabo for their belief in the proximity of the eastern shores. Thus, a pilot in the service of the King of Portugal, while sailing at 1350 miles' distance from Cape St. Vincent, the south-western point of the Portuguese province of Algarve, met with a piece of wood ornamented with ancient sculptures, which he considered must have come from a continent not far off. Again, some fishermen had found near the island of Madeira, a sculptured post and some bamboos, which in shape resembled those found in India. The inhabitants of the Azores also, often picked up gigantic pine-trees, of an unknown species, and one day two human bodies were cast upon their shores, "corpses with broad faces," says the chronicler Herrera, "and not resembling Christians."

These various facts tended to inflame imagination. As in the fifteenth century men had no knowledge of that great Gulf-stream, which, in nearing the European coasts, brings with it waifs and strays from America, so they could only imagine that these various débris must come from Asia. Therefore, they argued, Asia could not be far off, and the communication between these two extremes of the old continent must be easy. One point must be clearly borne in mind, no geographer of this period had any notion of the existence of a new world; it was not even a desire of adding to geographical knowledge which led to the exploration of the western route. It was the men of commerce who were the leaders in this movement, and who first undertook to cross the Atlantic. Their only thought was of traffic, and of carrying it on by the shortest road.

The mariner’s compass, invented, according to the generally received opinion, about 1302, by one Flavio Gioja of Amalfi, enabled vessels to sail at a distance from the coasts, and to guide themselves when out of sight of land. Martin Béhaim, with two physicians in the service of Prince Henry of Portugal, had also added to nautical science by discovering the way of directing the voyager’s course according to the position of the sun in the heavens, and by applying the astrolabe to the purposes of navigation. These improvements being adopted, the commercial question of the western route increased daily in importance in Spain, Portugal, and Italy, countries in which three-quarters of the science is made up of imagination. There was discussion, there were writings. The excited world of commerce disputed with the world of science. Facts, systems, doctrines, were grouped together. The time was come when there was needed one single intelligence to collect together and assimilate the various floating ideas. This intelligence was found. At length all the scattered notions were gathered together in the mind of one man, who possessed in a remarkable degree genius, perseverance, and boldness.

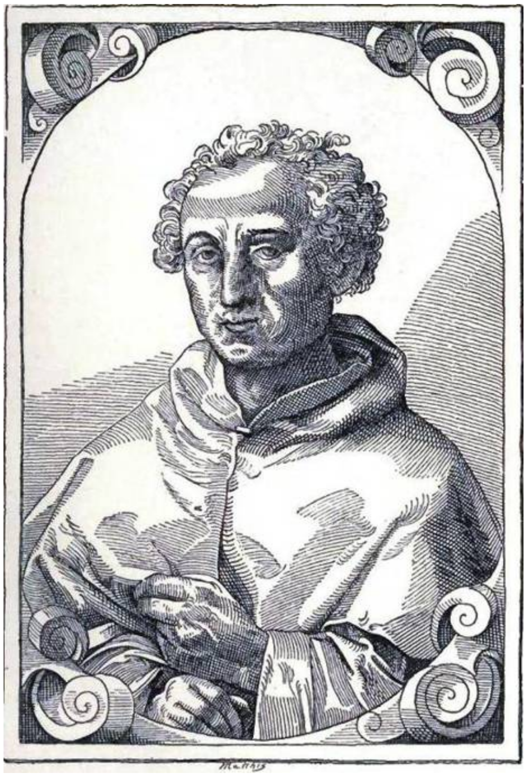

Christopher Columbus.

This man was no other than Christopher Columbus, born, probably near Genoa, about the year 1436. We say “probably,” for the towns of Cogoreo and Nervi dispute with Savona and Genoa, the honour of having given him birth. The date of his birth varies, with different biographers, from 1430 to 1445, but the year 1436 would appear to be the correct one, according to the most reliable documents. The family of Columbus was of humble origin; his father, Domenic Columbus, a manufacturer of woollen stuffs, seems, however, to have been in sufficiently easy circumstances to enable him to give his children a more than ordinarily good education. The young

Christopher, the eldest of the family, was sent to the University of Pavia, there to study Grammar, Latin, Geography, Astronomy, and Navigation.

At fourteen years of age Christopher left school and went to sea; from this time until 1487, very little is known of his career. It is interesting to give the remark of Humboldt on this subject, as reported by M. Charton; he said, “that he regretted the more this uncertainty about the early life of Columbus when he remembered all that the chroniclers have so minutely preserved for us upon the life of the dog Becerillo, or the elephant Aboulababat, which Haroun-al-Raschid sent to Charlemagne!” The most probable account to be gathered from contemporary documents and from the writings of Columbus himself, is that the young sailor visited the Levant, the west, the north, England several times, Portugal, the coast of Guinea, and the islands of Africa, perhaps even Greenland, for, by the age of forty “he had sailed to every part that had ever been sailed to before.” He was looked upon as a thoroughly competent mariner, and his reputation led to his being chosen for the command of the Genoese galleys, in the war which that Republic was waging against Venice. He afterwards made an expedition, in the service of René, king of Anjou, to the coasts of Barbary, and in 1477, he went to explore the countries beyond Iceland.

This voyage being successfully terminated, Christopher Columbus returned to his home at Lisbon. He there married the daughter of an Italian gentleman, Bartolomeo Munez Perestrello, a sailor like himself and deeply interested in the geographical ideas of the day. The wife of Columbus, Dona Filippa, was without fortune, and Columbus, having none himself, felt he must work for the support of himself and his family. The future discoverer, therefore, set to work to make picture-books, terrestrial globes, maps, and nautical charts, and continued in this employment until 1481, but without at the same time abandoning his scientific and literary pursuits. It seems probable even, that during this period he studied deeply, and attained to knowledge far beyond that possessed by most of the sailors of his time. Can it have been that at this time “the Great Idea” first arose in his mind? It may well have been so. He was following assiduously the discussions relative to the western routes, and the facility of communication by the west, between Europe and Asia. His correspondence proves that he shared the opinion of Aristotle as to the relatively short distance separating the extreme shores of the old Continent. He wrote frequently to the most distinguished savants of his time. Martin Béhaim, of whom we have already spoken, was amongst his correspondents, and also the celebrated Florentine astronomer, Toscanelli, whose opinions in some degree influenced those of Columbus.

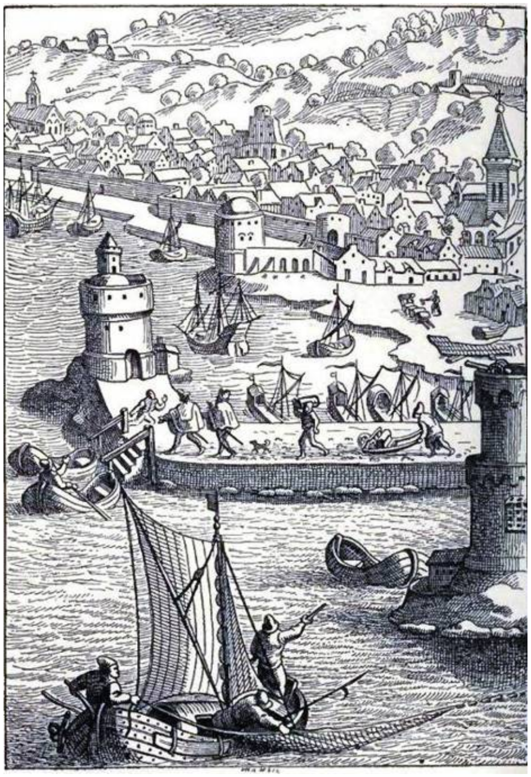

A Spanish Port.

At this time Columbus, according to the portrait of him given by his biographer Washington Irving, was a tall man, of robust and noble presence. His face was long, he had an aquiline nose, high cheek bones, eyes clear and full of fire; he had a bright complexion, and his face was much covered with freckles. He was a truly Christian man, and it was with the liveliest faith that he fulfilled all the duties of the Catholic religion.

At the time when Christopher Columbus was in correspondence with the astronomer Toscanelli, he learnt that the latter, at the request of Alphonso V. King of Portugal, had sent to the king a learned Memoir upon the possibility of reaching the Indies by the western route. Columbus was consulted, and supported the ideas of Toscanelli with all his influence; but without result, for the King of Portugal, who was engaged at the time in war with Spain, died, without having been able to give any attention to maritime discoveries. His successor, John II. adopted the plans of Columbus and Toscanelli with enthusiasm. At the same time, with most reprehensible cunning, he tried to deprive these two savants of the benefit of their proposition; without telling them, he sent out a caravel to attempt this great enterprise, and to reach China by crossing the Atlantic. But he had not reckoned upon the inexperience of his pilots, nor upon the violence of the storms which they might encounter; the result was, that some days after their departure, a hurricane brought back to Lisbon the sailors of the Portuguese king. Columbus was justly wounded by this unworthy action, and felt that he could not reckon upon a king who had so deceived him. His wife being dead, he left Spain with his son Diego, towards the end of the year 1484. It is thought that he went to Genoa and to Venice, where his projects of transoceanic navigation were but badly received.

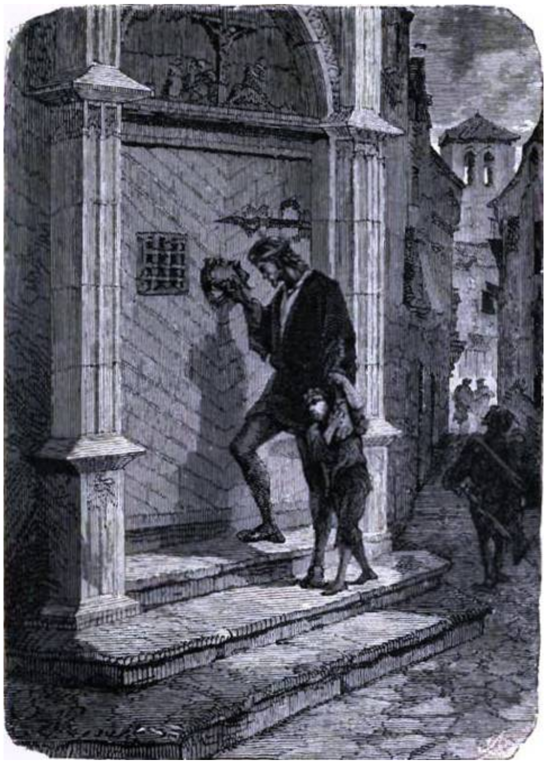

Columbus knocks at a convent door.

However it may have been, in 1485 we find him again in Spain. This great man was poor, without resources. He travelled on foot, carrying Diego his little son of ten years old, in his arms. From this period of his life, history follows him step by step; she no more loses sight of him, and she has preserved to posterity the smallest incidents of this grand existence. We find Columbus arrived in Andalusia, only half a league from the port of Palos. Destitute, and dying of hunger, he knocked at the door of a Franciscan convent, dedicated to Santa Maria de Rabida, and asked for a little bread and water for his poor child and for himself. The superior of the convent, Juan Perez de Marchena, gave hospitality to the unfortunate traveller. He questioned him, and was surprised by the nobleness of his language, but still more astonished was he, by the boldness of the ideas of Columbus, who made the good Father the confidant of his aspirations. For several months the wandering sailor remained in this hospitable convent; some of the monks were learned men, and interested themselves about him and his projects; they studied his plans; they mentioned him to some of the well-known navigators of the time; and we must give them the credit of having been the first to believe in the genius of Christopher Columbus. Juan Perez showed still greater kindness; he offered to take upon himself the charge of the education of Diego, and he gave to Columbus a letter of recommendation addressed to the confessor of the Queen of Castille.

This confessor, prior of the monastery of Prado, was deep in the confidence of Ferdinand and Isabella; but he did not approve of the projects of the Genoese navigator, and he rendered him no service whatever with his royal penitent. Columbus must still resign himself to wait. He went to live at Cordova, where the court was soon to come, and for livelihood he resumed his trade of picture-seller. Is it possible to quote from the lives of illustrious men an instance of a more trying existence than this of the great navigator? Could ill-fortune have assailed any man with more cruel blows? But this indomitable, indefatigable man of genius, rising up again after each trial, did not despair. He felt within him the sacred fire of genius, he worked on unceasingly, he visited influential persons, spreading his ideas and defending them, and combating all objections with the most heroic energy. At length he obtained the protection of the great cardinal-archbishop of Toledo, Pedro Gonzalez de Mendoza, and thanks to him, was admitted into the presence of the King and Queen of Spain.

Christopher Columbus must have imagined himself now at the end of all his troubles. Ferdinand and Isabella received his project favourably, and caused it to be submitted for examination to a council of learned men, consisting of bishops and monks who were gathered together *ad hoc* in a Dominican convent at Salamanca. But the unfortunate pleader was not yet at the end of his vicissitudes. In this meeting at Salamanca all his judges were against him. The truth was, that his ideas interfered with the intolerant religious notions of the fifteenth century. The Fathers of the Church had denied the sphericity of the earth, and since the earth was not round they declared that a voyage of circumnavigation was absolutely contrary to the Bible, and could not therefore, on any logical theory, be undertaken. “Besides,” said these theologians, “if any one should ever succeed in descending into the other hemisphere, how could he ever mount up again into this one?” This manner of arguing was a very formidable one at this period; for Christopher Columbus saw himself, in consequence, almost accused of heresy, the most unpardonable crime which could be committed in these intolerant countries. He escaped any evil consequences from the hostile disposition of the Council, but the execution of his project was again adjourned.

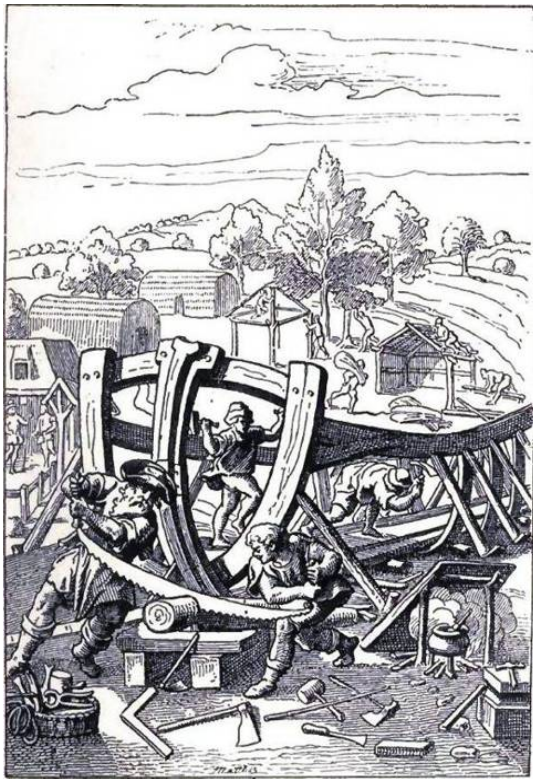

Building a caravel.

Long years passed away. The unfortunate man of genius, despairing of success in Spain, sent his brother to England to make an offer of his services to the king, Henry VII. But it is probable that the king gave no answer. Then Christopher Columbus turned again with unabated perseverance to Ferdinand, but Ferdinand was at this time engaged in a war of extermination against the Moors, and it was not until 1492, when he had chased the Moors from Spain, that he was able again to listen to the solicitations of the Genoese sailor.

This time the affair was thoroughly considered, and the king consented to the enterprise. But Columbus, as is the manner of proud natures, wished to impose his own conditions. They bargained over that which should enrich Spain! Columbus, in disgust, was without doubt ready to quit, and for ever, this ungrateful country, but Isabella, touched by the thought of the unbelievers of Asia, whom she hoped to convert to the Catholic faith, ordered Columbus to be recalled, and then acceded to all his demands.

Columbus was in the fifty-sixth year of his age when he signed a treaty with the King of Spain at Santa-Feta on the 17th of April, 1492, being eighteen years after he had first conceived his project, and seven years from the time of his quitting the monastery of Palos. By this solemn convention, the dignity of high admiral was to belong to Columbus in all the lands which he might discover, and this dignity was to descend in perpetuity to his heirs and successors. He was named viceroy and governor of the new possessions which he hoped to conquer in the rich countries of Asia, and one-tenth part of the pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, spices, provisions, and merchandise of whatever kind, which might be acquired in any manner whatsoever, within the limits of his jurisdiction, was of right to belong to him.

All was arranged, and at length Columbus was to put his cherished projects in execution. But let us repeat, he had no thought of meeting with the New World, of the existence of which he had not the faintest suspicion. His aim was “to explore the East by the West, and to pass by the way of the West to the Land whence come the spices.” One may even aver that Columbus died in the belief that he had arrived at the shores of Asia, and never knew himself that he had made the discovery of America. But this in no way lessens his glory; the meeting with the new Continent was but an accident. The real cause of the immortal renown of Columbus was that audacity of genius which induced him to brave the dangers of an unknown ocean, to separate himself afar from those familiar shores, which, until now, navigators had never ventured to quit, to adventure himself upon the waves of the Atlantic Ocean in the frail ships of the period, which the first tempest might engulf, to launch himself, in a word, upon the deep darkness of an unknown sea.

The preparations began, Columbus entering into an arrangement with some rich navigators of Palos, the three brothers Pinzon, who made the necessary advances for defraying the expenses of fitting out the ships. Three caravels, named the *Gallega*, the *Nina*, and the *Pinta*, were equipped in the port of Palos. The *Gallega* was destined to carry the admiral, who changed her name to the *Santa-Maria*. The *Pinta* was commanded by Martin Alonzo Pinzon, and the *Nina* by his two brothers, Francis Martin, and Vincent Yanez Pinzon. It was difficult to man the ships, sailors generally being frightened at the enterprise, but at last the captains succeeded in getting together one hundred and twenty men, and on Friday, August 3rd, 1492, the admiral crossing at eight o’clock in the morning the bar of Saltez, off the town of Huelva, in Andalusia, adventured himself with his three half-decked caravels upon the Atlantic waves.

II.
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

First voyage: The Great Canary — Gomera — Magnetic variation — Symptoms of revolt — Land, land — San Salvador — Taking possession — Conception — Fernandina or Great Exuma — Isabella, or Long Island — The Mucaras — Cuba — Description of the island — Archipelago of Notre-Dame — Hispaniola or San Domingo — Tortuga Island — The cacique on board the *Santa-Maria* — The caravel of Columbus goes aground and cannot be floated off — Island of Monte-Christi — Return — Tempest — Arrival in Spain — Homage rendered to Christopher Columbus.

During the first day’s voyage, the admiral — the title by which he is usually known in the various accounts of his exploits — bearing directly southwards, sailed forty-five miles before sunset; turning then to the south-east, he steered for the Canaries, in order to repair the *Pinta*, which had unshipped her rudder, an accident caused perhaps by the ill-will of the steersman, who dreaded the voyage. Ten days later Columbus cast anchor before the Great Canary Island, where the rudder of the caravel was repaired. Nineteen days afterwards he arrived before Gomera, where the inhabitants assured him of the existence of an unknown land in the west of the Archipelago. He did not leave Gomera until the 6th of September. He had received warning that three Portuguese ships awaited him in the open sea, with the intention of barring his passage; however, without taking any heed of this news, he put to sea, cleverly avoided meeting his enemies, and steering directly westward, he lost all sight of land. During the voyage the admiral took care to conceal from his companions the true distance traversed each day; he made it appear less than it really was in the daily abstracts of his observations, that he might not add to the fear already felt by the sailors, by letting them know the real distance which separated them from Europe. Each day he watched the compasses with attention, and it is to him we owe the discovery of the magnetic variation, of which he took account in his calculations. The pilots, however, were much disturbed on seeing the compasses all "north-westers," as they expressed it.

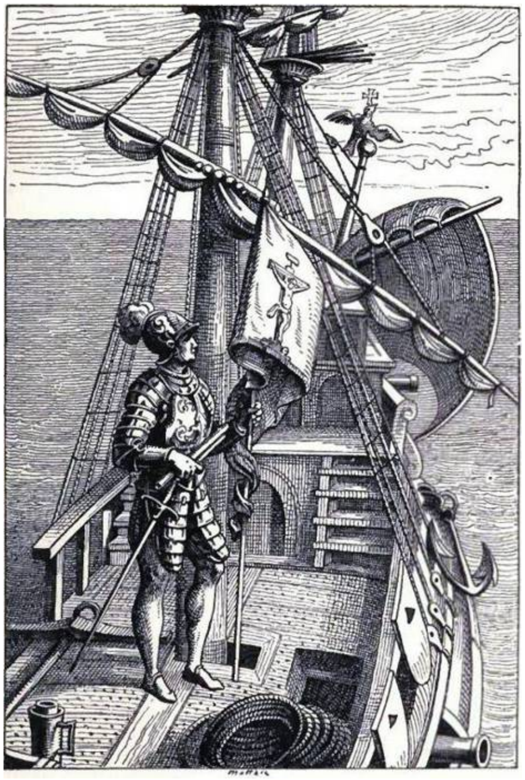

Christopher Columbus on board his caravel.

On the 14th of September the sailors saw a swallow and some tropic-birds. The sight of these birds was an evidence of land being near, for they do not usually fly more than about seventy miles out to sea. The temperature was very mild, the weather magnificent; the wind blew from the east and wafted the caravels in the desired direction. But it was exactly this continuance of east wind which frightened the greater part of the sailors, who saw in this persistence, so favourable for the outward voyage, the promise of a formidable obstacle to their return home. On the 16th of September some tufts of seaweed, still fresh, were seen floating on the waves. But no land was to be seen, and this seaweed might possibly indicate the presence of submarine rocks, and not of the shores of a continent. On the 17th, thirty-five days after the departure of the expedition, floating weeds were frequently seen, and upon one mass of weed was found a live cray-fish, a sure sign this of the proximity of land.

During the following days a large number of birds, such as gannets, sea-swallows, and tropic-birds, flew around the caravels. Columbus turned their presence to account as a means of reassuring his companions, who were beginning to be terribly frightened at not meeting with land after six weeks of sailing. His own confidence never abated, but putting firm trust in God, he often addressed energetic words of comfort to those around him, and made them each evening chant the *Salve Regina*, or some other hymn to the Virgin. At the words of this heroic man, so noble, so sure of himself, so superior to all human weaknesses, the courage of the sailors revived, and they again went onwards.

We can well imagine how anxiously both officers and men scanned the western horizon towards which they were steering. Each one had a pecuniary motive for wishing to be the first to descry the New Continent, King Ferdinand having promised a reward of 10,000 maravédis, or 400 pounds sterling, to the first discoverer. The latter days of the month of September were enlivened by the presence of numerous large birds, petrels, man-of-war birds, and damiers, flying in couples, a sign that they were not far away from home. So Columbus retained his unshaken conviction that land could not be far off.

On the 1st of October, the admiral announced to his companions that they had made 1272 miles to the west since leaving Ferro; in reality, the distance traversed exceeded 2100 miles, and of this Columbus was quite aware, but persisted in his policy of disguising the truth in this particular. On the 7th of October, the crews were excited by hearing discharges of musketry from the *Nina*, the commanders of which, the two brothers Pinzon, thought they had descried the land; they soon found, however, that they had been mistaken. Still, on their representing that they had seen some parroquets flying in a south-westerly direction, the admiral consented to change his route so far as to steer some points to the south, a change which had happy consequences in the future, for had they continued to run directly westward, the caravels would have been aground upon the great Bahama Bank, and would probably have been altogether destroyed.

Still the ardently desired land did not appear. Each evening the sun as it went down dipped behind an interminable horizon of water. The crews who had several times been the victims of an optical illusion, now began to murmur against Columbus, “the Genoese, the foreigner,” who had enticed them so far away from their country. Some symptoms of mutiny had already shown themselves on board the vessels, when, on the 10th of

October, the sailors openly declared that they would go no further. In treating of this part of the voyage, the historians would seem to have drawn somewhat upon their imagination; they narrate scenes of serious import which took place upon the admiral's caravel, the sailors going so far as even to threaten his life. They say also, that the recriminations ended by a kind of arrangement, granting a respite of three days to Columbus, at the end of which time, should land not have been then discovered, the fleet was to set out on its return to Europe. All these statements we may look upon as pure fiction; there is nothing in the accounts given by Columbus himself which lends them the smallest credibility. But it has been needful to touch upon them, for nothing must be omitted relating to the great Genoese Navigator, and some amount of legend mixed up with history does not ill beseem the grand figure of Christopher Columbus. Still, it is an undoubted fact that there was much murmuring on board the caravels, but it would seem that the crews, cheered by the words of the admiral, and by his brave attitude in the midst of uncertainty, did not refuse to do their duty in working the ships.

On the 11th of October, the admiral noticed alongside of his vessel, a reed still green, floating upon the top of a large wave: at the same time the crew of the *Pinta* hoisted on board another reed, a small board, and a little stick, which appeared to have been cut with an instrument of iron; it was evident that human hands had been employed upon these things. Almost at the same moment, the men of the *Nina* perceived a branch of some thorny tree covered with blossoms. At all this every one rejoiced exceedingly; there could be no doubt now of the proximity of the coast. Night fell over the sea. The *Pinta*, the best sailor of the three vessels, was leading. Already, Columbus himself, and one Rodrigo Sanchez, comptroller of the expedition, had thought they had seen a light moving amidst the shadows of the horizon, when a sailor named Rodrigo, on board the *Pinta*, cried out, "Land, land."

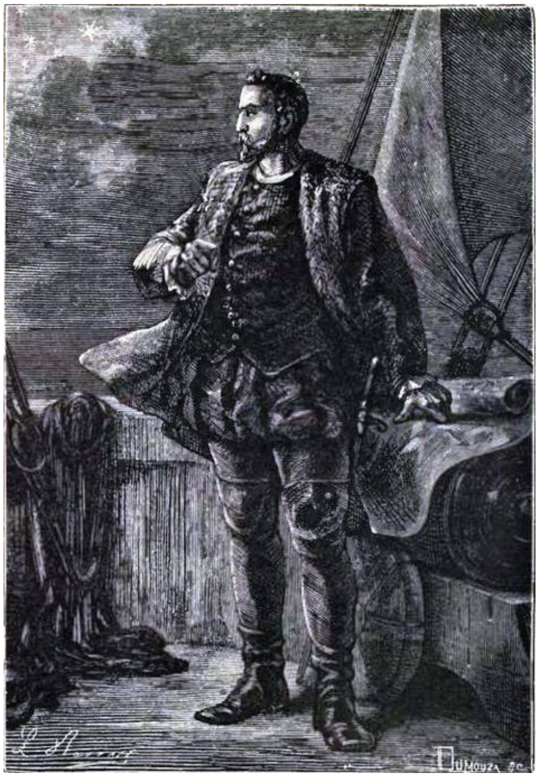

What must have been the feelings in the breast of Columbus at that moment?

What must have been the feelings in the breast of Columbus at that moment? Never had any man, since the first creation of the human race experienced a similar emotion to that now felt by the great navigator. Perhaps even it is allowable to think that the eye which first saw this New Continent, was indeed that of the admiral himself. But what matters it? The glory of Columbus consisted not in the having arrived, his glory was in the having set out. It was at two o'clock in the morning that the land was first seen, when the caravels were not two hours' sail away from it. At once all the crews deeply moved, joined in singing together the *Salve Regina*. With the first rays of the sun they saw a little island, six miles to windward of them. It was one of the Bahama group; Columbus named it San Salvador, and immediately falling on his knees, he began to repeat the hymn of Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine: “Te Deum laudamus, Te Deum confitemur.”

At this moment, some naked savages appeared upon the newly discovered coast. Columbus had his long boat lowered, and got into it with Alonzo and Yanez Pinzon, the comptroller Rodrigo, the secretary Descovedo, and some others. He landed upon the shore, carrying in his hand the royal banner, whilst the two captains bore between them the green banner of the Cross, upon which were interlaced, the initials of Ferdinand and Isabella. Then the admiral solemnly took possession of the island in the name of the King and Queen of Spain, and caused a record of the act to be drawn up. During this ceremony the natives came round Columbus and his companions. M. Charton gives the account of the scene in the very words of Columbus: “Desiring to inspire them (the natives) with friendship for us, and being persuaded, on seeing them, that they would confide the more readily in us, and be the better disposed towards embracing our Holy Faith, if we used mildness in persuading them, rather than if we had recourse to force, I caused to be given to several amongst them, coloured caps, and also glass beads, which they put around their necks. I added various other articles of small value; they testified great joy, and showed so much gratitude that we marvelled greatly at it. When we were re-embarking, they swam towards us, to offer us parroquets, balls of cotton thread, zagayes (or long darts), and many other things; in exchange we gave them some small glass beads, little bells, and other objects. They gave us all they had, but they appeared to me to be very poor. The men and women both were as naked as when they were born. Amongst those whom we saw, one woman was rather young, and none of the men appeared to be more than thirty years of age. They were well made, their figures handsome, and their faces agreeable. Their hair, coarse as that of a horse’s tail, hung down in front as low as their eyebrows, behind it formed a long mass, which they never cut. There are some who paint themselves with a blackish pigment; their natural colour being neither black nor white, but similar to that of the inhabitants of the Canary islands; some paint themselves with white, some with red, or any other colour, either covering the whole body with it, or the whole face, or perhaps only the eyes, or the nose. They do not carry arms like our people, and do not even know what they are. When I showed them some swords, they laid hold of them by the blades, and cut their fingers. They have no iron; their zagayes are sticks, the tip is not of iron, but sometimes made of a fish tooth, or of some other hard substance. They have much grace in their movements. I remarked that several had scars upon their bodies, and I asked them by means of signs, how they had been wounded. They answered in the same manner, that the inhabitants of the neighbouring islands had come to attack them, and make them prisoners, and that they had defended themselves. I thought then and I still think that they must have come from the mainland to make them prisoners for slaves; they would be faithful and gentle servants. They seem to have the power of repeating quickly what they hear. I am persuaded that they might be converted to Christianity without difficulty, for I believe that they belong to no sect.”

When Columbus returned on board, several of the savages swam after his boat; the next day, the 13th, they came in crowds around the ships, on board of enormous canoes shaped out of the trunks of trees; they were guided by means of a kind of baker’s shovel, and some of the canoes were capable of holding forty men. Several natives wore little plates of gold hanging from their nostrils; they appeared much surprised at the arrival of the strangers, and quite believed that these white men must have fallen from the skies. It was with a mixture of respect and curiosity that they touched the garments of the Spaniards, considering them doubtless, a kind of natural plumage.

The scarlet coat of the admiral excited their admiration above everything, and it was evident they looked upon Columbus as a parroquet of a superior species; at once they seemed to recognize him as the chief amongst the strangers.

So Columbus and his followers visited this new island of San Salvador. They were never tired of admiring the beauty of its situation, its magnificent groves, its running streams, and verdant meadows. The fauna of the island offered little variety; parroquets of radiant plumage abounded amongst the trees, but they appeared to be the only species of birds upon the island. San Salvador presented an almost flat plateau of which no mountain broke the uniformity; a small lake occupied the centre of the island. The explorers imagined that San Salvador must contain great mineral riches, since the inhabitants were adorned with ornaments of gold. But was this precious metal derived from the island itself? Upon this point the admiral questioned one of the natives, and succeeded in learning from him by means of signs, that in turning the island and sailing towards the south, the admiral would find a country of which the king possessed great vessels of gold and immense riches. The next morning, at daybreak, Columbus gave orders to have the ships prepared for sea; he set sail, and steered towards the continent of which the natives had spoken, which, as he imagined, could be none other than Cipango.

Here an important observation must be made, showing the state of geographical knowledge at this period: viz. that Columbus now believed himself to have arrived at Asia, Cipango being the name given by Marco Polo to Japan. This error of the admiral, shared in by all his companions, was not rectified for many years afterwards, and thus, as we have already remarked, the great navigator after four successive voyages to the islands, died, without knowing that he had discovered a new world. It is beyond doubt that the sailors of Columbus, and Columbus himself, imagined that they had arrived, during that night of the 12th October, 1492, either at Japan, or China, or the Indies. This is the reason why America so long bore the name of the “Western Indies,” and why the aborigines of this continent, in Brazil and in Mexico, as well as in the United States, are still classed under the general appellation of “Indians.”

So Columbus dreamt only of reaching the shores of Japan. He coasted along San Salvador, exploring its western side. The natives, running down to the shore, offered him water and cassava bread, made from the root of a plant called the “Yucca.” Several times the admiral landed upon the coast at different points, and with a sad want of humanity, he carried away some of the natives, that he might take them with him to Spain. Poor men! already the strangers began to tear them from their country; it would not be long before they began to sell them! At last the caravels lost sight of San Salvador, and were again upon the wide ocean.

Fortune had favoured Columbus in thus guiding him into the centre of one of the most beautiful archipelagos which the world contains. These new lands which he discovered were as a casket of precious stones, which needed only to be opened, and the hands of the discoverer were full of treasures. On the 15th October, at sunset, the flotilla came to anchor near the western point of a second island, at a distance of only fifteen miles from San Salvador; this island was named Conception; on the morrow the admiral landed upon the shore, having his men well armed for fear of surprise; the natives, however, proved to be of the same race as those of San Salvador, and gave a kind welcome to the Spaniards. A south-easterly wind having arisen, Columbus soon put to sea again, and twenty-seven miles further westward, he discovered a third island, which he called Fernandina, but which now goes by the name of the Great Exuma. All night they lay-to, and next day, the 17th October, large native canoes came off to the vessels. The relations with the natives were excellent, the savages peacefully exchanging fruit, and small balls of cotton for glass beads, tambourines, needles, which took their fancy greatly, and some molasses, of which they appeared very fond. These natives of Fernandina wore some clothing, and appeared altogether more civilized than those of San Salvador; they inhabited houses made in the shape of tents and having high chimneys; the interiors of these dwellings were remarkably clean and well kept. The western side of the island, with its deeply indented shore, formed a grand natural harbour, capable of containing a hundred vessels.

But Fernandina did not afford the riches so much coveted by the Spaniards as spoils to take back to Europe; there were no gold-mines here; the natives who were on board the flotilla always spoke, however, of a larger island, situated to the south and called Saometo, in which the precious metal was found. Columbus steered in the direction indicated, and during the night of Friday, the 19th of October, he cast anchor near this Saometo, calling it Isabella; in modern maps it goes by the name of Long Island. According to the natives of San Salvador, there was a powerful king in this island, but the admiral for several days awaited in vain the advent of this great personage; he did not show himself. The island of Isabella was beautiful of aspect, with its clear lakes, and thick forests; the Spaniards were never tired of admiring the new type of nature presented to their view, and of which the intense verdure was wonderful to European eyes. Parroquets in innumerable flocks were flying amongst the thick trees, and great lizards, doubtless iguanas, glided with rapid movements in the high grass. The inhabitants of the island fled at first at the sight of the foreigners, but soon becoming bolder, they trafficked with the Spaniards in the productions of their country.

Still Columbus held firmly to the notion of reaching the shores of Japan. The natives had mentioned to him a large island a little to the west which they called Cuba, and this the admiral supposed must form part of the kingdom of Cipango; he felt little doubt but that he would soon arrive at the town of Quinsay, or Hang-tchoo-foo, formerly the capital of China. With this object, as soon as the winds permitted, the fleet weighed anchor. On Thursday, the 25th of October, seven or eight islands lying in a straight line were sighted, these were probably the Mucaras. Columbus did not stop to visit them, and on the Sunday he came in sight of Cuba. The caravels were moored in a river, to which the Spaniards gave the name of San Salvador; after a short stay, they sailed again towards the west, and entered a harbour situated at the mouth of a large river which was afterwards called the harbour of Las Nuevitas del Principe.

Numerous palm-trees were growing upon the shores of the island, having leaves so broad that only one was required for roofing a native hut. The natives had fled at the approach of the Spaniards, who found upon the shore idols of female form, tame birds, bones of animals, also dumb dogs, and some fishing instruments. The Cuban savages, however, were ready to be enticed like the others, and they consented to barter their goods with the Spaniards. Columbus believed himself to be now on the mainland, and only a few leagues from Hang-tchoo-foo; this idea being so rooted in his mind, that he even busied himself in despatching some presents to the great Khan of China. On the 2nd of November he desired one of the officers of his ship, and a Jew who could speak Hebrew, Chaldee, and Arabic, to set out to seek this native monarch. The ambassadors, carrying with them strings of beads, and having six days given to them for the fulfilment of their mission, started, taking a route leading towards the interior of this so-called continent.

In the meantime, Columbus explored for nearly six miles a splendid river which flowed beneath the shade of woods of odoriferous trees. The inhabitants freely bartered their goods with the Spaniards, and frequently mentioned to them a place named Bohio, where gold and pearls might be obtained in abundance. They added that men lived there who had dogs' heads, and who fed upon human flesh.

The admiral's envoys returned to the port on the 6th of November, after a four days' absence. Two days had sufficed to bring them to a village composed of about fifty huts, where they were received with every mark of respect; the natives kissing their feet and hands, and taking them for deities descended from the skies. Among other details of native customs, they reported that both men and women smoked tobacco by means of a forked pipe, drawing up the smoke through their nostrils. These savages were acquainted with the secret of obtaining fire by rubbing briskly two pieces of wood against each other. Cotton was found in large quantities in the houses, made up into the form of tents, one of these containing as much as 11,000 pounds of the material. As to the grand khan they saw no vestige of him.

Another consequence of the error of Columbus must be noticed here, one which, according to Irving, changed the whole series of his discoveries. He believed himself to be on the coast of Asia, and therefore looked upon Cuba as a portion of that continent. In consequence, he never thought of making the tour of Cuba, but decided on returning towards the east. Now, had he not been deceived on this occasion, and had he continued to follow the same direction as at first, the results of his enterprise would have been greatly modified. He might then have drifted towards Florida at the south-eastern point of North America, or he might have run direct to Mexico. In this latter case, instead of ignorant and savage natives, what would he have found? The inhabitants of the great Aztec Empire, of the half-civilized kingdom of Montezuma. There he would have seen towns, armies, enormous wealth, and his rôle would no doubt have been the same as that afterwards played by Fernando Cortès. But it was not to be thus, and the admiral, persevering in his mistake, directed his flotilla towards the east, weighing anchor on the 12th of November, 1492.

Columbus tacked in and out along the Cuban coast; he saw the two mountains — Cristal and Moa; he explored a harbour to which he gave the name of Puerto del Principe, and an archipelago which he called the Sea of Nuestra Señora. Each night the fishermen’s fires were seen upon the numerous islands, the inhabitants of which lived upon spiders and huge worms. Several times the Spaniards landed upon different points of the coast, and there planted the cross as a sign of taking possession of the country. The natives often spoke to the admiral about a certain island of Babeque, where gold abounded, and thither Columbus resolved to go, but Martin-Alonzo Pinzon, the captain of the *Pinta*, the best sailer of the three ships, was beforehand with him, and at day-break on the 21st of November, he had completely disappeared from sight. The admiral was very angry at this separation, his feelings on the subject appearing plainly in his narrative, where he says, “Pinzon has said and done to me many like things.” Continuing his exploration of the coast of Cuba, Columbus discovered the Bay of Moa, the Point of Mangle, Point Vaez, and the harbour of Barracoa, but nowhere did he meet with cannibals, although the huts of the natives were often to be seen adorned with human skulls, a sight which appeared to give great satisfaction to the islanders on board the fleet. On the following days, they saw the Boma River, and the caravels, doubling the point of Los Azules, found themselves upon the eastern part of the island, whose coast they had now reconnoitred for a distance of 375 miles. But Columbus instead of continuing his route to the south turned off to the east, and on the

5th of December perceived a large island, called by the natives Bohio. This was Hayti, or San Domingo.

In the evening, the *Nina* by the admiral's orders, entered a harbour which was named Port Mary; it is situated at the north-western extremity of the island, and, with the cape near which it lies, is now called St. Nicholas. The next day the Spaniards discovered a number of headlands, and an islet, called Tortuga Island. Everywhere on the appearance of the ships, the Indian canoes took to flight. The island, along which they were now coasting, appeared very large and very high, from which latter peculiarity it gained, later on, its name of Hayti, which signifies High Land. The coast was explored by the Spaniards as far as Mosquito Bay; its natural features, its plains and hills, its plants and the birds which fluttered amongst the beautiful trees of the island, all recalled to the memory the landscapes of Castille, and for this reason Columbus named it Hispaniola, or Spanish Island. The inhabitants were extremely timid and distrustful; they fled away into the interior and no communication could be held with them. Some sailors, however, succeeded in capturing a young woman, whom they carried on board with them. She was young and rather pretty. The admiral gave her, besides rings and beads, some clothing, of which she had great need, and after most generous treatment, he sent her back to shore.

This good conduct had the result of taming the natives, and the next day, when nine of the sailors, well armed, ventured as far as sixteen miles inland, they were received with respect, the savages running to them in crowds, and offering them everything which their country produced. The sailors returned to the ships enchanted with their excursion. The interior of the island they had found rich in cotton plants, mastic-trees and aloes, while a fine river, named afterwards the Three Rivers, flowed gently along its limpid course. On December 15th, Columbus again set sail, and was carried by the wind towards Tortuga Island, upon which he saw a navigable stream of water, and a valley so beautiful that he called it the Vale of Paradise. The day following, having tacked into a deep gulf, an Indian was seen who, notwithstanding the violence of the wind, was skilfully manoeuvring a light canoe. This Indian was invited to come on board, was loaded with presents by the admiral, and then put on shore again, at one of the harbours of Hispaniola, now called the Puerto de Paz. This kindness tended to attach the natives to the admiral, and from that day they came in numbers round the caravels; their king came with them, a strong, vigorous, and somewhat stout young man of twenty years of age; he was naked, like his subjects of both sexes, who showed him much respect, but with no appearance of servility. Columbus ordered royal honours to be rendered to him, and in return, the king, or rather cacique, informed the admiral that the provinces to the east abounded in gold.

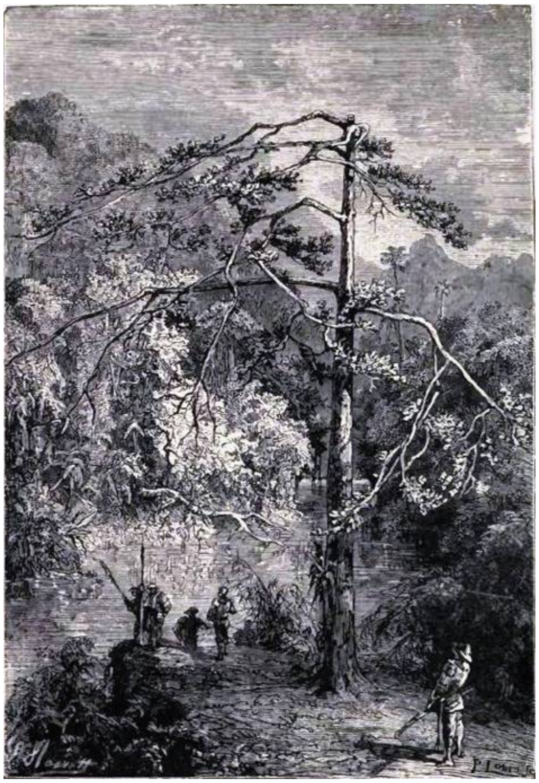

Columbus named it the Vale of Paradise.

Next day another cacique arrived, offering to place all the treasures of his country at the service of the Spaniards. He was present at a fête in honour of the Virgin Mary, that Columbus caused to be celebrated with great pomp on board his vessel, which was gaily dressed with flags on the occasion. The cacique dined at the admiral’s table, apparently enjoying the repast; after he had himself tasted of the different viands and beverages, he sent the dishes and goblets to the members of his suite; he had good manners, spoke little, but showed great politeness. After the feast, he gave the admiral some thin leaves of gold, while Columbus, on his side, presented him with some coins, upon which were engraved the portraits of Ferdinand and Isabella, and after explaining to him by signs that these were the representations of the most powerful sovereigns in the world, he caused the royal banners of Castille to be displayed before the savage prince. When night fell, the cacique retired, highly delighted with his visit; and on his departure he was saluted with a salvo of artillery. On the day following, the crews before quitting this hospitable coast, set up a large cross in the middle of the little town. In issuing from the gulf formed by Tortuga Island and Hispaniola, they discovered several harbours, capes, bays, and rivers; at the point of Limbé, a small island which Columbus named St. Thomas, and finally, an enormous harbour safe and sheltered, hidden between the island and the Bay of Acul, and to which access was given by a canal surrounded by high mountains covered with trees.

The admiral often disembarked upon this coast, the natives receiving him as an ambassador from heaven, and imploring him to remain among them. Columbus gave them quantities of little bells, brass rings, glass beads, and other toys, which they eagerly accepted. A cacique named Guacanagari, reigning over the province of Marien, sent to the admiral a belt adorned with the figure of an animal with large ears, of which the nose and tongue were made of beaten gold. Gold appeared to be abundant in the island, and the natives soon brought a considerable quantity of it to the strangers. The inhabitants of this part of Hispaniola seemed to be superior in intelligence and appearance to those of that portion of the island which had been first visited; in the opinion of Columbus, the paint, red, black, or white, with which the natives covered their bodies, served to protect them from sunstroke. The huts of these savages were pretty and well built. Upon Columbus questioning them as to the country which produced gold, they always indicated one towards the east, a country which they called Cibao, and which the admiral continued to identify with Cipango or Japan.

On Christmas Day a serious accident occurred to the admiral's caravel, the first damage sustained in this hitherto prosperous voyage. An inexperienced steersman was at the helm of the *Santa-Maria* during an excursion outside the Gulf of St. Thomas; night came on, and he allowed the vessel to be caught in some currents which threw her upon the rocks; the caravel grounded and her rudder stuck fast. The admiral, awakened by the shock, ran upon deck; he ordered an anchor to be fastened forward, by which the ship might warp herself off and so float again. The master and some of the sailors charged with the execution of this order, jumped into the long boat, but seized with a sudden panic, they rowed away in haste to the *Nina*. Meantime the tide fell, and the *Santa-Maria* ran further aground; it became necessary to cut away the masts to lighten her, and soon it was evident that everything on board must be removed to the other ship. The cacique Guacanagari, quite understanding the dangerous situation of the caravel, came with his brothers and other relations, accompanied by a great number of the Indians, and helped in unlading the ship. Thanks to this prince, not a single article of the cargo was stolen, and during the whole night armed natives kept watch around the stores of provisions.

The next day Guacanagari went on board the *Nina*, to console the admiral, and to place all his own possessions at his disposal, at the same time offering him a repast of bread, doe’s flesh, fish, roots, and fruit. Columbus, much moved by these tokens of friendship, formed the design of founding an establishment on this island. With this purpose in view, he addressed himself to gain the hearts of the Indians by presents and kindness, and wishing also to give them an adequate notion of his power, he ordered the discharge of an arquebuse and a small cannon, of which the reports frightened the poor savages terribly. On December 26th, the Spaniards commenced the construction of a fort upon this part of the coast, the intention of the admiral being to leave there a certain number of men, with a year’s provision of bread, wine, and seed, and to give them the long boat belonging to the *Santa-Maria*. The works at the fort were pushed forward with rapidity. It was also on the 26th that they received news of the *Pinta*, which had been separated from the flotilla since November 21st. The natives announced that she was at anchor in a river at the extreme point of the island, but a canoe despatched by Guacanagari returned without having found her. Then Columbus, not wishing to continue his explorations under the present conditions, since the loss of the *Santa-Maria*, which could not be floated again, left him but one caravel, decided to return to Spain, and preparations for the departure began.

On the 2nd of January Columbus caused his soldiers to act a mimic battle, greatly to the admiration of the cacique and his subjects. Afterwards the admiral chose out thirty-nine men to form the garrison of the fortress during his absence, naming Rodrigo de Escovedo as their commander. The greater part of the cargo of the *Santa-Maria* was to be left behind with them, for their year’s provision. Amongst these first colonists of the New World were included a writer, an alguazil, a cooper, a doctor, and a tailor. These Spaniards were charged with the mission of seeking for gold-mines, and of choosing a suitable site for the building of a town. On the 3rd of January, after solemn leave-takings of the cacique and the new colonists, the *Nina* weighed anchor and sailed out of the harbour. An island was soon discovered, having upon it a very high mountain; to this was given the name of Monte-Christi. Columbus had already sailed for two days along the coast, when he was aware of the approach of the *Pinta,* and very soon her captain, Martin Alonzo Pinzon, came on board the *Nina,* endeavouring to excuse his conduct. The real truth was that Pinzon had taken the lead with the view of being the first to reach the pretended island of Babeque, of which the riches had been described in glowing colours by the natives. The admiral was very ready to accept the bad reasons given him by Captain Pinzon, and learnt from him that the *Pinta* had done nothing but coast along the shores of Hispaniola, without discovering any new island.

On the 7th of January the ships lay to, to stop a leak which had sprung in the hold of the *Nina*. Columbus profited by this delay to explore a wide river, situated about three miles from Monte-Christi, and which carried so much gold-dust along with it, that he gave it the name of the Golden River. The admiral would have desired to visit this part of Hispaniola with greater care, but the crews were in haste to return home, and under the influence of the brothers Pinzon, began to murmur against his authority.

On the 9th of January the caravels set sail and steered towards the east-south-east, skirting the coast, and distinguishing by names even its smallest sinuosities; of such were point Isabella, the cape of La Roca, French Cape, Cape Cabron, and the Bay of Samana, situated at the eastern extremity of the island, where was a port, in which the fleet, being becalmed, came to anchor. At first the relations between the foreigners and the natives were excellent, but a change was suddenly perceived, the savages ceasing to barter, and making some hostile demonstrations, which left no doubt of the bad intentions entertained by them. On the 13th of January the savages made a sudden and unexpected attack upon the Spaniards, who, however, put a bold face on the matter, and by the aid of their weapons, put their enemies to flight after a few minutes' combat. Thus, for the first time, the blood of the Indian flowed beneath the hand of the European.

On the morrow Columbus again set sail, having on board four young natives, whom, notwithstanding their objections, he persisted in carrying off with him. His crews, embittered and fatigued, caused him great uneasiness, and in his narrative of the voyage, this great man, superior though he were to all human weaknesses, and a being whom adverse fate could not humble, bemoans himself bitterly over this trial. It was on the 16th of January that the homeward voyage commenced in good earnest, and Cape Samana, the extreme point of Hispaniola, disappeared below the horizon. The passage proved a quick one, and no incident is recorded until the 12th of February, when the vessels encountered a fearful storm lasting three days, with furious wind, enormous waves, and much lightning from the north-north-east. Three times did the terrified sailors make a vow of pilgrimage to St. Mary of Guadalupe, to our Lady of Loretto, and to St. Clara of Moguer, and at length, in extremity of fear, the whole crew swore to go and pray in their shirts and with naked feet in some church dedicated to the Virgin. But in spite of all, the storm raged with redoubled fury, and even the admiral feared for the result. In case of a catastrophe, he thought it well hastily to write upon a parchment an abstract of his discoveries, with a request that who ever should find the document would forward it to the King of Spain; wrapping the parchment in oil-cloth, he enclosed it in a wooden barrel, which was thrown into the sea.

At sunrise on the 15th of February the hurricane abated, the two caravels which had been separated by the storm again joined company, and after three days they cast anchor at the island of St. Mary, one of the Azores; as soon as they arrived there, the admiral sought to further the accomplishment of the vows made during the storm, and with this object, sent half of his people on shore; but these were unhappily made prisoners by the Portuguese, who did not restore them to liberty for five days, notwithstanding the urgent remonstrances made by Columbus. The admiral put to sea again on the 23rd of February; again the winds were contrary, and again, amidst a violent tempest, he took fresh vows in company with all his crew, promising to fast on the first Saturday which should follow their arrival in Spain. At last, on the 4th of March, the pilots sighted the mouth of the Tagus, in which the *Nina* took refuge, whilst the *Pinta*, caught by the wind, was carried away into the Bay of Biscay.

The Portuguese welcomed the admiral kindly, the king even admitting him to an audience. Columbus was in haste to return to Spain; as soon as the weather permitted, the *Nina* again set sail, and at mid-day on the 15th of March, she cast anchor in the port of Palos, after seven months and a half of navigation, during which Columbus had discovered the islands of San Salvador, Conception, Great Exuma, Long Island, the Mucaras, Cuba, and San Domingo.

The court of Ferdinand and Isabella was then at Barcelona, whither the admiral was summoned. He set out immediately, taking with him the Indians whom he had brought from the New World. The enthusiasm he excited was extreme; from all parts the people ran to look at him as he passed, rendering him royal honours. His entry into Barcelona was magnificent. The king and queen, with the grandees of Spain, received him with great pomp at the palace of the Deputation. He there gave an account of his wonderful voyage, and presented the specimens of gold which he had brought with him; then all the assembly knelt down and chanted the Te Deum. Christopher Columbus was afterwards ennobled by letters patent, and the king granted him a coat of arms bearing this device: “To Castille and Leon, Columbus gives a New World.” The fame of the Genoese navigator rang through the whole of Europe; the Indians whom he had brought with him were baptized in presence of the whole court; and thus, the man of genius, so long poor and unknown, had now risen to the highest point of celebrity.

III.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

Second Voyage: Flotilla of seventeen vessels — Island of Ferro — Dominica — Marie-Galante — Guadaloupe — The Cannibals — Montserrat — Santa-Maria-la-Rodonda — St. Martin and Santa Cruz — Archipelago of the Eleven Thousand Virgins — The island of St. John Baptist, or Porto Rico — Hispaniola — The first Colonists massacred — Foundation of the town of Isabella — Twelve ships laden with treasure sent to Spain — Fort St. Thomas built in the Province of Cibao — Don Diego, Columbus’ brother, named Governor of the Island — Jamaica — The Coast of Cuba — The Remora — Return to Isabella — The Cacique made prisoner — Revolt of the Natives — Famine — Columbus traduced in Spain — Juan Aguado sent as Commissary to Isabella — Gold-mines — Departure of Columbus — His arrival at Cadiz.

The narrative of the adventures of the great Genoese navigator had over-excited the minds of the hearers. Imagination already caught glimpses of golden continents situated beyond the seas. All the passions which are engendered by cupidity were seething in the people's hearts. The admiral, under pressure of public opinion, must set forth again with the most brief delay. He was himself also, eager to return to the theatre of his conquests, and to yet enrich the maps of the day with more new discoveries. He declared himself, therefore, ready to start.

The king and queen placed at his disposal a flotilla composed of three large ships and fourteen caravels. Twelve hundred men were to sail in them. Several Castilian nobles, with firm faith in the lucky star of Columbus, decided to try their fortune with him beyond seas. In the holds of the vessels were horses, cattle, instruments of all kinds for collecting and purifying gold, grain of various kinds; in a word, everything that might be needful in the establishing an important colony. Of the ten natives brought to Europe, five returned to their country, three, who were ill, remained behind in Europe, the other two were dead. Columbus was named captain-general of the squadron, with unlimited powers.

On the 25th of September, 1493, the seventeen ships left Cadiz, with all sails set, amidst the acclamations of an immense crowd of people and on the 1st of October, they cast anchor at the island of Ferro, the most westerly of the Canary group. On sailing again, the fleet was favoured by wind and sea, and after twenty-three days of navigation came in sight of new land. At sunrise on the 3rd of November, being the Sunday in the octave of All Saints, the pilot of the flag-ship, the *Marie-Galante*, cried out, “Good news, there is land.” This land proved to be an island covered with trees; the admiral, thinking it uninhabited, did not stop; but, after passing several scattered islets, he arrived before a second island. The first he named Dominica, the second Marie-Galante, names which they retain to the present day. The next day a still larger island was in sight, and, says the narrative of this voyage given by Peter Martyr, the contemporary of Columbus, “When they were arrived, they saw it was the island of the infamous cannibals, or Caribbees, of whom they had only heard a rumour during the first voyage.”

The Spaniards, well armed, landed upon the shore, where they found about thirty circular houses built of wood and covered with palm leaves. In the interior of the huts were suspended hammocks made of cotton. In the centre of the village were placed two trees or posts around which were entwined the dead bodies of two serpents. At the approach of the strangers the natives fled in haste, leaving behind them several prisoners whom they were preparing to devour. The sailors searched the houses, and found both leg and arm bones, heads so newly cut off that the blood was still moist, and other human remains, which left no doubt as to the food consumed by these Caribbees. This island, which, with its principal rivers, the admiral caused to be partially explored, was named Guadaloupe, on account of the resemblance it bore to one of the Spanish provinces. Some Indian women were carried off by the sailors, but, after having been kindly treated on board the admiral’s ship, they were sent back to land, Columbus hoping that this conduct towards the females would induce the men of the place to come on board, but in this he was disappointed.

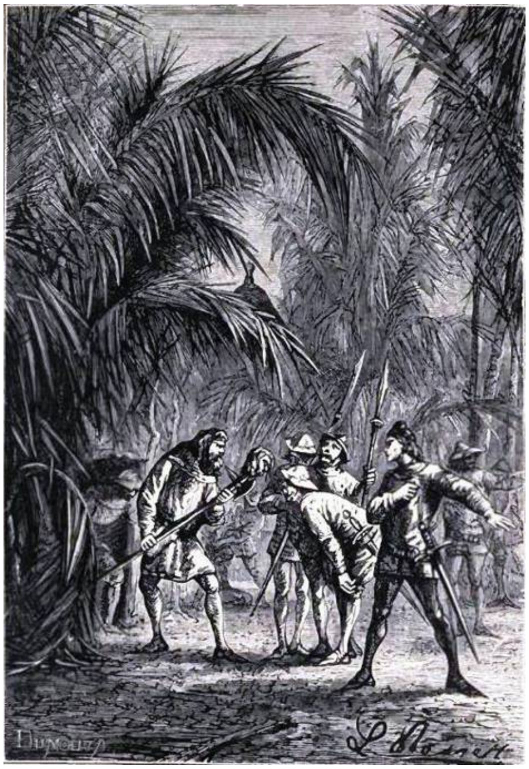

The sailors find some recently-severed heads.

On the 8th of November the signal for departure was given, and the whole fleet sailed for Hispaniola, the present San Domingo, and the island upon which Columbus had left thirty-nine of the companions of his first voyage. In turning again towards the north, a large island was discovered, to which the natives who had been kept on board after having been saved from the jaws of the Caribbees, gave the name of Mandanino. They declared that it was inhabited only by women, and as Marco Polo had mentioned an Asiatic country which possessed an exclusively feminine population, Columbus was confirmed in the idea that he was sailing upon the coast of Asia. He felt a great desire to explore this island, but the contrary winds completely prevented his doing so. Thirty miles from thence an island was seen surrounded by high mountains; it received the name of Montserrat; on the next day another, which was called Santa-Maria la Rodonda; and on the day following two more islands, St. Martin and Santa Cruz.

The squadron anchored before Santa Cruz, to take in water. There occurred a scene of grave import, reported by Peter Martyr in such expressive words, that we cannot do better than quote them: “The admiral,” he says, “ordered thirty men from his ship to go ashore and explore the island; and these men, being landed on the coast, were aware of four dogs and as many young men and women coming towards them, extending their arms in supplication, and praying for help and deliverance from the cruel people. The cannibals on seeing this fled, as in the island of Guadaloupe, and all retired into the forests. And our people remained two days on the island to visit it.

“During that time, those who had remained with the boat saw a canoe coming towards them from a distance, containing eight men and as many women; to these our people made signs; but they on approaching, began to transpierce ours with their arrows, before they had time to cover themselves with their bucklers, so that one Spaniard was killed by a shaft aimed by a woman, who also transfixed another with a second arrow. These savages had poisoned arrows, the poison being contained in the tip; amongst them was a woman whom all the others obeyed, bowing before her. And this was, as they conjectured, a queen, having a son of cruel appearance, robust, and with the face of a lion, who followed her.

“Ours then, considering that it was better to fight hand to hand, than to wait for greater evils in thus fighting at a distance, advanced their boat by rowing, and by so great violence did they make it move forward, that the stern of the said boat came with such velocity, it caused the enemies' canoe to founder.

"But these Indians, being very good swimmers, without moving themselves either more slowly or more rapidly, did not cease, both men and women, to shoot arrows with all their might, at our people. And they succeeded in reaching, by swimming, a rock covered with the water, upon which they mounted, and still fought manfully. Nevertheless, they were finally taken, and one of them slain, and the son of the queen, pierced in two places; when they were taken to the admiral's ship they showed no less ferociousness and atrocity of mien, than if they had been lions of Libya who felt themselves taken in the net. And such were they that no man could have even looked upon them without his heart trembling with horror, so greatly was their look hideous, terrible, and infernal."

From all this it is clear that the strife between the Indians and the Europeans was beginning to be serious. Columbus sailed again towards the north, going in the midst of islands "pleasant and innumerable," covered with forests overshadowed by mountains of various hues. This collection of islands was called the Archipelago of the Eleven Thousand Virgins. Soon appeared the island of St. John Baptist (now Porto Rico), a place infested by Caribbees, but cultivated with care, and appearing truly superb from its immense woods. Some sailors landed upon the shore, but only found there a dozen uninhabited huts. The admiral put to sea again, and sailed along the southern coast of Porto Rico for about one hundred and fifty miles.

On Friday, the 12th of November, Columbus at last reached the island of Hispaniola. With what emotions must he not have been agitated in revisiting the theatre of his first success, in seeking to behold that fortress in which he had left his companions! What might not have happened in the course of a year to those Europeans left alone in this barbarous land? Soon a great canoe, bringing the brother of the Cacique Guacanagari, came alongside of the *Marie-Galante,* and the Indian prince springing on board, offered two images of gold to the admiral. Still Columbus sought for his fortress, but, although he had anchored opposite its site, there was no trace whatever to be seen of it. With feelings of the deepest anxiety as to the fate of his companions, he went on shore. What was his dismay, when he found nothing left of the fortress but a few ashes! What could have become of his compatriots? Had their lives been the forfeit of this first attempt at colonization? The admiral ordered the simultaneous discharge of the cannon from all the ships to announce his arrival at Hispaniola. But none of his companions appeared. Columbus, in despair, immediately despatched messengers to the Cacique Guacanagari; who, on their return brought sad news. If Guacanagari might be believed, some other caciques, irritated by the presence of the foreigners in their island, had attacked the unfortunate colonists, and had massacred them to the last man. Guacanagari himself had received a wound in endeavouring to defend them, and to corroborate his story he showed his leg enveloped in a cotton bandage.

Columbus did not believe in this intervention of the cacique, but, resolving to dissimulate, he welcomed Guacanagari kindly when he came on board the next day; the cacique accepted an image of the Virgin, suspending it on his bosom. He appeared astonished at the sight of the horses which they showed him, these animals having been hitherto quite unknown to himself and his companions. When his visit was over, he returned to the shore, regained the region of mountains, and was seen no more.

The admiral then despatched one of his captains with three hundred men under his orders, to scour the country and carry off the cacique. This captain penetrated far into the interior, but found no traces of the cacique, nor of the unfortunate colonists. During this excursion, a great river was discovered, and also a fine sheltered harbour, which was named Port Royal. However, in spite of the bad success of his first attempt, Columbus had resolved to found a new colony upon this island, which appeared to be rich both in gold and silver. The natives constantly spoke of mines situated in the province of Cibao, and in the month of January two gentlemen, Alonzo de Hojeda and Corvalan, set out accompanied by a numerous escort to verify these assertions. They discovered four rivers having auriferous sands, and brought back with them a nugget which weighed nine ounces. The admiral on seeing these riches was confirmed in his idea that Hispaniola was the famous Ophir, spoken of in the Book of Kings. After looking for a site upon which to build a town, he laid the foundation of Isabella in a spot at the mouth of a river which formed a harbour, and at a distance of thirty miles east from Monte Christi. On the Feast of the Epiphany, thirteen priests officiated in the church in presence of an immense crowd of natives.

Columbus was now anxious to send news of the colony to the King and Queen of Spain. Twelve ships laden with gold collected in the island, and with various specimens of the produce of the soil, were prepared to return to Europe under the command of Captain Torrès. This flotilla set sail on the 2nd of February, 1494, and a short time afterwards Columbus sent back one more of the five ships which remained to him, with the Lieutenant Bernard of Pisa, against whom he had cause of complaint.

As soon as order was established in the colony of Isabella, the admiral, leaving his brother behind as governor, set out, accompanied by five hundred men, to visit the mines of Cibao. The country they traversed seemed to be splendidly fertile; vegetables came to perfection in thirteen days; corn sown in February was in full ear in April, and each year yielded two abundant harvests. They crossed successively mountains and valleys, where often the pick-axe had to be used to clear a way over these still virgin lands; at last the Spaniards arrived at Cibao. There the admiral caused a fort to be constructed of wood and stone on a hill near the brink of a large river; it was surrounded with a deep ditch, and Columbus bestowed upon it the name of St. Thomas, in derision of some of his officers who were incredulous upon the subject of the gold-mines. It ill became them to doubt, for from all parts the natives brought nuggets and gold dust, which they were eager to exchange for beads, and above all for the hawks' bells, of which the silvery sound excited them to dance. This country was not only a land of gold, it was also a country rich in spices and aromatic gums, the trees which bore them forming quite large forests. The Spaniards considered the conquest of this wealthy island a cause of unmixed congratulation.

Columbus left fifty-six men to guard the Fort of St. Thomas, under the command of Don Pedro de Margarita, while he returned to Isabella, towards the beginning of April, being much hindered on the road by excessive rain. On his arrival he found the infant colony in great disorder; famine was threatening from the want of flour, which could not be obtained, for there were no mills; both soldiers and workmen were exhausted with fatigue. Columbus sought to oblige the gentlemen to aid them; but these proud Hidalgos, anxious as they were to conquer fortune, would not stoop to pick it up, and refused to perform any manual labour. The priests upholding them in this conduct, Columbus, who was forced to act with vigour, was obliged to place the churches under an interdict. He could not spare time to remain any longer at Isabella, but was in haste to make further discoveries; therefore, having formed a council, composed of three gentlemen and the chief of the missionaries, under the presidency of Don Diego, to govern the colony, he set out on the 24th of April with three vessels, to complete the cycle of his discoveries.

The flotilla sailing towards the south, a new island was soon discovered, which was called by the natives Jamaica. The highest point of the island was a mountain of which the sides sloped gently down. The inhabitants appeared clever, and much given to the mechanical arts, but they were far from pacific in character, and several times opposed the landing of the Spaniards, who, however, repulsed them, and at length the savages were induced to conclude a treaty of alliance with the admiral. From Jamaica Columbus pushed his researches more towards the west. He imagined himself to be arrived at the point where the old geographers placed the golden region of the west, Chersonesus. Strong currents carried him towards Cuba, along whose coast he sailed for a distance of six hundred and sixty-six miles. During this dangerous navigation amongst shallows and narrow passages, he named more than seven hundred islands, discovered a great number of harbours, and often entered into communication with the natives.

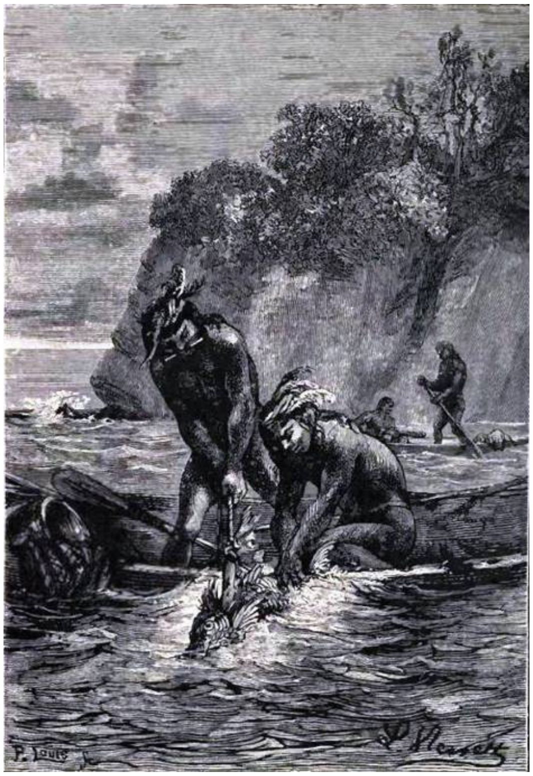

Fishermen on the coast of Cuba.

In the month of May, the look-out-men on board the ships descried a large number of grassy islands, fertile and inhabited. Columbus, on approaching the shore, entered a river, of which the water was so warm that the hand could not remain in it, a fact evidently of exaggeration, and one which later researches have not authenticated. The fishermen of this coast employed a certain fish called the Remora or sucking-fish, “which fulfilled for them the same office as the dog does for the hunter. This fish was of an unknown species, having a body like a great eel, and upon the back of his head a very tenacious skin, in fashion like a purse, wherewith to take the fishes. They keep this fish fastened by a cord to the boat, always in the water, for it cannot bear the *look* of the air. And when they see a fish or a turtle, which there are larger than great bucklers, then they loose the fish by slackening the rope. And when he feels himself at liberty, suddenly, and more rapidly than the flight of an arrow, he (the remora) assails the said fish or turtle, throws over him his skin in the manner of a purse, and holds his prey so firmly, be it fish or turtle, by the part visible beyond the shell, that none can wrest it from him, if he be not drawn to the surface of the water; the cord is therefore pulled up, and gathered in little by little; and no sooner does he see the splendour of the air, than incontinent he lets go of his prey. And the fishermen descend as far as is necessary to take the prey, and they put it on board the boat, and fasten the fish-hunter with as much of rope as is necessary for him to regain his old position and place; then, by means of another rope, they give him for reward a small piece of the flesh of his prey.”

The exploration of the coasts continued towards the west. The admiral visited several countries, in which abounded goslings, ducks, herons, and those dumb dogs which the natives eat, as we should kids, and which were probably either almigui or racoons. As the ships advanced, the sandy channels became narrower and narrower, and navigation more and more difficult, but the admiral adhered to his resolution of continuing the exploration of these coasts. One day, he imagined he saw upon a point of land some men dressed in white, whom he took for brothers of the order of Santa Maria de la Merced; he sent some sailors to open communication with them, when it proved to be simply an optical illusion; these so-called monks turning out to be great tropical herons, to whom distance had lent the appearance of human beings.

During the first days of June, Columbus was obliged to stop to repair the ships, of which the keels were much damaged by the shallow water on the coast. On the seventh day of the month he caused a solemn mass to be celebrated on the shore: during the service an old cacique arrived, who, the ceremony being over, offered the admiral some fruits, and then this native sovereign pronounced some words which the interpreters thus translated:—

“It hath been told us after what manner thou hast invested and enveloped with thy power these lands, which were to you unknown, and how thy presence has caused great terror to the people and the inhabitants. But I hold it my duty to exhort and to warn thee that two roads present themselves before the souls, when they are separated from the bodies: the one, filled with shadows and sadness destined for those who are harmful and hurtful to the human species; the other, pleasant and delightful, reserved for those who in their life-time have loved peace and the repose of the people. Therefore, if thou rememberest that thou art mortal, and that the future retribution will be meted out according to the works of the present life, thou wilt take care to do harm to nobody.” What philosopher of ancient or modern time could have spoken better or in sounder language! All the human side of Christianity is expressed in these magnificent words, and they came from the mouth of a savage! Columbus and the cacique separated, charmed with one another, and the more astonished of the two was not, perhaps, the old native. The rest of his tribe appeared to live in the practice of the excellent precepts indicated by their chief. Land was common property amongst the natives, as much so as sun, air, and water. The Meum and Tuum, cause of all strife, did not exist amongst them, and they lived content with little. “They enjoy the Golden Age,” says the narrative, “they protect not their possessions with ditches and hedges, they leave their gardens open; without laws, without books, without judges, they by nature follow what is right, and hold as bad and unjust whatever sins against, or causes harm to another.”

Leaving Cuba, Columbus returned towards Jamaica, and sailed along the whole of the southern coast as far as the eastern extremity of the island. His intention was to attack the islands of the Caribbees, and destroy that mischievous brood. But the admiral was at this time seized with an illness, brought on by watching and fatigue, which obliged him to suspend his projects. He was forced to return to Isabella, where, under the influence of good air and repose, and the care of his brother and his friends, he recovered his health. The colony greatly needed his presence. The governor of St. Thomas had aroused the indignation of the natives by his cruel exactions, and had refused to listen to the remonstrances upon the subject addressed to him by Don Diego, the brother of Columbus; he had returned to Isabella from St. Thomas during the absence of the admiral and he embarked for Spain upon one of the ships which had just brought Don Bartolomeo, the second brother of Columbus, to Hispaniola. When the admiral regained his health he resolved to punish the cacique who had revolted against the governor of St. Thomas, feeling that it would be unwise to allow his authority, in the person of his delegates, to be set at nought. In the first place he sent nine men well armed to take prisoner a bold cacique named Caonabo. The leader Hojeda, with an intrepidity of which we shall have further instances in the future, carried off the cacique from the midst of his own people, and brought him prisoner to Isabella. Columbus afterwards sent Caonabo to Europe, but the ship in which he sailed was wrecked during the voyage, and he was never heard of more.

In the meantime, Antonio de Torrès, sent by the King and Queen of Spain to compliment Columbus in their names, arrived at San Domingo with four vessels. Ferdinand declared himself highly content with the successes of the admiral, and informed him that he was about to establish a monthly service of transport between Spain and Hispaniola.

The carrying off of Caonabo had excited a general revolt amongst the natives, who burned to revenge the chief, so deeply insulted and unjustly carried away. The Cacique Guacanagari, notwithstanding the share he had had in the murder of the first colonists, alone remained faithful to the Spaniards. Columbus, accompanied by his brother Bartolomeo and the cacique, marched against the rebels and soon met with an army of natives, the numbers of which, with manifest exaggeration, he places at 100,000 men. However numerous it may have been, this army was quickly routed by a small detachment, composed of 200 infantry, twenty-five cavalry, and twenty-five dogs. This victory to all appearance re-established the admiral’s authority. The Indians were condemned to pay tribute to the Spaniards, those living near the mines were ordered to furnish every three months a small quantity of gold, while the others, more distant, were to contribute twenty-five pounds of cotton. But rebellion had been only curbed, not extinguished. At the voice of a woman, Anacaona, widow of Caonabo, the natives rose a second time; and even succeeded in drawing over the hitherto faithful Guacanagari to their side; the rebels destroyed all the fields of maize, and everything else which had been planted, and then retired into the mountains. The Spaniards, seeing themselves thus reduced to all the horrors of famine, indulged their anger by terrible reprisals against the natives; it is calculated that one-third of the island population perished from hunger, sickness, and the weapons of the companions of Columbus. These unfortunate Indians paid dearly indeed for their intercourse with the conquering Europeans.

The good fortune of Columbus was by this time on the wane. While his authority in Hispaniola was continually more and more compromised, his reputation and his character were the objects of violent attack in Europe. The officers whom he had sent back to the mother country, loudly accused him of injustice and cruelty; they even insinuated that he sought to render himself independent of the king; and against all these attacks, Columbus, being absent, could not defend himself. Ferdinand, influenced by this unworthy discourse, chose a commissioner, whom he ordered to proceed to the West Indies and to examine into the truth of the accusations. This gentleman was named Juan d'Aguado, and the choice of such a man to fulfil such a mission, possessing as he did a mind both prejudiced and partial, was not a happy one. Aguado arrived at Isabella in the month of October, at the time when the admiral was absent on an exploring expedition, and began at once to treat the brother of Columbus with extreme haughtiness, while Diego on his side, relying upon his title of governor-general, refused to submit to the commands of the royal commissioner. Aguado soon considered himself ready to return to Spain, although the examination he had made was a most incomplete one, when a fearful hurricane occurred, which sank the vessels which had brought him over in the harbour. There now remained only two caravels at Hispaniola, but Columbus, who had returned to the colony, acting with a greatness of soul which cannot be too much admired, placed one of these ships at the disposal of the commissioner, with the proviso that he himself would embark in the other, to plead his cause in person before the king.

So matters stood, when the news arriving of the discovery of fresh gold-mines in Hispaniola, caused the admiral to put off his departure. Covetousness was a power strong enough to cut short all discussions; there was no longer any mention of the King of Spain, nor of the inquiry which he had ordered; officers were sent off to the new auriferous ground, finding there nuggets of which some weighed as much as twenty ounces, and a lump of amber of the weight of 300 pounds. Columbus ordered two fortresses to be erected for the protection of the miners, one on the boundary of the province of Cibao, the other upon the banks of the River Hayna. Having taken this precaution, he set out for Europe, full of eagerness to justify himself. The two caravels sailed from the harbour of St. Isabella on the 10th of March, 1496. On board of the admiral’s ship were 225 persons and thirty Indians. On the 9th of April he touched at Marie-Galante, and on the 10th at Guadaloupe, to take in water; here there occurred a sharp skirmish with the natives. On the 20th he left this inhospitable island, and for a whole month he had to contend with contrary winds. On the 11th of June land was sighted in Europe, and on the next day the caravels entered the harbour of Cadiz.

This second return of the great navigator was not welcomed, as the first had been, by the acclamations of the populace. To enthusiasm had succeeded coldness and envy; the companions even of the admiral took part against him. Discouraged as they were, with illusions destroyed, and not bringing back that wealth, for the acquisition of which they had encountered so many dangers, and submitted to so much fatigue, they became unjust, and forgot that it was not the fault of Columbus if the mines hitherto worked had been a source of expense rather than of profit.

However, the admiral was received at court with a certain measure of favour, the narrative of his second voyage doing much to reinstate him in public opinion. And who could deny that during that expedition he had discovered the islands of Dominica, Marie-Galante, Guadaloupe, Montserrat, Santa-Maria, Santa Cruz, Porto Rico, Jamaica? Had he not also carried out a new survey of Cuba and San Domingo? Columbus fought bravely against his adversaries, even employing against them the weapon of irony. To those who denied the merit of his discoveries, he proposed the experiment of making an egg remain upright while resting upon one end, and when they could not succeed in doing this, the admiral, breaking the top of the shell, made the egg stand upon the broken part. "You had not thought of that," said he; "but behold! it is done."

IV.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

Third Voyage: Madeira — Santiago in the Cape Verd Archipelago — Trinidad — First sight of the American Coast in Venezuela, beyond the Orinoco, now the Province of Cumana — Gulf of Paria — The Gardens — Tobago — Grenada — Margarita — Cubaga — Hispaniola during the absence of Columbus — Foundation of the town of San Domingo — Arrival of Columbus — Insubordination in the Colony — Complaints in Spain — Bovadilla sent by the king to inquire into the conduct of Columbus — Columbus sent to Europe in fetters with his two brothers — His appearance before Ferdinand and Isabella — Renewal of royal favour.

Columbus had not yet given up the hope of pursuing his conquests on the further side of the Atlantic Ocean. No fatigue, no injustice from his fellow-men could stop him. After having triumphed, although not without difficulty, over the malice of his enemies, he succeeded in organizing a third expedition under the auspices of the Spanish government. The king granted him eight vessels, forty cavalry soldiers, and one hundred infantry, sixty sailors, twenty miners, fifty labourers, twenty workmen of various trades, thirty women, some doctors, and even some musicians. The admiral obtained the concession besides, that all the punishments in use in Spain should be changed into transportation to the islands. He was thus the precursor of the English in the intelligent idea of peopling new colonies with convicts, whom labour was to reform.

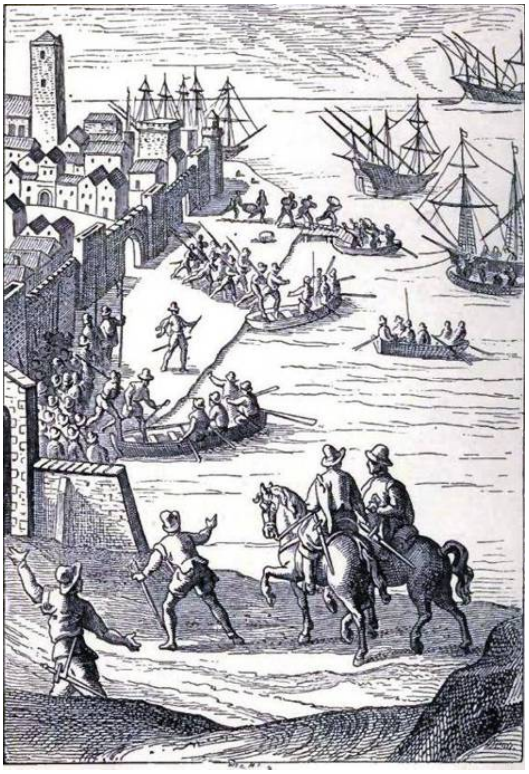

Embarkation of Christopher Columbus.

Columbus put to sea on the 30th of May, 1498, although he was still suffering from gout, and from the various mental trials which he had experienced since his return. Before starting, he learnt that a French fleet was lying in wait off Cape St. Vincent, with the purpose of hindering the expedition. To avoid it, Columbus made for Madeira, and anchored there; from that island he dispatched all his vessels, except three, to Hispaniola under the command of the Captains Pedro de Arana, Alonzo Sanchez of Carabajal, and Juan Antonio Columbus, one of his own relations, while he, with a large ship and two caravels bore down to the south with the intention of crossing the equator, and seeking for more southern countries, which, according to the general opinion, must be even richer in all kinds of productions. On the 27th of June the small flotilla touched at the islands of Sel and of Santiago, which form part of the Cape Verd group. It sailed again on the 4th of July, and made 360 miles to the south-west, experiencing long calms and intense heat; on arriving abreast of Sierra Leone, it steered due west, and at mid-day on the 31st of July, one of the sailors raised the cry of “land.” It was an island situated at the north-eastern extremity of South America, and very near the coast. The admiral gave it the name of Trinidad, and all the crews chanted the *Salve Regina* in sign of thankfulness. On the morrow, the 1st of August, at fifteen miles from the part of the land which had been first seen, the three vessels were moored near to the Point of Alcatraz, and the admiral sent some of his sailors ashore to obtain water and wood. The coast appeared to be uninhabited, but numerous footprints of animals were observed, made, as was thought, by goats.

On the 2nd of August a long canoe, manned by twenty-four natives, came towards the ships. These Indians, tall of stature, and paler in colour than those of Hispaniola, wore upon the head a turban formed of a cotton scarf of brilliant colours, and a small skirt of the same material around the body. The Spaniards endeavoured to entice them on board, by showing them mirrors and glass trinkets; the sailors even executing lively dances, in the hope of inspiring them with confidence; but the savages, taking fright at the sound of a tambourine, which seemed to them a sign of hostility, discharged a flight of arrows, and directed their canoe towards one of the caravels, whose pilot endeavoured to reassure them by steering towards them; but in vain, the canoe soon made off, and was seen no more.

Columbus again set sail, and discovered a new island which he called Gracia; but what he imagined to be an island, was, in reality, a portion of the American coast, and that part of the shore of Venezuela, which, being intersected by the numerous branches of the Orinoco, forms the Delta of that river. On this day the Continent of America, although unknown to him, was really discovered by Christopher Columbus, in that part of Venezuela which goes by the name of the Province of Cumana. Between this coast and the Island of Trinidad there is a dangerous gulf, the Gulf of Paria, in which a ship can with difficulty resist the currents which flow towards the west with great rapidity. The admiral, who believed himself to be in the open sea, was exposed to great peril in this gulf, where the rivers, falling into the sea from the continent, and being swollen at that time by an accidental flood, poured great masses of water upon the ships. Columbus, in writing to the king and queen, describes this incident in the following terms: —

“Being up on deck, at an advanced hour of the night, I heard a kind of terrible roaring; I tried to see through the darkness, and all at once I beheld a sea like a hill, as high as the ship, advancing slowly from the south towards my vessels. Opposing this great wave was a current, which met it with a frightful noise. I had no doubt then that we should be engulfed, and even now the remembrance causes me a feeling of horror. By good fortune, however, the current and the wave passed us, going towards the mouth of the canal, where, after long strife, they gradually sank to rest.”

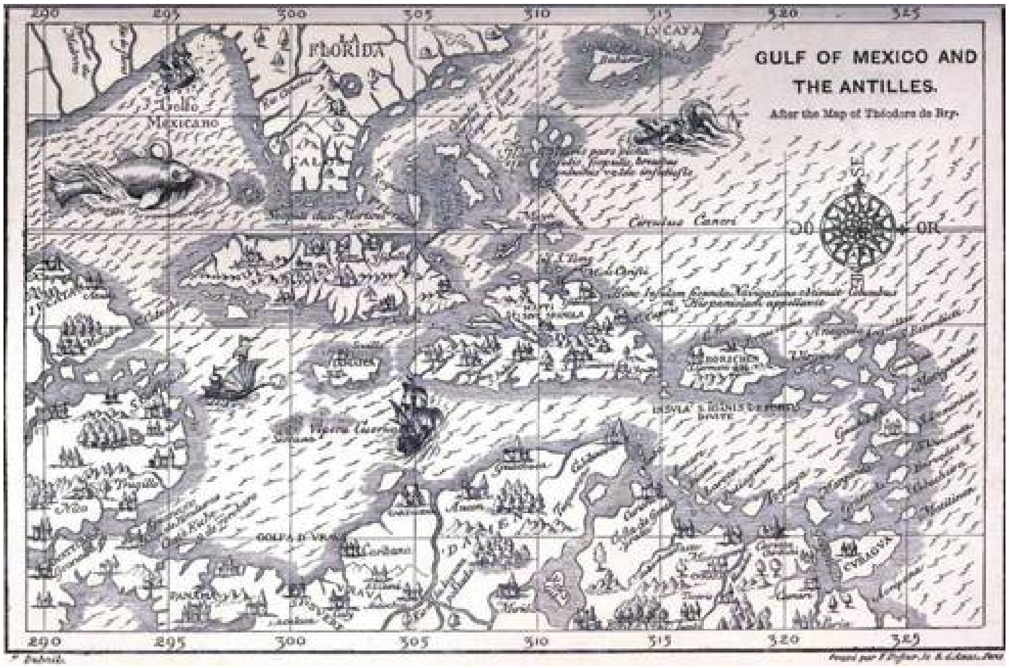
GULF OF MEXICO AND
THE ANTILLES.
After the Map of Théodore de Bry.
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320
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FLORIDA
LUCAYA
Golfo Mexicano
Cancri
GOLFO D' VRABA
CUBAGUA
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Notwithstanding the difficulties of the navigation, Columbus continued to explore this sea, of which the waters became gradually calmer as he sailed northwards; he discovered various headlands, one of them was to the east of the Island of Trinidad, and called the Cape of Pera Blanca. Another was on the west of the promontory of Paria, and named Cape Lapa. Several harbours were also noticed, amongst others one situated at the mouth of the Orinoco, to which was given the name of the Port of Monkeys. Columbus landed on the shore, west of Point Cumana, and received a kindly welcome from the numerous inhabitants. Towards the west, beyond the point of Alcatraz, the country was magnificent, and there according to the natives, much gold and pearls were to be obtained. Here the admiral would gladly have remained for some time if he could have found a safe anchorage. But as this was impossible, he felt it best to make for Port Isabella, especially as his crews were worn down by fatigue, and his own health much affected, besides the sufferings he experienced from the bad state of his eyesight. So he sailed onwards along the Venezuelan coast, making friends as far as possible with the natives. These Indians were agreeable in feature, and of magnificent physique; their dwellings displayed a certain amount of taste, their houses being built with façades in front, and containing articles of furniture ingeniously made. The natives wore plates of gold as ornaments upon their necks. As to the country, it was superb; the rivers, the mountains, the immense forests made it a real land of delight. So the admiral gave this beautiful country the name of Gracia, and by many arguments he tried to prove that in this spot was situated that terrestrial Paradise once inhabited by Adam and Eve, being the cradle of the whole human race. To explain to a certain degree this idea of the great navigator, we must not forget that he imagined himself all this time to be on the shores of Asia. This spot which delighted him so much, he called "the Gardens."

On the 23rd of August, after having at the expense of much danger and fatigue, overcome the perils of this bay, Columbus issued from the Gulf of Paria by the narrow strait to which he gave the name, retained to this day, of the Dragon's Mouth. Arrived in the open sea, the Spaniards discovered the Island of Tobago situated to the north-east of Trinidad, and then, more to the north, the Island of Conception, now known as Grenada. They next steered to the south-west and returned towards the American coast; after sailing along which for 120 miles, they discovered, on the 25th of August, the populous Island of Margarita, and afterwards the Island of Cubaga, situated very close to the mainland. At this place the natives had established a pearl-fishery, and busied themselves in collecting this valuable product.

Columbus sent a boat on shore, when a very profitable traffic was carried on, the natives giving in exchange for broken pottery or hawks’ bells, pounds’ weight of pearls, some of which were very large, and of the finest water.

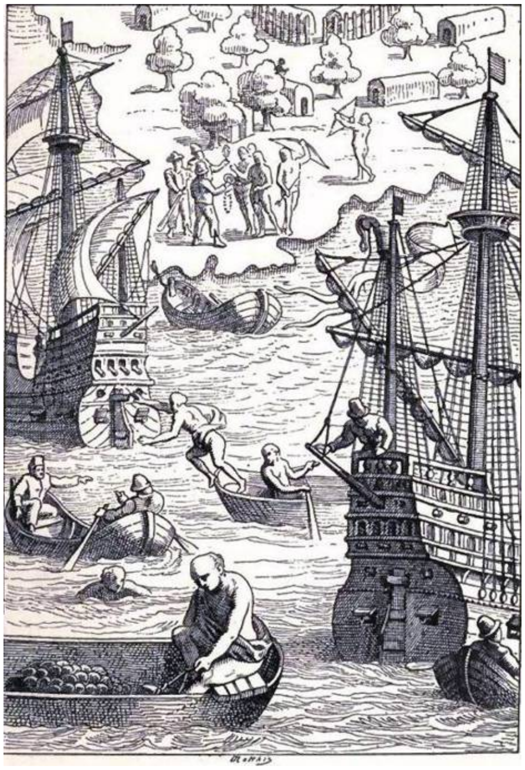

Pearl-fishers.

The admiral stopped at this point of his discoveries; the temptation was strong to explore this country, but both officers and crews were exhausted. Orders were therefore given to start for San Domingo, where matters of the gravest moment demanded the presence of Columbus. Before his departure from Hispaniola he had authorized his brother to lay the foundations of a new town. With this end Don Bartolomeo had explored the different portions of the island, and having discovered at the distance of 150 miles from Isabella a magnificent harbour at the mouth of a fine river, he there marked out the first streets of a town which became later on the city of San Domingo. Here Don Bartolomeo fixed his residence, while Don Diego remained as Governor of Isabella. By this arrangement Columbus’ two brothers had the whole administration of the colony in their hands. But there were many malcontents who were ready to revolt against their authority, and it was while this bad spirit was abroad that the admiral arrived at San Domingo. He approved of all that his brothers had done, their administration having been in fact, marked by great wisdom, and he published a proclamation recalling to their obedience the Spaniards who had revolted. On the 18th of October he despatched five ships to Spain, and with them an officer commissioned to inform the king of the new discoveries, and of the state of the colony, endangered by the fomenters of disorder.

Meanwhile, the affairs of Columbus had taken a bad turn in Europe. Since his departure calumnies against himself and his brothers had been ever on the increase. Some rebels who had been expelled the colony, denounced the encroaching dynasty of the Columbus family, thus exciting the jealousy of a vain and ungrateful monarch. Even the queen, until now the constant patroness of the Genoese navigator, was indignant at the arrival on board the vessels of three hundred Indians who had been torn from their country, and who were treated as slaves. Isabella did not know that this abuse of power had been carried out unknown to Columbus and during his absence; he was held responsible for it, and to inquire into his conduct, the Court sent to Hispaniola a commander of the order of Calatrava, named Francis de Bovadilla, to whom were given the titles of Governor-general, and Intendant of Justice. He was in reality meant to supersede Columbus. Bovadilla, invested with discretionary powers, set out with two caravels towards the end of June, 1500. On the 23rd of August, the colonists sighted the two ships, which were then endeavouring to enter the harbour of San Domingo.

At this time Christopher Columbus and his brother Bartolomeo were absent, engaged in superintending the erection of a fort in the province of Xaragua; Don Diego was commanding in their absence. Bovadilla landed and went to hear mass, displaying during the ceremony a very significant ostentation; then, having summoned Don Diego before him, he ordered him to resign his office into his hands. The admiral, warned by a messenger of what was occurring, arrived in great haste. He examined the letters patent brought by Bovadilla, and having read them, he declared his willingness to recognize him as intendant of justice, but not as governor-general of the colony.

Then Bovadilla gave him a letter from the king and queen, couched in the following terms: —

"Don Christopher Columbus, our Admiral in the ocean. We have ordered Commander Don Francis Bovadilla to explain to you our intentions. We command you to give credit to, and to execute, whatever he shall order on our part.

"I, THE KING, I, THE QUEEN."

In this letter, the title of Viceroy appertaining to Columbus by the solemn conventions signed by Ferdinand and Isabella, was not even mentioned. Columbus, suppressing his just indignation, quietly submitted. Then arose against the fallen admiral a whole host of false friends. All those who owed their fortune to Columbus turned against him; accusing him of having desired to render himself independent. Foolish calumnies! How could this idea have occurred to the mind of a foreigner, a Genoese, alone in the midst of a Spanish colony!

Bovadilla found the moment propitious for harsh measures. Don Diego was already imprisoned, and the governor soon ordered Don Bartolomeo and Christopher Columbus himself to be put in fetters. The admiral, accused of high treason, was placed with his two brothers on board a vessel bound for Spain, under the command of Alphonso de Villejo. That officer, a man of feeling, and ashamed of the treatment to which Columbus was exposed, wished to strike off his chains; but Columbus refused. He, the conqueror of a new world, would arrive loaded with chains in that kingdom of Spain, which he had so greatly enriched!

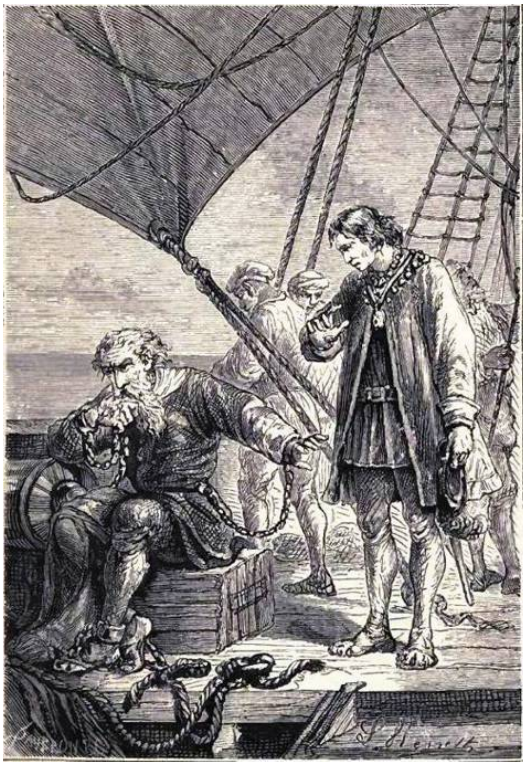

Columbus bound like a felon.

The admiral judged rightly in thus acting, for public opinion was revolted by the sight of him in this depth of humiliation, bound like a felon, and treated as a criminal. Gratitude towards the man of genius asserted itself against the bad passions which had been so unjustly excited, and there arose a cry of indignation against Bovadilla. The king and queen, swayed by the feelings of the people, loudly blamed the conduct of the commander, and addressed an affectionate letter to Columbus, inviting him to present himself at court.

Thus a bright day again dawned for Columbus. He appeared before Ferdinand, not as the accused, but as himself the accuser; then, his fortitude giving way under the remembrance of the unworthy treatment he had experienced, this unfortunate great man wept, and caused those around to weep with him. He pointed proudly to the story of his life. He showed himself to be almost without resources, he whom they accused of ambition, and of enriching himself out of the government of the colony! Verily, the man who had made the discovery of a world, did not possess a roof to shelter his own head!

Isabella, ever good and compassionate, wept in company with the old sailor, and for sometime could not make him any answer, so choked was she with her tears. At length she was able to utter some affectionate words; in assuring Columbus of her protection, she promised to avenge him of his enemies; she excused the bad choice they had made in sending this Bovadilla to the islands, and she declared he should expiate his guilt by an exemplary punishment. In addition, she desired the admiral to allow some time to elapse before returning to his government, in order that the minds prejudiced against him might return to sentiments of honour and justice.

The mind of Christopher Columbus was calmed by the gracious words of the queen; he showed himself content with his reception, and admitted the necessity of the delay enjoined upon him by Isabella. The chief wish of his heart was again to serve his adopted country and its sovereigns, and he sketched out grand designs of what still remained to be attempted in the way of discovery. His third voyage, in spite of its short duration, had not been without fruit, but had enriched the map with such new names as Trinidad, the Gulf of Paria, the coast of Cumana, the Islands of Tobago, of Grenada, of Margarita, and of Cubaga.

V.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

Fourth Voyage: A Flotilla of four vessels — Canary Islands — Martinique — Dominica — Santa-Cruz — Porto-Rico — Hispaniola — Jamaica — Cayman Island — Pinos Island — Island of Guanaja — Cape Honduras — The American Coast of Truxillo on the Gulf of Darien — The Limonare Islands — Huerta — The Coast of Veragua — Auriferous Strata — Revolt of the Natives — The Dream of Columbus — Porto-Bello — The Mulatas — Putting into port at Jamaica — Distress — Revolt of the Spaniards against Columbus — Lunar Eclipse — Arrival of Columbus at Hispaniola — Return of Columbus to Spain — His death, on the 20th of March, 1506.

Christopher Columbus saw himself now reinstated in favour, as he deserved to be, at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella. Perhaps the king may have still evinced a certain degree of coldness towards him, but the queen was his avowed and enthusiastic protectress. His official title as viceroy had not, however, been restored to him, but the admiral, with his usual magnanimity, did not demand it. He had the satisfaction of seeing Bovadilla deposed, partly for his abuse of power, and partly because his conduct towards the Indians had become atrocious; his inhuman proceedings towards them being pushed to such a length, that under his administration the native population of Hispaniola, sensibly decreased.

During this time the island began to fulfil the hopes of Columbus, who had prophesied that in three years the crown would derive from it a revenue of sixty millions. Gold was obtained in abundance from the best worked mines; a slave had dug up on the banks of the Hayna, a mass, equal in weight to 3600 golden crowns; it was easy to foresee that the new colonies would yield incalculable riches.

The admiral, who could not bear to remain inactive, earnestly demanded to be sent on a fourth voyage, although he was by this time sixty-six years of age. In support of his request he adduced some very plausible reasons. One year before the return of Columbus, the Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama, had returned from the Indies, after having doubled the Cape of Good Hope. Columbus felt certain that by sailing to India by the much safer and shorter western route, the Spaniards might enter into profitable competition with the Portuguese traders. He constantly maintained, believing as he did that he had been alongside the Asiatic territory, that the islands and continents discovered by him were only separated by a strait from the Moluccas. He therefore wished, without even returning to Hispaniola and the colonies already settled, to direct his course at once to the Indies. It is evident that the ex-Viceroy had again become the hardy navigator of his earlier years. The king agreed to the admiral’s request, and placed him in command of a flotilla composed of four vessels, the *Santiago*, *Gallego*, *Vizcaino*, and a caravel, as admiral’s galley. These ships were of small tonnage, the largest being only of seventy tons, and the smallest of fifty; they were in fact, little better than coasting-vessels.

Columbus left Cadiz on the 9th of May, 1502, with crews numbering in all 150 men. He took with him his brother Bartolomeo, and his son Fernando, the child of his second marriage, and at this time scarcely thirteen years old. On the 20th of May, the vessels stopped at Gran Canaria, and on the 15th of June arrived at Martinique, one of the Windward Islands; afterwards they touched at Dominica, Santa-Cruz, and Porto-Rico, and at length, after a prosperous voyage, reached Hispaniola, on the 29th of June. The intention of Columbus, acting on the queen’s advice, was not to land upon the island whence he had been so unworthily expelled; but his badly-constructed ship was scarcely sea-worthy, and repairs to the keel were greatly needed. Therefore the admiral demanded permission of the governor to enter the harbour.

The new governor, successor to Bovadilla, was a just and moderate man, a knight of the order of Alcantara, named Nicholas Ovando. His excessive caution, however, made him fear that the presence of Columbus in the colony might be a cause of disorder; he therefore thought it right to refuse the request. The admiral concealed the indignation which such treatment could not but cause him, and returned good for evil, by offering wise counsel to the governor in the following instance. The fleet which was to take Bovadilla back to Europe, and to bear with it, besides the enormous lump of gold already mentioned, other treasures of great value, was ready to put to sea. But the weather was very threatening, and Columbus, with a sailor’s penetration, having observed the signs of an approaching storm, implored the governor not to expose the ships and passengers to such danger. Ovando would not listen to the advice, and the ships put to sea;

scarcely had they reached the eastern point of the island before a terrible hurricane arose, causing twenty-one of the ships to founder with all on board. Bovadilla was drowned, and with him the greater part of the enemies of Columbus, but by an exception which may be called providential, the ship which carried the poor remains of the admiral’s fortune, escaped destruction. In this storm ten millions’ worth of gold and precious stones was engulfed by the ocean.

Meanwhile, the four caravels of Columbus, denied access to the harbour, had been driven before the storm. They were separated one from the other, and disabled, but they succeeded in meeting together again, and by the 14th of July, the squall had carried them within sight of Jamaica. Arrived there, strong currents bore them towards the islands called the Queen’s Garden, and then in the direction of east-south-east. The little flotilla contended for sixty days against the wind without making more than 210 miles, and at length was driven towards the coast of Cuba, which led to the discovery of Cayman and Pinos Islands.

Columbus then steered to the south-west, sailing upon seas hitherto unvisited by any European ship, and throwing himself once more into the course of discovery with all the passionate ardour of a navigator. Chance conducted him towards the southern coast of America; he discovered the island of Guanaja, on the 30th of July, and on the 14th of August he touched at Cape Honduras, that narrow strip of land, which, prolonged by the Isthmus of Panama, unites the two continents of America. Thus, for the second time Columbus, without being aware of it, approached the real soil of America. For more than nine months he followed the windings of these shores, in the face of all kinds of perils and difficulties, and succeeded in laying down the chart of the coast from the part since named Truxillo, as far as the Gulf of Darien. Each night he cast anchor, that he might not be driven far from the shore, and at length reached that eastern extremity of the coast where it ends abruptly in the Cape Gracias a Dios.

This cape was doubled on the 14th of September, but the ships encountered contrary winds so violent, that even the admiral, himself the oldest sailor of the crews, had never before experienced the like. He relates this terrible episode in his letter to the king of Spain in the following terms: “During eighty-four days the waves continued their assaults, nor did my eyes perceive sun, nor stars, nor any planet; the seams of my vessels gaped, my sails were torn; tackle, boats, rigging, all were lost; my sailors, ill and frightened, devoted themselves to the pious duties of religion; no one failed to promise pilgrimages, and all confessed to each other, thinking that each moment might prove their last. I have seen many tempests, but never have I experienced any of such duration and violence. Many of my men who passed for intrepid sailors, lost courage; but that which broke my heart, was the pain of my son, whose tender age added to my despair, and whom I saw the prey of greater suffering, greater torments, than fell to the lot of any one amongst us; but it was doubtless no other than God, who bestowed upon him such energy, that it was He alone who animated the courage, and reawakened the patience of the sailors under their severe toil; in a word, looking upon him, one might have fancied him a sailor who had grown old in contending with storms, an astonishing fact, almost incredible, but one which awakened some gleam of joy amidst the sorrows which overwhelmed me. I was ill, and several times I thought my last hour was near... To complete my misery comes the thought that twenty years of service, of fatigues and perils, have brought me no profit, and I find myself to-day unpossessed of even a roof to shelter me in Spain, and forced to betake myself to an inn when I would obtain repose or food; and when there I often find myself unable to pay my reckoning.” Do not these lines indicate clearly the intensity of sorrow which overwhelmed the soul of Columbus?

In the midst of such dangers and anxieties, how could he preserve the energy needful to command an expedition?

Throughout the duration of the storm, the ships had been following the line of coast which successively bears the names of Honduras, Mosquito, Nicaragua, Costa-Rica, Veragua, and Panama, the twelve Limonare Islands being also discovered at this time, and at last, on the 25th of September, Columbus cast anchor between the small island of Huerta and the continent. On the 5th of October he again set sail, and after having taken the bearings of the Bay of Almirante, he anchored opposite to the village of Cariaz. There he remained until the 15th of October, the repairs of the vessels meanwhile going actively forward.

Columbus now believed himself to be arrived near the mouth of the Ganges, and from the natives speaking of a certain province of Ciguare, which was surrounded by the sea, he felt himself confirmed in this opinion. They declared that it was a country containing rich gold-mines, of which the most important was situated seventy-five miles to the south. When the admiral again set sail, he followed the wooded coast of Veragua, where the Indians appeared to be very wild. On the 26th of November, the flotilla entered the harbour of El Retrete, which is now the port of Escribanos. The ships battered by the winds, were now in a most miserable plight; it was absolutely necessary to repair the damage they had sustained, and for this purpose to prolong the stay at El Retrete. Upon quitting this harbour Columbus was met by a storm even more dreadful than those which had preceded it: “During nine days,” he says, “I remained without hope of being saved. Never did any man see a more violent or terrible sea; it was covered with foam, the wind permitted no ships to advance, nor to steer towards any cape; I was kept in that sea, of which the waves seemed to be of blood, and the surges boiled as though heated by fire. Never have I seen so appalling an aspect of the heavens: on fire during one whole day and night like a furnace, they sent forth thunder and flame incessantly, and I feared each moment that the masts and sails would be carried away. The growling of the thunder was so horrible that it appeared sufficient to crush our vessels; and during the whole time the rain fell with such violence that one could scarcely call it rain, but rather a second Deluge. My sailors, overcome by so much trouble and suffering, prayed for death as putting a term to their miseries; my ships opened in all directions, and boats, anchors, ropes, and sails were once again lost."

During this long and painful navigation, the admiral had sailed one thousand and fifty miles. His crews were by this time quite exhausted; he was therefore obliged to turn back and to regain the river of Veragua, but not being able to find safe shelter there for his ships, he went a short distance off to the mouth of Bethlehem river, now called the Yebra, in which he cast anchor on the feast of the Epiphany in the year 1503. On the morrow the tempest was again renewed, and on the 24th of January, a sudden increase of water in the river caused the cables which held the ships to snap, and the vessels were only saved with great trouble.

In spite of all this, the admiral, who never forgot the principal object of his mission in these new countries, had succeeded in establishing regular intercourse with the natives. The cacique of Bethlehem showed a friendly disposition, and pointed out a country fifteen miles inland, where he said the gold-mines were very rich. On the 6th of February, Columbus despatched a force of seventy men to the spot indicated, under the command of his brother Bartolomeo. After travelling through a very undulating country, watered by rivers so winding that one of them had to be crossed thirty-nine times, the Spaniards arrived at the auriferous tracts. They were immense, and extended quite out of sight. Gold was so abundant that one man alone could collect enough of it in ten days to fill a measure. In four hours, Bartolomeo and his men had picked up gold to an enormous amount. They returned to the admiral, who, when he heard their narrative, resolved to settle upon this coast, and to have some wooden barracks constructed.

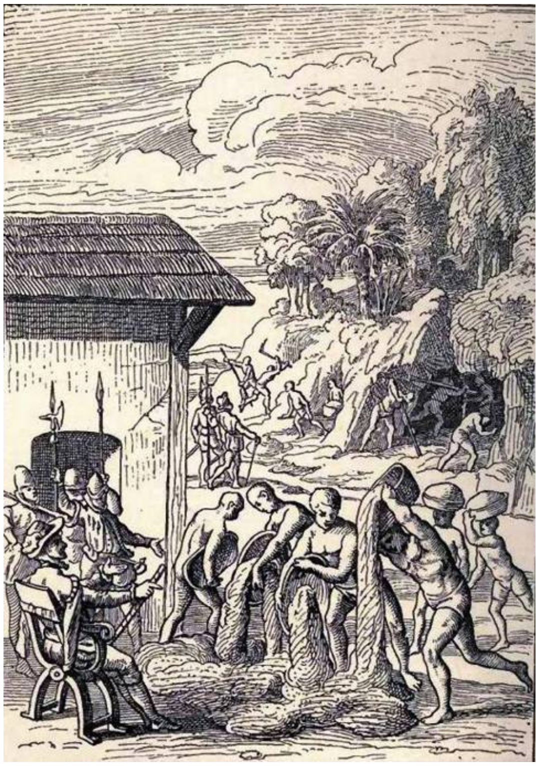

Gold-mines in Cuba.
From an old print.

The mines of this region were indeed of incomparable richness; they appeared to be inexhaustible, and quite made Columbus forget Cuba and San Domingo. His letter to King Ferdinand evinces his enthusiasm on the subject; one may feel some astonishment at reading the following sentiment from the pen of this great man, one indeed which is neither that of a philosopher nor of a Christian. “Gold! gold! excellent thing! It is from gold that spring riches! it is by means of gold that everything in the world is done, and its power suffices often to place souls in Paradise.”

The Spaniards set to work with ardour to store up this gold in their ships. Hitherto the relations with the natives had been peaceable, although these people were of fierce disposition. But after a time the cacique, irritated by the usurpation of the foreigners, resolved to murder them and burn their dwellings. One day the natives suddenly attacked the Spaniards in considerable force, and a very severe battle ensued, ending in the repulse of the Indians. The cacique had been taken prisoner with all his family, but he succeeded with his children in escaping from custody, and took refuge in the mountains in company with a great number of his followers. In the month of April, a considerable troop of the natives again attacked the Spaniards, who exterminated a large proportion of them.

Meanwhile, the health of Columbus became more and more enfeebled; the wind failed him for quitting the harbour, and he was in despair. One day, exhausted by fatigue, he fell asleep, and heard a pitying voice which addressed him as follows: — words which shall be given verbatim, for they bear the imprint of that kind of ecstatic religious fervour which gives a finishing touch to the picture of the great navigator.

“‘O foolish man! why such unwillingness to believe in and to serve thy God, the God of the Universe? What did He more for Moses His servant, and for David? Since thy birth, has He not had for thee the most tender solicitude; and when he saw thee of an age in which His designs for thee could be matured, has He not made thy name resound gloriously through the world? Has He not bestowed upon thee the Indies, the richest part of the earth? Has He not set thee free to make an offering of them to Him according to thine own will? Who but He has lent thee the means of executing His designs? Bounds were placed at the entrance of the ocean; they were formed of chains which could not be broken through. To thee were given the keys. Thy power was recognized in distant lands, and thy glory was proclaimed by all Christians. Did God even show Himself more favourable to the people of Israel, when He rescued them from Egypt? Did He favour David more, when from a shepherd boy He made him king of Judah? Turn to Him, confessing thy fault, for His compassion is infinite. Thine old age will prove no obstacle in the great actions which await thee: He holds in His hands a heritage the most brilliant. Was not Abraham a hundred years old, and had not Sarah already passed the flower of her youth when Isaac was born? Thou seekest an uncertain help. Answer me: who has exposed thee so often to so many dangers? Is it God, or the world? God never withholds the blessings promised to His servants. It is not His manner after receiving a service to pretend that His intentions have not been carried out, and to give a new interpretation to His desires; it is not He who seeks to give to arbitrary acts a favourable colour. His words are to be taken literally; all that He promises He gives with usury. Thus does He ever. I have told thee all that the Creator has done for thee; at this very moment He is showing thee the prize and the reward of the perils and sufferings to which thou hast been exposed in the service of thy fellow-men.’ And I listened to this voice, overcome though I were with suffering; but I could not muster strength to reply to these assured promises; I contented myself by deploring my fault with tears. The voice concluded with these words: — ’Take confidence, hope on; the record of thy labours will, with justice, be engraved on marble.’”

Columbus, as soon as he recovered, was anxious to leave this coast. He had desired to found a colony here, but his crews were not sufficiently numerous to justify the risk of leaving a part of them on land. The four caravels were full of worm-holes, and one of them had to be left behind at Bethlehem. On Easter day the admiral put to sea, but scarcely had he gone ninety miles before a leak was discovered in one of the ships; it was necessary to steer for the coast with all speed, and happily Porto-Bello was reached in safety, where the ship was abandoned, her injuries being irreparable. The flotilla consisted now of but two caravels, without boats, almost without provisions, and with 7000 miles of ocean to traverse. It sailed along the coast, passed the port of El Retrete, discovered the group of islands called the Mulatas, and at length entered the Gulf of Darien. This was the farthest point east reached by Columbus.

On the 1st of May the admiral steered for Hispaniola; by the 10th he was in sight of the Cayman Islands, but he found it impossible to make head against the winds which drove him to the north-west nearly as far as Cuba. There, while in shallow water, he encountered a storm, during which anchors and sails were carried away, and the two ships came into collision during the night. The hurricane then drove them southwards, and the admiral at length reached Jamaica with his shattered vessels, casting anchor on the 23rd of June in the harbour of San-Gloria, now called the bay of Don Christopher. Columbus wished to have gone to Hispaniola, where he would have found the stores needful for revictualling the ships, resources which were absolutely wanting in Jamaica; but his two caravels, full of worm-holes, “like to bee-hives,” could not without danger attempt the ninety miles’ voyage; the question now arose, how to send a message to Ovando, the governor of Hispaniola.

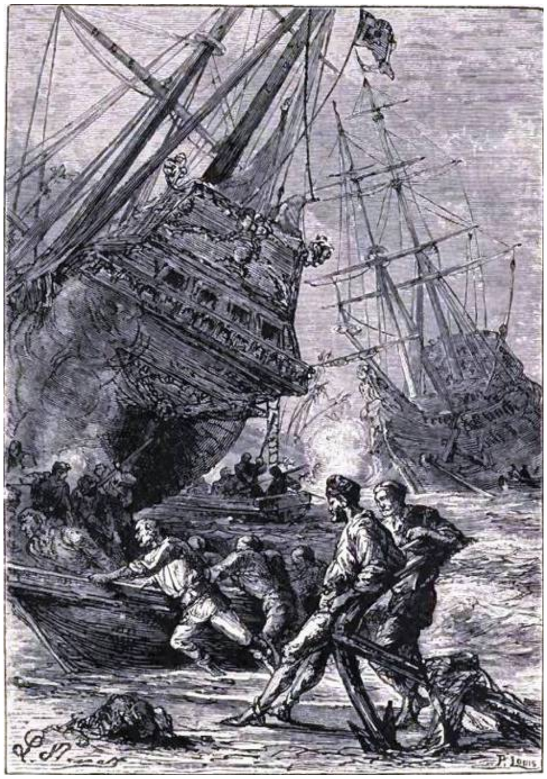

The Admiral is obliged to run the caravels aground.

The caravels let in water in every direction, and the admiral was obliged to run them aground; he then tried to organize a life in common upon shore. The Indians at first gave him assistance, and furnished the crews with the provisions of which they were in need, but the miserable and much tried sailors showed resentment against the admiral; they were ready for revolt, while the unfortunate Columbus, exhausted by illness, was confined to a bed of pain. It was in these trying circumstances that two brave officers, Mendez and Fieschi, proposed to the admiral to attempt to cross from Jamaica to Hispaniola in Indian canoes. This was in reality a voyage of six hundred miles, for it was necessary to row along the coast as far as the port where the colony was established. But these courageous officers were ready to face every peril, when it was a question of saving their companions. Columbus, appreciating the boldness of a proposal, which under other circumstances he would himself have been the first to make, gave the required permission to Mendez and Fieschi, who set out, while he, without ships, almost without provisions, remained with his crew upon this uncultivated island.

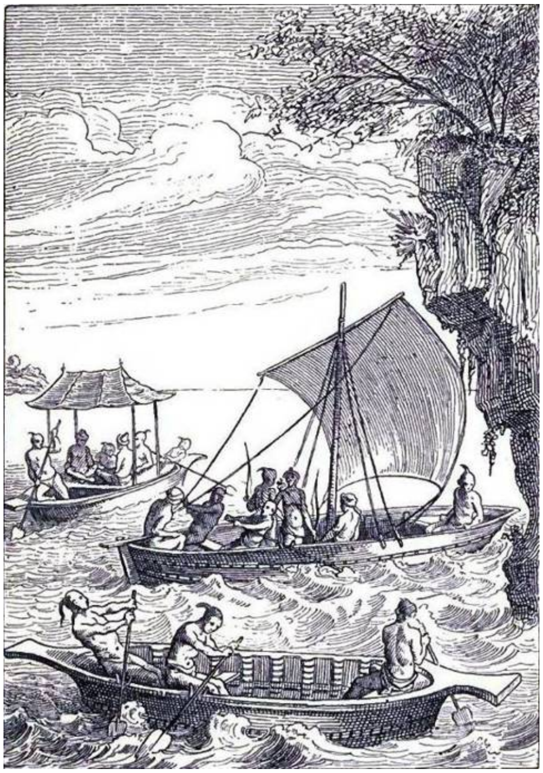

Indian Boats.
From an old print.

Soon the misery of the shipwrecked people — for so we may fairly call them — became so great that a revolt ensued. The admiral’s companions, blinded by their sufferings, imagined that their chief dared not return to the harbour in Hispaniola, to which Ovando had already denied him entrance. They thought this proscription applied to them equally with the admiral, and said among themselves that the governor, in excluding the flotilla from the harbours of the colony, must have acted under orders from the king. These absurd reasonings irritated minds already badly disposed, and at length on the 2nd of January, 1504, two brothers named Porras, one the captain of one of the caravels and the other the military treasurer, placed themselves at the head of the malcontents. Their wish was to return to Europe, and they rushed towards the admiral's tent, crying, "Castille! Castille!" Columbus was ill and in bed. His brother and his son threw themselves between him and the mutineers to defend him. At the sight of the aged admiral, the rebels stopped, and their violence abated; but they would not listen to the admiral's remonstrances and counsels; they did not understand that nothing could save them but general concord, and each, in unselfish forgetfulness, working for the public good. No! their decision was taken to quit the island, no matter by what means. Porras and his followers ran down to the shore, took possession of the canoes of the natives, and steered for the eastern extremity of the island. Arrived there, with no respect left for anything, and drunk with fury, they pillaged the Indians' dwellings — thus rendering the admiral responsible for their deeds of violence — and they dragged some unfortunate natives on board of the canoes which they had stolen. Porras and his companions continued their navigation; but when several leagues from shore, they were struck by a gust of wind which placed them in peril: with the object of lightening the canoes, they threw their prisoners overboard. After this barbarous execution, the canoes endeavoured, following the example of Mendez and Fieschi, to gain the island of Hispaniola, but in vain, they were continually thrown back upon the coasts of Jamaica.

Meanwhile the admiral, left alone with his friends and the sick, succeeded in establishing order in his little world. But the distress increased, and famine threatened. The natives wearied of providing food for these foreigners, whose sojourn upon their island was so prolonged; besides, they had seen the Spaniards fighting amongst themselves, a sight which had much destroyed their prestige, and convinced the Indians that these Europeans were nothing more than ordinary mortals; thus, they no longer respected nor feared them. The authority of Columbus over the native population was diminishing day by day, and an accidental circumstance was needed, of which the admiral cleverly took advantage, to bring back a renown which was necessary for the safety of his companions.

A lunar eclipse, foreseen and calculated by Columbus, was due on a certain day. On the morning of this day, the admiral sent to request an interview with the caciques of the island. They accepted the invitation, and when they were assembled in the tent of Columbus, the latter announced to them that God, desirous of punishing them for their inhospitable conduct, and their bad feeling towards the Spaniards, would that evening refuse them the light of the moon. All came to pass as the admiral had foretold; the shadow of the earth began to conceal the moon, whose disc had the appearance of being eaten away by some formidable monster. The savages in terror cast themselves at the feet of Columbus, praying him to intercede with Heaven on their behalf, and promising to place all they had at his disposal. Columbus, after some well feigned hesitation, pretended to yield to the prayers of the natives. Under pretext of supplicating the Deity, he remained in his tent during the whole time of the eclipse, only reappearing at the moment when the phenomenon was nearly over. Then he told the caciques that God had heard his prayer, and extending his arm he commanded the moon to reappear. Soon the disc was seen to issue from the cone of the shadow, and the queen of night shone forth in all her splendour. From that day forward, the grateful and submissive Indians accepted the admiral's authority as one manifestly delegated to him by the celestial powers.

While these events were passing at Jamaica, Mendez and Fieschi had long ago arrived at their destination. These brave officers had reached Hispaniola after a voyage of four days, little short of miraculous, accomplished as it was in a frail canoe. They immediately made the governor acquainted with the desperate condition of Columbus and his companions. Ovando, in a spirit of malice and injustice, detained these officers, and after a delay of eight months, under pretext of ascertaining the real condition of affairs, he despatched to Jamaica one of his own followers, a man named Diego Escobar, who was an especial enemy to Columbus. Escobar, on his arrival at Jamaica, would not communicate with Columbus; he did not even land, but contented himself with putting on shore, for the use of the distressed crews, "a side of pork and a barrel of wine;" then he again set sail without having allowed a single person to come on board. This infamous behaviour is but too real, although humanity almost refuses to believe in it.

The admiral was indignant over this cruel mockery; but he showed no violence, used no recrimination. The arrival of Escobar somewhat reassured the shipwrecked men, for at least it proved that their situation was known. Deliverance was therefore only a matter of time, and the *morale* of the Spaniards gradually improved.

The admiral was desirous of bringing about a reconciliation with Porras and the rebels, who, since their separation, had incessantly ravaged the island, and been guilty of odious cruelties towards the unfortunate natives. Columbus proposed to restore them to favour, but these foolish people only answered his generous overtures by advancing to attack him in his retreat. Those Spaniards who had remained faithful to the cause of order, were obliged to take up arms, and they valiantly defended the admiral, losing but one man in this sad affair. They took both the brothers Porras prisoners, and remained masters of the field of battle: then the rebels threw themselves on their knees before Columbus, who, in compassion for their sufferings, granted them pardon.

At length, just one year after the departure of Mendez and Fieschi, a ship appeared, equipped by them at the expense of Columbus, which was destined to restore the shipwrecked company to their homes. On the 24th of June, 1504, every one went on board, and quitting Jamaica, the theatre of accumulated miseries, both moral and physical, they set sail for Hispaniola. Arrived in harbour, after a prosperous voyage, Columbus, to his no small surprise, found himself at first received with much respect, the governor Ovando, as a shrewd man not willing to go against public opinion, doing him honour. But this happy temper did not last. Soon the quarrels recommenced, and then Columbus, unable as well as unwilling to hear more, humiliated, and even maltreated, freighted two ships, of which he shared the command with his brother Bartolomeo, and on the 12th of September, 1504, he for the last time set out for Europe.

His fourth voyage had increased geographical knowledge by the discovery of the Cayman Islands, Martinique, Guanaja, the Limonare Islands, with the coasts of Honduras, Mosquito, Nicaragua, Veragua, Costa-Rica, Porto-Bello, and Panama, the Mulatas Islands, and the Gulf of Darien.

During this, his last voyage across the ocean, Columbus was destined to be again tried by storms. His own vessel was disabled, and he and his crew were obliged to go on board his brother’s ship. On the 19th of October, another fearful hurricane broke the mast of this vessel, which had then to make more than two thousand miles with incomplete sails. At last, on the

7th of November, the admiral entered the harbour of San-Lucar. Here a sad piece of news was awaiting him. Isabella, his generous protectress, was dead. Who was there now to take an interest in the old Genoese?

The admiral was coldly received by the ungrateful and jealous king Ferdinand, who did not even disdain to use subterfuges and delays, hoping thus to evade the solemn treaties given under his sign manual; he ended by proposing to Columbus the acceptance of a small Castilian town, Camon de los Condes, in exchange for his titles and dignities. This ingratitude and faithlessness overwhelmed the aged man; his health, already so much impaired, did not improve, and grief carried him to the grave. On the 20th of May, at Valladolid, at the age of seventy, he rendered up his soul to God with these words: “O Lord, into Thy hands I resign my soul and body.”

The remains of Columbus were at first laid in the monastery of St. Francis; in 1513, they were removed to the Carthusian monastery of Seville. But it seemed as if, even after death, repose were to be denied to the great navigator, for in 1536 his body was transported to the cathedral of San Domingo. Local tradition affirms that when, after the Treaty of Basle in 1795, the Spanish government, before giving up to France the eastern portion of the island of San Domingo, ordered the removal of the ashes of the great sailor to Havana, a canon substituted some other remains for those of Christopher Columbus, and that the latter were deposited in the choir of the cathedral, to the left of the altar. Thanks to this manoeuvre of the canon, whether dictated by a sentiment of local patriotism or by respect to the last wishes of Columbus who had indicated San Domingo as his chosen place of sepulture, it is not the dust of the illustrious navigator which Spain possesses at Havana, but probably that of his brother Diego. The discovery so lately made in the cathedral of San Domingo, on the 10th of September, 1877, of a leaden chest containing human bones, and bearing an inscription stating that it encloses the remains of the *Discoverer of America*, seems to confirm in every particular the tradition which has been just mentioned.

But after all, it matters little whether the body of Columbus be at San Domingo or at Havana; his name and his glory are everywhere.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CONQUEST OF INDIA, AND OF THE SPICE COUNTRIES.

I.

Covilham and Païva — Vasco da Gama — The Cape of Good Hope is doubled — Escalès at Sam-Braz — Mozambique, Mombaz, and Melinda — Arrival at Calicut — Treason of the Zamorin — Battles — Return to Europe — The scurvy — Death of Paul da Gama — Arrival at Lisbon.

At the same time that the King of Portugal, John II. despatched Diaz to seek in the south of Africa the route to the Indies, he ordered two gentlemen of his court to find out if it would not be possible to attain the same end by an easier, safer, and more rapid means; by way of the isthmus of Suez, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

For carrying out such a mission there was needed a clever, enterprising man, well acquainted with the difficulties of a journey in those regions, and possessing a knowledge of the Oriental languages, or at the very least, of Arabic. This agent must be of a versatile disposition, and able to dissemble; capable, in a word, of concealing the real meaning of projects which aimed at nothing less than withdrawing all the commerce of Asia from the hands of the Mussulmans and Arabs, and through them from the Venetians, in order to enrich Portugal with it.

There was living at this time an experienced navigator, Pedro de Covilham, who had served with distinction under Alonzo V. in the war with Castille, and who had made a long stay in Africa. It was upon him that John II. cast his eye, and Alonzo de Païva was given him as a colleague. They left Lisbon in the month of May, 1487, furnished with detailed instructions, and with a chart drawn according to Bishop Calsadilla's map of the World, by the help of which the tour of Africa might be made.

The two travellers reached Alexandria and Cairo, where they were much gratified at meeting with some Moorish traders from Fez and Tlemcen, who conducted them to Tor — the ancient Ezion-geber — at the foot of Sinai, where they were able to procure some valuable information upon the trade of Calicut. Covilham resolved to take advantage of this fortunate circumstance to visit a country which, for more than a century, had been regarded by Portugal with covetous longing, while Païva set out to penetrate into those regions then so vaguely designated as Ethiopia, in quest of the famous Prester John, who, according to old travellers, reigned over a marvellously rich and fertile country in Africa. Païva doubtless perished in his adventurous enterprise, being never again heard of.

As for Covilham, he travelled to Aden, whence he embarked for the Malabar coast. He visited in succession Cananore, Calicut, and Goa, and collected accurate information upon the commerce and productions of the countries bordering on the Indian Ocean, without arousing the fears of the Hindoos, who could not suspect that the kind and friendly welcome they accorded to the traveller would bring about in the future the enthralment and ruin of their country. Covilham, not considering that he had yet done enough for his country, quitted India, and went to the eastern coast of Africa, where he visited Mozambique, Sofala — long famous for its gold-mines, of which the reputation, by means of the Arabs, had even reached Europe — and Zeila, the *Avalites portus* of the ancients, and the principal town of the Adel coast, upon the Gulf of Oman, at the entrance of the

Arabian Sea. After a somewhat long stay in that country, he returned by Aden, then the principal entrepôt of the commerce of the east, went as far as Ormuz, at the entrance of the Persian Gulf, and then again passing up the Red Sea, he arrived at Cairo.

John II. had sent to Cairo two learned Jews to await the arrival of Covilham, and to one of these, the Rabbi Abraham Beja, the traveller gave his notes, the itinerary of his journey, and a map of Africa given to him by a Mussulman, charging Beja to carry them all to Lisbon with the least possible delay. For himself, not content with all that he had done hitherto, and wishing to execute the mission which death had prevented Païva from accomplishing, he went into Abyssinia, where the "negus" or king, known by the name of Prester John, flattered by seeing his alliance sought by one of the most powerful sovereigns of Europe, received him with the greatest kindness, and gave him a high position at his court, but to make sure of retaining his services, he constantly refused him permission to leave the country. Although he had married there and had some children, Covilham still longed for his native country, and when, in 1525, a Portuguese embassy, of which Alvarès was a member, came into Abyssinia, he witnessed the departure of his countrymen with the deepest regret, and the chaplain of the expedition has naïvely re-echoed his complaints and his grief.

M. Ferdinand Denis says, "By furnishing precise information upon the possibility of circumnavigating Africa, by indicating the route to the Indies, by giving more positive and extended ideas upon the commerce of these countries, and above all, by describing the gold-mines of Sofala, and so exciting the cupidity of the Portuguese, Covilham contributed greatly to accelerate the expedition of Gama."

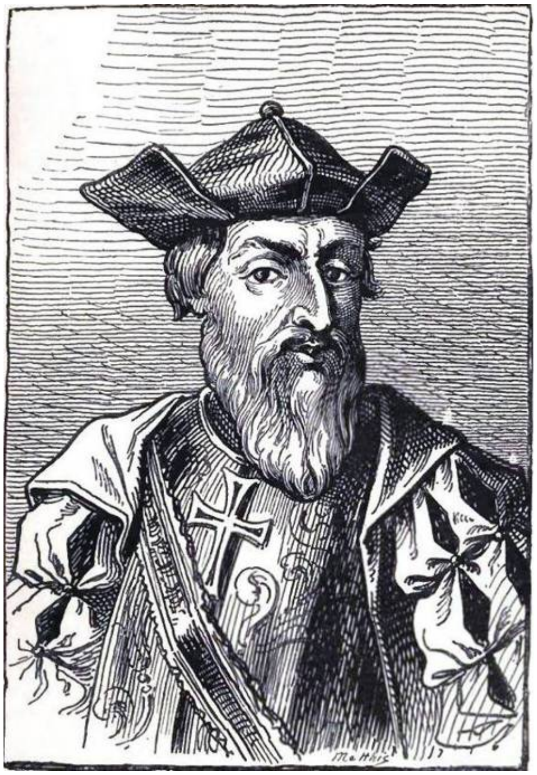

Vasco da Gama.
From an old print.

If one may believe an old tradition, but one which is unsupported by any authentic document, Gama was descended by an illegitimate line from Alphonso III. King of Portugal. His father, Estevam Eanez da Gama, grand alcalde of Sinès and of Silvès, in the kingdom of Algarve, and commander of Seizal, occupied a high position at the court of John II. He enjoyed great reputation as a sailor, so much so, that just at the moment when his own unexpected death occurred, King John was thinking of giving Gama the command of the fleet which he was desirous of sending to the Indies. By his marriage with Dona Isabella Sodré, daughter of Juan de Resende, proveditore of the fortifications of Santarem, he had several children, and amongst them Vasco, who first reached India by doubling the Cape of Good Hope, and Paul, who accompanied him in that memorable expedition. It is known that Vasco was born at Sinès, but the date of his birth is uncertain; the year 1469 is that generally given, but besides the fact that if this be the correct date, Gama would have been very young — not more than eight and twenty — when the important command of the expedition to the Indies was confided to him, there was discovered twenty years ago, amongst the Spanish archives, a safe-conduct to Tangier granted in 1478 to two persons, Vasco da Gama and Lemos. It is scarcely probable that such a passport would have been given to a child of nine years of age, so that this discovery would appear to carry back the birth of the celebrated voyager to an earlier date.

It seems that from an early period of his life, Vasco da Gama was destined to follow the career of a sailor, in which his father had distinguished himself. The first historian of the Indies, Lopez de Castañeda, delights in recalling the fact that he had signalized himself upon the African seas. At one time he was ordered to seize all the French ships lying in the Portuguese ports, in revenge for the capture by French pirates during a time of peace of a rich Portuguese galleon returning from Mina. Such a mission would only have been confided to an active, energetic and well-tried captain, a clear proof that Gama’s valour and cleverness were highly appreciated by the king.

About this time he married Dona Caterina de Ataïde, one of the highest ladies about the court, and by her he had several children, amongst others Estevam da Gama, who became governor of the Indies, and Dom Christovam, who, says Gaucher, by his struggle with Ahmed Guerad in

Abyssinia, and by his romantic death, deserves to be reckoned amongst the famous adventurers of the sixteenth century.

All doubt as to the precise date of Gama's first voyage is now at an end, thanks to the document in the public library at Oporto, a paper with which Castañeda must have been acquainted, and of which M. Ferdinand Denis has published a translation in the *Ancient and Modern Travellers* of M. E. Charton. The date may be fixed with certainty for Saturday, the 8th of July, 1497.

This expedition had been long ago determined upon, and all its details were minutely arranged. It was to be composed of four vessels of medium size, "in order," says Pacheco, "that they may enter everywhere and again issue forth rapidly." They were solidly constructed, and provided with a triple supply of sails and hawsers; all the barrels destined to contain water, oil, or wine had been strengthened with iron hoops; large provisions of all kinds had been made, such as flour, wine, vegetables, drugs, and artillery; the personnel of the expedition consisted of the best sailors, the cleverest pilots, and the most experienced captains.

Gama, who had received the title of *Capitam mõr*, hoisted his flag upon the *Sam-Gabriel* of 120 tons. His brother Paul da Gama was on board the *Sam-Raphael* of 100 tons. A caravel of 50 tons, the *Berrio*, so named in memory of the pilot Berrio, who had sold her to Emmanuel I. was commanded by an experienced sailor, Nicolo Coelho, while Pedro Nuñes was the captain of a large barque, laden with provisions and merchandise, destined for exchange with the natives of the countries which should be visited. Pero de Alemquer, who had been pilot to Bartholomew Diaz, was to regulate the course of the vessels. The crews, including ten criminals who were put on board to be employed on any dangerous service, amounted to one hundred and sixty persons. What feeble means these, what almost absurd resources, compared with the grandeur of the mission which these men were to accomplish!

On the 8th of July, at sunrise, Gama advanced towards the vessels, followed by his officers through an immense crowd of people. Around him were a number of monks and religious persons, who chanted sacred hymns, and besought Heaven’s protection for the voyagers. This departure from Rastello must have been a singularly moving scene; all, whether actors or spectators, mingling their chants, their cries, their adieux and their tears, while the sails, filled by a favourable breeze, bore away Gama and the fortune of Portugal towards the open sea. A large caravel and a smaller barque, which were bound for Mina under the command of Bartholomew Diaz, sailed in company with Gama’s fleet. On the following Saturday, the ships were in sight of the Canaries, and passed the night windward of Lancerota. When they arrived parallel with the Rio de Ouro, a thick fog separated Paul da Gama, Coelho, and Diaz from the rest of the fleet, but they joined again near the Cape de Verd Islands, which were soon reached. At Santiago fresh stores of meat, water, and wood were taken on board, and the ships were again put into good sailing order.

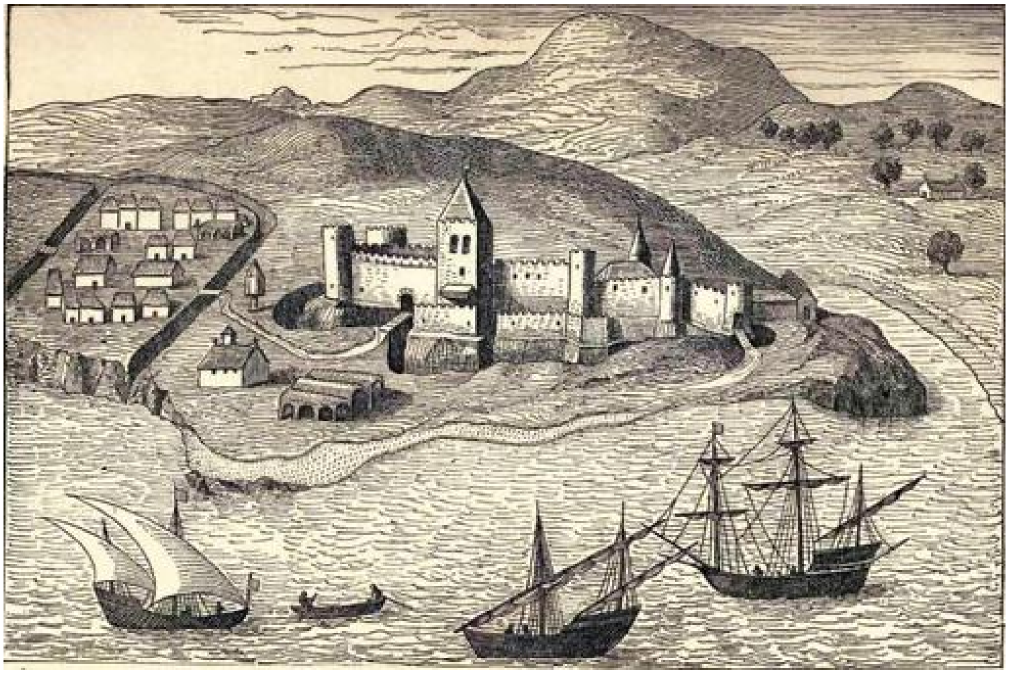

La Mina.
From an old print.

They quitted the shore of Santa Maria on the 3rd of August. The voyage was accomplished without any remarkable incidents, and on the 4th of November, anchors were dropped upon the African Coast in a bay which received the name of *Santa-Ellena*. Eight days were spent there in shipping wood, and in putting everything in order on board the vessels. It was there that they saw for the first time the Bushmen, a miserable and degraded race of people who fed upon the flesh of sea-wolves and whales, as well as upon roots. The Portuguese carried off some of these natives, and treated them with kindness. The savages knew nothing of the value of the merchandize which was offered to them, they saw the objects for the first time and were ignorant of their use. Copper was the only thing which they appeared to prize, wearing in their ears small chains of that metal. They understood well the use of the zagayes — a kind of javelin, of which the point is hardened in the fire — of which three or four of the sailors and even Gama himself had unpleasant experience, while endeavouring to rescue from their hands a certain Velloso, a man who had imprudently ventured into the interior of the country. This incident has furnished Camoens with one of the most charming episodes of the "Lusiad."

On leaving Santa-Ellena, Pero de Alemquer, formerly pilot to Diaz, declared his belief that they were then ninety miles from the Cape, but in the uncertainty the fleet stood off to sea; on the 18th of November the Cape of Good Hope was seen, and the next day it was doubled by the fleet sailing before the wind. On the 25th the vessels were moored in the Bay of Sam-Braz, where they remained thirteen days, during which time the boat which carried the stores was demolished, and her cargo divided amongst the three other vessels. During their stay the Portuguese gave the Bushmen some hawks' bells and other objects, which, to their surprise, were accepted, for in the time of Diaz the negroes had shown themselves timid and even hostile, and had thrown stones to prevent the crews from procuring water. Now they brought oxen and sheep, and to show their pleasure at the visit of the Portuguese, "they began," says Nicolas Velho, "to play upon four or five flutes, some set high, some low, a wonderful harmony for negroes, from whom one scarcely looks for music. They danced also, as dance the blacks, and the Capitam mõr commanded the trumpets to sound, and we in our boats danced too, the Capitam mõr himself dancing, as soon as he had returned amongst us."

What shall we say to this little fête and this mutual serenade between the Portuguese and the negroes? Would any one have expected to behold Gama, a grave man, as his portraits represent him, initiating the negroes into the charms of the pavane. Unhappily these favourable dispositions were transient, and it was found necessary to have recourse to some hostile demonstrations by means of repeated discharges of artillery.

In this Bay of Sam-Braz Gama erected a padrao, which was thrown down as soon as he was gone. The fleet soon passed the Rio Infante, the furthest point reached by Diaz. Here the ships experienced the effects of a strong current, but of which the violence was neutralized thanks to a favourable wind. On the 25th of December, Christmas Day, the country of Natal was discovered.

The ships had sustained some damage, and fresh water was needed; it was therefore urgent for them to find some harbour, which they succeeded in doing on the 10th of January, 1498. The blacks whom the Portuguese saw here upon landing were people of greater stature than those whom they had hitherto met with. Their arms were a large bow with long arrows, and a zagaye tipped with iron. They were Caffres, a race very superior to the Bushmen. Such happy relations were quickly established with them that Gama gave the country the name of the Land of Good People (*Terra da bon Gente*).

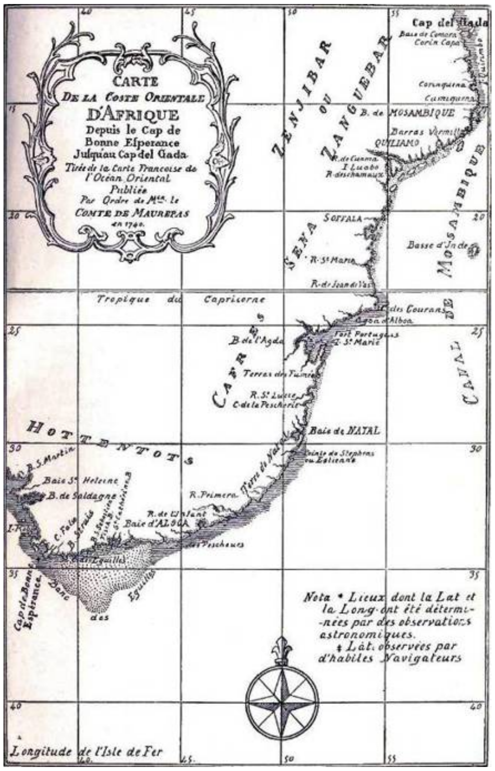
CARTE
DE LA COSTE ORIENTALE
D'AFRIQUE
Depuis le Cap de
Bonne Esperance
Jusqu'au Cap del Gada
Tirée de la Carte Francoise de
l'Océan Oriental
Publiée
Par Ordre de Mgr. le
COMTE DE MAUREPAS
en 1740.
Cap del Gada
Baie de Comora
Corin Capa
Corinquena
Camiquena
ZENJIBAR OU ZANGUEBAR
B. de MOSAMBIQUE
Barras Vermill
QUILIAMO
R. de Cuama
I. Luabo
R. des chameaux
SOFFALA
SENA
R. St. Marie
R. de Joan di Vas
Basse d'Inde
CANAL DE MOSAMBIQUE
Tropique du Capricorne
C. des Courans
Lagoa d'Alboa
B. de l'Agda
Fort Portugais
I. St. Marie
CAFRES
Terras des Fumées
R. St. Lucie
C. de la Pescherie
Baie de NATAL
Terre de Natal
Pointe de Stephens ou Etienne
HOTTENTOTS
B. S. Martin
Baie St. Heleine
B. de Saldagne
R. Primera
R. de l'Infant
Baie d'ALOGA
C. Falso
Peschaux
C. des Eguilles
Cap de Bonne Espérance
Banc des Eguilles
Nota * Lieux dont la Lat et la Long ont été détermi-nées par des observations astronomiques.
‡ Lat. observées par d'habiles Navigateurs
Longitude de l'Isle de Fer
40
45
50
55
15
20
25
30
35
40

A little further on, while still sailing up the coast, two Mussulman traders, one wearing a turban, the other a hood of green satin, came to visit the Portuguese, with a young man who, "from what could be understood from their signs, belonged to a very distant country, and who said he had already seen ships as large as ours." Vasco da Gama, took this as a proof that he was now approaching those Indian lands, which had been so long and so eagerly sought. For this reason he named the river which flowed into the sea at this place *Rio dos Bonis Signaes* (River of good tokens). Unhappily the first symptoms of scurvy appeared at this time amongst the crews, and soon there were many sailors upon the sick list.

On the 10th of March the expedition cast anchor before the Island of Mozambique, where, as Gama learnt through his Arab interpreters, there were several merchants of Mahometan extraction, who carried on trade with

India. Gold and silver, cloth and spices, pearls and rubies, formed the staple of their commerce. Gama at the same time was assured that in pursuing the line of the coast, he would find numerous cities; “Whereat we were so joyful,” says Velho in his naïve and valuable narrative, “that we wept for pleasure, praying God to grant us health that we might see all that which we had so much desired.”

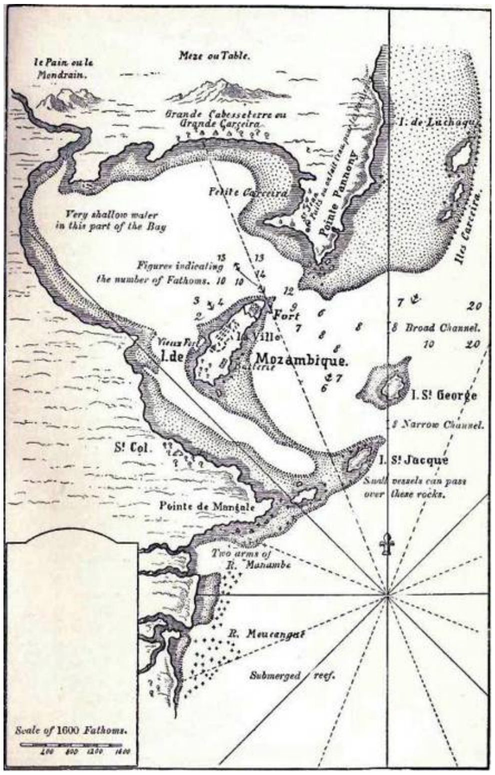
le Pain ou le Mondrain.
Meze ou Table.
Grande Cabesseterre ou Grande Carceira
I. de Luchaque
Petite Carceira
Pointe Pannony
Iles Carceira.
Very shallow water in this part of the Bay
Figures indicating the number of Fathoms.
Fort
la Ville
Vieux Fort
I. de Mozambique.
Batterie
Broad Channel.
I. St George
Narrow Channel.
St Col.
I. St Jacque
Small vessels can pass over these rocks.
Pointe de Mangale
Two arms of R. Manambe
R. Meucangat
Submerged reef.
Scale of 1600 Fathoms.
400 800 1200 1600

Mozambique Channel.

The Viceroy Colyytam, who imagined he was dealing with Mussulmen, came on board several times and was magnificently entertained; he returned the civility by sending presents, and even furnished Gama with two skilful pilots, but when some Moorish merchants who had traded in Europe told him that these foreigners, far from being Turks, were in reality the worst enemies of the Mahometans, the viceroy, disgusted at his mistake, made preparations for seizing the Portuguese by treachery, and killing them. Gama was obliged to point his artillery at the town and threaten to reduce it to ashes before he could obtain the water needed for the prosecution of his voyage. Blood flowed, and Paul da Gama captured two barques, whose rich cargo was divided amongst the sailors. The ships quitted this inhospitable town, on the 29th of March, and the voyage continued, a close surveillance being kept over the Arab pilots, whom Gama was obliged to cause to be flogged.

On the 4th of April the coast was seen, and on the 8th Mombasa or Mombaz was reached, a town, according to the pilots, inhabited by Christians and Mussulmen. The fleet dropped anchor outside the harbour, and did not enter it, notwithstanding the enthusiastic reception given to them. Already the Portuguese were reckoning upon meeting at mass the next day with the Christians of the Island, when during the night, the flag-ship was approached by a *zacra*, having on board a hundred armed men, who endeavoured to enter the ships in a body, which was refused them. The king of Mombaz was informed of all that had occurred at Mozambique, but pretending ignorance, he sent presents to Gama, proposing to him to establish a factory in his capital, and assuring him that so soon as he should have entered the port, he might take on board a cargo of spices and aromatics. The Capitam mõr, suspecting nothing, immediately sent two men to announce his entry for the morrow; already they were weighing anchor when the flag-ship refusing to tack, the anchor was let fall again. In graceful and poetic fiction, Camoens affirms that it was the Nereids led by Venus, the protectress of the Portuguese, who stayed their ships when on the point of entering the port. At this moment all the Moors on board the fleet quitted it simultaneously, whilst the Mozambique pilots threw themselves into the sea.

Two Moors who were put to the question with a drop of hot oil, confessed that the intention was to take all the Portuguese prisoners as soon as they should be inside the harbour. During the night the Moors endeavoured several times to climb on board and to cut the cables in order to run the ships aground, but each time they were discovered. Under these circumstances no prolonged stay was possible at Mombaz, but it had been long enough for all those ill of scurvy to recover their health.

At the distance of four-and-twenty miles from land, the fleet captured a barque richly laden with gold, silver, and provisions. The next day Gama arrived at Melinda, a rich and flourishing city, whose gilded minarets, sparkling in the sunshine, and whose mosques of dazzling whiteness, stood out against a sky of the most intense blue. The reception of the Portuguese at Melinda was at first very cold, the capture of the barque the evening before being already known there, but as soon as explanations had been given, the people became cordial. The king’s son came to visit the admiral, accompanied by a train of courtiers splendidly dressed, and a choir of musicians, who played upon various instruments. The greatest astonishment was shown at the artillery practice, for the invention of gunpowder was not yet known on the east coast of Africa. A solemn treaty was made, ratified by oaths upon the Gospel and the Koran, and cemented by an interchange of presents. From this moment the ill-will, the treachery, the difficulties of all kinds which had hitherto beset the expedition, ceased as if by magic: this must be attributed to the generosity of the King of Melinda, and to the aid which he furnished to the Portuguese.

Faithful to the promise which he had made to Vasco da Gama, the king sent him a Gujerat pilot named Malemo Cana, a man well instructed in navigation, understanding the use of charts, of the compass and the quadrant, and who rendered the most important service to the expedition. After a stay of nine days the fleet weighed anchor for Calicut. The coasting plan hitherto pursued was now to be abandoned, and the time was come when, in reliance upon the blessing of God, the Portuguese must venture out upon the wide ocean, without other guide than an unknown pilot furnished by a king whose kind welcome had not sufficed to lull to sleep the suspicions of the foreigners. And yet, thanks to the ability and loyalty of this pilot, thanks also to the clemency of the sea, and to the wind being constantly in its favour, the fleet, after a twenty-three days' voyage, reached the land on the 17th May, and the next day anchored at the distance of six miles below Calicut. The enthusiasm on board was great. At last they had arrived in those rich and wonderful countries. Fatigues, dangers, sickness, all were forgotten. The object of their long labours was attained! Or rather, it seemed to be so, for there was still needed the possession of the treasures and rich productions of India.

Scarcely were the anchors dropped when four boats came off from the shore, performing evolutions around the fleet, and apparently inviting the sailors to disembark. But Gama, rendered cautious by the occurrences at Mozambique and Mombaz, sent on shore one of the criminals who were on board, to act as a scout; ordering him to walk through the town and endeavour to ascertain the temper of its inhabitants. Surrounded by an inquisitive crowd, assailed by questions to which he could not reply, this man was conducted to the house of a Moor named Mouçaïda, who spoke Spanish, and to whom he gave a short account of the voyage of the fleet. Mouçaïda returned with him on board, and his first words on setting foot on the ship were “Good luck! good luck! quantities of rubies, quantities of emeralds!” Whereupon, Mouçaïda was at once engaged as interpreter.

The King of Calicut was at this time at a distance of forty-five miles from his capital, so the Capitam mõr despatched two men to announce the arrival of an ambassador from the King of Portugal, being the bearer of letters to him from his sovereign. The king at once sent a pilot, with orders to take the Portuguese ships into the safer roadstead of Pandarany, and promised to return himself on the morrow to Calicut; this he did, and ordered his Intendant or Catoual to invite Gama to land and open negotiations. In spite of the supplications of his brother, Paul da Gama, who represented to him the dangers which he might incur, and those to which his death would expose the expedition, the Capitam mõr set out for the shore, upon which an enormous crowd of people were awaiting him.

The idea that they were in the midst of a Christian population was so rooted in the minds of all the members of the expedition, that Gama, on passing by a pagoda on the way, entered it to perform his devotions. One of his companions, however, Juan de Saa, noticing the hideous pictures upon the walls, was less credulous, and whilst throwing himself upon his knees, said aloud, “If that be a devil, I intend nevertheless to adore only the true God!” A mental reservation which caused amusement to the admiral.

Near the gates of the town the crowd was even more closely packed. Gama and his companions, under the guidance of the Catoual, had some difficulty in reaching the palace, where the king, who in the narrative is called the “Zamorin,” was awaiting them with extreme impatience. Ushered into halls splendidly decorated with silken stuffs and carpets, and in which burned the most exquisite perfumes, the Portuguese found themselves in the presence of the Zamorin. He was magnificently attired, and loaded with jewels, the pearls and diamonds which he wore being of extraordinary size. The king ordered refreshments to be served to the strangers, and permitted them to be seated, a peculiar mark of favour in a country where the sovereign is usually only addressed with the most lowly prostrations. The Zamorin afterwards passed into another apartment, to hear with his own ears, as was proudly demanded by Gama, the reasons for the embassy and the desire felt by the King of Portugal to conclude a treaty of commerce and alliance with the King of Calicut. The Zamorin listened to Gama's discourse, and replied that he should be happy to consider himself the friend and brother of King Emmanuel, and that he would, by the aid of Gama, send ambassadors to Portugal.

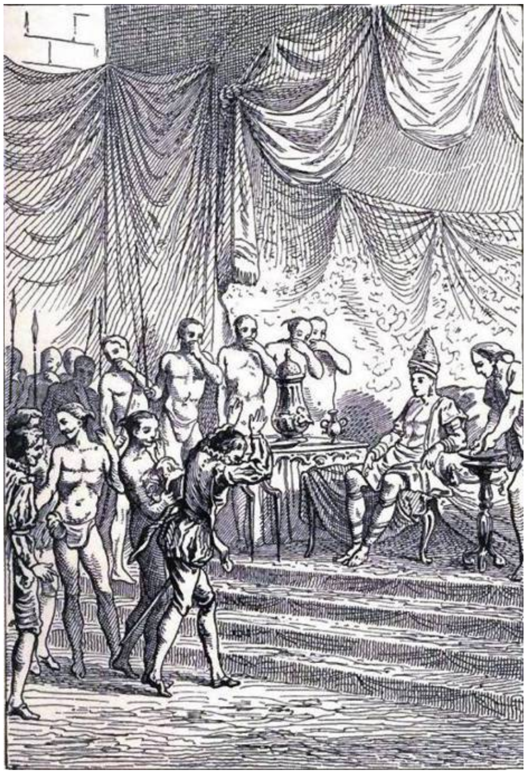

Gama's interview with the Zamorin.
From an old print.

There are certain proverbs of which the force is not affected by change of latitude, and the truth of that one which says, “The days succeed each other and have no similarity,” was proved the next day at Calicut. The enthusiasm which had been aroused in the mind of the Zamorin by the ingenious discourse of Gama, and the hope it had awakened of the establishment of a profitable trade with Portugal, vanished at the sight of the presents which were to be given him. “Twelve pieces of striped cloth, twelve cloaks with scarlet hoods, six hats, and four branches of coral, accompanied by a box containing six large basons, a chest of sugar, and four kegs, two filled with oil, and two with honey,” certainly did not constitute a very magnificent offering. At sight of it, the prime minister laughed, declaring that the poorest merchant from Mecca brought richer presents, and that the king would never accept of such ridiculous trifles. After this affront Gama again visited the Zamorin, but it was only after long waiting in the midst of a mocking crowd, that he was admitted to the presence of the king. The latter reproached him in a contemptuous manner for having nothing to offer him, while pretending to be the subject of a rich and powerful king. Gama replied with boldness, and produced the letters of Emmanuel, which were couched in flattering terms, and contained a formal promise to send merchandise to Calicut. The Zamorin, pleased at this prospect, then inquired with interest about the productions and resources of Portugal, and gave permission to Gama to disembark and sell his goods.

But this abrupt change in the humour of the Zamorin was not at all agreeable to the Moorish and Arab traders, whose dealings made the prosperity of Calicut. They could not look on quietly whilst foreigners were endeavouring for their own advantage to turn aside the commerce which had been hitherto entirely in their hands; they resolved, therefore, to leave no stone unturned to drive away once for all these formidable rivals from the shores of India. Their first care was to gain the ear of the Catoual; then they painted in the blackest colours these insatiable adventurers, these bold robbers, whose only object was to spy out the strength and resources of the town, that they might return in force to pillage it, and to massacre those who should venture to oppose their designs.

Upon arriving at the roadstead of Pandarany, Gama found no boat to take him off to the ships, and was forced to sleep on shore. The Catoual never left him, continually seeking to prove to him the necessity of bringing the ships nearer to the land; and when the admiral positively refused to consent to this, he declared him to be his prisoner. He had very little idea as yet of the firmness of Gama's character. Some armed boats were sent to surprise the ships, but the Portuguese, having received secret intelligence from the admiral of all that had happened, were on their guard, and their enemies dared not use open force. Gama, still a prisoner, threatened the Catoual with the anger of the Zamorin, whom he imagined could never thus have violated the duties of hospitality, but seeing that his menaces produced no effect, he tried bribery, presenting the minister with several pieces of stuff, who, thereupon at once altered his demeanour. "If the Portuguese," said he, "had but kept the promise they had made to the king, of disembarking their merchandise, the admiral would long ago have returned on board his ships." Gama at once sent an order to bring the goods to land, opened a shop for their sale, of which the superintendence was given to Diego Diaz, brother to the discoverer of the Cape of Good Hope, and was then allowed to go back to his ships.

The Mussulmen placed obstacles in the way of the sale of the merchandise by depreciating its value; Gama sent his agent Diaz to the Zamorin to complain of the perfidy of the Moors and of the bad treatment to which he had been subjected, requesting at the same time permission to move his place of sale to Calicut, where he hoped that the goods would be more easily disposed of. This request was favourably received, and friendly relations were maintained, in spite of the Moorish intrigues, until the 10th of August, 1498. On that day Diaz went to announce Gama's impending departure to the king, reminding him of his promise to send an embassy to Portugal, and asking him to allow Gama a specimen of each of the productions of the country. These were to be paid for on the first sale of goods which should take place after the departure of the fleet, it being intended that the employés of the factory should remain at Calicut during Gama's absence. The Zamorin, instigated by the Arab traders, not only refused to execute his promise, but demanded the payment of 600 *seraphins* as customs' duty, ordering at the same time the seizure of the merchandise, and making prisoners of the men employed in the factory.

Such an outrage, such contempt for the rights of nations, called for prompt vengeance, but Gama understood the art of dissimulation; however, on receiving a visit on board from some rich merchants, he detained them, and sent to the Zamorin to demand an exchange of prisoners. The king's reply not being sent within the time specified by the admiral, the latter set sail and anchored at the distance of sixteen miles from Calicut. After another fruitless attack by the Hindoos, the two agents returned on board, and a portion of the hostages whom Gama had secured were given up. Diaz brought back with him a curious letter from the Zamorin to the King of Portugal. It was written upon a palm leaf, and shall be quoted in all its strange laconicism, so different from the usual grandiloquence of the oriental style: —

"Vasco da Gama, a noble of thy palace, is come into my country which I have permitted. In my kingdom there is much cinnamon, cloves, and pepper, with many precious stones, and what I desire from thy country is gold, silver, coral, and scarlet. Adieu."

On the morrow, Mouçaïda the Moor of Tunis who had served as interpreter to the Portuguese, and had been a great assistance to them in their negotiations with the Zamorin, came to seek an asylum on board the ships. The merchandise had not been brought back on the appointed day, and the Capitam mõr now resolved to carry away with him the men whom he had kept as hostages, but the fleet was becalmed at several miles distance from Calicut, and was attacked by twenty armed boats, which were with difficulty kept at a distance by the artillery, until they were forced by a violent storm to take shelter under the coast.

The admiral was sailing along the coast of the Deccan, and had permitted some of the sailors to go on shore to gather fruit and collect cinnamon bark, when he perceived eight boats, which appeared to be coming towards him. Gama recalled the men, and sailed forward to meet the Hindoos, who made the greatest haste to flee from him, but not without leaving a boat laden with cocoa, and provisions, in the hands of the Portuguese. On arriving at the Laccadive Archipelago, Gama had the *Berrio* recalked, and his own ship drawn up on shore for repairs. The sailors were busy over this work when they were again attacked, but without more success than heretofore. The next day witnessed the arrival of an individual forty years of age, dressed in Hindoo style, who began to speak to the Portuguese in excellent Italian, telling them that he was a native of Venice, and had been torn from his country while still young, that he was a Christian, but without the possibility of practising his religion. He was in a high position at the court of the king of the country, who had sent him to them, to place at their disposal all that the country contained which could minister to their comfort. These offers of service, so different from the welcome accorded to them hitherto, excited the suspicions of the Portuguese, and they were not long in discovering that this adventurer was in command of the boats which had attacked them the day before. Upon this they had him scourged until he confessed that he had come to discover whether it were possible to attack the fleet with advantage, and he ended by affirming that all the inhabitants of the sea-shore were in league to destroy the Portuguese. He was retained on board, the work upon the ships was hurried forward, and as soon as water and provisions had been taken in, sail was made for a return to Europe.

In consequence of dead calms and contrary winds, the expedition was three months, all but three days, in reaching the African coast. During this long voyage the crews suffered terribly from scurvy, and thirty sailors perished. In each ship, only seven or eight men were in a condition to work the vessel, and very often the officers themselves were forced to lend a hand. “Whence I can affirm,” says Velho, “that if the time in which we sailed across those seas had been prolonged a fortnight, nobody from hence would have navigated them after us... And the captains having held a council upon the matter, it was resolved that in case of similar winds catching us again, to return towards India, there to take refuge.” On the 2nd of February, 1499, the Portuguese found themselves at last abreast of a great town on the coast of Ajan, called Magadoxo, distant 300 miles from Melinda.

Gama, dreading another reception like the one given to him at Mozambique, would not stop here, but while passing within sight of the town, ordered a general discharge of the guns. A few days afterwards the rich and salubrious plains of Melinda came in sight, and here they cast anchor. The king hastened to send off fresh provisions and oranges for the invalids on board. The reception given by him to the Portuguese was in every particular most affectionate, and the friendship which had arisen during Gama’s first visit to Melinda was greatly strengthened. The Sheik of Melinda sent for the King of Portugal a horn made of ivory and a number of other presents, entreating Gama at the same time to receive a young Moor on board his ship, that through him the king might learn how earnestly he desired his friendship.

The five days’ rest at Melinda was of the greatest benefit to the Portuguese, at its expiration they again set sail. Soon after passing Mombaz they were obliged to burn the *Sam-Raphael*, the crews being too much reduced to be able to work three ships. They discovered the Island of Zanzibar, anchored in the Bay of Sam-Braz, and on the 20th February, a favourable wind enabled them to double the Cape of Good Hope, when they again found themselves upon the Atlantic Ocean. The breeze remaining favourable, helped forward the return of the mariners, and at the end of twenty-seven days, they had arrived in the neighbourhood of the Island of Santiago. On the 25th of April Nicholas Coelho, captain of the *Berrio*, eager to be the first to carry to Emmanuel the news of the discovery of the Indies, separated himself from his chief, and without touching, as had been arranged, at the Cape de Verd Islands, made sail direct for Portugal, arriving there on the 10th of July.

During this time the unfortunate Gama was plunged in the most profound sorrow, for his brother, Paul da Gama, who had shared his fatigues and sufferings, and who was to be a partaker of his glory, seemed to be slowly dying. At Santiago, Vasco da Gama, now returned to well known and much frequented seas, gave up the command of his ships to Joao da Saa, and chartered a fast-sailing caravel, to hasten as much as possible his beloved invalid’s return to his native country. But all hope was vain, and the caravel only arrived at Terceira in time to inter there the body of the brave and sympathizing Paul da Gama.

Upon his arrival in Portugal, which must have taken place during the early part of September, the admiral was received with stately festivals. Of the 160 Portuguese whom he had taken with him, fifty-five only returned with him. The loss was great certainly, but what was it compared with the great advantages to be hoped for? The public realized this, and gave the most enthusiastic reception to Gama. The King, Emmanuel II. added to his own titles that of Lord of the conquests and of the navigation of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and the Indies; but he allowed two years to pass before rewarding Gama. He then bestowed upon him the title of Admiral of the Indies, and authorized him to use the prefix of *Dom* before his name, a privilege then rarely granted. Also, doubtless to make Vasco da Gama forget the tardiness with which his services had been rewarded, the king gave him 1000 crowns, a considerable sum for that period, and also conceded to him certain privileges in connexion with the commerce of the Indies, which were likely speedily to make his fortune.

II.

THE CONQUEST OF INDIA, AND OF THE SPICE COUNTRIES.

Alvarès Cabral — Discovery of Brazil — The coast of Africa — Arrival at Calicut, Cochin, Cananore — Joao da Nova — Gama’s second expedition — The King of Cochin — The early life of Albuquerque — The taking of Goa — The siege and capture of Malacca — Second expedition against Ormuz — Ceylon — The Moluccas — Death of Albuquerque — Fate of the Portuguese empire of the Indies.

On the 9th of March, 1500, a fleet of thirteen vessels left Rastello, under the command of Pedro Alvarès Cabral; on board, as a volunteer, was Luiz de Camoens, who in his poem the "Lusiad," was to render illustrious the valour and adventurous spirit of his countrymen. But little is known of Cabral, and nothing of the reason which had gained him the command of this important expedition. Cabral belonged to one of the most illustrious families in Portugal, and his father, Fernando Cabral, lord of Zurara da Beira, was Alcalde mõr of Belmonte. Pedro Alvarès Cabral had married Isabel de Castro, first lady in waiting to the Infanta Dona Maria, daughter of John III. If it be asked whether Cabral had made himself famous by some important maritime discovery, we answer there is no reason to think so, for in that case the historians would have recorded it. But it is difficult to believe that he owed to court favour alone the command of an expedition in which such men as Bartholomew Diaz, Nicholas Coelho the companion of Gama, and Sancho de Thovar sailed under his orders. Why had not this mission been confided to Gama, who had been at home for six months, and whose knowledge of the countries to be visited and of the manners of their inhabitants, seemed to point him out as the fittest man for the service? Had he not yet recovered from the fatigues of his first voyage? Or had his grief for the loss of a brother who had died almost within sight of the coasts of Portugal so deeply affected him, that he desired to remain in retirement? May it not rather have been that King Emmanuel was jealous of the fame of Gama, and did not wish to give him the opportunity of increasing his renown? These are problems which perhaps history may be for ever unable to solve.

It is easy to believe in the realization of those things which we ardently desire. Emmanuel imagined that the Zamorin of Calicut would not object to the establishment of Portuguese shops and factories in his country, and Cabral, the bearer of presents of such magnificence as to obliterate the memory of the shabbiness of those offered by Gama, received orders to obtain from the Zamorin an interdict, forbidding any Moor to carry on trade in his capital. The new Capitam mõr was in the first place to visit Melinda, to offer rich presents to its king, and to restore to him the Moor who had come to Portugal with Gama. Sixteen friars were sent out on board the fleet, charged to carry the knowledge of the Gospel to the distant countries of Asia.

The fleet had sailed for thirteen days and had passed the Cape de Verd Islands, when it was discovered that one of the ships, under the command of Vasco d’Ataïde, was no longer in company. The rest of the ships lay to for some time to await her, but in vain, and the twelve vessels then continued their navigation upon the open sea, and not, as had been the manner hitherto, steering simply from cape to cape along the shores of Africa. Cabral hoped by this means to avoid the calms in the Gulf of Guinea, which had proved so great a cause of delay to the preceding expeditions. Perhaps even the Capitam mõr, who must, in common with the rest of his countrymen, have been acquainted with the discoveries of Christopher Columbus, may have had the secret hope, by keeping to the west, of arriving at some region unvisited by the great navigator.

The fact remains, whether it is to be accounted for by a storm or by some secret design, that the fleet was out of the right way for doubling the Cape of Good Hope when, on the 22nd of April, a high mountain was seen, and soon afterwards a long stretch of coast, which received the name of Vera Cruz, changed afterwards to that of Santa Cruz. This was Brazil, and the point where now stands Porto Seguro. On the 28th, after a skilful reconnaissance of the coasts had been made by Coelho, the Portuguese sailors landed upon the American shores, and became aware of a delicious mildness of temperature, with a luxuriance of vegetation greatly exceeding anything which they had seen on the coasts of Africa or of Malabar. The natives formed themselves in groups around the sailors, without showing the least sign of fear. They were almost naked, and bore upon the wrist a tame parroquet, after the fashion in which the gentlemen of Europe carry their hawks or their gerfalcons.

On Easter Sunday, the 26th of April, a solemn mass was celebrated on the shore in sight of the Indians, whose silence and attitude of respect excited the admiration of the Portuguese. On the 1st of May a large cross and a padrao were erected on the shore, and Cabral formally took possession of the country in the name of the King of Portugal. His first care after this formality was accomplished was to despatch Gaspard de Lemos to Lisbon, to announce the discovery of this rich and fertile country. Lemos took with him the narrative of the expedition written by Pedro Vaz de Caminha, and an important astronomical document, the work of Master Joao, in which was doubtless stated the exact situation of the new conquest. Before setting out for Asia, Cabral put on land two criminals, whom he ordered to ascertain the resources and riches of the country, as well as the manners and customs of the inhabitants. These wise and far-sighted measures speak much for Cabral's prudence and sagacity.

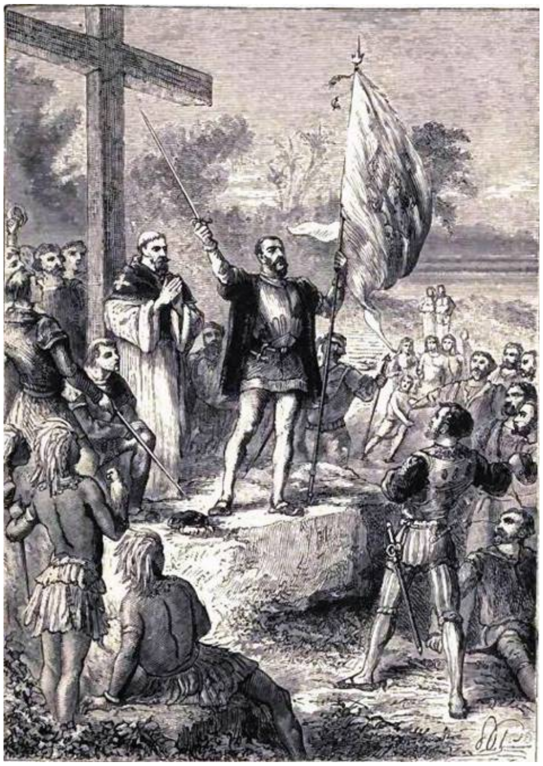

Cabral takes formal possession of Brazil.

It was the 2nd of May when the fleet lost sight of Brazil. All on board, rejoicing over this happy commencement of the voyage, believed in the prospect of an easy and rapid success, when the appearance of a brilliant comet on eight consecutive days struck the ignorant and simple minds of the sailors with terror; they considered it must be a bad omen, and for this once events appeared to justify superstition. A fearful storm arose, waves mountains high broke over the ships, whilst the wind blew furiously and rain fell without ceasing. When the sun at length succeeded in piercing the thick curtain of clouds which almost entirely intercepted his rays, a horrible scene was disclosed. The water looked thick and black, large patches of a livid white colour flecked the foaming, crested waves, while during the night phosphorescent lights, streaking the immense plain of water, marked out the course of the ships with a train of fire. For two-and-twenty days, without truce or mercy, the Portuguese ships were battered by the furious elements. The terrified sailors were utterly prostrate; they vainly exhausted their prayers and vows, and obeyed the orders of their officers only from the force of habit; from the first day they had given up any hope of their lives being spared, and only awaited the moment when they should all be submerged. When light at length returned and the billows became calm, each crew, thinking themselves to be perhaps the sole survivors, looked eagerly over the sea in search of their companions. Three ships met together again with a joy which the sad reality soon abated. Eight vessels were missing; four had been engulfed by a gigantic water-spout during the last days of the storm. One of these had been commanded by Bartholomew Diaz, the discoverer of the Cape of Good Hope: he had been drowned by these murderous waves, the defenders, according to Camoens, of the empire of the east against the nations of the west, who had for so many centuries coveted her marvellous riches.

During this long series of storms the Cape had been doubled and the fleet was approaching the coast of Africa. On the 20th of July Mozambique was signalled. The Moors of this place showed a more agreeable disposition than they had done when Gama was there, and furnished the Portuguese with two pilots, who conducted them to Quiloa, an island famed for the trade in gold-dust which was carried on with Sofala. There Cabral found two of the missing ships, which had been driven to this island by the wind. A plot was on foot in Quiloa for a wholesale massacre of the Europeans, but this was frustrated by a prompt departure from the island, and the ships arrived at Melinda without any untoward incident. The stay of the fleet in this port was the occasion of fêtes and rejoicings without number, and soon, revictualled, repaired, and furnished with excellent pilots, the Portuguese vessels sailed for Calicut, where they arrived on the 13th of December, 1500.

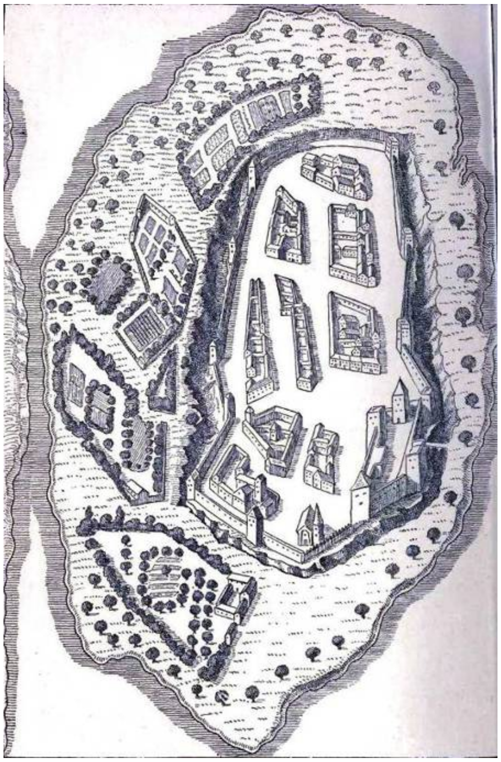

View of Quiloa.
From an old print.

This time, thanks to the power of their arms as well as to the richness of the presents offered to the Zamorin, the reception was different, and the versatile prince agreed to all the demands of Cabral: namely, a monopoly of the trade in aromatics and spicery, and the right of seizure upon all vessels which should infringe this privilege. For some time the Moors dissembled their resentment, but when they had succeeded in thoroughly exasperating the population against the foreigners, they rushed at a given signal into the factory which was under the direction of Ayrès Correa, and massacred fifty of the Portuguese, whom they surprised in it. Vengeance for this outrage was not slow; ten boats moored in the port were taken, pillaged, and burnt before the eyes of the Hindoos, who were powerless to render opposition; afterwards the town was bombarded, and was half-buried under its ruins.

When this affair was concluded, Cabral, continuing the exploration of the Malabar coast, arrived at Cochin, where the Rajah, a vassal of the Zamorin, hastened to conclude an alliance with the Portuguese, eagerly seizing this opportunity to declare himself independent. Although by this time his fleet was richly laden, Cabral made a visit to Cananore, where he entered into a treaty with the Rajah of the country; then, being impatient to return home, he set sail for Europe. While coasting along that shore of Africa, which is washed by the Indian Ocean, he discovered Sofala, a place which had escaped the observation of Gama. On the 13th of July, 1501, Cabral arrived at Lisbon, where he had the joy of finding the two remaining ships which he had imagined to be lost.

It is pleasant to believe that he received the welcome merited by the important results obtained in this memorable expedition. Although contemporary historians are silent upon the incidents of his life after his return, recent research has been rewarded by the discovery of his tomb at Santarem, and M. Ferdinand Denis has happily proved that, like Vasco da Gama, he received the title of *Dom* as a reward for his glorious deeds.

Whilst he was returning to Europe Alvarès Cabral might have encountered a fleet of four caravels under the command of Joao da Nova, which King Emmanuel had despatched to give fresh vigour to the commercial relations which Cabral had been charged to establish in the Indies. This new expedition doubled the Cape of Good Hope without misadventure, discovered between Mozambique and Quiloa an unknown island, which was named after the commander of the fleet, and arrived at Melinda, where Da Nova was informed of the events which had taken place at Calicut. He felt that he had not forces at his disposal sufficient to justify him in going to punish the Zamorin, and not wishing to endanger the prestige of Portuguese arms by the risk of a reverse, he steered for Cochin and Cananore, of which the kings, although tributaries of the Zamorin, had entered into alliance with Alvarès Cabral. Da Nova had already taken on board 1000 hundredweights of pepper, 50 of ginger, and 450 of cinnamon, when he received warning that a considerable fleet, coming apparently from Calicut, was advancing with hostile intentions. If he had hitherto been more concerned with trade than with war, he did not the less in these critical circumstances display a bold and courageous spirit worthy of his predecessors. He accepted the combat, notwithstanding the apparent superiority of the Hindoos, and partly by the skilful arrangements which he made, partly by the power of his guns, he managed to disperse, to take, or to sink the hostile vessels. Perhaps Da Nova ought to have profited by the terror which his victory had spread along the coast, and the temporary exhaustion of the Moorish resources, to strike a great blow by the taking of Calicut. But we are too far removed in time from the events, and know too little of their details, to appreciate with impartiality the reasons which induced the admiral to return immediately to Europe.

It was during this latter part of his voyage that Nova discovered the small island of Saint Helena in the midst of the Atlantic. A curious story attaches to this discovery. A certain Fernando Lopez had followed Gama to the Indies; this man, wishing to marry a Hindoo, was forced for this purpose to renounce Christianity and become a Mahometan. Upon Nova’s visit, having had enough either of his wife or of her religion, he begged to be taken back to his country, and returned to his old creed. Upon arriving at Saint Helena, Lopez, in obedience to a sudden idea, which he regarded as an inspiration from on high, requested to be landed there, in order, as he said, to expiate his detestable apostasy and to atone for it by his devotion to humanity. His will appeared so fixed that Da Nova was forced to consent, and he left him there, having given him at his request various seeds of fruits and vegetables. It must be added that this singular hermit worked for four years at the clearing and planting of the island with such success, that ships were soon able to call there to revictual during their long passage from Europe to the Cape of Good Hope.

The successive expeditious of Gama, Cabral, and Da Nova had conclusively proved that an uninterrupted commerce must not be reckoned upon, nor a continued exchange of merchandise, with the population of the Malabar Coast, who, while their own independence and liberty were respected had each time leagued together against the Portuguese. That trade with Europeans which they so persistently refused, must be forced upon them, and for that purpose permanent military establishments must be formed, capable of overawing the malcontents, and even in case of necessity of taking possession of the country. But to whom should such an important mission be entrusted? The choice could scarcely be doubtful, and Vasco da Gama was unanimously chosen to take the command of the powerful armament which was in preparation.

Vasco had ten ships under his own immediate command, while his second brother Stephen da Gama, and his cousin Vincent Sodrez, had each five ships under his orders, but they were both to recognise Vasco da Gama as their chief. The ceremonies which preceded the departure of the fleet from Lisbon were of a particularly grave and solemn character. King Emmanuel, followed by the whole court, repaired to the cathedral in the midst of an enormous crowd, and there called down blessings from heaven upon this expedition, partly religious, partly military, while the Archbishop blessed the banner which was entrusted to Gama.

The admiral’s first care was to visit Sofala and Mozambique, towns of which he had had reason to complain in the course of his first voyage. Being anxious to establish harbours for refuge, and revictualling of ships, he established there merchants’ offices, and laid the foundations of forts. He also levied a heavy tribute upon the Sheik of Quiloa, and then sailed for the coast of Hindostan. When Gama had arrived off Calicut, he perceived on the 3rd of October a vessel of large tonnage, which appeared to him to be richly laden. It was the *Merii* bringing back from Mecca a great number of pilgrims belonging to all the countries of Asia. Gama attacked the ship without provocation, captured her and put to death more than three hundred men who were on board. Twenty children alone were saved and taken to Lisbon, where they were baptized, and entered the army of Portugal. This frightful massacre, besides being quite in accordance with the ideas of the period, was calculated according to Gama, to strike terror into the Hindoo mind: it did nothing of the sort. This hateful and useless cruelty has left a stain of blood upon the hitherto pure fame of the admiral.

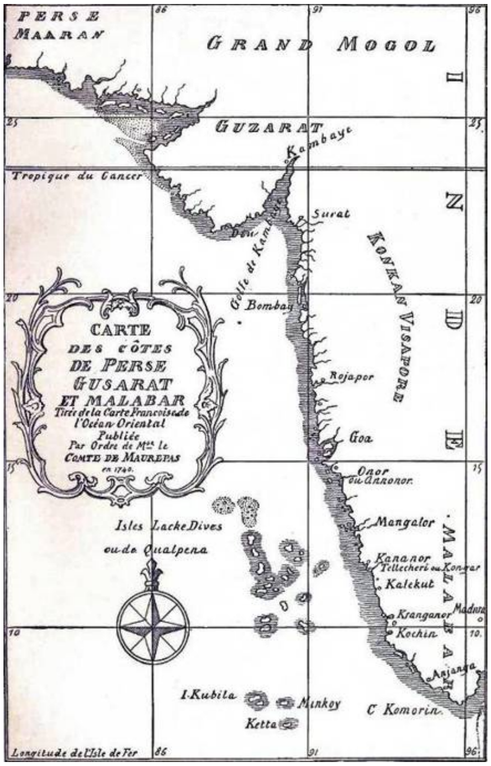
PERSE
MAARAN
GRAND MOGOL
INDE
GUZARAT
Kambaye
Tropique du Cancer
Surat
Dou
Golfe de Kambaye
KONKAN VISAPORE
Bombay
CARTE
DES CÔTES
DE PERSE
GUSARAT
ET MALABAR
Tirée de la Carte Francoise de l'Océan Oriental
Publiée
Par Ordre de Mgr. le
COMTE DE MAUREPAS
en 1740.
Rojapor
Goa
Onor ou Annonor
MALABAR
Mangalor
Kananor
Tellecheri ou Kongar
Kalekut
Kranganor
Madura
Kochin
Anjanga
Isles Lacke Dives ou de Qualpena
I. Kubila
Minkoy
Ketta
C. Komorin
Longitude de l'Isle de Fer
86
91
96
25
20
15
10

As soon as he arrived at Cananore, Gama obtained an audience of the Rajah, who authorized him to establish a counting-house, and to build a fort. At the same time a treaty of alliance, offensive and defensive was concluded. After setting the labourers to work, and installing his agent, the admiral set sail for Calicut, where he intended to summon the Zamorin to a reckoning for his disloyalty, as well as for the murder of the Portuguese who had been surprised in the factory. Although the Rajah of Calicut had been informed of the arrival in the Indies of his formidable enemies, he had taken no military precautions, and thus, when Gama presented himself before the town, he was able to seize some vessels anchored in the port and to make a hundred prisoners, without encountering any resistance; afterwards he granted the Zamorin a respite of four days, in which to make atonement to the Portuguese for the murder of Correa, and to refund the value of the merchandise which had been stolen on that occasion.

The time specified had scarcely elapsed when the bodies of fifty of the prisoners were strung up at the yard-arms of the vessels, where they remained exposed to the view of the town during the whole day. In the evening the feet and hands of these expiatory victims were cut off and taken on shore, with a letter from the admiral, declaring that his vengeance would not be limited to this execution. Accordingly, under cover of the night, the broadsides of the vessels were brought to bear upon the town, which was bombarded for the space of three days. It will never be known what was the exact number of the slain, but it must have been considerable. Without reckoning those killed by the fire of the cannon and the muskets, a great number of Hindoos were buried beneath the ruins of the buildings, or perished in the conflagration, which destroyed a portion of the town of Calicut. The Rajah had been one of the first to take flight, and fortunate was it for him that he had done so, for his palace was amongst the buildings which were demolished. At length, satisfied with having transformed this heretofore rich and populous city into a heap of ruins, and considering his vengeance satiated, and that the lesson so taught would be profitable, Gama set sail for Cochin, leaving behind him Vincent Sodrez, with several ships, to continue the blockade.

Triumpara, the sovereign of Cochin, informed the admiral that he had been eagerly solicited by the Zamorin to take advantage of the confidence reposed in him by the Portuguese, to surprise and seize them, in consequence of which intelligence, and to reward the integrity of the king whose loyalty had exposed him to the enmity of the Rajah of Calicut, Gama, when starting for Lisbon with a valuable cargo, left with Triumpara ships sufficient to enable him to await in safety the arrival of another squadron. During Gama’s return voyage the only noteworthy incident that occurred was the defeat of another Malabar fleet. The admiral arrived in Europe on the 20th of December, 1503.

Once more the eminent services rendered by this great man went unrecognised, or rather they were not appreciated as they deserved. Gama, who had just laid the foundations of the colonial empire of Portugal in India, remained for one and twenty years without employment, and it was only through the intercession of the Duke of Braganza, that he obtained the title of Count de Vidigueyra. A too common instance this of ingratitude, but one which it is never *mal à propos* to stigmatize as it deserves.

Scarcely had Gama set out for Europe, before the Zamorin at the instigation of the Musselmen, who saw their commercial supremacy more and more compromised, assembled his allies at Pani with the object of attacking the King of Cochin and of punishing him for the counsel and assistance which he had given to the Portuguese. The unfortunate Rajah's fidelity was now put to a hard proof. Besieged in his capital by a large force, he saw himself all at once deprived of the aid of those for whose advantage he had incurred so great a risk. Sodrez and several of his captains had deserted the post, where both honour and gratitude required them to remain, and if need were, to die in the discharge of their duty; they forsook Triumpara to go and cruise in the neighbourhood of Ormuz, and at the entrance to the Red Sea, where they calculated that the annual pilgrimage to Mecca was likely to ensure them some rich booty. The Portuguese agent vainly represented to them the unworthiness of their conduct, they set out in haste, to escape from these inconvenient reproaches.

The King of Cochin, betrayed by some of the Nairs (military nobles) of his palace, who had been gained over by the Zamorin, soon saw his capital carried by assault, and was obliged to seek refuge upon an inaccessible rock in the little Island of Viopia, with those Portuguese who had remained faithful to him. When he was reduced to the last extremity, an emissary was sent to him by the Zamorin, to promise him pardon and oblivion of his offences if he would give up to him the Portuguese. But Triumpara, whose fidelity cannot be sufficiently commended, answered, “that the Zamorin might use his rights of victory; that he was not ignorant of the perils by which he was menaced, but that it was not in the power of any man to make him a traitor and a perjurer.” No one could have made a nobler return than this for the desertion and cowardice of Sodrez.

Vincent Sodrez had arrived at the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, when a fearful tempest occurred, in which his ship split upon the rocks, and he and his brother perished. The survivors regarded this event as a judgment of Providence for their bad conduct, and they made haste, with all sails set to return to Cochin. They were detained by contrary winds at the Laccadive Islands, and were there joined by another Portuguese squadron under the command of Francisco d’Albuquerque, who had sailed from Lisbon almost at the same time as his cousin Alfonzo d’Albuquerque the most distinguished captain of the period, who with the title of Capitam mõr had started from Belem at the beginning of April, 1503.

The arrival of Francisco d’Albuquerque placed the Portuguese affairs, which had been so gravely compromised by the criminal conduct of Sodrez, upon a better footing, and at the same time effected the rescue of Triumpara, their sole and faithful ally. The besiegers fled at the sight of the Portuguese squadron, without even a show of resistance, and the Europeans in conjunction with the troops of the King of Cochin ravaged the Malabar Coast. As a consequence of these events, Triumpara allowed his allies to construct a second fortress in his dominions, and authorised an augmentation of the number and importance of their mercantile houses.

This was the moment that witnessed the arrival of Alfonzo d’Albuquerque, the man destined to be the real creator of the Portuguese Empire in the Indies. Diaz, Cabral, and Gama, had prepared the way, but Albuquerque was the leader of large views who was needed to determine which were the principal towns that must be seized in order to place the Portuguese dominion upon a solid and lasting basis. Thus every particular of the history of this man who showed so great a genius for colonisation, is of the deepest interest, and it is well worth while to record some particulars of his family, his education, and his early exploits.

Alfonzo d’Alboquerque or d’Albuquerque, was born in 1453 at Alhandra, eighteen miles from Lisbon. Through his father Gonzalo d’Albuquerque, the Lord of Villaverde, he was descended, but illegitimately, from King Diniz; and through his mother from the Menezez, the great explorers. Brought up at the court of Alphonzo V. he there received as liberal and thorough an education as was possible at the period. He made an especial study of the great writers of antiquity, whose influence may be traced in the majesty and accuracy of his own style, and of mathematics of which he knew as much as could be learnt at that time. After staying for some years at Arzila, an African town which was under the dominion of Alphonzo V. he returned to Portugal, and was appointed Master of the Horse to John II. a prince whose chief anxiety was to extend the name and power of Portugal beyond the seas. It is evident that it was to the constant attendance upon the king imposed upon him by the duties of his office, that Albuquerque owed the inclination of his mind towards geographical studies, and his anxious desire to find the means of giving to his country the Empire of the Indies. He had already taken part in an expedition sent to the succour of the King of Naples against an incursion of the Turks, and in 1489, had been charged with the commission of revictualling and defending the fortress of Graciosa, upon the coast of Larache.

We must now return from this digression and take up the history of Albuquerque, from the time of his arrival in India in 1503. It took him but a few days to become thoroughly aware of the position of affairs; he perceived that the commerce of Portugal must depend upon conquest for its power of development. But his first enterprise was proportioned to the feebleness of his resources; he laid siege to Raphelim, which he wished to make a military station for his countrymen, and then with two ships he undertook a reconnaissance of the coast of Hindostan. Being attacked quite unexpectedly both by land and sea, he was on the point of yielding when the fortunate arrival of his cousin Francisco turned the combat, and put the Zamorin’s troops to flight. The importance of this victory was considerable; the conquerors remained masters of an immense booty and quantities of precious stones, which had the result of stimulating the Portuguese spirit of covetousness; at the same time it confirmed Albuquerque in his designs, for the execution of which the consent of the king was needful, and also more considerable resources. He therefore set out on his return to Lisbon, where he arrived in July, 1504.

This same year, King Emmanuel wishing to organize a regular government in the Indies, had made Tristan da Cunha his viceroy, but Da Cunha having become temporarily blind was obliged to resign his power before he had exercised it. The king’s choice next fell upon Francisco d’Almeida, who set out with his son in 1505. It will be soon seen what were the means which he considered should be employed to assure the triumph of his countrymen.

On the 6th of March, 1506, sixteen vessels left Lisbon under the command of Tristan da Cunha, who had by that time regained his health. With him went Alfonzo Albuquerque, carrying with him, but unknown to himself, his patent of Viceroy of India. He was ordered not to open the sealed packet until three years should have expired, when Almeida would have completed the term of his mission.

This numerous fleet, after having stopped at the Cape de Verd Islands and discovered Cape St. Augustine in Brazil, steered directly for the unexplored parts of the South Atlantic, and went so far south that the old chroniclers assert that several sailors being too lightly clad died from cold, while the others were scarcely able to work the ships. In 37° 8’ south latitude, and 14° 21’ west longitude, Da Cunha discovered three small uninhabited islands, of which the largest still bears his name. A storm prevented a landing there, and so completely dispersed the fleet that the admiral could not get his vessels together again before he arrived at Mozambique. In sailing along this African coast he explored the island of Madagascar or Sam-Lorenzo, which had just been discovered by Soarez, who was in command of eight vessels which Almeida was sending back to Europe; it was not thought advisable to make a settlement upon the island.

After having wintered at Mozambique, Da Cunha landed three ambassadors at Melinda, who were to reach Abyssinia by travelling overland, then he anchored at Brava, which Coutinho, one of his lieutenants had been unable to subjugate. The Portuguese now laid siege to this town, which resisted bravely but which yielded in the end, thanks to the courage of the enemy and the perfection of their arms. The population was massacred without mercy, and the town pillaged and burnt. Upon Magadoxo, another town on the African Coast, Cunha tried but in vain, to impose his authority. The strength of the town and the stubborn resolution shown by the numerous population as well as the approach of winter forced him to raise the siege. He then turned his arms against Socotra, at the entrance of the Gulf of Aden, where he carried the fortress. The whole of the garrison were put to the sword, the only man spared being an old blind soldier, who was discovered hidden in a well. When asked how he had been able to get down there, he answered, — ”The blind only see the road which leads to liberty.” At Socotra, the two Portuguese chiefs constructed the fort of Çoco, intended by Albuquerque to command the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, by the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, thus cutting one of the lines of communication with the Indies, which was the most used by the Venetians.

Here Da Cunha and Albuquerque separated, the former going to India to obtain a cargo of spices, the latter officially invested with the title of Capitam mõr, and bent on the realization of his vast schemes, setting out on the 10th of August, 1507, for Ormuz, having left his nephew Alfonzo da Noronha in charge of the new fortress. He took in succession, and as if to get his hand in for the work, Calayati, where were found immense stores, Curiaty and Mascati, which he gave up to pillage, fire, and destruction, in order to avenge a series of acts of treachery easily understood by those who know the duplicity of these eastern people. The success which he had just gained at Mascati, important as it was, did not content Albuquerque. He dreamed of other and grander projects, of which the execution was, however, much compromised by the jealousy of the captains under his orders, and notably of Joao da Nova, who contemplated abandoning his chief, and whom Albuquerque was obliged to place under arrest on board his own ship. After having suppressed these beginnings of disobedience and rebellion, the Capitam mõr reached Orfacati, which was taken after a vigorous resistance.

It is a curious fact that Albuquerque had long heard Ormuz spoken of, but that as yet he was ignorant of its position. He knew that this town served as an entrepôt for all the merchandise passing from Asia into Europe. Its riches and power, the number of its inhabitants and the beauty of its monuments were at that time celebrated throughout the East, so much so that there was a common saying, “If the world be a ring, Ormuz is the precious stone set in it.” Albuquerque had resolved to take this town, not only because in itself it was a prize worth having, but also because it commanded the whole of the Persian Gulf, which was the second of the great commercial roads between the East and West. Without saying anything to the captains of his fleet, who, without doubt, would have rebelled at the idea of attacking so strong a town, and the capital of a powerful empire, Albuquerque gave orders to double Cape Mussendom, and the fleet soon entered the Strait of Ormuz, the door of the Persian Gulf, from whence was seen rising in all its magnificence a busy town built upon a rocky island, provided with formidable artillery, and protected by an army amounting to not less than from fifteen to twenty thousand men, while its harbour enclosed a fleet more numerous than could have been suspected at first sight. At this sight the captains made urgent representations upon the danger that Albuquerque would run in attacking so well-prepared a town, and made the most of the plea how very bad an influence a reverse would exercise. To this discourse Albuquerque answered, that indeed “it was a very great affair, but that it was too late to draw back, and that he had greater need of determination than of good advice.”

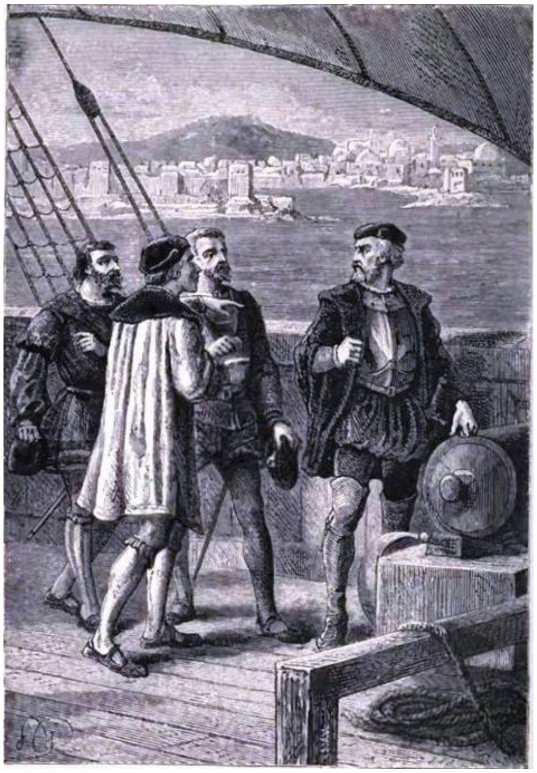

Albuquerque before Ormuz.

Scarcely was the anchor dropped before Albuquerque declared his ultimatum. Although the forces under his orders were very disproportionate in numbers, the Capitam mõr imperiously demanded that Ormuz should recognize the suzerainty of the King of Portugal and submit to his envoy, if it did not wish to share the same fate as Mascati. The King, Seif-Ed-din, who was then reigning over Ormuz, was still a child, and his Prime Minister, Kodja-Atar, a skilful and cunning diplomatist, governed in the king’s name. Without denying in principle the pretensions of Albuquerque, the Prime Minister wished to gain time, to allow contingents to arrive for the help of the capital; but the admiral, who guessed his object, did not hesitate, after waiting three days, to attack the formidable fleet at anchor under the guns of Ormuz, with his five vessels and the *Flor de la Mar*, the finest and largest ship of that time. The combat was bloody and long undecided, but when they saw fortune was against them the Moors, abandoning their vessels, endeavoured to swim on shore. The Portuguese upon this jumped into their boats, pursuing the Moors vigorously, and causing horrible carnage. Albuquerque next directed his efforts against a large wooden jetty defended by numerous guns and by archers, whose well-aimed arrows wounded a number of the Portuguese and the general himself, who, however, was not hindered thereby from landing and proceeding to burn the suburbs of the town. Convinced that resistance would soon be impossible, and that their capital was in danger of being destroyed, the Moors hoisted a flag of truce, and signed a treaty, by which Seif-Ed-din declared himself the vassal of King Emmanuel, promised to pay him an annual tribute of 15,000 seraphins or xarafins, and gave to the conquerors a site for a fortress, which, in spite of the repugnance and reproaches of the Portuguese captains, was soon put into a condition of resistance. Unfortunately some deserters quickly brought these unworthy dissensions to the knowledge of Kodja-Atar, who profited by them to avoid, under various pretexts, fulfilling the execution of the articles of the new treaty. Some days afterwards Joao da Nova and two other captains, jealous of the successes of Albuquerque, and trampling in the dust every sentiment of honour, discipline, and patriotism, left him to go to the Indies; while Albuquerque was obliged by this cowardly desertion to withdraw without being able even to guard the fortress which he had been at so much pains to construct. He went to Socotra, where the garrison was in need of help, and then returned to cruise before Ormuz, but thinking himself too weak to undertake anything, he retired for a time to Goa, arriving there at the end of the year 1508.

What had been occurring on the Malabar coast during this long and adventurous campaign? The answer may be summed up in a few lines. It will be remembered that Almeida had set out from Belem in 1505 with a fleet of twenty-two sail, carrying soldiers to the number of 1500 men. First he seized Quiloa and then Mombaz, of which the "cavaliers, as the inhabitants loved to repeat, did not yield as easily as the chicken hearts of Quiloa." Out of the enormous booty, which by the fall of this town fell into the hands of the Portuguese, Almeida only took one arrow as his share of the spoil, thus giving a rare example of disinterestedness. After having stopped at Melinda he went on to Cochin, where he delivered to the Rajah the golden crown sent to him by Emmanuel, whilst he himself, with the presumptuous vanity of which he gave so many proofs, assumed the title of viceroy. Then, after commencing a fortress at Sofala, destined to overawe the Mussulmen of that coast, Almeida and his son, Lorenzo, scoured the Indian Seas, destroying the Malabar fleets, capturing some trading vessels, and causing great injury to the enemy, whose accustomed commercial roads were thus intercepted. But for this cruising warfare a numerous fleet of light vessels was needed, for there was scarcely any other harbour of refuge except Cochin upon the Asiatic coast. How preferable was Albuquerque's system of establishing himself in the country in a permanent manner, by constructing fortresses in all directions, by seizing upon the most powerful cities, whence it was easy to branch off into the interior of the country, by rendering himself master of the keys of the straits, and thus ensuring with much less risk, and more solidity, the monopoly of the Indian commerce.

Meantime the victories of Almeida, and the conquests of Albuquerque had much disquieted the Sultan of Egypt. The abandonment of the Alexandrian route caused a great diminution in the amount of imposts and dues of customs, anchorage, and transit, which were laid upon the merchandise of Asia as it passed through his states. Therefore, with the help of the

Venetians, who furnished him with the wood for ship-building as well as with skilful sailors, he fitted out a squadron of twelve large ships, which came as far as Cochin, seeking the fleet of Lorenzo d'Almeida, and defeating it in a bloody combat in which Lorenzo was killed. If the sorrow of the viceroy were great at this sad news, at least he did not let it appear outwardly, but set to work to make all preparations for taking prompt vengeance upon the Roumis, — an appellation which shows the lasting terror attaching to the name of the Romans, and commonly used at this time upon the Malabar coast, for all Mussulman soldiers coming from Byzantium. With nineteen sail Almeida appeared before the fort where his son had been killed, and gained a great victory, but one sullied, it must be confessed, by most frightful cruelties, so much so that it soon became a common saying: "May the anger of the Franks fall upon thee as it fell upon Daboul." Not content with this first success, Almeida, some weeks later, annihilated the combined forces of the Sultan of Egypt, and the Rajah of Calicut, before Diu. This victory made a profound impression in India, and put an end to the power of the *Mahumetists* of Egypt.

Joao da Nova and the other captains, who had abandoned Albuquerque before Ormuz, had decided to rejoin Almeida; they had excused their disobedience by calumnies, in consequence of which a judicial process was about to be instituted against Albuquerque, when the viceroy received the news of his being replaced in his office by Albuquerque. At first Almeida declared that obedience must be rendered to this sovereign decree, but afterwards influenced by the traitors, who feared that they would be severely punished when the power had passed into the hands of Albuquerque, he repaired to Cochin in the month of March, 1509, with the fixed determination not to give up the command to his successor. There were disagreeable and painful disputes between these two great men, in which all the wrong done was on the side of Almeida. Albuquerque was about to be sent to Lisbon with chains on his feet, when a fleet of fifteen sail entered the harbour, under the command of the grand Marshal of Portugal, Ferdinand Coutinho. The latter took the part of the prisoner, whom he immediately released, notifying again to Almeida the powers held by Albuquerque from the king, and threatening him with the great anger of Emmanuel if he refused to obey. Almeida could do nothing but yield, and he then did it nobly. As for Joao da Nova, the author of these sad misunderstandings, he died some time afterwards, forsaken by everybody, and had scarcely any one to follow him to the grave except the new viceroy, who thus generously forgot the injuries done to Alfonzo Albuquerque.

Immediately after the departure of Almeida, the grand Marshal Coutinho declared that, having come to India with the intention of destroying Calicut, he intended to turn to account the absence of the Zamorin from his capital. In vain the new viceroy endeavoured to modify his zeal and induce him to take the wise measures recommended by experience. Coutinho would listen to nothing, and Albuquerque was obliged to follow him. Calicut, taken by surprise, was easily set on fire; but the Portuguese, having lingered to pillage the Zamorin’s palace, were fiercely attacked in rear by the Nairs, who had succeeded in rallying their troops. Coutinho, whose impetuous valour led him into the greatest danger, was killed, and it required all the skill and coolness of the viceroy to effect a re-embarkation of the troops under the enemy’s fire, and to preserve the soldiers of the King of Portugal from total destruction.

On his return to Cintagara, a sea-port which was a dependency of the King of Narsingue, with whom the Portuguese had been able to form an alliance, Albuquerque learnt that Goa, the capital of a powerful kingdom, was a prey to political and religious anarchy. Several chiefs were contending there for power. One of them, Melek Çufergugi, was just on the point of seizing the throne, and it was important to profit by the circumstances of the moment, and attack the town before he should have been able to gather a force capable of resisting the Portuguese. The viceroy perceived all the importance of this counsel. The situation of Goa, giving access as it did to the kingdom of Narsingue and to the Deccan, had already struck him forcibly. He did not delay, and soon the Portuguese reckoned one conquest more. Goa the Golden, a cosmopolitan town, where were mingled with all the various sects of Islam Parsees, the worshippers of Fire, and even some Christians, submitted to Albuquerque, and soon became, under a wise and strict government which understood how to conciliate the sympathies of opposing sects, the capital, the chief fortress, and the principal seat of trade of the Portuguese empire of the Indies.

By degrees and with the course of years the knowledge of these rich countries had increased. Much information had been gathered together by all those who had ploughed these sunny seas in their gallant vessels, and it was now known what was the centre of production of those spices which people went so far to seek, and for whose acquisition they encountered so many perils. It was already several years since Almeida had founded the first Portuguese factories in Ceylon, the ancient Taprobane. The Islands of Sunda, and the Peninsula of Malacca, were now exciting the desires of King Emmanuel, who had already been surnamed “the fortunate.” He resolved to send a fleet to explore them, for Albuquerque had enough to do in India to restrain the trembling Rajahs, and the Mussulmen — Moors as they were then called — who were always ready to shake off the yoke. This new expedition was under the command of Diego Lopez Sequeira, and according to the traditional policy of the Moors, was at first amicably received at Malacca; but when the suspicions of Lopez Sequeira had been lulled to sleep by reiterated protestations of alliance, the whole population suddenly rose against him, and he was forced to return on board, but not without leaving thirty of his companions in the hands of the Malays. These events had already happened some time when the news of the taking of Goa arrived at Malacca. The *bendarra*, or Minister of Justice, who exercised regal power in the name of his nephew who was still a child, fearing the vengeance which the Portuguese would doubtless exact for his treachery, resolved to pacify them. He went to visit his prisoners, excused himself to them by swearing that all had been done unknown to him and against his will, for he desired nothing so much as to see the Portuguese establish themselves in Malacca; also he was about to order the authors of the treason to be sought out and punished. The prisoners naturally gave no credence to these lying declarations, but profiting by the comparative liberty which was henceforth granted to them, they cleverly succeeded in conveying to Albuquerque some valuable information upon the position and strength of the town.

Albuquerque with much trouble collected a fleet of nineteen men of war, carrying fourteen hundred men, amongst whom there were only eight hundred Portuguese. This being the case, ought he to venture in obedience to the wish of King Emmanuel to steer for Aden, the key of the Red Sea, which it was important to master in preparation for opposing the passage of a new squadron, which the Sultan of Egypt was intending to send to India? Albuquerque hesitated, when a change in the trade-winds occurred which put an end to his irresolution. In fact, it was impossible to reach Aden in the teeth of the prevailing wind, while it was favourable for a descent upon Malacca. This town, at that time in its full splendour, did not contain less than 100,000 inhabitants. If many of the houses were built of wood, and roofed with the leaves of the palm-tree, yet they were equalled in number by the more important buildings, such as mosques and towers built of stone, which stretched out in a long panorama for the distance of three miles. The ships of India, China, and of the Malay kingdoms of the Sunda Islands, met in its harbour, where numerous vessels coming from the Malabar coast, the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the coast of Africa traded in merchandise of all kinds and of every country.

When the Rajah of Malacca saw the Portuguese fleet arrive in his waters, he felt that it was necessary to appear to give satisfaction to the foreigners by sacrificing the minister who had excited their anger and caused their arrival. His ambassador therefore came to the viceroy to announce the death of the *bendarra,* and to find out what were the intentions of the Portuguese. Albuquerque answered by demanding the prisoners who had remained in the hands of the Rajah, but the latter, desirous of gaining time to allow for the expected change in the trade-wind, — a change which would force the Portuguese to regain the Malabar coast, or else would oblige them to remain at Malacca, where he hoped to be able to exterminate them, — invented a thousand pretexts for delay, and in the meantime according to the old narratives, he prepared a battery of 8000 cannon, and collected troops to the number of 20,000. At length Albuquerque lost his patience, and ordered some houses and several Gujerat vessels to be set on fire, a beginning of execution which speedily brought about the restoration of the prisoners; he then claimed 20,000 crusades as indemnity for the damage caused to the fleet of Lopez Sequeira, and finally he demanded to be allowed to build a fortress within the town itself, which should also serve as a counting-house for the merchants. This demand could not be complied with as Albuquerque well knew; but upon the refusal he resolved to seize the town, fixing upon St. James' day for the attack. The town was taken quarter by quarter, house by house, after a truly heroic struggle and a most vigorous defence, which lasted for nine whole days, notwithstanding the employment of extraordinary devices, such as elephants of war, poisoned sabres and arrows, barricades, and skilfully concealed troops. An enormous booty was divided amongst the soldiers, Albuquerque only reserving to himself six lions, of gold according to some accounts, of iron according to others, which he intended for the adornment of his tomb, to perpetuate the memory of his victory.

The door which gave access to Oceania, and to Upper Asia, was henceforth open. Many nations unknown till this time would now have intercourse with Europeans. The strange manners and fabulous history of many people were about to be disclosed to the astonished West. A new era had commenced, and these great results were due to the unbridled audacity, and indomitable courage of a nation whose country was scarcely discernible upon the map of the world!

It was in part owing to the religious toleration which Albuquerque displayed, a toleration which contrasts strangely with the cruel fanaticism of the Spaniards, and in part to the skilful measures which he took, that the prosperity of Malacca resisted the rude shock which it had received. In the course of a few months no trace remained of the trials which the town had experienced, except the sight of the Portuguese banner floating proudly over this great city, which had now become the head and vanguard of the colonial empire of this people, small in numbers, but rendered great by their courage and their spirit of enterprise.

Great and wonderful as this new conquest might be, it had not made Albuquerque forget his former projects. If he had appeared to have renounced them, it was only because circumstances had not hitherto seemed favourable for their execution. With that tenacity of determination which formed the basis of his character, while still at the southern extremity of the empire which he was founding, his thoughts were fixed upon the northern part of it, upon Ormuz, which the jealousy and treachery of his subordinates had obliged him to abandon at the beginning of his career, at the very moment when success was about to crown his persevering efforts; it was Ormuz which tempted him still.

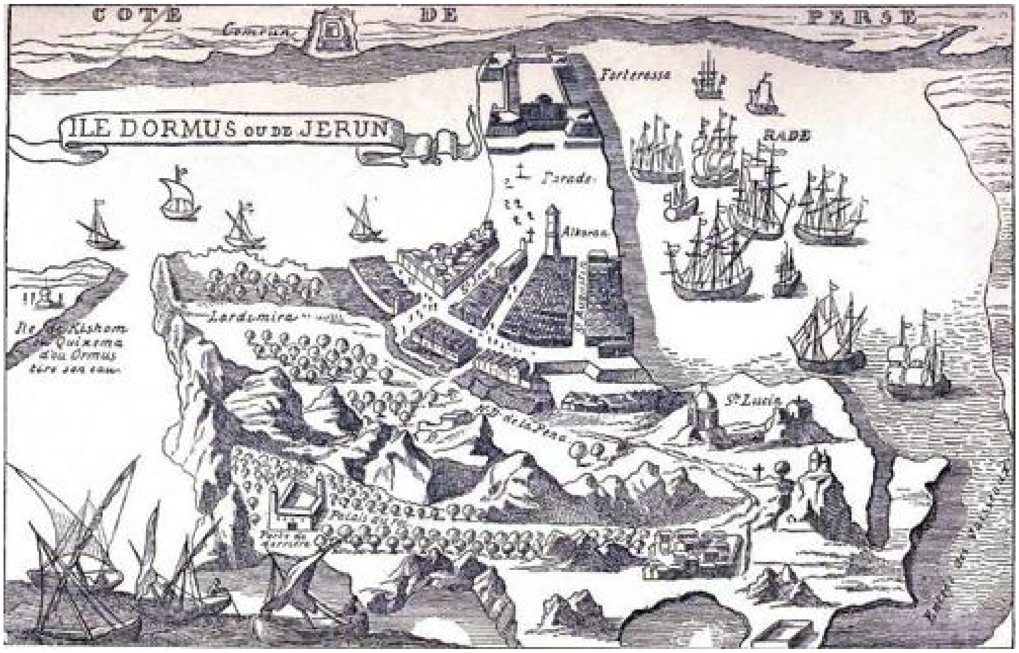

The fame of his exploits and the terror inspired by his name had decided Kodja-Atar to make some advances to Albuquerque, to ask for a treaty, and to send the arrears of the tribute which had been formerly imposed. Although the viceroy placed no belief on these repeated declarations of friendship — on that Moorish faith which deserves to be as notorious as Punic faith, — he nevertheless welcomed them, whilst waiting for the power to establish his dominion after a permanent manner in these countries. In 1513 or 1514 — the exact date is not ascertained — when his fleet and soldiers were set at liberty by the conquest of Malacca and the tranquillity of his other possessions, Albuquerque set sail for the Persian Gulf. Immediately upon his arrival, although a series of revolutions had changed the government of Ormuz and the power was then in the hands of a usurper named Rais-Nordim or Noureddin, Albuquerque demanded that the fortress, which had been formerly begun, should be immediately placed in his hands. After having had it repaired and finished, he took part against the pretender Rais Named, in the quarrel which was then dividing the town of Ormuz and preparing it to fall under the dominion of Persia. He seized upon the town and bestowed it upon the aspirant who had accepted his conditions beforehand, and who appeared to Albuquerque to present the most solid guarantees of submission and fidelity. Besides, it would not be difficult in the future to make this certain, for Albuquerque left in the new fortress a garrison perfectly able to bring Rais-Nordim to repentance for the slightest attempt at revolt, or the least desire of independence.

A well-known anecdote is related of this expedition to Ormuz, but one which, even from its notoriety, we should be blamed for omitting. When the King of Persia sent to Noureddin to demand the tribute which the sovereigns of Ormuz had been in the habit of paying to him, Albuquerque gave orders that a quantity of bullets, cannon-balls and shells, should be brought from his ships, and showing them to the ambassadors he told them that such was the coin in which the King of Portugal was accustomed to pay tribute. It does not appear that the Persian ambassadors repeated their demand.

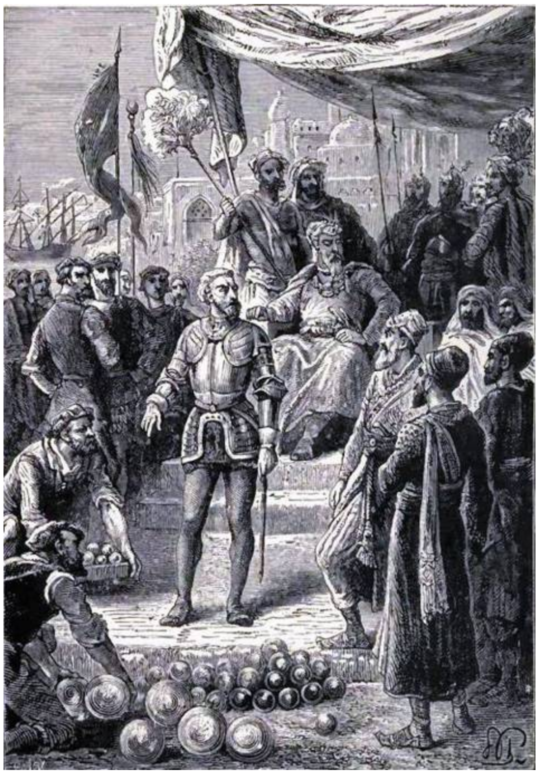

Albuquerque had a quantity of bullets brought from his vessels.

With his usual wisdom, the viceroy did not wound the feelings of the inhabitants, who speedily returned to the town. Far from squeezing all he could from them, as his successors were destined soon to do, he established an upright system of government which caused the Portuguese name to be loved and respected.

At the same time that he was himself accomplishing these marvellous labours, Albuquerque had desired some of his lieutenants to explore the unknown regions to which access had been given by the taking of Malacca. For this purpose he gave to Antonio and Francisco d’Abreu the command of a small squadron carrying 220 men, with which they explored the whole of the Sunda Archipelago, Sumatra, Java, Anjoam, Simbala, Jolor, Galam, &c.; then being not far from the coast of Australia they sailed back again to the north and arrived at the Islands of Buro and Amboyna, which form part of the Molucca group. After having made a voyage of more than 1500 miles amongst dangerous archipelagos strewn with rocks and coral reefs, and amidst populations often hostile, and after loading their ships there with cloves, nutmegs, sandal-wood, mace, and pearls, they set sail for Malacca in 1512. This time the veritable land of spices had been reached, it now only remained to found establishments there and to take possession of it definitely, which was not likely to be long postponed.

It has been often remarked that the Tarpeian rock is not far from the Capitol; of this Albuquerque was destined to make experience, and his last days were to be saddened by unmerited disgrace, the result of calumnies and lies, and of a skilfully woven plot, which, although it succeeded in temporarily clouding his reputation with King Emmanuel, has not availed to obscure the glory of this great man in the eyes of posterity. Already there had been an effort made to persuade the king that the taking possession of Goa had been a grave error; its unhealthy climate must, it was said, decimate the European population in a short time, but the king, with perfect confidence in the experience and prudence of his lieutenant, had refused to listen to his enemies, for which Albuquerque had publicly thanked him, saying, — ”I think more is owing to King Emmanuel for having defended Goa against the Portuguese, than to myself for having twice conquered it.” But in 1514 Albuquerque had asked the king to bestow upon him as a reward for his services the title of Duke of Goa, and it was this imprudent step which gave an advantage to his adversaries.

Soarez d’Albergavia and Diogo Mendez, whom Albuquerque had sent as prisoners to Portugal after they had publicly declared themselves his enemies, had succeeded not only in clearing themselves from the accusation brought against them by the viceroy, but in persuading Emmanuel that he wished to constitute an independent duchy of which Goa should be the capital, and they ended by obtaining his disgrace. The news of the appointment of Albergavia to the post of Captain-General of Cochin, reached Albuquerque as he was issuing from the Strait of Ormuz on his return to the Malabar coast, and at a time when he was suffering much from disease. “He raised his hands towards heaven,” says M. F. Denis, in his excellent History of Portugal, “and pronounced these few words: Behold I am in disgrace with the king on account of my love to men, and with men on account of my love to the king. Turn thee, old man, to the Church, and prepare to die, for it behoves thine honour that thou shouldest die, and never hast thou neglected to do aught which thine honour demands.” Whereupon, being arrived in the roadstead of Goa, Alfonzo Albuquerque set in order the affairs of his conscience with the Church, caused himself to be clad in the dress of the Order of St. Iago of which he was a commander, and then “on Sunday the 16th of December, an hour before daybreak, he rendered up his soul to God. Thus ended all his labours, without their having ever brought him any satisfaction.”

Albuquerque was buried with great pomp. The soldiers who had been the faithful companions of his wonderful adventures, and the witnesses of his manifold tribulations, disputed amidst their tears for the honour of carrying his remains to their last resting-place, which their commander had himself chosen. The Hindoos in their grief refused to believe that he was dead, declaring that he was gone to command the armies of the sky. A letter of King Emmanuel has been comparatively lately discovered which proves that, although he were deceived for a time by the false reports of the enemies of Albuquerque, he soon discovered his mistake, and rendered him full and entire justice. Unfortunately this letter of reparation never reached the unfortunate second Viceroy of the Indies; it would have sweetened his last moments, whereas he had the pain of dying in the belief that the sovereign for whose glory and the increase of whose power he had consecrated his life, had in the end proved ungrateful towards him. “With Albuquerque,” says Michelet, “all humanity and all justice disappeared from amongst the conquerors. Long years after his death the Indians would repair to the tomb of the great Albuquerque, to demand justice of him against the oppressions of his successors.”

Many causes may be adduced as bringing about the rapid decay and dismemberment of that great colonial empire with which Albuquerque had enriched his country, and which even amidst its ruins has left ineffaceable traces upon India. With Michelet we may cite the distance and dispersion of the various factories, the smallness of the population of Portugal, but little suited to the wide extension of her establishments, the love of brigandage, and the exactions of a bad government, but beyond all, that indomitable national pride which forbade any mingling of the victors with the vanquished.

The fall of the colonial empire was hindered for a time by the influence of two heroic men, the first was Juan de Castro, who after having had the control of untold riches, remained so poor that he had not even the wherewithal to buy a fowl in his last illness; and the second, Ataïde, who once again gave the corrupt eastern populations an example of the most manly virtues, and of the most upright administration. But after their time the empire began to drop to pieces, and fell by degrees into the hands of the Spaniards and the Dutch, who in their turn were unable to preserve it intact. All passes away, all is changed. What can be said but to repeat the Spanish saw, in applying it to the case of empires, “Life is but a dream”?

END OF THE FIRST PART.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

THE CONQUERORS OF CENTRAL AMERICA.

I.

Hojeda — Americus Vespucius — The New World named after him — Juan de la Cosa — Vincent Yañez Pinzon — Bastidas — Diego de Lepe — Diaz de Solis — Ponce de Leon and Florida — Balboa discovers the Pacific Ocean — Grijalva explores the coast of Mexico.

The letters and narratives of Columbus and his companions, especially those dwelling upon the large quantity of gold and pearls found in the recently discovered countries, had inflamed the imagination of eager traders, and of numbers of gentlemen who loved adventure. On the 10th of April, 1495, the Spanish government had issued an order allowing any one who might wish to do so, to go and discover new countries; but this privilege was so much abused, and Columbus complained so bitterly of its trenching upon established rights, that the permission was withdrawn on the 2nd of June, 1497, and four years later it became necessary to repeat the prohibition with more severe penalties attached to its infringement. The effect of the royal decree was at once to produce a kind of general rush to the Indies, and this was favoured by Bishop Fonseca of Badajoz, through whose hands passed all business connected with the Indies, and of whom Columbus had had so much reason to complain.

The admiral had but just left San-Lucar on his third voyage, when four expeditions of discovery were fitted out almost at the same moment, at the cost of some rich ship-owners, foremost among whom we find the Pinzons and Americus Vespucius. The first of these expeditions, which left the port of Santa-Maria on the 20th of May, 1499, consisted of four vessels, and was commanded by Alonzo Hojeda. Juan de la Cosa sailed with him as pilot; Americus Vespucius was also on board, without any very clearly defined duties, but he would seem to have been astronomer to the fleet.

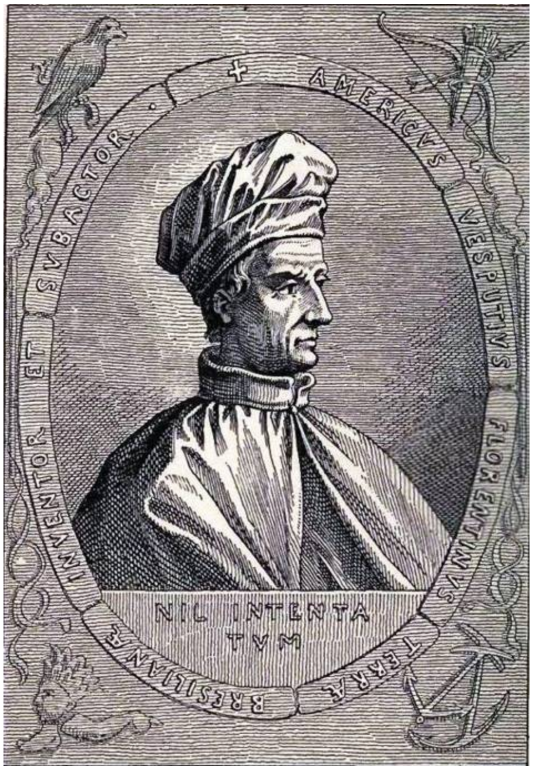
+ AMERICVS VESPVTIVS FLORENTINVS TERRÆ BRESILIANÆ INVENTOR ET SVBACTOR.
NIL INTENTA TVM

Americus Vespucius.
Fac-simile of an old print.

Before entering on a brief account of this voyage, we will glance for a few moments at the three men whom we have just named; the last of the three especially, plays a most important part in the discovery of the New World, which received its name from him.

Hojeda, born at Cuença about 1465, and brought up in the household of the Duke of Medina-Celi, had gained his first experience in arms in the wars against the Moors. Columbus enrolled him amongst the adventurers whom he recruited for his second voyage, when Hojeda distinguished himself alike by his cool courage and his readiness in surmounting all difficulties. What caused his complete rupture with Columbus remains a mystery; it appears still more inexplicable when we think of the distinguished services that Hojeda had rendered, especially in 1495, at the battle of La Vega, when the Caribbean Confederation was annihilated. All we know is, that on Hojeda's return to Spain he found shelter and protection with Bishop Fonseca. It is said even that the Indian minister supplied him with the journal of the admiral's last voyage, and the map of the countries which Columbus had discovered.

The first pilot employed by Hojeda was Juan de la Cosa, born probably at Santona, in the Biscayan country. He had often sailed along the coast of Africa before accompanying Columbus on his first voyage, while in the second expedition he filled the post of hydrographer (*maestro de hacer cartas*).

As specimens of La Cosa's talent in drawing maps may be mentioned two very curious ones still extant; one showing all the territory that had been acquired in Africa in 1500, the other on vellum, and enriched with colour like the first, giving the discoveries made by Columbus and his successors. The second pilot was Bartholomew Roldan, who had likewise sailed with Columbus on his voyage to Paria.

As to Americus Vespucius, his duties were not, as we have said, very clearly defined, he was there to aid in making discoveries (*per ajutare a discoprire*, says the Italian text of his letter to Soderini). Born at Florence on the 9th of March, 1451, Amerigo Vespucci belonged to a family of distinction and wealth. He had made mathematics, natural philosophy, and astrology (as it was then called) his special studies. His knowledge of history and literature, judging from his letters, appears to have been somewhat vague and ill-digested. He left Florence in 1492 without any special aim in view, and went to Spain, where he occupied himself at first in commercial pursuits. We hear of him in Seville acting as factor in the powerful trading house of his fellow countryman, Juanoto Berardi. As this house had advanced money to Columbus for his second voyage, it is not unlikely that Vespucius had become acquainted with the admiral at this period of his career. On Juanoto's death in 1495, Vespucius was placed by his heirs at the head of the financial department of the house. Whether he may have been tired of a situation that he thought below his powers, or been seized in his turn with the fever for making new discoveries, or whether he hoped to make his fortune rapidly in the new countries reputed to be so rich; whatever in short may have been the motive that actuated him, at least this we know, that he joined Hojeda's expedition in 1499, this fact being so stated in Hojeda's deposition in the law-suit instituted by the Treasury with the heirs of Columbus.

The flotilla, consisting of four vessels, set sail on the 20th of May from Santa-Maria, taking a south-westerly course, and in twenty-seven days the American continent was sighted at the place which was named Venezuela, because the houses being built upon piles reminded the beholders of Venice. Hojeda, after some ineffectual attempts to hold intercourse with the natives, with whom he had several skirmishes, next saw the Island of Margarita; after sailing about 250 miles to the east of the river Orinoco he reached the Gulf of Paria, and entered a bay called the Bay of *Las Perlas*, from the natives of that part being employed in the pearl fisheries.

Guided by the maps of Columbus, Hojeda passed by the Dragon's-Mouth, which separates Trinidad from the continent, and returned westward to Cape *La Vela*. Then, after touching at the Caribbee Islands, where he made a number of prisoners, whom he hoped to sell for slaves in Spain, he was obliged to cast anchor at Yaquimo, in Hispaniola, on the 5th of September, 1499.

Columbus, knowing Hojeda's courage and his restless spirit only too well, feared that he would introduce a new element of discord into the colony. He therefore despatched Francesco Roldan with two caravels to inquire into his motives in coming to the island, and if necessary to prevent his landing. The admiral's fears were but too well grounded; Hojeda had scarcely landed before he had an interview with some of the malcontents, inciting them to a rising at Xaragua, and to a determination to expel Columbus. After some skirmishes, which had not ended to Hojeda's advantage, a meeting was arranged for him with Roldan, Diego d'Escobar, and Juan de la Cosa, when they prevailed upon him to leave the island. "He took with him," says Las Casas, "a prodigious cargo of slaves, whom he sold in the market at Cadiz for enormous sums of money." He returned to Spain in February, 1500, where he had been preceded by Americus Vespucius and B. Roldan on the 18th of October, 1499.

The most southerly point that Hojeda had reached in this voyage was 4° north latitude, and he had only spent fourteen weeks on the voyage of discovery, properly so called. If we appear to have dwelt at some length upon this voyage, it is because it was the first one made by Vespucius. Some authors, Varnhagen for instance, and quite recently, Mr. H. Major, in his history of Prince Henry the Navigator, assert that Vespucius' first voyage was in 1497, and consequently that he must have seen the American continent before Columbus, but we prefer to follow Humboldt, who spent so many years in studying the history of the discovery of America, in his opinion that 1499 was the right date, also M. Ed. Charton and M. Jules Codine, the latter of whom discussed this question in the Report of the Geographical Society for 1873, *apropos* of Mr. Major's book.

"If it were true," says Voltaire, "that Vespucius had discovered the American Continent, yet the glory would not be his; it belongs undoubtedly to the man who had the genius and courage to undertake the first voyage, to Columbus." As Newton says in his argument with Leibnitz, "the glory is due only to the inventor." But we agree with M. Codine when he says, "How can we allow that there was an expedition in 1497 which resulted in the discovery of above 2500 miles of the coast-line of the mainland, when there is no trace of it left either among the great historians of that time, or in the legal depositions in connexion with the claims made by the heir of Columbus against the Spanish Government, in which the priority of the discoveries of each leader of an expedition is carefully mentioned, with the part of the coast explored by each?" Finally, the authentic documents extracted from the archives of the *Casa de contratacion* make it evident that Vespucius was entrusted with the preparation of the vessels destined for the third voyage of Columbus at Seville and at San Lucar from the middle of August, 1497, till the departure of Columbus on the 30th of May, 1498. The narratives of the voyages of Vespucius are very diffuse and wanting in precision and order; the information they give upon the places he visited is so vague, that it might apply to one part of the coast as well as to another; as to the localities treated of, as well as of the companions of Vespucius, there are no indications given of a nature to aid the historian. Not a single name is given of any well-known person, and the dates are contradictory in those famous letters which have given endless work to commentators. Humboldt says of them "There is an element of discord in the most authentic documents relating to the Florentine navigator." We have given an account of Hojeda's first voyage, which coincides with that of Vespucius according to Humboldt, who has compared the principal incidents of the two narratives. Varnhagen asserts that Vespucius, having started on the 10th of May, 1497, entered the Gulf of Honduras on the 10th of June, coasted by Yucatan and Mexico, sailed up the Mississippi, and at the end of February, 1498, doubled the Cape of Florida. After anchoring for thirty-seven days at the mouth of the St. Lawrence, he returned to Cadiz in October, 1498.

If Vespucius had really made this marvellous voyage, he would have far outstripped all the navigators of his time, and would have fully deserved that his name should be given to the newly-discovered continent, whose coast-line he had explored for so great a distance. But nothing is less certain, and Humboldt's opinion has hitherto appeared to the best writers to offer the largest amount of probability.

Americus Vespucius made three other voyages. Humboldt identifies the first with that of Vincent Yañez Pinzon, and M. d'Avezac with that of Diego de Lepe (1499-1500). At the close of this latter year, Giuliano Bartholomeo di Giocondo induced Vespucius to enter the service of Emmanuel, King of Portugal, and he accomplished two more voyages at the expense of his new master. On the first of these two voyages, he was no higher in command than he had been in his earlier ones, and only accompanied the expedition as one whose intimate acquaintance with all nautical matters might prove of service under certain circumstances. During this voyage the ships coasted along the American shores from Cape St. Augustine to 52° of south latitude. The fourth voyage of Vespucius was marked by the wreck of the flag-ship off the Island of Fernando de Noronha, which prevented the other vessels from continuing their voyage towards Malacca by way of the Cape of Good Hope, and obliged the crews to land at All Saints' Bay, in Brazil.

This fourth voyage was unquestionably made with Gonzalo Coelho, but we are quite ignorant as to who was in command on the third voyage. These various expeditions had not tended to enrich Vespucius, while his position at the Portuguese court was so far from satisfactory that he determined to re-enter the service of the King of Spain. By him he was made *Piloto Mayor* on the 22nd of March, 1508. There were some valuable emoluments attached for his advantage to this appointment, which enabled him to end his days, if not as a rich man, at least as one far removed from want. He died at Seville on the 22nd of February, 1512, with the same conviction as Columbus, that he had reached the shores of Asia. Americus Vespucius is especially famous from the New World having been named after him, instead of being called Columbia, as in all justice it should have been, but with this Vespucius had nothing to do. He was for a long time charged, though most unjustly, with impudence, falsehood, and deceit, it being alleged that he wished to veil the glory of Columbus and to arrogate to himself the honour of a discovery which did not belong to him. This was an utterly unfounded accusation, for Vespucius was both loved and esteemed by Columbus and his contemporaries, and there is nothing in his writings to justify this calumnious assertion. Seven printed documents exist which are attributed to Vespucius; they are — the abridged accounts of his four voyages, two narratives of his third and fourth voyages, in the form of letters, addressed to Lorenzo de Pier Francesco de Medici, and a letter addressed to the same nobleman, relative to the Portuguese discoveries in the Indies. These documents, printed and bound up as small thin volumes, were soon translated into various languages and distributed throughout Europe.

It was in the year 1507 that a certain Hylacolymus, whose real name was Martin Waldtzemuller, first proposed to give the name of America to the new part of the world. He did so in a book printed at Saint Dié and called

Cosmographia introductio. In 1509 a small geographical treatise appeared at Strasburg adopting the proposal of Hylacolymus; and in 1520 an edition of Pomponius Mela was printed at Basle, giving a map of the New World with the name of America. From this time the number of works employing the denomination proposed by Waldtzemuller increased perpetually.

Some years later, when Waldtzemuller was better informed as to the real discoverer of America and of the value to be placed upon the voyages of Vespucius, he eliminated from his book all that related to the latter, and substituted everywhere the name of Columbus for that of Vespucius, but it was too late, the same error has prevailed ever since.

As to Vespucius himself, it seems very unlikely that he was at all aware of the excitement which prevailed in Europe, nor of what was passing at St. Dié. The testimony that has been unanimously borne to his honourable and upright conduct should surely clear him from the unmerited accusations which have for too long a time clouded his memory.

Three other expeditions left Spain almost at the same time as that of Hojeda. The first of these, consisting of but one vessel, sailed from Barra Saltez in June 1499. Pier Alonzo Nino, who had served under Columbus in his two last voyages, was its commander, and he was accompanied by Christoval Guerra, a merchant of Seville, who probably defrayed the expenses of the expedition. This voyage to the coast of Paria seems to have been dictated more by the hope of lucrative commerce than by the interests of science. No new discoveries were made, but the two voyagers returned to Spain in April, 1500, bringing with them so large a quantity of valuable pearls as to excite the cupidity of their countrymen, who became anxious to try their own fortunes in the same direction.

The second expedition was commanded by Vincent Yañez Pinzon, the younger brother of Alonzo Pinzon who had been captain of the *Pinta* and had shown so much jealousy of Columbus, even adopting the following mendacious device: —

A Castilla, y a Leon
Nuevo Mundo dio Pinzon.

Yañez Pinzon, whose devotion to the admiral equalled his brother's jealousy, had advanced an eighth part of the funds required for the expedition of 1492, and had on that occasion been in command of the *Nina*.

He set out in December, 1499, with four vessels, of which only two returned to Palos at the end of September, 1500. He touched the coast of the newly discovered continent at a point near the shore visited by Hojeda some months before, and explored the coast for some 2400 miles, discovering Cape St. Augustine at 8° 20' south latitude, following the coast-line in a north-westerly direction to *Rio Grande*, which he named *Santa-Maria de la Mar dulce*, and continuing in the same direction as far as Cape St. Vincent. Diego de Lepe explored the same coasts with two caravels from January to June, 1500; there is nothing particular to record of this voyage beyond the very important observation that was made on the direction of the coast-line of the continent starting from Cape St. Augustine. Lepe had but just returned to Spain when two vessels left Cadiz, equipped by Rodrigo M. Bastidas, a wealthy and highly respectable man, with the view of making some fresh discoveries, but above all with the object of collecting as large a quantity of gold and pearls as possible, for which were to be bartered glass beads and other worthless trifles. Juan de la Cosa, whose talents as a navigator were proverbial, and who knew these coasts well from having explored them, was really at the head of this expedition. The sailors went on shore and saw the Rio Sinu, the Gulf of Urabia, and reached the *Puerto del Retrete* or *de los Escribanos*, in the Isthmus of Panama. This harbour was not visited by Columbus till the 26th of November, 1502; it is situated about seventeen miles from the once celebrated, but now destroyed town of *Nombre de Dios*. In fact this expedition, which had been organized by a merchant, became, thanks to Juan de la Cosa, one of the voyages the most fertile in discoveries; but alas! it came to a sad termination; the vessels were lost in the Gulf of Xaragua, and Bastidas and La Cosa were obliged to make their way by land to St. Domingo. When they arrived there, Bovadilla, the upright man and model governor, whose infamous conduct to Columbus we have already mentioned, had them arrested, on the plea that they had bought some gold from the Indians of Xaragua; he sent them off to Spain, which was only reached after a fearfully stormy voyage, some of the vessels being lost on the way.

After this expedition, so fruitful in results, voyages of discovery became rather less frequent for some years; the Spaniards being occupied in asserting their supremacy in the countries in which they had already founded colonies.

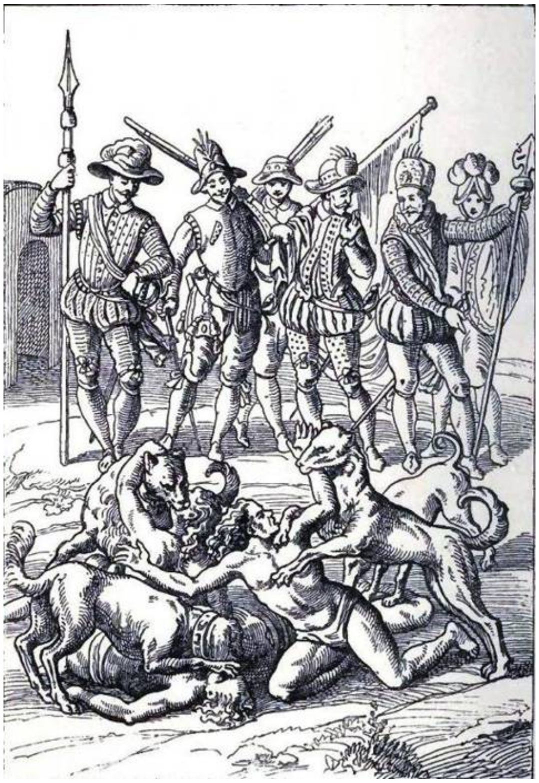

Indians devoured by Dogs.
From an old print.

The colonization of Hispaniola had commenced in 1493, when the town of Isabella was built. Two years afterwards Christopher Columbus had travelled over the island and had subjugated the poor savages, by means of those terrible dogs which had been trained to hunt Indians, and unaccustomed as the natives were to any hard work, he had forced them to toil in the mines. Both Bovadilla and Ovando treating the Indians as a herd of cattle, had divided them among the colonists as slaves. The cruelty with which this unfortunate people was treated became more and more unbearable. By means of a despicable ambush, Ovando seized the Queen of

Xaragua and 300 of her principal subjects, and at a given signal they were all put to the sword without there being any crime adduced against them. “For some years,” says Robertson, “the gold brought into the royal treasury of Spain amounted to about 460,000 *pesos* (2,400,000 livres of the currency of Tours) an enormous sum if we take into consideration the great increase in the value of money since the beginning of the sixteenth century.” In 1511 Diego Velasquez conquered Cuba with 300 men, and here again were enacted the terrible scenes of bloodshed and pillage which have rendered the Spanish name so sadly notorious. They cut off the thumbs of the natives, put out their eyes, and poured boiling oil or melted lead into their wounds, even when they did not torture them by burning them over a slow fire to extract from them the secret of the treasures of which they were believed to be the possessors. It was only natural under these circumstances that the population rapidly decreased, and the day was not far off when it would be wholly exterminated. To understand fully the sufferings of this race thus odiously persecuted, the touching and horrible narrative of Las Casas must be read, himself the indefatigable defender of the Indians.

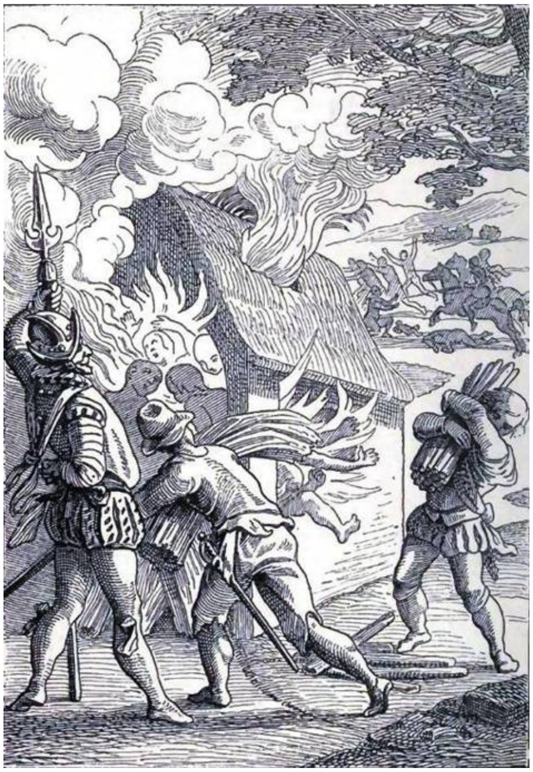

Indians burnt alive.
From an old print.

In Cuba, the Cacique Hattuey was made prisoner and condemned to be burnt. When he was tied to the stake, a Franciscan monk tried to convert him, promising him that if he would only embrace the Christian faith, he would be at once admitted to all the joys of Paradise. “Are there any Spaniards in that land of happiness and joy of which you speak?” asked Hattuey. “Yes,” replied the monk, “but only those who have been just and good in their lives.” “The very best among them can have neither justice nor mercy!” said the poor cacique, “I do not wish to go to any place where I should meet a single man of that accursed race.”

Does not this fact suffice to paint the degree of exasperation to which these unfortunate people had been driven? And these horrors were repeated wherever the Spaniards set foot! We will throw a veil over these atrocities practised by men who thought themselves civilized, and who pretended that they wished to convert to Christianity, the religion pre-eminently of love and mercy, a race who were in reality less savage than themselves.

In 1504 and 1505 four vessels explored the Gulf of Urabia. This was the first voyage in which Juan de la Cosa had the supreme command. This seems, too, to have been about the date of Hojeda’s third voyage, when he went to the territory of Coquibacoa, a voyage that certainly was made, as Humboldt says, but of which we have no clear account.

In 1509 Juan Diaz de Solis, in concert with Vincent Yañez Pinzon, discovered a vast province, since known by the name of Yucatan.

“Though this expedition was not a very remarkable one in itself,” says Robertson, “it deserves to be noticed as it led to discoveries of the utmost importance.” For the same reason we must mention the voyage of Diego d’Ocampo, who being charged to sail round Cuba, was the first to ascertain the fact that it was a large island, Columbus having always regarded it as part of the continent. Two years later Juan Diaz de Solis and Vincent Pinzon sailing southwards towards the equinoctial line, advanced as far as the 40° of south latitude, and found, to their surprise, that the continent extended on their right hand even to this immense distance. They landed several times, and took formal possession of the country, but could not found any colonies there, on account of the small resources they had at their command. The principal result of this voyage was the more exact knowledge which it gave of the extent of this part of the globe.

Alonzo de Hojeda, whose adventures we have narrated above, was the first to think of founding a colony on the mainland; although he had no means of his own, his courage and enterprising spirit soon gained him associates, who furnished him with the funds needed for carrying out his plans.

With the same object Diego de Nicuessa, a rich colonist of Hispaniola, organized an expedition in 1509.

King Ferdinand, who was always lavish of encouragements which cost little, gave both Hojeda and Nicuessa honourable titles and patents of nobility, but not a single maravédis (a Spanish coin). He also divided the newly-discovered continent into two governments, of which one was to extend from Cape *La Vela* to the Gulf of Darien, and the other from the Gulf of Darien to Cape *Gracias a Dios*. The first was given to Hojeda, the second to Nicuessa. These two “conquistadores” had to deal with a population far less easy to manage than that of the Antilles. Determined to resist to the utmost the invasion of their country, they adopted means of resistance hitherto unknown to the Spaniards. Thus the strife became deadly. In a single engagement seventy of Hojeda’s companions fell under the arrows of the savages, fearful weapons steeped in “curare,” so fatal a poison that the slightest wound was followed by death. Nicuessa on his side, had much difficulty in defending himself, and in spite of two considerable reinforcements from Cuba, the greater number of his followers perished during the year from wounds, fatigue, privations, or sickness. The survivors founded the small colony of Santa-Maria el Antigua upon the Gulf of Darien, and placed it under the command of Balboa.

Before we speak of Balboa’s wonderful expedition, we must notice the discovery of a country that forms the most northerly side of that arc, cut so deeply into the continent, and which bears the name of the Gulf of Mexico.

In 1502 Juan Ponce de Leon, a member of one of the oldest families in Spain, had arrived in Hispaniola with Ovando. He had assisted in its subjugation, and in 1508 had conquered the island of San Juan de Porto Rico. Having learnt from the Indians that there existed a fountain in the island of Bimini which possessed the miraculous power of restoring youth to all who drank of its waters, Ponce de Leon resolved to go in search of it. Infirmities must have been already creeping on him at fifty years of age, or he would scarcely have felt the need of trying this fountain. Ponce de Leon equipped three vessels at his own expense, and set out from St. Germain in Porto Rico on the 1st of March, 1512. He went first to the Lucayan Islands, which he searched in vain, and then to the Bahamas. If he did not succeed in finding the fountain of youth which he sought so credulously, at least he had the satisfaction of discovering an apparently fertile tract of country, which he named Florida, either from his landing there on Palm Sunday, (Pâques-Fleuries), or perhaps from its delightful aspect. Such a discovery would have contented many a traveller, but Ponce de Leon went from one island to another, tasting the water of every stream that he met with, without the satisfaction of seeing his white hair again becoming black or his wrinkles disappearing. After spending six months in this fruitless search, he was tired of playing the dupe, so giving up the business he returned to Porto Rico on the 5th of October, leaving Perez de Ortubia and the pilot Antonio de Alaminos to continue the search. Père Charlevoix says, “He was the object of great ridicule when he returned in much suffering, and looking older than when he set out.”

This voyage, so absurd in its motive but so fertile in its results, might well be considered to be simply imaginary, were it not vouched for by historians of such high repute as Peter Martyr, Oviedo, Herrera, and Garcilasso de la Vega.

Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who was fifteen years younger than Ponce de Leon, had come to America with Bastidas and had settled in Hispaniola. He was only anxious for a safe refuge from his numerous creditors, being, as were so many of his fellow-countrymen, deeply in debt, in spite of the *repartimiento* of Indians which had been allotted to him. Unfortunately for Balboa a law had been passed forbidding any vessels bound for the mainland taking insolvent debtors on board, but his ingenuity was equal to this emergency, for he had himself rolled in an empty barrel to the vessel which was to carry Encisco to Darien. The chief of the expedition had no choice but to receive the brave adventurer who had joined him in this singular manner, and who never fled except from duns, as he soon proved on landing. The Spaniards, accustomed to find but little resistance from the natives of the Antilles, could not subjugate the fierce inhabitants of the mainland. On account of the dissensions that had arisen among themselves, they were obliged to take refuge at Santa-Maria el Antigua, a settlement which Balboa, now elected commandant in place of Encisco, founded in Darien.

If the personal bravery of Balboa, or the ferocity of Leoncillo his blood-hound — who was more dreaded than twenty armed men and received the same pay as a soldier, — could have awed the Indians, Balboa would have also won their respect by his justice and comparative moderation, for he allowed no unnecessary cruelty. In the course of some years he collected a great mass of most useful information with regard to that El Dorado, that land of gold, which he was destined never to reach himself, but the acquisition of which he did much to facilitate for his successors.

It was in this way that he learnt the existence six suns away (six days' journey), of another sea, the Pacific Ocean, which washed the shores of Peru, a country where gold was found in large quantities. Balboa's character, which was as grand as those of Cortès and Pizarro, but who had not, as they, the time or opportunity to show the extraordinary qualities which he possessed, felt convinced that this information was most valuable, and that if he could carry out such a discovery, it would shed great lustre on his name.

He assembled a body of 190 volunteers, all valiant soldiers, and like himself, accustomed to all the chances of war, as well as acclimatised to the unhealthy effluvia of a marshy country, where fever, dysentery, and complaints of the liver were constantly present.

Though the Isthmus of Darien is only sixty miles in width, it is divided into two parts by a chain of high mountains; at the foot of these the alluvial soil is marvellously fertile, and the vegetation far more luxuriant than any European can imagine. It consists of an inextricable mass of tropical plants, creepers, and ferns, among trees of gigantic size which completely hide the sun, a truly virgin forest, interspersed here and there with patches of stagnant water, where live multitudes of birds, insects, and animals, never disturbed by the foot of man. A warm, moist atmosphere exists here which exhausts the strength and speedily saps the energy of any man, even the most robust.

With all these obstacles which Nature seemed to have rejoiced in placing in Balboa’s path, there was yet another no less formidable, and this was the resistance which the savage inhabitants of this inhospitable shore would offer to his progress. Balboa set out without caring for the risk he ran in the event of the guides and native auxiliaries proving faithless; he was escorted by a thousand Indians as porters, and accompanied by a troop of those terrible bloodhounds which had acquired the taste for human flesh in Hispaniola.

Of the tribes that he met with on his route, some fled into the mountains carrying their provisions with them, and others, taking advantage of the difficulties the land presented, tried to fight. Balboa marching in the midst of his men, never sparing himself, sharing in their privations and rousing their courage, which would have failed more than once, was able to inspire them with so much enthusiasm for the object that was before them, that after twenty-five days of marching and fighting, they could see from the top of a mountain that vast Pacific Ocean, of which, four days later, Balboa, his drawn sword in one hand and the banner of Castille in the other, took possession in the name of the King of Spain. The part of the Pacific Ocean which he had reached is situated to the east of Panama, and still bears the name of the Gulf of San Miguel, given to it by Balboa. The information he obtained from the neighbouring caciques, whom he subjugated by force of arms, and from whom he obtained a considerable booty, agreed in every particular with what he had heard before he set out.

A vast empire lay to the south, they said, “so rich in gold, that even the commonest instruments were made of it,” where the domestic animals were llamas that had been tamed and trained to carry heavy burdens, and whose appearance in the native drawings resembled that of the camel. These interesting details, and the great quantity of pearls offered to Balboa, confirmed him in his idea, that he must have reached the Asiatic countries described by Marco Polo, and that he could not be far from the empire of Cipango or Japan, of which the Venetian traveller had described the marvellous riches which were perpetually dazzling the eyes of these avaricious adventurers.

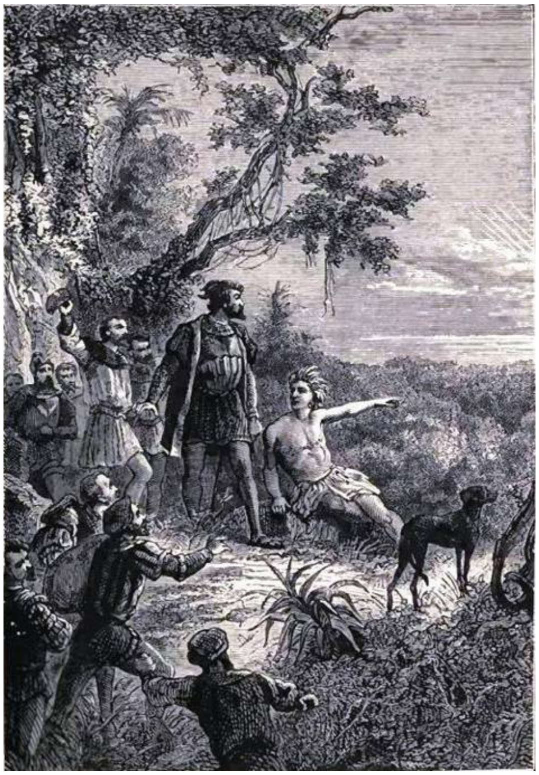

Balboa discovering the Pacific Ocean.

Balboa several times crossed the Isthmus of Darien, and always in some fresh direction. Humboldt might well say that this country was better known in the beginning of the sixteenth century than in his own day. Beyond this Balboa had launched some vessels built under his orders on the newly-discovered ocean, and he was preparing a formidable armament, with which he hoped to conquer Peru, when he was odiously and judicially murdered by the orders of Pedrarias Davila, the governor of Darien, who was jealous of the reputation Balboa had already gained, and of the glory which would doubtless recompense his bravery if he carried out the expedition which he had arranged. Thus the conquest of Peru was retarded by at least twenty-five years, owing to the culpable jealousy of a man whose name has acquired, by Balboa's assassination, almost as wretched a celebrity as that of Erostratus.

If we owe to Balboa the first authentic documents regarding Peru, another explorer was destined to furnish some not less important touching that vast Mexican Empire, which had extended its sway over almost the whole of Central America. In 1518, Juan de Grijalva had been placed in command of a flotilla, consisting of four vessels, armed by Diego Velasquez, the conqueror of Cuba, which were destined to collect information upon Yucatan, sighted the year before by Hernandez de Cordova. Grijalva, accompanied by the pilot Alaminos, who had made the voyage to Florida with Ponce de Leon, had two hundred men under his command; amongst the volunteers was Bernal Diaz del Castillo, the clever author of a very interesting history of the conquest of Mexico, from which we shall borrow freely.

After thirteen days' sailing, Grijalva reached the Island of Cozumel on the coast of Yucatan, doubled the Cape of Cotoche, and entered the Bay of Campeachy. He disembarked on the 10th of May at Potonchan, of which the inhabitants defended the town and citadel vigorously, in spite of their astonishment at the vessels, which they took for some kind of marine monsters, and their fear of the pale-faced men who hurled thunderbolts. Fifty-seven Spaniards were killed in the engagement, and many were wounded. This warm reception did not encourage Grijalva to make any long stay amongst this warlike people. He set sail again after anchoring for four days, took a westerly course along the coast of Mexico, and on the 19th of May entered a river named by the natives the Tabasco, where he soon found himself surrounded by a fleet of fifty native boats filled with warriors ready for the conflict, but thanks to Grijalva’s prudence and the amicable demonstrations which he made, peace was not disturbed.

“We made them understand,” writes Bernal Diaz, “that we were the subjects of a powerful emperor called Don Carlos, and that it would be greatly to their advantage if they also would acknowledge him as their master. They replied that they had a sovereign already, and were at a loss to understand why we, who had only just arrived, and who knew so little of them, should offer them another king.” This reply was scarcely that of a savage!

In exchange for some worthless European trinkets, the Spaniards obtained some Yucca bread, copal gum, pieces of gold worked into the shape of fishes or birds, and garments made of cotton, which had been woven in the country. As the natives who had been taken on board at Cape Cotoche did not perfectly understand the language spoken by the inhabitants of Tabasco, the stay here was but of short duration, and the ships again put to sea. They passed the mouth of the Rio Guatzacoalco, the snowy peaks of the San Martin mountains being seen in the distance, and they anchored at the mouth of a river which was called *Rio de las Banderas*, from the number of white banners displayed by the natives to show their friendly feeling towards the new comers.

When Grijalva landed, he was received with the same honour as the Indians paid to their gods; they burnt copal incense before him, and laid at his feet more than 1500 piastres’ worth of small gold jewels, as well as green pearls and copper hatchets. After taking formal possession of the country, the Spaniards landed on an island called *Los Sacrificios* Island, from a sort of altar which they found there placed at the top of several steps, upon which lay the bodies of five Indians sacrificed since the preceding evening; their bodies were cut open, their hearts torn out, and both legs and arms cut off.

Leaving this revolting spectacle, they went to another small island, which received the name of San Juan, being discovered on St. John's Day; to this they added the word *Culua*, which they heard used by the natives of these shores. But Culua was the ancient name for Mexico, and this Island of San-Juan de Culua is now known as St. John d'Ulloa.

Grijalva put all the gold which he had collected on board one of the ships and despatched it to Cuba, while he continued his exploration of the coast, discovered the Sierras of Tusta and Tuspa, and collected a large amount of useful information regarding this populous country; on arriving at the *Rio Panuco*, he was attacked by a flotilla of native vessels, and had much difficulty in defending himself against their attacks.

This expedition was nearly over, for provisions were running short, and the vessels were in a very bad state, the volunteers were many of them sick and wounded, and even had they been in good health their numbers were too small to make it safe to leave them among these warlike people, even under the shelter of fortifications. Besides, the leaders of the expedition no longer acted in concert, so after repairing the largest of the vessels in the Rio Tonala, where Bernal Diaz boasts of having sown the first orange-pips which were ever brought to Mexico, the Spaniards set out for Santiago in Cuba, where they arrived on the 15th of November, after a cruise of seven months, not forty-five days, as M. Ferdinand Denis asserts in the Biographie Didot, and as M. Ed. Charton repeats in his *Voyageurs Anciens et Modernes*.

The results obtained from this voyage were considerable. For the first time the long line of coast which forms the peninsula of Yucatan, the Bay of Campeachy, and the base of the Gulf of Mexico, had been explored continuously from cape to cape. Not only had it been proved beyond doubt that Yucatan was not an island as they had believed, but much and reliable information had been collected with regard to the existence of the rich and powerful empire of Mexico. The explorers had been much struck with the marks of a more advanced civilization than that existing in the Antilles, with the superiority of the architecture, the skilful cultivation of the land, the fine texture of the cotton garments, and the delicacy of finish of the golden ornaments worn by the Indians. All this combined to increase the thirst for riches among the Spaniards of Cuba, and to urge them on like modern Argonauts to the conquest of this new golden fleece. Grijalva was not destined to reap the fruits of his perilous and at the same time intelligent voyage, which threw so new a light on Indian civilization. The *sic vos, non vobis* of the poet was once again to find an exemplification in this circumstance.

II.

THE CONQUERORS OF CENTRAL AMERICA.

Ferdinand Cortès — His character — His appointment — Preparations for the expedition, and attempts of Velasquez to stop it — Landing at Vera-Cruz — Mexico and the Emperor Montezuma — The republic of Tlascala — March upon Mexico — The Emperor is made prisoner — Narvaez defeated — The *Noche Triste* — Battle of Otumba — The second siege and taking of Mexico — Expedition to Honduras — Voyage to Spain — Expeditions on the Pacific Ocean — Second Voyage of Cortès to Spain — His death.

Velasquez had not waited for Grijalva's return before sending off to Spain the rich products of the countries discovered by the latter, and at the same time soliciting from the council of the Indies, as well as from the Bishop of Burgos, an addition to his authority, that he might attempt the conquest of these countries. At the same time he fitted out a new armament proportioned to the dangers and importance of the undertaking that he proposed. But though it was comparatively easy for Velasquez to collect the necessary material and men, it was far more difficult for him — whom an old writer describes as niggardly, credulous, and suspicious in disposition — to choose a fit leader. He wished indeed, to find one who should combine qualities nearly always incompatible, high courage and great talent, without which there was no chance of success, with at the same time sufficient docility and submissiveness, to do nothing without orders, and to leave to him who incurred no risk, any glory and success which might attend the enterprise. Some who were brave and enterprising would not be treated as mere machines; others who were more docile or more cunning lacked the qualities required to insure the success of so vast an enterprise; among the former were some of Grijalva's companions who wished that he should be made commander, while the latter preferred Augustin Bermudez or Bernardino Velasquez. While this was pending, the governor's secretary, Andrès de Duero, and Amador de Larez, the Controller of Cuba, both favourites of Velasquez, made an arrangement with a Spanish nobleman named Ferdinand Cortès, that if they could obtain the appointment for him, they should be allowed a share in his gains.

Bernal Diaz says, "They praised Cortès so highly, and pointed him out in such flattering terms as the very man fitted to fill the vacant post, adding that he was brave and certainly very faithful to Velasquez (to whom he was son-in-law), that he allowed himself to be persuaded, and Cortès was nominated captain-general. As Andrès de Duero was the governor's secretary, he hastened to formulate the powers in a deed, making them very ample, as Cortès desired, and brought it to him duly signed.” Had Velasquez been gifted with the power of looking into the future, Cortès was certainly not the man he would have chosen.

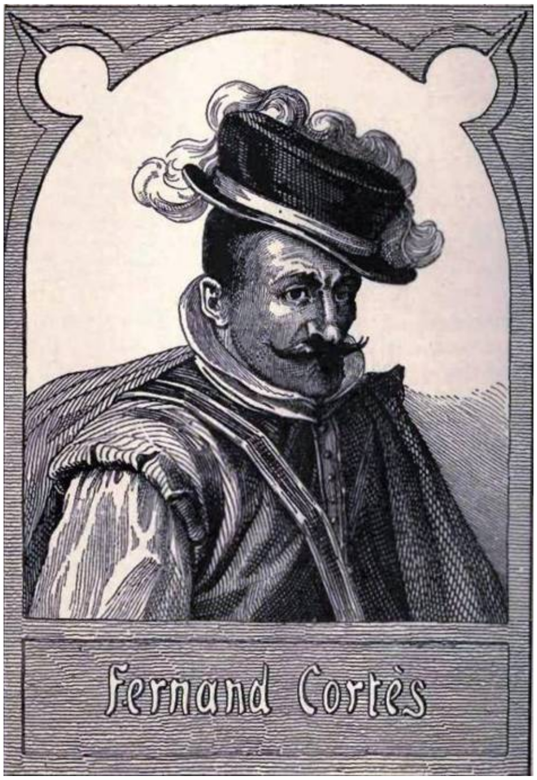

Ferdinand Cortès.
From an old print.

Cortès was born at Medellin in Estramadura in 1485, of an ancient, but slenderly-endowed family; after studying at Salamanca for some time, he returned to his native town, but the quiet monotonous life there was little suited to his restless and capricious temper, and he soon started for

America, reckoning upon the protection of his relation Ovando, the Governor of Hispaniola.

His expectations were fully realized, and he held several honourable and lucrative posts, without counting that between times he joined in several expeditions against the natives. If he became in this manner initiated into the Indian system of tactics, so also, unfortunately, did he grow familiar with those acts of cruelty which have too often stained the Castilian name. He accompanied Diego de Velasquez in his Cuban expedition in 1511, and here he distinguished himself so highly, that notwithstanding certain disagreements with his chief, a large grant of land as well as of Indians was made to him as a recognition of his services.

Cortès amassed the sum of 3000 castellanos in the course of a few years by his industry and frugality, a large sum for one in his position, but his chief recommendations in the eyes of Andrès de Duero and Amador de Sarès his two patrons, were his activity, his well-known prudence, his decision of character, and the power of gaining the confidence of all with whom he was brought into contact. In addition to all this, he was of imposing stature and appearance, very athletic, and possessed powers of endurance, remarkable even among the hardy adventurers who were accustomed to brave all kinds of hardships.

As soon as Cortès had received his commission, which he did with every mark of respectful gratitude, he set up a banner at the door of his house, made of black velvet embroidered in gold, bearing the device of a red cross in the midst of blue and white flames, and below, this motto in Latin, “Friends, let us follow the Cross, and if we have faith, we shall overcome by this sign.” He concentrated the whole force of his powerful mind upon the means to make the enterprise a success; even his most intimate friends were astonished at his enthusiasm in preparing for it. He not only gave the whole of the money which he possessed towards arming the fleet, but he charged part on his estate, and borrowed considerable sums from his friends to purchase vessels, provisions, munitions of war, and horses. In a few days 300 volunteers had enrolled themselves, attracted by the fame of the general, the daring nature of the enterprise, and the profit that would probably accrue from it. Velasquez, always suspicious, and doubtless instigated by some who were jealous of Cortès, tried to put a stop to the expedition at its outset. Cortès being warned by his two patrons that Velasquez would probably try to take the command from him, acted with his customary decision; he collected his men and, in spite of the vessels not being completed and of an insufficient armament, he weighed anchor and sailed during the night. When Velasquez discovered that his plans had been check-mated he concealed his indignation, but at the same time, he made every arrangement to stop the man who could thus throw off all dependence upon him with such consummate coolness. Cortès anchored at Macaca, to complete his stores, and found many of those who had accompanied Grijalva now hasten to serve under his banner: Pedro de Alvarado and his brothers, Christoval de Olid, Alonzo de Avila, Hernandez de Puerto-Carrero, Gonzalo de Sandoval, and Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who was to write a valuable account of these events "*quorum pars magna fuit*." Trinity Harbour, on the south coast of Cuba was the next resting-place, and here a further supply of provisions was taken on board, but while Cortès lay at anchor for this purpose, Verdugo the governor, received letters from Velasquez, desiring him to arrest the captain-general, the command of the fleet having been just taken from him. This bold step would have endangered the safety of the town, so Verdugo refrained from executing the order. Cortès sailed away to Havana in order to enlist some new adherents, while his lieutenant Alvarado went over land to the port where the last preparations were made. Although Velasquez was unsuccessful in his first attempt, he again sent an order to arrest Cortès, but Pedro Barba the governor, felt the impossibility of executing the order in the midst of soldiers who, as Bernal Diaz says, “would willingly have given their lives to save Cortès.”

At length, having recalled the volunteers by beat of drum, and taken on board all that appeared necessary, Cortès set sail on the 18th February, 1519, with eleven ships (the largest being of 100 tons), 110 sailors, 553 soldiers, — 13 of whom were arquebusiers, — 200 Indians from the island, and some women for domestic work. The real strength of the armament lay in the ten pieces of artillery, the four falconets provided with an ample supply of ammunition, and the sixteen horses which had been obtained at great expense. It was with these almost miserable means, which, however, had given Cortès much trouble to collect, that he prepared to wage war with a sovereign whose dominions were of greater extent than those appertaining to the King of Spain — an enterprise from which he would have turned back if he had foreseen half its difficulties. But long ago a poet said, “Fortune smiles on those who dare.”

After encountering a very severe storm, the fleet touched at the island of Cozumel, where they found that the inhabitants had embraced Christianity, either from fear of the Spaniards, or from finding the inability of their gods to help them. Just as the fleet was about to leave the island, Cortès had the good fortune to meet with a Spaniard named Jeronimo d’Aguilar, who had been kept a prisoner by the Indians for eight years. During that time he had learnt the Indian language perfectly; he was as prudent as he was clever, and when he joined the expedition he was of the greatest use as an interpreter.

After doubling Cape Catoche, Cortès sailed down the Bay of Campeachy, passed Potonchan, and entered the Rio Tabasco, hoping to meet with as friendly a reception there as Grijalva had done, and also to collect an equally large quantity of gold; but he found a great change had taken place in the feelings of the natives, and he was obliged to employ force. In spite of the bravery and numerical superiority of the Indians, the Spaniards overcame them in several engagements, thanks to the terror caused by the reports of their fire-arms and the sight of the cavalry, whom the Indians took for supernatural beings. The Indians lost a large number of men in these engagements, while among the Spaniards two were killed, and fourteen men and several horses wounded; the wounds of the latter were dressed with fat taken from the dead bodies of the Indians. At last peace was made, and the natives gave Cortès provisions, some cotton clothing, a small quantity of gold, and twenty female slaves, among whom was the celebrated Marina, who rendered such signal services to the Spaniards as an interpreter, and who is mentioned by all the historians of the conquest of the New World.

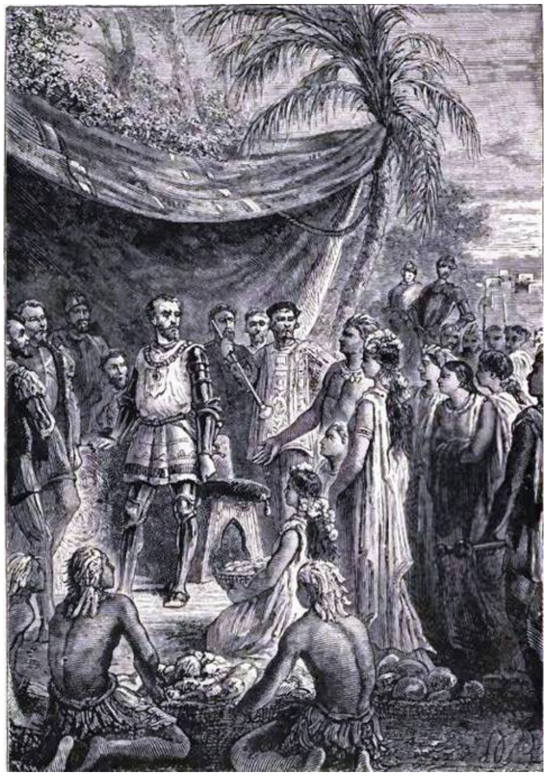

Cortès receives provisions, clothing, a little gold, and twenty female slaves.

Cortès continued on a westerly course, seeking a suitable place for landing, but he could find none until he reached St. John d’Ulloa. The fleet had scarcely cast anchor before a canoe made its way fearlessly to the admiral’s vessel, and here Marina (who was of Aztec origin) was of the greatest use, in telling Cortès that the Indians of this part of the country were the subjects of a great empire, and that their province was one recently added to it by conquest. Their monarch, named Moctheuzoma, better known under the name of Montezuma, lived in Tenochtitlan, or Mexico, nearly 210 miles away in the interior. Cortès offered the Indians some presents, assuring them of his pacific intentions, and then disembarked upon the torrid and unhealthy shore of Vera-Cruz. Provisions flowed in immediately, but the day after the landing, Teutile, governor of the province, and ambassador of Montezuma to the Spaniards, had much difficulty in answering Cortès when he asked him to conduct him to his master without delay, knowing as he did all the anxiety and fears which had haunted the mind of the Emperor since the arrival of the Spaniards. However, he caused some cotton stuffs, feather cloaks, and some articles made of gold to be laid at the feet of the general, a sight which simply excited the cupidity of the Europeans. To give these poor Indians an adequate idea of his power, Cortès called out his soldiers, and put them through their drill, he also ordered the discharge of some pieces of artillery, the noise of which froze the hearts of the savages with terror. During the whole time of the interview, some painters had been employed in sketching upon pieces of white cotton, the ships, the troops, and everything which had struck their fancy. These drawings very cleverly executed, were to be sent to Montezuma.

Before beginning the history of the heroic struggles which shortly commenced, it will be useful to give some details as to that Mexican empire which, powerful as it appeared, nevertheless contained within itself numerous elements of decay and dissolution, which fact explains the cause of its conquest by a mere handful of adventurers. That part of America which was under the dominion of Montezuma was called Anahuac and lay between 14° and 20° north latitude. This region presents great varieties of climate on account of its difference of altitude; towards the centre, and rather nearer to the Pacific than to the Atlantic, there is a huge basin at an elevation of 7500 feet above the sea, and about 200 miles in circumference, in the hollow of which there were at that time several lakes; this depression is called the valley of Mexico, taking its name from the capital of the empire. As may be easily supposed, we possess very few authentic details about a people whose written annals were burnt by the ignorant “conquistadores” and by fanatical monks, who jealously suppressed everything which might remind the conquered race of their ancient religious and political traditions.

Arriving from the north in the seventh century the Toltecs had overspread the plateau of Anahuac. They were an intelligent race of people, addicted to agriculture and the mechanical arts, understanding the working in metals, and to whom is due the construction of the greater part of the sumptuous and gigantic edifices of which the ruins are found in every direction in New Spain. After four centuries of power, the Toltecs disappeared from the country as mysteriously as they had come. A century later they were replaced by a savage tribe from the north-west, who were soon followed by more civilized races, speaking apparently the Toltec language. The most celebrated of these tribes were the Aztecs, and the Alcolhuès or Tezcucans, who assimilated themselves easily with the tincture of civilization which remained in the country with the last of the Toltecs. The Aztecs, after a series of migrations and wars, settled themselves in 1326 in the valley of Mexico, where they built their capital Tenochtitlan. A treaty of alliance both offensive and defensive was entered into between the states of Mexico, Tezcuco, and Tlacopan, and was rigorously observed for a whole century; in consequence of this the Aztec civilization, which had been at first bounded by the extent of the valley, spread on all sides, and soon was limited only by the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. In a short time these people had reached a higher degree of civilization than any other tribe in the New World. The rights of property were recognized in Mexico, commerce flourished there, and three kinds of coin in circulation provided the ordinary mechanism of exchange. There was a well-organized police, and a system of relays which worked with perfect regularity, and enabled the sovereign to transmit his orders with rapidity from one end of the empire to the other. The number and beauty of the towns, the great size of the palaces, temples, and fortresses indicated an advanced civilization, which presented a singular contrast to the ferocious manners of the Aztecs. Their polytheistic religion was in the highest degree barbarous and sanguinary; the priests formed a very numerous body, and exercised great influence even over political affairs. Side by side with rites similar to those of Christians, such as baptism and confession, the religion presented a tissue of the most absurd and bloody superstitions. The offering up of human sacrifices, adopted at the beginning of the 14th century, and used at first very sparingly, had soon become so frequent, that the number of victims immolated each year, and drawn chiefly from the conquered nations, amounted to 20,000, while under certain circumstances the number was much larger. Thus in 1486, at the inauguration of the temple of Huitzilopchit, 70,000 captives perished in a single day.

The Government of Mexico was monarchical; at first the imperial power had been carefully limited, but it had increased with the various conquests, and had become despotic. The sovereign was always chosen out of the same family, and his accession was marked by the offering up of numerous human sacrifices. The Emperor Montezuma belonged to the sacerdotal caste, and in consequence his power received some unwonted development. The result of his numerous wars had been the extension of his frontiers, and the subjugation of various nations; these latter welcomed the Spaniards with eagerness, thinking that their dominion must surely be less oppressive and less cruel than that of the Aztecs.

It is certain that if Montezuma, with the large force which he had at his disposal, had fallen upon the Spaniards when they were occupying the hot and unhealthy shore of Vera-Cruz, they would have been unable, in spite of the superiority of their arms and discipline, to resist such a shock; they must all have perished, or been obliged to re-embark, and the fate of the New

World would have been completely changed. But the decision which formed the most salient point in the character of Cortès, was completely wanting in that of Montezuma, a prince who never could at any time adopt a resolute policy.

Fresh ambassadors from the emperor had arrived at the Spanish camp, bringing to Cortès an order to quit the country, and upon his refusal all intercourse between the natives and the invaders had immediately ceased. The situation was becoming critical, and this Cortès felt. After having overcome some hesitation which had been shown by the troops, he laid the foundations of Vera-Cruz, a fortress designed to serve as a basis of operations, and a shelter in case of a possible re-embarkation. He next organized a kind of civil government, a *junta*, as it would be called in the present day, to which he resigned the commission which had been revoked by Velasquez, and then he made the junta give him one with new provisions and more extended powers. After this he received the envoys from the town of Zempoalla, who were come to solicit his alliance, and his protection against Montezuma, whose dominion they bore with impatience. Cortès was indeed fortunate in meeting with such allies so soon after landing, and not wishing to allow so golden an opportunity to slip, he welcomed the Totonacs kindly, went with them to their capital, and after having caused a fortress to be constructed at Quiabislan on the sea-shore, he persuaded his new friends to refuse the payment of tribute to Montezuma. He took advantage of his stay at Zempoalla to exhort these people to embrace Christianity, and he threw down their idols, as he had already done at Cozumel, to prove to them the powerlessness of their gods.

Meanwhile a plot had been forming in his own camp, and Cortès, feeling convinced that as long as there remained any way of returning to Cuba, there would be constant lukewarmness and discontent among his soldiers, caused all his ships to be run aground, under the pretext of their being in too shattered a condition to be of any further use. This was an unheard-of act of audacity, and one which forced his companions either to conquer or to die. Having no longer anything to fear from the want of discipline of his troops, Cortès set out for Zempoalla on the 16th of August, with five hundred soldiers, fifteen horses, and six field cannon, and also two hundred Indian porters, who were intended to perform all menial offices. The little army soon reached the frontiers of the small republic of Tlascala, of which the fierce inhabitants, impatient of servitude, had long been engaged in strife with Montezuma. Cortès flattered himself that his oft-proclaimed intention of delivering the Indians from the Mexican yoke would induce the Tlascalans to become his allies and at once to make common cause with him. He therefore asked for leave to cross their territory on his way to Mexico; but his ambassadors were detained, and as he advanced into the interior of the country, he was harassed for fourteen consecutive days and nights by continual attacks from several bodies of Tlascalans, amounting in all to 30,000 men, who displayed a bravery and determination such as the Spaniards had never yet seen equalled in the New World. But the arms possessed by these brave men were very primitive. What could they effect with only arrows and lances tipped with obsidian or fish-bones, stakes hardened in the fire, wooden swords, and above all with an inferior system of tactics? When they found that each encounter cost them the lives of many of their bravest warriors, while not a single Spaniard had been killed, they imagined that these strangers must be of a superior order of beings, while they could not tell what opinion to form of men who sent back to them the spies taken in their camp, with their hands cut off, and who yet after each victory not only did not devour their prisoners, as the Aztecs would have done, but released them, loading them with presents and proposing peace.

Upon this the Tlascalans declared themselves vassals of the Spanish crown, and swore to assist Cortès in all his expeditions, while he on his side promised to protect them against their enemies. It was time that peace should be made, for many of the Spaniards were wounded or ill, and all were worn out with fatigue, but the entry in triumph into Tlascala, where they were welcomed as supernatural beings, quickly made them forget their sufferings.

After twenty days of repose in this town, Cortès resumed his march towards Mexico, having with him an auxiliary army of six thousand Tlascalans. He went first to Cholula, a town regarded as sacred by the Indians, and as the sanctuary and favoured residence of their deities. Montezuma felt much satisfaction in the advance of the Spaniards to this town, either from the hope that the gods would themselves avenge the desecration of their temples, or that he thought a rising, and massacre of the Spaniards might be more easily organized in this populous and fanatical town. Cortès had been warned by the Tlascalans that he must place no trust in the protestations of friendship and devotion made by the Cholulans. However, he took up his quarters in the town, considering that he would lose his prestige if he showed any signs of fear, but upon being informed by the Tlascalans that the women and children were being sent away, and by Marina that a considerable body of troops was massed at the gates of the city, that pitfalls and trenches were dug in the streets, whilst the roofs of the houses were loaded with stones and missiles, Cortès anticipated the designs of his enemies, gave orders to make prisoners of all the principal men of the town, and then organized a general massacre of the population, thus taken by surprise and deprived of their leaders. For two whole days the unhappy Cholulans were subject to all the horrors which could be invented by the rage of the Spaniards, and the vengeance of their allies the Tlascalans. A terrible example was made, six thousand people being put to the sword, temples burned to the ground, and the town half destroyed, a work of destruction well calculated to strike terror into the hearts of Montezuma and his subjects.

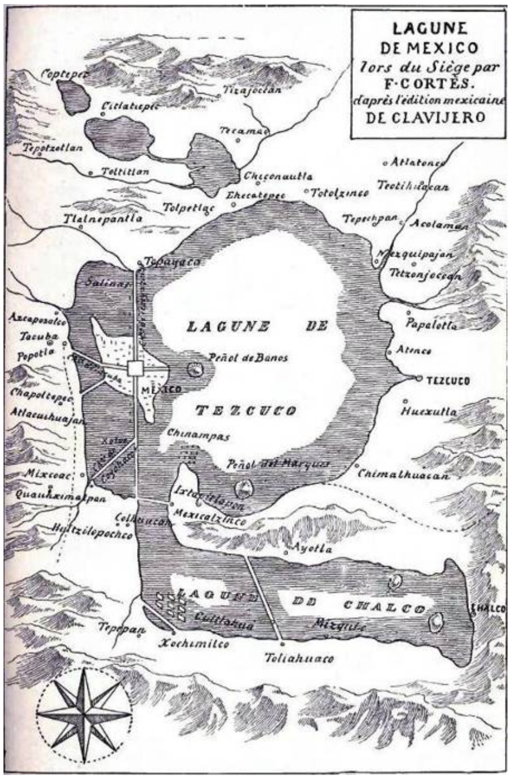
LAGUNE DE MEXICO lors du Siège par F·CORTÈS. d'après l'édition mexicaine DE CLAVIJERO
Coptepec
Tizajocan
Citlaltepec
Tecamac
Tepotzotlan
Toltitlan
Chiconautla
Ehecatepec
Totolzinco
Atlatonco
Teotihuacan
Tolpetlac
Tlalnepantla
Tepechpan
Acolaman
Mezquipajan
Tetzonjocean
Tepeyaca
Salinas
Azcapozalco
Tacuba
Popotla
LAGUNE DE TEZCUCO
Peñol de Banos
MEXICO
Papalotla
Atenco
TEZCUCO
Huexutla
Chapoltepec
Atlacuihuajan
Chinampas
Xoloc
Mixcoac
Peñol del Marques
Chimalhuacan
Quauhximalpan
Iztapalapan
Mexicalzinco
Colhuacan
Huitzilopochco
Ayotla
LAGUNE DE CHALCO
CHALCO
Cuitlahua
Mizquic
Tepepan
Xochimilco
Tolcahuaco

Lake of Mexico.

Sixty miles now separated Cortès from the capital, and everywhere as he passed along he was received as a liberator. There was not a cacique who had not some cause of complaint against the imperial despotism, and Cortès felt confirmed in the hope that so divided an empire would prove an easy prey. As the Spaniards descended from the mountains of Chalco, they beheld with astonishment the valley of Mexico, with its enormous lake, deeply sunk and surrounded by large towns, the capital city built upon piles, and the well-cultivated fields of this fertile region.

Cortès did not trouble himself about the continued tergiversations of Montezuma, who could not make up his mind to the last moment whether he would receive the Spaniards as friends or enemies. The Spanish general advanced along the causeway which leads to Mexico across the lake, and was already within a mile of the town, when some Indians, who, from their magnificent costume were evidently of high rank, came to greet him and to announce to him the approach of the emperor. Montezuma soon appeared, borne upon the shoulders of his favourites in a kind of litter adorned with gold and feathers, while a magnificent canopy protected him from the rays of the sun. As he advanced the Indians prostrated themselves before him, with their heads downwards, as though unworthy even to look at their monarch. This first interview was cordial, and Montezuma himself conducted his guests to the abode which he had prepared for them. It was a vast palace, surrounded by a stone wall, and defended by high towers. Cortès immediately took measures of defence, and ordered the cannon to be pointed upon the roads leading to the palace. At the second interview, magnificent presents were offered both to the general and soldiers. Montezuma related that according to an old tradition, the ancestors of the Aztecs had arrived in the country under the leadership of a man of white complexion, and bearded like the Spaniards. After laying the foundations of their power, he had embarked upon the ocean, promising them that one day his descendants would come to visit them and to reform their laws — and if, as Montezuma said, he now received the Spaniards rather as fathers than as foreigners, it was because he felt convinced that in them he beheld the descendants of his people’s ancient chief, and he begged them to regard themselves as the masters of his country.

The following days were employed in visiting the town, which appeared to the Spaniards as larger, more populous, and more beautiful than any city which they had hitherto seen in America. Its distinguishing peculiarity consisted in the causeways which formed a means of communication with the land, and which were cut through in various places to allow a free passage to vessels sailing on the waters of the lake. Across these openings were thrown bridges which could be easily destroyed. On the eastern side of the town there was no causeway and no means of communication with the land except by canoes. This arrangement of the town of Mexico caused some anxiety to Cortès, who saw that he might be at any moment blockaded in the town, without being able to find means of egress. He determined, therefore, to prevent any seditious attempt by securing the person of the emperor, and using him as a hostage. The following news which he had just received furnished him with an excellent pretext: Qualpopoca, a Mexican general, had attacked the provinces which had submitted to the Spaniards, and Escalante and seven of his soldiers had been mortally wounded; besides this, a prisoner had been beheaded and the head carried from town to town, thus proving that the invaders could be conquered, and were nothing more than ordinary mortals.

Cortès profited by these events to accuse the emperor of perfidy. He declared that although Montezuma appeared friendly to him and to his soldiers, it was only that he might wait for some favourable opportunity to treat them in the same manner as Escalante, a proceeding quite unworthy of a monarch, and very different from the confidence which Cortès had shown in coming, as he had done, to visit him. He went on to say that if the suspicions of the Spaniards were not justified, the emperor could easily exonerate himself by having Qualpopoca punished, and finally, to prevent the recurrence of aggressions which could but destroy the existing harmony, and to prove to the Mexicans that he harboured no ill-design against the

Spaniards, Montezuma could not do otherwise than come to reside amongst them. It may be easily imagined that the emperor was not very ready to decide upon this course, but was at last obliged to give in to the violence and threats of the Spaniards. Upon announcing his resolution to his subjects, he was made to assure them several times over that he put himself into the hands of the Spaniards of his own free will; these words were needed to calm the Mexicans, who threatened to make an attack upon the foreigners.

The success of Cortès in this bold scheme was quite beyond his expectations. Qualpopoca, with his son and five of the chief ringleaders in the revolt, were seized by the Mexicans, and brought before a Spanish tribunal, which was at the same time judge and prosecutor; the Indians were condemned and burnt alive. Not content with having punished men who had committed no crime but that of executing the orders of their emperor, and of opposing an armed resistance to the invasion of their country, Cortès imposed a new humiliation upon Montezuma, in placing fetters upon his feet, under the pretext that the culprits in their last moments had made accusations against him. For six months the “Conquistador” exercised the supreme government in the name of the emperor, now reduced to a puppet-show of authority. Cortès changed the governors who displeased him, collected the taxes, presided over all the details of the administration, and sent Spaniards into the various provinces of the empire with orders to examine their productions, and to take particular notice of the mining districts and the processes in use for collecting gold.

Cortès also turned to account the curiosity evinced by Montezuma to see European ships, to have rigging and other appurtenances brought from Vera-Cruz, and to order the construction of two brigantines destined to ensure his communications with terra-firma by the waters of the lake.

Emboldened by receiving so many proofs of submission and humility, Cortès took another step in advance, and required that Montezuma should declare himself the vassal and tributary of Spain. The act of fidelity and homage was accompanied, as may be easily imagined, with presents both rich and numerous, as well as by a heavy tax which was levied without much difficulty. The opportunity was now taken to gather together everything in gold and silver, which had been extorted from the Indians, and to melt them down, except certain pieces which were kept as they were, on account of the beauty of the workmanship. The whole did not amount to more than 600,000 pesos, or 100,000*l.* Thus, although the Spaniards had made use of all their power, and Montezuma had exhausted his treasures to satisfy them, the whole product amounted to an absurdly small sum, very little in accordance with the idea which the conquerors had formed of the riches of the country. After reserving one-fifth of the treasure for the king, and one-fifth for Cortès and subtracting enough to reimburse the sums which had been advanced for the expenses of the expedition, the share of each soldier did not amount to 100 *pesos*, and they considered that it would have been more worth their while to have remained in Hispaniola, than to have experienced such fatigues, encountered such great dangers, and suffered so many privations, all for the reward of 100 *pesos*! If the promises of Cortès ended in this beggarly result, and if the partition had been made with fairness, of which they did not feel certain, they argued that it was absurd to remain longer in so poor a country, while under a chief less prodigal in promises, but more generous, they might go to countries rich in gold and precious stones, where brave warriors would find an adequate compensation for their toils. So murmured these greedy adventurers; some accepting what fell to their share while fuming over its small amount, others disdainfully refusing it.

Cortès had succeeded in persuading Montezuma to conform to his will in everything which concerned politics, but it was otherwise in regard to religion. He could not persuade him to change his creed, and when Cortès wished to throw down the idols, as he had done at Zempoalla, a tumult arose which would have become very serious, had he not immediately abandoned his project. From that time the Mexicans, who had offered scarcely any resistance to the subjugation and imprisonment of their monarch, resolved to avenge their outraged deities, and they prepared a simultaneous rising against the invaders. It was at this juncture, when the affairs in the interior seemed to be taking a less favourable turn, that Cortès received news from Vera-Cruz, that several ships were cruising off the harbour. At first he thought this must be a fleet sent to his aid by Charles V. in answer to a letter which he had sent to him on the 16th of July, 1519, by Puerto Carrero and Montejo. But he was soon undeceived, and learnt that this expedition was organized by Diego Velasquez, who knew by experience how lightly his lieutenant could shake off all dependence upon him; he had sent this armament with the object of deposing Cortès from his command, of making him a prisoner, and of carrying him off to Cuba, where he would be speedily placed upon his trial. The fleet thus sent was under the command of Pamphilo de Narvaez; it consisted of eighteen vessels, and carried eighty horse-soldiers, and 100 infantry (of whom eighty were musketeers), 120 cross-bowmen, and twelve cannons.

Narvaez disembarked without opposition, near to the fort of San Juan d’Ulloa, but upon summoning the Governor of Vera-Cruz, Sandoval, to give up the town to him, Sandoval seized the men who were charged with the insolent message, and sent them off to Mexico, where Cortès at once released them, and then gained from them circumstantial information as to the forces, and the projects of Narvaez. The personal danger of Cortès at this moment was great; the troops sent by Velasquez were more numerous and better furnished with arms and ammunition than were his own, but his deepest cause of anxiety was not the possibility of his own condemnation and death, it was the fear lest all fruit of his efforts might be lost, and the knowledge of the hurtfulness of these dissensions to his country's cause. The situation was a critical one, but after mature reflection and the careful weighing of arguments for and against the course he meditated, Cortès determined to fight, even at a disadvantage, rather than to sacrifice his conquests and the interests of Spain. Before proceeding to this last extremity, he sent his chaplain Olmedo to Narvaez, but he was very ill-received, and saw all his proposals for an accommodation disdainfully rejected. Olmedo met with more success amongst the soldiers, who most of them knew him, and to whom he distributed a number of chains, gold rings, and other jewels, which were well calculated to give them a high idea of the riches of the conqueror. But when Narvaez heard of what was going on, he determined not to leave his troops any longer exposed to temptation; he set a price upon the heads of Cortès and his principal officers, and advanced to the encounter.

Cortès, however, was too skilful to be enticed into giving battle under unfavourable circumstances. He temporized and succeeded in tiring out Narvaez and his troops, who retired to Zempoalla. Then Cortès, having taken his measures with consummate prudence, and the surprise and terror of a nocturnal attack which he organized compensating for the inferiority of his troops, he made prisoners of his enemy and all his soldiers, his own loss amounting to but two men. The conqueror treated the vanquished well, and gave them the choice between returning to Cuba, or remaining to share his fortune. This latter proposal, backed up as it was by gifts and promises, appeared so seductive to the new arrivals, that Cortès found himself at the head of 1000 soldiers, the day after he had been in danger of falling into the hands of Narvaez. This rapid change of fortune was turned to the greatest advantage by the skilful diplomacy of Cortès, who hastened to return to Mexico. The troops whom he had left there under the command of Alvarado, to guard the emperor and the treasure, were reduced to the last extremity by the natives, who had killed or wounded a great number of soldiers, and who kept the rest in a state of close blockade, while threatening them constantly with a general assault. It must be confessed that the imprudent and criminal conduct of the Spaniards, and notably the massacre of the most distinguished citizens of the empire during a fête, had brought about the rising which they dreaded, and which they had hoped to prevent. After having been joined by 2000 Tlascalans, Cortès pressed forward by forced marches towards the capital, where he arrived in safety, and found that the Indians had not destroyed the bridges belonging to the causeways and dikes which joined Mexico to the land. In spite of the arrival of this reinforcement, the situation did not improve. Each day it was necessary to engage in new combats, and to make sorties to clear the avenues leading to the palace occupied by the Spaniards.

Cortès now saw but too plainly the mistake which he had made in shutting himself up in a town where his position might be stormed at any moment, and from which it was so difficult to extricate himself. In this difficulty he had recourse to Montezuma, who, by virtue of his authority and of the prestige which still clung to him, could appease the tumult, give the Spaniards some respite, and enable them to prepare for their retreat. But when the unfortunate emperor, now become a mere toy in the hands of the Spaniards, appeared upon the walls decked out with regal ornaments, and implored his subjects to cease from hostilities, murmurs of discontent arose, and threats were freely uttered. Hostilities began afresh, and before the soldiers had time to protect him with their shields, Montezuma was pierced with arrows, and hit upon the head by a stone which knocked him down. At this sight the Indians, horrified at the crime which they had just committed, at once ceased fighting, and fled in all directions, while the emperor, understanding but too late all the baseness of the part which Cortès had forced him to play, tore off the bandages which had been applied to his wounds, and refusing all nourishment, he died cursing the Spaniards.

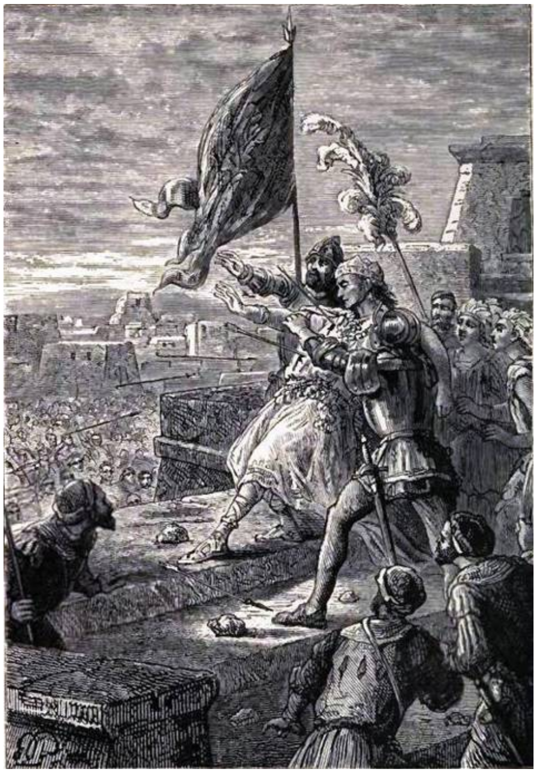

Death of Montezuma.

After so fatal an event, there was no more room to hope for peace with the Mexicans, and it became necessary to retire in haste, and at whatever cost, from a town in which the Spaniards were threatened with blockade and starvation. For this retreat Cortès was preparing in secret. He saw his troops each day more and more closely hemmed in, whilst several times he was forced himself to take his sword in his hand and to fight like a common soldier. Solis even relates, but upon what authority is not known, that during an assault which was made upon one of the edifices commanding the Spanish quarter, two young Mexicans, recognizing Cortès, who was cheering on his soldiers, resolved to sacrifice themselves in the hope of killing the man who had been the author of their country's calamities. They approached him in a suppliant attitude, as though they would ask for quarter, then seizing him round the waist they dragged him towards the battlements, over which they threw themselves, hoping to drag him over with them. But thanks to his exceptional strength and agility Cortès managed to escape from their embrace, and these two brave Mexicans perished in their generous but vain attempt to save their country.

The retreat being determined upon, it was necessary to decide upon whether it should be carried out by night or by day. If in the daytime the enemy would be more easily resisted, any ambuscades which might be prepared would be more easily avoided, while they could better take precautions to repair any bridges broken by the Mexicans. On the other hand, it was known that the Indians will seldom attack an enemy after sunset, but what really decided Cortès in favour of a nocturnal retreat was, that a soldier who dabbled in astrology had declared to his comrades that success was certain if they acted in the night.

They therefore began their march at midnight. Besides the Spanish troops, Cortès had under his orders detachments from Tlascala, Zempoalla, and Cholula, which, notwithstanding the serious losses which had been sustained, still numbered 7000 men. Sandoval commanded the vanguard, and Cortès the centre, where were the cannon, baggage, and prisoners, amongst whom were a son and two daughters of Montezuma; Alvarado and Velasquez de Léon led the rearguard. With the army was carried a flying bridge, which had been constructed to throw over any gaps there might be in the causeway. Scarcely had the Spaniards debouched upon the dike leading to Tacuba, which was the shortest of all, when they were attacked in front, flank, and rear by solid masses of the enemy, whilst from a fleet of numberless canoes, a perfect hailstorm of stones and missiles fell upon them. Blinded and amazed, the allies knew not against whom to defend themselves first. The wooden bridge sank under the weight of the artillery and fighting men. Crowded together upon a narrow causeway where they could not use their fire-arms, deprived of their cavalry who had not room to act, mingled with the Indians in a hand-to-hand combat, not having strength to kill, and surrounded on all sides, the Spaniards and their allies gave way under the ever renewed numbers of the assailants. Officers and soldiers, infantry and cavalry, Spaniards and Tlascalans were confounded together, each defended himself to the best of his ability, without caring about discipline or the common safety.

All seemed lost, when Cortès with one hundred men succeeded in crossing the breach in the dike upon the mass of corpses which filled it up. He drew up his soldiers in order as they arrived, and putting himself at the head of those least severely wounded, plunged wedge-fashion into the mêlée, and succeeded in disengaging from it a portion of his men. Before day dawned all those who had succeeded in escaping from the massacre of the *noche triste*, as this terrible night was called, found themselves reunited at Tacuba. It was with eyes full of tears that Cortès passed in review his remaining soldiers, all covered with wounds, and took account of the losses which he had sustained; 4000 Indians, Tlascalans, and Cholulans, and nearly all the horses were killed, all the artillery and ammunition, as well as the greatest part of the baggage, were lost, and amongst the dead were several officers of distinction — Velasquez de Léon, Salcedo, Morla, Larès, and many others; one of those most dangerously hurt was Alvarado, but not one man, whether officer or soldier, was without a wound.

The fugitives did not delay at Tacuba, and by accident they took the road to Tlascala, where they did not know what reception might await them. Ever harassed by the Mexicans, the Spaniards were again obliged to give battle upon the plains of Otumba to a number of warriors, whom some historians reckon at two hundred thousand. Thanks to the presence of some cavalry soldiers who still remained to him, Cortès was able to overthrow all who were in front of him, and to reach a troop of persons whose high rank was easily discerned by their gilded plumes and luxurious costumes, amongst whom was the general bearing the standard. Accompanied by some horsemen, Cortès threw himself upon this group and was fortunate enough, or skilful enough, to overturn by a lance-thrust the Mexican general, who was then despatched by the sword by a soldier named Juan de Salamanca. From the moment when the standard disappeared the battle was gained, and the Mexicans, panic-stricken, fled hastily from the field of battle. “Never had the Spaniards incurred greater danger,” says Prescott, “and had it not been for the lucky star of Cortès, not one would have survived to transmit to posterity the history of the sanguinary battle of Otumba.” The booty was considerable, and sufficed in part, to indemnify the Spaniards for the loss they had sustained in leaving Mexico, for this army which they had just defeated was composed of the principal warriors of the nation, who, having been quite confident of success, had adorned themselves with their richest ornaments.

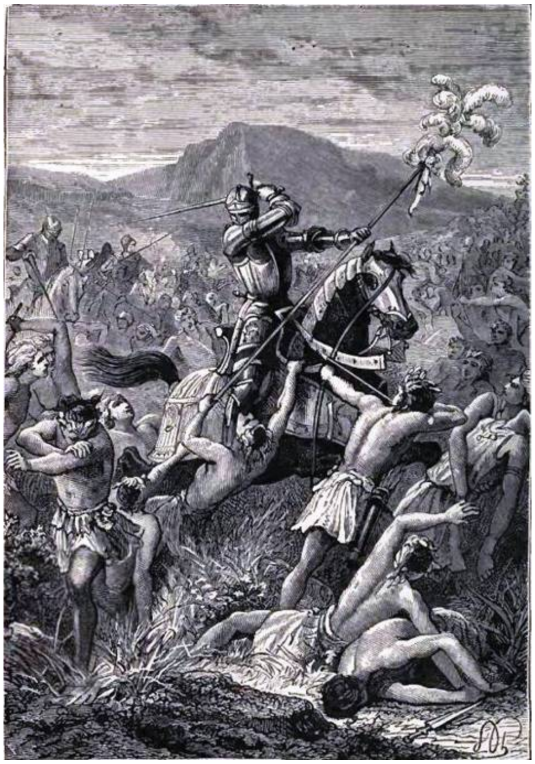

Cortès at the Battle of Otumba.

The day after the battle the Spaniards entered the territory of Tlascala. Bernal Diaz says, “I shall now call the attention of curious readers to the fact that when we returned to Mexico to the relief of Alvarado, we were in all 1300 men, including in that number ninety-seven horsemen, eighty cross-bowmen, and the same number armed with carbines; besides, we had more than 2000 Tlascalans, and much artillery. Our second entry into Mexico took place on St. John’s Day, 1520; our flight from the city was on the 10th day of the month of July following, and we fought the memorable battle of Otumba on the 14th day of this same month of July. And now I would draw attention to the number of men who were killed at Mexico during the passage of the causeways and bridges, in the battle of Otumba, and in the other encounters upon the route. I declare that in the space of five days 860 of our men were massacred, including ten of our soldiers and five Castilian women, who were killed in the village of Rustepèque; we lost besides 1200 Tlascalans during the same time. It is to be noticed also that if the number of dead in the troop of Narvaez were greater than in the troop of Cortès, it was because the former soldiers set out on the march laden with a quantity of gold, the weight of which hindered them from swimming, and from getting out of the trenches."

The troops with Cortès were reduced to four hundred and forty men, with twenty horses, twelve cross-bowmen, and seven carabineers; they had not a single charge of gunpowder, they were all wounded, lame, or maimed in the arms. It was the same number of men that had followed Cortès when he first entered Mexico, but how great a difference was there between that conquering troop, and the vanquished soldiers who now quitted the capital.

As they entered the Tlascalan territory Cortès recommended his men, and especially those of Narvaez, not to do anything which could vex the natives, the common safety depending upon not irritating the only allies which remained to them. Happily the fears which had arisen as to the fidelity of the Tlascalans proved groundless. They gave the Spaniards a most sympathizing welcome, and their thoughts seemed to be wholly bent upon avenging the death of their brothers massacred by the Mexicans. While in their capital Cortès heard of the loss of two more detachments, but these reverses, grave as they were, did not discourage him; he had under his orders troops inured to war and faithful allies, Vera-Cruz was intact, he might once more reckon upon his good fortune. But before undertaking a new campaign or entering upon another siege, help must be sought and preparations made, and with these objects in view the general set to work. He sent four ships to Hispaniola to enrol volunteers and purchase powder and ammunition, and meanwhile he caused trees to be cut down in the mountains of Tlascala, and with the wood thus obtained twelve brigantines were constructed, which were to be carried in pieces to the Lake of Mexico, to be launched there at the moment when needed.

After suppressing some attempts at mutiny amongst the soldiers, in which those who had come with Narvaez were the most to blame, Cortès again marched forwards, and, with the help of the Tlascalans, first attacked the people of Tepeaca and of other neighbouring provinces, a measure which had the advantage of exercising anew his own troops in war, and of training his allies. While this was going on, two brigantines bringing ammunition and reinforcements fell into the hands of Cortès; these ships had been sent to Narvaez by Velasquez, in ignorance of his misadventures; at this time also some Spaniards sent by Francis de Garay, governor of Jamaica, joined the army. In consequence of these reinforcements the troops with Cortès, after he had rid himself of several partisans of Narvaez with whom he was dissatisfied, amounted to five hundred infantry, of whom eighty carried muskets, and forty horse-soldiers. With this small army, and with one thousand Tlascalans, Cortès set out once more for Mexico on the 28th of December, 1520, six months after he had been forced to abandon the city. This campaign had for its theatre countries already described, and must therefore be passed over somewhat rapidly here, notwithstanding the interest attaching to it; to enter fully into the history of the conquest of Mexico would not be in accordance with the primary object of this work.

After the death of Montezuma his brother Quetlavaca was raised to the throne, and he adopted all the measures of precaution compatible with Aztec strategic science. But he died of the smallpox, the sad gift of the Spaniards to the New World, at the very moment when his brilliant qualities of foresight and bravery were the most needed by his country. His successor was Guatimozin, the nephew of Montezuma, a man distinguished by his talents and courage.

Cortès had no sooner entered the Mexican territory than fighting began. He speedily captured the town of Tezcuco, which was situated at twenty miles' distance, upon the edge of the great central lake, that lake upon whose waters the Spaniards were to see an imposing flotilla floating three months later. At this time a fresh conspiracy, which had for its object the assassination of Cortès and his principal officers, was discovered, and the chief culprit executed. At this moment fate seemed in every way to smile upon Cortès; he had just received the news of the arrival of fresh reinforcements at Vera-Cruz, and the greater part of the towns under the dominion of Guatimozin had submitted to the force of his arms. The actual siege of Mexico began in the month of May, 1521, and continued with alternate success and reverse until the day when the brigantines were launched upon the water of the lake. The Mexicans did not hesitate to attack them; from four to five thousand canoes, each bearing two men, covered the lake and advanced to the assault of the Spanish vessels, which carried in all nearly three hundred men. These nine brigantines were provided with cannon, and soon dispersed or sunk the enemy's fleet, who thenceforth left them in undisputed possession of the water. But this success and certain other advantages gained by Cortès had no very marked consequences, and the siege dragged slowly on, until the general made up his mind to capture the town by force. Unfortunately the officer who was charged with protecting the line of retreat by the causeways while the Spaniards were making their way into the town, abandoned his post, thinking it unworthy of his valour, and went to join in the combat. Guatimozin was informed of the fault which had been committed, and at once took advantage of it. His troops attacked the Spaniards on all sides with such fury that numbers of them were killed in a short time, while sixty-two of the soldiers fell alive into the hands of the Mexicans, a fate which Cortès, who was severely wounded in the thigh, narrowly escaped sharing. During the night following, the great temple of the war-god was illuminated in sign of triumph, and the Spaniards listened in profound sadness to the beating of the great drum. From the position they occupied they could witness the end of the prisoners, their unfortunate countrymen, whose breasts were opened and their hearts torn out, and whose dead bodies were hurled down the steps; they were then torn in pieces by the Aztecs, who quarrelled over the pieces with the object of using them for a horrible festival.

This terrible defeat caused the siege to go on slowly, until the day came when three parts of the city having been taken or destroyed, Guatimozin was obliged by his councillors to quit Mexico and to set out for the mainland, where he reckoned upon organizing his resistance, but the boat which carried him being seized he was made prisoner. In his captivity he was destined to display much greater dignity and strength of character than his uncle Montezuma had done. From this time all resistance ceased, and Cortès might take possession of the half-destroyed capital. After a heroic resistance, in which 120,000 Mexicans according to some accounts, but 240,000 according to others, had perished, after a siege which had lasted not less than seventy days, Mexico, and with the city all the rest of the empire, succumbed, less indeed to the blows dealt against it by the Spaniards than to the long-standing hatred and the revolts of the subjugated people, and to the jealousy of the neighbouring states, fated soon to regret the yoke which they had so deliberately shaken off.

Contempt and rage soon succeeded amongst the Spaniards to the intoxication of success; the immense riches upon which they had reckoned either had no existence, or they had been thrown into the lake. Cortès found it impossible to calm the malcontents, and was obliged to allow the emperor and his principal minister to be put to the torture. Some historians, and notably Gomara, report that whilst the Spaniards were stirring the fire which burnt below the gridiron upon which the two victims were extended, the minister turned his head towards his master and apparently begged him to speak, in order to put an end to their tortures; but that Guatimozin reproved this single moment of weakness by these words, “And I, am I assisting at some pleasure, or am I in the bath?” an answer which has been poetically changed into, “And I, do I lie upon roses?”

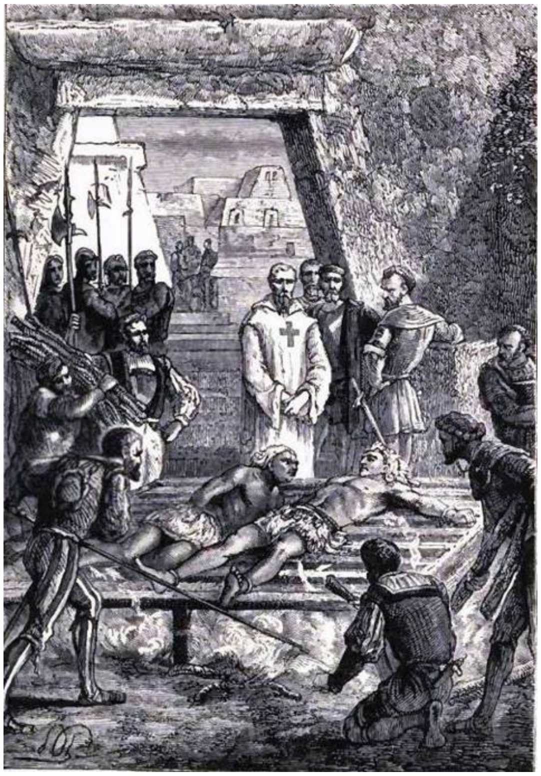

The Spaniards stir the fire burning below the gridiron.

The historians of the conquest of Mexico have usually stopped short at the taking of Mexico, but it remains for us to speak of some other expeditions undertaken by Cortès with different aims, but which resulted in casting quite a new light upon some portions of Central America; besides we could not leave this hero, who played so large a part in the history of the New World and in the development of its civilization, without giving some details of the end of his life.

With the fall of the capital was involved, properly speaking, that of the Mexican empire; if there were still some resistance, as notably there was in the province of Oaxaca, it was of an isolated character, and a few detachments of troops sufficed to reduce to submission the last remaining opponents of the Spaniards, terrified as the Mexicans were by the punishments which had been dealt out to the people of Panuco, who had revolted. At the same time ambassadors were sent by the people of the distant countries of the empire, to convince themselves of the reality of that wonderful event, the taking of Mexico, to behold the ruins of the abhorred town, and to tender their submission to the conquerors.

Cortès was at length confirmed in the position he held after incidents which would take too long to relate, and which caused him to say, “It has been harder for me to fight against my countrymen than against the Aztecs.” It now remained to him to organize the conquered country, and he began by establishing the seat of government at Mexico, which he rebuilt. He attracted Spaniards to the city by granting them concessions of lands, and the Indians, by allowing them at first to remain under the authority of their native chiefs, although he speedily reduced them all, except the Tlascalans, to the condition of slaves, by the vicious system of *repartimientos*, in vogue in the Spanish colonies. But if it is justifiable to reproach Cortès with having held cheaply the political rights of the Indians, it must be conceded that he manifested the most laudable solicitude for their spiritual well-being. To further this object he brought over some Franciscans, who by their zeal and charity in a short time gained the veneration of the natives, and in a space of twenty years brought about the conversion of the whole population.

At the same time Cortès sent some troops into the state of Mechoacan, who penetrated as far as the Pacific Ocean, and as they returned visited some of the rich provinces situated in the north. Cortès founded settlements in all the parts of the country which appeared to him advantageous: at Zacatula upon the shores of the Pacific, at Coliman in Mechoacan, at Santesteban near Tampico, at Medellin near Vera-Cruz, &c.

Immediately after the pacification of the country, Cortès entrusted Christoval de Olid with the command of a considerable force, in order to establish a colony in Honduras, and at the same time Olid was to explore the southern coast of that province, and to seek for a strait which should form a communication between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. But, carried away by the pride of command, Olid had no sooner reached his destination than he declared himself independent, whereupon Cortès immediately despatched one of his relations to arrest the culprit, and set out himself, accompanied by Guatimozin, at the head of one hundred horsemen and fifty foot-soldiers, on the 12th of October, 1524. After crossing the provinces of Goatzacoalco, Tabasco, and Yucatan, and enduring all kinds of privations in the course of a most trying march over marshy and shifting ground, and across a perfect ocean of undulating forests, the detachment was approaching the province of Aculan, when Cortès was told of the existence of a plot, formed, as was said, by Guatimozin and the principal Indian chiefs. Its aim was to seize the first opportunity to massacre both officers and soldiers, after which the march to Honduras was to be continued, the settlements were to be destroyed, and then there was to be a return to Mexico, where during a general rising there would doubtless be small difficulty experienced in getting rid of the invaders. Guatimozin in vain protested his innocence, in which there is every reason to believe; he was hung, as well as several of the Aztec nobles, upon the branches of a *Ceyba* tree, which shaded the road. Bernal Diaz del Castillo says, “The execution of Guatimozin was very unjust, and we were all agreed in condemning it.” But Prescott says, “If Cortès had consulted but his own interest and his renown, he should have spared him, for he was the living trophy of his victory, as a man keeps gold in the lining of his coat.”

At length the Spaniards reached Aculan, a flourishing town, where they refreshed themselves after their journey in excellent quarters; when they set out again, it was in the direction of the Lake of Peten, a part of the country where the population was easily converted to Christianity. We shall not dwell upon the sufferings and misery which tried the expedition in these sparsely-peopled countries, until it arrived at San Gil de Buena-Vista, upon the Golfo Dolce, where Cortès, after receiving the news of the execution of Olid and the re-establishment of the central authority, embarked upon his return to Mexico. At this time he entrusted to Alvarado the command of three hundred infantry, one hundred and sixty cavalry, and four cannon, with a body of Indian auxiliaries, with which he set out for the south of Mexico, to conquer Guatemala. He reduced to submission the provinces of Zacatulan, Tehuantepec, Soconusco, Utlatlan, and laid the foundations of the town of Guatemala la Vieja; when, some time afterwards he made a voyage to Spain, he was named by Charles V. governor of the countries which he had conquered.

Three years had not expired after the conquest, before a territory 1200 miles in length upon the sea-board of the Atlantic, and 1500 miles upon that of the Pacific, had submitted to the Castilian crown, and with but few exceptions, was in a state of perfect tranquillity.

The return of Cortès to Mexico from the useless expedition to Honduras — which had wasted so much time and caused almost as great sufferings to the Spaniards as the conquest of Mexico — had taken place but a few days, when he received the news that he was temporarily replaced by another commander, and was invited to repair to Spain to exculpate himself from certain charges. He was not in any haste to comply with this order, hoping that it might be revoked, but his indefatigable calumniators and his implacable enemies, both in Spain and Mexico, preferred accusations against him after such a manner, that he found himself obliged to go and make his defence, to state his wrongs, and boldly to claim the approval of his conduct. Cortès therefore started accompanied by his friend Sandoval, as well as by Tapia und several Aztec chiefs, amongst whom was a son of Montezuma. He disembarked at Palos, in May, 1528, at the same place where Columbus had landed thirty-five years before, and he was welcomed with the same enthusiasm and rejoicings as the discoverer of America had been; here Cortès met with Pizarro, then at the outset of his career, who was come to solicit the support of the Spanish government. Cortès afterwards set out for Toledo, where the court then was. The mere announcement of his return had produced a complete change in public opinion. His unexpected arrival at once contradicted the idea that he harboured any projects of revolt and independence. Charles V. saw that public feeling would be outraged at the thought of punishing a man who had added its greatest gem to the crown of Castille, and so the journey of Cortès became one continual triumph in the midst of crowds of people greater than had been ever known before. “The houses and streets of the large towns and of the villages,” says Prescott, “were filled with spectators impatient to contemplate the hero whose single arm might be said, in some sort, to have conquered an empire for Spain, and who, to borrow the language of an old historian, marched in all the pomp and glory, not of a great vassal, but of an independent monarch."

Charles V. after having granted several audiences to Cortès, and bestowed upon him those particular marks of favour which are termed important by courtiers, deigned to accept from him the empire which he had conquered for him, and the magnificent presents which he brought. But he considered that he had fully recompensed him when he had given Cortès the title of Marquis della Valle de Oajaca, and the post of captain-general of New Spain, without, however, restoring to him the civil government, a power which had been formerly delegated to him by the junta of Vera-Cruz. Cortès, after his marriage with the niece of the Duke de Béjar, who belonged to one of the first families in Spain, accompanied the emperor, who was on his way to Italy, to the port of embarkation; but the general, soon becoming tired of the frivolities of a court, so little in accordance with the active habits of his past life, set out again for Mexico in 1530, and landed at Villa-Rica. After his arrival he underwent some annoyance caused by the Audienza, which had exercised the power in his absence, and which had instituted law-suits against him, and he also found himself in conflict with the new civil junta on the subject of military affairs. The Marquis della Valle withdrew himself to Cuernavaca, where he had immense estates, and busied himself with agriculture. He was the means of introducing the sugar-cane and the mulberry into Mexico, he also encouraged the cultivation of hemp and flax, and the breeding, on a large scale, of merino sheep.

But this peaceable life without adventures could not long satisfy the enterprising spirit of Cortès. In 1532 and 1533, he equipped two squadrons destined to make voyages of discovery in the north-west of the Pacific. The latter expedition reached the southern extremity of the peninsula of California without attaining the object sought, namely the discovery of a strait uniting the Pacific with the Atlantic. Cortès himself met with no better success in 1536 in the Vermilion Sea (Gulf of California). Three years later a concluding expedition, of which Cortès gave the command to Ulloa, penetrated to the farthest extremity of the gulf, and then, sailing along the exterior side of the peninsula, reached the 29° of north latitude. From thence the chief of the expedition sent back one of his ships to Cortès, while the rest proceeded northwards, but from that time nothing more is heard of them. Such was the unhappy result of the expeditions of Cortès, which, while they did not bring him in a single ducat, cost him not less than 300,000 gold castellanos. But they at least had the result of making known the coast of the Pacific Ocean, from the Bay of Panama as far as Colorado. The tour of the Californian Peninsula was made, and it was thus discovered that what had been imagined to be an island, was in reality a part of the continent. The whole of the Vermilion Sea, or Sea of Cortès, as the Spaniards justly named it, was carefully explored, and it was ascertained that, instead of having an outlet as was supposed to the north, it was in reality only a gulf deeply hollowed into the continent.

Cortès had not been able to fit out these expeditions without coming into antagonism with the viceroy Don Antonio de Mendoza, whom the emperor had sent to Mexico, an appointment which had wounded the feelings of the Marquis della Valle. Wearied with these continual, annoyances, and indignant at finding his prerogative as captain-general, if not absolutely ignored, at least perpetually questioned, Cortès left Mexico, and once more set out for Spain. But this journey was not destined at all to resemble the first. Grown old, disgusted with life, and betrayed by fortune, the “conquistador” had no longer anything to expect from government. He had not to wait long before receiving proof of this; one day he pressed through the crowd which surrounded the emperor’s coach, and mounted upon the step of the door. Charles V. pretended not to recognize him, and asked who this man was. Cortès answered proudly, “It is the man who has given you more States than your father left you Towns.” By this time public interest was diverted from Mexico, which had not yielded as much as had been expected from it, and was centred upon the marvellous riches of Peru. Cortès was, however, received with honour by the supreme council of the Indies, and permitted to state his complaints before it, but the debates upon the subject were endlessly drawn out, and he could obtain no redress. In 1541, during the disastrous expedition of Charles V. against Algiers, Cortès, who was serving in it as a volunteer, but whose counsels had not been listened to, had the misfortune to lose three great carved emeralds, jewels which would have sufficed for the ransom of an empire. Upon his return he renewed his solicitations, but with the same want of success. His grief over this injustice and these repeated disappointments was so deep, that his health suffered severely; he died far from the scene of his exploits, on the 10th of November, 1547, at Castilleja de la Cuesta, at the very moment when he was making preparations to return to America.

“He was a true knight errant,” says Prescott; “of all that glorious troop of adventurers which the Spain of the sixteenth century sent forth to a career of discovery and conquest, there was not one more deeply imbued with the spirit of romantic enterprise than Fernando Cortès. Strife was his delight, and he loved to attempt an enterprise by its most difficult side.”...

This passion for the romantic might have reduced the conqueror of Mexico to the part of a common adventurer, but Cortès was certainly a profound politician and a great captain, if one is justified in giving this name to a man who accomplished great actions by his own unassisted genius. There is no other example in history of so great an enterprise having been carried to a successful end with such inadequate means. It may be said with truth that Cortès conquered Mexico with his own resources alone. His influence over the minds of his soldiers was the natural result of their confidence in his ability, but it must be attributed also to his popular manners, which rendered him eminently fit to lead a band of adventurers. When he had attained to a higher rank, if Cortès displayed more of pomp, his veterans at least continued on the same terms of intimacy with him as before. In finishing this portrait of the "conquistador," we shall quote the upright and veracious Bernal Diaz, with whose sentiments we fully agree. "He preferred his name of Cortès to all the titles by which he might be addressed, and he had good reasons for it, for the name of Cortès is as famous in our days as that of Cesar amongst the Romans, or Hannibal amongst the Carthaginians." The old chronicler ends by a touch which vividly depicts the religious spirit of the sixteenth century: "Perhaps he was destined to receive his reward only in a better world, and I fully believe it to be so; for he was an honest knight, very sincere in his devotions to the Virgin, to the Apostle St. Peter, and to all the saints."

III.
THE CONQUERORS OF CENTRAL AMERICA.

The triple alliance — Francisco Pizarro and his brothers — Don Diego d'Almagro — First attempts — Peru, its extent, people, and kings — Capture of Atahualpa, his ransom and death — Pedro d'Alvarado — Almagro in Chili — Strife among the conquerors — Trial and execution of Almagro — Expeditions of Gonzalo Pizarro and Orellana — Assassination of Francisco Pizarro — Rebellion and execution of his brother Gonzalo.

The information which had been gained by Balboa as to the riches of the countries situated to the south of Panama had scarcely become known to the Spaniards before several expeditions were organized to attempt the conquest of them. But all had failed, either from the means used being insufficient, or from the commanders not being equal to the greatness of the undertaking. It must be confessed also that the localities explored by these first adventurers — these pioneers, as they would be called now-a-days — did not at all come up to what Spanish greed had expected from them, and for this reason, that all the attempts had been hitherto made upon what was then called "Terra Firma," a country pre-eminently unhealthy, mountainous, marshy, and covered with forests; the inhabitants were few, but of so warlike a disposition that they had added another obstacle to all those which nature had strewn with so prodigal a hand in the path of the invaders. Little by little, therefore, the enthusiasm had cooled, and the wonderful narratives of Balboa were mentioned only to be turned into ridicule.

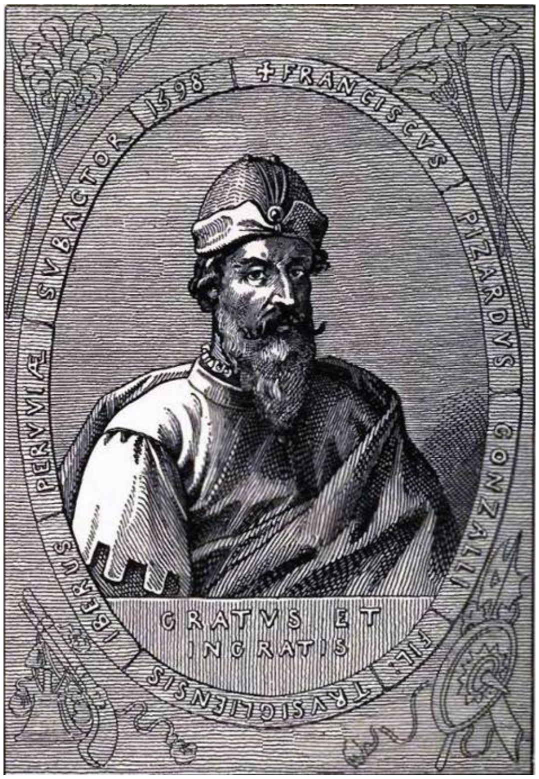
✠ FRANCISCVS PIZARRVS GONZALI FIL. TRVSIOLLENSIS IBERVS PERVVIÆ SVBACTOR 1598
GRATVS ET INGRATIS

Francisco Pizarro.
From an old print.

There lived, however, in Panama a man well able to weigh the truth of the reports which had been circulated concerning the richness of the countries bathed by the Pacific; this man was Francisco Pizarro, who had accompanied Muñez de Balboa to the southern sea, and who now associated with himself two other adventurers, Diego de Almagro and Ferdinand de Luque. A few words must be said about the chiefs of the enterprise. Francisco Pizarro, born near Truxillo between the years 1471 and 1478, was the natural son of a certain Captain Gonzalo Pizarro, who had taught the boy nothing but to take care of pigs; he was soon tired of this occupation, and took advantage of his having allowed one of the animals who were in his charge to stray, not to return to the paternal roof, where he was accustomed to be cruelly beaten for the smallest peccadillo. The young Pizarro enlisted, and after passing some years amidst the Italian wars, he followed Christopher Columbus to Hispaniola in 1510. He served there with distinction, and also in Cuba; afterwards he accompanied Hojeda to Darien, discovered, as has been already mentioned, the Pacific, with Balboa, and after the execution of the latter, he assisted Pedrarias Davila, whose favourite he had become, in the conquest of all the country known as Castille d’Or.

While Pizarro was an illegitimate child, Diego de Almagro was a foundling, picked up according to some in 1475 at Aldea del Rey, but according to others at Almagro, from which circumstance, as they maintain, he derived his name. He was educated in the midst of soldiers, and while still young went to America, where he had succeeded in amassing a small fortune.

Ferdinand de Luque was a rich ecclesiastic of Tobago, who exercised the calling of a schoolmaster at Panama. The youngest of these adventurers was by this time more than fifty years of age, and Garcilasso de la Vega relates that upon their project being known, they became the objects of general derision; Ferdinand de Luque was the most laughed at, and was called by no other name than *Hernando el Loco*, Ferdinand the Fool. The terms of partnership were soon agreed upon between these three men, of whom two at least were without fear, if they were not all three without reproach. Luque furnished money needed for the armament of the vessels and the pay of the soldiers, and Almagro bore an equal part in the expense, but Pizarro, who possessed nothing but his sword, was to pay his contribution in another manner. It was he who took the command of the first attempt, upon which we shall dwell in some detail, because it was then that the perseverance and inflexible obstinacy of the “conquistador” first came fully into sight.

One of the historians of the conquest of Peru, Augustin de Zarate, relates as follows: — ”Having then asked and obtained the permission of Pedro Arias d’Avila, Francisco Pizarro after much trouble equipped a vessel upon which he embarked with 140 men. At the distance of 150 miles from Panama he discovered a small and poor province named Peru, which caused the same name to be henceforward improperly bestowed upon all the country which was discovered along that coast for the space of more than 3600 miles in length. Passing onwards he discovered another country, which the Spaniards called *the burnt people*. The Indians slew so many of his men that he was constrained to retire in great disorder to the country of Chinchama, which is not far distant from the place whence he had started. Almagro, however, who had remained at Panama, fitted out a ship there, upon which he embarked with seventy Spaniards, and descended the coast as far as the River San Juan, 300 miles from Panama. Not having met with Pizarro, he went back northwards as far as *the burnt people*, where, having ascertained by certain indications that Pizarro had been there, he landed his men. But the Indians, puffed up by the victory which they had gained over Pizarro, resisted bravely, forced the entrenchments with which Almagro had covered his position, and obliged him to re-embark. He returned therefore, still following the coast-line until he arrived at Chinchama, where he found Francisco Pizarro. They were much rejoiced at meeting again, and having added to their followers some fresh soldiers whom they had levied, they found their troops amounted to 200 Spaniards, and once more they descended the coast. They suffered so much from scarcity of provisions and from the attacks of the Indians, that Don Diego returned to Panama to collect more recruits and to obtain provisions. He took back with him eighty men, with whom and with those who remained to them, they went as far as the country called Catamez, a country moderately peopled and where they found abundance of provisions. They noticed that the Indians of these parts who attacked them and made war against them, had their faces studded with nails of gold inserted in holes which they had made expressly for receiving these ornaments. Diego de Almagro returned once again to Panama, whilst his companion waited for him and for the reinforcements which he was to bring with him, in a small island called Cock Island, where he suffered much from the scarcity of all the necessaries of life.”

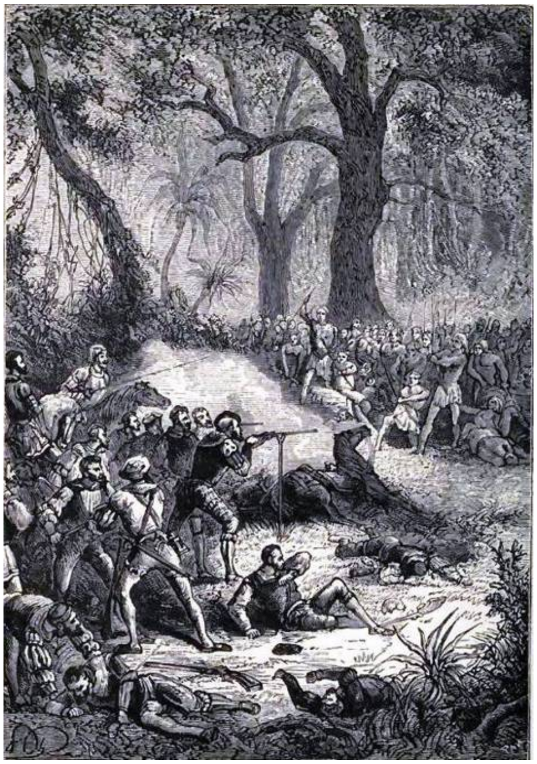

The Indians kill many of the Spaniards.

Upon his arrival in Panama, Almagro could not obtain permission from Los Rios, the successor of Avila, to make new levies, for he had no right, Los

Rios said, to allow a greater number of people to go and perish uselessly in a rash enterprise; he even sent a boat to Cock Island to bring away Pizarro and his companions. But such a decision could not be pleasing to Almagro and De Luque. It meant expense thrown away; and it meant the annihilation of the hopes which the sight of the ornaments of gold and silver of the inhabitants of Catamez had caused them to entertain. They sent therefore a trusty person to Pizarro, to recommend him to persevere in his resolution, and to refuse to obey the orders of the Governor of Panama. But Pizarro in vain held out the most seductive promises; the remembrance of the fatigues which had been endured was too recent, and all his companions except twelve abandoned him.

With these intrepid men, whose names have been preserved, and amongst whom was Garcia de Xerès, one of the historians of the expedition, Pizarro retired to an uninhabited island at a greater distance from the coast, to which he gave the name of Gorgona. There the Spaniards lived miserably on mangles, fish, and shell-fish, and awaited for five months the succour that Almagro and De Luque were to send them. At length, vanquished by the unanimous protestations of the whole colony, — who were indignant that people whose only crime was that they had not despaired of success, should be left to perish miserably and as though they were malefactors, — Los Rios sent to Pizarro a small vessel to bring him back. With the object of presenting no temptation to Pizarro to make use of this ship to renew his expedition, not a single soldier was placed on board of her. At the sight of the help which had arrived, and oblivious of all their privations, the thirteen adventurers thought of nothing but persuading the sailors who came to seek them to participate in their own hopes. Whereupon, instead of starting again on the route to Panama, they sailed all together, towards the south-east, in spite of contrary winds and currents, until, after having discovered the Island of St. Clara, they arrived at the port of Tumbez, situated beyond the

3° of south latitude, where they saw a magnificent temple and a palace belonging to the Incas, the sovereigns of the country.

The country was populous and fairly well-cultivated, but what proved beyond all else seductive to the Spaniards, and made them think that they had reached the marvellous countries of which so much had been said, was the sight of so great an abundance of gold and silver, that these metals were employed not only as finery and ornament by the inhabitants, but also for making vases and common utensils.

Pizarro caused the interior of the country to be explored by Pietro de Candia and Alonzo de Molina, who brought back an enthusiastic description of it, and he caused some gold vases to be given up to him, as well as some llamas, a quadruped domesticated by the Peruvians. He took two natives on board his vessel, to whom he proposed to teach the Spanish language, and to use them as interpreters when he should return to the country. He anchored successively at Payta, Saugarata, and in the Bay of Santa-Cruz, of which the sovereign, Capillana, received the strangers with such friendly demonstrations, that several of them were unwilling to re-embark. After having sailed down the coast as far as Porto Santo, Pizarro set out on his return to Panama, where he arrived after three whole years spent in dangerous explorations, which had completely ruined De Luque and Almagro.

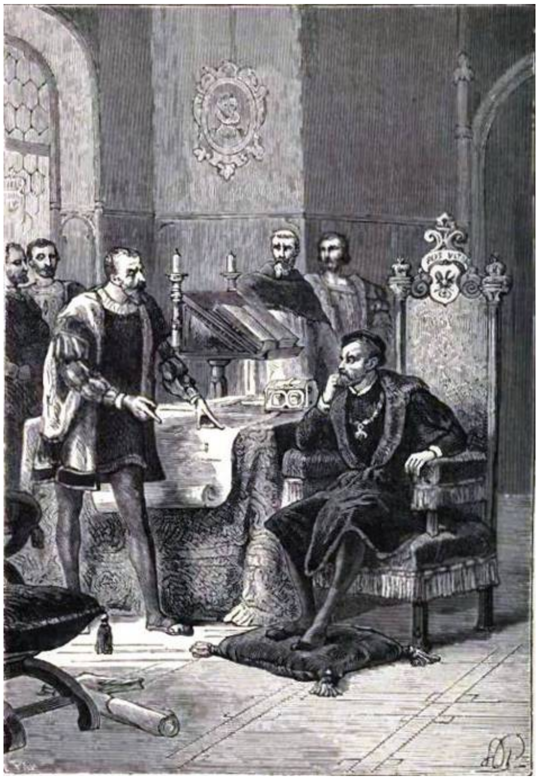

Pizarro received by Charles V.

Pizarro resolved to apply to Charles V. before undertaking the conquest of the country which he had discovered, for he could not obtain leave from Los Rios to engage fresh adventurers; so he borrowed the sum required for the voyage, and in 1528 he went to Spain to inform the emperor of the work which he had undertaken. He painted the picture of the countries that were to be conquered in the most pleasing light, and as a reward for his labours the titles of governor, captain-general, and alguazil-major of Peru were bestowed upon him and his heirs in perpetuity. At the same time he was ennobled, and a pension of 1000 crowns was bestowed upon him. His jurisdiction, independent of the governor of Panama, was to extend over a tract of 600 miles along the coast to the south of the Santiago river; it was to be called New Castille, and he was to be the governor; concessions that cost nothing to Spain, for Pizarro had yet to conquer the country. On his side he undertook to raise a body of 250 men, and to provide himself with the necessary ships, arms, and ammunition. Pizarro then repaired to Truxillo, where he persuaded his three brothers Ferdinand, Juan, and Gonzalo to accompany him, as well as one of his half-brothers Martin d’Alcantara. He took advantage of his stay in his native town, and at Caceres, to try to raise recruits, both there and throughout Estramadura; they did not, however, come forward in large numbers, in spite of the title of *Caballeros de la Espado dorada* which he promised to bestow upon all who would serve under him. Then he returned to Panama, where affairs were not going so smoothly as he had hoped. He had succeeded in getting De Luque named Bishop *protector de los Indios*; but for Almagro, whose talents he knew, and whose ambition he feared, he had only asked that he should be ennobled and a gratuity of 500 ducats bestowed upon him, with the government of a fortress which was to be built at Tumbez. Almagro refused to take part in this new expedition; he was not pleased with the meagre portion given to him after spending all his money on the earlier expeditions; he wished now to organize one on his own account. It required all Pizarro’s address, aided by the promise to give up to Almagro the office of *adelantado*, to appease him and make him consent to renew the old partnership.

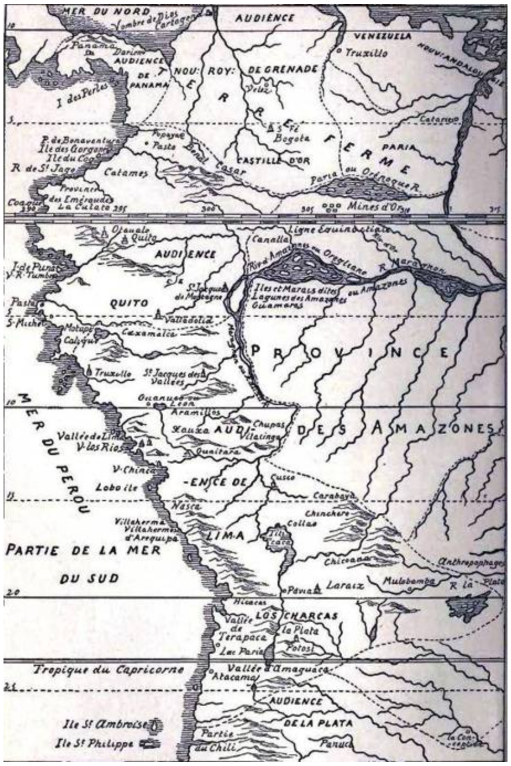
MER DU NORD
Nombre de Dios
Cartogena
AUDIENCE
VENEZUELA
Truxillo
NOUV. ANDALOUSIE
Panama
Darien
AUDIENCE DE PANAMA
NOU: ROY: DE GRENADE
T E R R E F E R M E
Velez
I des Perles
Catarieo
S. Fé Bogota
Popayne
Pasto
P. de Bonaventure
Ile des Gorgone
Ile du Coq
R de St Jago
Catames
Benal Casar
CASTILLE D'OR
PARIA
Paria ou Orenoque R.
Province des Emeraudes
La Culata
Mines d'Or
Otavalo
Quito
Ligne Equinoctiale
Canella
AUDIENCE
QUITO
I. de Puna
V. R. Tumbes
Rio d Amazones ou Oreglane
R Maragnon
St Jacques de Montagne
Iles et Marais dites Lagunes des Amazones
ou Amazones
Guamaras
Pasto
S. Michel
Valladolid
Motupe
Caxamalca
Calsqur
P R O V I N C E
Truxillo
St Jacques des Vallees
Guanuco ou Leon
Aramillos
MER DU PEROU
Xauxa
AUDI-
Chupas
Vilcatinga
D E S A M A Z O N E S
Vallée de Lima
V. los Rios
Quanitara
V. Chinca
-ENCE DE
Cusco
Lobo ile
Carabaya
Nasca
Chinchero
Villaherma
Villahermosa d'Arequipa
LIMA
Collao
Titicaca
PARTIE DE LA MER DU SUD
Chicoana
Anthropophages
Pavia
Laraix
Mulobamba
R la Plata
Hicacas
LOS CHARCAS
Vallée de Terapaca
la Plata
Potosi
Lac Paria
Tropique du Capricorne
Vallée d'Amaguaca
Atacama
AUDIENCE DE LA PLATA
Ile St Ambroise
Ile St Philippe
Partie du Chili
Panuco
la Conception
10
5
290
295
300
305
310
315
10
15
20
25

Map of Peru.

The resources of the three partners were so limited at this time, that they could only get together three small ships and 124 soldiers, of whom thirty-six were horse-soldiers; the expedition set out in February, 1531, under the command of Pizarro and his four brothers, whilst Almagro remained at Panama to organize an expedition of supplies. At the end of thirteen days' sailing, and after having been carried by a storm 300 miles more to the south than he had intended, Pizarro was forced to disembark both men and horses on the shores of the Bay of San Mateo, and to follow the line of the coast on land. This march was a difficult one in a very mountainous country, thinly-peopled, and intersected by rivers which had to be crossed at their mouths. At last a place called Coaqui was reached, where was found a great booty, which decided Pizarro to send back two of his ships. They carried to Panama and Nicaragua spoils to the amount of 30,000 *castellanos*, as well as a great number of emeralds, a rich booty, which would, according to Pizarro, determine many adventurers to come and join him.

Then the conqueror continued his march southwards as far as Porto-Viejo, where he was joined by Sebastian Benalcazar and Juan Fernandez, who brought him twelve horsemen and thirty foot-soldiers. The effect which had been produced in Mexico by the sight of the horses and the reports of the fire-arms was repeated in Peru, and Pizarro was able to reach the Island of Puna in the Gulf of Guayaquil without encountering any resistance. But the islanders were more numerous and more warlike than their brothers of the mainland, and for six months they valiantly resisted all the attacks of the Spaniards. Although Pizarro had received some aid from Nicaragua, brought by Ferdinand de Soto, and although he had beheaded the cacique Tonalla and sixteen of the principal chiefs, he could not overcome their resistance. He was, therefore, obliged to regain the continent, where the maladies peculiar to the country tried his companions so cruelly, that he was forced to stay three months at Tumbez, exposed to the perpetual attacks of the natives. From Tumbez he went next to the Rio Puira, discovered the harbour of Payta, the best on this coast, and founded the colony of San-Miguel, at the mouth of the Chilo, in order that vessels coming from Panama might find a safe shelter. It was here that Pizarro received some envoys from Huascar, who informed him of the revolt of Atahualpa, the brother of Huascar, and asked his aid.

At the period when the Spaniards landed to conquer Peru, it extended along the shore of the Pacific Ocean for 1500 miles, and stretched into the interior as far as the imposing chain of the Andes. Originally the population was divided into savage and barbarous tribes, having no idea of civilization, and living in a perpetual state of warfare with one another. For many centuries affairs had continued in the same state, and there appeared no presage of the coming of a better era, when, on the shores of Lake Titicaca, there appeared to the Indians a man and woman, who pretended that they were the Children of the Sun. They called themselves Manco-Capac and Mama-Oello, and were of majestic appearance; according to Garcilasso de la Vega, towards the middle of the twelfth century they united together a number of wandering tribes, and laid the foundations of the town of Cuzco. Manco-Capac had taught the men agriculture and mechanical arts, whilst Mama-Oello instructed the women in spinning and weaving. When Manco-Capac had satisfied these first needs of all societies, he framed laws for his subjects, and constituted a regular political state. It was thus that the dominion of the Incas or Lords of Peru was established. At first their empire was limited to the neighbourhood of Cuzco, but under their successors it rapidly increased, and extended from the Tropic of Capricorn to the Pearl Islands, a length of thirty degrees. The power of the incas was as absolute as that of the ancient Asiatic sovereigns. “Also,” says Zarate, “there was perhaps no other country in the world where the obedience and submission of the subjects was carried further. The incas were to them quasi-divinities; they had but to place a thread drawn from the royal head-fillet in the hands of any one, and the man so distinguished, was certain to be everywhere respected and obeyed, and to find such absolute deference paid to the king’s order which he carried, that he could alone exterminate a whole province without any assistance from soldiers, and cause to be put to death all the inhabitants, both male and female, because at the mere sight of this thread, taken from the royal crown, the people voluntarily and without any resistance, offered themselves up to die.” However, the old chroniclers all agree in saying that this unlimited power was always used by the incas for the well-being of their subjects. Out of a series of twelve kings, who in succession sat on the throne of Peru, there was not one who did not leave behind him the memory of a just prince adored by his subjects. Should we not search in vain through the annals of any other country in the world for facts analogous to these? Must it not be regretted that the Spaniards should have brought war with all its attendant horrors, and the maladies and vices of a different climate, along with what they in their pride called civilization, amongst a rich and happy people, whose descendants, impoverished and debased as they are, have not even the recollection of their ancient prosperity to console them in their irremediable decay?

“The Peruvians,” says Michelet in his admirable *Précis d’Histoire Moderne*, “handed down the principal facts to posterity by knots, which they made in ropes. They had obelisks and exact gnomons to mark the equinoxes and solstices. Their year consisted of 365 days. They had erected prodigies of architecture, and they carved statues with amazing art. They formed the most polished and industrious nation of the New World.”

The inca Huayna-Capac, father of Atahualpa, under whom this vast empire was destroyed, had done much to increase and embellish it. This inca, who conquered all the country of Quito, had made, by the hands of his soldiers and of the vanquished people, a great road 1500 miles in length from Cuzco to Quito, across precipices which had been filled up and mountains which had been levelled. Relays of men, stationed at intervals of a mile and a half from each other, carried the emperor’s orders throughout the empire. Such was their police, and if we wish to judge of Peruvian magnificence, we need only instance the fact that the king when he travelled was carried on a throne of gold which weighed 25,000 ducats, and the golden litter upon which the throne rested was borne by the highest personages of the realm.

In 1526, when the Spaniards appeared on the coast for the first time, the twelfth inca had lately married — in defiance of the ancient law of the kingdom — the daughter of the vanquished king of Quito, and had had a son of this marriage named Atahualpa, to whom he left this kingdom on his death, which happened about 1529. His eldest son Huascar, whose mother was descended from the incas, had the remainder of his states. But this partition, so contrary to the customs established from time immemorial, caused such great discontent at Cuzco, that Huascar, encouraged by his subjects, determined to march against his brother, who would not acknowledge him for his lord and master. Atahualpa, in his turn, had too lately tasted power to be willing to abandon it. He managed by bribes to attach to himself the greater part of the warriors who had accompanied his father during the conquest of Quito, and when the two armies met, fortune favoured the usurper.

Is it not curious to remark how both in Peru and Mexico the Spaniards were aided by entirely exceptional circumstances? In Mexico some of the people who had recently submitted to the Aztec race, being mercilessly trampled upon by their conquerors, welcome the Spaniards as deliverers; in Peru the strife between two brothers, furious against each other, hinders the Indians from turning all their forces against the invaders whom they might easily have crushed.

Pizarro upon receiving the envoys sent by Huascar, to ask his aid against his brother Atahualpa, whom he represented as a rebel and usurper, saw at once all the advantages that might accrue to him from these circumstances. He saw that by espousing the cause of one of the brothers, he could more easily crush them both, therefore he advanced at once into the interior of the country, at the head of a very inconsiderable force, consisting of sixty-two cavalry and one hundred and twenty foot-soldiers, of whom only twenty were armed with arquebuses and muskets; he was obliged to leave part of his troops to guard San-Miguel, in which Pizarro reckoned upon finding a refuge in case of his being unsuccessful, and where in any case all supplies which might arrive could be landed.

Pizarro first made for Caxamalca, a small town situated at about twenty days’ march from the coast. To reach it he had to cross a desert of burning sand, without vegetation and without water, which extended for sixty miles in length as far as the province of Motupé, and where the slightest attack of the enemy, joined to the sufferings endured by the little army, would have been sufficient to crush the whole expedition at one blow. Next the troops plunged into the mountains and became entangled in narrow defiles where a small force might have annihilated them. During this march Pizarro received an envoy from Atahualpa bringing him some painted shoes and gold bracelets, which he was requested to wear at his approaching interview with the inca. Naturally Pizarro was lavish in his promises of friendship and devotion, and assured the Indian ambassador that he should be only following the orders given him by the king his master in respecting the lives and property of the inhabitants. From the moment of his arrival at Caxamalca Pizarro prudently lodged his soldiers in a temple and a palace belonging to the inca, where they were sheltered from any surprise. Then he sent one of his brothers with De Soto and twenty horse-soldiers to the camp of Atahualpa, which was distant only three miles, to announce to him his arrival. The envoys of the governor were received with magnificence, and were astonished at the multiplicity of the ornaments and vases made of gold and silver which they saw throughout the Indian camp. They returned, bringing a promise from Atahualpa that he would come on the next day to visit Pizarro, to bid him welcome to his kingdom. At the same time the envoys gave an account of the wonderful riches they had seen, which confirmed Pizarro in the project which he had formed of seizing the unfortunate Atahualpa and his treasures by treachery.

Several Spanish authors, and notably Zarate, disguise these facts, which no doubt appeared to them too odious, and altogether deny the treachery towards Atahualpa. But at the present day there are extant many documents which force the historian to believe, with Robertson and Prescott, in the perfidy of Pizarro. It was very important for him to have the inca in his own hands, and to employ him as a tool, just as Cortès had done with Montezuma. He therefore took advantage of the honesty and simplicity of Atahualpa, who placed entire confidence in Pizarro's protestations of friendship and so was thrown off his guard, to arrange an ambuscade into which Atahualpa was certain to fall. There was not a scruple in the disloyal soul of the conqueror; he was as cool as though he were about to offer battle to enemies who had been forewarned of his approach; this infamous treason must be an eternal dishonour to his memory. Pizarro divided his cavalry into three small squadrons, left all his infantry in one body, hid his arquebusiers on the road by which the inca must pass, and kept twenty of his most determined companions near himself. Atahualpa, wishing to give the Spaniards a great idea of his power, advanced with the whole of his army. He himself was borne upon a kind of bed, decorated with feathers, covered with plates of gold and silver, and ornamented with precious stones. He was accompanied by his principal nobles, carried like himself on the shoulders of their servants, and he was surrounded by dancers and jesters. Such a march was more that of a procession than of an army.

As soon as the inca had nearly reached the Spanish quarters (according to Robertson), Father Vincent Valverde, the chaplain of the expedition, who was afterwards made a bishop as a reward for his conduct, advanced with the crucifix in one hand and his breviary in the other. In an interminable discourse he set forth to the monarch the doctrine of the creation, the fall of the first man, the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the choice made by God of St. Peter to be His vicar upon earth, the power transmitted through him to the Popes, and the gift made by Pope Alexander to the King of Castille of all the regions of the New World. When he had expounded all these doctrines, he called upon Atahualpa to embrace the Christian religion, to recognize the supreme authority of the Pope, and to submit to the King of Castille as his legitimate sovereign. If he submitted immediately, Valverde undertook to promise that the king his master would take Peru under his protection, and allow him to continue to reign there; but he declared war against him and threatened him with fearful vengeance if he refused to obey, and persevered in his impiety.

To say the least of it, this was a singular scene and a very strange harangue, alluding to facts which were utterly unknown to the Peruvians, and of the truth of which a more skilful orator than Valverde would not have succeeded in persuading them. If we add that the interpreter knew so little of the Spanish language that it was almost an impossibility for him to translate what he scarcely understood himself, and that the Peruvian language lacked words to express ideas so foreign to its genius, we shall not be much surprised to learn that Atahualpa understood almost nothing of the Spanish monk’s discourse. Some sentences, however, which attacked his own power, filled him with surprise and indignation. But he was none the less moderate in his reply. He said that, as master of his own kingdom by right of succession, he could not see how any one had the power to dispose of it without his consent; he added that he was not at all willing to renounce the religion of his fathers to adopt one of which he had only heard that day for the first time; with regard to the other points touched upon in the discourse he understood nothing, it was a thing entirely new to him, and he would much like to know where Valverde had learnt so many wonderful things. “In this book,” replied Valverde, handing him his breviary. Atahualpa received it with eagerness and turned over some of the leaves with much curiosity, then, putting it to his ear, he exclaimed, “What you show me there does not speak to me, and tells me nothing.” With this he flung the book upon the ground.

This served as a signal for the combat, or rather for the massacre. Cannon and muskets came into play, the cavalry sprang forward, and the infantry fell sword in hand upon the stupefied Peruvians. In a few moments the confusion was at its height. The Indians fled on all sides, without attempting to defend themselves. As to Atahualpa, although his principal officers tried to make a rampart of their own bodies, while they carried him off, Pizarro sprang upon him, dispersed or overthrew his guards, and seizing him by his long hair, threw him down from the litter in which he was carried. Only the darkness could arrest the carnage. Four thousand Indians were killed, a greater number wounded, and 3000 were taken prisoners. An incontestable proof that there was no real battle is, that of all the Spaniards Pizarro alone was hit, and he received his wound from one of his own soldiers who was too precipitately endeavouring to seize upon the inca.

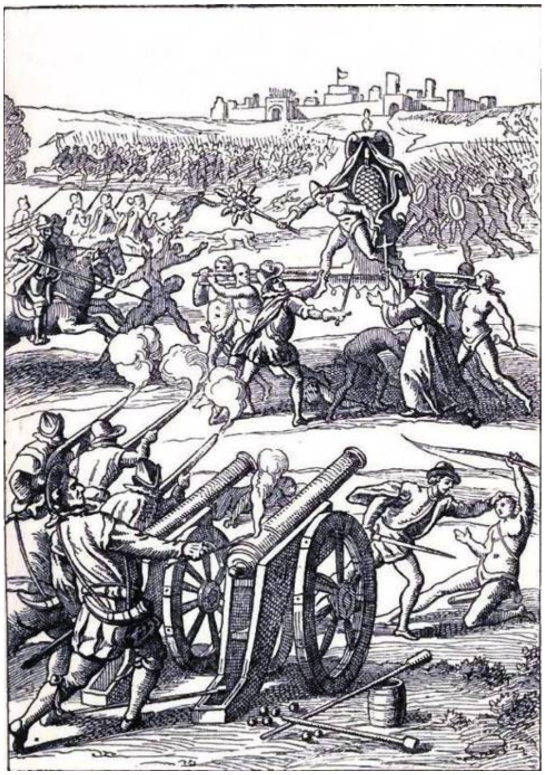

Atahualpa is made prisoner.
From an old print.

The booty collected in the camp and from the dead exceeded anything the Spaniards could have imagined, and their enthusiasm was proportioned to the conquest of such riches.

At first Atahualpa bore his captivity with resignation, which may have been partly due to Pizarro’s doing all he could to soothe him, at least by words. But the inca, soon understanding the unbridled covetousness of his jailors, made a proposal to Pizarro to pay him ransom, and to have a room of twenty-two feet in length by sixteen in width filled as high as the hand could reach with vases, utensils, and ornaments of gold. Pizarro eagerly agreed to this, and the captive inca despatched the necessary orders at once to all the provinces; these were carried out promptly and unmurmuringly. Beyond this, the Indian troops were disbanded, and Pizarro was able to send Soto and five Spaniards to Cuzco, a town situated more than 600 miles from Caxamalca, while he himself subjugated all the country within a circuit of 300 miles.

In the meantime Almagro landed with 200 soldiers. There had been set aside for him and his men — with what regrets may easily be imagined — 100,000 pesos (a Spanish coin); a fifth was reserved for the king, and this left 1,528,500 pesos to be divided between Pizarro and his companions. This product of pillage and massacre was solemnly divided between those entitled to it on the Festival of St. James, the patron saint of Spain, after fervent prayer to God. A deplorable mixture this of religion and profanity, too common unfortunately, in these times of mingled superstition and avarice.

Each horse-soldier received 8000 pesos as his share, and each foot-soldier 4000, which would be equivalent to about 1600*l.* and 800*l.* sterling. This was enough to satisfy the most exacting soldier, after a campaign which had been neither long nor difficult. Many of the adventurers wished to enjoy this unexpected good fortune in a peaceable manner in their own country, and eagerly asked for their dismissal. This Pizarro granted without hesitation, for he felt sure that the news of their rapidly-acquired wealth would soon bring him new recruits. With his brother Ferdinand, who went to Spain to give the emperor an account of Pizarro’s triumph and some splendid presents, went sixty Spaniards, laden heavily indeed with money, but lightly with remorse.

As soon as Atahualpa’s ransom was paid, he claimed his freedom; but Pizarro, who had only saved his life that he might make all the treasures of Peru his own, and shelter himself under the prestige and authority which the inca still exercised over his subjects, was soon wearied by his entreaties. He suspected him also of having for some time secretly given orders to levy troops in the distant provinces of the empire. Besides, Atahualpa having soon discovered that Pizarro was no better educated than one of the lowest of his soldiers, felt in consequence a contempt for the governor which, unfortunately, he could not conceal. Such were the reasons, all trivial as they were, which determined Pizarro to prepare for the trial of the inca.

Nothing could have been more hateful than this trial, in which Almagro and Pizarro were at the same time both suitors and judges. The heads of the accusation were so ridiculous and absurd, that one is in doubt whether to be most surprised by the effrontery or the wickedness of Pizarro, in subjecting the head of a powerful empire, over which he had no jurisdiction, to such an inquiry. Atahualpa, being found guilty, was condemned to be burnt alive; but as he had at length asked to be baptized, that he might rid himself of the importunities of Valverde, his enemies contented themselves with strangling him. A worthy counterpart this, of Guatimozin’s execution! These were amongst the most atrocious and odious deeds committed by the Spaniards in America, where, however, they have sullied themselves with every imaginable crime.

Among this herd of adventurers there were still some men who had retained sentiments of honour and self-respect. They protested loudly against this perversion of justice, but their generous pleadings were stifled by the selfish declamations of Pizarro and his worthy assistants.

The governor now raised one of Atahualpa’s sons to the throne, under the name of Paul Inca; but the civil war between the two brothers, and the events which had occurred since the arrival of the Spaniards, had done much to loosen the ties which bound the Peruvians to their kings, and this young man, destined soon to die an ignominious death, had scarcely more authority than Manco-Capac, the son of Huascar, who was acknowledged by the inhabitants of Cuzco. Soon after this, some of the principal people in the country even tried to carve for themselves kingdoms out of the empire of Peru. Such was Ruminagui, the commandant of Quito, who caused the brother and the children of Atahualpa to be massacred, and declared himself independent. Discord reigned in the Peruvian camp, and the Spaniards resolved to take advantage of it. Pizarro advanced rapidly upon Cuzco, the small number of his forces having been the only reason which had prevented him from doing so sooner. Now that a crowd of adventurers, attracted by the treasures which had been brought back to Panama, vied with each other in hastening to Peru, now that he could assemble 500 men — after leaving an important garrison at San-Miguel under Benalcazar’s command, — Pizarro had no further reason for delay. On the way some skirmishes took place with large bodies of troops, but they ended as always, with severe loss to the natives, and a very insignificant one to the Spaniards. When they entered Cuzco, and took possession of the town, the invaders showed surprise at the small quantity of gold and precious stones which they found there, although it far exceeded Atahualpa’s ransom. Was this because they were becoming accustomed to the riches of the country, or because there was a larger number to share in them?

Meanwhile, Benalcazar, being weary of inaction, took advantage of the arrival of a reinforcement from Nicaragua and Panama, to set out for Quito, where according to the Peruvians, Atahualpa had left the greater part of his treasure. He placed himself at the head of eighty horse-soldiers and 120 infantry, defeated on several occasions Ruminagui, who disputed his passage, and thanks to his prudence and cleverness, he entered Quito victorious; but he did not find there what he sought, that is to say, the treasures of Atahualpa.

At the same time, Peter d'Alvarado, who had so signally distinguished himself under Cortès, and who had been made governor of Guatemala, as a reward for his services, pretended to believe that the province of Quito was not included in Pizarro's command, and organized an expedition consisting of 500 men, 200 of whom were cavalry. Landing at Porto-Viejo, he wished to reach Quito without a guide, by going up the Guayaquil River and crossing the Andes. This road has always been one of the worst and most trying that it is possible to choose. Before they had reached the plain of Quito, after horrible sufferings from hunger and thirst, without speaking of the burning cinders hurled from the crater of Chimborazo, a volcano near Quito, and the snow-storms which assailed them, the fifth part of the band of adventurers, and half the horses, had perished; the remainder were completely discouraged and quite unfit for fighting. It was therefore with the greatest surprise, and some uneasiness, that they found themselves face to face, not with a body of Indians as they had expected, but with a party of Spaniards, under the command of Almagro. The latter were preparing to charge, when some of the more moderate among the officers caused an arrangement to be entered into, by virtue of which Alvarado was to withdraw to his own province after receiving 100,000 pesos to defray the expenses of the armament.

Ferdinand Pizarro had set sail for Spain, while these events were happening in Peru, feeling sure that the immense quantity of gold, silver, and precious stones which he took with him, would secure him a warm welcome. He obtained for his brother Francisco the confirmation of his appointment as governor, with more extended powers; he himself was made a knight of the order of St. Iago; as for Almagro, he was confirmed in his title of *adelantado*, and his jurisdiction was extended 600 miles, without, however, its limits being very strictly defined, which left the door open for many contests and all kinds of arbitrary interpretations.

Ferdinand Pizarro had not reached Peru again, when Almagro, having learnt that a special government had been assigned to him, pretended that Cuzco formed part of it, and made preparations for its conquest. But Juan and Gonzalo Pizarro had no intention of allowing themselves to be robbed, and the parties were on the point of coming to blows when Francisco Pizarro, who is often called *the Marquis* or *the great Marquis*, arrived at the capital.

Almagro had never forgiven Francisco Pizarro the duplicity which he had displayed in his negotiations with Charles V. nor the coolness with which he had claimed for himself, at the expense of his two friends, the principal share of authority, and the most extended government. But as Almagro met with great opposition to his designs, and as he was not the stronger, he concealed his vexation, put a good face on the matter, and seemed delighted at a reconciliation. “They renewed their partnership, therefore,” says Zarate, “on condition that Don Diego d’Almagro should go and discover the country on the south side, and if he found any that was really good, they should ask his Majesty to make him the governor of it; but that if he found nothing to suit him, they should share Don Francisco’s government between them.” This arrangement was made very solemnly, and they took their oath upon the consecrated wafer, that for the future they would undertake nothing against one another. Some say that Almagro swore that he would never encroach either upon Cuzco or on the surrounding country within 390 miles, even if his Majesty should give him the government of it. They add that turning towards the holy sacrament, he pronounced these words, “Lord, if I violate the oath that I now take, I pray that Thou wilt confound me, and punish me both in my body and my soul!”

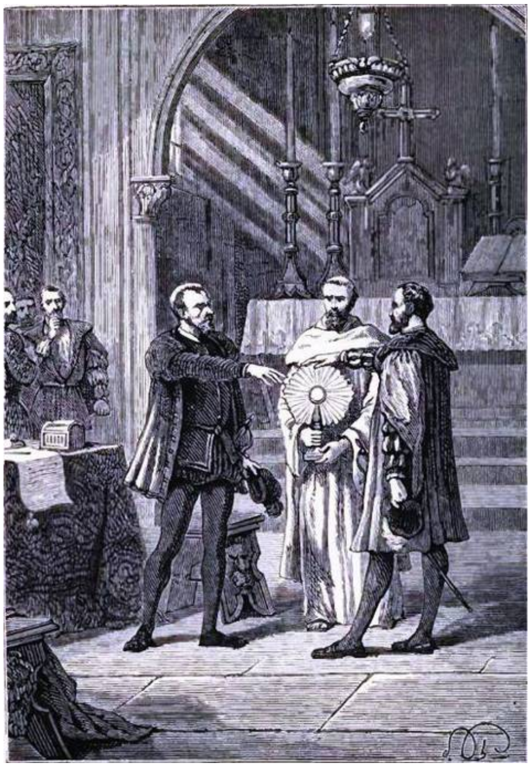

Pizarro and Almagro take an oath upon the Host.

After this solemn agreement, which was destined to be observed with as little fidelity as the first, Almagro made his preparations for departure. Thanks to his well-known liberality, as much as to his reputation for courage, he gathered together 570 men, of about equal numbers of cavalry and infantry, with which he set out by land for Chili. The journey was an extremely trying one, and the adventurers suffered severely from intense cold whilst crossing the Andes; they had also to deal with very warlike tribes, unsoftened by any civilization, who assailed them with a *furia* of which nothing they had seen in Peru had given them any idea. Almagro could make no settlement, for he had scarcely been two months in the country when he heard that the Indians in Peru had revolted, and massacred the greater part of the Spaniards, whereupon he immediately retraced his steps.

After the new partnership had been signed between the conquerors (1534), Pizarro had returned to the provinces bordering on the sea, in which he could establish a regular government, there being no longer anything to dread from resistance. For a man who had never studied legislation, he had drawn up some very wise rules for the administration of justice, for the collection of taxes, the apportionment of the Indians, and the working of the mines. Some parts of the “conquistador’s” character were doubtless very open to criticism, but it is only just to recognize that he was not wanting in enlarged ideas, and that he was conscientious in playing his part as the founder of a great empire. This it was which made him hesitate long before choosing the future capital of the Spanish possessions. Cuzco had the recommendation of having been the residence of the incas; but this town, situated more than 400 miles from the sea, was very distant from Quito, of which the importance seemed to Pizarro to be extreme. Before long he was struck with the beauty and fertility of a great valley, watered by a stream called the Rimac, and there in 1536, he established the seat of his dominion. Soon, the City of Kings (de Los Reyes), or Lima, as it is called by a corruption of the name of the river which flows at its feet, assumed the aspect of a great city, owing to the magnificent palace and the sumptuous residences for officers, which Pizarro caused to be built there. While these cares kept Pizarro far from his capital, small bodies of troops, sent in different directions, penetrated into the most distant provinces of the empire, with the object of extinguishing the last smouldering embers of resistance; so many of the soldiers were employed in this way, that there remained in Cuzco itself but a very small body of troops. The inca, who had remained in the hands of the Spaniards, thought this an opportune moment for fomenting a general rising, in which he earnestly hoped that the foreign government might be overthrown. Although closely guarded, he contrived to take his measures with so much skill that he did not arouse the suspicions of his oppressors. He obtained permission even to be present at a grand fête, which was to be held at several miles' distance from Cuzco, and for which the most distinguished persons in the empire had met together. As soon as the inca appeared, the standard of revolt was raised. The country was soon in arms from the confines of the province of Quito as far as Chili, and a number of small detachments of Spaniards were surprised and destroyed. Cuzco, defended by the three brothers Pizarro with but 170 Spaniards, was exposed for eight consecutive months to the incessant attacks of the Peruvians, who had now become expert in the use of the arms which they had taken from their enemies. The conquerors made a most valiant resistance, but experienced some severe losses, especially that of Juan Pizarro. Almagro left Chili in the greatest haste, crossed the stony and sandy desert of Atacama, where he suffered as severely from heat and drought as he had done in the Andes from cold and snow, penetrated into the Peruvian territory, defeated Manco-Capac in a great battle, and succeeded in approaching the town of Cuzco, after having driven away the Indians. He then tried to get the town given up to him, on the pretext that it was not included in Pizarro's government, and violating a truce, during which the followers of the marquis were taking a short rest, he entered Cuzco, seized both Ferdinand and Gonzalo Pizarro, and had himself acknowledged as governor.

While this was going on, a considerable body of Indians invested Lima, intercepted all communications, and annihilated the various small bodies of troops which Pizarro sent at intervals to the aid of the Spaniards at Cuzco.

At this time he sent away all his vessels to Panama to compel his companions to make a desperate resistance; he recalled from Truxillo the forces under the command of Alonzo d'Alvarado, and entrusted to the latter a column of 500 men, which advanced to within several miles of the capital without having the slightest suspicion that the town was now in the hands of fellow-countrymen, who were fully determined to bar their passage. But Almagro desired much rather to attract these new adversaries to himself than to destroy them; he arranged therefore, to surprise them and make them prisoners. He had now a fine opportunity in his hands of ending the war, and making himself master of the two governments by a single blow. Several of his officers had observed this to him, and especially Orgoños, who proposed that the two brothers of the "conquistador" should be put to death, and that Almagro should advance by forced marches with his victorious troops against Lima, where Pizarro, taken by surprise, would not be able to resist him. But as a Latin poet says, "Jupiter makes dotards of those whom he means to ruin." Almagro, who in so many other instances had thrown aside all scruples, did not wish to put himself in the wrong by invading Pizarro's dominions as a rebel, and he quietly took the road back to Cuzco.

Looking at it only from the side of Almagro's own interests, he evidently committed in this a gross blunder, of which he was soon to repent; but if we consider, what we should never lose sight of, the interest of the country, he had already committed a capital crime in the acts of aggression of which he had been guilty, and in kindling civil war in face of an enemy quite ready to take advantage of it. His adversaries did not delay to remind him of it. Whereas prompt decision would have been necessary for Almagro to make him master of the situation, Pizarro had everything to expect from time and opportunity. While waiting for the promised reinforcements from Darien, he commenced negotiations with his adversary, lasting for several months, during which time one of his brothers, as well as Alvarado, found means to escape with more than seventy men. Although Almagro had been so often duped, he consented again to receive the licentiate Espinosa, who was ordered to represent to him, that if the emperor knew what was taking place between the two competitors, and learnt the condition to which their contests had reduced affairs, no doubt he would recall them both, and put some one else in their place. At last, after the death of Espinosa, it was decided by the friar Francisco de Bovadilla, to whom Pizarro and Almagro had referred their differences, that Ferdinand Pizarro should be immediately set free, that Cuzco should be given back to the marquis, and that they should send several officers on both sides to Spain, charged with representing the respective rights of the two parties and submitting them to the emperor's decision.

Scarcely had the last of his brothers been set at liberty than Pizarro, rejecting all idea of peace and amicable arrangement, declared that arms alone should decide whether he or Almagro was to be lord of Peru. In a short time he had assembled a body of 700 men, of which he entrusted the command to his two brothers. Finding it impossible to cross the mountains which would have been the most direct road to Cuzco, they followed the line of the sea-coast as far as Nasca, and then penetrated into a branch of the Andes, by which they could reach the capital in a short time. Possibly Almagro ought to have defended the mountain defiles, but he had only 500 men, and he reckoned much on his splendid cavalry, whom he could not deploy in a confined space; he therefore waited for the enemy in the plain of Cuzco. The two parties encountered each other on the 26th of April, 1538, with equal animosity; but the victory was decided by two companies of musketeers which the emperor had sent to Pizarro when he heard of the revolt of the Indians. One hundred and forty soldiers perished in this engagement, which received the name of *las salinas*. Orgoños and several officers of distinction were killed in cold blood after the battle, and Almagro himself, aged and ill, could not escape from Pizarro.

The Indians who, assembled in arms on the surrounding mountains, had reckoned upon falling on the conqueror, had need instead to fly in all haste. “Nothing,” says Robertson, “more entirely proves the ascendancy gained by the Spaniards over the Americans, than seeing that the latter, witnesses of the defeat and dispersion of one of the parties, had not the courage to attack the other, even weakened and fatigued as they were by their victory, and dared not fall upon their oppressors when fortune offered them so favourable an opportunity for attacking them with advantage.”

At this period a victory not followed by pillage was incomplete, so the town of Cuzco was sacked, and all the riches that Pizarro’s companions found there did not suffice to content them. They had such exalted ideas of their merits and of the services which they had rendered, that each would have desired an appointment as governor. Ferdinand Pizarro therefore dispersed them, and sent them to conquer fresh territories with some of the partisans of Almagro who had rallied, and whom it was important to send to a distance.

As for Almagro himself, Ferdinand Pizarro, feeling convinced that his name constituted a focus of permanent agitation, resolved to get rid of him. He caused him therefore to be put upon his trial, which ended, as it was easy to foresee, in a sentence of death. When Almagro received this news, after giving way for a few moments to a very natural grief, pleading his great age and the different way in which he had behaved with regard to Ferdinand and Gonzalo Pizarro when they were his prisoners, he recovered his calmness and awaited his death with a soldier’s courage. He was strangled in his prison, and afterwards publicly beheaded (1538).

After several successful expeditions, Ferdinand Pizarro set out for Spain, to give the Emperor an account of what had taken place. He found most minds there strangely prejudiced against him and his brothers. Their cruelty, their violence, and their disregard of the most sacred engagements had been laid bare without reserve, by some friends of Almagro's. Ferdinand Pizarro needed the utmost cleverness to win the Emperor round. Charles V. had no means of judging fairly on which side the justice of the case lay, for he had only heard of it from the interested parties; he could only discern the deplorable consequences to his own government of the civil war. He decided, therefore, to send a commissioner to the country, to whom he gave most extensive powers, and who, after having inquired into all that had taken place, should establish whatever form of government he thought most advisable. This delicate mission was confided to Christoval de Vaca, a judge of *audience* at Valladolid, who proved not unequal to his task. One fact is worthy of notice; he was recommended to show the greatest respect towards Francisco Pizarro, at the very time when his brother Ferdinand was arrested and thrown into a prison, where he was destined to remain forgotten for twenty years.

While these events were taking place in Spain, the Marquis portioned out the conquered country, keeping for himself and his trustworthy friends the most fertile and best situated districts, and giving to Almagro's companions, the men of Chili as they were called, only the more sterile and distant territories. Next he confided to Pedro de Valdivia, one of his aides-de-camp the execution of the project which Almagro had only been able to sketch out, the conquest of Chili. Valdivia set out on the 28th of January, 1540, with 150 Spaniards, amongst whom Pedro Gomez, Pedro de Miranda, and Alonzo de Monroy were destined especially to distinguish themselves; he crossed first the desert of Atacama, which even at the present day is considered a most troublesome enterprise, and reached Copiapo, standing in the midst of a beautiful valley. Received at first with great cordiality, he had to sustain, as soon as harvest was over, several combats with the Araucanians, a race of brave, indefatigable warriors, very different from the Indians of Peru. In spite of this, he laid the foundations of the town of Santiago on the 12th of February, 1541. Valdivia spent eight years in Chili, presiding over the conquest and organization of the country. Less greedy than the other "conquistadores" his contemporaries, he only sought for the mineral riches of the country that he might ensure the development of the prosperity of his colony, in which he had taken care first of all to encourage agriculture. "The best mine that I know of, is one of corn and wine with nourishment for livestock. Who has this, has money. As for mines, we do not depend upon them for subsistence. And often that which looks well outwardly is not really worth much." These wise words of Lescarbot, in his *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, might have been used by Valdivia, so exactly do they correspond with and express his sentiments. His valour, prudence, and humanity, more especially the latter quality, which shines forth strangely in contrast with the cruelty of Pizarro, ensures for him a distinction all his own among the "conquistadores" of the sixteenth century.

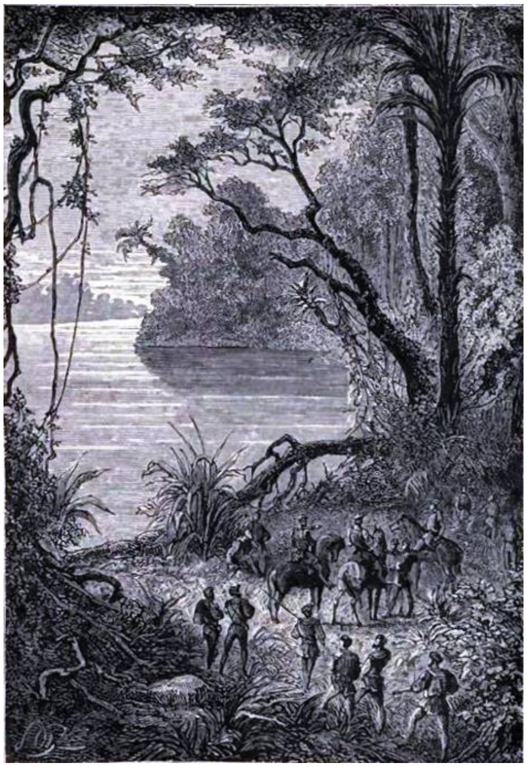

The shores of Rio Napo.

At the time that Valdivia set out for Chili, Gonzalo Pizarro crossed the Andes at the head of 340 Spaniards, half of whom were mounted, and 4000 Indians, of whom the greater part of the Indians perished from cold; then he penetrated eastwards into the interior, seeking for a country where spices and cinnamon were said to abound. In these vast Savannahs, intersected by marshes and virgin forests, the Spaniards encountered torrents of rain, which lasted quite two months; they found only a scattered population, who were not industrious and also hostile; in consequence, the invaders often suffered from hunger in a country where there were then neither horses nor oxen, where the largest quadrupeds were tapirs and llamas, and even the latter were seldom met with on this slope of the Andes. In spite of these difficulties, which would have discouraged any less energetic explorers than the *descubridores* of the sixteenth century, they persevered in their attempt and descended the Rio Napo or Coca, an affluent on the left of the Marañon, as far as its confluence. There, with great difficulty they built a brigantine, which was manned by fifty soldiers under the command of Francisco Orellana. But either the strength of the current carried him away, or else being no longer under the eyes of his chief, he wished in his turn to be the leader of an expedition of discovery; he did not wait for Gonzalo Pizarro at the appointed rendezvous, but continued to descend the river until he reached the ocean. Such a voyage is simply marvellous, through nearly 6000 miles of an unknown region, without guide, without compass, without provisions, with a crew who murmured more than once against the foolish attempt of their leader, and in the midst of populations almost invariably hostile. From the mouth of the river, which he had just descended in his badly built and dilapidated vessel, Orellana succeeded in reaching the Island of Cubagua, whence he set sail for Spain. If the proverb “He who comes from a distance tells many lies” were not of much earlier date, one might have thought it had been coined for Orellana. He invented the most preposterous fables as to the wealth of the countries he had traversed; the inhabitants were so rich that the roofs of the temples were formed of plates of gold; an assertion which gave rise to the legend of *El Dorado*. Orellana had heard of the existence of a Republic of female warriors who had founded a vast empire, which caused the river Marañon to be called the *River of the Amazons*. If, however, we strip this narrative of all that is ridiculous and grotesque, and calculated to please the imaginations of his contemporaries, it remains certain that Orellana’s expedition is one of the most remarkable of this epoch, so fertile in gigantic enterprises; and it furnishes the first information upon the immense zone of country lying between the Andes and the Atlantic.

But we must return to Gonzalo Pizarro. His embarrassment and consternation had been great, when on arriving at the confluence of the Napo and Marañon, he had not found Orellana, who was to have been awaiting him. Fearing that some accident might have befallen his lieutenant, he had descended the course of the river for 150 miles, until he met with an unfortunate officer, who had been left behind for having addressed some remonstrances to his chief upon his perfidy. The bravest among Pizarro’s men were discouraged at the news of the cowardly way in which they had been abandoned, and at the destitute condition in which they were left. Pizarro was obliged to yield to their entreaties and to return to Quito, from which they were more than 1200 miles away. To give an idea of their sufferings on this return journey, it suffices to say that, after having eaten horses, dogs, and reptiles, roots, and wild beasts, and after having devoured every article made of leather in their accoutrements, the unfortunate survivors who reached Quito, lacerated by brambles, emaciated and utterly impoverished, numbered only twenty-four. Four thousand Indians and two hundred and ten Spaniards had perished in this expedition, which had lasted less than two years.

While Gonzalo Pizarro was conducting the unfortunate expedition just related, the old partisans of Almagro, who had never frankly joined Pizarro, gathered round the son of their old leader, and formed a plot for murdering the Marquis. In vain was Francisco Pizarro several times warned of what was threatening him, he would pay no heed to the report. He said “Keep quiet, I shall be safe as long as there is no one in Peru who does not know that I can in a moment take the life of any one who should dare to form the project of attempting mine.”

On Sunday, the 26th of June, 1541, at the hour of siesta, Juan de Herrada and eighteen conspirators left the house of Almagro's son with drawn swords in their hands and armed from top to toe. They ran towards the house of Pizarro, crying out, “Death to the tyrant! death to the infamous wretch!” They entered the palace, killed Francisco de Chaves, who had appeared in haste on hearing the noise, and gained the hall, where was Francisco Pizarro, with his brother Francisco-Martin, the doctor Juan Velasquez, and a dozen servants. These jumped out of the windows, with the exception of Martin Pizarro, two other gentlemen, and two tall pages, who were killed while defending the door of the governor's apartment. He himself had not had time to put on his cuirass, but he seized his sword and buckler and defended himself valiantly, killing four of his adversaries and wounding several others. One of his assailants, in a spirit of self-devotion, attracted to himself the blows of Pizarro. Meanwhile the other conspirators made their way in and attacked him with such fury that he could not parry all the blows, being so exhausted that he could scarcely wield his sword. “Thus,” says Zarate, “they made an end, and succeeded in killing him by a thrust in the throat. Falling to the ground, he asked in a loud voice that he might be allowed to confess, and then not being able any longer to speak, he made the sign of the cross on the ground, which he kissed, and then yielded up his soul to God.” Some negroes carried his body to the church, where Juan Barbazan, his old servant, alone ventured to come and claim it. This faithful servant secretly rendered to it funeral honours, for the conspirators had pillaged the house of Pizarro, not leaving enough even to pay for wax tapers.

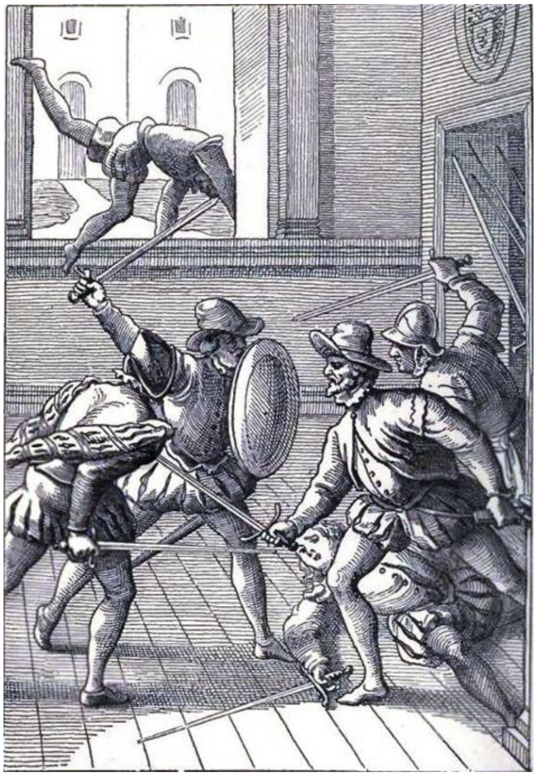

Death of Pizarro.
From an old print.

Thus did Francisco Pizarro come to his end, assassinated even in the capital of the vast empire which Spain owed to his valour and indefatigable perseverance, but which he bestowed upon his country, it must be admitted, ravaged, decimated, and drowned in a deluge of blood. Pizarro is often compared with Cortès; the one had as much ambition, courage, and military capacity as the other; but the cruelty and avarice of the Marquis della Valle were carried to an extreme in Pizarro, and united in him to perfidy and duplicity. If we are inclined to excuse certain parts of Cortès' character which are not estimable, by the times in which he lived, we are at least charmed by that grace and nobility of manners, and by that way of a gentleman above prejudices, which made him so much beloved by the soldier. In Pizarro, on the contrary, we find roughness, and a harsh, unsympathizing way of feeling, while his chivalrous qualities disappear entirely behind the rapacity and perfidy which are the salient features of his character.

If Cortès found brave and resolute adversaries among the Mexicans, who opposed almost insurmountable difficulties to his progress, Pizarro had no trouble in vanquishing the Peruvians, who were timid and enervated, and who never made any serious resistance to his arms. Of the conquests of Peru and Mexico, the less difficult produced the greater metallurgic advantage to Spain, and thus it was the more appreciated.

The civil war was on the point of breaking out again after Pizarro’s death when the governor arrived, who was delegated by the metropolitan government. As soon as he had collected the needful troops, he marched towards Cuzco. He seized young Almagro without trouble, had him beheaded with forty of his confederates and governed the country with firmness, until the viceroy Blasco Nuñez Vela, arrived. It is not our intention to enter into the detail of the disputes which took place between the latter and Gonzalo Pizarro, who, profiting by the general discontent, caused by the new regulations as to the “repartimientos,” revolted against the Emperor’s representative. After many changes of fortune, for which we have not space, the struggle ended by the defeat and execution of Gonzalo Pizarro, which took place in 1548. His body was taken to Cuzco and buried fully dressed; “No one,” says Garcilasso de la Vega, “being willing to give even a winding-sheet for it.” Thus ended the judicial assassin of Almagro. Is not the text appropriate in this case: “They that take the sword shall perish with the sword”?

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD.

Magellan — His early history — His disappointment — His change of nationality — Preparations for the expedition — Rio de Janeiro — St. Julian's Bay — Revolt of a part of the squadron — Terrible punishment of the guilty — Magellan's Strait — Patagonia — The Pacific — The Ladrone Islands — Zebu and the Philippine Islands — Death of Magellan — Borneo — The Moluccas and their Productions — Separation of the *Trinidad* and *Victoria* — Return to Europe by the Cape of Good Hope — Last misadventures.

No one as yet was aware of the immense size of the continent discovered by Christopher Columbus. Still was sought perseveringly on the coast of America — which was thought to be a collection of several islands — the famous strait which should lead at once to the Pacific Ocean and to those Spice Islands the possession of which would have made the fortune of Spain. While Cortereal and Cabot were seeking for it in the Atlantic Ocean, and Cortès in the furthest part of the Gulf of California, while Pizarro was coasting along Peru, and Valdivia was conquering Chili, the solution of this problem was found by a Portuguese in the service of Spain, Ferdinand de Magellan.

The son of a gentleman of *Cota e Armas*, Ferdinand de Magellan was born either at Oporto, at Lisbon, at Villa de Sabrossa, or at Villa de Figueiro, it is not actually known which; the date of his birth is unknown, but it took place towards the end of the fifteenth century. He had been brought up in the house of King John II. where he received as complete an education as could then be given him. After having made mathematics and navigation his special study — for at this time in Portugal there was an irresistible current which drew the whole country towards maritime expeditions and discoveries — Magellan early embraced a maritime career, and embarked in 1505 with Almeida, who was on his way to the Indies. He took part in the sacking of Quiloa, and in all the events of that campaign. The following year he accompanied Vaz Pereira to Sofala; then, on returning to the Malabar coast, we find him assisting Albuquerque at the taking of Malacca, and bearing himself on that occasion with equal prudence and bravery. He took part in the expedition sent by Albuquerque about 1510, to seek for the famous Spice Islands, under the command of Antonio de Abreu and of Francisco Serrão, which discovered Banda, Amboyna, Ternate, and Tidor. During this time Magellan had landed at the Malaysian Islands, distant 1800 miles from Malacca, and in the Archipelago of the Moluccas he had obtained the circumstantial information which gave birth in his mind to the idea of the voyage which he was destined to accomplish later on.

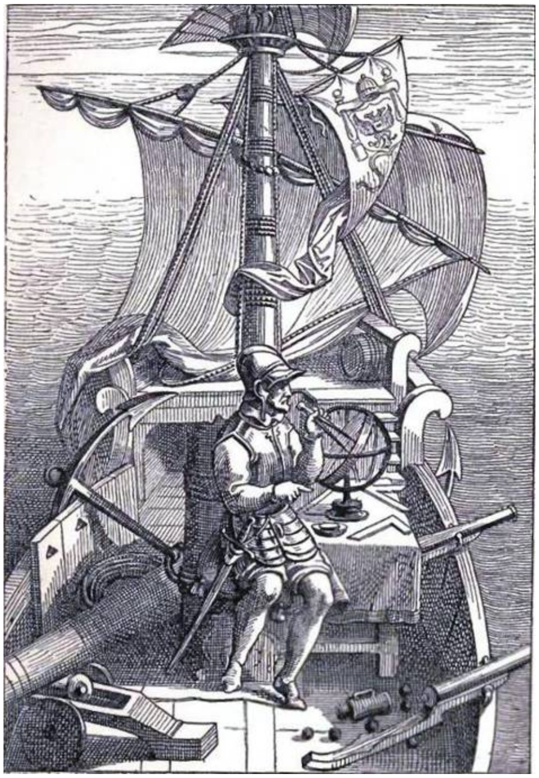

Magellan on board his caravel.
From an old print.

On his return to Portugal, Magellan obtained leave, though not without difficulty, to search through the royal archives. He soon became certain that the Moluccas were situated in the hemisphere which the bull of demarcation adopted at Tordesillas by the kings of Spain and Portugal, and confirmed in 1494 by Pope Alexander VI. had given to Spain.

In virtue of this line of demarcation, which was destined to give rise to so many impassioned debates, all the countries situated at 360 miles west of the meridian of the Cape de Verd Islands were to belong to Spain, and all those lying to the east of the same meridian to Portugal. Magellan was of too active a nature to remain long without again taking service; he went next to fight in Africa at Azamor, a town in Morocco, where he received a slight wound in his knee, but one which by injuring a nerve made him lame for the remainder of his life, and obliged him to return to Portugal. Conscious of the superiority which his theoretical and practical knowledge and his services had earned for him above the herd of courtiers, Magellan naturally felt more keenly than another would have done the unjust treatment he received from Emmanuel with regard to certain complaints laid by the people of Azamor against the Portuguese officers. King Emmanuel’s prejudices soon changed to a real dislike. It showed itself by the outrageous imputation that Magellan was pretending to suffer from a wound which was really of no consequence and was completely cured, that he might escape from accusations which he could not refute. Such an assertion was a serious matter for the honour of Magellan, so susceptible and suspicious; he thereupon came to a desperate determination which corresponded moreover with the greatness of the insult which he had received. That no one might be ignorant of it, he caused it to be legally set forth that he renounced his rights as a Portuguese citizen, and changed his nationality, and he then took out letters of naturalization in Spain. This was to proclaim, as solemnly as could possibly be done, that he intended to be looked upon as a subject of the crown of Castille, to which henceforward he would consecrate his services and his whole life. This was a serious determination, as we can see, which no one blamed, and which even the most severe historians, such as Barros and Faria y Sousa, have excused.

At the same time as Magellan, the licentiate Rey Faleiro left Lisbon with his brother Francisco and a merchant named Christovam de Haro; the former was a man deeply versed in cosmographical knowledge, and had equally with Magellan fallen under Emmanuel’s displeasure. Faleiro had entered into a treaty of partnership with Magellan to reach the Moluccas by a new way, but one which was not otherwise specified, and which remained Magellan’s secret. As soon as they arrived in Spain, (1517), the two partners submitted their project to Charles V. who accepted it in principle; but there remained the always delicate question touching the means for putting it into execution. Happily, Magellan found in Juan de Aranda, the factor of the Chamber of Commerce, an enthusiastic partisan of his theories, and one who promised to exert all his influence to make the enterprise a success. He had an interview accordingly with the high Chancellor, the Cardinal and Bishop of Burgos, Fonseca. He set forth with such skill the great advantage that Spain would derive from the discovery of a route leading to the very centre of the spice production, and the great prejudice which it would cause to the trade of Portugal, that an agreement was signed on the 22nd of March, 1518. The Emperor undertook to pay all the expenses of the expedition on condition that the greater part of the profits should belong to him.

But Magellan had still many obstacles to surmount before taking to the sea. In the first place there were the remonstrances of the Portuguese ambassador, Alvaro de Costa, who, seeing that his endeavours were in vain, even tried to compass the assassination of Magellan, so says Faria y Sousa. Then he encountered the ill-will of the employés of the *Casa de contratacion* at Seville, who were jealous of a stranger being entrusted with the command of such an important expedition, and envious of the least token of favour which had been accorded to Magellan and Rey Faleiro, who had been named commanders of the order of St. James. But Charles V. had given his consent by a public act, which seemed to be irrevocable. They tried, however, to make the Emperor alter his decision by organizing, on the 22nd of October, 1518, a disturbance paid for with Portuguese gold. It broke out on the pretext that Magellan, who had just had one of his ships drawn on shore for repairs and painting, had decorated it with the Portuguese arms. This last attempt failed miserably, and three statutes of the 30th of March, and 6th and 30th of April, fixed the composition of the crews and named the staff; while a final official document dated from Barcelona the 26th of July, 1519, confided the sole command of the expedition to Magellan.

What had meanwhile been happening to Rey Faleiro? We cannot exactly say. But this man, who had up to this time been treated on the same footing as Magellan, and who had perhaps first conceived the project, now found himself quite excluded from the command of the expedition, after some dissensions of which the cause is unknown. His health, already shaken, received a last shock from this affront, and poor Rey Faleiro, who had become almost childish, having returned to Portugal to see his family, was arrested there, and only released upon the intercession of Charles V. At last, after having sworn fidelity and homage to the crown of Castille, Magellan received in his turn the oath of his officers and sailors, and left the port of San Lucar de Barrameda on the morning of the 10th of August, 1519.

But before entering on the narrative of this memorable campaign, we must give a few particulars of the man who has left us the most complete account of it, Francesco Antonio Pigafetta or Jerome Pigaphète as he is often called in France. Born at Venice about 1491, of a noble family, Pigafetta formed part of the suite of the Ambassador Francesco Chiericalco, sent by Leo X. to Charles V. who was then at Barcelona. His attention was no doubt aroused by the noise which the preparations for the expedition made at that time in Spain, and he obtained permission to take part in the voyage. This volunteer proved an excellent recruit, for he showed himself in every respect as faithful and intelligent an observer as he was a brave and courageous companion. He was wounded at the battle of Zebu, fighting beside Magellan, which prevented him from being present at the banquet during which so many of his companions were destined to lose their lives. As to his narrative, with the exception of some exaggerations of detail according to the taste of that time, it is exact, and the greater part of the descriptions which we owe to him have been verified by modern travellers and learned men, especially by M. Alcide d’Orbigny.

Upon his return to San Lucar on the 6th of September, 1522, after having fulfilled the vow which he had made to go bare-foot to return thanks to *Nuesta Señora de la Victoria*, the Lombard (as they called him on board the *Victoria*,) presented to Charles V. then at Valladolid, a complete journal of the voyage. When he returned to Italy, by means of the original as well as of some supplementary notes, he wrote a longer narrative of the expedition, at the request of Pope Clement VII. and of Villiers de l’Isle Adam, grand-master of the Knights of Malta. He sent copies of this work to several distinguished personages, and notably to Louisa of Savoy, mother of

Francis I. But she not understanding, so thinks Harrisse, the very learned author of the *Bibliotheca Americana Vetustissima*, the kind of patois used by Pigafetta, and which resembles a mixture of Italian, Venetian, and Spanish, employed a certain Jacques Antoine Fabre to translate it into French. Instead of giving a faithful translation, Fabre made a kind of abridgment of it. Some critics, however, suppose that this narrative must have been written originally in French; they found their opinion upon the existence of three French manuscripts of the sixteenth century, which give very different readings, and of which two are deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris.

Pigafetta died at Venice about 1534, in a house in the Rue de la Lune, which in 1800 was still to be seen, and which bore the well-known device, “No rose without a thorn.”

At the same time, not wishing to confine ourselves to Pigafetta’s narrative entirely, we have compared and completed it with that of Maximilian Transylvain, secretary to Charles V. of which there is an Italian translation in Ramusio’s valuable collection.

The fleet of Magellan consisted of the *Trinidad*, of 120 tons’ burden, which carried the flag of the commander of the expedition; the *Sant’-Antonio*, also of 120 tons, commanded by Juan de Carthagena, the second in rank, the *person joined with* Magellan, says the official document; the *Concepcion*, of 90 tons, commanded by Gaspar de Quesada; the famous *Victoria*, of 85 tons, commanded by Luis de Mendoza; and lastly the *Santiago*, of 75 tons, commanded by Joao Serrâo, called by the Spaniards Serrano.

Four of these captains and nearly all the pilots were Portuguese. Barbosa and Gomez on board the *Trinidad*, Luis Alfonso de Goez and Vasco Gallego on the *Victoria*, Serrâo, Joao Lopez de Carvalho on the

Concepcion, Joao Rodriguez de Moefrapil on the *Sant'-Antonio*, and Joao Serrâo on the *Santiago*, with 25 sailors, formed a total of 33 Portuguese out of the whole body of 237 individuals whose names have all been handed down to us, and amongst whom are found a considerable number of Frenchmen.

Of the officers whose names have been mentioned, it is to be remembered that Duarte Barbosa was brother-in-law to Magellan and that Estavam Gomez, who, by returning to Seville on the 6th of May, 1521, did not participate in the conclusion of this memorable voyage, was afterwards sent by Charles V. to seek for the north-west passage, and in 1524 sailed along the coast of America from Florida to Rhode Island, and perhaps as far as Cape Cod.

Nothing could have been better arranged than this expedition, for the equipment of which the whole resources of the nautical science of that epoch had been taxed. At the moment of departure Magellan gave his last orders to his pilots and captains, and the code of signals which were to ensure unanimity in manoeuvres, and prevent a possible separation.

On Monday morning, the 10th of August, 1519, the fleet weighed anchor and sailed down the Guadalquiver as far as San Lucar de Barrameda, which forms the port of Seville, where the victualling of the ships was completed, and it was the 20th of September before they were really off. Six days afterwards the fleet anchored at Teneriffe in the Canary Archipelago, where both wood and water were taken on board. It was on leaving this island that the first symptoms appeared of the misunderstanding between Magellan and Juan de Carthagena which was to prove so fatal to the expedition. The latter claimed to be informed by the commander-in-chief of the route which he intended to take, a claim which was at once rejected by Magellan, who declared that he was not called upon to give any explanation to his subordinate.

After having passed between the Cape de Verd Islands and Africa, the ships reached the shores of Sierra Leone, where contrary winds and dead calms detained the fleet for twenty days.

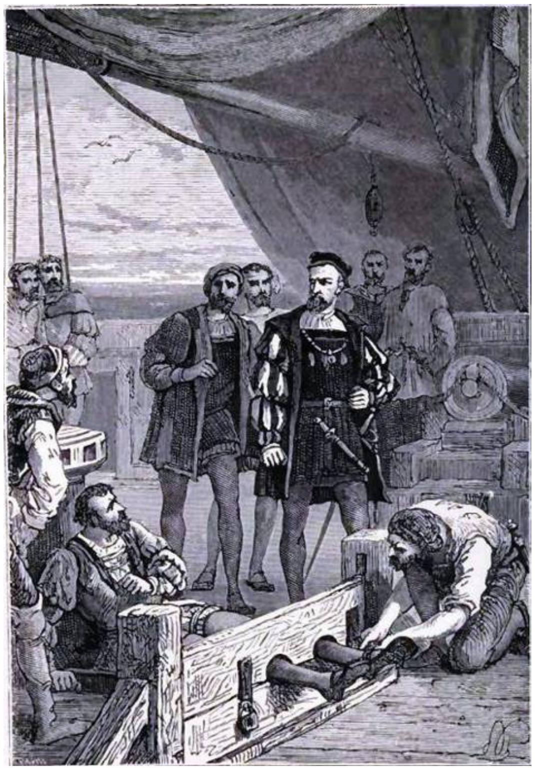

Juan de Carthagena placed in the stocks.

A painful incident now occurred. During a council which was held on board the flag-ship, a sharp dispute arose, and Juan de Carthagena, who affected to treat the Captain-general with contempt, having answered him with pride and insolence, Magellan felt obliged to arrest him with his own hand, and to have him put in the stocks, an instrument made of two pieces of wood placed one upon the other and pierced with holes, in which were placed the legs of the sailor who was to be punished. The other captains remonstrated loudly with Magellan against a punishment which was too degrading for a superior officer, and Carthagena in consequence was simply put under arrest, and guarded by one of the captains. To the calms now succeeded rain, tempests, and heavy squalls, which obliged the vessels to lie-to. During these storms the navigators several times witnessed an electric phenomenon of which the cause was not then known, but which they considered an undoubted sign of the protection of heaven, and which even at the present day is known by the name of St. Elmo's fire. Once past the equinoctial line — a passage which does not at that time seem to have been celebrated by the grotesque ceremony of baptism which is in vogue at the present day — they steered for Brazil, where, on the 13th of December, 1519, the fleet cast anchor in the magnificent port of Santa Lucia, now known under the name of Rio Janeiro. This was not, however, the first time that this bay had been seen by Europeans, as was long believed. Since the year 1511 it had been known under the name of *Bahia do Cabo Frio*. It had been visited also, four years before Magellan's arrival, by Pero Lopez, and seems to have been frequented since the commencement of the sixteenth century by mariners from Dieppe who, inheritors of the passion for adventurous navigation of their ancestors the North-men, roamed over the world, and founded small establishments or factories in all directions. Here the Spanish expedition procured cheaply, in exchange for looking-glasses, pieces of ribbon, scissors, hawks' bells or fish-hooks, a quantity of provisions, amongst which Pigafetta mentions pine-apples, sugar-canes, sweet potatoes, fowls, and the flesh of the *Anta,* which is thought to be the tapir.

The account given in the same narrative of the manners of the inhabitants is sufficiently curious to be repeated. “The Brazilians are not Christians,” he says, “but no more are they idolaters, for they worship nothing; natural instinct is their only law.” This is an interesting fact, and a singular avowal for an Italian of the sixteenth century, deeply imbued with superstition; it offers one more proof that the idea of the Divinity is not innate, as some theologians have imagined. “These natives live to a great age, they go entirely naked, and sleep in cotton nets called hammocks, suspended by the two ends to beams. As to their boats, called canoes, each is hollowed out of the single trunk of a tree and can hold as many as forty men. They are anthropophagi (cannibals), but only on special occasions, and scarcely ever eat any but their enemies taken in battle. Their dress of ceremony is a kind of vest made of paroquets’ feathers, woven together, and so arranged that the large wing and tail-feathers form a sort of girdle round their loins, which gives them a whimsical and ridiculous appearance.”

We have already said that the feather cloak was in use on the shores of the Pacific, among the Peruvians; it is curious to ascertain that it was worn equally by the Brazilians. Some specimens of this singular garment may be seen at the exhibition of the Ethnographical Museum. This was not however the only ornament of these savages; they suspended little stone cylinders from three holes pierced in the lower lip, a custom which is common among many of the Oceanic people, and which may be compared with our fashion of ear-rings. These people were extremely credulous and of good disposition and thus, as Pigafetta says, they could easily have been converted to Christianity, for they assisted in silence, and with gravity, at the mass which was said on shore, a remark that Alvarez Cabral had already made.

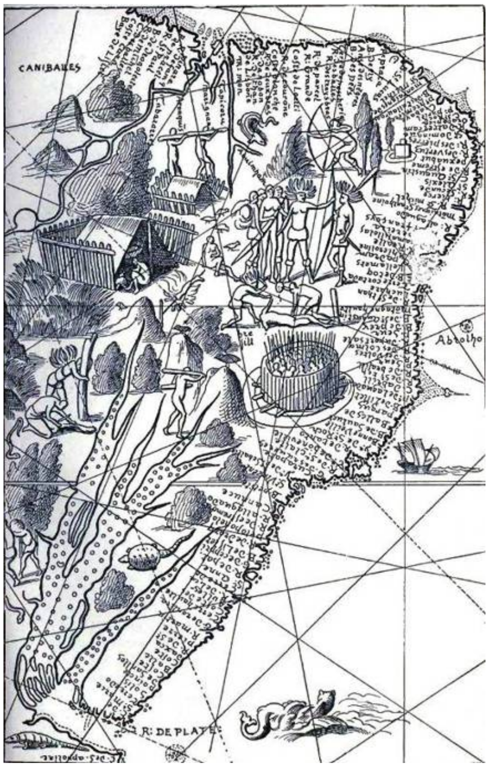

The Coast of Brazil.

After remaining thirteen days in this place, the squadron continued its route to the south, coasting along the shore, and arrived at 34° 40’ of south latitude in a country where flowed a large river of fresh water. It was the La Plata. The natives, called Charruas, were so frightened at the sight of the vessels that they hastily took refuge in the interior of the country, carrying with them all their valuables, and it was impossible to overtake any of them. It was in this country that four years previously, Juan Diaz de Solis had been massacred by a tribe of Charruas, armed with that terrible engine which is still in use at the present day among the *gauchos* of the Argentine

Republic, the *bolas*, which are metal balls fastened to the two ends of a long leather thong, called a *lasso*.

A little below the estuary of the La Plata, once thought to be an arm of the sea opening into the Pacific, the flotilla anchored at Port Desire. Here they obtained an ample supply of penguins for the crews of the five vessels — a bird which did not make a very delicious meal. Then they anchored in 49° 30’ in a beautiful harbour, where Magellan resolved to winter, and which received the name of St. Julian’s Bay. The Spaniards had been two months there, when one day they perceived a man who seemed to them to be of gigantic stature. At sight of them he began dancing and singing and throwing dust upon his head. This was a Patagonian, who allowed himself without resistance to be taken on board the vessels. He showed the greatest surprise at all he saw around him, but nothing astonished him so much as a large steel mirror which was presented to him. “The giant, who had not the least idea of the use of this piece of furniture, and who, no doubt, now saw his own face for the first time, drew back in such terror, that he threw to the ground four of our people who were behind him.” He was taken back on shore loaded with presents, and the kind welcome which he had received induced eighteen of his companions, thirteen women and five men, to come on board. They were tall, and had broad faces, painted red except the eyes, which were encircled with yellow; their hair was whitened with lime, they were wrapped in enormous fur cloaks, and wore those large leather boots from which was given to them the name of Large-feet or Patagonians. Their stature was not, however, so gigantic as it appeared to our simple narrator, for it varies from 5ft. 10in. to 5ft. 8in. being somewhat above the middle height among Europeans. For arms they had a short massive bow, and arrows made of reed, of which the point was formed of a sharp pebble.

The captain, to retain two of these savages whom he wished to take to Europe, used a stratagem, which we should characterize as hateful in the present day, but which had nothing revolting about it for the sixteenth century, when Indians and negroes were universally considered to be a kind of brute beasts. Magellan loaded these Indians with presents, and when he saw them embarrassed with the quantity, he offered to each of them one of those iron rings used for chaining captives. They would have desired to carry them away, for they valued iron above everything, but their hands were full. It was then proposed to fasten the rings to their legs, to which they agreed without suspicion. The sailors then closed the rings, so that the savages found themselves in fetters. Nothing can give an idea of their fury when they discovered this stratagem, worthy rather of savages than of civilized men. The capture of others was attempted, but in vain, and in the chase one of the Spaniards was wounded by a poisoned arrow, which caused his death almost instantaneously. Intrepid hunters, these people wander about perpetually in pursuit of guanaquis and other game; they are endowed with such wonderful voracity "that what would suffice for the nourishment of twenty sailors, can scarcely satisfy seven or eight of them." Magellan, foreseeing that the stay here was likely to be prolonged, and perceiving that the country only presented meagre resources, gave orders to economize the provisions, and to put the men on fixed rations, that they might not experience too great privations before the spring, when they might reach a country where there was more game. But the Spaniards, discontented at the sterility of the place, and at the length and rigour of the winter, began to murmur. This land seemed to stretch southwards as far as the Antarctic pole, they said; there did not seem to be any strait; already several had died from the privations they had endured; lastly it was time to return to Spain, if the commander did not wish to see all his men perish in this place.

Magellan, fully resolved to die, or else to bring the enterprise he commanded to a successful issue, replied that the Emperor had assigned him the course which the voyage was to take, and he neither could nor would depart from it under any pretext, and that in consequence, he should go straight forward to the end of this land, or until he met with some strait. As to provisions, if they found them insufficient, his men might add to their rations the produce of their fishing or hunting. Magellan thought that so firm a declaration would impose silence on the malcontents, and that he would hear no more of privations, from which he suffered equally with his crews. He deceived himself completely. Certain of the captains, and Juan de Carthagena in particular, were interested in causing a revolt to break out. These rebels therefore began by reminding the Spaniards of their old animosity against the Portuguese. The captain-general being one of the latter nation, had never, according to them, tendered a whole-hearted allegiance to the Spanish flag. In order to be able to return to his own country and to gain pardon for what he had done wrong, he wished to commit some heinous crime, and nothing could be more advantageous to Portugal than the destruction of this fine fleet. Instead of leading them to the Archipelago of the Moluccas, of the riches of which he had boasted to them, he wished to take them into frozen regions, the dwelling-place of eternal snow, where he could easily manage that they should all perish; then with the help of the Portuguese on board the squadron, he would take back to his own country the vessels which he had seized.

Such were the reports and accusations that the partisans of Juan de Carthagena, Luis de Mendoza, and Gaspar de Quesada had disseminated among the sailors, when on Palm Sunday, the 1st of April, 1520, Magellan summoned the captains, officers, and pilots, to hear mass on board his vessel and to dine with him afterwards. Alvaro de la Mesquita, a cousin of the captain-general, accepted this invitation with Antonio de Coca and his officers, but neither Mendoza nor Quesada, nor Juan de Carthagena, who was Quesada's prisoner, appeared. The next night the malcontents boarded the *Sant'-Antonio* with thirty of the men of the *Concepcion*, and desired to have La Mesquita given up to them. The pilot, Juan de Eliorraga, while defending his captain, received four stabs from a poniard in the arm. Quesada cried out at the same time, "You will see that this fool will make our business fail." The three vessels, the *Concepcion*, *Sant'-Antonio*, and *Santiago*, fell without difficulty into the hands of the rebels, who reckoned more than one accomplice among the crews. In spite of this success, the three captains did not dare openly to attack the commander-in-chief, and sent to him some proposals for a reconciliation. Magellan ordered them to come on board the *Trinidad* to confer with him; but this they stoutly refused to do, whereupon Magellan, having no further need of caution, had the boat seized which had brought him this answer, and choosing six strong and brave men from amongst his crew, he sent them on board the *Victoria* under the command of the *alguazil* Espinosa. He carried a letter from Magellan to Mendoza enjoining him to come on board the *Trinidad*, and when Mendoza smiled in a scornful manner, Espinosa stabbed him in the throat with a poniard, while a sailor struck him on the head with a cutlass. While these events were taking place, another boat, laden with fifteen armed men, came alongside the *Victoria*, and took possession of her without any resistance from the sailors, surprised by the rapidity of the action. On the next day, the 3rd of April, the two other rebel vessels were taken, not however without bloodshed. Mendoza's body was divided into quarters, while a clerk read in a loud voice the sentence that blasted his memory. Three days afterwards, Quesada was beheaded and cut in pieces by his own servant, who undertook this sad task to save his own life. As to Carthagena, the high rank which the royal edict had conferred upon him in the expedition saved him from death, but with Gomez de la Reina, the chaplain, he was left behind on the shore, where some months afterwards he was found by Estevam Gomez. Forty sailors convicted of rebellion were pardoned because their services were considered indispensable. After this severe lesson Magellan might well hope that the mutinous spirit was really subdued.

When the temperature became milder the anchors were weighed; the squadron put to sea on the 24th of August, following the coast, and carefully exploring all the gulfs to find that strait which had been so persistently sought. At the level of Cape St. Croix, one of the vessels, the *Santiago*, was lost on the rocks during a violent gale from the east. Happily both the men and merchandise on board were saved, and they succeeded also in taking from the wrecked vessel the rigging and appurtenances of the ship, which they divided among the four remaining vessels.

At last on the 21st of October, according to Pigafetta, the 27th of November according to Maximilian Transylvain, the flotilla penetrated by a narrow entrance into a gulf, at the bottom of which a strait opened, which as they soon saw passed into the sea to the south. First they called this the Strait of the *Eleven Thousand Virgins*, because this was the day dedicated to them. On each side of the strait rose high land covered with snow, on which they saw numerous fires, especially to the left, but they were unable to obtain any communication with the natives. The details which Pigafetta and Martin Transylvain have given with regard to the topographical and hydrographical dispositions of this strait are rather vague, and as we shall have to mention it again when we speak of De Bougainville’s expedition, we shall not dilate upon it now. After sailing for twenty-two days across this succession of narrow inlets and arms of the sea, in some places three miles wide, in some twelve, which extends for a distance of 440 miles and has received the name of Magellan’s Strait, the flotilla emerged upon a sea of immense extent and great depth.

The rejoicings were general when at last the sailors found themselves at the long-wished-for end of their efforts. Henceforward the route was open and Magellan’s clever conjectures were realized.

Nothing is more extraordinary than the navigation of Magellan upon this ocean, which he called Pacific, because for four months no storm assailed him upon it. The privations endured by the crews during this long space of time were excessive. The biscuit was nothing more than dust mixed with worms, while the water had become bad and gave out an unbearable smell. The sailors were obliged to eat mice and sawdust to prevent themselves from dying of hunger, and to gnaw all the leather that it was possible to find. As it was easy to foresee under these circumstances, the crews were decimated by scurvy. Nineteen men died, and thirty were seized with violent pains in their arms and legs, which caused prolonged sufferings. At last, after having sailed over more than 12,000 miles without meeting with a single island, in a sea where so many and such populous archipelagos were destined to be discovered, the fleet came upon two desert and sterile islands, called for that reason the Unfortunate Islands, but of which the position is indicated in much too contradictory a manner, for it to be possible to recognize them.

In 12° north latitude and 146° longitude, on Wednesday the 6th of March, the navigators discovered successively three islands, at which they greatly desired to stop to recruit, and take in fresh provisions; but the islanders who came on board stole so many things, without the possibility of preventing them, that the sailors were obliged to give up the idea of remaining there. The natives contrived even to carry off a long boat. Magellan, indignant at such daring, made a descent with forty armed men, burned some houses and boats, and killed seven men. These islanders had neither chief, king, nor religion. Their heads were covered with palm-leaf hats, they wore beards, and their hair descended to their waists. Generally of an olive tint, they thought they embellished themselves by colouring their teeth black and red, while their bodies were anointed with cocoa-nut oil, no doubt in order to protect themselves from the heat of the sun. Their canoes of curious construction, carried a very large matting sail, which might have easily capsized the boat if the precaution had not been taken of giving a more stable trim by means of a long piece of wood kept at a certain distance by two poles; this is what is called the “balance.” These islanders were very industrious, but had a singular aptitude for stealing, which has gained for their country the name of the *Islands of Thieves* (Ladrone Islands).

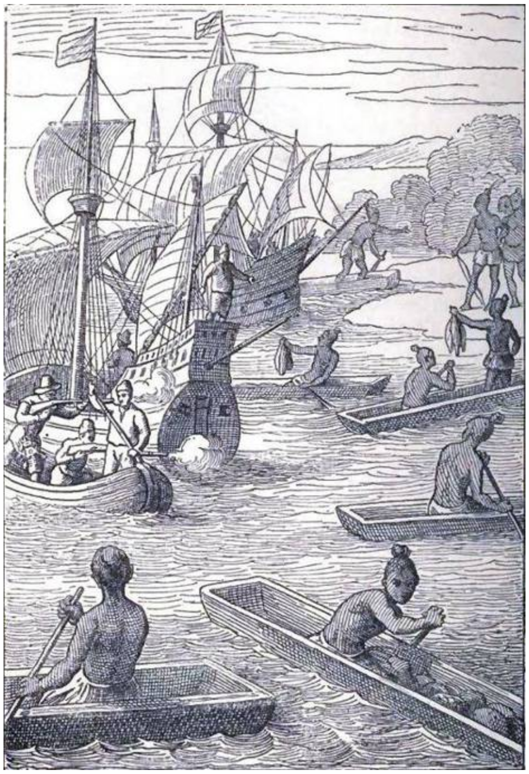

The Ladrone Islands.
From an old print.

On the 16th of March was seen, at about 900 miles from the Ladrones, some high ground; this was soon discovered to be an island which now goes by the name of Samar Island. There Magellan, resolving to give his exhausted crews some rest, caused two tents to be pitched on land for the use of the sick. The natives quickly brought bananas, palm wine, cocoa-nuts, and fish; for which mirrors, combs, bells, and other similar trifles were offered in exchange. The cocoa-nut, a tree which is valuable beyond all others, supplied these natives with their bread, wine, oil, and vinegar, and besides they obtained from it their clothing and the necessary wood for building and roofing in their huts.

The natives soon became familiar with the Spaniards, and told them that their archipelago produced cloves, cinnamon, pepper, nutmegs, ginger, maize or Indian-corn, and that even gold was found there. Magellan gave this archipelago the name of the St. Lazarus Islands, afterwards changed to that of the Philippines from the name of Philip of Austria, son of Charles V.

This archipelago is formed of a great number of islands which extend in Malaysia, between 5° 32’ and 19° 38’ north latitude, and 114° 56’ and 123° 43’ longitude east of the meridian of Paris. The most important are Luzon, Mindoro, Leyte, the Ceylon of Pigafetta, Samar, Panay, Negros, Zebu, Bohol, Palawan, and Mindanao.

When they were a little restored, the Spaniards put to sea again, in order to explore the archipelago. They saw in succession the islands of Cenalo, Huinaugan, Ibusson, and Abarien, as well as another island called Massava, of which the king Colambu could make himself understood by a slave a native of Sumatra, whom Magellan had taken to Europe from India, and who by his knowledge of Malay rendered signal service in several instances. The king came on board with six or eight of his principal subjects. He brought with him presents for the captain-general, and in exchange he received a vest of red and yellow cloth, made in Turkish fashion, and a cap of fine scarlet, while mirrors and knives were given to the members of his suite. The Spaniards showed him all their fire-arms and fired some shots from the cannon in his presence, at which he was much terrified. “Then Magellan caused one of our number to be fully armed,” says Pigafetta, “and ordered three men to give him blows with the sword and stiletto, to show the king that nothing could wound a man armed in this manner, which surprised him greatly, and turning to the interpreter he said to the captain through him, ‘that a man thus armed, could fight against a hundred.’ ‘Yes,’ replied the interpreter, in the name of the commandant, ‘and each of the three vessels carries 200 men armed in this manner.’” The king, astonished by all that he had seen, took leave of the captain, begging him to send two of his men with him, to let them see something of the island. Pigafetta was chosen, and was much satisfied with the welcome that he received. The king told him “that in this island they found pieces of gold as large as nuts, and even eggs, mixed with the earth which they passed through a sieve to find them; all his vessels and even some of the ornaments of his house were of this metal. He was very neatly dressed, according to the custom of the country, and was the finest man that I have seen among these people. His black hair fell upon his shoulders; a silk veil covered his head, and he wore two rings in his ears. From his waist to his knees, he was covered with a cotten cloth embroidered in silk. On each of his teeth there were three spots of gold, arranged in such a manner that one would have said all his teeth were fastened together with this metal. He was perfumed with storax and benzoin. His skin was painted, but its natural tint was olive.”

On Easter Day, the Europeans went on shore to celebrate mass in a kind of little church which they had constructed on the sea-shore with sails and branches of trees. An altar had been set up, and during the whole time that the religious ceremony lasted, the king with a large concourse of people, listened in silence and imitated all the motions of the Spaniards. Then a cross having been planted on a hill with great solemnity, they weighed anchor and made for the port of Zebu, as being the best for revictualling the vessels and trading. They arrived there on Sunday, the 7th of April. Magellan sent one of his officers on shore at once with the interpreter, as ambassador to the king of Zebu. The envoy explained that the chief of the squadron was under the orders of the greatest king in the world. The object of the voyage, he added, was the wish to pay him a visit, and at the same time to take in some fresh provisions in exchange for merchandise, and then to go to the Molucca Islands. Such were the motives which caused them to tarry in a country where they came as friends.

“They are welcome,” replied the king; “but if they intend to trade they should pay a duty to which all vessels are subject that enter my port, as did, not four days since, a junk from Siam, which came to seek for slaves and gold, to which a Moorish merchant who has remained in this country can testify.”

The Spaniard replied that his master was too great a king to submit to such an unreasonable demand. They had come with pacific intentions; but if war were declared, it would be seen with whom they had to deal.

The king of Zebu, warned by the Moorish merchant, of the power of those who stood before him, and whom he took for Portuguese, at length consented to forego his claims. Moreover the king of Massava, who had continued to serve as pilot to the Spaniards, so altered the inclinations of his brother sovereign, that the Spaniards obtained the exclusive privilege of trading in the island, and a loyal friendship was sealed between the king of Zebu and Magellan by an exchange of blood which each drew from his right arm.

From this moment, provisions were brought and cordial relations established. The nephew of the king came with a numerous suite to visit Magellan on board his ship, and the latter took this opportunity to relate to his visitors the wonderful history of the creation of the world, and of the redemption of the human race, and to invite him and his people to become converts to Christianity. They showed no repugnance to being baptized, and on the 14th of April the kings of Zebu and Massava, and the Moorish merchant, with 500 men and as many women received baptism. But what was only a fashion at first, for it cannot be said that the natives knew the religion which they embraced or were persuaded of its truth, became a real frenzy, after a wonderful cure had been effected by Magellan. Having learnt that the father of the king had been ill for two years and was on the point of death, the captain-general promised, that if he consented to be baptized and the natives would burn their idols, he would find himself cured. “He added that he was so convinced of what he said,” relates Pigafetta — for it is as well to quote the author verbatim in such a matter — ”that he agreed to lose his head if what he promised did not happen immediately. We then made a procession, with all possible pomp, from the place where we were to the sick man’s house, whom we found really in a very sad state in that he could neither speak nor move. We baptized him with two of his wives and ten daughters. The captain asked him directly after his baptism how he found himself, and he suddenly replied that thanks to our Lord he was well. We were all witnesses of this miracle. The captain above all rendered thanks to God for it. He gave the prince a refreshing drink, and continued to send him some of it every day till he was quite restored. On the fifth day the invalid found himself quite cured and got up. His first care was to have burned, in the presence of the king and all the people, an idol for which he had great veneration, and which some old women guarded carefully in his house. He also caused some temples which stood on the sea-shore, and in which the people assembled to eat the meat consecrated to their old divinities, to be thrown down. All the inhabitants applauded these acts, and proposed themselves to go and destroy all the idols, even those which were in use in the king's house, crying at the same time '*Vive la Castille!*' in honour of the king of Spain."

Near to the Island of Zebu is another island called Matan which had two chiefs, one of whom had recognized the authority of Spain, while the other having energetically resisted it, Magellan resolved to impose it upon him by force. On Friday, the 26th of April, three long boats left for the Island of Matan containing sixty men wearing cuirasses and helmets, and armed with muskets; and thirty *balangais* bearing the king of Zebu, his son-in-law, and a number of warriors.

The Spaniards waited for day and then to the number of forty-nine leapt into the water, for the boats could not approach the land on account of the rocks and shallow water. More than 1500 natives awaited them, and at once threw themselves upon them, and attacked them in three troops, both in front and flank. The musketeers and the crossbow-men fired on the multitude of warriors from a distance, without doing them much harm, they being protected by their bucklers. The Spaniards, assailed by stones, arrows, javelins, and lances, and overwhelmed by numbers, set fire to some huts to disperse and intimidate the natives. But these, made more furious by the sight of the fire, redoubled their efforts, and pressed the Spaniards on all sides, who had the greatest difficulty in resisting them, when a sad event took place which compromised the issue of the combat. The natives were not slow in remarking that all the blows which they directed towards those parts of their enemies' bodies which were protected by armour, caused no wounds; they set themselves therefore to hurl their arrows and javelins against the lower part of the body, which was undefended. Magellan, wounded in the leg by a poisoned arrow, gave the order for retreat, which, begun in good order, soon changed into such a flight, that seven or eight Spaniards alone remained at his side. With much difficulty they kept moving backwards, fighting as they went, in order to reach the boats. They were already knee-deep in the water when several islanders rushed all together upon Magellan, who, wounded in the arm, was unable to draw his sword; they gave him such a sabre-cut upon his leg that he immediately fell down in the water, where he was speedily despatched. His remaining companions, and among them Pigafetta, every one of whom had been hit, hastily regained the boats. Thus perished the illustrious Magellan on the 27th of April, 1521. "He was adorned with every virtue," says Pigafetta, "and ever exhibited an unshaken constancy in the midst of the greatest adversity. At sea he always condemned himself to greater privations than the rest of his crew. Better versed than any one else in the knowledge of nautical charts, he was perfect in the art of navigation, as he proved by making the tour of the world, which none before him had ventured to do." Pigafetta's funeral eulogy, though a little hyperbolical, is not untrue in the main. Magellan had need of singular constancy and perseverance to penetrate, despite the fears of his companions, into regions peopled by the superstitious spirit of the time with fantastic dangers. Peculiar nautical science was also necessary to achieve the discovery at the extremity of that long coast of the strait which so justly bears his name. He was obliged to give unceasing attention to avoid all untoward accidents while exploring those unknown parts without any exact instruments. That one of the vessels was lost must be imputed to pride and a spirit of revolt in her own captain, more than to any incapacity or want of caution in the captain-general. Let us add with our enthusiastic narrator, “The glory of Magellan will survive his death.”

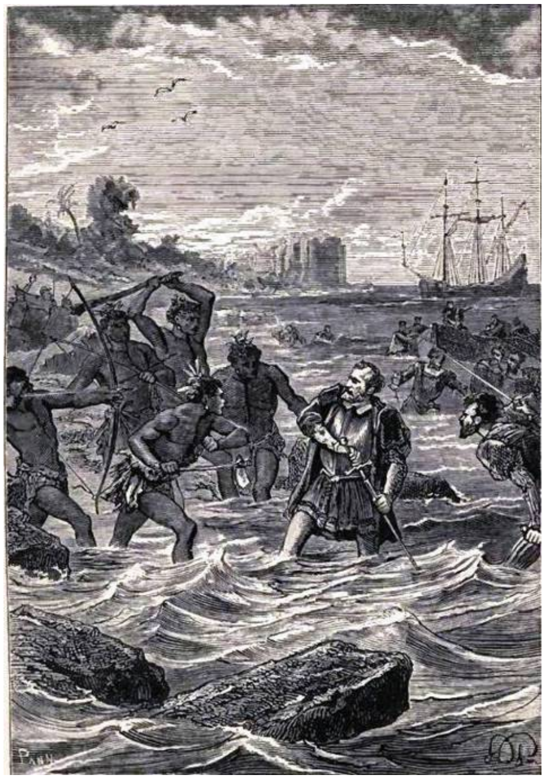

Death of Magellan.

Duarte Barbosa, Magellan’s brother-in-law, and Juan Serrano were elected commanders by the Spaniards, who were destined to meet with further catastrophes. The slave who had acted as interpreter up to this time had been slightly wounded during the battle. From the time of his master’s death he had kept aloof, not rendering any further service to the Spaniards, and remaining extended upon his mat. After some rather sharp reproofs from Barbosa, who told him that his master’s death did not make him a free man, he disappeared all at once. He was gone to the newly-baptized king, to whom he declared that if he could allure the Spaniards into some trap and then kill them, he would make himself master of all their provisions and merchandise. Serrano, Barbosa, and twenty-seven Spaniards were accordingly invited to a solemn assembly to receive the presents destined by the king of Zebu for the Emperor; during the banquet they were attacked unexpectedly, and were all massacred except Serrano, who was led bound to the sea-shore, where he besought his companions to ransom him, for if they did not he would be murdered. But Juan de Carvalho and the others, fearing that the insurrection would become general, and that they might be attacked during the negotiations by a numerous fleet which they would not be able to resist, turned a deaf ear to the unfortunate Serrano's supplications. The ships set sail and reached the Island of Bohol, which was not far distant.

When there, thinking that their numbers were too much reduced to navigate three vessels, they burnt the *Concepcion*, after having transshipped all that was most precious on board the other vessels. Then, after having coasted along the Island of Panilongon they stopped at Butuan, which forms part of Mindanao, a magnificent island, with numerous ports, and rivers abounding in fish, to the north-west of which lies the Island of Luzon, the most considerable of the Archipelago. The ships touched also at Paloan, where they found pigs, goats, fowls, different kinds of bananas, cocoa-nuts, sugar-canes, and rice, with which they provisioned the ships. This was for them, as Pigafetta expresses it, "a promised land." Among the things which he thought worthy of notice, the Italian traveller mentions the cocks kept by the natives for fighting; a passion which after so many years is still deeply-rooted amongst the population of the whole Philippine Archipelago. From Paloan, the Spaniards next went to the Island of Borneo, the centre of Malay civilization. From that time they had no longer to deal with poverty-stricken people, but with a rich population, who received them with magnificence. Their reception by the rajah is sufficiently curious to warrant a few words being devoted to it. At the landing-place they found two elephants with silk trappings, who bore the strangers to the house of the governor of the town, while twelve men carried the presents which were to be offered to the rajah. From the governor's house where they slept, to the palace of the king, the streets were kept by armed men. Upon descending from their elephants the Spaniards were admitted to a room filled with courtiers. At the end of this room opened another smaller room, hung with cloth of gold, in which were 300 men of the king's guard armed with poniards. Through a door they could then see the rajah, sitting by a table with a little child, chewing betel-nut. Behind him there were only some women.

Etiquette required that the petition to be made must pass in succession through the mouths of three nobles, each of higher rank than the last, before being transmitted, by means of a hollow cane placed in a hole in the wall, to one of the principal officers, who submitted it to the king. Then there was an exchange of presents, after which the Spanish Ambassadors were conducted back to their vessels with the same ceremony as on their arrival. The capital is built on piles in the sea; so that when the tide rises, the women who sell provisions go about the town in boats. On the 29th of July more than 100 canoes surrounded the two vessels, whilst at the same time some junks weighed anchor to approach them more nearly. The Spaniards, fearing to be treacherously attacked, took the initiative and fired off their artillery, which killed a number of people in the canoes, upon which the king excused himself, saying that his fleet had not been directed against them, but against the Gentiles with whom the Mussulmen had daily combats. This island produces arrack (the alcohol of rice), camphor, cinnamon, ginger, oranges, citrons, sugar-canes, melons, radishes, onions,

&c. The articles of exchange are copper, quicksilver, cinnabar, glass, woollen cloths, and canvas, and above all iron and spectacles, without mentioning porcelain, and diamonds, some of which were of extraordinary size and value. The *fauna* comprises elephants, horses, buffaloes, pigs, goats, and domestic poultry. The money in use is of bronze, it is called *sapèque* and consists of small coins which are perforated with holes, that they may be strung together.

On leaving Borneo the travellers sought for a suitable spot in which to repair their vessels, which were in such great need of it that the men were not less than forty-two days over the work. “The oddest things which I have found in this island,” says Pigafetta, “are the trees of which all the leaves are animated. These leaves resemble those of the mulberry, but are not so long; the stalk is short and pointed, and near the stalk on both sides there are two feet. If you touch the leaves, they escape; but when crushed no blood comes from them. I have kept one of them in a box for nine days; when I opened the box, the leaf was walking about in it; I believe they must live upon air.” These very curious animals are well known at the present day, and are commonly called leaf-flies (*mouches-feuille*); they are of a grey-brown, which makes them more easily mistaken for dead leaves, which they exactly resemble in appearance.

It was while in these parts that the Spanish expedition, which, during Magellan’s life had preserved its scientific character, began perceptibly to become piratical. Thus, on several occasions, junks were seized upon, and their crews forced by their Spanish captors to pay large ransoms.

The ships next passed by the Archipelago of the Sooloo Islands, the haunt of Malay pirates, who have even now only lately submitted to the Spanish arms; then by Mindanao, which had been already visited, for it was known that the eagerly sought-for Moluccas must be in its neighbourhood, whether more or less remote. At last, after having seen a number of islands, of which the names would not convey much idea to us, on Wednesday, the 6th of November the Spaniards discovered the Archipelago, about which the Portuguese had related such terrifying fables, and two days later they landed at Tidor. Thus the object of the voyage was attained.

The king came to meet the Spaniards, and invited them to go on board his canoe. “He was seated under a silk parasol which covered him entirely. In front of him were placed one of his sons who carried the royal sceptre, two men who had each a golden vase full of water for washing the king’s hands, and two others holding small gilt boxes filled with betel.” Then the Spaniards made the king come on board the vessels, where they showed him much respect, at the same time loading him and those who accompanied him with presents, which seemed to them very precious. “This king is a Moor, that is to say, an Arab,” Pigafetta affirms; “he is nearly forty-five years of age, tolerably well made, and with a fine physiognomy. His clothing consisted of a very fine shirt, the cuffs of which were embroidered in gold; drapery descended from his waist to his feet; a silk veil (no doubt a turban) covered his head, and upon this veil there was a garland of flowers. His name is Rajah-sultan Manzor.”

The next day, in a long interview which he had with the Spaniards, Manzor declared his intention of placing himself with the Islands of Ternate and Tidor under the protection of the king of Spain.

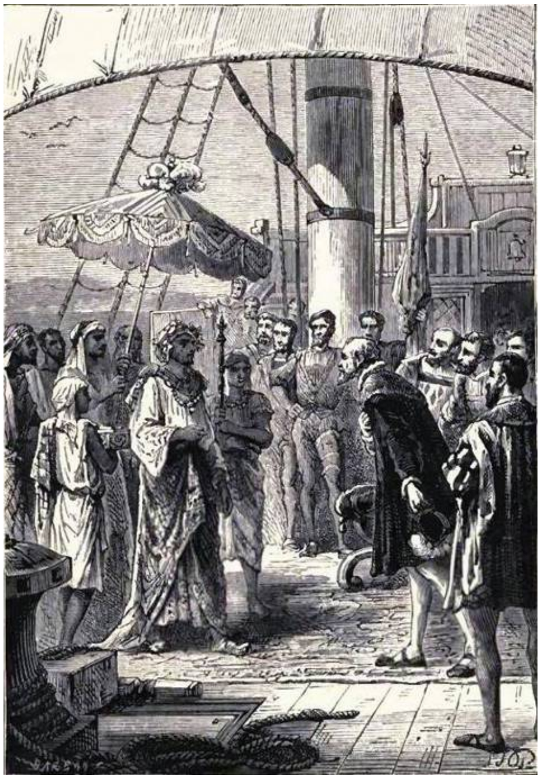

The Sultan Manzor.

This is the place to give some details about the Archipelago of the Moluccas, drawn from Pigafetta’s narrative, which we are following step by step in the version that M. Ed. Charton has given, and to which he has added such valuable notes.

This Archipelago properly speaking, comprises the Islands of Gilolo, Ternate, Tidor, Mornay, Batchian, and Misal; but the Banda and Amboyna groups are also often comprehended under the general name of Molucca. Formerly convulsed by repeated volcanic commotions, this Archipelago contains a great number of craters almost all extinct, or in repose during a long succession of years. The air there is burning, and would be almost unfit to breathe, if frequent rains did not fall and refresh the atmosphere. The natural productions are extremely valuable. In the first rank must be placed the sago-tree, of which the pith called sago takes, with yams, the place of cereals throughout Malacca. As soon as the tree is cut down, the pith is extracted, which is then grated, passed through a sieve, and afterwards cut up in the form of small rolls, which are dried in the shade. There are also the mulberry, the clove, the nutmeg, the camphor, and pepper-trees; in fact all the spice-trees and all the tropical fruits. The forests contain some valuable kinds of wood, ebony, iron-wood, teak, famous for its strength and employed from the most ancient times in costly buildings, and the Calilaban laurel, which yields an aromatic essential oil that is highly prized. At this period domestic animals were not numerous in the Moluccas, but among the wild animals the most curious were the *babiroussa*, an enormous wild boar with long tusks bent backwards; the opossum, a kind of didelphis a little larger than our squirrel; the phalanger, a marsupial which lives in thick, dark forests, where it feeds upon leaves and fruit; and the tarsier, a kind of jerboa, a very harmless, inoffensive little animal with reddish-coloured hair, about the size of a rat, but whose body bears some resemblance to that of an ape. Among the birds, the most remarkable were the parroquets and cockatoos, the birds of Paradise of which so many fabulous accounts were given, and which until then had been believed to be without legs, the king-fishers, and the cassowaries, great wading-birds almost as large as ostriches.

A Portuguese named Lorosa had been long settled in the Moluccas, and to him the Spaniards forwarded a letter, in the hope that he would betray his country and attach himself to Spain. They obtained the most curious information from him with regard to the expeditions which the king of Portugal had despatched to the Cape of Good Hope, to the Rio de la Plata and to the Moluccas; but from various circumstances these latter expeditions had not been able to take place. He himself had been sixteen years in this Archipelago; the Portuguese had been installed there for ten years, but upon this fact they preserved the most complete silence. When Lorosa saw the Spaniards making their preparations for departure, he came on board with his wife and his goods to return to Europe. On the 12th of November all the merchandise destined for barter was landed, it being chiefly derived from the four junks which had been seized in Borneo. Certainly the Spaniards traded to great advantage, but nevertheless not to so great an extent as they might have done, for they were in haste to return to Spain. Some vessels from Gilolo and Batchian came also to trade with them, and a few days later they received a considerable stock of cloves from the king of Tidor. This king invited them to a great banquet which he said it was his custom to give when a vessel or junk was loaded with the first cloves. But the Spaniards, remembering what had happened to them in the Philippines, refused the invitation while presenting compliments and excuses to the king. When their cargo was completed, they set sail. Scarcely had the *Trinidad* put to sea before it was perceived that she had a serious leak, and the return to Tidor as fast as possible was unavoidable. The skilful divers whom the king placed at the disposal of the Spaniards, were unable to discover the hole, and it became necessary to partly unload the ship to make the necessary repairs. The sailors who were on board the *Victoria* would not wait for their companions, and the ship's officers seeing clearly that the *Trinidad* would not be fit for the voyage to Spain, decided that she should go to Darien, where her valuable cargo would be discharged and transported across the Isthmus to the Atlantic, where a vessel would be sent to fetch it. But neither the unfortunate vessel nor her crew was destined ever to return to Spain.

The *Trinidad*, commanded by the alguazil Gonzalo Gomez de Espinosa, who had Juan de Carvalho as pilot, was in so bad a state that after leaving

Tidor, she was obliged to anchor at Ternate, in the port of Talangomi, where her crew consisting of seventeen men was immediately imprisoned by the Portuguese. The only reply given to Espinosa's remonstrances was a threat to hang him to the yard of a vessel; and the unfortunate alguazil, after having been transferred to Cochin, was sent to Lisbon, where for seven months he remained shut up in the prison of the Limoeiro with two Spaniards, the sole survivors of the crew of the *Trinidad*.

As to the *Victoria*, she left Tidor richly laden under the command of Juan Sebastian del Cano, who, after having been simply a pilot on board one of Magellan's ships, had taken the command of the *Concepcion* on the 27th of April, 1521, and who succeeded to Juan Lopez de Carvalho, when the latter was superseded in his command for incapacity. The crew of the *Victoria* was composed of only fifty-three Europeans and thirteen Indians. Fifty-four Europeans remained at Tidor on board the *Trinidad*.

After passing amidst the islands of Caioan, Laigoma, Sico, Giofi, Cafi, Laboan, Toliman, Batchian, Mata, and Batu, the *Victoria* left this latter island to the west, and steering west-south-west, stopped during the night at the island of Xulla or Zulla. At thirty miles from thence the Spaniards anchored at Booro, (the Boero of Bougainville), where the ship was revictualled. They stopped 105 miles further on, at Banda, where mace and nutmegs are found, then at Solor, where a great trade in white sandal-wood is carried on. They spent a fortnight there to repair their ship, which had suffered much, and there they laid in an ample provision of wax and pepper; then they anchored at Timor, where they could only obtain provisions by retaining by stratagem the chief of the village and his son, who had come on board the ship. This island was frequented by junks from Luzon, and by the "praos," from Malacca and Java, which traded largely there in sandal-wood and pepper. A little further on the Spaniards touched at Java, where, as it appears, *suttee* was practised at this time, as it has been in India until quite recently.

Among the stories which Pigafetta relates, without entirely believing them, is one which is most curious. It concerns a gigantic bird the Epyornis, of which the bones and the enormous eggs were discovered in Madagascar about the year 1850. It is an instance proving the caution needed before rejecting as fictitious many apparently fabulous legends, but which on examination may prove to possess a substratum of truth. “To the north of Greater Java,” says Pigafetta, “in the gulf of China, there is a very large tree called *campanganghi* inhabited by certain birds called *garula*, which are so large and strong that they can bear away a buffalo and even an elephant, and carry it as they fly to the place where the tree *puzathaer* is.” This legend has been current ever since the ninth century, among the Persians and Arabs, and this bird plays a wonderful part in Arabian tales under the name of the *roc*. It is not surprising, therefore, that Pigafetta found an analogous tradition among the Malays.

After leaving greater Java, the *Victoria* rounded the peninsula of Malacca, which had been subjugated to Portugal by the great Albuquerque ten years before. In the immediate neighbourhood are Siam and Cambodia, and Tchiampa, where rhubarb grows. This substance is discovered in the following manner. “A company of from twenty to five-and-twenty men go into the wood, where they pass the night in the trees, to protect themselves from lions (note here, that there are no lions in this country), and other ferocious beasts, and also that they may better perceive the odour of the rhubarb, which the wind wafts towards them. In the morning they go towards the place whence came the odour, and search there for the rhubarb until they find it. Rhubarb is the putrefied wood of a great tree, and acquires its odour even from its putrefaction, the best part of the tree is the root, nevertheless the trunk, which they call *calama*, has the same medicinal virtue.”

Decidedly it is not from Pigafetta that we should seek to acquire botanical knowledge; we should run a great risk of deceiving ourselves if we took in earnest the nonsense that the Moor told him from whom he drew his information. The Lombard traveller gives us also fantastic details about China with the greatest seriousness, and falls into the grave errors, which his contemporary Duarte Barbosa had avoided. It is to the latter we owe the information that the trade in *anfiam* or opium has existed from this period. When once the *Victoria* had left the shores of Malacca, Sebastian del Cano took great care to avoid the coast of Zanguebar, where the Portuguese had been established since the beginning of the century. He kept to the open sea as far as 42° south latitude, and for nine weeks he was obliged to keep the sails furled, on account of the constant west and north-west winds, which ended in a fearful storm. To keep to this course required great perseverance on the part of the captain, with a settled desire on his part to carry his enterprise to a successful issue. The vessel had several leaks, and a number of the sailors demanded an anchorage at Mozambique, for the provisions which were not salted having become bad, the crew had only rice and water for food and drink. At last on the 6th of May, the Cape of Tempests was doubled and a favourable issue to the voyage might be hoped for. Nevertheless, many vexatious accidents still awaited the navigator. In two months, twenty-one men, Europeans and Indians, died from privations, and if on the 9th July they had not landed at Santiago, one of the Cape de Verd Islands, the whole crew would have died of hunger. As this archipelago belonged to Portugal, the sailors took care to say that they came from America, and carefully concealed the route which they had discovered. But one of the sailors having had the imprudence to say that the *Victoria* was the only vessel of Magellan’s squadron which had returned to Europe, the

Portuguese immediately seized the crew of a long-boat, and prepared to attack the Spanish vessel. However, Del Cano on board his vessel was watching all the movements of the Portuguese, and suspecting, by the preparations which he saw, that there was an intention of seizing the *Victoria*, he set sail, leaving thirteen men of his crew in the hands of the Portuguese. Maximilian Transylvain assigns a different motive from the one given by Pigafetta, for the anchorage at the Cape de Verd Islands. He asserts that the fatigued state of the crew, who were reduced by privations, and who in spite of everything had not ceased to work the pumps, had decided the captain to stop and buy some slaves to aid them in this work. Having no money the Spaniards would have paid with some of their spices, which would have opened the eyes of the Portuguese.

“To see if our journals were correctly kept,” says Pigafetta, “we inquired on shore what day of the week it was. They replied that it was Thursday, which surprised us, because according to our journals it was as yet only Wednesday. We could not be persuaded that we had made the mistake of a day; I was more astonished myself than the others were, because having always been sufficiently well to keep my journal, I had uninterruptedly marked the days of the week, and the course of the months. We learnt afterwards, that there was no error in our calculation, for having always travelled towards the west, following the course of the sun, and having returned to the same point, we must have gained twenty-four hours upon those who had remained stationary; one has only need of reflection to be convinced of this fact.”

Sebastian del Cano rapidly made the coast of Africa, and on the 6th of September entered the Bay of San Lucar de Barrameda, with a crew of seventeen men, almost all of whom were ill. Two days later he anchored before the mole at Seville, after having accomplished a complete circuit of the world.

As soon as he arrived, Sebastian del Cano went to Valladolid, where the court was, and received from Charles V. the welcome which was merited after so many difficulties had been courageously overcome. The bold mariner received permission to take as his armorial bearings, a globe with this motto, *Primus circumdedisti me*, and he also received a pension of 500 ducats.

The rich freight of the *Victoria*, decided the Emperor to send a second fleet to the Moluccas. The supreme command of it was not, however, given to Sebastian del Cano; it was reserved for the commander Garcia de Loaisa, whose only claim to it was his grand name. However, after the death of the chief of the expedition, which happened as soon as the fleet had passed the Strait of Magellan, Del Cano found himself invested with the command, but he did not hold it long, for he died six days afterwards. As for the ship *Victoria*, she was long preserved in the port of Seville, but in spite of all the care that was taken of her, she at length fell to pieces from old age.

CHAPTER III.

THE POLAR EXPEDITIONS AND THE SEARCH FOR THE NORTH-WEST PASSAGE.

I.

The Northmen — Eric the Red — The Zenos — John Cabot — Cortereal — Sebastian Cabot — Willoughby — Chancellor.

Pytheas had opened up the road to the north to the Scandinavians by discovering Iceland (the famous Thule) and the *Cronian* Ocean, of which the mud, the shallow-water, and the ice render the navigation dangerous, and where the nights are as light as twilight. The traditions of the voyages undertaken by the ancients to the Orkneys, the Faröe Islands, and even to Iceland, were treasured up among the Irish monks, who were learned men, and themselves bold mariners, as their successive establishments in these archipelagos clearly prove. They were also the pilots of the Northmen, a name given generally to the Scandinavian pirates, both Danish and Norwegian, who rendered themselves so formidable to the whole of Europe during the Middle Ages. But if all the information that we owe to the ancients, both Greeks and Romans, with regard to these hyperborean countries be extremely vague and so to speak fabulous, it is not so with that which concerns the adventurous enterprises of the “Men of the North.” The Sagas, as the Icelandic and Danish songs are called, are extremely precise, and the numerous data which we owe to them are daily confirmed by the archæological discoveries made in America, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Denmark. This is a source of valuable information which was long unknown and unexplored, and of which we owe the revelation to the learned Dane, C. C. Rafn, who has furnished us with authentic facts of the greatest interest bearing on the pre-Columbian discovery of America.

Norway was poor and encumbered with population. Hence arose the necessity for a permanent emigration, which should allow a considerable portion of the inhabitants to seek in more favoured regions the nourishment which a frozen soil denied them. When they had found some country rich enough to yield them an abundant spoil, they then returned to their own land, and set out the following spring accompanied by all those who could be enticed either by the love of lucre, the desire for an easy life, or by the thirst for strife. Intrepid hunters and fishermen, accustomed to a dangerous navigation between the continent and the mass of islands which border it and appear to defend it against the assaults of the ocean, and across the narrow, deep *fiords*, which seem as though they were cut into the soil itself by some gigantic sword, they set out in those oak vessels, the sight of which made the people tremble who lived on the shores of the North Sea and British Channel. Sometimes decked, these vessels, long or short, large or small, were usually terminated in front by a spur of enormous size, above which the prow sometimes rose to a great height, taking the form of an *S*. The *hällristningar*, for so they call the graphic representations so often met with on the rocks of Sweden and Norway, enable us to picture to ourselves these swift vessels, which could carry a considerable crew. Such was the *Long-serpent* of Olaf Tryggvason, which had thirty-two benches of rowers and held ninety men, Canute’s vessel, which carried sixty, and the two vessels of Olaf the Saint, which carried sometimes 200 men. The Sea-kings, as they often called these adventurers, lived on the ocean, never settling on shore, passing from the pillage of a castle to the burning of an abbey, devastating the coasts of France, ascending rivers, especially the Seine, as far as Paris, sailing over the Mediterranean as far as Constantinople, establishing themselves later in Sicily, and leaving traces of their incursions or their sojourn in all the regions of the known world.

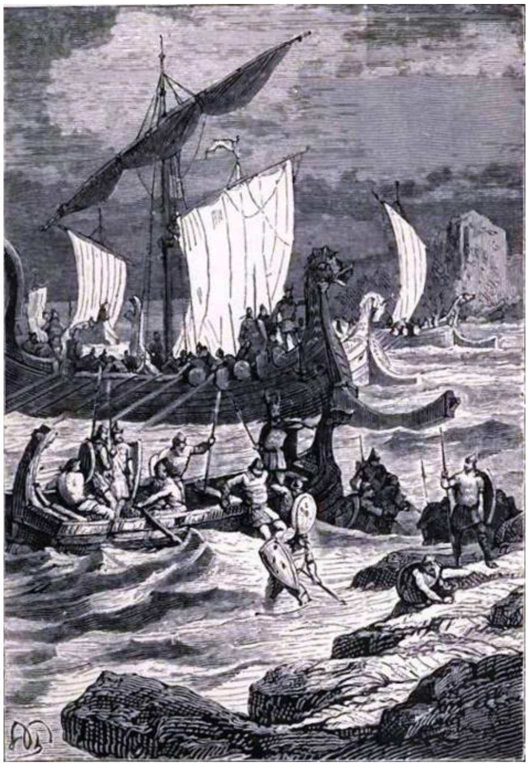

Norman Ships.

Piracy, far from being, as at the present day, an act falling under the ban of the law, was not only encouraged in that barbarous or half-civilized society, but was celebrated in the songs of the *Skalds*, who reserved their most enthusiastic eulogies for celebrating chivalrous struggles, adventurous privateering, and all exhibitions of strength. From the eighth century, these formidable sea-rovers frequented the groups of the Orkney, the Hebrides, the Shetland, and Faröe Islands, where they met with the Irish monks, who had settled themselves there nearly a century earlier, to instruct the idolatrous population.

In 861 a Norwegian pirate, named Naddod, was carried by a storm towards an island covered with snow, which he named Snoland (land of snow), a name changed later to that of Iceland (land of ice). There again the Northmen found the Irish monks under the name of Papis, in the cantons of Papeya and Papili.

Ingolf installed himself some years afterwards in the country, and founded Reijkiavik. In 885 the triumph of Harold Haarfager, who had just subjugated the whole of Norway by force of arms, brought a considerable number of malcontents to Iceland. They established there the republican form of government, which had just been overthrown in their own country, and which subsisted till 1261, the epoch when Iceland passed under the dominion of the kings of Norway.

When established in Iceland, these bold fellows, lovers of adventure and of long hunts in pursuit of seals and walrus, retained their wandering habits and pursued their bold plans in the west, where only three years after the arrival of Ingolf, Guunbjorn discovered the snowy peaks of the mountains of Greenland. Five years later, Eric the Red, banished from Iceland for murder, rediscovered the land in latitude 64° north, of which Guunbjorn had caught a glimpse. The sterility of this ice-bound coast made him decide to seek a milder climate with a more open country, and one producing more game, in the south. So he rounded Cape Farewell at the extremity of Greenland, established himself on the west coast, and built some vast dwellings for himself and his companions, of which M. Jorgensen has discovered the ruins. This country was worthy at that period of the name of Green-Land (Groenland) which the Northmen gave to it, but the annual and great increase of the glaciers, has rendered it since that epoch a land of desolation.

Eric returned to Iceland to seek his friends, and in the same year that he returned to Brattahalida (for so he called his settlement), fourteen vessels laden with emigrants came to join him. It was a veritable exodus. These events took place in the year 1000. As quickly as the resources of the country allowed of it, the population of Greenland increased, and in 1121, Gardar, the capital of the country, became the seat of a bishopric, which existed until after the discovery of the Antilles by Christopher Columbus.

In 986 Bjarn Heriulfson, who had come from Norway to Iceland to spend the winter with his father, learnt that the latter had joined Eric the Red in Greenland. Without hesitation, the young man again put to sea, seeking at haphazard for a country of which he did not even know the exact situation, and was cast by currents on coasts which we think must have been those of New Scotland, Newfoundland, and Maine. He ended, however, by reaching Greenland, where Eric, the powerful Norwegian *jarl*, reproached him for not having examined with more care countries of which he owed his knowledge to a happy accident of the sea.

Eric had sent his son Leif to the Norwegian court, so close at this time was the connexion between the metropolis and the colonies. The king, who had been converted to Christianity, had just despatched a mission to Iceland charged to overthrow the worship of Odin. He committed to Leif’s care some priests who were to instruct the Greenlanders; but scarcely had the young adventurer returned to his own country, when he left the holy men to work out the accomplishment of their difficult task and hearing of the discovery made by Bjarn, he fitted out his vessels and went to seek for the lands which had been only imperfectly seen. He landed first on a desolate and stony plain, to which he gave the name of *Helluland*, and which we have no hesitation in recognizing as Newfoundland, and afterwards on a flat sandy shore behind which rose an immense screen of dark forests, cheered by the songs of innumerable birds. A third time he put to sea and steering towards the south he arrived at the Bay of Rhode Island, where the mild climate and the river teeming with salmon induced him to settle, and where he constructed vast buildings of planks, which he called *Leifsbudir* (Leif's house). Then he sent some of his companions to explore the country, and they returned with the good news that the wild vine grows in the country, to which it owes the name of *Vinland*. In the spring of the year 1001, Leif, having laded his ship with skins, grapes, wood, and other productions of the country, set out for Greenland; he had made the valuable observation that the shortest day in *Vinland* lasted nine hours, which places the site of Leifsbudir at 41° 24' 10". This fortunate voyage and the salvage of a Norwegian vessel carrying fifteen men, gained for Leif the surname of the Fortunate.

This expedition made a great stir, and the account of the wonders of the country in which Leif had settled, induced his brother Thorvald, to set out with thirty men. After passing the winter at Leifsbudir, Thorvald explored the coasts to the south, returning in the autumn to Vinland, and in the following year 1004, he sailed along the coast to the north of Leifsbudir. During this return voyage, the Northmen met with the Esquimaux for the first time, and without any provocation, slaughtered them without mercy. The following night they found themselves all at once surrounded by a numerous flotilla of *Kayacs*, from which came a cloud of arrows. Thorvald alone, the chief of the expedition, was mortally wounded; he was buried by his companions on a promontory, to which they gave the name of the promontory of the Cross.

Now, in the Gulf of Boston in the eighteenth century, a tomb of masonry was discovered, in which, with the bones, was found a sword-hilt of iron. The Indians not being acquainted with this metal, it could not be one of their skeletons; it was not either, the remains of one of the Europeans who had landed after the fifteenth century, for their swords had not this very characteristic form. This tomb has been thought to be that of a Scandinavian, and we venture to say, that of Thorvald, son of Eric the Red.

In the spring of 1007, three vessels carrying 160 men and some cattle, left Eriksfjord; the object in view was the foundation of a permanent colony. The emigrants after sighting Helluland, Markland, and Vinland, landed in an island, upon which they constructed some barracks and began the work of cultivation. But they must either have laid their plans badly, or have been wanting in foresight, for the winter found them without provisions, and they suffered cruelly from hunger. They had, however, the good sense to regain the continent, where in comparative ease, they could await the end of the winter.

At the beginning of 1008, they set out to seek for Leifsbudir, and settled themselves at Mount-Hope Bay, on the opposite shore to the old settlement of Leif. There, for the first time, some intercourse was held with the natives, called *Skrellings* in the sagas, and whom, from the manner in which they are portrayed, it is easy to recognize as Esquimaux. The first meeting was peaceable, and barter was carried on with them until the day when the desire of the Esquimaux to acquire iron hatchets, always prudently refused them by the Northmen, drove them to acts of aggression, which decided the new-comers, after three years of residence, to return to their own country, which they did without leaving behind them any lasting trace of their stay in the country.

It will be easily understood that we cannot give any detailed account of all the expeditions, which set out from Greenland, and succeeded each other on the coasts of Labrador and the United States. Those of our readers who wish for circumstantial details, should refer to M. Gabriel Gravier’s interesting publication, the most complete work on the subject, and from which we have borrowed all that relates to the Norman expeditions.

The same year as Erik the Red landed in Greenland (983), a certain Hari Marson, being driven out of the ordinary course by storms, was cast upon the shores of a country known by the name of “White man’s land,” which extended according to Rafn from Chesapeake Bay to Florida.

What is the meaning of this name “White man’s land”? Had some compatriots of Marson’s already settled there? There is some reason to suppose so even from the words used in the chronicle. We can understand how interesting it would be, to be able to determine the nationality of these first colonists. However, the Sagas have not as yet revealed all their secrets. There are probably, some of them still unknown, and as those which have been successively discovered, have confirmed facts already admitted, there is every reason to hope that our knowledge of Icelandic navigation may become more precise.

Another legend, of which great part is mere romance, but which nevertheless, contains a foundation of truth, relates that a certain Bjorn, who was obliged to quit Iceland in consequence of an unfortunate passion, took refuge in the countries beyond Vinland, where in 1027, he was found by some of his countrymen.

In 1051, during another expedition, an Icelandic woman was killed by some *Skrellings*, and in 1867, a tomb was exhumed, bearing a *runic* inscription, and containing bones, and some articles of the toilet, which are now preserved in the museum at Washington. This discovery was made at the exact spot indicated in the Saga which related these events, and which was not itself discovered until 1863.

But the Northmen, established in Iceland and Greenland, were not the only people who frequented the coast of America about the year 1000, which is proved by the name of “Great Ireland,” which was given to White man’s land. As the history of Madoc-op-Owen proves, the Irish and Welsh founded colonies there, regarding which we have but little information, but vague and uncertain as it is, MM. d’Avezac and Gaffarel agree in recognizing its probability.

Having now said a few words upon the travels and settlements of the Northmen in Labrador, Vinland, and the more southern countries, we must return to the north. The colonies first founded in the neighbourhood of Cape Farewell, had not been slow in stretching along the western coast, which at this period was infinitely less desolate than it is at the present day, as far as northern latitudes, which were not again reached until our own day. Thus at this time they caught seals, walrus, and whales in the bay of Disco; there were 190 towns counted then in Westerbygd and eighty-six in Esterbygd, while at the present day, there are far fewer Danish settlements on these icy shores. These towns were probably only inconsiderable groups of those houses in stone and wood, of which so many ruins have been found from Cape Farewell, as far as Upernavik in about 72° 50’. At the same time numerous runic inscriptions, which have now been deciphered, have given a degree of absolute certainty to facts so long unknown. But how many of these vestiges of the past still remain to be discovered! how many of these valuable evidences of the bravery and spirit of enterprise of the Scandinavian race are for ever buried under the glaciers!

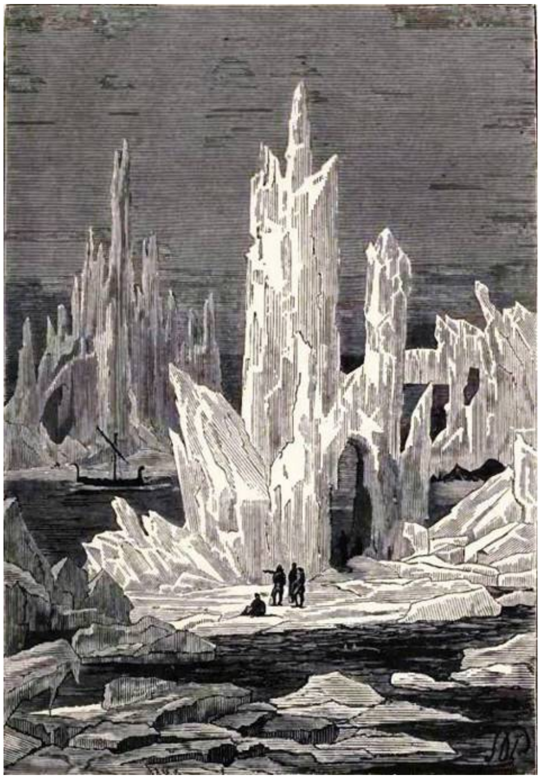

The Glaciers of Greenland.

We have also obtained evidence that Christianity had been brought into America, and especially into Greenland. To this country, according to the instructions of Pope Gregory IV. there were pastoral visits made to strengthen the newly-converted Northmen in the faith, and to evangelize the Esquimaux and the Indian tribes. Besides this, M. Riant in 1865, has proved incontrovertibly that the Crusades were preached in Greenland in the bishopric of Gardar, as well as in the *islands and neighbouring lands*, and that up to 1418, Greenland paid to the Holy See tithes and St. Peter’s pence, which for that year consisted of 2600 lbs. of walrus tusks.

The Norwegian colonies owe their downfall and ruin to various causes: to the very rapid extension of the glaciers, — Hayes has proved that the glacier of Friar John moves at the rate of about thirty-three yards annually; — to the bad policy of the mother country, which prevented the recruiting of the colonies; to the black plague, which decimated the population of Greenland from 1347 to 1351; lastly, to the depredations of the pirates, who ravaged these already enfeebled countries in 1418, and in whom some have thought they recognized certain inhabitants of the Orkney and Faröe Islands, of which we are now about to speak.

One of the companions of William the Conqueror, named Saint-Clair or Sinclair, not thinking that the portion of the conquered country allotted to him was proportioned to his merits, went to try his luck in Scotland, where he was not long in rising to fortune and honours. In the latter half of the fourteenth century, the Orkney Islands passed into the hands of his descendants.

About 1390, a certain Nicolo Zeno, a member of one of the most ancient and noble Venetian families, who had fitted out a vessel at his own expense, to visit England and Flanders as a matter of curiosity, was wrecked in the archipelago of the Orkneys whither he had been driven by a storm. He was about to be massacred by the inhabitants, when the Earl, Henry Sinclair took him under his protection. The history of this wreck, and the adventures and discoveries which followed it, published in the collection of Ramusio had been written by Antonio Zeno, says Clements Markham, the learned geographer, in his "Threshold of the Unknown Region." Unfortunately one of his descendants named Nicolo Zeno, born in 1515, when a boy, not knowing the value of these papers, tore them up, "but some of the letters surviving, he was able from them subsequently to compile the narrative as we now have it, and which was printed in Venice in 1558. There was also found in the palace an old map, rotten with age, illustrative of his voyages. Of this he made a copy, unluckily supplying from his own reading of the narrative what he thought was requisite for its illustration. By doing this in a blundering way, unaided by the geographical knowledge which enables us to see where he goes astray, he threw the whole of the geography which he derived from the narrative into the most lamentable confusion, while those parts of the map which are not thus sophisticated, and which are consequently original, present an accuracy far in advance by many generations of the geography even of Nicolo Zeno's time, and confirm in a notable manner the site of the old Greenland colony. In these facts we have not only the solution of all the discussions which have arisen on the subject, but the most indisputable proof of the authenticity of the narrative; for it is clear that Nicolo Zeno, junior, could not himself have been the ingenious concocter of a story the straightforward truth of which he could thus ignorantly distort upon the face of the map."

The name of Zichmni, in which writers of the present day, and chief among them Mr. H. Major, who has rescued these facts from the domain of fable, recognize the name of Sinclair — appears to be in fact only applicable to this earl of the Orkneys.

At this time the seas of the north of Europe were infected by Scandinavian pirates. Sinclair, who had recognized in Zeno a clever mariner, attached him to himself, and with him conquered the country of Frisland, the haunt of pirates, who ravaged all the north of Scotland. In the maps at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century this name is applied to the archipelago of the Faröe Islands, a reasonable indication, for Buache has recognized in the present names of the harbours and islands of this archipelago a considerable number of those given by Zeno; finally the facts which we owe to the Venetian navigator about the waters, — abounding in fish and dangerous from shallows, — which divide this archipelago, are still true at the present day.

Satisfied with his position, Zeno wrote to his brother Antonio to come and join him. While Sinclair was conquering the Faröe Islands, the Norwegian pirates desolated the Shetland Islands, then called Eastland. Nicolo set sail to give them battle, but was himself obliged to fly before their fleet, much more numerous than his own, and to take refuge on a small island on the coast of Iceland.

After wintering in this place Zeno must have landed the following year on the eastern coast of Greenland at 69° north latitude, in a place "where was a monastery of the order of preaching friars, and a church dedicated to St. Thomas. The cells were warmed by a natural spring of hot water, which the monks used to prepare their food and to bake their bread. The monks had also gardens covered over in the winter season, and warmed by the same means, so that they were able to produce flowers, fruits, and herbs as well as if they had lived in a mild climate." There would seem to be some confirmation of these narratives in the fact that between the years 1828-1830 a captain of the Danish navy met with a population of 600 individuals at 69° north latitude, of a purely European type.

But these adventurous travels in countries of which the climate was so different from that of Venice, proved fatal to Zeno, who died a short time after his return to Frisland.

An old sailor, who had returned with the Venetian, and who said he had been for many long years a prisoner in the countries of the extreme west, gave to Sinclair such precise and tempting details of the fertility and extent of these regions, that the latter resolved to attempt their conquest with Antonio Zeno who had rejoined his brother. But the inhabitants showed themselves everywhere so hostile, and opposed such resistance to the strangers landing, that Sinclair after a long and dangerous voyage was obliged to return to Frisland.

These are all the details that have been left to us, and they make us deeply regret the loss of those that Antonio should have furnished in his letters to his father Carlo, on the subject of the countries which Forster and Malto-Brun have thought may be identified with Newfoundland.

Who knows, if in his voyage to England and during his wanderings as far as Thule, Christopher Columbus may not have heard mentioned the ancient expeditions of the Northmen and the Zeni, and if this information may not have appeared to him a strange confirmation of the theories which he held, and of the ideas for whose realization he came to claim the protection of the King of England?

From the collection of facts which have been here briefly given, it follows that America was known to Europeans and had been colonized before the time of Columbus. But in consequence of various circumstances, and foremost among these must be placed the rarity of communication between the people in the north of Europe and those in the south, the discoveries made by the Northmen were only vaguely known in Spain and Portugal. Judging by appearances, we of the present day know much more on this subject than did the fellow-countrymen and contemporaries of Columbus. If the Genoese mariner had been informed of the existence of some rumours, he classed them with the information he had collected in the Cape de Verd Islands and with his classical recollections of the famous Island of Antilia and the Atlantides of Plato. From this information, which came from so many different sides, the certainty awoke within him that the east could be reached by the western route. However it may be, his glory remains whole and entire; he is really the discoverer of America, and not those who were carried thither in spite of themselves by chances of wind and storm, without their having any intention of reaching the shores of Asia, which Christopher Columbus would have done, had not the way been barred by America.

The information that we are about to give on the family of Cortereal, although it may be much more complete than that which can be met with in biographical Dictionaries, is still extremely vague. Nevertheless we must content ourselves with it, for up to this time history has not collected further details concerning this race of intrepid navigators.

Joao Vaz Cortereal was the natural son of a gentleman named Vasco Annes da Costa, who had received the soubriquet of Cortereal from the King of Portugal, on account of the magnificence of his house and followers. Devoted like so many other gentlemen of this period to sea-faring adventure, Joao Vaz had carried off in Gallicia a young girl named Maria de Abarca, who became his wife. After having been gentleman-usher to the Infante don Fernando, he was sent by the king to the North Atlantic, with Alvaro Martins Homem. The two navigators saw an island known from this time by the name of *Terra dos Bacalhaos* — the land of cod-fish — which must really have been Newfoundland. The date of this discovery is approximately fixed by the fact that on their return, they landed at Terceira and finding the captainship vacant by the death of Jacome de Bruges, they went to ask for it from the Infanta Doña Brites, the widow of the Infante Don Fernando; she bestowed it upon them on condition that they would divide it between them, a fact which is confirmed by a deed of gift dated from Evora the 2nd of April, 1464. Though one cannot guarantee the authenticity of this discovery of America, it is nevertheless an ascertained fact that Cortereal's voyage must have been signalized by some extraordinary event; donations of such importance as this were only made to those who had rendered some great service to the crown.

When Vaz Cortereal was settled at Terceira from 1490 to 1497, he caused a fine palace to be built in the town of Angra, where he lived with his three children. His third son, Gaspard, after having been in the service of King Emmanuel, when the latter was only Duke de Beja had felt himself attracted while still young to the enterprises of discovery which had rendered his father illustrious. By an act dated from Cintra the 12th of March, 1500, King Emmanuel made a gift to Gaspard Cortereal of any islands or *terra firma* which he might discover, and the king added this valuable information, that “already and at other times he had sought for them on his own account and at his own expense.”

For Gaspard Cortereal this was not his first essay. Probably, his researches may have been directed to the parts where his father had discovered the Island of Cod. At his own expense, although with the assistance of the king, Gaspard Cortereal fitted out two vessels at the commencement of the summer of 1500, and after having touched at Terceira, he sailed towards the north-west. His first discovery was of a land of which the fertile and verdant aspect seems to have charmed him. This was Canada. He saw there a great river bearing ice along with it on its course — the St. Lawrence — which some of his companions mistook for an arm of the sea, and to which he gave the name of *Rio Nevado*. “Its volume is so considerable that it is not probable that this country is an island, besides, it must be completely covered with a very thick coating of snow to produce such a stream of water.”

The houses in this country were of wood and covered with skins and furs. The inhabitants were unacquainted with iron, but used swords made of sharpened stones, and their arrows were tipped with fish-bones or stones. Tall and well-made, their faces and bodies were painted in different colours according to taste, they wore golden and copper bracelets, and dressed themselves in garments of fur. Cortereal pursued his voyage and arrived at the Cape of *Bacalhaos*, "fishes which are found in such great quantities upon this coast that they hinder the advance of the caravels." Then he followed the shore for a stretch of 600 miles, from 56° to 60°, or even more, naming the islands, the rivers, and the gulfs that he met with, as is proved by *Terra do Labrador, Bahia de Conceiçao*, &c. and landing and holding intercourse with the natives. Severe cold, and a veritable river of gigantic blocks of ice prevented the expedition from going farther north, and it returned to Portugal bringing back with it fifty-seven natives. The very year of his return, on the 15th of May, 1501, Gaspard Cortereal, in pursuance of an order of the 15th of April, received provisions, and left Lisbon in the hope of extending the field of his discoveries. But from this time he is never again mentioned. Michael Cortereal, his brother, who was the first gentleman-usher to the king, then requested and obtained permission to go and seek his brother, and to pursue his enterprise. By an act of the 15th of January, 1502, a deed of gift conveyed to him the half of the terra firma and islands which his brother might have discovered. Setting out on the 10th of May of this year with three vessels, Michael Cortereal reached Newfoundland, where he divided his little squadron, so that each of the vessels might explore the coasts separately, while he fixed the place of rendezvous. But at the time fixed, he did not reappear, and the two other vessels, after waiting for him till the 20th of August, set out on their return to Portugal.

In 1503, the king sent two caravels to try to obtain news of the two brothers, but the search was in vain, and they returned without having acquired any information. When Vasco Annes, the last of the brothers Cortereal, who was captain and governor of the Islands of St. George and Terceira, and alcaide mõr of the town of Tavilla, became acquainted with these sad events, he resolved to fit out a vessel at his own cost, and to go and search for his brothers. The king, however, would not allow him to go, fearing to lose the last of this race of good servants.

Upon the maps of this period, Canada is often indicated by the name of Terra dos Cortereales, a name which is sometimes extended much further south, embracing a great part of North America.

All that concerns John and Sebastian Cabot has been until recently shrouded by a mist which is not even now completely dissipated, notwithstanding the conscientious labours of Biddle the American in 1831, and of our compatriot M. d’Avezac; as also those of Mr. Nicholls the Englishman, who taking advantage of the discoveries made among the English, Spanish, and Venetian archives, has built up an imposing monument, of which some parts, however, are open to discussion. It is from the two last-named works that we shall draw the materials for this rapid sketch, but principally from Mr. Nicholls’ book, which has this advantage over the smaller volume of M. d’Avezac, that it relates the whole life of Sebastian Cabot.

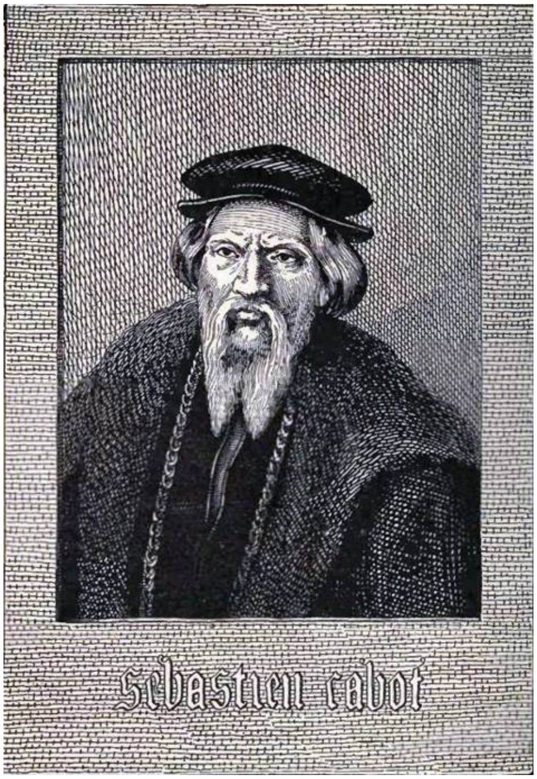

Sebastian Cabot.
From an old print.

It has been found impossible to determine with certainty either the name or the nationality of John Cabot, and still less to settle the period of his birth. John Cabota, Caboto or Cabot must have been born, if not in Genoa itself, as M. d'Avezac asserts, at least in the neighbourhood of that town, possibly at Castiglione, about the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Some historians have considered that he was an Englishman, and perhaps Mr. Nicholls from national considerations is inclined to adopt this opinion; at least this seems to be the meaning of the expressions used by him. What we do know without room for doubt, is that John Cabot came to London to occupy himself with commerce, and that he soon settled at Bristol, then the second town in the kingdom, in one of the suburbs which had received the name of Cathay, probably from the number of Venetians who resided there, and the trade carried on by them with the countries of the extreme East. It was at Bristol that Cabot's two youngest children were born, Sebastian and Sancho, if we may rely upon the following account given by the old chronicler Eden. "Sebastian Cabot told me that he was born at Bristol, and that at four years of age he went with his father to Venice, returning with him to England some years later; this made people imagine that he was born at Venice." In 1476, John Cabot was at Venice, and there on the 29th of March, he received letters of naturalization, which prove that he was not a native of this city, and that he must have merited the honour by some service rendered to the Republic. M. d'Avezac is inclined to think that he devoted himself to the study of cosmography and navigation, perhaps even in company with the celebrated Florentine, Paul Toscanelli, with whose theories upon the distribution of land and sea on the surface of the globe, he would certainly be acquainted at this time. He may also have heard mention made of the islands situated in the Atlantic, and known by the names of Antilia, the Land of the Seven Cities, or Brazil. What seems more certain is, that his business affairs took him to the Levant, and, it is said, to Mecca, and that while there he would learn from what country came the spices, which then constituted the most important branch of Venetian commerce.

Whatever value we may attach to these speculative theories, it is at least certain that John Cabot founded an important mercantile house at Bristol. His son Sebastian, who in these first voyages had acquired an inclination for the sea, studied navigation, as far as it was then known, and made some excursions on the sea, to render himself as familiar with the practice of this art, as he already was with its theory. "For seven years past," says the Spanish Ambassador in a despatch of the 25th of July, 1498, speaking of an expedition commanded by Cabot, “the people of Bristol have fitted out two, three, or four caravels every year, to go in search of the Island of Brazil, and of the Seven Cities, according to the ideas of the Genoese.” At this time the whole of Europe resounded with the fame of the discoveries of Columbus. “It awoke in me,” says Sebastian Cabot, in a narrative preserved by Ramusio, “a great desire and a kind of ardour in my heart to do myself also something famous, and knowing by examining the globe, that if I sailed by the west wind I should reach India more rapidly, I at once made my project known to His Majesty, who was much satisfied with it.” The king to whom Cabot addressed himself was the same Henry VII. who some years before had refused all support to Christopher Columbus. It is evident that he received with favour the project which John and Sebastian Cabot had just submitted to him; and though Sebastian, in the fragment which we have just quoted, attributes to himself alone all the honour of the project, it is not less true that his father was the promoter of the enterprise, as the following charter shows, which we translate in an abridged form.

“We Henry... permit our well-beloved Jehan Cabot, citizen of Venice, and Louis, Sebastian, and Sancho, his sons, under our flag and with five vessels of the tonnage and crew which they shall judge suitable, to discover at their own expense and charge... we grant to them as well as to their heirs and assigns, licence to occupy, possess... at the charge of, by them, upon the profits, benefits, and advantages, accruing from this navigation, to pay us in merchandise or in money the fifth part of the profit thus obtained, for each of their voyages, every time that they shall return to the port of Bristol (at which port they shall be compelled to land)... We promise and guarantee to them, their heirs and assigns, that they shall be exempt from all custom-house duties on the merchandise which they shall bring from the countries thus discovered... We command and direct all our subjects, as well on land as on the sea, to render assistance to the said Jehan, and to his sons... Given at... the 5th day of March, 1495.”

Such was the charter that was granted to John Cabot and his sons upon their return from the American continent, and not as certain authors have pretended, anterior to this voyage. From the time that the news of the discovery made by Columbus had reached England, that is to say, probably in 1493, John and Sebastian Cabot prepared the expedition at their own expense, and set out at the beginning of the year 1494, with the idea of reaching Cathay, and finally the Indies. There can be no doubt upon this point, for in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris is preserved an unique copy of the map engraved in 1544, that is to say, in the lifetime of Sebastian Cabot, which mentions this voyage, and the precise and exact date of the discovery of Cape Breton.

It is probable that we must attribute to the intrigues of the Spanish Ambassador, the delay which occurred in Cabot’s expedition, for the whole of the year 1496 passed without the voyage being accomplished.

The following year he set out at the beginning of summer. After having again sighted the *Terra Bona-vista*, he followed the coast, and was not long in perceiving to his great disappointment that it trended towards the north. “Then, sailing along it to make sure if I could not find some passage, I could not perceive any, and having advanced as far as 56°, and seeing that at this point the land turned towards the east, I despaired of finding any passage, and I put about to examine the coast in this direction towards the equinoctial line, always with the same object of finding a passage to the Indies, and in the end, I reached the country now called Florida, where as provisions were beginning to run short, I resolved to return to England.” This narrative, of which we have given the commencement above, was related by Cabot to Fracastor, forty or fifty years after the event. Also, is it not astonishing that Cabot mixes up in it two perfectly distinct voyages, that of 1494, and that of 1497? Let us add some reflections on this narrative. The first land seen was, without doubt, the North Cape, the northern extremity of the island of Cape Breton, and the island which is opposite to it is that of Prince Edward, long known by the name of St. John's Island. Cabot, probably penetrated into the estuary of the St. Lawrence, which he took for an arm of the sea, near to the place where Quebec now stands, and coasted along the northern shore of the gulf, so that he did not see the coast of Labrador stretching away in the east. He took Newfoundland for an archipelago, and continued his course to the south, not doubtless, as far as Florida as he states himself, the time occupied by the voyage making it impossible that he can have descended so low, but as far as Chesapeake Bay. These were the countries which the Spaniards afterwards called "Terra de Estevam Gomez."

On the 3rd of February, 1498, King Henry VII. signed at Westminster some new letters patent. He empowered John Cabot or his representative, — being duly authorized — to take in English ports six vessels of 200 tons' burden, and to procure all that should be required for their equipment, at the same price as if it were for the crown. He was allowed to take on board such master-mariners, pages, and other subjects as might of their own accord wish to go, and pass with him to the recently discovered land and islands. John Cabot bore the expense of the equipment of two vessels, and three others were fitted out at the cost of the merchants of Bristol.

In all probability it was death — a sudden and unexpected death — which prevented John Cabot from taking the command of this expedition. His son Sebastian then assumed the direction of the fleet, which carried 300 men and provisions for a year. After having sighted land at 45°, Sebastian

Cabot followed the coast as far as 58°, perhaps even higher, but then it became so cold, and although it was the month of July, there was so much floating ice about, that, it would have been impossible to go further northwards. The days were very long, and the nights excessively light, an interesting detail by which to fix the latitude reached, for we know that below the 60th parallel of latitude the longest days are eighteen hours. These various reasons made Sebastian Cabot decide to put about, and he touched at the Bacalhaos Islands, of which the inhabitants, who were clothed in the skins of animals, were armed with bow and arrows, lance, javelin, and wooden sword. The navigators here caught a great number of cod-fish; they were even so numerous, says an old narrative, that they hindered ships from advancing. After having sailed along the coast of America as far as 38°, Cabot set out for England, where he arrived at the beginning of autumn. This voyage had indeed a threefold object, that of discovery, commerce, and colonization, as is shown by the number of vessels which took part in it and the strength of the crews. Nevertheless it does not appear that Cabot landed any one, or that he made any attempts at forming a settlement, either in Labrador, or in Hudson’s Bay — which he was destined to explore more completely in 1517, in the reign of Henry VIII. — or even to the south of the Bacalhaos, known by the general name of Newfoundland. At the close of this expedition, which was almost entirely unproductive, we lose sight of Sebastian Cabot, if not completely, at least so as to be insufficiently informed about his deeds and voyages until 1517. The traveller Hojeda, whose various enterprises we have related above, had left Spain in the month of May, 1499. We know that in this voyage he met with an Englishman at Caquibaco, on the coast of America. Can this have been Cabot? Nothing has come to light to enable us to settle this point; but we may believe that Cabot did not remain idle, and that he would be likely to undertake some fresh expedition: what we do know is, that in spite of the solemn engagements that he had made with Cabot, the King of England granted certain privileges of trading in the countries which he had discovered, to the Portuguese and to the merchants of Bristol. This ungenerous manner of recognizing his services wounded the navigator, and decided him to accept the offers which had been made to him on different occasions, to enter the Spanish service. From the death of Vespucius, which happened in 1512, Cabot was the navigator held in most renown. To attach him to himself, Ferdinand wrote on the 13th of September, 1512, to Lord Willoughby, commander in chief of the troops which had been transported to Italy, to treat with the Venetian navigator.

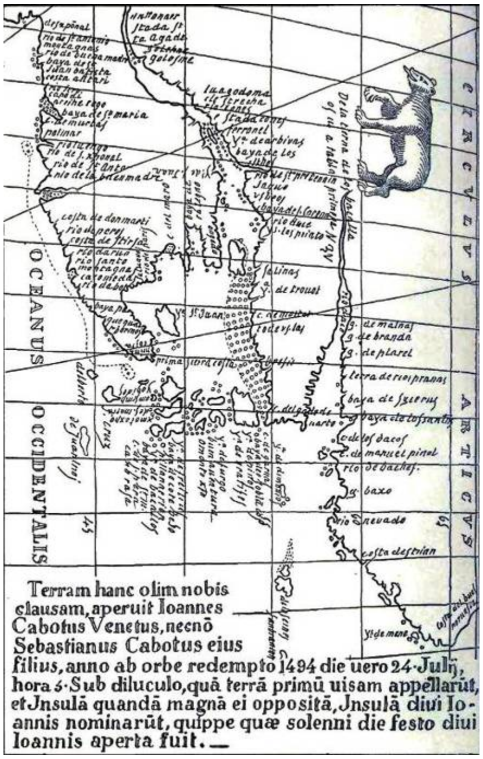
OCEANUS OCCIDENTALIS
CIRCVLVS ARTICVS
Terram hanc olim nobis clausam, aperuit Ioannes Cabotus Venetus, necnō Sebastianus Cabotus eius filius, anno ab orbe redempto 1494 die uero 24 Julij, hora 5 Sub diluculo, quā terrā primū uisam appellarūt, et Jnsulā quandā magnā ei oppositā, Jnsulā diui Ioannis nominarūt, quippe quæ solenni die festo diui Ioannis aperta fuit.

Discoveries of John and Sebastian Cabot.

As soon as he arrived in Castille, Cabot received the rank of captain, by an edict dated the 20th of October, 1512, with a salary of 5000 maravédis. Seville was fixed upon for his residence, until an opportunity might arise of turning his talents and experience to account. There was a plan on foot for his taking the command of a very important expedition, when Ferdinand the Catholic died, on the 23rd of January, 1516. Cabot returned at once to England, having probably obtained leave of absence. Eden tells us that the following year Cabot was appointed with Sir Thomas Pert to the command of a fleet which was to reach China by the north-west. On the 11th of June, he was in Hudson’s Bay at 67½° of latitude; the sea free from ice spread itself out before him so far that he reckoned upon success in his enterprise, when the faintheartedness of his companion, together with the cowardice and mutinous spirit of the crews, who refused to go any further, obliged him to return to England. In his *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, Ortelius traces the shape of Hudson’s Bay as it really is; he even indicates at its northern extremity a strait leading northwards. How can the geographer have attained to such exactness? “Who,” says Mr. Nicholls, “can have given him the information set forth in his map, if not Cabot?”

On his return to England, Cabot found the country ravaged by a horrible plague, which put a stop even to commercial transactions. Soon, either because the time of his leave had expired, or that he wished to escape from the pestilence, or that he was recalled to Spain, the Venetian navigator returned to that country. In 1518, on the 5th of February, Cabot was made pilot-major, with a salary which, added to that which he already had, made a total of 125,000 maravédis, say, 300 ducats. He did not actually exercise the functions of his office till Charles V. returned from England. His principal duty consisted in examining pilots, who were not allowed to go to the Indies until after having passed this examination.

This epoch was by no means favourable to great maritime expeditions. The struggle between France and Spain absorbed all the resources both in men and money, of these two countries — Cabot too, who seems to have adopted science for his fatherland, much more than any particular country, made some overtures to Contarini, the Ambassador of Venice, to take service on board the fleets of the Republic; but when the favourable answer of the Council of Ten arrived, he had other projects in his head, and did not carry his attempt any further.

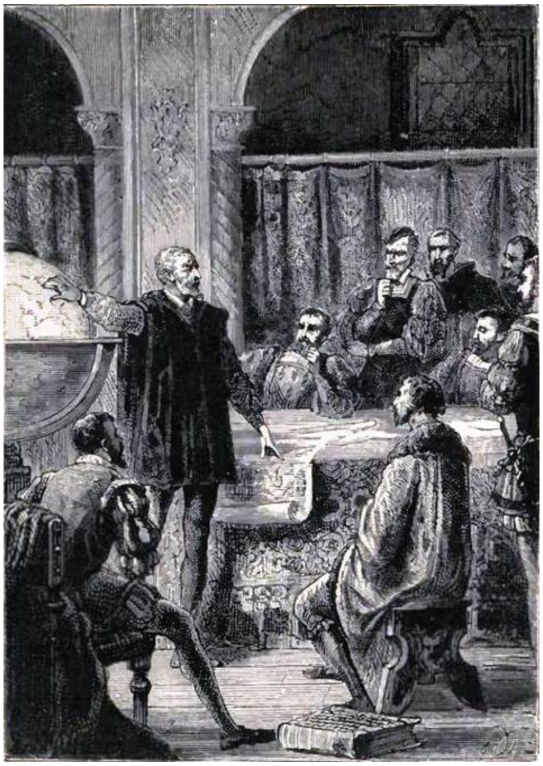

Cabot presides over a Conference of Cosmographers.

In the month of April, 1524, Cabot presided at a conference of mariners and cosmographers, which met at Badajoz, to discuss the question whether the

Moluccas belonged, according to the celebrated treaty of Tordesillas, to Spain or Portugal. On the 31st of May, it was decided that the Moluccas were within the Spanish waters, by 20°. Perhaps this resolution of the junta of which Cabot was president, and which again placed in the hands of Spain a great part of the spice trade, was not without its influence upon the resolutions of the council of the Indies. However this may be, in the month of September of the same year Cabot was authorized to take the command of three vessels of 100 tons, and a small caravel, carrying together 150 men, with the title of captain-general.

The declared aim of this voyage was to pass through the Strait of Magellan, carefully to explore the western coast of America, and to reach the Moluccas, where they would take in on their return a cargo of spices. The month of August, 1525, had been fixed upon as the date of departure, but the intrigues of Portugal succeeded in delaying it until April, 1526.

Different circumstances seem from this moment to have augured ill for the voyage. Cabot had only a nominal authority, and the association of merchants who had defrayed the expenses of the equipment not accepting him willingly as chief, had found means to oppose all the plans of the Venetian sailor. Thus it was that in place of the man whom he had appointed as second in command, another was imposed upon him, and that instructions destined to be unsealed when at sea were delivered to each captain. They contained this absurd arrangement, that in case of the death of the captain-general, eleven individuals were to succeed him each in his turn. Was not this an encouragement given to assassination?

Scarcely was the fleet out of sight of land, when discontent appeared. The rumour spread that the captain-general was not equal to his task; then as they saw that these calumnies did not affect him, they pretended that the flotilla was already short of provisions. The mutiny broke out as soon as land was reached, but Cabot was not the man to allow himself to be annihilated by it; he had suffered too much from Sir Thomas Pert's cowardice to bear such an insult. In order to nip the evil in the bud, he had the mutinous captains seized, and notwithstanding their reputation and the brilliancy of their past services, he made them get into a boat, and abandoned them on the shore. Four months afterwards they had the good luck to be picked up by a Portuguese expedition, which seems to have had orders to thwart the plans of Cabot.

The Venetian navigator then penetrated into the Rio de la Plata, the exploration of which had been commenced by his predecessor the Pilot-major de Solis. The expedition was not then composed of more than two vessels, one having been lost during the voyage. Cabot sailed up the Argent River, and discovered an island which he called Francis Gabriel, and upon which he built the fort of San Salvador, entrusting the command of it to Antonio de Grajeda. Cabot had the keel removed from one of his caravels, and with it, being towed by his small boats, entered the Parana, built a new fort at the confluence of the Carcarama and Terceiro, and after having thus secured his line of retreat he pursued the course of these rivers farther into the interior. Arriving at the confluence of the Parana and Paraguay, he followed the second, the direction of which agreed best with his project of reaching the region of the west where silver was to be obtained. But it was not long before the aspect of the country changed, and the attitude of the inhabitants altered also. Until now, they had collected in crowds, astonished at the sight of the vessels; but upon the cultivated shores of the Paraguay they courageously opposed the strangers' landing, and three Spaniards having tried to knock down the fruit from a palm-tree, a struggle took place, in which 300 natives lost their lives. This victory had disabled twenty-five

Spaniards. It was too much for Cabot, who rapidly removed his wounded to the fort San Spirito and retired, still presenting a bold front to the enemy.

Cabot had already sent two of his companions to the Emperor, to acquaint him with the attempt at revolt of the captains, to explain to him the motives which obliged him to modify the course marked out for his voyage, and to request aid from him, both in men and provisions. The answer arrived at last. The Emperor approved of what Cabot had done, and ordered him to colonize the country in which he had just made a settlement, but did not send him either one man or a single maravédi. Cabot tried to procure the resources which he needed in the country, and caused some attempts at cultivation to be commenced. At the same time, to keep his troops in exercise, he reduced the neighbouring nations to obedience, had some forts built, and again sailing up the Paraguay he reached Potosi, and the water-courses of the Andes which feed the basin of the Atlantic. At last he prepared to enter Peru, from whence came the gold and silver which he had seen in the possession of the natives; but it needed more troops than he could muster, to attempt the conquest of this vast region. The Emperor, however, was quite unable to send him any. His European wars absorbed all his resources, the Cortez refused to vote new subsidies and the Moluccas had just been pledged to Portugal. In this state of affairs, after having occupied the country for five years, and waited all this time for the assistance which never came, Cabot decided to evacuate a part of his settlements, and he returned with some of his people to Spain. The rest, amounting to 120, men who were left to guard the fort of San Spirito, after many vicissitudes which cannot be related here, perished by the hands of the Indians, or were obliged to take refuge in the Portuguese settlements on the coast of Brazil. It is to the horses imported by Cabot that is due the wonderful race of wild horses which may be seen in large troops on the pampas of La Plata at the present day; this was the only result of the expedition.

Some time after his return to Spain, Cabot resigned his office, and went to Bristol, where he settled about 1548, that is to say at the beginning of the reign of Edward VI. What were the motives of this fresh change? Was Cabot discontented at having been left to his own resources during his expedition? Was he hurt at the manner in which his services were recompensed? It is impossible to say. But Charles V. took advantage of Cabot’s departure to deprive him of his pension, which Edward VI. hastened to replace, causing him to receive 250 marks annually, about 116*l.* and a fraction, which was a considerable sum for that period.

The post which Cabot occupied in England seems to be best expressed by the name of Intendant of the Navy; under the authority of the king and council, he appears to have superintended all maritime affairs. He issues licences, he examines pilots, he frames instructions, he draws maps, a varied and complicated function for which he possessed the rare gift of both practical and theoretical knowledge. At the same time he instructed the young king in cosmography, explained to him the variation of the compass, and was successful in interesting him in nautical matters, and in the glory resulting from maritime discoveries. It was a high and almost unique situation. Cabot used it to put into execution a project which he had long cherished.

At this period, we may almost say there was no trade in England. All commerce was in the hands of the Hanseatic towns, Antwerp, Hamburg, Bremen, &c. These companies of merchants had, on various occasions, obtained considerable reductions in import duties, and had ended by monopolizing the English trade. Cabot held that Englishmen possessed as good qualifications as these merchants for becoming manufacturers, and that the already powerful navy which England possessed might assist marvellously in the export of the products of the soil and of the manufactures. What was the use of having recourse to strangers when people could do their own business? If they had been unable up to this time to reach Cathay and India by the north-west, might they not endeavour to reach it by the north-east. And if they did not succeed, would they not find in this direction more commercial, and more civilized people than the miserable Esquimaux on the coast of Labrador and Newfoundland?

Cabot assembled some leading London merchants, laid his projects before them, and formed them into an association, of which on the 14th of December, 1551, he was named president for life. At the same time he exerted himself most vigorously with the king, and having made him understand the wrong which the monopoly enjoyed by strangers did to his own subjects, he obtained its abolition on the 23rd of February, 1551, and inaugurated the practice of free trade.

The Association of English Merchants, under the name of “Merchant Adventurers,” hastened to have some vessels built, adapted to the difficulties to be encountered in the navigation of the Arctic regions. The first improvement which the English marine owed to Cabot was the sheathing of the keels, which he had seen done in Spain, but which had not hitherto been practised in England.

A flotilla of three vessels was assembled at Deptford. They were the *Buona-Speranza*, of which the command was given to Sir Hugh Willoughby, a brave gentleman who had earned a high reputation in war; the *Buona-Confidencia*, Captain Cornil Durforth; and the *Bonaventure*, Captain Richard Chancellor, a clever sailor, and a particular friend of Cabot’s; he received the title of pilot-major. The sailing-master of the *Bonaventure* was Stephen Burrough, an accomplished mariner, who was destined to make numerous voyages in the North seas, and later to become pilot in chief for England.

Although age and his important duties prevented Cabot from placing himself at the head of the expedition, he wished at least, to preside over all the details of the equipment. He himself wrote out the instructions, which have been preserved, and which prove the prudence and skill of this distinguished navigator. He there recommends the use of the log-line, an instrument intended to measure the speed of the vessel, and he desires that the journal of the events happening at sea may be kept with regularity, and that all information as to the character, manners, habits, and resources of the people visited, and the productions of the country, may be recorded in writing. The sailors were to offer no violence to the natives, but to act towards them with courtesy. All blasphemy and swearing was to be punished with severity, and also drunkenness. The religious exercises are prescribed, prayers are to be said morning and evening, and the Holy Scriptures are to be read once in the day. Cabot ends by recommending union and concord above all, and reminds the captains of the greatness of their enterprise, and the honour which they might hope to gain; finally he promises them to add his prayers to theirs for the success of their common work.

The squadron set sail on the 20th of May, 1558, in presence of the court assembled at Greenwich, amid an immense concourse of people, after fêtes and rejoicings, at which the king, who was ill, could not be present. Near the Loffoden Islands, on the coast of Norway at the bearing of Wardhous, the squadron was separated from the *Bonaventure*. Carried away by the storm, Willoughby's two vessels touched, without doubt, at Nova Zembla, and were forced by the ice to return southwards. On the 18th of September, they entered the port formed by the mouth of the River Arzina in East Lapland. Some time afterwards, the *Buona-Confidencia*, separated from Willoughby by a fresh tempest, returned to England. As to the latter, some Russian fishermen found his vessel the following year, in the midst of the ice. The whole crew had died of cold. This, at least, is what we are led to suppose from the journal kept by the unfortunate Willoughby up to the month of January, 1554.

Chancellor, after having waited in vain for his two consorts at the rendezvous which had been agreed upon in case of separation, thought they must have outsailed him, and rounding the North Cape, he entered a vast gulf which was none other than the White Sea; he then landed at the mouth of the Dwina, near the monastery of St. Nicholas, on the spot upon which the town of Archangel was soon to stand. The inhabitants of these desolate places told him that the country was under the dominion of the Grand Duke of Russia. Chancellor resolved at once to go to Moscow, in spite of the enormous distance which separated him from it. The Czar then on the throne was Ivan IV. Wassiliewitch, called the Terrible. For some time before this, the Russians had shaken off the Tartar yoke, and Ivan had united all the petty rival principalities in one body politic, of which the power was already becoming considerable. The situation of Russia, exclusively continental, far from any frequented sea, isolated from the rest of Europe, of which it did not yet form part, so much were its habits and manners still Asiatic, promised success to Chancellor.

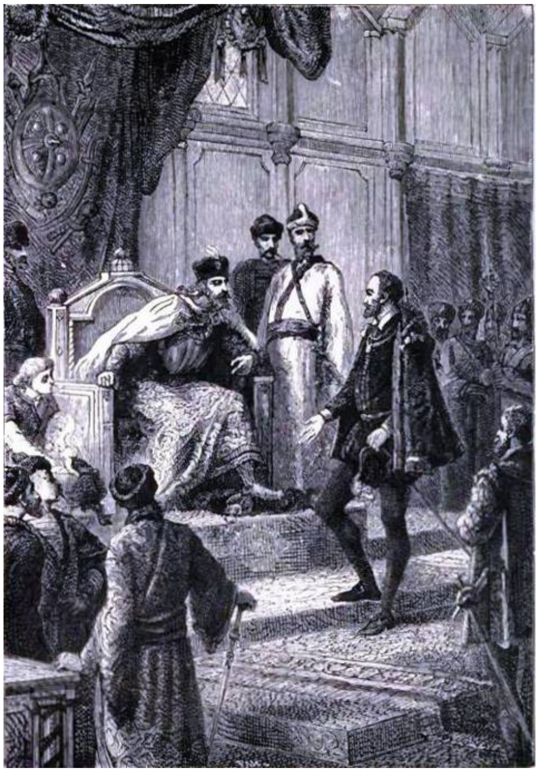

Chancellor received by the Czar.

The Czar, who up to this time, had not been able to procure European merchandise, except by way of Poland, and who wished to gain access to the German seas, saw with pleasure the attempts of the English to establish a trade which would be beneficial to both parties. He not only received Chancellor courteously, but he made him most advantageous offers, granted him great privileges and encouraged him, by the kindness of his reception, to repeat his voyage. Chancellor sold his merchandise to great advantage, and after taking on board another cargo of furs, of seal and whale oils, copper, and other products, returned to England, carrying a letter from the Czar. The advantages which the Company of Merchant Adventurers had derived from this first voyage, encouraged them to attempt a second. So Chancellor the following year, made a fresh voyage to Archangel, and took two of the Company's agents to Russia, who concluded an advantageous treaty with the Czar. Then he set out again for England with an ambassador and his suite, sent by Ivan to Great Britain. Of the four vessels which composed the flotilla, one was lost on the coast of Norway, another as it left Drontheim, and the *Bonaventure*, on board of which were Chancellor and the ambassador, foundered in the Bay of Pitsligo, on the east coast of Scotland on the 10th of November, 1556. Chancellor was drowned in the wreck, being less fortunate than the Muscovite ambassador, who had the good luck to escape; but the presents and merchandise which he was carrying to England were lost.

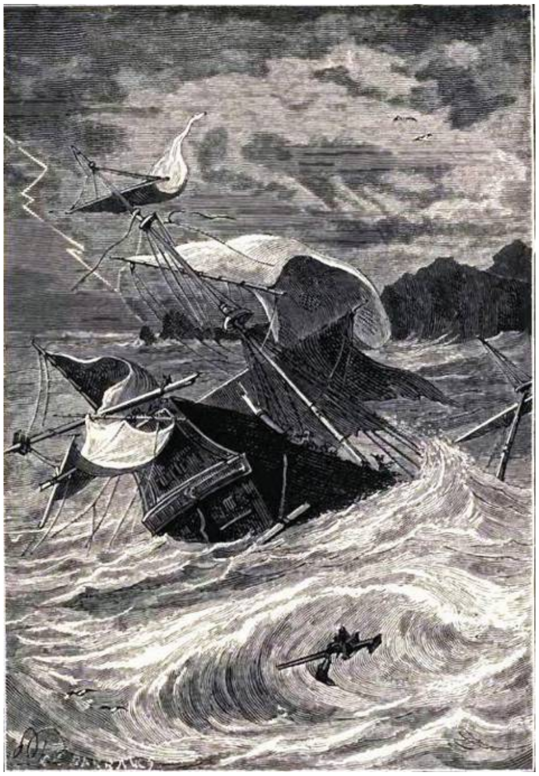

Wreck of the *Bonaventure*.

Such was the commencement of the Anglo-Russian Company. A goodly number of expeditions succeeded each other in those parts, but it would be beside our purpose to give an account of them. Let us now return to Cabot.

It was in 1554 that Queen Mary of England was married to Philip II. King of Spain. When the latter came to England he showed himself very ill-disposed towards Cabot, who had abandoned the service of Spain, and who, at this very moment was procuring for England a commerce which would soon immensely increase the maritime power of an already formidable country. Thus we are not surprised to learn that eight days after the landing of the King of Spain, Cabot was forced to resign his office and his pension, both of which had been bestowed upon him for life by Edward VI. Worthington was nominated in his place. Mr. Nicholls thinks that this dishonourable man, who had had some quarrels with the law, had a secret mission to seize among Cabot's plans, maps, instructions, and projects, those which could be of use to Spain. The fact is that all these documents are now lost, at least unless they may yet be discovered among the archives of Simancas.

At the end of this period, history completely loses sight of the old mariner. The same mystery which hangs over his birth, also envelopes the place and date of his death. His immense discoveries, his cosmographical works, his study of the variations of the magnetic needle, his wisdom, his humane disposition, and his honourable conduct, place Sebastian Cabot in the foremost rank among discoverers. A figure lost in the shadow and vagueness of legends until our own day, Cabot owes it to his biographers, to Biddle, D'Avezac, and Nicholls, that he is now better known, more highly appreciated, and for the first time really placed in the light.

II.

POLAR EXPEDITIONS.

John Verrazzano — Jacques Cartier and his three voyages to Canada — The town of Hochelaga — Tobacco — The scurvy — Voyage of Roberval — Martin Frobisher and his voyages — John Davis — Barentz and Heemskerke — Spitzbergen — Winter season at Nova Zembla — Return to Europe — Relics of the Expedition.

From 1492 to 1524, France had stood aloof, officially at least, from enterprises of discovery and colonization. But Francis I. could not look on quietly while the power of his rival Charles V. received a large addition by the conquest of Mexico. He therefore ordered John Verrazzano, a Venetian who was in his service, to make a voyage of exploration. We will pause here for a short time, although the various places may have already been visited on several occasions, because for the first time the banner of France floats over the shores of the New World. This exploration besides, was to prepare the way for those of Jacques Cartier and of Champlain in Canada, as well as for the unlucky experiments in colonization of Jean Ribaut, and of Laudonnière, the sanguinary voyage of reprisals of Gourgues, and Villegagnon’s attempt at a settlement in Brazil.

We possess no biographical details with regard to Verrazzano. Under what circumstances did he enter the service of France? What was his title to the command of such an expedition? Nothing is known of the Venetian traveller, for all we possess of his writings is the Italian translation of his report to Francis I. published in the collection of Ramusio. The French translation of this Italian translation exists in an abridged form in Lescarbot’s work on New France and in the *Histoire des Voyages*. For our very rapid epitome we shall make use of the Italian text of Ramusio, except in some passages where Lescarbot’s translation has appeared to give an idea of the rich, original, and marvellously modulated language of the sixteenth century.

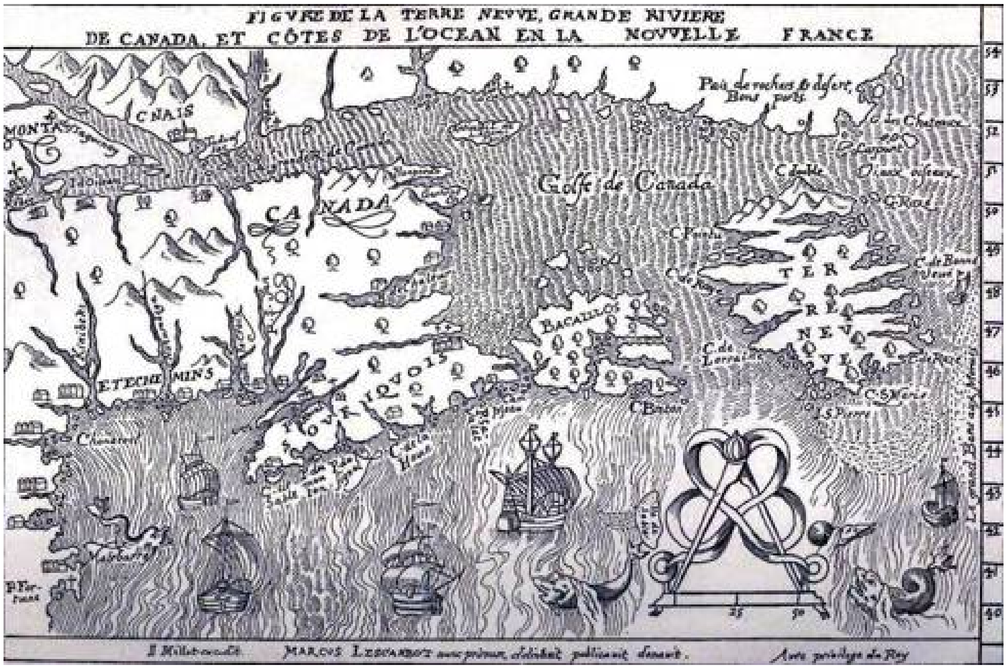
FIGVRE DE LA TERRE NEVVE, GRANDE RIVIERE DE CANADA, ET CÔTES DE L'OCEAN EN LA NOUVELLE FRANCE
CNAIS
CANADA
Golfe de Canada
Pais de rochers & desert. Bons ports.
TERRE NEVVE
BACALLOS
ETECHEMINS
OVRIQVOIS
C. Breton
C. de Lorraine
C. S. Marie
MARCVS LESCARBOT

Having set out with four vessels to make discoveries in the ocean, says Verrazzano in a letter written from Dieppe to Francis I. on the 8th July, 1524, he was forced by a storm to take refuge in Brittany with two of his vessels, the *Dauphine* and the *Normande*, there to repair damages. Thence he set sail for the coast of Spain, where he seems to have given chase to some Spanish vessels. We see him leave with the *Dauphine* alone on the 17th of January, 1524, a small inhabited island in the neighbourhood of Madeira, and launch himself upon the ocean with a crew of fifty men, well furnished with provisions and ammunition for an eight months’ voyage.

Twenty-five days later he has made 1500 miles to the west, when he is assailed by a fearful storm; and twenty-five days afterwards, that is to say on the 8th or 9th of March, having made about 1200 miles, he discovers land at 30° north latitude, which he thought had never been previously explored. “When we arrived, it seemed to us to be very low, but on approaching within a quarter of a league we saw by the great fires which were lighted along the harbours and borders of the sea, that it was inhabited, and in taking trouble to find a harbour in which to land and make acquaintance with the country, we sailed more than 150 miles in vain, so that seeing the coast trended ever southwards, we decided to turn back again.” The Frenchmen finding a favourable landing-place, perceived a number of natives who came towards them, but who fled away when they saw them land. Soon recalled by the friendly signs and demonstrations of the French, they showed great surprise at their clothes, their faces, and the whiteness of their skin. The natives were entirely naked, except that the middle of the body was covered with sable-skins, hung from a narrow girdle of prettily woven grasses, and ornamented with tails of other animals, which fell to their knees. Some wore crowns of birds’ feathers. “They have brown skins,” says the narrative, “and are exactly like the Saracens; their hair is black, not very long, and tied at the back of the head in the form of a small tail. Their limbs are well proportioned, they are of middle height, although a little taller than ourselves, and have no other defect beyond their faces being rather broad; they are not strong, but they are agile, and some of the greatest and quickest runners in the world.” It was impossible for Verrazzano to collect any details about the manners and mode of life of these people, on account of the short time that he remained among them. The shore at this place was composed of fine sand interspersed here and there with little sandy hillocks, behind which were scattered “groves and very thick forests which were wonderfully pleasant to look upon.” There were in this country, as far as we could judge, abundance of stags, fallow deer and hares, numerous lakes, and streams of sparkling water, as well as a quantity of birds.

This land lies at 34°. It is therefore the part of the United States which now goes by the name of Carolina. The air there is pure and salubrious, the climate temperate, the sea is entirely without rocks, and in spite of the want of harbours it is not unfavourable for navigators.

During the whole month of March the French sailed along the coast, which seemed to them to be inhabited by a numerous population. The want of water forced them to land several times, and they perceived that the savages were most pleased with mirrors, bells, knives, and sheets of paper. One day they sent a long-boat ashore with twenty-five men in it. A young sailor jumped into the water "because he could not land on account of the waves and currents, in order to give some small articles to these people, and having thrown them to them from a distance because he was distrustful of the natives, he was cast violently on shore by the waves. The Indians seeing him in this condition, take him and carry him far away from the sea, to the great dismay of the poor sailor, who expected they were about to sacrifice him. Having placed him at the foot of a little hill, in the full blaze of the sun, they stripped him quite naked and wondered at the whiteness of his skin; then lighting a large fire they made him come to it and recover his strength, and it was then that the poor young man as well as those who were in the boat, thought that the Indians were about to massacre and immolate him, roasting his flesh in this large brazier and then eating their victim, as do the cannibals. But it happened quite differently; for having shown a desire to return to the boat they reconducted him to the edge of the sea, and having kissed him very lovingly, they retired to a hill to see him re-enter the boat."

Continuing to follow the shore northwards for more than 150 miles, the Frenchmen reached a land which seemed to them more beautiful, being covered with thick woods. Into these forests, twenty men penetrated for more than six miles and only returned to the shore from the fear of losing themselves. In this walk, having met two women, one young and the other old, with some children, they seized one of the latter who might be about eight years old, with the idea of taking him away to France; but they could not do the same with the young woman, who began to cry with all her might, calling for aid from her compatriots, who were hidden in the wood. In this place the savages were whiter than any of those hitherto met with; they snared birds and used a bow of very hard wood, and arrows tipped with fish-bones. Their canoes, twenty feet long and four feet wide, were hollowed by fire out of a trunk of a tree. Wild vines abounded and climbed over the trees in long festoons as they do in Lombardy. With a little cultivation they would no doubt produce excellent wine — ”for the fruit is sweet and pleasant like ours, and we thought that the natives were not insensible to it, for in all directions where these vines grew, they had taken care to cut away the branches of the surrounding trees so that the fruit might ripen.” Wild roses, lilies, violets, and all kinds of odoriferous plants and flowers, new to the Europeans, carpeted the ground everywhere, and filled the air with sweet perfumes.

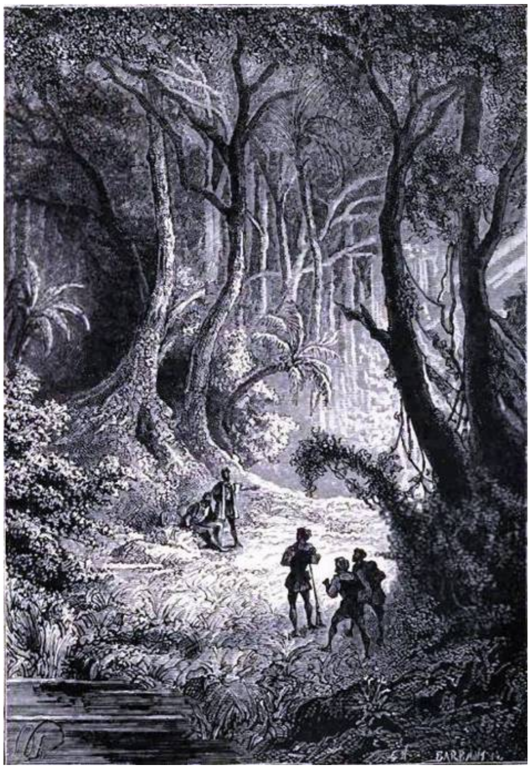

Canadian Landscape.

After remaining for three days in this enchanting place, the Frenchmen continued to follow the coast northwards, sailing by day and casting anchor at night. As the land trended towards the east, they went 150 miles further in that direction, and discovered an island of triangular shape about thirty miles distant from the continent, similar in size to the Island of Rhodes, and upon which they bestowed the name of the mother of Francis I. Louisa of Savoy. Then they reached another island forty-five miles off, which possessed a magnificent harbour and of which the inhabitants came in crowds to visit the strange vessels. Two kings, especially, were of fine stature and great beauty. They were dressed in deer-skins, with the head bare, the hair carried back and tied in a tuft, and they wore on the neck a large chain ornamented with coloured stones. This was the most remarkable nation which they had until now met with. “The women are graceful,” says the narrative published by Ramusio. “Some wore the skins of the lynx on their arms; their head was ornamented with their plaited hair and long plaits hung down on both sides of the chest; others had headdresses which recalled those of the Egyptian and Syrian women; only the elderly women, and those who were married, wore pendants in their ears of worked copper.” This land is situated on the same parallel as Rome, in 41° 40’, but its climate is much colder.

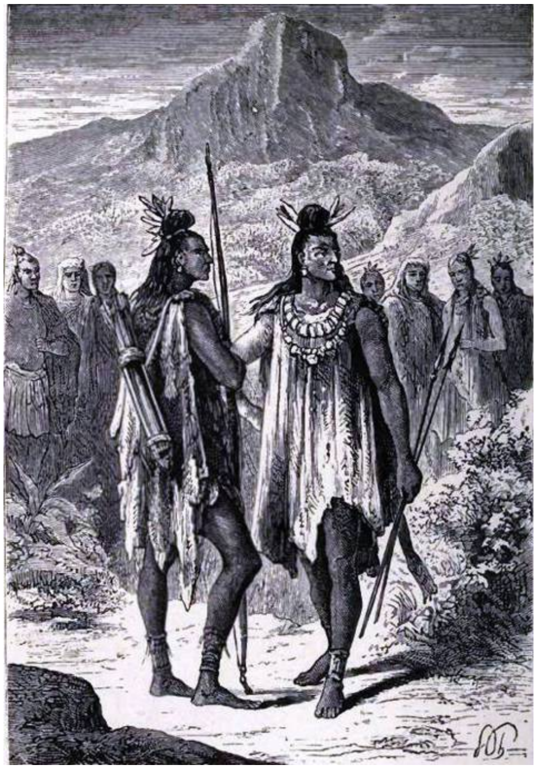

Two Canadian Kings.

On the 5th of May, Verrazzano left this port and sailed along the sea-shore for 450 miles. At last he reached a country of which the inhabitants resembled but little any of those whom he had hitherto met with. They were so wild that it was impossible to carry on any trade with them, or any sustained intercourse. What they appeared to esteem above everything else were fish-hooks, knives, and all articles in metal, attaching no value to all the trifling baubles which up to this time had served for barter. Twenty-five armed men landed and advanced from four to six miles into the interior of the country. They were received by the natives with flights of arrows, after which the latter retired into the immense forests which appeared to cover the whole country.

One hundred and fifty miles further on spreads out a vast archipelago composed of thirty-two islands, all near the land, separated by narrow canals, which reminded the Venetian navigator of the archipelagos which in the Adriatic border the coasts of Sclavonia and Dalmatia. At length, 450 miles further on, in latitude 50°, the French came to lands which had been previously discovered by the Bretons. Finding themselves then short of provisions, and having reconnoitred the coast of America for a distance of 2100 miles, they returned to France, and disembarked safely at Dieppe in the month of July, 1524.

Some historians relate that Verrazzano was made prisoner by the savages who inhabit the coast of Labrador, and was eaten by them. A fact which is simply impossible, since he addressed from Dieppe to Francis I. the account of his voyage which we have just abridged. Besides, the Indians of these regions were not anthropophagi. Certain authors, but we have not been able to discover on the authority of what documents, nor under what circumstances this happened, relate that Verrazzano having fallen into the power of the Spaniards, had been taken to Spain and there hanged. It is wiser to admit that we know nothing certain about Verrazzano, and that we are totally ignorant what rewards his long voyage procured for him. Perhaps when some learned man shall have looked through our archives (of which the abstract and inventory are far from being finished), he may recover some new documents; but for the present we must confine ourselves to the narrative of Ramusio.

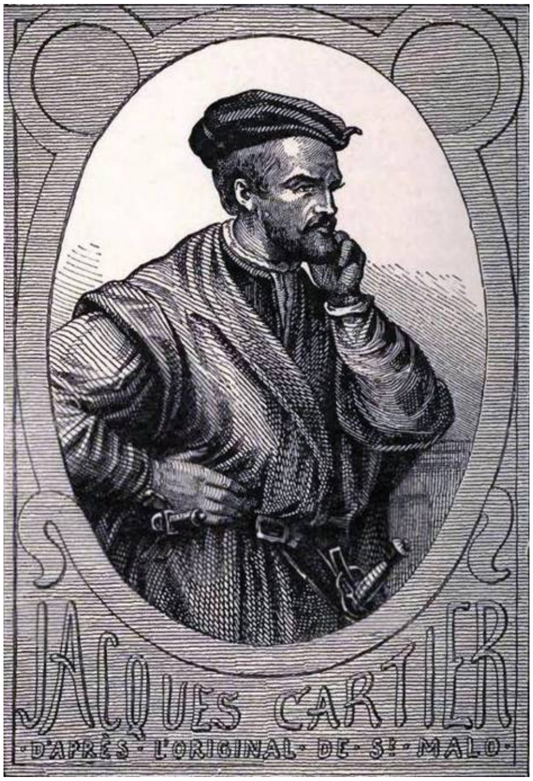
JACQUES CARTIER
·D'APRÈS · L'ORIGINAL · DE · St · MALO ·

Jacques Cartier.
From an old print.

Ten years later a captain of St. Malo, named Jacques Cartier, born on the 21st of December, 1484, conceived the project of establishing a colony in the northern part of America. Being favourably received by Admiral

Philippe de Chabot, and by Francis I. who asked to see the clause in Adam’s will which disinherited him of the New World in favour of the kings of Spain and Portugal, Cartier left St. Malo with two vessels on the 20th of April, 1534. The vessel which carried him weighed only sixty tons and carried a crew of sixty-one men. At the end of only twenty days, so favourable was the voyage, Cartier discovered Newfoundland at Cape Bonavista. He then went northwards as far as Bird Island, which he found surrounded by ice, all broken up and melting, but on which he was able, nevertheless, to lay in a stock of five or six tons of guillemots, puffins, and penguins, without reckoning those which were eaten fresh. He then explored all the coast of the island, which at this time bore a number of Breton names, thus proving the assiduous manner in which the French frequented these shores. Then penetrating into the Strait of Belle-Isle, which separates the continent from the Island of Newfoundland, Cartier arrived at the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Along the whole of this coast the harbours are excellent: “If the land only corresponded to the goodness of the harbours,” says the St. Malo sailor, “it would be a great blessing; but one ought not to call it *land*; it is rather pebbles and savage rocks and places fit for wild beasts: as for all the land towards the north, I never saw as much earth there as would fill a tumbrel.” After having coasted along the continent, Cartier was cast by a tempest upon the west coast of Newfoundland, where he explored Cape Royal and Cape Milk, the Columba Islands, Cape St. John, the Magdalen Islands, and the Bay of Miramichi on the continent. In this place he had some intercourse with the savages, who showed “a great and marvellous eagerness in the acquisition of iron tools and other things, always dancing and performing various ceremonies, among others throwing sea-water on their heads with their hands; so well did they receive us that they gave us all that they had, keeping back nothing.” The next day the number of the savages was even greater, and our French sailors made an ample harvest of furs and skins of animals.

After having explored the Bay of Chaleurs, Cartier arrived at the entrance of the estuary of the St. Lawrence, where he saw some natives, who possessed neither the appearance nor the language of the first. “The latter may truly be called savages, for no poorer people can be found in the world, and I think that all put together, excepting their boats and their nets, they could not have had the value of two pence half-penny. They have the head entirely shaved, with the exception of a lock of hair on the very top, which they allow to grow as long as a horse’s tail, and which they fasten upon the head with some small copper needles. Their only dwelling is underneath their boats, which they overturn and then stretch themselves on the ground beneath them without any covering.”

After having planted a large cross in this place, Jacques Cartier obtained the chief’s permission to take away with him two of his children, whom he was to bring back again on his next voyage. Then he set out again for France, and landed at St. Malo on the 5th of September, 1534.

The following year, on the 19th of May, Cartier left St. Malo at the head of a fleet composed of three vessels called the *Grande* and the *Petite Hermine* and the *Emerillon* on board of which some gentlemen of high rank had taken passages, among whom may be named Charles de la Pommeraye, and Claude de Pont-Briant, son of the Sieur de Moncevelles and cup-bearer to the Dauphin.

Very soon the squadron was dispersed by the storm, and could not be brought together again until it reached Newfoundland. After having landed at Bird Island, in Whitesand harbour, which is in Castle Bay, Cartier penetrated into the Bay of St. Lawrence. He discovered there the Island of

Natiscotec which we call Anticosti, and entered a great river called Hochelaga, which leads to Canada. On the banks of this river lies the country called Saguenay, whence comes the red copper, to which the two savages whom he had taken on his first voyage gave the name of *caquetdazé*. But before entering the St. Lawrence, Cartier wished to explore the whole gulf, to see if no passage existed to the north. He afterwards returned to the Bay of the Seven Islands, went up the river, and soon reached the river Saguenay, which falls into the St. Lawrence on its northern bank. A little further on, after passing by fourteen islands, he entered the Canadian territories, which no traveller before him had ever visited.

“The next day the lord of Canada, called Donnacona, with twelve boats and accompanied by sixteen men, approached the ships. When abreast of the smallest of our vessels he began to make a palaver or preachment in their fashion, while moving his body and limbs in a marvellous manner, which is a sign of joy and confidence, and when he arrived at the flag-ship where were the two Indians who had been brought back from France, the said chief spoke to them and they to him. And they began to relate to him what they had seen in France and the good treatment which they had received, at which the said chief was very joyful, and begged the captain to give him his arms that he might kiss and embrace them, which is their mode of welcome in this country. The country of Stadaconé, or St. Charles, is fertile and full of very fine trees of the same nature and kind as in France, such as oaks, elms, plum-trees, yews, cedars, vines, hawthorns — which bear fruit as large as damsons — and other trees; beneath them grows hemp as good as that of France.” Cartier succeeded afterwards in reaching with his boats and his galleon a place which is the Richelieu of the present day, next, a great lake formed by the river — St. Peter’s Lake — and at last he arrived at Hochelaga or Montreal, which is 630 miles from the mouth of the St.

Lawrence. In this place are “ploughed lands and large and beautiful plains full of the corn of the country, which is like the millet of Brazil, as large or larger than peas, on which they live as we do on wheat. And among these plains is placed and seated the said town of Hochelaga near to and joining on to some high ground which is around the town; and which is well cultivated and quite small; from the top of it one can see very far. We named this mountain the *Mount Royal*.”

The welcome given to Jacques Cartier could not have been more cordial. The chief or Agouhanna, who was crippled in all his limbs, begged the captain to touch them, as if he had asked him for a cure. Then the blind, and those who were blind in one eye, the lame, and the impotent came and sat down near Jacques Cartier, that he might touch them, so thoroughly were they persuaded that he was a god descended to heal them. “The said captain, seeing the faith and piety of this people, recited the Gospel of St. John, namely: *In principio*, making the sign of the cross over the poor sick people, praying GOD that he would give them the knowledge of our holy faith and grace to accept Christianity and baptism. Then the said captain took a book of Hours and read aloud the Passion of our Saviour, so well that all those present could hear it, all the poor people being quite silent, looking up to heaven and using the same ceremonies as they saw us use.” After making themselves acquainted with the country, which could be seen for ninety miles around from the top of Mount Royal, and having collected some information about the water-falls and rapids of the St. Lawrence, Jacques Cartier returned towards Canada, where he did not delay to rejoin his ships. We owe to him the first information on tobacco for smoking, which does not seem to have been in use throughout the whole extent of the New World. “They have a herb,” he says, “of which they collect great quantities during the summer for the winter; they esteem it highly, and the men alone use it in the following manner: they dry it in the sun and carry it on their necks in a small skin of an animal in the shape of a bag, with a horn of stone or of wood, then constantly they make the said herb into powder, and put it into one of the ends of the said horn; they then place a live coal upon it and blow through the other end, and so fill their body with smoke that it issues from the mouth and nostrils, as if from the shaft of a chimney. We have tried the said smoke, but after having put it into our mouths, it seemed as if there were ground pepper in them, so hot is it." In the month of December the inhabitants of Stadaconé were attacked by an infectious disease which proved to be the scurvy. "This malady spread so rapidly in our vessels that by the middle of February out of our 110 men there were but ten in good health." Neither prayers, nor orisons, nor vows to our Lady of Roquamadour brought any relief. Twenty-five Frenchmen perished up to the 18th of April, and there were not four amongst them who were not attacked by the malady. But at this time a savage chief informed Jacques Cartier that a decoction of the leaves and sap of a certain tree, probably either the Canadian fir-tree or the barberry, was very salutary. As soon as two or three had experienced its beneficial effects "there was a crowding as if they would have killed each other to be the first to get the medicine; and one of the tallest and largest trees I ever saw was used in less than eight days, which had such an effect that if all the doctors of Louvain and Montpellier had been there with all the drugs of Alexandria, they had not done as much in a year as the said tree accomplished in eight days."

Some time after, Cartier, having noticed that Donnacona was trying to excite sedition against the French, caused him to be seized, as well as nine other savages, that he might take them to France, where they died. He set sail from the harbour of St. Croix on the 6th of May, descended the St. Lawrence, and after a voyage which was not marked by any incident, he landed at St. Malo on the 16th of July, 1536.

Francis I. in consequence of the report of this voyage which the St. Malo captain made to him, resolved to take effective possession of the country. After having appointed François de la Roque, Sieur de Roberval, viceroy of Canada, he caused five vessels to be fitted out, which being laden with provisions and ammunition for two years, were to transport Roberval and a certain number of soldiers, artizans, and gentlemen to the new colony, which they were about to establish. The five vessels set sail on the 23rd of May, 1541. They met with such contrary winds that it took them three months to reach Newfoundland. Cartier did not arrive at the harbour of St. Croix till the 23rd of August. As soon as he had landed his provisions, he sent back two of his vessels to France with letters for the king, telling him what had been done, also that the Sieur de Roberval had not yet appeared, and that they did not know what had happened to him. Then he had works commenced to clear the land, to build a fort, and to lay the first foundations of the town of Quebec. He next set out for Hochelaga, taking with him Martin de Paimpont and other gentlemen, and went to examine the three waterfalls of Sainte Marie, La Chine, and St. Louis; on his return to St. Croix, he found Roberval had just arrived. Cartier returned to St. Malo in the month of October, 1542, where, probably ten years later, he died. As to the new colony, Roberval having perished in a second voyage, it vegetated, and was nothing more than a factory until 1608, the date of the foundation of Quebec by M. de Champlain, of whom we shall relate the services and discoveries a little further on.

We have just seen how Cartier, who had set out first to seek for the north-west passage, had been led to take possession of the country and to lay the foundations of the colony of Canada. In England a similar movement had begun, set on foot by the writings of Sir Humphrey Gilbert and of Richard Wills. They ended by carrying public opinion with them, and demonstrating that it was not more difficult to find this passage than it had been to discover the Strait of Magellan. One of the most ardent partizans of this search was a bold sailor, called Martin Frobisher, who after having many times applied to rich ship-owners, at last found in Ambrose Dudley, Earl of Warwick, the favourite of Queen Elizabeth, a patron, whose pecuniary help enabled him to equip a pinnace and two poor barks of from twenty to twenty-five tons' burden. It was with means thus feeble, that the intrepid navigator went to encounter the ice in localities which had never been visited since the time of the Northmen. Setting out from Deptford on the 8th of June, 1576, he sighted the south of Greenland, which he took for the Frisland of Zeno. Soon stopped by the ice, he was obliged to return to Labrador without being able to land there, and he entered Hudson's Straits. After having coasted along Savage and Resolution Islands, he entered a strait which has received his name, but which is also called by some geographers, Lunley's inlet. He landed at Cumberland, took possession of the country in the name of Queen Elizabeth, and entered into some relations with the natives. The cold increased rapidly, and he was obliged to return to England. Frobisher only brought back some rather vague scientific and geographical details about the countries which he had visited; he received, however, a most flattering welcome when he showed a heavy black stone in which a little gold was found. At once all imaginations were on fire. Several lords and the Queen herself contributed to the expense of a new armament, consisting of a vessel of 200 tons, with a crew of 100 men, and two smaller barks, which carried six months' provision both for war and for nourishment. Frobisher had some experienced sailors — Fenton, York, George Best, and C. Hall, under his command. On the 31st of May, 1577, the expedition set sail, and soon sighted Greenland, of which the mountains were covered with snow, and the shores defended by a rampart of ice. The weather was bad. Exceedingly dense fogs, — as thick as pease-soup, said the English sailors, — islands of ice a mile and a half in circumferance, floating mountains which were sunk seventy or eighty fathoms in the sea, such were the obstacles which prevented Frobisher from reaching before the 9th of August, the strait which he had discovered during his previous campaign. The English took possession of the country, and pursued both upon land and sea some poor Esquimaux, who, wounded "in this encounter, jumped in despair from the top of the rocks into the sea," says Forster in his *Voyages in the North*, "which would not have happened if they had shown themselves more submissive, or if we could have made them understand that we were not their enemies." A great quantity of stones similar to that which had been brought to England were soon discovered. They were of gold marcasite, and 200 tons of this substance was soon collected. In their delight, the English sailors set up a memorial column on a peak to which they gave the name of Warwick Mount, and performed solemn acts of thanksgiving. Frobisher afterwards went ninety miles further on in the same strait, as far as a small island, which received the name of Smith's Island. There the English found two women, of whom they took one with her child, but left the other on account of her extreme ugliness. Suspecting, so much did superstition and ignorance flourish at this time, that this woman had cloven feet, they made her take the coverings off her feet, to satisfy themselves that they really were made like their own. Frobisher, now perceiving that the cold was increasing, and wishing to place the treasures which he thought he had collected, in a place of safety, resolved to give up for the present any farther search for the north-west passage. He then set sail for England, where he arrived at the end of September, after weathering a storm which dispersed his fleet. The man, woman, and child who had been carried off were presented to the Queen. It is said with regard to them, that the man, seeing at Bristol Frobisher's trumpeter on horseback wished to imitate him, and mounted with his face turned towards the tail of the animal. These savages were the objects of much curiosity, and obtained permission from the Queen to shoot all kinds of birds, even swans, on the Thames, a thing which was forbidden to every one else under the most severe penalties. They did not long survive, and died before the child was fifteen months old.

People were not slow in discovering that the stones brought back by Frobisher really contained gold. The nation, but above all the higher classes, were immediately seized with a fever bordering on delirium. They had found a Peru, an Eldorado. Queen Elizabeth, in spite of her practical good sense, yielded to the current. She resolved to build a fort in the newly discovered country, to which she gave the name of *Meta incognita*, (unknown boundary) and to leave there, with 100 men as garrison, under the command of Captains Fenton, Best, and Philpot, three vessels which should take in a cargo of the auriferous stones. These 100 men were carefully chosen; there were bakers, carpenters, masons, gold-refiners, and others belonging to all the various handicrafts. The fleet was composed of fifteen vessels, which set sail from Harwich on the 31st of May, 1578. Twenty days later the western coasts of Frisland were discovered. Whales played round the vessels in innumerable troops. It is related even that one of the vessels propelled by a favourable wind, struck against a whale with such force that the violence of the shock stopped the ship at once, and that the whale after uttering a loud cry, made a spring out of the water and then was suddenly swallowed up. Two days later, the fleet met with a dead whale which they thought must be the one struck by the *Salamander*. When Frobisher came to the entrance of the strait which has received his name, he found it blocked up with floating ice. “The barque *Dennis*, 100 tons,” says the old account of George Best, “received such a shock from an iceberg that she sank in sight of the whole fleet. Following upon this catastrophe, a sudden and horrible tempest arose from the south-east, the vessels were surrounded on all sides by the ice; they left much of it, between which they could pass, behind them, and found still more before them through which it was impossible for them to penetrate. Certain ships, either having found a place less blocked with ice, or one where it was possible to proceed, furled sails and drifted; of the others, several stopped and cast their anchors upon a great island of ice. The latter were so rapidly enclosed by an infinite number of islets of ice and fragments of icebergs, that the English were obliged to resign themselves and their ships to the mercy of the ice, and to protect the ships with cables, cushions, mats, boards, and all kinds of articles which were suspended to the sides, in order to defend them from the fearful shocks and blows of the ice." Frobisher himself was thrown out of his course. Finding the impossibility of rallying his squadron, he sailed along the west coast of Greenland, as far as the strait which was soon to be called Davis' Strait, and penetrated as far as the Countess of Warwick Bay. When he had repaired his vessels with the wood which was to have been used in the building of a dwelling, he loaded the ships with 500 tons of stones similar to those which he had already brought home. Judging the season to be then too far advanced, and considering also that the provisions had been either consumed, or lost in the *Dennis*, that the wood for building had been used for repairing the vessels, and having lost 40 men, he set out on his return to England on the 31st of August. Tempests and storms accompanied him to the shores of his own country. As to the results of his expedition they were almost none as to discoveries, and the stones, which he had put on board in the midst of so many dangers, were valueless.

This was the last Arctic voyage in which Frobisher took part. In 1585 we meet with him again as vice-admiral, under Drake; in 1588 he distinguished himself against the *Invincible Armada*; in 1590 he was with Sir Walter Raleigh's fleet on the coast of Spain; finally in a descent on the coast of France, he was so seriously wounded that he had only time to bring his squadron back to Portsmouth before he died. If Frobisher's voyages had only gain for their motive, we must put this down not to the navigator himself, but to the passions of the period, and it is not the less true that in difficult circumstances, and with means the insufficiency of which makes us smile, he gave proof of courage, talent, and perseverance. To Frobisher is due, in one word, the glory of having shown the route to his countrymen, and of having made the first discoveries in the localities where the English name was destined to render itself illustrious.

If it became necessary to abandon the hope of finding in these circumpolar regions countries in which gold abounded as it did in Peru, this was no ground for not continuing to seek there for a passage to China; an opinion supported by very skilful sailors, and one which found many adherents among the merchants of London. By the aid of several high personages, two ships were equipped; the *Sunshine*, of fifty tons' burden and carrying a crew of twenty-three in number, and the *Moonshine*, of thirty-five tons. They quitted Portsmouth on the 7th of June, 1585, under the command of John Davis.

Davis discovered the entrance of the strait which received his name, and was obliged to cross immense fields of drifting ice, after having reassured his crew, who were frightened while in the midst of a dense fog, by the dash of the icebergs, and the splitting of the blocks of ice. On the 20th July, Davis discovered the Land of Desolation, but without being able to disembark upon it. Nine days later he entered Gilbert Bay, where he found a peaceable population, who gave him sealskins and furs in exchange for some trifling articles. These natives, some days afterwards, arrived in such numbers, that there were not less than thirty-seven canoes around Davis' vessels. In this place, the navigator perceived an enormous quantity of drift wood, amongst which he mentions an entire tree, which could not have been less than sixty feet in length. On the 6th of August, he cast anchor in a fine bay called Tottness; near a mountain of the colour of gold, which received the name of Raleigh, at the same time, he gave the names of Dyer and Walsingham to two capes of that land of Cumberland.

During eleven days, Davis still sailed northwards on a very open sea, free from ice, and of which the water had the colour of the Ocean. Already he believed himself at the entrance of the sea, which communicated with the Pacific, when all at once the weather changed, and became so foggy, that he was forced to return to Yarmouth, where he landed on the 30th of September.

Davis had the skill to make the owners of his ships partake in the hope which he had conceived. Thus on the 7th of May (1586), he set out again with the two ships which had made the previous voyage. To them were added the *Mermaid* of 120 tons, and the pinnace *North Star*. When, on the 25th of June, he arrived at the southern point of Greenland, Davis despatched the *Sunshine* and the *North Star* towards the north, in order to search for a passage upon the eastern coast, whilst he pursued the same route as in the preceding year, and penetrated into the strait which bears his name as far as 69°. But there was a much greater quantity of ice this year, and on the 17th of July, the expedition fell in with an “icefield” of such extent that it took thirteen days to coast along it. The wind after passing over this icy plain was so cold, that the rigging and sails were frozen, and the sailors refused to go any further. It was needful, therefore, to descend again to the east-south-east. There Davis explored the land of Cumberland, without finding the strait he was seeking, and after a skirmish with the Esquimaux, in which three of his men were killed, and two wounded, he set out on the 19th of September, on his return to England.

Although once more his researches had not been crowned with success, Davis still had good hope, as is witnessed by a letter, which he wrote to the Company, in which he said that he had reduced the existence of the passage to a species of certainty. Foreseeing, however, that he would have more trouble in obtaining the despatch of a new expedition, he added that the expenses of the enterprise would be fully covered by the profit arising from the fishery of walrus, seals, and whales, which were so numerous in those parts, that they appeared to have there established their head-quarters. On the 15th of May, 1587, he set sail with the *Sunshine*, the *Elizabeth* of Dartmouth, and the *Helen* of London. This time he went farther north than he had ever done before, and reached 72° 12’, that is to say, nearly the latitude of Upernavik, and he descried Cape Henderson’s Hope. Stopped by the ice, and forced to retrace his way, he sailed in Frobisher’s Strait, and after having crossed a large gulf, he arrived, in 61° 10’ latitude, in sight of a cape to which he gave the name of Chudleigh. This cape is a part of the Labrador coast, and forms the southern entrance to Hudson’s Bay. After coasting along the American shores as far as 52°, Davis set out for England, which he reached on the 15th of September.

Although the solution of the problem had not been found, yet nevertheless, precious results had been obtained, but results to which people at that period did not attach any great value. Nearly the half of Baffin’s Bay had been explored, and clear ideas had been obtained of its shores, and of the people inhabiting them. These were considerable acquisitions, from a geographical point of view, but they were scarcely those which would greatly affect the merchants of the city. In consequence, the attempts at finding a north-west passage were abandoned by the English for a somewhat long period.

A new nation was just come into existence. The Dutch — while scarcely delivered from the Spanish yoke, — inaugurated that commercial policy, which was destined to make the greatness and prosperity of their country, by the successive despatch of several expeditions to seek for a way to China by the north-east; the same project formerly conceived by Sebastian Cabot, and which had given to England the Russian trade. With their practical instinct, the Dutch had acquainted themselves with English navigation. They had even established factories at Kola, and at Archangel, but they wished to proceed further in their search for new markets. The Sea of Kara appearing to them too difficult, they resolved, acting on the advice of the cosmographer Plancius, to try a new way by the north of Nova Zembla. The merchants of Amsterdam applied therefore, to an experienced sailor, William Barentz, born in the island of Terschelling, near the Texel. This navigator set out from the Texel in 1594, on board the *Mercure*, doubled the North Cape, saw the island of Waigatz, and found himself, on the 4th of July, in sight of the coast of Nova Zembla, in latitude 73° 25’. He sailed along the coast, doubled Cape Nassau on the 10th of July, and three days later he came in contact with the ice. Until the 3rd of August, he attempted to open a passage through the pack, testing the mass of ice on various sides, going up as far as the Orange Islands at the north-western extremity of Nova Zembla, sailing over 1700 miles of ground, and putting his ship about no less than eighty-one times. We do not imagine that any navigator had hitherto displayed such perseverance. Let us add that he turned this long cruise to account, to fix astronomically, and with remarkable accuracy, the latitude of various points. At last, wearied with the fruitless boxing about along the edge of the pack, the crew cried for mercy, and it became necessary to return to the Texel.

The results obtained were judged so important, that the following year, the Dutch States-General entrusted to Jacob van Heemskerke, the command of a fleet of seven vessels, of which Barentz was named chief pilot. After touching at various points upon the coasts of Nova Zembla and of Asia, this squadron was forced by the pack to go back without having made any important discovery, and it returned to Holland on the 18th of September.

As a general rule governments do not possess as much perseverance as do private individuals. The large fleet of the year 1595, had cost a great sum of money, and had produced no results; this was sufficient to discourage the States-General. The merchants of Amsterdam therefore, substituting private enterprise for the action of the government, which merely promised a reward to the man who should first discover the north-east passage — fitted out two vessels, of which the command was given to Heemskerke and to Jan Corneliszoon Rijp, while Barentz, who had only the title of pilot, was virtually the leader of the expedition. The historian of the voyage, Gerrit de Veer, was also on board as second mate.

The Dutchmen sailed from Amsterdam on the 10th of May, 1596, passed by the Shetland and Faröe Islands, and on the 5th of June, saw the first masses of ice, “whereat we were much amazed, believing at first that they were white swans.” They soon arrived to the south of Spitzbergen, at Bear Island, upon which they landed on the 11th of June. They collected there a great number of sea-gulls’ eggs, and after much trouble killed at some distance inland a white bear, destined to give its name to the land which Barentz had just discovered. On the 19th of June, they disembarked upon some far-spreading land, which they took to be a part of Greenland, and to which on account of the sharp-pointed mountains, they gave the name of Spitzbergen; of this they explored a considerable portion of the western coast. Forced by the Polar pack to go southwards again to Bear Island, they separated there from Rijp, who was once more to endeavour to find a way by the north. On the 11th of July, Heemskerke and Barentz were in the parts of Cape Kanin, and five days later they had reached the western coast of Nova Zembla, which was called Willoughby's Land. They then altered their course, and again going northwards, they arrived on the 19th at the Island of Crosses, where the ice which was still attached to the shore, barred their passage. They remained in this place until the 4th of August, and two days later they doubled Cape Nassau. After several changes of course, which it would take too long to relate, they reached the Orange Islands at the northern extremity of Nova Zembla. They began to descend the eastern coast, but were soon obliged to enter a harbour, where they found themselves completely blocked in by the pack-ice, and in which "they were forced in great cold, poverty, misery, and grief, to stay all the winter." This was on the 26th of August. "On the 30th the masses of ice began to pile themselves one upon another against the ship, with snow falling. The ship was lifted up and surrounded in such a manner, that all that was about her and around her began to crack and split. It seemed as if the ship must break into a thousand pieces, a thing most terrible to see and to hear, and fit to make one's hair stand on end. The ship was afterwards in equal danger, when the ice formed beneath, raising her and bearing her up as though she had been lifted by some instrument." Soon the ship cracked to such a degree, that prudence dictated the debarkation of some of the provisions, sails, gunpowder, lead, the arquebuses as well as other arms, and the erection of a tent or hut, in which the men might be sheltered from the snow and from any attacks by bears. Some days later, some sailors who had advanced from four to six miles inland, found near a river of fresh water, a quantity of drift-wood; they discovered there also the traces of wild goats and of reindeer. On the 11th of September, seeing that the bay was filled with enormous blocks of ice piled one upon the other, and welded together, the Dutchmen perceived that they would be obliged to winter in this place, and resolved, "in order to be better defended against the cold, and armed against the wild beasts," to build a house there, which might be able to contain them all, while they would leave to itself the ship, which became each day less safe and comfortable. Fortunately, they found upon the shore whole trees, coming doubtless from Siberia, and driven here by the current, and in such quantity that they sufficed not only for the construction of their habitation, but also for firewood throughout the winter.

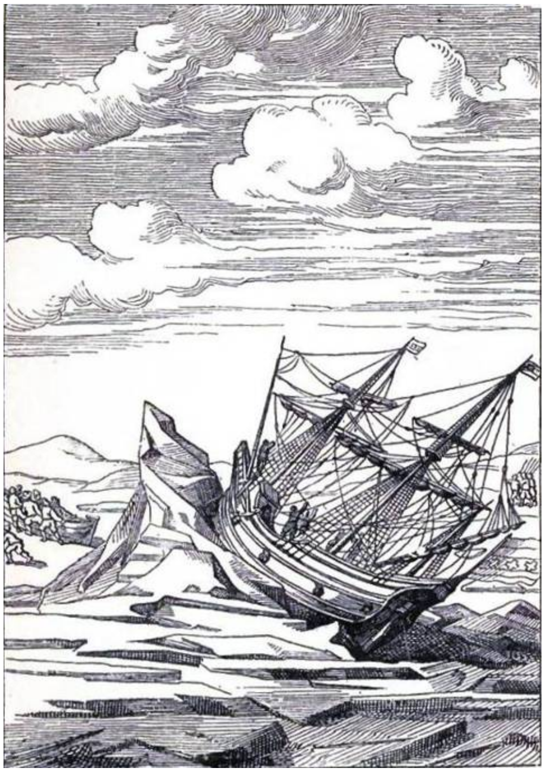

Barentz’s Ship.
From an old print.

Never yet had any European wintered in these regions, in the midst of that slothful and immovable sea, which according to the very false expressions used by Tacitus, forms the girdle of the world, and in which is heard the uproar caused by the rising of the sun. The Dutchmen, therefore, were unable to picture to themselves the sufferings which threatened them. They bore them, however, with admirable patience, without a single murmur, and without the least want of discipline or attempt at mutiny. The conduct of these brave seamen, quite ignorant of what so apparently dark a future might have in reserve for them, but who with wonderful faith had “placed their affairs in the hands of God,” may be always proposed as an example even to the sailors of the present day. It may well be said that they had really in their heart the *æs triplex* of which Horace speaks. It was owing to the skill, knowledge, and foresight of their leader Barentz, as much as to their own spirit of obedience, that the Dutch sailors ever came forth from Nova Zembla, which threatened to be their tomb, and again saw the shores of their own country.

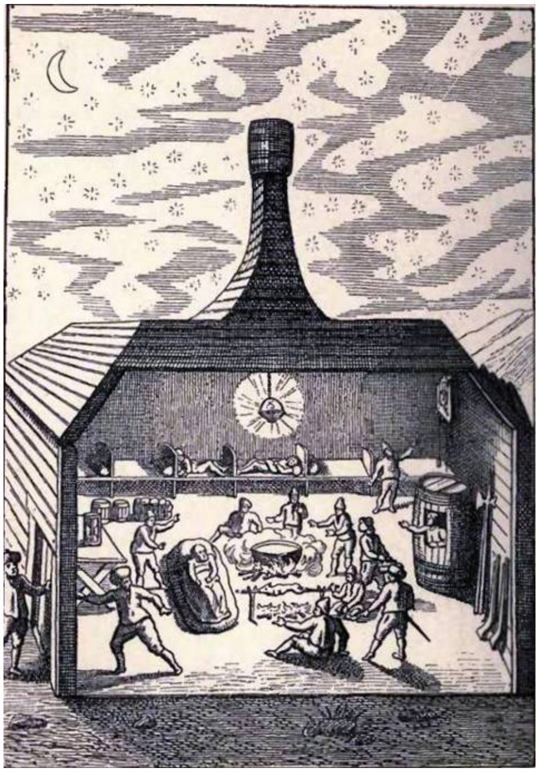

Interior view of the house.
From an old print.

The bears, which were extremely numerous at that period of the year, made frequent visits to the crew. More than one was killed, but the Dutchmen contented themselves with skinning them for the sake of their fur, and did not eat them, probably because they believed the flesh to be unwholesome. It would have been, however, a considerable addition to their food, and would have saved them from using their salted meat, and thus they might longer have escaped the attacks of scurvy. But that we may not anticipate, let us continue to follow the journal of Gerrit de Veer.

On the 23rd September, the carpenter died, and was interred the next day in the cleft of a mountain, it being impossible to put a spade into the ground, on account of the severity of the frost. The following days were devoted to the transport of driftwood and the building of the house. To cover it in, it was necessary to demolish the fore and aft cabins of the ship; the roof was put on, on the 2nd October, and a piece of frozen snow was set up like a May pole. On the 31st September, there was a strong wind from the north-west, and as far as the eye could reach, the sea was entirely open and without ice. “But we remained as though taken and arrested in the ice, and the ship was raised full two or three feet upon the ice, and we could imagine nothing else but that the water must be frozen quite to the bottom, although it was three fathoms and a half in depth.”

On the 12th October, they began to sleep in the house, although it was not completed. On the 21st, the greater part of the provisions, furniture, and everything which might be wanted was withdrawn from the ship, for they felt certain that the sun was about to disappear. A chimney was fixed in the centre of the roof, inside a Dutch clock was hung up, bed-places were formed along the walls, and a wine-cask was converted into a bath, for the surgeon had wisely prescribed to the men frequent bathing as a preservative of health. The quantity of snow which fell during this winter, was really marvellous. The house disappeared entirely beneath this thick covering, which, however, sensibly raised the temperature within. Every time that they wished to go forth, the Dutchmen were obliged to hollow out a long corridor beneath the snow. Each night they first heard the bears, and then the foxes, which walked upon the top of the dwelling, and tried to tear off some planks from the roof, that they might get into the house. So the sailors were accustomed to climb into the chimney, whence, as from a watch-tower they could shoot the animals and drive them off. They had manufactured a great number of snares, into which fell numbers of blue foxes, the valuable fur of which served as a protection against cold, while their flesh enabled the sailors to economize their provisions. Always cheerful and good tempered, they bore equally well the ennui of the long polar night, and the severity of the cold, which was so extreme, that during two of three days, when they had not been able to keep so large a fire as usual, on account of the smoke being driven back again by the wind, it froze so hard in the house, that the walls and the floor were covered with ice to the depth of two fingers, even in the cots where these poor people were sleeping. It was necessary to thaw the sherry, when it was served out, as was done every two days, at the rate of half a pint.

“On the 7th of December, the rough weather continued, with a violent storm coming from the north-east, which produced horrible cold. We knew no means of guarding ourselves against it, and while we were consulting together, what we could do for the best, one of our men in this extreme necessity proposed to make use of the coal which we had brought from the ship into our house, and to make a fire of it, because it burns with great heat and lasts a long time. In the evening we lighted a large fire of this coal, which threw out a great heat, but we did not provide against what might happen, for as the heat revived us completely, we tried to retain it for a long time. To this end we thought it well to stop up all the doors and the chimney, to keep in the delightful warmth. And thus, each went to repose in his cot, and animated by the acquired warmth, we discoursed long together. But in the end, we were seized with a giddiness in the head, some however, more than others; this was first perceived to be the case with one of our men who was ill, and who for this reason, had less power of resistance. And we also ourselves were sensible of a great pain which attacked us, so that several of the bravest came out of their cots and began by unstopping the chimney, and afterwards opening the door. But the man who opened the door fainted, and fell senseless upon the snow, on perceiving which, I ran to him and found him lying on the ground in a fainting fit. I went in haste to seek for some vinegar, and with it I rubbed his face until he recovered from his swoon. Afterwards, when we were somewhat restored, the captain gave to each a little wine, in order to comfort our hearts..."

"On the 11th, the weather continued fine, but so extremely cold, that no one who had not felt it could imagine it; even our shoes, frozen to our feet, were as hard as horn, and inside they were covered with ice in such a manner that we could no longer use them. The garments which we wore were quite white with frost and ice."

On Christmas Day, the 25th December, the weather was as rough as on the preceding days. The foxes made havoc upon the house, which one of the sailors declared to be a bad omen, and upon being asked why he said so, answered, "Because we cannot put them in a pot, or on the spit, which would have been a good omen."

If the year 1596, had closed with excessive cold, the commencement of 1597 was not more agreeable. Most violent storms of snow, and hard frost prevented the Dutchmen from leaving the house. They celebrated Twelfth Night with gaiety, as is related in the simple and touching narrative of Gerrit de Veer. “For this purpose, we besought the captain to allow us a little diversion in the midst of our sufferings, and to let us use a part of the wine which was destined to be served out to us every other day. Having two pounds of flour we made some pancakes with oil, and each one brought a white biscuit, which we soaked in the wine and eat. And it seemed to us that we were in our own country, and amongst our relations and friends; and we were as much diverted as if a banquet had been given in our honour, so much did we relish our entertainment. We also made a Twelfth-Night king, by means of paper, and our master gunner was king of Nova Zembla, which is a country enclosed between two seas, and of the great length of six hundred miles.”

After the 21st January, the foxes became less numerous, the bears reappeared, and daylight began to increase, which enabled the Dutchmen, who had been so long confined to the house, to go out a little. On the 24th, one of the sailors, who had been long ill, died, and was buried in the snow at some distance from the house. On the 28th, the weather being very fine, the men all went out, walking about, running for exercise, and playing at bowls, to take off the stiffness of their limbs, for they were extremely weak, and nearly all suffering from scurvy. They were so much enfeebled that they were obliged to go to work several times before they could carry to their house the wood which was needful. At length in the first days of March, after several tempests and driving snowstorms, they were able to verify the fact that there was no ice in the sea. Nevertheless, the weather was still rough and the cold glacial. It was not feasible as yet to put to sea again, the rather because the ship was still embedded in the ice. On the 15th of April, the sailors paid a visit to her and found her in fairly good condition.

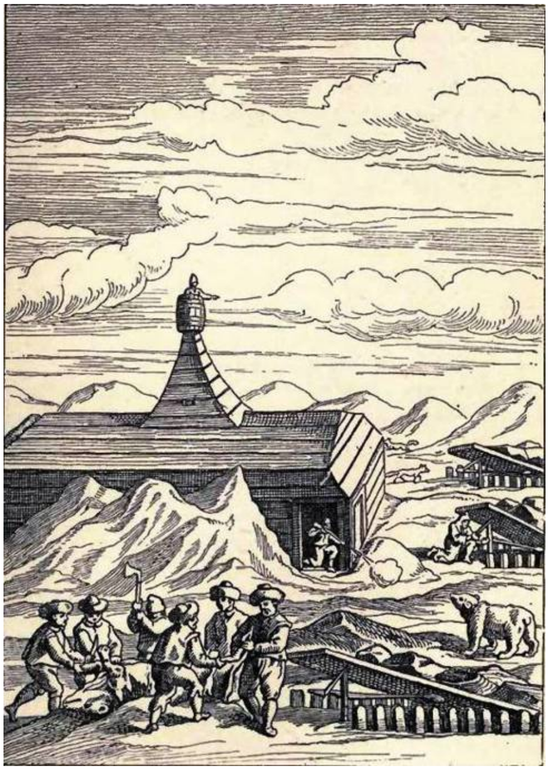

Exterior view of the house.
From an old print.

At the beginning of May the men became somewhat impatient, and asked Barentz if he were not soon intending to make the necessary preparations for departure. But Barentz answered that he must wait until the end of the month, and then, if it should be impossible to set the ship free, he would take measures to prepare the long-boats and the launch, and to render them fit for a sea voyage. On the 20th of the month the preparations for departure commenced; with what joy and ardour it is easy to imagine. The launch was repaired, the sails were mended, and both boats were dragged to the sea, and provisions put on board. Then, seeing that the water was free, and that a strong wind was blowing, Heemskerke went to seek Barentz, who had been long ill, and declared to him “that it seemed good to him to set out from thence, and in God’s name to commence the voyage and abandon Nova Zembla.”

“William Barentz had before this written a paper setting forth how we had started from Holland to go towards the kingdom of China, and all that had happened, in order that, if by chance, some one should come after us, it might be known what had befallen us. This note he enclosed in the case of a musket which he hung up in the chimney.”

On the 13th June, 1597, the Dutchmen abandoned the ship, which had not stirred from her icy prison, and commending themselves to the protection of God, the two open boats put to sea. They reached the Orange Islands, and again descended the western coast of Nova Zembla in the midst of ceaselessly recurring dangers.

“On the 20th of June Nicholas Andrieu became very weak, and we saw clearly that he would soon expire. The lieutenant of the governor came on board our launch, and told us that Nicholas Andrieu was very much indisposed, and that it was very evident that his days would soon end. Upon which, William Barentz said, ‘It appears to me that my life also will be very short.’ We did not imagine that Barentz was so ill, for we were chatting together, and William Barentz was looking at the little chart which I had made of our voyage, and we had various discourses together. Finally, he laid down the chart, and said to me, ‘Gerard, give me something to drink.’ After he had drunk, such weakness supervened that his eyes turned in his head, and he died so suddenly that we had not time to call the captain, who was in the other boat. This death of William Barentz saddened us greatly, seeing that he was our principal leader, and our sole pilot, in whom we had placed our whole trust. But we could not oppose the will of God, and this thought quieted us a little.” Thus died the illustrious Barentz, like his successors Franklin and Hall, in the midst of his discoveries. In the measured and sober words of the short funeral oration of Gerrit de Veer may be perceived the affection, sympathy, and confidence which this brave sailor had been able to inspire in his unfortunate companions. Barentz is one of the glories of Holland, so prolific in brave and skilful navigators. We shall mention presently what has been done to honour his memory.

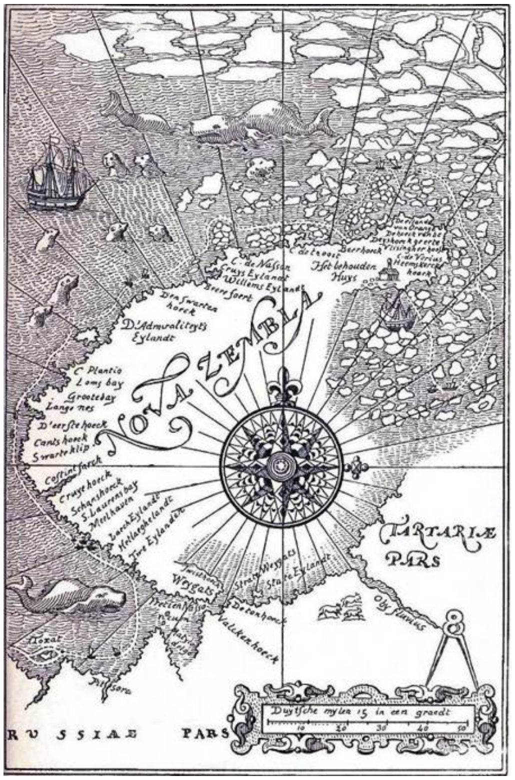
NOVA ZEMBLA
C. de Nassau
Cruys Eylandt
Willems Eylandt
Beere fort
Den swarten hoeck
D'Admiraliteyts Eylandt
C. de troost
Beerhoeck
Het behouden Huys
Vlissingher hooft
C. de Vorias
Heemskercks hoeck
C. Plantio
Loms bay
Grootebay
Lange nes
D'eerste hoeck
Cants hoeck
Swarte klip
Costinsarch
Cruyshoeck
Schanshoeck
S. Laurens bay
Meelhaven
Lacch Eylandt
Hellaghe landt
Twe Eylanden
Weygats
Strat Weygats
Staten Eylandt
Twisthoeck
Dotenhoeck
Valcken hoeck
Oby fluvius
Toxat
Pitsora
TARTARIÆ PARS
RUSSIAE PARS
Duytsche mylen 15 in een graedt
10
20
30
40
50

After having been forced several times to haul the boats out of the water when they were on the point of being crushed between the blocks of ice; after having seen on various occasions the sea open, and again close before them; after having suffered both from thirst and hunger, the Dutchmen reached Cape Nassau. One day, being obliged to draw up the long-boat, which was in danger of being stove in upon an iceberg, the sailors lost a part of their provisions and were all deluged with water, for the ice broke away under their feet. In the midst of so much misery they sometimes met with good windfalls. Thus, when they were upon the ice on the Island of Crosses they found there seventy eggs of the mountain-duck. “But they did not know what they should put them in to carry them. At length one man took off his breeches, tying them together by the ends, and having put the eggs into them, they carried them on a pike between two, while the third man carried the musket. The eggs were very welcome, and we eat them like lords.” From the 19th July, the Dutchmen sailed over a sea, which, if not altogether free from ice, was at least clear of those great fields of ice which had given them so much trouble to avoid. On the 28th July, when entering the Gulf of St. Lawrence, they met with two Russian vessels, which at first they dared not approach. But when they saw the sailors come to them unarmed and with friendly demonstrations, they put aside all fear, the rather as they recognized in the Russians some people whom they had met with the year before in the neighbourhood of Waigatz. The Dutchmen received some assistance from them, and then continued their voyage, still keeping along the coast of Nova Zembla, and as close in shore as the ice would allow. Upon one occasion when they landed, they discovered the cochlearia (scurvy-grass), a plant of which the leaves and seeds form one of the most powerful of known anti-scorbutics. They eat them, therefore, by handfuls, and immediately experienced great relief. Their provisions were, however, nearly exhausted; they had only a little bread remaining and scarcely any meat. They decided therefore to take to the open sea, in order to shorten the distance which separated them from the coast of Russia, where they hoped to fall in with some fishermen’s boats, from which they might obtain assistance. In this hope they were not deceived, although they had still many trials to undergo. The Russians were much touched by their misfortunes, and consented on several occasions to bestow provisions upon them, which prevented the Dutch sailors from dying of hunger. In consequence of a thick fog the two boats were separated from each other, and did not come together again until some distance beyond Cape Kanin on the further side of the White Sea, at Kildyn Island, where some fishermen informed the Dutchmen that at Kola there were three ships belonging to their nation, which were ready to put to sea on their return to their own country. They therefore despatched thither one of their men accompanied by a Laplander, who returned three days afterwards with a letter signed *Jan Rijp*. Great was the astonishment of the Dutch at the sight of this signature. It was only on comparing the letter just received with several others which Heemskerke had in his possession, that they were convinced that it really came from the captain who had accompanied them the preceding year. Some days later, on the 30th September, Rijp himself arrived with a boat laden with provisions, to seek them out and take them to the Kola River, in which his ship was at anchor.

Rijp was greatly astonished at all that they related to him, and at the terrible voyage of nearly 1200 miles which they had made, and which had not taken less than 104 days — namely, from the 13th June to the 25th September. Some days of repose accompanied by wholesome and abundant food sufficed to clear off the last remains of scurvy, and to refresh the sailors after their fatigues. On the 17th September, Jan Rijp left the Kola River, and on the 1st November the Dutch crew arrived at Amsterdam. “We had on,” says Gerrit de Veer, “the same garments which we wore in Nova Zembla, having on our heads caps of white fox-skin, and we repaired to the house of Peter Hasselaer, who had been one of the guardians of the town of Amsterdam charged with presiding over the fitting out of the two ships of

Jan Rijp and of our own captain. Arrived at this house, in the midst of general astonishment, because that we had been long thought to be dead, and this report had been spread throughout the town, the news of our arrival reached the palace of the prince, where there were then at table the Chancellor, and the Ambassador of the high and mighty King of Denmark and Norway, of the Goths and the Vandals. We were then brought before them by M. l'Écoutets and two lords of the town, and we gave to the said lord Ambassador, and to their lordships the burgomasters, a narrative of our voyage. Afterwards each of us retired to his own house. Those who had not dwellings in the town, were lodged in an inn until such time as we had received our money, when each went his own way. These are the names of the men who returned from this voyage: Jacob Heemskerke, clerk and captain, Peter Peterson Vos, Gerrit de Veer, mate, Jan Vos, surgeon, Jacob Jansen Sterrenburg, Leonard Henry, Laurence William, Jan Hillebrants, Jacob Jansen Hoochwout, Peter Corneille, Jacob de Buisen, and Jacob Everts."

Of all these brave sailors we have nothing further to record except that De Veer published the following year the narrative of his voyage, and that Heemskerke after having made several cruises to India, received in 1607 the command of a fleet of twenty-six vessels, at the head of which, on the 25th of April, he had a severe battle with the Spaniards under the guns of Gibraltar, in which battle, although the Dutch were the conquerers, Heemskerke lost his life.

The spot where the unfortunate Barentz and his companions had wintered was not revisited until 1871, nearly three hundred years after their time. The first to double the northern point of Nova Zembla, Barentz had remained alone in the achievement until this period. On the 7th September, 1871, the Norwegian Captain, Elling Carlsen, well known by his numerous voyages in the North Sea and the Frozen Ocean, arrived at the ice haven of Barentz, and on the 9th he discovered the house which had sheltered the Dutchmen. It was in such a wonderful state of preservation that it seemed to have been built but a day, and everything was found in the same position as at the departure of the shipwrecked crew. Bears, foxes, and other creatures inhabiting these inhospitable regions had alone visited the spot. Around the house were standing some large puncheons and there were heaps of seal, bear, and walrus bones. Inside, everything was in its place. It was the faithful reproduction of the curious engraving of Gerrit de Veer. The bed-places were arranged along the partition as they are shown in the drawing, as well as the clock, the muskets, and the halberd. Amongst the household utensils, the arms, and the various objects brought away by Captain Carlsen, we may mention two copper cooking-pans, some goblets, gun-barrels, augers and chisels, a pair of boots, nineteen cartridge-cases, of which some were still filled with powder, the clock, a flute, some locks and padlocks, twenty-six pewter candlesticks, some fragments of engravings, and three books in Dutch, one of which, the last edition of Mendoza's "History of China" shows the goal which Barentz sought in this expedition, and a "Manual of Navigation" proves the care taken by the pilot to keep himself well up in all professional matters.

Upon his return to the port of Hammerfest, Captain Carlsen met with a Dutchman, Mr. Lister Kay, who purchased the Barentz relics, and forwarded them to the authorities of the Netherlands. These objects have been placed in the Naval Museum at the Hague, where a house, open in front, has been constructed precisely similar to the one represented in the drawing of Gerrit de Veer, and each object or instrument brought back has been placed in the very position which it occupied in the house in Nova Zembla. Surrounded by all the respect and affection which they merit, these precious witnesses of a maritime event so important as the first wintering in the Arctic regions, these touching reminiscences of Barentz, Heemskerke, and their rough companions, constitute one of the most interesting monuments in the Museum. Beside the clock is placed a copper dial, through the middle of which a meridian is drawn. This curious dial, invented by Plancius, which served without doubt to determine the variations of the compass, is now the only example extant of a nautical instrument which has never been in very general use. For this reason it is as precious as, from another point of view, are the flute used by Barentz, and the shoes of the poor sailor who died during the winter sojourn. It is impossible to behold this curious collection without experiencing poignant emotion.

CHAPTER IV.

VOYAGES OF ADVENTURE AND PRIVATEERING WARFARE.

Drake — Cavendish — De Noort — Walter Raleigh.

A very poor cottage at Tavistock in Devonshire was the birthplace in 1540, of Francis Drake, who was destined to gain millions by his indomitable courage, which however, he lost with as much facility as he had obtained them. Edmund Drake his father, was one of those clergy who devote themselves to the education of the people. His poverty was only equalled by the respect which was felt for his character. Burdened with a family as he was, the father of Francis Drake found himself obliged from necessity to allow his son to embrace the maritime profession, for which he had an ardent longing, and to serve as cabin-boy on board a coasting vessel which traded with Holland. Industrious, active, self-reliant, and saving, the young Francis Drake had soon acquired all the theoretical knowledge needed for the direction of a vessel. When he had realized a small sum, which was increased by the sale of a vessel bequeathed to him by his first master, he made more extended voyages; he visited the Bay of Biscay and the Gulf of Guinea, and laid out all his capital in purchasing a cargo which he hoped to sell in the West Indies. But no sooner had he arrived at Rio de la Hacha, than both ship and cargo were confiscated, we know not under what frivolous pretext. All the remonstrances of Drake, who thus saw himself ruined, were useless. He vowed to avenge himself for such a piece of injustice, and he kept his word.

In 1567, two years after this adventure, a small fleet of six vessels, of which the largest was of 700 tons' burden, left Plymouth with the sanction of the Queen, to make an expedition to the Coasts of Mexico. Drake was in command of a ship of fifty tons. At first starting they captured some negroes on the Cape de Verd Islands, a sort of rehearsal of what was destined to take place in Mexico. Then they besieged La Mina, where some more negroes were taken, which they sold at the Antilles. Hawkins, doubtless by the advice of Drake, captured the town of Rio de la Hacha; after which he reached St. Jean d'Ulloa, having encountered a fearful storm. But the harbour contained a numerous fleet, and was defended by formidable artillery. The English fleet was defeated, and Drake had much difficulty in regaining the English coast in January, 1568.

Drake afterwards made two expeditions to the West Indies for the purpose of studying the country. When he considered himself to have acquired the necessary information, he fitted out two vessels at his own expense: the *Swan*, of twenty-five tons, commanded by his brother John, and the *Pasha* of Plymouth, of seventy tons. The two vessels had as crew seventy-three jack-tars, who could be thoroughly depended on. From July, 1572, to August, 1573, sometimes alone, sometimes in concert with a certain Captain Rawse, Drake made a lucrative cruise upon the coasts of the Gulf of Darien, attacked the towns of Vera Cruz and of Nombre de Dios, and obtained considerable spoil. Unfortunately these enterprises were not carried out without much cruelty and many acts of violence which would make men of the present day blush. But we will not dwell upon the scenes of piracy and barbarity which are only too frequently met with in the sixteenth century.

After assisting in the suppression of the rebellion in Ireland, Drake, whose name was beginning to be well known, was presented to Queen Elizabeth.

He laid before her his project of going to ravage the western coasts of South America, by passing through the Strait of Magellan, and he obtained, with the title of admiral, a fleet of six vessels, on board of which were 160 picked sailors.

Francis Drake started from Plymouth on the 15th November, 1577. He had some intercourse with the Moors of Mogador, of which he had no reason to boast, made some captures of small importance before arriving at the Cape de Verd Islands, where he took in fresh provisions, and then was fifty-six days in crossing the Atlantic and reaching the coast of Brazil, which he followed as far as the estuary of La Plata, where he laid in a supply of water. He afterwards arrived at Seal Bay in Patagonia, where he traded with the natives, and killed a great number of penguins and sea-wolves for the nourishment of his crew. "Some of the Patagonians who were seen on the 13th May a little below Seal Bay," says the original narrative, "wore on the head a kind of horn, and nearly all had many beautiful birds' feathers by way of hats. They also had the face painted and diversified by several kinds of colours, and they each held a bow in the hand, from which every-time they drew it, they discharged two arrows. They were very agile, and as far as we could see, well instructed in the art of making war, for they kept good order in marching and advancing, and for so few men as they were, they made themselves appear a large number." M. Charton, in his *Voyageurs Anciens et Modernes*, notices that Drake does not mention the extraordinary stature which Magellan had attributed to the Patagonians. For this there is more than one good reason. There exists in Patagonia more than one tribe, and the description here given by Drake of the savages whom he met, does not at all resemble that given by Pigafetta of the Patagonians of Port St. Julian. If there exist, as seems now to be proved, a race of men of great stature, their habitat appears fixed upon the shores of the Strait at the southern extremity of Patagonia, and not at fifteen days' sail from Port

Desire, at which Drake arrived on the 2nd June. On the following day he reached the harbour of St. Julian, where he found a gibbet erected of yore by Magellan for the punishment of some rebellious members of his crew. Drake in his turn, chose this spot to rid himself of one of his captains, named Doughty, who had been long accused of treason and underhand dealing, and who on several occasions had separated himself from the fleet. Some sailors having confessed that he had solicited them to join with him in frustrating the voyage, Doughty was convicted of the crimes of rebellion, and of tampering with the sailors, and according to the laws of England, he was condemned by a court martial to be beheaded. This sentence was immediately executed, although Doughty until the last moment vehemently declared his innocence. Was his guilt thoroughly proved? If Drake were accused upon his return to England — in spite of the moderation which he always evinced towards his men, — of having taken advantage of the opportunity to get rid of a rival whom he dreaded, it is difficult to conceive that the forty judges who pronounced the sentence should have concerted together to further the secret designs of their admiral and condemn an innocent man.

On the 20th of August, the fleet, now reduced to three vessels — two of the ships having been so much damaged that they were at once destroyed by the admiral — entered the strait, which had not been traversed since the time of Magellan. Although he met with fine harbours, Drake found that it was difficult to anchor in them, on account both of the depth of the water close to the shore, and of the violence of the wind, which, blowing as it did in sudden squalls, rendered navigation dangerous. During a storm which was encountered at the point where the strait opens into the Pacific, Drake beheld one of his ships founder, while his last companion was separated from him a few days afterwards, nor did he see her again until the end of the campaign. Driven by the currents to the south of the strait as far as 55°

40’, Drake had now only his own vessel; but by the injury which he did to the Spaniards, he showed what ravages he would have committed if he had had still under his command the fleet with which he left England. During a descent upon the island of Mocha, the English had two men killed and several wounded, while Drake himself, hit by two arrows on the head, found himself utterly unable to punish the Indians for their perfidy. In the harbour of Valparaiso he captured a vessel richly laden with the wines of Chili, and with ingots of gold valued at 37,000 ducats; afterwards he pillaged the town, which had been precipitately abandoned by its inhabitants. At Coquimbo, the people were forewarned of his approach, so that he found there a strong force, which obliged him to re-embark. At Arica he plundered three small vessels, in one of which he found fifty-seven bars of silver valued at 2006*l*. In the harbour of Lima, where were moored twelve ships or barks, the booty was considerable. But what most rejoiced the heart of Drake was to learn that a galleon named the *Cagafuego*, very richly laden, was sailing towards Paraca. He immediately went in pursuit, capturing on the way a bark carrying 80 lbs. of gold, which would be worth 14,080 French crowns, and in the latitude of San Francisco he seized without any difficulty the *Cagafuego*, in which he found 80 lbs. weight of gold. This caused the Spanish pilot to say, laughing, “Captain, our ship ought no longer to be called *Cagafuego* (spit-fire), but rather *Caga-Plata* (spit money), it is yours which should be named *Caga-Fuego*.” After making some other captures more or less valuable, upon the Peruvian coast, Drake, learning that a considerable fleet was being prepared to oppose him, thought it time to return to England. For this, there were three different routes open to him: he might again pass the Strait of Magellan, or he might cross the Southern Sea, and doubling the Cape of Good Hope might so return to the Atlantic Ocean, or he could sail up the coast of China and return by the Frozen Sea and the North Cape. It was this last alternative, as being the safest of the three, which was adopted by Drake. He therefore put out to sea, reached the 38° of north latitude, and landed on the shore of the Bay of San Francisco, which had been discovered three years previously by Bodega. It was now the month of June, the temperature was very low, and the ground covered with snow. The details given by Drake of his reception by the natives, are curious enough: “When we arrived, the savages manifested great admiration at the sight of us, and thinking that we were gods, they received us with great humanity and reverence.”

“As long as we remained, they continued to come and visit us, sometimes bringing us beautiful plumes made of feathers of divers colours, and sometimes petun (tobacco) which is a herb in general use among the Indians. But before presenting these things to us, they stopped at a little distance, in a spot where we had pitched our tents. Then they made a long discourse after the manner of a harangue, and when they had finished, they laid aside their bows and arrows in that place, and approached us to offer their presents.”

“The first time they came their women remained in the same place, and scratched and tore the skin and flesh of their cheeks, lamenting themselves in a wonderful manner, whereat we were much astonished. But we have since learnt that it was a kind of sacrifice which they offered to us.”

The facts given by Drake with regard to the Indians of California are almost the only ones which he furnishes upon the manners and customs of the nations which he visited. We would draw the reader’s attention here, to that custom of long harangues which the traveller especially remarks, just as Cartier had observed upon it forty years earlier, and which is so noticeable amongst the Canadian Indians at the present day. Drake did not advance farther north and gave up his project of returning by the Frozen Sea. When he again set sail, it was to descend towards the Line, to reach the Moluccas, and to return to England by the Cape of Good Hope. As this part of the voyage deals with countries already known, and as the observations made by Drake are neither numerous nor novel, our narrative here shall be brief.

On the 13th of October, 1579, Drake arrived in latitude 8° north, at a group of islands of which the inhabitants had their ears much lengthened by the weight of the ornaments suspended to them; their nails were allowed to grow, and appeared to serve as defensive weapons, while their teeth, "black as ship's pitch," contracted this colour from the use of the betel-nut. After resting for a time, Drake passed by the Philippines, and on the 14th of November arrived at Ternate. The king of this island came alongside, with four canoes bearing his principal officers dressed in their state costumes. After an interchange of civilities and presents, the English received some rice, sugar-canes, fowls, *figo*, cloves, and sago. On the morrow, some of the sailors who had landed, were present at a council. "When the king arrived, a rich umbrella or parasol all embroidered in gold was borne before him. He was dressed after the fashion of his country, but with extreme magnificence, for he was enveloped from the shoulders with a long cloak of cloth of gold reaching to the ground. He wore as an ornament upon the head, a kind of turban made of the same stuff, all worked in fine gold and enriched with jewels and tufts. On his neck there hung a fine gold chain many times doubled, and formed of broad links. On his fingers, he had six rings of very valuable stones, and his feet were encased in shoes of morocco leather."

After remaining some time in the country to refresh his crew, Drake again put to sea, but his ship on the 9th of January, 1580, struck on a rock, and to float her off it was necessary to throw overboard eight pieces of ordnance and a large quantity of provisions. A month later, Drake arrived at Baratena Island where he repaired his ship. This island afforded much silver, gold, copper, sulphur, spices, lemons, cucumbers, cocoa-nuts, and other delicious fruits. “We loaded our vessels abundantly with these, being able to certify that since our departure from England we have not visited any place where we have found more comforts in the way of food and fresh provisions than in this island and that of Ternate.”

After quitting this richly endowed island, Drake landed at Greater Java, where he was very warmly welcomed by the five kings amongst whom the island was partitioned, and by the inhabitants. “These people are of a fine degree of corpulence, they are great connoisseurs in arms, with which they are well provided, such as swords, daggers, and bucklers, and all these arms are made with much art.” Drake had been some little time at Java when he learnt that not far distant there was a powerful fleet at anchor, which he suspected must belong to Spain; to avoid it he put to sea in all haste. He doubled the Cape of Good Hope during the first days of June, and after stopping at Sierra Leone to take in water, he entered Plymouth harbour on the 3rd November, 1580, after an absence of three years all but a few days.

The reception which awaited him in England was at first extremely cold. His having fallen by surprise both upon Spanish towns and ships, at a time when the two nations were at peace, rightly caused him to be regarded by a portion of society as a pirate, who tramples under foot the rights of nations. For five months the Queen herself, under the pressure of diplomatic proprieties, pretended to be ignorant of his return. But at the end of that time, either because circumstances had altered, or because she did not wish to show herself any longer severe towards the skilful sailor, she repaired to Deptford where Drake’s ship was moored, went on board, and conferred the honour of knighthood upon the navigator.

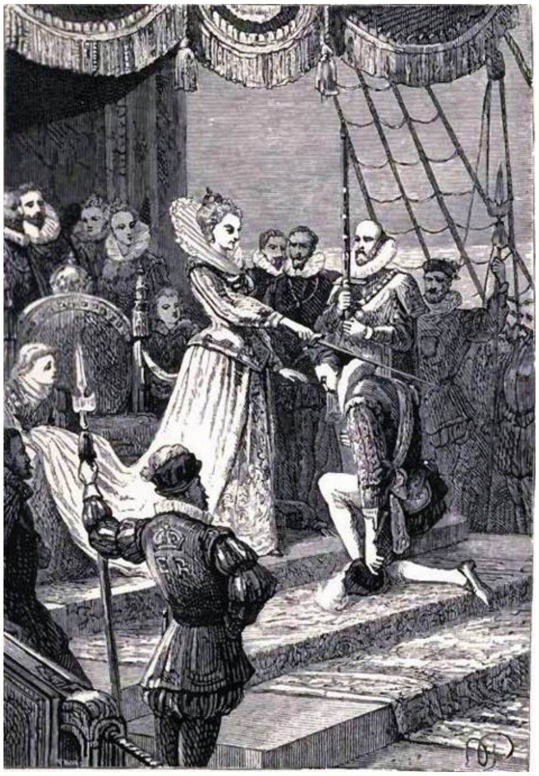

Elizabeth knighting Drake.

From this period Drake’s part as a discoverer is ended, and his after-life as a warrior and as the implacable enemy of the Spaniards does not concern us. Loaded with honours, and invested with important commands, Drake died at sea on the 28th January, 1596, during an expedition against the Spaniards.

To him pertains the honour of having been the second to pass through the Strait of Magellan, and to have visited Tierra del Fuego as far as the parts about Cape Horn. He also ascended the coast of North America to a point higher than any his predecessors had attained, and he discovered several islands and archipelagos. Being a very clever navigator, he made the transit through the Strait of Magellan with great rapidity. If there are but very few discoveries due to him, this is probably either because he neglected to record them in his journal, or because he often mentions them in so inaccurate a manner that it is scarcely possible to recognize the places. It was he who inaugurated that privateering warfare by which the English, and later on the Dutch, were destined to inflict much injury upon the Spaniards. And the large profits accruing to him from it, encouraged his contemporaries, and gave birth in their minds to the love for long and hazardous voyages.

Among all those who took example by Drake, the most illustrious was undoubtedly Thomas Cavendish or Candish. Cavendish joined the English marine service at a very early age; and passed a most stormy youth, during which he rapidly dissipated his modest fortune. That which play had robbed him of, he resolved to recover from the Spaniards. Having in 1585 obtained letters of mark, he made a cruise to the East Indies and returned with considerable booty. Encouraged by his easy success as a highwayman on the great maritime roads, he thought that if he could acquire some honour and glory while engaged in making his fortune, so much the better would it be for him. With this idea he bought three ships, the *Desire*, of twenty tons, the *Content*, of sixty tons, and the *Hugh Gallant*, of forty tons, upon which he embarked one hundred and twenty-three soldiers and sailors. Setting sail on the 22nd July, 1586, he passed by the Canaries, and landed at Sierra Leone, which town he attacked and plundered; then, sailing again, he crossed the Atlantic, sighted Cape Sebastian in Brazil, sailed along the coast of Patagonia, and arrived on the 27th November at Port Desire. He found there an immense quantity of dog-fish, very large, and so strong that four men could with difficulty kill them, and numbers of birds, which, having no wings, could not fly, and which fed upon fish. They are classed under the general names of auks and penguins. In this very secure harbour, the ships were drawn up on shore to be repaired. During his stay at this place Cavendish had some skirmishes with the Patagonians, — ”men of gigantic size, and having feet eighteen inches long” — who wounded two of the sailors with arrows tipped with sharpened flints.

On the 7th January, 1587, Cavendish entered the Strait of Magellan, and in the narrowest part of it received on board his ships one-and-twenty Spaniards and two women, the sole survivors of the colony founded three years previously, under the name of Philippeville, by Captain Sarmiento. This town, which had been built to bar the passage through the strait, had possessed no fewer than four forts as well as several churches. Cavendish could discern the fortress, then deserted and already falling into ruins. Its inhabitants, who had been completely prevented by the continual attacks of the savages from gathering in their harvests, had died of hunger, or had perished in endeavouring to reach the Spanish settlements in Chili. The Admiral, upon hearing this lamentable tale, changed the name of Philippeville into that of Port Famine, under which appellation the place is known at the present day. On the 21st the ships entered a beautiful bay, which received the name of Elizabeth, and in which was buried the carpenter of the *Hugh Gallant*. Not far from thence a fine river fell into the sea, on the banks of which dwelt the anthropophagi who had fought so fiercely with the Spaniards, and who endeavoured, but in vain, to entice the Englishmen into the interior of the country.

On the 24th February, as the little squadron came forth from the strait, it encountered a violent storm, which dispersed it. The *Hugh Gallant*, left alone, and letting in water in all directions, was only kept afloat with the greatest trouble. Rejoined on the 15th by his consorts, Cavendish tried in vain to land on Mocha Island, where Drake had been so maltreated by the Araucanians. This country, rich in gold and silver, had hitherto successfully resisted all Spanish attempts to subjugate it, and its inhabitants, fully determined to maintain their liberty, repulsed by force of arms every attempt to land. It was necessary therefore to go to the island of St. Maria, where the Indians, who took the Englishmen for Spaniards, furnished them with abundance of maize, fowls, sweet potatoes, pigs, and other provisions.

On the 30th March, Cavendish dropped anchor in 32° 50’ in the Bay of Quintero. A party of thirty musketeers advanced into the country and met with oxen, cows, wild horses, hares, and partridges in abundance. The little troop was attacked by the Spaniards, and Cavendish was obliged to return to his ships after losing twelve of his men. He afterwards ravaged, plundered, or burnt the towns of Paraca, Cincha, Pisca, and Païta, and devastated the island of Puna, where he obtained a booty in coined money of the value of 25,760*l.* After having scuttled the *Hugh Gallant*, which was totally unfit any longer to keep the water, Cavendish continued his profitable cruising, burnt, in the latitude of New Spain, a ship of 120 tons, plundered and burnt Aguatulio, and captured, after six hours of fighting, a vessel of 708 tons, laden with rich stuffs, and with 122,000 gold pesos. Then, “victorious and contented,” Cavendish wished to secure the great spoils which he was conveying against any chance of danger. He touched at the Ladrones, the Philippines, and Greater Java, doubled the Cape of Good Hope, recruited himself at St. Helena, and on the 9th September, 1588, anchored at Plymouth, after two years of sailing, privateering, and fighting. At the end of two years after his return, of all the great fortune which he had brought back with him, there remained only a sum sufficient for the fitting out of a third, and as it proved, a last expedition.

Cavendish started on the 6th August, 1591, with five vessels, but a storm on the coast of Patagonia scattered the flotilla, which could not be collected again until the arrival at Port Desire. Assailed by fearful hurricanes in the

Strait of Magellan, Cavendish was obliged to go back, after having seen himself deserted by three of his ships. The want of fresh provisions, the cold, and the privations of all kinds which he underwent, and which had decimated his crew, forced him to return northwards along the coast of Brazil, where the Portuguese opposed every attempt at landing. He was therefore obliged to put to sea again without having been able to revictual. Cavendish died, from grief perhaps as much as from hardships, before he reached the English coast.

One year after the return of the companions of Barentz, two ships, the *Mauritius* and the *Hendrik Fredrik*, with two yachts, the *Eendracht* and *Espérance*, having on board a crew of 248 men, quitted Amsterdam on the 2nd July, 1598. The commander-in-chief of this squadron was Oliver de Noort, a man at that time about thirty or thereabouts, and well known as having made several long cruising voyages. His second in command and vice-admiral was Jacob Claaz d'Ulpenda, and as pilot there was a certain Melis, a skilful sailor of English origin. This expedition, fitted out by the merchants of Amsterdam with the concurrence and aid of the States-General of Holland, had a double purpose; at once commercial and military. Formerly the Dutch had contented themselves with fetching from Portugal the merchandise which they distributed by means of their coasting vessels throughout Europe; but now they were reduced to the necessity of going to seek the commodities in the scene of their production. For this object, De Noort was to show his countrymen the route inaugurated by Magellan, and on the way to inflict as much injury as he could upon the Spaniards and Portuguese. At this period Philip II. whose yoke the Dutch had shaken off, and who had just added Portugal to his possessions, had forbidden his subjects to have any commercial intercourse with the rebels of the Low Countries. It was thus a necessity for Holland if she did not wish to be ruined, and as a consequence, to fall anew under Spanish rule, to open up for herself a road to the Spice Islands. The route which was the least frequented by the enemy’s ships was that by the Strait of Magellan, and this was the one which De Noort was ordered to follow.

After touching at Goree, the Dutch anchored in the Gulf of Guinea, at the Island *do Principe*. Here the Portuguese pretended to give a friendly welcome to the men who went on shore, but they took advantage of a favourable opportunity, to fall upon and massacre them without mercy. Among the dead were Cornille de Noort, brother of the admiral, Melis, Daniel Goerrits, and John de Bremen — the captain, Peter Esias, being the only man who escaped. It was a sorrowful commencement for a campaign, a sad presage which was destined not to remain unfulfilled. De Noort, who was furious over this foul play, landed from his ships 120 men; but he found the Portuguese so well entrenched, that after a brisk skirmish in which seventeen more of his men were either killed or wounded, he was obliged to weigh anchor without having been able to avenge the wicked and cowardly perfidy to which his brother and twelve of his companions had fallen victims. On the 25th December, one of the pilots named Jan Volkers, was abandoned on the African coast as a punishment for his disloyal intrigues, for endeavouring to foment a spirit of despondency amongst the crews, and for his well-proved rebellion. On the 5th January, the island of Annobon, situated in the Gulf of Guinea, a little below the Line, was sighted, and the course of the ships was changed for crossing the Atlantic. De Noort had scarcely cast anchor in the Bay of Rio Janeiro before he sent some sailors on shore to obtain water and buy provisions from the natives; but the Portuguese opposed the landing, and killed eleven men. Afterwards, repulsed from the coast of Brazil by the Portuguese and the natives, driven back by contrary winds, having made vain efforts to reach the island of St. Helena, where they had hoped to obtain the provisions of which they were in the most pressing want, the Dutchmen, deprived of their pilot, toss at random upon the ocean. They land upon the desert islands of Martin Vaz, again reach the coast of Brazil at Rio Doce, which they mistake for Ascension Island, and are finally obliged to winter in the desert island of Santa Clara. The putting into port at this place was marked by several disagreeable events. The flag-ship struck upon a rock with so much violence that had the sea been a little rougher, she must have been lost. There were also some bloody and barbarous executions of mutinous sailors, notably that of a poor man, who having wounded a pilot with a knife thrust, was condemned to have his hand nailed to the mainmast. The invalids, of whom there were many on board the fleet, were brought on shore, and nearly all were cured by the end of a fortnight. From the 2nd to the 21st of June, De Noort remained in this island, which was not more than three miles from the mainland. But before putting to sea he was obliged to burn the *Eendracht*, as he had not sufficient men to work her. It was not until the 20th December, after having been tried by many storms, that he was able to cast anchor in Port Desire, where the crew killed in a few days a quantity of dog-fish and sea-lions, as well as more than five thousand penguins. “The general landed,” says the French translation of De Noort’s narrative, published by De Bry, “with a party of armed men, but they saw nobody, only some graves placed on high situations among the rocks, in which the people bury their dead, putting upon the grave a great quantity of stones, all painted red, having besides adorned the graves with darts, plumes of feathers, and other singular articles which they use as arms.”

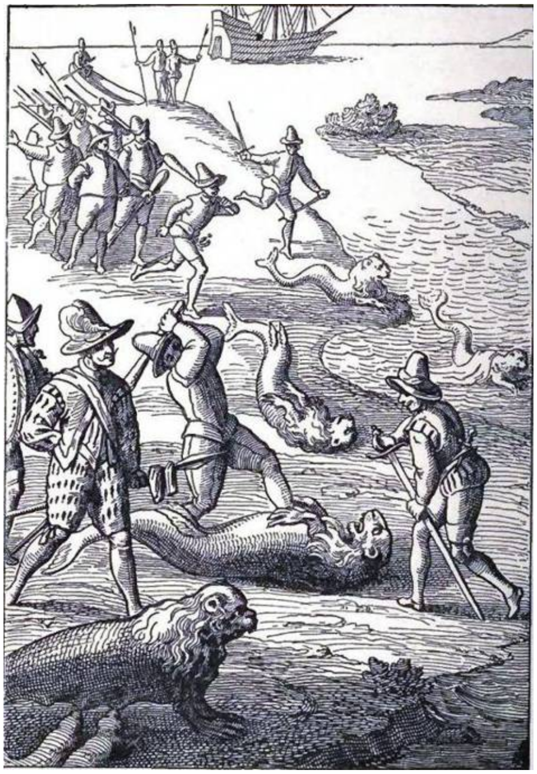

A Sea-lion Hunt.
From an old print.

The Dutch saw also, but at too great a distance to shoot them, buffalos, stags, and ostriches, and from a single nest they obtained ten ostrich eggs. Captain Jacob Jansz Huy de Cooper, died during the stay at this place, and was interred at Port Desire. On the 23rd November, the fleet entered the Strait of Magellan. During a visit to the shore three Dutchmen were killed by some Patagonians, and their death was avenged by the massacre of a whole tribe of Enoos. The long navigation through the narrows and the lakes of the Strait of Magellan was signalized by the meeting with two Dutch ships, under the command of Sebald de Weerdt, who had wintered not far from the Bay of Mauritius, and by the abandoning of Vice-admiral Claaz, who, as it would appear, had been several times guilty of insubordination. Are not these acts, which we see so frequently committed by English, Dutch, and Spanish navigators, a true sign of the times? A deed which we should regard now-a-days as one of terrible barbarity seemed, doubtless, a relatively mild punishment in the eyes of men so accustomed to set but little value upon human life. Nevertheless, could anything be more cruel than to abandon a man in a desert country, without arms and without provisions, to put him on shore in a country peopled by ferocious cannibals, prepared to make a repast on his flesh; what was it but condemning him to a horrible death?

On the 29th of February, 1600, De Noort, after having been ninety-nine days in passing through the strait, came out on to the Pacific Ocean. A fortnight later, a storm separated him from the *Hendrik Fredrik*, which was never again heard of. As for De Noort, who had now with him only one yacht besides his own vessel, he cast anchor at the island of Mocha, and, unlike the experience of his predecessors, he was very well received by the natives. Afterwards he sailed along the coast of Chili, where he was able to obtain provisions in abundance in exchange for Nuremberg knives, hatchets, shirts, hats, and other articles of no great value. After ravaging, plundering, and burning several towns on the Peruvian coast, after sinking all the vessels that he met with, and amassing a considerable booty, De Noort, hearing that a squadron commanded by the brother of the viceroy, Don Luis de Velasco, had been sent in pursuit of him, judged it time to make for the Ladrone Islands, where he anchored on the 16th of September. “The inhabitants came around our ship with more than 200 canoes, there being three, four, or five men in each canoe, crying out all together: ‘Hierro, hierro’ (iron, iron), which is greatly in request amongst them. They are as much at home in the water as upon land, and are very clever divers, as we perceived when we threw five pieces of iron into the sea, which a single man went to search for.” De Noort could testify unfortunately, that these islands well deserved their name. The islanders tried even to drag the nails out of the ship, and carried off everything upon which they could lay their hands. One of them, having succeeded in climbing along a part of the rigging, had the audacity to enter a cabin and seize upon a sword, with which he threw himself into the sea.

On the 14th October following, De Noort traversed the Philippine Archipelago, where he made several descents, and burnt, plundered, or sunk a number of Spanish or Portuguese vessels, and some Chinese junks. While cruising in the Strait of Manilla he was attacked by two large Spanish vessels, and in the battle which followed the Dutch had five men killed, and twenty-five wounded and lost their brigantine, which was captured with her crew of twenty-five men. The Spaniards lost more than 200 men, for their flag-ship caught fire and sank. Far from picking up the wounded and the able-bodied men, who were trying to save themselves by swimming, the Dutch, “making way with sails set on the foremast, across the heads which were to be seen in the water, pierced some with lances, and also discharged their cannon over them.” After this bloody and fruitless victory, De Noort went to recruit at Borneo, captured a rich cargo of spices at Java, and having doubled the Cape of Good Hope, landed at Rotterdam on the 26th of August, having only one ship and forty-eight men remaining. If the merchants who had defrayed the expenses of the expedition approved of the conduct of De Noort, who brought back a cargo which more than reimbursed them for their expenditure, and who had taught his countrymen the way to the Indies, it behoves us, while extolling his qualities as a sailor, to take great exception to the manner in which he exercised the command, and to mete out severe blame for the barbarity which has left a stain of blood upon the first Dutch voyage of circumnavigation.

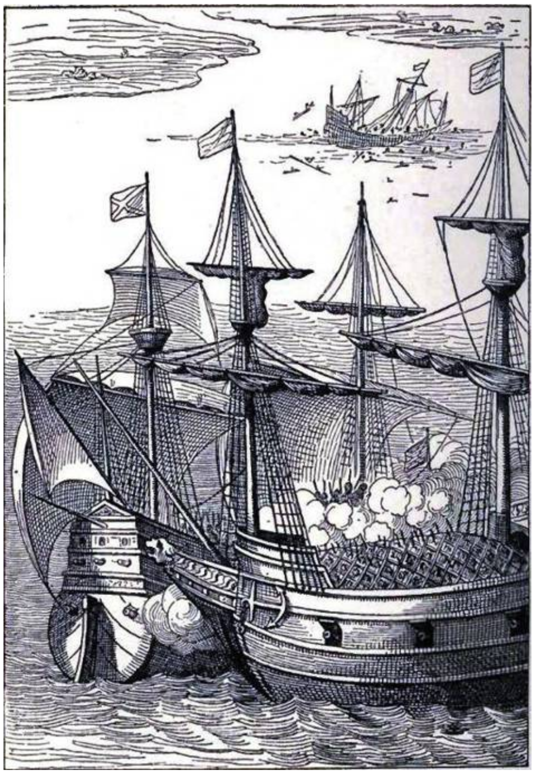

Battle of Manilla.
From an old print.

We have now to speak of a man who, endowed with eminent qualities and with at least equal defects, carried on his life’s work in divers, sometimes even in opposing directions, and who after having reached the highest summit of honour to which a gentleman could aspire, at last laid his head upon a scaffold, accused of treason and felony. This man is Sir Walter Raleigh. If he have any claim to a place in this portrait gallery of great sailors, it is neither as founder of any English colony nor as a sailor; it is as a discoverer, and what we have to say of him is not to his credit. Walter Raleigh passed five years in France fighting against the League, in the midst of all those Gascons who formed the basis of the armies of Henry of Navarre, and in such society he perfected the habits of boasting and falsehood which belonged to his character. In 1577, after a campaign in the Low Countries against the Spaniards, he returns to England and takes a deep interest in the questions so passionately debated among his three brothers by the mother's side, John, Humphrey, and Adrian Gilbert. At this period England was passing through a very grave economic crisis. The practice of agriculture was undergoing a transformation; in all directions grazing was being substituted for tillage, and the number of agricultural labourers was greatly reduced by the change. From thence arose general distress, and also such a surplussage of population as was fast becoming a matter of anxious concern. At the same time, to long wars succeeds a peace, destined to endure throughout the reign of Elizabeth, so that a great number of adventurers know not how to find indulgence for their love of violent emotions. At this moment, therefore, arises the necessity for such an emigration as may relieve the country of its population, may permit all the miserable people dying of hunger to provide for their own wants in a new country, and by that means may increase the influence and prosperity of the mother country. All the more thoughtful minds in England, who follow the course of public opinion — Hakluyt, Thomas Hariot, Carlyle, Peckham, and the brothers Gilbert — are struck with this need. But it is to the last named that belongs the credit of indicating the locality suitable for the establishing of colonies. Raleigh only joined with his brothers in the scheme, following their lead, but he neither conceived nor began the carrying into execution — as he has been too often credited with doing — of this fruitful project, the colonization of the American shores of the Atlantic. If Raleigh, all-powerful with Queen Elizabeth, fickle and nevertheless jealous in her affections as she was, encourage his brothers; if he expend himself 40,000*l.* sterling in his attempts at colonization, he still takes good care not to quit England, for the life of patience and self-devotion of the founder of a colony would have no attractions for him. He gives up and sells his patent as soon as he perceives the inutility of his efforts, while he does not forget to reserve for himself the fifth part of any profit arising eventually from the colony.

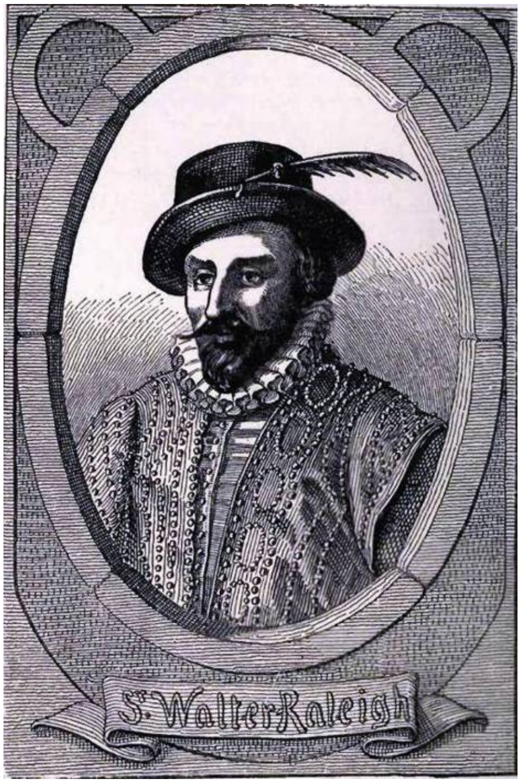

Sir Walter Raleigh.
From an old print.

At the same time Raleigh fits out some vessels against the Spanish possessions; and himself soon takes part in the strife and the battles which saved England from the Invincible Armada, afterwards proceeding to support the claims of the Prior de Crato, to the throne of Portugal. It is a short time after his return to England that he falls into disgrace with his royal mistress, and after his release from prison, while he is confined to his princely mansion of Sherborne, he conceives the project of his voyage to Guiana. To his mind, this is a gigantic enterprise of which the marvellous results are destined to draw upon him the attention of the whole world, and to restore to him the favour of his sovereign. Would not the discovery and conquest of El Dorado, of the country in which according to Orellana, the temples are roofed with plates of gold, where all the tools, even those for the meanest purposes, are made of gold, where one walks upon precious stones, "procure for him greater glory," these are the very words which Raleigh employs in his account, "than Cortès had gained in Mexico, or Pizarro in Peru. He will have under him more golden towns and nations than the King of Spain, the Sultan of the Turks, and no matter what Emperor!" We have already spoken of the fables which Orellana had invented in 1539, and which had been the fruitful source of more than one legend. Humboldt discloses what had given them birth when he describes to us the nature of the soil and the rocks which surround Lake Parima, between the Essequibo and the Branco. "They are," says this great traveller, "rocks of micaceous slate, and of sparkling talc, which are resplendent in the midst of a sheet of water, which acts as a reflector beneath the burning tropical sun." So are explained those massive domes of gold, those obelisks of silver, and all those marvels of which the boastful and enthusiastic minds of the Spaniards afforded them a glimpse. Did Raleigh believe really in the existence of this city of gold, for the conquest of which he was about to sacrifice so many lives? Was he thoroughly convinced himself, or did he not yield to the illusions of a mind eager for glory? It is impossible to say, but this at least is indisputable, that, to borrow the just expressions of M. Philarète Chasles, "at the moment even of his embarkation men did not believe in his promises, they were suspicious of his exaggerations, and dreaded the results of an expedition directed by a man so fool-hardy, and of a morality so equivocal.”

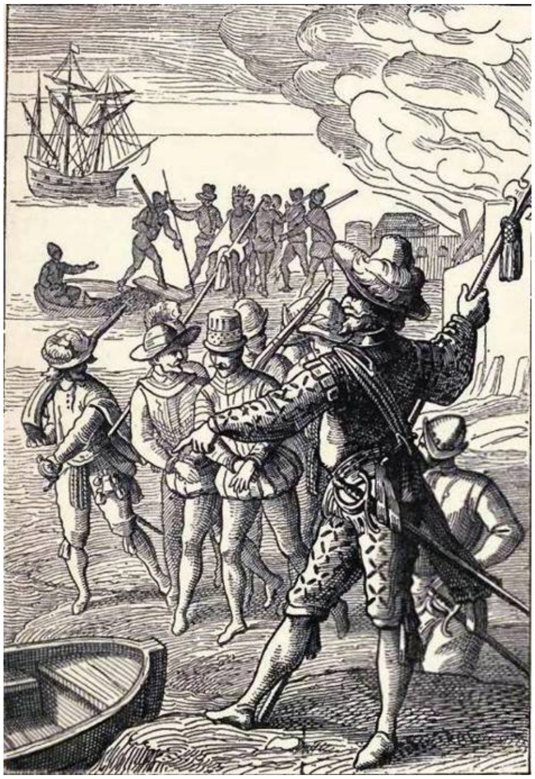

Raleigh seizes Berreo.
From an old print.

Nevertheless, it seemed that Raleigh had foreseen everything needful for this undertaking, and that he had made the necessary studies. Not only did he speak of the nature of the soil of Guiana, of its productions, and its inhabitants with imperturbable assurance, but he had taken care to send, at his own expense, a ship commanded by Captain Whiddon, to prepare the way for the fleet which he intended to conduct in person to the banks of the Orinoco. What he took good care, however, not to confide to the public, was that all the information he received from his emissary was unfavourable to the enterprise. Raleigh himself started from Plymouth on the 9th February, 1595, with a small fleet of five vessels, and 100 soldiers, without reckoning marines, officers, and volunteers. After stopping four days at Fortaventura, one of the Canaries, to take in wood and water there, he reached Teneriffe, where Captain Brereton ought to have rejoined him. Having waited for him in vain for eighty days, Raleigh sailed for Trinidad, where he met Whiddon. The island of Trinidad was at that time governed by Don Antonio de Berreo, who, it is said, had obtained accurate information concerning Guiana. The arrival of the English did not please him, and he immediately despatched emissaries to Cumana and to Margarita, with orders to gather together the troops to attack the Englishmen, while at the same time he forbade any Indians or Spaniards to hold intercourse with them under pain of death. Raleigh, forewarned, determined to be beforehand with him. At nightfall he landed in secret with 100 men, captured the town of St. Joseph, to which the Indians set fire, without a blow, and carried off Berreo and the principal personages to the ships. At the same time arrived Captains Gifford and Knynin, from whom he had been separated upon the Spanish Coasts. Raleigh at once sailed for the Orinoco, entered Capuri Bay with a large galley and three boats carrying 100 sailors and soldiers, became entangled in the inextricable labyrinth of islands and canals which form the mouth of the river, and ascended the Orinoco for a distance of 330 miles. The account which Raleigh gives of his campaign is so fabulous, with the coolness of a Gascon transported to the banks of the Thames, he so heaps one falsehood upon the top of another, that one is almost tempted to class his narrative amongst the number of imaginary voyages. He says that some Spaniards who had seen the town of Manoa, called El Dorado, told him that this town exceeds in size and wealth all the towns in the world, and everything which the “conquistadores” had seen in America. “There is no winter there,” he says; “a soil dry and fertile, with game, and birds of every species in great abundance, who filled the air with hitherto unknown notes; it was a real concert for us. My captain, sent to search for mines, perceived veins both of gold and silver; but as he had no tool but his sword, he was unable to detach these metals to examine them in detail; however, he carried away several bits of them which he reserved for future examination. A Spaniard of Caracas called this mine *Madre del Oro* (mother of gold).” Then, as Raleigh well knows that the public is on its guard against his exaggerations, he adds, “It will be thought perchance, that I am the sport of a false and cheating delusion, but why should I have undertaken a voyage thus laborious, if I had not entertained the conviction that there is not a country upon earth which is richer in gold than Guiana? Whiddon and Milechappe, our surgeon, brought back several stones which resembled sapphires. I showed these stones to several inhabitants of Orinoco, who have assured me that there exists an entire mountain of them.” An old cacique of the age of 110, who nevertheless could still walk ten miles without fatigue, came to see Raleigh, boasted to him of the formidable power of the Emperor of Manoa, and proved to him that his forces were insufficient. He depicted these people as much civilized, as wearing clothes, and possessing great riches, especially in plates of gold; finally, he spoke to him of a mountain of pure gold. Raleigh relates that he wished to approach this mountain, but, sad mischance, it was at that moment half submerged. “It had the form of a tower, and appeared to me rather white than yellow. A torrent which precipitated itself from the mountain, swollen by the rains, made a tremendous noise, which could be heard at the distance of many miles, and which deafened our people. I recollected the description which Berreo had given of the brilliancy of the diamonds and of the other precious stones scattered over the various parts of the country. I had, however, some doubt as to the value of these stones; their extraordinary whiteness, nevertheless surprised me. After a short time of repose on the banks of the Vinicapara, and a visit to the village of the cacique, the latter promised to conduct me to the foot of the mountain by a circuitous route; but at the sight of the numerous difficulties which presented themselves, I preferred to return to the mouth of the Cumana, where the caciques of the neighbourhood came to bring various presents, consisting of the rare productions of the country.” We will spare the reader the description of people three times taller than ordinary men, of cyclops, of natives who had their eyes upon the shoulders, their mouth in the chest, and the hair growing from the middle of the back — all affirmations seriously related, but which give to Raleigh’s narrative a singular resemblance to a fairy tale. One fancies while reading it that it must be a page taken out of the *Thousand and one Nights*.

If we put on one side all these figments of an imagination run mad, what gain has been derived for geography? There was certainly no pains spared in announcing with much noise, and very great puffing, this fantastic expedition, and we may well say with the fable-writer, —

“In fancy free I an author see,
Who says, ‘The awful war I’ll sing
Of Titans with the Thunder-King:’
Of this grand promise the result, we find,
Is often wind.”

CHAPTER V.

MISSIONARIES AND SETTLERS. MERCHANTS AND TOURISTS.

I.

Distinguishing characteristics of the Seventeenth Century — The more thorough exploration of regions previously discovered — To the thirst for gold succeeds Apostolic zeal — Italian missionaries in Congo — Portuguese missionaries in Abyssinia — Brue in Senegal and Flacourt in Madagascar — The Apostles of India, of Indo-China, and of Japan.

The seventeenth century has a distinctive character of its own, differing from that of the preceding century in the fact that nearly all the great discoveries have been already made, and that the work of this whole period consists almost exclusively in perfecting the information already acquired. It contrasts equally with the century which is to succeed it, because scientific methods are not yet applied by astronomers and sailors, as they are to be 100 years later. It appears in fact, that the narratives of the first explorers — who were only able, so to speak, to obtain a glimpse of the regions which they traversed while waging their wars, — may have in some degree exercised a baneful influence upon the public mind. Curiosity, in the narrowest sense of the word, is carried to an extreme. Men travel over the world to gain an idea of the manners and customs of each nation, of the productions and manufactures of each country, but there is no real study. They do not seek to trace what they see to its source, and to reason scientifically upon the why and wherefore of facts. They behold, curiosity is satisfied, and they pass on. The observations made do not penetrate beneath the surface, and the great object appears to be to visit, as rapidly as may be, all the regions which the sixteenth century has brought to light.

Besides, the abundance of the wealth diffused on a sudden over the whole of Europe has caused an economic crisis. Commerce, like industry, is transformed and altered. New ways are opened, new mediums arise, new wants are created, luxury increases, and the eagerness to make a fortune rapidly by speculation, turns the heads of many. If Venice from a commercial point of view be dead, the Dutch are about to constitute themselves, to use a happy expression of M. Leroy-Beaulieu, “the carriers and agents of Europe,” and the English are preparing to lay the foundations of their vast colonial empire.

To the merchants succeed the missionaries. They alight in large numbers upon the newly-discovered countries, preaching the Gospel, civilizing the barbarous nations, studying and describing the country. The development of Apostolic zeal is one of the dominant features of the seventeenth century, and it behoves us to recognize all that geography and historic science owe to these devoted, learned, and unassuming men. The traveller only passes through a country, the missionary dwells in it. The latter has evidently much greater facilities for acquiring an intimate knowledge of the history and civilization of the nations which he studies. It is therefore very natural that we should owe to them narratives of journeys, descriptions, and histories, which are still consulted with advantage, and which have served as a basis for later works.

If there be any country to which these reflections more particularly apply, it is to Africa, and especially to Abyssinia. How much of this vast triangular continent of Africa was known in the seventeenth century? Nothing but the coasts, it will be said. A mistake. From the earliest times the two branches of the Nile, the Astapus and the Bahr-el-Abiad, had been known to the ancients. They had even advanced — if the lists of countries and nations discovered at Karnak by M. Mariette may be believed — as far as the great Lakes of the interior. In the twelfth century, the Arab geographer Edrisi writes an excellent description of Africa for Roger II. of Sicily, and confirms these data. Later on, Cadamosto and Ibn Batuta travel over Africa, and the latter goes as far as Timbuctoo. Marco Polo affirms that Africa is only united to Asia by the Isthmus of Suez, and he visits Madagascar. Lastly, when the Portuguese, led by Vasco da Gama, have completed the circumnavigation of Africa, some of them remain in Abyssinia, and in a short time diplomatic relations are established between that country and Portugal. We have already said something of Francesco Alvarez; in his train several Portuguese missionaries settle in the country, amongst whom must be named Fathers Paez and Lobo.

Father Paez left Goa in 1588 to preach Christianity upon the eastern coast of North Africa. After long and sad mishaps, he landed at Massowah in Abyssinia, traversed the country, and in 1618 pushed on as far as the sources of the Blue Nile, — a discovery the authenticity of which Bruce was hereafter to dispute, but of which the narrative differs only in some unimportant particulars from that of the Scotch traveller. In 1604, Paez, arrived at the court of the king Za Denghel, had preached with such success that he had converted the king and all his court. He had even soon acquired so great an influence over the Abyssinian monarch, that the latter, in writing to the Pope and to the King of Spain to offer them his friendship, asked them to send him men fitted to teach his people.

Father Geronimo Lobo landed in Abyssinia with Alfonzo Meneses, patriarch of Ethiopia, in 1625. But times were greatly changed. The king converted by Paez had been murdered, and his successor, who had summoned the Portuguese missionaries, died after a short time. A violent revulsion of feeling ensued against the Christians, and the missionaries were driven away, imprisoned, or given up to the Turks. Lobo was charged with the mission of obtaining the sum necessary for the ransom of his companions. After many wanderings, which led him to Brazil, Carthagena, Cadiz, and Seville, to Lisbon and to Rome, where he gave the Pope and the King of Spain numerous and accurate details upon the Church of Ethiopia and the manners of the inhabitants, he made a last journey in India, and returned to Lisbon to die, in 1678.

Christianity had been introduced into Congo, upon the Atlantic coast, in 1489, the year of its discovery by the Portuguese. At first Dominicans were sent; but as they made scarce any progress, the Pope, with the consent of the King of Portugal, despatched thither some Italian Capuchins. These were Carli de Placenza in 1667, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi, from 1654 to 1668, afterwards Antonio Zucchelli and Gradisca, from 1696 to 1704. We shall mention these missionaries only, because they have published accounts of their journeys. Cavazzi explored in succession Angola, the country of Matumba, and the islands of Coanza and Loana. In the ardour of his apostolic zeal, he could devise no better means of converting the blacks than by burning their idols, rebuking the kings for the time-honoured custom of polygamy, and subjecting to torture, or to being torn with whips, those who relapsed into idolatry. Notwithstanding all this, he gained considerable ascendancy over the natives, which, if it had been well directed, might have produced very useful results in the development of civilization and the progress of religion. The same reproach is due also to Father Zucchelli and to the other Missionaries in Congo. The narrative of Cavazzi, published at Rome in 1687, asserted that Portuguese influence extended from 200 to 300 miles from the coast, and that in the interior there existed a very important town, known by the name of San Salvador, which possessed twelve churches, a Jesuit college, and a population of 50,000 souls.

At the close of the fourteenth century Pigafetta published the account of the journey of Duarte Lopez, ambassador from the King of Congo to the Courts of Rome and Lisbon. A map which accompanies this narrative presents to us a Lake Zambré, in the very place occupied by Lake Tanganyika, and more to the west, Lake Acque Lunda, from whence issued the Congo River; south of the equator two lakes are indicated, one the Lake of the Nile, the other, more to the east, bears the name of Colué; they appear to be the Albert and the Victoria Nyanza. This most curious information was rejected by the geographers of the nineteenth century, who left blank the whole interior of Africa.

Upon the West Coast of Africa at the mouth of the Senegal, the French had established settlements which, under the skilful administration of Andrew Brue, speedily received considerable extension. Brue, *Commandant for the King and Director-general of the Royal French Company upon the Senegal Coast and in other parts of Africa* — so ran his official title — although he may be little known, and the article which treats of him may be one of the most curtailed in the great collections of biography, deserves to occupy one of the most prominent positions among colonizers and explorers. Not content with extending the colony as far as its present limits, he explored countries which have been only lately revisited by Lieutenant Mage, or which have not been visited at all since Brue’s time. He carried the French outposts eastwards above the junction of the Senegal and the Faleme, northwards as far as Arguin, which we have since abandoned, although reserving our rights, and southwards as far as the island of Bissao. He explored in the interior Galam and Bambouk, so rich in gold, and collected the earliest documents concerning the Pouls, Peuls or Fouls, the Yoloffs and the Mussulmen, who coming from the north, attempted the religious conquest of all the black nations of the country. The information thus collected by Brue about the history and migrations of these various people, is of the greatest value, affording clear light, even in the present day, to the geographer and the historian. Not only has Brue left us the narrative of deeds of which he was witness and the description of the places which he visited, but we also owe to him much information about the productions of the countries, the plants, the animals, and all the objects which would give occasion for commercial or industrial enterprise. These most curious documents, put together very maladroitly it must be confessed, by Father Labat, formed the subject, a few years ago, of a very interesting work by M. Berlioux.

To the south-east of Africa, during the first half of the seventeenth century, the French founded some commercial settlements in Madagascar, an island long known under the name of St. Lawrence. They build Fort Dauphin under the administration of M. de Flacourt; several unknown districts of the island are explored as well as the neighbouring islands upon the coast; the Mascarene Islands are occupied in 1649. Although firm and moderate towards his countrymen, De Flacourt did not use the same self-control towards the natives; he even brought about a general revolt, as a consequence of which he was recalled. Expeditions into the interior of Madagascar were henceforth very rare, and it is not until the present day that we find a thorough exploration carried out.

Of Indo-China and Thibet the only information which reached Europe during the whole of the seventeenth century was due to the missionaries. Such names as Father Alexandre de Rhodes, Ant. d’Andrada, Avril, Benedict Goes, may not be passed over in silence. In their *Annual Letters* is to be found a quantity of information, which even in the present day retains a real interest, as concerning regions so long closed against Europeans. In Cochin China and Tonkin, Father Tachard devoted himself to astronomical observations, of which the result was to prove by the most conclusive evidence the great errors in the longitudes given by Ptolemy. This called the attention of the learned world to the necessity of a reform in the graphic representation of the countries of the extreme east, and for attaining this end, to the absolute need of close observations made by specially qualified scientific men, or by navigators familiar with astronomical calculations.

The country which especially attracted the missionaries was China, that enormous and populous empire, which ever since the arrival of Europeans in India, had persevered with the greatest strictness in the absurd policy of abstention from any intercourse whatsoever with foreigners. It was not until the close of the sixteenth century that the missionaries obtained the permission, so often demanded before in vain, to penetrate into the Middle Empire. Their knowledge of mathematics and astronomy facilitated their settlement and enabled them to gather, as well from the ancient annals of the country, as during their journies, a prodigious quantity of most valuable information concerning the history, ethnography, and geography of the Celestial Empire. Fathers Mendoza, Ricci, Trigault, Visdelou, Lecomte, Verbiest, Navarrete, Schall, and Martini, deserve especial mention for having carried to China the arts and sciences of Europe, while they diffused in the west the first accurate and precise information upon the unprogressive civilization of the Flowery Land.

II.

MISSIONARIES AND SETTLERS. MERCHANTS AND TOURISTS.

The Dutch in the Spice Islands — Lemaire and Schouten — Tasman — Mendana — Queiros and Torrès — Pyrard de Laval — Pietro della Valle — Tavernier — Thévenot — Bernier — Robert Knox — Chardin — De Bruyn — Kæmpfer.

The Dutch were not slow in perceiving the weakness and decadence of the Portuguese power in Asia. They felt with how much ease a clever and prudent nation might in a short time become possessed of the whole commerce of the extreme East. After a considerable number of private expeditions and voyages of reconnaissance they had founded in 1602 that celebrated Company of the Indies which was destined to raise to so high a pitch the wealth and prosperity of the metropolis. Equally in its strife with the Portuguese as in its dealing with the natives, the Company pursued a very skilful policy of moderation. Far from founding colonies, or repairing and occupying the fortresses which they took from the Portuguese, the Dutch bore themselves as simple traders, exclusively occupied with their commerce. They avoided building any fortified factory, except at the intersection of the great commercial roads. Thus they were able in a short time to seize all the carrying trade between India, China, Japan, and Oceania. The one fault committed by the all-powerful Company was the concentrating in its own hands a monopoly of the trade in spices. It drove away the foreigners who had settled in the Moluccas or in the Islands of Sunda, or who came thither to obtain a cargo of spices; it even went the length, in order to raise the price of this valuable commodity, of proscribing the cultivation of certain species in a large number of islands, and of forbidding, under pain of death, the exportation and sale of seeds and cuttings of the spice-producing trees. In a few years the Dutch were established in Java, Sumatra, Borneo, the Moluccas, and at the Cape of Good Hope, harbours the best placed for ships returning to Europe.

It was at this time that a rich merchant of Amsterdam, Jacob Lemaire, in concert with a skilful mariner, named Wilhem Cornelis Schouten, conceived a project for reaching the Indies by a new route. The Dutch States-General had in fact forbidden any subject of the United Provinces, not in the pay of the Company of the Indies, from going to the Spice Islands by way of the Cape of Good Hope or of the Strait of Magellan. Schouten, according to some, Lemaire, according to others, had formed the idea of eluding this interdict by seeking a passage to the south of Magellan's Strait. This much is certain, that Lemaire bore one half of the expense of the expedition, while Schouten, by the aid of several merchants whose names have been handed down to us, and who filled the chief offices in the town of Hoorn, provided the other half. They fitted out the *Concorde*, a vessel of 360 tons, and a yacht, carrying together a crew of sixty-five men, and twenty-nine cannon. This was certainly an equipment but little in accordance with the magnitude of the enterprise. But Schouten was a skilful mariner, the crew had been carefully chosen, and the vessels were abundantly furnished with provisions and spare rigging. Lemaire was commissioner, and Schouten the captain of the ship. The destination was kept secret, and officers and crew entered into an unlimited engagement to go wherever they might be led. On the 25th June, 1615, eleven days after quitting the Texel, and when there was no longer anything to be feared from indiscretion, the crews were assembled to listen to the reading of an order which ran as follows: "The two vessels would seek another passage than that of Magellan, by which to enter the South Sea, and to discover there certain southern countries, in the hope of obtaining enormous profits from them, and if heaven should not favour this design, they would repair by means of the same sea to the East Indies." This declaration was received with enthusiasm by the whole crew, who were animated, like all Dutchmen of that period, with a love for great discoveries.

The route then usually pursued for reaching South America — as may perhaps have been already observed — followed the African coasts as far as below the equator. The *Concorde* did not try to deviate from it; she reached the shores of Brazil, Patagonia, and Port Desire, at 300 miles to the north of the Strait of Magellan, but was for several days hindered by storms from entering the harbour. The yacht even remained for the space of one whole tide, aground and lying on her side, but high water set her afloat again; only for a short time however, for whilst some repairs were being done to her keel, her rigging took fire, and she was consumed in spite of the energetic efforts of the two crews. On the 13th January, 1616, Lemaire and Schouten arrived at the Sebaldine Islands, discovered by Sebald de Weerdt, and followed the coast of Tierra del Fuego at a short distance from land. The coast ran east-quarter-south-east, and was skirted by high mountains covered with snow. On the 24th of January at mid-day, they sighted its extreme point, but eastward stretched some more land, which also appeared to be of great elevation. The distance between these two islands, according to the general opinion, appeared to be about twenty-four miles, and Schouten entered the strait which divided them. It was so encumbered with whales that the ship was obliged to tack more than once to avoid them. The island to the east received the name of Staten Island, and that to the west the name of Maurice of Nassau.

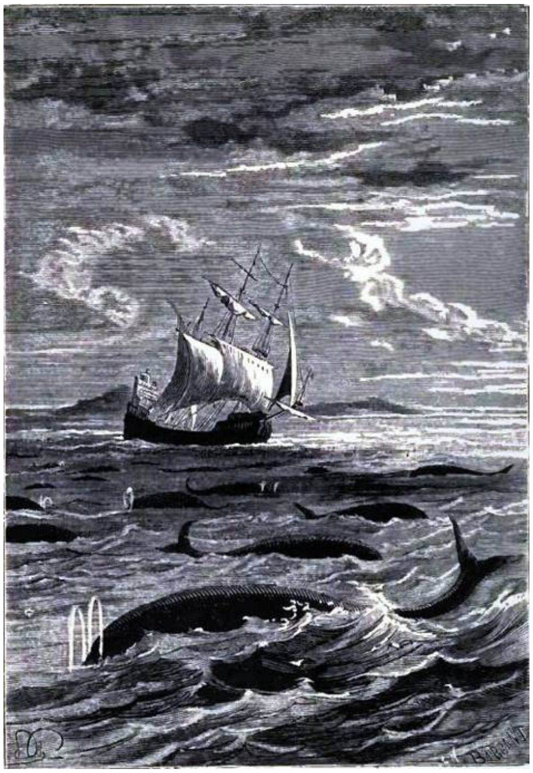

The sea was so encumbered with whales.

Twenty-four hours after entering this strait, which received the name of Lemaire, the ship emerged from it, and to an archipelago of small islands situated to starboard was given the name of Barneveldt, in honour of the Grand Pensionary of Holland. In 58° Lemaire doubled Cape Horn — so named in remembrance of the town where the expedition had been fitted out — and entered the South Sea. Lemaire afterwards went northwards as far as the parallel of the Juan Fernandez Islands, where he judged it wise to stop, in order to recruit his men who were suffering from scurvy. As Magellan had done, Lemaire and Schouten passed without perceiving them amongst the principal Polynesian archipelagos, and cast anchor on the 10th

April, at the Island of Dogs, where it was only possible to procure a little fresh water and some herbs. They hoped to reach the Solomon Islands, but in the north the Dangerous Archipelago was entered, in which were discovered Waterland Island — so named on account of its containing a great lake — and Fly Island, because a cloud of these insects settled upon the vessel, and it was impossible to get rid of them until at the end of four days there was a change of wind. Afterwards Lemaire crossed the Friendly Archipelago, and entered that of the Navigators, or of Samoa, of which four small islands still retain the names which were then given to them: Goed Hoep, Cocoa, Horn, and Traitors' Islands. The inhabitants of these parts showed themselves extremely addicted to stealing; they tried to draw out the bolts from the ship and to break the chains. Scurvy continued to prevail among the crew, and it was therefore a great boon to receive from the king a present of a black boar and some fruits. The sovereign, who was named Latou, speedily arrived in a large canoe with sails, in shape like the Dutch sledges (*trainaux*), escorted by a flotilla of five and twenty boats. The king did not venture himself to go on board the *Concorde*, but his son was of a bolder spirit, and inquired the reason of everything he saw with the most lively curiosity. The next day the number of canoes was greatly augmented, and the Dutch perceived by certain indications that an attack was impending. Accordingly, a shower of stones falls on a sudden upon the ship, the canoes approach nearer, become annoying, and the Dutch to free themselves from them are forced to resort to a discharge of musketry. This island was rightly named Traitors' Island.

It was now the 18th of May, and Lemaire ordered the course to be changed, that the Moluccas might be reached by the north of New Guinea. He probably passed within sight of the Solomon Archipelago, the Admiralty Islands, and the Thousand Islands (Mille Iles), coasting afterwards along New Guinea from 143° to Geelwink Bay. He frequently landed, and gave names to a number of points: the twenty-five islands which form a part of the Admiralty Archipelago, the High Corner, the High Mountain (Hoogberg) — which seems to correspond to a portion of the neighbouring coast of Kornelis-Kinerz Bay — Moa and Arimoa, two islands again seen later on by Tasman, the island to which was given the name of Schouten, but which is now called Mysore and which must not be confounded with some other Schouten Islands situated upon the Coast of Guinea but much farther to the west, and finally the Cape Goede-Hoep, which appears to be Cape Saavedra at the western extremity of Mysore. After sighting the country of Papua, Schouten and Lemaire reached Gilolo, one of the Moluccas, where they received an eager welcome from their compatriots.

When they were thoroughly rested from their fatigues and cured of scurvy, the Dutch went to Batavia, arriving there on the 23rd October, 1616, only thirteen months after quitting the Texel, and having lost only thirteen men during the long voyage. But the Company of the Indies did not at all understand their privileges being infringed upon, and a possibility discovered of reaching the colonies by a way not foreseen in the letters patent which had been granted to the Company at the time of its establishment. The Governor caused the *Concorde* to be seized, and arrested her officers and sailors, whom he sent off to Holland, there to be tried. Poor Lemaire, who had expected a totally different recompense for his toils and fatigues, and for the discoveries which he had made, could not bear up under the blow which had fallen so unexpectedly upon him; he fell ill of grief and died in the latitude of the island of Mauritius. As for Schouten, he appears not to have been molested upon his return to his own country, and to have made several voyages to the Indies, which were not distinguished by any fresh discovery. He was returning to Europe in 1625, when he was forced by bad weather to enter Antongil Bay, upon the east coast of Madagascar, where he died.

Such was the history of this important expedition, which by means of Strait Lemaire opened up a shorter and less dangerous route than that by Magellan’s Strait, an expedition signalized by several discoveries in Oceania, and by a more attentive exploration of points already seen by Spanish or Portuguese navigators. But it is often a matter of difficulty to settle with accuracy to which of these nations the discovery of certain islands, countries, or archipelagos in the neighbourhood of Australia, may be due.

Since we are speaking of the Dutch, we shall put the chronological order of discoveries a little on one side, that we may relate as well as those of Mendana and Quiros, the expeditions of Jan Abel Tasman.

What was the early history of Tasman, by what concurrence of circumstances did he embrace the profession of a sailor, by what means did he acquire the nautical skill and science of which he gave so many proofs, and which conducted him to his important discoveries? From ignorance we cannot answer these questions, all we know of his biography commences with his departure from Batavia on 2nd June, 1639. After passing the Philippines, he would seem during this first voyage to have visited in company with Matthew Quast the Bonin Islands, then known by the fantastic title of “the Gold and Silver Islands.”

In a second expedition, composed of two vessels of which he had the chief command, and which sailed from Batavia on the 14th of August, 1642, he reached the Mauritius on the 5th September, and afterwards sailed to the south-east, seeking for the Australian Continent. On the 24th November in latitude 42° 25’ south, he discovered land, to which he gave the name of Van-Diemen, after the Governor of the Sunda Islands, but which is now with much greater justice called Tasmania. He anchored there in Fredrik

Hendrik Bay, and ascertained that the country was inhabited, although he could not see a single native.

After following this coast for a certain time, he sailed eastwards, with the intention of afterwards making once more for the north, to reach the Solomon Archipelago. On the 13th December, in latitude 42° 10’, he came in sight of a mountainous country which he followed towards the north, until the 18th December, when he cast anchor in a bay; but even the boldest of the savages whom he met with there, did not approach the ship within a stone’s throw. Their voices were rough, their stature tall, their colour brown inclining to yellow, and their black hair, which was nearly as long as that of the Japanese, was worn drawn up to the crown of the head. On the morrow they summoned courage to go on board one of the vessels and carry on traffic by means of barter. Tasman, upon seeing these pacific dispositions, despatched a boat for the purpose of obtaining a more accurate knowledge of the shore. Of the sailors who manned it, three were killed without provocation by the natives, while the others escaped by swimming, and were picked up by the ships’ boats, but by the time they were in readiness to fire upon the assailants, these had disappeared. The spot where this sad event happened, received the name of Assassins’ (Moordenaars) Bay. Tasman, who felt convinced that he could not carry on any intercourse with such fierce people, weighed anchor and sailed up the coast as far as its extreme point, which he named Cape Maria Van-Diemen, in honour of his “lady,” for a legend states that having had the audacity to pretend to the hand of the daughter of the governor of the East Indies, the latter had sent him to sea with two dilapidated ships, the *Heemskerke* and the *Zeechen*.

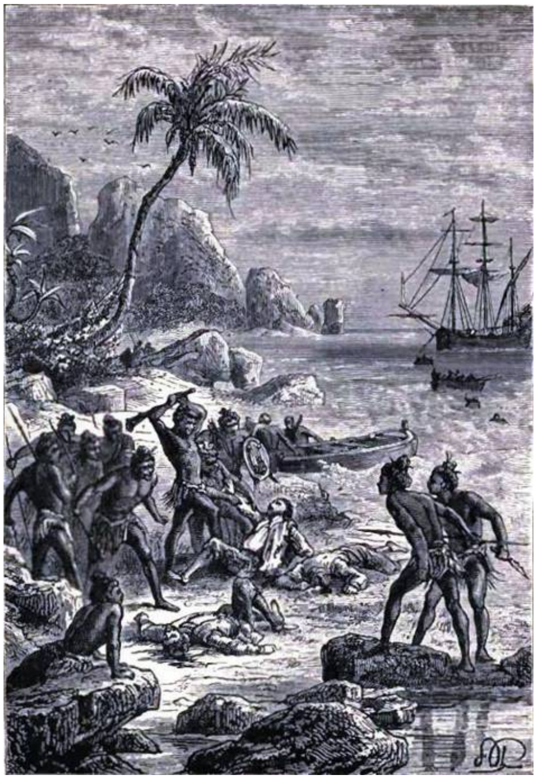

Three were killed by the natives without provocation.

The land thus discovered received the name of Staaten Land, soon changed into that of New Zealand. On the 21st January, 1643, Tasman discovered the islands of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, upon which he found a great quantity of pigs, fowls, and fruit. On the 6th February, the ships entered an archipelago, consisting of a score of islands, which were called Prince William Islands, and after sighting Anthong-Java, Tasman followed the coast of New Guinea from Cape Santa Maria, passed by the various points previously discovered by Lemaire and Schouten, and anchored off Batavia on the 15th June following, after a ten months' voyage.

In a second expedition, Tasman, in obedience to his orders dated 1664, was to visit Van Diemen’s Land, and to make a careful examination of the western coast of New Guinea, as far as 17° south latitude, in order to ascertain whether that island belonged to the Australian Continent. It does not appear that Tasman carried out this programme, but the loss of his journals causes complete uncertainty as to the route which he followed, and the discoveries which he may have made. From this time there is no record of the events which marked the close of his career, nor of the place and date of his death.

From the period of the taking of Malacca by Albuquerque, the Portuguese conceived that a new world extended to the south of Asia. Their ideas were soon shared by the Spaniards, and henceforward a series of voyages were made on the Pacific Ocean, to search for a southern continent, of which the existence appeared geographically necessary to counterbalance the immense extent of the lands already known. Java the Great, designated later by the names of New Holland and Australia, had been seen by the French perhaps, or as is more probable by Saavedra, from 1530 to 1540, and it was sought for by a crowd of navigators, amongst whom we may mention the Portuguese, Serrao and Meneses, and the Spaniards, Saavedra, Hernando de Grijalva, Alvarado, and Inigo Ortiz de Retes, who explored the greater part of the islands to the north of New Guinea, as well as that great island itself. Afterwards come Mendana, Torrès, and Quiros, upon whose deeds we shall pause a little, on account of the importance and authenticity of the discoveries which we owe to them.

Alvaro Mendana de Neyra was nephew to the Governor of Lima, Don Pedro de Castro, who warmly advocated with the home government his nephew’s project of searching for new countries in the Pacific Ocean. Mendana was one-and-twenty when he took the command of two ships and one hundred and twenty-five soldiers and sailors. He sailed from Callao, the port of Lima, on the 19th November, 1567. After sighting the small Island of Jesus, he discovered on the 7th February between 7° and 8° south latitude, the Island of Santa Isabella, where the Spaniards built a brigantine, with which they explored the archipelago of which this island was a part. “The inhabitants,” says the narrative of a companion of Mendana, “are anthropophagi, they devour those whom they can make their prisoners in war, and even without being in open hostility, those whom they can succeed in taking by treachery.” One of the chiefs in the island sent to Mendana as a delicacy, a quarter of a child, but the Spanish commander caused it to be buried in the presence of the natives, who appeared much hurt by an act which they could not understand. The Spaniards explored the Island las Palmas (Palm Island), los Ramos — so named because it was discovered on Palm Sunday — Galley Island, and Buena-Vista, of which the inhabitants, under the appearance of friendship concealed hostile intentions, which were not long in displaying themselves. The same reception awaited the Spaniards at the Island San Dimas, at Sesarga, and at Guadalcanar, upon which ginger was found for the first time. In the return voyage to Santa Isabella, the Spaniards pursued a course which enabled them to discover St. George Island, where they found bats as large as kites. Scarcely had the crew of the brigantine cast anchor in the harbour of Santa Isabella, than they were obliged again to weigh it, for the place was so unhealthy that five soldiers died and a great number of others were taken ill. Mendana stopped at the Island of Guadalcanar, where out of ten men who had landed to fetch water, one negro alone escaped from the attacks of the natives, who were extremely angry at one of their fellows having been carried off by the Spaniards. The punishment was terrible; twenty men were killed and a number of houses burnt. Mendana afterwards visited several islands of the Solomon archipelago, amongst others the Three Maries and San Juan. Upon the latter island, whilst the ships were being repaired and calked, several affrays with the natives occurred, in which some prisoners were made. After this checkered rest, Mendana again put to sea, and visited the islands of San Christoval, Santa Catalina, and Santa Anna. But as by this time the number of invalids was considerable, the provisions and ammunition nearly exhausted, and the rigging become rotten, the flotilla now set out to return to Peru. The separation of the flagship, the discovery of certain islands which it is difficult to identify, and probably of the Sandwich Islands; violent storms, during which the sails were carried away; the sickness caused by the insufficiency and putrefaction of the water and biscuit on board, were all incidents signalizing this long and trying return voyage, which was ended by the arrival of the ships at the port of Colima in California after five months of navigation.

The narrative of Mendana excited no enthusiasm, in spite of the name of Solomon which he gave to the archipelago discovered by him, to make it believed that from thence came the treasures of the Jewish King. Marvellous recitals had no longer any fascination for men glutted with the riches of Peru. Proofs were what they demanded; the smallest nugget of gold, or the least grain of silver would have been more satisfactory to them.

Mendana had twenty-seven years to wait before he was able to organize another expedition, but then his fleet was a large one, it being proposed to found a colony in the island of San Christoval which Alvaro de Mendana had seen during his first voyage. Thus four ships carrying nearly four hundred people sailed from the port of Lima on the 11th April, 1595. Amongst those on board may be named Doña Isabella, wife of Mendana, the three brothers-in-law of the general, and the pilot Pedro Fernandez Quiros, who later on distinguished himself as commander-in-chief of another expedition. The fleet did not finally leave the Peruvian coast, where its equipment had been completed, until the 16th April. At the end of a month’s navigation, not distinguished by any remarkable incident, an island was discovered, which according to custom received the name of the saint whose day it was, and was called Magdalena. Immediately the fleet was surrounded by a crowd of canoes bearing more than four hundred Indians, of fine stature and nearly white, and who while presenting cocoa-nuts and other fruits to the sailors, appeared to entreat them to disembark. The natives no sooner came on board than they began to pilfer, and it was necessary to fire a cannon to get rid of them; a wound which one of the natives received in the fray soon changed their disposition, and a discharge of musketry was the reply to the shower of arrows which they let fly from their boats. Not far from this island three others were discovered, San Pedro, Dominica, and Santa Christina, and the name of *las Marquezas de Mendoça* was given to the group, in honour of the governor of Peru. So friendly had been the intercourse at the beginning, that an Indian woman upon seeing the beautiful fair hair of Doña Isabella de Mendana had begged her by signs to give her a curl of it; but by the fault of the Spaniards the mutual relations speedily became hostile, and so continued until the day when the natives, becoming conscious of the great inferiority of their arms, begged for peace.

On the 5th August the Spanish flotilla again put to sea and made 1200 miles west-north-west. On the 20th August were discovered the St. Bernard, since called Dangerous Islands, and afterwards Queen Charlotte’s Islands, upon which notwithstanding the scarcity of provisions, no landing was made. After Solitary Island — a name which explains its situation — the Santa Cruz archipelago was reached. But at this time, during a storm, the flagship became separated from the fleet, and although search was made several times, no tidings of her were obtained. Fifty canoes, carrying a crowd of natives of a tawny complexion, or of a lustrous black, immediately approached the ships. “All had frizzled hair, black, red, or some other colour (for it was dyed); their teeth also were dyed red; the head was half shaven, the body was naked, except a small veil of fine linen, the face and the arms painted black, glittering and striped with various colours; the neck and limbs loaded with several strings of small beads, of gold, or of black wood, of fishes’ teeth, or of a species of medals made of mother of pearl, or of pearls.” For arms they carried bows, poisoned arrows with sharp points hardened in the fire, or tipped with bone and steeped in the juice of a herb, great stones, heavy wooden swords made of stiff wood, with three harpoon points, each more than a handbreadth long. Slung over their shoulders they had haversacks exceedingly well made out of palm leaves, and filled with biscuits made from certain roots which serve them for food.

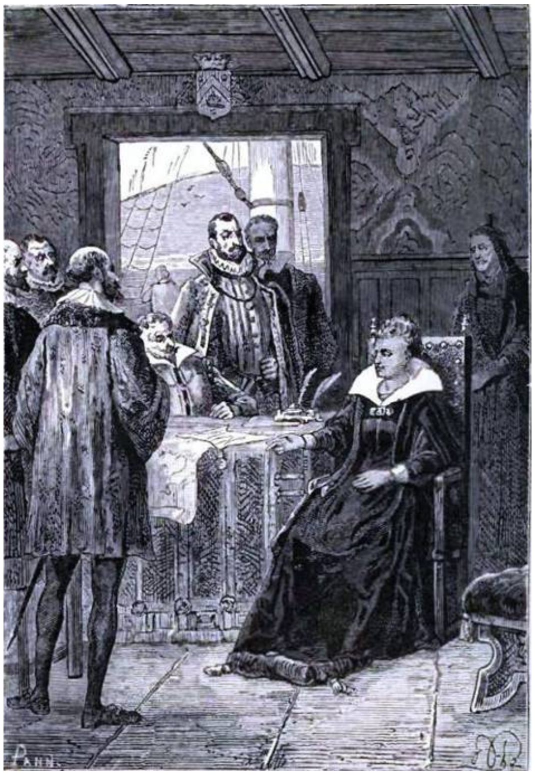

Doña Isabella consults the officers.

At first Mendana thought he recognized in these natives the inhabitants of the islands he was seeking, but he was quickly undeceived. The vessels were received with a shower of arrows, which was the more vexatious because Mendana, seeing that he could not find the Solomon Islands, had determined to establish his colony in this archipelago. At this juncture, discord reigned among the Spaniards; a revolt fomented against the general was almost immediately suppressed, and the guilty were executed. But these sorrowful events and the fatigues of the voyage had so completely undermined the health of the head of the expedition, that he died on the 17th October, after having had time to indicate his wife as his successor in the conduct of the enterprise. After the death of Mendana the hostilities with the natives redoubled, and many of the Spaniards were so exhausted by sickness and hardships, that a score of thoroughly determined natives might easily have gained the mastery over them. To persist in the intention of founding a settlement under such conditions would have been folly; all agreed in this, and the anchor was raised on the 18th November. Doña Isabella de Mendana’s project was to go to Manilla, and there to obtain recruits from amongst the colonists, with whom she would return to found a settlement. She consulted the officers, who all gave their approval in writing; and she found in Quiros a devotion and skill which were speedily to be put to a severe proof. They at once steered away from New Guinea, in order to avoid being entangled amongst the numerous archipelagos surrounding it, and also to enable them sooner to reach the Philippines, which the dilapidated state of the ships rendered necessary. After passing within sight of several islands surrounded by reefs of madrepore, upon which the crews wished to land, a permission which Quiros with great prudence always refused, after having been separated from one of the ships of the squadron, which could not or would not follow, the flotilla arrived at the Ladrone — soon to be called the Marianne — Islands. The Spaniards went on shore several times to buy some provisions; the natives did not desire either their silver or gold, but set the highest value upon iron and all tools made of that metal. The narrative contains here some details upon the veneration shown by the natives towards their ancestors, which are curious enough to warrant our reproducing them verbatim: “They take out the bones from the bodies of their relations, burn the flesh, and mixing the ashes with *tuba*, a wine made from the cocoa palm, swallow them. They weep for the dead every year for a whole week; there are a great number of female mourners, who are to be hired for the purpose. Besides that, all the neighbours come to weep in the house of the deceased; the compliment being returned to them when the turn comes for the feast to take place at their house. These anniversaries are much frequented, all those assisting at them being liberally regaled. They weep all day and drink to intoxication all night. They recite in the midst of tears, the life and deeds of the dead, beginning with the moment of his birth, and dealing with the whole course of his life, recounting his strength, his height, his beauty, in a word, all that can in any way do him honour. If some amusing action occur in the recital, the company begin to laugh as if they would split their sides; then on a sudden they drink and are again drowned in tears. There are sometimes two hundred persons present at these absurd anniversaries.” When the Spanish crew arrived at the Philippines, it was scarcely more than a company of skeletons, emaciated and half dead with hunger. Doña Isabella landed at Manilla on the 11th February, 1596, under a salute from the guns, and was solemnly received in the midst of the troops drawn up under arms. The rest of the crew, fifty having died since the departure from Santa Cruz, were housed and fed at the public expense, and the women all found husbands in Manilla, except four or five who embraced the religious life. As for Doña

Isabella, she was escorted back to Peru some time afterwards by Quiros, who lost no time in submitting to the viceroy a project for a fresh voyage. But Luis de Velasco, who had succeeded Mendoza, referred the navigator to the King of Spain and the Council of the Indies, under the pretext that such a decision would overstep the limits of his authority. Quiros therefore went to Spain and thence to Rome, where he received a kindly welcome from the Pope, who recommended him warmly to Philip III. At length in 1605, after numberless applications and solicitations, he was empowered to fit out at Lima the two vessels which he should judge the most suitable for the investigation of the Australian continent and for continuing the discoveries of Mendana. With two ships and one light vessel, Quiros set out from Callao on the 21st December, 1605. At 3000 miles from Peru he had as yet discovered no land. In latitude 25° south he observed a group of small islands belonging to the Dangerous archipelago. These were the *Convercion de San Pablo*, the *Osnabrugh* of Wallis, and *Decena*, so named because it was the tenth island seen. Although this island was defended by rocks, intercourse was carried on with the natives, whose dwellings were scattered about amongst palm-trees on the sea shore. The natives were strong and well proportioned, and their chief wore on his head a kind of crown made of small black feathers so fine and supple that they might have been taken for silk. His fair hair, which descended to the waist, excited the wonder of the Spaniards, who, not being able to understand how a man with so tawny coloured a face could have such light yellow hair, “chose to think that he was married, and that he wore his wife’s hair.” This singular colour was only due to the habitual use of powdered lime, which burns the hair and causes it to turn yellow.

This island to which Quiros gave the name of Sagittaria, is, according to Fleurieu, Tahiti, one of the principal of the group of Society Islands. On the succeeding days Quiros sighted several other islands, upon which he did not land, and to which he gave names taken from the Calendar, according to a practice which has changed all the native nomenclature of Oceania into a veritable litany. One island visited may be especially noticed; it was named the island of *la Gente Hermosa* on account of the beauty of its inhabitants, and of the fair colour and coquetry of its women, who, as the Spaniards declared, even bore away the palm for grace and attractiveness from their own fellow-countrywomen of Lima, whose beauty is proverbial. This island, according to Quiros, was situated upon the same parallel as Santa Cruz, to which he intended to go. He therefore sailed westward and reached an island called by the natives Taumaco, in 10° south latitude and 240 miles east of Santa Cruz. This must have been one of the Duff Islands, and here Quiros was told that if he directed his course southwards, he would discover a great land, of which the inhabitants were whiter than those whom he had hitherto seen. This information determined him to abandon his scheme of going to Santa Cruz. He steered in a south-westerly direction, and after having sighted several small islands, he arrived on the 1st May, 1606, in a bay more than twenty-four miles broad. He gave to this island the name which it still bears, of Espiritu Santo. It was one of the New Hebrides group. What events happened during the stay of the ships here? The narrative is silent upon this subject, but we know from other sources that the crew mutinied, made Quiros prisoner, and abandoning the second ship and the brigantine, set out on the 11th June to return to America, where they arrived on the 3rd October, 1606, after a nine months' voyage. M. Ed. Charton throws no light upon this incident. He is silent upon the mutiny of the crew, and even throws all the blame of the separation upon the commander of the second vessel, Luis Vaes de Torrès, who abandoned his chief in quitting Espiritu Santo. Now it is known by a letter from Torrès himself to the King of Spain — published by Lord Stanley at the end of his English edition of Antoine de Morga's *History of the Philippines* —

that he remained “fifteen” days waiting for Quiros in the Bay of Saint Philip and Saint James. The officers met in council, resolved to weigh anchor on the 26th June, and to continue the search for the Australian continent. Hindered by bad weather, which prevents him from sailing round Espiritu Santo Island, assailed by the demands of a crew over whom prevails a slight breath of mutiny, Torrès decides to steer to the north-east to reach the Spanish Islands. In 11° 30’ he discovers land, which he imagines must be the commencement of New Guinea. “All this land is part of New Guinea,” says Torrès, “it is peopled by Indians who are not very white, and who go naked, although their middles are covered with the bark of trees... They fight with javelins, bucklers, and certain clubs of stone, the whole adorned with beautiful feathers. All along this land there are other inhabited islands. Upon the whole of this coast there are numerous and vast harbours, with very broad rivers and great plains. Outside these islands stretch reefs and shallows; the islands are between these dangers and the mainland, and a channel runs between. We took possession of these harbours in your Majesty’s name. Having pursued this coast for 900 miles, and seen our latitude decrease from 2½° until we found ourselves in 9°, at this point commenced a shoal of from three to nine fathoms deep, which stretched along the coast to 7½°. Not being able to proceed farther on account of the numerous shallows and powerful currents which we encountered, we decided to alter our course to the south-west, by the deep channel which has been mentioned, as far as about 11°. There is there, from one end to the other, an archipelago of innumerable islands, by which I passed. At the end of the eleventh degree the bottom became deeper. There were some very large islands there, and there appeared to be more of them towards the south; they were inhabited by a black population, very robust and quite naked, bearing for arms, strong and long spears, arrows, and stone clubs roughly fashioned.”

Modern geographers are agreed in recognizing in the localities thus described, that portion of the Australian Coast which ends in York Peninsula, and the extremity of New Guinea recently visited by Captain Moresby. It was known that Torrès had entered the strait which has been named after him, and which divides New Guinea from Cape York; but the very recent exploration of the south-eastern portion of New Guinea, of which the population has been discovered to be of a comparatively light colour and differing much from the Papous, has just furnished an unexpected confirmation of the discoveries of Quiros. It is for this reason that we have dwelt at some length upon them, referring for the purpose to a very learned work of M. E. T. Hamy, which appeared in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*.

It behoves us now to say a few words about some travellers who explored some unfrequented countries, and furnished their contemporaries with more exact knowledge of a world until then almost unknown. The first of these travellers is François Pyrard, of Laval. Having embarked in 1601 on board a St. Malo ship to go to the Indies to trade, he was wrecked in the Maldive Archipelago. These islets or atolls (detached coral reefs,) to the number of at least 12,000, descend into the Indian Ocean from Cape Comorin as far as the equator. The worthy Pyrard relates his shipwreck, the flight of a portion of his companions in captivity in the archipelago, and his long sojourn of seven years upon the Maldive Islands, a stay rendered almost agreeable by the pains which he took to acquire the native language. He had plenty of time to learn the manners, customs, religion, and industries of the inhabitants, as well as to study the productions and climate of the country. Thus his narrative is filled with details of all kinds, and had retained its attractions until recent years, because travellers do not voluntarily frequent this unhealthy archipelago, the isolated situation of which had kept away foreigners and conquerors. Pyrard's narrative therefore, is still instructive and agreeable reading.

In 1607, a fleet was sent to the Maldives by the King of Bengal, in order to carry off the 100 or 120 cannon which the Maldive sovereign owed to the wreck of numerous Portuguese vessels. Pyrard, notwithstanding all the liberty allowed him, and that he had become a landholder, was desirous to behold his beloved Brittany once more. He therefore eagerly embraced this opportunity of quitting the Archipelago with the three companions who out of the whole crew alone remained with him. But the eventful travels of Pyrard were not yet concluded. Taken first to Ceylon, he was carried afterwards to Bengal, and endeavoured to reach Cochin. Before reaching this town he was captured by the Portuguese and carried prisoner to Cochin; he afterwards fell ill and was nursed in the Hospital of Goa which he only quitted to serve for two years as a soldier, at the end of which time he was again thrown into prison, and it was not until 1611, that he was able to revisit the good town of Laval. After so many trials, Pyrard must doubtless have felt the need of repose, and we are justified in imagining, from the silence of history as to the close of his life, that he was privileged at length to find happiness.

While the honest burgess François Pyrard, was, so to speak, in spite of himself, and from having indulged the desire of making a fortune too rapidly, launched into adventures in which he had to pass much of his life, circumstances of a different and romantic kind caused Pietro della Valle to determine upon travelling. Descendant of an ancient and noble family, he is by turns a soldier of the Pope, and a sailor chasing Barbary corsairs. Upon his return to Rome he finds that a rival, profiting by his absence, has taken his place with a young girl whom he was to have married. So great a misfortune demands an heroic remedy, and Della Valle makes a vow of pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre. But if, as saith the proverb, there is no road which does not lead to Rome, so there is no circuit so long as not to lead to Jerusalem, and of this Della Valle was to make proof. He embarks at Venice in 1614, passes thirteen months at Constantinople, reaches Alexandria by sea, afterwards Cairo, and joins a caravan which at length brings him to Jerusalem. But while en route, Delia Valle had no doubt imbibed a taste for a traveller's life, for he visits in succession Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo, and even pushes on as far as the ruins of Babylon. We must believe that Della Valle was marked out as an easy prey to love, for upon his return he becomes enamoured of a young Christian woman of Mardin, of wondrous beauty, whom he marries. One would imagine that here at length is fixed the destiny of this indefatigable traveller. Nothing of the kind. Della Valle contrives to accompany the Shah in his war against the Turks, and to traverse during four consecutive years the provinces of Iran. He quits Ispahan in 1621, loses his wife in the month of December of the same year, causes her to be embalmed, and has her coffin carried about in his train for four years longer, which he devotes to exploring Ormuz, the western coasts of India, the Persian Gulf, Aleppo, and Syria, landing at length at Naples in 1626.

The countries which this singular character visited, urged on as he was by an extraordinary enthusiasm, are described by him in a shrewd, gay, and natural style, and even with some degree of fidelity. But he inaugurates the pleiad of amateur, curious, and commercial travellers. He is the first of that prolific race of tourists who each year encumber geographical literature with numerous volumes, from which the savant finds nothing to glean beyond meagre details.

Tavernier is a specimen of insatiable curiosity. At two-and-twenty he has traversed France, England, the Low Countries, Germany, Switzerland, Poland, Hungary, and Italy. Then when Europe no longer offers any food for his curiosity, he starts for Constantinople, where he remains for a year, and then arrives in Persia, where the opportunity and

Quelque diable, aussi, le poussant,

he sets to work to purchase carpets, stuffs, precious stones, and those thousand trifles of which lovers of curiosities soon became passionately fond, and for which they were ready to pay fabulous sums. The profit which Tavernier realized from his cargo induced him to resume his travels. But like a wise and prudent man, before starting he learnt from a jeweller the art of knowing precious stones. During four successive journeys from 1638 to 1663, he travelled over Persia, the Mogul Empire, the Indies as far as the frontier of China, and the Islands of Sunda. Dazzled by the immense fortune which his traffic had obtained for him, Tavernier would play the lord, and soon saw himself on the verge of ruin, which he hoped to avert by sending one of his nephews to the east with a considerable venture, but instead, his ruin was consummated by this young man, who, judging it best to appropriate the goods which had been confided to him, settled down at Ispahan. Tavernier, who was a well-educated man, made a number of interesting observations upon the history, manners and customs, of the countries which he visited. His narrative certainly contributed to give his contemporaries a much more correct idea of the countries of the east than they previously possessed.

All travellers during the reign of Louis XIV. take the route to the East Indies, whatever may be the end they have in view. Africa is entirely deserted, and if America be the theatre of any real exploration, it is carried out without aid from government.

Whilst Tavernier was accomplishing his last and distant excursions, a distinguished archæologist, Jean de Thévenot, nephew of Melchisedec Thévenot — a learned man to whom we owe an interesting series of travels — journeyed through Europe, and visited Malta, Constantinople, Egypt, Tunis, and Italy. He brought back in 1661 an important collection of medals and monumental inscriptions, recognized nowadays as so important a help to the historian and the philologist. In 1664, he set out anew for the Levant, and visited Persia, Bassorah, Surat, and India, where he saw Masulipatam, Burhampur, Aurungabad, and Golconda. But the fatigues which he had experienced prevented his return to Europe, and he died in Armenia in 1667. The success of his narratives was considerable, and was well deserved by the care and exactitude of a traveller whose scientific attainments in history, geography, and mathematics, far surpassed the average level of his contemporaries.

We must now speak of the amiable Bernier, the “pretty philosopher,” as he was entitled in his polite circle, in which were found Ninon and La Fontaine, Madame de la Sablière, St. Evremont, and Chapelle, without reckoning many other good and gay spirits, refractories from the stiff solemnity which then weighed upon the entourage of Louis XIV. Bernier could not escape from the fashion of travelling. After having taken a rapid survey of Syria and Egypt, he resided for twelve years in India, where his good knowledge of medicine conciliated the favour of Aurung-Zebe, and gave him the opportunity of beholding in detail, and with profit, an empire then in the full bloom of its prosperity.

To the south of Hindostan, Ceylon had more than one surprise in reserve for its explorers. Robert Knox, taken prisoner by the natives, owed to this sad circumstance his long residence in the country and the collection of the first authentic documents relating to the forests and the savage natives of

Ceylon, the Dutch, with a commercial jealousy which they were not singular in evincing, having until now kept secret all the information which had come to light concerning an island of which they were endeavouring to make a colony.

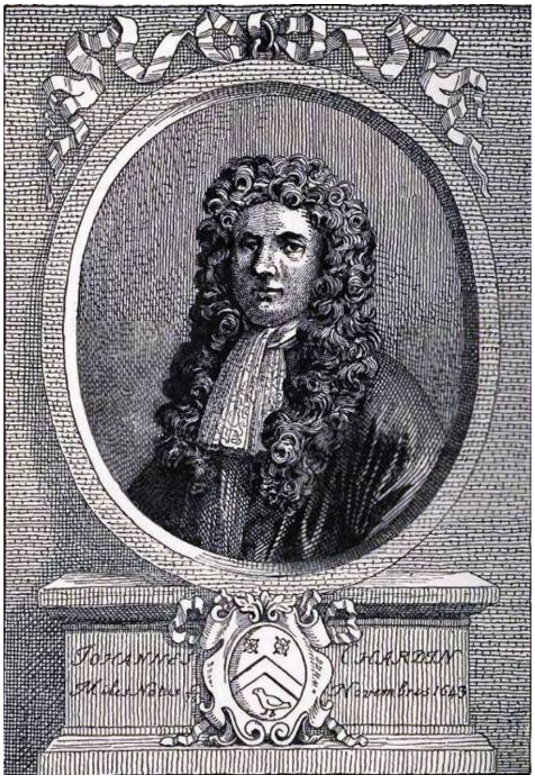

Jean Chardin.
From an old print.

Another merchant, Jean Chardin, the son of a rich Parisian jeweller, jealous of the successes of Tavernier, desired, like him, to make his fortune by trading in diamonds. The countries which attract these merchants are those of which the fame for wealth and prosperity is become proverbial; these are Persia and India, where rich costumes sparkle with jewels and gold, and where there are mines of diamonds of a fabulous size. The moment is well chosen for visiting these countries. Thanks to the Mogul Emperors, civilization and art have been developed; mosques, palaces, temples have been built, and towns have risen suddenly. Their taste — that curious taste, so distinctly characterized, so different from our own, — is displayed in the construction of gigantic edifices, quite as much as in jewellery and goldsmith’s work, and in the manufacture of those costly trifles of which the east was beginning to be passionately fond. Like a wise man, Chardin takes a partner, as good a connoisseur as himself. At first Chardin only traversed Persia in order to reach Ormuz and to embark for the Indies. The following year he returns to Ispahan, and applies himself to learn the language of the country, in order to be able to transact business directly and without any intermediary agent. He has the good fortune to please the Shah, Abbas II. From that time his fortune is made, for it is at once genteel and also the part of a prudent courtier to employ the same purveyor as his sovereign. But Chardin had another merit besides that of making a fortune. He was able to collect so considerable a mass of information concerning the government, manners, creeds, customs, towns, and populations of Persia, that his narrative has remained to our own days the *vade-mecum* of the traveller. This guide is so much the more precious because Chardin took care to engage at Constantinople a clever draughtsman named Grelot, by whom were reproduced the monuments, cities, scenes, costumes, and ceremonies which so well portray what Chardin called, “the every day of a people.”

When Chardin returned to France in 1670, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, with the barbarous persecutions which resulted from it, had chased from their country great numbers of artisans, who, taking refuge in foreign countries enriched them with our arts and manufactures. Chardin, being a protestant, clearly perceived that his religion would hinder him from attaining “to what are termed honours and advancement.” As, to use his own words, “one is not free to believe what one will,” he resolved to return to the Indies “where, without being urged to a change of religion,” he could not fail of attaining an honourable position. Thus liberty of conscience was at that period greater in Persia than in France. Such an assertion on the part of a man who had made the comparison, is but little flattering to the grandson of Henry IV.

This time, however, Chardin did not follow the same route as before. He passed by Smyrna and Constantinople, and from thence, crossing the Black Sea, he landed in the Crimea, in the garb of a religious. Whilst passing through the region of the Caucasus he had the opportunity of studying the Abkasians and Circassians. He afterwards penetrated into Mingrelia, where he was robbed of his goods and papers, and of a portion of the jewels which he was taking back to Europe. He could not have escaped himself had it not been for the devotion to him of the theatines, from whom he had received hospitality, but he escaped only to fall into the hands of the Turks, who, in their turn, accepted a ransom for him. After further misadventures he arrived at Tiflis on the 17th of December, 1672, and as Georgia was then governed by a prince who was a tributary of the Shah of Persia, it was easy for Chardin to reach Erivan, Tauriz, and finally Ispahan.

After a stay of four years in Persia, and a concluding journey to India, during which he realized a considerable fortune, Chardin returned to Europe and settled in England, his own country on account of his religion, being forbidden ground to him.

The journal of his travels forms a large work, in which everything that concerns Persia is especially developed. The long stay he made in the country and his intimate acquaintance with the highest personages of the state enabled him to collect numerous and authentic documents. It may fairly be said that in this way Persia was better known in the seventeenth century than it was 100 years later.

The countries which Chardin had just explored were visited again some years later by a Dutch painter, Cornelius de Bruyn, or Le Brun. The great value of his work consists in the beauty and accuracy of the drawings which illustrate it, for as far as the text is concerned, it contains nothing which was not known before, except in what relates to the Samoyedes, whom he was the first to visit.

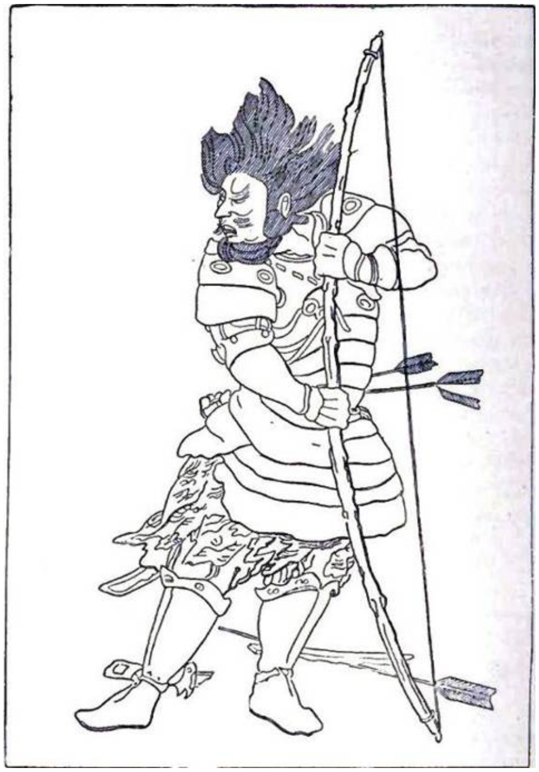

Japanese Warrior.
From an old print.

We must now speak of the Westphalian, Kæmpfer, almost a naturalized Swede in consequence of his long sojourn in Scandinavian countries. He refused the brilliant position which was there offered him in order to accompany as secretary, an ambassador who was going to Moscow. He was thus enabled to see the principal cities of Russia, a country which at that period had scarcely entered upon the path of western civilization; afterwards he went to Persia, where he quitted the Ambassador Fabricius, in order to enter the service of the Dutch Company of the Indies, and to continue his travels. He thus visited in the first place Persepolis, Shiraz, Ormuz upon the Persian Gulf, where he was extremely ill, and whence he embarked in 1688 for the East Indies. Arabia Felix, India, the Malabar Coast, Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, and Japan were afterwards all visited by him. The object of these journeys was exclusively scientific. Kæmpfer was a physician, but was more especially devoted to the various branches of Natural History, and collected, described, drew, or dried, a considerable number of plants then unknown in Europe, gave new information upon their use in medicine or manufactures, and collected an immense herbarium, which is now preserved with the greater part of his manuscripts in the British Museum in London. But the most interesting portion of his narrative, now-a-days indeed quite obsolete and very incomplete since the country has been opened up to our scientific men, — was for a long time that relating to Japan. He had contrived to procure books treating of the history, literature, and learning of the country, when he had failed in obtaining from certain personages to whom he had rendered himself very acceptable, information which was not usually imparted to foreigners.

To conclude, if all the travellers of whom we have just spoken are not strictly speaking discoverers, if they do not explore countries unknown before, they all have, in various degrees and according to their ability or their studies, the merit of having rendered the countries which they visited better known. Besides they were able to banish to the domain of fable, many of the tales which others less learned had naïvely accepted, and which had for long become so completely public property that nobody dreamed of disputing them.

Thanks to these travellers, something is known of the history of the east, the migrations of nations began to be dimly suspected, and accounts to be given of the changes in those great empires of which the very existence had been long problematical.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GREAT CORSAIR.

William Dampier; or a Sea-King of the Seventeenth Century.

William Dampier was born in 1612 at East Coker, and by the death of his parents was from his childhood left to his own control. Not possessing any great taste for study, he preferred running wild in the woods, and fighting with his companions, to remaining in his place on the school benches. While still young he was sent to sea as cabin-boy on board merchant ships. After a voyage to Newfoundland and a campaign in the East Indies, he took service in the Naval Marine, and being wounded in a battle, returned to Greenwich to be nursed. Free from any prejudices, Dampier forgot his engagement when he left the Military Hospital, and started for Jamaica in the position of manager of a plantation. It did not require a long trial to discover that this occupation was not to his taste. So he abandoned his negroes at the end of six months, and went on board a ship bound for the Bay of Campeachy, where he worked for three years at gathering in woods for dyeing.

At the end of that period he is again found in London, but the laws and the officers charged with compelling their observance are too strict for his comfort. He goes back to Jamaica, where he speedily puts himself into communication with those famous buccaneers and corsairs, who at that time did so much harm to the Spaniards.

These English or French adventurers, established in the Island of Tortuga, off the coast of San Domingo, had sworn implacable hatred to Spain. Their ravages were not confined to the Gulf of Mexico: they crossed the Isthmus of Panama and devastated the coast of the Pacific Ocean from the Strait of Magellan to California. Terror exaggerated the exploits of these pirates, which however presented something of the marvellous.

It was amongst these adventurers, then commanded by Harris, Sawkins, and Shays, that Dampier enrolled himself. In 1680 we find him in Darien, where he pillages Santa Maria, endeavours in vain to surprise Panama, and with his companions, on board of some wretched canoes stolen from the Indians, captures eight vessels well armed, which were at anchor not far from the town. In this affair the losses of the corsairs are so great in the fight, and the spoil is so poor, that they separate from each other. Some go back to the Gulf of Mexico, while others establish themselves upon the island of Juan Fernandez, whence shortly after they attack Arica. But here again they were so roughly handled that a new secession takes place, and Dampier is sent to Virginia, where his captain hoped to make some recruits. There Captain Cook was fitting out a vessel, with the intention of reaching the Pacific by the Strait of Magellan, and Dampier joins the expedition. It begins by privateering upon the African coast, in the Cape de Verd Islands, at Sierra Leone, and in the River Scherborough, for this is the route habitually taken by the ships going to South America. In 36° south latitude, Dampier, who notes in his journal every interesting fact, remarks that the sea is become white or rather pale, but of this he cannot explain the reason, which he might easily have done had he made use of the microscope. The Sebaldine Islands are passed without incident, the Strait of Le Maire is traversed, Cape Horn is doubled on the 6th February, 1684, and as soon as he can escape from the storms which usually assail ships entering the Pacific, Captain Cook arrives at the island of Juan Fernandez, where he hopes to revictual. Dampier wondered if he would find a Nicaraguan Indian there, who had been left behind in 1680 by Captain Sharp. “This Indian had remained alone upon the island for more than three years. He had been in the woods hunting goats when the English captain had ordered his men to re-embark, and they had set sail without perceiving his absence. He had only his gun and his knife, with a small horn of powder and a little lead; when his powder and lead were exhausted he had contrived to saw the barrel of his gun into small pieces with his knife, and out of them to make harpoons, spears, fish hooks and a long knife. With these instruments he obtained all the supplies which the island afforded: goats and fish. At the distance of half a mile from the sea, he had a small hut covered with goat skins. He had no clothes left, but an animal's skin covered his loins." We have dwelt at some length upon this involuntary hermit because he served Daniel de Foe as the original of his "Robinson Crusoe," a romance which has formed the delight of every child.

We shall not relate minutely all the expeditions in which Dampier participated. Suffice it to mention that in this campaign he visited the Gallapagos Islands. In 1686, Dampier was serving on board of Captain Swan's ship, who, seeing that the greater part of his enterprises failed, went to the East Indies, where the Spaniards were less upon their guard, and where the corsairs reckoned upon seizing the Manilla galleon. But when our adventurers arrived at Guaham, they had only three days' provisions, and the sailors had plotted if the voyage should be prolonged, to eat in turn all those who had declared themselves in favour of the voyage, and to begin with the captain who had proposed it. Dampier's turn would have come next. "Thus it came to pass," says he very humourously, "that after having cast anchor at Guaham, Swan embraced him and said: 'Ah Dampier, you would have made them but a sorry meal.' He was right," he adds, "for I was as thin and lean, as he was fat and plump." Mindanao, Manilla, certain parts of the Chinese coasts, the Moluccas, New Holland, and the Nicobar Islands, were the places visited and plundered by Dampier in this campaign. In the last-named archipelago he became separated from his companions, and was discovered half dead upon the coast of Sumatra.

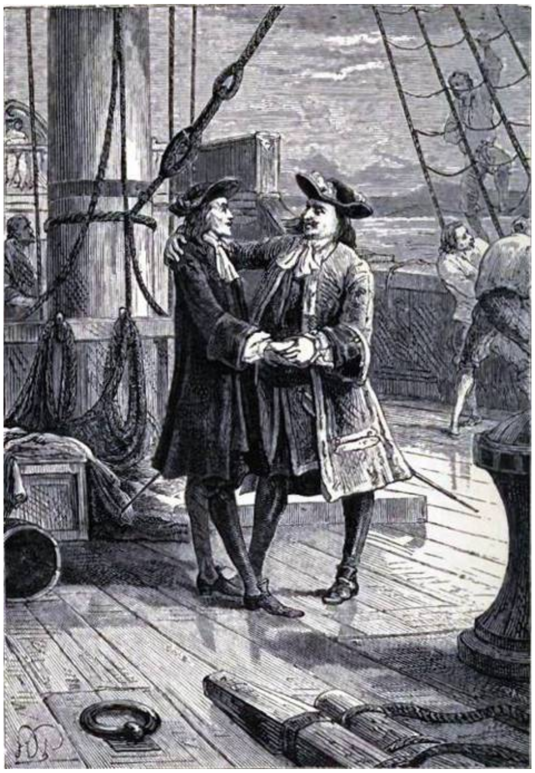

“Ah! Dampier, you would have afforded them but a sorry meal.”

During this voyage, Dampier had discovered several hitherto unknown islands, and especially the Baschi group. Like the thorough adventurer he was, immediately he recovered his health he travelled over the south of Asia, Malacca, Tonkin, Madras, and Bencoolen, where he enrolled himself as an artilleryman in the English service. Five months afterwards he deserted and returned to London. The narrative of his adventures and his privateering obtained for him a certain amount of sympathy amongst the higher classes, and he was presented to the Earl of Oxford, Lord High

Admiral. He speedily received the command of the ship *Roebuck* to attempt a voyage of discovery in the seas which he had already explored. He left England on the 14th January, 1699, with the intention of passing through the Strait of Magellan, or of making the tour of Tierra del Fuego, so as to commence his discoveries on the coasts of the Pacific, which had hitherto received the visits of a comparatively small number of travellers. After crossing the line on the 10th March, he sailed for Brazil, where the ship was revictualled. Far from being able again to descend the coast of Patagonia, he beheld himself driven by the wind to forty-eight miles south of the Cape of Good Hope, whence he steered east-south-east towards New Holland, a long passage which was not signalized by any adventure. On the 1st August, Dampier saw land, and at once sought for a harbour in which to land. Five days later he entered the Bay of Sea-Dogs upon the western coast of Australia; but he only found there a sterile soil, and met with neither water nor vegetation. Until the 31st August, he sailed along this coast without discovering what he sought. Once when he landed, he had a slight skirmish with some of the inhabitants, who seemed to be very thinly scattered over the country. Their chief was a young man of middle height, but quick and vigilant; his eyes were surrounded by a single ring of white paint, while a stripe of the same colour descended from the top of his forehead to the end of his nose; his chest and arms were likewise striped with white. His companions were black, fierce in aspect, their hair woolly, and in shape they were tall and slender.

For five weeks Dampier hovered near land, and found neither water nor provisions; however, he would not give in, and intended to continue to ascend the coast northwards, but the shallows which he incessantly encountered, and the monsoon from the north-west which was soon due, obliged him to give up the enterprise, after having discovered more than 900 miles of the Australian continent. He afterwards steered towards Timor, where he intended to repose and recruit his crew, exhausted by the long voyage. But he knew little of these parts, and his charts were quite insufficient. He was therefore obliged to make a reconnaissance of it, as if the Dutch had not already been long settled there. Thus he discovered a passage between Timor and Anamabao, in a locality in which his map only indicated a bay. The arrival of Dampier in a port known only to themselves, astonished and greatly displeased the Dutch. They imagined that the English could only have reached it by means of charts taken on board a ship of their own. However, in the end they recovered from their fright and received the strangers with kindness.

Although the precursors of the monsoon were making themselves felt, Dampier again put to sea, and steered towards the western coast of New Guinea, where he arrived on the 4th February, 1700, near to Cape Maho of the Dutch. Amongst the things which struck him, Dampier notices the prodigious quantities of a species of pigeon, bats of extraordinary size, and scallops, a kind of shell fish, of which the empty shell weighed as much as 258 lbs. On the 7th of February he approaches King William’s Island and runs to the east, where he soon sights the Cape of Good Hope of Schouten, and the island named after that navigator. On the 24th the crew witnessed a curious spectacle: “Two fish, which had accompanied the vessel for five or six days, perceived a great sea serpent, and began to pursue it. They were about the shape and size of mackerel, but yellow and green in colour. The serpent, who fled from them with great swiftness, carried his head out of the water, and one of them attempted to seize his tail. As soon as he turned round, the first fish remained in the rear, and the other took his place. They retained their wind for a long time, always heedful to defend themselves by flight, until they were lost to view.”

On the 25th, Dampier gave the name of Saint Matthias to a mountainous island, thirty miles long, situated above and to the east of the Admiralty Islands. Further on at the distance of twenty-one or twenty-four miles, he discovered another island, which received the name of Squally Island, on account of violent whirlwinds which prevented him from landing upon it. Dampier believed himself to be on the coast of New Guinea, while he was in reality sailing along that of New Ireland. He endeavoured to land there, but he was surrounded by canoes carrying more than 200 natives, and the shore was covered by a large crowd. Seeing that it would be imprudent to send a boat on shore, Dampier ordered the ship to be put about. Scarcely was the order given, when the ship was assailed by showers of stones, which the natives hurled from a machine of which Dampier could not discover the shape, but which caused the name of Slingers’ Bay to be given to this locality. A single discharge of cannon stupefied the natives, and put an end to hostilities. A little further on, at some distance from the coast of New Ireland, the English discover the Islands of Denis and St. John. Dampier is the first to pass through the strait which separates New Ireland from New Britain, and discovers Vulcan, Crown, G. Rook, Long Reach and Burning Islands.

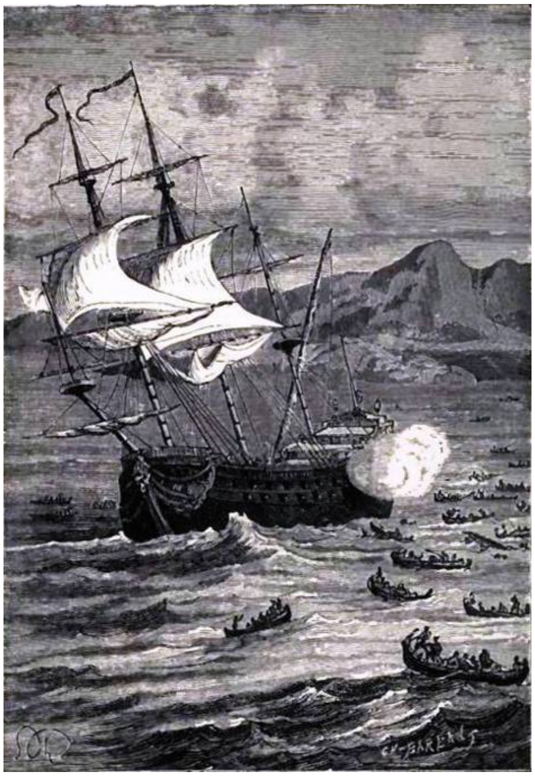

Battle in Slingers’ Bay.

After this long cruise, distinguished by important discoveries, Dampier again steered towards the west, reached Missory Island, and at length arrived at the Island of Ceram, one of the Moluccas, where he made a somewhat long stay. He went afterwards to Borneo, passed through the Strait of Macassar, and on the 23rd of June anchored at Batavia, in the Island of Java. He remained there until the 17th of October, when he set out for Europe. On arriving at the Island of Ascension on the 23rd of February, 1701, his vessel had so considerable a leak that it was impossible to stop it. It was necessary to run the ship aground and to put the crew and cargo on shore. Happily there was no want of water, turtles, goats, and land-crabs, which prevented any fear of dying of hunger before some ship should call at the island, and transport the shipwrecked sailors to their country. For this they had not long to wait, for on the 2nd of April an English vessel took them on board and carried them to England. We shall have occasion again to speak of Dampier with relation to the voyages of Wood Rodgers.

II.

THE POLE AND AMERICA.

Hudson and Baffin — Champlain and La Sale — The English upon the coast of the Atlantic — The Spaniards in South America — Summary of the information acquired at the close of the 17th century — The measure of the terrestrial degree — Progress of cartography — Inauguration of Mathematical Geography.

Although the attempts to find a passage by the north-west had been abandoned by the English for twenty years, they had not, however, given up the idea of seeking by that way, for a passage which was only to be discovered in our own days, and of which the absolute impracticability was then to be ascertained. A clever sailor, Henry Hudson, of whom Ellis says, “that never did any one better understand the seafaring profession, that his courage was equal to any emergency, and that his application was indefatigable,” concluded an agreement with a company of merchants to search for the passage by the north-west. On the 1st of May, 1607, he sailed from Gravesend in the *Hopewell*, a craft about the size of one of the smallest of modern collier brigs, and having on board a crew of twelve men; and on the 13th of June, reached the eastern coast of Greenland at 73°, and gave it a name answering to the hopes he entertained, in calling it Cape Hold with Hope. The weather here was finer and less cold than it had been ten degrees southwards. By the 27th of June, Hudson had advanced 5° more to the north, but on the 2nd of July, by one of the sudden changes which so frequently occur in those countries, the cold became severe. The sea, however, remained free, the air was still, and drift wood floated about in large quantity. On the 14th of the same month, in 33° 23’, the master’s mate and the boatswain of the vessel landed upon a shore which formed the northern part of Spitzbergen. Traces of musk oxen, and foxes, great abundance of aquatic birds, two streams of fresh water, one of them being warm, proved to our navigators that it was possible to live in these extreme latitudes at this period of the year. Hudson, who had re-embarked without delay, found himself arrested at the height of 82°, by thick pack ice, which he endeavoured in vain to penetrate or sail round. He was compelled to return to England, where he arrived on September 15th, after having discovered an island, which is probably that of Jan Mayen. The route followed in this first voyage having had no result towards the north, Hudson would try another, and accordingly set sail on April 21st in the following year, and advanced between Spitzbergen and Nova Zembla; but he could only follow for a certain distance the coast of that vast land, without being able to attain as high an elevation as he had wished. The failure of this second attempt was more complete than that of the voyage of 1607. In consequence, the English Company, which had defrayed the expenses of both attempts, declined to proceed further. This was doubtless the reason which decided Hudson to take service in Holland.

The Company of Amsterdam gave him, in 1609, the command of a vessel, with which he set sail from the Texel at the beginning of the year. Having doubled the North Cape, he advanced along the coasts of Nova Zembla; but his crew, composed of English and Dutch, who had made voyages to the

East Indies, were soon disheartened by the cold and ice. Hudson found himself forced to change his route, and to propose to his sailors, who were in open mutiny, to seek for a passage, either by Davis’ Strait, or the coasts of Virginia, where, according to the information of Captain Smith, who had frequently visited them, an outlet must surely be found. The choice of this crew, little accustomed to discipline, could not be doubtful. In order not to render the outlay of the Company completely abortive, Hudson was obliged to make for the Faröe Islands, to descend southward as low as 44°, and to search on the coast of America for the strait, of the existence of which he had been assured. On July 18th, he disembarked on the continent, in order to replace his foremast, which had been broken in a storm; and he took the opportunity of bartering furs with the natives. But his undisciplined sailors, having by their exactions roused the indignation of the poor and peaceable natives, compelled him again to set sail. He continued to follow the coast until August 3rd, and then landed a second time. At 40° 30’, he discovered a great bay which he explored in a canoe for more than 150 miles. In the meantime, his provisions began to run short, and it was impossible to procure supplies on land. The crew, which appears to have imposed its wishes on its captain during this whole voyage, assembled; some proposed to winter in Newfoundland, in order to resume the search for the passage in the following year; others wished to make for Ireland. This latter proposition was adopted; but when they approached the shores of Great Britain, the land proved so attractive to his men, that Hudson was obliged, on November 7th, to cast anchor at Dartmouth.

The following year, 1610, notwithstanding all the mortifications which he had experienced, Hudson tried to renew his engagement with the Dutch company. But the terms which they named as the price of their concurrence compelled him to renounce the project, and induced him to submit to the requirements of the English Company. This company imposed on Hudson as a condition, that he should carry on board, rather as an assistant than as a subordinate, a clever seaman, named Coleburne, in whom they had full confidence. It is easy to understand how mortifying this condition was to Hudson. Accordingly, he took the earliest opportunity of ridding himself of the superintendent who had been imposed upon him. He had not yet left the Thames when he sent Coleburne back to shore with a letter for the Company, in which he endeavoured to palliate and justify this certainly very strange proceeding.

Towards the end of May, when the ship had cast anchor in one of the ports of the island, the crew formed on the subject of Coleburne, its first conspiracy, which was repressed without difficulty, and when Hudson quitted the island on June 1st, he had re-established his authority. After having passed Frobisher’s Strait, he sighted the land of Desolation of Davis, entered the strait which has received his name, and speedily penetrated into a wide bay, the entire western coast of which he examined until the beginning of September. At this epoch, one of the inferior officers, continuing to excite revolt against his chief, was superseded; but this act of justice only exasperated the sailors. In the early part of November, Hudson, having arrived at the extremity of the bay, sought for an appropriate spot to winter in, and having soon found one, drew up the ship on dry land. It is difficult to understand such a resolution. On the one hand, Hudson had left England with provisions for six months only, which had already been largely reduced, and he could scarcely reckon, considering the barrenness of the country, upon procuring a further supply of nourishment; on the other, the crew had exhibited such numerous signs of mutiny, that he could hardly rely upon its discipline and good will. Nevertheless, although the English were often obliged to content themselves with scanty rations, they did not, owing to the arrival of great numbers of birds, pass a very distressing winter. But, on the return of spring, as soon as the ship was prepared to resume her route to England, Hudson found that his fate was decided. He made his arrangements accordingly, distributed to each his share of biscuit, paid the wages due, and awaited the course of events. He had not long to wait. The conspirators seized their captain, his son, a volunteer, the carpenter, and five sailors, put them on board a boat, without arms, provisions, or instruments, and abandoned them to the mercy of the ocean. The culprits reached England again, but not all; two were killed in an encounter with the Indians, another died of sickness, while the others were sorely tried by famine. Eventually, no prosecution was commenced against them. Only, the Company, in 1674, procured employment, on board a vessel, for the son of Henry Hudson, “lost in the discovery of the North-west,” the son being entirely destitute of resources.

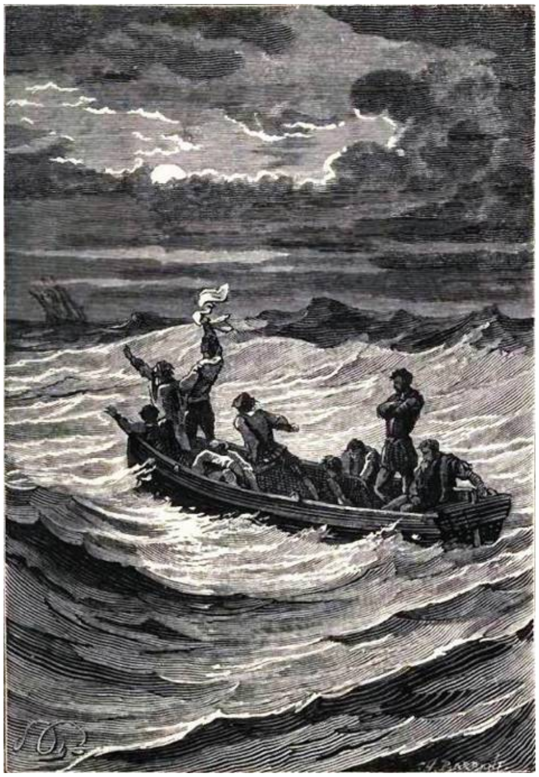

Hudson abandoned by his crew.

The expeditions of Hudson were followed by those of Button and of Gibbons, to whom we owe, if not new discoveries, important observations on the tides, the variation of the weather and the temperature, and on a number of natural phenomena.

In 1615, the English Company entrusted to Byleth, who had taken part in the last voyages, the command of a vessel of fifty tons. Her name, the *Discovery*, was of good augury. She carried, as pilot, the famous William Baffin, whose renown has eclipsed that of his captain. Setting sail from England on April 13th, the English explorers sighted Cape Farewell by the 6th of May, passed from the Island of Desolation to the Savage Islands, where they met with a great number of natives, and ascended north-westward as high as 64°. On July 10th, land appeared on the starboard, and the tide flowed from the north; from which they conceived so much hope of the passage sought for, that they gave to the cape, discovered on this spot, the name of Comfort. It was probably Cape Walsingham, for they ascertained, after doubling it, that the land inclined towards the north-east, and the east. It was at the entry of Davis' Strait, that their discoveries came to an end for this year. They returned to Plymouth on September 9th, without having lost a single man.

So strong were the hopes entertained by Byleth and Baffin, that they obtained permission to put to sea again in the same vessel the following year. On May 14th, 1616, after a voyage in which nothing worthy of remark occurred, the two captains penetrated into Davis' Strait, sighted Cape Henderson's Hope, the extreme point formerly reached by Davis, and ascended as high as 72° 40' to the Women's Island, thus named after some Esquimaux females whom they met with. On June 12th, Byleth and Baffin were forced by the ice to enter a bay on the coast. Some Esquimaux brought them a great quantity of horns, without doubt tusks of walruses, or horns of musk oxen; from which they named the bay Horn Sound. After remaining some days in this place, they were able to put to sea again. On setting out from 75° 40’, they encountered a vast expanse of water free from ice, and penetrated, without much danger, beyond the 78° of latitude, to the entrance of the strait, which prolonged northwards the immense bay which they had just traversed, and which received the name of Baffin. Then turning to the west, and afterwards to the south-west, Byleth and Baffin discovered the Carey Islands, Jones Strait, Coburg Island, and Lancaster Strait, and afterwards they descended along the entire western shore of Baffin’s Bay as far as Cumberland Land. Despairing then of being able to carry his discoveries further, Byleth, who had several men among his crew afflicted with scurvy, found himself obliged to return to the shores of England, where he disembarked at Dover, on August 30th.

If this expedition terminated again in failure, in the sense that the north-west passage was not discovered, the results obtained were nevertheless considerable. Byleth and Baffin had prodigiously increased the knowledge of the seas and coasts in the quarters of Greenland. The captain and the pilot, in writing to the Director of the Company, assured him that the bay which they had visited was an excellent spot for fishing, in which thousands of whales, seals, and walruses, disported themselves. The event could not be long in amply proving the correctness of this information.

Let us now descend again upon the coast of America, as far as Canada, and see what had happened since the time of Jacques Cartier. This latter, we may remember, had made an attempt at colonization, which had not produced any important results. Nevertheless, some Frenchmen had remained in the country, had married there, and founded families of colonists. From time to time, they received reinforcements brought by fishing vessels from Dieppe or St. Malo. But it was difficult to establish a current of emigration. It was under these circumstances that a gentleman, named Samuel de Champlain, a veteran of the wars of Henry IV. and who, for two years and a half, had frequented the East Indies, was engaged by the Commander of Chastes with the Sieur de Pontgravé, to continue the discoveries of Jacques Cartier, and to choose the situations most favourable for the establishment of towns and centres of population. This is not the place for us to consider the manner in which Champlain understood the business of a colonizer, nor his great services, which might well entitle him to be called the father of Canada. We will, therefore, advisedly leave this aspect of his undertaking, not the least brilliant, in order simply to occupy ourselves with the discoveries which he effected in the interior of the continent.

Setting sail from Honfleur, on March 15th, 1603, the two chiefs of the enterprise first ascended the St. Lawrence, as far as the harbour of Tadoussac, 240 miles from its mouth. They were welcomed by the populations, which had, however, “neither faith, nor law, and lived without God, and without religion, like brute beasts.” At this place they quitted their ships, which could not have advanced further without danger, and reached in a boat the Fall of St. Louis, where Jacques Cartier had been stopped; they even penetrated a little into the interior, and then returned to France, where Champlain printed a narrative of the voyage for the king.

Henry IV. resolved to continue the enterprise. In the meantime M. de Chastes having died, his privilege was transferred to M. de Monts, with the title of Vice-admiral and Governor of Acadia. Champlain accompanied M. de Monts to Canada, and passed three whole years, whether in aiding by his counsels and his exertions the efforts of colonization, or in exploring the coasts of Acadia, the bearings of which he took beyond Cape Cod, or in making excursions into the interior and visiting the savage tribes which it was important to conciliate. In 1607, after a new voyage to France to recruit colonists, Champlain returned again to New France, and founded, in 1608, a town which was to become Quebec. The following year was devoted to again ascending the St. Lawrence, and ascertaining its course. On board of a pirogue, with two companions only, Champlain penetrated, with some Algonquins, to the Iroquois, and remained conqueror in a great battle fought on the borders of a lake which has received his name; he then descended the river Richelieu, as far as the St. Lawrence. In 1610, he made a fresh incursion into the territory of the Iroquois, at the head of his allies, the Algonquins, whom he had the greatest possible difficulty in making observe the European discipline. In this campaign he employed instruments of warfare which greatly astonished the savages, and easily secured him the victory. For the attack of a village, he constructed a cavalier of wood, which 200 of the most powerful men “carried before this village to within a pike’s length, and displayed three arquebusiers well protected from the arrows and stones which might be shot or launched at them.” A little later, we see him exploring the river Ottawa, and advancing, in the north of the continent, to within 225 miles of Hudson’s Bay. After having fortified Montreal, in 1615, he twice ascended the Ottawa, explored Lake Huron, and arrived by land at Lake Ontario, which he crossed.

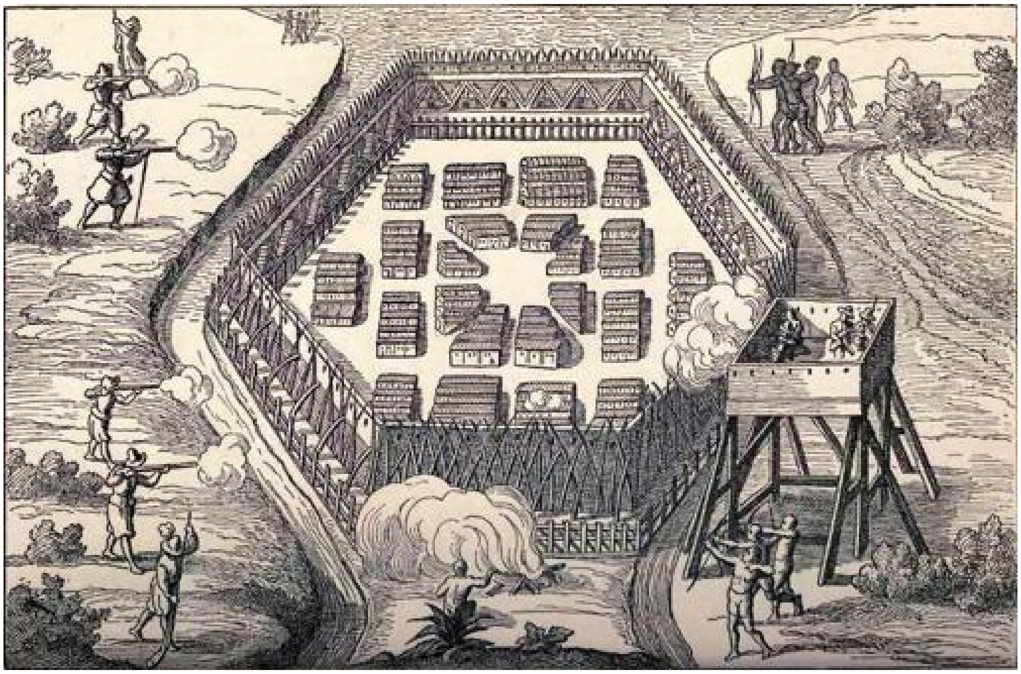

Siege of a village by Champlain.

It is very difficult to divide into two parts a life so occupied as Champlain’s. All his excursions, all his reconnaissances, had but one object, the development of the work to which he had consecrated his existence. Thus detached from what gives them their interest, they appear to us unimportant; and yet if the colonial policy of Louis XIV. and his successor had been different, we should possess in America a colony which assuredly would not yield in prosperity to the United States. Notwithstanding our abandonment, Canada has preserved a fervent love for the mother country.

We must now leap over a period of forty years, to arrive at Robert Cavelier de la Sale. During this time, the French establishments have acquired some importance in Canada, and have extended themselves over a great part of

North America. Our hunters and trappers scour the woods, and bring, every year, with their load of furs, new information respecting the interior of the continent. In this latter task they are powerfully seconded by the missionaries, in the first rank of whom we must place Father Marquette, whom the extent of his voyages on the great lakes and as far as the Mississippi marks out for special acknowledgment. Two men, besides, deserve to be mentioned for the encouragements and facilities which they afforded to the explorers, viz. M. de Frontenac, Governor of New France, and Talon, intendant of justice and police. In 1678, there arrived in Canada, without any settled purpose, a young man named Cavelier de la Sale. “He was born at Rouen,” says Father Charlevoix, “of a family in easy circumstances; but having passed some years with the Jesuits, he had had no share in the inheritance of his parents. He had a cultivated mind, he wished to distinguish himself, and he felt within himself sufficient genius and courage to ensure success. In reality, he was not deficient in resolution to enter upon, nor in perseverance to follow up, an undertaking, nor in firmness in contending against obstacles, nor in resource to repair his losses; but he knew not how to make himself loved, nor how to manage those of whom he stood in need, and when he had attained authority, he exercised it with harshness and arrogance. With such defects he could not be happy, and in fact he was not.”

Father Charlevoix’s portrait appears to us somewhat too black, and he does not seem to estimate at its true value the great discovery which we owe to Cavelier de la Sale; a discovery, which has nothing like it, we do not say equal to it, except that of the river Amazon, by Orellana, in the 16th century, and that of the Congo, by Stanley, in the 19th. However this may be, no sooner had he arrived in the country, than he set himself, with extraordinary application, to study the native idioms, and to associate with the savages in order to render himself familiar with their manners and habits. At the same time he gathered from the trappers a mass of information on the situation of the rivers and lakes. He communicated his projects of exploration to M. de Frontenac, who encouraged him, and gave him the command of a fort constructed at the outlet of the lake into the St. Lawrence. In the meantime, one Jolyet arrived at Quebec. He brought the news that in company with Father Marquette and four other persons, he had reached a great river called the Mississippi, flowing towards the south. Cavelier de la Sale very soon understood what advantage might be derived from an artery of this importance, especially if the Mississippi had, as he believed, its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico. By the lakes and the Illinois, an affluent of the Mississippi, it was easy to effect a communication between the St. Lawrence, and the Sea of the Antilles. What marvellous profit would France derive from this discovery! La Sale explained the project which he had conceived to the Count of Frontenac, and obtained from him very pressing letters of recommendation to the Minister of Marine. On arriving in France, La Sale learned the death of Colbert; but he remitted to his son, the Marquis of Seignelay, who had succeeded him, the despatches of which he was the bearer. This project, which appeared to rest upon solid foundations, could not fail to please a young minister. Accordingly, Seignelay presented La Sale to the king, who caused letters of nobility to be prepared for him, granted him the Seignory of Catarocouy, and the government of the fort which he had built, with the monopoly of commerce in the countries which he might discover.

La Sale had also found means to procure the patronage of the Prince de Conti, who asked him to take with him the Chevalier Tonti, son of the inventor of the Tontine, in whom he felt an interest. He was for La Sale a precious acquisition. Tonti, who had made a campaign in Sicily, where his hand had been carried off by the explosion of a grenade, was a brave and skilful officer, who always showed himself extremely devoted.

La Sale and Tonti embarked at Rochelle, on July 14th, 1678, carrying with them about thirty men, workmen and soldiers, and a Recollet (monk), Father Hennepin, who accompanied them in all their voyages.

Then La Sale, being conscious that the execution of his project required more considerable resources than those which were at his disposal, constructed a boat upon the Lake Erie, and devoted a whole year to scouring the country, visiting the Indians, and carrying on an active trade in furs, which he stored in his fort of Niagara, while Tonti pursued the same course in other directions. At length, towards the middle of August, of the year 1679, his boat, the *Griffon*, being prepared for sailing, he embarked on the Lake Erie, with thirty men, and three Fathers, Recollets, for Machillimackinac. In crossing the lakes St. Clair and Huron, he experienced a violent storm, which caused the desertion of some of his people, whom, however, Tonti brought back to him. La Sale arrived at Machillimackinac, and very soon entered the Green Bay. But during this time his creditors at Quebec had sold all that he possessed, and the *Griffon*, which he had despatched, laden with furs, to the fort of Niagara, was either lost or pillaged by the Indians; which of these took place has never been precisely ascertained. For himself, although the departure of the *Griffon* had displeased his companions, he continued his route, and reached the river St. Joseph, where he found an encampment of Miamis, and where Tonti speedily rejoined him. Their first care was to construct a fort on this spot. Then they crossed the dividing line of the water between the basin of the great lakes, and that of the Mississippi; they subsequently reached the river of the Illinois, an affluent on the left of that great river. With his small band of followers, upon whose fidelity he could not entirely depend, the situation of La Sale was critical, in the midst of an unknown country, and among a powerful nation, the Illinois, who, at first allies of France, had been prejudiced and excited against us by the Iroquois and the English, jealous of the progress of the Canadian colony.

Nevertheless, it was necessary, at all cost, to attach to himself these Indians, who from their situation, were able to hinder all communication between La Sale and Canada. In order to strike their imagination, Cavelier de la Sale proceeds to their encampment, where more than 3000 men are assembled. He has but twenty men, but he traverses their village haughtily, and stops at some distance. The Illinois, who have not yet declared war, are surprised. They advance towards him, and overwhelm him with pacific demonstrations. So versatile is the spirit of the savages! Such an impression does every mark of courage make upon them! Without delay, La Sale takes advantage of their friendly dispositions, and erects upon the very site of their camp, a small fort, which he calls Crèvecoeur, in allusion to the troubles which he has already experienced. There he leaves Tonti with all his people, and he himself, anxious about the fate of the *Griffon*, returns with three Frenchmen and one Indian, to the fort of Catarocouy, separated by 500 leagues from Crèvecoeur. Before setting out, he had detached with Father Hennepin, one of his companions named Dacan, on a mission to reascend the Mississippi beyond the river of the Illinois, and if possible, to its source. “These two travellers,” says Father Charlevoix, “set out from the fort of Crèvecoeur, on February 28th, and having entered the Mississippi, ascended it as far as 46° of north latitude. There they were stopped by a considerable waterfall, extending quite across the river, to which Father Hennepin gave the name of St. Anthony of Padua. Then they fell, I know not by what mischance, into the hands of the Sioux, who kept them for a long time prisoners.”

On his journey back to Catarocouy, La Sale, having discovered a new site appropriate to the construction of a fort, summoned Tonti thither, who immediately set to work, while La Sale continued his route. This is Fort St. Louis. On his arrival at Catarocouy, La Sale learned news which would have broken down a man of a less hardy temperament. Not only had the *Griffon*, on board of which he had furs of the value of 10,000 crowns, been lost, but a vessel which was bringing him from France a cargo worth 880*l.* had been shipwrecked, and his enemies had spread a report of his death. Having no further business at Catarocouy, and having proved by his presence that the reports of his disappearance were all false, he arrived again at the fort of Crèvecoeur, where he was much astonished to find no one.

This is what had happened. While the Chevalier Tonti was employed in the construction of Fort St. Louis, the garrison of Fort Crèvecoeur had mutinied, had pillaged the magazines, had done the same at Fort Miami, and then fled to Machillimackinac. Tonti, almost alone in face of the Illinois, who were roused against him by the depredations of his men, and judging that he could not resist in his fort of Crèvecoeur, had left it on September 11th, 1680, with the five Frenchmen who composed his garrison, and had retired as far as the bay of the Lake Michigan. After having placed a garrison at Crèvecoeur and at Fort St. Louis, La Sale came to Machillimackinac, where he rejoined Tonti, and together they set out again from thence towards the end of August for Catarocouy, whence they embarked on the Lake Erie with fifty-five persons, on August 28th, 1681. After a journey of 240 miles along the frozen river of the Illinois, they reached Fort Crèvecoeur, where the water, free from ice, permitted the use of their canoes. On February 6th, 1682, La Sale arrived at the confluence of the Illinois and the Mississippi. He descended the river, sighted the mouth of the Missouri, and that of the Ohio, where he raised a fort, penetrated into the country of the Arkansas, of which he took possession in the name of France, crossed the country of the Natchez, with whom he made a treaty of friendship, and finally passed out into the Gulf of Mexico on April 9th, after a navigation of 1050 miles in a mere bark. The anticipations so skilfully conceived by Cavelier de la Sale, were realized. He immediately took formal possession of the country, to which he gave the name of Louisiana, and called the immense river which he had just discovered the St. Louis.

La Sale's return to Canada occupied not less than one year and a half. There is no ground for astonishment, when all the obstacles scattered in his path are considered. What energy, what strength of mind were requisite in one of the greatest travellers of whom France has reason to be proud, to succeed in such an enterprise!

Unhappily, a man, otherwise well intentioned, but who allowed himself to be prejudiced against La Sale by his numerous enemies, M. Lefèvre de la Barre, who had succeeded M. de Frontenac as governor of Canada, wrote to the Minister of Marine, that the discoveries of La Sale were not to be regarded as of much importance. "This traveller," he said "was actually, with about twenty French vagabonds and savages, at the extremity of the bay, where he played the part of sovereign, plundered and ransomed those of his own nation, exposed the people to the incursions of the Iroquois, and covered all these acts of violence with the pretext of the permission, which he had from His Majesty, to carry on commerce alone in the countries which he might be able to discover."

Cavelier de la Sale could not allow himself to remain exposed to these calumnious imputations. On the one side, honour prompted him to return to France to exculpate himself; on the other, he would not leave others to reap the profit of his discoveries. He set out, therefore, and received from Seignelay a kindly welcome. The minister had not been much influenced by the letters of M. de la Barre; he was aware that men could not accomplish great achievements without wounding much self-love, nor without making numerous enemies. La Sale took the opportunity to explain to him his project of discovering the mouth of the Mississippi by sea, in order to open a way for French vessels, and to found an establishment there. The minister entered into these views, and gave him a commission which placed Frenchmen and savages under his orders, from Fort St. Louis to the sea. At the same time the commandant of the squadron which was to transport him to America, was to be under his authority, and to furnish him on his disembarkation with all the succours which he might require, provided that nothing was done to the prejudice of the king. Four vessels, one of them a frigate of forty guns, commanded by M. de Beaujeu were to carry 280 persons, including the crews, to the mouth of the Mississippi, to form the nucleus of the new colony. Soldiers and artisans had been very badly chosen, as was perceived when too late, and no one knew his business. Setting sail from La Rochelle, on July 24th, 1684, the little squadron was almost immediately obliged to return to port, the bowsprit of the frigate having broken suddenly in the very finest weather. This inexplicable accident was the commencement of misunderstanding between M. de Beaujeu and M. de la Sale. The former could scarcely be pleased to see himself subordinated to a private individual, and did not forgive Cavelier this. Nothing however would have been more easy than to decline the command. La Sale had not the gentleness of manner and the politeness necessary to conciliate his companions. The disagreement did but gather force during the voyage by reason of the obstacles raised by M. de Beaujeu to the rapidity and secrecy of the expedition. The annoyances of La Sale had indeed become so great when he arrived at St. Domingo, that he fell seriously ill. He recovered, however, and the expedition set sail again on November 25th. A month later, it was off Florida; but, as “La Sale had been assured that in the Gulf of Mexico, all the currents bore eastwards, he did not doubt that the mouth of the Mississippi must be far to the west; an error which was the source of all his misfortunes.”

La Sale then steered to the west, and passed by, without perceiving it, without deigning even to attend to certain signs which he was asked to observe, the mouth of the Mississippi. When he perceived his mistake, and entreated M. de Beaujeu to turn back, the latter would no longer consent. La Sale, seeing that he could make no impression upon the contradictory mind of his companion, decided to disembark his men and his provisions in the Bay of St. Bernard. Yet, in this very last act, Beaujeu manifested an amount of culpable ill-will, which did as little honour to his judgment as to his patriotism. Not only was he unwilling to land all the provisions, under the pretext that certain of them being at the bottom of the hold, he had no time to change his stowage, but further he gave shelter on board his own ship to the master and crew of the transport, laden with the stores, utensils, and implements necessary for a new establishment, people whom everything seems to convict of having purposely cast their vessel upon shore. At the same time, a number of savages took advantage of the disorder caused by the shipwreck of the transport, to plunder everything on which they could lay their hands. Nevertheless, La Sale, who had the talent of never appearing depressed by misfortune, and who found in his own genius resources adapted to the circumstances of the case, ordered the works of the establishment to be begun. In order to give courage to his companions, he more than once took part with his own hands in the work; but very slow progress was made, in consequence of the ignorance of the workmen. Struck with the resemblance of the language and habits of the Indians of these parts to those of the Mississippi, La Sale was very soon persuaded that he was not far distant from that river, and made several excursions in order to approach it. But, if he found a country beautiful and fertile, he did not make progress towards what he was in search of. He returned each time to the fort more gloomy and more harsh; and this was not the way to restore calm to spirits embittered by sufferings and the inutility of their efforts. Grain had been sown; but scarcely any came up for want of rain, and what had sprung up was soon laid waste by the savages and the deer. The hunters who wandered far from the camp were massacred by the Indians, and sickness found an easy prey in men overwhelmed with ennui, disappointment, and misery. In a short time, the number of the colonists fell to thirty-seven. At length, La Sale resolved to try a last effort to reach the Mississippi, and in descending the river to seek help from the nations with which he had made alliance. He set out on January 12th, 1687, with his brother, his two nephews, two missionaries, and twelve colonists. He was approaching the country of the Shawnees, when, in consequence of an altercation between one of his nephews and three of his companions, these latter assassinated the young man and his servant during their sleep, and resolved immediately to do the same with the chief of the enterprise. De la Sale, uneasy at not seeing his nephew return, set out to seek him on the morning of the 19th, with Father Anastase. The assassins, seeing him approach, lay in ambush in a thicket, and one of them shot him in the head, and stretched him on the ground stark dead. Thus perished Cavelier de la Sale, "a man of a capacity," says Father Charlevoix, "of a largeness of mind, of a courage and firmness of soul, which might have led him to the achievement of something great, if with so many great qualities, he had known how to master his gloomy and atrabilious disposition, and to soften the severity or rather the harshness of his nature..." Many calumnies had been spread abroad against him; but it is necessary so much the more to be on our guard against all these malevolent reports "as it is only too common to exaggerate the defects of the unfortunate, to impute to them even some which they had not, especially when they have given occasion for their misfortune, and have not known how to make themselves beloved. What is sadder for the memory of this celebrated man, is that he has been regretted by few persons, and that the ill-success of his undertakings — only of his last — has given him the air of an adventurer, among those who judge only by appearances. Unhappily, these are usually the most numerous, and in some degree the voice of the public.”

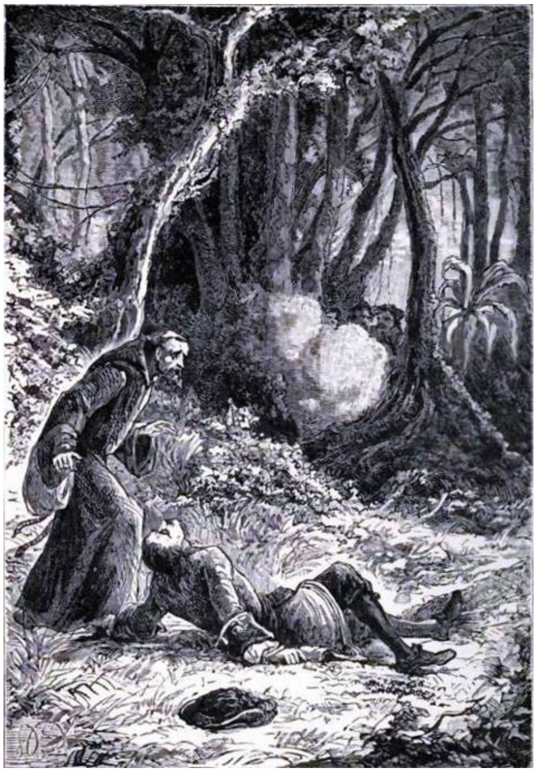

Assassination of La Sale.

We have but little to add to these last wise words. La Sale knew not how to obtain pardon for his first success. We have related subsequently by what concurrence of circumstances his second enterprise miscarried. He died, the victim it may be said, of the jealousy and malevolence of the Chevalier de Beaujeu. It is to this slight cause that we owe the failure to found in

America a powerful colony, which would very soon have been found in a condition to compete with the English establishments.

We have narrated the beginning of the English colonies. The events which took place in England were highly favourable to them. The religious persecutions, the revolutions of 1648 and 1688, furnished numerous recruits, who, animated by an excellent spirit, set themselves to work, and transported to the other side of the Atlantic the arts, the industry, and in a short time the prosperity, of the mother country. Very soon, the immense forests which covered Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Carolina, fell beneath the hatchet of the “Squatter,” and the soil became cleared, while the hunters of the woods, driving back the Indians, made the interior of the country better known, and prepared the work of civilization.

In Mexico, in the whole of Central America, in Peru, in Chili, and on the shores of the Atlantic, a different state of things prevailed. The Spaniards had extended their conquests; but, far from acting like the English, they had reduced the Indians to slavery. Instead of applying themselves to the cultivation appropriate to the variety of the climates and of the countries of which they had made themselves masters, they sought only in the produce of the mines the resources and prosperity which they should have endeavoured to obtain from the land. If a country can thus rapidly attain prodigious wealth, yet this factitious system cannot last long. With the mines a prosperity which does not renew itself, must ere long become exhausted. The Spaniards could not fail to experience the sad result.

Thus then, at the end of the seventeenth century, a great part of the new world was known. In North America, Canada, the shores of the Atlantic and of the Gulf of Mexico, the valley of the Mississippi, the coasts of California and of New Mexico, were discovered or colonized. All the central part of the continent, from Rio del Norte, as far as Terra Firma, was subject, at least nominally, to the Spaniards. In the south, the savannahs and the forests of Brazil, the pampas of the Argentine, and the interior of Patagonia, escaped the observation of the explorers, as they were destined to do for a long time yet.

In Africa, the long line of coasts, which are washed by the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans, had been patiently followed and observed by navigators. At some points only, colonists and missionaries had tried to penetrate the mystery of this vast continent. Senegal, Congo, the valley of the Nile, and Abyssinia, were all that were known with some degree of detail and of certainty.

If many of the countries of Asia, surveyed by the travellers of the middle ages, had not been revisited since that epoch, we had carefully explored the whole anterior part of that continent, India had been revealed to us, we had even founded some establishments there, China had been touched by our missionaries, and Japan, that famous Cipango which had exercised so great an attraction for our travellers of the preceding age, was at length known to us. Only Siberia and the whole north-east angle of Asia had escaped our investigations, and it was not yet known whether America was not connected with Asia, a mystery which was before long to be cleared up.

In Oceania, a number of archipelagos, of islands and separate islets, remained still to be discovered, but the islands of Sunda were colonized, the coasts of Australia and of New Zealand had been partially revealed, and the existence of that great continent which, according to Tasman, extended from Tierra del Fuego to New Zealand, began to be doubted; but it still required the long and careful researches of Cook to banish definitely into the domain of fable a chimera so long cherished.

Geography was on the point of transforming itself. The great discoveries made in astronomy were about to be applied to geography. The labours of Fernel and above all of Picard, upon the measure of a terrestrial degree between Paris and Amiens, had made it clear that the globe is not a sphere, but a spheroid, that is to say, a ball flattened at the poles and swollen at the equator, and thus were found at one stroke the form and the dimensions of the world which we inhabit. At length the labours of Picard, continued by La Hire and Cassini, were completed at the commencement of the following century. The astronomical observations, rendered possible by the calculation of the satellites of Jupiter, enabled us to rectify our maps. If this rectification had been already effected with regard to certain places, it became indispensable when the number of points of which the astronomical position had been observed, had been considerably increased; and this was to be the work of the next century. At the same time, historical geography was more studied; it began to take for its foundation the study of inscriptions, and archæology was about to become one of the most useful instruments of comparative geography.

In a word, the seventeenth century is an epoch of transition and of progress; it seeks and it finds the powerful means which its successor, the eighteenth century, was destined to put into operation. The era of the sciences has already opened, and with it the modern world commences.

II. THE GREAT NAVIGATORS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Translated by N. D’anvers,

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PART I.

CHAPTER I.

I.ASTRONOMERS AND CARTOGRAPHERS.

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Before we enter upon a recital of the great expeditions of the eighteenth century, we shall do well to chronicle the immense progress made during that period by the sciences. They rectified a crowd of prejudices and established a solid basis for the labours of astronomers and geographers. If we refer them solely to the matter before us, they radically modified cartography, and ensured for navigation a security hitherto unknown.

Although Galileo had observed the eclipses of Jupiter’s satellites as early as 1610, his important discovery had been rendered useless by the indifference of Governments, the inadequacy of instruments, and the mistakes committed by his followers.

In 1660 Jean Dominique Cassini published his “Tables of the Satellites of Jupiter,” which induced Colbert to send for him the following year, and which obtained for him the superintendence of the Paris Observatory.

In the month of July, 1671, Philippe de la Hire went to Uraniborg in the Island of Huen, to take observations for the situation of Tycho Brahe’s Observatory. In that spot he calculated with the assistance of Cassini’s Tables, and with an exactitude never before obtained, the difference between the longitudes of Paris and Uraniborg.

The Academy of Sciences sent the astronomer Jean Richter the same year to Cayenne, to study the parallaxes of the sun and moon, and to determine the distance of Mars and Venus from the earth. This voyage, which was entirely successful, was attended with unforeseen consequences, and resulted in inquiries shortly after entered into as to the shape of the earth.

Richter noticed that the pendulum lost two minutes, twenty-eight seconds at Cayenne, which proved that the momentum was less at this place than at Paris. From this fact, Newton and Huyghens deduced the flatness of the Globe at the Poles. Shortly afterwards, however, the computation of a terrestrial degree given by Abbé Picard, and the determination of the Meridional arc, arrived at by the Cassinis, father and son, led scientific men to an entirety different result, and induced them to consider the earth an elliptical figure, elongated towards the polar regions. Passionate discussions arose from this decision, and in them originated immense undertakings, from which astronomical and mathematical geography profited.

Picard undertook to estimate the space contained between the parallels of Amiens and Malvoisine, which comprises a degree and a third. The Academy, however, decided that a more exact result could be obtained by the calculation of a greater distance, and determined to portion out the entire length of France, from north to south, in degrees. For this purpose, they selected the meridian line which passes the Paris Observatory. This gigantic trigonometrical undertaking was commenced twenty years before the end of the seventeenth century, was interrupted, and recommenced, and finally finished towards 1720.

At the same time Louis XIV. urged by Colbert, gave orders for the preparation of a map of France. Men of science undertook voyages from 1679 to 1682, and by astronomical observations found the position of the coasts on the Ocean and Mediterranean. But even these undertakings, Picard's computation of the Meridional arc, the calculations which determined the latitude and longitude of certain large cities in France, and a map which gave the environs of Paris in detail with geometrical exactitude, were still insufficient data for a map of France.

As in the measurement of the Meridional arc, the only course to adopt was to cover the whole extent of the country with a network of triangles. Such was the basis of the large map of France which justly bears the name of Cassini.

The result of the earlier observations of Cassini and La Hire was to restrict France within much narrower limits than had hitherto been assigned to her.

Desborough Cooley in his "History of Voyages," says, "They deprived her (France) of several degrees of longitude in the length of her western coast, from Brittany to the Bay of Biscay. And in the same way retrenched about half a degree from Languedoc and La Provence." These alterations gave rise to a "bon-mot." Louis the XIV. in complimenting the Academicians upon their return, remarked, "I am sorry to see, gentlemen, that your journey has cost me a good part of my kingdom!"

So far, however, cartographers had ignored the corrections made by astronomers. In the middle of the seventeenth century, Peiresc and Gassendi had corrected upon the maps of the Mediterranean a difference of "five hundred" miles of distance between Marseilles and Alexandria. This important rectification was set aside as non-existent until the hydrographer, Jean Matthieu de Chazelles, who had assisted Cassini in his labours, was sent to the Levant to draw up a coast-chart for the Mediterranean.

“It was sufficiently clear,” say the Memoirs of the Academy of Sciences, that the maps unduly extended the Continents of Europe, Africa, and America, and narrowed the Pacific Ocean between Asia and Europe. These errors had caused singular mistakes. During M. de Chaumont’s voyage, when he went as Louis XIV.’s ambassador to Siam, the pilots, trusting to their charts, were mistaken in their calculations, and both in going and in returning went a good deal further than they imagined. In proceeding from the Cape of Good Hope to the island of Java they imagined themselves a long way from the Strait of Sunda, when in reality they were more than sixty leagues beyond it. And they were forced to put back for two days with a favourable wind to enter it. In the same way upon their return voyage from the Cape of Good Hope to France, they found themselves at the island of Flores, the most western of the Azores, when they conceived themselves to be at least a hundred and fifty leagues eastward of it. They were obliged to navigate for twelve days in an easterly direction in order to reach the French coast. As we have already said, the corrections made in the map of France were considerable. It was recognized that Perpignan and Collioures more especially were far more to the east than had been supposed. To gain a fair idea of the alteration, one has only to glance at the map of France published in the first part of the seventh volume of the memoirs of the Academy of Sciences. All the astronomical observations to which we have called attention are noted in it, and the original outline of the map, published by Sanson in 1679, makes the modification apparent.

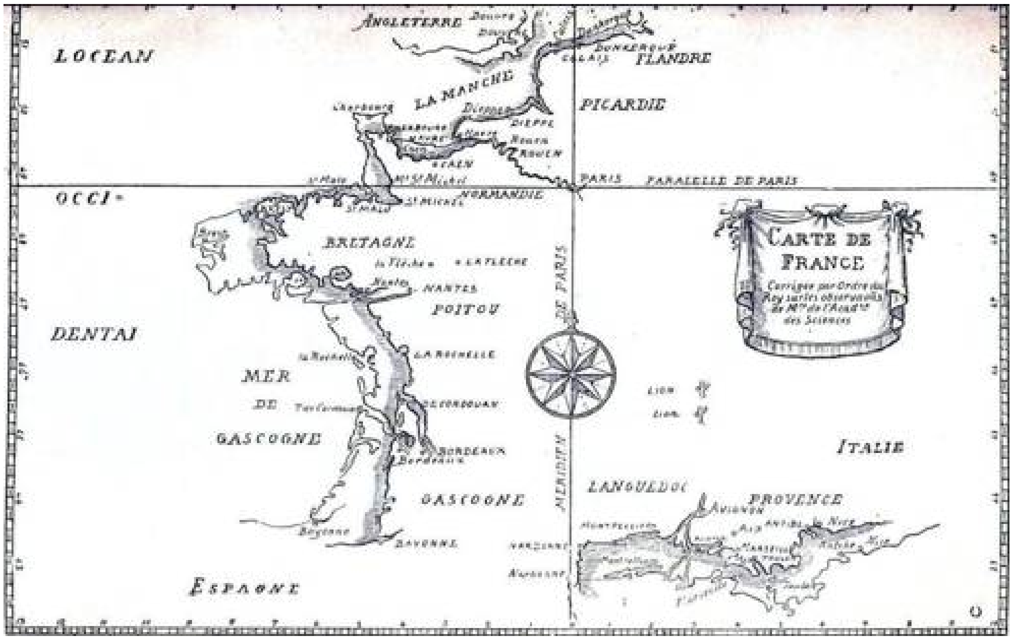
ANGLETERRE
L'OCEAN
OCCI-
DENTAL
LA MANCHE
FLANDRE
PICARDIE
NORMANDIE
PARIS
PARALELLE DE PARIS
BRETAGNE
NANTES
POITOU
LA ROCHELLE
MER
DE
GASCOGNE
BORDEAUX
GASCOGNE
BAYONNE
MERIDIEN DE PARIS
LANGUEDOC
PROVENCE
ITALIE
ESPAGNE
CARTE DE FRANCE
Corrigée par Ordre du Roy sur les observations de Mrs de l'Acade des Sciences

Map of France, corrected by order of the king, in accordance with the instructions of the Members of the Academy of Sciences.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Cassini was right in saying that cartography was no longer at its height as a science. In reality, Sanson had blindly followed the longitudes of Ptolemy, without taking any note of astronomical observations. His sons and grandsons had simply re-edited his maps as they were completed, and other geographers followed the same course.

William Delisle was the first to construct new maps, and to make use of modern discoveries. He arbitrarily rejected all that had been done before his time. His enthusiasm was so great that he had entirely carried out his project at the age of twenty-five. His brother, Joseph Nicolas, who taught astronomy in Russia, sent William materials for his maps. At the same time his younger brother, Delisle de la Ceyére, visited the coast of the Arctic Ocean, and astronomically fixed the position of the most important points. He embarked on board De Behring's vessel and died at Kamtchatka. That was the work of the three Delisles, but to William belongs the glory of having revolutionized geography.

"He succeeded," says Cooley, "in reconciling ancient and modern computations, and in collecting an immense mass of documents. Instead of limiting his corrections to any one quarter of the earth, he directed them to the entire globe. By this means he earned the right to be considered the founder of modern geography."

Peter the Great, on his way to Paris, paid a tribute to his merit by visiting him, and placing at his disposal all the information he himself possessed of the geography of Russia.

Could there be a more conclusive testimony to his worth than this from a stranger? and if French geographers are excelled in these days by those of Germany and England, is it not consolatory and encouraging to them to know, that they have excelled in a science, in which they are now struggling to regain their former superiority?

Delisle lived to witness the success of his pupil, J. B. d'Anville. If the latter is inferior to Adrian Valois in the matter of historical science, he deserved his high fame for the relative improvement of his outlines, and for the clear and artistic appearance of his maps.

"It is difficult," says M. E. Desjardins, in his "Geographie de la Gaule Romaine," "to understand the slight importance which has been attributed to his works as a geographer, mathematician, and draughtsman." The latter more especially do justice to his great merit. D’Anville was the first to construct a map by scientific methods, and that of itself is sufficient glory. In the department of historical geography, D’Anville exhibited unusual good sense in discussion, and a marvellous topographical instinct for identifications, but it is well to remember that he was neither a man of science, nor even well versed in classic authorities. His most beautiful work is his map of Italy, the dimensions of which, hitherto exaggerated, extended from the east to the west in accordance with the ideas of the ancients.

In 1735, Philip Buache, whose name as a geographer is justly celebrated, inaugurated a new method in his chart of the depths of the English Channel, by using contour levels to represent the variations of the soil.

Ten years later d’Après De Mannevillette published his “*Neptune Oriental*,” in which he rectified the charts of the African, Chinese, and Indian coasts. He added to it a nautical guide, which was the more precious at this period, as it was the first of the kind. Up to the close of his life he amended his manual, which served as a guide for all French naval officers during the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Of English astronomers and physicists, Hally was the chief. He published a theory of “Magnetic Variations,” and a “History of the Monsoons,” which gained for him the command of a vessel, that he might put his theory into practice.

That which D’Après achieved for the French, Alexander Dalrymple accomplished for the English. His views, however, bordered on the hypothetical, and he believed in the existence of an Antarctic Continent.

He was succeeded by Horsburgh, whose name is justly dear to navigators.

We must now speak of two important expeditions, which ought to have settled the animated discussion as to the shape of the earth. The Academy of Sciences had despatched a mission to America, to compute the arc of the meridian at the Equator. It was composed of Godin, Bouguer, and La Condamine.

It was decided to entrust a similar expedition to the North to Maupertuis.

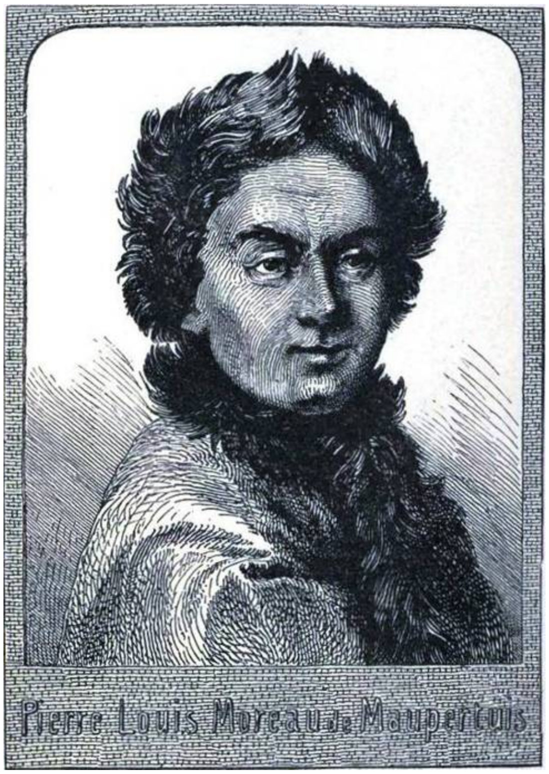
Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis

Pierre Louis Moreau de Maupertuis.

“If,” said this scientific man, “the flatness of the earth be not greater then Huyghens supposed, the margin between the degrees of the meridian measured in France, and the first degrees of the meridian near the Equator, would not be too considerable to be attributed to possible errors of the observers, or to the imperfection of instruments. But, if the observation can be made at the Pole, the difference between the first degree of the meridian nearest the equatorial line, and, for example, the sixty-sixth degree, which crosses the polar circle, will be great enough, even by Huyghens' hypothesis, to show itself irresistibly, and beyond the possibility of miscalculation, because the difference would be repeated just as many times as there are intermediate degrees."

The problem thus neatly propounded ought to have obtained a ready solution both at the Pole and the Equator — a solution which would have settled the discussion, by proving Huyghens and Newton to be right.

The expedition embarked in a vessel equipped at Dunkerque. In addition to Maupertuis, it comprised De Clairaut, Camus, and Lemonnier, Academicians, Albey Outhier, canon of Bayeux, a secretary named Sommereux, a draughtsman, Herbelot, and the scientific Swedish astronomer, Celsius.

When the King of Sweden received the members of the mission at Stockholm, he said to them, "I have been in many bloody battles, but I should prefer finding myself in the midst of the most sanguinary, rather than join your expedition."

Certainly, it was not likely to prove a party of pleasure. The learned adventurers were to be tested by difficulties of every kind, by continued privation, by excessive cold. But what comparison can be made between their sufferings, and the agonies, the trials and the dangers which were to be encountered by the Arctic explorers, Ross, Parry, Hall, Payer, and many others.

Damiron in his “Eulogy of Maupertuis,” says, “The houses at Tornea, north of the Gulf of Bothnia, almost in the Arctic Circle, are hidden under the snow. When one goes out, the air seems to pierce the lungs, the increasing degrees of frost are proclaimed by the incessant crackling of the wood, of which most of the houses are built. From the solitude which reigns in the streets, one might fancy that the inhabitants of the town were dead. At every step one meets mutilated figures, people who have lost arms or legs from the terrible severity of the temperature. And yet, the travellers did not intend pausing at Tornea.”

Now-a-days these portions of the globe are better known, and the region of the Arctic climate thoroughly appreciated, which makes it easier to estimate the difficulties the inquirers encountered.

They commenced their operations in July, 1736. Beyond Tornea they found only uninhabited regions. They were obliged to rely upon their own resources for scaling the mountains, where they placed the signals intended to form the uninterrupted series of triangles.

Divided into two parties in order thus to obtain two measurements instead of one, and thereby also to diminish the chance of mistakes, the adventurous savants, after inconceivable hairbreadth escapes, of which an account can be found in the Memoirs of the Academy of Sciences for 1737, and after incredible efforts, decided that the length of the meridian circle, comprised between the parallels of Tornea and Kittis was 55,023 fathoms and a half. Thus below the Polar circle, the meridian degree comprised a thousand fathoms more than Cassini had imagined, and the terrestrial degree exceeded by 377 fathoms the length which Picard has reckoned it between Paris and Amiens.

The result, therefore, of this discovery (a result long repudiated by the Cassinis, both father and son), was that the earth was considerably flattened at the poles.

Voltaire somewhat maliciously said of it, —

Courrier de la physique, argonaute nouveau,

Qui, franchissant les monts, qui, traversant les eaux,

Ramenez des climats soumis aux trois couronnes,

Vos perches, vos secteurs et surtout deux Laponnes.

Vous avez confirmé dans ces lieux pleins d’ennui

Ce que Newton connut sans sortir de lui.

In much the same vein he alludes to the two sisters who accompanied Maupertuis upon his return, the attractions of one of whom proved irresistible, —

Cette erreur est trop ordinaire

Et c’est la seule que l’on fit

En allant au cercle polaire.

M. A. Maury in his “History of the Academy of Sciences,” remarks, —

“At the same time, the importance of the instruments and methods employed by the astronomers sent to the North, afforded a support to the defenders of the theory of the flattening of the globes, which was hardly theirs by right, and in the following century the Swedish astronomer, Svanburg, rectified their involuntary exaggerations, in a fine work published by him in the French language.”

Meantime the mission despatched by the Academy to Peru proceeded with analogous operations. It consisted of La Condamine, Bouguer, and Godin, three Academicians, Joseph de Jussieu, Governor of the Medical College, who undertook the botanical branch, Seniergues, a surgeon, Godin des Odonais, a clock-maker, and a draughtsman. They started from La Rochelle, on the 16th of May, 1735.

Upon reaching St. Domingo, they took several astronomical observations, and continued by way of Porto Bello, and Carthagena. Crossing the Isthmus of Panama, they disembarked at Manta in Peru, upon the 9th of March, 1736.

Arrived there, Bouguer and Condamine parted from their companions, studied the rapidity of the pendulum, and finally reached Quito by different routes. Condamine pursued his way along the coast, as far as Rio de las Esmeraldas, and drew the map of the entire country, which he traversed with such infinite toil. Bouguer went southwards towards Guayaquil, passing through marshy forests, and reaching Caracol at the foot of the Cordillera range of the Andes, which he was a week in crossing. This route had been previously taken by Alvarado, when seventy of his followers perished; amongst them, the three Spaniards who had attempted to penetrate to the interior. Bouguer reached Quito on the 10th of June. At that time this city contained between thirty and forty thousand inhabitants, and boasted of an episcopal president of the Assembly, and numbers of religious communities, besides two colleges.

Living there was cheap, with the exception of foreign merchandises, which realized exorbitant prices, so much so indeed, that a glass goblet fetched from eighteen to twenty francs.

The adventurers scaled the Pichincha, a mountain near Quito, the eruptions from which had more than once been fatal to the inhabitants, but they were not slow in discovering that they could not succeed in carrying their implements to the summit of the mountains, and that they must be satisfied with placing the signals upon the hills.

“An extraordinary phenomena may be witnessed almost every day upon the summit of these mountains,” said Bouguer in the account he read before the Academy of Sciences, “which is probably as old as the world itself, but what it appeared was never witnessed by any one before us. We first remarked it when we were altogether upon a mountain called Pamba Marca. A cloud in which we had been enveloped, and which dispersed, allowed us a view of the rising sun, which was very brilliant. The cloud passed on, it was scarcely removed thirty paces when each of us distinguished his own shadow reflected above him, and saw only his own, because the cloud presented a broken surface.

“The short distance allowed us fully to recognize each part of the shadow; we distinguished the arms, the legs, the head, but we were most amazed at finding that the latter was surrounded by a glory, or aureole formed of two or three small concentric crowns of a very bright colour, containing the same variety of hues as the rainbow, red being the outer one. The spaces between the circles were equal, the last circle the weakest, and in the far distance, we perceived one large white one, which surrounded the whole. It produced the effect of a transfiguration upon the spectator."

The instruments employed by these scholars were not as accurate as more modern ones, and varied with changes of temperature, in consequence of which, they were forced to proceed most carefully, and with most minute accuracy, lest small errors accumulating should end by leading to greater ones. Thus, in their trigonometrical surveys Bouguer and his associates never calculated the third angle by the observation of the two first, but always observed all three.

Having calculated the number of fathoms contained in the extent of country surveyed, the next point was to discover what part this was of the earth's circumference, which could only be ascertained by means of astronomical observations.

After numerous obstacles, which it is impossible to give in detail, after curious discoveries, as for example the attraction exercised on the pendulum by mountains, the French inquirers arrived at conclusions which fully confirmed the result of the expedition to Lapland. They did not all return to France at the same time.

Jussieu continued his search after facts in natural history, and La Condamine decided to return by way of the Amazon River, making an important voyage, to which we shall have occasion to refer later.

II.

VOYAGES IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

Expedition of Wood Rogers — Adventures of Alexander Selkirk — Galapagos Island — Puerto Seguro — Return to England — Expedition of George Anson — Staten Island — Juan Fernandez — Tinian — Macao — Taking of the vessel — Canton river — Results of the Cruise.

The war of the Spanish succession was at its height, when some privateers of Bristol determined to fit out ships to attack the Spanish vessels, in the Pacific Ocean, and to devastate the coasts of South America. The two vessels chosen, the *Duke* and *Duchess*, under Captains Rogers and Courtenay, were carefully equipped, and stocked with everything necessary for so long a voyage, the famous Dampier, who had acquired a great reputation by his daring adventures and piracies, did not disdain to accept the title of chief pilot, and although this trip was richer in material results than in geographical discoveries, the account of it contains a few curious particulars worthy of preservation.

The *Duke* and *Duchess* set sail from the Royal Port of Bristol on the 2nd April, 1708. To begin with, we may note one interesting fact. Throughout the voyage a register was at the service of the crew, in which all the incidents of the voyage were to be noted, so that the slightest errors, and the most insignificant oversights could be rectified before the facts of the case faded from memory.

Nothing of note occurred on this voyage till the 22nd December, when the Falkland Islands, previously noticed by few navigators, were discovered. Rogers did not land on them, but contented himself with observing that the coast, although less precipitous, resembled that of Portland.

“All the hills,” he added, “with their well-wooded and gradually sloping sides, appeared fertile, and the shore is not wanting in good harbours.”

Now these islands do not possess a single tree, and the good harbours, as we shall presently see, are anything but numerous, so we can judge of the exactitude of the observations made by Rogers. Navigators have done well not to trust to them.

After passing this archipelago the two vessels steered due south, and penetrated as far as south lat. 60° 58’. Here, there was no night, the cold was intense, and the sea so rough that the *Duchess* sustained a few injuries. The chief officers of the two vessels assembled in council, agreed that it would be better not to attempt to go further south, and the course was changed for the west. On the 15th January, 1709, Cape Horn is said to have been doubled, and the southern ocean entered.

Up to this date the position of the island of Juan Fernandez, was differently given on nearly all maps, and Wood Rogers, who intended to harbour there, take in water, and get a little fresh meat, came upon it almost unawares.

On the 1st February, he embarked in a little boat to try and find an anchorage. Whilst his people were awaiting his return, a large fire was noticed on shore. Had some Spanish or French vessels cast anchor here? Would it be necessary to fight for the water and food required? Every preparation was made during the night, but in the morning no ship was in sight. Conjectures were already being hazarded as to whether the enemy had retired, when the end was put to all surmises by the return of the boat, bringing in it a man clad in goatskins, whose personal appearance was yet more savage than his garments.

It was a Scotch mariner, Alexander Selkirk by name, who in consequence of a quarrel with the captain of his ship, had been left on this desert island four years and a half before. The fire which had attracted notice had been lighted by him.

During his stay on the island of Juan Fernandez, Selkirk had seen many vessels pass, but only two, both Spanish, had cast anchor. Discovered by the sailors, Selkirk had been fired upon, and only escaped death by the agility with which he managed to climb into a tree and hide.

He told how he had been put ashore with his clothes, his bed, a pound of powder, some bullets, a little tobacco, a hatchet, a knife, a kettle, a Bible, with a few other devotional books, his nautical instruments and books.

Poor Selkirk provided for his wants as best he could, but during the first few months he had great difficulty in conquering the sadness and mastering the horror consequent upon his terrible loneliness. He built two huts of willow, which he covered with a sort of rush, and lined with the skins of the goats he killed to satisfy his hunger, so long as his ammunition lasted. When it was likely to fail, he managed to strike a light by rubbing two pieces of pimento wood together. When he had quite exhausted his ammunition, he caught the goats as they ran, his agility had become so great by dint of constant exercise, that he scoured the woods, rocks, and hills, with a perfectly incredible speed. We had sufficient proof of his skill, when he went hunting with us. He outran and exhausted our best hunters, and an excellent dog which we had on board; he easily caught the goats, and brought them to us on his back. He himself related to us, that one day he chased his prey so eagerly to the edge of a precipice, which was concealed by bushes, that they rolled over and over together, until they reached the bottom. He lost consciousness through that fall, and upon discovering that the goat lay under him quite dead, after remaining where he was for twenty-four hours, he with the utmost difficulty succeeded in crawling to his cabin, which was about a mile distant; and he was unable to walk again for six days.

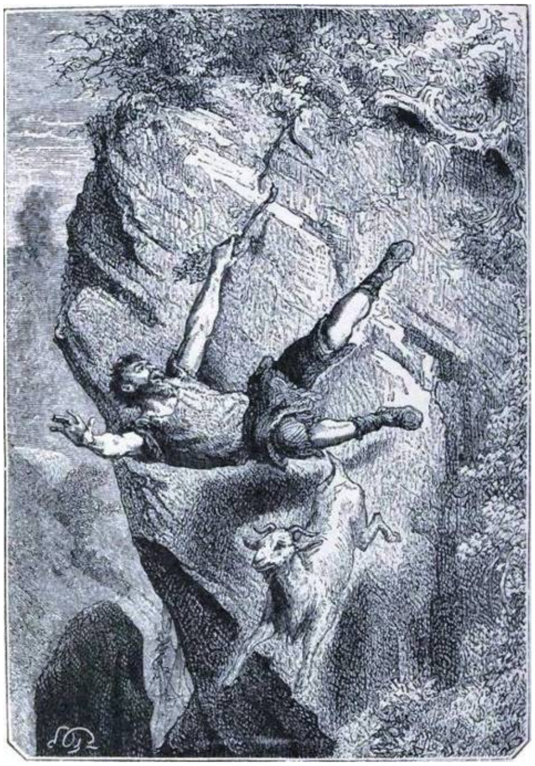

Selkirk falling over the precipice with his prey.

This deserted wretch managed to season his food with the turnips sown by the crew of a ship, with cabbages, capsicums, and all-spice. When his clothes and shoes were worn out, a process which occupied but a short time, he ingeniously constructed new ones of goatskin, sewing them together with a nail, which served him as a needle. When his knife was useless, he constructed a new one from the cask-hoops he found on the shore. He had so far lost the use of speech, that he could only make himself understood by an effort. Rogers took him on board, and appointed him boatswain’s mate.

Selkirk was not the first sailor abandoned upon the island of Juan Fernandez. It may be remembered that Dampier had already rescued an unfortunate Mosquito man, who was abandoned from 1681 to 1684. Sharp and other buccaneers have related that the sole survivor of a crew of a vessel wrecked on this coast, lived there for five years, until he was rescued by another ship. Saintine, in his recent novel, “Alone,” has detailed Selkirk’s adventures.

Upon the 14th of February, the *Duke* and *Duchess* left Juan Fernandez, and commenced their operations against the Spaniards. Rogers seized Guayaquil, for which he obtained a large ransom, and captured several vessels, which, however, provided him with more prisoners than money.

This part of his voyage concerns us but little, and a few particulars only are interesting, as, for instance, his mention of a monkey in the Gorgus Island, who was so lazy, that he was nicknamed the Sluggard, and of the inhabitants of Tecamez, who repulsed the new-comers with poisoned arrows, and guns. He also speaks of the Galapagos Island, situated two degrees of northern latitude. According to Rogers, this cluster of islands was numerous, but out of them all one only provided fresh water. Turtle-doves existed there in great quantities, and tortoises, and sea-turtles, of an extraordinary size abounded, thence the name given by the Spaniards to this group.

Sea-dogs also were common, one of them had the temerity to attack Rogers. “I was walking along the shore,” he says, “when it left the water, his jaws gaping, as quickly and ferociously as a dog escaping from his chain. Three times he attacked me, I plunged my pike into his breast, and each time I inflicted such a wound that he fled howling horribly. Finally, turning towards me, he stopped to growl and show his fangs. Scarcely twenty-four hours earlier, one of my crew had narrowly escaped being devoured by a monster of the same family.”

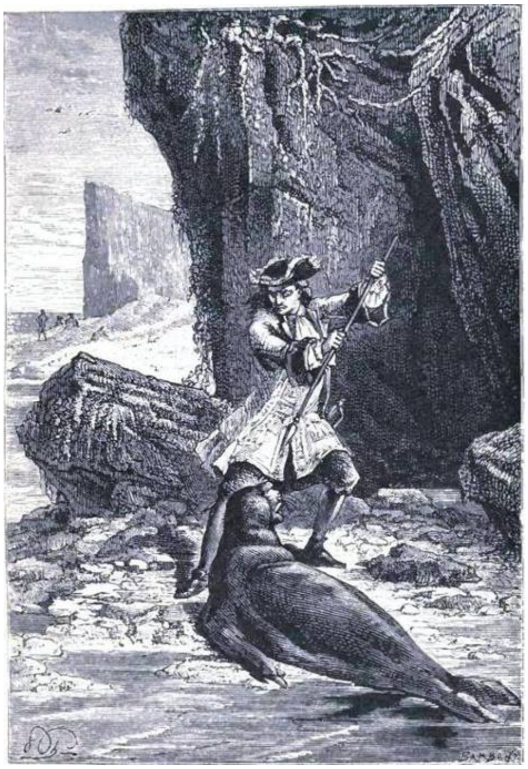

“I plunged my pike into his breast.”

In December, Rogers repaired to Puerto Seguro, upon the Californian coast, with a Manilla galleon, which he had seized. Many of his men penetrated to the interior; he found large forest trees, but not the slightest appearance of culture, although smoke indicated the existence of inhabitants.

The inhabitants, according to Albey Presort's "History of Voyages," were straight built and powerful, blacker than any Indian tribe hitherto met with in the Pacific Ocean Seas. They had long black hair plaited, which reached below the waist. All the men went about naked, but the women wore a garment, either composed of leaves or of stuff made from them, and sometimes the skins of beasts and birds. Occasionally they wore necklaces and bracelets made of bits of wood or shells. Others adorned their necks with small red berries and pearls. Evidently they did not know how to pierce holes in them, for they notched them and joined them by a thread. They valued these ornaments so highly, that they refused to change them for English necklaces of glass. Their chief anxiety was to obtain knives and useful implements.

The *Duke* and *Duchess* left Porto Segura on the 12th January, 1710, and reached the island of Guaham, of the Mariannes, in the course of two months. Here they revictualled, and passing by the Straits of Boutan and Saleyer, reached Batavia. After a necessary delay at the latter place, and at the Cape of Good Hope, Rogers cast anchor in the Downs upon the 1st of October.

In spite of Rogers' reticence with regard to the immense riches he brought with him, a good idea of their extent may be gathered from the account of ingots, vessels of silver and gold, and pearls, with which he delighted the shipowners.

We now come to our account of Admiral Anson's voyage, which almost belongs to the category of naval warfare, but with it we may close the list of piratical expeditions, which dishonoured the victors without ruining the vanquished. And if he brought no new acquisition to geography, his account teams with judicious observations, and interesting remarks about a country then little known.

The merit of them, however, if we are to believe Nichols' Literary anecdotes, rests rather with Benjamin Robins, than, as the title would appear to indicate, with the chaplain of the expedition, Richard Walter.

George Anson was born in Staffordshire in 1697. A sailor from his childhood, he early brought himself into notice.

He was already well known as a clever and fortunate captain, when in 1739 he was offered the command of a squadron. It consisted of the *Centurion,* 60 guns, the *Gloucester* and *Severe*, each 50 guns, the *Pearl*, 40 guns, the *Wager*, 28 guns. To it were attached also the sloop *Trial,* and two transports carrying food and ammunition. In addition to the crew of 1460, a reinforcement of 470 marines was added to the fleet.

Leaving England on the 18th September, 1740, the expedition proceeded by way of Madeira, past the island of St. Catharine, along the Brazilian coast, by St. Julian Harbour, and finally crossed the Strait of Lemaire.

“Terrible,” said the narrative, “as the aspect of Tierra del Fuego may be, that of Staten Island is more horrible still. It consists of a series of inaccessible rocks, crowned with sharp points. Prodigiously high, they are covered with eternal snow, and edged with precipices. In short, it is impossible to conceive anything more deserted, or more wild than this region.”

Scarcely had the last vessels of the squadron filed through the strait, than a series of heavy gales, squalls, and storms, caused the oldest sailors to vow that all they had hitherto known of tempests were nothing in comparison.

This fearful experience lasted seven weeks without intermission. It is needless to state that the vessels sustained great damage, that many men were swept away by the waves, numbers destroyed by illnesses occasioned by the exposure to constant damp, and want of sufficient nourishment.

Two of the vessels, the *Severe* and the *Pearl*, were engulfed, and four others were lost sight of. Anson was unable to reach Valdivia, the rendezvous he had selected in case of separation; carried far to the north, he could only arrest his course at Juan Fernandez, which he reached upon the 9th of June.

The *Centurion* had the greatest need of rest. She had lost eighty of her crew, her supply of water had failed, and the sailors were so weakened by scurvy, that ten only of the remaining number were available for the watch. The other vessels, in an equally bad plight, were not long in regaining her.

The first care was to restore the exhausted crews, and to repair the worst injuries sustained by the vessels. Anson sent the sick on shore and installed them in a sheltered hospital in the open air, then putting himself at the head of the most enterprising sailors, he scoured the entire island, and thoroughly examined its roads and shores. The best anchorage, according to his report, was in Cumberland Bay. The south-eastern portion of Juan Fernandez, a little island scarcely five leagues by two in extent, is dry, rocky, treeless; the ground lies low, and is level in comparison with the northern portion. It produces water-cresses, purslain, sorrels, turnips, and Sicilian radishes in abundance, as well as oats and clover. Anson sowed carrots and lettuces, and planted plums, apricots, and peaches. He soon discovered that the number of goats, left by the buccaneers, and which had multiplied marvellously, had since decreased.

The Spaniards, eager to deprive their enemies of this valuable resource, had let loose a quantity of famished dogs upon the island, who chased the goats, and devoured so many of them, that, at the time of Anson's visit, scarcely two hundred remained. The Commodore, for so Anson is always called in the narrative of this voyage, reconnoitered the Island of Mas a Fuero, which is only twenty-five leagues west of Juan Fernandez. Smaller than the latter, it is more wooded, better watered, and possessed more goats.

At the beginning of December, the crews were sufficiently recovered for Anson to put into execution his projected attack upon the Spaniards. He commenced by seizing several ships laden with precious merchandise and ingots, and then set fire to the city of Paita. Upon this occasion the Spaniards estimated their loss at one and a half million piastres.

Anson then proceeded to Quibo Bay, near Panama, to lie in wait for the galleon which, every year, transported the treasures of the Philippine Islands to Acapulco. There, although the English met with no inhabitants in the miserable huts, they found heaps of shells and beautiful mother of pearl left there during the summer months by the fishermen of Panama. In mentioning the resources of this place, we must not omit the immense turtles, which usually weighed two hundred pounds, and which were caught in a singular manner. When a shoal of them were seen floating asleep upon the surface of the ocean, a good swimmer would plunge in a few fathoms deep, and rising, seize the turtle towards the tail, and endeavour to force it down. Upon awakening, the creature's struggles to free itself suffice to support both the man and his prey, until the arrival of a boat to receive them both.

After a fruitless cruise, Anson determined to burn three of the Spanish vessels which he had seized and equipped. Distributing the crews and cargo upon the *Centurion* and the *Gloucester*, the only two vessels remaining to him, he decided upon the 6th of May, 1742, to make for China, where he hoped to find reinforcements and supplies.

But this voyage, which he expected to accomplish in sixty days, took him fully four months. After a violent gale, the *Gloucester*, having all but foundered, and her crew being too reduced to work her, was burnt. Her cargo of silver, and her supplies were trans-shipped to the *Centurion*, which alone remained of all that magnificent fleet which two years earlier had set sail from England!

Thrown out of his course, far to the north, Anson discovered on the 26th of August, the Isles of Atanacan and Serigan, and the following day those of Saypan, Tinian, and Agnigan, which form a part of the Marianne Archipelago.

A Spaniard, a sergeant, whom he captured in a small bark in these seas, told him that the island of Tinian was inhabited, and abounded with cattle, fowls, and excellent fruits, such as oranges, lemons, limes, bread fruit, &c. Nowhere could the *Centurion* have found a more welcome port for her exhausted crew, now numbering only seventy-one men, worn out by privation and illness, the only survivors of the 2000 sailors who had manned the fleet at its departure.

“The soil of this island,” says the narrative, “is dry and somewhat sandy, which makes the verdure of the meadows and woods more delicate and more uniform than is usually the case in tropical climates.

“The ground rises gently from the English encampment to the centre of the isle, but before its greatest height is reached, one meets with sloping glade, covered with fine clover, and many brilliant flowers, and bordered by beautiful fruit-trees.

"The animals, who, for the greater part of the year, are the only lords of this beautiful retreat, add to its romantic charm, and contribute not a little to its marvellous appearance. Thousands of cattle may be seen grazing together in a vast meadow, and the sight is the more singular as the animals are all of a milk white colour, with the exception of their ears, which are generally black. Although it is a desert-island, the sight and sound of such a number of domestic animals, rushing in crowds through the woods, suggest the idea of farmhouses and villages."

Truly an enchanting description! But has not the author rather drawn upon his imagination for the charming details of his description?

After so long a voyage, after so many storms, it is little to be wondered at, if the verdant woods, the exuberant vegetation, and the abundance of animal life, profoundly impressed the minds of Anson's companions. Well! we shall soon learn whether his successors at Tinian found it as wonderful as he did.

Meanwhile Anson was not altogether free from anxiety. It was true that his ships were repaired, but many of his men remained on land to recover their strength, and but a small number of able-bodied seamen remained on board with him. The roadstead being lined with coral, great precautions were necessary to save the cables from being cut, but in spite of them, at new moon, a sudden tempest arose and broke the ship loose. The anchors held well, but the hawsers gave way, and the *Centurion* was carried out to sea. The thunder growled ceaselessly, and the rain fell with such violence, that the signals of distress which were given by the crew were not even heard. Anson, most of his officers, and a large part of the crew, numbering one hundred and thirteen persons, remained on land and found themselves deprived of the only means they possessed of leaving Tinian. Their despair was great, their consternation inexpressible. But Anson, with his energy and endless resources, soon roused his companions from their despair! One vessel, that which they had captured from the Spaniards, still remained to them, and it occurred to them to lengthen it, until it could contain them all with the necessary provisions for a voyage to China. However, after nineteen days, the *Centurion* returned, and the English, embarking in her upon the 21st of October, were not long in reaching Macao, putting into a friendly and civilized port for the first time since their departure from England, two years before.

“Macao,” says Anson, “formerly rich, well populated, and capable of self-defence against the Chinese Government, is greatly shorn of its ancient splendour! Although still inhabited by the Portuguese and ruled by a Governor, nominated by the King of Portugal, it is at the mercy of the Chinese, who can starve the inhabitants, or take possession of it, for which reasons the Portuguese Governor is very careful not to offend them.”

Anson was forced to write an imperious letter to the Chinese Governor, before he could obtain permission to buy, even at high prices, the provisions and stores he required. He then publicly announced his intention of leaving for Batavia and set sail on the 19th of April, 1743. But, instead of steering for the Dutch possession, he directed his course towards the Philippine Islands, where, for several days, he awaited the arrival of the galleon returning from Acapulco, laden with the proceeds of the sale of her rich cargo. These vessels usually carried forty-four guns, and were manned by a crew of over 500 men. Anson had only 200 sailors, of whom thirty were but lads, but this disproportion did not deter him, for he had the expectation of rich booty, and the cupidity of his men was sufficient guarantee of their courage.

“Why,” asked Anson one day of his steward, “why do you no longer give us mutton for dinner? Have we eaten all the sheep we bought in China?”

“Pray excuse me, Commodore,” replied the steward, “but I am reserving the only two which remain for the Captain of the galleon.”

No one, not even the steward, doubted of success! Anson well understood how to secure it, and the efficiency of his men compensated for their reduced numbers. The struggle was hot, the straw mats which filled the rigging of the galleon took fire and the flames rose as high as the mizen mast. The Spaniards found the double enemies too much! After a sharp contest of two hours, during which sixty-seven of their men were killed and eighty-four wounded, they surrendered.

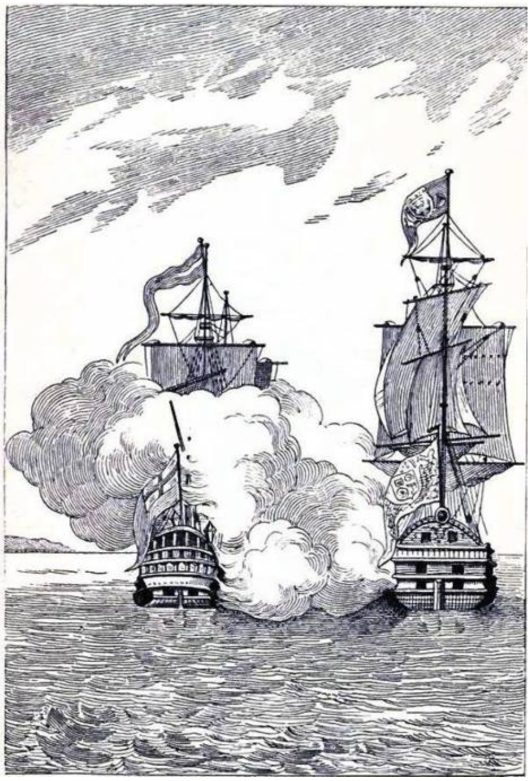

Fight between the *Centurion* and a Spanish galleon.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

It was a rich prize, 1,313,842 “pieces of eight,”[1] and 35,682 ounces of ingot silver, with other merchandise of little value in comparison with the money. This booty, added to others, amounted to nearly 400,000*l*, without taking into account the vessels, goods, &c. of the Spaniards which the English squadron had burnt or destroyed, and which could not be reckoned at less than 600,000*l*.

[1] A Spanish coin, so called, because it represents the eighth of a doubloon, it is worth about nine shillings English money.

Anson convoyed his prize to the Canton River, where he sold it much below its value, for 6000 piastres. He left on the 10th of December, and reached Spithead on the 15th of June, 1744, after an absence of three years and nine months. He made a triumphal entry into London. The half-million of money, which was the result of his numerous prizes, was conveyed through the city in thirty-two chariots, to the sound of trumpets and beating of drums and amidst the shouts of the people.

The money was divided between himself, his officers, and men; the king himself could not claim a share.

Anson was created rear-admiral shortly after his return, and received important commands.

In 1747, he captured the Marquis of La Jonquière Taffanel, after an heroic struggle. For this exploit, he was made First Lord of the Admiralty and Admiral.

In 1758, he covered the attempted descent of the English near St. Malo, and died in London a short time after his return.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN COOK'S PREDECESSORS.

I.

Roggewein — The little that is known of him — The uncertainty of his discoveries — Easter Island — The Pernicious Islands — The Baumans — New Britain — Arrival in Batavia — Byron — Stay at Rio Janeiro and Port Desire — Entrance into Straits of Magellan — Falkland Islands and Port Egmont — The Fuegians — Mas a Fuero — Disappointment Islands — Danger Islands — Tinian — Return to Europe.

As early as 1669, Roggewein the elder had petitioned the Dutch West India Company for three armed vessels, in order to prosecute his discoveries in the Pacific Ocean. His project was favourably received, but a coolness in the relations between Spain and Holland forced the Batavian government to relinquish the expedition for a time. Upon his death-bed Roggewein forced from his son Jacob a promise to carry the plan he had conceived into execution.

Circumstances, over which he had no control, for a long time hindered the fulfilment of his promise. It was only after several voyages in the Indian seas, after having even been judge in the Batavian Justice Court, that at length Jacob Roggewein was in a position to take the necessary steps with the West India Company. We have no means of finding out Roggewein's age in 1721, or of ascertaining what were his claims to the command of an expedition of discovery. Most biographical dictionaries honour him with but a slight mention, perhaps of a couple of lines, and Fleurieu, in his learned and exhaustive account of the Dutch navigator, was unable to find out anything certain about him.

Moreover, the narrative of the voyage was written not by Roggewein, but by a German named Behrens. We may, therefore, with some justice, attribute the obscurities and contradictions of the particulars given, and their general want of accuracy, rather to the narrator than to the navigator. It even appears sometimes (and this is far from improbable), that Roggewein was ignorant of the voyages and discoveries of his predecessors and contemporaries.

Upon the 21st of August, 1721, three vessels set sail from Texel, under his command. They were, the *Eagle* of 36 guns, and with a crew of 111 men, the *Tienhoven* of 28 guns and 100 men, Captain James Bauman, and the galley *African* of 14 guns and a crew of 60 men, Captain Henry Rosenthal. Their voyage across the Atlantic afforded no particulars of interest. Touching at Rio, Roggewein went in search of an island which he named Auke's Magdeland, and which would appear to be the same as the Land of the Virgin, Hawkins' Virginia, and the Archipelago of the Falkland, or Malouine Islands, unless indeed it was Southern Georgia. Although these islands were then well known, it would appear that the Dutch knew little of their whereabouts, as after vainly seeking the Falkland Isles, they set to work to look for the island St. Louis, belonging to the French, apparently quite unaware that they belonged to the same group.

There are few lands indeed which have borne so many different names as Pepys Isles, Conti Isles, and many which we need not mention. It would be easy to count up a dozen.

After discovering, or rather noticing an island below the parallel of the Straits of Magellan, about twenty-four leagues from the American continent, of two hundred leagues in circumference, which he named South Belgium, Roggewein passed through the Straits of Lemaire, or possibly was carried by the current to 62½° of southern latitude. Finally, he regained the coast of Chili; and cast anchor opposite the island of Mocha, which he found deserted. He afterwards reached Juan Fernandez, where he met with the *Tienhoven*, from which he had been separated since the 21st of December.

The vessels left this harbour before the end of March, and steered to the west-north-west, in search of the land discovered by Davis, between 27° and 28° south.

After a search of several days, Roggewein sighted an island upon the 6th of April, 1722, which he named Easter Island.

We will not stop to enumerate the exaggerated dimensions claimed for this island by the Dutch navigator, nor to notice his observations of the manners and customs of the inhabitants. We shall have occasion to refer to them in dealing with the more detailed and reliable accounts of Cook and La Perouse. "But," said Fleurieu, "we shall vainly look in this narrative for any sign of learning on the part of Roggewein's sergeant-major." After describing the Banana, of which the leaves are six or eight feet high, and two or three wide, he adds that this was the leaf with which our first parents covered their nakedness after the Fall; and to make it clearer, further remarks that those who accept this view, do so on account of this leaf being the largest of all the plants growing either in eastern or western countries, thereby plainly indicating his notion of the proportions of Adam and Eve.

A native came on board the *Eagle*. He delighted every one by his good humour, gaiety, and friendly demonstrations.

In the morning Roggewein distinguished an eager multitude upon the shore, which was adorned with high statues, who awaited the arrival of the strangers with impatient curiosity. For no discoverable purpose a gun was fired, one of the natives was killed, and the multitude fled in every direction, — soon, however, to return in greater haste. Roggewein, at the head of 150 men, fired a volley, stretching a number of victims on the ground. Overcome with terror, the natives hastened to appease their terrible visitors by offering them all they possessed.

Fleurieu is of opinion that Easter Island and Davis Land are not identical; but in spite of the reasons with which he supports his opinions, and the differences which he points out in the situation and description of the two islands, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Roggewein and Davis's discoveries are one and the same. No other island answering to the description is to be found in these latitudes, which are now thoroughly well known.

A violent storm of wind drove Roggewein from his anchorage on the eastern side of the island, and obliged him to make for the west-north-west. He traversed the sea called Mauvaise by Schouten, and having sailed eight hundred leagues from Easter Island, fell in with what he took to be the Isle of Dogs, so called by Schouten. Roggewein named it Carlshoff, a name which it still retains.

The squadron passed this island in the night, without touching at it, and was forced in the following night, by the wind and adverse currents, to the midst of a group of low islands, which were quite unexpectedly encountered. The *African* was dashed against a coral rock, and the two consorts narrowly escaped the same fate. Only after five days of unceasing effort, of danger and anxiety, the crew succeeded in extricating the vessels and in regaining the open sea.

The natives of this group were tall, with long and flowing hair. They painted their bodies in various colours. It is generally agreed now to recognize in Roggewein's description of the Pernicious Islands, the group to which Cook gave the name of Palliser Isles.

On the morning succeeding the day in which he had so narrowly escaped the dangers of the Pernicious Islands, Roggewein discovered an island to which he gave the name of Aurora. Lying low, it was scarcely visible above the water, and had the sun not shone out, the *Tienhoven* would have been lost upon it.

As night approached, new land was perceived, to which the name of Vesper was given, and it is difficult to decide whether or no it belonged to the Palliser group.

Roggewein continued to sail between the 15th and 16th degrees, and was not long in finding himself "all of a sudden" in the midst of islands which were half submerged.

"As we approached them," says Behrens, "we saw an immense number of canoes navigating the coasts, and we concluded that the islands were well populated. Upon nearing the land we discovered that it consisted of a mass of different islands, situated close the one to the other, and we were insensibly drawn in amongst them. We began to fear that we should be unable to extricate ourselves. The admiral sent one of the pilots up to the look-out to ascertain how we could get free of them.

"We owed our safety to the calm that prevailed. The slightest movement of the water would have run our ships upon the rocks, without the possibility of assistance reaching us. As it was, we got away without any accident worth mentioning. These islands are six in number, all very pleasant, and taken together may extend some thirty leagues. They are situated twenty-five leagues westward of the Pernicious Islands. We named them the Labyrinth, because we could only leave them by a circuitous route."

Many authors identify this group with Byron's Prince of Wales Islands. Fleurieu holds a different opinion. Dumont d'Urville thinks them identical with the group of Vliegen, already seen by Schouten and Lemaire.

After navigating for three days in a westerly direction, the Dutch caught sight of a beautiful island. Cocoa-nuts, palm-trees, and luxuriant verdure testified to its fertility. But finding it impossible to anchor there, the officers and crews were obliged to visit it in well-armed detachments.

Once more the Dutch needlessly shed the blood of an inoffensive population which had awaited them upon the shore, and whose only fault consisted in their numbers.

After this execution, worthy rather of barbarians than of civilized men, they endeavoured to persuade the natives to return, by offering presents to the chiefs, and by deceitful protestations of friendship. But they were not to be deceived by the latter, and having enticed the sailors into the interior, the inhabitants rushed upon them and attacked them with stones. Although a volley of bullets stretched a number upon the ground, they still bravely persisted in attacking the strangers, and forced them to re-embark, carrying with them their dead and wounded.

Of course the Dutch cried treason, not knowing how to find epithets strong enough for the treachery and disloyalty of their adversaries. But, who struck the first blow? Who was the aggressor? Even admitting that a few thefts were committed, which is probable enough, was it necessary to visit them with so severe a punishment, to revenge upon an entire population the wrong-doing of a few individuals, who after all can have had no very strict notions of honesty?

In spite of their losses, the Dutch called this island, in memory of the refreshment they had enjoyed there, Recreation Island. Roggewein gives its situation as below the sixth parallel, but his longitude is so incorrect, that it is impossible to depend upon it.

The question now arises, whether the captain should prosecute his search for the Island Espirito Santo de Quiros in the west, or whether, on the contrary, he should sail northward and reach the East Indies during the favourable season?

The counsel of war, which Roggewein called to the consideration of this question, chose the latter alternative.

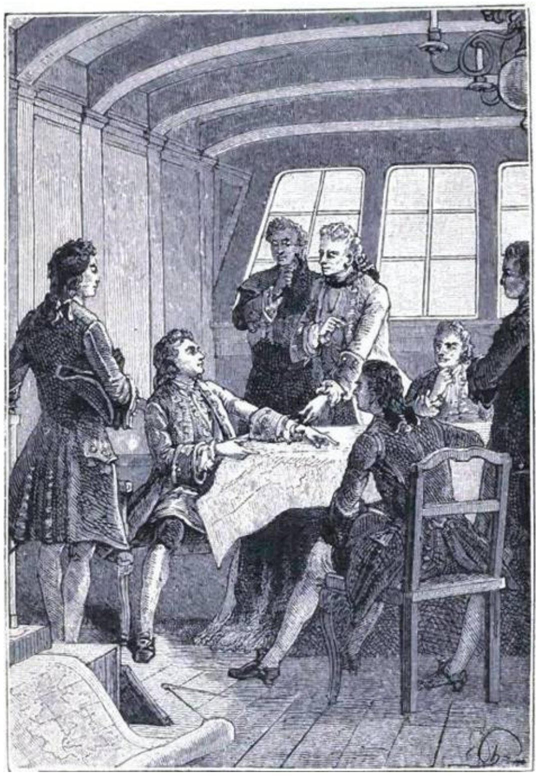

“The counsel chose the latter alternative.”

The third day after this decision, three islands were simultaneously discovered. They received the name of Bauman, after the captain of the *Tienhoven,* who was the first to catch sight of them. The natives came round the vessels to traffic, whilst an immense crowd of the inhabitants lined the shore, armed with bows and spears. They were white skinned, and only differed from Europeans in appearance, when very much tanned by the sun. Their bodies were not painted. A strip of stuff, artistically arranged and fringed, covered them from the waist to the heels. Hats of the same material protected their heads and necklaces of sweet-smelling flowers, adorned their necks.

"It must be confessed," says Behrens, "that this is the most civilized nation, as well as the most honest, which we have met with in the southern seas. Charmed with our arrival, they received us like gods, and when we showed our intention of leaving, they testified most lively regrets."

From the description, these would appear to have been the inhabitants of the Navigators Islands.

After having encountered the islands which Roggewein believed to be Cocoa and Traitor Islands, already visited by Schouten and Lemaire, and which Fleurieu, imagining them to be a Dutch discovery, named Roggewein Islands; after having caught sight of Tienhoven and Groningue Islands, which were believed by Pingré to be identical with Santa Cruz of Mendana, the expedition finally reached the coast of New Ireland. Here the discoverers perpetrated new massacres. From thence they went to the shores of New Guinea, and after crossing the Moluccas, cast anchor at Batavia.

There their fellow-countrymen, less humane than many of the tribes they had visited, confiscated the two vessels, imprisoned the officers and sailors indiscriminately, and sent them to Europe to take their trial. They had committed the unpardonable crime of having entered countries belonging to the East India Company, whilst they themselves were in the employ of the West India Company.

The result was a trial, and the East India Company was compelled to restore all that it had appropriated, and to pay heavy damages.

We lose all sight of Roggewein after his arrival at Texel upon the 11th July, 1723, and no details are to be obtained of the last years of his life. Grateful thanks are due to Fleurieu for having unravelled this "chaotic" narrative, and for having thrown some light upon an expedition which deserves to be better known.

Upon the 17th of June, 1764, Commodore Byron received instructions signed by the Lord of the Admiralty. They were to the following effect, — ”As nothing contributes more to the glory of this nation, in its character of a maritime power, to the dignity of the British crown, and to the progress of its national commerce and navigation, than the discovery of new regions; and as there is every reason for believing in the existence of lands and islands in great numbers, between the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Magellan, which have been hitherto unknown to the European powers, and which are situated in latitudes suitable for navigation, and in climates productive of different marketable commodities; and as moreover, his Majesty’s islands, called Pepys and Falkland Islands, situated as will be described, have not been sufficiently examined for a just appreciation of their shores and productions, although they were discovered by English navigators; his Majesty, taking all these considerations into account, and conceiving the existing state of profound peace now enjoyed by his subjects especially suitable for such an undertaking, has decided to put it into execution.”

Upon what seaman would the choice of the English Government fall?

Commodore John Byron, born on the 8th of November, 1723, was the man selected. From his earliest years, he had shown an enthusiastic love of seafaring life, and at the age of seventeen had offered his services upon one of the vessels that formed Admiral Anson’s squadron, when it was sent out for the destruction of Spanish settlements upon the Pacific coast.

We have already given an account of the troubles which befell this expedition before the incredible fortune which was to distinguish its last voyage.

The vessel upon which Byron embarked was the *Wager*. It was wrecked in passing through the Straits of Magellan, and the crew being taken prisoners by the Spaniards, were sent to Chili. After a captivity which lasted at least three years, Byron effected his escape, and was rescued by a vessel from St. Malo, which took him to Europe. He returned at once to service, and distinguished himself in various encounters during the war with France. Doubtless it was the recollection of his first voyage round the world, so disastrously interrupted, which procured for him the distinction conferred upon him by the Admiralty.

The vessels entrusted to him were carefully armed. The *Dauphin* was a sixth-rate man-of-war, and carried 24 guns, 150 sailors, 3 lieutenants, and 37 petty officers. The *Tamar* was a sloop of 16 guns, and 90 sailors, 3 lieutenants, 27 petty officers, commanded by Captain Mouat.

The start was not fortunate. The expedition left the Downs upon the 21st of June, but the *Dauphin* grounded before leaving the Thames, and was obliged to put into Plymouth for repairs.

Upon the 3rd of July, anchor was finally weighed, and ten days later, Byron put in at Funchal in the Island of Madeira for refreshments. He was forced to halt again at Cape Verd Islands, to take in water, that with which he was supplied having become rapidly wasted.

Nothing further occurred to interrupt the voyage, until the two English vessels sighted Cape Frio.

Byron remarked a singular fact, since fully verified, that the copper sheathing of his vessels appeared to disperse the fish, which he expected to meet with in large quantities.

The tropical heat, and constant rains, had struck down a large proportion of the crew, hence the urgent need of rest and of fresh victuals which they experienced.

These they hoped to find at Rio de Janeiro, where they arrived on the 12th December. Byron was warmly welcomed by the viceroy, and thus describes his first interview.

“When I made my visit, I was received in the greatest state, about sixty officers were drawn up by the palace. The guard was under arms. They were fine, well-drilled men. His Excellency accompanied by the nobility received me on the staircase. Fifteen salutes from the neighbouring fort honoured my arrival. We then entered the audience-chamber, and after a conversation of a quarter of an hour, I took my leave, and was conducted back with the same ceremonies.”

We shall see a little later how slightly the reception given to Captain Cook some years afterwards resembled that just related.

The Commodore obtained ready permission to disembark his sick, and found every facility for revictualling. His sole cause of complaint was the repeated endeavour of the Portuguese to tempt his sailors to desert.

The insupportable heat experienced by the crew shortened their stay at Rio. Upon the 16th of October, anchor was weighed, but it was five days before a land breeze allowed the vessels to gain the open sea.

Up to this moment, the destination of the expedition had been kept secret. Byron now summoned the captain of the *Tamar* on board, and in the presence of the assembled sailors, read his instructions.

These enjoined him not to proceed to the East Indies, as had been supposed, but to prosecute discoveries, which might prove of great importance to England in the southern seas. With this object the Lords of the Admiralty promised double pay to the crew, with future advancement and enjoyments, if they were pleased with their services. The second part of this short harangue was the most acceptable to the sailors and was received by them with joyous demonstrations.

Until the 29th of October no incident occurred in their passage. Upon that date sudden and violent squalls succeeded each other and culminated in a fearful tempest, the violence of which was so great that the Commodore ordered four guns to be thrown overboard, to avoid foundering. In the morning the weather moderated somewhat, but it was as cold as in England at the same time of year, although in this quarter of the globe the month of November answers to the month of May. As the wind continued to drive the vessel eastward, Byron began to think that he should experience great difficulty in avoiding the east of Patagonia.

Suddenly, upon the 12th of November, although no land was marked on the chart in this position, a repeated cry of “Land! land ahead!” arose. Clouds at this moment obscured almost the entire horizon, and it thundered and lightened without intermission.

“It seemed to me,” says Byron, “that what had at first appeared to be an island, was really two steep mountains, but, upon looking windward, it was apparent that the land which belonged to these mountains stretched far to the south-east.” Consequently, he steered south-west. “I sent some officers to the masthead to watch the wind, and to verify the discovery. They unanimously asserted that they saw a great extent of country. We then went

E.S.E. The land appeared to present entirely the same appearance. The mountains looked blue, as is often the case in dark and rainy weather, when one is near them. Shortly afterwards, several of our number fancied they could distinguish waves breaking upon a sandy shore, but after steering with the utmost caution for an hour, that which we had taken for land disappeared suddenly, and we were convinced to our amazement that it had been only a land of fog! I have passed all my life at sea," continues Byron, "since I was twenty-seven, but I never could have conceived so complete and sustained an illusion.

"There is no doubt, that had the weather not cleared so suddenly as it did, we should one and all on board have declared that we had discovered land in this latitude. We were then in latitude 43° 46' S. and longitude 60° 5' W."

The next morning a terrible gale of wind arose, heralded by the piercing cries of many hundred birds flying before it. It lasted only twenty minutes — sufficiently long, however, to throw the vessel on its beam end before it was possible to let go the halliards. At the same moment a blow from the sheet of the mainsail overthrew the first lieutenant, and sent him rolling to a distance, while the mizen-mast, which was not entirely lowered, was torn to pieces.

The following days were not much more favourable. Moreover, the ship had sunk so little, that she drifted away as the wind freshened. After such a troublesome voyage, we may guess how gladly Byron reached Penguin Island and Port Desire on the 24th of November. But the delights of this station did not by any means equal the anticipations of the crew.

The English sailors landed and upon advancing into the interior, met only with a desert country, and sandy hills, without a single tree. They found no game, but they saw a few guanacos too far off for a shot; they were, however, able to catch some large hares, which were not difficult to secure. The seals and sea birds, however, furnished food for an entire fleet.

Badly situated and badly sheltered, Port Desire offered the further inconvenience that only brackish water could be procured there. Not a trace of inhabitants was to be found! A long stay in this place being useless and dangerous, Byron started in search of Pepys Island on the 25th.

The position of this island was most uncertain. Halley placed it 80° east of the continent. Cowley, the only person who asserted that he had seen it, declared it was about 47° latitude, S. but did not fix its longitude. Here then was an interesting problem to solve.

After having explored to the N. to the S. and to the E. Byron, satisfied that this island was imaginary, set sail for the Sebaldines, in haste to reach the first possible port where he could obtain food and water, of which he had pressing need. A storm overtook him, during which the waves were so terrific, that Byron declared he had never seen them equalled, even when he doubled Cape Horn with Admiral Anson. This danger surmounted, he recognized Cape Virgin, which forms the northern entrance to the Straits of Magellan.

As soon as the vessels neared the shore, the sailors distinguished a crowd of men on horseback, who set up a white tent, and signed to them to land. Curious to see these Patagonians, about whom preceding navigators had so disagreed, Byron landed with a strong detachment of armed soldiers.

He found nearly 500 men, most of them on horseback, of gigantic stature, and looking like monsters in human shape. Their bodies were painted in the most hideous manner, their faces traced with various coloured lines, their eyes encircled with blue, black, or red, so that they had the appearance of wearing enormous spectacles. Almost all were naked, with the exception of a skin thrown over their shoulders — the wool inside, and a few of them wore boots. Truly, a singular costume! primitive and not expensive!

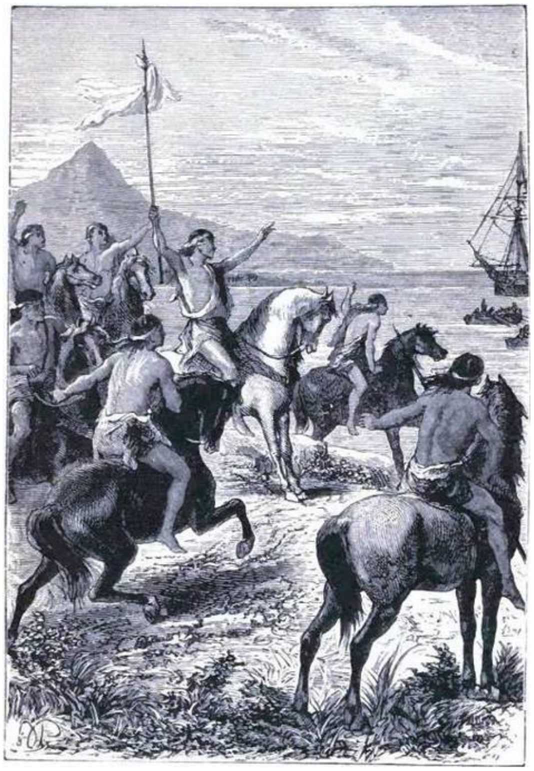

“Most of them on horseback.”

With them were numbers of dogs and of very small horses, excessively ugly, but not the less extremely swift.

The women rode on horseback like the men without stirrups, and all galloped on the shore, although it was covered with immense stones and very slippery.

The interview was friendly. Byron distributed numbers of toys, ribbons, glass trinkets, and tobacco, to the crowd of giants.

As soon as he had brought the *Dauphin* to the wind, Byron entered the Straits of Magellan with the tide. It was not his intention to cross it, but merely to find a safe and commodious harbour, where he might secure wood and water before starting in his search for the Falkland Islands.

On leaving the second outlet, he met with St. Elizabeth, St. Bartholomew, and St. George Islands, and Sandy Point. Near the last he found a delicious country, springs, woods, fields covered with flowers, which shed an exquisite perfume in the air. The country was swarming with hundreds of birds, of which one species received the name of the “Painted Goose,” from the exceeding brilliancy of its plumage. But nowhere could a spot be found where the ship’s boat could approach without extreme danger. The water was shallow everywhere, and the breakers were heavy. Fish of many kinds — more especially mullets, — geese, snipe, teal, and other birds of excellent flavour, were caught and killed by the crew.

Byron was obliged to continue his voyage to Port Famine, which he reached on the 27th of December.

“We were sheltered from all winds,” he says, “with the exception of the south-east, which rarely blows, and no damage could accrue to vessels which might be driven on shore in the bay, because of the profound calm that prevails. Wood enough floated near the shore to stock a thousand vessels, so we had no need to go and cut it in the forest.

“The River Sedger ran at the bottom of the bay, the water of which is excellent. Its banks are planted with large and beautiful trees, excellent for masts; parrots, and birds of brilliant plumage thronged the branches.” Abundance reigned in Famine Port during Byron’s stay.

As soon as his crew were completely recovered from their fatigue and the ships well provisioned, the Commodore, on the 5th of January, 1765, resumed his search for the Falkland Islands. Seven days later, he discovered a land in which he fancied he recognized the Islands of Sebald de Wert, but upon nearing them he found that what he had taken for three islands, was, in reality, but one, which extended far south. He had no remaining doubt that he had found the group marked upon the charts of the time as New Ireland, 51° south latitude, and 63°, 32’ west longitude.

First of all, Byron steered clear of them, fearing to be thrown upon a coast with which he was unacquainted, and after this summary bearing, a detachment was selected to skirt the coast as closely as possible, and look for a safe and commodious harbour — which was soon met with. It received the name of Port Egmont, in honour of Earl Egmont, First Lord of the Admiralty.

“I did not expect,” says Byron, “that it would be possible to find so good a harbour. The depth was excellent, the supply of water easy; all the ships of England might be anchored there in shelter from winds.

“Geese, ducks, and teal abounded to such an extent, that the sailors were tired of eating them. Want of wood was general, with the exception of some trunks of trees which floated by the shore, and which were apparently brought here from the Strait of Magellan.

“The wild sorel and celery, both excellent anti-scorbutics, were to be found in abundance. Sea-calves and seals, as well as penguins, were so numerous that it was impossible to walk upon the strand without seeing them rush away in herds. Animals resembling wolves, but more like foxes in shape, with the exception of their height and tails, several times attacked the sailors, who had great difficulty in defending themselves. It would be no easy task to guess how they came here, distant as the country is from any other continent, — by at least a hundred leagues; or to imagine where they found shelter, in a country barren of vegetation, producing only rushes, sword-grass, and not a single tree."

The account of this portion of Byron's voyage, in Didot's biography, is a tissue of errors.

"The flotilla," says M. Alfred de Lacaze, "became entangled in the Straits of Magellan, and was forced to put into a bay near Port Famine, which was named Port Egmont." A singular mistake, which proves how lightly the articles of this important collection were sometimes written.

Byron took possession of Port Egmont and the adjacent isles, called Falkland, in the name of the King of England. Cowley had named them Pepys Islands, but in all probability the first discoverer was Captain Davis in 1592. Two years later Sir Richard Hawkins found land which was thought to be the same, and named it Virginia, in honour of his queen Elizabeth. Lastly, vessels from St. Malo visited this group, and no doubt it was owing to this fact that Frezier called them the Malouines Islands.

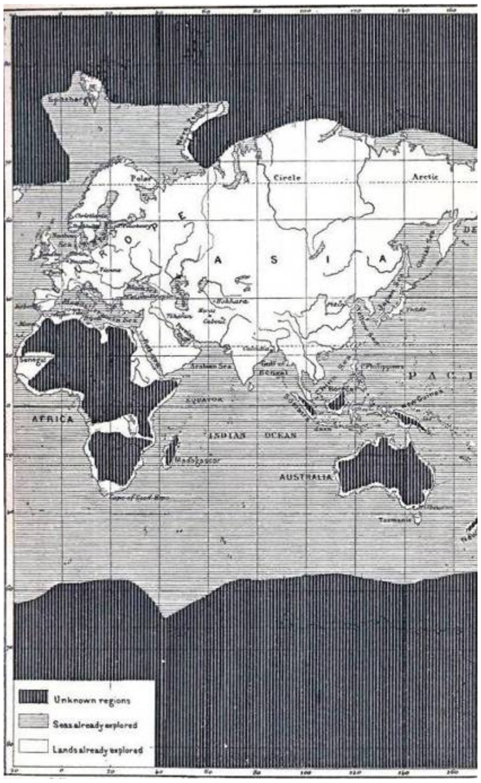
Spitzberg
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Borneo
Sumatra
Java
New Guinea
EQUATOR
AFRICA
INDIAN OCEAN
Madagascar
AUSTRALIA
Cape of Good Hope
Tasmania
Unknown regions
Seas already explored
Lands already explored

Engraved by E. Morieu 23, r. de Brea Paris.

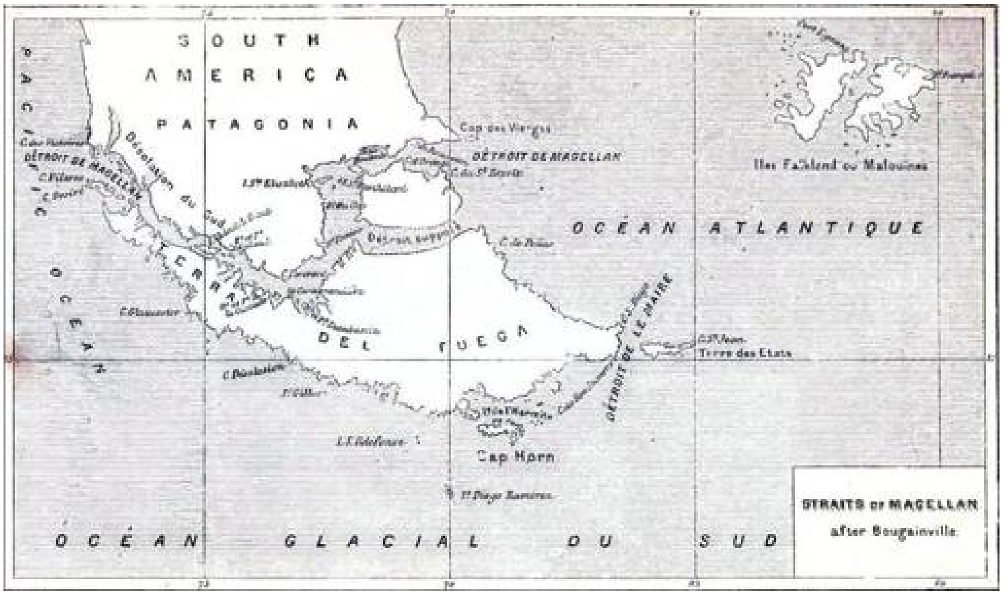
SOUTH AMERICA
PATAGONIA
PACIFIC
OCEAN
Cap des Vierges
DÉTROIT DE MAGELLAN
Iles Falkland ou Malouines
OCÉAN ATLANTIQUE
TERRA DEL FUEGO
DÉTROIT DE LE MAIRE
Terre des Etats
Cap Horn
OCÉAN GLACIAL DU SUD
STRAITS of MAGELLAN
after Bougainville

Gravé par E. Morieu.

After having named a number of rocks, islets, and capes, Byron left Port Egmont on the 27th of January, and set sail for Port Desire, which he reached nine days later. There he found the *Florida* — a transport vessel, which had brought from England the provisions and necessary appliances for his long voyage.

But this anchorage was too dangerous. The *Florida* and the *Tamar* were in too bad a condition to be equal to the long operation of transhipment. Byron therefore sent one of his petty officers, who had a thorough knowledge of the Strait of Magellan, on board the *Florida*, and with his two consorts set sail for Port Famine. He met with a French ship so many times in the straits, that it appeared as if she were bent upon the same course as himself. Upon returning to England, he ascertained that she was the *Aigle*, Captain M. de

Bougainville, who was coasting Patagonia in search of the wood needed by the French colony in the Falkland Islands.

During the various excursions in the straits, the English expedition received several visits from the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego.

“I have never seen such wretched beings,” says Byron; “they were entirely naked, with the exception of a skin thrown across the shoulders. They offered me the bows and arrows with which they were armed in exchange for beads, necklaces, and other trifles. Their arrows, which were two feet long, were made of cane, and pointed with greenish stone; the bows were three feet long and were furnished with catgut for strings.

“Their nourishment consisted of certain fruits, mussels, and the remains of putrid fish thrown upon the beach during the storms. Pigs only could have relished their food. It consisted of large pieces of whale, already putrified, the odour of which impregnated the air for some distance. One of them tore the carrion in pieces with his teeth, and handed the bits to his companions, who devoured them with the voracity of wild beasts.

“Several of these miserable beings decided to come on board. Wishing to give them a pleasant reception, one of my petty officers played the violin and the sailors danced. This delighted them. Anxious to show their appreciation, one of their number hastened to his pirogue (small boat) and returned with a little bag of wolf-skin, containing a red ointment, with which he rubbed the face of the violinist. He was anxious to pay me the same attention, but I drew back. He then tried every means of overcoming my delicacy, and I had great difficulty in avoiding the mark of esteem he was so anxious to give me.”

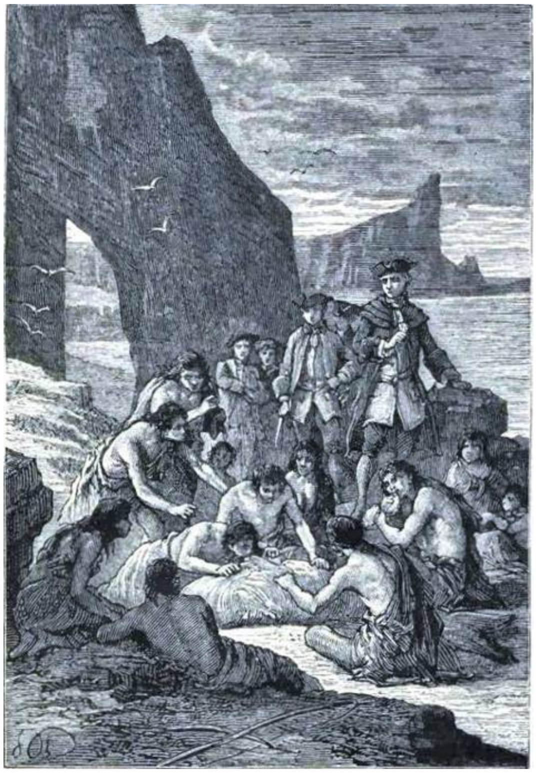

“One of them tore the carrion with his teeth.”

It will not be out of place here to record the opinion held by Byron, an experienced seaman, upon the advantages and disadvantages offered to the passage through the Straits of Magellan. He does not agree with the majority of navigators who have visited these latitudes. He says, —

“Our account of the difficulties and dangers we encountered may lead to the idea that it is not prudent to attempt this passage, and that ships leaving Europe for the southern seas, should prefer to double Cape Horn. I am by no means of this opinion, although I have twice doubled Cape Horn. There is one season in the year when not only one ship, but an entire fleet, might safely cross the straits, and to profit by this season one should enter them in the month of December. One inestimable advantage which should weigh with all navigators is that celery, scurvy-grass, fruits, and other anti-scorbutic vegetables abound. Such obstacles as we encountered, and which delayed us from the 17th of February till the 8th of April in the straits, were mainly due to the equinoctial season, a season which is invariably stormy, and which, more than once, tried our patience.”

Until the 26th of April, the day upon which they found Mas-a-Fuero, belonging to the Juan Fernandez group, Byron had sailed to the N.W. He hastened to disembark several sailors, who after obtaining water and wood, chased wild goats, which they found better flavoured than venison in England.

During their stay in this port, a singular fact occurred. A violent surf broke over the shore, and prevented the shore-boats from reaching the strand. Although he was provided with a life-belt, one of the sailors, who could not swim, refused to jump into the sea to reach the boat. Threatened with being left alone on the island, he still persistently refused to venture, when one of his companions cleverly encircled his waist with a cord, in which he had made a running knot, and one end of which was made fast to the boat. When he reached the vessel, Hawksworth’s narrative relates, that the unfortunate fellow had swallowed so much water that he appeared lifeless. He was accordingly hung up by the heels, whereupon he soon regained his senses, and the next day was completely restored. But in spite of this truly wonderful recovery, we can hardly venture to recommend this course of treatment to humane rescue societies.

Leaving Mas-a-Fuero, Byron changed his route, with the intention of seeking Davis Land, now known as Easter Island, which was placed by geographers in 27° 30’, a hundred leagues westward of the American coast. Eight days were devoted to this search.

Having found nothing after this cruise, which he was unable to prolong, Byron, following his intention of visiting the Solomon group, steered for the north-west. Upon the 22nd of May scurvy broke out on board the vessels, and quickly made alarming havoc.

Fortunately land was perceived from the look-out on the 7th of June in 140° 58’ west longitude.

Next day, the fleet neared two islands, which presented an attractive appearance.

Large bushy trees, shrubs and groves were seen, and a number of natives who hastened to the shore and lighted fires.

Byron sent a boat in search of anchorage. It returned without having found the requisite depth at a cable’s length from shore.

The unfortunate victims of scurvy who had crawled on to the forecastle, cast looks of sorrowful longing at the fertile islands, which held the remedy for their sufferings and which Nature placed beyond their reach!

The narrative says, —

“They saw the cocoa-trees in abundance, laden with fruit, the milk of which is probably the most powerful anti-scorbutic in the world. They had reason for supposing that limes, bananas, and other tropical fruits abounded, and to add to their torments they saw the shells of tortoises floating on the shore.”

All these delights, which would have restored them to vigour, were no more attainable than if they had been separated by half the globe, but the sight of them increased the misery of their privations.

Byron was anxious to curtail the tantalizing misery of his unfortunate crew, and giving the name of Disappointment Islands to the group, he set sail once more on the 8th of June.

The very next day he found a new land, long, flat, covered with cocoa-nut trees. In its midst was a lake with a little islet. This feature alone was indicative of the madreporic formation of the soil, simple deposit, which was not yet, but which in time would become, an island. The boat sent to sound met in every direction with a coast as steep as a wall.

Meanwhile the natives made hostile demonstrations. Two men entered the boat. One stole a sailor’s waistcoat, another put out his hand for the quarter-master’s cocked hat, but not knowing how to deal with it, pulled it towards him, instead of lifting it up, which gave the quarter-master an opportunity of interfering with his intention. Two large pirogues, each manned by thirty paddlers, showed an intention of attacking the vessels, but the latter immediately chased them. Just as they were running ashore a struggle ensued, and the English, all but overwhelmed by numbers, were forced to use their arms. Three or four natives were killed.

Next day, the sailors and such of the sick as could leave their hammocks landed.

The natives, intimidated by the lesson they had received in the evening, remained in concealment, whilst the English picked cocoa-nuts, and gathered anti-scorbutic plants. These timely refreshments were so useful that in a few days there was not a sick man on board.

Parrots, rarely beautiful, and tame doves, and several kinds of unknown birds composed the fauna of the island, which received the name of King George — that which was discovered afterwards was called Prince of Wales' Island. All these lands belonged to the Pomotou group, which is also known as the Low Islands, a very suitable name for this archipelago.

On the 21st again a new chain of islands surrounded by breakers was sighted. Byron did not attempt a thorough investigation of these, as to do so he would have incurred risks out of proportion to the benefit to be gained. He called them the Dangerous Islands.

Six days later, Duke of York Island was discovered. The English found no inhabitants, but carried off two hundred cocoa-nuts, which appeared to them of inestimable value.

A little farther, in latitude 1° 18' south, longitude 173° 46' west, a desert island received the name of Byron; it was situated eastward of the Gilbert group.

The heat was overwhelming, and the sailors, weakened, by their long voyage and want of proper food, in addition to the putrid water they had been forced to drink, were almost all attacked by dysentery.

At length, on the 28th of July, Byron joyfully recognized Saypan and Tinian Islands, which form part of the Marianne or Ladrone Islands, and he prepared to anchor in the very spot where Lord Anson had cast anchor with the *Centurion*. Tents were immediately prepared for the sufferers from scurvy. Almost all the sailors had been attacked by this terrible disease, many even had been at the point of death. The captain undertook to explore the dense wood which extended to the very edge of the shore, in search of the lovely country so enthusiastically described in the account written by

Lord Anson’s chaplain. How far were these enchanting descriptions from the truth! Impenetrable forests met him on every side, overgrown plants, briars, and tangled shrubs, at every step caught and tore his clothes. At the same time the explorers were attacked and stung by clouds of mosquitoes. Game was scarce and wild, the water detestable, the roadstead was never more dangerous than at this season.

The halt was made, therefore, under unfortunate auspices. Still, in the end limes, bitter oranges, cocoa-nuts, bread-fruits, guavas, and others were found. But although these productions were beneficial to the invalids, who were shortly restored to vigour, the malarious atmosphere caused such violent fever that two sailors succumbed to it. In addition, the rain fell unceasingly and the heat was overpowering. Byron says that he never experienced such terrific heat, even in his visits to the coast of Guinea, the East Indies, or St. Thomas Island, which is immediately below the equator.

Fowls and wild pigs which weighed about 2 cwt. each, were easily procurable, but had to be eaten immediately, as in less than a hour decomposition took place. Lastly, the fish caught upon this shore was so unwholesome, that even those who ate it in moderation became dangerously ill, and risked their lives.

After a stay of nine weeks, the two ships, amply provisioned, left the port of Tinian. Byron continued his route to the north, after having passed Anatacan Island, already discovered by Anson. He hoped to meet the N.E. monsoon before reaching the Bashees, which form the extreme north of the Philippines. Upon the 22nd he perceived Grafton Island, the most northerly of this group, and upon the 3rd of November he arrived at Timoan, which had been mentioned by Dampier as a favourable place for procuring provisions. The natives, however, who are of Malay descent, refused the offer of hatchets, knives, and iron instruments in exchange for fowls — they demanded rupees. Finally they accepted some handkerchiefs in payment of a dozen fowls, a goat and its kid. Fortunately fish was abundant, as it would have been impossible to procure fresh victuals.

Byron set sail once more on the 7th November, passed Poulo Condor at a distance, stopped at Poulo Taya, where he encountered a vessel bearing Dutch colours, but which was manned entirely by Malays. Reaching Sumatra, he explored the coast and cast anchor at Batavia, the principal seat of Dutch power in the East Indies, on the 20th November.

At this time there were more than one hundred ships, large and small, in this roadstead, so flourishing was the trade of the East India Company at this epoch. The town was at the height of its prosperity. Its large and open thoroughfares, its admirable canals, bordered by pine-trees, its regular buildings, singularly recalled the cities of the Netherlands.

Portuguese, Chinese, English, Dutch, Persians, Moors, and Malays, mixed in the streets, and transacted business. Fêtes, receptions, gaieties of every kind impressed new comers with a high idea of the prosperity of the town, and contributed to make their stay a pleasant one. The sole drawback, and it was a serious one to crews after so long a voyage, was the unhealthiness of the locality, where endemic fevers abound. Byron being aware of this, hurried the embarkation of his provisions, and set sail after an interval of twelve days.

Short as their stay had been, it had been too long. The fleet had scarcely reached the strait of the sound, before a malignant fever broke out among the crew, disabling half their number, and ending in the death of three sailors.

After forty-eight days' navigation, Byron perceived the coast of Africa, and cast anchor three days later in Table Bay.

Cape Town furnished all that he could require. Provisions, water, medicines, were all shipped with a rapidity which sufficiently indicated their anxiety to return, and once more the prow of the vessel was directed homewards.

Two incidents occurred on the passage across the Atlantic, thus described by Byron.

"Off St. Helena, in fine weather, and with a favourable wind, the vessel, then at a considerable distance from land, received a shock which was as severe as if she had struck on a rock. Its violence so alarmed us that we all ran to the bridge. Our fears were dissipated when we saw the sea tinged with blood to a great distance. We concluded that we had come in contact with a whale or a grampus, and that our ship had apparently received no damage, which was true."

A few days later, however, the *Tamar* was found to be in such a dilapidated state, such grave injuries were discovered in her rudder, that it was necessary to invent something to replace it, and to enable her to reach the Antilles, it being too great a risk to allow her to continue her voyage.

Upon the 9th of May, 1766, the *Dauphin* anchored in the Downs, after a voyage round the world which had lasted for twenty-three months.

This was the most fortunate of all the circumnavigation voyages undertaken by the English. Up to this date, no purely scientific voyage had been attempted. If it was less fruitful of results than had been anticipated, the fault lay not so much with the captain as with the Lords of the Admiralty.

They were not sufficiently accurate in their instructions, and had not taken the trouble (as was done in later voyages) of sending special professors of the various branches of science with the expedition.

Full justice, however, was paid to Byron. The title of Admiral was conferred on him, and an important command in the East Indies was entrusted to him. But we have no interest in the latter part of his life, which ended in 1786, and to that, therefore, we need not allude.

II.

Wallis and Carteret — Preparations for the Expedition — Difficult navigation of the Strait of Magellan — Separation of the *Dauphin* and the *Swallow* — Whitsunday Island — Queen Charlotte’s Island — Cumberland, Henry Islands, &c. — Tahiti — Howe, Boscawen, and Keppel Islands — Wallis Island — Batavia — The Cape — The Downs — Discovery of Pitcairn, Osnaburgh, and Gloucester Islands by Carteret — Santa Cruz Archipelago — Solomon Islands — St. George’s canal and New Ireland, Portland and Admiralty Islands — Batavia and Macassar — Meeting with Bougainville in the Atlantic.

The impulse once given, England inaugurated the series of scientific expeditions which were to prove so fruitful of results, and to raise her naval reputation to such a height.

Admirable indeed is the training acquired in these voyages round the world. In them the crew, the officers, and sailors, are constantly brought face to face with unforeseen difficulties and dangers, which call forth the best qualities of the sailor, the soldier, and the man!

If France succumbed to the naval superiority of Great Britain during the revolutionary and imperial wars, was it not fully as much owing to this stern training of the British seaman, as to the internal dissensions which deprived France of the services of the greater part of her naval staff?

Be this as it may, the English Admiralty, shortly after Byron's return, organized a new expedition. Their preparations appear to have been far too hasty. The *Dauphin* only anchored in the Downs at the beginning of May, and six weeks later, on the 19th of June, Captain Samuel Wallis received the command.

This officer, after attaining the highest rank in the military marine service, had been entrusted with an important command in Canada, and had assisted in the capture of Louisburgh. We cannot tell what qualities commended him to the Admiralty in preference to his companions in arms, but in any case, the noble lords had no reason to regret their decision. Wallis hastened the needful preparations on board the *Dauphin*, and on the 21st of August (less than a month after receiving his commission), he joined the sloop *Swallow* and the *Prince Frederick* in Plymouth Harbour.

The latter was in charge of Lieutenant Brine, the former was commanded by Philip Carteret. Both were most distinguished officers who had just returned from a voyage round the world with Commodore Byron, and whose reputation was destined to be increased by their second voyage.

The *Swallow*, unfortunately, appears to have been quite unfit for the service demanded of her. Having already been thirty years in service, the sheathing was very much worn, and her keel was not studded with nails, which might have served instead of sheathing to protect her from parasites. Again the provisions and marketable commodities were so unequally divided, that the *Swallow* received much less than the *Dauphin*. Carteret begged in vain for a rope yarn, a forge, and various things which his experience told him would be indispensable.

This rebuff confirmed Carteret in his notion that he should not get further than the Falkland Isles, but none the less he took every precaution which his experience dictated to him.

As soon as the equipment was complete, on the 22nd of April 1766, the vessels set sail. It did not take Wallis long to find out that the *Swallow* was a bad sailer, and that he might anticipate much trouble during his voyage. However, no accident happened during the voyage to Madeira, where the vessels put in to revictual.

Upon leaving the port, the commander supplied Carteret with a copy of his instructions, and selected Port Famine, in the Strait of Magellan, as a rendezvous, in case of separation.

Their stay at Port Praya, in the Island of Santiago, was shortened on account of the ravages committed there by the small-pox, and Wallis would not even allow his crew to land. Shortly after leaving the Equator, the *Prince Frederick* gave signs of distress, and it was necessary to send the carpenter on board to stop up a leak on the larboard side. This vessel, which was provided with inferior provisions, counted already a number of sick among her crew.

Towards eight o’clock in the evening of the 19th of November, the crews perceived in the N.E. a meteor of extraordinary appearance, moving in a straight line towards the S.W. with marvellous rapidity. It was visible for almost a minute, and left behind a trail of light, so bright that the deck was illuminated as if it were mid-day.

On the 8th of December, the coast of Patagonia was at last visible. Wallis skirted it until he reached Cape Virgin, where he landed with the armed detachments of the *Swallow* and *Prince Frederick*. A crowd of natives awaited them upon the shore, and received with apparent satisfaction the knives, scissors, and other trifles which it was usual to distribute upon such occasions, but they would not part with guanacos, ostriches, or any other game which were seen in their possession for any consideration. Wallis says, —

“We took the measure of the largest of them, one was six feet six inches in height, several were five feet five inches, but the average was five foot six, or six feet.”

It must be remembered that these were English feet, which are only 305 millemetres.

If these natives were not quite so tall as the giants mentioned by previous navigators, they were very little less striking.

“Each one,” continues the narrative, “carried a strange kind of weapon, it consisted of two round stones, covered with copper, each of which weighed about a pound, and they were attached at both ends to a cord about eight feet long. They used them like slings, holding one of the stones in the hand, and whirling the other round the head until it attained sufficient velocity, when they threw it towards the object they wished to strike. They managed this weapon so adroitly that they could strike a butt no larger than a shilling with both stones, at a distance of fifteen roods. They did not, however, employ it in chasing guanacos or ostriches.”

Wallis conducted eight of these Patagonians on board. They did not appear surprised, as one would have expected, at the number of new and extraordinary things they met with. They advanced, retired, made a thousand grimaces before the mirrors, shouted with laughter, and conversed animatedly among themselves. Their attention was attracted by the pigs for a moment, but they were immensely amused with the guinea fowls and turkeys. It was difficulty to persuade them to leave the vessel. At last they returned to the shore, singing and making signs of delight to their countrymen who awaited them on the bank.

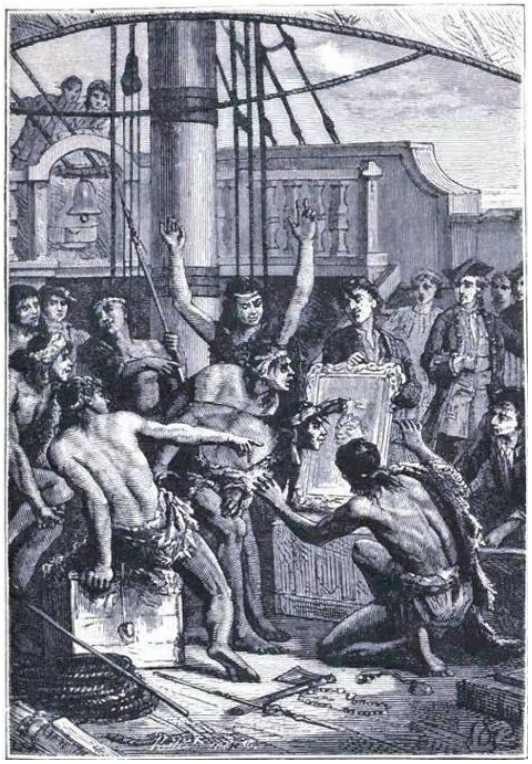

“They made a thousand grimaces.”

On the 17th of December, Wallis signalled the *Swallow* to head the squadron for the passage of the Straits of Magellan.

At Port Famine the commander had two tents erected on shore for the sick, the wood-cutters, and the sailors. Fish in sufficient quantities for each day’s meal, abundance of celery, and acid fruits similar to cranberries and barberries, were to be found in this harbour, and in the course of about a fortnight these remedies completely restored the numerous sufferers from scurvy. The vessels were repaired and partially calked, the sails were mended, the rigging, which had been a good deal strained, was overhauled and repaired, and all was soon ready for sea again.

But Wallis first ordered a large quantity of wood to be cut and conveyed on board the *Prince Frederick*, for transport to the Falkland Isles, where it is not obtainable. At the same time he had hundreds of young trees carefully dug up, and the roots covered in their native soil to facilitate their transplantation in Port Egmont, that in taking root — as there was reason to hope they would — they might supply the barren archipelago with this precious commodity.

Lastly, the provisions were divided between the *Dauphin* and the *Swallow*. The former taking sufficient for a year, the latter for ten months.

We will not enlarge upon the different incidents which befell the two ships in the Straits of Magellan, such as sudden gales, tempests and snowstorms, irregular and rapid currents, heavy seas and fogs, which more than once brought the vessels within an inch of destruction. The *Swallow* especially, was in such a dilapidated condition, that Carteret besought Wallis to consider his vessel no longer of any use in the expedition, and to tell him what course should best be pursued for the public good.

Wallis replied, “The orders of the Admiralty are concise, and you must conform to them, and accompany the *Dauphin* as long as possible. I am aware that the *Swallow* is a bad sailer; I will accommodate myself to her speed, and follow her movements, for it is most important that in case of accident to one of the ships, the other should be within reach, to give all the assistance in her power.”

Carteret had nothing to urge in reply, but he augured badly for the result of the expedition.

As the ships approached the opening of the straits on the Pacific side, the weather became abominable. A thick fog, falls of snow and rain, currents which sent the vessels on to the breakers, a chopping sea, contributed to detain the navigators in the straits until the 10th of April. On that day, the *Dauphin* and *Swallow* were separated off Cape Pilar, and could not find each other, Wallis not having fixed a rendezvous in case of separation.

Before we follow Wallis on his voyage across the Pacific, we will give a short account of the wretched natives of Tierra del Fuego, and of the general appearance of their country. These wretches, who were as miserable and debased as possible, subsisted upon the raw flesh of seals and penguins.

“One of our men,” says Wallis, “who fished with a line, bestowed a live fish, which he had just caught, and which was about the size of a herring, upon one of these Americans. He took it with the eagerness of a dog snatching a bone. He commenced operations by killing the fish with a bite near the gills, and proceeded to devour it, beginning at the head and finishing at the tail, without rejecting the bones, fins, scales, or entrails. In fact, these people swallowed everything that was offered to them, cooked or uncooked, fresh or salt, but they refused all drink but water. Their sole covering was a miserable seal-skin reaching to the knees. Their weapons were javelins tipped with a fish-bone. They all suffered from bad eyes, which the English attributed to their custom of living in smoke to protect themselves from mosquitos. Lastly, they emitted a most offensive smell, only to be likened to that of foxes, which doubtless arose from their excessively filthy habits."

Although certainly not inviting, this picture is graphic, as all navigators testify. It would appear that progress is not possible to these savages, so nearly allied to brutes. Civilization is a dead letter to them, and they still vegetate like their forefathers, with no wish to improve, and with no ambition to attain a more comfortable existence. Wallis continues, —

"Thus we quitted this savage and uninhabitable region, where for four months we had been in constant danger of shipwreck, where in the height of summer the weather is foggy, cold, and stormy, where almost all the valleys are without verdure, and the mountains without woods, in short where the land which one can see rather resembles the ruins of a world, than the abode of living creatures."

Wallis was scarcely free of the strait, when he set sail westward in spite of dense fogs, and with high wind and such a heavy sea, that for weeks together there was not a dry corner in the ship.

The constant exposure to damp engendered cold and severe fevers, to which scurvy shortly succeeded. Upon reaching 32° south latitude, and 100° west longitude, the navigator steered due north.

Upon the 6th of June, two islands were discovered amidst general rejoicings.

The ships' boats, well armed and equipped, reached the shore under command of Lieutenant Furneaux. A quantity of cocoa-nuts and anti-scorbutic plants were obtained, but although the English found huts and sheds, they did not meet with a single inhabitant. This island was discovered on the eve of Whitsunday and hence received the name Whitsunday.

It is situated in 19° 26' south latitude, and 137° 56' west longitude. Like the following islands, it belongs to the Pomotou group.

Next day, the English endeavoured to make overtures to the inhabitants of another island, but the natives appeared so ill-disposed and the coast was so steep, that it was impossible to land. After tacking about all night, Wallis despatched the boats, with orders not to use violence to the inhabitants if they could avoid it, or unless absolutely obliged.

As Lieutenant Furneaux approached the land, he was astonished by the sight of two large pirogues with double masts, in which the natives were on the eve of embarking.

As soon as they had done so, the English landed, and searched the island thoroughly. They discovered several pits full of good water. The soil was firm, sandy, covered with trees, more especially cocoanut-trees, palm-trees, and sprinkled with anti-scorbutic plants. The narrative says, —

"The natives of this island were of moderate stature. Their skin was brown, and they had long black hair, straggling over the shoulders. The men were finely formed, and the women were beautiful. Some coarse material formed their garment, which was tied round the waist, and appeared to be intended to be raised round the shoulders. In the afternoon, Wallis sent the lieutenant to procure water and to take possession of the island in the name of King George III. It was called Queen Charlotte's Island, in honour of the English queen."

After reconnoitring personally, Wallis determined to remain in this region for a week, in order to profit by the facilities it afforded for provisioning.

In their walks the English met with working implements made of shells, and sharpened stones shaped like axes, scissors, and awls. They also noticed boats in course of construction, made of boards joined together. But they were most of all astonished at meeting with tombs upon which the dead bodies were exposed under a sort of awning, and where they putrified in the open air.

When they quitted the island, they left hatchets, nails, bottles, and other things as reparation for any damage they might have committed.

The 17th century teamed with philanthropic aspirations! And from the accounts of all navigators one is led to believe that the theory so much advocated was put into practice upon most occasions. Humanity had made great strides. Difference of colour no longer presented an insuperable barrier to a man's being treated as a brother, and the convention which at the close of the century ordered the freedom of the black, set a seal to the convictions of numbers.

The *Dauphin* discovered new land, the same day that she left Queen Charlotte's Island. It lay to the westward, but after cruising along the coast, the vessel was unable to find anchorage. Lying low, it was covered with trees, neither cocoa-nuts nor inhabitants were to be found, and it evidently was merely a rendezvous for the hunters and fishers of the neighbouring islands. Wallis therefore decided not to stop. It received the name of Egmont, in honour of Earl Egmont, then chief Lord of the Admiralty. The following days brought new discoveries. Gloucester, Cumberland, William, Henry, and Osnaburgh Islands, were sighted in succession. Lieutenant Furneaux was able to procure provisions without landing at the last named.

Observing several large pirogues on the beach, he drew the conclusion that other and perhaps larger islands would be found at no great distance, where they would probably find abundant provisions, and to which access might be less difficult. His pre-vision was right. As the sun rose upon the 19th, the English sailors were astonished at finding themselves surrounded by pirogues of all sizes, having on board no less than eight hundred natives. After having consulted together at some distance, a few of the natives approached, holding in their hands banana branches. They were on the point of climbing up the vessels, when an absurd accident interrupted these cordial relations.

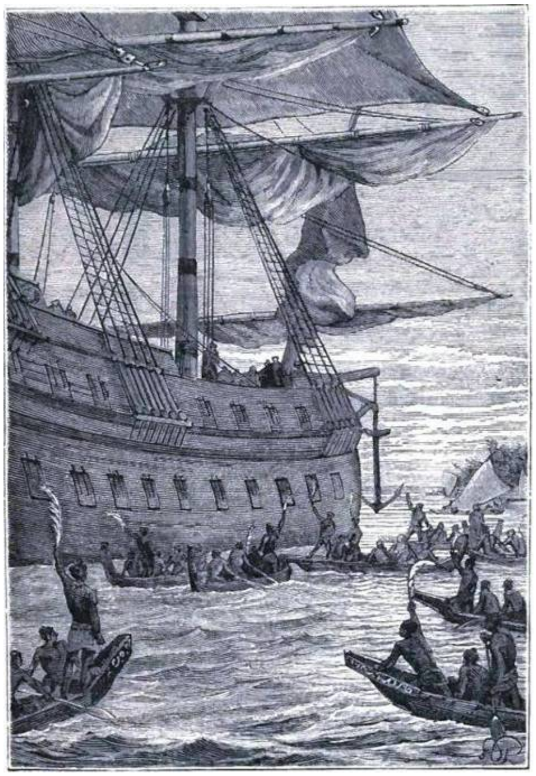

The natives waving palm-leaves as a sign of welcome.

One of them had climbed into the gangway when a goat ran at him. Turning he perceived the strange animal upon its hind legs preparing to attack him again. Overcome with terror, he jumped back into the sea, an example quickly followed by the others. It recalled the incident of the sheep of Panurge.

Recovering from this alarm, they again climbed into the ship, and brought all their cunning to bear upon petty thefts. However, only one officer had his hat stolen. The vessel all the time was following the coast in search of a fitting harbour, whilst the boats coasted the shore for soundings.

The English had never found a more picturesque and attractive country in any of their voyages. On the shore, the huts of the natives were sheltered by shady woods, in which flourished graceful clusters of cocoanut-trees. Graduated chains of hills, with wooded summits, and the silver sheen of rivers glistening amid the verdure as they found their way to the sea, added to the beauty of the interior.

The boats sent to take soundings were suddenly surrounded at the entrance of a large bay by a crowd of pirogues. Wallis, to avoid a collision, gave the order for the discharge from the swivel gun above the natives' heads, but although the noise terrified them, they still continued their approach.

The captain accordingly ordered his boats to make for the shore, and the natives finding themselves disregarded, threw some sharp stones which wounded a few sailors. But the captains of the boats replied to this attack by a volley of bullets, which injured one of them, and was followed by the flight of the rest.

The *Dauphin* anchored next day at the mouth of a large river in twenty fathoms of water. The sailors rejoiced universally. The natives immediately surrounded them with pirogues, bringing pigs, fowls, and various fruits, which were quickly exchanged for hardware and nails. One of the boats employed in taking soundings, however, was attacked by blows from paddles and sticks, and the sailors were forced to use their weapons. One native was killed, a second severely wounded, and the rest jumped into the water. Seeing that they were not pursued, and conscious that they themselves had been the aggressors, they returned to traffic with the *Dauphin* as if nothing had happened. Upon returning on board, the officers reported that the natives had invited them to land, more especially the women, with unequivocal gestures, and that moreover, there was excellent anchorage near the shore within reach of water.

The only inconvenience arose from a considerable swell. The *Dauphin* accordingly weighed anchor and proceeded into the open sea to run with the wind, when all at once Wallis perceived a bay seven or eight miles distant, which he determined to reach. The captain was soon to experience the truth of the proverb which asserts that one had better leave well alone.

Although soundings were taken by the boats as they advanced, the *Dauphin* struck on a rock and damaged her forepart. The usual measures in such a case were taken immediately, but outside the chain of madreporic rocks no depth could be sounded. It was consequently impossible to cast anchor, or to use the capstan. What course had best be pursued in this critical situation? The vessel beat violently against the rocks, and a host of pirogues waited in expectation of a shipwreck, eager to clutch their prey. Fortunately at the end of an hour a favourable breeze rising, disengaged the *Dauphin*, and wafted her into good anchorage. The damage done was not serious, and was as easily repaired as forgotten.

Wallis, rendered prudent by the constant efforts of the natives, divided his men into four parties, one of which was always to be armed. And he ordered guns to be fired. But after one or two rounds the number of pirogues increased, and no longer laden with poultry, they appeared to be filled with stones. The crews of the larger vessels also were augmented.

All at once upon a given signal a storm of pebbles fell upon the ship. Wallis ordered a general discharge, and had two guns loaded with fine shot. The natives, after some slight hesitation and disorder, returned to the attack with great bravery; and the captain, noticing the constantly increasing numbers of the assailants, was not without anxiety as to the result, when an unexpected event put an end to the contest.

Among the pirogues which attacked the *Dauphin* most energetically, was one which appeared to contain a chief, as from it the signal of attack was given. A well-directed shot cut this double pirogue in two.

This was enough to decide the natives upon retreat. They set about it so precipitately that in less than half an hour not a single boat remained in sight. The vessel was then towed into port, and so placed as to protect the disembarkation. Lieutenant Furneaux landed at the head of a strong detachment of sailors and marines, and planting the English flag, took possession of the island in the name of the King of England, in whose honour it was named George the Third. The natives called it Tahiti.

After prostrating themselves, and offering various marks of repentance, the natives appeared anxious to commence friendly and honest business with the English, but fortunately Wallis, who was detained on board by severe illness, perceived preparations for a simultaneous attack by land and sea upon the men sent to find water. The shorter the struggle the less the loss! Acting upon which principle, directly the natives came within gunshot range, a few discharges dispersed their fleet.

To put a stop to these attempts, it was necessary to make an example. Wallis decided with regret that it was so. He accordingly sent a detachment on shore at once with his carpenters, ordering them to destroy every pirogue which was hauled up on the beach. More than fifty, many of them sixty feet long, were hacked to pieces. Upon this the Tahitians decided to give in. They brought pigs, dogs, stuffs, and fruits to the shore, placed them there, and then withdrew. The English left in exchange hatchets and toys which were carried off to the forest with many delighted gestures.

Peace was established, and from the morrow a regular and abundant traffic commenced, which supplied the ships with the fresh provisions needed by the crews. There was ground for hope that these amicable relations would continue during their stay in the island, now that the natives had once realized the power and effect of the strangers’ weapons. Wallis, therefore, ordered a tent to be prepared near the water supply, and disembarked all the sufferers from scurvy, whilst the healthy members of his company were engaged in repairing the rigging, mending the sails, and calking and repainting the vessel, putting her, in short, in a condition fitted for the long journey which was to take her to England.

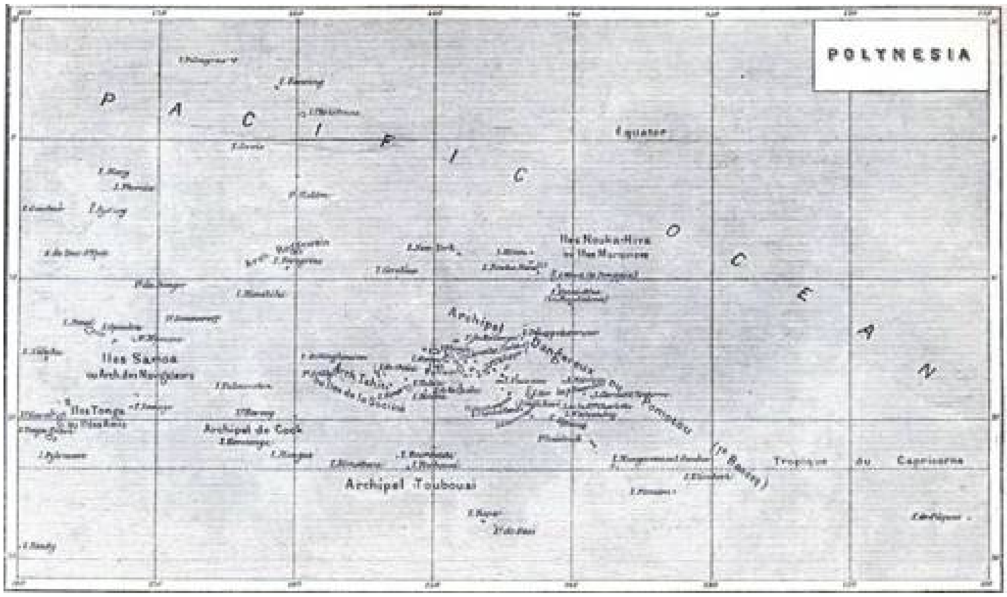
POLYNESIA
PACIFIC OCEAN
Equateur
Iles Nouka-Hiva ou Iles Marquises
Iles Samoa ou Arch. des Navigateurs
Iles Tonga ou Iles des Amis
Archipel Dangereux ou Pomotous
Arch. Tahiti ou Iles de la Société
Archipel de Cook
Archipel Toubouai
Tropique du Capricorne

Gravé par E. Morieu.

At this juncture Wallis’s illness assumed an alarming character. The first lieutenant was in hardly better health. All the responsibility of the expedition fell upon Furneaux, who was quite equal to the task. After a rest of fifteen days, during which the peace had not been disturbed, Wallis found all his invalids restored to health.

Provisions, however, became less plentiful. The natives, spoilt by the abundance of nails and hatchets, became more exacting.

Upon the 15th of July, a tall woman, apparently some forty-five years of age, of majestic appearance, and who seemed to be much respected by the natives, came on board the *Dauphin*. Wallis at once perceived by the dignity of her deportment, and the freedom of her manner, peculiar to persons habituated to command, that she was of high station. He presented her with a blue mantle, a looking-glass, and other gewgaws, which she received with an expression of profound contentment. Upon leaving the vessel she invited the captain to land, and to pay her a visit. Wallis, although still very weak, did not fail to comply with this request next day. He was conducted to a large hut, which covered about 327 feet in length, and 42 in width. The roof was constructed of palm leaves and was supported by fifty-three pillars.

A considerable crowd, collected together by the event, lined the approach, and received him respectfully. The visit was enlivened by a comical incident. The surgeon of the vessel, who perspired greatly from the effects of the walk, to relieve himself took off his wig. A sudden exclamation from one of the Indians at this sight, drew general attention to the prodigy, and all fixed their eyes upon it. The whole assemblage remained perfectly still for some moments, in the silence of astonishment, which could not have been greater if they had seen one of our company decapitated.

Next day, a messenger, sent to convey a present to Queen Oberoa, in acknowledgment of her gracious reception, found her giving a feast to several hundred persons.

Her servants carried the dishes to her already prepared, the meat in cocoanut shells, and the shell fish in a sort of wooden trough, similar to those used by our butchers. She herself distributed them with her own hands to each of her guests, who were sitting and standing all round the house. When this was over, she seated herself upon a sort of raised dais, and two women beside her gave her her food. They offered the viands to her in their fingers; and she had only to take the trouble to open her mouth.

The consequences of this exchange of civilities were speedily felt. The market was once more fully supplied with provisions, although no longer at the same low price as upon the first arrival of the English.

Lieutenant Furneaux reconnoitred the length of the coast westward, to gain an idea of the island, and to see what it was possible to obtain from it. The English were everywhere well received. They found a pleasant country, densely populated, whose inhabitants appeared in no hurry to sell their commodities. All their working implements were either of stone or of bone, which led Lieutenant Furneaux to infer that the Tahitians possess no metals.

As they had no earthenware vessels, they had no idea that water could be heated. They discovered it one day when the queen dined on board. One of the principal members of her suite, having seen the surgeon pour water from the boiler into the teapot, turned the tap and received the scalding liquor upon his hand. Finding himself burnt, he uttered most frightful screams, and ran round the cabin making most extravagant gestures. His companions, unable to imagine what had happened to him, stared at him with mingled astonishment and fear. The surgeon hastened to interfere, but for a long time the poor Tahitian refused to be comforted.

Some days later, Wallis discovered that his sailors stole nails to give them to the native women. They even went so far as to raise the planks of the ship to obtain screws, nails, bolts, and all the bits of iron which united them to the timbers. Wallis treated the offence rigorously, but nothing availed, and in spite of the precaution he took, of allowing no one to leave the vessel without being searched, these robberies constantly occurred.

An expedition, undertaken into the interior, discovered a large valley watered by a beautiful river. Everywhere the soil was carefully cultivated, and arrangements had been made for watering the gardens and the fruit plantations. Farther penetrations into the interior proved the capacious windings of the river; the valley narrowed, the hills were succeeded by mountains, at every step the way became more difficult. A peak, distant about six miles from the place of landing, was climbed, in the hope of thus discovering the entire island, even to its smallest recesses. But the view was intercepted by yet higher mountains. On the side towards the sea, however, nothing interfered with the magnificent view which stretched before their gaze, everywhere hills, covered with magnificent woods, upon whose verdant slopes the huts of the natives stood out clearly, and in the valleys with their numberless cabins, and gardens surrounded by hedges, the scenes were still more enchanting. The sugar cane, ginger plant, tamarind and tree ferns, with cocoanut-trees, furnished the principal resources of this fertile country.

Wallis, wishing to enrich it still more with the productions of our own climate, caused peach, cherry, and plum stones to be planted, as well as lemon, orange and lime pips, and sowed quantities of vegetable seeds. At the same time he gave the queen a present of a cat about to kitten, of two cocks, fowls, geese, and other domestic animals, which he hoped might breed well.

However, time pressed, and Wallis decided to leave. When he announced his intention to the queen, she threw herself upon a seat and cried for a long time, with so much grief that it was impossible to comfort her. She remained upon the vessel up to the last moment, and as it set sail “embraced us,” says Wallis, “in the tenderest way, weeping plenteously, and our friends the Tahitians bade us farewell, with so much sorrow, and in so touching a manner, that I felt heavy-hearted, and my eyes filled with tears.” The uncourteous reception of the English, and the repeated attempts made by the natives to seize the vessel, would hardly have led to the idea of a painful separation! However, as the proverb has it, All’s well that ends well!

Of Wallis’ observations of the manners and customs of the island, we shall only enumerate the few following, as we shall have occasion to return to them again in relating the voyages undertaken by Bougainville and Cook.

Tall, well built, active, slightly dark in complexion, the natives were clothed in a species of white stuff made from the bark of trees. Two pieces of stuff completed their costume, one was square and looked like a blanket. The head was thrust through a hole in the centre, and it recalled the “zarapo” of the Mexicans, and the “poncho” of the South American Indian. The second piece was rolled round the body, without being tightened. Almost all, men and women, tattoo their bodies with black lines close together, representing different figures. The operation was thus performed: the pattern was pricked in the skin, and the holes filled with a sort of paste composed of oil and grease, which left an indelible mark.

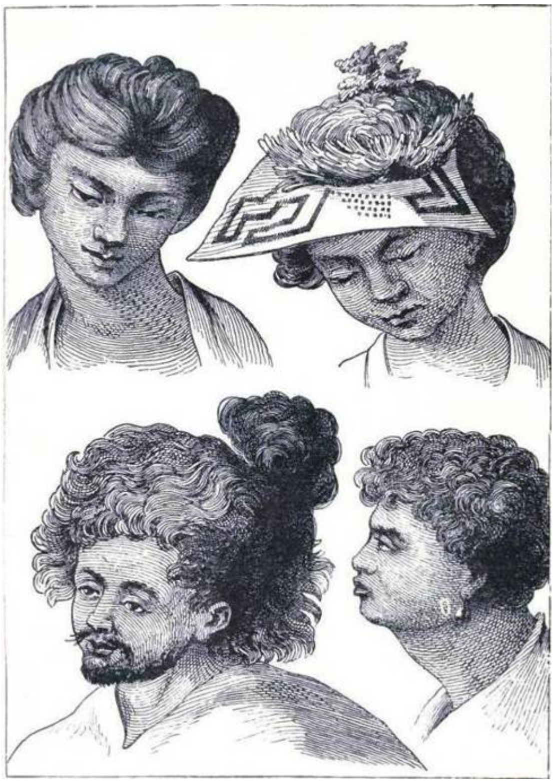

Head-dresses of natives of Tahiti.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Civilization has little advanced. We have already stated that the Tahitians did not understand earthenware vessels. Wallis, therefore, presented the queen with a saucepan, which everybody flocked to inspect with extreme curiosity.

As to religion, the captain found no trace of that! He only noticed that upon entering certain places, which he took to be cemeteries, they maintained a respectful appearance, and wore mourning apparel.

One of the natives, more disposed than his companions to adopt English manners, was presented with a complete suit of clothes, which became him very well. Jonathan — so they had named him, was quite proud of his new outfit. To put the finishing touch to his manners, he desired to learn the use of a fork. But habit was too strong for him! his hands always went to his mouth! and the bit of meat at the end of the fork, found its way to his ear.

It was the 27th of July, when Wallis left the George III. Island. After coasting Duke of York Island, he discovered several islands or islets in succession, upon which he did not touch. For example, Charles Saunders, Lord Howe, Scilly, Boscawen, and Keppel Islands, where the hostile character of the natives, and the difficulty of disembarkation prevented his landing.

Winter was now to begin in the southern region. The vessel leaked in all directions, the stern especially was much strained by the rudder. Was it wise, under such circumstances, to sail for Cape Horn or the Straits of Magellan? Would it not be running the risk of certain shipwreck? Would it not be better to reach Tinian or Batavia, where repairs were possible, and to return to Europe by the Cape of Good Hope?

Wallis decided upon the latter course. He steered for the north-west, and upon the 19th of September, after a voyage which was too fortunate to supply any incidents, he cast anchor in the Tinian harbour.

The incidents which marked Byron’s stay in this place were repeated, with far too much regularity. Wallis could not rejoice over its facilities for provisioning, or the temperature of the country, any more than his predecessors. But the sufferers from scurvy recovered in a short time, the sails were mended, and the vessel calked and repaired, and the crew had the unexpected good fortune of catching no fever.

On the 16th October, 1769, the *Dauphin* returned to sea, but this time, she encountered a succession of frightful storms, which tore the sails, reopened the leakage, broke the rudder, and carried away the poop with all that was to be found on the forecastle.

However, the Bashees were rounded, and Formosa Strait crossed, Sandy Isle, Small Key, Long Island, and New Island were recognized, as also, Condor, Timor, Aros, and Pisang, Pulo-Taya, Pulo-Toté, and Sumatra, before the arrival at Batavia, which took place upon the 30th of November.

We have already had occasion to mention the localities which witnessed the completion of the voyage. It is enough to state that from Batavia, where the crews took the fever, Wallis proceeded by the Cape, thence to St. Helena, and finally arrived in the Downs, on the 20th of May, 1768, after six hundred and thirty-seven days' voyage.

It is to be regretted that Hawkesworth has not reproduced the instructions Wallis received from the Admiralty. Without knowing what they were, we cannot decide whether this brave sailor carried out the orders he had received *au pied de la lettre*. We have seen that he followed with little variation the route traced by his predecessors, in the Pacific Ocean. In fact, nearly all had approached by the dangerous archipelago, leaving unexplored that portion of Oceania, where islands are most numerous, and where Cook was later to make such important discoveries.

Clever as a navigator, Wallis understood how to obtain from a hasty and incomplete equipment unexpected resources, which enabled him to bring an adventurous enterprise to a successful close. He is equally to be honoured for his humanity and the efforts he made to collect reliable information of the countries he visited. Had he only been accompanied by special men of science, there is no doubt that their scientific harvest would have been abundant.

The fault lay with the Admiralty.

We have related how, on the 10th of April, 1767, as the *Dauphin* and the *Swallow* entered the Pacific, the former, carried away by a strong breeze, had lost sight of the latter, and had been unable to follow her. This separation was most unfortunate for Captain Carteret. He knew better than any of his crew the dilapidated condition of his vessel and the insufficiency of his provisions. In short, he was well aware that he could only hope to meet the *Dauphin* in England, as no plan of operation had been arranged, and no rendezvous had been named — a grave omission on Wallis' part, who was aware of the condition of his consort.

Nevertheless, Carteret allowed none of his apprehensions to come to the knowledge of the crew. At first the detestable weather experienced by the *Swallow* upon the Pacific Ocean (most misleading name), allowed no time for reflection. The dangers of the passing moment, in which there was every prospect of their being engulfed, hid from them the perils of the future.

Carteret steered for the north, by the coast of Chili. Upon investigating the quantity of soft water which he had on board, he found it quite insufficient for the voyage he had undertaken. He determined therefore, before setting sail for the west, to take in water at Juan Fernandez, or at Mas-a-Fuero.

The weather continued wretched. Upon the evening of the 27th a sudden squall was followed by a rising wind, which carried the vessel straight to the Cape. The violence of the storm failed to carry away the masts or to founder the ship. The tempest continued in all its fury, and the sails being extremely wet, clung round the masts and rigging so closely, that it was impossible to work them. Next day a sudden wave broke the mizen-mast, just where there was a flaw in the sail, and submerged the vessels for a few moments. The storm only abated sufficiently to allow the crew of the *Swallow* time to recover a little, and to repair the worst damage; then recommenced, and continued with violent squalls until the 7th of May. The wind then became favourable, and three days later Juan Fernandez was reached.

Carteret was not aware that the Spaniards had fortified this island. He was, therefore, extremely surprised at seeing a large number of men upon the shore, and at perceiving a battery of four pieces on the beach, and a fort, pierced with twenty embrasures and surmounted by the Spanish flag, upon a hill.

The rising wind prevented an entrance into Cumberland Bay, and after cruising about for an entire day, Carteret was obliged to content himself with reaching Mas-a-Fuero. But he met the same obstacles, and the surge which broke upon the shore interfered with his operations, and it was only with the utmost difficulty that he succeeded in shipping a few casks of water. Some of the crew, who had been forced by the state of the sea to remain on land, killed guinea fowls enough to feed the entire crew. These, with the exception of some seals and plenty of fish, were the sole result of a stay, marked by a succession of squalls and storms, which constantly placed the ship in danger.

Carteret, who, owing to unfavourable winds, had had several opportunities of noticing Mas-a-Fuero, corrected many of the errors in the account of Lord Anson’s voyage, and furnished many details of inestimable use to navigators.

On leaving Mas-a-Fuero, Carteret steered northward in the hope of meeting the south-eastern trade wind. Carried farther than he had counted upon, he determined to seek St. Ambrose, and St. Felix Island, or the island of St. Paul. Now that the Spaniards had taken possession of and fortified Juan Fernandez, those islands might be of great value to the English in the event of war.

But Mr. Green’s charts and the “Elements of Navigation” by Robertson did not tally as to their situation. Carteret, having most confidence in the latter work, sought for them in the north, and failed to find them. In re-reading the description given by Waser, Davis’ surgeon, he thought these two islands were identical with the land met with by that filibuster, in his route to the south of the Galapagos Islands, and that Davis’ Land did not exist. This caused a double error, that of identifying St. Felix Island with Davis’ Land, and of denying the existence of the latter, which is in reality Easter Island.

“At this parallel,” says Carteret, that is in 18° west from his point of departure, “we had fresh breezes, and a strong northerly current, and other reasons for conjecturing that we were near Davis’ Land, which we were seeking so carefully. But a stiff breeze rising again, we steered quarter S.W. and reached 28½° southern latitude, from which it follows that if this land or anything answering to it exists, I must infallibly have fallen in with it, or at least have seen it. I afterwards remained in 28° south latitude, and 40° west of my point of departure, and as far as I can conjecture 121° west London.”

All the navigators combined in insisting upon the existence of a southern continent. Carteret could not conceive that Davis’ Land was but a small island, a spot lost in the immensity of the ocean. As he found no continent, he decided upon the non-existence of Davis' Land. It was precisely in this way that he was misled.

Carteret continued his search until the 7th of June. He was in 28° south latitude and 112° west longitude, that is to say, he was in the immediate neighbourhood of Easter Island. It was still the depth of winter. The sea ran continually high, violent and variable winds, dull, foggy, and cold weather was accompanied by thunder, rain, and snow. No doubt it was owing to the great darkness, and to the thick fog, which hid the sun for several days, that Carteret failed to perceive Easter Island, for many signs, such as the number of birds, floating seaweeds, &c. announced the neighbourhood of land.

These atmospheric troubles again retarded the voyage, in addition to which the *Swallow* was as bad a sailer as possible, and one may guess at the weariness, the preoccupation, even the mental suffering of the captain, who saw his crew on the point of starvation. But in spite of all, the voyage was continued by day and night in a westerly direction until the 2nd of July. Upon this day land was discovered to the north, and on the morrow, Carteret was sufficiently close to recognize it. It was only a great rock five miles in circumference, covered with trees, which appeared uninhabited, but the swell, so prevalent at this time of year, prevented the vessel coming alongside. It was named Pitcairn, after the first discoverer. In these latitudes, the sailors, previously in good health, felt the first attacks of scurvy.

Upon the 11th, a new land was seen in 22° southern latitude, and 145° 34' longitude. It received the name of Osnaburgh in honour of the king's second son.

Next day Carteret sent an expedition to two more islands, where neither eatables nor water were found. The sailors caught many birds in their hands, as they were so tame that they did not fly at the approach of man.

All these islands belonged to the Dangerous group, a long chain of low islands, clusters of which were the despair of all navigators, for the few resources they offered. Carteret thought he recognized Quiros in the land discovered, but this place, which is called by the natives Tahiti, is situated more to the north.

Sickness, however, increased daily. The adverse winds, but especially the damage the ship had sustained, made her progress very slow. Carteret thought it necessary to follow the route upon which he was most likely to obtain provisions and the needful repairs.

“My intention in the event of my ship being repaired,” says Carteret, “was to continue my voyage to the south upon the return of a favourable season, with a view to new discoveries in that quarter of the world. In fact, I had settled in my own mind, if I could find a continent where sufficient provisions were procurable, to remain near its coast until the sun had passed the Equator, then to gain a distant southern latitude and to proceed westward towards the Cape of Good Hope, and to return eastward after touching at the Falkland Islands, should it be necessary, and thence to proceed quickly to Europe.”

These laudable intentions show Carteret to have been a true explorer, rather stimulated than intimidated by danger, but it proved impossible to carry them into execution.

The trade wind was only met on the 16th, and the weather remained detestable. Above all, although Carteret navigated in the neighbourhood of Danger Island, discovered in 1765 by Byron, and by others, he saw no land.

“We probably were close by land,” he says, “which the fog prevented our seeing, for in these waters numbers of birds constantly flew round the ship. Commodore Byron in his last voyage had passed the northern limits of this portion of the ocean, in which the Solomon Islands are said to be situated, and as I have been myself beyond the southern limit without seeing them, I have good reasons for thinking, that if these islands exist they have been badly marked on all the charts.”

This last supposition is correct, but the Solomon Islands do exist, and Carteret stopped there a few days later without recognizing them. The victuals were now all but consumed or tainted, the rigging and the sails torn by the tempest, half the crew on the sick list, when a fresh alarm for the captain arose. A leak was reported, just below the load water-line; it was impossible to stop it, as long as they were in the open sea. By unexpected good fortune land was seen on the morrow. Needless to say what cries of delight, what acclamations followed this discovery. To use Carteret’s own comparison, the feelings of surprise and comfort experienced by the crew can only be likened to those of a criminal, who at the last moment on the scaffold receives a reprieve! It was Nitendit Island, already discovered by Mendana.

No sooner was the anchor cast than landing was hurried, in search of water supply. The natives were black, with woolly hair, and perfectly naked. They appeared upon the shore, but fled again before the boat could come up with them.

The leader of the landing-party described the country as wild, bristling with mountains and impenetrable forests of trees and shrubs reaching to the shore itself, through which ran a fine current of fresh water.

The following day, the master was sent in search of an easier landing-place, with orders to propitiate the natives, if possible, by presents. He was expressly enjoined not to expose himself to danger, to return if several pirogues advanced against him, not to leave the boat himself, and not to allow more than two men to land at once, whilst the remainder held themselves on the defensive.

Carteret, at the same time, sent his ship's boat on shore for water. Some natives attacked it with arrows, which fortunately hit no one.

Meantime, the sloop regained the *Swallow*, the master had three arrows in his body, and half his crew were so dangerously wounded that three sailors and he himself died a few days later.

This is what had happened. Landing the fifth in succession, in a spot where he had noticed huts, he entered into friendly traffic with the natives. The latter soon increased in numbers, and several large pirogues advanced towards his sloop, and he was unable to rejoin it until the very moment when the attack commenced. Pursued by the arrows of the natives, who waded up to their shoulders into the water, chased by pirogues, he only succeeded in escaping after having killed several natives and foundered one of their boats.

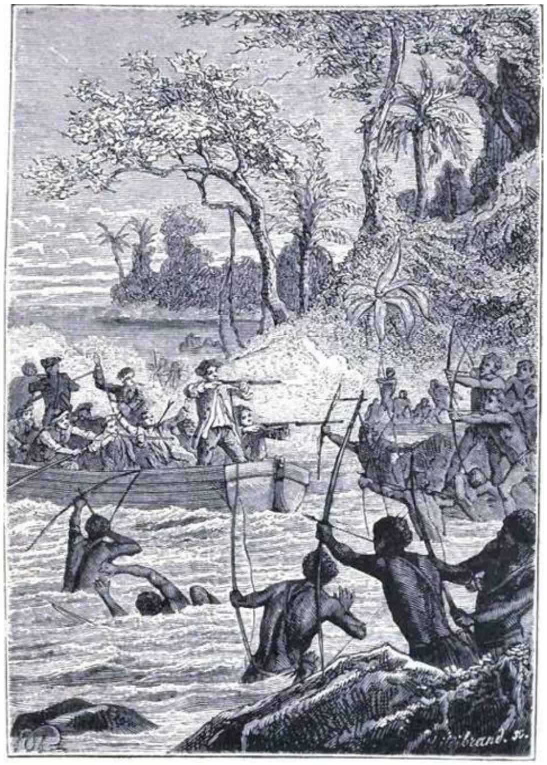

“Pursued by the arrows of the natives.”

This effort to find a more favourable spot where he might run the *Swallow* ashore, having ended so unfortunately, Carteret heaved his ship down where he was, and efforts were made to stop the leak. If the carpenter, the only healthy man on board, did not succeed in perfectly stopping it, he at least considerably diminished it.

Whilst a fresh landing for water was sought, the fire of the guns was directed upon the woods as well as volleys of musketry from the sloop. Still the sailors worked for a quarter of an hour, when they were attacked by a shower of arrows which grievously wounded one or two in the breast. The same measures were necessary each time they fetched water.

At this juncture, thirty of the crew became incapable of performing their duty. The master died of his wounds. Lieutenant Gower was very ill. Carteret himself, attacked by a bilious and inflammatory illness, was forced to keep his bed.

These three were the only officers capable of navigating the *Swallow* to England, and they were on the point of succumbing.

To stay the ravages of disease, it was necessary to procure provisions at all costs, and this was utterly impossible in this spot. Carteret weighed anchor on the 17th of August, after calling the island Egmont, in honour of the Lord of the Admiralty, and the bay where he had anchored, Swallow. Although convinced that it was identical with the land named Santa Cruz by the Spaniards, the navigator nevertheless followed the prevailing mania of giving new appellations to all the places he visited. He then coasted the shore for a short distance, and ascertained that the population was large. He had many a crow to pick with the natives. These obstacles, and moreover the impossibility of procuring provisions, prevented Carteret’s reconnoitring the other islands of this group, upon which he bestowed the name of Queen Charlotte.

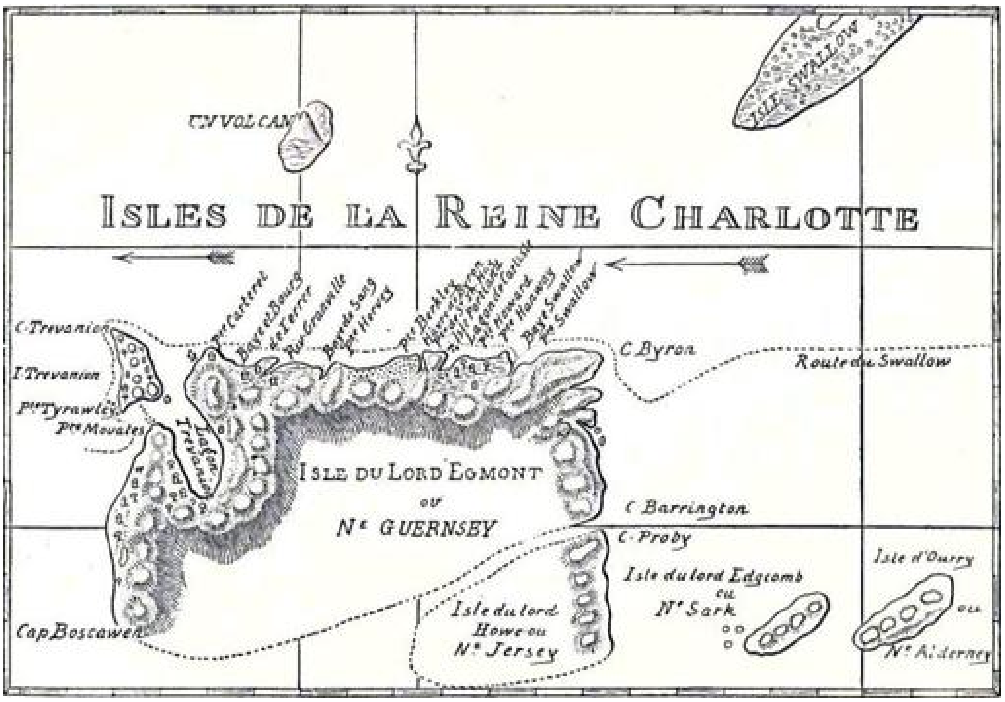
ISLES DE LA REINE CHARLOTTE
UN VOLCAN
ISLE SWALLOW
C. Trevanion
I. Trevanion
Pte Tyrawley
Pte Movales
Lagon Trevanion
Pte Carteret
Pte Granville
Baye de Sang
Pte Berkley
Pte Howard
Baye Swallow
Pte Swallow
C. Byron
Route du Swallow
ISLE DU LORD EGMONT
ou
Ne GUERNSEY
C. Barrington
C. Proby
Isle du lord Edgcomb
ou
Ne Sark
Isle d'Ourry
ou
Ne Alderney
Isle du lord Howe ou
Ne Jersey
Cap Boscawen

Map of Queen Charlotte Islands.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

“The inhabitants of Egmont Isle,” he says, “are extremely agile, active, and vigorous. They appear to live as well in water as on land, for they are continually jumping from their pirogues into the sea. One of the arrows which they sent passed through the planks of the boat, and dangerously wounded the officer at the poop in the thigh.

“Their arrows are tipped with stone, and we saw no metal of any kind in their possession. The country in general is covered with woods and mountains and interspersed with a great number of valleys.”

On the 18th of August, 1767, Carteret left this group with the intention of regaining Great Britain. He fully expected to meet with an island on his passage, where he might be more fortunate. And on the 20th, he actually did so, discovering a little low island, which he named Gower, where cocoa-nuts were procurable. Next day he encountered Simpson and Carteret Islands, and a group of new islands which he took to be the Ohang Java, discovered by Tasman; then successively Sir Charles Hardy and Winchelsea Islands, which he did not consider as belonging to the Solomon Archipelago, the Island of St. John, so-called by Schouten, and finally that of New Britain, which he gained on the 28th of August.

Carteret coasted this island, in search of a safe and convenient port, and stopped in various bays, where he obtained water, wood, cocoa, nutmegs, aloes, sugar-canes, bamboos, and palm-cabbages.

“This cabbage,” he says, “is white, crisp, of a substance filled with sugar. Eaten raw, the flavour resembles that of a chestnut, and boiled it is superior to the best parsnip. We cut it into small strips, and boiled it in the broth made from our cakes, and this broth, afterwards thickened with oatmeal furnished us with a good meal.”

The wood was all alive with pigeons, turtle-doves, parroquets, and other unknown birds. The English visited several deserted huts.

If an idea of the civilization of a people can be drawn from their dwellings, these islanders were on the lowest rung of the social ladder, for their huts were the most miserable Carteret had ever seen.

The commander profited by his stay in this place, by once more overhauling the *Swallow*, and attending to the leak, which the carpenters doctored as well as they could. The sheathing was greatly worn, and the keel quite gnawed away by worms; they coated it with pitch and warm tar mixed together.

On the 7th of September, Carteret accomplished the ridiculous ceremony of taking possession of the country in the name of George III. he then despatched one of his boats upon a reconnoitring expedition, which returned with a quantity of cocoa and palm-cabbages, most precious provision for the sick on board.

In spite of the fact that the monsoon would soon blow from the east for a long time, Carteret, alive to the dilapidated condition of his ship, determined to start for Batavia, where he hoped to make up his crew, and to repair the *Swallow*.

Upon the 9th September, therefore, he left Carteret harbour, the best which he had met with since leaving the Straits of Magellan.

He soon penetrated to a gulf to which Dampier had given the name of St. George Bay, and was not long in reconnoitring for a strait which separated New Britain and New Ireland. This passage he found and named St. George. He describes it in his narrative with a care which should certainly have earned for him the thanks of all his contemporary navigators. He then followed the coast of New Ireland to its southern extremity. Near a little island, which he named Sandwich, Carteret had some dealings with the natives.

“These natives,” he says “are black, and have woolly hair like negroes, but they have not flat noses or large lips. We imagine them to be of the same race as the inhabitants of Egmont Island. Like them they are entirely naked, if we except some ornaments of shells which they attach to their arms and legs. At the same time, they have adopted a fashion, without which our fashionable men and women are not supposed to be perfectly dressed. They powder their hair or rather the wool on their heads white, from which it follows that the fashion of wearing powder is probably of greater antiquity and of more extended fashion than we would have generally supposed. They are armed with spears and large sticks in the shape of clubs, but we perceived neither bows nor arrows.”

At the south-western extremity of New Ireland Carteret found another land, to which he gave the name of New Hanover, and shortly afterwards the group of the Duke of Portland.

Although all this portion of the narrative of his voyage, in countries unknown before his time, abounds in precious details, Carteret, a far more able and zealous navigator than his predecessors Byron and Wallis, makes excuses for not having collected more facts.

“The description of the country,” he says, “and of its productions and inhabitants, would have been far more complete and detailed had I not been so weakened and overcome by the illness to which I had succumbed through the duties which devolved upon me from want of officers. When I could scarcely drag myself along, I was obliged to take watch after watch and to share in other labours with my lieutenant, who was also in a bad state of health.”

After leaving St. George’s Strait, the route was westward. Carteret discovered several other islands, but illness for several days prevented his coming on deck, and therefore he could not determine their position. He named them Admiralty Islands, and after two attacks, found himself forced to employ fire-arms to repulse the natives.

He afterwards reconnoitred Durour and Matty Islands and the Cuedes, whose inhabitants were quite delighted at receiving bits of an iron hoop. Carteret affirms, that he might have bought all the productions of this country for a few iron instruments. Although they are the neighbours of New Guinea, and of the groups they had just explored, these natives were not black, but copper coloured. They had very long black hair, regular features, and brilliantly white teeth. Of medium height, strong and active, they were cheerful and friendly, and came on board fearlessly. One of them even asked permission to accompany Carteret upon his voyage, and in spite of all the representations of his countrymen and even of the captain, he refused to leave the *Swallow*. Carteret, meeting with so decided a will, consented, but the poor Indian, who had received the name of Joseph Freewill, soon faded away and died at Celebes.

On the 29th October, the English reached the north-eastern portion of Mindanao. Always on the look-out for fresh water and provisions, Carteret in vain looked for the bay which Dampier had spoken of as abounding in game. A little farther off he found a watering-place, but the hostile demonstrations of the inhabitants forced him to re-embark.

After leaving Mindanao, the captain sailed for the Straits of Macassar, between the islands of Borneo and Celebes. They entered it on the 14th of November. The vessel then proceeded with so much difficulty that she only accomplished twenty-eight leagues in fifteen days.

“Ill,” he says, “weakened, dying, tortured by the sight of lands which we could not reach, exposed to tempests which we found it impossible to overcome, we were attacked by a pirate!”

The latter, hoping to find the English crew asleep, attacked the *Swallow* in the middle of the night. But far from allowing themselves to be cowed by this new danger, the sailors defended themselves with so much courage and skill, that they succeeded in foundering the Malay prah.

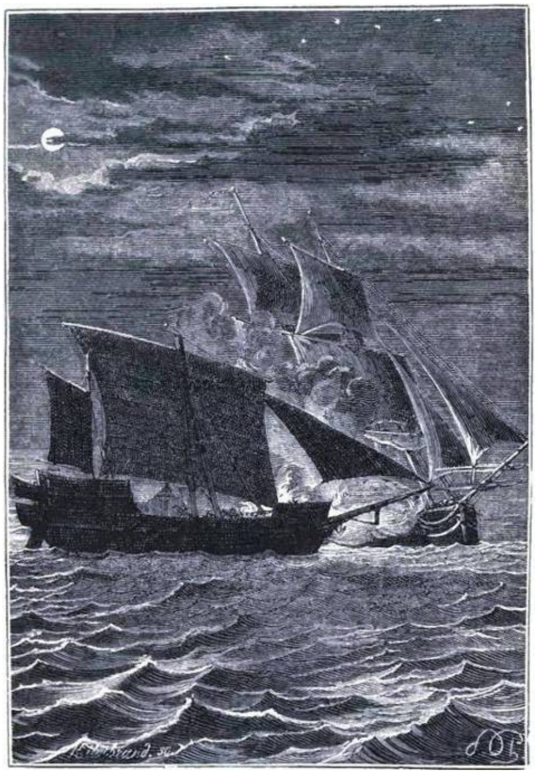

A struggle between the *Swallow* and a Malay prah.

On the 12th of December Carteret sorrowfully perceived that the western monsoon had commenced. The *Swallow* was in no condition to struggle against this wind and current to reach Batavia by the west. He must then content himself with gaining Macassar, then the principal colony of the Dutch in the Celebes Islands.

When the English arrived, it was thirty-five weeks since they left the Straits of Magellan.

Anchor was scarcely cast, when a Dutchman, sent by the governor, came on board the *Swallow*. He appeared much alarmed on finding that the vessel belonged to the English marine service. In the morning, therefore, when Carteret sent his lieutenant, Mr. Gower, to ask for access to the port in order to secure provisions for his dying crew, and to repair his dilapidated ship, and await the return of the monsoon, not only could he not obtain permission to land, but the Dutch hastened to collect their forces and arm their vessels. Finally, after five hours, the governor's reply was brought on board. It was a refusal couched in terms as little polite as they were equivocal. The English were simultaneously forbidden to land at any port under Dutch government.

All Carteret's representations, his remarks upon the inhumanity of the refusal, even his hostile demonstrations, had no other result than the sale of a few provisions, and permission to proceed to a small neighbouring bay.

He would find there, he was told, certain shelter from the monsoon, and might set up a hospital for his sick, that indeed he could procure more plentiful provisions there than in Macassar, from whence they would send him all that he could need. Fearing death by starvation and foundering, it was necessary to overlook these exactions, and Carteret proceeded to the roadstead of Bonthain.

There the sick, installed in a house, found themselves prohibited from going more than thirty roods from their hospital.

They were kept under guard, and could not communicate with the natives. Lastly they were forbidden to buy anything excepting through the agency of the Dutch soldiers, who strangely abused their power, often making more than a thousand per cent. profit. All the complaints of the English were useless. They were forced to submit during their stay, to a surveillance to the last degree humiliating. It was only on the 22nd of May, 1768, on the return of the monsoon, that Captain Carteret was able to leave Bonthain, after a long series of annoyances, vexations, and alarms, which it is impossible to give in detail and which had sorely tried his patience.

“Celebes,” he says, “is the key to the Moluccas, or Spice Islands, which are necessarily under the power of the people who are masters of this island. The town of Macassar is built upon a promontory, and is watered by one or two rivers which cross it or flow in its vicinity. The ground is even and beautiful in appearance. There are many plantations and cocoa-nut woods, interspersed with houses, which convey the idea that it is well populated.

“At Bonthain the beef is excellent, but it is difficult to procure enough of it to feed a fleet. Fowls, and as much rice and fruits as can be wished, are procurable. The woods abound with wild pigs, which are to be had cheap, because the natives, being Mohamedans, do not eat them.”

These details, however incomplete, had great interest at the time they were collected, and we go so far as to believe, that even now, some hundred years since they were first written, they yet contain a certain amount of truth. No incident marked the voyage to Batavia. After several delays, caused by the desire of the Dutch Company to make Carteret give them a testimonial as to the treatment he had met with from the government of Macassar, and which he steadily refused, Carteret at last obtained permission to repair his vessel.

On the 15th of September, the *Swallow*, partially refitted, set sail. She was reinforced with a supplementary number of English sailors, without which it would have been impossible to regain Europe. Eighty of her original crew were dead, and eighty more were so reduced that seven of their number died before they reached the Cape.

After a stay in this port, a most salutary one for the crew, which lasted until the 6th of January, 1769, Carteret set out once more, and a little beyond Ascension Island, at which he had touched, he met a French vessel. It was the frigate, *La Boudeuse*, with which Bougainville had just been round the world.

On the 20th of March the *Swallow* anchored in Spithead roadstead, after thirty-one months of a voyage as painful as it had been dangerous.

All Carteret's nautical ability, all his *sang-froid*, all his enthusiasm were needed to save so inefficient a vessel from destruction, and to make important discoveries, under such conditions. If the perils of the voyage, add lustre to his renown, the shame of such a miserable equipment falls upon the English Admiralty, who, despising the representations of an able captain, risked his life and the lives of his crew upon so long a voyage.

III.

Bougainville — A notary's son metamorphosed — Colonization of the Malouine Islands — Buenos Ayres and Rio Janeiro — The Malouines relinquished to the Spaniards — Hydrography of the Strait of Magellan — The Pecherais — The Quatre Facardius — Tahiti — Incidents of the stay there — Productions of the country and manners of the inhabitants — Samoa Islands — The Land of the Holy Spirit or the New Hebrides — The Louisiade — The Anchorite Isles — New Guinea — Boutan — From Batavia to St. Malo.

Whilst Wallis completed his voyage round the world, and Carteret continued his long and hazardous circumnavigation, a fresh expedition was organized for the purpose of prosecuting new discoveries in the Southern Seas.

Under the old régime, when all was arbitrary, titles, rank, and places were obtained by interest. It was therefore not surprising that a military officer, who left the army scarcely four years before with the rank of colonel, to enter the navy as a captain, should obtain this important command.

Strangely enough, this singular measure was amply justified, thanks to the talents possessed by the favoured recipient.

Louis Antoine de Bougainville was born at Paris, on the 13th of November, 1729. The son of a notary, he was destined for the bar, and was already an advocate. But having no taste for his father’s profession, he devoted himself to the sciences, and published a Treatise on the Integral Calculus, whilst he obtained a commission in the Black Musqueteers.

Of the three careers he thus entered upon, he entirely abandoned the two first, slightly neglected the third, for the sake of a fourth — diplomacy, and finally left it entirely for a fifth — the naval service. He was destined to die a member of the senate after a sixth metamorphosis.

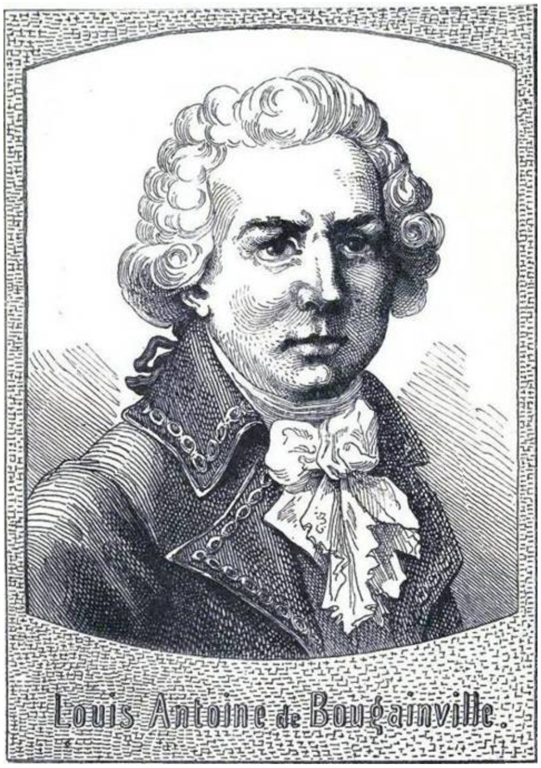
Louis Antoine de Bougainville.

Portrait of Bougainville.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

First aide-de-camp to Chevret, then Secretary of the Embassy in London, where he was made a member of the Royal Society, he left Brest in 1756, with the rank of captain of Dragoons, to rejoin Montcalm in Canada. Becoming aide-de-camp to this general, he distinguished himself on various occasions, and obtained the confidence of his chief, who sent him to France to ask for reinforcements.

That unhappy country was just then overwhelmed with reverses in Europe, and had need of all her resources. Therefore, when young Bougainville entered upon the object of his mission to M. de Choiseul, the minister answered brusquely, —

“When the house is on fire, one does not worry oneself about the stables!”

“At least,” replied Bougainville, “no one can say that you speak like a horse!”

This sally was too witty and too stinging to conciliate the minister. Ultimately Madame de Pompadour, who appreciated witty people, introduced Bougainville to the king, and although he did not succeed in obtaining much for his general, he gained a colonelcy, and the order of St. Louis for himself, although he had only seen seven years’ service. Returning to Canada he was anxious to justify Louis XIV.’s confidence, and distinguished himself in various matters. After the loss of the colony he served in Germany under M. de Choiseul-Stainville.

His military career was cut short by the peace of 1763. His active spirit and love of movement rebelled against a garrison life. He conceived the strange idea of colonizing the Falkland Islands in the extreme south of South America, and of conveying there free of expense the emigrants from Canada who had settled in France to escape the tyrannous yoke of England. Carried away by this idea, he addressed himself to certain privateers at St. Malo, who, from the commencement of the century, had been in the habit of visiting the group, and who had named them Malouine Islands.

Having gained their confidence, Bougainville brought the advantages (however problematical) of this colony to the minister’s notice, maintaining that the fortunate situation of the island, would secure a good resting-place for ships going to the Southern Seas. Having high interest, he obtained the authority he desired, and received his nomination as ship-captain.

It was the year 1763. There is little reason to suppose, that marine officers, who had passed all the grades of the service, looked with gratification upon an appointment which no past event justified. But that mattered little to the Minister of Marine, M. de Choiseul-Stainville. Bougainville had served under him, and was far too grand a personage to trouble himself about the grumbling of the ship's officers.

Bougainville having brought his uncle and cousin, MM. de Nerville and d'Arboulin, to look favourably upon his venture, caused the *Eagle* of twenty guns, and the *Sphinx* of twelve, to be built at St. Malo, under the auspices of M. Guzot Duclos. Upon these he embarked several Canadian families.

Leaving St. Malo on the 15th of September, 1763, he rested at St. Catherine's Island, on the coast of Brazil, and at Montevideo, where he took horses and cattle, and landed at the Malouines in a large bay, which appeared to him wholly suited to his purpose, but he was not long in discovering that what had been taken by preceding navigators for woods of moderate height, were only reeds. Not a tree, not a shrub grew in the islands. Fortunately an excellent turf did for fuel in their stead, whilst fish and game offered good resources.

The colony consisted at first of only twenty-nine persons, for whom huts were built and also a provision warehouse. At the same time a fort, capable of holding fourteen guns, was planned and commenced. M. de Nerville agreed to remain at the head of the establishment, whilst Bougainville returned to France on the 5th of April. There he recruited some more colonists, and took a considerable cargo of provisions of every kind, which he disembarked on the 5th of January, 1765. He then went to the Strait of

Magellan in search of a cargo of wood, and having, as we have already narrated, met Commodore Byron's squadron, followed it to Port Famine.

There he took in more than ten thousand saplings of different growths, which he intended to transport to the Malouines. When he left the group on the 27th of April following, the colony already numbered eighty persons, comprising a staff paid by the king. Towards the end of 1765, the same two vessels were sent back with provisions and new colonists.

The colony was beginning to make a show, when the English settled themselves in Port Egmont, reconnoitred by Byron. At the same time Captain Macbride attempted to obtain possession of the colony, on the ground that the land belonged to the English king, although Byron had not recognized the Malouines in 1765, and the French had then been settled there two years.

In the meantime Spain laid claim to it in her turn, as a dependency of Southern America. England and France were equally adverse to a breach of the peace, for the sake of this archipelago, which was of so little commercial value, and Bougainville was forced to relinquish his undertaking on condition that the Spanish Government indemnified him for his expenses. In addition, he was ordered by the French Government to facilitate the restoration of the Malouines to the Spanish Commissioners.

This foolish attempt at colonization was the origin and groundwork of Bougainville's good fortune, for in order to make use of the last equipment, the minister ordered Bougainville to return by the South Sea, and to make discoveries.

In the early days of November, 1766, Bougainville repaired to Nantes, where his second in command, M. Duclos-Guiyot, captain of the fire-ship, and an able and veteran sailor, who grew grey in the inferior rank because he was not noble, superintended the equipment of the frigate *La Boudeuse*, of twenty-six guns.

Bougainville left the roadstead of Minden at the mouth of the Loire, on the 15th of November, for the La Plata river, where he hoped to find two Spanish vessels, the *Esmeralda* and the *Liebre*. But scarcely had the *Boudeuse* gained the open sea when a furious tempest arose. The frigate, the rigging of which was new, sustained such serious damages that it was necessary to put for repairs into Brest, which she entered on the 21st November. This experience sufficed to convince the captain that the *Boudeuse* was but little fitted for the voyage he had before him. He therefore had the masts shortened, and changed his artillery for less heavy pieces, but in spite of these modifications, the *Boudeuse* was not fit for the heavy seas and storms of Cape Horn. However, the rendezvous with the Spaniards was arranged, and Bougainville was obliged to put to sea. The staff of the frigate consisted of eleven officers and three volunteers, among whom was the Prince of Nassau-Sieghen. The crew comprised 203 sailors, boys, and servants.

As far as La Plata the sea was calm enough to allow of Bougainville's making many observations on the currents, a frequent source of the errors made by navigators in their reckonings.

On the 31st of January, *La Boudeuse* anchored in Montevideo Bay, where the two Spanish frigates had been awaiting her for a month, under the command of Don Philippe Pelicis Puente.

The long stay Bougainville made in this part, and also at Buenos Ayres, enabled him to collect facts about the city, and the manners of the inhabitants, which are too curious to be passed over in silence. Buenos

Ayres appeared to them too large for its population, which amounted only to 20,000, the reason being that the houses are of only one story, and have large courts or gardens. Not only has this town no fort, but it has not even a jetty. Thus ships are forced to discharge their cargoes on to lighters, which convey them to the little river, where carts come to take the bales and convey them to the town.

The number of religious communities, both male and female, in Buenos Ayres, adds to the originality of its character.

Bougainville says, "The year is full of Saint days, which are celebrated by processions and fireworks. Religious ceremonies supply the place of theatres. The Jesuits incite the women to greater austerity in their piety than any other order. Attached to their convent they have an institution intitled, *Casa de los egericios de las mugeres*, that is, 'house for the devotion of women.' Women and girls, without the permission of husbands or fathers, enter the retreat for twelve days, to increase their sanctity."

They were lodged and boarded at the expense of the company. No man ever set foot in this sanctuary unless in the cowl of St. Ignatius. Servants even of the female sex were not allowed to accompany their mistresses. The devotional services consisted of meditation, prayer, catechizings, confession, and flagellation. "We were shown the stains on the walls of the chapel, made by the blood which flowed under the hands of these Magdalens as they did penance."

The environs of the town were well cultivated and brightened by a large number of country houses named "quentas," but scarcely two or at most three leagues from Buenos Ayres were immense plains, with scarcely a single undulation, given up to bulls and horses, which are almost the only inhabitants. Bougainville says, —

“These animals were so abundant, that travellers, when they needed food, would kill a bull, consume what they could eat, and leave the rest to be devoured by wild dogs and tigers.”

The Spaniards had not yet succeeded in subduing the Indian tribes on the two shores of the La Plata River. They were called “Indios bravos.”

“They are of medium height, very ugly, and almost all infected with the itch. Their complexions are very dark, and the grease with which they perpetually rub themselves, makes them even blacker. Their sole garment is the skin of the roe-buck, which reaches to the heels, and in which they wrap themselves.

“These Indians pass their lives on horseback, at least near the Spanish settlement. They occasionally come there with their wives to buy eau de cologne, and they never cease drinking until drunkenness literally deprives them of the power to move. Sometimes they assemble in droves of two or three hundred to carry off the cattle from the Spanish lands, or to attack the caravans of travellers.

“They pillaged, massacred, and carried off slaves. It was an evil without remedy. How was it possible to subdue a wandering nation in a vast and uncultivated country where it was difficult even to meet with them?

“Commerce was far from flourishing, as no European merchandise was allowed to pass by land to Peru or Chili.”

Nevertheless Bougainville saw a vessel leaving Buenos Ayres carrying a million piastres, “And if,” adds he, “all the inhabitants of this country had the traffic of their hides in Europe, that of itself would be enough to enrich them.”

The anchorage of Montevideo was safe, although several times they were visited by “pamperos,” a scourge of the South-West, accompanied by violent tempests. The town offered nothing of interest. The environs are so uncultivated that it is necessary to import flour, biscuits, and everything necessary for the boats. But fruits, such as figs, peaches, apples, lemons, &c. are plentiful, as well as the same quantity of butcher’s meat as in the rest of the country.

These documents, which are a hundred years old, are curious when compared with those furnished by contemporary navigators, especially by M. Emile Daireaux, in his work on La Plata. In many respects this picture is still correct, but there are other details (such for instance as regards instruction, of which Bougainville could not speak, as it did not exist) in which it has made immense progress. When the victuals, the provision of water, and the cattle were embarked, the three vessels set sail on the 28th of February, 1767, for the Malouines. The voyage was not fortunate. Variable winds, heavy weather, and a running sea, caused much damage to the *Boudeuse*. On the 23rd of March she cast anchor in French Bay, where she was joined on the morrow by the two Spanish vessels, which had been much tried by the tempest.

Upon the 1st of April the restitution of the colony to the Spaniards was solemnized. Very few French profited by their king’s permission to remain in the Malouines; almost all preferred to embark upon the Spanish frigates upon their leaving Montevideo. As for Bougainville, he was forced to await the provisions, which the fly-boat *Etoile* was to bring him, and which was to accompany him upon his voyage round the world.

However, the months of March, April, and May passed, and no *Etoile* appeared. It was impossible to cross the Pacific with only six months’ provisions, which was all the *Boudeuse* carried.

Bougainville decided at last, on the 2nd of June, to reach Rio Janeiro, which he had mentioned to M. de la Gerandais, the commander of the *Etoile* as a rendezvous, should unforeseen circumstances prevent his reaching the Malouines.

The crossing was made with such favourable weather, that only eighteen days were needed to reach the Portuguese Colony. The *Etoile*, which had been awaiting her for four days, had left France later than was expected. She had been forced to seek shelter from the tempest at Montevideo, from whence, following her instructions she gained Rio.

Well received by the Count of Acunha, Viceroy of Brazil, the French had opportunities of seeing the comedies of Metastasio given at the opera by a Mulatto troupe, and of hearing the works of the great Italian masters executed by a bad orchestra, conducted by a deformed abbé in ecclesiastical dress.

But the cordial relations with the viceroy were not lasting. Bougainville, who with the viceroy’s permission had made some purchase, found the delivery of it refused for no reason. He was forbidden to take wood he needed from the royal timber-yard, although he had concluded a contract for it, and lastly, he was prevented from lodging with his staff, during the repairs of the *Boudeuse*, in a house near the town, placed at his disposal by a friend. To avoid altercation, Bougainville hurried the preparations for departure.

Before leaving the capital of Brazil, the French commander entered into various details of the beauty of the port, and the picturesque nature of its surroundings, and finished by a very curious digression upon the prodigious riches of the country, of which the port was the emporium.

“The mines called ‘general,’” he says, “are the nearest to the town, although they are seventy-five leagues away from it. They yield the king a yearly revenue by his right to a fifth share of at least a hundred and twelve arobas of gold. In 1762, they brought him in a hundred and nineteen. Under the captaincy of the ‘general’ mines, those of the ‘Rio des Morts,’ Sabara, and Sero Frio were included — the last named, in addition to all the gold it produces, yields all the diamonds which come from the Brazils. No precious stones, except diamonds, are contraband. They belonged to the speculators, who were obliged to keep an exact account of the diamonds they find and to restore them to the possession of an intendant named by the king for this purpose. He immediately places them in a casket bound with iron, and fastened with three locks. He retains one key, the king has another, and the ‘Provedor de hacienda reale’ the third. This casket is enclosed in a second, stamped with the seals of the three persons named, and containing the three keys of the smaller one.”

But in spite of all these precautions, and the severe punishment visited upon diamond robberies, an enormous contraband trade was carried on. It was, however, not the only source of revenue; and Bougainville calculated, that deducting the maintenance of troops, the pay of the civil officers, and all the expenses of the administration, the King of Portugal drew no less than ten million francs from the Brazils.

From Rio to Montevideo no incident occurred, but upon the Plata, during a storm, the *Etoile* was run down by a Spanish vessel, which broke her bowsprit, her beak head, and much of her rigging. The damages and the shock increased the leak of the ship, and forced her to return to Encenada de

Baragan, where repairs were more easily managed than at Montevideo. It was impossible therefore to leave the river until the 14th of November.

NORTH ISLAND
PACIFIC OCEAN
CANTERBURY
SOUTH ISLAND
I. STEWART
NEW ZEALAND
Kilomètres

Gravé par E. Morieu.

Thirteen days later, both ships came in sight of Virgin Cape at the entrance to the Strait of Magellan, which they hastened to enter.

Possession Bay, the first they met with, is a large space, open to all winds and offering very bad anchorage. From Virgin Cape to Orange Cape is about fifteen leagues, and the strait is throughout seven or eight leagues wide. The first narrow entrance was easily passed, and anchor cast in Boucault Bay, where half a score of officers and men landed.

They soon made acquaintance with the Patagonians, and exchanged a few trifles, precious to the natives, for swansdown and gunaco skins.

The inhabitants were tall, but none of them reached six feet.

“What struck me as gigantic in their proportions,” says Bougainville, “was their enormous breadth of shoulder, the size of their heads, and the thickness of their limbs. They are robust and well-nourished, their muscles are sinewy, their flesh firm, and in fact they are men who, having lived in the open air and drawn their nourishment from juicy aliments, have reached their highest point of development.”

The distance from the first to the second opening may have been six or seven leagues, and was passed without accident. This opening is only one and a half leagues in width, and four in length. In this part of the strait the ships easily reconnoitred St. Bartholomew and St. Elizabeth Islands.

At the latter the French landed. They found neither wood nor water. It was an absolutely desert land.

Leaving this place, the American side of the strait is amply furnished with wood. But although the first advances had been fortunate, Bougainville was to find plenty to try his patience.

The distinctive character of the climate lies in the rapid atmospheric changes, which succeeded each other so quickly that it is quite impossible to forecast their sudden and dangerous variations. Hence the damages which it is impossible to foresee, which retard the passage of the ships, even if they do not force them to seek shelter for repairs.

Guyot-Duclos Bay provides an excellent anchorage, with six or eight fathoms of water and sound bottom. Bougainville remained there long enough to fill several casks, and endeavoured to procure fresh meat, but he only met with a few wild animals. St. Anne’s point was reached. At that place Sarmiento had founded the colony of Philippeville in 1581.

In a preceding volume we have narrated the fearful catastrophe which procured the name of Port Famine for this spot.

The French reconnoitred several bays, capes, and harbours at which they touched. They were Bougainville Bay, where the *Etoile* was repainted, Port Beau Bassin, Cormadière Bay, off the coast of Tierra del Fuego, and Cape Forward, which forms the most southerly point of the strait and of Patagonia, Cascade Bay in Tierra del Fuego, the safety, easy anchorage, and facilities for procuring water and wood of which, render it a most desirable haven for navigators.

The various ports which Bougainville discovered are particularly valuable, as they offer favourable points for doubling Cape Forward, one of the most difficult routes for sailors on account of the violent and contrary winds which prevail there.

The year 1768 opened for the adventurers in Fortescue Bay, below which is Port Galant, the plan of which had been taken with great exactitude by M. de Gennes. Detestable weather, of which the worst winter in Paris can give no idea, detained the French expedition for three weeks. It was visited by a band of Pecheians, the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, who boarded the ship.

“We made them sing,” says the narrative, “dance, listen to instruments, and above all eat. Everything was pleasant to them, bread, salt meat, tallow, they devoured everything that was given them. They showed no surprise either at the sight of the vessels or that of the various objects which were shown to them, no doubt because to feel surprise at works of art, one must have elementary ideas. These men, akin to brutes, treated *chef-d'oeuvres* of human industry as they treated the laws and phenomena of nature.

"These savages are small, ugly, thin, and smell abominably. They are all but naked, having only clothing of seal-skin too small to cover them.

"These women are hideous, and the men appear to care little for them. They live all together, men and women and children, in one hut, in the centre of which a fire is lighted.

"Their food is chiefly shell-fish. Still they have dogs and snares set with whalebone. On the whole they appear to be a good sort of people, but so weak that one overlooks their faults.

"Of all the savages I have met with, the Pecherais are the most destitute."

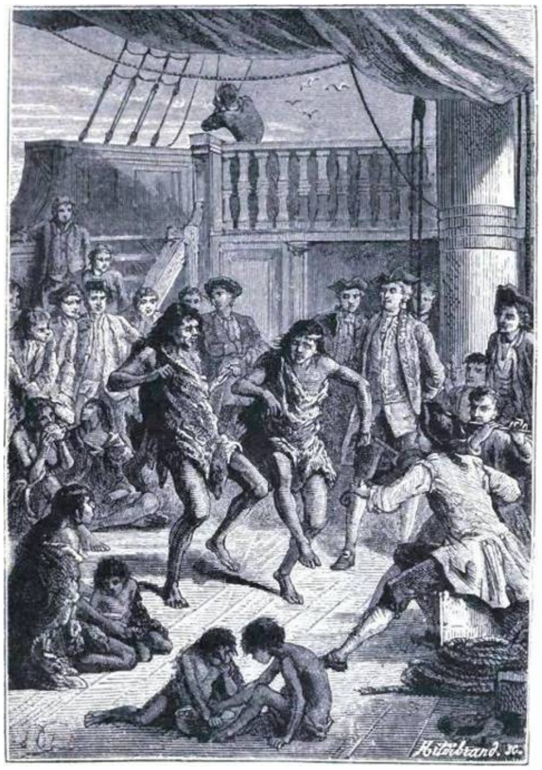
Hildebrand. sc.

“We made them sing.”

A painful event occurred whilst the crew were in this port. A child of about twelve years of age came on board, and glass beads and bits of glass were given to it, with no suspicion of the use to which they would be put. It would appear that these savages are in the habit of stuffing pieces of talc down their throats as talismans. This boy no doubt meant to do the same with the glass, for when they landed they found him vomiting violently and spitting blood. His throat and gums were lacerated and bleeding. In spite of the enchantments and violent rubbings of a juggler, or perhaps on account of this not too effective treatment, the poor child suffered dreadfully, and died shortly afterwards. This was the signal for a precipitate flight of the

Pecherais. They no doubt entertained a fear that the French had cast a spell upon them, and that they would all die in a similar manner.

On the 16th of January, in endeavouring to reach Rupert Isle, the *Boudeuse* was driven by the currents half a cable's length from the shore. The anchor which was then heaved, gave way, and without the least land-breeze the vessel stranded.

It was necessary to regain Galant Harbour. It was just time, for next day a fearful storm was raging.

"After experiencing constantly adverse and variable winds for twenty-six days in Port Galant, thirty-six hours favourable breeze, for which we had not dared to hope, sufficed to take us into the Pacific Ocean. This I believe to be a solitary instance of a voyage without anchorage from Port Galant to the narrow channel. I estimate the entire length of this strait, from Virgin Cape to Cape Peliers, at about 114 leagues.

"We took fifty-two days to accomplish it. In spite of the difficulties we met with in the passage of the Straits of Magellan" (and in this Bougainville entirely agrees with Byron), "I should advise this route, in preference to that by Cape Horn from September to the end of March. During the remaining months of the year I should prefer the open sea.

"Contrary winds and heavy seas are not dangerous, whilst it is not wise to grope one's way between two coasts. One is sure to be detained for some time in the strait, but this delay is not time wholly lost. One meets with water in abundance, wood and shell-fish, and occasionally very good fish. And I am decidedly of opinion that a crew reaching the Pacific by doubling Cape Horn suffers more from the ravages of scurvy than that which proceeds by the Straits of Magellan."

Bougainville's opinion has met with many opposers up to the present time, and the route which he lauds so highly has been almost abandoned by navigators. One strong reason for which is that steam has completely transformed maritime experience, and entirely changed nautical science.

Scarcely had he entered the Southern Sea, when Bougainville, to his intense surprise, found the winds southerly. He was therefore obliged to relinquish his intention of reaching Juan Fernandez.

Bougainville had agreed with M. de la Giraudais, captain of the *Etoile*, that if a larger stretch of sea was discovered, the two vessels should separate, but not lose sight of each other, and that every evening the bugle should recall them within half a league of each other, so that, in the event of the *Boudeuse* encountering danger, the *Etoile* might avoid it.

Bougainville for some time sought Easter Island in vain. At last he fell in during the month of March with the lands and islands erroneously marked upon M. Bellin's chart as Quiros Islands. On the 22nd of the same month he met with four islets, to which he gave the name of Quatre Facardins, which belonged to the Dangerous group, a set of madreporic islets, low and damp, which all navigators who have visited the Pacific Ocean by way of the Straits of Magellan appear to have noticed.

A little further discovery was made, of a fertile island inhabited by entirely naked savages, who were armed with long spears, which they brandished with menacing gestures, and thus it obtained the name of Lancers Island.

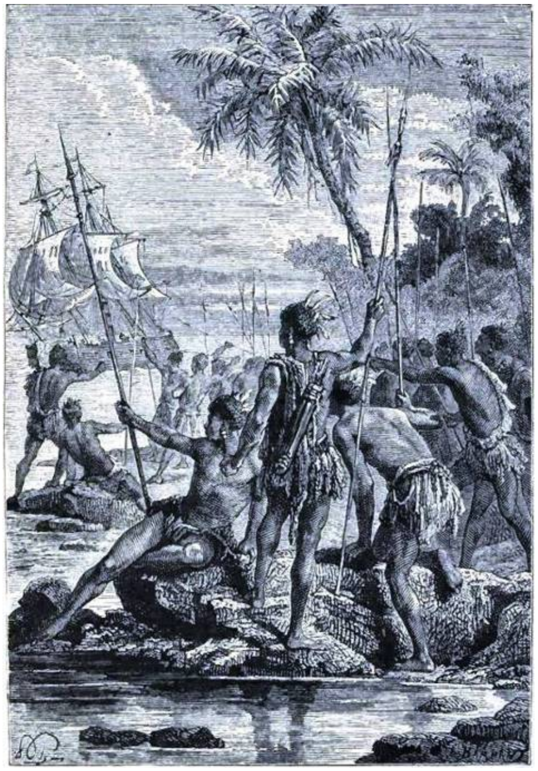

Lancer’s Island.

We need not refer to what we have already repeatedly said of the nature of these islands, the difficulty of access to them, their wild and inhospitable inhabitants. Cook calls this very Lancers Island, Thrum Cape, and the island of La Harpe, which Bougainville found on the 24th, is identical with Cook’s Bow Island.

The captain, knowing that Roggewein had nearly perished in these latitudes, and thinking the interest of their exploration not worth the risk to be run, proceeded southward and soon lost sight of this immense archipelago, which extends in length 500 leagues, and contains at least sixty islands or groups.

Upon the 2nd of April Bougainville perceived a high and steep mountain, to which he gave the name of La Boudeuse. It was Maïtea Island, already called La Dezana by Quiros. On the 4th at sunrise the vessel reached Tahiti, a long island consisting of two peninsulas, united by a tongue of land no more than a mile in width.

More than 100 pirogues hastened to surround the two vessels. They were laden with cocoa-nuts and many delicious fruits which were readily exchanged for all sorts of trifles.

When night fell, the shore was illuminated by a thousand fires, to which the crew responded by throwing rockets.

“The appearance of this shore,” says Bougainville, “raised like an amphitheatre, offered a most attractive picture. Although the mountains are high, the land nowhere shows its nakedness, being covered with wood. We could scarcely credit our sight, when we perceived a peak, covered with trees, which rose above the level of the mountains in the southern portion of the island. It appeared only thirty fathoms in diameter, and decreased in size at its summit. At a distance it might have been taken for an immense pyramid, adorned with foliage by a clever decorator. The least elevated portions of the country are intersected by fields and groves. And the entire length of the coast, upon the shore below the higher level, is a stretch of low land, unbroken and covered by plantations. There, amid the bananas, cocoa-nut and other fruit-trees we saw the huts of the natives.”

The whole of the morrow was spent in barter. The natives, in addition to fruits, offered fowls, pigeons, fishing instruments, working implements, stuffs, and shells, for which they asked nails and earrings.

Upon the morning of the 6th, after three days devoted to tacking about and reconnoitring the coast in search of a roadstead, Bougainville decided to cast anchor in the bay he had seen the first day of his arrival.

“The number of pirogues round our vessels,” he says, “was so great, that we had immense trouble in making way through the crowd and noise. All approached crying, ‘Tayo,’ *friend*, and offering a thousand marks of friendship. The pirogues were full of women, who might vie with most Europeans in pleasant features, and who certainly excelled them in beauty of form.”

Bougainville’s cook managed to escape, in spite of all prohibitions, and gained the shore. But he had no sooner landed, than he was surrounded by a vast crowd, who entirely undressed him to investigate his body. Not knowing what they were going to do with him, he thought himself lost, when the natives restored his clothes, and conducted him to the vessel more dead than alive. Bougainville wished to reprimand him, but the poor fellow assured him, that however he might threaten him, he could never equal the terrors of his visit on shore.

As soon as the ship could heave to, Bougainville landed with some of his officers to reconnoitre the watering-place. An enormous crowd immediately surrounded him, and examined him with great curiosity, all the time crying “Tayo! Tayo!” One of the natives received them in his house, and served them with fruits, grilled fish, and water. As they regained the shore, a native of fine appearance, lying under a tree, offered them a share of the shade.

“We accepted it,” says Bougainville, “and the man at once bent towards us, and in a gentle way, sung, to the sound of a flute which another Indian blew with his nose, a song which was no doubt anacreontic. It was a charming scene, worthy of the pencil of Boucher. Four natives came with great confidence to sup and sleep on board. We had the flute, bassoon, and violin played for them, and treated them to fireworks composed of rockets and serpents. This display excited both surprise and fear."

Before giving further extracts from Bougainville's narrative, it appears *apropos* to warn the reader not to accept these descriptions *au pied de la lettre*. The fertile imagination of the narrator embellished everything. Not content with the ravishing scenes under his eyes, the picturesque reality is not enough for him, and he adds new delights to the picture, which only overload it. He does this almost unconsciously. None the less, his descriptions should be received with great caution. We find a strange example of this tendency of the age, in the narrative of Cook's second voyage. Mr. Hodges, the painter who was attached to the expedition, wishing to reproduce the disembarkation of the English on the island of Middleburgh, paints personages who have not the smallest resemblance to the dwellers in the ocean regions, and whose togas give them the appearance of being contemporaries of Cæsar or of Augustus. Yet he had the originals before his eyes, and nothing could have been easier to him than to depict the scene as it really was.

We know better how to respect truth in these days. No additions, no embellishments are found in the narratives of *our* navigators. And if sometimes they prove but dry accounts, which give little pleasure to the general public, they are sure to contain the elements of earnest study for the scientific man, and the basis of works for the advancement of science.

With this preamble, let us follow the narrator.

Bougainville established his sick and his water-casks upon the shore of a small river which ran at the bottom of the bay, under a guard for their security. These precautions were not taken without arousing the susceptibility and distrust of the natives. They had no objection to seeing the strangers walk about their island all day, but they expected them to return on board at night. Bougainville persisted, and at last he was obliged to fix the length of his stay.

At this juncture, harmony was restored. A large shed was prepared for the sufferers from scurvy, in number thirty-four, and for their guard, which consisted of thirty men. The shed was closed on all sides and only one opening left, to which the natives crowded with the wares they wished to exchange. The only trouble they had was in keeping an eye upon everything that was brought on shore, for “there are no more adroit sharpers in Europe than these folks.” Following a laudable custom, now becoming general, Bougainville presented the chief of this settlement with a pair of turkeys, and ducks and drakes, and then cleared a piece of land, where he sowed corn, wheat, rice, maize, onions, &c.

On the 10th, a native was killed by a gunshot. All Bougainville’s inquiries failed to find out the perpetrator of this abominable assassination. Apparently the natives thought the victim in the wrong, for they continued to frequent the market with their former confidence.

The captain, however, knew that the harbour was not well-sheltered, and the bottom was entirely coral.

On the 12th, during a storm of wind, the *Boudeuse*, whose anchor cable had been cut by the coral, caused great injuries to the *Etoile*, upon which she was driven. Whilst all on board were busily occupied in repairing these injuries, and a boat had been despatched in search of a second passage, by means of which the ships might have left with any wind, Bougainville learned that three natives had been killed or wounded in their cabins by bayonets, and that owing to the general alarm all the inhabitants had hurried to the interior.

In spite of the risk run by his ships, the captain at once landed, and put the supposed perpetrators of this outrage (which might have brought the entire population upon the French) into irons. Thanks to these rigorous measures the natives calmed down, and the night passed without incident.

Still, Bougainville’s worst apprehensions were not upon this score. He returned on board as soon as possible. But for a breeze which opportunely sprang up, both vessels would have been driven on shore by a strong squall, accompanied by a swell and thunder. The anchor cables broke, and the vessels had a narrow escape of striking on the breakers, where they must speedily have been demolished. Fortunately the *Etoile* was able to gain the open, and was soon followed by the *Boudeuse*, leaving in this foreign roadstead six anchors, which might have been of great use during the rest of the voyage.

So soon as they perceived the approaching departure of the French, the natives came in crowds with provisions of every variety. One of them, named Aotourou, asked, and finally obtained, permission to accompany Bougainville on his voyage. After his arrival in Europe, Aotourou lived eleven months in Paris, where he was received with cordiality and welcome in the highest society. In 1770, when he returned to his native land, the government took an opportunity of conveying him to the Isle of France. He was to return to Tahiti as soon as the weather permitted, but he died in the island without having been able to convey to his land the useful implements, grains, and cattle, which had been given to him by the French Government.

Tahiti, which was named Nouvelle Cythère by Bougainville, on account of the beauty of the women, is the largest of the Society's group. Although it was visited, as we have already narrated, by Wallis, we will give a little information which we owe to Bougainville.

The principal productions were cocoas, bananas, bread fruits, yams, sugar cane, &c. M. de Commerson, naturalist, who was on board the *Etoile*, recognized the Indian flora. The only quadrupeds were pigs, dogs, and rats, who multiplied rapidly.

Bougainville says, "The climate is so healthy that in spite of our fatigues, although our people were perpetually in the water, and under a burning sun, sleeping on the naked soil under the stars, no one was ill. The sufferers from scurvy whom we disembarked, and who had not enjoyed a single night's sleep, regained their strength, and were so soon restored, that some of them were completely cured on board."

In addition to this, the health and strength of the natives, who live in cabins open to every wind, and who scarcely cover the ground, which serves them as a bed, with a few leaves, the happy old age to which they easily attain, the sharpness of all their senses, and the singular beauty of their teeth, which they preserve to the greatest age, all testify to the salubrity of the climate, and the efficiency of the rules followed by the inhabitants.

In character the people seem gentle and good. It would not appear that they have civil wars among themselves, although the country is divided into little portions under independent chiefs. They are constantly at war with the inhabitants of the neighbouring islands. Not satisfied with massacring the men and male children taken in arms, they skin their chins with the beard, and keep this hideous trophy. Bougainville could only obtain very vague information of their ceremonies and religion. But he could at least assert the reverence they pay their dead. They preserve the corpses for a long time in the open air, on a sort of scaffold sheltered by a shed. In spite of the odour of decomposition, the women go every day to weep near the monuments, and bedew the sad relics of their beloved ones with their tears and with cocoa-nut oil.

The soil is so productive, and requires so little cultivation, that men and women live in a state of almost entire idleness. Therefore it is not astonishing that the sole care of the latter is to be pleasing. Dancing, singing, long conversations, teeming with gaiety, have developed a mobility of expression among the Tahitans, surprising even to the French, a people who themselves have not the reputation of being serious, possibly because they are more lively than those who reproach them with levity.

It is impossible to fix a native’s attention. A trifle strikes them, but nothing occupies them. In spite of their want of reflection they were clever and industrious. Their pirogues were constructed after a fashion equally ingenious and solid. Their fish-hooks and all their fishing implements were of delicate workmanship. Their nets were like those of Europeans. Their stuffs manufactured of the bark of a tree, were generally woven and dyed of various colours.

In fact Bougainville’s impression of the Tahitan people was that they were “lazzaroni.”

At eight o’clock on the 16th of April, Bougainville was about ten leagues north of Tahiti, when he perceived land to windward. Although it had the appearance of three islands, it was in reality but one. It was named Oumaita after Aotourou. The captain, not thinking it wise to stop there, steered so as to avoid the Pernicious Islands, of which Roggewein’s disaster had made him afraid. During the remainder of the month of April the weather was fine, with little wind.

On the 3rd of May, Bougainville bore down towards a new land, which he had just discovered, and was not long in finding others on the same day. The coasts of the largest one were steep; in point of fact, it was simply a mountain covered with trees to its summit, with neither valley nor sea coast. Some fires were seen there, cabins built under the shade of the cocoanut-trees, and some thirty men running on the shore. In the evening, several pirogues approached the vessels, and after a little natural hesitation, exchanges commenced. The natives demanded pieces of red cloth in exchange for cocoa-nuts, yams, and far less beautiful stuffs than those of the Tahitans; they disdainfully refused iron, nails, and earrings, which had been so appreciated elsewhere in the Bourbon Archipelago, as Bougainville had named the Tahitan group. The natives had their breasts and thighs painted dark blue; they wore no beards; their hair was drawn into tufts on the top of their heads.

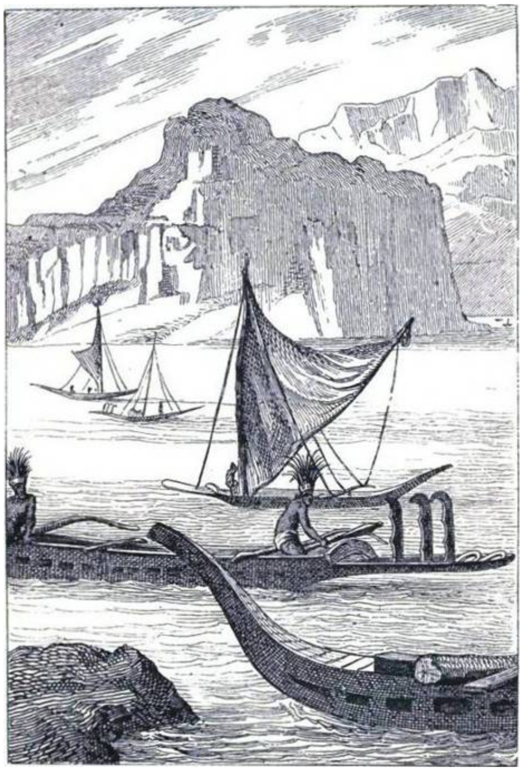

Pirogue of the Marquesas islanders.

Next day, fresh islands belonging to the archipelago were seen. The natives, who appeared very savage, would not approach the vessels.

“The longitude of these islands,” says the narrative, “is pretty nearly similar to that which Abel Tasman reckoned it when he discovered Amsterdam and Rotterdam Islands, the Pilstaars, Prince William Island, and the low lands of Fleemskerk. It is also approximate to that assigned for the Solomon Islands. Besides the pirogues which we have seen rowing in the open sea, and to the south, indicate other islands in this locality. Thus it appears likely that these lands form an extended chain in the same parallel. The islands comprising the Navigator Archipelago, lie below the fourteenth southern parallel, between 170° and 172° west longitude from Paris.”

As fresh victuals diminished, scurvy again began to appear. It was necessary to think of putting into a port again. On the 22nd and the following days of the same month, Pentecost Island, Aurora and Leper Islands, which belong to the archipelago of New Hebrides, were reconnoitred. They had been discovered by Quiros in 1606. The landing appearing easy, the captain determined to send an expedition on shore, which would bring back cocoa-nuts and other antiscorbutic fruits. Bougainville joined them during the day. The sailors cut wood, and the natives aided in shipping it. But in spite of this apparent good feeling, the natives were still distrustful, and carried their weapons in their hands. Those who possessed none, held large stones, all ready to throw.

As soon as the boats were laden with fruit and wood, Bougainville re-embarked his men. The natives then approached in great numbers, and discharged a shower of arrows, lances, and javelins, some even entered the water, the better to aim at the French. Several gunshots, fired into the air, having no effect, a well-directed general volley soon put the natives to flight.

A few days later, a boat seeking anchorage upon the coast of the Leper Islands, was in danger of attack. Two arrows aimed at them served as a pretext for the first discharge, which was speedily followed by a fire so well directed, that Bougainville believed his crew in danger. The number of victims was very large, the natives uttered piercing cries as they fled to the woods. It was a regular massacre. The captain, uneasy at the prolonged firing, sent another boat to the help of the first, when he saw it doubling a point, He therefore signalled for their return. “I took measures,” he said, "that we should never again be dishonoured by such an abuse of our superior forces."

The easy abuse of their powers by captains is truly sad! The mania for destroying life needlessly, even without any object, raises one's indignation! To whatever nation explorers belong we find them guilty of the same acts. The reproach, therefore, belongs not to a particular nation, but to humanity at large.

Having obtained the commodities he needed, Bougainville regained the sea.

It would appear that the navigator aimed at making many discoveries, for he only reconnoitred the lands he found very superficially and hastily, and of all the charts which accompany the narrative, and there are many of them, not one gives an entire archipelago, or settles the various questions to which a new discovery gives rise. Captain Cook did not proceed in this way. His explorations, always conducted with care, and with rare perseverance, are for that very reason far superior in value to those of the French explorer.

The lands which the French now encountered, were no other than St. Esprit, Mallicolo, and St. Bartholomew, and the islets belonging to the latter. Although he was perfectly aware that these islands were identical with the *Tierra del Espiritu Santo* of Quiros, Bougainville could not refrain from bestowing a new name upon them, and called them the Archipelago des "Grandes Cyclades," to which however, the name of New Hebrides has been given in preference. "I readily believed," he says, "that it was its extreme southern point which Roggewein saw under the eleventh parallel, and which he named *Tienhoven* and *Groningue*. But when we arrived there everything led us to believe that we were in the southern land of Espiritu Santo. Every appearance seemed to coincide with Quiros's narrative, and the discoveries we made every day encouraged us in our search. It is singular that precisely in the same latitude and longitude as that which Quiros gives to his St. Philip and St. James' Bays, upon a shore which at first sight appeared like a continent, we found a passage equal in size to that which he gives to the opening of his bays. Did the Spanish navigator see badly, or did he wish to hide his discoveries?

"Had geographers merely guessed in making the Tierra del Espiritu Santo identical with New Guinea? To ascertain the truth, we must follow the same parallel for over 350 leagues. I resolved upon doing so, although the state and quantity of our provisions warned us to seek a European settlement as soon as possible. It will be seen that we narrowly escaped being the victims of our own persistance."

Whilst Bougainville was in these latitudes certain business matters required his presence on board the *Etoile*, and he there found out a singular fact, which had already been largely discussed by his crew. M. de Commerson had a servant named Barré. Indefatigable, intelligent, and already an experienced botanist, Barré had been seen taking an active part in the herborising excursions, carrying boxes, provisions, the weapons, and books of plants, with endurance which obtained from the botanist, the nickname of his beast of burden. For some time past Barré had been supposed to be a woman. His smooth face, the tone of his voice, his reserve, and certain other signs, appeared to justify the supposition, when on arriving at Tahiti suspicions were changed into certainty. M. de Commerson landed to botanize, and according to custom Barré followed him with the boxes, when he was surrounded by natives, who, exclaiming that it was a woman, were disposed to verify their opinion. A midshipman, M. Bommand, had the greatest trouble in rescuing her from the natives, and escorting her back to the ship. When Bougainville visited the *Etoile*, he received Barré's confession. In tears, the assistant botanist confessed her sex, and excused herself for having deceived her master, by presenting herself in man's clothes, at the very moment of embarkation. Having no family, and having been ruined by a law-suit, this girl had donned man's clothes to insure respect. She was aware, before she embarked, that she was going on a voyage round the world, and the prospect, far from frightening her, only confirmed her in her resolution.

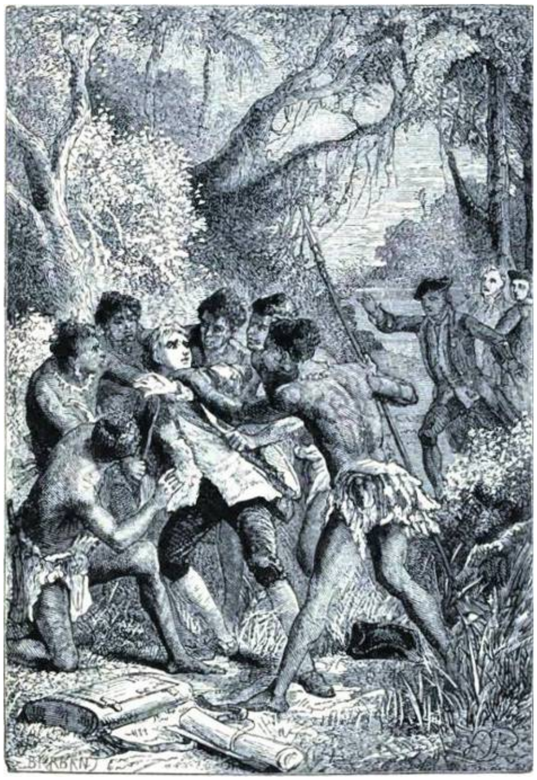

Mdlle. Barré's adventure.

"She will be the first woman who has been round the world," says Bougainville, "and I must do her the justice to admit that she has conducted herself with the most scrupulous discretion. She is neither ugly nor pretty, and at most is only twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. It must be admitted that had the two vessels suffered shipwreck upon a desert island, it would have been a singular experience for Barré."

The expedition lost sight of land on the 29th of May. The route was directed westward. On the 4th of June, a very dangerous rock, so slightly above water that at two leagues' distant it was not visible from the look-out, was discovered in latitude 15° 50', and 148° 10' longitude. The constant recurrence of breakers, trunks of trees in large quantities, fruits and sea wrack, and the smoothness of the sea, all indicated the neighbourhood of extensive land to the south-east. It was New Holland. Bougainville determined to leave these dangerous latitudes, where he was likely to meet with nothing but barren lands, and a sea strewn with rocks and full of shallows. There were other urgent reasons for changing the route, provisions were getting low, the salt meat was so tainted, that the rats caught on board were eaten in preference. Bread enough for two months, and vegetables for forty days alone remained. All clamoured for a return to the north.

Unfortunately the south winds had ceased, and when they re-commenced, they brought the expedition within an inch of destruction.

On the 10th of June land was seen to the north. It was the bottom of the Gulf of the Louisiade, which had received the name of Cul-de-sac de l'Orangerie. The country was magnificent. On the sea shore, a low land covered with trees and shrubs, the balmy odours of which reached the ships, rose like an amphitheatre towards the mountains, whose summits were lost in the skies. However, it was impossible to visit this rich and fertile country, but, on the other hand, desirable to find to the east a passage to the south of New Guinea, which, by way of the Gulf of Carpentaria, would have led direct to the Moluccas. Did such a passage exist? Nothing was more problematic, for the notion was that land had been seen extending far to the westward. It was needful to hurry as fast as possible from the gulf where the ships had so incautiously involved themselves.

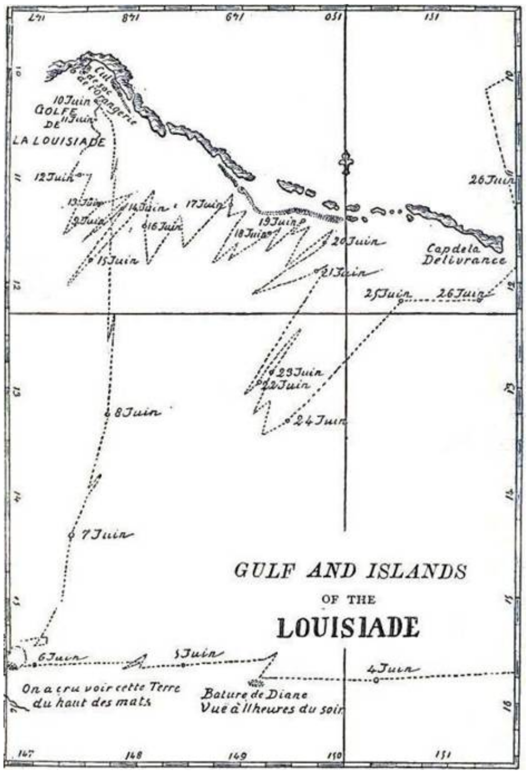
Cul de sac de l'Orangerie
10 Juin
GOLFE DE LA LOUISIADE
11 Juin
12 Juin
13 Juin
9 Juin
14 Juin
17 Juin
16 Juin
15 Juin
19 Juin
18 Juin
20 Juin
21 Juin
26 Juin
Cap de la Delivrance
25 Juin
26 Juin
23 Juin
22 Juin
24 Juin
8 Juin
7 Juin
GULF AND ISLANDS
OF THE
LOUISIADE
6 Juin
5 Juin
4 Juin
On a cru voir cette Terre du haut des mats
Bature de Diane Vue à 11heures du soir
147
148
149
150
151
10
11
12
13
14
15
16

Louisiade Archipelago.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

But there is a wide difference between a wish and its fulfilment! The two vessels strove in vain up to the 21st of June to transport themselves to the west, from this coast, which was so full of rocks and breakers, and upon which the wind and currents bade fair to swallow them up. The fog and rain continued so closely with them, that the frigate could only proceed in company with the *Etoile* by a constant firing of guns. When the wind changed, they profited by it, and immediately proceeded to the open sea — but it soon veered again, and continued east-south-east, and thus they speedily lost the ground they had gained.

During this terrible cruise, the rations of bread and vegetables were obliged to be reduced, consumption of old leather was threatened with severe punishment, and the last goat on board was sacrificed.

It is difficult for the reader, tranquilly sitting in his chimney-corner, to imagine the anxiety of a voyage in these unknown seas, — threatened with the unexpected appearance of rocks and breakers, with contrary winds, unknown currents, and a fog which concealed all dangers. Cape Deliverance was only rounded on the 26th. It was now possible to start for the north-north-east.

Two days later, when they had made about sixty leagues northward, some islands were perceived ahead. Bougainville imagined they were a part of the Louisiade group, but they are more generally accepted as belonging to the Solomon Archipelago, which Carteret, who saw them the preceding year, as little imagined that he had reached, as the French navigator.

Several pirogues speedily surrounded the two ships. They were manned by natives, blacker than Africans, with long curling red hair. Armed with javelins, they uttered shrill cries, and showed dispositions far from peaceful. It was useless to attempt to reach them. The surge broke violently, and the coast was so narrow that it scarcely seemed as if there were one at all.

Surrounded on all sides by islands, and in a thick fog, Bougainville steered by instinct in a passage only four or five leagues in width, and with a sea so rough that the *Etoile* was forced to close her hatchways.

Upon the eastern coast a pretty bay was perceived, which promised good anchorage. Boats were told off to sound it. Whilst they were thus engaged, ten or more pirogues, upon which some hundred and fifty men armed with bucklers, lances, and bows, were embarked, advanced against them. The pirogues divided into two parties to surround the French boats. As soon as they were within sufficient reach, the natives showered a storm of arrows and javelins upon the boats. The first discharge failed to stop them. A second was necessary to disperse them. Two pirogues, the crews of which had jumped into the sea, were captured. Of great length and well made, these boats were decorated in front with a man's head carved, the eyes of which were formed of mother of pearl, the ears of tortoise-shell, and the lips painted red.

The water in which this combat took place was called the Warrior River, and the island received the name of Choiseul, in honour of the French Minister of Marine.

On leaving this strait a new land was discovered — Bougainville Island, the southern extremity of which, called Laverdy Cape, appears to join Bouka Island. The latter, which Carteret had seen the preceding year, and which he named Winchelsea, appeared densely populated — if the cabins which abounded were any criterion.

The inhabitants, whom Bougainville classifies as Negroes, probably to distinguish them from the Polynesians and Malays, are Papuans, of the same race as the inhabitants of New Guinea. Their short curly hair was painted red, and the betel-nut, which they perpetually chewed, had communicated the same colour to their teeth. The coast with its cocoanut and other trees, promised plentiful refreshments, but contrary winds and currents quickly drew the ships away.

On the 6th of July Bougainville cast anchor on the southern coast of New Ireland, which had been discovered by Schouten, in Port Praslin, at the very point where Carteret had stopped.

“We sent our casks on shore,” says the narrative, “and began to collect water and wood, and commence washing, all of which was most necessary. The disembarkation was splendid — upon fine sand, with neither rock nor wave.

“Four streams flowed into the harbour in a space measuring four hundred paces. We selected three, according to custom; one to supply water for *La Boudeuse*, one for the *Etoile*, and one for washing purposes. Wood was plentiful on the shore, and there were various kinds of it, all good for burning, and several first-rate for carpentery, joinery, and even toy-making.

“The two vessels were in hearing of each other and close to the shore. Again this part and its neighbourhood to a great distance were uninhabited — a fact which secured us precious peace and liberty. We could not have hoped for a surer anchorage, or a more convenient spot for water, wood, or the various repairs needed by the vessels. We were able to send the sufferers from scurvy to range the woods. But with all these advantages, the port had a few inconveniences. In spite of active search, neither cocoanut-trees nor bananas were to be found, nor any of the resources which either by consent or by force, could have been gained in an inhabited country. Fish was not abundant, and we could expect only safety and strictly necessary things. There was every fear that the sick would not re-establish their health. We had indeed no serious cases, but several were infected, and no improvement took place, and their malady could not have increased more rapidly.”

They had been only a few days in port, when a sailor found a leaden plate upon which was an inscription in English. It was easy to guess that they had found the very spot where Carteret had made a stay the preceding year.

The resources offered by this country to sportsmen were mediocre in the extreme. They did indeed catch sight of a few boars or wild pigs, but it was impossible to hit them. To make up for this they shot most beautiful pigeons, the bodies and necks of grey-white, and of golden green plumage, turtle-doves, parroquets, crested birds, and a species of crow, whose cry was so like the baying of a dog, as to be mistaken for it. The trees were large and magnificent, amongst them the betel, the areca, and the pepper-tree. Malignant reptiles swarm in these marshy lands, and in the ancient forests, serpents, scorpions, and other venomous reptiles abounded. Unfortunately, they were not only to be found on land. A sailor in search of *marteaux*, a very rare kind of bivalve mussel, was stung by a serpent. The fearful suffering and violent convulsions which followed only subsided at the expiration of five or six hours, and at last, the theriac which was administered to him after the bite, effected a cure. This accident was a sad damper to conchological enthusiasm. Upon the 22nd, after a severe storm, the ships were sensible of several slight earthquakes, the sea rose and fell several times in succession, which greatly alarmed the sailors who were occupied in fishing.

In spite of the rain and ceaseless storms which continued daily, a detachment started to search the interior for Bourbon palms, palm-trees, and turtle-doves. They expected to find wonders, but returned oftenest empty-handed and with the one result of being wet to the skin. A natural curiosity at some distance from the anchorage, a thousand times more beautiful than the wonders invented for the ornament of kingly palaces, attracted numberless visitors, who could never tire of admiring it. It was a waterfall, too beautiful for description! To form any idea of its beauty, it would be necessary to reproduce by the brush the sparkling gleam of the spray lit up by the rays of the sun, the vaporous shade of the tropical trees which dipped their branches into the water, and the fantastic display of light over a magnificent country, not yet spoiled by the hand of man!

As soon as the weather changed, the ships left Port Praslin, to follow the coast of New Guinea, until the 3rd of August. The *Etoile* was attacked by hundreds of pirogues, and forced to return the stones and arrows that assailed her by a few gunshots, which put the assailants to flight. On the 4th the islands named Matthias and Stormy by Dampier were sighted. Three days later Anchorite Island was recognized, so called because a number of pirogues occupied in fishing, took no notice of the *Etoile* and *Boudeuse*, disdaining to enter into relations with the strangers. After passing a series of islets half under water, upon which the vessels nearly struck, and which were named the Echiquiers by Bougainville, the coast of New Guinea appeared. Steep and mountainous, it ran west-north-west. On the 12th a large bay was discovered, but the currents, which so far had been unfavourable, were equally so in carrying the boats far from it. It was visible at a distance of twenty leagues from two gigantic mountains, Cyclops and Bougainville.

The Arimoa Islands, the largest of which is only four miles in length, were next seen, but the bad weather and the currents forced the two vessels to remain in the open sea and relinquish all exploration. It was necessary, however, to maintain a close watch in order to avoid missing the outlet into the Indian Ocean. Mispulu and Waigiou, the last at the extreme north of New Guinea, were passed in succession.

The “Canal des Français,” the outlet for ships from this mass of little islands and rocks, was passed without mishap. From thence Bougainville penetrated to the Molucca Archipelago, where he reckoned upon finding the fresh provisions requisite for the forty-five sufferers from scurvy on board.

In absolute ignorance of the events which had occurred in Europe since he left it, Bougainville would not run the risk of visiting a colony in which he was not the strongest power. The small Dutch establishment, Boeton or Bourou Island, suited him perfectly, all the more that provisions were easily obtained there. The crew received orders to enter the Gulf of Cajeti with the greatest delight. No one on board had escaped scurvy, and half the crew, Bougainville says, were quite unfit for duty.

“The victuals remaining to us were so tainted and ill-smelling, that the worst moments of our sad days were those when we were obliged to partake of such disgusting and unwholesome viands.

“The charms of Boeton Island were enhanced by our wretched situation.

“About midnight a delicious odour, emanating from the aromatic plants with which the Molucca Islands are covered, had been wafted several leagues out to sea, and was hailed by us as a forerunner of the end of our woes.

“The appearance of the moderately sized town, situated below the gulf, with vessels at anchor, and cattle grazing in the pastures that surrounded it, caused pleasure in which I participated, but which I cannot describe.”

Scarcely had the *Boudeuse* and the *Etoile* cast anchor, than the resident governor sent two soldiers to inquire of the French captain what reason he could assign for stopping at this place, when he must be aware that entrance was permitted to the ships of the India Company only. Bougainville immediately sent an officer to explain that hunger and sickness forced him to enter the first port which presented itself in his route. Also, that he would leave Boeton as soon as he had received the aid of which he had urgent need. The resident at once sent him the order of the Governor of Amboyna, which expressly forbade his receiving any strange ship in his harbour, and begged Bougainville to make a written declaration of the reason for his putting into port, in order that he might prove to his superior that he had not infringed his orders except under paramount necessity.

As soon as Bougainville had signed a certificate to this effect, cordiality was established with the Dutch. The resident entertained the officers at his own table, and a contract was concluded for provisions and fresh meat. Bread gave place to rice, the usual food of the Dutch, and fresh vegetables which are not usually cultivated in the island, were provided for the crews by the resident, who obtained them from the Company’s gardens. It would have been desirable for the re-establishment of the health of the crew, that the stay at this port could have been prolonged, but the end of the monsoon warned Bougainville to set out for Batavia.

The captain left Boeton on the 7th of September, convinced that navigation in the Molucca Archipelago was not so difficult as it suited the Dutch to affirm. As for trusting to French charts, they were of no use, being more qualified to mislead vessels than to guide them.

Bougainville therefore directed his course through the Straits of Button and Saleyer; a route which, though commonly used by the Dutch, is but little known to other nations. The narrative therefore carefully describes, with mention of every cape, the course he took. We will not dwell upon this part of the voyage, although it is very instructive, and on that account interesting to seafaring men.

On the 28th of September, ten months and a half after leaving Montevideo, the *Etoile* and the *Boudeuse* arrived at Batavia, one of the finest colonies in the world. After touching at the Isle of France, the Cape of Good Hope, and Ascension Island, near which he met Carteret, Bougainville entered St. Malo on the 16th of February, 1769, having lost only seven men, in the two years and four months which had elapsed since he left Nantes.

The remaining particulars of the career of this fortunate navigator do not concern our purpose, and may be dismissed briefly.

He took part in the American war, and in 1781 participated in an honourable combat before Port Royal off Martinique. Made Chief of the fleet in 1780, he, ten years later, received a commission to re-establish order in the mutinous fleet of M. d'Albert de Rions. Created vice-admiral in 1792, he did not think it right to accept a high rank, which was, to use his own words, "a title without duties."

Nominated first to the Bureau of Longitudes, and then to the Institute, raised to the rank of senator, created a count by Napoleon I. Bougainville died full of years and honours, on the 31st of August, 1811.

Bougainville acquired popularity as the first Frenchman who accomplished a voyage round the world. Though the merit of discovering and reconnoitring, if not of exploring, many groups of islands little known and quite neglected before his time, has been ascribed to him, he owes his reputation rather to the charm and easy animation of his narrative, than to his labours. If he is better known than many other French naval officers, his competitors, it is not so much because he accomplished more than they, as because his style of narrating his adventures charmed his contemporaries.

As for Guyot Duclos, his secondary share in the enterprise, and his plebeian rank, excluded him from reward. He was afterwards given the cross of St. Louis, but he earned the title by his rescue of the *Belle Poule*. Although he was born in 1722, and had been in the navy since the year 1734, he was still only lieutenant in 1791. A succession of ministers of new views was needed to obtain the rank of ship-captain for him: a tardy recompense of long and signal services. Guyot Duclos died at St. Servan on the 10th March, 1794.

CHAPTER III.

CAPTAIN COOK’S FIRST VOYAGE.

I.

The beginning of his maritime career — The command of the *Adventure* entrusted to him — Tierra del Fuego — Discovery of some islands in the Pomotou Archipelago — Arrival at Tahiti — Manners and customs of the inhabitants — Discovery of other islands in the Society group — Arrival at New Zealand — Interview with the natives — Discovery of Cook’s Strait — Circumnavigation of two large islands — Manners and productions of the country.

In narrating the career of a distinguished man, it is well to neglect none of those details which may appear of but slight importance. They acquire significance as indications of a vocation unknown even to its subject, and throw a light upon the character under consideration. For these reasons we shall dwell a little upon the humble beginning of the career of one of the most illustrious navigators whom England boasts.

James Cook was born at Marton, in Yorkshire, on the 27th of October, 1728. He was the ninth child of a farm servant, and a peasant woman named Grace. When scarcely eight years of age little James assisted his father in the rough toil of the farm of Airy Holme, near Ayton. His amiability, and love of work, attracted the interest of the farmer, who had him taught to read.

When he was thirteen years of age, he was apprenticed to William Sanderson, a linendraper at Snaith, a fishing-hamlet of some importance. But young Cook found little pleasure in an employment which kept him behind a counter, and he spent every leisure moment in chatting with the sailors who visited the port. Gaining his father’s consent, James soon left the linendraper’s, to engage himself as ship-boy, to Messrs. Walker, whose boats carried coal from England to Ireland.

Successively ship-lad, sailor, and master, Cook rapidly learned all the details of his profession.

In the spring of 1755, as the first hostilities between England and France broke out, the boat upon which Cook served was anchored in the Thames. The navy was recruited in those days by means of pressgangs. At first Cook hid himself, but afterwards, urged no doubt by a presentiment, he engaged himself on board the *Eagle*, a vessel of sixty guns, to the command of which Sir Hugh Palliser was soon appointed.

Intelligent, active, thoroughly at home in all the details of the service, Cook was noticed by the officers, and attracted the attention of his captain, who in a short time received a letter of warm recommendation from the member for Scarborough, sent in accordance with the pressing solicitations of all the inhabitants of Ayton, for young Cook, who shortly afterwards received a warrant as boatswain. He embarked upon the *Mercury*, bound for Canada, upon the 15th of May, 1759, and joined the fleet of Sir Charles Saunders, who, in conjunction with General Wolfe, conducted the siege of Quebec.

In that campaign Cook found the first opportunity of distinguishing himself. Ordered off to sound the St. Lawrence between Orleans Island and the northern shore of the river, he executed his task with much skill, and drew up a chart of the channel in spite of the difficulties and dangers of the enterprise. His hydrographical sketch was acknowledged to be so exact and complete that he received orders to examine the channels of the river below Quebec. This duty he performed so well that his chart of the St. Lawrence was published by the English Admiralty. After the capture of Quebec, Cook passed on to the *Northumberland*, under command of Lord Colville, and profited by his stay on the shores of Newfoundland to devote himself to astronomy. Important operations were now entrusted to him. He drew up the plan of Placentia, and took the bearings of St. Peter and Miquelon.

In 1764 he was made naval engineer for Newfoundland and Labrador, and was employed for three consecutive years in hydrographical tasks, which obtained for him the notice of the ministry, and helped to correct innumerable errors in the maps of America.

At the same time he addressed a treatise to the Royal Society of London, upon an eclipse of the sun, which he had observed in Newfoundland in 1766.

This document appeared in the “Philosophical Transactions.” Cook was not long in receiving a due reward for so much, and such successful labour, and for his patient studies, the more meritorious, as he had had few opportunities, and was self-taught.

A scientific question of the highest importance, viz. the transit of Venus across the sun’s disc, which had been announced for 1769, was eagerly discussed by all the scientists of the day. The English Government, confident that this observation could only be effectually made in the Pacific Sea, resolved to send a scientific expedition thither.

The command was offered to the famous hydrographer A. Dalrymple, equally celebrated for his astronomical investigations, and his geographical discoveries in the southern seas. But he was so exacting in his demands, and so persevering in his request for a commission as ship’s captain, which Sir

Edward Hawker as obstinately refused, that the Secretary of the Admiralty proposed another commander for the projected enterprise.

His choice fell upon James Cook, who was cordially recommended by Sir Hugh Palliser, and to him therefore the command of the *Endeavour* was given, whilst he was at the same time raised to the rank of ship's lieutenant.

Cook was now forty years of age. This was his first appointment in the Royal Navy. The mission entrusted to him called for varied qualifications, rarely to be met with in a sailor. For, although the observation of the transit of Venus was the principal object of the voyage, it was by no means the only one. Cook was also to make a voyage of discovery in the Pacific Ocean. But the humbly born Yorkshire lad was destined to prove himself equal to his task.

Whilst the *Endeavour* was being equipped, her crew of eighty-four men chosen, her store of eighteen months' provision embarked, her ten guns and twelve swivel guns, with the needful ammunition, shipped, Captain Wallis arrived in England. He had accomplished his voyage round the world. He was consulted as to the best spot for the observation of the transit of Venus, and he selected an island which he had discovered, and which was named by him after George III. It was later known by its native name of Tahiti. From this spot therefore Cook was to take observations.

Charles Green, assistant to Dr. Bradley, of Greenwich Observatory, embarked with him. To Green was entrusted the astronomical department, Doctor Solander, a Swedish doctor of medicine, a disciple of Linnæus, and professor at the British Museum, undertook the botanical part. Finally, Sir Joseph Banks joined the expedition, out of simple interest, anxious to employ his energy and fortune. After leaving Oxford, Sir Joseph Banks had visited the Newfoundland coast and Labrador, and had there acquired a taste for botany. Two painters accompanied the expedition, one a landscape and portrait painter, the other a scientific draughtsman. In addition to these persons, the company comprised a secretary and four servants, two of whom were negroes.

The *Endeavour* left Plymouth upon the 26th of August, 1768, and put into port at Funchal, in the island of Madeira, on the 13th of September, to obtain fresh fruit and make discoveries. The expedition met with a cordial reception.

During their visit to a convent, the staff of the *Endeavour* were entreated by the poor immured recluses to let them know when it would thunder, and to find a spring of fresh water for them, which they sorely needed, in the interior of the convent. With all their learning, Banks, Solander, and Cook found it impossible to satisfy these demands.

From Madeira to Rio de Janeiro, where the expedition arrived on the 13th of November, no incident interrupted the voyage, but Cook's reception by the Portuguese was hardly what he expected. The whole time of his stay in port was spent in disputes with the viceroy, a man of little knowledge, and quite incapable of understanding the scientific aspect of the expedition. However, he could not well refuse to supply the English with fresh provisions, of which they had absolutely none left. As, however, Cook was passing Fort Santa Cruz on leaving the bay, two shots were fired after him, whereupon he immediately cast anchor, and demanded the meaning of the insult. The viceroy replied that the commandant of the Fort had orders to allow no vessel to leave the bay without his having received notice, and although Captain Cook had notified his intention to the viceroy, it had, by pure neglect, not been communicated to the Commandant of the Fort. Was this an intentional act of discourtesy on the part of the viceroy? or was it simple heedlessness?

If the viceroy was equally negligent in all the details of his administration, the Portuguese colony must have been well regulated!

Cook entered the Straits of Lemaire on the 14th of January, 1769. Kippis, in his Life of Captain Cook, gives the following account: —

“The sea ran so high, that the water was above Cape San Diego, and the vessel was so driven by the wind that her bowsprit was constantly under water. Next day anchor was cast in a small harbour, which was recognized as Port Maurice, and soon afterwards they anchored in the Bay of Good Success. Whilst the *Endeavour* remained off this spot a strange and untoward adventure befell Banks, Solander, Dr. Green, and Monkhouse, the surgeon of the vessel, and their attendants. They were proceeding towards a mountain in search of plants, and as they climbed it they were surprised by cold, so penetrating and sudden, that they were all in danger of perishing. Dr. Solander was seized with vertigo, two negro servants died on the spot, finally the gentlemen were only able to regain the vessel after a lapse of two days. They rejoiced in their deliverance, with a joy which can only be estimated by those who have escaped similar dangers, whilst Cook showed a lively pleasure in the cessation of the anxiety their absence had caused him. This event gave them a proof of the severity of the climate.”

It was the middle of summer in this part of the world, and the day, when the cold surprised them, had begun as warmly as an ordinary May morning in England.

James Cook was enabled to make some curious observations upon the savage inhabitants of those desolate regions. Destitute of the necessaries of life, without clothes, without efficient shelter from the almost perpetual severity of this glacial latitude, unarmed, and unlearned in any industrial art which would enable them to construct the more necessary utensils, they passed a miserable life, and could only exist with difficulty. In spite of these facts, of all the articles offered in exchange they invariably chose the least useful. They joyfully accepted bracelets and necklaces, and rejected hatchets, knives, and fish-hooks. Careless of what we consider valuables, our superfluities were their necessaries.

Cook had reason to congratulate himself upon the selection of this route. He took thirty days to double Tierra del Fuego, from the date of his entrance into the Straits of Lemaire to his arrival, three degrees north of Magellan. No doubt a much longer time would have been needed, if he had followed the winding course of the Strait of Magellan. His very exact astronomical observations, in which Green joined him, and the directions he gave for this dangerous navigation, smoothed the difficulties of his successors, and rectified the charts of L’Hermite, Lemaire, and Schouten.

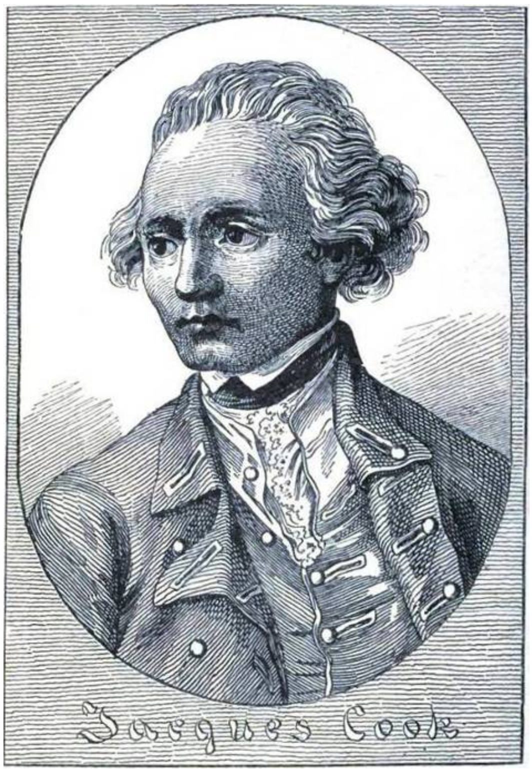

Captain James Cook.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Cook noticed no current of any importance from the 21st January, the day upon which he doubled Cape Horn, to the 1st of March, in a distance of one hundred and sixty leagues of sea. He discovered a good many islands in the Dangerous Archipelago, which he respectively named, Lagoon, Arch, Groups, Birds, and Chain Islands. The greater number were inhabited and were covered with vegetation, which to sailors who for three months had seen only sea and sky, and the frozen rocks of Tierra del Fuego, appeared luxuriant. Soon they found Martea Island, which Wallis had named

Osnaburgh, and on the next day, 11th of June, the island of Tahiti was reached.

Two days later, the *Endeavour* cast anchor in Port Matavai, called Port Royal by Wallis, and where that captain had had a struggle with the natives, over whom, however, he had triumphed without much difficulty. Cook, aware of the incidents of his predecessor's stay in this port, wished above all to avoid similar scenes. Moreover, it was essential to the success of his observations that no interruption or distraction should occur. His first care was to read out standing orders to his crew, which they were forbidden under heavy penalties to infringe. He first declared that he intended in every possible way to cultivate friendly relations with the natives, then he selected those who were to buy the needed provisions, and forbade all others to attempt any sort of traffic without special permission. Finally, the men who landed were on no pretext to leave their posts, and if any soldier or workman parted with his arms or implements, not only would the price be deducted from his wages, but he would be punished in proportion to the exigency of the case.

In addition to this, to guard the observers from attack, Cook decided on constructing a sort of fort, in which they might be sheltered within gun range of the *Endeavour*. He then landed with Messrs. Banks, Solander, and Green, soon found a favourable spot, and in presence of the natives immediately traced out the extent of land he intended to occupy. One of them, named Owhaw, who had had friendly intercourse with Wallis, was particularly profuse in his protestations of friendship.

As soon as the plan of the fort was fixed, Cook left thirteen men and an officer in charge of the tents, and accompanied his associates into the interior of the island. But he was speedily recalled by the sound of firing.

A very painful incident, the consequences of which might have been serious, had occasioned this.

One of the natives had surprised a sentinel near the tents, and had possessed himself of his gun. A general discharge was immediately directed upon the inoffensive crowd, but fortunately no one was injured. The robber meantime was pursued and killed.

A great commotion ensued, and Cook was profuse in his protestations, to pacify the natives. He promised payment for all that he required for the construction of his fort, and would not allow a tree to be felled without their sanction. Finally, he had the butcher of the *Endeavour* mast-headed and flogged, for threatening the wife of one of the chiefs with death.

This proceeding effaced the recollection of the painful antecedents, and with the exception of some thieving by the natives, the friendly relations remained undisturbed.

And now the moment for the execution of the primary object of the voyage approached. Cook accordingly took steps for putting the instructions he had received into effect. With this view, he despatched observers with Sir Joseph Banks to Eimeo, one of the neighbouring isles.

Four others proceeded to a favourable distance from the fort, where Cook himself proposed to await the transit of the planet. Hence the point of observation was called Point Venus.

The night preceding the observation passed with many fears of unfavourable weather, but on the 3rd of June, the sun rose in all its glory, and not a cloud troubled the observers throughout the day.

The observations, according to W. de Tonnelle's article in "Nature," for the 28th of March, 1874, were most fatiguing for the astronomers, for they began at twenty-one minutes after nine in the morning, and only terminated at ten minutes after three in the afternoon, at which moment the heat was stifling. The thermometer registered 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Cook assures us, and we can readily believe it, that he himself was not certain of the end of his observation. In such thermetrical conditions, the human organism, admirable instrument as it is, loses its powers.

On passing the sun, the rim of Venus was elongated as though attracted. A black point or dark ligament, a little less dark than the body of the star, was formed; the same phenomenon occurred upon the second interior contact.

"The observation," says Cook, "was made with equal success at the fort, and by those I had sent to the east of the island. From the rising to the setting of the sun, not a single cloud obscured the sky, and Mr. Green, Dr. Solander, and myself, observed the entire transit of Venus with the greatest ease. Mr. Green's telescope and mine were of equal power, and that of Dr. Solander still stronger. We noted a luminous atmosphere or fog surrounding the planet, which rendered the actual moment of contact and especially of interior contacts somewhat indistinct. To this fact it is owing that our observations varied somewhat one from the other."

Whilst the officers and *savants* were engaged in this important observation, some of the crew, forcing an entrance into the storeroom, stole a hundredweight of nails. This was a grave offence, and one which might have had disastrous results for the expedition. The market was at once glutted with that one article of traffic, and as the natives testified an immoderate desire to possess it, there was every reason to anticipate an increase in their demands. One of the thieves was detected, but only seventy nails were found in his possession, and the application of eighty lashes failed to make him betray his accomplices.

Other incidents of this kind constantly occurred, but friendly relations were not seriously disturbed. The officers were free to make incursions into the interior of the island to prosecute scientific investigations, and to inquire into the manners of the inhabitants.

In one of these excursions, Sir Joseph Banks met a band of itinerant musicians and *improvisatori*. They were somewhat surprised to find that the arrival of the English, and the various incidents of their stay formed the subjects of native songs. Banks followed the river which flows into the sea at Matavai, some distance into the interior, and found traces of a long extinct volcano. He planted, and also distributed among the population a large number of kitchen-garden seeds, such as water-melons, oranges, lemons, &c. and planned a garden near the fort, where he sowed many of the seeds he had selected at Rio Janeiro.

Cook, and his principal assistants, wished to accomplish the circumnavigation of the island, which they estimated at thirty nautical leagues. During this voyage they entered into amicable relations with the chiefs of different districts, and collected a mass of information as to the manners and customs of the natives.

A curious custom was that of allowing the dead to decompose in the open air, and of burying the bones only. The corpse was placed in a hut about fifteen feet in length, and eleven in height, and of proportionate width. One end was closed up, and the three other sides shut in by trellis-work of twigs. The board upon which the corpse rested was five feet above the earth. There the dead body was laid, covered in stuffs, with its club and stone hatchet. Cocoa-nuts, wreathed together, were hung at the open end of the tent; half a cocoa-nut, filled with soft water, was placed outside, and a bag containing some bits of toasted bread, was attached to a post. This species of monument is called Toupapow. Whence could that singular method of raising the dead above the ground until the flesh was decayed by putrefaction have been derived! It is quite impossible to find out. Cook could only ascertain that the cemeteries called Morai, are places where the natives observe certain religious customs, and that they always betrayed some uneasiness when the English approached.

One of their most delicate dishes was dog. Those intended for the table never ate meat, but were fed upon bread-fruits, cocoa-nuts, yams, and other vegetables. The flesh placed in a hole upon hot stones covered with green leaves, was stewed down in four hours. Cook, who partook of it, says it has a delicious flavour.

On the 7th of July, preparations for departure began. In a short time the doors and palings were removed, and the walls demolished. At this moment, one of the natives, who had received the English with cordiality, came on board with a young lad of about thirteen years of age, who acted as his servant. He was named Tupia. Formerly first minister to Queen Oberea, he was afterwards one of the principal priests of Tahiti. He asked to be allowed to go to England. Many reasons combined to decide Cook upon permitting this. Thoroughly acquainted (as a necessary consequence of his high functions) with all the particulars concerning Tahiti, this native would be able to give the most circumstantial details of his compatriots, and at the same time to initiate them into the civilized customs of the Europeans. Finally, he had visited the neighbouring islands and perfectly understood the navigation of those latitudes.

On the 13th of July there was a crowd on board the *Endeavour*. The natives came to bid farewell to their English friends, and to their countryman Tupia. Some overcome with silent sorrow shed tears, others, on the contrary, uttered piercing cries, with less of true grief than of affectation in their demonstrations.

In the immediate neighbourhood of Tahiti were to be found, according to Tupia, four islands, Huaheine, Ulieta, Otaha, and Bolabola. He asserted that wild pigs, fowls, and other needful provisions could easily be obtained there. These commodities had become scarce in the latter part of the stay at Matavai. Cook, however, preferred visiting a small island called Tethuroa, about eight miles north of Tahiti, but the natives had no regular settlement, and he therefore considered it useless to wait there.

When they came in sight of Huaheine, several pirogues approached the *Endeavour*, and it was only after they had recognized Tupia that the natives consented to come on board. King Oreá, who was among the passengers, was greatly surprised at all the vessel contained. Soon reassured by the welcome of the English, he became so familiar as to wish to exchange names with Cook. During the entire stay in port, he always called himself “Cookee,” and gave his own name to the captain. Anchor was cast in a convenient harbour, and the officers of this vessel on landing found the manners, the language, and the productions of this island identical with those of Tahiti.

Seven or eight leagues south-west lay Ulietea. Cook landed there also, and solemnly took possession of this and the three neighbouring isles. He also profited by his stay to make hydrographical surveys of the shores, whilst a leak which had been found in the gun-room of the *Endeavour*, was attended to. After reconnoitring various other small islands, Cook gave the entire group the name of Society Isles.

Cook sailed on the 7th of August; six days later he reconnoitred the island of Oteroah. The hostile demonstrations of the natives prevented the *Endeavour* from remaining. She set sail for the south.

On the 25th of August, the anniversary of their departure from England was celebrated by the crew. On the 1st of September, in 40° 22’ S. Lat. 174° 29’ E. Long. the sea, agitated by a west wind, became very rough. The *Endeavour* was obliged to put her head to the north, and to run before the storm. Up to the 3rd the weather continued the same, then it abated and it was possible to resume the westward route.

In a few days, sundry indications of an island or a continent appeared, such as floating weeds, land-birds, &c.

On the 5th of October the colour of the sea changed, and on the morning of the 6th, a coast running west by north-west was perceived. Nearer approach showed it to be of great extent. Unanimous opinion decided that the famous continent, so long looked for, so necessary for the equipoise of the world, known to cosmographers, as the “Unknown land of the South,” was at last discovered!

This land was the eastern shore of the most northerly of the two islands which have received the name of New Zealand.

Smoke was perceived at different points, and the details of the shore were soon mastered. The hills were covered with verdure, and large trees were distinguishable in the valleys. Then houses were perceived, then pirogues, then the natives assembled on the strand. And lastly, a pallisade, high and regularly built, surrounded the summit of the hill. Opinions varied as to the nature of this object; some declaring it to be a deer park, others a cattle enclosure, not to speak of many equally ingenious surmises, which were all proved false, when later it turned out to be a “pah.”

Towards four o’clock on the afternoon of the 8th of October, anchor was cast in a bay at the mouth of a little river. On either side were white rocks; in the middle a brownish plain, rising by degrees, and joining by successive levels a chain of mountains, which appeared far in the interior. Such was the aspect of this portion of the shore.

Cook, Banks, and Solander entered two small boats, accompanied by a part of the crew. As they approached the spot where the natives were assembled, the latter fled; this, however, did not prevent the English from landing, leaving four lads to guard one of the boats, whilst the other remained at sea.

They had proceeded only a short distance from the boat, when four men, armed with long spears, emerged from the wood, and threw themselves upon it to take possession of it. They would have succeeded with ease, had not the crew of the boat out at sea perceived them, and cried out to the lads to let it drift with the current. They were pursued so closely by the enemy, that the master of the pinnace discharged his gun over the heads of the natives.

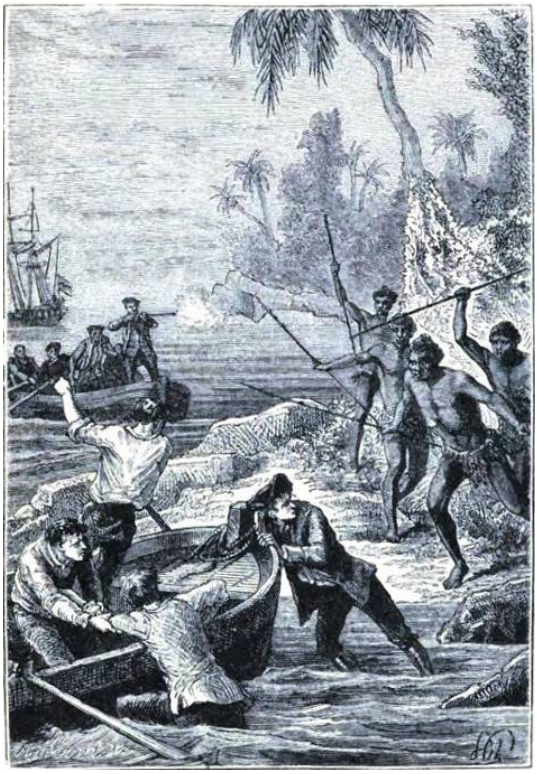

“They were pursued so closely.”

After a moment’s hesitation, the natives continued their pursuit, when a second discharge stretched one of them dead on the spot. His companions made an effort to carry him away with them, but were obliged to abandon the attempt, as it retarded their flight. Hearing the firing, the officers who had landed went back to the vessel, whence they soon heard the natives returning to the shore, eagerly discussing the event.

Still Cook desired to have friendly intercourse with them. He ordered three boats to be manned, and landed with Banks, Solander, and Tupia. Fifty or more natives seated on the shore awaited them. They were armed with long lances, and an instrument made of green talc, and highly polished, a foot long, which perhaps weighed four or five pounds. This was the “patou-patou,” or toki, a kind of battle-axe, in talc or bone, with a very sharp edge. All rose at once and signed to the English to keep their distance.

As soon as the marines landed, Cook and his companions advanced to the natives, whom Tupia told that the English had come with peaceful intentions, that they only wished for water and provisions, that they would pay for all that was brought them with iron, of which he explained the use. They saw, with pleasure, that the people, whose language was only a dialect of that spoken by the Tahitans, perfectly understood them. After some parleying, about thirty of the natives crossed the river. The strangers gave them iron and glass wares, on which they set no store; but one of them, having succeeded in possessing himself secretly of Mr. Green’s cutlass, the others recommenced their hostile demonstrations, and it was necessary to fire at the robber, who was hit, when they all threw themselves into the river to gain the opposite shore.

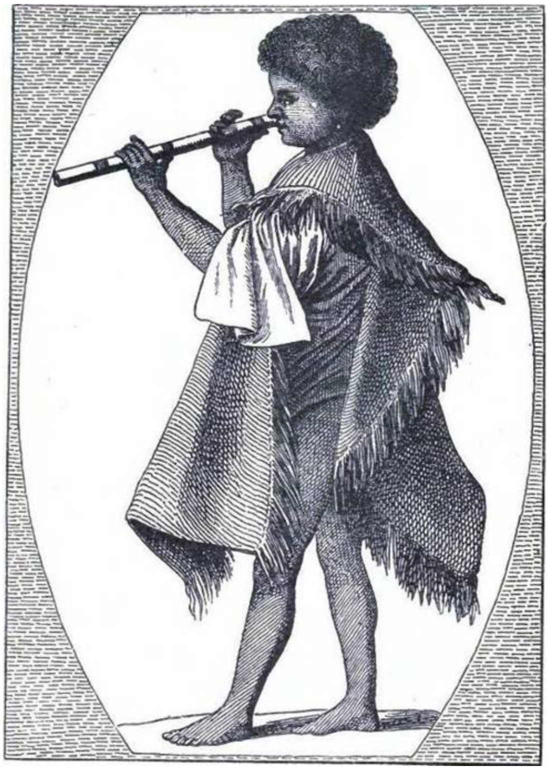

Tahitian flute-player.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The various attempts at commercial intercourse with the people ended too unfortunately for Cook to persevere in them any longer. He therefore decided to find a watering-place elsewhere. Meanwhile, two pirogues, which were trying to regain the shore, were perceived. Cook took measures to intercept them; one escaped by rapid paddling, the other was caught, and although Tupia assured the natives that the English came as friends, they seized their weapons, and commenced attacking them. A discharge killed four, and three others, who threw themselves into the sea, were seized after a fierce resistance.

The reflections which this sad incident suggested to Captain Cook, are much to his honour. They are in strong contradistinction to the ordinary method of proceeding then in vogue, and deserve to be repeated verbatim.

“I cannot disguise from myself,” he says, “that all humane and sensible people will blame me for having fired upon these unfortunate Indians, and I should be forced to blame myself for such an act of violence if I thought of it in cold blood. They certainly did not deserve death for refusing to trust to my promises, and to come on board, even if they suspected no danger; but my commission by its nature obliged me to take observations of their country, and I could only do so by penetrating into the interior, either by open force or by gaining the confidence and good will of the natives. I had tried unsuccessfully by means of presents and my anxiety to avoid new hostilities led me to attempt having some of them on board, as the sole method of persuading them that far from wishing to hurt them, we were disposed to be of use to them. So far, my intentions were certainly not criminal. It is true that during the struggle, which was unexpected by me, our victory might have been equally complete without taking the lives of four of these Indians, but it must also be remembered that in such a situation, the command to fire having once been given, one is no longer in a position to proscribe it, or to lighten its effect.”

The natives were welcomed on board, with every possible demonstration, if not to make them forget, at least to make them less sensible of the pain of remembering their capture, they were loaded with presents, adorned with bracelets and necklaces, but when they were told to land, they all declared, as the boats were directed to the mouth of the river, that it was an enemy’s country, and that they would be killed and eaten. However, they were put on shore, and there is no reason to suppose that anything painful came of their adventure.

Next day, the 11th of October, Cook left this miserable settlement. He named it Poverty Bay, because of all that he needed he had been able to procure but one thing — wood. Poverty Bay, in 38° 42’ S. Lat. and 181° 36’ W. Long. is of horse-shoe shape, and affords good anchorage, although it is open to the winds between south and east.

Cook continued along the coast in a southerly direction, naming the most remarkable points, and bestowing the name of Portland upon an island which resembled that of the same name in the English Channel. His relations with the natives were everywhere inimical; if they did not break out into open outrage, it was owing to the English patience under every provocation.

One day several pirogues surrounded the ship, and nails and glassware were exchanged for fish; when the natives seized Tayeto, Tupia’s servant, and quickly paddled off.

As it was necessary to fire at the robbers, the little Tahitan profited by the confusion, and jumping into the sea was soon picked up by the pinnace of the *Endeavour*.

On the 17th of October, Cook, not having been able to find a suitable harbour, and considering himself, as the sea became more and more rough, to be losing time which might be better employed in reconnoitring the northern coast, tacked round and returned the way he had come.

On the 23rd of October, the *Endeavour* reached a bay called Tedago, where no swell was perceptible. The water was excellent, and it was easy to procure provisions, the more so as the natives appeared friendly.

After having arranged everything for the safety of the workers, Messrs. Banks and Solander landed and collected plants, and in their walk they found many things worthy of note. Below the valley, surrounded by steep mountains, arose a rock so perforated, that from one side the sea could be seen through it, and from the other the long range of hills.

Returning on board, the excursionists were stopped by an old man, who insisted upon their taking part in the military exercises of the country with the lance and the patou-patou.

In the course of another walk, Dr. Solander bought a top exactly resembling European tops, and the natives made signs to show him that he must whip it to make it go.

Upon an island to the left of the bay, the English saw the largest pirogue they had yet met with. It was no less than sixty-eight feet long, five wide, and three feet six inches high. It had in front a sculpture in relief, of grotesque taste, in which the lines were spiral and the figures strangely contorted.

On the 30th of October, as soon as he was supplied with wood and water, Cook set sail and continued along the coast towards the north.

Near an island, to which Cook had given the name of Mayor, the natives behaved most insolently, and were greater thieves than any previously encountered. It was, however, necessary to make a stay of five or six days in this district, to observe the transit of Mercury. With a view to impressing upon the natives that the English were not to be illused with impunity, a robber who had taken a piece of cloth was fired upon with grape shot, but although he received the discharge in the back, it had no more effect upon him than a violent blow with a rattan. But a bullet which struck the water and returning to the surface passed several times over the pirogues, struck such terror into the hearts of the natives, that they hastily paddled to the shore.

On the 9th of November, Cook and Green landed to observe the transit of Mercury. Green only observed the passing, while Cook took the altitude of the sun.

It is not our intention to follow the navigators in their thorough exploration of New Zealand.

The same incidents were endlessly repeated, and the recital of the similar struggles with the natives, with descriptions of natural beauty, however attractive in themselves, could not but pall upon the reader. It is better, therefore, to pass rapidly over the hydrographic portion of the voyage, in order to devote ourselves to our picture of the manners of the natives, now so widely modified.

Mercury Bay is situated at the foot of the long divided peninsula which, running from the east to the north-east, forms the northern extremity of New Zealand. On the 15th of November, as the *Endeavour* left the bay, several boats advanced towards her.

“Two of their number,” says the narrative, “which carried about sixty armed men, approached within hearing, and the natives began their war-song, but seeing that this attracted little attention, they began throwing stones at the English, and paddled along the shore. Soon they returned to the charge, evidently determined to fight the navigators, and encouraging themselves with their war cry.”

Without being incited to it, Tupia addressed them reproachfully, and told them that the English had arms, and were in a position to overpower them instantly. But they valiantly replied, —

“Come to land, and we will kill you all!”

“Directly,” replied Tupia, “but why insult us as long as we are at sea? We have no wish to fight, and we will not accept your challenge, because there is no quarrel between us. The sea does not belong to you any more than to our ship.”

Tupia had not been credited with so much simple and true eloquence, and it surprised Cook and the other English.

Whilst he was in the bay of the islands, the captain reconnoitred a considerable river, which he named after the Thames. It was shaded with trees, of the same species as those on Poverty Island. One of them measured nineteen feet in circumference at the height of six feet above the ground, another was not less than ninety feet long from the root to the lowest branches.

Although quarrels with the natives were frequent, the latter were not invariably in the wrong.

Kippis relates as follows: —

“Some of the men on board, who, after the Indians had once been found in fault, did not fail to exhibit a severity worthy of Lycurgus, thought fit to enter a New Zealand plantation, and to carry off a quantity of potatoes. Captain Cook condemned them to a dozen stripes each. Two of them received them peaceably, but the third persisted that it was no crime for an Englishman to pillage Indian plantations. Cook’s method of dealing with this casuist was to send him to the bottom of the hold until he agreed to receive six additional stripes.”

On the 30th of December the English doubled a cape which they took to be that of Maria Van Diemen, discovered by Tasman, but they were so assailed by threatening winds, that Cook only accomplished ten leagues in three weeks. Fortunately they kept at a uniform distance from shore all the time, otherwise we should probably have been spared the recital of their further adventures.

On the 16th of January, 1770, after naming various portions of the eastern shore, Cook arrived in sight of an imposing peak, which was covered with snow, and which he named Mount Egmont in honour of the earl of that name.

Scarcely had he doubled the peak, when he found that the coast described the arc of a circle. It was split up into numberless roadsteads, which Cook determined to enter, in order to allow of his ship being repaired and keeled.

He landed at the bottom of a creek where he found a fine river and plenty of trees, for the forest only ceased at the sea for want of soil.

The amicable relations with the natives at this point enabled him to inquire if they had ever seen a vessel like the *Endeavour*. But he found that even the traditions of Tasman's visit were forgotten, although he was only fifteen miles south of Assassin Bay.

In one of the provision baskets of the Zealanders ten half gnawed bones were found. They did not look like a dog's bones, and on nearer inspection they turned out to be human remains. The natives in reply to the questions put to them, asserted that they were in the habit of eating their enemies. A few days later, they brought on board the *Endeavour* seven human heads, to which hair and flesh still adhered, but the brains as being delicate morsels, were already picked. The flesh was soft, and no doubt was preserved from decay by some ingredient, for it had no unpleasant odour. Banks bought one of these heads after some difficulty, but he could not induce the old man who brought it to part with a second, probably because the New Zealanders considered them as trophies, and testimonies to their bravery.

The succeeding days were devoted to a visit to the environs, and to some walks in the neighbourhood. During one of these excursions Cook, having climbed a high hill, distinctly perceived the whole of the strait to which he had given the name of Queen Charlotte, and the opposite shore, which appeared to him about four leagues distant.

A fog made it impossible for him to see further to the south-east, but he had discerned enough to assure him that it was the final extent of the large island of which he had followed all the windings. He had now only to finish his discoveries in the south, which he proposed to do as soon as he had satisfied himself that Queen Charlotte's Sound was really a strait.

Cook visited a pah in the neighbourhood. Built upon a little island or inaccessible rock, the pah was merely a fortified village. The natives most frequently add to the natural defences by fortifications, which render the approach still more perilous. Many were defended by a double ditch, the inner one having a parapet and double palisade. The second ditch was at least eighty feet in depth. On the inside of the palisade, at the height of twenty feet, was a raised platform forty feet long by six wide. Supported on two large poles, it was intended to hold the defenders of the place, who from thence could easily overwhelm the attacking party with darts and stones, of which an enormous supply was always ready in case of need.

These strongholds cannot be forced, unless by means of a long blockade the inmates should be compelled to surrender.

"It is surprising," as Cook remarks, "that the industry and care employed by them in building places so well adapted for defence, almost without the use of instruments, should not by the same means, have led them to invent a single weapon of any importance, with the sole exception of the spear they throw with the hand. They do not understand the use of a bow to throw a dart, or of a sling to fling a stone, which is the more astonishing, as the invention of slings, and bows and arrows is far more simple than the construction of these works by the people, and moreover these two weapons are met with in almost all parts of the world, in the most savage countries."

On the 6th of February, Cook left the bay, and set sail for the east, in the hope of discovering the entrance to the strait before the ebb of the tide. At seven in the evening, the vessel was driven by the violence of the current to the close neighbourhood of a small island, outside Cape Koamaroo. Sharply pointed rocks rose from the sea. The danger increased momentarily, one only hope of saving the ship remained. It was attempted and succeeded. A cable's length was the distance between the *Endeavour* and the rock when anchor was cast, in seventy-five fathoms of water. Fortunately the anchor found a hold, and the current changing its direction after touching the island, carried the vessel past the rock. But she was not yet in safety, for she was still in the midst of rocks, and the current made five miles an hour.

However, the current decreased, the vessel righted herself, and the wind becoming favourable, she was speedily carried to the narrowest part of the strait, which she crossed without difficulty.

The most northerly island of New Zealand, which is named Eaheinomauwe, was, however, as yet only partially known, there still remained some fifteen leagues unexplored.

A few officers affirmed from this that it was a continent, and not an island, which was contrary to Cook's view. But although his own mind was made up, the captain directed his navigation with a view to clear up any doubt which might remain in the minds of his officers. After two days' voyage, in which Cape Palliser was passed, he called them up on the quarter deck and asked if they were satisfied. As they replied in the affirmative, Cook gave up his idea of returning to the most southerly point he had reached on the eastern coast of Eaheinomauwe, and determined to prolong his cruise the entire length of the land which he had found, and which was named Tawai-Pounamow.

The coast was more sterile, and appeared uninhabited. It was necessary to keep four or five leagues from the shore.

On the night of the 9th of March the *Endeavour* passed over several rocks, and in the morning the crew discovered what dangers they had escaped. They named these reefs the Snares, as they appeared placed there to surprise unsuspecting navigators.

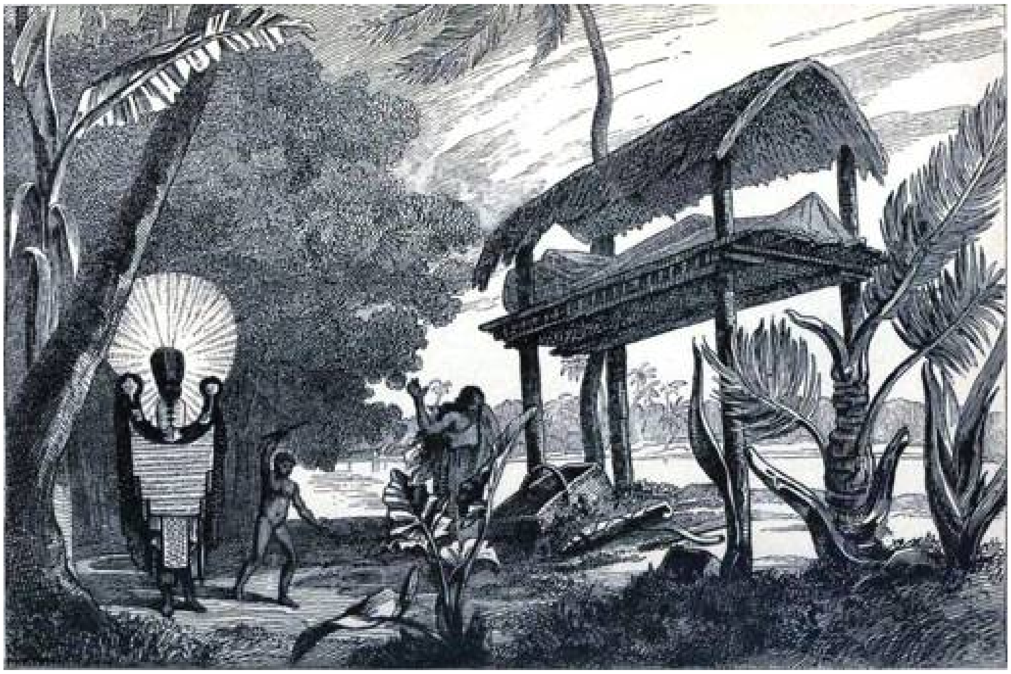

A Fa-toka, New Zealand.

Next day, Cook reconnoitred what appeared to him to be the extreme south of New Zealand, and called it South Cape. It was the point of Steward

Island. Great waves from the south-west burst over the vessel as it doubled this cape, which convinced Captain Cook that there was no land in that quarter. He therefore returned to the northern route, to complete the circumnavigation of New Zealand by the eastern coast.

Almost at the southern extremity of this coast, a bay was discovered, which received the name of Dusky. This region was sterile, steep, covered with snow. Dusky Bay was three or four miles in width at its entrance, and appeared as deep as it was wide. Several islands were contained in it, behind which a vessel would have excellent shelter; but Cook thought it prudent not to remain there, as he knew that the wind, which would enable him to leave the bay, blew only once a month in these latitudes. He differed upon this point with several of his officers, who thinking only of the present advantage, did not reflect upon the inconveniences of a stay in port, the duration of which would be uncertain.

No incident occurred during the navigation of the eastern coast of Tawai-Pounamow.

From Dusky Bay, according to Cook, to 44° 20’ latitude, there is a straight chain of hills which rise directly from the sea, and are covered with forests. Behind and close to these hills, are mountains which form another chain of prodigious height, composed of barren and jagged rocks, excepting in the parts where they are covered with snow, mostly in large masses. It is impossible to conceive a wilder prospect, or a more savage and frightful one than this country from the sea, because from every point of view nothing is visible but the summits of rocks; so close to each other that in lieu of valleys there are only fissures between them. From 44° 20’ to 42° 8’ the aspect varies, the mountains are in the interior, hills and fruitful valleys border the coast.

From 42° 8’ to the 41° 30’ the coast inclines vertically to the sea, and is covered with dark forests. The *Endeavour*, moreover, was too far from the shore, and the weather was too dark for it to be possible to distinguish minor details. After achieving the circumnavigation of the country, the vessel regained the entrance to Queen Charlotte Sound.

Cook took in water and wood; then he decided on returning to England, following the route which permitted him best to fulfil the object of his voyage. To his keen regret, for he had greatly wished to decide whether or no the southern continent existed, it was as impossible for him to return to Europe by Cape Horn as by the Cape of Good Hope.

In the middle of winter, in an extreme southerly latitude his vessel was in no condition to bring the enterprise to a successful issue. He had no choice, therefore, but to take the route for the East Indies, and to this end to steer westward to the eastern shores of New Holland.

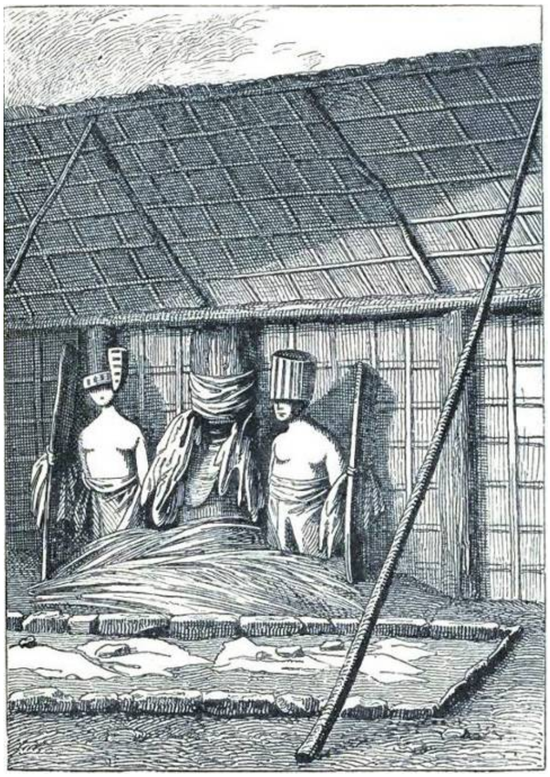

Interior of a morai in Hawai.

But before proceeding to the narration of the incidents of the second part of the campaign, it will be better to glance backward and to summarize the information upon the situation, productions, and inhabitants of New Zealand which the navigators had accumulated.

We have already seen that this land had been discovered by Abel Tasman, and we have noted those incidents which were marked with traces of bloodshed when it was reconnoitred by the Dutch captain. With the exception of Tasman, in 1642, no European captain had ever visited its shores. It was so far unknown, that it was not even decided whether it formed a part of the southern continent, as Tasman supposed, when he named it Staten Island. To Cook belongs the credit of determining its position and of tracing the coasts of these two large islands, situated between 34° and 48° S. Lat. 180° and 194° W. Long.

Tawai-Pounamow was mountainous, sterile, and apparently very sparsely populated. Eaheinomauwe presented an attractive appearance, in its hills, mountains, and valleys covered with wood, and watered by bright flowing streams. Cook formed an opinion of the climate upon the remarks made by Banks and Solander, that, —

“If the English settled in this country, it would cost them but little care and work to cultivate all that they needed in great abundance.”

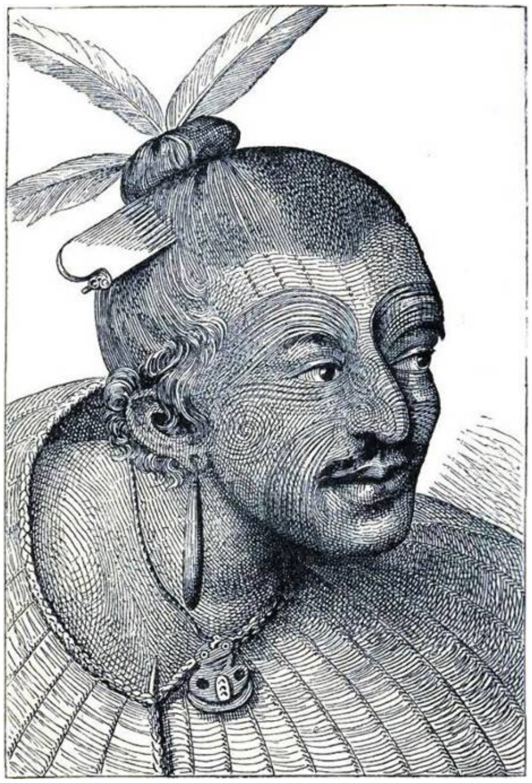

Tatooed head of a New Zealander.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

As for quadrupeds, New Zealand afforded an asylum for dogs and rats only, the former reserved for food. But if the fauna was poor, the flora was rich. Among the vegetable products which attracted the English most, was one of which the narrative says, —

“The natives used as hemp and flax, a plant which surpasses all those used for the same purposes in other countries. The ordinary dress of the New Zealanders is composed of leaves of this plant, with very little preparation. They fabricate their cords, lines, and ropes from it, and they are much stronger than those made with hemp, and to which they can be compared. From the same plant, prepared in another way, they draw long thin fibres, lustrous as silk and white as snow. Their best stuffs are manufactured from these fibres, and are of extraordinary strength. Their nets, of an enormous size, are composed of these leaves, the work simply consists in cutting them into suitable lengths and fastening them together.” This wonderful plant, which was so enthusiastically described, in the lyrical account just quoted, and in the hardly less exuberant one which La Billadière afterwards gave of it, is known in our day as *phornium tenax*.

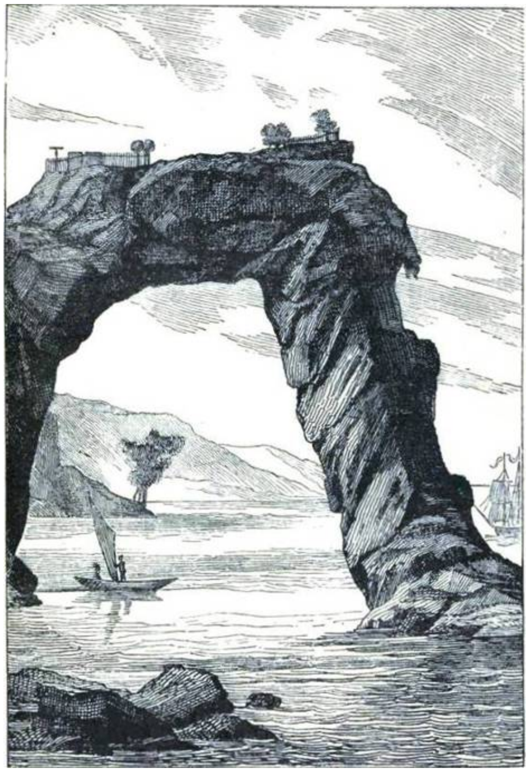

An i-pah.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

It was really necessary to subdue the expectations that these narratives excited! According to the eminent chemist Ducharte, the prolonged action of the damp heat, and above all bleaching, disintegrates the cellular particles of this plant, and after one or two washings, the tissues which are fabricated from it, are reduced to tow. Still it forms a considerable article of commerce. Mr. Alfred Kennedy, in his very curious work on New Zealand, tells us that in 1865, only fifteen bales of *phornium* were exported, that four years later the export amounted to the almost incredible number of 12,162 bales, and in 1870 to 32,820 bales, valued at 132,578*l*.

The inhabitants were tall and well proportioned, alert, vigorous, and intelligent. The women had not the delicate organization, and grace of form, which distinguish them in other countries; dressed like the men, they were recognizable only by their sweetness of voice and liveliness of expression. Although the natives of the same tribe were affectionate in their relations to each other, they were implacable to their enemies, and they gave no quarter; the dead bodies of their enemies afforded horrible festivities, which the want of other animal food explains, but can hardly excuse.

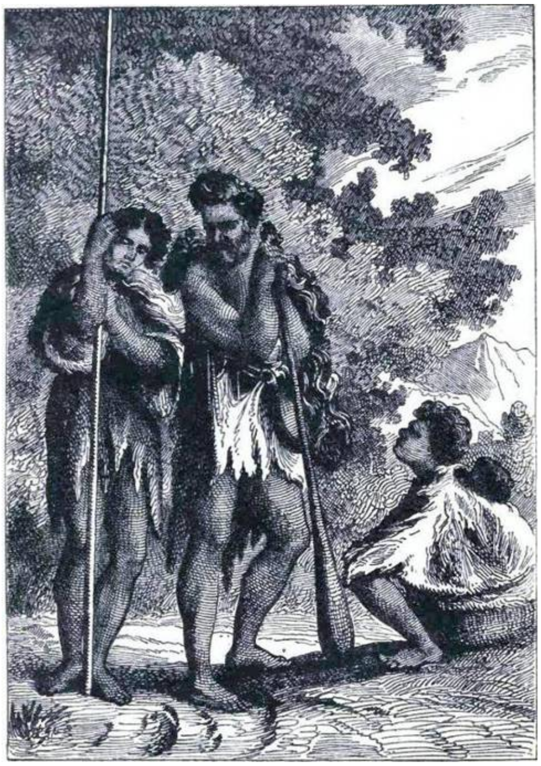

A New Zealand family.

“Perhaps,” says Cook, “it appears strange that there were frequent wars in a country where so few advantages follow victory.” But besides the need of procuring meat, which led to the frequency of these wars, another cause for them, unknown to Cook, existed in the fact that the population consisted of two distinct races, naturally enemies of each other.

Ancient tradition has it that the Maories came in the first instance, some thirteen hundred years ago, from the Sandwich Islands. There is reason for believing this to be correct, when one reflects that the beautiful Polynesian race peopled all the archipelago sprinkled throughout the Pacific Ocean.

Leaving Haouaikai, which must be identical with Hawai, of the Sandwich Islands, or Sanaï of the Navigator Archipelago, the Maories had repelled or possibly driven back the aboriginal population. In truth, the earliest colonists noticed two distinctly separate types in the New Zealanders. The one, and most important, unmistakably recalled the natives of Hawaii, the Marquisas, and Tonga Islands, whilst the other offered many resemblances to the Melanesian races.

These particulars, collected by Freycinet, and recently confirmed by Hochsetten, are in perfect accord with the singular fact, recorded by Cook, that Tupia, a native of Tahiti, made himself readily understood by the New Zealanders.

The migrations of the Polynesian tribes are thoroughly understood in these days, thanks to the wider knowledge of languages and anthropology, but they were scarcely suspected in the time of Cook, who, indeed, was one of the first to collect legends on the subject.

“Every one of these tribes,” he says, “traditionally believes that his forefathers came years ago from another country, and they all assert from the same tradition, that the country was called Heawise.” The country at this time produced only one quadruped, the dog, and that was an alien. Thus the New Zealanders had no means of subsistence, but vegetables and a few fowls unknown to the English. Fortunately the inhabitants were saved from death by starvation by the abundance of fish. Accustomed to war, and looking upon all strangers as enemies, possibly seeing in them merely an edible commodity, the natives naturally attacked the English.

Once convinced, however, of the utter inadequacy of their weapons, and of the powers of their adversaries, once convinced that the new comers avoided using those instruments which produced such terrific effects, they treated the navigators as friends, and conducted themselves towards them with surprising loyalty.

If the natives usually met with by the navigators had little idea of decency or modesty, the same was not true of the New Zealanders, and Cook gives a curious example of this fact. Although not so clean as the natives of Tahiti, whose climate is much warmer, and although they bathed less often, they took a pride in their persons, and showed a certain coquetry. For instance, they greased their hair with an oil or fat obtained from fishes or birds, which becoming rank after awhile, made them as disagreeable to a refined sense of smell as the Hottentots.

They were in the habit of tatooing themselves, and some of their tatoo designs demonstrated wonderful skill, and taste certainly not to be expected among this primitive race.

The English were greatly surprised to find that the women devoted less attention to their attire than the men. Their hair was cut short and without ornament, and they wore clothes similar to those of their husbands. Their sole attempt at coquetry consisted in fastening the most extraordinary things to their ears, stuffs, feathers, fish-bones, bits of wood, not to mention green talc needles, the nails and teeth of their deceased parents, and generally everything they could lay hands on, which they suspended by means of thread.

This recalls an adventure related by Cook, which happened to a Tahitan woman. This woman, envious of all she saw, wanted to have a padlock attached to her ear. She was allowed to take it, and then the key was thrown into the sea before her. After a certain time, either because the weight of this singular ornament worried her, or because she wished to replace it by another, she begged to have it removed. The request was refused, upon the ground that her demand was foolish, and that as she had wished for this singular ear-ring, it was fair that she should put up with its inconveniences.

The clothing of the New Zealanders consisted of one piece of stuff, something between reed or cloth, attached to the shoulders and falling to the knees, and of a second rolled round the waist, which reached to the ground. But the latter was not an invariable part of their dress. Thus, when they had on only the upper part of their costume, and they squatted, they presented the appearance of thatched roofs.

Their coverings were sometimes trimmed in a most elegant manner, by means of various coloured fringes, and more rarely with dogskin cut into strips. But the industry of these people was especially shown in the construction of their pirogues.

Their war-vessels contained from forty to fifty armed men, and one of them, measured at Ulaga, was no less than sixty-eight feet long. It was beautifully ornamented with open work and decorated with fringes of black feathers. The smaller ones generally had poles. Occasionally two pirogues were joined together. The fishing-boats were ornamented at the prow and the poop by the face of a grinning man with hideous features, lolling tongue and eyes made of white shells. Two pirogues were often coupled, and the very smallest carried only the poles needed to preserve their equilibrium.

“The usual cause of illnesses,” remarks Cook, “being intemperance and want of exercise, it is not surprising that these people rejoice in perfect health. Each time that we went to their settlements, men, women, and children surrounded us, excited by the same curiosity which caused us to look at them. We never saw one who appeared affected by illness, and amongst all that we saw naked we never remarked the smallest eruption on the skin, nor any trace of spots or sores.”

II.

Reconnoitring the Eastern Coast of Australia — Remarks on the natives and productions of the country — The *Endeavour* stranded — Perpetual dangers of navigation — Crossing Torres Straits — The natives of New Guinea — Return to England.

On the 31st of March, Cook left Cape Farewell and New Zealand, steering westward. On the 19th of April, he perceived land which extended from north-east to west, in 37° 58’ S. Lat. and 210° 39’ W. Long.

In his opinion, judging by Tasman’s chart, this was the country called Van Diemen’s Land. In any case, he was unable to ascertain whether the portion of the coast before him belonged to Tasmania. He named all the points on his northern voyage, Hick’s Point, Ram Head, Cape Howe, Dromedary Mount, Upright Point, Pigeon House, &c.

This part of Australia is mountainous, and covered with various kinds of trees.

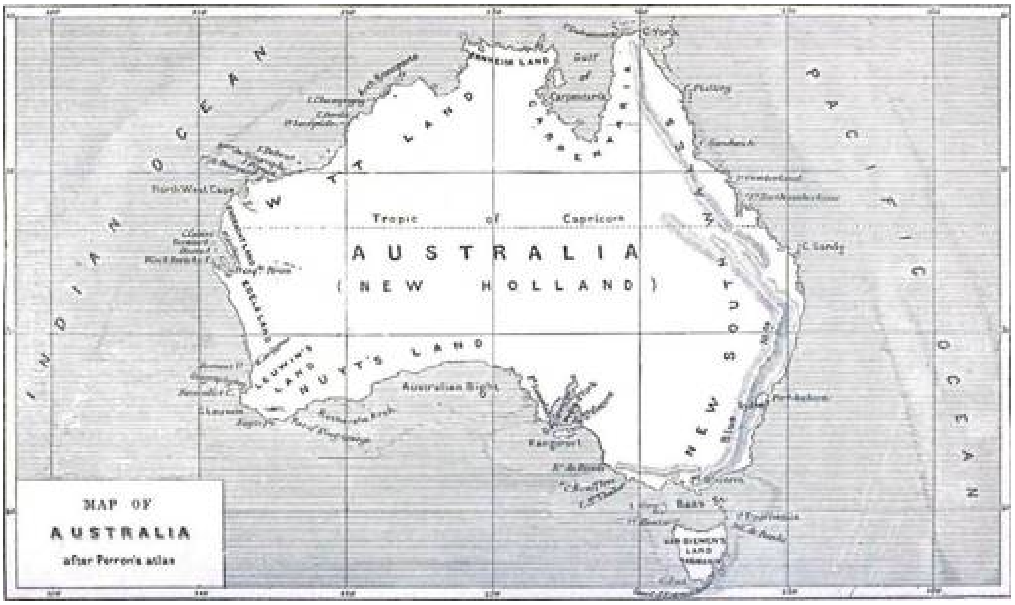
MAP OF
AUSTRALIA
after Peron's atlas
INDIAN OCEAN
PACIFIC OCEAN
AUSTRALIA
(NEW HOLLAND)
Tropic of Capricorn
Gulf of Carpentaria
CARPENTARIA
ARNHEIM LAND
WITT'S LAND
NUYT'S LAND
LEEUWIN'S LAND
Australian Bight
NEW SOUTH WALES
North West Cape
Kangaroo I.
Bass Str.
VAN DIEMEN'S LAND

Smoke announced it to be inhabited, but the sparse population ran away as soon as the English prepared to land.

The first natives seen were armed with long lances and a piece of wood shaped like a scimitar. This was the famous “boomerang,” so effective a weapon in the hands of the natives, so useless in that of Europeans.

The faces of the natives were covered with white powder, their bodies were striped with lines of the same colour, which, passing obliquely across the chest, resembled the shoulder-belts of soldiers. On their thighs and legs they had circles of the same kind, which would have appeared like gaiters had not the natives been entirely naked.

A little further on the English once more attempted to land. But two natives whom they had previously endeavoured to propitiate by throwing them nails, glassware, and other trifles, made such menacing demonstrations, that they were obliged to fire over their heads. At first they seemed stunned by the detonation, but as they found that they were not wounded, they commenced hostilities by throwing stones and javelins. A volley of bullets struck the oldest in his legs. The unfortunate native rushed at once to one of the cabins, but returned with a shield to continue the fight, which was shortly ended, when he was convinced of his powerlessness.

The English seized the opportunity to land, and reach the houses, where they found several spears. In the same bay, they landed some casks for water, but communication with the natives was hopeless; they fled immediately on the advance of the English.

During an excursion on land, Cook, Banks, and Solander found traces of various animals. The birds were plentiful, and remarkably beautiful. The great number of plants discovered by the naturalists in this part, induced Cook to give it the name of Botany Bay. “This bay is,” he says, “large, safe, and convenient; it is situated in 34° S. Lat. and 208° 37’ W. Long.” Wood and water were easily procurable there.

“The trees,” according to Cook, “were at least as large as the oaks of England, and I saw one which somewhat resembled them. It is that one which distils a red gum like ‘Dragon’s blood.’”

No doubt this was a species of Eucalyptus. Among the various kinds of fishes which abound in these latitudes is the thorn-back skate, one of which, even after cleaning, weighed three hundred and thirty-six pounds.

On the 6th of May, Cook left Botany Bay, and continued to coast to the north at two or three miles distance from the shore. The navigation along this coast was sufficiently monotonous. The only incidents which imparted a slight animation, were the sudden and unexpected differences in the depth of the sea, caused by the line of breakers which it was necessary to avoid.

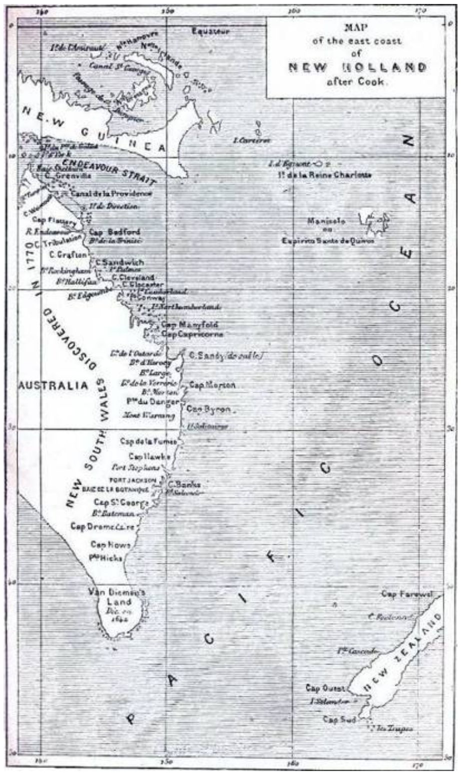
MAP
of the east coast
of
NEW HOLLAND
after Cook.
Equateur
NEW GUINEA
ENDEAVOUR STRAIT
C. Grenville
Canal de la Providence
Cap Flattery
R. Endeavour
Cap Bedford
C. Tribulation
C. Grafton
C. Sandwich
C. Cleveland
Cap Manyfold
Cap Capricorne
C. Sandy
Cap Morton
Pte du Danger
Cap Byron
DISCOVERED IN 1770
AUSTRALIA
NEW SOUTH WALES
Cap de la Fumee
Cap Hawke
Port Stephens
PORT JACKSON
BAIE DE LA BOTANIQUE
C. Banks
Cap St. George
Cap Dromedaire
Cap Hows
Pte Hicks
Van Diemen's Land
I. Carteret
Ile de la Reine Charlotte
Manicolo ou Espiritu Santo de Quiros
PACIFIC OCEAN
Cap Farewel
NEW ZEALAND
Cap Ouest
Cap Sud
140
150
160
170
10
20
30
40
50

Gravé par E. Morieu.

Landing a little further on, the navigators ascertained that the country was inferior to that surrounding Botany Bay.

The soil was dry and sandy, the sides of the hills were sparsely covered with isolated trees and free from brush-wood. The sailors killed a bustard, which was pronounced to be the best game eaten since leaving England. Hence, this point was named Bustard Bay. Numbers of bivalves were found there, especially small pearl oysters.

On the 25th of May, the *Endeavour* being a mile from land, was opposite a point which exactly crossed the Tropic of Capricorn. The following day, it was ascertained that the sea rose and fell seven feet. The flow was westward, and the ebb eastward, just the reverse of the case in Botany Bay. In this spot islands were numerous, the channel narrow and very shallow.

On the 29th, Cook landed with Banks and Solander in a large bay, in search of a spot where he could have the keel and bottom of his vessel repaired, but they were scarcely on terra firma, when they found their progress impeded by a thick shrub, prickly and studded with sharp seeds, no doubt a species of “*spinifex*,” which clung to the clothes, pierced them, and penetrated the flesh. At the same time, myriads of gnats and mosquitoes attacked them, and covered them with painful bites.

A suitable spot for repairs was found, but a watering-place was sought in vain. Gum-trees growing here and there were covered with enormous ants’ nests, and soon deprived of gum by those insects. Numerous brilliantly-coloured butterflies hovered over the explorers.

These were curious facts, interesting from more than one point of view, but they failed to satisfy the captain, who was eager to replenish his water supply.

From the first, the great defect of this country was apparent. It consists in the absence of streams, springs, and rivers!

A second excursion made during the evening of the same day was equally barren of good results. Cook ascertained that the bay was very deep, and decided on making the circuit of it in the morning.

He soon discovered that the width of the channel by which he entered increased rapidly, and that it ultimately formed a vast lake communicating with the sea to the north-west. Another arm stretched eastwards, and it was conceivable that the lake had a second outlet into the sea at the bottom of the bay.

Cook named this part of Australia New South Wales. Sterile, sandy, dry, it lacked all that was most necessary for the establishment of a colony. And the English could not ascertain from their cursory inspection or hydrographical examination that, mineralogically speaking, it was one of the richest countries of the New World.

The navigation was monotonously continued from the 31st of May to the 10th of June. On this latter date the *Endeavour*, after passing safely along an unknown coast, in the midst of shallows and breakers, for a space of 22° or 1300 miles, was all at once exposed to a greater danger than any which had been apprehended.

They were in 16° S. Lat. and 214° 39’ W. Long. when Cook, seeing two islets lying low and covered with trees, gave orders to keep well out to sea during the night, so as to look for the islands discovered by Quiros in these latitudes, an archipelago which some geographers had maintained was united to the mainland.

Shortly after nine in the evening the soundings taken every quarter of an hour showed constantly decreasing depth. All crowded to the deck. The water became deeper. It was concluded that the vessel had passed over the extremity of the sand-banks seen at sunset, and all rejoiced at escape from danger. When the depth increased, Cook and all but the officers of the watch retired to their berths, but at eleven o’clock the sounding-line, after indicating twenty fathoms, suddenly recorded seventeen, and before it was possible to cast anchor, the *Endeavour* had touched, and beaten by the waves, struck upon a rock.

The situation was a serious one. The *Endeavour*, raised by a wave over the ridge of a reef, had fallen again into a hollow in the rock, and by the moonlight, portions of the false keel and the sheathing could be seen floating.

Unfortunately the accident happened at high water. It was useless therefore to count upon the assistance of the tide to release the ship. Without loss of time the guns, barrels, casks, ballast, and all that could lighten the vessel, were thrown overboard. The vessel still struck against the rock. The sloop was put to sea, the sails and topsails were lowered, the tow-lines were thrown to the starboard, and the captain was about to order the anchor to be cast on the same side, when it was discovered that the water was deeper at the stern. But although the capstan was vigorously worked, it was impossible to move the vessel.

Daybreak disclosed the position in all its horrors. Land was eight leagues distant, not a single isle was visible between the ship and land where refuge might be found if, as was to be feared, the vessel broke up. Although she had been lightened of fifty tons weight, the sea only gained a foot and a half.

Fortunately the wind fell, otherwise the *Endeavour* must soon have been a wreck. However, the leak increased rapidly, although the pumps were worked incessantly. A third was put into action. The alternative was dreadful! If the vessel were freed, it must sink when no longer sustained by the rock, while if it remained fixed, it must be demolished by the waves which rent its planks asunder. The boats were too small to carry all the crew to land at one time.

Under such circumstances was there not danger that discipline would be thrown to the winds? Who could tell whether a fratricidal struggle might not ensue? And even should some of the sailors reach land, what fate could be in store for them upon an inhospitable shore, where nets and fire-arms would scarcely procure them nourishment?

What would become of those who were obliged to remain on board? Every one shared these fears, but so strong a sense of duty prevailed, so much was the captain beloved by his crew, that the terrors of the situation evoked no single cry, no disorder of any kind. The strength of the men not employed at the pumps was wisely harboured for the moment when their fate should be decided.

Measures were so skilfully taken, that when the sea rose to its height, all the officers and crew worked the capstan, and as the vessel was disengaged from the rock, it was ascertained that she drew no more water than when on the reef. But the sailors were exhausted after twenty-four hours of such terrible anxiety. It was necessary to change the hands at the pumps every five minutes.

A new disaster was now added. The man whose duty it was to measure the water in the hold, announced that it had increased to eighteen inches in a few moments. Fortunately the mistake of the measure taken was immediately ascertained, and the crew were so overjoyed that they fancied all danger over.

An officer named Monkhouse conceived an excellent idea. He applied a sort of cap to the stern, which he filled in with wool, rope-yarn, and the intestines of the animals slaughtered on board, and so effected a stoppage of the leak. From this time the men, who spoke of driving the vessel on a coast to reconstruct another from its ruins, which might take them to the East Indies, thought only of finding a suitable harbour for the purpose.

The desirable harbour was reached on the 17th of June, at the mouth of a current which Cook called Endeavour River.

The necessary labours for the careening of the vessel were at once begun and carried on with the utmost rapidity.

The sick were landed, and the staff visited the land several times, in the hope of killing some game, and procuring fresh meat for the sufferers from scurvy. Tupia saw an animal which Banks, from his description, imagined to have been a wolf. But a few days later several others were seen, who jumped upon their fore feet, and took enormous leaps. They were kangaroos, marsupial animals, only met with in Australia, and which had never before seen a European. The natives in this spot appeared far less savage than on other parts of the coast. They not only allowed the English to approach, but treated them cordially, and remained several days with them.

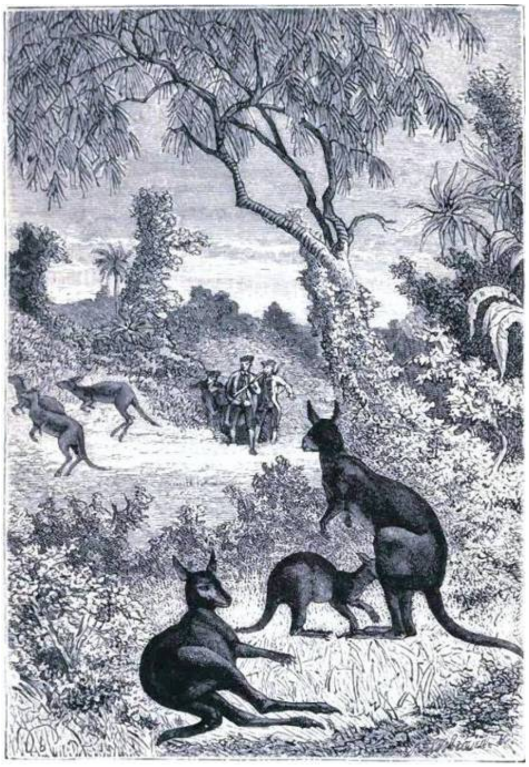

“They were kangaroos.”

The narrative says, —

“They were usually of medium height, but their limbs were remarkably small. Their skin was the colour of soot, or rather, it might be described as of deep chocolate colour. Their hair was black and not woolly, and was cut short; some wore it plaited, some curled. Various portions of their bodies were painted red, and one of them had white stripes on his lips and breast which he called ‘carbanda.’ Their features were far from disagreeable; they had very bright eyes, white and even teeth, and their voices were sweet and musical. Some among them wore a nose-ornament which Cook had not met with in New Zealand. It was a bone, as large as a finger, passed through the cartilage.

“A little later a quarrel arose. The crew had taken possession of some tortoises which the natives claimed, without having in the least assisted in capturing them. When they found that their demand was not acceded to, they retired in fury, and set fire to the shrubs in the midst of which the English encampment was situated. The latter lost all their combustible commodities in the conflagration, and the fire, leaping from hill to hill, afforded a magnificent spectacle during the night.”

Meantime Messrs. Banks, Solander, and others, enjoyed many successful hunts. They killed kangaroos, opossums, a species of pole-cat, wolves, and various kinds of serpents, some of which were venomous. They also saw numbers of birds, kites, hawks, cockatoos, orioles, paroquets, pigeons, and other unknown birds.

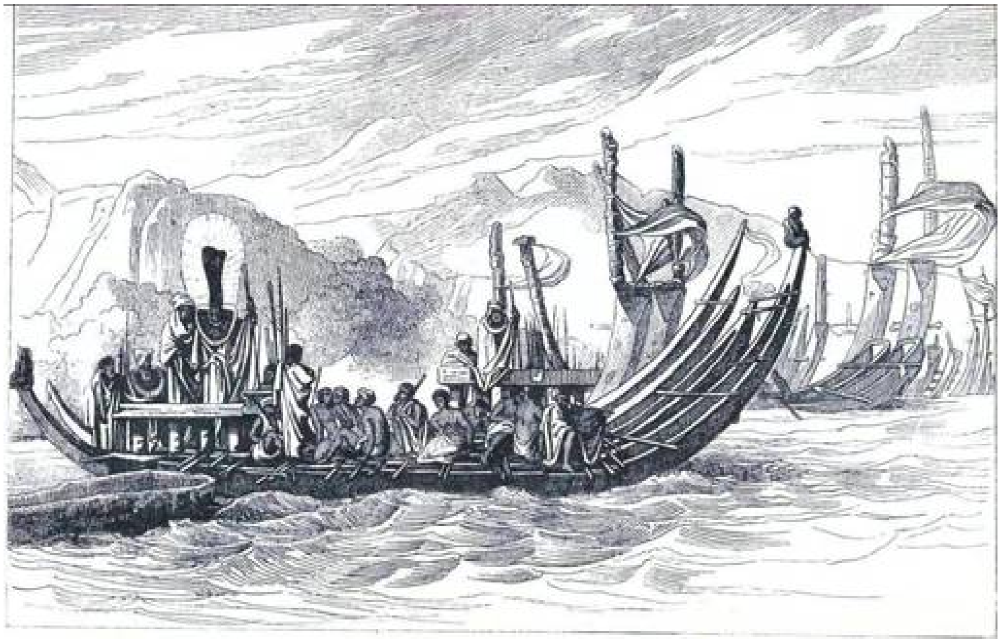

Tahitian fleet off Oparee.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

After leaving Endeavour River, Cook had good opportunities of testing the difficulties of navigation in these latitudes. Rocks and shallows abounded. It was necessary to cast anchor in the evening, for it was impossible to proceed at night through this labyrinth of rocks without striking. The sea, as far as the eye could reach, appeared to dash upon one line of rocks more violently than upon the others; this appeared to be the last.

Upon arriving there, after five days’ struggle with a contrary wind, Cook discovered three islands stretching four or five leagues to the north. But his difficulties were not over. The vessel was once more surrounded by reefs and chains of low islets, amongst which it was impossible to venture.

Cook was inclined to think it would be more prudent to return and seek another passage. But such a détour would have consumed too much time, and have retarded his arrival in the East Indies. Moreover there was an insurmountable obstacle to this course. Three months' provisions were all that remained.

The situation appeared desperate, and Cook decided to steer as far as possible from the coast, and to try and pass the exterior line of rocks. He soon found a channel, which shortly brought them to the open sea.

"So happy a change in the situation," says Kippis, "was received with delight. The English were full of it, and openly expressed their joy. For nearly three months they had been in perpetual danger. When at night they rested at anchor, the sound of an angry sea forced them to remember that they were surrounded by rocks, and that, should the cable break, shipwreck was inevitable. They had travelled over 360 miles, and were forced to keep a man incessantly throwing the line and sounding the rocks through which they navigated. Possibly no other vessel could furnish an example of such continued effort."

Had they not just escaped so terrible a danger, the English would have had cause for uneasiness in reflecting upon the length of way that remained to them across a sea but little known, upon a vessel which let in nine inches of water in an hour. With pumps out of repair and provisions almost consumed, the navigators only escaped these terrible dangers to be exposed on the 16th of April to a peril of equal magnitude.

Carried by the waves to a line of rocks above which the sea spray washed to a prodigious height, making it impossible to cast anchor; without a breath of wind, they had but one resource, to lower boats to tow the vessel off. In spite of the sailors' efforts the *Endeavour* was still only 100 paces from the reef, when a light breeze, so slight that under better circumstances no one would have noticed it, arose and disengaged the vessel. But ten minutes later it fell, the currents strongly returned, and the *Endeavour* was once more carried within 200 feet of the breakers.

After many unsuccessful attempts, a narrow opening was perceived.

"The danger it offered was less imminent than that of remaining in so terrible a situation," says the narrative. "A light breeze which fortunately sprang up, the efforts of the boats, and the tide, conveyed the ship to the opening, across which she passed with frightful rapidity. The strength of the current prevented the *Endeavour* from touching either shore of the channel, which, however, was but a mile in width, and extremely unequal in depth, giving now thirty fathoms, now only seven of foul bottom."

If we have lingered somewhat over the incidents of this voyage, it is because it was accomplished in unknown seas, in the midst of breakers and currents, which, sufficiently dangerous for a sailor when they are marked on a map, become much more so when, as was the case with Cook, since leaving the coast of New Holland, the voyage is made in the face of unknown obstacles, which all the instinct and keen vision of the sailor cannot always successfully surmount.

One last question remained to be solved, —

Were New Holland and New Guinea portions of one country? Were they divided by an arm of the sea, or by a strait?

In spite of the dangers of such a course, Cook approached the shore, and followed the coast of Australia towards the north.

On the 21st he doubled the most northerly cape of New Holland, to which he gave the name of Cape York, and entered a channel sprinkled with islands near the mainland, which inspired him with the hope of finding a passage to the Indian Ocean.

Once more he landed, and planting the English flag, solemnly took possession in the name of King George, of the entire Eastern Coast from the eighteenth degree of latitude to this spot, situated in 107° south. He gave the name of New South Wales to this territory, and to fitly conclude the ceremony, he caused three salutes to be fired.

Cook next penetrated Torres Strait, which he called Endeavour Strait, discovered and named the Wallis Islands, situated in the middle of the south-west entrance to Booby Island, and Prince of Wales Island, and steered for the southern coast of New Guinea, which he followed until the 3rd of September without being able to land.

Upon that day Cook landed with about eleven well-armed men, amongst them Solander, Banks, and his servants. They were scarcely a quarter of a mile from their ship, when three Indians emerged from the wood, uttering piercing cries, and rushed at the English.

“The one who came nearest,” says the narrative, “threw something which he carried at his side, with his hand, and it burned like gunpowder, but we heard no report.”

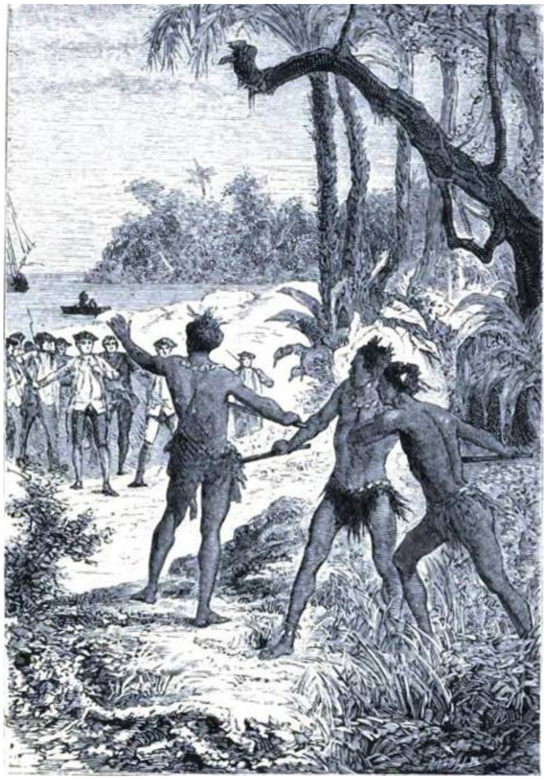

“Three Indians emerged from the wood.”

Cook and his companions were obliged to fire upon the natives in order to regain their ship, from whence they could examine them at their leisure. They resembled the Australians entirely, and like them, wore their hair short, and were perfectly naked — only their skin was less dark; no doubt because they were less dirty.

“Meantime the natives struck their fire at intervals, four or five at a time. We could not imagine what this fire could be, nor their object in throwing it.

“They held in the hand a short stick, perhaps a hollow cane, which they flourished from side to side, and at the same instant we saw the fire and smoke exactly as it flashes from a gun, and it lasted no longer. We observed this astonishing phenomenon from the vessel, and the illusion was so great that those on board believed the Indians had fire-arms, and we ourselves should have imagined they fired guns, but that our ship was so close that in such a case we must have heard the explosion.”

This fact remains unexplained, in spite of the many commentaries it has occasioned, and which bear out the testimony of the great navigator.

Many of the English officers demanded immediate permission to land in search of cocoa-nuts arid other fruits, but the captain was unwilling to risk his sailors’ lives in so futile an attempt; he was, besides, anxious to reach Batavia, to obtain repairs for his vessel. He thought it useless, moreover, to remain a longer time in these latitudes. They had been so often visited by the Spanish and Dutch, that there were no further discoveries to make.

In passing Arrow and Wesel Islands he rectified their positions, and reaching Timor, put into port in Savu Island, where the Dutch had been settled for some time. There Cook revictualled, and by accurate observations settled its position at 10° 35’ southern latitude, and 237° 30’ west longitude.

After a short interval the *Endeavour* arrived at Batavia, where she was repaired.

But the stay in that unhealthy country was fatal after such severe fatigue. Endemic fevers raged there; and Banks, Solander, and Cook, as well as the greater part of the crew, fell ill. Many died, amongst them Monkhouse, the surgeon, Tupia, and little Tayeto. Ten men only escaped the fever.

The *Endeavour* set sail on the 27th of December, and on the 15th of January, 1771, put into Prince of Wales Island for victuals.

From that moment, sickness increased among the crew. Twenty-three men died, amongst them Green, the astronomer, who was much regretted.

After a stay at the Cape of Good Hope, where he met with the welcome he so sorely needed, Cook re-embarked, touched at St. Helena, and anchored in the Downs on the 11th of June, 1772, after an absence of nearly four years.

“Thus,” says Kippis, “ended Cook’s first voyage, a voyage in which he had experienced such dangers, discovered so many countries, and so often evinced his superiority of character. He was well worthy of the dangerous enterprise and of the courageous efforts to which he had been called.”

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN COOK’S SECOND VOYAGE.

I.

Search for the Southern Continent — Second stay at New Zealand — Pomontou Archipelago — Second stay at Tahiti — Reconnoitring Tonga Isles — Third stay at New Zealand — Second crossing of the Southern Ocean — Easter Island reconnoitred — Visit to the Marquesas Islands.

Had the government not been desirous of rewarding James Cook for the way in which he had fulfilled the mission entrusted to him, the unanimous voice of the public would have constrained them. On the 29th of August he received the rank of commander in the Royal Navy. But the great navigator, proud of the services he had rendered to England and to science, thought the reward less than his achievements merited. He would have delighted in an appointment as ship’s captain, but Lord Sandwich, who was then at the head of the Admiralty, pointed out to him, that it was not possible to gratify him without upsetting all established customs, and injuring the discipline of the Royal Navy.

However, Cook busied himself in putting together the necessary materials for the narration of his experiences; but, being soon occupied with still more important matters, he placed them in the hands of Dr. Hawkesworth, who was to superintend their publication.

At the same time, the observations he had taken on the transit of Mercury in concert with Mr. Green, his calculations and astronomical solutions, were submitted to the consideration of the Royal Society, and that learned body at once recognized his merit.

In one respect, however, the important results obtained by Cook were incomplete. He had not perfectly proved the impossibility of an antarctic continent. This chimera was still dear to the hearts of scientific men. Although obliged to admit that neither New Zealand nor Australia made part of such a continent, and that the *Endeavour* had navigated in latitudes in which it might have been found, they still affirmed that it would be found still more south, and reiterated all those advantages which its discovery would entail.

The government determined to settle a question which had been discussed for so many years, and to despatch an expedition for the purpose. Its commander was easily selected. The nature of the voyage demanded vessels of peculiar construction. As the *Endeavour* had been sent to the Falkland Islands, the Admiralty gave orders for the purchase of the two suitable vessels for the purpose.

Cook was consulted, and insisted that the ships should be solidly built, draw little water, and possess capacity for carrying provisions and ammunition in proportion to the number of the crew and the length of the voyage.

The Admiralty accordingly bought two vessels, constructed at Whitby, by the same ship-builder as the *Endeavour*. The larger was of 462 tons burden, and was named the *Resolution*, the second was only of 336 tons, and was called the *Adventure*.

Cook received command of the *Resolution*, and Captain Tobias Furneaux, second lieutenant of the *Wallis*, was raised to the command of the

Adventure. The second and third officers, and several of the crew had already served in the *Endeavour*.

It may readily be imagined that every possible care was taken in the equipment of these ships. Lord Sandwich and Captain Palliser themselves superintended every detail.

Each of the ships was stocked with provisions of every kind for two years and a half.

Very extraordinary articles were provided at the instance of Captain Cook, who claimed them as anti-scorbutics, for instance, malt, sour krout, salted cabbages, soup-slabs, mustard and saloop, as well as carrot marmalade, and thickened and unfermented beer, which was tried at the suggestion of Baron Storch of Berlin, and Mr. Pelham, secretary to the Commissariat department.

Equal care was taken to ship two small boats, each of twenty tons, intended to carry the crew in case of shipwreck.

William Hodges, a landscape painter, two naturalists, John Reinhold Forster and his son George; two astronomers, W. Wales and W. Bayley, accompanied the expedition, provided with the best instruments for observation.

Nothing that could conduce to the success of the adventure was neglected. It was to return with an immense amount of collected information, which was to contribute to the progress of the natural and physical sciences, and to the ethnology of navigation and geography.

Cook says, “I received my instructions at Plymouth dated 25th June. They enjoined my immediate departure for the island of Madeira. To ship wine there, and thence to proceed to the Cape of Good Hope, where I was to let the crew have a spree on shore, and obtain the provisions and other stores I needed. To advance southwards and endeavour to find Circumcision Cape, which was said to have been discovered by M. Bouvet, in the 54° southern parallel, and about 11° 20’ east longitude, reckoning from Greenwich. If I found this cape, to ascertain whether it was part of the continent or an island. Should it prove the former, to neglect no opportunity of investigating its possible extent. To collect facts of every kind which might be useful to navigation and commerce, or would tend to the progress of the natural sciences. I was desired to observe the spirit, temperament, character, and means of the inhabitants, should there be any, and to use every fair means of forming friendly alliances with them.

“My instructions proceeded to enjoin me to seek discoveries in the east or west, according to the position in which I might find myself, and advised my nearing the south pole as much as possible, and as long as the condition of the ships, the health of the crew, and the provisions allowed of my doing so. To be careful in any case to reserve sufficient provisions to reach some known port, where I might refit for my return to England.

“In addition, I was ordered, if I found Circumcision Cape to be an island, or if I did not succeed in finding it, in the first case to take the necessary bearings, and in both to sail southward as long as I still hoped to find the continent. Then to proceed eastward, to look for this continent, and to discover the islands which might be situated in this part of the southern hemisphere. To remain in high latitudes and to prosecute my discoveries, as had been already said, as near the pole as possible, until I had completed the navigation of the world, and finally to repair to the Cape of Good Hope, and from thence to Spithead.”

Cook left Plymouth harbour on the 13th of July, and on the 29th of the same month he arrived at Funchal, in Madeira. Here he took in provisions, and continued his route southwards. But being shortly convinced that his supply of water would not hold out until he reached the Cape of Good Hope, he determined to break the voyage by putting in at Cape Verd Islands, and on the 10th of August he anchored in Praya Port, which he left four days later.

Cook availed himself of his stay in this port, as he usually did, to collect every fact which might be useful to navigators. His description is the more valuable now, as these parts have completely changed in character, and the conditions of a stay in port have been greatly modified by the improvements accomplished there.

On the 23rd of the same month, after violent squalls which had driven every one on deck, Cook, aware of the pernicious effect of the damp of warm climates, and always on the alert to keep his crew in good health, gave orders to aerate (renew the air) in the between decks. He even had a fire lighted in order to smoke it, and dry it quickly, and not only took the precautions advocated by Lord Sandwich, and Sir Hugh Palliser, but also those which the experience of his last voyage suggested to him.

Thanks to all these efforts at prevention there was not a single sick case on board the *Resolution* when she arrived at the Cape of Good Hope on the 30th of October. Cook, in company with Captain Furneaux, and Messrs. Foster, went to pay a visit to the Dutch governor, Baron de Plettemberg, who placed all the resources of the colony at his disposal. There he found that two French ships, which had left the island of Mauritius in March, had touched at the Cape before proceeding to the southern seas where they were to prosecute discoveries, under command of Captain Marion.

During this stay in port, which was longer than they expected, Forster met the Swedish botanist Sparman, a pupil of Linnæus, and engaged him to accompany him, by promising him large pay. It is difficult to praise Forster's disinterestedness under these circumstances too highly. He had no hesitation in admitting a rival, and even paid his expenses, in order to add completeness to the studies in natural history which he wished to make in the countries he was about to visit.

Anchor was weighed on the 22nd of November, and the two ships resumed their course southwards, in search of Cape Circumcision, discovered by Captain Bouvet, on the 1st of January, 1739. As the temperature would rapidly become colder, Cook distributed the warm clothes, furnished by the Admiralty, to his sailors. From the 29th of November till the 6th of December a frightful tempest prevailed. The ships, driven out of their course, were carried to the east, to such a degree that they were forced to resume the search for Circumcision Cape. Another consequence of the bad weather, and of the sudden change from heat to extreme cold was the death of all the animals embarked at the Cape. And lastly, the sailors suffered so much from the damp, that it was necessary to increase the rations of brandy to stimulate them to work.

On the 10th of December, in 50° 40' southern latitude the first ice was met with. Rain and snow succeeded each other uninterruptedly. The fog soon became so dense, that the crews did not perceive a floating iceberg, until they were a mile past it. "One of these," says the narrative, "was not less than 200 feet high, 400 wide, and 2000 long.

“Taking it as probable, that this piece was of absolutely equal size, its depth beneath the water, would have been 1800 feet, and its height about 2000 feet, and from the dimensions just given its entire bulk must have contained 1600 million cubic feet of ice.”

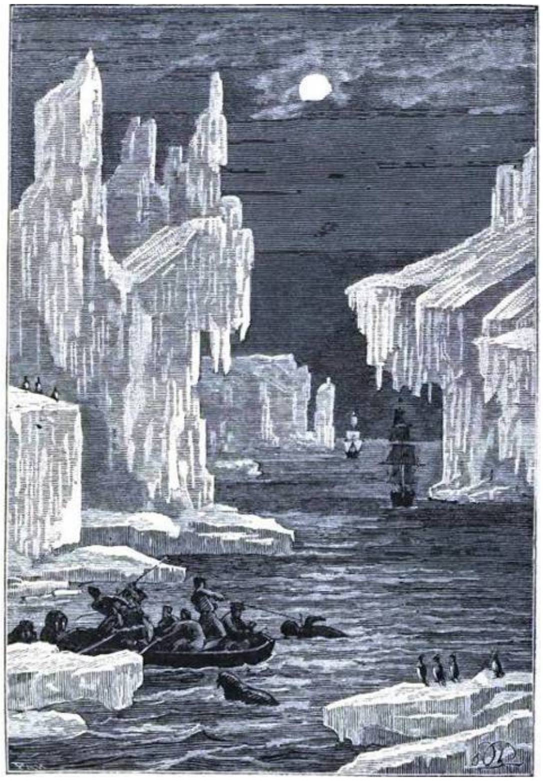

Among the icebergs.

As they proceeded further south the icebergs increased. The sea was so rough, that the waves climbed these glacial blocks, and fell on the other side in fine impalpable dust. The scene filled the observers with admiration. But this was soon succeeded by terror, upon the reflection that if the vessel struck one of these enormous masses, she must be dashed to pieces. The presence of danger soon, however, produced indifference, and more thought was bestowed upon the sublime beauty, than upon the strife with this terrible element.

Upon the 14th of December, an enormous iceberg, which closed in the horizon, prevented the two vessels from proceeding southwards, and it became absolutely necessary to skirt it.

It did not present an unbroken surface, for hillocks were visible on it, similar to those met on the previous days. Some thought they distinguished land under the ice, even Cook for the moment was deceived, but as the fog lifted the mistake was easily rectified.

Next day the vessels were driven before a strong current. The elder Forster and Wales, the astronomer, embarked in a small boat to ascertain its swiftness. Whilst thus engaged, the fog became so dense, that they completely lost sight of the ship. In this miserable boat, without instruments or provisions, in the midst of the wide ocean, far from any coast, surrounded by ice, their situation was dreadful. They left off rowing, lest they should get farther from the ship. They were losing all hope when the sound of a distant bell fell upon their ears. They rowed swiftly in the direction of the sound. The *Adventure* replied to their shouts and picked them up after several hours of terrible suspense.

The generally received opinion was, that the ice floats collected in the bays or mouths of rivers. The explorers, therefore, imagined themselves near land, which would prove to be situated in the south behind the vast iceberg.

They were thirty leagues to the west of it, before they found an opening in the ice which might lead to the south. The captain then determined to steer an equal distance to the east. Should he not find land, he at least hoped to double the iceberg, and penetrate in advance of it to the pole, and thereby settle the doubts of all the physicists.

But although it was the middle of summer in this part of the world, the cold became daily more intense. The sailors complained of it, and symptoms of scurvy appeared on board.

Warmer clothes were distributed, and recourse was had to the remedies usual in such cases, malt and lemon-juice, which soon overcame the malady, and enabled the crews to bear the severity of the temperature.

On the 29th of December, Cook ascertained positively that the iceberg was joined to no land. He therefore decided to proceed eastward as far as the parallel of Cape Circumcision, that is, if no obstacle prevented him.

He had scarcely put this resolve into execution when the wind became so violent, and the sea so rough, that navigation, in the midst of floating ice, which crashed with a fearful noise, became most perilous.

The danger increased, when a field of ice extending beyond the range of vision was seen to the north. There seemed every prospect of the ships being imprisoned for many weeks, “hemmed in,” to use the expression of whalers, if indeed they did not run the risk of being crushed at once.

Cook neither tried to run to the west or east, he steered straight for the south. He was now in the latitude attributed to Cape Circumcision, and seventy leagues south of the position assigned to it. Hence he concluded that if land existed as stated by Bouvet (which is now known to be a fact) it could only be an inconsiderable island, and not a large continent.

The captain had no further reason for remaining in these latitudes. In 67° 15’ southern latitude a new ice barrier, running from east to west closed the passage for him, and he could find no opening in it. Prudence enjoined his remaining no longer in this region, for two-thirds of the summer were already passed. He therefore determined to seek, with no further delay, the land recently discovered by the French.

On the 1st of February, 1773, the vessels were in 48° 30’ south latitude, and 38° 7’ west longitude, very nearly the parallel attributed to St. Maurice Island.

After a fruitless cruise, productive of no results, they were forced to conclude, that if there really were land in these latitudes it could only be a small island, otherwise it could not have escaped their search.

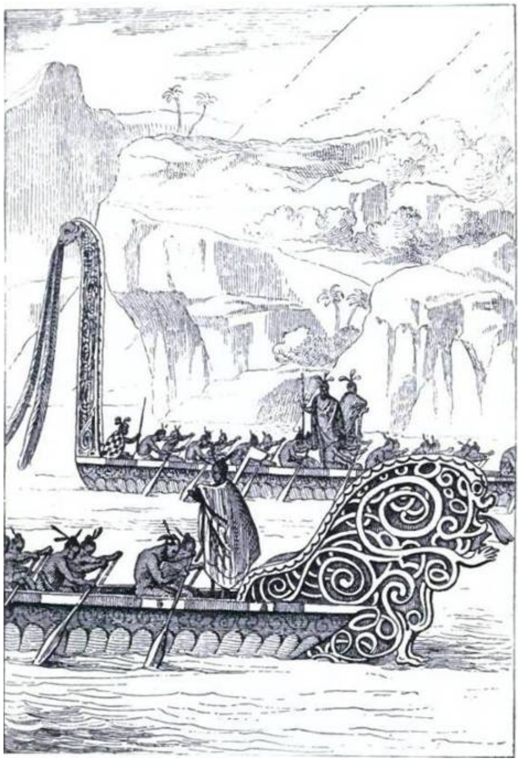

New Zealand war canoe.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

On the 8th of February, the captain found to his dismay that the *Adventure* was no longer sailing with him. He waited in vain for two days, firing at close intervals and keeping great fires upon the deck all night. The *Resolution* had to continue her voyage alone.

On the morning of the 17th of February, between twelve and three o’clock, the crew witnessed a magnificent spectacle, then first seen by European eyes. It was an aurora borealis. “The officer of the watch,” says the narrative, “noticed that from time to time rays left it in spiral and circular forms, and that then its brilliancy increased, which gave it an extremely beautiful appearance. It appeared to have no particular bearing, but remained motionless in the heavens, which it filled entirely from time to time, by throwing its light to all parts.”

After another attempt to pass the arctic circle, an attempt, which the fogs, the rain, the snow, and the ice-blocks forced him to relinquish, Cook resumed his course to the north, convinced that he left no large land behind him, and regained New Zealand, which he had agreed upon with the *Adventure* as a rendezvous in the event of separation.

On the 25th of March he cast anchor in Dusky Bay, after one hundred and seventy consecutive days of sea, in which he had not made less than three thousand six hundred and sixty leagues, without one sight of land.

As soon as he could find suitable anchorage, the captain hastened to avail himself of the resources for feeding his crew, which the country furnished in fowls, fish, and vegetables, whilst he himself, generally with the plumb-line in his hand, traversed the environs of the bay. He met only a few natives, with whom he had little intercourse. But one family becoming somewhat familiarized, established itself a hundred yards from the landing-place. Cook gave a concert for them, in which the fife and cornet were lavished on them in vain, the New Zealanders awarded the palm to the drum!

On the 18th of April, a chief came on board with his daughter. But before entering the ship he rapped her sides with a green wand he held in his hand, and addressed an harangue or invocation in modulated accents, to the strangers, a very general custom with the islanders of the southern sea. Scarcely was his foot on deck, when he offered the captain a bit of cloth, and a green talc hatchet, an unprecedented act of generosity for a New Zealander.

The chief visited every part of the ship. In order to testify his gratitude to the captain he plunged his fingers into a bag at his waist, and offered to anoint his hair with the tainted oil it contained. Cook had much difficulty in escaping from this proof of affection, which had not been very pleasing to Byron in the Strait of Magellan, but the painter Hodges was forced to submit to the operation, to the amusement of the entire crew. The chief then departed, to return no more, taking with him nine hatchets, and thirty pairs of carpenter’s scissors, which the officers had given him. Richer than all the New Zealanders put together, he no doubt hastened to stow away his treasures, in the fear that some one would deprive him of them.

Before leaving Cook landed five geese, the last of those he had brought from the Cape, thinking that they would multiply in this little inhabited spot, and he had a plot of land cleared in which he planted kitchen garden seeds. Thus he worked at the same time for the natives and for the future navigators who should find precious resources here.

When Cook had completed the hydrographical survey of Dusky Bay, he started for Queen Charlotte's Sound, the rendezvous assigned to Captain Furneaux.

On the 17th of May the crew witnessed a magnificent spectacle. Six water-spouts, one of them sixty feet wide at its base, were visible a hundred feet from the ship in succession, drawing the clouds and sea into communication by their powerful suction. This phenomenon lasted three quarters of an hour, and the first feeling of fear which it awakened in the breasts of the crew was soon merged in one of admiration, the greater as at this time such marvels were little known.

Next day, just as the *Resolution* entered Queen Charlotte's Sound, the *Adventure* was seen, and proved to have been waiting for six weeks. Furneaux, after reaching Van Diemen's Land on the 1st of March, had coasted it for seventeen days, but he was forced to desist before ascertaining whether it was, as he supposed, a part of New Holland. The refutation of this error was reserved for the surgeon, Bass. On the 9th of April after reaching Queen's Charlotte's Sound, the captain of the *Adventure* had profited by his leisure to lay out a garden and to open relations with the natives, who had furnished him with irresistible proofs of their cannibalism.

Before he continued his voyage of discovery, Cook followed the same line of conduct as at Dusky Bay. He landed a ram and a sheep, a goat and a she-goat, a pig and a sow. He also planted potatoes, which only existed upon the more southerly of the two islands which form New Zealand.

The natives resembled those of Dusky Bay, but they appeared more thoughtless, ran from room to room during supper, and devoured everything that was offered to them. It was impossible to induce them to taste wine or brandy, but they were very partial to sugar and water. Cook says, —

“They laid hands on all they saw, but they gave up anything so soon as we made them understand by signs that we could not, or would not give it to them. They particularly admired glass bottles, which they called Tawhaw, but when the durability and use of iron was explained to them they preferred it to glass-ware, ribbons, or white paper. Amongst them were several women, whose lips were covered with little holes, painted a blueish black, whilst vivid red formed of chalk and oil, covered their cheeks. Like the natives of Dusky Bay, they had small legs and bodies, but thick knees, which proves that they take little exercise and sit cross-legged. The almost perpetual squatting in their pirogues no doubt also adds to these peculiarities.

“The colour of their skin is clear brown, their hair is very black, their faces are round, their nose and lips are somewhat thick but not flat, their eyes are black and bright enough, and tolerably expressive.

“Placed in a row, the natives took off their outer garments, and one of them sang a rough sort of song, the others accompanying him with gestures. They stretched out their hands, and alternately struck their feet against the ground with frantic contortions. The last words they repeated in chorus, and we easily distinguished a sort of metre, but I am not sure that there was any rhyme; the music was wild and monotonous.”

Some of the New Zealanders begged for news of Tupia, and when they heard of his death, they expressed their grief by a kind of lamentation plainly artificial.

Cook did not recognize a single native whom he had met on his first voyage. He naturally concluded that the natives who in 1770 inhabited the Sound had been chased out, or had gone elsewhere of their free will. The number of inhabitants, too, was reduced by a third, the “pah” was deserted, as well as a number of cabins along the coast.

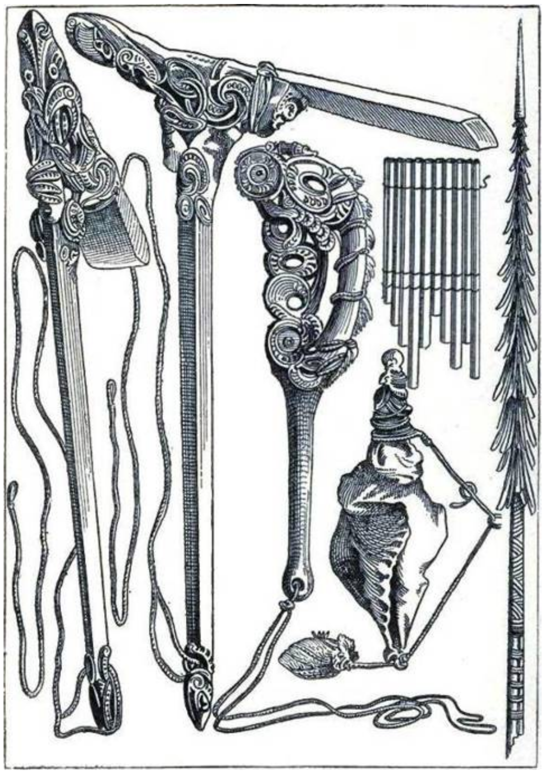

New Zealand utensils and weapons.

The two ships being ready to return to sea, Cook gave instructions to Captain Furneaux. He wished to advance southward between 41° to 46° S. lat. up to 140° west longitude, and if he found no land, to steer towards Tahiti, which was appointed as the place of rendezvous. He then proposed to return to New Zealand and survey all the unknown parts of the sea between that island and Cape Horn.

Towards the end of July, after a few days' hot weather, scurvy again broke out on board the *Adventure*. The *Resolution* escaped the scourge, owing to the precautions from which Cook never departed for a single day, and the example which he himself set of constantly eating celery and scurvy grass.

On the 1st of July, the two vessels were in S. lat. 25° 1', and 134° 6' W. long. the situation which Carteret attributed to Pitcairn Island. Cook endeavoured to find it, but, to his great regret, the illness on board the *Adventure* shortened his cruise.

He was anxious to verify or rectify the longitude of this island, and by so doing, that of all the surrounding lands discovered by Carteret, which had not been confirmed by astronomical observations. But having no longer any hope of finding an Antarctic continent, he set sail for the north-west, and soon reconnoitred several of the islands seen by Bougainville.

"The outlying islands with which the Pacific Ocean abounds between the tropics," he says, "are on a level with the waves in the low parts, and raised only a rood or two above them in the others. Their shape is often circular. In the centre they contain a basin of sea water, and the depth of water all round is not to be sounded. They produce little; cocoa-nuts appear to be the best of their productions; yet in spite of this sterility, and of their small extent, most of them are inhabited. It is not easy to conceive how these little settlements were peopled, and it is not less difficult to determine from whence the highest islands of the Southern Sea drew their inhabitants.”

On the 15th of April, Cook reconnoitred Osnaburgh or Mairea Islands, discovered by Wallis, and set off for Otaiti-Piha, where he intended to embark as many provisions as possible before reaching Matavai.

“At daybreak,” says Forster, “we rejoiced in one of those beautiful mornings which poets of every country have tried to paint. A light breeze brought a delicious perfume from the land, and ruffled the surface of the water. The forest-capped mountains elevated their majestic heads, over which the rising sun shed his beams. Close to us we saw a ridge of hills, of gentler ascent, but wooded like the first, and pleasantly intermixed with green and brown tints; below, a plain adorned with breadfruit-trees, and a quantity of palms in the background, overshadowing the delightful groves. All seemed still asleep. Dawn was but just breaking, and the country was wrapped in peaceful darkness. Yet we could perceive the houses amid the trees, and the pirogues on the shore. Half a mile from the beach, the waves broke over a reach of rocks level with the sea, and nothing could equal the tranquillity of the interior flow of the harbour. The day-star shed its lustre on the plain; the natives rose, and by degrees added life to this charming scene. At the sight of our vessels, several launched their pirogues in haste, and paddled towards us, as we were happily watching them. We little thought that we were going to run into great danger, and that destruction would soon threaten the vessels and their crews on this fortunate coast.”

Skilful the writer, happy the painter, who knew how to find such fresh and varied colours! This enchanting picture is conveyed in a few words. One regrets not having accompanied this bold sailor, this scientist who so well understood Dame Nature! Unfortunately we could not visit these innocent and peaceable inhabitants in that age of gold to which our own century offers a painful comparison.

The vessels were half a league from a reef, when the wind fell. In spite of every effort, the ships were driven upon the rocks, in the very sight of the much-coveted land, when a clever manoeuvre of the captain's, ably seconded by the tide and the land breeze, came to their rescue. They had, however, received some injuries, and the *Adventure* lost three anchors.

The ships were surrounded by a crowd of pirogues, and every variety of fruit was exchanged for glass beads. Still the natives offered neither fowls nor pigs. Those that were seen near the cabins belonged to the king, and they had no right to sell them. Several of the Tahitans begged for news of Banks and the companions of Cook's earlier voyage. Some also inquired for news of Tupia, but they spoke no more of him when they had learned the circumstances of his death.

Next day, the two vessels anchored in the roadstead of Otaiti-Piha, two cable-lengths from the shore, and were besieged by visitors and traffickers.

Some profited by the crush to throw the merchandize they had already sold into their canoes, that they might sell it over again. To put a stop to this trick, Cook drove the perpetrators away, after having flogged them, a punishment which they accepted without complaining.

In the afternoon the two captains landed, to examine the watering place, which they found very convenient. During their absence a crowd of natives came on board, and amply confirmed the unenviable reputation they had acquired in the earlier records of Bougainville and Cook.

“One of the officers, standing on the quarter-deck,” says the narrative, “desiring to give a child six years old, in one of the pirogues, some glass beads, let them fall into the sea. The child at once jumped into the water and dived until he recovered them. To reward his skill, he threw other trifles to him, a generosity which tempted a crowd of men and women, who amused us by their surprising agility in the waves. Their easy attitudes in the water, and the suppleness of their limbs, made them like amphibious animals.”

But the Tahitans who came on board were detected in several acts of theft. One of them, who remained for the greater part of the day in Cook’s bedroom, hastened to jump into the sea, and the captain, enraged by his conduct, had shots fired over his head. A boat, sent to take the pirogues of the robbers, was assailed with stones until it reached the shore, and it was only after a discharge of shot that the assailants determined to retreat. These hostilities led to no result, the natives came on board as if nothing had occurred.

Cook learned from them that the greater part of his old friends from the neighbourhood of Matavai had fallen in a battle between the inhabitants of the two peninsulas.

The officers made many excursions on land. Forster, animated by an ardour for botanical research, missed none of them. In one of these he witnessed the method employed by the Tahitans in preparing their stuffs.

“We had gone but a few paces,” he says, “when a noise from the forest struck upon our ears. Following the sounds, we reached a little tent, where five or six women sitting upon either side of a large square piece of wood, were thrashing the fibrous bark of mulberry-trees to fabricate their stuffs. For this purpose they used a bit of square wood, with long parallel grooves more or less hollowed, according to the different sides. They paused a moment to enable us to examine the bark, the hammer, and the beam which served them for a table.

“They also showed us a kind of gum-water in a large cocoa-nut which they used from time to time to join the various bits of bark together.

“This glue, which appears to us to be obtained from the ‘Hibiscus Esculentus,’ is absolutely needful in the fabrication of the stuff, which being occasionally two or three yards wide and fifty long, are composed of small pieces of the bark. The women employed at this work wore very old and ragged clothes and their hands were hard and knotted.”

The same day Forster saw a man with very long nails, of which he was immensely proud, as proving that he was not obliged to work for his bread. In Annam, in China and other countries, this singular and ridiculous fashion is common. A single finger is kept with a shorter nail, being the one used to scratch with, a very frequent occupation in the extreme East.

In another of his walks Forster saw a native, who passed his days in being fed by his wives, quietly lying upon a carpet of thick shrubs. This melancholy person, who fattened without rendering any service to society, recalled Sir John Mandeville’s anger at seeing “such a glutton who passed his days without distinguishing himself by any feats of arms, and who lived in pleasure, as a pig which one fattens in a sty.”

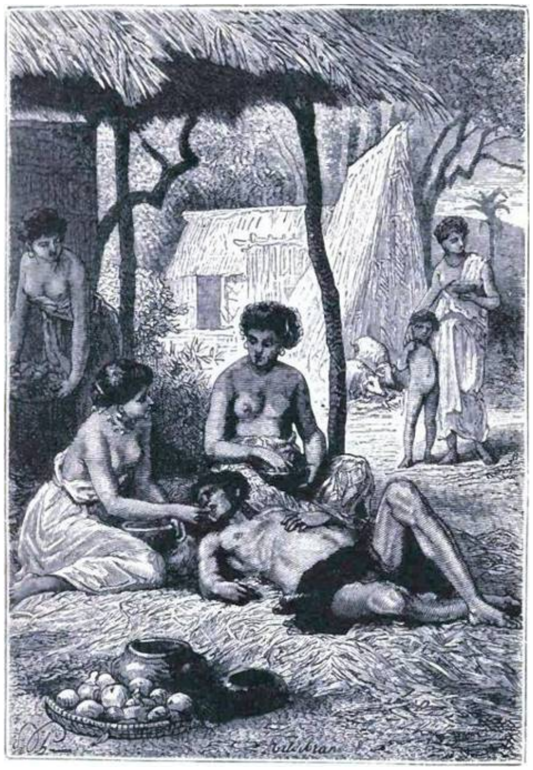

“Who passed his days in being fed by his wives.”

On the 22nd of August, Cook having learned that King Waheatua was in the neighbourhood, and being desirous of seeing him, landed with Captain Furneaux, the Forsters, and several natives. He met him advancing towards him with a numerous suite, and recognized him at once as he had seen him several times in 1769.

This king was then a child, and was called Te Arée, but he had changed his name at the death of his father Waheatua. He made the captain sit down on his stool, and inquired solicitously for the various Englishmen he had known on the former voyage. Cook, after the usual compliments, presented him with a shirt, a hatchet, some nails, and other trifles. But of all his presents, that which appeared most precious to him, and which excited most cries of admiration from his followers, was a tuft of red feathers mounted upon iron wire.

Waheatua, king of Little Tahiti, was about seventeen or eighteen years of age. Tall and well made, his appearance would have been majestic, but for a look of fear and distrust.

He was surrounded by several chiefs and noble personages, remarkable for their height, and one of whom, tattooed in a peculiar manner, was enormously stout. The king, who showed him great deference, consulted him every moment. Cook then learned that a Spanish vessel had put into Tahiti a few months previously, and he afterwards ascertained that it was that of Domingo Buenechea, which came from Callao.

Whilst Eteé, the king's confidant, conversed with some officers upon religious subjects, and asked the English if they had a god, Waheatua amused himself with the captain's watch. Astonished at the noise it made, and venting his surprise in the words, "It speaks!" he inquired of what use it was.

It was explained to him that it told the time, and in that respect resembled the sun. Waheatua gave it the name of the "little sun," to show that he understood the explanation.

The vessels sailed on the morning of the 24th, and were followed for a long time by numbers of pirogues bearing cocoa-nuts and fruit. Rather than lose this opportunity of obtaining European commodities, the natives parted with their wares very cheaply; a dozen cocoa-nuts could be obtained for one glass bead.

The abundant fresh provisions soon restored the health of all on board the vessels, and most of the sailors, who on reaching Osnaburgh could scarcely walk, could get about well when they left.

The *Resolution* and *Adventure* reached Matavai Bay on the 26th. A crowd of Tahitians soon invaded the deck. Most of them were known to the captain, and Lieutenant Pickersgill, who had accompanied Wallis in 1767, and Cook two years later, received a warm welcome from them.

Cook had tents erected for the sick, the sail-menders, and the coopers, and then left with Captain Furneaux and the two Forsters for Oparreé. The boat which took them soon passed a “moraï” of stones, and a cemetery known as the “morai of Tootahah.” When Cook called it by this name, one of the natives who accompanied him interrupted him by saying that since Tootahah’s death it was called O Too.

“A fine lesson for princes, who thus in their lives are reminded that they are mortal, and that after their death the earth which contains their corpse will not be their own. The chief and his wife removed the upper garments from their shoulders as they passed, a mark of respect which natives of all ranks exhibit before a ‘morai,’ as they appear to attach a particular idea of sanctity to these places.”

Cook soon gained admittance to the presence of King O-Too. After many compliments he offered him all that he thought he had which would please him, because he appreciated the advantage this man’s friendship would be to him, for his every word showed timidity of disposition.

Tall and well made, the king was about thirty years old. He inquired after Tupia and Cook’s companions, although he had seen none of them. Many presents were distributed to those of his cortége who appeared the most influential.

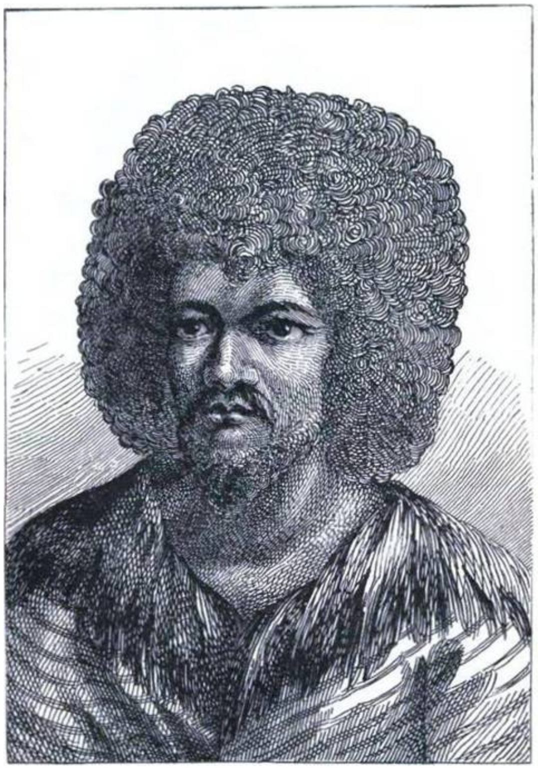

O-Too, King of Otaheite.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

“The women sent their servants to find large pieces of their finest stuffs, tinted scarlet, rose, and straw colour, and perfumed with the most odoriferous oil. They placed them over our outer clothing, and so loaded us that we could scarcely move.”

O-Too paid the captain a visit on the morrow. He only came on board after Cook had been enveloped in a considerable quantity of the most costly native stuff, and he dared not go below until his brother had first done so. The king and his suite were seated for breakfast, at which the natives went into ecstasies over the usefulness of chairs. O-Too would not taste anything, but his companions were far from following his example. He greatly admired a beautiful spaniel belonging to Forster and expressed a wish to possess it. It was at once given to him, and he had it carried behind him by one of his lords-in-waiting. After breakfast the captain himself conducted O-Too to his sloop, and Captain Furneaux gave him a pair of goats. Upon an excursion to the interior, Mr. Pickersgill met the aged Oberea, who appeared to have lost all her honours, and she was so poor that it was impossible for her to give a present to her friends.

When Cook left on the 1st of September, a young Tahitian, named Poreo, begged to accompany him. The captain consented, hoping that he might prove useful. The moment he lost sight of land poor Poreo could not restrain his tears. The officers comforted him by promising to be like fathers to him.

Cook directed his course to Huaheine Island, which was only twenty-five leagues distant, and anchored there at three in the morning. The natives brought quantities of large fowls, which were the more acceptable as it had been impossible to obtain any at Tahiti. Pigs, dogs, and fruit were in the market, and were exchanged for hatchets, nails, and glass-ware.

This island, like Tahiti, showed traces of earlier volcanic eruptions, and the summit of one of its hills resembled a crater.

The appearance of the country is similar to that of Tahiti, but is on a smaller scale, for Huaheine is only seven or eight leagues in circumference.

Cook went to see his old friend Orea. The king, dispensing with all ceremony, threw himself on the captain’s neck, and shed tears of joy; then he presented him to his friends, to whom the captain gave presents.

The king offered Cook all his most precious possessions, for he looked upon this man as a father. Orea promised to supply the English with all they needed and most loyally kept his word. However, on the morning of the 6th the sailors who presided over the traffic were insulted by a native covered with red, in war dress, and holding a club, who threatened every one. Cook, landing at this moment, threw himself on the native, struggled with him and finally possessed himself of his weapon, which he broke.

The same day another incident occurred. Sparrman had imprudently penetrated to the interior of the island to make botanical researches. Some natives, taking advantage of the moment when he was examining a plant, snatched a dagger, which was the only weapon he carried, from his belt, gave him a blow on the head, and rushing upon him, tore some of his clothes. Sparrman, however, managed to rise and run towards the shore, but, hampered by the bushes and briars, he was captured by the natives, who cut his hands to possess themselves of his shirt, the sleeves of which were buttoned, until he tore the wristbands with his teeth. Others of the natives, seeing him naked and half dead, gave him their clothes, and conducted him to the market-place, where there was a crowd assembled. When Sparrman appeared in this plight, they all took flight, without waiting to be told. Cook at first thought they intended to commit a theft. Undeceived by the appearance of the naturalist, he recalled the other natives, assured them that he would not revenge it upon the innocent, and carried his complaint straight to Orea. The latter, miserable and furious at what had occurred, loaded his people with vehement reproaches, and promised to do all in his power to find out the robbers and the stolen things.

In spite of the prayers of the natives, the king embarked in the captain's vessel, and entered upon a search for the culprits with him. The latter had removed their clothes, and for a while it was impossible to recognize them. Orea therefore accompanied Cook on board, dined with him, and on his return to land was received by his people, who had not expected his return, with lively expressions of joy.

"One of the most agreeable reflections suggested by this voyage," says Forster, "is that instead of finding the inhabitants of this island plunged in voluptuousness, as had been falsely affirmed by earlier navigators, we remarked the most humane and delicate sentiments among them. There are vicious characters in every society, but we could count fifty more sinners in England or any other civilized country than in these islands."

As the vessels were putting off, Orea came to announce that the robbers were taken, and to invite Cook to land and assist in their punishment. It was impossible. The king accompanied Cook half a league on his way, and left him with friendly farewells.

This stay in port had been very productive. The two vessels brought away more than three hundred pigs, and quantities of fowls and fruits. Probably they would not have procured much more, even had their stay been prolonged.

Captain Furneaux had agreed to take a young man named Omai on board. His conduct and intelligence gave a favourable idea of the inhabitants of the Society Islands. Upon his arrival in England this Tahitian was presented to the king by Earl Sandwich, first lord of the Admiralty. At the same time he found protectors and friends in Banks and Solander. They arranged a friendly reception for him among the first families of Great Britain. He lived two years in this country, and upon Cook's third voyage he accompanied him, and returned to his native land.

The captain afterwards visited Ulietea, where the natives gave him the most appreciative welcome. They inquired with interest about Tupia and the English they had seen in the *Endeavour*. King Oreo hastened to renew his acquaintance with the captain, and gave him all the provisions his island produced. During their stay, Poreo, who had embarked in the *Resolution*, landed with a young Tahitan girl, who had enchanted him, and would not return on board. He was replaced by a young man of seventeen or eighteen years of age, a native of Bolabola, named OEdidi, who announced his wish to go to England. The grief evinced by this native on leaving his native land spoke well for his good heart.

The vessels, laden with more than four hundred pigs, and also with fowls, and fruit, left the Society Islands on the 17th of September, and steered for the west. Six days later, one of the Harvey Islands was sighted, and on the 1st of October anchor was cast off Eoa, called Middelbourg Island by Tasman and Cook.

The welcome by the natives was cordial. A chief named Tai-One came on board, touched the captain's nose with a pinch of pepper, and sat down without speaking. The alliance was concluded and ratified by the gift of a few trifles.

Tai-One guided the English into the interior. The new comers were surrounded by a dense crowd of natives, offering stuffs and mats in exchange for nails as long as the walk lasted. The natives often even carried their liberality so far as to decline any return for these presents. Tai-One conducted his new friends to his dwelling, agreeably situated in a beautiful valley, in the shade of some “*sadhecks*.” He served them with a liquor extracted from the juice of the “*eava*,” the use of which is common to the Polynesian islanders. It was prepared in the following manner: — Pieces of a root, a species of pepper, were first chewed, and then placed in a large wooden vase, over which water was poured. As soon as this liquor was drinkable, the natives poured it out into cups made of green leaves, shaped into form, and holding about half a pint. Cook was the only one who tasted it. The method of preparing the liquor had quenched the thirst of his companions, but the natives were not fastidious, and the vase was soon emptied.

The English afterwards visited several plantations or gardens, separated by intertwined hedges, which were connected by doors formed of planks and hung upon hinges. The perfection of culture, and the fully developed instinct of property, showed a degree of civilization superior to that of Tahiti.

In spite of the reception he met with, Cook, who could procure neither pigs nor fowls, left this island to reach that of Amsterdam, called Tonga Tabou by the natives. Here he hoped to find the provisions he needed. The vessels soon anchored in the roadstead of Van Dieman, in eighteen fathoms of water, a cable’s length from the breakers which border the shore. The natives were friendly, and brought stuffs, mats, implements, arms, ornaments, and soon afterwards pigs and fowls. OEdidi bought some red feathers of them with much delight, declaring they would have a high value at Tahiti. Cook landed with a native named Attago, who had attached himself to him at once. During his excursion, he remarked a temple similar to a “morai,” and which was called by the generic name of Faitoka. Raised upon an artificial butt, sixteen or eighteen feet from the ground, the temple was in an oblong form, and was reached by two stone staircases. Built like the homes of the natives, with posts and joists, it was covered with palm leaves. Two wooden images coarsely carved, two feet in length, occupied the corners.

“As I did not wish to offend either them or their gods,” says the captain, “I dared not touch them, but I inquired of Attago if these were ‘Eatuas,’ or gods. I do not know if he understood me, but he instantly handled them, and turned them over as roughly as if he had merely touched a bit of wood, which convinced me that they did not represent a divine being.”

A few thefts were perpetrated, but they did not interrupt cordiality, and a quantity of provisions were procured. Before leaving, the captain had an interview with a person who was treated with extraordinary respect, to whom all the natives accorded the rank of king. Cook says, —

“I found him seated, with a gravity of deportment so stupid and so dull, that in spite of all they had told me, I took him for an idiot, whom the people adored from superstitious motives. I saluted him, and talked to him, but he made no reply, and paid no attention to me. I was about to leave him, when a native made me understand that it was without doubt the king. I offered him a shirt, a hatchet, a piece of red stuff, a looking-glass, some nails, medals, and glass-ware. He received them, or rather allowed them to be placed upon his person or beside him, losing nothing of his gravity, and speaking no word, not even moving his head to the right or left.”

However, next day, this chief sent baskets of bananas and a roast pig, saying that it was a present from the “ariki” of the island to the “ariki” of the ship.

Cook called this archipelago the Friendly Islands. They had formerly received various names from Schouten and Tasman, as, Cocoa-nut Islands, Traitor Islands, Hope Islands, and Horn Islands.

Cook not having been able to obtain fresh water, was obliged to leave Tonga sooner than he wished. He found time, however, to make a few observations as to the productions of the country, and the manners of the natives. We will mention the most striking.

Nature had showered its treasures with a liberal hand upon Tonga and Eoa Islands. Cocoa-nuts, palm-trees, breadfruit-trees, yams, and sugar-canes are most plentiful there. As for edible animals, pigs and fowls alone were met with, but dogs if not existing there, are known by name. The most delicate fish abounds on the coast. Of much the same form as Europeans, and equally white, the inhabitants of these islands are well-proportioned and of pleasant features. Their hair is originally black, but they are in the habit of tinting it with powder, so that white, red, and blue hair abounds, which produces a singular effect. Tattooing is a universal practice. Their clothes are very simple, consisting of one piece of stuff, rolled round the waist, and falling to the knees. The women, who at Tonga, as everywhere else, are more coquettish than men, make aprons of cocoa-nut fibres, which they ornament with shells, and bits of coloured stuffs and feathers.

The natives have some singular customs, which the English had not noticed before. Thus they put everything that is given them on their heads, and conclude a bargain with this practice. When a friend or relation dies, they slash their limbs, and even some of their fingers. Their dwellings are not collected in villages, but are separate and dispersed among the plantations. Built in the same style as those of the Society Isles, they differ from them only in being raised higher above the ground.

The *Adventure* and *Resolution* sailed on the 7th of October, and the following day reconnoitred Pylstart Island, discovered by Tasman. On the

21st, anchor was cast in Hawke’s Bay, New Zealand. Cook landed a certain number of animals, which he wished to acclimatize, and set sail again to enter Queen Charlotte’s Sound, but being caught in a great gale, he was separated from the *Adventure*, and did not meet her again until he reached England.

On the 5th of November the captain repaired the damages of his vessel, and before undertaking a new voyage in the southern seas, he wished to ascertain the extent and quality of his provisions. He reckoned that four thousand five hundred pounds of biscuits had been entirely spoiled, and that more than three thousand pounds were in scarcely better condition. During his stay here he obtained a new and still more convincing proof of the cannibalism of the natives of New Zealand. An officer had bought the head of a young man, who had been killed and eaten, and some natives seeing it, wished very much for a piece, Cook gave it up to them, and the avidity with which they threw themselves upon this revolting food, proved the pleasure that these cannibals took in eating food which they have difficulty in procuring.

The *Resolution* left New Zealand on the 26th of November, and entered the glacial regions which she had already traversed; but the circumstances attending her second voyage were distressing. The crew, though in good health, were overcome by fatigue, and less capable of resisting illness, the more so that they had no fresh food on board.

The *Resolution* had lost her consort, and the world was convinced that no Antarctic continent existed. It was, so to say, a “platonic” voyage. It was necessary to prove beyond the possibility of doubt that no new land of any importance was to be discovered in these latitudes.

The first ice was encountered on the 12th of December, and farther to the south than in the preceding year. From this date, the usual incidents of navigation in these latitudes were repeated day by day. OEdidi was quite astonished by the "white rain," as he called the snow which fell on his hand, but the sight of the first ice was a still greater marvel to him; he called it "white earth."

"His mind had been struck by a phenomenon in the torrid zone," says the narrative. "As long as the ships remained in these latitudes, we had had scarcely any night, and he had seen that we could write at midnight by the light of the sun. OEdidi could scarcely believe his eyes, and he assured us that his fellow countrymen would put him down as a liar, if he talked to them of petrified rain, and of perpetual day."

The young Tahitan had time to become accustomed to this phenomenon, for the ship advanced as far as 76° south, amidst floating ice. Then, convinced that if a continent existed the ice made access to it impossible, Cook determined to proceed to the North.

General dissatisfaction prevailed; no one on board was free from severe colds, or from an attack of scurvy. The captain himself was seriously affected by bilious sickness, which kept him in bed. For eight days his life was in danger, and his recovery was likely to be equally painful and slow. The same route was followed until the 11th of March, when with the rising of the sun the joyful cry of "Land! land!" arose.

It was the Easter Island, of Roggewein's Davis' Land. Upon nearing it, the navigators were struck with astonishment, as the Dutch had been, by the enormous statues erected on the shore. Cook says that the latitude of Easter Island answers very closely to that marked in Roggewein's MS. journal, and its longitude is only one degree wrong.

The shore, composed of black broken rock of ferruginous appearance, shows traces of violent subterranean eruption. A few scattered plantations were perceived in the centre of the island.

Singular coincidence! The first word spoken by the natives as the strangers approached the shore, was to ask in the Tahitan tongue for a rope. This again suggested that the origin of both races was the same. Like the Tahitans they were tattooed, and clothed in stuffs similar to those of the Society Islands.

“The action of the sun on their heads,” says the narrative, “has forced them to find different means for protecting themselves. The greater number of the men wear a circular head-covering about two inches thick, twisted with grass from one side to the other, and covered with a great quantity of those long, black feathers which adorn the frigate bird. Others have enormous hats of brown gulls’ feathers, almost as large as the wigs of European lawyers, and many have a simple wooden hoop, surrounded with white gulls’ feathers, which wave in the air. The women wear large and wide hats of neat plaits, which come to a point in front, with a ridge along the top, and two great lobes on either side.

“The country was a picture of desolation. It was surveyed by two detachments, and was found to be covered with black and porous stones. The entire vegetation which could thrive on this mass of lava consisted of two or three kinds of rugose grass, which grew on the rocks, scanty bushes, especially the paper-mulberry, the ‘hibiscus,’ and the mimosa, and some plantains. Close to the landing-place is a perpendicular wall, constructed of square stones, compactly and durably joined in accordance with art rules, and fitting in a style of durability. Further on, in the centre of a well-paved area, a monolith is erected, representing a half-naked human figure, some twenty[1] feet high, and more than five wide, very roughly hewn. The head is badly designed, the eyes, nose, and mouth scarcely indicated, but the ears are very long, as is the fashion in this country, and are better finished than the rest."

These monuments, which are numerous, do not appear to have been erected or hewn by the race the English found, or this race had degenerated; for these natives paid no respect to the statues, although they treated them with a certain veneration, and objected to any one's walking on the pavement near them.

It was not only on the sea-shore that these enormous sentinels were seen. Between the mountains, in the fissures of rocks, others existed, some erect or fallen to earth through some convulsion, others still imperfectly separated from the block from which they were being cut. What sudden catastrophe stopped the works? What do these monoliths represent? To what distant period do these testimonies of the industry of a race long disappeared, or the recollection of whom has perished, seem to point? This problem must remain for ever insoluble.

[1] In the earlier editions of the French translation of Cook's Voyages (Paris, 1878, seven 4to vols.), the height of this statue is given as two feet, evidently by a typographical error. We now correct this mistake, which has been repeated in all subsequent editions.

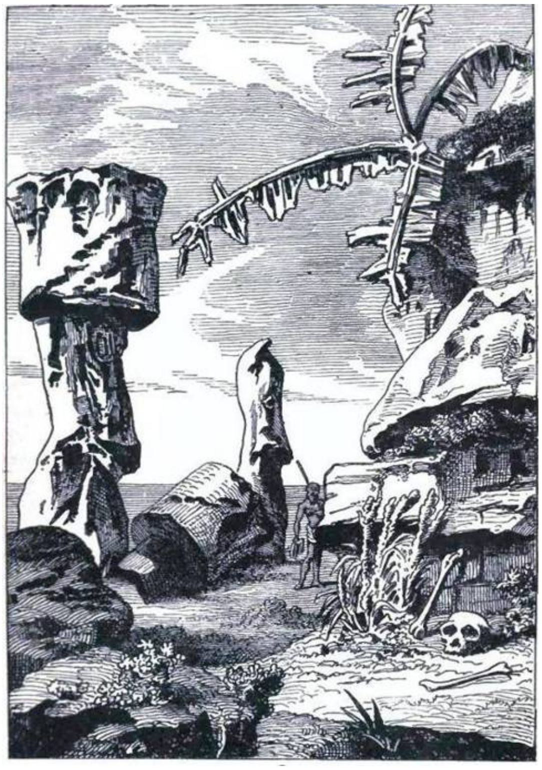

Monuments in Easter Island.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Traffic proceeded easily. It was only necessary to repress the marvellous dexterity of the natives in emptying pockets. The few possessions which had been obtained had been very useful, though the want of drinkable water prevented Cook remaining long in Easter Island. He directed his course to the archipelago of the Marquesas of Mendana, which had not been visited since 1595. But his vessel had no sooner been put to sea than he was again attacked by the bilious fever, from which he had suffered so severely. The sufferers from scurvy relapsed, and all who had undertaken long walks across Easter Island had their faces burnt by the sun.

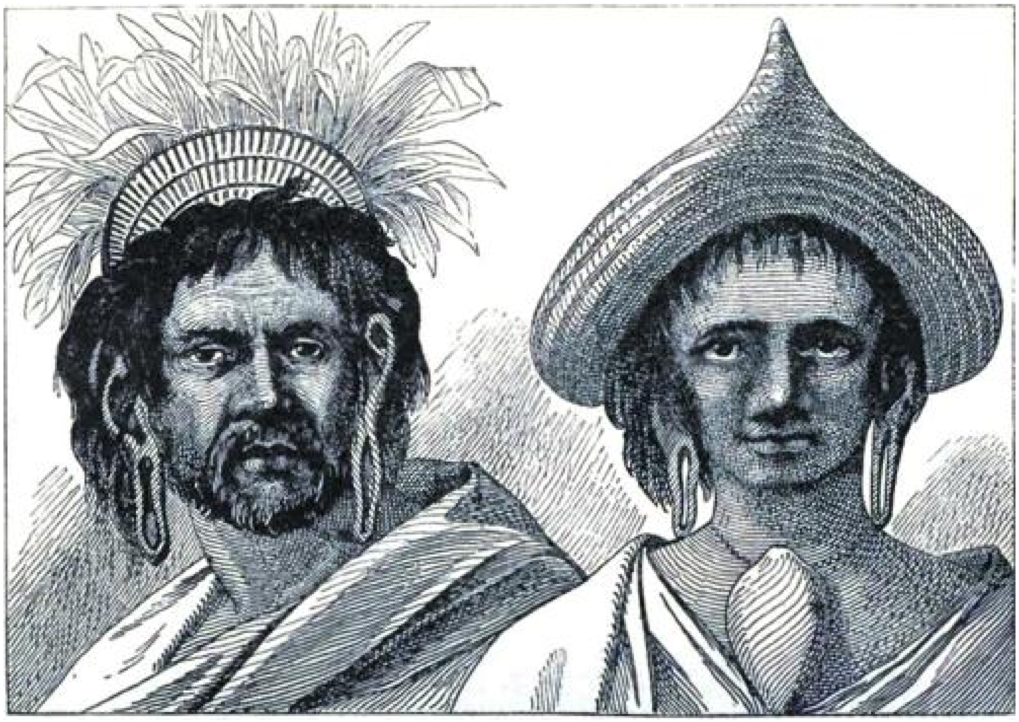

Natives of Easter Island.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

On the 7th of April, 1774, Cook sighted the Marquesas group, after seeking them in vain for five consecutive days in the different positions assigned to them by geographers. Anchor was cast at Tao Wati, the Santa Cristina of Mendana.

The *Resolution* was soon surrounded by pirogues, the foremost of which was full of stones, every man on board having a sling round his hand. However, friendly relations were formed, followed by barter.

“These natives,” says Forster, “are well made, with handsome faces, yellowish or tanned complexions, and marks all over their bodies, which gives them an almost black appearance. The valleys of our harbour were filled with trees, and tallied in every particular with the description given by the Spaniards. We saw fire across the forests several times, very far from the shore, and concluded that the country was well populated.”

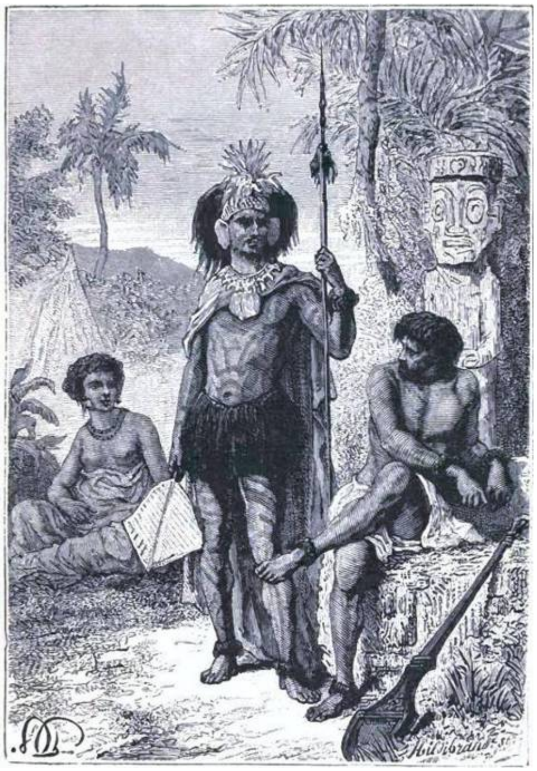

Natives of the Marquesas.

The difficulty of procuring food decided Cook upon a hasty departure. But he had time to collect some interesting facts about the people, whom he considered the handsomest in Oceania. These natives appear to surpass all others in the regularity of their features. The resemblance in their speech, however, to that of the Tahitans, appears to point to a common origin.

The Marquesas are five in number, Magdalena, San Pedro, Dominica, Santa Cristina, and Hood Island, the latter so called after the volunteer who first discovered it. Santa Cristina is divided by a chain of mountains of considerable elevation, to which the hills that rise from the sea lead. Deep, narrow, and fertile valleys, filled with fruit-trees, and watered by streams of excellent water, intersect this mountain isle. Port Madre de Dios, called by Cook Resolution Harbour, is about the centre of the eastern coast of Santa Cristina. It contains two sandy creeks, into which two streams flow.

II.

A fresh visit to Tahiti and the Friendly Islands — Exploration of New Hebrides — Discovery of New Caledonia and Pine Island — Stay in Queen Charlotte’sSound — South Georgia — Accident to the *Adventure*.

After leaving these islands, on the 12th of April, and sailing for Tahiti, Cook fell in, five days later, with the Pomotou archipelago. He landed on the Tioukea Island of Byron. The inhabitants, who had cause to complain of earlier navigators, received the advances of the English coldly. The latter could only obtain about two dozen cocoa-nuts and five pigs, which appeared plentiful in this island. In another settlement a more friendly reception was met with. The natives embraced the new-comers, and rubbed their noses in the same fashion as the New Zealanders. OEdidi bought several dogs, the long and white hair of whose skins serves as an ornament for cuirasses in his native land.

Forster relates: —

“The natives told us that they broke up scurvy grass, mixed it with shell-fish, and threw it into the sea on the approach of a shoal of fish. This bait intoxicated the fish for a time, and when they came to the surface it was easy to take them. The captain afterwards saw several other islands of this immense archipelago, which were similar to those he had left, especially the Pernicious Islands, where Roggewein had lost his sloop, the *African*, and to which Cook gave the name of Palliser Islands.”

He then steered for Tahiti, which the sailors, certain of the good-will of the natives, regarded as a home. The *Resolution* cast anchor in Matavai Bay on the 22nd of April, and their reception was as friendly as had been anticipated. A few days later, King O-Too and several other chiefs visited the English, and brought them a present of ten or a dozen large pigs and some fruit.

Cook’s first idea was to remain in this spot only just long enough for Mr. Wales, the astronomer, to take observations, but the abundance of provisions induced him to prolong his stay.

On the morning of the 26th, the captain, who had been to Oparrée with some of his officers, to make a formal visit to the king, observed a fleet of more than 300 pirogues, drawn up in order on the shore. They were all completely equipped. At the same time a number of warriors assembled on the beach.

The officers’ suspicions were excited by this formidable armament, collected in one night, but they were reassured by the welcome they received.

This fleet consisted of no less than sixty large double pirogues, decorated with flags and streamers, and 170 smaller ones, intended for the transport of provisions, and the flotilla was manned with no fewer than 7760 men, warriors or paddlers.

“The sight of this fleet,” says Forster, “increased our ideas of the power and wealth of this island. The entire crew was astonished. When we reflect upon the implements possessed by this people, we can but admire the patience and toil necessary to cut down these enormous trees, separate and polish the branches, and then to carry the heavy constructions to such perfection. These works are produced by them by means of a stone hatchet and saw, a piece of coral, and the hide of whales. The chiefs, and all who occupied a prominent fighting rank, were dressed in military style — that is to say, in a quantity of stuffs, turbans, helmets, and breastplates. The height of some of the helmets was most embarrassing to the wearers. The entire equipment appeared more appropriate for scenic effect than suitable for a battlefield. But, in any case, it added to the grandeur of the display, and the warriors did not fail to show themselves with a view to the most striking effect.

“Upon reaching Matavai, Cook learned that this formidable armament was destined for an attack upon Eimio, whose chief had revolted against the Tahitan yoke, and become independent.

“During the following days the captain was visited by some of his old friends. All showed a desire to possess red feathers, which were of considerable value. One only attached more importance to a glass bead or a nail. The Tahitans were so impressed that they offered in exchange the strange mourning garments, which they had refused to sell during Cook's first voyage.

"These garments are made of the rarest productions of the islands and the surrounding sea, and are worked with care and great skill, and no doubt are of great value to themselves. We bought no less than ten, which we brought to England."

OEdidi, who had taken good care to procure some feathers for himself, could indulge in any caprice he liked. The natives looked upon him as a prodigy, and listened eagerly to his tales. The principal personages of the island, and even the king sought his society. He married a daughter of the chief of Matavai, and brought his wife on board. Every one was delighted to make him a present. Finally he decided to remain at Tahiti, where he had found his sister married to a powerful chief.

In spite of the thefts, which more than once caused unpleasantness, the English procured more provisions on their stay in this port than ever before. The aged Oberea, who was like a queen in the island during the stay made by the *Dauphin* in 1767, herself brought pigs and fruits, in the secret hope of obtaining red feathers, which had so great a success. Presents were liberally given, and the Indians were amused with fireworks and military manoeuvres.

Just before he left, the captain witnessed a curious naval review. O-Too ordered a sham fight, but it lasted so short a time that it was impossible to observe the movements. The fleet was to commence hostilities five days after Cook's departure, and he would much have liked to have waited for it; but, fearing the natives might suspect him of an attempt to overcome both conquered and victors, he determined to leave.

The *Resolution* had scarcely left the bay, when one of the gunners, seduced by the delights of Tahiti, and possibly by the promises of King O-Too, who, no doubt, thought a European might be of use to him, threw himself into the sea, but he was soon retaken by a boat launched by Cook in his pursuit.

Cook very much regretted the fact that discipline obliged him to act in this way. The man had no relations or friends in England, and, had he requested permission to remain in Tahiti, it would not have been refused.

On the 15th, the *Resolution* anchored in O Wharre harbour, in Huaheine Island. The old chief Orea was one of the first to congratulate the English upon their return, and to bring them presents. The captain presented him with red feathers, but the old chief appeared to prefer iron, hatchets, and nails. He seemed more indolent than upon the previous visit. His head was weaker, no doubt owing to his immoderate love for an intoxicating drink extracted from pepper by the natives. His authority was evidently despised, and Cook sent in pursuit of a band of robbers, who had not refrained from pillaging the old king himself, and who had taken refuge in the centre of the island.

Orea showed himself grateful for the consideration the English had always shown him. He was the last to leave the vessel before she sailed, on the 24th of April, and when Cook said that they should never meet again, he shed tears and replied, —

“Send your children here, we will treat them well.”

On another occasion, Orea asked the captain where he should be buried. “At Stepney,” said Cook. Orea begged him to repeat the word until he could pronounce it. Then a hundred voices cried at once, “Stepney morai no Toote,” “Stepney the grave of Cook.” In giving this reply the great navigator had no prevision of his fate, or of the difficulty his fellow-countrymen would have in finding his remains.

OEdidi, who at the last moment had accompanied the English to Huaheine, had not met with so cordial a welcome as at Tahiti. His riches had strangely diminished and his credit suffered in consequence. The narrative says, —

“He soon proved the truth of the proverb, that a man is never a prophet in his own country. He left us with regrets, which proved his esteem for us, and when the moment of separation arrived, he ran from cabin to cabin embracing every one. It is impossible to describe the mental anguish of the young man when he left. He gazed at the vessel, burst into tears, and crouched in despair in the bottom of his pirogue. We saw him again, stretching out his arms to us, as we left the reefs.”

Cook reconnoitred Hove Island (so called by Wallis) on the 6th of June. It is named Mohipa by the natives. A few days later he found several uninhabited islets, surrounded by a chain of breakers, to which he gave the name of Palmerston, in honour of one of the Lords of the Admiralty.

Upon the 20th a steep and rocky island was discovered, crowned with large woods, and bushes; the beach was narrow and sandy, and several natives of very dark complexion were seen upon it.

They made menacing demonstrations, and were armed with lances and clubs. As soon as the English landed they retired. Champions, however, advanced, and endeavoured to provoke the strangers, assailing them with a storm of arrows and stones. Sparrman was wounded in the arm, and Cook just escaped being struck by a javelin. A general volley soon dispersed these inhospitable islanders, and the uncivil reception which was thus accorded well deserved the name bestowed upon their land of Savage Island.

Four days later Cook reached the Tonga archipelago once more. He stopped this time at Nomouka, called Rotterdam by Tasman.

He had scarcely cast anchor before the ship was surrounded by a crowd of pirogues, filled with bananas and every kind of fruit, which were exchanged for nails and old pieces of stuff. This friendly reception encouraged the naturalists to land and penetrate to the interior, in search of new plants and unknown productions. Upon their return they enlarged upon the beauty of this picturesque and romantic country, and upon the affability and cordiality of the natives.

In spite of it, however, various thefts continued to take place, until a more important larceny than usual obliged the captain to resort to severity.

A native, who opposed the seizure of two pirogues by the English, as hostages until the stolen arms were restored, was wounded severely by a gunshot. During this second visit Cook bestowed the name of Friendly Islands upon this group, no doubt with a sarcastic meaning. Now-a-days they are better known by the native name of Tonga.

The indefatigable navigator continued his route in a westward direction, passed in succession Lepreux, Aurora, Whitsunday and Mallicolo Islands, to which archipelago Bougainville had given the name of the Grandes Cyclades.

Cook gave his usual order, to enter into friendly and commercial relations with the inhabitants.

The first day passed quietly, and the natives celebrated the visit of the English by games and dancing, but on the morrow an incident occurred which led to a general collision.

A native, who was refused access to the ship, prepared to launch an arrow at one of the sailors. His fellow-countrymen at first prevented him. At the same moment Cook appeared on deck, his gun in his hand. His first step was to shout to the native, who again aimed at the sailor. Without replying, the native was about to let his arrow fly at him, when a shot anticipated and wounded him. This was the signal for a general discharge of arrows, which struck on the vessel and did but little damage. Cook then ordered a gun to be fired over the natives' heads with a view to dispersing them. A few hours later the natives again surrounded the ship, and returned to their barter as if nothing had happened.

Cook took advantage of these friendly indications to land an armed detachment for wood and water. Four or five natives were collected on the beach. A chief, leaving the group, advanced to the captain, holding in his hand, as Cook also did, a green bough. The two branches were exchanged, and peace thus concluded, a few slight presents helped to cement it. Cook then obtained permission to take wood, but not to go far from the shore, and the naturalists, who were anxious to prosecute their investigations in the interior, were brought back to the beach, in spite of their protestations.

Iron implements had no value for these people. This made it extremely difficult to obtain provisions. Only a few agreed to exchange arms for stuffs, and exhibited an honesty in their transactions to which the English were unaccustomed.

The exchanges continued after the *Resolution* had set sail, and the natives hurried in their pirogues to deliver the articles for which they had received the price. One of them, after vigorous efforts, succeeded in gaining the vessels, carrying his weapons to a sailor who had paid for them and forgotten it, it was so long ago. The native refused the recompense the sailor would have given, making him understand that he had been paid already. Cook gave the name of Port Sandwich to this harbour of refuge, which he left on the morning of the 23rd of July.

He was most favourably impressed by the moral qualities of the natives of Mallicolo, but by no means so in regard to their physical powers.

Small and badly proportioned, bronze in colour, with flat faces, they were hideous. Had Darwinian theories been in vogue in those days, no doubt Cook would have recognized in them that missing link between man and monkey, which is the despair of Darwin's followers.

Their coarse, crinkly black hair was short, and their bushy beards did not add to their beauty. But the one thing which made them most grotesque was their habit of tying a cord tightly across the stomach, which made them appear like great emmets. Tortoise-shell ear-rings, bracelets made of hogs'-teeth, large tortoise-shell rings, and a white flat stone which they passed through the cartilage of the nose, constituted their ornaments. Their weapons were bows and arrows, spears and clubs. The points of their arrows, which were occasionally two or three in number, were coated with a substance which the English thought was poisonous, from observing the care with which the natives drew them out of a kind of quiver.

The *Resolution* had only just left Port Sandwich when all the crew were seized with colic, vomiting, and violent pains in the head and back. Two large fish had been caught and eaten by them, possibly whilst they were under the influence of the narcotic mentioned above. In every case, ten days elapsed before entire recovery. A parrot and dog which had also eaten of the fish died next day. Quiros' companions had suffered in the same way, and since Cook's voyage similar symptoms of poisoning have been noticed in these latitudes.

After leaving Mallicolo, Cook steered for Ambrym Island, which appeared to contain a volcano, and shortly afterwards discovered a group of small islands, which he named Shepherd Islands, in honour of the Cambridge Professor of Astronomy.

He then visited the Islands of Two Hills, Montagu and Hinchinbrook Islands, and the largest of all, Sandwich Island, which must not be mistaken for the group of the same name. All the islands, lying among and protected by breakers, were covered with rich vegetation and were largely populated.

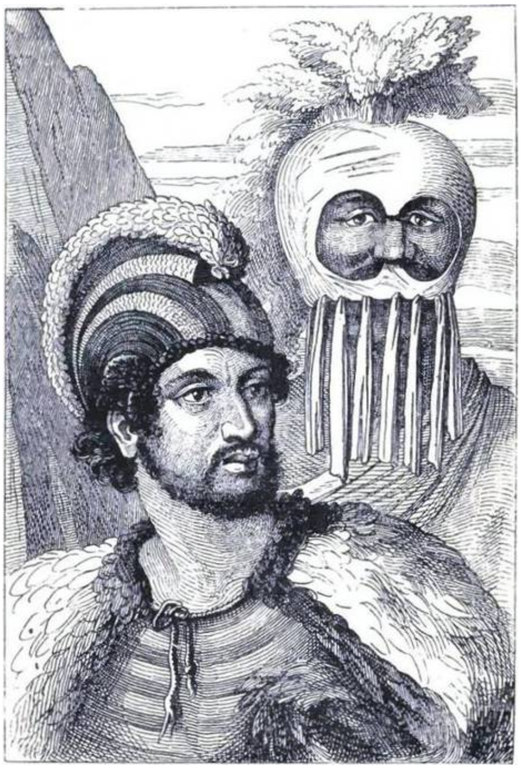

Typical natives of the Sandwich Islands.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Two slight accidents interrupted the calm on board. A fire broke out, which was soon extinguished, and one of the sailors falling overboard, was at once rescued.

Koro Mango was discovered on the 3rd of August. Next day Cook reached its shore, hoping to find a watering-place, and facility for landing. The greater part of the sufferers from the poisonous fish had not yet recovered their health, and they looked forward to its speedy re-establishment on shore. But the reception accorded to them by the natives, who were armed with clubs, lances, and arrows, seemed wanting in sincerity.

Cook was on his guard. Finding that they could not lure the English into landing, the natives endeavoured to force them. A chief and several men tried to snatch the oars from the sailors. Cook wished to fire his musket, but the priming would not go off. The English were immediately overwhelmed with stones and arrows. The captain at once ordered a general volley; fortunately half of the shots missed, or the slaughter would have been terrific.

Forster says, “These natives appear to be of different race to those living in Mallicolo. They speak a different language. They are of medium height, but well-shaped, and their features are not disagreeable. They were bronze in complexion, and they paint their faces black or red; their hair is somewhat woolly and curly. The few women I saw appeared very ugly. I have seen no pirogues on any part of the coast. They live in houses covered with palm-leaves, and their plantations are in straight lines and are surrounded by a hedge of reeds.”

It was useless to make a second attempt to land. Cook having bestowed the name of Cape Traitor upon the scene of the collision, reached an island, which he had seen the previous evening, and which the natives called Tanna.

“The highest hill of the same range is of conical shape,” says Forster, “with a crater in the centre. It is reddish brown, and composed of a mass of burnt stones, perfectly sterile. From time to time it emitted a thick column of smoke like a great tree, increasing in width as it ascended.”

The *Resolution* was at once surrounded by a score of pirogues, the largest of which contained twenty-five men. The latter sought to appropriate everything within their reach, buoys, flags, the hinges of the rudder, which they tried to knock off. They only returned to the shore after a four-pounder had been fired over their heads.

The vessel made for the shore, but all the trifles that were distributed could not induce the natives to relinquish their attitude of defiance and bravado. It was clear that the smallest misunderstanding would lead to bloodshed.

Cook imagined these people to be cannibals, although pigs, fowls, roots, and fruits abounded.

During the stay prudence prevented any one leaving the shore. Forster, however, ventured a little way and discovered a spring of water, so hot that he could not hold his finger in it longer than a second. In spite of all their wishes, the English found it impossible to reach the central volcano, which emitted torrents of fire and smoke as high as the clouds, and projected enormously large stones into the air. The number of extinct volcanoes in every direction was considerable, and the soil was decidedly subject to volcanic eruptions. By degrees, though without losing their reserve, the Tannians became more at home with the strangers, and intercourse was less difficult.

“These people,” says Cook, “showed themselves hospitable, civil, and good-hearted, when we did not excite their jealousy. We cannot blame their conduct greatly, for after all, from what point of view can they have judged us? They could not possibly know our real intentions. We entered their country, as they dared not oppose us; we endeavoured to disembark as friends, but we landed and maintained our superiority by force of arms. Under such circumstances what opinion could the natives form of us? It doubtless appeared far more plausible that we came to invade their country, than that we visited them as friends. Time only, and intimate relations, could teach them our good intentions.”

However that might be, the English were at a loss to guess why the natives prevented their penetrating to the interior of the country. Was it owing to a naturally shy nature? or possibly because they were threatened with constant inroads from their neighbours. Their address in the use of arms and their bearing supported this idea, but it was impossible to know with any certainty.

As the natives did not value anything the English offered, they did not bring any great quantity of the fruits and roots the latter longed for. They would not consent to part with their pigs even for hatchets, the utility of which they had proved.

The productions of the island included bread-fruits, cocoa-nuts, a fruit like a peach, called “parre,” yams, potatoes, wild pigs, nutmegs, and many others of which Forster did not know the names.

On the 21st Cook left Tanna, discovered successively, Erromam and Annatom Islands, and coasted Sandwich Island. He passed Mallicolo and Quiros' Land of the Holy Spirit, where he easily recognized St. James and St. Philip Bays, and left this archipelago after having named it New Hebrides, by which appellation it is now known.

A new discovery was made on the 5th of September. No European foot had ever trodden the soil he now sighted. It was the northern extremity of New Caledonia. The first point recognized was called Cape Colnett, after one of the volunteers who saw it first. The coast was bordered by a chain of breakers, behind which two or three pirogues appeared to be paddling, so as to reconnoitre the new-comers. But at sunrise they brailed their sails and were seen no more.

Having cruised for two hours along the outer reefs, Cook perceived an opening which he thought would enable him to draw near. He steered for it and landed at Balade.

The country appeared sterile, and uniformly covered with a whitish grass. Some trees with white trunks, like the willow in shape, were seen here and there. They were "niaoulis." At the same time several houses like bee-hives were perceived.

No sooner was anchor cast than fifteen or more pirogues surrounded the vessel. The natives had sufficient confidence to approach and begin traffic. Some of them even entered the ship, and inspected all the various parts of it with extreme curiosity. They refused to touch the dishes offered them, stewed peas, beef, and salt pork, but they voluntarily tasted the yams. They were most surprised at the goats, pigs, dogs, and cats, which were so strange to them that they had no words to designate them. Nails, all iron implements, and red stuffs, appeared precious to them. Tall, strong, and well-proportioned, with curly hair and beard, and of dark chocolate colour, they spoke a language which bore no resemblance to any which the English had hitherto heard.

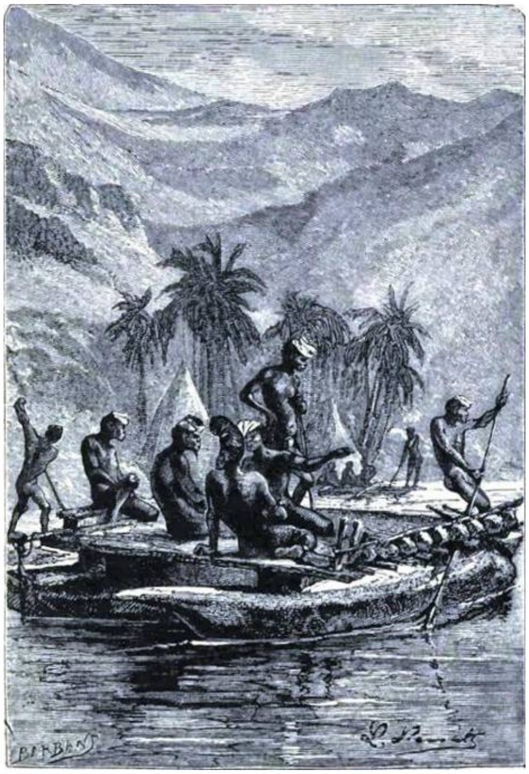

“The natives had sufficient confidence.”

When the captain landed he was received with joyful demonstrations, and with the surprise natural to people who are brought face to face with objects of which they have had no previous idea. Some of the chiefs, enjoining silence, made short harangues, and Cook began the usual distribution of ironmongery and hardware. His officers mixed with the crowd to make observations.

Many of the natives appeared afflicted with a kind of leprosy, and their arms and legs were greatly swollen. They were all but naked, wearing merely a cord tightened to the figure, from which hung scraps of stuff made from the fig-tree. A few wore enormous cylindrical hats, open on two sides, like the hats of the Hungarian hussars. They hung tortoiseshell earrings or rolls of the leaves of the sugar-cane in their ears, which were pulled out and split.

The English soon perceived a little village above the mangroves which bordered the shore. It was surrounded by sugar-cane plantations, yams, and banana-trees, and watered by little canals, cleverly diverted from the large river.

Cook soon discovered that he need expect nothing of this race but permission to survey the country.

“These natives,” he says, “taught us a few words of their language, which bore no resemblance to that of any other tribe. They were mild and peaceable in character, but extremely lazy. If we addressed them they replied, but if we continued our way seldom joined us in our excursions. If we passed their cabins without remark, they took no notice of us. The women were slightly more curious, and hid themselves in the bushes to look after us, but they would only approach in the company of the men. They appeared neither vexed nor alarmed when we shot birds. Indeed, if we were near their huts, the young people would point them out to us, for the pleasure of seeing us fire. They appeared to have very little to do at this time of year. Having tilled the ground, and sown roots and bananas, they awaited their crops next summer.

“Perhaps in this fact lay the explanation of their having no provisions to offer in traffic, for in other respects we found them fully alive to the hospitable instinct which more particularly commends the islanders of the southern seas to navigators.”

Cook’s assertion of the indolence of the New Caledonians is perfectly true. But his stay amongst them was too short to enable him to appreciate their character thoroughly; and he certainly never suspected that they indulged in the horrible practice of cannibalism. He noticed no birds living in a wild state there excepting quails, turtle-doves, pigeons, turkeys, ducks, teal, and a few smaller ones. He could not ascertain the presence of any quadrupeds, and he entirely failed in his endeavours to procure provisions.

At Balade the captain made several excursions into the interior, and climbed the mountains to gain a general view over the country. From the summit of a rock he clearly saw the two coasts and ascertained that New Caledonia in this part was only ten leagues in width.

In its general features the country resembled various portions of New Holland, which is in the same latitude. The productions of both appear to be the same, and there is an absence of brushwood in the forests of both.

Cook also observed the presence of minerals on the hills, and his discovery has been verified in late years by the proved existence of gold, iron, copper, coal, and nickel.

A few of the crew met with a similar adventure here to that which had been almost fatal to some of them in the neighbourhood of Mallicolo.

Cook relates it thus: — ”My secretary bought a fish which had been harpooned by a native, and sent it to me on board. This fish was of an entirely new species, and resembled that known as sun-fish, it was of the order called ‘tetrodon’ by Linnæus. Its head was hideous, wide and long. Never suspecting that it might be poisonous, I ordered it to be served at table the same evening. Fortunately so much time was consumed in drawing and describing it that no time was left for the cooking, and only the liver was served.

“The two Forsters and myself partook of it, and towards three in the morning we experienced a sensation of weakness and want of power in our limbs. I all but lost the sense of touch, and could no longer distinguish light from heavy objects when I desired to move them. A pot full of water and a feather appeared to me equally heavy. We first resorted to emetics, and afterwards we succeeded in inducing perspiration, which relieved us greatly. In the morning, a pig which had eaten the entrails of the fish was found dead. When the natives came on board, and saw the fish hanging up, they made us understand that it was unwholesome. They showed their disgust of it, but neither in selling it, or even after having been paid for it, had they given the slightest hint of such aversion.”

Cook next proceeded to the survey of the greater part of the eastern coast. During this excursion he met with a native as white as a European. His complexion was attributed to illness. This man was an Albino, like those already met with in Tahiti and the Society Islands.

The captain was anxious to acclimatize pigs in New Caledonia, but he had the greatest difficulty in inducing the natives to accept a hog and a sow. He was forced to insist upon their usefulness, the facility of breeding them, and to exaggerate their value before the natives would consent to their being landed.

Cook describes the New Caledonians as tall, robust, active, polite, and peaceable. He gives them the rare character of honesty. But his successors in this country, more especially D’Entrecasteaux, discovered to their detriment that they did not preserve this quality. Some of them had the thick lips, flat nose, and general appearance of the negro. Their naturally curly hair added to the resemblance.

“If I were to guess,” says Cook, “at the origin of this people, I should take them to be an intermediate race between the people of Tanna and the Friendly Islands, or between those of Tanna and New Zealand, or possibly between all three, for their language is in some respects a sort of mixture of that of these different countries.”

The frequency of war amongst them is indicated by the number of their offensive weapons, clubs, spears, lances, slings, javelins, &c. The stones used for their slings are smooth and oval. Their houses are built on a circular plan, most of them being like bee-hives, with the roof of considerable height, and terminating in a point. They always have one or two fires alight, but as there is only one outlet for the smoke, through the doorway, no European could live in them.

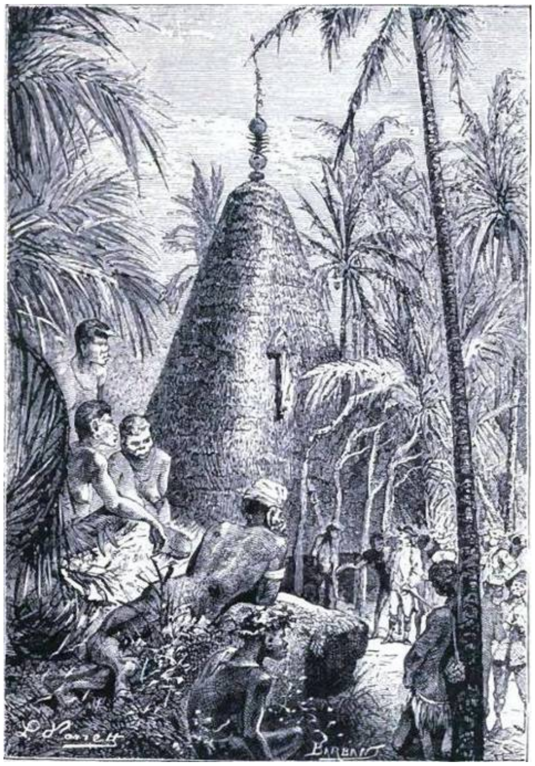

“With the roof of considerable height.”

They subsisted entirely upon fish and roots, such as yams, and the bark of a tree, which was but little succulent. Bananas, sugar-canes, and bread-fruit were rare, and cocoa-nuts did not flourish so well as in the island previously visited by the English. The number of inhabitants appeared considerable. But Cook justly remarked that his arrival had brought about a general reunion of all the tribes, and Lieutenant Pickersgill decided during his hydrographical excursions that the country was sparsely populated.

The New Caledonians buried their dead. Many of the crew visited their cemeteries, and especially the tomb of a chief, which was a kind of mound, decorated with spears, javelins, arrows, and darts, which were stuck around it.

Cook left the harbour of Balade, and continued to coast New Caledonia, without finding fresh provisions. The aspect of the country was universally sterile. But quite to the south of this large land a smaller one was discovered, to which the name of Pine Island was given, on account of the number of pine trees upon it.

They were a species of Prussian pine, very appropriate for the spars needed for the *Resolution*. Cook accordingly sent a sloop and some men to choose and cut the trees he needed. Some of them were twenty inches in diameter, and seventy feet high, so that a mast could have been formed of one had it been needed. The discovery of this island had a certain value, as, with the exception of New Zealand, it was the only one in the entire Pacific Ocean which produced wood fit for masts and poles.

In steering southwards towards New Zealand, Cook sighted a small uninhabited island on the 10th of October, upon which the botanists reaped a plentiful harvest of unknown vegetables. It was Norfolk Island, so named in honour of the Howard family. It was afterwards colonized by a part of the mutineers of the *Bounty*.

The *Resolution* anchored again in Queen Charlotte’s Sound. The gardens so anxiously planted by the English had been entirely neglected by the New Zealanders, but in spite of this several plants had grown marvellously.

The natives were very shy of appearing at first, and seemed to care little for any intercourse with the strangers; but when they recognized their old friends, they testified their delight most extravagantly. When asked why they had been so reserved at first, they evaded a reply, and there was no doubt that they were thinking of murder and combats.

This aroused Cook's apprehensions for the fate of the *Adventure*, of which he had heard nothing since his last stay in this port, but he could obtain no reply to the questions he put. He was only to learn what had occurred in his absence, when he reached the Cape of Good Hope, and found letters from Captain Furneaux.

After once more landing some pigs, with which he wished to endow New Zealand, the captain set sail for Cape Horn on the 10th of November. After a vain cruise, he at last sighted the eastern shore of Tierra del Fuego, near the entrance to the Straits of Magellan.

"The portion of America which now met our view," says Cook, "was dreary enough. It seemed to be cut up into small islands, which though by no means high, were very black, and almost entirely barren. In the background, we saw high ground covered with snow, almost to the water's edge. It is the wildest shore I have ever seen, and appears entirely composed of mountains and rocks, without a vestige of vegetation. The mountains overhang horrible precipices, the sharp peaks of which arise to great height. Probably there is nothing in nature which presents so wild an appearance. The interior mountains are covered with snow, but those bordering the sea are not. We imagined the former to belong to Tierra del Fuego, and the latter to be ranged over the small islands in such a way as to present the appearance of an uninterrupted coast."

The captain still thought it better to remain some time in this desolate region, to procure fresh victuals for his crew. He found safe anchorage in Christmas Sound, where as usual, he made a careful hydrographical survey.

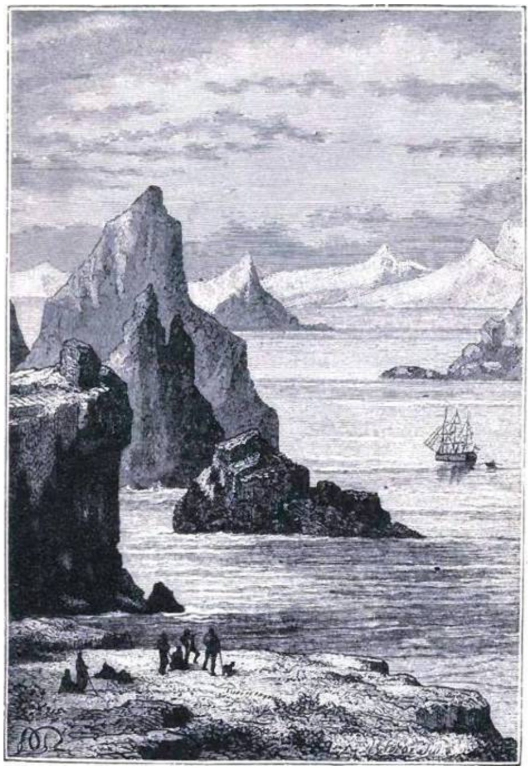

View of Christmas Sound.

Several birds were shot, and Mr. Pickersgill brought three hundred sea-gull’s eggs and fourteen geese on board.

“I was thus enabled,” says Cook, “to distribute them to the entire crew, a fact which gave the greater satisfaction as it was near Christmas. Without this timely supply, they must have contented themselves with beef and salt pork.”

Some of the natives, belonging to the nation called “Pecherais” by Bougainville, came on board without any pressing. Cook’s description of these savages recalls that of the French explorer. They preferred the oily portions of the flesh of the seals upon which they lived — a taste which Cook attributed to the fact that the oil warmed their blood, and enabled them to resist the intense cold.

“If,” he adds, “the superiority of a civilized to a savage life could ever be called in question, a single glance at one of these Indians would be sufficient to settle the question. Until it is proved that a man perpetually tortured by the rigour of a climate is happy, I shall never give in to the eloquent declamations of those philosophers who have never had the opportunity of observing human nature in all its phases, or who have not felt what they have seen.”

The *Resolution* at once set sail and doubled Cape Horn. The Strait of Lemaire was then crossed, and Staten Island reconnoitred. Here a good anchorage was found. Quantities of whales abound in these latitudes. It was now their pairing season, and seals and sea-lions, penguins and garnets appeared in shoals.

“Dr. Sparman and myself,” says Forster, “narrowly escaped being attacked by one of these sea-monsters, upon a rock where several of them were assembled, appearing to wait the upshot of the struggle. The doctor had fired at a bird, and stooped to pick it up, when the sea-lion growled, and showing his tusks, seemed disposed to attack my companion. From where I was posted I shot the animal stark dead, and at the report of my gun the herd, seeing their companion fall, fled along the coast. Several of them threw themselves into the sea with such haste, that they jumped ten or fifteen roods, straight upon the pointed rocks. But I do not think they hurt themselves much, for their skin is very hard and their fat is so elastic that it is easily compressed.”

After leaving Staten Island, Cook set sail on the 3rd of January, for the south-east, to explore the only part of the ocean which had hitherto escaped him. He soon reached Southern Georgia, seen in 1675 by Laroche, and again by M. Guyot Duclos in 1756, when in command of the Spanish vessel the *Leön*. This discovery was made on the 14th of January, 1775. The captain landed in three places and took possession in the name of King George III. of England, bestowing his name upon the newly-found country. Possession Bay is bordered by pointed rocks of ice exactly similar to those which had been met with in the high southern latitudes.

“The interior of the country,” says the narrative, “is no less savage and frightful. The summits of the rocks are lost in the clouds and the valleys are covered with perpetual snow. Not a tree or even the smallest shrub is to be seen.”

After leaving Georgia, Cook penetrated further to the south-east, amidst floating ice. The continual dangers of the voyage overcame the crew. Southern Thule, Saunder’s Island, and Chandeleur Islands, and finally Sandwich Land were discovered. These sterile and deserted archipelagoes have no value for the merchant or geographer. Once certain of their existence, it was unnecessary to remain, for to do so was to risk in exploring them the valuable records the *Resolution* was taking to England.

Cook was convinced by the discovery of these isolated islands “that near the pole there is a stretch of land, where the greater part of the floating ice spread over this vast southern ocean is formed.” This ingenious theory has been confirmed in every particular by the explorers of the 19th century.

After another fruitless search for Cape Circumcision, mentioned by Bouvet, Cook decided to regain the Cape of Good Hope, and he arrived there on the 22nd of March, 1775.

The *Adventure* had put into this port, where Captain Furneaux had left a letter relating all that had happened in New Zealand. Captain Furneaux arrived in Queen Charlotte’s Sound on the 13th of November, 1773, and took in wood and water. He then sent one of his boats under Lieutenant Rowe to gather edible plants. As the lieutenant did not return on board either in the evening or the next morning, Captain Furneaux, feeling sure that an accident had happened, sent in search of him. The following is a short account of what he learned.

After various useless searchings, the officer in command of the sloop came upon some traces, as he landed upon the shore, near Grass Creek. Portions of a boat and some shoes, one of which had belonged to an officer of the watch, were found. A sailor, at the same time, noticed a piece of fresh meat, which was taken to be the flesh of a dog, for it was not known then that the people of the place were cannibals. “We opened,” says Furneaux, “about eight baskets which we found on the beach, tightly corded. Some were full of roast flesh, and others of roots used by the natives for bread. Continuing our search, we found more shoes, and a hand, which we recognized as that of Thomas Hill, because T. H. was tatooed upon it in the Tahitan fashion.

“At a short distance an officer perceived four pirogues and a number of natives, assembled round a large fire. The English landed and fired a regular volley, which put the Zealanders to flight, with the exception of two, who left with the greatest *sang-froid*. One of them was severely wounded, and the sailors advanced up the beach.

“A frightful scene was soon presented before our eyes. We saw the heads, hearts, and lungs of many of the crew upon the sands, and at a little distance dogs were devouring the entrails.”

The officer had not a sufficient force with him, being backed by only ten men, to meet this fearful massacre with fitting vengeance. The weather, too, became bad, and the savages collected in large numbers. It was necessary to regain the *Adventure*.

“I do not believe,” says Captain Furneaux, “that this butchery was premeditated on the part of the natives, for in the morning Mr. Rowe said that he observed two vessels pass us, and remain all the forenoon in sight of the ship. The bloodshed was most likely the result of a quarrel which was instantly fought out, or possibly as our men took no measures for their own safety, their want of caution tempted the Indians.”

The natives having heard one discharge, were encouraged by observing that a gun was not an infallible instrument, that it sometimes missed fire, and that once fired it was necessary to reload before firing again.

In this fearful ambuscade the *Adventure* lost ten of her best sailors.

Furneaux left New Zealand on the 23rd of December, 1773, doubled Cape Horn, put into the Cape of Good Hope, and reached England on the 14th of July, 1774.

After Cook had taken in provisions and repaired his vessel, he left False Bay on the 27th of May, put into St. Helena, Ascension Island, and Fernando de Noronha, at Fayal, one of the Azores, and finally at Plymouth, on the 29th of July, 1775. During his voyage of three years and eighteen days, he had only lost four men, that is to say, without reckoning the ten sailors who were massacred at New Zealand.

No former expedition had reaped such a harvest of discoveries and hydrographical, physical, and ethnological observations. The learned and ingenious investigations pursued by Cook elucidated many of the difficulties of earlier navigators. He made various important discoveries, amongst others, that of New Caledonia and Easter Island. The non-existence of an antarctic continent was definitely ascertained. The great navigator received the fitting reward of his labours almost immediately. He was nominated ship’s captain nine days after his landing, and was elected a member of the Royal Society of London on the 29th of February, 1776.

CHAPTER V.

CAPTAIN COOK’S THIRD VOYAGE.

I.

Search for the lands discovered by the French — Kerguelen Islands — Stay at Van Diemen’s Land — Queen Charlotte’s Strait — Palmerston Island — Grand rejoicings in the Tonga Islands.

At this date the idea which had sent so many explorers to Greenland was in full force. The question of the existence of a northern passage between the Atlantic and the Pacific, by way of the Asiatic or American coasts, was eagerly discussed: and should such a passage exist, was it practicable for ships? The attempt had quite lately been made, to discover this outlet in Hudson or Baffin Bays, and it was now determined to seek it in the Pacific.

The task was an arduous one. The Lords of the Admiralty felt that it was essential to send out a navigator who had experience of the dangers of the Polar Seas, and one who had shown presence of mind in the face of danger; one moreover, whose talents, experience, and scientific knowledge might be of use in the powerful equipment then in course of preparation.

In Captain Cook alone were all the requisite qualities to be found. The command was offered to him, and although he might have passed the remainder of his days in peace at his post in the Greenwich Observatory, in the full enjoyment of the honour and glory he had gained by his two voyages round the world, he did not hesitate for a moment.

Two ships, the *Resolution* and the *Discovery*, were placed under his command. The latter was under the orders of Captain Clerke; and the equipment of both was similar to that of the last expedition.

The instructions given to the commander of the expedition, enjoined his reaching the Cape of Good Hope, and steering south in search of the islands recently discovered by the French, in 48 degrees of latitude, towards the meridian of the island of Mauritius. He was then to touch at New Zealand, if he thought well, to take in refreshments at the Society Islands, and to land the Tahitan Mai there; then to proceed to New Albion, to avoid landing in any of the Spanish possessions in America, and from thence to make his way by the Arctic Ocean to Hudson and Baffin Bays. In other words he was to look in an easterly direction for the north-west passage. This once effected, after a stay at Kamschatka, he was to make another attempt to reach England by the route he might judge most productive of good results for geography and navigation.

The two vessels did not start together. The *Resolution* set sail from Plymouth on the 12th of July, 1776, and was rejoined at the Cape by the *Discovery* on the 10th of the following November, she having left England only on the 1st of August.

The two ships were detained at the Cape until the 30th of November, by the repairs needed by the *Discovery*. Much damaged by tempest, she required calking. The captain profited by this long delay, to buy live stock, which he intended to land at Tahiti and New Zealand, and also to stock his vessels with the necessary stores for a two-years’ voyage.

After steering southwards for twelve days, two islands were discovered in 46° 53’ south latitude, and 37° 46’ east longitude. The strait which separates them was crossed, and it was found that their steep sterile coasts were uninhabited. They had been discovered with four others, from nine to twelve degrees further east, by the French Captains Marion-Dufresne and Crozet, in 1772.

On the 24th of December, Cook found the islands which M. de Kerguelen had surveyed in his two voyages of 1772, 1773.

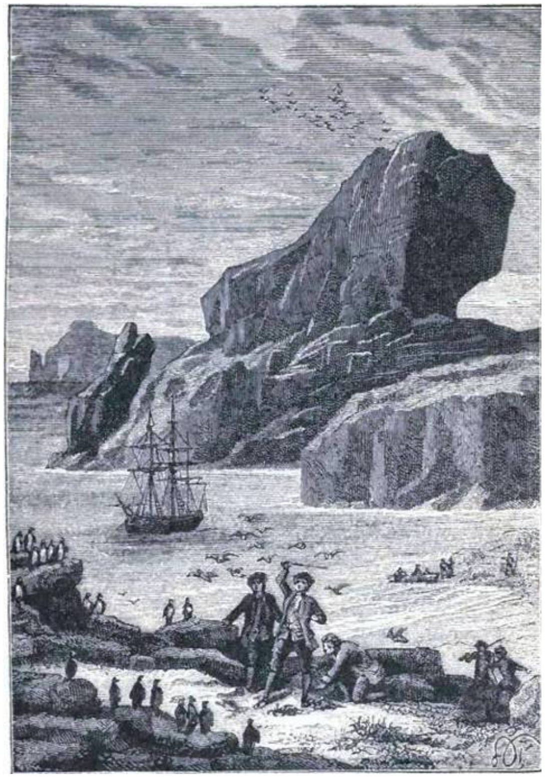

Kerguelen Islands.

We will not here relate the observations made by Cook upon this group. As they agree in every particular with those of M. de Kerguelen, we can reserve them until we relate the adventures of that navigator, and content ourselves with remarking that Cook surveyed the coasts carefully, and left them on the 31st of December. The vessels were enveloped in a thick fog, which accompanied them for more than 300 leagues.

Anchor was cast in Adventure Bay, in Van Diemen’s Land, on the 26th of January. It was the same spot at which Captain Furneaux had touched four years earlier. The English were visited by a few natives, who received the presents offered to them, without showing any satisfaction.

The narrative says, —

“They were of ordinary height, but rather slightly built. Their skin was black and their hair of the same colour, and as woolly as that of the negroes of New Guinea, but they had not the thick lips or flat noses of African negroes. There was nothing disagreeable in their features, and their eyes struck us as beautiful, so did their teeth, but they were very dirty. Most of them anointed their hair and beards with a yellow ointment, and some even rubbed their faces with the same stuff.”

Concise as this account is, it is not the less valuable. The race of Tasmanians is extinct, the last of them died a few years ago.

Cook weighed anchor on the 30th of January, and took up his station at his usual point in Queen Charlotte’s Strait. The vessels were soon surrounded by pirogues, but not a single native ventured to go on board, they were so fully persuaded that the English had come to avenge their murdered comrades. Once convinced that the English had no such intention, they banished their mistrust and reserve. The captain soon found out by Mai’s interpretation (he understanding the Zealand tongue) the right cause of this terrible catastrophe.

It appeared that the English had been seated on the grass, taking their evening meal when the natives committed several thefts. One of them was caught and struck by a sailor. At his cry, his companions rushed upon the sailors of the *Adventure*, who killed two of them, but unfortunately succumbed to numbers. Several of the Zealanders pointed out to Cook the chief who had directed the carnage, and urged Cook to kill him. But to the great surprise of the natives and the stupefaction of Mai, the captain refused.

Mai remarked, “In England they kill a man who assassinates another; this fellow killed ten, and you take no revenge!”

Before he left, Cook landed pigs and goats, hoping that these animals might at length become acclimatized to New Zealand.

Mai had a wish to take a New Zealander to Tahiti. Two offered to go, and Cook agreed to receive them, warning them at the same time that they would never see their native land again. But no sooner had the vessels lost sight of the shores of New Zealand than they began to weep. Sea-sickness added to their distress. But as they recovered from it their sadness disappeared, and they soon attached themselves to their new friends.

An island named Mangea was discovered on the 29th of March. At Mai’s representations the inhabitants decided to come on board. Small, but vigorous and well-proportioned, they wore their hair knotted upon the top of the head. They wore long beards, and were tatooed in all parts of their bodies. Cook could not carry out his earnest wish to land, as the people were too hostile.

A new island, similar to the last, was discovered four leagues further on. The natives appeared more friendly than those of Mangea, and Cook profited by this fact, and landed a detachment under Lieutenant Gore, with Mai as interpreter. Anderson, the naturalist, an officer named Barnes, and Mai landed alone and unarmed, running the risk of being maltreated.

They were received with solemnity, and conducted through a crowd of men, with clubs on their shoulders, to the presence of three chiefs, whose ears were adorned with red feathers. They soon perceived a score of women, who danced in a grave and serious fashion, paying no attention to their arrival.

The officers were separated from each other, and observing that the natives hastened to empty their pockets, they began to entertain fears for their safety, when Mai reappeared. They were detained all day, and forced several times to take their clothes off, and allow the natives to examine the colour of their skin; but night arrived at last, without the occurrence of any disagreeable incident. The visitors regained their sloop, and cocoa-nuts, bananas, and other provisions were brought to them.

The English may have owed their safety to the description Mai had given of the power of their weapons, and the experiment he made before them of setting fire to a cartridge.

Mai had recognized three of his fellow-countrymen in the crowd on the beach.

These Tahitans had started in a pirogue to reach Ulitea Island, and had been driven out of their course by contrary winds. As they expected a short voyage, they had not provided themselves with food. Famine and fatigue had reduced their number to four men, all of them half dead, when the pirogue capsized. The unfortunate wretches managed to seize the side of their boat and support themselves in the water until they were picked up by the inhabitants of this island, Wateroo. It was now twelve years since fate threw them upon this shore, more than two hundred leagues from their native island. They had contracted family ties and friendly alliances with these people, whose manners and language were not unlike their own. They refused to return to Tahiti.

Cook says, “We may find in this incident a better explanation of the way in which detached portions of the globe, and particularly the islands of the Pacific, have been peopled, than in any theories; especially in regard to those which are far from any other continent, and at a great distance from each other.”

Wateroo Island is situated in 20° 1’ south latitude, and 201° 45’ east longitude.

The two vessels afterwards reached a neighbouring island called Wenooa, upon which M. Gore landed to get fodder. Although the ruins of houses and tents were seen, it was uninhabited.

On the 5th of April, Cook arrived in sight of Harvey Island, which he had discovered during his second voyage in 1773. At that time it appeared to him deserted. He was, therefore, astonished to see several pirogues leave the shore and approach the ships. But the natives could not find courage to go on board.

Their fierce appearance and noisy offers did not promise well for their friendly intentions.

Their language was still more like that of Tahiti, than that of the last islands they had visited.

Lieutenant King was sent in search of good anchorage, but could not succeed in finding a suitable harbour. The natives, armed with spears and clubs, appeared disposed to resent any attempt at landing.

Cook, in his great need of wood and water, determined to reach the Friendly Islands. He was sure of finding refreshments for his men and forage for his beasts there. The season was too far advanced, and the distance between these latitudes and the pole too great to allow of anything being attempted in the southern hemisphere.

The wind obliged him to relinquish his idea of reaching Middlebourgh or Eoa, as he had at first intended. He therefore, directed his course towards Palmerston Island, where he arrived on the 14th of April, and where he found birds in abundance, scurvy grass, and cocoa-nuts. This island was merely a collection of nine or ten islets, very slightly raised, appearing almost like the points of reefs, belonging to one coral bank.

The English reached Komango Island on the 28th of April, and the natives brought them quantities of cocoa-nuts, bananas, and other stores.

They then proceeded to Annamooka, which is also part of the Tonga, or Friendly archipelago.

On the 6th of May, a chief of Tonga Tabou, named Finaou, visited Cook. He called himself king of all the Friendly Islands.

“I received,” says Cook, “a present from this great personage of two fish, which were brought to me by one of his servants. I paid him a visit after dinner. He came to meet me as soon as he saw me land. He appeared some thirty years of age, tall and of slender form, and I have met no countenance in these islands so European in ‘type.’”

When all the provisions of this island were exhausted, Cook visited a group of islets called Hapaee, where his reception was friendly, owing to the orders given by Finaou, and where he procured pigs, water, fruits, and roots. Some of the native warriors exhibited their skill in various singular combats, with clubs and boxing.

“What most surprised us,” says the narrative, “was to see two great women enter the lists, and attack each other with their fists, without the least ceremony, and with as much skill as the men. Their fight lasted about half a minute, when one of them declared herself beaten. The victorious heroine received as much applause from the assembled multitude as is usually accorded to a man who has overcome his rival by his skill and address.”

There was no cessation of the fêtes and games. A dance was executed to the sound of two drums, or rather of two hollow trunks, by a hundred and five performers, supported by a vocal choir. Cook reciprocated these demonstrations by putting his soldiers through their artillery exercises, and letting off fireworks, which produced indescribable astonishment in the minds of the natives.

Not wishing to be out-done in the attempt at display, the natives gave a concert, and then a dance, executed by twenty women crowned with China roses. This magnificent ballet was followed by another performance by fifteen men. But we shall never end, if we attempt to give an account of the wonders of this enthusiastic reception. It justly gained for the Tonga archipelago the name of Friendly Islands.

On the 23rd, Finaou, who had represented himself as king of the entire archipelago, came to inform Cook of his departure for the neighbouring island of Vavaoo. He had excellent reasons for this, as he had just heard of the arrival of the real sovereign, named Futtafaih or Poulaho.

Cook at first refused to recognize the new-comer in this character, but he soon had irrefutable proof that the title of king belonged to him.

Poulaho was extremely stout, which with his short height made him look like a barrel. If rank is proportioned to size in these islands, he was without exception the *greatest* chief the English had met with. Intelligent, grave, and dignified, he examined the vessel and everything that was new to him in detail, put judicious questions, and inquired into the motives of the arrival of these vessels. His followers objected to his descending below decks, saying it was "*tabu*" and that it was not allowed for any one to walk over his head. Cook, however, promised through the interpreter Mai that no one should be allowed to walk over his cabin, and so Poulaho dined with the captain. He ate little and drank still less, and invited Cook to land with him. The marks of respect lavished upon Poulaho by all the natives, convinced Cook that he had been entertaining the real sovereign of the archipelago.

On the 29th of May, Cook set sail on his return to Annamooka, thence to Tonga Tabou, where a feast or "*keiva*," more magnificent than any he had seen, was given in his honour.

"In the evening," he said, "we had the spectacle of a '*bomai*,' that is to say, the dances of the night were performed in front of Finaou's house. We saw twelve dances during the time. They were executed by women, and in the midst of them we noticed the arrival of a number of men, who formed a ring within that of the dancing women. Twenty-four men, who executed a third, made a movement with the hands, which was greatly applauded, and which we had not previously seen. The orchestra was renewed once. Finaou appeared upon the scene at the head of fifty dancers, most magnificently apparelled. His garment consisted of cloth and a large piece of gauze, and round his neck small figures were suspended.”

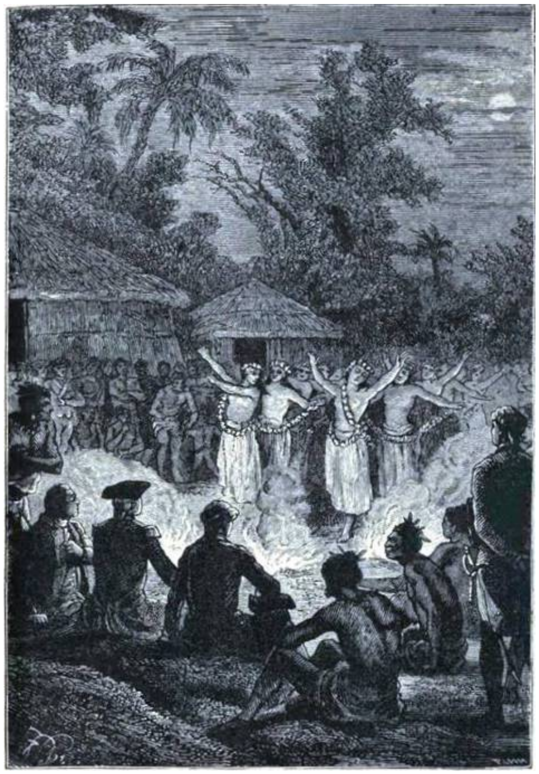

Fête in Cook’s honour at Tonga.

Cook, after a stay of three months, thought it well to leave these enchanting islands, he distributed a share of the cattle he had bought at the Cape, and explained, through Mai, the way to feed them, and their utility. Before leaving, he visited a cemetery or “Fiatooka,” belonging to the king, composed of three good-sized houses, placed on the edge of a sort of hill. The planks of these buildings, and the artificial hills which supported them, were covered with pretty movable pebbles, and flat stones, placed erect, surrounded the whole.

“One thing which we had not previously seen, was that the buildings were open on one side, and within there were two wooden busts, roughly carved, one at the entrance, and the other a little within. The natives followed us to the door, but dared not pass the threshold. We asked them the meaning of the busts: they assured us that they did not represent any divinity, but were intended to recall two chiefs who were buried in the ‘Fiatooka.’”

Leaving Tonga Tabou on the 10th of July, Cook repaired to the small of Eoa, where his old friend Tai-One received him cordially. The captain learned from him that the property of the various islands in the archipelago belonged to the chiefs of Tonga Tabou, which was known as the land of the chiefs. Thus Poulaho had a hundred and fifty islands under his rule. The most important are Vavao and Hamao. As for the Viti Islands, which are comprised in this number, they were inhabited by a warlike race, very superior in intelligence to those of the Friendly Islands.

We can only refer to some of the many and interesting particulars collected by the captain and the naturalist Anderson, which relate to the gentleness and docility of the natives.

Cook could do nothing but praise the welcome accorded to him, each time he stayed in the archipelago. But then he did not guess the project entertained by Finaou, and the other chiefs, of assassinating him during the nocturnal feast of Hapaee, and of seizing his vessels.

The navigators who succeeded him were not lavish in their praises, and if we did not know his sincerity, we should be tempted to think that the illustrious mariner gave the name of Friendly Islands to this group satirically.

The inhabitants of Tonga Island always mourned the death of a relation, by hitting themselves on their cheeks, and by tearing them with whale's teeth, a custom which explains the many tumours and cicatrices they have on the face. If their friends are dangerously ill, they sacrifice one or two joints of their little finger, to propitiate the divinity, and Cook did not meet with one native in ten who was not mutilated.

The expression "tabu," he says, "which plays so great a part in the language of this people, has a very wide significance. When they are not allowed to touch anything they say it is tabu. They also told us that if the king enters a house belonging to one of his subjects, the house becomes 'tabu,' and the owner of it may not live in it any longer."

Cook fancied he had made out their religion. Their principal god was Kallafoutonga, and in his anger, he destroys plantations and scatters illness and death. The religious ideas of all the islands are not alike, but the immortality of the soul is unanimously admitted. Although they do not offer fruit or other productions of the earth to their divinity, they sacrifice human victims.

Cook lost sight of the Tonga Islands on the 17th of July, and the expedition arrived in sight of an island called Tabouai by the inhabitants, upon the 8th of August, after a series of tempestuous winds which caused serious damage to the *Discovery*. All the eloquence of the English failed to bring the natives on board. Nothing would induce them to leave their boats, and they contented themselves with inviting the strangers to visit them. But as time pressed, and Cook had no need of provisions, he passed the island without stopping, although it appeared to him fertile, and the natives assured him that it abounded in pigs and fowls. Strong, tall, and active, the natives had a hardy and savage appearance. They spoke the Tahitan language, which made intercourse with them easy.

Some days later, the verdant summits of Tahiti appeared on the horizon, and the two vessels were not slow in stopping opposite the peninsula of Tairabon, where the welcome Mai received from his compatriots was as indifferent as possible. His brother-in-law, chief Outi, would scarcely consent to recognize him, but when Mai showed him the treasures he brought back, amongst them all the famous red feathers, which had been so successful in Cook's last voyage, Oati changed his demeanour, treated Mai affably, and proposed to change names with him.

Mai was overcome by these demonstrations of tenderness, and, but for Cook's interference, would have been robbed of all his treasures.

The ships were well supplied with red feathers. Therefore fruits, pigs, and fowls appeared in great abundance during the stay in port. Cook, however, soon proceeded to Matavai Bay, where King Otoo left his residence at Pané, to pay his old friend a visit. Mai was disdainfully received by his friends there also, and although he threw himself at the king's feet, when he presented him with a tuft of red feathers, and three pieces of gold cloth, he was scarcely noticed. But as at Taqabou, the treatment changed suddenly upon the discovery of Mai's fortune, but he being only happy in the company of vagabonds, who laughed at him good-naturedly, even while they robbed him, was unable to acquire the influence over Otoo, and the principle chiefs, which was necessary to the development of civilization.

Cook had long heard that human sacrifices were common in Tahiti, but he had always refused to believe it. A solemn ceremonial which he saw at Atahour, no longer allowed him to doubt the existence of the practice. In order to gain the favourable assistance of the Atoua or Godon in an expedition against the island of Eimèo, a man of the lowest social rank was killed by blows with clubs in the king’s presence. As an offering the hair and one eye of the victim was placed before the king; last signs of the cannibalism which formerly existed in this archipelago. At the end of this barbarous ceremony, which was a blot in the memoirs of so peaceable a people, a king-fisher alighted in the foliage. “It is Atoua!” cried Otoo, delighted at the happy augury.

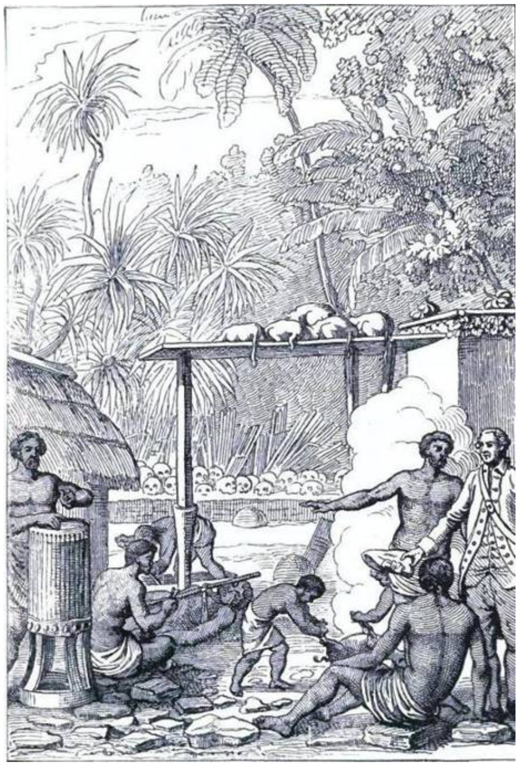

Human sacrifice at Tahiti.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Next day the ceremony was to be continued by a holocaust of pigs. The priests, like the Roman augurs, sought to read the history of the expedition in the dying struggles of the victims.

Cook, who had silently assisted at the ceremony, could not conceal the horror with which it inspired him. Mai interpreted for him, eloquently and forcibly. Towha could scarcely contain his anger.

“If the king had killed a man in England,” said Mai, “as he has done the unhappy and innocent victim he has offered to his gods, it would have been impossible to save him from hanging, a punishment reserved for murderers and assassins.” Mai’s severe reflection was a little out of place, Cook should have remembered that manners vary with countries. It is absurd to attempt to apply to Tahiti, as punishment for that which is their custom, a punishment reserved in London for what is considered a crime. “Every man’s house is his castle,” says a popular proverb, which European nations have too often forgotten. Under the pretext of civilization, they have often shed more blood than would have flowed if they had not interfered.

Before he left Tahiti, Cook bestowed all the animals he had had so much difficulty in bringing from Europe upon Otoo. They were geese, ducks, turkeys, goats, sheep, horses, and cattle. Otoo was at a loss to express his gratitude to the “Areeke no Pretonne,” (King of Britain) especially when he found that the English could not take a large pirogue on board which he had constructed as an offering for his friend the King of England, it being too large.

The *Resolution* and the *Discovery* left Tahiti on the 30th of September, and anchored at Eimeo.

In this place their stay was marked by a painful incident. Frequent thefts had occurred for several days, when a goat was stolen. To make an example, Cook burnt five or six cabins, and set fire to a large number of pirogues, threatening the king with his anger if the animal were not immediately produced. As soon as he had obtained satisfaction the captain started for Huaheine with Mai who was to settle on that island.

A sufficiently large space of land was ceded by the chiefs of the Ouare settlement in return for such presents. Upon this Cook had a house built, and planted a garden, where he planted European cabbages. Mai was left with two houses, two goats, and fowls. At the same time he was presented with a present of a coat of mail, of a complete set of armour, powder, balls, and guns. A portable organ, an electrical machine, fireworks, and domestic and agricultural implements completed the collection of useful and ornamental presents intended to give the Tahitans an idea of European civilization. Mai had a sister married at Huaheine, but her husband occupied too humble a position for him to attempt to despoil him. Cook then solemnly declared that the native was his friend, and that in a short time he should return to ascertain how he had been treated, and that he should severely punish those who had acted badly to him.

His threats were likely to be effective, as a few days earlier, some robbers, caught in the act by the English, had had their heads shaved and their ears cut. A little later at Raiatea, in order to force the natives to send back some deserters, Cook had carried off the entire family of the chief Oreo on one rope.

The moderation exhibited by the captain in his first voyage, constantly diminished; every day he became more severe and exacting. This change in his conduct was fatal to him.

The two Zealanders who had asked to accompany Mai were landed with him. The elder readily consented to live at Huaheine, but the younger conceived such an affection for the English, that it was necessary to use force, as it were, to land him, amid the most touching demonstrations of affection. At the last moment as anchor was weighed Cook bid farewell to Mai, whose expression and tears testified to his comprehension of all he was to lose.

Although Cook left satisfied with having loaded the young Tahitan who had trusted himself to him with benefits, he was also full of anxious fears as to his future. He knew his light and inconstant character, and he left him weapons with some regret, fearing that he might make a bad use of them. The King of Huaheine gave Mai his daughter in marriage and changed his name to Paori, by which he was afterwards known. Mai profited by his high station to show his cruelty and inhumanity. Always armed, he began to try his skill with pistol and gun upon his fellow-countrymen. His memory therefore is hated in Huaheine, and the memory of his crimes was for a long time associated with that of the English.

Cook visited Raiatea before leaving the island. He found his friend Oreé deprived of supreme authority. Then he went to Bolabole on the 8th of December, and bought of the King Pouni an anchor, which Bougainville had lost in the roadstead.

During his long sojourns in the different islands of the Society archipelago, Cook completed his geographical, hydrographical, and ethnological investigations, as well as his studies of natural history.

In this difficult task he was seconded by Anderson, and by his entire staff, who invariably showed the greatest zeal in their efforts for the advancement of science.

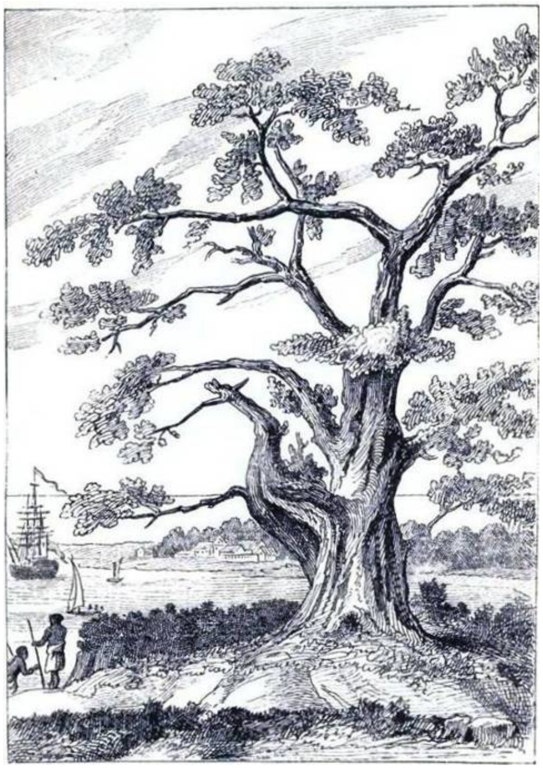

Tree, from beneath which Cook observed the transit of Venus.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

On the 24th of December Cook discovered another low island. It was uninhabited and the crew obtained abundance of turtle there. It was named Christmas Island, in honour of the solemn anniversary of the morrow.

Although seventeen months had passed since he left England, Cook considered his voyage as only begun. Indeed he had not as yet been able to put the part of his instructions relating to the exploration of the Southern Atlantic and the search for a north passage, into execution.

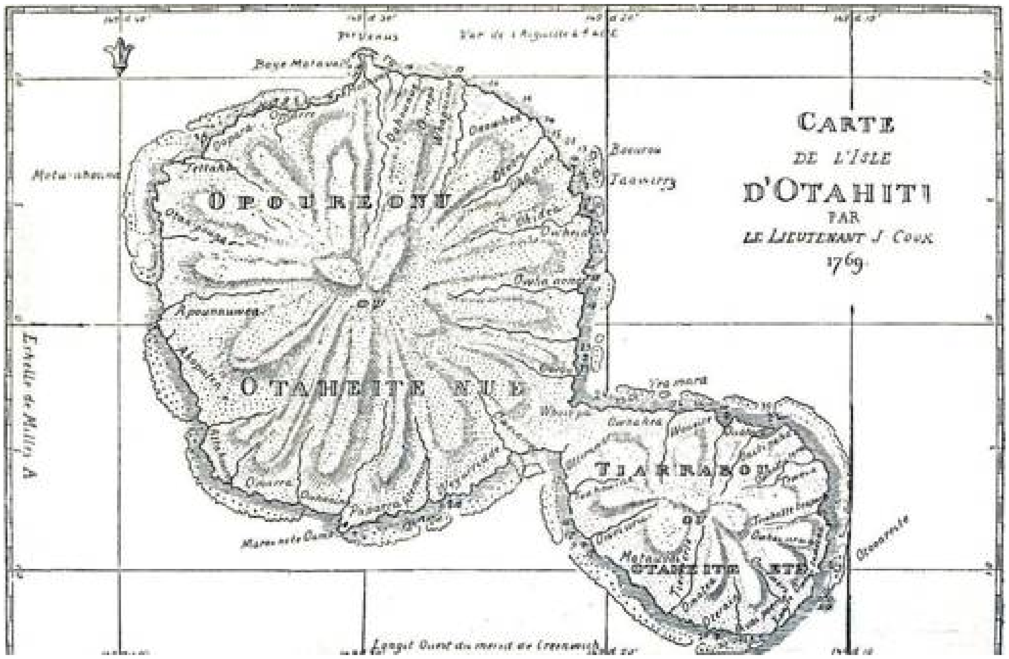

CARTE
DE L'ISLE
D'OTAHITI
PAR
LE LIEUTENANT J. COOK
1769.
Port Venus
Baye Matavai
Motu-ahouna
OPOUREONU
Apourounwea
OTAHEITE NUE
TIARRABOU
OU
OTAHEITE ETE
Echelle de Milles

II.

Discovery of the Sandwich Islands — Exploration of the Western shore of America — From thence to Behring Straits — Return to the Hawain Group — History of Rono — Death of Cook — Return of the Expedition to England.

On the 18th of January, 1778, in longitude 160° and latitude 20° north, the two vessels perceived the first islands of the Sandwich or Hawain archipelago.

It did not take long to convince the navigators that they were inhabited. A large number of pirogues left Atooi or Tavaï Island and surrounded the ships.

The English were not a little surprised at hearing these natives speak in the Tahitan language. On this account the intercourse between them was soon friendly, and next day numbers of the islanders agreed to go on board. They showed their astonishment and admiration, at the sight of so many unknown objects, by their looks, gestures, and continual exclamations. Iron they were acquainted with, and called “hamaite.”

But their covetousness was soon excited by so many curiosities and precious things, and they tried to appropriate them both by honest and by illicit means.

Their cleverness and their taste for thieving was as keen as is usual with the natives of the southern seas. It was necessary to take a thousand precautions, and they were often taken in vain, to guard against their larceny. The English, when they approached the shore, under charge of Lieutenant Williamson, to sound and search for anchorage, were forced to repulse the attempts of the natives by force. The death of one of them repressed their turbulence in a measure, and gave them an exalted opinion of the strength of the new arrivals.

As soon, however, as the *Resolution* and *Discovery* had cast anchor in Ouai Mea Bay, Cook had himself taken on shore. He had scarcely touched land, when the natives assembled in a crowd upon the strand, prostrated themselves at his feet, and welcomed him with signs of the most profound respect.

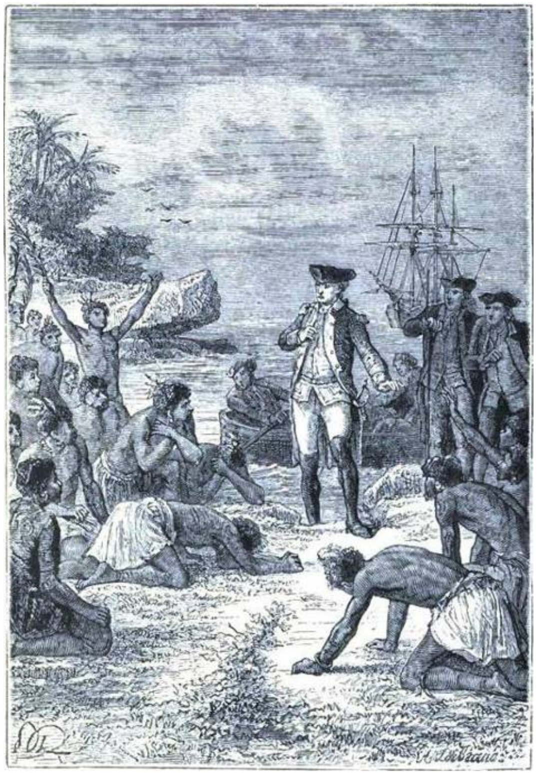

Cook’s reception by the natives.

This extraordinary reception gave promise of a pleasant stay, for provisions appeared to be abundant; fruits, pigs, fowls, began to arrive from all parts. At the same time a party of natives assisted the English sailors in filling the casks with water, and in carrying them on board.

Anderson and the draughtsman Weller were encouraged by this friendly conduct to advance into the interior. They were not long in coming upon a *moraï,* similar in every respect to the Tahitian *moraïs*. This discovery confirmed the English in the ideas induced by the similarity of the language with that of Tahiti. An engraving in Cook’s narrative represents the interior of this *morai*. In it two figures may be seen, standing, the top of the heads disappearing in high cylindrical hats, similar to those on the statues in Easter Island. In any case, the singular resemblance gives rise to reflection.

Cook remained two days more in this anchorage and could only extol the traffic with the natives. He then explored the neighbouring Island of Oneeheow. In spite of his great wish to explore this interesting archipelago, he set sail, and from a distance perceived Ouahou Island, and the reef of Tahoora which he designated by the general appellation of Sandwich Archipelago. This name has been superseded by the native appellation of Hawai. Strong and vigorous, although of medium height, the Hawaians are represented by Anderson as being of frank and loyal character. Not so serious as the natives of the Friendly Isles, they are less frivolous than the Tahitans.

Clever, industrious, and intelligent, their plantations showed a knowledge of rural economy, and an extensive taste for agriculture. They not only abstained from showing the childish and common curiosity which the English had so often noticed, but they inquired into their customs and evinced a certain regret for their own inferiority.

The population appeared considerable, and was estimated at 30,000 in Tavai Island alone. In their style of dress, their choice of food, their manner of preparing it, and their general habits, they conform to the customs of Tahiti. This identity of two populations separated by a large stretch of sea gave the English much food for reflection.

During his first stay Cook did not become acquainted with any chief, but Captain Clerke, of the *Discovery*, at last received a visit from one. He was a young and well-made man, wrapped up from head to foot. The natives testified their respect by kneeling before him. Clerke made him several presents, and in return received a vase decorated with two small figures, fairly well sculptured, which served for the “kava,” a favourite drink of the Hawaians, as well as the natives of Tonga. Their weapons comprise bows, clubs, and lances, the latter made of a strong and durable wood, and a sort of poignard called “paphoa,” terminating in a point at both ends. The custom of “tabu” was just as universally practised as in the Friendly Islands, and the natives were always careful to ask if things were “tabu” before they touched them.

On the 27th of February, Cook continued his course to the north, and soon fell in with the sea wrack of the rocks mentioned by the narrator of Lord Anson’s voyage. On the 1st of March he steered for the east, in order to approach the American coast, and five days later he recognized New Albion, so named by Francis Drake.

The expedition, coasting at a distance, surveyed Cape Blanc, already seen by Martin d’Aguilar on the 19th of January, 1603, and near which the geographers placed a large opening, to the strait, the discovery of which they attributed to him. Shortly afterwards the latitude of Juan de Fuca was reached, but nothing resembling it was discovered, although this strait really exists, and divides the continent from Vancouver’s Island.

Cook soon reconnoitred a bay in latitude 49° 15’, to which he gave the name of Hope Bay. He anchored there to obtain water, and give a little rest to his worn-out crews. This coast was inhabited, and three boats approached the vessels.

“One of the savages,” he says, “rose up, and with many gesticulations made a long speech, which we understood as an invitation to land. In addition, he threw feathers towards us, and many of his companions threw us handfuls of dust or red powder. The native who usurped the post of orator was clothed in a skin, and in each hand he held something which he shook, and which emitted a sound like that of a child’s rattle.

“When he was tired of haranguing and exhorting, of which we did not understand a word, he rested, but two other men took up the speech in succession. Their speeches were not so long, and they did not declaim so vehemently.

“Many of the natives had their faces painted in an extraordinary way, and feathers fixed in their heads. Although they appeared friendly, it was impossible to persuade any of them to come on board. However, as the vessels had cast anchor, the captain had the sails furled, took in the topmasts, and unrigged the mizzen mast of the *Resolution*, in order to allow of repairs. Barter with the Indians soon commenced, and the most rigorous honesty prevailed. The objects offered were bear and wolf skins, and those of foxes, deers, and polecats, weasels, and especially otters, which are found in the islands east of Kamschatka. Also clothes made of a kind of hemp, bows, lances, fish-hooks, monstrous figures, and a kind of stuff of hair or wool, bags filled with red ochre, bits of sculptured wood, trinkets of copper and iron shaped like horse-shoes, which they wore hung from the nose.

“Human ears and hands, not yet free from flesh, struck us most among the things they offered us. They made us clearly understand that they had eaten the portions that were missing, and we indeed perceived that these hands and ears had been on the fire.”

The English were not long in ascertaining that these natives were as habitual robbers as any they had hitherto met with. They were even more dangerous, as, possessing iron implements, they could easily cut the cords. They combined their thefts with intelligence, and one of them amused the sentinel at one end of the boat, whilst another snatched the iron from the other end. They sold a quantity of very good oil, and a great deal of fish, especially sardines.

When the numerous repairs needed by the ships were made, and the grass required for the few goats and sheep remaining on board had been shipped, Cook set sail on the 26th of April, 1778.

He gave the name of King George's Sound to the spot where he had stayed, although it was called Nootka by the natives.

The vessels had scarcely gained the open sea when a violent tempest overtook them, during which the *Resolution* sprung a leak on the starboard side below the water line.

Carried away by the storm, Cook passed the spot selected by geographers as the situation of the Strait of Admiral de Fonte, though he greatly wished to dispel all doubt on the subject.

The captain therefore continued along the American coast, surveying and naming the principal points. During this cruise he had constant intercourse with the Indians, and was not slow in noticing that their canoes had been replaced by boats, of which only the framework was wood, and over which were spread seal-skins.

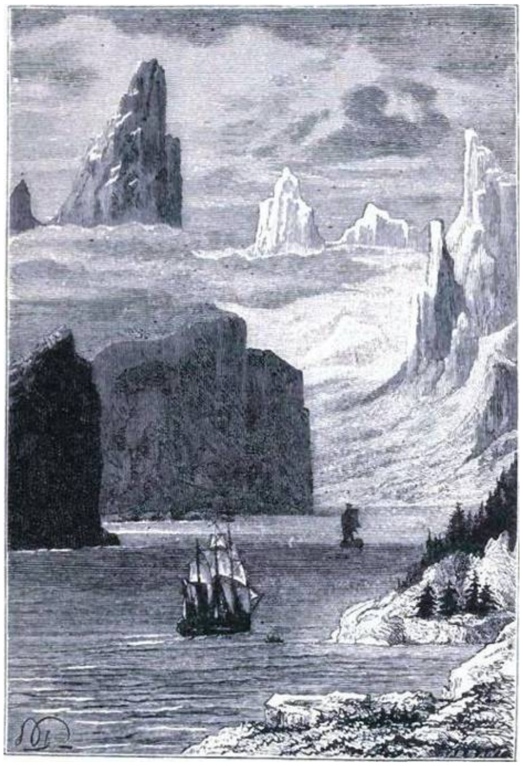

Prince William’s Sound.

After a stay at Prince William’s Sound, where the leak of the *Resolution* was repaired, Cook resumed his voyage, reconnoitred and named Elizabeth and Saint Hermogene Capes, Bank’s Point, Capes Douglas and Bede, Saint Augustine’s Mount, the River Cook, Kodiak Island, Trinity Island, and the islands called Schumagin by Behring. Afterwards he passed Bristol Bay, Round Island, Calm Point, Newenham Cape, where Lieutenant Williamson landed, and Anderson Island, so called in honour of the naturalist, who died there of disease of the chest; later, King Island, and Prince of Wales’s Cape, the most western extremity of America. Cook then passed the Asiatic coast and entered into communication with the Tchouktchis, entered Behring Strait on the 11th of April, and next week came in contact with ice.

He tried in vain to survey in various directions. The iceberg presented an insuperable barrier. On the 17th of April, 1778, the expedition was in latitude 70° 41’. During an entire month he coasted the iceberg, in the hope of finding an opening which might enable him to proceed to the north, but in vain. It was remarked that “the ice was clear and transparent except in the upper part, which was slightly porous.”

“I supposed,” says Cook, “that it was frozen snow, and it appeared to me that it must have been formed in the open sea, both because it is improbable, or rather impossible, that such enormous masses could float down rivers which contain too little water for a boat, and also because we perceived no produce of the earth, which we must have done if it was so formed.”

Up to this date the passage through Behring’s Strait had been the least used to reach the northern latitudes. Cook’s observation is valuable, as it proves that beyond this aperture a vast extent of sea without land must exist. It may possibly be (this was the view held by the lamented Gustave Lambert) that this sea is open. No greater distance north has ever been attained since Cook’s time, except on the Siberian coast — where Plover and Long Islands were discovered, and where at this moment, as we write, Professor Nordenskjold is exploring.[1]

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[1] [On the 5th September, 1879, a telegram from Stockholm announced that the Swedish Arctic Expedition under Professor Nordenskjold had made the North-East Passage from Europe to Japan, and that the Swedish exploring

vessel, the *Vega*, had arrived at Yokohama by way of Behring's Straits.] — Translator.

After most careful exploration and repeated efforts to reach higher latitudes, Cook, seeing that the season was advanced, and encountering more icebergs daily, had no choice but to seek winter quarters in a more clement country, before continuing his expedition the following summer. He therefore retraced his route as far as Ounalaska Island, and on the 26th of October steered towards the Sandwich Islands, hoping to complete his survey of them during his wintering there.

An island was discovered on the 26th of November. The natives sold a quantity of fruits, roots, bread-fruits, potatoes, "taro" and "eddy" roots, which they exchanged for nails and iron implements. It was Mowee Island, which forms part of the Sandwich Archipelago. Shortly afterwards Owhyhee or Hawai was sighted, the summits of which were covered with snow.

The captain says: —

"We never met savages so liberal as these in their views. They usually sent the different articles they wished to sell to the ships. They then came on board themselves, and finished their 'trade' on the quarter-deck. The Tahitans, in spite of our constant stays there, have not the same confidence in us. I conclude from this that the inhabitants of Owhyhee are more accurate and true in their reciprocal trade than those of Tahiti, for the latter have no honour among themselves, and are thus not inclined to believe in the honour of others."

On the 17th of January Cook and Clerke cast anchor in a bay, called by the natives Karakakooa. The sails were unbent from the yard, the yards and the top-mast struck. The vessels were crowded with visitors and surrounded by pirogues, and the shore was covered by a curious multitude. Cook had never previously seen so much excitement. Among the chiefs who came on board the *Resolution*, a young man named Pareea was soon remarked. He said he was "Iakanee," but it was not known that was his title of office, or if it suggested a degree of relationship or alliance with the king. However, he evidently had great authority over the common people. Some presents, opportunely given, attached him to the English, and he rendered them more than one service.

If Cook on his first visit to Hawai pronounced that the natives were little disposed to robbery, he was not of the same opinion this time. Their large numbers gave them many facilities for thieving trifles, and encouraged them to think that their larceny would not be punished. It became evident at last that they were encouraged by their chiefs, for several stolen objects were found in the possession of the latter.

Pareea and another chief named Kaneena brought an old man on board, whose name was Koah. He was very thin and his body was covered with white scurf from immoderate use of "ava." He was a priest. When he was presented to Cook, he put a sort of red mantle which he had brought upon his shoulders, and gravely delivered a long discourse as he gave him a little pig. It was soon proved that it was intended as a form of adoration, for all the idols were clothed in similar stuff. The English were immensely astonished at the whimsical ceremonies of homage presented to Cook. They only understood them later, through the researches of the learned missionary Ellis. We shall give a brief account of his interesting discovery. It will make the recital of the events that followed plainer.

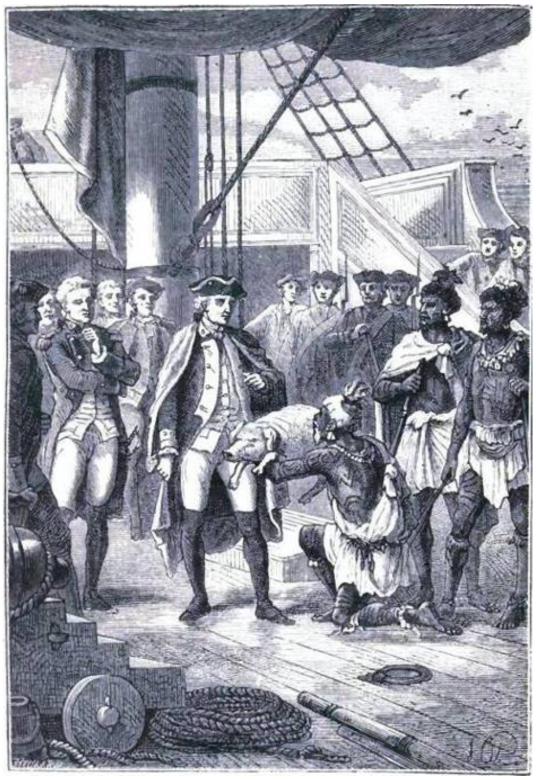

“They gave him a little pig.”

According to tradition, a certain Rono, who lived under one of the ancient kings of Hawai, had killed his wife, whom he tenderly loved, in a transport of jealousy. The grief and sorrow which followed upon his act, drove him mad; he ran about the island, quarrelling with, and striking everybody. At last, tired out, but not satiated, with murder, he embarked, promising to return one day, upon a floating island, bringing cocoa-nuts, pigs, and dogs.

This legend had been embodied in a national song, and became an article of faith with the priests, who added Rono to their list of deities. Confident in the fulfilment of the prediction, they awaited his coming every year, with a patience which nothing could exhaust.

Is not there a strange resemblance between this legend and that relating to the Mexican god Quetzalcoatl, who, forced to fly from the wrath of a more powerful god, embarked upon a skiff of serpent skin, promising those who accompanied him to return at some later time, and visit the country with his descendants?

As soon as the English ships appeared, the high priest Koah and his son One-La declared that it was Rono himself, fulfilling his prediction. From that moment Cook was a divinity for the entire population. As he went about, the natives prostrated themselves. The priests made him speeches or addressed prayers to him. They would have sprinkled him with incense had that been fashionable at Hawai. The captain felt that there was something extraordinary in these demonstrations, but, unable to understand it, he resigned himself for the sake of his crew and for the advancement of science to the mysterious circumstances he was unable to unravel.

He was obliged to give himself up to all kinds of ceremonies, which appeared, to him at least, ridiculous. Thus he was taken to a moraï, a solid construction of stone forty roods long and fourteen high. The summit was well built and was surrounded by a wooden balustrade, upon which were hung the ears of the captives sacrificed to the gods. At the opening of the platform were two large wooden figures with grinning faces, and bodies draped in red stuff, the heads surmounted by a large piece of sculptured wood, the shape of a reversed cone. There Koah mounted with Cook upon a sort of table, under which lay a rotten pig and a quantity of fruit. Some men brought a living pig in a procession, and some scarlet cloth in which it was wrapped. The priests then sang some religious hymns, while the assistants were devoutly prostrated at the entrance of the moraï. After various ceremonies, which it would take too long to describe, a pig, cooked in the oven, was presented to the captain, with fruits and the roots which were used in the preparation of “ava.”

“The ava,” says Cook, “was then handed round, and when we had tasted it, Koah and Pareea divided the flesh of the pig into several pieces, which they placed in our mouths.”

“I felt no repugnance when Pareea, who is very clean, gave me something to eat,” says Lieutenant King, “but Cook, to whom Koah offered the same attention, could not swallow a morsel, as he thought of the putrid pig. The old man, wishing to redouble his politeness, tried to give him pieces already chewed, and one can easily imagine that the disgust of our captain increased.”

After this ceremony Cook was conducted to his boat, by four men carrying sticks, who repeated the same words and phrases as at the landing, in the midst of a kneeling host of the natives. The same ceremonies were observed every time the captain landed. One of the priests always walked before him, announcing that Rono had landed, and ordering the people to prostrate themselves.

If the English had reason to feel satisfied with the priests, who loaded them with attentions and presents, it was otherwise with the “carees,” or warriors. The latter encouraged the robberies which were perpetrated daily, and in other ways exhibited disloyalty. Still, up to the 24th of January, 1779, no important event occurred. Upon that day the English were surprised to see that none of the pirogues left the river to trade with the ships. The arrival of “Terreoboo” had made the bay “tabu,” and prevented any communication with the strangers. Upon the same day, the chief, or rather king, went without ceremony to the ships. He had but one pirogue, in which were his wife and children. On the 26th, Terreoboo paid a second visit, which was official.

“Cook,” says the narrative, “noticing that the prince landed, followed him and arrived about the same time. He conducted them to the tent; they were scarcely seated when the prince rose, and in a graceful manner threw his mantle over the captain’s shoulders. He further placed a hat of feathers upon his head, and a curious fan in Cook’s hands, at whose feet he also spread five or six very pretty mantles of great value.”

Terreoboo and the principal chiefs of his suite asked many questions of the English as to the time of their leaving. The captain wished to ascertain the opinion the Hawaians had formed of the English; but he could only learn that they supposed them to be the natives of a country where provisions were scarce, and that they had simply come there “to fill their stomachs.” This conviction arose from the emaciated appearance of some of the sailors, and from the desire to ship fresh victuals.

There was no fear, however, of exhausting their provisions, in spite of the immense quantity which had been consumed since the English arrived. It is very likely that the king wished for time to prepare the present he intended to offer the strangers upon their leaving; and, accordingly, the day before the one fixed upon, the king begged Captains Cook and Clerke to accompany him to his residence. Enormous heaps of every kind of vegetable, parcels of stuffs, yellow and red feathers, and a herd of pigs were collected together.

All this was a gratuitous gift to the king from his subjects. Terreoboo chose about a third of these articles, and gave the rest to the two captains — a more valuable present than they had ever received either at Tonga or Tahiti.

On the 4th of February the vessels left the bay, but the damage received by the *Resolution* forced her to put in again in a few days. The vessels had scarcely cast anchor before the English noticed a change in the conduct of the natives. Still all went on peaceably until the afternoon of the 13th. Upon that day several chiefs wished to prevent the natives from assisting the English in filling their casks. A tumult ensued. The natives armed themselves with stones, and became threatening.

The officer in command of the detachment was ordered by Cook to draw upon the natives, if they persisted in throwing stones, or became insolent. Under these circumstances, a pirogue was fired into, and it was soon apparent that a robbery had been committed by its crew.

At the same time a still more serious dispute arose. A sloop belonging to Pareea was seized by an officer, who took it to the *Discovery*. The chief hastened to claim his belongings, and to protest his innocence. The discussion grew animated, and Pareea was overthrown by a blow from an oar.

The natives, who had hitherto been peaceable observers, armed themselves with stones, forced the sailors to retire precipitately, and took possession of the pinnace which had brought them. Pareea, forgetful of his resentment at this moment, interposed, and restored the pinnace to the English, together with several things which had been stolen.

“I am afraid the Indians will force me to violent measures,” said Cook, upon learning what had passed. “We must not allow them to believe that they have gained an advantage over us.”

The boat of the *Discovery* was stolen upon the 13th or 14th of February. The captain determined to possess himself of the person of Terreoboo, or some others of the leading persons, and to keep them as hostages until the stolen objects were restored to him.

He therefore landed with a detachment of marines, and pursued his way to the king's residence. He was received with the usual marks of respect on the road, and perceiving Terreoboo and his two sons, to whom he said a few words on the theft of the sloop, he decided to pass the day on board the *Resolution*.

The matter took a happy turn, and the two young princes embarked upon the pinnace, when one of Terreoboo's wives begged him with tears not to go on board. Two other chiefs joined her, and the natives, frightened by the hostile preparations they saw, began to crowd round the king and captain. The latter hurried to embark, and the prince appeared willing to follow him, but the chiefs interposed, and used force to prevent his doing so.

Cook, seeing that his project had failed, and that he could only put it into execution by bloodshed, gave it up, and walked quietly along the shore to regain his boat, when a rumour spread that one of the principal chiefs had been killed. The women and children were therefore sent away, and all directed their attention to the English.

A native armed with a "pahooa" defied the captain, and as he would not cease his threats, Cook discharged his pistol. The native, protected by a thick mat, did not feel himself wounded, and so became more audacious. Several others advanced, and the captain discharged his gun at the nearest and killed him. This was the signal for a general attack.

The last that was seen of Cook was his signing to the boats to cease firing, and to approach, that his small troop might embark. In vain! The captain was struck and fell to the earth.

“The natives,” says the narrative, “uttered cries of joy when they saw him fall. They at once dragged his body along the shore, and taking the poniard one after the other, they all attacked him with ferocious blows until he ceased to breathe.”

Thus perished this great navigator, assuredly the most illustrious produced by England. The boldness of his undertakings, his perseverance in carrying them out, and the extent of his knowledge, all made him a type of the true sailor of discovery.

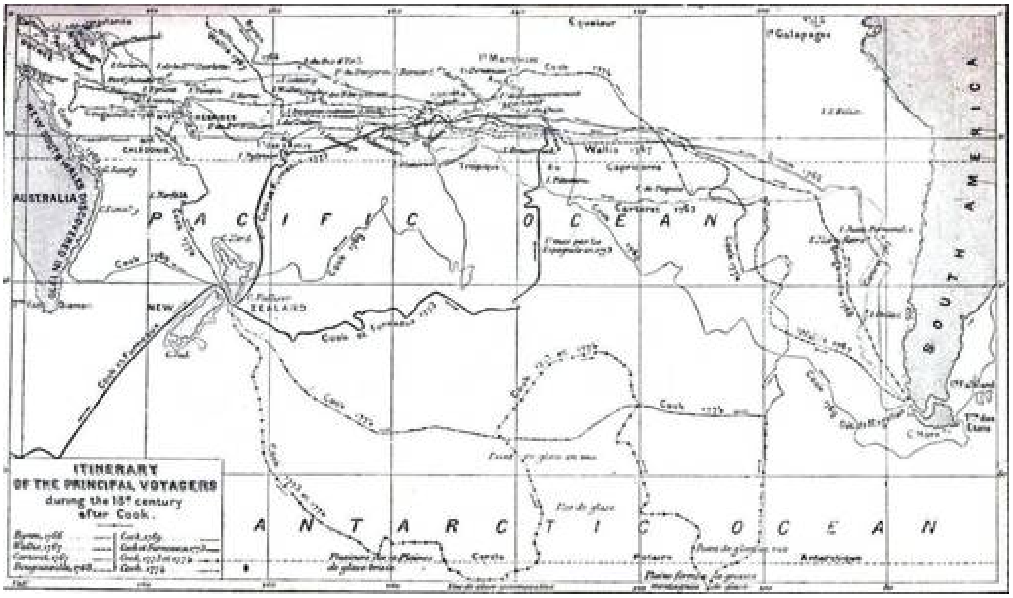
ITINERARY
OF THE PRINCIPAL VOYAGERS
during the 18th century
after Cook.
Equateur
Galapagos
AUSTRALIA
NEW ZEALAND
PACIFIC OCEAN
SOUTH AMERICA
ANTARCTIC OCEAN
Wallis 1767
Carteret 1767
Cook 1774
Cook 1773
Cook 1777
Cook 1775
C. Horn

Gravé par E. Morieu.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

What immense service he has rendered to geography! In his first voyage he reconnoitred the Society Islands, proved that New Zealand is formed of two islands, explored the strait that separates them, and surveyed its coast, and lastly he visited the entire eastern coast of New Holland.

In his second voyage he proved the chimerical character of the long-talked-of Antarctic continent, the dream of stay-at-home geographers. He discovered New Caledonia, Southern Georgia, the Sandwich Islands, and penetrated farther into the southern hemisphere than any one had done before him.

In his third expedition he discovered the Hawaian archipelago, and surveyed the eastern coast of America, to the forty-third degree, that is to say, an extent of 3500 miles. He passed through Behring Straits, and ventured into the Arctic Sea, which was the horror of navigators, until the icebergs opposed an impenetrable barrier to his progress.

It is needless to praise his qualities as a seaman; his hydrographical works remain, but above all his careful treatment of his crews deserves to be remembered. To it was due their ability to bear the long and trying voyages, which he made with so little loss of life.

After this fatal day the English folded their tents and returned on board. Their offers for the recovery of the body of their unfortunate captain were in vain. In their anger they were about to have recourse to arms, when two priests, friends of Lieutenant King, brought a piece of human flesh at the instance of the other chiefs, which weighed from nine to ten pounds. It was all, they said, that remained of Rono’s body, which had been burnt according to custom. This sight of course made the English still more anxious for reprisals, and the natives on their side had to avenge the death of five chiefs and a score of men. Every time the English landed at their watering place they found a furious crowd armed with stones and sticks. In order to make an example, Captain Clerke, who had taken the command of the expedition, set fire to the abodes of the priests, and massacred those who opposed them.

On the 19th of February, however, an interview was arranged, and the remains of Cook, his hands, recognizable by a large scar, his head, stripped of flesh, and various other débris, were made over to the English, who three days later paid them the last honours.

After that, barter was resumed as if nothing had happened, and no other incident occurred during the remainder of the stay in the Sandwich Islands.

Captain Clerke had relinquished the command of the *Discovery* to Lieutenant Gore, and hoisted his flag upon the *Resolution*. After completing the survey of the Hawaiian Islands, he set sail for the north, touched at Kamschatka, where the Russians made him heartily welcome, passed through Behring Strait, and advanced as far as latitude 69° 50’ north, where his further progress was barred by icebergs.

On the 22nd of April, 1779, Captain Clerke died of pulmonary phthisis, aged thirty-eight.

Captain Gore then assumed the command in chief, put in again at Kamschatka, again at Canton, and at the Cape of Good Hope, and anchored in the Thames on the 1st of October, 1780, after more than four years’ absence.

The death of Captain Cook caused a general mourning throughout England. The Royal Society of London, of which he was a member, struck a medal in his honour, the cost of which was covered by public subscription, to which persons of the highest rank subscribed.

The Admiralty petitioned the king to provide for the family of the deceased captain. The king granted a pension of 200*l*. to his widow, and 25*l*. to each of his three sons. The charts and drawings relating to his last voyage were engraved at the expense of the government, and the proceeds of their sale divided among Cook’s family, and the heirs of Captain Clerke and Captain King.

Although the family of the great navigator is extinct, a proof of the esteem in which his memory is held was given in the solemn meeting of the French Geographical Society on the 4th of February, 1879.

A large number assembled to celebrate the centenary of Cook’s death. Amongst them were many representatives of the Australian colonies, which are now so flourishing, and of the Hawaian Archipelago, where he met his death. A quantity of relics belonging to the great navigator, his charts, Webber’s magnificent water-colours, and the instruments and weapons of the Oceanic islanders decorated the walls.

This touching homage, after the lapse of a hundred years, was accorded by a people whose king had bidden them not to thwart Cook’s scientific and civilizing mission, and was well calculated to awake an echo in England, and to draw yet closer the bonds of that good fellowship which exists between England and France.

PART II

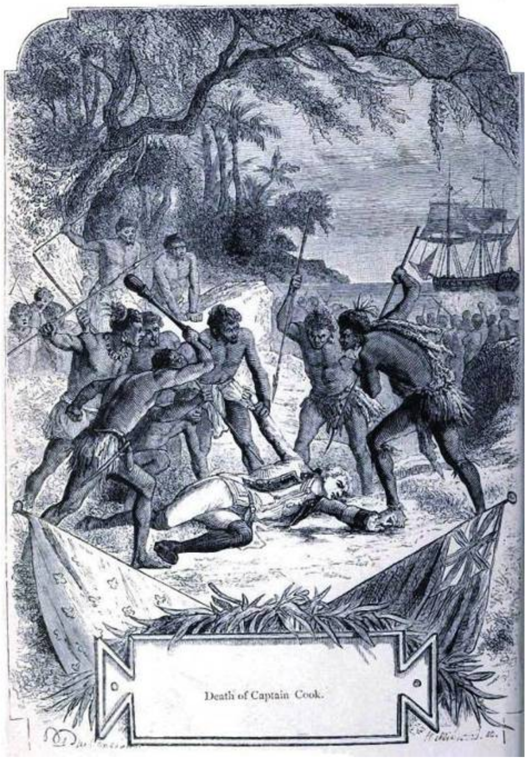

Death of Captain Cook.

CHAPTER I.

FRENCH NAVIGATORS.

I.

Discoveries made by Bouvet de Lozier in the Southern Seas — Surville — The land of the Arsacides — Incident during the stay at Port Praslin — Arrival upon the coast of New Zealand — Death of Surville — Marion’s discoveries in the Antarctic Ocean — He is murdered at New Zealand — Kerguelen in Iceland and the Antarctic regions — The contest between the watches — Fleurien and Verdun de la Crenne.

In the earlier half of the eighteenth century, a discovery had been made which was destined to exercise a favourable influence upon the progress of geographical science. Jean Baptiste Charles Bouvet de Lozier, a captain of one of the East India Company’s ships, was so struck by the immensity of the space surrounding the Southern Pole, known to geographers as the *Terra australis incognita*, that he begged for the privilege of prosecuting discoveries in these unknown regions. His importunities were long disregarded, but at length, in 1738, the Company consented, in the hope of opening new facilities for trade.

Two small frigates, the *Aigle* and the *Marie*, fully equipped, left Brest upon the 19th of July, 1738, under command of Bouvet de Lozier. After a stay of a month at St. Catherine’s Island, upon the coast of Brazil, they put to sea again upon the 13th of November, and steered for the south-east.

On the 26th, heavy fog set in, so that the vessels could only keep in company by constant firing, and were obliged to tack about continually, at the risk of running foul of each other. Upon the 5th of December, although it would have appeared impossible, the fog increased in density to such an extent that those on board the *Aigle* could hear the movement of the *Marie*, though they could not see her. The sea was covered with kelp, and sea-gulls, never found at a distance from land, were shortly afterwards seen.

“Upon the 15th of December,” says M. Favre, in his Memoir the Bouvets, in 48° 50’ S. lat. (Paris is in N. lat. 48° 50’) and in 7° W. long. (the meridian of Teneriffe), an enormous iceberg was perceived towards five or six in the morning; shortly afterwards many others were seen, surrounded by ice-floes of various sizes.

The *Marie*, signalling danger, tacked about, but Bouvet, annoyed by this action, which was likely to affect the confidence of the crews, crowded sail on the *Aigle*, and, by passing the *Marie*, showed his determination to maintain his southern course. To reassure his men, he asserted that it was considered a lucky omen to meet with ice, as it was a certain indication of land at hand.

The course was continued to the south, and Bouvet's perseverance was soon rewarded by the appearance of land, to which he gave the name of Cape Circumcision. It was steep, covered with snow, and so shut in by large icebergs, that it was impossible to approach to within seven or eight leagues. It appeared to measure from four to five leagues from north to south.

"This land was supposed," says M. Favre, judging from Pietergos' charts, which were used by Bouvet, "to be situated in 54° S. lat. and 26° and 27° east of the meridian of Teneriffe, or between 5° 30' and 6° 3' east of that of Paris."

Bouvet would much have liked to make closer acquaintance with this region, but the fogs and contrary winds prevented his reaching it, and he was obliged to satisfy himself with observing it from a distance.

"Upon the 3rd of January, 1739," says Bouvet, in his report to the Company, "we made up for what we had lost during the preceding days, and about four in the afternoon, the fog clearing somewhat, we distinctly saw land. The coast, broken throughout its entire length, formed several bays. The summits of the mountains were covered with snow; the sides appeared wooded."

After several fruitless attempts to near the coast, Bouvet was forced to relinquish the idea. His sailors were worn out with fatigue, discouraged, and enfeebled by scurvy. The *Marie* was sent to the Isle of France, and the *Aigle* directed her course to the Cape of Good Hope, which she reached upon the 28th of February.

“We had penetrated,” says Bouvet, in the report already cited, “twelve or fifteen hundred leagues into an unknown sea. For seventy days we had encountered almost continuous fog. We had been for forty days in the midst of ice, and we had had snow and hail almost every day. Several times our decks and rigging were covered with them. Our shrouds and sails were frozen. On the 10th of January, it was impossible to work our fore-topsail. The cold was severe, for men accustomed to a warm climate, and who were lightly clad. Many had chilblains on the hands and feet. Still they were forced constantly to tack about, bring to, get under weigh, and take soundings at least once a day. One of the sailors belonging to the *Aigle*, having been sent to loosen the fore-topsail, became frozen in the fore-top. He had to be lowered by a whip, and circulation was with difficulty restored. I have seen others with tears gushing from their eyes as they handled the sounding-line. And all this was in the fine season, and I ameliorated their condition by every means in my power.”

We can readily understand that such small results did not tempt the East India Company to continue their efforts in these latitudes. If they were productive of no good, they cost heavily in the loss of men and ships they entailed. Still Bouvet’s discovery was a first blow to the existing belief in an Antarctic continent. He gave the start, and various navigators, amongst them two Frenchmen, followed it up.

In our short record of this expedition, which is scarcely known, we have testified to an appreciation of our countryman, who was the pioneer of Antarctic navigation, and who deserves the credit of furnishing an example to the great English explorer, James Cook.

Another of the East India Company's captains, who had distinguished himself in various battles against the English, Jean François Marie de Surville, was destined to make important discoveries in Oceania some thirty years later, and to re-discover, almost simultaneously with Cook, the lands first seen by Tasman, and which he called Staten Island. The following is an account of the circumstances.

Messrs. Law and Chevalier, governors in French India, determined to send a vessel at their own risk to trade in the southern seas. They admitted Surville to their schemes, and sent him to France to obtain the needful authority from the Company, and to superintend the equipment of the vessel.

The *Saint-Jean Baptiste* was made ready for sea at Nantes, and provisioned for three years, with every requisite for a distant expedition. Surville then reached India, where Law provided him with twenty-four native soldiers.

Leaving Angley Bay on the 3rd of March, 1769, the *Saint-Jean Baptiste* put in successively at Masulipatam, Yanaon, and Pondicherry, where her equipment was completed.

Surville left the last-named port on the 2nd of June, and steered his course for the Philippines. On the 20th of August, he cast anchor off the Bashees, or Baschy Islands. Dampier had so named them after an intoxicating drink, which the natives compounded from the juice of the sugar-cane, into which they infused a certain black seed.

Several of Dampier’s crew had formerly deserted in these islands; they had received from the natives a field, agricultural instruments, and wives. The recollection of this fact incited three of the sailors belonging to the *Saint-Jean Baptiste* to follow their example. But Surville was not the man to allow his crew to melt away in such a manner. He seized twenty-six Indians, and signified his intention of keeping them as hostages until his men were brought back to him.

“Among the Indians thus seized,” says Crozet, in his narrative of Surville’s voyage, “there were several courageous enough to throw themselves into the sea, and, much to the surprise of the crew, they had sufficient courage and skill to swim to one of their pirogues, which was far enough from the vessel to be secure from danger.”

Pains were taken to make the savages understand that they had been treated in this way in order to make their comrades bring back the three deserters. They made signs that they understood, and were then released, with the exception of six, who had been taken on shore. The haste with which they left the ship, and flung themselves into their pirogues, augured badly for their return. Much surprise was therefore felt when in a short time they were seen returning with joyful acclamations. Doubt was no longer possible, they could only be bringing the deserters back to the commander. They came on board, and proceeded to deposit on deck — what? — three magnificent pigs, tied and bound. Surville did not appreciate, and he objurgated the natives so fiercely, that they jumped into their pirogues, and disappeared. Twenty-four hours later the *Saint-Jean Baptiste* left the Bashees, taking three captive Indians to replace the deserters.

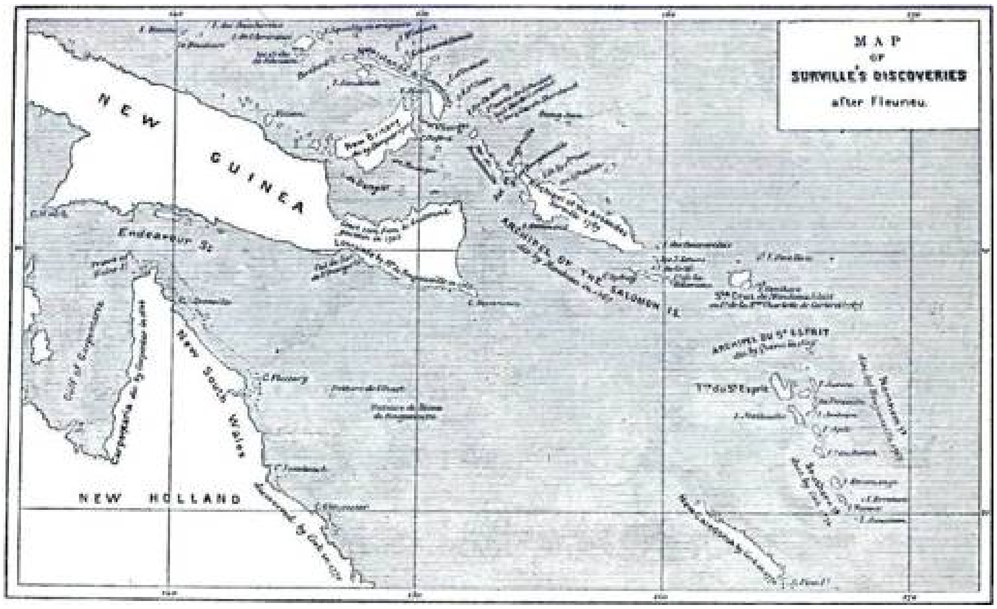
MAP
OF
SURVILLE'S DISCOVERIES
after Fleurieu.
NEW GUINEA
Endeavour St
Gulf of Carpentaria
New South Wales
NEW HOLLAND
C. Flattery
ARCHIPEL OF THE SALOMON IS.
ARCHIPEL DU St ESPRIT
Tre du St Esprit

Upon the 7th of October, after a lengthened route to the south-east, land, to which the name of “Prémiere Vue” was given, was sighted in 6° 56’ S. lat. and 157° 30’ long. east of Paris.

The explorers coasted along it until the 13th October, upon which day an excellent port was discovered, sheltered from every wind, and formed by a number of small islands. M. de Surville cast anchor and named it Port Praslin. It is situated in 7° 25’ S. lat. and 151° 55’ E. long. reckoning from the Paris meridian.

Upon entering this port, the French saw several Indians, armed with spears, and carrying a sort of shield. The *Saint-Jean Baptiste* was very soon surrounded by pirogues, manned by a crowd of Indians, who were profuse in menacing gestures. However, they were pacified at last. About thirty of the boldest clambered on to the deck, and examined everything they saw with close attention. It soon became needful to check their advances, as there were many sick among the crew, and it was unwise to allow too many natives on board.

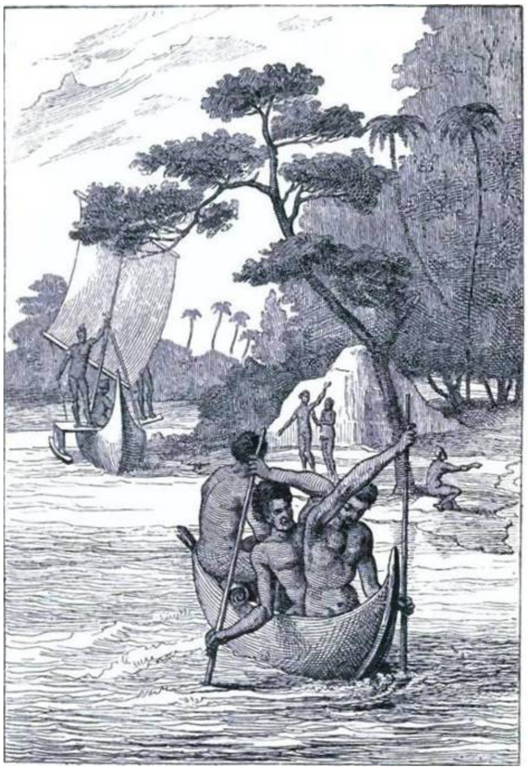

Pirogues of the Admiralty Islands.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

In spite of the welcome they received, the natives were still doubtful, and their looks expressed distrust. The slightest movement on board the vessel was sufficient to make them jump into their pirogues, or the sea. One only showed a little more confidence, and Surville gave him several presents. The Indian acknowledged the attention, by saying he could point out a spot where good water was to be had.

The captain gave orders to arm the boats, and entrusted the command to his lieutenant Labbé.

“The savages appeared impatient for the departure of the boats from the ship,” says Fleurien, in his “Découvertes des Français,” “and they were no sooner lowered than they were followed by all the pirogues. One of these appeared to lead the others; in it was the Indian who had offered his services to Surville. At the back of the pirogue, a man stood erect, holding in his hands a bunch of herbs, raising them above his head, with a rhythmical movement. In the centre of the same pirogue stood a young man, resting upon a spear, who gravely watched all that went on. Red flowers were in his ears, and passed through the cartilage of his nose, and his hair was powdered with white lime.”

Certain trifling symptoms aroused the suspicions of the French, who soon found themselves in a cul-de-sac, where the natives persisted in declaring that fresh water was to be found. Labbé, in spite of all the persuasions of the natives, did not wish to imperil his boats in two or three feet of water, with a muddy bottom, and therefore allowed only a corporal and four soldiers to disembark. They soon returned, asserting that they had seen on all sides nothing but marsh, in which the men would sink to the waist.

It was evident that the natives had meditated treason. Labbé took good care not to let them suspect that he had detected their design, and asked them to point out a spring.

The natives then led the boats some three leagues away, to a spot from whence it was impossible to see the ship. The corporal was again sent forward with some men, but he found only a very poor spring, barely affording sufficient water to slake the thirst of his party. During his absence, the natives did all in their power to induce Labbé to land, pointing out to him the abundant cocoa-nut and other fruit trees, and even attempting to possess themselves of the boat-hook.

“More than two hundred and fifty of these natives,” says the narrative, “armed with spears, from seven to eight feet long, with swords, or wooden clubs, arrows and stones, and some carrying shields, were assembled on the shore, observing the movements of the boats. When the detachment, consisting of five men, proceeded to re-embark, the natives fell upon them, wounding one soldier with a blow from a club, the corporal with a spear, and many others in different ways. M. Labbé himself was hit by two arrows in the thigh, and on the leg by a stone. The traitors were fired upon. The first volley so astonished them that they remained motionless. It was the more fatal, as, being fired only three or five fathoms from the boats, every shot took effect. The amazement of the natives gave the opportunity for a second discharge, which completely routed them, the death of their chief greatly hastening their flight. M. Labbé, who had recognized him, apart from the others, with his hands raised to heaven, striking his breast, and encouraging the assailants by his voice, aimed at him and shot him dead. The natives carried off their wounded, leaving thirty or forty dead upon the field of battle. It was then possible to land, and, picking up such of the enemy’s weapons as were scattered about, the victors contented themselves with towing away one of their pirogues and destroying the others.”

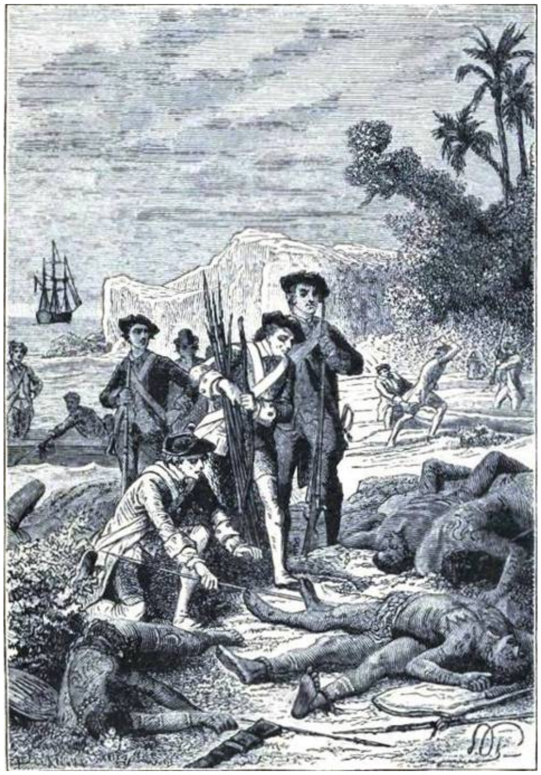

“Picking up the enemies’ weapons.”

Surville was extremely anxious to capture an Indian, who might serve him as a guide, and who, convinced of the superiority of European weapons, might warn his countrymen against opposing the French. With this view, he hit upon a singular expedient. He ordered two negro sailors to be placed on board the pirogue he had seized, had their heads powdered, and disguised them so cleverly that the natives were likely to be deceived.

In fact, a pirogue soon after approaching the *Saint-Jean Baptiste*, the men who were in it, seeing what they took to be two of their own people trafficking with the strangers, drew nearer. So soon as the French imagined they were at a fair distance, they launched two boats in pursuit. The natives gained ground; it was then decided to fire, in order to stop them. One of the natives was killed at once, and, his boat capsizing, he fell into the sea, and the other, who was only fourteen or fifteen years of age, endeavoured to reach the shore by swimming.

“He defended himself most courageously,” says the narrative, “sometimes making believe to bite himself, but really biting those who held him. His hands and feet were tied, and he was taken on board. He counterfeited death for an hour, but when he was made to sit up, and he fell back on deck, he took good care to fall on his shoulders instead of his head. When he was tired of playing this game he opened his eyes, and, seeing that the crew were eating, he asked for a biscuit, ate it with a good appetite, and made many expressive signs. He was bound securely, so that he might not throw himself overboard.”

During the night, it was necessary to resort to firing, to disperse the pirogues, which approached with a view to surprising the ship. Next day, the native was taken in a boat to a small islet, since called Aiguade Island. Scarcely had he landed when it was perceived that he had almost cut through the ropes with a sharp shell.

The young savage was taken by a different route to the shore; when he perceived that he was to re-embark, he rolled upon the ground, shrieking, and biting the sand in his fury.

The sailors succeeded at last in finding an abundant spring, and plenty of wood. One of the trees they cut appeared to have dyeing properties, for it tinged the sea with red. Some of the bark was boiled, and pieces of cotton steeped in the decoction turned deep red.

Welcome refreshment was afforded to the crew by the palm cabbages, good oysters, and various shell-fish which abounded. There were indeed many sufferers from scurvy on board the *Saint-Jean Baptiste*. Surville had looked forward to this stay to cure them, but the rain, which fell ceaselessly for six days, aggravated their complaint to such a degree that three of them died before they left the anchorage.

This port was named Praslin, and the large island or archipelago, to which it belonged, Arsacides, in reference to the deceitful nature of its inhabitants.

"Port Praslin," says Fleurien, "would be one of the finest ports in the world, if the bottom were better. It is of circular shape, reckoning all the islands discovered from the spot where the *Saint-Jean Baptiste* cast anchor. The ferocity of the people inhabiting the islands of Port Praslin was such that it was impossible to penetrate into the interior, and it was only possible to examine the sea-coast. We perceived no cultivated ground, either in the trip we made to the further end of the port, nor upon Aiguade Island, which was explored throughout."

Such are the superficial particulars which Surville and his crew were able to collect. Fortunately, they were supplemented by those furnished by the captive native, whose name was Lova-Salega, and who possessed a great faculty for learning languages.

According to his account, the island produced palms, cocoa-nut trees, various almond trees, wild coffee, the ebony tree, the tacamahac, as well as numerous resinous or gum trees, the banana, sugar-cane, yams, aniseed, and lastly a plant called "Binao," which is used by the natives as bread. Cockatoos, wood pigeons, lories, and black-birds, somewhat larger than those of Europe, abounded in the woods. In the marshes the curlew, sea lark, a species of snipe, and ducks were to be found. The only quadrupeds the country produced were goats and half-wild pigs.

“The natives of Port Praslin,” says Fleurien, quoting from the manuscripts in his possession, “are of ordinary height, but strong and muscular. They do not appear to be all of one origin (a valuable remark), for some are perfectly black, whilst others are copper-coloured. The former have woolly hair, which is very soft to the touch, their foreheads are small, their eyes slightly sunken, whilst the lower part of their face is pointed, and adorned with a small beard; their expression is fierce. Some of the copper-coloured natives have smooth hair. They usually cut it round the head as high as the ear. A few only retain a little, shaped like a cap, on the top of the head, shaving off the remainder with a sharp stone, and leaving only a circular fringe about an inch deep at the bottom. Their hair and eyebrows are powdered with lime, which gives them a yellowish hue.

“Both men and women are stark naked; but it must be allowed that their nudity is not so startling as would be that of an European without clothes, for the faces, arms, and generally every part of their bodies are tattooed. Sometimes the taste of these designs is really wonderful. They pierce their ears and the cartilage of their nose, and the nostrils often hang down, from the weight of the ornaments, to the upper lip.”

The commonest ornament worn by the natives of Port Praslin is a necklace made of men’s teeth. It was at once concluded that they were cannibals, although the same customs had been met with among people who were not. Lova’s confused replies, and the half-broiled head of a man, found by Bougainville in a pirogue in Choiseul Island, placed the existence of this barbarous practice beyond the possibility of doubt.

On the 21st of October, after nine days’ rest, the *Saint-Jean Baptiste* left Port Praslin.

On the next and ensuing days, lofty and mountainous land was constantly in sight. Upon the 2nd of November Surville descried an island, which received the name of Contrariétés, from the contrary winds which for three days checked the progress of the ship.

This island presented a delightful appearance. It was well cultivated, and, judging from the number of pirogues, which constantly surrounded the *Saint-Jean Baptiste*, it must have been well populated.

The natives could scarcely be persuaded to go on board. At last a chief sprang on deck. His first act was to possess himself of a sailor’s clothes. He next visited the poop and took the white flag, which he wished to appropriate. It was only after some difficulty that he was dissuaded from the attempt. Lastly, he climbed up the mizen mast, and from that elevated position observed all parts of the vessel. Then, coming down, he began to jump about, and, addressing himself to those he had left in the canoes, he invited them, by words and gestures, to join him on deck.

About a dozen ventured. They resembled the natives of Port Praslin, but they spoke a different language, and could not make themselves understood by Lova-Salega. Their stay on board did not last long, for one of them having possessed himself of a bottle and thrown it into the sea, the captain showed some annoyance, which induced them to return to their pirogues.

The land appeared so inviting, and the sufferers from scurvy were in such pressing need of green provisions, that Surville determined to send a boat to test the disposition of the natives.

It had no sooner left the vessel than it was surrounded by pirogues, manned by a number of warriors. Hostilities were imminent, but a few shots dispersed the assailants. During the night a flotilla advanced towards the *Saint-Jean Baptiste*, and Surville, from motives of humanity, did not wait until the natives were close, but at once fired several pieces charged with grape shot, which put them to flight.

It was useless to think of landing, and Surville regained the open sea. He discovered successively the Three Sisters Island, and Gulf and Deliverance Islands, the last of the group.

The archipelago, just explored by Surville, was no other than that of the Solomon Islands, which, as we have mentioned, was discovered in the first instance by Mendana. That skilful navigator had traced and surveyed a hundred and forty leagues, besides drawing a series of fourteen very curious views of this sea coast.

If Surville's crew were not to be decimated by death, it was necessary at all risks to reach land, where he might disembark the sick, and procure fresh provisions for them.

He resolved to steer for New Zealand, which had not been visited since the time of Tasman.

On the 12th of December, 1769, Surville descried land in 35° 37' S. lat. and five days later he cast anchor in a bay which he called Lauriston. At the extremity was a creek which received the name of Chevalier. Cook had been in search of this land since the beginning of October, and was fated to pass by Lauriston Bay a few days later without observing the French vessel.

Whilst anchored in Chevalier Creek, Surville was overtaken by a frightful tempest, which brought him within an ace of destruction, but his sailors had such confidence in his nautical ability that they felt no anxiety, and obeyed his orders with a *sang froid* of which, unfortunately, the Maoris were the sole spectators.

The sloop which was conveying the sick to land had no time to reach the shore, before the storm broke in all its fury, and she was driven into Refuge Creek. The sailors and invalids were cordially welcomed by a chief called Naginoui, who received them into his cabin, and bestowed upon them all the green provisions which he could procure during their stay.

One of the boats which was towed behind the *Saint-Jean Baptiste* was carried away by the waves. Surville saw it stranded in Refuge Creek. He sent in search of it, but only the rudder was found. The natives had carried it off. The river was searched in vain; there was no trace of the boat. Surville would not allow this theft to go unpunished. He made signs to some Indians who were near their pirogues to approach him. One of them ran to him at once, and was immediately seized and carried on board. The others fled.

“He seized one pirogue,” says Crozet, “and burnt the other; set fire to the huts and returned to the ship. The Indian who was taken was recognized by the surgeon as the chief who had so generously assisted them during the storm. It was the unfortunate Naginoui, who, after the services he had rendered the whites, could hardly have anticipated such treatment at their hands, when he obeyed Surville’s signal.”

He died on the 24th of March, 1770, near the island of Juan Fernandez.

We will pass over the observations made by the French navigator upon the natives, and the productions of New Zealand, as they are merely a repetition of those of Captain Cook.

Surville, convinced that he could not obtain the provisions he needed, put to sea a few days later, and steered between the parallels of 27° and 28° S. lat.; but the ravages of the scurvy, which increased daily, decided him on steering for the coast of Peru without delay.

He sighted it on the 5th of April, 1770, and three days later cast anchor off the Chilica Bar at the entrance of Callao.

In his haste to reach the land, and seek help for his sick, Surville was unwilling to allow any one else to visit the governor. Unfortunately his boat was capsized by the waves that break over the bar, and only one of the crew was saved. Surville and all the rest were drowned.

Thus miserably perished this great navigator, too early for the services he might have rendered to his country and to science. As for the *Saint-Jean Baptiste*, she was detained "for three years" before Lima by the interminable delays of the Spanish customs. Labbé assumed the command, and took her back to Lorient on the 23rd of August, 1773.

As we have already related, M. de Bougainville had taken a Tahitan named Aoutourou to Europe. When this native expressed a desire to return to his native land, the French administration had sent him to Mauritius, with orders to the governor of that colony to facilitate his return to Tahiti.

A naval officer, Marion Dufresne, availed himself of this opportunity, and offered Poivre, the Governor of Mauritius and Bourbon, to send the young Aoutourou to Tahiti at his own expense and in a vessel belonging to him. He only required that a vessel belonging to the state might be assigned to him, and a small sum of money advanced to assist him in the preparations for the expedition.

Nicholas Thomas Marion Dufresne was born at St. Malo on the 22nd of December, 1729, and had entered the naval service very young. On the 16th of October, 1746, he was made lieutenant of a frigate, and at the time of his offer was still only captain of a fire ship. Still he had served everywhere with distinction, and nowhere more successfully than in the Indian Seas.

The mission for which he offered himself was merely a pretext for a voyage of discovery in the Southern Seas.

Poivre, an intelligent governor and a friend to progress, approved of Dufresne’s projects, and gave him detailed instructions for the enterprise he was about to undertake in the Southern Hemisphere. At this time Cook had not yet proved the non-existence of an Antarctic Continent.

Poivre would dearly have liked to have discovered the northern portion of the lands he imagined to lie near the French colonies, and where he hoped to meet with a more temperate climate. He calculated upon finding timber for masts, and many other necessaries there, such as provisions, which he was now obliged to obtain at heavy cost from the metropolis. Moreover, there might be a safe port, where vessels could find shelter from the storms which almost periodically ravaged the islands of Mauritius and Bourbon.

The government had just sent a ship’s lieutenant, M. Kerguelen, to make discoveries in these unknown seas. Marion’s expedition, which was to try a different route, could not fail to aid in the solution of the problem.

On the 18th of October, 1771, the *Mascarin*, commanded by Marion, and the *Marquis de Castries*, under the Chevalier Du Clesmeur, midshipman, set sail. They put in first at Bourbon Island. There they took Aoutourou on board. He was unfortunately infected with small-pox, which he had caught in the Mauritius; and the illness soon declared itself, so that it was necessary to leave Bourbon lest he should communicate it to the inhabitants. The two vessels then made for Port Dauphin, on the coast of Madagascar, in order to allow the malady to run its course, before proceeding to the Cape, where they were to complete provisioning. Young Aoutourou soon died of the disease.

Under these circumstances, was it necessary to return to Mauritius, disarm the ships, and give up the expedition? Marion thought not. With greater freedom of action, he determined to make himself famous by a new voyage, and he inspired his companions with enthusiasm like his own.

He soon reached the Cape of Good Hope, where he completed in a few days the provisioning necessary for an eighteen months’ voyage.

A southerly route was chosen towards the land discovered in 1739 by Bouvet de Lozier, and which was to be looked for east of the meridian of Madagascar.

Nothing remarkable occurred from the 28th of December, 1771, the day upon which the vessels had left the Cape, until the 11th of January. It was then discovered, by taking the longitude 20° 43’ east of the Paris meridian, that they were in the parallel (40° to 41° south) of the islands named in Van Keulen’s chart as Dina and Marvezen, and not marked at all upon French maps.

Although the presence of land-birds induced Marion to suppose that he was not far from the islands, he left these latitudes on the 9th of January, convinced that his search for the southern continent ought to occupy his entire attention. The 11th of January found him in 45° 43’ S. lat. and, although it was summer in these regions, the cold was severe, and snow fell without ceasing. Two days later, in a dense fog, which was succeeded by rain, Marion discerned land which extended a distance of five leagues from the W.S.W. to the E.N.E. The soundings gave a depth of eighty fathoms with a bottom of coarse sand mixed with coral. This land stretched away till it could be seen behind the vessels, that is to say, over a distance of six to seven leagues. It appeared to be very lofty and mountainous. It received the name of Hope, marking Marion’s great desire to reach the southern continent. Four years later Cook called it Prince Edward’s Island.

To the north lay another territory.

Crozet, editor of Marion’s voyage, says, —

“I noticed, in coasting along this island, that to the N.E. there existed a creek, opposite to what appeared to be a large cavern. All around this cavern he remarked a number of large white spots, which looked like a flock of sheep. Had time allowed, he might have found anchorage opposite the creek. I fancied I saw a cascade issuing from the mountains. In rounding the island we discovered three islets detached from it, two of them situated in the large bay formed by the coast, and the third on its northern extremity. The island itself was about seven or eight leagues in circumference, without verdure, and apparently barren. The coast was healthy and safe. M. Marion named it Cavern Island.

“These two southern territories are situated in 45° 45’ S. lat. by 34° 31’ east of the Paris meridian, half a degree east of the route pursued by Bouvet. Next day, about six leagues of the coast of the land of Hope was made out. It looked fertile. The mountains were lofty and covered with snow. The navigators were about to look for anchorage, when, during the sounding operations, the two ships ran foul of each other and were both damaged. Three days were occupied in repairs. The weather, which had hitherto been fine, broke up, and, the wind becoming violent, it was necessary to continue the course following the forty-sixth parallel. New lands were discovered on the 24th of January.

“At first,” says Crozet, “they appeared formed of two islands; I took a sketch at a distance of eight leagues, and shortly afterwards we took them for two capes, imagining we could see in the far distance a stretch of land between them. They are situated in 40° 5’ S. lat. and about 42° E. long. reckoning from the meridian of Paris. M. Marion named them Les Îles Froides, or the Cold Islands.

“Although little progress was made during the night, the islands were invisible next morning. Upon this day the *Castries* signalled land, which stretched some ten or twelve leagues E.S.E.; but a dense fog, lasting no less than twelve hours, continued rain, and cold, which was severe and trying to lightly-clad men, made any approach nearer than six or seven leagues impossible.

“This coast was seen again upon the 24th, as well as new land, which received the name of the Arid Island, and is now known as Crozet Island. Marion was at length able to lower a boat, and ordered Crozet to take possession of the larger of the two islands in the name of the king. It is situated in 46° 30’ S. lat. and 43° E. long. reckoning from the Paris meridian. M. Marion called this island La Prise de Possession (it is now known as Marion Island). This was the sixth island discovered by us in these southern waters. From a height I discerned snow in many of the valleys. The land appeared barren, and covered with very small grass. I found neither tree nor bush in the island. Exposed to the continual ravages of the stormy west winds which prevailed the entire year in these latitudes, it appeared uninhabitable. I found nothing there but seals, penguins, sea-gulls, Mother Carey's chickens, and every variety of aquatic birds, usually met with by navigators in the open sea, when passing the Cape of Good Hope. These creatures, never having seen a man, were not wild, and allowed us to take them in the hand. The female birds sat tranquilly upon their eggs, others fed their young, whilst the seals continued their gambols in our presence, without appearing in the least alarmed."

Marion continued to steer between 46° to 47° lat. in the midst of a fog so dense that it was impossible to see from one end of the deck to the other, and without constant firing the ships must have parted company. Upon the 2nd of February the two ships were in 47° 22' E. long. that is to say within 1° 10' of the lands discovered upon the 13th of the same month by the king's vessels *La Fortune* and *Le Gros Ventre*, commanded by MM. de Kerguelen and Saint Allouarn. Doubtless, but for the accident to the *Castries*, Marion would have fallen in with them.

Having reached 90° east of the Paris meridian, Marion changed his route, and directed his course to Van Diemen's Land. No incident occurred during the cruise, and the two vessels cast anchor in Frederick Henry Bay.

Boats were at once lowered, and a strong detachment made its way to the shore, where some thirty natives were found; and the country, judging from the fires and smoke, must have been well populated.

"The natives of the country," says Crozet, "came forward willingly. They picked up wood and formed a sort of pile. They then presented the new comers with pieces of dried wood which they had lighted; and appeared to invite them to set fire to the pile. No one knew what the ceremony might mean, and it was accordingly tried. The natives did not appear surprised.

They remained about us, without making any demonstration either of hostility or friendship, and their wives and children were with them. Both men and women were of ordinary height, black in colour, with woolly hair, and all were naked. Some of the women carried their children tied on to their backs with rushes. All the men were armed with pointed sticks and stones, which appeared to us to be sharp, like hatchets.

“We attempted to win them over by small presents. They disdainfully rejected all that we offered, even iron, looking-glasses, handkerchiefs, and pieces of cloth. Fowls and ducks which had been brought from the ship were shown to them; as evidence that we wished to trade. They took them, looked at them as if they had never seen such things before, and threw them aside with an angry air.”

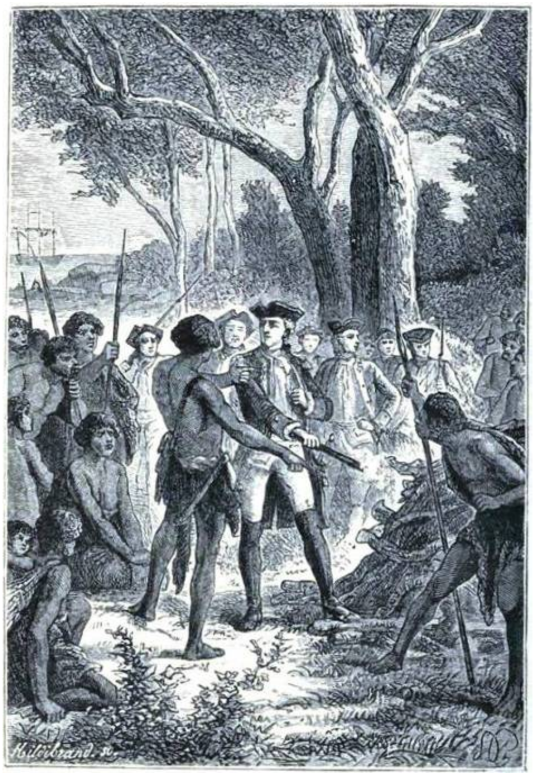
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“A lighted brand was also presented to them.”

An hour had been spent in the attempt to gain the good-will of the savages, when Marion and Du Clesmeur landed. A lighted brand was also presented to them, and fully persuaded that it was a peaceful ceremony, they did not hesitate to light the pile which was prepared. They were mistaken, for the natives immediately retired and flung a volley of stones, which wounded the two captains. They retaliated by a few shots, and the whole party re-embarked.

After another attempt at landing, which the natives opposed with great bravery, it was necessary to repulse them by a volley which wounded several and killed one. The crew then landed and pursued the natives, who made no attempt to resist them.

Two detachments were sent in search of a watering place, and of trees suitable for repairing the masts of the *Castries*. Six days passed in fruitless search; fortunately not wholly wasted, as many curious observations were made on behalf of science.

“From the considerable number of shells which we found at short distances,” says Crozet, “we concluded that the ordinary food of these savages was mussels, cockles, and various shell-fish.”

Is it not strange to find, among the New Zealanders, the remains of food similar to that with which we are familiar on the Scandinavian coasts? Is not man everywhere the same, and incited by the same needs to the same actions?

Finding it waste of time to seek for water and wood with which to remast the *Castries* and repair the *Mascarin,* which leaked a good deal, Marion started on the 10th of March for New Zealand, and reached that island fourteen days later.

New Zealand, discovered by Tasman in 1642, and visited by Cook and Surville in 1772, was now becoming known.

The two vessels made for land at Mount Egmont, but the shore was so steep at this point, that Marion put back to sea and returned to reconnoitre the land upon the 31st of March in 36° 30’ latitude.

He coasted along the shore, and, in spite of contrary winds, returned northward as far as the Three Kings Islands. He found it impossible to land there. It was therefore necessary to reach the mainland, and anchor was cast opposite Cape Maria-Van-Diemen, the most northerly extremity of New Zealand. The anchorage was soon perceived to be bad, and after many attempts Marion stopped at Cook’s Island Bay on the 11th of May.

Tents were erected on one of the islands, where wood and water were found, and the sick were installed there under a strong guard. The natives came on board, some of them even slept there, and trade, facilitated by the use of a Tahitan vocabulary, was carried on in grand style.

“I remarked with surprise,” says Crozet, “that among the savages who came on board were three distinct species of men. One of these appeared to be the original native, and was of a yellowish white colour, taller than the others, the usual height being from five foot nine to five foot ten inches; he had smooth black hair. The more swarthy and somewhat smaller men had slightly curling hair. And lastly, the genuine negro, with woolly hair and of smaller stature than the others, but usually broader chested. The first have very little beard, whilst the negroes have a great deal.”

This curious observation was afterwards verified. It is unnecessary to linger over the customs of the New Zealanders, or over Marion’s minute description of their fortified villages, their arms, clothing and food; these details are already known to our readers.

The French pitched three camps on land. The first for the sick, upon Matuaro Island, the second upon the mainland, which served as a depôt, and a means of communication with the third, which was the workshop of the carpenters, and was some two leagues away in the midst of a wood. The crew, persuaded by the friendliness of the natives, made long excursions into the interior, and received a hearty welcome everywhere. Confidence was at length so fully established that, in spite of Crozet’s representations, Marion ordered the sloops’ boats to be disarmed. This was unpardonable imprudence in a country where Tasman had given the name of Assassin Bay to the first point on which he landed, where Cook had met with cannibals, and had been nearly massacred.

On the 8th of June, Marion landed, and was received with even greater demonstrations of friendship than usual. He was proclaimed head chief of the country, and the natives placed four white feathers in his hair, as insignia of royalty.

Four days later he again landed with two young officers, MM. de Vaudricourt and Le Houx, a volunteer and captain of arms, and a few sailors, seventeen persons in all. Evening approached, but no one came back to the ship. At first no anxiety was felt, for the hospitable customs of the natives were well-known. It was supposed that Marion had slept on shore, to be ready to visit the workshops in the morning.

On the 13th of June the *Castries* sent her boat for the daily supply of wood and water. At nine o’clock a man was seen swimming towards the ships. A boat was lowered to help him on board. It was one of the rowers, the only one who had escaped from the massacre of his comrades. He had received two lance thrusts in the side, and been much ill-treated.

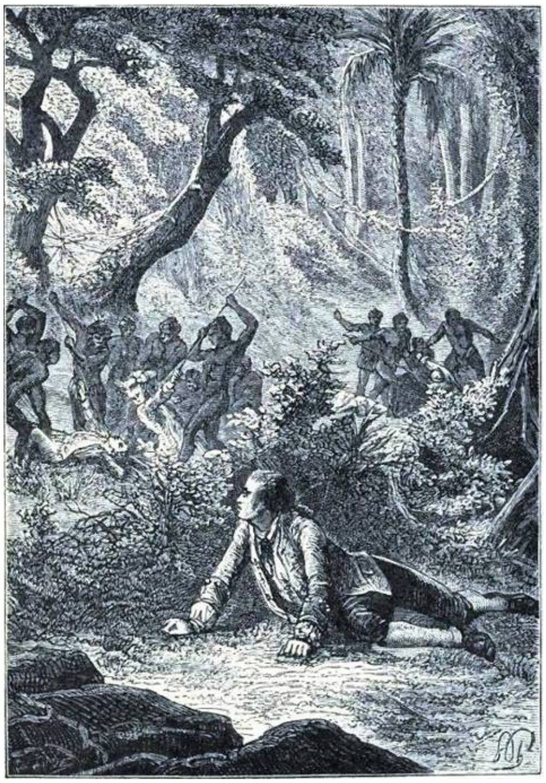

“The only one who had escaped.”

From his account, it appeared that the natives had at first shown their usual friendliness. They had even carried the sailors, who feared getting wet, ashore upon their shoulders. But, when the crew dispersed to pick up their cargo of wood, the natives reappeared, armed with spears, tomahawks, and clubs, and threw themselves in parties of six and seven upon each of the sailors. The survivor had been attacked by two men only, who had wounded him with two lance thrusts, and as, fortunately, he was not far from the sea, he had succeeded in reaching the shore, where he hid himself in some brushwood. From thence he had witnessed the massacre of all his companions. The savages had the bodies stripped, and commenced cutting them up, when he stole noiselessly from his concealment, and threw himself into the sea, hoping to reach the ship by swimming. Had all the sixteen men who accompanied Marion, and of whom no news was received, met a like fate? It seemed probable. In any case, it was needful to take immediate precautions for the safety of the three camps. Chevalier Du Clesmeur at once took the command, and, thanks to his energy, the disaster did not assume worse proportions.

The sloop of the *Mascarin* was armed and sent in search of Marion's boat and sloop, with orders to warn all the camps, and carry help to the most distant, where masts and spars were being made. On the road, upon the shore, the two boats were discovered near the village of Tacoury. They were surrounded by natives, who had pillaged them after massacring the sailors.

Without waiting to regain possession of the boats, the officer put on all speed in the hope of reaching the workshop in time. Fortunately, it had not yet been attacked by the natives. All work was immediately stopped, the utensils and weapons were collected, the guns were loaded, and such objects as could not be removed were buried beneath the ruins of the shed, which was set on fire.

The retreat was accomplished amongst crowds of natives, crying in sinister tones, "Tacouri maté Marion," "Tacouri has killed Marion." Two leagues were traversed in this manner, during which no aggression was attempted against the sixty men who composed the detachment. Upon their arrival at the sloop, the natives approached them; Crozet first sent all the sailors who carried loads on board, then, tracing a line on the ground, he made it understood that the first native who passed it would immediately be fired upon. An order was then given to the natives to seat themselves; and it must have been an imposing spectacle to see thousands obeying unresistingly, in spite of their desire to seize the prey which was escaping before their eyes.

Crozet embarked last, and no sooner had he set foot in the sloop than the war-cry was uttered; whilst javelins and stones were thrown from every direction. Hostilities had succeeded threats, and the savages rushed into the water the better to aim at their foes. Crozet found himself obliged to prove to these wretches the superiority of his weapons, and gave orders to fire. The New Zealanders, seeing their comrades fall wounded or dead, without their appearing to have been touched, were quite amazed. They would all have been killed had not Crozet stopped the firing. The sick were taken on board without accident, and the encampment, reinforced and put on guard, was not molested.

Next day, the natives, who had an important village upon Matuaro Island, endeavoured to prevent the sailors from fetching the water and wood they needed. The latter then marched against them, bayonet in hand, and followed them up to their village, where they shut themselves in. The voice of the chief inciting them to battle was heard. Firing was commenced as soon as the village was within range, and this was so well directed that the chiefs were the first victims. As soon as they fell, the natives fled. Some fifty were killed, the rest were driven into the sea, and the village was burned.

It was useless to dream of bringing to the shore the five masts, made with great difficulty from the cedars which had been cut down, and the carpenters were obliged to repair the mast with pieces of wood collected on the ships. The provisioning of the ships with the seven hundred barrels of water, and seventy loads of wood, necessary for the voyage, would infallibly occupy at least a month, for there remained only one sloop.

The fate of Marion, and the men who had accompanied him, was still unknown. A well-armed detachment therefore started for the village of Tacouri.

It was abandoned! Only men too old to follow the flight of their companions remained, and were seated in the doors of their huts. An effort was made to take them. One of them, without any apparent effort, at once struck a soldier with a javelin he held in his hand. He was killed, but no injury was inflicted upon the others who were left in the village. All the houses were thoroughly searched. In Tacouri’s kitchen a man’s skull was found which had been cooked some days before. Some fleshy parts still remained which bore the impress of the cannibal’s teeth. On a wooden spit, a piece of a human thigh, three parts eaten, was found. In another house, a shirt was recognized as having belonged to the unfortunate Marion. The collar was soaked in blood, and two or three holes were found in the side, also blood-stained. In various other houses, portions of the clothes, and the pistols belonging to young Vaudricourt, who had accompanied the Captain, were brought to light. The boat’s arms, and quantities of scraps of the unfortunate sailors’ clothing, were also discovered.

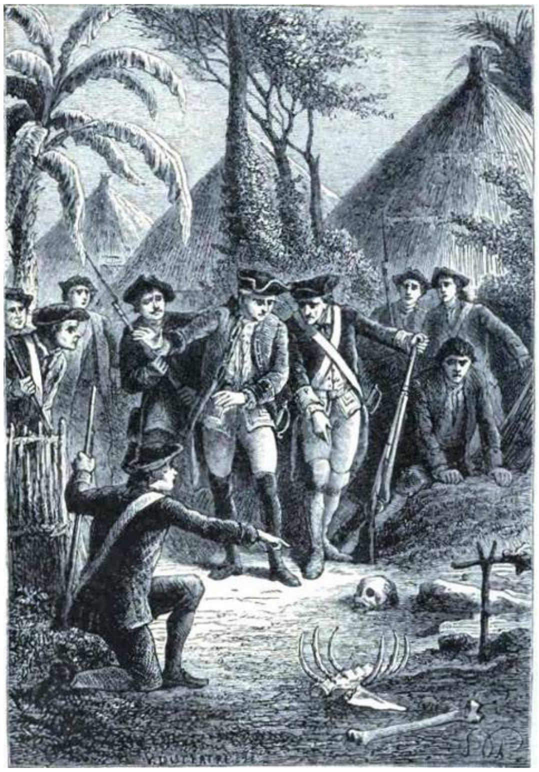

“A man’s skull was found.”

Doubt was unfortunately no longer possible. An account of the death of the victims was drawn up, and Chevalier Du Clesmeur searched Marion’s papers to discover his projects, and the plans for the prosecution of the voyage. He found only the instructions given by the Governor of Mauritius.

A council was held with the ship’s officers, and, bearing in mind the lamentable condition of the vessels, it was decided to abandon the search for new lands, and to make for Amsterdam or Rotterdam Island, then for the Mariana and Philippines, where there was a chance of disposing of the cargo, before returning to Mauritius. On the 14th of July, Du Clesmeur left Treason Port, as he named the bay of these islands, and the vessels steered towards Amsterdam and Rotterdam Islands, to the north of which they passed on the 6th of August. Navigation was aided by splendid weather, a fortunate circumstance, as scurvy had made such ravages among the sailors, that very few of them were in a condition to work. At length, on the 20th of September, Guaham Island, the largest of the Mariana group, was discovered. It was impossible to cast anchor until seven days later.

The account published by Crozet contains very precise and circumstantial details regarding this island, with its productions and inhabitants. We will only transcribe from it one phrase, as explicit as it is short.

“Guaham Island,” he says, “appeared to us a terrestrial paradise. The air was excellent, the water good, the vegetables and fruits were perfect, the herds of cattle, goats, and pigs, innumerable; every species of fowl abounded.” Amongst the vegetable productions, Crozet mentions “Rima,” the fruit of which is good to eat, when it has attained its full growth and is still green.

“In this condition,” he says, “the natives gather it for food. They remove the rough skin, and cut it in slices like bread. When they wish to preserve it, they cut it in round pieces, and dry it in the sun or in an oven, in the form of very small cakes. This natural biscuit preserves its bread-like qualities for several years, and far longer than our best ship’s biscuits.”

From Port Agana, Crozet reached the Philippine Islands, and anchored off Cavite, in Manilla Bay. This was the spot where the *Castries* and *Mascarin* parted, to go back to Mauritius separately.

Some years previously a gallant officer of the royal navy, Chevalier Jacques Raymond de Geron de Grenier, who was one of that group of distinguished men, — the Chazelles, the Bordas, the Fleuriens, the Du Martz de

Gormpy, the Chaberts, the Verduns de la Crenne, who contributed so zealously to the progress of navigation and geography — had employed his leisure, during a stay in the Isle of France, in exploring the adjacent seas.

He had made a very profitable cruise in the corvette, the *Heure du Berger*, during which he rectified the position of Saint Brandon’s rock, and of the Saya-de-Malha sandbank, examined separately Saint Michael, Rocque-pire, and Agalega in the Seychelles archipelago, and corrected the charts of Adu and Diego Garcia Islands. Convinced of the connexion of the currents with the monsoon, which he had thoroughly studied, he proposed a shortened route, always open, from the Isle of France to the Indies. It would be a saving of eight hundred leagues, and was well worth serious consideration.

The minister of Marine, who had seen Grenier’s proposition well received by the Naval Academy, decided to entrust its examination to a ship’s officer, who was accustomed to work of the kind.

He selected Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen. During two expeditions, undertaken in 1767 and 1768, for the encouragement and protection of the cod-fisheries on the coast of Iceland, this navigator had surveyed a great number of ports and roadsteads, collected astronomical observations, rectified the map of Iceland, and accumulated a mass of particulars concerning this little-known country. It was he, indeed, who gave the earliest authentic account of “geysers,” those springs of warm water which occasionally reach to such great heights, and he also supplied curious details of the existence of fossil wood, which prove that at an early geological period, Iceland, now entirely devoid of trees, possessed enormous forests.

Kerguelen had at the same time published novel details of the manners and customs of the inhabitants.

“The women,” he said, “have dresses, jackets, and aprons made of a cloth called ‘wadmal’ which is made in Iceland. They wear an ample robe above their jackets, rather like that of the Jesuits, but not so long as the petticoats, which they allow to be seen. These robes are of different colours, but generally black; they are called ‘hempe.’ They are trimmed with velvet or some other ornament. The head-dresses look like pyramids or sugar-loaves, two or three feet high. The women ornament the head with a large handkerchief of very coarse cloth, which stands upright, and they cover it with another finer one, which forms the shape of which I spoke.” Lastly, Kerguelen had collected very interesting documents, relating to Denmark, the Laplanders, the Samoyedes, the Faroe Islands, the Orkney and Shetland Islands, which he had thoroughly explored.

Kerguelen, entrusted with the examination of the route proposed by Grenier, asked permission of the minister to employ his ship to explore all the southern lands discovered in 1739 by Bouvet de Lozier. The Abbé Terray, who had just succeeded the Duke of Praslin, gave him command of the ship *Le Berryer*, which brought 300 able-bodied seamen and provisions for fourteen months from Lorient, together with some ammunition for Mauritius. The Abbé Rochon was associated with Kerguelen, for making astronomical observations. Upon reaching Mauritius, on the 20th of August, 1771, Kerguelen exchanged the *Berryer* for the *La Fortune*, to which a small vessel, the *Gros-ventre*, with sixteen guns and a crew of a hundred men, was attached under command of M. de Saint Allouarn.

As soon as the two vessels were equipped, Kerguelen set sail and steered northward in search of the Mahé Islands. During a great storm, the sounding lines of the *Fortune* gave an ever-decreasing depth, first thirty, then twenty, and at last only fourteen fathoms. Anchor was then cast, and it held fast throughout the tempest.

“Daybreak at last relieved our anxieties,” says Kerguelen; “we perceived neither land nor rock. The *Gros-ventre* was three leagues distant; her captain could not believe that I was at anchor, for the noise of the thunder, and the dazzling lightning, prevented his hearing or seeing my signals. This is the sole instance of a vessel anchoring in the night in the open sea upon an unknown coast. I set sail, and allowed the vessels to drift, taking constant soundings. I at first found fourteen, then twenty, then twenty-five, at last twenty-eight fathoms. Then I suddenly lost the bottom altogether, proving that we had passed above a submarine mountain. This new bank, which I called Fortune Bank, stretched, N.W. and S.E. It is situated in 7° 16’ S. lat. and 55° 50’ E. long.”

The *Fortune* and the *Gros-ventre* then made for 50° S. lat. which was the route recommended by the Chevalier de Grenier. The two captains were aware that the winds constantly blew from the east, at this season of the year, and therefore went to the Maldives, and coasted along Ceylon from Point de Galle, to Trincomalée. Upon their return the monsoon had changed. The prevailing winds were W. and S.W. as Grenier had predicted. The route suggested by him had undeniable advantages, and these have been so amply confirmed by experience that no other is now followed.

Returning to Mauritius on the 8th of December, Kerguelen hurried his preparations for departure to such an extent that he was able to start upon the 12th of January, 1772. He steered southwards, for, supposing that he found land in that direction, the nearest would naturally be the most useful for the French colony.

From the 1st of February, numbers of birds seemed to indicate the proximity of land. Hail succeeded snow. The vessels experienced foul weather, boisterous winds, and a heavy sea. The first land was sighted upon the 12th. Next day a second was discovered, and shortly afterwards a very lofty and extensive cape. The following day at seven o'clock in the morning, the sun having dispelled the clouds, a line of coast extending some twenty-five leagues was clearly seen. The vessels were then in 49° 40' S. lat. and 61° 10' E. long.

Unfortunately storm succeeded storm, and the two vessels with great difficulty escaped being cast ashore. Kerguelen was driven northward by currents, shortly after he had sent a boat to attempt a landing.

"Finding myself so far from land," says Kerguelen, "I reflected upon the best course to be pursued. I remembered that the state of my mast was too bad to allow me to crowd sail, and leave the coast, and that, having no sloop to carry my anchors, I was exposed to extreme danger whilst near the shore, that in the dense fog it was all but impossible to find the *Gros-ventre*, from which I had been separated for several days. It was the more difficult on account of the tempest we had experienced, and the variable winds that prevailed. These reflections and my conviction that the *Gros-ventre* was an excellent sailer, and that she was provisioned for seven months, determined me to return to Mauritius, which I reached upon the 16th of March." Fortunately no accident had happened to the *Gros-ventre*. Her boat had returned in time; M. de Boisguehenneuc, who had landed, had taken possession of the land with all the usual formalities, and left some writing in a bottle, which was found by Captain Cook in 1776.

Kerguelen returned to France, but his successful enterprise had gained him many enemies. When upon the 1st of January, 1772, the king nominated him captain, and Chevalier de Saint Louis, the attacks upon him increased. The most malignant slanders were circulated. They even went the length of accusing him of having scuttled the *Gros-ventre* in order to derive all the benefit accruing from the discovery which he had made in concert with M. de Saint Allouarn.

The minister, however, was not influenced by these slanders, and decided to entrust the command of a second expedition to Kerguelen. The *Roland*, and the frigate *Oiseau*, left Brest upon the 26th of March, 1772, the latter under command of M. de Saux de Rosnevet.

Upon reaching the Cape, Kerguelen was obliged to put in for forty days. The entire crew was suffering from putrid fever, probably owing to the dampness of the new vessel.

“This appeared the more probable,” says the narrative, “because all the dried vegetables, such as peas, beans, lentils, &c. together with the rice, and a quantity of biscuits, were spoiled in the store-room. The vegetables emitted a kind of steam which was infectious, and the store-rooms became infested with numbers of white worms. The *Roland* left the Cape upon the 11th of July, but she was almost immediately overtaken by a frightful tempest, which carried away two topsails, the jib, and the mizen mast. Finally Mauritius was reached by means of jury-masts.”

MM. de Roches and Poivre, who had contributed so essentially to the success of the first expedition, had been succeeded by M. de Ternay and the Intendant Maillard. They appeared determined to offer every possible obstacle to the execution of Kerguelen’s orders. They gave him no fresh victuals, of which the crew had pressing need, and there were no means of replacing the masts destroyed by the tempest. In lieu of the thirty-four sailors who had to go to the hospital, he was provided only with disgraced or maimed soldiers, of whom he was glad to rid himself. An expedition to the southern seas, so equipped, could only come to a disastrous end; and that was precisely what happened.

On the 5th of January, Kerguelen sighted the lands he had discovered in his first voyage, and between that date and the 16th he recognized various points, Croy Island, Re-union Island, Roland Island, which in his estimation made more than eighty leagues of coast. The weather continued extremely severe; thick fogs, snow, hail, and gales succeeded each other. On the 21st, the vessels could only keep in company by constant firing. Upon that day the cold was so severe that several of the sailors fainted on deck.

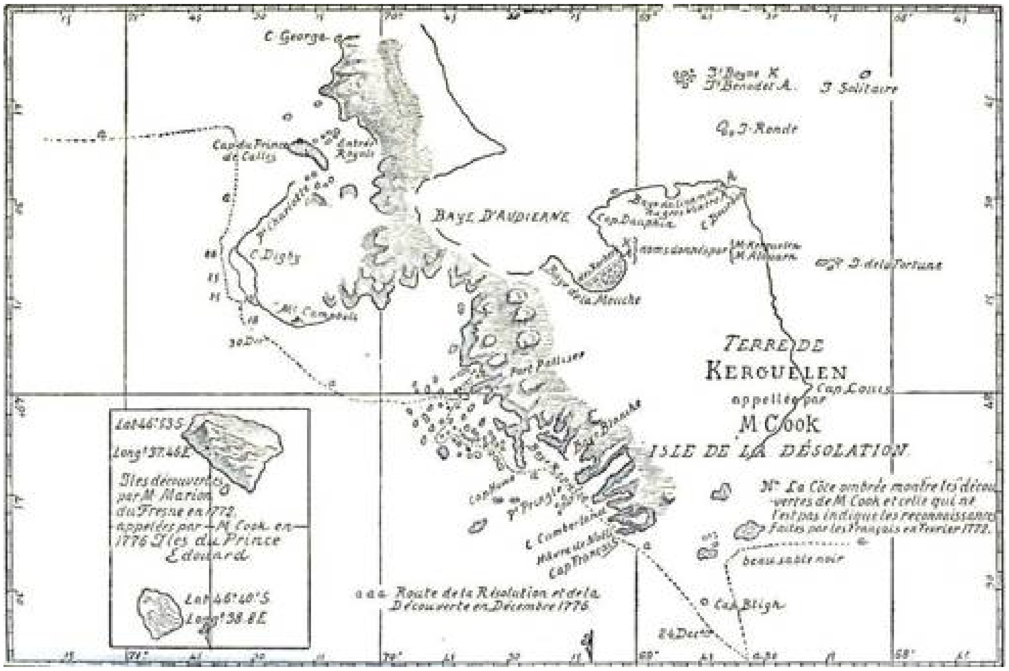
C. George
I. Boyne K
I. Benodet A.
I. Solitaire
I. Ronde
Cap du Prince de Galles
Entrée Royale
C. Digby
M. Campbell
30 Dec.
BAYE D'AUDIERNE
Cap Dauphin
I. de la Fortune
Baye de la Mouche
TERRE DE KERGUELEN appellée par M. Cook ISLE DE LA DÉSOLATION
Cap Louis
Port Palliser
Cap Pringle
C. Cumberland
Cap François
Cap Bligh
24 Dec.
beau sable noir
Lat 46° 53' S.
Long. 37.46 E.
Iles découvertes par M. Marion du Fresne en 1772, appelées par M. Cook en 1776 Iles du Prince Edouard
Lat 46° 40' S.
Long. 38.8 E.
a a a Route de la Résolution et de la Découverte en Décembre 1776
Nota: La Côte ombrée montre les découvertes de M. Cook et celle qui ne l'est pas indique les reconnaissances faites par les François en Février 1772.
70°
69°
68°

“The officers,” says Kerguelen, “insisted that the ordinary ration of biscuit was not enough, and that without more the crew could not possibly resist the cold and fog. I increased each man’s rations by four ounces of biscuit daily.”

Upon the 8th of January, 1774, the *Roland* signalled the frigate at Re-union Island. Communication with her was opened, and M. Rosnevet declared that he had found an anchorage in a bay behind Cape Français, that he had sent a boat on the 6th to take soundings, and that, upon landing to take possession, the men had killed a sea-lion and some penguins.

Once again, the prostrate condition of the crew, the bad quality of the victuals, and the dilapidated state of the vessels, prevented Kerguelen from making a thorough investigation of this desolate archipelago. He was forced to return; but, instead of returning to Mauritius, he landed in Antongil Bay, Madagascar, where he was sure of obtaining lemons, limes, custard apples, and other anti-scorbutics, as well as fresh meat.

An adventurer named Beniowski, whose history is sufficiently curious, had just founded a French colony there. But he was in need of everything. Kerguelen gave him ammunition, bricks, iron implements, shirts, blankets, &c. and finally ordered his carpenters to build a store-shed for him.

Thirty-four of the crew of the *Roland* had died since leaving the southern regions, and if Kerguelen had remained another week in these latitudes, he would have lost a hundred men! On his return to France, Kerguelen met with nothing but ill-will and calumny, in return for so much fatigue, so bravely born. The feeling against him was so strong that one of his officers was not ashamed to publish a memoir, in which all the facts were dressed up in the most unfavourable shape, and the failure of the enterprise thrown upon Kerguelen. We do not assert that he was entirely free from blame, but we consider the verdict of the council of war which deprived him of his rank, and condemned him to detention in the Château of Saumur, most unjust. No doubt the judgment was found to be excessive, and the government discerned more malice than justice in it, for a few months later

Kerguelen was restored to liberty. The gravest charge against him was that of having abandoned his sloop and a portion of his crew, in the southern seas, who, but for the opportune arrival of the *Fortune*, must have perished. Probably, however, even this was much exaggerated, for a letter exists from the abandoned officer, M. de Rosily (afterwards vice-admiral), in which he begs to serve again under Kerguelen. The account of these expeditions is an extract from the apology published by Kerguelen during his imprisonment, a work which was confiscated by government, and on that account is extremely rare.

We must now turn our attention to the account of expeditions which, although they did not result in discoveries, had an importance of their own. They contributed to the rectification of charts, to the progress of navigation and geography, but, above all, they solved a long-standing problem, the determination of longitude at sea.

To decide upon the position of a locality it is first necessary to obtain its latitude, that is to say, its distance N. or S. from the equator, and its longitude, or in other words its distance E. or W. from some known meridian.

At this period, no instrument for determining the position of a ship existed but the rope known as a log, which, thrown into the sea, measured the distance which the ship made every half minute; the proportionate speed of the vessel per hour was deduced from it. But the log is far from immoveable, and the speed of a vessel is not always the same, hence arose two important sources of error. The direction of the route was determined by the mariner’s needle or compass. But every one knows that the compass is subject to variations, and that the vessel does not invariably follow the course it indicates, and it is no easy matter to determine the exact difference. These inconveniences once admitted, the question was to find a method exempt from them.

With Hadley's quadrant, latitude could be determined within a minute, that is to say, to the third of a league. But such an approximate exactitude was not possible in deciding longitudes. When once the different phenomena of the variations of the magnetic needle, either of declination or inclination, should be fully understood, it would be easy; but how to obtain this knowledge? It was well known that in the Indian Sea, between Bourbon, Madagascar, and Rodriguez, a variation of four degrees in the declination of the needle was equivalent to a variation of five degrees in the longitude, but it was equally admitted that the declination of the magnetic needle was subject to variations, in the same localities, for which no cause could be assigned.

Verdun de la Crenne, writing in 1778, says a declination of twelve degrees, from N. to W. twenty years ago, indicated a longitude of 61° W. of Paris, in any given latitude. It is very probable that within the last twenty years the declination has varied two degrees, which makes the longitude deduced from it wrong by two and a half degrees, or nearly fifty nautical miles.

If the right time is known on board, that is to say, the correct time by which the meridian could be computed at the moment of any given observation, and if at the same time, the exact time at the port from which the ship had started, or that if any known meridian could be ascertained, the difference of time would evidently give that of the meridians, at the rate of fifteen degrees per hour, or one degree per four minutes. The problem of the longitude could thus be reduced to a determination, at a given moment of the time at any given meridian.

To achieve this it was necessary to have a watch or clock which should preserve a perfect isochronism, in defiance of the state of the sea or differences of temperature.

Many attempts had been made. Besson in the sixteenth century, Huyghens in the seventeenth century, and again Sully, Harrison, Dutertre, Gallonde, Rivas, Le Roy, and Ferdinand Berthoud had attempted to solve the problem.

The English and French Governments, moreover, convinced of the value of a perfect instrument, had offered a high reward for its invention. The Academy of Science had instituted a competition. In 1765 Le Roy sent in two watches for competition, whilst Berthould, who was in the king's service, was unable to do so. Le Roy's watches passed successfully through the various trials to which they were subjected on land. It remained to be proved whether they would be equally trustworthy at sea.

The Marquis de Constanvaux had the frigate *Aurora* built at his own cost for this experiment. Le Roy, however, decided that a cruise, with constant stoppages, at Calais, Dunkirk, Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Boulogne, lasting only from the 25th of May to the 29th of August, was far too short, and he demanded a second trial. This time his watches were sent on board the frigate, the *Enjouée*, which, leaving Havre, put in at St. Pierre near Teneriffe, at Salee in Africa, at Cadiz, and finally, after a voyage of four months and a half, at Brest. The trial had been a serious one, the latitudes and the state of the sea having both changed constantly. If the watch had neither lost or gained, it won the prize, which was in fact assigned to Le Roy.

The Academy, however, knew that many other scientific men had bestowed their attention upon the subject, and for various causes had been unable to exhibit. They therefore proposed the same subject for the competition of 1771, and in 1773 they doubled the prize.

F. Berthould imagined that he had reached perfection, but his watch had still to be tested by the trial of a long sea voyage.

The *Isis*, a frigate of eighteen guns, was equipped at Rochefort at the latter end of 1768, and placed under command of Chevalier d’Eveux de Fleurien, known later as Caret-de Fleurien. Fleurien, then a midshipman, was already, though only thirty years of age, a well known *savant*. We have already mentioned his name, and shall find further occasion to do so. At this juncture, fascinated by mechanics, Fleurien had assisted Berthould in his undertaking, but that his disinterestedness might be above suspicion, he selected several officers to assist him in observing the motions of the watch which was entrusted to him.

Starting in November, 1768, the *Isis* put in successively at Cadiz, the Canary Islands, Goree, the Cape Verde Islands, Martinique, St. Domingo, Terra Nuova, the Canaries, Cadiz again, and reached Aix Island on the 31st of October, 1769.

The watches, carried through climates alternately cold, hot, and temperate, had experienced every vicissitude of climate, and at the same time had been exposed to all the variations of the sea, in the roughest season of the year.

After this trial, which had redounded so much to his honour, Berthould obtained the rank and pension of an inspector of nautical watches.

This expedition had other results which concern us more particularly. Fleurien took a number of astronomical observations, and hydrographical surveys, which resulted in a well-founded condemnation of the maps of his country.

“For a long time,” he says, in his account of his voyage, “I did not attempt criticism of the maps belonging to the Society; I wished to limit myself to giving new details by which they might be rectified; but I found such numberless and dangerous mistakes, that I should have considered myself culpable towards mariners if I had neglected fully to point them out.”

A little further on he justly criticizes the maps of a geographer who had at one time been famous.

“I will not undertake,” he says, “to enumerate all the errors which I have found in M. Bellin’s maps. Their number is infinite. I shall content myself simply with proving the necessity for the work I did, by indicating the more glaring faults, either by comparing the positions of various places upon his maps, with the positions they should have occupied if *M. Bellin had been willing to use the astronomical observations which have been published at various times*; or by comparing other positions with those which we have determined by our own observations.”

Lastly, after giving a long list of errors in the situation of the most frequented places of Europe, of Africa and America, he winds up with these judicious words: —

“Upon glancing at a list of the various errors I have discovered in M. Bellin’s maps, one is led to a reflection, sad but true and inevitable — if the maps of the best known part of the globe, and on which the greater number of observations have been taken, are so far from correct, what exactitude can we hope to find in maps representing less frequented shores and islands, drawn and arranged by guess-work?”

Up to this time the watches had been examined separately and by different judges. Now arose the question of submitting them simultaneously to the same test, and of seeing which would come out victorious.

For this purpose the frigate *La Flore* was equipped at Brest, and the command was given to a most distinguished officer, Verdun de la Crenne, who was to become vice-admiral in 1786. The various stages of the expedition were Cadiz, Madeira, the Salvage Islands, Teneriffe, Goree, Martinique, Terra Nuova, Iceland — which our explorers had some trouble to find — the Faroe Islands, Denmark and Dunkerque. The narrative published by Verdun de la Crenne, like that of Fleurien, abounds in rectifications of every kind. It is easy to see how carefully and exactly the soundings were taken, with what care the coasts were surveyed; but not a little interesting also is that which is altogether wanting in Fleurien's publication, descriptions of the countries and critical reflections upon the manners and customs of the different peoples visited.

Amongst the most interesting particulars contained in two large 4to volumes, we must mention those relating to the Canary Islands and their ancient inhabitants the Serères and Yolof, on Iceland, and the accurate remarks made by Verdun upon the subject of the meridian of Faroe Islands.

"It was the most easterly meridian of these islands," he says, "that Ptolemy chose for the first meridian. It would doubtless have been easy for him to have selected Alexandria for the first meridian; but this great man was aware that such a choice would bring no real honour to his country, that Rome and other ambitious towns might covet this imaginary glory, that every geographer, every narrator of voyages, arbitrarily choosing his own meridian, would engender confusion or at least embarrassment in the mind of the reader."

Clearly Verdun regarded the question of the first meridian from a high standpoint, as all really disinterested minds still do. It gives him yet another claim to our sympathy.

Let us conclude with a quotation from this author: “The watches came out of the contest with honour. They had borne heat and cold, they had been becalmed, they had endured shocks as well as the vessel which carried them when it was wrecked at Antigua, and when it received charges of artillery. In a word, they fulfilled the hopes we had indulged, they deserve the confidence of navigators, and lastly they are of great service in the determination of longitude at sea.”

The solution of the problem was found!

II.

The Expedition of La Perouse — St. Catherine’s Island — Conception Island — The Sandwich Islands — Survey of the American coast — French Port — Loss of two boats — Monterey and the Indians of California — Stay at Macao — Cavite and Manilla — *En route* for China and Japan — Formosa — Quelpaert Island — The coast of Tartary — Ternay Bay — The Tartars of Saghalien — The Orotchys — Straits of La Perouse — Ball at Kamtchatka — Navigator Islands — Massacre of M. de Langle and several of his companions — Botany Bay — No news of the Expedition — D’Entrecasteaux sent in search of La Perouse — False News — D’Entrecasteaux Channel — The coast of New Caledonia — Land of the Arsacides — The natives of Bouka —

Stay in Port Carteret — Admiralty Islands — Stay at Amboine — Lewin Land — Nuyts Archipelago — Stay in Tasmania — Fête in the Friendly Islands — Particulars of the stay of La Perouse at Tonga Tabou — Stay at Balado — Traces of La Perouse in New Caledonia — Vanikoro — Sad fate of the Expedition.

The result of Cook's voyage, except the fact of his death, was still unknown, when the French government resolved to make use of the leisure which the peace just concluded had secured to the navy. The French officers, desirous of emulating the success of their old rivals the English, were fired with a noble emulation to excel them in some new field. The question arose as to the fittest person for the conduct of an important expedition. There was no lack of deserving candidates. Indeed, in the number lay the difficulty.

The Minister's choice fell upon Jean François Galaup de la Perouse, whose important military services had rapidly advanced him to the rank of captain. During the last war he had been intrusted with the difficult mission of destroying the English posts in Hudson's Bay, and in this task he had proved himself not only an able soldier and sailor, but a man who could combine humanity with professional firmness. Second to him in the command was M. de Langle, who had ably assisted him in the expedition to Hudson's Bay.

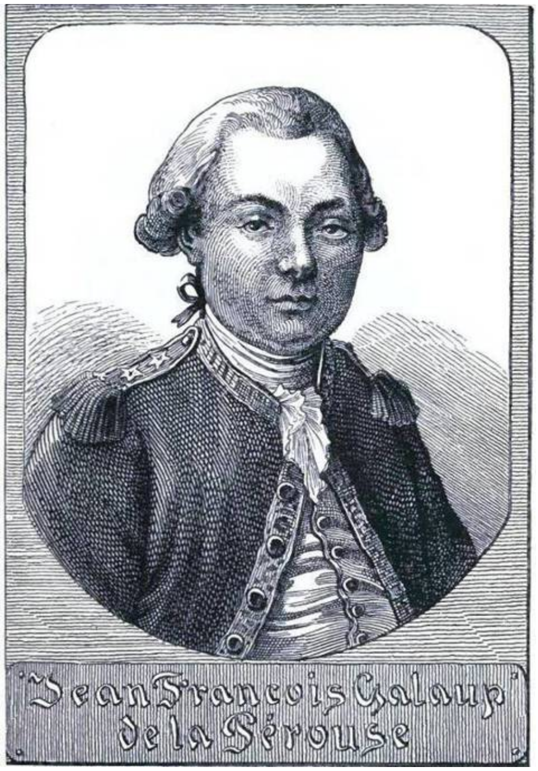

Portrait of La Pérouse.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

A large staff embarked upon the two frigates *La Boussole* and *L'Astrolabe*. On board the *Boussole* were La Perouse; Clenard, who was made captain during the expedition; Monneron, an engineer; Bernizet, a geographer; Rollin, a surgeon; Lepante Dagelet, an astronomer of the Academy of Sciences; Lamanon, a physicist; Duché de Vancy and Prevost the younger, draughtsmen; Collignon, a botanist; and Guéry, a clock maker. The *Astrolabe*, in addition to her commander, Captain de Langle, carried Lieutenant de Monte, who was made captain during the voyage, and the celebrated Monge, who, fortunately for the interests of science, landed at Teneriffe upon the 30th of August, 1785.

The Academy of Sciences and the Society of Medicine had drawn up reports for the Minister of Marine, in which they called the attention of the navigators to certain points. Lastly, Fleurien, the superintendent of ports and naval arsenals, had himself drawn up the maps for the service of the expedition, and added to it an entire volume of learned notes and discussions upon the results of all known voyages since the time of Christopher Columbus.

The two ships carried an enormous amount of merchandise for trade, as well as a vast quantity of provisions and stores, a twenty-ton boat, two sloops, masts, and reserve sets of sails and rigging.

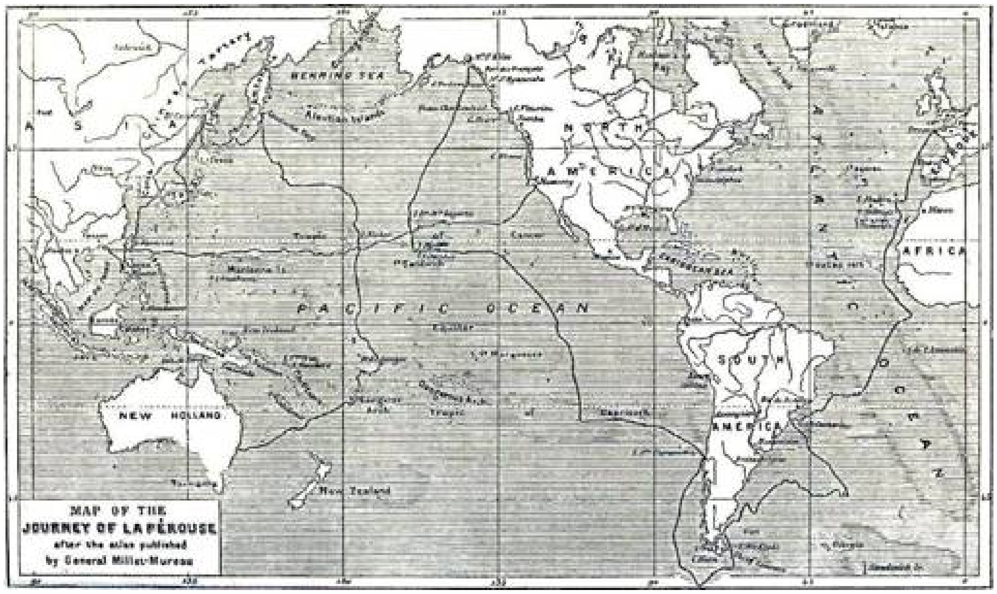
MAP OF THE
JOURNEY OF LA PÉROUSE
after the atlas published
by General Millet-Mureau
ASIA
BEHRING SEA
Aleutian Islands
NORTH AMERICA
PACIFIC OCEAN
SOUTH AMERICA
AFRICA
NEW HOLLAND
New Zealand
Mariana Is.

The two frigates sailed upon the 1st of August, 1785, and anchored off Madeira thirteen days later.

The French were at once charmed and surprised at the kind and cordial welcome accorded them by the English residents. Upon the 19th La Perouse put into Teneriffe.

“The various observations,” he says, “made by MM. de Fleurien, Verdun, and Borda, upon Madeira, the Salvage Islands, and Teneriffe leave nothing to be wished for. Our attention was therefore confined to testing our instruments.”

This remark proves that La Perouse was capable of doing justice to his predecessors. And we shall have other opportunities of observing that quality in him.

While the astronomers devoted themselves to estimating the regularity of the astronomical watches, the naturalists, with several officers, ascended the Peak, and collected some curious plants. Monneron succeeded in measuring this mountain with much greater accuracy than his predecessors, Herberdeen, Feuillée, Bouguer, Verdun, and Borda, who calculated its height respectively at 2409, 2213, 2100, and 1904 fathoms. Unfortunately his work, which would have settled the discussion, never reached France.

Upon the 16th of October, the isles, or rather rocks, of Marten Vas were seen. La Perouse ascertained their position, and afterwards made for the nearest, Trinity Island, which was only some nine leagues to the west. The commander of the expedition sent a sloop on shore in charge of an officer, in the hope of finding water, wood, and provisions. The officer had an interview with the Portuguese governor, whose garrison consisted of about two hundred men, fifteen of whom wore uniforms, and the rest merely shirts. The poverty of the land was obvious, and the French re-embarked without having obtained anything.

After a vain search for Ascension Island, the expedition reached Saint Catherine’s Island, off the coast of Brazil.

“After ninety-six days’ navigation,” we read in the narrative of the voyage published by General Millet-Mureau, “we had not one case of illness on board. The health of the crew had remained unimpaired by change of climate, rain, and fog; but our provisions were of first-class quality; I neglected none of the precautions which experience and prudence suggested to me; and above all, we kept up our spirits by encouraging dancing every evening among the crew, whenever the weather permitted, from eight o’clock till ten.”

Saint Catherine’s Island, of which we have more than once had occasion to speak in the course of this narrative, extends from 27° 19’ 10” S. lat. to 27° 49’. It is only two leagues wide, and is divided in its narrowest part from the mainland by a channel of two hundred fathoms. The town of Nostra Señora del Desterra, the capital of the colony, where the governor resides, is built at the point of this narrow entrance. The population amounts, at the utmost, to three thousand, and there are about four hundred houses. The appearance of the town is very pleasant. According to Frezier’s account, this island was a refuge in 1712 for the vagabonds who fled there from different parts of Brazil. They were Portuguese subjects in name only, and recognized no other authority. The country is so fertile that the inhabitants can live quite independently of any neighbouring colony. The ships in the harbour gave them shirts and coats, of which they had absolutely none, in exchange for provisions.

This island is extremely fertile, and the soil could easily be made to grow sugar-cane, but the inhabitants are so poor that they cannot buy the needful slaves for the labour.

The French vessels found all that they needed in this spot, and their officers were cordially received by the Portuguese authorities.

The following fact will give an idea of the hospitality of these people. “My boat,” says La Perouse, “having been upset in a creek where I was having wood cut, the inhabitants, after assisting in saving it, insisted on our shipwrecked sailors using their beds, and themselves slept on mats upon the floor of the room where they received them so hospitably. A few days later they brought to my vessel the sails, mast, grapnel, and flag of the boat, which would have been of great use to them for their pirogues.”

The *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe* weighed anchor upon the 19th of November, and directed their course to Cape Horn. After a violent storm, during which the frigates behaved very well, and after forty days’ fruitless search for the large island discovered by a Frenchman, Antoine de la Roche, and called Georgia by Captain Cook, La Perouse crossed the Straits of Lemaire. Finding the winds favourable, he decided not to remain in Good Success Bay at this advanced season of the year, but immediately to double Cape Horn, in the hope of avoiding a possible delay that would have exposed his ships to injury and his crew to useless fatigue.

The friendly demonstrations of the Fuegians, the abundance of whales, which had never before been disturbed, the immense flocks of albatross and petrels, did not change his resolve. Cape Horn was rounded more easily than could have been expected. Upon the 9th of February the expedition was in the Straits of Magellan, and upon the 24th anchor was cast in Concepcion Harbour, which La Perouse preferred to that of Juan Fernandez, on account of the exhaustion of his provisions. The robust health of the crews astonished the Spanish governor. Possibly this was the first time a vessel had rounded Cape Horn and arrived in Chili without any sick on board.

The town, which was destroyed by an earthquake in 1757, had been rebuilt three leagues from the sea, upon the shore of the river Biobio. The houses are of one storey, and the town of La Concepcion contains ten thousand inhabitants. The bay is one of the most commodious in the world; the sea is smooth, and almost free from currents. This part of Chili is wonderfully fertile. One ear of corn reproduces sixty; vines are equally prolific; and the country teems with innumerable flocks, which multiply beyond all credence.

In spite of these prosperous conditions the country made no progress, on account of the prohibitive system which at this time prevailed. Chili, with its productions, which might easily have fed the half of Europe; its wool, which might have sufficed for the manufactures of France and England; its meats, which might have been preserved — had no commerce whatever. At the same time the duty upon imported goods was excessive, so that living was very dear. The middle class, as the “bourgeoisie” are now called, did not exist; the population consisted of two classes, the rich and the poor, as the following passage shows: —

“The dress of the women consists of a plaited skirt of the ancient gold or silver tissues which were formerly manufactured at Lyons. These petticoats, which are kept for grand occasions, are often inherited like diamonds, and are handed down from generation to generation. They are only worn by a small number of the higher class; the others have scarcely the means of clothing themselves at all.”

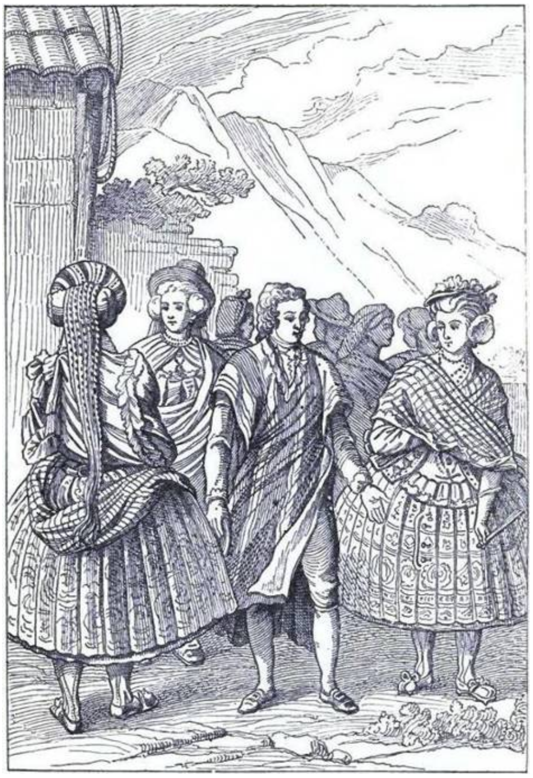

Costumes of the inhabitants of Conception.

We will not follow La Perouse into his details of the enthusiastic reception given to him, and we will pass over in silence his description of balls and toilettes, which never for a moment induced him to lose sight of the object of his voyage. So far the expedition had only passed through regions often before visited by Europeans. It was now about to penetrate to less-known realms. Anchor was raised upon the 15th of March, and, after a voyage entirely free from incident, the two frigates anchored upon the 9th of April in Cook’s Bay, Easter Island.

La Perouse affirms that Mr. Hodges, the painter, who accompanied the celebrated English navigator, has given a very unjust representation of the inhabitants. Generally their physiognomies are pleasing, but they cannot be said to have much character.

This is by no means the only point upon which the French navigator differs from Captain Cook. He believed the famous statues, of which one of the draughtsmen made an excellent sketch, to have been the work of the present generation, whose numbers he estimates at two thousand. It appeared to him also that the absolute lack of trees, and therefore of lakes and rivers, was due to the extravagant waste of wood by the earlier races. No disagreeable incident occurred during the stay. Robberies, it is true, were frequent; but as the French intended remaining only one day on the island, they thought it superfluous to give the population stricter ideas of honesty.

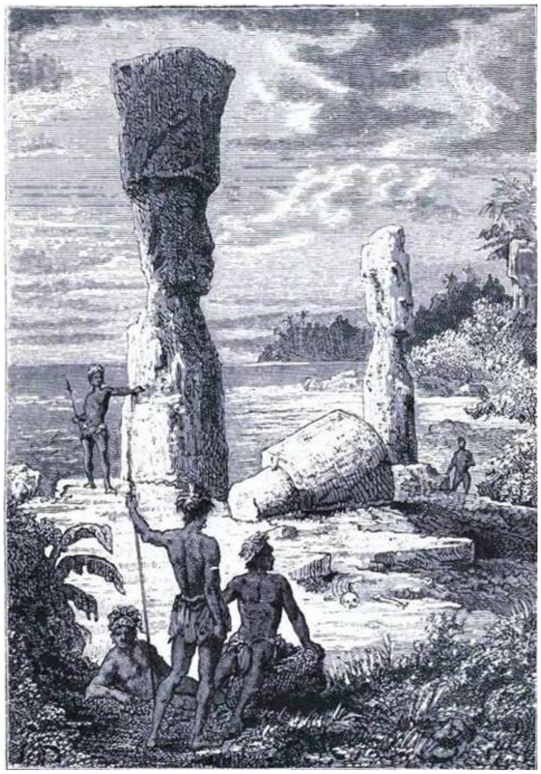

Inhabitants of Easter Island.

After leaving Easter Island, upon the 10th of April, La Perouse followed much the same route as Cook had done in 1777, when he sailed from Tahiti to the American coast; but he was a hundred leagues farther west. La Perouse indulged in the hope of making discoveries in this little-known region of the Pacific Ocean, and he promised to reward the sailor who should first sight land. Upon the 29th of May the Hawaiian archipelago was reached.

The naval watches proved of great assistance upon this occasion, and justified the opinion entertained of them. Upon reaching the Sandwich Islands La Perouse found a difference of five degrees between the longitude given and that obtained by him. Without the watches he would have placed this group five degrees too far east. This explains why the islands discovered by the Spanish — Mendana, Queros, &c. — are much too near the American coast, and also the non-existence of the group called by the Spaniards La Mesa, Los Majos, and La Disgraceada, which there is every reason to suppose was none other than the Sandwich archipelago, as Mesa in Spanish means “table,” and Captain King compares the mountain called Mauna Loa to a plateau or table-land. He did not, however, trust to conjecture; he crossed the reputed site of Los Majos, and found not the slightest trace of land.

“The aspect of Monee,” says La Perouse, “is delightful. We saw water tumbling in cascades from the summit of the mountains, and reaching the sea after watering the Indian plantations, of which there are so many that each village extends over three or four leagues. All the huts are, however, on the sea-shore; and the mountains are so close that the habitable portion of the land appeared to me to be less than half a league in depth. One must be a sailor, and, like us, have been reduced to a bottle of water per day in a burning climate, to realize the sensations we experienced. The trees which crowned the mountains, the green fields, the banana-trees which surrounded the dwellings, all combined to charm our senses with an inexpressible delight; but the sea broke violently on the shore, and, like Tantalus, we were obliged to devour with our eyes what was completely beyond our reach.”

The two frigates had no sooner anchored than they were surrounded by pirogues, full of natives, offering pigs, potatoes, bananas, “taro,” &c. Clever traders, they attached most value to bits of old iron rings. Their acquaintance with iron and its use, for which they were not indebted to Cook, is another proof that this people had known the Spaniards, to whom the discovery of the group is probably due.

The welcome accorded to La Perouse was most cordial, in spite of the military force by which he had thought proper to protect himself. Although the French were the first to land on Monee Island, La Perouse did not think it his duty to take possession.

“The usual European custom in such matters,” he says, “is perfectly ridiculous. Philosophers may well sigh when they see men, simply because they have guns and bayonets, thinking nothing of sixty thousand of their fellow-men, and, without the least respect for the most sacred rights, looking upon a land whose inhabitants have cultivated it in the sweat of the brow, and whose ancestors lie buried there, as an object fit for conquest.”

La Perouse does not pause to give any details about the inhabitants of the Sandwich Islands. He only passed a few hours there, whilst the English remained for four months. He therefore rightly refers to Captain Cook’s narrative.

During their short stay the French bought more than a hundred pigs, mats, fruits, a pirogue, ornaments made of feathers and shells, and handsome helmets decorated with feathers.

The instructions furnished La Perouse before his departure enjoined him to survey the American coast, of which a portion, extending to Mount Elias had, with the exception of Nootka port, been merely sighted by Captain Cook.

On the 23rd of June he reached 60° N. lat. and, in the midst of a long chain of snow-covered mountains, recognized the Mount Elias of Behring. After skirting along the coast for some time, La Perouse sent three boats, under command of one of his officers, M. de Monte, who discovered a large bay, to which he gave his name.

Following the coast at a short distance, surveys were taken, which were uninterrupted as far as an important river, which received the name of Behring. Apparently it was that to which Cook had given this name.

Upon the 2nd of July, in 58° 36’ lat. and 140° 3’ long. what appeared to be a fine bay was discovered. Boats, under command of MM. de Pierrevert, de Flassan, and Boutevilliers, were sent to examine it.

Their report being favourable, the two frigates arrived at the entrance of the bay, but the *Astrolabe* was driven back to the open sea by a strong current, and the *Boussole* was forced to join her. At six o’clock in the morning, after a night passed under sail, the vessels again approached the bay. “But,” says the narrative, “at seven in the morning, when we were close to it, the wind veered so suddenly to W.N.W. and N.N.W. that we were forced to give way, and even to bring our ships to the wind. Fortunately the tide carried our frigates into the bay, and we escaped the rocks on the east by half a pistol’s range. I anchored in three and a half fathoms, with a rocky bottom, half a cable's length from shore. The *Astrolabe* had anchored in the same depth, and upon a similar bottom. In all the thirty years I have spent at sea, I have never seen two vessels in greater danger. Our situation would have been safe had we not anchored upon a rocky bottom, which extended several cables' length around us, and which was different from what MM. de Flasson and Boutevilliers had reported. We had no time to make reflections; it was above everything necessary to get out of our dangerous anchorage, to which the rapidity of the current was a great obstacle." However, by dint of much skilful tacking, La Perouse succeeded.

Ever since their entry into the bay the vessels had been surrounded by pirogues swarming with savages. The natives showed a decided preference for iron, in exchange for fish and the skins of otters and other animals. After a few days' stay their number increased rapidly, and they became, if not dangerous, at least a nuisance.

La Perouse established an observatory upon one of the islands in the bay, and set up tents for the sail makers and smiths. Although these posts were most carefully watched, the natives, gliding along the ground like snakes, scarcely stirring a leaf, managed in spite of our sentinels to commit various thefts; and one night they were clever enough to enter the tent where MM. de Launston and Darbaud (who were in charge of the observatory) slept. They carried off a silver-mounted gun, as well as the clothes belonging to the two officers, who had placed them for safety under their pillows. They escaped the notice of a guard of twelve men, and the two officers were not even awakened.

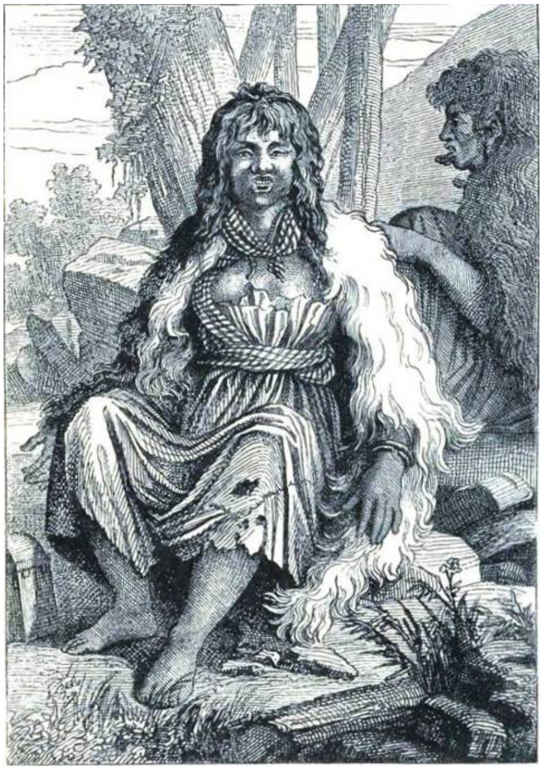

Typical natives of the Port des Français.

But now the stay of the expedition in this port drew to a close. The soundings, surveys, plans, and astronomical observations were completed; but, before finally leaving the island, La Perouse wished thoroughly to explore the depths of the bay. He imagined that some large river must empty itself into it, which would enable him to penetrate into the interior; but in all the openings he entered he found only vast glaciers, which extended to the very summit of Fair Weather Mount.

No accident or sickness marred the success which had so far attended the expedition.

“We thought ourselves,” says La Perouse, “the most fortunate of navigators, for having reached so great a distance from Europe without having had one invalid or a single sufferer from scurvy. But the greatest misfortune, and one it was impossible to foresee, now awaited us.”

Upon the chart of the Port des Français, drawn up by MM. Monneron and Bernizet, the soundings alone remained to be indicated. The naval officers were bound to accomplish the task, and three boats, under the orders of MM. d’Escures, de Marchainville, and Boutin, were selected for the undertaking. La Perouse, acquainted with the somewhat rash zeal of M. d’Escures, advised him on the eve of departure to act with most careful prudence, and only to attempt the soundings in the channel if the sea were smooth.

The boats left at six o’clock in the morning. It was as much a party of pleasure as of duty, as the crews were to hunt, and breakfast under the trees.

“At ten in the morning,” says La Perouse, “I saw our little boat return. Somewhat surprised, for I had not expected it so soon, I asked M. Boutin, before he came on deck, whether he had any news. At first I feared an attack from the natives, and M. Boutin’s expression was not calculated to reassure me, for it was profoundly sad.

“He soon related to me the terrible disaster he had just witnessed, and from which he had escaped by the presence of mind which enabled him to see the best course to pursue in the dreadful peril. Carried, whilst following his commander, into the midst of breakers caused by the tide rushing with a speed of three or four leagues per hour out of the channel, he thought he could place his boat stern on the breakers; the boat yielding to their force, and being impelled by the tide, would not fill, but would be carried safely outside.

“Soon, however, he saw breakers ahead of his boat, and found himself in the open sea. More concerned for the safety of his companions than for his own, he again approached the breakers, and in the hope of saving some life he again braved them, but was repulsed by the tide; finally, he mounted on M. Mouton’s shoulder, in the hope of finding a wider opening. All was in vain; everything had been swallowed up, and M. Boutin returned with the ebb of the tide.

“The sea becoming quieter, this officer had still some hope of finding the boat of the *Astrolabe*; he had only witnessed the loss of ours. M. de Marchainville was now a quarter of a mile from the danger, that is to say, in a sea as still as the quietest harbour; but, impelled by an imprudent generosity — for all help was quite impossible under the circumstances — this rash young officer, being too high-spirited and too courageous to pause in presence of his friends’ danger, flew to their help, threw himself among the breakers, and, a victim to his imprudence and disregard of his chief’s orders, perished with him.

“M. de Langle shortly after came on board my ship, as much overcome as myself, and informed me with tears that the misfortune was even greater than I had supposed. We had always made a point, ever since leaving France, of never allowing the two brothers, M. la Borde Marchainville and M. la Borde Boutevilliers, to go on the same service, but on this one occasion he had yielded, as they desired to hunt together; and it was almost wholly on this account that we had, both of us, directed our boats in the way we did, thinking there was as little danger as there is in Brest Harbour in fine weather.

“Several boats were at once despatched in search of the shipwrecked crew. Rewards were offered to the natives if they saved any one; but the return of the sloops destroyed all hope. All had perished.”

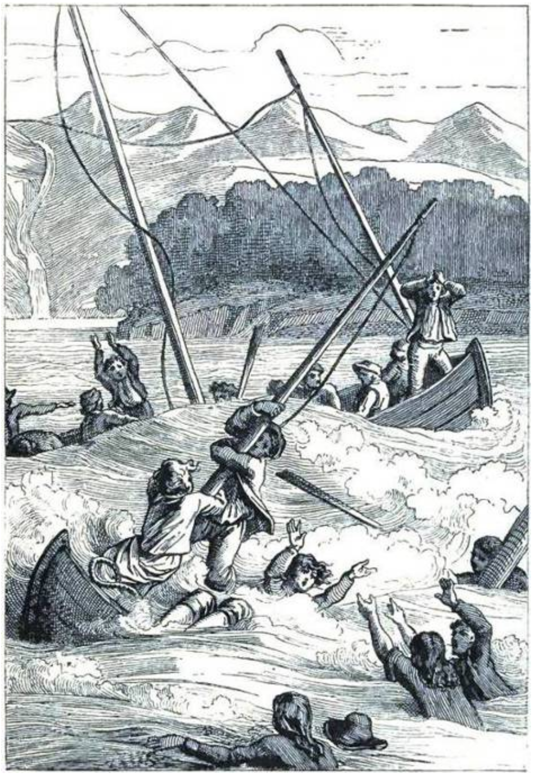

Shipwreck of French boats outside the Port des Français.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Eighteen days after this catastrophe, the two frigates left the Port des Français. La Perouse erected a monument to the memory of his unfortunate countrymen, in the middle of the bay, on an island which he called the Cenotaph. It bore the following inscription: —

“At the entrance of this port, twenty-one brave sailors perished.

Whoever you are, mingle your tears with ours.”

A bottle, containing an account of this deplorable accident, was buried at the foot of the monument.

The Port des Français, which is situated in 58° 37’ N. lat. and 139° 50’ W. long. presents many advantages, but also many inconveniences — foremost amongst them the currents of the channel. The climate is much milder than in Hudson’s Bay, which is in the same latitude. The vegetation is vigorous; pines six feet in girth, and a hundred and forty in height, are not rare. Celery, sorrel, lupine, wild pea, chicory, and mimulus are met with in every direction, as well as many pot-herbs, the use of which helped to keep the crews in health.

The sea supplied abundance of salmon, trout, cod, and plaice.

In the woods are found black and brown bears, the lynx, ermine, weasel, minever, squirrel, marmot, beaver, fox, elk, and the wild goat. The most precious skins are those of the otter, wolf, and sea-bear.

“But if the vegetable and animal productions of this country,” says La Perouse, “are similar to those of many others, its aspect cannot be compared with them, and I doubt whether the deep valleys of the Alps and Pyrenees offer so terrible, and at the same time so picturesque, a prospect. Were it not at one of the extremities of the world, it should be visited by every one.”

As to the inhabitants, La Perouse gives an account of them which is worth preserving.

“The Indians in their pirogues surrounded our frigates, hovering about for three or four hours before beginning to exchange a few fish, or two or three otter skins; they seized every opportunity of robbing us; they tore off all the iron which could be easily carried away, and they took every precaution to elude our vigilance at night. I invited some of the principal personages on board my frigate, and loaded them with presents; and the very men I distinguished in this manner did not scruple to steal a nail or an old pair of trousers. Whenever they assumed a particularly lively and pleasant air, I was convinced that they had committed a theft, and I often pretended not to see it.”

The women make an opening in the thick part of the lower lip, the whole length of the jaw. They wear a sort of wooden bowl without a handle, which rests on the gums, “to which this split lip forms an outer cushion, in such a way that the lower part of the mouth protrudes some two or three inches.”

The forced stay which La Perouse had just made in Port des Français prevented his stopping elsewhere and reconnoitring the indentations of the coast, for at all hazards he was to reach China during the month of February, in order to secure the following summer for the survey of the coast of Tartary.

He successively reconnoitred, upon this coast, Cross Sound, where the high snow-covered mountains cease, Cook’s Island Bay, Engamio Cape, low land partly submerged and containing Mount Hyacinthine, Mount Edgecomb of Cook, Norfolk Sound, where the following year the English navigator Dixon was to anchor, ports Necker and Guibert, Cape Tschiri-Kow, Croyère Islands, so called after the brother of the famous geographer Delisle, companion of Tschiri-Kow, the San Carlos Islands, La Touche Bay, and Cape Hector.

La Perouse imagined that these various coast lines were formed by a vast archipelago; and in this he was correct. They contained George III.’s Island, Prince of Wales and Queen Charlotte's Islands — Cape Hector forming the southern extremity of the latter.

The season was far advanced, and too short a time remained at La Perouse's disposal to allow of his making detailed observations of these countries; but his instinct had justly led him to imagine that the series of points he had discovered indicated a group of islands, and not a continent. Beyond Cape Fleurien, which formed the extremity of an elevated island, he passed several groups, which he named Sartines, and then returning, he reached Nootka Sound on the 25th of August. He afterwards visited various parts of the continent which Cook had been unable to approach, and which had left a blank on his chart. This navigation was attended with a certain amount of danger, on account of the currents, "which rendered it impossible to make more than three knots an hour at a distance of five leagues from land."

Upon the 5th of September new islets were discovered, about a league from Cape Blanco, to which the captain gave the name of Necker Islands. The fog was very thick, and more than once the fear of running upon some islet or rock, the existence of which could not be suspected, obliged the vessels to deviate from the land. Until they reached Monterey Bay the weather continued bad. At that port La Perouse found two Spanish vessels.

At this time Monterey Bay abounded in whales, and the sea was literally covered with pelicans, which were very common upon the Californian coast.

A garrison of two hundred and eighty men was sufficient to keep in order a population of fifty thousand Indians, wandering about this part of America. It must be admitted that these Indians were usually small and insignificant, and not endowed with that love of independence which characterizes the northern tribes; and, unlike them, they have no appreciation of art, and no industry.

“These Indians,” says the narrative, “are very expert in the use of the bow and arrow. They killed the smallest birds in our presence. It is true that they approach them with wonderful patience, hiding themselves, gliding, somehow, close to their prey, and aiming at them only when within fifteen paces.

“Their skill in the capture of larger animals is even more wonderful. We saw an Indian with a stag’s head over his own, walking on all fours, appearing to graze, and carrying out the pantomime with such truth to life that our hunters would have fired at him at thirty paces had they not been prevented. By this means the natives approach quite close to a herd of deer, and then kill them with arrows.”

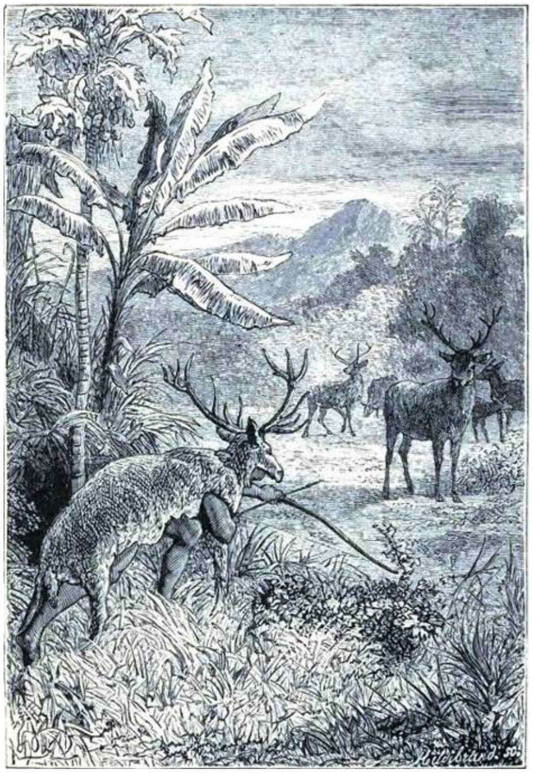

“An Indian with a stag’s head over his own.”

La Perouse gave many details of the presidency of Loretto and of the Californian missions, but these are rather of historical interest, and are out of place in a work of this kind. His remarks upon the fertility of the country are more within our programme. “The harvest of maize, barley, corn, and peas,” he says, “is comparable only to that of Chili. Our European husbandmen could not conceive of such abundance. The most moderate yield of corn is at the rate of from seventy and eighty to one, and the largest from sixty to a hundred.”

Upon the 22nd of September the two frigates returned to sea, after a cordial welcome from the Spanish governor and the missionaries. They carried with them a quantity of provisions of all sorts, which would be of the greatest value to them during the long trip to be taken before reaching Macao.

The portion of the ocean now to be crossed by the French was almost unknown. The Spaniards had navigated it previously, but their political jealousy prevented their publishing the discoveries and observations they had made. La Perouse wished to steer S.W. as far as 28° lat. where some geographers had placed the island of Nuestra Señora-de-la-Gorta.

But he looked for it in vain during a long and difficult cruise, with contrary winds, which sorely tried the patience of the navigators.

“We were daily reminded,” he says, “by the condition of our sails and rigging, that we had been sixteen months at sea. Our ropes gave way, and the sail makers could not repair the sails, which were fairly worn out.”

Upon the 6th of November a small island, or rather rock, some five hundred fathoms long, upon which not a single tree grew, and which was thickly covered with guano, was discovered. It was named Necker Island, and is in 166° 52’ long. W. of Paris, and 23° 34’ N. lat.

Never had the expedition seen a more lovely sea, or a more exquisite night, when suddenly, at about half-past one in the morning, breakers were perceived two cable lengths ahead of the *Boussole*. The sea, only broken here and there by a slight ripple, was so calm that it scarcely made any sound. The ship’s course was altered immediately; but the manoeuvre took time, and when it was accomplished the vessel was but a cable’s length off the rocks.

“We had just escaped one of the most imminent dangers to which navigators are subject,” says La Perouse, “and I must do my crews the justice to say that less disorder and confusion in such a position would have been impossible. The slightest neglect in the execution of the manoeuvres which were necessary to carry us from the breakers would have been fatal.”

These rocks were unknown; it was therefore needful to determine their exact position, for the safety of succeeding navigators. La Perouse, after fulfilling this duty, named them the “Reef of the French Frigates.”

Upon the 14th of December the *Astrolabe* and the *Boussole* sighted the Mariana Islands. A landing was effected upon the volcanic island of Assumption. Here the lava had formed ravines and precipices, bordered by a few stunted cocoa-nut trees, alternately with tropical creepers and a few shrubs. It was almost impossible to advance a couple of hundred yards in an hour. Landing and re-embarkation were difficult, and the few cocoa-nut shells and bananas, of a new variety, which the naturalists obtained, were not worth the risk.

It was impossible to remain longer in this archipelago if China were to be reached before the vessels returned to Europe. They were to take back an account of the results of the expedition upon the American coast, and of the crossing to Macao.

After taking the position of the Bashees, without stopping, La Perouse sighted the coast of China, and next day cast anchor in the roadstead of Macao.

Here La Perouse met with a small French cutter, commanded by M. de Richery, midshipman, whose business it was to cruise about the eastern coast, and protect French trade.

The town of Macao is so well known that it is needless for us to give La Perouse’s description of it. The constant outrages and humiliations to which Europeans were daily subjected under the most despotic and cowardly government in the world, aroused the indignation of the French captain, and made him heartily wish that an international expedition might put a stop to so intolerable a state of things.

The furs which had been collected upon the American coasts were sold at Macao for ten thousand piastres. The sum produced should have been divided among the crews, and the head of the Swedish company undertook to ship it at Mauritius; but the unfortunate sailors themselves were never to receive the money.

Leaving Macao on the 5th of February, the vessels directed their course to Manilla, and, after sighting the shoals of Pratas, Bulinao, Manseloq, and Marivelle, wrongly placed upon D'Après' maps, they were forced to put into the port of Marivelle, to wait for better winds and more favourable currents. Although Marivelle is only one league to windward of Cavito, three days were consumed in reaching the latter port.

"We found," says the narrative, "different houses where we could repair our sails, salt our provisions, construct two boats, lodge the naturalists and geographical engineers, and the governor kindly lent us his own for the establishment of our observatory. We enjoyed as much liberty as if we had been in the country; and in the market and arsenal we found the same resources as in the best European ports."

Cavito, the second town of the Philippine islands, and the capital of the province of the same name, was then but a miserable village, where only Spanish military and government officers resided; but although the town was nothing but a mass of ruins, it was none the less a port, and afforded the French every possible resource. Upon the morrow of his arrival La Perouse, accompanied by De Langle and his principal officers, paid a visit to the governor, reaching Manila by boat.

"The environs of Manila are delightful," he says. "A most beautiful river flows through it, separating into different canals, one of which leads to the famous Bay Lake, which is distant seven leagues in the interior, surrounded by more than a hundred Indian settlements in the midst of a most fertile territory.

"Manila, built upon the shore of the bay of that name, which is more than twenty-five leagues in circumference, is at the mouth of a river navigable as far as the lake in which it rises. It is probably the most fortunately situated town in the whole world. Provisions are found there in the greatest profusion, and very cheap; but clothing, European cutlery, and furniture fetch an enormous price.

“Want of competition, the prohibitive tariffs, and commercial restrictions of every sort, tend to make the productions and manufactured goods of India and China at least as dear as in Europe; and although the various duties on imports bring to the treasury some eight hundred thousand piastres, the colony costs the Spanish government at least fifteen hundred thousand francs per annum, which are sent from Mexico. The immense possessions of the Spanish in America have prevented the government from bestowing much attention upon the Philippines. They are still like the possessions of great lords, which remain uncultivated, though they might provide fortunes for many families.

“I do not hesitate to state, that a great nation with no colony but the Philippine Islands, supposing that colony to be as well governed as possible, need not envy all the European colonies in Africa and America.”

Upon the 9th of April — after having heard of the arrival at Macao of M. d’Entrecasteaux, who had come from Mauritius with the contrary monsoon, and received despatches from Europe by the frigate *La Subtile*, MM. Guyet, midshipman, and Le Gobien, naval officer, and a reinforcement of eight sailors — the two vessels set out for the coast of China.

Upon the 21st La Perouse sighted Formosa, and at once entered the channel which separates that island from China. He discovered a very dangerous bank unknown to navigators, and carefully examined the soundings and approaches. Shortly afterwards he passed in front of the bay of the ancient Dutch fort of Zealand, where the capital of the island, Tai-wan, is situated.

The monsoon was unfavourable for ascending the channel, and La Perouse therefore resolved to pass to the east of the island. He rectified the position of the Pescadores Islands, a mass of rocks which assume various shapes, reconnoitred the small island of Botol-Tabaco-Xima, where no navigator had landed, coasted Kinin Island, which forms part of the kingdom of Liken, whose inhabitants are neither Chinese nor Japanese, but appear to be of both races, and sighted Hoa-pinsu and Tiaoy-su Islands. The latter form part of the Liken Archipelago, known only through the letters of Father Goubil, a Jesuit.

The frigates then entered the Eastern Sea, and directed their course to the channel which divides China and Japan. La Perouse there encountered fogs as thick as those which prevail upon the coast of Labrador, with variable and violent currents. The first point of interest before entering the Sea of Japan was Quelpaert Island, first made known to Europeans by the shipwreck of the *Sparrow Hawk* upon its coast in 1635. La Perouse determined its southerly extremity, and surveyed it for a distance of twelve leagues.

“It is scarcely possible,” he says, “to find an island of pleasanter aspect. A peak of about four thousand five hundred feet high, visible at a distance of eighteen or twenty leagues, rises in the centre of the island; the land slopes gently from thence to the sea, so that the houses look like an amphitheatre. The soil seemed to be highly cultivated. By the aid of our glasses we clearly made out the divisions of the fields. They are in very small allotments, which augurs a large population. The different shades of the various cultivated patches give a very agreeable variety to the view.”

The explorers had ample opportunity for taking the longitude and latitude, which was the more important, as no European vessel had navigated these seas, which were only indicated upon the maps in accordance with the Chinese and Japanese maps published by the Jesuits.

Upon the 25th of May the frigates entered the channel of Corea, which was minutely explored, and in which soundings were taken every half hour.

As it was possible to keep close in shore, it was easy to observe some fortifications in the European style, and to note all their details.

On the 27th an island was perceived which was not to be found upon any map, and which seemed to be about twenty leagues distant from the coast of Corea. It received the name of Dagelet Island.

The course was now directed towards Japan, but it was very slow, on account of the contrary winds that prevailed.

On the 6th of June Cape Noto and the island of Tsus Sima were discovered.

“Cape Noto, upon the Japanese coast,” says La Perouse, “is a point on which geographers may rely. Reckoning from it to Cape Kona on the eastern coast, the position of which was determined by Captain King, the width of the northern half of the empire may be ascertained. Our observations have the greater value for geographers as they determine the width of the Gulf of Tartary, to which I now directed my course.”

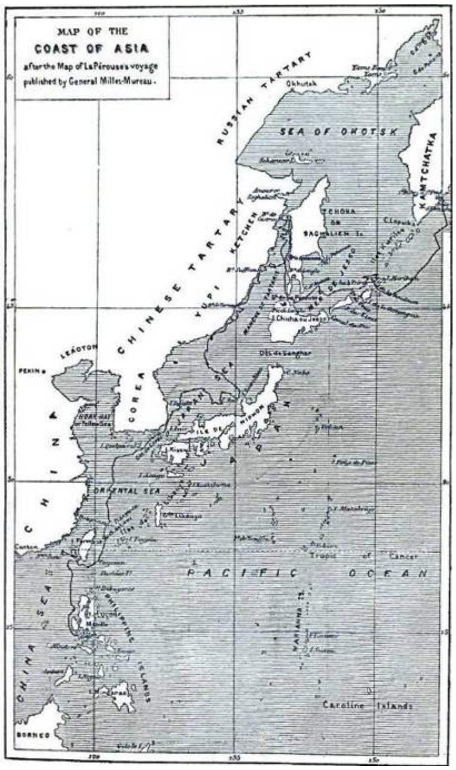
MAP OF THE
COAST OF ASIA
after the Map of La Pérouse's voyage
published by General Millet-Mureau.
RUSSIAN TARTARY
Okhotsk
SEA OF OKHOTSK
KAMTCHATKA
TCHOKA
OR
SAGHALIEN I.
CHINESE TARTARY
YUPI
KETCHEN
JESSO
I. Chicha ou Jesso
Dt. de Sangaar
LEAOTON
PEKIN
COREA
SEA
HOAN-HAI
or Yellow Sea
ILE DE
NIPHON
JAPAN
CHINA
ORIENTAL SEA
I. Formosa
Canton
PACIFIC
OCEAN
Tropic of Cancer
Manille
PHILIPPINE ISLANDS
MARIANNA IS.
CHINA SEA
Caroline Islands
BORNEO
120
135
150

Upon the 11th of June La Perouse sighted Tartary. He made land precisely at the boundary between the Corea and Manchuria. The mountains appeared to be six or seven thousand feet high. A small quantity of snow was visible on the summits. No trace of inhabitants or cultivation could be seen; nor was any river’s mouth found upon a length of coast extending for forty leagues. A halt would have been desirable, to enable the naturalists and lithologists to make observations.

“Up to the 14th of June the coast had run to the N.E. by N. We were now in 44° lat. and had reached the degree which geographers assign for the so-called Strait of Tessoy, but we were five degrees farther west than the longitude given for this spot. These five degrees should be taken from Tartary, and added to the channel which separates it from the islands north of Japan.”

Whilst coasting along this shore no sign of habitation had been perceived — not a pirogue left the shore. The country, although covered with magnificent trees and luxuriant vegetation, appeared to be uninhabited.

On the 23rd of June the *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe* cast anchor in a bay situated in 45° 13’ N. lat. and 135° 9’ E. long. It was named Ternay Bay.

“We burned with impatience,” say La Perouse, “to reconnoitre this land, which had occupied our imagination ever since we left France. It was the only portion of the globe which had escaped the indefatigable activity of Captain Cook; and perhaps we owe the small advantage of having first landed there to the sad event which ended his days.

“This roadstead was formed of five little creeks, separated one from the other by hillocks covered with trees of a more delicate and varied green than is to be seen in France in the brightest spring. Before our boats reached the shore, our glasses had been directed to the coast, but we perceived nothing but stags and bears, quietly grazing. Our impatience to disembark increased at the sight. The ground was carpeted with plants similar to those of our climate, but more vigorous and green; most of them were in flower. At every step we found roses, red and yellow lilies, lilies of the valley, and almost all our field flowers. The summits of the mountains were crowned with pines, and oak-trees grew half way up, decreasing in size and vigour as they neared the sea. The rivers and streams were planted with willows, birches, and maples; and skirting the larger woods we saw apple-trees and azaroles in full bloom, as well as clumps of nut-trees, the fruit of which was beginning to form.”

Upon returning from a fishing excursion the French met with a Tartar tomb. Curiosity induced them to open it, and they found in it two skeletons, lying side by side. The heads were covered with stuff caps, the bodies were wrapped in bearskins, and from the waists hung several little Chinese coins and copper ornaments. They also found half-a-score of silver bracelets, an iron hatchet, a knife, and other things, amongst which was a small bag of blue nankeen filled with rice.

Upon the morning of the 27th La Perouse left this solitary bay, after depositing there several medals, with an inscription giving the date of his arrival.

A little further on, more than eight hundred cod, which were at once salted, were caught, and an immense quantity of oysters with superb mother of pearl were also obtained.

After a stay in Saffren Bay, situated in 47° 51’ N. lat. and 137° 25’ E. long. La Perouse discovered, upon the 6th of July, an island, which was no other than Saghalien. The shore here was as wooded as that of Tartary. Lofty mountains arose in the interior, the highest of which was called Lamanon peak. As huts and smoke were seen, M. de Langle and several officers landed. The inhabitants had recently fled, for the ashes of their fires were scarcely cold.

Just as the French were re-embarking, after leaving some presents for the natives, a pirogue landed seven natives, who showed no signs of fear.

“Amongst them,” says the narrative, “were two old men with long white beards, dressed in stuff made from the bark of trees, very like the cotton drawers worn in Madagascar. Two of the seven natives had coats of padded nankeen, differing little in shape from those of the Chinese. Others wore long gowns, which were fastened by means of a waist-belt and some little buttons, so that they had no need of drawers. Their heads were bare, but one or two of them wore bearskin bands. They had their forelocks and faces shaven, but the back hair kept about eight or ten inches long, in a different fashion from the Chinese, however, who leave only a round tuft of hair, which they call ‘pen-t-sec.’ All had sealskin boots with the feet artistically worked *à la Chinoise*.

“Their weapons were bows, spears, and arrows, tipped with iron. The oldest of the natives, to whom the others showed the most respect, had his eyes in a dreadful state; he wore a shade round his head, to protect them from the sun. These natives were grave in manner, and friendly.”

M. de Langle appointed a meeting for the morrow. La Perouse and most of his officers attended. The facts they learned about these Tartars were important, and decided La Perouse to pursue his discoveries further north.

“We succeeded in making them understand,” he says, “that we wished them to draw their country, and that of Manchuria. One of the old men then arose, and with the point of his spear traced the coast of Tartary westward, running nearly N. and S. To the east, *vis-à-vis* in the same direction, he represented his island, and, placing his hand upon his breast, made us understand that he had indicated his own country. He left an opening between his island and Tartary, and, pointing to our vessels, showed us by signs that they could pass through it. At the south island he delineated another, and left a second opening, indicating that this too was a route for our ships.

“His quickness in understanding us was great, but not equal to that of another islander, about thirty years of age, who, seeing that the figures traced on sand were rubbed out, took one of our pencils and some paper. He traced out his island, which he called Tchoka, and made a line for the little river upon the shore of which we were — placing it two-thirds of the length of the island from north to south. He then drew Manchuria, leaving, as the old man had done, a strait at the extreme end; and to our surprise he added the river Saghalien, the name of which the natives pronounce like ourselves. He placed the mouth of this river a little to the south of the northerly point of his island.

“We afterwards wished to ascertain whether this strait was very wide. We tried to make him understand our idea. He caught at it at once, and, placing his two hands upright at a distance of three inches one from the other, he made us understand that he meant to indicate the width of the little river which formed our watering place; and then, holding them wider apart, he indicated that the second width was to represent that of the river Saghalien; and, separating them still more, he gave the breadth of the strait which divides his country from Tartary.

“M. de Langle and I thought it of the greatest importance to ascertain whether the island we were coasting was that to which geographers had given the name of Saghalien, without guessing its extension southwards. I ordered all hands on board, and prepared to sail in the morning. The bay in which we had anchored received the name of Langle, from the captain who discovered it, and was the first to put foot on land.

“In another bay upon the same shore, called Estaing Bay, the boats landed close to ten or twelve huts. They were larger than those we before had seen, and were divided into two rooms. That at the back contained the stove, cooking utensils, and the bench running all round. That in front was absolutely bare, and probably destined for the reception of strangers. The women fled when they saw the French land. Two of them, however, were caught, and, whilst they were being re-assured, time was found to sketch them. Their faces were peculiar, but pleasant; they had small eyes and thick lips, the upper one being painted or tattooed.”

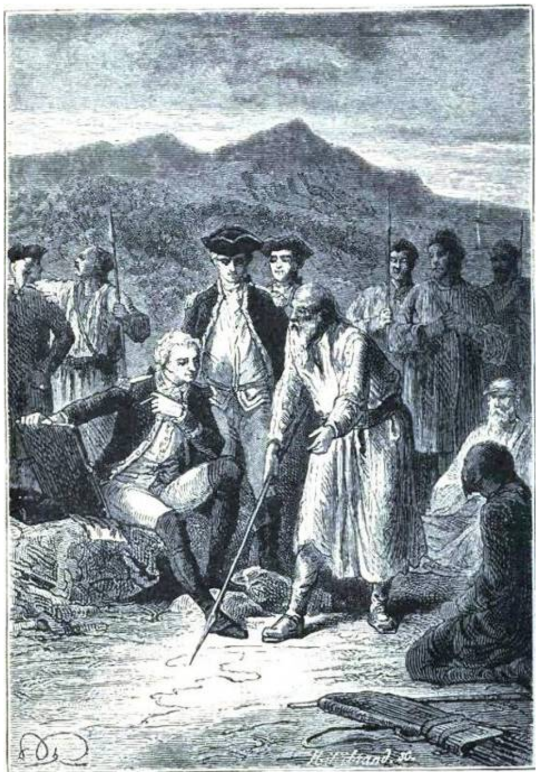

He traced the coast of Tartary.

M. de Langle found the natives gathered about four boats, that were loaded with smoked fish, which they were helping to put in water. They were Manchurians, from the shores of Saghalien River. In the corner of the island was a kind of circus, planted with fifteen or twenty stakes, each surmounted by the head of a bear. It was supposed, not without some show of reason, that these trophies were intended to perpetuate the memory of a victory over this wild beast.

Quantities of cod-fish were obtained upon this coast; and at the mouth of the river a prodigious quantity of salmon was caught. After reconnoitring the bay of La Jonquière, La Perouse cast anchor in Casters Bay. His water supply was nearly exhausted, and he had no more wood. The further he penetrated into the strait which separates Saghalien from the continent, the more the depth diminished. La Perouse, recognizing that he could not double the island of Saghalien by the north, and afraid of not being able to leave the defile in which he now found himself excepting by the strait of Sangaar, which was much further south, determined to remain only five days in Casters Bay, a period which he absolutely needed to take in provisions.

The observatory was set up in a small island, while the carpenters cut down wood, and the sailors filled the water-barrels.

“The huts of these islanders, who call themselves Orotchys,” says the narrative, “are surrounded by a drying ground for salmon, which were exposed to the sun upon perches, after having been smoked for three or four days at the stove which is in the centre of the hut. The women who have charge of this operation take them, as soon as they are smoked through, into the open air, where they become as hard as wood.

“The natives joined us in our fishing with nets or hooks, and we saw them voraciously devouring the head, gills, and sometimes the skin, of raw salmon, tearing it up very cleverly. They sucked out the mucilage, much as we eat oysters. Their fish seldom reach the shore without having first paid toll, unless the catch is very large; and the women show the same eagerness to seize upon the whole fish, and in the same ravenous way devour the mucilaginous parts, which appear to be their tid-bits.

“These people are revoltingly dirty. It would be impossible to find a race farther removed from our ideas of beauty. In height they are less than four foot ten, their bodies are emaciated, their voices are weak and shrill like children’s. They have projecting cheek-bones, bleared and sunken eyes, large mouths, flat noses, short and almost beardless chins, and olive skins, shining with oil and smoke. They allow their hair to grow long, and dress it somewhat in the European style. The women wear it loose over their shoulders, and the description we have given applies to them as well as to the men, from whom they are scarcely to be distinguished, except for a slight difference in their apparel. The women are not subject to any labour, which, as in the case of the American Indians, might have accounted for the inelegance of their appearance. All their time is occupied in cutting out and making their clothes, in drying fish and nursing their children, whom they suckle to the age of three or four years. It rather astonished me to see a child of this age, who had been shooting with bow and arrows, beating a dog, &c. throw himself upon his mother’s bosom, and take the place of an infant of five or six months who was lying asleep upon her knees.”

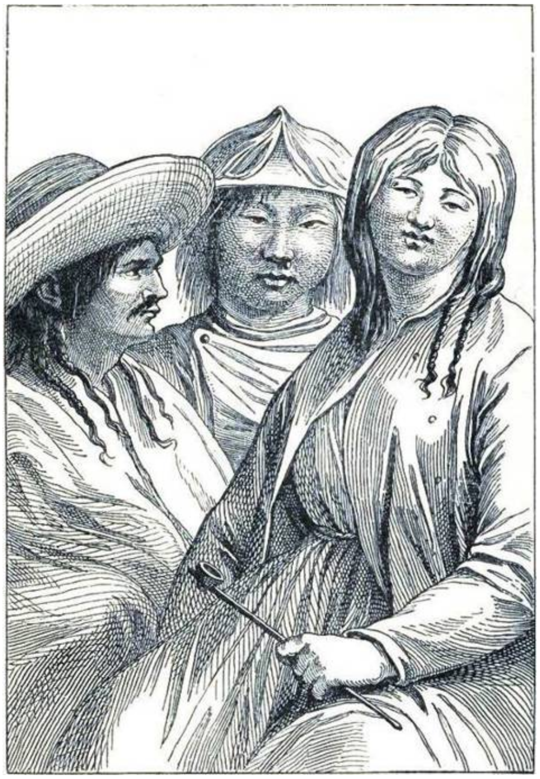

Typical Orotchys.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The Bitchys and the Orotchys confirmed much of the information which La Perouse had already obtained. From them he ascertained that the northern point of Saghalien was connected with the continent merely by a sand-bank, on which grew seaweed, and where there was but little water.

This concurrence of testimony left no room for doubt, especially as he never found more than six fathoms in the canal. There remained but one point of interest to determine, and that was the survey of the southern point of Saghalien, which he had only explored as far as Langle Bay in 47° 49’.

Upon the 2nd of August the *Astrolabe* and the *Boussole* left Casters Bay, and returned southwards, successively discovering and reconnoitring Monneron Island and Langle Peak, doubling the southern point of Saghalien called Cape Crillon, which led to a strait between Oku-Jesso and Jesso; this they named after La Perouse. Hitherto the geography of this part of the world had been most fanciful and imaginary. Sansen was of opinion that Corea was an island, and that Jesso, Oku-Jesso, and Kamtchatka existed only in imagination; whilst Delisle insisted that Jesso and Oku-Jesso were merely an island, ending at Sangaar Strait; and lastly, Buache, in his “Considérations Géographiques,” page 105, says, “Jesso, after being placed first in the east, then in the south, and finally in the west, was at last found to be in the north.”

To this confusion the discoveries of the French expedition were destined to put an end.

La Perouse had some intercourse with the natives of Crillon Cape, and stated that they were handsome men, far more industrious than the Orotchys of Casters Bay, but less liberal in their dealings.

“They have,” he says, “one most important article of commerce — unknown in the channel of Tartary — from which they derive their riches, namely, whale oil. Of this they collect considerable quantities. They extract it in a way which is far from economical. They cut the flesh into pieces, and dry it upon a slope in the open air, by exposing it to the sun. The oil which flows from it is caught in vessels made of bark, or into bottles of dried sealskin.”

After sighting the Cape Arniva of the Dutch, the vessels coasted along the barren, treeless, uninhabited country in possession of the Dutch Company, and shortly reached the Kurile Islands. They then passed between Marikon Island and the Island of the Four Brothers, calling the strait — the finest amongst the Kurile Islands, through which they penetrated — La Boudeuse.

On the 3rd of September the coast of Kamtchatka was reached. This coast was uninviting enough. “There the eyes rest painfully, and often fearfully, upon enormous masses of rock, which are already covered with snow in the beginning of September, and which never appear to have had any vegetation.”

Three days later Avatscha Bay, or the Bay of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, was reached. The astronomers at once proceeded to take observations; the naturalists made the perilous and arduous ascent of a volcano, some eight leagues inland; whilst those of the crew who were not engaged upon the vessels gave themselves up to hunting and fishing. Thanks to the welcome accorded by the governor, their pleasures were varied.

“We were invited,” says La Perouse, “to a ball which the governor wished to give to all the women, whether from Kamtchatka or Russia. If the ball was not large, it was at least mixed. Thirteen females, clothed in silk, ten of whom were natives of Kamtchatka, with large faces, small eyes, and flat noses, were seated upon benches round the room. Both they and the Russians wore silk handkerchiefs wrapped round the head, in a way similar to those worn by mulattoes. The ball opened with Russian dances, the airs for which were very lively, and like those of the Cossack dances given a short time since in Paris. These were followed by Kamtchatka dances, which were comparable only to the convulsionists of the famous tomb of Saint Médard. The dancers of this part of Asia scarcely require legs, they make such vigorous use of the shoulders and arms. The impression made upon the spectators by the convulsive and contorted movements of the Kamtchatka dancers is painful, and is rendered more so by a pitiful cry which escapes them at intervals, and which is the sole music by which they measure their time. The exertions they made are so formidable that they are completely covered with sweat, and at the conclusion they lie upon the ground unable to move a limb. The exhalations from their bodies permeate the atmosphere with the smell of fish and oil, so strong as to be disagreeable to the unaccustomed nostrils of Europeans.”

The arrival of a courier from Okotsk interrupted the ball. The news he brought was pleasant for every one, but particularly for La Perouse, who learned that he was promoted.

During their stay in this port, the navigators found the tomb of Louis Delisle de la Croyère, Member of the Academy of Sciences, who died in Kamtchatka in 1741, upon his return from an expedition undertaken by command of the Czar for the survey of the American coast. His fellow-countrymen honoured his memory by placing an engraved copper slab over his grave. They paid the same homage to Captain Clerke, Captain Cook’s second in command, and successor.

“Avatscha Bay,” says La Perouse, “is certainly the best, most commodious, and safest to be found in any part of the world. The entrance is narrow, and forts might easily be constructed to command vessels entering it. The anchorage is excellent, the bottom muddy; and two large harbours, one on the eastern shore and one on the west, would hold all the vessels of the French and English navy.”

The *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe* set sail upon the 29th of September, 1787. M. de Lesseps, Vice-Consul for Russia, who had accompanied La Perouse thus far upon his expedition, was charged to return to France by land (at that time a most perilous journey), and to convey despatches from the expedition to the government.

The question now arose of finding land discovered in 1620 by the Spaniards. The two frigates passed south of 37° 30’ some three hundred leagues, without finding any trace of it. Crossing the line for the third time, they passed the site given by Byron as that of the Dangerous Islands, without finding them; and, upon the 6th of December, entered the Navigator Archipelago, the merit of discovering which belongs to Bougainville. The vessels were at once surrounded by pirogues. The natives who manned them did not give La Perouse a very favourable idea of the beauty of the inhabitants.

“I saw but two women,” he says, “and they had no delicacy of feature; the younger, who may have been eighteen years of age, had a frightful ulcer upon her leg. Many of these islanders were covered with sores, which may have been the commencement of leprosy; for I noticed two men, whose ulcerated and swollen legs left no doubt as to their malady. They approached us fearlessly and unarmed, and appeared as peaceable as the natives of the Society or Friendly Islands.”

Upon the 9th of December anchor was cast off Maouna Island. Next day the weather was so promising that La Perouse resolved to land to take in water, and then set sail at once, as the anchorage was too bad to admit of a second night’s stay. Every precaution having been taken, La Perouse landed, and proceeded to the spot where his sailors were obtaining water. Captain Langle penetrated to a small creek about a league from the watering place, “and this excursion, from which he returned delighted with the beauty of the village he had seen, was, as will be seen, the cause of our misfortunes.”

Upon the shore, meantime, a brisk trade was going on. Men and women sold hens, parrots, fruits, and pigs. At the same time a native, getting into one of the sloops, possessed himself of a hammer, and commenced dealing vigorous blows upon a sailor’s back. He was speedily seized by four strong fellows, and thrown into the sea.

La Perouse penetrated into the interior, accompanied by women, old men, and children. He enjoyed a delightful excursion through a charming country, which rejoiced in the double advantage of a soil which required no culture, and a climate in which clothing was superfluous.

“Bread-fruits, cocoa-nuts, bananas, guavas, and oranges afforded a wholesome and sufficient nourishment to the inhabitants; while chickens, pigs, and dogs, which lived upon the surplus fruits, afforded the necessary change of diet.

“The first visit passed over without serious danger. There were a few quarrels, it is true; but, thanks to the prudence and reserve of the French, who kept on their guard, they did not amount to anything serious. La Perouse had given orders to re-embark, when M. de Langle insisted upon sending for a few more casks of water.

“He had adopted Captain Cook’s views: he thought fresh water preferable to all other things which he had on board; and as some of his crew showed signs of scurvy, he was right in thinking that every help should be given them.”

La Perouse from the first had a presentiment against consenting. But he yielded when M. de Langle persisted that a captain is responsible for the health of his crew, that the spot which he named was perfectly safe, that he himself would command the expedition, and that three hours would suffice for the work.

“M. de Langle,” says the narrative, “was a man of so much judgment, that his representation influenced my decision more than anything else.

“Next day two boats, under command of M. Boutin and M. Mouton, conveying all the sufferers from scurvy, under charge of six armed soldiers and a captain, in all twenty-eight men, left the *Astrolabe*, to be under M. de Langle’s orders. M. de Langle was accompanied in his boat by M. de Lauranon and M. Collinet, who were invalids, and M. de Varignas, who was convalescent. M. de Gobien commanded the sloop, M. de la Martinière, M. Lavant, and the elder Receveur, were amongst the thirty-three persons sent by the *Boussole*. The entire force amounted to sixty-one, and those the picked men of the expedition.

“M. de Langle ordered every one to be armed with guns, and six swivel-guns were placed in the sloop. M. de Langle and all his companions were greatly surprised when, instead of a large and commodious bay, they found a creek filled with coral, which it was only possible to reach through a tortuous channel, where the surf broke violently. M. de Langle had only seen this bay at high tide, and as soon as this new sight met his view his first idea was to regain the former watering-place.

“But the friendly appearance of the natives, the number of women and children he observed among them, the quantities of pigs and fruit they offered for sale, put his prudent resolutions to flight.

“The water-casks of the four boats were landed quietly, the soldiers keeping order upon the shore, and forming a barrier which left a free space for the workers. But this peaceful condition of affairs did not last long. Many of the pirogues, having disposed of their wares to our vessels, returned to the shore, and, landing in the bay of our watering-place, it was soon entirely filled by them. In place of the two hundred natives, counting women and children, whom De Langle had found an hour and a half previously, there were now, at the end of three hours, a thousand or twelve hundred.

“M. de Langle’s situation became more perilous every moment. He succeeded, however, seconded by M. de Varignas, M. Boutin, M. Collier, and Gobien, in embarking the water-casks. But the bay was almost dry, and he could not hope to get his boats off before four o’clock in the afternoon. However, followed by his detachment, he attempted it, and, leading the way with his gun and the soldiers, he forbade firing until he should give the order.

“He felt that he would soon be forced to fire. Already stones were flying; and the Indians who were in shallow water surrounded the sloops for a distance of at least two hundred yards. The soldiers who were already in the boats tried in vain to drive them back.

“M. de Langle was anxious to avoid beginning hostilities, and fearful of being accused of barbarity; otherwise he would, no doubt, have ordered a general discharge, which would effectually have scattered the multitude. But he believed he could subdue the natives without bloodshed, and he was the victim of his humanity.

“Very soon a storm of stones, thrown at short distances with the force of a sling, struck almost all who were in the sloop. M. de Langle had only time to discharge his gun. He was thrown over, and unfortunately fell outside the sloop. He was at once massacred by more than two hundred Indians, who assailed him with clubs and stones. As soon as he expired they fastened him by one arm to the sloop, no doubt with a view to despoiling the body.

“The sloop of *La Boussole*, under M. Boutin, was run aground within four yards of that of the *Astrolabe*, and parallel between them was a narrow channel not yet occupied by the Indians. By this outlet, all the wounded who were fortunate enough to avoid falling into the open sea, escaped by swimming. They reached our boats, which fortunately had remained afloat, and we succeeded in saving forty-nine out of the sixty-one men who had composed the expedition.

“M. Boutin had imitated M. de Langle. He would not fire, and only gave orders for a discharge after his commander’s shot. Naturally, at the short distance of four or five paces, every shot killed an Indian; but there was no time to re-load. M. Boutin was knocked down by a stone, and fortunately fell between the two stranded boats. Those who had escaped by swimming towards the two boats had received many wounds, mostly on the head; whilst those who, less fortunate, had fallen overboard upon the side near the Indians, were killed instantaneously.

“The safety of forty-nine of the crew is due to the good order which M. de Varignas was wise enough to maintain, and to the punctuality with which M. Mouton, who commanded the boats of the *Boussole*, carried out his orders.

“The boat belonging to the *Astrolabe* was so overloaded that it grounded. The natives at once decided to harass the wounded in their retreat. They hastened in great numbers towards the reefs, within six feet of which the boats must necessarily pass. The little ammunition which remained was exhausted upon these savages, and the boats at last emerged from the creek.”

La Perouse’s first idea was naturally to avenge the death of his unfortunate companions; but M. de Boutin, who, although severely wounded, retained all his faculties, begged him to desist, representing to him that if by any mishap one of the boats ran aground, the creek was so situated, being bordered with trees which afforded secure shelter to the natives, that not a Frenchman would come back alive. La Perouse remained for two days upon the scene of this terrible disaster, without being able to gratify the vindictive desires of his crew.

“No doubt,” says La Perouse, “it will appear incredible that during this time five or six pirogues left the shore, bringing pigs, pigeons, and cocoa-nuts, and offering them in exchange. I was forced to control myself, or I should have disposed of these natives summarily enough.”

It may readily be supposed that an event which deprived La Perouse of a large number of officers, and of thirty-two of his best sailors, was calculated to upset the plans of the expedition. At the slightest approach of danger it would now be necessary to destroy one frigate, in order to arm the other. But one course remained for La Perouse — to set sail for Botany Bay, reconnoitring the various islands he passed, and taking their astronomical positions.

Upon the 14th of December, Oyolava, another island belonging to the same group, and which Bougainville had seen from a distance, was sighted. It was larger than Tahiti, and exceeded that island in beauty, fertility, and in the number of its inhabitants.

The natives resembled those of Maouna in every particular, and quickly surrounded the two frigates, offering the multifarious productions of their island. It appeared that the French must have been the first to trade with them, for they were quite unacquainted with the use or value of iron, and preferred a single coloured bead to a hatchet, or a nail six inches long.

Some of the women had pleasant features and elegant figures; their eyes were gentle, and their movements quiet, whilst the men were wild and fierce in appearance.

Pola Island, also belonging to the Navigator Archipelago, was passed upon the 17th of December. Probably the news of the massacre of the French had already reached this people, for no pirogue approached the vessels.

Cocoa-nut Island and Schouten’s Traitor Island were recognized upon the 20th of December. The latter is divided by a strait, which the navigators would not have perceived, had they not coasted close in shore. About a score of natives appeared, bringing the finest cocoa-nuts La Perouse had ever seen, with a few bananas and one small pig.

These islands, which Wallis calls Boscawen and Keppel Islands, and which he places 1° 13’ too far west, may also be considered part of the Navigator Archipelago. La Perouse considers the natives of this group as belonging to the finest Polynesian race. Tall, vigorous, and well-formed, they are of finer type than those of the Sandwich Islands, whose language is very similar to theirs. Under other circumstances, the captain would have proceeded to explore Oyolava and Pola Islands; but the memory of the disaster at Maouna was too recent, and he dreaded another encounter which might end in massacre.

“Painful associations,” he says, “met us with every succeeding island. In the Recreation Islands, east of the Navigator Archipelago, Roggewein’s crew had been attacked and stoned to death; at Traitor Island, which was now in sight, Schouten’s crew were the victims; and in the south was Maouna Island, where we ourselves had met with so shocking a calamity.

“These recollections affected our way of dealing with the Indians. We now punished every little theft and injustice severely; we demonstrated by force of arms that flight would not save them from our vengeance; we refused to allow them to come on board, and threatened to punish all who did so without permission with death.”

These remarks prove that La Perouse was right in preventing all intercourse between his crews and the natives. We cannot sufficiently praise the prudence and humanity of the commander who, in the excited condition of his men’s minds, knew how to curb the desire for vengeance.

From the Navigator Islands the route was directed to the Friendly Archipelago, which Cook had been unable to explore entirely. Upon the 27th of December, Vavao Island was discovered, one of the largest of the group, which had not been visited by the English navigator. As large as Tonga Tabou, it is higher, and not wanting in fresh water. La Perouse reconnoitred many of these islands, and entered into relations with the natives, who, however, did not offer sufficient provisions to make it worth his while to trade. He therefore resolved upon the 1st of January, 1788, to go to Botany Bay, following a route not yet attempted by any navigator.

Pilstaart Island, discovered by Tasman — or rather, the rock of Pilstaart, for its entire length is but a quarter of a league — presents but a steep and broken appearance, and serves only as a resting-place for sea birds. On this account La Perouse, having no reason for remaining, wished to hasten on to New Holland; but there was another power to be consulted — the wind, and by it La Perouse was detained for three days before Pilstaart.

Norfolk Island and its two islets were sighted upon the 13th of January. La Perouse cast anchor within easy distance of shore, intending to allow the naturalists to land, and inspect the productions of the island; but the waves broke with such violence upon the beach that landing was impossible. Yet Cook had landed there with the greatest facility.

An entire day was passed in vain attempts, and was quite unproductive of scientific results.

Next day La Perouse started afresh, and upon entering the roadstead of Botany Bay encountered an English vessel, under command of Commodore Phillip, who was engaged in constructing Port Jackson, the embryo of that powerful colony which in our day, after only a quarter of a century's growth, has attained to such a height of civilization and prosperity.

Here the journal kept by La Perouse terminates. A letter, written by him from Botany Bay, upon the 5th of February, to the Naval Minister, informs us that he intended building two sloops, to replace those which had been destroyed at Maouna. All his wounded, amongst them M. Lavaux, the surgeon of the *Astrolabe,* who had been trepanned, were perfectly recovered. M. de Clenard had assumed command of the *Astrolabe*, and had been succeeded upon the *Boussole* by M. de Monti.

In a letter of two days' later date, giving particulars of his intended route, La Perouse says, —

"I shall regain the Friendly Islands, and carry out the instructions I have received with regard to the northern portion of New Caledonia, to Santa Cruz de Mendana, to the land south of the Arsacides of Surville, and to the Louisiade of Bougainville, and also ascertain, if possible, whether the latter constitutes a portion of New Guinea, or is a separate continent. At the end of July, 1788, I shall pass between New Guinea and New Holland by some other channel than the Endeavour; that is to say, if there be another. During September, and the early part of October, I propose to visit the Gulf of Carpentaria, and the eastern coast of New Holland, as far as Van Diemen's Land, so as to allow of my return to the north in time to arrive at Mauritius in the beginning of December, 1788."

Not only did La Perouse fail to keep the rendezvous he himself appointed, but two entire years passed away, and no news whatever of his expedition were received.

Although at that epoch France was passing through a terrible crisis, the interest of the public in the fate of La Perouse was so intense that it found vent in an appeal to the National Assembly from the members of the Society of Natural History in Paris. Upon the 9th of February, 1791, a decree was passed enjoining the fitting out of two or more armed vessels, to be sent in search of La Perouse. It was argued, that had shipwreck overtaken the expedition a number of the crews might still survive, and that it was only just to carry help to them as soon as possible. Men of science, naturalists, and draughtsmen, were to take part in the expedition, with the view to obtaining valuable information for navigation, geography, and commerce, as well as for the arts and sciences. Such were the terms of the decree to which we have alluded.

The command of the expedition was entrusted to Vice-admiral Bruny d’Entrecasteaux, who had attracted the attention of government by his conduct in India. Two vessels, the *Recherche*, and the *Espérance*, the latter under the orders of M. Huon de Kermadec, ship’s captain, were placed at his command. The staff of these vessels comprised many officers who later attained to high military positions. Amongst them were, Rossei, Willaumez, Trobriand, La Grandière, Laignel, and Jurien. Amongst the men of science on board were, La Billardière, naturalist, Bertrand and Pierson, astronomers, Ventenat and Riche, naturalists, Beautemps-Beaupré, hydrographer, and Jouveney, engineer.

The vessels were stocked with provisions for eighteen months, and a quantity of merchandise, for trading purposes. Leaving Brest upon the 28th of September, they reached Teneriffe upon the 13th of October. An ascent of the famous Peak followed as a matter of course. La Billardière noticed a phenomenon which had already been observed by him in Asia Minor: his figure was reflected upon the clouds below him, opposite to the sun, in every colour of the rainbow.

Upon the 23rd of October, the necessary provisions having been shipped, anchor was weighed, and the start made for the Cape. During the cruise, La Billardière discovered that the phosphorescent appearance of the sea is caused by minute globular animalculi, floating in the waves. The voyage to the Cape, where the vessels arrived upon the 18th of January, 1792, was barren of incident, if we except the unusual quantity of bonitos, or tunny, and other fish that were met with, and a small leakage which occurred, but was quickly remedied.

At the Cape, D’Entrecasteaux found a letter from M. de Saint Felix, commanding the French forces in India, which seemed likely to upset all his plans, and exercise an unfavourable influence upon the expedition. From this communication it appeared that two French captains, from Batavia, had stated that Commodore Hunter, in command of the English frigate *Syrius*, had seen, “near the Admiralty Islands, in the Pacific Ocean, men dressed in the European style, and in what he took to be French uniforms.” “It is clear,” wrote M. de Saint Felix, “that the commodore was convinced they were the remnants of La Perouse’s company.”

When D’Entrecasteaux arrived at the Cape, Hunter was still in the roadstead; but within two hours of the arrival of the French vessels he weighed anchor. This conduct, appeared very strange. The commodore had had time to hear that the vessels just arrived were those sent in search of La Perouse, and yet he had made no communication to the commander upon the subject. But it was soon ascertained that Hunter had declared himself quite ignorant of the facts stated by M. de Saint Felix. Were they then to be regarded as unfounded? Incredible as M. de Saint Felix’s communication appeared, D’Entrecasteaux could not suppose so.

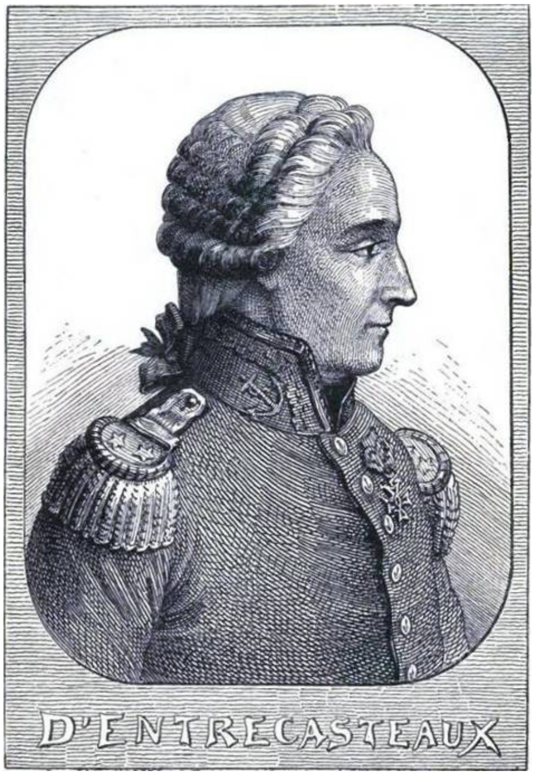

Portrait of D’Entrecasteaux.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The naturalists had availed themselves of their stay at the Cape to make many excursions in the neighbourhood: La Billardière had penetrated as far into the interior as the short stay of the frigates in the roadstead permitted.

Anchor was weighed upon the 16th of February, and D’Entrecasteaux decided upon reaching the southern seas by doubling Cape Horn, and steered for the passage between St. Paul and Amsterdam Islands. Captain Valming had discovered these islands in 1696, and they had been recognized by Cook in his last voyage. When the *Recherche* and the

Espérance passed St. Paul Island it was enveloped in a thick smoke, through which the summits of the mountains were visible. The forests were on fire.

Upon the 21st of April the two vessels entered a bay upon the coast of Van Diemen’s Land, which was supposed to be Adventure Bay, but which in reality was Storm Bay. The extreme point of this bay was named after D’Entrecasteaux. Wood was easily obtained there, and fish was very abundant. Amongst the magnificent trees of the country, La Billardière mentions various species of the eucalyptus, the many uses of which were then unknown. The hunting-parties caught black swans and kangaroos, creatures also but little known.

Upon the 16th of May the vessels left the port, and made for a strait, afterwards named after D’Entrecasteaux.

“M. Creton and M. Auribeau,” says the narrative, “were encouraged to land by the sight of fires close to the shore. They had gone but a short distance when they came upon four natives, attending to three small fires, by which they were seated. They took to flight on seeing the strangers, in spite of every friendly demonstration, leaving the lobsters and shell-fish which they had been broiling. As many huts as there were fires were close by.

“One of the natives, in his hurry, left a small basket, full of pieces of silica, behind him. He was not afraid to return in search of it, but approached Creton with a bold air, possibly owing to his confidence in his own strength. Some of these savages were naked, and others wore only a kangaroo skin upon the shoulders. In colour they were nearly black; they had woolly hair, and allowed the beard to grow.”

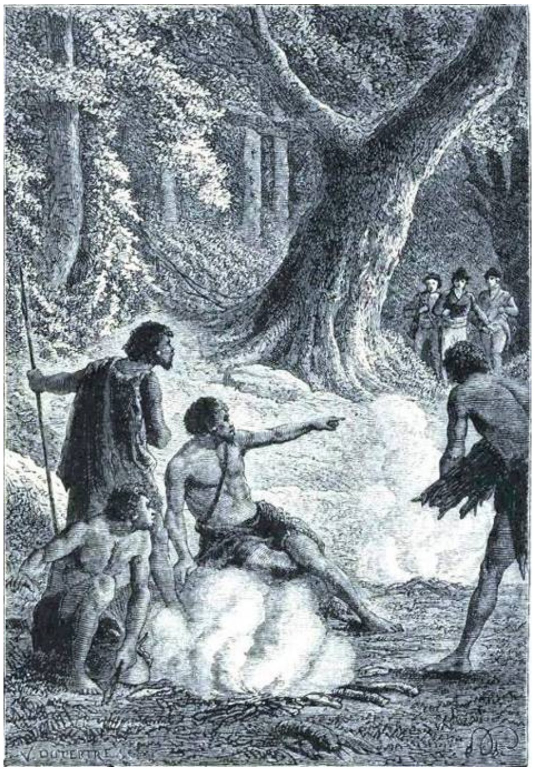

“They came upon four natives.”

Upon leaving D’Entrecasteaux Strait, the vessels proceeded to survey the south-western coast of New Caledonia, which La Perouse should have visited. A portion of Pine Island, which stretches to the north of that country, was the first to be recognized.

The *Recherche* narrowly escaped destruction upon the coral reefs which surround the coast, leaving only a narrow passage between them and the main land. At the northern extremity several mountainous islands and detached rocks were perceived, which rendered the navigation extremely dangerous. The navigators, grateful for their escape, named them the Entrecasteaux Reefs and Huon Islands.

The survey of this perilous coast lasted from the 16th of June to the 3rd of July. A true service was thus rendered to geographers and navigators, though it was, perhaps, the least profitable part of the voyage of discovery.

As the favourable season was now approaching, D’Entrecasteaux determined to avail himself of it to reach the land of the Arsacides, which had been seen by Surville, and visited some years later by Shortland, who, imagining he was making a new discovery, named it New Georgia.

“Upon the 9th of July,” says La Billardière, “towards half-past four o’clock, we perceived, about ten miles to the N.W. a rock called Eddystone. We took it at first, as Shortland had done, for a sailing vessel. The illusion was the greater, as in colour it much resembles the sails of a ship; a few shrubs crowned the summit. The land of the Arsacides, opposite this rock, is steep, and covered with large trees.”

After rectifying the position of Eddystone rocks, and that of the Treasury Islands — which are five in number, though so close together that Bougainville took them for one island — D’Entrecasteaux coasted Bougainville Island. It is separated from Bouka Island by a narrow strait, and is covered with plantations. It appeared to be well populated. Some trade was done with the natives, but nothing would induce them to venture on board the vessels.

“The colour of their skins,” says La Billardière, “is nearly black. They are of medium height, and wear no clothes. They are muscular and strong. Although their features are not pleasant, they are very expressive. They have large heads, and broad foreheads. Their faces, especially in the lower part, are flat; they have thick chins, rather prominent cheek bones, flat noses, large mouths, and thin lips.

“Their ugliness is increased by the colour with which the betel-nut stains their mouths. They appear very skilful in the use of bows and arrows. One of them brought a gannet which he had just killed, on board, and the hole made by the arrow could easily be seen.

“These natives have bestowed particular attention upon their weapons, which are very well finished. We could not but admire the skill with which they coated the strings of their bows with resin, in such a way that at first sight they looked like catgut. The centre was protected with a piece of bark, to lessen the wear in projecting the arrows.”

The survey of the western coast of these two islands was completed upon the 15th of July. Bougainville had already surveyed the eastern shore.

Next day the French navigators sighted first the island to which Carteret had given the name of Sir Charles Hardy, and then the south eastern extremity of New Ireland.

The two vessels cast anchor in Carteret Bay, and the crews were established upon Cocoa Island. This island is covered with evergreen trees, which, in spite of the volcanic nature of the soil, grow vigorously.

The cocoa-nuts from which it received its name were procured with difficulty. On the other hand, it afforded the naturalists so many varieties of plants and insects as to charm Billardière.

Rain fell abundantly during the stay; it was like a ceaseless torrent of tepid water.

After obtaining the necessary wood and water, the *Recherche* and *Espérance* set sail from Port Carteret upon the 24th of July, 1792. In so doing the Espérance unfortunately lost an anchor, the cable having been cut by the coral reefs. The two vessels then entered St. George’s Strait, which at the southern extremity is only about forty-two miles in width, about half the extent assigned to it by Carteret. The currents were so rapid that the ships were carried past Man and Sandwich Islands, without being able to stop.

After sighting Portland Islands, low lands, seven in number, which stretch from 2° 39’ 44” S. lat. to 147° 15’ E. long. D’Entrecasteaux continued his route towards the Admiralty Islands, which he intended to visit. It was upon the most easterly of these islands that, according to the report received by Commodore Hunter, the natives wearing French naval uniforms had been seen.

“The natives appeared in crowds,” says the narrative. “Some ran along the shore, others, fixing their eyes upon our vessels, invited us by signs to land. The cries they uttered were intended to express their joy. At half-past one the vessels anchored, and a boat was despatched from each, containing articles for distribution among the natives of this small island. The frigates were so placed as to protect the boats as they neared the land, in the event of any attack by the savages, for our recollection of the treachery of the natives of the islands south of the Admiralty made us distrustful.”

The coast abounded in reefs; the boats could only approach within a hundred yards of the shore. Numbers of the natives crowded to the beach, and invited the French by signs to land.

“One of the savages, distinguished by a double row of small shells upon his forehead, appeared to exercise a good deal of authority. He ordered one of the natives to jump into the water, and bring us some cocoa-nuts. Fearing to approach strangers swimming and defenceless, he hesitated for a moment. The chief, evidently quite unaccustomed to resistance to his wishes, followed up his command by blows from his club, and compelled obedience.

“As soon as the islander returned to land, curiosity brought the natives around him in crowds. Each wished to participate in our presents. Pirogues were immediately launched, and many natives swam to the boats, which were shortly surrounded by quite a crowd. We were surprised that the violence of the surf upon the breakers did not intimidate them.”

Perhaps the French may have attempted that which the Indians accomplished. It seems probable that they would never have observed these people if the vessels, or at least a small boat, had not been wrecked in the archipelago.

The only remark made by them is to the effect that the natives understood and appreciated the use of iron.

D’Entrecasteaux then proceeded to reconnoitre the northern portion of the archipelago, and to trade with the natives. He did not land anywhere, and does not appear to have executed this part of his task with the minute care and attention which might have been expected of him.

The *Recherche* and the *Espérance* afterwards visited the Hermit Islands, discovered in 1781 by a Spanish frigate, *La Princesa*. The natives, like all those they had encountered, showed a great desire to induce the strangers to land, but did not succeed in persuading them to do so.

The Exchequer Islands, discovered by Bougainville, several unknown low islands, covered with luxuriant vegetation, Schouten Island, and the coast of New Guinea, were successively sighted. In the interior of the last-named a large chain of mountains was distinguished, the loftiest of which appeared at least three thousand five hundred feet high.

After coasting this large island, the *Recherche* and the *Espérance* entered Pitt Strait to reach the Moluccas.

Upon the 5th of September, 1792, the French joyfully anchored in the roadstead of Amboyna. There were many sufferers from scurvy on board, and officers and crew alike needed a lengthened rest. The naturalists, astronomers, and other scientific men immediately landed, and took the necessary steps for the prosecution of their various observations. The naturalists were particularly successful in acquiring new facts. La Billardière congratulates himself upon the multiplicity of new plants and animals that he was able to obtain.

“Once when upon the shore,” he says, “I heard what appeared to be wind instruments, the tones now harmonious, now discordant, yet never unpleasing. These harmonious and distinct sounds appeared to come from a distance, and I imagined the natives were making music some six or seven miles beyond the roadstead. But my ear deceived me, for I found that I was not a hundred yards from the instrument. A bamboo cane, at least sixty feet high, was fixed vertically upon the shore. At each notch a slit had been made, about two and a half inches long and one and a quarter broad. These slits made so many openings for the wind, which, passing through them, produced varied and pleasant sounds. As the notches in this cane were very numerous, the slits had been made all round, so that whichever way the wind blew it went through some of them. I can only compare the sound of this instrument to that of an harmonium.”

During this long stay of a month in one place the vessels were well caulked, the sails and rigging attended to, and every precaution taken for a voyage in tropical and damp climates.

A few details on the roadstead of Amboyna, and the manners and customs of the native population, will not be out of place.

“Amboyna roadstead,” says La Billardière, “forms a channel some thirteen or fourteen miles in length, and about two and a half miles in breadth. It affords good anchorage, although the bottom is partly of coral.

“The fort, called Victory Fort, is built of bricks; the governor and some of the members of government reside there. It was at this time falling into ruins, and every discharge of cannon did evident damage.

“The garrison consisted of about two hundred men, of which the natives of the island composed a considerable part; the remainder consisted of a few retired European soldiers and a small detachment of a Wurtemberg regiment.

“The mortality amongst officers living in the Indies makes the lives of those who have been some time in the climate precious; the Dutch Company is therefore seldom true to its promise to allow them to return to Europe at the expiration of their time of service. I met with several of these unfortunate men who had been detained for more than twenty years, when, according to agreement, they ought to have been freed long before.

“The language of the natives of Amboyna is Malay. It is very soft and musical. The country produces spices, coffee, which is inferior to that of Reunion Island, and sago; the latter is largely cultivated in the marshy districts.

“The rice consumed at Amboyna is not indigenous to the soil, but still it might be successfully cultivated in the low lands. The Dutch Company, however, prohibit the growth of this article of commerce, because its sale enables them to keep back a part of the sum which they are obliged to pay for cloves furnished by the blacks. They thus prevent the increase of pay, and obtain the fruits of native labour at a moderate price.

“Thus the company, consulting their own interest only, discourage all industry in the population, by forcing them, as it were, to relinquish everything but the cultivation of spices.

“The Dutch are careful to limit the cultivation of spices within the compass of ordinary consumption. Their efforts, which are destructive of all enterprise, chime in with the *nonchalant* character of the natives.”

On the 23rd of “Vendémiaire”[1] of the year 1, if we conform to the new style, as Bougainville does, the two vessels left Amboyna, amply provisioned with fowls, ducks, geese, pigs, goats, potatoes, yams, bananas, and pumpkins. Meat, however, they obtained in but small quantities, the flour was of a bad quality, and the sailors could never accustom themselves to the sago which was shipped in its stead; bamboos, cloves, and arrack may be added to the list of shipments.

“Young bamboo shoots, cut in slices, and preserved in vinegar,” says La Billardière, “made an excellent store for a long voyage. These young shoots are generally very tender. They are gathered early, and sold in the market as vegetables, for which they are a good substitute. They are often a yard long, and half an inch thick.

[1] First month of the Republican calendar.

“These young bamboo shoots are much appreciated by the Chinese, who think them similar to asparagus in flavour.

“We were also provided with cloves and nutmegs preserved in sugar. The shell of the nutmeg is the only edible portion; unfortunately, ignorant preservers had chosen full-grown nutmegs. Cloves, when once as large as ordinary olives, retain too much flavour to be a pleasant sweetmeat. One must be endowed with an Indian palate to enjoy them. I might say the same of our ginger preserves.

“The only spirituous liquor obtainable was arrack, several casks of which were bought. Many travellers have spoken in praise of this liquor, which is, in reality, not equal to the poorest brandy.”

Upon leaving Amboyna, the expedition sailed for the south-west coast of Australia. Shortly afterwards, Kisser Island, the north shore of Timor, Baton Island, and the delightful Sauva Island, were successively passed; and finally, upon the 16th “Frimaire,” the western extremity of the south-western coast of New Holland, which was discovered by Leuwin in 1622, was sighted.

The coast presented a succession of sandy dunes, in the midst of which arose pointed rocks, apparently utterly sterile. Navigation upon this unsheltered coast was extremely dangerous. The sea ran high, the wind was boisterous, and it was necessary to steer amongst the breakers. During a strong gale the *Espérance* was nearly driven upon the coast, when one of the officers fortunately distinguished from the main-mast an anchorage, where, he declared, the ships would be in safety.

“The safety of the two ships,” says the narrative, “was due to this discovery, for the *Recherche*, after battling as long as she could against the storm, had been forced to tack about all night amidst these perilous breakers, hoping for a change of wind which would make it possible for her to reach the open sea, and must infallibly have perished. This bay, named Legrand, after the able seaman who first discovered it, will always recall his invaluable service to the expedition.”

The islets surrounding this coast were reconnoitred by the navigators. A geographical engineer, named Riche, belonging to the *Recherche*, landing upon the mainland to make observations, lost his way, and only reached the vessels after two days’ absence, nearly dead of fatigue and hunger.

This small archipelago concluded the discoveries of Nuyts.

“We were surprised,” says La Billardière, “at the exactitude with which the latitude had been determined by this navigator, at a time when instruments were very imperfect. The same remark applies to nearly all Leuwin’s discoveries in this region.”

Upon the 15th Nivose[2] 31° 52’ lat. and 129° 16’ E. long. Captain Huon de Kermadec informed D’Entrecasteaux that his rudder was injured, that he was obliged to limit his crew to three quarters of a bottle of water per day, that he had been forced to discontinue the distribution of anti-scorbutic drinks, and that he had only thirty casks of water remaining. The *Recherche* was hardly in better case. D’Entrecasteaux accordingly made for Cape Dieman, after navigating for about six hundred and seventy miles along a barren coast, which offered no object of interest or value.

[2] Fourth month of the Republican calendar, from 21st December to 21st January.

Upon the 3rd Pluviose,[3] the vessels anchored in the Bay of Rocks, in Tempest Bay, which they had visited the preceding year. This spot was very rich in points of interest. La Billardière was amazed at the varied products of this portion of Van Diemen’s Land, and was never tired of admiring the vast forests of gigantic trees, and the many unknown shrubs and plants, through which he had to force his way. During one of his numerous excursions he picked up some fine pieces of beautiful bronze red hæmatite, and further on some earth containing ochre, of so bright a red as to denote the presence of iron. He soon encountered some natives, and his remarks upon this race, which is now quite extinct, are interesting enough for repetition; moreover, they complete the particulars already given by Captain Cook.

[3] Fifth month of the Republican calendar, from 20th January to 20th February.

He says, “There were about forty-two natives; seven grown men, and eight women, the others appeared to be their children; many of them were girls already arrived at maturity, who were even more lightly clad than their mothers. They have woolly hair, and the men let their beards grow long. In the children the upper jaw projects, but in adults it is about even with the lower. No doubt these people consider it a beauty to be black; for, not being very dark to begin with, they powder the upper part of the body with coal dust.

“We noticed rows of spots on the skin, especially of the shoulders and breast, now in lines above three inches long, now in equidistant dots. These people do not appear to observe the custom which many travellers have thought to be universal amongst their tribes, of extracting the incisor teeth, for we saw no native with any missing from the upper jaw, and they all had very fine, strong teeth. These people swarm with vermin. We could not but admire the patience of a woman, whom we watched freeing her child of them; nor could we avoid feeling shocked when she crushed the disgusting insects with her teeth, and then swallowed them. Monkeys have the same habit!

“The young children greatly admired everything shining, and they did not hesitate to take the metal buttons off our coats. I must not omit to mention a trick played upon a sailor by a young savage. The man had collected a number of shells, and left them in a bag at the foot of a rock. The native furtively removed them, and allowed the sailor to search for them vainly for some time; then quietly replacing them, he seemed much amused at the trick he had played.”

Early in the morning of the 26th Pluviose the two vessels weighed anchor, entered D’Entrecasteaux Strait, and, on the 5th of Ventose,[4] anchored in Adventure Bay. After a stay of five days, spent in taking observations, D’Entrecasteaux set sail for New Zealand, and reached its southern extremity. After an interview with the natives, too short to admit of additions being made to the many and precise observations of Captain Cook, D’Entrecasteaux started for the Friendly Islands, which La Perouse had intended visiting. He anchored in Tonga Tabou Bay. The vessels were at once surrounded by a crowd of pirogues, and literally boarded by the natives, who came to sell pigs and every variety of fruit.

[4] Sixth month of French Republican calendar.

One of the sons of Poulao, the king Cook had known, received the navigators cordially, and scrupulously superintended the trade with the islanders. This was no easy task, for they developed surprising talents for stealing everything which came in their way.

La Billardière describes rather a good joke of which he was the victim. He was followed to the provision tent by two natives, whom he took to be chiefs.

“One of them,” he says, “was very anxious to choose the best fruits for me. I had placed my hat on the ground, thinking it safe there; but these two rogues understood their business. The one behind me was clever enough to hide my hat under his clothes, and was off before I perceived the theft; the other speedily followed. I was the more surprised at this attempt, because I should have supposed they would not have had the courage to steal so large an object, running the risk of being caught, in the enclosure to which we had admitted them. Moreover, a hat could not be a very useful article to these people, who generally go bare-headed. Their dexterity in robbing me, convinced me that it was by no means their first attempt.”

The French entered into relations with a chief named Finau, probably the same who is mentioned as Finauo in Captain Cook’s voyage, and who called him Touté. But he was only a secondary chief. The real king, supreme chief of Tonga Tabou, Vavao, and of Annamooka, was named Toubau. He visited the ships, and brought back a gun which had been stolen a day or two previously from a sentinel. He presented D’Entrecasteaux with two pieces of stuff made from the bark of the mulberry-tree, so large that if opened out either would have covered the vessel. In exchange for mats and pigs he received a fine hatchet and a general’s red coat, which he immediately put on.

Two days later, an extraordinarily stout female, at least fifty years of age, and to whom the natives paid great respect, came on board. This was Queen

Tina. She tasted everything that was offered to her, but preferred preserved bananas. The steward stood behind her chair, and waited to clear away, but she saved him the trouble by appropriating the plate and napkin.

King Toubau was anxious to give an entertainment to D’Entrecasteaux. The admiral was received upon landing by two chiefs, Finau and Omalai, and conducted by them to an extensive esplanade. Toubau arrived with his two daughters. They had sprinkled a quantity of cocoa-nut oil upon their heads, and each wore a necklace made of the pretty seeds of the *arbus peccatorius*.

“The natives,” says the narrative, “arrived from all parts in great crowds; we estimated that the number amounted to at least four thousand.

“The seat of honour was evidently to the left of the king, for he invited D’Entrecasteaux to take his place there. The captain then offered the presents he had brought for the king which were gratefully accepted. A piece of crimson damask excited the most vivid admiration from all the assembled natives. ‘Eho! Eho!’ they exclaimed repeatedly, in accents of the greatest surprise. They uttered the same admiring cry when we unfolded some pieces of coloured ribbon, in which red predominated. The captain then presented a couple of goats, and a pair of rabbits, of which the king promised to take every care. D’Entrecasteaux also bestowed various presents upon Toubau’s son Omalai, and several other chiefs.

“To our right, on the north-east, under a shady bread-fruit tree laden with fruit, thirteen musicians were seated, who sang together in different parts. Four of the musicians played the accompaniment by striking bamboo canes, yard and a yard and a half long, upon the ground, the holder of the longest bamboo occasionally acting as conductor. These bamboo canes emitted a sound not unlike that of a tambourine, and they were arranged in the following order. The two medium-sized canes were in unison, the longest a tone and a half lower, and the shortest two tones and a half higher. The voice of the alto was heard far above all the others, although he was a little hoarse; he accompanied himself by striking with two little sticks upon a bamboo cane, some six yards long, and split throughout its entire length. Three musicians stationed in front of the others appeared to explain the song by gestures, which had apparently been well studied, as they all acted in unison. Occasionally gracefully moving their arms, they turned towards the king; whilst sometimes they suddenly sunk their heads upon their breasts, and as suddenly tossed them back.

“After these entertainments Toubau offered the captain several pieces of stuff made from the bark of the mulberry-tree. He had them unrolled with great ostentation, that we might fully appreciate the value of his gift. The minister seated upon his left ordered the preparation of ‘kava,’ which was soon brought in an oval-shaped wooden vase, about three feet long.

“The musicians had reserved their best pieces for this moment, for at each succeeding effort we heard applauding cries of ‘Mâli, Mâli;’ and it was evident that the music had an agreeable and inspiriting effect upon the natives. The ‘kava’ was then offered to the various chiefs by those who had prepared it.”

This concert, it will be seen, was by no means equal to the splendid entertainment which had been given to Captain Cook.

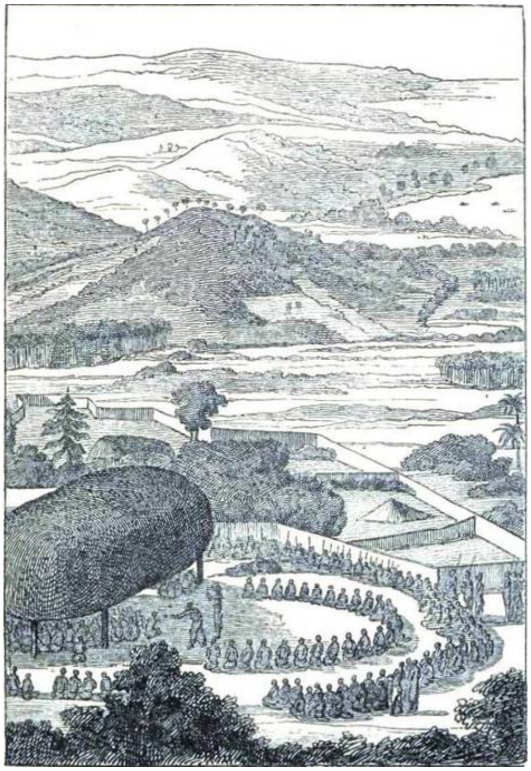

Fête in honour of D’Entrecasteaux at the Friendly Islands.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Queen Tina followed it up by giving a grand ball, which was preceded by a concert, fully attended by the natives, amongst whom, we may incidentally mention, were numbers of thieves, who became so bold that they ended by forcibly taking possession of a cutlas. As the blacksmith of the *Recherche* pursued the thieves, they turned, and seeing him alone, struck him on the head with a club. Fortunately his danger was perceived by those on board the *Espérance*, and a well-directed shot dispersed his assailants. Several natives were killed upon this occasion by the officers and sailors, who, not seeing exactly what had happened, treated all the islanders they met as dangerous. Fortunately, concord was soon restored; and the relations were so friendly when the time came for the French to leave, that many of the natives begged to accompany them to France.

“The intelligent account which these islanders gave of the vessels which had anchored in this archipelago,” says the narrative, “convinced us that La Perouse had not visited any of these islands. They remembered perfectly every occasion upon which they had seen Captain Cook, and they indicated the intervals between his visits by the crops of yams, reckoning two in each year.”

It is true that their information, as far as it related to La Perouse, was in direct contradiction to the facts which Dumont-Durville collected thirty-six years later, when Tamaha was queen.

“I was anxious to know,” he says, “if any Europeans had visited Tonga between Cook and D’Entrecasteaux. After a few moments’ reflection, she explained to me very clearly that a few years before D’Entrecasteaux’s visit, two large vessels, like his in every respect, carrying guns and many Europeans, had anchored off Annamooka, and remained there six days. They showed a white flag, quite unlike the English one. The strangers had been very friendly with the natives, and had had a house on the island and entered into trade. She related that a native who had agreed to exchange a wooden bolster for a knife, was shot by an officer because he wanted to take back his merchandise when he had been paid for it. However, the incident had not broken the peace, because in that instance the native was in the wrong.”

Although it is impossible to suspect Dumont-Durville of any attempt at imposition, many portions of this circumstantial account bear the impress of truth, more especially that relating to the flag, as being different to that of the English. Must we then charge D’Entrecasteaux with want of thoroughness in his work? This would be a very serious charge. Yet two circumstances, which we shall presently relate, appear to point to that conclusion.

The natives witnessed the departure of the French with keen regret. The expedition left upon the 21st Germinal,[5] and six days later the *Espérance* signalled Erronan, the most easterly of the islands of Santo Espiritu, discovered by Quiros in 1660. Beyond this Annatom, Tanna, with its volcano in constant eruption, and the Beautemps-Beaupré Islands were passed. Carried onwards by the currents, the vessels were soon in sight of the mountains of New Caledonia, and anchored in Balade harbour, where Captain Cook had cast anchor in 1774.

The natives were acquainted with the use of iron, but they did not appear to value it as highly as others had done, probably because the stones they used instead were very hard and answered admirably for their purposes. Their first demand upon going on board was for something to eat; and their need was unmistakable, for they pointed to their manifestly empty stomachs. Captain Cook had already remarked that they managed their pirogues, which were far less ingeniously constructed than those of the Friendly Islands, unskilfully. The greater number of these natives had woolly hair, and skins almost as black as those of the inhabitants of Van Diemen’s Land. Their weapons were assegais and clubs; and in addition to these they carried at the waist a little bag, full of the oval stones which they throw from their slings.

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[5] Seventh month of the Republican calendar, from 21st March to 19th April.

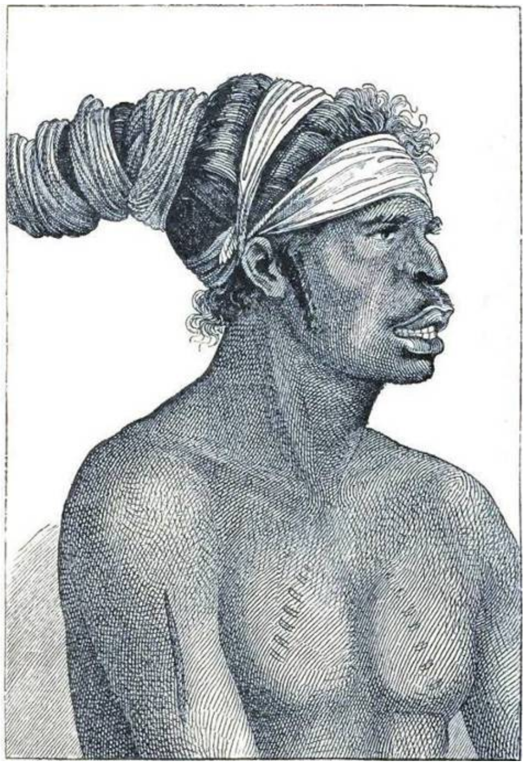

Typical native of New Holland.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

After a short excursion inland, during which they visited the huts of the natives, which were shaped like beehives, the officers and naturalists prepared to re-embark.

“Upon returning to our boat,” says the narrative, “we found more than seven hundred natives, who had assembled from all directions. They began by demanding stuffs and iron in exchange for their wares, and soon some of them proved themselves arrant thieves.

“I will mention one of their many manoeuvres. A man offered to sell me the little bag of stones which he carried at his waist. He unfastened it, and pretended to offer it to me in one hand, whilst he held out the other for the price upon which we had agreed. But at the same moment another native, who had taken up his stand behind me, uttered a shrill scream, which made me turn my head in his direction, whereupon the rogue made off with his bag, and hid himself in the crowd. We were unwilling to punish him, although most of us carried our guns.

“Unfortunately our leniency might be regarded as a proof of our weakness, and so add to the native insolence; and an incident which shortly occurred indicates this was so.

“Some natives were bold enough to throw stones at an officer who was only about two hundred paces away from us. We were still unwilling to act harshly, as we had heard so much in their favour from Forster’s narrative, and had such confidence in their good will that still more evidence was required to convince us of their real character.

“One of them, who was enjoying a broiled bone, and busily devouring the meat which still clung to it, offered a share of his meal to a sailor named Piron. He, thinking it to be the bone of some animal, accepted it, but before eating it showed it to me. I at once recognized that it had belonged to the body of a child, of probably fourteen or fifteen years of age. The natives crowding round us, showed us upon a living child the position of the bone, owning without hesitation that the man had been making his meal off it, and giving us to understand that it was a great delicacy.

“Those of our company who had remained on board, could hardly credit our account of this disgusting fact. They refused to believe that a people who had been so differently described by Captain Cook and Captain Forster could be capable of so degrading a practice, but the most incredulous were soon convinced. I had retained possession of the gnawed bone, and our surgeon at once recognized it as that of a child. To make still more sure of the cannibalism of the natives, I offered it to one of them. He seized it eagerly, and tore the remaining flesh from it with his teeth; after he had done with it, I passed it to another, who still found something upon it to relish."

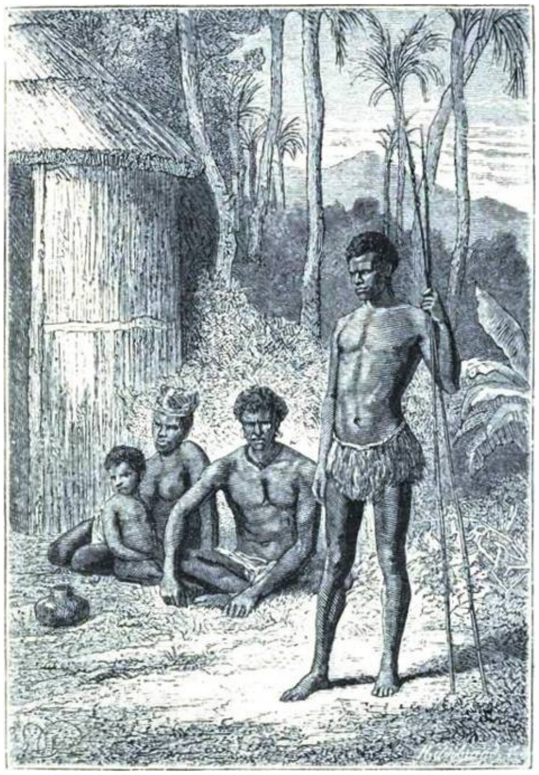

Natives of New Caledonia.

The natives who visited the vessel, committed so many thefts, and became so impudent, that we were forced to drive them away. Upon landing next day, the French found the natives feasting.

They immediately offered a share of their meal to the strangers. It proved to be human flesh recently cooked.

Many of them even came close up to the French and felt the muscles of their arms and legs, uttering the word Karapek, with an expression of admiration and longing which was anything but reassuring.

Many of the officers were assaulted and robbed with the greatest effrontery. There remained no doubt of the intentions of the natives. They even attempted to possess themselves of the hatchets the sailors had brought on shore to cut wood, and were only made to desist by being fired upon.

These constantly recurring hostilities always ended in the repulse of the natives, many of whom were killed or wounded. But in spite of the repulses they met with, they let no favourable opportunity pass of recommencing their attacks.

La Billardière was witness to a fact which has since been frequently observed, but was long disbelieved. He saw the natives eating steatite. This mineral substance serves to deaden the sense of hunger, by filling the stomach and sustaining the viscera of the diaphragm, and although it contains no nourishment whatever, it is useful to them, because they have long periods when food is scarcely procurable, as they bestow very little cultivation upon their land, which is naturally very sterile. Yet, one would scarcely have expected hungry cannibals to resort to such an expedient.

No news of La Perouse had been obtained during the stay in New Caledonia. But M. Jules Garnier states that a tradition exists of the appearance of two large ships, which had sent boats on shore, near the northern extremity of Pine Island.

“After the first alarm,” says M. Jules Garnier, in a communication which appeared in the “Bulletin de la Societé de Géographie” for November, 1869, “the natives approached the strangers and fraternized with them; they were quite astonished at their riches, and their cupidity induced them to oppose the departure of the French sailors by force; but their ardour was moderated by a volley which killed a few of them. Little pleased with their reception, the French vessels proceeded to the mainland, after letting off a cannon, which the natives took to be a clap of thunder.”

It is strange that D’Entrecasteaux, who entered into communications with the natives of Pine Island, should have heard nothing of these events. The island is small, and its population has always been scanty. The natives must have kept secret the fact of their dealings with La Perouse.

Had D’Entrecasteaux, in his navigation among the coral reefs which protect the eastern coast of New Caledonia, succeeded in entering one of the many openings he met with, he might have found some trace of the course taken by La Perouse, who was a careful navigator, and anxious to emulate Cook, who had touched at several points of that coast. A whaler, whose account is quoted by Rienzi, declared that he had seen medals and a cross of St. Louis, relics of the French expedition, in possession of the natives of New Caledonia.

M. Jules Garnier, during a voyage from Noumea to Canala, in March, 1865, observed in the hand of one of their native escort, “an old rusty sword, in the fashion of the last century,” which bore the impression of the “fleur-de-lys.” He could obtain no account of it from its possessor, except that he had had it a long time.

There is no evidence that any member of the expedition gave a sword, still less a cross of the order of St. Louis, to a savage. No doubt an officer had fallen in some encounter, and thus these articles had come into native hands.

This hypothesis accords with M. Garnier’s explanation of the contradictory accounts given by Cook and D’Entrecasteaux of the people of Balade. According to the former, they are peaceable, honest, and friendly; according to the latter, they are robbers, traitors, and cannibals. M. Jules Garnier suggests that some extraordinary event must have changed the disposition of the natives between the two visits. Most likely an encounter had taken place. The Europeans may have been driven to the use of arms: they may possibly have destroyed plantations and burnt huts. In such a case their hostile reception of D’Entrecasteaux would be explicable.

La Billardière, in his account of an excursion to the mountains forming the water-shed of the northern extremity of New Caledonia, and from which the sea can be seen on either side, says, —

“We were followed by three natives, who had no doubt seen us a year previously, when we coasted the eastern shores of their island, for before they left us they spoke of two ships which they had seen upon that coast.”

La Billardière ought to have pressed the natives upon this subject. Were the vessels seen by them those of La Perouse or of D’Entrecasteaux: and was it really “a year previously”?

From these details we see how much it is to be regretted that D’Entrecasteaux did not pursue his investigations more zealously. No doubt, had he done so, he would have found traces of his fellow-countrymen. We shall shortly see, that with a little perseverance he would have found some at least, if not all of them alive.

During the stay in this port Captain Huon de Kermadec succumbed to a hectic fever from which he had long been suffering. He was succeeded in the command of the *Espérance* by M. D’Hesminy d’Auribeau.

Leaving New Caledonia upon the 21st Floréal,[6] D’Entrecasteaux sighted successively Moulin and Huon Islands, and Santa Cruz de Mendana, which is separated from New Jersey by a strait, in which the French vessels were attacked by the natives.

To the south-east D’Entrecasteaux observed an island, which he named after the *Recherche*, and which he might have called Discovery if he had approached it. It was Vanikoro, an islet surrounded by coral reefs, upon which La Perouse’s vessels had been wrecked, and which at this time, in all probability, was inhabited by some of the unfortunate seamen. It was most unfortunate to be so near success, and yet to miss it! But the veil which hid the fate of La Perouse and his companions was not destined to be removed for a long time yet.

After surveying the northern extremities of Santa Cruz, without any result so far as the object of his expedition was concerned, D’Entrecasteaux directed his course to De Surville’s Land of the Arsacides. He reconnoitred the northern coast, and thence reached the shores of Lousiade, which La Perouse had announced his intention of visiting when he left Salomon Island, and surveyed Cape Deliverance. Bougainville was wrong in supposing that this cape belonged to New Guinea; it is the extreme point of an island, called Rossel after one of the officers who has given an account of the expedition.

[6] Eighth month of the Republican calendar, from 18th April to 20th May.

After coasting along a series of low and rocky islands, which were named after the principal officers, the vessels reached Cape William, on the coast of New Guinea. They then directed their course to Dampier's Strait. After sailing along the northern coast of New Britain, several small and mountainous islands, hitherto unknown, were discovered. Upon the 17th of July a small island in the neighbourhood of the Anchorite Islands was sighted.

D'Entrecasteaux had long been suffering from dysentery and scurvy, and was in extreme danger. Following the advice of his officers, he decided to take leave of the *Espérance*, and endeavoured to reach Waihoun more quickly. Upon the 20th of July he sunk under long and protracted sufferings. After a stay at Waihoun and Bouro Islands, at which latter place the President overwhelmed the French with civilities, and where Bougainville was still remembered by the natives, the expedition left, under command of D'Auribeau. He also unfortunately fell ill, and the command was transferred to Rossel, under whose orders the vessels passed first Boutong, and then Saleyer Straits, and reached Sourabaya upon the 19th of October.

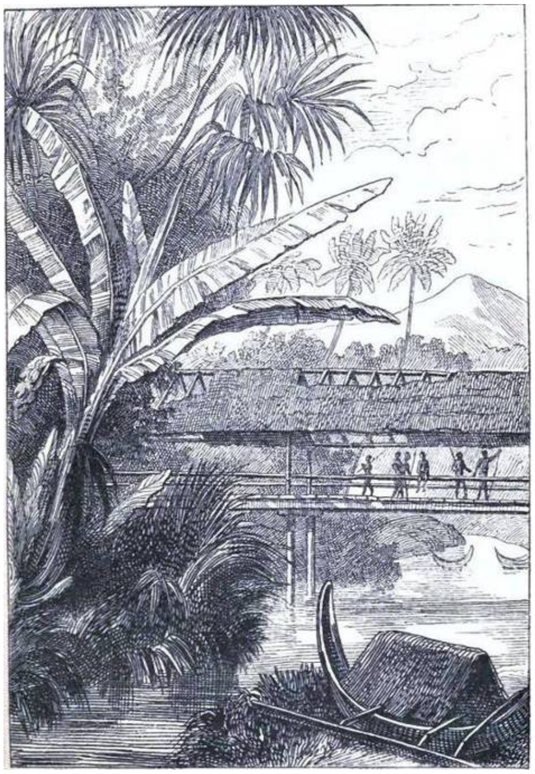

View of the Island of Bouron.

Sad news here awaited the members of the expedition. Louis XVI. had been beheaded. France was at war with Holland and all the European powers. Although both the *Recherche* and the *Espérance* needed many repairs, and the health of the crews needed repose, D’Auribeau was about to start for Mauritius, when he was detained by the Dutch governor. Fearing that the news from Europe, affecting as it did the various members of the expedition so differently, might lead to disaffection in his colony, he subjected his “prisoners,” as he called the French, to most humiliating conditions, which they could not escape. Irritation and hatred were rampant, when it occurred to D’Auribeau to unfurl the white flag. However, the greater part of the officers and men of science, amongst them Billardière, obstinately refused to respect the conditions imposed; and being arrested by order of the Dutch authorities, were distributed throughout the different ports of the colony.

After the death of D’Auribeau, which occurred upon the 21st of Aug. 1794, Rossel became head of the expedition. He undertook to convey all documents of every kind collected during the voyage to France; but being taken prisoner by an English frigate, he was deprived of his property, in defiance of justice; and when France obtained the objects of natural history, of which she had been robbed — the expression is not too strong when we recall the instructions given by the French government with regard to Captain Cook’s expedition — they were in so bad a condition that they had lost much of their value.

Thus ended this unfortunate expedition. Although its principal object had not been attained, it had at least resulted in some geographical discoveries; it had completed or rectified those made by preceding navigators; and to it, especially to the exertions of La Billardière, are due the acquisition of an immense number of facts in natural history.

III.

Captain Marchand’s voyage — The Marquesas — Discovery of Nouka-Hiva — Manners and customs of the inhabitants — Revolution Islands — The coast of America and Tchinkitané Port — Cox Strait — Stay at the Sandwich Islands — Macao — Disappointment — Return to France — Discoveries made by Bass and Flinders upon the Australian coast — Captain Baudin’s expedition — Endracht and De Witt Islands — Stay at Timor — Survey of Van Diemen’s Land — Separation between the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste* — Stay at Port Jackson — Convicts — Agricultural wealth of New South Wales — Return of the *Naturaliste* to France — Cruise of the *Géographe* and of the *Casuarina* to the Islands of Nuyts, Edels, Endracht, and De Witt — Second stay at Timor — Return to France.

Etienne Marchand, a captain in the merchant service, returning to France from Bengal in 1788, met with the English Captain Portlock in the roadstead of St. Helena. Their conversation naturally fell upon commerce, and the value of various articles of trade. Like a sensible man, Marchand allowed his companion to talk, and only put in a few words himself now and again, and thus drew from Portlock the interesting information that furs, and more especially otter skins, which could be obtained for a mere trifle upon the eastern coast of North America, realized an enormous price in China; whilst at the same time a cargo brought from the Celestial Empire would return a large profit in Europe.

Upon arriving in France, Marchand communicated what he had learned to his ship-owners, MM. Baux of Marseilles, and they at once resolved to act upon the knowledge he had obtained. Navigation in the Pacific Ocean required a ship of special strength and excellence. MM. Baux ordered the construction of a vessel of 300 tons’ burden, plated with copper, and provided with every necessary for defence in case of attack, and for repairs in the event of accident, and also with everything likely to promote trade and to ensure the health of the crews during a voyage of three or four years.

Two captains, MM. Masse and Prosper Chanal, were associated with Marchand in the command of the expedition, and the rest of the party consisted of three lieutenants, two surgeons, three volunteers, and a crew of thirty-nine seamen. Four cannon, two howitzers, four swivel guns, with the needful ammunition, &c. formed the equipment.

Although the vessel was only to reach Cape Horn at the beginning of winter, the *Solide* left Marseilles upon the 14th of December, 1790. After a short stay at Praya, Cape Verde Islands, Marchand proceeded to Staten Island, which he reached upon the 1st of April, 1791. He then doubled Tierra del Fuego, and entered the Pacific. His intention was to proceed immediately to the north-western coast of America, but at the beginning of May the water on board was already so tainted that he required a fresh supply.

Under these circumstances, the captain decided to reach the Marquesas Islands of Mendoza which are situated in S. lat. 6°, and near 141° west of the Paris meridian.

“The situation of these islands,” says Fleurien, who published an interesting account of this voyage, “was the more suitable for his purpose, because with a view to escaping the calms often met with in too easterly a course, he had resolved to cross the line at 142° west longitude.”

This group of islands had been discovered in 1595 by Mendoza, and visited by Cook in 1774. Magdalena Island, the most southerly of the group, was reached upon the 12th of June.

The captain, and his associate Chanal, had calculated with such precision, that the *Solide* anchored off the Mendoza Islands, after a cruise of seventy-three days from the time of leaving Staten Island, without having noticed any land whatever. Constant astronomical observations alone ensured the safety of the vessel in a sea where the currents were unequal, and it was quite impossible to regulate the course of the ship by any ordinary calculations.

Marchand made for San Pedro, which lay on the west. He soon recognized Dominica, Santa Cristina, and Hood Island, the most northerly of the group, and finally anchored in Madre-de-Dios Bay, where he was enthusiastically welcomed by the natives, crying “Tayo, Tayo.”

Finding it impossible to obtain the number of pigs he required at this port, the captain decided upon visiting the remaining bays of Santa Cristina Island, which he found better populated, more fertile, and more picturesque than that of Madre-de-Dios.

The stay of the English in the Marquesas Islands had been too short to allow of accurate observations of the manners and customs of the inhabitants. We will therefore make a few extracts from the description given by Etienne Marchand.

“These natives are tall, strong, and active. Their complexion is clear brown, but many differ little in this respect from the lower orders in Europe. The climate renders clothing unnecessary, but they tattoo their entire bodies so regularly (each arm and leg, for example, exactly like its fellow), that the effect is by no means bad. The way of arranging the hair varies, and fashion is as despotic in the Marquesas as in other countries. Some wear necklaces of red beads, others a string of small pieces of light wood. Although both men and women have their ears pierced, ear-rings are not usually worn. But a young native girl has been seen strutting about wearing as a neck ornament the rusty iron shaving-dish which she had stolen from the ship’s barber, whilst a man was equally proud of sporting the ramrod of Captain

Marchand’s gun, which he had placed in the orifice of his ear, letting part of it hang down.”

Cook affirms that these islanders, like the Tahitans, were acquainted with “Kaba.” Certain it is that they called the brandy, which was offered them on the *Solide*, by the name of the pepper-plant. It appeared that they did not indulge to excess in this liquor, for none of them were ever seen in a state of drunkenness.

The English did not mention in their account of the natives an act of civility, which Captain Chanal thought worthy of special record. It consisted in offering to a friend a piece of food which had been already chewed, that he might have no trouble but that of swallowing it. We may easily imagine that the French, in spite of their appreciation of the good-will conveyed in this action, were little likely to avail themselves of it.

To Marchand we owe also the curious observation that their huts are raised upon flat stones, and that the stilts which they use indicate that Santa Cristina is subject to inundations. In the exhibition at the Trocadero, one of these stilts, extremely well made and carved, was exhibited; and M. Hamy, whose thorough knowledge of everything relating to Oceania is well known, has written an essay upon this singular object.

Beyond the usual occupations of fishing, the construction of their weapons, pirogues, and domestic implements, the natives of Santa Cristina pass their time in singing, dancing, and amusing themselves. The common expression of “killing the time” seems to have been invented to mark the uselessness of the actions which make up their lives.

During the earlier days of the stay in Madre-de-Dios Bay, Marchand had observed something which led him to the discovery of a group of islands hitherto unknown to the older navigators or to Cook. Upon a clear evening, at sunset, he noticed a spot upon the horizon, which had the appearance of a lofty peak. As this appeared several nights in succession, he concluded that it was land, and finding it not mentioned upon any of the charts, it seemed probable that it was some unknown island.

Marchand determined to satisfy himself upon this point, and leaving Santa Cristina upon the 20th of June, he had the satisfaction of discovering a group of small islands in the north-west, which were situated in 7° south latitude. He gave his own name to the most important of them. The natives were evidently of the same race as that which peopled the Marquesas. Shortly afterwards several other islands were discovered; including Baux Island, which is identical with Nouka-Hiva, the Deux Frères, and Masse and Chanal Islands. This group, since united by geographers to that of the Marquesas, received the name of Revolution Islands.

The course was then directed to the American coast. It was too late in the season to attempt to reach William’s Sound or Cook’s River, on the sixth parallel. Marchand accordingly resolved upon making for Engano Cape and entering the Norfolk Bay of Dixon, which is identical with the Guadaloupe Bay of the Spaniards.

Upon the 7th of August Engano Cape was sighted, and after five days of calm anchor was cast in Guadaloupe Bay. There had not been a single case of scurvy on board, after 242 days’ navigation, ten of which only were passed in port, at Praya and Madre-de-Dios, and after traversing some 5800 leagues of sea. This was certainly a wonderful fact, due to the prevision of the ship-owners, who had spared nothing that could conduce to the health of the crews, and also to the care with which the captains had observed the sanitary measures commended to them by experience.

During his stay in this port, which the natives called Tchinkitané, Marchand bought a number of otter skins, one hundred of which were of the very first quality.

The natives are ugly, stunted, but well proportioned. They have round, flat faces, small, sunken, bleared eyes, and prominent cheek-bones, which do not add to their beauty.

It is difficult to define the colour of their skins, so carefully is it disguised under a thick coating of grease, and the black and red substances which they rub in. Their hair is coarse, thick, and bushy, covered with ochre, down, and all the filth accumulated by time and neglect, and adds not a little to their unprepossessing appearance.

The women, though not so black as the men, are even more ugly. They are short and thick-set; their feet turn inwards, and their incredibly filthy habits make them repulsive. The coquetry which is innate in the female mind, induces them to add to their natural charms by the use of a labial ornament, as ugly as it is inconvenient, of which we have already spoken in our account of Captain Cook’s stay in these waters.

By means of an incision just below the lower lip, they make an opening parallel to that of the mouth, into which they insert an iron or wooden skewer, and from time to time they gradually increase the size of the instrument, in accordance with advancing age.

Finally, they introduce a piece of wood, made for the purpose, of the size and shape of the bowl of an ordinary table-spoon. This ornament, weighing upon the projecting part, naturally forces down the lower lip upon the chin, and developes the beauty of a large, gaping mouth, in shape not unlike an oven, revealing a row of dirty, yellow teeth. This bowl is removable at pleasure, and when it is absent the opening in the lower lip presents the appearance of a second mouth, which is little smaller than the natural one, and in some cases has been known to be three inches in length.

The *Solide* left Tchinkitané upon the 21st of August, and steered to the south-east, in the hope of coming upon Queen Charlotte's Islands, which had been discovered in 1786 by La Perouse. These islands extend over a distance of nearly seventy leagues. Upon the 23rd, Etienne Marchand sighted Manteau Bay (Dixon's Cloak Bay), which was carefully surveyed by Captain Chanal.

Next day the vessels entered Cox Strait, and began to trade with the Indians for furs.

The navigators were immensely astonished at seeing two enormous paintings, evidently of great age, and some gigantic sculptures, which, although not bearing the very smallest comparison to the *chef-d'oeuvres* of Greece, testified none the less to artistic tastes little to be expected from the miserable population.

The lands which form Cox Strait and Bay are low and covered with firs. The soil, composed of the remains of plants and broken rocks, does not appear to have much depth, and the productions are similar to those of Tchinkitané.

The population may be estimated at 400. Not unlike Europeans in height and figure, they are less hideous than the Tchinkitaneans.

This stay in Cloak Bay was not as productive of trade in furs as Marchand had expected, and he therefore decided to send an expedition under Captain Chanal to the more southerly islands. The object of the expedition was the survey of the regions which had hitherto been unvisited. Dixon was the only navigator who had crossed these waters, and none of his crew had landed. It is therefore not astonishing that many of his assertions were either rectified or denied after this more careful exploration.

After sighting Nootka Sound, Berkley Bay was reached, but just as the *Solide* was about to enter it, a three-masted ship was seen approaching the harbour from the south, which was precisely what Marchand had intended doing. This decided the French navigator to proceed immediately to the coast of China, and dispose of his merchandize before the vessel he now saw should have time to reach it and compete with him.

The best route to follow was that of the Sandwich Islands, and upon the 5th of October, the heights of Mauna Loa, and Mauna-Koa were made out by the French. They seemed quite free from snow, which was contrary to the description given of them by Captain King.

So soon as Owhyhee Island was in sight, Marchand wisely decided to conduct all his trade on board. He obtained pigs, fowls, cocoa-nuts, bananas, and various fruits from this island, and was delighted at finding amongst them pumpkins and watermelons, no doubt from the seeds sown by Captain Cook.

Four days were passed in trade, then the route to China was resumed, and in due course Tinian Island, one of the Mariannas, was sighted.

Commodore Anson’s glowing description of this island will be recalled. Byron, as we have already mentioned, was quite astonished at the different aspect it presented to him. But the fact is, some fifty years earlier Tinian was flourishing and counted thirty thousand inhabitants, and the victorious Spaniards had since introduced an epidemic which had decimated the population, whilst the miserable survivors had been torn from their country and sent to Guaham as slaves.

Marchand did not land at Tinian — which according to the accounts of every navigator who had visited it since Byron, had relapsed into barbarism — but made for the southern extremity of Formosa.

Reaching Macao upon the 28th of November, he heard news which disconcerted him. The Chinese Government had just passed a law prohibiting the introduction of furs into the ports of the empire under most severe penalties. Was this the result of some unknown clause in a secret treaty with Russia, or was it due to the cupidity and avarice of a few mandarins? In either case it was impossible to infringe the law.

Marchand wrote to MM. Baux’s agents in Canton; but the same prohibition held good in that town also, and it was useless to think of reaching Whampoa, where he would have had to pay duty, amounting to at least six thousand piastres.

The only course open to Marchand was to go to Mauritius, and thence return to Marseilles. It is unnecessary to describe the return voyage, which was accomplished without any unusual incidents.

What were the scientific results of this expedition? Nothing to speak of, from a geographical point of view. They may be enumerated as follows: — The discovery of that portion of the Marquesas Islands which had escaped the notice of Captain Cook and his predecessors, a more thorough examination of the country, and the manners and customs of the natives of Santa Christina in the same group, of Tchinkitané and Cloak Bays, and of Queen Charlotte’s Islands off the American coast. Small as these results might appear for an official expedition, they were not unsatisfactory for a vessel equipped by private enterprise; moreover, Captain Marchand and his colleagues had turned new discoveries to such good account, and studied the narratives of earlier voyagers so carefully, that they carried out the plan of their expedition more precisely than many experienced navigators might have done. And, in their turn, they rendered valuable assistance to their successors by the accuracy of their charts and drawings.

Circumstances were to prove less favourable for the publication of an account of a scientific expedition undertaken some years later, under the auspices of the French Government, having for its object the survey of the Australian coast. Although the results of the voyage made by Nicolas Baudin were most abundant, they seem up to this date to have been little recognized, and scientific dictionaries and biographies say as little as possible of his expedition.

From the time of Tasman's discovery of the western coast of New Holland, much had been done towards exploring this immense continent. Cook had carefully surveyed the eastern coast, discovering Endeavour Strait, and had urged upon his government the great advantages which would accrue from the founding of a colony in Botany Bay. In 1788, Philip, with his band of convicts, had laid the foundation of Port Jackson and of English power in this fifth continent of the world. In 1795 and 1796, Flinders, a midshipman, and Surgeon Bass, with a small vessel called the *Tom Thumb*, had explored twenty miles of the River George, and made a careful survey of a long stretch of coast.

In 1797, Bass discovered a large harbour, which he named Western Port on account of its situation.

“His provisions were now exhausted,” says Desborough Coolley, “and in spite of his earnest wish to make an accurate and minute survey of his new discoveries, he was obliged to retrace his steps. He was only provided with provisions for six weeks; still, by aid of fish and sea-birds, which he obtained in abundance, he succeeded in extending his voyage for another five weeks, although he had taken on board two convicts, whom he had picked up. This voyage of six hundred miles in an open boat, is one of the most remarkable on record. It was not undertaken from necessity, but with the view to exploring unknown and dangerous shores.”

In 1798, Bass, accompanied by Flinders, discovered the strait which now bears his name, and which divides Tasmania from New Holland, and in a schooner of some twenty-five tons’ burden, he made the tour of Van Diemen’s land. These brave adventurers collected facts, and made observations of the rivers and ports of this country which were of great use in the future colonization of the continent. Bass and Jackson were both enthusiastically received at Port Jackson.

Upon his return to England, Flinders received command of the *Investigator*, with the rank of naval lieutenant. This vessel was especially equipped for a voyage of discovery upon the Australian coast. The south and north-western shores, the Gulf of Carpentaria, and Torres Straits, were to be explored.

Public attention in France had been attracted to New Holland by the narratives published by Cook and D’Entrecasteaux. This wonderful continent, with its strange unknown animals, and forests of gigantic eucalyptus, alternating with barren plains producing nothing but prickly plants, was long to present all but invincible obstacles to the explorer.

The French Institute was the mouthpiece of popular opinion, in demanding from the government the organization of an expedition to the southern continent. As a result of their representations, twenty-four scientific men were selected to participate in the voyage.

No previous expedition had been so fortunate in the number of scientific men attached to the staff. Astronomers, geographers, mineralogists, botanists, zoologists, draughtsmen, and gardeners, all mustered four or five strong. Foremost amongst them we may mention, Leschenaut de Latour, Francois Péron, and Borg de Saint Vincent. Officers and sailors had been carefully selected. Among the first were François-Andre Baudin, Peureux de Mélay, Hyacinthe de Bougainville, Charles Baudin, Emmanuel Hamelen, Pierre Milius, Mangin, Duval d'Ailly, Henri de Freycinet, all of whom in after-life rose to be admirals or vice-admirals; Le Bas Sante-Croix, Pierre Gillaume Gicquel, Jacques-Philippe Montgéry, Jacques de Saint Cricq, Louis de Freycinet, all future naval captains.

The narrative says, “The plans for the expedition were such as to guarantee its success, and the attainment of the results so eagerly desired. All the experiences of preceding navigators, in the latitudes through which we were to pass, all that theories and reasoning could suggest, had been called into requisition. Most accurate calculations of the variable winds, monsoons, and currents had been made, and the misfortunes which overtook us were in every case due to our deviation from our valuable instructions.”

A third vessel of lesser draught was equipped at the Mauritius. The navigators were then to proceed to Van Diemen's Land, D'Entrecasteaux, Bass, and Banks Straits, and thence, having determined the situation of the Hunter Islands, to pass behind St. Peter and St. Francis Islands, and survey the country behind them, in the hope of finding the strait supposed to be connected with the Gulf of Carpentaria and to divide New Holland into two parts.

This survey accomplished, Leuvin, Edels, and Endracht Islands were next to be visited, Swan River to be followed as far as possible, and a survey taken of Rottnest Island and the coast near it. From thence the expedition was to proceed to Shark Bay, to determine various points in De Witt Land, and, leaving the coast at North West Cape, to go to Timor, in the Moluccas, for a well-earned rest.

After allowing sufficient time for the crews to recover from their fatigue, the coast of New Guinea was to be surveyed, with the view to ascertaining whether it was broken up into islands by various straits, the further portion of Gulf of Carpentaria was to be explored, various districts in Arnheim Land were to be reconnoitred, and from thence the expedition was to proceed to Mauritius, on its way to Europe.

A more splendid programme was impossible, and it was clearly traceable to the able mind which had laid down the route taken by La Perouse and D’Entrecasteaux. If the expedition were skilfully conducted the results could not fail to be considerable.

The *Géographe*, a corvette of thirty guns, and the *Naturaliste*, a large transport ship, were equipped at Havre for the expedition.

Nothing had been forgotten, the provisions were abundant and of good quality; each vessel was provided with all kinds of scientific instruments by the best makers, a library of the most trustworthy authorities, passports couched in the most flattering terms and signed by every government in Europe, and unlimited credit in all the towns of Asia and Africa. In short, every possible measure was taken to ensure the success of this important expedition.

Upon the 19th of October, 1800, the two vessels left Havre amidst the acclamations of an immense multitude. A short stay was made at Port Santa Cruz in Teneriffe, and thence they proceeded without stopping to Mauritius, where several officers were left who were too ill to proceed when the expedition set sail upon the 25th of April, 1801.

This was not an encouraging beginning, and discontent was rife when it was ascertained that the allowance of fresh bread was to be limited to half a pound weekly, and that the usual ration of wine was to be replaced by three-sixths of a bottle of the inferior tafia of Mauritius, whilst biscuits and salt meats were to be the staple food. This ill-advised economy resulted in the illnesses of the crew, and the discontent of many of the scientific staff.

The length of the voyage from France to Mauritius, and the long stay in that island, had consumed much valuable time, and the favourable season was on the wane. Baudin, fearing to attempt to reach Van Diemen’s Land, decided to commence his exploration upon the north-west coast of New Holland. He forgot that he would thus maintain a southerly course, so that his advance would coincide with that of the season.

The coast of New Holland was discovered upon the 27th of May. It was low, barren, and sandy. Geography Bay, Naturalist Cape, Depuch Creek, and Piquet Point, were successively sighted and named. In the last-named spot the naturalists landed, and reaped a rich harvest of plants and shells.

Meantime, however, the violence of the waves carried away the two vessels, and twenty-five of the crew were forced to spend several days on shore, unable to obtain any but brackish water. They could not succeed in killing any sort of game, and their only nourishment was a species of samphire, containing a quantity of carbonate of soda and acid juice.

A sloop which had been driven on shore by the force of the waves had to be abandoned, together with guns, sabres, cartridges, cables, tackle, and many other valuable articles.

“But the worst part of this last misfortune,” says the narrative, “was the loss of Vasse, of Dieppe, one of the most able of the crew of the *Naturaliste*. Swept away by the waves three times in his efforts to re-embark, he was finally swallowed up without the possibility of assistance being rendered to him, or even the fact of his death being ascertained — so violent were the waves, and so dark the night!”

The foul weather continued, the wind blew in hurricanes, fine rain fell uninterruptedly, and the *Naturaliste* was lost to view in a thick fog which prevailed until Timor was reached.

Upon reaching Rottnest Island — which he had named as a place of rendezvous to Captain Hamilton in case of separation — Baudin, to the surprise of every one, gave orders to make for Shark’s Bay, upon the coast of Endracht Island.

The coast of this part of New Holland is a succession of low and almost level sandy barren lands, with grey or reddish soil, intercepted here and there by slight ravines. The coast is almost perpendicular, and is protected by inaccessible reefs; it well deserves the name of “the iron coast,” which was bestowed upon it by the able hydrographer, Boullanger.

From Dirk Hartog Island (where Endracht Land commences), Doore Islands, Bernier Islands (where troops of kangaroos were met with), and Dampier roadstead, were successively sighted, as far as Shark’s Bay, which was thoroughly explored.

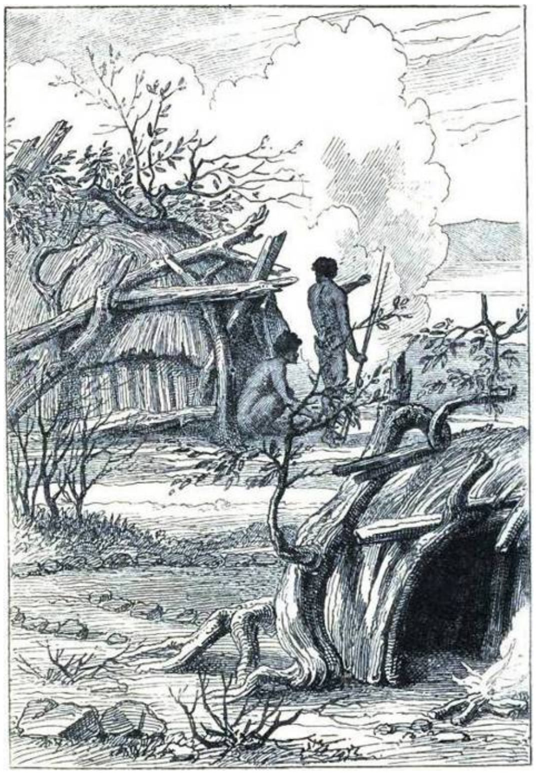

Native hut in Endracht Land.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Upon leaving Endracht Land, which offers no attractions, De Witt Land — extending from the North West Cape to Arnheim Land, over ten degrees of latitude and fifteen of longitude — was thoroughly surveyed. Much the same incidents and dangers were met with by the explorers as they successively named Hermit and Forester islands, the latter with volcanic soil. The Basseterre, in Geography channel — low lands, which were avoided with difficulty — with Bedont and Lacepede Islands, Capes Borda and Mollien, Champagny d’Arcole, Freycinet, Lucas, and other islands, were seen and named.

“Amidst these numberless islands,” says the narrative, “there was little to please the navigators. The sun shines unprotected by any clouds, and, except during the nocturnal storms, there is no movement even of the water. Man appears to have fled from this ungrateful soil, for no trace of his presence is to be seen.”

It is difficult for the traveller, who turns in despair from the inhospitable islands of this forsaken coast, where dangers of every sort assail him, and no provisions are to be had, to reflect that this barren country adjoins groups of Asiatic islands upon which nature has lavished her treasures and delights with a liberal hand.

The discovery of the Buonaparte Archipelago completed the survey of this miserable region. It is situated between 13° 15’ S. lat. and 123° 30’ long. W. of Paris.

“The wretched food upon which we had lived since we left Mauritius had tried the strongest constitutions. The ravages of scurvy had been severely felt, our store of water was very low, and there was no possibility of replenishing it in this miserable region. The time approached for the return of the monsoon, and its accompanying storms must be avoided on this coast; above all, we must procure a boat to enable us to rejoin the *Naturaliste*.”

Moved by all these considerations, the captain decided to direct his course to Timor Island, and he anchored there upon the 22nd of August, in the roadstead of Coupang.

It is unnecessary to enter into details of the reception accorded to the navigators. Hospitality and kindness are ever valuable to the recipients, but there is a sameness in an account of them which is wearisome to the reader. We need only dwell upon the sore need of rest for the suffering crew: ten of those who landed were in the worst stage of scurvy, and many others had the swollen and inflamed gums which precede the attack of this scourge of seamen.

Unfortunately, although the scurvy yielded to the remedies applied, it was succeeded by dysentery, which in a few days laid low eighteen men.

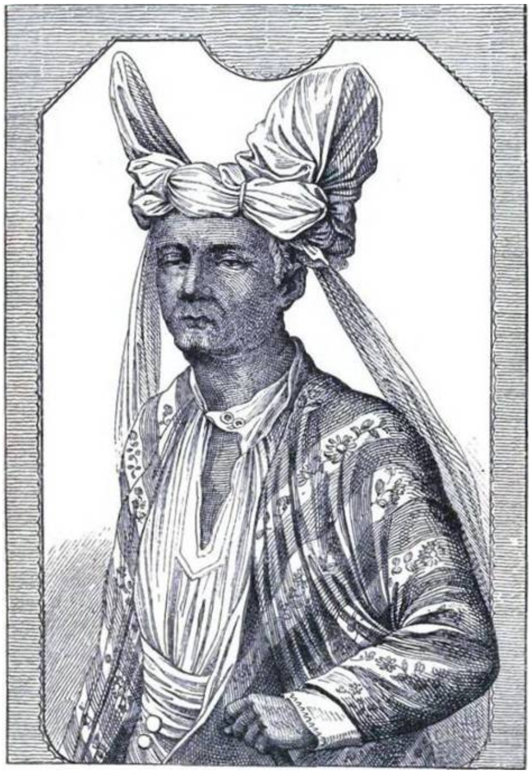

King of the Island of Timor.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

At length, upon the 21st of September, the *Naturaliste* appeared. Her captain had patiently awaited the arrival of the *Géographe* in Shark's Bay, that being the rendezvous appointed by Baudin, but which he had failed to keep. The officers availed themselves of this stay thoroughly to survey the shores of Rottnest Island, and to explore the Swan River, and Albrolhos or Houtman Rocks.

Two Dutch inscriptions, scratched upon tin plates, had been discovered by Captain Hamelin upon Dirk Hartog Island. One recorded the passage, upon the 25th of October, 1616, of the ship *Eendraght*, from Amsterdam; and the other, the stay of the *Geelwinck* in this port in 1697, under command of Captain Vlaming.

"The result of the examinations made by the officers of the *Naturaliste* was as follows: — The so-called Shark's Bay extends from Cape Cuvier on the north, to Freycinet Gulf; the eastern coast is all part of the mainland; and the western consists of the islet of Koks, Bernier, Doore, and Dirk Hartog Islands, and a small portion of the mainland. The peninsula of Péron occupies the centre of this extensive bay, and to the east and west are the harbours of Hamelin and Henri Freycinet."

Unfortunately even the sickness among their unfortunate crews did but restore temporary concord between Captain Baudin and his staff. He himself had been attacked by a fever, and for a few hours it was supposed that he was dead.

Upon his recovery eight days later, however, he did not hesitate to place one of his officers, M. Picquet, ensign, under arrest. All the members of his staff disapproved of this action, and offered repeatedly many flattering tokens of their esteem and regard to the disgraced officer. As M. Picquet was made lieutenant upon his return to France, it would appear that he was not in fault.

Captain Baudin had deviated from the instructions given him by the Institute. He now proceeded to Van Diemen’s Land, leaving Timor upon the 13th of November, 1801. The French found themselves in sight of the southern coast of this island exactly two months later; the ravages of disease continued on board, and the number of victims was considerable.

The two ships at length reached D’Entrecasteaux Strait, which had escaped the notice of Tasman, Furneaux, Cook, Marion, Hunter and Bligh, and the discovery of which was the result of a mistake, which might have had dangerous consequences. The vessels had anchored in this spot for the sake of obtaining water, and several boats were sent in search of it.

“At half-past nine,” says Péron, “we were at the mouth of Swan River. This spot appeared to me to exceed in beauty and picturesque effect anything that I had hitherto met with. Seven mountain ranges rise one above the other, forming the background of the harbour; whilst on the right and left lofty hills shut it in, and present the appearance of a number of rounded capes and romantic creeks. Vegetation is most luxuriant, the shores abound in hardy trees, growing so densely that it is almost impossible to penetrate into the forest. Flocks of paroquets and cockatoos, of most brilliant plumage, hover above them, while the blue-ringed tomtits sport beneath their branches. The sea was almost calm, and scarcely ruffled by the passage of the innumerable black swans continuously passing to or fro.”

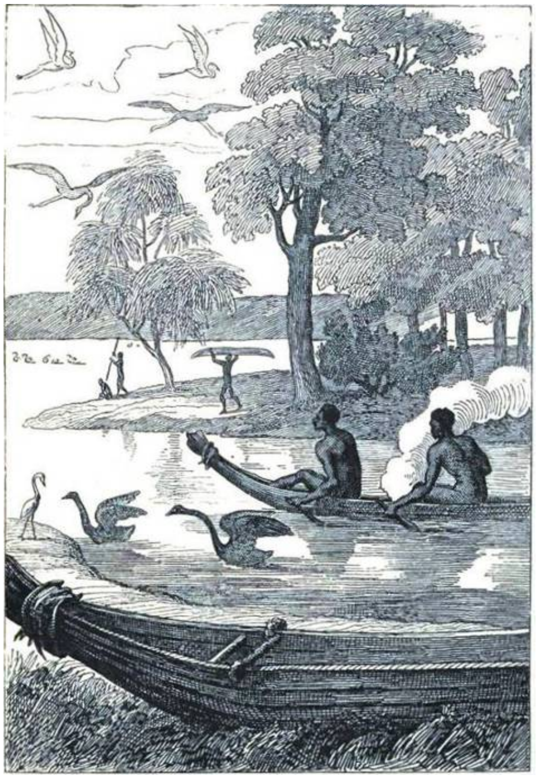

The Swan River.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

All who went in search of a watering-place were not equally pleased with their reception by the natives.

Captain Hamelin, in company with MM. Leschenant and Petit, and several officers and sailors, had encountered some natives, to whom he offered various presents. As they were about to re-embark the French were assailed by a shower of stones, one of which wounded Captain Hamelin severely. The natives brandished their assegais, and made many threatening gestures, but could not provoke the strangers to retaliate by a single shot — a most rare example of moderation and humanity!

“The geographical observations made by Admiral D’Entrecasteaux in Van Diemen’s Land are so wonderfully correct,” says the narrative, “that it would be scarcely possible to imagine anything more perfect of their kind. Their principal author, M. Beautemps-Beaupré has indeed fully merited the esteem of his fellow countrymen and the gratitude of all navigators. In every case where investigation was possible, this skilful engineer made sure of every point. His survey of the strait of D’Entrecasteaux, and the numberless bays and channels comprised in it, was especially thorough. Unfortunately his explorations did not extend to that portion of Van Diemen’s Land which lies north-east of the strait, and which was only superficially examined by the French boats.”

It was to this portion of the coast that the hydrographers more particularly directed their attention, in the hope that by adding the results of their observations to that of their fellow-countrymen they might gain a thorough knowledge of the coast. This undertaking, which was to complete the results of D’Entrecasteaux’s exertions, detained the navigators until the 6th of February. The details and incidents of such exploration are always alike, and offer little to interest the general reader. For this reason we shall not dwell upon them, in spite of their importance, except when they contain anecdotes of interest.

The *Naturaliste* and *Géographe* next proceeded to the exploration of Banks’ and Bass’s straits.

“Upon the morning of the 6th of March we coasted the islets of Taillefer and Schouten Island, at a good distance. Towards mid-day we found ourselves opposite Forester’s Cape, and our skilful geographer, M.

Boullanger, embarked in the long-boat, commanded by M. Maurouard, to survey the coast. The ship was to follow a route parallel with that of the boat, of which it was never to lose sight for a moment; but M. Boullanger had scarcely been gone a quarter of an hour when Capt. Baudin, without any apparent reason, tacked round and gained the more open sea. The boat was lost to sight, and the coast was not neared again until night was approaching. A strong breeze had arisen, which, increasing every moment, added to the uncertainty of our movements. Night fell, and the coast upon which we had abandoned our unhappy comrades was hidden from our sight. The three following days were vainly spent in the endeavour to find the missing boats."

This calm narration would appear to veil strong indignation against Captain Baudin.

What can have been his motive for forsaking his sailors and two of his ablest officers? This is a problem which the most attentive perusal of Péron’s narrative fails to elucidate.

To enter the straits of Banks and Bass was to tread in the footsteps of the latter, and of Flinders, who had made these waters the special field of their discoveries; but when, upon the 29th of March, 1802, the *Géographe* commenced coasting the south-western shore of New Holland, one portion of it only was known — that which extends from Cape Leuwin to St. Peter and St. Francis Islands. The land stretching from the eastern boundary of Nuytsland to Port Western had never yet been trodden by an European foot. All the importance of this cruise is apparent when we reflect that it was undertaken to decide whether New Holland consisted of one island only, and whether any large rivers flowed into the sea from it.

Latreille Island, Mount Tabor Cape, Cape Folard, Descartes Bay, Bouffler Cape, Estaing Bay, Rivoli Bay, Mongo Cape, were all successively sighted and named. An extraordinary take of dolphins had delighted the crew, when a sail was seen upon the horizon. It was of course supposed that it was the *Naturaliste*, from which the *Géographe* had been separated by violent storms since the night of the 7-8 March. As the vessel was making rapid way, she was soon abreast of the *Géographe*. She carried the English colours. It was the *Investigator*, under command of Captain Flinders, eight months from Europe, sent for the completion of the survey of New Holland. Flinders had been engaged for three months in the exploration of the coast. He, too, had suffered from storms and tempest in Bass’s Strait; during one of the latter he had lost a boat, containing eight men and his chief officer.

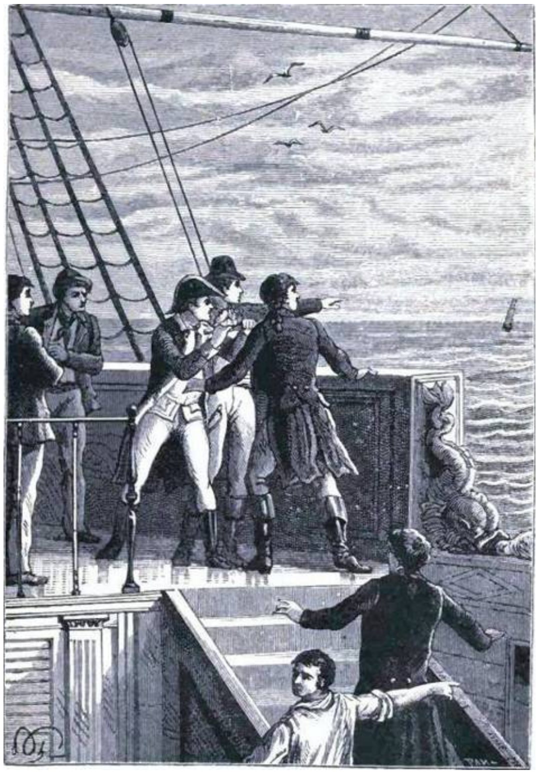

“A sail was seen on the horizon.”

The *Géographe* visited in succession Cape Crêtet, the Peninsula of Fleurien (which is about twenty miles in extent), the Gulf of St. Vincent (so called by Flinders), Kangaroo Island, Althorp Islands, Spencer Gulf — upon the western coast of which is Port Lincoln, the finest and safest harbour in New Holland — and the islands of St. Francis and St. Peter. Certainly Captain Baudin, in order to render this hydrographical survey complete, should have followed out his instructions, and penetrated beyond St. Peter and St. Francis Islands. The weather, however, was too unpropitious, and this exploration was reserved for a future expedition.

Scurvy meantime made fearful ravages amongst the adventurers. More than half the crew were incapable of service. Two only of the helmsmen were in a fit condition for duty. How could anything else be expected in a vessel which was not provided with either wine or brandy, but was provisioned only with foetid water, biscuits infested with maggots, and putrid meats, the mere smell of which was injurious?

Winter, too, had set in in the southern hemisphere, and the crews were in sore need of rest. The nearest harbour was Port Jackson, and the shortest passage thither was by Bass’s Strait. Baudin, who always appears to have disliked following a beaten track, thought differently, and gave orders for doubling the southern extremity of Van Diemen’s Land.

Upon the 20th of May anchor was cast in Adventure Bay. The sick who could be moved were carried on shore, where water was plentiful. But the stormy waters were no longer passable; a thick fog prevailed, and only the sound of the waves breaking upon the shore saved the vessels from running aground. The number of sick increased. The ocean claimed a fresh victim each succeeding day. Upon the 4th of June there were only six men equal to their work, and the tempest increased in fury, yet the *Géographe* escaped destruction once more!

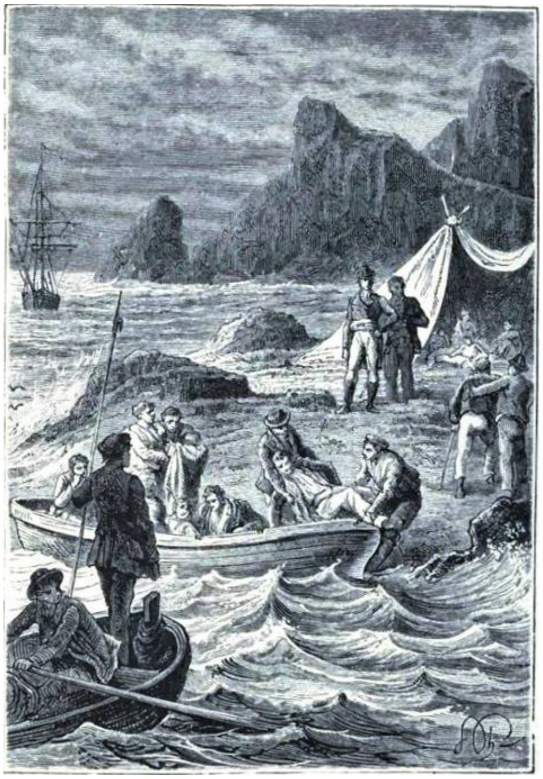

“The sick were carried on shore.”

Upon the 17th of June a vessel was signalled, and from her captain the navigators learned that the *Naturaliste*, after waiting vainly for her consort at Port Jackson, had gone in search of her — that the abandoned boat had been rescued by an English vessel, and the crew had been received upon the *Naturaliste*.

The *Géographe* was awaited with eager impatience at Port Jackson, where help of every kind was prepared for her.

The *Géographe* was for three days within reach of Port Jackson, and yet unable to enter the harbour, for want of able-bodied seamen to work her. An

English sloop, with a pilot, and the necessary men for working the vessel, was, however, sent to the rescue.

The entrance to Port Jackson is only two miles in width, but it widens until it forms a large harbour containing water enough for the largest ships, and space enough to accommodate all comers in perfect safety. A thousand ships of the line might easily anchor there, according to Commodore Philips' report.

"Towards the centre of this magnificent port, and upon its southern coast, the town of Sydney is situated. Built upon two adjacent hills, and watered by a small river which runs through it, this rising town presents a pleasant and picturesque appearance.

"The eye is at once struck by the fortifications, and the hospital, which is large enough to contain two or three hundred sick, and was brought from England in pieces by Commodore Philips. Immense warehouses, for the reception of the cargoes of the largest vessels, are built upon the shore. Ships of all kinds were being constructed in the yards from the wood of the country."

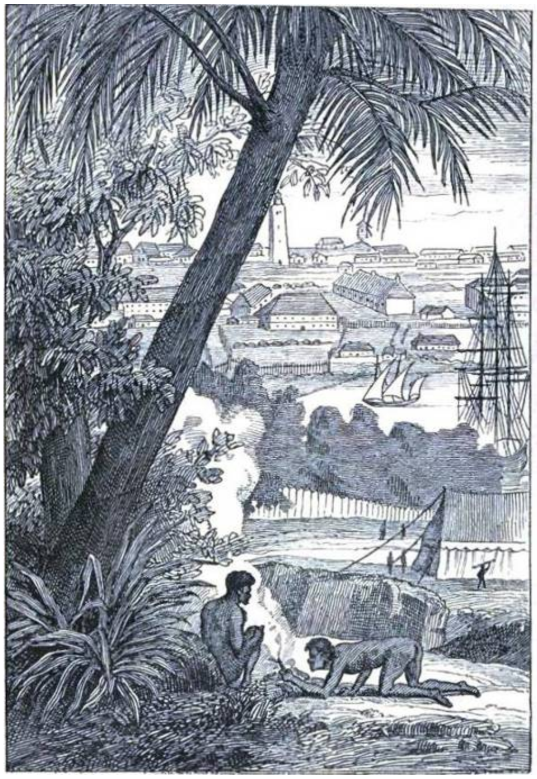

View of Sydney.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

With a sentiment of respect, which almost amounts to veneration, the sloop in which M. Bass made the discovery of the strait which separates Tasmania from New Holland is preserved. Snuff-boxes made of the wood of her keel are valued as relics by their possessors; and the governor of the fort could think of no more acceptable present for Captain Baudin than a piece of the wood of this famous vessel, mounted in silver, upon which the chief details of the discovery of Bass's Straits were engraved. Equally worthy of admiration were the prison (capable of lodging two hundred prisoners), the wine and provision warehouses, the exercising ground (overlooked by the governor’s house), the barracks, observatory, and the English church, of which the foundations were at this time but just laid.

“The great change in the conduct and condition of the convicts was not less interesting.

“We found new cause for surprise in the population of the colony. A more worthy subject for the reflection of a philosopher or statesman never existed — no brighter example of the influence of social institutions can be imagined — than that afforded on the distant shores of which we are speaking. Here are to be found the formidable ruffians who in a civilized country were the terror of their government. Transported to these foreign shores, ejected from European society, and placed from their first arrival between the certainty of punishment on the one hand and the hope of a better fate in store for them upon the other, surrounded by a surveillance as benevolent as it is active, they are absolutely forced to relinquish their anti-social habits.

“The majority, after expiating their crimes by hard labour, receive the rank of citizenship. Interested themselves in the maintenance of order and justice, for the sake of the preservation of such property as they have accumulated, many of them having become husbands and fathers, the closest of all ties bind them to their present situation.

“The same revolution, brought about by the same means, takes place in the lives of the women and wretched girls. By degrees accustomed to more correct principles of conduct, they in time become the mothers of hard-working and honest families.”

The welcome accorded to the French at Port Jackson was in the highest degree satisfactory. Every possible facility for the prosecution of their researches was afforded to the naturalists, whilst the military authorities and private inhabitants vied with each other in offering provisions and help of every kind.

Many were the successful excursions in the neighbourhood, and the naturalists delighted in examining the famous vineyards of Rose Hill, to which the finest plants from the Cape, the Canary Islands, Madeira, Xeres, and Bordeaux had been transported.

When questioned, the vine-dressers said the plants sprout more vigorously here than anywhere else, but the first breath of wind from the north-west is enough to destroy everything; buds, flowers, and leaves alike withering beneath its scorching heat.

Somewhat later, the culture of the vine, transported to a more favourable locality, increased greatly; and although it has as yet not attained to any remarkable growth, furnishes a wine which is pleasant to the taste and very alcoholic.

The Blue Mountains, which for a long time bounded European research, are thirty miles beyond Sydney. Lieutenant Dawes and Captain Tench Paterson — who explored Hawkesbury River, the Nile of New Holland — Hacking, Bass, and Barraillier, had alike failed to scale them.

Already, the thinning of the trees in the neighbouring forests, and the excellence of the grass, had rendered New South Wales an excellent pasturage. Cattle and sheep had been largely imported.

“They multiplied so quickly, that in State pastures alone there were no less than 1800 head of cattle within a short time of our stay at Port Jackson; of these 514 were bulls, 121 oxen, and 1165 cows. The increase and growth of these animals was so rapid, that in less than eleven months the number of oxen and cows had reached from 1856 to 2450, which would be at the rate of increase per annum of 650 head, or one third of the entire number.

“Carrying this calculation on at the same rate for a period of thirty years, or even reducing the increase by one half, it is clear that New South Wales would be teeming throughout its length and breadth with cattle.

“Sheep farming has had even greater success. The increase of flocks upon these distant shores is so prolific that Captain MacArthur, one of the richest landowners of New South Wales, does not hesitate to assert, in a pamphlet published for that purpose, that in twenty years New Holland alone will be able to supply England with all the wool which is now imported from neighbouring countries, and the price of which amounts yearly to 1,800,000*l*. sterling.”

We know now how very little exaggeration there was in these calculations, although at that time they appeared most wonderful. It is interesting to read of the growth of this industry, and the impression produced by it, in its earlier stages, upon the French navigators.

The crew had many of them recovered their health, but the number of able sailors was still so small that it was necessary to send the *Naturaliste* back to France, after selecting the most healthy of the crew. She was replaced by a vessel of thirty tons burden, called the *Casuarina*, the command of which was entrusted to Louis de Freycinet. The slight build and low draught of this vessel made it valuable for coasting purposes.

The *Naturaliste*, says Péron, with the records of the expedition, and the results of the observations made during the two voyages, also took away with it “more than 40,000 animals of different kinds, collected from the various countries which had been visited during the two years.” Thirty-two huge cases contained these collections, certainly the richest ever brought together in Europe, which when exhibited in the house occupied by myself and M. Bellefin, excited the admiration of all the English visitors, especially of the celebrated naturalist, Paterson.

The *Géographe* and the *Casuarina* left Port Jackson upon the 18th of November, 1802. On this new trip the explorers surveyed King Island, Hunter Island, and the north-western portion of Van Diemen’s Land, thus completing the geography of the coast of this huge island. From the 27th of December, 1802, till the 15th of February, 1803, Captain Baudin was engaged in reconnoitring the Kangaroo Islands, upon the south-western coast of Australia, with the two gulfs opposite to them.

“It was indeed strange,” says Péron, “to observe the monotonous and sterile character of the different portions of New Holland — the greater on account of its contrast to that of the neighbouring countries. On the north-west we had been charmed by the fertile islands of the Timor Archipelago, with their lofty mountains, rivers, streams, and forests. Yet scarcely forty-eight hours had passed since we left the desert shores of De Witt Land. Again, on the south, the wonderful vegetation and smiling slopes of Van Diemen’s Land had excited our admiration, and yet more recently we had been delighted with the verdure and fertility of King Island.

“The scene changes; we reach the shore of New Holland, and are once more face to face with the desolation, the description of which must already have wearied the reader as much as it surprised the philosopher and oppressed the explorer.”

The engineers who accompanied the *Casuarina* for the survey of Spencer Gulf, and the peninsula which divides it from the Gulf of St. Vincent, were obliged to abridge the prosecution of their discoveries in Lincoln Port, and content themselves with the thorough survey which enabled them to decide positively that no great river discharges itself into the ocean in this region. The time for their return to Kangaroo Island had arrived. But in spite of their conviction that if they delayed they would be left behind, they did not hasten their movements sufficiently, and upon reaching the rendezvous found that the captain of the *Géographe* had already started, without concerning himself in the least about the *Casuarina*, although her stock of provisions was very inadequate.

Baudin decided to continue the exploration of the coast and the survey of St. Francis Archipelago alone — a most important undertaking, as no navigator had examined its islands separately since its first discovery by Peter Nuyts in 1627.

Flinders had really just made this exploration; but Baudin was not aware of this, and fancied himself the first European who had entered these waters since their discovery.

When the *Géographe* reached King George’s Harbour upon the 6th of February, the *Casuarina* had already arrived there, but in such a damaged condition that her captain had been obliged to run her aground.

King George’s Sound, discovered in 1791 by Vancouver, is of great importance, as being the only point throughout an extent of coast equal to the distance between Paris and St. Petersburg where it is possible to rely upon obtaining sweet water at all seasons of the year.

In spite of its advantages in this respect, the surrounding country is very barren. M. Boullanger in his “Journal” says, “The aspect of the country inland at this point is perfectly horrible; even birds are scarce: it is a silent desert.”

In one of the recesses of this bay, known as Oyster Harbour, a naturalist, named M. Faure, discovered a large river, named after the French, the mouth of which was as wide as the Seine at Paris. He undertook to ascend it, and thus penetrated as far as possible into the interior of the country. About two leagues from the entrance of the river his further progress was arrested by two embankments, solidly constructed of stones, connected with a small island, and forming an impassable obstacle.

This barrier was pierced by several openings, most of them above the low tide level, and much wider upon the side facing the sea than upon the other.

By these openings the fish which entered the river at high tide could easily pass through, but could not return, and were consequently imprisoned in a sort of reservoir, where the natives could catch them at their leisure.

M. Faure found no less than five of these erections in the space of less than the third of a mile — a most singular proof of the ingenuity of the barbarous natives of the country, who in other respects appear upon the level of brutes.

In King George’s Harbour one of the officers attached to the *Géographe*, named M. Ransonnet, more fortunate than Vancouver and D’Entrecasteaux, had an interview with the natives. This was the first time a European had been able to approach them.

M. Ransonnet says, “We had scarcely appeared when eight natives, who, upon our first appearance on their coast, had vainly called to us by cries and gestures, appeared suddenly together. After awhile three of them, who were no doubt women, went away again. The remaining five, first throwing their assegais to a distance, to convince us, probably, of their pacific intentions, assisted us in landing. At my suggestion, the sailors offered them various presents, which they received with an air of satisfaction, but without enthusiasm. Whether from apathy, or as a mark of confidence, they returned the presents to us with a pleased expression; and upon our once more presenting them with the same things, they left them upon the ground or surrounding rocks.

“They were accompanied by many large and handsome dogs. I did all I could to induce them to part with one. I offered them all I had, but their refusal was persistent. They probably employed them in hunting the kangaroo, which, with the fish that I had seen them pierce with their assegais, formed their staple food. They drank some coffee, and ate some salt beef and biscuits, but refused the bacon we offered, and left it behind them upon the stones without touching it.

“These natives are tall, thin, and very active. They have long hair, black eyebrows, short flat noses, sunken eyes, large mouths, with projecting lips, and fine and very white teeth. The inside of their mouths seemed as black as the outside of their bodies.

“The three who appeared the oldest among them, and who might have been from forty to fifty years of age, had large black beards. Their teeth appeared to have been filed, and the cartilage of the nose pierced. Their hair was trimmed, and curled naturally.

“The other two, whose ages we took to be from sixteen to eighteen, were not tatooed at all. Their long hair was gathered into a chignon, powdered with red dust, similar to that which the elder ones had rubbed over their bodies.

“They were all naked, and wore no ornament, excepting a large waistband, composed of a number of small fringed strips of kangaroo skin. They talked volubly, and sang in snatches, but always in the same key, and accompanied their song with the same gestures. In spite of the friendly feeling which continued to exist between us, they never allowed us to approach the spot where the other natives, probably their wives, were hidden.”

After a stay of twelve days in King George’s Harbour, the explorers again put to sea. They rectified and completed the maps drawn by D’Entrecasteaux and Vancouver of Lecon, Edel, and Endrant Lands, which were in turn visited and surveyed, between the 7th and the 26th of March. Thence Baudin proceeded to De Witt Land, which was almost unknown when he visited it the first time. He hoped to succeed better than De Witt, Vianen, Dampier, and St. Allouarn, who had all been unsuccessful in their efforts to explore it; but the breakers, reefs, and sandbanks, rendered navigation extremely perilous.

A new source of danger shortly afterwards arose, in the singular illusion of the mirage. “The effect,” says the narrative, “was to make the *Géographe* appear to be surrounded by reefs, although at the time she was a full league away from them, and every one on board the *Casuarina* imagined her to be in the most imminent danger. Only when it became too exaggerated to be real was the magic of the illusion dispelled.”

Upon the 3rd of May the two vessels once more cast anchor in Coupang Port, Timor Island. One month later, after revictualling, Captain Baudin set sail for De Witt Land, where he now hoped to find the winds favourable for an advance to the east. From thence he proceeded to Mauritius, where he died upon the 16th of September, 1803. It appears probable that the precarious state of his health had some influence upon his conduct of this expedition, and possibly his staff would have had less reason to complain of him had he been in full possession of all his faculties. This, however, is a question for psychologists to decide.

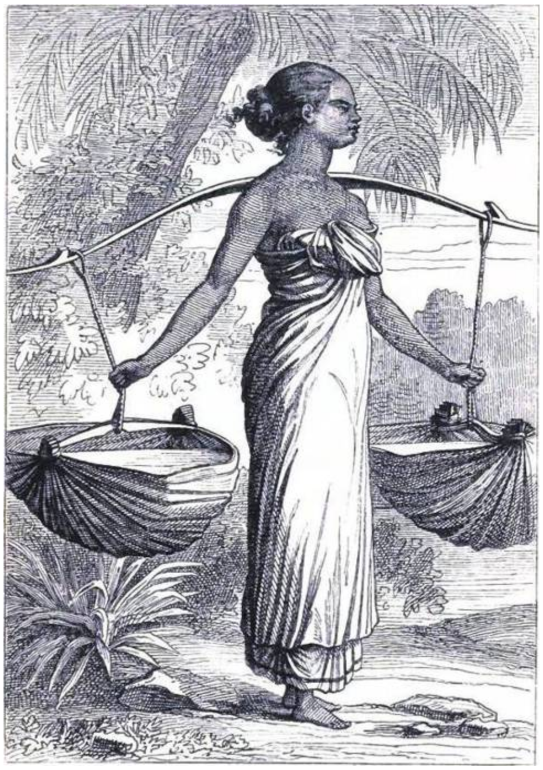

Water-carrier at Timor.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The *Géographe* entered Lorient roadstead upon the 23rd of March, and three days later the vast collection of natural curiosities was landed.

The narrative says, “Besides an immense number of cases, containing minerals, dried plants, fish, reptiles, and zoophytes, preserved in brandy, stuffed or dissected quadrupeds and birds, we had seventy large cases filled with vegetables in their natural state, comprising nearly two hundred species of useful plants, and about six hundred varieties of seeds. In addition to all this, at least a hundred living animals."

We cannot better complete our account of the results of this expedition than by giving an extract from the report laid before the Government by the Institute, relating more particularly to the zoological collection made by MM. Péron and Lesueur.

"It comprises more than 100,000 specimens of large and small animals. Many important new species are already recognized, and there still remain, according to the statement made by the professor at the museum, upwards of 2500 to be classified."

When we reflect that Cook's second voyage, the most successful undertaken up to this period, had produced only 250 specimens; that the united voyages of Carteret, Wallis, Furneaux, Meares, and even Vancouver, had not accumulated so many, and when we admit that the same statement applies to all succeeding French expeditions, it is evident that MM. Péron and Lesueur introduced more new animals to Europe than all other modern travellers put together.

Moreover, the geographical and hydrographical results were considerable. The English Government has always refused to acknowledge them, and Desborough Cooley, in his "History of Voyages," subordinates Baudin's discoveries to those of Flinders. It was even suggested that Flinders was detained prisoner at Mauritius for six years and a half, in order to allow French authors time to consult his maps, and arrange the details of their voyages accordingly. This accusation is too absurd to need refutation.

The two navigators, French and English, have each fairly earned a place in the history of the discovery of the Australian coasts, and it is unnecessary to praise one at the expense of the other.

In the preface to the second edition of his “Voyage de la Corvette *Australis*” which was revised and corrected by Louis de Freycinet, Péron has given each his due meed of praise; and to his able work we refer all readers who are interested in the question.

CHAPTER II.

AFRICAN EXPLORERS.

Shaw in Algeria and Tunis — Hornemann in Fezzan — Adamson at Senegal — Houghton in Senegambia — Mungo Park and his two voyages to the Djoliba, or Niger — Sego — Timbuctoo — Sparmann and Lavaillant at the Cape, at Natal, and in the Interior — Lacerda in Mozambique, and at Cazembé — Bruce in Abyssinia — Sources of the Blue Nile — Tzana Lake — Browne's journey in Darfur.

An Englishman named Thomas Shaw, a chaplain in Algeria, had profited by his twelve years' stay in Barbary to gather together a rich collection of natural curiosities, medals, inscriptions, and various objects of interest. Although he himself never visited the southern portion of Algeria, he availed himself of the facts he was able to obtain from well-informed travellers, who imparted to him a mass of information concerning the little known and scarcely visited country. He published a book in two large quarto volumes, which embraced the whole of ancient Numidia.

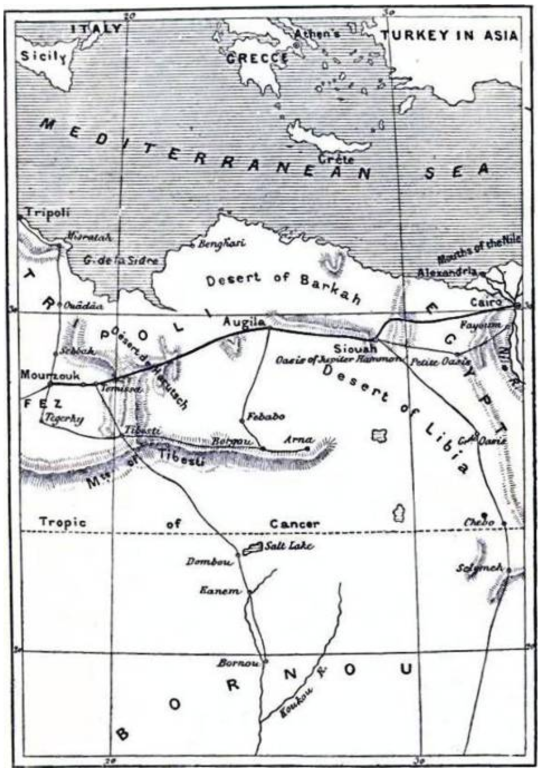
ITALY
Sicily
GRECCE
Athen's
TURKEY IN ASIA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Crete
Tripoli
Misratah
G. de la Sidre
Benghari
Desert of Barkah
Mouths of the Nile
Alexandria
Cairo
TRIPOLI
Ouâdâa
Augila
Fayoum
EGYPT
Sebbah
Desert de Harutsch
Siouah
Oasis of Jupiter Hammon
Petite Oasis
Desert of Libia
Nile R.
Mourzouk
Temissa
FEZ
Tegerhy
Febabo
Tibesti
Borgou
Arna
Gd. Oasis
Mts. of Tibesti
Tropic of Cancer
Chebo
Salt Lake
Dombou
Selymeh
Kanem
Bornou
BORNOU
Koukou
20
30

It was rather the work of a learned man than the account of a traveller, and it must be admitted that the learning is occasionally ill-directed. But in spite of its shortcomings as a geographical history, it had a large value at the time of its publication, and no one could have been better situated than Shaw for collecting such an enormous mass of material.

The following extract may give an idea of the style of the work: —

“The chief manufacture of the Kabyles and Arabs is the making ‘hykes,’ as they call their blankets. The women alone are employed in this work; like Andromache and Penelope of old, they do not use the shuttle, but weave every thread of the woof with their fingers. The usual size of a hyke is six yards long and five or six feet broad, serving the Kabyle and Arab as a complete dress during the day, and as a covering for the bed at night. It is a loose but troublesome garment, as it is often disarranged and slips down, so that the person who wears it is every moment obliged to tuck it up and rearrange it. This shows the great use there is of a girdle whenever men are in active employment, and explains the force of the Scripture injunction *of having our loins girded*. The method of wearing this garment, with the use it is at other times put to as bed-covering, makes it probable that it is similar to if not identical with the *peplus* of the ancients. It is likewise probable that the loose garment flung over the shoulder, the *toga* of the Romans, was of this kind, as the drapery of statues is arranged very much in the same manner as the Arab hyke."

It is unnecessary to linger over this work, which has little interest for us. We shall do better to turn our attention to the journey of Frederic Conrad Horneman to Fezzan.

This young German offered his services to the African Society of London, and, having satisfied the authorities of his knowledge of medicine and acquaintance with the Arabic language, he was engaged, and furnished with letters of introduction, safe-conducts, and unlimited credit.

Leaving London in July, 1797, he went first to Paris. Lalande introduced him to the Institute, and presented him with his "Mémoire sur l'Afrique," and Broussonet gave him an introduction to a Turk from whom he obtained letters of recommendation to certain Cairo merchants who carried on business in the interior of Africa.

During his stay at Cairo, Horneman devoted himself to perfecting his knowledge of Arabic, and studying the manners and customs of the natives. We must not omit to mention that the traveller had been presented by Monge and Berthollet to Napoleon Buonaparte, who was then in command of the French forces in Egypt. From him he received a cordial welcome, and Buonaparte placed all the resources of the country at his service.

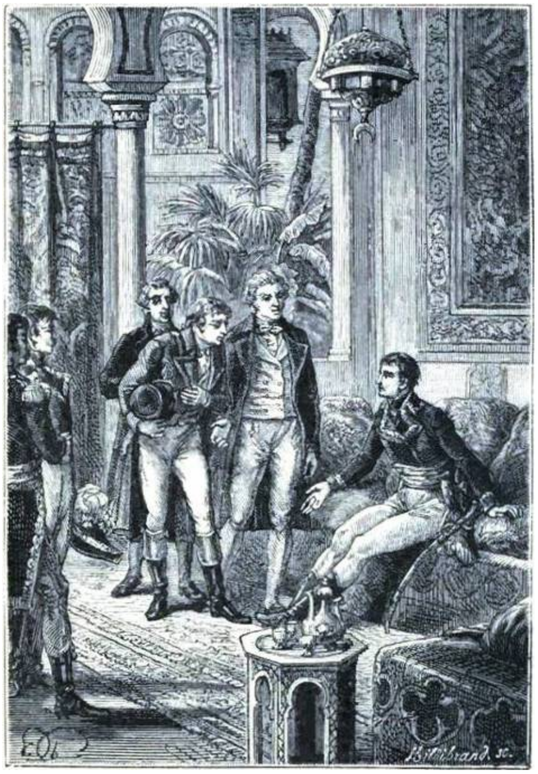

“He received a cordial welcome.”

As the safer method of travelling, Horneman resolved to disguise himself as a Mohammedan merchant. He quickly learned a few prayers, and adopted a style of dress likely to impose upon unsuspecting people. He then started, accompanied by a fellow-countryman named Joseph Frendenburg, who had been a Mussulman for more than twelve years, had already made three pilgrimages to Mecca, and was perfectly familiar with the various Turkish and Arabic dialects. He was to act as Horneman’s interpreter.

On the 5th of September, 1798, the traveller left Cairo with a caravan, and visited the famous oasis of Jupiter Ammon or Siwah, situated in the desert on the east of Egypt. It is a small independent state, which acknowledges the Sultan, but is exempt from paying tribute. The town of Siwah is surrounded by several villages, at distances of a mile or two. It is built upon a rock in which the inhabitants have hollowed recesses for their dwellings. The streets are so narrow and intricate that a stranger cannot possibly find his way among them.

This oasis is of considerable extent. The most fertile portion comprises a well-watered valley, about fifty miles in circumference, which is productive of corn and edible vegetables. Dates of an excellent flavour are its most valuable export.

Horneman was anxious to explore some ruins which he had noticed, for he could obtain little information from the natives. But every time he penetrated to any distance in the ruins, he was followed by a number of the inhabitants, who prevented him from examining anything in detail. One of the Arabs said to him, “You must still be a Christian at heart, or you would not so often visit the works of the infidels.”

This remark put a speedy end to Horneman’s further explorations. As far as his superficial examination enabled him to judge, it was really the oasis of Ammon, and the ruins appeared to him to be of Egyptian origin.

The immense number of catacombs in the neighbourhood of the town, especially on the hill overlooking it, indicate a dense population in ancient times. The traveller endeavoured vainly to obtain a perfect head from one of these burial-places. Amongst the skulls he procured, he found no certain proof that they had been filled with resin. He met with many fragments of clothing, but they were all in such a state of decay that it was impossible to decide upon their origin or use.

After a stay of eight days in this place, Horneman crossed the mountains which surrounded the oasis of Siwah, and directed his steps towards Schiatah. So far no misfortune had interrupted his progress. But at Schiatah he was denounced as a Christian and a spy. Horneman cleverly saved his life by boldly reading out a passage in the Koran which he had in his possession. Unfortunately, his interpreter, expecting that his baggage would be searched, had burned the collection of fragments of mummies, the botanical specimens, the journal containing the account of the journey, and all the books. This loss was quite irreparable.

A little further on, the caravan reached Augila, a town mentioned by Herodotus, who places it some ten days' journey from the oasis of Ammon. This accords with the testimony given by Horneman, who reached it in nine days' forced march. At Augila a number of merchants from Bengasi, Merote, and Mokamba had joined the caravan, amounting altogether to no less than a hundred and twenty persons. After a long journey over a sandy desert, the caravan entered a country interspersed with hills and ravines, where they found trees and grass at intervals. This was the desert of Harutsch. It was necessary to cross it in order to reach Temissa, a town of little note, built upon a hill, and surrounded by a high wall. At Zuila the Fezzan country was entered. The usual ceremonies, with interminable compliments and congratulations, were repeated at the entrance to every town. The Arabs appear to lay great stress upon these salutations, little trustworthy as they are, and travellers constantly express surprise at their frequent recurrence.

Upon the 17th of November, the caravan halted at Murzuk, the capital of Fezzan. It was the end of the journey. Horneman says that the greatest length of the cultivated portion of Fezzan is about three hundred miles from north to south, but to this must be added the mountainous region of Harutsch on the east, and the various deserts north and west. The climate is never pleasant; in summer the heat is terrible, and when the wind blows from the south, it is all but insupportable, even to the natives, and in winter the north wind is so cold that they are obliged to have recourse to fires.

The produce of the country consists principally of dates and vegetables. Murzuk is the chief market; there are collected the products of Cairo, Bengazi, Tripoli, Ghâdames, Ghât, and the Soudan. Among the articles of commerce are male and female slaves, ostrich feathers, skins of wild beasts, and gold-dust or nuggets. Bornu produces copper; Cairo silks, calicoes, woollen garments, imitation coral, bracelets, and Indian manufactures. Fire-arms, sabres, and knives are imported by the merchants of Tripoli and Ghâdames.

The Fezzan country is ruled by a sultan descended from the scherifs, whose power is limitless, but who, nevertheless, pays a tribute of four thousand dollars to the Bey of Tripoli. Horneman, without giving the grounds of his calculation, informs us that the population amounts to seventy-five thousand inhabitants, all of whom profess Mohammedanism.

Horneman’s narrative gives a few more details of the manners and customs of the people. He ends his report to the African Society by saying that he proposes visiting Fezzan again in the hope of obtaining new facts.

We learn, further, that Frendenburg, Horneman’s faithful associate, died at Murzuk. Attacked by a violent fever, Horneman was forced to remain much longer than he desired in that town. While still only partially recovered, he went to Tripoli for change and rest, hoping there to meet with Europeans. Upon the 1st of December, 1799, he returned to Murzuk, and left it finally with a caravan upon the 7th of April, 1800. He was irresistibly attracted towards Bornu, and perished in that country, which was to claim so many victims.

During the eighteenth century, Africa was literally besieged by travellers. Explorers endeavoured to penetrate into it from every side. More than one succeeded in reaching the interior, only to meet with repulse or death. The discovery of the secrets of this mysterious continent was reserved for our own age, when the unexpected fertility of its resources has astonished the civilized world.

The facts relating to the coast of Senegal needed confirmation, but the French superiority was no longer undisputed. The English, with their earnest and enterprising character, were convinced of its importance in the development of their commerce, and determined upon its exploration. But before proceeding to the narrative of the adventures of Major Houghton and Mungo Park, we will devote a small space to the record of the work done by the French naturalist, Michel Adanson.

Devoted from early youth to the study of natural history, Adanson wished to become famous by the discovery of new species. It was hopeless to dream of obtaining them in Europe, and, in spite of opposition, Adanson selected Senegal as the field of his labours. He says, in a manuscript letter, that he chose it because it was the most difficult to explore of all European settlements, and, being the hottest, most unhealthy, and most dangerous, was the least known by naturalists. Certainly a choice founded upon such reasoning gave proof of rare courage and ambition.

It is true that Adanson was by no means the first naturalist to encounter similar dangers, but he was the first to undertake them, with so much enthusiasm, at his own cost, and without hope of reward. Upon his return, he had not sufficient money to pay for the publication of his account of the discoveries he had made.

Embarking upon the 3rd of March, 1749, on board the *Chevalier Marin*, commanded by D'Après de Mannevillette, he touched at Santa Cruz, Teneriffe, and disembarked at the mouth of the Senegal, which he took to be the Niger of ancient geographers. During nearly five years he was engaged in exploring the colony in every direction, visiting in turn Podor, Portudal, Albreda, and the mouth of the Gambia. With unceasing perseverance, he collected a rich harvest of facts in the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms.

To him is due the first exact account of a gigantic tree called the Baobab, which is often called Adansonia after him; of the habits of the grasshoppers, which form the chief food of certain wild tribes; of the white ants, and the dwellings they construct; and of a certain kind of oyster, which attach themselves to trees at the mouth of the Gambia. He says, —

"The natives have not the difficulty one might anticipate in catching them; they simply cut off the bough to which they cling. They often cluster to the number of over two hundred on one branch, and if there are several branches, they form a bunch of oysters such as a man could scarcely carry."

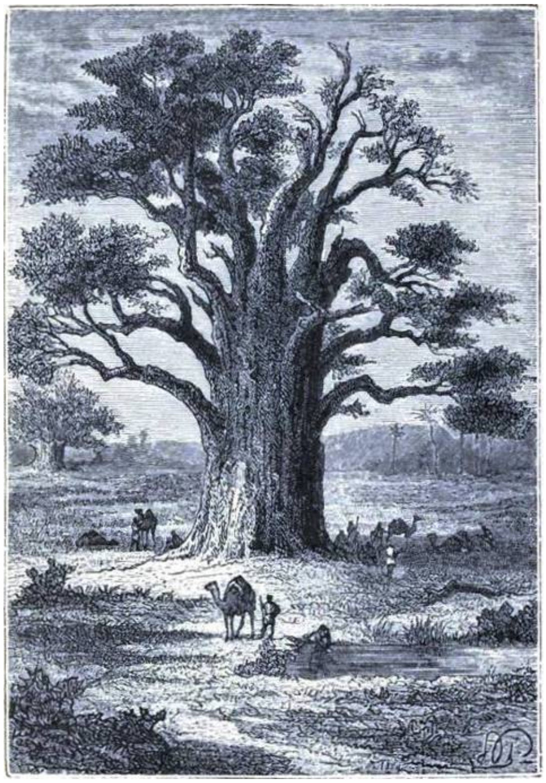

The Baobab.

In spite of the interest of these and similar discoveries, there are few new facts for the geographer to glean. A few words about the Yolofs and Mandingoes comprise all there is to learn. If we followed Adanson throughout his explorations, we should gain little fresh information.

The same cannot be said of the expedition of which we are about to give some account. Major Houghton, captain in the 69th regiment, and English Governor of the Fort of Goree, had been familiar from his youth, part of which was passed with the English Embassy in Morocco, with the manners and customs of the Moors and the negroes of Senegambia. In 1790, he proposed to the African Society to explore the course of the Niger, penetrate as far as Timbuctoo and Houssa, and return by way of the Sahara. The carrying out of this bold plan met with but one obstacle, but that was almost sufficient to upset it.

Houghton left England upon the 16th of October, 1790, and anchored in Jillifree harbour, at the mouth of the Gambia, upon the 10th of November. Well received by the King of Barra, he followed the course of the Gambia to a distance of three hundred leagues, traversed the remainder of Senegambia, and reached Gonda Konda in Yanvi.

Walknaer, in his "History of Voyages," says, "He purchased a negro, a horse, and five asses, and prepared to proceed with the merchandise which was to pay his expenses to Mendana, the capital of the little kingdom of Woolli. Fortunately his slight knowledge of the Mandingo language enabled him to understand a negress who was speaking of a plot against him. The merchants trading on the river, imagining commerce to be his sole object, and fearing that he might compete with them, had determined upon his death.

"In order to avoid the threatened danger, he thought it wise to deviate from the usual route, and, accordingly, crossed the river with his asses, and reached the northern shore in the kingdom of Cantor."

Houghton then crossed the river a second time, and entered the kingdom of Woolli. He at once sent a messenger to the king, bearing presents, and asking for protection. He was cordially received, and the traveller was welcomed to Mendana, the capital, which he describes as an important town, situated in the midst of a fertile country, in which many herds of cattle graze.

Houghton was justified in anticipating a successful issue to his voyage; everything appeared to presage it, when an event occurred which was the first blow to his hopes. A hut next that in which he slept took fire, and the whole town was soon in flames. His interpreter, who had made several attempts to rob him, seized this opportunity, and fled with a horse and three asses.

Still the King of Woolli continued his protection of the traveller, and loaded him with presents, precious not on account of their value, but as signs of the good-will which they demonstrated. This friend of the Europeans was named Djata. Humane, intelligent, and good-hearted, he wished the English to establish a factory in his kingdom.

Houghton, in a letter to his wife, says, —

“Captain Littleton, during a stay of four years here, has amassed a considerable fortune. He possesses several ships which trade up and down the river. At any time one can obtain, for the merest trifle, gold, ivory, wax, and slaves. Poultry, sheep, eggs, butter, milk, honey, and fish are extremely abundant, and for ten pounds sterling a large family might be maintained in luxury. The soil is dry, the air very healthy; and the King of Woolli told me that no white man had ever died at Fataconda.”

Houghton then followed the Falemé river as far as Cacullo, which in D’Anville’s map is called Cacoulon, and whilst in Bambouk gleaned a few facts about the Djoliba river, which runs through the interior of the Soudan. The direction of this river he ascertained to be southward as far as Djeneh, then west by east to Timbuctoo — facts which were later confirmed by Mungo Park. The traveller was cordially received by the King of Bambouk, who provided him with a guide to Timbuctoo, and with cowries to pay his expenses during the journey. It was hoped that Houghton would reach the

Niger without accident, when a note, written in pencil and half effaced, reached Dr. Laidley. It was dated from Simbing, and stated that the traveller had been robbed of his baggage, but that he was prosecuting his journey to Timbuctoo. This was followed by accounts from various sources, which gave rise to a suspicion that Houghton had been assassinated in Bambara. His fate was uncertain until it was discovered by Mungo Park.

Walknaer says, —

“Simbing, where Houghton wrote the last words ever received from him, is a little walled town on the frontier of the kingdom of Ludamar. Here he was abandoned by his negro servants, who were unwilling to accompany him to the country of the Moors. Still he continued his route, and, after surmounting many obstacles, he advanced to the north, and endeavoured to cross the kingdom of Ludamar. Finally he reached Yaouri, and made the acquaintance of several merchants, on their way to sell salt at Tischet, a town situated near the marshes of the great desert, and six days’ journey north of Yaouri. Then, by bribing the merchants with a gun and a little tobacco, he persuaded them to conduct him to Tischet. All this would lead us to suppose that the Moors deceived him, either as to the route he should have followed, or as to the state of the country between Yaouri and Timbuctoo.

“After two days’ march, Houghton, finding himself deceived, wished to return to Yaouri. The Moors robbed him of all he possessed, and fled. He was forced to reach Yaouri on foot. Did he die of hunger, or was he assassinated by the Moors? This has never been rightly determined, but the spot where he perished was pointed out to Mungo Park.”

The loss of Houghton’s journals, containing the observations made during his journey, deprived science of the result of all his fatigue and devotion. To ascertain what he accomplished, one must have recourse to the *Proceedings of the African Society*. At this time Mungo Park, a young Scotch surgeon, who had just returned from a voyage to the East Indies on board the *Worcester*, learnt that the African Society were anxious to find an explorer willing to penetrate to the interior of the country watered by the Gambia. Mungo Park, who had long wished to acquaint himself with the productions of the country, and the manners and customs of the inhabitants, offered his services. He was not deterred by the apprehension that his predecessor, Houghton, had probably perished.

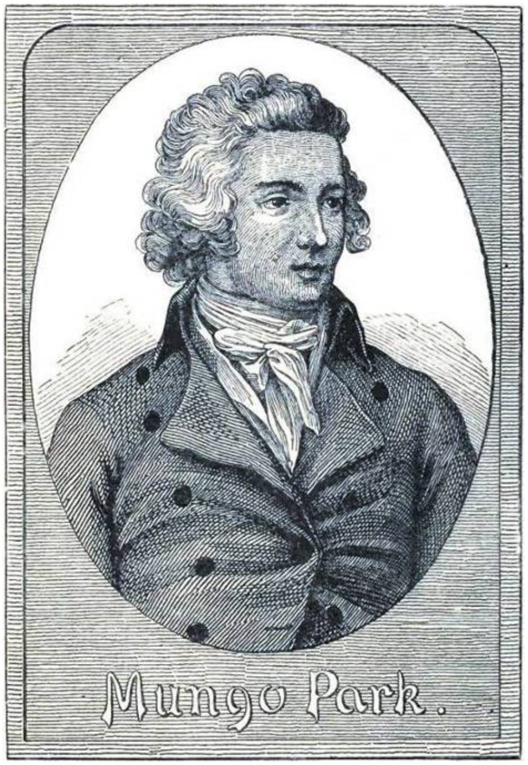

Portrait of Mungo Park.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

At once accepted by the Society, Mungo Park hastened his preparations, and left Portsmouth upon the 22nd of May, 1795. He was furnished with introductions to Dr. Laidley, and a credit of two hundred pounds sterling. Landing at Jillifree, at the mouth of the Gambia, in the kingdom of Barra, and following the river, he reached Pisania, an English factory belonging to Dr. Laidley. He directed his attention first to acquiring a knowledge of the Mandingo language, which was most generally used, and in collecting the facts most likely to be useful in the execution of his plans.

His stay here enabled him to obtain more accurate information than his predecessors with regard to the Feloups, the Yolofs, the Foulahs, and the Mandingoes. The Feloups are morose, quarrelsome, and vindictive, but faithful and courageous. The Yolofs are a powerful and warlike nation, with very black skins. Except in colour and speech, they resemble the Mandingoes, who are gentle and sociable. Tall and well-made, their women are, comparatively speaking, pretty. Lastly, the Foulahs, who are the lightest in colour, seem much attached to a pastoral and agricultural life. The greater part of these populations are Mohammedans, and practise polygamy.

Upon the 2nd of December, Mungo Park, accompanied by two negro interpreters, and with a small quantity of baggage, started for the interior. He first reached the small kingdom of Woolli, the capital of which, Medina, comprises a thousand houses. He then proceeded to Kolor, a considerable town, and, after two days’ march across a desert, entered the kingdom of Bondou. The natives are Foulahs, professing the Mohammedan religion; they carry on a brisk trade in ivory, when they are not engaged in agriculture.

The traveller soon reached the Falemé river, the bed of which, near its source in the mountains of Dalaba, is very auriferous. He was received by the king at Fataconda, the capital of Bondou, and had great difficulty in convincing him that he travelled from curiosity. His interview with the wives of the monarch is thus described. Mungo Park says, —

“I had scarcely entered the court, when I was surrounded by the entire seraglio. Some begged me for physic, some for amber, and all were most desirous of trying the great African specific of *blood-letting*. They are ten or twelve in number, most of them young and handsome, wearing on their heads ornaments of gold or pieces of amber. They rallied me a good deal upon different subjects, particularly upon the whiteness of my skin and the length of my nose. They insisted that both were artificial. The first, they said, was produced, when I was an infant, by dipping me in milk, and they insisted that my nose had been pinched every day till it had acquired its present unsightly and unnatural conformation.”

Leaving Bondou by the north, Mungo Park entered Kajaaga, called by the French Galam. The climate of this picturesque country, watered by the Senegal, is far healthier than that of districts nearer the coast. The natives call themselves Serawoullis, and are called Seracolets by the French. The colour of their skin is jet black, and in this respect they are scarcely distinguishable from the Yolofs.

Mungo Park says, “The Serawoollis are habitually a trading people. They formerly carried on a great commerce with the French in gold-dust and slaves, and still often supply the British factories on the Gambia with slaves. They are famous for the skill and honesty with which they do business.”

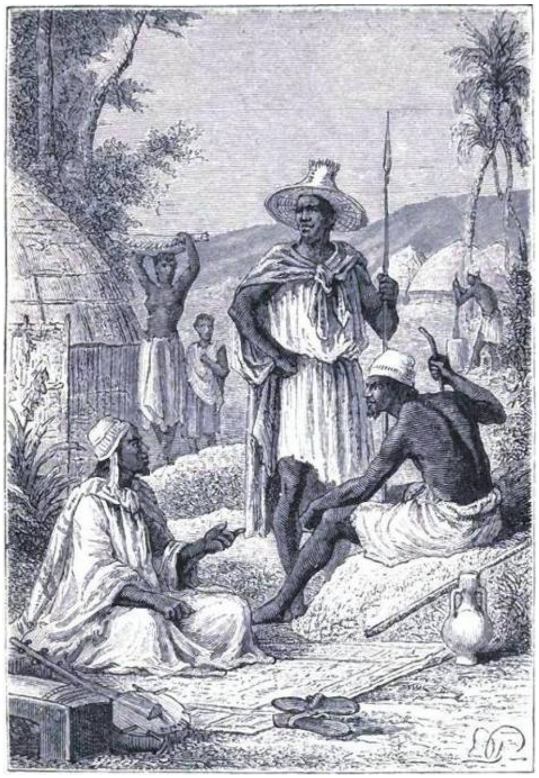

Natives of Senegal.

At Joag, Mungo Park was relieved of half his property by the envoys of the king, under pretence of making him pay for the right to pass through his kingdom. Fortunately for him, the nephew of Demba-Jego-Jalla, King of Kasson, who was about to return to his country, took him under his protection. They reached Gongadi, where there are extensive date plantations, together, and thence proceeded to Samia, on the shores of the Senegal, on the frontiers of Kasson.

The first town met with in this kingdom was that of Tiesie, which was reached by Mungo Park on the 31st of December. Well received by the natives, who sold him the provisions he needed at a reasonable price, the traveller was subjected by the brother and nephew of the king to endless indignities.

Leaving this town upon the 10th of January, 1796, Mungo Park reached Kouniakari, the capital of Kasson — a fertile, rich, and well-populated country, which can place forty thousand men under arms. The king, full of kindly feeling for the traveller, wished him to remain in his kingdom as long as the wars between Kasson and Kajaaga lasted. It was more than probable that the countries of Kaarta and Bambara, which Mungo Park wished to visit, would be drawn into it. The advice of the king to remain was prudent, and Park had soon reason enough to regret not having followed it.

But, impatient to reach the interior, the traveller would not listen, and entered the level and sandy plains of Kaarta. He met crowds of natives on the journey who were flying to Kasson to escape the horrors of war. But even this did not deter him; he continued his journey until he reached the capital of Kaarta, which is situated in a fertile and open plain.

He was kindly received by the king, Daisy Kourabari, who endeavoured to dissuade him from entering Bambara, and, finding all his arguments useless, advised him to avoid passing through the midst of the fray, by entering the kingdom of Ludamar, inhabited by Moors. From thence he could proceed to Bambara.

During his journey Mungo Park noticed negroes who fed principally upon a sort of bread made from the berries of the lotus, which tasted not unlike gingerbread. This plant, the *rhamnus lotus*, is indigenous in Senegambia, Nigritia, and Tunis.

“So,” says Mungo Park, “there can be little doubt of this fruit being the lotus mentioned by Pliny as the food of the Lybian Lotophagi. I have tasted lotus bread, and think that an army may very easily have been fed with it, as is said by Pliny to have been done in Lybia. The taste of the bread is so sweet and agreeable, that the soldiers would not be likely to complain of it.”

On the 22nd February, Mungo Park reached Jarra, a considerable town, with houses built of stone, inhabited by negroes from the south who had placed themselves under the protection of the Moors, to whom they paid considerable tribute. From Ali, King of Ludamar, the traveller obtained permission to travel in safety through his dominions. But, in spite of this safe-conduct, Park was almost entirely despoiled by the fanatical Moors of Djeneh. At Sampaka and Dalli, large towns, and at Samea, a small village pleasantly situated, he was so cordially welcomed that he already saw himself in fancy arrived in the interior of Africa, when a troop of soldiers appeared, who led him to Benown, the camp of King Ali.

“Ali,” says Mungo Park, “was sitting upon a black morocco cushion, clipping a few hairs on his upper lip — a female attendant holding a looking-glass before him. He was an old man of Arab race, with a long white beard, and he looked sullen and angry. He surveyed me with attention, and inquired of the Moors if I could speak Arabic. Being answered in the negative, he appeared surprised, and continued silent. The surrounding attendants, and especially ladies, were much more inquisitive. They asked a thousand questions, inspected every part of my apparel, searched my pockets, and obliged me to unbutton my waistcoat to display the whiteness of my skin. They even counted my toes and fingers, as if they doubted whether I was in truth a human being.”

An unprotected stranger, a Christian, and accounted a spy, Mungo Park was a victim to the insolence, ferocity, and fanaticism of the Moors. He was spared neither insults, outrages, nor blows. They attempted to make a barber of him, but his awkwardness in cutting the hairy face of the king’s son exempted him from this degrading occupation. During his captivity he collected many particulars regarding Timbuctoo, which is so difficult of access to Europeans, and was the bourne of all early African explorers.

“Houssa,” a scherif told him, “is the largest town I have ever seen. Walet is larger than Timbuctoo, but as it is farther from the Niger, and its principal trade is in salt, few strangers are met there. From Benown to Walet is a distance of six days’ journey. No important town is passed between the two, and the traveller depends for sustenance upon the milk procurable from Arabs, whose flocks and herds graze about the wells and springs. The road leads for two days through a sandy desert, where not a drop of water is to be had.”

It takes eleven days to go from Walet to Timbuctoo, but water is not so scarce on this journey, which is generally made upon oxen. At Timbuctoo there are a number of Jews who speak Arabic, and use the same forms of prayer as the Moors.

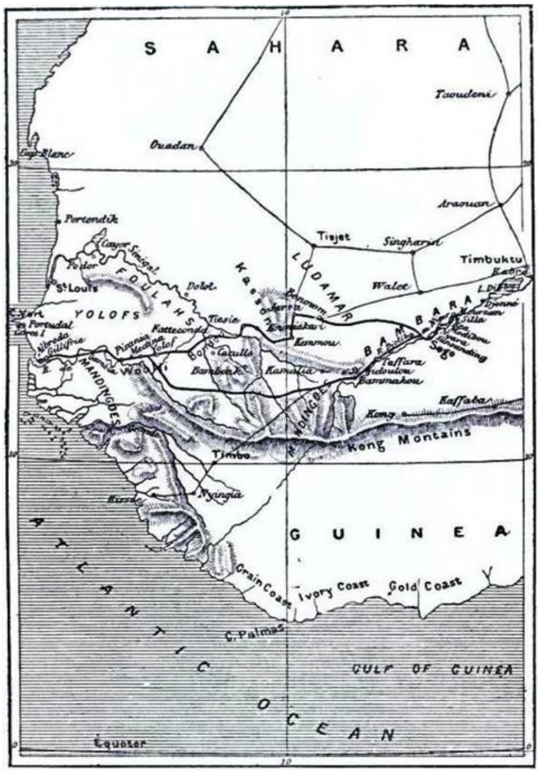
SAHARA
Taoudeni
Ouadan
Cap Blanc
Portendik
Araouan
Tisjet
Singharin
Timbuktu
Kabra
L. Dibbie
Djenné
Walet
LUDAMAR
Kaarta
Benowm
Jarra
Kemmou
Cayor
Senegal
Podor
St. Louis
FOULAHS
Dolol
YOLOFS
Portudal
Goree I.
Tiarie
Fatteconda
Pisania
Medina
Woolli
Bondou
Bambouk
Kamalia
Bammakou
Taffara
Sego
Silla
BAMBARA
Kaffaba
Kong
Kong Montains
MANDINGOES
Timbo
Nyingia
GUINEA
Grain Coast
Ivory Coast
Gold Coast
C. Palmas
ATLANTIC OCEAN
GULF OF GUINEA
Equator

The events of the war decided Ali to proceed to Jarra. Mungo Park, who had succeeded in making friends with the sultan’s favourite, Fatima, obtained permission to accompany the king. The traveller hoped, by nearing the scene of action, to manage to escape. As it happened, the King of Kaarta, Daisy Kourabari, soon after marched against the town of Jarra. The larger number of inhabitants fled, and Mungo Park did the same.

He soon found means to get away, but his interpreter refused to accompany him. He was forced to start for Bambara alone, and destitute of resources.

The first town he came to was Wawra, which properly belongs to Kaarta, but was then paying tribute to Mansong, King of Bambara. Mungo Park says, —

“Upon the morning of the 7th of July, as I was about to depart, my landlord, with a great deal of diffidence, begged me to give him a lock of my hair. He had been told, he said, that white men’s hair made a *saphic* (talisman) that would give the possessor all the knowledge of the white man. I had never before heard of so simple a mode of education, but I at once complied with the request; and my landlord’s thirst for learning was so great that he cut and pulled at my hair till he had cropped one side of my head pretty closely, and would have done the same with the other had I not signified my disapprobation, assuring him that I wished to reserve some of this precious material for a future occasion.”

First Gallon and then Mourja, a large town, famous for its trade in salt, were passed, after fatigues and incredible privations. Upon nearing Sego, Mungo Park at last perceived the Djoliba. “Looking forward,” he says, “I saw, with infinite pleasure, the great object of my mission — the long-sought-for, majestic Niger, glittering in the morning sun, as broad as the Thames at Westminster, and flowing slowly to the eastward. I hastened to the brink, and, having drunk of the water, lifted up my fervent thanks in prayer to the Great Ruler of all things for having thus far crowned my endeavours with success.

“The fact of the Niger flowing towards the east did not, however, excite my surprise; for, although I had left Europe in great hesitation on this subject, and rather believed it ran in the contrary direction, I had made frequent inquiries during my progress, and had received from negroes of different nations such clear and decisive assurances that its course *was towards the rising sun* as scarce left any doubt in my mind, more especially as I knew that Major Houghton had collected similar information in a similar manner.

“Sego, the capital of Bambara, at which I had now arrived, consists, properly speaking, of four distinct towns; two on the northern bank of the river, called Sego Korro and Sego Boo, and two on the southern bank, called Sego Sou Korro and Sego See Korro. They are all surrounded with high mud walls; the houses are built of clay, of a square form, with flat roofs; some of them have two stories, and many of them are whitewashed. Besides these buildings, Moorish mosques are seen in every quarter, and the streets, though narrow, are broad enough for every practical purpose in a country where wheel carriages are unknown. From the best information I could obtain, I have reason to believe that Sego contains altogether about thirty thousand inhabitants. The king of Bambara resides permanently at Sego See Korro; he employs a great many slaves in conveying people over the river; and the money they take, though the fare is only ten cowries for each person, furnishes a considerable revenue to the king in the course of a year.”

By advice of the Moors, the king refused to receive the traveller, and forbade him to remain in his capital, where he could not have protected him from ill-treatment. However, to divest his refusal of all appearance of ill-will, he sent him a bag containing 5000 cowries, of the value of about a pound sterling, to buy provisions. The messenger sent by the king was to serve as guide as far as Sansanding. Protest and anger were alike impossible; Mungo Park could do nothing but follow the orders sent. Before reaching Sansanding, he was present at the harvest of vegetable butter, which is the produce of a tree called Shea.

“These trees,” says the narrative, “grow in great abundance all over this part of Bambara. They are not planted by the natives, but are found growing naturally in the woods; and, in clearing land for cultivation, every tree is cut down but the shea. The tree itself very much resembles the American oak;

the fruit — from the kernel of which, after it has been dried in the sun, the butter is prepared by boiling in water — has somewhat the appearance of a Spanish olive. The kernel is imbedded in a sweet pulp, under a thin green rind, and the butter produced from it, besides the advantage of keeping a whole year without salt, is whiter, firmer, and, to my palate, of a richer flavour than the best butter I ever tasted from cows' milk. It is a chief article of the inland commerce of these districts."

Sansanding, a town containing from eight to ten thousand inhabitants, is a market-place much frequented by the Moors, who bring glass-ware from the Mediterranean forts, which they exchange for gold-dust and cotton. Mungo Park was not able to remain at this place, for the importunities of the natives and the perfidious insinuations of the Moors warned him to continue his route. His horse was so worn out by fatigue and privation that he felt obliged to embark on the river Djoliba or Niger.

At Mourzan, a fishing village upon the northern bank of the river, everything combined to induce Park to relinquish his enterprise. The further he advanced to the eastward down the river, the more he placed himself in the power of the Moors. The rainy season had commenced, and it would soon be impossible to travel otherwise than by boat. Mungo Park was now so poor that he could not even hire a boat; he was forced to rely upon public charity.

To advance further under these circumstances was not only to risk his life, but to place the results of all his fatigues and efforts in jeopardy. To return to Gambia was scarcely less perilous; to do so he must traverse hundreds of miles on foot through hostile countries. Still the hope of returning home might sustain his courage.

“Before leaving Silla,” says the traveller, “I thought it incumbent on me to collect from the Moorish and negro traders all the information I could concerning the further course of the Niger eastward, and the situation and extent of the kingdoms in its neighbourhood.

“Two days’ journey eastward of Silla is the town of Djenneh, which is situated on a small island in the river, and is said to contain as many inhabitants as Sego itself, or any other town in Bambara. At a distance of two days’ more, the river widens and forms a considerable lake, called Dibby (or the dark lake), concerning the extent of which, all I could learn was that, in crossing it from east to west, the canoes lose sight of land for one whole day. From this lake the water issues in many different streams, which finally become two branches, one flowing to the north-east, the other to the east; but these branches join at Kabra, which is one day’s journey to the south of Timbuctoo, and is the port or shipping-place of that city. The tract of land between the two streams is called Timbala, and is inhabited by negroes. The whole distance by land from Djenneh to Timbuctoo is twelve days’ journey. North-east of Masena is the kingdom of Timbuctoo, the great object of European research, the capital of the kingdom being one of the principal marts for the extensive commerce which the Moors carry on with the negroes. The hope of acquiring wealth in this pursuit, and zeal for propagating their religion, have filled this extensive city with Moors. The king himself and all the chief officers of his court are Moors, and are said to be more intolerant and severe in their principles than any other of the Moorish tribes in this part of Africa.”

Mungo Park was then forced to retrace his steps, and that through a country devastated by inundation and heavy rains. He passed through Mourzan, Kea, and Modibon, where he regained his horse; Nyara, Sansanding, Samea, and Sai, which is surrounded by a deep moat, and protected by high walls with square towers; Jabbéa, a large town, from which he perceived high mountain ranges, and Taffara, where he was received with little hospitality.

At the village of Souha, Park begged a handful of grain of a “dooty,” who answered that he had nothing to give away.

“Whilst I was examining the face of this inhospitable old man, and endeavouring to find out the cause of the sullen discontent which was visible in his eye, he called to a slave who was working in the corn-field at a little distance, and ordered him to bring his spade with him. The Dooty then told him to dig a hole in the ground, pointing to a spot at no great distance. The slave with his spade began to dig in the earth, and the Dooty, who appeared to be a man of very fretful disposition, kept muttering to himself until the pit was almost finished, when he repeatedly pronounced the word *ankatod* (good for nothing), *jankra lemen* (a regular plague), which expressions I thought applied to myself. As the pit had very much the appearance of a grave, I thought it prudent to mount my horse, and was about to decamp when the slave, who had gone before to the village, returned with the corpse of a boy about nine or ten years of age, quite naked. The negro carried the body by an arm and leg, and threw it into the pit with a savage indifference such as I had never seen. As he covered the body with earth, the Dooty kept repeating *naphula attemata* (money lost), whence I concluded the boy had been his slave.”

Mungo Park left Koulikorro, where he had obtained food by writing saphics or talismans for the natives, upon the 21st of August, and reached Bammakoa, where a large salt-market is held. From an eminence near the town he perceived a high mountain range in the kingdom of Kong, whose ruler had a more numerous army than the King of Bambara.

Once more robbed by brigands of all he possessed, the unfortunate traveller found himself, in the rainy season, alone in a vast desert, five leagues from the nearest European settlement, and for the moment gave way to despair. But his courage soon revived; and reaching the town of Sibidoulou, his horse and clothes, which had been stolen from him by Foulah robbers, were restored to him by the *mansa*, or chief. Kamalia, or Karfa Taura advised him to await the cessation of the rainy season, and then to proceed to Gambia with a caravan of slaves. Worn out, destitute, attacked by fever, which for five months kept him prostrate, Mungo Park had no choice but to remain in this place.

Upon the 19th of April the caravan set out. We can readily imagine the joy experienced by Mungo Park when all was ready. Crossing the desert of Jallonka, and passing first the principal branch of the Senegal river, and then the Falemé, the caravan finally reached the shores of the Gambia, and on the 12th of June, 1797, Mungo Park once more arrived at Pisania, where he was warmly welcomed by Dr. Laidley, who had despaired of ever seeing him again.

The traveller returned to England upon the 22nd of September. So great was the impatience with which an account of his discoveries, certainly the most important in this part of Africa, was awaited, that the African Society allowed him to publish for his own profit an abridged account of his adventures.

He had collected more facts as to the geography, manners, and customs of the country than all preceding travellers; he had determined the position of the sources of the Senegal and Gambia, and surveyed the course of the Niger or Djoliba — which he proved to run eastwards, whilst the Gambia flowed to the west.

Thus a point, which up to this time had been disputed by geographers, was definitely settled. It was no longer possible to confound the three rivers, as the French geographer Delisle had done, in 1707, when he represented the Niger as running eastward from Bornu, and flowing into the river Senegal on the west. He himself, however, had admitted and corrected this error, in his later maps of 1722 and 1727, no doubt on account of the facts ascertained by André Brue, governor of Senegal.

Houghton, indeed, had learned much from the natives of the course of the Niger through the Mandingo country, and of the relative positions of Sego, Djennéh, and Timbuctoo; but it was reserved for Mungo Park to fix positively, from personal knowledge, the position of the two first-named towns, and to furnish circumstantial details of the country, and the tribes who inhabit it.

Public opinion was unanimous as to the importance of the great traveller’s exploration, and keenly appreciative of the courage, skill, and honesty exhibited by him.

A short time later, the English government offered Mungo Park the conduct of an expedition to the interior of Australia; but he refused it.

In 1804, however, the African Society determined to complete the survey of the Niger, and proposed to Mungo Park the command of a new expedition for its exploration. This time the great traveller did not refuse, and upon the 30th of January, 1805, he left England. Two months later he landed at Goree.

He was accompanied by his brother-in-law, Anderson, a surgeon, by George Scott, a draughtsman, and by thirty-five artillery-men. He was authorized to enrol as many soldiers as he liked in his service, and was provided with a credit of five hundred pounds.

“These resources,” says Walcknaer, “so vast in comparison with those furnished by the African Society, were, to our thinking, partly the cause of his loss. The rapacious demands of the African kings grew in proportion to the riches they supposed our traveller to possess; and the effort to meet the enormous drain made upon him, was in great part the cause of the catastrophe which brought the expedition to an end.”

Four carpenters, one officer and thirty-five artillery-men, and a Mandingo merchant named Isaac, who was to act as guide, with the leaders of the expedition already mentioned, composed an imposing caravan. Mungo Park left Cayee upon the 27th of April, 1805, and reached Pisania the next day. From this place, ten years earlier, he had started upon his first exploration. Taking an easterly direction, he followed his former route as far as Bambaku, upon the shores of the Niger. When he arrived at this place, the number of Europeans was already reduced to six soldiers and a carpenter; the remainder had succumbed to fatigue, or the fevers incidental to the inundations. The exactions of the various petty chiefs through whose domains the expedition passed had considerably diminished the stock of merchandise.

Mungo Park was now guilty of an act of grave imprudence. Remarking that trade was very active at Sansanding, a town containing eleven thousand inhabitants, and that beads, indigo, antimony, rings, bracelets, and other articles not likely to be spoiled in the transit to England, were freely exhibited for sale, “he opened,” says Walcknaer, “a large shop, which he stocked with European merchandise, for sale wholesale and retail; and probably the large profits he made excited the envy of the merchants. The natives of Djenneh, the Moors, and merchants of Sansanding, joined with those of Sego in offering, in the presence of Modibinne, to give the King of Mansong a larger and more valuable quantity of merchandise than he had received from the English traveller, if he would seize his baggage, and then kill him, or send him out of Bambarra. But in spite of his knowledge of this fact, Mungo Park still kept his shop open, and he received, as the proceeds of one single day’s business, 25,756 pieces of money, or cowries.”

Upon the 28th of October Anderson expired, after four months’ illness, and Mungo Park found himself once more alone in the heart of Africa. The King of Mansong had accorded him permission to build a boat, which would enable him to explore the Niger. Naming his craft the *Djoliba*, he fixed upon the 16th of November for his departure.

Here his journal ends, with details on the riverside populations, and on the geography of the countries he was the first to discover. This journal, when it reached Europe, was published, imperfect as it was, as soon as the sad fact was realized that the writer had perished in the waters of the Djoliba. It contained in reality no new discovery, but it was recognized as useful to geographical science. Mungo Park had determined the astronomical position of the more important towns, and thereby furnished material for a map of Senegambia. The perfecting of this map was entrusted to Arrowsmith, who stated in an advertisement, that, finding wide differences between the positions of the towns as shown in the journal by each day’s travel and that furnished by the astronomical observations, it was impossible to reconcile them; but that, in accordance with the latter, he had been obliged to place the route followed by Mungo Park in his first voyage farther north.

It was reserved for the Frenchman Walcknaer to discover a curious discrepancy in Mungo Park's journal. This was a singular error upon the part of the traveller, which neither the English editor nor the French translator (whose work was badly performed) had discovered. Mungo Park in his diary records events as happening upon the 31st of April. As every one knows that that month has only thirty days, it followed that during the course of his journey the traveller had made a mistake of a whole day, reckoning in his calculations from the evening instead of the morning. Hence important rectifications were necessary in Arrowsmith's map; but none the less, when once Mungo Park's error is recognized, it is evident that to him we owe the first faithful map of Senegambia.

Although the facts that reached the English Government allowed no room for doubt as to the fate of the traveller, a rumour that white men had been seen in the interior of Africa induced the Governor of Senegal to fit out an expedition. The command was entrusted to the negro merchant Isaac, Mungo Park's guide, who had faithfully delivered the traveller's journal to the English authorities. We need not linger over the account of this expedition, but merely relate that which concerns the last days of Mungo Park.

At Sansanding, Isaac encountered Amadi Fatouma, the native who was with Park on the *Djoliba* when he perished, and from him he obtained the following recital: —

"We embarked at Sansanding, and in two days reached Silla, the spot where Mungo Park completed his first journey.

"After two days' navigation we reached Djenneh. In passing Dibby, three boats, filled with negroes armed with lances and arrows, but without fire-arms, approached us. We had passed successively Racbara and Timbuctoo, when we were pursued by these boats, which we repulsed with difficulty, and only after killing several natives. At Gourouma we were attacked by seven boats, but succeeded in repulsing them. Constant skirmishes ensued, with heavy loss to the blacks, until we reached Kaffo, where we remained for a day. We then proceeded down the river as far as Carmusse, and anchored off Gournou. Next day we perceived a Moorish detachment, who allowed us to pass.

“We then entered the country of Houssa. Next day we reached Yaouri, and sent Amadi Fatouma into the town, with presents for the chief and to purchase food. The negro, before accepting the presents, enquired if the white traveller intended to revisit his country. Mungo Park, to whom the question was reported, replied that he should never return.”

It is supposed that these words brought about his death. The negro chief, once convinced that he should not see Mungo Park again, determined to keep the presents intended for his king.

Meantime, Amadi Fatouma reached the king’s residence, at some distance from the river. The prince, warned of the presence of the white men, sent an army next day to the small village of Boussa, on the river side. When the *Djoliba* appeared it was assailed by a shower of stones and arrows. Park threw his baggage into the river, and jumped in with his companions. All perished.

Thus miserably died the first Englishman who had navigated the Djoliba and visited Timbuctoo. Many efforts were made in the same direction, but almost all were destined to fail.

At the end of the eighteenth century, two of Linnæus’s best pupils explored the south of Africa in the interests of natural history. Sparrman undertook to search for animals, and Thunberg for plants. The account of Sparrman’s expedition, which, as we have said, was interrupted by his voyage in Oceania, after Cook’s expedition, was the first to appear. It was translated into French by Le Tourneur. In his preface, which is still allowed to stand, Le Tourneur deplored the loss of the learned explorer, who he said had died during a voyage to the Gold Coast. Just as the work was published, Sparrman reappeared, to the great astonishment of Le Tourneur.

Sparrman had reached Africa upon the 30th of April, 1772, and landed at the Cape of Good Hope. At this time the town was only two miles across each way, including the gardens and plantations adjoining it on one side. The streets were wide, planted with oaks, and the houses were white, or, to Sparrman’s surprise, painted green.

His object in visiting the Cape was to act as tutor to the children of a M. Kerste; but upon his arrival in Cape Town, he found that his employer was absent at his winter residence in False Bay. When the spring came round, Sparrman accompanied Kerste to Alphen, a property which he possessed near Constance. The naturalist availed himself of the opportunity to make many excursions in the neighbourhood, and attempt the somewhat dangerous ascent of the Table Mountain. By these means he became acquainted with the manners and customs of the Boers, and their treatment of their slaves. The violence of the latter was so great that the inhabitants of the town were obliged to sleep with locked doors, and provided with fire-arms close at hand.

Nearly all over the colony a rough hospitality ensured a certain welcome for the traveller. Sparrman relates several curious experiences of his own.

“I arrived one evening,” he says, “at the dwelling of a farmer named Van der Spooei, a widower, born in Africa, and father of the proprietor of the

Red Constance, or the Old Constance.

“Making believe not to see me approach, he remained stationary in the entry of his house. As I approached him, he offered his hand, still without attempting to come forward, and said, ‘Good day! You are welcome! How are you? *Who* are you? A glass of wine perhaps? or a pipe? Will you partake of something?’ I answered his questions laconically, and accepted his offers in the same style as they were offered. His daughter, a well-made girl of some fourteen or fifteen years of age, brought in dinner, which consisted of a fine breast of lamb, stewed with carrots. The meal over, she offered me tea so pleasantly that I was quite puzzled whether to admire the dinner or my charming hostess the most. Both father and daughter showed the greatest kindness and good will. I spoke to my host several times, in hopes of breaking his silence; but his replies were brief; and I observed that he only once commenced a conversation himself, when he pressed me to remain over night in his house. I bid him farewell, deeply impressed with his hospitality.”

Sparrman undertook several similar expeditions, among others, one to Hout Bay and Paarl, in which he had frequent occasion to notice the exaggerations to be met with in the narrative of Kolbe, his predecessor.

He intended to continue his explorations during the winter, and projected a journey into the interior, when the fine season should return. When the frigates commanded by Captain Cook, the *Resolution* and *Adventure*, arrived at the Cape, Forster invited the young Swedish naturalist to accompany him; and Sparrman was thus enabled to visit New Zealand, Van Diemen’s Land, New Holland, Otaheite, Tierra del Fuego, the Antarctic Regions, and New Georgia, before his return to the Cape, where he landed on the 22nd of March, 1775.

His first care upon his return was to organize his expedition to the interior; and in order to add to his available resources he practised medicine and surgery during the winter. A cargo of corn, medicine, knives, tinder-boxes, and spirits for the preservation of specimens was collected, and packed in an immense waggon, drawn by five yoke of oxen.

Sparrman says, —

“The conductor of this cart needs dexterity, not only in his management of the animals, but in the use of the whip of African drivers. These instruments are about fifteen feet long, with a thong of the same or greater length, and a tongue of white leather almost three feet long. The driver holds this formidable instrument in both hands, and from his seat in front of the waggon can reach the foremost oxen with it. He distributes his cuts unceasingly, well understanding how and where to distribute them in such a manner that the hide of the animals feels the whip.”

Sparrman was to accompany the waggon on horseback, and was accompanied by a young colonist, named Immelman, who wished to penetrate into the interior for recreation. They started upon the 25th of July, 1775. After passing Rent River, scaling the Hottentot Holland Kloof, and crossing the Palmite, they entered a desert country, interspersed with plains, mountains, and valleys, without water, but frequented by antelopes of various kinds, with zebras and ostriches.

Sparrman soon reached the warm mineral baths at the foot of the Zwartberg, which, at that time, were much frequented, the company having built a house near the mountains. At this point the explorer was joined by young Immelman, and together they started for Zwellendam, which they reached upon the 2nd of September. We will give a few of the facts they collected about the inhabitants.

The Hottentots are as tall as Europeans, their hands and feet are small, and their colour a brownish yellow. They have not the thick lips of the Kaffirs and natives of Mozambique. Their hair is black and woolly, curly, but not thick. They rub the entire body with fat and soot. A Hottentot who paints himself looks less naked, and more complete, so to say, than one who only rubs himself with grease. Hence the saying, “A Hottentot without paint, is like a shoe without blacking.”

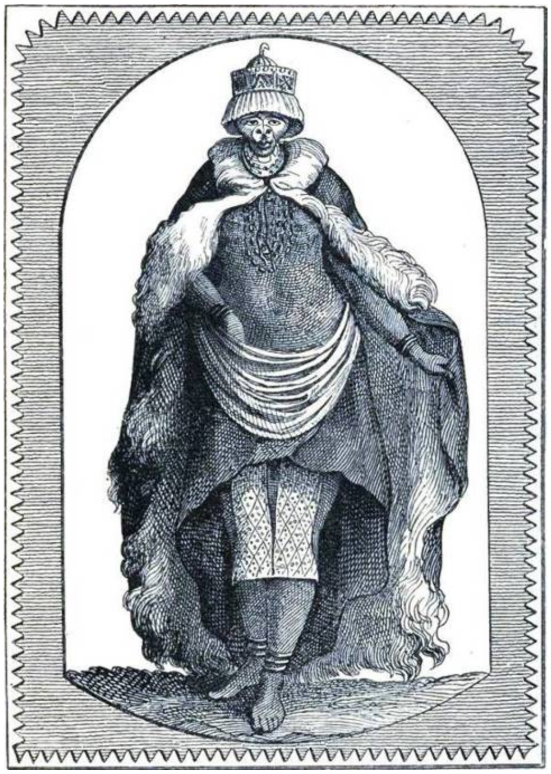

A Hottentot.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

These natives usually wear a cloak called karos, made of sheep’s skin, with the wool turned inwards. The women arrange it with a long point, which forms a sort of hood, in which they place their children. Both men and women wear leather rings upon their arms and legs — a custom, which gave rise to the fable that this race rolled puddings round their limbs, to feed on from time to time. They also wear copper and iron rings, but these ornaments are less common.

The kraal, or Hottentot village, is a collection of huts in a circle, all very similar, and of the shape of beehives. The doors, which are in the centre, are so low that they can only be entered on the knees. The hearth is in the middle of the hut, and the roof has no hole for the escape of the smoke.

The Hottentots must not be confounded with the Bushmen. The latter live only for hunting and robbery; their skill in throwing poisoned arrows, their courage, and the wildness of their lives, render them invincible.

At Zwellendam, Sparrman saw the quagga, a species of horse, like a zebra in shape, but with shorter ears.

The explorer next visited Mossel Bay, a harbour little used, as it is too much exposed to the west winds; and thence he proceeded to the country of the Houtniquas, or, as Burchell’s map calls them, the Antiniquas. This woody country appeared fertile, and the colonists established there are prosperous. Sparrman met with most of the quadrupeds of Africa in this district, such as elephants, leopards, lions, tiger cats, hyenas, monkeys, hares, antelopes, and gazelles.

We will not attempt to follow Sparrman to all the small settlements he visited. An enumeration of the streams, kraals, or villages he passed would convey no information to the reader. Rather let us gather from his narratives a few curious and novel details concerning two creatures which he describes, the sheep of the Cape, and the “honey-guide.”

“When a sheep is to be killed,” he says, “the very leanest of the flock is selected. It would be impossible to use the others for food. Their tails are of a triangular shape, and are often a foot and a half long, and occasionally six inches thick in the upper part. One of these tails will weigh eight or twelve pounds, and they consist principally of delicate fat, which some persons eat with bread instead of butter. It is used in the preparation of food, and sometimes to make candles.”

After describing the two-horned rhinoceros, hitherto unknown, the gnu — an animal in form something between the horse and the ox — the gazelle, the baboon, and the hippopotamus, the habits of which were previously imperfectly known, Sparrman describes a curious bird, of great service to the natives, which he calls the honey-guide.

“This bird,” he says, “is remarkable neither in size nor colour. At first sight it would be taken for a common sparrow, but it is a little larger than that bird, of a somewhat lighter colour, with a small yellow spot on each shoulder, and dashes of white in the wings and tail.

“In its own interests, this bird leads the natives to the bees’ nests, for it is very fond of honey, and it knows that whenever a nest is destroyed, a little honey will be spilled, or left behind, as a recompense for its services.

“It seems to grow hungry in the morning and evening. In any case, it is then that it leaves its nest, and by its piercing cries attracts the attention of the Hottentots or the colonists. The cries are almost always answered by the appearance of natives or settlers, when the bird, repeating its call unceasingly, slowly flies from place to place towards the spot where the bees have made their home. Arrived at the nest, whether it be in the cleft of a rock, in a hollow tree, or in some underground cavity, the guide hovers about it for a few seconds, and then perches hard by, and remains a silent and hidden spectator of the pillage, in which he hopes subsequently to have his share. Of this phenomenon I have myself twice been a witness.”

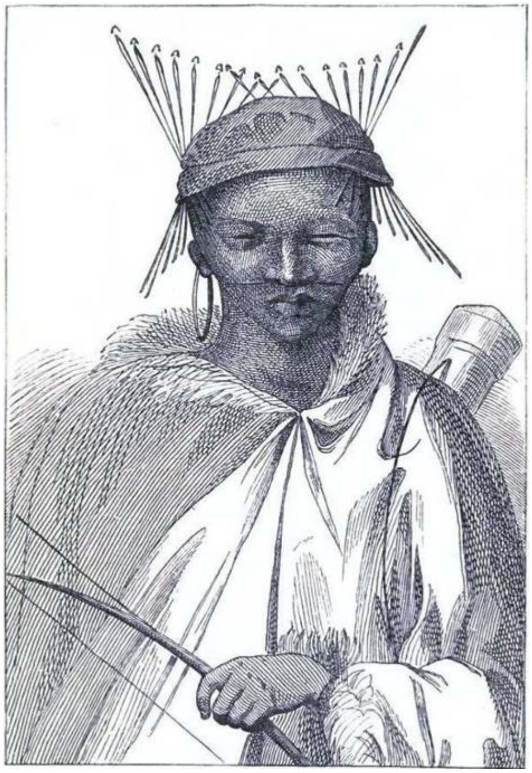

A Bosjeman.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

On the 12th of April, 1776, on his way back to the Cape, Sparrman heard that a large lake, the only one in the colony, had been discovered to the north of the Schneuwberg district. A little later, the traveller got back to the

Cape, and embarked for Europe with the numerous natural history collections he had made.

About the same time, between 1772-1775, Thunberg, the Swede, whom Sparrman had met at the Cape, made three successive journeys in the interior of Africa. They were not, any more than Sparrman’s, actual journeys of discovery; and we owe the acquisition of no new geographical fact to Thunberg. He did but make a vast number of interesting observations on the birds of the Cape, and he also ascertained a few interesting details respecting the various races of the interior, which turned out to be far more fertile than was at first supposed.

Thunberg was followed in the same latitudes by an English officer, Lieutenant William Paterson, whose chief aim was to collect plants and other objects of natural history. He penetrated a little further north than the Orange River, and into Kaffraria a good deal further east than Fish River. To him we owe the first notice of the giraffe; and his narrative is rich in important observations on the natural history, structure, and inhabitants of the country.

It is a curious fact that the Europeans attracted to South Africa by zeal for geographical discovery, were far less numerous than those whose motive was love of natural history. We have already mentioned Sparrman, Thunberg, and Paterson. To this list we must now add the name of the ornithologist Le Vaillant.

Born at Paramaribo, in Dutch Guiana, of French parents, who traded in birds, Le Vaillant visited Europe with them as a mere child, and traversed Holland, Germany, Lorraine, and the Vosges, on his way to Paris. It will readily be understood that this wandering life awoke in him a taste for travelling; and his passion for birds, early excited by the examination of private and public collections, made him eager to enrich science by descriptions and drawings of unknown species.

Now what country would afford the richest ornithological harvest? The districts near the Cape had been explored by botanists, and by a scientific man who had made quadrupeds his chief study; but no one had as yet traversed them to collect birds.

Le Vaillant arrived at the Cape on the 29th of March, 1781, after the loss of his vessel in an explosion, with nothing but the clothes he wore, ten ducats, and his gun.

Others would have been disheartened, but Le Vaillant did not despair of extricating himself from his painful position. Confident in his skill with the gun and the bow, in his strength and agility, as well as in his skill in preparing the skins of animals, and in stuffing birds so that their plumage should retain all its original gloss, the naturalist had soon opened relations with the wealthiest collectors of the Cape.

One of these, an official named Boers, provided Le Vaillant with every requisite for a successful journey, including carts, oxen, provisions, objects for barter, and horses. Even servants and guides were appointed, free of cost, to the explorer. The kind of researches to which Le Vaillant intended to devote himself influenced his mode of travelling. Instead of seeking frequented and beaten tracks, he tried to avoid them, and to penetrate into districts neglected by Europeans, hoping in them to meet with birds unknown to science. As a result he may be said always to have taken nature by surprise, coming into contact with natives whose manners had not yet been modified by intercourse with whites; so that the information he gives us brings savage life, as it really is, more vividly before us than anything told us by his predecessors or successors. The only mistake made by Le

Vaillant was the entrusting of the translation of his notes to a young man who modified them to suit his own notions. Far from taking the scrupulous care to be exact which distinguishes modern editors, he exaggerated facts; and, dwelling too much on the personal qualities of the traveller, he gave to the narrative of the journey a boastful tone very prejudicial to it.

After three months’ stay at the Cape and in its neighbourhood, Le Vaillant started, on the 18th December, 1781, for a first journey eastwards, and in Kaffraria. His equipment this time consisted of thirty oxen — ten for each of his two waggons, and ten as reserve — three horses, nine dogs, and five Hottentots.

Le Vaillant first crossed the Dutch districts already explored by Sparrman, where he met with vast herds of zebras, antelopes, and ostriches, arriving in due course at Zwellendam, where he bought some oxen, a cart, and a cock — the last serving as an alarm-clock throughout the journey. Another animal was also of great use to him. This was a monkey he had tamed, and promoted to the post, alike useful and honourable, of taster — no one being allowed to touch any fruit or root unknown to the Hottentots till Master Rees had given his verdict upon it.

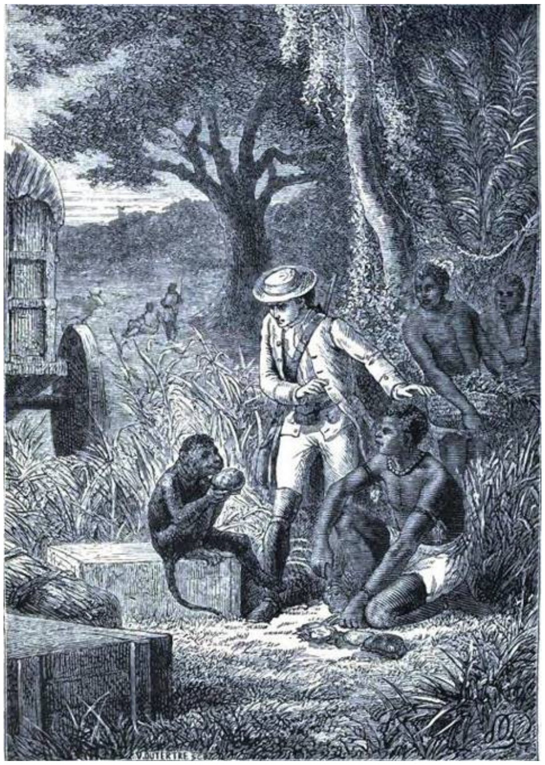

“Till Master Rees had given his verdict.”

Rees was also employed as a sentinel; and his senses, sharpened by use and the struggle for life, exceeded in delicacy those of the most subtle Redskin. He it was who warned the dogs of the approach of danger. If a snake approached, or a troop of monkeys were disporting themselves in a neighbouring thicket, Rees’ terror and his shrieks quickly revealed the presence of a disturbing element.

From Zwellendam, which he left on the 12th January, 1782, Le Vaillant made his way eastwards, at some little distance from the sea. He pitched his camp on the banks of the Columbia (Duywen Hock) river and made many very successful hunting excursions in a district rich in game, finally reaching Mossel Bay, where the howls of innumerable hyenas frightened the oxen.

A little farther on he entered the country of the Houtniquas, a Hottentot name signifying men filled with honey. Here not a step could be taken without coming upon swarms of bees. Flowers sprang up beneath the feet of the travellers; the air was heavy with their perfume; their varied colours lent such enchantment to the scene that some of the servants would have liked to halt. Le Vaillant however hastened to press on. The whole of this district, down to the sea, is occupied by colonists, who breed cattle, make butter, cultivate timber, and collect honey, sending their merchandise to the Cape for sale.

A little beyond the last post of the company, Le Vaillant, having entered a district peopled by thousands of “turacos,” and other rare birds, pitched his hunting camp; but his plans were terribly upset by the continuous fall of heavy rains, the result of which was to reduce the travellers to great straits for want of food.

After many a sudden change of fortune and many hunting adventures, an account of which would be very amusing, though beyond the scope of our narrative, Le Vaillant reached Mossel Bay. Here, with what delight we can easily imagine, he found letters from France awaiting him. One excursion after another was now made in various directions, until Kaffraria was entered. It was difficult to open relations with its people, who sedulously avoided the whites, having suffered the loss of many men and much cattle at their hands. Moreover the Tamboukis had taken advantage of their critical position to invade Kaffraria and commit numerous depredations, whilst the Bosjemans hunted them down unmercifully. Without fire-arms, and attacked on so many sides at once, the Kaffirs were driven to hiding themselves, and were retiring northwards.

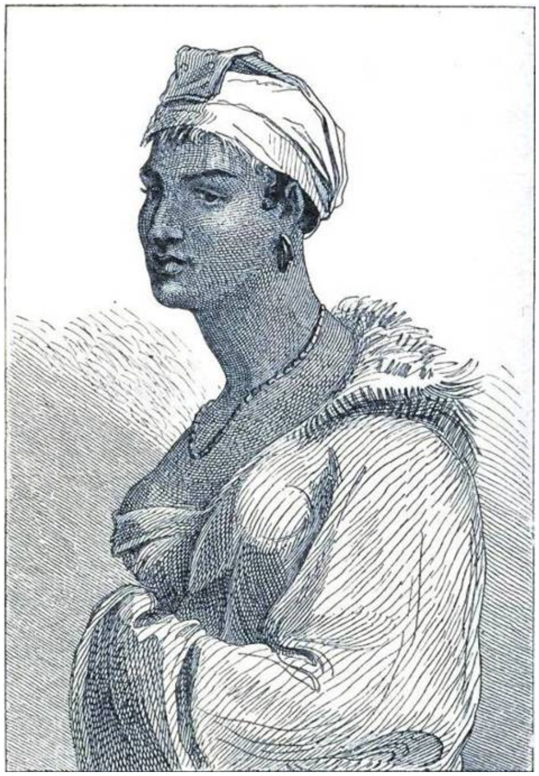

A Kaffir woman.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

As matters stood it was useless to attempt to penetrate into the mountainous districts of Kaffraria, and Le Vaillant retraced his steps. He then visited the Schneuwberg mountains, the Karroo desert and the shores of the Buffalo River, returning to the Cape on the 2nd April, 1783.

The results of this long campaign were important. Le Vaillant obtained some decided information about the Gonaquas, a numerous race which must not be confounded with the Hottentots properly so called, but are probably the offspring of their intermarriage with the Kaffirs. With regard to the Hottentots themselves, the information collected by Le Vaillant agrees on almost every point with that obtained by Sparrman.

“The Kaffirs seen by Le Vaillant,” says Walcknaer, “were most of them taller than either the Hottentots or the Gonaquas. They have neither the retiring jaws nor prominent cheek bones which are so repulsive in the Hottentots, but are less noticeable in the Gonaquas, neither have they the broad flat faces and thick lips of their neighbours the negroes of Mozambique. Their faces, on the contrary, are round, their noses fairly prominent, and their teeth the whitest and most regular of any people in the world. Their complexion is of a clear dark brown; and, but for this one characteristic, says Le Vaillant, any Kaffir woman would be considered very pretty, even beside a European.”

During Le Vaillant’s sixteen months of absence, the aspect of the Cape had completely changed. When the traveller left he admired the modest bearing of the Dutch women; on his return he found them thinking only of amusement and dress. Ostrich feathers were so much in vogue that they had to be imported from Europe and Asia. All those brought by our traveller were quickly bought up. The birds which he had sent to the colony on every possible opportunity now amounted to one thousand and twenty-four specimens; and Mr. Boers’ house, where they were kept, was converted into a regular natural history museum.

Le Vaillant’s journey had been so successful that he could not but wish to begin another. Although his friend Boers had returned to Europe, he was able, with the aid of the many other friends he had made, to collect the materials for a fresh trip. On the 15th June, 1783, he started at the head of a caravan numbering nineteen persons. He also took thirteen dogs, one he- and two she-goats, three cows, thirty-six draught and fourteen reserve oxen, with two for carrying the baggage of the Hottentot servants.

We shall not, of course, follow the traveller in his hunting excursions; all we need to know is that he succeeded in making a collection of marvellous birds, that he introduced the first giraffe to Europe, and that he traversed the whole of the vast space between the tropic of Capricorn on the west and the 14th meridian on the east. He returned to the Cape in 1784, he embarked for Europe, and arrived at Paris early in January, 1785.

The first native people met with by Le Vaillant in his second voyage were the Little Namaquas, a race but very little known, and who soon died out — the more readily that they occupied a barren country, subject to constant attacks from the Bosjemans. Although of fair height, they are inferior in appearance to the Kaffirs and Namaquas, to whose customs theirs bear a great resemblance.

The Caminouquas, or Comeinacquas, of whom Le Vaillant gives many particulars, exceed them in height. He says, —

“They appear taller even than the Gonaquas, although possibly they are not so in reality; but the illusion is sustained by their small bones, delicate and emaciated appearance, and slender limbs. The long mantle of light material which hangs from the shoulder to the ground adds to their height. They look like drawn out men. Lighter in colour than the Cape natives, they have better features than the other Hottentot tribes, owing to the fact that their noses are less flat and their cheek bones less prominent.”

Of all the races visited by Le Vaillant, the most peculiar and most ancient was that of the Houzonanas, a tribe which had not been met with by any other northern traveller; but they appear identical with the Bechuanas, although the part of the country assigned to them does not coincide with that which they are known to have occupied for many years.

“The Houzonanas,” says the narrative, “are small in stature, the tallest being scarcely five feet four in height. These small beings are perfectly proportioned, and are surprisingly strong and active. They have an imposing air of boldness.” Le Vaillant considers them the best endowed mentally, and the strongest physically, of all the savage races he had met with. In face they resemble the Hottentots, but they have rounder chins, and they are far less black. They have curly hair, so short that Le Vaillant at first imagined it to be shaven.

One striking peculiarity of the Houzonanas is a large mass of flesh upon the back of the women, which forms a natural saddle, and oscillates strangely with every movement of the body. Le Vaillant describes a woman whom he saw with her child about three years old, who was perched upon his feet behind her, like a footman behind a cabriolet.

We will pass over the traveller’s description of the appearance and customs of these various races, many of which are now extinct, or incorporated in some more powerful tribe. Although by no means the least curious portion of his narrative, the details are so exaggerated that we prefer to omit them.

Upon the eastern coast of Africa, a Portuguese traveller, named Fransisco José de Lacerda y Almeida, left Mozambique in 1797, to explore the interior. The account of this expedition to a place which has only lately been revisited, would be of great interest; but unfortunately, so far as we know, his journal has not been published. His name is often quoted by geographers, and they appear to know what countries he visited; but in France, at least, no lengthened notice of this geographer exists which would furnish the details of his exploration. A very few words will convey all that we have been able to collect of the history of a man who made most important discoveries, and whose name has most unfairly been forgotten.

Lacerda, the date and place of whose birth are unknown, was an engineer, and he was professionally engaged in settling the boundary of the frontier between the Spanish and Portuguese possessions in South America. Whilst thus employed, he collected a mass of interesting particulars of the province of Mato Grosso, which are given in the *Rivesta trimensal do Brazil*. We cannot tell what circumstances led him, after this successful expedition, to the Portuguese possessions in Africa; nor is it easy to imagine his motive for crossing South Africa from the eastern shore to the kingdom of Loanda. It is however certain that he left the well-known town of Teté in 1797, in command of an important caravan bound for the States of Cazembé.

This country was governed by a king as renowned for his benevolence and humanity as for his bravery. He inhabited a town called Lunda, which was two miles in extent, and situated upon the eastern shore of the lake called Mofo. It would have been interesting to compare these localities with those that we know of in the same parallels to-day; but the lack of details obliges us to desist, merely observing that the word Lunda was well-known to Portuguese travellers. As regards Cazembé, there is no longer any question as to its position.

Well received by the king, Lacerda remained some twelve days with him, and then proceeded upon his journey. Unfortunately, when a day or two’s march from Lunda he succumbed to fatigue and the unhealthiness of the climate.

The native king collected the traveller’s notes and journals, and ordered them to be sent with his remains to Mozambique. But unfortunately the caravan entrusted with these precious memorials was attacked, and the remains of the unfortunate Lacerda were left in the heart of Africa. His notes were brought to Europe by a nephew, who had accompanied the expedition.

We now come to the account of the expeditions undertaken in the east of Africa, foremost amongst which is that of the well-known traveller Bruce. A Scotchman by birth, like so many other African explorers, James Bruce was brought up for the bar; but the sedentary nature of his occupation had little charm for him, and he embraced an opportunity of entering commercial life. His wife died a few years after their marriage, and Bruce started for Spain, where he employed his leisure in studying Arabic monuments. He wished to publish a detailed account of those in the Escorial, but the Spanish Government refused him the necessary permission.

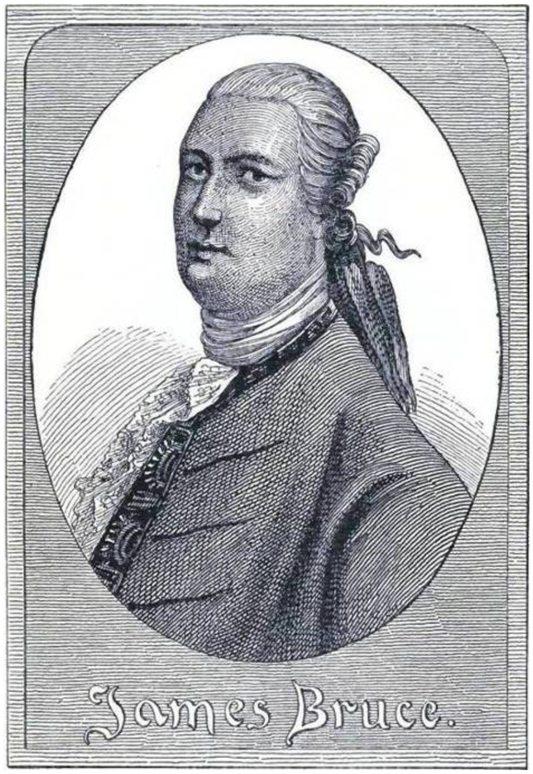
James Bruce.

Portrait of James Bruce.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Returning to England, Bruce began to study Eastern languages, and more especially the Ethiopian, which at that time was known only through the imperfect works of Ludolf. One day Lord Halifax half jestingly proposed to him an exploration of the sources of the Nile. Bruce entered enthusiastically into the subject, and set to work to realize it. He overcame every objection, conquered every difficulty, and in June, 1768, left England for the shores of the Mediterranean. Bruce hurriedly visited some of the islands of the Archipelago, Syria, and Egypt. Leaving Djedda he proceeded to Mecca, Lobheia, and arrived at Massowah upon the 19th September, 1769. He had taken care to obtain a firman from the Sultan, and also letters from the Bey of Cairo, and the Sheriff of Mecca. This was fortunate, for the Nawab, or governor did all in his power to prevent his entering Abyssinia, and endeavoured to make him pay heavily with presents. Abyssinia had been explored by Portuguese Missionaries, thanks to whose zeal some information about the country had been obtained, although far less accurate in detail than that which we owe to Bruce. Although his veracity has often been questioned, succeeding travellers have confirmed his assertions.

From Massowah to Adowa the road rises gradually, and passes over the mountains which separate Tigré from the shores of the Red Sea.

Adowa was not originally the capital of Tigré. A manufacture of a coarse cotton cloth which circulates as current money in Abyssinia was established there. The soil in the neighbourhood is deep enough for the cultivation of corn.

“In these districts,” says Bruce, “there are three harvests a year. The first seeds are sown in July and August, when the rain flows abundantly. In the same season they sow ‘tocusso,’ ‘teff,’ and barley. About the 20th of November they reap the first barley, then the wheat, and last of all the ‘teff.’ In some of these they sow immediately upon the same ground without any manure, barley, which they reap in February, and then often sow ‘teff,’ but more frequently a kind of vetch or pea, called Shimbra; these are cut down before the first rains, which are in April; yet with all the advantages of a triple harvest, which requires neither manure nor any expensive processes, the farmer in Abyssinia is always very poor.”

At Fremona, not far from Adowa, are the ruins of a Jesuit convent, resembling rather a fort than the abode of men of peace. Two days’ journey further on, one comes to the ruins of Axum, the ancient capital of

Abyssinia. “In one square,” says Bruce, “which I apprehend to have been the centre of the town, there are forty obelisks, none of which have any hieroglyphics on them. The two first have fallen down, but a third a little smaller than them is still standing. They are all hewn from one block of granite, and on the top of that which is standing there is a *patera*, exceedingly well engraved in the Greek style.

“After passing the convent of Abba Pantaleon, called in Abyssinia Mantillas, and the small obelisk on a rock above, we follow a path cut in a mountain of very red marble, having on the left a marble wall forming a parapet about five feet high. At intervals solid pedestals rise from this wall, bearing every token of having served to support colossal statues of Sirius, the barking Anubis, or the Dog star. One hundred and thirty-three of these pedestals with the marks just mentioned are still in their places, but only two figures of the dog were recognizable when I was there; these, however, though much mutilated, were evidently Egyptian.

“There are also pedestals supporting the figures of the Sphinx. Two magnificent flights of steps, several hundred feet long, all of granite, exceedingly well finished, and still in their places, are the only remains of a magnificent temple. In an angle of this platform where the temple stood, is the present small church of Axum. This church is a mean, small building, very ill kept and full of pigeons’ dung.” It was near Axum that Bruce saw three soldiers cut from a living cow a steak for their midday meal.

In his account of their method of cutting the steak Bruce says, “The skin which had covered the flesh that was cut away was left intact, and was fastened to the corresponding part by little wooden skewers serving as pins. Whether they put anything between the skin and the wounded flesh I do not know, but they soon covered the wound with mud. They then forced the animal to rise, and drove it on before them, to furnish them, no doubt, with another meal when they should join their companions in the evening.”

From Tigré, Bruce passed into the province of Siré, which derives its name from its capital, a town considerably larger than Axum, but constantly a prey to putrid fevers. Near it flows the Takazzé, the ancient Siris, with its poisonous waters bordered by majestic trees.

In the province of Samen, situated amongst the unhealthy and broiling Waldubba Mountains, and where many monks had retired to pray and do penance, Bruce stayed only long enough to rest his beasts of burden, for the country was not only haunted by lions and hyenas, and infested by large black ants, which destroyed part of his baggage, but also torn with civil war; so that foreigners were anything but safe. This made him most anxious to reach Gondar, but when he arrived typhoid fever was raging fiercely. His knowledge of medicine was very useful to him, and procured him a situation under the governor, which was most advantageous to him, as it rendered him free to scour the country in all directions, at the head of a body of soldiers. By these means he acquired a mass of valuable information upon the government, manners, and customs of the country, and the chief events of its history, which combined to make his work the most important hitherto published about Abyssinia.

It was in the course of one of these excursions that Bruce discovered the sources of the Blue Nile, which he took to be the true Nile. Arrived at the church of St. Michael, at Geesh, where the river is only four paces wide, and some four inches deep, Bruce became convinced that its sources must be in the neighbourhood, although his guide assured him that he must cross a mountain before he found them. The traveller was not to be deceived.

"'Come! come!'" said Bruce, "'no more words. It is already late; lead me to Geesh and the sources of the Nile, and show me the mountain that separates us from it.' He then made me go round to the south of the church, and coming out of the grove of cedars surrounding it, 'This is the mountain,' he said, looking maliciously up into my face, 'that when you were on the other side of it, was between you and the fountains of the Nile; there is no other. Look at that green hillock in the centre of that marsh. It is there that the two fountains of the Nile are to be found. Geesh is at the top of the rock, where you see those very green trees. If you go to the fountains, pull off your shoes as you did the other day, for these people are all Pagans, and they believe in nothing that you believe, but only in the Nile, to which they pray every day as if it were God, as you perhaps invoke it yourself.' I took off my shoes, and rushed down the hill towards the little green island, which was about two hundred yards distant. The whole of the side of the hill was carpeted with flowers, the large roots of which protruded above the surface of the ground; and as I was looking down, and noticing that the skin was peeling off the bulbs, I had two very severe falls before I reached the edge of the marsh; but at last I approached the island with its green sod. It was in the form of an altar, and apparently of artificial construction. I was in rapture as I gazed upon the principal fountain which rises in the middle of it. It is easier to imagine than to describe what I felt at that moment, standing opposite the sources which had baffled the genius and courage of the most celebrated men for three thousand years."

Bruce's narrative contains many other curious observations, but we must now pass on to his account of Lake Tzana.

"Lake Tzana," according to his narrative, "is by far the largest sheet of water known in these regions. Its extent, however, has been greatly exaggerated. Its greatest breadth from Dingleber to Lamgue, i.e. from east to west, is thirty-five miles, but it decreases greatly at each end, and in some parts is not above ten miles broad. Its greatest length is forty-nine miles from north to south, measured from Bab-Baha to a point a trifle to the S.W.¼W. of the spot where the Nile, after flowing through the lake with an ever perceptible current, bends towards Dara in the Allata territory. In the dry season, from October to March, the lake decreases greatly; but when the rains have swollen the rivers, which unite at this place like the spokes of a wheel at the nave, the lake rises, and overflows a portion of the plain. If the Abyssinians, great liars at all times, are to be believed, there are forty-five islands in Lake Tzana; but this number may be safely reduced to eleven. The largest is named Dek, Daka, or Daga; the next in size are Halimoon, on the Gondar side of the lake, Briguida, on the Gorgora side, and Galila, beyond Briguida. All these islands were formerly used as prisons for Abyssinian chieftains, or as retreats by such as were dissatisfied at court, or wished to secure their valuables in troubled times."

And now having visited Abyssinia with Bruce, let us return to the north.

Some light was now being thrown upon the ancient civilization of Egypt. The archæological expedition of Pococke, Norden, Niebuhr, Volney, and Savary had been published in succession, and the Egyptian Society was at work upon the publication of its large and magnificent work. The number of travellers increased daily, and amongst others W. G. Browne determined to visit the land of the Pharaohs.

From his work we learn much alike of the monuments and ruins which make this country so interesting, and of the customs of its inhabitants. The portion of the work relating to Darfur is entirely new, no Europeans having previously explored it. Browne attained a high place among travellers by his discovery that the Bahr-el-Abiad is the true Nile, and because he endeavoured not indeed to discover its source, that he could scarcely hope to do, but to ascertain its latitude and course.

Arriving in Egypt upon the 10th of January, 1792, Browne set out upon his first expedition to Siwâh, and discovered, as Horneman did later, the oasis of Jupiter Ammon. He had little more opportunity than his successor for exploring the catacombs and ruins, where he saw many skulls and human remains.

“The ruins of Siwâh,” he says, “resembled too much those of Upper Egypt to leave any doubt that the buildings to which they belonged were built by the same race of men. The figures of Isis and Anubis are easily recognizable on them, and the proportions of their architectural works, though smaller, are the same as those of the Egyptian temples.

“The rocks I noticed in the neighbourhood of Siwâh were of the sandstone formation, bearing no relation whatever to the stones of these ruins; so that I should think that the materials for these buildings cannot have been obtained on the spot. The people of Siwâh have preserved no credible traditions respecting these objects. They merely imagined them to contain treasures, and to be frequented by demons.”

After leaving Siwâh, Browne made various excursions in Egypt, and then settled in Cairo, where he studied Arabic. He left this town upon the 10th of September, 1792, and visited in succession Kaw, Achmin, Gergeh, Dendera, Kazr, Thebes, Assoûan, Kosseir, Memphis, Suez, and Mount Sinai; then wishing to enter Abyssinia, but convinced that he could not do so by way of Massowah, he left Assiût for Darfur, with a Soudan caravan, in May, 1793. The caravan halted upon its way to Darfur at the different towns of Ainé, Dizeh, Charyeh, Bulak, Scheb, Selinceh, Leghéa, and Ber-el-Malha.

Being taken ill at Soueini, Browne was detained there, and only reached El-Fascher after a long delay. Here his annoyances and the exactions levied recommenced, and he could not succeed in obtaining an interview with the Sultan. He was forced to spend the winter at Cobbeh, awaiting his restoration to health, which only took place in the summer of 1794. This time of forced inaction was not, however, wasted by the traveller; he acquainted himself with the manners and dialects of Darfur. Upon the return of summer, Browne repaired to El-Fascher, and recommenced his applications for admittance to the Sultan. They were attended with the same unsuccessful results, until a crowning act of injustice at length procured for him the interview he had so long solicited in vain.

“I found,” he says, “the monarch Abd-el-Raschman seated on his throne under a lofty wooden canopy, of Syrian and Indian stuffs indiscriminately mixed. The floor in front of the throne was spread with small Turkey carpets. The meleks (officers of the court) were seated at some little distance off on the right and left, and behind them stood a line of guards, wearing caps ornamented in front with a small copper plate and a black ostrich feather. Each bore a spear in his right hand, and a shield of hippopotamus-hide on the left arm. Their only clothing was a cotton shirt, of the manufacture of the country. Behind the throne were fourteen or fifteen eunuchs, clothed in rich stuffs of various kinds and all manner of colours. The space in front was filled with petitioners and spectators, to the number of more than fifteen hundred. A kind of hired eulogist stood on the monarch’s left hand, crying out at the top of his voice during the whole ceremony, ‘See the buffalo, the son of a buffalo, the powerful Sultan Abd-el-Raschman El-rashid. May God protect thy life, O master, may God assist thee and render thee victorious.’”

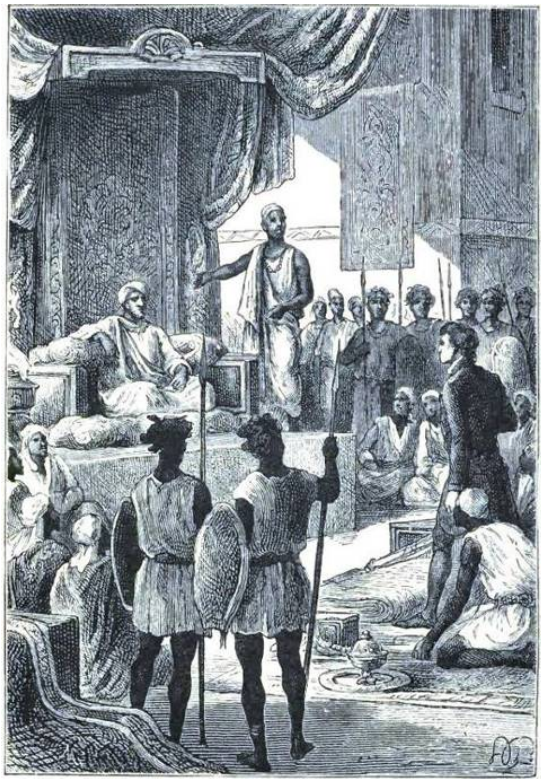

“I found the monarch seated on his throne.”

The Sultan promised justice to Browne, and put the matter into the hands of the meleks, but he only obtained restitution of a sixth of that of which he had been robbed.

The traveller had merely entered Darfur to cross it. He found it would be no easy task to leave it, and that in any case he must give up the idea of prosecuting his exploration; he says, —

“On the 11th of December, 1795, (after a delay of three months) I accompanied the chatib (one of the principal officers of the country) to the monarch’s presence. I shortly stated what I required, and the chatib seconded me, though not with the zeal that I might have wished. To my demand for permission to travel no answer was returned, and the iniquitous despot, who had received from me no less than the value of about 750 piastres in goods, condescended to give me twenty meagre oxen, worth about 120 piastres. The state of my purse would not permit me to refuse even this mean return, and I bade adieu to El-Fascher as I hoped for ever."

Browne was not able to leave Darfur till the spring of 1796, when he joined the caravan which was about to return to Egypt.

The town of Cobbeh, although not the resort of the merchants, must be considered the capital of Darfur. It is more than two miles in length, but is extremely narrow, each house stands in a field surrounded by a palisade, and between each there is a plot of fallow land.

The plain in which the town is situated runs W.S.W. to a distance of some twenty miles. Almost all the inhabitants are merchants, who trade with Egypt. Their number may be estimated at six thousand, the larger proportion being slaves. The entire population of Darfur cannot exceed two hundred thousand, but Browne only arrived at this calculation by estimating the number of recruits raised for the war with Kordofan.

"The inhabitants of Darfur," says the narrative, "are of various races. Some, chiefly fakeers or priests and traders, come from the west, and there are a good many Arabs, none of whom are permanent residents. They are of various tribes; the greater number lead a wandering life on the frontiers, where they pasture their camels, oxen, and horses. They are not in such complete dependence on the Sultan as always to contribute to his forces in war, or to pay him tribute in time of peace."

After the Arabs come the people of Zeghawa, which once formed a distinct kingdom, whose chief could put a thousand horsemen in the field. The Zeghawas speak a different dialect from the people of Für. We must also include the people of Bego or Dageou, who are now subject to Darfur, but are the issue of a tribe which formerly ruled the country.

The natives of Darfur are inured to hunger and thirst, but they indulge freely in an intoxicating liquor called *Bouzza* or *Merissé*. Thieving, lying, and dishonesty, with their accompanying vices, prevail largely among them.

“In buying and selling the parent glories in deceiving the son, and the son the parent, and atrocious frauds are committed in the name of God and of the Prophet.

“Polygamy, which it is well known is tolerated by their religion, is indulged in to excess by the people of Darfur. When Sultan Teraub went to war with Korodofan, he took in his retinue five hundred women, leaving as many in his palace. This may at first sight seem ridiculous, but it must be remembered that these women had to grind corn, draw water, dress food, and perform all the domestic work for a large number of people, so that there was plenty for them to do.”

Browne’s narrative contains many medical observations of interest, and gives valuable advice as to the mode of travelling in Africa, with particulars of the animals, fish, metals, and plants of Darfur. We do not give them here, because they do not contain anything of special interest for us.

CHAPTER III.

ASIA AND ITS INHABITANTS.

Witzen’s account of Tartary — China as described by the Jesuits and Father Du Halde — Macartney in China — Stay at Chu-Sang — Arrival at Nankin — Negotiations — Reception of the Embassy by the Emperor — Fêtes and ceremonies at Zhe Hol — Return to Pekin and Europe — Volney — Choiseul Gouffier — Le Chevalier in Troas — Olivier in Persia — A semi-Asiatic country — Pallas’s account of Russia.

At the end of the seventeenth century, a traveller named Nicolas Witzen had explored eastern and northern Tartary, and in 1692 published a curious narrative of his journey. This work, which was in Dutch, and was not translated into any other European language, did not win for its author the recognition he deserved. A second edition, illustrated with engravings which were meritorious rather from their fidelity to nature than their artistic merit, was issued in 1705, and in 1785 the remaining copies of this issue were collected, and appeared under a new title. But it attracted little notice, as by this time further, and more curious particulars had been obtained.

From the day that the Jesuits first entered the Celestial Empire, they had collected every possible fact with regard to the customs of this immense country, which previous to their stay there had been known only through the extravagant tales of Marco Polo. Although China is the country of stagnation, and customs and fashion always remain much the same in it, the many events which had taken place made it desirable to obtain more exact particulars of a nation with whom Europeans might possibly enter into advantageous friendly relations.

The Jesuits published the result of these investigations in the rare work entitled “Lettres Edifiantes,” which was revised and supplemented by a zealous member of their order, Father Du Halde. It would be useless to attempt any reproduction of this immense work, for which a volume would be required, and it is the less necessary as at this day we have fuller and more complete details of the country than are to be found even in the learned father’s book. To the Jesuits also belong the merit of many important astronomical observations, facts concerning natural history, and the compilation of maps, which were till quite lately authorities on remote districts of the country consulted with advantages.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Abbé Grosier, of the order of St. Louis du Louvre, published in an abridged form, a new description of China and Tartary. He made use of the work of his predecessor, Du Halde, and at the same time rectified and added to it. After an account of the fifteen provinces of China and Tartary, with the tributary States, such as Corea, Tonking, Cochin China, and Thibet, the author devotes several chapters to the population and natural history of China, whilst he reviews the government, religion, manners, literature, science, and art of the Chinese.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the English Government, being desirous of entering into commercial relations with China, sent an Envoy-extraordinary to that country named George Macartney.

This diplomatist had already visited the courts of Europe and Russia, had been governor of the English Antilles and Madras, and Governor-General of India.

He had acquired in the course of his travels in such varied climates, and amid such diverse peoples, a profound knowledge of human nature. His narrative of his voyages is rich in facts and observations calculated to give Europeans a true idea of the Chinese character.

Personal accounts of travel are always more interesting than anonymous ones.

Although the great *I* is generally hateful, it is not so in travels, where the assertion *I* have been there, *I* have done such or such a thing, carries weight, and gives interest to the narrative.

Macartney and his suite sailed in a squadron consisting of three vessels, the *Lion*, the *Hindustan*, and the *Jackal*, which left Portsmouth on the 26th September, 1792.

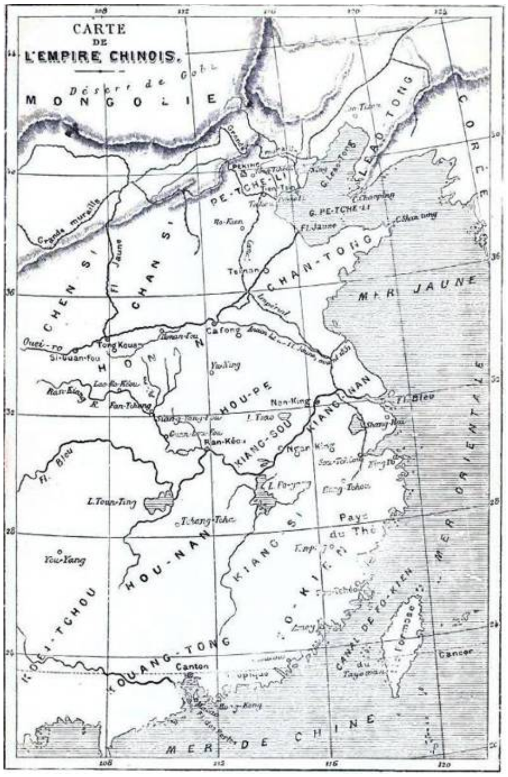
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L'EMPIRE CHINOIS.
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C. Chanping
G. PE-TCHE-LI
C. Shan tong
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Ho-Kien
CHEN-SI
CHAN-SI
Fl. Jaune
Tsinan
CHAN-TONG
MER JAUNE
Canal Impérial
Cafong
Ouei-ro
Tong Kouan
Si-Gan-fou
HO-NAN
Yu-Ning
Lao-Ho-Keou
Fan-Tcheng
HOU-PE
Nan-King
KIANG-NAN
Fl. Bleu
L. Tsao
KIANG-SOU
Han-Keou
Ngan-King
Fl. Bleu
L. Toun-Ting
L. Po-yang
Hang-Tcheou
Tchang-Tcha
Pays du Thé
You-Yang
HOU-NAN
KIANG-SI
FO-KIEN
MER ORIENTALE
KOEI-TCHOU
QUANG-TONG
Canton
Amoy
CANAL DE FO-KIEN
Formose
Cancer
Hong-Kong
MER DE CHINE
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Gravé par E. Morieu. 23, r. de Brea Paris.

After a few necessary delays at Rio-de-Janeiro, St. Paul and Amsterdam Islands, where some seal-hunters were seen, at Batavia, and Bantam, in Java, and at Poulo Condere, the vessels cast anchor off Turon (Han San) in Cochin China, a vast harbour, of which only a very bad chart was then in existence.

The arrival of the English was at first a cause of uneasiness to the natives of Cochin China. But when they were once informed of the motives which had brought the English to their country, they sent an ambassador of high rank on board with presents for Macartney, who was shortly afterwards invited to a banquet at the governor's, followed by a dramatic entertainment. During the short stay many notes were taken of the manners and customs of the people, unfortunately too hurriedly to admit of accuracy.

As soon as the sick had recovered and fresh provisions had been obtained the vessels set sail. A short stay was made at the Ladrone Islands, and the squadron then entered the Strait of Formosa, where it encountered stormy weather, and took refuge in Chusan Harbour. During this stay the map of this archipelago was rectified and an opportunity was taken to visit Tinghai, where the English excited as much curiosity as they felt themselves at the sight of the many things which were new to them.

Many of the facts which surprised them are familiar to us, the appearance of the houses, the markets and dress of the Chinese, the small feet of the women, and many other particulars to which we need not refer. We will only allude to the account of the method employed by them in cultivating dwarf trees.

“This stunted vegetation,” says Macartney, “seems to be highly appreciated in China, for specimens of it are found in all the larger houses. It is an art peculiar to the Chinese, and the gardener’s skill consists in knowing how to produce it. Independently of the satisfaction of triumphing over a difficulty, he has the advantage of introducing into rooms plants whose natural size would have precluded such a possibility.

“The following is the method employed in China for the production of dwarfed trees. The trunk of a tree of which it is desired to obtain a dwarfed specimen, is covered as nearly as possible where it separates into branches with clay or mould, over which is placed a linen or cotton covering constantly kept damp. This mould is sometimes left on for a whole year, and throughout that time the wood it covers throws out tender, root-like fibres. Then the portions of the trunk from which issue these fibres, with the branch immediately above them, are carefully separated from the tree and placed in fresh mould, where the shoots soon develope into real roots, whilst the branch forms the stem of a plant which is in a manner metamorphosed. This operation neither destroys nor alters the productive faculties of the branch which is separated from the parent tree. When it bears fruit or flowers it does so as plentifully as when it was upon the original stem. The extremities of the branches intended to be dwarfed are always pulled off, which precludes the possibility of their growing tall, and forces them to throw out shoots and lateral branches. These shoots are tied with wire, and assume the form the gardener chooses. When it is desired to give an aged appearance to the tree, it is constantly moistened with theriaca or treacle, which attracts to it multitudes of ants, who not content with devouring the sweetmeat, attack the bark of the tree, and eat it away in such a manner as to produce the desired effect.”

Upon leaving Chusan, the squadron entered the Yellow Sea, never before navigated by an European vessel. The river Hoang-Ho flows into it, and it is from the immense quantity of yellow mud brought down by it in its long and tortuous course that the sea derives its name.

The English vessels cast anchor in Ten-chou-Fou Bay, and thence entered the gulf of Pekin, and halted outside the bar of Pei-Ho. There being only three or four feet of water on this bar at low tide, the vessels could not cross it.

The mandarins appointed by the government to receive the English ambassador, arrived shortly after, bringing numerous presents; whilst the gifts intended for the emperor were placed in junks, and Macartney went on board a yacht which had been prepared for him.

The first town reached was Takoo, where Macartney received a visit from the viceroy of the province and the principal mandarin. Both were men of venerable and dignified aspect, polite and attentive, and entirely free from obsequiousness.

“It has been rightly said,” remarks Macartney, “that a people are as they are made, and the English had continual proof of this truth in the effect produced upon the Chinese character by the fear of the iron power that ruled them. Apart from this fear they were cheerful and confiding, but in the presence of their rulers they appeared most timid and embarrassed.”

In ascending the Pei-Ho towards Pekin, the course was retarded by the many windings of the river. The country through which they passed was highly cultivated, with houses and villages at intervals upon the banks of the river or inland, alternating with cemeteries and pyramids of bags of salt, producing a charming and ever varying landscape. When night approached, lanterns of every hue, fastened to the masts and rigging of the yachts, produced the fantastic effect of many-coloured lights.

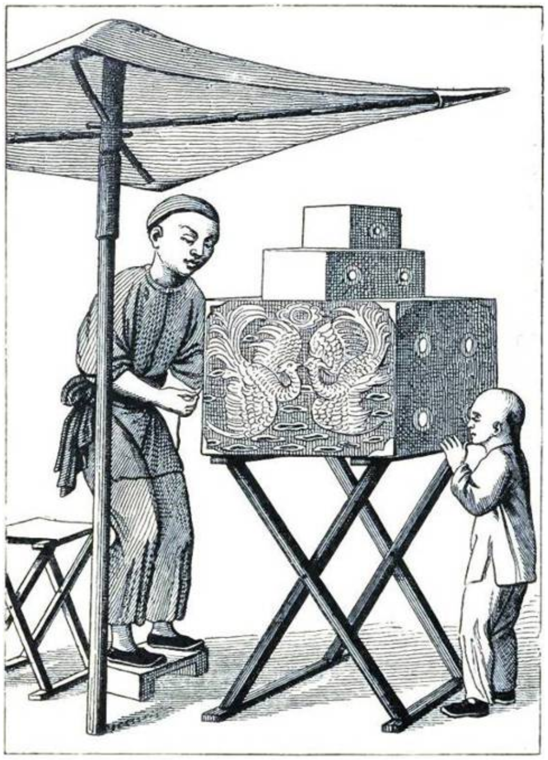

Chinese magic-lantern.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Tieng Tsing signifies “heavenly spot,” and the town owes this name to its agreeable climate and clear blue sky, and the fertility of its neighbourhood. In this place, the ambassador was received by the viceroy and a legate sent by the emperor. From them Macartney learned that the emperor was at his summer palace in Tartary, and that the anniversary of his birthday was to be celebrated there upon the 13th of September. The ambassador and his suite were therefore to go up by water as far as Tong Schou, about a dozen miles from Pekin, and thence proceed by land to Zhe Hol, where the emperor awaited them. The presents might be sent on afterwards. Although the first intimation was pleasant, the latter was singularly disagreeable to Macartney, for the presents consisted for the most part of delicate instruments, which had been taken to pieces for safety and packed separately. The legate would not consent to their being left where they would be free from danger of being disturbed. Macartney was obliged to obtain the intervention of the viceroy for the protection of these proofs of the genius and knowledge of Europe.

The cortège reached Tien Tsing, a town which appeared as long as London, and contained not less than seven hundred thousand inhabitants. A vast crowd assembled on the banks of the river to see the English pass, and the river swarmed with junks teeming with natives.

The houses in this city are built of blue with a few red bricks, some are two stories high, but that is unusual. Here the English saw the employment of those carriages with sails which had long been considered fabulous. They consist of two barrows made of bamboo, with one large wheel between them.

When there is not sufficient wind to propel the carriage, says the narrative, it is drawn by one man, while another pushes behind and keeps it steady. When the wind is favourable, the sail, which is a mat attached to two sticks placed upon either side of the carriage, renders the help of the man in front unnecessary.

The banks of the Pei-Ho are in many parts protected by breastworks of granite, to arrest inundation, and here and there dikes, also of granite, provided with a sluice, by means of which water is conveyed to the fields below. The country, although well cultivated, was often devastated by famines, following upon inundations, or resulting from the ravages of locusts.

Thus far, the cortège had been sailing through the immense alluvial plain of Pe-tche-Li. Not until the fourth day after leaving Tien Tsing was the blue outline of mountains perceived on the horizon. Pekin was now in sight; and on the 6th of August, 1793, the yachts anchored within two miles of the capital, and half a mile from Tong-Chow-Fow.

In order to leave the presents which could not be taken to Zhe Hol, at the palace, called "The garden of eternal spring," it was necessary to land. The inhabitants of Tong-Chow-Fow, who were already greatly excited by the appearance of the English, were still more amazed at the first sight of a negro servant. His skin, his jet black colour, his woolly hair, and all the distinguishing marks of his race, were absolutely novel in this part of China. The people could not remember seeing anything at all like him before. Some of them even doubted if he could be a human being at all, and the children cried out in fear that it was a black devil. But his good humour soon reconciled them to his appearance, and they became accustomed to look upon him without fear or displeasure.

The English were especially surprised at seeing upon a wall the sketch of a lunar eclipse which was to take place in a few days. They ascertained among other facts, that silver is an article of commerce with the Chinese, for they have no coined money, but use ingots bearing only a sign, indicative of their weight. The English were struck with the extraordinary resemblance between the religious ceremonies of Fo and those of the Christians.

Macartney states that certain authors maintain that the apostle Thomas visited China; while the Missionary Tremore contends, that this is merely a fiction palmed upon the Jesuits by the devil himself.

Ninety small carriages, forty-four wheelbarrows, more than two hundred horses, and over three thousand men, were employed in the transport of the presents of the British government to the emperor. Macartney and three of his suite accompanied the convoy in palanquins. An enormous crowd followed them. The English ambassador was greeted at the gates of Pekin by volleys of artillery. Once beyond the fortifications, he found himself in a wide unpaved street, with houses on either side, one or two stories high. Across the street extended a wooden triumphal arch in three partitions, each with a lofty and highly decorated roof.

The embassy afforded ample material for the tales which at this time filled the imagination of the people. It was declared that the presents brought for the emperor consisted of everything that was rare in other countries and unknown in China. It was gravely asserted that among the animals, there was an elephant not larger than a monkey, but as fierce as a lion, and a cock which was fed upon coal. Everything which came from England was supposed to differ from anything hitherto seen in Pekin, and to possess the very opposite qualities to those usual to it.

The wall of the imperial palace was at once recognized by its yellow colour. Through the gate were seen artificial hills, lakes and rivers, with small islets, and fantastic buildings amidst the trees.

At the end of a street terminating at the northern wall of the city, was a vast edifice of considerable height, which contained an enormous bell. The English explored the town in various directions, and on the whole were not favourably impressed. They concluded that a Chinaman visiting London, with its bridges and innumerable ships, its squares and monuments, would carry away a better idea of the importance of the capital of Great Britain than they could do of Pekin.

Upon their arrival at the palace, where the presents for the emperor were to be displayed, the governor discussed with Macartney the best way to arrange and display them. They were finally placed in a large and well-decorated hall, which at the time contained nothing but a throne and a few vases of old china.

It is unnecessary to enter upon the interminable negotiations which arose out of the resolve of the Chinese, that Macartney should prostrate himself before the emperor; which humiliating proposition they had prepared for by the inscription placed upon the yachts and carriages of the embassy, “Ambassador bringing tribute from England.”

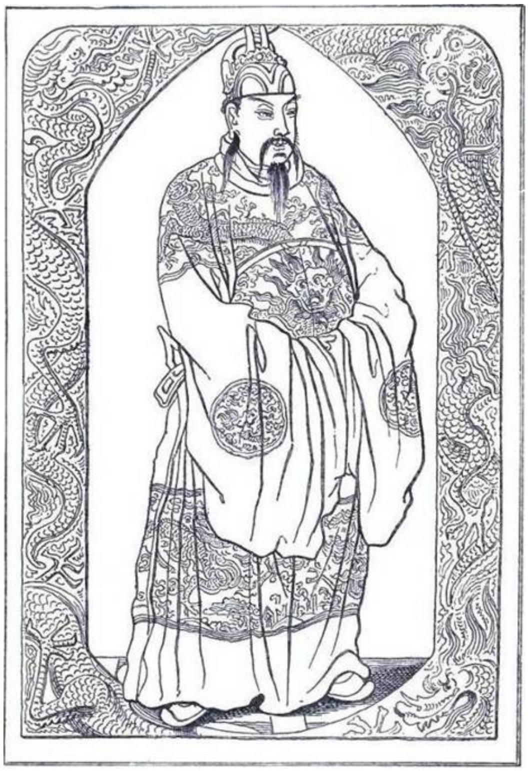

The Emperor of China.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

It is in Pekin that the field is situated which the emperor, in accordance with ancient custom, sows every spring. Here, too, is to be found the “Temple of the Earth,” to which the sovereign resorts at the summer solstice, to acknowledge the astral power which lightens the world, and to give thanks for its beneficent influence.

Pekin is merely the seat of the Imperial government in China, and has neither shipping, manufactures, nor trade.

Macartney computes the number of inhabitants at three millions. The one-storied houses in the town appear insufficient for so large a population, but a single house accommodates three generations. This density of the population is the result of the early ages at which marriages are contracted. These hasty unions are often brought about from prudential motives by the Chinese, the children, and especially the sons, being responsible for the care of their parents.

The embassy left Pekin on the 2nd of September, 1793, Macartney, travelling in a post-chaise, probably the first carriage of the kind which ever entered Tartary.

As the distance from Pekin increased, the road ascended and the soil became more sandy, and contained less and less clay and black earth. Shortly afterwards, vast plains, planted with tobacco, were crossed.

Macartney imagines tobacco to be indigenous, and not imported from America, and thinks that the habit of smoking was spontaneous in Asia.

The English soon noticed that as the soil became more and more barren, the population decreased. At the same time the Tartar element became larger and larger, and the difference between the manners of the Chinese and their conquerors was less marked.

Upon the fifth day of the journey, the far-famed Great Wall was seen.

“The first glance at this fortified wall,” says Macartney, “is enough to give an impression of an enterprise of surprising grandeur. It ascends the highest mountains to their very loftiest peaks, it goes down into the deepest valleys, crossing rivers on sustaining arches, and with its breadth often doubled and trebled to increase its strength, whilst at intervals of about a hundred paces rise towers or strong bastions. It is difficult to understand how the materials for this wall were brought to and used in places apparently inaccessible, and it is impossible sufficiently to admire the skill brought to bear upon the task. One of the loftiest mountains over which the wall passes has been ascertained to be no less than 5225 feet high.

“This fortification — for the simple word ‘wall’ gives no just idea of the wonderful structure — is said to be 1500 miles long, but it is not quite finished. The fifteen hundred miles was the extent of the frontier which separates colonized China from the various Tartar tribes. Such barriers as these would not suffice in modern times for nations at war.

“Many of the lesser works in the interior of this grand rampart have yielded to the effect of time, and fallen into ruins; others have been repaired; but the principal wall appears throughout to have been built with such care and skill as never to have needed repairs. It has now been preserved more than two thousand years, and appears as little susceptible of injury as the rocks which nature herself has planted between China and Tartary.”

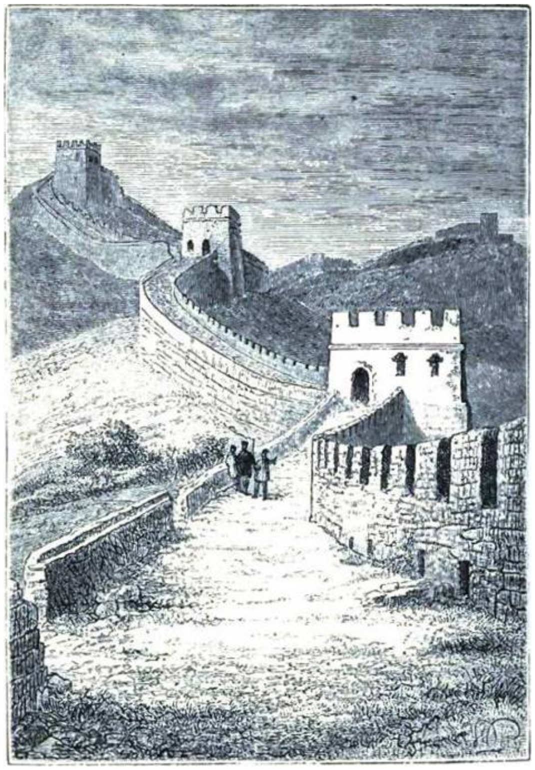

The great wall of China.

Beyond the wall nature seems to proclaim the entrance into a new country; the temperature is colder, the roads are more rugged, and the mountains are less wooded. The number of sufferers from goître in the Tartar valleys is very considerable, and, according to the estimate given by Dr. Gillan, physician to the embassy, comprises a sixth of the population. The portion of Tartary in which this malady rages is not unlike many of the cantons of Switzerland and Savoy.

The valley of Zhe Hol, where the emperor possesses a summer palace and garden, was at length reached. This residence is called “The abode of pleasant freshness,” and the park surrounding it is named the “Garden of innumerable trees.” The embassy was received with military honours, amid an immense crowd of people, many of whom were dressed in yellow. These were inferior lamas or monks of the order of Fo, to which the emperor also belonged.

The disputes as to prostration before the emperor begun in Pekin were continued here. At last Tchien Lung consented to content himself with the respectful salutation with which English nobles are accustomed to greet their own sovereign. The reception accordingly took place, with every imaginable pomp and ceremony.

The narrative says, —

“Shortly after daybreak the sound of many instruments, and the confused voices of distant crowds, announced the approach of the emperor. He soon appeared, issuing from behind a high mountain, bordered with trees, as if from a sacred grove, and preceded by a number of men who proclaimed his virtues and power in loud voices. He was seated in a chair carried by sixteen men; his guards, the officers of his household, standard and umbrella bearers, and musicians accompanied him. He was clothed in a robe of sombre-coloured silk, and wore a velvet cap, very similar in shape to that of Scotch mountaineers. A large pearl was conspicuous on his forehead, and was the only jewel or ornament he wore.”

Upon entering the tent, the emperor mounted the steps of the throne, which he alone is allowed to ascend. The first minister, Ho Choo-Tang, and two of the chief officers of his household, remained near, and never addressed him but in a kneeling position. When the princes of royal blood, the tributary princes, and state officers, were in their places, the president of the customs conducted Macartney within a foot of the left-hand side of the throne, which in the Chinese court is considered the place of honour. The ambassador was accompanied by the minister plenipotentiary, and followed by his page and interpreter.

Macartney, in accordance with the instructions given him by the president, raised above his head the magnificent square golden box studded with diamonds, which contained the King of England’s letter to the emperor. Then mounting the few steps leading to the throne, he bowed the knee, and, with a short prefatory compliment, presented the box to his Imperial Majesty. The Chinese monarch received it graciously, and said, as he placed it on one side, “that he experienced much satisfaction at the token of esteem and friendship offered by his Britannic Majesty in sending to him an embassy with a letter and rich gifts; that, for his part, he had the like friendly feelings towards the King of Great Britain, and he hoped the same harmony would always continue between their respective subjects.”

After a few moments of private conversation with the ambassador, the emperor presented gifts to him and to the minister plenipotentiary. They were then conducted to cushions, in front of which were tables covered with a number of vessels containing meat and fruits. The emperor also partook of these, and continued to overwhelm the ambassadors with expressions of regard and esteem, which had a great effect in raising the English in the estimation of the Chinese public. Macartney and his suite were later invited to visit the gardens of Zhe Hol. During their walk in the grounds, the English met the emperor, who stopped to receive their respectful salutations, and order his first minister, who was looked upon as little less than a vice-emperor, and several other grandees to accompany them.

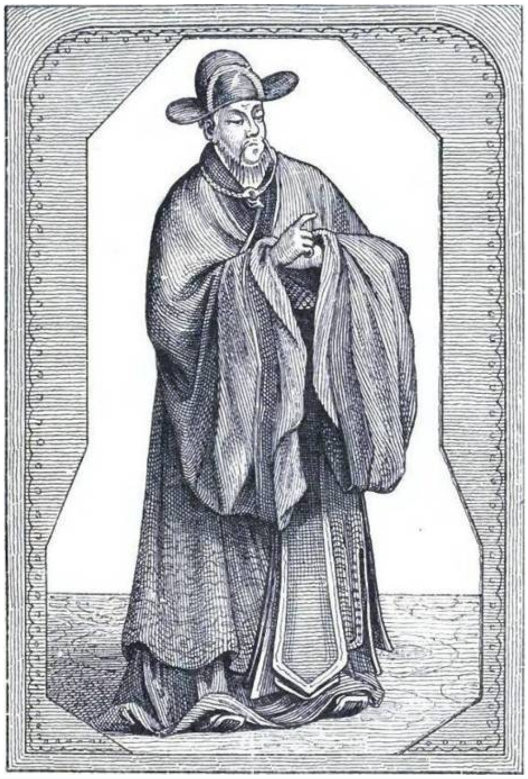

Chinese Prime Minister.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The Chinese conducted the English over a portion of the grounds laid out as pleasure-gardens, which formed only a small portion of the vast enclosure. The rest is sacred to the use of the women of the imperial family, and was as rigorously closed to the Chinese ministers as to the English embassy.

Macartney was then led through a fertile valley, in which there were many trees, chiefly willows of enormous size. Grass grows abundantly between the trees, and its luxuriance is not diminished by cattle or interfered with by mowing. Arriving upon the shores of an irregular lake, of vast extent, the whole party embarked in yachts, and proceeded to a bridge which is thrown across the narrowest part of the lake, and beyond which it appeared to stretch away indefinitely.

Upon the 17th of September Macartney and his suite were present at a ceremony which took place upon the anniversary of the emperor's birthday. Upon the morrow and following days splendid fêtes succeeded each other, Tchien Lung participating in them with great zest. Dancers on the tight-rope, tumblers, conjurors (of unrivalled skill), and wrestlers, performed in succession. The natives of various portions of the empire appeared in their distinctive costumes and exhibited the different productions of their provinces. Music and dancing were succeeded by fireworks, which were very effective, although they were let off in daylight.

The narrative says, —

"Several of the designs were novel to the English. One of them I will describe. A large box was raised to a great height, and the bottom being removed as if by accident, an immense number of paper lamps fell from it. When they left the box they were all neatly folded; but in falling they opened by degrees and sprung one out of the other. Each then assumed a regular form, and suddenly a beautifully coloured light appeared. The Chinese seemed to understand the art of shaping the fireworks at their fancy. On either side of the large boxes were smaller ones, which opened in a similar manner, letting fall burning torches, of different shapes, as brilliant as burnished copper, and flashing like lightning at each movement of the wind. The display ended with the eruption of an artificial volcano."

It is the usual custom for the Emperor of China to conclude his birthday festivities by hunting in the forests of Tartary; but in the present case advancing age rendered that diversion unwise, and his Majesty decided to return to Pekin, the English embassy being invited to precede him thither.

Macartney, however, felt that it was time to terminate his mission. In the first place, it was not customary for ambassadors to reside long at the Chinese court; and in the second, the fact that the Chinese emperor defrayed the expenses of the embassy naturally induced him to curtail his stay. In a short time he received from Tchien Lung the reply to the letter of the King of England, and the presents intended for the English monarch, as well as a number for the members of his suite. This Macartney rightly interpreted as his *congé*!

The English went back to Tong Chou Fou by way of the imperial canal. Upon this trip they saw the famous bird "Leutzé," fishing for its master. It is a species of cormorant, and is so well trained that it is unnecessary to place either a cord or ring round its neck to prevent it from swallowing any of its prey.

"Upon every boat or raft there are ten or twelve of these birds, ready to plunge the instant they receive a sign from their masters. It is curious to see them catch enormous fish, and carry them in their beaks."

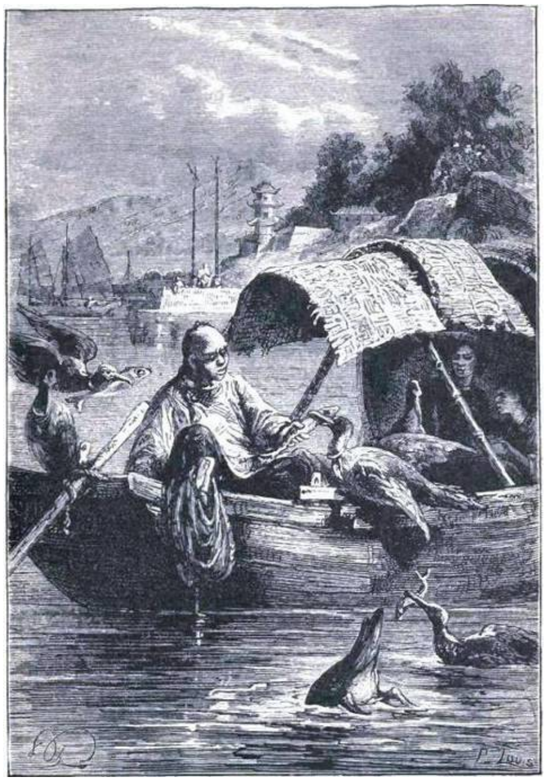

“The famous bird Leutzé.”

Macartney mentions a singular manner of catching wild ducks and other water-birds. Empty jars and calabashes are allowed to float upon the water for several days, until the birds are accustomed to the sight of them. A man then enters the water, places one of the jars upon his head, and advancing gently, seizes the feet of any bird which allows him to come near enough: he rapidly immerses it in the water to choke it, and then noiselessly continues his search until his bag is full.

The embassy visited Canton and Macao, and thence returned to England. We need not dwell upon the return voyage.

We must now consider that portion of Asia which may be called the interior. The first traveller to be noticed is Volney.

Every one knows, by repute at least, his book on Ruins; but his account of his adventures in Egypt and Syria far surpasses it. There is nothing exaggerated in the latter; it is written in a quiet, precise manner, and is one of the most instructive of books. The members of the Egyptian Expedition refer to it as containing exact statements as to climate, the productions of the soil, and the manners of the inhabitants.

Volney prepared himself most carefully for the journey, which was a great undertaking for him. He determined to leave nothing to chance, and upon reaching Syria he realized that he could not possibly acquire the knowledge of the country he desired unless he first made himself acquainted with the language of the people. He therefore retired to the monastery of Mar-Hannd, in Libiya, and devoted himself to the study of Arabic.

Later on, in order to learn something of the life led by the wandering tribes of the Arabian desert, he joined company with a sheik, and accustomed himself to the use of a lance, and to live on horseback, thus qualifying himself to accompany the tribes in their excursions. Under their protection he visited the ruins of Palmyra and Baalbec, cities of the dead, known to us only by name.

“His style of writing,” says La Beuve, “is free from exaggeration, and marked by singular exactness and propriety. When, for example, he wishes to illustrate the quality of the Egyptian soil, and in what respect it differs from that of Africa, he speaks of ‘this black, light, greasy earth,’ which is brought up and deposited by the Nile. When he wishes to describe the warm winds of the desert, with their dry heat, he compares them ‘to the impression which one receives upon opening a fierce oven to take out the bread;' according to his description, speaking of the fitful winds, he says they are not merely laden with fog, but gritty and powdery, and in reality full of fine dust, which penetrates everything; and of the sun, he says it 'presents to view but an obscured disk.'"

If such an expression may be used in speaking of a rigid statement of facts, Volney attained to true beauty of expression — to an actual physical beauty, so to speak, recalling the touch of Hippocrates in his "De Aere, Aquis et Locis." Although no geographical discoveries can be imputed to him, we must none the less recognize in him one of the first travellers who had a true conception of the importance of their task. His aim was always to give a true impression of the places he visited; and this in itself was no small merit, at a time when other explorers did not hesitate to enliven their narratives with imaginary details, with no recognition whatever of their true responsibility.

The Abbé Barthélemy, who in 1788 was to publish his "Voyage du jeune Anacharsis," was already exercising a good deal of influence on public taste, by his popularity in society and position as a man of science, and drawing special attention to Greece and the neighbouring countries. It was evidently whilst attending his lessons that De Choiseul imbibed his love for history and archæology.

Nominated ambassador at Constantinople, De Choiseul determined to profit by the leisure he enjoyed in travelling as an artist and archæologist through the Greece of Homer and Herodotus. Such a journey was the very thing to complete the education of the young ambassador, who was only twenty-four years of age, and if he knew himself, could not be said to have any acquaintance with the ways of the world.

Sensible of his shortcomings, he surrounded himself with learned and scientific men, amongst them the Abbé Barthélemy, the Greek scholar, Ansse de Villoison, the poet Delille, the sculptor Fauvel, and the painter Cassas. In fact, in his “Picturesque History of Greece” he himself merely plays the *rôle* of Mæcenas.

M. de Choiseul Gouffier engaged as private secretary a professor, the Abbé Jean-Baptiste Le Chevalier, who spoke Greek fluently. The latter, after a journey to London, where M. de Choiseul’s business detained him long enough for him to learn English, went to Italy, and was detained at Venice by severe illness for seven months. After this he joined M. de Choiseul Gouffier at Constantinople.

Le Chevalier occupied himself principally with the site of Troy. Well versed in the Iliad, he sought for, and believed he identified, the various localities mentioned in the Homeric poem.

His able geographical and historical book at once provoked plentiful criticism. Upon the one side learned men, such as Bryant, declared the discoveries made by Choiseul to be illusory, for the reason that Troy, and, as a matter of course, the Ten Years Siege, existed only in the imagination of the Greek poet; whilst others, and principally the English portion of his critics, adopted his conclusions. The whole question was almost forgotten, when the discoveries made quite recently by Schliemann reopened the discussion.

Guillaume-Antoine Olivier, who traversed the greater portion of the Western hemisphere, at the end of the last century, had a strange career. Employed by Berthier de Sauvigny to translate a statistical paper on Paris, he lost his patron and the payment for his labours in the first outburst of the Revolution. Wishing to employ his talent for natural history away from

Paris, he was nominated, by the minister Roland, to a mission to the distant and little-known portions of the Ottoman Empire. A naturalist, named Bruguère, was associated with him.

The two friends left Paris at the end of 1792, and were delayed for four months at Versailles, until a suitable ship was found for them.

They only reached Constantinople at the end of the following May, carrying letters relating to their mission to M. de Semonville. But this ambassador had been recalled, and his successor, M. de Sainte Croix had heard nothing of their undertaking. What was the best thing to do whilst awaiting the reply to the inquiries sent to Paris by M. de Sainte Croix?

The two friends could not remain inactive. They therefore decided to visit the shores of Asia Minor, and some islands in the Egyptian Archipelago.

The French minister had excellent reasons for not supplying them with much money, and their own resources being limited, they were unable to do more than make a flying visit to these interesting countries.

Upon their return to Constantinople they found a new ambassador, named Verninac, who had received instructions to send them to Persia, where they were to endeavour to awaken the sympathy of the government for France, and to induce it to declare war against Russia.

At this time the most deplorable anarchy reigned in Persia. Usurpers succeeded each other upon the throne, to the great detriment of the welfare of the inhabitants. War was going on in Khorassan at the time that Olivier and Bruguère arrived. An opportunity occurred for them to join the shah in a country as yet unvisited by any European; but unfortunately Bruguère was in such bad health that they were not only forced to lose the chance, but were detained for four months in an obscure village buried amongst the mountains.

In September, 1796, Mehemet returned to Teheran. His first act was to order a hundred Russian sailors whom he had taken prisoners on the Caspian Sea, to be put to death, and their limbs to be nailed outside his palace walls — a disgusting trophy worthy of the butcher tyrant.

The following year Mehemet Ali was assassinated, and his nephew, Fehtah-Ali Shah, succeeded him, after a short struggle.

It was difficult for Olivier to discharge his mission with this constant change of reigning sovereigns. He was forced to renew his negotiations with each succeeding prince. Finally, the travellers, realizing the impossibility of obtaining anything definite under such circumstances, returned to Europe, and left the question of alliance between France and Persia to a more favourable season. They stopped upon their homeward journey at Bagdad, Ispahan, Aleppo, Cyprus, and Constantinople.

Although this journey had been fruitless as regarded diplomacy, and had contributed no new discovery to geography, Cuvier, in his eulogy of Olivier, assures us that, so far as natural history was concerned, much had been achieved. This may be the better credited, as Olivier was elected to the Institute as the successor to Daubenton.

Cuvier, in academic style, says that the narrative of the voyage published, in three quarto volumes, was warmly received by the public.

“It has been said,” he continues, “that it might have been of greater interest if the censor had not eliminated certain portions; but allusions were found throughout the whole volume, which were inadmissible, as it does not do to say all we know, especially of Thamas Kouli Khan.

“M. Olivier had no greater regard for his assertions than for his fortune; he quietly omitted all that he was told to leave out, and restricted himself to a quiet and simple account of what he had seen.”

A journey from Persia to Russia is not difficult; and was less so in the eighteenth century than to-day. As a matter of fact, Russia only became an European power in the days of Peter the Great. Until the reign of that monarch she had been in every particular — manners, customs, and inhabitants — Asiatic. With Peter the Great and Catherine II. however, commerce revived, high roads were made, the navy was created, and the various tribes became united into one nation.

The empire was vast from the first, and conquest has added to its extent. Peter the Great ordered the compilation of charts, sent expeditions round the coast to collect particulars as to the climate, productions, and races of the different provinces of his empire; and at length he sent Behring upon the voyage which resulted in the discovery of the straits bearing his name.

The example of the great emperor was followed by his successor, Catherine II. She attracted learned men to her court, and corresponded with the savants of the whole world. She succeeded in impressing the nations with a favourable idea of her subjects. Interest and curiosity were awakened, and the eyes of Western Europe were fixed upon Russia. It became recognized that a great nation was arising, and many doubts were entertained as to the result upon European interests. Prussia had already changed the balance of power in Europe, by her victories under Frederick II.; Russia possessed resources of her own, not only in men, but in silver and riches of every kind — still unknown or untested.

Thus it came to pass that publications concerning that country possessed an attraction for politicians, and those interested in the welfare of their country, as well as for the scientific men to whom descriptions of manners and customs foreign to their experience were always welcome.

No work had hitherto excelled that of the naturalist Pallas, which was translated into French between 1788-1793. It was a narrative of a journey across several provinces of the Russian empire. The success of this publication was well deserved.

Peter Simon Pallas was a German naturalist, who had been summoned to St. Petersburg by Catherine II. in 1668, and elected by her a member of the Academy of Sciences. She understood the art of enlisting him in her service by her favours. Pallas, in acknowledgment of them, published his account of fossil remains in Siberia. England and France had just sent expeditions to observe the transit of Venus. Russia, not to be behindhand, despatched a party of learned men, of whom Pallas was one, to Siberia.

Seven astronomers and geometers, five naturalists, and a large number of pupils, made up the party, which was thoroughly to explore the whole of the vast territory.

For six whole years Pallas devoted himself to the successive explorations of Orenburg upon the Jaik, the rendezvous of the nomad tribes who wander upon the shores of the Caspian Sea; Gouriel, which is situated upon the borders of the great lake which is now drying up; the Ural Mountains, with their numberless iron-mines; Tobolsk, the capital of Siberia; the province of Koliwan, upon the northern slopes of the Atlas; Krasnojarsk, upon the Jenissei; and the immense lake of Bakali, and Daouria, on the frontiers of China. He also visited Astrakan; the Caucasus, with its varied and interesting inhabitants; and finally, he explored the Don, returning to St. Petersburg on the 30th of July, 1774.

It may well be believed that Pallas was no ordinary traveller. He was not merely a naturalist; he was interested in everything that affects humanity; geography, history, politics, commerce, religion, science, art, all occupied his attention; and it is impossible to read his narrative without admiring his enlightened patriotism, or without recognizing the penetration of the sovereign who understood the art of securing his services.

When his narrative was once arranged, written, and published, Pallas had no idea of contenting himself with the laurels he had gained. Work was his recreation, and he found occupation in assisting in the compilation of a map of Russia.

His natural inclinations led him to the study of botany, and by his works upon that subject he obtained a distinctive place among Russian naturalists.

One of his later undertakings was a description of Southern Russia, a physical and topographical account of the province of Taurius — a work which, originally published in French, was afterwards translated into English and German.

Delighted with this country, which he had visited in 1793-94, he desired to settle there. The empress bestowed some of the crown lands upon him, and he transported his family to Simpheropol.

Pallas profited by the opportunity to undertake a new journey in the northern provinces of the empire, the Steppes of the Volga, and the countries which border the Caspian Sea as far as the Caucasus. He then explored the Crimea. He had seen parts of the country twenty years before, and he now found great changes. Although he complains of the devastation of the forests, he commends the increase of agricultural districts, and the centres of industries which had been created. The Crimea is known to be considerably improved since that time — it is impossible to foresee what it may yet become.

Enthusiastic though he was at first in his admiration of this province, Pallas was exposed to every kind of treachery on the part of the Tartars. His wife died in the Crimea; and finally, disgusted with the country and its inhabitants, he returned to Breton to end his days. He died there on the 8th of September, 1811.

He left two important works, from which naturalists, geographers, statesmen, and merchants, were able to gather much trustworthy information upon countries then but little known, and the commodities and resources of which were destined to have a large influence over European markets.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO AMERICAS.

The western coast of America — Juan de Fuca and De Fonte — The three voyages of Behring and Tschirikow — Exploration of the straits of De Fuca — Survey of the Archipelago of New Georgia and of part of the American coast — Exploration of the interior of America — Samuel Hearn — Discovery of the Coppermine river — Mackenzie, and the river named after him — Fraser river — South America — Survey of the Amazon by Condamine — Journey of Humboldt and Bonpland — Teneriffe — The Guachero cavern — The “Llaños” — The Electric eels — The Amazon, Negro, and Orinoco rivers — The earth-eaters — Results of the journey — Humboldt’s second journey — The “Volcanitos,” or little volcanoes — The cascade at Tequendama — The bridge of Icononzo — Crossing the Brindisi on men’s backs — Pinto and Pinchincha — Ascent of Chimborazo — The Andes — Lima — The transit of Mercury — Exploration of Mexico — Puebla and Cofre de Perote — Return to Europe.

We have more than once had occasion to speak of expeditions for the survey of the coasts of America. We have told of the attempts of Fernando Cortes and of the voyages and explorations of Drake, Cook, La Perouse, and Marchand. It will be well now to go back for a time, and with Fleurieu sum up the series of voyages along the western coast of America, to the close of the eighteenth century.

NORTHERN ARTIC OCEAN
I. Melville
Banks Strait
Banks Iᵈ
Pᶜᵉ Albert Land
Wollaston Land
C. Colville
Fᵗ Mac Pherson
Mackenzie R.
Fᵗ Good Hope
Polar Circle Artic
Great Bear Lake
Fᵗ Franklin
Fᵗ Norman
Fᵗ Entreprise
R. Yuna or Yukon
ALASKA
Fᵗ Selkirk
Fᵗ Providence
Fᵗ Simpson
Great Slave Lake
Volcan
Mᵗ Sᵗ Elias
Fᵗ Résolution
Mᵗ Fairweather
Fᵗ Halkett
Lake Athabasca
Fᵗ Vermillon
Fᵗ Chipewayan
Fᵗ Lake Slave
Petit Slave Lake
Fᵗ de la Crosse
Prince of Wales Arch.
Fᵗ Babine
Queen Charlotte's Islands
Fᵗ Fraser
Fᵗ George
Moresby I.
Fᵗ Edmonton
Fᵗ Alexandre
Fᵗ Hope
I. Quadra and Vancouver
PACIFIC OCEAN
UNITED STATES
150
140
130

In 1537, Cortes with Francisco de Ulloa, discovered the huge peninsula of California, and sailed over the greater part of the long and narrow strait now known as the Vermilion Sea.

He was succeeded by Vasquez Coronado and Francisco Alarcon, who — the former by sea, and the latter by land — devoted themselves to seeking the channel which was erroneously supposed to connect the Atlantic and Pacific. They did not, however, penetrate beyond 36° N. lat.

Two years later, in 1542, the Portuguese Rodrique de Cabrillo, reached 44° N. lat. where the intense cold, sickness, want of provisions, and the bad state of his vessel, compelled him to turn back. He made no actual discovery, but he ascertained that, from Port Natividad to the furthest point reached by him, the coast-line was unbroken. The channel of communication seemed to recede before all explorers.

The little success met with appears to have discouraged the Spaniards, for at this time they retired from the ranks of the explorers. It was an Englishman, Drake, who, after having sailed along the western coast as far as the Straits of Magellan, and devastated the Spanish possessions, reached the forty-eighth degree, explored the whole coast, and, returning the same way, gave to the vast districts included within ten degrees the name of New Albion.

Next came, in 1592, the greatly fabulous voyage of Juan de Fuca, who claimed to have found the long-sought Strait of Anian, when he had but found the channel dividing Vancouver’s Island from the mainland.

In 1602 Viscaino laid the foundations of Port Monterey in California, and forty years later took place that much contested voyage of Admiral De Fuente, or De Fonte according as one reckons him a Spaniard or a Portuguese, which has been the text of so many learned discussions and ingenious suppositions. To him we owe the discovery of the Archipelago of St. Lazarus above Vancouver’s Island; but all that he says about the lakes and large towns he claims to have visited must be relegated to the realms of romance, as well as his assertion that he discovered a communication between the two oceans.

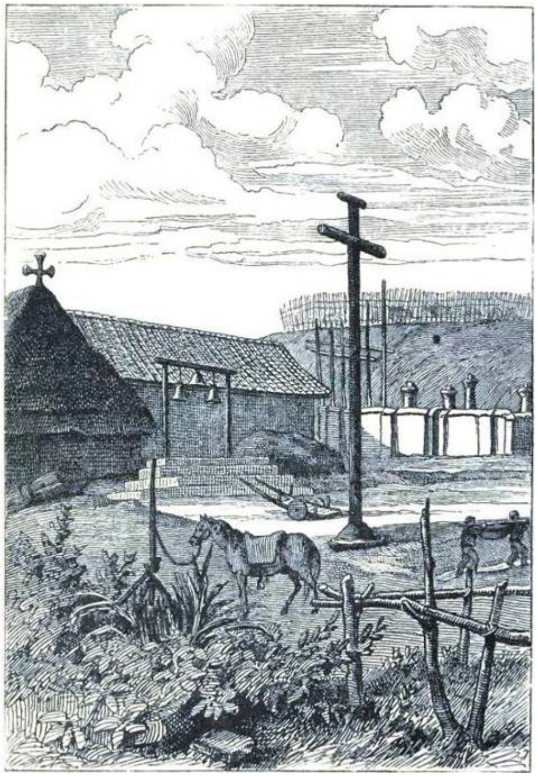

Port Monterey.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

In the eighteenth century the assertions of travellers were no longer blindly accepted. They were examined and sifted, those parts only being believed which accorded with the well authenticated accounts of others. Buache, Delisle, and above all Fleurieu, inaugurated the prolific literature of historical criticism, and we have every reason to be grateful to them.

The Russians, as we know, had greatly extended the field of their knowledge, and there was every reason to suppose that their hunters and Cossacks would soon reach America, if, as was then believed, the two continents were connected in the north. But from such unprofessional travellers no trustworthy scientific details could be expected.

A few years before his death the Emperor Peter I. drew up, with his own hands, a plan of an expedition, with instructions to its members, which he had long had in view, for ascertaining whether Asia and America are united, or separated by a strait.

The arsenal and forts of Kamtchatka being unable to supply the necessary men, stores, &c. captains, sailors, equipment, and provisions, had to be imported from Europe.

Vitus Behring, a Dane, and Alexis Tschirikow, a Russian, who had both given many a proof of skill and knowledge, were appointed to the command of the expedition, which consisted of two vessels built at Kamtchatka. They were not ready to put to sea until July 20th, 1720. Steering north-east along the coast of Asia, of which he never for a moment lost sight, Behring discovered, on the 15th August, in 67° 18' N. lat. a cape beyond which the coast stretched away westwards.

In this first voyage Behring did not apparently see the coast of America, though he probably passed through the strait to which posterity has given his name. The fabulous strait of Anian gave place to Behring Straits. A second voyage made by the same explorers the following year was without results.

Not until June 4th, 1741, were Behring and Tschirikow in a position to start again. This time they meant to bear to the east after reaching 50° N. lat. till they should come to the coast of America; but the two vessels were separated in a gale of wind on the 28th August, and were unable to find each other again throughout the trip. On the 18th July Behring discerned the

American continent in 58° 28’ N. lat. and the succeeding days were devoted to the survey of the vast bay between Capes St. Elias and St. Hermogenes.

Behring spent the whole of August in sailing about the islands known as the Schumagin archipelago, off the peninsula of Alaska; and after a struggle, lasting until the 24th September, with contrary winds, he sighted the most southerly cape of the peninsula, and discovered part of the Aleutian group.

Exhausted by long illness, however, the explorer was now no longer able to direct the course of his vessel, and could not prevent her from running aground on the little island bearing his name. There, on the 8th December, 1741, this brave man and skilful explorer perished miserably.

The remnant of his crew who survived the fatigues and privations of winter in this desolate spot, succeeded in making a large sloop of the remains of the vessel, in which they returned to Kamtchatka.

Meanwhile Tschirikow, after waiting for his superior officer until the 25th June, made land between 55° 56’ N. lat. where he lost two boats with their crews, without being able to find out what had become of them. Unable after this catastrophe to open communication with the natives, he went back to Kamtchatka.

The way was now open, and adventurers, merchants, and naval officers eagerly rushed in, directing their efforts carefully to the Aleutian Islands and the peninsula of Alaska.

The expeditions sent out by the English, and the progress made by the Russians, had, however, aroused the jealousy and anxiety of the Spanish, who feared lest their rivals should establish themselves in a country nominally belonging to Spain, though she owned not a single colony in it.

The Viceroy of Mexico now remembered the discovery of an excellent port by Viscaino, and resolved to found a “presidio” there. Two expeditions started simultaneously, the one by land, under Don Gaspar de Partola, the other by sea, consisting of two packets, the *San Carlos* and *San Antonio*, and after a year’s search found again the harbour of Monterey, alluded to by Viscaino.

After this expedition the Spanish continued the exploration of the Californian coast. The most celebrated voyages were those of Don Juan de Ayala and of La Bodega, which took place in 1775, and resulted in the discovery of Cape Engano and Guadalupe Bay. Next to these rank the expeditions of Arteaga and Maurelle.

We have already related what was done by Cook, La Pérouse, and Marchand, so we can pass on to say a few words on the expeditions of Vancouver. This officer, who had accompanied Cook on his second and third voyage, was naturally appointed to the command of the expedition sent out by the English government with a view to settling the disputes with the Spanish government as to Nootka Sound.

George Vancouver was commissioned to obtain from the Spanish authorities the formal cession of this great harbour, of such vast importance to the fur trade. He was then to survey the whole of the north-west coast, from 30° N. lat. to Cook’s River in 61° N. lat. Lastly, he was to give special attention to the Straits of De Fuca and the bay explored in 1749 by the *Washington*.

The two vessels, the *Discovery* of 340 tons, and the *Chatham* of 135 — the latter under the command of Captain Broughton — left Falmouth on the 1st of April, 1791. After touching at Teneriffe, Simon Bay, and the Cape of Good Hope, Vancouver steered south-wards, sighted St. Paul’s Island,

and sailed towards New Holland, between the routes taken by Dampier and Marion, and through latitudes which had not yet been traversed. On the 27th September was sighted part of the coast of New Holland, ending in abrupt and precipitous cliffs, to which the name of Cape Chatham was given. As many of his crew were down with dysentery, Vancouver decided to anchor in the first harbour he came to, to get water, wood, and above all provisions, of which he stood sorely in need. Port George III. was the first reached, where ducks, curlews, swans, fish, and oysters abounded; but no communication could be opened with the natives, although a recently abandoned village of some twenty huts was seen.

We need not follow Vancouver in his cruise along the south-west coast of Holland, as we shall learn nothing new from it.

On the 28th November Van Diemen’s Land was doubled, and on the 2nd December the coast of New Zealand was reached and anchor cast by the two vessels in Dusky Bay. Here Vancouver completed the survey left unfinished by Cook. A gale soon separated the *Discovery* from the *Chatham*, which was found again in Matavai Bay, Tahiti. During the voyage there from Dusky Bay, Vancouver discovered some rocky islands, which he called the Snares, and a large island named Oparra, whilst Captain Broughton had discovered Chatham Island, on the east of New Zealand. The incidents of the stay at Tahiti resemble those of Cook’s story too closely for repetition.

On the 24th January the two vessels started for the Sandwich Islands, and stopped for a short time off Owyhee, Waohoo, and Ottoway. Since the murder of Cook many changes had taken place in this archipelago. English and American vessels now sometimes visited it to take whales, or trade in furs, and their captains had given the natives a taste for brandy and fire-arms. Quarrels between the petty chiefs had become more frequent, the most complete anarchy prevailed everywhere, and the number of inhabitants was already greatly diminished.

BERING SEA
Baffin's Bay
Iceland
NORTH AMERICA
ATLANTIC OCEAN
G. of Mexico
Caribbean Sea
FIC OCEAN
EQUATOR
Senegal
SOUTH AMERICA
Lima
Cape Horn
Zealand

On the 17th March, 1792, Vancouver left the Sandwich Islands and steered for America, of which he soon sighted the part called by Drake New Albion. Here he almost immediately met Captain Grey, who was supposed to have penetrated, in the *Washington*, into De Fuca Strait, and discovered a vast sea. Grey at once disavowed the discoveries with which he was so generously credited, explaining that he had only sailed fifty miles up the strait, which runs from east to west till it reaches a spot where, according to some natives, it veers to the north and disappears.

Vancouver in his turn entered De Fuca Strait, and recognized Discovery Port, Admiralty Entry, Birch Bay, Desolation Sound, Johnston Strait, and

Broughton Archipelago. Before reaching the northern extremity of this long arm of the sea, he met two small Spanish vessels under the command of Quadra. The two captains compared notes, and gave their names to the chief island of the large group known collectively as New Georgia.

Vancouver next visited Nootka Sound and the Columbia River, whence he sailed to San Francisco, off which he anchored. It will be understood that it is impossible to follow the details of the minute survey of the vast stretch of coast between Cape Mendocino and Port Conclusion, in N. lat. 56° 37’, which required no less than three successive trips.

“Now,” says the great navigator, “that we have achieved the chief aim of the king in ordering this voyage, I flatter myself that our very detailed survey of the north-west coast of America will dispel all doubts, and do away with all erroneous opinions as to a north-west passage; surely no one will now believe in there being a communication between the North Pacific and the interior of the American continent in the part traversed by us.”

Leaving Nootka, to survey the coast of South America before returning to Europe, Vancouver touched at the small Cocoa-Nut Island — which, as we have already observed, little deserves its name — cast anchor off Valparaiso, doubled Cape Horn, took in water at St. Helena, and re-entered the Thames on the 12th September, 1795.

The fatigue incidental to this long expedition had so undermined the health of the explorer that he died in May, 1798, leaving the account of his voyage to be finished by his brother.

Throughout the arduous survey, occupying four years, of 900 miles of coast, the *Discovery* and *Chatham* lost but two men. It will be seen from this how apt a pupil of Cook the great navigator was; and we do not know whether most to admire in Vancouver his care for his sailors and humanity to the natives, or the wonderful nautical skill he displayed in this dangerous cruise.

While explorers thus succeeded each other on the western coast of America, colonists were not idle inland. Already established on the borders of the Atlantic, where a series of states had been founded from Florida to Canada, the white men were now rapidly forcing their way westwards. Trappers, and *coureurs des bois*, as the French hunters were called, had discovered vast tracts of land suitable for cultivation, and many English squatters had already taken root, not, however, without numerous conflicts with the original owners of the soil, whom they daily tried to drive into the interior. Emigrants were soon attracted in large numbers by the fertility of a virgin soil, and the more liberal constitution of the various states.

Their number increased to such an extent, that at the end of the seventeenth century the heirs of Lord Baltimore estimated the produce of the sale of their lands at three thousand pounds; and in the middle of the following century, 1750, the successors of William Penn also made a profit ten times as great as the original price of their property. Yet emigration was even then not sufficiently rapid, and convicts were introduced. Maryland numbered 1981 in 1750. Many scandalous abuses also resulted from the compulsory signing by new comers of agreements they did not understand.

Although the lands bought of the Indians were far from being all occupied, the English colonists continued to push their way inland, at the risk of encounters with the legitimate owners of the soil.

In the north the Hudson’s Bay Company, holding a monopoly of the fur trade, were always on the look-out for new hunting-grounds, for those originally explored were soon exhausted. Their trappers made their way far into the western wilds, and gained valuable information from the Indians whom they pressed into their service, and taught to get drunk. By this means the existence of a river flowing northwards, past some copper-mines, from which some natives brought fine specimens to Fort Prince of Wales, was ascertained. The company at once, i.e. in 1769, decided to send out an expedition, to the command of which they appointed Samuel Hearn.

For a journey to the Arctic regions, where provisions are difficult to obtain, and the cold is intense, a few well-seasoned men are required, who can endure the fatigue of an arduous march over snow, and bear up against hunger. Hearn took with him only two whites, and a few Indians on whom he could depend.

In spite of the great skill of the guides, who knew the country, and were familiar with the habits of the game it contained, provisions soon failed. Two hundred miles from Fort Prince of Wales the Indians abandoned Hearn and his two companions, who were obliged to retrace their steps.

The chief of the expedition, however, was a rough sailor, accustomed to privations, so he was not discouraged. If he had failed the first time, that was no reason why a second attempt should not succeed.

In March, 1770, Hearn started again to try and cross the unknown districts. This time he was alone with five Indians, for he had noticed that the inability of the whites to endure fatigue excited the contempt of the natives. He had penetrated 500 miles when the severity of the weather compelled him to wait for a less severe temperature. He had had a terrible experience. At one time to have, indeed, more game than can be eaten; but more often to have no food whatever, and be compelled for a week at a time to gnaw old leather, pick bones which had been thrown aside, or to seek, often in vain, for a few berries on the trees; and lastly, to endure fearful cold — such is the life of an explorer in these Arctic regions.

Hearn started once more in April, wandered about the woods until August, and had arranged to spend the winter with an Indian tribe which had received him well, when an accident which deprived him of his quadrant compelled him to continue his journey.

Privations, miseries, and disappointments, had not quenched the ardour of Hearn’s indomitable spirit. He started again on the 7th December, and penetrating westwards below the 60th parallel N. lat. he came to a river. Here he built a canoe, and went in it down the stream, which flowed into an innumerable series of large and small lakes. Finally, on the 13th July, 1771, he reached the Coppermine River. The Indians with him now declared that they had been for some weeks in the country of the Esquimaux, and that they meant to massacre all they should meet of that hated race.

An encounter very soon took place.

“Coming,” says Hearn, “upon a party of Esquimaux asleep in their tents, the Indians fell upon them suddenly, and I was compelled to witness the massacre of the poor creatures.”

Of twenty individuals, not one escaped the sanguinary rage of the Indians; and they put to death with indescribable tortures an old woman who had in the first instance eluded them.

“After this horrible carnage,” says Hearn, “we sat down on the grass, and made a good dinner off fresh salmon.”

Here the river widened considerably. Had Hearn arrived at its mouth? The water was still quite sweet. There were, however, signs of a tide on the shores, and a number of seals were disporting themselves in the water. A quantity of whale blubber was found in the tents of the Esquimaux. Everything in fact combined to prove that the sea was near. Hearn seized his telescope, and saw stretching before him a huge sheet of water, dotted with islands. There was no longer any doubt; it was the sea!

On the 30th June Hearn got back to the English posts, after an absence of no less than a year and five months.

The company recognized the immense service just rendered by Hearn, by appointing him Governor of Fort Prince of Wales. During his expedition to Hudson's Bay, La Perouse visited this post, and there found the journal of Samuel Hearn's expedition. The French navigator returned it, on condition that he would publish it. We do not know why its appearance in accordance with the promise given by the English traveller to the French sailor was delayed until 1795.

Not until the close of the eighteenth century did the immense chain of lakes, rivers, and portages become known, which, emanating from Lake Superior, receive all the waters flowing from the Rocky Mountains, and divert them to the Arctic Ocean. It was to the brothers Frobisher, fur traders, and to a Mr. Pond, who reached Athabasca, that their discovery is partially due.

Thanks to their efforts, travelling in these parts became less difficult. One explorer succeeded another, posts were established, and the country was opened to all comers. Soon after a rumour was spread of the discovery of a large river flowing in a north-westerly direction.

It was Alexander Mackenzie who gave his name to it. Starting on the 3rd June, 1789, from Fort Chippewyan, on the southern shores of the Lake of the Hills, accompanied by a few Canadians, and several Indians who had been with Samuel Hearn, he reached 67° 45’ N. lat. where he heard that the sea was not far off on the east, but that he was even nearer to it on the west. It was evident that he was quite close to the north-western extremity of America.

On the 12th July, Mackenzie reached a large sheet of shallow water covered with ice, which he could not believe to be the sea, though no land could be seen on the horizon. It was, however, the Northern Ocean, as he became assured when he saw the water rising, although the wind was not violent. The tide was coming in! The traveller then gained an island at a little distance from the shore, from which he saw several whales gambolling in the water. He therefore named the island, which is situated in N. lat. 69° 11’, Whale Island. On the 12th September the expedition safely returned to Fort Chippewyan.

Three years later Mackenzie, whose thirst for discovery was unslaked, ascended Peace River, which rises in the Rocky Mountains. In 1793, after forcing his way across this rugged chain, he made out on the other side the Tacoutche-Tesse River, which flows in a south-westerly direction. In the midst of dangers and privations more easily imagined than described, Mackenzie descended this river to its mouth, below Prince of Wales Islands. There, he wrote with a mixture of grease and vermilion, the following laconic but eloquent inscription on a wall of rock: “Alexander Mackenzie, come from Canada overland, July 22nd, 1793.” On the 24th August he re-entered Fort Chippewyan.

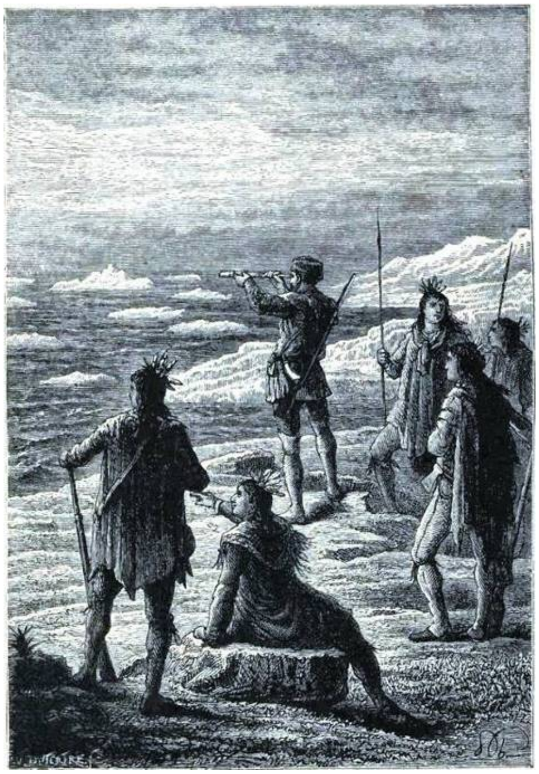

Mackenzie’s first view of the North Pacific Ocean.

In South America no scientific expedition took place during the first half of the eighteenth century. We have now only to speak of Condamine. We have already told of his discoveries in America, explaining how when the work was done he had allowed Bougner to return to Europe, and left Jussieu to continue the collection of unknown plants and animals which was to enrich science, whilst he himself went down the Amazon to its Mouth.

“Condamine,” says Maury in his “Histoire de l’Académie des Sciences,” “may be called the Humboldt of the eighteenth century. An intellectual and scientific man, he gave proof in this memorable expedition of an heroic devotion to the progress of knowledge. The funds granted to him by the king for his expedition were not sufficient; he added 100,000 livres from his private purse; and the fatigue and suffering he underwent led to the loss of his ears and legs. The victim of his enthusiasm for science, on his return home he met with nothing but ridicule and sarcasm from a public who could not understand a martyr who aimed at winning anything but Heaven. In him was recognized, not the indefatigable explorer who had braved so many dangers, but the infirm and deaf M. de Condamine, who always held his ear-trumpet in his hand. Content, however, with the recognition of his fellow-savants, to which Buffon gave such eloquent expression in his reply to the address at his reception at the French Academy, Condamine consoled himself by composing songs; and maintained until his death, which was hastened by all he had undergone, the zeal for information on all subjects, even torture, which led him to question the executioner on the scaffold of Damiens."

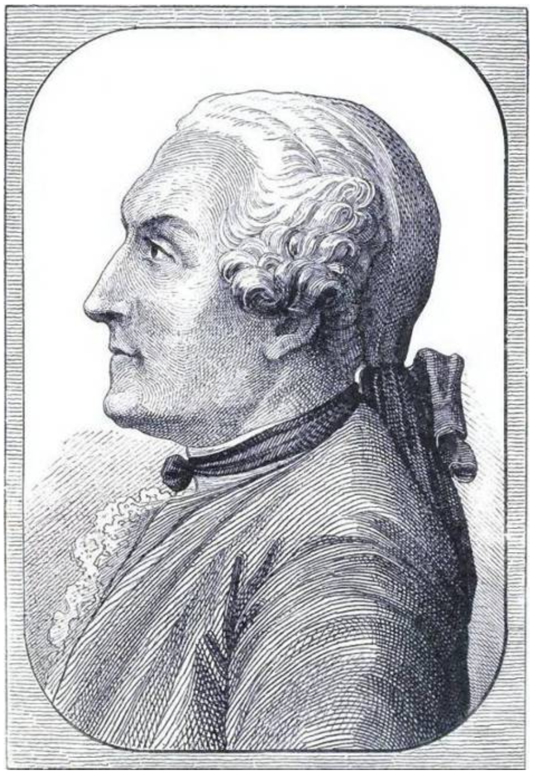

Portrait of Condamine.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Few travellers before Condamine had had an opportunity of penetrating into Brazil. The learned explorer hoped, therefore, to render his journey useful by making a map of the course of the river, and putting down all his observations on the singular costumes worn by the natives of that little frequented country.

After Orellana, whose adventurous trip we have related, Pedro de Ursua was sent in 1559 by the Viceroy of Peru to seek for Lake Parima and the El Dorado. He was murdered by a rebel soldier, who committed all manner of outrages on his way down the river, and finished his course by being abandoned on Trinity Island.

Efforts of this kind did not throw much light on the course of the river. The Portuguese were more fortunate. In 1636 and 1637 Pedro Texeira with forty-seven canoes, and a large number of Spaniards and Indians, followed the Amazon as far as the junction of its tributary the Napo, and then ascended, first it, and afterwards the Coca, to within thirty miles of Quito, which he reached with a few men.

The map drawn up by Sanson after this trip, and as a matter of course copied by all geographers, was extremely defective, and until 1717 there was no other. At that time the copy of a map drawn up by Father Fritz, a German missionary, came out in Vol. xii. of the “Lettres Édifiantes,” a valuable publication, containing a multitude of interesting historical and geographical facts. In this map it was shown that the Napo is not the true source of the Amazon, and that the latter, under the name of the Marañon, issues from Lake Guanuco, thirty leagues east of Lima. The lower portion of the course of the river was badly drawn, as Father Fritz was too ill when he went down it to observe closely.

Leaving Tarqui, five leagues from Cuenca, on the 11th May, 1743, Condamine passed Zaruma, a town once famous for its gold-mines, and having crossed several rivers on the hanging bridges, which look like huge hammocks slung from one side to the other, reached Loxa, four degrees from the line, and 400 fathoms lower than Quito. Here he noticed a remarkable difference of temperature, and found the mountains to be mere hills compared with those of Quito.

Between Loxa and Jaen de Bracamoros the last buttresses of the Andes are crossed. In this district rain falls every day throughout the year, so that a long stay cannot be made there. The whole country has declined greatly from its former prosperity. Loyola, Valladolid, Jaen, and the greater number of the Peruvian towns at a distance from the sea, and the main road between Carthagena and Lima, were in Condamine’s time little more than hamlets. Yet forests of cocoa-nut trees grow all around Jaen, the natives thinking no more of them than they do of the gold dust brought down by their rivers.

Condamine embarked on the Chincipe, wider here than the Seine at Paris, and went down it as far as its junction with the Marañon, beyond which the latter river becomes navigable, although its course is broken by a number of falls and rapids, and in many places narrows till it is but twenty fathoms wide. The most celebrated of these narrows is the *pongo*, or gate, of Manseriche, in the heart of the Cordillera, where the Amazon has hewn for itself a bed only fifty-five fathoms wide, with all but perpendicular sides.

Condamine, attended only by a single negro, met with an almost unparalleled adventure on a raft in this pongo.

“The stream,” he says, “the height of which had diminished twenty-five feet in thirty-six hours, continued to decrease in volume. In the middle of the night, part of a large branch of a tree caught between the woodwork of my boat, penetrating further and further as the latter sunk with the water, so that if I had not been awake and on guard at the time, I should have found myself hanging from a tree, on my raft. The least of the evils threatening me would have been the loss of my journals and note-books, the fruit of eight years of work. Fortunately, I eventually found means to free my raft, and float it again.”

In the midst of the woods near the ruined town of Santiago, where Condamine arrived on the 10th July, lived the Xibaro Indians, who had been for a century in revolt against the Spaniards, who tried to force them to labour in the gold-mines.

Beyond the pongo of Manseriche a new world was entered, a perfect ocean of fresh water — a labyrinth of lakes, rivers, and channels, set in an impenetrable forest. Although he had lived in the open air for more than seven years, Condamine was struck dumb by this novel spectacle of water and trees only, with nothing else besides. Leaving Borja on the 14th July, the traveller soon passed the mouth of the Morona, which comes down from the volcano of Sangay, the ashes from which are sometimes flung beyond Guayaquil. He next passed the three mouths of the Pastaca, a river at this time so much swollen that the width of no one of its mouths could be estimated.

On the 19th of the same month Condamine reached Laguna, where Pedro Maldonado, governor of the province of Esmeraldas, who had come down the Pastaca, had been waiting for him for six weeks. At this time Laguna was a large community, of some thousand Indians capable of bearing arms, who recognized the authority of the missionaries of the different tribes.

“In making a map of the course of the Amazon,” says Condamine, “I provided myself with a resource against the *ennui* of a quiet voyage with nothing to break the monotony of the scenery, though that scenery was new to me. My attention was continually on the strain as, compass and watch in hand, I noted the deflexions in the course of the river, the time occupied in passing from one bend to another, the variations in the breadth of its bed and in that of the mouths of its tributaries, the angle formed by the latter at the confluence, the position and size of the islands, and above all the rate of the current and that of the canoe. Now on land and now in the canoe, employing various modes of measurement, which it would be superfluous to explain here, every instant was occupied. I often sounded, and measured geometrically the breadth of the river and that of its tributaries. I took the height of the sun at the meridian every day, and I noted its amplitude at its rising and setting, wherever I went.”

On the 25th July, after having passed the Tigre River, Condamine came to a new mission station, that of a tribe called Yameos, recently rescued from the woods by the Fathers. Their language is difficult to learn, and their mode of pronouncing it extraordinary. Some of their words are nine or ten syllables long, and yet they can only count up to three. They use a kind of pea-shooter with great skill, firing from it small arrows tipped with a poison which causes instantaneous death.

The following day the explorer passed the mouth of the Ucayale, one of the most important of the tributaries of the Marañon, and which might even be its source. Beyond it the main stream widens sensibly.

Condamine reached on the 27th the mission station of the Omaguas, formerly a powerful nation, whose dwelling extended along the banks of the Amazon for a distance of 200 leagues below the Napo. Originally strangers in the land, they are supposed to have come down some river rising in Granada, and to have fled from the Spanish yoke. The word Omagua means flat-head in Peruvian, and these people have the singular custom of squeezing the foreheads of new-born babies between two flat pieces of wood, to make them, as they say, resemble the full moon. They also use two curious plants, the floripondio and the curupa, which makes them drunk for twenty-four hours, and causes very wonderful dreams. So that opium and hatchich have their counterparts in Peru.

Cinchona, ipecacuanha, simaruba, sarsaparilla, guaiacum, cocoa, and vanilla grow on the banks of the Marañon, as does also a kind of india-rubber, of which the natives make bottles, boots, and syringes, which, according to Condamine, require no piston. They are of the shape of hollow pears, and are pierced at the end with a little hole, into which a pipe is fitted. This contrivance is much used by the Omaguas; and when a fête is given, the host, as a matter of politeness, always presents one to each of his guests, who use them before any ceremonial banquet.

Changing boats at San Joaquin, Condamine arrived at the mouth of Napo in time to witness, during the night of the 31st July or the 1st August, the emersion of the first satellite of Jupiter, so that he was able to determine exactly the latitude and longitude of the spot — a valuable observation, from which all other positions on the journey could be calculated.

Pevas, which was reached the next day, is the last of the Spanish missions on the Marañon. The Indians collected there were neither all of the same race nor all converts to Christianity. They still wore bone ornaments in the nostrils and the lips, and had their cheeks riddled with holes, in which were fixed the feathers of birds of every colour.

St. Paul is the first Portuguese mission. There the river is no less than 900 fathoms wide, and often rises in violent storms. The traveller was agreeably surprised to find the Indian women possessed of pet birds, locks, iron keys, needles, looking-glasses, and other European utensils, procured at Para in exchange for cocoa. The native canoes are much more convenient than those used by the Indians of the Spanish possessions. They are in fact regular little brigantines, sixty feet long by seven wide, manned by forty oarsmen.

Between St. Paul and Coari several large and beautiful rivers flow into the Amazon. On the south the Yutay, Yuruca, Tefé, and Coari; on the north the Putumayo and Yupura. On the shores of the last-named river lives a cannibal race. Here Texeira set up a barrier, on the 26th June, 1639, which was to mark the frontier between the district in which the Brazilian and Peruvian languages respectively were to be used in dealing with the Indians.

Purus River and the Rio Negro, connecting the Orinoco with the Amazon, the banks dotted with Portuguese missions under the direction of the monks of Mount Carmel, were successively surveyed. The first reliable information on the important geographical fact of the communication between the two great rivers, is to be found in the works of Condamine, and his sagacious comments on the journeys of the missionaries who preceded him. It was in these latitudes that the golden lake of Parimé and the fabulous town of Manoa del Dorado are said to have been situated. Here, too, lived the Manaos Indians, who so long resisted the Portuguese.

Now were passed successively the mouth of the Madera River — so called on account of the quantity of timber which drifts down from it, the port of Pauxis — beyond which the Marañon takes the name of the Amazon, and where the tide begins to be felt, although the sea is more than 200 miles distant — and the fortress of Topayos, at the mouth of a river coming down from the mines of Brazil, on the borders of which live the Tupinambas.

Not until September did the mountains come in sight on the north — quite a novel spectacle, since for two months Condamine had not seen a single hill. They were the first buttresses of the Guiana chain.

On the 6th September, opposite Fort Paru, Condamine left the Amazon, and passed by a natural canal to the Xingu River, called by Father D'Acunha the Paramaribo. The port of Curupa was then reached, and lastly Para, a large town, with regular streets and houses of rough or hewn stone. To complete his map, the explorer was obliged to visit the mouth of the Amazon, where he embarked for Cayenne, arriving there on the 20th February, 1774.

This long voyage had the most important results. For the first time the course of the Amazon had been laid down in a thoroughly scientific manner, and the connexion between it and the Orinoco ascertained. Moreover Condamine had collected a vast number of interesting observations on natural history, physical geography, astronomy, and the new science of anthropology, then in its earliest infancy.

We have now to relate the travels of a man who recognized, better than any one else had done, the connexion between geography and the other physical sciences. We allude to Alexander von Humboldt. To him is due the credit of having opened to travellers this fertile source of knowledge.

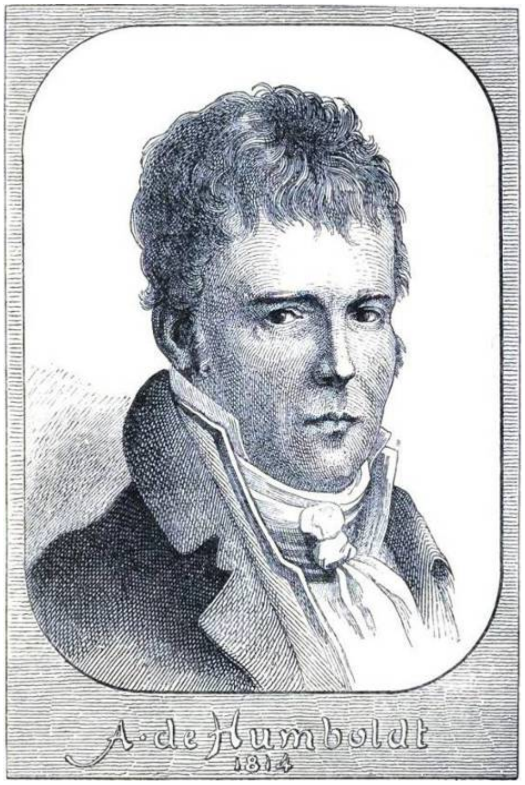

Portrait of Alex. de Humboldt.

(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Born at Berlin, in 1759, Humboldt’s earliest studies were carried on under Campe, the well-known editor of many volumes of travels. Endowed with a great taste for botany, Humboldt made friends at the university of Göttingen with Forster the younger, who had just made the tour of the world with Captain Cook. This friendship, and the enthusiastic accounts given of his adventures by Forster, probably did much to rouse in Humboldt a longing to travel. He took the lead in the study of geology, botany, chemistry, and animal magnetism; and to perfect himself in the various sciences, he visited

England, Holland, Italy, and Switzerland. In 1797, after the death of his mother, who objected to his leaving Europe, he went to Paris, where he became acquainted with Aimé Bonpland, a young botanist, with whom he at once agreed to go on several exploring expeditions.

It had been arranged that Humboldt should accompany Captain Baudin, but the delay in the starting of his expedition exhausted the young enthusiast’s patience, and he went to Marseilles with the intention of joining the French army in Egypt. For two whole months he waited for the sailing of the frigate which was to take him; and, weary of inaction, he went to Spain with his friend Bonpland, in the hope of obtaining permission to visit the Spanish possessions in America.

This was no easy matter, but Humboldt was a man of rare perseverance. He was thoroughly well-informed, he had first-rate introductions, and he was, moreover, already becoming known. In spite, therefore, of the extreme reluctance of the government, he was at last authorized to explore the Spanish colonies, and take any astronomical or geodesic observations he chose.

The two friends left Corunna on the 5th June, 1799, and reached the Canaries thirteen days later. Of course, as naturalists they were in duty bound not to land at Teneriffe without ascending the Peak.

“Scarcely any naturalist,” says Humboldt in a letter to La Metterie, “who, like myself, has passed through to the Indies, has had time to do more than go to the foot of this colossal volcano, and admire the delightful gardens of Orotava. Fortunately for me our frigate, the *Pizarro*, stopped for six days. I examined in detail the layers of which the peak of Teyde is composed. We slept in the moonlight at a height of 1200 fathoms. At two o’clock in the morning we started for the summit, where we arrived at eight o’clock, in spite of the violent wind, the great heat of the ground, which burnt our boots, and the intense cold of the atmosphere. I will tell you nothing about the magnificent view, which included the volcanic islands of Lancerote, Canaria, and Gomera, at our feet; the desert, twenty leagues square, strewn with pumice-stone and lava, and without insects or birds, separating us from thickets of laurel-trees and heaths; or of the vineyards studded with palms, banana, and dragon-trees, the roots of which are washed by the waves. We went into the very crater itself. It is not more than forty or sixty feet deep. The summit is 1904 fathoms above the sea-level, as estimated by Borda in a very careful geometric measurement... The crater of the Peak — that is to say, of the summit — has been inactive for several centuries, lava flowing from the sides only. The crater, however, provides an enormous quantity of sulphur and sulphate of iron."

In July, Humboldt and Bonpland arrived at Cumana, in that part of America known as Terra Firma. Here they spent some weeks in examining the traces left by the great earthquake of 1797. They then determined the position of Cumana, which was placed a degree and a half too far north on all the maps — an error due to the fact of the current bearing to the north near La Trinidad, having deceived all travellers. In December, 1799, Humboldt wrote from Caracas to the astronomer Lalande: —

"I have just completed an intensely interesting journey in the interior of Paria, in the Cordillera of Cocolar, Tumeri, and Guiri. I had two or three mules loaded with instruments, dried plants, &c. We penetrated to the Capuchin mission, which had never been visited by any naturalist. We discovered a great number of new plants, chiefly varieties of palms; and we are about to start for the Orinoco, and propose pushing on from it perhaps to San Carlos on the Rio Negro, beyond the equator. We have dried more than 1600 plants, and described more than 500 birds, picked up numberless shells and insects, and I have made some fifty drawings. I think that is pretty well in four months, considering the broiling heat of this zone."

During this first trip Humboldt visited the Chayma and Guarauno Missions. He also climbed to the summit of the Tumiriquiri, and went down into the Guacharo cavern, the entrance to which, framed as it is with the most luxuriant vegetation, is truly magnificent. From it issues a considerable river, and its dim recesses echo to the gloomy notes of birds. It is the Acheron of the Chayma Indians, for, according to their mythology and that of the natives of Orinoco, the souls of the dead go to this cavern. To go down into the Guacharo signifies in their language to die.

The Indians go into the Guacharo cavern once a year, in the middle of summer, and destroy the greater number of the nests in it with long poles. At this time many thousands of birds die a violent death, and the old inhabitants of the cave hover above the heads of the Indians with piercing cries, as if they would defend their broods.

The young birds which fall to the ground are opened on the spot. Their peritoneum is covered with a thick layer of fat, extending from the abdomen to the anus, and forming a kind of cushion between the legs. At the time called at Caripe the oil harvest, the Indians build themselves huts of palm leaves outside the cavern, and then light fires of brushwood, over which they hang clay pots filled with the fat of the young birds recently killed. This fat, known under the name of the Guacharo oil or butter, is half-liquid, transparent, without smell, and so pure that it can be kept a year without turning rancid.

Humboldt continues: "We passed fifteen days in the Caripe valley, situated at a height of 952 Castilian varas above the sea-level, and inhabited by naked Indians. We saw some black monkeys with red beards. We had the satisfaction of being treated with the greatest kindness by the Capuchin monks and the missionaries living amongst these semi-barbarous people.”

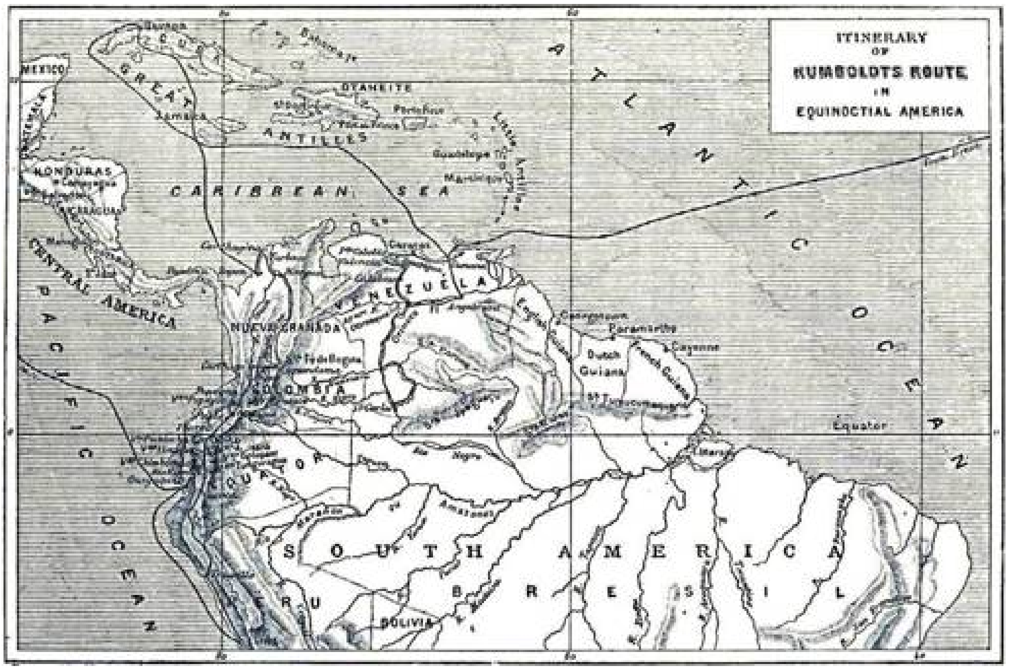
ITINERARY OF HUMBOLDTS ROUTE IN EQUINOCTIAL AMERICA
MEXICO
CUBA
GREAT
ANTILLES
Jamaica
HAYTI
Porto Rico
Guadaloupe
Martinique
Lesser Antilles
HONDURAS
NICARAGUA
CARIBBEAN SEA
Caracas
VENEZUELA
NUEVA GRANADA
COLOMBIA
CENTRAL AMERICA
PACIFIC OCEAN
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Paramaribo
Cayenne
Dutch Guiana
Equator
ECUADOR
Amazones
SOUTH AMERICA
BRESIL
PERU
BOLIVIA

Engraved by Morieu.

From the Caripe valley the two travellers went back to Cumana by way of the Santa Maria Mountains and the Catuaro missions, and on the 21st November they arrived — having come by sea — at Caracas, a town situated in the midst of a valley rich in cocoa, cotton, and coffee, yet with a European climate.

Humboldt turned his stay at Caracas to account by studying the light of the stars of the southern hemisphere, for he had noticed that several, notably the Altar, the Feet of the Centaur, and others, seemed to have changed since the time of La Caille.

At the same time he put his collections in order, despatching part of them to Europe, and most thoroughly examined some rocks, with a view to ascertaining of what materials the earth's crust was here composed.

After having explored the neighbourhood of Caracas, and ascended the Silla, which, although close to the town, had never been scaled by any native, Humboldt and Bonpland went to Valencia, along the shores of a lake called Tacarigua by the Indians, and exceeding in size that of Neufchâtel in Switzerland. Nothing could give any idea of the richness and variety of the vegetation. But the interest of the lake consists not only in its picturesque and romantic beauty; the gradual decrease in the volume of its waters attracted the attention of Humboldt, who attributed it to the reckless cutting down of the forests in its neighbourhood, resulting in the exhaustion of its sources.

Near this lake Humboldt received proof of the truth of the accounts he had heard of an extraordinary tree, the palo de la vaca, or cow-tree, which yields a balsamic and very nutritive milk, drawn off from incisions made in the bark.

The most arduous part of the trip began at Porto Caballo, at the entrance to the llanos, or perfectly flat plains stretching between the hills of the coast and the Orinoco valley.

"I am not sure," says Humboldt, "that the first sight of the llanos is not as surprising as that of the Andes."

Nothing in fact could be more striking than this sea of grass, from which whirls of dust rise up continually, although not a breath of wind is felt at Calabozo, in the centre of this vast plain. Humboldt first tested the power of the gymnotus, or electric eel, large numbers of which are met with in all the tributaries of the Orinoco. The Indians, who were afraid of exposing themselves to the electric discharge of these singular creatures, proposed sending some horses into the marsh containing them.

“The extraordinary noise made by the shoes of the horses,” says Humboldt, “made the eels come out of the ooze and prepare for battle. The yellowish livid gymnoti, resembling serpents, swam on the top of the water, and squeezed themselves under the bodies of the quadrupeds which had disturbed them. The struggle which ensued between animals so differently constituted presented a very striking spectacle. The Indians, armed with harpoons and long canes, surrounded the pond on every side, and even climbed into the trees, the branches of which stretched horizontally over the water. Their wild cries, as they brandished their long sticks, prevented the horses from running away and getting back to the shores of the pond; whilst the eels, driven mad by the noise, defended themselves by repeated discharges from their electric batteries. For a long time they appeared victorious, and some horses succumbed to the violence of the repeated shocks which they received upon their vital organs from every side. They were stunned, and sank beneath the water.

“Others, panting for breath, with manes erect, and wild eyes full of the keenest suffering, tried to fly from the scene, but the merciless Indians drove them back into the water. A very few, who succeeded in eluding the vigilance of the guards, regained the bank, stumbling at every step, and lay down upon the sand, exhausted with fatigue, every limb paralyzed from the electric shocks received from the eels.

“I never remember receiving a more terrible shock from a Leyden jar than I did from a gymnotus on which I accidentally trod just after it came out of the water.”

The astronomic position of Calabozo having been determined, Humboldt and Bonpland resumed their journey to the Orinoco. The Uriticu, with its numerous and ferocious crocodiles, and the Apure, one of the tributaries of the Orinoco, the banks of which are covered with a luxuriant vegetation such as is only met with in the tropics, were successively crossed or descended.

The latter stream is flanked on either side by thick hedges, with openings here and there, through which boars, tigers, and other wild animals, made their way to quench their thirst. When the shades of night shut in the forest, so silent by day, it resounds with the cries of birds and the howling or roaring of beasts of prey, vying with each other as to which shall make the most noise.

While the Uriticu is inhabited by fierce crocodiles, the Apure is the home of a small fish called the “carabito,” which attacks bathers with great fury, often biting out large pieces of flesh. It is only four or five inches long, but more formidable than the largest crocodile, and the waters it frequents are carefully avoided by the Indians, in spite of their fondness for bathing, and the relief it affords them, persecuted as they are by ants and mosquitoes.

Our travellers went down the Orinoco as far as the Temi, which is connected by a short portage with the Cano-Pimichino, a tributary of the Rio Negro.

The banks of the Temi, and the adjacent forests, are often inundated, and then the Indians make waterways, two or three feet wide, between the trees. Nothing could be more quaint or imposing than floating amongst the gigantic growths, beneath their green foliage. Sometimes, three or four hundred leagues inland, the traveller comes upon a troop of fresh-water dolphins, spouting up water and compressed air in the manner which has gained for them the name of blowers.

It took four days to transport the canoes from the Tenir to the Cano-Pimichino, as a path had to be cleared with axes.

The Pimichino flows into the Rio-Negro, which is in its turn a tributary of the Amazon.

Humboldt and Bonpland went down the Rio-Negro as far as San Carlos, and then up the Casiquiaro, an important branch of the Orinoco, which connects it with the Rio-Negro. The shores of the Casiquiaro are inhabited by the Ydapaminores, who live entirely on smoked ants.

Lastly, the travellers went up the Orinoco nearly to its source, at the foot of the Duida volcano, where their further progress was stopped by the hostility of the Guaharibos and the Guaica Indians, who were skilful marksmen with the bow and arrow. Here was discovered the famous El Dorado lake, with its floating islets of talc.

Thus was finally solved the problem of the junction of the Orinoco and the Marañon, which takes place on the borders of the Spanish and Portuguese territories, two degrees above the equator.

The two travellers then floated with the current down the Orinoco, traversing by this means five hundred leagues in twenty-five days, after which they halted for three weeks at Angostura, to tide over the time of the great heat, when fever is prevalent, regaining Cumana in October, 1800.

“My health,” says Humboldt, “was proof against the fatigue of a journey of more than 1300 leagues, but my poor comrade Bonpland, was, immediately on his return, seized with fever and sickness, which nearly proved fatal. A constitution of exceptional vigour is necessary to enable a traveller to bear the fatigue, privations, and interruptions of every kind with which he has to contend in these unhealthy districts, with impunity. We were constantly surrounded by voracious tigers and crocodiles, stung by venomous mosquitoes and ants, with no food for three months but water, bananas, fish, and tapioca, now crossing the territory of the earth-eating Otomaques, now wandering through the desolate regions below the equator, where not a human creature is seen for 130 leagues. Few indeed are those who survive such perils and such exertions, fewer still are those who, having surmounted them, have sufficient courage and strength to encounter them a second time.”

We have seen what an important geographical discovery rewarded the perseverance of the explorers who had completed the examination of the whole of the district north of the Amazon, between Popayan and the mountains of French Guiana. The results obtained in other branches of science were no less novel and important.

Humboldt had discovered that there exists amongst the Indians of the Upper Orinoco and the Rio Negro a race with extremely fair complexions, differing entirely from the natives of the coast. He also noticed the curious tribe of the Otomaques.

“These people,” he says “who disfigure their bodies with hideous paintings, eat nothing but loam for some three months, when the height of the Orinoco cuts them off from the turtles which form their ordinary food. Some monks say they mix earth with the fat of crocodiles’ tails, but this is a very false assertion. We saw provisions made of unadulterated earth, prepared only by slow roasting and moistening with water.”

Amongst the most curious of the discoveries made by Humboldt, we must mention that of the “curare,” the virulent poison which he saw manufactured by the Catarapeni and Maquiritare Indians, and a specimen of which he sent to the Institute with the “dapiche,” a variety of Indian rubber hitherto unknown, being the gum which exudes spontaneously from the roots of the trees known as “jacio” and “cucurma,” and dries underground.

Humboldt concluded his first journey by the exploration of the southern districts of San Domingo and Jamaica, and by a short stay in Cuba, where he and his companions made several experiments with a view to facilitating the making of sugar, surveyed the coast of the island, and took some astronomical observations.

These occupations were interrupted by the news of the starting of Captain Baudin, who, it was said, was to double Cape Horn and examine the coasts of Chili and Peru. Humboldt, who had promised to join the expedition, at once left Cuba, and crossed South America, arriving on the coast of Peru in time, as he thought, to receive the French navigator. Although Humboldt had throughout his long journey worked with a view to timing his arrival in the Peruvian capital to meet Baudin, it was only when he reached Quito that he ascertained that the new expedition was making for the Pacific by way of the Cape of Good Hope.

In May, 1801, Humboldt, still accompanied by the faithful Bonpland, embarked at Cartagena, whence he proposed going first to Santa Fé de Bogota, and then to the lofty plains of Quito. To avoid the great heat the travellers spent some time at the pretty village of Turbaco, situated on the heights overlooking the coast, where they made the necessary preparations for their journey. In one of their excursions in the neighbourhood they visited a very strange region, of which their Indian guides had often spoken under the name of *Volcanitos*.

This is a volcanic district, set in a forest of palms, and of the tree called “tola,” about two miles to the east of Turbaco. According to a legend, the country was at one time one vast collection of burning mountains, but the fire was quenched by a saint, who merely poured a few drops of holy water upon it.

In the centre of an extensive plain Humboldt came upon some twenty cones of greyish clay, about twenty-five feet high, the mouths of which were full of water. As the travellers approached a hollow sound was heard, succeeded in a few minutes by the escape of a great quantity of gas. According to the Indians these phenomena had recurred for many years.

Humboldt noticed that the gas which issues from these small volcanoes was a far purer azote than could then be obtained by chemical laboratories.

Santa Fé is situated in a valley 8600 feet above the sea-level. Shut in on every side by lofty mountains, this valley appears to have been formerly a large lake. The Rio-Bogota which receives all the waters of the valley, has forced a passage for itself near the Tequendama farm, on the south-west of Santa-Fé, beyond which it leaves the plain by a narrow channel and flows into the Magdalena basin. As a natural consequence, were this passage blocked, the whole plain of Bogota would be inundated and the ancient lake restored. There exists amongst the Indians a legend similar to that connected with Roland’s Pass in the Pyrenees, telling how one of their heroes split open the rocks and drained dry the valley of Bogota, after which, content with his exploit, he retired to the sacred town of Eraca, where he did penance for 2000 years, inflicting upon himself the greatest torture.

The cataract of Tequendama, although not the largest in the world, yet affords a very beautiful sight. When swollen by the addition of all the waters of the valley, the river, a little above the Falls, is 175 feet wide, but on entering the defile which appears to have been made by an earthquake, it is not more than forty feet in breadth. The abyss into which it flings itself, is no less than 600 feet deep. Above this vast precipice constantly rises a dense cloud of foam, which, falling again almost immediately, is said to contribute greatly to the fertility of the valley.

Nothing could be more striking than the contrast between the valley of the Rio Bogota and that of the Magdalena: the one with the climate and productions of Europe, the corn, the oaks and other trees of our native land; the other with palms, sugar-canes, and all the growths of the tropics.

One of the most interesting of the natural curiosities met with by our travellers on the trip, was the bridge of Jcononzo, which they crossed in September, 1801. At the bottom of one of the contracted ravines, known as “cañons,” peculiar to the Andes, a little stream, the Rio Suma Paz, has forced for itself a narrow channel. To cross this river would be impossible, had not nature herself provided two bridges, one above the other, which are justly considered marvels of the country.

Three blocks of rock detached from one of the mountains by the earthquake which produced this mighty fissure, have so fallen as to balance each other and form a natural arch, to which access is obtained by a path along the precipice. In the centre of this bridge there is an opening through which the traveller may gaze down into the infinite depth of the abyss, at the bottom of which rolls the torrent, its terrible roar mingled with the incessant screaming of thousands of birds. Sixty feet above this bridge is a second, fifty feet long by forty wide, and not more than eight feet thick in the middle. To serve as a parapet, the natives have made a slender balustrade of reeds along the edges of this second bridge, from which the traveller can obtain a fine view of the magnificent scene beneath him.

The heavy rain and bad roads made the journey to Quito very exhausting, but for all that Humboldt and Bonpland only halted there for an absolutely necessary rest, quickly pressing on for the Magdalena valley, and the magnificent forests clothing the sides of the Trinidiu in the Central Andes.

This mountain is considered one of the most difficult to cross in the whole chain. Even when the weather is favourable, twelve days, at least, are necessary for traversing the forests, in which not a human creature is seen and no food can be obtained. The highest point is 1200 feet above the sea-level, and the path leading up to it is in many parts only one foot wide. The traveller is generally carried, bound to a chair in a sitting posture, on the back of a native, as a porter carries a trunk.

“We preferred to go on foot,” says Humboldt in a letter to his brother, “and the weather being very fine we were only seventeen days in these solitudes, where not a trace is to be seen of any inhabitant. The night is passed in temporary huts made of the leaves of the heliconia, brought on purpose. On the western slopes of the Andes marshes have to be crossed, into which one sinks up to the knees; and the weather having changed when we reached them, it rained in torrents for the last few days. Our boots rotted on our feet, and we reached Carthago with naked and bleeding feet, but enriched with a fine collection of new plants.

“From Carthago we went to Popayan by way of Buga, crossing the fine Cauca valley, and skirting along the mountain of Choca, with the platina-mines for which it is famous.

“We spent October, 1801, at Popayan, whence we made excursions to the basaltic mountains of Julusuito and the craters of the Puracé volcano, which discharge hydro-sulphuric steam and porphyritic granite with a terrible noise...

“The greatest difficulties were met with in going from Popayan to Quito. We had to pass the Pasto Paramos, and that in the rainy season, which had now set in. A ‘paramo’ in the Andes is a district some 1700 or 2000 fathoms high, where vegetation ceases, and the cold is piercing.

“We went from Popayan to Almager and thence to Pasto, at the foot of a terrible volcano, by way of the fearful precipices forming the ascent to the summit of the Cordillera, thus avoiding the heat of the Patia valley, where one night will often bring on the fever known as the *Calentura de Patia*, lasting three or four months.”

The province of Pasto consists entirely of a frozen plateau almost too lofty for any vegetation to thrive on it, surrounded by volcanoes and sulphur-mines from which spiral columns of smoke are perpetually issuing. The inhabitants have no food but batatas, and when they run short they are obliged to live upon a little tree called “achupalla,” for which they have to contend with the bear of the Andes. After being wet through night and day for two months, and being all but drowned in a sudden flood, accompanied by an earthquake near the town of Jbarra, Humboldt and Bonpland arrived on the 6th January, 1801, at Quito, where they were received in cordial and princely style by the Marquis of Selva-Alegre.

Quito is a fine town, but the intense cold and the barren mountains surrounding it make it a gloomy place to stay in. Since the great earthquake of the 4th February, 1797, the temperature has considerably decreased, and Bouguer, who registered it at an average of from 15° to 16° would be surprised to find it varying from 4° to 10° Reaumur. Cotopaxi and Pinchincha, Antisana and Illinaza, the various craters of one subterranean fire, were all examined by the travellers, a fortnight being devoted to each.

Humboldt twice reached the edge of the Pinchincha crater, never before seen except by Condamine.

“I made my first trip,” he says, “accompanied only by an Indian. Condamine had approached the crater by the lower part of its edge which was covered with snow, and in this first attempt I followed his example. But we nearly perished. The Indian sank to the breast in a crevasse, and we found to our horror that we were walking on a bridge of frozen snow, for a little in advance of us there were some holes through which we could see the light. Without knowing it we were in fact on the vaults belonging to the crater itself. Startled, but not discouraged, I changed my plan. From the outer rim of the crater, flung as it were upon the abyss, rise three peaks, three rocks, which are not covered with snow, because the steam from the volcano prevents the water from freezing. I climbed upon one of these rocks and on the top of it found a stone attached on one side only to the rock and undermined beneath, so as to protrude like a balcony over the precipice. This stone was but about twelve feet long by six broad, and is terribly shaken by the frequent earthquakes, of which we counted eighteen in less than thirty minutes. To examine the depths of the crater thoroughly we lay on our faces, and I do not think imagination could conceive anything drearier, more gloomy, or more awful than what we saw. The crater consists of a circular hole nearly a league in circumference, the jagged edges of which are surrounded by snow. The interior is of pitchy blackness, but so vast is the gulf that the summits of several mountains situated in it can be made out at a depth of some 300 fathoms, so only fancy where their bases must be!

“I have no doubt that the bottom of the crater must be on a level with the town of Quito. Condamine found this volcano extinct and covered with snow, but we had to take the bad news to the inhabitants of the capital, that the neighbouring burning mountain is really active.”

Humboldt ascended the volcano of Antisana to a height of 2773 fathoms, but could go no further, as the cold was so intense that the blood started from the lips, eyes, and gums of the travellers. It was impossible to reach the crater of Cotopaxi.

On the 9th June, 1802, Humboldt, accompanied by Bonpland, started from Quito to examine Chimborazo and Tungurunga. The peak of the latter fell in during the earthquake of 1797, and Humboldt found its height to be but 2531 fathoms, whilst in Condamine’s time it was 2620 fathoms.

From Quito the travellers went to the Amazon by way of Lactacunga, Ambato and Rio-Bamba situated in the province laid waste by the earthquake of 1797, when 40,000 inhabitants were swallowed up by water and mud. Going down the Andes, Humboldt and his companions had an opportunity of admiring the remains of the Yega road, leading from Cusco to Assuay, and known as the Inca’s road. It was built entirely of hewn stones, and was very straight. It might have been taken for one of the best Roman roads. In the same neighbourhood are the ruins of a palace of the Inca Fupayupangi, described by Condamine in the minutes of the Berlin Academy.

After a stay of ten days at Cuença, Humboldt entered the province of Jaen, surveyed the Marañon as far as the Rio Napo, and with the aid of the astronomical observations he was able to make, supplemented Condamine’s map. On the 23rd October, 1802, Humboldt entered Lima, where he successfully observed the transit of Mercury.

After spending a month in that capital he started for Guayaquil, whence he went by sea to Acapulco in Spanish America.

The vast number of notes collected by Humboldt during the year he spent in Mexico, and which led to the publication of his Essay on Spanish America, would, after what we have said of his previous proceedings, be enough to prove, if proof were needed, what a passion he had for knowledge, how indomitable was his energy and how immense his power of work.

At one and the same time he was studying the antiquities and the history of Mexico, the character, customs, and language of its people, and taking observations in natural history, physical geography, chemistry, astronomy, and topography.

The Tasco, Moran, and Guanajuato mines, which yield a profit of several million piastres per annum, first attracted the attention of Humboldt, who had early studied geology. He then examined the Jerullo volcano, which, although situated in the centre of an immense plain thirty-six leagues from the sea, and more than forty from any volcano, discharged earth on the 29th September, 1759, and formed a mountain of cinders and clay 1700 feet high.

In Mexico the travellers were able to obtain everything necessary to the arrangement of the immense collections they had accumulated, to classify and compare the observations each had taken, and to prepare their geographical map for publication.

Finally, in January, 1804, they left Acapulco to examine the eastern slopes of the Cordilleras, and to take the dimensions of the two lofty Puebla volcanoes.

“Popocatepetl,” says Desborough Cooley, “is always active, although nothing but smoke and ashes have issued from its crater for centuries. It is not only 2000 feet higher than the loftiest mountains of Europe, but is also the loftiest mountain in Spanish America.” In spite of the great quantity of snow which had recently fallen, Humboldt accomplished the ascent of the Cofre, 1300 feet higher than the peak of Teneriffe, obtaining from its summit, an extensive and varied view, embracing the Puebla plain and the eastern slopes of the Mexican Cordilleras, clothed with thick forests of “liquidambar,” tree-ferns and sensitive plants. The travellers were able to make out the port of Vera Cruz, the castle of San Juan d’Ulloa and the sea-shore.

This mountain owes its name of Cofre to a naked rock of pyramidal form which rises like a tower from its summit at a height of 500 feet.

After this last trip Humboldt went down to Vera Cruz, and having fortunately escaped the yellow fever then decimating the population, he set sail for Cuba, where he had left the greater part of his collection, going thence to Philadelphia. There he remained a few weeks to make a cursory study of the political constitution of the United States, returning to Europe in August, 1804.

The results of Humboldt’s travels were such, that he may be justly called the discoverer of Equinoctial America, which before his time had been explored without becoming really known, while many of its innumerable riches were absolutely ignored. It must be fully acknowledged that no traveller ever before did so much as Humboldt for physical geography and its kindred sciences. He was the very ideal of a traveller, and the world is indebted to him for important generalizations concerning magnetism and climate; whose results are plainly seen in the isothermal lines of modern maps. The writings of Humboldt mark an era in the science of geography, and have led to many further researches.

III. THE GREAT EXPLORERS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Translated by N. D'anvers,

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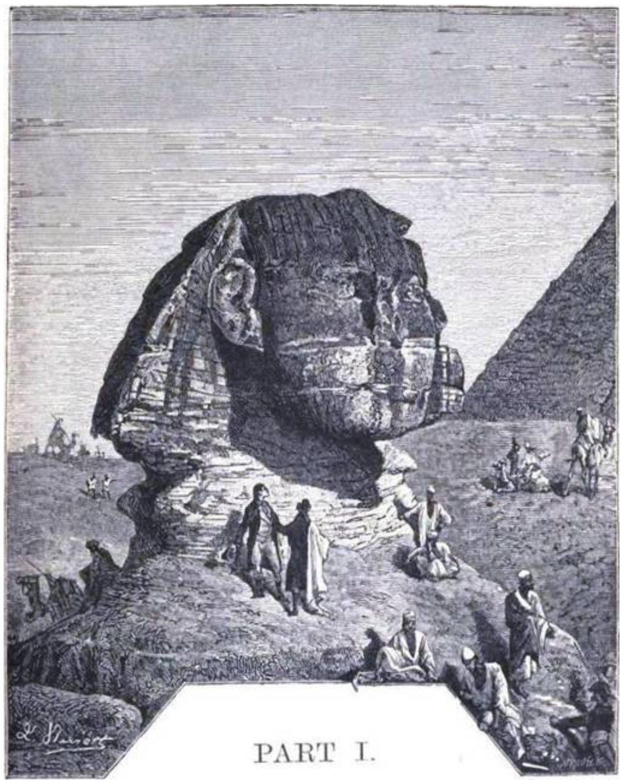

PART I.

PART I

CHAPTER I.

THE DAWN OF A CENTURY OF DISCOVERY.

Slackness of discovery during the struggles of the Republic and Empire — Seetzen's voyages in Syria and Palestine — Hauran and the circumnavigation of the Dead Sea — Decapolis — Journey in Arabia — Burckhardt in Syria — Expeditions in Nubia upon the two branches of the Nile — Pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina — The English in India — Webb at the Source of the Ganges — Narrative of a journey in the Punjab — Christie and Pottinger in Scinde — The same explorers cross Beluchistan into Persia — Elphinstone in Afghanistan — Persia according to Gardane, A. Dupré, Morier, Macdonald-Kinneir, Price, and Ouseley — Guldenstædt and Klaproth in the Caucasus — Lewis and Clarke in the Rocky Mountains — Raffles in Sumatra and Java.

A sensible diminution in geographical discovery marks the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

We have already noticed the organization of the Expedition sent in search of La Pérouse by the French Republic, and also Captain Baudin's important cruise along the Australian coasts. These are the only instances in which the unrestrained passions and fratricidal struggles of the French nation allowed the government to exhibit interest in geography, a science which is especially favoured by the French.

At a later period, Bonaparte consulted several savants and distinguished artists, and the materials for that grand undertaking which first gave an idea (incomplete though it was) of the ancient civilization of the land of the Pharaohs, were collected together. But when Bonaparte had completely given place to Napoleon, the egotistical monarch, sacrificing all else to his ruling passion for war, would no longer listen to explorations, voyages, or possible discoveries. They represented money and men stolen from him; and his expenditure of those materials was far too great to allow of such futile waste. This was clearly shown, when he ceded the last remnants of French colonial rule in America to the United States for a few millions.

Happily other nations were not oppressed by the same iron hand. Absorbed although they might be in their struggle with France, they could still find volunteers to extend the range of geographical science, to establish archæology upon scientific bases, and to prosecute linguistic and ethnographical enterprise.

The learned geographer Malte-Brun, in an article published by him in the “Nouvelles Annales des Voyages” in 1817, gives a minute account of the condition of French geographical knowledge at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and of the many desiderata of that science. He reviews the progress already made in navigation, astronomy, and languages. The India Company, far from concealing its discoveries, as jealousy had induced the Hudson Bay Company to do, founded academies, published memoirs, and encouraged travellers.

War itself was utilized, for the French army gathered a store of precious material in Egypt. We shall shortly see how emulation spread among the various nations.

From the commencement of the century, one country has taken the lead in great discoveries. German explorers have worked so earnestly, and have proved themselves possessed of will so strong and instinct so sure, that they have left little for their successors to do beyond verifying and completing their discoveries.

The first in order of time was Ulric Jasper Seetzen, born in 1767 in East Friesland; he completed his education at Göttingen, and published some essays upon statistics and the natural sciences, for which he had a natural inclination. These publications attracted the attention of the government, and he was appointed Aulic Councillor in the province of Tever.

Seetzen's ambition, like that of Burckhardt subsequently, was an expedition to Central Africa, but he wished previously to make an exploration of Palestine and Syria, to which countries attention was shortly to be directed by the "Palestine Association," founded in London in 1805.

Seetzen did not wait for this period, but in 1802 set out for Constantinople, furnished with suitable introductions.

Although many pilgrims and travellers had successively visited the Holy Land and Syria, the vaguest notions about these countries prevailed. Their physical geography was not determined, details were wanting, and certain regions, as for example, the Lebanon and the Dead Sea had never been explored.

Comparative geography did not exist. It has taken the unwearied efforts of the English Association and the science of travellers in connexion with it to erect that study into a science. Seetzen, whose studies had been various, found himself admirably prepared to explore a country which, often visited, was still in reality new.

Having travelled through Anatolia, Seetzen reached Aleppo in May, 1802. He remained there a year, devoting himself to the practical study of the Arabic tongue, making extracts from Eastern historians and geographers, verifying the astronomical position of Aleppo, prosecuting his investigations into natural history, collecting manuscripts, and translating many of those popular songs and legends which are such valuable aids to the knowledge of a nation.

Seetzen left Aleppo in 1805 for Damascus. His first expedition led him across the provinces of Hauran and Jaulan, situated to the S.E. of that town. No traveller had as yet visited these two provinces, which in the days of Roman dominion had played an important part in the history of the Jews, under the names of Auranitis and Gaulonitis. Seetzen was the first to give an idea of their geography.

The enterprising traveller explored the Lebanon and Baalbek. He prosecuted his discoveries south of Damascus, and entered Judea, exploring the eastern portion of Hermon, the Jordan, and the Dead Sea. This was the dwelling-place of those races well known to us in Jewish history; the Ammonites, Moabites, and Gileadites. At the time of the Roman conquest, the western portion of this country was known as Perea, and was the centre of the celebrated Decapolis or confederacy of ten cities. No modern traveller had visited these regions, a fact sufficient to induce Seetzen to begin his exploration with them.

His friends at Damascus had tried to dissuade him from the journey, by picturing the difficulties and danger of a route frequented by Bedouins; but nothing could stay him. Before visiting the Decapolis region and investigating the condition of its ruins, Seetzen traversed a small district, named Ladscha, which bore a bad reputation at Damascus on account of the Bedouins who occupied it, but which was said to contain remarkable antiquities.

Leaving Damascus on the 12th of December, 1805, with an Armenian guide who misled him from the first, Seetzen, having prudently provided himself with a passport from the Pasha, proceeded from village to village escorted by an armed attendant.

In a narrative published in the earlier “Annales des Voyages,” says the traveller, —

“That portion of Ladscha which I have seen is, like Hauran, entirely formed of basalt, often very porous, and in many districts forming vast stony deserts. The villages, which are mostly in ruins, are built on the sides of the rocks. The black colour of the basalt, the ruined houses, the churches and towers fallen into decay, with the total dearth of trees and verdure, combine to give a sombre aspect to this country, which strikes one almost with dread. In almost every village are either Grecian inscriptions, columns, or other remnants of antiquity; amongst others I copied an inscription of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Here, as in Hauran, the doors were of basalt.”

Seetzen had scarcely arrived at the village of Gerasa and enjoyed a brief rest, before he was surrounded by half a score of mounted men, who said they had come by order of the vice-governor of Hauran to arrest him. Their master, Omar Aga, having learned that the traveller had been seen in the country the preceding year, and imagining his passports to be forgeries, had sent them to bring him before him.

Resistance was useless. Without allowing himself to be disconcerted by an incident which he regarded as a simple contretemps, Seetzen proceeded in the direction of Hauran, where after a day and a half’s journey he met Omar Aga, travelling with the Mecca caravan. The travellers having received a hearty welcome, departed on the morrow, but meeting upon his way with many troops of Arabs, upon whom his demeanour imposed respect, he came to the conclusion that it had been Omar Aga’s intention to have him robbed.

Returning to Damascus, Seetzen had great trouble in finding a guide who would accompany him in his expedition along the eastern shore of the Jordan, and around the Dead Sea. At last, a certain Yusuf-al-Milky, a member of the Greek church, who, for some thirty years, had carried on traffic with the Arab tribes, and travelled in the provinces which Seetzen desired to visit, agreed to bear him company.

The two travellers left Damascus on the 19th of January, 1806. Seetzen’s entire baggage consisted of a few clothes, some indispensable books, paper for drying plants, and an assortment of drugs, necessary to sustain his assumed character as a physician. He wore the dress of a sheik of secondary rank.

The districts of Rasheiya and Hasbeiya, at the foot of Mount Hermon — whose summit at the time was hidden by snow — were the first explored by Seetzen, for the reason that they were the least known in Syria.

He then visited Achha, a village inhabited by the Druses, upon the opposite side of the mountain; Rasheiya, the residence of the Emir; and Hasbeiya, where he paid a visit to the Greek Bishop of Szur or Szeida, to whom he carried letters of recommendation. The object which chiefly attracted his attention in this mountainous district, was an asphalt-mine, whose produce is there used to protect the vines from insects.

Leaving Hasbeiya, Seetzen proceeded to Bâniâs, the ancient Casaræa Philippi, which is now a mere collection of huts. Even if traces of its fortifications were discoverable, not the smallest remains could be found of the splendid temple erected by Herod in honour of Augustus.

Ancient authorities hold that the river of Bâniâs is the source of the Jordan, but in reality that title belongs to the river Hasbany, which forms the larger branch of the Jordan. Seetzen recognized it, as he also did the Lake of Merom, or the ancient Samachonitis.

Here he was deserted by his muleteers, whom nothing could induce to accompany him so far as the bridge of Jisr-Benat-Yakûb, and also by his guide Yusuf, whom he was forced to send by the open road to await his arrival at Tiberias, while he himself proceeded on foot towards the celebrated bridge, accompanied by a single Arab attendant.

He, however, found no one at Jisr-Benat-Yakûb who was willing to accompany him along the eastern shore of the Jordan, until a native, believing him to be a doctor, begged him to go and see his sheik, who was suffering from ophthalmia, and who lived upon the eastern bank of the Lake of Tiberias.

Seetzen gladly availed himself of this opportunity; and it was well he did so, for he was thus enabled to study the Lake of Tiberias and also the Wady Zemmâk at his leisure, not, however, without risk of being robbed and murdered by his guide. Finally he reached Tiberias, called by the Arabs Tabaria, where he found Yusuf, who had been waiting for him for several days.

“The town of Tiberias,” says Seetzen, “is situated upon the lake of the same name. Upon the land side it is surrounded by a good wall of cut basalt rock, but nevertheless, it scarcely deserves to be called a town. No trace of its earlier splendour remains, but the ruins of the more ancient city, which extended to the Thermæ, a league to the eastward, are recognizable.

“The famous Djezar-Pasha caused a bath to be erected above the principal spring. If these baths were in Europe, they would rival all those now existing. The valley in which the lake is situated, is so sheltered, and so warm, that dates, lemon-trees, oranges, and indigo, flourish there, whilst on the high ground surrounding it, the products of more temperate climates might be grown.”

South-west of the lake are the remains of the ancient city of Tarichæa. There, between two mountain chains, lies the beautiful plain of El Ghor, poorly cultivated, and overrun by Arab hordes. No incident of moment marked Seetzen’s journey to Decapolis, during which he was obliged to dress as a mendicant, to escape the rapacity of the native tribes.

“Over my shirt” he relates, “I wore an old kambas, or dressing-gown, and above that a woman’s ragged chemise; my head was covered with rags, and my feet with old sandals. I was protected from cold and wet by an old ragged ‘abbaje,’ which I wore across my shoulders, and a stick cut from a tree served me as a staff; my guide, who was a Greek Christian, was dressed much in the same style; and together we scoured the country for some ten days, often hindered in our journey by chilling rains, which wetted us to the skin. For my part, I travelled an entire day in the mud with bare feet, because I could not wear my sandals upon sodden ground.”

Draa which he reached a little farther on, presented but a mass of desert ruins; and no trace of the monuments which rendered it famous in earlier days, were visible. El-Botthin, the next district, contains hundreds of caverns, hewn in the rocks, which were occupied by the ancient inhabitants. It was much the same at Seetzen’s visit. That Mkês was formerly a rich and important city, is proved by its many ruined tombs and monuments. Seetzen identified it with Gadara, one of the minor towns of the Decapolis. Some leagues beyond are the ruins of Abil or Abila. Seetzen’s guide, Aoser, refused to go there, being afraid of the Arabs. The traveller was, therefore, obliged to go alone.

“This town,” he says, “is entirely in ruins and abandoned. Not a single building remains; but its ancient splendour is sufficiently proved by ruins. Traces of the old fortifications remain, and also many pillars and arches of marble, basalt, and granite. Beyond the walls, I found a great number of pillars; two of them were of an extraordinary size. Hence I concluded that a large temple had formerly existed there.”

On leaving El-Botthin, Seetzen entered the district of Edschlun, and speedily discovered the important ruins of Dscherrasch, which may be compared with those of Palmyra and Baalbek.

“It is difficult to conjecture,” says Seetzen, “how this town, which was formerly so celebrated, has hitherto escaped the attention of antiquarians. It is situated in an open plain, which is fertile, and watered by a river. Several tombs, with fine bas-reliefs arrested my attention before I entered it; upon one of them, I remarked a Greek inscription. The walls, which were of cut marble, are entirely crumbled away, but their length over three quarters of a league, is still discernible. No private house has been preserved, but I remarked several public buildings of fine architectural design. I found two magnificent amphitheatres constructed of solid marble, the columns, niches, &c. in good condition, a few palaces, and three temples; one of the latter having a peristyle of twelve large Corinthian pillars, of which eleven were still erect. In one of these temples I found a fallen column of the finest polished Egyptian granite. Beside these, I found one of the city gates, formed of three arches, and ornamented with pilasters, in good preservation. The finest of the remains is a street adorned throughout its length with

Corinthian columns on either side, and terminating in a semicircle, which was surrounded by sixty Ionic columns, all of the choicest marble. This street was crossed by another, and at the junction of the two, large pedestals of wrought stone occupied each angle, probably in former times these bore statues. Much of the pavement was constructed of hewn stone. Altogether I counted nearly two hundred columns, still in a fair state of preservation; but the number of these is far exceeded by those which have fallen into decay, for I saw only half the extent of the town, and in all probability the other half beyond this was also rich in remarkable relics."

From Seetzen's description, Dscherrasch would appear to be identical with the ancient Gerasa, a town which up to that time had been erroneously placed on the maps.

The traveller crossed Gerka — the Jabok of Jewish history — which forms the northern boundary of the country of the Ammonites, and penetrated into the district of El-Belka, formerly a flourishing country, but which he found uncultivated and barren, with but one small town, Szalt, formerly known as Amathus. Afterwards Seetzen visited Amman, a town which, under the name of Philadelphia, is renowned among the decapolitan cities, and where many antiquities are to be found, Eleal, an ancient city of the Amorites, Madaba, called Madba in the time of Moses, Mount Nebo, Diban, Karrak, the country of the Moabites, and the ruins of Robba, (Rabbath) anciently the royal residence. After much fatigue, he reached the region situated at the southern extremity of the Dead Sea, named Gor-es-Sophia.

The heat was extreme, and great salt-plains, where no watercourses exist, had to be crossed. Upon the 6th of April, Seetzen arrived in Bethlehem, and soon afterwards at Jerusalem, having suffered greatly from thirst, but having passed through most interesting countries, hitherto unvisited by any modern traveller.

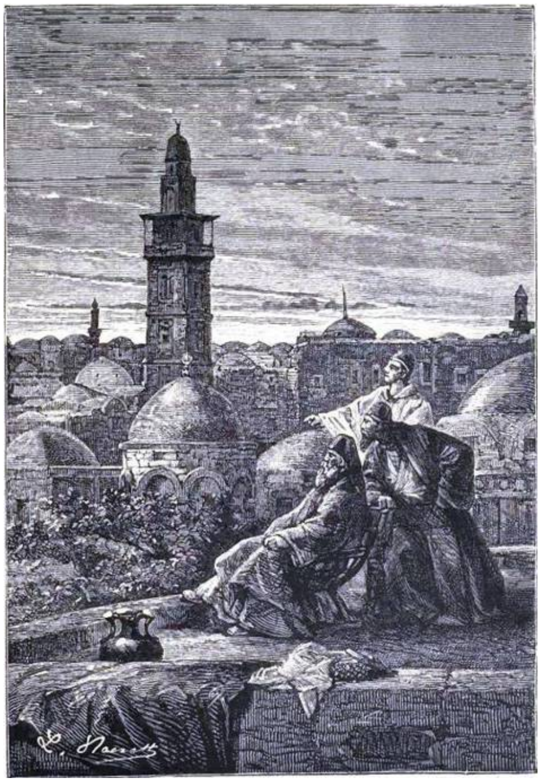

Jerusalem.

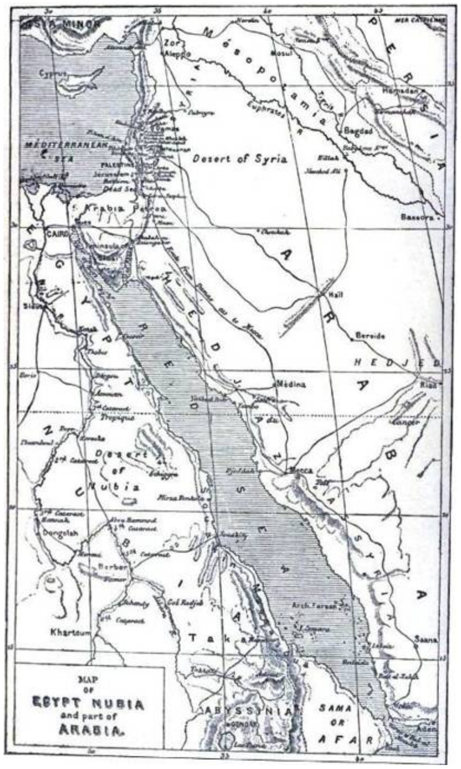

MAP
OF
EGYPT NUBIA
and part of
ARABIA.
ASIA MINOR
Cyprus
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
PALESTINE
Dead Sea
Arabia Petrea
CAIRO
Zor
Aleppo
Mosul
Mesopotamia
Euphrates
Tigris
Bagdad
Hamadan
PERSIA
MER CASPIENNE
Desert of Syria
Bassora
Hail
Beroide
HEDJED
Riad
Medina
Mecca
Cancer
Desert of Nubia
Dongolah
Berber
Khartoum
Taka
ABYSSINIA
SAMA OR AFAR
Saana
Aden
EGYPT
NUBIA
ARABIA
RED SEA
HEDJAZ
ASSYRIA

He had also collected much valuable information respecting the nature of the waters of the Dead Sea, refuted many false notions, corrected mistakes upon the most carefully constructed maps, identified several sites of the ancient Peræa, and established the existence of numberless ruins, which bore witness to the prosperity of all this region under the sway of the Roman Empire. Upon the 25th of June, 1806, Seetzen left Jerusalem, and returned to St. Jean d’Acre by sea.

In an article in the *Revùe Germanique* for 1858, M. Vinen speaks of his expedition as a veritable journey of discovery. Seetzen, however, was unwilling to leave his discoveries incomplete. Ten months later, he again visited the Dead Sea, and added largely to his observations. From thence he proceeded to Cairo, where he remained for two years, and bought a large portion of the oriental manuscripts which now enrich the library of Gotha.

He collected many facts about the interior of the country, choosing instinctively those only which could be amply substantiated.

Seetzen, with his insatiable thirst for discovery, could not remain long in repose, far removed from idleness though it was. In April, 1809, he finally left the capital of Egypt, and directed his course towards Suez and the peninsula of Sinai, which he resolved to explore before proceeding to Arabia. At this time Arabia was a little-known country, frequented only by merchants trading in Mocha coffee-beans. Before Niebuhr’s time no scientific expedition for the study of the geography of the country or the manners and customs of the inhabitants had been organized.

This expedition owed its formation to Professor Michälis, who was anxious to obtain information which would throw light on certain passages in the Bible, and its expenses were defrayed by the generosity of King Frederick V. of Denmark. It comprised Von Hannen, the mathematician, Forskaal, the naturalist, a physician named Cramer, Braurenfeind, the painter, and Niebuhr, the engineer, a company of learned and scientific men, who thoroughly fulfilled all expectations founded upon their reputations.

In the course of two years, from 1762 to 1764, they visited Egypt, Mount Sinai, Jeddah, landed at Loheia, and advancing into Arabia Felix, explored the country in accordance with the speciality of each man. But the enterprising travellers succumbed to illness and fatigue, and Niebuhr alone survived to utilize the observations made by himself and his companions. His work on the subject is an inexhaustible treasury, which may be drawn upon in our own day with advantage.

Seetzen, therefore, had much to achieve to eclipse the fame of his predecessor. He omitted no means of doing so. After publicly professing the faith of Islam, he embarked at Suez for Mecca, and hoped to enter that city disguised as a pilgrim. Tor and Jeddah were the places visited by him before he travelled to the holy city of Mecca. He was much impressed by the wealth of the faithful and the peculiar characteristics of that city, which lives for and by the Mahometan cultus. “I was seized,” says the traveller, “with an emotion which I have never experienced elsewhere.”

It is alike unnecessary to dwell upon this portion of the voyage and upon that relating to the excursion to Medina. Burckhardt’s narrative gives a precise and trustworthy account of those holy places, and besides, there remain of Seetzen’s works only the extracts published in “Les Annales des Voyages,” and in the Correspondence of the Baron de Zach. The Journal of Seetzen’s travels was published in German, and in a very incomplete manner, only in 1858.

The traveller returned from Medina to Mecca, and devoted himself to a secret study of the town, with its religious ceremonies, and to taking astronomical observations, which determined the position of the capital of Islam.

Seetzen returned to Jeddah on the 23rd March, 1810. He then re-embarked, with the Arab who had been his guide to Mecca, for Hodeidah, which is one of the principal ports of Yemen. Passing the mountainous district of Beith-el-Fakih, where coffee is cultivated, after a month’s delay at Doran on account of illness, Seetzen entered Sana, the capital of Yemen, which he calls the most beautiful city of the East, on the 2nd of June. Upon the 22nd of July he reached Aden, and in November he was at Mecca, whence the last letters received from him are dated. Upon re-entering Yemen, he, like Niebuhr, was robbed of his collections and baggage, upon the pretext that he collected animals, in order to compose a philtre, with the intention of poisoning the springs.

Seetzen, however, would not quietly submit to be robbed. He started at once for Sana, intending to lay a complaint before the Iman. This was in December, 1811. A few days later news of his sudden death arrived at Taes, and the tidings soon reached the ears of the Europeans who frequented the Arabian ports.

It is little to the purpose now to inquire upon whom the responsibility of this death rests — whether upon the Iman or upon those who had plundered the traveller — but we may well regret that so thorough an explorer, already familiar with the habits and customs of the Arabs, was unable to continue his explorations, and that the greater portion of his diaries and observations have been entirely lost.

“Seetzen,” says M. Vivien de Saint Martin, “was the first traveller since Ludovico Barthema (1503) who visited Mecca, and before his time no European had even seen the holy city of Medina, consecrated by the tomb of the Prophet.”

From these remarks we gather how invaluable the trustworthy narrative of this disinterested and well-informed traveller would have been.

Just as an untimely death ended Seetzen’s self-imposed mission, Burckhardt set out upon a similar enterprise, and like him commenced his long and minute exploration of Arabia by preliminary travel through Syria.

“It is seldom in the history of science,” says M. Vivien de Saint Martin, “that we see two men of such merit succeed each other in the same career or rather continue it; for in reality Burckhardt followed up the traces Seetzen had opened out, and, seconded for a considerable time by favourable circumstances which enabled him to prosecute his explorations, he was enabled to add very considerably to the known discoveries of his predecessor."

Although John Lewis Burckhardt was not English, for he was a native of Lausanne, he must none the less be classed among the travellers of Great Britain. It was owing to his relations with Sir Joseph Banks, the naturalist who had accompanied Cook, and Hamilton, the secretary of the African Association, who gave him ready and valuable support, that Burckhardt was enabled to accomplish what he did.

Burckhardt was a deeply learned man. He had passed through the universities of Leipzic, and Göttingen, where he attended Blumenbach's lectures, and afterwards through Cambridge, where he studied Arabic. He started for the East in 1809. To inure himself to the hardships of a traveller's life, he imposed long fasts upon himself, accustomed himself to endure thirst, and chose the pavements of London or dusty roads for a resting-place. But how trifling were these experiences in comparison with those involved in an apostolate of science!

Leaving London for Syria, where he hoped to perfect his knowledge of Arabic, Burckhardt intended to proceed to Cairo and to reach Fezzan by the route formerly opened up by Hornemann. Once arrived in that country, circumstances must determine his future course.

Burckhardt, having taken the name of Ibrahim-Ibn-Abdallah, intended to pass as an Indian Mussulman. In order to carry out this disguise, he had recourse to many expedients. In an obituary notice of him in the "Annales des Voyages," it is related that when unexpectedly called upon to speak the Indian language, he immediately had recourse to German. An Italian dragoman, suspecting him of being a giaour, pulled him by his beard, thereby offering him the greatest insult possible in his character of

Mussulman. But Burckhardt had so thoroughly entered into the spirit of his rôle, that he responded by a vigorous blow, which sending the unfortunate dragoman spinning to a distance, turned the laugh against him, and thoroughly convinced the bystanders of the sincerity of the traveller.

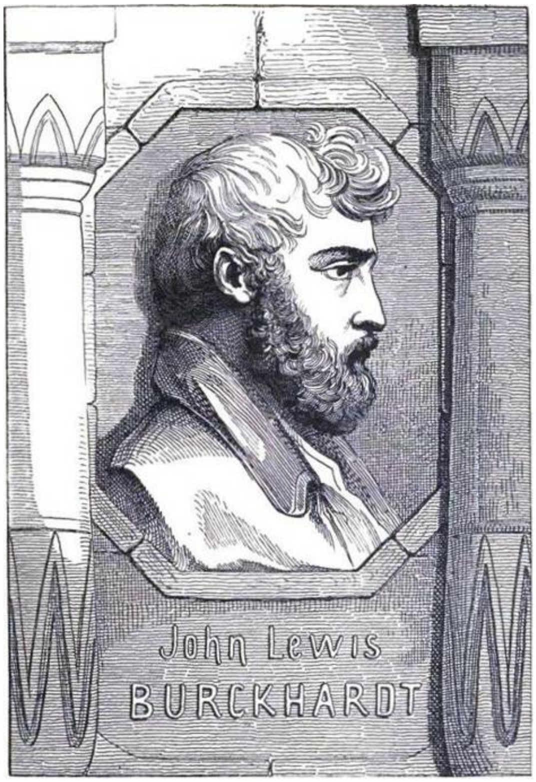

Portrait of Burckhardt.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Burckhardt remained at Aleppo from September, 1809, to February, 1812, pursuing his studies of Syrian manners and customs, and of the language of the country, with but one interruption, a six months’ excursion to Damascus, Palmyra, and the Hauran, a country which had hitherto been visited by Seetzen only.

It is related that, during an excursion into Gor, a district north of Aleppo, upon the shores of the Euphrates, the traveller was robbed of his baggage and stripped of his clothes by a band of robbers. When nothing remained to him but his trousers, the wife of a chief, who had not received her share of the spoil, wished to relieve him even of those indispensable garments!

The *Revue Germanique* says: — ”We owe a great deal of information to these excursions, respecting a country of which we had only crude notions, gained from Seetzen’s incomplete communications. Burckhardt’s power of close observation detected a number of interesting facts, even in well-known districts, which had escaped the notice of other travellers. These materials were published by Colonel Martin William Leake, himself a geographer, a man of learning, and a distinguished traveller.”

Burckhardt had seen Palmyra and Baalbek, the slopes of Lebanon and the valley of the Orontes, Lake Huleh, and the sources of the Jordan; he had discovered many ancient sites; and his observations had led especially to the discovery of the site of the far-famed Apamoea, although both he and his publisher were mistaken in their application of the data obtained. His excursions in the Auranitis were equally rich, even though coming after Seetzen’s, in those geographical and archæological details which represent the actual condition of a country, and throw a light upon the comparative geography of every age.

Leaving Damascus in 1813, Burckhardt visited the Dead Sea, the valley of Akâba, and the ancient port of Azcongater, districts which in our own day are traversed by parties of English, with their *Murray*, *Cook*, or *Bædeker* in their hands; but which then were only to be visited at the risk of life. In a lateral valley, the traveller came upon the ruins of Petra, the ancient capital of Arabia Petræa.

At the end of the year Burckhardt was at Cairo. Judging it best not to join the caravan which was just starting for Fezzan, he felt a great inclination to visit Nubia, a country rich in attractions for the historian, geographer, and archæologist. Nubia, the cradle of Egyptian civilization, had only been visited, since the days of the Portuguese Alvares, by Poncet and Lenoir Duroule, both Frenchmen, at the close of the seventeenth century, at the opening of the eighteenth by Bruce, whose narrative had so often been doubted, and by Norden, who had not penetrated beyond Derr.

In 1813 Burckhardt explored Nubia proper, including Mahass and Kemijour. This expedition cost him only forty-two francs, a very paltry sum in comparison with the price involved in the smallest attempt at an African journey in our own day; but we must not forget that Burckhardt was content to live upon millet-seed, and that his entire *cortége* consisted of two dromedaries.

Two Englishmen, Mr. Legh and Mr. Smelt, were travelling in the country at the same time, scattering gold and presents as they passed, and thus rendering the visits of their successors costly.

Burckhardt crossed the cataracts of the Nile. “A little farther on,” says the narrative, “near a place called Djebel-Lamoule, the Arab guides practise a curious extortion.” This is their plan of proceeding. They halt, descend from their camels, and arrange a little heap of sand and pebbles, in imitation of a Nubian tomb. This they, call “*preparing the grave for the traveller*” and follow up the demonstration by an imperious demand for money. Burckhardt having watched his guide commence this operation, began quietly to imitate him, and then said, “Here is thy grave; as we are brothers, it is but fair that we should be buried together.” The Arab could not help laughing, both graves were simultaneously destroyed, and remounting the camels, the cavalcade proceeded, better friends than before. The Arab quoted a saying from the Koran: “No human being knows in what spot of the earth he will find his grave.”

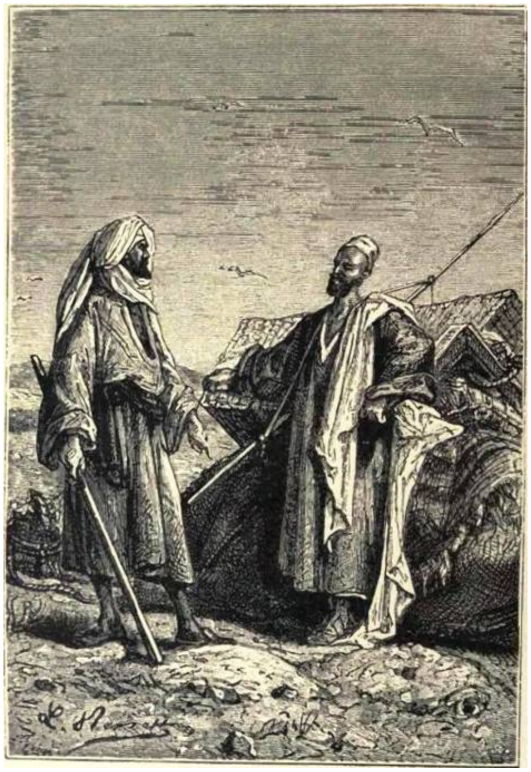

“Here is thy grave.”

Burckhardt had hoped to get as far as Dingola, but was obliged to rest satisfied with collecting information about the country and the Mamelukes, who had taken refuge there after the massacre of their army by order of the viceroy of Egypt.

The attention of the traveller was frequently directed to the ruins of temples and ancient cities, than which none are more curious than those of Isambul.

“The temple on the banks of the Nile is approached by an avenue flanked by six colossal figures, which measure six feet and a half from the ground to the knees. They are representations of Isis and Osiris, in various attitudes. The sides and capitals of the pillars are covered with paintings or hieroglyphic carvings, in which Burckhardt thought a very ancient style was to be traced. All these are hewn out of the rock, and the faces appear to have been painted yellow, with black hair. Two hundred yards from this temple are the ruins of a still larger monument, consisting of four enormous figures, so deeply buried in the sand that it is impossible to say whether they are in a standing or sitting posture.”

These descriptions of antiquities, which in our own day are accurately known by drawings and photographs, have, however, little value for us; and are merely interesting as indicating the state of the ruins when Burckhardt visited them, and enabling us to judge how far the depredations of the Arabs have since changed them.

Burckhardt’s first excursion was limited to the borders of the Nile, a narrow space made up of little valleys, which debouched into the river. The traveller estimated the population of the country at 100,000, distributed over a surface of fertile land 450 miles in length, by a quarter of a mile in width.

“The men,” says the narrative, “are, as a rule, muscular, rather shorter than the Egyptians, having little beard or moustache, usually merely a pointed beard under the chin. They have a pleasant expression, are superior to the Egyptians in courage and intelligence, and naturally inquisitive. They are not thieves. They occasionally pick up a fortune by dint of hard work, but they have little enterprise. Women share the same physical advantages, are pretty as a rule, and well made; their appearance is gentle and pleasing, and they are modest in behaviour. M. Denon has underrated the Nubians, but it must not be forgotten that their physique varies in different districts. Where there is much land to cultivate, they are well developed; but in districts where arable land is a mere strip, the people diminish in vigour, and are sometimes walking skeletons."

The whole country groaned under the yoke of the Kashefs, who were descendants of the commander of the Bosniacs, and paid only a small annual tribute to Egypt, which, however, was sufficient to serve as a pretext for oppressing the unfortunate fellaheen. Burckhardt cites a curious example of the insolence with which the Kashefs behaved.

"Hassan Kashef," he says, was in need of barley for his horses. Accompanied by his slaves, he walked into the fields, and there met the owner of a fine plot of barley. "How badly you cultivate your land," said he. "Here you plant barley in a field where you might have reaped an excellent crop of water-melons of double the value. See, here are some melon-seeds (offering a handful to the peasant proprietor); sow your field with these; and you, slaves, tear up this bad barley and bring it to me."

In March, 1814, after a short rest, Burckhardt undertook a fresh exploration, not this time of the banks of the Nile, but of the Nubian desert. Justly conceiving poverty to be his surest safe guard, he dismissed his servant, sold his camel, and contenting himself with one ass, joined a caravan of poor traders. The caravan started from Daraou, a village inhabited partly by fellahs and partly by Ababdéh Arabs. The traveller had good reason to complain of the former, not because they recognized him as a European, but because they imagined him to be a Syrian Turk, come to share the commerce in slaves of which they had the monopoly.

It would be useless to enumerate the names of the bridges, hills, and valleys in this desert. We will rather summarize the traveller’s report of the physical aspect of the country.

Bruce, who had explored it, paints it in too gloomy colours, and exaggerates the difficulties of the route. If Burckhardt is to be credited, the country is less barren than that between Aleppo and Bagdad, or Damascus and Medina. The Nubian desert is not merely a plain of sand, where nothing interrupts the dreary monotony. It is interspersed with rocks, some not less than 300 feet in height, and shaded by thickets of acacias or date-trees. The shelter of these trees is, however, unavailing against the vertical rays of the sun, which explains an Arabic proverb, “Rely upon the favour of the great and the shade of an acacia.”

At Ankheyre, or Wady-Berber, the caravan reached the Nile, after passing Shigre, one of the best mountain springs. One danger only is to be feared in crossing the desert; that of finding the wells at Nedjeym dry; and, unless the traveller should lose his way, which, however, with trustworthy guides, is little likely to happen, no serious obstacle arises.

It would appear, therefore, that the sufferings experienced by Bruce must have been greatly exaggerated, although the narrative of the Scotch traveller is generally trustworthy. The natives of the province of Berber appear to be identical with the Barbarins of Bruce, the Barabas mentioned by D’Anville, and the Barauras spoken of by Poncet. They are a well-made race, and different in feature from the negroes. They maintain their purity of descent by marrying only with the women of their own or of kindred tribes. Curious as is the picture Burckhardt draws of the character and manners of this tribe, it is not at all edifying. It would be difficult to convey an idea of the corruption and degradation of the Berbers. The little town of Wady-Berber, a commercial centre, the rendezvous for caravans, and a depôt for slaves, is a regular resort of banditti.

Burckhardt, who had trusted to the protection of the merchants of Daraou, found that he had made a great mistake in so doing. They sought every means of plundering him, chased him out of their company, and forced him to seek refuge with the guides and donkey-drivers, who cordially welcomed him.

Upon the 10th of April a fine was levied upon the caravan by the Mek of Damer, which lies a little south of the tributary Mogren (called Mareb by Bruce). This is a well-kept and cleanly Fakir village, which contrasts agreeably with the ruins and filth of Berber. The Fakirs give themselves up to the practices of sorcery, magic, and charlatanism. One of them, it is said, could even make a lamb bleat in the stomach of the man who had stolen and eaten it! These ignorant people have entire faith in such fables, and it must be reluctantly admitted that the fact contributes not a little to the peace of the town and the prosperity of the country.

From Damer, Burckhardt proceeded to Shendy, where he passed a month, during which time no one suspected him to be an infidel. Shendy had grown in importance since Bruce’s visit, and now consisted of about a thousand houses. Considerable trade was carried on — grass, slaves, and cattle taking the place of specie. The principal marketable commodities were gum, ivory, gold, and ostrich feathers.

According to Burckhardt, the number of slaves sold yearly at Shendy amounts to 5000; 2500 of these are for Arabia, 400 for Egypt, 1000 for Dongola and the districts of the Red Sea.

The traveller employed his time during his stay at Sennaar in collecting information about that kingdom. Amongst other curious things, he was told that the king having one day invited the ambassador of Mehemet Ali to a cavalry review, which he considered rather formidable, the envoy in his turn begged the king to witness part of the Turkish artillery exercises. But at the outset of the performance — at the discharge of two small mounted guns — cavalry, infantry, spectators, courtiers, and the king himself, fled in terror.

Burckhardt sold his wares, and then, worn out by the persecutions of the Egyptian merchants who were his companions, he joined the caravan at Suakin, intending to traverse the unknown district between that town and Shendy. From Suakin he meant to set out for Mecca, hoping to find the Hadji useful to him in the realization of his projects.

“The Hadji,” he says, “form one powerful body, and every member is protected, because if one is attacked the whole number take up arms.” The caravan which Burckhardt now joined consisted of 150 merchants and 300 slaves. Two hundred camels were employed to convey heavy bales of “danmour,” a stuff manufactured in Sennaar, and cargoes of tobacco.

The first object of interest to the travellers was the Atbara, a tributary of the Nile, whose banks, with their verdant trees, were grateful to the eye after the sandy desert. The course of the river was followed as far as the fertile district of Taka. During the journey the white skin of the pretended sheik Ibrahim (it will be remembered that this was the name assumed by Burckhardt) attracted much attention from the female population, who were little accustomed to the sight of Arabs.

“One day,” relates the traveller, “a girl of the country, of whom I had been buying onions, offered to give me an extra quantity if I would remove my turban, and show her my head. I demanded eight more onions, which she immediately produced. As I removed my turban, and exposed my white and close-shaven head to view, she sprang back in horror and dismay. I asked her jokingly if she would not like a husband with a similar head, to which she replied with much energy, and many expressions of disgust, that she would prefer the ugliest slave ever brought from Darfur."

Just before Goz Radjeh was reached, Burckhardt's attention was attracted to a building, which he was told was either a church or temple, the same word having the two meanings. He at once proceeded in that direction, hoping to examine it, but his companions stopped him, saying, "It is surrounded by bands of robbers; you cannot go a hundred steps without danger of attack."

Burckhardt was unable to decide whether it was an Egyptian temple, or a monument of the empire of Axum.

At last the caravan entered the fertile district of Tak or El Gasch, a wide watered plain, whose soil is wonderfully fertile, but which for two months in the year is uninhabited. Grain is plentiful and is sold in Jeddah for twenty per cent. more than the best Egyptian millet.

The inhabitants, who are called Hadendoa, are treacherous, dishonest, and bloodthirsty; and their women are almost as degraded as those of Shendy and Berber.

Upon leaving Taka, the road to Suakin and the shores of the Red Sea lay over a chain of chalk hills. At Schenterab granite is found. The hills presented few difficulties, and the caravan reached Suakin in safety upon the 26th May. But Burckhardt's troubles were not yet at an end. The Emir and Aga combined to plunder him, and treated him as the lowest of slaves, until he produced the firman which he had received from Mehemet Ali and

Ibrahim Pasha. This changed the face of affairs. Instead of being thrown into prison the traveller was invited to the Aga's, who offered him a present of a young slave. M. Vivien de Saint Martin writes of this expedition, "This journey of from twenty to twenty-five days, between the Nile and the Red Sea, was the first ever undertaken by a European. The observations collected, as to the settled or nomad tribes of these districts are invaluable for Europe. Burckhardt's narrative is of increasing interest, and few can compare with it for instruction and interest."

Upon the 7th of July Burckhardt succeeded in embarking in a boat, and eleven days later he reached Jeddah, which serves as a harbour to Mecca. Jeddah is built upon the sea-shore, and is surrounded by a wall, which, insufficient as it would be against artillery, protects it perfectly from the attacks of the Wahabees, who have been nicknamed the "Puritans of Islamism." These people are a distinct sect, who claim to restore Mahomedanism to its primitive simplicity.

"The entrance to the town, upon the side nearest the sea," says Burckhardt, "is protected by a battery which overlooks the entire fort, and is surmounted by one enormous piece of artillery capable of discharging a five-hundred pound shot, which is so renowned throughout the Arabian Gulf, that its reputation alone is enough to protect Jeddah."

The greatest drawback to this city is its want of fresh water, which is brought from small wells two miles distant. Without gardens, vegetables, or date-trees, Jeddah, in spite of its population of twelve or fifteen thousand (a number which is doubled in the pilgrimage season) presents a strange appearance. The population is the reverse of autochthonous; it is composed of natives of Hadramaut and Yemen, Indians from Surat and Bombay, and Malays who come as pilgrims and settle in the town. Burckhardt introduces many anecdotes of interest into his account of the manners, mode of living, price of commodities, and number of traders in the place.

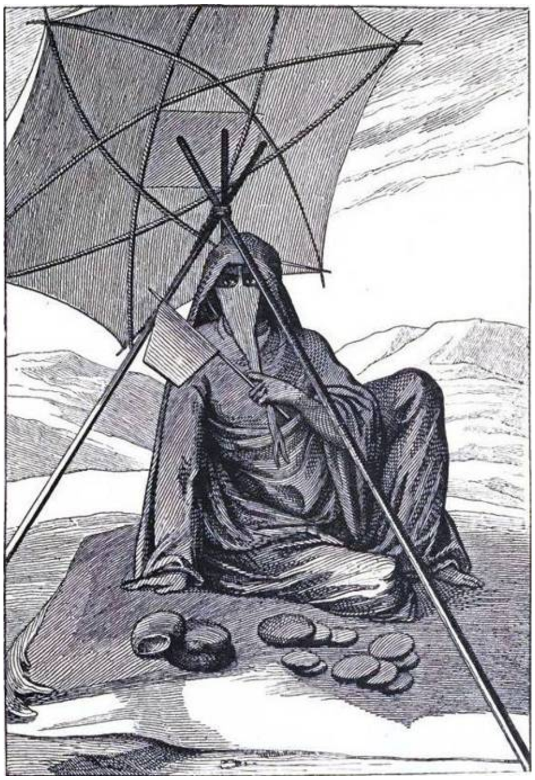

Merchant of Jeddah.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Speaking of the singular customs of the natives of Jeddah, he says: — ”It is the almost universal custom for everybody to swallow a cup full of ghee or melted butter in the morning. After this they take coffee, which they regard as a strong tonic; and they are so accustomed to this habit from their earliest years, that they feel greatly inconvenienced if they discontinue it. The higher classes are satisfied with drinking the cup of butter, but the lower classes add another half cup, which they draw up through the nostrils, imagining that they thus prevent bad air entering the body by those apertures.”

The traveller left Jeddah for Tayf on the 24th of August. The road winds over mountains and across valleys of romantic beauty and luxuriant verdure. Burckhardt was taken for an English spy at Tayf, and, although he was well received by the Pasha, he had no liberty, and could not carry on his observations.

Tayf, it appears, is famous for the beauty of its gardens; roses and grapes are sent from it into all the districts of Hedjaz. This town had a considerable trade, and was very prosperous before it was plundered by the Wahabees.

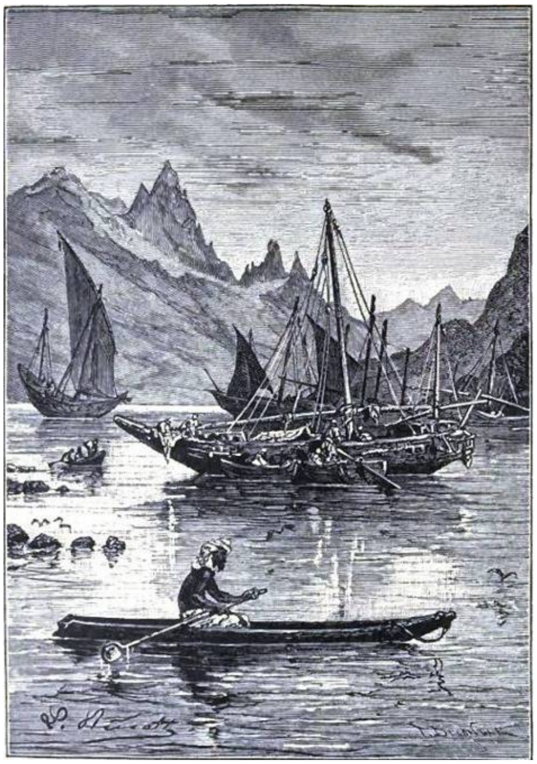

Shores and boats of the Red Sea.

The surveillance to which he was subjected hastened Burckhardt's departure, and upon the 7th of September he started for Mecca. Well versed in the study of the Koran, and acquainted with all the practices of Islamism, he was prepared to act the part of a pilgrim. His first care was to dress himself in accordance with the law prescribed for the faithful who enter Mecca — in the "ihram," or pieces of cloth without seam, one covering the loins, the other thrown over the neck and shoulders. The pilgrim's first duty is to proceed to the temple, without waiting even to procure a lodging. This Burckhardt did not fail to do, observing at the same time the rites and ceremonies prescribed in such cases, of which he gives many interesting particulars; we cannot, however, dwell upon them here.

"Mecca," says Burckhardt, "may be called a pretty town. As a rule, the streets are wider than in most Eastern cities. The houses are lofty and built of stone; and its numerous windows, opening upon the street, give it a more cheerful and European aspect than the cities of Egypt or Syria, whose dwellings generally have few windows on the outside. Every house has a terrace built of stone, and sloping in such a way as to allow water to run down the gutters into the street. Low walls with parapets conceal these terraces; for, as everywhere else in the East, it is not thought right for a man to appear there; he would be accused of spying upon the women, who spend much of their time upon the terrace of the house, engaged in domestic work, drying corn, hanging out linen, &c."

The only public place in the city is the large court of the Grand Mosque. Trees are rare; not a garden enlivens the view, and the scene depends for animation upon the well-stocked shops which abound during the pilgrimage. With the exception of four or five large houses belonging to the administration, two colleges, which have since been converted into warehouses for corn, and the mosque with the few buildings and colleges connected with it, Mecca can boast of no public buildings, and cannot compete in this respect with other cities in the East of the same size.

The streets are unpaved; and as drains are unknown, water collects in puddles, and the accumulation of mud is inconceivable. For a water supply the natives trust to heaven, catching the rain in cisterns, for that obtained from the wells is so foul that it is impossible to drink it.

In the centre of the town, where the valley widens a little, the mosque known as Beithóu’llah, or El Haram, is situated. This edifice owes its fame to the Kaaba which is enclosed in it, for other Eastern towns can boast of mosques equally large and more beautiful. El Haram is situated in an oblong space, surrounded on the eastern side by a quadruple colonnade, and by a triple one on the other. The columns are connected by pointed arches, upon each four stand little domes constructed of mortar and whitened outside. Some of these columns are of white marble, granite, or porphyry, but the greater part are of the common stone found among the mountains of Mecca.

The Kaaba has been so often ruined and restored that no trace of a remote antiquity remains. It was in existence before this mosque was built.

The traveller says, “The Kaaba is placed upon an inclined base some two feet high, and its roof being flat, it presents the appearance at a little distance of a perfect cube. The only door by which it can be entered, and which is opened two or three times a year, is on the north side, about seven feet above the ground, for which reason one cannot enter except by means of a wooden staircase. The famous ‘black stone’ is enshrined at the north-eastern corner of the Kaaba, near the door, and forms one of the angles of the building four or five feet above the floor of the court. It is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of this stone, as its surface has been completely worn and reduced to its present condition by the kisses and worshipping touches bestowed upon it by countless millions of pilgrims. The Kaaba is entirely covered with black silk, which envelopes its sides, leaving the roof exposed. This veil or curtain is called ‘the Kesoua,’ and is renewed yearly during the pilgrimage. It is brought from Cairo, where it is manufactured at the expense of the Viceroy.”

Up to the time of Burckhardt no such detailed account of Mecca and her sanctuary had been given to the world. For this reason we shall insert extracts from the original narrative; extracts which might indeed be multiplied, for they include circumstantial accounts of the sacred well, called Zemzem, water from which is considered as an infallible remedy for every complaint. The traveller speaks also of the “Gate of Salvation,” of the Makam Ibrahim, a monument containing the stone upon which Abraham sat when he was engaged in building the Kaaba, and where the marks of his knees may still be seen, and of all the buildings enclosed within the temple precincts.

Judging from Burckhardt’s minute and complete description, these spots still retain their former physiognomy. The same number of pilgrims chant the same songs; the men only are no longer the same. His accounts of the feast of the pilgrimage and the holy enthusiasm of the faithful, are followed by a picture which brings before us, in the most sombre colours, the effects of this great gathering of men, attracted from every part of the world.

“The termination of the pilgrimage,” he says, “lends a very different aspect to the mosque. Illness and death, consequent upon the great fatigues undergone during the voyage, are accelerated by the scanty covering afforded by the Ihram, the unhealthy dwellings of Mecca, the bad food, and frequent absolute dearth of provisions. The temple is filled with corpses brought thither to receive the prayers of the Iman, or with sick persons who insist upon being carried, as their last hours approach, to the colonnade, hoping to be saved by the sight of the Kaaba, or in any case to have the consolation of expiring within the sacred precincts. One sees poor pilgrims, sinking under illness and hunger, dragging their weary bodies along the colonnade; and when they no longer have the strength to stretch out a hand to the passer-by, they place a little jar beside the mat upon which they are laid, to receive what charity may bestow upon them. As they feel the last moment approach, they cover themselves with their ragged clothes, and very often a day passes before it is ascertained that they are dead."

We will conclude our extracts from Burckhardt's account of Mecca with his opinion of the inhabitants.

"Although the natives of Mecca possess grand qualities, although they are pleasant, hospitable, cheerful and proud, they openly transgress the Koran by drinking, gambling, and smoking. Deceit and perjury are no longer looked upon as crimes by them; they do not ignore the scandal such vices bring upon them; but while each individually exclaims against the corruption of manners, none reform themselves."

Upon the 15th of January, 1815, Burckhardt left Mecca with a caravan of pilgrims on their way to visit the tomb of the prophet. The journey to Medina, like that between Mecca and Jeddah, was accomplished at night, and afforded little opportunity for observation. In the winter night-travelling is less comfortable than travelling by day. A valley called Wady-Fatme, but generally known as El-Wadi, was crossed; it abounded in shrubs and date-trees, and was well cultivated in the eastern portion. A little beyond it lies the valley of Es-Ssafra, the market of the neighbouring tribes and celebrated for its plantations of dates.

The traveller relates that “The groves of date-trees extend for nearly four miles, and belong to the natives of Ssafra as well as to the Bedouins of the neighbourhood, who employ labourers to water the ground, and come themselves to reap the harvest. The date-trees pass from one person to another in the course of trade; they are sold separately. A father often receives three date-trees as the price of the daughter he gives in marriage. They are all planted in deep sand brought from the middle of the valley, and piled up over their roots; they ought to be renewed every year, and they are generally swept away by the torrents. Each little plot is surrounded by a wall of mud or stone, and the cultivators live in hamlets or isolated cabins among the trees. The principal stream flows through a grove near the market; beside it rises a little mosque, shaded by large chestnuts. I had seen none before in the Hedjaz.”

Burckhardt was thirteen days in reaching Medina. But this rather long journey was not lost time to him; he collected much information about the Arabs and the Wahabees. At Medina, as at Mecca, the pilgrim’s first duty is to visit the tomb and mosque of Mahomet; but the ceremonies attending the visit are much easier and shorter, and the traveller performed them in a quarter of an hour.

Burckhardt’s stay at Mecca had already been prejudicial to him. At Medina he was attacked by intermittent fever, which increased in violence, and was accompanied by violent sickness. This soon so reduced him, that he could no longer rise from his carpet without the assistance of his slave, “a poor fellow who by nature and habit was more fit to tend camels than to take care of his worn-out and enfeebled master.”

Burckhardt being detained at Medina for more than three months by a fever, due to bad climate, the detestable quality of the water, and the prevalence of infectious illnesses, was forced to relinquish his project of crossing the desert to Akabah, in order to reach Yanibo as quickly as possible, and from thence embark for Egypt.

“Next to Aleppo,” he says, “Medina is the best-built town I have seen in the East. It is entirely of stone, the houses being generally three stories high, with flat tops. As they are not whitewashed, and the stone is brown in colour, the streets, which are very narrow, have usually a sombre appearance. They are often only two or three paces wide. At the present time Medina looks desolate enough; the houses are falling into ruins. Their owners, who formerly derived a considerable profit from the inroad of pilgrims, find their revenues diminishing, as the Wahabees forbid visitors to the tomb of the prophet, alleging that he was but a mere mortal. The possession which places Medina on a par with Mecca is the Grand Mosque, containing the tomb of Mahomet. This is smaller than that at Mecca, but is built upon the same plan, in a large square courtyard, surrounded on all sides by covered galleries, and having a small building in the centre. The famous tomb, surrounded by an iron railing painted green, is near the eastern corner. It is of good workmanship, in imitation of filagree, and interlaced with inscriptions in copper. Four doors, of which three lead into this enclosure, are kept constantly shut. Permission to enter is freely accorded to persons of rank, and others can purchase permission of the principal eunuchs for about fifteen piasters. In the interior are hangings which surround the tomb, and are only a few feet from it.” According to the historian of Medina, these hangings cover a square edifice, built of black stones, and supported upon two columns, in the interior of which are the sepulchres of Mahomet and his two eldest disciples, Abou-Bekr and Omar. He also states that these sepulchres are deep holes, and that the coffin which contains the ashes of Mahomet is covered with silver, and surmounted by a marble slab with the inscription, “In the name of God, give him thy pity.” The fables which were spread throughout Europe as to the tomb of the prophet being suspended in mid air, are unknown in the Hedjaz. The mosque was robbed of a great part of its treasures by the Wahabees, but there is some ground for believing that they had been forestalled by the successive guardians of the tomb.

Many other interesting details of Medina, and its inhabitants, surroundings, and the haunts of pilgrims, are to be found in Burckhardt’s narrative. But we have given sufficient extracts to induce the reader who desires further information respecting the manners and customs of the Arabs, which have not changed, to refer to the book itself.

Upon the 21st of April, 1815, Burckhardt joined a caravan which conducted him to Yembo, where the plague was raging. The traveller at once fell ill and became so weak that it was impossible for him to resort to a country place. To embark was equally impossible; all the vessels which were ready to start were crowded with soldiers. He was compelled to remain eighteen days in the unhealthy little town, before he could obtain a passage in a small vessel which took him to Cosseir, and thence to Egypt.

Upon his return to Cairo Burckhardt heard of his father’s death. The traveller’s constitution had been sorely tried by illness, and he was unable to attempt the ascent of Mount Sinai until 1816. The study of natural history, the publication of his diary, and his correspondence, occupied him until 1817, at which time he expected to go with a caravan to Fezzan. Unfortunately he succumbed to a sudden attack of fever, his last words being, “Write and tell my mother that my last thought was of her.”

Burckhardt was an accomplished traveller; well-informed, exact to minuteness, patient, courageous, and endowed with an upright and energetic character. His writings are of great value; the narrative of his voyage in Arabia — of which he unfortunately could not explore the interior — is so complete and precise, that owing to it that country was then better known than many in Europe.

In writing to his father from Cairo on the 13th of March, 1817, he says, “I have never said a word about what I have seen and met with that my conscience did not entirely justify; I did not expose myself to so much danger in order to write a romance!”

The explorers who have succeeded him in the same countries unanimously testify to his exactness, and agree in praising his fidelity, knowledge, and sagacity.

“Few travellers,” says the *Revue Germanique*, “have enjoyed in a like degree the faculty of observation. That is a rare gift of nature, like all eminent qualities. He possessed a sort of intuition which discerned the truth, apart from his own observations, and thus information given by him from hearsay has a value that seldom attaches to statements of that nature. His mind, early ripened by reflection and study (he was but in his thirty-third year at the time of his death), invariably went straight to the point. His narrative, always sober, is filled — one may say — rather with things than words; yet his narratives possess infinite charm; one admires the man in them as much as the savant and observer.”

While the Biblical countries occupied the attention of Seetzen and Burckhardt, India, the birthplace of most of the European languages, was about to command the attention of students of language, literature, and religion, as well as of geography. For the present our concern is with those problems of physical geography, which the conquests and studies of the India Company were about to solve by degrees.

In a preceding volume we have related how the Portuguese rule was established in India. The union of Portugal with Spain, in 1599, led to the fall of the Portuguese colonies, which came into the possession of the English and Dutch. England soon afterwards granted a monopoly of the commerce of India to a Company which was destined to play an important part in history.

At this time Akbar, the great Mogul emperor, the seventh descendant of Timour Leng, had established a vast empire in Hindustan and Bengal, upon the ruins of the Rajpoot kingdoms. Owing to the personal qualities of Akbar, which had gained for him the surname of the Benefactor of Man, that empire was at the height of its glory. The same brilliant course was pursued by Shah Jehan; but Akbar’s grandson, Aurung Zeb, inspired by an insatiable ambition, assassinated his brothers, imprisoned his father, and seized the reins of government. While the Mogul Empire was in the enjoyment of profound peace, a clever adventurer laid the foundations of the Mahratta Empire. The religious intolerance of Aurung Zeb, and his crafty policy, led to the insurrection of the Rajpoots, and a struggle, which by draining the resources of the empire, shook his power. The death of the great usurper was followed by the decadence of the empire.

Up to this period the India Company had been unable to add to the narrow strip of territory which they possessed at the ports, but it was now to benefit by the conflict between the nabobs and rajahs of Hindustan. It was not, however, until after the taking of Madras, in 1746, by La Bourdonnais, and the struggle against Dupleix, that the influence and dominion of the English Company was materially increased.

The crafty policy of Clive and Hastings, the English Governors, who successively employed force, stratagem, and bribery, to attain their ends, laid the foundation of British greatness in India, and, at the close of the last century, the Company were possessors of an immense extent of country, with no less than sixty millions of inhabitants. Their territory included Bengal, Behar, the provinces of Benares, Madras, and the Sircars. Tippoo Saib alone, the Sultan of Mysore, struggled against the English encroachments, but he was unable to hold out against the coalition formed against him by the skill of Colonel Wellesley. When rid of their formidable enemies, the Company overcame such opposition as remained by pensions; and, under the pretext of protection, imposed upon the rajahs an English garrison which was maintained at their expense.

One would imagine from all this that the English rule was detested; but that is not the case. The Company, recognizing the rights of individuals, did not attempt to change the religion, laws, or customs of their subjects. Neither is it surprising that travellers, even when they ventured into districts which, properly speaking, did not belong to Great Britain, incurred but little danger. In fact, so soon as the East India Company was free from political embarrassments, it encouraged explorers throughout its vast domains. At the same time travellers were despatched to the neighbouring territories to collect observations, and we propose rapidly to review those expeditions.

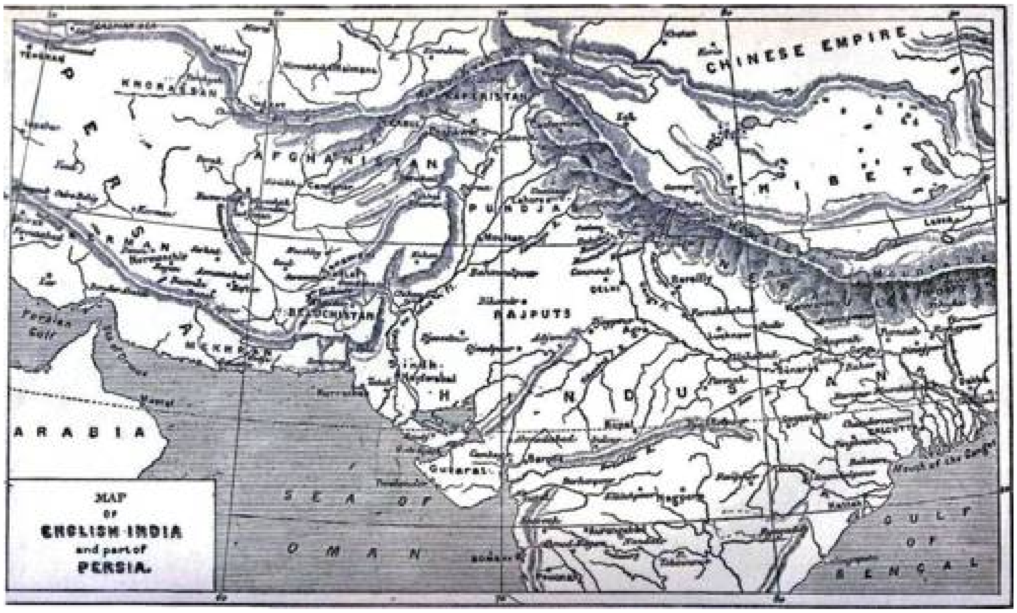
MAP
OF
ENGLISH INDIA
and part of
PERSIA.
CHINESE EMPIRE
TIBET
KHORASAN
AFGHANISTAN
PUNDJAB
PERSIA
RAJPUTS
BELOOCHISTAN
MEKRAN
Sindh
HINDUSTAN
Persian Gulf
ARABIA
Guzerat
Delhi
Calcutta
Mouth of the Ganges
SEA OF OMAN
Bombay
GULF OF BENGAL

Gravé par E. Morieu.

One of the first and most curious was that of Webb to the sources of the Ganges, a river concerning which uncertain and contradictory opinions prevailed. The Government of Bengal, recognizing the great importance of the Ganges in the interests of commerce, organized an expedition, of which Messrs. Webb, Roper, and Hearsay, formed part. They were to be accompanied by Sepoys, native servants, and interpreters.

The expedition reached Herdouar, a small village on the left of the river, upon the 1st of April, 1808. The situation of this village, at the entrance of the fertile plains of Hindustan, had caused it to be much frequented by pilgrims, and it was at this spot that purifications in the waters of the holy river took place during the hot season.

As every pilgrimage implies the sale of relics, Herdouar was the centre of an important market, where horses, camels, antimony, asafoetida, dried fruits, shawls, arrows, muslins, cotton and woollen goods from the Punjab, Cabulistan, and Cashmere, were to be had. Slaves, too, were to be bought there from three to thirty years of age, at prices varying from 10 to 150 rupees. This fair, where such different races, languages, and costumes were to be met with, presented a curious spectacle.

Upon the 12th of April the English expedition set out for Gangautri, following a road planted with white mulberries and figs, as far as Gourondar. A little farther on water-mills of simple construction were at work, upon the banks of streams shaded with willows and raspberry-trees. The soil was fertile, but the tyranny of the Government prevented the natives from making the best of it.

The route soon became mountainous, but peach, apricot, nut, and other European trees abounded, and at length the expedition found themselves in the midst of a chain of mountains, which appeared to belong to the Himalaya range.

The Baghirati, which is known further on as the Ganges, was met with at the end of a pass. To the left, the river is bounded by high, almost barren mountains; to the right stretches a fertile valley. At the village of Tchiavli, the poppy is largely cultivated for the preparation of opium; here, owing probably, to the bad quality of the water, all the peasants suffer from wens.

At Djosvara the travellers had to cross a bridge of rope, called a “djorila.” This was a strange and perilous structure.

“On either side of the river,” says Webb, “two strong poles are driven in, at a distance of two feet from each other, and across them is placed another piece of wood. To this is attached a dozen or more thick ropes, which are held down upon the ground by large heaps of wood. They are divided into two packets, about a foot apart; Blow hangs a ladder of rope knotted to one of these, which answers instead of a parapet. The flooring of the bridge is composed of small branches of trees, placed at intervals of two and a half, or three feet from each other. As these are generally slender, they seem as if they were on the point of breaking every moment, which naturally induces the traveller to depend upon the support of the ropes which form the parapet, and to keep them constantly under their arms. The first step taken upon so shaky a structure is sufficient to cause giddiness, for the action of walking makes it swing to either side, and the noise of the torrent over which it is suspended is not reassuring. Moreover the bridge is so narrow, that if two persons meet upon it, one must draw completely to the side to make room for the other.”

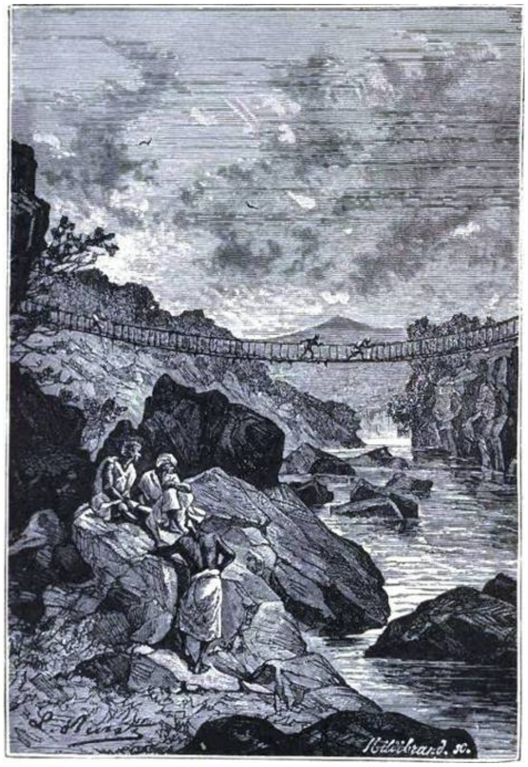
Hildibrand. sc.

Bridge of rope.

The expedition afterwards passed through the town of Baharat, where but few of the houses have been rebuilt since the earthquake of 1803. This locality has always enjoyed a certain importance from the fact that a market is held there, and also on account of the difficulty of obtaining provisions in the towns higher up, as well as from its central position. The routes to Jemauhi, Kedar, Nath, and Sirinagur all meet there.

Beyond Batheri the road became so bad that the travellers were obliged to abandon their baggage. There was a mere path-track by the edge of precipices, amid débris of stones and rocks; and the attempt to proceed was soon relinquished.

Devaprayaga is situated at the junction of the Baghirati, and the Aluknanda. The first, coming from the north, hurries along with noise and impetuosity; the second, broader, deeper, and more tranquil, rises no less than forty-six feet above its ordinary level in the rainy season. The junction of these two rivers forms the Ganges, and is a sacred spot from which the Brahmins draw considerable profit, as they have arranged pools there, where for a certain price pilgrims can perform their ablutions without danger of being carried away by the current.

The Aluknanda was crossed by means of a running bridge, or “Dindla,” which is thus described: —

“This bridge consists of three or four large ropes fixed upon either bank, and upon these a small seat some eighteen inches square is slung by means of hoops at either end. Upon this seat the traveller takes his place, and is drawn from one side of the river to the other by a rope pulled by the man upon the opposite bank.”

The expedition reached Sirinagur upon the 13th of May. The curiosity of the inhabitants had been so much excited that the magistrates sent a message to the English begging them to march through the town.

Sirinagur, which had been visited by Colonel Hardwick in 1796, had been almost completely destroyed by the earthquake of 1803, and had in the same year been conquered by the Gorkhalis. Here Webb was joined by the emissaries whom he had sent to Gangautri by the route which he himself had been unable to follow, and who had visited the source of the Ganges.

“A large rock,” he says, “on either side of which water flows, and which is very shallow, roughly resembles the body and mouth of a cow. A cavity at one end of its surface gave rise to its name of Gaoumokhi, the mouth of the cow, who, by its fancied resemblance, is popularly supposed to vomit the water of the sacred river. A little farther on, advance is impossible, a mountain as steep as a wall rises in front; the Ganges appeared to issue from the snow, which lay at its feet; the valley terminated here. No one has ever gone any farther.”

The expedition returned by a different route. It met with the tributaries of the Ganges, and of the Keli Ganga, or Mandacni, rivers rising in the Mountains of Kerdar. Immense flocks of goats and sheep laden with grain were met with, numbers of defiles crossed, and after passing the towns of Badrinath and Manah the expedition finally reached the cascade of Barson, in the midst of heavy snow and intense cold.

“This,” says Webb’s narrative, “is the goal of the devotions of the pilgrims. Some of them come here to be sprinkled by the sacred spray of the cascade.

At this spot the course of the Aluknanda may be traced as far as the south-western extremity of the valley, but its source is hidden under heaps of snow, which have probably been accumulating for centuries.”

Webb furnishes some details respecting the women of Manah. They wore necklaces, earrings, and gold and silver ornaments, which were scarcely in keeping with their coarse attire. Some of the children wore necklaces and bracelets of silver to the value of six hundred rupees.

In winter, this town, which does a great trade with Thibet, is completely buried in snow, and the natives take refuge in neighbouring towns.

The expedition visited the temple at Badrinath, which is far-famed for its sanctity. Neither its internal nor external structure or appearance give any idea of the immense sums which are expended upon it. It is one of the oldest and most venerated sanctuaries of India. Ablutions are performed there in reservoirs fed with very warm sulphureous water.

“There are,” says the narrative, “a great number of hot springs, each having their special name and virtue, and from all of them doubtless the Brahmins derive profit. For this reason, the poor pilgrim, as he gets through the requisite ablutions, finds his purse diminish with the number of his sins, and the many tolls exacted from him upon the road to paradise might induce him to consider the narrow way by no means the least expensive one. This temple possesses seven hundred villages, which have either been ceded to it by government, given as security for loans, or bought by private individuals and given as offerings.”

The expedition reached Djosimah on the 1st of June. There the Brahmin who acted as guide received orders from the government of Nepaul, to conduct the travellers back immediately to the territories of the Company.

The government had discovered, a little late it must be admitted, that the English explorations had a political as well as a geographical significance. A month afterwards, Webb and his companions entered Delhi, having definitely settled the course of the Ganges, and ascertained the sources of the Baghirati and Aluknanda; in fact, having attained the object which the Company had had in view.

In 1808, the English government decided upon sending a new mission to the Punjab, then under the dominion of Runjeet Sing. The anonymous narrative of this expedition published in the “Annales des Voyages” offers some particulars of interest, from which we will extract a few.

Upon the 6th of April, 1808, an English officer, in charge of the expedition, reached Herdonai, which he represents as the rendezvous of a million individuals at the time of the yearly fair. At Boria, which is situated between the Jumna and the Sutlej, the traveller was an object of much curiosity to the women, who begged permission to come and see him.

“Their looks and gestures,” says the narrative, “sufficiently expressed their surprise. They approached me laughing heartily, the colour of my face amused them extremely. They addressed many questions to me, asking me whether I never wore a hat, whether I exposed my face to the sun, whether I remained continually shut up, or only walked out under shelter, and whether I slept upon the table placed in my tent, although my bed occupied one side of it; the curtains were, however, closed. They then examined it in detail, together with the lining of my tent and everything belonging to it. These women were all good-looking, with mild and regular features, their complexion was olive, and contrasted agreeably with their white and even teeth, which are a distinguishing feature of all the inhabitants of the Punjab.”

Mustafabad, Mulana, and Umballa were visited in succession by the British officer. The country through which he passed was inhabited by Sikhs, a race remarkable for benevolence, hospitality, and truthfulness. The author of the narrative is of opinion that they are the finest race of men in India. Puttiala, Makeonara, Fegonara, Oudamitta, which Lord Lake entered in 1805 in his pursuit of a Mahratta chief, and finally Amritsur were stages easily passed.

Amritsur is better built than the generality of towns in Hindustan. It is the largest depôt of shawls and saffron as well as other articles of Deccan merchandise. The traveller says: —

“Upon the 14th, having put white shoes on my feet, I paid a visit to the Amritsur or reservoir of the elixir of immortality from whence the city derives its name. It is a reservoir of about 135 feet square, built of brick, and in the centre is a pretty temple dedicated to Gourogovind Sing. A footpath leads to it; it is decorated both within and without, and the rajah often adds to its stores by gifts of ornaments. In this sacred receptacle, the book of the laws, written by Gouron in the ‘gourou moukhtis’ character, is placed. This temple is called Hermendel, or the Dwelling of God. Some 600 priests are attached to its service, and comfortable dwellings are provided for them out of the voluntary contributions of the devotees who visit the temple. Although the priests are regarded with infinite respect, they are not absolutely free from vice. When they have money, they spend it as freely as they have gained it. The number of pretty women who daily repair to the temple is very great. They far excel the women of the inferior classes in Hindustan in the elegance of their manners, their fine proportions, and handsome features.”

Lahore was next visited by the officer. It is interesting to know what remained of that fine city at the commencement of the present century. The narrative says: —

“Its very high walls are ornamented externally with all the profusion of Eastern taste, but they are falling into ruins, as are also the mosques and houses inside the town. Time has laid its destructive hand upon this city, as upon Delhi and Agra. The ruins of Lahore are already as extensive as those of that ancient capital.”

Three days after his arrival the traveller was received with great politeness by Runjeet Sing, who conversed with him, principally upon military topics. The rajah was then twenty-seven years of age. His countenance would have been pleasant, had not the small-pox deprived him of one eye; his manners were simple, affable, and yet kingly. After paying visits to the tomb of Shah Jehan, to the Schalamar, and other monuments at Lahore, the officer returned to Delhi and the possessions of the Company. To his visit was due that better knowledge of the country which could not fail to tempt the ambition of the English Government.

The following year (1809), an embassy, consisting of Messrs. Nicholas Hankey Smith, Henry Ellis, Robert Taylor, and Henry Pottinger, was sent to the Emirs of Scinde. The escort was commanded by Captain Charles Christie.

The mission was transported to Keratchy by boat. The governor of that fort refused to allow the embassy to disembark, without instructions from the emirs. An interchange of correspondence ensued, as a result of which the envoy, Smith, drew attention to certain improprieties relating to the title and respective rank of the Governor-General and the emirs. The governor excused himself upon the ground of his ignorance of the Persian language, and said, that not wishing a cause of misunderstanding to exist, he was quite ready to kill or put out the eyes (as the envoy pleased) of the person who had written the letter. This declaration appeared sufficient to the English, who deprecated the execution of the guilty person.

In their letters the emirs affected a tone of contemptuous superiority; at the same time they brought a body of 8000 men within reach, and put every possible difficulty in the way of the English efforts to procure information. After tedious negotiations, in the course of which British pride was humbled more than once, the embassy received permission to start for Hyderabad.

Above Keratchy, which is the principal export harbour of Scinde, a vast plain without trees or vegetation extends along the coast. Five days are necessary to cross this, and reach Tatah, the ancient capital of Scinde, then ruined and deserted. Formerly it was brought into communication by means of canals, with the Sind, an immense river, which is, at its mouth, in reality an arm of the sea. Pottinger collected the most precise, complete, and useful details respecting the Sind, which were then known.

It had been arranged beforehand that the embassy should find a plausible excuse for separating and reaching Hyderabad by two different routes, in order to obtain geographical information on the country. The city was soon reached, and the same difficult negotiations about the reception of the embassy, who refused to submit to the humiliating exactions of the emirs, had to be gone through. Pottinger thus describes the arrival at Hyderabad. “The precipice upon which the eastern façade of the fortress of Hyderabad is situated, the roofs of the houses, and even the fortifications, were thronged by a multitude of both sexes, who testified friendly feeling towards us by acclamation and applause. Upon reaching the palace, where they were to dismount, the English were met by Ouli Mahommed Khan and other eminent officers, who walked before us towards a covered platform, at the extremity of which the emirs were seated. This platform being covered with the richest Persian carpet, we took off our shoes. From the moment the envoy took the first step towards the princes, they all three rose, and remained standing until he reached the place pointed out to him — an embroidered cloth, which distinguished him from the rest of the embassy. The princes addressed to each of us polite questions respecting our health. As it was a purely ceremonial reception, everything went off well, with compliments and polite expressions.

“The emirs wore a great number of precious stones, in addition to those which ornamented the hilts and scabbards of their swords and daggers, and emeralds and rubies of extraordinary size shone at their girdles. They were seated according to age, the eldest in the centre, the second to his right, the youngest on the left. A carpet of light felt covered the entire circle, and over this was a mattress of silk about an inch thick, exactly large enough to accommodate the three princes.”

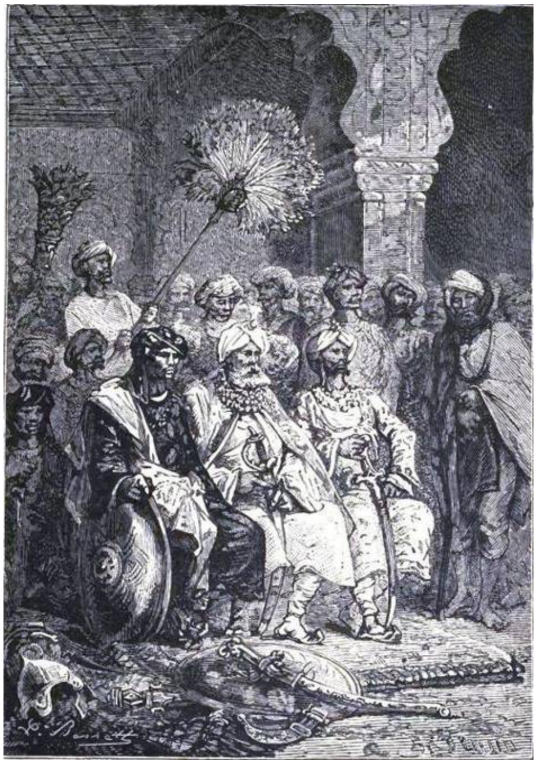

“They were seated according to age.”

The narrative concludes with a description of Hyderabad, a fortress which would have scarcely been able to offer any resistance to a European enemy, and with various reflections upon the nature of the embassy, which had amongst other aims the closing of the entrance of Scinde against the French. The treaty concluded, the English returned to Bombay.

By this expedition the East India Company gained a better knowledge of one of the neighbouring kingdoms, and collected precious documents relating to the resources and productions of a country traversed by an immense river, the Indus of the ancients, which rises in the Himalayas, and might readily serve to transport the products of an immense territory. The end gained was perhaps rather political than geographical; but science profited, once more, by political needs.

Hitherto the little knowledge that had been gained of the regions lying between Cabulistan, India, and Persia, had been as incomplete as it was defective.

The Company, thoroughly satisfied with the manner in which Captain Christie and Lieutenant Pottinger had accomplished their embassy, resolved to confide to them a delicate and difficult mission. They were to rejoin General Malcolm, ambassador to Persia, by crossing Beluchistan, and in so doing to collect more accurate and precise details of that vast extent of country than had hitherto been acquired.

It was useless to think of crossing Beluchistan, with its fanatic population, in European dress. Christie and Pottinger, therefore, had recourse to a Hindu merchant, who provided horses on behalf of the Governments of Madras and Bombay, and accredited them as his agents to Kelat, the capital of Beluchistan.

Upon the 2nd of January, 1810, the two officers embarked at Bombay for Someany, the sole sea-port of the province of Lhossa, which they reached after a stay at Poorbunder, on the coast of Guzerat.

The entire country traversed by the travellers before they arrived at Bela was a morass, interspersed with jungle. The “Djam,” or governor of that town, was an intelligent man. He put numerous questions to the English, by which he showed a desire to learn, and then confided the task of conducting the travellers to Kelat, to the chief of the tribe of Bezendjos, who are Belutchis.

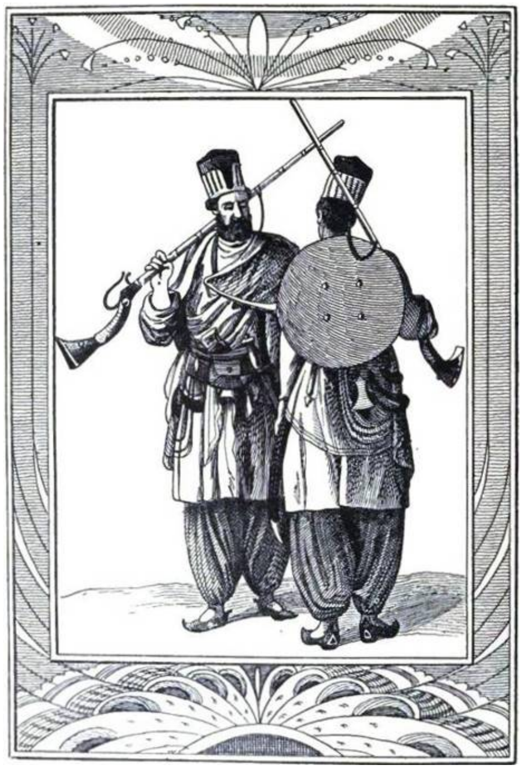

Beluchistan warriors.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The climate had changed since they left Bombay, and in the mountains, Pottinger and Christie experienced cold sufficiently keen to freeze the water in the leather bottles.

“Kelat,” says Pottinger, “the capital of the whole of Beluchistan, whence it derives its name, Kelat, or *the city*, is situated upon a height to the west of a well-cultivated plain or valley, eight miles long and three wide. The greater portion of this is laid out in gardens. The town forms a square. It is surrounded on three sides by a mud wall about twenty feet high, flanked, at distances of 250 feet, by bastions, which, like the walls, are pierced with a large number of barbicans for musketry. I had no opportunity of visiting the interior of the palace, but it consists merely of a confused mass of mud buildings with flat roofs like terraces; the whole is defended by low walls, furnished with parapets and pierced with barbicans. There are about 2500 houses in the town, and nearly half as many in the suburbs. They are built of half-baked bricks and wood, the whole smeared over with mud. The streets, as a rule, are larger than those in towns inhabited by Asiatics. They usually have a raised footway on either side for pedestrians, in the centre an open stream, which is rendered very unpleasant by the filth and rubbish thrown into it, and by the stagnant rainwater which collects, for there is no regulation insisting upon it being cleaned. Another obstacle to the cleanliness and comfort of the town exists in the projection of the upper stories of the houses, which makes the under buildings damp and dark. The bazaar of Kelat is very large, and well stocked with every kind of merchandize. Every day it is supplied with provisions, vegetables, and all kinds of food, which are cheap.”

According to Pottinger’s account, the population is divided into two distinct classes — the Belutchis and the Brahouis, and each of these is subdivided into a number of tribes. The first is related to the modern Persian, both in appearance and speech; the Brahoui, on the contrary, retains a great number of Hindu words. Intermarriage between the two has given rise to a third.

The Belutchis, coming from the mountains of Mekram, are “Tunnites,” that is to say, they consider the first four Imans as the legitimate successors of Mahomet.

They are a pastoral people, and have the faults and virtues of their class. If they are hospitable, they are also indolent, and pass their time in gambling and smoking. As a rule, they content themselves with one or two wives, and are less jealous of their being seen by strangers than are other Mussulmen. They have a large number of slaves of both sexes, whom they treat humanely. They are excellent marksmen, and passionately fond of hunting. Brave under all circumstances, they take pleasure in “razzias,” which they call “tchépaos.” As a rule, these expeditions are undertaken by the Nherouis, the wildest and most thievish of the Belutchis.

The Brahouis carry their wandering habits still farther. Few men are more active and strong; they endure the glacial cold of the mountains equally with the burning heat of the plains. They are of small stature, but as brave, as skilful in shooting, as faithful to their promises, as the Belutchis, and have not so pronounced a taste for plunder.

Pottinger says, “I have seen no Asiatic people whom they resemble, for a large number have brown hair and beards.”

After a short stay at Kelat, the two travellers, who still passed as horse-dealers, resolved to continue their journey, but instead of following the high road to Kandahar, they crossed a dreary and barren country, ill-populated, watered by the Caisser, a river which dries up during the summer; and they reached a little town, called Noschky or Nouchky, on the frontier of Afghanistan.

At this place, the Belutchis, who appeared friendly, represented to them the great difficulty of reaching Khorassan and its capital, Herat, by way of Sedjistan. They advised the travellers to try to reach Kerman by way of Kedje and Benpor, or by Serhed, a village on the western frontier of Beluchistan, and from thence to enter Nermanchir. At the same moment the idea of following two distinct routes presented itself to both Christie and Pottinger. This course was contrary to their instructions; “but,” said Pottinger, “we found a ready excuse in the unquestionable advantage which would result from our procuring more extensive geographical and statistical knowledge of the country we were sent to explore than we could hope to do by travelling together.”

Christie set out first, by way of Douchak. We shall follow his fortunes hereafter.

A few days later, while still at Noutch, Pottinger received letters from his correspondent at Kelat, telling him that the emirs of Scinde were searching for them, as they had been recognized, and that his best plan for safety was to set out immediately.

Upon the 25th of March Pottinger started for Serawan, a very small town near the Afghan frontier. Upon his way thither Pottinger met with some singular altars, or tombs, the construction of which was attributed to the Ghebers, or fire-worshippers, who are known in our day as Parsees.

Serawan is six miles from the Serawani mountains, in a sterile and bare district. This town owes its existence to the constant supply of water it derives from the Beli, an inestimable advantage in a country constantly exposed to drought, scarcity, and famine.

Pottinger afterwards visited the Kharan, celebrated for the strength and activity of its camels, and crossed the desert which forms the southern extremity of Afghanistan. The sand of this desert is so fine that its particles are almost impalpable, and the action of the wind causes it to accumulate into heaps ten or twenty feet high, divided by deep valleys. Even in calm weather a great number of particles float in the air, giving rise to a mirage of a peculiar kind, and getting into the traveller’s eyes, mouth, and nostrils, cause an excessive irritation, with an insatiable thirst.

In all this territory, Pottinger personated a “pyrzadeh,” or holy man, for the natives are of a very thievish disposition, and in the character of a merchant he might have been involved in unpleasant adventures. After leaving the village of Goul, in the district of Daizouk, the traveller passed through the ruined towns of Asmanabad, Hefter, and Pourah, where Pottinger was forced to admit that he was a “Feringhi,” to the great scandal of the guide, who during the two months they had been together had never doubted him, and to whom he had given many proofs of sanctity.

At last, worn out by fatigue, and at the end of his resources, Pottinger reached Benpor, a locality which had been visited in 1808 by Mr. Grant, a captain in the Bengal Sepoy Infantry. Encouraged by the excellent account given by that officer, Pottinger presented himself to the Serdar. But instead of affording him the necessary help for the prosecution of his journey, that functionary, discontented with the small present Pottinger offered him, found means to extort from him a pair of pistols, which would have been of great use to him.

Basman is the last inhabited town of Beluchistan. At this spot there is a hot sulphureous spring, which the Belutchis consider a certain cure for cutaneous diseases.

The frontiers of Persia are far from "scientific," hence a large tract of country remains not neutral, but a subject of dispute, and is the scene of sanguinary contests.

The little town of Regan, in Nermanchir, is very pretty. It is a fort, or rather a fortified village, surrounded by high walls, in good repair, and furnished with bastions.

Further on, in Persia proper, lies Benn, a town which was formerly of importance, as the ruins which surround it sufficiently prove. Here Pottinger was cordially received by the governor.

"On approaching," says Pottinger, "he turned to one of his suite and asked where the 'Feringhi' was. I was pointed out to him. Making me a sign to follow him, his fixed look at me, which took me in from head to foot, proclaimed his astonishment at my costume, which in truth was strange enough to serve as an excuse for the impoliteness of his staring. I was wearing the long shirt of a Belutchi, and a pair of trousers which had once been white, but which in the six weeks I had worn them had become brown, and were all but in rags; in addition to this I had on a blue turban, a piece of rope served me as a girdle, and I carried in my hand a thick stick, which had assisted me greatly in my walking, and protected me from dogs.”

In spite of the dilapidated appearance of the tatterdemalion who thus presented himself before him, the governor received Pottinger with as much cordiality as was to be expected from a Mussulman, and provided him with a guide to Kerman. The traveller reached that town upon the 3rd of May, feeling that he had accomplished the most difficult portion of his journey, and was almost in safety.

Kerman is the capital of ancient Karamania. Under the Afghan rule it was a flourishing town, and manufactured shawls which rivalled those of Cashmere.

Here Pottinger witnessed one of those spectacles which, common enough to countries where human life is of little value, always fill Europeans with horror and disgust. The governor of this town was both son-in-law and nephew of the shah, and also the son of the Shah’s wife. “Upon the 15th of May,” says Pottinger, “the prince himself judged certain persons who were accused of killing one of their servants. It is difficult to estimate the state of restlessness and alarm which prevailed in the village during the entire day. The gates of the town were shut, that no one might pass out. The government officials did not transact any business. People were cited as witnesses, without previous notice. I saw two or three taken to the palace in a state of agitation which could scarcely have been greater had they been going to the scaffold. About three in the afternoon the prince passed sentence upon those who had been convicted. Some had their eyes put out, some the tongue split. Some had the ears, nose, and lips cut off; others were deprived of their hands, fingers, or toes. I learned that whilst these horrible punishments were inflicted, the prince remained seated at the window where I had seen him, and gave his orders without the least sign of compassion or of horror at the scene which took place before him.”

Leaving Kerman, Pottinger reached Cheré Bebig, which is equally distant from Yezd, Shiraz, and Kerman, and thence proceeded to Ispahan, where he had the pleasure of finding his companion Christie. At Meragha he met General Malcolm. It was now seven months since they had left Bombay. Christie had traversed 2250 miles, and Pottinger 2412. Meanwhile Christie had accomplished his perilous journey much better than he had anticipated.

Leaving Noutch upon the 22nd of March, he crossed the Vachouty mountains and some uncultivated country, to the banks of the Helmend, a river which flows into Lake Hamoun.

Christie in his report to the Company says: —

“The Helmend, after passing near Kandahar, flows south-west and west, and enters Sedjestan some four days march from Douchak; making a détour around the mountains, it finally forms a lake. At Peldalek, which we visited, it is about 1200 feet in width, and very deep; the water is very good. The country is cultivated by irrigation for half a mile on either side; then the desert begins, and rises in perpendicular cliffs. The banks of the river abound in tamarind-trees and provide pasturage for cattle.”

Sedjestan, which is watered by this river, comprises only 500 square miles. The portions of this district which are inhabited are those upon the river Helmend, whose bed deepens every year.

At Elemdar Christie sent for a Hindu, to whom he had an introduction. This man advised him to dismiss his Belutchi attendants and to personate a pilgrim. A few days later he penetrated to Douchak, now known as Jellalabad. He says: —

“The ruins of the ancient city cover quite as large a space of ground as Ispahan. It was built, like all the towns of Sedjistan, of half-burned bricks, the houses being two stories high, with vaulted roofs. The modern town of Jellalabad is clean, pretty, and growing; it contains nearly 2000 houses and a fair bazaar.” The road from Douchak to Herat was easy. Christie’s sole difficulty was in carrying out his personation of a pilgrim. Herat lies in a valley, surrounded by high mountains and watered by a river, to which it is due that gardens and orchards abound. The town covers an area of about four square miles; it is surrounded by a wall flanked with towers, and a moat full of water. Large bazaars, containing numerous shops, and the Mechedé Djouna, or Mosque of Friday, are its chief ornaments.

No town has less waste land or a denser population. Christie estimates it at 100,000. Herat is the most commercial of all Asiatic towns under the dominion of native princes. It is the depôt for all the traffic between Cabul, Candahar, Hindustan, Cashmere, and Persia, and itself produces choice merchandize, silks, saffron, horses, and asafoetida.

“This plant,” says Christie, “grows to a height of two or three feet, the stalk is two inches thick; it finishes off in an umbel which at maturity is yellow, and not unlike a cauliflower. It is much relished by Hindus and Belutchis. They prepare it for eating by cooking the stalks in ashes, and boiling the head like other vegetables; but it always retains its pungent smell and taste.” Herat, like so many other Eastern towns, possesses beautiful public gardens, but they are only cultivated for the sake of the produce, which is sold in the bazaar. After a stay of a month at Herat, disguised as a horse-dealer, Christie, announcing that he would return after a pilgrimage to Meshid, which he contemplated, left the town. He directed his course to Yezd, across a country ravaged by the Osbeks, who had destroyed the tanks intended to receive the rain-water.

Yezd is a large and populous town on the skirts of a desert of sand. It is called “Dar-oul-Ehabet” or “The Seat of Adoration.” It is celebrated for the security to be enjoyed there, which contributes largely to the development of its trade with Hindustan, Khorassan, Persia, and Bagdad. Christie describes the bazaar as large and well stocked. The town contains 20,000 houses, apart from those belonging to the Ghebers, who are estimated at 4000. They are an active and laborious people, although cruelly oppressed. From Yezd to Ispahan, where he alighted at the palace of the Emir Oud-Daoulé, Christie had travelled a distance of 170 miles upon a good road.

At Yezd, as we have seen, he met his companion, Pottinger. The two friends could but exchange mutual congratulations at the accomplishment of their mission, and their escape from the dangers of a fanatical country.

Pottinger’s narrative, as may perhaps be gathered from the sketch we have given, was very curious. More exact than most of his predecessors, he had collected and offered to the public a mass of most interesting historical facts, anecdotes, and geographical descriptions.

Cabulistan had been, from the middle of the eighteenth century, the scene of a succession of ruinous civil wars. Competitors, with more or less right to the throne, had carried fire and sword everywhere, and converted that rich and fertile province into a desert, where the remains of ruined cities alone bore witness to former prosperity.

About the year 1808 the throne of Cabul was occupied by Soojah-Oul-Moulk. England, uneasy at the projects formed by Napoleon with a view of attacking her possessions in India, and at the offers of alliance made by him through General Gardane to the Shah of Persia, resolved to send an embassy to the court of Cabul, hoping to gain the king over to the interests of the East India Company.

Mountstuart Elphinstone was selected as envoy, and has left an interesting account of his mission. He collected much novel information concerning this region and the tribes by which it is peopled. His book acquires a new interest in our own day, and we turn with pleasure to pages devoted to the Khyberis and other mountain tribes, amid the events which are now taking place.

Leaving Delhi in October, 1808, Elphinstone reached Kanun, where the desert commences, and then the Shekhawuttée, a district inhabited by Rajpoots. At the end of October the embassy arrived at Singuana, a pretty town, the rajah of which was an inveterate opium-smoker. He is described as a small man, with large eyes, much inflamed by the use of opium. His beard, which was curled up to his ears on each side, gave him a ferocious appearance.

Djounjounka, whose gardens give freshness in the midst of these desert regions, is not now a dependency of the Rajah of Bekaneer, whose revenues do not exceed 1,250,000 francs. How is it possible for that prince to collect such revenues from a desert and uncultivated territory, overrun by myriads of rats, flocks of gazelles, and herds of wild asses?

The path across the sand-hills was so narrow that two camels abreast could scarcely pass it. At the least deviation from the path those animals would sink in the sand as if it had been snow, so that the smallest difficulty with the head of the column delayed the entire caravan. Those in front could not advance if those in the rear were delayed; and lest they should lose sight of the guides, trumpets and drums were employed as signals to prevent separation.

One could almost fancy it the march of an army. The warlike sounds, the brilliant uniforms and arms, were scarcely calculated to convey the idea of a peaceful embassy. The envoy speaks of the want of water, and the bad quality of that which was procurable was unbearable to the soldiers and servants. Although they quenched their thirst with the abundant water-melons, they could not do so without ill results to their health. Most of the natives of India who accompanied the embassy suffered from low fever and dysentery. Forty persons died during the first week's stay at Bekaneer. La Fontaine's description of the floating sticks might be aptly applied to Bekaneer. "From afar off it is something, near at hand it is nought." The external appearance of the town is pleasant, but it is a mere disorderly collection of cabins enclosed by mud walls.

At that time the country was invaded by five armies, and the belligerents sent a succession of envoys to the English ambassador, hoping to obtain, if not substantial assistance, at least moral support. Elphinstone was received by the Rajah of Bekaneer. "This court," he says, "was different from all I had seen elsewhere in India. The men were whiter than the Hindus, resembled Jews in feature, and wore magnificent turbans. The rajah and his relatives wore caps of various colours, adorned with precious stones.

"The rajah leant upon a steel buckler, the centre of which was raised, and the border encrusted with diamonds and rubies. Shortly after our entrance the rajah proposed that we should retire from the heat and importunity of the crowd. We took our seats on the ground, according to Indian custom, and the rajah delivered a discourse, in which he said he was the vassal of the sovereign of Delhi, and that as Delhi was in the possession of the British, he honoured the sovereignty of my government in my person.

“He caused the keys of the fort to be brought to him and handed them to me, but having received no instructions regarding such an event, I refused them. After much persuasion the rajah consented to keep his keys. Shortly afterwards a troop of bayadères came in, and dancing and singing continued until we took our leave.”

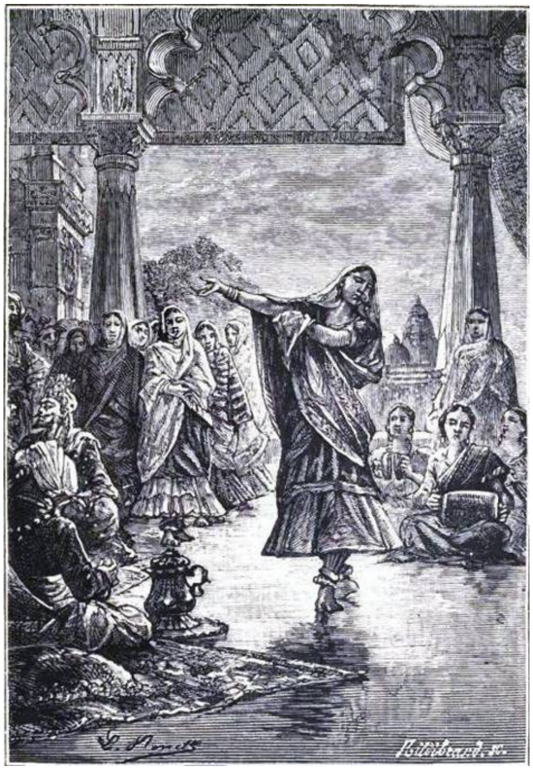

“A troop of bayadères came in.”

Upon leaving Bekaneer the travellers entered a desert, in the middle of which stand the cities of Monyghur and Bahawulpore, where a compact crowd awaited the embassy. The Hyphases, upon which Alexander’s fleet sailed, scarcely answered to the idea such a reminiscence inspires. Upon the morrow Bahaweel-Khan, governor of one of the eastern provinces of Cabul, arrived, bringing magnificent presents for the English ambassador, whom he conducted by the river Hyphases as far as Moultan, a town famous for its silk manufactures. The governor of the town had been terror-struck at hearing of the approach of the English, and there had been a discussion as to the attitude it was to assume, and whether the latter intended to take the town by stratagem, or to demand its surrender. When these fears were allayed, a cordial welcome followed.

Elphinstone’s description, if somewhat exaggerated, is not the less curious. After describing how the governor saluted Mr. Strachey, the secretary to the embassy, after the Persian custom, he adds, — ”They took their way together towards the tent, and the disorder increased. Some were wrestling, others on horseback mixed with the pedestrians. Mr. Strachey’s horse was nearly thrown to the ground, and the secretary regained his equilibrium with difficulty. The khan and his suite mistook the road in approaching the tent, and threw themselves upon the cavalry with such impetuosity that the latter had scarcely time to face about and let them pass. The disordered troops fell back upon the tent, the servants of the khan fled, the barriers were torn up and trampled under foot; even the ropes of the tent broke, and the cloth covering very nearly fell on our heads. The tents were crowded immediately, and all was in darkness. The governor and six of his suite seated themselves, the others stood at arms. The visit was of short duration; the governor took refuge in repeating his rosary with great fervour, and in saying to me, in agitated tones, ‘You are welcome! you are welcome!’ Then on the pretext that the crowd inconvenienced me, he retired.”

The account is amusing, but are all its details accurate? That, however, is of little moment. On the 31st December the embassy passed the Indus, and entered a country cultivated with a care and method unlike anything to be seen in Hindustan. The natives of this country had never heard of the English, and took them for Moguls, Afghans, or Hindus. The strangest reports were current among these lovers of the marvellous.

It was necessary to remain a month at Déra, to await the arrival of a “Mehnandar,” a functionary whose duty it was to introduce ambassadors. Two persons attached to the embassy availed themselves of that opportunity to ascend the peak of Tukhte Soleiman, or the Crown of Solomon, upon which, according to the legend, the ark of Noah rested after the deluge.

The departure from Déra took place upon the 7th of February, and after travelling through delightful countries, the embassy arrived at Peshawur. The king had come to meet them, for Peshawur was not the usual residence of the court. The narrative says, — ”Upon the day of our arrival our dinner was furnished from the royal kitchen. The dishes were excellent. Afterwards we had the meat prepared in our own way; but the king continued to provide us with breakfast, dinner, and supper, more than sufficient for 2000 persons, 200 horses, and a large number of elephants. Our suite was large, and much of this was needed; still I had great trouble at the end of a month in persuading his majesty to allow some retrenchment of this useless profusion.”

As might have been expected, the negotiations preceding presentation at court were long and difficult. Finally, however, all was arranged, and the reception was as cordial as diplomatic customs permitted. The king was loaded with diamonds and precious stones; he wore a magnificent crown, and the Koh-i-noor sparkled upon one of his bracelets. This is the largest diamond in existence; a drawing of it may be seen in Tavernier's Travels.[1]

[1] The Koh-i-noor is now in the possession of the Queen of England.

Elphinstone, after describing the ceremonies, says, — "I must admit that if certain things, especially the extraordinary richness of the royal costume, excited my astonishment, there was also much that fell below my expectations. Taking it as a whole, one saw less indication of the prosperity of a powerful state than symptoms of the decay of a monarchy which had formerly been flourishing."

The ambassador goes on to speak of the rapacity with which the king's suite quarrelled about the presents offered by the English, and gives other details which struck him unpleasantly.

Elphinstone was more agreeably impressed with the king at his second interview. He says, — "It is difficult to believe that an Eastern monarch can possess such a good manner, and so perfectly preserve his dignity while trying to please."

The plain of Peshawur, which is surrounded on all but the eastern side by high mountains, is watered by three branches of the Cabul river, which meet here, and by many smaller rivers. Hence it is singularly fertile. Plums, peaches, pears, quinces, pomegranates, dates, grow in profusion. The population, so sparsely sprinkled throughout the arid countries which the ambassador had come through, were collected here, and Lieut. Macartney counted no less than thirty-two villages.

At Peshawur there are 100,000 inhabitants, living in brick houses three stories high. Various mosques, not in any way remarkable for architecture, a fine caravanserai, and the fortified castle in which the king received the embassy, are the only buildings of importance. The varieties of races, with different costumes, present a constantly changing picture, a human kaleidoscope, which appears made especially for the astonishment of a stranger. Persians, Afghans, Kyberis, Hazaurehs, Douranis, &c. with horses, dromedaries, and Bactrian camels, afford the naturalist much both to observe and to describe respecting bipeds and quadrupeds. But the charm of this town, as of every other throughout India, is to be found in its gardens, with their abundant and fragrant flowers, especially roses.

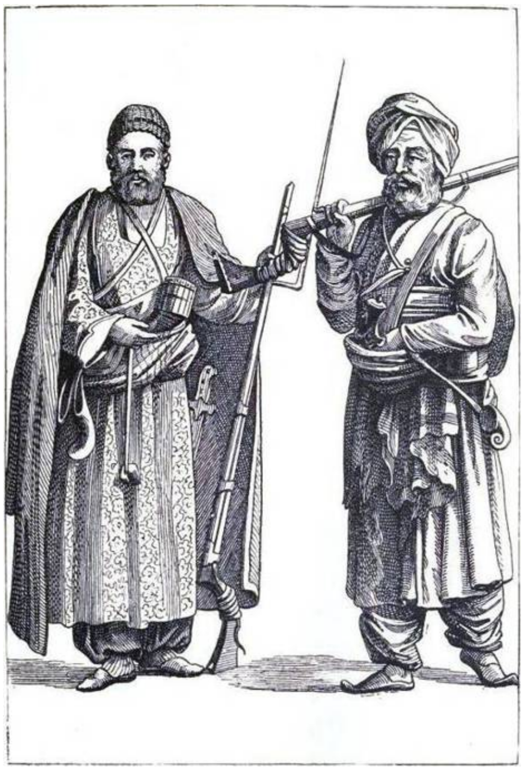

Afghan costumes.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The king’s situation at this time was far from pleasant. His brother, whom he had dethroned after a popular insurrection, had now taken arms and just seized Cabul. A longer stay was impossible for the embassy. They had to return to India by way of Attock and the valley of Hussoun Abdoul, which is celebrated for its beauty. There Elphinstone was to await the result of the struggle between the brothers, which would decide the fate of the throne of Cabul, but he had received letters of recall. Moreover, fate was against Soojah, who, after being completely worsted, had been forced to seek safety in flight.

The embassy proceeded on its way, and crossed the country of the Sikhs — a rude mountain race, half-naked and semi-barbarous.

“The Sikhs, who a few years later were to make themselves terribly famous,” says Elphinstone, “are tall, thin men, and very strong. Their garments consist of trousers which reach only half way down the thigh. They wear cloaks of skins which hang negligently from the shoulder. Their turbans are not large, but are very high and flattened in front. No scissors ever touch either hair or beard. Their arms are bows and arrows or muskets. Men of rank have very handsome bows, and never pay a visit without being armed with them. Almost the whole Punjab belongs to Runjeet Sing, who in 1805 was only one among many chiefs in the country. At the time of our expedition, he had acquired the sovereignty of the whole country occupied by the Sikhs, and had taken the title of king.”

No incident of any moment marked the return of the embassy to Delhi. In addition to the narrative of events which had taken place before their eyes, its members brought back invaluable documents concerning the geography of Afghanistan and Cabulistan, the climate, animals, and vegetable and mineral productions of that vast country.

Elphinstone devotes several chapters of his narrative to the origin, history, government, legislation, condition of the women, language, and commerce of these countries; facts that were largely appropriated by the best informed newspapers when the recent English expedition to Afghanistan was undertaken.

His work ends with an exhaustive treatise upon the tribes who form the population of Afghanistan, and a summary of invaluable information respecting the neighbouring countries.

Elphinstone’s narrative is curious, interesting, and valuable for many reasons, and may be consulted in our own day with advantage.

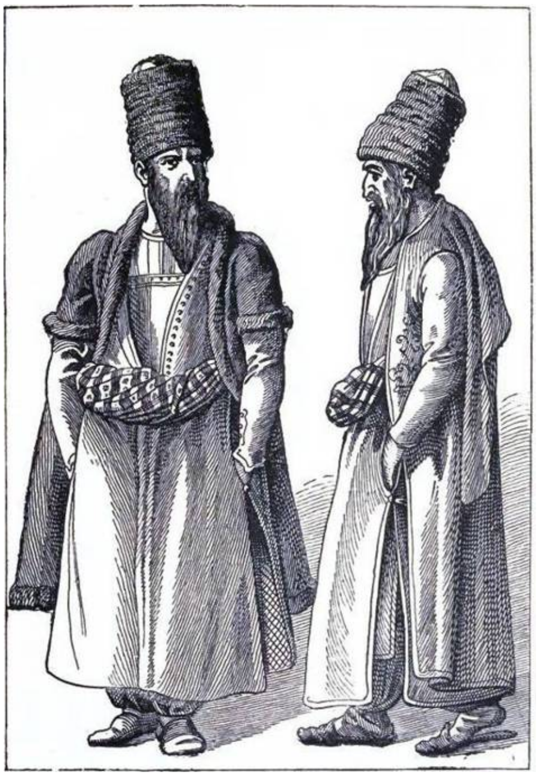

Persian costumes.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The zeal of the East India Company was indefatigable. One expedition had no sooner returned than another was started, with different instructions. It was highly important to be thoroughly *au fait* of the ever-changing Asiatic policy, and to prevent coalition between the various native tribes against the conquerors of the soil. In 1812, a new idea, and a more peaceful one, gave rise to the journey of Moorcroft and Captain Hearsay to Lake Manasarowar, in the province of the Un-dés, which is a portion of Little Thibet.

This time the object was to bring back a flock of Cashmere goats, whose long silk hair is used in the manufacture of the world-famed shawls. In addition, it was proposed to disprove the assertion of the Hindus that the source of the Ganges is beyond the Himalayas, in Lake Manasarowar. A difficult and perilous task! It was first of all necessary to penetrate into Nepaul, whilst the government of that country made such an attempt very difficult, and thence to enter a region from which the natives of Nepaul are excluded, and with still greater reason the English.

The explorers disguised themselves as Hindu pilgrims. Their suite consisted of twenty-five persons, one of whom pledged himself to walk in strides of four feet! This was certainly a rough method of ascertaining the distance traversed!

Messrs. Moorcroft and Hearsay passed through Bareilly, and followed Webb’s route as far as Djosimath, which place they left on the 26th of May, 1812. They soon had to cross the last chain of the Himalayas, with increasing difficulties, owing to the rarity of the villages, which caused a scarcity of provisions and service, and the bad roads, at so great a height above the level of the sea.

Nevertheless they saw Daba, where there is an important lamasery, Gortope, Maisar; and, a quarter of a mile from Tirthapuri, curious hot springs.

The original narrative, which appeared in the “Annales des Voyages,” speaks of this water as flowing from two openings six inches in diameter in a calcareous plain some three miles in extent, and which is raised in almost every direction from ten to twelve feet above the surrounding country. It is formed of the earthy deposits left by the water in cooling. The water rises four inches above the level of the plain. It is clear, and so warm that one cannot keep a hand in it longer than a few minutes. It is surrounded by a thick cloud of smoke. The water, flowing over a horizontal surface, hollows out basins of various shapes, which as they receive the earthy deposits contract again. When they are filled up, the flow of the water again hollows out a new reservoir, which in its turn becomes full. Flowing thus from one to the other, it finally reaches the plain below. The deposit left by the water is as white as the purest stucco close to the opening, a little further it becomes pale yellow, and further still saffron-coloured. At the other spring it is first rose-coloured, and then dark red. These different colours are to be found in the calcareous plain, and are no doubt the work of centuries.

Tirthapuri, the residence of a lama, is of great antiquity, and is a favourite rendezvous for the faithful, as a wall more than 400 feet long and four wide, formed of stones upon which prayers are inscribed, sufficiently testifies.

Upon the 1st of August the travellers left this place, hoping to reach Lake Manasarowar, and leaving on the right Lake Rawan-rhad, which is supposed to be the source of the largest branch of the Sutlej.

Lake Manasarowar lies at the foot of immense sloping prairies, to the south of the gigantic mountains. This is the most venerated of all the sacred places of the Hindus, which is no doubt owing to its distance from Hindustan, the dangers and fatigues of the journey, and the necessity of pilgrims providing themselves with money and provisions. Hindu geographers regard this lake as the source of the Ganges, the Sutlej, and the Kali rivers. Moorcroft had no doubt as to the error of this assertion as regards the Ganges. Desiring to ascertain the truth as to the other rivers, he explored the steep banks of the lake, and found a number of streams which flowed into it, but none flowing out of it. It is possible that before the earthquake which destroyed Srinagar, the lake had an outlet, but Moorcroft found no trace of it. The lake is situated between the Himalayas and the Cailas chain, and is of irregular oblong shape, five leagues long by four wide.

The end of the expedition was attained. Moorcroft and Hearsay returned towards India, passed by Kangri, and saw Rawan-rhad; but Moorcroft was too weak, and could not continue the tour; he regained Tirthapuri and Daba, and suffered a great deal in crossing the ghat which separates Hindustan from Thibet.

The narrative describes the wind which comes from the snow-covered mountains of Bhutan as cold and piercing, and the ascent of the mountain as long and painful, its descent slippery and steep, making precautions necessary. “We suffered greatly,” says the writer; “our goats escaped by the negligence of their drivers, and climbed up to the edge of a precipice some hundred feet in height. A mountaineer disturbing them from their perilous position, they began the descent, running down a very steep incline. The hinder ones kicked up the stones, which, falling with violence, threatened to strike the foremost. It was curious to note how cleverly they managed to run, and avoid the falling stones."

Very soon the Gorkhalis, who had hitherto been content to place obstacles in the way of the travellers, approached them with intent to stop them. For some time the firmness displayed by the English kept them at bay; but at last, gaining courage from their numbers, they began an attack.

"Twenty men," says Moorcroft, "threw themselves upon me. One seized me by my neck, and, pressing his knees against me, tried to strangle me by tightening my cravat; another passed a cord round my legs and pulled me from behind. I was on the point of fainting. My gun, upon which I was leaning, escaped my hold; I fell; they dragged me up by my feet until I was nearly garotted. When at last I rose, nothing could exceed the expression of fierce delight on the faces of my conquerors. Fearing that I should attempt to escape, two soldiers held me by a rope and gave me a blow from time to time, no doubt to remind me of my position. Mr. Hearsay had not supposed that he should be attacked so soon; he was rinsing out his mouth when the hubbub began, and did not hear my cries for help. Our men could not find the few arms we possessed; some escaped, I know not how; the others were seized, amongst them Mr. Hearsay. He was not bound as I was; they contented themselves with holding his arms."

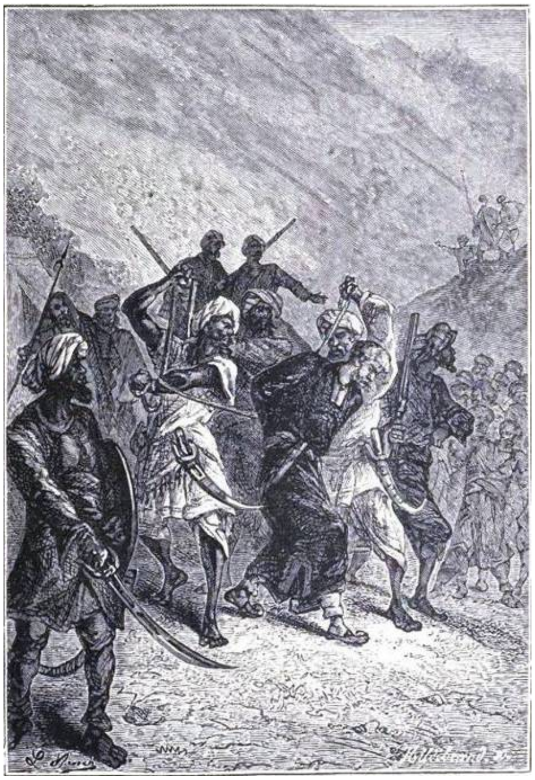

“Two soldiers held me.”

The chief of this band of savages informed the two Englishmen that they had been recognized, and were arrested for having travelled in the country in the disguise of Hindu pilgrims. A fakir, whom Moorcroft had engaged as a goat-herd, succeeded in escaping, and took two letters to the English authorities. Aid was sent, and on the 1st of November the prisoners were released. Not only were excuses offered for their treatment, but what had been taken from them was returned, and the Rajah of Nepaul gave them permission to leave his dominions. All’s well that ends well!

To complete our sketch, we must give an account of Mr. Fraser’s expedition to the Himalayas, and Hodgson’s exploration to the source of the Ganges, in

1817.

Captain Webb, as we have seen, had traced the course of that river past the valley of Dhoun, to Cadjani, near Reital. Leaving this spot upon the 28th of May, 1817, Captain Hodgson reached the source of the Ganges in three days, and proceeded to Gangautri. He found that the river issues from a low arch in the midst of an enormous mass of frozen snow, more than 300 feet high. The stream was already of considerable size, being no less than twenty-seven feet wide and eighteen inches deep. In all probability the Ganges first emerged into the light at this spot.

Captain Hodgson wished to solve various questions; for example: — What was the length of the river under the frozen snow? Is it the product of the melting of these snows? or did it spring from the ground? But, wishing to explore further upwards than his guides advised, the traveller sank into the snow up to his neck, and had to retrace his steps with great difficulty. The spot from which the Ganges issues is situated 12,914 feet above the level of the sea, in the Himalayas.

Hodgson also explored the source of the Jumna. At Djemautri the mass of snow from which the river makes its escape is no less than 180 feet wide and more than forty feet deep, between two perpendicular walls of granite. This source is situated on the south-east slope of the Himalayas.

The extension of the British power in India was necessarily attended by considerable danger. The various native States, many of which could boast of a glorious past, had only yielded in obedience to the well-known political principle “divide and govern,” ascribed to Machiavelli. But the day might come when they would merge their rivalries and enmities, to make common cause against the invader.

This was anything but a cheering prospect for the Company, whose policy it was to maintain the system that had hitherto worked so well. Certain neighbouring States, still powerful enough to regard the growth of the British power with jealousy, might serve as harbours of refuge to the discontented, and become the centres of dangerous intrigues. Of all these neighbouring States that which demanded the strictest surveillance was Persia, not only on account of its contiguity to Russia, but because Napoleon was known to have designs in connexion with it which nothing but his European wars prevented him from putting into execution.

In February, 1807, General Gardane, who had gained his promotion in the wars of the Republic, and had distinguished himself at Austerlitz, Jena, and Eylau, was appointed Minister Plenipotentiary to Persia, with instructions to ally himself with Shah Feth-Ali against England and Russia. The selection was fortunate, for the grandfather of General Gardane had held a similar post at the court of the shah. Gardane crossed Hungary, and reached Constantinople and Asia Minor; but when he entered Persia, Abbas Mirza had succeeded his father Feth-Ali.

The new shah received the French ambassador with respect, loaded him with presents, and granted certain privileges to Catholics and French merchants. These were, however, the only results of the mission, which was thwarted by the English General Malcolm, whose influence was then paramount; and Gardane, disheartened by finding all his efforts frustrated, and recognizing that success was hopeless, returned to France the following year.

His brother Ange de Gardane, who had acted as his secretary, published a brief narrative of the journey, containing several curious details respecting the antiquities of Persia, which have been, however, largely supplemented by works brought out by Englishmen.

The French Consul, Adrien Dupré, attached to Gardane’s mission, also published a work, under the title of “Voyage en Perse, fait dans les années 1807 à 1809, en traversant l’Anatolie, la Mésopotamie, depuis Constantinople jusqu’à l’extremité du golfe Persique et de là à Irwan, suivi de détails sur les moeurs, les usages et le commerce des Persans, sur la cour de Téhéran et d’une notice des tribus de la Perse.” The book bears out the assertions of its title, and is a valuable contribution to the geography and ethnography of Persia.

The English, who made a much longer stay in the country than the French, were better able to collect the abundant materials at hand, and to make a judicious selection from them.

Two works were long held to be the chief authorities on the subject. One of these was by James Morier, who availed himself of the leisure he enjoyed as secretary to the embassy to acquaint himself with every detail of Persian manners, and on his return to England published several Oriental romances, which obtained a signal success, owing to the variety and novelty of the scenes described, and the fidelity to nature of every feature, however minute.

The second of the two volumes alluded to above was the large quarto work by John Macdonald Kinneir, on the geography of Persia. This book, which made its mark, and left far behind it everything previously published on the subject, not only gives, as its title implies, very valuable information on the boundaries of the country, its mountains, rivers, and climate, but also contains interesting and trustworthy details respecting its government, constitution, army, commerce, animal, vegetable, and mineral productions, population, and revenue.

After giving an exhaustive and brilliant picture of the material and moral resources of the Persian Empire, Kinneir goes on to describe its different provinces, quoting from the mass of valuable documents accumulated by himself, thus making his work the most complete and impartial yet issued.

Kinneir passed the years 1808 to 1814 in travelling about Asia Minor, Armenia, and Kurdistan; and the different posts held by him during that period were such as to give him exceptional opportunities for making observations and comparing their results. In his several capacities as captain in the service of the Company, political agent to the Nawab of the Carnatic, or private traveller, his critical acumen was never at fault; and his wide knowledge of Oriental character and Oriental manners, enabled him to recognize the true significance of many an event and many a revolution which would have escaped the notice of less experienced observers.

At the same time, William Price, also a captain in the East India Company’s service, who had been attached as interpreter and secretary to Sir William Gore Ouseley’s embassy to Persia in 1810, devoted himself to the study of the cuneiform character. Many had previously attempted to decipher it, with results as various as they were ridiculous; and, like those of his predecessors and contemporaries, Price’s opinions were mere guess-work; but he succeeded in interesting a certain class of students in this obscure branch of research, and may be said to have perpetuated the theories of Niebuhr and other Orientalists.

To Price we owe an account of the journey of the English embassy to the Persian court, after which he published two essays on the antiquities of Persepolis and Babylon.

Mr. Ouseley, who had accompanied his brother Sir William as secretary, availed himself of his sojourn at the Court of Teheran to study Persian. His works do not, however, bear upon geography or political economy, but treat only of inscriptions, coins, manuscripts, and literature — in a word, of everything connected with the intellectual and material history of the country. To him we owe an edition of Firdusi, and many other volumes, which came out at just the right time to supplement the knowledge already acquired of the country of the Shah.

Another semi-Asiatic semi-European country was also now becoming known. This was the mountainous district of the Caucasus. As early as the second half of the eighteenth century, John Anthony Guldenstædt, a Russian doctor, had visited Astrakhan, and Kisliar on the Terek, at the most remote boundary of the Russian possessions, entered Georgia, where the Czar Heraclius received him with great respect, and penetrated to Tiflis and the country of the Truchmenes, finally arriving at Imeritia. The next year, 1773, he visited the great Kabardia, the Oriental Kumania, examined the ruins of Madjary, visited Tscherkask and Asov, discovered the mouth of the Don, and was about to extend his researches to the Crimea when he was recalled to St. Petersburg.

Guldenstædt’s travels have not been translated into French. Their author’s career was cut short by death before he had completed their revision for the press, and they were edited at St. Petersburg by Henry Julius von Klaproth, a young Prussian, who afterwards explored the same countries.

Klaproth, who was born at Berlin on the 11th October, 1783, gave proof at a very early age of a special aptitude for the study of Oriental languages. At fifteen years old he taught himself Chinese; and he had scarcely finished his studies at the Universities of Halle and Dresden, when he began the publication of his “Asiatic Magazine.” Invited to Russia by Count Potoki, he was at once named Professor of Oriental Languages at the Academy of St. Petersburg.

Klaproth did not belong to the worthy race of book-worms who shut themselves up in their own studies. He took a wider view of the nature of true knowledge, feeling that the surest way to attain a thorough acquaintance with the languages of Asia and of Oriental manners and customs was to study them on the spot. He therefore asked permission to accompany the ambassador Golowkin, who was going to China overland; and the necessary credentials obtained, he started alone for Siberia, making acquaintance with the Samoyèdes, the Tongouses, Bashkirs, Yakontes, Kirghizes, and other of the Finnic and Tartar hordes which frequent these vast steppes, finally arriving at Yakutsk, where he was soon joined by Golowkin. After a halt at Kiakta, the embassy crossed the Chinese frontier on the 1st January, 1806.

The Viceroy of Mongolia, however, insisted upon the observance by the ambassador of certain ceremonies which were considered by the latter degrading to his dignity; and neither being disposed to yield, Golowkin set out with his suite to return to St. Petersburg. Klaproth, not caring to retrace his steps, preferred to visit hordes still unknown to him, and he therefore crossed the southern districts of Siberia, and collected during a journey extending over twenty months, a large number of Chinese, Mandchoorian, Thibetan, and Mongolian books, which were of service to him in his great work “Asia Polyglotta.”

On his return to St. Petersburg he was invested with all the honours of the Academy; and a little later, at the suggestion of Count Potoki, he was appointed to the command of an historical, archæological, and geographical expedition to the Caucasus. Klaproth now passed a whole year in journeys, often full of peril, amongst thievish tribes, through rugged districts, and penetrated to the country traversed by Guldenstædt at the end of the previous century.

Klaproth’s description of Tiflis is curious as compared with that of contemporary authors. “Tiflis,” he says, “so called on account of its mineral springs, is divided into three parts: Tiflis properly so called, or the ancient town; Kala, or the citadel; and the suburb of Issni. This town is built on the Kur, and the greater part of its outer walls is now in ruins. Its streets are so narrow, that ‘arbas,’ as the lofty carriages so characteristic of Oriental places are called, could only pass with difficulty down the widest, whilst in the others a horseman would barely find room to ride. The houses, badly built of flints and bricks cemented with mud, never last longer than about fifteen years.” In Klaproth’s time Tiflis boasted of two markets, but everything was extremely dear, shawls and silk scarves manufactured in the neighbouring Asiatic countries bringing higher prices than in St. Petersburg.

Tiflis must not be dismissed without a few words concerning its hot springs. Klaproth tells us that the famous hot baths were formerly magnificent, but they are falling into ruins, although some few remain; the floors of which are cased in marble. The waters contain very little sulphur and are most salutary in their effects. The natives, especially the women, use them to excess, the latter remaining in them several days, and even taking their meals in the bath.

The chief food of the people of Tiflis, at least in the mountainous districts, is the bhouri, a kind of hard bread with a very disagreeable taste, prepared in a way repugnant to our sybarite notions.

When the dough is sufficiently kneaded a bright clear fire of dry wood is made, in earthen vessels four feet high by two wide, which are sunk in the ground. When the fire is burning fiercely, the Georgians shake into it the vermin by which their shirts and red-silk breeches are infested. Not until this ceremony has been performed do they throw the dough, which is divided into pieces of the size of two clenched fists, into the pots. The dough once in, the vessels are covered with lids, over which rags are placed, to make sure of all the heat being kept in and the bread being thoroughly baked. It is, however, always badly done, and very difficult of digestion.

Having thus assisted at the preparation of the food of the poor mountaineer, let us join Klaproth at the table of a prince. A long striped cloth, about a yard and a half wide and very dirty, was spread for his party; on this was placed for each guest an oval-shaped wheaten cake, three spans long by two wide, and scarcely as thick as a finger. A number of little brass bowls, filled with mutton and boiled rice, roast fowls, and cheese cut in slices, were then brought in. As it was a fast day, smoked salmon with uncooked green vegetables was served to the prince and his subjects. Spoons, forks, and knives are unknown in Georgia; soup is eaten from the bowl, meat is taken in the hands, and torn with the fingers into pieces the size of a mouthful. To throw a tid-bit to another guest is a mark of great friendship. The repast over, grapes and dried fruits are eaten. During the meal a good red native wine, called traktir by the Tartars, and ghwino by the Georgians, is very freely circulated. It is drunk from flat silver bowls greatly resembling saucers.

Klaproth’s account of the different incidents of his journey is no less interesting and vivid than this description of the manners of the people. Take, for instance, what he says of his trip to the sources of the Terek, the site of which had been pretty accurately indicated by Guldenstædt, although he had not visited them.

“I left the village of Utzfars-Kan on the 17th March, on a bright but cold morning. Fifteen Ossetes accompanied me. After half an hour’s march, we began to climb the steep and rugged ascent leading to the junction of the Utzfars-Don with the Terek. This was succeeded by a still worse road, running for a league alongside of the river, which is scarcely ten paces wide here, although it was then swollen by the melting of the snow. This part of the river banks is inhabited. We continued to ascend, and reached the foot of the Khoki, also called Istir-Khoki, finally arriving at a spot where an accumulation of large stones in the bed of the river rendered it possible to cross over to the village of Tsiwratté-Kan, where we breakfasted. Here the small streams forming the Terek meet. I was so glad to have reached the end of my journey, that I poured a glass of Hungarian wine into the river, and made a second libation to the genius of the mountain in which the Terek rises. The Ossetes, who thought I was performing a religious ceremony, observed me gravely. On the smooth sides of an enormous block of schist I engraved in red the date of my journey, together with my name and those of my companions, after which I climbed up to the village of Ressi.”

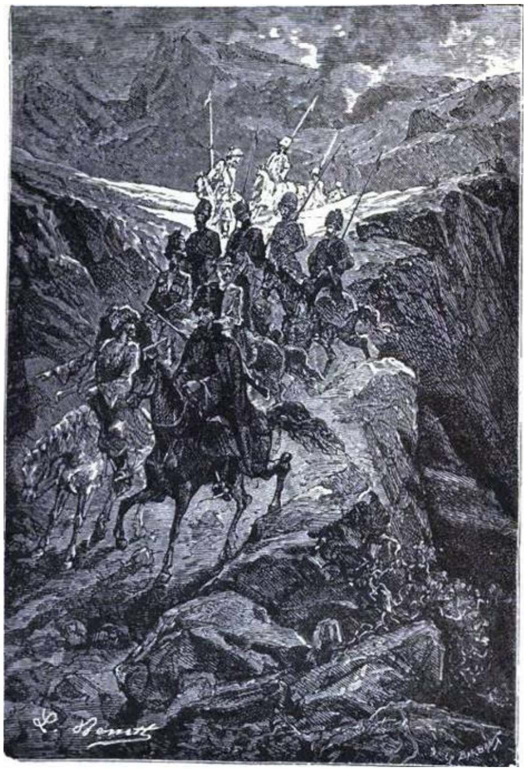

“Fifteen Ossetes accompanied me.”

After this account of his journey, from which we might multiply extracts, Klaproth sums up all the information he has collected on the tribes of the Caucasus, dwelling specially on the marked resemblances which exist between the different Georgian dialects and those of the Finns and Lapps. This was a new and useful suggestion.

Speaking of the Lesghians, who occupy the eastern Caucasus, known as Daghestan, or Lezghistan, Klaproth says their name is a misnomer, just as Scythian or Tartar was used to indicate the natives of Northern Asia; adding, that they do not form one nation, as is proved by the number of dialects in use, which, however, would seem to have been derived from a common source, though time has greatly modified them. This is a contradiction in terms, implying either that the Lesghians, speaking one language, form one nation, or that forming one nation the Lesghians speak various dialects derived from the same source.

According to Klaproth, Lesghian words have a considerable affinity with the other languages of the Caucasus, and with those of Western Asia, especially the dialects of the Samoyedes and Siberian Finns.

West and north-west of the Lesghians dwell the Metzdjeghis, or Tchetchentses, who are probably the most ancient inhabitants of the Caucasus. This is not, however, the opinion of Pallas, who looks upon them as a separate tribe of the Alain family. The Tchetchentse language greatly resembles the Samoyede and other Siberian dialects, as well as those of the Slavs.

The Tcherkesses, or Circassians, are the Sykhes of the Greeks. They formerly inhabited the eastern Caucasus and the Crimea. Their language differs much from other Caucasian idioms, although the Tcherkesses proceed, with the Wogouls and the Ostiakes — we have just seen that the Lesghian and Tchetchentse dialects resemble the Siberian — from one common stock, which at some remote date separated into several branches, of which the Huns probably formed one. The Tcherkesse dialect is one of the most difficult to pronounce, some of the consonants being produced in a manner so loud and guttural that no European has yet been able to acquire it.

In the Caucasus also dwell the Abazes — who have never left the shores of the Black Sea, where they have been settled from time immemorial — and the Ossetes, or As, who belong to the Indo-Germanic stock. They call their country Ironistan, and themselves the Irons. Klaproth takes them to be

Sarmatic Medes, not only on account of their name, which resembles Iran, but because of the structure of their language, which proves more satisfactorily than historical documents, and in a most conclusive manner, that they spring from the same stock as the Medes and Persians. This opinion, however, appears to us mere conjecture, as in the time of Klaproth the interpretation of cuneiform inscriptions had not been accomplished, and too little was known of the language of the Medes for any one to judge of its resemblance to the Ossete idiom.

"However," continues Klaproth, "after meeting again the Sarmatic Medes of the ancients in this people, it is still more surprising also to recognize the Alains, who occupied the districts north of the Caucasus."

He adds: "It follows from all we have said, that the Ossetes, who call themselves Irons, are the Medes, who assumed the name of Irans, and whom Herodotus styles the Arioi. They are, moreover, the Sarmatic Medes of the ancients, and belong to the Median colony founded in the Caucasus by the Scythians. They are the As or Alains of the middle ages. And lastly, they are the Iasses of Russian chronicles, from whom some of the Caucasus range took their name of the Iassic Mountains." This is not the place to discuss identifications belonging to the realm of criticism. We will content ourselves with adding to these remarks of Klaproth on the Ossete language, that its pronunciation resembles that of the Low-German and Slavonic dialects.

The Georgians differ essentially from the neighbouring nations, alike in their language and in their physical and moral qualities. They are divided into four principal tribes — the Karthalinians, Mingrelians, and Shvans (or Swanians), inhabiting the southern range of the Caucasus, and the Lazes, a wild robber tribe.

As we have seen, the facts collected by Klaproth are very curious, and throw an unexpected light on the migration of ancient races. The penetration and sagacity of the traveller were marvellous, and his memory was extraordinary. The scholar of Berlin rendered signal services to the science of philology. It is to be regretted that his qualities as a man, his principles, and his temper, were not on a level with his knowledge and acumen as a professor.

We must now leave the Old World for the New, and give an account of the explorations of the young republic of the United States. So soon as the Federal Government was free from the anxieties of war, and its position was alike established and recognized, public attention was directed to the “fur country,” which had in turn attracted the English, the Spanish, and the French. Nootka Sound and the neighbouring coasts, discovered by the great Cook and the talented Quadra, Vancouver, and Marchand, were American. Moreover, the Monroe doctrine, destined later to excite so much discussion, already existed in embryo in the minds of the statesmen of the day.

In accordance with an Act of Congress, Captain Merryweather Lewis and Lieutenant William Clarke, were commissioned to trace the Missouri, from its junction with the Mississippi to its source, and to cross the Rocky Mountains by the easiest and shortest route, thus opening up communication between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. The officers were also to trade with any Indian tribes they might meet.

The expedition was composed of regular troops and volunteers, numbering altogether, including the leaders, forty-three men; one boat and two canoes completed the equipment.

On the 14th May, 1804, the Americans left Wood River, which flows into the Mississippi, and embarked on the Missouri. From what Cass had said in his journal, the explorers expected to have to contend with natural dangers of a very formidable description, and also to fight their way amongst natives of gigantic stature, whose hostility to the white man was invincible.

During the first days of this long canoe voyage, only to be compared to those of Orellana and Condamine on the Amazon, the Americans were fortunate enough to meet with some Sioux Indians, an old Frenchman, a Canadian *coureur des bois*, or trapper, who spoke the languages of most of the Missouri tribes, and consented to accompany the expedition as interpreter.

They passed the mouths of the Osage, Kansas, Platte or Nebraska, and White River, all tributaries of the Missouri, successively, and met various parties of Osage and Sioux, or Maha Indians, who all appeared to be in a state of utter degradation. One tribe of Sioux had suffered so much from smallpox, that the male survivors, in a fit of rage and misery, had killed the women and children spared by the terrible malady, and fled from the infected neighbourhood.

A little farther north dwelt the Ricaris, or Recs, at first supposed to be the cleanest, most polite, and most industrious of the tribes the expedition met with; but a few thefts soon modified that favourable judgment. It is curious that these people do not depend entirely on hunting, but cultivate corn, peas, and tobacco.

This is not, however, the case with the Mandans, who are a more robust race. A custom obtains among them, also characteristic of Polynesia — they do not bury their dead, but expose them on a scaffold.

Clarke’s narrative gives us a few details relating to this strange tribe. The Mandans look upon the Supreme Being only as an embodiment of the power of healing. As a result they worship two gods, whom they call the Great Medicine or the Physician, and the Great Spirit. It would seem that life is so precious to them that they are impelled to worship all that can prolong it!

Their origin is strange. They originally lived in a large subterranean village hollowed out under the ground on the borders of a lake. A vine, however, struck its roots so deeply in the earth as to reach their habitations, and some of them ascended to the surface by the aid of this impromptu ladder. The descriptions given by them on their return of the vast hunting-grounds, rich in game and fruit, which they had seen, led the rest of the tribe to resolve to reach so favoured a land. Half of them had gained the surface, when the vine, bending beneath the weight of a fat woman, gave way, and rendered the ascent of the rest impossible. After death the Mandans expect to return to their subterranean home, but only those who die with a clear conscience can reach it; the guilty will be flung into a lake.

The explorers took up their quarters for the winter amongst the Mandans, on the 1st of November. They built huts, as comfortable as possible with the materials at their command; and in spite of the extreme cold, gave themselves up to the pleasures of hunting, which soon became a positive necessity of their existence.

When the ice should break up on the Missouri, the explorers hoped to continue their voyage; but on their sending the boat down to St. Louis, laden with the skins and furs already obtained, only thirty men were found willing to carry the expedition through to the end.

The travellers soon passed the mouth of the Yellowstone River, with a current nearly as strong as that of the Missouri, flowing through districts abounding in game.

Cruel was their perplexity when they arrived at a fork where the Missouri divided into two rivers of nearly equal volume, for which was the main stream? Captain Lewis with a party of scouts ascended the southern branch, and soon came in sight of the Rocky Mountains, completely covered with snow. Guided to the spot by a terrific uproar, he beheld the Missouri fling itself in one broad sheet of water over a rocky precipice, beyond which it formed a broken series of rapids, extending for several miles.

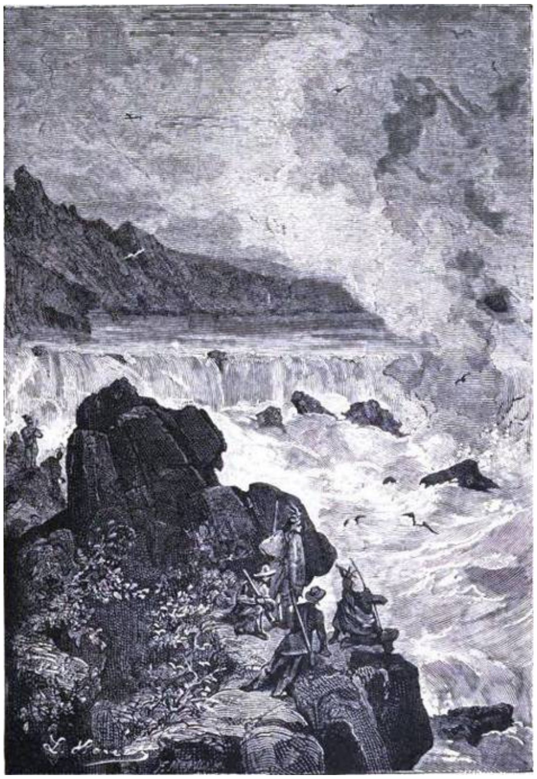

“He beheld the Missouri.”

The detachment now followed this branch, which led them into the heart of the mountains, and for three or four miles dashed along between two perpendicular walls of rock, finally dividing itself into three parts, to which were given the names of Jefferson, Madison, and Galatin, after celebrated American statesmen.

The last heights were soon crossed, and then the expedition descended the slopes overlooking the Pacific. The Americans had brought with them a Soshone woman, who had been protected as a girl by the Indians of the east, and not only did she serve the explorers faithfully as an interpreter, but also, through her recognition of a brother in the chief of a tribe disposed to be hostile, she from that moment secured cordial treatment for the white men. Unfortunately the country was poor, the people living entirely on wild berries, bark, and the little game they were able to obtain.

The Americans, little accustomed to this frugal fare, had to eke it out by eating their horses, which had grown very thin, and buying all the dogs the natives would consent to sell. Hence they obtained the nickname of Dog-eaters.

As the temperature became milder, so did the character of the natives, whilst food grew more abundant; and as they came down the Oregon, also known as the Columbia, the salmon formed a seasonable addition to the bill of fare. When the Columbia, which is dangerous for navigation, approaches the sea, it forms a vast estuary, where the waves from the offing meet the current of the river. The Americans more than once incurred considerable risk of being swallowed up, with their frail canoe, before they reached the shores of the ocean.

Glad to have accomplished the aim of their expedition, the explorers wintered at the mouth of the river, and when the fine weather set in they made their way back to St. Louis, arriving there in May, 1806, after an absence of two years, four months, and ten days. They had in that time, according to their own estimate, traversed less than 1378 leagues.

The impulse was now given, and reconnoitring expeditions in the interior of the new continent rapidly succeeded each other, assuming, a little later, a scientific character which gives them a position of their own in the history of discovery.

A few years later, one of the greatest colonizers of whom England can boast, Sir Stamford Raffles, organizer of the expedition which took possession of the Dutch colonies, was appointed Military Governor of Java. During an administration extending over five years, Raffles brought about numerous reforms, and abolished slavery. Absorbing as was this work, however, it did not prevent him from publishing two huge quarto volumes, which are as interesting as they are curious. They contain, in addition to the history of Java, a vast number of details about the natives of the interior, until then little known, together with much circumstantial information respecting the geology and natural history of the country. It is no wonder, therefore, that in honour of the man who did so much to make Java known, the name of Rafflesia should have been given to an immense flower native to it, and of which some specimens measure over three feet in diameter, and weigh some ten pounds.

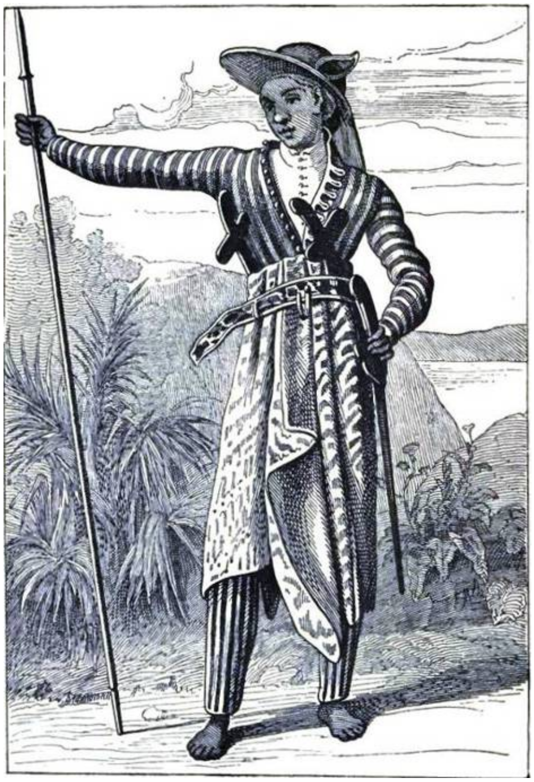

Warrior of Java.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Raffles was also the first to penetrate to the interior of Sumatra, of which the coast only was previously known. He visited the districts occupied by the Passoumahs, sturdy tillers of the soil, the northern provinces, with Memang-Kabou, the celebrated Malayan capital, and crossed the southern half of the island, from Bencoulen to Palimbang.

Sir Stamford Raffles’ fame, however rests principally upon his having drawn the attention of the Indian Government to the exceptionally favourable position of Singapore, which was converted by him into an open port, and grew rapidly into a prosperous settlement.

CHAPTER II.

THE EXPLORATION AND COLONIZATION OF AFRICA.

I.

Peddie and Campbell in the Soudan — Ritchie and Lyon in Fezzan — Denham, Oudney, and Clapperton in Fezzan, and in the Tibboo country — Lake Tchad and its tributaries — Kouka and the chief villages of Bornou — Mandara — A razzia, or raid, in the Fellatah country — Defeat of the Arabs and death of Boo-Khaloum — Loggan — Death of Toole — En route for Kano — Death of Oudney — Kano — Sackatoo — Sultan Bello — Return to Europe.

The power of Napoleon, and with it the supremacy of France, was scarcely overthrown — the Titanic contests, to gratify the ambition of one man at the expense of the intellectual progress of humanity, were scarcely at an end, before an honourable rivalry awoke once more, and new scientific and commercial expeditions were set on foot. A new era had commenced.

Foremost in the ranks of the governments which organized and encouraged exploring expeditions we find as usual that of England. It was in Central Africa, the vast riches of which had been hinted at in the accounts given of their travels by Hornemann and Burckhardt, that the attention of the English was now concentrated.

As early as 1816 Major Peddie, starting from Senegal, reached Kakondy, on the River Nuñez, succumbing, however, to the fatigue of the journey and unhealthiness of the climate soon after his arrival in that town. Major Campbell succeeded him in the command of the expedition, and crossed the lofty mountains of Foota-Djalion, losing in a few days several men and part of the baggage animals.

Arrived at the headquarters of the Almamy, as most of the kings of this part of Africa are called, the expedition was detained for a long time, and only obtained permission to depart on payment of a large sum.

Most disastrous was the return journey, for the explorers had not only to recross the streams they had before forded with such difficulty, but they were subjected to so many insults, annoyances, and exactions, that to put an end to them Campbell was obliged to burn his merchandize, break his guns, and sink his powder.

Against so much fatigue and mortification, added to the complete failure of his expedition, Major Campbell failed to bear up, and he died, with several of his officers, in the very place where Major Peddie had closed his career. The few survivors of the party reached Sierra Leone after an arduous march.

A little later, Ritchie and Captain George Francis Lyon, availing themselves of the prestige which the siege of Algiers had brought to the British flag, and of the cordial relations which the English consul at Tripoli had succeeded in establishing with the principal Moorish authorities, determined to follow Hornemann’s route, and penetrate to the very heart of Africa.

On the 25th March, 1819, the travellers left Tripoli with Mahommed el Moukni, Bey of Fezzan, who is called sultan by his subjects. Protected by this escort, Ritchie and Lyon reached Murzuk without molestation, but there the former died on the 2nd November, worn out by the fatigue and privations of the journey across the desert. Lyon, who was ill for some time from the same causes, recovered soon enough to foil the designs of the sultan, who counting on his death, had already begun to take possession of his property, and also of Ritchie’s. The captain could not penetrate beyond the southern boundaries of Fezzan, but he had time to collect a good deal of valuable information about the chief towns of that province and the language of its inhabitants. To him we likewise owe the first authentic details of the religion, customs, language, and extraordinary costumes of the Tuarick Arabs, a wild tribe inhabiting the Great Sahara desert.

Captain Lyon’s narrative also contains a good deal of interesting information collected by himself on Bornou, Wadai, and the Soudan, although he was unable to visit those places in person.

The results obtained did not by any means satisfy the English Government, which was most eager to open up the riches of the interior to its merchants. Consequently the authorities received favourably the proposals made by Dr. Walter Oudney, a Scotchman, whose enthusiasm had been aroused by the travels of Mungo Park. This Dr. Oudney was a friend of Hugh Clapperton, a lieutenant in the Navy, three years his senior, who had distinguished himself in Canada and elsewhere, but had been thrown out of employment and reduced to half-pay by the peace of 1815.

Hearing of Oudney’s scheme, Clapperton at once determined to join him in it, and Oudney begged the minister to allow him the aid of that enterprising officer, whose special knowledge would be of great assistance. Lord Bathurst made no objection, and the two friends, after receiving minute instructions, embarked for Tripoli, where they ascertained that Major Denham was to take the command of their expedition.

Denham was born in London on the 31st December, 1783, and began life as an articled pupil to a country lawyer. As an attorney’s clerk he found his duties so irksome and so little suited to his daring spirit that his longing for adventure soon led him to enlist in a regiment bound for Spain. Until 1815 he remained with the army, but after the peace he employed his leisure in visiting France and Italy.

Denham, eager to obtain distinction, had chosen the career which would best enable him to achieve it, even at the risk of his life, and he now resolved to become an explorer. With him to think was to act. He had asked the minister to commission him to go to Timbuctoo by the route Laing afterwards took when he heard of the expedition under Clapperton and Oudney; and he now begged to be allowed to join them.

Without any delay Denham obtained the necessary equipment, and accompanied by a carpenter named William Hillman, he embarked for Malta, joining his future travelling companions at Tripoli on the 21st November, 1821. The English at this time enjoyed very great prestige, not only in the States of Barbary, on account of the bombardment of Algiers, but also because the British consul at Tripoli had by his clever diplomacy established friendly relations with the government to which he was accredited.

This prestige extended beyond the narrow range of the northern states. The nationality of certain travellers, the protection accorded by England to the Porte, the British victories in India had all been vaguely rumoured even in the heart of Africa, and the name of Englishman, was familiar without any particular meaning being attached to it. According to the English consul, the route from Tripoli to Bornou was as safe as that from London to Edinburgh. This was, therefore, the moment to seize opportunities which might not occur again.

The three travellers, after a cordial reception from the bey, who placed all his resources at their disposal, lost no time in leaving Tripoli, and with an escort provided by the Moorish governor, they reached Murzuk, the capital of Fezzan, on the 8th April, 1822, without difficulty, having indeed been received with great enthusiasm in some of the places through which they passed.

At Sockna, Denham tells us, the governor came out to meet them, accompanied by the principal inhabitants and hundreds of the country people, who crowded round their horses, kissing their hands with every appearance of cordiality and delight, and shouting *Inglesi*, *Inglesi*, as the visitors entered the town. This welcome was the more gratifying from the fact that the travellers were the first Europeans to penetrate into Africa without wearing a disguise. Denham adds that he feels sure their reception would have been far less cordial had they stooped to play the part of impostors by attempting to pass for Mahommedans.

At Murzuk they were harassed by annoyances similar to those which had paralyzed Hornemann; in their case, however, circumstances and character were alike different, and without allowing themselves to be blinded by the compliments paid them by the sultan, the English, who were thoroughly in earnest, demanded the necessary escort for the journey to Bornou.

It was impossible, they were told, to start before the following spring, on account of the difficulty of collecting a kafila or caravan, and the troops necessary for its escort across the desert.

A rich merchant, however, Boo-Bucker-Boo-Khaloum by name, a great friend of the pacha, gave the explorers a hint that if he received certain presents he would smooth away all difficulties. He even offered to escort them himself to Bornou, for which province he was bound if he could obtain the necessary permission from the Pacha of Tripoli.

Denham, believing Boo-Khaloum to be acting honestly, went off to Tripoli to obtain the governor’s sanction, but on his arrival there he obtained only evasive answers, and finally threatened to embark for England, where he said he would report the obstacles thrown in his way by the pacha, in the carrying out of the objects of the exploring expedition.

These menaces produced no effect, and Denham actually set sail, and was about to land at Marseilles when he received a satisfactory message from the bey, begging him to return, and authorizing Boo-Khaloum to accompany him and his companions.

On the 30th October Denham rejoined Oudney and Clapperton at Murzuk, finding them considerably weakened by fever and the effects of the climate.

Denham, convinced that change of air would restore them to health, persuaded them to start and begin the journey by easy stages. He himself set out on the 20th of November with a caravan of merchants from Mesurata, Tripoli, Sockna, and Murzuk, escorted by 210 Arab warriors chosen from the most intelligent and docile of the tribes, and commanded by Boo-Khaloum.

The expedition took the route followed by Lyon and soon reached Tegerry, which is the most southerly town of Fezzan, and the last before the traveller enters the desert of Bilma.

Denham made a sketch of the castle of Tegerry from the southern bank of a salt lake near the town. Tegerry is entered by a low narrow vaulted passage leading to a gate in a second rampart. The wall is pierced with apertures which render the entrance by the narrow passage very difficult. Above the second gate there is also an aperture through which darts, and fire-brands may be hurled upon the besiegers, a mode of warfare once largely indulged in by the Arabs. Inside the town there are wells of fairly good water. Denham is of opinion that Tegerry restored, well-garrisoned and provisioned, could sustain a long siege. Its situation is delightful. It is surrounded by date-trees, and the water in the neighbourhood is excellent. A chain of low hills stretches away to the east. Snipes, ducks, and wild geese frequent the salt lakes near the town.

Leaving Tegerry, the travellers entered a sandy desert, across which it would not have been easy to find the way, had it not been marked out by the skeletons of men and animals strewn along it, especially about the wells.

“One of the skeletons we saw to-day,” says Denham, “still looked quite fresh. The beard was on the chin, the features could be recognized. ‘It is my slave,’ exclaimed one of the merchants of the kafila. ‘I left him near here four months ago.’ ‘Make haste and take him to the market!’ cried a facetious slave merchant, ‘lest some one else should claim him.’”

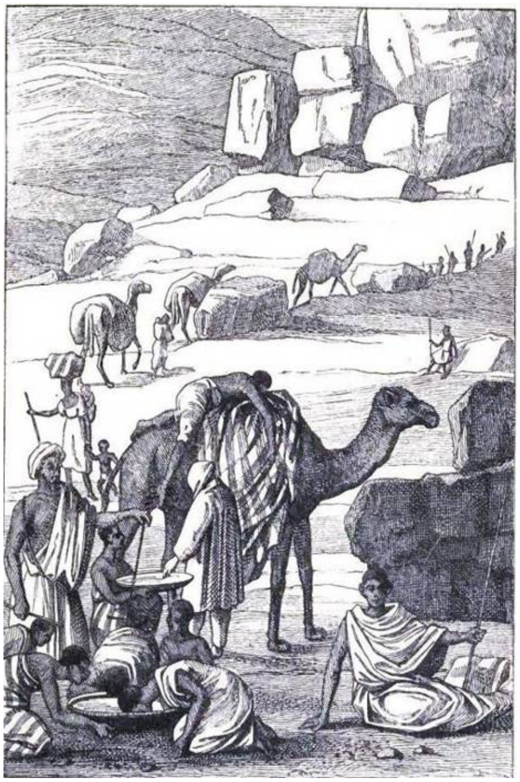

A kafila of slaves.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Here and there in the desert are oases containing towns of greater or less importance, at which the caravans halt. Kishi is one of the most frequented of these places, and there the money for the right of crossing the desert is paid. The Sultan of Kishi, the ruler of a good many of these petty principalities, and who takes the title of Commander of the Faithful, was remarkable for a complete disregard of cleanliness, a peculiarity in which, according to Denham, his court fully equalled him.

This sultan paid Boo-Khaloum a visit in his tent, accompanied by half a dozen Tibboos, some of whom were positively hideous. Their teeth were of a dark yellow colour, the result of chewing tobacco, of which they are so fond that they use it as snuff as well as to chew. Their noses looked like little round bits of flesh stuck on to their faces with nostrils so wide that they could push their fingers right up them. Denham's watch, compass, and musical snuffbox astonished them not a little. He defines these people as brutes with human faces.

A little further on the travellers reached the town of Kirby, situated in a wâdy near a low range of hills of which the highest are not more than 400 feet above the sea level, and between two salt lakes, produced by the excavations made for building. From the centre of these lakes rise islets consisting of masses of muriate and carbonate of soda. The salt produced by these wâdys, or depressions of the soil, form an important article of commerce with Bornou and the whole of the Soudan.

It would be impossible to imagine a more wretched place than Kirby. Its houses are empty, containing not so much as a mat. How could it be otherwise with a place liable to incessant raids from the Tuaricks?

The caravan now crossed the Tibboo country, inhabited by a peaceful, hospitable people to whom, as keepers of the wells and reservoirs of the desert, the leaders of caravans pay passage-money. The Tibboos are a strong, active race, and when mounted on their nimble steeds they display marvellous skill in throwing the lance, which the most vigorous of their warriors can hurl to a distance of 145 yards. Bilma is their chief city, and the residence of their sultan.

On the arrival of the travellers at Bilma, the sultan, escorted by a number of men and women, came out to meet the strangers. The women were much better-looking than those in the smaller towns; some of them had indeed very pleasant faces, their white, regular teeth contrasting admirably with their shining black skins, and the three “triangular flaps of hair, streaming with oil.” Coral ornaments in their noses, and large amber necklaces round their throats, gave them what Denham calls a “seductive appearance.” Some of them carried fans made of grass or hair, with which to keep off the flies; others were provided with branches of trees; all, in fact, carried something in their hands, which they waved above their heads. Their costume consisted of a loose piece of Soudan cloth, fastened on the left shoulder, and leaving the right uncovered, with a smaller piece wound about the head, and falling on the shoulders or flung back. In spite of this paucity of clothing, there was not the least immodesty in their bearing.

A mile from Bilma, and beyond a limpid spring, which appears to have been placed there by nature to afford a supply of water to travellers, lies a desert, which it takes no less than ten days to cross. This was probably once a huge salt lake.

On the 4th February, 1823, the caravan reached Lari, a town on the northern boundary of Bornou, in lat. 14° 40’ N. The inhabitants, astonished at the size of the “kafila,” fled in terror at its approach.

“Beyond, however,” says Denham, “was an object full of interest to us, and the sight of it produced a sensation so gratifying and inspiring, that it would be difficult for language to convey an idea of its force or pleasure. The great Lake Tchad, glowing with the golden rays of the sun in its strength, appeared to be within a mile of the spot on which we stood.”

On leaving Lari, the appearance of the country changed completely. The sandy desert was succeeded by a clay soil, clothed with grass and dotted with acacias and other trees of various species, amongst which grazed herds of antelopes, whilst Guinea fowls and the turtle-doves of Barbary flew hither and thither above them. Towns took the place of villages, with huts of the shape of bells, thatched with durra straw.

The travellers continued their journey southwards, rounding Lake Tchad, which they had first touched at its most northerly point.

The districts bordering on this sheet of water were of a black, firm, but muddy soil. The waters rise to a considerable height in winter, and sink in proportion in the summer. The lake is of fresh water, rich in fish, and frequented by hippopotami and aquatic birds. Near its centre, on the south-east, are the islands inhabited by the Biddomahs, a race who live by pillaging the people of the mainland.

The explorers had sent a messenger to Sheikh El Khanemy, to ask permission to enter his capital, and an envoy speedily arrived to invite Boo-Khaloum and his companions to Kouka.

On their way thither, the travellers passed through Burwha, a fortified town which had thus far resisted the inroads of the Tuaricks, and crossed the Yeou, a large river, in some parts more than 500 feet in width, which, rising in the Soudan, flows into Lake Tchad.

On the southern shores of this river rises a little town of the same name, about half the size of Burwha.

The caravan soon reached the gates of Kouka, where, after a journey extending over two months and a half, they were received by a body of cavalry 4000 strong, under perfect discipline. Amongst these troops was a corps of blacks forming the body-guard of the sheikh, whose equipments resembled those of ancient chivalry.

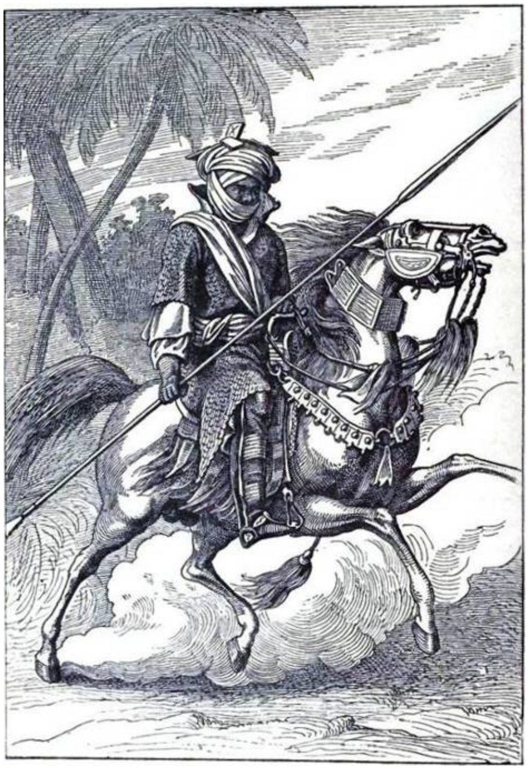

Member of the body-guard of the Sheikh of Bornou.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

They wore, Denham tells us, suits of chain armour covering the neck and shoulders. These were fastened above the head, and fell in two portions, one in front and one behind, so as to protect the flanks of the horse and the thighs of the rider. A sort of casque or iron coif, kept in its place by red, white or yellow turbans, tied under the chin, completed the costume. The horses' heads were also guarded by iron plates. Their saddles were small and light, and their steel stirrups held only the point of the feet, which were clad in leather shoes, ornamented with crocodile skin. The horsemen managed their steeds admirably, as, advancing at full gallop, brandishing their spears, they wheeled right and left of their guests, shouting “Barca! Barca!” (Blessing! Blessing!).

Surrounded by this brilliant and fantastic escort, the English and Arabs entered the town, where a similar military display had been prepared in their honour.

They were presently admitted to the presence of Sheikh El-Khanemy, who appeared to be about forty-five years old, and whose face was prepossessing, with a happy, intelligent, and benevolent expression.

The English presented the letters of the pacha, and when the sheikh had read them, he asked Denham what had brought him and his companions to Bornou.

“We came merely to see the country,” replied Denham, “to study the character of its people, its scenery, and its productions.”

“You are welcome,” was the reply; “it will be a pleasure to me to show you everything. I have ordered huts to be built for you in the town; you may go and see them, accompanied by one of my people, and when you are recovered from the fatigue of your long journey, I shall be happy to see you.”

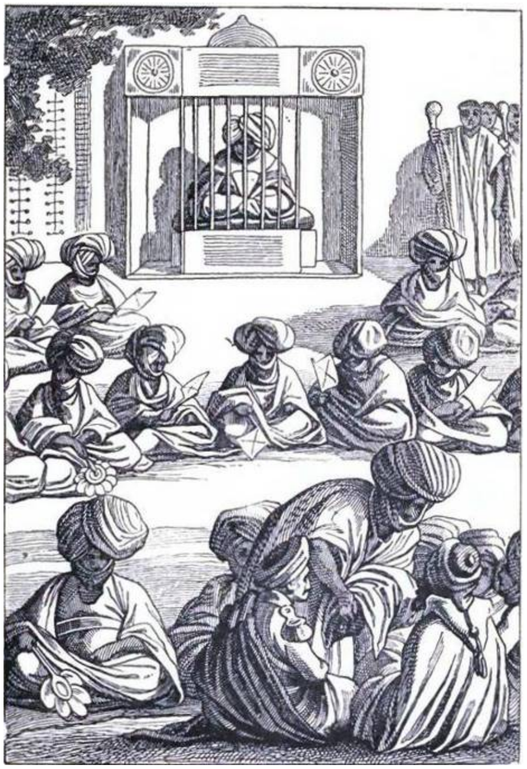

Reception of the Mission.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The travellers soon afterwards obtained permission to make collections of such animals and plants as appeared to them curious, and to make notes of all their observations. They were thus enabled to collect a good deal of information about the towns near Kouka.

Kouka, then the capital of Bornou, boasted of a market for the sale of slaves, sheep, oxen, cheese, rice, earth-nuts, beans, indigo, and other productions of the country. There 100,000 people might sometimes be seen haggling about the price of fish, poultry, meat — the last sold both raw and cooked — or that of brass, copper, amber and coral. Linen was so cheap in these parts, that some of the men wore shirts and trousers made of it.

Beggars have a peculiar mode of exciting compassion; they station themselves at the entrance to the market, and, holding up the rags of an old pair of trousers, they whine out to the passers-by, “See! I have no pantaloons!” The novelty of this mode of proceeding, and the request for a garment, which seemed to them even more necessary than food, made our travellers laugh heartily until they became accustomed to it.

Hitherto the English had had nothing to do with any one but the sheikh, who, content with wielding all real power, left the nominal sovereignty to the sultan, an eccentric monarch, who never showed himself except through the bars of a wicker cage near the gate of his garden, as if he were some rare wild beast. Curious indeed were some of the customs of this court, not the least so the fancy for obesity: no one was considered elegant unless he had attained to a bulk generally looked upon as very inconvenient.

Some exquisites had stomachs so distended and prominent that they seemed literally to hang over the pommel of the saddle; and in addition to this, fashion prescribed a turban of such length and weight that its wearer had to carry his head on one side.

These uncouth peculiarities rivalled those of the Turks of a masked ball, and the travellers had often hard work to preserve their gravity. To compensate, however, for the grotesque solemnity of the various receptions, a new field for observation was open, and much valuable information might now be acquired.

Denham wished to proceed to the south at once, but the sheikh was unwilling to risk the lives of the travellers entrusted to him by the Bey of

Tripoli. On their entry into Bornou, the responsibility of Boo-Khaloum for their safety was transferred to him.

So earnest, however, were the entreaties of Denham, that El-Khanemy at last sanctioned his accompanying Boo-Khaloum in a “ghrazzie,” or plundering expedition against the Kaffirs or infidels.

The sheikh’s army and the Arab troops passed in succession Yeddie, a large walled city twenty miles from Angoumou, Badagry, and several other towns built on an alluvial soil which has a dark clay-like appearance.

They entered Mandara, at the frontier town of Delow, beyond which the sultan of the province, with five hundred horsemen, met his guests.

Denham describes Mahommed Becker as a man of short stature, about fifty years old, wearing a beard, painted of a most delicate azure blue. The presentations over, the sultan at once turned to Denham, and asked who he was, whence he came, what he wanted, and lastly if he were a Mahommedan. On Boo-Khaloum’s hesitating to reply, the sultan turned away his head, with the words, “So the pacha numbers infidels amongst his friends!”

This incident had a very bad effect, and Denham was not again admitted to the presence of the sultan.

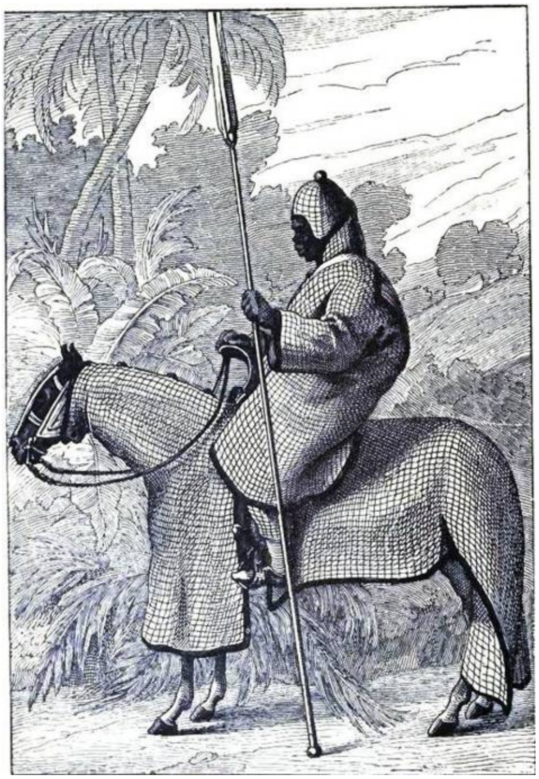

Lancer of the army of the Sultan of Begharmi.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The enemies of the Pacha of Bornou and the Sultan of Mandara, were called Fellatahs. Their vast settlements extended far beyond Timbuctoo. They are a handsome set of men, with skins of a dark bronze colour, which shows them to be of a race quite distinct from the negroes. They are professors of Mahommedanism, and mix but little with the blacks. We shall presently have to speak more particularly of the Fellatahs, Foulahs, or Fans, as they are called throughout the Soudan.

South of the town of Mora rises a chain of mountains, of which the loftiest peaks are not more than 2500 feet high, but which, according to the natives, extend for more than “two months’ journey.”

The most salient point noticed by Denham in his description of the country, is a vast and apparently interminable chain of mountains, shutting in the view on every side; this, though in his opinion, inferior to the Alps, Apennines, Jura, and Sierra Morena in rugged magnificence and gigantic grandeur, are yet equal to them in picturesque effect. The lofty peaks of Valhmy, Savah, Djoggiday, Munday, &c. with clustering villages on their stony sides, rise on the east and west, while Horza, exceeding any of them in height and beauty, rises on the south with its ravines and precipices.

Derkulla, one of the chief Fellatah towns, was reduced to ashes by the invaders, who lost no time in pressing on to Musfeia, a position which, naturally very strong, was further defended by palisades manned by a numerous body of archers. The English traveller had to take part in the assault. The first onslaught of the Arabs appeared to carry all before it; the noise of the fire-arms, with the reputation for bravery and cruelty enjoyed by Boo-Khaloum and his men, threw the Fellatahs into momentary confusion, and if the men of Mandara and Bornou had followed up their advantage and stormed the hill, the town would probably have fallen.

The besieged, however, noticing the hesitation of their assailants, in their turn assumed the defensive, and rallying their archers discharged a shower of poisoned arrows, to which many an Arab fell a victim, and before which the forces of Bornou and Mandara gave way.

Barca, the Bornou general, had three horses killed under him. Boo-Khaloum and his steed were both wounded, and Denham was in a similar plight, with the skin of his face grazed by one arrow and two others lodged in his burnoos.

The retreat soon became a rout. Denham’s horse fell under him, and the major had hardly regained his feet when he was surrounded by Fellatahs. Two fled on the presentation of the Englishman’s pistols, a third received the charge in his shoulder.

Denham thought he was safe, when his horse fell a second time, flinging his master violently against a tree. This time when the major rose he found himself with neither horse nor weapons; and the next moment he was surrounded by enemies, who stripped him and wounded him in both hands and the right side, leaving him half dead at last to fight over his clothes, which seemed to them of great value.

Availing himself of this lucky quarrel, Denham slipped under a horse standing by, and disappeared in the thicket. Naked, bleeding, wild with pain, he reached the edge of a ravine with a mountain stream flowing through it. His strength was all but gone, and he was clutching at a bough of a tree overhanging the water with a view to dropping himself into it as the banks were very steep, and the branches were actually bending beneath his weight, when from beneath his hand a gigantic liffa, the most venomous kind of serpent in the country, rose from its coil in the very act of striking. Horror-struck, Denham let slip the branch, and tumbled headlong into the water, but fortunately the shock revived him, he struck out almost unconsciously, swam to the opposite bank, and climbing it, found himself safe from his pursuers.

Fortunately the fugitive soon saw a group of horsemen amongst the trees, and in spite of the noise of the pursuit, he managed to shout loud enough to make them hear him. They turned out to be Barca Gana and Boo-Khaloum, with some Arabs. Mounted on a sorry steed, with no other clothing than an old blanket swarming with vermin, Denham travelled thirty-seven miles.

The pain of his wounds was greatly aggravated by the heat, the thermometer being at 32°.

The only results of the expedition, which was to have brought in such quantities of booty and numerous slaves, were the deaths of Boo-Khaloum and thirty-six of his Arabs, the wounding of nearly all the rest, and the loss or destruction of all the horses.

The eighty miles between Mora and Kouka were traversed in six days. Denham was kindly received in the latter town by the sultan, who sent him a native garment to replace his lost wardrobe. The major had hardly recovered from his wounds and fatigue, before he took part in a new expedition, sent to Munga, a province on the west of Bornou, by the sheikh, whose authority had never been fully recognized there, and whose claim for tribute had been refused by the inhabitants.

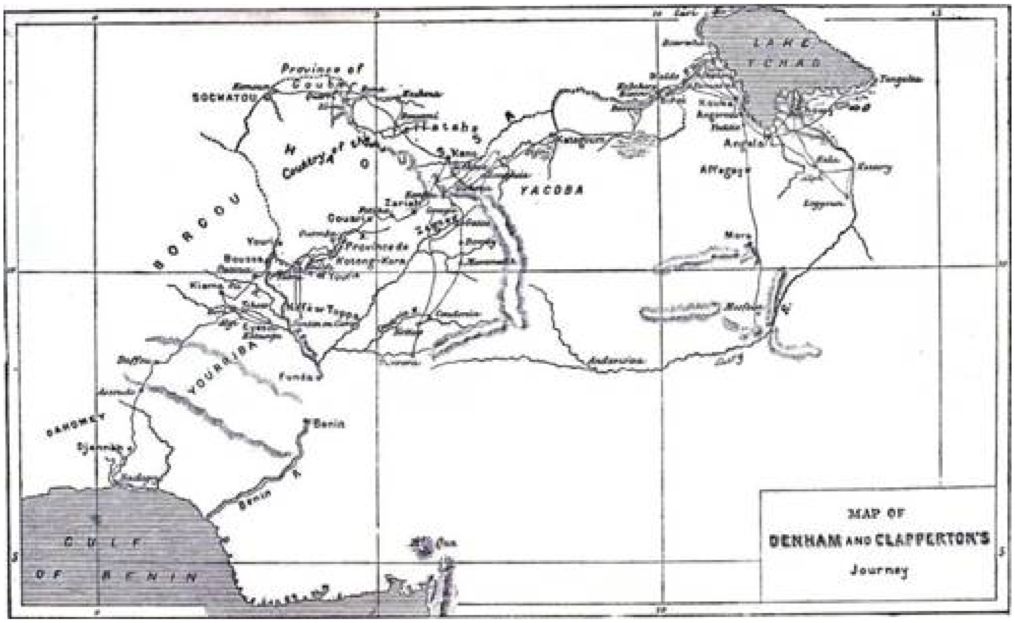
MAP OF
DENHAM AND CLAPPERTON'S
Journey
LAKE TCHAD
Province of Goubur
SOCKATOU
Country of the Houssa
Kano
YACOBA
Zaria
Kouka
Angala
Affagay
Mora
BORGOU
YOURRIBA
Boussa
Fundah
Benin
DAHOMEY
GULF OF BENIN

Gravé par E. Morieu.

Denham and Oudney left Kouka on the 22nd May, and crossed the Yeou, then nearly dried up, but an important stream in the rainy season, and visited Birnie, with the ruins of the capital of the same name, which was capable of containing two hundred thousand inhabitants. The travellers also passed through the ruins of Gambarou with its magnificent buildings, the favourite residence of the former sultan, destroyed by the Fellatahs, Kabshary, Bassecour, Bately, and many other towns or villages, whose numerous populations submitted without a struggle to the Sultan of Bornou.

The rainy season was disastrous to the members of the expedition, Clapperton fell dangerously ill of fever, and Oudney, whose chest was delicate even before he left England, grew weaker every day. Denham alone kept up. On the 14th of December, when the rainy season was drawing to a close, Clapperton and Oudney started for Kano. We shall presently relate the particulars of this interesting part of their expedition.

Seven days later, an ensign, named Toole, arrived at Kouka, after a journey from Tripoli, which had occupied only three months and fourteen days.

In February, 1824, Denham and Toole made a trip into Luggun, on the south of Lake Tchad. All the districts near the lake and its tributary, the Shari, are marshy, and flooded during the rainy season. The unhealthiness of the climate was fatal to young Toole, who died at Angala, on the 26th of February, at the early age of twenty-two. Persevering, enterprising, bright and obliging, with plenty of pluck and prudence, Toole was a model explorer.

Luggun was then very little known, its capital Kernok, contained no less than 15,000 inhabitants. The people of Luggun, especially the women —

who are very industrious, and manufacture the finest linens, and fabrics of the closest texture — are handsomer and more intelligent than those of Bornou.

The necessary interview with the sultan ended, after an exchange of complimentary speeches and handsome presents, in this strange proposal from his majesty to the travellers: “If you have come to buy female slaves, you need not be at the trouble to go further, as I will sell them to you as cheap as possible.” Denham had great trouble in convincing the merchant prince that such traffic was not the aim of his journey, but that the love of science alone had brought him to Luggun.

On the 2nd of March, Denham returned to Kouka, and on the 20th of May, he was witness to the arrival of Lieutenant Tyrwhitt, who had come to take up his residence as consul at the court of Bornou, bearing costly presents for the sultan.

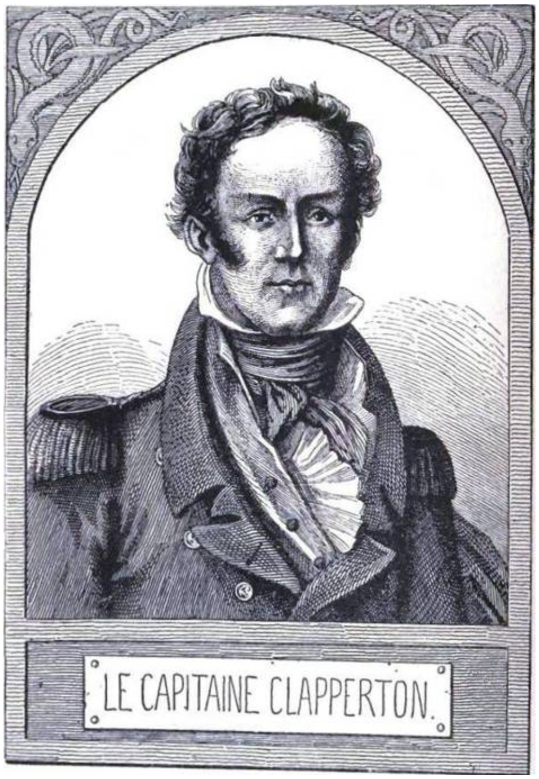
LE CAPITAINE CLAPPERTON.

Portrait of Clapperton.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

After a final excursion in the direction of Manou, the capital of Kanem, and a visit to the Dogganah, who formerly occupied all the districts about Lake Fitri, the major joined Clapperton in his return journey to Tripoli, starting on the 16th of April, and arriving there in safety at the close of a long and arduous journey, whose geographical results, important in any case, had been greatly enhanced by the labours of Clapperton. To the adventures and discoveries of the latter we must now turn. Clapperton and Oudney started for Kano, a large Fellatah town on the west of Lake Tchad, on the 14th of December, 1823, followed the Yeou as far as Damasak, and visited the ruins of Birnie, and those of Bera, on the shores of a lake formed by the overflowing of the Yeou, Dogamou and Bekidarfi, all towns of Houssa. The people of this province, who were very numerous before the invasion of the Fellatahs, are armed with bows and arrows, and trade in tobacco, nuts, gouro, antimony, tanned hares' skins, and cotton stuffs in the piece and made into clothes.

The caravan soon left the banks of the Yeou or Gambarou, and entered a wooded country, which was evidently under water in the rainy season.

The travellers then entered the province of Katagoum, where the governor received them with great cordiality, assuring them that their arrival was quite an event to him, as it would be to the Sultan of the Fellatahs, who, like himself, had never before seen an Englishman. He also assured them that they would find all they required in his district, just as at Kouka.

The only thing which seemed to surprise him much, was the fact that his visitors wanted neither slaves, horses, nor silver, and that the sole proof of his friendship they required was permission to collect flowers and plants, and to travel in his country.

According to Clapperton’s observations, Katagoum is situated in lat. 12° 17’ 11” N. and about 12° E. long. Before the Fellatahs were conquered, it was on the borders of the province of Bornou. It can send into the field 4000 cavalry, and 2000 foot soldiers, armed with bows and arrows, swords and lances. Wheat, and oxen, with slaves, are its chief articles of commerce. The citadel is the strongest the English had seen, except that of Tripoli. Entered by gates which are shut at night, it is defended by two parallel walls, and three dry moats, one inside, one out, and the third between the two walls which are twenty feet high, and ten feet wide at the base. A ruined mosque is the only other object of interest in the town, which consists of mud houses, and contains some seven or eight hundred inhabitants.

There the English for the first time saw cowries used as money. Hitherto native cloth had been the sole medium of exchange.

South of Katagoum is the Yacoba country, called Mouchy by the Mahommedans. According to accounts received by Clapperton, the people of Yacoba, which is shut in by limestone mountains, are cannibals. The Mahommedans, however, who have an intense horror of the “Kaffirs,” give no other proof of this accusation than the statement that they have seen human heads and limbs hanging against the walls of the houses.

In Yacoba rises the Yeou, a river which dries up completely in the summer; but, according to the people who live on its banks, rises and falls regularly every week throughout the rainy season.

On the 11th of January, the journey was resumed; but a halt had to be made at Murmur at noon of the same day, as Oudney showed signs of such extreme weakness and exhaustion, that Clapperton feared he could not last through another day. He had been gradually failing ever since they left the mountains of Obarri in Fezzan, where he had inflammation of the throat from sitting in a draught when over-heated.

On the 12th of January, Oudney took a cup of coffee at daybreak, and at his request Clapperton changed camels with him. He then helped him to dress, and leaning on his servant, the doctor left the tent. He was about to attempt to mount his camel, when Clapperton saw death in his face. He supported him back to the tent, where to his intense grief, he expired at once, without a groan or any sign of suffering. Clapperton lost no time in asking the governor’s permission to bury his comrade; and this being obtained, he dug a grave for him himself under an old mimosa-tree near one of the gates of the town. After the body had been washed according to the custom of the country, it was wrapped in some of the turban shawls which were to have served as presents on the further journey; the servants carried it to its last resting-place, and Clapperton read the English burial service at the grave. When the ceremony was over, he surrounded the modest resting-place with a wall of earth, to keep off beasts of prey, and had two sheep killed, which he divided amongst the poor.

Thus closed the career of the young naturalist and ship’s doctor, Oudney. His terrible malady, whose germs he had brought with him from England, had prevented him from rendering so much service to the expedition as the Government had expected from him, although he never spared himself, declaring that he felt better on the march, than when resting. Knowing that his weakened constitution would not admit of any sustained exertion on his part, he would never damp the ardour of his companions.

After this sad event, Clapperton resumed his journey to Kano, halting successively at Digou, situated in a well-cultivated district, rich in flocks; Katoungora, beyond the province of Katagoum; Zangeia, once — judging from its extent and the ruined walls still standing — an important place, near the end of the Douchi chain of hills; Girkoua, with a finer market-place than that of Tripoli; and Souchwa, surrounded by an imposing earthwork.

Kano, the Chana of Edrisi and other Arab geographers, and the great emporium of the kingdom of Houssa, was reached on the 20th January.

Clapperton tells us that he had hardly entered the gates before his expectations were disappointed; after the brilliant description of the Arabs, he had expected to see a town of vast extent. The houses were a quarter of a mile from the walls, and stood here and there in little groups, separated by large pools of stagnant water. “I might have dispensed with the care I had bestowed on my dress,” (he had donned his naval uniform), “for the inhabitants, absorbed in their own affairs, let me pass without remark and never so much as looked at me.”

Kano, the capital of the province of that name and one of the chief towns of the Soudan, is situated in N. lat. 12° 0’ 19”, and E. long. 9° 20’. It contains between thirty and forty thousand inhabitants, of whom the greater number are slaves.

The market, bounded on the east and west by vast reedy swamps, is the haunt of numerous flocks of ducks, storks, and vultures, which act as scavengers to the town. In this market, stocked with all the provisions in use in Africa, beef, mutton, goats’ and sometimes even camels’ flesh, are sold.

Writing paper of French manufacture, scissors and knives, antimony, tin, red silk, copper bracelets, glass beads, coral, amber, steel rings, silver ornaments, turban shawls, cotton cloths, calico, Moorish habiliments, and many other articles, are exposed for sale in large quantities in the market-place of Kano.

There Clapperton bought for three piastres, an English cotton umbrella from Ghadames. He also visited the slave-market, where the unfortunate human chattels are as carefully examined as volunteers for the navy are by our own inspectors.

The town is very unhealthy, the swamps cutting it in two, and the holes produced by the removal of the earth for building, produce permanent malaria.

It is the fashion at Kano to stain the teeth and limbs with the juice of a plant called *gourgi*, and with tobacco, which produces a bright red colour. Gouro nuts are chewed, and sometimes even swallowed when mixed with *trona*, a habit not peculiar to Houssa, for it extends to Bornou, where it is strictly forbidden to women. The people of Houssa smoke a native tobacco.

On the 23rd of February, Clapperton started for Sackatoo. He crossed a picturesque well-cultivated country, whose wooded hills gave it the appearance of an English park. Herds of beautiful white or dun-coloured oxen gave animation to the scenery.

The most important places passed en route by Clapperton were Gadania, a densely populated town, the inhabitants of which had been sold as slaves by the Fellatahs, Doncami, Zirmia, the capital of Gambra, Kagaria, Kouari, and the wells of Kamoun, where he met an escort sent by the sultan.

Sackatoo was the most thickly populated city that the explorer had seen in Africa. Its well-built houses form regular streets, instead of clustering in groups as in the other towns of Houssa. It is surrounded by a wall between twenty and thirty feet high, pierced by twelve gates, which are closed every evening at sunset, and it boasts of two mosques, with a market and a large square opposite to the sultan’s residence.

The inhabitants, most of whom are Fellatahs, own many slaves; and the latter, those at least who are not in domestic service, work at some trade for their masters’ profit. They are weavers, masons, blacksmiths, shoemakers, or husbandmen.

To do honour to his host, and also to give him an exalted notion of the power and wealth of England, Clapperton assumed a dazzling costume when he paid his first visit to Sultan Bello. He covered his uniform with gold lace, donned white trousers and silk stockings, and completed this holiday attire by a Turkish turban and slippers. Bello received him, seated on a cushion in a thatched hut like an English cottage. The sultan, a handsome man, about forty-five years old, wore a blue cotton *tobe* and a white cotton turban, one end of which fell over his nose and mouth in Turkish fashion.

Bello accepted the traveller’s presents with childish glee. The watch, telescope, and thermometer, which he naively called a “heat watch,” especially delighted him; but he wondered more at his visitor than at any of his gifts. He was unwearied in his questions as to the manners, customs, and trade of England; and after receiving several replies, he expressed a wish to open commercial relations with that power. He would like an English consul and a doctor to reside in a port he called Raka, and finally he requested that certain articles of English manufacture should be sent to

Funda, a very thriving sea-port of his. After a good many talks on the different religions of Europe, Bello gave back to Clapperton the books, journals, and clothes which had been taken from Denham, at the time of the unfortunate excursion in which Boo-Khaloum lost his life.

On the 3rd May, Clapperton took leave of the sultan. This time there was a good deal of delay before he was admitted to an audience. Bello was alone, and gave the traveller a letter for the King of England, with many expressions of friendship towards the country of his visitor, reiterating his wish to open commercial relations with it and begging him to let him have a letter to say when the English expedition promised by Clapperton would arrive on the coast of Africa.

Clapperton returned by the route by which he had come, arriving on the 8th of July at Kouka, where he rejoined Denham. He had brought with him an Arab manuscript containing a geographical and historical picture of the kingdom of Takrour, governed by Mahommed Bello of Houssa, author of the manuscript. He himself had not only collected much valuable information on the geology and botany of Bornou and Houssa, but also drawn up a vocabulary of the languages of Begharmi, Mandara, Bornou, Houssa, and Timbuctoo.

The results of the expedition were therefore considerable. The Fellatahs had been heard of for the first time, and their identity with the Fans had been ascertained by Clapperton in his second journey. It had been proved that these Fellatahs had created a vast empire in the north and west of Africa, and also that beyond a doubt they did not belong to the negro race. The study of their language, and its resemblance to certain idioms not of African origin, will some day throw a light on the migration of races. Lastly, Lake Tchad had been discovered, and though not entirely examined, the greater part of its shores had been explored. It had been ascertained to have two tributaries: the Yeou, part of whose course had been traced, whilst its source had been pointed out by the natives, and the Shari, the mouth and lower portion of which had been carefully examined by Denham. With regard to the Niger, the information collected by Clapperton from the natives was still very contradictory, but the balance of evidence was in favour of its flowing into the Gulf of Benin. However, Clapperton intended, after a short rest in England, to return to Africa, and landing on the western coast make his way up the Kouara or Djoliba as the natives call the Niger; to set at rest once for all the dispute as to whether that river was or was not identical with the Nile; to connect his new discoveries with those of Denham, and lastly to cross Africa, taking a diagonal course from Tripoli to the Gulf of Benin.

II.

Clapperton’s second journey — Arrival at Badagry — Yariba and its capital Katunga — Boussa — Attempts to get at the truth about Mungo Park’s fate — ”Nyffé,” Yaourie, and Zegzeg — Arrival at Kano — Disappointments — Death of Clapperton — Return of Lander to the coast — Tuckey on the Congo — Bowditch in Ashantee — Mollien at the sources of the Senegal and Gambia — Major Grey — Caillié at Timbuctoo — Laing at the sources of the Niger — Richard and John Lander at the mouth of the Niger — Cailliaud and Letorzec in Egypt, Nubia, and the oasis of Siwâh.

So soon as Clapperton arrived in England, he submitted to Lord Bathurst his scheme for going to Kouka *viâ* the Bight of Benin — in other words by the shortest way, a route not attempted by his predecessors — and ascending the Niger from its mouth to Timbuctoo.

In this expedition three others were associated with Clapperton, who took the command. These three were a surgeon named Dickson, Pearce, a ship's captain, and Dr. Morrison, also in the merchant service; the last-named well up in every branch of natural history.

On the 26th November, 1825, the expedition arrived in the Bight of Benin. For some reason unexplained, Dickson had asked permission to make his way to Sockatoo alone and he landed for that purpose at Whydah. A Portuguese named Songa, and Colombus, Denham's servant, accompanied him as far as Dahomey. Seventeen days after he left that town, Dickson reached Char, and a little later Yaourie, beyond which place he was never traced.[1]

[1] Dickson quarrelled with a native chief, and was murdered by his followers. See Clapperton's "Last Journey in Africa." — *Trans.*

The other explorers sailed up the Bight of Benin, and were warned by an English merchant named Houtson, not to attempt the ascent of the Quorra, as the king of the districts watered by it had conceived an intense hatred of the English, on account of their interference with the slave-trade, the most remunerative branch of his commerce.

It would be much better, urged Houtson, to go to Badagry, no great distance from Sackatoo, the chief of which, well-disposed as he was to travellers, would doubtless give them an escort as far as the frontiers of Yariba. Houtson had lived in the country many years, and was well acquainted with the language and habits of its people. Clapperton, therefore, thought it desirable to attach him to the expedition as far as Katunga, the capital of Yariba.

The expedition disembarked at Badagry, on the 29th November, 1825, ascended an arm of the Lagos, and then, for a distance of two miles, the Gazie creek, which traverses part of Dahomey. Descending the left bank, the explorers began their march into the interior of the country, through districts consisting partly of swamps and partly of yam plantations. Everything indicated fertility. The negroes were very averse to work, and it would be impossible to relate the numerous “palavers” and negotiations which had to be gone through, and the exactions which were submitted to, before porters could be obtained.

The explorers succeeded, in spite of these difficulties, in reaching Jenneh, sixty miles from the coast. Here Clapperton tells us he saw several looms at work, as many as eight or nine in one house, a regular manufactory in fact. The people of Jenneh also make earthenware, but they prefer that which they get from Europe, often putting the foreign produce to uses for which it was never intended.

At Jenneh the travellers were all attacked with fever, the result of the great heat and the unhealthiness of the climate. Pearce and Morrison both died on the 27th December, the former soon after he left Jenneh with Clapperton, the latter at that town, to which he had returned to rest.

At Assondo, a town of no less than 10,000 inhabitants; Daffou, containing some 5000, and other places visited by Clapperton on his way through the country, he found that an extraordinary rumour had preceded him, to the effect that he had come to restore peace to the districts distracted by war, and to do good to the lands he explored.

At Tchow the caravan met a messenger with a numerous escort, sent by the King of Yariba to meet the explorers, and shortly afterwards Katunga was entered. This town is built round the base of a rugged granite mountain. It is about three miles in extent, and is both framed in and planted with bushy trees presenting a most picturesque appearance.

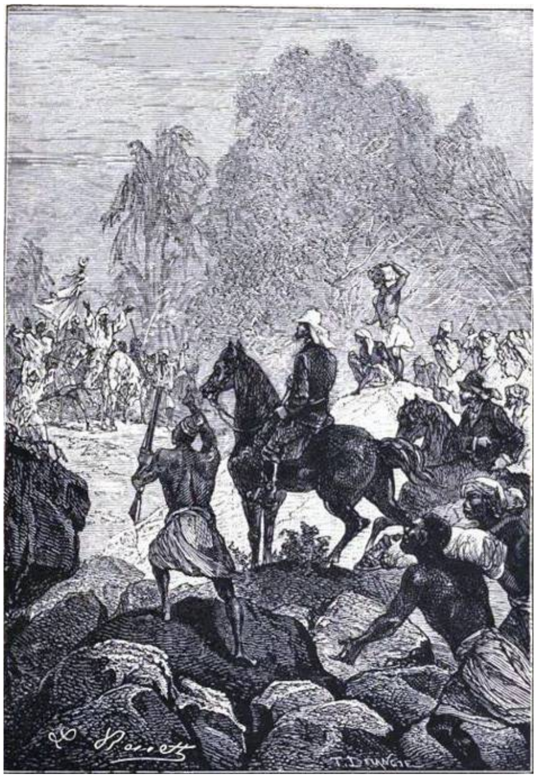

“The caravan met a messenger.”

Clapperton remained at Katunga from the 24th January to the 7th March, 1826. He was entertained there with great hospitality by the sultan, who, however, refused to give him permission to go to Houssa and Bornou by way of Nyffé or Toppa, urging as reasons that Nyffé was distracted by civil war, and one of the pretenders to the throne had called in the aid of the Fellatahs. It would be more prudent to go through Yaourie. Whether these excuses were true or not, Clapperton had to submit.

The explorer availed himself of his detention at Katunga to make several interesting observations. This town contains no less than seven markets, in which are exposed for sale yams, cereals, bananas, figs, the seeds of gourds, hares, poultry, sheep, lambs, linen cloth, and various implements of husbandry.

The houses of the king and those of his wives are situated in two large parks. The doors and the pillars of the verandahs are adorned with fairly well executed carvings, representing such scenes as a boa killing an antelope, or a pig, or a group of warriors and drummers.

According to Clapperton the people of Yariba have fewer of the characteristics of the negro race than any natives of Africa with whom he was brought in contact. Their lips are not so thick and their noses are of a more aquiline shape. The men are well made, and carry themselves with an ease which cannot fail to be remarked. The women are less refined-looking than the men, the result, probably, of exposure to the sun and the fatigue they endure, compelled as they are to do all the work of the fields.

Soon after leaving Katunga, Clapperton crossed the Mousa, a tributary of the Quorra and entered Kiama, one of the halting-places of the caravans trading between Houssa and Borghoo, and Gandja, on the frontiers of Ashantee. Kiama contains no less than 13,000 inhabitants, who are considered the greatest thieves in Africa. To say a man is from Borghoo is to brand him as a blackguard at once.

Outside Kiama the traveller met the Houssa caravan. Some thousands of men and women, oxen, asses, and horses, marching in single file, formed an interminable line presenting a singular and grotesque appearance. A motley assemblage truly: naked girls alternating with men bending beneath their loads, or with Gandja merchants in the most outlandish and ridiculous costumes, mounted on bony steeds which stumbled at every step.

Clapperton now made for Boussa on the Niger, where Mungo Park was drowned. Before reaching it he had to cross the Oli, a tributary of the Quorra, and to pass through Wow-wow, a district of Borghoo, the capital of which, also called Wow-wow, contained some 18,000 inhabitants. It was one of the cleanest and best built towns the traveller had entered since he left Badagry. The streets are wide and well kept, and the houses are round, with conical thatched roofs. Drunkenness is a prevalent vice in Wow-wow: governor, priests, laymen, men and women, indulge to excess in palm wine, in rum brought from the coast, and in “bouza.” The latter beverage is a mixture made of dhurra, honey, cayenne pepper, and the root of a coarse grass eaten by cattle, with the addition of a certain quantity of water.

Clapperton tells us that the people of Wow-wow are famous for their cleanliness; they are cheerful, benevolent, and hospitable. No other people whom he had met with had been so ready to give him information about their country; and, more extraordinary still, did not meet with a single beggar. The natives say they are not aborigines of Borghoo, but that they are descendants of the natives of Houssa and Nyffé. They speak a Yariba dialect, but the Wow-wow women are pretty, which those of Yariba are not. The men are muscular and well-made, but have a dissipated look. Their religion is a lax kind of Mahommedanism tinctured with paganism.

Since leaving the coast Clapperton had met tribes of unconverted Fellatahs speaking the same language, and resembling in feature and complexion others who had adopted Mahommedanism. A significant fact which points to their belonging to one race.

Boussa, which the traveller reached at last, is not a regular town, but consists of groups of scattered houses on an island of the Quorra, situated in lat. 10° 14’ N. and long. 6° 11’ E. The province of which it is the capital is the most densely populated of Borghoo. The inhabitants are all Pagans, even the sultan, although his name is Mahommed. They live upon monkeys, dogs, cats, rats, beef, and mutton.

Breakfast was served to the sultan whilst he was giving audience to Clapperton, whom he invited to join him. The meal consisted of a large water-rat grilled without skinning, a dish of fine boiled rice, some dried fish stewed in palm oil, fried alligators’ eggs, washed down with fresh water from the Quorra. Clapperton took some stewed fish and rice, but was much laughed at because he would eat neither the rat nor the alligators’ eggs.

The sultan received him very courteously, and told him that the Sultan of Yaourie had had boats ready to take him to that town for the last seven days. Clapperton replied that as the war had prevented all exit from Bornou and Yaourie, he should prefer going by way of Coulfo and Nyffé. “You are right,” answered the sultan; “you did well to come and see me, and you can take which ever route you prefer.”

At a later audience Clapperton made inquiries about the Englishmen who had perished in the Quorra twenty years before. This subject evidently made the sultan feel very ill at ease, and he evaded the questions put to him, by saying he was too young at the time to remember what happened.

Clapperton explained that he only wanted to recover their books and papers, and to visit the scene of their death; and the sultan in reply denied having anything belonging to them, adding a warning against his guest's going to the place where they died, for it was a "very bad place."

"But I understood," urged Clapperton, "that part of the boat they were in could still be seen."

"No, it was a false report," replied the sultan, "the boat had long since been carried down by the stream; it was somewhere amongst the rocks, he didn't know where."

To a fresh demand for Park's papers and journals the sultan replied that he had none of them; they were in the hands of some learned men; but as Clapperton seemed to set such store by them, he would have them looked for. Thanking him for this promise, Clapperton begged permission to question the old men of the place, some of whom must have witnessed the catastrophe. No answer whatever was returned to this appeal, by which the sultan was evidently much embarrassed. It was useless to press him further.

This was a check to Clapperton's further inquiries. On every side he was met with embarrassed silence or such replies as, "The affair happened so long ago, I can't remember it," or, "I was not witness to it." The place where the boat had been stopped and its crew drowned was pointed out to him, but even that was done cautiously. A few days later, Clapperton found out that the former Imaun, who was a Fellatah, had had Mungo Park's books and papers in his possession. Unfortunately, however, this Imaun had long since left Boussa. Finally, when at Coulfo, the explorer ascertained beyond a doubt that Mungo Park had been murdered.

Before leaving Borghoo, Clapperton recorded his conviction of the baselessness of the bad reputation of the inhabitants, who had been branded everywhere as thieves and robbers. He had completely explored their country, travelled and hunted amongst them alone, and never had the slightest reason to complain.

The traveller now endeavoured to reach Kano by way of Zouari and Zegzeg, first crossing the Quorra. He soon arrived at Fabra, on the Mayarrow, the residence of the queen-mother of Nyffé, and then went to visit the king, in camp at a short distance from the town. This king, Clapperton tells us, was the most insolent rogue imaginable, asking for everything he saw, and quite unabashed by any refusal. His ambition and his calling in of the Fellatahs, who would throw him over as soon as he had answered their purpose, had been the ruin of his country. Thanks indeed to him, nearly the whole of the industrial population of Nyffé had been killed, sold into slavery, or had fled the country.

Clapperton was detained by illness much longer than he had intended to remain at Coulfo, a commercial town on the northern banks of the Mayarrow containing from twelve to fifteen thousand inhabitants. Exposed for the last twenty years to the raids of the Fellatahs, Coulfo had been burnt twice in six years. Clapperton was witness when there of the Feast of the New Moon. On that festival every one exchanged visits. The women wear their woolly hair plaited and stained with indigo. Their eyebrows are dyed the same colour. Their eyelids are painted with kohl, their lips are stained yellow, their teeth red, and their hands and feet are coloured with henna. On the day of the Feast of the Moon they don their gayest garments, with their glass beads, bracelets, copper, silver, steel, or brass. They also turn the occasion to account by drinking as much bouza as the men, joining in all their songs and dances.

After passing through Katunga, Clapperton entered the province of Gouari, the people of which though conquered with the rest of Houssa by the Fellatahs, had rebelled against them on the death of Bello I. and since then maintained their independence in spite of all the efforts of their invaders. Gouari, capital of the province of the same name, is situated in lat. 10° 54’ N. and long. 8° 1’ E.

At Fatika Clapperton entered Zegzeg, subject to the Fellatahs, after which he visited Zariyah, a singular-looking town laid out with plantations of millet, woods of bushy trees, vegetable gardens, &c. alternating with marshes, lawns, and houses. The population was very numerous, exceeding even that of Kano, being estimated indeed at some forty or fifty thousand, nearly all Fellatahs.

On the 19th September, after a long and weary journey, Clapperton at last entered Kano. He at once discovered that he would have been more welcome if he had come from the east, for the war with Bornou had broken off all communication with Fezzan and Tripoli. Leaving his luggage under the care of his servant Lander, Clapperton almost immediately started in quest of Sultan Bello, who they said was near Sackatoo. This was an extremely arduous journey, and on it Clapperton lost his camels and horses, and was compelled to put up with a miserable ox; to carry part of his baggage, he and his servants dividing the rest amongst them.

Bello received Clapperton kindly and sent him camels and provisions, but as he was then engaged in subjugating the rebellious province of Gouber, he could not at once give the explorer the personal audience so important to the many interests entrusted by the English Government to Clapperton.

Bello advanced to the attack of Counia, the capital of Gouber, at the head of an army of 60,000 soldiers, nine-tenths of whom were on foot and wore padded armour. The struggle was contemptible in the extreme, and this abortive attempt closed the war. Clapperton, whose health was completely broken up, managed to make his way from Sackatoo to Magaria, where he saw the sultan.

After he had received the presents brought for him, Bello became less friendly. He presently pretended to have received a letter from Sheikh El Khanemy warning him against the traveller, whom his correspondent characterized as a spy, and urging him to defy the English, who meant, after finding out all about the country, to settle in it, raise up sedition and profit by the disturbances they should create to take possession of Houssa, as they had done of India.

The most patent of all the motives of Bello in creating difficulties for Clapperton was his wish to appropriate the presents intended for the Sultan of Bornou. A pretext being necessary, he spread a rumour that the traveller was taking cannons and ammunition to Kouka. It was out of all reason Bello should allow a stranger to cross his dominions with a view to enabling his implacable enemy to make war upon him. Finally, Bello made an effort to induce Clapperton to read to him the letter of Lord Bathurst to the Sultan of Bornou.

Clapperton told him he could take it if he liked, but that he would not give it to him, adding that everything was of course possible to him, as he had force on his side, but that he would bring dishonour upon himself by using it. “To open the letter myself,” said Clapperton, “is more than my head is worth.” He had come, he urged, bringing Bello a letter and presents from the King of England, relying upon the confidence inspired by the sultan’s letter of the previous year, and he hoped his host would not forfeit that confidence by tampering with another person’s letter.

On this the sultan made a gesture of dismissal, and Clapperton retired.

This was not, however, the last attempt of a similar kind, and things grew much worse later. A few days afterwards another messenger was sent to demand the presents reserved for El Khanemy, and on Clapperton’s refusing to give them up, they were taken from him.

“I told the Gadado,” says Clapperton, “that they were acting like robbers towards me, in defiance of all good faith: that no people in the world would act the same, and they had far better have cut my head off than done such an act; but I suppose they would do that also when they had taken everything from me.”

An attempt was now made to obtain his arms and ammunition, but this he resisted sturdily. His terrified servants ran away, but soon returned to share the dangers of their master, for whom they entertained the warmest affection.

At this critical moment, the entries in Clapperton’s journal ceased. He had now been six months in Sackatoo, without being able to undertake any explorations or to bring to a satisfactory conclusion the mission which had brought him from the coast. Sick at heart, weary, and ill, he could take no rest, and his illness suddenly increased upon him to an alarming degree. His servant, Richard Lander, who had now joined him, tried in vain to be all things at once. On the 12th March, 1827, Clapperton was seized with dysentery. Nothing could check the progress of the malady, and he sank rapidly. It being the time of the feast of the Rhamadan, Lander could get no help, not even servants. Fever soon set in, and after twenty days of great suffering, Clapperton, feeling his end approaching, gave his last instructions to Lander, and died in that faithful servant’s arms, on the 11th of April.

“I put a large clean mat,” says Lander, “over the whole [the corpse], and sent a messenger to Sultan Bello, to acquaint him with the mournful event, and ask his permission to bury the body after the manner of my own country, and also to know in what particular place his remains were to be interred. The messenger soon returned with the sultan’s consent to the former part of my request; and about twelve o’clock at noon of the same day a person came into my hut, accompanied by four slaves, sent by Bello to dig the grave. I was desired to follow them with the corpse. Accordingly I saddled my camel, and putting the body on its back, and throwing a union jack over it, I bade them proceed. Travelling at a slow pace, we halted at Jungavie, a small village, built on a rising ground, about five miles to the south-east of Sackatoo. The body was then taken from the camel’s back, and placed in a shed, whilst the slaves were digging the grave; which being quickly done, it was conveyed close to it. I then opened a prayer-book, and, amid showers of tears, read the funeral service over the remains of my valued master. Not a single person listened to this peculiarly distressing ceremony, the slaves being at some distance, quarrelling and making a most indecent noise the whole time it lasted. This being done, the union jack was then taken off, and the body was slowly lowered into the earth, and I wept bitterly as I gazed for the last time upon all that remained of my generous and intrepid master.”

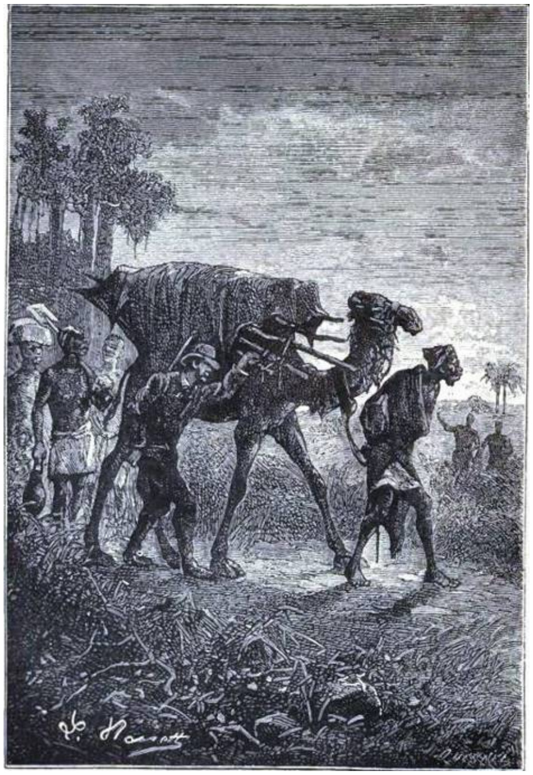

“Travelling at a slow pace.”

Overcome by heat, fatigue, and grief, poor Lander himself now broke down, and for more than ten days was unable to leave his hut.

Bello sent several times to inquire after the unfortunate servant’s health, but he was not deceived by these demonstrations of interest, for he knew they were only dictated by a wish to get possession of the traveller’s baggage, which was supposed to be full of gold and silver. The sultan’s astonishment may therefore be imagined when it came out that Lander had not even money enough to defray the expenses of his journey to the coast. He never found out that the servant had taken the precaution of hiding his own gold watch and those of Pearce and Clapperton about his person.

Lander saw that he must at any cost get back to the coast as quickly as possible. By dint of the judicious distribution of a few presents he won over some of the sultan's advisers, who represented to their master that should Lander die he would be accused of having murdered him as well as Clapperton. Although Clapperton had advised Lander to join an Arab caravan for Fezzan, the latter, fearing that his papers and journals might be taken from him, resolved to go back to the coast.

On the 3rd May Lander at last left Sackatoo en route for Kano. During the first part of this journey, he nearly died of thirst, but he suffered less in the second half, as the King of Djacoba, who had joined him, was very kind to him, and begged him to visit his country. This king told him that the Niam-Niams were his neighbours; that they had once joined him against the Sultan of Bornou, and that after the battle they had roasted and eaten the corpses of the slain. This, I believe, is the first mention, since the publication of Hornemann's Travels, of this cannibal race, who were to become the subjects of so many absurd fables.

Lander entered Kano on the 25th May, and after a short stay there started for Funda, on the Niger, whose course he proposed following to Benin. This route had much to recommend it, being not only safe but new, so that Lander was enabled to supplement the discoveries of his master.

Kanfoo, Carifo, Gowgie, and Gatas, were visited in turns by Lander, who says that the people of these towns belong to the Houssa race, and pay tribute to the Fellatahs. He also saw Damoy, Drammalik, and Coudonia, passed a wide river flowing towards the Quorra, and visited Kottop, a huge slave and cattle market, Coudgi and Dunrora, with a long chain of lofty mountains running in an easterly direction beyond.

At Dunrora, just as Lander was superintending the loading of his beasts of burden, four horsemen, their steeds covered with foam, dashed up to the chief, and with his aid forced Lander to retrace his steps to visit the King of Zegzeg, who, they said, was very anxious to see him. This was by no means agreeable to Lander, who wanted to get to the Niger, from which he was not very far distant, and down it to the sea; he was, however, obliged to yield to force. His guides did not follow exactly the same route as he had taken on his way to Dunrora, and thus he had an opportunity of seeing the village of Eggebi, governed by one of the chief of the warriors of the sovereign of Zegzeg. He paid his respects as required, excusing the small value of the presents he had to give on the ground of his merchandise having been stolen, and soon obtained permission to leave the place.

Yaourie, Womba, Coulfo, Boussa, and Wow-wow were the halting-places on Lander's return journey to Badagry, where he arrived on the 22nd November, 1827. Two months later he embarked for England.

Although the commercial project, which had been the chief aim of Clapperton's journey, had fallen through, owing to the jealousy of the Arabs, who opposed it in their fear that the opening of a new route might ruin their trade, a good deal of scientific information had rewarded the efforts of the English explorer.

In his "History of Maritime and Inland Discovery," Desborough Cooley thus sums up the results obtained by the travellers whose work we have just described: —

"The additions to our geographical knowledge of the interior of Africa which we owe to Captain Clapperton far exceed in extent and importance those made by any preceding traveller. The limit of Captain Lyon's journey southward across the desert was in lat. 24°, while Major Denham, in his expedition to Mandara, reached lat. 9° 15’, thus adding 14¾ degrees, or 900 miles, to the extent explored by Europeans. Hornemann, it is true, had previously crossed the desert, and had proceeded as far southwards as Niffé, in lat. 10° 30’. But no account was ever received of his journey. Park in his first expedition reached Silla, in long. 1° 34’ west, a distance of 1100 miles from the mouth of the Gambia. Denham and Clapperton, on the other hand, from the east side of Lake Tchad, in long. 17°, to Sackatoo, in long. 5° 30’, explored a distance of 700 miles from east to west in the heart of Africa; a line of only 400 miles remaining unknown between Silla and Sackatoo. The second journey of Captain Clapperton added ten-fold value to these discoveries; for he had the good fortune to detect the shortest and most easy road to the populous countries of the interior; and he could boast of being the first who had completed an itinerary across the continent of Africa from Tripoli to Benin.”

We need add but little to so skilful and sensible a summary of the work done. The information given by Arab geographers, especially by Leo Africanus, had been verified, and much had been learnt about a large portion of the Soudan. Although the course of the Niger had not yet been actually traced — that was reserved for the expeditions of which we are now to write — it had been pretty fairly guessed at. It had been finally ascertained that the Quorra, or Djoliba, or Niger — or whatever else the great river of North-West Africa might be called — and the Nile were totally different rivers, with totally different sources. In a word, a great step had been gained.

In 1816 it was still an open question whether the Congo was not identical with the Niger. To ascertain the truth on this point, an expedition was sent out under Captain Tuckey, an English naval officer who had given proof of intelligence and courage. James Kingston Tuckey was made prisoner in

1805, and was not exchanged until 1814. When he heard that an expedition was to be organized for the exploration of the Zaire, he begged to be allowed to join it, and was appointed to the command. Two able officers and some scientific men were associated with him.

Tuckey left England on the 19th March, 1816, with two vessels, the *Congo* and the *Dorothea*, a transport vessel, under his orders. On the 20th June he cast anchor off Malembé, on the shores of the Congo, in lat. 4° 39’ S. The king of that country was much annoyed when he found that the English had not come to buy slaves, and spread all manner of injurious reports against the Europeans who had come to ruin his trade.

On the 18th July, Tuckey entered the vast estuary formed by the mouths of the Zaire, on board the *Congo*; but when the height of the river-banks rendered it impossible to sail farther, he embarked with some of his people in his boats. On the 10th August he decided, on account of the rapidity of the current and the huge rocks bordering the stream, to make his way partly by land and partly by water. Ten days later the boats were brought to a final stand by an impassable fall. The explorers therefore landed, and continued their journey on foot; but the difficulties increased every day, the Europeans falling ill, and the negroes refusing to carry the baggage. At last, when he was some 280 miles from the sea, Tuckey was compelled to retrace his steps. The rainy season had set in, the number of sick increased, and the commander, miserable at the lamentable result of the trip, himself succumbed to fever, and only got back to his vessel to die on the 4th October, 1816.

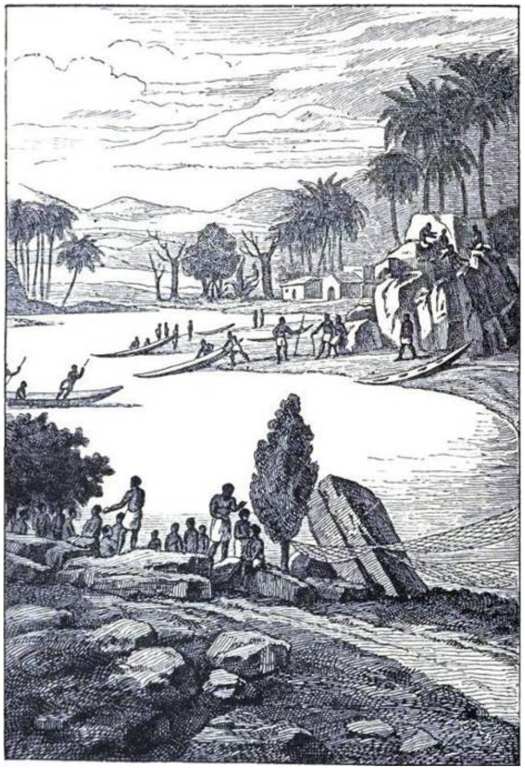

View on the banks of the Congo.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

An exact survey of the mouth of the Congo, and the rectification of the coast-line, in which there had previously been a considerable error, were the only results of this unlucky expedition.

In 1807, not far from the scene of Clapperton’s landing a few years later, a brave but fierce people appeared on the Gold Coast. The Ashantees, coming none knew exactly whence, flung themselves upon the Fantees, and, after horrible massacres, in 1811 and 1816, established themselves in the whole of the country between the Kong mountains and the sea.

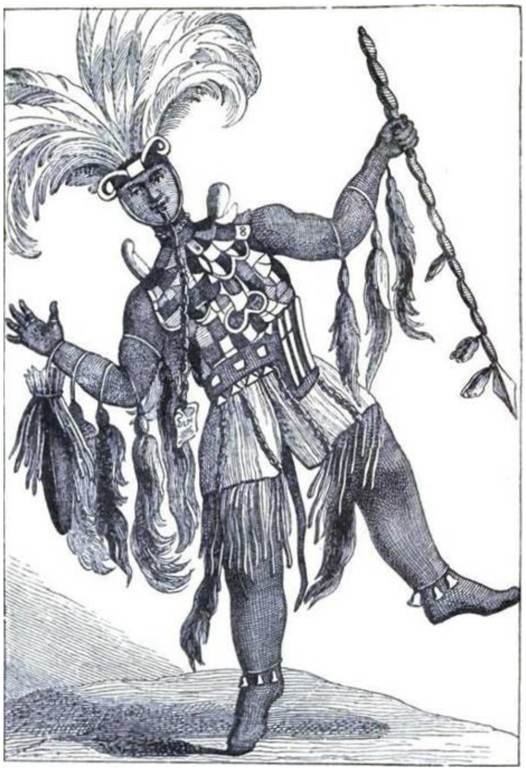

Ashantee warrior.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

As a necessary result, this led to a disturbance in the relations between the Fantees and the English, who owned some factories and counting-houses on the coast.

In 1816 the Ashantee king ravaged the Fantee territories in which the English had settled, reducing the latter to famine. The Governor of Cape Coast Castle therefore sent a petition home for aid against the fierce and savage conqueror. The bearer of the governor’s despatches was Thomas Edward Bowditch, a young man who, actuated by a passion for travelling, had left the parental roof, thrown up his business, and having married against the wishes of his family, had finally accepted a humble post at Cape Coast Castle, where his uncle was second in command.

The English minister at once acceded to the governor’s request, and sent Bowditch back in command of an expedition; but the authorities at Cape Coast considered him too young for the post, and superseded him by a man whose long experience and thorough knowledge of the country and its people seemed to fit him for the important task to be accomplished. The result showed that this was an error. Bowditch was attached to the mission as scientific observer, his chief duty being to take the latitude and longitude of the different places visited.

Frederick James and Bowditch left the English settlement on the 22nd August, 1817, and arrived at Coomassie, the Ashantee capital, without meeting with any other obstacle than the insubordination of the bearers. The negotiations with a view to the conclusion of a treaty of commerce, and the opening of a road between Coomassie and the coast, were brought to something of a successful issue by Bowditch, but James proved himself altogether wanting in either the power of making or enforcing suggestions. The wisdom of Bowditch’s conduct was fully recognized, and James was recalled.

It would seem that geographical science had little to expect from a diplomatic mission to a country already visited by Bosman, Loyer, Des Marchais, and many others, and on which Meredith and Dalzel had written; but Bowditch turned to account his stay of five months at Coomassie, which is but ten days’ march from the Atlantic, to study the country, manners, customs, and institutions of one of the most interesting races of Africa.

We will now briefly describe the pompous entry of the English mission into Coomassie. The whole population turned out on the occasion, and all the troops, whose numbers Bowditch estimated at 30,000 at least, were under arms.

Before they were admitted to the presence of the king, the English witnessed a scene well calculated to impress upon them the cruelty and barbarity of the Ashantees. A man with his hands tied behind him, his cheeks pierced with wire, one ear cut off, the other hanging by a bit of skin, his shoulders bleeding from cuts and slashes, and a knife run through the skin above each shoulder-blade, was dragged, by a cord fastened to his nose, through the town to the music of bamboos. He was on his way to be sacrificed in honour of the white men!

“Our observations *en passant*,” says Bowditch, “had taught us to conceive a spectacle far exceeding our original expectations; but they had not prepared us for the extent and display of the scene which here burst upon us. An area of nearly a mile in circumference was crowded with magnificence and novelty. The king, his tributaries and captains, were resplendent in the distance, surrounded by attendants of every description, fronted by a mass of warriors which seemed to make our approach impervious. The sun was reflected, with a glare scarcely more supportable than the heat, from the massive gold ornaments which glistened in every direction. More than a hundred bands burst at once on our arrival, into the peculiar airs of their several chiefs; the horns flourished their defiances, with the beating of innumerable drums and metal instruments, and then yielded for a while to the soft harmonious breathings of their long flutes, with which a pleasing instrument, like a bagpipe without the drone, was happily blended. At least a hundred large umbrellas or canopies, which could shelter thirty persons, were sprung up and down by the bearers with brilliant effect, being made of scarlet, yellow, and the most showy cloths and silks, and crowned on the top with crescents, pelicans, elephants, barrels, and arms, and swords of gold.

“The king’s messengers, with gold breastplates, made way for us, and we commenced our round, preceded by the canes and the English flag. We stopped to take the hand of every caboceer, (which, as their household suites occupied several spaces in advance, delayed us long enough to distinguish some of the ornaments in the general blaze of splendour and ostentation). The caboceers, as did their superior captains and attendants, wore Ashantee cloths of extravagant price, from the costly foreign silks which had been unravelled to weave them, in all the varieties of colour as well as pattern; they were of an incredible size and weight, and thrown over the shoulder exactly like the Roman toga; a small silk fillet generally encircled their temples, and massy gold necklaces, intricately wrought, suspended Moorish charms, inclosed in small square cases of gold, silver, and curious embroidery. Some wore necklaces reaching to the navel, entirely of aggry beads; a band of gold and beads encircled the knee, from which several strings of the same depended; small circles of gold, like guineas, rings, and casts of animals, were strung round their ancles; their sandals were of green, red, and delicate white leather; manillas, and rude lumps of rock gold, hung from their left wrists, which were so heavily laden as to be supported on the head of one of their handsomest boys. Gold and silver pipes, and canes, dazzled the eye in every direction. Wolves’ and rams’ heads, as large as life, cast in gold, were suspended from their gold-handled swords, which were held around them in great numbers; the blades were shaped like round bills, and rusted in blood; the sheaths were of leopard skin, or the shell of a fish like shagreen. The large drums, supported on the head of one man, and beaten by two others, were braced around with the thigh-bones of their enemies, and ornamented with their skulls. The kettle-drums, resting on the ground, were scraped with wet fingers, and covered with leopard skin. The wrists of the drummers were hung with bells and curiously-shaped pieces of iron, which jingled loudly as they were beating. The smaller drums were suspended from the neck by scarves of red cloth; the horns (the teeth of young elephants) were ornamented at the mouth-piece with gold, and the jaw-bones of human victims. The war-caps of eagles' feathers nodded in the rear, and large fans, of the wing feathers of the ostrich, played around the dignitaries; immediately behind their chairs (which were of a black wood, almost covered by inlays of ivory and gold embossment) stood their handsomest youths, with corslets of leopard's skin, covered with gold cockle-shells, and stuck full of small knives, sheathed in gold and silver and the handles of blue agate; cartouch-boxes of elephant's hide hung below, ornamented in the same manner; a large gold-handled sword was fixed behind the left shoulder, and silk scarves and horses' tails (generally white), streamed from the arms and waist cloth; their long Danish muskets had broad rims of gold at small distances, and the stocks were ornamented with shells. Finely-grown girls stood behind the chairs of some, with silver basins. Their stools (of the most laborious carved work, and generally with two large bells attached to them) were conspicuously placed on the heads of favourites; and crowds of small boys were seated around, flourishing elephants' tails curiously mounted. The warriors sat on the ground close to these, and so thickly as not to admit of our passing without treading on their feet, to which they were perfectly indifferent; their caps were of the skin of the pangolin and leopard, the tails hanging down behind; their cartouch-belts (composed of small gourds which hold the charges, and covered with leopard's or pig's skin) were embossed with red shells, and small brass bells thickly hung to them; on their hips and shoulders was a cluster of knives; iron chains and collars dignified the most daring, who were prouder of them than of gold; their muskets had rests affixed of leopard's skin, and the locks a covering of the same; the sides of their faces were curiously painted in long white streaks, and their arms also striped, having the appearance of armour.

“We were suddenly surprised by the sight of Moors, who afforded the first general diversity of dress. There were seventeen superiors, arrayed in large cloaks of white satin, richly trimmed with spangled embroidery; their shirts and trousers were of silk; and a very large turban of white muslin was studded with a border of different coloured stones; their attendants wore red caps and turbans, and long white shirts, which hung over their trousers; those of the inferiors were of dark blue cloth. They slowly raised their eyes from the ground as we passed, and with a most malignant scowl.

“The prolonged flourishes of the horns, a deafening tumult of drums, and the fuller concert at the intervals, announced that we were approaching the king. We were already passing the principal officers of his household. The chamberlain, the gold horn blower, the captain of the messengers, the captain for royal executions, the captain of the market, the keeper of the royal burying-ground, and the master of the bands, sat surrounded by a retinue and splendour which bespoke the dignity and importance of their offices. The cook had a number of small services, covered with leopard’s skin, held behind him, and a large quantity of massy silver plate was displayed before him — punch-bowls, waiters, coffee-pots, tankards, and a very large vessel with heavy handles and clawed feet, which seemed to have been made to hold incense. I observed a Portuguese inscription on one piece, and they seemed generally of that manufacture. The executioner, a man of immense size, wore a massy gold hatchet on his breast; and the execution stool was held before him, clotted in blood, and partly covered with a cawl of fat. The king’s four linguists were encircled by a splendour inferior to none, and their peculiar insignia, gold canes, were elevated in all directions, tied in bundles like fasces. The keeper of the treasury added to his own magnificence by the ostentatious display of his service; the blow pan, boxes, scales and weights, were of solid gold.

“A delay of some minutes whilst we severally approached to receive the king’s hand, afforded us a thorough view of him. His deportment first excited my attention; native dignity in princes we are pleased to call barbarous was a curious spectacle; his manners were majestic, yet courteous, and he did not allow his surprise to beguile him for a moment of the composure of the monarch. He appeared to be about thirty-eight years of age, inclined to corpulence, and of a benevolent countenance.”

This account is followed by a description, extending over several pages, of the costume of the king, the filing past of the chiefs and troops, the dispersing of the crowd, and the ceremonies of reception, which lasted far on into the night.

Reading Bowditch’s extraordinary narrative, we are tempted to ask if it be not the outcome of the traveller’s imagination, for we can scarcely credit what he says of the wonderful luxury of this barbarous court, the sacrifice of thousands of persons at certain seasons of the year, the curious customs of this warlike and cruel people, this mixture of barbarism and civilization hitherto unknown in Africa. We could not acquit Bowditch of great exaggeration, had not later travellers as well as contemporary explorers confirmed his statements. We can therefore only express our astonishment that such a government, founded on terror alone, could have endured so long.

It is a pleasure to us Frenchmen when we can quote the name of a fellow-countryman amongst the many travellers who have risked their lives in the cause of geographical science. Without abating our critical acumen, we feel our pulse quicken when we read of the dangers and struggles of such travellers as Mollien, Caillié, De Cailliaud, and Letorzec.

Gaspar Mollien was nephew to Napoleon’s Minister of the Treasury. He was on board the *Medusa*, but was fortunate enough to escape when that vessel was shipwrecked, and to reach the coast of the Sahara in a boat, whence he made his way to Senegal.

The dangers from which Mollien had just escaped would have destroyed the love of adventure and exploration in a less ardent spirit. They had no such effect upon him. He left St. Louis as soon as ever he obtained the assent of the Governor, Fleuriau, to his proposal to explore the sources of the great rivers of Senegambia, and especially those of the Djoliba.

Mollien started from Djeddeh on the 29th January, 1818, and taking an easterly course between the 15th and 16th parallels of north latitude, crossed the kingdom of Domel, and entered the districts peopled by the Yaloofs. Unable to go by way of Woolli, he decided in favour of the Fouta Toro route, and in spite of the jealousy of the natives and their love of pillage, he reached Bondou without accident. It took him three days to traverse the desert between Bondou and the districts beyond the Gambia, after which he penetrated into Niokolo, a mountainous country, inhabited by the all but wild Peuls and Djallons.

Leaving Bandeia, Mollien entered Fouta Djallon, and reached the sources of the Gambia and the Rio Grande, which are in close proximity. A few days later he came to those of the Falemé; and, in spite of the repugnance and fear of his guide, he made his way into Timbo, the capital of Fouta. The absence of the king and most of the inhabitants probably spared him from a long captivity abbreviated only by torture. Fouta is a fortified town, the king owns houses, with mud walls between three and four feet thick and fifteen high.

At a short distance from Timbo, Mollien discovered the sources of the Senegal — at least what were pointed out to him as such by the blacks; but it was impossible for him to take astronomical observations.

The explorer did not, however, look upon his work as done. He had ever before him the still more important discovery of the sources of the Niger; but the feeble state of his health, the setting in of the rainy season, the swelling of the rivers, the fears of his guides, who refused to accompany him into Kooranko and Soolimano, though he offered them guns, amber beads, and even his horse, compelled him to give up the idea of crossing the Kong mountains, and to return to St. Louis. Mollien had, however, opened several new lines in a part of Senegambia not before visited by any European.

“It is to be regretted,” says M. de la Renaudière, “that worn out with fatigue, scarcely able to drag himself along, in a state of positive destitution, Mollien was unable to cross the lofty mountains separating the basin of the Senegal from that of the Djoliba, and that he was compelled to rely upon native information respecting the most important objects of his expedition. It is on the faith of the assertions of the natives that he claims to have visited the sources of the Rio Grande, Falemé, Gambia, and Senegal. If he had been able to follow the course of those rivers to their fountainhead his discoveries would have acquired certainty, which is, unfortunately, now wanting to them. However, when we compare the accounts of other travellers with what he says of the position of the source of the Ba-Fing, or Senegal, which cannot be that of any other great stream, we are convinced of the reality of this discovery at least. It also seems certain that the two last springs are higher up than was supposed, and that the Djoliba rises in a yet loftier locality. The country rises gradually to the south and south-east in parallel terraces. These mountain chains increase in height towards the east, attaining their greatest elevation between lat. 8° and 10° N.”

Such were the results of Mollien’s interesting journey in the French colony of Senegal. The same country was the starting-point of another explorer, Réné Caillié.

Caillié, who was born in 1800, in the department of the Seine et Oise, had only an elementary education; but reading Robinson Crusoe had fired his youthful imagination with a zeal for adventure, and he never rested until, in spite of his scanty resources, he had obtained maps and books of travel. In 1816, when only sixteen years old, he embarked for Senegal, in the transport-ship *La Loire*.

At this time the English Government was organizing an inland exploring expedition, under the command of Major Gray. To avoid the terrible almamy of Timbo, who had been so fatal to Peddie, the English made for the mouth of the Gambia by sea. Woolli and the Gaboon were crossed, and the explorers penetrated into Bondou, which Mollien was to visit a few years later, a district inhabited by a people as fanatic and fierce as those of Fouta Djallon. The extortions of the almamy were such that under pretext of there being an old debt left unpaid by the English Government, Major Gray was mulcted of nearly all his baggage, and had to send an officer to the Senegal for a fresh supply.

Caillié knowing nothing of this disastrous beginning, and aware that Gray was glad to receive new recruits, left St. Louis with two negroes, and reached Goree. But there some people, who took an interest in him, persuaded him not to take service with Gray, and got him an appointment at

Guadaloupe. He remained, however, but six months in that island, and then returned to Bordeaux, whence he started for the Senegal once more.

Partarieu, one of Gray’s officers, was just going back to his chief with the merchandise he had procured, and Caillié asked and obtained leave to accompany him, without either pay or a fixed engagement.

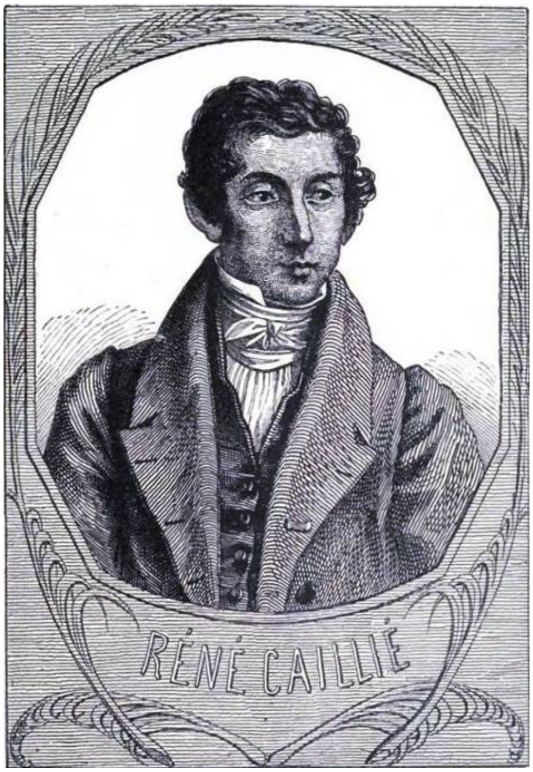

Réné Caillié.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The caravan consisted of seventy persons, black and white, and thirty-two richly-laden camels. It left Gandiolle, in Cayor, on the 5th February, 1819, and before entering Jaloof a desert was crossed, where great suffering was endured from thirst. The leader, in order to carry more merchandise, had neglected to take a sufficient supply of water.

At Boolibaba, a village inhabited by Foulah shepherds, the travellers were enabled to recruit, and to fill their leathern bottles for a journey across a second desert.

Avoiding Fouta Toro, whose inhabitants are fanatics and thieves, Partarieu entered Bondou. He would gladly have evaded visiting Boulibané, the capital and residence of the almamy, but was compelled to do so, owing to the refusal of the people to supply grain or water to the caravan, and also in obedience to the strict orders of Major Gray, who thought the almamy would let the travellers pass after paying tribute.

The terrible almamy began by extorting a great number of presents, and then refused to allow the English to visit Bakel on the Senegal. They might, he said, go through his states, those of Kaarta, to Clego, or they might take the Fouta Toro route. Both these alternatives were equally impossible, as in either case the caravan would have to travel among fanatic tribes. The explorers believed the almamy’s object was to have them robbed and murdered, without incurring the personal responsibility.

They resolved to force their way. Preparations were scarcely begun for a start, when the caravan was surrounded by a multitude of soldiers, who, taking possession of the wells, rendered it impossible for the travellers to carry out their intentions. At the same time the war-drum was beaten on every side. To fight was impossible; a palaver had to be held. In a word, the English had to own their powerlessness. The almamy dictated the conditions of peace, mulcted the whites of a few more presents, and ordered them to withdraw by way of Fouta Toro.

Yet more — and this was a flagrant insult to British pride — the English found themselves escorted by a guard, which prevented their taking any other route. When night fell they revenged themselves by setting fire to all their merchandise in the very sight of the Foulahs, who had intended to get possession of them. The crossing of Fouta Toro among hostile natives was terribly arduous. The slightest pretext was seized for a dispute, and again and again violence seemed inevitable. Food and water were only to be obtained at exorbitant prices.

At last, one night, Partarieu, to disarm the suspicion of the natives, gave out that he could not carry all his baggage at once, and having first filled his coffers and bags with stones, he decamped with all his followers for the Senegal, leaving his tents pitched and his fires alight. His path was strewn with bales, arms, and animals. Thanks to this subterfuge, and the rapidity of their march, the English reached Bakel in safety, where the French welcomed the remnant of the expedition with enthusiasm.

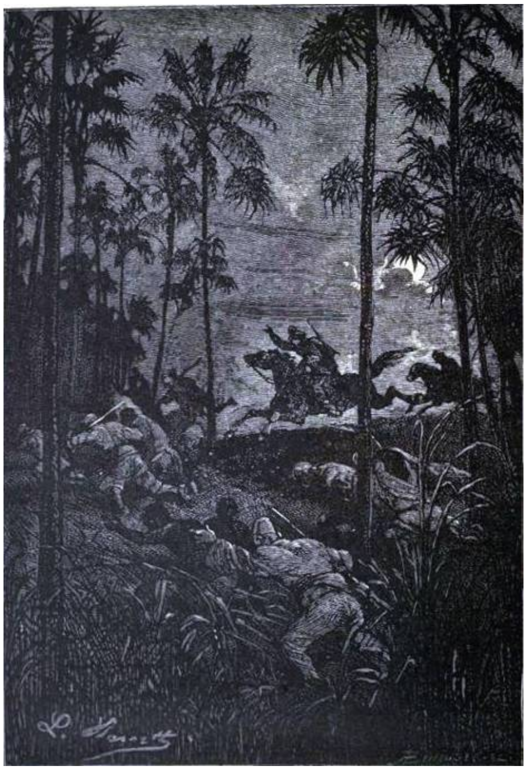

“He decamped with all his followers.”

Caillié, attacked by a fever which nearly proved fatal, returned to St. Louis; but not recovering his health there, he was obliged to go back to France. Not until 1824 was he able to return to Senegal, which was then governed by Baron Roger, a friend to progress, who was anxious *pari passu*, to extend our geographical knowledge with our commercial relations. Roger supplied Caillié with means to go and live amongst the Bracknas, there to study Arabic and the Mussulman religion.

Life amongst the suspicious and fanatic Moorish shepherds was by no means easy. The traveller, who had great difficulty in keeping his daily journal, was obliged to resort to all manner of subterfuges to obtain permission to explore the neighbourhood of his house. He gives us some curious details of the life of the Bracknas — of their diet, which consists almost entirely of milk; of their habitations, which are nothing more than tents unfitted for the vicissitudes of the climate; of their “*guéhués*” or itinerant minstrels; their mode of producing the excessive *embonpoint* which they consider the height of female beauty; the aspect of the country; the fertility and productions of the soil, &c.

The most remarkable of all the facts collected by Caillié are those relating to the five distinct classes into which the Moorish Bracknas are divided. These are the *Hassanes*, or warriors, whose idleness, slovenliness, and pride exceed belief; the *Marabouts*, or priests; the *Zénagues*, tributary to the Hassanes; the *Laratines*; and the slaves.

The *Zénagues* are a miserable class, despised by all the others, but especially by the *Hassanes,* to whom they pay a tribute, which is of variable amount, and is never considered enough. They do all the work, both industrial and agricultural, and rear all the cattle.

“In spite of my efforts,” says Caillié, “I could find out nothing about the origin of this people, or ascertain how they came to be reduced to pay tribute to other Moors. When I asked them any questions about this, they said it was God’s will. Can they be a remnant of a conquered tribe? and if so, how is it that no tradition on the subject is retained amongst them. I do not think they can be, for the Moors, proud as they are of their origin, never forget the names of those who have brought credit to their families; and were such the case, the Zénagues, who form the majority of the population, and are skilful warriors, would rise under the leadership of one of their chiefs, and fling off the yoke of servitude.”

Laratine is the name given to the offspring of a Moor and a negro slave. Although they are slaves, the Laratines are never sold, but while living in separate camps, are treated very much like the Zénagues. Those who are the sons of Hassanes are warriors, whilst the children of Marabouts are brought up to the profession of their father.

The actual slaves are all negroes. Ill-treated, badly fed, and flogged on the slightest pretext, there is no suffering which they are not called upon to endure.

In May, 1825, Caillié returned to St. Louis. Baron Roger was absent, and his representative was by no means friendly. The explorer had to content himself with the pay of a common soldier until the return of his protector, to whom he sent the notes he had made when amongst the Bracknas, but all his offers of service were rejected. He was promised a certain sum on his return from Timbuctoo; but how was he even to start without private resources?

The intrepid Caillié was not, however, to be discouraged. As he obtained neither encouragement nor help from the colonial government, he went to Sierra Leone, where the governor, who did not wish to deprive Major Laing of the credit of being the first to arrive at Timbuctoo, rejected his proposals.

In the management of an indigo factory, Caillié soon saved money to the extent of two thousand francs, a sum which appeared to him sufficient to carry him to the end of the world. He lost no time in purchasing the necessary merchandise, and joined some Mandingoes and “seracolets,” or wandering African merchants. He told them, under the seal of secrecy, that he had been born in Egypt of Arab parents, taken to France at an early age, and sent to Senegal to look after the business of his master, who, satisfied with his services, had given him his freedom. He added, that his chief desire was to get back to Egypt, and resume the Mohammedan religion.

On the 22nd March, 1827, Caillié left Freetown for Kakondy, a village on the Rio Nuñez, where he employed his leisure in collecting information respecting the Landamas and the Nalous, both subject to the Foulahs of Fouta Djallon, but not Mohammedans, and, as a necessary result, both much given to spirituous liquors. They dwell in the districts watered by the Rio Nuñez, side by side with the Bagos, an idolatrous race who dwell at its mouth. The Bagos are light-hearted, industrious, and skilful tillers of the soil; they make large profits out of the sale of their rice and salt. They have no king, no religion but a barbarous idolatry, and are governed by the oldest man in their village, an arrangement which answers very well.

On the 19th April, 1827, Caillié with but one bearer and a guide, at last started for Timbuctoo. He speaks favourably of the Foulahs and the people of Fouta Djallon, whose rich and fertile country he crossed. The Ba-Fing, the chief affluent of the Senegal, was not more than a hundred paces across, and a foot and a half deep where he passed it; but the force of the current, and the huge granite rocks encumbering its bed, render it very difficult and dangerous to cross the river. After a halt of nineteen days in the village of Cambaya, the home of the guide who had accompanied him thus far, Caillié entered Kankan, crossing a district intersected by rivers and large streams, which were then beginning to inundate the whole land.

On the 30th May the explorer crossed the Tankisso, a large river with a rocky bed belonging to the system of the Niger, and reached the latter on the 11th June, at Couronassa.

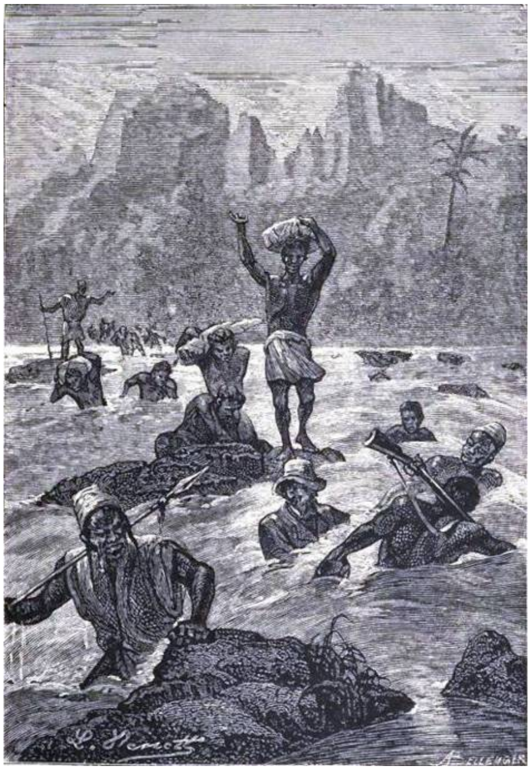

Caillié crossing the Tankisso.

“Even here,” says Caillié, “so near to its source, the Niger is 900 feet wide, with a current of two miles and a half.”

Before we enter Kankan with the French explorer, it will be well to sum up what he says of the Foulahs of Fouta. They are mostly tall, well-made men, with chestnut-brown complexions, curly hair, lofty foreheads, aquiline noses, features in fact very like those of Europeans. They are bigoted Mohammedans, and hate Christians. Unlike the Mandingoes, they do not travel, but love their home; they are good agriculturists and clever traders, warlike and patriotic, and they leave none but their old men and women in their villages when they go to war.

The town of Kankan stands in a plain surrounded by lofty mountains. The bombax, baobab, and butter-tree, also called “cé” the “shea” of Mungo Park, are plentiful. Caillié was delayed in Kankan for twenty-eight days before he could get on to Sambatikala; and during that time he was shamefully robbed by his host, and could not obtain from the chief of the village restitution of the goods which had been stolen.

“Kankan,” says the traveller, “is a small town near the left bank of the Milo, a pretty river, which comes from the south, and waters the Kissi district, where it takes its rise, flowing thence in a north-westerly direction to empty itself into the Niger, two or three days’ journey from Kankan. Surrounded by a thick quick-set hedge, this town, which does not contain more than 6000 inhabitants, is situated in an extensive and very fertile plain of grey sand. On every side are pretty little villages, called *Worondes,* where the slaves live. These habitations give interest to the scene, and are surrounded by very fine plantations; yams, rice, onions, pistachio nuts, &c. are exported in large quantities.”

Between Kankan and Wassolo the road led through well cultivated, and, at this time of year, nearly submerged districts. The inhabitants struck Caillié as being of a mild, cheerful, and inquiring disposition. They gave him a cordial welcome.

Several tributaries of the Niger, including the Sarano, were passed before a halt was made at Sigala, the residence of Baranusa, the chief of Wassolo. He was of slovenly habits, like his subjects, and used tobacco both as snuff and for smoking. He was said to be very rich in gold and slaves. His subjects paid him a tribute in cattle; he had a great many wives, each of whom owned a hut of her own, their houses forming a little village, with well cultivated environs. Here Caillié for the first time saw the Rhamnus Lotus mentioned by Park.

On leaving Wossolo, Caillié entered Foulou, whose inhabitants, like those of the former district, are idolaters, of slovenly habits. They speak the Mandingo tongue. At Sambatikala the traveller paid a visit to the almamy.

“We entered,” he says, “a place which served him as a bedroom for himself and a stable for his horse. The prince’s bed was at the further end. It consisted of a little platform raised six inches from the ground, on which was stretched an ox hide, with a dirty mosquito curtain, to keep off the insects. There was no other furniture in this royal abode. Two saddles hung from stakes driven into the wall; a large straw hat, a drum only used in war-time, a few lances, a bow, a quiver, and some arrows, were the only ornaments. A lamp made of a piece of flat iron set on a stand of the same metal, stood on the ground. This lamp was fed by a kind of vegetable matter, not thick enough to be made into candles.”

The almamy soon informed Caillié of an opportunity for him to go to Timeh, whence a caravan was about to start for Jenneh. The traveller then entered the province of Bambarra, and quickly arrived at the pretty little village of Timeh, inhabited by Mohammedan Mandingoes, and bounded on the east by a chain of mountains about 350 fathoms high.

When he entered this village, at the end of July, Caillié little dreamt of the long stay he would be compelled to make in it. He had hurt his foot, and the wound became very much inflamed by walking in wet grass. He therefore decided to let the caravan for Jenneh go on without him, and remain at Timeh until his foot should be completely healed. It would have been too great a risk for him in his state to travel through Bambarra, where the idolatrous inhabitants of the country would be pretty sure to rob him.

“The Bambarras,” he says, “have few slaves, go almost naked, and are always armed with bows and arrows. They are governed by a number of petty independent chiefs, who are often at war with one another. They are in fact rude and wild creatures as compared with the tribes who have embraced Mohammedanism.”

Caillié was detained at Timeh by the still unhealed wound in his foot, until the 10th November. At that date he proposed starting for Jenneh, but, to quote his own words, “I was now seized with violent pains in the jaws, warning me that I was attacked with scurvy, a terrible malady, all the horrors of which I was to realize. My palate was completely skinned, part of the bone came away, my teeth seemed ready to fall out of the gums, my sufferings were terrible. I feared that my brain might be affected by the agony of pain in my head. I was more than a fortnight without an instant’s sleep.”

To make matters worse, the wound broke out afresh; and he would have been cured neither of it nor of the scurvy had it not been for the energetic treatment of an old negress, who was accustomed to doctor the scorbutic affections, so common in that country.

On the 9th January, 1828, Caillié left Timeh, and reached Kimba, a little village where the caravan for Jenneh was assembled. Near to this village rises the chain erroneously called Kong, which is the general name for mountain amongst the Mandingoes.

The names of the villages entered by the travellers, and the incidents of the journey through Bambarra, are of no special interest. The inhabitants are accounted great thieves by the Mandingoes, but are probably not more dishonest than their critics.

The Bambarra women all wear a thin slip of wood imbedded in the lower lip, a strange fashion exactly similar to that noticed by Cook amongst the natives of the north-western coast of America. The Bambarras speak Mandingo, though they have a dialect of their own called *Kissour*, about which the traveller could obtain no trustworthy written information.

Jenneh was formerly called “the golden land.” The precious metal is not, however, found there, but a good deal is imported by the Boureh merchants and the Mandingoes of Kong.

Jenneh, two miles and a half in circumference, is surrounded by a mud wall ten feet high. The houses, built of bricks baked in the sun, are as large as those of European peasants. They have all terraces, but no outer windows. Numbers of foreigners frequent Jenneh. The inhabitants, as many as eight or ten thousand, are very industrious and intelligent. They hire out their slaves, and also employ them in various handicrafts.

The Moors, however, monopolize the more important commerce. Not a day passes that they do not despatch huge boats laden with rice, millet, cotton, honey, vegetable butter, and other native products.

In spite of this great commercial movement, the prosperity of Jenneh was threatened. Sego Ahmadou, chief of the country, impelled by bigoted zeal, made fierce war upon the Bambarras of Sego, whom he wished to rally round the standard of the Prophet. This struggle did a great deal of harm to the trade of Jenneh, for it interrupted intercourse with Yamina, Sansanding, Bamakou, and Boureh, which were the chief marts for its produce.

The women of Jenneh would not be true to their sex if they did not show some marks of coquetry. Those who aim at fashion pass a ring or a glass ornament through the nostrils, whilst their poorer sisters content themselves with a bit of pink silk.

During Caillié’s long stay at Jenneh, he was loaded with kindness and attentions by the Moors, to whom he had told the fabulous tale about his birth in Egypt, and abduction by the army of occupation.

On the 23rd March, the traveller embarked on the Niger for Timbuctoo, on which the sheriff, won over by the gift of an umbrella, had obtained a passage for him. He carried with him letters of introduction to the chief persons in Timbuctoo.

Caillié now passed in succession the pretty villages of Kera, Taguetia, Sankha-Guibila, Diebeh, and Isaca, near to which the river is joined by an important branch, which makes a great bend beyond Sego, catching sight also of Wandacora, Wanga, Corocoïla, and Cona, finally reaching, on the 2nd of April, the mouth of the important Lake Debo.

“Land,” says Caillié, “is visible on every side of this lake except on the west, where it widens out like a vast inland sea. Following its northern coast in a west-north-west direction for a distance of fifteen miles, you leave on the left a tongue of level ground, which runs several miles to the south, seeming to bar the passage of the lake, and form a kind of strait. Beyond this barrier the lake stretches away out of sight in the west. The barrier I have just described cuts Lake Debo into two parts, the upper and lower. That navigable to boats contains three islands, and is very wide; it stretches away a short distance on the east, and is supplemented by an immense number of huge marshes.”

One after the other, Caillié now passed the fishing village of Gabibi; Tongoon in the Diriman country, a district stretching far away on the east; Codosa, an important commercial town; Barconga, Leleb, Garfolo, Baracondieh, Tircy, Talbocoïla, Salacoïla, Cora, Coratou, where the Tuaricks exact a toll from passing boats, and finally reached Cabra, built on a height out of reach of the overflowing of the Niger, and serving as the port of Timbuctoo.

On the 20th, Caillié disembarked, and started for that city, which he entered at sundown.

“I, at last,” cries our hero, “saw the capital of the Soudan, which had so long been the goal of my desires. As I entered that mysterious town, an object of curiosity to the civilized nations of Europe, I was filled with indescribable exultation. I never experienced anything like it, and my delight knew no bounds. But I had to moderate my transports, and it was to God alone I confided them. With what earnestness I thanked Him for the success which had crowned my enterprise and the signal protection He had accorded me in so many apparently insurmountable difficulties and perils.

My first emotions having subsided, I found that the scene before me by no means came up to my expectations. I had conceived a very different idea of the grandeur and wealth of this town. At first sight it appeared nothing more than a mass of badly-built houses, whilst on every side stretched vast plains of arid, yellowish, shifting sands. The sky was of a dull red colour on the horizon; all nature seemed melancholy; profound silence prevailed, not so much as the song of a bird was heard. And yet there was something indescribably imposing in the sight of a large town rising up in the midst of the sandy desert, and the beholder cannot but admire the indomitable energy of its founders. I fancy the river formerly passed nearer the town of Timbuctoo; it is now eight miles north of it and five of Cabra."

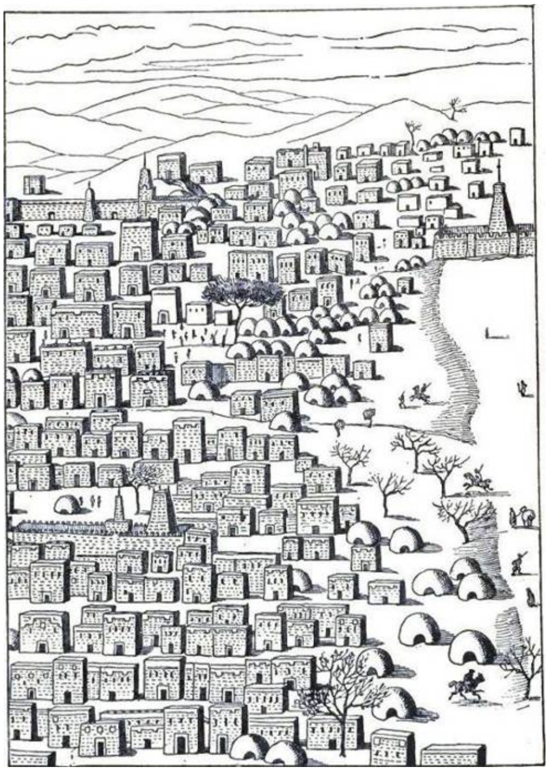

View of part of Timbuctoo.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Timbuctoo, which is neither so large nor so well populated as Caillié expected, is altogether wanting in animation. There are no large caravans constantly arriving in it, as at Jenneh; nor are there so many strangers there as in the latter town; whilst the market, held at three o’clock in the morning on account of the heat, appears deserted.

Timbuctoo is inhabited by Kissour negroes, who seem of mild dispositions, and are employed in trade. There is no government, and strictly speaking no central authority; each town and village has its own chief. The mode of life is patriarchal. A great many Moorish merchants are settled in the town, and rapidly make fortunes there. They receive consignments of merchandise from Adrar, Tafilet, Ghât, Ghâdames, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli.

To Timbuctoo is brought all the salt of the mines of Toudeyni, packed on camels. It is imported in slabs, bound together by ropes, made from grass in the neighbourhood of Tandayeh.

Timbuctoo is built in the form of a triangle, and measures about three miles in circumference. The houses are large but not lofty, and are built of round bricks. The streets are wide and clean. There are seven mosques, each surmounted by a square tower, from which the muezzin calls the faithful to prayer. Counting the floating population, the capital of the Soudan does not contain more than from ten to twelve thousand inhabitants.

Timbuctoo, situated in the midst of a vast plain of shifting white sand, trades in salt only, the soil being quite unsuitable to any sort of cultivation. The town is always full of people, who come to exact what they call presents, but what might with more justice be styled forced contributions. It is a public calamity when a Tuarick chief arrives. He remains in the town a couple of months, living with his numerous followers at the expense of the inhabitants, until he has wrung costly presents from them. Terror has extended the domination of these wandering tribes over all the neighbouring peoples, whom they rob and pillage without mercy.

The Tuarick costume is the same as that of the Arabs, with the exception of the head-dress. Day and night they wear a cotton band which covers the eyes and comes down over the nose, so that they are obliged to raise the head in order to see. The same band goes once or twice round the head and hides the mouth, coming down below the chin, so that the tip of the nose is all that is visible.

The Tuaricks are perfect riders, and mounted on first-rate horses or on fleet camels; each man is armed with a spear, a shield, and a dagger. They are the pirates of the desert, and innumerable are the caravans they have robbed, or blackmailed.

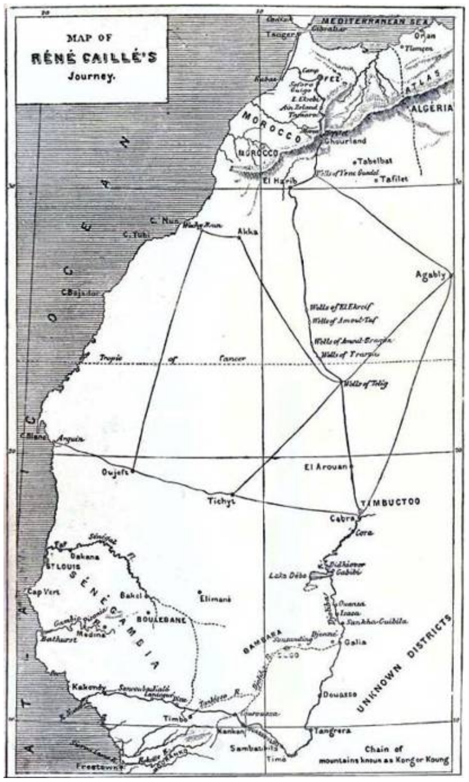
MAP OF
RÉNÉ CAILLÉ'S
Journey.
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Gibraltar
Tanger
Oran
Tlemçen
Rabat
Fez
ATLAS
ALGERIA
MOROCCO
MOROCCO
Ghourland
Tabelbat
Tafilet
El Harib
C. Nun
C. Yubi
Akka
Agably
C. Bojador
Wells of El Ekreif
Wells of Amoul-Taf
Wells of Amoul-Gragin
Wells of Trarzas
Tropic of Cancer
Wells of Telig
C. Blanc
Arguin
Oujeft
El Arouan
Tichyt
TIMBUCTOO
Cabra
Cora
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Sénégal R.
Dakana
ST LOUIS
SÉNÉGAMBIA
Cap Vert
Bakel
Elimané
BOULEBANE
Gambia R.
Medina
Bathurst
Lake Débo
Gabibi
Ouanza
Isaca
Sankha-Guibila
Djenné
Galia
BAMBARA
UNKNOWN DISTRICTS
Kakondy
Douasso
Timbo
Kankan
Couroussa
Tangrera
Sambatikila
Timé
Freetown
Chain of
mountains known as Kong or Koung

Four days after Caillié’s arrival at Timbuctoo, he heard that a caravan was about to start for Talifet; and as he knew that another would not go for three months, fearing detection, he resolved to join this one. It consisted of a large number of merchants, and 600 camels. Starting on the 4th of May, 1828, he arrived, after terrible sufferings from the heat, and a sand-storm in which he was caught, at El Arawan, a town of no private resources, but important as the emporium for the Toudeyni salt, exported at Sansanding, on the banks of the Niger, and also as the halting-place of caravans from Tafilet, Mogadore, Ghât, Drat, and Tripoli, the merchants here exchanging European wares for ivory, gold, slaves, wax, honey, and Soudan stuffs. On the 19th May, the caravan left El Arawan for Morocco, by way of the Sahara. To the traveller’s usual sufferings from heat, thirst, and privations of all kinds, was now added the pain of a wound incurred in a fall from his camel. He was also taunted by the Moors, and even by their slaves, who ridiculed his habits and his awkwardness, and even sometimes threw stones at him when his back was turned towards them.

“Often,” says Caillié, “one of the Moors would say to me in a contemptuous tone: ‘You see that slave? Well I prefer him to you, so you may guess in what esteem I hold you.’ This insult would be accompanied with roars of laughter.”

Under these miserable circumstances Caillié passed the wells of Trarzas, in whose vicinity salt is found, also those of Amul Gamil, Amul Taf, El Ekreif, surrounded by date-trees, wood, willows, and rushes, and reached Marabouty and El Harib, districts whose inhabitants are disgustingly dirty in their habits.

El Harib lies between two chains of low hills, dividing it from Morocco, to which it is tributary. Its inhabitants, divided into several nomad tribes, employ themselves chiefly in the breeding of camels. They would be rich and contented, but for the ceaseless exactions of the Berber Arabs.

On the 12th July the caravan left El Harib, and eleven days later entered the province of Talifet, famous for its majestic date-trees. At Ghourland, Caillié was welcomed with some kindness by the Moors, though he was not admitted to their houses, lest the women, who are visible only to the men of their own families, should be seen by the irreverent eyes of a stranger.

Caillié visited the market, which is held three times a week near a little village called Boheim, three miles from Ghourland, and was surprised at the variety of articles exposed for sale in it: vegetables, native fruits, fodder for cattle, poultry, sheep, &c. &c. all in large quantities. Water in leather bottles was carried about for sale to all who cared to drink in the exhausting heat, by men who announced their approach by ringing a small hand-bell. Moorish and Spanish coins alone passed current. The province of Tafilet contains several large villages and small towns. Ghourland, El Ekseba, Sosso, Boheim, and Ressant, which our traveller visited, contained some twelve hundred inhabitants each, all merchants and owners of property.

The soil is very productive: corn, vegetables, dates, European fruits, and tobacco, are cultivated in large quantities. Among the sources of wealth in Tafilet we may name very fine sheep, whose beautifully white wool makes very pretty coverlets, oxen, first-rate horses, donkeys, and mules.

As at El-Drah, a good many Jews live in the villages together with Mohammedans. They lead a miserable life, go about half naked, and are constantly struck and insulted. Whether brokers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, porters, or whatever their ostensible occupation, they all lend money to the Moors.

On the 2nd August the caravan resumed its march, and after passing A-Fileh, Tanneyara, Marca, Dayara, Rahaba, El Eyarac, Tamaroc, Ain-Zeland, El Guim, Guigo, and Soporo, Caillié arrived at Fez, where he made a short stay, and then pressed on to Rabat, the ancient Saléh. Exhausted by his long march, with nothing to eat but a few dates, obliged to depend on the charity of the Mussulmans, who as often as not declined to give him anything, and finding at Fez no representative of France but an old Jew named Ismail, who acted as Consular Agent, and who, being afraid of compromising himself, would not let Caillié embark on a Portuguese brig bound for Gibraltar, — the traveller eagerly availed himself of a fortunate chance for going to Tangiers. There he was kindly received by the Vice-Consul, M. Delaporte, who wrote at once to the commandant of the French station at Cadiz, and sent him off bound for that port, disguised as a sailor, in a corvette.

The landing at Toulon of the young Frenchman fresh from Timbuctoo, was a very unexpected event in the scientific world. With nothing to aid him but his own invincible courage and patience, he had brought to a satisfactory conclusion an exploit for which the French and English Geographical Societies had offered large rewards. Alone, without any resources to speak of, without the aid of government or of any scientific society, by sheer force of will, he had succeeded in throwing a flood of new light on an immense tract of Africa.

Caillié was not indeed the first European who had visited Timbuctoo. In the preceding year, Major Laing had penetrated into that mysterious city, but he had paid for his expedition with his life, and we shall presently relate the touching details of his fatal trip.

Caillié had returned to Europe, and brought back with him the curious journal from which our narrative is taken. It is true his profession of the Mohammedan faith had prevented him from taking astronomical observations, and from making sketches and notes freely, but only at the price of his seeming apostasy could he have passed through the region where the very name of a Christian is held in abhorrence.

How many strange observations, how many fresh and exact details, did Caillié add to our knowledge of North-West Africa! It had cost Clapperton two journeys to traverse Africa from Tripoli to Benin; Caillié had crossed from Senegal to Morocco in one — but at what a price! How much fatigue, how much suffering, how many privations, had the Frenchman endured! Timbuctoo was known at last, as well as the new caravan route across the Sahara by way of the oases of Tafilet and El Harib.

Was Caillié compensated for his physical and mental sufferings by the aid which the Geographical Society sent to him at once, by the prize of 10,000 francs adjudged to him, by the Cross of the Legion of Honour and the fame and glory attached to his name? We suppose he was. He says more than once in his narrative that nothing but his wish to add by his discoveries to the glory of France, his native country, could have sustained him under the trying circumstances and insults to which he was constantly subjected. All honour then to the patient traveller, the sincere patriot, the great discoverer.

We have still to speak of the expedition which cost Alexander Gordon Laing his life; but before giving our necessarily brief account, for his journals were all lost, we must say a few words about his early life and an interesting excursion made by him to Timmannee, Kouran and Soolimana, when he discovered the sources of the Niger.

Laing was born in Edinburgh in 1794, entered the English army at the age of sixteen, and soon distinguished himself. In 1820 he had gained the rank of Lieutenant, and was serving as aide-de-camp to Sir Charles Maccarthy, then Governor General of Western Africa. At this time war was raging between Amara, the Mandingo almamy, and Sannassi, one of his principal chiefs. Trade had never been very flourishing in Sierra Leone, and this state of things dealt it its death-blow. Maccarthy, anxious to put matters on a better footing, determined to interfere and bring about a reconciliation between the rival chiefs. He decided on sending an embassy to Kambia, on the borders of the Scarcies, and from thence to Malacoury and the Mandingo camp. The enterprising character, intelligence, and courage of Laing led to his being chosen by the governor as his envoy, and on the 7th January, 1822, he received instructions to report on the manufactures and topography of the provinces mentioned, and to ascertain the feeling of the inhabitants on the abolition of slavery.

A first interview with Yareddi, leader of the Soolimana troops accompanying the almamy, proved that the negroes of the districts under notice had only the vaguest ideas on European civilization, and that they had had but little intercourse with the whites.

“Every article of our dress,” says Laing, “was a subject of admiration; observing me pull off my gloves, Yareddi stared, covered his widely-opened mouth with his hands, and at length exclaimed, ‘Alla Akbar!’ ‘he has pulled the skin off his hands!’ By degrees, and as he became more familiar, he alternately rubbed down Dr. Mackie’s hair and mine, then indulging himself in a loud laugh, he would exclaim, ‘They are not men, they are not men!’ He repeatedly asked my interpreter if we had bones?”

These preliminary excursions, during which Laing ascertained that many Soolimanas owned a good deal of gold and ivory, led to his asking the governor’s sanction to explore the districts to the east of the colony, with a view to increasing the trade of Sierra Leone by admitting their productions.

Maccarthy liked Laing’s proposal and submitted it to the council. It was decided that Laing should be authorized to penetrate into Soolimana by the most convenient route for future communications.

Laing left Sierra Leone on the 16th April, 1824, and rowed up the Rokelle river to Rokon, the chief town of Timmannee. His interview with the King of Rokon was extremely amusing. To do him honour Laing had a salvo of ten charges fired as he came into the court in which the reception was to be held. At the noise the king stopped, drew back, darted a furious look at his visitor, and ran away. It was with great difficulty that the cowardly monarch was induced to return. At last he came back, and seating himself with great dignity in his chair of state he questioned the major:

“He wished to know,” says Laing, “why he had been fired at, and was, with some difficulty, persuaded that it had been done out of honour to him. ‘Why did you point your guns to the ground?’ ‘That you might see our intention was to show you respect.’ ‘But the pebbles flew in my face; why did you not point in the air?’ ‘Because we feared to burn the thatch on your houses.’ ‘Well, then, give me some rum.’”

Needless to add that the interview became more cordial after the major had complied with this request!

The portrait of the Timmannee monarch deserves a place in our volume for more than one reason. It is a case of *ab uno disce omnes*.”

“Ba-Simera,” to quote Laing again, “the principal chief or king of this part of the Timmannee country, is about ninety years of age, with a mottled, shrivelled-up skin, resembling in colour that of an alligator more than that of a human being, with dim, greenish eyes, far sunk in his head, and a bleached, twisted beard, hanging down about two feet from his chin; like the king of the opposite district he wore a necklace of coral and leopard’s teeth, but his mantle was brown and dirty as his skin. His swollen legs, like those of an elephant, were to be observed from under his trousers of baft, which might have been originally white, but, from the wear of several years, had assumed a greenish appearance.”

Like his predecessors in Africa, Laing had to go through many discussions about the right of passage through the country and bearers’ wages, but thanks to his firmness he managed to escape the extortions of the negro kings. The chief halting-places on the route taken by the major were: Toma, where a white man had never before been seen; Balandeko, Roketchnick, which he ascertained to be situated in N. lat. 8° 30’, and W. long. 12° 11’; Mabimg, beyond a very broad stream flowing north of the Rokelle; and Ma-Yosso, the chief frontier town of Timmannee. In Timmannee Laing made acquaintance with a singular institution, a kind of free-masonry, known as “Purrah,” the existence of which on the borders of the Rio Nuñez had been already ascertained by Caillié.

“Their power” [that of the “Purrah”], says Laing, “supersedes even that of the headmen of the districts, and their deeds of secrecy and darkness are as little called in question, or inquired into, as those of the Inquisition were in Europe, in former years. I have endeavoured in vain to trace the origin, or cause of formation of this extraordinary association, and have reason to suppose, that it is now unknown to the generality of the Timmannees, and may possibly be even so to the Purrah themselves, in a country where no traditionary records are extant, either in writing or in song.”

So far as Laing could ascertain Timmannee is divided into three districts. The chief of each arrogates to himself the title of king. The soil is fairly productive, and rice, yams, guavas, earth-nuts, and bananas might be grown in plenty, but for the lazy, vicious, and avaricious character of the inhabitants who vie with each other in roguery.

“I think,” says Laing, “that a few hoes, flails, rakes, shovels, &c. would be very acceptable to them, when their respective uses were practically explained; and that they would prove more beneficial both to their interest and ours, than the guns, cocked hats, and mountebank coats, with which they are at present supplied.” In spite of our traveller’s philanthropic wish, things have not changed since his time. The negroes are just as fond of intoxicating drinks, and their petty kings still go about wearing on grand occasions hats the shape of an accordion, and blue coats with copper buttons, with no shirts underneath. The maternal sentiment did not seem to Laing to be very fully developed amongst the people of Timmannee, for he was twice roundly abused by women for refusing to buy their children of them. A few days later there was a great tumult raised against Laing, the white man who had inflicted a fatal blow on the prosperity of the country by checking its trade. The first town entered in Kouranko was Maboum, and it is interesting to note *en passant* what Laing says of the activity of the inhabitants.

“I entered the town about sunset, and received a first impression highly favourable to its inhabitants, who were returning from their respective labours of the day, every individual bearing about him proofs of his industrious occupation. Some had been engaged in preparing the fields for the crops, which the approaching rains were to mature; others were penning up cattle, whose sleek sides and good condition denoted the richness of their pasturages; the last clink of the blacksmith’s hammer was sounding, the weaver was measuring the quantity of cloth he had woven during the day, and the gaurange, or worker in leather, was tying up his neatly-stained pouches, shoes, knife-scabbards, &c. (the work of his handicraft) in a large kotakoo or bag; while the crier at the mosque, with the melancholy call of ‘Alla Akbar,’ uttered at measured intervals, summoned the dévôts Moslems to their evening devotions.”

Had a Marilhat or a Henri Regnault transferred to canvas a scene like this, when the dazzling light of the sun is beginning to die away in green and rose tints, might he not aptly name his painting the *Retour des Champs,* a title so often given to landscapes in our misty climate.

“This scene,” adds Laing, “both by its nature and the sentiment which it inspired, formed an agreeable contrast with the noise, confusion, and the dissipation which pervaded a Timmannee town at the same hour; but one must not trust too much to appearances, and I regret to add, that the subsequent conduct of the Kouranko natives did not confirm the good opinion which I had formed of them.”

The traveller now passed through Koufoula, where he was very kindly received, crossed a pleasant undulating district shut in by the Kouranko hills and halted at Simera, where the chief ordered his “guiriot” to celebrate in song the arrival of his guest, a welcome neutralized by the fact that the house assigned to Laing let in the rain through its leaky roof and would not let out the smoke, so that, to use his own words, he was more “like a chimney-sweeper” than the white guest of the King of Simera.

Laing afterwards visited the source of the Tongolelle, a tributary of the Rokelle, and then left Kooranko to enter Soolimana. Kooranko, into which our traveller did not penetrate beyond the frontier, is of vast extent and divided into a great number of small states. The inhabitants resemble the Mandingoes in language and costume, but they are neither so well looking nor so intelligent. They do not profess Mohammedanism and have implicit confidence in their “grigris.” They are fairly industrious, they know how to sew and weave. Their chief object of commerce is rosewood or “cam,” which they send to the coast. The products of the country are much the same as those of Timmannee.

Komia, N. lat. 9° 22’, is the first town in Soolimana. Laing then visited Semba, a wealthy and populous city, where he was received by a band of musicians, who welcomed him with a deafening if not harmonious flourish of trumpets, and he finally reached Falaba, the capital of the country.

The king received Laing with special marks of esteem. He had assembled a large body of troops whom he passed in review, making them execute various manoeuvres accompanied by the blowing of trumpets, beating of tambourines, and the playing of violins and other native instruments. This “fantasia” almost deafened the visitor. Then came a number of *guiriots,* who sang of the greatness of the king, the happy arrival of the major, with the fortunate results which were to ensue from his visit for the prosperity of the country and the development of commerce.

Laing profited by the king’s friendliness to ask his permission to visit the sources of the Niger, but was answered by all manner of objections on the score of the danger of the expedition. At last, however, his majesty yielded to the persuasions of his visitor, telling him that “as his heart panted after the water, he might go to it.”

The major had not, however, left Falaba two hours before the permission was rescinded, and he had to give up an enterprise which had justly appeared to him of great importance.

A few days later he obtained leave to visit the source of the Rokelle or Sale Kongo, a river of which nothing was known before his time beyond Rokon. From the summit of a lofty rock, Laing saw Mount Loma, the highest of the chain of which it forms part. “The point,” says the traveller, “from which the Niger issues, was now shown to me, and appeared to be at the same level on which I stood, viz. 1600 feet above the level of the Atlantic; the source of the Rokelle, which I had already measured, being 1470 feet. The view from this hill amply compensated for my lacerated feet... Having ascertained correctly the situation of Konkodoogore, and that of the hill upon which I was at this time, the first by observation, and the second by account, and having taken the bearings of Loma from both, I cannot err much in laying down its position in 9° 25’ N. and 9° 45’ W.”

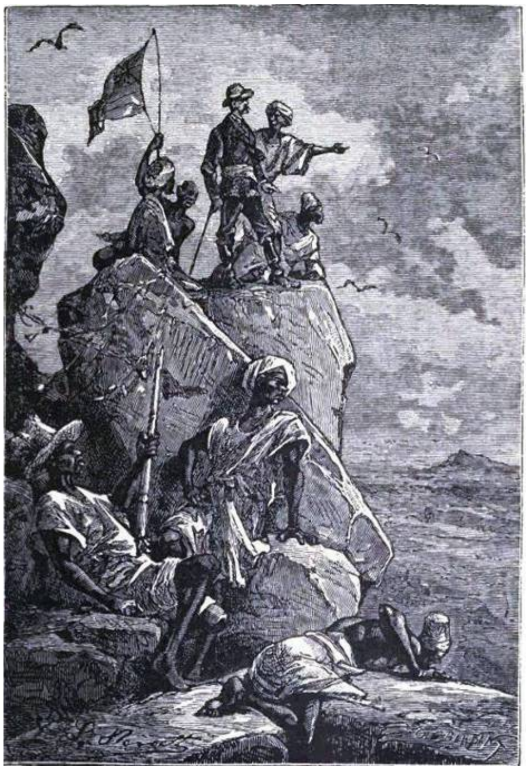

“Laing saw Mount Loma.”

Laing had now spent three months in Soolimana, and had made many excursions. It is a very picturesque country, in which alternate hills, valleys, and fertile plains, bordered by woods and adorned with thickets of luxuriant trees.

The soil is fertile and requires very little cultivation; the harvests are abundant and rice grows well. Oxen, sheep, goats, and a small species of poultry, with a few horses, are the chief domestic animals of the people of Soolimana. The wild beasts, of which there are a good many, are elephants, buffaloes, a kind of antelope, monkeys, and leopards.

Falaba, which takes its name from the Fala-ba river, on which it is situated, is about a mile and a half long by one broad. The houses are closer together than in most African towns, and it contains some six thousand inhabitants. Its position as a fortified town is well-chosen. Built on an eminence in the centre of a plain which is under water in the rainy season, it is surrounded by a very strong wooden palisade, proof against every engine of war except artillery.

Strange to say in Soolimana the occupations of men and women seem to be reversed; the latter work in the fields except at seed time and harvest, build the houses, act as masons, barbers, and surgeons, whilst the men attend to the dairy, milk the cows, sew, and wash the linen.

On the 17th September, Laing started on his return journey to Sierra Leone bearing presents from the king, and escorted for several miles by a vast crowd. He finally reached the English colony in safety.

Laing’s trip through Timmannee, Kooranko, and Soolimana was not without importance. It opened up districts hitherto unknown to Europeans, and introduced us to the manners, occupations, and trade of the people, as well as to the products of the country. At the same time the course was traced and the source discovered of the Rokelle, whilst for the first time definite information was obtained as to the sources of the Niger, for although our traveller had not actually visited them, he had gone near enough to determine their position approximately.

The results obtained by Laing on this journey, only fired his ambition for further discoveries. He, therefore, determined to make his way to Timbuctoo.

On the 17th June, 1825, he embarked at Malta for Tripoli, where he joined a caravan with which Hateeta, the Tuarick chief, who had made such friends with Lyon, was also travelling as far as Ghât. After two months' halt at Ghadames, Laing again started in October and reached Insalah, which he places a good deal further west than his predecessors had done. Here he remained from November, 1825, to January 1826, and then made his way to the Wâdy Ghât, intending to go from thence at once to Timbuctoo, making a tour of Lake Jenneh or Debbie, visiting the Melli country, and tracing the Niger to its mouth. He would then have retraced his steps as far as Sackatoo, visited Lake Tchad and attempted to reach the hill.

Outside Ghât the caravan with which Laing was travelling was attacked, some say by Tuaricks, others by Berber Arabs, a tribe living near the Niger.

"Laing," says Caillié, who got his information at Timbuctoo, "was recognized as a Christian and horribly ill-treated. He was beaten with a stick until he was left for dead. I suppose that the other Christian whom they told me was beaten to death, was one of the major's servants. The Moors of Laing's caravan picked him up, and succeeded by dint of great care in recalling him to life. So soon as he regained consciousness he was placed on his camel, to which he had to be tied, he was too weak to be able to sit up. The robbers had left him nothing, the greater part of his baggage had been rifled."

Laing arrived at Timbuctoo on the 18th August, 1826, and recovered from his wounds. His convalescence was slow, but he was fortunately spared the extortions of the natives, owing to the letters of introduction he had brought with him from Tripoli and to the sedulous care of his host, a native of that city.

According to Caillié, who quotes this remarkable fact from an old native, Laing retained his European costume, and gave out that he had been sent by his master, the king of England, to visit Timbuctoo and describe the wonders it contained.

“It appears,” adds the French traveller, “that Laing drew the plan of the city in public, for the same Moor told me in his naive and expressive language, that he had ‘written the town and everything in it.’”

After a careful examination of Timbuctoo, Laing, who had good reason to fear the Tuaricks, paid a visit by night to Cabra, and looked down on the waters of the Niger. Instead of returning to Europe by way of the Great Desert, he was very anxious to go past Jenneh and Sego to the French settlements in Senegal, but at the first hint of his purpose to the Foulahs who crowded to stare at him, he was told that a Nazarene could not possibly be allowed to set foot in their country, and that if he dared attempt it they would make him repent it.

Laing was, therefore, driven to go by way of El Arawan, where he hoped to join a caravan of Moorish merchants taking salt to Sansanding. But five days after he left Timbuctoo, his caravan was joined by a fanatic sheikh, named Hamed-ould-Habib, chief of the Zawat tribe, and Laing was at once arrested under pretence of his having entered their country without authorization. The major being urged to profess Mohammedanism refused, preferring death to apostasy. A discussion then took place between the sheikh and his hired assassins as to how the victim should be put to death, and finally Laing was strangled by two slaves. His body was left unburied in the desert.

This was all Caillié was able to find out when he visited Timbuctoo but one year after Major Laing’s death. We have supplemented his accounts by a few details gathered from the reports of the Royal Geographical Society, for the traveller’s journal and the notes he took are alike lost to us.

We have already told how Laing managed to fix pretty accurately the position of the sources of the Niger. We have also described the efforts made by Mungo Park and Clapperton to trace the middle portion of the course of that river. We have now to narrate the journeys made in order to examine its mouth and the lower part of its course. The earliest and most successful was that of Richard Lander, formerly Clapperton’s servant.

Richard Lander and his brother John proposed to the English Government, that they should be sent to explore the Niger to its mouth. Their offer was accepted, and they embarked on a government vessel for Badagry, where they arrived on the 19th March, 1830.

The king of the country, Adooley, of whom Richard Lander retained a friendly remembrance, was in low spirits. His town had just been burnt, his generals and his best soldiers had perished in a battle with the people of Lagos, and he himself had had a narrow escape when his house and all his treasures were destroyed by fire.

He determined to retrieve his losses, and to do so at the expense of the travellers, who could not get permission to penetrate into the interior of the country until they had been robbed of their most valuable merchandise, and compelled to sign drafts in payment for a gun-boat with a hundred men, for two puncheons of rum, twenty barrels of powder, and a large quantity of merchandise, which they knew perfectly well would never be delivered by this monarch, who was as greedy of gain as he was drunken. As a matter of course the natives followed the example of their chief, vied with him in selfishness, greed, and meanness, regarded the English as fair spoil, and fleeced them on every opportunity.

At last, on the 31st March, Richard and John Lander succeeded in getting away from Badagry; and preceded by an escort sent in advance by the king, arrived at Katunga on the 13th May, having halted by the way at Wow-wow, a good-sized town, Bidjie, where Pearce and Morrison had been taken ill, Jenneh, Chow, Egga, all towns visited by Clapperton, Engua, where Pearce died, Asinara, the first walled city they saw, Bohou, formerly capital of Yariba, Jaguta, Leoguadda, and Itcho, where there is a famous market.

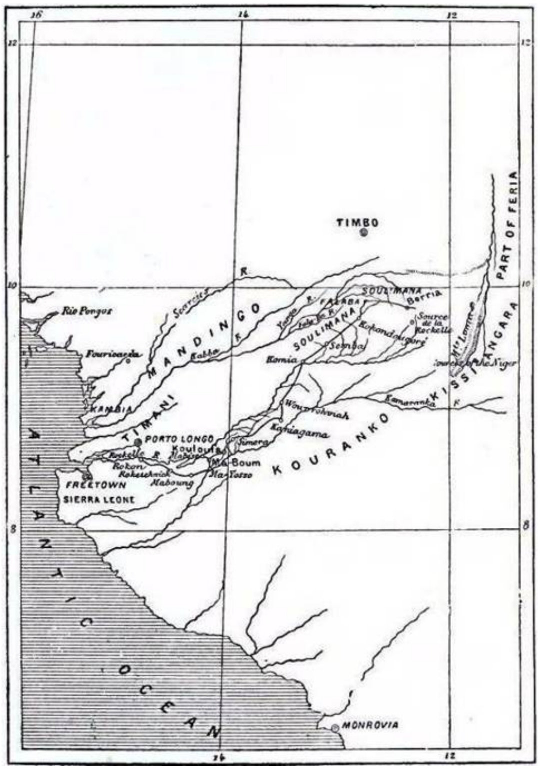
TIMBO
PART OF FERIA
Rio Pongos
Fourioaeda
MANDINGO
Searcies R
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TIMANI
PORTO LONGO
Kouloufa
Rokelle R
Rokon
FREETOWN
SIERRA LEONE
Ma-Boum
Ma-Yosso
Maboung
SOULIMANA
FALABA
Berria
Source de la Rockelle
Semba
Kornia
Simera
Koniagama
KOURANKO
KISSI
SANGARA
Source of the Niger
Kamaranka R
MONROVIA
ATLANTIC OCEAN
16
14
12
10
8

Lower Course of the Niger (after Lander).

At Katunga, according to custom, the travellers halted under a tree before they were received by the king. But being tired of waiting, they presently went to the residence of Ebo, the chief eunuch, and the most influential man about the person of the sovereign. A diabolical noise of cymbals, trumpets, and drums, all played together, announced the approach of the white men, and Mansolah, the king, gave them a most hearty welcome, ordering Ebo to behead every one who should molest them.

The Landers, fearful of being detained by Mansolah until the rainy season, acted on Ebo’s advice, and said nothing about the Niger, but merely spoke of the death of their fellow-countryman at Boussa twenty years before, adding that the King of England had sent them to the sultan of Yaourie to recover his papers.

Although Mansolah did not treat the brothers Lander quite as graciously as he had treated Clapperton, he allowed them to go eight days after their arrival.

Of the many details given in the original account of the Landers’ journey, of Katunga and the province of Yariba, we will only quote the following: —

“Katunga has by no means answered the expectations we had been led to form of it, either as regards its prosperity, or the number of its inhabitants. The vast plain on which it stands, although exceedingly fine, yields in verdure and fertility, and simple beauty of appearance, to the delightful country surrounding the less celebrated city of Bohoo. Its market is tolerably well supplied with provisions, which are, however, exceedingly dear; insomuch that, with the exception of disgusting insects, reptiles, and vermin, the lower classes of the people are almost unacquainted with the taste of animal food.”

Mansolah’s carelessness and the imbecile cowardice of his subjects had enabled the Fellatahs to establish themselves in Yarriba, to entrench themselves in its fortified towns, and to obtain the recognition of their independence, until they became sufficiently strong to assume an absolute sovereignty over the whole country.

From Katunga the Landers travelled to Borghoo, by way of Atoupa, Bumbum — a town much frequented by the merchants of Houssa, Borghoo, and other provinces trading with Gonja — Kishi, on the frontiers of Yarriba, and Moussa, on the river of the same name, beyond which they were met by an escort sent to join them by the Sultan of Borghoo. Sultan Yarro received them with many expressions of pleasure and kindness, showing special delight at seeing Richard Lander again. Although he was a convert to Mohammedanism, Yarro evidently put more faith in the superstitions of his forefathers than in his new creed. Fetiches and gri-gris were hung over his door, and in one of his huts there was a square stool, supported on two sides by four little wooden effigies of men. The character, manners, and costumes of the people of Borghoo differ essentially from those of the natives of Yarriba.

“Perhaps no two people in the universe residing so near each other,” says the narrative, “differ more widely... than the natives of Yarriba and Borghoo. The former are perpetually engaged in trading with each other from town to town, the latter never quit their towns except in case of war, or when engaged in predatory excursions; the former are pusillanimous and cowardly, the latter are bold and courageous, full of spirit and energy, and never seem happier than when engaged in martial exercises; the former are generally mild, unassuming, humble and honest, but cold and passionless. The latter are proud and haughty, too vain to be civil, and too shrewd to be honest; yet they appear to understand somewhat of the nature of love and the social affections, are warm in their attachments, and keen in their resentments.”

On the 17th June our travellers at last came in sight of the city of Boussa. Great was their surprise at finding that town on the mainland, and not, as Clapperton had said, on an island in the Niger. They entered Boussa by the western gate, and were almost immediately introduced to the presence of the king and of the midiki or queen, who told them that they had both that very morning shed tears over the fate of Clapperton.

The Niger or Quorra, which flows below the city, was the first object of interest visited by the brothers.

“This morning,” writes the traveller, “we visited the far-famed *Niger* or *Quorra*, which flows by the city about a mile from our residence, and were greatly disappointed at the appearance of this celebrated river. Bleak, rugged rocks rose abruptly from the centre of the stream, causing strong ripples and eddies on its surface. It is said that, a few miles above Boussa, the river is divided into three branches by two small, fertile islands, and that it flows from hence in one continued stream to Funda. The Niger here, in its widest part, is not more than a stone’s-throw across at present. The rock on which we sat overlooks the spot where Mr. Park and his associates met their unhappy fate.”

Richard Lander made his preliminary inquiries respecting the books and papers belonging to Mungo Park’s expedition with great caution. But presently, reassured by the sultan’s kindness, he determined to question him as to the fate of the explorer. Yarro was, however, too young at the time of the catastrophe to be able to remember what had occurred. It had taken place two reigns back; but he promised to have a search instituted for relics of the illustrious traveller.

“In the afternoon,” says Richard Lander, “the king came to see us, followed by a man with a book under his arm, which was said to have been picked up in the Niger after the loss of our countryman. It was enveloped in a large cotton cloth, and our hearts beat high with expectation as the man was slowly unfolding it, for, by its size, we guessed it to be Mr. Park’s Journal; but our disappointment and chagrin were great when, on opening the book, we discovered it to be an old nautical publication of the last century.”

There was then no further hope of recovering Park’s journal.

On the 23rd June the Landers left Boussa, filled with gratitude to the king, who had given them valuable presents, and warned them to accept no food, lest it should be poisoned, from any but the governors of the places they should pass through. They travelled alongside of the Niger as far as Kagogie, where they embarked in a wretched native canoe, whilst their horses were sent on by land to Yaoorie.

“We had proceeded only a few hundred yards,” says Richard Lander, “when the river gradually widened to two miles, and continued as far as the eye could reach. It looked very much like an artificial canal, the steep banks confining the water like low walls, with vegetation beyond. In most places the water was extremely shallow, but in others it was deep enough to float a frigate. During the first two hours of the day the scenery was as interesting and picturesque as can be imagined. The banks were literally covered with hamlets and villages; fine trees, bending under the weight of their dark and impenetrable foliage, everywhere relieved the eye from the glare of the sun’s rays, and, contrasted with the lively verdure of the little hills and plains, produced the most pleasing effect. All of a sudden came a total change of scene. To the banks of dark earth, clay, or sand, succeeded black, rugged rocks; and that wide mirror which reflected the skies, was divided into a thousand little channels by great sand-banks."

A little further on the stream was barred by a wall of black rocks, with a single narrow opening, through which its waters rushed furiously down. At this place there is a portage, above which the Niger flows on, restored to its former breadth, repose, and grandeur.

After three days' navigation, the Landers reached a village, where they found horses and men waiting for them, and whence they quickly made their way, through a continuously hilly country, to the town of Yaoorie, where they were welcomed by the sultan, a stout, dirty, slovenly man, who received them in a kind of farm-yard cleanly kept. The sultan, who was disappointed that Clapperton had not visited him, and that Richard Lander had omitted to pay his respects on his return journey, was very exacting to his present guests. He would give them none of the provisions they wanted, and did all he could to detain them as long as possible.

We may add that food was very dear at Yaoorie, and that Richard Lander had no merchandise for barter except a quantity of "Whitechapel sharps, warranted not to cut in the eye," for the very good reason, he tells us, that most of them had no eyes at all, so that they were all but worthless.

They were able, however, to turn to account some empty tins which had contained soups; the labels, although dirty and tarnished, were much admired by the natives, one of whom strutted proudly about for some days wearing an empty tin on his head, bearing four labels of "concentrated essence of meat."

The Sultan would not permit the Englishmen to enter Nyffé or Bornou, and told them there was nothing for them but to go back to Boussa. Richard

Lander at once wrote to the king of that town, asking permission to buy a canoe in which to go to Funda, as the road by land was infested by plundering Fellatahs.

At last, on the 26th July, a messenger arrived from the King of Boussa to inquire into the strange conduct of the Sultan of Yaoorie, and the cause of his detention of the white men. After an imprisonment of five weeks the Landers were at last allowed to leave Yaoorie, which was now almost entirely inundated.

The explorers now ascended the Niger to the confluence of the Cubbie, and then went down it again to Boussa, where the king, who was glad to see them again, received them with the utmost cordiality. They were, however, detained longer than they liked by the necessity of paying a visit to the King of Wow-wow, as well as by the difficulty of getting a boat. Moreover, there was some delay in the return of the messengers who had been sent by the King of Boussa to the different chiefs on the banks of the river, and lastly, Beken Rouah (the Dark Water) had to be consulted in order to ensure the safety of the travellers in their journey to the sea.

On taking leave of the king, the brothers were at a loss to express their gratitude for his kindness and hospitality, his zeal in their cause, and the protection he was ever ready to extend during their stay of nearly two months in his capital. The natives showed great regret at losing their visitors, and knelt in the path of the brothers, praying with uplifted hands to their gods on their behalf.

Now began the descent of the Niger. A halt had to be made at the island of Melalie, whose chief begged the white men to accept a very fine kid. We may be sure they were too polite to refuse it. The Landers next passed the large town of Congi, the Songa of Clapperton, and then Inguazilligie, the rendezvous of merchants travelling between Nouffe and the districts north-east of Borghoo. Below Inguazilligie they halted at Patashie, a large fertile island of great beauty, planted with palm groves and magnificent trees.

As this place was not far from Wow-wow, Richard Lander sent a message to the king of that town, who, however, declined to deliver the canoe which had been purchased of him. The messenger failing in his purpose, the brothers were compelled themselves to visit the king, but as they expected, they got only evasive answers. They had now no choice, if they wished to continue their journey, but to make off with the canoes which had been lent them at Patashie. On the 4th October, after further delays, they resumed their course, and being carried down by the current, were soon out of sight of Lever, or Layaba, and its wretched inhabitants.

The first town the brothers came to was Bajiebo, a large and spacious city, which for dirt, noise, and confusion, could not be surpassed. Next came Leechee, inhabited by Nouffe people, and the island of Madje, where the Niger divides into three parts. Just beyond, the travellers suddenly found themselves opposite a remarkable rock, two hundred and eighty feet high, called Mount Kesa, which rises perpendicularly from the centre of the stream. This rock is greatly venerated by the natives, who believe it to be the favourite home of a beneficent genius.

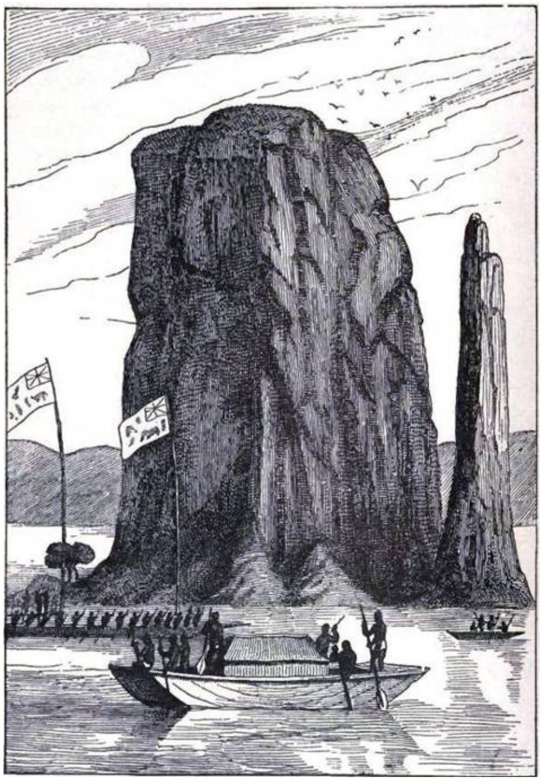

Mount Kesa.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

At Belee, a little above Rabba, the brothers received a visit from the “King of the Dark Waters,” chief of the island of Zagoshi, who appeared in a canoe of great length and unusual cleanliness, decked with scarlet cloth and gold lace. On the same day they reached the town of Zagoshi, opposite Rabba, and the second Fellatah town beyond Sackatoo.

Mallam Dendo, chief of Zagoshi, was a cousin of Bello. He was a blind and very feeble old man in very bad health, who knew he had but a few years longer to reign, and his one thought was how best to secure the throne to his son.

Although he had received very costly presents, Mallam Dendo was anything but satisfied, and declared that if the travellers did not make him other and more valuable gifts, he would require their guns, pistols, and powder, before he allowed them to leave Zagoshi.

Richard Lander did not know what to do, when the gift of the tobé (or robe) of Mungo Park, which had been restored by the King of Boussa, threw Mallam Dendo into such ecstasies of joy that he declared himself the protector of the Europeans, promised to do all he could to help them to reach the sea, made them a present of several richly-coloured plaited mats, two bags of rice, and a bunch of bananas. These stores came just in time, for the whole stock of cloth, looking-glasses, razors, and pipes was exhausted, and the English had nothing left but a few needles and some silver bracelets as presents for the chiefs on the banks of the Niger.

“Rabba,” says Lander, “... seen from Zagoshi, appears to be a large, compact, clean, and well-built town, though it is unwalled, and is not otherwise fenced. It is irregularly built on the slope of a gently-rising hill, at the foot of which runs the Niger; and in point of rank, population, and wealth, it is the second city in the Fellatah dominions, Sackatoo alone being considered as its superior. It is inhabited by a mixed population of Fellatahs, Nyffeans, and emigrants and slaves from various countries, and is governed by a ruler who exercises sovereign authority over Rabba and its dependencies, and is styled sultan or king... Rabba is famous for milk, oil, and honey. The market, when our messengers were there, appeared to be well supplied with bullocks, horses, mules, asses, sheep, goats, and abundance of poultry. Rice, and various sorts of corn, cotton cloth, indigo, saddles and bridles made of red and yellow leather, besides shoes, boots, and sandals, were offered for sale in great plenty. Although we observed about two hundred slaves for sale, none had been disposed of when we left the market in the evening... Rabba is not very famous for the number or variety of its artificers, and yet in the manufacture of mats and sandals it is unrivalled. However, in all other handicrafts, Rabba yields to Zagoshi.”

The industry and love of labour displayed by the people of the latter town were an agreeable surprise in this lazy country. Its inhabitants, who are hospitable and obliging, are protected by the situation of their island against the Fellatahs. They are independent too, and recognize no authority but that of the “King of the Dark Waters,” whom they obey because it is to their interest to do so.

On the 16th October, the Landers at last started in a wretched canoe, for which the king had made them pay a high price, with paddles they had stolen, because no one would sell them any. This was the first time they had been able to embark on the Niger without help from the natives. They went down the river, whose width varies greatly, avoiding large towns as much as possible, for they had no means of satisfying the extortions of the chiefs. No incident of note occurred before Egga was reached, if we except a terrible storm which overtook the travellers when, unable to land in the marshes bordering the river, they had allowed their boat to drift with the current, and during which they were all but upset by the hippopotami playing about on the surface of the water. All this time the Niger flowed in an E.S.E. direction, now eight, now only two miles in width. The current was so rapid that the boat went at the rate of four or five miles an hour.

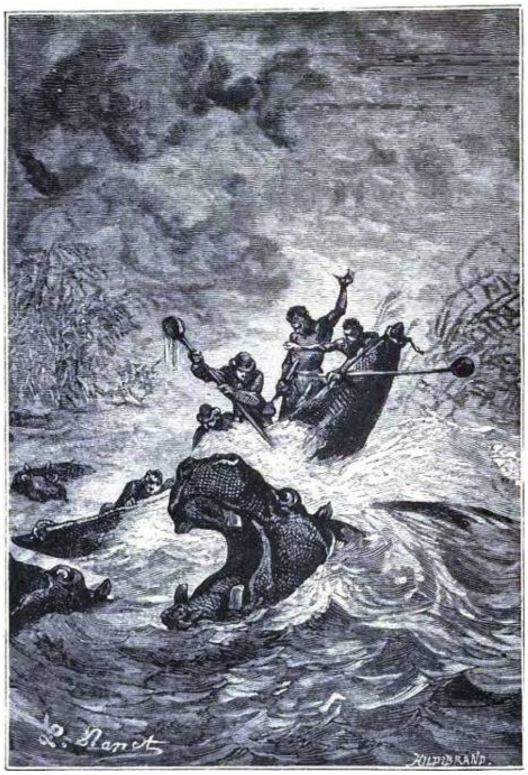

“They were all but upset.”

On the 19th October the Landers passed the mouth of the Coudonia, which Richard had crossed near Cuttup on his first expedition, and a little later they came in sight of Egga. The landing-place was soon reached by way of a bay encumbered with an immense number of large and heavy canoes full of merchandise, with the prows daubed with blood, and covered with feathers, as charms against thieves.

The chief, to whom the travellers were at once conducted, was an old man with a long white beard, whose appearance would have been venerable and patriarchal had he not laughed and played in quite a childish manner. The natives assembled in hundreds to see the strange-looking visitors, and the latter had to place three men as sentinels outside their door to keep the curious at a distance.

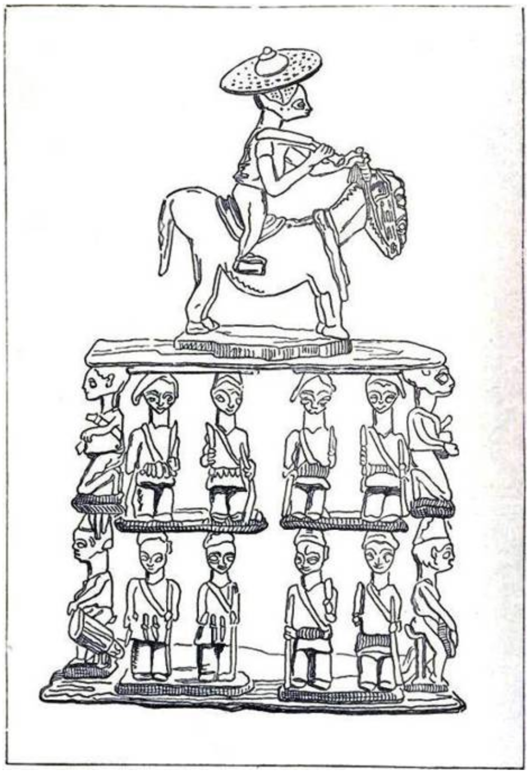

Square stool belonging to the King of Bornou.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Lander says that Benin and Portuguese cloths are sold at Egga by many of its inhabitants, so that it would appear that some kind of communication is kept up between the sea-coast and this place. The people are very speculative and enterprising, and numbers of them employ all their time solely in trading up and down the Niger. They live entirely in their canoes, over which they have a shed, that answers completely every purpose for which it is intended, so that, in their constant peregrinations, they have no need of any other dwelling or shelter than that which their canoes afford them...

“Their belief,” says Lander, “that we possessed the power of doing anything we wished, was at first amusing enough, but their importunities went so far that they became annoying. They applied to us for charms to avert wars and other national calamities, to make them rich, to prevent the crocodiles from carrying off the people, and for the chief of the fishermen to catch a canoe-load of fish every day, each request being accompanied with some sort of present, such as country beer, goora-nuts, cocoa-nuts, lemons, yams, rice, &c. in quantity proportionate to the value of their request.

“The curiosity of the people to see us is so intense, that we dare not stir out of doors, and therefore we are compelled to keep our door open all day long for the benefit of the air, and the only exercise which we can take is by walking round and round our hut like wild beasts in a cage. The people stand gazing at us with visible emotions of amazement and terror; we are regarded, in fact, in just the same light as the fiercest tigers in Europe. If we venture to approach too near the doorway, they rush backwards in a state of the greatest alarm and trepidation; but when we are at the opposite side of the hut they draw as near as their fears will permit them, in silence and caution.

“Egga is a town of vast extent, and its population must be immense. Like all the towns on the banks of the Niger, it is inundated every year. We can but conclude that the natives have their own reasons for building their houses in situations which, in our eyes, are alike so inconvenient and unhealthy. Perhaps it may be because the soil of the surrounding districts consists of a black greasy mould of extraordinary fertility, supplying all the necessaries of life at the cost of very little trouble. Although the King of Egga looked more than a hundred years old, he was very gay and light-hearted. The chief people of the town met in his hut, and spent whole days in conversation. This company of greybeards, for they are all old, laugh so heartily at the sprightliness of their own wit, that it is an invariable practice, when any one passes by, to stop and listen outside, and they add to their noisy merriment so much good-will, that we hear nothing from the hut in which the aged group are revelling during the day but loud peals of laughter and shouts of applause."

One day the old chief wished to show off his accomplishments of singing and dancing, expecting to astonish his visitors.

"He frisked," says Lander, "beneath the burden of five-score, and shaking his hoary locks, capered over the ground to the manifest delight of the bystanders, whose plaudits, though confined, as they always are, to laughter, yet tickled the old man's fancy to that degree, that he was unable to keep up his dance any longer without the aid of a crutch. With its assistance he hobbled on a little while, but his strength failed him; he was constrained for the time to give over, and he set himself down at our side on the threshold of the hut. He would not acknowledge his weakness to us for the world, but endeavoured to pant silently, and suppress loud breathings, that we might not hear him. How ridiculous, yet how natural, is this vanity! He made other unavailing attempts to dance, and also made an attempt to sing, but nature would not second his efforts, and his weak piping voice was scarcely audible. The singers, dancers, and musicians, continued their noisy mirth, till we were weary of looking at and listening to them, and as bedtime was drawing near, we desired them to depart, to the infinite regret of the frivolous but merry old chief."

Mallam-Dendo, however, tried to dissuade the English from continuing the descent of the river. Egga, he said, was the last Nouffe town, the power of the Fellatahs extended no further, and between it and the sea dwelt none but savage and barbarous races, always at war with each other. These rumours and the stories told by the natives to the Landers' people of the danger they would run of being murdered or sold as slaves so terrified the latter, that they refused to embark, declaring their intention of going back to Cape Coast Castle by the way that they came. Thanks to the firmness of the brothers this mutiny was quelled, and on the 22nd October the explorers left Egga, firing a parting salute of three musket-shots. A few miles further down, a sea-gull flew over their heads, a sure sign that they were approaching the sea, and with it, it appeared all but certain, the end of their wearisome journey.

Several small and wretched villages, half under water, and a large town at the foot of a mountain, which looked ready to overwhelm it, the name of which the travellers could not learn, were passed in succession. They met a great number of canoes built like those on the Bonny and Calabar Rivers. The crews stared in astonishment at the white men whom they dared not address. The low marshy banks of the Niger were now gradually exchanged for loftier, richer, and more fertile districts.

Kacunda, where the people of Egga had recommended Lander to halt, is on the western bank of the river. From a distance its appearance is singularly picturesque. The natives were at first alarmed at the appearance of the travellers. An old Mallam acting as Mohammedan priest and schoolmaster took them under his protection, and, thanks to him, the brothers received a warm welcome in the capital of the independent kingdom of Nouffé. The information collected in this town, or rather in this group of four villages, coincided with that obtained at Egga. Richard Lander therefore resolved to make the rest of the voyage by night and to load his four remaining guns and two pistols with balls and shot. To the great astonishment of the natives, who could not understand such contempt of danger, the explorers left Kacunda with three loud cheers, committing their cause to the hands of God. They passed several important towns, which they avoided. The river now wound a great deal, flowing from the south to south-east, and then to the south-west between lofty hills.

On the 25th October, the English found themselves opposite the mouth of a large river. It was the Tchadda or Benuwe. At its junction with the Niger is an important town called Cutum Curaffi. After a narrow escape from being swallowed up in a whirlpool and crushed against the rocks, Lander having found a suitable spot showing signs of habitation, determined to land. That this place had been visited a little time previously, was proved by two burnt out fires with some broken calabashes, fragments of earthenware vessels, cocoa-nut shells, staves of powder-barrels, &c. which the travellers picked up with some emotion, for they proved that the natives had had dealings with Europeans. Some women ran away out of a village which three of Lander's men entered with a view to get the materials for a fire. The exhausted explorers were resting on mats when they were suddenly surrounded by a crowd of half-naked men armed with guns, bows and arrows, cutlasses, iron barbs, and spears. The coolness and presence of mind of the brothers alone averted a struggle, the issue of which could not be dubious. "As we approached," says Lander, "we made all the signs and motions we could with our arms, to deter the chief and his people from firing on us. His quiver was dangling at his side, his bow was bent, and an arrow which was pointed at our breasts already trembled on the string, when we were within a few yards of his person. This was a highly critical moment, the next might be our last. But the hand of Providence averted the blow; for just as the chief was about to pull the fatal cord, a man that was nearest him rushed forward, and stayed his arm. At that instant we stood before him, and immediately held forth our hands; all of them trembled like aspen leaves; the chief looked up full in our faces, kneeling on the ground; light seemed to flash from his dark, rolling eyes, his body was convulsed all over, as though he were enduring the utmost torture, and with a timorous yet undefinable expression of countenance, in which all the passions of our nature were strangely blended, he drooped his head, eagerly grasped our proffered hands, and burst into tears. This was a sign of friendship; harmony followed, and war and bloodshed were thought of no more. It was happy for us that our white faces and calm behaviour produced the effect it did on these people; in another minute our bodies would have been as full of arrows as a porcupine's is full of quills. 'I thought you were children of heaven fallen from the skies,' said the chief, in explanation of this sudden change."

This scene took place in the famous market-town of Bocqua, of which the travellers had so often heard, whither the people come up from the coast to exchange the merchandise of the whites for slaves brought in large numbers from Funda, on the opposite bank.

The information obtained at Bocqua was most satisfactory; the sea was only ten days' journey off. There was no danger in going down the river, the chief said, though the people on the banks were a bad lot.

Following the advice of this chief, the travellers passed the fine town of Atta without stopping, and halted at Abbagaca, where the river divides into several branches, and whose chief showed insatiable greed. Refusing to halt at several villages, whose inhabitants begged for a sight of the white strangers, they were finally obliged to land at the village of Damuggo, where a little man wearing a waistcoat which had once formed part of a uniform, hailed them in English, crying out: “Halloa, ho! you English, come here!” He was an emissary from the King of Bonny come to buy slaves for the master.

The chief of Damuggo, who had never before seen white men, received the explorers very kindly, held public rejoicings in their honour and detained them with constant fêtes until the 4th November. Although the fetich consulted by him presaged that they would meet with a thousand dangers before reaching the sea, this monarch supplied them with an extra canoe, some rowers, and a guide.

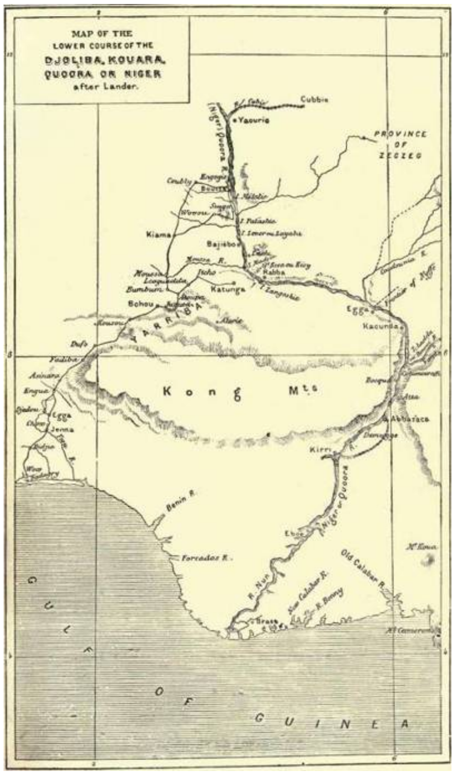
MAP OF THE
LOWER COURSE OF THE
DJOLIBA, KOUARA,
QUOCRA OR NIGER
after Lander.
Cubbie
Yaourie
Niger, Quorra R.
PROVINCE OF ZEGZEG
Coubly
Boussa
Wowou
Kiama
Bajiebo
Moussa R.
Rabba
Jeho
Katunga
Bumbum
Bohou
YARRIBA
Alorie
Kousou
Dufo
Fadiba
Kong Mts
Egga
Kacunda
Boqua
Atta
Abbaraca
Damuggo
Kirri
Jenna
Niger or Quorra
Benin R.
Eboe
Forcados R.
Mt Kina
Old Calabar R.
R. Nun
New Calabar R.
R. Bonny
Brass
Mt Cameroons
GULF OF GUINEA

Gravé par E. Morieu.

The sinister predictions of the fetich were soon fulfilled. John and Richard Lander were embarked in different boats. As they passed a large town called Kirree they were stopped by war-canoes, each containing forty men wearing European clothes, minus the trousers.

Each canoe carried what at first sight appeared to be the Union Jack flying from a long bamboo cane fixed in the stern, a four or six pounder was lashed to each prow, and every black sailor was provided with a musket.

The two brothers were taken to Kirree, where a palaver was held upon their fate. Fortunately the Mallams or Mohammedan priests interfered in their favour, and some of their property was restored to them, but the best part had gone to the bottom of the river with John Lander’s canoe.

“To my great satisfaction,” says Lander, “I immediately recognized the box containing our books, and one of my brother’s journals; the medicine-chest was by its side, but both were filled with water. A large carpet bag, containing all our wearing apparel, was lying cut open, and deprived of its contents, with the exception of a shirt, a pair of trousers, and a waistcoat. Many valuable articles which it had contained were gone. The whole of my journal, with the exception of a note-book with remarks from Rabba to this place, was lost. Four guns, one of which had been the property of the late Mr. Park, four cutlasses, and two pistols, were gone. Nine elephants’ tusks, the finest I had seen in the country, which had been given us by the kings of Wow-wow and Boussa; a quantity of ostrich feathers, some handsome leopard skins, a great variety of seeds, all our buttons, cowries, and needles, which were necessary for us to purchase provisions with, all were missing, and said to have been sunk in the river.”

This was like going down in port. After crossing Africa from Badagry to Boussa, escaping all the dangers of navigating the Niger, getting free from the hands of so many rapacious chiefs, to be shipwrecked six day’s journey from the sea, to be made slaves of or condemned to death just on the eve of making known to Europe the results of so many sufferings endured, so many dangers escaped, so many obstacles happily surmounted! To have traced the course of the Niger from Boussa, to be on the point of determining the exact position of its mouth and then to find themselves stopped by wretched pirates was really too much, and bitter indeed were the reflections of the brothers during the interminable palaver upon their fate.

Although their stolen property was partially restored to them, and the negro who had begun the attack upon them was condemned to be beheaded, the brothers were none the less regarded as prisoners, and they were marched off to Obie, king of the country, who would decide what was to be done with them. It was evident that the robbers were not natives of the country, but had only entered it with a view to pillage. They probably counted on trading in two or three such market-towns as Kirree if they did not meet with any boats but such as were too strong to be plundered. For the rest, all the tribes of this part of the Niger seemed to be at daggers drawn with each other, and the trade in provisions was carried on under arms. After two days’ row the canoes came in sight of Eboe, at a spot where the stream divides into three “rivers” of great width, with marshy level banks covered with palm-trees. An hour later one of the boatmen, a native of Eboe, cried, “There is my country.” Here fresh difficulties awaited the travellers. Obie, king of Eboe, a young man with a refined and intelligent countenance, received the white men with cordiality. His dress, which reminded his visitors of that of the King of Yarriba, was adorned with such a quantity of coral that he might have been called the coral king.

Obie seemed to be affected by the account the English gave of the struggle in which they had lost all their merchandise, but the aid he gave them was by no means proportioned to the warmth of the sentiments which he expressed, indeed he let them all but die of hunger.

“The Eboe people,” says the narrative, “like most Africans, are extremely indolent, and cultivate yams, Indian corn, and plantains only. They have abundance of goats and fowls, but few sheep are to be seen, and no bullocks. The city, which has no other name than the Eboe country, is situated on an open plain; it is immensely large, contains a vast population, and is the capital of a kingdom of the same name. It has, for a series of years, been the principal slave-mart for native traders from the coast, between the Bonny and Old Calabar rivers; and for the production of its palm-oil it has obtained equal celebrity. Hundreds of men from the rivers mentioned above come up for the purpose of trade, and numbers of them are at present residing in canoes in front of the town. Most of the oil purchased by Englishmen at the Bonny and adjacent rivers is brought from thence, as are nearly all the slaves which are annually exported from those places by the French, Spaniards, and Portuguese. It has been told us by many that the Eboe people are confirmed anthropophagi; and this opinion is more prevalent among the tribes bordering on that kingdom, than with the natives of more remote districts.”

From what the travellers could learn, it was pretty certain that Obie would not let them go without exacting a considerable ransom. He may doubtless have been driven to this by the importunity of his favourites, but it was more likely the result of the greed of the people of Bonny and Brass, who quarrelled as to which tribe should carry off the English to their country.

A son of the Chief of Bonny, King Pepper, a native named Gun, brother of King Boy, and their father King Forday, who with King Jacket govern the whole of the Brass country, were the most eager in their demands, and produced as proofs of their honourable intentions the testimonials given to them by the European captains with whom they had business relations.

One of these documents, signed James Dow, captain of the brig “Susan” of Liverpool, and dated from the most important river of the Brass Country, September, 1830, ran thus: —

“Captain Dow states that he never met with a set of greater scoundrels than the natives generally, and the pilots in particular.”

It goes on in a similar strain heaping curses upon the natives, and charging them with having endeavoured to wreck Dow’s vessel at the mouth of the river with a view to dividing his property amongst them. King Jacket was designated as an arrant rogue and a desperate thief. Boy was the only one of common honesty or trustworthiness.

After an endless palaver, Obie declared that according to the laws and customs of the country he had a right to look upon the Landers and their people as his property, but that, not wishing to abuse his privileges, he would set them free in exchange for the value of twenty slaves in English merchandise. This decision, which Richard Lander tried in vain to shake, plunged the brothers into the depths of despair, a state of mind soon succeeded by an apathy and indifference so complete that they could not have made the faintest effort to recover their liberty. Add to these mental sufferings the physical weakness to which they were reduced by want of food, and we shall have some idea of their state of prostration. Without resources of any kind, robbed of their needles, cowries, and merchandise, they were reduced to the sad necessity of begging their bread. “But we might as well have addressed our petitions to the stones or trees,” says Lander; “we might have spared ourselves the mortification of a refusal. We never experienced a more stinging sense of our own humbleness and imbecility than on such occasions, and never had we greater need of patience and lowliness of spirit. In most African towns and villages we have been regarded as demigods, and treated in consequence with universal kindness, civility, and veneration; but here, alas, what a contrast! we are classed with the most degraded and despicable of mankind, and are become slaves in a land of ignorance and barbarism, whose savage natives have treated us with brutality and contempt."

It was Boy who finally achieved the rescue of the Landers, for he consented to pay to Obie the ransom he demanded for them and their people. Boy himself was very moderate, asking for nothing in return for his trouble and the risk he ran in taking the white men to Brass, but fifteen bars or fifteen slaves, and a barrel of rum. Although this demand was exorbitant, Lander did not hesitate to write an order on Richard Lake, captain of an English vessel at anchor in Brass river, for thirty-six bars.

The king's canoe, on which the brothers embarked on the 12th November, carried sixty persons, forty of whom were rowers. It was hollowed out of a single tree-trunk, measured more than fifty feet long, carried a four-pounder in the prow, an arsenal of cutlasses and grape-shot, and was laden with merchandise of every kind. The vast tracts of cultivated land on either side of the river showed that the population was far more numerous than would have been supposed. The scenery was flat, open, and varied; and the soil, a rich black mould, produced luxuriant trees, and green shrubs of every shade. At seven p.m. on the 11th November the canoe left the chief branch of the Niger and entered the Brass river. An hour later, Richard Lander recognized with inexpressible delight tidal waves.

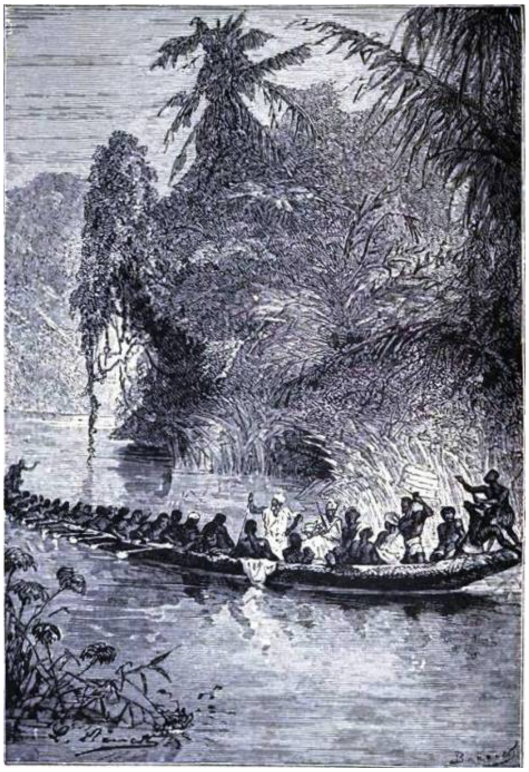

“It was hollowed out of a single tree-trunk.”

A little farther on Boy’s canoe came up with those of Gun and Forday. The latter was a venerable-looking old man, in spite of his wretched semi-European semi-native clothing and a very strong predilection for rum, of which he consumed a great quantity, although his manners and conversation betrayed no signs of excessive drinking.

That was a strange escort which accompanied the two Englishmen as far as the town of Brass.

“The canoes,” says Lander, “were following each other up the river in tolerable order, each of them displaying three flags. In the first was King

Boy, standing erect and conspicuous, his headdress of feathers waving with the movements of his body, which had been chalked in various fantastic figures, rendered more distinct by its natural colour; his hands were resting on the barbs of two immense spears, which at intervals he darted violently into the bottom of the canoe, as if he were in the act of killing some formidable wild animal under his feet. In the bows of all the other canoes fetish priests were dancing, and performing various extraordinary antics, their persons, as well as those of the people with them, being chalked over in the same manner as that of King Boy; and, to crown the whole, Mr. Gun, the little military gentleman, was most actively employed, his canoe now darting before and now dropping behind the rest, adding not a little to the imposing effect of the whole scene by the repeated discharges of his cannon."

Brass consists of two towns, one belonging to Forday, the other to King Jacket. The priests performed some curious ceremonies before disembarking, evidently having reference to the whites. Was the result of the consultation of the fetish of the town favourable or not to the visitors? The way the natives treated them would answer that question. Before he set foot on land Richard Lander, to his great delight, recognized a white man on the banks. He was the captain of a Spanish schooner at anchor in the river. The narrative goes on to say: —

"Of all the wretched, filthy, and contemptible places in this world of ours none can present to the eye of a stranger so miserable an appearance, or can offer such disgusting and loathsome sights, as this abominable Brass Town. Dogs, goats, and other animals run about the dirty streets half-starved, whose hungry looks can only be exceeded by the famishing appearance of the men, women, and children, which bespeaks the penury and wretchedness to which they are reduced; whilst the persons of many of them are covered with odious boils, and their huts are falling to the ground from neglect and decay."

Another place, called Pilot Town by the Europeans, on account of the number of pilots living in it, is situated at the mouth of the river Nun, seventy miles from Brass. King Forday demanded four bars before the Landers left the town, saying it was customary for every white man who came to Brass by the river to make that payment. It was impossible to evade compliance, and Lander drew another bill on Captain Lake. At this price Richard Lander obtained permission to go down in Boy's royal canoe to the English brig stationed at the mouth of the river. His brother and his servants were not to be set free until the return of the king. On his arrival on the brig, Lander's astonishment and shame was extreme when he found that Lake refused to give him any help whatever. The instructions given to the brothers from the ministry were read, to prove that he was not an impostor; but the captain answered, —

"If you think that you have a — — fool to deal with, you are mistaken; I'll not give a — — flint for your bill. I would not give a — — for it."

Overwhelmed with grief at such unexpected behaviour from a fellow-countryman, Richard Lander returned to Boy's canoe, not knowing to whom to apply, and asked his escort to take him to Bonny, where there were a number of English vessels. The king refused to do this, and the explorer was obliged to try once more to move the captain, begging him to give him at least ten muskets, which might possibly satisfy Forday.

"I have told you already," answered Lake, "that I will not let you have even a flint, so bother me no more."

"But I have a brother and eight people at Brass Town," rejoined Lander, "and if you do not intend to pay King Boy, at least persuade him to bring them here, or else he will poison or starve my brother before I can get any assistance from a man-of-war, and sell all my people."

"If you can get them on board," replied the captain, "I will take them away; but as I have told you before, you do not get a flint from me."

At last Lander persuaded Boy to go back and fetch his brother and his people. The king at first declined to do so without receiving some payment on account, and it was only with difficulty that he was induced to forego this demand. When Lake found out that Lander's servants were able-bodied men, who could replace the sailors he had lost by death or who were down with fever, he relented a little. This yielding mood did not, however, last long, for he declared that if John and his people did not come in three days he would start without them. In vain did Richard prove to him beyond a doubt that if he did so the white men would be sold as slaves. The captain would not listen to him, only answering, "I can't help it; I shall wait no longer." Such inhumanity as this is fortunately very rare; and a wretch who could thus insult those not merely his equals, but so much his superiors, ought to be pilloried. At last, on the 24th November, after weathering a strong breeze which made the passage of the bar very rough and all but impossible, John Lander arrived on board. He had had to bear a good many reproaches from Boy, for whom, it must be confessed, there was some excuse; for had he not at his own cost rescued the brothers and their people from slavery, brought them down in his own canoe, and fed them, although very badly, all on the strength of their promise to pay him with as much beef and rum as he could consume? whereas he was, after all, roughly received by Lake, told that his advances would never be refunded, and treated as a thief. Certainly he had cause to complain and any one else would have made his prisoners pay dearly for the disappointment of so many hopes, and the loss of so much money.

For all this, however, Boy brought John Lander safely to the brig. Captain Lake received the traveller pretty cordially, but declared his intention of making the king go back without so much as an obolus. Poor Boy was full of the most gloomy forebodings. His haughty manner was exchanged for an air of deprecating humility. An abundant meal was placed before him, but he scarcely touched it. Richard Lander, disgusted with the stinginess and bad faith of Lake, and unable to keep his promises, ransacked all his possessions; and finding, at last, five silver bracelets and a sabre of native manufacture, which he had brought from Yarriba, he offered these to Boy, who accepted them. Finally, the king screwed up courage enough to make his demand to the captain, who, in a voice of thunder which it was difficult to believe could have come from such a feeble body, declined to accede to it, enforcing his refusal with a shower of oaths and threats, such as made Boy, who saw, moreover, that the vessel was ready to sail, beat a hasty retreat, and hurry off to his canoe.

Thus ended the vicissitudes of the Brothers Lander’s journey. They were in some danger in crossing the bar, but that was their last. They reached Fernando Po, and then the Calabar River where they embarked on the *Carnarvon* for Rio Janeiro, at which port Admiral Baker, then commanding the station, got them a passage on board a transport-ship.

On the 9th June they disembarked at Portsmouth. Their first care, after sending an account of their journey to Lord Goderich, then Colonial Secretary, was to inform that official of the conduct of Captain Lake, conduct which was of a nature to compromise the credit of the English

Government. Orders were at once given by the minister for the payment of the sums agreed upon, which were perfectly just and reasonable.

Thus was completely and finally solved the geographical problem which had for so many centuries occupied the attention of the civilized world, and been the subject of so many different conjectures. The Niger, or as the natives call it, the Joliba, or Quorra, is not connected with the Nile, and does not lose itself in the desert sands or in the waters of Lake Tchad; it flows in a number of different branches into the ocean on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea, at the point known as Cape Formosa. The entire glory of this discovery, foreseen though it was by scientific men, belongs to the Brothers Lander. The vast extent of country traversed by the Niger between Yaoorie and the sea was completely unknown before their journey.

So soon as the discoveries made by Lander became known in England, several merchants formed themselves into a company for developing the resources of the new districts. In July, 1832, they equipped two steamers, the *Quorra* and *Alburka*, which, under the command of Messrs. Laird, Oldfield, and Richard Lander, appended the Niger as far as Bocqua. The results of this commercial expedition were deplorable. Not only was there absolutely no trade to be carried on with the natives, but the crews of the vessels were decimated by fever. Finally, Richard Lander, who had so often gone up and down the river, was mortally wounded by the natives, on the 27th January, 1834, and died on the morning of 5th February, at Fernando Po.

To complete our account of the exploration of Africa during the period under review, we have still to speak of the various surveys of the valley of the Nile, the most important of which were those by Cailliaud, Russegger, and Rüppell.

Frederic Cailliaud was born at Nantes in 1787, and arrived in Egypt in 1815, having previously visited Holland, Italy, Sicily, part of Greece, and European or Asiatic Turkey, where he traded in precious stones. His knowledge of geology and mineralogy won for him a cordial reception from Mehemet Ali, who immediately on his arrival commissioned him to explore the course of the Nile and the desert.

This first trip resulted in the discovery of emerald mines at Labarah, mentioned by Arab authors, which had been abandoned for centuries. In the excavations in the mountain Cailliaud found the lamps, crowbars, ropes, and tools used in working these mines by men in the employ of Ptolemy. Near the quarries the traveller discovered the ruins of a little town, which was probably inhabited by the ancient miners. To prove the reality of his valuable discovery he took back ten pounds’ weight of emeralds to Mehemet Ali.

Another result of this journey was the discovery by the French explorer of the old road from Coptos to Berenice for the trade of India.

From September, 1819, to the end of 1832, Cailliaud, accompanied by a former midshipman named Letorzec, was occupied in exploring all the known oases east of Egypt, and in tracing the Nile to 10° N. lat. On his first journey he reached Wady Halfa, and for his second trip he made that place his starting-point. A fortunate accident did much to aid his researches. This was the appointment of Ismail Pacha, son of Mehemet Ali, to the command of an expedition to Nubia. To this expedition Cailliaud attached himself.

Leaving Daraou in November, 1820, Cailliaud arrived, on the 5th January in the ensuing year, at Dongola, and reached Mount Barka in the Chaguy country, where are a vast number of ruins of temples, pyramids, and other monuments. The fact of this district bearing the name of Merawe had given rise to an opinion that in it was situated the ancient capital of Ethiopia. Cailliaud was enabled to show this to be erroneous.

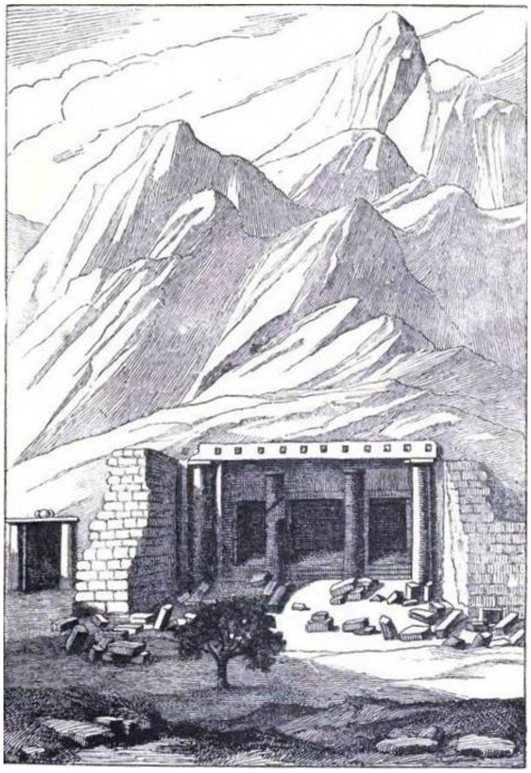

View of a Merawe temple.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The French explorer, accompanying Ismail Pacha in the character of a mineralogist beyond Berber, on a quest for gold-mines, arrived at Shendy. He then went with Letorzec to determine the position of the junction of the Atbara with the Nile; and at Assour, not far from 17° N. lat. he discovered the ruins of an extensive ancient town. It was Meroë. Pressing on in a southerly direction between the 15th and 16th degrees of N. lat. Cailliaud next identified the mouth of the Bahr-el-Abiad, or White Nile, visited the ruins of Saba, the mouth of the Rahad, the ancient Astosaba, Sennaar, the river Gologo, the Fazoele country, and the Toumat, a tributary of the Nile, finally reaching the Singue country between the two branches of the river. Cailliaud was the first explorer to penetrate from the north so near to the equator; Browne had turned back at 16° 10’, Bruce at 11°. To Cailliaud and Letorzec we owe many observations on latitude and longitude, some valuable remarks on the variation of the magnetic needle, and details of the climate, temperature, and nature of the soil, together with a most interesting collection of animals and botanical specimens. Lastly, the travellers made plans of all the monuments beyond the second cataract.

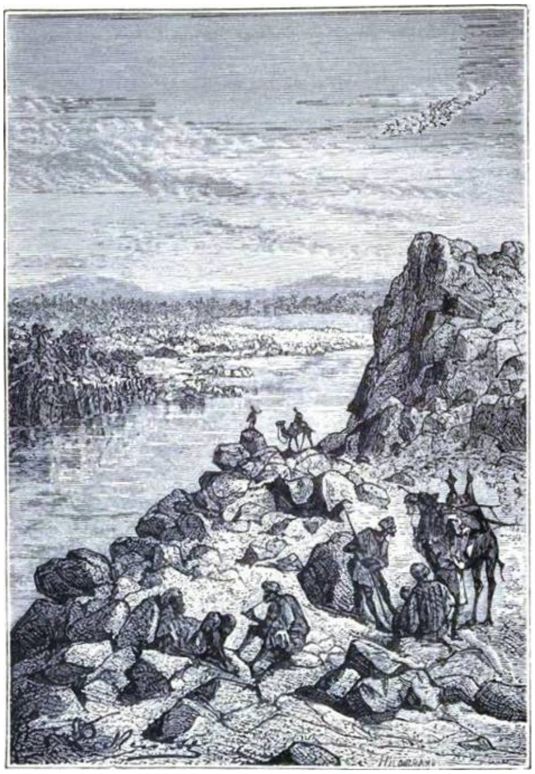

The Second Cataract of the Nile.

The two Frenchmen had preluded their discoveries by an excursion to the oasis of Siwâh. At the end of 1819 they left Fayum with a few companions, and entered the Libyan desert. In fifteen days, and after a brush with the Arabs, they reached Siwâh, having on their way taken measurements of every part of the temple of Jupiter Ammon, and determined, as Browne had done, its exact geographical position. A little later a military expedition was sent to this same oasis, in which Drovetti collected new and very valuable documents supplementing those obtained by Cailliaud and Letorzec. They afterwards visited successively the oasis of Falafre, never before explored by a European, that of Dakel, and Khargh, the chief place of the Theban oasis. The documents collected on this journey were sent to France, to the care of M. Jomard, who founded on them his work called “Voyage à l’Oasis de Siouah.”

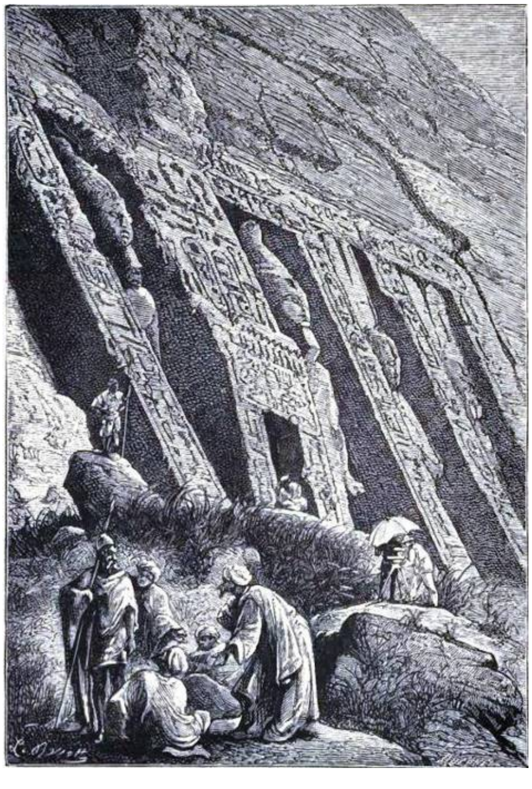

Temple of Jupiter Ammon.

A few years later Edward Rüppell devoted seven or eight years to the exploration of Nubia, Sennaar, Kordofan, and Abyssinia in 1824, he ascended the White Nile for more than sixty leagues above its mouth.

Lastly, in 1836 to 1838, Joseph Russegger, superintendent of the Austrian mines, visited the lower portion of the course of the Bahr-el-Abiad. This official journey was followed by the important and successful surveys afterwards made by order of Mehemet Ali in the same regions.

CHAPTER III.

THE ORIENTAL SCIENTIFIC MOVEMENT AND AMERICAN DISCOVERIES.

The decipherment of cuneiform inscriptions, and the study of Assyrian remains up to 1840 — Ancient Iran and the Avesta — The survey of India and the study of Hindustani — The exploration and measurement of the Himalaya mountains — The Arabian Peninsula — Syria and Palestine — Central Asia and Alexander von Humboldt — Pike at the sources of the Mississippi, Arkansas, and Red River — Major Long’s two expeditions — General Cass — Schoolcraft at the sources of the Mississippi — The exploration of New Mexico — Archæological expeditions in Central America — Scientific expeditions in Brazil — Spix and Martin — Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied — D’Orbigny and American man.

Although the discoveries which we are now to relate are not strictly speaking geographical, they nevertheless throw such a new light on several early civilizations, and have done so much to extend the domain of history and ideas, that we are compelled to dedicate a few words to them.

The reading of cuneiform inscriptions, and the decipherment of hieroglyphics are events so important in their results, they reveal to us so vast a number of facts hitherto unknown, or distorted in the more or less marvellous narratives of the ancient historians Diodorus, Ctesias, and Herodotus, that it is impossible to pass over scientific discoveries of such value in silence.

Thanks to them, we form an intimate acquaintance with a whole world, with an extremely advanced civilization, with manners, habits, and customs differing essentially from our own. How strange it seems to hold in our hands the accounts of the steward of some great lord or governor of a province, or to read such romances as those of *Setna* and the *Two Brothers,* or stories such as that of the *Predestined Prince*.

Those buildings of vast proportions, those superb temples, magnificent hypogæa, and sculptured obelisks, were once nothing more to us than sumptuous monuments, but now that the inscriptions upon them have been read, they relate to us the life of the kings who built them, and the circumstances of their erection.

How many names of races not mentioned by Greek historians, how many towns now lost, how many of the smallest details of the religion, art, and daily life, as well as of the political and military events of the past, are revealed to us by the hieroglyphic and cuneiform inscriptions.

Not only do we now see into the daily life of these ancient peoples, of whom we had formerly but a very superficial knowledge, but we get an idea even of their literature. The day is perhaps not far distant when we shall know as much of the life of the Egyptians in the eighteenth century before Christ as that of our forefathers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of our own era.

Carsten Niebuhr was the first to make and bring to Europe an exact and complete copy of inscriptions at Persepolis in an unknown character. Many attempts had been made to explain them, but all had been vain, until in 1802 Grotefend, the learned Hanoverian philologist, succeeded, by an inspiration of genius, in solving the mystery in which they were enveloped.

Truly these cuneiform characters were strange and difficult to decipher! Imagine a collection of nails variously arranged, and forming groups horizontally placed. What did these groups signify? Did they represent sounds and articulations, or, like the letters of our alphabet, complete words? Had they the ideographic value of Chinese written characters? What was the language hidden in them? These were the problems to be solved! It appeared probable that the inscriptions brought from Persepolis were written in the language of the ancient Persians, but Rask, Bopp, and Lassen had not yet studied the Iranian idioms and proved their affinity with Sanskrit.

It would be beyond our province to give an account of the ingenious deductions, the skilful guesses, and the patient groping through which Grotefend finally achieved the recognition of an alphabetic system of writing, and succeeded in separating from certain groups of words what he believed to be the names of Darius and Xerxes, thus attaining a knowledge of several letters, by means of which he made out other words. It is enough for us to say that the key was found by him, and to others was left the task of completing and perfecting his work.

More than thirty years passed by, however, before any notable progress was made in these studies. It was our learned fellow-countryman Eugène Burnouf who gave them a decided impulse. Turning to account his knowledge of Sanskrit and Zend, he found that the language of the inscriptions of Persepolis was but a Zend dialect used in Bactriana, which was still spoken in the sixth century B.C. and in which the books of Zoroaster were written. Burnouf’s pamphlet bears date 1836. At the same period Lassen, a German scholar of Bonn, came to the same conclusion on the same grounds.

The inscriptions already discovered were soon all deciphered; and with the exception of a few signs, on the meaning of which scholars were not quite agreed, the entire alphabet became known. But the foundations alone were laid; the building was still far from finished. The Persepolitan inscriptions appeared to be repeated in three parallel columns. Might not this be a triple version of the same inscription in the three chief languages of the Achæmenian Empire, namely, the Persian, Median, and Assyrian or Babylonian. This guess proved correct; and owing to the decipherment of one of the inscriptions, a test was obtained, and the same plan was followed as that of Champollion with regard to the Rosetta stone, on which was the tri-lingual inscription in Greek, Demotic or Enchorial, and hieroglyphic characters.

In the second and third inscriptions were recognized Syro-Chaldee, which, like Hebrew, Himyaric, and Arabic, belong to the Semitic group, and a third idiom, to which the name of Medic was given, resembling the dialects of the Turks and Tartars. But it would be presumptuous of us to enlarge upon these researches. That was to be the task of the Danish scholar Westergaard, of the Frenchmen De Saulcy and Oppert, and of the Englishmen Morris and Rawlinson, not to mention others less celebrated. We shall have to return to this subject later.

The knowledge of Sanskrit, and the investigation of Brahmanic literature, had inaugurated a scientific movement which has gone on ever since with increasing energy.

Long before Nineveh and Babylon were known as nations, a vast country, called Iran by orientalists, which included Persia, Afghanistan, and Beloochistan, was the scene of an advanced civilization, with which is connected the name of Zoroaster, who was at once a conqueror, a law-giver, and the founder of a religion. The disciples of Zoroaster, persecuted at the time of the Mohammedan conquest, and driven from their ancient home, where their mode of worship was still preserved, took refuge, under the name of Parsees, in the north-west of India.

At the end of the last century, the Frenchman Aquetil Duperron brought to Europe an exact copy of the religious books of the Parsees, written in the language of Zoroaster. He translated them, and for sixty years all the *savants* had found in them the source of all their religious and philological notions of Iran. These books are known under the name of the Zend-Avesta, a word which comprises the name of the language, *Zend*, and the title of the book, *Avesta*.

As the knowledge of Sanskrit increased, however, that branch of science required to be studied afresh by the light of the new method. In 1826 the Danish philologist Rask, and later Eugène Burnouf, with his profound knowledge of Sanskrit, and by the help of a translation in that language recently discovered in India, turned once more to the study of the Zend. In 1834 Burnouf published a masterly treatise on the Yacna, which marked an epoch. From the resemblance between the archaic Sanskrit and the Zend came the recognition of the common origin of the two languages, and the relationship, or rather, the identity, of the races who speak them. Originally the names of the deities, the traditions, the generic appellation, that of Aryan, of the two peoples, are the same, to say nothing of the similarity of their customs. But it is needless to dwell on the importance of this discovery, which has thrown an entirely new light on the infancy of the human race, of which for so many centuries nothing was known.

From the close of the eighteenth century, that is to say from the time when the English first obtained a secure footing in India, the physical study of the country was vigorously carried on, outstripping of course for a time that of the ethnology and kindred subjects, which require for their prosecution a more settled country and less exciting times. It must be owned, however, that knowledge of the races of the country to be controlled is as essential to the government as it is to commercial enterprise; and in 1801 Lord Wellesley, as Governor for the Company, recognizing the importance of securing a good map of the English territories, commissioned Brigadier William Lambton, to connect, by means of a trigonometrical survey, the eastern and western banks of the Indus with the observatory of Madras. Lambton was not content with the mere accomplishment of this task. He laid down with precision one arc of the meridian from Cape Comorin to the village of Takoor-Kera, fifteen miles south-east of Ellichpoor. The amplitude of this arc exceeded twelve degrees. With the aid of competent officers, amongst whom we must mention Colonel Everest, the Government of India would have hailed the completion of the task of its engineers long before 1840, if the successive annexation of new territories had not constantly added to the extent of ground to be covered.

At about the same time with this progress in our knowledge of the geography of India an impulse was given to the study of the literature of India.

In 1776 an extract from the most important native codes, then for the first time translated under the title of the Code of the Gentoos[1] was published in London. Nine years later the Asiatic Society was founded in Calcutta by Sir William Jones, the first who thoroughly mastered the Sanskrit language. In "Asiatic Researches," published by this society, were collected the results of all scientific investigations relating to India. In 1789, Jones published his translation of the drama of S'akuntala, that charming specimen of Hindu literature, so full of feeling and refinement. Sanskrit grammars and dictionaries were now multiplied, and a regular rivalry was set on foot in British India, which would undoubtedly soon have spread to Europe, had not the continental blockade prevented the introduction of works published abroad. At this time an Englishman named Hamilton, a prisoner of war in Paris, studied the Oriental MSS. in the library of the French capital, and taught Frederick Schlegel the rudiments of Sanskrit, which it was no longer necessary to go to India to learn.

[1] Gentoo was the name given by old English writers to the natives of Hindustan, and is now obsolete, having been superseded by that of Hindoo. — *Trans.*

Lassen was Schlegel's pupil, and together they studied the literature and antiquities of India, examining, translating, and publishing the original texts; whilst at the same time Franz Bopp devoted himself to the study of the language, making his grammars accessible to all, and coming to the conclusion which was then startling, although it is now generally accepted, of the common origin of the Indo-European languages.

It was proved that the Vedas, that collection of sacred writings held in too universal veneration to be tampered with, were written in a very ancient and very pure idiom which had not been revived, and whose close resemblance with the Zend, put back the date of the composition of the books beyond the time of the separation of the Aryan family into two branches. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana, dating from the Brahminical or the period succeeding that of the Vedas, were next studied, together with the Puranas. Owing to a profounder knowledge of the language and a more intimate acquaintance with the mythology of the Hindus, scholars were able to fix approximately the date of the composition of these poems, to ascertain the numberless interpolations, and to extract everything of actual historical or geographical value from those marvellous allegories.

The result of these patient and minute investigations was a conviction that the Celtic, Greek, Latin, Germanic, Slave, and Persian languages had one common parent, and that parent none other than Sanskrit. If, then, their language was the same, it followed as a matter of course that the people had been also identical. The differences now existing between these various idioms are accounted for by the successive breakings up of the primitive people, approximate dates enable us to realize the greater or less affinity of those languages with the Sanskrit, and the nature of the words which they have borrowed from it, words corresponding by their nature to the different degrees of advance in civilization.

Moreover a very clear and definite notion was obtained of the kind of life led by the founders of the Indo-European race, and the changes brought about in it by the progress of civilization. The Vedas give us a picture of the Aryan race before it migrated to India, and occupied the Punjab and Cabulistan. By the aid of these poems we can look on at struggles against the primitive races of Hindustan; whose resistance was all the more desperate in that the conqueror, of their caste divisions, left them only the lowest and most degraded. Thanks to the Vedas we can realize every detail of the pastoral and patriarchal life of the Aryans, a life so domestic and unruffled, that we mentally ask ourselves whether the eager strife of the modern peoples is not a poor exchange for the peaceful existence which their few wants secured to their forefathers.

We cannot dwell longer on this subject, but the little that we have said will be enough to show the reader the importance to history, ethnography, and philology, of the study of Sanskrit. For further details we refer him to the special works of Orientalists and to the excellent historical manuals of Robiou, Lenormant, and Maspero. All the scientific results of whatever kind obtained up to 1820 are also skilfully and impartially summed up in

Walter Hamilton’s large work, “A Geographical, Statistical, and Historical Description of Hindustan, and the neighbouring Countries.” This is a book which, by recording the various stages of scientific progress, marks with accuracy the point reached at any given epoch.

After this brief review of the labours of scholars in reference to the intellectual and social life of the Hindus, we must turn to those studies whose aim was a knowledge of the physical character of the country.

One of the most surprising results obtained by the travels of Webb and Moorcroft was the extraordinary height attributed by them to the Himalaya mountains. According to them their elevation exceeded that of the loftiest summits of the Andes. Colonel Colebrook had estimated the average height of the chain at 22,000 feet, and even this would appear to be less than the reality. Webb measured Yamunavatri, one of the most remarkable peaks of the chain, and estimated its height above the level of the plateau from which it rises as 20,000 feet, whilst the plateau in its turn is 5000 feet above the plain. Not satisfied, however, with what he looked upon as too perfunctory an estimate, he measured, with all possible mathematical accuracy, the Dewalagiri or White Mountain, and ascertained its height to be no less than 27,500 feet.

The most remarkable feature of the Himalaya chain is the succession of these mountains, the ranges of heights rising one above the other. This gives a far more vivid impression of their loftiness than would one isolated peak rising from a plain and with its head lost among the clouds.

The calculations of Webb and Colebrook, were soon verified by the mathematical observations of Colonel Crawford, who measured eight of the highest peaks of the Himalayas. According to him the loftiest of all was

Chumulari, situated near the frontiers of Bhoutan and Thibet, which attains to a height of 30,000 feet above the sea-level.

Results such as these, confirmed by the agreement of so many observers, who could not surely all be wrong, took the scientific world by surprise. The chief objection urged was the fact that the snow-line must in these districts be something like 30,000 feet above the sea-level. It appeared, therefore, impossible to believe the assertion of all the explorers, that the Himalayas were covered with forests of gigantic pines. Finally, however, actual personal observation upset theory. In a second journey, Webb climbed the Niti-Ghaut, the loftiest peak in the world, the height of which he fixed at 16,814 feet, and not only did he find no snow, but even the rocks rising 300 feet above it were quite free from snow in summer. Moreover, the steep sides, where breathing was difficult, were clothed with magnificent forests of tapering pines, and firs, and wide-spreading cypress and cedar-trees.

“The high limits of perpetual snow on the Himalaya mountains,” says Desborough Cooley, “are justly ascribed by Mr. Webb to the great elevation of the table-land or terrace from which these mountain peaks spring. As the heat of our atmosphere is derived chiefly from the radiation of the earth’s surface, it follows that the temperature of any elevated point must be modified in a very important degree by the proximity and extent of the surrounding plains. These observations seem satisfactorily to refute the objections made by certain savants respecting the great height of the Himalaya mountains, which may be, therefore, safely pronounced to be the loftiest mountain chain on the surface of the globe.”

We must now refer briefly to an expedition in the latitudes already visited by Webb and Moorcroft. The traveller Fraser, with neither the necessary instruments nor knowledge for measuring the lofty peaks he ascended, was endowed with a great power of observation, and his account of his journey is full of interest, and here and there very amusing. He visited the source of the Jumna, and, at a height of more than 25,000 feet, he found numerous villages picturesquely perched on slopes carpetted with snow. He then made his way to Gangoutri, in spite of the opposition of his guides, who represented the road thither as extremely dangerous, declaring that it was swept by a pestilential wind which would deprive any traveller, who ventured to expose himself to it, of his senses. The explorer, however, was more than rewarded for all his dangers and fatigues by the enjoyment he derived from the grandeur and magnificence of the views he obtained.

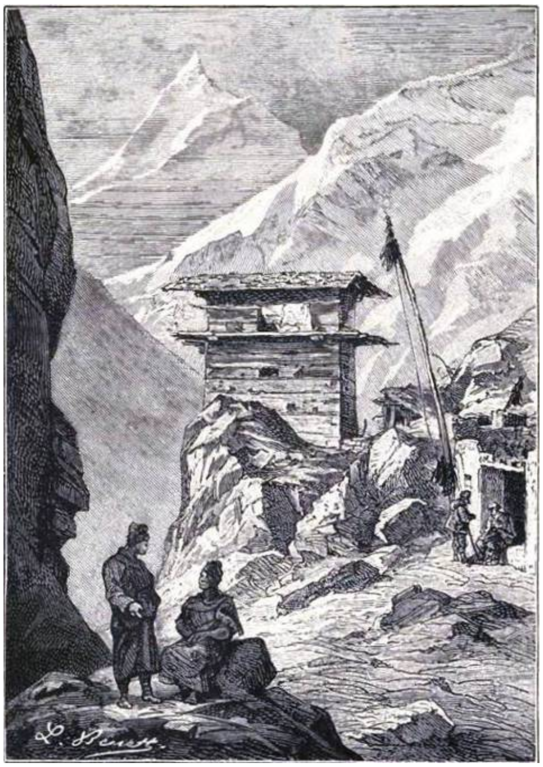

“Villages picturesquely perched.”

“There is that,” says Desborough Cooley in reference to Fraser’s journey, “in the appearance of the Himalaya range, which every person who has seen them will allow to be peculiarly their own. No other mountains that I have ever seen bear any resemblance to their character; their summits shoot in the most fantastic and spiring peaks to a height that astonishes, and, when viewed from an elevated situation, almost induce the belief of an ocular deception.”

We must now leave the peninsula of the Ganges for that of Arabia, where we have to record the result of several interesting journeys. That of Captain Sadler of the Indian army, claims the first rank. Sent by the Governor of Bombay in 1819, on an embassy to Ibrahim Pacha, who was then at war with the Wahabees, that officer crossed the entire peninsula from Port El Katif on the Persian Gulf to Yambo on the Red Sea.

Unfortunately the interesting account of this crossing of Arabia, never before accomplished by a European, has not been separately published, but is buried in a book which it is almost impossible to obtain, “The Transactions of the Literary Society of Bombay.”

At about the same time, 1821-1826, the English Government commissioned Captains Moresby and Haines, of the naval service, to make hydrographical surveys with a view to obtaining a complete chart of the coasts of Arabia. These surveys were to be the foundation of the first trustworthy map of the Arabian peninsula.

We have now only to mention the two expeditions of the French naturalists, Aucher Eloy in the country of Oman, and Emile Botta in Yemen, and to refer to the labours in reference to the idioms and antiquities of Arabia of the French consul at Djedda, Fulgence Fresnel. He was the first, in his letters on the history of the Arabs before Islamism, published in 1836, to explain the Himyarite or Homeric language and to recognize that it resembles rather the early Hebrew and Syriac dialects, than the Arabic of the present day.

At the beginning of this volume we spoke of the explorations and archæological and historical researches of Seetzen and Burckhardt in Syria and Palestine. We have still to say a few words on an expedition the results of which were entirely geographical. We refer to the journey of the Bavarian naturalist Heinrich Schubert.

Schubert was a devout Catholic and an enthusiastic student, and the melancholy scenery of the Holy Land with its wonderful legends, and the lovely banks of the mysterious Nile with its historic memories, had for him an extraordinary fascination. In his account of his journey we find the deep impressions of the believer combined with the scientific observations of the naturalist.

In 1837, Schubert, having crossed Lower Egypt and the peninsula of Sinai, entered the Holy Land. The learned Bavarian pilgrim was accompanied by two friends, Dr. Erdl and Martin Bernatz, a painter.

The travellers landed at El Akabah on the Red Sea, and went with a small Arab caravan to El Khalil, the ancient Hebron. The route they followed had never before been trodden by a European. It led through a wide, flat valley terminating at the Dead Sea; a valley through which the waters of the Dead Sea were supposed at one time to have flowed towards the Red Sea. This hypothesis was shared by Burckhardt and many others who had only seen the district from a distance, and who attributed the cessation of the drainage to an upheaval of the soil. The heights, as taken by the travellers, showed this hypothesis to be altogether erroneous.

In fact from the lower end of the Persian Gulf the country presents a continuous ascent for two or three days' march to the point called by the Arabs the Saddle, from thence it begins to sink and slopes down towards the Dead Sea. The Saddle is about 2100 feet above the sea-level, at least that was the estimate given a year later by Count Bertou, a Frenchman, who visited those localities at that time.

On their way down to the Bituminous Lake, Schubert and his companions took some other barometrical observations, and were very much surprised to find their instrument marking ninety-one feet *below* the Red Sea, the levels gradually decreasing in height as they advanced. At first they thought there must be some mistake, but finally, the evidence was too strong for them, and it became proved beyond a doubt that the Dead Sea could never have emptied its waters into the Red Sea for the very excellent reason that the level of the former is very much lower than that of the latter.

The depression of the Dead Sea is very much more noticeable when Jericho is approached from Jerusalem. In that case the way lies through a long valley with a very rapid slope, all the more remarkable as the hilly plains of Judea, Peræ, and El Harran are very lofty, the latter rising to a height of nearly 3000 feet above the sea-level.

The appearance of the country and the testimony of the instruments were in such contradiction to the prevalent belief, that Messrs. Erdl and Schubert were very unwilling to accept the results obtained, which they attributed to their barometer being out of order and to a sudden disturbance of the atmosphere. But on their way back to Jerusalem the barometer returned to the mean height it had registered before they started for Jericho. There was nothing for it then but to admit, whether they liked it or not, that the Dead Sea was at least 600 feet below the level of the Mediterranean, an estimate, as later researches showed, which fell one-half short of the truth.

This, it will be admitted, was a fortunate rectification, which would have considerable influence, by calling the attention of *savants* to a phenomenon which was soon to be verified by other explorers.

At the same time, the survey of the basin of the Dead Sea was completed and rectified. In 1838, two American Missionaries, Edward Robinson and Eli Smith, gave quite a new impulse to Biblical geography. They were the forerunners of that phalanx of naturalists, historians, archæologists, and engineers, who, under the patronage or in conjunction with the English Exploration Society, were soon to explore the land of the patriarchs from end to end, making maps of it, and achieving discoveries which threw a new light on the history of the ancient peoples who, by turns, were possessors of this corner of the Mediterranean basin.

But it was not only the Holy Land, so interesting on account of the many associations it has for every Christian, which was the scene of the researches of scholars and explorers; Asia Minor was also soon to yield up her treasures to the curiosity of the learned world. That country was visited by travellers in every direction. Parrot visited Armenia; Dubois de Monpereux traversed the Caucasus in 1839. In 1825 and 1826, Eichwald explored the shores of the Caspian Sea; and lastly, Alexander von Humboldt at the expense of the generous Nicholas, Emperor of Russia, supplemented his intrepid work as a discoverer in the New World by an exploration of Western Asia and the Ural Mountains. Accompanied by the mineralogist Gustave Rose, the naturalist Ehrenberg, well known for his travels in Upper Egypt and Nubia, and Baron von Helmersen, an officer of engineers, Humboldt travelled through Siberia, visited the gold and platinum mines of the Ural Mountains, and explored the Caspian steppes and the Altai chain to the frontiers of China. These learned men divided the work, Humboldt taking astronomical, magnetic, and physical observations, and examining the flora and fauna of the country, while Rose kept the journal of the expedition, which he published in German between 1837 and 1842.

Although the explorers travelled very rapidly, at the rate of no less than 11,500 miles in nine months, the scientific results of their journey were considerable. In a first publication which appeared in Paris in 1838, Humboldt treated only the climatology and geology of Asia, but this fragmentary account was succeeded in 1843 by his great work called "Central Asia." "In this," says La Roquette, "he has laid down and systematized the principal scientific results of his expedition in Asia, and has recorded some ingenious speculation as to the shape of the continents and the configuration of the mountains of Tartary, giving special attention to the vast depression which stretches from the north of Europe to the centre of Asia beyond the Caspian Sea and the Ural River."

We must now leave Asia and pass in review the various expeditions in the New World, which have been sent out in succession since the beginning of the present century. In 1807, when Lewis and Clarke were crossing North America from the United States to the Pacific Ocean, the Government commissioned a young officer, Lieutenant Zabulon Montgomery Pike, to examine the sources of the Mississippi. He was at the same time to endeavour to open friendly relations with any Indians he might meet.

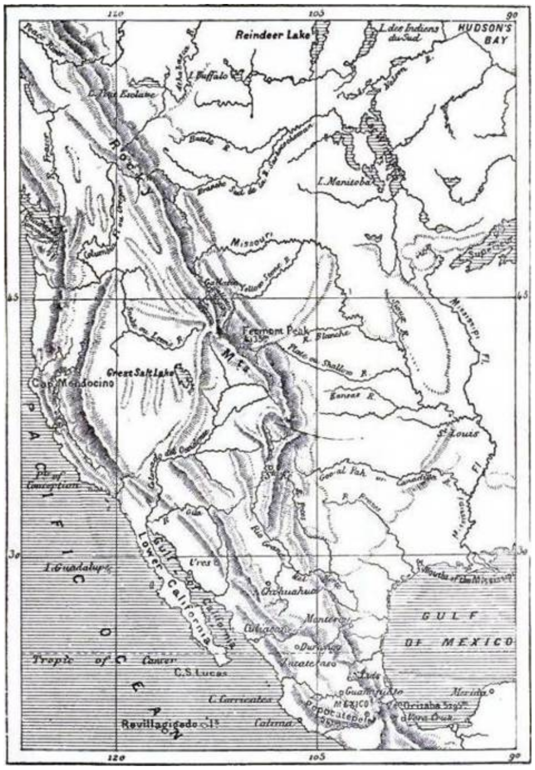
120
105
90
Reindeer Lake
L. des Indiens du Sud
HUDSON'S BAY
Peace River
L. Buffalo
Athabasca R.
Nelson R.
R. Fraser
Rocky
Bassle R.
Branche Sud de la R. Saskatchewan
L. Manitoba
Missouri
Columbia
Superior
Yellow Stone R.
45
Snake ou Lewis R.
Fremont Peak
R. Blanche
Sioux R.
Mississippi Fl.
Mts.
Platte ou Shallow R.
Great Salt Lake
Cap Mendocino
Kansas R.
St. Louis
Colorado del Occidente
Pt. of Conception
Canadian R.
R. Gila
Rio Grande
Fl.
30
I. Guadalupe
Gulf of California
Lower California
Ures
Mouths of the Mississippi
Chihuahua
Monterey
Culiacan
Durango
GULF OF MEXICO
Tropic of Cancer
Zacatecas
C. S. Lucas
C. Corrientes
Guanajuato
Merida
MEXICO
Orizaba
Popocatepetl
Vera Cruz
Revillagigedo Is.
Colima
PACIFIC OCEAN
120
105
90

Map of the Missouri.

Pike was well received by the Chief of the powerful Sioux nation and presented with the pipe of peace, a talisman which secured to him the protection of the allied tribes; he ascended the Mississippi, passing the mouths of the Chippeway and St. Peter, important tributaries of that great river. But beyond the confluence of the St. Peter with the Mississippi as far as the Falls of St. Anthony, the course of the main river is impeded by an uninterrupted series of falls and rapids. A little below the 45th parallel of North latitude, Pike and his companions had to leave their canoes and continue their journey in sledges. To the severity of a bitter winter were soon added the tortures of hunger. Nothing, however, checked the intrepid explorers, who continued to follow the Mississippi, now dwindled down to a stream only 300 roods wide, and arrived in February at Leech Lake, where they were received with enthusiasm at the camp of some trappers and fur hunters from Montreal.

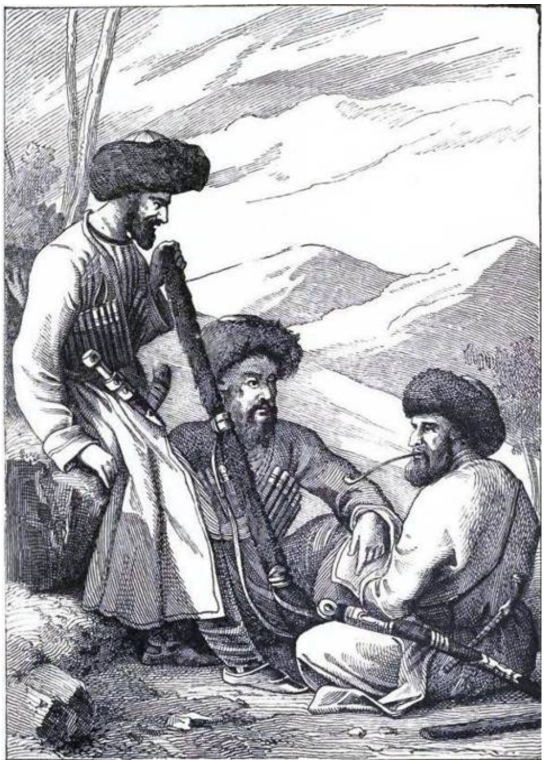

Circassians.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

After visiting Red Cedar Lake, Pike returned to St. Louis. His arduous and perilous journey had extended over no less than nine months; and although he had not attained its main object, it was not without scientific results. The skill, presence of mind, and courage of Pike were recognized, and the government soon afterwards conferred on him the rank of major, and appointed him to the command of a fresh expedition. This time he was to explore the vast tract of country between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains, and to discover the sources of the Arkansas and Red River. With twenty-three companions Pike ascended the Arkansas, a fine river navigable to the mountains in which it rises, that is to say for a distance of 2000 miles, except in the summer, when its bed is encumbered with sand-banks. On this long voyage, winter, from which Pike had suffered so much on his previous trip, set in with redoubled vigour. Game was so scarce that for four days the explorers were without food. The feet of several men were frostbitten, and this misfortune added to the fatigue of the others. The major, after reaching the source of the Arkansas, pursued a southerly direction and soon came to a fine stream which he took for the Red River.

This was the Rio del Norte, which rises in Colorado, then a Spanish province, and flows into the Gulf of Mexico.

From what has been already said of the difficulties which Humboldt encountered before he obtained permission to enter the Spanish possessions in America, we may judge with what jealous suspicion the arrival of strangers in Colorado was regarded. Pike was surrounded by a detachment of Spanish soldiers, made prisoner with all his men, and taken to Santa Fé. Their ragged garments, emaciated forms, and generally miserable appearance did not speak much in their favour, and the Spaniards at first took the Americans for savages. However, when the mistake was recognized, they were escorted across the inland provinces to Louisiana, arriving at Natchitoches on the 1st July, 1807.

The unfortunate end of this expedition cooled the zeal of the government, but not that of private persons, merchants, and hunters, whose numbers were continually on the increase. Many even completely crossed the

American continent from Canada to the Pacific. Amongst these travellers we must mention Daniel William Harmon, a member of the North-West Company, who visited Lakes Huron and Superior, Rainy Lake, the Lake of the Woods, Manitoba, Winnipeg, Athabasca, and the Great Bear Lake, all between N. lat. 47° and 58°, and reached the shores of the Pacific. The fur company established at Astoria at the mouth of the Columbia also did much towards the exploration of the Rocky Mountains.

Four associates of that company, leaving Astoria in June, 1812, ascended the Columbia, crossed the Rocky Mountains, and following an east-south-east direction, reached one of the sources of the Platte, descended it to its junction with the Missouri, crossed a district never before explored, and arrived at St. Louis on the 30th May, 1813.

In 1811, another expedition composed of sixty men, started from St. Louis and ascended the Missouri as far as the settlements of the Ricara Indians, whence they made their way to Astoria, arriving there at the beginning of 1812, after the loss of several men and great suffering from fatigue and want of food.

These journeys resulted not only in the increase of our knowledge of the topography of the districts traversed, but they also brought about quite unexpected discoveries. In the Ohio valley between Illinois and Mexico for instance, were found ruins, fortifications, and entrenchments, with ditches and a kind of bastion, many of them covering five or six acres of ground. What people can have constructed works such as these, which denote a civilization greatly in advance of that of the Indians, is a difficult problem of which no solution has yet been found.

Philologists and historians were already regretting the dying out of the Indian tribes, who, until then, had been only superficially observed, and lamenting their extinction before their languages had been studied. A knowledge of these languages and their comparison with those of the old world, might have thrown some unexpected light upon the origin of the wandering tribes.[2]

[2] The author has evidently not seen Bancroft’s “Native Races of the Pacific,” an exhaustive work in five volumes, published at New York and San Francisco a few years ago, and which embodies the researches of a number of gentlemen, who collected their information on the spot, and whose contributions to our knowledge of the past and present life of the Indians should certainly not be ignored. — *Trans.*

Simultaneously with the discovery of the ruins the flora and geology of the country began to be studied, and in the latter science great surprises were in store for future explorers. It was so important for the American government to proceed rapidly to reconnoitre the vast territories between the United States and the Pacific, that another expedition was speedily sent out.

In 1819, the military authorities commissioned Major Long to explore the districts between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains, to trace the course of the Missouri and of its principal tributaries, to fix the latitude and longitude of the chief places, to study the ways of the Indian tribes, in fact to describe everything interesting either in the aspect of the country or in its animal, vegetable, and mineral productions.

Leaving Pittsburgh on the 5th March, 1819, on board the steamship *Western Engineer*, the expedition arrived in May of the following year at the junction of the Ohio with the Mississippi, and ascended the latter river as far as St. Louis. On the 29th June, the mouth of the Missouri was reached. During the month of July, Mr. Say, who was charged with the zoological observations, made his way by land to Fort Osage, where he was joined by the steamer. Major Long turned his stay at Fort Osage to account by sending a party to examine the districts between the Kansas and the Platte, but this party was attacked, robbed, and compelled to turn back after losing all their horses. After obtaining at Cow Island a reinforcement of fifteen soldiers, the expedition reached Fort Lisa, near Council Bluff, on the 19th September. There it was decided to winter. The Americans suffered greatly from scurvy, and having no medicines to check the terrible disorder, they lost 100 men, nearly a third of the whole party. Major Long, who had meanwhile reached Washington in a canoe, brought back orders for the discontinuation of the voyage up the Missouri, and for a journey overland to the sources of the Platte, whence the Mississippi was to be reached by way of the Arkansas and Red River. On the 6th June, the explorers left Engineer’s Fort, as they called their winter quarters, and ascended the Platte Valley for more than a hundred miles, its grassy plains, frequented by vast herds of bisons and deer, supplying them with plenty of provisions.

Those boundless prairies, whose monotony is unbroken by a single hillock, were succeeded by a sandy desert gradually sloping up, for a distance of nearly four hundred miles, to the Rocky Mountains. This desert, broken by precipitous ravines, *cañons,* and gorges, at the bottom of which gurgles some insignificant stream, its banks clothed with stunted and meagre vegetation, produces nothing but cacti with sharp and formidable prickles.

On the 6th July, the expedition reached the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Dr. James scaled one of the peaks, to which he gave his own name, and which rises to a height of 11,500 feet above the sea level.

“From the summit of the peak,” says the botanist, “the view towards the north, west, and south-west, is diversified with innumerable mountains all white with snow, and on some of the more distant it appears to extend down to their bases. Immediately under our feet on the west, lay the narrow valley of the Arkansas; which we could trace running towards the north-west, probably more than sixty miles. On the north side of the peak was an immense mass of snow and ice... To the east lay the great plain, rising as it receded, until, in the distant horizon, it appeared to mingle with the sky."

Here the expedition was divided into two parties, one, under the command of Major Long, to make its way to the sources of the Red River, the other, under Captain Bell, to go down the Arkansas as far as Port Smith. The two detachments separated on the 24th July. The former, misled by the statements of the Kaskaia Indians and the inaccuracy of the maps, took the Canadian for the Red River, and did not discover their mistake until they reached its junction with the Arkansas. The Kaskaias were the most miserable of savages, but intrepid horsemen, excelling in lassoing the wild mustangs which are descendants of the horses imported into Mexico by the Spanish conquerors. The second detachment was deserted by four soldiers, who carried off the journals of Say and Lieutenant Swift with a number of other valuable effects. Both parties also suffered from want of provisions in the sandy deserts, whose streams yield nothing but brackish and muddy water. The expedition brought to Washington sixty skins of wild animals, several thousands of insects, including five hundred new species, four or five hundred specimens of hitherto unknown plants, numerous views of the scenery, and the materials for a map of the districts traversed.

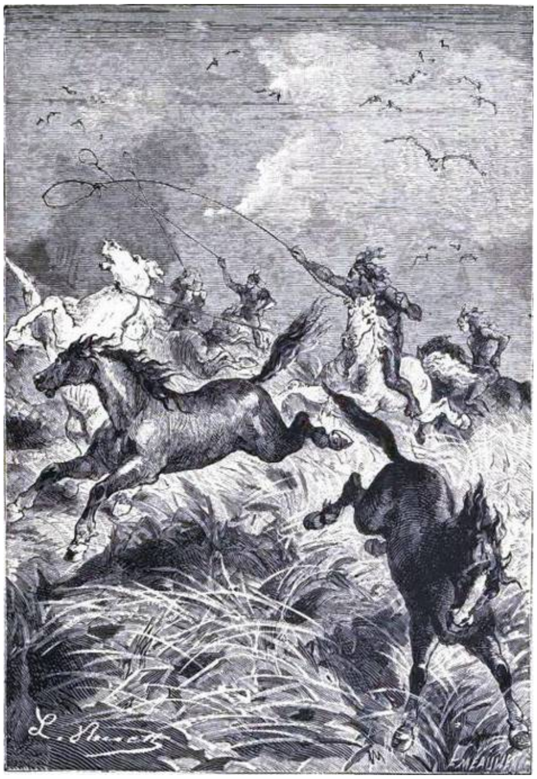

“Excelling in lassoing the wild mustangs.”

The command of another expedition was given in 1828 to Major Long, whose services were thoroughly appreciated. Leaving Philadelphia in April, he embarked on the Ohio, and crossed the state of the same name, and those of Indiana and Illinois. Having reached the Mississippi, he ascended that river to the mouth of the St. Peter, formerly visited by Carver, and later by Baron La Hontan. Long followed the St. Peter to its source, passing Crooked Lake and reaching Lake Winnipeg, whence he explored the river of the same name, obtained a sight of the Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake, and arrived at the plateau which separates the Hudson’s Bay valley from that of the St. Lawrence. Lastly, he went to Lake Superior by way of Cold Water Lake and Dog River.

Although all these districts had been constantly traversed by Canadian pathfinders, trappers, and hunters for many years previously, it was the first time an official expedition had visited them with a view to the laying down of a map. The explorers were struck with the beauty of the neighbourhood watered by the Winnipeg. That river, whose course is frequently broken by picturesque rapids and waterfalls, flows between two perpendicular granite walls crowned with verdure. The beauty of the scenery, succeeding as it did to the monotony of the plains and savannahs they had previously traversed, filled the explorers with admiration.

The exploration of the Mississippi, which had been neglected since Pike’s expedition, was resumed in 1820 by General Cass, Governor of Michigan. Leaving Detroit at the end of May with twenty men trained to the work of pathfinders, he reached the Upper Mississippi, after visiting Lakes Huron, Superior, and Sandy. His exhausted escort halted to rest whilst he continued the examination of the river in a canoe. For 150 miles the course of the Mississippi is rapid and uninterrupted, but beyond that distance begins a series of rapids extending over twelve miles to the Peckgama Falls.

Above this cataract the stream, now far less rapid, winds through vast savannahs to Leech Lake. Having reached Lake Winnipeg, Cass arrived on the 21st July at a new lake, to which he gave his own name, but he did not care to push on further with his small party of men and inadequate supply of provisions and ammunition.

The source of the Mississippi had been approached, but not reached. The general opinion was that the river took its rise in a small sheet of water known as Deer Lake, sixty miles from Cass Lake. Not until 1832, however, when General Cass was Secretary of State for war, was this important problem solved.

The command of an expedition was then given to a traveller named Schoolcraft, who had in the previous year explored the Chippeway country, north-west of Lake Superior. His party consisted of six soldiers, an officer qualified to conduct hydrographic surveys, a surgeon, a geologist, an interpreter, and a missionary.

Schoolcraft left St. Marie on the 7th June, 1832, visited the tribes living about Lake Superior, and was soon on the St. Louis river. He was then 150 miles from the Mississippi, and was told that it would take him no less than ten days to reach the great river, on account of the rapids and shallows. On the 3rd July, the expedition reached the factory of a trader named Aitkin, on the banks of the river, and there celebrated on the following day the anniversary of the independence of the United States.

Two days later Schoolcraft found himself opposite the Peckgama Falls, and encamped at Oak Point. Here the river winds a great deal amongst savannahs, but guides led the party by paths which greatly shortened the distance. Lake Winnipeg was then crossed, and on the 10th July, Schoolcraft arrived at Lake Cass, the furthest point reached by his predecessors.

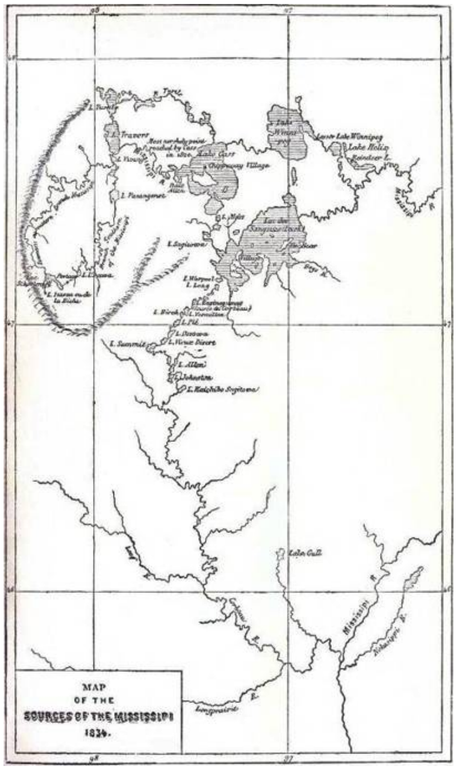
MAP
OF THE
SOURCES OF THE MISSISSIPPI
1834.
L. Travers
Most northerly point reached by Cass in 1820.
Lake Cass
Chippeway Village
Lake Winnipeg
Lower Lake Winnipeg
Lake Holis
Reindeer L.
L. Pasangemi
Lac des Sangsues (Leech)
L. Sugiwewa
L. Long
L. Vermilion
L. Birch
L. Summit
L. Allen
L. Johnston
L. Kaichibo Sogitowa
Mississippi R.
Lake Gull
Longprairie
R.
98
97

A party of Chippeway Indians led the explorers to their settlement on an island in the river. The friendliness of the natives led Cass to leave part of his escort with them, and, accompanied by Lieutenant Allen, the surgeon Houghton, a missionary, and several Indians, he started in a canoe.

Lakes Tasodiac and Crooked were visited in turn. A little beyond the latter, the Mississippi divides into two branches or forks. The guide took Schoolcraft up the eastern, and after crossing Lakes Marquette, La Salle, and Kubbakanna, he came to the mouth of the Naiwa, the chief tributary of this branch of the Mississippi. Finally, after passing the little lake called Usawa, the expedition reached Lake Itasca, whence issues the Itascan, or western branch of the Mississippi.

Lake Itasca, or Deer Lake, as the French call it, is only seven or eight miles in extent, and is surrounded by hills clothed with dark pine woods. According to Schoolcraft it is some 1500 feet above the sea level; but we must not attach too much importance to this estimate, as the leader of the expedition had no instruments.

On their way back to Lake Cass, the party followed the western branch, identifying its chief tributaries. Schoolcraft then studied the ways of the Indians frequenting these districts, and made treaties with them.

To sum up, the aim of the government was achieved, and the Mississippi had been explored from its mouth to its source. The expedition had collected a vast number of interesting details on the manners, customs, history, and language of the people, as well as numerous new or little known species of flora and fauna.

The people of the United States were not content with these official expeditions, and numbers of trappers threw themselves into the new districts. Most of them being however absolutely illiterate, they could not turn their discoveries to scientific account. But this was not the case with James Pattie, who has published an account of his romantic adventures and perilous trips in the district between New Mexico and New California.

On his way down the River Gila to its mouth, Pattie visited races then all but unknown, including the Yotans, Eiotaws, Papawans, Mokees, Umeas, Mohawas, and Nabahoes, with whom but very little intercourse had yet been held. On the banks of the Rio Eiotario he discovered ruins of ancient monuments, stone walls, moats, and potteries, and in the neighbouring mountains he found copper, lead, and silver mines.

We owe a curious travelling journal also to Doctor Willard, who, during a stay of three years in Mexico, explored the Rio del Norte from its source to its mouth.

Lastly, in 1831 Captain Wyeth and his brother explored Oregon, and the neighbouring districts of the Rocky Mountains.

After Humboldt’s journey in Mexico, one explorer succeeded another in Central America. In 1787, Bernasconi discovered the now famous ruins of Palenque. In 1822, Antonio del Rio gave a detailed description of them, illustrated with drawings by Frederick Waldeck, the future explorer of Palenque, that city of the dead.

Between 1805 and 1807, three journeys were successively taken in the province of Chiapa and to Palenque by Captain William Dupaix and the draughtsman Castañeda, and the result of their researches appeared in 1830 in the form of a magnificent work, with illustrations by Augustine Aglio, executed at the expense of Lord Kingsborough.

Lastly, Waldeck spent the years 1832 and 1833 at Palenque, searching the ruins, making plans, sections, and elevations of the monuments, trying to decipher the hitherto unexplained hieroglyphics with which they are covered, and collecting a vast amount of quite new information alike on the natural history of the country and the manners and customs of the inhabitants.

We must also name Don Juan Galindo, a Spanish colonel, who explored Palenque, Utatlan, Copan, and other cities buried in the heart of tropical forests.

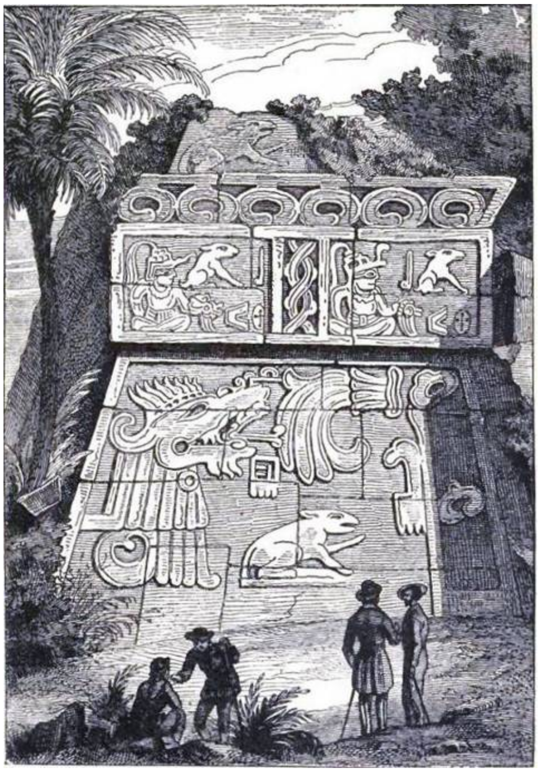

View of the Pyramid of Xochicalco.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

After the long stay made by Humboldt in equinoctial America, the impulse his explorations would doubtless otherwise have given to geographical science was strangely checked by the struggle of the Spanish colonies with the mother country. As soon, however, as the native governments attained to at least a semblance of stability, intrepid explorers rushed to examine this world, so new in the truest sense, for the jealousy of the Spanish had hitherto kept it closed to the investigations of scientific men.

Many naturalists and engineers now travelled or settled in South America. Soon indeed, that is in 1817-1820, the Austrian and Bavarian Governments sent out a scientific expedition, to the command of which they appointed Doctors Spix and Martins, who collected a great deal of information on the botany, ethnography, and geography of these hitherto little known districts — Martins publishing, at the expense of the Austrian and Bavarian governments, a most important work on the flora of the country, which may be looked upon as a model of its kind.

At the same time the editors of special publications, such as Malte Brun's *Annales des Voyages* and the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, cordially accepted and published all the communications addressed to them, including many on Brazil and the province of Minas Geraës.

About this period too a Prussian Major-General, the Prince of Wied-Neuwied, who had been at leisure since the peace of 1815, devoted himself to the study of natural science, geography, and history, undertaking moreover, in company with the naturalists Freirciss and Sellow, an exploring expedition in the interior of Brazil, having special reference to its flora and fauna.

A few years later, i.e. in 1836, the French naturalist Alcide d'Orbigny, who had won celebrity at a very early age, was appointed by the governing body of the Museum to the command of an expedition to South America, the special object of which was the study of the natural history of the country. For eight consecutive years D'Orbigny wandered about Brazil, Uruguay, the Argentine Republic, Patagonia, Chili, Bolivia, and Peru.

"Such a journey," says Dumour in his funeral oration on D'Orbigny, "in countries so different in their productions, climate, the character of their soil, and the manners and customs of their inhabitants, was necessarily full of ever fresh perils. D'Orbigny, endowed with a strong constitution and untiring energy, overcame obstacles which would have daunted most travellers. On his arrival in the cold regions of Patagonia, amongst savage races constantly at war with each other, he found himself compelled to take part, and to fight in the ranks of a tribe which had received him hospitably. Fortunately for the intrepid student his side was victorious, and he was left free to proceed on his journey.”

It took thirteen years of the hardest work to put together the results of D’Orbigny’s extensive researches. His book, which embraces nearly every branch of science, leaves far behind it all that had ever before been published on South America. History, archæology, zoology, and botany all hold honoured positions in it; but the most important part of this encyclopædic work is that relating to American man. In it the author embodies all the documents he himself collected, and analyzes and criticizes those which came to him at second hand, on physiological types, and on the manners, languages, and religions of South America. A work of such value ought to immortalize the name of the French scholar, and reflect the greatest honour on the nation which gave him birth.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

VOYAGES ROUND THE WORLD, AND POLAR EXPEDITIONS.

The Russian fur trade — Kruzenstern appointed to the command of an expedition — Noukha-Hiva — Nangasaki — Reconnaisance of the coast of Japan — Yezo — The Ainos — Saghalien — Return to Europe — Otto von Kotzebue — Stay at Easter Island — Penrhyn — The Radak Archipelago — Return to Russia — Changes at Otaheite and the Sandwich Islands — Beechey's Voyage — Easter Island — Pitcairn and the mutineers of the *Bounty* — The Paumoto Islands — Otaheite and the Sandwich Islands — The Bonin Islands — Lütke — The Quebradas of Valparaiso — Holy week in Chili — New Archangel — The Kaloches — Ounalashka — The Caroline Archipelago — The canoes of the Caroline Islanders — Guam, a desert island — Beauty and happy situation of the Bonin Islands — The Tchouktchees: their manners and their conjurors — Return to Russia.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Russians for the first time took part in voyages round the world, Until that time their explorations had been almost entirely confined to Asia, and their only mariners of note were Behring, Tchirikoff, Spangberg, Laxman, Krenitzin, and Saryscheff. The last-named took an important part in the voyage of the Englishman Billings, a voyage by the way which was far from achieving all that might have been fairly expected from the ten years it occupied and the vast sums it cost.

Adam John von Kruzenstern was the first Russian to whom is due the honour of having made a voyage round the world under government auspices and with a scientific purpose.

Born in 1770, Kruzenstern entered the English navy in 1793. After six years' training in the stern school which then numbered amongst its leaders the most skilful sailors of the world, he returned to his native land with a profound knowledge of his profession, and with his ideas of the part Russia might play in Eastern Asia very considerably widened.

During a stay of two years at Canton, in 1798 and 1799, Kruzenstern had been witness of the extraordinary results achieved by some English fur traders, who brought their merchandise from the northwest coasts of Russian America. This trade had not come into existence until after Cook's third voyage, and the English had already realized immense sums, at the cost of the Russians, who had hitherto sent their furs to the Chinese markets overland.

In 1785, however, a Russian named Chelikoff founded a fur-trading colony on Kodiak Island, at about an equal distance from Kamtchatka and the Aleutian Islands, which rapidly became a flourishing community. The Russian government now recognized the resources of districts it had hitherto considered barren, and reinforcements, provisions, and stores were sent to Kamtchatka via Siberia.

Kruzenstern quickly realized how inadequate to the new state of things was help such as this, the ignorance of the pilots and the errors in the maps leading to the loss of several vessels every year, not to speak of the injury to trade involved in a two years' voyage for the transport of furs, first to Okhotsk, and thence to Kiakhta.

As the best plans are always the simplest they are sure to be the last to be thought of, and Kruzenstern was the first to point out the imperative necessity of going direct by sea from the Aleutian Islands to Canton, the most frequented market.

On his return to Russia, Kruzenstern tried to win over to his views Count Kuscheleff, the Minister of Marine, but the answer he received destroyed all hope. Not until the accession of Alexander I., when Admiral Mordinoff became head of the naval department, did he receive any encouragement.

Acting on Count Romanoff's advice, the Russian Emperor soon commissioned Kruzenstern to carry out the plan he had himself proposed; and on the 7th August, 1802, he was appointed to the command of two vessels for the exploration of the north-west coast of America.

Although the leader of the expedition was named, the officers and seamen were still to be selected, and the vessels to be manned were not to be had in either the Russian empire or at Hamburg. In London alone were Lisianskoï, afterwards second in command to Kruzenstern, and the builder Kasoumoff, able to obtain two vessels at all suitable to the service in which they were to be employed. These two vessels received the names of the *Nadiejeda* and the *Neva*.

In the meantime, the Russian government decided to avail itself of this opportunity to send M. de Besanoff to Japan as ambassador, with a numerous suite, and magnificent presents for the sovereign of the country.

On the 4th August, 1803, the two vessels, completely equipped, and carrying 134 persons, left the roadstead of Cronstadt. Flying visits were paid to Copenhagen and Falmouth, with a view to replacing some of the salt provisions bought at Hamburg, and to caulk the *Nadiejeda*, the seams of which had started in a violent storm encountered in the North Sea.

After a short stay at the Canary Islands, Kruzenstern hunted in vain, as La Pérouse had done before him, for the Island of Ascension, as to the existence of which opinion had been divided for some three hundred years. He then rounded Cape Frio, the position of which he was unable exactly to determine although he was most anxious to do so, the accounts of earlier travellers and the maps hitherto laid down varying from 23° 6' to 22° 34'. A reconnaissance of the coast of Brazil was succeeded by a sail through the passage between the islands of Gal and Alvaredo, unjustly characterized as dangerous by La Pérouse, and on the 21st December, 1803, St. Catherine was reached.

The necessity for replacing the main and mizzen masts of the *Neva* detained Kruzenstern for five weeks on this island, where he was most cordially received by the Portuguese authorities.

On the 4th February, the two vessels were able to resume their voyage, prepared to face all the dangers of the South Sea, and to double Cape Horn, that bugbear of all navigators. As far as Staten Island the weather was uniformly fine, but beyond it the explorers had to contend with extremely violent gales, storms of hail and snow, dense fogs, huge waves, and a swell in which the vessels laboured heavily. On the 24th March, the ships lost sight of each other in a dense fog a little above the western entrance to the Straits of Magellan. They did not meet again until both reached Noukha-Hiva.

Kruzenstern having given up all idea of touching at Easter Island, now made for the Marquesas, or Mendoza Archipelago, and determined the position of Fatongou and Udhugu Islands, called Washington by the American Captain Ingraham, who discovered them in 1791, a few weeks before Captain Marchand, who named them Revolution Islands. Kruzenstern also saw Hiva-Hoa, the Dominica of Mendaña, and at Noukha-

Hiva met an Englishman named Roberts, and a Frenchman named Cabritt, whose knowledge of the language was of great service to him.

The incidents of the stay in the Marquesas Archipelago are of little interest, they were much the same as those related in Cook's Voyages. The total, but at the same time utterly unconscious immodesty of the women, the extensive agricultural knowledge of the natives, and their greed of iron instruments, are commented upon in both narratives.

Nothing is noticed in the later which is not to be found in the earlier narrative, if we except some remarks on the existence of numerous societies of which the king or his relations, priests, or celebrated warriors, are the chiefs, and the aim of which is the providing of the people with food in times of scarcity. In our opinion these societies resemble the clans of Scotland or the Indian tribes of America. Kruzenstern, however, does not agree with us, as the following quotation will show.

"The members of these clubs are distinguished by different tattooed marks upon their bodies; those of the king's club, consisting of twenty-six members, have a square one on their breasts about six inches long and four wide, and to this company Roberts belonged. The companions of the Frenchman, Joseph Cabritt, were marked with a tattooed eye, &c. Roberts assured me that he never would have entered this association, had he not been driven to it by extreme hunger. There was an apparent want of consistency in this dislike, as the members of these companies are not only relieved from all care as to their subsistence, but, even by his own account, the admittance into them is a distinction that many seek to obtain. I am therefore inclined to believe that it must be attended with the loss of some part of liberty."

A reconnaissance of the neighbourhood of Anna Maria led to the discovery of Port Tchitchagoff, which, though the entrance is difficult, is so shut in by land that its waters are unruffled by the most violent storm.

At the time of Kruzenstern's visit to Noukha-Hiva, cannibalism was still largely practised, but the traveller had no tangible proof of the prevalence of the custom. In fact Kruzenstern was very affably received by the king of the cannibals, who appeared to exercise but little authority over his people, a race addicted to the most revolting vices, and our hero owns that but for the intelligent and disinterested testimony of the two Europeans mentioned above he should have carried away a very favourable opinion of the natives.

"In their intercourse with us," he says, "they always showed the best possible disposition, and in bartering an extraordinary degree of honesty, always delivering their cocoa-nuts before they received the piece of iron that was to be paid for them. At all times they appeared ready to assist in cutting wood and filling water; and the help they afforded us in the performance of these laborious tasks was by no means trifling. Theft, the crime so common to all the islanders of this ocean, we very seldom met with among them; they always appeared cheerful and happy, and the greatest good humour was depicted in their countenances.... The two Europeans whom we found here, and who had both resided with them several years, agreed in their assertions that the natives of Nukahiva were a cruel, intractable people, and, without even the exceptions of the female sex, very much addicted to cannibalism; that the appearance of content and good-humour, with which they had so much deceived us, was not their true character; and that nothing but the fear of punishment and the hopes of reward, deterred them from giving a loose to their savage passions. These Europeans described, as eye-witnesses, the barbarous scenes that are acted, particularly in times of war — the desperate rage with which they fall upon their victims, immediately tear off their head, and sip their blood out of the skull,[1] with the most disgusting readiness, completing in this manner their horrible repast. For a long time I would not give credit to these accounts, considering them as exaggerated; but they rest upon the authority of two different persons, who had not only been witnesses for several years to these atrocities, but had also borne a share in them: of two persons who lived in a state of mortal enmity, and took particular pains by their mutual recriminations to obtain with us credit for themselves, but yet on this point never contradicted each other. The very fact of Roberts doing his enemy the justice to allow, that he never devoured his prey, but always exchanged it for hogs, gives the circumstance a great degree of probability, and these reports concur with several appearances we remarked during our stay here, skulls being brought to us every day for sale. Their weapons are invariably adorned with human hair, and human bones are used as ornaments in almost all their household furniture; they also often gave us to understand by pantomimic gestures that human flesh was regarded by them as a delicacy."

[1] "All the skulls which we purchased of them," says Kruzenstern, "had a hole perforated through one end of them for this purpose."

There are grounds for looking upon this account as exaggerated. The truth, probably, lies between the dogmatic assertions of Cook and Forster and those of the two Europeans of Kruzenstern's time, one of whom at least was not much to be relied upon, as he was a deserter.

And we must remember that we ourselves did not attain to the high state of civilization we now enjoy without climbing up from the bottom of the ladder. In the stone age our manners were probably not superior to those of the natives of Oceania.

We must not, therefore, blame these representatives of humanity for not having risen higher. They have never been a nation. Scattered as their homes are on the wide ocean, and divided as they are into small tribes, without agricultural or mineral resources, without connexions, and with a climate which makes them strangers to want, they could but remain stationary or cultivate none but the most rudimentary arts and industries. Yet in spite of all this, how often have their instruments, their canoes, and their nets, excited the admiration of travellers.

On the 18th May, 1804, the *Nadiejeda* and the *Neva* left Noukha-Hiva for the Sandwich Islands, where Kruzenstern had decided to stop and lay in a store of fresh provisions, which he had been unable to do at his last anchorage, where seven pigs were all he could get.

This plan fell through, however. The natives of Owhyhee, or Hawaii, brought but a very few provisions to the vessels lying off their south-west coast, and even these they would only exchange for cloth, which Kruzenstern could not give them. He therefore set sail for Kamtchatka and Japan, leaving the *Neva* off the island of Karakakoua, where Captain Lisianskoï relied upon being able to revictual.

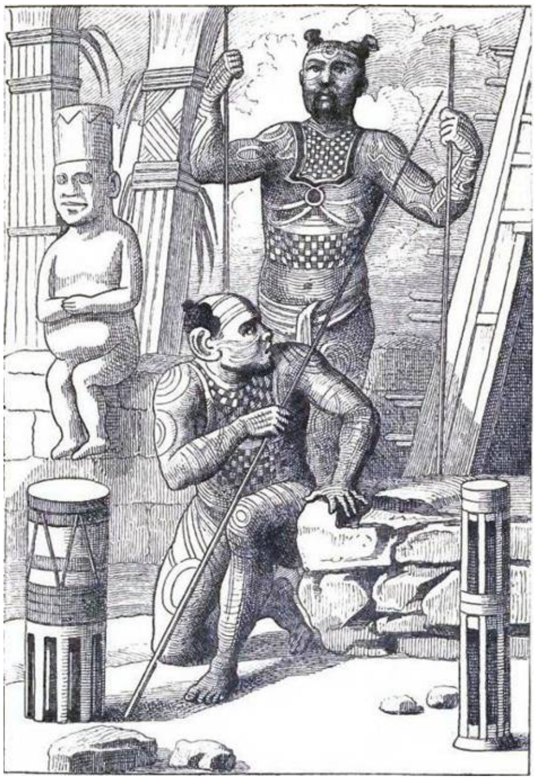

New Zealanders.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

On the 11th July, the *Nadiejeda* arrived off Petropaulovski, the capital of Kamtchatka, where the crew obtained the rest and fresh provisions they had so well earned. On the 30th August, the Russians put to sea again.

Overtaken by thick fogs and violent storms, Kruzenstern now hunted in vain for some islands marked on a map found on a Spanish gallion captured by Anson, and the existence of which had been alternately accepted and rejected by different cartographers, though they appear in La Billardière's map of his voyage.

The navigator now passed between the large island of Kiushiu and Tanega-Sima, by way of Van Diemen Strait, till then very inaccurately defined, rectified the position of the Liu-Kiu archipelago, which the English had placed north of the strait, and the French too far south, and sailed down, surveyed and named the coast of the province of Satsuma.

"This part of Satsuma," says Kruzenstern, "is particularly beautiful: and as we sailed along at a very trifling distance from the land, we had a distinct and perfect view of the various picturesque situations that rapidly succeed each other. The whole country consists of high pointed hills, at one time appearing in the form of pyramids, at others of a globular or conical form, and seeming as it were under the protection of some neighbouring mountain, such as Peak Homer, or another lying north-by-west of it, and even a third farther inland. Liberal as nature has been in the adornment of these parts, the industry of the Japanese seems not a little to have contributed to their beauty; for nothing indeed can equal the extraordinary degree of cultivation everywhere apparent. That all the valleys upon this coast should be most carefully cultivated would not so much have surprised us, as in the countries of Europe, where agriculture is not despised, it is seldom that any piece of land is left neglected; but we here saw not only the mountains even to their summits, but the very tops of the rocks which skirted the edge of the coast, adorned with the most beautiful fields and plantations, forming a striking as well as singular contrast, by the opposition of their dark grey and blue colour to that of the most lively verdure. Another object that excited our astonishment was an alley of high trees, stretching over hill and dale along the coast, as far as the eye could reach, with arbours at certain distances, probably for the weary traveller — for whom these alleys must have been constructed, — to rest himself in, an attention which cannot well be exceeded. These alleys are not uncommon in Japan, for we saw a similar one in the vicinity of Nangasaky, and another in the island of Meac-Sima."

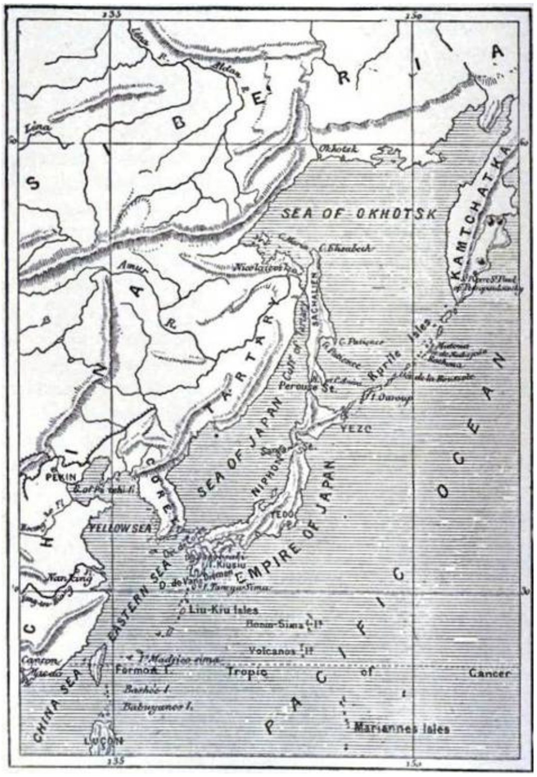
135
150
SIBERIA
Lena R.
Aldan R.
Lena
Okhotsk
SEA OF OKHOTSK
KAMTCHATKA
Amur R.
Nicolaievsk
C. Elisabeth
SACHALIEN
Gulf of Tartary
TARTARY
C. Patience
Kurile Isles
Perouse St.
I. Ouroup
YEZO
Sanga St.
SEA OF JAPAN
NIPHON
YEDO
EMPIRE OF JAPAN
COREA
PEKIN
YELLOW SEA
CHINA
Nanking
I. Kiusiu
EASTERN SEA
Liu-Kiu Isles
Bonin-Sima Is
Volcanos Is
Madjico-sima
Formosa I.
Tropic of Cancer
Canton
Bashée I.
Babuyanes I.
CHINA SEA
LUÇON
Mariannes Isles
PACIFIC OCEAN

Coast of Japan.

The *Nadiejeda* had hardly anchored at the entrance to Nagasaki harbour before Kruzenstern saw several *daïmios* climb on board, who had come to forbid him to advance further.

Now, although the Russians were aware of the policy of isolation practised by the Japanese government, they had hoped that their reception would have been less forbidding, as they had on board an ambassador from the powerful neighbouring state of Russia. They had relied on enjoying comparative liberty, of which they would have availed themselves to collect information on a country hitherto so little known and about which the only people admitted to it had taken a vow of silence.

They were, however, disappointed in their expectations. Instead of enjoying the same latitude as the Dutch, they were throughout their stay harassed by a perpetual surveillance, as unceasing as it was annoying. In a word, they were little better than prisoners.

Although the ambassador did obtain permission to land with his escort "under arms," a favour never before accorded to any one, the sailors were not allowed to get out of their boat, or when they did land the restricted place where they were permitted to walk was surrounded by a lofty palisading, and guarded by two companies of soldiers.

It was forbidden to write to Europe by way of Batavia, it was forbidden to talk to the Dutch captains, the ambassador was forbidden to leave his house — the word forbidden may be said to sum up the anything but cordial reception given to their visitors by the Japanese.

Kruzenstern turned his long stay here to account by completely overhauling and repairing his vessel. He had nearly finished this operation when the approach was announced of an envoy from the Emperor, of dignity so exalted that, in the words of the interpreter, "he dared to look at the feet of his Imperial Majesty."

This personage began by refusing the Czar's presents, under pretence that if they were accepted the Emperor would have to send back others with an embassy, which would be contrary to the customs of the country; and he then went on to speak of the law against the entry of any vessels into the ports of Japan, and absolutely forbade the Russians to buy anything, adding, however, at the same time, that the materials already supplied for the refitting and revictualling the vessel would be paid for out of the treasury of the Emperor of Japan. He further inquired whether the repairs of the *Nadiejeda* would soon be finished. Kruzenstern understood what was meant as soon as his visitor began to speak, and hurried on the preparations for his own departure.

Truly he had not much reason to congratulate himself on having waited from October to April for such an answer as this. So little were the chief results hoped for by his government achieved, that no Russian vessel could ever again enter a Japanese port. A short-sighted, jealous policy, resulting in the putting back for half a century the progress of Japan.

On the 17th April the *Nadiejeda* weighed anchor, and began a hydrographic survey, which had the best results. La Pérouse had been the only navigator to traverse before Kruzenstern the seas between Japan and the continent. The Russian explorer was therefore anxious to connect his work with that of his predecessor, and to fill up the gaps the latter had been compelled for want of time to leave in his charts of these parts.

"To explore the north-west and south-west coasts of Japan," says Kruzenstern, "to ascertain the situation of the Straits of Sangar, the width of which in the best charts — Arrowsmith's 'South Sea Pilot' for instance, and the atlas subjoined to La Pérouse's Voyage — is laid down as more than a hundred miles, while the Japanese merely estimated it to be a Dutch mile; to examine the west coast of Yezo; to find out the island of Karafuto, which in some new charts, compiled after a Japanese one, is placed between Yezo and Sachalin, and the existence of which appeared to me very probable; to explore this new strait and take an accurate plan of the island of Sachalin, from Cape Crillon to the north-west coast, from whence, if a good harbour were to be found there, I could send out my long boat to examine the supposed passage which divides Tartary from Sachalin; and, finally, to attempt a return through a new passage between the Kuriles, north of the Canal de la Boussole; all this came into my plan, and I have had the good fortune to execute part of it."

Kruzenstern was destined almost entirely to carry out this detailed plan, only the survey of the western coast of Japan and of the Strait of Sangar, with that of the channel closing the Farakaï Strait, could not be accomplished by the Russian navigator, who had, sorely against his will, to leave the completion of this important task to his successors.

Kruzenstern now entered the Corea Channel, and determined the longitude of Tsusima, obtaining a difference of thirty-six minutes from the position assigned to that island by La Pérouse. This difference was subsequently confirmed by Dagelet, who can be fully relied upon.

The Russian explorer noticed, as La Pérouse had done before him, that the deviation of the magnetic needle is but little noticeable in these latitudes.

The position of Sangar Strait, between Yezo and Niphon, being very uncertain, Kruzenstern resolved to determine it. The mouth, situated between Cape Sangar (N. lat. 41° 16' 30" and W. long. 219° 46') and Cape Nadiejeda (N. lat. 41° 25' 10", W. long. 219° 50' 30"), is only nine miles wide; whereas La Pérouse, who had relied, not upon personal observation but upon the map of the Dutchman Vries, speaks of it as ten miles across. Kruzenstern's was therefore an important rectification.

Kruzenstern did not actually enter this strait. He was anxious to verify the existence of a certain island, Karafonto, Tchoka, or Chicha by name, set down as between Yezo and Saghalien in a map which appeared at St.

Petersburg in 1802, and was based on one brought to Russia by the Japanese Koday. He then surveyed a small portion of the coast of Yezo, naming the chief irregularities, and cast anchor near the southernmost promontory of the island, at the entrance to the Straits of La Pérouse.

Here he learnt from the Japanese that Saghalien and Karafonto were one and the same island.

On the 10th May, 1805, Kruzenstern landed at Yezo, and was surprised to find the season but little advanced. The trees were not yet in leaf, the snow still lay thick here and there, and the explorer had supposed that it was only at Archangel that the temperature would be so severe at this time of year. This phenomenon was to be explained later, when more was known as to the direction taken by the polar current, which, issuing from Behring Strait, washes the shores of Kamtchatka, the Kurile Islands, and Yezo.

During his short stay here and at Saghalien, Kruzenstern was able to make some observations on the Ainos, a race which probably occupied the whole of Yezo before the advent of the Japanese, from whom — at least from those who have been influenced by intercourse with China — they differ entirely.

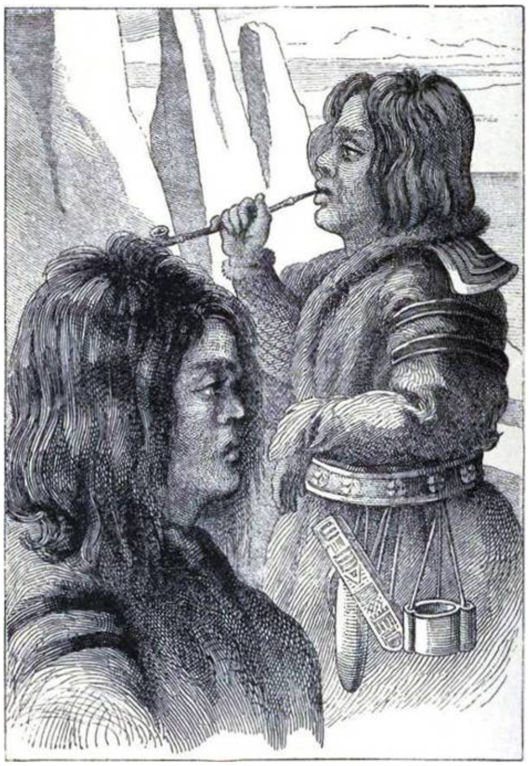

Typical Ainos.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

"Their figure," says Kruzenstern, "dress, appearance, and their language, prove that they are the same people, as those of Saghalien; and the captain of the *Castricum*, when he missed the Straits of La Pérouse, might imagine, as well in Aniwa as in Alkys, that he was but in one island.... The Ainos are rather below the middle stature, being at the most five feet two or four inches high, of a dark, nearly black complexion, with a thick bushy beard, black rough hair, hanging straight down; and excepting in the beard they have the appearance of the Kamtschadales, only that their countenance is much more regular. The women are sufficiently ugly; their colour, which is equally dark, their coal black hair combed over their faces, blue painted lips, and tattooed hands, added to no remarkable cleanliness in their clothing, do not give them any great pretensions to loveliness.... However, I must do them the justice to say, that they are modest in the highest degree, and in this point form the completest contrast with the women of Nukahiva and of Otaheite.... The characteristic quality of an Aino is goodness of heart, which is expressed in the strongest manner in his countenance; and so far as we were enabled to observe their actions, they fully answered this expression.... The dress of the Ainos consists chiefly of the skins of tame dogs and seals; but I have seen some in a very different attire, which resembled the *Parkis* of the Kamtschadales, and is, properly speaking a white shirt worn over their other clothes. In Aniwa Bay they were all clad in furs; their boots were made of seal-skins, and in these likewise the women were invariably clothed."

After passing through the Straits of La Pérouse, Kruzenstern cast anchor in Aniwa Bay, off the island of Saghalien. Here fish was then so plentiful, that two Japanese firms alone employed 400 Ainos to catch and dry it. It is never taken in nets, but buckets are used at ebb-tide.

After having surveyed Patience Gulf, which had only been partially examined by the Dutchman Vries, and at the bottom of which flows a stream now named the Neva, Kruzenstern broke off his examination of Saghalien to determine the position of the Kurile Islands, never yet accurately laid down; and on the 5th June, 1805 he returned to Petropaulovski, where he put on shore the ambassador and his suite.

In July, after crossing Nadiejeda Strait, between Matona and Rachona, two of the Kurile Islands, Kruzenstern surveyed the eastern coast of Saghalien, in the neighbourhood of Cape Patience, which presented a very picturesque appearance, with the hills clothed with grass and stunted trees and the shores with bushes. The scenery of the interior, however, was somewhat monotonous, with its unbroken line of lofty mountains.

The navigator skirted along the whole of this deserted and harbourless coast to Capes Maria and Elizabeth, between which is a deep bay, with a little village of thirty-seven houses nestling at the end, the only one the Russians had seen since they left Providence Bay. It was not inhabited by Ainos, but by Tartars, of which very decided proof was obtained a few days later.

Kruzenstern next entered the channel separating Saghalien from Tartary, but he was hardly six miles from the middle of the passage when his soundings gave six fathoms only. It was useless to hope to penetrate further. Orders were given to "'bout ship," whilst a boat was sent to trace the coast-line on either side, and to explore the middle of the strait until the soundings should give three fathoms only. A very strong current had to be contended with, rendering this row very difficult, and this current was rightly supposed to be due to the River Amoor, the mouth of which was not far distant.

The advice given to Kruzenstern by the Governor of Kamtchatka, not to approach the coast of Chinese Tartary, lest the jealous suspicions of the Celestial Government should be aroused, prevented the explorer from further prosecuting the work of surveying; and once more passing the Kurile group, the *Nadiejeda* returned to Petropaulovsky.

The Commander availed himself of his stay in this port to make some necessary repairs in his vessel, and to confirm the statements of Captain Clerke, who had succeeded Cook in the command of his last expedition, and those of Delisle de la Croyère, the French astronomer, who had been Behring's companion in 1741.

During this last sojourn at Petropaulovsky, Kruzenstern received an autograph letter from the Emperor of Russia, enclosing the order of St. Anne as a proof of his Majesty's satisfaction with the work done.

On the 4th October, 1805, the *Nadiejeda* set sail for Europe; exploring *en route* the latitudes in which, according to the maps of the day, were situated the islands of Rica-de-Plata, Guadalupas, Malabrigos, St. Sebastian de Lobos, and San Juan.

Kruzenstern next identified the Farellon Islands of Anson's map, now known as St. Alexander, St. Augustine, and Volcanos, and situated south of the Bonin-Sima group. Then crossing the Formosa Channel, he arrived at Macao on the 21st November.

He was a good deal surprised not to find the *Neva* there, as he had given instructions for it to bring a cargo of furs, the price of which he proposed expending on Chinese merchandise. He decided to wait for the arrival of the *Neva*.

Macao seemed to him to be falling rapidly into decay.

"Many fine buildings," he says, "are ranged in large squares, surrounded by courtyards and gardens; but most of them uninhabited, the number of Portuguese residents there having greatly decreased. The chief private houses belong to the members of the Dutch and English factories.... Twelve or fifteen thousand is said to be the number of the inhabitants of Macao, most of whom, however, are Chinese, who have so completely taken possession of the town, that it is rare to meet any European in the streets, with the exception of priests and nuns. One of the inhabitants said to me, 'We have more priests here than soldiers;' a piece of raillery that was literally true, the number of soldiers amounting only to 150, not one of whom is a European, the whole being mulattos of Macao and Goa. Even the officers are not all Europeans. With so small a garrison it is difficult to defend four large fortresses; and the natural insolence of the Chinese finds a sufficient motive in the weakness of the military, to heap insult upon insult."

Just as the *Nadiejeda* was about to weigh anchor, the *Neva* at last appeared. It was now the 3rd November, and Kruzenstern went up the coast in the newly arrived vessel as far as Whampoa, where he sold to advantage his cargo of furs, after many prolonged discussions which his firm but conciliating attitude, together with the intervention of English merchants, brought to a successful issue.

On the 9th February, the two vessels once more together weighed anchor, and resumed their voyage by way of the Sunda Isles. Beyond Christmas Island they were again separated in cloudy weather, and did not meet until the end of the trip. On the 4th May, the *Nadiejeda* cast anchor in St. Helena Bay, sixty days' voyage from the Sunda Isles and seventy-nine from Macao.

"I know of no better place," says Kruzenstern, "to get supplies after a long voyage than St. Helena. The road is perfectly safe, and at all times more convenient than Table Bay or Simon's Bay, at the Cape. The entrance, with the precaution of first getting near the land, is perfectly easy; and on quitting the island nothing more is necessary than to weigh anchor and stand out to sea. Every kind of provision may be obtained here, particularly the best kinds of garden stuffs, and in two or three days a ship may be provided with everything."

On the 21st April, Kruzenstern passed between the Shetland and Orkney Islands, in order to avoid the English Channel, where he might have met some French pirates, and after a good voyage he arrived at Cronstadt on the 7th August, 1806.

Without taking first rank, like the expedition of Cook or that of La Pérouse, Kruzenstern's trip was not without interest. We owe no great discovery to the Russian explorer, but he verified and rectified the work of his predecessors. This was in fact what most of the navigators of the nineteenth century had to do, the progress of science enabling them to complete what had been begun by others.

Kruzenstern had taken with him in his voyage round the world the son of the well-known dramatic author Kotzebue. The young Otto Kotzebue, who was then a cadet, soon gained his promotion, and he was a naval lieutenant when, in 1815 the command was given to him of the *Rurik*, a new brig, with two guns, and a crew of no more than twenty-seven men, equipped at the expense of Count Romantzoff. His task was to explore the less-known parts of Oceania, and to cut a passage for his vessel across the Frozen Ocean. Kotzebue left the port of Cronstadt on the 15th July, 1815, put in first at Copenhagen and Plymouth, and after a very trying trip doubled Cape Horn, and entered the Pacific Ocean on the 22nd January, 1816. After a halt at Talcahuano, on the coast of Chili, he resumed his voyage; sighted the desert island of Salas of Gomez, on the 26th March, and steered towards Easter Island, where he hoped to meet with the same friendly reception as Cook and Pérouse had done before him.

The Russians had, however, hardly disembarked before they were surrounded by a crowd eager to offer them fruit and roots, by whom they were so shamelessly robbed that they were compelled to use their arms in self-defence, and to re-embark as quickly as possible to avoid the shower of stones flung at them by the natives.

The only observation they had time to make during this short visit, was the overthrow of the numerous huge stone statues described, measured, and drawn, by Cook and La Pérouse.

On the 16th April, the Russian captain arrived at the Dog Island of Schouten, which he called Doubtful Island, to mark the difference in his estimate of its position and that attributed to it by earlier navigators. Kotzebue gives it S. lat. 44° 50' and W. long. 138° 47'.

During the ensuing days were discovered the desert island of Romantzoff, so named in honour of the promoter of the expedition; Spiridoff Island, with a lagoon in the centre; the Island Oura of the Pomautou group, the Vliegen chain of islets, and the no less extended group of the Kruzenstern Islands.

On the 28th April, the *Rurik* was near the supposed site of Bauman's Islands, but not a sign of them could be seen, and it appeared probable that the group had in fact been one of those already visited.

As soon as he was safely out of the dangerous Pomautou archipelago Kotzebue steered towards the group of islands sighted in 1788 by Sever, who, without touching at them, gave them the name of Penrhyn. The Russian explorer determined the position of the central group of islets as S. lat. 9° 1' 35" and W. long. 157° 44' 32", characterizing them as very low, like those of the Pomautou group, but inhabited for all that.

At the sight of the vessel a considerable fleet of canoes put off from the shore, and the natives, palm branches in their hands, advanced with the rhythmic sound of the paddles serving as a kind of solemn and melancholy accompaniment to numerous singers. To guard against surprise, Kotzebue made all the canoes draw up on one side of the vessel, and bartering was done with a rope as the means of communication. The natives had nothing to trade with but bits of iron and fish-hooks made of mother-of-pearl. They were well made and martial-looking, but wore no clothes beyond a kind of apron.

At first only noisy and very lively, the natives soon became threatening. They thieved openly, and answered remonstrances with undisguised taunts. Brandishing their spears above their heads, they seemed to be urging each other on to an attack.

When Kotzebue felt that the moment had come to put an end to these hostile demonstrations, he had one gun fired. In the twinkling of an eye the canoes were empty, their terrified crews unpremeditatingly flinging themselves into the water with one accord. Presently the heads of the divers reappeared, and, a little calmed down by the warning received, the natives returned to their canoes and their bartering. Nails and pieces of iron were much sought after by these people, whom Kotzebue likens to the natives of Noukha-Hiva. They do not exactly tatoo themselves, but cover their bodies with large scars.

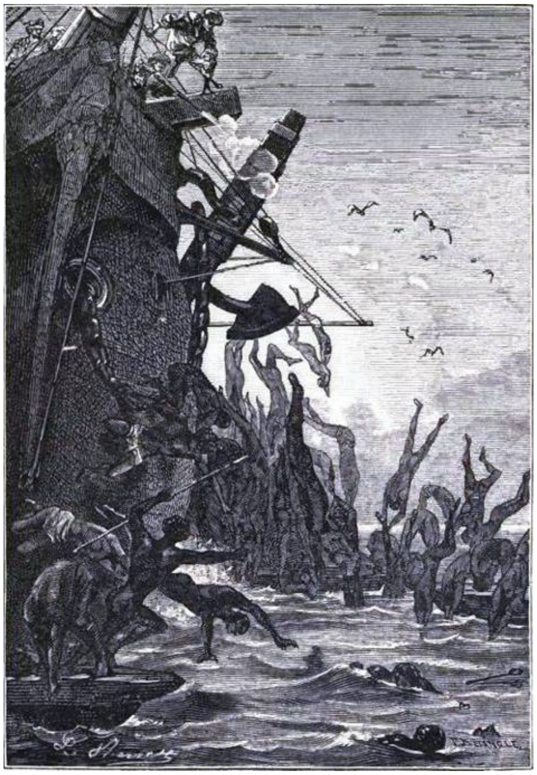

"In the twinkling of an eye the canoes were empty."

A curious fashion not before noticed amongst the islanders of Oceania prevails amongst them. Most of them wear the nails very long, and those of the chief men in the canoes extended three inches beyond the end of the finger.

Thirty-six boats, manned by 360 men, now surrounded the vessel, and Kotzebue, judging that with his feeble resources and the small crew of the *Rurik* any attempt to land would be imprudent, set sail again without being able to collect any more information on these wild and warlike islanders.

Continuing his voyage towards Kamtchatka, the navigator sighted on the 21st May two groups of islands connected by a chain of coral reefs. He named them Kutusoff and Suwaroff, determined their position, and made up his mind to come back and examine them again. The natives in fleet canoes approached the *Rurik*, but, in spite of the pressing invitation of the Russians, would not trust themselves on board. They gazed at the vessel in astonishment, talked to each other with a vivacity which showed their intelligence, and flung on deck the fruit of the pandanus-tree and cocoa-nuts.

Their lank black hair, with flowers fastened in it here and there, the ornaments hung round their necks, their clothing of "two curiously-woven coloured mats tied to the waist" and reaching below the knee, but above all their frank and friendly countenances, distinguished the natives of the Marshall archipelago from those of Penrhyn.

On the 19th June the *Rurik* put in at New Archangel, and for twenty-eight days her crew were occupied in repairing her.

On the 15th July Kotzebue set sail again, and five days later disembarked on Behring Island, the southern promontory of which he laid down in N. lat. 55° 17' 18" and W. long. 194° 6' 37".

The natives Kotzebue met with on this island, like those of the North American coast, wore clothes made of seal-skin and the intestines of the walrus. The lances used by them were pointed with the teeth of these amphibious animals. Their food consisted of the flesh of whales and seals, which they store in deep cellars dug in the earth. Their boats were made of leather, and they had sledges drawn by dogs.

Their mode of salutation is strange enough, they first rub each other's noses and then pass their hands over their own stomachs as if rejoicing over the swallowing of some tid-bit. Lastly, when they want to be very friendly indeed, they spit in their own palms and rub their friends' faces with the spittle.

The captain, still keeping his northerly course along the American coast, discovered Schichmareff Bay, Saritschiff Island, and lastly, an extensive gulf, the existence of which was not previously known. At the end of this gulf Kotzebue hoped to find a channel through which he could reach the Arctic Ocean, but he was disappointed. He gave his own name to the gulf, and that of Kruzenstern to the cape at the entrance.

Driven back by bad weather, the *Rurik* reached Ounalashka on the 6th September, halted for a few days at San Francisco, and reached the Sandwich Islands, where some important surveys were made and some very curious information collected.

On leaving the Sandwich Islands, Kotzebue steered for Suwaroff and Kutusoff Islands, which he had discovered a few months before. On the 1st January, 1817, he sighted Miadi Island, to which he gave the name of New Year's Island. Four days later he discovered a chain of little low wooded islands set in a framework of reefs, through which the vessel could scarcely make its way.

Just at first the natives ran away at the sight of Lieutenant Schischmaroff, but they soon came back with branches in their hands, shouting out the word *aidara* (friend). The officer repeated this word and gave them a few nails in return, for which the Russians received the collars and flowers worn as neck-ornaments by the natives.

This exchange of courtesies emboldened the rest of the islanders to appear, and throughout the stay of the Russians in this archipelago these friendly demonstrations and enthusiastic but guarded greetings were continued. One native, Rarik by name, was particularly cordial to the Russians, whom he informed that the name of his island and of the chain of islets and *attolls*[2] connected with it was Otdia. In acknowledgment of the cordial reception of the natives, Kotzebue left with them a cock and hen, and planted in a garden laid out under his orders a quantity of seeds, in the hope that they would thrive; but in this he did not make allowance for the number of rats which swarmed upon these islands and wrought havoc in his plantations.

[2] Attolls are coral islands like circular belts surrounding a smooth lagoon. — *Trans.*

On the 6th February, after ascertaining from what he was told by a chief named Languediak, that these sparsely populated islands were of recent formation, Kotzebue put to sea again, having first christened the archipelago Romantzoff.

The next day a group of islets, on which only three inhabitants were found, had its name of Eregup changed to that of Tchitschakoff, and then an enthusiastic reception was given to Kotzebue on the Kawen Islands by the tamon or chief. Every native here fêted the new-comers, some by their silence — like the queen forbidden by etiquette to answer the speeches made to her — some by their dances, cries, and songs, in which the name of Totabou (Kotzebue) was constantly repeated. The chief himself came to fetch Kotzebue in a canoe, and carried him on his shoulders through the breakers to the beach.

In the Aur group the navigator noticed amongst a crowd of natives who climbed on to the vessel, two natives whose faces and tattooing seemed to mark them as of alien race. One of them, Kadu by name, especially pleased the commander, who gave him some bits of iron, and Kotzebue was surprised that he did not receive them with the same pleasure as his companions. This was explained the same evening. When all the natives were leaving the vessel, Kadu earnestly begged to be allowed to remain on the *Rurik,* and never again to leave it. The commander only yielded to his wishes after a great deal of persuasion.

"Kadu," says Kotzebue, "had scarcely obtained permission, when he turned quickly to his comrades, who were waiting for him, declared to them his intention of remaining on board the ship, and distributed his iron among the chiefs. The astonishment in the boats was beyond description: they tried in vain to shake his resolution; he was immovable. At last his friend Edock came back, spoke long and seriously to him, and when he found that his persuasion was of no avail, he attempted to drag him by force; but Kadu now used the right of the strongest, he pushed his friend from him, and the boats sailed off. His resolution being inexplicable to me, I conceived a notion that he perhaps intended to steal during the night, and privately to leave the ship, and therefore had the night-watch doubled, and his bed made up close to mine on the deck, where I slept, on account of the heat. Kadu felt greatly honoured to sleep close to the tamon of the ship."

Born at Ulle, one of the Caroline Islands, more than 300 miles from the group where he was now living, Kadu, with Edok and two other fellow-countrymen, had been overtaken, when fishing, by a violent storm. For eight months the poor fellows were at the mercy of the winds and currents on a sea now smooth, now rough. They had never throughout this time been without fish, but they had suffered the cruelest tortures from thirst. When their stock of rain-water, which they had used very sparingly, was exhausted, there was nothing left to them to do but to fling themselves into the sea and try to obtain at the bottom of the ocean some water less impregnated with salt, which they brought to the surface in cocoa-nut shells pierced with a small opening. When they reached the Aur Islands, even the sight of land and the immediate prospect of safety did not rouse them from the state of prostration into which they had sunk.

The sight of the iron instruments in the canoe of the strangers led the people of Aur to decide on their massacre for the sake of their treasures; but the tamon, Tigedien by name, took them under his protection.

Three years had passed since this event, and the men from the Caroline Islands, thanks to their more extended knowledge, soon acquired a certain ascendancy over their hosts.

When the *Rurik* appeared, Kadu was in the woods a long way from the coast. He was sent for at once, as he was looked upon as a great traveller, and he might perhaps be able to say what the great monster approaching the island was. Now Kadu had more than once seen European vessels, and he persuaded his friends to go and meet the strangers, and to receive them kindly.

Such had been Kadu's adventures. He now remained on the *Rurik*, identified the other islands of the Archipelago, and lost no time in facilitating intercourse between the Russians and the natives. Dressed in a yellow mantle, and wearing a red cap like a convict, Kadu looked down upon his old friends, and seemed not to recognize them. When a fine old man with a flowing beard, named Tigedien, came on board, Kadu undertook to explain to him and his companions the working of the vessel and the use of everything about the ship. Like many Europeans, he made up for his ignorance by imperturbable assurance, and had an answer ready for every question.

Interrogated on the subject of a little box from which a sailor took a black powder and applied it to his nostrils, Kadu glibly told some most extraordinary stories, and wound up with a practical illustration by putting the box against his own nose. He then flung it from him, sneezing violently and screaming so loud that his terrified friends fled away on every side; but when the crisis was over he managed to turn the incident to his own advantage.

Kadu gave Kotzebue some general information about the group of islands then under examination, and the Russians spent a month in taking surveys, &c. All these islands, which the natives call Radack, were under the control of one tamon, a man named Lamary. A few years later Dumont d'Urville gave the name of Marshall to the group. According to Kadu, another chain of islets, attolls, and reefs was situated some little distance off on the west.

Kotzebue had not time to identify them, and steering in a northerly direction he reached Ounalashka on the 24th April, where he had to repair the serious damage sustained by the *Rurik* in two violent storms. This done, he took on board some baidares (boats cased in skins to make them water-tight), with fifteen natives of the Aleutian Islands, who were used to the navigation of the Polar seas, and resumed his exploration of Behring Strait.

Kotzebue had suffered very much from pain in his chest ever since when, doubling Cape Horn, he had been knocked down by a huge wave and flung overboard, an accident which would have cost him his life had he not clung to some rope. The consequences were so serious to his health that when, on the 10th July, he landed on the island of St. Lawrence, he was obliged to give up the further prosecution of his researches.

On the 1st October the *Rurik* made a second short halt at the Sandwich Islands where seeds and animals were landed, and at the end of the month the explorers landed at Otdia in the midst of the enthusiastic acclamations of the natives. The cats brought by the visitors were welcomed with special enthusiasm, for the island was infested with immense numbers of rats, who worked havoc on the plantations. Great also was the rejoicing over the return of Kadu, with whom the Russians left an assortment of tools and weapons, which made their owner the wealthiest inhabitant of the archipelago.

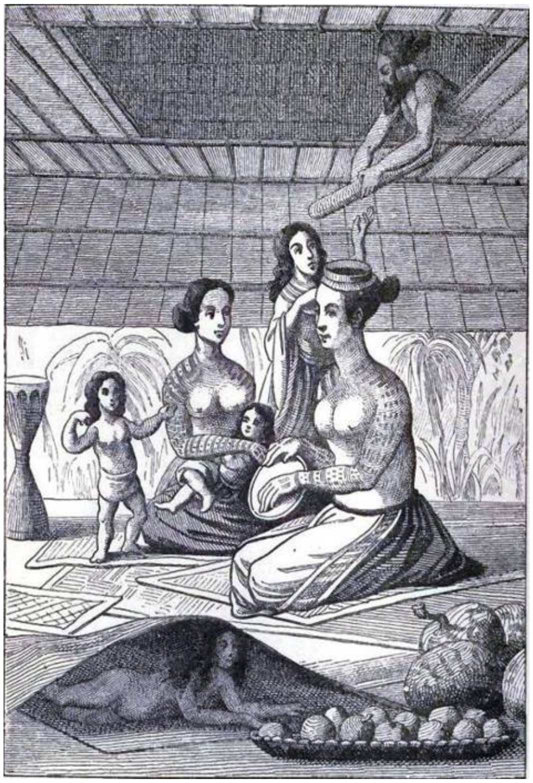

Interior of a house at Radak.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

On the 4th November the *Rurik* left the Radak Islands, after identifying the Legiep group, and cast anchor off Guam, one of the Marianne islands, where she remained until the end of the month. A halt of some weeks at Manilla enabled the commander to collect some curious information about the Philippine Islands, to which he would have to return later.

After escaping from the violent storms encountered in doubling the Cape of Good Hope, the *Rurik* cast anchor on the 3rd August, 1818, in the Neva, opposite Count Romantzoff's palace.

These three years of absence had been turned to good account by the hardy navigators. In spite of the smallness of their number and the poverty of their equipments, they had not been afraid to face the terrors of the deep, to venture amongst all but unknown archipelagoes, or to brave the rigours of the Arctic and Torrid zones. Important as were their actual discoveries, their rectification of the errors of their predecessors were of yet greater value. Two thousand five hundred species of plants, one third of which were quite new, with numerous details respecting the language, ethnography, religion, and customs of the tribes visited, formed a rich harvest attesting the zeal, skill, and knowledge of the captain as well as the intrepidity and endurance of his crew.

When, therefore, the Russian government decided, in 1823, to send reinforcements to Kamtchatka to put an end to the contraband trade carried on in Russian America, the command of the expedition was given to Kotzebue. A frigate called the *Predpriatie* was placed at his disposal, and he was left free to choose his own route both going and returning.

Kotzebue had gone round the world as a midshipman with Kruzenstern, and that explorer now entrusted to him his eldest son, as did also Möller, the

Minister of Marine, a proof of the great confidence both fathers placed in him.

The expedition left Cronstadt on the 15th August, 1823, reached Rio Janeiro in safety, doubled Cape Horn on the 15th January, 1824, and steered for the Pomautou Archipelago, where Predpriatie Island was discovered and the islands of Araktschejews, Romantzoff, Carlshoff, and Palliser were identified. On the 14th March anchor was cast in the harbour of Matavar, Otaheite.

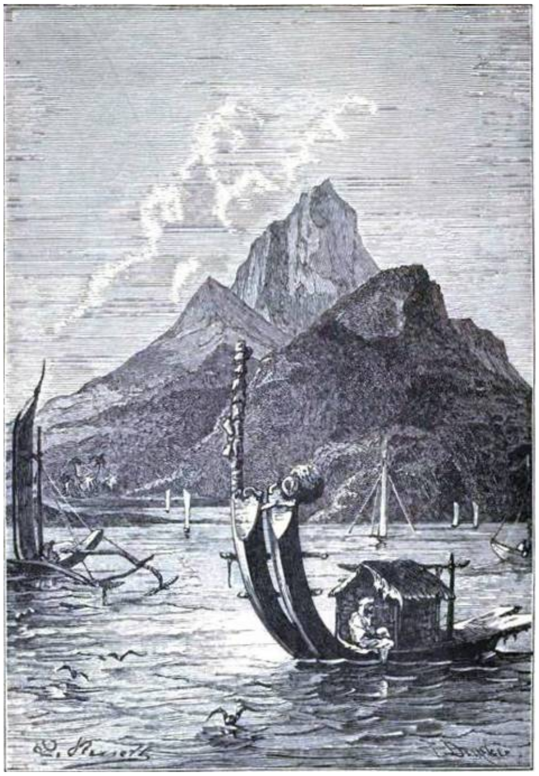

View of Otaheite.

Since Cook's stay in this archipelago a complete transformation had taken place in the manners and customs of the inhabitants.

In 1799 some missionaries settled in Otaheite, where they remained for ten years, unfortunately without making a single conversion, and we add with regret without even winning the esteem or respect of the natives. Compelled at the end of these ten years, in consequence of the revolutions which convulsed Otaheite, to take refuge at Eimeo and other islands of the same group, their efforts were there crowned with more success. In 1817, Pomaré, king of Otaheite, recalled the missionaries, made them a grant of land, and declared himself a convert to Christianity. His example was soon followed by a considerable number of natives.

Kotzebue had heard of this change, but he was not prepared to find European customs generally adopted.

At the sound of the discharge announcing the arrival of the Russians, a boat, bearing the Otaheitian flag, put off from shore, bringing a pilot to guide the *Predpriatie* to its anchorage.

The next day, which happened to be Sunday, the Russians were surprised at the religious silence which prevailed throughout the island when they landed. This silence was only broken by the sound of canticles and psalms sung by the natives in their huts.

The church, a plain, clean building of rectangular form, roofed with reeds and approached by a long avenue of palms, was well filled with an attentive, orderly congregation, the men sitting on one side, the women on the other, all with prayer-books in their hands. The voices of the neophytes often joined in the chant of the missionaries, unfortunately with better will than correctness or appropriateness.

If the piety of the islanders was edifying, the costumes worn by these strange converts were such as somewhat to distract the attention of the visitors. A black coat or the waistcoat of an English uniform was the only garment worn by some, whilst others contented themselves with a jacket, a shirt, or a pair of trousers. The most fortunate were wrapped in cloth mantles, and rich and poor alike dispensed with shoes and stockings.

The women were no less grotesquely clad. Some wore men's shirts, white or striped as the case might be, others a mere piece of cloth; but all had European hats. The wives of the Areois[3] wore coloured robes, a piece of great extravagance, but with them the dress formed the whole costume.

On the Monday a most imposing ceremony took place. This was the visit to Kotzebue of the queen-mother and the royal family. These great people were preceded by a master of ceremonies, who was a sort of court fool wearing nothing but a red waistcoat, and with his legs tattooed to represent striped trousers, whilst on the lower portion of his back was described a quadrant divided into minute sections. He performed his absurd capers, contortions, and grimaces with a gravity infinitely amusing.

The queen regent carried the little king Pomaré III. in her arms, and beside her walked his sister, a pretty child of ten years old. The royal infant was dressed in European style, like his subjects, and like them, he wore nothing on his feet. At the request of the ministers and great people of Otaheite,

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[3] The Areois are a curious vagrant set of people, who have been found in these regions, who practise the singular and fatal custom of killing their children at birth, because of a traditional law binding them to do so. — *Trans.*

Kotzebue had a pair of boots made for him, which he was to wear on the day of his coronation.

Great were the shouts of joy, the gestures of delight, and the envious exclamations over the trifles distributed amongst the ladies of the court, and fierce were the struggles for the smallest shreds of the imitation gold lace given away.

What important matter could have brought so many men on to the deck of the frigate, bearing with them quantities of fruits and figs? These eager messengers were the husbands of the disappointed ladies of Otaheite who had not been present at the division of the gold lace more valuable in their eyes than rivers of diamonds in those of Europeans.

At the end of ten days, Kotzebue decided to leave this strange country, where civilization and barbarism flourished side by side in a manner so fraternal, and steered for the Samoa Archipelago, notorious for the massacre of the companions of La Pérouse.

How great was the difference between the Samoans and the Otaheitians! Wild and fierce, suspicious and threatening, the natives of Rose Island could scarcely be kept off the deck of the *Predpriatie*, and one of them at the sight of the bare arm of a sailor made a savage and eloquent gesture showing with what pleasure he could devour the firm and doubtless savoury flesh displayed to view.

The insolence of the natives increased with the arrival of more canoes from the shore, and they had to be beaten back with boathooks before the *Predpriatie* could get away from amongst the frail boats of the ferocious islanders.

Upolu or Oyalava, Platte and Pola or Savai Islands, which with Rose Island form part of the Navigator or Samoan group, were passed almost as soon as they were sighted; and Kotzebue steered for the Radak Islands, where he had been so kindly received on his first voyage. This time, however, the natives were terrified at sight of the huge vessel, and piled up their canoes or fled into the interior, whilst on the beach a procession was formed, a number of islanders with palm branches in their hands advancing to meet the intruders and beg for peace.

At this sight, Kotzebue flung himself into a boat with the surgeon Eschscholtz, and rowing rapidly towards the shore, shouted: "Totabou aïdara" (Kotzebue, friend). An immediate change was the result; the petitions the natives were going to address to the Russians were converted into shouts and enthusiastic demonstrations of delight, some rushing forwards to welcome their friend, others running over to announce his arrival to their fellow-countrymen.

The commander was very pleased to find that Kadu was still living at Aur, under the protection of Lamary, whose countenance he had secured at the price of half his wealth.

Of all the animals left here by Kotzebue, the cats, now become wild alone, had survived, and thus far they had not destroyed the legions of rats with which the island was overrun.

The explorer remained several days with his friends, whom he entertained with dramatic representations; and on the 6th May he made for the Legiep group, the examination of which he had left uncompleted on his last voyage. After surveying it, he intended to resume his exploration of the Radak Islands, but bad weather prevented this, and he had to set sail for Kamtchatka.

The crew here enjoyed the rest so fully earned, from the 7th June to the 20th July, when Kotzebue set sail for New Archangel on the American coast, where he cast anchor on the 7th August.

The frigate, which was here to take the place of the *Predpriatie*, was not however ready for sea until the 1st March of the following year, and Kotzebue turned the delay to account by visiting the Sandwich Islands, where he cast anchor off Waihou in December, 1824.

The harbour of Hono-kourou or Honolulu is the safest of the archipelago; a good many vessels therefore put in there even at this early date, and the island of Waihou bid fair to become the most important of the group, supplanting Hawaii or Owhyee. The appearance of the town was already semi-European, stone houses replaced the primitive native huts, regular streets with shops, café, public-houses, much patronized by the sailors of whalers and fur-traders, together with a fortress provided with cannon, were the most noteworthy signs of the rapid transformation of the manners and customs of the natives.

Fifty years had now elapsed since the discovery of most of the islands of Oceania, and everywhere changes had taken place as sudden as those in the Sandwich Islands.

"The fur trade," says Desborough Cooley, carried on with the north-west coast of America, "has effected a wonderful revolution in the Sandwich Islands, which from their situation offered an advantageous shelter for ships engaged in it. Among these islands the fur-traders wintered, refitted their vessels, and replenished their stock of fresh provisions; and, as summer approached, returned to complete their cargo on the coast of America. Iron tools and, above all, guns were eagerly sought for by the islanders in exchange for their provisions; and the mercenery traders, regardless of consequences, readily gratified their desires. Fire-arms and ammunition being the most profitable stock to traffic with were supplied them in abundance. Hence the Sandwich islanders soon became formidable to their visitors; they seized on several small vessels, and displayed an energy tinctured at first with barbarity, but indicating great capabilities of social improvement. At this period, one of those extraordinary characters which seldom fail to come forth when fate is charged with great events, completed the revolution, which had its origin in the impulse of Europeans. Tame-tame-hah, a chief, who had made himself conspicuous during the last and unfortunate visit of Cook to those islands, usurped the authority of king, subdued the neighbouring islands with an army of 16,000 men, and made his conquests subservient to his grand schemes of improvement. He knew the superiority of Europeans, and was proud to imitate them. Already, in 1796, when Captain Broughton visited those islands, the usurper sent to ask him whether he should salute him with great guns. He always kept Englishmen about him as ministers and advisers. In 1817, he is said to have had an army of 7000 men, armed with muskets, among whom were at least fifty Europeans. Tame-tame-hah, who began his career in blood and usurpation, lived to gain the sincere love and admiration of his subjects, who regarded him as more than human, and mourned his death with tears of warmer affection than often bedew the ashes of royalty."

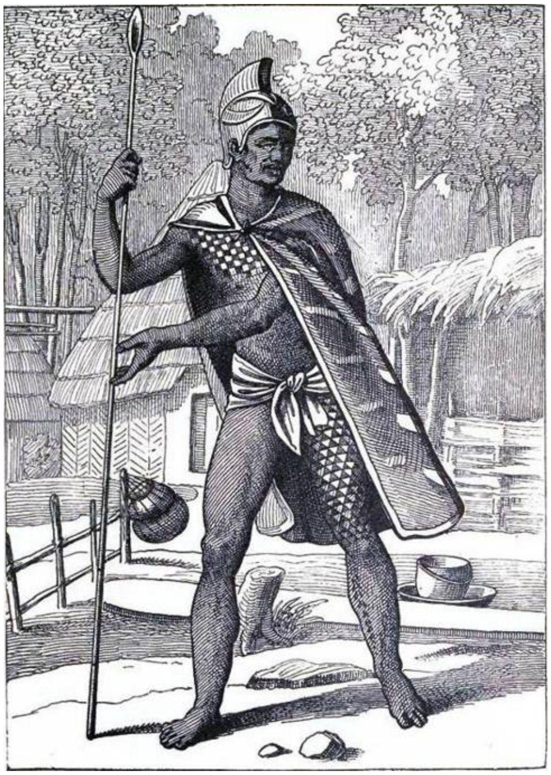

One of the guard of the King of the Sandwich Islands.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Such was the state of things when the Russian expedition put in at Waihou. The young king Rio-Rio was in England with his wife, and the government of the archipelago was in the hands of the queen-mother, Kaahou Manou.

Kotzebue took advantage of the latter and of the first minister both being absent on a neighbouring island, to pay a visit to another wife of Kamea-Mea.

"The apartment," says the traveller, "was furnished in the European fashion, with chairs, tables, and looking-glasses. In one corner stood an immensely large bed with silk curtains; the floor was covered with fine mats, and on these, in the middle of the room, lay Nomahanna, extended on her stomach, her head turned towards the door, and her arms supported on a silk pillow.... Nomahanna, who appeared at the utmost not more than forty years old, was exactly six feet two inches high, and rather more than two ells in circumference.... Her coal-black hair was neatly plaited, at the top of a head as round as a ball; her flat nose and thick projecting lips were certainly not very handsome, yet was her countenance on the whole prepossessing and agreeable."

The "good lady" remembered having seen Kotzebue ten years before. She, therefore, received him graciously, but she could not speak of her husband without tears in her eyes, and her grief did not appear to be assumed. In order that the date of his death should be ever-present to her mind she had had the inscription 6th May, 1819, branded on her arm.

A zealous Christian, like most of the population, the queen took Kotzebue to the church, a vast but simple building, not nearly so crowded as that at Otaheite. Nomahanna seemed to be very intelligent, she knew how to read and was specially enthusiastic about writing, that art which connects us with the absent. Being anxious to give the commander a proof alike of her affection and of her acquirements she sent him a letter by hand which it had taken her several weeks to concoct.

The other ladies did not like to be outdone, and Kotzebue found himself overwhelmed with documents. The only means to check this epistolatory inundation was to weigh anchor, which the captain did without loss of time.

Before his departure he received queen Nomahanna on board. Her Majesty appeared in her robes of ceremony, consisting of a magnificent peach-coloured silk dress embroidered with black, evidently originally made for a

European, and consequently too tight and too short for its wearer. People could, therefore, see not only the feet, beside which those of Charlemagne would have looked like a Chinaman's, and which were cased in huge men's boots, but also a pair of fat, brown, naked legs resembling the balustrades of a terrace. A collar of red and yellow feathers, a garland of natural flowers, serving as a gorget, and a hat of Leghorn straw, trimmed with artificial flowers, completed this fine but absurd costume.

Nomahanna went over the ship, asking questions about everything, and at last, worn out with seeing so many wonders, betook herself to the captain's cabin, where a good collation was spread for her. The queen flung herself upon a couch, but the fragile article of furniture was unable to sustain so much majesty, and gave way beneath the weight of a princess, whose *embonpoint* had doubtless had a good deal to do with her elevation to such high rank.

After this halt Kotzebue returned to New Archangel, where he remained until the 30th July, 1825. He then paid another visit to the Sandwich Islands a short time after Admiral Byron had brought back the remains of the king and queen. The archipelago was then at peace, its prosperity was continually on the increase, the influence of the missionaries was confirmed, and the education of the young monarch was in the hands of Missionary Bingham. The inhabitants were deeply touched by the honours accorded by the English to the remains of their sovereigns, and the day seemed to be not far distant when European customs would completely supersede those of the natives.

Some provisions having been embarked at Waihou, the explorer made for Radak Islands, identified the Pescadores, forming the southern extremity of that chain, discovered the Eschscholtz group, a short distance off, and touched at Guam on the 15th October. On the 23rd January, 1826, he left Manilla after a stay of some months, during which constant intercourse with the natives had enabled him to add greatly to our knowledge of the geography and natural history of the Philippine islands. A new Spanish governor had arrived with a large reinforcement of troops, and had so completely crushed all agitation that the colonists had quite given up their scheme of separating themselves from Spain.

On the 10th July, 1826, the *Predpriatie* returned to Cronstadt, after a voyage extending over three years, during which she had visited the north-west coast of America, the Aleutian Islands, Kamtchatka, and the Sea of Oktoksh; surveyed minutely a great part of the Radak Islands, and obtained fresh information on the changes through which the people of Oceania were passing. Thanks to the ardour of Chamisso and Professor Eschscholtz, many specimens of natural history had been collected, and the latter published a description of more than 2000 animals, as well as some curious details on the mode of formation of the Coral islands in the South Seas.

The English government had now resumed with eagerness the study of the tantalizing problem, the solution of which had been sought so long in vain. We allude to the finding of the north-west passage. When Parry by sea and Franklin by land were trying to reach Behring Strait, Captain Frederick William Beechey received instructions to penetrate as far north as possible by way of the same strait so as to meet the other explorers, who would doubtless arrive in a state of exhaustion from fatigue and privation.

The *Blossom*, Captain Beechey commander, set sail from Spithead on the 19th May, 1825, and after doubling Cape Horn on the 26th December, entered the Pacific Ocean. After a short stay off the coast of Chili, Beechey visited Easter Island, where the same incidents which had marked

Kotzebue's visit were repeated. The same eager reception on the part of the natives, who swam to the *Blossom* or brought their paltry merchandise to it in canoes, and the same shower of stones and blows from clubs when the English landed, repulsed, as in the Russian explorer's time, with a rapid discharge of shot.

On the 4th December, Captain Beechey sighted an island completely overgrown with vegetation. This was the spot famous for the discovery on it of the descendants of the mutineers of the *Bounty*, who landed on it after the enactment of a tragedy, which at the end of last century had excited intense public interest in England.

In 1781 Lieutenant Bligh, one of the officers who had distinguished himself under Cook, was appointed to the command of the *Bounty*, and received orders to go to Otaheite, there to obtain specimens of the breadfruit-tree and other of its vegetable productions for transportation to the Antilles, then generally known amongst the English as the Western Indies. After doubling Cape Horn, Bligh cast anchor in the Bay of Matavai, where he shipped a cargo of breadfruit-trees, proceeding thence to Ramouka, one of the Tonga Isles, for more of the same valuable growth. Thus far no special incident marked the course of the voyage, which seemed likely to end happily. But the haughty character and stern, despotic manners of the commander had alienated from him the affections of nearly the whole of his crew. A plot was formed against him which was carried out before sunrise on the 28th April, off Tofona.

Surprised by the mutineers whilst still in bed, Bligh was bound and gagged before he could defend himself, and dragged on deck in his night-shirt, and after a mock trial, presided over by Lieutenant Christian Fletcher, he, with eighteen men who remained faithful to him, was lowered into a boat containing a few provisions, and abandoned in the open sea.

After enduring agonies of hunger and thirst, and escaping from terrible storms and from the teeth of the savage natives of Tofona, Bligh succeeded in reaching Timor Island, where he received an enthusiastic welcome.

"I now desired my people to come on shore," says Bligh, "which was as much as some of them could do, being scarce able to walk; they, however, were helped to the house, and found tea with bread and butter provided for their breakfast.... Our bodies were nothing but skin and bones, our limbs were full of sores, and we were clothed in rags; in this condition, with the tears of joy and gratitude flowing down our cheeks, the people of Timor beheld us with a mixture of horror, surprise, and pity.... Thus, through the assistance of Divine Providence, we surmounted the difficulties and distresses of a most perilous voyage."

Perilous, indeed, for it had lasted no less than forty-one days in latitudes but little known, in an open boat, with insufficient food, want and exposure causing infinite suffering. Yet in this voyage of more than 1500 leagues but one man was lost, a sailor who fell a victim at the beginning of the journey to the natives of Tofona.

The fate of the mutineers was strange, and more than one lesson may be learnt from it.

They made for Otaheite, where provisions were obtained, and those who had been least active in the mutiny were abandoned, and thence Christian set sail with eight sailors, who elected to remain with him, and some twenty-two natives, men and women from Otaheite and Toubonai. Nothing more was heard of them!

As for those who remained at Otaheite, they were taken prisoners in 1791 by Captain Edwards of the *Pandora*, sent out by the English Government in search of them and the other mutineers, with orders to bring them to England. Of the ten who were brought home by the *Pandora*, only three were condemned to death.

Twenty years passed by before the slightest light was thrown on the fate of Christian and those he took with him.

In 1808 an American trading-vessel touched at Pitcairn, there to complete her cargo of seal-skins. The captain imagined the island to be uninhabited, but to his very great surprise a canoe presently approached his ship manned by three young men of colour, who spoke English very well. Greatly astonished, the commander questioned them, and learnt that their father had served under Bligh.

The fate of the latter was now known to the whole world, and its discussion had lightened the tedious hours in the forecastles of vessels of every nationality, and the American captain, reminded by the singular incident related above of the disappearance of so many of the mutineers of the *Bounty*, landed on the island, where he met an Englishman named Smith, who had belonged to the crew of that vessel, and who made the following confession.

When he left Otaheite, Christian made direct for Pitcairn, attracted to it by its lonely situation, south of the Pomautou Islands, and out of the general track of vessels. After landing the provisions of the *Bounty* and taking away all the fittings which could be of any use, the mutineers burnt the vessel not only with a view to removing all trace of their whereabouts, but also to prevent the escape of any of their number.

From the first the sight of the extensive marshes led them to believe the island to be uninhabited, and they were soon convinced of the justice of this opinion. Huts were built and land was cleared; but the English charitably assigned to the natives, whom they had carried off or who had elected to join them, the position of slaves. Two years passed by without any serious dissensions arising, but at the end of that time the natives laid a plot against the whites, of which, however, the latter were informed by an Otaheitan woman, and the two leaders paid for their abortive attempt with their lives.

Two more years of peace and tranquillity ensued, and then another plot was laid, this time resulting in the massacre of Christian and five of his comrades. The murder, however, was avenged by the native women, who mourned for their English lovers and killed the surviving men of Otaheite.

A little later the discovery of a plant, from which a kind of brandy could be made, caused the death of one of the four Englishmen still remaining, another was murdered by his companions, a third died a natural death, and the last one, Smith, took the name of Adams and lived on at the head of a community, consisting of ten women and nineteen children, the eldest of whom were but seven or eight years old.

This man, who had reflected on his errors and repented of them, now led a new life, fulfilling the duties of father, priest, and sovereign, his combined firmness and justice acquiring for him an all-powerful influence over his motley subjects.

This strange teacher of morality, who in his youth had set all laws at defiance, and to whom no obligation was sacred, now preached pity, love, and sympathy, arranged regular marriages between the children of different parents, his little community thriving lustily under the mild yet firm control of one who had but lately turned from his own evil ways.

Such at the time of Beechey's arrival was the state of the colony at Pitcairn. The navigator, well received by the inhabitants, whose virtuous conduct recalled the golden age, remained amongst them eighteen days. The village consisted of clean, well-built huts, surrounded by pandanus and cocoa-palms; the fields were well cultivated, and under Adams' tuition the young people had made implements of agriculture of really extraordinary excellence. The faces of these half breeds were good-looking and pleasant in expression, and their figures were well-proportioned, showing unusual muscular development.

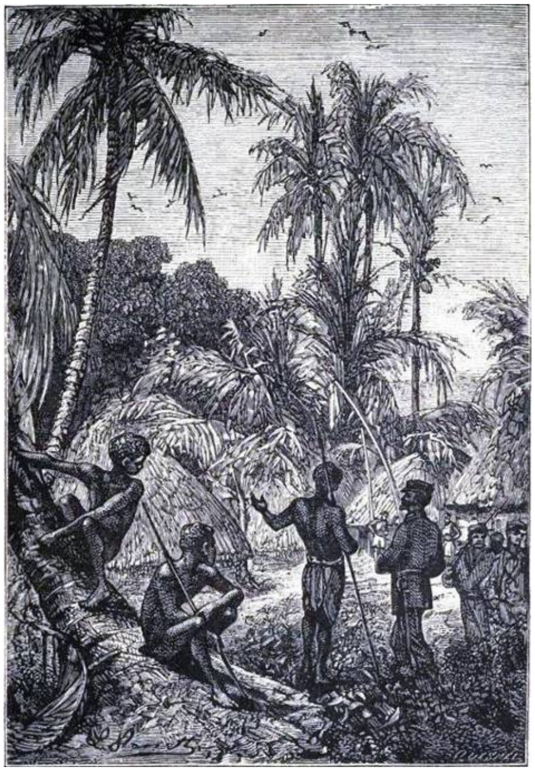

"The village consisted of clean, well-built huts."

After leaving Pitcairn, Beechey visited Crescent, Gambier, Hood, Clermont, Tonnerre, Serles, Whitsunday, Queen-Charlotte, Tehaï, and the Lancer Islands, all in the Pomautou group, and an islet to which he gave the name of Byam-Martin.

Here the explorer met a native named Ton-Wari, who had been shipwrecked in a storm. Having left Anaa with 500 fellow-countrymen in three canoes to render homage to Pomaré III., who had just ascended the throne, Ton-Wari had been driven out of his course by westerly winds. These were succeeded by variable breezes, and provisions were soon so completely exhausted that the survivors had to feed on the bodies of those who were the first to succumb. Finally Ton-Wari arrived at Barrow Island in the centre of the Dangerous Archipelago, where he obtained a small stock of provisions, and after a long delay, his canoe having been stove in off Byam-Martin, once more put to sea.

Beechey yielded under considerable persuasion to Ton-Wari's entreaty to be received on board with his wife and children and taken to Otaheite. The next day, by one of those strange chances seldom occurring except in fiction, Beechey stopped at Heïon, where Ton-Wari met his brother, who had supposed him to be long since dead. After the first transports of delight and surprise the two natives sat down side by side, and holding each others hands related their several adventures.

Beechey left Heïon on the 10th February, sighted Melville and Croker Islands, and cast anchor on the 18th off Otaheite, where he had some difficulty in obtaining provisions. The natives now demanded good Chilian dollars and European clothing, both of which were altogether wanting on the *Blossom*.

After receiving a visit from the queen-mother, Beechey was invited to a *soirée* given in his honour in the palace at Papeïti. When the English arrived, however, they found everybody sound asleep, the hostess having forgotten all about her invitation, and gone to bed earlier than usual. She received her guests none the less cordially however, and organized a little dance in spite of the remonstrances of the missionaries; only the *fête* had to be conducted so to speak in silence, that the noise might not reach the ears of the police on duty on the beach. From this incident we can guess the amount of liberty the missionary Pritchard allowed to the most exalted personages of Otaheite. What must the discipline then have been for the common herd of the natives!

On the 3rd April the young king paid a visit to Beechey, who gave him, on behalf of the Admiralty, a fine fowling-piece. Very friendly was the intercourse which ensued, and the good influence the English missionaries had obtained was strengthened by the cordiality and tact of the ship's officers.

Leaving Otaheite on the 26th April, Beechey reached the Sandwich Islands, where he remained some ten days, and then set sail for Behring Strait and the Arctic Ocean. His instructions were to skirt along the North American coast as far as the state of the ice would permit. The *Blossom* made a halt in Kotzebue Bay, a desolate, forbidding, and inhospitable spot, where the English had several interviews with the natives without obtaining any information about Franklin and his people. At last Beechey sent forward one of the ship's boats, under command of Lieutenant Elson, to seek the intrepid explorer. Elson was, however, unable to pass Point Barrow (N. lat. 71° 23') and was compelled to return to the *Blossom*, which in her turn was driven back to the entrance of the strait by the ice on the 13th October, the weather being clear and the frost of extreme severity.

In order to turn to account the winter season, Beechey visited San Francisco and cast anchor yet again off Honolulu in the Sandwich Islands. Thanks to the liberal and enlightened policy of the government, this archipelago was now rapidly growing in prosperity. The number of houses had increased, the town was gradually acquiring a European appearance, the harbour was frequented by numerous English and American vessels, and a national navy numbering five brigs and eight schooners had sprung into being. Agriculture was in a flourishing condition; coffee, tea, spices, were cultivated in extensive plantations, and efforts were being made to utilize the luxuriant sugar-cane forests native to the archipelago.

After a stay in April at the mouth of the Canton River, the explorers surveyed the Liu-Kiu archipelago, a chain of islands connecting Japan with Formosa, and the Bonin-Sima group, districts in which no animals were seen but big green turtles.

This exploration over, the *Blossom* resumed her northerly course, but the atmospheric conditions were less favourable than before, and it was impossible this time to penetrate further than N. lat. 70° 40'. Beechey left provisions, clothes, and instructions on the coast in this neighbourhood in case Parry or Franklin should get as far. The explorer then cruised about until the 6th October, when he decided with the greatest regret to return to England. He touched at Monterey, San Francisco, San-Blas, and Valparaiso, doubled Cape Horn, cast anchor at Rio de Janeiro, and finally arrived off Spithead on the 21st October.

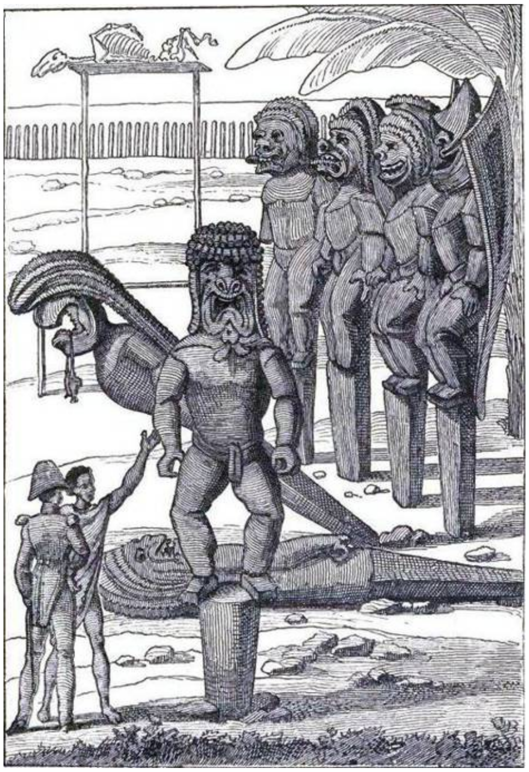

A Morai at Kayakakoua.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

We must now give an account of the expedition of the Russian Captain Lütke, which was fruitful of most important results. The explorer's own relation of his adventures is written in a most amusing and spirited style, and from it we shall therefore quote largely.

The *Seniavine* and the *Möller* were two transport ships built in Russia, both of which were good sea-going boats. The latter, however, was a very slow sailer, which unfortunately kept the two vessels apart for the greater part of the voyage. Lütke commanded the *Seniavine*, and Stanioukowitch the *Möller*.

The two vessels set sail from Cronstadt on the 1st September, 1828, and touched at Copenhagen and Plymouth, where scientific instruments were purchased. Hardly had they left the Channel before they were separated. The *Seniavine*, whose movements we shall most particularly follow, touched at Teneriffe, where Lütke hoped to meet his consort.

From the 4th to the 8th November, Teneriffe had been devastated by a terrific storm such as had not been seen since the Conquest. Three vessels had perished in the very roadstead of Santa Cruz, and two others thrown upon the coast had gone to pieces. Torrents swollen by a tremendous downpour had destroyed gardens, walls, and buildings, laid waste plantations, all but demolished one fort, swept down a number of houses in the town, and rendered several streets impassable. Three or four hundred persons had met their deaths in this convulsion of nature, and the damage done was estimated at several millions of piastres.

In January the two vessels met again at Rio de Janeiro, and kept together as far as Cape Horn, where they encountered the usual storms and fogs, and were again separated. The *Seniavine* then made for Conception.

"On the 15th May," says Lütke, "we were not more than eight miles from the nearest coast, but a dense fog hid it from us. In the night this fog lifted, and at daybreak a scene of indescribable grandeur and magnificence met our eyes. The serrated chain of the Andes, with its pointed peaks, stood out against an azure blue sky lit up by the first rays of the morning sun. I will not add to the number of those who have exhausted themselves in vain efforts to transmit to others their own sensations at the first sight of such scenes. They are as indescribable as the majesty of the scene itself. The variety of the colours, the light, which as the sun rose gradually spread over the sky, and the clouds were alike of inimitable beauty. To our great regret this spectacle, like everything most sublime in nature, did not last long. As the atmosphere became flooded with light the huge masses of clouds seemed with one accord to plunge into the deep, and the sun, appearing above the horizon, removed every trace of them."

Lütke's opinion of Conception does not agree with that of some of his predecessors. He had not yet forgotten the exuberant richness of the vegetation of the Bay of Rio de Janeiro, so that he found this new coast poor. As far as he could judge, during a very short stay, the inhabitants were more affable and civilized than the people of the same class in many other countries.

When he reached Valparaiso, Lütke met the *Möller* setting sail for Kamtchatka. The crews bid each other good-bye, and thenceforth the two vessels took different directions.

The first excursion of the officers and naturalists of Lütke's party was to the celebrated "quebradas."

"These," says the explorer, "are ravines in the mountains, crowded so to speak with the little huts containing the greater part of the people of Valparaiso. The most densely populated of these 'quebradas' is that rising at the south-west corner of the town. The granite, which is there laid bare, serves as a strong foundation for the buildings, and protects them from the destructive effects of earthquakes. Communication between the town and the different houses is carried on by means of narrow paths without supports or steps, which are carried along the slopes of the rocks, and on which the children play and run about like chamois. The few houses here belong to foreigners. Little paths lead up to them, and some have steps, which the Chilians look upon as a superfluous and altogether useless luxury. A staircase of tiled or palm-branch roofs below and above an amphitheatre of gates and gardens present a curious spectacle. At first I kept up with the naturalists, but they presently brought me to a place where I could not advance or retire a step, which decided me to return with one of my officers, and to leave them there with a hearty wish that they might bring their heads back safely to our lodgings. As for myself I expected to lose mine a thousand times before I got down again."

On their return from an arduous excursion, a few leagues from Valparaiso, the marines were astonished at being arrested as they rode into the town, by a patrol, who in spite of their remonstrances compelled them to dismount.

"It was Holy Thursday," says Lütke, "and from that day to Holy Saturday no one is here permitted under pain of a severe penalty either to ride, sing, dance, play on any instrument, or wear a hat. All business, work, and amusement are strictly forbidden during that time. The hill in the centre of the town with the theatre upon it is converted for the time being into a Golgotha. In the centre of a railed-in space rises a crucifix with numerous tapers and flowers about it and female figures kneeling on either side representing the witnesses of the Passion of our Lord. Pious souls come here to obtain absolution from their sins by loud prayers. I saw none but female penitents, not a single man was there amongst them. Most of them were doubtless very certain of obtaining the divine favour, for they came up playing and laughing, only assuming a contrite air when close to the object of their devotion, before which they knelt for a few minutes, resuming their pranks and laughter again directly they turned away."

The intolerance and superstition met with by the visitors at every turn made the explorer reflect deeply. He regretted seeing so much force and so many resources which might have promoted the intellectual progress and material prosperity of the country wasted on perpetual revolutions.

To Lütke nothing less resembled a valley of Paradise than Valparaiso and its environs: rugged mountains, broken by deep *quebradas*, a sandy plain, in the centre of which rises the town, with the lofty heights of the Andes in the background, do not, strictly speaking, form an Eden.

The traces of the terrible earthquake of 1823 were not yet entirely effaced, and here and there large spaces covered with ruins were still to be seen.

On the 15th April, the *Seniavine* set sail for New Archangel, where she arrived on the 24th June, after a voyage unmarked by any special incident. The necessity for repairing the effects of the wear and tear of a voyage of ten months, and of disembarking the provisions for the company of which the *Seniavine* was the bearer, detained Captain Lütke in the Bay of Sitka for five weeks.

This part of the coast of North America presents a wild but picturesque appearance. Lofty mountains clothed to their very peaks with dense and gloomy forests form the background of the picture. At the entrance of the bay rises Mount Edgecumbe, an extinct volcano 2800 feet above the sea-level. On entering the bay the visitor finds himself in a labyrinth of islands, behind which rise the fortress, towers, and church of New Archangel, which consists of but one row of houses with gardens, a hospital, a timber-yard, and outside the palisades a large village of Kaloche Indians. At this time the population consisted of a mixture of Russians, Creoles, and Aleutians, numbering some 800 altogether, of whom three-eighths were in the service of the company. This population, however, fluctuates very much according to the season. In the summer almost every one is away at the chase, and no sooner does autumn bring the people before they are all off again fishing.

New Archangel does not offer too many attractions in the way of amusements. Truth to tell, it is one of the dullest places imaginable, inexpressibly gloomy, where autumn seems to reign all through the year except for three months, when snow falls continuously. All this, however, does not of course affect the passing visitor, and for the resident there is nothing to keep up his spirits but a good stock of philosophy or a stern determination not to die of hunger. There is a good deal of remunerative trade with California, the natives, and foreign vessels.

The chief furs obtained by Aleutians who hunt for the Company are those of the otter, the beaver, the fox, and the *souslic*. The natives also hunt the walrus, seal, and whale, not to speak of the herring, the cod, salmon, turbot, lote, perch, and tsouklis, a shell fish found in Queen Charlotte's Islands, used by the Company as a medium of exchange with the Americans.

As for these Americans they seem to be all of one race between the 46th and 60th degrees of N. lat., such at least is the conclusion to which we are led by the study of their manners, customs, and languages.

The Kaloches of Sitka claim a man of the name of Elkh as the founder of their race, favoured by the protection of the raven, first cause of all things.[4] Strange to say, this bird also plays an important part amongst the Kadiaks, who are Esquimaux. According to Lütke, the Kaloches have a tradition of a deluge and some fables which recall those of the Greek mythology.

[4] The raven was regarded by these races with superstitious dread, as having the power of healing diseases, &c. — *Trans.*

Their religion is nothing more than a kind of Chamanism or belief in the power of the Chamans or magicians to ward off diseases, &c. They do not recognize a supreme God, but they believe in evil spirits, and in sorcerers who foretell the future, heal the sick, and transmit their office from father to son.

They believe the soul to be immortal, and that the spirits of their chieftains do not mix with those of the common people. Slaves are slaves still after death; the far from consolatory nature of this creed is obvious. The government is patriarchal; the natives are divided into tribes, the members of which have the figures of animals as signs, after which they are also sometimes named. We meet for instance with the wolf, the raven, the bear, the eagle, &c.

The slaves of the Kaloches are prisoners taken in war, and very miserable is their lot. Their masters hold the power of life and death over them. In some ceremonies, that on the death of a chief, for instance, the slaves who are no longer of use are sacrificed, or else their liberty is given to them.[5]

[5] The aim being to give up the slaves as property, it was a matter of indifference whether they were killed or set at liberty. — *Trans.*

Suspicious and crafty, cruel and vindictive, the Kaloches are neither better nor worse than the neighbouring tribes. Hardened to fatigue, brave but idle, they leave all the housework to their wives, of whom they have many, polygamy being an institution amongst them.

On leaving Sitka, Lütke made for Ounalashka. Ilioluk is the chief trading establishment on that island, but it only contains some twelve Russians and ten Aleutians of both sexes.

This island has a good many productions which tend to make life pass pleasantly. It is rich in good pastures, and cattle-breeding is largely carried on, but it is almost entirely wanting in timber, the inhabitants being obliged to pick up the *débris* flung up by the sea, which sometimes includes whole trunks of cypress, camphor-trees, and a kind of wood which smells like roses.

At the time of Lütke's visit the people of the Fox Islands had adopted to a great extent Russian manners and costumes. They were all Christians. The Aleutians are a hardy, kind-hearted, agile race, almost living on the sea.

Since 1826 several eruptions of lava have caused terrible devastation in these islands. In May, 1827, the Shishaldin volcano opened a new crater, and vomited forth flames.

Lütke's instructions obliged him to explore St. Matthew's Island, which Cook had called Gore Island. The hydrographical survey was successful beyond the highest expectations, but the Russians could do nothing towards learning anything of the natural history of the island, for they were not allowed to land at all.

In the meantime the winter with its usual storms and fogs was rapidly drawing on. It was of no use hoping to get to Behring Strait, and Lütke therefore made for Kamtchatka after touching at Behring Island. He remained three weeks at Petropaulovsky, which he employed in landing his cargo and preparing for his winter campaign.

Lütke's instructions were now to spend the winter in the exploration of the Caroline Islands. He decided to go first to Ualan Island, which had been discovered by the French navigator Duperrey. Here a safe harbour enabled him to make some experiments with the pendulum.

On his way Lütke sought in vain for Colonnas Island in N. lat. 26° 9', W. long. 128°. He was equally unsuccessful in his search for Dexter and St. Bartholomew Islands, though he identified the Brown coral group discovered by Butler in 1794 and arrived safely off Ualan on the 4th December.

From the first the relations between the natives of this island and the Russians were extremely satisfactory. Many of the former came on board, and showed so much confidence in their visitors as to remain all night, though the vessel was still in motion.

It was only with great difficulty that the *Seniavine* entered Coquille harbour. Following the example of Duperrey, who had set up his observatory on the islet of Matanial, Lütke landed there and took his observations, whilst his people traded with the natives, who were, throughout his stay, peaceful, friendly, and civil. To check their thieving propensities, however, a chief was kept as a hostage for a couple of days, and one canoe was burnt, these new measures being completely successful.

"We are glad to be able to declare in the face of the world," says Lütke, "that our stay of three weeks at Ualan cost not a drop of human blood, but that we were able to leave these friendly islanders without enlightening them further on the use of our fire-arms, which they looked upon as suitable only for the killing of birds. I don't think there is another instance of the kind in the records of any previous voyages in the South Seas."

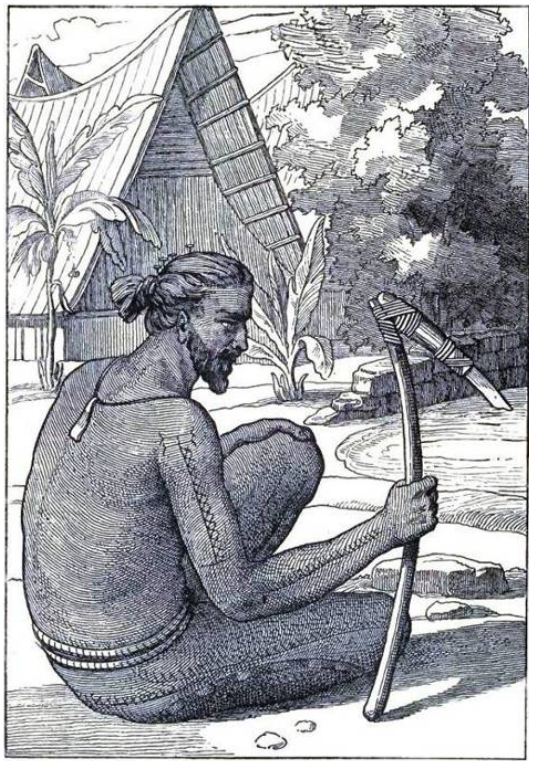

Native of Ualan.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

After leaving Ualan, Lütke had a vain search for the Musgrave Islands, marked on Kruzenstern's map, and soon discovered a large island, surrounded by a coral reef, which had escaped the notice of Duperrey, and is known as Puinipet, or Pornabi. Some very large and fine canoes, each manned by fourteen men, and some smaller ones, worked by two natives only, soon surrounded the vessel. Their inmates, with fierce faces and blood-shot eyes, were noisy and blustering, and did a good deal of shouting, gesticulating, and dancing before they could make up their minds to trust themselves on board the *Seniavine*.

It would have been impossible to land, except by force, as the native canoes completely surrounded the vessel, and when an attempt at disembarkation was made, the savages surrounded the ship's boat, only retiring before the warlike attitude of the sailors and a volley from the guns of the *Seniavine*.

Lütke had not time to examine thoroughly his discovery, to which he gave the name of the Seniavine Archipelago. The information he collected on the people of the Puinipet Islands is, therefore, not very trustworthy. According to him they do not belong to the same race as those of Ualan, but resemble rather the Papuans, the nearest of whom are those of New Ireland, seven hundred miles away.

After another vain search, this time for Saint Augustine's Island, he sighted the Cora of Los Vaherites, also called Seven, or Raven Island, discovered in 1773 by the Spaniard Felipe Tompson.

The navigator next saw the Mortlock Archipelago, the old Lugunor group, known to Torrés as the Lugullos, the people of which resemble those of Ualan. He landed on the principal of these islands, which he found to be one huge garden of cocoa palms and breadfruit-trees.

The natives enjoy a centre degree of civilization. They weave and dye the fibres of the banana and cocoa-nut palms, as do those of Ualan and Puinipet. Their fishing-tackle does credit to their inventive faculties, especially a sort of case constructed of small sticks and split bamboo-canes, which the fish cannot get out of when once in. They also use nets of the shape of large wallets, lines, and harpoons.

Their canoes, in which they spend more than half their lives, are wonderfully adapted to their requirements. The large ones, which are a very great trouble to build, and which are kept in sheds constructed specially for them, are twenty-six feet long, two and a half wide, and four deep. They are furnished with gimbals, the cross-pieces being connected by a rafter. On the other side there is a small platform, four feet square, and furnished with a roof, under which they are accustomed to keep their provisions. These pirogues have a triangular sail, which is made of matting woven from bandanus leaves, and is attached to two yards. In tacking about they drop the sail, and turn the mast towards the other end of the canoe, to which, at the same time, they have passed the fastening of the sail, so that the pirogue moves forward by its other extremity.

Lütke next sighted the Namuluk group, the inhabitants of which do not differ at all from the people of Lugunor, and he proved the identity of Hogolu Island — already described by Duperrey — with Quirosa. He then visited the Namnuïto group, the first stratum of a number of islands, or of one large island which will some day exist in this part of the world.

Lütke, who was in want of biscuits and other articles, which he hoped to obtain at Guam, or from vessels at anchor in that port, now set sail for the Marianne Islands, where he counted upon being able to repeat some new experiments with the pendulum, in which Freycinet had found an important anomaly of gravitation.[6]

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[6] "From numerous experiments," says Freycinet, "with the pendulum, collected at our observatory at Agagna, in lat. 13° 27' 511" 5 N. ... at the level of the sea, and with the thermometer at +20° centig., we were shown that the pendulum which, in the same circumstances, would make at Paris 86,400 oscillations in 24 mean solar hours would here make 86,295 ^{osc}.013 in the same time." — *Trans.*

Great, however, was his surprise when he arrived to find not a sign of life at Guam. No flags waved above the two ports, the silence of death reigned everywhere, and but for the presence of a schooner at anchor in the inner harbour, it might have been a desert island. There was hardly anybody about on shore, and the few people there were were half savage, from whom it was all but impossible to obtain the slightest information. Fortunately, an English deserter came and offered his services to Lütke, who sent him to the governor with a letter, which elicited a satisfactory reply.

The governor was the same Medinella whose hospitality had been lauded by Kotzebue and Freycinet. There was, therefore, no difficulty in obtaining permission to set up an observatory, and to take to it the necessary provisions. The stay at Guam was, however, saddened by an accident to Lütke, who wounded himself severely in the thumb with his own gun when hunting.

The repairing and refitting of the *Seniavine*, with the taking in of wood and water, delayed the explorer at Guam until the 19th March. During this time Lütke was able to verify the information collected ten years ago by Freycinet in his stay of two months in the Governor's own house. Things had not changed at all since the French traveller's visit.

As it was not yet time to go north, Lütke made for the Caroline Islands, *viâ* the Swedes Islands. The inhabitants seemed to him to be better made than their neighbours on the west, from whom, however, they differ in no other particulars. The Faraulep, Ulie, Ifuluk, and Euripeg Islands were successively examined, and on the 27th April the explorer started for the Bonin Islands, where he learnt that his exploration of that group had been anticipated by Beechey. He, therefore, took no hydrographical surveys. Two of the crew of a whaling-vessel, which had been shipwrecked on the coast, were still living at Bonin Sima.

Since the rise of the great fisheries, this Archipelago has been frequented by numerous whalemen, who here find a safe port at all seasons, plenty of wood and water, turtles for six months of the year, fish, and immense quantities of anti-scorbutic plants, including the delicious savoy cabbage.

"The majestic height and the vigour of the trees," says Lütke, "the productions of the tropical and temperate zones, alternating with each other, bear witness at once to the fertility of the soil and the salubrity of the climate. Most of our vegetables and pot-herbs, perhaps, indeed, all of them would certainly flourish well, as would also wheat, rice, and maize, nor could a better climate be desired for the cultivation of the vine. Domestic animals of every kind and bees would multiply rapidly. In a word, a small and industrious colony would shortly convert this little group into a fertile and flourishing settlement."

On the 9th June, after a week's delay for want of wind, the *Seniavine* entered Petropaulovsky, where it was retained taking in provisions until the 26th. A whole series of surveys were taken during this interval, of the coasts of Kamtchatka, and of the Kodiak and Tchouktchi districts, interrupted, however, by visits to Karaghinsk Island, the bay of St. Lawrence, and the gulf of Santa Cruz.

During one of these visits, the captain met with a strange adventure. He had been for several days on a friendly footing with the Tchouktchis, whose knowledge of the people and customs of Russia he endeavoured to increase.

"These natives," he says, "were friendly and polite, and endeavoured to pay back our jokes and tricks in our own coin. I softly patted the cheek of a sturdy Tchouktchi as a sign of kindly feeling, and suddenly received in return a box on the ear which knocked me down. Recovered from my astonishment, there I saw my Tchouktchi with a laughing face, looking like a man who has just given proof of his politeness and tact. He too had meant to give me merely a gentle tap, but it was with a hand only accustomed to deal with reindeer."

The travellers were also witnesses of some proofs of the skill of a Tchouktchi conjurer, or chaman, who went behind a curtain, from which his audience soon heard a voice like the howl of a wild beast, accompanied by blows on a tambourine with a whale-bone. The curtain then rose, revealing the sorcerer balancing himself, and accompanying his own voice with blows on his drum, which he held close to his ear. Presently he flung off his jacket, leaving himself naked to the waist, took a polished stone, which he gave to Lütke to hold, took it away again, and as he passed one hand over the other the stone disappeared. Then showing a tumour on his shoulder, he pretended that the stone was in it; turned over the tumour, extracted the stone from it, and prophesied a favourable issue of the journey of the Russians.

The conjuror was congratulated on his skill, and a knife was given to him as a token of gratitude. Taking this knife in his hand, he put out his tongue, and began to cut it. His mouth became full of blood, and he finally cut a piece of his tongue off, and held the piece out in his hand. Here the curtain fell, probably because the skill of the professor of legerdemain could go no further.

The people inhabiting the north-east corner of Asia are known under the general name of Tchouktchis. This includes two races, one nomad, like the Samoyedes, called the Reindeer Tchouktchis; the other, living in fixed habitations, called the sedentary Tchouktchis. The mode of life, the physiognomy, and the very language of these two races differ. The idiom spoken by the sedentary Tchouktchis has great affinity with that of the Esquimaux, whom they also resemble in their mode of building their huts and leather boats, and in the instruments they use.

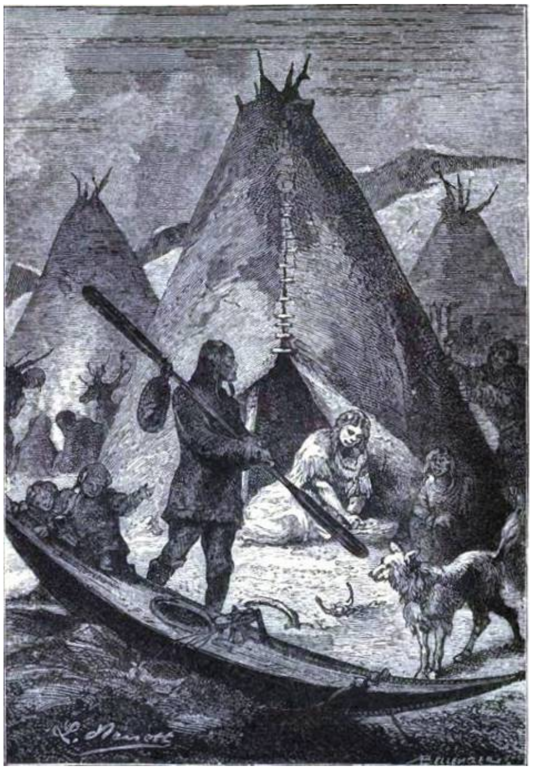

Sedentary Tchouktchis.

Lütke did not see many Reindeer Tchouktchis, so that he could add nothing to the information obtained by his predecessors. He was of opinion, however, that they had been painted in unfairly gloomy colours, and that their turbulence and wildness had been grossly exaggerated.

The sedentary Tchouktchis, generally called Namollos, spend the winter in sheds, and the summer in huts covered with skins. The latter usually each serve for several families.

"The sons and their wives, the daughters and their husbands," says the narrative, "live together with their parents, and *vice versâ*. Each family occupies one division of the back part of the hut, curtained off from the others. The curtains are made of reindeer-skins, sewn into the shape of a bell. They are fastened to the beams of the ceiling, and reach to the ground. With the aid of the grease they burn in cold weather, two, three, and sometimes more persons so warm the air with their breath in these hermetically sealed positions that all clothing is superfluous, even with the severest frost, but only Tchouktchi lungs are fitted to respire in such an atmosphere. In the outer part of the hut cooking-utensils, pottery, baskets, seal-skin trunks, &c., are kept. Here too is the hearth, if we can so call the spot where burn a few sticks of brushwood, painfully collected in the marsh, or when they are not to be obtained, whale-bones floating in grease. Round about the hut on wooden dryers, black and disgusting looking pieces of seal's flesh are exposed to view." These people lead a miserable life. They feed upon the half-raw flesh of seals and walruses hunted by themselves, or on that of whales flung up by the waves on the beach. The dog is the only domestic animal they possess, and they treat it badly enough, although the poor creatures are very affectionate and render them great services, now towing along their canoes, now dragging their sledges over the snow.

After a second stay of five weeks at Petropaulovski, the *Seniavine* left Kamtchatka, on the 10th of November, on its way back to Europe. Before reaching Manilla, Lütke made a cruise in the northern part of the Caroline Archipelago, which he had not had time to visit during the preceding winter. He saw in succession the islands of Marileu, Falulu, Faïu, Namuniuto, Magur, Faraulep, Eap, Mogmog, and found at Manilla the sloop, the *Möller* which was waiting his arrival.

The Caroline Archipelago embraces an immense space, and the Marianne Islands, as well as the Radak group, might fitly be included in it, as containing a population perfectly identical in race. For a long time the old geographers had had for their guidance only the charts of missionaries who, lacking alike the education and the appliances necessary to estimate accurately the size, position, and relative distance of all these archipelagoes, had attached notable importance to them, and often fixed at a considerable number of degrees the extent of a group which covered only a few miles.

Thus navigators accepted their guidance with wise caution. Freycinet was the first to infuse a little order into this chaos, and, thanks to his meeting with Kadu and Don Louis Torrès, he was able to identify later with earlier discoveries. Lütke did his part — and that not a small part — in the settling of an accurate and scientific chart of an archipelago which had long been the terror of navigators.

The learned Russian explorer is not of the same opinion as Lesson, one of his predecessors, who connected all the inhabitants of the Caroline group with the Mongolian race, under the name of the "Mongolo-Pelagian" branch. He rather sees in them, as did Chamisso and Balbi, a branch of the Malay family, which has peopled Eastern Polynesia. Whilst Lesson compares the people of the Carolines with the Chinese and Japanese, Lütke, on the other hand, finds in their great, projecting eyes, thick lips, and *retroussé* nose, a family likeness to the people of the Sandwich and Tonga Islands. The language does not suggest the slightest comparison with Japanese, whilst it shows a great resemblance to that of the Tonga Islands.

Lütke spent the time of his sojourn at Manilla in laying in stores, and repairing the sloop, and, on the 30th of January, he left that Spanish possession for Russia, which he reached on the 6th of September, 1829, casting anchor in the roads of Cronstadt.

It remains now to tell how it had fared with the sloop, the *Möller*, after the separation at Valparaiso. Arriving at Kamtchatka from Otaheite, she had left part of her cargo at Petropaulovski, and thereafter — in August, 1827 — had set sail for Ounalashka, where she had remained for a month. After an examination of the west coast of America, which was cut short by unfavourable weather, and a stay at Honolulu, which extended to February, 1828, she had discovered the island Möller, noted the Necker, Gardner, and Lisiansky Islands, and marked, at a distance of six miles southwards, a very dangerous reef.

The sloop had then coasted the island of Curè, the French Frigate Shoal the reef Maro, Pearl Island, and the Isle of Hermes; and, after having made search for several islands marked upon Arrowsmith's charts, had at length reached Kamtchatka. At the end of April, she had set sail for Ounalashka and taken observations of the north coast of the Alaska peninsula. In September the *Möller* rejoined the *Seniavine*, and, from that period until their return to Russia, they were no more separated, save for brief intervals.

As one may judge from the sufficiently detailed account which has just been given, this expedition did not fail to bring about results of importance to geographical science. We must add that the different branches of natural history, physics, and astronomy, owe to it equally numerous and important additions.

CHAPTER II.

FRENCH CIRCUMNAVIGATORS.

The journey of Freycinet — Rio de Janeiro and its gipsy inhabitants — The Cape and its wines — The Bay of Sharks — Stay at Timor — Ombay Island and its cannibal inhabitants — The Papuan Islands — The pile dwellings of the Alfoers — A dinner with the Governor of Guam — Description of the Marianne Islands and their inhabitants — Particulars concerning the Sandwich Islands — Port Jackson and New South Wales — Shipwreck in Berkeley Sound — The Falkland Islands — Return to France — The voyage of the *Coquille* under the command of Duperrey — Martin-Vaz and Trinidad — The Island of St. Catharine — The independence of Brazil — Berkeley Sound and the remains of the *Uranie* — Stay at Conception — The civil war in Chili — The Araucanians — Discoveries in the Dangerous Archipelago — Stay at Otaheite and New Ireland — The Papuans — Stay at Ualan — The Caroline Islands and their inhabitants — Scientific results of the expeditions.

The expedition under the command of Louis Claude de Saulces de Freycinet was the result of the leisure which the Peace of 1815 brought to the French navy. The idea was started by one of its most adventurous officers, the same who had accompanied Baudin in his survey of the Australian coasts, and to him was entrusted the task of carrying it out. It was the first voyage which had not hydrography alone for its object. Its chief aim was to survey the shape of the land in the southern hemisphere, and to make observations in terrestrial magnetism, without, at the same time, omitting to give attention to all natural phenomena, and to the manners, customs, and languages of indigenous races. Purely geographical inquiries, though not altogether omitted from the programme, had the least prominent place in it.

Among the medical officers of the navy, Freycinet found MM. Quoy, Gaimard, and Gaudichaud, whose attainments in natural history qualified them for being valuable coadjutors; and he also chose to accompany him several distinguished officers who had risen to high rank in the navy, the best known being Duperrey, Lamarche, Berard, and Odet-Pellion, who subsequently became, one a member of the Institute, the others superior officers or admirals.

No less care was exercised by Freycinet in composing his crew chiefly of sailors who were also skilled in some trade; so that out of the 120 men who manned the corvette *Uranie*, no less than fifty could serve on occasion as carpenters, ropemakers, sailmakers, blacksmiths, or other mechanics.

The *Uranie*, amply supplied with stores for two years, and provided with all sorts of apparatus of proved utility, iron cisterns for fresh water, machines for distilling salt water, preserved provisions, remedies for scurvy, &c. At last, on the 17th of September, 1817, she set sail from Toulon. On board, disguised as a sailor, was the commander's wife, who was not to be deterred from joining her husband by the dangers and hardships of so protracted a voyage.

Together with all these provisions for bodily comfort, Freycinet took with him a stock of the best scientific instruments, together with minute instructions from the Institute intended to direct his researches, and to suggest the experiments best adapted to promote the progress of science.

The *Uranie* reached Rio de Janeiro on the 6th of December, having put in at Gibraltar, and made a short stay at Teneriffe, one of the Canaries, which, as Freycinet wittily observes, were not Fortunate Islands for his crew, all communication with the land being forbidden by the governors.

During their stay at Rio de Janeiro the officers took a great many magnetical observations and made experiments with the pendulum, whilst the naturalists scoured the country for new specimens and curiosities, making large and important collections.

The original records of the voyage contain a long narrative of the discovery and colonization of Brazil, and detailed information on the customs and manners of the people, on the temperature and the climate, as well as a minute description of the principal buildings and the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro itself. The most curious part of this account is that which touches upon the gipsies, who, at that time, were to be met with at Rio de Janeiro.

"Worthy descendants of the Pariahs of India, whence these gipsies without doubt originally came," says Freycinet, "they are noted like their ancestors for every vicious practice and criminal propensity. Most of them, possessing immense wealth, make a great display in dress and in horses, especially at their weddings, which are celebrated with much expense; and they find their chief pleasure either in riotous debauchery or in sheer idleness. Knaves and liars, they cheat as much as they can in trade, and are also clever smugglers. Here, as elsewhere, these detestable people intermarry only among their own race. They speak a jargon of their own with a peculiar accent. The government most unaccountably tolerates the nuisance of their presence, and goes so far as to appropriate to their exclusive use two streets in the neighbourhood of the Campo de Santa Anna."

A little further on the traveller remarks, —

"Any one who saw Rio de Janeiro only by day would come to the conclusion that the population consisted entirely of negroes. The respectable classes never go out except in the evening, unless compelled by some pressing circumstance or for the performance of religious duties; and it is in the evening that the ladies especially show themselves. During the day all remain indoors, and pass the time between their couches and their looking-glasses. The only places where a man can enjoy the society of the ladies are the theatres and the churches."

During the sail from Brazil to the Cape of Good Hope nothing occurred deserving special mention. On the 7th March the *Uranie* anchored in Table Bay. After a quarantine of three days, the travellers obtained permission to land, and were received with a hearty welcome by Governor Somerset. As soon as a place suitable for their reception had been found, the scientific instruments were brought on shore, and the usual experiments were made with the pendulum, and the variations of the magnetic needle observed.

MM. Quoy and Gaimard, the naturalists, in company with several officers of the staff, made scientific excursions to Table Mountain and to the famous vineyards of Constantia. M. Gaimard observes, "The vines that we rode amongst are in the midst of alleys of oak and of pine; and the vine-stems, planted at the distance of four feet from one another, are not supported by props. Every year the vines are pruned, and the earth about them, which is of a sandy nature, is turned up. We noticed here and there plenty of peaches, apricots, apples, pears, citrons, as well as small plots cultivated as kitchen-gardens. On our return, M. Colyn insisted on our tasting the several sorts of wine which he produces, — Constantia properly so-called, both red and white, Pontac, Pierre, and Frontignac. The wine produced in other localities, which is called *Cape wine par excellence*, is manufactured from a muscatel grape of a dark straw colour, which seemed to me in flavour preferable to the grape of Provence. We have just said that there are two sorts of Constantia, the red and the white; they are both produced from muscatel grapes of different colours. People at the Cape generally prefer Frontignac to all the other wines produced from the vintages of Constantia."

Exactly a month after quitting the southern extremity of Africa, the *Uranie* cast anchor off Port Louis in the Isle of France, which, since the Treaties of 1815, has been in the hands of the English. The necessity for careening the ship, that it might be thoroughly examined, and the copper sheathing repaired, led to a much longer stay in this port than Freycinet had calculated upon; but our travellers found no cause to regret the delay, for the society of Port Louis fully sustained its old reputation for generous hospitality. The time passed quickly in excursions, receptions, dinners, balls, horse-races, and all sorts of festivities. It was, therefore, not without some regret that the French guests bade adieu to a place where they had been received with so much kindness both by their old compatriots and by those who had so lately been their bitter enemies.

The stay of the *Uranie* at the Isle of France had not, however, been sufficiently long to allow Freycinet to investigate many subjects of much interest, but this omission was remedied by the polite readiness shown by some of the leading residents in supplying him with valuable papers on the agriculture of the island, its commerce, its financial position, the industrial pursuits, and the social condition of the people, the correct appreciation of which demanded a more careful and minute examination than a mere passing traveller could possibly give to them. Since the island had come under English administration, it appeared that a number of new roads had been planned out, and a policy of reform had supplanted a benumbing system of routine fatal to all activity and progress.

Bourbon was the next place touched at by the *Uranie,* where the supplies of which the travellers stood in need were to be procured from the government stores. She cast anchor off St. Denis on the 19th July, 1818, remaining in the roadstead of St. Paul until the 2nd August, when she set sail for the Bay of Sharks, on the western shores of Australia. There is little of interest to be noted in connexion with the stay at Bourbon beyond the steady increase of the population and of trade which had taken place during the century preceding the arrival of the French expedition in 1717. According to Gentil de Barbinais, there were living in the island only 900 free people, amongst whom were no more than six white families, and 1100 slaves. At the last census taken in 1817, these numbers had risen to 14,790 whites, 4342 free blacks, 49,759 slaves, making a total of 68,898 inhabitants. This large and rapid increase must be attributed partly to the salubrity of the climate, but chiefly to the freedom of trade, of which the island had for some time enjoyed the advantage.

After a fortunate voyage of forty days, the *Uranie* cast anchor at the entrance of the Bay of Sharks on the 12th September. A party was at once despatched to Dirk Hartog, in order to determine the latitude and longitude of Cape Levaillant, and to bring on board the corvette a certain metal plate which had been left there by the Dutch at a remote period, and had been seen by Freycinet in 1801. Whilst this party were away, the two alembics were set to work to distil sea-water, which was effected so successfully that as long as the vessel stayed there, no other water was drunk but that obtained by this process, and all on board were satisfied with it.

On landing, the party sent to Dirk Hartog, got a view of the natives, who were armed with javelins and clubs, but had not a vestige of clothing. They, however, refused to have any close communications with the white strangers, keeping themselves at a respectful distance, and not handling any of the presents offered them without a previous careful inspection.

Although the Bay of Sharks had been minutely explored at the time of the expedition under Baudin, there still remained a hydrographical gap to be filled up on the eastern side of Hamelin Bay. Accordingly Duperrey proceeded there to complete the survey of that part of the coast. At the same time Gaimard, the naturalist, not disposed to rest satisfied with the interviews which as yet he had been able to obtain with the natives of the country, whom the sound of the fire-arms had summarily dispersed, decided upon penetrating into the interior, to gain some information respecting their mode of life. His companion and himself lost their way, as also did Riche in 1792 upon Nuyt's Land, where for three days they underwent severe sufferings from thirst, not being able to find a single rivulet or spring in the country.

The Expedition were well pleased when the inhospitable shores of Endracht disappeared from view. They had a pleasant passage in lovely weather, and over an unruffled sea, to the island of Timor, where on the 9th October the *Uranie* cast anchor in the roadstead of Coupang, and the travellers met with a cordial reception from the Portuguese authorities. But they found that the prosperity which had made the colony an object of wonder and admiration to the French travellers who had visited it with Baudin, had passed away. The Rajah of Amanoubang, the district where the sandal-tree grows in such abundance, who was formerly a tributary prince, was carrying on war to gain independence. The hostilities which were proceeding were not only detrimental to the interests of the colony, but also made it very difficult for Freycinet to purchase the commodities of which he stood in need. Some of the staff set off to pay a visit to the Rajah Peters de Banacassi, whose residence was not more than three-quarters of a league from Coupang. Peters, then eighty years of age, must have been a remarkably fine man. He gave them an audience surrounded by his attendants, who treated him with profound respect, and among whom were conspicuous several warriors of gigantic stature. The dwelling that served for the royal palace was rudely constructed, yet the French travellers saw with lively surprise that articles of luxury were plentiful, and they observed also some muskets of good manufacture and great value.

Notwithstanding the excessive heat of the climate, the thermometer rising in the open air to 45°, and in the shade to 33°, and even to 35°, the commander and his officers carried on with unremitting zeal the observations and surveys which it was the object of the Expedition to make. A few fell victims to their own imprudence, for in defiance of the earnest warnings of Freycinet, some of the young officers and the seamen chose to sally forth in the middle of the day, and with the view of fortifying themselves against the injurious effects of their dangerous freak, drank and ate plentifully of cold water and sour fruits. The result was that in a short time five of the most imprudent were confined to their hammocks with dysentery. This necessitated a departure from Timor; so the *Uranie* weighed anchor and set sail on the 23rd October.

At first the corvette sailed rapidly along the north coast of Timor, for the purpose of making a survey, but when she had reached the narrowest part of the Channel of Ombay, she encountered such violent currents that — the winds being slight and contrary — it was only with great difficulty she was able to regain the course which she had lost during the calm. No less than nineteen days were wasted in this trying situation; though certain of the officers took advantage of the delay to land on the nearest point of the island of Ombay, where the coast had a very inviting appearance. They went on shore near a village called Bitouka, and advanced to meet a body of the natives, armed with shields and cuirasses made of buffalo-skin, and carrying bows, arrows, and daggers. Savages though they were, they had quite the air of warriors, and were not at all afraid of fire-arms; on the contrary, they argued that the loading of the gun caused loss of time, for while that operation was going on, they could fire off a great number of arrows.

Gaimard writes, "The points of the arrows were of hard wood, or of bone, and some of iron. The arrows themselves, displayed fan-wise, were fastened on the left side of the warrior to the belt of his sword or dagger. Most of these people wore bundles of palm-leaves, slit so as to allow red or black coloured strips of the same to be passed through to hold them together, which were attached to the belt or the right thigh. The rustling sound produced with every movement of the wearers of this singular ornament, increased by knocking against the cuirass or the buckler, with the addition of the tinkling of little bells, which also formed part of the warrior's equipment, altogether made such a jumble of discordant sounds that we could not refrain from laughing. Far from taking offence, our Ombayan friends joined heartily in our merriment. M. Arago[1] greatly excited their astonishment by performing some sleight-of-hand tricks. We then took our way straight to the village of Bitouka, which was situated on a rising ground. In passing one of their cottages we happened to see about a score of human jawbones suspended from the roof, and anxious to get possession of one or two, I offered the most valuable articles I had about me in exchange. The answer was, 'palami,' they are sacred. We ascertained afterwards that these were the jawbones of their enemies, preserved as trophies of victory."

[1] Jacques Arago, brother of the illustrious astronomer.

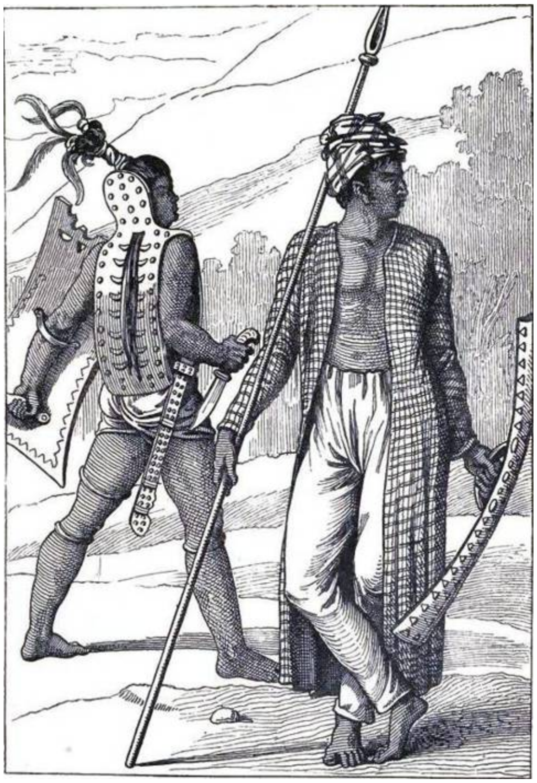

Warriors of Ombay and Guebeh.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

This excursion derived greater interest from the circumstance of the island of Ombay having been up to that time rarely visited by Europeans; and the few vessels that had effected any landing brought mournful accounts of the warlike and ferocious temper of the natives, and even in some instances of their cannibal propensities. Thus in 1802 the merchant-ship *Rose* had her small boat carried off, and the crew were detained as prisoners by the savages. Ten years later, the captain of the ship *Inacho*, who landed by himself, received several arrow wounds. Again, in 1817, an English frigate sent the cutter ashore for the purpose of getting wood, when a scrimmage took place between the crew and the natives, which ended in the former being killed and eaten. The day after, an armed sloop was despatched in quest of the missing crew; but nothing was found save some fragments of the cutter and the bloody remains of the unfortunate men.

In view of these facts the French travellers must be congratulated on having escaped being entrapped by the savage cannibals, which would undoubtedly have been attempted had the *Uranie* stayed long enough at Ombay.

On the 17th of November the anchor was let go at Dili.

After the customary interchange of compliments with the Portuguese governor, Freycinet made known the requirements of the expedition, and received a friendly assurance that the necessary provisions should be instantly forthcoming. The reception given to all the members of the expedition was both hearty and liberal, and when Freycinet took his leave, the governor, wishing that he should carry away some souvenir of his visit, presented him with two boys and two girls, of the ages of six and seven, natives of Failacor, a kingdom in the interior of Timor. To insure the acceptance of this present, the governor, D. José Pinto Alcofarado d'Azevado e Souza, stated that the race to which the children belonged was quite unknown in Europe. In spite of all the strong and conclusive reasons that Freycinet gave to explain why he felt compelled to decline the present, he was obliged to take charge of one of the little boys, who subsequently received the name of Joseph Antonio in baptism, but when sixteen years old died of some scrofulous disease at Paris.

On a first examination it would appear that the population of Timor belonged altogether to the Asiatic race; but so far as any reliance can be placed upon somewhat extended researches, there is reason to think that in the unfrequented mountains in the centre of the island there exists a race of negroes with woolly hair, and savage manners, of the type of the indigenous races of New Guinea and New Ireland, whom one is led to consider the primitive population. This line of research, commenced at the close of the eighteenth century by an Englishman of the name of Crawford, has been in our time carried forward with striking results by the labours of the learned Doctors Broca and E. Hamy, to the latter of whom the reading public are indebted for the pleasing and instructive papers on primitive populations which have appeared in *Nature* and in the journals of the Royal Geographical Society.

After leaving Timor the *Uranie* proceeded towards the Strait of Bourou, and in passing between the islands of Wetter and Roma got sight of the picturesque island of Gasses, clothed in the brightest and thickest verdure imaginable. The corvette was then drifted by currents almost as far as the island of Pisang, near which she fell in with three dhows, manned by natives of the island of Gueby. These people have an olive complexion, broad flat noses, and thick lips; some are strong, looking robust and athletic, others are slender and weakly in appearance; and others, again, thickset and repulsive-looking. The only clothing worn by the majority at this time was a pair of drawers fastened with a handkerchief round the waist.

A landing was effected on the little island of Pisang. It was found to be of volcanic origin, and the soil, formed from the decomposition of trachytic lava, was evidently very fertile. From Pisang the corvette made her way among islands, till then scarcely known, to Rawak, where she cast anchor at noon on the 16th of December. This island, though small, is inhabited; but though our navigators were often visited by the natives of Waigiou, opportunities for studying this species of the human family have been rare. Moreover, it ought to be mentioned that through ignorance of the language of the indigenous tribes, and the difficulty of making them understand through the medium of Malayan, of which they know only a few words, even those few opportunities have not been turned to much account. As soon as a suitable position was found, the instruments were set up, and the usual physical and astronomical observations were made in conjunction with geographical researches.

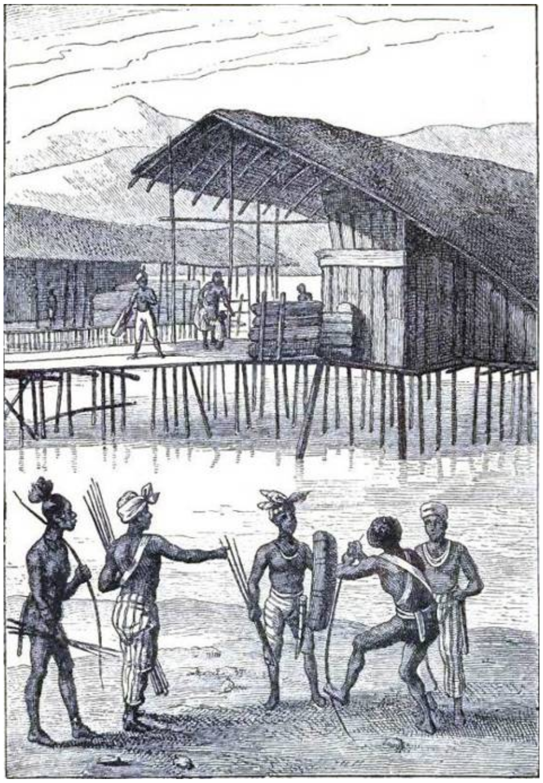

Rawak hut on piles.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The islands which Freycinet calls the islands of the Papuans are Rawak, Boni, Waigiou, and Manouran, which are situated almost immediately below the equator. The largest of these, Waigiou, is not less than seventy-two miles from one side to the other; the low shorage consists mainly of swamp and morass, while the banks, which run up steeply, are surrounded by coral reefs, and are full of small caves hollowed out by the waves. All the islets are clothed with vegetation of surprising beauty. They abound with magnificent trees, amongst which the "Barringtonia" may be recognized, with its voluminous trunk always leaning towards the sea, allowing the tips of the branches to touch the water; the "scoevola lobelia," fig-trees, mangroves, the casuarinæ, with their straight and slender stems shooting up to the height of forty feet, the rima, the takanahaka, with its trunk more than twenty feet in circumference; the cynometer, belonging to the family of leguminous plants, bright from its topmost to its lowest branches with pale red flowers and golden fruits; and besides these rarer trees, palms, nutmeg-trees, roseapple-trees, banana-trees, flourish in the low and moist ground.

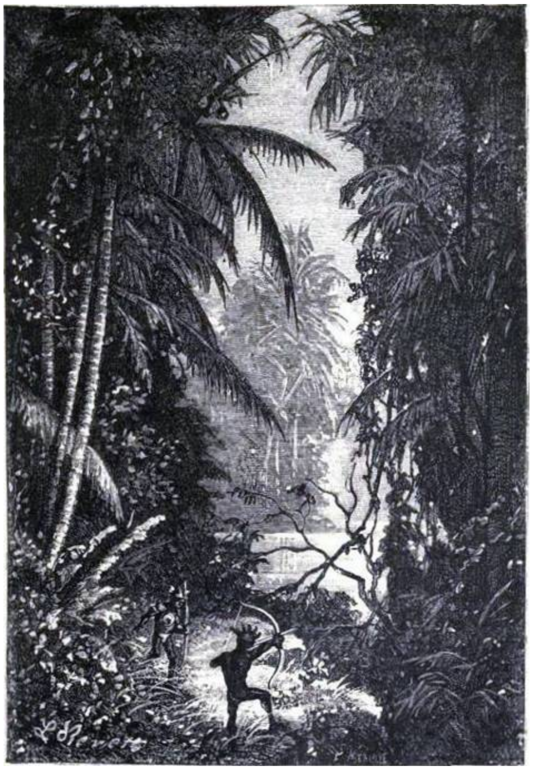

The luxuriant vegetation of the Papuan Islands.

The fauna, however, has not attained to the same exceptionally fine development as the flora. At Rawak the phalanger and the sheepdog in a wild state were the only quadrupeds met with. In Waigiou, the boar called barberossa, and a diminutive of the same race were found. But as to the feathered tribe, they were not so numerous as one might have supposed; the plants yielding grain necessary for the sustenance of birds not being able to thrive in the dense shade of the forests. Hornbills are here met with, whose wings, furnished with long feathers separated at the tips, make a very loud noise when they fly; great quantities of parrots, kingfishers, turtle-doves, piping-crows, brown hawks, crested pigeons, and possibly also birds of paradise, though the travellers did not see any specimens.

The Papuans themselves are positively repulsively ugly. To quote the words of Odet-Pellion, "a flat skull, a facial angle of 75°, a large mouth, eyes small and sunken, a thick nose, flat at the end and pressed down on the upper lip, a scanty beard, a peculiarity of the people of those regions already noticed, shoulders of a moderate size, a prominent belly, and slight lower limbs; these are the chief characteristics of the Papuans. Their hair both in its nature and mode of arrangement varies a good deal. Most commonly it is dressed with great pains into a matted structure not less than eight inches in height; composed of a mass of soft downy hair curling naturally; or it is frizzed up, till it positively bristles, and with the assistance of a coating of grease, is plastered round the skull in the shape of a globe. A long wooden comb of six or seven teeth is also often stuck in, not so much to aid in keeping the mass together as to give a finishing touch of ornament."

These unfortunate people are afflicted with the terrible scourge of leprosy, which is so prevalent that at least a tenth part of the population are infested with the disease. The cause of this dreadful malady must be sought in the insalubrity of the climate, the miasma from the marshes, which are overflowed with sea-water every flood tide, the neighbourhood of the burial-places, which are badly kept, and perhaps also to the consumption of shell-fish which these natives devour greedily.

All the houses, whether inland or on the coast, are built on piles. Many of these dwellings are erected in places extremely difficult of access. They are made by thrusting stakes into the earth, to which transverse beams are fastened with ropes made of fibre, and on these a flooring is laid of palm-leaves, trimmed and strongly intertwined one with another. These leaves, made to lap over in an artistic fashion, are also used for the roof of the house, which has only one door. Should the dwellings be built over the water, communication is carried on between them and the shore by means of a kind of bridge resting upon trestles, the movable flooring of which can be quickly taken up. Every house is also surrounded by a kind of balcony furnished with a balustrade.

The travellers could not obtain any information as to the friendly disposition of these natives. Whether the whole tribe consists of large communities united under one chief or several, whether each community obeys only its own proper head, whether the population is numerous or not, are all points which could not be ascertained. The name by which they call themselves is Alfourous. They appeared to talk in several distinct dialects, which differ remarkably from Papuan or Malay.

The inhabitants of this group seem to be a very industrious race. They manufacture all sorts of fishing apparatus very cleverly; they are expert in finding their way through the forests; they know how to prepare the pith of the sago-plant, and to make ovens for the cooking of the sago; they can turn pottery ware, weave mats, carpets, baskets, and can also carve idols and figures. In the harbour of Boni on the coast of Waigiou, MM. Quoy and Gaimard noticed a statue moulded in white clay, under a sort of canopy close to a tomb. It represented a man standing upright, of the natural height, with his hands raised towards heaven. The head was of wood, with the cheeks and eyes inlaid with small pieces of white shell.

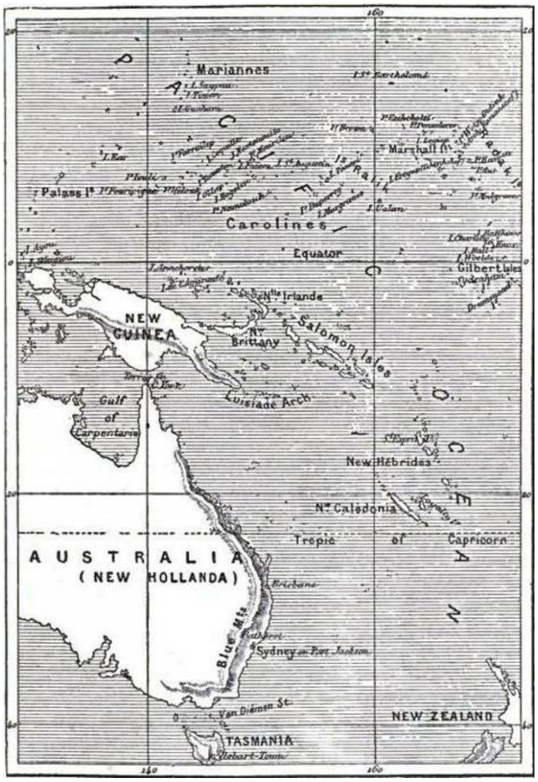
PACIFIC OCEAN
Mariannes
Palaos Is
Carolines
Ralik Is
Radak Is
Marshall Is
Gilbert Isles
Equator
NEW GUINEA
Nlle Irlande
Nle Brittany
Salomon Isles
Louisiade Arch
Gulf of Carpentaria
New Hébrides
Nle Caledonia
Tropic of Capricorn
AUSTRALIA
(NEW HOLLANDA)
Brisbane
Blue Mts
Sydney
Van Diémen St.
TASMANIA
NEW ZEALAND
140
160
0
20
40

On the 6th of January, 1819, having taken in supplies at Rawak, the *Uranie* proceeded on her voyage, and soon came in sight of the Ayou islands, mere sand-banks surrounded by breakers, of which few geographical details had been known up to that time. There was much to be done in the way of accurate survey, but unfortunately the hydrographers were sorely hindered in their work by the fever which they and some forty of the crew had contracted at Rawak. Sailing on, the Anchoret Islands came in sight on the 12th of February, and on the day following the Amirantes, but the *Uranie* did not attempt to make for the land. Shortly after passing the Amirantes, the corvette sighted St. Bartholomew, which the inhabitants call Poulousouk. It belongs to the Caroline archipelago. A busy trade, always attended with much uproar, was soon set on foot with the indigenous people, who resisted all persuasion to come on board, conducting all their transactions, nevertheless, with admirable good faith, in no instance showing any dishonest tendencies. One after another Poulouhat, Alet, Tamatam, Allap, Tanadik, all islands belonging to this archipelago, passed before the admiring gaze of the French navigators. At length, on the 17th of March, 1819, just eighteen months from the time of quitting France, Freycinet got sight of the Marianne Islands, and cast anchor in the roads of Umata on the coast of Guam. Just as the officers of the expedition were ready to go on shore, the governor of the island, D. Medinilla y Pineda, accompanied by his lieutenant, Major D. Luis de Torrès, came on board to bid them welcome. These gentlemen showed a polite anxiety to learn what the explorers stood in need of, and engaged that all their wants should be supplied with the least possible delay.

No time was lost in looking for a place suited for conversion into a temporary hospital, and one being found, the sick on board, to the number of twenty, were removed to it for treatment the very next day.

A dinner to the staff of the expedition was given by the governor, and all the officers assembled in his house at the appointed hour. They found a table covered with light cakes and fruits, in the midst of which were two bowls of hot punch. Some surprise escaped the guests, in private remarks to one another, at this singular kind of banquet. Could it be a fast-day? Why did no one sit down? But as there was no interpreter to clear up these points, and as it would have been unbecoming to ask for an explanation, they kept their difficulties for solution among themselves, and paid attention to the good things before them. Soon a fresh surprise came; the table was cleared and covered with various sorts of prepared dishes — in short, a substantial and sumptuous dinner was served. The collation which had been taken at the commencement, called in the language of the country "Refresco," had been intended only to whet the appetites of the guests for what was to follow.

After this, luxurious dinners became quite the rage at Guam. Two days subsequent to the governor's banquet, the officers found themselves at a dinner-party of fifty guests, where no less than forty-four separate dishes were served at each of the three courses of which the dinner consisted. Freycinet, from information he had received, relates that "this dinner cost the lives of two oxen and three fat pigs, to say nothing of poultry, game, and fish. Such a slaughter, I should think, has not been known since the marriage-feast of Gamache. No doubt our host considered that persons who had undergone so many privations during a protracted voyage ought to be compensated with an unusually profuse entertainment. The dessert showed no falling off either in abundance or in variety; it was succeeded by tea, coffee, creams, liqueurs of every description; and as the 'Refresco' had been served as usual an hour previous to dinner, it will be admitted without question that at Guam the most intrepid gourmand could find no other cause for disappointment but the limited capacity of the human stomach."

However, the objects of the mission were not interfered with by all this dining and festivity. Natural history excursions, magnetical observations, the geographical survey of the island of Guam, entrusted to Duperrey, were all being pushed forward simultaneously. But in the meantime the corvette had got to moorings in the deep water off the port of St. Louis, while the chief of the Staff, as well as the sick, were housed at Agagna, the capital of the island and the seat of government. At that place, in honour of the French visitors, cock-fights took place, a kind of sport very popular in all the Spanish possessions in Oceania; dances also were given, the figures in which, it was said, contained allusions to events in the history of Mexico. The dancers, students of the Agagna college, were dressed in rich silks, imported a long time previously by the Jesuits from New Spain. Then came combats with sticks in which the Carolins took part; which again were succeeded, almost uninterruptedly by other amusements. But what Freycinet considered of most value was the mass of information concerning the customs and manners of the former inhabitants of the islands, which he obtained through Major D. Luis Torrès; who, himself born in the country, had made a constant study of this subject. Of this interesting information use will be made when the subject is presently resumed, but first some notice must be taken of an excursion to the islands Rota and Tinian, the latter of which had already become known to us through the narratives of former travellers.

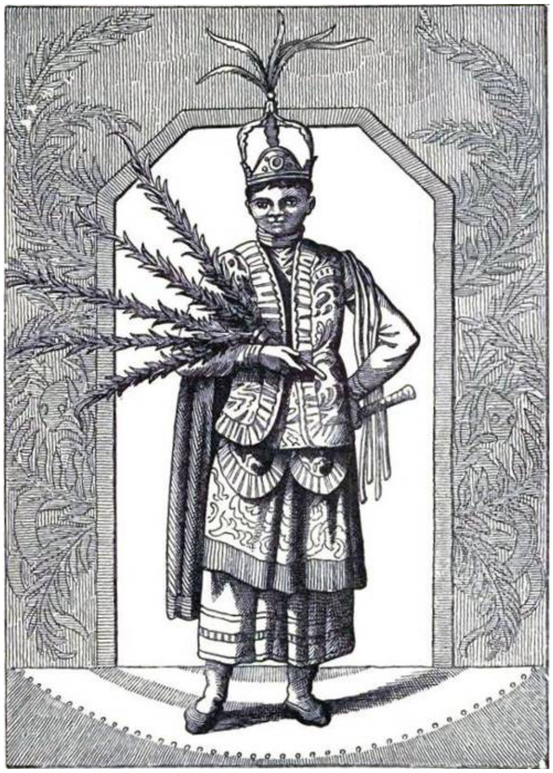

A performer of the dances of Montezuma.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

On the 22nd April a small fleet of eight proas conveyed MM. Berard, Gaudichaud, and Jacques Arago to Rota, where their arrival occasioned great surprise and alarm, explained by the fact that a report had gained currency in the island that the corvette was manned with rebels from America.

Beyond Rota the proas reached Tinian, where the arid plains recalled to the travellers the desolate coasts of the land of Endracht, testifying to the considerable changes that must have taken place there since the time when Lord Anson described the place as a terrestrial Paradise.

The Marianne archipelago was discovered by Magellan on the 6th March, 1521, and at first received the name of *Islas de las velas latinas*, the Isles of the lateen sails, but subsequently that of the *Ladrones*, or the Robbers. If one may trust Pigafetta, the illustrious admiral saw no islands but Tinian, Saypan, and Agoignan. Five years later they were visited by the Spaniard Loyasa, whose cordial reception was quite a contrast to that of Magellan; and in 1565 the islands were declared to be Spanish territory by Miguel Lopez de Legaspi. It was not, however, until 1669 that they were colonized and evangelized by Father Sanvitores. It will be understood that we should not follow Freycinet's narrative of past events in the history of this archipelago, were it not that the manuscripts and works of every kind which he was permitted to consult enabled him to treat the subject *de novo*, and throw upon it the light of real knowledge.

The admiration, still lingering in the minds of the travellers, which had been aroused by the incredible fertility of the Papuan Islands and the Moluccas was no doubt calculated to weaken the impression produced by any of the Marianne Islands. The forests of Guam, though well stocked, did not present the gigantic appearance common to forest scenery in the tropics. They extended over a large part of the island, yet there were also immense spaces devoted to pasturage, where not a breadfruit-tree nor a cocoa-nut palm was to be seen. In the depths of the forests, moreover, the conquerors of the islands had created artificial glades, in order that the herds of horned cattle which they had introduced might find food and also enjoy shelter from the sun.

Agoignan, an island with a very rocky coast, presented from a distance an arid and barren appearance, but is in reality thickly clothed with trees even to the summit of its highest mountains.

Rota is a regular jungle, an almost impenetrable mass of brushwood, above which rise thickets of rimas, tamarind, fig, and palm trees. Tinian, too, presents anything but an agreeable appearance. The French explorers altogether missed the charming scenes described in such glowing colours by their predecessors, but the appearance of the soil, and the immense number of dead trees, led them to the conclusion that old accounts were not altogether exaggerated, especially as the southern portion of the island is now rendered quite inaccessible by its dense forests.

At the time of Freycinet's visit the population of these islands was of a very mixed character, the aborigines being quite in the minority. The more highly born of the natives were formerly bigger, stronger, and better made than Europeans, but the race is degenerating, and the primitive type in its purity is now only to be met with in Rota.

Capital swimmers and divers, able to walk immense distances without fatigue, every man of them had to prove his proficiency in these exercises on his marriage; but although this proficiency has been in some measure kept up, the leading characteristic of the people of the Marianne group is idleness, or perhaps to be more strictly accurate, indifference.

Marriages are contracted at a very early age, the bridegroom being generally between fifteen and eighteen, the bride between twelve and fifteen. A numerous progeny is the result of these unions; instances being on record of twenty-two children born of one mother.

Not only do the people of Guam suffer from many diseases, such as lung complaints, smallpox, &c., introduced by Europeans; but also from some which seem to be endemic, or in any case to have assumed a type peculiar to the place and altogether abnormal. Such are elephantiasis and leprosy, three varieties of which are met with at Guam, differing from each other alike in their symptoms and their effects.

Before the conquest, the people of the Mariannes lived on the fruit of the rima or bread-tree, rice, sago, and other farinaceous plants. Their mode of cooking these articles was extremely simple, though not so much so as their style of dress, for they went about in a state of nature, unrelieved even by the traditional fig-leaf.

At the present time children still wear no clothing till they are about ten years old. Alluding to this peculiar custom, Captain Pages, writing at the close of last century, says, "I found myself near a house, in front of which an Indian girl, about eleven years old, was squatted on her heels in the full blaze of the sun, without a vestige of clothing on. Her chemise lay folded on the ground in front of her. When she saw me approaching, she got up quickly and put it on again. Although still far from decently clothed, for only her shoulders were covered by it, she now considered herself properly dressed, and stood before me quite unembarrassed."

Judging from the remains nearly everywhere to be met with, such as the ruins of dwellings originally supported by masonry pillars, it is plain that the population was formerly considerable. The earliest traveller who has made any reference to this subject is Lord Anson. He has given a somewhat fanciful description, which, however, the explorers in the *Uranie* were able to corroborate, as will be seen from the following extract.

"The description found in the narrative of Lord Anson's voyage is correct; but the ruins and the branches of the trees that have in some way twined themselves about the masonry pillars, wear now a very different aspect from what they did in his time. The sharp edges of the pillars have got rubbed away, and the half-globes that surmounted them have no longer their former roundness."

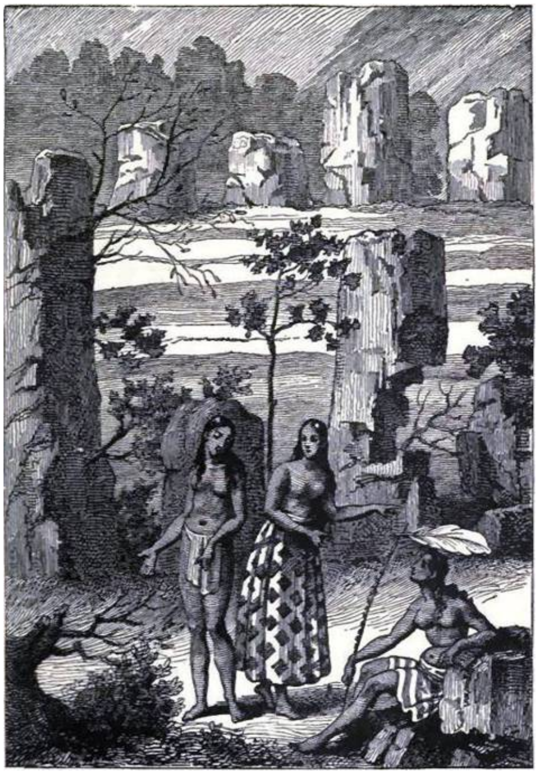

Ruins of ancient pillars at Tinian.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Of the structures of more recent date only a sixth part are of stone. At Agagna may be counted several buildings possessing some interest on account of their size, if not on that of their elegance, grandeur, or the fineness of their proportions. These are the College of St. John Lateran, the church, the clergy-house, the governor's palace, and the taverns.

Before the Spaniards established their sway in these islands, the natives were divided into three classes, the nobility, the inferior nobility, and the commonalty. These last, the Pariahs of the country, Freycinet remarks, though without citing his authority, were of a more diminutive stature than the other inhabitants. This difference of height is, however, scarcely a sufficient reason for pronouncing them to be of a different race from the other two classes; is it not more reasonable to conclude it to be the result of the degrading servitude to which they have been subjected? These plebeians could under no circumstances raise themselves to a higher class; and a seafaring life was forbidden to them. Each of the three castes had its own sorceresses and priestesses, or medicine-women, who each devoted her attention to the treatment of some one disorder; only no reason, however, for crediting them with any special skill in its cure.

The business of canoe-building was monopolized by the nobles; who, however, allowed the inferior nobles to assist in their construction. The making of canoes was to them a work of the utmost importance, and the nobles maintained it as one of their most valuable privileges. The language spoken in the Philippine group, though it has some affinity with the Malay and Tagala dialects, has all the same a distinctive character of its own. Freycinet's narrative also contains much information on the extremely singular customs of the former population of the Mariannes, which are beyond our province, though well worthy of the attention of the philosopher and historian.

The *Uranie* had been now more than two months at anchor. It was full time to resume the work of exploration. Freycinet and his staff, therefore, devoted the few remaining days of their stay to the task of paying farewell visits and expressing their gratitude for the hearty kindness which had been so profusely shown to them. The governor, however, not only declined to admit his claim to thanks from the French travellers for the hospitable attentions heaped upon them for upwards of two months; but also refused to accept any payment for the supplies which had been furnished for the refitting of the corvette. He even went so far as to write a letter of apology for the scantiness of the provisions, the result of the drought which had desolated Guam for the previous six months, and which had prevented him from doing things as he could have wished. The final farewell took place off Agagna. "It was impossible," says Freycinet, "to take leave of the amiable man, who had loaded us with so many proofs of his friendly disposition, without being deeply affected. I was too much moved to be able to find expression for the feelings with which my heart was filled; but the tears which filled my eyes must have been to him a surer evidence than any words could have been of my gratitude and my regret."

From the 5th to the 16th June the *Uranie* occupied in an exploring cruise round the north of the Marianne Islands, in the course of which were made the observations of which the substance has been given above. The commander, wishing to make a quick passage to the Sandwich Islands, then took advantage of a breeze to gain a higher latitude, where he hoped to meet with favourable winds. But as the explorers penetrated further and further into this part of the Pacific Ocean, cold and dense fogs wrapped them round, permeating the whole vessel with damp, equally unpleasant and injurious to health. However, the crew suffered no worse inconvenience than slight colds; in fact, the change had rather a bracing effect than otherwise on men now for some time accustomed to the enervating heat of the tropics.

On the 6th August the south point of Hawaï was doubled, and Freycinet made for the western side of the island, where he hoped to find a safe and convenient anchorage. A dead calm prevailing, the first and second days were spent in opening relations with the natives. The women came off in crowds immediately on the arrival of the ship, with the view of carrying on their usual trade, but the commander laid an interdict on their coming on board.

The first piece of news given to the captain by one of the Areois[2] was that King Kamahamaha was dead, and that his young son Rio Rio had succeeded him. Taking advantage of a change of wind the *Uranie* sailed on to the Bay of Karakakoa, and Freycinet was about to send an officer in advance to take soundings, when a canoe put off from the shore, having on board the governor of the island, Prince Kouakini, otherwise John Adams,[3] who promised the captain that he would find boats suitable for the taking of the necessary supplies to the corvette. This young man, about nine and twenty years of age, almost a giant in stature, but well proportioned, surprised Freycinet by the extent of his information. On being informed that the corvette was on a voyage of discovery, he inquired, "Have you doubled Cape Horn or did you come round the Cape of Good Hope?" He then asked for the latest information about Napoleon, and wished to know whether it was true that the island of St. Helena had been swallowed up with all its inhabitants! A story he had evidently heard from some facetious whalemen, but had not entirely believed.

Kouakini next apprised Freycinet that though actual disturbances had not broken out on the death of Kamahamaha, yet that some of the chiefs having asserted claims to independence, the stability of the monarchy was in some danger. As a result the political situation was strained and the government was in some perplexity, a state of things which probably would soon terminate, especially if the commandant would consent to make some declaration in favour of the youthful sovereign. Freycinet landed with the prince, to pay him a return visit; and, on entering his house, was introduced to his wife, a very corpulent woman, who was lying on a European bedstead covered with matting. After this visit, the captain and his host went to visit the widows of Kamahamaha, the prince's sisters, but not being able to see them, they proceeded to the yards and workshops of the deceased king. Here were four sheds sacred to the building of large war-canoes, and others containing European boats. Farther on were seen wood for building purposes, bars of copper, quantities of fishing-nets, a forge, a cooper's workshop, and lastly, some cases belonging to the prime minister, Kraimokou, filled with all necessary appliances for navigation, such as compasses, sextants, thermometers, watches, and even a chronometer. Strangers were not allowed to inspect two other magazines in which were stored powder and other war-materials, strong liquors, iron, &c. All these places were for the present abandoned by the new sovereign, who held his court at Koaihai Bay.

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[2] See previous footnote.

[3] It was the custom for the chiefs in these parts to assume new names, often for the most trifling reasons. — *Trans.*

Freycinet, on receiving an invitation from the king, made ready to visit him there, under the guidance of a native pilot who showed himself most attentive, and was very skilful in forecasting the weather. "The monarch," writes Freycinet, "was waiting for me on the beach, dressed in the full uniform of an English captain, and surrounded by the whole of his suite. In spite of the terrible barrenness of this side of the island, the spectacle of the grotesque assemblage of men and women was not without grandeur and beauty. The king himself stood in front with his principal officers a little distance behind him; some wearing splendid mantles made of red or yellow feathers, or of scarlet cloth; others in short tippets of the same kind, but in which the two glaring colours were relieved with black; a few had helmets on their heads. This striking picture was further diversified by a number of soldiers grouped here and there, and clad in various and strange costumes."

The sovereign now under notice was the same, who, with his young and charming wife, undertook at a later period a voyage to England, where they both died. Their remains were brought back to Hawaï by Captain Byron in the frigate *La Blonde*.

Freycinet seized this opportunity to repeat his request for supplies of fresh provisions, and the king promised that two days should not pass before his wishes should be fully complied with. However, although the good faith of the young monarch was above suspicion, the commander soon discovered that most of the chiefs had no intention of obeying their sovereign's orders.

Some little time after this, the principal officers of the staff went to pay a visit to the widows of Kamahamaha. The following amusing description of their lively reception is given by M. Quoy: — "A strange spectacle," he says, "met our view on our entrance into an apartment of narrow dimensions, where eight lumps of half naked humanity lay on the ground with their faces downwards. It was not an easy task to find space to lay ourselves down according to custom in the same manner. The attendants were constantly on the move, some carrying fans made of feathers to whisk away the flies; another a lighted pipe, which was passed from one prostrate figure to another, each taking a whiff or two, while the rest were engaged in shampooing the royal personages.... Conversation, it may readily be imagined, was not well maintained under these trying circumstances, and had it not been for some excellent watermelons which were handed to us, the tedium of the interview would have been insupportable."

Freycinet next went to pay a visit to the famous John Young, who had been for so long a time the faithful friend and sagacious adviser of King Kamahamaha. Although he was then old and in bad health, he was not the less able to supply Freycinet with some valuable information about the Sandwich Islands, where he had lived for thirty years, and in the history of which he had played a prominent part.

Kraimokou, the minister, during a visit which he was paying on board the *Uranie*, had caught sight of the Abbé de Quelen, the chaplain, whose costume puzzled him a good deal. As soon as he had learned that the strangely dressed person was a priest, he expressed to the commandant a desire to receive baptism. His mother, he said, had been admitted to that sacrament upon her deathbed, and she had obtained from him a promise to submit himself to the same ceremony as soon as he met with a convenient opportunity. Freycinet gave his consent, and endeavoured to make the proceeding as solemn as possible, all the more because Rio Rio requested permission to be present at it with all his suite. Every one behaved with the utmost decorum and reverence while the ceremony was taking place; but immediately on its close there was a general rush to the collation which the commandant had ordered to be prepared. It was wonderful to see how rapidly the bottles of wine and the flasks of rum and of brandy were emptied, and to witness the speedy disappearance of the viands with which the table had been covered. Fortunately the day was coming to a close, or Rio Rio and the majority of his officers and courtiers would not have been in a condition to reach the shore. In spite of this, however, it was necessary to comply with his request for two additional bottles of brandy, that he might, as he said, drink the health of the commander and success to his voyage, a request which all his attendants felt bound in politeness to make likewise.

"It is not an over-statement," observes Freycinet, "to say that in the short space of two hours our distinguished guests drank and carried away what would have been sufficient to supply the wants of ten ordinary persons for three months." Several presents had been exchanged between the royal pair and the commander. Among those made by the young queen was a cloak of feathers, a kind of garment which had become exceedingly scarce in the Sandwich Islands.

Freycinet was about to set sail again, when he learnt from an American captain that a merchant-vessel was lying off the island of Miow, having a large quantity of biscuit and rice on board, which there was no doubt might be purchased. This information determined Freycinet to anchor first off Raheina, among other reasons, because it was there that Kraimokou had undertaken to deliver a number of pigs, which were required for the use of the crew. But the minister displayed signal bad faith in the transaction; he tendered miserably poor pigs, and demanded an extravagantly high price; so that it was necessary to have recourse to threats before the business could be satisfactorily arranged. In this matter Kraimokou was under the misguidance of an English runaway convict from Port Jackson, and most probably had the native been left to obey the promptings of his own nature he would have acted on this occasion with the good faith and the sense of honour which were his usual characteristics.

On reaching the island of Waihou, Freycinet dropped anchor off Honolulu. The hearty welcome he received from the European residents made him regret that he had not come here direct to begin with; for he was able without any delay to procure all the supplies which he had found so much difficulty in getting together at the two other islands. Boki, the governor of Waihou, received baptism from the chaplain of the *Uranie*. He was prompted apparently by no other motive than a wish to do as his brother had done, who had previously received this sacrament. He was far from having the air of intelligence common to the other natives of the various islands of the Sandwich group hitherto visited.

Many observations on these natives are made in the narrative of the expedition, which are too interesting to be passed over without a brief summary here. All navigators are agreed in considering that the class of chiefs belong to a race excelling the other inhabitants, both in intelligence and in stature. It is very unusual to find one who is less than six feet in height. Obesity is very common, but chiefly among the women, who while still quite young often become enormously corpulent. The Sandwich type is strongly marked and distinct. Pretty women are numerous; but the blessing of length of days is seldom enjoyed. An old man of seventy is a rare phenomenon. This early decline and premature death must be ascribed to the persistent dissipation in which the people pass their lives.

On leaving the Sandwich Islands, Freycinet found it necessary to notice carefully the curves of the magnetic equator in low latitudes.[4] Accordingly, he crowded all sail in an easterly direction. On the 7th October the *Uranie* entered the southern hemisphere, and on the 19th of the same month the Dangerous Islands came in sight. To the eastward of the Navigators' archipelago, an island was discovered, not marked on the charts, which was named "Rose," after Madame Freycinet. This was the only actual discovery of the voyage.

[4] This refers to the line made up of the succession of points at which the magnetic needle ceases to indicate. — *Trans.*

The position of the islands of Pylstaart and Howe was next rectified, and on the 13th November the lights of Port Jackson, or Sydney, were at last sighted.

Freycinet had fully expected to find the town enlarged during the sixteen years that had passed since his last visit; but his astonishment was great indeed at the sight of a large and prosperous European city, set down in the midst of scenery which might almost be called wild. But as the travellers made excursions in various directions, fresh signs of the progress which the colony had made were forced on their attention. Fine roads carefully kept, bordered with the eucalyptus, styled by Pérou "the giant of the Australian forests," well constructed bridges, distances marked by milestones, proved the existence of a well organized local administration; whilst the charming cottages, the numerous herds of cattle, and the carefully cultivated fields, bore testimony to the industry and perseverance of the new colonists.

Governor Macquarie, and the principal authorities of the province vied with each other in showing attention to the French travellers, who, however, persisted in declining all but a single invitation, lest the work of the mission should not receive its fair share of attention. The entertainment given by the governor took place at his country house at Paramatta, whither the officers of the expedition proceeded by water, accompanied by a military band. Several of them also visited the little town of Liverpool, built in a pleasant situation on the banks of the river George. Excursions too were made to the little villages of Richmond and Windsor, which were growing up near Hawkesbury river. At the same time a party of the staff joined in a kangaroo hunt, and crossing the Blue Mountains penetrated the Bathurst settlement.

Through the friendly relations which Freycinet had established with the residents during his two visits, he was able to collect numerous interesting details respecting the Australian colony. Therefore the chapter that he devotes to New South Wales, recording the marvellous and rapid advance of this effort at colonization, excited a lively interest in France, where the development and growing prosperity of Australia were very imperfectly known. Freycinet's narrative was there quite a new revelation, well calculated to excite inquiry, and which had, moreover, the advantage of showing the exact condition of the colony so late as the year 1825.

The chain of mountains at some distance from the coast, known by the name of the Australian Alps, separates New South Wales from the interior of the Australian continent. For twenty-five years this chain formed a barrier against all communication with the country beyond; but now, thanks to the energy of Governor Macquarie, the barrier has been removed. A zigzag road has been cut in the rock, thus opening the way to the colonization of wide spreading plains watered by important rivers. The loftiest summits of this chain, nearly 10,000 feet in height, are covered with snow even in the middle of summer. Whilst the elevation of the principal peaks, Mount Exmouth, Mount Cunningham, and others was being taken, it was discovered that so far from Australia possessing only one large watercourse, the Swan River, it had several, the chief being Hawkesbury River, formed by the confluence of the Nepean, the Grose, and the Brisbane; the river Murray not being yet known. At the period under notice a commencement had been made in the working of coal-mines, slate quarries, layers of solid carbonate of iron, sandstone, chalk, porphyry and jasper; but the presence of gold, the metal that was to effect so rapid a development of the young colony, had not as yet been established.

The nature of the soil varies. On the sea-coast it is barren, able only to support the growth of a few stunted trees; but inland the traveller meets with fields clothed with a rich vegetation, vast pasturages in which here and there rise a few tall shrubs, and forests where giant trees entwined with an inextricable growth of underwood, defy all attempts to penetrate to their recesses.

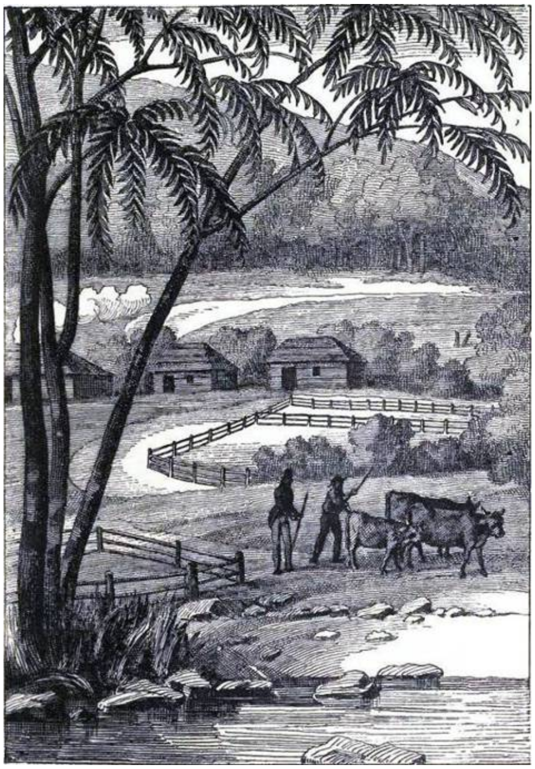

An Australian farm near the Blue Mountains.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

One circumstance which much surprised travellers was the apparent homogeneity of race throughout the whole of this immense continent. Take the aborigines at the Bay of Sharks, or in the land of Endracht, or by the Swan River, or at Port Jackson, and the same complexion, and the same kind of hair, the same features, the same physique, all prove indisputably that they have sprung from one common origin. Those dwelling by the rivers or on the sea coast subsist chiefly on shell or other fish, but those living in the interior trust to hunting for their food, and will eat indiscriminately the flesh of the opossum or the kangaroo, not rejecting even lizards, snakes, worms, or ants, the last named of which they manufacture into a sort of paste with the addition of their eggs and the roots of ferns. All over the continent the practice of the aborigines is to go completely naked; though they have no objection to put on any articles of European clothing that they can get possession of. It is said that in 1820 at Port Jackson there was a laughable caricature of the European style of dress to be seen in the person of an ancient negress who went about clothed in some pieces of an old woollen blanket, wearing on her head a bonnet of green silk. A few of the aborigines, however, make themselves cloaks of opossum or kangaroo skin, stitching the pieces together with the nerve-fibres of the cassowary; but this kind of garment is of rare occurrence.

Though their hair is smooth, they plaster it with grease and arrange it in curls. Then inserting in the middle a tuft of grass, they raise a strange and comical superstructure, surmounted by a few cockatoo feathers; or failing these, they fasten on, with the aid of a resinous gum, a few human teeth, or some bits of bone, a dog's tail, or one or two fish bones. Although the practice of tattooing is not much in favour among the natives of New Holland, some are occasionally to be seen who have succeeded by means of sharp shells in cutting symmetrical figures upon their skins. A more general custom is that of painting on their bodies monstrous designs in red and white colours which, on their dark skins, give them an almost diabolical aspect.

These savages formerly believed that after death they would take the form of children, and be transported to the clouds or to the summits of lofty trees, where, in a sort of aërial paradise, they would be regaled with plentiful repasts. But since the arrival of the Europeans their faith on this point has undergone some change, their present belief being, that metamorphosed into whites they will go to inhabit some far-off land. It is also an article of their creed that the whites themselves are no other than their own ancestors, who, having been killed in battle, have assumed the form of Europeans.

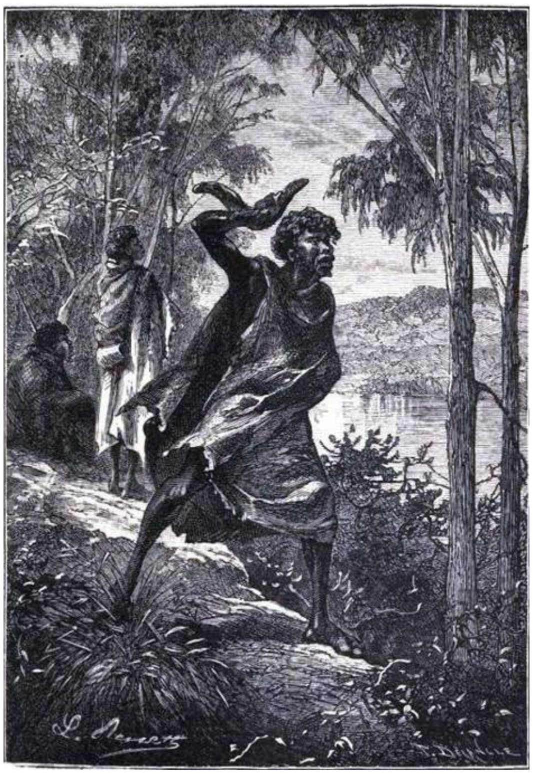

Native Australians.

The census of 1819 — one of the strictest hitherto instituted — gives the number of the colonists at 25,425; this return, it must be understood, does not take in the soldiers. The women being very much in the minority, the mother-country had made efforts to remedy the inconvenience resulting from this great disparity of the sexes, by promoting the immigration of young women, who soon married and founded families of a higher tone of morality than that of the convicts.

Freycinet devotes a very long chapter in his narrative to all matters connected with political economy. The various soils and the crops suited to them; industrial pursuits; the breeding of cattle; farming economy; manufactures; foreign trade; means of communication; government; — all these subjects are treated comprehensively on the authority of documents then newly compiled, and with an ability that could scarcely have been expected from a man who had not given special attention to questions of this nature. He has, moreover, added a close inquiry into the regimen which the convicts were subjected to from the time of their arrival in the colony, the punishments they had to undergo, as also the encouragements and rewards which were readily granted to them, when earned by good behaviour. The chapter concludes with reflections full of learning and sound judgment on the probable development and future prosperity of the Australian colony.

After this long and fruitful stay in New Holland, the *Uranie* put to sea on the 25th December, 1819, and steered so as to pass to the south of New Zealand and Campbell Island, with the view of doubling Cape Horn. A few days afterwards ten fugitive convicts were discovered on board; but the corvette had left the shores of Australia too far behind to allow of their restoration. The coast of Tierra del Fuego was reached without anything worthy of special notice having occurred during a very prosperous voyage, with a prevailing west wind. On the 5th February, Cape Desolation was sighted. Having doubled Cape Horn without any difficulty, the *Uranie* let go her anchor in the Bay of Good Success, where the shores, lined with grand forest-trees and echoing to the sound of waterfalls, presented a scene totally different from the sterile desolation generally characterizing this quarter of the globe. No long stay was, however, made there; the corvette resuming her voyage, lost no time in entering the Strait of Le Maire, notwithstanding a dense haze. Here she met with a heavy swell, a strong gale, and a mist so thick that land, sea, and sky were confounded in one general obscurity. The rain and the heavy spray raised by the storm, and the coming on of night, made it necessary to put the *Uranie* under a close-reefed topsail and jib, under which pressure of sail she behaved splendidly. The only available course was to run before the wind, and the travellers had just begun to feel thankful for their good fortune in being driven by the storm far away from the land, when the cry was heard, "Land close ahead!"

All hearts sunk with despair; shipwreck and death seemed inevitable. Freycinet alone, after a brief instant of hesitation, recovered his self-command. It was impossible that land could be ahead. He, therefore, kept on his northerly course, bearing a little east, and the correctness of his calculations was soon verified. On the next day but one the weather grew calmer; observations were taken, and as they proved the vessel to have run a great distance from the Bay of Good Success, the commander had to choose between a detention off the coast of South America, or off the Falkland Islands. The island of Conti, the Bay of Marville, and Cape Duras, were successively observed through the haze, whilst a favourable breeze speeded the corvette on her course to Berkeley Sound, fixed on as the best place for the next halt.

Mutual congratulations were already being exchanged on the happy termination of the dangerous struggle, and on the fortunate escape from any serious accident during so hazardous a trip. The sailors all rejoiced, to use the words of Byron, that —

"The worst was over, and the rest seemed sure."

But a severe trial was still in store for them!

On entering Berkeley Sound, every man was at his post, ready to let go the anchor. The look-outs were on the watch, men were stationed in the main-shrouds to heave the lead. Then first at twenty, after at eighteen fathoms, the presence of rocks was reported. The ship was now about half a league off shore, and Freycinet thought it prudent to put her off about two points. This precaution proved fatal, for the corvette suddenly struck violently on a hidden rock. As she struck, the soundings gave fifteen fathoms to starboard, and twelve to larboard. The reef against which the corvette had run, was, therefore, not so wide as the vessel itself; in fact, it was but the pointed summit of a rock.

The immediate rising of pieces of wood to the surface of the water at once gave reason for fears that the injury was serious. There was a rush to the pumps. Water was pouring into the hold. Freycinet had sent for a sail, and had it passed under the vessel in such a manner that the pressure of the water forcing it into the leak in a measure stopped it up. But it was of no avail. Although the whole ship's company, officers and sailors alike, worked at the pumps, no more could be done than just keep the water from gaining on the vessel. There was nothing for it but to run her ashore. This decision, painful as it was, had to be carried out, and it was indeed no easy task. On every side the land was girded with rocks, and only at the very bottom of the bay was there a strip of sandy beach favourable for running the ship aground. Meanwhile the wind had become contrary, night was approaching, the vessel was already half full of water. The distress of the commander can be imagined. But there was no alternative, so the vessel was stranded on Penguin Island.

"This effected," to quote Freycinet, "the men were so exhausted that it was necessary to cease further work of every kind, and to allow the crew an interval of rest, all the more indispensable on account of the hardships and dangers which our present disastrous situation must entail upon all. As for myself, repose was out of the question. Tormented by a thousand harassing reflections, I could scarcely credit my own existence. The sudden transition from a position where all things seemed to smile on me, to that in which I found myself at that moment, weighed on my spirits like a horrible nightmare. It was difficult to regain the composure necessary to face fairly the painful trial. All my companions had done their duty in the frightful accident, which had all but lost us our lives, and I am glad to be able to do justice to their admirable conduct.

"As soon as daylight revealed the nature of the country, a mournful gloomy look settled upon every countenance. Not a tree, not so much as a blade of grass was to be seen, not a sound was to be heard, and the silent desolation around reminded us of the Bay of Sharks."

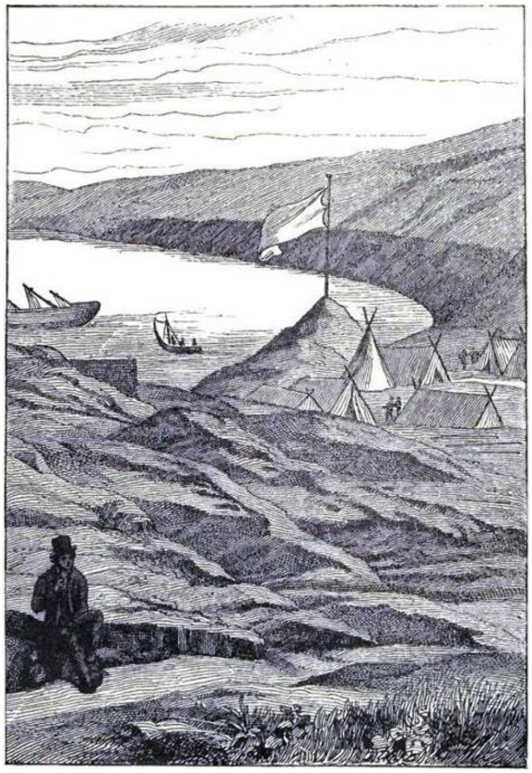

Berkeley Sound, in the Falkland Islands.

But there was no time to be lost in vain lamentations. Was the sea to be allowed to swallow up the journals and observations, the precious results of so much labour and so many hardships?

All the papers were saved. The same good fortune did not, unfortunately, attend the collections. Several cases of specimens which were at the bottom of the hold were entirely lost; others were damaged by the sea water. The collections that sustained the chief injury were those of natural history, and the herbarium that had been put together with infinite trouble by Gaudichaud. The merino sheep, generously presented to the expedition by

Mr. MacArthur, of Sydney, which it was hoped could be acclimatized in France, were brought on shore, as also were all the animals still alive.

A few tents were pitched, first for the sick, happily not very numerous, and then for the officers and the crew. The provisions and ammunition taken out of the ship were carefully deposited in a place where they would be sheltered from the inclemency of the weather. The alcoholic liquors were allowed to remain on board until the time arrived for quitting the scene of the shipwreck, and during the three months of the expedition's stay here, not a single theft of rum or of brandy came to light, although no one had anything to drink but pure water.

The efforts of the whole of the expedition were steadily applied to the task of trying to repair the main injuries sustained by the *Uranie*, with the exception of a few sailors told off to provide, by hunting and fishing, for the subsistence of the community. The lakes were frequented by numbers of sea-lions, geese, ducks, teal, and snipe, but it was no easy matter to procure, at one time, a sufficient quantity of these animals to serve for the food of the entire crew; at the same time, the expenditure of powder was necessarily considerable. As good luck would have it, gulls abounded in sufficient numbers to furnish a hundred and twenty men with food for four or five months, and these creatures were so stupid as to allow themselves to be knocked on the head with a stick. A few horses were also killed which had relapsed into a wild state since the departure of the colony founded by Bougainville.

By the 28th February the painful conclusion was come to, that with the slender resources available, it was impracticable to repair the damage done to the *Uranie*, especially as the original injury had been aggravated by the repeated shocks occasioned by thumping on the beach. "What was to be done?" Should the explorers calmly wait until some vessel chanced to put in at Berkeley Sound? This would be to leave the sailors with nothing to do, and this enforced idleness would open the door to disorder and insubordination. Would it not be better to build a small vessel out of the wreckage of the *Uranie*? As it happened, there was a large sloop belonging to the ship; if the sides were raised, and a deck added, it might be possible to reach Monte Video, and there obtain the assistance of a vessel capable of bringing off in safety the members of the expedition and all the cargo worth preserving. This latter plan met with the approval of Freycinet, and a decision once come to, not a moment was wasted.

The sailors, animated with fresh energy, rapidly pushed on the work. Now was proved the sound judgment of the commander when manning the corvette at Toulon, in selecting sailors who were also skilled in some mechanical employment. Blacksmiths, sail-makers, rope-makers, sawyers, all worked with zeal at the different tasks assigned to them.

No doubts were entertained of the success of the voyage before them. Monte Video was separated from the Falkland Islands by but three hundred and fifty nautical miles, and with the winds prevailing in these latitudes at this time of year, this distance could be traversed in a few days by the *Esperance* — for so the transformed sloop was named. To provide, at the same time, against the possible contingency of the frail vessel failing to reach the Rio de la Plata, Freycinet determined to commence the construction of a schooner of a hundred tons, as soon as the sloop had taken her departure. Notwithstanding the incessant demands on the energies of all made by the arduous and varied tasks involved in reconstruction and refitting of the new vessel, the usual astronomical and physical observations, the natural history researches and the hydrographical surveys, were not neglected. No one could have imagined that the stay in Berkeley Sound was anything more than an ordinary halt for exploring purposes.

At last the sloop was finished and safely launched. The instructions for Captain Duperrey, appointed to take command, were all drawn up; the crew was selected; the provisions were on board; in two days the adventurers were to sail, when on the 19th March, 1820, the cry was raised, "A sail! a sail!" A sloop under full sail was seen entering the bay.

A cannon was fired several times to attract attention, and in a short time the master of the new arrival was on shore. In a few words Freycinet explained to him the misadventure which had led to the residence of the explorers upon this desolate coast. The master stated in reply that he was under the orders of the captain of an American ship, the *General Knox*, engaged in the seal-fishery at West Island, to the west of the Falklands. An officer was at once deputed to go and ascertain from the captain what succour he could render to the French travellers. The result of the interview was a demand for 135,750 francs for the conveyance of the shipwrecked strangers to Rio — an unworthy advantage to take of the necessities of the unfortunate. To such a bargain the French officer was unwilling to agree without the consent of his commander; so he begged the American captain to sail for Berkeley Sound. While these negotiations were going on, however, another ship, the *Mercury*, under command of Captain Galvin, had made its appearance in the bay. The *Mercury* was bound from Buenos Ayres to Valparaiso with cannon, but just before doubling Cape Horn she had sprung a leak, and was compelled to put in at the Falkland Islands to make the necessary repairs. It was a fortunate incident for the Frenchmen, who knew they could turn to account the competition which must result from the arrival of two ships.

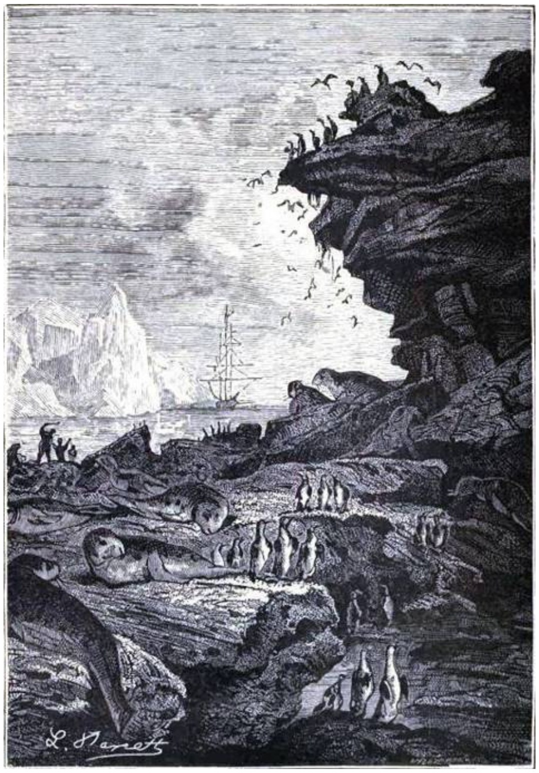

The *Mercury* at anchor in Berkeley Sound.

Freycinet at once made an offer to Captain Galvin to repair the damage the *Mercury* had sustained, with the materials and the labour at his command, asking in return for this service a free passage for himself and his companions to Rio de Janeiro.

At the end of fifteen days the repairs of the *Mercury* were completed. While they were going on, the negotiation with the *General Knox* was terminated by a positive refusal on the part of Freycinet to agree to the extravagant terms proposed by the American captain. It took several days to come to a settlement with Captain Galvin, who finally made the following agreement.

1. Captain Galvin engaged to convey to Rio the wrecked persons, their papers, collections, and instruments, as well as all the cargo saved out of the *Uranie* that could be got on board.

2. Freycinet and his people were during the passage to subsist entirely on the provisions set apart for them.

3. That the captain was to receive the sum of 97,740 francs within ten days of their arrival at Rio. By the acceptance of these truly extortionate conditions a bargain, which had cost much dispute, was finally settled.

Before leaving the Falklands, however, the naturalist, Gaudichaud, planted its destitute shores with several sorts of vegetables, which he thought likely to be of service to future voyagers who might be detained there.

A few particulars regarding this archipelago will not be without interest. The group, lying between 50° 57', and 52° 45' S. latitude, and 60° 4', 63° 48' west of the meridian of Paris, consists of several islets and two principal islands, named Conti and Maidenland. Berkeley Sound, situated in the extreme east of the Conti Island, is a wide opening, rather deep than extensive, with a shelving rocky coast. The temperature of the islands is milder than one would expect from the high latitude. Snow does not fall in any great quantity, and does not remain even on the summits of the highest hills longer than for about two months. The streams are never frozen, and the lakes and marshes are never covered with ice hard enough to bear the weight of a man, for more than twenty-four hours consecutively. From the observations of Weddell, who visited these parts between 1822 and 1824, the temperature must have risen considerably during the last forty years in consequence of a change in the direction taken by the icebergs which melt away in the mid-Atlantic. M. Quoy, the naturalist, judging from the shallowness of the sea between the Falkland Islands and South America, as well as the resemblance of their grassy plains to the pampas of Buenos Ayres, is of opinion that they once formed part of the continent. These plains are low, marshy, covered with tall grass and shrubs, and are inundated in the winter. Peat is abundant and makes excellent fuel. The character of the soil has proved an obstacle to the growth of the trees which Bougainville endeavoured to acclimatize, of which scarce a vestige remained at the time of Freycinet's visit. The plant which reaches the greatest height and grows most plentifully is a species of sword-grass, excellent food for cattle, and serving also as a place of shelter to numbers of seals and multitudes of gulls. It is this high grass which sailors have taken from a distance for bushes. The only vegetables growing on these islands of any use to man are celery, scurvy-grass, watercress, dandelion, raspberries, sorrel, and pimpernel.

Both French and Spanish colonists had at different times imported into these islands oxen, horses, and pigs, which had multiplied to a singular extent in the island of Conti; but the persistent hunting of them by the crews of the whaling ships must tend to considerably reduce their numbers. The only quadruped indigenous to the Falkland Islands is the Antarctic dog, the muzzle of which strikingly resembles that of the fox. It has therefore had the name dog-fox, or wolf-fox, given to it by whalers. These animals are so fierce that they rushed into the water to attack Byron's sailors. They, however, find rabbits enough, whose reproductive powers are limitless, to satisfy them; but the seals, which the dogs attack without any fear, manage to escape from them.

The *Mercury* set sail on the 28th of April, 1821, to convey Freycinet and his crew to the port of Rio de Janeiro. But one point Captain Galvin had failed to take into his reckoning, — his ship, equipped under the flag of the Independent State of Buenos Ayres, then at war with the Portuguese, would be seized on entering the harbour of Rio, and he himself with all his crew would be made prisoners. On this he endeavoured to make Freycinet cancel the engagement between them, hoping to prevail on him to land at Monte Video. But as Freycinet would not agree to this proposal on any ground, a new contract had to be substituted for the original one. According to the latter arrangement Freycinet became proprietor of the *Mercury* on behalf of the French navy by payment of the sum stipulated under the first contract. The ship was renamed the *Physicienne*, and reached Monte Video on the 8th of May, where the command was taken over by Freycinet. The stay at Monte Video was made use of for arming the vessel, arranging its trim, repairing the rigging, taking on board the supply of water and provisions requisite for the trip to Rio de Janeiro; before reaching which port, however, several serious defects in the ship had been discovered. The appearance of the *Physicienne* was so distinctly mercantile that on entering the port of Rio, though the flag of a man-of-war was flying at the masthead, the customs officers were deceived and proposed to inspect her as a merchant-vessel. Extensive repairs were absolutely necessary, and the making of them compelled Freycinet to remain at Rio until the 18th of September. He was then able to take his departure direct for France; and on the 13th of November, 1820, he cast anchor in the port of Havre, after an absence of three years and two months, during which time he had sailed over 18,862 nautical miles.

A few days after his return, Freycinet proceeded to Paris, suffering from a severe illness, and forwarded to the secretary of the Academy of Sciences the scientific records of the voyage, which made no less than thirty-one quarto volumes. At the same time, the naturalists attached to the expedition, MM. Quoy, Gaimard, and Gaudichaud, submitted the specimens which they had collected. Among these were four previously unknown species of mammiferous animals, forty-five of fishes, thirty of reptiles, besides rare kinds of molluscs, polypes, annelides, &c., &c.

The rules of the French service required that Freycinet should be summoned before a council of war to answer for the loss of his ship. The trial terminated in a unanimous verdict of acquittal from all blame, the council expressing at the same time their hearty acknowledgment of the energy and ability displayed by the commander, approving, moreover, the skilful and careful measures he had taken to remedy the disastrous results of his shipwreck. A few days after, being received by the king, Louis XVIII., his Majesty, accompanying him to the door, said, "You entered here the captain of a frigate, you depart the captain of a ship of the line. Offer me no thanks; reply in the words used by Jean Bart to Louis XIV., 'Sire, you have done well!'"

From that time Freycinet devoted himself entirely to the task of publishing the notes of his travels. The meagre account which has been given here will serve to show how extensive these notes were. But the extreme conscientiousness of the explorer prevented him from publishing anything which was not complete, and he was bent on placing his work in advance of the recognized boundaries of knowledge at that date. Even the mere classification of the vast quantity of material which he had collected during his voyage demanded a large expenditure of time. Thus it was that when surprised by death on the 18th of August, 1842, he had not put the last finishing touch to one of the most curious and novel divisions of his work, that relating to the languages of Oceania with special reference to that of the Marianne Islands.

At the close of the year 1821 the Marquis de Clermont Tonnerre, then Minister of Marine, received the scheme of a new voyage from two young officers, MM. Duperrey and Dumont d'Urville. The former, second in command to Freycinet on board the *Uranie*, after having rendered valuable assistance to the expedition by his scientific researches and surveys, had within the year returned to France; the other, the colleague of Captain Garnier, had brought himself into notice during the hydrographical cruises in the Mediterranean and Black Seas, which it had fallen to Captain Garnier to complete. He had a fine taste for botany and art, and had been one of the first to draw attention to the artistic value of the Venus of Milos which had just been discovered. These two young *savants* proposed in the plan submitted by them to make special researches into three departments of natural science — magnetism, meteorology, and the configuration of the globe. "In the geographical department," said Duperrey, "we would propose to verify or to rectify, either by direct, or by chronometrical observations, the position of a great number of points in different parts of the globe, especially among the numerous island groups of the Pacific Ocean, notorious for shipwrecks, and so remarkable for the character and the form of the shoals, sandbanks, and reefs, of which they in part consist; also to trace new routes through the Dangerous Archipelago and the Society Islands, side by side with those taken by Quiros, Wallis, Bougainville, and Cook; to carry on hydrographical surveys in continuation of those made in the voyages of D'Entrecasteaux and of Freycinet in Polynesia, New Holland, and the Molucca Islands; and particularly to visit the Caroline Islands, discovered by Magellan, about which, with the exception of the eastern side, examined in our own time by Captain Kotzebue, we have only very vague information, communicated by the missionaries, and by them learnt from stories told by savages who had lost their way and were driven in their canoes upon the Marianne Islands. The languages, character, and customs of these islanders must also receive special and careful attention."

The naval doctors, Garnon and Lesson, were placed in charge of the natural history department, whilst the staff was composed of officers most remarkable for their scientific attainments, among whom may be mentioned MM. Lesage, Jacquinot, Bérard, Lottin, De Blois, and De Blosseville.

The Academy of Sciences took up the plan of research submitted by the originators of this expedition with much enthusiasm, and furnished them with minute instructions, in which were set forth with care the points on which accurate scientific information was especially desirable. At the same time the instruments supplied to the explorers were the most finished and complete of their kind.

The vessel chosen for the expedition was the *Coquille*, a small ship, not drawing more than from twelve to thirteen feet of water, which was lying in ordinary at Toulon. The time spent in refitting, stowing the cargo, arming the ship, prevented the expedition from starting earlier than the 11th of August, 1822. The island of Teneriffe was reached on the 28th of the same month, and there the officers hoped to be able to make a few gleanings after the rich harvest of knowledge which their predecessors had reaped; but the Council of Health in the island, having received information of an outbreak of yellow fever on the shores of the Mediterranean, imposed on the *Coquille* a quarantine of fifteen days. It happened, however, that at that period political opinion was in a state of fervid excitement at Teneriffe, and party spirit ran so high in society that the inhabitants found it hard to come together without also coming to blows. Under these circumstances it is easy to imagine that the French officers did not indulge in violent regrets over the privations which they had to sustain. The eight days during which their stay at Teneriffe lasted were given up exclusively to the revictualling of the ship, and to magnetic and astronomical observations.

Towards the end of September anchor was weighed, and on the 6th of October the work of surveying the islands of Martin-Vaz and of Trinidad was commenced. The former are nothing more than bare rocks rising out of the sea, of a most forbidding aspect. The island of Trinidad is high land, rugged and barren, with a few trees crowning the southern point. This island is none other than the famous Ascençao — now called Ascension — which for three centuries had been the object of exploring research. In 1700 it was taken possession of by the celebrated Halley in the name of the English Government, but it had to be ceded to the Portuguese, who formed a settlement there. La Pérouse found it still in existence at the same place in 1785. The settlement, which turned out expensive and useless, was abandoned a short time after the visit just referred to, and the island was left in the occupation of the dogs, pigs, and goats, whose progenitors had entered the island in company with the early colonists.

When he left the island of Trinidad, Duperrey purposed to steer a direct course for the Falkland Islands; but an accidental damage, in the repair of which no time was to be lost, compelled him to alter his course for the island of St. Catherine, where only he could obtain without any delay the wood required for new yards and masts, as well as provisions, which from their abundance could there be bought very cheap. As he drew near to the island he was delighted with the grand and picturesque scene presented by its dense forests, where laurel-trees, sassafras, cedars, orange-trees, and mangroves intermingled with banana and other palms, with their feathery foliage waving gracefully in the breeze. Just four days before the corvette anchored off St. Catherine, Brazil had cast off the authority of the mother-country, and declared its independence by the proclamation of Prince Don Pedro d'Alcantara as Emperor. This led the commander to despatch a mission consisting of MM. d'Urville, de Blosseville, Gabert, and Garnot to the capital of the island, Nossa-Senhora-del-Desterro, to make inquiries about the political change, and learn how far it might modify the friendly relations of the country with France. It appeared that the administration of the province was in the hands of a Junto, but orders were at once given to allow the French travellers to cut what wood they might stand in need of, and the Governor of the Fort of Santa Cruz was requested to further the scientific inquiries of the Expedition by all the means at his command. As to provisions, however, there was considerable difficulty, for the merchants had transferred their funds to Rio, in apprehension of what the political change might result in. It is probable that this circumstance accounts for the commander of the *Coquille* finding the course of business not run smooth in a port which had received the warm recommendations of Captains Kruzenstern and Kotzebue.

The narrative of the travellers states that "the inhabitants were living in expectation of the island being shortly attacked with the view to recolonization, which they considered would be tantamount to their enslavement. The decree issued on the 1st August, 1822, calling on all Brazilians to arm themselves for the defence of their shores and proclaiming under all circumstances a war of partisans had given rise to these fears. The measures which Prince Don Pedro propounded were equally generous and vigorous, and had created a favourable opinion of his character and of his desire to promote freedom. Full of confidence in his purposes, the strong party in favour of independence were filled with enthusiasm expressing itself all the more boisterously as for so long a time their fervid aspirations had been kept under restraint. They now gave open demonstration of their joy by making the towns of Nossa-Senhora-del-Desterro, Laguna, and San Francisco one blaze of light with their illuminations, and marching through the streets singing verses in honour of Don Pedro."

But the excitement which had been thus strikingly manifested in the towns was not shared by the quiet peace-loving dwellers in the rural districts, to whose breasts political passion was an entire stranger. And there cannot be a doubt that, if Portugal had been in a position to enforce her decrees by the despatch of a fleet, the province would have been easily reconquered.

The *Coquille* set sail again on the 30th October. When to the east of Rio de la Plata she was caught in one of those formidable gales, there called *pampero*, but had the good fortune to weather it without sustaining any damage.

While in this part of the ocean Duperrey made some interesting observations on the current of the Plate River. Freycinet had already established the fact of its flowing at the rate of two miles and a half an hour, at a distance of a hundred leagues to the east of Monte Video. It was reserved to the commander of the *Coquille* to ascertain that the current is sensibly felt at a much greater distance; he proved moreover that the water of the river resisted by that of the ocean is forcibly divided into two branches running in the direction of the two banks of the river at its mouth; and finally he accounts for the comparative shallowness of the sea down to the shores of the Magellan Strait by the immense residuum of earth held in suspension by the waters of the La Plata and deposited daily along the coast of South America.

Before entering Berkeley Sound the *Coquille*, driven by a favourable breeze, passed immense shoals of whales and dolphins, flocks of gulls and numerous flying fish, the ordinary tenants of those tempestuous regions. The Falkland Isles were reached, and Duperrey with a few of his fellow-travellers felt a lively pleasure at revisiting the land which had been to them a place of refuge for three months after their shipwreck in the *Uranie*. They paid a visit to the spot where the camp had been pitched. The remains of the corvette were almost entirely imbedded in sand, and what was visible of it bore marks of the appropriations which had been made by the whalers who had followed them in that place. On all sides were scattered miscellaneous fragments, carronades with the knobs broken off, pieces of the rigging, tattered clothes, shreds of sails, unrecognizable rags, mingled with the bones of the animals which the castaways had killed for food. "This scene of our recent calamity," Duperrey observes, "wore an aspect of desolation which was rendered still gloomier by the barrenness of the land and the dark rainy weather prevailing at the time of our visit. Nevertheless, it had for us an inexplicable sort of attraction and left a melancholy impression on our minds, which was not effaced till long after we had left the Falkland Islands well behind us."

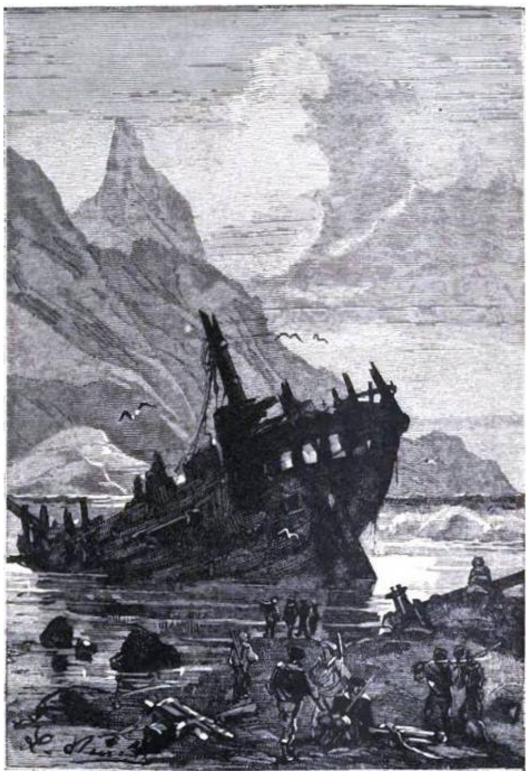

The wreck of the *Uranie*.

The stay of Duperrey at the Falklands was prolonged to the 17th December. He took up his residence in the midst of the ruins of the settlement founded by Bougainville, in order to execute certain repairs which the condition of his vessel required. The crew provided themselves by fishing and hunting with an ample supply of food; everything necessary was found in abundance, except fruit and vegetables; and having laid in abundant stores, all prepared to confront the dangers of the passage round Cape Horn.

At first the *Coquille* had to struggle against strong winds from the south-west and violent currents; these were succeeded by squalls and hazy weather until the island of Mocha was reached on the 19th January, 1823. Of this island a brief mention has already been made. Duperrey places it in 38° 20' 30" S. lat., and 76° 21' 55" W. long., and reckons it to be about twenty-four miles in circumference. Consisting of a chain of mountains of moderate elevation, sloping down towards the sea, it was the rendezvous of the early explorers of the Pacific. It furnished the ships touching there, now a merchantman, now a pirate, with horses and with wild pigs, the flesh of which had a well-known reputation for delicacy of flavour. Here was also a good supply of pure fresh water, as well as of some European fruits, such as apples, peaches, and cherries, the growth of trees planted here by those who first took possession of the island. In 1823, however, these resources had all but disappeared, through the wasteful practices of improvident whalers. At no great distance might be seen the two round eminences which mark the mouth of the river Bio-Bio, the small island of Quebra-Ollas, and that of Quiriquina, and, these passed, the Bay of Conception opened to view, where was a solitary English whaler about to double the Cape, to which was entrusted the correspondence for home, as well as the notes of the work that had already been accomplished.

On the day after the arrival of the *Coquille*, as soon as the morning sun had lit up the bay, the melancholy and desolate appearance of the place, which had taken every one by surprise on the previous evening, became still more depressing. The name of the town was Talcahuano; and the picture it presented was one of houses in ruins and silent streets. A few wretched canoes, ready to fall to pieces, were on the beach; near them loitered a few poorly clad fishermen; while in front of the tumble-down cottages and roofless huts sat women in rags employed in combing one another's hair. In contrast with this human squalor, the surrounding hills and woods, the gardens and the orchards, were clothed in the most splendid foliage; on every side flowers displayed their gorgeous colours, and fruits proclaimed their ripeness in tints of gold.

Overhead a glowing sun, a sky without a cloud, completed the bitter irony of the spectacle. All this ruin, desolation, and wretchedness were the outward and visible signs of a series of revolutions. At St. Catherine the French travellers had been witnesses of the declaration of Brazilian independence; on the opposite side of the continent they were spectators of the downfall of Director O'Higgins. This official had evaded the summons of the Congress, had sacrificed the interests of the agricultural community to those of the traders and merchants, by the imposition of direct taxes and the lowering of customs duties; was openly accused, as well as his ministers, of peculation; and as the result of all this malversation the greater part of the population had risen in revolt. The movement against O'Higgins was led by a General D. Ramon Freire y Serrano, who gave formal assurances to the explorers that the political disturbance should be no impediment to the revictualling of the *Coquille*.

On the 26th January two corvettes arrived at Conception. They brought a regiment under the command of a French official, Colonel Beauchef, who came to assist General Freire. The regiment, which had been organized by the exertions of Colonel Beauchef, was in point of steadiness, discipline, and knowledge of drill, one of the smartest in the Chilian army.

On the 2nd February the officers of the *Coquille* proceeded to Conception, to pay a visit to General Freire. The nearer they approached the city the more fields were lying waste, the more ruined houses were seen, the fewer people were visible, while their clothing had almost reached the vanishing-point. At the entrance of the town itself stood a mast, with the head of a notorious bandit affixed to the top, one Benavidez, a ferocious savage, more wild beast than man, whose name was long execrated in Chili for the horrible atrocities he had committed.

The interior of the town was found as desolate in appearance as the approach to it. Having been set fire to by each party that had successively been victorious, Conception was nothing more than a heap of ruins, amongst which loitered a little remnant of scantily clothed inhabitants, the wretched residuum of a once flourishing population. Grass was growing in the streets, the bishop's palace and the cathedral were the only buildings still standing, and these, roofless and gutted, would not be able much longer to resist the dilapidating influence of the climate.

General Freire, before placing himself in opposition to O'Higgins, had arranged a peace with the Araucanians, an indigenous tribe distinguished for their bravery, who had not only maintained their own independence but were always ready, when opportunity offered, to encroach on the Spanish territory. Some of these natives were employed as auxiliary troops in the Chilian army. Duperrey saw them, and, having obtained from General

Freire and Colonel Beauchef trustworthy information, has given a not very flattering description of them, of which the substance shall be here given.

The Araucanians are of an ordinary stature, in complexion copper-coloured, with small, black, vivacious eyes, a rather flat nose, and thick lips; the result of which is an expression of brutal ferocity. Divided into tribes, each one jealous of another, all animated by an unbridled lust of plunder, and ever on the move, their lives are spent in perpetual warfare. The mounted Araucanian is armed with a long lance, a long cutlass, sabre-shaped, called a "*Machete*,"[5] and the lasso, in the use of which they are extremely expert, while the horse he rides is usually swift.

[5] This is a weapon shorter than a sword and longer than a dagger. — *Trans.*

"Sometimes they are known," says Duperrey, "to receive under their protection vanquished enemies and become their defenders; but the motive prompting them to this seemingly generous conduct is always one of special vindictiveness; the fact being that their real object is the total extermination of some tribe allied with the opposite party. Among themselves hatred is the ruling passion; it is the only enduring bond of fidelity. All display undoubted courage, spirit, recklessness, implacability towards their enemies, whom they massacre with a shocking insensibility. Haughty in manner and revengeful in disposition, they treat all strangers with unqualified suspicion, but they are hospitable and generous to all whom they take as friends. All their passions are easily excited, but they are inordinately sensitive with regard to their liberty and their rights, which they are ever ready to defend sword in hand. Never forgetting an injury, they know not how to forgive; nothing less than the life-blood of their enemies can quench their thirst for vengeance."

Duperrey pledges himself to the truth of the picture which he has here drawn of these savage children of the Andes, who at least deserve the credit of having from the sixteenth century to the present day managed to preserve their independence against the attacks of all invaders.

After the departure of General Freire, and the troops he led away with him, Duperrey took advantage of the opportunity to get his vessel provisioned as quickly as possible. The water and the biscuits were soon on board; but longer time was necessary to procure supplies of coal, which, however, was to be got without any other expense save that of paying the muleteers, who transported it to the beach from a mine scarcely beneath the level of the earth, where it was to be picked up for nothing.

Although the events happening at Conception during the detention there of the *Coquille* were far from being cheerful, the prevailing depression could not hold out against the traditional festivities of the Carnival. Dinners, receptions, and balls recommenced, and the departure of the troops made itself felt only in the paucity of cavaliers. The French officers, in acknowledgment of the hospitable welcome offered to them, gave two balls at Talcahuano, and several families came from Conception for the sole purpose of being present at them.

Unfortunately, Duperrey's narrative breaks off at the date of his quitting Chili, and there is no longer any official record from which to gather the details of a voyage so interesting and successful. Far from being able to trace step by step from original documents the course of the expedition, as has been done in the case of other travellers, we are obliged in our turn to epitomize other epitomes now lying before us. It is an unpleasing task; as little agreeable to the reader as it is difficult for the writer, who, while bound to respect facts, is no longer able to enliven his narrative with personal observations, and the generally lively stories of the travellers themselves. However, some few of the letters of the navigator to the Minister of Marine have been published, from which have been extracted the following details.

On the 15th February, 1823, the *Coquille* set sail from Conception for Payta, the place where, in 1595, Alvarez de Mendana and Fernandez de Quiros took ship on the voyage of discovery that has made their names famous; but after a fortnight's sail the corvette was becalmed in the vicinity of the island of Laurenzo, and Duperrey resolved to put in at Callao to obtain fresh provisions. It need not be said that Callao is the port of Lima; so the officers could not lose the opportunity of paying a visit to the capital of Peru. They were not fortunate in the time of their visit. The ladies were away for sea-bathing at Miraflores, and the men of most distinction in the place had gone with them. The travellers were thus compelled to rest content with an inspection of the chief residences and public buildings of the city, returning to Callao on the 4th March. On the 9th of the same month the *Coquille* anchored at Payta.

The situation of this place between the terrestrial and magnetic equators was most favourable for conducting observations on the variations of the magnetic needle. The naturalists also made excursions to the desert of Pierra, where they collected specimens of petrified shells imbedded in a tertiary stratum precisely similar to that in the suburbs of Paris. As soon as all the sources of scientific interest at Payta had been exhausted the *Coquille* resumed her voyage, setting sail for Otaheite. During the sail thither a circumstance occurred which might have materially delayed the progress of the expedition, if not have led to its total destruction. On the night of the 22nd April, the *Coquille* being in the waters of the Dangerous Archipelago, the officer of the watch all at once heard the sound of breakers dashing over reefs. He immediately made the ship lie to, and at daybreak the peril which had been escaped became manifest. At the distance of barely a mile and a half from the corvette lay a low island, well wooded, and fringed with rocks along its entire extent. A few people lived on it, some of whom approached the vessel in a canoe, but none of them would venture on board. Duperrey had to give up all thoughts of visiting the island, which received the name of Clermont-Tonnerre. On all sides the waves broke violently on the rocks, and he could do no more than coast it from end to end at a little distance.

The next and following days some small islands of no note were discovered, to which were given the names of Augier, Freycinet, and Lostanges.

At length, as the sun rose on the 3rd May, the verdant shores and woody mountains of Otaheite came in sight. Duperrey, like preceding visitors, could not help noticing the thorough change which had been effected in the manners and practices of the natives. Not a canoe came alongside the *Coquille*. It was the hour of Divine worship when the corvette entered the Bay of Matavai, and the missionaries had collected the whole population of the island, to the number of seven thousand, inside the principal church of Papahoa to discuss the articles of a new code of laws. The Otaheitan orators, it seems, would not yield the palm to those of Europe. There were not a few of them gifted with the valuable talent of being able to talk for several hours without saying anything, and to make an end of the most promising undertakings with the flowers of their rhetoric. A description of one of these meetings is given by D'Urville.

"M. Lejeune, the draughtsman of the expedition, went by himself to be present at the meeting held the next day, when certain political questions were submitted to the popular assembly. It lasted for several hours, during which the chiefs took it in turn to speak. The most brilliant speaker of the gathering was a chief called Tati. The chief point of discussion was the imposition of an annual poll-tax at the rate of five measures of oil per man. Then came a question as to the taxes which were to be levied, whether they should be on behalf of the king, or on behalf of the missionaries. After some time, we arrived at the conclusion that the first question had been answered in the affirmative; but that the second, the one relating to the missionaries, had been postponed by themselves from a forecast of its probable failure. About four thousand persons were present at this kind of national congress."

Two months before, Otaheite had renounced the English flag, in order to adopt one of its own, but that pacific revolution in no wise diminished the confidence which the people placed in their missionaries. The latter received the French travellers in a friendly manner, and supplied them at the usual prices with the stores of which they stood in need.

But what seemed especially curious in the reforms effected by the missionaries was the total change in the behaviour of the women. From being, according to the statements of Cook, Bougainville, and contemporary explorers, compliant to an unheard of degree, they had become most modest, reserved, and decently conducted; so that the whole island wore the air of a convent, a revolution as amusing as it was unnatural.

From Otaheite the *Coquille* proceeded to the adjacent island of Borabora, belonging to the same group, where European customs had been adopted to the same extent; and on the 9th June, steering a westerly course, made a survey in turn of the islands Salvage, Coa, Santa Cruz, Bougainville, and

Bouka; finally coming to an anchor in the harbour of Praslin, on the coast of New Ireland, famous for its beautiful waterfall. "The friendly relations which were established with the natives there were the means of extending our knowledge of the human race by the observation of some peculiarities which had not fallen under the notice of preceding travellers." The sentence just quoted from an abridged account appearing in the "Annals of Voyages," which merely excites curiosity without satisfying it, causes us here to express our regret that the original narrative of the voyage has not been published in its entirety.

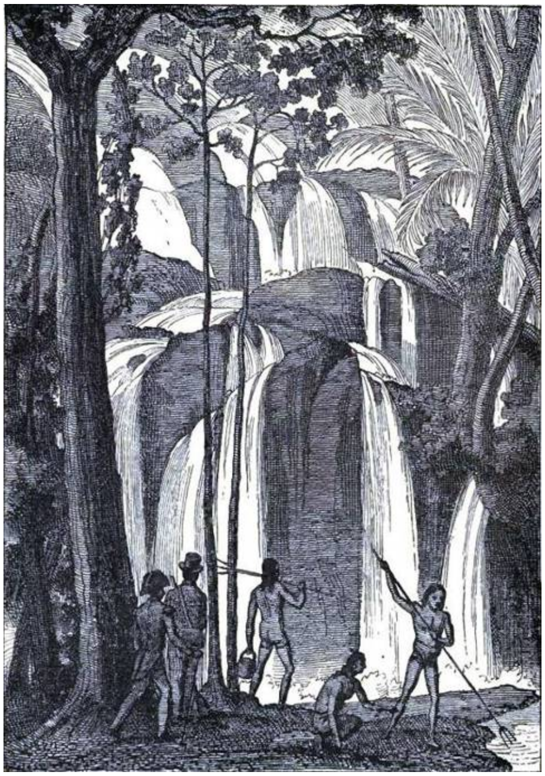

The waterfall of Port Praslin.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The student Porel de Blossville — the same who afterwards lost his life with the *Lilloise* in the Polar regions — undertook a journey to the village of Praslin, in spite of all the means adopted by the savages to deter him. When there he was shown a kind of temple, where several ill-shaped, grotesque idols had been set up on a platform surrounded by walls.

Great pains were taken to prepare a chart of St. George's Channel, after which Duperrey paid a visit to the islands previously surveyed by Schouten to the north-east of New Guinea. Three days — the 26th, 27th, and 28th — were devoted to a survey of them. The explorer, after this, searched ineffectually for the islands Stephen and De Carteret, and after comparing his own route with that taken by D'Entrecasteaux in 1792, he came to the conclusion that this group must be identical with that of Providence, discovered long since by Dampier.

On the 3rd of September the north cape of New Guinea was recognized. Three days later the *Coquille* entered the narrow and rocky harbour of Offak on the north-west coast of Waigiou, one of the Papuan islands. The only navigator who has mentioned this harbour is Forest. Duperrey therefore felt unusual satisfaction at having explored a corner of the earth all but untrodden by the foot of the European. It was also an interesting fact for geographers that the existence of a southern bay, separated from Offak by a very narrow isthmus, was established.

Two officers, MM. d'Urville and de Blossville, were employed in this work, which MM. Berard, Lottin, and de Blois de la Calande connected with that accomplished by Duperrey on the coast during the cruise of the *Uranie*. This land was found to be particularly rich in vegetable products, and D'Urville was able there to form the nucleus of a collection as valuable for the novelty as the beauty of its specimens.

D'Urville and Lesson, full of curiosity to study the inhabitants, who belonged to the Papuan race, started for the shore immediately after the corvette arrived at the island in a boat manned with seven sailors. They had already walked some distance in a deluge of rain, when all at once they found themselves opposite a cottage built upon piles, and covered over with leaves of the plane-tree.

Cowering amongst the bushes, at a little distance, was a young female savage, who seemed to be watching them. A few paces nearer was a heap of about a dozen cocoa-nuts freshly gathered, placed well in sight, apparently intended for the refreshment of the visitors. The Frenchmen came to understand that this was a present offered by the youthful savage of whom they had caught a glimpse, and proceeded to feast on the fruits so opportunely placed at their disposal. The native girl, soon gathering confidence from the quiet behaviour of the strangers, came forward, crying, "*Bongous!*" (good!), making signs to show that the cocoa-nuts had been presented by herself. Her delicate attention was rewarded by the gift of a necklace and earrings.

When D'Urville regained the boat he found a dozen Papuans playing, eating, and seeming on the best possible terms with the boatmen. "In a short time," he says, "they had surrounded me, repeating, '*Captain, bongous,*' and offering various tokens of good will. These people are, in general, of diminutive stature, their constitution is slight and feeble; leprosy is a common disease among them; their voice is soft, their behaviour grave, polite, and even marked with a certain air of melancholy that is habitually characteristic of them."

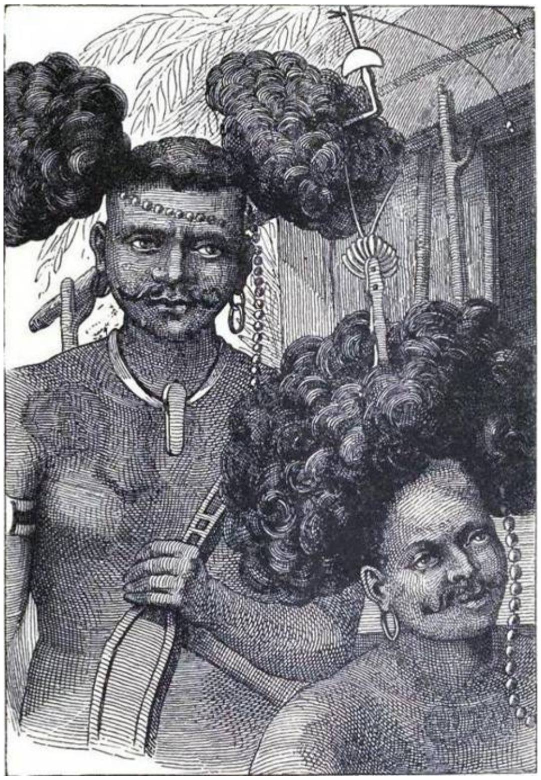

Natives of New Guinea.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Among the antique statues of which the Louvre is full, there is one of Polyhymnia, which is celebrated above the rest for an expression of melancholy pensiveness not usually found among the ancients. It is a singular circumstance that D'Urville should have observed among the Papuans the very expression of countenance distinguishing this antique statue. On board the corvette another company of natives were conducting themselves with a calmness and reserve, offering a marked contrast to the usual manner of the greater part of the inhabitants of the lands of Oceania.

The same impression was made on the French travellers during a visit paid to the rajah of the island, as also during his return visit on board the *Coquille*. In one of the villages on this southern bay was observed a kind of temple, in which were to be seen several rudely carved statues, painted over with various colours, and ornamented with feathers and matting. It was quite impossible to obtain the slightest information on the subject of the worship which the natives paid to these idols.

The *Coquille* set sail again on the 16th September, coasting along the north side of the islands lying between Een and Yang, and after a brief stay at Cayeli reached Amboyna, where the remarkably kind reception given by M. Merkus, the governor of the Molucca Island, afforded the staff an interval of rest from the continual labours of this troublesome voyage. The 27th October saw the corvette again on its course, steering towards Timor and westward of the Turtle and Lucepara Islands. Duperrey next determined the position of the island of Vulcan; sighted the islands of Wetter, Baba, Dog, Cambing, and finally, entering the channel of Ombay, surveyed a large number of points in the chain of islands stretching from Pantee and Ombay in the direction of Java. After having made a chart of Java, and an ineffectual search for the Trial Islands in the place usually assigned to them, Duperrey steered for New Holland, but through contrary winds was not able to sail along the western coast of the island. On the 10th January he at length rounded Van Diemen's Island, and six days after that sighted the lights of Port Jackson, coming to an anchor off Sydney the following day.

The governor, Sir Thomas Brisbane, who had received previous intimation of the arrival of the Expedition, gave the officers a cordial welcome, forwarded with all the means at his command the revictualling of the corvette, and rendered friendly assistance in the repairs which the somewhat shattered condition of the ship rendered necessary. He also provided means to enable MM. d'Urville and Lesson to make an excursion, full of interest, beyond the Blue Mountains into the plain of Bathurst, the resources of which were as yet but imperfectly known to Europeans.

Duperrey did not leave Australia until the 20th of March. On this occasion he directed his course towards New Zealand, which had been rather overlooked in former voyages. The vessel came to an anchor in the Bay of Manawa, forming the southern part of the grand Bay of Islands. Here the officers occupied their leisure in scientific and geographical observations, and in making researches in natural history. At the same time, the frequent intercourse of the explorers with the natives threw quite a new light upon their manners, their religious notions, their language, and on their attitude of hostility up to that time to the teaching of the missionaries. What these savages most appreciated in European civilization was well-finished weapons — of which at that time they possessed a great quantity — for by their help they were the better able to indulge their sanguinary instincts.

The stay of the *Coquille* at New Zealand terminated on the 17th of April, when a *détour* was made northwards as far as Rotuma, discovered, but not visited, by Captain Wilson in 1797. The inhabitants, gentle and hospitable, took great pains to furnish the navigators with the provisions they required. But it was not long before the Frenchmen discovered that these gentle islanders, taking advantage of the confidence which they had known how to create, had carried off a number of articles that it afterwards cost much trouble to make them restore. Stringent orders were given, and all thieves caught in the act were flogged in the presence of their fellow-countrymen, who, however, as well as the culprits themselves, treated the affair only as a joke.

Among these savages four Europeans were observed, who had a long time before deserted from the whale-ship *Rochester*. They were no better clothed than the natives, and were tatooed and smeared with a yellow powder after the native fashion; so that it would have been hard to recognize them but for their white skins and more intelligent looks. They were quite content with their lot, having married wives and reared families at Rotuma, where, escaping the cares, the troubles, and the difficulties of civilized life, they reckoned on ending their days in comfort. One among them asked to be allowed to remain on board the *Coquille*, a favour which Duperrey was ready to grant, but the chief of the island was unwilling, until he learned that two convicts from Port Jackson asked permission to stay on shore.

Although these people, hitherto little known, offered a most interesting subject of study to the naturalists, it was necessary to depart, so the *Coquille* proceeded to survey the Coral Isles and St. Augustin, discovered by Maurelle in 1781. Then came Drummond Island, where the inhabitants, dark complexioned, with slight limbs, and unintelligent faces, offered to exchange some triangular shells, commonly called holy water cups, for knives and fishhooks; next the islands of Sydenham and Henderville, where the inhabitants go entirely naked; after them, Woolde, Hupper, Hall, Knox, Charlotte, Mathews, which form the Gilbert Archipelago; and finally the Marshall and Mulgrave groups.

On the 3rd of June Duperrey came in sight of the island of Ualan, which had been discovered in 1804 by an American, Captain Croser. As it was not marked upon any chart, the commander decided upon making an exact and particular survey of it. No sooner had the anchor touched the bottom than Duperrey, accompanied by some of his officers, made for the shore. The inhabitants turned out to be a mild and obliging race, who made their visitors presents of cocoa-nuts and the fruit of the bread-tree, conducting them through most picturesque scenery to the dwelling of their principal chief, or "Uross-ton," as he was called. Dumont d'Urville has given the following sketch of the country through which the travellers passed on their way to the residence of the chief.

"We glided calmly across a magnificent basin girdled in by a well-wooded shore, the foliage a bright green. Behind us rose the lofty hill-tops, carpeted with verdure, from which shot up the light and graceful stems of the cocoa palms. Out of the sea to the front rose the little island of Leilei, covered with the pretty cottages of the islanders, and crowned with a verdant mound. If this pleasant prospect be further brightened by a magnificent day, in a delicious climate, some notion may be formed of the sensations we experienced as we proceeded in a sort of triumphal procession, surrounded by a crowd of simple, gentle, kind attendants."

The number of persons accompanying the boats D'Urville estimated at about 800. On arriving before a neat and charming village, with well paved streets, they divided themselves, the men standing on one side, the women on the other, maintaining an impressive silence. Two chiefs advanced, and taking the travellers by the hand, conducted them to the dwelling of the "Uross-ton." The crowd, still silent, remained outside while the Frenchmen entered the chief's house. The "Uross-ton" shortly made his appearance, a pale and shrivelled old man, bowed down under the weight of fourscore years. The Frenchmen politely rose on his entering the room, but they were apprised by a whisper of disapproval from those standing about that this was a violation of the local etiquette. The crowd in front prostrated themselves on the ground. The chiefs themselves could not withhold that mark of respect. The old man, recovering from a momentary surprise at the boldness of the strangers, called upon his subjects to keep silence, then seated himself near the travellers. In return for the trifling presents which were made to him and his wife, he vouchsafed marks of goodwill in the shape of slight pats on the cheek, the shoulder, or the thigh. But the gratitude of these sovereigns was expressed only by the gift of seven so-called "*tots*" — probably pieces of cloth — four of which were of very fine tissue.

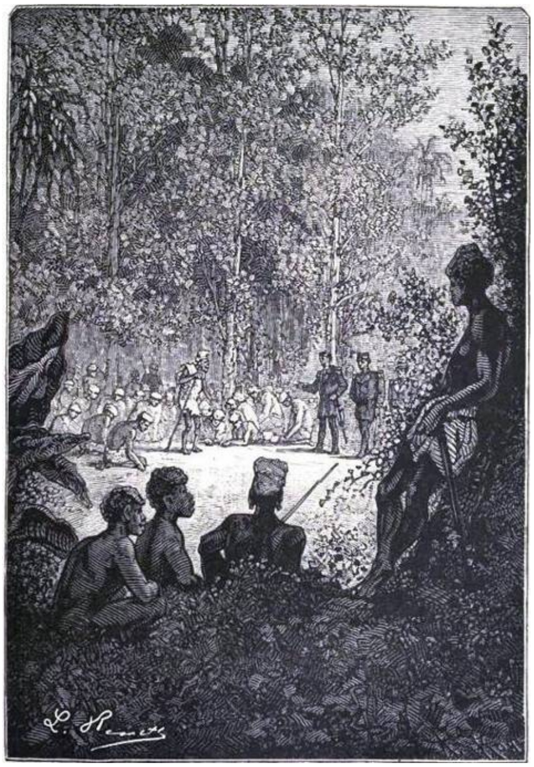

Meeting with the Chief of Ualan.

After the audience was over the travellers proceeded to look round the village, where they were astonished to find two immense walls made of coral, some blocks of which were of immense size and weight.

Notwithstanding a few acts of petty theft committed by the chiefs, the ten days during which the expedition remained at the island passed without disturbance; the good understanding on which the intercourse between the Frenchmen and the Ualanese was based never suffered a moment's interruption. Duperrey remarks that "it is easy to predict that this island of Ualan will one day become of considerable importance. It is situated in the midst of the Caroline group, in the course of ships sailing from New Holland to China, and presents good ports for careening vessels, ample supplies of water, and provisions of various kinds. The inhabitants are generous and peaceably disposed, and they will soon be in a position to supply a kind of food most essential to sailors, from the progeny of the sows that we left with them, a gift which excited a very lively gratitude."

Subsequent events, however, have not verified the forecast made by Duperrey. Although a route from Europe to China, by the south of Van Diemen's Island, passes near the coast of Ualan, the island is of little more value now than it was fifty years ago. Steam has completely revolutionized the conditions of navigation. Sailors at the commencement of the century could not possibly foresee the radical changes which the introduction of this agent would produce.

The *Coquille* had not gone more than two days' sail from Ualan, when on the 17th, 18th, and 23rd June were discovered several new islands, which by the native inhabitants were called Pelelap, Takai, Aoura, Ougai, and Mongoul. These are the groups usually called Mac-Askyll and Duperrey, the people resembling those of Ualan, who, as well as those of the Radak Islands, give to their chiefs the title of "Tamon."

On the 24th of the same month the *Coquille* found herself in the middle of the Hogoleu group, which Kotzebue had looked for in too high a latitude, the commander recognizing their bearings by means of certain names given by the natives, which were found entered in the chart of Father Cantova. The hydrographical survey of this group, contained within a circumference of at least thirty leagues, was executed by M. Blois from the 24th to the 27th June. The islands are for the most part high, terminating in volcanic peaks; but some are of opinion, judging from the arrangement of the lagoon, that they are of madreporic formation. They are tenanted by a race of diminutive, badly-shaped people, subject moreover to repulsive complaints. If ever the converse of the phrase *mens sana in corpore sano* can find a just application, it must be here, for these natives are low in the scale of intelligence, and inferior by many degrees to the people of Ualan. Even at that time foreign styles of dress appeared to have found their way into the islands. Some of the people were wearing conical-shaped hats, after the Chinese fashion; others had on garments of plaited straw, with a hole in the middle to allow the head to pass through, reminding one of the "Poncho" of the South American; but they held in contempt such trumpery as looking-glasses, necklaces, or bells, asking rather for axes and steel weapons, evidences of frequent intercourse with Europeans.

The islands of Tamatan, Fanendik, and Ollap, called "The Martyrs" on old maps, were next surveyed; afterwards an ineffectual search was made for the islands of Namoureck and Ifelouk about the position assigned to them by Arrowsmith and Malaspina; and then, by way of continuing the exploration of the north side of New Guinea, the *Coquille* put in at the port of Doreï, on the south-east coast of the island, where a stay was made until the 9th August.

Whether estimated by the addition made to natural history, or to geography, or to astronomy, or to science in general, no more profitable a sojourn could have been made than this. The indigenous inhabitants of New Guinea belong to the purest race of Papuans. Their dwellings are huts built upon piles, the entrance to them being made by means of a piece of wood with notches cut in it to serve for steps; this is drawn up into the interior every night. The natives dwelling on the coast are always at war with those in the interior, the Harfous or Arfakis negroes.

Guided by a young Papuan, D'Urville succeeded in making his way to the place where these last-mentioned dwelt. He found them gentle, hospitable, courteous creatures, not in the least like the portrait drawn of them by their enemies.

After the stay at New Guinea, the *Coquille* again sailed through the Moluccas, put in for a short time at Sourabaya, upon the coast of Java, and on the 30th October reached the islands of Bourbon and Mauritius. At length, having on the way stopped at St. Helena, where the officers paid a visit to the tomb of Napoleon, and at Ascension, where an English colony had been established since 1815, the corvette entered Marseilles on the 24th April, 1825, concluding a voyage that had occupied thirty-one months and three days, over 24,894 nautical miles, without the loss of a single life, or any cases of sickness, and without any damage being sustained by the ship. A success in every way so distinguished covered with glory the young commander of the expedition and all its officers, who had manifested such untiring energy in the prosecution of scientific inquiries, yielding a rich harvest of valuable results.

Fifty-two charts and plans carefully drawn up; collections of natural specimens of all kinds, both numerous and curious; copious vocabularies, by the help of which it may be possible to throw new light on the migrations of the Oceanic peoples; interesting intelligence regarding the productions of the places visited; the condition of commerce and industrial pursuits; observations relating to the shape of the globe; magnetical, meteorological, and botanical researches; such formed the bulk of the valuable freight of knowledge brought home by the *Coquille*. The scientific world waited eagerly for the time when this store of information should be thrown open to the public.

II.

Expedition of Baron de Bougainville — Stay at Pondicherry — The "White Town" and the "Black Town" — "Right-hand" and "Left-hand" — Malacca — Singapore and its prosperity — Stay at Manilla — Touron Bay — The monkeys and the people — The marble rocks of Faifoh — Cochin-Chinese diplomacy — The Anambas — The Sultan of Madura — The straits of Madura and Allas — Cloates and the Triad Islands — Tasmania — Botany Bay and New South Wales — Santiago and Valparaiso — Return *viâ* Cape Horn — Expedition of Dumont d'Urville in the *Astrolabe* — The Peak of Teneriffe — Australia — Stay at New Zealand — Tonga-Tabu — Skirmishes — New Britain and New Guinea — First news of the fate of La Pérouse — Vanikoro and its inhabitants — Stay at Guam — Amboyna and Menado — Results of the expedition.

The expedition, the command of which was entrusted to Baron de Bougainville, was, strictly speaking, neither a scientific voyage nor a campaign of discovery. Its chief purpose was to unfurl the French flag in the extreme East, and to impress upon the governments of that region the intention of France to protect her nationalities and her interests, everywhere and at all times. The chief instructions given to the commander were that he was to convey to the sovereign of Cochin-China a letter from the king, together with some presents, to be placed on board the frigate *Thetis*.

M. de Bougainville was also, whenever possible, without such delays as would prejudice the main object of the expedition, to take hydrographic surveys, and to collect information upon the commerce, productions, and means of exchange, of the countries visited.

Two vessels were placed under the orders of M. de Bougainville. One, the *Thetis*, was an entirely new frigate, carrying forty-four cannons and three hundred sailors, no French frigate of this strength, except the *Boudeuse*, having ever before accomplished the voyage round the world; the other, the sloop *Espérance*, had twenty carronades upon the deck, and carried a hundred and twenty seamen.

The first of these vessels was under the direct orders of Baron de Bougainville, and his staff consisted of picked officers, amongst whom we may mention Longueville, Lapierre, and Baudin, afterwards captain, vice-admiral, and rear-admiral. The *Espérance* was commanded by Frigate-Captain De Nourquer du Camper, who, as second in command of the frigate *Cleopatra*, had already explored a great part of the course of the new expedition. It numbered among its officers, Turpin, afterwards vice-admiral, deputy, and aide-de-camp of Louis Philippe; Eugène Penaud, afterwards general officer, and Médéric Malavois, the future governor of Senegal.

Not one notable scientific man, such as those who had been billeted in such numbers on the *Naturalist* and other circumnavigating vessels, had embarked upon those of Baron de Bougainville, to whom it was a constant matter of regret, a regret intensified by the fact that the medical officers, with so many under their care, could not be long absent from the vessels when in port. M. de Bougainville's journal of the voyage opens with this judicious remark: —

"It was not many years ago a dangerous enterprise to make a voyage round the world, and scarce half a century has elapsed since the time when an expedition of this kind would have sufficed to reflect glory upon the man who directed it. This was 'the good old time,' the golden age of the circumnavigator, and the dangers and privations against which he had to struggle were repaid a hundredfold, when, rich in valuable discoveries, he hailed on his return the shores of his native land. But this is all over now; the *prestige* has gone, and we make our tour of the globe nowadays as we should then have made that of France."

What would Baron Yves-Hyacinth Potentien de Bougainville, the son of the vice-admiral, senator, and member of the *Institut*, say to-day to our admirable steamships of perfect form, and charts of such minute exactitude that distant voyages appear a mere joke.

On the 2nd March, 1824, the *Thetis* quitted the roads at Brest to take up at Bourbon her companion, the *Espérance*, which, having started some time before, had set sail for Rio de Janeiro. A short stay at Teneriffe, where the *Thetis* was only able to purchase some poor wine and a very small quantity of the provisions needed; a view of the Cape Verd Islands and the Cape of Good Hope in the distance, and a hunt for the fabulous island of Saxemberg, and some rocks no less fictitious, were the only incidents of the voyage to Bourbon, where the *Espérance* had already arrived.

Bourbon was at this time so familiar a point with the navigators that there was little to be said about it, when its two open roads of St. Denis and St.

Paul had been mentioned. St. Denis, the capital, situated on the north of Bourbon, and at the extremity of a sloping table-land, was, properly speaking, merely a large town, without enclosure or walls, and each house in it was surrounded by a garden. There were no public buildings or places of interest worth mentioning except the governor's palace, situated in such a position as to command a view of the whole road; the botanic garden and the "Jardin de Naturalisation," which dates from 1817. The former, which is in the centre of the town, contains some beautiful walks, unfortunately but little frequented, and it is admirably kept. The eucalyptus, the giant of the Australian forests, the *Phormium tenax*, the New Zealand hemp-plant, the casuarina (the pine of Madagascar), the baobab, with its trunk of prodigious size, the carambolas, the sapota, the vanilla, combined to beautify this garden, which was refreshed by streams of sparkling water. The second, upon the brow of a hill, formed of terraces rising one above the other, to which several brooklets give life and fertility, was specially devoted to the acclimatisation of European trees and plants. The apple, peach, apricot, cherry, and pear-trees, which have thriven well, have already supplied the colony with valuable shoots. The vine was also grown in this garden, together with the tea-plant, and several rarer species, amongst which Bougainville noted with delight the "Laurea argentea," with its bright leaves.

On the 9th June the two vessels left the roads of St. Denis. After having doubled the shoals of La Fortune and Saya de Malha, and passed off the Seychelles, whilst among the atolls to the south of the Maldive Islands, which are level with the surface of the water and covered with bushy trees ending in a cluster of cocoas, they sighted the island of Ceylon and the Coromandel coast, and cast anchor before Pondicherry.

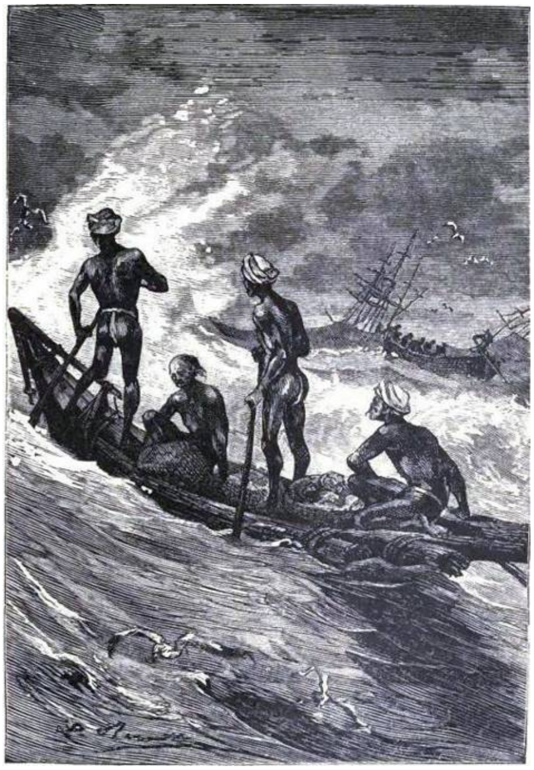

Natives of Pondicherry.

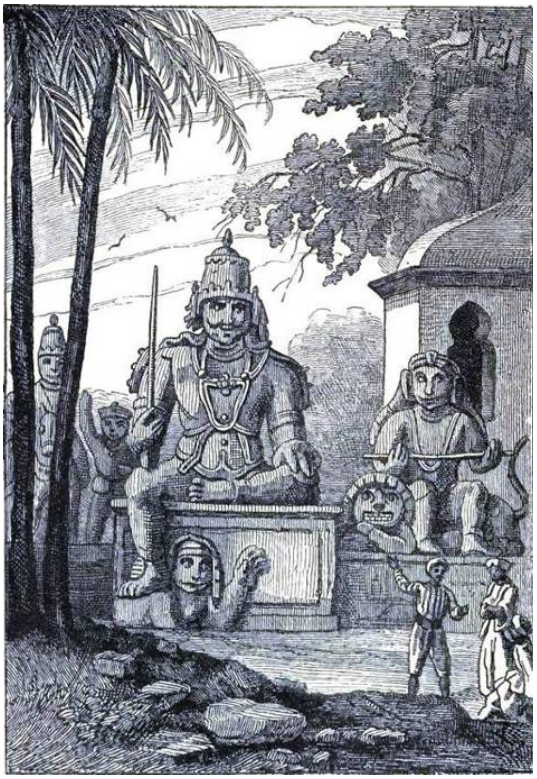

Ancient idols near Pondicherry.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

This part of India is far from answering to the "enchantress" idea which the dithyrambic descriptions of writers who have celebrated its marvels have led Europeans to form. The number of public buildings and monuments at Pondicherry will scarcely bear counting, and when one has visited the more curious of the pagodas, and the "boilers," whose only recommendation is their utility, there is nothing very interesting, except the novelty of the scenes met with at every turn. The town is divided into two well-defined quarters. The one called the "white town," dull and deserted in spite of its coquettish-looking buildings, and the far more interesting "black town," with its bazaars, its jugglers, its massive pagodas, and the attractive dances of the bayadères.

"The Indian population upon the coast of Coromandel," says the narrative, "is divided into two classes, — the 'right-hand' and the 'left.' This division originated under the government of a nabob against whom the people revolted; those who remained faithful to the prince being distinguished by the designation of 'right-hand,' and the rest by that of 'left-hand.' These two great tribes, which divide between them almost equally the entire population, are in a chronic state of hostility against the holders of the ranks and prerogatives obtained by the friends of the prince. The latter, however, retain the offices in the gift of the government, whilst the others are engaged in commerce. To maintain peace amongst them it was necessary to allow them to retain their ancient processions and ceremonies.... The 'right-hand' and 'left-hand' are subdivided into eighteen castes or guilds, full of pretensions and prejudices, not diminished even by the constant intercourse with Europeans which has now for centuries been maintained. Hence have arisen feelings of rivalry and contempt, which would be the source of sanguinary wars, were it not that the Hindus have a horror of bloodshed, and that their temperament renders them averse to conflict. These two facts, i.e. the gentleness of the native disposition and the constant presence of an element of discord amongst the various tribes, must ever be borne in mind if we would understand the political phenomenon of more than fifty millions of men submitting to the yoke of some five and twenty or thirty thousand foreigners."

The *Thetis* and the *Espérance* quitted the roadstead of Pondicherry on the 30th July, crossed the Sea of Bengal, sighted the islands of Nicobar and Pulo-Penang, with its free port capable of holding 300 ships at a time. They then entered the Straits of Malacca, and remained in the Dutch port of that name from the 24th to the 26th July, to repair damages sustained by the *Espérance*, so that she might hold out as far as Manilla. The intercourse of the explorers with the Resident and the inhabitants generally were all the more pleasant that it was confirmed by banquets given on land and on board the *Thetis* in honour of the kings of France and the Netherlands. The Dutch were expecting soon to cede this station to the English, and this cession took place shortly afterwards. It must be added, with regard to Malacca, that in point of fertility of soil, pleasantness of situation and facilities for obtaining all really necessary supplies, it was superior to its rivals.

Bougainville set out again on August 26th, and was tossed about by head-winds, and troubled alike by calms and storms during the remainder of his passage through the straits. As these latitudes were more frequented than any others by Malay pirates, the commandant placed sentries on the watch and took all precautions against surprise, although his force was strong enough to be above fearing any enemy. It was no uncommon thing to see fly-boats manned by a hundred seamen, and more than one merchant-ship had recently fallen a prey to these unmolested and incorrigible corsairs. The squadron, however, saw nothing to awake any suspicions, and continued its course to Singapore.

The population of this town is a curious mixture of races, and our travellers met with Europeans engaged in the chief branches of commerce; Armenian and Arabian merchants, and Chinese; some planters, others following the various trades demanded by the requirements of the population. The Malays, who seemed out of place in an advancing civilization, either led a life of servitude, or slept away their time in indolence and misery whilst the Hindus, expelled from their country for crime, practised the indescribable trades which in all great cities alone save the scum from dying of starvation. It was only in 1819 that the English procured from the Malayan sultan of

Johore the right to settle in the town of Singapore; and the little village in which they established themselves then numbered but 150 inhabitants, although, thanks to Sir Stamford Raffles, a town soon rose on the site of the unpretending cabins of the natives. By a wise stroke of policy all customs-duties were abolished; and the natural advantages of the new city, with its extensive and secure port, were supplemented and perfected by the hand of man.

The garrison numbered only 300 sepoys and thirty gunners; there were as yet no fortifications, and the artillery equipment consisted merely of one battery of twenty cannons, and as many bronze field-pieces. Indeed, Singapore was simply one large warehouse, to which Madras sent cotton cloth; Calcutta, opium; Sumatra, pepper; Java, arrack and spices; Manilla, sugar and arrack; all forthwith despatched to Europe, China, Siam, &c. Of public buildings there appeared to be none. There were no stores, no careening-wharves, no building-yards, no barracks, and the visitors noticed but one small church for native converts.

The squadron resumed its voyage on the 2nd September, and reached the harbour of Cavité without any mishap. Meanwhile, M. du Camper, commander of the *Espérance* who had, during a residence of some years, become acquainted with the principal inhabitants, was ordered to go to Manilla, that he might inform the Governor-General of the Philippines of the arrival of the frigates, the reasons of their visit, &c., and at the same time gauge his feelings towards them, and form some idea of the reception the French might expect. The recent intervention of France in the affairs of Spain placed them indeed in a very delicate position with the then governor, Don Juan Antonio Martinez, who had been nominated to his post by the very Cortés which had just been overthrown by their government. The fears of the commandant, however, were not confirmed, for he met with the warmest kindness and most cordial co-operation from the Spanish authorities.

Cavité Bay, where the vessels cast anchor, was constantly encumbered with mud, but it was the chief port in the Philippine Islands, and there the Spaniards owned a very well supplied arsenal in which worked Indians from the surrounding districts, who though skilful and intelligent were excessively lazy. Whilst the *Thetis* was being sheathed, and the extensive repairs necessary to the *Espérance* were being carried out, the clerks and officers were at Manilla, seeing about the supply of provisions and cordage. The latter, which was made of "abaca," the fibre of a banana, vulgarly called "Manilla hemp," although recommended on account of its great elasticity, was not of much use on board ship. The delay at Manilla was rendered very disagreeable by earthquakes and typhoons, which are always of constant occurrence there. On October 24th there was an earthquake of such violence that the governor, troops, and a portion of the people were compelled hastily to leave the town, and the loss was estimated at 120,000*l*. Many houses were thrown down, eight people were buried in the ruins, and many others injured. Scarcely had the inhabitants begun to breathe freely again, when a frightful typhoon came to complete the panic. It lasted only part of the night of the 31st October, and the next day, when the sun rose, it might have been looked upon as a mere nightmare had not the melancholy sight of fields laid waste, and of the harbour with six ships lying on their sides, and all the others at anchor, almost entirely disabled, testified to the reality of the disaster. All around the town the country was devastated, the crops were ruined, the trees — even the largest of them — violently shaken, the village destroyed. It was a heart-rending spectacle! The *Espérance* had its main-mast and mizen-mast lifted several feet above deck, and its barricadings were carried off; the *Thetis*, more fortunate than its companion, escaped almost uninjured in the dreadful tempest.

The laziness of the workpeople, and the great number of holidays in which they indulge, early decided Bougainville to part for a time from his convoy, and on December 12th he set sail for Cochin-China. Before following the French to the little-frequented shores of that country, however, we must survey with them Manilla and its environs. The Bay of Manilla is one of the most extensive and beautiful in the world; numerous fleets might find anchorage in it; and its two channels were not yet closed to foreign vessels, and in 1798 two English frigates had been allowed to pass through them and carry off numerous vessels under the very guns of the town. The horizon is shut in by a barrier of mountains, ending on the south of the Taal, a volcano now almost extinct, but the eruptions of which have often caused frightful calamities. In the plains, framed in rice plantations, several hamlets and solitary houses give animation to the scene. Opposite to the mouth of the bay rises the town, containing 60,000 inhabitants, with its lighthouse and far-extending suburbs. It is watered by the Passig, a river issuing from Bay Lake, and its exceptionally good situation secures to it advantages which more than one capital might envy. The garrison, without including the militia, consisted at that time of 2200 soldiers; and, in addition to the military navy, always represented by some vessel at anchor, a marine service had been organized for the exclusive use of the colony, to which the name of "sutil" had been given, either on account of the small size, or the fleetness of the vessels employed. This service, all appointments in which are in the gift of the governor-general, is composed of schooners and gun-sloops, intended to protect the coasts and the trading-vessels against the pirates of Sulu. But it cannot be said that the organization, imposing as it is, has achieved any great results. Of this Bougainville gives the following curious illustration: — In 1828 the Suluans seized 3000 of the inhabitants upon the coast of Luzon, and an expedition sent against them cost 140,000 piastres, and resulted in the killing of six men!

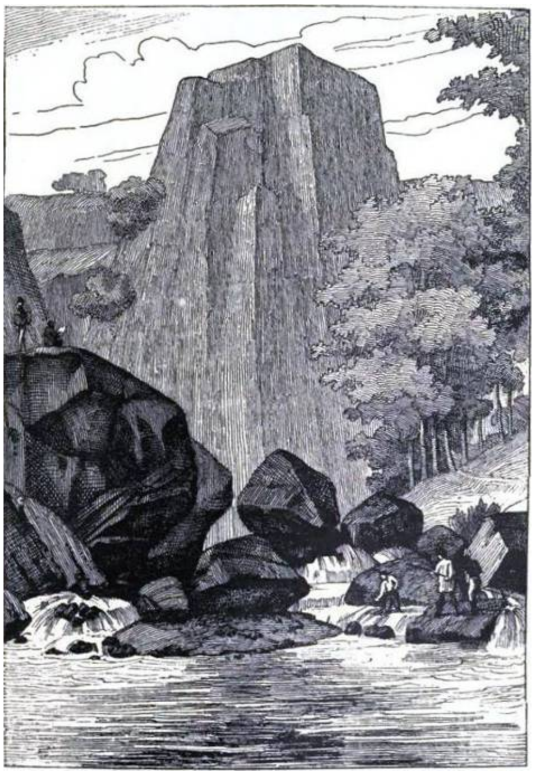

Near the Bay of Manilla.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Great uneasiness prevailed in the Philippines at the time of the visit of the *Thetis* and the *Espérance*, and a political reaction which had steeped the metropolis in blood had thrown a gloom over every one. On December 20th, 1820, a massacre of the whites by the Indians; in 1824, the mutiny of a regiment, and the assassination of an ex-governor, Senor de Folgueras, had been the first horrors which had endangered the supremacy of the Spanish.

The Creoles, who, with the Tagalas, were alike the richest and most industrious classes of the true native population, at this time gave just cause for uneasiness to the government, because they were known to desire the expulsion of all who were not natives of the Philippines; and when it is borne in mind that they commanded the native regiments, and held the greater part of the public offices, it is easy to see how great must have been their influence. Well might people ask whether they were not on the eve of one of those revolutions which lost to Spain her fairest colonies.

Until the *Thetis* reached Macao, she was much harassed by squalls, gales, heavy showers, and an intensity of cold, felt all the more keenly by the navigators after their experience for several months of a temperature of 75¾° Fahrenheit. Scarcely was anchor cast in the Canton river before a great number of native vessels came to examine the frigate, offering for sale vegetables, fish, oranges, and a multitude of trifles, once so rare, now so common, but always costly.

"The town of Macao," says the narrative, "shut in between bare hills, can be seen from afar; the whiteness of its buildings rendering it very conspicuous. It partly faces the coast, and the houses, which are elegantly built, line the beach, following the natural contour of the shore. The parade is also the finest part of the town, and is much frequented by foreigners; behind it, the ground rises abruptly, and the façades of the buildings, such as convents, noticeable for their size and peculiar architecture, rise, so to speak, from the second stage; the whole being crowned by the embattled walls of the forts, over which floated the white flag of Portugal.

"At the northern and southern extremities of the town, facing the sea, are batteries built in three stages; and near the first, but a little further inland, rises a church with a very effective portico and fine external decorations.

Numerous *sampangs*, junks, and fishing-boats anchored close in shore, give animation to the scene, the setting of which would be much brightened if the heights overlooking the town were not so totally wanting in verdure."

Situated as it is in the high road, between China and the rest of the world, Macao, once one of the chief relics of Portuguese colonial prosperity, long enjoyed exceptional privileges, all of which were, however, gone by 1825, when its one industry was a contraband trade in opium.

The *Thetis* only touched at Macao to leave some missionaries, and to hoist the French flag, and Bougainville set sail again on January 8th.

Nothing worthy of notice occurred on the voyage from Macao to Touron Bay. Arrived there, Bougainville learned that the French agent, M. Chaigneu, had left Hué for Saigon, with the intention of there chartering a barque for Singapore, and in the absence of the only person who could further his schemes he did not know with whom to open relations. Fearing failure as an inevitable result of this *contretemps* he at once despatched a letter to Hué, explaining the object of his mission, and expressing a wish to go with some of his officers to Saigon. The time which necessarily elapsed before an answer was received was turned to account by the French, who minutely surveyed the bay and its surroundings, together with the famous marble rocks, the objects of the curious interest of all travellers. Touron Bay has been described by various authors, notably by Horsburgh, as one of the most beautiful and vast in the universe; but such is not the opinion of Bougainville, who thinks these statements are to be taken with a great deal of reservation. The village of Touron is situated upon the sea-coast, at the entrance of the channel of Faifoh, from the right bank of which rises a fort with glacis, bastions, and a dry moat, built by French engineers.

The French being looked upon as old allies were always received with kindness and without suspicion. It had not, apparently, been so with the English, who had not been permitted to land, whilst the sailors on board the *Thetis* were at once allowed to fish and hunt, and to go and come as they chose, every facility for obtaining fresh provisions being also accorded to them. Thanks to this latitude, the officers were able to scour the country and make interesting observations. One of them, M. de la Touanne, gives the following description of the natives: — "They are rather under than over middle height, and in this respect they closely resemble the Chinese of Macao. Their skin is of a yellowish-brown, and their heads are flat and round; their faces are without expression, their eyes are as melancholy, but their eyebrows are not so strongly marked as those of the Chinese. They have flat noses and large mouths, and their lips bulge out in a way rendered the more disagreeable as they are always black and dirty from the habit indulged in, by men and women alike, of chewing areca nut mixed with betel and lime. The women, who are almost as tall as the men, have not a more pleasant appearance; and the repulsive filthiness, common to both sexes, is enough without anything else to deprive them of all attractiveness."

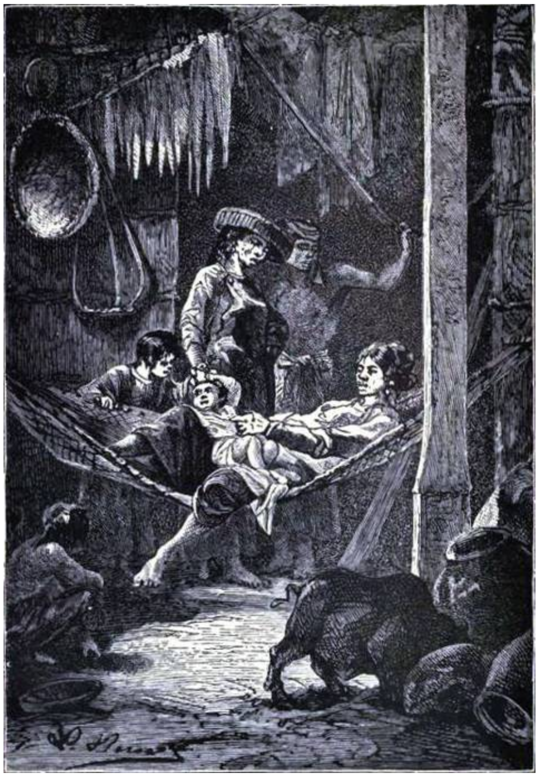

Women of Touron Bay.

What strikes one most is the wretchedness of the inhabitants as compared with the fertility of the soil, and this shocking contrast betrays alike the selfishness and carelessness of the government and the insatiable greed of the mandarins. The plains produce maize, yams, manioc, tobacco, and rice, the flourishing appearance of which testifies to the care bestowed upon them; the sea yields large quantities of delicious fish, and the forests give shelter to numerous birds, as well as tigers, rhinoceroses, buffaloes, and elephants, and troops of monkeys are to be met with everywhere, some of them four feet high, with bodies of a pearl-grey colour, black thighs, and red legs. They wear red collars and white girdles, which make them look just as if they were clothed. Their muscular strength is extraordinary, and they clear enormous distances in leaping from branch to branch. Nothing can be odder than to see some dozen of these creatures upon one tree indulging in the most fantastic grimaces and contortions. "One day," says Bougainville, "when I was at the edge of the forest, I wounded a monkey who had ventured forth for a stroll in the sunshine. He hid his face in his hands and sent forth such piteous groans that more than thirty of his tribe were about him in a moment. I lost no time in reloading my gun not knowing what I might have to expect, for some monkeys are not afraid of attacking men; but the troop only took up their wounded comrade, and once more plunged into the wood."

Another excursion was made to the marble rocks of the Faifoh River, where are several curious caves, one containing an enormous pillar suspended from the roof and ending abruptly some distance from the ground; stalactites were seen, but the sound of a water-fall was heard from the further end. The French also visited the ruins of an ancient building near a grotto, containing an idol, and with a passage opening out of one corner. This passage Bougainville followed. It led him into an "immense rotunda lighted from the top, and ending in an arched vault, at least sixty feet high. Imagine the effect of a series of marble pillars of various colours, some from their greenish colour, the result of old age and damp, looking as if cast in bronze, whilst from the roof hung down creepers, now in festoons, now in bunches, looking for all the world like candelabra without the lights. Above our heads were groups of stalactites resembling great organ-pipes, altars, mutilated statues, hideous monsters carved in stone, and even a complete pagoda, which, however, occupied but a very small space in the vast enclosure. Fancy such a scene in an appropriate setting, the whole lit up with a dim and wavering light, and you can perhaps form some idea how it struck me when it first burst upon me."

On the 20th of January, 1825, the *Espérance* at last rejoined the frigate; and, two days later, two envoys arrived from the court at Hué, with orders to ask Bougainville for the letter of which he was the bearer. But, as the latter had received orders to deliver it to the Emperor in person, this request involved a long series of puerile negotiations. The formalities by which the Cochin-Chinese envoys were, so to speak, hemmed in, reminded Bougainville of the anecdote of the envoy and the governor of Java, who, rivalling each other in their gravity and diplomatic prudence, remained together for twenty-four hours without exchanging a word. The commander was not the man to endure such trial of patience as this, but he could not obtain the necessary authorization of his explorations, and the negotiations ended in an exchange of presents, securing nothing in fact but an assurance from the Emperor that he would receive with pleasure a visit of the French vessels to his ports, if their captain and officers would conform to the laws of the Empire. Since 1817 the French had been pretty well the only people who had done any satisfactory business with the people of Cochin-China, a state of things resulting from the presence of French residents at the court of Hué, on whom alone of course depended the maintenance of the exceptionally cordial relations so long established between them and the government to which they were accredited.

The two ships left Touron Bay on the 17th February for the Anambas Archipelago, which had not as yet been explored; and, on the 3rd of March, they came in sight of it, and found it to bear no resemblance whatever to the islands of the same name, marked upon the English map of the China Sea. Bougainville was agreeably surprised to see a large number of islands and islets, the bays, &c., of which were sure to afford excellent anchorage during the monsoons. The explorers penetrated to the very heart of the archipelago, and made a hydrographic survey of it. Whilst the small boats were engaged upon this task, two prettily built canoes approached, from one of which a man of about fifty came on board the *Thetis*, whose breast was seamed with scars, and from whose right-hand two fingers were missing. The sight of the rows of guns and ammunition, however, so terrified him that he beat a hasty retreat to his canoe, though he had already got as far as the orlop-deck. Next day two more canoes approached, manned by fierce-looking Malays, bringing bananas, cocoa-nuts, and pineapples, which they bartered for biscuits, a handkerchief, and two small axes. Several other interviews took place with islanders, armed with the kriss, and short two-edged iron pikes, who were very evidently pirates by profession.

Although the French explored but a part of the Anamba group, the information they collected was extremely interesting on account of its novelty. The first requisite of a large population is plenty of fresh water, and there is apparently very little of it in the Anambas. Moreover, the cultivable soil is not very deep, and the mountains are separated by narrow ravines, not by plains, so that agriculture is all but out of the question. Even the native trees, with the exception of the cocoa-palm, are very stunted. The population was estimated by a native at not more than 2000, but Bougainville thought even that too high a figure. The fortunate position of the Anambas — they are passed by all vessels trading with China, whichever route may be taken — long since brought them to the notice of navigators; and we must attribute to their lack of resources the neglect to which they have been abandoned. The small amount of cordiality and confidence met with by Bougainville from the inhabitants, the high price of provisions, and the destructive nature of the monsoons in the Sunda waters, determined him to cut short his survey and to make with all speed for Java, where his instructions compelled him to touch. The 8th of March was fixed for the departure of the two vessels, which sighted Victory, Barren, Saddle, and Camel Islands, passed through the Gasper Straits — the passage of which did not occupy more than two hours, although it often takes several days with an unfavourable wind — and cast anchor at Surabaya, where the explorers were met with the news of the death of Louis XVIII. and the accession of Charles X. As the cholera, which had claimed 300,000 victims in Java in 1822, was still raging, Bougainville took the precaution of keeping his crew on board under shelter from the sun, and expressly forbade any intercourse with vessels laden with fruit, the use of which is so dangerous to Europeans, especially during the rainy season then setting in. In spite of these wise orders, however, dysentery attacked the crew of the *Thetis*, and too many fell victims to it.

The town of Surabaya is situated one league from the mouth of the river, and it can only be reached by towing up the stream. Its approaches are lively, and everything bears witness to the presence of an active commercial population. An expedition to the island of Celebes having exhausted the resources of the government and the magazines being empty, Bougainville had to deal direct with the Chinese merchants, who are the most bare-faced robbers on the face of the globe, and now resorted to all manner of cunning and knavery to get the better of their visitors. The stay at Surabaya, therefore, left a very disagreeable impression on all. It was quite different, however, with regard to the reception met with from the chief personages of the colony, for there was every reason to be satisfied with the conduct of all connected with the government.

To go to Surabaya without paying a visit to the Sultan of Madura, whose reputation for hospitality had crossed the seas, would have been as impossible as it is to visit Paris without going to see Versailles and Trianon. After a comfortable lunch on shore, therefore, the staff of the two vessels set out in open carriages and four; but the roads were so bad and the horses so worn out that they would many a time have stuck in the mud if men stationed at the dangerous places had not energetically shoved at the wheels. At last they arrived at Bankalan, and the carriages drew up in the third court of the palace at the foot of a staircase, at the top of which the hereditary prince and the prime minister awaited the arrival of the travellers. Prince Adden Engrate belonged to the most illustrious family of the Indian Archipelago. He wore the undress uniform of a Java chief, consisting of a long flowered petticoat of Indian make, scarcely allowing the Chinese slippers to be seen, a white vest with gold buttons, and a small skirted waistcoat of brown cloth, with diamond buttons. A handkerchief was tied about his head, on which he wore a visor-cap, his ease and dignity of bearing alone saving him from looking like the grotesque figure of a carnival amazon. The palace or "kraton" consisted of a series of buildings with galleries, kept delightfully cool by awnings and curtains, whilst lustres, tasty European furniture, pretty hangings, glass and crystal ornaments decorated the vast halls and rooms. A suite of private apartments, with no opening to the court, but with a view of the gardens, is reserved for the "Ratu" (sovereign) and the harem.

The reception was cordial, and the repast, served in European style, was delicious. "The conversation," says Bougainville, "was conducted in English, and many toasts were proposed, the prince drinking our healths in tea poured from a bottle, and to which he helped himself as if it had been Madeira. Being head of the church as well as of the state, he strictly obeys the precepts of the Koran, never drinking wine, and spending a great part of his time at the mosque; but he is not the less sociable, and his talk bears no trace of the austerity to be expected in that of one who leads so regular a life. This life is not, however, all spent in prayer, and the scenes witnessed by us would give a very false impression if we did not know that great latitude is allowed on this point to the followers of the prophet."

In the afternoon the Frenchmen visited several coach-houses, containing very handsome carriages, some of which, built on the island, were so well-made that it was absolutely impossible to distinguish them from those which had been imported. Some archery was then witnessed, and joined in, after which, on the return to the palace, the visitors were welcomed by the sound of melancholy music, speedily interrupted, however, by the barking and fantastical dancing of the prince's fool, who showed wonderful agility and suppleness. To this dance, or rather to these postures of a bayadère, succeeded the excitement of vingt-et-un, followed by well-earned repose. Next day there were new entertainments and new exercises; beginning with wrestling-matches for grown men and for youths, and proceeding with quail-fights, and feats performed by a camel and an elephant. After lunch Bougainville and his party had a drive and some archery, and witnessed sack-races, basket-balancing, &c. In this way, they were told, the sultan passed all his time. Most striking is the respect and submission shown by all to this sovereign. No one ever stands upright before him, but all prostrate themselves before addressing him. All his subjects do but "wait at his feet," and even his own little child of four years clasps his tiny hands when he speaks to his father.

While at Surabaya, Bougainville took the opportunity of visiting the volcano of Brumo, in the Tengger Mountains; and this excursion, in which he explored the island for a hundred miles, from east to west, was one of the most interesting undertaken by him. Surabaya contains some curious buildings and monuments, most of them the work of a former governor, General Daendels; such are the "Builder's Workshop," the "Hôtel de la Monnaie" (the only establishment of the kind in Java), and the hospital, which is built on a well-chosen site, and contains 400 beds. The island of Madura, opposite to Surabaya, is at least 100 miles in length, by fifteen or twenty in breadth, and does not yield produce sufficient to maintain the population, sparse as it is. The sovereignty of this island is divided between the sultans of Bankalan and Sumanap, who furnish annually six hundred recruits to the Dutch, without counting extraordinary levies.

On the 20th April, symptoms of dysentery showed themselves amongst the crews. Two days later therefore the vessel set sail, and it took seven good days to get beyond the straits of Madura. They returned along the north coast of Lombok, and passed through the Allas Straits, between Lombok and Sumbawa. The first of these islands, from the foot of the mountains to the sea, presents the appearance of a green carpet, adorned with groups of trees of elegant appearance, and upon its coast there is no lack of good anchorage, whilst fresh water and wood are plentiful. On the other side, however, there are numerous peaks of barren aspect, rising from a lofty table-land, the approach to which is barred by a series of rugged and inaccessible islands, known as Lombok, the coral-beds and treacherous currents about which must be carefully avoided. Two stoppages at the villages of Baly and Peejow, with a view to taking in fresh provisions, enabled the officers to make a hydrographical chart of this part of the coast of Lombok. Upon leaving the strait, Bougainville made an unsuccessful search for Cloates Island. That he did not find it is not very wonderful, as during the last eight years many ships have passed over the spot assigned to it upon the maps. The "Triads," on the other hand, i.e. the rocks seen in 1777 by the *Freudensberg Castle*, are, in Captain King's opinion, the Montepello Islands, which correspond perfectly with the description of the Danes.

Bougainville had instructions to survey the neighbourhood of the Swan River, where the French Government hoped to find a place suitable for the reception of the wretches then huddled together in their convict-prisons; but the flag of England had just been unfurled on the shores of Nuyts and

Leuwin, in King George's Sound, Géographe Bay, the little Leschenault inlet, and on the Swan River, so that there was no longer any reason for a new exploration. Everything in fact had combined to prevent it; the delays to which the expedition had been subjected had indeed been so serious that instead of arriving in these latitudes in April, they did not reach them until the middle of May, there the very heart of winter. Moreover, the coast offers no shelter, for so soon as the wind begins to blow, the waves swell tremendously, and the memory of the trials which the *Géographe* had undergone at the same season of the year was still fresh in the minds of the French. The *Thetis* and the *Espérance* were pursued by the bad weather as far as Hobart Town, the chief English station upon the coast of Tasmania, where the commander was very anxious to put in. He was, however, driven back by storms to Port Jackson, which is marked by a very handsome lighthouse, a granite tower seventy-six feet high, with a lantern lit by gas, visible at a distance of nine leagues.

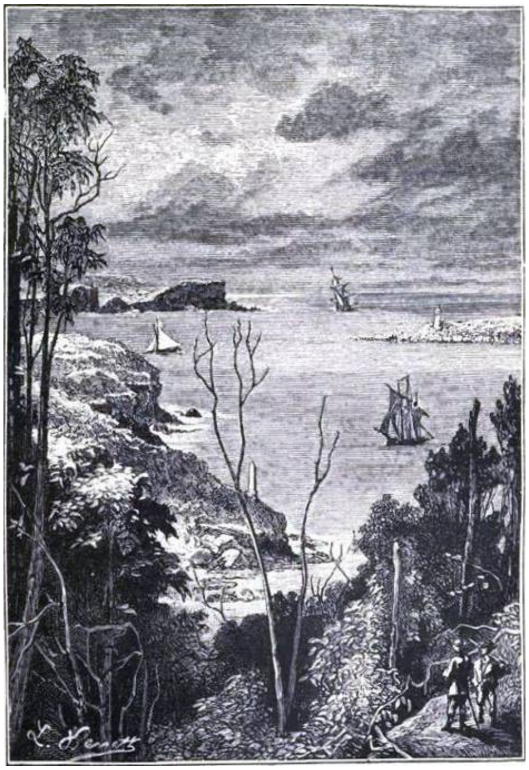

Entrance to Sydney Bay.

Sir Thomas Brisbane, the governor, gave a cordial reception to the expedition, and at once took the necessary steps to furnish it with provisions. This was done by contract at low prices, and the greatest good faith was shown in carrying out all bargains. The sloop had to be run ashore to have its sheathing repaired, but this, with some work of less importance necessary to the *Thetis*, did not take long. The delay was also turned to account by the whole staff, who were greatly interested in the marvellous progress of this penal colony. While Bougainville was eagerly reading all the works which had as yet appeared upon New South Wales, the officers wandered about the town, and were struck dumb with amazement at the numberless public buildings erected by Governor Macquarie, such as the barracks, hospital, market, orphanages, almshouses for the aged and infirm, the prison, the fort, the churches, government-house, the fountains, the town gates, and last but not least, the government-stables, which are always at first sight taken for the palace itself. There was, however, a dark side to the picture. The main thoroughfares, though well-planned, were neither paved nor lighted, and were so unsafe at night, that several people had been seized and robbed in the very middle of George Street, the best quarter of Sydney. If the streets in the town were unsafe, those in the suburbs were still more so. Vagrant convicts overran the country in the form of bands of "bushrangers," who had become so formidable that the government had recently organized a company of fifty dragoons for the express purpose of hunting them down. All this did not, however, hinder the officers from making many interesting excursions, such as those to Paramatta, on the banks of the Nepean, a river very deeply embanked, where they visited the Regent Ville district; and to the "plains of Emu," a government agricultural-station, and a sort of model farm. They went to the theatre, where a grand performance was given in their honour. The delight sailors take in riding is proverbial, and it was on horseback that the French crossed the Emu plains. The noble animals, imported from England, had not degenerated in New South Wales; they were still full of spirit as one of the young officers found to his cost, when, as he was saying in English to Sir John Cox, acting as cicerone to the party, "I do love this riding exercise," he was suddenly thrown over his horse's head and deposited on the grass before he knew where he was. The laugh against him was all the more hearty as the skilful horseman was not injured.

Beyond Sir John Cox's plantations extends the unbroken "open forest," as the English call it, which can be crossed on horseback, and consists chiefly of the eucalyptus, acacias of various kinds, and the dark-leaved casuarinas. The next day, an excursion was made up the river Nepean, a tributary of the Hawkesbury, on which trip many valuable facts of natural history were obtained, Bougainville enriching his collection with canaries, waterfowl, and a very pretty species of kingfisher and cockatoos. In the neighbouring woods was heard the unpleasant cry of the lyre-pheasant and of two other birds, which feebly imitate the tinkling of a hand-bell and the jarring noise of the saw. These are not, however, the only feathered fowl remarkable for the peculiarity of their notes; we must also mention the "whistling-bird," the "knife-grinder," the "mocking-bird," the "coachman," which mimics the crack of the whip, and the "laughing jackass," with its continual bursts of laughter, which have a strange effect upon the nerves. Sir John Cox presented the commander with two specimens of the water-mole, also called the ornithorhynchus, a curious amphibious creature, the habits of which are still little known to European naturalists, many museums not possessing a single specimen.

Another excursion was made in the Blue Mountains, where the famous "King's Table-land" was visited, from which a magnificent view was obtained. The explorers gained with great difficulty the top of an eminence, and an abyss of 1600 feet at once opened beneath them; a vast green carpet stretching away to a distance of some twenty miles, whilst on the right and left were the distorted sides of the mountain, which had been rudely rent asunder by some earthquake, the irregularities corresponding exactly with each other. Close at hand foams a roaring, rushing torrent, flinging itself in a series of cascades into the valley beneath, the whole passing under the name of "Apsley's Waterfall." This trip was succeeded by a kangaroo hunt in the cow-pastures with Mr. Macarthur, one of the chief promoters of the prosperity of New South Wales. Bougainville also turned his stay at Sydney to account by laying the foundation-stone of a monument to the memory of La Pérouse. This cenotaph was erected in Botany Bay, upon the spot where the navigator had pitched his camp.

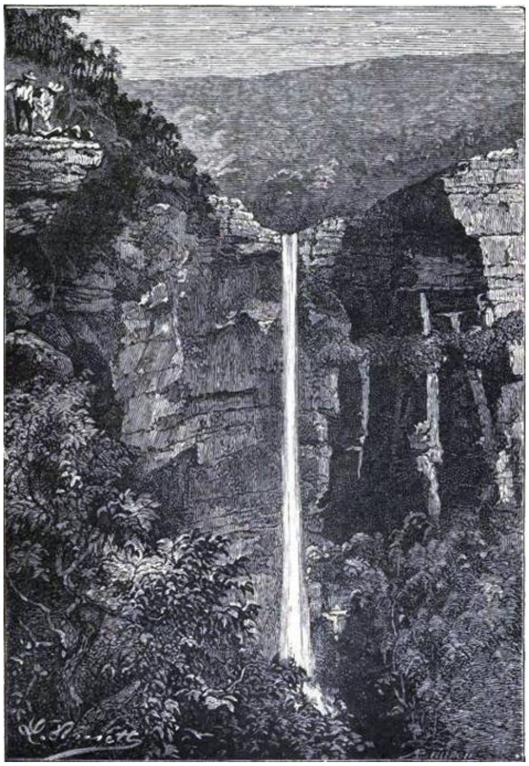

"Apsley's Waterfall."

On September 21st the *Thetis* and the *Espérance* at last set sail; passing off Pitcairn Island, Easter Island, and Juan Fernandez, now a convict settlement for criminals from Chili, after having been occupied for a half-century by Spanish vine-growers.

On the 23rd November the *Thetis*, which had been separated from the *Espérance* during a heavy storm, anchored off Valparaiso, where it met Admiral de Rosamel's division. Great excitement prevailed in the roadstead, for an expedition against the island of Chiloë, which still belonged to Spain, was being organized by the chief director, General Ramon Freire y Serrano, of whom we have already spoken.

Bougainville, like the Russian navigator Lütke, is of opinion that the position of Valparaiso does not justify its reputation. The streets are dirty and narrow, and so steep that walking in them is very fatiguing. The only pleasant part is the suburb of Almendral, which, with its gardens and orchards, would be still more agreeable but for the sand-storms prevalent throughout nearly the whole of the year. In 1811, Valparaiso numbered only from four to five thousand inhabitants; but in 1825 the population had already tripled itself, and the increase showed no sign of ceasing. When the *Thetis* touched at Valparaiso, the English frigate, the *Blonde,* commanded by Lord Byron, grandson of the explorer of the same name, whose discoveries are narrated above, was also at anchor there. By a singular coincidence Byron had raised a monument to the memory of Cook in the island of Hawaii, at the very time when Bougainville, the son of the circumnavigator, met by Byron in the Straits of Magellan, was laying the foundation-stone of the monument to the memory of La Pérouse in New South Wales.

Bougainville turned the delay necessary for the revictualling of his division to account by paying a visit to Santiago, the capital of Chili, thirty-three leagues inland. The environs of Chili are terribly bare, without houses or any signs of cultivation. Its steeples alone mark the approach to it, and one may fancy oneself still in the outskirts when the heart of the city is reached. There is, however, no lack of public buildings, such as the Hôtel de la Monnaie, the university, the archbishop's palace, the cathedral, the church of the Jesuits, the palace, and the theatre, the last of which is so badly lighted that it is impossible to distinguish the faces of the audience. The promenade, known as La Cañada, has now supplanted that of L'Alameda on the banks of the river Mapocha, once the evening rendezvous. The objects of interest in the town exhausted, the Frenchmen examined those in the neighbourhood, visiting the Salto de Agua, a waterfall of 1200 feet in height, the ascent to which is rather arduous, and the Cerito de Santa-Lucia, from which rises a fortress, the sole defence of the town.

The season was now advancing, and no time was to be lost if the explorers wished to take advantage of the best season for doubling Cape Horn. On the 8th January, 1826, therefore, the two vessels once more put to sea, and rounded the Cape without any mishap, though landing at the Falklands was rendered impossible by fog and contrary winds. Anchor was cast on the 28th March in the roadstead of Rio Janeiro, and, as it turned out, at a time most favourable for the French to form an accurate opinion alike on the city and the court.

"The emperor," says Bougainville, "was upon a journey at the time of our arrival, and his return was the occasion of fêtes and receptions which roused the population to activity, and broke for a time the monotony of ordinary life in Rio, that dullest and dreariest of towns to the foreigner. Its environs, however, are charming; nature has in them been lavish of her riches; and the vast harbour, the Atlantic, rendezvous of the commercial world, presents a most animated scene. Innumerable ships, either standing in or getting under weigh, small craft cruising about, a ceaseless roar of cannon from the forts and men-of-war, exchanging signals on the occasion of some anniversary or the celebration of some festival of the church, whilst visits were constantly being exchanged between the officers of the various foreign vessels and the diplomatic agents of foreign powers at the court of Rio."

The division set sail again on the 11th April, and arrived at Brest on the 24th June, 1826, without having put into port since it left Rio Janeiro. We must remember that if Bougainville did not make any discoveries on this voyage, he had no formal instructions to do so, his mission being merely to unfurl the flag of France where it had as yet been rarely seen. None the less do we owe to this general officer some very interesting, and in some cases new information on the countries visited by him. Some of the surveys made by his expedition may be of service to navigators, and it must be owned that the hydrographical researches which alone could be undertaken in the absence of scientific men were carefully made, and resulted in the obtaining of numerous and accurate data. We can but sympathize with the commander of the *Thetis*, in his expression of regret, in the preface to his journal, that neither the Government nor the *Académie des Sciences* had seen fit to turn his expedition to account to obtain new results supplementary of the rich harvest gleaned by his predecessors.

The expedition next sent out under the command of Captain Dumont d'Urville was merely intended by the minister to supplement and consolidate the mass of scientific data collected by Captain Duperrey in his voyage from 1822 to 1824. As second in command to Duperrey, and the originator and organizer of the new exploring expedition, D'Urville had the very first claim to be appointed to its command. The portions of Oceania he proposed to visit were New Zealand, the Fiji Islands, the Loyalty Islands, New Britain, and New Guinea, all of which he considered urgently to demand the consideration alike of the geographer and the traveller. What he effected in this direction we shall ascertain by following him step by step. An interest of another character also attaches to this trip, but it will be well to quote on this point the instructions given to the navigator.

"An American captain," writes the Minister of Marine, "said that he saw in the hands of the natives of an isle situated between New Caledonia and the Louisiade Archipelago a cross of St. Louis and some medals, which he imagined to be relics of the wrecked vessel of the celebrated La Pérouse, whose loss is so deeply and justly regretted. This is, of course, but a feeble reason for hoping that some of the victims of the disaster still survive; but you, sir, will give great satisfaction to his Majesty, if you are the means of restoring any one of the poor shipwrecked mariners to their native land after so many years of misery and exile."

The aims of the expedition were therefore manifold, and by the greatest chance it was able to achieve them nearly all. D'Urville received his appointment in December, 1825, and was permitted himself to choose all who were to accompany him. He named as second in command Lieutenant Jacquinot, and as scientific colloborateurs Messrs. Quoy and Gaimard, who had been on board the *Uranie,* and as surgeon Primevère Lesson. The *Coquille,* the excellent qualities of which were well known to D'Urville, was the vessel selected; and the commander having named her the *Astrolabe* in memory of La Pérouse, embarked in her a crew of twenty-four men. Anchor was weighed on the 25th April, and the mountains of Toulon with the coast of France were soon out of sight.

After touching at Gibraltar, the *Astrolabe* stopped at Teneriffe to take in fresh provisions before crossing the Atlantic, and D'Urville took advantage of this delay to ascend the peak, accompanied by Messrs. Quoy, Gaimard, and several officers, a bad road, very arduous for pedestrians, leading the first part of the way over fields of scoria, though as Laguna is approached the scenery improves. This town, of a considerable size, contains but a small, indolent, and miserable population.

Between Matunza and Orotara the vegetation is magnificent, and the luxuriant foliage of the vine enhances the beauty of the view. Orotara is a small seaboard town, with a port affording but little shelter. It is well-built and laid out, and would be comfortable enough if the streets were not so steep as to make traffic all but impossible. After three-quarters of an hour's climb through well-cultivated fields, the Frenchmen reached the chestnut-tree region, beyond which begin the clouds, taking the form of a thick moist fog, very disagreeable to the traveller. Further on comes the furze region, beyond which the atmosphere again becomes clear, vegetation disappears, the ground becomes poorer and more barren. Here are met with decomposed lava, scoria, and pumice-stones in great abundance, whilst below stretches away the boundless sea of clouds.

Thus far hidden by clouds or by the lofty mountains surrounding it, the peak at last stands forth distinctly, the incline becomes less steep, and those vast plains of intensely melancholy appearance, called Cañadas by the Spanish, on account of their bareness, are crossed. A halt is made for lunch at the Pine grotto before climbing the huge blocks of basalt ranged in a circle about the crater, now filled in with ashes from the peak, and forming its enceinte. The peak itself is next attached, the ascent of which is broken one-third of the way up by a sort of esplanade called the Estancia de los Ingleses. Here our travellers passed the night, not perhaps quite so comfortably as they would have done in their berths, but without suffering too much from the feeling of suffocation experienced by other explorers. The fleas, however, were very troublesome, and their unremitting attacks kept the commander awake all night.

At four a.m. the ascent was resumed, and a second esplanade, called the Alta Vista, was soon reached, beyond which all trace of a path disappears, the rest of the ascent being over rough lava as far as the Chahorra Cone, with here and there, in the shade, patches of unmelted snow. The peak itself is very steep, and its ascent is rendered yet more arduous by the pumice-stone which rolls away beneath the feet.

"At thirty-five minutes past six," says M. Dumont d'Urville, "we arrived at the summit of the Chahorra, which is evidently a half-extinct crater. Its sides are thin and sloping, it is from sixty to eighty feet deep, and the whole surface is strewn with fragments of obsidian, pumice-stones, and lava. Sulphureous vapour, forming a kind of crown of smoke, is emitted from it, whilst the atmosphere at the bottom is perfectly cool. At the summit of the peak the thermometer marked 11°, but in my opinion it was affected by the presence of the fumerolles, for when at the bottom of the crater it fell rapidly from 19° in the sun to 9° 5' in the shade."

The descent was accomplished without accident by another route, enabling our travellers to examine the Cueva de la Nieve, and to visit the forest of Aqua Garcia, watered by a limpid stream, and in which D'Urville made a rich collection of botanical specimens.

In Major Megliorini's rooms at Santa Cruz the commander was shown, together with a number of weapons, shells, animals, fish, &c., a complete mummy of a Guanche, said to be that of a woman. The corpse was sewn up in skins, and seemed to be that of a woman five feet four high, with regular features and large hands. The sepulchral caves of the Guanches also contained earthenware, wooden vases, triangular seals of baked clay, and a great number of small discs of the same material, strung together like chaplets, which may have been used by this extinct race for the same purposes as the "quipos" of the Peruvians.

On the 21st June the *Astrolabe* once more set sail and touched at La Praya, and at the Cape Verd Islands, where D'Urville had hoped to meet Captain King, who would have been able to give him some valuable hints on the navigation of the coast of New Guinea. King, however, had left La Praya thirty-six hours previously, and the *Astrolabe* therefore resumed her voyage the next day, i.e. on the 30th June.

On the last day of July the rocks of Martin-Vaz and Trinity Island were sighted, and the latter appearing perfectly barren, a little dried-up grass and a few groups of stunted trees, dotted about amongst the rocks, being the only signs of vegetation.

D'Urville had been very anxious to make some botanical researches on this desert island, but the surf was so rough that he was afraid to risk a boat in it.

On the 4th August the *Astrolabe* sailed over the spot laid down as "Saxembourg" Island, which ought to be finally erased from French as it has been from English charts; and after a succession of squalls, which tried her sorely, she arrived off St. Paul and Amsterdam Islands, finally anchoring on the 7th October in King George's Sound, on the coast of Australia. In spite of the roughness of the sea, and constant bad weather throughout his voyage of 108 days, D'Urville had carried on all his usual observations on the height of the waves, which he estimated at 80 and occasionally as much as 100 feet, off Needle Bank; the temperature of the sea at various depths, &c.

Captain Jacquinot having found a capital supply of fresh water on the right bank of Princess Royal Harbour, and at a little distance a site suitable for the erection of an observatory, the tents were soon pitched by the sailors, and several officers made a complete tour of the bay, whilst others opened relations with the aborigines, one of whom was induced to go on board, though it was only with the greatest difficulty that he was persuaded to throw away his *Banksia*, a cone used to retain heat, and to keep the stomach and the front part of the body warm. He remained quietly enough on board for two days, however, eating and drinking in front of the kitchen fire. In the meantime his fellow-countrymen on land were peaceable and well-disposed, even bringing three of their children into the camp.

During this halt a boat arrived manned by eight Englishmen, who asked to be taken on board as passengers, and told such a very improbable story of having been deserted by their captain, that D'Urville suspected them of being escaped convicts; a suspicion which became a conviction, when he saw the wry faces they made at his proposal to send them back to Port Jackson. The next day, however, one took a berth as sailor, and two were received as passengers; whilst the other five decided to remain on land and drag out a miserable existence amongst the natives.

All this time hydrographical and astronomical observations were being made, and the hunters and naturalists were trying to obtain specimens of new varieties of fauna and flora. The delays extending to October 24th enabled the explorers to regain their strength, after their trying voyage, to make the necessary repairs, take in wood and water, draw up a map of the whole neighbourhood, and to collect numerous botanical and zoological specimens. His observations of various kinds made D'Urville wonder that the English had not yet founded a colony on King George's Sound, admirably situated as it is, not only for vessels coming direct from Europe, but for those trading between the Cape and China, or bound for the Sunda Islands, and delayed by the monsoons. The coast was explored as far as West Port, preferred by D'Urville to Port Dalrymple, the latter being a harbour always difficult and often dangerous either to enter or to leave. West Port moreover, was as yet only known from the reports of Baudin and Flinders, and it was therefore better worth exploring than a more frequented district. The observations made in King George's Sound were therefore repeated at West Port, resulting in the following conclusions: —

"It affords," says D'Urville, "an anchorage alike easy to reach and to leave, the bottom is firm, and wood is abundant and easily procurable. In a word, when a good supply of fresh water is found, and that will probably be soon, West Port will rise to a position of great importance in a channel such as Bass's Straits, when the winds often blow strongly from one quarter for several days together, the currents at the same time rendering navigation difficult."

From November 19th to December 2nd the *Astrolabe* cruised along the coast, touching only at Jervis Bay, remarkable for its magnificent eucalyptus forests.

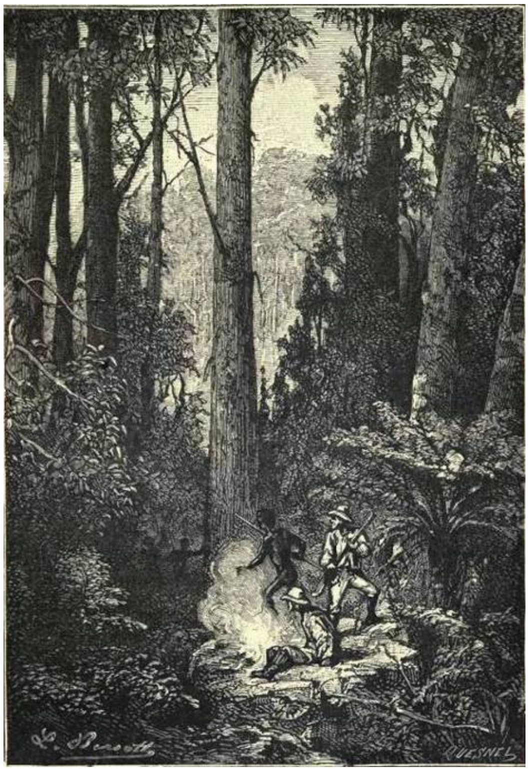

Eucalyptus forest of Jervis Bay.

The reception given to the French at Port Jackson, by Governor Darling and the colonial authorities, was none the less cordial for the fact that the visits made by D'Urville to various parts of New Holland had greatly amazed the English Government.

During the last three years Port Jackson had increased greatly in size and improved in appearance; though the population of the whole colony only amounted to 50,000, and that in spite of the constant foundation of new English settlements. The commander took advantage of his stay in Sydney to forward his despatches to France, together with several cases of natural history specimens. This done and a fresh stock of provisions having been laid in, he resumed his voyage.

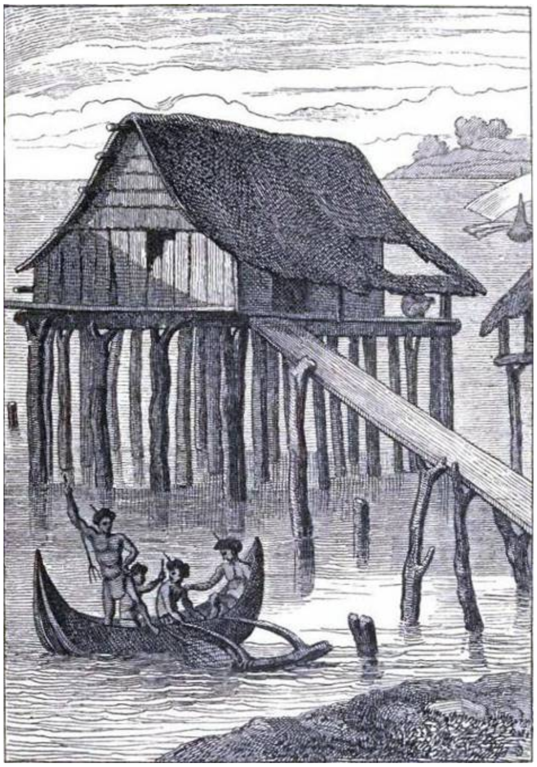

New Guinea hut on piles.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

It would be useless to linger with Dumont d'Urville at New South Wales, to the history of which, and its condition in 1826, he devotes a whole volume of his narrative. We have already given a detailed account of it, and it will be better to leave Sydney with our traveller, on the 19th December, and follow him to Tasman Bay, through calms, head-winds, currents, and tempests, which prevented his reaching New Zealand before the 14th January, 1827. Tasman Bay, first seen by Cook on his second voyage, had never yet been explored by any expedition, and on the arrival of the *Astrolabe* a number of canoes, containing some score of natives, most of them chiefs, approached. These natives were not afraid to climb on board, some remaining several days, whilst later arrivals drew up within reach, and a brisk trade was opened. Meanwhile several officers climbed through the thick furze clothing the hills overlooking the bay, and the following is D'Urville's verdict on the desolate scene which met their view.

"Not a bird, not an insect, not even a reptile to be seen, the solemn, melancholy silence is unbroken by the voice of any living creature." From the summit of these hills the commander saw New Bay, that known as Admiralty, which communicates by a current with that in which the *Astrolabe* was anchored; and he was anxious to explore it, as it seemed safer than that of Tasman, but the currents several times brought his vessel to the very verge of destruction; and had the *Astrolabe* been driven upon the rocky coast, the whole crew would have perished, and not so much as a trace of the wreck would have been left. At last, however, D'Urville succeeded in clearing the passage with no further loss than that of a few bits of the ship's keel.

"To celebrate," says the narrative, "the memory of the passage of the *Astrolabe*, I conferred upon this dangerous strait the name of the 'Passe des Français'" (French Pass), "but, unless in a case of great necessity, I should not advise any one else to attempt it. We could now look calmly at the beautiful basin in which we found ourselves; and which certainly deserves all the praise given to it by Cook. I would specially recommend a fine little harbour, some miles to the south of the place, where the captain cast anchor. Our navigation of the 'Passe des Français' had definitively settled the insular character of the whole of the district terminating in the 'Cape Stephens' of Cook. It is divided from the mainland of Te-Wahi-Punamub[1] by the Current Basin. The comparison of our chart with that of the strait as laid down by Cook will suffice to show how much he left to be done."

[1] Now "South Island." — *Trans.*

The *Astrolabe* soon entered Cook's Strait, and sailing outside Queen Charlotte's Bay, doubled Cape Palliser, a headland formed of some low hills. D'Urville was greatly surprised to find that a good many inaccuracies had crept into the work of the great English navigator, and in that part of the account of his voyage which relates to hydrography, he quotes instances of errors of a fourth, or even third of a degree.

The commander then resolved to make a survey of the eastern side of the northern island Ika-Na-Mawi. On this island pigs were to be found, but no "*pounamon*" the green jade which the New Zealanders use in the manufacture of their most valuable tools; strange to say, however, jade is to be found on the southern island, but there are no pigs.

Two natives of the island, who had expressed a wish to remain on board the corvette, became quite low-spirited as they watched the coast of the district where they lived disappear below the horizon. They then began to repent, but too late, the intrepidity which had prompted them to leave their native shores; for intrepid they justly deserve to be called, seeing that again and again they asked the French sailors if they were not to be eaten, and it took several days of kind treatment to dispel this fear from their minds.

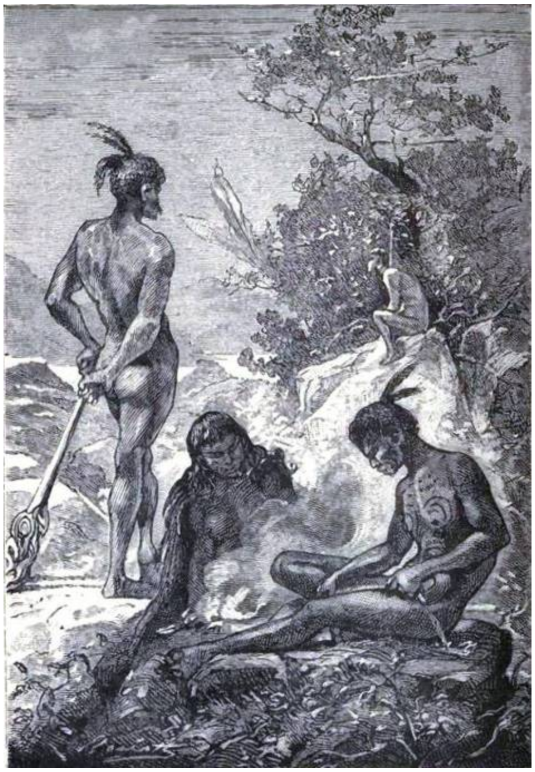

New Zealanders.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

D'Urville continued to sail northward up the coast until the capes, named by Cook Turn-again and Kidnappers, had been doubled, and Sterile Island with its "Ipah" came in sight. In the Bay of Tolaga, as Cook called it, the natives brought alongside the corvette pigs and potatoes, which they readily exchanged for articles of little value. On other canoes approaching, the New Zealanders who were on board the vessel urged the commander to fire upon and kill their fellow-countrymen in the boats; but as soon as the latter climbed up to the deck, the first arrivals advanced to greet them with earnest assurances of friendship. Conduct so strangely inconsistent is the outcome of the compound of hatred and jealousy mutually entertained for each other by these tribes. "They all desire to appropriate to themselves exclusively whatever advantage may be obtained from the visits of foreigners, and they are distressed at the prospect of their neighbours getting any share." Proof was soon afforded that this explanation is the right key to their behaviour.

Upon the *Astrolabe* were several New Zealanders, but among them was a certain "*Shaki*" who was recognized as a chief by his tall stature, his elaborate tattooing, and the respectful manner in which he was addressed by his fellow-islanders. Seeing a canoe manned by not more than seven or eight men approaching the corvette, this "*Shaki*" and the rest came to entreat D'Urville most earnestly to kill the new arrivals, going so far as to ask for muskets that they might themselves fire upon them. However, no sooner had the last comers arrived on board than all those who were there already overwhelmed them with courtesies, while the "*Shaki*" himself, although he had been one of the most sanguinary, completely changed his tone and made them a present of some axes he had just obtained. After the chief men of a warlike and fierce appearance, with faces tattooed all over, had been a few minutes on board, D'Urville was preparing to ask them some questions, with the aid of a vocabulary published by the missionaries, when all at once they turned away from him, leaped into their canoes and pushed out into the open sea. This sudden move was brought about by their countrymen, who, for the purpose of getting rid of them, slily hinted that their lives were in danger, as the Frenchmen had formed a plot to kill them.

It was in the Bay of Tolaga, the right name of which is Houa-Houa, that D'Urville found the first opportunity of gaining some information about the "kiwi," by means of a mat decorated with the feathers of that bird, such mats being articles of luxury among these islanders. The "kiwi" is about the size of a small turkey, and, like the ostrich, has not the power of flying. It is hunted at night by the light of torches and with the assistance of dogs. It is this bird which is also known under the name of the "apteryx." What the natives told D'Urville about it was in the main accurate. The apteryx, with the tail of a fowl and a plumage of a reddish-brown, has an affinity to the ostrich; it inhabits damp and gloomy woods, and never comes out even in search of food except in the evening. The incessant hunting of the natives has considerably diminished the numbers of this curious species, and it is now very rare.

D'Urville made no pause in the hydrographical survey of the northern island of New Zealand, keeping up daily communication with the natives, who brought him supplies of pigs and potatoes. According to their own statements, the tribes were perpetually at war with one another, and this was the true cause of the decrease in the population of these islands. Their constant demand was for fire-arms; failing to obtain these, they were satisfied if they could get powder in exchange for their own commodities.

On the 10th February, when not far from Cape Runaway, the corvette was caught in a violent storm, which lasted for thirty-six hours, and she was more than once on the point of foundering. After this, she made her way into the Bay of Plenty, at the bottom of which rises Mount Edgecumbe; then keeping along the coast, the islands of Haute and Major were sighted; but during this exploration of the bay, the weather was so severe that the chart of it then laid down cannot be considered very trustworthy. After leaving this bay, the corvette reached the Bay of Mercury; surveyed Barrier Island, entered Shouraki or Hauraki Bay, identified the Hen and Chickens and the Poor Knights Islands, finally arriving at the Bay of Islands. The native tribes met with by D'Urville in this part of the island were busy with an expedition against those of Shouraki and Waikato Bays. For the purpose of exploring the former bay, which had been imperfectly surveyed by Cook, D'Urville sailed back to it, and discovered that that part of New Zealand is indented with a number of harbours and gulfs of great depth, each one being safer, if possible, than the other. Having been informed that by following the direction of the Wai Magoia, a place would be reached distant only a very short journey from the large port of Manukau, he despatched some of his officers by that route, and they verified the correctness of the information he had received. This discovery, observes Dumont d'Urville, may become of great value to future settlements of Shouraki Bay; and this value will be still farther increased should the new surveys prove that the port of Manukau is accessible to vessels of a certain size, for such a settlement would command two seas, one on the east and the other on the west.

One of the "Rangatiras," as the chiefs of that quarter of the island are called, Rangui by name, had again and again begged the commander to give him some lead to make bullets with; a request which was always refused. Just before setting sail, D'Urville was informed that the deep-sea lead had been carried off; and he at once reproached Rangui in severe terms, telling him that such petty larcenies were unworthy of a man in a respectable position. The chief appeared to be deeply moved by the reproach, and excused himself by saying that he had no knowledge of the theft, which must have been committed by some stranger. "A short time afterwards," the narrative goes on to say, "my attention was drawn to the side of the ship by the sound of blows given with great force, and piteous cries proceeding from the canoe of Rangui. There I saw Rangui and Tawiti striking blow after blow with their paddles upon an object resembling the figure of a man covered with a cloak. It was easy to perceive that the two wily chiefs were simply beating one of the benches of the canoe. After this farce had been played for some little time, Rangui's paddle broke in his hands. The sham man was made to appear to fall down, when Rangui, addressing me, said that he had just killed the thief, and wished to know whether that would satisfy me. I assured him that it would, laughing to myself at the artifice of these savages; an artifice, for that matter, such as is often to be met with among people more advanced in civilization."

D'Urville next surveyed the lovely island of Wai-hiki, and thus terminated the survey of the Astrolabe Channel and Hauraki Bay. He then resumed his voyage in a northerly direction towards the Bay of Islands, sailing as far as Cape Maria Van Diemen, the most northerly point of New Zealand, where, say the Waïdonas, "the souls of the departed gather from all parts of Ika-Na-Mawi, to take their final flight to the realms of light or to those of eternal darkness."

The Bay of Islands, at the time when the *Coquille* put in there, was alive with a pretty considerable population, with whom the visitors soon became on friendly terms. Now, however, the animation of former days had given place to the silence of desolation. The Ipah, or rather the Pah of Kahou Wera, once the abode of an energetic tribe, was deserted, war had done its customary destructive work in the place. The Songhui tribe had stolen the possessions, and dispersed the members of the tribe of Paroa.

The Bay of Islands was the place chosen for their field of effort by the English missionaries, who, notwithstanding their devotion to their work had not made any progress among the natives. The unproductiveness of their labours was only too apparent.

The survey of the eastern side of New Zealand, a hydrographical work of the utmost importance, terminated at this point. Since the days of Cook no exploration of anything like such a vast extent of the coast of this country had been conducted in so careful a manner, in the face of so many perils. The sciences of geography and navigation were both signally benefited by the skilful and detailed work of D'Urville, who had to give proof of exceptional qualities in the midst of sudden and terrible dangers. However, on his return to France, no notice was taken of the hardships he had undergone, or the devotion to duty he had shown; he was left without recognition, and duties were assigned to him, the performance of which could bring no distinction, for they could have been equally well discharged by any ordinary ship's captain.

Leaving New Zealand on the 18th of March, 1827, D'Urville steered for Tonga Tabou, identified to begin with the islands Curtis, Macaulay, and Sunday; endeavoured, but without success, to find the island of Vasquez de Mauzelle, and arrived off Namouka on the 16th of April. Two days later he made out Eoa; but before reaching Tonga Tabou he encountered a terrible storm which all but proved fatal to the *Astrolabe*. At Tonga Tabou he found some Europeans, who had been for many years settled on the island; from them he received much help in getting to understand the character of the natives. The government was in the hands of three chiefs, called *Equis*, who had shared all authority between them since the banishment of the *Tonï Tonga*, or spiritual chief, who had enjoyed immense influence. A Wesleyan mission was in existence at Tonga; but it could be seen at a glance that the

Methodist clergy had not succeeded in acquiring any influence over the natives. Such converts as had been made were held in general contempt for their apostasy.

When the *Astrolabe* had reached the anchorage, after her fortunate escape from the perils from contrary winds, currents, and rocks, which had beset her course, she was at once positively overwhelmed with the offer of an incredible quantity of stores, fruits, vegetables, fowls, and pigs, which the natives were ready to dispose of for next to nothing. For equally low prices D'Urville was able to purchase, for the museum, specimens of the arms and native productions of the savages. Amongst them were some clubs, most of them made of casuarina wood, skilfully carved, or embossed in an artistic manner with mother-of-pearl or with whalebone. The custom of amputating a joint or two of the fingers or toes, to propitiate the Deity, was still observed, in the case of a near relative being dangerously ill.

From the 28th of April the natives had manifested none but the most friendly feelings; no single disturbance had occurred; but on the 9th of May, while D'Urville, with almost all his officers, went to pay a visit to one of the leading chiefs, named Palou, the reception accorded to them was marked by a most unusual reserve, altogether inconsistent with the noisy and enthusiastic demonstrations of the preceding days. The distrust evinced by the islanders aroused that of D'Urville, who, remembering how few were the men left on board the *Astrolabe*, felt considerable uneasiness. However, nothing unusual happened during his absence from the ship. But it was only the cowardice of Palou which had caused the failure of a conspiracy, aiming at nothing less than the massacre, at one blow, of the whole of the staff, after which there would have been no difficulty in prevailing over the crew, who were already more than half-disposed to adopt the easy mode of life of the islanders. Such at least was the conclusion the commander came to, and subsequent events showed that he was right.

These apprehensions determined D'Urville to leave Tonga Tabou as quickly as possible, and on the 13th every preparation was made to set sail on the following day. The apprentice Dudemaine was walking about on the large island, whilst the apprentice Faraquet, with nine men, was engaged on the small island, Pangaï Modou, in getting fresh water, or studying the tide, when Tahofa, one of the chiefs, with several other islanders, then on board the *Astrolabe*, gave a signal. The canoes pushed off at once and made for the shore. On trying to discover the cause of this sudden retreat, it was observed that the sailors on the island Pangaï Modou were being forcibly dragged off by the natives. D'Urville was about to fire off a cannon, when he decided that it would be safer to send a boat to shore. This boat took off the two sailors and the apprentice Dudemaine, but was fired upon when despatched shortly afterwards to set fire to the huts, and to try to capture some natives as hostages. One native was killed and several others were wounded, whilst a corporal of the marines received such severe bayonet wounds, that he died two hours later.

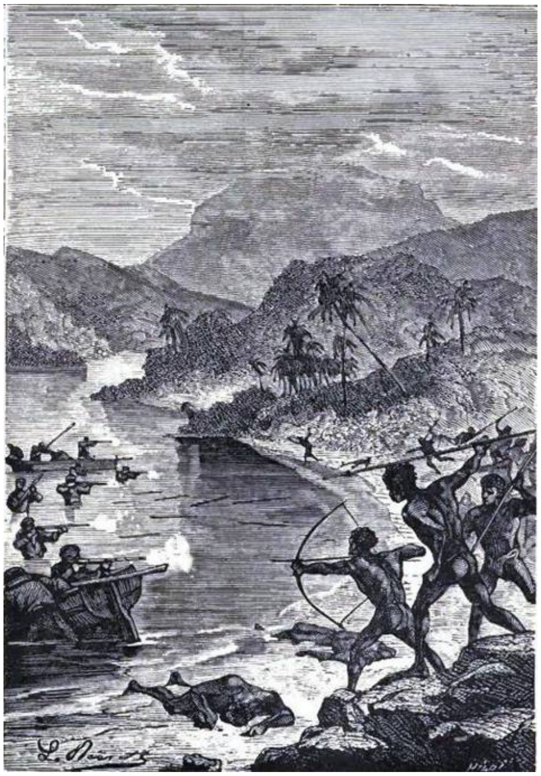

Attack from the natives of Tonga Tabou.

D'Urville's anxiety about the fate of his sailors, and of Faraquet, who was in command of them, knew no bounds. Nothing was left for him to do but to make an attack upon the sacred village of Mafanga, containing the tombs of several of the principal families. But on the following day a crowd of natives so skilfully surrounded the place with embankments and palisades, that it was impossible to hope to carry it by an attack. The corvette then drew nearer to the shore, and began to cannonade the village, without, however, doing any other damage than killing one of the natives. At length the difficulty of obtaining provisions, the rain, and the continual alarm in which the firing of the Frenchmen kept them, induced the islanders to offer terms of peace. They gave up the sailors, who had all been very well treated, made a present of pigs and bananas; and on the 24th of May the *Astrolabe* took her final departure from the Friendly Islands.

It was quite time indeed that this was done, for D'Urville's situation was untenable, and in a conversation with his boatswain he ascertained that not more than half a dozen of the sailors could be relied on; all the others were ready to go over to the side of the savages.

Tonga Tabou is of madreporic formation, with a thick covering of vegetable soil, favourable to an abundant growth of shrubs and trees. The cocoa-tree, the stem of which is slenderer than elsewhere, and the banana-tree here shoot up with wonderful rapidity and vigour. The aspect of the land is flat and monotonous, so that a journey of one or two miles will give as fair an impression of the country as a complete tour of the island. The number of the population who have the true Polynesian cast of countenance may be put down at about 7000. D'Urville says "they combine the most opposite qualities. They are generous, courteous, and hospitable, yet avaricious, insolent, and always thoroughly insincere. The most profuse demonstration of kindness and friendship may at any moment be interrupted by an act of outrage or robbery, should their cupidity or their self-respect be ever so slightly roused."

In intelligence the natives of Tonga are clearly far superior to those of Otaheite. The French travellers could not sufficiently admire the astonishing order in which the plantations of yams and bananas were kept, the excessive neatness of their dwellings, and the beauty of the garden-plots. They even knew something of the art of fortification, as D'Urville ascertained by an inspection of the fortified village of Hifo, defended with stout palisades, and surrounded by a trench between fifteen and twenty feet wide, and half filled with water.

On the 25th of May, D'Urville began the exploration of the Viti or Fiji Archipelago. At the outset he was so fortunate as to fall in with a native of Tonga who was living on the Fiji Islands for purposes of trade, and had previously visited Otaheite, New Zealand, and Australia. This man, as well as a Guam islander, proved most useful to the commander in furnishing him with the names of more than 200 islands belonging to this group, and in acquainting him beforehand with their position, and that of the reefs in their neighbourhood. At the same time, Gressier, the hydrographer, collected all the materials requisite for preparing a chart of the Fiji Islands.

At this station a sloop was put under orders to proceed to the island of Laguemba, where was an anchor which D'Urville would have been well pleased to obtain, as he had lost two of his own while at Tonga. On arrival at the island, Lottin, who was in command of the sloop, observed on the shore none but women and children; armed men, however, soon came running up, made the women leave the place, and were preparing to seize the sloop and make the sailors prisoners. Their intentions were too plain to leave room for any doubt on the subject, so Lottin at once gave orders to draw up the grapnel, and got away into the open sea before there was time for an encounter to take place.

During eighteen consecutive days, in the face of bad weather and a rough sea, the *Astrolabe* cruised through the Fiji Archipelago, surveyed the islands of Laguemba, Kandabou, Viti-Levou, Oumbenga Vatou Lele, Ounong Lebou, Malolo, and many others, giving special attention to the southern islands of the group, which up to that period had remained almost entirely unknown.

The population of this group, if we accept D'Urville's account, form a kind of transition between the copper-coloured, or the Polynesian, and the black or Melanesian races. Their strength and vigour are in proportion to their tall figures, and they make no secret of their cannibal propensities.

On the 11th of June the corvette set sail for the harbour of Carteret; surveyed one by one the islands of Erronan and Annatom, the Loyalty Islands, of which group D'Urville discovered the Chabrol and Halgan Islands, the little group of the Beaupie Islands, the Astrolabe reefs, all the more dangerous as they are thirty miles distant from the Beaupie Islands, and sixty from New Caledonia. The island of Huon, and the chain of reefs to the north of New Caledonia, were subsequently surveyed. From this point D'Urville reached the Louisiade Archipelago in six days, but the stormy weather there encountered determined him to abandon the course he had planned out, and not to pass through Torres Straits. He thought that an early examination of the southern coast of New Britain, and of the northern coast of New Guinea, would be the most conducive to the interests of science.

Rossel Island and Cape Deliverance were next sighted; and the vessel was steered for New Ireland, with a view to obtaining fresh supplies of wood and water. Arriving there on the 5th of July in such gloomy, rainy weather, that it was with no small difficulty that the entrance of the harbour of Carteret, where D'Entrecasteaux made a stay of eight days, was made out; whilst there the travellers received several visits from the score of natives, who seem to make up the total population of the place. They were creatures possessed of scarcely any intelligence, and quite destitute of curiosity about objects that they had not seen before. Neither did their appearance lead to the slightest prepossession in their favour. They wore no vestige of clothing; their skin was black and their hair woolly; and the partition of the nostrils had a sharp bone thrust through by way of ornament. The only object that they showed any eagerness to possess was iron, but they could not be made to understand that it was only to be given in exchange for fruits or pigs. Their expression was one of sullen defiance, and they refused to guide any one whatever to their village. During the unprofitable stay of the corvette in this harbour, D'Urville had a serious attack of enteritis, from which he suffered much for several days.

On the 19th July the *Astrolabe* went to sea again and coasted the northern side of New Britain, the object of this cruise was frustrated by rainy and hazy weather. Continual squalls and heavy showers compelled the vessel to put off again as soon as it had succeeded in nearing the land. His experience on this coast D'Urville thus describes: — "One who has not had, as we have, a practical acquaintance with these seas, is unable to form any adequate conception of these incredible rains. Moreover, to obtain a just estimate of the cares and anxieties which a voyage like ours entails, there must be a liability to the call of duties similar to those which we had to discharge. It was very seldom that our horizon lay much beyond the distance of 200 yards, and our observations could not possibly be other than uncertain, when our own true position was doubtful. Altogether, the whole of our work upon New Britain, in spite of the unheard of hardships that fell to our lot and the risks which the *Astrolabe* had to run, cannot be put in comparison for a moment, as respects accuracy, with the other surveys of the expedition."

As it was impracticable to fall back upon the route by the St. George's Channel, D'Urville had to pass through Dampier's Strait, the southern entrance to which is all but entirely closed by a chain of reefs, which were grazed more than once by the *Astrolabe*.

The charming prospect of the western coast of New Britain excited intense admiration both in Dampier and D'Entrecasteaux; an enthusiasm fully shared by D'Urville. A safe roadstead enclosed by land forming a semicircle, forests whose dark foliage contrasted with the golden colour of the ripening fields, the whole surmounted by the lofty peaks of Mount Gloucester, and this variety still further enhanced by the undulating outlines of Rook Island, are the chief features of the picture here presented by the coast of New Britain.

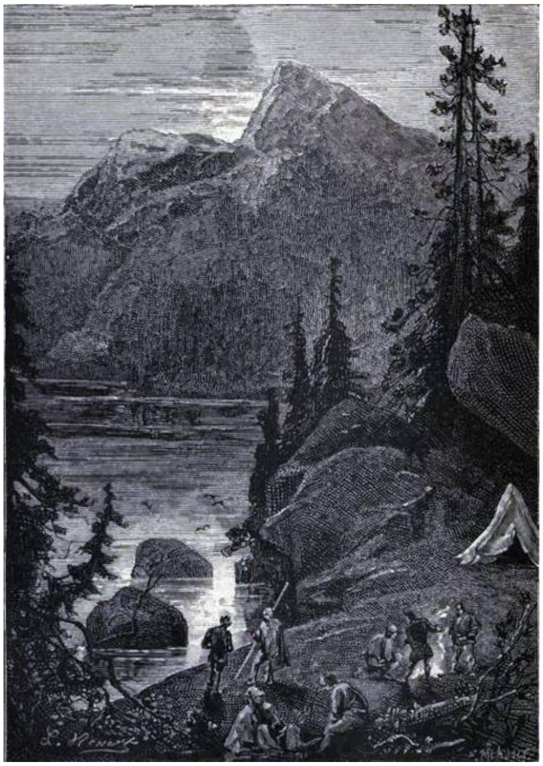

Lofty mountains clothed with dense and gloomy forests.

On issuing from the strait the mountains of New Guinea rose grandly in the distance; and on a nearer approach they were seen to form a sort of half-circle shutting in the arm of the sea known as the Bay of Astrolabe. The Schouten Islands, the Creek of the Attack (the place where D'Urville had to withstand an onset of savages), Humboldt Bay, Geelwinck Bay, the Traitor Islands, Tobie and Mysory, the Arfak Mountains, were one after another recognized and passed, when the *Astrolabe* at length came to an anchor in Port Dorei, in order to connect her operations with those accomplished by the *Coquille*.

Friendly intercourse was at once established with the Papuans of that place, who brought on board a number of birds of paradise, but not much in the shape of provisions. These natives, are of so gentle and timid a disposition, that only with great reluctance will they risk going into the woods through fear of the Arfakis, who dwell on the mountains, and are their sworn enemies.

One of the sailors engaged in getting fresh water was wounded with an arrow shot by one of these savages, whom it was impossible to punish for a dastardly outrage prompted by no motive whatever.

The land here is everywhere so fertile that it requires no more than turning over and weeding, in order to yield the most abundant harvests; yet the Papuans are so lazy and understand so little of the art of agriculture, that the growth of food plants is often allowed to be choked with weeds. The inhabitants belong to several races. D'Urville divides them into three principal varieties: the Papuans, a mixed breed, belonging more or less to the Malay or Polynesian race; and the Harfous or Alfourous, who resemble the common type of Australians; New Caledonians and the ordinary black Oceanic populations. These latter would appear to be the true indigenous people of the country.

On the 6th September the *Astrolabe* again put to sea, and after an uninteresting stay at New Guinea, in the course of which scarcely any specimens of natural history were obtained, except a few mollusca, and still less exact information regarding the customs, religion, or language of its diversified population, steered for Amboyna, which was reached without any accident on the 24th September. The governor, M. Merkus, happened to be on circuit; but his absence was no obstacle to the supply of all the stores needed by the commander. The reception given by the authorities and the society of the place was of a very cordial kind, and everything was done to compensate the French explorers for the hardships undergone in their long and troublesome voyage.

From Amboyna D'Urville proceeded to Hobart Town in Tasmania, a place not visited by any French vessel since the time of Baudin, arriving on the 27th December, 1827. Thirty-five years previously D'Entrecasteaux had met on the shores of this island only a few wretched savages; and ten years later Baudin found it quite deserted. The first piece of news that Dumont d'Urville learnt on entering the river Derwent, before even casting anchor at Hobart Town, was that Captain Dillon, an Englishman, had received certain information, when at Tucopia, of the shipwreck of La Pérouse at Vanikoro; and that he had brought away the hilt of a sword which he believed to have belonged to that navigator. On his arrival at Calcutta Dillon communicated his information to the governor, who without delay despatched him with instructions to rescue such of the shipwrecked crew as might still be alive, and collect whatever relics could be found of the vessels. To D'Urville this intelligence was of the highest interest, seeing that he had been specially instructed to search for whatever might be calculated to throw any light upon the fate of the unfortunate navigator, and he had while at Namouka obtained proof of the residence for a time of La Pérouse at the Friendly Islands.

In the English colony itself there was some difference of opinion as to the credit which Captain Dillon's story was entitled to receive; but the report which that officer had made to the Governor-General of India, quite removed any doubt from the mind of D'Urville. Abandoning, therefore, all further plans with reference to New Zealand, he decided upon proceeding at once in the *Astrolabe*, in the track of Dillon, to Vanikoro, which he then knew only by the name of Mallicolo.

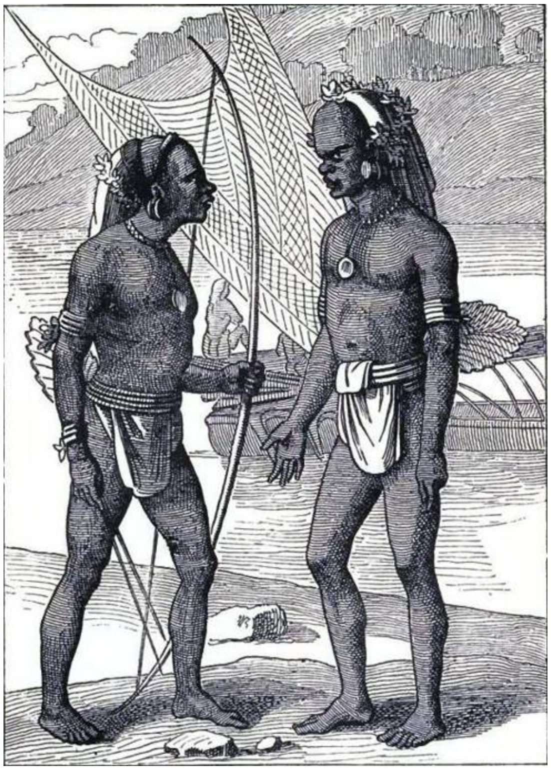

Natives of Vanikoro.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

The following is the statement of the circumstances as made by Dillon.

During a stay made by the ship *Hunter* at the Fiji Islands, three persons, a Prussian named Martin Bushart, his wife, and a Lascar, called Achowlia, were received on board, endeavouring to escape from the horrible fate awaiting them, which had already befallen the other European deserters settled in that archipelago, that of being devoured by the savages; this unhappy trio merely begged to be put on shore at the first inhabited island which the *Hunter* might touch at. Accordingly, they were left on one of the Charlotte Islands, Tucopia, in 12° 15' S. lat, and 169° W. long. In the month of May, 1836, Dillon, who had been one of the crew of the ship *Hunter*, paid a visit to the island of Tucopia, with a view of ascertaining what had become of the people put on shore in 1813. There he found the Lascar and the Prussian; the former of whom sold him a silver sword-hilt. As might have been expected, Dillon was curious to know how the natives of that island had come into possession of such an article. The Prussian then related that on his arrival at Tucopia he had found many articles of iron, such as bolts, axes, knives, spoons, and other things, which he was told had come from Mallicolo, a group of islands situated about two days canoe sail to the east of Tucopia. By further interrogatories, Dillon learnt that two vessels had been thrown upon the coasts many years previously, one of which had perished entirely with all on board, whilst the crew of the second had constructed out of the wreck of their ship a little boat, in which they had put to sea, leaving some of their number at Mallicolo. The Lascar said he had seen two of these men, who had acquired a well-merited influence through services rendered to chiefs.

Dillon tried in vain to persuade his informant to take him to Mallicolo, but was more successful with the Prussian, who took him within sight of the island, called Research by D'Entrecasteaux, on which, however, Dillon was unable to land on account of the dead calm and his want of provisions.

On hearing his account, on his arrival at Pondicherry, the governor entrusted him with the command of a boat specially constructed for exploring purposes. This was in 1827. Dillon now touched at Tucopia, where he obtained interpreters and a pilot, and thence went to Mallicolo, where he learnt from the natives that the strangers had stayed there five months to build their vessel, and that they had been looked upon as supernatural visitors, an idea not a little confirmed by their singular behaviour. They had been seen, for instance, to talk to the moon and stars through a long stick, their noses were immense, and some of them always remained standing, holding bars of iron in their hands. Such was the impression left on the minds of the natives by the astronomical observations, cocked hats, and sentinels of the French.

Dillon obtained from the natives a good many relics of the expedition, and he also saw at the bottom of the sea, on the coral reef on which the vessel had struck, some bronze cannons, a bell, and all kinds of rubbish, which he reverently collected and carried to Paris, arriving there in 1828, and receiving from the king a pension of 4000 francs as a reward for his exertions. All doubt was dispelled when the Comte de Lesseps, who had landed at Kamtchatka from La Pérouse's party, identified the cannons and the carved stern of the *Boussole*, and the armorial bearings of Colignon, the botanist, were made out on a silver candlestick. All these interesting and curious facts, however, D'Urville did not know until later; at present he had only heard Dillon's first report. By chance, or perhaps because he was afraid of being forestalled, the captain had not laid down the position of Vanikoro or the route he followed on the way from Tucopia, which island D'Urville supposed to belong to the Banks or Santa Cruz group, each as little known as the other.

Before following D'Urville, however, we must pause with him for awhile at Hobart Town, which he looked upon even then as a place of remarkable importance. "Its houses," he says, "are very spacious, consisting only of one story and the ground-floor, though their cleanness and regularity give them a very pleasant appearance. Walking in the streets, which are unpaved, though some have curb stones, is very tiring; and the dust always rising in clouds is very trying to the eyes. The Government house is pleasantly situated on the shores of the bay, and will be greatly improved in a few years if the young trees planted about it thrive. Native timber is quite unsuitable for ornamental purposes."

The stay at Hobart Town was turned to account to complete the stock of provisions, anchors, and other very requisite articles, and also to repair the vessel and the rigging, the latter being sorely dilapidated.

On the 5th January the *Astrolabe* once more put to sea, surveyed Norfolk Island on the 20th, Matthew Volcano six days later, Erronan on the 28th, and the little Mitre Island on the 8th February, arriving the next day off Tucopia, a small island three or four miles in circumference with one rather pointed peak covered with vegetation. The eastern side of Tucopia is apparently inaccessible from the violence of the breakers continually dashing on to its beach. The eagerness of all was now great, and was becoming unbounded when three boats, one containing a European, were seen approaching. This European turned out to be the Prussian calling himself Bushart, who had lately gone with Dillon to Mallicolo, where the latter remained a whole month, and where he really obtained the relics of the expedition as D'Urville had heard at Hobart Town. Not a single Frenchman now remained on the island; the last had died the previous year. Bushart at first consented, but declined at the last moment, to go with D'Urville or to remain on the *Astrolabe*.

Vanikoro is surrounded by reefs, through which, not without danger, the *Astrolabe* found a passage, casting anchor in the same place as Dillon had done, namely in Ocili Bay. The scene of the shipwreck was on the other side of the bay. It was not easy to get information from the natives, who were avaricious, untrustworthy, insolent, and deceitful. An old man, however, was finally induced to confess that the whites who had landed on the beach at Vanon had been received with a shower of arrows, and that a fight ensued in which a good many natives had fallen; as for the *maras* (sailors) they had all been killed, and their skulls buried at Vanon. The rest of the bones had been used to tip the arrows of the natives.

A canoe was now sent to the village of Nama, and after considerable hesitation the natives were induced by a promise of some red cloth to take the Frenchmen to the scene of the shipwreck about a mile off, near Païon and opposite Ambi, where amongst the breakers at the bottom of a sort of shelving beach anchors, cannons, and cannonballs, and many other things were made out, leaving no doubt as to the facts in the minds of the officers of the *Astrolabe*. It was evident to all that the vessel had endeavoured to get inside the reefs by a kind of pass, and that she had run aground and been unable to get off. The crew may then have saved themselves at Païon, and according to the account of some natives they built a little boat there, whilst the other vessel, which had struck on the reef further out, had been lost with all on board.

Chief Moembe had heard it said that the inhabitants of Vanon had approached the vessel to pillage it, but had been driven back by the whites, losing twenty men and three chiefs. The savages in their turn had massacred all the French who landed, except two, who lived on the island for the space of three months.

Another chief, Valiko by name, said that one of the boats had struck outside the reef opposite Tanema after a very windy night, and that nearly all its crew had perished before they could land. Many of the sailors of the second vessel had got to land, and built at Païon a little boat out of the pieces of the large ship wrecked. During their stay at Païon quarrels arose, and two sailors with five natives of Vanon and one from Tanema were killed. At the end of five months the Frenchmen left the island.

Lastly, a third old man told how some thirty sailors belonging to the first vessel had joined the crew of the second, and that they had all left at the end of six or seven months. All these facts, which had so to speak to be extracted by force, varied in their details; the last, however, seemed most nearly to approach the truth. Amongst the objects picked up by the *Astrolabe* were an anchor weighing about 1800 pounds, a cast-iron cannon, a bronze swivel, a copper blunderbuss, some pig lead, and several other considerably damaged articles of little interest. These relics, with those collected by Dillon, are now in the Naval Museum at the Louvre.

D'Urville did not leave Vanikoro without erecting a monument to the memory of his unfortunate fellow-countrymen. This humble memorial was placed in a mangrove grove off the reef itself. It consists of a quadrangular prism, made of coral slabs six feet high, surmounted by a pyramid of Koudi wood of the same height, bearing on a little plate of lead the following inscription, —

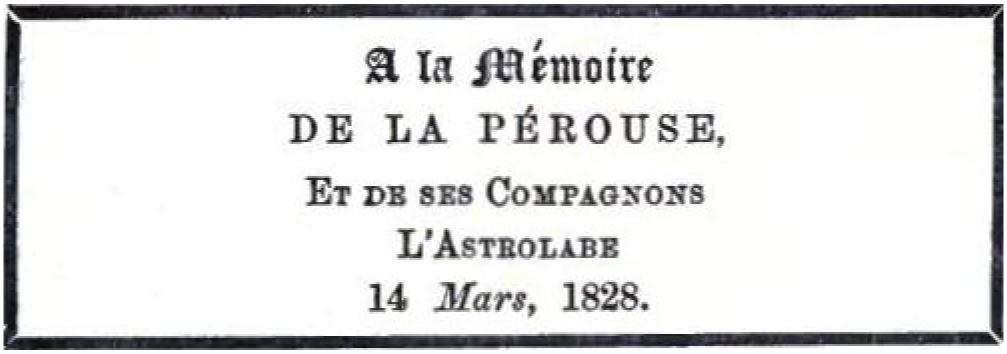

A la Mémoire
DE LA PÉROUSE,
Et de ses Compagnons
L'Astrolabe
14 *Mars*, 1828.

As soon as this task was accomplished, D'Urville prepared to set sail again, as it was time he did, for the damp resulting from the torrents of rain had engendered serious fevers, prostrating no less than twenty-five of the party. The commander would have to make haste if he wished to keep a crew fit to execute the arduous manoeuvres necessary to the exit of the vessel from a narrow pass strewn with rocks.

The last day passed by the *Astrolabe* at Vanikoro would have shown the truth to D'Urville had he needed any enlightening as to the true disposition of the natives. The following is his account of the last incidents of this dangerous halt.

"At eight o'clock, I was a good deal surprised to see half a dozen canoes approaching from Tevaï, the more so, that two or three natives from Manevaï who were on board showed no uneasiness, although they had told me a few days before that the people of Tevaï were their mortal enemies. I expressed my surprise to the Manevaians, who merely said, with an evident air of equivocation, that they had made their peace with the Tevaians, who were only bringing some cocoa-nuts. I soon saw, however, that the new comers were carrying nothing but bows and arrows in first rate condition. Two or three of them climbed on board, and in a determined manner came up to the main watch to look down into the orlop-deck to find out how many men were disabled, whilst a malignant joy lit up their diabolical features. At this moment some of the crew told me that two or three of the Manevaï men on board had done the same thing during the last three or four days, and M. Gressien, who had been watching their movements since the morning, thought he had seen the warriors of the two tribes meet on the beach and have a long conference together. Such behaviour gave proof of the most treacherous intentions, and I felt the danger to be imminent. I at once ordered the natives to leave the vessel and return to the canoes, but they had the audacity to look at me with a proud and threatening expression, as if to defy me to put my order into execution. I merely had the armoury, generally kept jealously closed, opened, and with a severe look I pointed to it with one hand, whilst with the other I motioned the savages to the canoes. The sudden apparition of twenty shining muskets, the powers of which they understood, made them tremble, and relieved us of their ominous presence."

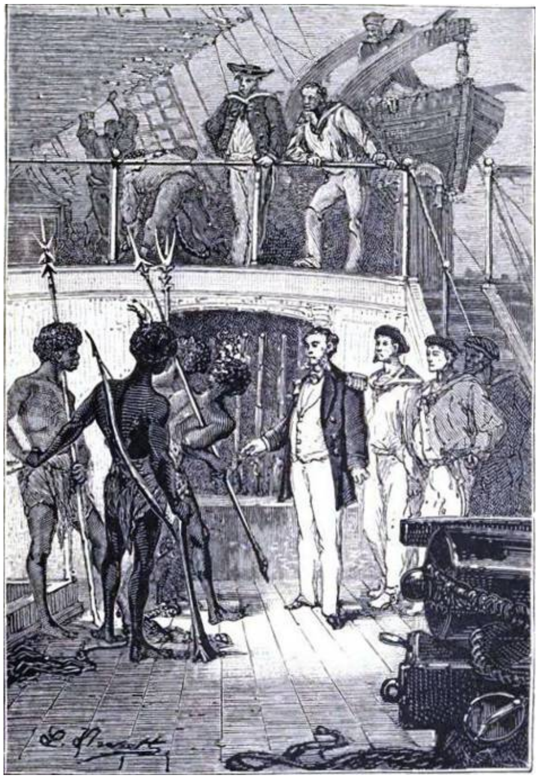

"I merely had the armoury opened."

Before leaving the scene of this melancholy story, we will glean a few details from D'Urville's account of it. The Vanikoro, Mallicolo, or, as Dillon calls it, the La Pérouse group, consists of two islands, Research and Tevaï. The former is no less than thirty miles in circumference, whilst the latter is only nine miles round. Both are lofty, clothed with impenetrable forests almost to the beach, and surrounded by a barrier of reefs thirty-six miles in circumference, with here and there a narrow strait between them. The inhabitants, who are lazy, slovenly, stupid, fierce, cowardly, and avaricious, do not exceed twelve or fifteen hundred in number. It was unfortunate for La Pérouse to be shipwrecked amongst such people, when he would have received a reception so different on any other island of Polynesia. The women are naturally ugly, and the hard work they have to do, with their general mode of life, render their appearance yet more displeasing. The men are rather less ill-favoured, though they are stunted and lean, and covered with ulcers and leprosy scars. Arrows and bows are their only weapons, and, according to themselves, the former, with their very fine bone tips, soldered on with extremely tenacious gum, inflict mortal wounds. They therefore value them greatly, and the visitors had great trouble to obtain any.

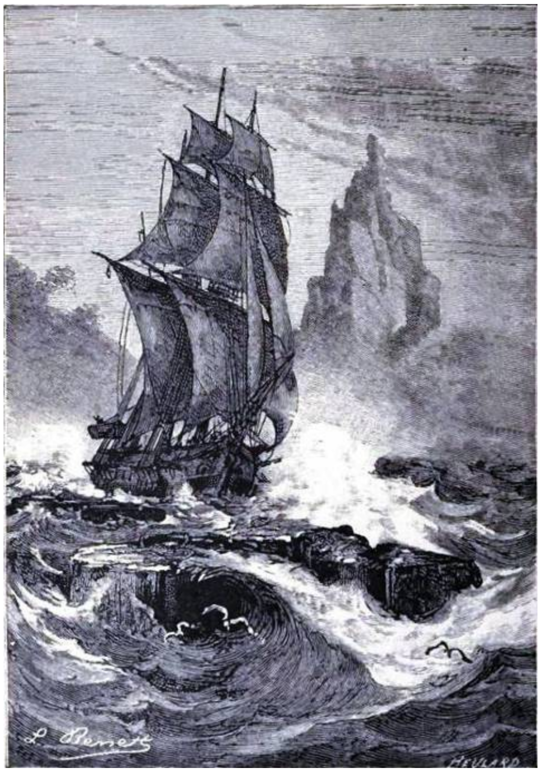

Reefs off Vanikoro.

On the 17th March the *Astrolabe* at length issued from amongst the terrible reefs encircling Vanikoro. D'Urville had intended to survey Tamnako, Kennedy, Nitendi, and the Solomon Islands, where he hoped to meet with traces of the survivors from the shipwreck of the *Boussole* and the *Astrolabe*. But the melancholy condition of the crew, pulled down as they were by fever, and the illness of most of the officers, with the absence of any safe anchorage in this part of Oceania, decided him to make for Guam, where he thought a little rest might possibly be obtained. This was a very grave dereliction from the instructions which ordered him to survey Torres Straits, but the fact of forty sailors being *hors de combat* and on the sick-list, will suffice to prove how foolish it would have been to make so perilous an attempt.

Not until the 26th April was Hogoley Archipelago sighted, where D'Urville bridged over the gaps left by Duperrey in his exploration, and only on the 2nd May did the coasts of Guam come in sight. Anchor was cast at Umata, where a supply of fresh water was easily found, and the climate much milder than at Agagna. On the 29th May, however, when the expedition set sail again, the men were not by any means all restored to health, which D'Urville attributed to the excesses in the way of eating indulged in by the sick, and the impossibility of getting them to keep to a suitable diet.

The good Medinilla, of whom Freycinet had such reason to speak favourably, was still governor of Guam. He did not this time, it is true, show so many kind attentions to the present expedition, but that was because a terrible drought had just devastated the colony, and a rumour had got afloat that the illness the crew of the *Astrolabe* was suffering from was contagious. Umata too was a good distance from Agagna, so that D'Urville could not visit the governor in his own home. Medinilla, however, sent the expedition fresh provisions and fruits in such quantities as to prove he had lost none of his old generosity.

After leaving Guam D'Urville surveyed, under sail, the Elivi, the Uluthii of Lütke, Guapgolo and the Pelew group of the Caroline Archipelago, was driven by contrary winds past Waigiou, Aiou, Asia, and Guebek, and finally entered Bouron Straits and cast anchor off Amboine, where he was cordially received by the Dutch authorities, and obtained news from France to the effect that the Minister of Marine had taken no notice of all the work, fatigue, and perils of the expedition, for not one officer had received advancement.

The receipt of this news caused considerable disappointment and discouragement, which the commander at once tried to remove. From Amboine the *Astrolabe* steered, *viâ* Banka Strait, for Uanado, with its well-armed and equipped fort, forming a pleasant residence. Governor Merkus obtained for D'Urville's natural history collections some fine *barberosas*, a *sapioutang* — the latter a little animal of the size of a calf, with the same kind of muzzle, paws, and turned-back horns — serpents, birds, fishes, and plants.

According to D'Urville the people of the Celebes resemble in externals the Polynesians rather than the Malays. They reminded him of the natives of Otaheite, Tonga Tabou, and New Zealand, much more than of the Papuans of Darei Harbour, the Harfous of Bouron, or the Malays, with their square bony faces. Near Manado are some mines of auriferous quartz, of which the commander was able to obtain a specimen, and in the interior is the lake of Manado, said to be of immense depth, and which is the source of the torrent of the same name that dashes in the form of a magnificent waterfall over a basalt rock eighty feet high, barring its progress to the sea. D'Urville, accompanied by the governor and the naturalists of the expedition, explored this beautiful lake, shut in by volcanic mountains, with here and there a few fumerolles still issuing from them, and ascertained the depth of the water to be no more than twelve or thirteen fathoms, so that in the event of its ever drying up, its basin would form a perfectly level plain.

On the 4th August anchor was weighed at Manado, where the sufferers from fever and dysentery had not got much better, and on the 29th of the same month the expedition arrived at Batavia where it only remained three days. The rest of the voyage of the *Astrolabe* was in well-known waters. Mauritius was reached in due course, and there D'Urville met Commander Le Goarant, who had made a trip to Vanikoro in the corvette *La Bayonnaise*, and who told D'Urville that he had not attempted to enter the reef, but had only sent in some boats to reconnoitre. The natives had respected the monument to the memory of La Pérouse, and had been reluctant even to allow the sailors of the *Bayonnaise* to nail a copper plate upon it.

On the 18th November the corvette left Mauritius, and after touching at the Cape, St. Helena, and Ascension, arrived on the 25th March, 1829, at Marseilles, exactly thirty-five months after her departure from that port. To hydrographical science, if to nothing else, the results of the expedition were remarkable, and no less than forty-five new charts were produced by the indefatigable Messrs. Gressien and Paris. Nothing will better bring before us the richness of harvest of natural history specimens than the following quotation from Cuvier's report: —

"They (the species brought home by Quoy and Gaimard) amount to thousands in the catalogues, and no better proof can be given of the activity of our naturalists than the fact that the directors of the Jardin du Roi do not know where to store the results of the expedition, especially those now under notice. They have had to be stowed away on the ground-floor, almost in the cellars, and the very warehouses are now so crowded — no other word would do as well — that we have had to divide them by partitions to make more stowage."

The geological collections were no less numerous; one hundred and eighty-seven species or varieties of rock attest the zeal of Messrs. Quoy and Gaimard, while M. Lesson, junior, collected fifteen or sixteen hundred plants; Captain Jacquinot made a number of astronomical observations; M. Lottin studied magnetism, and the commander, without neglecting his duties as a sailor and leader of the expedition, made experiments on submarine temperature and meteorology, and collected an immense mass of information on philology and ethnography.

We cannot better conclude our account of this expedition than with the following quotation from Dumont d'Urville's memoirs, given in his biography by Didot: —

"This adventurous expedition surpassed all previous ones, alike in the number and gravity of the dangers incurred, and the extent of the results of every kind obtained. An iron will prevented me from ever yielding to any obstacle. My mind once made up to die or to succeed, I was free from any hesitation or uncertainty. Twenty times I saw the *Astrolabe* on the eve of destruction without once losing hope of her salvation. A thousand times did I risk the very lives of my companions in order to achieve the object of my instructions, and I can assert that for two consecutive years we daily incurred more real perils than we should have done in the longest ordinary voyage. My brave and honourable officers were not blind to the dangers to which I daily exposed them, but they kept silence, and nobly fulfilled their duty."

From this admirable harmony of purpose and devotion resulted a mass of discoveries and observations in every branch of human knowledge, of all of which an exact account was given by Rossel, Cuvier, Geoffrey St. Hilaire, Desfontaines, and others, all competent and disinterested judges.

CHAPTER III.

POLAR EXPEDITIONS.

Bellinghausen, yet another Russian explorer — Discovery of the islands of Traversay, Peter I., and Alexander I. — The whaler, Weddell — The Southern Orkneys — New Shetland — The people of Tierra del Fuego — John Biscoe and the districts of Enderby and Graham — Charles Wilkes and the Antarctic Continent — Captain Balleny — Dumont d'Urville's expedition in the *Astrolabe* and the *Zelée* — Coupvent Desbois and the Peak of Teneriffe — The Straits of Magellan — A new post-office shut in by ice — Louis Philippe's Land — Across Oceania — Adélie and Clarie Lands — New Guinea and Torres Strait — Return to France — James Clark Rosset — Victoria.

We have already had occasion to speak of the Antarctic regions, and the explorations made there in the seventeenth, and at the end of the eighteenth century, by various navigators, nearly all Frenchmen, amongst whom we must specially note La Roche, discoverer of New Georgia, in 1675, Bouvet, Kerguelen, Marion, and Crozet. The name of Antarctic is given to all the islands scattered about the ocean which are called after navigators, as well as those of Prince Edward, the Sandwich group, New Georgia, &c.

It was in these latitudes that William Smith, commander of the brig *William*, trading between Monte Video and Valparaiso, discovered, in 1818, the Southern Shetland Islands, arid and barren districts covered with snow, on which, however, collected vast herds of seals, animals of which the skins are used as furs, and which had not before been met with in the Southern Seas. The news of this discovery led to a rush of whaling-vessels to the new hunting-grounds, and between 1821 and 1822 the number of seals captured in this archipelago is estimated at 32,000, whilst the quantity of sea-elephant oil obtained during the same time may be put down at 940 tons. As males and females were indiscriminately slaughtered, however, the new fields were soon exhausted. The survey of the twelve principal islands, and of the innumerable and all but barren rocks, making up this archipelago, occupied but a short time.

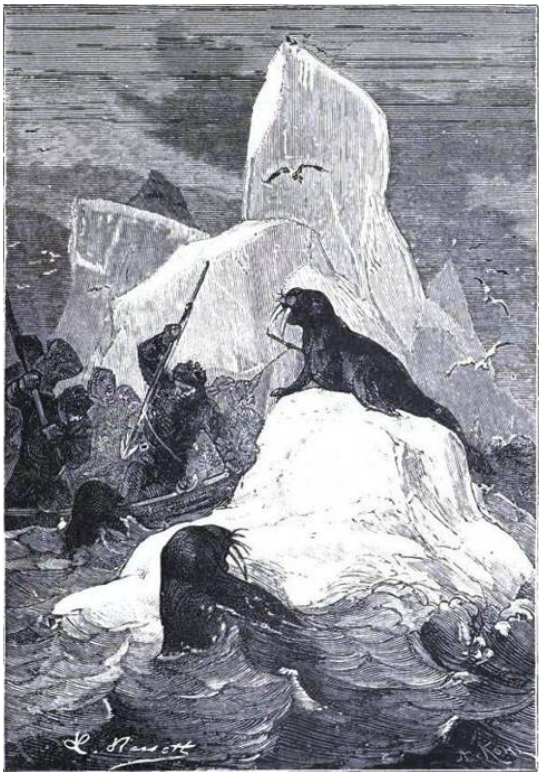

Hunting sea-elephants.

Two years later Botwell discovered the Southern Orkneys, and then Palmer and other whalemen sighted, or thought they sighted, districts to which they gave the names of Palmer and Trinity.

More important discoveries were, however, to be made in these hyberborean regions, and the hypothesis of Dalrymple, Buffon, and other scholars of the eighteenth century, as to the existence of a southern continent, forming, so to speak, a counterpoise to the North Pole, was to be unexpectedly confirmed by the work of these intrepid explorers.

The navy of Russia had now for some years been rapidly gaining in importance, and had played no insignificant part in scientific research. We have related the interesting voyages of most Russian circumnavigators; but we have still to speak of Bellinghausen's voyage round the world, which occupies a prominent place in the history of the exploration of the Antarctic seas.

The *Vostok*, Captain Bellinghausen, and the *Mirni*, commanded by Lieutenant Lazarew, left Cronstadt on the 3rd July, 1819, *en route* for the Antarctic Ocean. On the 15th December Southern Georgia was sighted, and seven days later an island was discovered in the south-east, to which the name of Traversay was given, and the position of which was fixed at 52° 15' S. lat., and 27° 21' W. long., reckoning from the Paris meridian.

Continuing their easterly course in S. lat. 60° for 400 miles as far as W. long. 187°, the explorers then bore south to S. lat. 70°, where their further progress was arrested by a barrier of ice.

Bellinghausen, nothing daunted, tried to cut his way eastwards into the heart of the Polar Circle, but at 44° E. long, he was compelled to return northwards. After a voyage of forty miles a large country hove in sight, which a whaler was to discover twelve years later when the ice had broken up.

Back again in S. lat. 62°, Bellinghausen once more steered eastwards without encountering any obstacles, and on the 5th March, 1820, he made for Port Jackson to repair his vessels.

The whole summer was given up by the Russian navigator to a cruise about Oceania, when he discovered no less than seventeen new islands, and on the 31st October he left Port Jackson on a new expedition. The first places sighted on this trip were the Macquarie Islands; then cutting across the 60th parallel, S. lat. in E. long. 160°, the explorers bore east between S. lat. 64° and 68° as far as W. long. 95°. On the 9th January, Bellinghausen reached 70° S. lat., and the next day discovered, in S. lat. 69° 30', W. long. 92° 20', an island, to which he gave the name of Peter I., the most southerly land hitherto visited. Then fifteen degrees further east, and in all but the same latitude, he sighted some more land which he called Alexander I.'s Land. Scarcely 200 miles distant from Graham's Land, it appeared likely to be connected with it, for the sea between the two districts was constantly discoloured, and many other facts pointed to the same conclusion.

From Alexander I.'s Land the two vessels, bearing due north, and passing Graham's Land, made for New Georgia, arriving there in February. Thence they returned to Cronstadt, the port of which they entered in July 1821, exactly two years after they left it, having lost only three men out of a crew of 200.

We would gladly have given further details of this interesting expedition, but we have not been able to obtain a sight of the original account published in Russian at St. Petersburg, and we have had to be content with the *résumé* brought out in one of the journals of the Geographical Society in 1839.

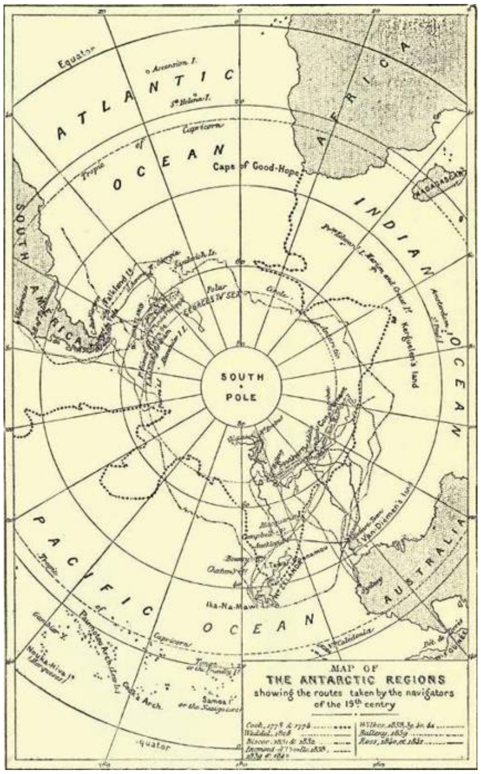
Equator
Ascension I.
St Helena I.
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Tropic of Capricorn
Cape of Good-Hope
AFRICA
MADAGASCAR
INDIAN OCEAN
Kerguelen's land
SOUTH AMERICA
SOUTH POLE
PACIFIC OCEAN
Van-Diemen's Ld
AUSTRALIA
Sydney
New Zealand
Chatham I.
New Caledonia
MAP OF
THE ANTARCTIC REGIONS
showing the routes taken by the navigators
of the 19th centry
Cook, 1773 & 1774
Weddell, 1822
Biscoe, 1831 & 1832
Dumont d'Urville 1838, 1839 & 1840
Wilkes, 1838, 39, 40, 41
Balleny, 1839
Ross, 1840 et 1842

Engraved by E. Morieu.

At the same period a master in the Royal Navy, James Weddell by name, was appointed by an Edinburgh firm to the command of an expedition, to obtain seal-skins in the southern seas, where two years were to be spent. This expedition consisted of the brig *Jane*, 160 tons, Captain Weddell, and the cutter *Beaufort*, sixty-five tons, Matthew Brisbane commander.

The two vessels left England on the 17th September, 1822, touched at Bonavista, one of the Cape Verd Islands, and cast anchor in the following December in the port of St. Helena, on the eastern coast of Patagonia, where some valuable observations were taken on the position of that town.

Weddell put to sea again on the 27th December, and steering in a south-easterly direction, came in sight, on the 12th January, of an archipelago to which he gave the name of the Southern Orkneys. These islands are situated in S. lat. 60° 45', and W. long. 45°.

According to the navigator, this little group presents an even more forbidding appearance than New Shetland. On every side rise the sharp points of rocks, bare of vegetation, round which surge the restless waves, and against which dash enormous floating icebergs, with a noise like thunder. Vessels are in perpetual danger in these latitudes, and the eleven days passed under sail by Weddell in surveying minutely the islands, islets, and rocks of this archipelago, were a time of ceaseless exertion for the crew, who were throughout in constant danger of their lives.

Specimens of the principal strata of these islands were collected, and on the return home put into the hands of Professor Jameson, of Edinburgh, who identified them as belonging to primary and volcanic rocks.

Weddell now made for the south, crossed the Antarctic Circle in W. long. 30°, and soon came in sight of numerous ice islands. Beyond S. lat. 70°, these floes decreased in number, and finally disappeared; the weather moderated, innumerable flocks of birds hovered above the ships, whilst large schools of whales played in its wake. This strange and unexpected change in the temperature surprised every one, especially as it became more marked as the South Pole was more nearly approached. Everything pointed to the existence of a continent not far off. Nothing was, however, discovered.

On the 20th February the vessels were in S. lat. 74° 15' and W. long. 34° 16' 45".

"I would willingly," says Weddell, "have explored the south-west quarter, but taking into consideration the lateness of the season, and that we had to pass homeward through 1000 miles of sea strewed with ice islands, with long nights, and probably attended with fogs, I could not determine otherwise than to take advantage of this favourable wind for returning."

Having seen no sign of land in this direction, and a strong southerly wind blowing at the time, Weddell retraced his course as far as S. lat. 58°, and steered in an easterly direction to within 100 miles of the Sandwich Islands. On the 7th February he once more doubled the southern cape, sailed by a sheet of ice fifty miles wide, and on the 20th February reached S. lat. 74° 15'. From the top of the masts nothing was to be seen but an open sea with a few floating ice-islands.

Unexpected results had ensued from these trips in a southerly direction. Weddell had penetrated 240 miles nearer the Pole than any of his predecessors, including Cook. He gave the name of George IV. to that part of the Antarctic Ocean which he had explored. Strange and significant was the fact that the ice had decreased in quantity as the South Pole was approached, whilst fogs and storms were incessant, and the atmosphere was always heavily charged with moisture, and the temperature of surprising mildness.

Another valuable observation made, was that the vibrations of the compass were as slow in these southern latitudes as Parry had noted them to be in the Arctic regions.

Weddell's two vessels, separated in a storm, met again in New Georgia after a perilous voyage of 1200 miles amongst the ice. New Georgia, discovered by La Roche in 1675, and visited in 1756 by the *Lion*, was really little known until after Captain Cook's exploration of it, but his account of the number of seals and walruses frequenting it had led to being much favoured by whalers, chiefly English and American, who took the skins of their victims to China and sold them at a guinea or thirty shillings each.

"The island," says Weddell, speaking of South Georgia, "is about ninety-six miles long, and its mean breadth about ten. It is so indented with bays, that in several places, where they are on opposite sides, they are so deep as to make the distance from one side to the other very small. The tops of the mountains are lofty, and perpetually covered with snow; but in the valleys, during the summer season, vegetation is rather abundant. Almost the only natural production of the soil is a strong-bladed grass, the length of which is in general about two feet; it grows in tufts on mounds three or four feet from the ground. No land quadrupeds are found here; birds and amphibious animals are the only inhabitants."

Here congregate numerous flocks of penguins, which stalk about on the beach, head in air. To quote an early navigator, Sir John Nasborough, they look like children in white aprons. Numerous albatrosses are also met with here, some of them measuring seventeen feet from tip to tip of their wings. When these birds are stripped of their plumage their weight is reduced one-half.

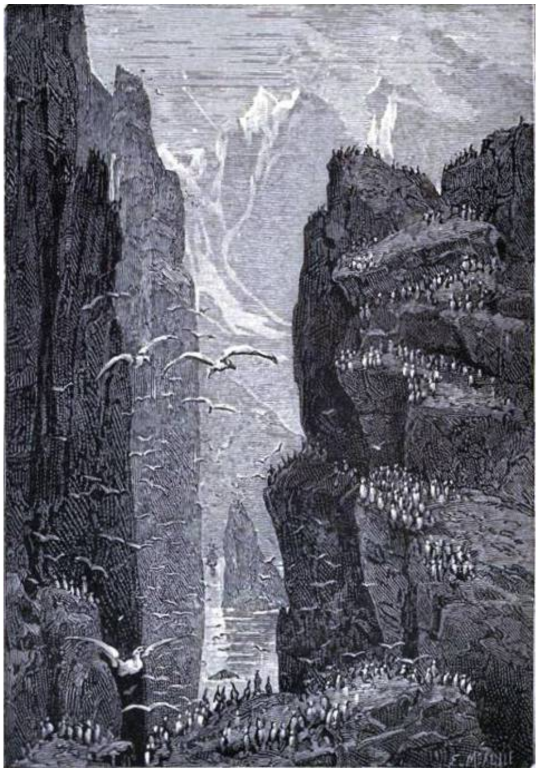

"Here congregate flocks of penguins."

Weddell also visited New Shetland, and ascertained that Bridgeman Island, in that group, is an active volcano. He could not land, as all the harbours were blocked up with ice, and he was obliged to make for Tierra del Fuego.

During a stay of two months here, Weddell collected some valuable information on the advantages of this coast to navigators, and obtained some accurate data as to the character of the inhabitants. In the interior of Tierra del Fuego rose a few mountains, always covered with snow, the loftiest of which were not more than 3000 feet high. Weddell was unable to identify the volcano noticed by other travellers, including Basil Hall in 1822, but he picked up a good deal of lava which had probably come from it. There was, moreover, no doubt of its existence, for the explorer under notice had seen on his previous voyage signs of a volcanic eruption in the extreme redness of the sky above Tierra del Fuego.

Hitherto there had been a good deal of divergence in the opinion of explorers as to the temperature of Tierra del Fuego. Weddell attributes this to the different seasons of their visits, and the variability of the winds. When he was there and the wind was in the south the thermometer was never more than two or three degrees above zero, whereas when the wind came from the north it was as hot as July in England. According to Weddell dogs and otters are the only quadrupeds of the country.

The relations with the natives were cordial throughout the explorer's stay amongst them. At first they gathered about the ship without venturing to climb on to it, and the scenes enacted on the passage of the first European vessel through the states were repeated in spite of the long period which had since elapsed. Of the bread, madeira, and beef offered to them, the natives would taste nothing but the meat; and of the many objects shown to them, they liked pieces of iron and looking-glasses best, amusing themselves with making grimaces in the latter of such absurdity as to keep the crew in fits of laughter. Their general appearance, too, was very provocative of mirth. Their jet black complexions, blue feathers, and faces streaked with parallel red and white lines, like tick, made up a whole of the greatest absurdity, and many were the hearty laughs the English enjoyed at their expense. Presently disgusted at receiving nothing more than the iron hoops of casks from people possessed of such wealth, they proceeded to annex all they could lay hands on. These thefts were soon detected and put a stop to, but they gave rise to many an amusing scene, and proved the wonderful imitative powers of the natives.

"A sailor had given a Fuegan," says Weddell, "a tin-pot full of coffee, which he drank, and was using all his art to steal the pot. The sailor, however, recollecting after awhile that the pot had not been returned, applied for it, but whatever words he made use of were always repeated in imitation by the Fuegan. At length he became enraged at hearing his requests reiterated, and, placing himself in a threatening attitude, in an angry tone, he said, 'You copper-coloured rascal, where is my tin-pot?' The Fuegan, assuming the same attitude, with his eyes fixed on the sailor, called out, 'You copper-coloured rascal, where is my tin-pot?' The imitation was so perfect that every one laughed, except the sailor, who proceeded to search him, and under his arm he found the article missing."

The sterile mountainous districts in this rigorous climate of Tierra del Fuego furnish no animal fit for food, and without proper clothing or nourishment the people are reduced to a state of complete barbarism. Hunting yields them hardly any game, fishing is almost equally unproductive of results; they are obliged to depend upon the storms which now and then fling some huge cetacean on their shores, and upon such salvage they fall tooth and nail, not even taking the trouble to cook the flesh.

In 1828 Henry Foster, commanding the *Chanticleer*, received instructions to make observations on the pendulum, with a view to determining the figure of the earth. This expedition extended over three years, and was then — i.e. in 1831 — brought to an end by his violent death by drowning in the river Chagres. We allude to this trip because it resulted, on the 5th January, 1829, in the identification and exploration of the Southern Shetlands. The commander himself succeeded in landing, though with great difficulty, on one of these islands, where he collected some specimens of the syenite of which the soil is composed, and a small quantity of red snow, in every respect similar to that found by explorers in the Arctic regions.

Of far greater interest, however, was the survey made in 1830 by the whaler John Biscoe. The brig *Tula,* 140 tons, and the cutter *Lively,* left London under his orders on the 14th July, 1830. These two vessels, the property of Messrs. Enderby, were fitted up for whale-fishing, and were in every respect well qualified for the long and arduous task before them, which, according to Biscoe's instructions, was to combine discovery in the Antarctic seas with whaling.

After touching at the Falklands, the ships started on the 27th November on a vain search for the Aurora Islands, after which they made for the Sandwich group, doubling its most southerly cape on the 1st January, 1831.

In 59° S. lat. masses of ice were encountered, compelling the explorers to give up the south-western route, in which direction they had noted signs of the existence of land. It was therefore necessary to bear east, skirting along the ice as far as W. long. 9° 34'. It was only on the 16th January that Biscoe was able to cross the 60th parallel of S. lat. In 1775 Cook had here come to a space of open sea 250 miles in extent, yet now an insurmountable barrier of ice checked Biscoe's advance.

Continuing his south-westerly course as far as 68° 51' and 10° E. long., the explorer was struck by the discoloration of the water, the presence of several eaglets and cape-pigeons, and the fact that the wind now blew from the south-south-west, all sure tokens of a large continent being near. Ice, however, again barred his progress southwards, and he had to go on in an easterly direction approaching nearer and nearer to the Antarctic Circle.

"At length, on the 27th February," says Desborough Cooley, "in S. lat. 65° 57' and E. long. 47° 20' land was distinctly seen." This land was of considerable extent, mountainous and covered with snow. Biscoe named it Enderby, and made the most strenuous efforts to reach it, but it was so completely surrounded with ice that he could not succeed. Whilst these attempts were being made a gale of wind separated the two vessels and drove them in a south-easterly direction, the land remaining in sight, and stretching away from east to west for an extent of more than 200 miles. Bad weather, and the deplorable state of the health of the crew, compelled Biscoe to make for Van Diemen's Land, where he was not rejoined by the *Lively* until some months later.

The explorers had several opportunities of observing the aurora australis, to quote from Biscoe's narrative, or rather the account of his trip drawn up from his log-book, and published in the journal of the Royal Geographical Society. "Extraordinarily vivid coruscations of aurora australis (were seen), at times rolling," says Captain Biscoe, "as it were, over our heads in the form of beautiful columns, then as suddenly changing like the fringe of a curtain, and again shooting across the hemisphere like a serpent; frequently appearing not many yards above our heads, and decidedly within our atmosphere."

Leaving Van Diemen's Land on the 11th January, 1832, Biscoe and his two vessels resumed their voyage in a south-easterly direction. The constant presence of floating sea-weed, and the number of birds of a kind which never venture far from land, with the gathering of low and heavy clouds made Biscoe think he was on the eve of some discovery, but storms prevented the completion of his explorations. At last, on the 12th February, in S. lat. 64° 10' albatrosses, penguins, and whales were seen in large quantities; and on the 15th land was seen in the south a long distance off.

The next day this land was ascertained to be a large island, to which the name of Adelaide was given, in honour of the Queen of England. On this island were a number of mountains of conical form with the base very large.

In the ensuing days it was ascertained that this was no solitary island, but one of a chain of islets forming so to speak the outworks of a lofty continent. This continent, stretching away for 250 miles in an E.N.E. and W.S.W. direction, was called Graham, whilst the name of Biscoe was given to the islets in honour of their discoverer. There was no trace either of plants or animals in this country.

To make quite sure of the nature of his discovery, Biscoe landed on the 21st February, on Graham's Land, and determined the position of a lofty mountain, to which he gave the name of William, in S. lat. 64° 45' and W. long. 66° 11', reckoning from the Paris meridian.

To quote from the journal of the Royal Geographical Society, — "The place was in a deep bay, in which the water was so still that could any seals have been found the vessels could have been easily loaded, as they might have been laid alongside the rocks for the purpose. The depth of the water was also considerable, no bottom being found with twenty fathoms of line almost close to the beach; and the sun was so warm that the snow was melted off all the rocks along the water-line, which made it more extraordinary that they should be so utterly deserted."

From Graham's Land, Biscoe made for the Southern Shetlands, with which it seemed possible the former might be connected, and after touching at the Falkland Islands, where he lost sight of the *Lively*, he returned to England.

As a reward for all he had done, and as an encouragement for the future, Biscoe received medals both from the English and French Geographical

Societies.

Very animated were the discussions which now took place as to the existence of a southern continent, and the possibility of penetrating beyond the barrier of ice shutting in the adjacent islands. Three powers simultaneously resolved to send out an expedition. France entrusted the command of hers to Dumont d'Urville; England chose James Ross; and the United States, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes.

The last named found himself at the head of a small fleet, consisting of the *Porpoise*, two sloops, the *Vincennes* and the *Peacock*; two schooners, the *Sea-Gull* and the *Flying-Fish*; and a transport ship, the *Relief*, which was sent on in advance to Rio with a reserve of provisions, whilst the others touched at Madeira, and the Cape Verd Islands.

From the 24th November, 1838, to the 6th January, 1839, the squadron remained in the bay of Rio de Janeiro, whence it sailed to the Rio Negro, not arriving at Port Orange, Tierra del Fuego, until the 19th February, 1839.

There the expedition divided, the *Peacock* and *Flying-Fish* making for the point were Cook crossed S. lat. 60°, and the *Relief*, with the naturalists on board, penetrating into the Straits of Magellan, by one of the passages south-east of Tierra del Fuego; whilst the *Vincennes* remained at Port Orange; and the *Sea-Gull* and *Porpoise* started on the 24th February for the Southern Seas. Wilkes surveyed Palmer's Land for a distance of thirty miles to the point where it turns in a S.S.E. direction, which he called Cape Hope; he then visited the Shetlands and verified the position of several of the islands in that group.

After passing thirty-six days in these inhospitable regions the two vessels steered northwards. A voyage marked by few incidents worthy of record brought Wilkes to Callao, but he had lost sight of the *Sea-Gull*. The commander now visited the Paumatou group, Otaheite, the Society and Navigator's Islands, and cast anchor off Sydney on the 28th November.

On the 29th December, 1839, the expedition once more put to sea, and steered for the south, with a view to reaching the most southerly latitude between E. long 160° and 145° (reckoning from Greenwich), bearing east by west. The vessels were at liberty to follow out separate courses, a rendezvous being fixed in case of their losing sight of each other. Up to January 22nd numerous signs of land were seen, and some officers even thought they had actually caught sight of it, but it turned out, when the various accounts were compared at the trial Wilkes had to undergo on his return, that it was merely through the accidental deviation before the 22nd January of the *Vincennes*, in a northerly direction, that the English explorers ascertained the existence of land. Not until he reached Sydney did Wilkes, hearing that D'Urville had discovered land on the 19th January, pretend to have seen it on the same day.

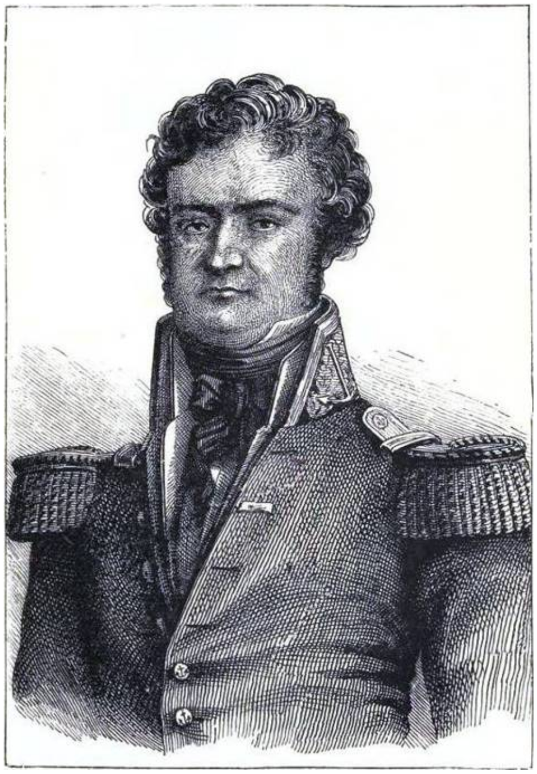

Dumont d'Urville.

These facts are established in a very conclusive article published by the hydrographer Daussy in the *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*. Further on we shall see that d'Urville actually landed on the new continent, so that the honour of being the first to discover it is undoubtedly his.

The *Peacock* and *Flying-Fish*, either because they had sustained damages or because of the dangers from the roughness of the sea and floating ice, had steered in a northerly direction from the 24th January to the 5th February, The *Vincennes* and *Porpoise* alone continued the arduous voyage as far as E. long. 97°, having land in sight for two or three miles, which they approached whenever the ice allowed them to do so.

"On the 29th of January," says Wilkes, in his report to the National Institution of Washington, "we entered what I have called Piners Bay, the only place where we could have landed on the naked rocks. We were driven out of it by one of the sudden gales usual in those seas. We got soundings in thirty fathoms. The gale lasted thirty-six hours, and after many narrow escapes, I found myself some sixty miles W. to leeward of this bay. It now became probable that this land which we had discovered was of great extent, and I deemed it of more importance to follow its trend than to return to Piners Bay to land, not doubting I should have an opportunity of landing on some portion of it still more accessible; this, however, I was disappointed in, the icy barrier preventing our approach, and rendering it impossible to effect.

"Great quantities of ice, covered with mud, rock, and stone, presented themselves at the edge of the barrier, in close proximity of the land; from these our specimens were obtained, and were quite as numerous as could have been gathered from the rocks themselves. The land, covered with snow, was distinctly seen in many places, and between them such appearances as to leave little or no doubt in my mind of it being a continuous line of coast, and deserving the name bestowed upon it of the *Antarctic Continent*, lying as it does under that circle. Many phenomena were observed here, and observations made, which will be found under their appropriate head in the sequel.

"On reaching 97° east, we found the ice trending to the northward and continuing to follow it close, we reached to within a few miles of the position where Cook was stopped by the barrier in 1773."

Piners Bay, where Wilkes landed, is situated in E. long. 140° (reckoning from Paris), that is to say it is identical with the place visited by D'Urville on the 21st January. On the 30th January the *Porpoise* had come in sight of D'Urville's two vessels, and approached to within speaking distance of them, but they put on all sail and appeared anxious to avoid any communication.

On his arrival at Sydney, Wilkes found the *Peacock* in a state of repair and with that vessel he visited New Zealand, Tonga Tabou, and the Fiji Islands, where two of the junior officers of the expedition were massacred by the natives. The Friendly, Navigator, and Sandwich Islands, Admiralty Straits, Puget Sound, Vancouver's Island, the Ladrones, Manilla, Sooloo, Singapore, the Sunda Islands, St. Helena, and Rio de Janeiro, were the halting places on the return voyage, which terminated on the 9th June, 1842, at New York, the explorers having been absent three years and ten months altogether.

The results to every branch of science were considerable, and the young republic of the United States was to be congratulated on a début so triumphant in the career of discovery. In spite, however, of the interest attaching to the account of this expedition, and to the special treatises by Dana, Gould, Pickering, Gray, Cassin, and Brackenbridge, we are obliged to refrain from dwelling on the work done in countries already known. The success of these publications beyond the Atlantic was, as might be expected in a country boasting of so few explorers, immense.

Whilst Wilkes was engaged in his explorations, i.e. in 1839, Balleny, captain of the *Elizabeth Scott*, was adding his quota to the survey of the Antarctic regions. Starting from Campbell Island, on the south of New Zealand, he arrived on the 7th February in S. lat. 67° 7', and W. long. 164° 25', reckoning from the Paris meridian. Then bearing west and noting many indications of the neighbourhood of land, he discovered two days later a black band in the south-west which, at six o'clock in the evening, he ascertained beyond a doubt to be land. This land turned out to be three islands of considerable size, and Balleny gave them his own name. As may be imagined the captain tried to land, but a barrier of ice prevented his doing so. All he could manage was the determination of the position of the central isle, which he fixed at S. lat. 66° 44' and W. long. 162° 25'.

On the 14th February a lofty land, covered with snow, was sighted in the W.S.W. The next day there were but ten miles between the vessel and the land. It was approached as nearly as possible, and then a boat was put off, but a beach of only three or four feet wide with vertical and inaccessible cliffs rising beyond it rendered landing impossible, and only by getting wet up to their waists were the sailors able to obtain a few specimens of the lava characteristic of this volcanic district.

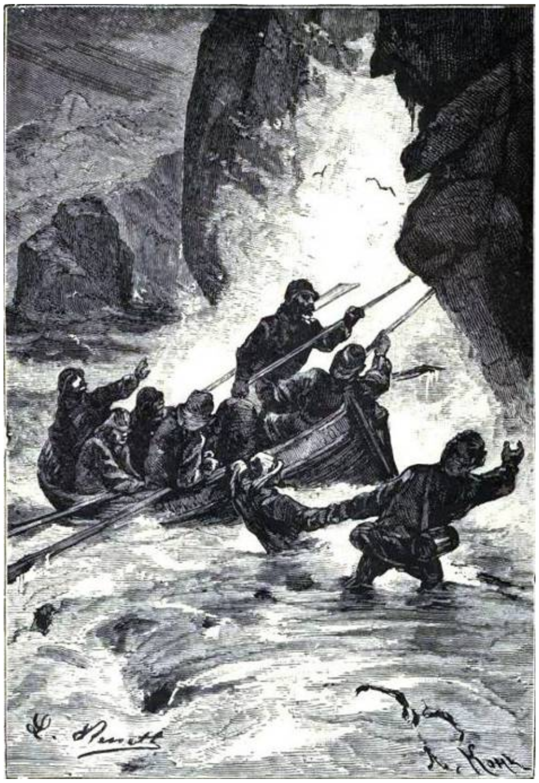

"Only by getting wet up to their waists."

Yet once more, on the 2nd March in S. lat. 65° and about W. long. 120° 24', land was seen from the deck of the *Elizabeth Scott*. The vessel was brought to for the night, and the next day an attempt was made to steer in a south-west direction, but it was impossible to get through the ice barrier. Naming the new discovery Sabrina, Balleny resumed his northerly route without being able further to verify his discoveries.

In 1837, just as Wilkes had started on his expedition, Captain Dumont d'Urville proposed to the Minister of Marine a new scheme for a voyage round the world. The services rendered by him in 1819-21 in a hydrographic expedition, in 1822 and 1825 on the *Coquille*, under Captain Duperrey, and lastly in 1826-29 on the *Astrolabe*, had given him an amount of experience which justified him in submitting his peculiar views to the government, and to supplement so to speak the mass of information collected by himself and others in these little known latitudes.

The minister at once accepted D'Urville's offer, and exerted himself to find for him enlightened and trustworthy fellow-workers. Two corvettes, the *Astrolabe* and the *Zelée*, fitted up with everything which French experience had proved to be necessary, were placed at his disposal, and amongst his colleagues were many who were subsequently to rise to the rank of general officers, including Jacquinot, commander of the *Zelée*, Coupvent Desbois, Du Bouzet, Tardy de Montravel, and Perigot, all well-known names to those interested in the history of the French navy.

The instructions given by Vice-Admiral Rosamel to D'Urville differed from those of his predecessors chiefly in his being ordered to penetrate as near as the ice would permit to the South Pole. He was also ordered to complete the great work he had begun in 1827 on the Viti Islands, to survey the Salomon archipelago, to visit the Swan river of Australia, New Zealand, the Chatham Islands, that part of the Caroline group surveyed by Lütke, Mindanao, Borneo, and Batavia, whence he was to return to France *viâ* the Cape of Good Hope.

These instructions concluded in terms proving the exalted ideas of the government. "His Majesty," said Admiral de Rosamel, "not only contemplates the progress of hydrography and natural science; but his royal solicitude for the interests of French commerce and the development of the French navy is such as to lead him greatly to extend the terms of your commission and to hope for great results from it. You will visit numerous places, the resources of which you must study with a view to the interests of our whaling-ships, collecting all information likely to be of service to them alike in facilitating their voyages and rendering those voyages as remunerative as possible. You will touch at those ports where commercial relations with us are already opened, and where the visit of a state vessel will have salutary effects, and at others hitherto closed to our produce and about which you may on your return give us some valuable details."

In addition to the personal good wishes of Louis Philippe, D'Urville received many marks of the most lively interest taken in his work by the *Académie des Sciences morales* and the Geographical Society, but not unfortunately from the *Académie des Sciences*, although he had for twenty years been working hard to increase the riches of the Museum of Natural History.

"Whether from prejudice or from whatever cause," says D'Urville, "they (the members of the *Académie des Sciences*) showed very little enthusiasm for the contemplated expedition and their instructions to me were as formal as they would have been to a complete stranger."

It is matter of regret that the celebrated Arago, the declared enemy of Polar researches, was one of the bitterest opponents of the new expedition. This was not, however, the case with various scholars of other nationalities, such as Humboldt and Kruzenstern, who wrote to congratulate D'Urville on his approaching voyage and on the important results to science which might be hoped for.

After numerous delays, resulting from the fitting up of two vessels which were to take the Prince de Joinville to Brazil, the *Astrolabe* and *Zelée* at last left Toulon on the 7th September, 1837. The last day of the same month they cast anchor off Santa Cruz de Teneriffe which D'Urville chose as a halting-place in preference to one of the Cape Verd Islands, in the hope of laying in a stock of wine and also of being able to take some magnetic observations which he had been blamed for neglecting in 1826, although it was well known that he was not then in a fit state to attend to such things.

In spite of the eagerness of the young officers to go and enjoy themselves on shore they had to submit to a quarantine of four days, on account of rumours of cases of plague having occurred in the lazaretto of Marseilles. Without pausing to relate the details of Messrs. Du Bouzet, Coupvent, and Dumoulin's ascent of the Peak, we will merely quote a few enthusiastic remarks of Coupvent Desbois: —

"Arrived," says that officer, "at the foot of the peak, we spent the last hour of the ascent in crossing cinders and broken stones, arriving at last at the longed-for goal, the loftiest point of this huge volcano. The smoking crater presented the appearance of a hollow sulphurous semi-circle about 1200 feet wide and 300 feet deep, covered with the débris of pumice and other stones. The thermometer, which had marked five degrees at ten a.m., got broken through being placed on the ground where there was an escape of sulphuric vapour. There are upon the sides and in the crater numerous fumerolles which send forth the native sulphur, which forms the base of the peak. The rush of the vapour is so rapid as to sound like shots from a cannon.

"The heat of the ground is so great in some parts that it is impossible to stand on it for a minute at a time. Look around you and see if these three mountains piled one upon the other do not resemble a staircase built up by giants, on which to climb to heaven. Gaze upon the vast streams of lava, all issuing from one point which form the crater, and which a few centuries back you could not have trodden upon with impunity. See the Canaries in the distance, look down, ye pigmies, on the sea, with its breakers dashing against the shores of the island, of which you for the moment form the summit!... See for once, as God sees, and be rewarded for your exertions, ye travellers, whose enthusiasm for the grand scenes of nature has brought you some 12,182 feet above the level of the ocean."

We must add that the explorers testified to the brilliancy of the stars, as seen from the summit of the peak, the clearness of all sounds, and also to the giddiness and headache known as mountain sickness. Whilst part of the staff were engaged in this scientific excursion, several other officers visited the town, where they noticed nothing special except a narrow walk called the Alameda, and the church of the Franciscans. The neighbourhood, however, is interesting enough on account of the curious aqueducts for supplying the town with water, and the Mercede forest which, in D'Urville's opinion, might more justly be called a coppice, for it contains nothing but shrubs and ferns. The population seemed happy, but extremely lazy;

economical, but horribly dirty; and the less said about their morals the better.

On the 12th October the two vessels put to sea again, intending to reach the Polar regions as soon as possible. Motives of humanity, however, determined D'Urville to change his plans and touch at Rio, the state of an apprentice with disease of the lungs becoming so rapidly worse that a stay in the Arctic regions would probably have been fatal.

The vessels cast anchor in the roadstead, not the Bay of Rio, on the 13th November, but they only remained there one day, that is to say, just long enough to land young Dupare, and to lay in a stock of provisions. The southerly route was then resumed.

For a long time D'Urville had wished to explore the Strait of Magellan, not with a view to further hydrographical surveys, for the careful explorations of Captain King, begun in 1826, had been finished in 1834 by Fitzroy, leaving little to be done in that direction, but to gather the rich and still unappropriated harvest of facts relating to natural history. How intensely interesting it was, too, to note how real had been the dangers encountered by early navigators, such as the sudden veering of the wind, &c. What a good thing it would be to obtain further and more detailed information about the famous Patagonians, the subject of so many fables and controversies. Yet another motive led D'Urville to anchor off Port Famine, rather than off Staten Island. His perusal of the accounts of the work of explorers who had penetrated into the Southern Seas convinced him that the end of January and the whole of February were the best times for visiting these regions, for then only are the effects of the annual thaw over, and with them the risk of over-fatigue to the crews.

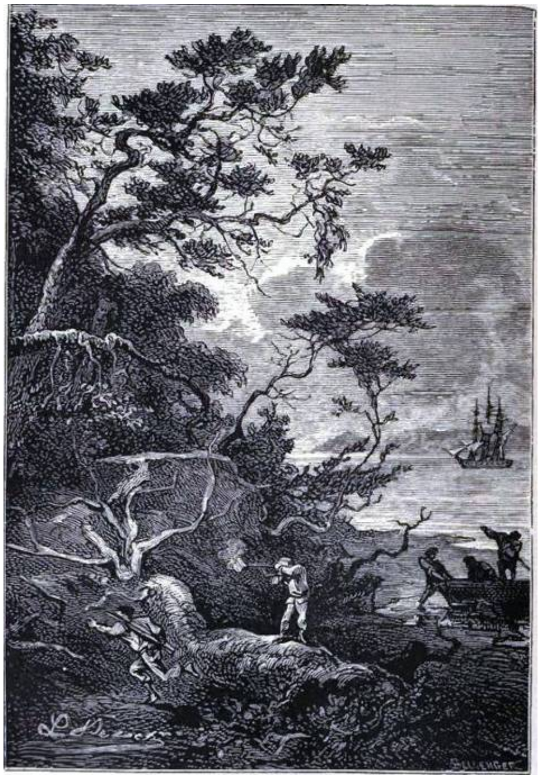

Anchorage off Port Famine.

This resolution once taken, D'Urville communicated it to Captain Jacquinot, and set sail for the strait. On the 12th December Cape Virgin was sighted, and Dumoulin, seconded by the young officers, began a grand series of hydrographical surveys. In the intricate navigation of the strait, D'Urville, we are told, showed equal courage and calmness, skill and presence of mind, completely winning over to his side many of the sailors, who, when they had seen him going along at Toulon when suffering with the gout, had exclaimed, "Oh, that old fellow won't take us far!" Now, when his constant vigilance had brought the vessels safely out of the strait, the cry was, "The — — man is mad! He's made us scrape against rocks, reefs, and land, as if he had never taken a voyage before! And we used to think him as useless as a rotten keel!"

We must now say a few words on the stay at Port Famine.

Landing is easy, and there is a good spring and plenty of wood; on the rocks are found quantities of mussels, limpets, and whelks, whilst inland grows celery, and a kind of herb resembling the dandelion. Another fruitful source of wealth in this bay is fish, and whilst the vessels were at anchor, drag-nets, trammels, and lines captured enough mullet, gudgeon, and roaches to feed the whole crew.

"As I was about to re-embark," says D'Urville, "a little barrel was brought to me which had been found hung on a tree on the beach, near a post on which was written *Post Office*. Having ascertained that this barrel contained papers, I took it on board and examined them. They consisted of notes of captains who had passed through the Straits of Magellan, stating the time of their visits, the incidents of their passage, with advice to those who should come after them, and letters for Europe or the United States. It seemed that an American captain, Cunningham by name, had been the originator of this open-air post-office. He had merely, in April, 1833, hung a bottle on a tree, and his fellow-countryman, Waterhouse, had supplemented it by the post with its inscription. Lastly, Captain Carrick of the schooner *Mary Ann*, from Liverpool, passed through the strait in March 1837, on his way to San Blas, California, going through it again a second time on his way back on the 29th November, 1837, that is to say, sixteen days before our own visit, and he it was who had substituted the barrel for the bottle, adding an invitation to all who should succeed him to use it as the receptacle of letters for different destinations. I mean to improve this ingenious and useful contrivance by forming an actual post-office on the highest point of the peninsula with an inscription in letters of a size so gigantic as to compel the attention of navigators who would not otherwise have touched at Port Famine. Curiosity will then probably lead them to send a canoe to examine the box, which will be fastened to the post. It seems likely that we shall ourselves reap the first fruits of this arrangement, and our families will be agreeably surprised to receive news from us from this wild and lonely district, just before our plunge into the ice of the Polar regions."

At low tide the mouth of the Sedger river, which flows into Famine Bay, is encumbered with sand-banks; some 1000 feet further on the plain is transformed into a vast marsh, from which rise the trunks of immense trees, and huge bones, bleached by the action of time, which have been brought down by the heavy rainfall, swelling the course of the stream.

Skirting this marsh is a fine forest, the entrance to which is protected by prickly shrubs. The commonest trees are the beech, with trunks between eighty and ninety feet high, and three or four in diameter; Winteria aromatica, a kind of bark which has long since replaced the cinnamon, and a species of Barbary. The largest beeches seen by D'Urville measured fifteen feet in diameter, and were about 150 feet high.

Unfortunately, no mammiferous animals or reptiles, or fresh or salt water shell-fish are found on these coasts; and one or two different kinds of birds with a few lichens and mosses were all the naturalist was able to obtain.

Several officers went up the Sedger in a yawl till they were stopped by the shallowness of the water. They were then seven and a half miles from the mouth, and they noted the width of the river where it flows into the sea to be between ninety and a hundred feet.

"It would be difficult," says M. de Montravel, "to imagine a more picturesque scene than was spread out before us at every turn. Everywhere was that indescribable wildness which cannot be imitated, a confused mass of trees, broken branches, trunks covered with moss, which seemed literally to grow before our eyes."

To resume, the stay at Port Famine was most successful; wood and water were easily obtained, repairs, &c., were made, horary, physical, meteorological, tidal, and hydrographical observations were taken, and, lastly, numerous objects of natural history were collected, the more interesting as the museums of France hitherto contained nothing whatever from these unknown regions beyond "a few plants collected by Commerson and preserved in the Herbarium of M. de Jussieu."

On the 28th December, 1837, anchor was weighed without a single Patagonian having been seen, although the officers and crew had been so eager to make acquaintance with the natives.

The difficulties attending navigation compelled the two corvettes to cast anchor a little further on, off Port Galant, the shores of which, bordered by fine trees, are cut by torrents resembling a little distance off magnificent cascades from fifty to sixty feet high. This compulsory halt was not wasted, for a large number of new plants were collected, and the port with the neighbouring bays were surveyed. The commander, however, finding the season already so far advanced, gave up his idea of going out at the westerly end of the strait, and went back the way he came, hoping thus to get an interview with the Patagonians before going to the Polar regions.

St. Nicholas Bay, called by Bougainville the *Baie des Français*, where the explorers passed New Year's Day, 1838, is a much pleasanter looking spot than Port Galant. The usual hydrographical surveys were there brought to a satisfactory issue by the officers under the direction of Dumoulin. A boat was despatched to Cape Remarkable, where Bougainville said he had seen fossil shells, which, however, turned out to be nothing but little pebbles imbedded in a calcareous gangue.

Interesting experiments were made with the thermometrograph, or marine thermometer, at 290 fathoms, without reaching the bottom, at less than two miles from land. Whereas the temperature was nine degrees on the surface, it was but two at the above-named depth, and as it is scarcely likely that currents convey the waters of the two oceans so far down, one is driven to the belief that this is the usual temperature of such depths.

The vessels now made for Tierra del Fuego, where Dumoulin resumed his surveys. Low exposed, and strewn with rocks which serve as landmarks, there were but few dangers to be encountered here. Magdalena Island, Gente Grande Bay, Elizabeth Island, and Oazy Harbour, where the camp of a large party of Patagonians was made out with the telescope, and Peckett Harbour, where the *Astrolabe* struck in three fathoms, were successively passed.

"As we struck," says D'Urville, "there were signs of astonishment and even of excitement amongst the crew, and some grumbling was already audible, when in a firm voice I ordered silence, and without appearing at all put out by what had happened, I cried, 'This is nothing at all, and we shall have plenty more of the same kind of thing.' Later these words often recurred to the memory of our sailors. It is more difficult than one would suppose for a captain to maintain perfect calmness and impassiveness in the midst of the worst dangers, even those he has reason to imagine likely to be fatal."

Peckett Harbour was alive with Patagonians, and officers and men were alike eager to land. A crowd of natives on horseback were waiting for them at the place of disembarkation.

Gentle and peaceable they readily replied to the questions put to them, and looked quietly at everything shown to them, expressing no special desire for anything offered to them. They did not seem either to be at all addicted to thieving, and when on board the French vessels they made no attempt to carry anything off.

Their usual height is from four and a half to five feet, but some are a good deal shorter. Their limbs are large and plump without being muscular, and their extremities are of extraordinary smallness. Their most noteworthy characteristic is the breadth of the lower part of the face as compared to the forehead, which is low and retreating. Long narrow eyes, high cheek-bones, and a flat nose, give them something of a resemblance to the Mongolian type.

They are evidently extremely languid and indolent, and wanting in strength and agility. Looking at them squatting down, standing or walking, with their long hair flowing down their backs, one would take them for the women of a harem rather than savages used to enduring the inclemency of the weather and to struggle for existence. Stretched upon skins with their dogs and horses about them, their chief amusement is to catch the vermin with which they swarm. They hate walking so much that they mount horses just to go down and pick up shells on the beach a few yards off.

A white man was living amongst these Patagonians; a miserable, decrepit-looking fellow, who said he came from the United States, but he spoke English very imperfectly, and the explorers took him to be a German-Swiss. Niederhauser, so he called himself, had gone to seek his fortune in the United States, and that fortune being long on the road, he had given ear to the wonderful proposals of a certain whaleman, who wanted to complete his crew. By this whaleman he was left with seven others and some provisions on a desert island off Tierra del Fuego to hunt seals and dress their skins. Four months later the schooner returned laden with skins, left the seal-hunters fresh provisions, went off again, and never came back! Whether it had been shipwrecked, or whether the captain had abandoned his sailors, it was impossible to ascertain. When the poor fellows found themselves deserted and their provisions exhausted, they embarked in their canoe and rowed up the Straits of Magellan, soon meeting with some Patagonians, with whom Niederhauser remained, whilst his companions went on. Well received by the natives, he lived their life with them, faring well when food was plentiful, drawing in his belt and living on roots when food was scarce.

Weary, however, of this miserable existence, Niederhauser entreated D'Urville to take him on board, urging that another month of the life he was leading would kill him. The captain consented, and received him as a passenger.

During his three months' residence amongst them, Niederhauser had learnt something of the language of the Patagonians, and with his aid D'Urville drew up a comparative vocabulary of a great many words in Patagonian, French, and German.

The war costume of the Fuegans includes a helmet of tanned leather protected by steel-plates and surmounted by a crest of cock's feathers, a tunic of ox-hide dyed red with yellow stripes, and a kind of double-bladed scimitar. The chief of Peckett Harbour allowed his visitors to take his portrait in full martial costume, thereby showing his superiority to his subjects, who would not do the same for fear of witchcraft.

On the 8th January anchor was finally weighed, and the second entrance to the strait was slowly navigated against the tide. The Straits of Magellan having now been crossed from end to end, and a survey made of the whole of the eastern portion of Tierra del Fuego, thus bridging over an important gulf in hydrographic knowledge, no detailed map of this coast having previously been made, the vessels steered for the Polar regions, doubling Staten Island without difficulty, and on the 15th January coming in sight of the first ice, an event causing no little emotion, for now was to begin the really hard work of the voyage.

Floating ice was not the only danger to be encountered in these latitudes: a dense fog, which the keenest sight could not penetrate, soon gathered about the vessels, paralyzing their movements, and though they were under a foresail only, rendering a collision with the ice-masses imminent. The temperature fell rapidly, and the thermometrograph marked only two degrees on the surface of the sea, whilst the deep water was below zero. Half-melted snow now began to fall, and everything bore witness that the Antarctic regions were indeed entered.

Clarence, New South Orkney Islands, could not be identified. Every one's attention had to be concentrated on avoiding blocks of ice. At midday on the 20th January the vessels were in S. lat. 62° 3' and W. long. 49° 56', not far from the place were Powell encountered compact ice-fields, and an immense ice-island was soon sighted, some 6000 feet in extent and 300 in height, with perpendicular sides greatly resembling land under certain conditions of the light. Numerous whales and penguins were now seen swimming about the vessels, whilst white petrels continually flew across them. On the 21st observations gave S. lat. 62° 53', and D'Urville was expecting soon to reach the 65th parallel, when at three a.m. he was told that further progress was arrested by an iceberg, across which it did not seem possible to cut a passage. The vessels were at once put about and slowly steered in an easterly direction, the wind having fallen.

"We were thus enabled," says D'Urville, "to gaze at our leisure upon the wonderful spectacle spread out before our eyes. Severe and grand beyond expression it not only excited the imagination but filled the heart with involuntary terror, nowhere else is man's powerlessness more forcibly brought before him.... A new world displays itself to him, but it is a motionless, gloomy, and silent world, where everything threatens the annihilation of human faculties. Should he have the misfortune to be left here alone, no help, no consolation, no spark of hope, would soothe his last moments. One is involuntarily reminded of the famous inscription on the gate of the Inferno of Dante —

"'Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch' entrate.'"

D'Urville now set to work on a very strange task, which, as compared with others of a similar kind, was likely to be of considerable value. He had an exact measurement taken of the outlines of the iceberg. Had other navigators done the same we should have had some precise information as to the direction taken by icebergs, their movements, &c., in the southern Polar regions, a subject still wrapped in the greatest obscurity.

On the 22nd, after doubling a point, it was ascertained that the iceberg was bearing S.S.W. by W. A lofty and broken piece of land was sighted in these latitudes. Dumoulin had begun to survey it, and D'Urville was about, as he thought, to identify it with the New South Greenland of Morrell, when its outlines became dim and it sunk beneath the horizon. On the 24th the two corvettes crossed a series of floating islets, and entered a plain where the ice was melting. The passage, however, became narrower and narrower, and they were obliged to veer round, to save themselves from being blocked in.

Everything pointed to the conclusion that the edge of the ice was melting, the ice-islands fell apart with loud reports, the ice running off in little rivulets: there was undoubtedly a thaw, and Fanning had been right in saying that these latitudes should not be visited before February.

D'Urville now decided to steer for the north, and try to reach the islands of New South Orkney, the map of which had not yet been accurately laid down. The commander was anxious to survey that archipelago thoroughly, and to spend several days there before resuming his southerly course, so as to be in the Antarctic regions at the same time of year as Weddell.

For three days the explorer coasted along the southern shores of New South Orkney without being able to land; he then once more turned southwards, and came in sight of the ice again in S. lat. 62° 20' and W. long. 39° 28'.

A few minutes before midday a kind of opening was discovered, through which the vessels were forced at all risks. This bold manoeuvre was successful, and in spite of the heavy snow, the explorers penetrated into a small basin scarcely two miles in extent and hemmed in on every side by lofty walls of ice. It was decided to make fast to the ice, and when the order to cast anchor was given a young middy on board the *Zelée* cried naively, "Is there a port here? I shouldn't have thought there were people living on the ice."

Great indeed was now the joyful enthusiasm on both vessels. Some of the young officers of the *Zelée* had come to empty a bowl of punch with their comrades of the *Astrolabe*, and the commander could hear their shouts of delight from his bed. He himself did not, however, look upon the situation in quite the same favourable light. He felt that he had done a very imprudent thing. Shut into a *cul-de-sac*, he could only go out as he had come, and that he could not do until he had the wind right aft. At eleven o'clock D'Urville was awoke by a violent shock, accompanied by a noise of breaking, as if the vessel had struck on some rocks. He got up, and saw that the *Astrolabe*, having drifted, had struck violently against the ice, where she remained exposed to collision with the masses of ice which the current was sweeping along more rapidly than it did the vessel herself.

When day dawned the adventurers found themselves surrounded by ice, but in the north a blackish blue line seemed to betray the existence of an open sea. This direction was at once taken, but a thick fog immediately and completely enveloped both ships, and when it cleared off they found themselves face to face with a compact ice barrier, beyond which stretched away as far as the eye could reach AN OPEN SEA!

D'Urville now resolved to cut himself a passage, and began operations by dashing the *Astrolabe* with all possible speed against the obstacle. The vessel penetrated two or three lengths into the ice, and then remained motionless. The crew climbed out of her on to the ice armed with pickaxes, pincers, mattocks, and saws, and merrily endeavoured to cut a passage. The fragment of ice was already nearly crossed when the wind changed, and the motion of the waves in the offing began to be felt, causing the officers to agree in urging a retreat into the shelter of the ice-walls, for there was some danger if the wind freshened of the vessel being embayed against the ice and beaten to pieces by the waves and floating *débris*.

The corvettes had traversed twelve or fifteen miles for nothing, when an officer, perched in the shrouds, sighted a passage in the E.N.E. That direction was at once taken, but again it was found impossible to cut a passage, and when night came the crew had to make the ship fast to a huge block of ice. The loud cracking noises which had awoke the commander the night before now began with such violence that it really seemed impossible for the vessel to live till daylight.

After an interview with the captain of the *Zelée*, however, D'Urville made for the north, but the day passed without any change being effected in the position of the vessels, and the next day during a storm of sleet the swell of the sea became so powerful as completely to raise the ice plain in which they were imprisoned.

More careful watch than ever had now to be kept, to guard against the pieces of ice flung long distances by this motion, and the rudder had to be protected from them by a kind of wooden hut.

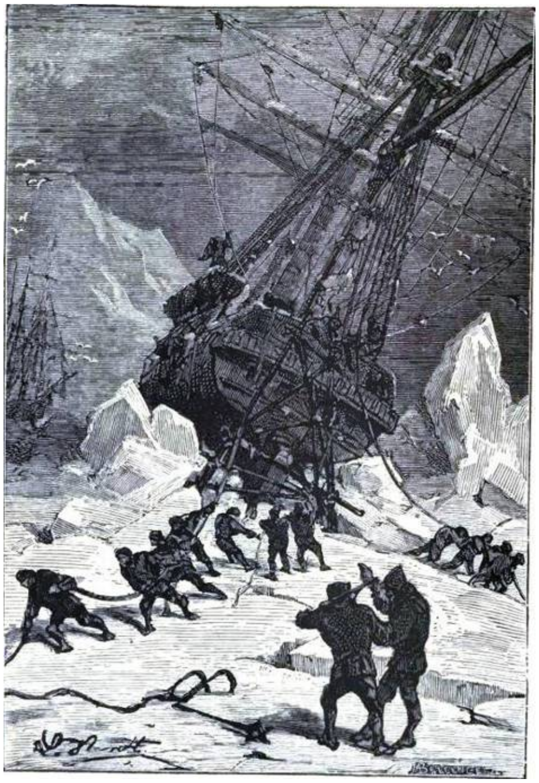

"The rudder had to be protected."

With the exception of a few cases of ophthalmia, resulting from the continual glare of the snow, the health of the crews was satisfactory, and this was no little satisfaction to the leaders of the expedition, compelled as they were to be continually on the *qui-vive*. Not until the 9th February were the vessels, favoured by a strong breeze, able to get off, and once more enter a really open sea. The ice had been coasted for a distance of 225 leagues. The vessels had actually sustained no further damage than the loss of a few spars and a considerable portion of the copper sheathing, involving no further leakage than there had been before.

The next day the sun came out, and observations could be taken, giving the latitude as 62° 9' S., and the longitude 39° 22' W.

Snow continued to fall, the cold was intense, and the wind very violent for the three succeeding days. This continuance of bad weather, together with the increasing length of the nights, warned D'Urville of the necessity of giving up all idea of going further. When, therefore, he found himself in S. lat. 62° and W. long. 33° 11', in other words in that part of the ocean where Weddell had been able to sail freely in 1823, and the new explorer had met with nothing but impassable ice, he steered for New South Orkney. A whole month passed amongst the ice and fogs of the Antarctic Ocean had told upon the health of the crews, and nothing could be gained for science by a continuance of the cruise.

On the 20th the archipelago was again sighted, and D'Urville was once more driven out of his course in a northerly direction by the ice, but he was able to put off with two boats, the crews of which collected on Weddell Island a large number of geological specimens, lichens, &c., and some twenty penguins and chionis.

On the 25th February Clarence Island was seen, forming the eastern extremity of the New South Shetland Archipelago, a very steep and rugged district covered with snow except on the beach, and thence the explorers steered towards Elephant Island, resembling Clarence Island in every respect, except that it is strewn with peaks rising up black against the plains of snow and ice. The islets of Narrow, Biggs, O'Brien, and Aspland were successively identified, but covered as they are with snow they are perfectly inaccessible to man. The little volcano of Bridgeman was also seen, and the naturalists tried in vain to land upon it from two boats.

"The general colour of the soil," says the narrative, "is red, like that of burnt brick with particles of grey, suggestive of the presence of pumice-stone, or of calcined cinders. Here and there on the beach are seen great blackish-looking blocks, which are probably lava. This islet has, however, only one true crater, although thick columns of smoke are emitted from it, nearly all of them issuing from the base on the western side, whilst in the north are two other fumerolles, thirty or forty feet along the water. There are none on the eastern or northern side, or at the top, which is smooth and round. The bulk appears recently to have undergone some considerable modification, as indeed it must have done, or it could not now resemble so little the description given by Powell in December, 1822."

D'Urville soon resumed his southerly route, and on the 27th February sighted a considerable belt of land in the south-east on which he was prevented from landing by the fog and the continuous fall of very fine snow. He was now in the latitude of Hope Island — i.e. in S. lat. 62° 57'. He approached it very closely, and sighted before reaching it a low-lying land, to which he gave the name of Joinville. Then further on in the south-west he came to an extensive district which he named Louis Philippe, and between the two in a kind of channel, encumbered with ice, an island he called Rosamel.

"Now," says D'Urville, "the horizon was so light that we could trace all the irregularities of Louis Philippe's Land. We could see it stretching away from Mount Bransfield in the north (62° W. long.) to the S.S.W., where it faded away on the horizon. From Mount Bransfield to the south it is lofty, and of fairly uniform surface, resembling a vast, unbroken ice-field. In the south, however, it rises in the form of a fine peak (Mount Jacquinot), which is equal perhaps, indeed superior, to Bransfield; but beyond this peak it stretches away in the form of a mountain chain, ending in the south-west in a peak loftier than any of the others. For the rest, the effect of the snow and ice, together with the absence of any objects with which they can be compared, aid in exaggerating the height of all irregularities, and, as a matter of fact, the results of the measurements taken by M. Dumoulin showed all these mountains, which then appeared to us gigantic and equal to the Alps and Pyrenees at least, to be after all of very medium size. Mount Bransfield, for instance, was not more than about 2068 feet high, Mount Jacquinot 2121 feet, and Mount d'Urville, the loftiest of them all, about 3047 feet. Except for the islets grouped about the mainland, and a few peaks rising above the snow, the whole country is one long series of compact blocks of ice, and it is impossible to do more than trace the outlines of this ice-crust, those of the land itself being quite indistinguishable."

On the 1st March soundings gave only eighty fathoms with a bottom of rock and gravel. The temperature is 1°9 on the surface, and 0°2 at the bottom of the sea. On the 2nd of March, off Louis Philippe's Land, an island was sighted which was named Astrolabe, and the day after a large bay, or rather strait, to which the name of Orleans Channel was given was surveyed between Louis Philippe's Land, and a lofty, rocky belt, which D'Urville took for the beginning of Trinity Land, hitherto very inaccurately laid down.

From the 26th February then to the 5th March D'Urville remained in sight of the coast, skirting along it a little distance off, but unable entirely to regulate his course on account of the incessant fogs and rain. Everything bore witness to the setting in of a very decided thaw; the temperature rising at midday to five degrees above zero, whilst the ice was everywhere melting and running off in little streams of water, or falling with a formidable crush into the sea in the form of blocks, the wind meanwhile blowing strongly from the west.

All this decided D'Urville against the further prosecution of this voyage. The sea was heavy, the rain and fog incessant. It was therefore necessary to leave this dangerous coast, and make for the north, where on the following day he surveyed the most westerly islands of the New Shetland group.

D'Urville next steered for Conception, and very arduous was the voyage there, for, in spite of every precaution, the crews of both corvettes, especially that of the *Zelée*, were attacked with scurvy. It was now that D'Urville measured the heights of some of the waves, with a view to the disproving of the charge of exaggeration which had been brought against him when he had estimated those he had seen break over Needle Bank at a height of between eighty and a hundred feet.

With the help of some of his officers, that there might be no doubt as to his accuracy, D'Urville measured some waves of which the vertical height was thirty-five feet, and which measured not less than 196½ feet from the crest to the lowest point, making a total length of 393 feet for a single wave. These measurements were an answer to the ironical assertion of Arago, who, settling the matter in his own study, would not allow that a wave could exceed from five to six feet in height. One need not hesitate a single moment to accept, as against the eminent but impulsive physicist, the measurements of the navigators who had made observations upon the spot.

On the 7th April, 1838, the expedition cast anchor in Talcahuano Bay, where the rest so sorely needed by the forty scrofulous patients of the *Zelée* was obtained. Thence D'Urville made for Valparaiso, after which, having entirely crossed Oceania, he cast anchor on the 1st January, 1839, off Guam, arrived at Batina in October, and went thence to Hobart's Town, whence, on the 1st January, 1840, he started on a new trip in the Antarctic regions.

At this time D'Urville knew nothing either of Balleny's voyage, or of the discovery of Sabrina's Land. He merely intended to go round the southern extremity of Tasmania with a view to ascertaining beneath which parallel he would meet with ice. He was under the impression that the space between 120° and 160° E. long. had not yet been explored, so that there was still a discovery to be made.

At first navigation was beset with the greatest difficulties. The swell was very strong, the currents bore in an easterly direction, the sanitary condition of the crews was far from satisfactory, and 58° S. lat. had not yet been reached when the presence of ice was ascertained.

The cold soon became very intense, the wind veered round to the W.N.W., and the sea became calm, a sure indication of the neighbourhood of land or of ice. The former was the more generally received hypothesis, for the ice-islands passed were too large to have been formed in the open ocean. On the 18th January, S. lat. 64° was reached, and great perpendicular blocks of ice were met with, the height of which varied from ninety to 100 feet, whilst the breadth exceeded 3000.

The next day, January 19th, 1840, a new land was sighted, to which the name of Adélie was given. The sun was now burning hot, and the ice all seemed to be melting, immense streams running down from the summits of the rocks into the sea. The appearance of the land was monotonous, covered as it was with snow. It ran from west to east, and seemed to slope gradually down to the sea. On the 21st the wind allowed the vessels to approach the beach, and deep ravines were soon made out, evidently the result of the action of melted snow.

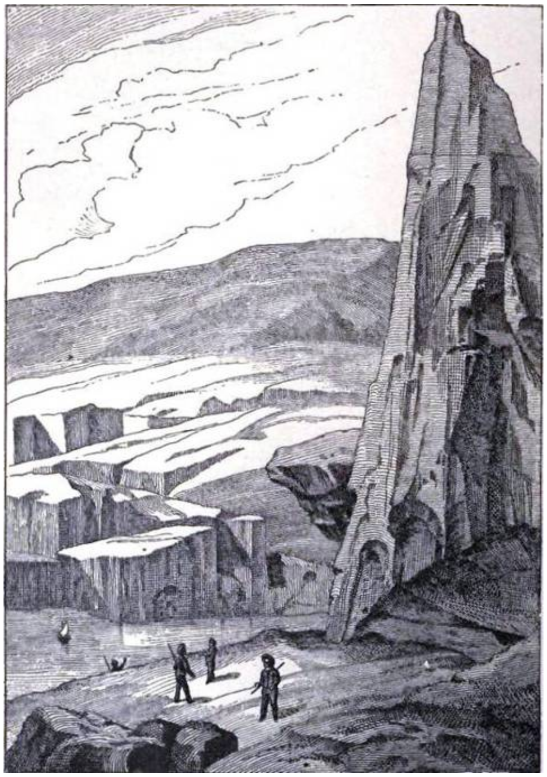

View of Adélie Land.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

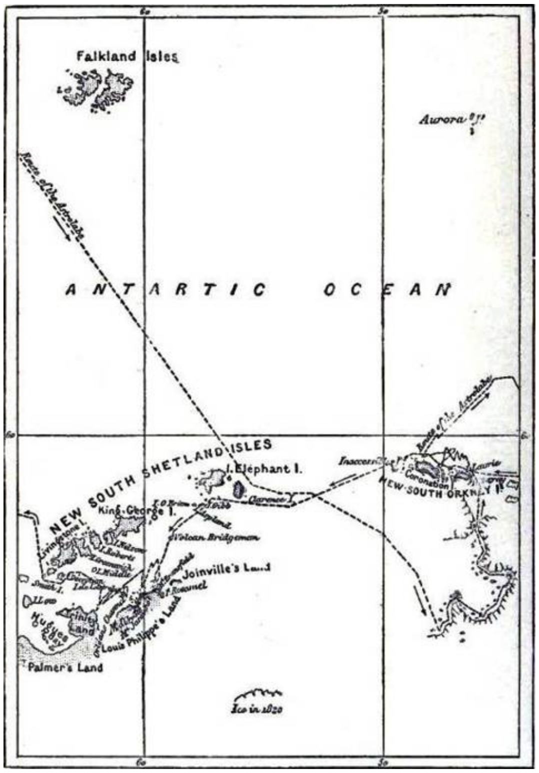
Falkland Isles
Aurora
Route of the Astrolabe
ANTARTIC OCEAN
NEW SOUTH SHETLAND ISLES
Elephant I.
Clarence
King George I.
Livingstone I.
Vulcan Bridgeman
Joinville's Land
Inaccessible
Coronation
NEW SOUTH ORKNEY I.
Laurie
Route of the Astrolabe
Trinity Land
Hughes Bay
Louis Philippe's Land
Palmer's Land
Ice in 1820
60
50

Reduced Map of D'Urville's discoveries in the Antarctic regions.

As the ships advanced navigation became more and more perilous, for the ice-islands were so numerous that there was hardly a large enough channel between them for any manoeuvring.

"Their straight walls," says D'Urville, "rose far above our masts, glowering down upon our vessels, which appeared of absurdly small dimensions, as compared with their huge masses. The spectacle spread out before us was alike grand and terrible. One might have fancied oneself in the narrow streets of a city of giants."

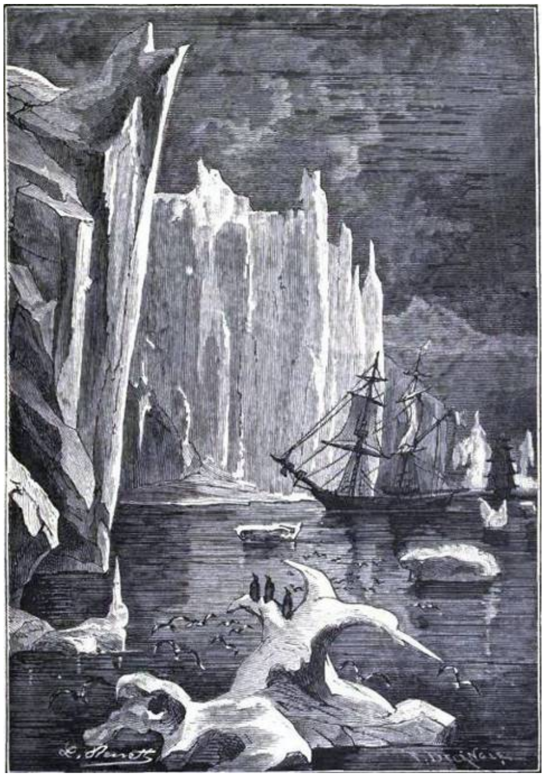

"Their straight walls rose far above our masts."

The corvettes soon entered a huge basin, formed by the coast and the ice-islands which had just been passed. The land stretched away in the south-east and north-west as far as the eye could reach. It was between three and four thousand feet high, but nowhere presented any very salient features. In the centre of the vast snow plain rose a few rocks. The two captains at once sent off boats with orders to bring back specimens which should testify to the discovery made. We quote from the account of Du Bouzet, one of the officers told off on this important survey.

"It was nearly nine o'clock when to our great delight we landed on the western side of the most westerly and loftiest islet. The *Astrolabe* boat had arrived one moment before ours, and its crew were already clambering up the steep sides of the rock, flinging down the penguins as they went, the birds showing no small surprise at being thus summarily dispossessed of the island, of which they had been hitherto the only inhabitants. I at once sent one of our sailors to unfurl a tricolour flag on these territories, which no human creature had seen or trod before ourselves. According to the old custom — to which the English have clung tenaciously — we took possession of them in the name of France, together with the neighbouring coast, which we were prevented from visiting by the ice. The only representatives of the animal kingdom were the penguins, for in spite of all our researches we did not find a single shell. The rocks were quite bare, without so much as the slightest sign of a lichen. We had to fall back on the mineral kingdom. We each took a hammer and began chipping at the rock, but, it being of granite, was so extremely hard that we could only obtain very small bits. Fortunately in climbing to the summit of the island the sailors found some big pieces of rock broken off by the frost, and these they embarked in their boats. Looking closely at them, I noticed an exact resemblance between these rocks and the little bits of gneiss which we had found in the stomach of a penguin we had killed the day before. The little islet on which we landed is part of a group of eight or ten of similar character and form; they are between five hundred and six hundred yards from the nearest coast. We also noticed on the beach several peaks and a cape quite free from snow. These islets, close as they are to each other, seem to form a continuous chain parallel with the coast, and stretching away from east to west."

On the 22nd and 23rd the survey of this coast was continued; but on the second day an iceberg soldered to the coast compelled the vessels to turn back towards the north, whilst at the same time a sudden and violent snow-storm overtook and separated them. The *Zelée* especially sustained considerable damage, but was able to rejoin her consort the next day.

Throughout it all, however, sight of the land had not, so to speak, been lost, but on the 29th the wind blew so strongly and persistently from the east, that D'Urville had to abandon the survey of Adélie Land. It was on this same day that he sighted the vessels of Lieutenant Wilkes. D'Urville complains of the discourtesy of the latter, and says that his own manoeuvres intended to open communications with them had been misunderstood by the Americans.

"We are no longer," he says, "in the days when navigators in the interests of commerce thought it necessary carefully to conceal their route and their discoveries, to avoid the competition of rival nations. I should, on the contrary, have been glad to point out to our emulators the result of our researches, in the hope that such information might be of use to them and increase our geographical knowledge."

On the 30th January a huge wall of ice was sighted, as to the nature of which opinions were divided. Some said it was a compact and isolated mass, others — and this was D'Urville's opinion — thought these lofty mountains had a base of earth or of rocks, or that they might even be the bulwarks of a huge extent of land which they called Clarie. It is situated in 128° E. long.

The officers had collected sufficient information in these latitudes to determine the position of the southern magnetic pole, but the results obtained by them did not accord with those given by Duperrey, Wilkes, and Ross.

On the 17th February the two corvettes once more cast anchor off Hobart's Town, and on the 25th set sail again for New Zealand, where they completed the hydrographical surveys of the *Uranie*. They then made for New Guinea, ascertained that it was not separated by a strait from the Louisiade Archipelago, surveyed Torres Strait with the greatest care, in spite of dangers from currents, coral reefs, &c.; arrived at Timor on the 20th, and returned to Toulon on the 8th November, after touching at Bourbon and St. Helena.

When the news of the grand discoveries made by the United States reached England, a spirit of emulation was aroused, and the learned societies decided on sending an expedition to the regions in which Weddell and Biscoe had been the only explorers since the time of Cook.

Captain James Clark Ross, who was appointed to the command of this expedition, was the nephew of the famous John Ross, explorer of Baffin's Bay. Born in 1800, James Ross was a sailor from the age of twelve. He accompanied his uncle in 1818 in his first Arctic expedition, had taken part under Parry in four expeditions to the same latitudes, and from 1829-1833 he had been his uncle's constant and faithful companion. Entrusted with the taking of scientific observations, he had discovered the north magnetic pole, and he had also made a good many excursions across the ice on foot and in sledges. He was, therefore, now one of the most experienced of British naval officers in Polar expeditions.

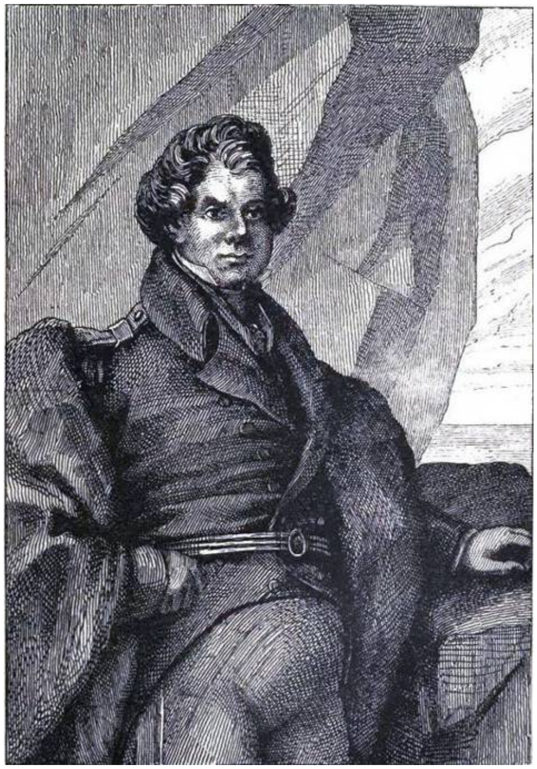

Captain John Ross.

Two vessels, the *Erebus* and the *Terror,* were entrusted to him, and his second in command was an accomplished sailor, Captain Francis Rowdon Crozier, companion of Parry in 1824; of Ross in 1835 in Baffin's Bay; and the future companion of Franklin in the *Terror,* in his search for the north-west passage. It would have been impossible to find a braver or more experienced sailor.

The instructions given to James Ross by the Admiralty differed essentially from those received by Wilkes and Dumont d'Urville. For the latter the exploration of the Antarctic regions was but one incident of their voyage round the world, whereas it was the very *raison d'être* of Ross's journey. Of the three years he would be away from Europe, the greater part was to be spent in the Antarctic regions, and he would only leave the ice to repair the damages to his vessels or recruit the health of his crew, worn out as they would probably be by fatigue and sickness.

The vessels had been equally judiciously chosen, stronger than those of D'Urville, they were better fitted to resist the repeated assaults of the ice, and their seasoned crews had been chosen from sailors familiar with polar navigation.

The *Erebus* and *Terror*, under the command of Ross and Crozier, left England on the 29th September, 1839, and touched successively at Madeira, the Cape Verd Islands, St. Helena, and the Cape of Good Hope, where numerous magnetic observations were taken.

On the 12th April Ross reached Kerguelen's Island, and there landed his instruments. The scientific harvest was abundant. Some fossil trees were extracted from the lava of which this island is formed, and some rich layers of coal were discovered, which have not yet been worked. The 29th was fixed for simultaneous magnetic observations in different parts of the globe, and by a singular coincidence some magnetic storms such as had already visited Europe, were on this very day observed in these latitudes. The instrument registered the same phenomena as at Toronto, Canada, proving the vast extent of these meteoric disturbances, and the incredible rapidity with which they spread.

On his arrival at Hobart Town, where his old friend John Franklin was now governor, Ross heard of the discovery of Adélie and of Clarie Lands by the French, and the simultaneous survey of them by Wilkes, who had even left a sketch of his map of the coasts.

Ross, however, decided to make for E. long. 170°, because it was in that direction that Balleny had found an open sea extending to S. lat. 69°. He duly reached first the Auckland and then the Campbell Islands, and after having, like his predecessors, tacked about a great deal in a sea strewn with ice-islands, he came beyond the sixty-third degree to the edge of the stationary ice, and on the 1st January, 1841, crossed the Antarctic Circle.

The floating ice did not in any respect resemble that of the Arctic regions, as James Ross very soon discovered. It consisted of huge blocks, with regular and vertical walls, whilst the ice-fields, less compact than those of the north, move about in chaotic confusion, looking, to quote Wilkes' imaginative simile, like a heaving land, as they alternately break away from each other and reunite.

To Ross the ice barrier did not present so formidable an appearance as it had done to the French and Americans. He did not at first venture upon it, however, being kept in the offing by storms. Not until the 5th January was he able to penetrate to S. lat. 66° 45', and E. long. 174° 16'. Circumstances could not have been more favourable, for the sea and wind were both acting upon and loosening the ice, and thanks to the strength of his vessels, Ross was able to cut a passage. As he advanced further and further southward, the fog became denser and the constant snow-storms added to the already serious dangers of navigation. Encouraged, however, by the reflection in the sky of an open sea, a phenomenon which turned out to be trustworthy, he pushed on, and on the 9th January, after crossing 200 miles of ice he actually entered that open sea!

On the 11th January land was sighted 100 miles ahead in S. lat. 70° 47' and E. long. 172° 36'. This, the most southern land ever yet discovered, consisted of snow-clad peaks with glaciers sloping down to the sea, the peaks rising to a height of from nine to twelve thousand feet. This estimate, judging from D'Urville's remarks on Graham's Land, may, however, possibly be an exaggerated one. Here, there, and everywhere, black rocks rose up from the snow, but the coast was so shut in with ice that landing was impossible. This curious series of huge peaks received the name of Admiralty chain, and the country itself that of Victoria.

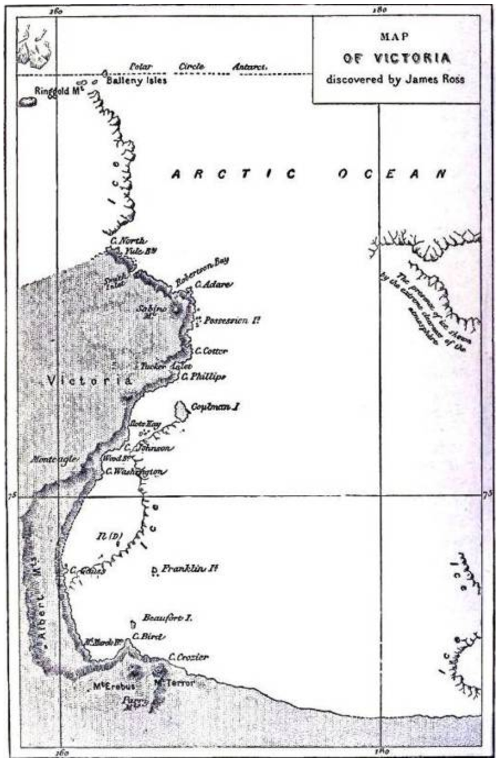
MAP
OF VICTORIA
discovered by James Ross
Polar Circle Antarct.
Balleny Isles
Ringgold Mt
ARCTIC OCEAN
Ice
C. North
Yule By
Robertson Bay
Smith Inlet
C. Adare
Sabine Mt
Possession Is
C. Cotter
Tucker Inlet
C. Phillips
Victoria
Coulman I
C. Johnson
Monteagle
Wood By
C. Washington
Franklin Is
Albert Mts
Beaufort I.
C. Bird
C. Crozier
Mt Erebus
Mt Terror
Parry Mts
The presence of the Ice shewn by the extreme clearness of the atmosphere
160
180
75

Engraved by E. Morieu.

A few little islands were made out in the south-east before the vessels left this coast, and on the 12th January the two captains, with some of their officers, disembarked on one of the volcanic islets, and took possession of it in the name of England. Not the slightest trace of vegetation was found upon it.

Ross soon ascertained that the eastern side of this vast land sloped towards the south, whilst the northern stretched away to the north-west. He, therefore, skirted along the eastern beach, forcing a passage in a southerly direction beyond the magnetic pole, which he places near S. lat. 76°, and then returning by the west, thus entirely circumnavigating his new discovery, which he looked upon as a very large island. The mountain chain extends all along the coast. Ross gave to the principal peaks the names of Herschell, Whewell, Wheatstone, Murchison, and Melbourne. He was unable, however, on account of the ever-increasing quantity of ice about the coast, to make out the details of its outlines. On the 23rd January the seventy-fourth degree, the most southerly latitude ever reached, was passed.

The vessels were now considerably hampered by fogs, southerly gales, and violent snow-storms, but they managed to continue their cruise along the coast, and on the 27th January the English disembarked on a little volcanic island in S. lat. 76° 8' and E. long. 168° 12', to which they gave the name of Franklin.

The next day a huge mountain was seen, which rose abruptly to a height of 12,000 feet above a far-stretching land. The summit, of regular form, and completely covered with snow, was every now and then wrapped in a thick cloud of smoke, no less than 300 feet in diameter. Taking this diameter as a standard of measure, the height of the cloud, in shape like an inverted cone, would be about one-half of it. When this cloud of smoke dispersed, a bare crater was discovered, lit up by a bright red glow, visible even in broad daylight. The sides of the mountain were covered with snow up to the very crater, and it was impossible to make out any signs of a flow of lava.

A volcano is always a magnificent spectacle, and the sight of this one rising up from amongst the Antarctic ice, and excelling Etna and Teneriffe in its marvellous activity, could not fail to make a vivid impression upon the minds of the explorers. The name of Erebus was given to it, and that of Terror to an extinct crater on the east of it, both titles being admirably appropriate.

The two vessels continued their cruise along the northern coast of Victoria, until their further passage was barred by a huge mass of ice towering 505 feet above their masts. Behind this barrier rose another mountain chain, which sunk out of sight in the S.S.E., and to which the name of Parry was given. Ross skirted along the ice barrier in an easterly direction until the 2nd February, when he reached S. lat. 78° 4', the most southerly point attained on this trip, during which he had followed the shores of the land he had discovered for more than 300 miles. He left it in E. long. 191° 23'.

But for the strong favourable winds which now blew, it seems probable that the vessels would never have issued in safety from amongst the formidable ice masses through which they finally worked their way at the cost of incredible exertions and fatigues, and in face of incessant danger.

On the 15th February yet another attempt was made in S. lat. 76° to reach the magnetic pole; but further progress was barred by land in S. lat. 76° 12' and E. long. 164°, i.e. sixty-five ordinary miles from the position assigned to it (the magnetic pole) by Ross, and the appearance of this land was forbidding and the sea so rough that the explorer gave up all idea of continuing his researches on shore.

After identifying the islands discovered in 1839 by Balleny, Ross found himself on the 6th March amongst the mountains alluded to by Wilkes.

"On the 4th March," says Ross's narrative, "they recrossed the Antarctic Circle, and being necessarily close by the eastern extreme of those *patches of land* which Lieut. Wilkes has called 'the Antarctic Continent,' and having reached the latitude on the 5th, they steered directly for them; and at noon on the 6th, the ship being exactly over the centre of this mountain range, they could obtain no soundings with 600 fathoms of line; and having traversed a space of eighty miles in every direction from this spot, during beautiful clear weather, which extended their vision widely around, were obliged to confess that this position, at least, of the pseudo-antarctic continent, and the nearly 200 miles of barrier represented to extend from it, have no real existence."[1]

[1] The Editor of the *Literary Gazette* adds the following note. "Lieutenant Wilkes may have mistaken some clouds or fog-banks, which in these regions are very likely to assume the appearance of land to inexperienced eyes, for this continent and range of lofty mountains. If so, the error is to be regretted, as it must tend to throw discredit on other portions of his discoveries, which have a more substantial foundation." — *Trans.*

The expedition got back to Tasmania without having a single case of sickness on board or sustaining the slightest damage. The vessels were here refitted, and the instruments regulated before starting on a second trip, on which Sydney and Island's Bay, New Zealand, and Chatham, were the first stations touched at by Ross to make magnetic observations. On the 18th December, in S. lat. 62° 40' and E. long, 146°, ice was encountered 300 miles further north than in the preceding year. The vessels had arrived too early, but Ross, nevertheless, endeavoured to break through this formidable barrier. After penetrating for 300 miles he was stopped by masses so compact that it was impossible to go further, and he did not cross the Antarctic Circle until the 1st January, 1842. On the 19th of the same month the two vessels encountered the most violent storm just as they were entering an open sea; the *Erebus* and *Terror* lost their helms, floating ice washed over them, and for twenty-six hours they were in danger of going down.

The detention of the expedition amongst the ice lasted no less than forty-six days, and not until the 22nd did Ross reach the great barrier of stationary ice, which was considerably lower beyond Erebus, where it was no less than 200 feet high. When Ross came to it this year it was only 107 feet high, and it was 150 miles further east than it had been on the previous expedition. The acquisition of this piece of geographical information was the only result of this arduous campaign, extending over 136 days, and greatly excelling in dramatic interest the preceding expedition.

The vessels now made for Cape Horn, and sailed up the coast as far as Rio de Janeiro, where they found everything of which they stood in need. As soon as they had laid in a stock of provisions they again put to sea and reached the Falkland Islands, whence, on the 17th December, 1842, they started on their third trip.

The first ice was this time met with near Clarence Island, and on the 25th December Ross found his further progress barred by it. He then made for the New Shetland Islands, completed the survey of Louis Philippe and Joinville Lands, discovered by Dumont d'Urville, named Mts. Haddington and Parry, ascertained that Louis Philippe's Land is only a large island, and visited Bransfield Strait, separating it from Shetland. Such were the marvellous results obtained by James Ross in his three expeditions.

To assign to the three explorers, whose work in the Antarctic regions we have been reviewing, his just meed of praise, we may say that D'Urville first discovered the Antarctic continent; Wilkes traced its shores for a considerable distance, for we cannot fail to recognize the resemblance between his map and that of the French navigator; and that James Ross visited the most southerly and most interesting part.

But is there such a continent after all? D'Urville was not quite sure about it, and Ross did not believe in it. We must leave the decision of this great question to the later explorers who were to follow in the footsteps of the intrepid sailors whose voyages and discoveries we have related.

II.

THE NORTH POLE.

Anjou and Wrangell — The "polynia" — John Ross's first expedition — Baffin's Bay closed — Edward Parry's discoveries on his first voyage — The survey of Hudson's Bay, and the discovery of Fury and Hecla Straits — Parry's third voyage — Fourth voyage — On the ice in sledges in the open sea — Franklin's first trip — Incredible sufferings of the explorers — Second expedition — John Ross — Four winters amongst the ice — Dease and Simpson's expedition.

We have more than once alluded to the great impulse given to geographical science by Peter I. One of the earliest results of this impulse was the discovery by Behring of the straits separating Asia from America, and the most important was the survey thirty years later of the Liakhov Archipelago, or New Siberia.

In 1770 a merchant named Liakhov noticed a large herd of reindeer coming across the ice from the north, and he reflected that they could only have come from a country where there were pastures enough to support them. A month later he started in a sledge, and after a journey of fifty miles he discovered between the mouths of the Lena and Indighirka three large islands, the vast deposits of fossil ivory on which have since become celebrated all over the world.

In 1809 Hedenstroem received instructions to make a map of this new discovery. He made several attempts to cross the frozen ocean on a sledge, but was always turned back by ice which would not bear him. He came to the conclusion that there must be an open sea beyond, and he founded this opinion on the immense quantity of warm water which flows into the Arctic Ocean from the great rivers of Asia.

In March, 1821, Lieutenant (afterwards Admiral) Anjou crossed the ice to within forty-two miles of the north of the island of Kotelnoï, and in N. lat. 76° 38' saw a vapour which led him to believe in the existence of an open sea. In a second trip he actually saw this sea with its drifting ice, and came back convinced of the impossibility of going further in a sledge on account of the thinness of the ice.

Whilst Anjou was thus employed, another naval officer, Lieutenant Wrangell, collected some important traditions about the existence of land the other side of Cape Yakan.

From a Tchouktchi chief he learnt that in fine weather — though never in the winter — from the coast and some reefs at the mouth of a river mountains covered with snow could be seen far away in the north; and that in former days when the sea was frozen over reindeer used to come from there. The chief had himself once seen a herd of reindeer on their way back to the north by this route and he had followed them in a sledge for a whole day until the state of the ice compelled him to give up the experiment.

His father had told him, too, that a Tchouktchi had once gone there with a few companions in a skin boat, but he did not know what they had discovered or what had become of them. He was sure that the land in the north was inhabited, because a dead whale had once been washed on to Aratane Island with spears tipped with slate in its flesh, and the Tchouktchis never used such weapons.

These facts were very curious, and they increased Wrangell's desire to penetrate to the unknown northern districts; but the truth of all the rumours was not verified until our own day.

Between 1820 and 1824 Wrangell made four expeditions in sledges from the mouth of the Kolyma, which he made his headquarters, first exploring the coast to Cape Tchelagskoi, and enduring thirty-five degrees of cold; and in his second trip trying how far he could go across the ice, an experiment resulting in a journey of 400 miles from the land. In the third year (1822), Wrangell started in March with a view to verifying the report of a native who said he had seen land in the offing. He now came to an icefield, on which he advanced safely for a long distance, when it began to be less compact and was soon not solid enough to bear many sledges, so two small ones were selected, on which were packed a wherry, some planks, and some tools. The explorer then ventured on some melting ice which broke under his feet.

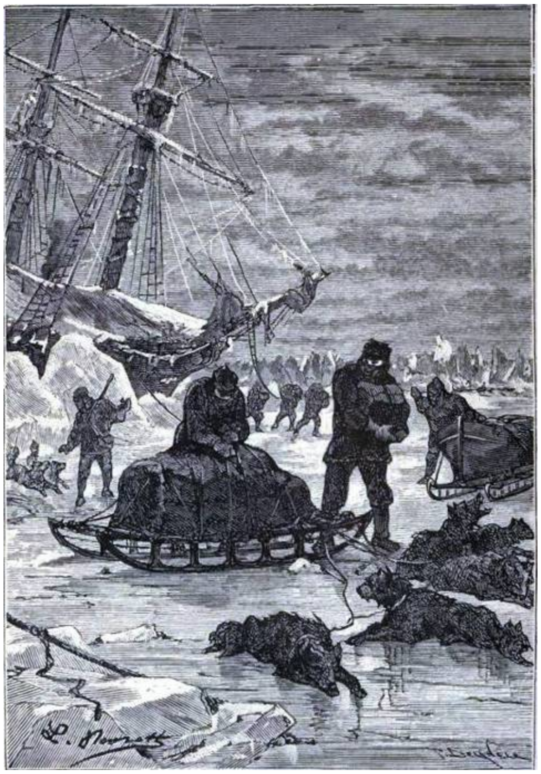

"Two small sledges were selected."

"At the outset," says Wrangell, "I had to make way for seven wersts across a bed of brine; further on appeared a surface furrowed with great *crevasses*, which we could only succeed in clearing by the help of our planks. I noticed in this part several small mounds of ice in such a liquefying condition that the slightest touch would suffice to break it and convert the mound into a round slough. The ice upon which we were travelling was without consistency, was but a foot in thickness, and — what was more — was riddled with holes.... I could only compare the appearance of the sea, at this stage, to an immense morass; and indeed the muddy water which issued from these thousands of crevasses, opening up in every direction, the melting snow mixed with earth and sand, those little mounds whence numerous streamlets were issuing, — all these combined to make the illusion perfect."

Wrangell had advanced some 140 miles, and it was the open sea or the *polynia* — as he calls vast expanses of water — north of Siberia, the outskirts of which he had reached, the same in fact as that already sighted by Leontjew in 1764, and Hedenstroem in 1810.

On his fourth voyage Wrangell and his small party of followers started from Cape Yakan, the nearest point to the Arctic regions, and, after passing Cape Tchelagskoi, made for the north; but a violent storm broke up the ice, there only three feet thick, and involved the explorers in the greatest danger. Now dragged across some large unbroken slab, now wet to the waist on a moving plank, sometimes above and sometimes under water, or moored to a block serving as a ferryboat, which the swimming dogs dragged along, they at last succeeded in crossing the shifting reverberating ice and regaining the land, owing their life to the strength and agility of their teams of dogs alone. Thus closed the last attempt made to reach the districts north of Siberia.

The Arctic calotte[1] was meanwhile being attacked from the other side with equal energy and yet more perseverance. It will be remembered with what untiring enthusiasm the famous north-west passage had been sought. No sooner had the peace of 1815 necessitated the disarmament of numerous English vessels and set free their officers on half-pay, than the Admiralty, unwilling to let experienced seamen rust in idleness, sought for them some employment. It was under these circumstances that the search for the north-west passage was resumed.

[1] The word *calotte* here used by Verne is untranslateable. It signifies, literally, a particular kind of cap, frequently a monk's cap or cowl. — *Trans.*

The *Alexander*, 252 tons, and the *Isabel*, 385, under command of the experienced officers, John Ross and Lieutenant Parry, with James Ross, Back, and Belcher, who were to win honour in Arctic explorations amongst their subordinates, were sent by the Government to explore Baffin's Bay and set sail on the 18th April. After touching at the Shetland Islands, and seeking in vain for the submerged land seen by Bass in N. lat. 57° 28', the explorers came on the 26th May to the first ice, and on the 2nd June surveyed the western coast of Greenland, hitherto very imperfectly laid down in maps, finding it greatly encumbered by ice. Indeed the governor of the Dutch settlement of Whale Island told them that the severity of the winter months had been steadily increasing during the eleven years of his residence in the country.

Hitherto it had been supposed that the country was uninhabited beyond 75° N. lat., and the travellers were therefore greatly surprised to see a whole tribe of Esquimaux arrive by way of the ice. They knew nothing of any race but their own, and stared at the English without daring to touch them, one of them even addressing to the vessels in a grave and solemn voice the inquiries, Who are you? Whence do you come? From the sun or from the moon?

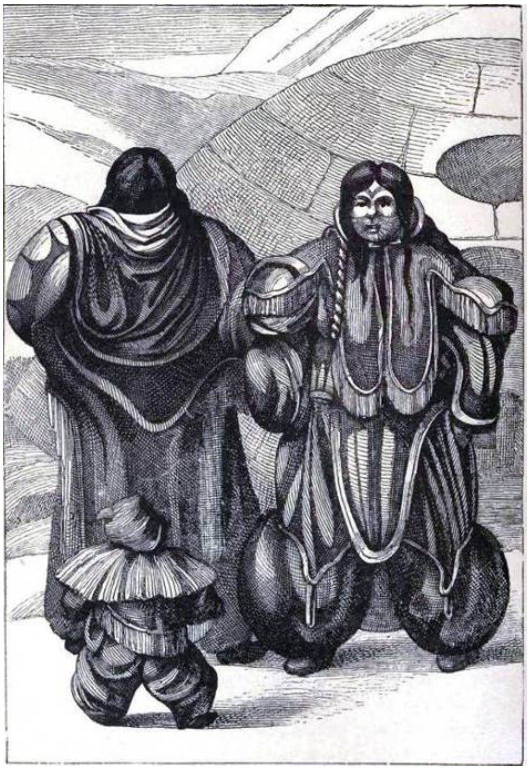

Esquimaux family.
(Fac-simile of early engraving.)

Although in many respects far inferior to the Esquimaux who had become to some extent civilized by long intercourse with Europeans, the new-comers understood the use of iron, of which a few of them had even succeeded in making knives. This iron as far as the English could gather was dug out of a mountain. It was probably of meteoric origin.

As public opinion in England subsequently confirmed, Ross, in spite of qualities as a naval officer of the highest order, showed extraordinary apathy and levity on this voyage, appearing not to trouble himself in the least about the geographical problems for the solution of which the expedition was organized. He passed Wolstenholme and Whale Sounds and Smith's Strait, opening out of Baffin's Bay, without examining them, the last named at so great a distance that he did not even recognize it. Still worse than that was his conduct later. Cruising down the western shores of Baffin's Bay a long deep gulf no less than fifty miles across gradually came in sight of the eager explorers, yet when on the 29th August the two vessels had sailed up it for thirty miles only Ross gave orders to tack about, on the ground that he distinctly saw at the further end a chain of lofty mountains to which he gave the name of Croker. His officers did not share his opinion; they could not see so much as the slightest sign of a hill, for the very excellent reason that the gulf they had entered was really Lancaster Sound, so named by Baffin, and connecting his bay with the western Arctic Ocean.

The same sort of thing occurred again and again in the voyage along this deeply indented coast, the vessels keeping so far off shore that not a detail could be made out. Thus it came about that Cumberland Bay was passed on the 1st October without any survey of that most important feature of Davis Strait, and Ross returned to England, having literally turned his back on the glory awaiting him.

When accused of apathy and neglect of duty, Ross replied with supreme indifference, "I trust, as I believe myself, that the objects of the voyage have been in every important point accomplished; that I have proved the existence of a bay, from Disco to Cumberland Strait, and set at rest for ever the question of a north-west passage in this direction."

It would have been impossible to make a more complete mistake. But fortunately the failure of this expedition did not in the least discourage other explorers. Some saw in it a brilliant confirmation of the venerable Baffin's discovery, others looked upon the innumerable inlets, with their deep waters and strong currents, as something more than mere bays. They were straits, and all hope of the discovery of the north-west passage was not yet lost.

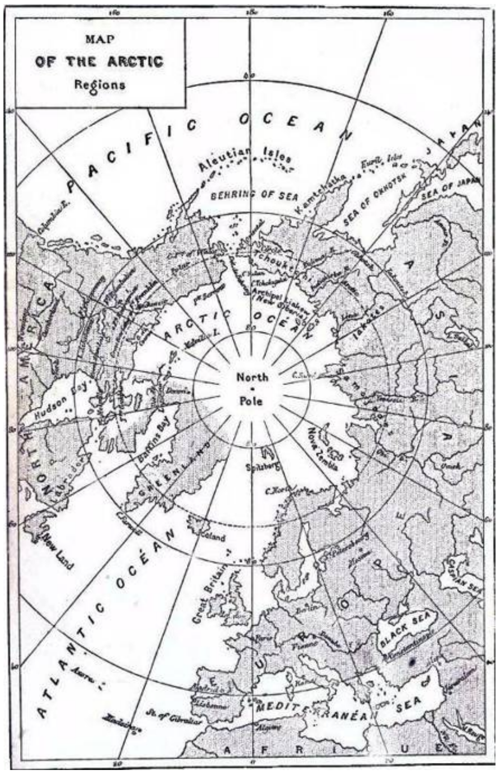
MAP
OF THE ARCTIC
Regions
PACIFIC OCEAN
Aleutian Isles
BEHRING OF SEA
Kamtchatka
Kurile Isles
SEA OF OKHOTSK
SEA OF JAPAN
JAPAN
ASIA
Tchoukchi
Archipel Liakhov (New Siberia)
Iakoutsk
ARCTIC OCEAN
North Pole
NORTH AMERICA
Hudson Bay
Labrador
Baffins Bay
GREENLAND
Spitzberg
Nova Zembla
C. North
Iceland
New Land
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Azores
Madeira
St. of Gibraltar
Great Britain
Paris
Vienna
Lisbonne
Algiers
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
BLACK SEA
Constantinople
CASPIAN SEA
Omsk
EUROPE
AFRIQUE

Engraved by E. Morieu.

These suggestions so far weighed with the English Admiralty as to lead to the equipment of two small vessels, the bomb-vessel *Hecla* and the brigantine *Griper*, which left the Thames on the 5th May, 1819, under command of Lieutenant William Parry, whose opinion as to the existence of the north-west passage had not coincided with that of his chief. The vessels reached Lancaster Sound without meeting with any special adventures, and after a delay of seven days amongst the ice which encumbered the sea for a distance of eighty miles, they entered the supposed Bay "shut in by a mountain chain" of John Ross, to find not only that this mountain chain did not exist, but that the bay was a strait more than 310 fathoms deep, where the influence of the tide could be felt. The temperature of the water rose some ten degrees, and in the course of a single day no less than eighty full-grown whales were seen.

On the 31st July the explorers landed on the shores of Possession Bay, visited by them the previous year, and found there their own footprints, a sign of the small quantity of snow and hoar frost which had fallen during the winter. All hearts beat high when with a favourable wind and all sails set the two vessels entered Lancaster Sound.

"It is more easy," says Parry, "to imagine than to describe the almost breathless anxiety which was now visible in every countenance, while, as the breeze continued to a fresh gale, we ran quickly up the sound. The mast-heads were crowded by the officers and men during the whole afternoon; and an unconcerned observer, if any could have been unconcerned on such an occasion, would have been amused by the eagerness with which the various reports from the crow's-nest were received; all, however, hitherto favourable to our most sanguine hopes."

The two coasts extended in a parallel line as far as the eye could reach, that is to say for a distance exceeding fifty miles, and the height of the waves together with the absence of ice combined to convince the English that they had reached the open sea by way of the long sought passage, when an island framed in masses of ice checked their further progress.

An arm of the sea, however, some twelve leagues wide, opened on the south, and by it the explorers hoped to find a passage less encumbered with ice. Strange to say, as they had advanced in a westerly direction through Lancaster Sound, the vibrations of the pendulum had increased, whilst now it appeared to have lost all motion, and "we now therefore witnessed for the first time the curious phenomenon of the directive power of the needle becoming so weak as to be completely overcome by the attraction of the ship; so that the needle might now be properly said to point to the north pole of the ship."

The arm of the sea widened as the vessels advanced in a westerly direction, and the shores seemed to bend sensibly towards the south-west, but after making some 120 miles further progress was again barred by ice. The explorers therefore returned to Barrow's Strait, of which Lancaster Sound is but the entry, and once more entered the sea, now free from the ice, by which it had been encumbered a few days previously.

In W. long. 92° 1' 4" was discovered an inlet called Wellington Channel, about eight leagues wide, entirely free from ice and apparently not bounded by any land. The existence of these numerous straits led the explorers to the conclusion that they were in the midst of a vast archipelago, an opinion daily receiving fresh confirmation. The dense fogs, however, made navigation difficult, and the number of little islands and shallows increased whilst the ice became more compact. Parry, however, was not to be deterred from pressing on towards the west, and presently his sailors found, on a large island, to which the name of Bathurst was given, the remains of some Esquimaux huts and traces of the former presence of reindeer. Magnetic observations were now taken, pointing to the conclusion that the magnetic pole had been passed on the north.

Another large island, that of Melville, soon came in sight, and in spite of the fogs and ice the expedition succeeded in passing W. long. 110°, thus earning the reward of 100*l*. sterling promised by the English Government. A promontory near Melville Island was named Cape Munificence, whilst a good harbour close by was called Hecla and Griper Bay. It was in Winter Harbour at the end of this bay that the vessels passed the winter. "Dismantled for the most part," says Parry, "the yards however being laid for walls and roofed in with thick wadding tilts, they were sheltered from the snow, whilst stoves and ovens were fixed inside." Hunting was useless, and resulted in nothing but the frost-biting of the limbs of some of the hunters, as Melville Island was deserted at the end of October by all animals except wolves and foxes. To get through the long winter without dying of ennui was no easy matter, but the officers hit upon the plan of setting up a theatre, the first representation in which was given on the 6th November, the day of the disappearance of the sun for three months. A special piece was given on Christmas day, in which allusion was made to the situation of the vessels, and a weekly paper was started called the *North Georgia Gazette and Winter Chronicle*, which with Sabine, as editor, run into twenty-one numbers, all printed on the return to Europe of the expedition.

In January scrofula broke out, and with such virulence as to cause considerable alarm, but the evil was soon checked by skilful treatment and the daily distribution of mustard and cress, which Parry had managed to grow in boxes round his stove.

On the 7th February the sun reappeared, and although many months must elapse before it would be possible to leave Melville Island, preparations for a start were at once begun. On the 30th April the thermometer rose to zero, and the sailors taking this low temperature for summer wanted to leave off their winter clothes. The first ptarmigan appeared on the 12th May, and on the following day were seen traces of reindeer and of musk goats on their way to the north; but what caused the greatest delight and surprise to the crews was the fall of rain on the 24th May.

"We had been so unaccustomed to see water naturally in a fluid state at all, and much less to see it fall from the heavens, that such an occurrence became a matter of considerable curiosity, and I believe every person on board hastened on deck to witness so interesting as well as novel a phenomenon."

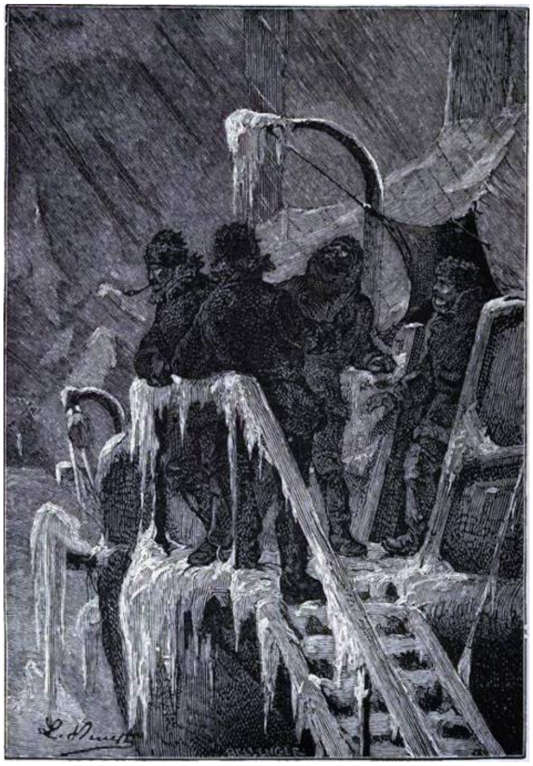

Rain as a novel phenomenon.

During the first fortnight in June, Parry, accompanied by some of his officers, made an excursion to the most northerly part of Melville Island. On his return, vegetation was everywhere to be seen, the ice was beginning to melt, and it was evident that a start could soon be made. The vessels began to move on the 1st August, but the ice had not yet broken up in the offing, and they got no further than the eastern extremity of Melville Island, of which the furthest point reached by Parry was in N. lat. 113° 46' 13" and W. long. 113° 46' 43". The voyage back was unmarked by any special incident, and the expedition got back to England towards the middle of November.

The results of this voyage were numerous and important. Not only had a vast extent of the Arctic regions been surveyed; but physical and magnetic observations had been taken, and many new details collected on their climate and animal and vegetable life. In fact in a single trip Parry did more than was accomplished in thirty years by all who followed in his steps.

Satisfied with the important results obtained by him, the Admiralty appointed Parry to the command in 1821 of the *Hecla* and the *Fury*, the latter built on the model of the former. On this new trip the explorer surveyed with the greatest care the shores of Hudson's Bay and the coast of the peninsula of Melville, not to be confounded with the island of the same name. The winter was passed on Winter Island on the eastern coast of this peninsula, and the same amusements were resorted to which had succeeded so well on the previous expedition, supplemented most effectively by the arrival on the 1st February of a party of Esquimaux from across the ice. Their huts, which had not been discovered by the English, were built on the beach; and numerous visits paid to them during the eighteen months passed on Winter Island gave a better notion than had ever before been obtained of the manners, customs, character, &c., of this singular people.

The thorough survey of the Straits of Fury and Hecla, separating the peninsula of Melville from Cockburn Island, involved the passing of a second winter in the Arctic regions, and though the quarters were now more comfortable, time dragged heavily, for the officers and men were dreadfully disappointed at having to turn back just as they had thought to start for Behring's Strait. On the 12th August the ice broke up, and Parry wanted to send his men to Europe, and himself complete by land the exploration of the districts he had discovered, but Captain Lyon dissuaded him from a plan so desperate. The vessels therefore returned to England with all hands after an absence of twenty-seven months, having lost but five men, although two consecutive winters had been spent in the Arctic regions.

Although the results of the second voyage were not equal to those of the first, some of them were beyond price. It was now known that the American coast did not extend beyond the 70° N. lat., and that the Atlantic was connected with the Arctic Ocean by an immense number of straits and channels, most of them — the Fury, Hecla, and Fox, for instance — obstructed with ice brought down by the currents. Whilst the ice barrier on the south-east of Melville Peninsula appeared permanent, that at Regent's Inlet was evidently the reverse. It might, therefore, be possible to penetrate through it to the Polar basin, and it was with this end in view that the *Fury* and *Hecla* were once more equipped, and placed under the orders of Parry.

This voyage was the least fortunate of any undertaken by this skilful seaman, not on account of any falling off in his work, but because he was the victim of unlucky accidents and unfavourable circumstances. Meeting, for instance, with an unusual quantity of ice in Baffin's Bay, he had the greatest trouble to reach Prince Regent's inlet. Had he arrived three weeks earlier he would probably have been able to land on the American coast, but as it was he was obliged to make immediate preparations for going into winter-quarters.

It was no very formidable matter to this experienced officer to spend a winter under the Polar circle. He knew what precautions to take to preserve the health of his crews, to keep himself well, and what occupations and amusements would best relieve the tedium of a three months' night. Races between the officers, masquerades and theatrical entertainments, with the temperature maintained at 50° Fahrenheit kept all the men healthy and happy until the thaw, which set in on the 20th July, 1825, enabled Parry to resume exploring operations.

He now skirted along the eastern coast of Prince Regent's Inlet, but the floating ice gathered about the vessels and drove them on shore. The *Fury* was so much damaged that though four pumps were constantly at work she could hardly be kept afloat, and Parry was trying to get her repaired under shelter of a huge block of ice when a tempest came on, broke in pieces the extemporary dock and flung the vessel again upon the shore, where she had to be abandoned. Her crew were received on the *Hecla*, which, after such an accident as this, was of course obliged to return to England.

Parry's tempered spirit was not broken even by this last disaster. If the Arctic Ocean could not be reached from Baffin's Bay, were there not other routes still to be attempted? The vast tract of ocean between Greenland and Spitsbergen, for instance, might turn out less dangerous, freer as it of necessity would be from the huge icebergs which gather about the Arctic coasts. The earliest expeditions in these latitudes of which we have any record are those of Scoresby, who long cruised about them in search of whales. In 1806 he penetrated in E. long. 16° (reckoning from Paris), beyond Spitzbergen, i.e. to N. lat. 81° 30', where he saw ice stretching away in the E.N.E., whilst between that and the S.E. the sea was open for a distance of thirty miles. There was no land within 100 miles. It seems a matter of regret that the whaler did not take advantage of the favourable state of the sea to have advanced yet further north, when he might have made some important discovery, perhaps even have reached the Pole itself.

Parry now resolved to do what the exigencies of his profession had rendered impossible to Scoresby, and leaving London on the *Hecla* on the 27th March, 1827, he reached Lapland in safety, and having at Hammerfest embarked dogs, reindeer, and canoes, he proceeded on his way to Spitzbergen. Port Snweerenburg, where he wished to touch, was still shut in with ice; and against this barrier the *Hecla* struggled until the 24th May, when Parry left her in Hinlopen Strait, and advanced northwards with Ross, Crozier, a dozen men, and provisions for seventy-two days in a couple of canoes. After leaving a depôt of provisions at Seven Islands he packed his food and boats on sledges specially constructed for the occasion, hoping to cross in them the barrier of solid ice, and to find beyond a navigable if not an entirely open sea. The ice did not, however, as Parry expected, turn out to form a homogeneous mass. There were here and there vast gaps to be forded or steep hills to be climbed, and in four days the explorers only advanced about eight miles in a northerly direction. On the 2nd July, in a dense fog, the thermometer marked 1° 9' above zero in the shade, and 8° 3' in the sun; and as may be imagined the march across the broken surface, gaping everywhere with fissures, was terribly arduous, whilst the difficulties were aggravated by the continual glare from the snow and ice. In spite, however, of all obstacles the party pressed bravely on, and on the 20th July found they had got no further than N. lat. 82° 37', i.e. only about five miles beyond the point reached three days previously. Now, as they had undoubtedly made at least about fourteen miles in the interval, it was evident that the ice on which they were was being drifted southwards by a strong current.

Parry at first concealed this most discouraging fact from his men; but it soon became evident to every one that no progress was being made, but the slight difference between their own speed as they struggled over the many obstacles in their path and that of the current bearing the ice-field in the opposite direction. Moreover, the expedition now came to a place where the half-broken ice was not fit to bear the weight of the men or of the sledges. It was in fact nothing more than an immense accumulation of blocks of ice, which, tossed about by the waves, made a deafening noise as they crashed against each other; provisions too were running short, the men were discouraged, Ross was hurt, Parry was suffering from inflammation of the eyes, and the wind had veered into a contrary direction, driving the explorers southwards. There was nothing for it but to turn back.

This venturesome trip, throughout which the thermometer had not sunk beneath 2° 2, might have succeeded had it been undertaken a little earlier in the season, for then the explorers could have penetrated beyond 82° 4'. In any case they would certainly not have had to turn back on account of rain, snow, and damp, all signs of the summer thaw.

When Parry got back to the *Hecla*, he found that she had been in the greatest danger. Driven before a violent gale, her chains had been broken by the ice, and she had been flung upon the beach, and run aground. When got off, she had been taken to Waygat Strait. All dangers past, however, the explorers got back safely in the rescued vessel to the Orkneys, where they landed, and whence they returned to London, arriving there on the 30th September.

Whilst Parry was seeking a passage to the Pacific, by way of Baffin's or Hudson's Bay, several expeditions were organized to complete the discoveries of Mackenzie, and survey the North American coast. These expeditions were not fraught with any great danger, and the results might be of the most vital importance alike to geographical and nautical science. The command of the first was entrusted to Franklin afterwards so justly celebrated, with whom were associated Dr. Richardson, George Back, then a midshipman in the royal navy, and two common seamen.

The explorers arrived on the 30th August at York Factory on the shores of Hudson's Bay, and having obtained from the fur-hunters all the information necessary to their success, they started again on the 9th September, reaching Cumberland House, 690 miles further, on the 22nd October. The season was now nearly at an end, but Franklin and Back nevertheless succeeded in penetrating to Fort Chippeway on the western side of Lake Athabasca, where they proposed making preparations for the expedition of the ensuing summer. This trip of 857 miles was accomplished in the depth of winter with the thermometer at between 40° and 50° below zero.

Early in spring, Dr. Richardson joined the rest of the party at Fort Chippeway, and all started together on the 18th July, 1820, in the hope of reaching comfortable quarters at the mouth of the Coppermine before the bad season set in; Franklin and his people did not, however, make sufficient allowance for the difficulties of the route or for the obstacles resulting from the severity of the weather, and it took them till the 20th August to cross the waterfalls, shallows, lakes, rivers, and portages which impeded their progress. Game too was scarce. At the first appearance of ice on the ponds the Canadian guides began to complain; and when flocks of wild geese were seen flying southwards they refused to go any further. Annoyed as he was at this absence of good will in the people in his service, Franklin was compelled to give up his schemes, and when 550 miles from Fort Chippeway, in N. lat. 64° 28', W. long. 118° 6', he built on the banks of Winter River a wooden house, which he called Fort Enterprise.

Here the explorers collected as much food as they could, manufacturing with reindeer flesh what is known throughout North America as *pemmican*.

At first the number of reindeer seen was considerable; no less than 2000 were once sighted in a single day, but this was only a proof that they were migrating to more clement latitudes. The *pemmican* prepared from eighty reindeer and the fish obtained in Winter River both run short before the expedition was able to proceed. Whole tribes of Indians, on hearing of the arrival of the whites, collected about the camp, greatly harassing the explorers by their begging, and soon exhausted the supply of blankets, tobacco, &c., which had been brought as means of barter.

Disappointed at the non-arrival of reinforcements with provisions, Franklin sent Back with an escort of Canadians to Fort Chippeway on the 18th October.

"I had the pleasure," says Back, writing after his return, "of meeting my friends all in good health, after an absence of nearly five months, during which I travelled 1104 miles in snow-shoes, and had no other covering at night in the woods than a blanket and deerskin, with the thermometer frequently at 40°, and once at 57° below zero, and sometimes passing two or three days without tasting food."

Those who remained at the fort also suffered terribly from cold, the thermometer sinking three degrees lower than it had done when Parry was at Melville Island, nine degrees nearer the pole. Not only did the men suffer from the extreme severity of the cold, but the trees were frozen to the pith, and axes broke against them without making so much as a notch.

Two interpreters from Hudson's Bay had accompanied Back to Fort Enterprise, one of whom had a daughter said to be the loveliest creature ever seen, and who, though only sixteen, had already been married twice. One of the English officers took her portrait, to the terrible distress of her mother, who feared that if the "great chief of England" saw the inanimate representation he would fall in love with the original.

On the 14th June the Coppermine River was sufficiently free from ice to be navigable, and although their provisions were all but exhausted, the explorers embarked upon it. As it fortunately turned out, however, game was very plentiful on the green banks of the river, and enough musk oxen were killed to feed the whole party.

The mouth of the Coppermine was reached on the 18th July, when the Indians, afraid of meeting their enemies, the Esquimaux, at once returned to Fort Enterprise, whilst the Canadians scarcely dared to launch their frail boats on the angry sea. Franklin at last succeeded in persuading them to run the risk; but he could not get them to go further than Cape Turn-again in N. lat. 68° 30', a promontory at the opening of a deep gulf dotted with islands, to which the leader of the expedition gave the name of Coronation, in memory of the accession of George IV.

Franklin had begun to ascend Hood River, when he was stopped by a cataract 250 feet high, compelling him to make his way overland across a barren, unknown district, and through snow more than two feet deep. The fatigue and suffering involved in this return journey can be more easily imagined than described; suffice it to say that the party arrived on the 11th October in a state of complete exhaustion — having eaten nothing for five days — at Fort Enterprise, which they found utterly deserted. Ill and without food, there seemed to be nothing left for Franklin to do but to die. The next day, however, he set to work to look for the Indians, and those of his party who had started before him, but the snow was so thick he had to return without accomplishing anything. For the next eighteen days life was supported by a kind of bouilli made from the bones and the skin of the game killed the previous year, and at last, on the 29th October, Dr. Richardson arrived with John Hepburn, only looking thin and worn, and scarcely able to speak above a whisper. It seemed as if they were doomed! We quote the following from Desborough Cooley: —

"Dr. Richardson had now a melancholy tale to relate. For the first two days his party had nothing whatever to eat. On the third day, Michel arrived with a hare and partridge, which afforded each a small morsel. Then another day passed without food. On the 11th, Michel offered them some flesh, which he said was part of a wolf; but they afterwards became convinced that it was the flesh of one of the unfortunate men who had left Captain Franklin's party to return to Dr. Richardson. Michel was daily growing more insolent and shy, and it was strongly suspected that he had a hidden supply of meat for his own use. On the 20th, while Hepburn was cutting wood near the tent, he heard the report of a gun, and looking towards the spot saw Michel dart into the tent. Mr. Hood was found dead; a ball had entered the back part of his head, and there could be no doubt but that Michel was the murderer. He now became more mistrustful and outrageous than before; and as his strength was superior to that of the English who survived, and he was well armed, they became satisfied that there was no safety for them but in his death. 'I determined,' says Dr. Richardson, 'as I was thoroughly convinced of the necessity of such a dreadful act, to take the whole responsibility upon myself; and, upon Michel coming up, I put an end to his life by shooting him through the head!'"

Many of the Indians who had accompanied Richardson and Hepburn had died of hunger, and the two leaders were on the brink of the grave when, on the 7th November, three Indians, sent by Back, brought them help. As soon as they felt a little stronger, the two Englishmen made for the Company's settlement, where they found Back, to whom they had twice owed their lives on this one expedition.

The results of this journey, in which 5500 miles had been traversed, were of the greatest importance to geographical, magnetic, and meteorological science, and the coast of America had been surveyed as far as Cape Turnagain.

In spite of all the fatigue and suffering so bravely borne, the explorers were quite ready to make yet another attempt to reach the shores of the Polar Sea, and at the end of 1823 Franklin received instructions to survey the coast west of Mackenzie River, all the agents of the Company being ordered to supply his party with provisions, boats, guides, and everything else they might require.

After a hearty reception at New York, Franklin went to Albany, by way of the Hudson, ascended the Niagara from Lewiston to the famous Falls, made his way thence to Fort St. George on the Ontario, crossed the lake, landed at York, the capital of Upper Canada (*sic*), passed Lakes Siamese, Huron, and Superior, where he was joined by twenty-four Canadians, and on the 29th June, 1825, came to Lake Methye, then alive with boats.

Whilst Dr. Richardson was surveying the eastern coast of Great Bear Lake, and Back was superintending the preparations for the winter, Franklin reached the mouth of the Mackenzie, the navigation of which was very easy, no obstacles being met with, except in the Delta. The sea was free from ice, and black and white whales and seals were playing about at the top of the water. Franklin landed on the small island of Garry, the position of which he determined as N. lat. 69° 2', W. long. 135° 41', a valuable fact, proving as it did, how much confidence was to be placed in the observations of Mackenzie.

The return journey was made without difficulty, and on the 5th September the explorers arrived at the fort to which Dr. Richardson had given the name of Franklin. The winter was passed in festivities, such as balls, &c., in which Canadians, English, Scotch, French, Esquimaux, and Indians of various tribes took part.

On the 22nd June a fresh start was made, and on the 4th July the fort was reached where the Mackenzie divides into two branches. There the expedition separated into two parties, one going to the east and the other to the west, to explore the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Franklin and his companions had hardly left the river when he met near a large bay a numerous party of Esquimaux, who at first testified great delight at the rencontre, but soon became obstreperous, and tried to carry off the boat. Only by the exercise of wonderful patience and tact were the English able to avert bloodshed on this emergency.

Franklin now surveyed and gave the name of Clarence to the river separating the English from the Russian territories, and a little further on was discovered another stream, which he called the Canning. On the 16th April, finding he had only made half of the distance between Mackenzie River and Icy Cape, though the winter was rapidly approaching, Franklin turned back and embarked on the beautiful Peel River, which he mistook for that of Mackenzie, not discovering his error till he came in sight of a chain of mountains on the east. On the 21st September he got back to the fort, after having in the course of three months traversed 2048 miles, and surveyed 372 miles of the American coast.

Richardson meanwhile had advanced into much deeper water with far less floating ice, and had met with a great many Esquimaux of mild and hospitable manners. He surveyed Liverpool and Franklin Bays, and discovered opposite the mouth of the Coppermine a tract of land separated from the continent by a channel not more than twenty miles wide, to which he gave the name of Wollaston. His boats arrived at Coronation Gulf, explored on the previous trip, on the 7th August; and on the 1st September they got back to Fort Franklin, without having sustained any damage.

In dwelling on Parry's voyages, we have, for the time, turned aside from those made at the same time by Ross, whose extraordinary exploration of Baffin's Bay had brought upon him the censure of the Admiralty, and who was anxious to regain his reputation for skill and courage. Though the Government had lost confidence in him, he won the esteem of a rich ship-owner, who did not hesitate to entrust to him the command of the steamship *Victory,* on which he started for Baffin's Bay on the 25th May, 1830.

For four years nothing was heard of the courageous navigator, but on his return, at the end of that time, it turned out that his voyage had been as rich in discoveries as had been Parry's first trip. Ross, entering Prince Regent's Inlet, by way of Barrow and Lancaster Sounds, had revisited the spot where the *Fury* had been abandoned four years previously; and continuing his voyage in a southerly direction, he wintered in Felix Harbour — so named after the equipper of the expedition — ascertaining whilst there that the lands he had passed formed a large peninsula attached on the south to the northern coast of America.

In April, 1830, James Ross, nephew of the leader of the party, set out in a canoe to examine the shores of this peninsula, and those of King William's Land; and in November of the same year all had once more to go into winter-quarters in Sherif Harbour, it being impossible to get the vessel more than a few miles further north. The cold was intense, and it was agreed by the sailors of the *Victory* that this was the very severest winter ever spent by them in the Arctic regions.

The summer of 1831 was devoted to various surveys, which proved that there was no connexion between the two seas. All that was accomplished this season was to bring the *Victory* as far as Discovery Harbour, a very little further north than that of Sherif. The ensuing winter was so intensely severe, that the vessel could not be extricated from her ice prison, and but for the fortunate discovery of the provisions left by the *Fury*, the English would have died of hunger. As it was, they endured daily greater and greater privations and sufferings before the summer of 1833 at last enabled them finally to leave their winter-quarters and go by land to Prince Regent's and Barrow Straits. They had just reached the shores of Baffin's Bay when a vessel appeared, which turned out to be the *Isabel*, once commanded by Ross himself, and which now received the refugees from the *Victory*.

But England had not all this time been forgetful of her children, and had sent an expedition in search of them every year. In 1833 Back, Franklin's companion, was the leader, and he starting from Fort Revolution, on the shore of Slave Lake, made his way northwards, discovered Thloni-Tcho-Deseth River, and settled down in winter-quarters, with the intention of reaching the next year the Polar Sea, where he supposed Ross to be held prisoner, when he heard of his incredible return journey overland. Back, therefore, gave up the next season to the survey of the fine Fish River, discovered the previous year, and sighted the Queen Adelaide Mts., with Capes Booth and Ross.

1836 found him at the head of a new expedition, which was to attempt to connect by sea the discoveries of Ross and Franklin. It failed, and the accomplishment of the task assigned to it was reserved to Peter Williams, Dease, and Thomas Simpson, all officers in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, who, leaving Fort Chippeway on the 1st June, 1837, went down the Mackenzie, arriving on the sea-coast on the 9th July, and making their way along it to N. lat. 71° 3' and W. long. 156° 46', i.e. to a cape they named Simpson, after the governor of their company.

Thomas Simpson now made his way overland with five men to Port Barrow, already sighted in the direction of Behring Strait by one of Beechey's officers, so that the whole of the North American coast from Cape Turn-again to Behring's Strait was now complete, and there was nothing left to do but to explore the space between the former and Point Ogle, a task accomplished by the explorers in a later expedition.

Leaving the Coppermine in 1838, they followed the eastern coast, arriving on the 9th August at Cape Turn-again, which was too much encumbered with ice to be rounded. Thomas Simpson therefore remained near it for the winter, discovered Victoria Land, and on the 12th August, 1839, arrived at Back River. The rest of the month he devoted to the exploration of Boothia.

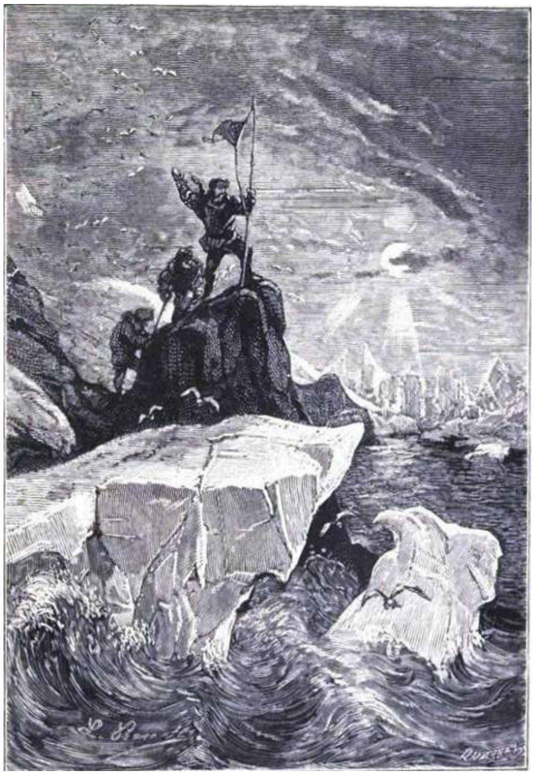

Discovery of Victoria Land.

The whole of the coast-line of North America was now accurately laid down, but at the cost of what struggles, devotion, privations, and sufferings? What, however, is human life when weighed in the balance with the progress of science? and with what disinterestedness and enthusiasm must be embued the savants, sailors, and explorers, who give up all the joys of existence to contribute to the best of their power to the progress of knowledge and to the moral and intellectual development of humanity.

With the voyages last recorded the discovery of the earth was completed, and with our account of them our work, which began with the first attempts of the earliest explorers, also closes. The shape of the earth is now known, the task of explorers, is done. The land on which man lives is henceforth familiar to him, and he has now only to turn to account the vast resources of the countries to which access has recently become easy, or of which he can without difficulty possess himself.

How rich in lessons of every kind is this history of twenty centuries of exploration. Let us cast a glance behind us and enumerate the main features of the progress made in this long series of years. If we take the map of the world of Hecatæus, who lived 500 years before the Christian era, what do we see? When it was published the known world did not extend beyond the basin of the Mediterranean, and the whole, with a terribly distorted outline, is represented only by a very small portion of southern Europe, the interior of Asia, and part of North Africa; whilst encircling them all is a river without beginning or end, to which is given the name of Ocean.

Side by side with this map, ancient monument as it is of antique science, let us place a planisphere representing the world as known in 1840, and on this vast surface we shall find the portion known, and that but imperfectly to Hecatæus, occupying but an infinitesimal space.

Taking these two typical maps as our starting-point, we shall be able to judge of the magnitude of the discoveries of modern times. Imagine for a moment all that is involved in thorough knowledge of the whole world, and you will marvel at the results achieved by the efforts of so many explorers and martyrs, you will grasp the importance of their discoveries and the intimate relations between geography and all the other sciences. This is the point of view from which can best be seen all the philosophic bearings of a work to which so many generations have devoted themselves.

Doubtless the motives actuating these various explorers differ greatly. First, we have the natural curiosity of the owner anxious to know thoroughly every part of the domain belonging to him, so that he may estimate the extent of the habitable districts, and determine the boundaries of the seas, &c.; and secondly, we have the natural outcome of a trade, which, though still in its infancy, introduced even in remote Norway the products of Central Asian industry. In the time of Herodotus the aim of explorers was loftier: they wished to learn the history, manners, customs, and religion of foreign races; and later, the Crusades, which, whatever else they accomplished, certainly vulgarized oriental studies, inspired some few with a fervent desire to wrest from infidels the scene of our Lord's Passion, but the greater number with a lust of pillage and a yearning to explore the unknown.

Columbus, seeking a new route to the Indies, came across America on the way, and his successors were only anxious to make rapid fortunes, differing greatly indeed from the noble Portuguese who sacrificed their private interests to the glory and colonial prosperity of their country, and were the poorer for the offices conferred on them with a view to doing them honour.

In the sixteenth century religious persecution and civil war drove to the New World the Huguenots and Puritans, who, whilst laying for England the foundations of colonial prosperity, were to bring about a radical change in America. The next century was essentially one of colonization. In America the French, in India the English, and in Oceania the Dutch established counting-houses and offices, whilst missionaries endeavoured to win over to the Christian faith and modern ideas the unchangeable "Empire of the Mean."

The eighteenth century, ushering in our own, rectified received errors, and surveyed minutely alike continents and archipelagoes; in a word brought to perfection the work of its predecessors. The same task has occupied modern explorers, who pride themselves on not passing over in their surveys the smallest corner of the earth, or the tiniest islet. With a similar enthusiasm are imbued the intrepid navigators who penetrate the ice-bound solitudes of the two poles, and tear away the last fragments of the veil which has so long hidden from us the extremities of the globe.

All then is now known, classed, catalogued, and labelled! Will the results of so much toil be buried in some carefully laid down atlas, to be sought only by professional *savants*? No! it is reserved to our use, and to develope the resources of the globe, conquered for us by our fathers at the cost of so much danger and fatigue. Our heritage is too grand to be relinquished. We have at our command all the facilities of modern science for surveying, clearing, and working our property. No more lands lying fallow, no more impassable deserts, no more useless streams, no more unfathomable seas, no more inaccessible mountains!

We suppress the obstacles nature throws in our way. The isthmuses of Panama and Suez are in our way; we cut through them! The Sahara interferes with the connexion of Algeria and Senegal; we will throw a railway across it. The Pas de Calais prevents two nations so well fitted for cordial friendship from shaking each other by the hand; we will pierce it with a railway!

This is our task and that of our contemporaries. Is it less grand than that of our predecessors, that it has not yet succeeded in inspiring any great writer of fiction? To dwell upon it ourselves would be to exceed the limits we laid down for our work. We meant to write the History of the Discovery of the World, and we have written it. Our task therefore is complete.

FINIS.

La Madeleine Cemetery, Amiens, France– Verne’s final resting place

Verne’s grave